

Studies of Religion in Africa

Supplements to the Journal of
Religion in Africa

Edited by

Paul Gifford

School of Oriental and African Studies, London

VOLUME 33

Africas of the Americas

Beyond the Search for Origins in the Study of
Afro-Atlantic Religions

Edited by

Stephan Palmié



BRILL

LEIDEN • BOSTON
2008

Cover Photograph by Brian Brazeal

This book is printed on acid-free paper.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Africas of the Americas : beyond the search for origins in the study of Afro-Atlantic religions / edited by Stephan Palmié.

p. cm. — (Studies of religion in Africa, ISSN 0169-9814 ; v. 33)

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-90-04-16472-7 (hardback : alk. paper)

1. Afro-Caribbean cults. 2. Africa—Religion. 3. Caribbean Area—Religion.

I. Palmié, Stephan. II. Title. III. Series.

BL2565.A36 2008

299.6097—dc22

2008008544

ISSN 0169-9814

ISBN 978 90 04 16472 7

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PRINTED IN THE NETHERLANDS

FREE TO BE A SLAVE: SLAVERY AS METAPHOR IN THE
AFRO-ATLANTIC RELIGIONS

J. Lorand Matory

Introduction

Èṣù Láàròyé

Exú Laroîè

Eṣu, Lord of the Crossroads, hear my plea

Alaroyé Agó

Papa Legba, ouvè baryè pou mwen

Owner of Power, open the gate for me.

African diaspora scholars and lay people tend to represent 'resistance' and the desire for 'freedom' as the founding principles and enduring essence of black New World identities. Yet many of the religions that we allegedly 'retain' by dint of 'cultural resistance', as well as many that we 'freely' choose, configure human relations to the divine in images of un-freedom, representing gods as monarchs, feudal lords, masters and shepherds, while characterizing worshipers as subjects, slaves and sheep. This essay surveys the well-documented but taken-for-granted images of enslavement at the heart of Afro-Brazilian, Afro-Cuban, Haitian and Black North American religions that employ slavery as a sacred metaphor of proper personhood, personal efficacy and moral rectitude.¹

This comparative view thus awakens us to an apparent irony within the political traditions that the United States best exemplifies. On the one hand, most western nation states and the neo-liberal global capitalist order have conferred enormous prestige on the term 'freedom' as a verbal representation of social health and consumer self-fashioning. Yet Orlando Patterson (1991; 1982) has argued that freedom and slavery

¹ I dedicate this paper to my father, William E. Matory, MD, a faithful servant of his family and of his people. Special thanks to Professor Ibrahim Sundiata for inviting me to reflect upon these issues at the Howard University conference on 'Slavery: A Comparative Exploration' (18–19 May 2001) and to the friends who illuminated them for me based upon their personal experience: Ms Shirley Pérez, Mr Ernesto Pichardo, Professor Liza McAlister, Professor Stephan Palmié and Professor Gerdès Fleurant.

are interdependent in their meanings and that the ex-slave is the virtual founder of the 'freedom' concept and its extensive web of metaphorical entailments. Barbara Fields (1990) and Rebecca Scott (1988) have highlighted the temporal and interregional variation in the meaning of 'freedom'. I, in turn, will argue that 'slavery' too is conceived of differently in different times and different places, and that 'slavery' remains the chief of a whole family (or clan) of living metaphors through which the descendants of Africans throughout the New World regularly (and at their most serious moments of self-fashioning) understand themselves and act upon their worlds."

Hence, this paper is not precisely about *slavery* and religion but about when and how some present-day people *think* about slavery when they are pursuing healing, wealth, power, and safe haven from their adversaries. It concerns how religious people's ritual and verbal images of slavery reflect and affect their present-day social worlds. I have spent much of the past quarter-century observing, living with and relishing *orisha* worship in Nigeria and various other religions of song, dance, oratory, sacrifice, divination and spirit possession in the Americas. These religions are known variously as 'Candomblé' in Brazil, 'Palo Mayombe' and 'Ocha' in Cuba and its diaspora, and *Sèvi Lwa* (or, for ease of reference, 'Vodou') in Haiti. I have also attended many Nigerian services for Allah, not to mention my lifetime of conviviality with the worshipers of Jesus all around the Atlantic perimeter. In these traditions, my friends' dramatization and talk of slavery might well memorialize the bondage suffered by their pre-twentieth-century ancestors, but they also serve as a changing 'model of and model for' (Geertz 1973: 93) a twentieth- and twenty-first-century social reality.

First, legally free people have long invoked slavery in a trope called 'litotes' or 'negation'—that is to say, in the manner of certain figures of speech, in which an affirmative is expressed by negation of the contrary. The meaningfulness of certain *performances* also rests upon this trope. For example, 'blackface' minstrelsy was one highly effective symbolic means by which not-quite-white immigrants—most prominently, early-twentieth-century Jewish and Irish ones—showed that they were *not black* and therefore deserved the privileges of full citizenship in the United States. To accentuate the point visually, they often applied bright white make-up around the eyes before applying the burnt cork to the rest of the face (see also Ignatiev 1995; Roediger 1991). Similarly, at private parties and in comedy routines, African Americans sometimes contrive to dance or talk like white people in order to demonstrate what we *are*

not. African Americans thus identify and make a distinguishing mark of our allegedly unique competencies. We thus construct our black selves through the trope of litotes.

So, when I cite the litotic invocation of slavery, I am identifying, for example, the dominant use of slavery in US political discourses, as when the Founding Fathers urged the British not to treat 'us Americans' as though 'we' were their *slaves* (see, e.g., Jordan 1968: 291–92). In much of Afro-North Americans' public discourse about our Black selves as well, 'slavery' appears as the tropic negation of our proper individual and collective selves—hence the enduring importance of 'Uncle Tom' in the African American imaginary. Yet, in the religions that I research, slavery is less often the negation of the normative present than a metonym and a metaphor of it. Instead of being the opposite of the desired personal or social state, the image and mimesis of slavery become highly flexible instruments of legally free people's aspirations for themselves and for their loved ones.

The situational virtue of slavery and freedom

The cross-cultural encounter invariably requires a degree of moral relativism. What is right in our eyes is often wrong in theirs. Yet it is a product of self-serving convenience, rather than honesty, that ethnocentrists often judge the Other as though he were the moral opposite of the self. With respect to good and evil—as well as freedom and slavery—the Afro-Latin religions of spirit possession dramatize a situational morality that challenges Christian America's pretensions of moral purity. The apparent differences between the moralities of the modern Afro-Atlantic religions and the Abrahamic faiths variously frighten, puzzle and intrigue western Christians, who, particularly in the US, maintain an idealistic vision of their own faith. In fact, much of the ethical reasoning embodied in the Afro-Atlantic gods resembles the ethics of the Old Testament high god, as well as the real-world conduct of contemporary Christians, Muslims and Jews. For example, in both sets of religions kindness, generosity and forgiveness are the prerogatives of power; the threat of rebellion, defeat or oppression sometimes legitimately demands resort to terrible, destructive powers.

Practitioners of Brazilian Candomblé, Cuban Ocha, Haitian *Sèvi Lwa* and similar religions avow that survival ultimately depends on one's ability to 'work with the right *and* with the left'. Communal piety and

the worship of esteemed gods occupy a central place in the organization of religious communities. However, self-protection, self-aggrandizement and even anti-social magic hold an acknowledged place in the ritual world of most temples. Therefore, no one's practice is pure—any more than any individual in Judeo-Christian North American culture is considered purely good or purely evil.

There is, however, a major difference between Abrahamic and Afro-Atlantic morality. The Abrahamic religions tend to advocate a homogeneous set of behavioral injunctions, while condemning outsiders as inferior. The Afro-Atlantic religions, on the other hand, tend to acknowledge a multiplicity of divine personalities and a multiplicity of rule sets surrounding each. Virtue lies in the deft management of social and divine heterogeneity, rather than in the rigid imposition of a single divine will or rule set (see also K.M. Brown 1987; Chernoff 1979). Just as the gods must get along, so must their followers, and a single person must often harmonize the demands of the multiple gods and spirits, who inhabit their bodies and their communities.

Also unlike the Abrahamic faiths, in which ethnic and religious groupings—such as 'Jew' vs. 'Gentile' or 'goy', 'Christian' vs. 'heathen', and 'believer' vs. 'infidel' or 'kafir'—posit the unworthiness of the Other, the Afro-Latin American religions often employ ethnicity as a metaphor for the complementary and equally necessary practice of the 'right' and the 'left' hands. Haitian, Afro-Cuban and Afro-Brazilian religious traditions are each sub-divided into 'nations', which are believed to correspond to the African origins of each ethnic sub-division. For example, Cuba hosts a 'Congo' nation and a Yoruba-affiliated 'Lucumí' nation. Afro-Brazilian and Haitian religions host similar sacred sub-divisions. However, cultural historian Stephan Palmié (2002) rightly corrects the premise that such sub-divisions, or nations, owe the distinctiveness of their practices entirely to the diversity of their African origins. In fact, each Afro-Latin nation is a product of interaction among nations, and of an emergent division of ritual labor. I would add some further sources of differentiation: the class differences between nations and, consequently, between diverse nations' ability to travel and promote their interests among New World elites (Matory 1999a; 1999b; 2005). For both reasons, some nations enjoy greater prestige and better moral reputations than others in their American host societies.

Particularly in Cuba and Haiti, those religious practices identified with West African origins (that is, in Nigeria and the People's Republic of Benin) tend to be associated with communal piety and the worship

of esteemed gods. These traditions are called 'Ocha' or 'Lucumí' in Cuba and 'Rada' in Haiti. On the other hand, those religions widely identified with West-Central African origins (in the Democratic Republic of Congo and the Republic of Congo), which emphasize work with the spirits of the dead, are disproportionately suspected of self-protective, self-aggrandizing and even anti-social magic. These traditions are called 'Palo Mayombe' in Cuba. In Haiti they are associated with the 'Petwo' nation and with the activities of priests known as the *bòkò*.² In fact, though, the division of ritual labor among the nations is seldom clear cut.

It is against this backdrop that I propose to examine some imagery that many practitioners condemn as amoral and profess to be beyond the limits of acceptable practice. The reader is warned, therefore, not to judge any whole tradition according to the apparently malign practices that I have selected for examination. These are related to a far wider range of benign practices in the same way that Satanism is related to Christianity and Judaism: they belong to the same family of symbols, myths, expressive possibilities and culturally conceivable forms of conduct within western culture. Moreover, I hope to illustrate that, despite North Americans' predilection for self-idealization, the same situational morality exists at the heart of the officially secular democracy of the United States. I will argue that the joint necessity of 'working with the right hand' and 'working with the left' in the Afro-Latin American traditions illuminates the similar inter-dependency of 'freedom' and 'slavery' in North American religious and political life. In sum, this paper concerns the North American discourse of 'slavery' and 'freedom' as they might be viewed through the lens of the Afro-Latin American religions. First, however, let us more closely examine the case that seems most to contradict this Afro-Latin vision.

² Unlike their counterparts in Brazil and Cuba, the *nachons* of Haiti are typically families of gods rather than groupings of temples, and the Yoruba-affiliated Haitian 'Nago' nation is a sub-set of the larger Rada nation, which, named after the West African city of Allada, embraces multiple ethnic categories from the Gulf of Guinea. In Haiti, the nation bearing the most obvious references to West-Central Africa—the Petwo nation—is associated with anger and brutality. Thus Haiti fits the general pattern of crediting West African-identified and West-Central African-identified religious categories with opposite moral values (see, e.g., Métraux 1959: 86–7). For an exploration of the economic and political roots of the moral superiority attributed to West African-inspired denominations and practices, see Matory 1999a.

America: 'the home of the un-slave'

Most US North Americans represent slavery as nothing short of a horror, as an unnatural aberration, and as the anti-type of the logic of natural agency that we call 'freedom'. US notions of 'freedom' posit that it is *normal* for an adult individual to move about as he or she pleases, to consume as he or she pleases, to retain the profits from his or her exchanges and to object if he or she believes those freedoms are being unduly infringed upon.

Such 'freedom' is limited by numerous regulatory conventions governing how one can speak, what one must pay to reach certain audiences, where one can move about, at what hours, in what conveyances, which resources must be shared with the state, who is free to earn how much profit and in what ways. Hence, the 'free' person recognizes him- or herself *not* by the *absence* of responsibilities or encumbrances to his or her individual self-indulgence but by the existence of a conceptually opposite population that is not only far more encumbered but which, by reason of place or race of birth, *deserves* to be more encumbered and, more importantly, is rightly subject to corporal punishment and restraint beyond the age of majority (Patterson 1991).

The positional descendants of slave-owners in the United States tend to regard slavery as a regrettable mistake or inconsistency that, through the vision of certain wise slaveholders and the ultimate triumph of logical consistency, was overcome, just as British government restrictions on the practice of alternative cults and on American commerce were overcome. The descendants of African slaves in the United States, on the other hand, tend to regard slavery as the past form of an enduring hypocrisy, which, in every subsequent generation, has allowed whites to collude in denying to the descendants of slaves some form of 'freedom' or another that is otherwise publicly promised to all. In our religions, Black North Americans therefore sing of being released from bondage, and we sometimes even renounce personal names that recall our ancestors' servitude to immigrants from the British Isles. (Distinctly African-American names often convey the bearer's dignity through French-, Arabic- or African-sounding contrast to Anglo-Saxon names. Ironically, many of the Arabic names avow the bearer's enslavement to Allah. Only at first sight is it ironic that those oppressed within one imperial metropole construct submission to rival empires as a form of spiritual resistance. The citation of obscurantist French writings and the idealization of France play a similar role among the middling

elites of the American academic class.) Black North Americans typically imagine the slave as the kidnapped and bloodily beaten man, the raped woman, the child sold off from her mother. The implication of bodily assault is emphasized.

Details notwithstanding, most black and white Americans (as well as other black Atlantic anglophones) seem to agree in representing slavery as the opposite of a normative present-day freedom. For example, despite his aim to diminish the centrality of the United States in representations of African-diaspora culture, the influential work of Paul Gilroy (e.g., 1993) cleaves closely to Black North Americans' public ideology about the genesis of our culture and our peoplehood. For Gilroy, the African diaspora is no mere 'survival' of African culture. Instead, disappointment with the failed promises of the French Enlightenment and the sublimated pain of the Middle Passage are the driving forces behind the cultures of the African diaspora.

For many contemporary African Americans (and particularly the intellectuals), slavery is then the foil against which our culture is believed to have developed or the mire that, through resistance, we have striven to rise above. Slavery is the lost progress from which we hope to recover and the nullification of personal and collective identity, which we have only gradually and partially reclaimed or replaced. Slavery legally made African Americans into objects of exchange, rather than exchangers, and thus the *opposite* of people in a capitalist society.

Masters who worship the slave

I admit that this sketch of present-day North Americans' image of slavery is over-simple and runs the risk of trivializing a subject we all take very seriously. But it is serious enough to serve a heuristic purpose—to capture a remarkable contrast between images of slavery among Black *estadounidenses*, on the one hand, and some other black Atlantic peoples, on the other. For example, one well-known song casually invokes slaves (*eru*) and pawns (*iwofa*)³ as the instruments of the deepest love known to Yoruba people: a parent's and, implicitly, a mother's love for her child:

³ In late-precolonial and early colonial Yorubaland, *iwofa* were usually minor relatives lent to labor for the creditor in order to pay off the debtor's debt.

Aso t'ò ba dara, maa ra f'òmọọ mi.
 Èwu t'ò ba dara maa ra f'òmọọ mi.
 Gele t'ò ba dara maa ra f'òmọọ mi
 Fila t'ò ba dara maa ra f'òmọọ mi
 Ti m ba l'ogun eru,
 Ki n yá iwọfa ogbon,
 [Repeat]
 Ijọ t'aa ba ku o,
 Ş'omọ l'a dele?
 Baba l'oke jẹ ki ọọmo mi
 Wo ile dec mi,
 Nitori pe omọ l'asọ ayẹ.
 Omọ l'asọ.
 Omọ l'asọ aye.
 Omọ l'asọ.

[Repeat]

Good cloth I will buy for my child.
 A good piece of clothing I will buy for my child.
 A good head-tie I will buy for my child.
 A good hat I will buy for my child.
 If I own twenty *slaves*,
 If I command thirty *pauns*.
 The day that we die, I really mean it,
 Aren't children the ones that we leave behind in the house?
 Father above, let my children
 Look after the house for me,
 Because children are the clothing of life.
 Children are clothing.
 Children are the clothing of life.
 Children are clothing,
 (Emphasis mine)

In this song, clothing, slaves and offspring are treated as similarly inanimate extensions of the agent and narrator. Inborn agency, rights or freedom are not what distinguishes the beloved child from the clothing and the slaves. Rather, it is the child's unique role in the posthumous survival of the agent's social personality.

In a further West African example, Judy Rosenthal (1997: 100–21) reports on the Gorovodu and Mama Tchamba priests among the late-twentieth-century Ewe of Togo, who worship the spirits of their slaves, incorporating—through spirit possession—and serving those who once served them. The slave is thus not a foil to the selves that these priests aspire to be but, argues Rosenthal, their means to healing, spiritual counsel and personal wholeness. By reconciling male with female and the southern slave-owner with the northern slave in relationships of

sacred reciprocity and union, possession by these slave spirits resists the alienating hierarchies of colonialism and capitalism, as well as the colonialist 'divide-and-conquer' strategy of pitting northern and southern ethnic groups against one another.

The descendants of some New World slaveholders also actively seek to re-link themselves (which is, after all, the etymological implication of all 'religion') with the slaves of their ancestors. For example, the all white Society for the Preservation of Spirituals in Charleston, South Carolina, relives and laments, through the music of nineteenth-century black slaves, the loss of the conviviality that this group believes existed between its ancestors and their slaves. Made up exclusively of the children and grandchildren of slaveholding South Carolina Low Country planters, the Society has, since around 1923, endeavored to preserve the nineteenth-century, pre-'concert hall' versions of the Negro spirituals that African Americans themselves have progressively abandoned. The group not only studies and transcribes these 'authentic' forms of the Negro spiritual, but, until recently, performed and recorded them in carefully reproduced Gullah dialect. Whatever last-ditch efforts at paternalism one might suspect in this project, the musical results and the sincerity of the performers are sometimes moving and beautiful (Howe 1930; Smythe et al. 1931; Society for the Preservation of Spirituals [recording] 1955; Puckett 1969 [1926]). While the Society's transcriptions of Gullah, like Newbell Niles Puckett's (1969 [1926]) and Joel Chandler Harris's (1982 [1880]) transcriptions of Black English generally, seem intent on conveying the ignorance or naivete of the original speakers—such as 'wuz' for 'was' and 'frum' for 'from'—the introductory presentation of Augustine T. Smythe and the performance of this white choir, as recorded in 1955, struck me as both sensitive and warm.⁴

It is through both contempt for and admiration of the slave that not-so-white immigrants too have linked themselves to Americanness. Blackface minstrelsy is the most influential and widely cited instance of this phenomenon (e.g., Lott 1993). But not-so-white immigrants have shared leadership in the *folkloric representation and use* of the United States's principal racial Other as well. On the one hand, with a Mississippi College and a Yale degree, Puckett published numerous books

⁴ My further sources of information on the Society include letters from Dale Rosengarten to the author (dated 5 September 1996 and 12 October 1996) and a letter from Mary Julia Royall to Dale Rosengarten (n.d.), kindly copied to the author by Dr Rosengarten on 5 September 1996.

on southern Black folklore, including *Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro* (1969 [1926]). On the other hand, unlike most of his southern white comrades in the fetishization of the slave, Joel Chandler Harris had actually grown up poor, the illegitimate son of an Irish day-laborer. But, like many Irish immigrants and their children, he had a great investment in America's guarantee of social superiority for those who could call themselves white. Thus, he became a dramatic spokesman for the southern gentry, the goodness of its ways, and, above all, the wisdom and loving submission of the old black slave. Harris is best known as the creator of Uncle Remus, through whose fictional mouth he narrated the folktales he had heard from African Americans. His *Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings* (1982 [1880]) became the basis of a popular Disney movie, 'Song of the South' (1946).⁵

Sacred performances like those of Charleston's Society for the Preservation of Spirituals are also common in the Latin American lands of *mestizaje* and 'racial democracy'. For example, white practitioners of religions like Umbanda in Brazil and Kardecist Spiritism (or *Espiritismo*) in Cuba and Puerto Rico call in the slaves to heal and make them whole. Practitioners of these traditions variously worship the Yoruba-related messenger god Exú and the spirits of dead blacks, Indians and Gypsies. These religions are also grounded in the teachings of Allan Kardec, a spirit channeled by French mystic Hippolyte Rivail. His books (e.g., Kardec 1944 [1857]) have circulated widely in Latin America since the nineteenth century. Among the premises of Kardecist Spiritism is the view that human beings are in a position to 'enlighten' and 'elevate' the 'unevolved' spirits of those who died uneducated or in a socially lowly position. Since some spirits are more 'evolved' and 'enlightened' than others, they too can charitably assist suffering or unevolved spirits and people toward wellness and enlightenment. Thus, Umbanda practitioners host *sessões* ('sessions') and Caribbean spiritists host *misas espirituales* ('spiritual masses') where enlightened people assist unenlightened spirits, and, more importantly, spirits of all sorts help living people to solve their worldly problems. Those spirits typically do so by possessing their human mediums and offering both 'spiritual cleansings' and ritual or practical advice.

⁵ See, for example, *Who Was Who in America* (1968: vol. IV, 768; May 1983: vol. 108, 218); Trosky and Olendorf (1992: vol. 137, 191-37). See also Ignatiev (1995) on the violent and litotic efforts of Irish immigrants to prove their whiteness in the nineteenth- and twentieth-century US.

The *pretos velhos*, or 'old blacks', of Umbanda and the Congo spirits of Caribbean spiritism are the spirits of dead slaves. They are arguably the most numerous and active spirits in these traditions of spiritual healing. The Congo spirits are usually imagined or depicted as petroleum-black slaves—whether as raggedly dressed and muscular field hands or as elderly, white-clad and white-haired house servants. These spirits come in vividly diverse types, and display a theatrical complexity of character. While not free of racism and condescension, white priests of Cuban Spiritism depict their slave spirits as multi-faceted and dynamic—just as multi-faceted and dynamic as those spirits' interventions in the priests' own lives. These slave spirits are called by many names: *muertos* ('dead people'); Congos and Congas ('Congo people'); *madamos* and *madamas*; and *eguns* (from the Yoruba for 'ancestral spirits'). This last appellation marks such priests' adherence to both Spiritism and Ocha, the Yoruba-affiliated worship of the Afro-Cuban gods known as *orichas*.

The Alarcóns⁶ of Miami, who practice this religion, fled Cuba after the 1959 socialist revolution and have since prospered in the wholesaling of produce. Though white and Republican, the family is zealously Africa-centered in its interpretation of the religion and, so, regards the gods as Yoruba and upholds Yoruba linguistic standards wherever possible. The dead person who is central to the Alarcóns' religious life is Encarnación de la Caridad y Rodríguez, or 'Caridad'. She is the main *egun*, or 'spirit of the dead', working with the mother of my best friend in this family (let us call him Eduardo).

Caridad, I am told, looks like Aunt Jemima and was not just any old slave. She had been enslaved as a child by a Portuguese ship owner, who found her with her brothers and 'took' them all from some part of Nigeria, but not the Yoruba part. Nonetheless, once in Cuba, she was ordained as a priestess of Ochún—Yoruba goddess of gold, amber and sensuality. She was then raised in the Cuban home of the shipper's family (one of several homes owned by this wealthy slaveholder). There she became the main cook and raised the children, later taking care of the wife whenever she traveled. The lady of the house could not bear children, so, with her consent, Caridad bore three children by the master. Therefore, according to Eduardo, Caridad did not experience the terrible aspects of slavery.

⁶ The family's name has been changed.

In fact, she had authority over all the other slaves, which authority remains key to her *modus operandi* until today. Caridad arrives regularly in the body of Eduardo's mother during *misas espirituales*, or 'spiritual masses', where the dead woman issues warnings and directs her 'clan' of fellow spirits to clear out any malign influences that might otherwise injure her living hosts. She is a *ña*, as house slaves were honorifically addressed, and is therefore more educated and refined than the field slaves. Her Spanish is not perfect, but it is far more comprehensible than that of the field slaves. Her behavior is said to be 'less harsh' and her posture quite erect. 'Whereas the field slaves sit on the floor when they come, Caridad and the other house slaves demand chairs, even the sort of bentwood rocker that was normally the prerogative of the *amo*, or 'master', on Caribbean plantations. When the field slaves appear in the spiritual masses, they often arrive and depart with a limp, a stiff leg or an atrophied arm, recalling some injury they had sustained in life. Hence, the suffering slave is not invisible in the Cuban Spiritist cosmology of slavery; rather, s/he appears amid a vertically arranged hierarchy of slave types and a range of divinely dramatized slave personalities. When the field slaves come, it is *ños* and *ñas* like Caridad who often translate their warnings and directives, beginning with such prefaces as 'Let me explain to you what this dumb ass is saying...' *Ña Caridad* is always in charge.

Half a decade ago, *Ña Caridad* announced that she would begin 'calling in her clan'. Since then, a series of people initiated into Ocha by my friend have turned out to be accompanied by slave spirits who had belonged to *Ña Caridad's* African clan. Another initiate brought with him the spirit of Caridad's dead Portuguese owner. And Caridad supervises them all. She has thus re-arranged not only the relationships among the dead masters and slaves but also among the living people who now worship them. Among the dead, it is the house slave, and not the master, who provides authoritative healing counsel to the living. The authoritative house slave also provides the spiritual and metaphorical armature for the authority of the elderly matriarch of a living family and temple community.

Umbanda and Spiritism are arguably the Afro-Atlantic religions in which *whites* have had the greatest influence as interpreters of slavery. With all their apparent condescension to the slave spirits, they invest those spirits with efficacy and authority that they deny to the spirits of the dead slaveholders and most Anglo-North Americans find unimaginable in a slave.

'Little people': Black Latin American metaphors of servitude and efficacy

Some might expect black devotees and demographically blacker Afro-Atlantic religions to be more articulate and more direct in their naming and interpretation of slavery. In fact, they tend to be less direct but more articulate about *the metaphoric value of the slave* as a 'model of and model for' (Geertz 1973) the lives of worshipers in the early twenty-first century. Thus, my priestly friends and I have been able to identify no explicit reference to slavery in the liturgical songs of Brazilian Candomblé and Cuban Ocha. However, these religions and Haitian Vodou are rich in iconography and ritual practices suggesting the captivity and sale of initiates, as well as the enslavement and corporal punishment of subordinate people and spiritual entities.

Before returning to these themes, let me simply list a few of the terms for masters and slaves that my Haitian, Brazilian and Cuban friends offered when I asked recently about the imagery of slavery in their practices. Some terms refer only indirectly to legal slavery, and others possess additional referents, which is perhaps why these terms lend themselves to such persuasive metaphorical uses. In their capacity as overwhelming, domineering and sometimes physically punitive beings, various spirits, priests and temple inhabitants are called *mèt* ('masters' in Kreyòl), *dueños* and *anos* ('owners' and 'masters' in Spanish), *donos* and *patrões* ('owners' and 'bosses' in Portuguese). The spirits, priests and temple inhabitants dominated by them are sometimes called *escravos* (or 'slaves' in Brazilian Portuguese), but in Spanish the terms *servientes* ('servants') and *criados* ('housemaids') arose more often. Haitians use terms like *sevité* ('servitors', which Joan Dayan [1995: 71] argues is a euphemism for 'slave' borrowed from the Jesuits in Haiti) and *restavèk* (the child servants whose impoverished parents leave them to toil for those better able to feed them).

In Haiti, there are also the terms *zonbi* and *timoun*. Unlike the categorical verbal and corporal imagery of slavery in Umbanda and Spiritism, such terms are polysemic in ways that defy easy translation into English. My favorite in this regard is the term *timoun*—which literally means 'little people' in Haitian Kreyòl. The minor children, clients, servants, dependents and subordinates of worldly people are called *timoun*, or 'little people', but so are kidnapped spirits of the dead and flesh-and-blood zombies (Gerdès Fleurant, personal communication, 5/12/01; also Cosentino 1995).

Zombies are real. One kind of zombie (*zonbi* in Kreyòl) is a real living person who has been poisoned, it is said, for committing some infraction against the social order. He or she is then exhumed and revived but sold to another part of Haiti, kept in a frightened and semi-conscious state and made to labor for others. Wade Davis (1988) and a number of journalists have documented the cases of two rescued zombies: Clairvius Narcisse and Francina Illeus, or 'Ti Femme'. Mr. Narcisse reportedly died in 1962, in the context of a land dispute with his siblings and allegations of stinginess toward them and toward the mothers of his numerous children. According to Davis, a combination of poisoning by a *bòkò* in cahoots with Narcisse's aggrieved family, Narcisse's own belief in zombification, and ostracism by his community turned Narcisse into a socially dead, involuntary worker known as a *zonbi*.

Another kind of zombie is the kidnapped and enslaved spirit of a dead person, also called a *zonbi* in Kreyòl. Thus, *wanga*, or 'charms', often contain such zombies. The zombie might be embodied in and made present by, for example, the shavings of two skulls stolen from the graveyard and bought by a *bòkò* priest. Not all *wanga* contain the enslaved spirits of the dead, but they work best if they do.

Thus, Haitian religious discourses generate particularly vivid metaphors of hierarchy and personal efficacy in the real, daily lives of twenty-first-century people. Indeed, real daily life in Haiti is extremely hierarchical. Says one avid student of Haiti, 'Even the maids have maids'. For example, a woman who works for a rich white person might have an ill-fed and lesser-paid servant of her own at home.⁷ Equally ironic in the eyes of most North Americans, more than a few mulattoes and blacks owned slaves in nineteenth-century Brazil, Cuba and other locales in the Greater Caribbean sphere, including Louisiana and South Carolina. Even in the wake of the Haitian Revolution, the black rulers of northern Haiti instituted a regime of forced labor and continued to purchase African workers through the slave trade (Geggus 1997: 15, 32). Thus, whites are not the worldly prototype of the master in twenty-first-century Haitian religious and secular language.

On the contrary, the Kreyòl term for an economically and politically masterful person is *gwo nèg*—literally, a 'big black'.⁸

Despite its real-life counterparts all around the black Atlantic, hardly any Afro-Atlantic religious concept has been more generative in its interpellation of hierarchy than the term *zonbi*, which can be used to describe, for example, slow workers, people of doubtful intelligence, and morally hamstrung intellectuals under dictatorship. In his 1977 album 'Zombie', the Nigerian musician Fela Ransome-Kuti used the term so effectively to describe the soldiers of the Nigerian military dictatorship, then led by General Olusegun Obasanjo, that the troops fatally injured Fela's mother in the course of burning down his nightclub.⁹ In a society where the elderly are so revered, Obasanjo's soldiers gave proof of Fela's accusations. Not all zombies are metaphorical, but all of them recall Marcus Garvey and Bob Marley's metaphoric observation that your body does not have to be in chains for you to be a slave; mental and spiritual slavery can shackle you just as effectively. In his 1980 'Redemption Song', Marley paraphrased Garvey's call—in multiple speeches from 1929 onward—for people of African descent to emancipate themselves from 'mental slavery', freeing their minds from the white supremacist psychology that oppressed them from within.

Achille Mbembe (2001), for his part, highlights, through the image of the zombie, the mutual consent and epistemological collusion between the rulers and ruled, even in racially homogeneous settings. On the one hand, Mbembe describes the vulgar forms of consumption and concupiscence through which he believes post-colonial African heads of state display their authority. On the other, the response of the citizenry

⁸ Like all translations, this one is imperfect. In Kreyòl, the term *nèg*—derived from the French *nègre* ('black person')—denotes 'person' and connotes local belonging, as opposed to foreignness. Yet the semantic drift of this term from its French origins suggests the degree to which, in Haitian understandings, blackness is the prototype of normal humanity, even the most powerful classes of humanity. By contrast, human normalcy, accomplishment and power in the US are implicitly but habitually associated with whiteness. For example, both poor whites (in expressions like 'poor white trash' and 'trailer trash') and prosperous blacks ('middle-class blacks') are marked categories. In other words, whites are assumed to be prosperous and blacks poor, unless otherwise indicted. Moreover, observers of some US secondary schools report that many contemporary African American teenagers identify academic achievement as appropriate uniquely for whites. Hence, African American students who conspicuously pursue academic success and/or give the impression of pursuing social distinction in other ways are condemned as 'acting white' (Fordham and Ogbu 1986).

⁹ Fela Kuti: Wikipedia. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fela-Kuti>.

⁷ Liza McAlister, personal communication, 15 May 2001.

is less resistance than imitation, mockery and the banalization of this authoritarian idiom. This vulgar collusion between the rulers and the ruled is described as 'mutual zombification' (2001: 104). Thus, Afro-Atlantic imagery of mystical and mental enslavement captures important truths about the local *social* order where these vocabularies of human relations to the divine are employed.

These religious vocabularies also reveal locally credible and symbolically effective means of bargaining for survival and well-being. One such means is Palo Mayombe. Twenty-first-century worshipers and scholars identify this Afro-Cuban tradition with origins among the West-Central African Kongo people, and many outsiders look askance at its enslavement of the dead. Each Palo altar houses a god or spirit called an *inquice* (from the KiKongo term *nkisi*). The *inquice* pantheon includes such generic spirits as Mamachola, Tiembla Loma and Sarabanda. Each commands a force of nature or society and corresponds to a specific Lucumí, or Yoruba-related, *oricha* god. Any given altar for, say, Sarabanda houses a specific avatar of this generic Congo spirit, such as Sarabanda Rompe Monte—'Pathbreaker Sarabanda'. That altar is an iron cauldron containing hooked sticks of wood, chalk markings, mercury, feathers, other animal parts, and other objects intended to represent the whole world. The entire iconic assemblage is called a *prenda*, meaning 'jewel' or 'treasure', and many of its specific ingredients are specific to the *prenda*'s functions and to the personal desires of its priestly owner, the *Tata Inquice* (see Cabrera 1979: 126–27; Brown 1989: 371–76; Palmié 2004). Its powerful visual, olfactory and spiritual presence fills even unbelievers with awe.

Much of the power and efficacy of this sacred 'jewel' derive from its main feature: it contains the enslaved spirit of a dead person, attracted and secured by the presence of the skull that had belonged to him or her in life. Ideally, the skull has come from a person who had lived a bad life and is therefore 'seeking light', or enlightenment, as a Spiritist would describe it. However, instead of enlightening that spirit, the *Tata Inquice* priest tricks it into doing his own personal bidding. The spirit—known as an *mfumbi*, Congo or *muerto*—thus becomes a servant of the greater spirit (such as Sarabanda Rompe Monte) and of the *Tata Inquice* priest. This servant also becomes the chief of all the other contents of the *prenda*, which are conceived of as people in their own right. When the dead person possesses his medium, or *mbua* (from the KiKongo for 'dog'), the embodied spirit calls the priest his *amo*, or 'master'. Thus, much like Ña Caridad, the dead person in the cauldron is understood

to be a highly effective slave-worker and the chief of a team of slaves all laboring for its owner—in this case, the *Tata Inquice*.

*Enslavement as a form of redemption. or hierarchy as a state
of social health*

What do these images of kidnapping, servitude and efficacy suggest about the societies where they inspire so much confidence, or at least about how these priests perceive and act upon those societies? The vividly productive images of hierarchy and personal efficacy in Candomblé, Ocha and Vodou invite interpretation in terms of a heuristic distinction that Carl N. Degler (1971) drew years ago between the United States and Brazil. On the one hand, the United States is a society where the official and public ideology posits universal equality as the norm of socio-political life. According to this ideology, the slave is anomalous. If the slave can be fitted into the system in any way, it is as an outsider or as a foil to proper citizenship. On the other hand, there are societies like Brazil, where hierarchy is so normal that the place of the subordinate is not beyond the system but somewhere below certain people and above certain other people (1971: 261–64). Thus, in those societies, elaborate and subtle vocabularies of social hierarchy *locate* people, rather than *dislocating* them. Whereas North Americans tend to regard enslavement as a form of *dehumanization*, many objects that North American Protestants and atheists might call inanimate are, in the Afro-Latin possession religions, *humanized* by their very subordination.

And here is one of the most striking corollaries to this heuristic contrast between North and Latin American logics of hierarchy and personal efficacy. On the one hand, contrary to the historiographic and econometric evidence (e.g., Stamp 1956; Genovese 1974; Fogel and Engerman 1974), most contemporary North Americans imagine that slavery was economically inefficient, doomed to collapse under its own weight.¹⁰ The positional descendants of North American slave-owners project that slaves were lazy and incapable, while the descendants of slaves project that masters were lazy and that slaves were given to feigning laziness and breaking tools in order to sabotage an unjust system. From either

¹⁰ The reigning popular interpretation owes much to the influence of Ulrich B. Phillips (1918).

position, the slave was allegedly an inefficient producer and indeed the anti-type of the efficient laborer. True 'freedom' and the egalitarian 'fairness' of non-discriminatory proletarianization are assumed to be uniquely efficient. All over Latin America, by contrast, a hard worker is said to *trabajar como un negro*—'to work like a black'. The slave is thus implicitly the paradigm of sweat-of-the-brow diligence, concentration and efficacy.

And so are Latin American slave *spirits*. Whether black or white, practitioners of Cuban Palo Mayombe, as well as Cuban and Puerto Rican Spiritism, agree that black spirits work more effectively than white ones, and that the *prendas* of Palo Mayombe (which contain the enslaved spirit of a dead person) work faster and more predictably than the Yoruba-related *orichas*, or gods. Haitian priests tell me that the *wanga*, or charms, that contain the captive *zombi* of a dead person are the most effective of all. Captive souls and the spirits of dead slaves are said to warn their owners sooner and work harder because they are closer to the world than are the heavenly spirits. Like laborers, they will do your bidding not only *fast* but also in the way that *you* prescribe. By contrast, if you call the 'boss' god in, says my friend Eduardo, the matter should be pretty important, and he or she is likely to solve the problem in *his or her own way*, rather than to *your* complete satisfaction.

Over a century after the official abolition of slavery in the Americas, the relationships between these spirit-slaves and human beings resist assimilation to the current legal model of 'free' labor. The medium of exchange and reciprocity in these spiritual relationships is not money but food. Of course, this is true of many religions, but Brazilian Candomblé and Cuban Ocha cultivate such elaborate cuisines, such elaborate logics of spiritual cleansing, and, in the case of Candomblé, such an obsession with cleaning that one cannot help but consider domestic labor in the nineteenth-century big house as one of these religions' most influential prototypes.¹¹ In return for the right feeding (not to mention occasional beating and threats), these sacred slaves—the Haitian *limoun*, the Caribbean Spiritist Congos and the Cuban Palo *inquices*—can make their owners rich and keep them safe.

Moreover, contrary to the conventional North American imagery of the slave's child-like dependency on his or her master, the imagery

¹¹ See also D.H. Brown (2003: 210–86) on the references to Euro-Cuban domestic furnishings in Afro-Cuban altars and sacred dress.

of Exú in the Brazilian Candomblé suggests the extreme dependency of even the most *elevated* master upon the competency and the goodwill of the slave. In Brazilian Candomblé, each *orixá*, or god, is said to have an Exú (pronounced 'ay-SHOO'), who is described as that *orixá's* 'slave', or *escravo*. That Exú is the indispensable intermediary in all transactions with and in the feeding of the god who is its master. Thus, the Exú must always eat first, before the master. Hence my indispensable epigraphic salute to this sacred slave. The slave and his image are far more central to modern politics and economics—as Buck-Morss points out—than Hegel and most other European philosophers of modernity have ever cared to admit.¹²

A further corollary of the efficacy of the slave, as Palmié points out (2004: 159–200), is that his or her subordination is always tenuous. For example, in Cuban Palo Mayombe, the *inquice* will do anything you want (for good or for evil) if you reward him or her properly, but if you do not, he or she can quickly turn on you, drain the life out of you and devour you. A priestess of Cuban Ocha, or Santería, told me of a *palero* priest who keeps a 'Jewish' *prenda*, or *inquice* altar. That is, because it has not been 'baptized' and contains no cross, it is especially willing to do the priest's evil bidding. But the 'master' of this *prenda* now has cancer (anonymous, personal communication, 12 May 2001). Stephan Palmié (2004: 173) was told of a Miami priest of Palo who gave his *prenda* cocaine to enhance its labors, but the *prenda* came to crave the drug; the dead person inside it demanded so much that the deeply indebted master was executed by his dealer. Thus, the Afro-Latin possession religions not only acknowledge the reality of hierarchy in the societies that surround them but also acknowledge the impermanence of that hierarchy. The master himself can be caught up in the power of the slave and can be undone by it. This is the context of the wise actor's entrepreneurial efforts to secure the optimal position in a hierarchical and humanizing community.

From the point of view of Cuban Ocha priests and Haitian priests faithful to *Ginèn* (or the ideal ancestral way [Larose 1977]), the more righteous option is the hereditary or unwilling and serendipitous encounter with the Good Master, and submission to his or her beneficent will.

¹² Susan Buck-Morss (2000) argues that Hegel's dialectic of lordship and bondage was indebted to the author's readings of contemporary newspaper articles on the Haitian Revolution and on communication with his Freemason brothers in Haiti.

On the one hand, the slave spirits can be bought by anyone. On the other, initiation in the more morally self-conscious Cuban Ocha (or Brazilian Candomblé) normally results from an involuntary *calling*. That is, people normally seek initiation in these religions not out of ambition or piety but because of some affliction or persistent misfortune of supernatural origin. Some people fall ill or repeatedly lose consciousness. Others repeatedly suffer losses in business or love. Some experience frequent auto accidents. Most afflictions and misfortunes like these are believed to be accidental or of natural causation, but priests of these religions are experts at divining hidden dimensions and causes through the casting of sacred objects (such as cowry shells, pieces of coconut, kola nut segments and the divination chain) or through the reading of cards, dreams and other signs. Once discovered, most problems of supernatural causation can be ameliorated through minor cleansings and sacrifices, but some are intended by the gods as a sign that the afflicted person has no choice but to undergo initiation and contract a lifelong relationship of service to the god.

Early in my investigation of Brazilian Candomblé, I myself considered getting initiated. I knew that some people did so out of simple piety, and my own curiosity did entail a significant measure of reverence for this impressive African-inspired tradition. At the time, an influential Bahian anthropologist had taken a generous interest in my work and my friendship. So, naturally, I shared my thoughts with him. What I expected was a dispassionate review of the pros and cons. What I got was considerably less ambiguous. As we lunched in the middle of a Bahian restaurant, he slapped his hand on the table and guffawed. However hurt I felt, I was hardly in a position to doubt the words he finally managed to blurt out: if I went that route, I would just become a 'slave' (*escravo*) to the priest and learn nothing that other scholars did not already know. The initiating priest has the power to confer or withhold training, to protect or harm subordinates mystically, to house or evict the initiate and to inflict corporal punishment. However, love, loyalty and ambition are the more usual motives for initiates' obedience to the initiating priest, who is regarded as a sort of parent. A similar expectation of deference and obedience extends to everyone previously initiated in that temple. In the daily operation of the temple and in the execution of rituals, the demands on the initiate's labor and time are extensive. Moreover, the initiate's age and gender, combined with the gender and character of her tutelary god, prescribe a specific set

of duties and behavioral expectations that can be highly confining. For example, it is the female devotees of goddesses who are normally expected to cook the sacred foods and clean the temple. The daughters of male gods are favored as chief priests. Initiation thus fixes one's place in a division of labor and in a local socio-political hierarchy.

I have since come to see that, once initiated, novices vary a great deal with respect to how 'slavishly' they behave outside the ritual context, and, as in slavery itself, the individual's social skills and level of ambition can create highly variable outcomes, even in the ritual situation. It is a truism in social life that rank is only partially prescribed by the official rules; it also depends upon (and can be augmented by) effective assertion and improvisation.¹³ However, what is clear is that metaphors of slavery (as it is recalled today) do structure the relationship among gods, priests and novices in these religions from the moment of initiation. These metaphors prescribe limits to the range of improvisations available to any given actor and can be invoked with great force to induce loyalty and obedience throughout the lifelong duration of these social relationships.

Each in its own way, the Candomblé initiation and the Haitian *kanzo* initiation recall the Middle Passage. For example, during the *couche*, or 'lying in', portion of the *kanzo* initiation, the entire cohort of novices lies together in spoon fashion on their left sides, their ankles bound together with vines. Throughout their subsequent lives, the members of the initiatic cohort will be bound together socially as well (Liza McAlister, personal communication, 15 May 2001). A similar but apparently stronger relationship binds together the initiatory cohort in the Brazilian Candomblé, which is explicitly called a *barco*, or 'boat'. Ties of mutual obligation and hierarchy forever bind this group together in ritual and non-ritual settings.¹⁴ The order in which novices are possessed by their respective gods during their joint initiation will continue to determine the rank order among the initiates. During the initiation itself, novices wear a bell on the ankle called a *xaorô* (from the Yoruba

¹³ For an illustrative and true anecdote, see Emilio Rodrigués's *Gigante pela Natureza* (1991: 219). When the relative seniority of ritual participants is ambiguous, relative knowledge, ambition and boldness can reconfigure hierarchies.

¹⁴ See also Mintz and Price (1992 [1976]: 43–4) who list a half-dozen terms for close friendship that African-diaspora populations describe metaphorically as 'ship-mate' relationships, evidently recalling the intense camaraderie of shared suffering in the holds of the slave ships.

saworo for 'bell'), which is intended symbolically to alert the priest of any effort by the novice to escape. Some priests have told me expressly that it marks out the novice as a 'slave', captive to the initiating priest and to the god, and unable to flee even if she wants to.

In the years after the initiation, during the sacred festivals in which the gods possess the initiates, the initiates wear bracelets called *escravas*, because, it is said, they are exactly of the sort that slave women used to wear. These bracelets are typically fashioned out of repoussé metals, such as copper, chrome-plate or gold-plate, and are sometimes bejeweled. If this sort of bracelet was indeed worn by slaves, they were probably prosperous or favored slaves, such as slave mistresses and *negros de ganho*—that is, the slaves who were permitted to move about freely to ply their trades. The slaveholder typically demanded a weekly dividend, and the *negro de ganho* retained any additional earnings.

Thus, in these religions, redemption from affliction and misfortune often entails a new form of privileged enslavement. Few cases are as explicit as the one in which a Haitian priest divined that a man had become sick because he had been mystically 'sold' to one of Haiti's secret societies. The priest therefore ordered the man to bring a large sum of paper money, which the priest then burned in a cemetery for the lord of the cemetery, Baron Samedi. With the essence of this money now in hand, Baron Samedi could redeem the man from the secret society that had bought him. Addressing the spirit, the priest declared that no one but Baron Samedi could now kill the sick man, since Baron Samedi was now the patient's 'master', or *mèt* (Gerdès Fleurant, personal communication, May 2001).

On the other hand, while initiation in Cuban Ocha also usually results from an involuntary calling, Ocha seems to have displaced most of its symbolism of enslavement onto the neighboring Cuban traditions of Palo Mayombe and Spiritism. In Ocha, every initiate becomes a king or queen, 'crowned' by his or her god, from the first moment of initiatory rebirth. Though Ocha priests acknowledge hierarchy by prostrating themselves when saluting longer-crowned heads, the priest is said to be showing respect for the age of the substance in the elder's head, not necessarily humbling him- or herself to the senior *person*. Indeed, the junior person shares in the royal substance that he or she is saluting. Thus, an egalitarian (dare I say republican?) logic underlies even the hierarchical vocabulary and body language of Cuban Ocha. The notion that the citizen is the king of his own home is perhaps the

defining cliché of liberal democracy. Likewise, the Ocha priest is the monarch of his own multi-spirited body.

Yet the especially elaborate embrace of royalism in the post-slavery societies of the Americans might contain some special lessons. First, it may recall the fact that both British and Portuguese royals showed themselves much friendlier to emancipation than did the white creoles who founded the US in 1776 and the Brazilian republic in 1889. After 1898, in cooperation with the US occupiers of the island, the white creole republicans of Cuba betrayed the Afro-Cuban demand for political equality, despite Afro-Cubans' leading role in the military struggle for independence from Spain (see, e.g., Helg 1995). The royalist theme in twentieth-century Cuban and Brazilian ritual and religious organizations hints at the failure of republican democracy's promises to the people of the African diaspora.

Yet this black royalism is more than nostalgia: it replies to a metaphoric logic at the heart of white republican aspirations. For white creole republicanism is less the abolition of royal, hereditary authority than the extension of that royal authority beyond one wealthy white family to all wealthy and, eventually, middling white families (see also Anderson 1991 [1983]: 150). Thus, a black man or woman's declaring himself or herself a monarch in his or her personal and ritual sphere is also a claim of equality within the republican system. This logic is also plainly evident in Afro-centric Black North Americans' claims, in resistance to oppression within the US republic, of being 'descendants of [African] kings and queens'.

The situational morality of 'freedom': the lessons of comparison

We have now come full circle. In a way, the Ocha crowning resembles the rebirth of white men when they are called by their Old World misfortunes to immigrate to the United States. As soon as a phenotypically white man steps off the boat, so to speak, he becomes as much a king as any man. At the very least, he is a king in his own home, the cliché goes, and he has the right to shoot anybody who denies it. By this analogy I do not mean to trivialize the *kariocha* initiation. I excuse myself for such an apparently odious comparison on the grounds that vivid metaphors and other tropes are, after all, the stock-in-trade of Afro-Atlantic ritual, and, as I have argued, these ritual tropes regularly become insiders' means of reading the meaningful shape of secular

life. To extend this metaphor, the entrepreneurial ethics that go along with white America's petty royalty are also similar to those that guide Palo Mayombe and the Haitian *bòkò*, and they attract similar disapproval from the more pious Cuban Lucumí priests and the Haitian upholders of *Ginèn*.

The success of white America's citizen-kings often comes through the selective suspension of morality and at the expense of both the natural environment and the people classified literally or metaphorically as non-kings—including foreign or indigenous peoples, slaves, black people and women. Just as 'freedom' is defined and made salient by the visible co-presence of the slave, so has citizenship in the American republics been defined and made salient by the visible co-presence of groups whose race or gender defined them as the opposite and as worthy victims of theft, exploitation, murder and other forms of expiatory violence.

Yet Anglo-North American society is no more a 'warre of all against all' than is Afro-Brazilian, Afro-Cuban or Haitian society. Most Cubans, Brazilians, Haitians and North Americans do not feel infinitely free to pursue an entrepreneurial amorality, because most New World people, including the descendants of slaves, believe in (or strategically invoke) the logic of the Good Master. For Black North American Christians, the biblical imagery of 'redemption' is more than a dead metaphor. Its references to slavery are consistent with other metaphors modeling the subsequent behavior of the redeemed. African American Christians vow to submit to the will of the 'Master', as do sheep to that of the Good Shepherd. The founding model of that submission is Abraham's willingness to murder his own son on the Master's orders, and the practical equivalence of that son to the male sheep who ended up being sacrificed instead. In exchange for a sort of healing called 'salvation', the Jewish, Christian and Muslim followers of Abraham concede to the Good Master the right to protect and bless or afflict and kill them, and, on the model of Job, they are advised to resist those who question the correctness of the Master's orders.

In this covenant of servitude, we are also shown the efficacy of 'working with the left'—that is, of efficacious and amoral magic, as in the Battle of Jericho, when the ancient Hebrews used their inspired magic to crumble the walls of that Canaanite city and expropriate its lands. In the Negro spiritual 'Joshua Fit the Battle of Jericho', Black North American Protestants celebrate the Hebrews' success without

giving the least thought to what the people of Jericho might have done to deserve the slaughter of every single chicken, goat, ass, horse, man, woman and child within the city walls. Was their extermination not a Holocaust? Apparently, the Good Master, as long as he receives his ritual due from his worshipers, is willing to engineer genocide and settler colonialism on behalf of his chosen people—be they ancient Hebrews, white Americans, Boers, Australians or modern Israelis.

In the wake of the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, several US journalists and at least one talk-show host seeking to understand the Islamic beliefs of the attackers quoted the injunction in the Qu'ran (Sura IX, verse V) for Muslims to 'slay the Pagans wherever ye find them, and lie in wait for them'. I was surprised, however, by the journalists' failure to draw a connection between such verses and the simultaneous atrocities being committed against the peoples of southern Sudan (not to mention the non-Muslims of northern Nigeria) in the name of Islamic law. Other oversights in the journalistic analysis are less surprising. For example, in the various journalistic efforts to illuminate the differences and similarities among Islam, Christianity and Judaism, there seems to have been no discussion of the forms of mass murder and land theft recounted piously in the Old Testament, which seem to me just as critical to an understanding of the Jewish and Christian faiths. Such a comparative view could help North Americans to understand why so many third-world, indigenous and formerly enslaved peoples might find Zionism, Manifest Destiny and the Boer treks comparably odious, despite the religious pieties that Jews and Christians have invested in them.

Ironically, some of the descendants of North American slaves who most vocally reject mental and spiritual enslavement to white America also embrace a patently Arabo-centric religion that literally calls itself 'Submission'—that is, Islam—and gives its adherents endless variants on names like 'Abdallah', or 'Slave of God'. Yet I do not doubt that the thousands of people who convert to this religion annually find a sense of equality (albeit a gender-specific equality) in the shared state of enslavement to their god, as well as an energizing sense of their superiority to the *soi-disant* 'free' people whom they call 'unbelievers'. It should be noted that Middle Eastern Muslims enslaved as many African 'unbelievers' as did European and Euro-American Christians and Jews, and they did so over a far longer period. Unabashed by this history, Arabic speakers commonly employ the same term for 'slave'

and 'black person' (*abd*). Moreover, racialized slavery is still widely documented in both the Islamic Republic of Mauritania and the Republic of Sudan.

*Freedom and slavery: coeval and interdependent metaphors
in twenty-first-century life*

'Freedom' (as in the phrases 'free trade', 'freedom of religion' and 'freedom of speech') constitutes the main legitimizing discourse of the secular, capitalist nation-state and, particularly, of the United States. Equally persuasive is the allied view that 'resistance' and the pursuit of 'freedom' have been the founding principles and enduring essence of black New World identities. Yet, in a republican age, many of the religions that the peoples of the African diaspora allegedly 'retain' by dint of 'cultural resistance' and many religions that even Black North Americans 'freely' choose configure divine-human relations in images of un-freedom—representing gods as monarchs, feudal lords, masters and shepherds, while characterizing worshipers as subjects, slaves and sheep. This paper has surveyed the well-documented but taken-for-granted images of enslavement at the heart of Afro-Brazilian, Afro-Cuban, Haitian and Black North American religions that construct proper personhood, personal efficacy and/or moral rectitude in terms of slavery.

As an anthropologist, I am not criticizing traditions that imagine the self or others in slavery, or those that configure insiders as kings and outsiders as nobodies.¹⁵ I do not suggest that this imagery of hierarchy and servitude compels the faithful to *act* in any simple sense like slaves or slaveholders, that it proves they are immoral, or that slavery is the ultimate underlying principle of these religions and the social orders where they thrive. Rather, I have tried to highlight the fact that slavery is not merely a past transcended, a distant source of African-American cultural practices, an aching scar, or a foil against which black New World identities are constructed. It may at times be any of these things—but not all the time or for every purpose. At many central

¹⁵ Muslims and Christians hold no monopoly on religious chauvinism. Some Ocha initiates call the uninitiated *ossis*, from the Yoruba for 'there is nothing' or 'there are none' (*kò sí*), suggesting that the uninitiated are lacking in some essential content or characteristic.

ritual moments and in a range of important non-ritual ones throughout the black and white Atlantic, 'slavery' has become a sacred 'model of and model for' twentieth- and twenty-first-century life. Practitioners of Candomblé, Ocha, Vodou, Umbanda, Spiritism, Islam and Black North American Christianity regularly invoke slavery in efforts to name and re-organize present-day relationships and thus to restore the well-being of the participating individuals and communities.

Nor should it be forgotten that the imprint of these models is both historically deep in the societies that host them and often biographically deep in the lives of Brazilian, Cuban, Haitian and US citizens. These models suffuse not only religious but also secular and political practice, even where the principles of political 'freedom' and of 'the separation of church and state' are most loudly proclaimed.

One is tempted to conclude, as a Marxist might, that religious images of slavery rationalize capitalist exploitation by hiding who is really responsible for production and who should benefit from it. But images of slavery in Cuban Palo Mayombe, Caribbean Spiritism and the Haitian *bòkò* tradition do not appear to do that. These traditions are, more precisely, survival guides to the reality of hierarchy, cruelty and exploitation even in a nominally 'free' world. Indeed, they make explicit and available for criticism a central but unspoken principle of the democratic nation-state: survival often depends on the suspension of dissent (or 'patriotism') and on forms of cooperation with unequal benefits for citizens with unequal resources (or 'bargaining').

One is also tempted, as a Foucauldian might be, to interpret these traditions as embodying a 'disciplinary' function. They guide people's conduct through 'discourse', insofar as the gods embody (through the terms of their worship) the disciplinary norms of the socio-political order, and the priests engineer the embodiment, internalization and naturalization of its vocabulary by the worshiper. Indeed, like physicians, priests are in a position to do so at the supplicant's moments of greatest affliction and vulnerability, when the supplicant is least able to resist the expert's prescriptions for a properly lived life and a properly constituted community. Perhaps the 'freedom of religion' principle simply privatizes the disciplinary functions of the capitalist state, allowing a very un-free political and economic order to represent itself as voluntary, legitimate and 'free'. Albeit under vastly unequal odds and with vastly unequal means, we have all internalized similar forms of self-constraint and desire, and so seem equally 'free' to compete for goods and power. In support of Foucault, I do suspect that, despite all

of our talk of resistance and the will to resist, the blacks and whites of any given New World nation often agree more than they disagree about the logic of legitimate domination and hierarchy.

However, I am even more tempted to study the semantic slipperiness of both 'slavery' and 'freedom' as they serve real-world projects. The discourse of 'freedom' is often used in order to secure its seeming opposites—such as community (as when slaves sought freedom in order to be reunited with their families) and the continuation of slavery itself (as when Southern slaveholders sought in 'states' rights' the constitutional 'freedom' to keep their slaves). Discourses of 'slavery' and rituals of enslavement can also heal people and restore their sense of personal efficacy and self-possession. I am not the kind of scholar to seek some deep and underlying Afro-Atlantic 'philosophy' in this sampling of religious traditions. Rather, I would propose that, in the future study of any given Afro-Atlantic population, we not regard 'slavery' and 'freedom' as points in a historical and teleological trajectory (no matter how morally committed we Afro-Saxons are to the discourse of 'freedom') but as inter-dependent metaphors in human projects with the most diverse local intentions and purposes behind them.

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