MISSING VODUN AND QUESTIONS OF AUTHENTICITY: Yoruba Supremacy in the African Diaspora

A AUSÊNCIA DO VODU E AS QUESTÕES DA AUTENTICIDADE: a supremacia ioruba na diáspora africana

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Abstract

The privileging of Yoruba and Orisha in the African Diaspora scholarship creates a gap in knowledge production involving other African Diaspora religious traditions. Vodun, Vodou, or Voodoo is particularly marginalized and maligned and understudied especially outside of the United States and in places such as Cuba and Brazil. The debates surrounding "authenticity" in African religions been perhaps the biggest debate within Vodun and Orisha on both sides of the Atlantic. These debates speak to the importance of lineage, ancestry, and legitimacy. Sorting out what is authentic and legitimate is often a futile task, one that harmonizes better with Western urges to categorize than it does with African philosophies of embeddedness and continuous change.

Keywords: Authenticity, Vodun, Vodou, Orisha, Santeria, Cuba, Brazil, Gbe, Arada, Lucumi, Candomblé

Resumo

O privilegio de ioruba e orixá na bolsa de estudos da diáspora africana cria uma lacuna na produção de conhecimento envolvendo outras tradições religiosas da diáspora africana. Vodun, Vodou ou Voodoo é particularmente marginalizado e difamado e subestudado, especialmente fora dos Estados Unidos e em lugares como Cuba e Brasil. Os debates em torno da "autenticidade" nas religiões africanas foram talvez o maior debate entre o Vodu e o Orisha em ambos os lados do Atlântico. Esses debates falam da importância da linhagem,

ancestralidade e legitimidade. Classificar o que é autêntico e legítimo é frequentemente uma tarefa fútil, que se harmoniza melhor com os impulsos ocidentais de categorizar do que com as filosofias africanas de inclusão e mudança contínua.

Palavras chaves: autenticidade, Vodu, Orisha, Santeria, Cuba, Brazil, Gbe, Arada, Lucumi, Camdomblé

Questions of Authenticity and Syncretism in African Religions

This article is a comparative and historical ethnographic analysis of "authenticity" and so-called syncretism as theoretical tools for explaining African-based religions (Vodou, Vodun, and Orisha) in Latin America and the Caribbean (namely Brazil and Cuba)[1]. Despite many shortcomings and problems with syncretism as a concept, it continues to be employed across many disciplines, even as it conflates and mystifies the different aspects and elements of African religions. Syncretism approaches tend to confound African symbols and explain away things that, from the inside, are fundamental to African systems. Meanwhile, debates of authenticity, often ignore the very foundational aspects of cultural and religious mixing which constitute the very bedrock of African cosmologies throughout the Atlantic world. The concept of syncretism reflects a value-laden verdict established in ethnocentric typologies of Western/Christian/Muslim lenses. When African traditions are evaluated by anthropologists, and practitioners themselves, we are guilty of simplifying some symbols and historical encounters and overplaying some of these internal orders, especially Yoruba influences in the Atlantic World, often at the expense of *Gbe* (Ewe and Fon) and Congolese religious traditions. Moreover, anything viewed as non-Yoruba, is often believed to be invented, and therefore illegitimate, and practitioners in Brazil, Cuba, and Nigeria are constantly feuding over what authentic—despite the fact that the ethnonym Yoruba itself is precarious and more hybrid than "pure." What is lost here is that all religions on earth invent, blend, and are essentially amalgamations of ubiquity. Conspicuously absent from most of this literature are publications by African agents from within these systems, or the need to frame things explicitly through parallels or oppositions, and not both (Pichardo 2012). Religions in general constantly adapt and change and are influenced from polyvalent sources; and Yoruba Orisha and Adja-Ewe Vodun have long been influenced by each other, neighboring groups, and even Abrahamic religions at times.

Within the anthropology of religion as it pertains to the African Diaspora there is a definitive lack of engagement with the theoretical and methodological problems of the concept of "authenticity." These debates stem back early 20th century, with questions as to whether culture is genuine or spurious, but also traverse innumerable fields—archeology, heritage, poststructuralism, Marxism, Latin American Cultural Studies, tourism, religion, colonialism—about what is authenticity or "real" culture and what

1 The descriptive terms and labels used to describe and denote the "orisha" based religions practiced in different geographies include various labels including "Orisha"; "Yoruba Orisha"; "Lukumi/Santeria" "Candomblé", however none of these are discussed or defined in depth. For the purposes of time/space I am contrasting "Vodun" with "Orisha" writ large and realize they are subject to unique histories and manifestations based on geography and time.

is mixed, transcultural, hybrid, and thus also what is the significance of this hybridity and/or syncretism (see Apter 1991, pp's 235-260; Montgomery, 2016, p. 7; Falen, 2018, p. 456). The key argument to make from an anthropological perspective is that these debates are profoundly political contentions that in one way or another are gambits for power, prestige, and privilege. The piece is an attempt to combine different types of knowledge to assess and evaluate questions of authenticity in Orisha religions of Cuba and Brazil. Montgomery is a practitioner and anthropologist who has done twenty years of ethnographic fieldwork in Ghana, Togo, and Benin. Gonzalez is a Puerto Rican *Babalawo* (priest) trained by Cuban priests, and regular general practitioner trained in Ifa divination and more. While Montgomery works to articulate the aspects of "missing Vodun" and contemporary debates in the academic literature, Gonzalez speaks to debates between Cubans and Nigerians online, and also the elements of Cuban Lucumi and Brazilian Candomblé which do not fit supposed true-Orisha frameworks. This collaborative approach can hopefully address and analyze ongoing debates concerning Yoruba-Orisha and Gbe-Vodun on both sides of the Atlantic with particular attention to Cuba, Brazil, and beyond.

What and Where is Vodun?

Vodun is the indigenous "animistic" religion of southern Benin and Togo, while "Orisha" is the same for the Yoruba of southwestern Nigeria. Both religions have been transported and redefined throughout the African Diaspora and their spellings, meanings, and descriptions change across time and space. "Voodoo" (Vodun, Vodu, Vodou) is perhaps the most recognized African-based religion, though knowledge of it has long been mystified by the popular media and in many academic accounts. Even within academic spheres it has nearly always been associated with Haiti, Benin, Togo, and sometimes New Orleans (see Montgomery and Vannier, 2017; Bay, 2008; Richman, 2005; McAlister, 2002; Rosenthal, 1998; Blier, 1996). While popular culture has been less apt to dedicate negative attentions to Yoruba Orisha, Lucumi, and Santeria worship, they too are misunderstood and maligned and are often "lumped " with "diabolical Vodun." Regarding Orisha, more academics have recognized its scale and scope throughout the Atlantic world: Nigeria, Brazil, Cuba, Trinidad, Venezuela, Mexico, and beyond (Houk 2010; Matory 2009; Dianttelli 2002; Apter 1995; Gonzalez Whippler 1994; Verger 1969; Bascom 1969). The degree to which African religions and from where they came to the Americas during and after the Diaspora, and the question of why and how, in places like Brazil and Cuba, Orisha came to rule at the expense of other belief systems, have been and endure as topics of intense debate by anthropologists and religious scholars.

Intra-denominational disputes about legitimacy and acceptability constitutes a pattern within religions throughout the world, evidenced by raging debates within Islam, Christianity, and Hinduism. There are religious diasporas everywhere, and our concern here is with the historical and cultural complexities surrounding these mis-founded battles for authenticity and legitimacy between Africa, Brazil, and the Caribbean.

Arguments around authenticity tend to miss the importance of creativity and adaptability necessary for all religions fighting for survival to survive. The case study here is no different, for Vodun, Orisha, and other Africa-derived religions are also concerned about power and survivorship of their belief systems and are thus a part of this bigger dynamic process concerning validity. There are two spheres of knowledge at play here: 1) how anthropologists write about and experience Vodun and Orisha, and 2) how practitioners themselves talk about their beliefs (sometimes online). As ethnographers concerned with meaning, we must suppress our arrogance, and recognize that these transatlantic ongoing debates, often online between practitioners, are of academic interest. These controversies about Vodun/Orisha and other African-derived ways of seeing and knowing are a moving target, and escape the anthropological fantasy of well-defined terms. What happens online between Cubans, Brazilians, Nigerians, Haitians, and others is a relevant genre of knowledge equitable with the ethnographically embodied knowledge regarding these same topics. We work to bridge these disparate realms of knowledge through our co-authorship and very different backgrounds. People on both sides of the Atlantic dismiss each other for not being properly genuine, and anthropologists and practitioners fall into the same oppositional trap. That is why this co-authored piece includes an anthropologist (and initiate), and a practitioner engaged in online debates, for we need each other, for authenticity itself is a cultural invention. Human beings are always redefining and reinventing ideas of the sacred, because religion is a creative process, and inter and intrareligious fighting is always political, and about power. How the ideas of Orisha, Vodun, and African-derived religions relate to each other across time and space is the subject of this article.

Peoples from the Bight of Benin (Ghana, Togo, and Benin) were not only shipped to Haiti, but to Cuba, Brazil, Guyana, and Jamaica. This begs a deeper questions: why have Vodun liturgical elements found outside of Togo, Benin, and Haiti been mostly ignored? Two factors are key: First, more slaves were brought from Yorubaland (especially later in the Trans-Atlantic trade) and most arrived after the mass slave expulsions from "Dahomey," today's Togo and Benin. Second, for socio-political reasons, Europeans, Africans, and Caribbean and Latin Americans alike have muddied the articulation of Yoruba identity and religion, for "Yoruba" identity itself is a colonial "invention" (Matory, 2015a). The result has been that manifestations of "Vodun proper" in other areas have been mostly overlooked, particularly in The Dominican Republic, Cuba, Brazil, and also Suriname and Guyana.

Research in the African Diaspora has revealed two key religions strains from Africa: the West African religions of Yoruba Orisha, and Ewe and Adja-Fon Vodun (Matory, 2015a; Law, 2005; Bastide, 1972). There have been other diffusions as well, including distinct varieties from Central Africa. Ethnic names and religious significations have been numerous and ever-changing in the historical record, and this has led to much ambiguity and debate regarding the extents and impacts of Vodun, Orisha, and other African religious systems within the African Diaspora (Fandrich, 2007, p. 777). Another challenge for elucidating the bigger picture has been the overlapping gods, liturgical elements, and histories between these religions and their associated ethnic groups, before, during, and after the Atlantic Slave trade, both within Africa and beyond.

In Nigeria, some priests and adepts believe that Cuban, Brazilian, and other Latin American followers are practicing and propagating beliefs that are not true to their Nigerian roots; these beliefs are said to be "invented," and corrupted by Catholicism and slavery. Gonzalez is regularly told by Nigerian babalawo's that Catholicism has diluted his Lucumi, and that slavery has disconnected Cubans from Africa, while many Cubans fire back that British colonialism has watered-down traditions in Nigeria. What seems like a proverbial "pissing match" is nonetheless alive and well as people jockey for power and privilege during what many such as Babalawo Ivan Poli from Brazil see as an "African Renaissance." Meanwhile, some Latin American babalawos insist that the within Nigeria itself Orisha has been co-opted by evangelical Christianity and especially Islam (Chirila, 2014; Olupona and Rey, 2008). Missed in this ongoing firestorm is that many if not most adherents of these religious complexes are less concerned with authenticity than with serving the spirits as they know them. In Togolese Gorovodu, for example, authenticity is a moot point to the extent that foreign gods are celebrated for their otherness (Montgomery, 2019, p. 251-270; Rosenthal, 1998, p. 100-129). Less understood is the degree to which Cuban Lucumi/Santeria, Brazilian Candomblé, and other Diasporic religions have been affected and informed by other non-Orisha religions.

The Ewes, Minas, and "Aradas" of Ghana, Togo, and Benin

This article is an attempt to insert Gbe/Ewe/Fon concepts and practices of the religion as a major player in the global Atlantic and to challenge the hegemony of orisha-based religions that have structured a great deal of academic work in the diaspora. The historical record references both "Aradas" and "Minas," who originate west of Yorubaland in Nigeria, from southwest Ghana to southeastern Benin. "Aradas" refers to those coming from Allada in modern-day Benin, including Minas, Ewes, Adja-Fons, and other groups these people enslaved from the hinterlands including Kabye, Hausa, Fulani, and "Dagari" peoples. As Robin Law points out:

> *Mina* when encountered as an ethnic designation of enslaved Africans in the Americas in the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries, has commonly been interpreted as referring to persons brought from the area of the Gold Coast (*Costa da Mina* in Portuguese usage), corresponding roughly to the southern parts of Ghana, who are further commonly presumed to have been mainly speakers of the Akan languages Fanti, Twi, etc.) dominant on that section of the coast and its immediate hinterland (2005, p. 245–46).

Many of these Akan peoples ended up in Jamaica, as evidenced by many so-called Ghanaian "survivals" alive in Jamaican society, music, and religious expressions.

Today in Ghana, Togo, and Benin some refer to both a Mina language and a "Guin-Mina" peoples, who are closely associated with Anlo-Ewes, and other Adja-Ewes (Rosenthal, 1998). Others have lumped together "Mina" and "Aradas," claiming both groups hail from the "Slave Coast" (modern southern Ghana, Togo, and Benin), where people speak the languages today generally called "Gbe" (more commonly "Ewe" in the

past), including Ewe, Adja, and Fon (Law 2005). As Law posits, following Gwendolyn Hall, if the extent of "Mina" presence in the Americas was greater than has formerly been recognized, this must substantially alter the picture we have of ethnic formation in the Americas (2005). Parés (2013) makes similar arguments regarding Brazil, where the number of "Slave Coast" slaves was under calculated, especially in the seventeenth to eighteenth centuries, which may have also distorted the picture we have of other places.

In Spanish, there is a substantial growth referencing the Ewe-Fon practices of "Arara" in Matanzas Cuba, including the religious connections between Ewe and Arara dances collected in oral histories and folklore, as well as codifications of musical instruments from the Bight of Benin (see Crosby, 2010; Vinueza, 1989; Courlander, 1942). David H. Brown's "Santeria Enthroned" (2003) explains how innovation and cultural borrowing has always been part and parcel of the development and evolution of Cuban Lucumi. While Palmié (2002) delves into "genealogies of morality" and "the work of witchcraft and science" in Cuban history and modernity, or how African knowledge thrived on the planation and afterwards with wage labor and into contemporary times. James Sweet's (2011) work on Domingo Alvarez and the power of Gbe-speaking priests in Brazil is also illustrative and beautifully crafted.

In Brazil, Cuba, and other Caribbean Islands and regions of South, Central, and Latin America, too, there was a greater "Mina" and "Arada" influence than previously suggested (Mason, 2015; Murrell, 2010). Perez de la Riva in his work (1979) focused on Haiti, which most scholars have long associated with "Dahomean" roots. Interestingly, the same sort of essentialization of Yoruba traits that occurred in Cuba and Brazil may have occurred in the other direction in Haiti, where Congolese and Angolan liturgical roots were swept aside in favor of Dahomean influences. Be that as it may, there is no doubt that "Mina" and "Arada" or "Ewe" and "Fon" influences were high there. Aspects of the mutual-aid and "brotherhood" organizations such as Haitian freemasons, or what Daniela Pérez has called "The French Tombs" (2017), an amalgamation of French and African-based "Vodou" ritual elements, are still preserved in the carnival of Santiago de Cuba; the *cocoye'* (carnival march), *tajona-tambores*, and *baile de tajona*—all Haitian and Dahomean in origin— and remain prominent in contemporary Cuba, especially in the eastern provinces (Perez de la Riva, 1980).

Could it be that what some Nigerians see as "false" Orisha rites in Cuba (as expressed in online debates), and what Cubans themselves consider "true" Orisha elements, may not be Yoruba at all, but rather elements of Vodun? For further clues we can look to music. Songs and musical instruments serve as vivid windows into the religious soul throughout the African Diaspora, and in both Cuba and Brazil there are drums and musical elements that are "Arada" or "Mina" in origin—often sung in the Gbe-tongue while summoning Orisha spirits. Daniela Pérez writes:

> Their songs and dances were accompanied by the drums called by extension tombs, one larger (drum premiere), two bulá, and a cylindrical xylophone, in position horizontal on an easel called katá. These drums are a simplified version in the form of the dahomeyanos drums from where they come, but they have the same principle acoustic" (2017, p. 138).

Slaves: From Where, and How Many?

Within West Africa, new data suggests an increased importance in the slave trade for the Gold Coast and the Bight of Benin relative to other West African regions. Whereas earlier estimates gave the Gold Coast six percent of the total trade and the Bight of Benin seventeen percent, the distribution made possible by the new data set almost doubles the importance of the Gold Coast and increases the Bight of Benin share to twenty-two percent (Parés 2013; Eltis and Richardson 2001, p. 25). The Dubois Institute reveals that it is likely that departures from the Bight of Benin exceeded ten thousand per year over the 125 years from 1687 to 1811. These larger numbers of slaves hailing from between Ghana and Benin mean that more Ewes, Minas, Akans, as well as northern Sahelians including Mossi, Hausa, and Fulani, ended up in Brazil and Cuba, cultural and religious influences of "Arada Vodun" were also more pronounced, at least until the late nineteenth century. Many of the liturgical elements of Vodun survived and flourished throughout the Caribbean and Latin America as Sweet show regarding Gbe-speaking priests of Sakpata (2011). Larger numbers of Central Africans and Yoruba populations came later and eventually superseded and sometimes weakened the symbols of Vodun and replaced them with Orisha markings, which eventually led to a Yoruba-centric universality of ideas. Arguments abound about the authenticity and purity of Orisha rites obscure that many New World differences may not convey confusions or dilutions of Yoruba Orisha traits, but rather earlier strains of Vodun. Indeed, if we allow for bias in the assertions of Bahian slave ship captains who knew little about African constructions of identity, in the period after the British took authoritarian action against the trade after 1815, this high-volume era probably protracted over a century and a half to 1830 (Parés, 2013, p. 28).

While the British American trade dominated slave shipments from the Gold Coast, of every ten slaves that left the Bight of Benin, six went to Bahia in Brazil, two to the French Americas, notably St Domingue, and one to the British Caribbean. From 1791 to 1830, Bahia took seventy-five percent of deportees from the Bight of Benin. Thereafter, Cuba became more important as a market for slaves, and for fifteen years after 1851 it was the only market available to shippers of slaves from the Bight of Benin. Compared to Bahia, Cuba's links with the Bight of Benin were relatively short-lived. It is nevertheless striking that the strong Yoruba presence in Cuba noted by some historians should be based on such limited exposure to the region, at least compared to Cuban ties to other African regions. Ifa priests there who have studied rites, spirits, and religious songs in Africa often find many commonalities with the Vodun of Benin and Togo.

"Authenticity" and Efflorescence

Debates about "authenticity" in Vodun and Orisha are nothing new, Professor Terry Rey told Montgomery via email correspondence, "The entire question of authenticity, along with gender, was the leading subject of contention and debate at the 1999 Miami

conference from which the volume I edited with Olupona emerged" (23 JUN. 2019). These debates speak to the importance of lineage, ancestry, and authority. Even within what Dana Rush called the "open-ended" and "unfinished" pantheons of *Tron* Gorovodun and Vodun in Togo and Benin (2013), a crucial emphasis is still placed on training in and legitimacy attributed to sacred rites, medicines, language, the proper manufacture of god objects, and how animals must be sacrificed, and rhythms and dances performed (see Landry, 2018). Vodun and Orisha remain very kinship- and legacy based religions. Even in Gorovodun in Togo, which anyone can purchase, people maintain a strict code for initiations and the performance of rituals.

That said, sorting out what is authentic and legitimate is often a futile task, one that harmonizes nicer with Western desires to categorize than it does with African philosophies of embeddedness and constant change. Even the term "Yoruba" is problematic in this way: it is a Western colonial label first applied within efforts to unify diverse groups—under colonial rule (Capone, 2005; Matory, 2015b). Within Africa itself origins are not as important as where the actual spirit services take place. The "Hausa Gods" of Gorovodun are all but invisible today in the northern territories of Ghana and Togo from where they originated. These gods themselves are seen as "Muslims," complete with long beards, "Salah" prayer ceremonies are held on Fridays, and there is an array of other mimetic nods to Islam (Montgomery and Vannier 2017; Friedson, 2009). As Terry Rey reminded Montgomery, the notion that Islam could have diluted Orisha religion ignores an age-old understanding in West Africa in which Shango (God of Justice, Thunder and Lightning) is portrayed as a light-skinned Muslim. Many believe Ifa/Fa/Afa divination systems within the Yoruba, Adja, and Ewe groups originated with "Muslims" from the north and east of the Bight of Benin. In sum, despite fixations on authenticity, these gods of Orisha and Vodun have for centuries traversed regions, cultures, and time epochs both in and outside Africa, and they continue to do so today. That is not to say that legitimacy and the preservation of proper liturgy are unimportant, but rather to emphasize that, just as in Islam, Christianity, Judaism, and other "world religions," in Orisha and Vodun interpretations, migrations, and dynamic change are constant.

In the United States, a licensing body called The National African Religion Congress (NARC), headquartered in Philadelphia, is seeking to register all priests of these African-based religions. Their mission is multi-faceted as they work to ensure the freedom to perform ceremonies, rituals, and animal sacrifices, and also to fight against persecutions by other religions. They issue plaques to their licensed "clergy members" and are trying to gain African priests and priestesses the legal certification to perform marriages. NARC works to build legitimacy for priests and priestesses of Lucumi, Yoruba, Santeria, Vodun, Vodou, Candomblé, and related orders worldwide. More generally, as the global reach and depth of Vodun and Orisha grow, so too will the collective respect they require to gain full legitimacy in the eyes of others. This is why practitioners ways of seeing (often online) needs to be taken seriously by anthropologists, we are all seeking a greater respect for African-derived religions.

What is undeniable is that religious practices of African origin, are gaining steam throughout the world, especially in the United States, Europe, the Caribbean, and South

and Central America—where Santeria (Regla de Ocha and Congolese Palo Monte) has found fertile ground since the civil rights movement and also within today's "new age" movement—adoption of new African religious identities will continue to grow in the coming decades (Capone, 2005; Matory, 2018). The practice of African-American variants like "orisha-voodoo" is revitalizing Yoruba and Adja-Ewe culture on U.S soil (Capone, 2005), and nearly every major city there now exists a small population of African-first religious communities. This is part of what Capone calls "growing ritual pan-Africanism." Gonzalez regularly visits Puerto Rican and Cubano members of Lucumi to carry out rituals, while Montgomery does the same in Detroit and Chicago. There are small but growing robust communities of Orisha and Vodou throughout the US, Richman (2018) details Vodun and migration in her recent book, while McAlister (2002) has long detailed the Haitian Vodou communities of greater New York. Out of a fragmented ethnohistory shattered by colonialism, the slave trade, and the continuing impacts of neoliberalism, people are putting the pieces back together and a new collective identity of African consciousness is on the rise.

Vodun and Vodou in Cuba

Orisha/Santeria and Vodou/Vodun have practitioners whom believe in one god, served by several spirits. That is, though the monotheistic versus polytheistic debate has sometimes been used to devalue these religions, in fact the belief in multiple spirits does not inevitably invalidate the concept of a creator god. In Latin America and the Caribbean, for instance, *lwas*, *vodus*, and *orishas* (spirits) are often mistakenly identified with Catholic saints, and the exact manner and degree of actual "mixing" or syncretism is often confused. The fact is that every religion on earth is syncretic, making these debates sort of stale and short-sighted. In fact it is more about a form of resistance to domination than an actual assimilation or integration (Falen, 2016; Montgomery, 2016). Early on in the African Diaspora, there were more slaves from Ewe and Fon origins, who were later superseded by Yoruba and Central African slaves, which may help to explain how and why Orisha became the dominant manifestation and spirit-system in places such as Cuba and Brazil. In both Western Africa and throughout the Atlantic world, Orishas and Vodun spirits have intermingled, overlapped, and co-existed for centuries. In the village where Montgomery lives in Togo there are shrines and installations to Papa Legba, Shango (and Heviesso), Ogun, Sakpata, Mami Wata, as well as modern Gorovodu spirits, *Mama Tchamba* (slave spirits), and more. The periods between the wars between Dahomey and Yoruba chiefdoms, Ewe and Asante cultures saw the pervasive cooptation of foreign gods, which increased still further in the "New World" both during and after slavery. Most people think that "voodoo" is only practiced in Haiti or parts of the U.S. south, but it also reached places such as Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Dutch Guyana, Brazil, and other places where Orisha eventually "won out" (Carr, 2016).

Cuba is geographically close to Haiti and the Dominican Republic, where Vodou has reigned supreme since before the revolution. During performances of the *contradanza* in

Santiago de Cuba, adepts dance in pairs, a pattern that originated in the French plantation ceremonies, or what have been dubbed *mazon, vuba, djouba,* or *djounba* (Pérez, 2017). Even the dress and costumes worn in some Cuban ceremonies are French 19th century imitations. They were imitations historically, and still are today, mimetic gestures to Vodou. These practices may not all have all come directly from the Slave Coast (although some certainly did), but instead through Haiti due to the Ten Years War in 1848 after the bankruptcy of the Haitian coffee economy and the burnings and protests of the 1871 "riots" in the Guantanamo area, where many Haitian insurgents were active (Pérez, 2017; Millet and Brea 1989, p. 33). When slavery was finally abolished in Cuba in 1886, these "French" factions adopted Catholic religious elements under the Law of Associations and became enshrouded in the personas of the Catholic saints. Since 1959, Cuban collective memories have kept alive these various Dahomean/Haitian traditions in the ancestral drumming, dances, and gods that are still on display (Crosby, 2010). These survived despite ruthless settlers and empowered members of Cuban society who were trying to end them. They were cultivated by the religious imaginations of contemporary Cubans (Glissant 2006, p. 23), attesting to the creativity and determination of black Cubanos (Smallwood, 1975).

In Cuba (and Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic), one still finds "brushstrokes of Vodun," verifiable in the music, sacred languages, traditional medicines, spirit possessions, and material culture (Palmié, 2002). Cuba has not always been a country keen to claim or grow its infamous black and African musical forms, and indeed drums and "ecstatic dancing" were long banned from public events throughout the island. Not until the twentieth century was black music danced to in white people's homes. The marginalized music of blacks began to enter the private parties, theaters, dance halls, and night clubs of affluent Cubans (Benitez-Rojo and Maraniss, 1998, p. 180). Before this great awakening, the Cuban government, under the U.S. military, went to great lengths to prohibit the use of drums. In 1903 it outlawed the Calabari-based Abakua secret society (often mistaken as Yourba) and prohibited Afro-Cuban ceremonial dancing and ceremonies across the entire "republic," supposing them to be "symbols of barbarity and disturbing to the social order" (Diaz and Ayala quoted in Benitez-Rojo and Maraniss 1998, p. 180).

Abakua secret societies brought by slaves were born in Nigeria and Cameroon, but were similar to fraternal orders tied to West African Vodun. We know they are not Yoruba since they apply "Calabari" language and make no reference to Yorubaland Orishas. Fernández, the academic, published his *Los Cabildos Afrocubanos* in 1921, and several other articles and books on black culture and music shortly thereafter. After more than forty years of slavery and violence, African-inspired music with a religious foundation brought people together, and the rhythms of black and mulatto music included *buta* drums, "Chango" (god of justice and lightning) ballet, and Yoruba, Congo, Arada, and Abakua dances were ubiquitous (Hill, 1998). This same black revival inspired Afrocentric art, poetry, literature, plays, and other cultural forms. Cuban identity, paradigmatic to black American identity more generally, now included African religious identity. What have often been overlooked are the Ewe/Fon spiritual connections to Cuba. Orisha and Vodun combined to form a hybrid element of resistance that summoned aspects of African Orisha, Haitian Vodou, and African Vodun as well.

Comparative Ethnography and Evidence of Vodun

Beyond academia, there exists a goldmine of knowledge along with frameworks and debates regarding African influences on African Diasporic religions. This is especially pronounced among Lucumi worshippers in modern-day Cuba and Puerto Rico; a "movement" of Babalawo priests from the Lucumi tradition (Cuban Ifa) asserts that not all practices stem directly from Yorubaland-based traditions. From the Yorubaland side, large gaps in time and space due to slavery have led many to criticize diasporic religions outside of Nigeria for having "invented" many aspects of their beliefs and practices due to an absence of ancestral information and other effects of slavery. It is, of course, a universal human truth that all religious traditions are over time steadily reinterpreted, reformed, and reassembled—reinvented—and such processes have long been on-going on both sides of the Atlantic (and in all religions everywhere). This makes all the more striking the degree to which many diasporic religious practices match up with those found in parts of Africa today, problematizing simplistic critiques of diasporic invention and inauthenticity.

The debates on "invention" rage at conferences, on the internet, and in households on both sides of the Atlantic. According to Puerto Rican drummer and friend of Montgomery, Miguelito Soto, the same debates are ongoing in New York and Puerto Rico, especially between younger and older Orisha priests. A recent movement among younger Lucumi babalawos suggests that we can find other source-roots in Benin and Togo based *Fa-Agbassa*, a Beninese and Togolese specific type of divination and oral-story telling repository unique to Vodun. Stories surrounding Legba/Elegua/Eshu (trickster, god of the crossroads) and even the particular offerings (*vossa*) and sacrifices (*ebo*) are strikingly similar in Cuba and parts of Uruguay as they are in the Togolese village where Montgomery lives (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yZpqdICyqUM&t=194s). Common "Vodun" liturgical features in Uruguay, Puerto Rico, and Panama are virtually carbon-copies of practices from the Bight of Benin, and therefore cannot be categorized or criticized as "inventions." Here are some examples:

1. Cuban based Eshu-Elegua statues (installations) closely resemble Benin-based Legba icons: cement-based, cowrie shell eyes, and complex ingredients of dozens of similar plants and animal parts. RF Thompson (2010) offers a wonderful exegesis on kaolin Legba statues and Cuban Elegua statues, overlaps that Gonzalez and Montgomery noticed when viewing one another's videos from Togo, Cuba, and Puerto Rico respectively. This "god of the crossroads" is literally everywhere in the Diaspora, but how he is presented speaks volumes about cultural origins and movements of peoples and ideas. Sacred mantras are uttered upon construction, and many of their words are Ewe and Fon in origin, as are the prostrations performed and the ingredients used to make the god objects and shrines. Yorubaland-based "Eshu" are often more simple stone or wooden carved dolls, and their clay shrines are distinct from Adja-Ewe ones.

2. The use of a ceramic tile to represent the spirits or Egungun (Yoruba ancestral gods). These tiles are rare in Yorubaland, but are abundant in Ghana and Togo, even in Gorovodu shrines (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EyvYAZiA_fU&t=557s). Vodun interlocutors use a bundle of sticks for rituals to open the doors between worlds during

prayers, called *Atori Ogun* in Yoruba (they also do this in Lucumi Ifa when the initiate receives *Oro Lewe* or *Orun*), but they do use a different tile. The Benin *bokonos* (priests) use a similar tile as alters to the spirits. The biggest evidence regarding Vodun presence occurs in religious songs in the Gbe language that are sung to the Orishas (*Afrekete, Hevioso, Legba/Afra*, and the ritualization of the *Sakpata* family of earth spirits like *Toxosu* during many rituals).

3. Babalawo Martin Rodriguez (Ogunda Irosun) placed online in a blog in which Gonzalez participated in, some images and essays about Benin-based "Hand of Orunmila" ceremonies (the first hand of De Ki or *inkiness*) regarding Ifa/Fa divination, and according to his research it resembles the Cuban "Hand of Orunmila" ceremony or *Owo Ifakan*. Still, Cuban Ifa sometimes looks more like Ewe *Afa* or Fon *Fa* than it does the Ifa divination and ceremony in Yorubaland, where adepts receive the first hand of Orunmila seeds (*Isefa*). Even the music played in Togo and Benin after Afa/Fa initiation hits in the 6/8 meter of Cuban Ifa, which differs from what one hears in Nigeria.

4. There exists another cosmic connection, pertaining to the authors of this article. The authors have the same *odu* or *du* (Ifa chapter) which is staggering, literally a 1:256 chance, and our personal stories and personalities bear the evidence of a cosmic connection for what we both took as a sign that we needed to work together and to write this article. Both of us have the same *odu* ('*du*' in Togo), what the Ewes for Montgomery call "*gbelete*." Montgomery's "du" casted from Gorovodu and Vodun Afa priests in Togo and Benin, while Gonzalez's stems from Cuban Lucumi Ifa (*odu*). In Cuba he is called "Ogbe Irete" or "Ogbe Ate," similar to the Nigerian description. "*Gbe*" is "*ogbe*," and "Lete" is "Irete or Rete." Therefore, our destinies and lives are tied for eternity, and that is probably not a coincidence. The forthcoming story from the Detroit River encompasses many of the same magical ingredients for Cuba and Togo, testifying to another Cuban/Vodun link. The cornmeal used (*eko* in Yoruba), *epo* (red palm oil), *otin* (rum or gin), and *omi*/*etsi* (water) are the same in both settings (Togo and Cuba). Including *eku* and *eya* (dried and smoke Jutia tree rat and fish), *awado* (toasted corn), *onyi* (honey), *Inle Shilekun Ile* (dirt from the front door of one's home), *efun* (white cascarilla powder), *ori* (cocoa butter), and in Montgomery's, gun powder (*dzu* in Ewe) and a bullet casing. The goal here is not to undermine the strong positivist evidence for our argument, but to show that mysticism and creativity also inform how the authors themselves sort out controversy.

5. Other paradigmatic elements between African Vodun and Cuban Lucumi were deciphered from Montgomery videos and a comparative approach to the authors many divination sessions over the years. Montgomery's documentary short on Afa divination on https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yZpqdICyqUM&t=194s shows that the *bokonos* and *afavis* (children of Afa) and elder priests use a simple calabash to deposit "*De Ki*" (palm nuts) after performing divination on the Earth, not on the divining board common in Yoruba circles. This same procedure is often done in Cuban Lucumi Ifa. Gonzalez insists that Cuban Lucumi priests are taught to be very rustic and "roots"-based in their doctrines. As in Togo, Cubans do not use plates (though they have them) to hold the *Ikin* seeds used in divination. In Cuba, they sit upon a straw mat with their backs to a wall, as do the Afa diviners in southern Ghana, Togo, and Benin. A ducks' mouth is invoked

during sacrifice in the same way in both Cuba and along the Bight of Benin. In both places half-gourds or calabashes are used, as well as fresh palm wine and certain carbonized plant materials (‘*atike*’ in Ewe/Fon). In Yorubaland Orisha-based practice, diviners use elaborate *Agere Ifa* (temporary receptacles for divination objects).

[PLEASE INSERT FIGURES 1.1, 1.2, 1.3, AND 1.4]

Cubans and Brazilians have not lost their ways or become tainted by a need for invention. Rather, the influences on Lucumi, Candomblé, and Ifa were never unilinear from only Yoruba; there have always been multiple sources of influence. Even though many Cuban and Brazilian Ifa diviners lack the capacity of Africans to memorize orally received meanings in divination, they can, even when referring to texts, be just as accurate in their readings and useful to their clients. Some Lucumi brethren have been attracted by the siren-call of ancestralism coming from Yoruba-based babalawos, and many have internalized a sense of deficiency or of being “second-class.” Many of the differences between Cuban and Nigerian practices lie crucially in the Beninese and Togolese roots of some Cuban liturgical elements.

Cubanos recite Ifa legends, and some *patakines* (fables) have complex characters and topics and eclipse six thousand words. In Togo, Benin, and Cuba, diviners use storytelling to tell their clients what they are suffering from, and why. This does not seem to be the main storyline in Yoruba spheres. In both Cuba and Togo, a binary code is applied with sacred seeds or palm nuts to determine whether a “1” or “11” is marked in the sand, and this procedure will eventually yield one’s Odu/du. In both contexts, they can determine this binary code by posing questions eventually marked with the ritual implement called the *Ekuele* (in Ewe *‘Opele’*). When a Cuban-American casted Ifa for Montgomery in southwestern Detroit (in 2018), the results were the same as they had been in Togo and Benin in 2011 and 2014, respectively. Rosenthal cites a similar study she made while visiting different Afa *bokonos* (diviners) during her fieldwork in Togo in the 1990s (1998, p. 173). In both contexts, the oracles marked which “*Ebo*,” or sacrifices, were necessary for which spirits. They also recommended Montgomery assemble a “*vossa*,” or offering, wrapped in white cloth to leave in the Detroit River. They warned of witchcraft on behalf of his ex-wife and told him which precautions to take. It was to include certain flowers, weeds from a grave site, marijuana, mercury, familial jewelry, talcum powder, gin, dried blood from a fowl, horse hair, and several photos. These are many of the same ingredients used in Cuba during rituals performed for Gonzalez a decade or so ago earlier, and in both instances they even mentioned a *hadith* from the Quran.

Vudum and JejE in Brazil

Vudum, or Vodun, was the major African religious collective that persisted in Brazilian black culture until it was usurped by Orisha and Catholicism during the past century or so. According to Luis Nicolau Parés, Candomblé is “the name given to the

regional development of Afro-Brazilian religion in the state of Bahia ... a possession cult involving divination, initiation, sacrifice, healing, and celebration (2005, p. 139). The term "Nago" refers to the Yoruba-speaking slaves who are credited with establishing the caboclos (houses of Orisha) in northern Brazil. Pares explains,

> *Jeje* references Vodun gods, and Angolan spirits are referred to as *enkices.* All of these pantheons have certain 'super-languages' of ritual linguistics to reference and communicate with corresponding spirits as well as particular songs, drum rhythms, ritual clothing, food offerings, and medicinal practices. This *eclecticism* varies across boundaries and diacritical signs of these real and imagined communities are important for deciphering the cultural roots and applications in Brazilian society" (2005, p. 77).

It is key that these cultural and religious distinctions have also been important in Africa before and during slavery and up to the present day.

It seems that non-Nago houses of worship were more prevalent a century ago, but like all other non-Yoruba societies, the empowered Yoruba majority eventually grew in number. In fact, Parés references a work by Mott and Cerqueira (1998, p. 13), which:

Suggests that cult houses self-identifying as belonging to the Nagô-Ketu or Ketu nation constitute 56.4 percent of the total (against 27.2 percent of the Angola and a mere 3.6 percent of the Jeje). This Ketu predominance is due to the social visibility and prestige of three cult houses" (Parés 2005, p. 139).

> In both Cuba and Brazil, the first, founding "cult houses" are said to have had both Yoruba and Ketu origins around the turn of the twentieth century. In Brazil, the "Casa Branca" of Eugenho Velto is the original terreiro (house or society) which later birthed two other Nago-Ketu houses around 1910 (Parés, 2005). These "true" guardians of Orisha gained esteem with the help of the media and the larger numbers of Yoruba-descended Brazilians, and also with Brazil's Black Power movement in the 1960s. Interestingly, the Brazilian presence is also alive and well in Togo and Benin. Togo's first president, Sylvanus Olympio, has Brazilian forebears, and in present-day Benin, Brazilian family names are common in cities such as Porto Novo, Ouidah, and Cotonou. The Black Power movements in both Cuba and Brazil only strengthened the Orisha pull. In Brazil, the Ketu houses at this same time relegated Angolan and Beninese influences into the realm of "impure invention" (Davila, 2010; Parés, 2005).

This "Yorubization" ignores that Yoruba identity, like Orisha religion itself, was invented as a colonial construct, and has contributed to a homogenization of African peoples on both sides of the Atlantic (Matory, 2015b). Throughout slavery, and especially by mid-nineteenth century, religious practices of African origin were not particularly dominated by the Yoruba orixá cults and the "Jeje vudum" cults may have exerted a more critical influence, at least an equally important one" (Parés, 2005, p. 140). It seems that anti-Lucumi and anti-Candomblé opinions have come from not only from Nigeria but also many people in Brazil and Cuba. As Parés (2005, p. 141) astutely points out, this demonization of New World liturgy is essentially ahistorical. Parés writes:

> The record indicates a number of religious cult groups in the early nineteenth century and if my argument is correct we further speculate that, despite the massive demographic superiority of the Nago from 1820 onwards, the Jeje re-

> ligious traditions were critical points of reference in the organization of ritual practice"(PARÉS, 2005, p. 142).

Even today, the initiation room is called hunco and the shrines peji, which are Gbe-speaking terms (Parés, 2005). Jeje was a central founder of Candomblé and had great agency (Castro, 1981). The linguistic and ethnomusicological evidence also points to more "Jeje" and Angolan influence in the nineteenth century, evidenced in the songs of the Pretos-Velhos (Old Blacks) (Alvarez-Lopez, 2019, pp. 177-194; Reiz, 2001). Their songs and language are permeated with Central African cognates while, as both Reiz (2001) and Parés (2005) point out, up until the late-1800s it seems Gbe terms were as popular and common as any Nago terms. Words such as hun, (drum), vudum, and other references to certain gods, musical instruments, and material culture were of Adja-Fon and Ewe provenance. In "Winti" religious orders in Surinam and Guyana, we find other markers of Akan, Adja-Ewe, and Adja-Fon slaves, traversing the pantheons of earth, water, forest, and sky, with "Gbe" names for spirits such as: Loko (tree), Fodo, Bisi (Ewe for kola nut), Aladi (Allada) and more. Not only were Gbe terms more widespread, but they were also embedded within Yoruba terms and beliefs, in a sense "fused" with them, as Nina Rodriguez wrote in the 1890s. It seems the Yoruba referents won out over the "Vodun" cultural symbols sometime between 1870 and 1896, partly because the Nago-houses were large and able to hold huge feasts, Jeje/Vudum elements eroded over time. The "order and progress" of the new Brazil after independence in 1888 allowed no room for the "barbaric" ways of black-Bahia, and this further decimated the Jeje Vudum in favor of a Western Catholicism and a "more evolved" Orisha (Parés,2005). Parés writes:

> The Jeje voduns in Bahia and Maranhão present important similarities but also significant differences. In Bahia the 'kings' of the Jeje 'nation' are the snake vodun Bessen (Dan family), the thunder vodun Sogbo (Hevioso or Kaviono family), and the smallpox vodun Azonzu (Sakpata family). The eldest female vodun Nana, the gameleira-tree vodun Loko, Lisa, Aizan or Elegba are other well-known voduns, and there are many others still preserved in memory, but the first three 'families', including a varied number of voduns each, are the main identities of the contemporary Bahian Jeje pantheon. Despite evidence of the presence of Gbe-speaking people in different parts of Maranhão, in São Luis, the presence of the Jeje seems to have centered in the Casa das Minas also known as Querebentã de Zomadonu. The voduns of this cult house are grouped in four linhas (lines, spiritual fields) or families: Kevioso, Dambirá, Savaluno, and Davice (PARÉS, 2005, p. 87).

The Yewe Vodun of Benin can be public or secretive, and the same holds true in Brazil, as exemplified by Sakpata or Heviesso (from the Togolese town of Xevie). As Parés writes, this "suggests that the Casa das Minas took in from the very beginning members of different ethnic groups from the Gbe-speaking area, although always maintaining some sort of clear ritual boundaries between them." (p. 34). There are also many linguistic commonalities. For example, "Zandro," meaning "evening" in Fongbe, are the night ceremonies performed in certain cult houses, just as Egungun, or spirits of the night, have cultural associations within Yoruba legacies in Togo and Benin. Other shared

elements relate to the importance afforded to sacrificial animals such as goats, or to the use of small, round, dark red beads called runjebi or gongeva (from the Fongbe hû = deity, je = bead vè = red) that are used by the Nesuhué devotees in Benin, and which in the Casa das Minas are a mark of the Jeje nation. The use of the term hûnjevi is also reported in the Jeje terreiros of Bahia (Parés, 2005, 2013). All this is evidence that Jeje indeed possesses a range of distinctive elements, encoded in different aspects of their religious activity and expression, which distinguish them from other 'nations.' Nonetheless, a Jeje religious orthodoxy does not exist as such.

The process of Yoruba dominance, and whether it stemmed from Nigeria, or from within Brazil and Cuba, has been another central debate among scholars. Randy Matory believes that British dominance over African and African-American collaborations led to the "highly publicized" reputation of superiority of Yoruba peoples, and thus the inferiority of others (1999). For Matory, this Yoruba hegemony was born of the bourgeois black Lagos Nigerians to whom black racial and religious superiority were rooted in the Yoruba Nigerian nationalism of the 1890s (1999). Parés has explored the history of slave trading between Africa and Brazil across three centuries, and the numbers and origins of the slaves, this research adds credence to the possibility of a greater influence of Vodun ritual and culture in Brazil than previously thought. He applies historical and ethnographic study to trace the formation of Candomblé, and provides invaluable information on Yoruba and non-Yoruba influences on Brazilian Candomblé (2013).

Conclusion

The extent to which African religions left their residue in the Americas during and after the Diaspora, and the question of why, in places like Brazil and Cuba, Orisha came to dominate at the expense of other belief systems, are hot topics of intense debate. The Yoruba cultural supremacy model in the black Atlantic world is not just a question for historians; it sparks sometimes passionate debate among practitioners, and especially on the internet. This paper has questioned this model and, using Haiti, Brazil, and Cuba as case studies, along with comparative ethnography between Montgomery and Gonzalez, we have offered various kinds of evidence that the model has led to an underappreciation of the significant influences that "Vodun" has had on the region's religious practices. Influences of "Vodun" stretch well beyond Haiti to other areas of the Atlantic, we are sure to hear more about them in the coming years.

Olupona and Rey's (2008) work on the global dimensions of Orisha raised important issues, such as struggles between black Americans' and black Africans concerning their respective Orisha rites. They also highlighted the role of gender in these religions, particularly contemporary effects of "machismo." They ask in their introduction:

> Is there any merit to a Cuban Santero's claim that Yoruba religious culture in its purest form is found today in Cuba and Miami but not in Nigeria, where exposure to Islam has weakened "tradition"? Or is there validity to Oyotunji Village's general theological position that Yoruba-derived traditions in and from Cuba

> are somehow "contaminated" by Catholicism? Ultimately answers to these questions rely on underlying epistemological questions such as: How is something "known" in Yoruba religious culture? How is this knowledge transmitted, and what does it lose and/or gain in cultural transmission? Who has the authority to represent this knowledge, and how is such legitimacy acquired and maintained? What should the world most urgently learn from Yoruba religious culture" (OLUPONA&REY´S, 2008, p. 10).

For Wole Soyinka (2008, cited in Olupona and Rey), Orisha are "tolerant gods" offering a counter-narrative to the East/West, democratic/fascist, capitalism/communism binaries that have hegemonically muffled out the sound of the rest of the world, deeming everything else (as world religions have also done) as Other. But, how have these African religions affected one another? Has Orisha marginalized Vodun in Cuba and Brazil? Has Vodou done the same to Yoruba and Central African systems in Haiti? Why are Vodun and Orisha not recognized as world religions? These internal debates are proliferating and scholars should not ignore them. Scholars need to take seriously non-academic practitioners, many of whom are active online, because they are also very knowledgeable with much to say (as evidenced by Gonzalez in this writing). Further, that Vodun and Orisha are inclusive, and also largely oral, should not deter them from having open academic debates among themselves. It seems that many Latin American practitioners and adepts of African "traditional" religions are changing the way they think about the true compositions of their lineage, so that they can be proud enough of it not to discard it so quickly when faced with challenges from Yorubaland priests and Yoruba-centric narratives. This article brings into the light debates surrounding the authenticity of western Lucumi, Orisha, Candomblé, and related orders in the hope that lineages and liturgies will not be deemed "second-class" by a Yoruba hegemony. It also speaks to the creative capacity for people and their religious beliefs to recreate and reinterpret the changing world in which they live.

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