Introduction

What piece of our soil was not saturated with secret African influences?

—Lydia Cabrera, Yemayá y Ochún

Luis is a young man who works in the stockroom of a tourist café in Havana. An inventory reveals five boxes of missing supplies and, despite his claims of innocence, the police consider him a suspect. In his distress, he seeks out Marín, his spiritual godfather or padrino, a lifelong friend whose spiritual work in Santería, Regla de Palo, and Espiritismo follows the practices of his African ancestors. Marín summons the spirit of Ma Pancha, an African slave with whom he has communicated on previous occasions. Marín sits before a home altar that contains, among other things, the statues of the Catholic saints San Juan Bosco and Santa Bárbara, and a glass of water. Uncorking a bottle of strong cane liquor, he pours a drink into a dry gourd, lights a homemade cigar, and chants a verse, calling upon Ma Pancha’s spirit to respond “in the name of Jesus Christ and of Papá Changó.” At this point Ma Pancha greets them in broken Spanish through Marín’s voice with “Good morning, how are my children here on this earth?” and is informed of the problem. Stating that Luis’s boss is responsible for the theft, Ma Pancha counsels the men to gather the bark of certain types of trees “to open the eyes of the police” and suggests that Marín prepare a macuto or magical pouch, and dedicate it to Ochosi, the deity of forests and herbs, patron of those with problems involving the law, to protect Luis and convince the authorities of his innocence. The macuto is assembled with the name of the guilty party placed inside and set at the base of a nganga or spiritual cauldron.

Paulette, a middle-aged Haitian woman living in Coral Gables, Miami, has been married to a lawyer and former politician for many years. When she discovers that her husband is having an affair with his young secretary, a friend suggests that she speak with Denizé, a houngan, or Vodou priest who does spiritual readings using cards for divination. During the reading Pau-
lette discovers that her tutelary lwa (spirit) is Erzulie, spirit of femininity and sensuality, and Denizé advises her to make efforts to become more attractive to her husband. He recommends a purifying bath of white flowers, powdered egg shells, and perfume, during which Paulette would be released from all negativity. Afterwards, she is to leave the flowers at a crossroads. He instructs Paulette to cleanse her house with water composed of the same ingredients as the bath, adding a bit of honey. She is to make an offering to Erzulie of sweet fruit and honey to be placed on her home altar. After the reading, Denizé prepares a small bottle of perfume for Paulette to bring her chans, or luck. In it he inserts a small plant (wont) believed to have the power to open paths for the achievement of goals.

Desmond and Earl, young Jamaicans living in Toronto, have engaged in a series of robberies involving small suburban banks. They are assiduous clients of an Obeahman, from whom they seek the ritual cleansings and massages they believe will protect them from arrest and punishment. When they kill a young woman during a robbery, their Obeahman alerts the police to their possible involvement. Surveillance equipment is installed in his consultation room, and when his clients return—this time seeking protection that will allow them to return to Jamaica, where the woman’s duppy or spirit will not follow them to do them harm— their sessions are recorded and the evidence leads to their arrest. The case against them centers on the admissibility of the evidence, an issue that itself revolves around the confidentiality—or sacredness—of the communications, or “confessions,” between the Obeahman and his client. The sanctity of their interactions is rejected by the courts on the basis of Obeah being a healing practice and not a religion, and the two are convicted of robbery and murder.

These tales—based on the actual experiences of people living in the Caribbean and its Diaspora—speak to the continuing power of the Afro-Caribbean spiritual traditions that have sustained the peoples of the region and beyond for centuries. Creole Religions of the Caribbean is intended as a comprehensive introduction to the creolized, African-based religions that developed in the Caribbean in the wake of European colonization. It shows how Caribbean peoples fashioned a heterogeneous system of belief out of the cacophony of practices and traditions that came forcibly together in colonial society: the various religious and healing traditions represented by the extensive slave population brought to the New World through the Middle Passage; Spanish, French, and Portuguese variants of Catholicism; the myriad strands of Protestantism brought to the English and Dutch colonies; and remnants of Amerindian animistic practices.
Creolized religious systems, developed in secrecy, were frequently outlawed by the colonizers because they posed a challenge to official Christian practices and were believed to be associated with magic and sorcery. They nonetheless allowed the most oppressed sectors of colonial Caribbean societies to manifest their spirituality, express cultural and political practices suppressed by colonial force, and protect the health of the community. These complex systems developed in symbiotic relationships to the social, linguistic, religious, and natural environments of the various islands of the Caribbean, taking their form and characteristics from the subtle blends and clashes between different cultural, political, and spiritual practices. This book traces the historical-cultural origins of the major Creole religions and spiritual practices of the region—Vodou, Santería, Obeah, Espiritismo—and describes their current-day expression in the Caribbean and its Diaspora.1

Caribbean Creole religions developed as the result of cultural contact. The complex dynamics of encounters, adaptations, assimilation, and syncretism that we refer to as creolization are emblematic of the vibrant nature of Diaspora cultures. They led to the development of a complex system of religious and healing practices that allowed enslaved African communities that had already suffered devastating cultural loss to preserve a sense of group and personal identity. Having lost the connection between the spirits and Africa during the Middle Passage, they strove to adapt their spiritual environment to suit their new Caribbean space. The flexibility, eclecticism, and malleability of African religions allowed practitioners to adapt to their new environments, drawing spiritual power from wherever it originated. More than simply a strategy for survival, this dynamic, conscious, syncretic process demonstrates an appreciation for the intrinsic value of creativity, growth, and change as well as for the spiritual potential of other belief systems.

Transculturation, a term coined by Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz to describe the ceaseless creation of new cultures, was intended to counterbalance the notion of acculturation, the term in vogue among anthropologists during the 1940s. Ortiz understood the notion of acculturation as one that interpreted the development of Caribbean cultures as the one-way imposition of the culture of the dominant or conquering nation on the conquered societies, an imposition that devalued and eventually supplanted the conquered cultures. Believing that colonization had initiated instead a creative, ongoing process of appropriation, revision, and survival leading to the mutual transformation of two or more pre-existing cultures into a new one, Ortiz posited the notion of transculturation as a more accurate rendering of the processes that produced contemporary Caribbean cultures.
Religious practices were at the very center of the processes of transculturation. “Throughout the diaspora, African religions provided important cultural resources for not only reconstructing ethnic ties and social relations that had been disrupted by slavery, but also for forging new collective identities, institutions and belief systems which partook of the cultures of diverse African peoples to meet the daunting challenges of new and oppressive social contexts” (Gregory 1999: 12). The metaphor for the process of transculturation used by Fernando Ortiz is the *ajiaco*, a delicious soup made with very diverse ingredients, in which the broth that stays at the bottom represents an integrated nationality, the product of synthesis. This metaphor has found an echo throughout the Caribbean region, finding its counterpart in the Dominican *sancocho* and the West Indian *callaloo*. However, although rich in metaphoric power, neither the ajiaco nor the callaloo are ideal formulas. They have been challenged by Caribbean scholars and critics for failing to do full justice to the “undissolved ingredients” represented by the magical, life-affirming elements of Afro-Caribbean religions. Cuban art critic Gerardo Mosquera, for example, has argued that “beside the broth of synthesis, there are bones, gristle, and hard seeds that never fully dissolve, even after they have contributed their substance to the broth. These undissolved ingredients are the survivals and recreations of African traditions within religious-cultural complexes” (1992: 30).

**Creolization**

Creolization—that is, the malleability and mutability of various beliefs and practices as they adapt to new understandings of class, race, gender, power, labor, and sexuality—is one of the most significant phenomena in Caribbean religious history. Given the subtle negotiations necessary for the survival of the cultural practices of the enslaved and colonized in the highly hierarchical colonial societies of the Caribbean, the resulting religious systems are fundamentally complex, pluralistic, and integrationist. In our approach to the creolized religious systems that developed in the region in the wake of colonization, we seek to avoid essentialist definitions of religious experience, opting instead for a practice- or experience-based presentation and analysis, rooted in particular historical circumstances. Although the Creole religions vary in their origins, beliefs, and rituals, all of them demonstrate the complexities and the creative resourcefulness of the creolization process.

The term *creole* was first used in the Americas to refer to native-born persons of European ancestry and evolved from a geographical to an ethnic
New World enslaved Africans were distinguished from African-born contemporaries by the label *criollos*. Hoetink notes the multiple contemporary nuances of the term.²

I take the word *creole* to mean the opposite of foreign. Thus *creole culture* refers to those aspects of culture that evolved or were adapted in the Western Hemisphere and became part of a New World society’s distinctive heritage. In Latin America, the term *criollo*, when used in reference to people, was originally reserved for native whites. In the Hispanic Caribbean nowadays, it often includes all those born and bred in a particular society. Elsewhere, as in Suriname, the term may be used to denote long-established population groups, such as the Afro-Americans, as opposed to more recent immigration groups. (1985: 82)

Melville Herskovits challenged prevailing assumptions regarding the survival of African influences in the New World in his *Myth of the Negro Past* (1941), demonstrating in great detail that African culture has survived and indeed thrived. In the 1970s, Edward Kamau Brathwaite in his essay, “The African Presence in Caribbean Literature” and in *Folk Cultures of the Slaves in Jamaica*, claimed that the Middle Passage “was not, as is popularly assumed, a traumatic, destructive experience, separating the blacks from Africa, disconnecting their sense of history and tradition, but a pathway or channel between this tradition and what is being evolved, on new soil, in the Caribbean” (Brathwaite 1974: 5).

Creolization thus describes the ongoing and ever-changing process (not the static result) of new forms born or developed from the interaction of peoples and forces due to “adaptive pressures omnipresent and irresistible” in the Americas (Buisseret 2000, “Introduction”: 7). The concept of Creole and creolization has been extended to other “transplanted” categories of interchange: from linguistic speech variations (*Créole*, for example, refers to the national language of Haiti, developed as a result of Old and New World contact) and literary styles to a wide range of cultural contexts—religious, musical, curative, and culinary (Mintz and Price 1985: 6–7). “There is, then, a vast range of examples of the Creolizing process, even without taking into account such areas of human activity as art, law, material culture, military organization, politics, or social structures” (Buisseret 2000, “Introduction”: 12).

Anthropologists, historians, and literary and social critics continue to expand the linguistic application of the term creolization to that of metaphor for a wide and diverse cross-cultural and transnational phenomena.

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Aisha Khan’s essay in Creolization: History, Ethnography, Theory describes our conception of the term as defined above and throughout this book as a “means of revealing the successful and creative agency of subaltern or deterritorialized peoples, and the subversiveness inhering in creolization, which contradicts earlier notions of cultural dissolution and disorganization” and considers it among several definitions used in creolist scholarship.3 The editor of Creolization, Charles Stewart, acknowledges that the term “‘creole’ has itself creolized, which is what happens to all productive words with long histories.”4

The concept of creolization is at once fascinating, fertile and potentially confusing. Those who approach it from one or another of the disciplinary approaches or literary currents . . . or with the normative meaning from a particular historical period in mind, are in for some surprises should they encounter it outside their own familiar territory. (2007: 3)

According to Silvio Torres-Saillant in An Intellectual History of the Caribbean, in the late 1980s the focus on postcolonial cultural studies and globalizing theoretical approaches in European and North American intellectual circles elicited globalized paradigms from Caribbeanists: “Perhaps sensing that the focus of Third World thought production had shifted away from their region, Caribbeanists gradually came to give in to the new academic world order. Thus marginalized, they began to assert the relevance of their studies by highlighting their link to the larger, grander, and more ‘theoretical’ postcolonial field” (2006: 43). The manner in which they secured their intellectual legitimacy, however, is problematic for Torres-Saillant: Caribbeanists relied on the pillars of Western tradition as they did prior to the rise of anticolonialism in the region, reaffirming the “centrality of Western critical theory” (44).5 One example he cites among many is that of Antonio Benítez Rojo, who examined the notion of creolization utilizing the Western scientific branch of physics known as Chaos Theory in his influential work, The Repeating Island: The Caribbean and the Postmodern Perspective (1996), which describes creolization by means of three fundamental principles: plantation, rhythm, and performance.

Creolization is not merely a process (a word that implies forward movement) but a discontinuous series of recurrences, of happenings, whose sole law is change. Where does this instability come from? It is the product of the plantation (the big bang of the Caribbean universe), whose slow explo-
sion throughout modern history threw out billions and billions of cultural fragments in all directions—fragments of diverse kinds that, in their endless voyage, come together in an instant to form a dance step, a linguistic trope, the line of a poem, and afterward repel each other to re-form and pull apart once more, and so on. (1996: 55)6

Cultural bricolage, from the French, meaning to improvise with whatever is at hand—a concept introduced by French structural anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss in The Savage Mind (1966) to describe a form of being in the world—is another Western model used to describe the creolization process. “Creolization can be seen enacted through bricolage as the art of the disparate and fragmentary; the art of adopting and adapting multiple concrete fragments or artifacts as well as elements of imaginative, ideological, cultural, social or religious practices, experiences, and beliefs” (Knepper 2006: 73). Wendy Knepper notes, however, that while Lévi-Strauss’s use of the term bricolage may be politically neutral, the application of the word to describe the creolization process in the Caribbean is evasive; there, cultural bricolage was an uneven process, highly politicized, involving “selective, coerced, forced, and violent intermixtures in addition to spontaneous meldings, subversive appropriations, and processes of adaptation. The creolist appropriation of this structuralist term could be seen as instituting a kind of white-washing of bricolage rather than consciously embracing the ambivalent cultural and sociopolitical etymology of bricolage within the Caribbean” (73).

The concept of creolization has thus expanded to become synonymous with hybridity, syncretism, multiculturalism, créolité, métissage, mestizaje, postcolonialism, and diaspora.7 In an age of mass migrations and globalization, creolization is employed to reframe notions of past and present transnational and diasporan cultures and communities. In the French West Indies, for example, the concept of créolité was formulated by authors Jean Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiseau and Raphaël Confiant in their Eloge de la créolité (In Praise of Creoleness, 1989) wherein creole identity is based on a multietnic and multilingual Caribbean culture; it is also a response to the African-identified model of négritude and its defiant affirmation of black anticolonial identity.

Martinican author Edouard Glissant contributes to the discourse on cultural creolization by expanding the multiple metaphors of the creolization process and the language of Creole cultural identity. Responding to the notion of créolité, Glissant presented his influential concept of antillanité (Caribbeanness) creating a postcolonial “Archipel” view: a Creole identity
which is highly flexible and adaptable and “traces the path from an ontological model of being to an historically and geographically situated, hence changeable, existence” (Schwieger Hiepko 2003: 244). Indeed, Glissant speaks of the “archipelagoization” of the Caribbean in its interaction with Africa and the United States, and of the world.

Europe is being “archipelagoized” in its turn and is splitting into regions. Florida is in the process of changing completely in response to its Cuban and Caribbean populations. It seems to me that these new dimensions of existence escape national realities which are trying to resist the forces of archipelagoization. . . . We must accustom our minds to these new world structures, in which the relationship between the center and the periphery will be completely different. Everything will be central and everything will be peripheral. (Glissant 2000)

Creolization as a concept can never be neutral; its very semantic origins force us to confront issues of power, race, and history. Stephan Palmié questions the “proliferating mangroves of metaphors” of Caribbean/creolization rhetoric beyond linguistic applications to other “kinds of discourses on ‘culture,’ local or global,” creating a transglobal identity that may be empirically and theoretically ill advised (2006: 434, 443). Although scholars and critics are always eager for new analytical and descriptive tropes, more specificity in the construction of indigenously Caribbean analytical and political projects could avoid an imaginary reinvention of the region: “It is difficult to understand how—other than by retrospectively constructing a ‘Caribbean’ of the (nonregionalist) anthropological imagination—we could ever have regarded the region as a ‘prototype’ (in both temporal and evolutionary senses) of an allegedly global postmodern condition” (443). Palmié offers the example of Ulf Hannerz’s 1987 article, “The World in Creolisation,” regarded by Palmié as an essay that establishes a “creolization paradigm” in which Hannerz claims “we are all being creolised,” yet does not refer to a “single intellectual (or social scientist) from the Caribbean” (443). The expediency of using creolization as a conceptual tool will undoubtedly continue to be controversial and problematic. For Torres-Saillant, such authors as Glissant and Benítez-Rojo, while contributing impressive organizing metaphors that capture the complexity of Caribbean history and culture at a discursive level, fail, in his estimation, to take into account the region’s extratextual reality and the “trauma of our catastrophic history . . . postcolonial studies have seldom shed meaningful new light on historical, cultural, or political dynamics in the region” (2006: 238).
Syncretism

In current theories of globalization, Creole and creolization are often mentioned as synonyms of hybridity and syncretism. “All these terms, currently used in positive senses to describe the resilience, creativity, and inevitability of cultural mixture, had extremely pejorative meanings in the past. In the cases of syncretism and hybridity, various writers have examined these pasts and reappropriated the terms through a positive reevaluation of the political significance of mixture” (Stewart 2007: 4). The strategies of religious syncretism—the active transformation through renegotiation, reorganization, and redefinition of clashing belief systems—are consistent with the creolization process.

In *African Civilizations in the New World*, Roger Bastide differentiated between various categories of religious syncretism in the Caribbean, among them morphological or mosaic syncretism based on the juxtaposition and coexistence of African-derived elements and Catholic symbols—the Vodou pé, or altars, with stones, wax candles, crosses, the statues of saints, and pots containing souls of the dead, for example—and institutional syncretism, which combines prescribed religious observances by reconciling Christian and African liturgical calendars (1971: 154–156). The most common, however, is syncretism by correspondence, or what Leslie Desmangles calls a “symbiosis by identity,” through which an African deity and a Catholic saint became one on the basis of mythical or symbolic similarities.8

Syncretism has been a polemical term for centuries. In the seventeenth century it was used to defend “true” religion against heresy and referred to the “illegitimate reconciliation of opposing theological views” (Droogers 1989: 9). The term was later applied by scholars to the early forms of Christianity that were perceived to be syncretic as well, and was later broadened to apply to all religions when a review of religious history revealed syncretic elements at the foundation of all major religions. However, syncretism is not a value-free concept. The identification of Creole religions as “syncretic” is problematical and disparaging: a Eurocentric bias limits the definition to non-European religions, negating their full legitimacy. Creole religions are frequently identified with and “legitimized” by accentuating their Roman Catholic elements, for example, but are not always afforded an equivalent status.

The term “syncretism” first appeared in Plutarch’s *Moralia* in reference to the behavior of the Cretan peoples who “mixed together,” came to agreement, or closed ranks when confronted by a mutual enemy; it was later used
to describe the integration of two or more separate beliefs into a new religion. Thus, from its origins, the term presupposes encounter and confrontation between systems: “Syncretism is in the first place contested religious interpenetration” (Droogers 1989: 20). Though all definitions of syncretism are thorny, Michael Pye recognizes the term’s dynamism when he describes it as “the temporary ambiguous coexistence of elements from diverse religions and other contexts within a coherent religious pattern” and considers that the process should be understood as “a natural moving aspect of major religious traditions . . . a part of the dynamics of religion which works its way along in the ongoing transplantation of these religious traditions from one cultural context to another whether geographically or in time” (1971: 92). However, despite the existence of historical interactions, borrowings, and modifications based on contact and context that have occurred among all the major religions, the rhetorical division between so-called pure faiths and illicit or “contaminated” syncretic belief systems persists, often mentioned with the related concepts of “hybridization and creolization as a means of portraying the dynamics of global social developments” (Stewart 2007: 40). Syncretism in the Creole context is not the description of a static condition or result but of a dynamic process. Roman Catholic missionaries adopted a policy of “guided syncretism” during the conquest of the Americas and the colonial period, tolerating the existence of a polytheistic idolatry that could be identified with Catholic saints and considering it a necessary evil—a transitional state that would eventually lead the conquered peoples to the “true” faith and the elimination of such beliefs. However, the policy never fully realized its goals. The old gods refused to disappear (and still do). Whether to avoid further oppression in a type of “defensive syncretism” or to gain legitimacy, the conquered peoples embraced Christian forms but with new meanings they themselves had refashioned, at times appropriating them as tools of resistance. According to Mosquera, syncretism should designate “something that corresponds more to the concept of ‘appropriation,’ in the sense of taking over for one’s own use and on one’s own initiative the diverse and even the hegemonic or imposed elements, in contrast to assuming an attitude of passive eclecticism or synthesis,” strategies that he claims are clearer now thanks to the evolution of a “postmodern” contemporary consciousness (1996: 227). The stress on syncretism and such terms as “syncretic cults” emphasizes the “accessory syncretic elements to the detriment of the essence: the truly effective evolutions of African religions in America” (Mosquera 1992: 30).
In an interesting example of the historical revision of the definition of cultural and religious “legitimacy,” Stephen Palmié notes in “Against Syncretism: ‘Africanizing’ and ‘Cubanizing’ Discourses in North American Òrîsà Worship,” that the American Yoruba movement created in the United States in the 1960s, also known as Yoruba-Reversionism or the Oyotunji-Movement, has attempted to purge all European elements from Cuban and Cuban-American Santería/Regla de Ocha in order to regain a more “pure” form of worship and cultural “legitimacy.” The re-Africanization of “syncretistically adulterated” Cuban beliefs and practices “runs counter to an understanding of ‘tradition’ still at the very heart of North American variants of Afro-Cuban religious practices” (1995: 77). A movement to eliminate any vestiges of European religions from Santería and other Creole religions, led by so-called “African revisionists,” and return to a more “pure” and “authentic” African-centered religion has led to African-centered movements in Cuba as well where some advocate for a “religión Yoruba” to replace Regla de Ocha/Santería.

For Andrew Apter, religious syncretism is yet another form of empowerment, another modality of revision and popular resistance:

The syncretic revision of dominant discourses sought to transform the authority that these discourses upheld . . . the power and violence mobilized by slave revolts and revolution were built into the logic of New World syncretism itself. The Catholicism of Vodou, Candomblé and Santería was not an ecumenical screen, hiding the worship of African deities from official persecution. It was the religion of the masters, revised, transformed, and appropriated by slaves to harness its power within their universes of discourse. In this way the slaves took possession of Catholicism and thereby repossessed themselves as active spiritual subjects. (1991: 254)

And, according to Laura E. Pérez in “Hybrid Spiritualities and Chicana Altar-Based Art,” U.S. Latina/o artists and intellectuals in the fields of religion and visual arts are radically redefining the understanding of religious and cultural syncretism beyond the Eurocentric notion “that vestiges of the precolonial survive as largely incoherent fragments within the engulfing colonial culture” and are replacing it with the realization that globalization has restructured religious beliefs and practices and given birth to “altogether new forms” (2008: 344–345).
Shared Characteristics of Creole Religions

Despite notable differences among African-based Caribbean Creole practices, a general overview of the Creole religions reveals that they share a number of fundamental features.¹⁴

1. The first of these is their characteristic combination of monotheism and polytheism. At the center of all Afro-Caribbean religions is a belief in a unique Supreme Being—creator of the universe. This belief is complemented by belief in a pantheon of deities (orishas, lwas, and the like) who are emanations of the Creator and who serve as intermediaries between mankind and the supreme god.

2. These religious practices are also linked by a cult of dead ancestors and/or deceased members of the religious community who watch over and influence events from beyond.

3. In addition, Creole religions share a belief in an active, supernatural, mysterious power that can be invested in objects (mineral, vegetable, animal, human), a force not intrinsic to the objects themselves.

4. This belief is in turn linked to animistic beliefs in other spirits (often found in nature), beyond the divinities and the ancestors, who can also be contacted and who can exert a positive or negative influence over a person’s life. Plants and trees, for example, have a will and a soul, as do all things under the sun.

5. Afro-Caribbean religions are centered on the principle of contact or mediation between humans and the spirit world, which is achieved through such numerous and complex rituals as divinatory practices, initiation, sacrifice, spiritual possession, and healing.¹⁵

6. These contacts are mediated by a central symbol or focus, a fundamental or philosophical foundation that serves as the dynamic organizing principle of spiritual worship: the sacred stones (otanes) of the Afro-Cuban Regla de Ocha and the nganga cauldron and sign tracings of Regla de Palo, the sacred Ekué drum of the Abakuá Secret Society, and the poto-mitan of the Vodou ritual space (the hounfort). These and other consecrated objects are not merely the symbols of the gods but are the material receptacles of divine power. The image of Catholic saints and the crucifix may appear to dominate altars or shrines, but, as William Bascom has noted regarding the Afro-Cuban religions, the stones, blood, and herbs of ritual offerings and sacrifice contain the “secrets” and are the real focus of religious power (1950, 1972).

7. Central to the ceremonies of Creole religions is music and dance: sound has the power to transmit action. Consecrated drums and the polyrhythmic percussion they produce, along with clapping, the spoken or sung word in
repeated chants, and dance (rhythms and dance are coded to the identities of the gods that are summoned in ceremonies and rituals), produce an altered state of consciousness that beckons the supernatural entities and communicates between worlds.16

8. Music and dance are also instrumental in strengthening the conscious sense of community and an institutionalized regrouping of Africans and their descendants, and the transference of African “space” into houses, temples, or rooms. Ritual communities are more than simply religious groups. Rather, they re-create the types of family ties and obligations to the deities and to each other that would have existed in Africa.

9. This re-creation relies on religious leaders responsible for the care of the religious space, sacred objects, and ritual implements and the general spiritual care of the community. The leaders represent “the depository of maximum mystical and initiatory powers and liturgical knowledge. The cult priest [priestess] distributes or ‘plants’ power by initiating novices and infusing them with the power of which he is the depository” (Dos Santos and Dos Santos 1984: 77). There is no central authority in Creole religions, however; worship is individualized and community-based. Devotees are members of a religion, but not of a specific institutionalized church.

10. In Caribbean Creole religions, spiritual power is internalized and mobilized in human beings who become, through the experience of possession, “a real live altar in which the presence of the supernatural beings can be invoked.”17 In possession, the deities—orishas, lwas—manifest themselves through the bodies of the initiated.18 “During the experience of possession, the entire religious system, its theogony and mythology, are relived. Each participant is the protagonist of a ritualistic activity, in which Black historic, psychological, ethnic, and cosmic life is renewed” (Dos Santos and Dos Santos 1984: 78). Ritual dramatizes myth and promotes the magic that responds to life’s problems.19

11. Given the complexity of the practice of magic in the form of spells, hexes, conjurations, and ethno-magical medicine-healing, it deserves more extensive examination here.

**Magic, Witchcraft, and Healing**

The logic, structure, and “technology” of magic in Creole religions follow the principles described by Sir James Frazer in his classic text *The Golden Bough* (1922): “homeopathic” or “imitative” magic, following the law of similarity in which like produces like and an effect resembles its cause, so that one can produce any effect by imitating it (a photograph or doll in the like-
ness of the person one wishes to influence); and “contagious” magic, which follows the law of contact, namely, that things which have once been in contact continue to act upon each other at a distance, a “magical sympathy” that exists between a person and any severed portion of his or her person (human remains or dirt from a grave invested with the power of the deceased, for example). Anyone gaining possession of human hair, nails, or other portions of the body may work his or her will upon the person from whom they were obtained, at any distance.20

In *Spiritual Merchants: Religion, Magic and Commerce*, Carolyn Morrow Long uses the generic word “charm” to designate “any object, substance, or combination thereof believed to be capable of influencing physical, mental, and spiritual health; manipulating personal relationships and the actions of others; and invoking the aid of the deities, the dead, and the abstract concept of ‘luck’” (2001: xvi). Although the objects themselves may be commonplace and ordinary, faith and belief invest them with their true “power”:

More important than the magical principles of imitation and contact is the spiritual presence that governs the charm. In the African traditional religions, European folk Christianity and popular magic, and the African-based New World belief systems, charms are often believed either to be endowed with an indwelling spirit or to enable the user to contact and direct an external spirit. An African deity, God the Father, Jesus, the Holy Ghost, one of the saints, a folk hero, or the dead might be summoned through the use of charms. In African American hoodoo practice the religious concept of an indwelling spirit has sometimes been lost, and the user may believe that the charm itself performs the desired act. The principles of imitative and contagious magic, plus the spiritual presence behind the charm, work to achieve the intention of the charm user through choice of ingredients, charm type, and related ritual actions. (xvii–xviii)

Bastide notes that Europeans brought their own varieties of medieval magic with them to the New World, often in the form of witches and magicians who were no longer burned at the stake but rather deported to the new Western territories. (Recall that the major phase of the European witch trials coincided with the colonization of the Americas and that the *Malleus Maleficarum*, the handbook for witch-hunters and Inquisitors throughout late Medieval Europe, was published in 1487, five years before Columbus’s voyage.) “Of greatest importance was the folk Christianity and popular magic practiced by many Europeans of the sixteenth through the nineteenth cen-
turies. Characterized by veneration of the saints as minor deities, belief in spirits, and the use of sacramental objects as charms, folk Christianity was remarkably similar to the traditional religions of Africa. European popular magic and healing were also compatible with African magical and medicinal practices” (Long 2001: 9).

European magic retained the advantage, however, of representing the practices of the ruling class and was perceived to be superior in one major aspect: it guaranteed European hegemony, while African magic had not prevented enslavement. “This is why, though they never rejected any of their own African practices which proved effective, the black population would reinforce the unsuccessful one with some European formula” in a process referred to as “magical accumulation” which serves to strengthen the operative force of a given spell or remedy (Bastide 1971: 16). He also observes, “It remains to be said that, while Negroes may borrow European magic to strengthen their own spells, the reverse is also true. Europeans tend to regard Negro magic as more effective, because of its ‘weird’ character and the old colonial terrors which it inspired” (161). According to Eugene Genovese,

Magic, in the widest sense of the word, as Frazer, Tylor, and other pioneer anthropologists taught, is a false science with an erroneous idea of cause and effect, but it is akin to science nonetheless in its appeal to human devices for control of the world. . . . For peasantry magic, however petty many of its applications, has served the vital social function of providing some defense, no matter how futile in the end, against the natural disasters and forces beyond their control. (1976: 230–231)

Magic is typically associated with the religions and cultures of premodern societies. That notion, however, is contested by scholars who have noted the interconnectedness of cultures created by world economic systems and link the practices of magic and witchcraft in the Americas to modernity and to Western colonial and anticolonial processes. In Wizards & Scientists: Explorations in Afro-Cuban Modernity & Tradition, Palmié argues for the “modernity” of Afro-Cuban religious and cultural adaptation to the transatlantic experience, establishing that the modern structures of power in the transition from the colonial period to the modern were located not only in the New World of colonial power, but within the very structure of religion itself. Both, he claims, are linked to Western rationality, emerging out of the relations of inequality and oppression in colonization that created modernity’s achievements, and, citing Swiss anthropologist Alfred Métraux’s 1972 state-
ment, “It is too often forgotten . . . that Voodoo, for all of its African heritage, belongs to the modern world and is part of our own civilization” (2002: 57). Magic and witchcraft have been linked to forms of political and cultural resistance but also, as in Raquel Romberg’s *Witchcraft and Welfare: Spiritual Capital and the Business of Magic in Modern Puerto Rico*, to the consumerism and the global flow of products and ideas in a postcapitalist world where *bru-jos* become “spiritual entrepreneurs” providing for the spiritual, emotional, and at times economic needs of their clients (2003: 14).

Religious and cultural development follows many paths; a true understanding of magic and its place in a society requires an appreciation of cultural context, as we will observe in the chapters that follow. A complex and thorny issue, magic can be used as a form of resistance or retaliation, a means of redressing issues within a group, of defining self with regard to others, or a mode of gaining a sense of security and empowerment. On some level, magical thinking is common to all societies, but magic as a religious and spiritual practice is a category that is perhaps the most misunderstood, maligned, feared, and sensationalized of all identified with African-derived religions. Value-laden assumptions have been assigned to the category and definitions of “miracles” and “magicreligious” practices as well as their legitimacy and authenticity; indictments of superstition and witchcraft are common.

Of course, the expression “magicreligious” itself is problematic, usually assigned to the religions and the spiritual practices of the “Other” that the modern Western world considers archaic. Where does one draw the line between magic and religion? A straightforward definition can be found in Keith Thomas’s *Religion and the Decline of Magic*: “If magic is to be defined as the employment of ineffective techniques to allay anxiety when effective ones are not available, then we must recognize that no society will ever be free from it” (1971: 667). It is a question that Yvonne P. Chireau also examines in *Black Magic: Religion and the African American Conjuring Tradition*, a book concerning

[t]he creations that black people have woven into their quest for spiritual empowerment and meaning. It is about magic, as that term refers to the beliefs and actions by which human beings interact with an invisible reality. But it is also about religion, which may be defined as a viable system of ideas and activities by which humans mediate the sacred realm. In some African American spiritual traditions, ideas about magic and
religious practice can enclose identical experiences. . . . Individuals may utilize the rhetoric of miracle to characterize this kind of spiritual efficacy, or they may adopt a lexicon that is associated with magic. Or they may choose both. A fixed dichotomy between these ideas is not always apparent. It is clear, then, that we are dealing with contested notions of belief. (2003: 2–3)

Diasporan Religions and Religion in the Diaspora

The “diasporan religions,” a term coined by Joseph M. Murphy,22 share significant traits, but perhaps the most characteristic is their dynamism. The globalization process has created an “intense intra-Caribbean circulation of ritual specialists—a free-flow of espiritistas, santeros, brujos [witches or sorcerers] . . . . These encounters and the availability of ritual commodities from distant parts of the world yield incomparable opportunities for mutual learning and exchange. . . . These interactions have broadened the pool of saints, deities, and spirits” (Romberg 2005: 141–142).

In the 2001 edition of Karen McCarthy Brown’s ground-breaking ethnography Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn, we learn that cultural pluralism and transnational contacts have expanded religious options for Alourdes, the Haitian mambo whose story is the focus of the book. In addition to Haitian Vodou, Alourdes has added Santería and was initiated into the religion by a friend who was born in Puerto Rico and lives in Oakland, California, where she hopes that “bringing Vodou and Santería together can help reduce the tensions between the Latino and black populations in Oakland” (399). Mama Lola observed the ritual similarities between the two religions and when asked why, if they are, in her words, “almost the same thing,” she would go through the expense and responsibility of adding Santería to her religious practices, her response demonstrates a practical and religious intent: she wants to add more spirits to insure protection for herself, her family, and her support network, living and deceased. “I do it because my grandmother . . . . she used to travel to Cuba …in her trade. That’s how she get it. Now, I got Yemaya too” (400).

The religious and cultural influence of the Creole religions of the Caribbean and its diaspora has broadened its reach: to the African American and U.S. Latino population, and, interestingly, to the artists and writers of those communities who have demonstrated an affinity with and been inspired by the Creole spiritual traditions, an issue we will discuss further in subsequent
chapters. Orishas and lwas have claimed such spiritual daughters in the African American feminist spirituality movement as writer, performer, and ritual priestess Luisah Teish in the Bay area of California, an initiated elder in the Ifa/Orisha tradition of the West African Diaspora and a devotee of Damballah Hwedo, the Haitian Rainbow Serpent, under the guidance of Mama Lola. In African American Folk Healing, Stephanie Y. Mitchem observes that Teish, “like many African-Americans who are searching for religious meaning, draws from multiple African traditions to construct and define a spiritual tradition” (2007: 124):

For some, then, African religions reconcile seemingly disparate parts of the self—culturally, religiously, and socially. Part of the attraction is what theologian Joseph Murphy describes as “the reciprocity between community and spirit.” For some, there is a sense of belonging and coming home. In a way, the participant constructs his or her core identity. (125)

One woman Mitchem interviewed, who was disillusioned with Roman Catholicism and found a spiritual home in Santería, claimed, “Thank God for the Cubans who saved it for us” (125). Mexican American muralists, writers, and poets have combined Creole spirituality with Native American and European influences in their art and their lives. Hailing from the Rio Grande Valley of South Texas, the acclaimed Chicana author and cultural theorist Gloria Anzaldúa—who helped transform contemporary Chicana and border theories and whose works appear in class syllabi throughout the United States in courses on contemporary American women writers, Chicana/o and Latina/o literature, among others—considered herself a spiritual activist and daughter of Yemayá and included the orisha in her spiritual pantheon, according to AnaLouise Keating, editor of The Gloria Anzaldúa Reader. In her influential work Borderlands: The New Mestiza = La frontera/, Anzaldúa crosses bridges and borders with illuminating analyses surrounding gender, class, and racial and ethnic identity.

In the bilingual opening poem of the first chapter of Borderlands, “The Homeland, Aztlán/El otro México,” the author invokes Yemayá’s name with that of the Catholic Virgin of Guadalupe, the patron saint of Mexico. Both spirits guide the inhabitants of the borderlands, “transgressors, aliens—whether they possess documents or not, whether they’re Chicanos, Indians or Blacks,” who populate the U.S.-Mexican border, an area Anzaldúa refers to as a third country or “border culture” (Anzaldúa 1987: 3).
But the skin of the earth is seamless.
The sea cannot be fenced,  
el mar does not stop at borders.  
To show the white man what she thought of his  
arrogance,  
Yemaya blew that wire fence down.  

Anzaldúa invoked Yemayá in the years prior to her death in 2004 to summon the orisha, her “ocean mother,” as protector spirit in the final years of the poet’s life and we will see the artistic and spiritual significance of a “spirited identity” in our discussion of Creole religions and Mexican Americans.

The chapters that follow seek to elucidate how the various elements described above manifest themselves in the specific systems of belief and practice of the major Creole religions of the Caribbean and its Diaspora, as well as their influence on U.S. Latino cultures in contact with Creole diasporic cultures. As we trace their histories and characteristic elements we will seek to illustrate how, although at times severely restricted, controlled, penalized, ostracized, and devalued by the dominant cultures of the respective countries, they constitute practices of resistance that devotees have succeeded in maintaining for centuries, contesting the racialized inequalities in their societies, defining and shaping the everyday lives of individuals and communities. As such the Creole religions are at the very center of the process of transculturation that has defined Creole societies.