

**Perspectives in Lived History:
Religion, Ethnography, and the Study of African Diasporic Religions**

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ABSTRACT

For scholars trained in the discipline of religion and open to researching across disciplinary boundaries, the social science method of ethnography affords unique access to the lived dimensions of human experience and practice. For religionists, navigating fluid disciplinary boundaries between religion and ethnography allows aspects of popular ritual practices embedded in everyday life to transform into layered sites of analysis beyond exclusive discussions of theologies, orthodoxies, and doctrines. This has especially been the case in the study of African diasporic religious cultures. Through an examination of the ethnographic historiography of this field of study, the author seeks to foreground discussions on the disciplinary compatibility between religion and ethnography. In excavating the meaning of African diasporic religious practices, religion and ethnography have been methodologically central to accessing their multiple expressions amidst lived contexts, permeable boundaries, and shifting social milieus throughout the Atlantic world.

Adorned in a white *agbada*, white pants, and a white Yoruba-styled hat atop his small slender head, Baba Medahochi Kofi Omowale Zanu spoke with the authority of an elder that his 82 years, and a quarter of a century as a Yoruba priest, upheld. Armed with disciplinary training in the historical study of religion, I stepped once again into the murky and miry world of ethnography to conduct research on the lived religion of African diasporic traditions, to gather

“lived history,” and to better understand the religious worldview of practitioners. Baba Medachochi fluidly maneuvered between and across religious and cultural boundaries in his capacities as a Yoruba priest of *Shango* and an esteemed elder and member of the First Afrikan Presbyterian Church in Lithonia, Georgia.¹ He was one of several African American members of the initiated priesthood of Yoruba religious cultures who, through religious practice, muddied the waters of strict orthodoxy, challenged the strictures of rigid theologies, and succeeded in creating spaces and crevices that historical texts alone prove unable to penetrate.

Within this ethnographic vortex, spent in the Greater Atlanta area in Yoruba ceremonies, Christian services, and conversations with interviewees like Baba Medahochi from December 2005 to August 2006, I encountered an intellectual domain, through ethnography, where texts were “living,” time was continuous, religious boundaries were pliable, ritual practice was somatically embedded, and experience was arbitrary and unpredictable. As a historically trained humanist, I discovered rather quickly that within ethnographic research, the interview context often emerged as a site of unpredictability.

On one such occasion, I was interviewing Baba Medahochi in an attempt to access the annals of oral history surrounding the religio-cultural basis upon which polygamy and plural marriage developed among African American Yoruba devotees in the United States. I checked and secured my recording device for receiving what I predicted would be a theologically dense exegesis on the cultural and religious foundations of plural marriage as it related to complex African cosmologies. Instead what followed was a pronouncement and subsequent query from the ethnographic realm of the unpredictable: “I don’t think people that practice polygamy or polygyny are doing so because of so-called African culture...I think *most* men are polygamous. I would go so far as to say it’s by *nature*.”² What then pursued was the unexpected and unforeseen query pointedly directed to the ethnographer: “So, what do *you* think about polygamy?” The question ushered in an ensuing reflective moment in *self-ethnography*—the *scholar as data*, followed by a pregnant, awkward pause, and a scholar’s *Gasp*. Slowly what began to fill the still void of silence was a scholarly response of non-committal intellectual verbiage that then prompted Baba Medahochi’s piercing and indicting smile: “*Now*, what do *you* really think about polygamy?”

As a disciplinary trained religious historian now utilizing ethnographic method, I came face to face with direct queries no written archive or text had ever dared to utter. Instead, what I came to realize was that I was engaging in “living” history through one of the last remaining elders of the first generation of African American Yoruba priests.³ While engaging in disciplinary negotiations between the humanities and the social sciences, what ultimately endured from field experiences like those with Baba Medahochi were invaluable lessons regarding the ways in which the worlds of ethnography and lived religion co-mingle, inform the recording of history, and enmesh scholarly positionality.

'Lived Religion,' Ethnographic Method, and the Excavation of Religious Practice

Within the discipline of religion, David D. Hall and Robert Orsi have for close to two decades been at the forefront in pioneering “a history of practice” in American religious history through the heuristic rubric of “lived religion.” Inspired from the French concept *la religion vécue*, Hall and Orsi sought to encourage new innovations in “cultural and ethnographical approaches to the study of religion and American religious history” by “enlisting perspectives” that privilege human practice as an important lens for determining how humans “live with and work through multiple realms of meaning.”⁴ Through examining “modalities of practice” over and against normative theologies, doctrines, or elite orthodoxies, lived religion sought to recast the disciplinary representation of religion into a more flexible, “complex and multifaceted phenomenon.”⁵ Lived religion expanded the interpretive gaze of American religious history to include not only practice as a crucial site for engaging religious meaning but also the inclusion of non-elite popular communities as significant actors in religious production.

In my own area of study in African diasporic religious cultures, since its formative historiography beginning in the 1930s, ethnography has been centrally located at the methodological foreground of the field. Because the study of religion encompasses, according to David Hall, “what we do,” along with “practices and...the meanings that energize such practices,” ethnography has been one important mode of interdisciplinary collaboration in the social sciences that has provided scholars of African diasporic religions entrée into the deeper recesses of religious devotion, practice, and meaning as they exist within the lived context of social history.⁶ As a complementary method to those in the discipline of religion, ethnography in many ways helps to render the lived spaces of religion and its practices more “accessible” in the process of seeking to decode “other peoples’ symbol systems” and systems of meaning.⁷

The interrogative methods of ethnography aid religionists in translating religious practice into “inspectable forms” for interpretive reflection.⁸ Ethnography is also an important way of “gaining access to indigenous meaning” that occurs in “local contexts.”⁹ This proved exceptionally useful in the study of diasporic religious traditions in the Atlantic world as they extended across the Bahamas, Haiti, Suriname, Cuba, Brazil, Trinidad, etc. Because these diasporic religious practices were always in flux, existed amidst constant processes of negotiation, and were readily enacted in unstable and uncertain social contexts, ethnography in many ways provided methodological accountability for this motion and for the continuous negotiation and re-negotiation of African people’s fluidly lived practices. Utilized in the study of these traditions, ethnography captured the “range of meanings” that constituted religion and sacred practice that often lay “embedded in the fabric of everyday life.”¹⁰ What religion and ethnography collectively generated were “coinherent aspects of an integral ‘form of life’” or “life-world” of which religion and culture functioned as key organizing features.¹¹

Within the field of African diasporic religions, a long line of ethnographers has pioneered

this work across interdisciplinary boundaries. Thus, through a careful examination of what I call *ethnographic historiography*, this essay is devoted to the ways in which ethnographic method was crucial to the development of foundational ritual, theological, and theurgical theorizations of African diasporic religious traditions in the Americas and in the Caribbean. Chronicling the works of trained North American social scientists and several French ethnographers, I ultimately seek to underscore the continued relevance and usefulness of this 1930s-1940s historiography as it relates to important methodological synergies between religious history and social science ethnographic method within the study of African diasporic religious practice and its demarcation of sacred boundaries in the geographies of the Atlantic world.

Ethnographic Historiography and the Study of African Diasporic Religious Cultures, 1930s-1940s

During the 1930s and 1940s, a rich ethnographic historiography began to develop around the study of African diasporic religions in North America, South America, and the Caribbean. Foregrounding this decade of ethnographic inquiry throughout the Americas and the Caribbean were key ethnographers of African diasporic traditions such as Zora Neale Hurston, Melville Herskovits, George Eaton Simpson, William Bascom, Katherine Dunham, Maya Deren, Roger Bastide, Pierre Verger, and Alfred Métraux, resulting in an important historiographical body of religious, folkloric, ethno-musicological, ritual, and performance study monographs, audio-visual documentation, and collected essays. It was at this juncture that African diasporic religious expressions such as North American *Hoodoo* and *Voodoo*, Surinamese *Winti*, Haitian *Vodou*, Trinidadian *Shango*, Brazilian *Candomblé*, Jamaican *Kumina* and *Obeah*, and Cuban *Santería* found themselves at the center of prime scholarly investigation and ethnographic reflection. Privileged in these studies were the ritual, performative, and somatic practices of popular communities and the complex analyses of their religions in dynamically lived contexts. As a consequence, these studies yielded not only rare esoteric data, musical recordings, and visual documentation, but also complex theorizations on acculturation, cultural borrowing, syncretism, ritualization, Africanisms, survivals, reinterpretation, and cultural retentions that, though contested, formed the theoretical foundation for the field of African diasporic traditions. They proffered the ability to examine the lived dimensions of religious practices as they existed within the fissures of multiple social and geographical contexts across the Atlantic.

With her publication of the 1930s “Dance Songs and Tales from the Bahamas” in *The Journal of American Folklore* just five years after studying with Franz Boas, Ruth Benedict, and Margaret Mead at Columbia University, Zora Neale Hurston became one of the first women and earliest scholars to interrogate the question of African cross-cultural fertilization with the use of ethnographic data. From her ethnographic research in the Bahamas, she documented various cultural practices such as a form of “African folk dance” where “the players form a ring” with

a “bonfire to one side” and at the cry of “Gimbay,” (which Hurston cites as “a corruption of the African word *gumbay*, a large drum), the music and dance commence.¹² In a comparative analysis of cultural practice, Hurston indicated that the dance “resembles the Cuban *rumba* and the dances held in New Orleans after the great migration of Haitian and Santo Dominican Negroes after the success of L’Ouverture.”¹³ Of the musical data she collected and chose to include in the article was one song from “the purely descended African colony” of Fox Hill in Nassau that she identified as an African “Yoruba song.”¹⁴ Entitled, “Farewell to the Rock (Africa),” Hurston phonetically lyricizes, “*Eh, yea ai yea. Lah, na sah wu. Ray, ray, ai yea. Nah, nah sah rue,*” translated as “Farewell to you (Who remain) we are going we know not where.”¹⁵ She described the percussion musical accompaniment as “mournful” and “very eerie” and the bodily “dancing posture” used by the Bahamians as one that “even weeps” in its re-enactment of the mourning of Africa.¹⁶

This initial *Journal of American Folklore* article became a foray into a larger intellectual journey for Hurston that eventually embraced her interests in North American Voodoo, Haitian Vodou, and African Obeah and Jamaican Kumina. Funding from the Rosenwald Foundations in 1935 enabled Hurston to pursue her North American interests and to conduct ethnographic research throughout Alabama, Florida, and Louisiana, resulting in the publication of *Mules and Men* the same year. A Guggenheim Fellowship awarded a year later, and renewed in 1937, provided Hurston with the opportunity to extend her hemispheric research into the Caribbean through the study of African diasporic traditions in Haiti and Jamaica, the data of which became the basis for her 1938 publication, *Tell My Horse*.

Having worked with Melville J. Herskovits in the summer of 1926 and having greatly admired his previous ethnographic work on the diasporic religion of voodoo, Hurston chose to correspond regularly with Herskovits as she formulated and executed her own project in Haiti.¹⁷ According to her teacher and mentor anthropologist Franz Boas, until the publication of Zora Neale Hurston’s ethnographic work, “the descriptions of Negro magic and voodoo” were lacking because “the intimate setting in the social life of the Negro has been given very inadequately.”¹⁸ He commended his student’s work on its remarkable ability to enter “into the homely life of the southern Negro as one of them,” to be able “to penetrate through the affected demeanor by which the Negro excludes the White observer effectively from participating in his true inner life,” and to gain the “confidence of the voodoo doctors” shedding “new light upon the much discussed voodoo beliefs and practices.”¹⁹ In Boas’ opinion, due to Hurston’s ability to penetrate the deeply lived aspects of her subjects’ religious and cultural lives, she was able to make an “unusual contribution to our knowledge of the true inner life of the Negro.”²⁰ Its contribution to “the student of cultural history,” Boas concluded, was not just in its capacity to provide “the Negro’s reaction to every day events, to his emotional life, his humor and passions,” but in its ability to showcase “the peculiar amalgamation of African and European tradition which is so important for understanding historically the character of American Negro life, with its strong African background in the West Indies, the importance of which diminishes with increasing distance from the south.”²¹ Boas’ theory of cultural survivals,

as understood in hemispheric perspective, found great resonance in Hurston's work and later became the major theoretical paradigm in fostering the debate on African cultural retentions by Boas' most prolific student, Melville J. Herskovits.

With the contributions of Melville J. Herskovits, the 1930s and following would mark a period of increased ethnographic scholarly productions on geographies of the diaspora and their African provenience. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, Herskovits would conduct fieldwork not only on the African continent in countries like Benin, Ghana, and Nigeria, but also throughout the African diaspora in Suriname, Haiti, Brazil, Trinidad, and the North American South. From 1934-1947, in addition to a series of critical theoretical essays published in *American Anthropologist*, *The American Sociological Review*, *The Journal of American Folklore*, *Phylon*, and *The Musical Quarterly*, Herskovits also published a body of seminal texts that would theoretically anchor New World African discourse for decades to follow. These texts included *Rebel Destiny: Among the Bush-Negroes of Dutch Guiana* (1934); *Suriname Folklore* (1936); *Life in a Haitian Valley* (1937); *The Myth of the Negro Past* (1941); and *Trinidad Village* (1947).

Herskovits' work was deeply focused on the ethnographic investigation of cultural and religious practices and the construction of cross-regional correspondences. Within the context of African diasporic practice, he was able to gather what he understood as quantifiable data such as religion, magic, art, folklore, music, and language, and then organize these data into a cultural typology tabulated along a metric that ranged from "a: very African" to "e: trace of African customs, or absent."²² According to Herskovits, one

...methodological device that has proved of outstanding value in analyzing the problems of Afroamerican research is that of a scale of intensity of Africanisms over the New World. This implies a logically conceived continuum which ranges from retentions that are completely African, or almost so, to those least African...Such a continuum permits an arrangement of the data that gives insight into the processes of cultural change by allowing comparisons to be drawn between cultures whose various aspects lie at different points on it. This, in turn, facilitates analysis of the processes that have operated to bring about the cultural changes observed in the field research.²³

Although Herskovits admitted its limitations, this "classificatory devise" was to serve as one possible "technique for analyzing cultures" cross-regionally in order to establish patterns of variations and differentials as determined by cultural contact, cultural borrowing, acculturative processes, and social conditions of enslavement.²⁴

The scholarly hypotheses and conclusions Herskovits would draw from this mode of analysis would inevitably come under heavy scrutiny. Analytical claims such as those found in his 1934 publication, *Rebel Destiny: Among the Bush-Negroes of Dutch Guiana*, postulating cultural correlations in the New World with direct West African antecedents in addition to engaging in cross-regional analysis of diaspora rituals and identifying their West African roots became the focus of a vast majority of criticism. Herskovits' theoretical deductions possessed a seamless ability to link Africa with multiple parts of the African diaspora in a complex web of cultural resonances,

productions, and meaning that were not always held in scholarly consensus. In *Rebel Destiny*, Herskovits says of the religious traditions in Suriname,

Many of the gods of both bush and town are the same, and they are African gods, invoked today in Nigeria, Dahomey, in Togo, in Ashanti, and invoked also in the islands of the Caribbean...*Dagowe* is a snake god in the Suriname bush and town – the Haitians and Dahomeans dance to the same snake-god who they call *Dangbe*...In bush and town the people dance to the river gods, as do the Negroes in Africa and the Caribbean, and the pattern of the ceremonies has been preserved in part in Negro baptismal rites in the United States. Bush and town invoke the buzzard, *Opete*, so named in Ashanti, and sacred everywhere in West Africa, and the style of dancing resembles certain of the dances of the ‘saints’ who ‘shout’ in the Negro Sanctified Churches of the United States.²⁵

Criticism of Herskovits would greatly intensify particularly as he tried to extend his theoretical analysis to North America through the extensive argumentation found in his 1941 publication, *The Myth of the Negro Past*. Sociologist E. Franklin Frazier and other social scientists fervently critiqued Herskovits for what they saw as an essentialist reading of African-American religiosity, an analytical inability to persuasively disaggregate Africanisms from a situation of cultural encounter, an inability to definitively locate New World Africanisms in precise African ethnic designations, and what they saw as Herskovits’ theological and ritual over-determinism in making direct correspondences between religious rites in the African diaspora with that of African antecedents.²⁶ Contrary to Herskovits’ findings, Frazier would conclude, “It is impossible to establish any continuity between African religious practices and the Negro church in the United States” and the vast preponderance of African Americans in North America had “sloughed off completely the African heritage.”²⁷

While perhaps positing valid challenges to Herskovits’ claims, what was not often widely discussed regarding Herskovits’ critics was their ideological stake in cultural de-Africanization, deculturation, and cultural assimilation particularly on the part of critics like E. Franklin Frazier who represented an analytical perspective heavily invested in a teleological culmination in North American Protestantism and the Black Church. What eventually crystallized into the famous Herskovits/Frazier debate became so formidable to penetrate, so rigidly codifying to engage, and so polarized to resolve, that the merits of Herskovits’ methodological intentions have often been largely obscured and eclipsed, particularly as it relates to the importance of ethnography and religious practice.

During the burgeoning of ethnography and African diaspora studies, Melville Herskovits, in the absence of concrete historical documentation on Africans during slavery, sought to utilize the rigors of ethnographic method in order to make anterior speculations on the historicity of diasporic cultural and religious practices. Methodologically, Herskovits located his work within “the technique of research known as ethnohistory” or “ethnohistorical method.”²⁸ Because he situated his research in “the Afroamericanist field” and understood its regional and academic contours as covering “a vast geographical area” and cutting “across many of the conventional academic dis-

ciplines,” Herskovits, as well as his other contemporaries, found great utility in the “joint use of historical analysis and ethnographic comparison.”²⁹ He asserted with all confidence that “this technique was responsible for the expeditiousness with which the long-debated problem of the predominant African influences that helped shape the cultures of the Negro peoples of the New World was solved.”³⁰ Herskovits maintained that “without the precise knowledge it yielded, pinpointed research in Africa aimed at understanding the historical baseline for African derivatives found in the New World Negro cultures, could not have been carried on.”³¹ For Herskovits, conducting ethnographic research both in Africa and its diaspora made it “possible to recover the predominant regional and tribal origins of the New World Negroes and, with this information in hand, to turn to ethnographic research in Africa with a certainty that the materials gathered there would be relevant to the problems of cultural retention and cultural change met within the New World.”³²

Herskovits’ academic critics, however, were not so confident in the interpretive soundness of this approach. They along with future scholars would greatly challenge this premise calling for more complex treatments of the vast geo-cultural rubrics of *Africa* and the *diaspora* that do not quickly collapse into discussions of cultural provenience, origins, or prototypes.³³ In the end, what should not be lost or obscured in these discussions is Herskovits’ insistence that however one made sense of the cultural complexities and meanings of diasporic African religious practices, central to their documentation must inevitably include the privileging of ethnographic approaches.

Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, the ethnographic excavation of the cultural and religious practices of African-descended communities in the New World continued to develop as an important research inquiry for a small cadre of emerging young social science scholars. Among them furthering this conversation was George Eaton Simpson. After graduating from the University of Pennsylvania in 1934, Simpson would soon make Haiti, Jamaica, Trinidad, and Nigeria the geographic focus of his ethnographic studies of Vodun, Rastafari, Shango, Spiritual Baptists, and Yoruba practice among African and African diasporic communities. During the 1940s, Simpson began to exhibit his early ethnographic findings in *The American Anthropologist*, *Social Forces*, and *The Journal of American Folklore*. Following in the path of Herskovits and Hurston, Simpson began to document the lived practices of what he called “Haitian Magic” and “Haitian Vodun.” Funded largely by a post-doctoral fellowship from the Social Science Research Council, Simpson’s 1930s research on Haiti recorded in great detail “the theology of the *vodun* cult” as expressed in the “*vodun service*.”³⁴

In thick descriptive form, Simpson provided a comprehensive account of a service he attended at Léogane in February 1937.³⁵ He vividly described the “colorful *vodun* altar with its collection of flags, chromoliths of Catholic Saints, crucifixes, holy water, choice foods and liqueurs, dishes, goblets, flowers, perfume, rosaries, candles, thunder stones, and various other objects which are thought to have some magical properties.”³⁶ In addition, Simpson provided detailed translations of *vodun* chants as sung in their original Haitian creole as well as carefully described the role of the drummers, the officiating responsibilities of the attending *vodun* priest, the “*mélange*” of prayers,

the rhythmic dances, the “solemn moment” of animal sacrifice, the ritual washing, and the “arrival” of the *loa* deity as evidenced through trance-possession.³⁷

In subsequent articles throughout the 1940s, Simpson would publish detailed exposés of the lived *vodun* belief system complete with a list of dozens of *vodun* deities, a meticulous chart highlighting certain *loa* deities and their specific attributes, special clothing, physical abode, favorite food and drink offerings, favorite colors, sacred days of worship, spiritual powers, and distinct possession characteristics.³⁸ Simpson also explored in his articles the social function of *vodun* in Haitian society as it related to extended kinships, the reinforcement of social mores, and its daily paradoxical relationship with Haitian political life.³⁹ His publications represent the complexity of *vodun* as not only an engagement with multiple powers of the supernatural, but a healing method in “preventive” and “curative” magic, a complex system with various “specialized rites,” and a sacred language with its own spiritual vocabulary and modes of divination.⁴⁰

Simpson described Vodun as “a hybrid cult consisting of African tribal religions, Catholicism, European witchcraft, and Haitian rural life.”⁴¹ Its lived expressions among devotees included a cosmological understanding that the “Saints, the African and indigenous gods, and the dead” were an integral part of one expansive and sentient universe.⁴² Similar to neighboring diasporic traditions in the Americas and the Caribbean, “the pantheon of Haiti is ‘living’ not because the gods and goddesses are immortals like classical deities, but because they are living archetypes, reincarnated during the rituals through the men and women they ride.”⁴³ This was the data Simpson tried to glean from African-descended populations and over the course of his career, he would go on to publish such seminal works as *The Shango Cult in Trinidad* (1965); *Religious Cults of the Caribbean: Trinidad, Jamaica, Haiti* (1970); and *Black Religions in the New World* (1978) as well as one of the earliest definitive works on Melville J. Herskovits in 1973.

Immediately continuing in this methodological trajectory of the ethnographic investigation of religion were two of Herskovits’ prominent students, William Bascom and Katherine Dunham. When William Bascom entered Northwestern University in 1936, he became the first of Herskovits’ doctoral students to be trained by him in the discipline of anthropology. Although it would be close to another decade before Herskovits’ disciplinary founding of an African Studies Department at Northwestern, he nonetheless trained his students as if it were already in existence. His student, William Bascom, would become one of the leading scholars in African Studies through his research on Yoruba culture in Nigeria. He would come to gain considerable prestige in the discipline with the publication of *The Yoruba of Southwestern Nigeria* and his prize-winning, *Ifa Divination: Communication Between Gods and Men in West Africa* in 1969.

Throughout the late 1930s and early 1940s, Bascom conducted research on Santería among Yoruba descendants in Cuba, and on Gullah folk cultures and cosmologies among African Americans in the Sea Islands. In his article, “Acculturation Among the Gullah Negroes” published in *American Anthropologist* in 1941, Bascom, in the intellectual footsteps of his teacher, contends that these Gullah communities ultimately retained an “African stamp.” Although it may not be

possible to identify each cultural practice with ethno-specificity, he argues “the similarities are to those elements which are common to West Africa as a whole – to the common denominators of West African culture.”⁴⁴ Although Bascom does concede that there are “European elements” within the Gullah cultural composite, his ethnographic research conducted in 1939 led him to conclude that Africanisms still persisted in Gullah speech, idiom, and vocabulary as well as in Gullah agricultural practices, animal tales, religious cosmology, and ritual pharmacopoeia. According to Bascom, “The interpretation of dreams in order to predict the future is important in West African as well as European tradition and it is wide-spread in the Sea Islands. Magic likewise is not foreign to the European tradition, but certain details of the practice are specifically African; the importance of ‘grave-yard dirt,’ of ‘foot track dust,’ and of hair and nails in working conjure; and the importance of ‘frizzled chickens’ as a means of detecting charms buried in the earth.”⁴⁵

In line with his social science contemporaries in the study of New World Africanisms, Bascom sought to place North American Gullah culture within an ethnohistorical paradigm privileging ethnography as a crucial methodological source for piecing together the historical cultural formations of African people in the Americas. He, like Hurston, Herskovits, and later Dunham, utilized ethnography and ethnographical fieldwork as a means of providing a necessary historicism to the religious and cultural dimensions of New World African communities. In other words, in the absence of written historical texts documenting the development of African culture in the Americas and in the Caribbean, careful ethnographic chronicling provided an alternative mode for theorizing and interpreting diasporic religio-cultural processes, its influences, and what Bascom understood as its African “resemblances.” Bascom believed that although his social science approach may not definitively prove the historicity of these diasporic traditions, he was confident in its ability to plausibly determine what might be either “historically incorrect” or “methodologically unsound” conclusions to draw based on ethnographic findings and evidence. He was particularly careful not to collapse ethnography into history especially in its methodological framing as a supplemental model of analysis and interpretation.

Like William Bascom, Katherine Dunham also reinforced Herskovitsian paradigms as she engaged religion, dance theory, and performance throughout her sixteen-month ethnographic study tour in Haiti, Martinique, Cuba, Trinidad, Jamaica, and later Brazil.⁴⁶ In the 1930s, Dunham was awarded a Julius Rosenwald Fund fellowship while working on her bachelor and graduate degrees at the University of Chicago in social anthropology. Intellectually, Dunham made both the University of Chicago and Northwestern University the axes of her anthropological studies. She considered her collective cohort of mentors to be social science heavyweights such as Robert Redfield, A.R. Radcliff-Brown, Bronislaw Malinowski, and Melville Herskovits. Reflecting on her mentors, Dunham states:

Dr. Redfield stressed the essential unity of activity – the cohesiveness of all elements in a simple society; this would mean that the dance would be related to other traits in the society. Dr. Herskovits gave me a more than adequate background for my West Indian research, both through African material and through his own West Indian material. Radcliff-Brown

lectured in terms of function, so that I was always reminded to look for the purpose and the use of whatever I saw, as well as the form. As for Dr. Malinowski, I shall always be grateful to him for giving me my first lesson in the beguine just a few days before I left for my field trip...After six months' training with Dr. Herskovits at Northwestern University, I felt sufficiently prepared to set out from island to island in the West Indies and look for the elements of the dance in the simple society which I hoped later to develop into an analysis of primitive dancing. The West Indies, I felt, was a very important field, because there one finds forms completely primitive as well as those in a process of acculturation. African forms still survive vigorously, chiefly in the ceremonial life...⁴⁷

Because of Dunham's unique interest in dance performance and anthropology, her research emphasized the importance of "interdisciplinary trajectories" in the study of African diasporic cultural practices.⁴⁸ This multi-lensed approach added vibrancy and richness to the scholarship Dunham would eventually produce.

In 1946, Dunham published her first book *Journey to Accompong* documenting her fieldwork in Jamaica. In a 1947 review of this book published in the *New York Herald Tribune Weekly Book Report*, Zora Neale Hurston, who shared a remote competitiveness with Dunham, wrote, "Miss Dunham's book is a day-to-day record of her observations: What has survived of the African cultures, and what has been absorbed from the outside world of Jamaicans, the traces of Obeah and African dances. Miss Dunham's book is very readable; in addition to the lively style and the pertinent observations of the doings of the men, women, and children of Accompong..."⁴⁹ One year after her first publication, Dunham's scholarly record expanded when her graduate thesis, "Dances of Haiti: Their Social Organization, Classification, Form, and Function," was translated into Spanish in 1947 and in subsequent years into French and English. In the Foreword to the book, Claude Lévi-Strauss, who worked largely in the 1930s among indigenous Amazon communities in Brazil, remarked on Dunham's "unquestionable originality" regarding her work in Haiti.⁵⁰ Reinforcing Dunham's originality, he stated, "her penetration into the life and local customs of the country was doubly facilitated by her theoretical and practical knowledge of aspects of dance. To the *dig-nataries* of the *vaudun* who were to become her informants, she was both a colleague, capable of comprehending and assimilating the subtleties of a complex ritual, and a stray soul who had to be brought back into the fold of the traditional cult..."⁵¹ By 1969, Dunham would publish *Island Possessed*, which many would argue represents the expansive chronicling of her extensive ethnographic work in Haiti on the Rada-Dahomey-Congo-Péto rites.

Dunham's ethnographic work in Haiti would not surprisingly become a source of inspiration for her then unknown Ukrainian assistant, Eleanora Derenkowsky (Maya Deren).⁵² By the late 1940s, Maya Deren would establish herself, in her own right, as an important ethnographer and visual documenter of Haitian vodou practices. As a result of Deren's ability to secure funding from the Guggenheim and Rockefeller Foundations to support an initial eight-month stay in Haiti in 1947, Dunham remarked that her one-time assistant was able "to go farther than I had in analyzing Haitian folklore and religion."⁵³ Following a series of three ethnographic trips to Haiti, Deren's research culminated in her 1953 publication and striking documentary, *Divine Horseman: The Liv-*

ing Gods of Haiti. Ultimately, Deren methodologically combined ethnography and film studies as she explored the intricate world of Haitian vodou. She witnessed the lived practice of this tradition and recorded 18,000 feet of film footage documenting vodou's clandestine sacred rituals. In terms of scholarly contribution, Deren's ethnographic footage became the first representation of Haitian vodou ritual and trance possession in cinematographic form.⁵⁴

Dunham and Deren in many ways transformed the study of African diasporic religions by translating their ethnographic data into written, visual, and performative mediums. Dunham's research throughout the African diaspora was distinct among her contemporaries in that she engaged in the traditional scholarly medium of written publications to showcase her ethnographic research but she also included the added medium of what American Studies professor Halifu Osumare calls "performance ethnographies" in which Dunham transformed the theatrical stage into a site for ethnographic encounters with African diasporic cultural practices.⁵⁵ According to Sara Johnson, in both written and theatrical texts, Dunham,

...catalogued, interpreted, and transformed New World, African-derived sensibilities from the vantage point of multiple disciplines, consistently putting them into dialogue with other epistemological frameworks...Likewise, she pioneered the study of comparative religions of the African diaspora, as can be seen in her study of Haitian Vodun, Cuban Santeria, Jamaican Obeah, and Brazilian Candomblé...She is, in fact, one of the few women belonging to a pantheon of scholars that spearheaded movements analyzing the legacy of slavery in the region and championed the worth of African-influenced traditions in various national milieus. Her pursuits embody a lived dimension of a theoretical construct of diaspora.⁵⁶

Dunham's work, along with Deren's moving images of cinematography, placed both women among a group of committed scholars in the 1930s and 1940s whose works gave voice and visibility to "the traditions of communities neglected by elite historiographies," bringing scholarly integrity to African diasporic expressions that were pejoratively deemed traditions of "ignorance" and "superstition."⁵⁷ As Johnson states above, the *diaspora* and its traditions could move beyond the fixity of a "theoretical construct" and be transformed into a multi-sited composite of complex lived dimensions.

Joining this American cohort of the 1930s and 1940s was a handful of French scholars such as Roger Bastide, Pierre Verger, and Alfred Métraux whose works in translation greatly contributed to rounding out the early Anglophone ethnographic historiography of African diasporic traditions in the Americas and in the Caribbean. The textual productions and visual documentation of Bastide, Verger, and Métraux inevitably proved essential to the study of Brazilian Candomblé and Haitian Vodun. Bastide was the first of the three to engage in ethnographic research in the Americas, making Brazil his point of entry in the 1930s. His *African Religions of Brazil: Toward a Sociology of the Interpenetration of Civilizations* (1960) and *African Religions in the New World* (1971) became key texts on often contested theoretical concepts such as "syncretism," "fusion," and "amalgamation" as central interpretive lenses for analyzing these traditions.

Moreover, Roger Bastide and the photographic ethnographer, Pierre Verger, would come to share not only a mutual interest in the religious traditions of Brazil's African descendants, but also a deep collegial relationship. After his arrival in the 1940s, Brazil became not only Verger's intellectual home but eventually his physical home even as he continued his ethnographic journeys throughout West Africa and the Caribbean. Unlike Bastide, Verger had no formal academic training in the social sciences, but nonetheless was able to produce a body of primary works and visual archives that expanded Brazilian cultural and religious studies. His 1950s publications, *Dieux d'Afrique: Culte Des Orishas Et Vodouns À L'ancienne Côte Des Esclaves En Afrique Et À Bahia, La Baie De Tous Les Saints Au Brésil* (1954) and most especially his *Notes Sur Le Culte Des Orisa Et Vodun À Bahia: La Baie De Tous Les Saints Au Brésil Et À L'ancienne Côte Des Esclaves En Afrique* (1957) established Verger as an important scholar, ethnographer, and photographer among his credentialed academic peers.

Lastly, Alfred Métraux—the Marcel Mauss-trained ethnographer—once reflected on the influence that Katherine Dunham's work had on him in choosing to study African diasporic religious cultures. According to Métraux, “those who fervently practice the cults and those who learned to love them are grateful to Katherine Dunham for having brought to the white world the profound beauty and humanity of a religion in which the American Negroes have found new reasons to hope and to live.”⁵⁸ Throughout his field research in Haiti in the late 1940s, Métraux came upon the memories and imprints of Dunham who had previously frequented many of his major ethnographic sites in her own research.⁵⁹ As one of the final scholars in this early ethnographic historiography, Métraux would become an important contributor to African diasporic religions in Haiti and, like Bastide, became an important colleague of Pierre Verger through his travels to Brazil. Although his *Voodoo in Haiti* was not published until 1958, the ethnographic work Métraux began in the 1940s became the foundational data for this significant scholarly work.

Most importantly, from among the ethnographic pioneers whose works close this formative 1930s-1940s period, Zora Neale Hurston, Katherine Dunham, Maya Deren, Roger Bastide, Pierre Verger, and Alfred Métraux transformed ethnographic approaches to the scholarly study of African diasporic religions. They revolutionized traditional methods of ethnography (participant observation, interviewing, note taking and journaling, and the writing of thick, descriptive texts) to include formal participatory initiations into these religious traditions.⁶⁰ This form of inquiry, which Halifu Osumare labeled the “emic-participatory approach,” made ethnography both embodied and lived and would come to impact the study of African diasporic traditions for generations to come.⁶¹

Finally, because of these scholarly innovators, ethnography and its relationship to the study of African diasporic religious cultures would no longer adhere to normative understandings of participant-observation. Instead, ethnographic approaches in this field would come to encompass what I call *participant engagement* with human devotees and their sacred spirits, with ritual and ceremonial preparations, informants in and out of trance-possession, embodied theistic pantheons, ritual specialists as they engage in animal sacrifice, devotees' methods of producing meaning, healing

and advisory arts of divination, and with the various symbolic “forms of language-using.”⁶² In the end, because of the multiple *blurrings* encountered through this method, Karen McCarthy Browns cautions that one should not become an “ethnographer...if you cannot tolerate a bit of moral (as well as intellectual) ambiguity” for to enter into this space is to enter into, what Zora Neale Hurston ultimately calls, “a formalized curiosity,” a “poking and prying with a purpose,” and “a seeking that he who wishes may know the cosmic secrets of the world and they that dwell therein” – a space religionists dare not enter into lightly.⁶³

Notes

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- 3 Ten months after the recording of this interview, Baba Medahochi died on May 26, 2007 at the age of 83.
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- 5 Brian Morris, *Religion and Anthropology: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 11. Hall, xi.
- 6 David D. Hall, “From ‘Religion and Society’ to Practices: The New Religious History” in *Possible Pasts: Becoming Colonial in Early America*, ed. Robert Blair St. George (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000), 159.
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- 8 Geertz, 19.
- 9 Anne Ryen, “Ethnography: Constitutive Practice and Research Ethics,” *The Handbook of Social Research Ethics*, ed. Donna M. Mertens and Pauline E. Ginsberg (Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, 2009), 237.
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14 Hurston, "Dance Songs," 299.

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30 Herskovits, 24.

31 Herskovits, 24-25.

32 Herskovits, "Problem," 49-50.

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- 37 Simpson, "The Vodun Service," 241, 250.
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