TURNING TOWARDS HOME: DEFINING “HOME” THROUGH RITUAL STUDIES

By

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(Under the direction of Carolyn Jones Medine)

ABSTRACT

Utilizing accounts compiled by other researchers and information obtained through field research, I explore the ways in which ritual serves particular religions and the individuals involved. Beginning with a broad understanding of ritual presented by Catherine Bell, subsequent chapters explore rituals by practitioners of Cuban Santería, Brazilian Candomblé, Haitian Vodou, and Shi’a Islam. The initiation rituals of African Derived Religions are approached from an outsider perspective while the Ashura rituals of Shi’a Islam take a far more personal approach.

INDEX WORDS: Ritual, African Traditional Religion, Yoruba, Cuban Santería, Brazilian Candomblé, Haitian Vodou, Shi’a, Muharram, Ashura, Karbala
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PREFACE

In August of 2011, I joined the Religion Department at the University of Georgia with the intention of earning my Master’s degree in Religion and Literature. After exploring a large array of literary genres and countless approaches towards literature during my undergraduate career as an English student, I thought it would be beneficial to explore an avenue that I had not thought much about. To my great surprise, I learned that my ideas and understandings about Religion and Literature could play a major role in how others approach this discipline instead of being fully rooted to theories of the past.

After a short four months into the program, I was invited to attend a Muslim ritual that would eventually alter the course of my studies from that point onward. After being fully absorbed in a religious ritual that I was completely unfamiliar with, I found the topic for what would become the thesis that follows this preface. I asked myself, “What does ritual do for the individual? What does the individual contribute to the ritual? Seen together, what does the individual and the ritual contribute to the religion? When you are outside of your homeland, how does ritual help build a bridge?” This line of questioning continued to unfold over a two year span, and has been carefully presented to you in the following way: first, I present the foundation of ritual by drawing primarily on works of Catherine Bell and Thomas Tweed to set the framework for two case studies. Second, I focus on initiation rituals that have developed in three African Derived Religions in the diaspora. Third, I present the case study of a ritual performed by Shia Muslims that
initially sparked my interest in this field. Finally, I explore how the rituals performed in the diaspora help to establish individual peace, communal strength, and guide participants towards “home.”
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CHAPTER ONE

RITUAL AND THE ART OF “HOMEMAKING”

The sun begins to break through the darkness, signaling the start of a new day which, for some, is no different than the day before and the days ahead. Like clockwork, the rattling of a tray filled with copper cups of water and steel bowls of milk and a carefully chosen selection of fruit fades down the hall into the household mandir\(^1\) where my grandmother waits. A match is lit and, one by one, seven homemade cotton wicks come to life. A single incense emits curls of smoke and my grandmother’s voice can be heard as she belts out the sacred “Om.” It is six o’clock in the morning. An hour passes and her voice begins to soften to a mumble as sleep overcomes her aging body once more. A second hour passes and she begins her first of twelve readings of the Hanuman Chalisa,\(^2\) one time for each of her grandchildren and great-grandchildren. In an effort to manage her time more efficiently, my grandmother irons her sari, combs her hair, makes her bed, and occasionally begins a project that her arthritic hands cannot complete, all while seven open flames dance hungrily in the corner of the room. Twelve recitations and three hours later, she emerges from the room looking drained of energy, ready for lunch and a nap. Whenever others hear of her morning, they admire her dedication to the

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\(^1\) Lit: Temple

\(^2\) Hindu devotional poem highlighting the deity, Hanuman, as the ideal devotee
rituals of her faith. Those of us who know better, however, continue to question the necessity of such a taxing routine.

The label of “belief” inevitably carries the weight of history and tradition that one must be willing to accept as a grounding force of any religious tradition. To be born into a religion, into a particular sphere of belief, does not make one a “believer” in the active sense of the word. To claim that one has fostered a deep relationship with the Other through a specific lens requires an honest and active look through others. Within any sphere of belief, the community helps to develop a relationship with the divine in the broadest sense possible. However, truly to accept all that a religion has to offer, one must continuously forge connections on personal levels through ritual performance. While a great deal has been written about the power of ritual, we must question an umbrella definition and ask whether “ritual” carries the same weight in every religious tradition. To do so, we will explore how Catherine Bell and Thomas Tweed help to expand upon older understandings of both religion and ritual, taking into account the individual’s role in any specific ritual.

According to Catherine Bell, author of *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice: Perspectives and Dimensions*, “the construction of ritual as a decipherable text allows the theorist to interpret simply by deconstructing ritual back into its perfused components. The theoretical construction of ritual becomes a reflection of the theorist’s method and the motor of discourse in which the concerns of the theorist take center stage.”3 What this suggests is that ritual can be defined in a way that aligns with the views of the theorist in a particular study. As with any performance, what is seen by one person does

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not describe what is seen by another. An analytical mind may focus on the subtle nuances of a hand gesture or breathing pattern, while another might marvel at words and objects being used in the same performance. The interpretative strength of the observers will influence the description of what the performer was doing, while—perhaps—neglecting the most notable element of the performance: the performer.

Observation allows for countless aspects to be associated with ritual, thus stretching the understanding of ritual action to a breaking point, at which a flickering light or heaving breathing becomes part of the “religious experience.” With, potentially, numerous individuals involved in a particular ritual on a number of different emotional levels, interpreting ritual becomes a challenging task for the observer who is responsible for sifting through active and passive participants to uncover what can only be assumed as the true essence of a particular ritual. As Bell states, “making everything a matter of ritual to some degree broadens the question to proportions impossible to organize.”

Therefore, rather than focusing on the body of participants as a representative whole, one might focus on the experience of an individual participant who appears emotionally invested in the observed ritual. Victor Turner presents two key components of ritual studies: liminality and *communitas*, that prove useful in this approach.

Although Turner’s observation of the Ndembu tribe of Zambia allowed him to further theorize about what took place in the sacred realm of rites of passage, generalizing about these experiences, his terms can serve a significant purpose in understanding the impact of ritual on a personal level. Describing those involved in the ritual, whom he calls *liminars*, he observes that:

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4 Bell, 73.
[They] are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned an arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial. As such, their ambiguous and indeterminate attributes are expressed by a rich variety of symbols in the many societies that ritualize social and cultural transitions. Thus, liminality is frequently likened to death, to being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness, to bisexuality, to the wilderness, and to an eclipse of the sun or moon.\(^5\)

While this description of the *limen* is an excellent description what the external observer has understood an “insider” perspective might offer a different description. The “insider,” however, may lack—or not desire—analytical tools and, therefore, be able to present his or her own individual experience. We would like to argue that a combination of the insider and outsider perspectives is needed to understand, as fully as possible, what a ritual is doing.

Turner’s presentation of *communitas* can be agreed upon by “insiders” and “outsiders” alike. Turner states, “We are presented, in such rites, with a ‘moment in and out of time,’ and in and out of secular social structure, which reveals, however fleetingly, some recognition […] of a generalized social bond that has ceased to he and has simultaneously yet to be fragmented into a multiplicity of structural ties.”\(^6\) With this in mind, by using the terms “insider” and “outsider,” we want to suggest that social ties are formed by those participating in the ritual, no matter where one stands in the ritual field. Within *communitas* a new community is formed by ritual participation, one in which a number of individuals are able to forge connections through participation in a unique,

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\(^6\) Ibid., 96
personal experience as well as a shared communal one, making us focus on practice as a key element of ritual.

According to Catherine Bell, “the dialectical unity of theory and practice was meant to indict the inadequacy of abstract thinking, knowledge, and truth.”7 As with any field, theory provides a sense of what should happen given a particular framework, but verification or contestation only emerges as a result of practice. To take this a step further, we want to underscore, within practice, emotional action. Mere repetition of a ritual may evolve into redundancy and routine. As such, the ritual practice may lose religious or emotional weight, thus eliminating any significant experience used to maintain the connection to the divine realm. We want to ask whether simple performance of ritual action is efficacious in and of itself or if attention and commitment are always necessary to the individual in ritual action.

In an effort to explain what a ritual does for the individual, theorists present an outsider perspective of the ritual based on the outward presentation of certain actions that carry the weight of tradition. Bell suggests that “when abstracted from its immediate context, an activity is not quite the same activity. Practice may embody determinative influences deriving from other situations, but practice is not the mere expression or effect of these influences.”8 Actions as simple as pouring water over one’s hands holds religious significance when this action is performed in a ritual context, yet the same actions under the kitchen faucet while washing dishes cannot be described as the same ritual action. Furthermore, acknowledging that countless aspects of any religious activity originate at

7 Bell, 75.

8 Ibid., 81
specific points in history and reflect the minds and needs of that time is essential in the study of religious ritual and performance. If developments from centuries ago are meant to carry the same meaning today, then religion can only be seen as a performance. Using historical and traditional understandings of ritual as a foundation, however, allows the participant both to unite his or her practice with that of the larger religious community, while still maintaining an essence of individuality. As Bell states, “practice, as real activity in time, by its very nature dodges the relations of intellectualist logic and excludes the questions asked by the analyst.”

In other words, when an individual participates in a ritual, the definite meaning cannot be contained by a single theory or definition. Our discipline works from the religious tradition’s statements about the meaning of rituals; however this approach could be said to assume that all adherents are of a common mind. Yet, no matter the size of the faith community, the group is comprised of adults, teens, and children with various levels of experience. Although one may be brought into a religious tradition by one’s parents, that individual, at some point in time, decides when practice becomes more than routine. Prostrations, recitations, and ablutions that once seemed to be a part of a check list begin to take on deeper meaning and significance that can no longer be contained in the scholarly, meta-understanding of the ritual.

As anthropologist Roy Rappaport suggests in his work on ritual ecology, “ritual is not simply one of a number of more or less equivalent ways in which the material embodied in liturgical orders may be expressed, presented, maintained or established. It may be [...] that ‘myth implies ritual, ritual implies myth,’ but they are not [...] one and

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9 Bell, 82
the same.” 10 This understanding of ritual notes that religious practices have origins rooted in history. This, however, does not limit ritual’s meaning to those historical understandings. The meaning of ritual is both carried forward and changed in practice. As Bell states, “[practice] addresses the question of why people do something or anything, but in a form that attempts to avoid the reductionism of most self-interest theory.” 11 Having said this, any definition of ritual that emerges must have elastic boundaries that can be stretched to reach the outer limits of the participant circle, but firm enough that a standard core remains steady for those involved.

What happens when we focus on the participant? To do so makes us ask what perspectives and expectations each participant comes into the ritual with. For the life-long adherents who purposefully walk into a ritual, history and tradition provide a sense of meaning and one’s life experience provides the map leading to that moment. On the surface this participant is acting as those who came before once acted, yet adding something new. In other words, “we can say that practice sees what it intends to accomplish, but it does not see the strategies it uses to produce what it actually does accomplish, a new situation.” 12 What makes ritual and practice so powerful is, I believe, this “new situation” that the participation of the individual potentially creates. For the individual to understand that his or her story plays a role in the continuation of historic practices opens large doors to the grand *communitas* that has been established over centuries.


11 Bell, 83.

12 Ibid., 87.
University of Chicago Historian of Religions, the late Mircea Eliade’s notions of
the “sacred” and “profane” gives us a suggestion about the difference between ritual
time and space and “time as usual.” Using these terms in conjunction with the terms
established by Victor Turner’s sense of the *limen* and of *communitas*, we want to suggest
that sacred space and time are liminal. Their boundedness is the arena in which ritual
change occurs. The profane world, on the other hand, is defined simply by the everyday.
Therefore, “from the perspective of ritualization the categories of sacred and profane
appear in a different light. Ritualization appreciates how sacred and profane activities are
differentiated in the performing of them, and thus how ritualization gives rise to (or
creates) the sacred as such by virtue of its sheer differentiation from the profane.”

Our earlier example of the washing of one’s hands is an example of what Bell argues here.
Until the individual moves into ritual space and time, actions may remain a part of the
profane. Catherine Bell elaborates on this concept of “ritualization” by highlighting the
fact that the individuals involved in ritual *make* meaning, rather than allowing ritual to
give meaning to them.

In this understanding of ritualization, Bell argues, “a ritualized body is a body
invested with a ‘sense’ of ritual. This sense of ritual exists as an implicit variety of
schemes whose deployment works to produce sociocultural situations that the ritualized
body can dominate in some way.”

Again, this approach stresses the role that the
individual plays in the construction of ritual. By establishing a difference between a
“ritualized body” and one that is not “invested with a ‘sense’ of ritual,” Bell suggests that

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13 Bell, 91.
14 Ibid., 98.
one can go through the motions of any devotional act and never fully enter the ritual. This idea further emphasizes how one can be born into a sphere of belief and not (yet) be invested.

To understand this more clearly, we might compare the position of the person brought into a tradition by his or her family to a child whose parent packs his or her suitcase. For many years, the child may be content with what the parent has packed and trusts that everything that is necessary will be present when the bag is opened. However, as this child matures, he begins to develop a personality that sets him apart from the community that he was brought up in. He begins to take what his parent has taught him about packing and begins to do this for himself, adjusting the contents when necessary. The same is true with religious beliefs. The adolescent, for example, may question whether or not the beliefs of the community suffice. To question, however, is not to deny. Questioning sets the sojourner on the path towards an integrated understanding, so that if the individual decides to identify with a religious tradition, he or she does so knowing what that title entails. As such, the individual is now invested with a “sense” of ritual that maintains the connection that was formed by that person’s choice. Taking this discussion even further, Bell asks:

What does ritualization see? It is a way of acting that sees itself as responding to a place, event, force, problem, or tradition. It tends to see itself as the natural or appropriate thing to do in the circumstances. Ritualization does not see how it actively creates place, force, events, and tradition, how it redefines or generates the circumstances to which it is responding. It does not see how its own actions
reorder and reinterpret the circumstances so as to afford the sense of a fit among the main spheres of experience—body, community, and cosmos.\footnote{Bell, 109.}

By arguing that ritualization is a “response,” Bell notes that individuals, in some way, are responsible for providing actions with meaning. What is the relation to the observer, the scholar, to this meaning-making? Even the most astute observer might argue that “tradition” is all that occurs in the sacred space. Although the word “tradition” implies a root for beliefs and practices, it also gives the impression of set order and meaning; we do things a certain way because that is how we are told to do them and they mean what we are told they mean. Bell, however, suggests, “tradition, of course is not created once and then left to its own momentum. Tradition exists because it is constantly produced and reproduced, pruned for a clear profile, and softened to absorb revitalizing elements.”\footnote{Ibid., 123.} “Keeping this in mind, we see that a check list of items and actions in a ritual is not enough.

The religious practitioner both embodies and performs ritual. That is to say, the practitioner is formed in a belief system but also shapes the religion as much as the religion shapes him. Ritualization, however, “the production of ritualized acts, can be described, in part, as that way of acting that sets itself off from other ways of acting by virtue of the way in which it does what it does. Even more circularly, it can be described as the strategic production of expedient schemes that structure an environment in such a way that the environment appears to be the source of the schemes and their values.”\footnote{Ibid., 140.}
This structure that ritualization constructs is a kind of container in which each person involved both acts on and changes. We could argue that the “sense” of ritual is an openness to liminality and communitas that may come to transcend the ritual’s boundaries: the ritualized self is now open to change, breaking the sacred/profane dualism.

Emmanuel Levinas understands this openness as a key element of home. What is beyond the limits of what we call “home” is not, necessarily, wholly other, but, potentially, an aspect of the self that has gone unnoticed. For our purposes, “home” is meant to define a place, whether physically, mentally, or emotionally, that provides the individual with a level of comfort and stability that mere performance cannot fully provide. Levinas believes that “to seek and to obtain truth is to be in a relation not because one is defined by something other than oneself, but because in a certain sense one lacks nothing.” In other words, “home” rests with the individual, but every act of crossing, to use Thomas Tweed’s words, reconstitutes what is understood as “home.” Every crossing becomes a dwelling, and within each dwelling the individual builds upon the ground he has previously discovered. Like a chambered nautilus, each person ascends to a new level of understanding but carries each place and experience—each history—for a lifetime.

At its root, we suggest, ritual creates a “home” for the individual involved, a meaning that is portable. Once the individual has constructed a meaning for him or herself, out of ritual, the sense of ritual is no longer confined to a particular place and time. We want to argue that the theorist may find himself in the role of participant-

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observer, that the “objective” role of the theorist/scholar may undergo a “crossing” into some other form. From this point of view, the theorist who becomes more than an observer begins to add a new dimension to the study of religion and ritual that both complicates and clarifies the beauty and significance of ritualization. By setting out to observe a ritual as a “fly on the wall,” the theorist develops academic goals and follows procedures, deciding what he or she expects to comment on after the observation. The theorist as participant-observer opens the boundaries, allowing modifications to the goals and procedures.

If ritual is meant to guide a participant towards “home,” we must question how a ritual of a different faith can trigger emotion from the observer. However, as a quest for truth and understanding, ritual should not be confined to the labels of faith, nor should those involved. With this in mind, approaching the rituals that “belong” to a different religion than that practiced by the observer, one’s personal experience becomes the foundation on which meaning is constructed in that particular time and place. Depending on the experience, the individual may have discovered that “home” includes far more than he or she initially expected. Furthermore, by forming connections to other participants, a larger *communitas* is also generated and the experience of the now participating observer is far more beneficial than that of the distanced observer.

Having created the character of the “participating observer,” we recognize that by being involved in the ritual that is being studied, we gain immense information while inevitably neglecting much as well. In the third chapter of his book, *Crossing and Dwelling*, Thomas Tweed offers a definition of religion that clearly underscores the meaning of movement and relation. Tweed comes to his definition of religion after
reviewing many of the “classic” definitions by thinkers like Mircea Eliade, Emile Durkheim, and others. Much like Clifford Geertz’s five-fold definition of religion, Tweed states: “Religions are confluences of organic-cultural flows that intensify joy and confront suffering by drawing on human and superhuman forces to make homes and cross boundaries.” Immediately, one notices that he desires to offer a definition that can be applied to religions generally. However, the key aspect to his definition is expressed through the word “confluences” which places the study of religion and ritual in motion. By choosing this particular word to describe religion and ritual studies, Tweed suggests that variations in observations are bound to occur. Furthermore, while “confluence” implies a “coming together,” it also implies a separation that the theorist and observer should be aware of. He goes on to describe the confluence of “organic-cultural flows,” further emphasizing the location-specific significance that religion plays. One can easily discuss the Eucharist of the Catholic Church in broad terms, but to gain a complete understanding, an observation, or even an attempt to participate in, the Eucharist from the cultures that have adopted this “organic” ritual may be necessary. Despite the cultural differences, Tweed suggests that religions help believers “intensify joy and confront suffering” which also varies from culture to culture. It is true, however, that no matter how one approaches joy and suffering, rituals magnify those feelings to an extraordinary degree by “drawing on superhuman forces.” The final part of his definition—“to make homes and cross boundaries”—emphasizes the fact that individuals

19 A system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic. (Pals, 349).

20 Thomas Tweed, Crossing and Dwelling (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 54.
are in flux as much as the religions are. Although his definition touches on many points relating to a broad understanding of religion, this final portion is most significant in that it stresses the importance of the individual involved. The definitions presented by scholars, such as Immanuel Kant, Karl Marx, Paul Tillich, and others, provide a framework to study religions from a “top-down” point of view, while Tweed encourages scholars to approach their study from the “bottom-up,” giving particular attention to the practitioners themselves.

While shifts in ontological perspectives are typical through any form of ritual, “bottom-up” participation by the observer will often allow the individual to see things in a new way. As Catherine Bell suggests, the process does not end once a “truth” has been discovered. Once an individual has expanded his or her ontological view of the world, he or she is able to enter a sphere of belief once again and be aware of the door that opens out, to return to Levinas’s notion of home, rather than the one that is shutting something in. Levinas states that “truth is in effect not separable from intelligibility; to know is not simply to record, but always to comprehend.”21 What this seems to say is that the individual is invited to step out of a sphere of belief into new territory on a regular basis. This does not imply, however, that the door will be closed if the individual chooses to return. In order to embrace “infinity,” as Levinas defines it, one must recognize that the search for truth and meaning does not end with institutional boundaries and formulations. To believe that the truth of today is the “totality,” to use Levinas’s contrasting term, hinders one from experiencing the truth of tomorrow. When one is willing to cross from the sphere of personal understanding, one does not destroy everything from the past. The

21 Levinas, 82.
pieces are still present, although rearranged, and one encounters new material to reshape one’s understanding of what one left. Finding “home,” therefore, does not equate to finding the core of one’s stability and security; “home” keeps individuals oriented without keeping them stagnate.

Early in his discussion of “homemaking,” Tweed asks readers to “note that dwelling is always “for a time”; it is never permanent or complete.”22 What he suggests here is that there is always an action involved in religion. Furthermore, Tweed notes that religion is not stationary—there is always a flux; as the individuals change, their relationship with religion will also change. Tweed develops his idea of “dwelling” using historian of religions, Charles H. Long's concept of orientation which seeks to focus on the individual's significance and place in the world. Tweed goes on to comment that “as clusters of dwelling practices, religions orient individuals and groups in time and space, transform the natural environment, and allow devotees to inhabit the worlds they construct.”23 Note that a profound emphasis is placed on the individual in his study of religion. Not only does religion work for the group, but the members who constitute that group are of equal importance. Therefore, Tweed's theory invites observers to embrace the limitations of their scope and to comment on what can be seen rather than hastily applying a “stock” definition to religion and ritual as a whole. To conclude his theory of religion, Tweed states that “theory [...] is an itinerary in all three senses of that term: a proposal for a journey, a representation of a journey, and the journey itself.”24 As such,

22 Tweed, 81.
23 Ibid., 82.
24 Ibid., 164.
he notes that by following a particular theory, one will have “blind spots.” To take his metaphor even further, when an observer decides to follow the current of a specific religious experience, he or she submits to an ever-changing flow and must adapt and be willing to approach theory knowing that some things will be left behind. As Tweed states, “theories always obscure some things as they illumine others; that there are ways of trying to adapt to the blind spots that come with any theoretical sighting; and that [his] own theory illumines more than it obscures.” An observer’s participation in a ritual that was originally meant for strict observation complicates the theoretical even more. The participant-observer may neglect some details that the majority of researchers include in their studies, but may also shed more light on other dimensions of the ritual.

In the following pages, I seek to emphasize the importance and inherent qualities of “homemaking” through two examples of ritual studies. The first focuses on the initiation rituals practiced by members of three dominating traditions derived from African Traditional Religions: Cuban Santeria, Brazilian Candomble, and Haitian Voodoo. This study is presented as a synthesis of information gathered by periphery observers in an attempt to highlight the broader understandings of ritual, while deliberately skirting emotional investment. The second study, however, focuses on Ashura rituals present in Shia Islam. In this study, the line separating participant and observer is blurred to the point that both identities merge into one, underscoring the significant contributions that can be made through the emotional investment of the observer. Despite whichever approach is favored by the reader, we want to argue that rituals turn participants towards home: back to their traditions of origin and practice, a

25 Tweed, 177.
place of comfort and stability, but away from them as well, in constant motion. Ritual, in its deepest sense, begs participants to hold on to individuality, reconnect oneself to one’s roots, and to seek a path worth taking. To begin, we will focus our attention on the African derived religions of Santería, Candomblé, and Vodou to see how initiation rituals in each tradition ties the participant towards “home.”
CHAPTER TWO
IN A FOREIGN LAND: RITUAL IN AFRICAN DERIVED RELIGIONS

Regarded as simple commercial transactions in the seventeenth century, the transatlantic slave trade marked the transformation of the Africans to objects of commerce. Along the Middle Passage between Africa and the Americas, every measure was taken to make a slave out of the humans on board the ships. One by one, these individuals were stripped of their identities, many losing their lives to the dark seas. Whatever the methods used to take the Africans out of Africa, removing Africa from the Africans was an entirely different task. Broken and scattered throughout the Americas, many of the Yoruba lost the central community that once held the deep and spiritually lifting elements of their traditional African beliefs. In the diaspora, however, community, eventually, would form. Although certain rituals have been adjusted to accommodate new surroundings, the traditional belief systems are far from obsolete. As George Eaton Simpson reiterates,

the religious behavior of these persons of African descent in the Caribbean sector of the diaspora has been part of their attempt to identify with forces in the universe greater than themselves, to express themselves, to escape--at least temporarily and imaginatively--from rejection, discrimination, and exploitation, and, in some cases, to change their life situations.\(^{26}\)

To survive the constant influence of the dominant regional religions, adaptations had to be made to conform to the social conditions of specific locations. Although the slave trade was successful in upsetting the African social structure, threats and the thought of isolation have failed to hinder derived religions from thriving. In many cases, the religion of the Africans were draped in the belief system of the dominating white culture; if religion could not be practiced publicly, it would be done secretly. In the initiation rituals of Cuban Santería, Brazilian Candomblé, and Haitian Vodou, the uprooted Africans actively seek a personal divine connection and a communal understanding of home away from home. Before we can discuss the adaptations, we must begin at the source.

In the West African tradition, at the dawn of creation, there was a pure cosmic energy known as *ashé*. Through the workings of the ultimate creator, Olodumare, everything that our eyes can see, and everything that they cannot, came into existence. Throughout human history, Olodumare has been called by different names, like Allah, Yahweh, and God, all of which are different guises for the same entity, but Olodumare cannot be captured in any image conceivable to mankind; he is without beginning and without end. His force exists in the air we breathe, the food we eat, the world we see, and the wind we feel. His energy fuels the life force of reality, transcending all things beyond human perception. *Ashé* is unlimited. In his infinite ability, Olodumare created entities to rule over aspects of existence in his stead. Known as *orishas*, these secondary gods serve as intermediaries between Olodumare and his creations. It is impossible to separate

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mankind from these entities so that wherever the individual lives, the spirit world follows.

Through the slave trade and the dispersion of many Africans to Cuba, traditional elements of the Yoruba religion seemed to die away as families were torn apart in the New World. As new slaves, the Yoruba felt no reason to seek salvation in the “white” face of Jesus. Although they were outwardly prevented from worshipping traditional figures, no form of oppression could prevent them from draping their orishas with the clothing of Catholicism. Thus, Santería emerged as the neo-African religion of the oppressed people. While many of the practices were secretive in the beginning, the confines of slavery could not effectively eliminate the elements of the Yoruba tradition that dwells within the individual. Under constant criticism by slave owners, those who began to practice Santería continued to do so in every action and with every decision they made. It became more than a religion; it became a way of life. Having been uprooted from their native Yoruba lands, however, practitioners of this new religion sought new ways of communicating with the divine entities they were forced to leave behind. In turn, new initiates to Santería inevitably reestablish their ontology in a suitable way to accompany the complex understanding of ashé. With the initiation ritual, comes the shaping force of illnesses and the healing practices associated therein. As we seek to understand the terms “illness” and “healing,” we must allow ourselves to synthesize this as a “transformation of the self in which the ill person begins to experience the world in

new ways.”

The process allows the initiate to sift through the impurities of life and, ultimately, emerge in a purer state of existence.

For the initiate, the sign of an illness marks a liminal state of existence in which new realms of cosmology and ontology begin to open. Within the framework of Santería, illnesses are not seen as being caused by viruses, but as the result of various acts of sorcery brought about by strained social relationships. When one is dealing with such an illness, pharmaceutical medications will not suffice. In order to manage an illness caused by forms of magic, one must approach a healer skilled in developing relations with divine elements beyond the physical realm of existence. According to Johan Wedel, “the world is ruled by divine forces. Illness is prevented and healing is achieved by creating and maintaining relations with these divine beings and spirits.”

With such a wide array of potential causes, the inflicted individual likely begins the healing process by consulting a medium known as an espiritismo, a person skilled in Spiritism, who can connect the person to the ancestors.

As a result of the slave trade, the traditional understanding of ancestor worship ended in the diaspora because of the destruction of a strong family unit. In the Yorubaland, families consider the spirits of the deceased as members of the “living-dead” and “ancestral spirits” through which connections to the divinities are made. In Cuba, however, an espiritismo, a spiritist, is responsible for forming and maintaining this important connection with the living-dead. Therefore, during a personal consultation between a spiritist and the inflicted, the former will assume the role of the desired spirit

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30 Wedel, 47.
for the inflicted individual. Through this process, the once lost living-dead can speak through the mouth of the spiritist to warn or advise those present about their weakened condition. Although this may sound like a very outdated way of dealing with problems, today in Cuba one can find the home of a spiritist a boveda, a table covered with a white cloth. On top of it there are usually photographs of departed family members, a crucifix, dolls, and glasses of water. The dolls represent spiritual guides, and each glass represents a particular muerto, often a deceased family member.31

It is important to note here that the elements described therein are an amalgamation of traditions incorporated into Santería by priests from different parts of the Yorubaland. The desire, therefore, is to attract a member of the living-dead through at least one of the objects presented on the spiritist’s table. If successful, the spirit of the deceased will aid the inflicted by pointing the individual in the direction of the root problem.

Within Santería, illnesses are explained using sorcery as a framework for understanding. For example, if one member of the community has been blessed with new child and the mother or child falls ill, it can often be assumed that a barren neighbor, for example, holds some responsibility. In polygamous societies, if the youngest of wives falls ill, one assumes that jealousy among the other wives has played a role in the ailment. Therefore, illnesses caused by strained relationships within a community or family unit are often explained as acts of sorcery. In such a situation, the healing process described above will come into play. However, a simple end to the pain and suffering of the individual is not the only goal. As we have discussed, the healing process and the various

31 Wedel, 52-53.
rituals involved seeks to open the mind of the sufferer to new dimensions of cosmology and ontology. In the example of the youngest wife, for instance, the healing process will encourage this woman to broaden her scope of those around her and to scrutinize her actions carefully. In the end, her pain will cease, and she will have developed a better relationship with the women in her company. As one can imagine, by associating personal health problems with the larger society, an individual is forced to see his or her life in a new light in order to solve that problem. After all, since Santería originated as the religion of the oppressed, these individuals cannot afford to oppress others within their own communities on a much smaller scale. In order to ensure the safety and security of those within African societies in the diaspora, various rituals are performed for the sake of those involved.

Most important throughout the Santería tradition is the role of drumming and dance in the bembe festivals. Originating through Yoruba tradition, these festivals “are generally given to honor, thank, supplicate, or repay an orisha. The rhythm of the drums invites the orishas to come and possess the dancers, bridging the gap between the physical and spiritual worlds.” As a result of the diaspora, this festival and the ensuing possession allows for the participant to experience the unique connection to the spirit world that was once common in their native land. When the possession takes place in the appropriate conditions, the possessed individual will transcend the limits of time and place and enter into a liminal space. Through this process, the possessed will ultimately reestablish (in the closest way possible) the connection to their traditional religious roots, while expanding upon Santería's ontological views.

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32 Torre, 119.
As we have seen through the initiation ritual, members of the religion seek to blend mind and body in order to establish a greater connection to a world that transcends the physical. In the modern western mind, a stomach ache rarely gives way to a new outlook on the world—Santería proposes the opposite. However, the relationship between the self and other physical objects must be considered when discussing acts of sorcery. According to Wedel, “when sorcery is performed in order to cause a mental or bodily illness, the intended victim’s name and his nails, hair, blood, semen, sweat, and urine are often used.” A person’s life force still exists in the fluids and other sources that have been removed from the body. Therefore, it is common practice to dispose of such material in order to protect oneself from harm. As a point of comparison, it must be stressed that illnesses result from the material world while healing requires assistance from the spiritual world, emphasizing the need for reestablished views of ontology.

When the practice of divination fails to guide the inflicted towards greater insight, one must resort to the controversial ritual of animal sacrifice for help.

With the understanding that illnesses are often carried throughout the body by one’s own blood, the ideal solution would be to replace it in much the same way that one would replace a broken light bulb with a new one. In Santería, animal blood is often rubbed on the body of the ailing individual, symbolically replacing the diseased life force of the human with the cleaner life force of an animal. Since the animal has already been slaughtered, it is understood that it has died for the sake of the human. While this ritual often causes tension to those unfamiliar with such practices, it must be noted that

33 Wedel, 111.

34 Sandoval, 112-115.
Olodumare created these animals with the same life force as he created mankind. With this in mind, mankind was also the last of the Supreme Being’s creations, and, therefore, everything that comes before is for the sake of sustaining life. Although many may argue that the blood of an animal is unfit for the human body, we must stress that the blood is not being replaced but rather the same God-given life force. Even though the very idea seems incomprehensible in a world of modern medicine, this “life force transfusion” ultimately allows the patient to cast aside old worldviews in favor of fresh perceptions.

As we have seen in this short assessment of Santería ritual practices, the roles of illness and healing are not simply a part of the religion, but are rather the foundation of the religion. With each of these rituals, we begin to understand that there are forces in nature that are beyond human comprehension at work in the world. Through the use of various herbs, plants, and objects from the human body utilized in sorcery and healing, one recognizes that everything encompasses elements of the divine and should not be overlooked. Each breath one takes is the consumption of the divine. Each blade of grass or drop of rain serves a purpose for the individuals who walk the earth. When one understands the importance of nature and allows oneself to be carried to another plane through trance and possession, one begins to see the world in a new, ever evolving way.

As we move on to the Brazilian coastline, one hears the ebb and flow of the waters inching closer and closer towards the feet of a passerby. Closing your eyes, you are engulfed by the deafening rhythm of nature and are lulled into relaxation and are momentarily lifted to a new realm of existence never before appreciated until that singular moment. This is the spirit of Candomblé. Among the religions that derived as a result of the slave trade, Candomblé has become one of the most widely recognized
African religions outside of the continent. Originating as a form of protest during the period of slavery, this religion forced its way onto the global scene in an attempt to establish a sense of meaning for those torn from Africa. As we have seen with Santería, this religion is also largely defined by ritual dance, spiritual healing, divination, possession, and sacrificial offerings. Following the lines of the Yoruba tradition, these elements are not simply a part of the religion, but are at its very core. Although many elements of “traditional” practices inevitably fade as families are scattered throughout Brazil, the human condition remains “a product of interrelations with the spirit world.”  

This connection is not simply a part of one’s life; it is the foundation of one’s life.

Before exploring the complex elements associated with the Candomblé concept of spiritism and healing, we should consider the following as a foundation of our study:

Olorun, the Supreme Being, decided to create the universe that we see today. Having set the plan in motion, he gave the orders to a male Orisha who plotted his journey to scatter the contents that Olorun had given him. Having become intoxicated by palm wine, the male Orisha fell asleep and his wife continued the task set out by the Supreme Being. When the sleeping Orisha awoke, a world resembling the Kingdom of Olorun had been created. After confessing his negligence to the Supreme Being, the male Orisha was ordered to conclude the task and create human beings to populate the earth that was already created.  

Through this adaptation of a Yoruba creation myth, we see that the Supreme Being created the universe and its inhabitants before ordering the orishas to put everything in

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the proper positions. What this implies is that everything found on the earth is created from the same ethereal substance as human beings, meaning mankind shares the same vital life force as every other living thing on Earth. Furthermore, it reveals “that the material and spiritual worlds are exact duplicates, parallel expressions of the same reality.” Therefore, everything that happens to mankind in the natural world inevitably has a connection to the spiritual world.

With this understanding in mind, it comes as no surprise that accidents occurring in one’s life are attributed to a higher spiritual cause. Nothing “just happens” to someone. According to Nathan Samuel Murrell, “in the African cosmology, a direct relationship exists between most human tragedies and the ability of mortals to live in concord with the immortal world. That is, few human misfortunes happen by chance.”

Much like the belief structure of Santería, a connection with the spiritual world is essential for a peaceful existence. In the secular western mindset, one often places religion in a “box” separated from other aspects of human life. Within the system of Candomblé, this separation causes an imbalance, a disequilibrium, in the workings of day to day activity which can lead to illness, financial ruin, marital feuds, or simply the smallest accident. In order to reestablish the spiritual connection necessary for a steady balance, a small ceremony or an elaborate ritual process may be required.

As a branch of the African worldview, these rituals not only seek to forge a balance in one’s world, but they also serve the purpose of reaffirming or strengthening one’s ontological views of the world around them. This is where the concept of ashé

37 Voeks, 71.

comes into play in the Candomblé tradition. As we established in our discussion of
Santeria, ashé is the life-force provided by an orisha to humans, plants and animals. To
take this concept a step further, ashé supplies the “power, energy, and strength necessary
to deal with life’s problems”³⁹ that are always present in some capacity in the human body. When one loses this vital life-force and problems arise, it becomes imperative that
a diviner be consulted to determine the best path to a cure.

When approached, the diviner will determine whether or not it is necessary for the
client to undergo the initiation ritual to reestablish a connection with the divinities. If the
elaborate process is required, the initiate will experience a spiritual death and rebirth
which seeks to reform the individual’s ontological views. Much like the prophets Moses,
Jesus, and Muhammad in the western traditions, initiates go through a liminal period of
isolation and seclusion in order to find what is necessary in the spiritual realm of
existence. One can only imagine the experience of being alone for the sake of “soul
searching,” free of distractions and confined to one’s own mind. Although no one but the
individual can truly express what the process was like, every person’s account would
vary because of his or her unique connection to the spiritual world. In solitude, one has
time to reflect on the life that he left in the profane world and to search for something he
may not have been looking for. With orishas circling the sojourner, the deepest aspects
of that person’s life will attract the appropriate spirits from above. After spending some
time alone the initiate works with the diviner to forge a connection between the spirit
world and the human world to call forth the orishas with the strongest ties to the initiate.
When successful, “a medium gives his or her body as a conduit for the [orishas’]

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³⁹ Murrell, 180.
manifestation and cognitive communication to the community. Upon possession, the medium speaks with authority and can allegedly diagnose mysterious evils and afflictions, find lost objects, give advice on or predict future events, and resolve puzzling enigmas or problems.\textsuperscript{40} Furthermore, while this possession is particularly important for the initiate, others in attendance reaffirm their faith by witnessing the manifested connection between the human world and the spirit world. By hearing the potential path of the future, those hearing the prophecy are granted the opportunity to make necessary changes to his or her life in order to avoid an ill fate for the community. Again, we see that this process seeks to maintain strong societal relationships in the diaspora communities.

In addition to this aspect of possession, the initiate participates in numerous rituals designed to infuse the soul with \textit{ashé}. For example, “the neck of a white dove or pigeon chosen for the sacrifice is wrung and the head of the initiate is anointed with the blood.”\textsuperscript{41} By having the blood rubbed over the head, the epicenter of religious thought, the initiate is primed to become the embodiment of an \textit{orisha}. During this particular period of time, the initiate’s only sense of comfort comes through possession, while other members of the community dance and chant to the rhythm of a drum to keep the spirit within the profane world. Having originated through the confines of slavery, Candomblé is not simply a “religion” in the common sense of the word, but rather a way to gain honor, self-esteem, and solid grounding in a foreign land. Therefore, it is through this initiation process that one joins the family system of Candombé to live in harmony with

\textsuperscript{40} Murrell, 176.

\textsuperscript{41} Ibid, 178.
fellow initiates. As Joseph M. Murphy states, “to enter the Candomblé is to make Africa present, either by returning to Africa or bringing Africa to Brazil.” Unfortunately, even if an individual is initiated, he is still responsible for doing what he can in the profane world to maintain this balance and harmony.

When one loses sight of the purpose of one’s life, ashé-damaging illnesses are likely to overcome the human body. While this can take the form of pain and suffering characteristic of “illness” in the common sense of the word, our definition here can be expanded to include selfish attitudes, habitual arguments, and a general disturbance of the social structure. As we have been exploring, the likely cause of these illnesses belong to the lack of ashé in the individual’s body. Although this individual was directly infused with ashé from the Orisha during the initiation process, regeneration of this spiritual life-force must now come from other sources. Luckily, all aspects of creation, including plants and animals, contain an abundance of ashé for the individual to use. According to Murrell, “medicine may come in the form of drinking potions, inhaling substances, or rubbing the body with special herbs [...] The [cleansing bath], done along with animal sacrifice, rids the body of negative fluids and energy.” With the assumption that the cause of the illness is a result of the natural and spiritual world, it only seems appropriate to utilize natural and spiritual substances to neutralize the illness and to restore the afflicted individual to a harmonious state with the world.

Although the use of herbal medicines may seem far-fetched in world full of pharmaceutical drugs, we must understand that there is a second (and more important)

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43 Murrell, 181.
function of these medicines. For a group of people who have been separated from the traditional elements of African religion, it becomes extraordinarily important for the participants to grasp a strong understanding of ontology and cosmology. Having a lineage tracing back to a religion based largely on oral tradition, the connection with the divine realm not only keeps tradition alive, but it reforms the ties to the ancestral cults common in African Traditional Religions. Unfortunately, onlookers misinterpret the practices of Candomblé as a form of devil worship when, in fact, their practices resemble elements of mysticism in the world’s largest religions. Continuing along these lines, it becomes clear that the point of Candomblé is to worship nothing other than the Supreme Being, and to build a direct connection to the spirit world where individuals can turn to for answers.

Despite the misunderstandings that arise in the study of Candomblé, one cannot deny that this African Derived Religion provides what all religions do: a sense of hope to promote survival, community, and love for the ones around us. Although the role of spirits and possession challenge the notions set forth by the dominating religions of the world, the individuals involved find great meaning in the practices nevertheless. While scriptures in western traditions seek to validate a particular ontology, the experience and elements within Candomblé do the same things.

From here we turn to the oldest of the African Derived Religions. Vodou, with its combination of music, dance, prayer and ritual, is the most famous and most misunderstood of the religions strengthened in the Diaspora. Unlike our understandings of Santería and Candomblé, one does not become a member of this religion, but rather a servant of the lwa (the equivalent of the Orishas). Using language associated with
servitude, it should come as no surprise that Vodou rituals involve a great deal of action to sustain the connection to the divine. Before focusing on elements of divination, possession, and healing, we must first understand that “the lwa depend on the rites for their sustenance; without these rites, the lwa would wither and die. So the living community hold the responsibility for the definition and maintenance of the divine.”

Through this brief description, we begin to expand the idea of the individual ontological growth explored in Santería and Candomblé to include the well-being and growth of the entire Vodou community. Through the various rites and activities, the spirit is ultimately brought into focus and is open to communication with the human world in an unlimited capacity.

On the surface, the understanding of the spirit world is that of a “cloud” of spirits without specific identities. However, through the rituals and ceremonies performed in Vodou circles, this “spiritual cloud” begins to rain down the many individual identities that originate in the African motherland. According to Murphy, “to understand the spirit of vodou, then, is to see that it is an orientation to a historical memory and to a living reality.” Therefore, by concentrating on the lwa, practitioners bring elements of Africa to Haiti while the spirits form a mental bridge from Haiti back to Africa. For those living in diaspora, the desire to be an active participant in this living history requires a great deal of preparation and the understanding that much is going to change from that point onward. Generally speaking, “through divination or luck or, most usually, critical

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44 Murphy, 37.

misfortune, a lwa reveals itself as the master of one’s head." As we explored in our discussion of Santería and Candomblé, initiation into this religion demands a great deal from those who wish to undergo the process.

Since initiation is intended to help build a bridge from the past to the present, the initiate must be willing to participate in a series of difficult rituals. For those who are mentally capable of the mystical experience, they will ultimately form a direct contact with the divine world and will have a lwa bestowed upon him as a personal protector, combating misfortune and the various illnesses caused by spiritual turbulence. In much the same ways that were mentioned in the other derived religions, any illness is typically attributed to some form of supernatural causation. Therefore, in order for one to be “called” to initiation, a priest will diagnose and prescribe the ceremony as a form of apology for the lwa that the initiate may have unknowingly offended. As we continue to approach the process of initiation, it is important to note that it is “both a death and resurrection. It gives those who undergo it the chance of rising from the profane state to a new life in which they will be dependent upon--but also in the good graces of--the [lwa].” While this seems to match much of what has been discussed in the previous sections, the biggest difference is that the lwa may even suggest that initiation take place through various signs, including dreams. If such an event were to take place, the individual should not consider it his or her choice to answer the call that the lwa has made--it is now an obligation. However the initiation process is approached the initiate becomes the ultimate benefactor.

46 Ibid, 40

47 Alfred Metraux, 

At its core, the initiation process, in addition to all of the mystical elements and ontological understandings that become prominent in the initiate’s life, brings that individual luck. With this understanding of Vodou initiation, it seems natural that the members of the community at large would desire to be a part of the process for themselves. Although initiation is typically brought on by signs of illnesses, a person is allowed to devote a considerable amount of time and money to learn all that needs to be learned to go through the process for themselves. In this situation, however, the initiates become responsible for presenting themselves in ways that appeal to the lwa that they are hoping to be mounted by. In order for this to happen, the prospective initiate must learn the precise dance steps, songs, chants, and mannerisms to attract a member of the spirit world. Once all of the preparations are in order (a process that may take weeks, months, or even years), the “putting-to-bed” ceremony begins. During this rite of passage, the initiates are withdrawn from the community and enter into the liminal phase of the existence. Although much of what occurs during this period of time varies from person to person, one can assume that a greater appreciation for the natural world and the creator of that world begins to amplify. At this moment, the ontological understanding of the reality begins to collapse and rebuild from the ground up. Furthermore, during this period the initiates are ritually cleansed with herbs and naturally derived substances. With our understanding of ashé from Santería and Candomblé, one can see the importance of having “life force” infuse the body through every pore in the skin. It must be noted that “what goes on behind the locked doors [...] is a secret which initiates may

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48 Ibid., 194.

49 Metraux, 195.
not reveal.” However, whatever goes on during this retreat definitely contributes to the new world view and mentality of the initiates that emerge at the end of the ceremony.

While the ceremonies are far more elaborate that has been explained thus far, it is important to note that the end of the initiation process begins with a ritual “baptism” in which the initiate is cleansed again. Until the final rites of passage that all initiates experience, the initiate still remains vulnerable to supernatural dangers but can now use his new found intellect to help him ward of such dangers. Similar to the concepts of Karma and Samsara in Hinduism and Buddhism, this interim period leading up to the final ceremonies allows the individual to learn from past mistakes so that future mistakes can be avoided. Since the individual has been approached by the Iwa at this time, the initiate should have discovered a new knowledge of himself that has strengthened his relationship with the divinities, the community, and with his own soul. According to Murphy, “the Iwa makes the person whole.”

Furthermore, this interim period acts as a test for the initiate to use his new found knowledge in the profane world that he originally came from. After avoiding the ever-present dangers of the world, the “decent of the necklaces” ceremony commences and the initiate gives the “reins of his life” over to the Iwa to control from that point forward.

While the initiation process is extraordinarily beneficial for the initiate in particular, the ritual dancing involved in the communal ceremonies play a significant role to all of those in attendance. As we have seen throughout this discussion, music and dance are seen as ways of attracting the spirits. In Vodou, in particular, the incorporation

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50 Ibid, 199.

51 Murphy, 41.
of ritual music and dance are used to entice the “cloud” of spirits to assume their individual identities. For those involved in the motions of Vodou dance, intercourse between the visible and the invisible world becomes possible through possession trances. When possession occurs, it becomes obvious to all of those present in that the dances become more exaggerated and frenzied. Although possession in Santería and Candomblé last for short periods of time, Vodou has seen possession last for considerable expanses, emphasizing the importance placed on the spirits’ desire to connect the possessed to their African origins. When the possession ends, however, the possessed no longer remembers the experience. In fact, “for a person to admit that he remembers what he has said or done as a god, is to admit that he was not genuinely possessed--it being impossible to be oneself and a lwa at the same time.”

After an individual is officially initiated into the Vodou religion, participation in magic and sorcery becomes a very realistic possibility. Based on common Hollywood depictions, the image that comes to mind when “magic” and “Vodou” are presented together is often quite negative, and for that reason, magic should be seen as having two forms: black and white. This distinction, however, does not discount the popular conception of the Vodou doll. In fact:

The sorcerer, by means of incantation, tries to lure the person he is required to kill into a bucket of water. When he sees the image of his victim reflected in the water, he stabs it. If successful the water immediately reddens. Naturally a person can be killed if certain rites are carried out on objects which have belonged to him. [Therefore, deaths cause by] suicide [are] not regarded as truly voluntary

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52 Metraux, 140.
act[s], but as they consequence of a state of mental alienation brought about by a sorcerer.\textsuperscript{53}

To combat these acts of black magic, divination is seen as a form of white magic used to locate the cause of a problem. Although the belief is that the Lwa will protect the initiate from harm, this does not mean that the practitioners will never encounter the presence of evil in the world ever again. While one person may never attack another, Lwa can still attack Lwa. Therefore, through this new ontological understanding and with the connection to the divine realm of existence, the clearest and most effective way to attack forms of black magic is through the spirit world.

It is through the spirit world that these African Derived Religions maintain their connections to the traditional Yoruba traditions. As we have seen through Santería, Candomblé, and Vodou, the belief in Olodumare is the underlying element that unites these religions in the diaspora. Among the Yoruba people, “the existence of the Supreme Being is taken as a matter of course. It is rare, if not impossible, to come across a Yoruba who will doubt the existence of the Supreme Being or claim to be an atheist.”\textsuperscript{54} As noted before, the traditional religions of Africa cannot be entered into easily since one is typically born with the particular religion in his or her heart. Therefore, wherever a practitioner lands, the religion follows closely. Even though adjustments have to be made for assimilative purposes, the strongest elements persist in every derivation. For example, “the Yoruba hold the belief that as the Supreme Being created heaven and earth and all the inhabitants, so also did He bring into being the divinities and spirits [...] to

\textsuperscript{53} Ibid., 272-73.

\textsuperscript{54} J. Omosade Awolalu, \textit{Yoruba Beliefs and Sacrificial Rites} (London: Longman Group Limited, 1979), 3.
serve His theocratic world.” While these divinities and spirits assume different names and forms in various parts of the world, they nevertheless continue to assist mankind in achieving goals and maintaining a relationship with the Supreme Being.

While it is absurd to assume that specific prayers and rituals have remained unchanged in the diaspora, the importance of music and dancing has grown in the derived religions. For the Yoruba people, song and dance are apart of one’s daily life and easily make their way into religious ritual. With the understanding that the divinities are a central part of the Yoruba life, it comes as no surprise that much of the music is dedicated towards particular divinities. Furthermore, “dancing is no less prominent during worship than songs. The dances take definite forms, depending on the divinities to whom the offerings are made. These ritual dances are not mere emotional responses to the rhythm of music. They are symbolic, often reenactments of something sacred.” Although these elements of music and dance seem very similar to the rituals performed in Santería, Candomblé, and Vodou, we must note the connection the practitioners have with the divinities being honored. For the Yoruba people, the relationship with the divinities is quite strong and the song and dance are used as modes of celebrating their presence. For those in the African Derived Religions, however, the incorporation of song and dance into religious practice is of greater importance. Their purpose in the diaspora is to form a connection with the spirit world. Through the songs and the carefully learned dances, initiates are initially opened to a greater ontological understanding of the world. These

55 Ibid., 20.
56 Awolalu, 107.
elements, in a way, allow the initiate to be spiritually lifted back to the Yorubaland where their ancestors come from.

In much the same way as song and dance, divination plays as great a role in traditional religions as it does in the diaspora. Although initiates in Santería, Candomblé, and Vodou turn to divination to begin the initiation process, the Yoruba see it as always being “associated with a situation which, from the point of view of the client or investigator, calls for a decision upon important plans or vital actions to be taken on important occasions.” With the understanding that community and religion are inseparable, divination is not only intended to help the individual but the larger community as well. Since African religions, whether traditional or derived, place great emphasis on ancestors, the process of divination assures that the history of a lineage is involved in every major decision in a person’s life. For those dispersed as a result of the slave trade, divination has not only been used as a way to reconnect individuals to the heart of the religious tradition, but has reestablished a sense of “family” in spirit if not in form.

Finally, in conjunction with the belief in divinities and the process of divination, sacrifice has played a key role within the Yoruba and derived traditions across the world. Although claims have been made in the studies of Santería, Candomblé, and Vodou as to the purpose of sacrifices, agreeing on a single answer in the traditional sense is far more difficult to determine. According to Awolalu:

the various theories propounded by the different scholars attempt to spell out the purposes of sacrifice, but we do not consider it necessary to regard one theory

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57 Awolalu, 120.
alone as correct; each theory has an element of truth in it. When we examine sacrificial practices among the Yoruba, we discover that we cannot speak of one purpose of sacrifice—the purposes are multiple.\textsuperscript{58}

Looking at the derived religions, however, we can be sure of one thing: if initiates are going to effectively maintain a relationship with the divinities, the divinities must be pleased by means of sacrificial offerings. Beyond the scope of initiation, sacrifices can be made for countless reasons specific to the practitioner. Despite the variations, each act of sacrifice, whether in the Yorubaland or in the diaspora, assures continued support and comfort from the spiritual world in daily life. It reaffirms the notion that there can be a home away from home.

Therefore, although the transatlantic slave trade effectively tore countless Africans out of Africa, elements of Africa can never be fully separated from the African. In countries like Brazil, Cuba, and Haiti, adjustments have been made but the traditional elements live on. As generations pass and the influence of Christianity and Islam spread, the rituals discussed above become of greater importance for the survival of the Yoruba tradition. It is through these rituals that practitioners remain connected with their religious foundations and their historical heritage. To allow oneself to be separated from a religious and familial heritage, both physically and spiritually, is to lose a sense of home; to be a nomad in the world forever. Turning our attention away from the derived religions of the Caribbean, we will now focus on an aspect ritual in the most direct way that this work can provide—the \textit{Ashura} ritual performed by Shia Muslims.

\textsuperscript{58} Awolalu, 138.
CHAPTER THREE
TEARS ON THE SANDS OF KARBALA: RITUAL IN SHI’A ISLAM

December 6, 2011. In a world away, bombs exploded in the city of Kabul killing numerous Shi’as as they carried out the rituals of the Tenth of Muharram, Ashura. Moments earlier, the faithful walked and beat their chests in unison as they remembered the story and courage of Imam Hussein, whose story centers nearly two thousand miles to the west in the sacred city of Karbala. With banners billowing high and proud in the air, mourners aligned their hearts with those who suffered until they too were presented with a mirror of the past. Images of men, women, and children strewn on the streets while survivors covered in ash and blood beholding the atrocity were displayed for the world to see. The shock of the event would send screams and tears across the world to fellow Shi’a brothers and sisters as they participated in the rituals in their own varied ways. The popular message saying “every day is Ashura and every place is Karbala,” would take on deeper meaning for those with the story of Imam Hussein engraved on their heart. Meanwhile, some seven thousand miles to the west, numerous American Shias made their way towards Lilburn, Georgia to conclude the Muharram ceremonies in their own sacred space: Dar-e-Abbas.

In the months leading up to the ten days of Muharram, I spent countless hours looking through various books and watching numerous documentaries to give myself as much background as possible before I observed the rituals and sermons conducted in Urdu, for myself. On the evening of December 6, 2011, I set out towards Dar-e-Abbas
with a Shia companion who continued to fill in the gaps of my understanding along the
way. In my mind, I had already pictured the mosque with its domed roof, ornate design,
and an enormous crowd. However, I would have missed it entirely had my companion
not been there to guide me. In complete contrast to the structure I had imagined, I parked
in front of a two story house with white paneling and green shutters. Nothing set this
location apart from the surrounding area except for the magnificent *alam*\(^{59}\) stretching
towards the deep evening sky. Perched on top of the flagpole rests the *panja*, an open
palmed hand calling pilgrims forward towards the heart of the *ahl al-bayt*—the people of
the house. With each step towards the *alam*, voices die down and ultimately silence as
the devout prostrate before Allah. Despite the dropping temperatures, bare feet, hands,
and lips press against the cold marble as individuals submit to a higher being and
transcend the limits of time and space through prayer. While the elderly place their hands
to their hearts, the youth wrap their arms around the base of the *alam* in utmost awe. In
place of the usual green flag seen throughout the year, a black flag commemorating the
events of Karbala hangs, serving as a reminder of the historical sacrifice that was made.
However, it is often argued that symbols like the *alam* and prostration to it should be
considered forms of idol worship and are, therefore, not permissible in Islam. For those
who prostrate before the *alam*, the intention is not to worship or venerate members of the
*ahl al-bayt*, but to pay their respects to the Prophet’s family. By doing so, the participant
feels a unique connection to the Prophet and a deeper connection to Allah. Even as an
observer it is evident that each person who approaches the *alam* enters a liminal space,
apart from our world, where time seems to stand still.

\(^{59}\) Lit: Flag (also “sign” or “symbol")
As I step back from the alam, I hear quiet conversations once more mixed with the occasional “as-salaam alaykum” as the men make their way inside the mosque. Upon entering the building, one cannot help but notice the throne-like seat situated in the south-west corner of the room. Draped over the seat is a black velvet cloth with an Arabic-script lion embroidered in gold thread representing Imam Ali, the first Imam and fourth Rightly Guided Caliph of Islam. Having arrived early, my companion and I seated ourselves on the floor very near to where the mullah\textsuperscript{60} would soon be sitting. Within ten minutes the service began and memories and emotions of Karbala slowly slid down the faces of everyone present. In the days leading up to the ninth of Muharram, the stories of ‘Ali Akbar and Hazrat ‘Abbas are recounted with swelling emotion until these stories culminate with a retelling of the story of ‘Ali Asghar. Once everyone had settled in, the first sermon began:

...Zainab said, “Brother Hussein, when you called for a companion to help you, ‘Ali Asghar fell from his cradle.” Immediately, Hussein knew what his son was trying to say. He approached his wife, where his son was seated in her lap crying. Gently, Hussein took his son in his arms and whispered softly in his ears. Upon hearing the comforting words of his father, Ali Asghar was eased to silence—the young child looked into his father’s face and smiled.

“I am taking ‘Ali Asghar, my little Mujahed,\textsuperscript{61} to the battlefield so that I may get him some water,” said Hussein. The baby’s clothes were changed and he accompanied his father to the hot battlefields of Karbala. From a distance,

\textsuperscript{60} A scholar in Islamic theology

\textsuperscript{61} Lit: someone striving on the path of Islam
Yazid and his men could see the approaching Hussein with what they assumed was a Quran in his hands. With this understanding they scoffed at the sight and thought of Hussein using a holy book as protection. When he was in range, the soldiers noticed that Hussein was not holding the Quran, but his youngest child.

Hoping these men would see reason, Hussein spoke: “Soldiers, you feel that I have offended you, but what has this innocent child done to you? His mother’s milk has dried and he has not had water to drink for many days. He dies of thirst. For this child, see reason and provide him with water.” Yazid’s soldiers stood firm. Hussein placed his son on the sands of Karbala and begged the soldiers to personally provide the water for his son if they had the slightest thought that Hussein would take the water for himself. Quietly, ‘Ali Asghar turned his head to stare at Yazid’s army, but no water came for the young child. Hussein whispered to his son, “Asghar, my dear, show them how thirsty you are.” ‘Ali Asghar smiled lovingly, separated his lips and showed the soldiers his dry tongue as he moved it over his lips. The ultimate weapon had been drawn.

Moved by the compassion that dwelled deep in their hearts, members of Yazid’s army began to soften their stern faces and many began to weep for the innocent child laying on the scorching sands. Fear of Yazid held the men in their spots and none dared come forward with water. The leader of the soldiers, ‘Umar Sa’ad, could see that this child was emerging as the victor and so he turned to his most skilled archer and said, “Silence Hussein.” Following orders, the archer lifted his bow and aimed a single arrow at the child. Once released, the arrow tore through the hot desert air with a terrible hissing sound. The smile never faded
from ‘Ali Asghar’s face. The small child arched his neck and the hissing sound of the arrow was silenced. Imam Hussein turned his gaze from Yazid’s army to the child lying in his arms. The archer’s arrow was lodged in his son’s neck but the sweet smile did not fade. After several moments, Imam Hussein set out to do the most difficult thing in his life. He would now have to tell his wife, Bibi Rubaab, that her precious child had been martyred on the plains of Karbala.

With each passing minute, those around me took deeper breaths as the emotions swelled and tears poured from their eyes. The man seated to my right wept silently, occasionally whispering *bismillah*, while my companion seated to my left cried with enormous strength. As I peered around the room, I noticed that everyone was experiencing something that I did not understand at the time. For someone seated “on the outside” of it all, I could not quite grasp how people over a thousand years removed from the situation could find the emotion to weep for Imam Hussein. Looking at the faces around me, I noticed that not one person reached out to console the person seated next to him. I also realized that I was the only person who was even making the effort to look around the room. This was not a competition of who could outcry the other, this was a time for reflection. I returned my attention to the front of the room, and the mullah continued his sermon with powerful emotion growing in his voice.

With the greatest of ease, Hussein pulled the arrow out of his son’s neck and a voice called: “Do not let his blood touch the ground, for crops will cease to grow from this earth.” Hussein looked to the sky and heard: “Do not let the blood spill towards the sky or rain will never saturate this earth.” Without any options left, the heart broken Hussein wiped ‘Ali Asghar’s blood on his face and moved
towards his tents. Looking ahead, Hussein saw his wife with arms outstretched for her child. Hussein thought, “How can I face my wife with our lifeless child in my hands? How can I tell her that her youngest child has been martyred without water? How?” With a heavy heart, he approached his wife but turned away. Seven times he attempted to approach his wife, uttering the words, “Surely we belong to God, and to Him shall we return,” as tears slipped down his cheeks.

Hussein reluctantly faced his wife and told her that her little soldier had died for the sake of Allah. Devastated, she took her son in her arms and let emotion overwhelm her. A stream of tears fell from the loving mother’s eyes as the short time spent with her son played through her mind, highlighting every subtle smile and the slightest sounds that ‘Ali Asghar had made in his sleep. Together, Hussein and his wife buried their son in a small grave and marked it with their tears.

In silence, each person rose to face the north-east corner of the room as the young *momin* hoisted a large coffin on their shoulders in memoriam of the fallen infant martyr. The anguish on the faces surrounding me grew more intense as the coffin made its circuit around the room and each person pressed the “blood” stained *chador* to his eyes to dry his tears. As the individuals made contact with the coffin, they began to form parallel lines facing one another, the younger men removing their shirts while the older men remained fully clothed. Many of the bare chests in front of me were deeply bruised from

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Lit: a person of faith; a believer

A cloth or sheet
the previous eight nights of *matam*,⁶⁴ ritual chest beating, but were ready for a ninth consecutive night. Some bore raw patches of skin just minutes away from bleeding. To the outsider, it is difficult to watch and understand *matam* as a form of grieving, but to the dedicated practitioner, the rhythmic hand-to-chest motion is a physical form of *dhikr*, or the remembrance of Allah.

Face-to-face, the young listen as the older generation recites melodic eulogies into the microphone. As though they were a single body, the men and young boys lift their right hands to their chest, and then the left. Back and forth they continue as the collective motion generates a roaring but gentle, unified clap, clap, clap. As the eulogy progresses, the men begin to shout in one voice: “Ya Hussein!” The claps grow louder and louder. The floor beneath my feet begins to shudder from the power issuing from hands to chests. To myself, I think about the pain that each of these men must be feeling. However, looking at the faces in all directions, I see that the probable pain does not compare to what is going on beneath the surface. No person, aside from myself, is looking at any other person in the room; all eyes are fixed towards the ceiling. Something truly transcendent was happening, and I was unable to experience it in the slightest capacity. As hand hit chest, the eyes of my companion remained unflinching. Within minutes, sweat and blood began to flow from many of the participants in the room, yet the intense demeanor of their faces only increased. One eulogy followed by many others extended the *matam* period for thirty minutes. When this outward expression of mourning came to an end, everyone made his or her way outside for some fresh air and a late dinner.

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⁶⁴ *Lit: action out of grief*
After I joined my companion in the men’s dining tent, he asked how I felt about what I had just seen. For someone who had never witnessed anything of this nature before, I had nothing to say in the moment. The clapping still rang in my ears through dinner as the young men discussed travel plans to the next mosque for another round of *matam*. I had been there for nearly three hours, and I was already exhausted from what I had just seen and was unsure if I could handle another series of eulogies and *matam*. For whatever reason, I was beginning to feel something that I was unsure was appropriate for an “outsider” to feel. But before I knew it, we were in a car heading for the Jafaari Center, some twenty minutes away.

I was packed in the backseat with my companion and two other individuals, rain began to pelt the windows as we headed towards our destination. To break the silence, my companions played recordings of melodic recitations through the speakers in an attempt to keep the mood of Muharram strong and to make any space a sacred space. I was asked once more how my experience had been thus far, to which I responded in much the same way as I had before: “It’s a lot to process.” Although I made it sound as though the images were difficult to think about, the emotion was the biggest hurdle. Why had I felt far more than shock at what I had seen not too long ago? Why, in fact, was I becoming more drawn to the prospect of feeling it again in the near future? No amount of preparation could have prepared me for leaving my comfortable position as a “fly on the wall” observer to becoming a “participant” in the loosest sense of the word. Locked in contemplation, I never noticed the outside world sliding past as I stared out of the rain-streaked window. The world even seemed to be weeping for the martyrdom of the Prophet Muhammad’s beloved family. Within minutes, the doors opened, and we
stepped out on to the wet ground and walked towards a larger, beautifully decorated mosque constructed by Gujarati Shi’as.

Upon entering this new setting, I noticed countless faces that I had seen not too long ago at Dar-e-Abbas in a sea of new men who were already in line for *matam* to begin. While my companion joined a line deep in the center of the room, I remained on the side hoping to regain my footing as a researcher in the situation. While everybody remained fully clothed, the familiar claps of hands to chests began to fill the room with even greater intensity than the first time. Although the recitations were difficult to hear with the echo bouncing from wall to wall, I began hearing words that were no longer foreign to me. These Shi’as were from the same Indian state of Gujarat where my family once called home--I knew the language! Even though there were slight dialectical changes in pronunciation, my position as an “outsider” no longer seemed to matter as I became more drawn into the emotion of all that was going on. To my great surprise, tears began to flood my eyes, and my right hand had made its way towards my heart, gently tapping in unison with those around me. I was becoming more involved in a ritual that did not belong to me, and I could not explain why it was happening. Entranced by the smell of incense and the rhythmic sounds around me, I was unaware that another hour passed by in pure devotion while the wider community slept through the night. After concluding the second round of *matam*, we made our way outdoors and heard news that emphasized the importance of this day. A bombing had occurred in Kabul killing numerous Shi’as during the Muharram rituals driving the point home that “every day is *Ashura* and every place is Karbala.” Rather than seeing looks of dismay around me, the news seemed to swell their hearts to a new level. With this new information in mind, we
set out once again towards another location to continue the rituals into the deeper hours of the night.

Having gone from one mosque to another, I assumed this next trip would take us to another house of worship. Instead, it took us to a simple home of one of the devoted members of Dar-e-Abbas. Much like every other location we had been that evening, the mood was somber and the lights were dimmed. We made our way into the room and settled ourselves near the mullah who we had seen hours earlier at the first location. Once everyone had found a place to sit, a young boy began with a short Qur’anic recitation and was greeted with calls of support and praise from the surrounding crowd. Immediately afterwards, the lights were turned off except for the faint glow from a small house shrine. The mullah cleared his voice and began his second sermon recounting the martyrdom of Hazrat ‘Abbas.

Tonight is a night never to be forgotten. Tonight is the last night that sweet little Sakina spent with her Uncle ‘Abbas and her Father Hussein. But we must ask ourselves, “Who is Hazrat ‘Abbas?” He was like his father, our beloved Imam ‘Ali. He was a true warrior: brave, strong, wise, loving, and incredibly faithful. With strength and obedience, he followed the example of our beloved Imam Hussein and treated him as his master. He was the shadow of Imam Hussein. His master, Hussein, would tell him, “Brother, keep your sword in its place. We have come to save Islam and to teach the truth with our character, not our weapons.” Imagine! A warrior like ‘Abbas asked to show patience in the face of Yazid’s army. We know, on the battlefield of Karbala, the martyred
entered ‘Abbas’ tent one after another and he still exhibited the patience that Imam Hussein asked for.

Although he agreed to remain where he was, ‘Abbas could not deny the itch to stand up and protect Islam and contemplated asking Imam Hussein for permission to fight. Before he could approach the Imam’s tent, little Sakina stood at ‘Abbas’ side and with a parched tongue, she said in a cracking voice, “Dear uncle, my mouth is very dry!” The warrior who had been ready to yield his sword just moments ago had been weakened by the words of his beloved niece. With love sparkling in his eyes, he bent down to pick up Sakina and wrap her in his embrace. Together, they set out for Hussein’s tent.

Just as she had done with ‘Abbas, Sakina succeeded in melting the heart of her father, Imam Hussein. “‘Abbas, how can I deny you permission now? Go, brother. You have my permission to go and fill Sakina’s mashk with water.”

Revitalized, ‘Abbas stood up with his hand on the hilt of his sword, ready to fight Yazid’s army if they dared approach him. Before he left, however, Hussein made one further request: “Leave your sword with me, ‘Abbas. Islam is a faith of peace and it is not your battle to fight. Please ‘Abbas, just bring water back for my daughter.” With the greatest respect, ‘Abbas complied with Hussein’s request and handed over his sword. Once more he bent down and looked his niece in the eyes and said, “Dearest Sakina, pray for me. Pray that I can get water for you.” With a smile on her face, Sakina replied simply: “Of course, uncle.” With that image of his niece in his mind, ‘Abbas set out for the battlefield with the alam of

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65 Of Hindu-Urdu origin; a traditional water carrying bag.
Hussein’s army in one hand and a spear and Sakina’s mashk in the other. He did not mean to fight, but he was entitled to protect himself if it became necessary.

The Furaat river was in sight and ‘Abbas wanted nothing more than to keep his promise to little Sakina. Yazid’s soldiers saw ‘Abbas coming from a distance. They knew ‘Abbas’ reputation as a warrior and hesitated before approaching him with his singular spear. Those who dared to test ‘Abbas’ skills were killed on the spot while he succeeded in reaching the river to fill Sakina’s mashk. Knowing his horse was parched, ‘Abbas offered him some water as well but the horse refused. It seemed as though the horse were saying “I will not drink until Sakina has had her water first.” Having filled Sakina’s mashk, ‘Abbas mounted his horse and set back towards camp. Surrounded on all sides, ‘Abbas could see Yazid’s army with arrows ready to be released.

With the most honorable courage imaginable, he took one step forward and the arrows were released from all directions. He was hit and began to bleed. A coward from Yazid’s army, seeing that ‘Abbas was injured, approached from behind and struck him in the shoulder with a sword. Gripping the mashk with his teeth, his arm and spear left his body and fell to the scorching ground. Just then, another man from Yazid’s army approached and struck his sword into ‘Abbas’ other shoulder. The alam and his other arm left his body and fell to the scorching ground. Imagine! Facing Yazid’s army, the epitome of evil in our world, with no arms and Sakina’s mashk between his teeth! ‘Abbas thought to himself, “this water must reach Sakina! An uncle can never break a promise to his beloved niece.” Just then, another arrow tore through the dry air and impaled the water-
filled *mashk*. The water that had been meant for the thirsty little Sakina began to pour on the plains of Karbala as the Yazidi army laughed and ‘Abbas’ horse cried out as though struck by an arrow himself.

As ‘Abbas cried out, his voiced carried on the light wind to the camp of Hussein. Upon hearing the undeniable voice of ‘Abbas, Hussein began to weep thinking “My back is gone! My ultimate support has been cut down!” Without a second thought, he rushed to the battlefield to find his dear brother lying helpless on the ground. The sand had hungered for ‘Abbas’ blood and had already soaked up all that it could be the time Hussein arrived. Kneeling on the ground, Hussein gently lifted his brother torso and placed ‘Abbas’ head into his lap. Softly, he began to speak: “Dear brother, ‘Abbas? Are you leaving me too?” After a brief moment of silence, he continued saying, “What am I to do without you, my strongest supporter, my standard bearer? With you gone, what hope is there left for me? Dear brother, tell me, is there anything that I can do for you?

With blood covering his eyes, ‘Abbas replied simply: “Dear Master, yours was the first face that I saw when I came into this world. I would like nothing more than to have your face be the last thing that I see when I leave this world.” With the softest of touches, Hussein gently wiped the blood from ‘Abbas’ face. By the grace of Allah, ‘Abbas stared into the face of his Master Hussein. Looking into the eyes of his fading brother, Hussein spoke once more: “‘Abbas, dear brother, I have one wish that I would like to make. All of our lives you have called me Master. Once, ‘Abbas, just this one time, please call me ‘brother’.” Just then, tears began to roll down ‘Abbas’ cheeks as he said, “Hussein, my
dearest brother, do not take my body back to the camp. I can’t bear to have Sakina see me after I have failed her. I wasn’t able to fulfill my niece’s simple request. I wasn’t able to bring her water.” With a deep breath in, ‘Abbas died in the lap of his brother Hussein. Overcome with emotion, Hussein gently placed the body on the ground and picked up the alam and mashk and set back towards camp.

From the distance, Sakina could see the magnificent alam stretching towards the sky. She called out to the children of the camp: “Come quickly! My dear, beloved uncle has returned with the water just as he promised!” The children rushed forward to stand beside Sakina, all with smiles stretched across their faces. As the alam came closer and closer, the smiles on the children’s faces began to fade once they realized that it was Hussein and not ‘Abbas who was coming forward. Seeing Hussein approaching, Bibi Zainab walked forward with a look of concern on her face. Hussein responded simply: “The alam has returned, but the alamdari has not. Surely we belong to God, and to Him shall we return.”

Through the documentaries that I had seen and the stories I had read, I had found the relationship between Hazrat ‘Abbas and Bibi Sakina was one of the most touching. Therefore, it came as no surprise that the emotion around me brought tears to my eyes for a second time that evening. In my stupor that night, I could no longer distinguish between true emotions and sleep deprivation and decided to justify my tears as a result of the latter. My plan was to observe religious practices that night, not to have religious

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66 Lit: The standard bearer
practices absorb me. In my confusion, I stepped aside as the men formed lines for a third round of *matam* that evening. With a far more intimate group of individuals, this round did not have the same earth-shaking effect as the previous two. Although much of what was said was beyond my grasp, hearing the name “Sakina” and “paani” (the Urdu and Gujarati word for water) helped to develop a level of understanding. Again, my right hand reached my heart and began tapping lightly in unison with the others in front of me. No one seemed to notice what I was doing, and, evidently, I was the only person who seemed to see my involvement as an oddity. Another hour seemed to be lost to the night as the mourning continued. After leaving the house sermon, we packed ourselves inside of a car and made our way back to Dar-e-Abbas for one last *matam* for Hazrat ‘Abbas.

It seemed strange to walk into an empty room for the first time in hours that evening. It was now four o’clock in the morning and members from Dar-e-Abbas and the Jafaari Center were slowly making their way into the room. Rather than forming lines, however, they began to form a large circle around the room in what was later described to me as a Punjabi style of *matam*. When the melodic eulogies began, the circle moved in a counter-clockwise direction in time with the thuds of hands hitting chests. From my position on the periphery of the circle, I could see the devotion on each face as they passed by me. No one cared that I was looking. No one was looking at me. This was not a time to shine or outshine brethren. This was a time to focus one’s attention on emotions and on the beneficent Lord. My own emotion was still strong, and tears began to slide down my face while I watched each person looking upwards. For the first time that evening, I felt as though the atmosphere of community was too strong for me to be a part
of. I slipped out into the cold air while the *momin* continued with their expression of mourning.

I found myself alone in the presence of the *alam*. Hours before, this location had been a sign of welcome for each person that approached. Now, in the stillness of the night, it seemed to be the only thing that could bring unrestrained, unquestioned tears to my eyes. In its presence, I no longer felt like I needed to equate my tears with the martyrs of Karbala. My tears had been for my grandfather who died a mere year before my attendance at Dar-e-Abbas. That is what this experience had tapped into, and I could not hold it back. I knelt where many others had prostrated earlier and looked upward towards a deep, misty sky. This feeling had propelled me into a sacred space in the truest form. Lost in this world, I was oblivious to my companion’s father approaching me from the side. Knowing that I was new to the whole experience of Muharram, he asked how I was feeling and I spoke the truth. He said to me, “You understand more than you think you do. I saw you doing *matam* earlier, and I’ve seen you crying, and the reason you do it is because you’ve struggled. That’s what the stories of ‘Ali Asghar, Hazrat ‘Abbas, and Imam Hussein are all about. You don’t need to know their stories to know what struggling feels like. Those stories are meant to remind us, as human beings, that we are not alone. Salman was taught what these stories meant, you weren’t. The fact that you’re crying with people who were born into this religion shows that you’re a Muslim at heart. We respect that here.” For a moment, I allowed myself to acknowledge my feeling of belonging. Hours upon hours of watching others express love and devotion had culminated in the deepest emotions I had ever felt. This was the end of the ninth of Muharram.
On the Tenth of Muharram, the day of *Ashura*, I awoke on the carpeted floors of Dar-e-Abbas with my companion resting on my left and a group of elderly men huddled together in conversation on my right. As the rest of the men were shaken from their slumber, others sipped on *chai* and prepared for morning prayers. Still very much overwhelmed by the amount of devotion I had been a part of already, I took this time to separate myself from the group entirely and walk down the sidewalk of Lawrenceville Highway. With each step away from the mosque, the sacred space of the past twelve hours opened up to the profane world in which people made their way to their daily jobs. The thought that both of these worlds could coexist seemed foreign to me in that particular moment. After ten short minutes, I made my way back to see numerous men and women in black huddled together in their respective groups facing the direction in which all prayers had taken place.

The rain intensified with each passing minute, and from my vantage point, I saw the men and women stretch their hands outward as if holding something precious and taking seven gentle steps forward. As tears poured from their eyes, they each took seven steps back. The sound of the passing traffic seemed to sigh with sorrow as the reenactment of Imam Hussein’s struggle with Ali Asghar’s death took place. Behind the women, the *alam* caressed the passing wind, desperately attempting to take the seven steps forward and backwards with the devoted *momin*. Heavy at heart, the men and women retired to their respective locations for the sermon of the beloved Imam Hussein.

With the number of devotees swelling as people arrived from various states, I took my seat towards the back of the mosque as the mullah found his way to the front and began what would culminate the sermons associated with the tragedy of Karbala:
Dear brothers, today is the day of Ashura. This is the day when seventy two of the bravest and most faithful men were martyred in the name of true Islam. Today is the day of the greatest sacrifice and the day that our glorious faith was saved from destruction. Surely the Prophet Muhammad joins us in our mourning. Today Bibi Fatima leaves her seat in heaven to cry with us for the loss of many brave souls. For her dearest son, she would have us bid farewell once again to our beloved Imam Hussein, may peace and blessings be upon them all. Today is the day that Ashura came to the bloodied land of Karbala.

During Fajr Namaaz, the dawning prayer, the trumpets from Yazid’s army could be heard in the distance. The battle was ready to begin. One-by-one the brave companions of Imam Hussein stepped onto the battlefield prepared to defend the true essence of Islam. Hours upon hours had passed and slowly each of the martyred soldiers were carried back in to the camp until Imam Hussein was the only one left. His limbs ached, his mouth was dry, his heart was broken, but he did not give up. Our beloved Imam pushed on. Patience was his prayer.

Imam Hussein had lost his youngest son and countless companions in one short day. Knowing that his life was meant for martyrdom, he approached the women of the camp. Tears began to flow from their eyes as they said their final farewell to their dear Hussein. As his final wish, he hoped to see his ailing son to tell him of his decision to step back onto the battlefield. His son responded, “Father, why must you go? What has happened to everyone else?” With a heavy heart, Imam Hussein recounted the deaths of each beloved member on the battlefield. Tears flowed from their eyes and Hussein’s weakened son asked for
his sword and permission to join the fight. “No, my son, you are too sick for this struggle. Your struggle is still to come. After my death, hardships and sufferings will continue but you must stay on the true path of Islam. Never be afraid to fight for truth. Patience has been my friend and it will be yours if you ask for it. Allah remains with those who keep patience in their hearts.” After this, he turned his attention to his sister, Bibi Zainab saying “Sweet sister, those who remain are under your charge. Please, take care of my son. He is the future of the Imamate. Lastly, look after my dear Sakina. She will cry so much when she learns of my death.” As he spoke about his darling Sakina, tears began to stream from his eyes.

After delivering his final words to the caravan, Imam Hussein walked to his horse and struggled to mount it. He had always been the one to assist his companions when they struggled, but now he was alone with no one to help him. Seeing his struggle, Bibi Zainab offered her assistance as Hussein mounted his horse, Zuljana. The horse took a few uneven steps in pure exhaustion. Hussein spoke: “My faithful horse, I know you are tired. You have helped me carry the bodies of the martyred since dawn, but I ask you one last time: please carry me to the battlefield. I will not ask another favor of you again, dear Zuljana.” The horse did not move. Instead, he knelt his head and looked towards his leg where Sakina had held on. Sakina cried out: “Zuljana, please do not take my father away. I know you will not bring him back if you take him now. Every person who has left camp has not come back. I will not be able to live without my father. Please, Zuljana, please!” Hearing these words, Hussein got off of his horse and
let Sakina speak: “Father, how will I ever sleep when your chest has been my bed every night? Please, let me lie down on your chest one more time.” With these words, Hussein lay down on the sands of Karbala and allowed his daughter to rest on him one last time.

With a final hug, Hussein mounted his horse again and set off towards battle. Although he was tired, parched, and heartbroken, he remained strong in the face of Yazid’s army. Strengthened by the courage of his former comrades, Hussein killed the greatest warriors of the opposing forces one-by-one. After pushing the enemy further and further back, Hussein reached the river where ‘Abbas lay. At that moment, the angel Gabriel appeared and spoke to Hussein saying: “Brave Hussein, Allah is pleased with your determination to promote the true path of Islam. The time has come for you to put your sword down. Your patience has brought you very far and you have done enough. We welcome you with open arms, dear Hussein.” With a clear sign from Allah, Hussein lowered his sword. Seeing this, the enemies surrounded our beloved Imam, mounted steadily on his horse. Arrows, swords, and stones met Hussein’s body a thousand times over. The blood of our Imam flooded the sands of Karbala and his body fell to the earth. Falling on the arrows, Hussein’s body never touched the ground.

Back at camp, the women waited in silence for news of our beloved Imam. Suddenly, the earth trembled and darkness stretched across the sky. Every person in the camp knew this to be a sign from Allah that the worst had happened. Bibi Zainab looked into the distance and saw her brother’s head on a spear coming towards her. Moments later, the entire caravan was captured and the trail of tears
continues. For now, fellow *momin*, we mourn the loss of the bravest soldier.

Surely we come from God, and to Him shall we return. Ya Hussein! Ya Hussein!

Ya Hussein!

Overwhelmed by the emotion in the room once more, I stepped out of the room while the largest round of *matam* began. After arranging themselves in tight lines, men recited emotional eulogies accompanied by the powerful clap of the hand to chest motion. Outdoors, the sound seemed to intensify as it was joined by those who could not fit inside. Late arrivals immediately joined the lines, some with small blades in hand to take their devotion to a deeper level. Clapping hands to chest in unison, the devotees silenced the world of business as usual to encapsulate their mourning for the *ahl al-bayt* in an entirely new dimension. It was no longer possible to understand that I had been in familiar territory this entire time, forty-five minutes from home. Clap after clap, I was pulled away from the comforts of Georgia and taken to what I can only imagine to be a small-scale form of the acts of devotion in Karachi, Pakistan.

Moments later, with the sound of clapping growing louder, the devotees made their way outside with an ornately decorated coffin in the lead. Draped in black velvet, flecked with spots of silver embroidery, and covered in red and white flowers, the coffin was carried around those standing outside waiting to release the emotion within at the sight of their beloved Imam Hussein. As the coffin passed in my direction, those around me rushed forward hoping to place their hands on the structure representing the power of good over evil. After making the complete circuit around the men, women, and children, the coffin bearers made their way back inside while many of the men outside removed their shirts in the steady rain. The clanking sound of metal joined the hush of the rain,
and I soon saw that many sets of *zanjeer* where being pulled from boxes and bags in every direction. Attached to a small handle were five twelve-inch chains with eight-inch blades connected at the end. Looking at the backs of the men in the center of what had now become a circle of mourners, I noticed a large number of deep scars from what must have been years of intense devotion using the *zanjeer*. Although I had spent much time at home preparing for what I was about to see, knowing that the moment was near drove all preparations out of my mind entirely.

Standing in the rain, I joined my companion who had decided to be an onlooker this year at the request of his parents. Just two days ago I had done my part by donating blood to the American Red Cross. Today, however, I was no longer sure what I should expect finally seeing this form of *matam* in person. While the other men prepared themselves, an older gentleman stood in the center of the circle shouting, “Ya Hussein,” while forcefully delivering a quick blow to the top of his head with a single blade. After three or four hits, blood began to flow down his face and soak his hair. Slowly the trails of red ran down his back and spread quickly once it hit the top of his white pants. Despite what this man had just done, a look of pain did not cross his face as water and bandages were applied to the wound by doctors in the crowd. Shortly thereafter, three younger men participated in the same action for the first time in their lives. Only allowed to take one blow to the head, these young *momin* were quickly attended to and were greeted with hugs of love and affection from their fathers who had just witnessed their sons’ pure devotion to the life and legacy of Imam Hussein.

After this short round of *matam* had finished, larger groups stepped into the center of the circle to participate using *zanjeer*. While the twenty men spaced themselves within
the circle, those forming the border continued to do *matam* with their hands in unison with the chants for their beloved Imam. After a moment of silence, like the calm before the storm, a voice within the circle shouted “Ya Hussein” once more and streaks of silver cut through the air. In various rhythms, the blades grazed each person’s back leaving thin lines prepared to cry red tears in the name of Imam Hussein and the *ahl al-bayt*. Another moment of silence was followed once more by the blades reaching for the backs of the men. What was once scarred brown skin was now painted with blood. As the rain continued to pour, water began to mix with blood forming puddles of red as if to give all those present a small glimpse at the devastating scene of Karbala. Another round started, this time with onlookers stepping in to stop those who had clearly reached a dangerous limit. Those who felt as though they had not done enough for the cause swung their blades in large circles to clear space so they could continue with their act of devotion.

With bated breath, I watched as those in the circle were separated from their *zanjeer*, indicating that the action had come to a heart-racing end. Standing firm in my location, I watched as the rest of the circle closed in forming a condensed crowd ready for the final chants of devotion. Led by the gentleman who took the first blade to the head, he began by saying “Hai Hai Zainab” in a gentle, even tone. Those surrounding him, slowly doing *matam* with their hands, responded “Hai Hai Shaam.” The repetition continued, increasing in speed and causing the thunderous sound of *matam* to intensify each time. After the name and actions of Bibi Zainab had been honored, the name of ‘Abbas was given equal respect. The leader of the group began by saying “Ya ‘Abbas” in his gentle, even tone again and was met by an equally even response of “Ya ‘Abbas.” As expected, the speed increased as well as the intensity of the *matam*. However, at the
height of this *matam*, the name of “Hussein” was included and kept the speed steady for a matter of seconds, capable of drawing one in to make it feel like minutes. Although my hand did not meet my chest this time, my heart pounded as though it were calling for me to participate.

Suddenly everything had come to an end. All the men were now replacing their shirts and those who had cut their backs were having their wounds treated. The sacred space that had consumed the outdoors had retracted without notice, and Lawrenceville Highway became all too noisy in mere seconds. Everyone around me seemed to regain a demeanor that I had not seen since arriving at Dar-e-Abbas nearly twenty hours ago. In a strange turn of events, I was now the one whose mind was still struggling to let go of the past and walk into the future that was right before me. While everyone spoke on various subjects during dinner, silence had overcome me, only allowing me to speak when spoken to. After shaking the hands of those I had met and receiving a loving hug from my companion’s father I made my way, with my companion, back to Athens, Georgia where things remained unchanged in form. It was not until I had slept peacefully in my own bed that I was able to see that something in the world had changed as a result of my participation in the *Ashura* rituals. By being in the company of those mourning for their losses and washing away the problems of the past year, I was able to fully mourn for the loss of my grandfather and awake on December 8, 2011 with clearer eyes.

With this case study in mind, we can see that these rituals form bridges between individuals and foreign lands. In conjunction with Thomas Tweed’s definition of religion that “religions are confluences of organic-cultural flows that intensify joy and confront suffering by drawing on human and superhuman forces to make homes and cross
boundaries,” the Ashura rituals act in a similar manner. As we previously stated, American Shias from various parts of the East coast participated in the event held in Lilburn, Georgia. Although these individuals did not know many of those who attended Dar-e-Abbas, the ritual itself established a connection that helped to bridge the gap. From my perspective as an “outsider,” the wall of religious ritual kept me at a distance until waves of emotion were able to carry me over that wall and unite me with these individuals on a different level. What ritual does, in this case, is provide a communal space in which various parts come together to make a whole. On the surface, the grieving that takes place is for the beloved Imam Hussein and the martyrs of Karbala, but each individual walks a different path before he or she is able to release that emotion. Therefore, the experience is unique for each individual and will change each time that the individual enters into the liminal space of the ritual. With each interaction in one’s day-to-day activity, small changes begin to shape the views and thoughts of each person and once Muharram approaches, the individual enters the rituals with something new that is ready to be examined. While the symbols and actions may remain unchanged over the years, the individual approaches these symbols and carries out these actions in a way that makes sense in that particular time and place.

CHAPTER FOUR

TURNING TOWARDS HOME

As I conclude this study, I find myself returning to the idea and power of the word “home.” The comfort that this particular idea provides has been essential in our understanding of ritual in the diaspora. For those who were forcefully pulled from the West African coast, the various initiation practices, discussed earlier, form a community and establish a sense of comfort for those involved. Despite the fact that the participants are no longer apart of Africa, their rituals have given each person a place of solace in a world of chaos. Keeping this in mind, my study of African Derived Religions takes on deeper meaning when the personal aspect of ritual is truly considered. Although I cannot report on the atmosphere of initiation rituals from any observational stand point, it can likely be assumed that each individual involved in the ritual experiences something unique. Based on the three areas of interest—Cuba, Brazil, and Haiti—there is a clear emphasis on a return to tradition which, for those who undergo the initiation process, brings that person “home.” No matter which aspects of the traditional religion are tapped in to, the fact remains that for any religious person partaking in a ritual in the diaspora, the goal is to form some sort of connection to make that person feel whole.

Thinking back on the Ashura ritual that I attended at the end of 2011, the experience of momentarily finding my “home” with a group of strangers was completely unexpected. Although I have was raised Hindu, I had never felt a connection as strong as I did in that particular moment. I can attempt to describe that experience in as many
ways as I can imagine, but the full impact can only be felt by myself. With this in mind, I
must return to the story that set this work in motion: my grandmother’s morning rituals.
For someone, like myself, who has witnessed a ritual on countless occasions, it is easy to
lose sight of what that ritual is truly doing. My grandmother is enacting a ritual that has
communal ties but does it alone, for both communal and personal reasons. Her actions
sustain her and our small community in the diaspora. It ties not only her, but our entire
family back “home” in the most comforting sense of the word. Finding our “home” is an
ongoing process that will be essential as each generation becomes further removed from
our origins.

From all that has been said, it seems as though the importance of the Karbala
narrative and the initiations in African derived religions will continue to unfold as
individuals contribute their own understanding. As a participant in any religious ritual,
one cannot expect to walk forward unchanged by what he has experienced visually and
emotionally. As Thomas Tweed aptly describes, participants in religion are always
crossing and dwelling. Each participant enters into a ritual with a history unique to that
individual thus influencing the experiences within the liminal period. Much ground can
be covered while barely touching on the true feeling being the rituals. I can only offer a
description based solely on my history and my experiences to date, fully aware that many
blind spots exist. I have learned that the Karbala narrative reaches out to the thinkers and
dreamers; to minds that hold oceans and eyes that drop tears. The narrative is for those
who know any form of oppression or suffering; for any soul, the sinless and the sinners.
The message of Karbala and the story of Imam Hussein transcend the confines of religion
and bleeds in to the void between the spheres of faith. I have learned that African
diasporic initiation has the power to revise worldviews and form communities. No matter the ritual, it seems to turn the participant towards home, wherever that may be, to confront and embrace one’s origins with a renewed sense of understanding, ultimately prepared to face life once again with a stronger foundation.
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