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RECLAIMING AFRICAN RELIGIONS IN TRINIDAD: THE ORISHA AND SPIRITUAL
BAPTIST FAITHS TODAY[1]

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RECLAIMING AFRICAN RELIGIONS IN TRINIDAD: THE ORISHA AND SPIRITUAL BAPTIST FAITHS TODAY

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Abstract:

This paper is based on a three-year ethnographic study of the Orisha movement and the Spiritual Baptist faith in Trinidad and Tobago. It reflects a life long research interest since the author first began studying Orisha, then known as the Shango cult, in 1956. The paper focuses on the growing political and social legitimation of African derived religions in Trinidad society, and on the dynamics of change with respect to the challenge of authenticity within the Orisha religion as well as their growing administrative and centralized infrastructure.

Introduction

This paper is based on a three-year ethnographic study of the Orisha movement and the Spiritual Baptist faith in Trinidad and Tobago. It reflects a life long research interest since I first began studying Orisha, then known as the Shango cult, in 1956. Over the years, I've watched changes taking place with in the religion but in the early nineties, it became clear that the Orisha religion was again evolving in significant new directions. The major change taking place was that people were beginning to take notice of it, were less suspicious and more accepting. Moreover, government was beginning to take the group seriously and some policy decisions regarding its status as a religion was being discussed. Similarly, the Spiritual/Shouter Baptist groups were agitating for a national holiday and serious consideration was being given to that idea by government.

My interest accordingly was sparked by this new and growing relationship between Orisha, Spiritual/Shouter Baptism and the government. The relationship between politics and African derived religions became increasingly exciting especially when 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 which was 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 great fascination 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 Yorubanization 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. While in earlier times, Orisha worshippers were not especially concerned with issues of authenticity, that topic has surfaced within the last years as a group of 'innovators' are attempting to develop an infrastructure for this formally de-centralized and atomistic religion. What is found today is a period of transition between traditional syncretic and the more 'modern' African approach to the religion.

Both the increasing public or *external* legitimation of African religions by government and their growing presence on the public agenda as well as the *internal* processes and dynamics of authentification are influenced by the larger societal modernizing changes taking place in the country in recent times. This project therefore was informed by 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 over-arching framework within which the African religions and 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 as well as basic theological and ideological understanding of the ritual will also be examined.

The focus of the project on which this paper (and book) is therefore :
- It is on the growing political and social legitimation of African derived religions, primarily the Orisha movement, as they move from oppression and marginalization to occupy a more accepted role in mainstream Trinidad society.
- And on the dynamics of change with respect to the challenge of authenticity within the Orisha

religion as well as their growing administrative and centralized infrastructure.

Legitimation Processes:

1. 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 affected. 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 which 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.

2. Public Ceremonies

These are events that are developed by the religions but include the full participation of government and officialdom. The Orisha religion now celebrates a public Family Day to which the members, the public at large, and government and other 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.

3. Media Coverage

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

4. Popular Culture

Contributing to the growing acceptance of these groups is the way in which their portrayal in the popular culture and 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 more positive directions. As well, 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, Authenticity, and Syncretism

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 centralized infrastructure to 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 relate themselves to the African origin or their ancestors.

These more private or internal aspects of the process appear to relate the need in post-modern societies, to re-establish personal and national identities. 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 towards 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 oppression. Thus, it is through the belief in African religion as it is practiced here that a growing number of younger people are attracted to it. The need to re-affirm 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 by what they perceive to be Indian favoritism and a loss of power within their own group. Re-affirming African identity, through commitment to an African religion has become even more crucial today.

As newer members are reclaiming their African identity through involvement with Orisha, they are also attempting to transform some of the ritual and ceremonial practices of the religion to conform more closely to its 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 of practice and continue the Christian practices. It also raises the question of how 'authentic' is the Orisha religion as practiced in a changing Nigeria where its source, the Yoruba, have themselves been missionized under Colonial rule. This new movement within the Trinidadian group has, however, also resulted in the addition of ritualistic and ceremonial practices derived from its African Yoruban source. (The components of legitimation as well as the internal dynamics of change

are discussed in more detail in the book) Both dynamics must be understood within the context of a general and more over-arching impact of globalization on Trinidadian society and its political and socio-economic infrastructures. At a broader universal level, both issues must, however, be understood from the perspective of a changing, modernizing society being impacted by globalization and undergoing rapid socio-cultural, economic and political changes that impact on all of its institutions. 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, which 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.

Globalization and transnationalism have had a great impact on Trinidad largely brought about by the oil boom of the late eighties. Trinidad 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 headed by Prime Minister Basdeo Panday is widely perceived to be an 'Indian' government largely favoring its own ethnic group at the expense of the Afro-Trinidadian community. 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 fervor so characteristic of Trinidadian people and by providing assistance to them.

Beyond the actions of the state however is the important dynamic of public consciousness. In former times, African religions were despised, feared and rejected. Today they have become part of the public consciousness in more positive and energetic ways. Their social acceptance is a ready sign of the maturity of this society that can now not only accept that half of its population has African origins but assert this identity with pride. The transformation of the Orisha religion is spearheaded by Afrocentric innovators who, as part of their ideology, believe in the power and supremacy of their African heritage. While this new found African supremacy may be related to the ever present ethnic competition in this plural society, it is also apparent that segments of the Indian communities share in, and support, the need to create equal opportunity for all religions practiced in the country. In terms of benefits to the society as a whole, recognizing and supporting old African virtually indigenous religions, can only be regarded as a positive measure of the maturity and growth of the country.

The African religions and specifically Orisha have become a multi-leveled institutions in this society. They serve not only the obvious religious needs but also as a source of inspiration for personal identity somewhat similar to secular Jews who nevertheless identify as Jews. Many people, motivated by the need to re-claim their African heritage can now openly support the religions because they see in them a source of understanding and a coming to terms with their slave and colonial past. It is a source of amazement for Orisha believers and supporters that this religion could have been maintained undercover for so many years thus allowing it to survive under the most brutally oppressive conditions. The strength of belief in the traditional African gods was therefore extremely strong among the early slaves who brought it with them. This strength allowed the religion to survive. It is a mark of respect for these elders that the religion today is being brought back to the African traditions that they knew and respected before enforced Christianity changed its beliefs and rituals.

For many of the artistic supporters of the religion, Orisha is far more than a set of rituals. It is a source of creative inspiration that transforms their consciousness and brings them closer towards their African origins. It brings them in touch with a historical reality that for many years was rejected. One need only look at the lyrics of some modern calypsos or study the rhythmic percussive sounds of soca music to hear the African influences. The subtle nuances that speak to African forms and designs are clearly evident in the works of visual artists such as Leroy Clarke and Makuma Kenle. The Orisha themselves, gods and goddesses, are portrayed in some of this pictures.

On a more mundane and secular level, both religions have and continue to serve the needs of the state as a vehicle through which to attract electoral support. Finding such vehicles is a particular requirement of the state particularly at this time when the Indian led government is attempting to influence a crossover vote of Afro-Trinidadians to their cause. The last election in 1996 necessitated a coalition to between the NAR and UNC parties in order for Basdeo Panday to form a government. Providing a new national holiday, allowing Orisha marriage rites, donating land and promising to remove old oppressive legislation have given the present government a considerable amount of mileage. All of these events are covered in depth by the media and the Prime Minister takes every public occasion to remind the public of some of the perks given to these religions – all in the name of providing an equal place to every race. While these changes clearly benefit the members of the religion, their very need has provided this government with a chance to confer benefits on a predominantly Afro Trinidadian population.. Who can fault a government that is attempting to help African religions find their rightful place in society after years of marginalization and rejection. This is especially so in a multi-ethnic society such as Trinidad that places a very high value on religion and whose members are, in the main, deeply religious. To provide benefits to these religions shows the government acting to ensure the equality of all its citizens and without recourse to ethnicity.

Another function served by the African religions is that they have become a source of

synergy between the Indo and Afro Trinidadian segments of this society. They provide a means of coming together symbolically to achieve their ends. One example of this synergy deals with the controversy surrounding Orisha's membership in the Inter-Religious Organization. It took the combined efforts of the Maha Sabha and the Orisha's Council of Elders to highlight the discrimination that had been faced by the Orisha religions attempt to gain membership in that organization. The media made much of the meetings between Ms. Springer and Babalorisha Sam Phills' public attendance at a Maha Sabha led Hindu festival and their subsequent appearance on television a few days later. The Indian community in Trinidad also contains some marginalized religions and thus their coming together to champion the equality of all religions crosses over the ethnic boundaries in this society. Clearly, any mechanism that encourages ethnic solidarity in an often competitive and sometimes hostile societal environment can only lead to greater accommodation between these two often antagonistic groups.

Trinidad is an extraordinarily complex society despite its small size. It is also one rent with paradoxes so it is no surprise that the growing strength of the African religions centering on the Afrocentricity of their innovating members, also serves to provide a buffer against the growing Indo-Trinidadian hegemony in this society. Indo-Trinidadians not only run the present government but also appear to be increasing their participation and power in all areas of the public and private sectors. In the face of such hegemony, Afro-Trinidadians fear for their place in society. The African religions and especially Orisha with its growing Afrocentric focus provide a mechanism for Afro-Trinidadians to refocus, reclaim their identities and generally attempt to maintain themselves vis-à-vis the Indian community.

There have been significant changes within the Orisha religion but the trend towards secularization and centralization has not taken anything away from the spirituality of the religion. In fact, there are now more rituals and festivals being introduced into the religion in order to bring it back to its African roots. Attempting to remove its

syncretic Christian rituals will not undermine the richness of its ritual expression; it will in fact enhance the rites and ceremonies that are becoming more varied. As far as its ceremonial life is concerned, the increased Africanization will only make this religion more interesting and more available as a vehicle for finding and enhancing personal identity.

At another level, both religions are growing in the diaspora. Both are experiencing transnationalistic expressions. In the United States, the Orisha movement is rapidly growing among African Americans and while they dispute the authenticity of its expression in the Caribbean, they nevertheless recognize its viability and at least part of its African derivation. In the U.K., both religions have active followings and in Canada the Spiritual Baptist religion is well represented. Even the Orisha movement is beginning to be practiced there. Both religions are being transported abroad as Caribbean people migrate bringing their religious expression with them. Thus, from small beginnings in the tiny countries of the Caribbean, African derived religions are making their presence felt in the large metropoles of the world.