

"This Spot of Ground" Migration, Community, and Identity Among

by Carol B. Duncan

L'auteure de cet article analyse le syncrétisme entre l'Église baptiste spirituelle et le Shango. Elle examine,

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entre autres, la signification du concept «chez-soi» pour les immigrantes et immigrants de Trinidad qui vivent au Canada et qui retournent dans leur pays pour prendre part aux deux

systèmes religieux.

August 18, 1995

It's 11:46 p.m. I'm seated in seat 19A of a Boeing jet on Air Canada Flight 964 on my way to Port of Spain, Trinidad. I'm actually waiting for the plane to take off. It's been an extremely hectic week preparing for this trip. I'm tired, excited, and exhilarated. I feel like Avey Johnson in Praisesong for the Widow—a middle-class black woman making a voyage of discovery of the self. Somehow sitting here on the plane seems a little unreal.... And now ... the journey begins, or is that really continues? A continuation of a voyage which began 400 years ago.

This excerpt from my personal journal from a research trip to Trinidad in August and early September 1995 points to the two key themes of this paper: first, journeying and the return "home" in the context of immigration and diasporic African consciousness, and second, the blending of two syncretic African-Caribbean religious forms, the Spiritual Baptist Church and the Orisha religion, often referred to as "Shango" by church members. My inclusion of journal

entries as an integral part of this paper acknowledges, and includes as a part of my approach, the fact that, as a researcher, I am not external to the events that I witnessed and experienced. By including journal entries, I am attempting critically to reflect on the boundaries of the research process as both subject and researcher whose own autobiography is shaped by the history and culture of which I am writing (Clifford). My multiple and sometimes conflictual positioning as researcher and, relative to the life experiences of church elders, young woman as well as the fact that I am not a practitioner of either religion, affected my research experiences and the questions which gave them form. Thus my own experiences of the university, being "away from home," living in Toronto since childhood as an immigrant black woman of African-Caribbean descent, and "going home" guided my continually open answers as a participant on this journey.

Both the Orisha religion and the Spiritual Baptist Church, emerging as spiritual expressions of African people during enslavement and colonialism, drew on denominational Christianity and West African religious practices and spiritual beliefs, particularly Yoruban and Catholic ones. They also incorporate elements from Hindu, Protestant, and Kabbalah religious traditions (Houk xii). Both religious forms were important aspects of psychic survival for African-Caribbean people. The Spiritual Baptist Church can be considered a form of Africanized New World Christianity, while the Orisha religion can be considered a New World African religion. However, given the syncretism which characterized the formation of the Spiritual Baptist Church this classification is called into question by the practices and beliefs of some Spiritual Baptists who

embrace African elements of worship, in particular *orisha* "work."

It became apparent, as I interviewed Spiritual Baptist Church members in Toronto and attended church services and ceremonies at two churches, that there were elements of Orisha religion incorporated into worship. Some members were comfortable with these practices while others claimed no allegiance to them. Some members saw their inclusion as "too mix-up, mix-up," a Patois term referring to a state of confusion. However, it was precisely the "mix up, mix up" contradictory nature of this relationship on which I focussed as a site of multiple identity and community formations.

In the context of contemporary immigration to Canada, what, then, would it mean for African-Caribbean immigrants who are practitioners of the Spiritual Baptist faith to return "home" to Trinidad? "Home" for many such people in Toronto is a repository of dual experiences of economic hardship, which prompted emigration, and a greater sense of self-acceptance and belonging through everyday life experiences, such as being in closer touch with relatives and having a network of community-based relationships. I wondered how these two seemingly contradictory points of reference, hardship, on the one hand, and a source of regeneration, on the other, affected their consciousness and experience of life in Toronto and the return to "home."

"Home" is visited physically via Air Canada, but it is also a spiritual place accessed through the ground in the mourning room,¹ in trance, in visions and dreams, and in the vibrations of the human voice raised in song, the clap of hands, and the movement or the "shout" of barefeet "tramping" or rhythmically moving on the ground. It is the place of

Spiritual Baptists in Toronto

African ancestors, the "long time" people, according to Mother Ruby, a Queen Mother in Trinidad. A Queen Mother, the female spiritual head of a Spiritual Baptist Church, may lead a congregation on her own, or with a

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male leader called Bishop or Leader. The position of Queen Mother has ancestral ties to West African political and spiritual leadership roles of women.

"Tryin' my hand": concerning race, class, gender/sex, spirituality, and identity

August 31, 1995—12:09 p.m.

I am sitting on the gallery with Mother Ruby. The neighbour's radio is playing "No Woman No Cry." Mother Ruby [is] bent double in her chair replanting potted plants.... Her hands sift through the soil doing what she calls "an unpredicted work." She had planned for years to uproot one of the plants. Had tried in fact, to no avail. "Something" told her this morning to "try her hand." She did and out came the plant. She said, "When something tells you do something, you should do it. You have the energy to do it." A life lesson for me—most of my conversations with Mother Ruby have been like that....

"Long time people say ants is not a good sign," Mother Ruby says looking up from her replanting. We both look at the neighbours who are shaking out all of their clothing after waking up to an infestation of red ants. The "long time people" are the ancestors. Mother Ruby always refers to them in this way.

In doing this research, I employed conversational interviews with church elders and Shango leaders, attendance at church services, and preparation for, and attendance at, an Orisha feast. I refer to this procedure as "tryin' my hand." This expression, used by Mother Ruby and my own Antiguan grandmother, refers to an approach which incorporates both past knowledge and experience and yet is open to the newness of the current experience and all of the challenges that it may hold.

My research is informed by a consideration of race, class, gender/sex, and spirituality as elements in identity and community formation in the context of Caribbean immigration to Canada. I sought theories and research methods which would be authentic to the Spiritual Baptist Church and the lives of immigrant, working-class black Caribbean women in order to undercut the objectifying practices that Eurocentric discussion of African-Caribbean religion uses. As a result, a variety of perspectives influenced the construction of the theory and research methods of this study: African-Caribbean music, dance, theatre, and literature; black theological writing, including fictional texts; feminist methodologies and histories. Of critical importance are the epistemology and philosophy of the Spiritual Baptist Church which the oral culture of the church expresses; the songs, prayers, sermons, and testimonies. That is to say, I sought the theory and research method from the subjects themselves and, in so doing, acknowledged and incorporated my research subjects as active knowers, philosophers, and theorists of their own reality.

Journeying

I was invited on this journey by Mother Yvonne, the Queen Mother

Bishop of a Spiritual Baptist Church in Toronto. Mother Yvonne invited me because she thought that I should experience and observe what she called "another side of the faith, the African work, root work," in order to deepen my understanding of her practice of the Spiritual Baptist faith. She was returning to Trinidad to "close off" the Shango yard or *chapelle* of an older deceased female relative, in effect, to desanctify the ground because Mother Yvonne's spiritual "work" there had finished and would now move to another ground.

My referring in my first journal entry to the character Avey Johnson in Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow* resonates with the novel's central metaphor of journeying. Avey Johnson's journey of "spiritual reintegration" (Pettis 1) is symbolic of the trip to Trinidad in many ways. In the preparation for and conducting of the feast, Mother Yvonne was able to bring closure to the ground in Trinidad. This action symbolized a movement to another ground in Canada. The journey was both physical and spiritual in its significance and so wove diasporic links among

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Africa, Trinidad, Canada, and, in my case, Antigua as well. When Mother Yvonne and other participants in the feast "catch power" and "manifest" the gods, they are making a spiritual journey which reconnects them with an African unconscious. Similarly, when the participants in the Spiritual Baptist services I attended "manifest de Holy Spirit of Almighty God,"

they experience a rejuvenation such that those at the service say that they are "filled with the Spirit."

"This spot of ground"

The phrase "this spot of ground," along with the phrase "so spiritually, so carnally," is a part of what I refer to as the "spiritual nation language" of the Spiritual Baptist Church. Here I am using Kamau Brathwaite's notion of nation language as being a part of the self-definition of a people. This "spiritual nation language" expresses the epistemology and worldview of the Spiritual Baptist Church. For the Spiritual Baptists, nationhood is rooted in the spiritual and material worlds, and so "this spot of ground" refers to both the physical and the spiritual location in which people are gathered.

The ground signifies not only the physical world and the earth, but the material conditions in which people live their lives. It also refers to a sanctified space where the spiritual and the material meet. Thus, the spiritual and material aspects of life inform each other in a complex set of relationships or, according to the Spiritual Baptist Church, "so spiritually, so carnally."

The ground is sacred in both the Spiritual Baptist Church and Shango. The "powers" manifest themselves through the ground in the Shango feast. Mother Ruby spoke of the need to be "rooted and grounded in the name of the Lord." On August 30, 1995, as we sat on her gallery we sang the following chorus:

*You have to rooted and grounded
in the name of the Lord
You have to rooted and grounded
bless His holy name
If you want to get to heaven
You have to rooted and grounded
You have to rooted and grounded
In the name of the Lord.*

To be "rooted and grounded" is to be sanctified in the name of Jesus. To be rooted and grounded also points to the need to have connection with the

earth and with the ancestors, to have a "solid foundation," as church members often say. This ground can shift in terms of material time and space. One can be "grounded"; this means that the relationship with the ground, with the earth, with the mother, with the womb is active.

For example, the ground shifted from Africa to Grenada, to Trinidad, to Canada. And yet it remained beneath the feet of the travellers through involvement in the Spiritual Baptist Church and other cultural practices which maintain a connection with "home."

"This spot of ground" is also bell hooks's "homeplace." Hooks discusses "homeplace" as a space of psychic and cultural survival and regeneration created mainly by African-American women for black people facing racism. Hooks asserts that this homeplace was necessary in the context of black people's survival and resistance to racism, and, as such, its construction was shared throughout the diaspora.

Hooks notes the historical importance of the slave hut and the wooden shack as homeplaces. In the context of African-Caribbean culture, I also include the *chappelle* or Shango yard and the church as a part of homeplace. Significantly, Spiritual Baptist Churches are referred to by their members as "homes" and the male and female leaders as the mother and father of the "home." In the spiritual nation language of the church, "friends" and "visitors," "cousins" and "aunties" from other churches are welcomed to feel "at home."

Homeplace continues to be a vital part of the survival of black people living in North American societies. Thus homeplace, in the context of immigration to Canada, extends from the mourning ground of Spiritual Baptist Churches in Trinidad to storefront Spiritual Baptist Churches in Toronto, to the townhouse and apartment in areas of the city associated with working-class and poor people such as Regent Park and Jane and Finch, and to the detached house in middle-class suburban areas of

Pickering, Scarborough, and Thornhill. In this sense, "home" is linked to politics of cultural and economic survival of African-Caribbean people living in Toronto.

"This spot of ground" and "home" are linked to politics of identity and community formations in Toronto's black and Caribbean communities. The central point here is that there is more than one black community and Caribbean community in Toronto. In defining authentic notions of self and community, questions of inclusion and exclusion arise in relation to both internal (within the individual or community) and external ("outside" of the individual or community) power dynamics. Power relations based on division and exclusion, such as sexism, classism, and homophobia, as well as those based on inclusion such as the notion of an extended, diasporic family "in the spirit," inform community and identity formations around the notion of "home." In other words, the questions of who is welcome as "family" and in whose "home" under what conditions are of key importance. Though a comprehensive discussion of these issues lies beyond the scope of this paper, I am raising them here because analysis of identity and community formations within syncretic African and Caribbean religions in the Americas needs to be linked with these struggles in other areas of social life. I am suggesting this linkage precisely because of the central role that these religious forms have played in social life historically in African diasporic communities.

Shango Baptist?: ancestral legacies and spiritual regeneration

One of the questions guiding this paper is the contradictory experiences that I had had concerning the place in the Spiritual Baptist Church of explicitly African based spiritual practices associated with the Orisha religion. Members of the church in Toronto are divided on their acceptance of these practices. Young's notion of dualistic "ancestral legacies" is useful:

Ancestral legacies also connote contradictions, sometimes within a single individual, between alienation from and continuity with African heritages. The ancestors are not only progenitors of Niger-Congo heritages, [but] they are also progenitors who separate themselves from those heritages. Thus ancestral legacies refer to an inheritance entailing both the living memory of the ancestors' spirituality and the alienation from this memory as a result of slavery and colonialism. (1)

The term "Shango Baptist" points to a syncretism between Shango and Christianity in the Spiritual Baptist Church and the simultaneous existence of a legacy of remembrance and forgetting. According to a Shango leader in Trinidad, there is no such category, spiritually, as a Shango Baptist. The two forms of worship are separate. However, a person can be an *orisha* worshipper who chooses to serve the Spirit in the Spiritual Baptist faith. A Spiritual Baptist Queen Mother in Trinidad, for example, defines herself as an African "in the spirit" and therefore as someone whose consciousness resonates with *orisha* worship even though she is a Spiritual Baptist.

According to this Queen Mother, all people of African descent belong to an African tribe, and, through participation in the feast, the different tribes are able to manifest and greet their members who may be present. The Shango leader also noted that the "powers" or deities and all of the ancestors of the people present at the feast are manifested at the feast.

In this way, the feast serves the purpose of a homecoming and self-recognition and definition in radical opposition to the brutality and viciousness of a slave regime which stripped enslaved Africans of their identity and selfhood. It is also about nationhood and ancestral memory, for, in belonging to a tribe, one belongs to a nation and in so doing remembers one's place of origin.

An important part of the feast which symbolically addressed the connection between nationhood, politics, and black religious forms was Mother Yvonne's role as "mother of the tribe" and "mother of the nation." On the second day of the feast, the "feeding of the children" took place. In this ritual, neighbourhood children and others from nearby areas were fed a meal and given gifts of small toys, paper, and pens brought by Mother Yvonne from Canada. The feeding and the giving of gifts was a ritual enactment of her role as "mother of the tribe" whose responsibility is to feed and nurture her "children."

In returning "home" to Trinidad to "this spot of ground" with Mother Yvonne I participated in the remembrance of the ancestral legacy of *orisha* worship. The feast paid tribute to the *Orisha*. It also paid tribute to the ancestors of all those present "in spirit." The voice of the elders saying the prayers, singing the songs, and telling stories in the *chappelle* and in the church, respectively, is also a point of spiritual regeneration. For it is in these oral transmissions that "phenomenological libations" (Prince) are offered which rejuvenate and renew the participants.

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Carol B. Duncan's doctoral dissertation research on the Spiritual Baptist Church in Toronto, A Passport to Heaven's Gate: Identity and Community Formations among Spiritual Baptists in Toronto, is concerned with the transformation of a syncretic African-Caribbean religious form, the Spiritual Baptist Church, through immigration to Canada and the subsequent responses to this process in the political, social, economic, and cultural aspects of

the lives of African-Caribbean immigrant peoples and their communities.

¹A sacred space in Spiritual Baptist Churches where members "mourn"—a practice of prayer and fasting in which the mourner or "pilgrim" journeys spirituality.

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