

Recreating AFRICA



Culture, Kinship,
and Religion in the
African-Portuguese
World, 1441-1770

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Theory and Praxis in the Study of African Religions

As the number of Muslim slaves arriving in the ports of the Portuguese colonial world began diminishing in the second half of the sixteenth century, there arrived new waves of Africans whose religious beliefs were unlike those of most slaves the Portuguese had previously encountered. The overwhelming majority of these slaves were from the Central African areas of present-day Angola, Congo, Gabon, and Cabinda. These Africans brought with them to the Americas certain core beliefs and practices that were undeniable products of their indigenous pasts. When we discuss core beliefs and practices, we must attempt to distinguish those cultural beliefs that were central to one's sense of personhood from those that were secondary and thus more malleable. In the case of Central Africa, these core beliefs and practices included a religious cosmology based on the division between the world of the living and the world of the spirits, with a particular emphasis on the importance of ancestral spirits. My primary focus in the chapters that follow are those indigenous religious beliefs and practices that were transferred throughout the African-Portuguese diaspora. By comparing the ritual practices and beliefs of Central Africans in Africa with the beliefs and practices of their brethren in the Americas, we can demonstrate that certain core beliefs were not destroyed by the influences of Western Christianity.

Central African Cosmology

Before looking at the religious practices of Africans in the broader diaspora, we must first have some understanding of the belief systems that sustained them in the lands of their birth. There was a great deal of variation in religious practices from ethnic group to ethnic group and even from kinship group to kinship group; however, there appear to have been broad religious understandings that were shared by nearly all Central African peoples. One of the distinguishing features of Central African cosmologies was the belief that secular structures were intimately bound to religious ideas. Political, social, economic, and cultural ideologies were all animated by a tightly woven cosmology that explained the origins of the universe, the constitution of the person, and the connections between the worlds of the living and the dead. This broad cosmology dictated codes of behavior and ritual practices; explained the sources of illness, infertility, or other malevolence; and delineated the relationships between human beings and the various deities.

In more specific terms, the universe was conceived as divided between the world of the living and the world of the dead. These two worlds were separated by a large body of water through which the dead had to pass in order to reach the other world.¹ Though the souls of the dead moved on to the other realm to join the souls of deceased ancestors, they never completely abandoned the world of the living.² There was a fluidity between the two worlds that allowed ancestral spirits to remain engaged in the everyday lives of their surviving kinsmen. Indeed, ancestral spirits were believed to be among the most powerful influences in shaping the fortunes of their surviving kin. Ancestors witnessed village disputes, sometimes intervening to uphold moral codes and community standards. They watched over hunters in the forests, protected women during childbirth, and insured bountiful harvests. In return, the ancestors expected to be loved and remembered. They required food at communal feasts, expected to be consulted in important family decisions, and demanded proper burials and frequent offerings at their graves. In this way, the living and the dead formed a single community, with social and moral obligations flowing in both directions.³

The Central African conception of humanity was closely related to the model of the divided world. Human beings were considered “double beings,” consisting of a visible outer shell and an inner, invisible entity that was the actual or essential person. The “soul” was an eternal force that could act independently of the outer being. When the outer person slept, the soul flew off to pursue its own labors and adventures, thereby explaining what Westerners understood to be dreams.⁴

On earth, the most powerful people were thought to possess whole and complete souls. To maintain the well-being of the soul, humans relied on the dead to protect them from evil. These appeals occurred at grave sites or in other ritual settings where the living made offerings to the dead in exchange for power and protection of the life force.⁵ When illness, misfortune, or other signs of weakness occurred, it was interpreted to mean that the spiritual protection of the soul was no longer effective. Because good health was viewed as a sign of social and spiritual power, sickness was interpreted as a symbol of a much broader and more general social failure. Sometimes, ancestral spirits invoked illness as punishment for those who failed in their obligations to their kin. At other times, the weakening of the soul was attributed to witches and evil spirits who separated the soul from its body by stealing it, often while the person was sleeping. The longer the soul was away from its shell, the risk of illness and death increased, as the witches continued to “eat” away at the soul.⁶

To counteract the depletion of the life force by disgruntled ancestors and witches, individuals might rely on ritual healers or diviners to intervene on their behalf. The diviners, in addition to being able to predict past and future occurrences, were able to determine which spirits were plaguing the body of an individual. After determining the cause of the “illness,” the healer prescribed a variety of remedies, including treatment of the witchcraft through natural medicines (roots, herbs, etc.), appeasement of ancestral spirits with feasts in their honor, or ritual judgments of the suspected living witches. These judgments usually consisted of a trial, or ordeal, that had to be endured by the suspected witches. To determine the guilty party, suspects had to undergo a rigorous physical test (often drinking poisons). The innocent always survived unharmed, while the guilty succumbed, revealing their identity as witches.⁷

Some healers, usually “normal” men and women, were chosen by the water and earth spirits to cure specific diseases or illnesses or to protect from malevolent forces. The spirit revealed itself to the chosen individual through an unusually shaped object of the natural world—a shell, a stone, or a piece of wood. These objects were thought to contain the essence of the spirit. By manipulating the object in a ritual manner, the healer could be possessed by the spirit and be endowed with its power. Some of these fetish objects were embellished with “medicine” pockets that supplemented the power of the spirit. In other cases, the fetish object was a manufactured statuette with medicine put into a hole in its stomach or in a container such as a bag or a calabash. The medicine consisted of various power-saturated substances from the natural world—plants, minerals, hair, sweat, blood, and so on. These fetishes and medicines were also sold by the healers to protect against wild animals, to

protect the foundations of houses, to kill thieves, to protect crops, to ensure fertility, and so on. By using the proper medicines and engaging in carefully choreographed rituals, individuals could protect themselves from a wide array of malevolent forces.⁸

The Limitations of Western Outlooks on African Culture

Broadly speaking, this was the cosmological world of Central Africans in the seventeenth century. Though this is admittedly only a thumbnail sketch of a broadly conceived Central African cosmology, the reader should be able to discern some of the differences between European and African cosmologies. The transfer of Central African ideas and their associated rituals across the Portuguese world is clearly shown in the Inquisition records and in the writings of various travelers, clerics, and merchants who resided in those areas, but reading these accounts presents difficulties. One must recognize and filter out Western biases that flaw these otherwise useful documentary sources. Descriptions of African practices, both in Africa and in the African-Portuguese diaspora, were not only condemned and marginalized as “sin” and “idolatry,” they also were misinterpreted as the work of the Devil, thereby distorting and omitting important elements crucial to understanding ritual processes. Despite the biases inherent in the sources, if one sets aside the pejorative descriptions they provide, one can clearly identify the unmistakable religious imprint of Central Africa, in some cases, in almost exactly the same forms that existed in Africa.

Unfortunately, the Portuguese were not the only ones who misinterpreted the meanings and significance of African religious forms. Even in the present day, histories of Africa and the African diaspora suffer from the inability of many “devout” Christian scholars to shed the dominant paradigms of Judeo-Christian thought.⁹ As such, the interpretation of African religions has been difficult for many Western scholars. Though most scholars engage their subjects with the best of intentions, the essence of African religious meaning has been diluted by the tacit assumption of Christian superiority. In their attempts to reconcile progressive, antiracist agendas with their certainty that African religions are inferior to Christianity, “devout” scholars have used a Christian template in their analyses of African rituals and beliefs, often attempting to find Christianity where it did not exist. Unfortunately, this Christian paradigm only distorts and obscures our understanding of African religious principles. Many of these devout thinkers have operated on the unconscious assumption that if they can demonstrate Christian elements in African thought, they can

somehow redeem Africans' humanity. Ironically, these analyses not only misrepresent African religious beliefs, but they reify the same sorts of patronizing and ethnocentric attitudes that the original European colonizers exhibited toward Africans.

Among the many preconceived notions that scholars bring to the study of African religions are at least three important misconceptions that derive from Judeo-Christian theology. The first is the belief in a single, omnipotent, fixed God. This assumption has led some scholars to search for the Christian God in Africa, filtering African supreme beings through their own understandings of the Christian divinity. But there are important differences between the Christian God and the African creators. In most African societies, the supreme being was not conceived as a universal creator, but rather as the creator of a particular people. This "original ancestor" was concerned only with the well-being of his descendants; not with all of humanity. Many Africans also believed that the creator could be transformed in accordance with political, economic, or social change. As we have already noted, religious beliefs and everyday secular activities were intimately connected. Thus, change in the secular world often impacted religious beliefs and practices, including humans' relationship with the supreme being.

For example, in Kongo, the arrival of the Portuguese resulted in a correlation between *nzambi mpungu* (the creator of all things) and the Christian God. Gradually, *nzambi mpungu* became more involved in the everyday affairs of many Kongolese, especially those who identified themselves as Christians. No longer remote and inaccessible, *nzambi mpungu* was now the subject of frequent worship for Kongolese Christians.¹⁰ In other African societies, changing historical conditions initiated the complete reinvention of the supreme being. For example, among the Ewe and Fon peoples of the so-called Mina Coast, historical change resulted in a variety of different supreme beings over time.¹¹ This volatility in the nature of the supreme being illustrates not only the futility of attempting to find the "true" Christian God in Africa but also shows that African cosmologies were not constructed around a supreme being in the same way that Christianity was. Instead, a variety of separate and distinct ancestral spirits and deities were the spiritual arbiters of the temporal world.

While most scholars acknowledge the importance of these "lesser" spirits, many have suggested that these spirits were direct manifestations of the supreme being, which supposedly served as intermediaries between the worshiper and the one true God, similar to Catholic saints. Insofar as the lesser spirits were often understood to be the lineal offspring of the creator, there was indeed a hierarchy of kinship and respect. But the lesser spirits were not necessarily considered an extension of the supreme being's will.¹² As with all

families, each member had his or her own characteristics and earthly utilities and was worshipped in accordance with specific human needs. Indeed, across Central Africa, it was the spirits of the most recently deceased ancestors who often took the most prominent roles in the lives of the living. The supreme being had no role in these relationships between man and the other spiritual beings. Thus, rather than seeking to reveal the Christian God in Africa, studies of African religions should attempt to understand the specific utility of ancestral spirits and their relationship to man.

The second questionable assumption made by many Christian scholars is that God is a mysterious and unknowable entity from the paradise known as Heaven. In Africa, this assumption fails on at least two counts. First, as we have already suggested, most African deities were well-known to their adherents—by name, by where they lived, by their personal characteristics, by what illnesses they might cause, and so on. Second, the notion of Heaven, in the Judeo-Christian sense, was unknown in African religions. There was no belief in Africa analogous to the Christian belief that life on earth was inferior to that which would be enjoyed in the “other world.” As Ugandan anthropologist Okot p’Bitek succinctly states, “African ethics is not grounded on a promise or threat by some god that the good people will, in the future, enjoy life in heaven, while the bad will cook in a great fire.”¹³ Instead of moving on to heaven or hell at death, African souls moved on to the world of the ancestors, where they joined the souls of their “dead” kinsmen, but they were still capable of occupying the same temporal space that they occupied when they were “alive,” influencing the fortunes of their living relatives and friends.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, many Christian scholars assume that the ultimate goal of religion is communion with and worship of the one inscrutable God. Most Africans, on the other hand, viewed their religions as a way of explaining, predicting, and controlling events in the world around them. African rituals and beliefs were designed to deal directly with the fortunes and the dangers of the temporal realm—disease, drought, hunger, sterility, and so on. As such, religion provided many of the explanations for what Westerners call “science.”¹⁴ In the Western world, religion and science evolved into two separate spheres of thought, with science being the preferred method of explaining and controlling the temporal world. The religious domain became a preserve for metaphysical communion with God. But in Africa, religion and science were inextricably bound.

Let me cite one example to illustrate the potential similarities between African religion and Western science. In most African cosmologies, an herbal cure whose efficacy was proven time and again was regarded as a “strong” spiritual remedy, affirming the ritual knowledge of the diviners and curers who prof-

ferred the cure. For Westerners, a near perfect rate of herbal/medicinal success would be regarded as a scientific truth, with the cure being attributed to the chemical properties of the herbs. Both cures operated in the same manner, but the Africans attributed the cure to the spirits, while Westerners attributed it to a supposedly more rational science.

One might argue that the distinctions between Western science and African religion were mere semantic differences. The African interpretation might simply be called the science of religion, since the outcomes ultimately were the same as in the Western world. Indeed, scholars have demonstrated that many African spiritual cures can withstand the challenges of Western science. But this approach completely ignores the religious interpretation of the remedy and implicitly reduces to the level of superstition all those African beliefs and practices that do not meet the threshold of scientific certainty. By privileging Western science as the only valid explanation for African cures and healing rituals, scholars ignore the essential character of many African religious forms. The only way for scholars to interpret African cosmologies with any degree of accuracy is to take African beliefs and practices on their own terms.

Though African and European cosmologies were largely incompatible, some scholars are now suggesting that the key to religious exchange had little to do with replacing one belief system in favor of another. Rather, religious exchange between Africans and Europeans depended upon a series of shared revelations, revelations that resonated within both the African and European spiritual traditions. These shared revelations occurred as early as the late fifteenth century, when the Portuguese began their efforts to convert the Kongoleses to Christianity. For instance, soon after the first Catholic priests arrived in Kongo, two Kongo noblemen dreamed simultaneously that a beautiful woman implored the Kongo to convert to Christianity. The Kongo noblemen consulted the Catholic priests to interpret this strange coincidence. The priests explained that the woman in the dreams was the Virgin Mary and that the dreams were “miracles and revelations.”¹⁵ For the Kongoleses, dreams had long been understood to be important sources of revelations. The Catholic endorsement only served to reinforce the dream’s meaning. Thus, the dream functioned as an important revelation in both systems of thought.

The recent work of John Thornton has been most persuasive in arguing for the importance of revelation in the formation of African Christianity.¹⁶ Thornton’s explanations for the ways in which African revelations were integrated into Catholic thought are convincing to a point. Where Catholic priests were willing to make spiritual concessions and admit the validity of certain African revelations, some Kongoleses were drawn into the Christian fold. In fact, one of Thornton’s most important contributions is the notion of a thoroughly

Africanized version of Christianity arising in Kongo in the sixteenth century.¹⁷ But the Catholic priests validated only a very small number of Kongolese revelations, declaring all other revelations to be the work of the Devil. While the Catholic Church considered revelations to be extraordinarily rare and miraculous expressions of God's will on earth, the Kongolese depended upon continuous revelation for their daily survival.

By emphasizing revelation over the broader cosmology, Thornton downplays the real essence of Central African religious thought. The cosmology of Central Africa was *built* upon the necessity of continuous revelation, while Christianity increasingly was becoming a religion based on communion with the one "true" God.¹⁸ In the Christian context, sources of revelation were finite, limited to God, Jesus, the Virgin Mary, and various saints. The revelations that were proffered by this limited cast were so rare and extraordinary that when they did occur, they were judged to be miraculous. When the Catholic saints revealed themselves, the validity of the revelation had to be confirmed by the Catholic clergy, an irritating obstacle that had no precedent in African thought. Central African revelation, on the other hand, was ordinary, continuous, and included a variety of local deities and ancestral spirits whose function was to intervene from the other world on behalf of those in the temporal world. This constant dialogue between laypeople and the spirit world was the linchpin of African cosmology and became the primary target of Catholic extirpation campaigns.

As Thornton readily admits, Europeans saw "a considerable part of African religious life as being of diabolical nature."¹⁹ Everyday forms of curing, healing, and divination were often considered the work of the Devil. Even so-called African "Christians" continued to practice these rituals, prompting commentary from Catholic clergymen. In a 1612 letter to the King of Portugal, the Bishop of Congo, Manuel Baptista, wrote that the people of Kongo were "incapable" of serving God "because the vices are so old and the barbarism is so great that they cannot be cured."²⁰ Some years later, Father Cavazzi wrote that there were "bad Christians" from Kongo who were "apparently avowed to our religion, but, hidden, they protect the *feiticeiros*, the foundation and support of all the idolatry."²¹ As Cavazzi makes clear, those Kongolese who embraced the Catholic faith clearly did so on their own terms, persisting in their beliefs in indigenous African forms.

Catholic priests had little tolerance for African rituals and practices. Across Central Africa, priests burned "idol houses" and "fetish objects" in grand public displays meant to demonstrate the impotence of African spirits and religious leaders (*nganga*).²² In 1716, Father Lorenzo da Lucca, who had been in Kongo for over ten years as a missionary, complained bitterly about the pro-

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Capuchin priest burning an idol house in Kongo, ca. 1750. Watercolor by Father Bernardino Ignazio da Veza, “Missione in prattica [dei] Padri cappuccinni ne’ Regni di Congo, Angola, et adiacenti,” Biblioteca civica centrale di Torino, MS 457.

liferation of “diabolical witchcraft” in the region around Luanda. He argued that if the African healers were not punished, the city would be “boiling over in a few years swollen from the assembly [of witches].” Father da Lucca went on to complain that he alone could not “remedy these disorders” without the power to punish, and that “with the exception of a violent remedy, this open wound is almost incurable—*extremis malis, extrema remedia*. And if this precept was given to remedy the wound, there would be many more believers.” Father da Lucca predicted that there would be dire consequences if African practices were not curtailed. He wrote that there was not only the “fear of losing the law of God, but moreover of His Majesty losing the Reign, because if these witches (*feiticeiros*) multiply themselves they can corrupt all of these people.”²³ The attempts to crush traditional practices and reduce the number of African revelations to acceptable levels illustrates the narrowness of the European Catholic conversion project in Central Africa.²⁴ Despite a growing indigenous Catholic priesthood, and even millenarian challengers like Dona Beatriz Kimpa Vita,²⁵ interpretation of Christian doctrine ultimately rested in the hands of European priests and missionaries. While Europeans embraced

some African revelations as valid in the Catholic tradition, the vast majority were rejected as being the Devil's work. Thus, the core of African religious belief—continuous, everyday forms of revelation used to explain, predict, and control the temporal world—was viewed by European priests as a “diabolical” oppositional threat.²⁶

Despite the rejection of traditional African practices and beliefs by most Catholic priests, some Kongolese still embraced a Catholic identity, especially vis-à-vis their “heathen” neighbors to the north and east. As noted earlier, this was a distinct brand of African Christianity, with strong influences from traditional Kongolese cosmology. Some of the Kongolese elite became well-versed in the commandments, prayers, and sacraments of the church. Others were Christians “only in name.” At the very least, many Kongolese were familiar with the “broad outlines of the Faith” and readily added these elements of Catholicism to their arsenal of spiritual beliefs.²⁷ But to argue that the Kongolese were Christians, and leave it at that, is to strip them of their spiritual core. Catholicism simply could not meet the here-and-now needs of most Kongolese, even into the eighteenth century, after more than two centuries of practice as the official state religion.

Catholicism and traditional Kongolese beliefs remained discrete cosmologies because their ends were vastly different. Christian revelations, when they occurred, demonstrated and validated the power of a largely unknowable, mysterious, otherworldly God. And this most often required blind faith—communion with an idealized apparition dwelling in the heavens. Kongolese revelation, on the other hand, was a dialogue between the living and the world of the spirits, including the spirits of ancestors, whose powers and foibles were familiar and well known, in real life as well as in death. Faith in a particular deity was verified by the bounty, or lack thereof, that was offered by the deity. If the deity was not producing, then those in the temporal world were failing to accede to his or her wishes. The followers of the deity could either acquiesce to the demands required by the spirit, or they could seek sustenance in another spirit. In this way, African cosmology was based upon an intimate, dynamic relationship between the living and those in the other world.

Though Thornton provides a nuanced assessment of the complexities and contradictions of African Christianity, he still insists on labeling the Kongolese primarily Christians. Unfortunately, Thornton's emphasis on Kongolese Christianity pushes him dangerously close to the arguments made by the “devout” scholars mentioned earlier. While I do not contest Thornton's argument that the Kongolese adopted Christianity as a fundamental part of their individual and collective identity, I do question the extent to which Christian identity trumped other religious identities among the Kongolese. Indeed, if Chris-

tianity was naturalized, as Thornton argues, it must have been naturalized into some body of religious thought that already existed. The problem is that we do not have a ready-made set of conceptual terms to delineate the system of Kongolese belief that continued, even as Christianity was naturalized by that belief system. Thus, a label like “African Christianity” becomes a convenient way of describing Kongolese religion, writ large.

The danger in this formulation is that it dilutes the Kongolese cosmological core. Against some of his best arguments for the complex nature of Christianity in Africa, Thornton forsakes the Kongolese spiritual core and replaces it with a Catholic one.²⁸ Certainly Thornton would not assert that the Europeans who “adopted the revelations of African diviners and mediums” were adherents *only* of African beliefs.²⁹ Yet this is precisely the type of suggestion he makes when he labels the Kongolese Christians.

I am not arguing that there were no Kongolese Christians. There were. But they were not *just* Christians. A more plausible theoretical explanation for Kongolese beliefs is that Christianity and indigenous Kongolese religion operated in *parallel* fashion, with the broad Central African cosmology still being the dominant religious paradigm for most Kongolese, especially in the process of conversion to Christianity.³⁰ Without doubt, there was some overlap in these traditions, especially at the symbolic level. The Kongolese were quick to recognize the Christian God as *nzambi mpungu*, the creator of all things. They also drew parallels between the Catholic saints and their ancestral deities. The Catholic priests and their superiors in Rome accepted these spiritual convergences as expressions of Catholic orthodoxy.³¹ But despite what the priests believed, the Kongolese were likely using Christian symbols to represent their own deities, and they continued to worship them as they always had. In one of his earliest works, even Thornton acknowledged that “the Christian faith in seventeenth-century Kongo was in all its essentials simply Kongo’s own religious system renamed.”³²

In the initial stages of conversion, just as the Europeans believed that the Kongolese were embracing God and the Catholic saints, the Kongolese probably believed that the Europeans were embracing their deities. Wyatt MacGaffey has quite accurately called this stage of Kongolese-Portuguese interaction “dialogues of the deaf.”³³ The worldviews of Africans and Europeans were so radically different that religious meanings probably were misinterpreted on both sides. Over the course of several generations, the blending of various aspects of the two traditions eventually led to the development of a distinctly Africanized form of Christianity that began to be seen as a religious movement independent of traditional Kongolese cosmology.³⁴ Nonetheless, the *core* elements of Kongolese cosmology, even for those who were

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Funeral mass in Kongo with offerings of food for the dead, ca. 1750. Watercolor by Father Bernardino Ignazio da Vezza, "Missione in pratica [dei] Padri cappuccini ne' Regni di Congo, Angola, et adiacenti," Biblioteca civica centrale di Torino, MS 457.

self-identified "Christians," remained explanation, prediction, and control. Christian faith was, at best, a parallel system of belief that served to complement Kongolese worldviews.

Conversion to this Africanized form of Christianity did not render the Kongolese solely Christian; Christian and Kongolese spheres continued to operate separately, with most adherents being "bi-religious." As historian Sandra Barnes has put it, "The essential point about religious systems that parallel one another is that each of them is like an arena: participants come and go. People ordinarily assign one religious label to themselves, but there are no sanctions levied on those who move among several arenas simultaneously."³⁵ Kongolese Christians and practitioners of traditional beliefs were often one and the same, sliding seamlessly from one belief system to another, a process that was informed by a common core cosmology that emphasized earth-bound pragmatism over faith.

The phenomenon of parallel religious practices and shifting arenas is perhaps best illustrated in a case from a late seventeenth-century mission in

Kongo. Capuchin priest Andrea da Pavia was losing patience with his parishioners, who persisted in visiting indigenous diviners and healers. The priest confronted his flock, demanding to know if they “wished to observe the Laws of God or their superstitious ceremonies.” In a telling response, the majority responded that “they firmly believed in God and everything that was taught to them [by missionaries] but that they also believed in their ceremonies and . . . observances.”³⁶ Clearly, this was an indication that the Kongolese were practicing Christianity as well as their indigenous religious beliefs. The two were discrete systems of belief, but they were not necessarily incompatible.

We should emphasize that Europeans also practiced parallel beliefs, especially when Christian cosmology ceased to be an effective remedy to temporal concerns. When Portuguese Christians exhausted all possibilities of prayer and faith in their attempts to control their environments, they were quick to turn to African diviners and curers. Nevertheless, the core of their belief system remained communion with God. Ultimately, the differences in Christian and African cosmologies boiled down to a conflict over the hierarchy of worship, particularly when addressing temporal concerns beyond human control. Africans worshipped multiple deities (including Christian ones in some cases) in an effort to control their daily environments, while Christians depended upon the mercy of the one true God and a finite group of saints to aid them in their daily travails.

African Culture and the Creolization School: A Critique

The religious conflicts discussed so far in this chapter were never limited to the African context. They applied equally to the broader diaspora. Enslaved Africans carried their religious beliefs with them wherever they were dispersed across the globe, and their beliefs and rituals consistently clashed with those of their captors. Few scholars have challenged the notion that slaves carried elements of Africa with them to their various destinations, but the depth and extent of African cultural and religious diffusion has persisted as a matter of scholarly dispute.

The reigning contention is that the pain and cruelty of the Middle Passage and slave life, coupled with separation from their familiar ethnic cultural milieu, forced slaves to abandon most elements of their specific African pasts and to create entirely new creolized “slave societies.” According to this perspective, the diversity of African languages, cultural beliefs, and social structures in the slave populations of the Americas necessitated the creation of these so-called “new” communities. African “survivals” might have been important

at the symbolic level, but they had limited relevance to the institutions that were forged in response to the uncertainties of slave life. Creolization is therefore rendered largely as a reaction to enslavement—an American-born defense mechanism, with little consideration of specific elements from the African past.³⁷

Other scholars have argued for a more sustained connection between Africa and the Americas, showing how African cultural and religious forms “survived” in the African diaspora.³⁸ Unfortunately, these survivals have tended to be broadly conceived and detached from specific African historical contexts. In these renderings, Africa often becomes static and homogenized. But as we will see, some African beliefs and practices were more than diluted, culturally detached survivals. As Thornton has cogently stated, “the fact is that in the eighteenth century African culture was not surviving [in the Americas]: It was arriving.”³⁹ Indeed, evidence from previous chapters on family, kinship, and Islam, as well as from chapters on religion that follow, suggests that the cultural and religious values of specific African peoples were transferred to the Americas.

Neither the creolization nor the survivals approach suffice to explain the complex religious experiences of enslaved Africans in the diaspora. New data on the slave trade demonstrate that Africans were not always arriving in the Americas in heterogeneous “crowds.” Rather, many were arriving in coherent cultural groupings that shared much in common—language, kinship, religion, and so on. To be sure, European chattel slavery and the Middle Passage altered African understandings of malevolence, but the ways of addressing these new forms of evil often remained the same. The functional and structural integrity of specific African rituals and beliefs was sustained from Africa to the Americas. Just as in Africa, religious practices in the diaspora were a tool for addressing a variety of social ills, including slavery. The challenge is to trace these specific survivals in their various historical contexts, from Africa to the Americas.

By subjecting specific survivals to historical scrutiny, we will show how Central African religion emerged as a counter-hegemonic force that constantly chipped away at the foundation of Brazilian slave society. Examining the evolution of African religious beliefs and practices in Brazil across almost two centuries, we will also see how so-called “Mina” slaves, as well as “Guineas” and “Mozambiques,” joined with their “Angolan” counterparts to challenge their servitude through religious means. When significant “creolization” did occur among Africans, beginning in the eighteenth century, the process of cultural exchange was most salient among Ganguelas and Minas, or Ndembos and Ardas, not between Africans and Portuguese. The broad cosmological

core (explanation, prediction, control) shared by the majority of these African peoples allowed them to forge common understandings and to continue challenging their servitude. Thus, Angolas, Ganguelas, Minas, and Ardas also became “Africans.”⁴⁰

If the process of becoming “African” was essentially an American phenomenon, we must pay careful attention to the very specific ideas, beliefs, and rituals that ultimately contributed to this collective identity. We also must recognize that the pace of change was dependent on the ability (or inability) of African peoples to reconstruct specific institutions. In Brazil, sustained Central African domination in the slave trade resulted in the proliferation of Central African cultural forms and religious institutions during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In this chapter, we have suggested that most Central Africans shared broad cultural and religious understandings. While these core beliefs give us some idea of how Central Africans understood their worlds, they only begin to suggest how Central Africans addressed the maladies and tribulations that were directly associated with their enslavement. In the next chapter, we begin our analysis of specific African rituals, examining Central African forms of divination in slave communities. We will also show how the form and function of Central African divinations were strikingly similar to those of Africans from the so-called Mina coast, as well as other parts of Africa. Finally, we will demonstrate how African forms of divination were used as tools of resistance against the institution of slavery.