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## Thematic Section

# Good Spirit, Good Medicine: Religious Foundations of Healing in the Caribbean

## Introduction

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Historically, the Caribbean Basin has been a zone of massive and complex cultural interaction. The intercontinental voyages of Christopher Columbus, the advent of the transatlantic slave trade, and the development of international capitalism shaped the contexts in which Native Americans, Europeans, Africans and Asians encountered each other in the Caribbean. Each of the groups brought with them concepts of illness, therapeutic techniques and healing systems derived in part from their religious beliefs and in the Caribbean these religiously-based healing practices continued to evolve. These historical contexts, and the encounters that occurred within them, continue to influence the lives of Caribbean people today, whether they have remained in the Caribbean or have migrated to other regions of the world.

This collection of papers brings together researchers whose work documents and examines the religious foundations of illness and healing practices in the Caribbean and in the Caribbean Diaspora in the United States. The papers in this thematic section of *Anthropologica* combine rich ethnographic data from studies carried out in Caribbean communities in Trinidad and Puerto Rico with studies undertaken in communities of Haitian and Cuban immigrants to the United States. In this introductory essay the guest editors will first present brief descriptions of the papers and then review common threads that tie the papers together.

### The Contributions of Individual Papers

Stephen Glazier provides a broad overview of Sango healers, with special emphasis on Trinidad where he continues to conduct long-term fieldwork. His description of Sango in Trinidad places it within the background of related groups in St. Vincent, Grenada, Aruba and Puerto Rico where it is less studied, as well as Latin America. He then surveys interactions between Sango and other religious groups in Trinidad, particularly the Indian-inspired cult of Kali-Mai and the Spiritual Baptists.

Glazier also links participation in Sango to contemporary issues of cultural identity and African roots. Borrowing, divination and competition between healer types are examined and some attention is paid to the relationships between Sango healers and the biomedical system. His study makes it clear that the stereotypical image of folk medicine as the domain of rural, uneducated, poor and gullible people, who lack access to alternative sources of health care, does not characterize either Sango healers or their clientele.

**George Brandon** provides an overview of the complex origins and development of Cuban Santería (also known as Lucumi Oricha worship) as a religious foundation for understanding its healing work. Using a meaning-centered approach to the universals of symbolic healing, he examines Lucumi cowrie shell divination as a particular type of ritual performance with a characteristic style of interaction between diviners and clients, and as a site of knowledge production relative to Lucumi healing's mythic world. After this he compares Lucumi divination practices with those of two other healer types who also use cowries in divination.

**Karen Richman's** contribution demonstrates through an examination of social dramas that are at once transnational and intimate how a Haitian folk illness, "perdition," is being adapted to deal with stress in family and conjugal relations caused by poverty and prolonged separation in situations where women are desperately dependent on men for economic survival. Redefining this illness concept becomes one way of preserving relationships that are under great strain due to the problems generated by Haiti's high rates of unemployment, poverty and international migration. In this situation, Richman suggests, perdition serves as a vehicle to save the reputations of men and families and not only as a vehicle for explaining the reproductive problems of women.

**Raquel Romberg's** provocative essay presents a challenge to theoretical approaches to ritual and symbolic healing that depend upon the concept of belief. She contends that the "spiritual economy of affect" in Puerto Rican brujería does not depend upon a shared a priori belief system but upon brujas' abilities to create aesthetically compelling multi-sensorial healing dramas. Romberg emphasizes the concrete sensory aspects of brujería's ritual performances, rather than theology, as the key to its ability to deal with a religiously heterogeneous clientele while using an eclectic array of ritual symbols. In a contest between belief-based theorists and affect-based theorists, Romberg advocates concepts of charisma and embodiment that complement, if not subvert, a more cognitive belief-based approach to the efficacy of ritual healing.

## Convergent Themes

A number of themes recur throughout the papers and tie them together as a group. Roughly stated, these themes refer to the concepts of transnationalism, drama and performance, the hidden healing system, agency and ritual borrowing.

The phenomenon of transnationalism pervades all of the papers either openly or in more subtle ways. At the same time as some healers are deeply rooted in specific locales, sometimes they are itinerant and have international clienteles. Back and forth travel between homelands and their diasporic communities, and the relative ease and speed of international communication, provide the infrastructure that transfers ritual knowledge and cultural influences as well as labour and remittances. Historical experiences and traditions specific to each of the Caribbean islands continue to shape the thought and actions of their citizens today, but they do so under the relentless pressures of a global economic system whose effects are at once intimate and far-reaching.

Concepts of performance and drama are protean and appear in the papers in different ways. On one hand, ritual can be seen as a kind of stereotyped performance that effects change, reveals knowledge, links peoples to their pasts or, as in divination, secures motivation and engagement in the healing process (Brandon, Glazier). Or, drawing on Victor Turner's concept of social drama, as Karen Richman does, one can analyze lived episodes and crisis events in which deeply held but contradictory communal values that have come under strain are resolved through the symbolic manipulation of value concepts and social relations. Casting a wider net draws in the literary performance theorists such as Bakhtin, philosophers such as Austin and Certeau, and ultimately Moreno's psychodrama for a view of spiritism and brujería that treats healing rituals as dramas in their own right, aesthetically realized, consciously designed, and partially improvised cathartic enactments using potent ritual symbols for healing (Romberg).

In Caribbean communities, at home and in diaspora, the kind of religiously-based healing with which these papers are concerned is, paradoxically, visible yet invisible at the same time. Whether in the Caribbean or in North America, the practitioners and the clienteles of these healing traditions form a kind of hidden health care system (parallel to an informal economy) that often has complex and unacknowledged relationships with the hegemonic biomedical system. This comes through in all of the papers. Whether we consider the instances in which santeros refer clients to physicians, but also continue treating them; read about Sango healers who

are employed in clinics, hospitals or the pharmaceutical industry, but compartmentalize their healing work with spirits, herbs and sacrificed animals as a separate world; or look at the sophisticated way Haitian women suffering from perdition use the biomedical system according to agendas rooted in their own folk conceptions rather than the logic of biomedicine, what we see are whole systems of care that, while visible to a clientele that encompasses most of the class levels in their societies, remain invisible, seemingly disappearing upon contact with the society's dominant institutions.

The contributions come at the question of client/patient agency in different ways. The reshaping of the Haitian concept of perdition is being done by its sufferers, rather than by healers, as individuals and their families try to manipulate knowledge, gossip, economic and social resources to preserve what is most precious to them under trying circumstances. Glazier and Brandon both take into account the role played by client/patients in their own healing process whether through projection, revealing important information during divination, or securing the materials and having positive interactions with devotees during and in preparation for healing rites. Romberg emphasizes the skill of the bruja in provoking powerful emotions in the client, even though the client seems to play a relatively passive role up to and during the climactic rite. But Romberg also draws on Joseph Murphy's idea of treating imagination, in this case the client's imagination, as an active force, an intersubjective product of intersubjective action on the part of both the healer and the client, in the absence of which no healing would take place.

Finally, Glazier, Romberg and Brandon all note the extensive ritual borrowing that has occurred historically in these healing systems and which continues today. This is a long-standing theme in the study of Caribbean religions, and African-inspired religions in the Americas in general. The persistence of this theme is rooted in the concrete realities of what the cultural encounters between Europeans, Native Americans, Africans and Asians have produced in the Caribbean and in the difficulty of providing a satisfactory theoretical account of it. In the past Glazier has looked at this under the rubric of syncretism,

and notions of syncretism and symbiosis figure prominently in the work of co-editor Leslie Desmangles and Joseph Murphy to whom the original "Good Spirit, Good Medicine" session was dedicated. Romberg writes of a kind of "spiritual lingua franca," a fluid collection of ritual similarities that, in particular locales, allow individuals of different religious backgrounds and religious orientations to move in and out of the various healing systems with relative ease. Brandon addresses this issue also, in terms of his comparison of the cowrie shell divination performances of distinct healer types, and invokes Lee Drummond's Caribbean-inspired notion of a cultural continuum or cultural intersystem in which the phenomena of permeable boundaries, prototypical symbols, and variably manifested similarities and differences becomes analyzable as a distinctive kind of cultural phenomenon in its own right rather than as a confusing and impure anomaly.

## Conclusion

The research collected in these papers confirms earlier studies showing how Caribbean religions function as effective forms of folk healing through which people resolve psychological, social and economic problems, as well as physical ailments. But, the papers go beyond them to consider the internal characteristics of divination practices as sites of knowledge production and interaction, acknowledge the agency of lay people in reshaping folk medical concepts, and, taking a performative or sensory orientation, highlight how the quest for health and relief from suffering sometimes takes the form of totalizing, emotional events involving all the senses, where body, mind, social relations and ties to physical or symbolic geography all intertwine and are treated as one. All societies recognize the frailty of the human life, but when physical and mental afflictions affect a community its members are reminded forcibly of this fact. It is then that we can see that illness concerns the entire community and not only the afflicted individuals. Collectively this thematic section advances our understanding of the roles of Caribbean religions as healing systems in their home countries and in diaspora.