Introduction

"Why Are You Here?"

Martin Tsang

It was 1997 and I had just arrived after a nine-hour flight from London Heathrow to Detroit Metropolitan Wayne County Airport, and the stern immigration officer was asking me the purpose of my visit.

"I've come to explore an African religion I have read about on the internet," I said, honestly and without thinking. *Why didn't I just say "Disney World"?!* The officer paused for a split second, lifted his hand back off the stamp on his inkpad, and gave me a scrutinous gaze. He was probably thinking, *What the hell is this Chinese-looking, British-sounding kid really going to do in Detroit?!* "Come with me," the officer said, placing my passport in a red folder and standing up. Red is never a good sign in such situations. I tried not to pass out from nerves and willed my now jellied legs to work to keep up with the man.

It was March 1997; I was nineteen, looking disheveled from the long flight and a complete bag of nerves and excitement. A religion I had only heard about and not experienced was calling to me, and arriving in America was the culmination of years of reading, dreaming, and saving money from summer work so that I could travel to find out more about the orishas, the humanlike yet supernatural gods and goddesses of the Yorùbá people of Southwest Africa whose global spiritual imprint had been made, in large part, through the horrors of the transatlantic trade in enslaved Africans. The orishas and other deities originating on the African continent have thus been prayed to and adored by devotees for centuries, in all sorts of locations and attracting all sorts of adherents. One potential member was me, undergoing the unlikeliest of spiritual sojourns that began in Mount Clemens, Michigan.

After many follow-up questions, the officer allowed me to enter the United States. It was my first time traveling alone, and while I delve into

my journey in my chapter later in this book, I remember vividly how I was feeling upon arrival. The officer's question about what I was doing there had been something I was asking myself, and within a short time I would see and experience firsthand something that had been something I had read about, thought about, and longed for. Would I find what I had hoped? Would the orishas accept me? Would I be turned away or accepted? After getting my suitcase and finding my way out of the emptied baggage hall, Afolabí was there to meet me. We hugged and grinned. We had been corresponding daily through AOL chat rooms, by email, and via eye-wateringly expensive transatlantic phone calls. It was so good and comforting to finally meet him in person. He cracked a joke, and immediately I felt so much better. On the hourlong car ride to his house, we continued chatting like old friends, while my eyes were peeled at all the new landscape that was both wildly unfamiliar and familiar, thanks to American TV. I happened to arrive on the day his goddaughter, Babaladé, would be celebrating her priesthood initiation anniversary in his house. While spotting the iconic red stop signs and yellow school buses, and keeping up conversation and staving off tiredness, I was also processing that I would soon be among a whole house full of practitioners celebrating the orishas. I was beside myself! A natural introvert, I willed my shyness and insecurities to retreat and told myself that these were the type of people I would want to hang out with. My heart was hammering as I had read that at such a celebration, a special altar or throne is set up temporarily where the priest's orishas are placed, in the form of large, lidded vessels containing the consecrated emblems of the various orishas that a priest acquires for worship through initiation. Not only would I meet orisha priests, but I would also literally be face-to-face with the sacred!

I remember entering the lobby where Afolabí's orisha family members were milling around, eating pasta and cake, and they all greeted me warmly. These were real, living human beings who seemed sane and normal and were gathered in a shared love of the orishas. In the living room there was a majestic throne bedecked in shimmering white cloth and beads in honor of Obatalá and all of Babaladé's orishas, their respective vessels adorned with gorgeous textiles and large, multistrand beaded necklaces called *mazos* that took my breath away. I rang Obatalá's silver bell, his *agogo,* and was guided in how to prostrate with my head to the floor in front of the altar, called *moforibalé,* and was lifted by Babaladé and Afolabí. I instantly felt at home, and so began my journey, like so many others in this book, on the road to discovering my personal, perhaps out of the ordinary, connection to the divine.

Why Are We Here?

This is a collection of narratives of the sacred as written by individuals encountering Afro-Atlantic spirituality through initiation. The book helps open fresh dialogue on the diversity and inclusivity of these global religions from personal perspectives. These experiences of contemporary practitioners of African-centered religions reimagine plural ritual diasporas as spaces for contact, mobilization, and agency. More and more people are searching for tangible connection and initiation to the divine and are traveling to embrace and learn, transforming their lives and in turn amplifying religious global connections in new and impactful ways. The contributions found in this volume exemplify the plural global realities of priests and adherents, allowing for individuals to affirm their practice and to make visible their presence within a worldwide religious landscape. By drawing together firsthand accounts of practices and practitioners relating to Haitian Vodou, Yorùbá orisha, Afro-Cuban Lucumí/Santería/Ifá, and Afro-Brazilian Candomblé practices, we can see the manifold dynamics of continuities and changes over time, space, and worldviews.

In essence, this book signals the diversity of African-based religious traditions both in terms of ethnicity and global occurrences. In so doing, these narratives of orisha and Vodou religions help make visible their contemporary, transnational frameworks that rely on physical travel, digital communications, remittances of money and goods, sacred material culture, knowledge exchange, and cultural brokerage. Individuals are increasingly turning to Afro-Atlantic traditions and seeking instruction and initiation in them, creating transnational networks of practitioners. This book offers glimpses into the previously uncounted and underdocumented valuable experiences of cosmopolitan adherents, revealing some of the motives and methods that fuel their spiritual development and desire to "convert" to traditions different from those faiths and experiences akin to their geographical or familial frames. Each chapter is written by a person willing to share intimate aspects of their religious lives, how they came to encounter and learn about the tradition they would later initiate, and the pathways they made in realizing and creating their own ritual communities.

Contributors to this volume include scholars, activists, LGBTQIA+ identifying practitioners, and artists, yet they cannot and should not be reduced to such simplified or detached classifications. They—*we*—wear multiple hats and can claim many identities. A growing number of adherents are anchoring new centers for Afro-Atlantic spirituality and practice across the

globe, planting the flag in many locations that have historically been underrepresented or hostile to Afro-centric spirituality. By sharing these experiences and advocating with pride for their beliefs, the practitioners doing this valuable work help undo the harm and erasure experienced through imperial, colonial, religious extremist, and cultural hegemonic regimes. Rather than perpetuating the idea that orisha and Vodou religions are localized to exoticized geographies or othered demographics, this book establishes with greater precision a contemporary snapshot of diverse people who have made these religions their own through their personal sojourns of searching, learning, and initiation. Thus, while the persons and stories are varied, we get a heightened sense of the religious momentum and mobility that cross cultural, linguistic, and economic borders and honor the deep relevance and generative power these religions have on an ever-growing number of people. Pluralism, movement, and connections have been and continue to be important factors in spiritual encounters of African religions discussed here. From the historical contexts of Afro-Atlantic and Atlantic-Creole cultures to contemporary practices, these religions in Africa and beyond have mobility at their core. Such movement, called *iranjo* in the Yorùbá sacrocultural context, can be evidenced in the rich visual and material traditions such as woodcarving. Praise poetry, history, journeys, and sculptures inform the concept of iranjo and in turn become a rich epistemological and artistic framework.[1]

The individuals who have sought initiation into orisha and Vodou religions explore their respective reasons for having traversed geographical, cultural, and linguistic distances and divides to practice and create new global communities of devotion. The volume is, therefore, autoethnographic in its approach. The core of each chapter reveals the "religious itinerary" or journey—of travel, learning, adaptation, apprenticeship, and initiation—of each participant, allowing for nuanced analyses: exploring where they live, how they practice, and how they bring knowledge and understanding of their chosen religious traditions to their distinct geographies. The contributors to the book were not raised in the religion they write about. Instead, they are spiritual sojourners undergoing initiation as priests, often requiring the acquisition of new languages, traveling for learning, and negotiating both local and global terrains and cultures to understand and become competent in religious praxis.

Such conjunctions of worlds and words generate telling reflections on the panoply of emotions and actions each person underwent in deepening

their spirituality. We benefit from reading each personal encounter and initiation experience as they pull into focus broader aspects of religious precepts and perceptions that have beguiled many. The writers reveal telling points of intersection, whether they are tension points or experiences that really put their differences (or sameness) into relief.

Studying Religious Routes, Networks, and Circuits

Religious lives speak to the plurality and idiosyncratic nature of forming and forging pathways for ritual practice, especially in geographical settings that emerge as important contemporary centers for spiritual experiences. Marloes Janson reminds us that pluriform religious movements require a framework that moves beyond traditional dichotomies, especially since one can only really identify as a member of Religion A and not Religion B, when in practice a person navigates and creates from both A and B and beyond. Janson notes that individuals often develop a pathway of religious practice in daily life that eschews narrow and separatist ideas of religions and conceptualizes these encounters and convergences as assemblages.[2] In Janson's ethnographic analysis of mixing Christian, Islamic, and "Yorùbá" religious practices in Lagos, framing such work in terms of an assemblage approach "overcomes not only the compartmentalized study of religion along theological boundaries but also goes a step further by dissolving religion as a bounded and distinct category."[3] Such a dissolution is useful in terms of thinking through the limitations of denoting Afro-Atlantic spiritual practices as religion and pitting them against the established and privileged religions that the term normally connotes.

Taking a broader Afro-diasporic perspective—including the religions of Brazil, Cuba, Haiti, and elsewhere—there has been a seismic shift in theoretical orientation over the decades, paving the way for a new ontology of the diaspora.[4] No longer are these religious traditions, systems, and lifeways considered "primitive," nor are they treated as having their foundations enshrined within a pristine and static past. Within the last two decades, discussions of diasporic Afro-Atlantic religions have increasingly become situated within the context of complex and dynamic politics, scales of economies, and international networks of communication and movement that serve to disrupt nation-state boundaries and the assumed lived realities of immobile, religious complexes. The forces of global trade and information exchange have caused a de-emphasis of the African diaspora as being

comprised of neat, geographically bounded units of culture to be studied in isolation; instead, discussion centers on individuals actively engaging in modes that Kevin A. Yelvington frames as translocalism.[5]

Stefania Capone, writing on the ideas of power and tradition in Afro-Brazilian religions states that the tireless search for an idealized or essentialized idea of African tradition in Candomblé is a means to different ends. Capone cites the early work of Nina Rodríguez, for whom surviving African elements reified the primitive and inferior characteristics of Afro-Brazilians. Rodríguez's view contrasts with that of another early twentieth-century scholar of Candomblé, Roger Bastide, who argues that the ability to remain true to an African past and to cultivate those Africanisms in the diaspora became a positive sign of social and cultural cohesion.[6] "Black memory" for some Candomblé practitioners and *terreiros* (temples) thus becomes a sign of faithfulness to one's origins and notions of ritual purity, while moving away from these origins, in terms of incorporating European and Christian symbolism and syncretism, can be read as signs of betrayal caused by a loss of collective memory.[7] The concept and claiming of tradition in Afro-Atlantic religions is an important factor that has prevailed in scholarship and the search and desire for authenticity.[8] Thus, the signaling of religious constructs of being African, faithfully, and unchanged, especially in ritual, are echoed and reinforced in attendant academic studies. Such scholarly works may turn a blind eye and an ear toward European and American—especially Christian—influences, saints, and vernaculars and thus present biased histories. Afro-Atlantic religions and their scholars have entertained and cocreated complex histories and ritual pedigrees that manifest in terms of origins in the African continent and adaptation, addition, and preservation in the diaspora. Many early Black Atlantic sociological studies dealing with claims of authenticity and tradition by researchers of diaspora utilize the concept of collective memory, following Maurice Halbwachs,[9] whose work argues that individual memory is impacted by and impacts cultural realities. More specifically, collective memory can have a tremendous impact on all aspects of life, with the construction of a symbolic space that is situated within a material space, and the construction of these spaces leaves little room for cultural contact, routes, and networks. Rather, these diasporic religious were thought of as operating in isolation, cut off from what was considered the "homeland" as well as being distinct and wholly unconnected from similar and cognate diasporas. For Capone, writing on Afro-Brazilian diasporic religiosity, one can observe circuits between the