

Heterodoxy and Heteropraxy In The Spiritual Baptist Faith

The Spiritual Baptists are a Fundamentalist Protestant group with congregations in Trinidad and Tobago, Grenada, St. Vincent, Venezuela, Guyana and New York City. Earlier studies, notably those of Simpson (1970) and Henney (1974) referred to them as "Shakers," an appellation they neither use nor appreciate. Members of the faith refer to one another as "Brother" or "Sister" or more generally as "the Baptists."

In Trinidad, some Spiritual Baptists are associated with Xango worship and both outside observers and Trinidadian alike have confused Baptists with the African cult. This is not entirely accurate as many Baptists have no connections with Xango and actively oppose African elements within their faith. Some feel that the religion, in its purest most orthodox form, is to be found in St. Vincent where there is no organized Xango cult and religious services have much in common with 19th century Methodism. Twenty-two of my Baptist informants migrated from St. Vincent at the turn of the century and none are presently involved in Xango worship.

Some scholars contend that the Baptists represent a corrupt form of Xango worship, while others contend that Baptist practices have been corrupted through association with Xango. The issue is not easily resolved. Neither the spread of Protestantism nor that of African religions have been uniform throughout the country (Herskovits and Herskovits, 1947), and the exact sequence of events varies from region to region. It is clear that no variant has exclusive claim to orthodoxy. Today there are Revivalist churches, churches with some African elements, and churches heavily involved in Xango. All call themselves "Spiritual Baptists" and belong to the same denominational organizations. Both Revivalism and Xango represent long-standing options in the faith. In recent years, improved transportation and economic advances have increased the number of options available to the individual (at the time of Herskovits's study, for example, the people of Toco could not have attended a Xango-type service without great difficulty), but has done little to enforce orthodoxy. In the words of one informant: "the church encompasses peoples of varying theological positions, all of whom claim to represent the 'true' church."

THE BAPTIST BELIEF SYSTEM

Baptists are polytheists. They believe in a universe populated by spirit beings, many of whom interfere directly in the lives of men. While many

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spirits are amoral, neither good nor bad, their goals differ from those of humans, and therefore, relations with them are unpredictable. Some Baptists, especially those involved in Xango worship, attempt to manipulate the spirit world through the use of magical rites and incantations, while other Baptists fear them appealing to higher gods (especially members of the Trinity) for protection.

The world of the spirits is hierarchical, complex, and in many ways, replicates the world of men. Authority relations are not clearly defined and spirits possess many human qualities and vices. They may, on occasion, be greedy or generous, lustful or abstinent, active or otiose. Their powers are limited and even well intentioned attempts to help humans may go awry. Some spirits take human form (as in spirit possession during Xango worship), while others fear men preferring to remain unnoticed.

By and large, the spirits who manifest themselves during worship are the most powerful, controlling other (lesser) spirits who do their bidding for them. They, in turn, answer directly to higher ranking spirits. High ranking spirits, with the exception of the Holy Trinity, are inaccessible and must be dealt with through intermediaries.

Many Baptists do not make distinctions within the spirit world. They lump all spirits together as "orisha" or "jumbies." For those who do make distinctions within the spirit world, spirits of the dead are believed to be more powerful than spirits who have never been incarnate. Both African gods (associated with Xango worship) and Catholic saints are said to have been incarnate. A major difference is that the former lived in Africa while the latter lived in Europe. Shankpara, Oshun, St. Barbara, and St. Peter are accorded equal status, but contrary to the findings of Herskovits and Herskovits (1947) and Simpson (1970), they are never confused. Differences in personality and power are noted frequently and one would never ask of St. Peter what would best be accomplished by Oshun or Xango.

Saints and African gods serve as intermediaries between devotees and other members of the spirit world. Because these are believed to have been incarnate, they are said to understand humans and their desires, although they cannot be counted on to be sympathetic to all requests. At best, they are approachable, while at worst, they are unpredictable and ineffectual.

Other spirit beings may take human form, but were never incarnate. They occupy an anomalous position, half-way between man and beast. Among these are spirits adopted from European folk tradition (Niehoff and Niehoff, 1960) *jables*, *lagahus*, and *sukoiyas*; respectively, succubi, werewolves, and vampires. They are especially feared.

Of the three, *jables* deal most directly with men. They take the form of beautiful women and attempt to seduce men in their dreams. It is said that if a man succumbs to temptations, he will be the *jables'* slave in the next world. Baptists believe that nocturnal emissions are caused by *jable* and prescribe potions to drive them away. Many sleep with Bibles under their pillows to ward off *jable* and keep their minds from wandering to the flesh in their dreams.

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Lagahu, or werewolves, roam the night but are not thought to be particularly dangerous for human beings. *Sukoiyyas*, or vampires, on the other hand, warrant greater concern. Attacks from *Lagahu* are infrequent, however, *sukoiyya* attack is common in the culture. Cases of hook worm, leukemia, and anemia are attributed often to *sukoiyya* who develop a taste for an individual's blood returning nightly until the victim is "dry."

Potions and a Bible under the pillow are believed to be effective against *sukoiyya*; however, some Baptists do fall victim to attack. Members of the faith are reluctant to seek treatment for blood ailments since this would imply inadequate defense against the *sukoiyya*. One of my informants, dying of leukemia, claims publicly that she has "fatal diabetes." Her daughter knows of her condition and has tried to get her to accept a blood transfusion; thus far, without success. In this, as in other cases, Baptists' notions of etiology may preclude outside medical treatment.

Spirit beings may also be found in association with rocks, trees, inanimate objects, and bodies of water. Every piece of land, for example, has its spirits and any disturbance thereof (such as construction of a house or church) is likely to meet with their resistance. Baptist rites of purification are seen as one effective way of combating these spirits and any disturbance thereof (such as construction of a house or church) is likely to meet with their resistance. Baptist rites of purification are seen as one effective way of combating these spirits and peoples of many faiths hire Baptists for this purpose. Other religious practitioners (such as Obeahmen and Catholic priests) also provide such services, but at greater cost. Leader R. performed purification rites at the sites of the Curepe Catholic, Pentecostal and Seventh Day Adventist churches. The rites did not receive official sanction from religious bodies involved, but were required before workmen were willing to begin construction.

However little they distinguish between other members of the spirit world, all Baptists distinguish between "orisha" and members of the Holy Trinity. Members of the Trinity are the most powerful gods and both men and the spirit world are under their control.

Within the Trinity, there is no clearly developed notion of unity. Father, Son and Holy Ghost are understood as three separate entities and each carries on its activities independently of the others. God the Son, for example, is often unaware of the actions of God the Father. In ceremonies, it is seen as essential to repeat each ritual three times to gain the attention of all three members of the Trinity.

Prayer and supplication are directed at only one member of the Trinity at a time. Particular requests are directed to different members; for example, God the Son is believed to be most sympathetic to human needs since He, at one time, took human form. The Holy Ghost, on the other hand, is seen as more effective in dealing with problems in the spirit world, while God the Father, as the creator, is called upon in times of flood, hurricanes, and other natural disasters.

Some problems, of course, do not fall clearly within the domain of any one member and two or three separate prayers are offered. There is

hierarchical ranking within the Trinity with God the Father occupying the highest position. The Son or Holy Ghost may be petitioned to bring a prayer to the Father, but the Father may not be petitioned to bring a request to the Son or Holy Ghost. The Son and Holy Ghost do not communicate directly with one another, but only through the Father.

Various potions and objects have power through association with members of the Trinity. Holy water is associated with the Holy Ghost, communion wine with the Son, and the Bible with God the Father. The Bible, especially, is valued for power and wisdom contained therein. It is considered desirable within the faith to have many Bibles in many languages. Prominent leaders have extensive collections including, whenever possible, volumes in the original Greek and Hebrew. These are said to be useful in divining (proving) and curing. None of my informants had any knowledge of Greek or Hebrew; in fact, several older informants (including one with over fifty Bibles in his collection) were unable to read. They attempt to disguise the fact by committing long passages of the King James version to memory.

Baptists take the Bible seriously as the Word of God the Father; however, since God the Father is so far removed from affairs of men, there is considerable room for interpretation. Often, the Father's Word is inscrutable. It must be read and re-read; often the real meaning of a passage is hidden from men and they must request assistance from the Holy Spirit.

Communion wine is powerful as an extension of God the Son. It is not widely used in ritual contexts, however, because it also has negative connotations associated with the eating of Christ's blood and body. (Obeahmen and *sukoiyya* are said to suck the blood of their victims.) While some Baptists (in the course of Xango worship) perform animal sacrifice, they do not like to drink the blood of Christ. In their opinion, the eucharist has cannibalistic overtones and should be underplayed. Communion rites are performed seldom (once or twice a year) and they are poorly attended.

The crucifix, another prominent symbol in orthodox Christianity, is underplayed due to its association with human sacrifice. Believers do recognize the power of the crucifix (a cross sits on the altar of each church), but choose not to display them in their homes or wear them on their person.

Anointing with oil is the most common ritual associated with God the Son. Anointment takes place both before and after baptism and mourning (to be described below), and it is a very important part of healing ceremonies. Leaders readily admit that anointment is not as powerful as communion wine or the crucifix, but that there are negative connotations and other symbols are substituted in their place. Just as black is absent from ritual activities among the Ndembu (Turner, 1966), reference to the cross is obscured among the Baptists.

Various ritual paraphernalia is associated with members of the Trinity, but correspondence is incomplete. Many items have no associations at all; however, given the intensely pluralistic setting, the number of condensed

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symbols is greater than anticipated. Bells rung before and during service are "the voice of God the Father." Candles, when lit, are the Holy Ghost. Flowers (because Christ spent time in the Garden of Gethsemane) are God the Son. Chromolithographs of Jesus (never on the cross), the saints, and in some cases, the Virgin displayed above the altar represent their respective deities; although they are not claimed to have any magical powers. In several Curepe churches, Vishnu, Krishna, and other Hindu deities are posted either in the back of the church or on the left hand wall. These too, are not believed to have any special efficacy.

Baptist theology focuses on the individual and the relationship between three aspects of personality: body, mind, and spirit. These correspond roughly to relations between members of the Holy Trinity. Body, because it is incarnate, is associated with God the Son; the spirit is the Holy Ghost, and mind, the Creator, is associated with God the Father. Each aspect of a man's personality may act independently of the others. All aspects of personality are positive, although there is a feeling that body and spirit should be subordinate to mind. Wisdom is the highest virtue in the faith and those who seek after wisdom are accorded the highest status.

In Baptist ritual, attention is devoted to the whole person. The body is trained through deprivation and exercise, and the spirit is trained through song and prayer. The mind, however, is trained through visions and dreams. Dreams, according to Baptist belief, exist outside the individual. They are external to the normal waking self. Dreams, in some cases, are more real than waking existence and provide knowledge transcending experience.

All dreams are accorded special status; not only those obtained during ritual. Baptist rituals, according to informants, simply enhance opportunities to obtain proper visions. They provide a setting which is conducive, but are not understood as a necessity. What is stated in theory, however, is not always followed closely in practice. Baptists are more likely to question visions received without benefit of ceremony and many leaders are wary of independent visions. They usually suggest that members sponsor another ceremony to "check" their visions. On an individual level, all dreams are "true"; while on the level of day-to-day church affairs, those obtained in specific ritual contexts are more true than others.

A tripartite division of self accounts for some discrepancies between dreaming and waking life. Because dreams (from God the Father) are often incompatible with the will (or spirit) and body, even valid dreams may remain unfulfilled. Baptists take literally the adage "the mind is willing, but the flesh is weak." Balance and harmony are understood as keys to success and Baptist ritual reflects concern with balance. Portions of each service are directed to different members of the Trinity and different aspects of the self.

Earlier researchers have devoted attention to so-called "hot" aspects of service (glossolalia, etc.), often to the exclusion of "cold" cerebral portions of worship. In terms of actual time, Baptist worship is seventy percent "cool," reflecting the ascendancy of the Father who is associated with "cool" parts of service and the importance of "wisdom" for the faith.

Glossolalia and other manifestations of the Holy Ghost are not the major foci of the religion. High ranking and long-time members do not manifest the Holy Ghost during worship, and charisma is the weakest form of church authority. By and large, charisma is associated with the powerless, new members who experience the Holy Ghost, but do not yet know God the Father.

RITUAL PRACTICES

Regular worship, lasting from three to six hours, is held on Sundays, and in most churches, on Wednesday evenings as well. Occasionally leaders organize nightly services called "rallys." These last for several weeks and do not differ markedly from regular worship.

Worship patterns vary from church to church. Most services begin with elaborate rites of purification designed to drive evil spirits from the building. Candles, placed at all church openings, are thought to discourage evil spirits from entering the building, while incense, bell ringing, and "strewing" of perfumed water serve to dispel those already inside. Unbaptized worshippers and visitors are thought to be most vulnerable to attack by evil spirits and receive special attention. There are also regional considerations; for example, in the Curepe community, where a neighboring Pentecostal church specializes in demon exorcism (Glazier, 1980), special care is taken to purify churches since it is believed that there is an overabundance of recently exorcised evil spirits in the area looking for new homes.

Rites of purification begin approximately one hour before the stated time of worship, but are seldom completed before worship begins. During this time, the congregation sings "cool" hymns designed to keep the Holy Ghost from manifesting before purification is completed.

Sometimes, higher ranking church members do not appear until service is well underway. In general, higher ranking members should be among the last to arrive and those who enter after them are seen as challenging their authority. When the highest ranking member, the paramount leader, takes his place behind the altar, the service officially begins. From the altar, leaders direct (and/or occupy) their followers. Lower ranking men are asked to read or recite from memory Biblical passages, while upper ranking men are asked to provide interpretation and "enlightenment." Men speak from the altar, whereas women make prayer and supplication from the center pole. This serves to emphasize differences between men and women in the faith. The only time a woman is allowed behind the altar is to dust and mop.

Services alternate between "hot" and "cold" — between quiet contemplation and frenzy. Rites of intensification, the "hot" part of service, should not begin until paramount leaders are thoroughly in control. Spirits are dangerous potentially and only paramount leaders are powerful enough to deal with them. Among Baptists who perform African (Xango) work, rites of intensification are a focal point of service lasting from one to two hours, while among Revivalists, they are considerably shorter. These rites, designed to induce manifestations of the Holy Ghost, consist

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of hymn singing, hand clapping, and "adoption" (a form of hyperventilation). A major difference between Revivalists and those who also worship Xango is that Xango Baptists are possessed by recognizable spirit beings (ideally these should not manifest during Baptist worship, but they frequently do manifest themselves), and Revivalists manifest only the Holy Ghost through glossolalia ("speaking in tongues").

Manifestations of the spirit are followed by periods of illumination and contemplation. This part of service, consisting of additional scripture readings and short homilies from various members of the congregation, is devoted to the Word. Passages from the New Testament, and the books of Daniel, Psalms, Revelation, and Ezekiel are favored.

Several, often opposing, viewpoints are given for the interpretation of each passage, and speakers often point out fallacies in one another's arguments. Women's arguments, usually in the form of prayers for enlightenment at the center pole, are never acknowledged directly; however, their interpretations are reiterated from time to time. Men do not give women credit for inspiration and treat their contributions as if they were independent inventions.

All high ranking churchmen (and those aspiring to high rank) are expected to offer some illumination. This is a way to make one's talents known to a paramount leader; in addition, it increases one's reputation within the church. Baptist etiquette dictates that higher ranking members should allow lower ranking members to speak first. Later speakers enjoy a dual advantage in that they have longer to prepare their interpretations and benefit from earlier discussion. The final word rests with the paramount leader himself.

As each speaker concludes, there is a ritual of touching involving all members of the congregation. An attempt is made to diffuse the power of the Holy Ghost previously concentrated in the speaker. Before touching other members of the congregation the speaker is said to be in a dangerous "supercharged" state. If his spiritual powers were not shared, it would destroy him. Of course, the longer it takes to diffuse one's power, the greater one's spiritual claims, and high ranking members (and those who aspire to high ranks) must often perform the ritual two or three times before their spirit dissipates entirely.

After the paramount leader offers his interpretation, there is a brief period of religious frenzy before the benediction. Announcements are taken from the floor concerning upcoming baptisms, mourning ceremonies, and joint worship with other congregations. These are followed by a period of silence; talking is not permitted until all congregants are outside the church building. Placement of announcements at this juncture is of consequence since many of them are controversial and such placement allows no forum for debate.

Flexibility of worship permits leaders to make additions to the basic service outlined above. Embellishments may include: African dances, sacrifice (a chicken or a goat), Pentecostal-style exorcisms, ritual meals, Islamic or Hindu healing rites, or private consultations and confessions.

For the most part, embellishments occur either before or after the standard service, and under no circumstances are they allowed to change the basic order of worship. If for example, a leader desires to perform animal sacrifice, this is done after the close of service. Members leave the church building, wait ten or fifteen minutes, and begin preparations for sacrifice which is always held outside the church. Some Xango-Baptist leaders permit drumming both before and after service, but never during the actual service itself. In this way, leaders separate, temporally and spatially, rituals borrowed from other religions. Such embellishments serve to differentiate one church from another; and more importantly, are believed to be one means of attracting new members (Glazier, n.d.).

In the eyes of many Baptists, two rites distinguish them from all other religions, baptismal and mourning ceremonies. In regard to these ceremonies no embellishments are permitted and their basic form has changed little over the last forty years. Rites observed in 1976 and 1977 have much in common with earlier descriptions contained in the writings of Herskovits and Herskovits (1947), Simpson (1970), and Henney (1974). This is of even greater significance since Henney reports on Baptists from another island, St. Vincent.

All Baptists are expected to receive religious instruction (of varying intensity) prior to these rites. Instruction may last from several hours to several months, although a week is considered the normal period of preparation. Teaching consists of Bible readings, prayer, and a type of divination known as "proving." In "proving" candidates close their eyes, open the Bible to a random page, and pick a verse without looking at the pages. Verses thus chosen are said to reveal a candidate's spiritual readiness for Baptism and they also serve as a focus for later instruction.

Church teachers scrutinize candidates well and leaders, ideally, should not perform rites without their approval. In practice, however, teachers seldom deny anyone participation in the rites. Churches constantly seek new members and rarely turn anyone away. If a candidate experiences too much resistance at one church, he will become a candidate at another. Members of the hierarchy are acutely aware of this.

Preparations for baptism and mourning are not as rigorous as those described by Herskovits and Herskovits in 1947. At the time of their research, leaders and teachers imposed severe restrictions on personal behavior including demands for sexual abstinence and fasting prior to the rite. This is no longer the case. Candidates for mourning and baptism come from distant villages and restrictions are difficult to enforce due to increased geographical mobility.

After initial instruction is completed, a candidate is brought to the paramount leader who sets a date for baptism. Usually a date is chosen when there are other candidates for the rite. This saves leaders considerable time and expense and is thought to make rites more enjoyable for the candidate.

Most often, rites of baptism begin on a Saturday evening and continue until Sunday morning. In recent years, some leaders have offered shorter

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ceremonies on other nights of the week. The order of service is identical to that to be described, however, less time is devoted to each segment of the ceremony. Though criticized in some quarters, and privately by some leaders who perform them, so-called "quicky baptisms" are growing in popularity.

In the first segment of the ritual, candidates are given white robes and "bands" to wrap the head covering both eyes and ears. In some churches candidates are expected to provide their own "bands," while in other churches, leaders wash used "bands" and provide them to candidates for a fee.

The candidate, unable to see, is led to the sanctuary and placed on the Mercy Seat, a front bench signed with mystical writings and symbols. Lighted candles, symbolizing the Holy Ghost, are placed in the candidates hands. They are expected to hold these candles for several hours and it is believed that as long as the Holy Ghost is with them, they will not be burned. Church leaders try to make the Holy Ghost manifest in the candidate by prayer, singing, clapping, adoption, and exhortation.

Those researchers who have interpreted these ceremonies solely in light of sensory deprivation (Sargent, 1974; Henney, 1974), may have greatly underestimated the degree of physical contact between candidates and members of the congregation. For most of the rite, candidates receive a barrage of stimuli. "Bands" interfere with one's sight, but not one's senses of touch, hearing, smell, or taste. There is little monotony for the candidate as he performs a variety of activities under the watchful eye of his leader. Candidates march, stand, sit, sleep, eat, drink, etc.

At dawn, candidates are removed from the church and taken to a body of water where actual rites of baptism take place. Those who have been baptized previously in another denomination are "re-washed" (sprinkled with water), while those who have not been baptized previously are totally immersed three times, once, "In the name of God the Father," once "In the name of God the Son," and once "In the name of God the Holy Ghost." The initial dunking is considered the most efficacious. In many respects, this part of service parallels traditional Christian rites.

After immersion, candidates remove wet clothing, remove their "bands," and return to the church to be anointed with oil and receive further instruction. Following hymns, exhortation, rites of intensification, and prayer, service comes to a close. Services observed lasted between fourteen and sixteen hours.

Elements from baptismal rites also play a very large part in the mourning ceremony. A major difference is one of duration. Candidates for baptism wear their "bands" for several hours, while mourners wear theirs for several weeks. Candidates for the mourning ceremony are not scrutinized as carefully as candidates for baptism. It is assumed that all mourners have been baptized previously, but no attempts are made to verify this.

Few people attend the entire mourning ceremony, but there is still a great deal of sensory stimuli for the mourner and, like a candidate for baptism, mourners are never left alone. The purpose of the rite is to induce

visions and/or dreams thought to reveal one's "true" rank and duties within the faith. Mourning is a major mechanism for church advancement.

There are twenty-two specialized church ranks within the organizational hierarchy, and all mourning involves a change of rank and addition of responsibilities. Some ranks, such as that of paramount leader (and/or Pointer), are clearly defined, while other positions are often ambiguous. Some ranks are considered to be at the same level and there is debate as to whether or not an individual mourner has actually advanced within the hierarchy. Candidates express concern that their mobility has been horizontal instead of vertical (see chart below). Horizontal mobility is most prevalent in large, well-established, churches, while vertical mobility is more rapid in smaller churches. In either case, many factors are involved such as: current membership, the number of leadership positions vacant, loyalty of the mourner, etc.; and there is no one-to-one correspondence between visions obtained in the mourning ceremony and church rank.

HIERARCHY OF MERIT
Mt. Tabor Spiritual Baptist Church, Los Lomas

10. Judge
9. Inspector
8. Commander
7. Warrior
6. Teacher-Pointer
5. Captain-Prover-Diver
4. Hunter-Mother-Star Gazer-Leader
3. Surveyor-Shepherd-Postman-Watchman
2. Water Fetcher-Carrier
1. Sister-Brother

Informant: Captain B.
Date: July, 1976

A SAMPLE VISION FROM THE MOURNING ROOM

I am walking by a stream, I am thirsty, but I don't have a cup . . . A man . . . a Chinese, he offers me a cup so I may fetch the water from the stream . . . I take the cup. I dip the water and drink a little, but I am still thirsty. He tells me I can keep the cup, but I give it back to him saying others may come after me who will have need of it . . . Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. . . . I go travelling in Africa . . . a little child comes to me with a sore foot . . . she is crying. I bandage her foot. The Mother comes . . . she scolds me for bandaging the child . . . She says I am wasting time. I am travelling in China . . . I come to a giant tree . . . there is a man in the tree . . . it is Brother Bertie. Brother Bertie gives me a silver chalice. Father, Son and Holy Ghost . . . Amen.

Henny (1974) and Simpson (1970) may have overstated the connection between vision and rank. They overlooked a most important point; namely, that advancement is not based on visions *per se*, but visions as interpreted by church elders. Two mourners, as happened during my field experience, may claim identical visions; yet earn different ranks. In fact, experienced mourners often do obtain identical visions.

Leaders claim that the tracts of inexperienced mourners (that is, the public recital of visions obtained) are more honest than those of candidates who have mourned before. Mourners learn, through contact with more experienced mourners, what is expected of them and which dreams or visions confer the greatest power. One reason given by leaders for a lack of correspondence between vision and church rank is that some mourners

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falsify their visions in order to gain a higher rank. It is a leader's task to distinguish between true and false visions; to keep "orisha" from deceiving Mourners into believing they have attained ranks not given by the Holy Ghost or God the Father. Often, it is not a question of outright lying on the part of the mourner, but a question of self-delusion.

Baptists participate in mourning rites often. The rites are believed to have curative powers and provide a way of combating "orishas" and bad luck. Sometimes, mourning rites are not a matter of self-selection. Leaders approach potential candidates requesting their participation in the ceremony. Many church members wait for church leaders to approach them since this almost assures their advancement. Self-selection, on the other hand, is always riskier. Leaders do not have an obligation to advance candidates they did not select; although given intense competition between leaders, some mobility is always guaranteed. If a mourner does not advance, it reflects poorly on those who supervised the ceremony.

HETERODOX AND ORTHODOX CHRISTIANITY

Baptist notions of the Trinity, their de-emphasis on the crucifixion, their quasi-magical view of the Bible, their overly literal interpretation of scripture, and their penchant for ritual embellishment call into question the extent to which the religion may be understood as part of the Christian tradition. Baptists consider themselves part of this tradition, but some scholars have expressed reservations. Herskovits and Herskovits, for example, treat the faith as an independent cult underplaying Christian influences (even though the Toco group studied evidenced few African retentions and many Christian elements). Jeannette Henny, on the other hand, in her study of the group on St. Vincent, places the Baptists squarely and unequivocally in the Christian tradition.

Xango worshippers and Revivalists alike emphatically state that they should be included within mainline Christianity, but as a separate denomination like Presbyterians, London Baptists, Adventists, or Pentecostals. They also state that they are a unified church, and not as others have claimed, a cult or a sect. Admittedly, many do not know the difference between churches, sects and cults (at least not as these are understood in the Sociology of Religion), but they have read scholarly accounts of their religion and insist that whatever a cult is, "we are not one."

I am inclined to support their protestations. Their form of church organization and denominational structures are loose when compared to Catholicism or Presbyterianism, but no less structured than many Pentecostal groups. Their world view is magical, but no more so than that of First Century Christianity; and if an overly literal interpretation of the Bible were grounds for exclusion, many Fundamentalist groups would have been excluded long ago.

I believe that differences of interpretation between Henny (1974), Herskovits and Herskovits (1947) and Simpson (1970) may reveal as much about Western biases in the study of non-Western Christianity as it does of the faith itself. The Baptists are extremely conservative in some aspects of

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their faith. They are both flexible and rigid; heterodox and orthodox. Even their most "exotic" rite, the mourning ceremony, is not without Biblical justification (Daniel 3) and they are quick to point out that Christ himself mourned in the wilderness for forty days. The problem may be that many Western scholars associate religious conservatism (as found among the Spiritual Baptists) with orthodoxy, whereas many Caribbean religions are both conservative and heterodox at the same time.

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