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(RE)EXAMINING THE AFRICAN DIASPORA AND CHRISTIANITY

Abstract

Only recently has Africana studies broken through the ceiling of the academic basement and garnered the attention deserved. “(Re)Examining the African Diaspora and Christianity”, rejects Occidental understandings and interpretations of African Traditional Religions (ATR). For example, the “fact” ATR’s are polytheistic. The paper begins by setting the general context and events of the African Diaspora and Euro-Christian colonization efforts. Next, I focus in on the West African Yoruba tradition to demonstrate how and why ATRs have been able to remain vibrant even after 500 years of displacement. Then, I put to task the common academic notions of *syncretism* in order to determine if any such relationship exists between ATRs and Christianity. Following the discussion, I explore the Catholic colonies and Protestant colonies for permissive or restrictive environments and the impact on ATRs. I close the paper by briefly addressing the modern impacts and discussion of reparations.

PART I - Introduction

“Complex systems tend to locate themselves at a place we call ‘the edge of chaos’... there is enough innovation to keep a living system vibrant, and enough stability to keep it from collapsing... finding a balancing point must be a delicate matter – if a living system drifts too close, it risks falling over into incoherence and dissolution; but if a system moves too far away from the edge, it becomes rigid, frozen, totalitarian. Both conditions lead to extinction. Too much change is as destructive as too little. Only at the edge of chaos can complex systems flourish”.¹

One of the leading literary critics of the last quarter of the 20th century, Edward W. Said, revolutionized Western understanding of non-Western cultures by showing, in his groundbreaking book *Orientalism*², how Western images shaped the Occidental view of the Orient. But those who follow Said have not until recently reflected that understanding back into Western cultures. While these surface in informal conversations, they are not a frequent, explicit theme in

¹ Michael Crichton, *The Lost World* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1995), 2-3.

² Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, 1978).

academic research and writing. As the foremost African philosopher and cultural anthropologist, V.Y. Mudimbe, argues in his landmark book *The Invention of Africa*³, a closer examination of the West (from a non-West vantage) is required for a balanced discourse on power and knowledge of otherness. This paper is a small contribution towards that discourse, in calling attention to persistent and enduring shortcomings of the Western academia regarding the African Diaspora, and stereotypes and myths of African Traditional Religions that continue to be perpetuated. I aim to identify some of the factors that perpetuate these stereotypes and myths with a focus on West African Traditional Religions. I begin by (re)examining the most perpetuated myth of Africa – that the African Traditional Religion is polytheistic. Next, I (re)examine the concept of “syncretism” in order to better analyze and interpret African Traditional Religions’ ability to endure the hostile and cruel environments of “The New World”. I ask questions such as: what were (are) the permissive and restrictive factors allowing, or not allowing, African Traditional Religions to be practiced? How did African Traditional Religions impact the lives of Africans, and Afro descendants, during enslavement and after emancipation? To what extent have African Traditional Religions and Christianity competed, influenced, and transformed one another?

PART II - The African Diaspora

In order to understand context, we must briefly examine the events precipitating the African Diaspora and the events of the African Diaspora. This is by no means an all-encompassing account, but rather what the author thinks are the most important features for the reader to know. The European-African slave trade began early in the fifteenth century with the

³ V.Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988).

Dutch and Portuguese transporting slaves from North and West Africa into the Mediterranean and Asia.⁴ By 1441, the Portuguese had begun experimenting with the cultivation of sugar and slave labor on the islands of Madeira, Azores, Cape Verde, and Sao Tome, which was to have a major impact on the course of history. In 1492, Christopher Columbus with the financing of the Spanish monarchy set sail to find a route across the Atlantic to trade with India. Columbus instead landed on what is now Haiti and the Dominican Republic. Although the initial conditions of colonial endeavors may have been economic or political, religion was a critical element to justifying the practice. Howard Zinn notes, “He (Columbus) was full of religious talk: ‘thus the eternal god, our lord, gives victory to those who follow His way over apparent impossibilities’” and “let us in the name of the Holy Trinity go on sending all the slaves that can be sold”.⁵ In 1493, Pope Alexander VI issued a papal decree asserting the rights to colonize, convert and enslave: “And we make, appoint, and depute you and your said heirs and successors lords of them with full and free power, authority, and jurisdiction of every kind...”.⁶ This papal decree has never been rescinded. The level of exploitation and violence wrought on the Arawak people (Native Amerindians) was immense and terrifying. The Arawak were subject to have their hands cut off for not bringing enough gold, hung, burned, stabbed, decapitated and exposed to all sorts of new diseases - within two years half of the 250,000 Arawak Indians on Haiti were dead.⁷ From this point on, a system of exploitation reliant on extreme cruelty and violence sanctioned by the highest Christian authority in Europe was created and perpetuated in “The New World”.

⁴ M. Alpha Bah “Legitimate Trade, Diplomacy, and the Slave Trade” in *Africana Studies: A Survey of Africa and the African Diaspora* ed. Mario Azevedo (Durham: Carolina Academic Press, 2005) 71-90.

⁵ Howard Zinn, *A People’s History of the United States* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2003) 1-22.

⁶ Mario Anzuoni, “Why the pope has yet to overturn the church’s colonial legacy,” *The Conversation*, September 23, 2015, <http://theconversation.com/why-the-pope-has-yet-to-overturn-the-churchs-colonial-legacy-39622>.

⁷ Zinn, 5.

The practice of chattel slavery spread as fast as the European conquest of the Americas. As previously stated, the indigenous peoples were the primary victims but there was also widespread resistance. Raymond Gavins informs, “they slaved in the gold and silver mines of South America, while often attacking their captors and escaping into familiar terrain”.⁸ Unfortunately, this resistance was not enough to combat germs, guns, and the cruelty of the Europeans. Within one hundred years of contact the genocide of 10,000,000 to 80,000,000 Amerindians occurred.⁹ Needing new sources of labor, the Europeans created the Trans-Atlantic Slave trade, sometimes referred to as the “Triangle Trade” connecting West Africa, North America, and South America. In 1526, Europeans began bringing Africans to the Americas, with the Portuguese first landing slave ships successfully in Brazil. And in the same year Spaniards landed on the Cape Fear River in the United States. The practice of forcibly removing people from their homes in Africa to be used as slave labor and become chattel would continue as late as 1888. The number of people forcibly removed from Africa is still debated. The most common estimates are around 11.5 million were forced to leave Africa but only 9.5 million reached the Americas. Other recent scholarship contends the accepted figures are based off unreliable and under reported European accounts. The underreporting is claimed to be slavers attempting to avoid taxation, pirate slavers illegally or discreetly moving people, and not counting the Africans who died resisting both African and European slavers. Such theorists place the number of Africans lost in total due to the slave trade to be 20 to 50 million lives.¹⁰ The destinations for individuals varied - family, kin, and tribe were of no importance to the Europeans. About 38% were shipped to Brazil, 15% to Spanish America, 42% to the Caribbean, and 5% to British North

⁸ Raymond Gavins, “Diaspora Africans and Slavery,” in *Africana Studies: A Survey of Africa and the African Diaspora*, ed. Mario Azevedo (Durham: Carolina Academic Press. 2005), 92.

⁹ Gavins, 92.

¹⁰ Alpha Bah, 76-77.

America.¹¹ A primary reason for my inquiry into West African Traditional Religions is that West Africa is believed to have supplied about 60% of the persons taken to the Americas. I must again note that religion played a crucial structural factor at the outset. While there were missionaries along the coast and somewhat inland in Africa, Catholic missionaries worked side by side with the conquistadors in the Caribbean and South America destroying native temples, denigrating the once sacred and forcing mass conversion to Christianity. When enslaved Africans arrived in Catholic held colonies they were often “converted” with rituals like the sprinkling of holy water. The Protestant colonizers were much less concerned with converting both Native Americans and Africans for quite some time. All the way until the 1740’s we see little to no concern or willingness to convert. However, with a sharp rise in Evangelicalism in the latter half of the 1700’s and early 1800’s Protestants began converting Africans at every opportunity. When Protestants decided to take on the task of conversion it resulted in a colonizing not only of the body, but a colonizing of the mind.

PART III - Eurocentrism and Denigration of All that is African

Thus, for over five hundred years Eurocentric laypersons, leaders, clergy, and scholars have attempted to destroy, discredit, and delegitimize anything of African origin. Most manifestations of African Traditional Religion, African philosophy and Afro-Descendant movements to improve a relegated status have been vehemently and enthusiastically suppressed.¹²¹³¹⁴ Academics are often responsible for the worst and longest standing prejudices

¹¹ Gavins, 91.

¹² Ward Churchill and Jim Vander Wall, *The COINTELPRO Papers: Documents from the FBI’s secret wars against domestic dissent* (Boston: South End Press, 1990).

¹³ George Reid Andrews, *Afro-Latin America: 1800-2000* (New York: Oxford Press, 2004), 191-201.

¹⁴ Marina Lopes, “Brazilian police arrest two former cops for death of black Rio council woman,” *The Washington Post*, March 12, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/the_americas/brazilian-police-arrest-two-ex-cops-for-murder-of-outspoken-black-rio-councilwoman/2019/03/12/2eb4b132-44c8-11e9-90f0-0ccfeec87a61_story.html.

regarding Africa and African peoples. For example, “Arnold Toynbee, one of the most influential British historians held the view that Africans ‘had not contributed positively to any civilization’...”.¹⁵ German philosopher George Hegel declared, “that Africa did not constitute part of the history of the world...”, and British geographer James McQueen once wrote, ‘if we (the British) really wish to do good in Africa, we must teach her savage sons that white men are their superiors’.¹⁶ These remarks and ideas are not relegated to a distant and dusty past. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, an eminent historian, theologian, and former director of Harvard University’s Center for the Study of World Religions, “once stated that scholars interested in the study of non-Christian religions should devote their time and energy entirely to the study of living world religious traditions (Oriental and Far Eastern religions) such as Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism; and that the study of primal religions should be shelved, as these traditions have no relevance to contemporary society”.¹⁷ It is worth noting this esteemed historian and theologian was also a devoted Presbyterian Minister and taught at several self-avowed Christian colleges in both India and Canada. The so-called *secular* state carries its mindset and prejudices into all arenas in the same way academia does. Former President of France, Nicholas Sarkozy, in a speech to African University Students in Dakar, Senegal disparaged all African history, philosophy, and life stating, “The tragedy of Africa is that the African has not fully entered into history... they have never really launched themselves into the future... the African peasant has only knew the eternal renewal of time, marked by the endless repetition of the same gestures and the same words”.¹⁸ Having cited these so called “secular” academics brings me to a bold declaration that many will

¹⁵ Mario Azevedo, “African Studies and the State of the Art,” in *Africana Studies: A Survey of Africa and the African Diaspora*, ed. Mario Azevedo (Durham: Carolina Academic Press, 2005) 7.

¹⁶ Azevedo, 7-8.

¹⁷ Jacob K. Olupona, “Major Issues in the Study of African Traditional Religion,” in *African Traditional Religions in Contemporary Society*, ed. Jacob K. Olupona (St. Paul: Paragon House, 1991) 25.

¹⁸ Jacob K. Olupona, *African Religions: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), xix.

not enjoy. I contend that most, if not all, of the academic institutions are mentally colonized with linear, exclusionary, Christian thinking.

The paradigms within which we operate, the words we choose, the definitions fought over are all influenced by the Protestant Christian paradigm which has subtly infected the globe. One need only skim Ludwig Wittgenstein's seminal work, "*Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*"¹⁹, to garner how symbols, language and logic lay the scaffolding of our worlds. We are either born into a culture that has its own symbols, language, and logic systems, or, they are imposed upon another culture from the outside (as the case with colonization). Ali Mazrui in, "*The Re-Invention of Africa*", shows the artificiality, fluidity and created nature of a continental African identity.²⁰ Mazrui contends that the conceptualization of Africa has had five distinct phases. "The first regarded North Africa as an extension of Europe, while the rest of Africa was regarded as an empire of barbarism and darkness... the second phase concerned the interaction with the Semitic peoples and with classical Greece and Rome... the third involved the birth of Islam on the Arabian Peninsula and its expansion on the African continent... this third phase impacted the *continentalization* of Africa... the fourth phase is the recognition that Africa is a product of a dialogue of three civilizations – Africinity, Islam, and the impact of the West... and the fifth phase is the realization that the continent is the ancestry of the human species".²¹ The historic conception of Africa that academia operates within, or under, have produced vastly different consequences throughout time. William T. Cavanaugh throughout "*The Myth of Religious Violence*", breaks down Western attempts at transcultural and transhistorical definitions of

¹⁹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (Cambridge: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co Ltd, 1922; repr. Sweden: Chiron Academic Press, 2016).

²⁰ Ali. A. Mazrui, "The Re-Invention of Africa: Edward Said, V.Y. Mudimbe, and beyond," *Research in African Literatures* 36, no. 3 (Autumn 2005): 68-82.

²¹ Mazrui, 70-71.

religion, reveals the irrationality and inconsistencies in the Western “secular state” creation and model. Having done all of this, Cavanaugh goes on to illuminate the ways in which the Western model of a “secular – religious” divide was imposed, touted as the only rational state of affairs, and has been a crucial weapon in colonizing the globe – politically, economically, and educationally.²² Tomoka Masuzawa in, *“The Invention of World Religions”*, forces the introspection of all who endeavor to understand or teach the Western created categories of inquiry now commonly referred to in academics as “World Religions”.²³ Masuzawa takes a slightly different approach than Cavanaugh when studying religion and bias. What is initially a four-piece world - Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Pagan/Heathen – mindset began to shift in the 19th century. Replacing this worldview became much of what we see still today, the study of “Great World Religions” categories. But this was not done out of pure intellectual curiosity or without hidden ambitions. Masuzawa thinks, “the new discourse of pluralism and diversity of religions... neither displaced nor disabled the logic of European hegemony – formerly couched in the language of the universality of Christianity – but, in a way, gave it a new lease”.²⁴ The European Academy simply reshuffled their grouping and classifications to fit new needs. Two “Great” world traditions emerged – that of the “West” and the “East”. The biblical monotheistic traditions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, became known as Western religions and Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism became part of a larger Eastern religions grouping. Markedly left out of this conversation is a plethora of other religions that were (are) diminutively called “primitive” religions and referenced by a wide variety of terms like Shamanism, Animism,

²² William T. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

²³ Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions: Or How European Universalism was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005).

²⁴ Masuzawa, xiv.

Primal, Tribal, and Basic. In other words, “at its simplest and most transparent, this logic implies that the great civilizations of the past and present divide into two: venerable East on the one hand and progressive West on the other... the East preserves history, the West creates history... the tertiary group of minor religions has been considered lacking in history”.²⁵ We may now circle back to the relatively recent comments of both Smith and Sarkozy. With a reexamining of the Western academic tradition and mindset, it becomes evident the two cannot be blamed for their remarks and worldviews. They are simply a product of an academic system created by Christianity and Eurocentrism.

PART IV – A Persistent Myth of the Colonized Mind

An incredible component of the academic journey is that the conversation is eternal and there are always great minds contributing to the dialogue. A plethora of scholarship exists that aims to resist and counter enduring Occidental imperialistic thinking. This is no different when it comes to African Traditional Religions. Starting in the 1950’s, and continuing to the present, scholars indigenous to Africa like, Cheikh Anta Diop, John S. Mbiti, and Bolaji Idowu began earnest and crucial examinations of the African past and present. At the same time, in the United States, Africana studies departments were coming into being, with the first officially established at Cornell University in 1969. Today most major universities have an Africana Studies, African Studies, or African American Studies department. Certainly, indicative of at least a minor paradigm shift. However, the academic perpetuation of prejudices, misinformation, and myths don’t take decades to overcome. As history shows, it may take centuries for any deep and lasting change to occur. I have decided to single out one myth that I have repeatedly come across in

²⁵ Masuzawa, 4.

various readings and in coursework as an undergraduate. In no way is this meant to be exhaustive. It is my goal to state the common misconception, briefly refute, and direct the reader to scholars that are greater experts I could claim to be.

The claim that African Traditional Religions are polytheistic is the most repeated myth that I have read and heard perpetuated by both laypersons and academic experts. Much of this scholarship still perpetuated has origins in reports from uneducated European missionaries. The first European studies of African religion “was ultimately a *preparation evangelia*, a necessary step toward understanding the most expedient way to convert Africans to Christianity”.²⁶ It is here that misinformation began in earnest. It was reported that the African peoples did not believe in god, were “polytheistic”, “pagans”, “idolaters”, “totem worshippers”, and “heathens”. Initially the reports were justification for slavery. The fact that they were not Christian or “monotheistic” created a European narrative of Africans as irrational and subhuman. Later, the component of a “civilizing mission” was added to the narrative of slavery and colonization. The converting of Africans to Christianity was quickly framed as fulfilling the gospel, part of god’s divine plan and the moving of Africa from a primitive to modern state. Such an ideology is summed up with Belgium’s motto for Colonial Congo, “*dominer pour server*” (dominate in order to serve).²⁷ With this history being well known and acknowledged, why does the myth of polytheism still exist? I think it is clearly a case of Eurocentrism not properly, or equally, communicating with African Ontology, Epistemology and Cosmology. Not only do Eurocentric academics not properly examine African thought – there is a refusal to broadly teach anything African in origin. This bad faith understanding is then paired with an inaccurate, and sometimes

²⁶ Olupona, *African Religions*, xxi.

²⁷ Olupona, *African Religions*, xx.

incompatible, language barrier. In the past stating that Africans had “many gods” was either purposeful for proselytizing or it was an uneducated statement. But then why does a renowned scholar like Jacob K. Olupona continue to use the phrase “gods” when speaking of divinities, ancestors, and spirits? I think along with a language barrier there is a mental barrier that still needs to be bridged (and walls torn down) between African and Eurocentric thinking. “A language, most assuredly, is not conceptually neutral; syntax and vocabulary are apt to suggest definite models of conceptualization... the African who has learned philosophy in English has most likely become conceptually westernized to a large extent not by choice but by the force of historical circumstance”.²⁸ Individuals and academic departments must begin to decolonize their minds and curriculum to deal with subjects on the proper terms and in accurate contexts. “One cannot hope to disentangle the conceptual impositions that have historically been made upon African thought-formations without a close understanding of the indigenous languages concerned”.²⁹

This small section is in no way meant to encapsulate all African religion, nor is it meant to capture all African Traditional Religions, nor all of the Yoruba traditions. Rather, I intend to highlight information that reveals a strong sense of what is in the west called “monotheism”. Celucien Joseph provides valuable insight into a core West African belief system: “The Creator, Amma, sends nommo, the Word [in the collective sense of speech], to complete the spiritual and material reorganization of the world and to assist humans in the forward movement in history and society. It is through the Word, Ogotemmel, tells us, that weaving, foraging, cultivating, building family and community, and making the world good are made possible. Inherent in the

²⁸ Kwasi Wiredu, “Toward Decolonizing African Philosophy and Religion,” *African Studies Quarterly*. 1, no. 4, (1998): 18.

²⁹ Wiredu, 23.

concept of nommo are the triple aspects and elements of water, wind, and word, symbolizing, respectively, the life force (animation), life essence (spirit,) and life creation(creativity)".³⁰ Marimba Ani in "*Utamawazo*" gives some more detail into where humans fit in this created cosmos: "The universe to which they (humans) relate is sacred in origin, is organic and is a true 'cosmos'. Human beings are part of the cosmos, and, as such relate intimately with other cosmic beings. Knowledge of the universe comes through relationship with it and through perception of spirit in matter. The universe is one; spheres are joined because of a single unifying force that pervades all being. Meaningful reality issues from this force".³¹ If there is a core to African religion, particularly African diaspora religion, I personally think it lies here with the sense of a Supreme Creator, the Oneness of all creation and that there are layers to reality with human ability to interact intimately with other cosmic beings. In the Yoruba tradition some of the cosmic beings are referred to as *Orishas*. European academics typically referred to them as "gods" in order to frame African religion as polytheistic and to otherize them as distinct from Christian doctrine. The Orisha represent a complex hierarchy of beings akin to angels and djinn found within the Abrahamic traditions. Some of the Orishas were created outright as divinities by the Supreme - typically manifesting as life force of natural phenomena like rain, lightning, rainbows and epidemics. The divinities allow humans an indirect access to the Supreme Being in an effort to guide creation and assist with success on earth.³² However, it is worth noting that it is the Supreme Being that ultimately decides the outcome because the Supreme is seen as the engineer of fate and the originator of causality.³³ On a hierarchical tier below the Orishas are

³⁰ Celucian Joseph, "The Rhetoric of Prayer: Dutty Boukman, the Discourse of 'Freedom from Below' and the Politics of God," *Journal of Race, Ethnicity, and Religion* 2, no. 9 (June 2011): 15.

³¹ Marimba Ani, *Yurugu: An African-centered critique of European cultural thought and behavior* (Trenton: Africa World Press, 1994), 31.

³² Nei Lopes, "African Religions in Brazil, Negotiations and Resistance: A Look from Within," *Journal of Black Studies* 34, no. 6 (July 2004): 842.

³³ Olupona, 22.

Ancestors and Spirits of which some have been human, and others are not. These unseen cosmic forces are also able to act as intermediaries and be manipulated. Unlike Orishas, these entities can transmit energies with freer will and thus can be agents of “good” and “evil” depending on circumstances.³⁴ The lines are not often super clear of what is a Divinity as opposed to a Deity. Over time, some humans appear to have become divinized, as the case appears to be with Shango. There are a wide variety of manners to approach, commune with, remove, and utilize the powers granted and provided by a Supreme Being or the Supreme power. To highlight plurality in Africa it is true that some people do not acknowledge the concept of a Demiurge. Rather, they understand there is a permanent energy that pervades all things, such as the Longo in Uganda with the concept of *Jok*.³⁵ Kwasi Wiredu is quite emphatic that much of what early African scholars have said regarding a Supreme Creator and Western notions of god are incompatible and over exaggerated.³⁶ Decolonization of the mind need not force agreement, unanimity or universality. But it does force questioning and agitation of the status quo and misinformation.

PART V - Revisiting Syncretism, Hybridity, and Transculturation

The pioneering African scholar John Mbiti is adamant that African Traditional Religion is never truly gone when he says,

“African religion developed together with all the other aspects of heritage; it belongs to each people within which it has evolved. It is not preached from one people to another... Even if they are converted to another religion like Christianity or Islam, they do not completely abandon their traditional religion... When Africans are converted to other religions, they often mix their traditional religion with the one to which they are converted. In this way they think and feel that they are not losing something valuable but are gaining something from both religious systems. African Religion functions more on a

³⁴ Lopes, 842.

³⁵ Olupona, 23-24.

³⁶ Wiredu, 19-44.

communal than an individual basis...it does not matter much whether or not the individual accepts all beliefs".³⁷

The term *syncretism* is often attributed to Plutarch and defined as, "the act or system of blending, combining, or reconciling inharmonious elements... to forget dissensions and to unite in the face of common danger".^{38,39} The term was later popularized and applied to the African diaspora in the work of anthropologists Arturo Ramos and Melville Herskovits. Syncretism lost its meaning as the conscious forming of unity and was instead replaced as an idiosyncratic process devoid of rational thought. Christian syncretic religious phenomenon began to appear and be discussed as if there simply was not a full "Christianization" of the people, mind, and culture – a new way to disparage Afro-descendent people as "primitive". A focus of academics became on what by chance happened to be retained, or fused unconsciously, with the end result of syncretism between African "items" and the Christian theology.⁴⁰ This understanding is one of the many ways in which enslaved individuals and African belief systems have been devalued and discredited to this day.

Andres I. Perez y Mena in "*Cuban Santeria, Haitian Vodun, Puerto Rican Spiritualism: A Multiculturalist Inquiry into Syncretism*" insists that the Eurocentric item-based syncretism has served only to obscure the ways in which the enslaved actively, not unconsciously or passively, resisted their conditions. Perez y Mena calls this to attention with a reflection of novelist Umberto Eco's observations, "it (syncretism) is not only as the dictionary says, 'the combination of different forms of belief or practice,' such a combination must tolerate contradictions... in

³⁷ John S Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion* (Suffolk: Heinemann International, 1975), 12-13.

³⁸ Andres I. Perez y Mena, "Cuban Santeria, Haitian Vodun, Puerto Rican Spiritualism: A Multiculturalist Inquiry into Syncretism," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 37, no. 1 (1998): 16.

³⁹ Ulrich Berner, "The Notion of Syncretism in Historical and/or Empirical Research," *Historical Reflections* 27, no. 3 (Fall 2001): 504.

⁴⁰ Evandro M. Camara, "Afro-American Religious Syncretism in Brazil and the United States: A Weberian Perspective," *Sociological Analysis* 48, no.4 (Spring 1988): 299-318.

Europe it proposes to eradicate one reality and to replace it with ‘truth’”.⁴¹ Perez y Mena contends that alleged syncretism is in fact a result of pop culture and Eurocentrism and is not readily found among the initiated practitioners of Santeria, Vodun, and Spiritualism. Even the term *Santeria*, translated as “worship of the saints”, is in and of itself a remnant of colonialism with most initiated preferring to use *La Regla de Ocha*, the rule of the Orishas, and *La Religion de Lucumi*, the religion of the Yoruba. Perez y Mena emphasizes that the practitioners of African religions knowingly adapted to their New World enslavement by concealing the Orishas, rituals, and cosmology. “Undoubtedly, believers in Afro-Latin religions have contributed to confusion by concealing from the Spanish, and present-day researchers, the true basis of their beliefs”.⁴² But such observations seem to apply only in some of the interactions between African religion and Christianity.

Adrian H. Hearn in “*Transformation: Transcendence or Transculturation? The Many Faces of Cuban Santeria*”⁴³ examines the ways in which the traditional practices of Santeria are navigating the modern condition of increasing capitalism and tourism in Cuba. Hearn draws on the work of Fernando Ortiz, who during the 1940’s was exploring the African and Spanish influences in Cuban national identity. The paper is a well-informed, and sometimes hilarious, account of how Miguel, a Santeria priest and drummer, is navigating the increasing tourism and commodification of the sacred practices and beliefs which have been historically closely guarded. Hearn views the space between total commodification and total resistance as the negotiated episodes of daily life in which transculturation occurs. When Miguel was asked by

⁴¹ Perez y Mena, 24.

⁴² Perez y Mena, 17.

⁴³ Adrian H. Hearn, “Transformation: Transcendence or Transculturation? The Many Faces of Cuban Santeria,” *Humanities Research* 10, no. 3 (2003): 56-62.

Hearn what other *Babalawos* [priests/male ritual elders] might think of a performance he put on for U.S. film crews, Miguel responded: “‘Don’t worry, it’s all an act!’ he said. ‘I mean, look: this is what I used for Chango [the orisha of thunder and drumming]’. He was pointing to a conga drum, over which he’d draped a red cloth, to make it appear as though the container of Chango would appear in a real ceremony. ‘And look,’ he went on, ‘is that Orula?’ He was talking about the collection of small seashells held in his palm. Although there were sixteen of them, these were not the cowry shells of Orula. ‘Also, I didn’t say the real words. Look, Omi ani wana... Carlos Manuel y su Clan... afri anene... Los Van Van, Isaac Delgado’ (saying names of Cuban pop music groups). ‘Any babalawo who sees this on TV will laugh and say, Oh that Miguel is a cabron!’”⁴⁴ This comical and informative moment allowed Hearn to understand that syncretization need not always require, or imply, domination and subordination. It is a navigated process with immense thought, creativity, complex, and continuing at this very moment. Further, Hearn went on to reveal that he noticed some of the ritualistic drumming that Miguel teaches differs from what he is really performing. “Meaningful lessons are revealed little by little and sometimes not at all, requiring new initiates to learn actively and patiently over a period of time”.⁴⁵

Ulrich Berner attempts to provide a more updated and less ideologically loaded method of framing syncretism. The model Berner proposes to understand what may occur when two or more religions come into contact or conflict is twofold:

1. “Syncretism on the level of elements: the process of incorporating elements from a different religious system while at the same time emphasizing boundaries between the systems and perhaps even condemning the other system. This is a rather common phenomenon in the history of religions”.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Hearn, 60.

⁴⁵ Hearn, 61.

⁴⁶ Berner, 503.

2. “Syncretism on the level of systems: the process of abolishing the boundaries between different religious systems with the intention of reducing the tension between them. This is a rather rare phenomenon”.⁴⁷

Berner is well aware that “every terminology is limited in its perspective”⁴⁸ and “for the consumers of syncretism, things may appear rather different, so that employing other concepts (ambiguity) might be more suitable in investigating”.⁴⁹ The parameters set by Berner and his acknowledgement of individual autonomy, agency, and system level functions likely allow for a much more productive and meaningful discussion of Afro-Latin religions and Africanized Christianity. I believe that Berner’s model is the best operationalization of the term *syncretism* or *syncretization* to be used in future academic studies of the African Diaspora. These definitions in no way are meant to entirely box in the complexity of individuals, society and life. Rather, it is a definition that allows insights into moments where there seem to be contradictory events and statements occurring.

PART VI - Revisiting the Permissive and Restrictive Environments of Catholic vs

Protestant Colonialism:

In order to provide a level of focus with regards to African Traditional Religious practices my central reference point is the Yoruba of West Africa. To be clear, it is not my intent to erase the imagination and diversity of Africa under one superstructure. West Africa is home to the Fon, Akan, Ibo, Ambundu and many other communities that have their own ontology, epistemology, and cosmology.⁵⁰ To keep my research realistic and focused I had to narrow my

⁴⁷ Berner, 503.

⁴⁸ Berner, 507.

⁴⁹ Berner, 508.

⁵⁰ Eddie S. Glaude Jr., *African American Religion: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 25.

scope. The Yoruba are one of the largest ethno-linguistic groups in West Africa with an estimated population of over 40 million spanning from the nations of Sierra Leone, Gambia, Nigeria, Benin, Congo, Angola and into the Caribbean, Brazil, and the United States.⁵¹ For several scholars, like Olukoya Ogen, Yoruba culture occupies a dominant role in the shaping of African Diaspora identity. One important reason is that among the varied sub-groups of Yoruba there exists a mutually intelligible language thought to date to the late Stone Age.⁵² This mutually intelligible language among diverse peoples provided a sense of unity, adaptability, and organization. This was critical to the continuation and formation of mutual rituals, practices and beliefs during the Diaspora when families and direct tribal affiliations were broken up. The Yoruba civilization, prior to European contact, had developed a highly sophisticated government reminiscent of federalism. Powers and duties of different people had elaborate checks and balances. Also, abstract value systems emphasizing freedom, justice, equity, and a high level of gender consciousness were the norm.⁵³ The shared and accepted Yoruba ideals provided the philosophy and organizational frameworks to forge a new collective identity. This is all in stark contrast to the often-repeated Eurocentric narrative of enslaved Africans aspiring to “Enlightenment ideals”, as espoused by scholars like Franklin Knight.⁵⁴ An incredible amount of rebellions and revolutions manifested anywhere slavery was an institution, in my opinion facilitated by maintained Yoruba ideals. Africans that escaped created free communities often called Maroons (English/North America), Quilombos (Portuguese/Brazil), and Palenques

⁵¹ Olukoya Ogen, “*Historicizing African Contributions to the Emancipation Movement: The Haitian Revolution, 1791-1805*,” text of a paper slated for conference on “Teaching and Propagating African History and Culture to the Diaspora and Teaching Diaspora History and Culture to Africa”, State University of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, 2008, 11-13.

⁵² Ogen, 6-7.

⁵³ Ogen, 1-8.

⁵⁴ Franklin W Knight, “The Haitian Revolution,” *The American Historical Review* 105, no. 1 (February 2000): 103-115.

(Spanish/Caribbean). I will next discuss the interaction of West African Religious Traditions within two distinct colonial contexts - the Catholic and the Protestant.

In the Catholic dominated French, Portuguese, and Spanish colonies there existed a culture and structure that was more conducive to Perez y Mena's rejection of syncretism and Berner's second "system level" notion of syncretism. The Catholic system of slavery often called for a forced baptism to take place to "remove the heathen nature" from the African slave prior to sale and forced labor. Perez y Mena highlights that to most the "conversions" were more appearance oriented rather than real conversions to Catholicism. To many of the *babalawos* the baptism and "last rites" were only to combat the European "devil fetish". Rather than becoming fully syncretized, the traditional Western notion, the people chose to have two distinct religious cosmologies.⁵⁵ The Catholic ritualistic veneration of saints proved to be useful "shells" for Africans to layer or mask the Orishas. A highly permissive structure was in place due to a wide range of existing Catholic festivities, rituals and practices. Catholics tend to use incense, images of saints, services that involve music, permitted drumming, songs to be sung, and food to be cooked in elaborate manners. All of this proved to be an environment allowing the Yoruba to maintain identity and senses of dignity during the cruelties of slavery. Further, layperson Brazilian Catholics often had ecstatic displays of veneration much like today's Pentecostals. The ability to act out in such ways was certainly a permissive factor for Yoruba to maintain direct connection with the Orisha and other divinities. It is now well known that, "Africans all over Brazil were allowed to hold their native festivals and ceremonies... the African religious traits that were most acceptable were those which had counterparts in the Catholic ceremonial".⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Perez y Mena, 20.

⁵⁶ Camara, 303.

Brazil, particularly in Bahia Province, is perhaps the best example of the enduring Yoruba Traditions. An incredible array of academic work and documentaries exist showing the vitality and thriving nature of Yoruba religion.⁵⁷⁵⁸ It is even said that Bahia, Brazil is more West African than Africa due to its adamancy and adherence to maintaining traditions. This indicates the so called “Pizza Effect” or “Feedback Loop”, because some indigenous African scholars have said they were able to learn more about Yoruba tradition from Brazil than the now heavily converted West Africa. I will close with another observation highlighting the Yoruba willingness to adapt and welcome new thinking. Those who practice Afro descendent religions have allowed the inclusion of *Caboclo* or the spirits of former indigenous Brazilian chiefs and dignitaries.⁵⁹ Now when Yoruba deities and ancestors are worshipped it is done with the paying respects of indigenous founding heroes, lineages and original owners of the land.⁶⁰

In contrast to the more permissive structure of Catholicism are the Protestant dominated colonies of the Netherlands, Britain, and eventually, the United States. These settings appear to fit into Berner’s first level, the “syncretization of elements”. Eventually, almost all manifestations of African autonomy and traditions were condemned by Christians, socially stigmatized, and even outlawed – often with severe punishments or death.⁶¹ In this system what I call an “Africanized Christianity” eventually emerges and still may be witnessed today. The Protestant British, unlike Catholics, were much less concerned with the ideology of “saving the heathens” and were reluctant

⁵⁷ Broadcast Video Productions, “Bahia: Africans in the Americas,” University of California Extension Media Center, Berkley, CA, 1988.

⁵⁸ Iain S Maclean, “Bahia and Zion: The Irruption of New Religions of the Poor, Political Implications of the Afro-Brazilian and South African Independent Churches,” in *Religion, Conflict, and Democracy in Modern Africa: The Role of Civil Society in Political Engagement*, ed. Samuel K. Elolia (Eugene: Pickwick Publications. 2012), 253-283.

⁵⁹ Elisa Herrmann, dir., *Umbanda: Offerings of Faith*, 2019, Bruno Maestrini and Elisa Herrmann, documentary.

⁶⁰ Lopes, 845.

⁶¹ Bryan Edwards, “African Religions in Colonial Jamaica,” in *African American Religious History: A Documentary Witness*, ed. Milton C. Sernett (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999) 20-24.

to confer baptism to African slaves. A primary reason for not pressing conversion was a fear that the notion of “Christian fellowship” would require manumission and disrupt the racial hierarchies being codified.⁶² Even with the assurances from church and political leaders that conversion to Christianity did not mandate freedom, slaveholders chose not to do so for almost one hundred years. The lack of enthusiastic proselytizing allowed the African traditions to remain unabated on most plantations and homes.⁶³ But as time went on more laws passed that began to limit the ability of African slaves to express themselves and carry on their traditions. Beginning in the 1740’s, Evangelical revivals now called “the Great Awakening” emerged. Preachers and slave owners alike began to convert Africans to Christianity. Not many converted initially with only 5-10% of the African American population becoming Christian by the 1800’s. Different churches of Protestantism, such as Baptists, Methodists, and Calvinists, vied for new converts. There exists difference in theology and in some doctrine but they did share some common features: being bible centric, a rejection of iconography, a rejection of sainthood and intermediaries to god, a strict moral outlook, individualism, rejection of the material world, and an aversion to music, dancing, and other forms of recreational activities.⁶⁵ The veneration of any images, icons, objects or saints - thus the Orishas and many African ritual items - was considered idolatry and began to be harshly punished. A large focus of these sects is on rejection of this worldly existence and a perpetual vigilance against anything that may be construed as sinful and is clearly distinct from the non-dualistic nature of the West African Yoruba cosmology.⁶⁶ There was to be no free assembly of

⁶² Judith Weisenfeld, “Religion in African American History,” in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of American History*, (2015), DOI: 10.1093/acrefore/9780199329175.013.24.

⁶³ Makungu M Akinyela, “Battling the Serpent: Nat Turner, Africanized Christianity, and a Black Ethos,” *Journal of Black Studies* 33, no. 3 (January 2003): 255-280.

⁶⁴ Weisenfeld.

⁶⁵ Camara, 310.

⁶⁶ Camara, 309-312.

Africans, even for religious purposes, for fear of a rebellion being planned.⁶⁷⁶⁸ Any trace of African heritage would lead to segregation or exclusion as blackness became despised caste.⁶⁹ Clearly, Protestantism in the British colonies did not allow for the full richness of African tradition to continue like in the Caribbean or Brazil. The Protestant conversions once began in earnest seem to have led to a strong belief in Jesus as Christ being the sole path to salvation and a near total rejection African traditions and beliefs. This does not mean that all semblances of an African or Yoruba past has disappeared. What does appear to have happened is several new and unique versions of “Africanized Christianity” arose. The various sects of Christianity and different environments have led to a wide variety of new African influenced churches. In the North of the United States where proselytizing began earlier, and slaves were not on large plantations more conservative manifestations arose like the African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E) churches. Bishop Daniel Alexander Payne, a freeborn African American in Antebellum South Carolina, is a perfect example of a colonized mind. Daniel fully embraced the Christian doctrines proclaiming, “freedom is attained only through the faith of Jesus, love for Jesus, obedience to Jesus”.⁷⁰ He also fully accepted the European civilizing mission stating, “when you shall have reached this point(converting and reading the bible), you will be morally prepared to recognize and respond to all the relations of civilized and christianized life”.⁷¹ Payne was appalled when he saw other African Americans worshipping in more Pentecostal (African) manner. Albert Raboteau cites a passage from Payne’s autobiography of the incident, “About this time (1878) I attended a ‘bush

⁶⁷ Larry Koger, *Slave Owners: Free Black Slave Masters in South Carolina 1790-1860* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2012), 160-186.

⁶⁸ Nat Turner, “Religion and Slave Insurrection,” in *African American Religious History: A Documentary Witness*, ed. Milton C. Sernett (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 89-101.

⁶⁹ Gavins, 94.

⁷⁰ Daniel Alexander Payne, “Welcome to the Ransomed,” in *African American Religious History: A Documentary Witness*, ed. Milton C. Sernett (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 234.

⁷¹ Payne, 235.

meeting'... After the sermon they formed a ring, and with coats off sung, clapped their hands, and stamped their feet in a most ridiculous and heathenish way... taking their leader by the arm I requested him to desist and to sit down and sing in a rational manner. I told him also that it was a heathenish way to worship and disgraceful to themselves, the race, and the Christian name".⁷² A widely accepted theory is that this form of worship, now called the "ring shout", is in fact African in origin. Debated scholarship exists regarding links between baptismal rites and water deities in Africa, and the influence of African concepts of possession on European Pentecostal expression, sinfulness, death rites, and the afterlife.⁷³⁷⁴ I tend to agree with scholarship that insists all these aspects of daily life are imbued with African Tradition and are now a part of the American fabric of being. When the Civil War ended 85% of the African American population did not identify themselves as Christians. Not until the 1900's and the rise of Pentecostal movements do we begin to see truly massive conversions of African Americans. I do not believe it a mere coincidence that the doctrines and beliefs in major churches like the church of god in christ closely resemble African Traditional Religions ontologies and epistemologies.⁷⁵ I tend to see the vibrancy and resilience of African Traditional Religions not only in African institutions but in daily life and discourse. I contend that the context sensitive system of ethics portrayed by James W.C. Pennington and his escape from slavery, sometimes called "situation ethics", is due to ancient African philosophic systems passed down on plantations.⁷⁶⁷⁷ I make this connection in part to Kwasi Wiredu directly

⁷² Albert J. Raboteau, "Death of the Gods," in *African American Religious Thought: An Anthology*, ed. Cornel West and Eddie S. Glaude (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 260.

⁷³ Lewis V. Baldwin, "A Home in Dat Rock: Afro-American Folk Sources and Slave Visions of Heaven and Hell," *The Journal of Religious Thought* (2001): 38-57.

⁷⁴ Raboteau, 240-284.

⁷⁵ Glaude Jr, 53-58.

⁷⁶ James W.C. Pennington, "Great Moral Dilemma," *African American Religious History: A Documentary Witness*, ed. Milton C. Sernett (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 81-88.

⁷⁷ Kwame Gyekye, "African Ethics," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, (2011), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2011/entries/african-ethics/>.

claiming, “another significant contrast with other religions, particularly certain influential forms of Christianity, is that although god is held to be all-good, morality is not defined in Akan thought in the terms of the will of god but rather in terms of human interests. Neither are procedures for the promotion of morality attached to the Akan religion; they belong primarily to the home”.⁷⁸ I am apt to see the continuities of African tradition manifest through the music of Robert Johnson, the return of drum break beats in hip-hop, and the conscious raising lyrics of artists like Kendrick Lamar. I am, however, admittedly biased. I see the through lines, the endurance, and resistance of distinct African systems. A spirit and a culture that for over five hundred years has refused to be entirely colonized and destroyed.

PART VII - Conclusion

The African Diaspora created a matrix of new and unique forms of religious belief. Some systems remain Afro-Centric, some are Afro-Latin, others Afro-Christian syncretic and still others, Africanized Christianity. Unfortunately, the oppression of Afro descended people did not end with slavery. Globally, blackness and Africanness is still identified as something negative. Economic inequality and political under representation persist following emancipation and the fall of colonial governments. Neocolonial economic relationships are much to blame. But the colonization of the mind with Western ideas, categories, and systems is the root cause of it all. Academics still fail to implement the abundant and rich history of knowledge. Decolonizing the mind means much more than the all too common declarations of being “color blind”. Or the claims of being “tolerant”, “accepting”, or “celebrating” pluralism and diversity. Decolonization of the mind means more than making apologies or monetary reparations. The Euro-Christian

⁷⁸ Wiredue, 34-35.

ideology, and associated systems of thought like “universalism”, “modernity”, “secular/religion” dichotomy, have molded the education system. The system has learned and adapted to sustain itself based on “otherness” and exploitation. Often the tools to question, or destroy, a system are not readily provided by that system itself. Therefore, a question arises: Can the Western language, culture, and education (the “master’s toolbox”) be used to critique and impact Western discourse.⁷⁹ I do not know. I prefer to leave it vague, and end with the words of Kwasi Wiredu, “we won’t find out if we don’t investigate, and if we don’t investigate, we wallow in colonized thinking. What makes the difference, then, between decolonized and colonized thinking is what I am in the habit of calling due reflection in our approach to discourses about African thought framed in foreign categories”.⁸⁰

⁷⁹ Jin Suh Jirn, “*Orientalism’s* Discourse – Said, Foucault and the Anxiety of Influence,” *EurAmerica* 45, no. 2 (June 2015): 277-299.

⁸⁰ Wiredu, 20.

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