

Spirits, Blood, and Drums: The Orisha Religion in Trinidad. By James Houk. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995. P. xvi + 238, bibliography, ISBN 1-56639-350-7 pbk.)

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BOOK REVIEWS / COMPTES RENDUS

Spirits, Blood, and Drums: The Orisha Religion in Trinidad. By James Houk.
(Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995. P. xvi + 238, bibliography, ISBN 1-56639-350-7 pbk.)

James Houk's book *Spirits, Blood, and Drums: The Orisha Religion in Trinidad* investigates the complex and eclectic African-based rituals practiced in Trinidad. Houk's anthropological approach attempts to mediate the differences between "scientific" and folk explanations in order to provide the reader with a holistic understanding of the Yoruba-based Orisha worship religion. Moreover, he tries to explain the mechanisms of change that have transformed the Yoruba religion into a multi-layered form of worship. While not always successful, Houk's work provides a major addition to scholarship on Afro-Caribbean religion.

Houk divides his work into four parts. The first part juxtaposes his own research methodology with general contextual information. Next, he discusses the five religious traditions which "make up" the Trinidadian "Afro-American religious complex" — Yoruba, Catholic, Hindu, Protestant, and Kabbalah. He then focuses on Orisha worship, examining the rituals, pantheon, and social organization of the religion. Finally, Houk analyzes the syncretic processes that continue to transform the rituals and the countering forces that act to stabilize the religion.

Houk devoted much of his field research to visiting the many religious shrines throughout the country, documenting the orisha (deities) honored at each and surveying the worshippers' beliefs about their religion. The orisha honored at each shrine vary, revealing the syncretic processes at work on the religion. Catholic saints and Hindu deities may also be honored with their own ritual flags in an Orisha compound. Each shrine head normally holds an annual *ebo*, a ritual feast during which the orisha manifest and dance. Worshippers pilgrimage throughout the island to attend different feasts, sharing forms of ritual practice in the process.

An Orisha shrine may also contain a Spiritual Baptist church and a Kabbalah banquet hall. Many participants in Orisha worship find their way

into the religion through the Spiritual Baptist church. Spiritual Baptists participate in the mourning rite, a time of fasting, isolation, and trance during which the “pilgrim” may spiritually travel and obtain religious information. This may involve instructions to plant flags in honor of the orisha. Houk explains that the mourning rite also serves as a means of transmitting spiritual knowledge and engendering change.

Houk is one of the first ethnographers to write about Kabbalah ritual, an esoteric practice that only became public during the 1970s. Houk notes the surge in the popularity of Kabbalah ritual in the past twenty years, but he fails to reveal the potential for change this entails. In the past, the upper echelon of Orisha worship practiced Kabbalah; today, the everyday worshiper has access to knowledge of Kabbalah ritual. Transmission of knowledge is no longer controlled and directed. As Elder Biddeau states, “You must devote plenty of time to it, and you must be guided by an elder or a teacher. The self-taught man who is handling the Kabbalah is always in danger” (p. 94). Houk also fails to recognize the strong Masonic influence on Kabbalah ritual, and the importance of written literature such as the de Laurence publications on both Kabbalah and Spiritual Baptist rituals (though he does mention Arthur Waite’s magic books). The use of these texts accounts for many of the similarities Houk notes between the Kabbalah and Spiritual Baptist rituals (p. 95).

Houk does point to an area which needs further research. Kabbalah spirits are “hot” and work “fast.” Houk compares Kabbalah ritual to the Petro pantheon in Haitian vodoun, a “hot” form of worship he feels was “grafted” onto the existing “cool” Rada side (p. 176). He sees a similar process at work in the relationship between Kabbalah ritual and Orisha worship. Kabbalah provides a means of ritual for both “wicked” and “good” deeds. Elder Biddeau explains, “It all depends on the category of spirits you are dealing with. Whereas with the orishas, you do good and you don’t ever get the deities involved with anything that is wrong to your fellow man, because that is one of the laws within the Orisha religion” (p. 174).

Kabbalah spirits work fast. Houk quotes Joseph Henderson stating, “Man goes into the Kabbalah because he feels he will get rich overnight: fast money, jewels, and live a posh life . . . They get big overnight, and they get plenty material value, but they don’t live very old” (p. 174). Another worshiper performs a consecration ritual to protect himself before attending “a Kab thing” (p. 173). Perhaps most revealing, Leader Ronnie explains, “remember that the spirit is neither good or evil, hence we call it a demon. . . . Now, whatsoever we

have in our minds is what the spirit manifests itself in. If we have evil, the spirits feed on that. If the spirit comes evil, it is because we have hate in us” (p. 172).

Spirits reflect the physical world. The strength of this book is that it allows the worshipers to speak directly to the reader. Its weakness is that it does not always listen and allow theory to emerge from these voices. Worshipers often reveal that the same spirits exist throughout the “Afro-American religious complex” in Trinidad, though they may operate differently (p. 112) or go by another name. As Merlin Hernandez states, “whether you have Oshun in Yoruba or Lakshmi in Hindi, it’s the same essence” (p. 114). Houk’s discussion of syncretism ignores this conception and, therefore, misses a chance to explore the latent reasons behind religious syncretism in Trinidad.

Rather, Houk argues syncretism between Orisha and Catholic saints occurred either voluntarily, based on analogous characteristics, or as a camouflage of African ritual. Worshipers do concur with him. Houk feels the original syncretism was “done under duress” because the process appears to have been “haphazard and inconsistent,” with syncretic variation throughout the island. Houk’s arguments suffer because he does not look at the individual contexts of specific examples. The process may have been quite consistent, developing distinctly in different contexts.

The study of the “Afro-American religious complex” in Trinidad is a monumental task. No single book will reveal all aspects of the religion. *Spirits, Blood, and Drums* provides ample data and firsthand explanations for the many facets of Orisha worship. Perhaps too complicated for introductory classes, the book should be useful in upper level Afro-Caribbean religion courses and required reading for graduate students.

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