

# The Transnational and Diasporic Future of African American Religions in the United States

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## Abstract

This article calls forth a vision for the future study of African American religions in the United States by examining how transnational contact and diasporic consciousness have affected the past practice and are likely to affect the future practice of Christianity, Islam, and African-derived, Orisha-based religions in Black America. It offers a synthesis of scholarly literature and charts possible directions for analyzing Africana religions beyond the ideological and geographical boundaries of the nation-state. The article focuses on two primary forms of imagined and physical movement: the immigration of self-identifying Black people from Africa, Europe, the Caribbean, Mexico, and other places to the United States; and the travel, tourism, pilgrimage, and other movement—whether physical or not—of American-born Black people to places outside the United States.

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## INTRODUCTION

FROM THE TIME of their origins until present, African American religions have been shaped by transnational crossings and the diasporic imagination of their practitioners. Imagined and physical movement—both across geographic borders and human time and space—continues to define the present and is likely to shape the future of African American religions. This article lays out an agenda for the study of African American religions in the United States by examining how transnational contact and diasporic consciousness have affected and are likely to affect the practice of Christianity, Islam, and what are sometimes called African-derived, Orisha-based or Lwa-based religions such as Vodou or Lukumi. The article offers a new synthesis of recent scholarly literature, and, in so doing, advocates a vision for the study of US Black religion that goes beyond the ideological and geographical boundaries of the nation-state (compare Stewart and Hucks 2013). The evidence presented suggests that the examination of US Black religions within strictly national borders not only obscures the translocal, often transoceanic nature of religious formation in the modern world, but also silently furthers an exclusively nationalist interpretation of Black religions that underplays political and ethical solidarities that have been abundant in the modern Black experience. In examining the transnational and diasporic nature of African American religions, the article focuses on two primary forms of imagined and physical movement: the immigration of self-identifying Black people from Africa, Europe, the Caribbean, Mexico, and other places *to* the United States; and the travel, tourism, pilgrimage, and other movement—whether physical or not—of American-born Black people to places *outside* the United States.

The increased immigration of foreign-born Black people to the United States has changed the religious landscape of the United States, especially in New York, Florida, Minnesota, California,

the District of Columbia (DC), and other locales where Black immigrants tend to cluster. As of 2016, 9 to 10 percent of all self-identifying Black people in the United States (about 4.2 million people) were foreign born (Pew Research Center 2018). Approximately one-half of this group came from the Caribbean, although the number of Caribbean-born Black immigrants slowed considerably in the late twentieth century. Contrariwise, the number of Black immigrants from Africa, which totaled almost 1.6 million in 2016, has more than doubled in each of the last three decades. Self-identifying Black Africans have arrived mainly from West and East Africa, especially from Nigeria, Ghana, Ethiopia, and Kenya (Pew Research Center 2018; Capps, McCabe, and Fix 2012).

As this article will illustrate, Black immigrants have established separate churches, mosques, and other religious institutions, but they have also joined and helped to shape existing religious congregations. Some African-born Black Christians, for example, have contributed to the global spread of the so-called prosperity gospel and an emphasis on individual salvation as the basis for positive social change. Many first-generation immigrants such as the Senegalese followers of the Muridi Sufi order—also known as the Mourides—have cultivated distinct ethnic, trans/national, and linguistic identities as part of their religious activities and organizing. Some others—for example, Sierra Leonean men in Washington, DC—have questioned their national and ethnic practices of Islam, seeking to fashion a more standardized, pan-ethnic, global, and universal approach to Islamic religious norms. Finally, Black immigrants' theological orientations, ethical norms, ritualistic practices, and aesthetic forms have contributed to and often influenced African American culture outside of formally constituted religious communities as well.

The article will also reveal that as important as Black immigrants will be to the future of African American religions, the transnational and diasporic nature of these religions is not a one-way

affair. The twentieth- and twenty-first century religious imaginations and peregrinations of American-born Black people have looked beyond the shores of the United States to connect with religious communities not only in Africa, but also in the Caribbean, Latin America, the Middle East, South Asia, and East Asia. African American Christians have established and sustained African American missions and denominations in the Caribbean and in Africa. African American Muslims have gone on *hajj* to Mecca, studied in the great centers of Islamic learning, and sometimes sought Sufi *shaykhs*, or spiritual masters, in Africa. African American practitioners of Orisha-based religions have traveled to visit teachers and sacred places in both the Caribbean and on the African continent. Even more, American-born religionists have fashioned theologies, ethics, rituals, and aesthetics that shape their sense of racial belonging and trans/national identity.

### **AFRICAN AMERICAN CHRISTIANS**

The earliest Black Christians in America were free and enslaved Catholics in New Spain, numbering roughly 150,000 (mostly free) by the mid-1600s. In the thirteen colonies, Great Britain's Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts, established 1701 in London, sought Protestant converts among African Americans, but it was not until the mid-1700s that any significant number of African Americans converted to Christianity during what has been called the First Great Awakening. Enslaved African American Christians fashioned their own interpretations of the Bible, often rejecting the proslavery preachments of Christian ministers. Sometimes accommodating and at other times rebelling against the racist political order, most African American Christians developed forms of worship that affirmed their humanity and insisted that God would judge those who oppressed them. Their songs and chanted sermons, as well as practices of healing and spirit possession, reflected African roots, which became reinterpreted within a Christian matrix. Though their number increased in the 1800s, it was not

perhaps until after the Civil War of 1861 that the majority of African Americans in the South formally converted to Christianity (Raboteau 2001).

It was free rather than enslaved African converts to Protestantism who started the first independent African American churches in the nineteenth century. These independent Black denominations included the African Methodist Episcopal and African Methodist Episcopal Zion Churches. By the late 1800s, others such as the National Baptist Convention and Christian (formerly Colored) Methodist Episcopal denominations were also thriving as separate ecclesiastical bodies. Their members sometimes left the United States for religious purposes. Thousands went to Africa to missionize or to lead new churches, often while joining Black settler colonies (Pinn 2013). But the Black Church, as it came to be called, was focused mainly on Black life in the United States. It became what W. E. B. DuBois called a “nation within a nation.” After Reconstruction ended in 1877 and Jim Crow segregation was instituted in the United States, Protestant Black congregations emerged as the most popular, powerful institutions of Black public life, providing social services, education, business networks, and opportunities for political participation as well as prayer and preaching. Even with all the dramatic changes in African American religious life in the last one hundred years, these historically Black denominations still attract the majority (59 percent) of African American Christians in the twenty-first century (Lincoln and Mamiya 1990; Pew Research Center 2008).

Despite claims that Black churches were declining as a force in Black life, by the 1990s a new wave of Black megachurches began to command visibility and influence. These African American congregations, ironically, frequently defied the explicit racial affiliation so common to the historically Black denominations familiar to previous generations. Throughout the final decades of the twentieth century, moreover, an expanding Black middle-class defied predictions

of abandoning institutional Christianity, becoming a robust presence in historically Black congregations. As much as any other factor, however, Black immigration to the United States significantly reshaped African American Christian churches, bringing renewed vitality and introducing new patterns of theology and community networks. The existence of these communities demands that that we use a transnational lens to understand African American Christianity (Pinn 2002, 17–24; Burkett 1978, 94–95).

### **Black Immigrant Churches**

Black migration from Africa and the Caribbean has been a uniquely important factor in shaping future trends in Black Christianity in the United States. Since the early twentieth century, Black congregations in the United States have included the visible presence of Black immigrants from the Caribbean and Africa (particularly of sub-Saharan nations). Among the early examples is the African Orthodox Church, which the Antiguan-born minister George Alexander McGuire founded in 1921. McGuire became very active in the Universal Negro Improvement Association, the institutional center of the Garvey movement. His denomination attracted thousands of US-born Black members. In general, however, Black immigrant congregations have barely registered in the purview of scholars writing about the Black church until very recently. The Black Church, in other words, has typically functioned for scholars to denote Christianity among US-born Blacks, most notably those affiliated with the Black denominations of US provenance (Daniels 2007, 47–50).

Today, Black congregations of Caribbean Christian immigrants regularly dot the landscapes of America's urban regions. The Chicago metropolitan area, for instance, boasts multiple congregations of Haitian Baptists, Pentecostals, and Catholics. The city of Boston is likewise a testament to the growing diversity of Caribbean immigrant churches. These parishes not only

disseminate theological teachings and spiritual resources through prayer, worship, and scripture reading, but they also constitute a realm of cultural familiarity while sustaining essential networks of support for families who have recently arrived in the city. For instance, although immigrants quickly become skilled in English, the use of French (Haitian patois) is not unusual in these Haitian parishes (Zéphir 2004, 103–5).

A greater influence on African American Christianity has come from Black Christian denominations originating in Africa. Throughout the twentieth century, after a long period of Western Christian missionaries attempting to reshape the religious landscape of native Africans, Black Christians in African nations such as Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya, and South Africa began forging their own denominational expressions of Christianity. Known as African Independent Churches (AIC), these ecclesiastical movements produced major changes in the doctrine, liturgy, and aesthetics of African churches on a scale not unlike that employed by white Christian denominations. AICs range from the Aladura churches, which began among Yoruba Christians in Nigeria, to the Zion Christian congregations of South African provenance, to the intensively missionary Kimbangu Church that originated in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Autonomous and untethered by any formal ties to historically European denominations, the Aladura congregations began with a prayer-and-prophetic healing movement in 1930. In the case of the Kimbangu churches, Black activism against Belgium's colonial violence and anti-Black repression framed the rise of African prophet Simon Kimbangu, who began preaching an apocalyptic gospel of messianic liberation. The varieties of these AICs have asserted an authoritative claim to the authentic interpretation of Christianity while embodying many definitive dimensions of Orisha-type indigenous religions such as spiritual healing, divination, and veneration of ancestors. At the same time, all of these congregations unequivocally identify

as Christian. This is especially evident from the centrality of their use of Christian scripture, the messianic redeemer-salvation myth that focuses on the divine lordship of Jesus, and the overriding identification of these churches with some notion of a universalizing membership within a global community of Christian saints (Anderson 2001, 10–18; Crumbley and Cline-Smythe 2007, 159).

The increasing role of Black immigrants from Africa and the Caribbean in shaping the form and substance of Black Christianity signals that an important transformation is underway in the twenty-first century. The number of African-born immigrants alone has steadily increased from 230,000 in 1990 to over one million in 2003 (Daniels 2007, 48–49; US Census Bureau 2010; Olupona and Gemignani 2007, 2–3). Today, approximately one dozen AICs have congregations in the United States. These include the Celestial Church of Christ, the Deeper Life Bible Church, the Cherubim and Seraphim, the Presbyterian Church of Ghana, and the Redeemed Christian Church of God. As the religious cultures of the United States have been enriched by immigration from Africa, the rituals, theologies, and aesthetic norms of Black Christianity in the United States have developed in new directions. The transnational and diasporic aspects of African American Christianity have been especially visible in large cities of the United States such as New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, and Miami. In New York City, for instance, the Presbyterian Church of Ghana established a thriving branch in the city’s Manhattan Borough in the 1980s. It is a formal entity of the overseas mission of the Ghanaian church body. Decades of increasing immigration from Ghana to the northeastern United States have led this congregation to prominence, attracting parishioners from throughout the metropolitan area (Biney 2011, 85–86).

The Midwest is also home to dozens of African immigrant congregations, whose work is concerned with propagating the redemptive theology and spiritual networks of AICs. The

majority of these congregations are of the Pentecostal or charismatic type, emphasizing healing, spiritual gifts (prophecy and glossolalia), a dynamic style of participatory worship, and direct guidance or possession by a divine spirit (in Christian parlance, the “holy spirit”). As in other major cities, the majority of African immigrant churches are West African in affiliation and provenance, with less representation from eastern and southern Africa (Daniels 2007, 49).

### **Transnationalism and Missions**

Transnational dimensions of African American Christianity have been uniquely intensified by the robust expansion of Black immigrant Christian congregations. In contrast to the older generation of churches among US-born Blacks, Black Christian congregations in the twenty-first century are increasingly constituted among Black immigrant communities who maintain strong connections with their countries of origin by means of familial and religious networks. For instance, Black immigrants regularly provide financial support to extended family in their countries and travel back and forth to fulfill kinship obligations. More importantly, a growing number of Black churches in the United States are mission churches sponsored by denominational headquarters in Africa—in Lagos, Nigeria, or Accra, Ghana, for example. This formalizes a transnational structure in service to the global mission of propagating a message of Christian salvation and planting churches to expand the footprint of AICs. Church growth typically follows patterns of labor migration, as potential missionaries travel to major cities in the United States to pursue professional employment, higher education, or relief from political threats (Biney 2011, 17–19).

The Nigeria-based Church of the Lord is just one example of this transnational dimension. Since its inception in 1930, this AIC has established a missionary presence throughout Africa and in Europe and the United States. To date, several Church of the Lord congregations exist in US

cities such as Worcester, Massachusetts; Providence, Rhode Island; and New York City.

Missionary congregations send one-third of revenues back to the Nigerian headquarters, defer to clergy policymakers to adjudicate major disputes or decisions, and ensure that local practices and doctrinal teaching adhere to standards defined by Nigerian clergy. Of equal importance is the intersection of material practices and diaspora consciousness. Members of Church of the Lord congregations conceptualize their existence as satellite churches whose orbit is tethered by the gravitational force of a distinctly African (in this case, Nigerian) Christian revelation (Crumbley and Cline-Smythe 2007, 159–60).

This African foundation differentiates these mission churches from those of African immigrants who establish membership in the legacy congregations of African American Christianity.

Aladura congregations do not promote a self-understanding of being culturally *African*. The emphasis, rather, is on being authentically *Christian*. This does not alter the fact, however, that Aladura Christians emigrating from Nigeria to the United States benefit from a culturally familiar worship environment and theology by affiliating with Aladura mission congregations after arriving in the United States. Immigrants also benefit from the extensive support that derives from these congregations. Church leaders and laity are familiar with the challenges and protocols for obtaining employment, extending work visas, or securing green cards. They offer much-needed advice and support on these matters (Olupona and Gemignani 2007, 4–5).

Equally exemplary of this dynamic is the Brotherhood of the Cross and Star, an AIC that has thrived in Houston, Texas, among immigrants from the Cameroon and Nigeria. This messianic denomination was founded by Olumba Olumba Obu in Nigeria in 1942. Obu's congregation grew rapidly as word spread of his spiritual powers and anointing to lead Christians in religious renewal to prepare for the millennial age. Just as Western Christians have for many centuries

sought to missionize global populations, so also has the Brotherhood of the Cross and Star. By the 1970s, the church was sending missionaries to North America to create converts. Branches also exist in Western Europe (e.g., Britain and Germany) as well as Asia (India) and the Caribbean (Trinidad). Today, because the denomination holds that its founder is the sole earthly representative of the Christian deity, it is especially urgent for church members to missionize prospective converts and spread the meaning of Obu's message of redemption and preparation for a messianic age (Bongmba 2007, 109–10, 115).

This further illustrates the new role of African immigrant churches in the twenty-first century—as a self-understood missionizing presence in the very heart of the West. Given this self-understanding, it is not surprising that these parishioners do not view themselves as preserving a Nigerian ethnicity. Rather, it is the Christian gospel that constitutes the core of their message and purpose. As AICs continue to expand their presence in the United States in the coming decades, African American Christianity will increasingly feature the missionary impact of Black Christian immigrants conveying a universal message of Christian redemption. At the same time, these churches will deepen the transnational ties that connect families, regions, economies, and church administrations throughout Africa and its diaspora (Bongmba 2007, 103).

### **Megachurches and Charismatic Christianity: An Enduring Paradigm**

The growth of Black megachurches has been one of the most impactful developments in African American Christianity. Since the 1980s and 1990s, megachurches have become a regular, mainstream form of American Christianity. In the year 2000, Black megachurches ranged from 2,000 to 18,000 in weekly attendance with an average of 4,832. By 2005, more than one-third of Black megachurches averaged 2,000 attendees per week; more than 40 percent had a weekly attendance of 5,000 or more; and a small number (roughly 4 percent) regularly saw more than

10,000 attendees each Sunday. Because of their immense size, these megachurches have departed sharply from some of the traditional institutional patterns of Black churches. For instance, although the majority (70 percent) are affiliated with legacy Black denominations such as the African Methodist Episcopal and National Baptist sects, more than 20 percent are nondenominational. The nondenominational congregations usually exhibit a strong influence of neo-Pentecostalism. In fact, even the Black megachurches that belong to non-Pentecostal legacy Black denominations have generally adopted a charismatic style of worship that evidences the powerful influence of Pentecostalism. So, it seems clear enough that denominationalism among Black megachurches is less useful for determining the style of liturgy and theology than has been in the past (Tucker-Worgs 2011, 6, 28–32, 47).

Pentecostalism and charismatic forms of Christianity (collectively known as renewalist Christianity) were once exported by missionaries from the United States to Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean, and Pentecostalism is now the fastest-growing form of Christianity in these places, largely as a result of these missions. In 2006, at least 26 percent of Nigeria’s churches were of this variety (excluding AICs). In South Africa, the number was 34 percent. And 56 percent of Kenya’s churches were renewalist. In Brazil, which contains the highest number of Blacks of any western hemispheric nation, approximately one-half of all Christian churches are now Pentecostal-charismatic congregations. In the twenty-first century, consequently, immigration to the United States has become a key “import” factor that has contributed to reshaping the landscape of African American Christianity. This partly explains why Blacks constitute approximately 18 percent of all renewalist Christians in the United States, despite making up only 13 percent of the population (Pew Research Center 2006).

The megachurches of the United States, Africa, the Caribbean, and Brazil are Pentecostal or charismatic, as a rule. One example is Brazil's Universal Church of the Kingdom of God, which makes exorcism and spiritual healing central elements of the faith. In Nigeria, the Living Faith Church Worldwide, founded by David Oyedepo, has 400 branches and has spread to thirty-eight countries. Its Lagos congregation has the world's largest auditorium, seating more than 50,000. And in the United States, the Word of Faith movement is a major phenomenon among African Americans. All of these churches emphasize the common themes of renewalist theology. They also promote an emphasis on temporal blessings, which includes physical health and monetary wealth or prosperity. And their sheer numbers (more than 2 billion people throughout the world now affiliate with these churches) indicate powerfully that Pentecostal and charismatic religion will be an enduring aspect of the future of African American Christianity (Gifford 2011 251–54; Walton 2009, 99–100).

The growth of Pentecostalism among African American churches has also created massive transnational networks beyond the structures that result from immigration. Much of this has resulted from missionary revivals that feature international evangelists preaching a message of spiritual renewal through special, divinely bestowed abilities. Pentecostalism and charismatic religion emphasize healing as well as spiritual gifts such as prophecy, glossolalia, and exorcising demons. Conversion itself, in this context, is frequently attributed to the experience of religious healing. But equally important is the transnational distribution and sharing of sermons and study materials through the Internet, television, and mail. The sharing of objects and theological frameworks, in addition to the movement of peoples across national borders, has been a hallmark of Pentecostalism and now regularly defines the sense of membership in a single global community shared by renewalist Christians (Gunther Brown 2011, 8–11).

## **Theology, Progressivism, and Conservatism**

The political legacy of African American churches has attracted sustained attention from researchers. Throughout the early twentieth century, in fact, scholars such as W. E. B. DuBois and E. Franklin Frazier critiqued the function of Black theological conservatism and argued that attention to socio-political issues was severely lacking. The irruption of the civil rights movement, which was extensively church-based, transformed the image of Black churches in the eyes of many academics who concluded that the political sensibilities of Black churches had been underestimated. But as Barbara Savage has observed, the majority of Black churches have remained relatively conservative in theology, and the minority of Black churches that embraced the radical theology sustaining the civil rights movement seem to have received the lion's share of scholars' attention (Savage 2009).

Christian churches throughout the United States typically conformed to an expanding theological conservatism and an explicit fundamentalism that enjoyed an eventual victory over the social gospel tradition so that by the 1960s, the public meaning of Christianity was easily consonant with the pronouncements of white ministers such as Billy Graham and Black defenders of fundamentalism such as Joseph H. Jackson. In 1963, African American Christians organized the first major Black organization devoted to promoting fundamentalism—the National Black Evangelical Association. During the 1980s and 1990s, this conservative group expanded rapidly as African American churches aligned even more closely with the theology represented by predominantly White groups such as the Christian Coalition and the Promise Keepers. The public careers of African American ministers Juanita Bynum and Tony Evans exemplified the success within reach of Black Christian leaders whose devotion to fundamentalist themes of sexual purity, homophobia, and spiritual warfare against secularism (all increasingly joined to

Pentecostal renewal) indicated that Christian conservatism had become mainstream among African Americans (DeRogatis 2014, 130–35; Messner 1997, 91–92; Heltzel 2009, 136).

There is every indication that this trend is continuing unabated in the twenty-first century. The denominations of Black Christian churches experiencing growth are all theologically conservative. This includes the renewalist sects, the legacy denominations of Black churches, and all of the AIC denominations in the United States. Black churches in the United States, for instance, tend to be more conservative theologically in their view of scripture than the most conservative White congregations. Put differently, the Bible has played a central role in the expansion of fundamentalism among Black churches. Race, in fact, is the most highly correlative factor for fundamentalist views of the Bible in the United States. More than two-thirds (70 percent) of African Americans read the Bible outside of weekly church meetings. This stands in sharp contrast to whites (44 percent) and Latinx Christians (46 percent). More importantly, in the current decade, more than 50 percent of African Americans view the Bible as an inerrant book that contains the literal “word of God.” Fewer than 25 percent of Whites share such a view. African American congregations, on the whole, are as theologically conservative (based on their view of the Bible) as White conservative Protestants. In 2012, 98 percent of African American congregations surveyed in the United States indicated that their members viewed the Bible as an inerrant, divinely inspired book (Center for Study of Religion in American Culture 2014).

### **Liberationist and Social Justice Paradigms**

Standing in contrast to this trend is the work of Black liberationist and womanist theologians, some of whom have joined their academic work to active engagement with ecclesiastical communities (Cannon 1988; Grant 1989; Williams 1995; Baker-Fletcher 1998). Building on a long tradition of grassroots African American freedom thought, the formal, academic discourse

of Black liberation theology emerged through the racial justice struggles of the 1960s. African American clergy sought to incorporate Black power philosophy and the social theology of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference into the praxis of Black churches nationwide. Of special importance to Black liberation theology has been the transnational connections with theologians from Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean. Since 1976, when over twenty liberation theologians from the Third World met in Tanzania to propose a global theological response to social suffering, Black liberation theologies have affiliated with the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians. As a consequence, Black and womanist liberation theology has been shaped by a transnational dialogue for almost four decades. This has enabled fruitful collaboration and awareness of the complex challenges that colonialism, slavery, and heteropatriarchy have posed for human liberation (Hopkins 1999, 165–75).

Although the vast majority of historically Black churches have shown little engagement with Black theology, there are notable exceptions. In 2008, media companies throughout the United States turned the spotlight on the African American cleric Jeremiah Wright, who then served as the senior minister of Chicago’s Trinity United Church of Christ. The former pastor of Barack Obama, who at the time was campaigning for the nation’s presidency, was suddenly cast in dispersion for having uttered the words “God damn America.” This was a snippet from his critique of the common adage “God bless America,” which renders the United States as an innocent or virtuous nation of exceptional status worthy of divine favor. Drawing on his study of Black liberation thought and the history of massive atrocities committed by the United States against mostly Third World nations, Wright sermonized that American Christians should prioritize social justice above nationalism and exemplify the ethical conviction that not even the United States was exempt from the moral standards of divine judgment. Although the public

discourse about Wright indicated little comprehension of Black liberation theology's ethical norms and historical formation, it was nevertheless a searing reminder that the liberationist paradigm in African American Christian thought has remained an influential dimension of religion in the twenty-first century (Savage 2009, 270–83).

The fact that many mainstream African American churches have rejected Black theology has not spelled its demise. Its marginal status, rather, has served to amplify the urgency in the critical purchase of Black liberation and womanist theology. The philosopher and theologian Cornel West has been especially vocal in foregrounding the transnational legacy of Black liberation theology by rejecting American exceptionalism and connecting issues of domestic racism (such as racial profiling against Black and Latinx men and women) with the state racism and imperialism practiced by the United States (such as the target assassination of Muslims abroad). In addition, African American congregations such as Trinity, New York City's Abyssinian Baptist Church, and Atlanta's historic Ebenezer Baptist Church have institutionalized liberationist paradigms from womanist and Black liberation theology. And it seems clear enough that these churches and others like them will exert a continuing influence on the larger formation of African American Christianity during the twenty-first century (Goodman 2013; West 2004; Warnock 2013).

## **AFRICAN AMERICAN MUSLIMS**

A 2008 Gallup poll, which did not offer an estimate of the total Muslim American population in the United States, found that 35 percent of its 946 respondents reported that their race was "African American" (Younis 2009). But in 2017, only 20 percent of an estimated 3.45 million Muslim Americans self-identified as Black in a Pew Research Center poll, meaning that, according to this study, there were 690,000 Black Muslims in the United States. In the Pew poll,

of the adults surveyed, over one-half of all self-identifying Black Muslims said that they were third-generation Muslims, meaning that they likely trace their family's Muslim roots to the 1950s or before. Approximately 11 percent of self-identifying Black Muslims said that they were foreign-born (Pew Research Center 2017). (There are many hundreds of thousands more African-born Muslims in the United States, but they claim countries of origins in North Africa and from some parts of the Horn of Africa where Muslims do not self-identify as racially Black.) Whereas opinion surveys often yield various estimates of the total number of African American Muslims in the United States, there are far more reliable data on the number of immigrants from sub-Saharan African countries with substantial Muslim populations who have immigrated to the country. By 2009, for example, 965,300 African-born immigrants from Eastern and Western Africa were living in the United States (McCabe 2011). If 22 percent of these persons were Muslim, as indicated by the New Immigrant Survey, then there were at least 212,000 *African-born* Black Muslims in 2009 (Massey and Higgins 2011).<sup>1</sup>

Whatever the total number of Black Muslims in the United States—even if it is double or triple what current demographers estimate—it still accounts for less than 10 percent of the total African American population. Given this relatively small number, the long history of African American Muslim impact and influence on African American religious life and US history more generally is even more remarkable. One might say that in terms of historical significance, people such as Muhammad Ali and Malcolm X have punched above their weight. This observation is particularly true regarding the development of African American religion's transnational and diasporic character and its linking of religion to racial, ethnic, and trans/national identities.

Like other African American religions, African American Islam has been transnational and diasporic from the beginning. At least some enslaved African American Muslims such as Futa

Jalon nobleman Abdul Rahman Ibrahima, who arrived in Natchez, Mississippi in 1788 and lived in the United States until 1829, performed their Muslim identity in public as a way to claim a non-US national identity and increased social status. Ibrahima, a polyglot West African noble trained in West African seminaries, was among the best-educated people (of any race) in the United States, and he utilized his cultural capital in a national fundraising campaign to free his American family and buy them passage to Liberia. Though he did not return to his native Futa Jalon, he framed his family's move to Africa as a form of repatriation. Like some Black Christian emigrationists, he "created" Africa, rather than his specific place of origin in West Africa, as his native land, identifying himself as a diasporic Other in the United States. Often wearing identifiably Muslim clothes, he included Islamic religious identity in his claims to this outsider status, thus capitalizing on and also reifying the notion that Islam was not an American religion (when, in fact, it had been since the 1600s, if not earlier.) Most enslaved African American Muslims, or those who may have practiced various Islamic rituals such as prayer without identifying as Muslims, were not able to migrate to Africa, although there is evidence that they, like other non-Muslims, often dreamed that they would fly back to Africa or be reunited with African kin after death. This, too, was a form of diasporic consciousness that identified Africa as a homeland—not only a national home, but also a religious home, the site where one's ancestors were buried (Alford 2007; Curtis 2009; Diouf 2013).

Though African American Muslims did not establish long-standing, multi-generational religious communities in the United States, Islam again became an important religious identity among Black Americans during the 1920s and 1930s. During the inter-war period, African American and foreign missionaries either joined or established various Muslim congregations and associations. These "denominations" of Islam had radically different religious doctrines. Some of

them, such as the 1920s Buffalo and Pittsburgh congregations associated with Sudanese missionary Satti Majid, were Sunni Muslim. Others, like the Moorish Science Temple (MST), headquartered in 1920s Chicago, and the Nation of Islam (NOI), established in 1930 in Detroit, were prophetic movements based on the original teachings or interpretations of their leaders. Associated with the religious creativity and ingenuity of the Great Migration of African Americans to northern and Midwestern cities, these new religious movements, like Black Jewish and some other groups, often proposed different ethnic and religious identities for Black Americans that were international in character. Many of them were inspired by back-to-Africa leader Marcus Garvey and his Universal Negro Improvement Association, which advocated pan-African political consciousness and solidarity among all people of African descent. The African continent remained central to the African American Muslim religious imagination, but leaders such as MST founder Noble Drew Ali and NOI founder W. D. Fard Muhammad also insisted on the Asian roots of Black people. Echoing the political solidarities reflected in popular African American sympathy for the Japanese, who defeated the Russians in 1905, the anti-colonial consciousness of figures such as Duse Muhammad Ali and Marcus Garvey became expressed in simultaneously racial and religious terms (Weisenfeld 2016). In the hands of these religious innovators, Islam became the religion of all people of color, whereas Christianity was associated with White Europeans. Islam thus became a religious and political resource in the struggle against anti-colonialism, Jim Crow segregation, and racism, an identification that would only grow in the period after World War II (Curtis 2009, 31–44).

Africans such as Duse Muhammad Ali and Satti Majid played important roles in the establishment of Black Sunni Muslim congregations and an Islamic consciousness among thousands of African Americans in the interwar period, but it was Elijah Muhammad's Nation of

Islam that emerged after World War II as the preeminent African American Muslim organization. Its card-carrying membership may have been limited in size, but the organization, its prophetic leader, and its spokesman, Malcolm X, effectively interpreted Islam as a simultaneously religious and political response to the challenge of both domestic anti-Black racism and neocolonialism abroad. Its persistent Black internationalism tied the destiny of all people of color to Islam, interpreting Blackness in terms of a religious philosophy that was politically liberationist, socially conservative, and Black capitalist (Lincoln 1961; Curtis 2006, 35–93).

Even as the institution and nature of Islamic practice among African Americans changed in the late twentieth century, its many movements continued to espouse an international vision. The NOI may have been the most dominant African American Muslim denomination through the 1960s, but by the end of the twentieth century, it is clear that this dominance had been eclipsed. Following in the footsteps of Malcolm X, Sunni groups such as the Mosque of Islamic Brotherhood, Darul Islam, and the Islamic Party of North America emerged in the era of Black Power and Black Consciousness as socially conservative, entrepreneurial Muslim movements with a strong sense of connection to the global community of Muslims but also a focus on local social problems, particularly in the inner city. They were successful in reaching out to younger African Americans interested in community control over education and businesses in Black-majority neighborhoods. Members of these groups often lived either together in the same building or neighborhood, where they implemented a socially conservative version of the Shari'a that emphasized, among other things, pietistic practices such as prayer and fasting as well as patriarchal gender norms. During the era of dashikis and jejes, members of the Mosque of Islamic Brotherhood sometimes wore kuffiyas, or Arab headdress, to emphasize their Muslim

(but not Arab) identities. Some also incorporated Arabic words into their everyday English language. All of this remaking of Black identity in Islamic terms was simultaneously local and transnational, as they offered what they framed as an authentically Islamic cultural identity (Mamiya 2010, 12–18).

The transnational legacy of the Nation of Islam was also transformed. In 1975, Elijah Muhammad's son and heir, Warith Deen Muhammad (also known as W. D. Mohammed), instituted a radical reformation of the NOI, effectively bringing most of his followers and their local mosques to Sunni Islam. Cultivating close relationships with various foreign missionaries, Mohammed preached that, even as they joined the worldwide community of Muslims, they had a collective responsibility to their nation-state, the United States, and Black racial uplift (Curtis 2006, 175–85). Muhammad even changed the name of the group to the World Community of al-Islam in the West. In response, Minister Louis Farrakhan reconstituted a version of the Nation of Islam in 1977 and 1978. Farrakhan's Nation of Islam would never achieve the size and power of Elijah Muhammad's organization, but it carried on many of the original NOI's political and religious teachings. Like his prophet, Elijah Muhammad, Farrakhan kept the organization aligned with Third World Muslim revolutionaries such as Libyan leader Mu'ammarr Qaddafi and eventually the Iranian government (Gardell 1996).

But this was not the overall tenor of transnational contact and identification of African American Muslims during this late twentieth century. Instead, more and more American-born Black Muslims, like American-born Muslims more generally, saw Muslim-majority lands as a repository of Islamic knowledge. To be sure, a greater number of African American Muslims participated in the annual pilgrimage to Mecca, often reporting some of the same feelings of universal brotherhood that Malcolm X made famous in his autobiography. But what was perhaps

more important was the travel of African American Muslims to study the foundations of Islamic religion, including the Qur'an; the hadith (sayings and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad and his companions, treated by most Muslims as scripture); the science of fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence, i.e., the interpretation of the Shari'a); and Islamic spirituality (often known as Sufism). Landing at various universities in Egypt, Syria, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia, African American Muslim scholars such as Sherman Jackson, Zaid Shakir, and Amina Wadud sought to access the religious authority of these traditions while also providing relevant interpretations of them to US Muslims. Importantly, these scholars developed followings beyond Black-majority congregations and communities. Their works were read and their speeches were debated in Arab- and South Asian-dominant congregations and even more in national, multi-ethnic, multi-racial conventions and conferences, web-based discussion boards, and social media as well (Grewal 2014).

To a greater or lesser degree, each of them attempted to address the heritage of racism and contemporary racialization in the Muslim American community. Echoing the words of many Black Christian theologians, Jackson presented African American Islam as a God-oriented protest against racism, arguing that its emphasis on justice should set the political agenda for all American Muslims, regardless of race (Jackson 2005). Wadud, who did discuss race and racism in her work, was nevertheless focused more on gender justice, or what she, like others, deemed the gender jihad (Wadud 1999; 2006). In these and the cases of many other, less well-known but important African American Muslim intellectuals, mastery of Islamic religious traditions became an important way of weaving local and national African American concerns into the transnational, global, and universal aspirations of the umma, the world-wide community of Muslims. That is, anti-racism and Black dignity were cast as Islamic norms reflective of Islam's intentionally universal character as established by the authoritative sacred texts of the religion.

The integration of American-born Black Muslims into broader Muslim American intellectual discourses also echoes the integration of American-born Black Muslims into multi-ethnic mosques. During the twenty-first century, the growth rate of American-led Black Muslim majority mosques seems to have declined (while the number of African-born Black Muslim majority congregations increased). According to Ihsan Bagby, the number of African American-dominant mosques in the United States declined relative to other mosques from 29 percent of all mosques in 1994 to 23 percent of all mosques in 2011 (Bagby 2011, 14). If correct, this trend may signal a further shift away from English-speaking, mostly Black Muslim congregations—but not necessarily an abandonment of the political concerns and social justice commitments of American-born Black Muslims. There is evidence, for example, that some inner-city mosques that may have once been mostly Black are now multi-racial, but that these mosques and/or leaders remain focused on issues such as prison ministry and reintegration, job and poverty programs, and other social ministries that many inner-city religious congregations, whatever their religion, see as central to their identities.

Like many American-born Black Muslims, African-born Black Muslims create transnational identities that stress a universalistic and standardized interpretation of Islam, but they also debate the place of their ethnic, linguistic, and national traditions in their Islamic practice. Among the many different Black immigrant communities where this can be observed is the Sierra Leonean community of Washington, DC. Arriving as refugees from the 1991 civil war, many Sierra Leoneans were exposed to new ways of thinking about their Muslim identities. Sierra Leonean men often took jobs as taxi drivers, whereas numerous Sierra Leonean women became food vendors. In these public spaces, where they encountered both Muslims and non-Muslims, these Muslims displayed, performed, and, in some cases, missionized on behalf of their religious

identities through a variety of means, including bumper stickers on food carts and bumpers that read, “I love Islam.” Attending the Islamic Center of Washington on Massachusetts Avenue, some Sierra Leoneans encountered Muslims from around the world and an interpretation of Islam that transcended national, racial, and ethnic differences. According to their own testimonies, this transnational, umma-minded Islam inspired many to renew their faith commitments. They attempted to reform their own practice of Islam by separating what they considered to be their own cultural baggage from the “pure” religion found in the Qur’an and the Sunna, or Tradition of the Prophet Muhammad (D’Alisera 2004).

In some cases, it was Sierra Leonean women who questioned this universalizing tendency that discounted the value of African traditions, including what has been called female genital mutilation, cliterodectomy, and circumcision. A rite of passage in many African countries, this practice has been criticized throughout the world as a violation of women’s rights by secular, Christian, and Muslim scholars and activists. Even as some African women cited the procedure as their reason for seeking asylum under US immigration law, other Sierra Leonean women defended the practice as a cultural norm in which outsiders—including Sierra Leonean men—should not interfere. It was, as one anonymous Sierra Leonean put it, “women’s business.” Though Muslim husbands, fathers, and brothers would often challenge the practice, arguing that it was un-Islamic, some Muslim women countered that it was a defense against the danger of their children’s assimilation into US culture, their forgetting of their national and religious identities. Other men and women in the community agreed about the problematic nature of cultural forgetting, but argued that establishing Islamic weekend schools in which the West African languages of Krio and Fullah were taught was a better solution to the problem (D’Alisera 2004, 52–57, 74, 95–102, 136–45).

The transnational nature of the Senegalese Muslim American community is different. Well-known in New York City for their entrepreneurial activities such as operating food carts on the street, braiding hair, and driving cabs, some Senegalese Muslims have managed to turn the area of Harlem around 116th and 117th streets into Le Petit Senegal or Little Africa. Many of these Muslims are part of a transnational network and global diaspora of the Muridi Sufi order, whose founder, Ahmadu Bamba, is regarded as a Muslim saint, Sufi master, and Senegalese national hero. Many of these Mourides, as they are often called, have limited English fluency and have sought to create separate religious congregations, including mosques and study circles, that utilize Wolof, Pulaar, and/or French. Senegalese Muslims in New York and beyond are also part of a different Sufi order called the Tijaniyya, or Tijani order. All of these Sufi Muslims share devotional practices that are linked to the remembrance of Muslim saints and reciting *dhikrs*, or meditative religious litanies, and some also seek spiritual healing through the use of prayer, amulets, and water that has been blessed by a shaykh, or religious official. A relatively small number of American-born Black Muslims have been attracted to these Sufi practices, seeking to learn about them from African-born leaders and sometimes traveling to places such as Kaolack, Senegal to become initiated into the Tijani Sufi order. This is the case, for example, with American-born Black Muslim leader Daud Abdul Malick from Cleveland's Community Islamic School. Other American-born and African-born Muslims oppose Sufi practices and Sufism more generally as impermissible religious innovations that contradict the "pure" religion of Islam. Such criticisms of Sufi Islam are modern; they reject aspects of Sufism that were understood by many Sunni Islamic scholars of the Shari'a as praiseworthy aspects of Islamic spiritual life (Abdullah 2010; Kane 2011; Curtis 2014).

Debates among US Black Muslims about what is and is not orthodox Islam are likely to continue into the future, as are disagreements about the proper relationship between culture and religion. What is less clear is the role that race and ethnicity will play in the formation of Black Muslim religious communities and their religious practices. The multiple transnational and diasporic trends among African American Muslims mean that communal development and religious loyalties do not point in a single direction. It is possible that the multi-racial nature of many social justice-oriented congregations, teachers, and networks mitigate the need, in some practitioners' eyes, for Black-majority, Black-led mosques. The Islamic ideal of the umma, a global community that is intentionally multi-racial, multi-national, and multi-ethnic, may trump the need or desire for racial solidarity. Some African-born Muslims, and their children, will no doubt continue to cultivate diasporic and transnational ties to African homelands, African religious figures, and African organizations, questioning the universalizing trends of a standardized Islam that challenges the validity of religious, national, linguistic, and ethnic particularity. At least some American-born Muslims, especially those who identify with the leadership of W. D. Mohammed and Louis Farrakhan, will likely continue to embrace the heritage of Black-led, Black-majority Muslim institutions, congregations, and networks. They may even be joined by some of the children of first-generation African-born Muslims who grow up in places such as Washington, DC, New York, Minneapolis and St. Paul, and Chicago and are likely to seek relief from the anti-Black racism that they will experience, regardless of their parents' place of origins. How they, and other Black Muslims, respond in religious terms to anti-Black racism is by no means predictable. If the varied transnational and diasporic Black Muslim identities of the past are any guide, Black Muslims in the future will continue to form diverse political loyalties, religious practices, and cultural orientations.

## **AFRICAN AMERICAN PRACTITIONERS OF ORISHA DEVOTION**

Orisha devotion has been foundational to the history of African Americans and remains a vital part of contemporary African American religion. It was the most widespread form of religion among the earliest populations of Blacks in the Americas. With over 70 million practitioners and devotees worldwide today, Orisha religions have constituted a significant dimension of African American religion by sustaining intense loyalties between people and a range of extraordinary, powerful beings that might manifest as spirit (i.e., disembodied or immaterial) entities but that are also frequently understood as inhabiting or becoming physical, material entities like natural bodies of water or even ritual objects that might be worn on the body. This materiality of the Orisha is among the important characteristics that distinguish them from the immaterial concept of spirits commonly conceived in Western philosophy and some forms of Western religion. Among the highly visible practices of Orisha devotion is the system of divination commonly called Ifá. Spirit possession is also a common element of ritual, revelation, and cultic power (Matory 2005, 205–20; Stewart 2005).

During the early 1800s, as many people left the newly independent Republic of Haiti for a new life in francophone Louisiana, formal communities of Vodou practitioners became a visible and vibrant presence in the region.<sup>2</sup> Among the more influential leaders of this period was Marie Laveau (1801–1881), a free woman of color in New Orleans who led the city's most influential group of Vodou initiates and provided services to hundreds of clients. Since its inception among enslaved Africans in Haiti, this variety of African-derived religion was brutally repressed and banned by church and state officials because it frequently incited rebellions, most notably Haiti's successful revolutionary war against France. Anti-Black propagandists, consequently, made concerted efforts to stigmatize Vodou as a "devil religion." As Vodou gained a foothold in the

United States during the early 1800s, moreover, devotees experienced frequent harassment by police authorities and were often arrested for violating codes against interracial gatherings in both public and private spaces. Despite this, the religion continued to thrive in the New Orleans region, with numerous clients drawn from multiple racial groups (Long 2006; Fandrich 2012).

Not until the Black cultural revolution of the 1960s and 1970s, however, would a paradigm emerge that directly confronted the vilification of African-derived religion. African Americans began to counter enduring religious hatred against Orisha-based religion by critiquing the European pedigree of Christianity and emphasizing that Orisha-based religions were not demonic but human traditions rooted in venerating and communing with extraordinary, powerful beings and with deceased human ancestors. In contrast to the exceptional Haitian influence of the 1800s, it was immigration from Cuba (again, in response to an anticolonial revolution) that played a particularly special role in the spread and formalization of new communities of Orisha religion. Cuba had been the home of an Orisha-based religion known as Lukumí or “Regla de Ocha” (and sometimes called Santería), and Cuban immigrants established numerous networks of religious affiliation known as *cabildos* (“houses”) as tens of thousands of Cuban immigrants pursued a new life in major cities of the United States, particularly in New York City. As with Vodou, Santería was an African-derived religion influenced by Caribbean Catholicism, so devotees commonly associated African Orisha with Christian saints. In this context, a growing number of African Americans devoted to Black Nationalism and pan-Africanism began looking to African culture for religious inspiration and guidance, and many began to affiliate with the Cuban American *cabildos*. Among them was Oseijeman Adefunmi, the New York-born founder of the religious Order of Damballah Hwedo Ancestor Priests. Under Adefunmi’s leadership, this small religious community had honored the Haitian Vodou deity known as Damballah, one of

the popular serpent deities associated with harmony and the ancestors, while celebrating the legacy of Orisha religion throughout the Black diaspora. Following his decision to be initiated into Santería, Adefunmi established the Shango Temple in Harlem. African American members of the religious community began emphasizing a “pure” form of this African-derived religion, expurgating the Christian symbols (e.g., use of the Bible and Christian saints) and emphasizing a Yoruba orthodoxy (Hucks 2012, 88–101).

The watershed moment in this period of cultural revival was the creation of Oyotunji Village in South Carolina in the 1970s by Adefunmi and other Orisha devotees from New York City. This separate community became the most important center of what Adefunmi termed “Orisha-Vodou.” Here was an especially visible element of a larger movement in African American religions that constituted the intersection of Black cultural nationalism and religious revivalism. Whereas earlier forms of racial consciousness had occurred with Black Islam and Black Judaism in the 1920s, the process of humanizing African-derived religion during the 1960s and 1970s was distinguished by an explicit emphasis on African culture and the polytheistic religions of West-Central Africa that had been transformed throughout the Americas and the Caribbean (Pinn 1997, 84–87; Hucks 2012, 90–96).

As a direct consequence of continuing migration, the polyvalent currents of Black Caribbean religion came to play a major role in the latter half of the twentieth century. Cuban Santería, Haitian Vodou, Brazilian Candomblé—all were emblematic of a new focus on valorizing the legacy of Orisha-type religions in the Black diaspora. But immigration was no longer the most vital force for the expansion of Orisha religion in the United States. After decades of revolutionizing the public meaning of Black culture—now widely accepted in academic and

popular cultures—and African-derived religion, US-born Blacks were turning to Yoruba religion in increasing numbers (Olupona and Rey 2008, 4).

The growth and popularity of Orisha-based religion, thus, has continued to expand in the twenty-first century. This is due, in part, to continuing immigration from Caribbean nations and from Africa. Presently, more than one-half of the approximately 4.2 million Black immigrants in the United States are of Caribbean origin. Continuing immigration from West Central Africa, as with the Caribbean, also promises to increase the numbers of US Blacks who participate as clients of Orisha-based religion. This might at first seem counterintuitive. First of all, unlike some Caribbean and Latin American nations such as Cuba, Trinidad, and Brazil, which have witnessed a gradual but significant valorization of African-derived religions, not a single nation of sub-Saharan Africa has experienced significant change in the persecution of religions of Orisha devotion. The intensification of conservative Christianity, in fact, has inspired unprecedented repression of indigenous religions throughout Africa. In Ghana and Nigeria, for example, fundamentalist Christians frequently desecrate shrines associated with various African heritage religions. Second, approximately 95 percent of the populations in sub-Saharan states identify as either Christian or Muslim. In fact, fewer than 5 percent of sub-Saharan Africans identify as devotees of indigenous Orisha-based religion, with the exception of Liberia (12 percent). So, the overwhelming numbers of Christians and Muslims in African nations would seem to suggest that African immigration to the United States would not increase US populations of Orisha devotion (Pew Research Center 2010, 132).

It might come as a surprise, thus, that a significant number of African immigrants are familiar with indigenous religious practices and are clients of Orisha religion, despite identifying as Muslims or as Christians. This phenomenon can be explained by the tendency of some West

African religionists to combine religious practices from various traditions. Although only 1 percent of Nigerians identify as devotees or practitioners of indigenous religion, approximately one-third of Muslims and Christians (combined) use traditional religious healers to alleviate sickness. More than 10 percent, furthermore, embrace the efficacy of ancestral offerings, traditional spiritual workers, devotional shrines, or other sacred objects. The numbers are even more striking for Ghana: 42 percent of Christians and Muslims have used indigenous religious healers to remedy illness. More than one-fourth place confidence in the efficacy of ancestral offerings and shrines or sacred objects to provide protection from harm; and an equal number view the deity of Christianity or Islam as an impersonal force—this is the typical paradigm for conceiving of the chief deity in African indigenous religions. Throughout sub-Saharan Africa, in fact, it is typically the case that a significant proportion of Christians and Muslims actually participate in African heritage religious practices despite their refusal to identify formally with a community formally labeled as an African traditional religion (Pew Research Center 2010, 132).

Oyotunji Village is now officially recognized as a Yoruba community by elite priests living in Nigeria's Yorubaland. The government of Trinidad and Tobago has also granted recognition to Orisha communities as official religions. Such shifts have helped to mitigate the long history of persecuting and repressing African-derived religion as diabolical. Brazil has formally recognized Orisha devotion as an important source of cultural heritage, including folklore, music, and dance, but the government's protection of Africa-derived religions and their practitioners is limited, and under President Jair Bolsonaro, potentially imperiled. Yoruba religions have also found a home in the United States, though as in Trinidad and Tobago, they often express a pan-African, nationalist valorization of Orisha devotion, a consequence of the Black cultural revolution that emerged during the 1960s and 1970s (Clarke 2004).

Among the important trends that will shape the future of African American religions are the increasingly multiracial networks of affiliation among religious communicants. This pattern is especially evident among the Orisha-based religions. Both clients and initiates of Orisha devotion comprise a significant number of non-Hispanic Whites and non-Black Hispanics. These devotees frequent the same botanicas, attend common rituals, and—in hopes of being initiated—are often mentored by the same ritual experts. The larger history of Orisha religion among African Americans has, of course, been inseparable from multiracial, transnational networks of affiliation and patronage. As mentioned above, gatherings and client-based relations among Blacks, Free People of Color (*Fr. gens de couleurs*), and Whites became the norm in New Orleans, which has long functioned as the center of Vodou in the United States. As Orisha devotion quickly grew to become a visible presence in major US cities during the 1960s and 1970s, African Americans began to affiliate with Cubans and, subsequently, immigrants from the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, Jamaica, Haiti, and other countries of the Caribbean and Latin America (Sandoval 2008, 364, 367).

In addition to the migration of people and goods to the United States from the Caribbean, Latin America, and Africa, the digital domain will play an increasingly central role in religions of Orisha devotion in the years to come. As social media and personal devices such as smart phones enable billions of users to connect and interact online, Orisha devotees have rapidly incorporated digital methods of communication into their spiritual lives. More than 160 websites are currently dedicated to Orisha religion. Among the more prominent is OrishaNet. These websites range from the small and personal to busy hubs that support blogs, host articles by religious specialists and academic scholars, and introduce basic information about religions such as Santería or Yoruba to curious seekers (Brandon 2008, 449, 463–65).

Significantly, the digital domain also functions to enable students of Orisha religion to connect with mentors with whom they might otherwise have no access (Beliso-De Jesús 2015). As a consequence, increasing numbers of devotees in the United States will participate in a religious community and cultivate expertise in knowledge of the Orisha and ritual through reading historical and theological materials online. This new development is resonant with an earlier trend marked by the increasing use of books to develop ritual expertise. During the 1960s and 1970s, when immigration patterns challenged the ease of maintaining face-to-face networks of apprenticeship, written manuals or guides to ritual gained special currency. This was vital to supporting the thriving growth of Orisha devotion. By that time, academic studies of Orisha devotion were proliferating, and these also found eager adoption by devotees concerned with hewing close to early or classical forms of ritual and theology (Brandon 2008).

But literate methods of religious formation proved deeply controversial. In contrast to modern iterations of Islam and Christianity, which tend to stress the individual's encounter with sacred texts, religions of Orisha devotion have existed without any written scriptures before the twentieth century. For many centuries, therefore, Orisha devotees have cultivated their spiritual formation entirely through oral tradition for many centuries. The very fact that published texts have recently become means of developing religious expertise has undermined the authenticity of the transmission in the eyes of some devotees. Literate methods—especially those employing professionally published books—have thus generated dissent and created an ideological divide. For some Orisha devotees, digital media have signified even greater remove from the ethos of authenticity easily enjoyed by oral instruction and exclusively in-person methods of apprenticeship (Brandon 2008, 464).

Nevertheless, the sheer volume and pragmatic scale of digital methods of religious formation indicate that the digital future of Orisha devotion is bright. Controversies over authenticity will likely remain. And most devotees, to be sure, will employ online sources and social media as a supplemental rather than exclusive means of experiencing community and cultivating expertise. This indicates that both experts and amateurs or prospective devotees of Orisha religion will increasingly access writings by religious experts and scholars through online media.

Another noteworthy trend in Orisha religion is the relatively capacious freedom of inclusion and participation in leadership by women and gay or lesbian devotees. Religions of Orisha devotion have generally been devoid of the patriarchal and heteronormative moral policing so common in biblical religions. This does not mean that sexism and homophobia do not occur among practitioners of Orisha devotion. The point, rather, is that the number of female priests and the open participation of initiated LGBTQ peoples in religions of Orisha devotion are unparalleled in biblical religions. The Orisha pantheon includes female, male, and transgendered deities. At a time when African American Christianity mirrors the broader pattern of heterosexism and barriers to female leadership that characterize other American Christianities, there is every indication that Orisha devotion among African Americans will remain an atmosphere where women are a significant constituency among leaders and where heterosexual normativity is not an explicit agenda (Matory 2005, 205–20; Abimbola 2006, 125–28).

As the status of religious scriptures continues to abound in the United States, it is important to consider whether and how religions of Orisha devotion will figure into this continuing trend. Classical forms of Orisha devotion have relied on an oral tradition of scripturalizing practices to transmit knowledge of sacred formulas and narratives about the divine or extraordinary beings. The most obvious example of this is the scriptural body of Odù—256 sets of narratives, each of

which contains 800 stories about the Orisha—that form the basis of the Ifá system of divination. This specific form of divination derives from West Africa’s Yorubaland and has been in existence for many centuries. According to religious tradition, the provenance of the Odù is identified with Orunmila, the Orisha associated with wisdom and intelligence, one of the few Orisha present at the world’s creation (Adimbola 2006, 119). During the twentieth century, this corpus began to circulate as a printed book of scripture. It is most familiar in English translation as the *Sacred Ifá Oracle* (Epega and John 1995). As orature (in contrast to literature), this corpus continues to be memorized and transmitted orally in the classical style among experts in the twenty-first century who have been initiated into Ifá divination. At the same time, however, the book form of Ifá scripture has found a permanent place in the world of Orisha devotion. It is common for Ifá divination experts to possess a printed copy of the Odù scripture, whether or not they have memorized the thousands of narratives in the corpus. Like other scriptures, moreover, the Odù has found wide use as an inspirational text and as a source of practical wisdom or guidance. The very fact that the Odù is a printed scripture has spawned the authorship of dozens of spiritual resource books that provide readers with a means to applying scriptural insights or reasoning to their personal lives.

It is fair to conclude, for this reason, that Orisha religion among African Americans will remain deeply shaped by its classical emphasis on oral practices of scripturalizing as a standard means of initiation and mentoring in the twenty-first century while increasing its capacities for literary tactics of engaging with the scriptural corpus of the Odù. In one way, this expanding use of printed scripture replicates and mirrors important dimensions of orature. For instance, it further reifies the scriptural status and form of the Odù. This has been achieved not merely through asserting Odù exceptionalism—it is understood as an oracle or divine revelation—but also by

enabling this Ifá corpus to function at the center of initiatory preparation and training in divination. There is something different, however, that obtains through the literary or printed presentation of Ifá scripture: the ease with which the Odù has begun to function as a popular form of devotional reading. In the past Ifá had chiefly been a scripture for divination. It was memorized completely and interpretive paradigms were mastered and deeply shaped by the sustained proximity of the mentor and mentee. By contrast, in a pattern that resembles the use of biblical scriptures, the new trend of engaging with Ifá scripture in print form has allowed devotees of Orisha religion facile access to the corpus without any need to master the Odù as an oracle of divination. More succinctly, whereas the Odù as orature functioned predominantly for divinatory readings, the printed oracle has expanded the role of the Odù for devotional reading.

## **CONCLUSION**

Because African Americans are a people whose past and present illuminate and even exemplify the intensely transnational and diasporic character of modernity, African American religions must be understood in a simultaneously national and transnational framework. The international dimensions are a result, on the one hand, of the fact that about 10 percent of all Black Americans are foreign born. They have changed the composition of American religious institutions, establishing not only churches and mosques, but also Sufi orders and Orisha-based communities. On the other hand, the international character of African American religions goes beyond the aesthetics, rituals, institutions, and doctrines imported to the United States by newcomers. From the very beginning of African American religious life, American-born Black people have cultivated diasporic and transnational visions and performed rituals that look beyond the shores of the United States for inspiration and meaning. In the last two centuries, African American Christians, Muslims, Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, and Orisha devotees have journeyed abroad to

establish religious missions, make religious pilgrimages, and/or seek religious knowledge. These religionists may still regard themselves as Americans abroad, but their identities and practices also encompass connections—racial, religious, ethnic, or linguistic—to non-Americans.

One key factor in the future shape of African American religion is likely to be how Black religionists understand the relationship between their religious commitments and their diasporic and trans/national identities. It is clear that, for some, travel and pilgrimage to sacred sites in Africa, missions to various countries in Africa, association with religious leaders and communities in particular African nations, and the symbol of Africa itself will remain an important aspect of African American religious practices and identities. In addition, Black racial solidarity across the African diaspora, whether aesthetic or political, will likely be framed for many as part and parcel of their religious identities. Finally, some African American religionists such as Black Muslims, Black practitioners of Lukumi or Vodou, Black Jews, and Black Buddhists will continue to see their religious identities as connected to sacred places, religious institutions, and religious leaders in places outside of Africa such as Saudi Arabia, Iran, Haiti, Cuba, India, Tibet, and China.

Whether such transnational loyalties and diasporic consciousness will translate into a shared political program of racial empowerment or common notion of African American communal belonging is far less clear. Black American religionists will likely support different institutional, theological, and ethical orientations, even as many of them see their religions as resources in the shared battle against anti-Black racism. If the past is any guide, the rich and varied transnational and diasporic identities of African Americans will likely proliferate, helping to shape different notions of social citizenship, religious affiliation, and political solidarity among US Americans of African descent.



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## Footnotes

1. See especially Massey and Higgins 2011, Table 3,  
<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3629734/table/T3/>.
2. The term *lwa* (not *Orisha*) is employed in Vodou to designate the extraordinary beings whom devotees serve and venerate. Vodou's genealogy can be traced to a shared matrix of West-Central African religious practices and theological frameworks (from present-day Benin to the Kongo region) common to other varieties of Orisha devotion. See Olupona and Rey 2008, 4, and Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert 2003, 109–10.