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Reviews

Creole Religions of the Caribbean from Vodou and Santería to Obeah and Espiritismo: An Introduction by Margarite Fernández Olmos and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert. Third Edition. New York: New York University Press, 2022, xv + 384 pp. \$89 hardback ISBN: 978-1-479-80347-7. \$32 paperback ISBN: 978-1-4-798-0348-4. \$32 ebook ISBN: 978-1-479-80353-8.

Olmos's and Paravisini-Gebert's overview of Creole religions of the Caribbean provides a valuable overview of some of the most significant, yet understudied, diasporic religions and magical traditions of the Caribbean region. *Creole Religions of the Caribbean* is in its third edition, and this is because this volume's worth as an effective introduction to the traditions of Santería (Regla de Ocha), Regla de Palo, the Abakuá Secret Society, Vodou, Obeah, Myal, Quimbois, Rastafari, and Espiritismo. The primary function of this book is to trace the historical and cultural origins of these traditions. In addition, the authors frame these explorations within social and political contexts that are relevant to the countries and communities in which they exist.

In the introduction to the book, the authors clarify their use of the terms "creole" and "creolization," which are charged and contentious terms amongst scholars of diasporic cultures of the Caribbean, North America, and South America. In some cases, as the authors note, creole and creolization imply a sort of syncretism viewed from an elitist standpoint. For instance, syncretistic religion (and subsequently "creolized" religion) has been presented pejoratively as a corruption of "pure" religion—understood often as Christianity by Western scholars and commentators—with the infusion of cultural elements from Indigenous or diasporic peoples. Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert, however, draw from a line of scholars that view creolization not as a cultural corruption, but, on the contrary, as an "ongoing and ever-changing process" out of which new religious, spiritual, and magical forms are "born or developed from the interaction of peoples and forces due to" what David Bruissert and Steven

G. Reinhardt describe as ‘adaptive pressures omnipresent and irresistible’ in the Americas” (4). For the authors, the creolization process out of which the traditions treated in this book emerged involved “strategies of religious syncretism—the active transformation through renegotiation, reorganization, and redefinition of clashing belief systems” (9).

There is a great deal in this book that is of value to the scholar whose research concerns intersections between performance, theatre, ritual, religion, spirituality, and magic. Most useful are the detailed descriptions of ritual practices, texts, vestments, and objects that are located in each chapter. In some cases, the authors allude to theatre and use theatrical terminology. For instance, the authors note that the rituals and ceremonies (*plantas*) of the Abakúa Secret Society “have been compared to theatrical dramas” before describing Abakúa “temple-lodges,” ritual preparations of performance space, and drumming rites (119-120). In discussing the Nine Night ritual of Jamaica, at which loved ones celebrate the separation of a deceased person’s spirit from their body, the authors use Natasha Gordon’s play *Nine Night* to illuminate the human aspects of this ritual. In another chapter, Dolores Prida’s play *Botánica* is used to demonstrate how the traditions of Espiritismo and Santería blend within *botánicas* located in urban areas within the US (196, 274).

Creole Religions of the Caribbean focuses on the sacred aspects of each of the traditions it considers. The centrality of possession is described in relation to the dance and drumming traditions of Haitian *Vodou*. *Vodou* dance is presented not as “a means to secular pleasure,” but an art “in which the physique” facilitates “communication with the spirit.” The drums employed in *Vodou* (known as the *adjunto/manman*, the *ségond*, and the *bula*) initiate the process of possession within the body of the dancer. During the course of the performance, the authors explain, the devotees “bow before the drums” and make offerings to these holy instruments. Both the drums and the drummers are said to be inhabited by a spirit (*huntó*), and the rhythms produced by the drums help “open the ‘horse’s’ head”—that is, the drums prepare the head of the dancer to receive a spirit and enter a state of possession (150-152). Throughout the book, the authors’ clear and detailed descriptions of sophisticated physical processes and spiritual concepts renders these complex subjects accessible.

Of all the threads that Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert have worked into this text, the most enlightening is the one that concerns how the interweaving traditions of colonialist, indigenous, and diasporic religious and spiritual traditions have shaped the religious cultures of countries throughout the Caribbean. This is, of course, essential to the book, since such cultural interweaving is the very foundation of the creole religions discussed in its pages. African-derived religions and systems of magic in the Caribbean are linked to the areas in Africa from which those who shaped these religions and systems were taken. For instance, the Yoruba-speaking groups taken from southwest Nigeria, Dahomey, Togo, and Benin brought liturgical languages and deities to Cuba which were foundational to the establishment of the Afro-Cuban religion, Santería. Obeah, which is a form of incantation and charm-working that was widespread in the late-sixteenth and early-seventeenth centuries in Barbados, Antigua, and Jamaica, can “be traced to the concentrations of Ashanti and kindred tribes from the Gold Coast of Africa,” because these people were “heavily represented in the slave populations of the British colonies of the Caribbean” (25). The authors describe a “traditional African approach of dynamic and flexible cultural borrowing and merging,” which was common in Africa before the beginning of the transatlantic slave trade. This culturally-flexible tradition of cultural borrowing and merging became the basis of the “crossing,” “mixing,” and

identification of African deities and spirits with certain spiritual intermediary characters depicted within the colonizers' Christian religious traditions (37). Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert convincingly argue that this dynamic borrowing continues to inform the ongoing transformation of African-derived religions within the Caribbean and throughout the world.

Although certain portions of the text feel like an apologia when discussing gender and sexual inequalities within the hierarchies of some traditions, in the vast majority of cases the book addresses such issues in a direct and critical manner. This text is valuable for scholars, teachers, and independent readers in need of a deep introduction to some of the major religious and magical traditions of the Caribbean, as well as the impact that these traditions continue to make on a global scale.

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Puppet and Spirit : Ritual, Religion, and Performing Objects. Volume I Sacred Roots : Material Entities, Consecrating Acts, Priestly Puppeteers Edited by Claudia Orenstein and Tim Cusack. London and New York: Routledge, 2024. 246 pp. hardback. ISBN :978-0-367-71337-9.ebook. ISBN : 978-1-003-15036-7.

The essays in this anthropological and introspective volume explore the relationship between puppets and the world of transcendence. The first volume addresses questions related to traditionally established performances of puppetry, which are understood as objects of devotion related to sacred practices for undertaking ritualistic roles.

The volume uses many critical and theoretical models while addressing aspects of ritual and spirituality associated with puppetry performance traditions. The authors address how puppets are used in rituals in China, Indonesia, Korea, Mali, Brazil, Iran, and Germany. This book presents diverse and global cultural patterns in which the materiality of the puppet acts as a cultural signifier of the immateriality of the spiritual world. This volume also explores how the subconscious informs readings of the objective world by enmeshing spiritual understanding with the use of puppets, without necessarily objectifying the puppet itself.

The conceptual distinction between 'performance' and 'performativity' is not a primary concern in this volume. Although aspects of performativity are well explained, this book focuses on the choreological and gestural manifestations of traditions associated with the intersection of materiality and spirituality, instead of digging into the conceptual constructs involved. The book also juxtaposes traditional religious beliefs and practices with secular practices. The essays in this volume concentrate only on the necessary characteristics of detailed rituals that are projected through puppets and other similar objects, which emerge as a symbol cross various cultural and geographical boundaries.

This collection of essays contributes to the disciplines of arts, religion, and anthropological studies. The puppets and puppet-like objects discussed help to stimulate spheres of spiritual enactment through animated performative actions. Several scholars mentioned in the book's introduction focus on the material aspects of puppetry. The religious dimension that this book envisages is comprised by the detailed and meticulous

ornamentation of musical dramatic narratives and dances that engage community participation and invoke an emotional and spiritual vigor for both spectators and performers.

The puppetry traditions explored in this book are associated with the ritual actions that not only create logic for mundane entertainment, but also serve to enrich and enhance the community to which they belong. The rituals include performances to cure a sick child, to help a human soul achieve respite, to sustain and enhance a family lineage, to bless a house that has been newly inhabited, to establish communal harmony and deep-rooted community feeling, to remove evil spirits, to welcome a good harvest, and others.

While discussing the connections between the puppet and spirits in the book, it is acknowledged that there is a technical intersection between the object, the operator, and the observer. The concepts of spirit and spirituality are also disentangled from the doctrinal principles of religion. In Chapter 14, "Saintly puppet Masters and Sacred Clowning: Antinomian Religion and Patterns in Islamic Puppetry of Java," Kathy Foley notes that the practitioners of Indonesian shadow play puppetry—which include representations of Islamic saints—often lack the ideological understanding of religion and training to execute the exact ritual practices. Nevertheless, these puppeteers create spiritual representations. This illuminates an area of discomfort between the established order of insiders reliving doctrinal concepts and outsiders working with existing practices to create a new cultural paradigm. This particular differentiation between 'spirituality' and 'religion' offers the readers with a perspective on cultural diversity and perspectives that are transforming puppetry traditions. This volume is divided into five sections containing fifteen essays. These essays all focus on varied geographical locations and cultural traditions.

The first section deals with shamanic traditions. These chapters focus on how shamans create a communicative channel between the object, the spiritual, and ritualistic cultural connotations. In the opening essay, "Puppets and Souls: Some Encounters in Korean Shaman Rituals," Laurel Kendall researches objects (puppets and puppet-like models) in Kut rituals that connect the world of spirits and human world and acts as a release and comfort of departed souls of humans. "A *mansin* manifesting the god who leads the dead to Kut announced that the family had now accomplished harmony with the dead and fulfilled their responsibilities, that their gates of fortune would swing wide open" (32). Izabela Brochado's essay explores northeastern Brazil's *mamulengo* puppetry tradition. Most puppetry traditions in this section reflect on the entertainment of the community, and also transmit power structures through performativity. While two chapters in this section attempt a theoretical approach to puppetry traditions, the other two chapters project the vision of the practitioners through an analysis of interviews with those practitioners. Heather Jeanne Denyer's conversation focused on Yaya Coulibaly shows how Malian *Sogo bò* puppetry projects shamanic duties. The last chapter from this section, an interview with Auli'i Mitchell, explores Mitchell's research, performances, and teachings to show how performances projected by carved sacred images transmit supernatural elements into the performers who act as a figurative entity for expression through sacred narrative and songs.

The second section, titled "Communal Celebrations," ventures into the puppetry traditions that create a sense of unity within the community to commemorate cultural festivities. The first essay focuses on Japanese mechanical dolls and shows how these festivities enhance the devotion of a community towards the local *kami* or God/spirit. Another essay in this section by Deepshikha Chatterjee presents the *Neo-Vaishnavite Sattra* artists and

reveals the use of the mask puppets of the Assam region in narrating tales about the incarnations of Vishnu. Readers will find a discussion on the theme of communal harmony in the essay by Matthew Issac Cohen, in which he illustrates the community bond created by shadow puppetry in the Cirebon region of Indonesia. The concluding essay from this section focuses on Tomoe Kobayashi and Simon Moer's interview of Masako Nakauchi and Kimiyo Minami, who discuss the *Hako Mawashi* of Tokushima, Japan as a mode of blessing others and purifying houses during the New Year.

The third section titled 'Powerful Players' examines sacredness in several puppetry traditions. Detailed explanations of Chinese shadow puppetry its symbolization of cultural heritage are offered by Annie Katsura Rollins. Claudia Orenstein's essay examines Thailand's large shadow puppetry tradition and portrayals of the holy figures of *Narai* (Vishnu), *Isaun* (Shiva), and the Hermit (old father). 'Consecrated Puppets: The Puppet Deities of South China and Taiwan' by Robin Ruizendaal enumerates how puppetry traditions of South China and Taiwan have been modernized, while simultaneously maintaining the use of specific puppet characters to cure diseases. In the final essay from this section, A. Sangeeth Sankar and Rahul Koonathara present a conversation with puppeteer Ramachandra Pulavar, who is a twelfth-generation practitioner of the *Tholpavakoothu* tradition. which is generally performed in the ground of the temple for Goddess Bhadrakali. These puppetry customs unite the mundane with the divine.

Section four, titled 'Doctrinal Dialogues,' demonstrates how religious doctrines stand in tension with the animated, modernized and improvised dimensions of contemporary puppetry traditions. The first essay in this section discusses how some Islamic traditions prohibit the use of human shaped puppets and how anti-animist prohibitions have negatively impacted puppetry traditions. Kathy Foley analyses how certain parts of Indonesia practiced puppetry before the population converted to Islam, and how these puppetry traditions have adapted in response to Islamic law. The last essay in the section by Michelle K. Oing studies how the enactment of stories of Christ are reflected within religious doctrines that expound transcendence of the physical aspect of reality through the contemplation of divine truth. The final section of this volume—"Holding Heritage"—consists of two essays discussing the sacred objects used for the purpose of storytelling, which are not equated with the human figure. The *kaavad* in Nina Sabnani's discussion is a box painted with images concerning events that are narrated by a storyteller. This acts as a means of initiating mobility for the practitioners, so that remote populations in the desert of Rajasthan can witness the stories of this cultural, sacred tradition. In the last essay of this collection, Joseph Maybloom discusses the sacred Torah scroll that is created by Jewish scribes. The essay shows how the Torah, which is employed during rituals, is converted into a privileged actor in the performance of rituals.

The incredibly diverse range of historical and cultural traditions might create a sense of discontinuity in this volume for some readers. More explicit clarity could have been made between the terms 'Performance' and 'Performativity' in this work. Nevertheless, this book effectively conceptualizes and explores the connection of spirituality-oriented objects within several puppetry traditions. Ultimately, this book encourages further contemplation of intersections between puppetry and the cultures in which it exists.

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