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AFRICA

SOUTH OF THE SAHARA

Volume 1



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radically from the notion of an unbroken line of tradition connecting present-day African American cultures with (ideally specifiable) African prototypes. But they also do not readily yield to Mintz and Price's conceptions of the evolution of African American cultures out of synthetic processes characterizing the earliest stages of African American social formation.

Yet regardless of the recency of such phenomena, attributing Africanness to forms and institutions arising out of such processes of re-Africanization is more than a matter of supporting claims to ancestry for what are, historically speaking, "invented traditions"—whether such claims are made in an overtly politicized fashion or not. Just as the criteria on which a good part of the scholarly ascriptions of African derivation to New World cultural institutions have been based must be evaluated in terms of the social and ideological context of their pronunciation, so must such public claims to Africanness be analyzed not just on political, but theoretical grounds. Given the history of Western notions of "tradition" and "ancestrality," there is no reason why we should judge deliberately introduced social and cultural forms modeled after images of Africa (rather than transmitted from Africa in an unbroken line of tradition) as somehow "less genuine." Rather, their existence should stimulate research in the history of the social and intellectual conditions in which they emerged and encourage a thorough rethinking of the conceptual apparatus on which our inquiries have hitherto been based.

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See also Divination and Oracles; Music and Song; Religion and Ritual; Slave Trade.

← J. Land Motry

AFRICAN RELIGIONS IN THE AMERICAS

The Africans bound for the plantations, mines, and workshops of the Americas embarked primarily from the western African coast between present-day Senegal and Angola, and in smaller numbers from what is now Mozambique. Among the ten million or so who reached the Western Hemisphere, some began their odyssey as Muslims or Christians, many as worshipers of local gods and ancestors, and more than a few as practitioners of hybrid religions. They and their American cultural descendants have carried forth a complex legacy; various self-described African religions have spread beyond any single race, and the practices of many Christians of all colors appear to reflect African influence as well.

Explicitly African Religions

Religions in which most worshipers identify their beliefs and practices as African include, in Brazil, Macumba, Batuque, the Nagô and Jeje "nations," or sects, of Candomblé, and Tambor de Minas; in Cuba, Santería (Regla de Ocha), Palo Mayombe, and Abakuá; and, in Haiti, Sèvi Iwa, or "voodoo." All of these religions venerate gods with easily recognizable counterparts in specific west and west-central African societies. For example, Sango and Ogun are worshiped in Nigeria and Bénin, their counterparts Xango and Ogum in Brazil, Changó and Oggún in Cuba, and Chango and Ogou in Haiti. There are of course exceptions. Ezili in Haiti has no direct and obvious African counterparts.

Central to most of these religions are typically west African patterns of initiation, spirit possession, animal sacrifice, and divination.

The Cuban Abakuá society and the Brazilian Egum society feature masquerades, or divine spirits animating full-body masks. Both the Egum and Cuban Palo Mayombe priesthoods venerate the dead. Complex, African-inspired forms of ancestor veneration also continue prominently in Carriacou, an island in the southeastern Caribbean, and among the Suriname maroons, descendants of escaped slaves in that country.

The Conditions of African Religions' Success

Some have attributed the success of self-described African religions in certain regions to the alleged gentleness of Latin American slavery. While few recent historians would support that allegation, a number of other historical factors seem relevant. Such religions have flourished disproportionately in sugar-producing and predominantly Roman Catholic regions, especially where either forced or voluntary migration from Africa continued well into the late nineteenth or early twentieth century. Since sugar production tended to require a high ratio of labor to management, when crop prices remained high and the price of imported slaves relatively low, managers favored importation over the rearing of slave children to replace those who died from disease and overwork. Therefore, sugar-producing regions tended to host large and constantly refreshed African populations relatively uninfluenced, until a late date, by a sizable European cultural presence.

Syncretism: A Multiplicity of Sources

Nonetheless, European culture was inevitably influential. Beyond the obvious material control that European immigrants exercised over African bodies, the European folk-Catholic logic of multiple sacred beings and of bargaining with them must have seemed familiar to polytheistic Africans, who often came to identify their gods with Catholic saints. Since white authorities often feared African religion as a potential focus of rebellion or instrumentality of vengeance, Africans are said to have camouflaged the real object of their devotion behind a Catholic saint's name or image. However, later generations integrated important aspects of Catholic ritual, affect, mythology, and symbolism into their devotions. To this day, most contemporary practitioners of Candomblé and Santería, for example, consider themselves Roman Catholic as

well. Many of these syncretic religions were influenced by the nineteenth-century French mystic Allan Kardec—also known as Hippolyte Léon Denizard Rivail (1804–1869)—whose writings became popular among the Latin American bourgeoisie and thus entered into the dialogue that produced these religions.

The vocabulary and practices of the west-central African peoples like the Kongo are important references in Candomblé Angola, Palo Mayombe, Sèvilwa, and the black North American magical and divinatory practices called conjure, hoodoo, and voodoo. The religious vocabulary and practices of Ghanaian Akan-speakers appear to be influential among the Suriname maroons and in Caribbean magical practices known as *obeah*.

Among all the African cultures, the *orisa*-worshipping Nigerian Yoruba and the *vodun*-worshipping Béninese Fon provide the largest proportion of sacred references among the self-described African religions of the Americas. The imperialism of the Oyo Yoruba and of their former Dahomeyan vassals produced unusually uniform pantheons across large African populations. These populations supplied a disproportionate part of the nineteenth-century slave market, partly because the early nineteenth-century collapse of the Oyo Empire precipitated a flood of these peoples into the Americas during the latest period of the slave trade. In contrast with the incoming central African captives, these west Africans were often preferred in urban trades that allowed them some autonomy of earnings and movement.

New Meanings of Orisa Worship

Despite the clear proliferation of practices without obvious European precedents, indigenous claims of devotion to "African" religions should not always be taken literally. Significantly, worshipers' conception of "Africanness" in a post-slavocratic American society endows their sacred spirits with powers and meanings very different from the ones that African worshipers attribute to theirs. Indeed, west African Yoruba *orisa* worshipers are more likely to describe their gods as "in the mountain," "in the river," "Nupe" (i.e., of a neighboring African people), "Muslim," or "from Mecca" than as "African"; for them, little is sacred or awesomely powerful about "Africanness."

Even when they are focused on "Africa," religious practices in the Americas are rooted in American infrastructures of kin networks, political relationships, laws, economic structures, and medical

practices. Not only are the safety of religious practice and the authority of religious leaders guaranteed by non-African means, but these African religions in America are shaped by the very different forms of resistance they encounter and the very different problems they are called upon to solve. For example, the typical client of a modern Nigerian *orisa* priest is a woman seeking healing from barrenness. The most common single complaint of the Candomblé client is mental illness of an origin that priests diagnose as "spiritual"; mental and physical problems of a "material" nature are usually sent to a psychiatrist or physician. Africans and their American cultural descendants have mobilized their similar religions in the service of different political projects. For example, initiation into the pre-nineteenth-century Sango priesthood of the Yoruba served to create a body of viceroys, administrators, and messengers for the Oyo imperial palace. In the twentieth-century Brazilian Candomblé, similar initiations have served to create a familial sense of solidarity among people whose families slavery had destroyed and whose subsequent order of solidarity and sustenance—the plantation—had been disrupted by abolition and the late-nineteenth-century decline of the sugar industry.

Implicitly African Religion

Popular writers, indigenous theologians, and social scientists have attributed African roots to a range of beliefs and practices that practitioners may not classify as African. For example, the Haitians' purchase and ritual creation of spirits called *points* follow ethnographically documented precedents in African sorcery but are classified by Haitians as inimical to the conventions of "Guinea," or Africa, since *points* serve selfish and individualistic goals rather than the collective interests sanctioned by the ancestors. Brazilian Umbanda venerates the *orixás*, gods with Yoruba names that have been borrowed from Candomblé Nagô, but many middle-class practitioners are anxious to attribute Umbanda to ultimately non-African and racially "superior" sources. Practitioners of the popular Candomblé de Caboclo in Brazil worship the spirits of Brazilian Indians and explicitly identify their devotion as "Brazilian," unlike the "African" Candomblé Nagô. However, they still worship by means of animal sacrifice and spirit possession, which are atypical of Brazilian Indian religion.

The distinctive importance of dance and of being "filled with the Holy Spirit" in various African-

American Protestant denominations—such as the Trinidad Shouters, Jamaican Revivalism, and black North American Baptists and Pentecostals—can be seen as extensions of the role of sacred dance and spirit possession in the religions of Africa. Other observers have discussed the African content of conjure, voodoo, and hoodoo, which clearly owe a great deal to European folk beliefs as well. Practitioners' conceptions of the geographical origins of their religions appear to vary across regions and across generations.

Secondary Migrations and the Black Atlantic Dialogue

The self-described African religions of the Americas have spread from their earliest venues to broaden and integrate a sacred dialogue around the Atlantic perimeter. For example, at the end of the eighteenth century, the Haitian Revolution prompted the migration of slave owners, slaves, and free "people of color" to Cuba and Louisiana, where they influenced local religions. Some Afro-Brazilians traveled to west Africa on the late-nineteenth-century eve of its colonization by the French and the British, sometimes precisely in order to be initiated in African religions. They brought back not only religious information but African nationalist inspirations. The 1915 U.S. invasion of Haiti nurtured a libelous print and film literature on voodoo, transforming it into evidence that the oppressed are truly savage and therefore deserve to be oppressed. And, much to the chagrin of animal-loving North Americans, Cubans fleeing the 1959 revolution carried Santería and Palo Mayombe, with their sacrificial traditions, not only to Puerto Rico and Central America but to the United States mainland as well.

This secondary migration was a boon for many North American black nationalists, who adopted Afro-Cuban religion as their own lost spirituality and proceeded to strip it of its Roman Catholic accretions. Two sets of developments have in turn led many Brazilians, Cubans, and Haitians to do the same. First, ever since the late nineteenth century, scholarly books, from which many practitioners seek additional information about their religions, have tended to focus on and give honor to the "African survival." Second, the independence of various African nations and the activism of North American black nationalists have, since the 1960s, inspired much respect for black cultural resistance in the Americas. Thus, an ongoing international history has transformed the local practice and meaning of these traditions.

When compared with forms of economic and political organization, religious practices are among the most conspicuous of sub-Saharan Africa's contributions to American civilization. They stand second only to Africa's musical contribution. Yet what appears African in the American religions has transformed and been transformed by much that appears European or Amerindian. In any given American region, the dialogue among diverse African, European, and Amerindian religious traditions is shaped by a lengthy history of politics, migration, production, and, indeed, professional research.

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See also Religion and Ritual; Secret Societies.

THE INFLUENCE OF AFRICAN ART OUTSIDE AFRICA

For many years Western bias rendered the existence of African-influenced art in the Americas problematic. European and American scholars accept the spread of the Gothic style throughout western Europe, starting at St. Denis in 1144 C.E. They record the diffusion, in antiquity, of Greek temple siting from Athens to far-flung colonies at Segesta in Sicily and Paestum on the Italian mainland and the voyaging continuance of Buddhist art from India through China to the cities of Japan. They accept even the incredible sweep, through time and space, of the Scytho-Sarmatian "animal style," ricocheting across the steppes from the Caucasus to the gates of Han Dynasty China and back again to the peoples of pre-Christian Scandinavia.

But, when it came to the matter of a mere two to three hundred years of documented arrival in the Americas of captive Africans, from documented nations and societies in Africa, suddenly all the precedents of voyaging styles in the history of art mysteriously went astray. Scholars matter-of-factly went about studying the reestablishment of the East Anglian frame house in New England, and the emergence of a Muslim-influenced moment of Spanish colonial architecture in Lima, but arguments about African visual continuities in the Americas met disregard, skepticism, disavowal. Why?

Frances S. Connelly provides reasons in *The Sleep of Reason: Primitivism in Modern European Art and Aesthetics, 1725–1907*, a landmark text. Europe from 1725 to around 1907, she argues, construed art beyond the West as "savage" or "primitive." Western-imagined "primitive art" embodied the "hieroglyph" (as opposed to Western phonetic script), the "grotesque" (as opposed to Western classicizing norms of beauty), and, finally, the