Special Issue:
African Diaspora Religion:
Mobility and Transnationalism in the 21st Century
Photo from cover:

Drummers at Oyotunji Village, South Carolina perform during Odun Sango in 2011 (photo by Colin Townsend).
African Diasporic Religion:
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Message from the Editor

Religion is a key element in the social lives of practitioners of African-derived religion. It pervades every aspect of their daily lives even in ways that are not easily perceptible. In the study of African Diaspora, religion has played a key role because it was the most visible evidence of a social practice that demonstrated a connection to Africa. Religious and spiritual practice in everyday life figure prominently in how the diaspora is sustained, expanded and (re)created in different spaces all over the world. As the field of African diasporic religion has expanded within the last ten years, discussions have opened up regarding its links to globalization, authenticity, and (re)connection with continental Africa (Matory 2008; Palmie 2008; Selka 2013).

In the study of the African Diaspora, ideas of circulation, exchange, and (re)production are central. Exploring the African Diaspora provides an opportunity to think about the similarities that bind individuals and make an African Diaspora; but also it provides an opportunity to reflect on the differences that mark the uniqueness of the cultures, social practices, political and economic systems created by peoples of African descent throughout the globe. This reflection opens up new avenues of discovery and discussion within African Diaspora studies and once again emphasizes the diversity of experiences and individuals who make up the African Diaspora.

Within the diverse religious practices of the African Diaspora, one finds an overarching concern with maintaining an “authentic Africanity.” In contemporary times the concept of authenticity has become quite contentious due to the transnational nature of many of these religious practices. Scholars such as Stephan Palmie (2008) have pushed scholars to thoroughly examine these undertheorized, but overused, concepts. He has challenged scholars to better demonstrate how concepts such as “authentic Africanity” or transnationality are actualized in the social realities and lived religious experience of practitioners of African diasporic religions. Younger scholars, like the ones whose works are featured in this issue, are responding to that call. They are pushing the boundaries to explore how notions of blackness and Africanness are (re)created and expressed in the varying locations where the African Diaspora exist. I’m pleased to say that at the heart of this growing field is solid and rich ethnographic fieldwork.

Although Africans have traveled throughout the world, long before the advent of slavery, the modern understanding of the African Diaspora begins with the forced migration of black bodies from the West coast of Africa to the shores of the rich producing lands of the Americas. When one speaks of African Diaspora, one refers to
people of African descent wherever they may be. Within this understanding of the diaspora, we must also include those who are not of African descent, but yet who follow the religious or sociocultural practices created and promulgated by peoples of African descent. In this volume, Wakengut’s article on Rastafari in Germany sheds more light on this segment of the African Diaspora. In this issue, the articles explore different religious practices in different geographical areas and demonstrate the breadth and diversity of the African Diaspora and its religious practices. Today the mobilization is mostly voluntary and people of African descent migrate to many different parts of the globe and with them they bring their sociocultural and religious practices. In addition, the advent of new digital media increases their ability to export their sociocultural and religious practices around the globe.

The articles in this volume discuss adaptation, immigration, globalization and transnationalism in connection with the African Diaspora. In all of these articles, we see how African diasporic religions are transmitted and introduced to new spaces and places; and how these adherents adapt to new environments and how these religious practices and spiritual pathways aid them in that process. The circuits and networks of individuals who transmit religious ideas and praxis among African diasporic communities is one of the reasons this topic of study is so dynamic (Clarke 2004; Matory 2005; Scott 1986).

In African diasporic religion the emphasis is on the efficacy in the quotidian life of the practitioner. These spiritual practices assist practitioners in their daily life with healing, attaining gainful employment, maintaining positive energies in one’s immediate surroundings, adapting to new home countries, dealing with racism, or finding a new more affirmative identity. In one way or another, these articles explore how practitioners use religious practices to transform their immediate lives.

The issues explores how religion is a tool which helps immigrants adapt to their new surroundings, while also impacting and transforming their new adoptive host community. Munier’s article, “Self, Lwa and Haiti: Adherence Process and ‘Reinvention of the Self’ by a Therapeutic Use of Haitian Vodou in Montreal” examines how adapting and integrating into a host society requires the therapeutic use of Vodou. This way of using and interacting with Vodou then allows Nadine (an immigrant who arrived in Montreal as a non-devotee) to become part of a spiritual and cultural transnational network of practitioners, healers, and priests. Munier investigates how through this religious practice identity is recreated through the construction of a “Haitianness” grounded in religious cultural symbolism. His intervention demonstrates how the re-interpretation of identity and self through the interaction with and mediation of the lwa (Vodou deities) assist the individual in re-inventing themselves and their lives. In this particular case, the mediation prompted a woman to become a priestess, and thus be able to assist others and possibly have transformative effects on the lives of those within her community.
Beryl’s article, “Fostering Community Among African Migrant Christians in Massachusetts,” explores how religion functions in the process of immigration in the North American context among central African immigrants. Beryl focuses on how African immigrants use their participation in their Pentecostal church to help them acclimate to a new environment and recreate a familial network with other African immigrants in the Boston metropolitan area. Beryl demonstrates how a somewhat marginalized community strives to create “intimacy” and “bonds” that will tie them, one could even say anchor them, to a community to combat the feelings of homesickness and loss that often accompany migration. She closely examines how the church leaders specifically cultivate belonging within their congregation to create social ties that will eventually assist this immigrant community in achieving both psychological and material success. Faith becomes the salient vehicle through which both psychological, social, political and economic ties that establish community are formed.

These kinds of forging of connections and communities through faith is also evident in Wakengut’s “Rastafari in Germany: Jamaican Roots and Global–Local Influences.” In this community of white German Rastafarians, we see how accessing “African” or “Blackness” can take on different meanings within a new context. This article expands the boundaries of how the African Diaspora and “blackness” is usually conceptualized by exploring how those of non-African descent lay claim to such categories. The article also calls into question the role of strategic essentialism in the construction of identity. Wakengut examines how German Rastafari adapt the tenets of Rastafari in their attempts to create a “symbolic counterworld” to what they perceive to be a dominant German culture.

Another article that richly demonstrates how practitioners take an African diasporic religious practice and adapt it to their immediate environment, adjusting and adapting to meet their social, psychological and religious needs is Townsend’s “Drumming for the Orisa: (Re)Inventing Yoruba Identity in Oyotunji Village.” Music and dance performance are a major part of African diasporic religious practice. Townsend highlights how adaptation and “transposition” (Johnson 2007)—“re-inscription of religious practices onto new maps” (Selka 2013:7)—have helped orisha worshippers in Oyotunji Village in South Carolina to create their own connections and bonds to Yorubaland. Simultaneously, orisha worshippers introduce their own rhythms and songs to incorporate their own experiences as African Americans in the United States into the ritual and spiritual music played for the deities. While some other African American practitioners might refer to this as “invention” (Palmie 1996), for these practitioners it is simply part and parcel of the process of religious transposition that attests to the dynamism of this lived religion that has undergone many reinventions, recreations, and transformations in its journey across the Atlantic to spaces in the New World many centuries ago. Townsend’s contribution is unique in that it clarifies how the religious music of orisha orders the social world of practitioners and reinforces social norms and behaviors. As such music is not only a primary vehicle through which
practitioners communicate with their deities and ancestral spirits, but also a vehicle through which social hierarchies are structured.

I hope this offering will give readers a glimpse into and an initial understanding of the diversity and dynamism of African diasporic religions and the impact they have not only their community of practitioners but on transnational networks and political economies of identity, mobility, and globalization. May scholars of African diasporic religions continue to investigate the lived experiences of practitioners and the larger implications these have for both local and transnational communities and networks of spiritual exchange. These essays highlight the necessity to continue to employ rich “ethnographic, historically and culturally nuanced research and interpretive methods” (Hanchard 2004:148). The study of the African Diaspora continues to offer us new and innovative ways of viewing ourselves, and the world with which we interact on a daily basis.

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Fostering Community
among African Migrant Christians in Massachusetts

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Abstract
This article examines how social relationships and the feeling of “community” are fostered among African migrant Christians. It draws on data generated from participant observation, direct observation, and semi-structured interviews as part of a larger ethnographic study of families predominantly from the African Great Lakes Region who attend two born-again churches located northeast of Boston. Departing from classic assimilation theories of immigrants in the U.S. (e.g., Gordon 1964; Park 1930; Portes and Zhou 1993; Warner and Srole 1945), I contend that psycho-social well-being of immigrants is an integral part of integration. Moreover, religion as an institution and as a system of meaning (Alba et al. 2008) serves to promote that well-being, particularly for the African diaspora, which is a smaller, heterogeneous immigrant group in the U.S. who often have strong religious affiliations. In order to understand this better, I present the characteristics and practices through which intimacy is cultivated (Biolo 2009) to engender the feeling of community and build bonding and bridging social relationships (Dryden-Peterson 2009) among a more or less heterogeneous group of African migrants. Particularly in the case of bridging social ties, I show how certain distinguishing characteristics that suggest difference are minimized (e.g. country of origin, ethnicity, maternal language, and/or immigrant status), whereas others that suggest similarity (e.g., “African” and “believer”) are maximized. This study demonstrates that religion is crucial in the study of immigration, an intersection that was once an important area of scholarly interest (e.g., Herberg 1955) and has only recently reemerged (Alba et al. 2008).

Key Words: African Diaspora, Immigration, Religion, Community, Identity
Introduction

Across from a fire station on a quiet street in a Boston suburb, a small two story building stands rather unremarkably. There is a small, ruffled green awning with white numbers that identify its address, but no other symbols to indicate that it is the home of Grace Church.1 On Monday evenings, I make my way upstairs to a small, unadorned room, except for the small red, green, blue, and yellow chairs for children stacked along the wall, and warmly greet the four to eight women usually gathered there. A few relax casually on the blue-gray carpet, while others sit on adult-sized chairs to create a loose circle around which a toddler or two wander. Their conversations in Luganda switch to English for my benefit, but their rapid rate of conversation and spirited laughter do not diminish.

They begin their weekly “mother-to-mother” Bible study meeting with testimonies, which describe what they are thankful for or how they have been challenged during the week and how God has provided for them. Helen, a Ugandan immigrant who came to the U.S. in 2001 and has become the group’s de facto leader, opens the meeting with her usual refrain, “When two or three are gathered in His name, He will hear us.” After Helen gives her testimony, it is Sharon’s turn. She thanks God for “His provision.” She shares that she and her husband came to an important realization this week: they had contemplated moving from their two-bedroom apartment, which they share with four children, to a bigger house in a different suburb. However, they realized that the size of their physical house was less important than having “community,” which they had found through the church. They enjoyed “coming together and fellowshipping,” developing a “community because you’re family.” If they moved, they would be farther away from that community. Helen interjects to comment, “So you created your own family here.” Sharon turns to me to clarify, “I came here by myself.”

Ruthanne, a Ugandan immigrant with a husband and two-year old son, then begins her testimony. She prefices it by sharing with me that she lost her mother two or three weeks ago. She explains that everyone in her family is so depressed, and she has been sad too, but now she has told herself that she no longer wants to be sad. She wants to “live the legacy she [her mother] left behind” — her mother taught her and her siblings “strength.” Echoing Sharon, she says that she also has felt the “community” here because everyone called when they heard her mother had passed away. She thinks that if she had been in Atlanta, GA, where she first settled after coming to the U.S., that that would not have happened because there was “no sense of community” there. The way the community supported her here, she explains, “resemble[s] things that happen in Uganda.” She adds, “I appreciate communities like this.”

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1 The names of institutions and participants in this study have been changed to pseudonyms in accordance with IRB protocol.
The women continue going around the circle with their testimonies and then transition to a discussion about the chapter they are reading from *The Power of a Praying Parent* (2007[1995]) by Stormie Omartian. Later, they close their two-hour meeting with singing and personal prayers, which they share simultaneously out loud in Luganda and English.

**The Church as “Community”**

As I conducted twelve months of ethnographic fieldwork in the Greater Boston Area with African migrants and their children, I found myself spending more and more time with them at faith-based gatherings, such as the Bible study described above, at church services, and at social gatherings, like baby showers and barbecues, which were attended by those people who I had seen at church. In many conversations, my participants continually likened church and its congregants to a “community,” “home,” or “family.” As Sharon explained, it is not about the physical space of church, but rather the feeling that is created when people interact, which makes you “feel like you’re home,” like in Uganda. Thus, I explore how these feelings and close social relationships are fostered among migrants and the role that religion plays. I ask: 1) Which characteristics do migrants recognize are salient to their relationships and feelings of community, or belonging? Which characteristics of difference are ignored?; and 2) What are the practices through which social relationships are fostered? What is unique about religious practices, and in particular Pentecostal practices, that engender strong communal feelings? This article explores how religion as a system of meaning and as an institution (Alba et al. 2008) facilitates the development of meaningful social relationships and the feelings of belonging and community. It is critical to understand the development of these social relationships, because I argue that these relationships, as well as the associated feelings of belonging, enable the financial, educational, and linguistic achievements of migrants, which are associated with assimilation and acculturation.

**Theoretical Framework**

Studies of immigrants in the U.S. have largely focused on documenting and theorizing how immigrants “assimilate” or “acculturate” to their new environments. The metrics by which this is measured and the theoretical frameworks through which this is analyzed have changed. “Classic” views on assimilation presented it as: 1) a process whereby different people come together to attain cultural solidarity (Park 1930), 2) a process whereby ethnic groups forget old cultural traits and adopt new ones in order to be accepted in the new society (Warner and Srole 1945), and 3) a multi-step process whereby acculturation is first achieved by adopting key cultural elements of the host’s mainstream society (i.e. white, Protestant, middle class values) before achieving full assimilation and participation in the host society (Gordon 1964). Since the 1980s, assimilation theorists have asserted that assimilation is not the same for all immigrant
groups. Some scholars have documented the different patterns of segmented assimilation (Portes and Zhou 1993) and the contributing factors that enable or disable adaptation, such as aspiration, English language proficiency, age of arrival, length of residence, place of residence, and socioeconomics (Zhou 1997). Other scholars have argued that immigrants create a hybrid or third culture in their new environment (e.g., Bhabha 1994; Gutierrez et al. 1999; McDowell 1999; Smith and Leavy 2008). In these more recent theories, scholars have noted that migrants do not necessarily drop cultural values, practices, or social connections to their culture or country of origin (Gans 1992). In fact, in our more technological, transportable, and otherwise global world, many migrants lead transnational lives (Levitt and Jaworsky 2007). And scholars have found that many migrants often reject certain values of the host society (Foley and Hoge 2007; Huntington 2004), while still remaining loyal to the U.S. (Massey et al. 1987).

In all of these theories, however, the general paradigm encompasses a view of assimilation as change defined by cultural values, economic status, political engagement, and/or linguistic competence, among others. These are reasonable metrics by which to gauge immigrant assimilation or acculturation; however, I argue that another important dimension to consider is psycho-social well-being, or attaining the feeling of connection, identity, and belonging and developing meaningful social relationships (see also Dryden-Peterson 2009). It is about being comfortable in a new environment with new people. It is about building relationships within homogeneous communities, resulting in bonding social ties, as well as within heterogeneous communities, resulting in bridging social ties that cross national, ethnic, linguistic, and/or immigration status distinctions (Dryden-Peterson 2009:43-44). This is not to say that identity- and community-building happen in the absence of conflict or tension, but rather the point is to emphasize that the desire for belonging shapes the aspirations and choices of migrant ideas and practices. Indeed, I argue that it is the desire for social connection and the development of actual relationships, which in turn support financial, educational, linguistic, and other achievements for migrants that become assimilation or acculturation metrics.

In this study, as my participants illustrate in the opening vignette, religion is central to the development of that feeling of belonging and those relationships. Scholarship on the intersection of immigration and religion has only recently reemerged from a long lapse (Alba et al. 2008; Gozdziak and Shandy 2002). In a recent comprehensive study comparing old and new immigrant groups (e.g. Italians and Mexicans, Japanese and Koreans, European Jews and Arab Muslims, and African Americans and Haitians), Richard Alba, Albert J. Raboteau, and Josh DeWind (2008) argue that religion is still an integral part of integration for immigrants, both as a system of meaning and as an institution. These are two important thematic lenses through which to view the data presented in my study on how the feeling and relationships of a community are fostered for African migrants. Religion as an institution provides a space
for African migrants to meet and encourages faith-based practices that deepen interpersonal connections. Religion as a system of meaning promotes a certain discourse that helps to build identity and community. In both cases, participants are “cultivating intimacy,” as James Bielo (2009) describes it (see also Willen 2007). Thus, in this article, I present the characteristics and practices, highlighting those particular to Pentecostalism, through which intimacy is cultivated to engender the feeling of community and build bonding and bridging social relationships among African migrants that attend two born-again Christian churches in Massachusetts.

Methodology and Sample: Ethnography of the African Diaspora in a Religious Context

To be perfectly candid, I did not set out to study African migrants specifically in church settings; however, in the Greater Boston Area, I quickly learned that this is where they congregate. They do not live in ethnic enclaves in an urban area; rather, they settle (or are resettled, in the case of refugees) in suburbs that have a lower cost of living. And even in these suburbs, they are scattered across multiple towns. Thus, church on Sundays, as well as mid-week services and small group meetings, provide opportunities for this migrant population to connect and support one another emotionally, spiritually, and materially. This makes sense given that 62.7% of Africans are Christian (Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life 2011) and that African migrants make up only 4.1% of the total foreign-born population (Migration Policy Institute 2012). As a result, African migrants are more likely to be part of religious congregations than other immigrant groups and more likely to worship in heterogeneous ethnic groups (Foley and Hoge 2007). Moreover, the countries from which participants emigrated overwhelmingly identify as Christian — DR Congo (95.7%), Burundi (94.1%), Rwanda (93.4%), Uganda (86.7%), Kenya (84.8%), and Tanzania (59.6%) (Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life 2011).²

In spite of their smaller numerical presence in the U.S. when compared to other immigrant groups, African migrants are a valuable segment of the population to study because of their diversity. In a study on how the feeling of community is fostered, this group presents an important theoretical and empirical case study of how relationships develop across national, ethnic, linguistic, and/or immigrant status boundaries. To that end, I compare data collected through participant observation, direct observation, and semi-structured interviews with attendants at two churches: Grace Church, which has a congregation of mostly Ugandan immigrants; and Spirit Church, which has a more or less multinational congregation made up of immigrants and refugees from 11 different African countries (predominantly the DRC and Rwanda). These two churches were used as case studies in the exploration of social relationships: the congregation at Grace Church was more similar demographically speaking in nationality, language, and

² To be sure, there is diversity in faith traditions among African immigrants, including Islam and African Indigenous Religion (Olupona and Gemignani 2007).
immigrant status, whereas the congregation at Spirit Church was more diverse. Despite the difference, participants from both congregations described church as a “community,” “home,” or “family.” These churches are a part of a network of about five self-described “African churches,” which are located in several suburban areas northeast of the city of Boston. Both churches fall under the Protestant wing of Christianity, and most congregants generally identify themselves as born-again Christians, who have accepted Jesus as their personal savior, undergone a water baptism, and thus become born-again. Spirit Church has a Pentecostal affiliation; whereas Grace Church identifies more generally as “evangelical.” Pentecostals and charismatics are the world’s fastest growing group of Christians. And Africans are no exception to this trend (Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life 2006).

Collectively, the participants in this study mainly come from the African Great Lakes Region, which includes the DRC, Rwanda, Burundi, Uganda, Kenya, and Tanzania, although some participants did emigrate from other sub-Saharan African countries. With the exception of Uganda, Swahili is often the lingua franca in the region and in the diaspora, since there is tremendous linguistic diversity. In addition, in the U.S., English becomes the other lingua franca. Because of the heterogeneity of the participants in this study, I have chosen to use the term “African” in some places, because it is an inclusive term that encompasses all of their countries of origin. Moreover, it is a term that my participants frequently use. Although there is a danger of essentializing difference, most of my participants did not see this as troubling. In fact, it is potentially surprising that such close interpersonal relationships did develop among these diverse populations given the current and historical interethnic violence that has plagued the African Great Lakes Region from which they emigrate. That being said, in some areas of the paper, I choose to disclose the national origin of the participant speaking to show the diversity in their countries of origin. Migrants at times would identify themselves as African or by their countries of origin, depending on who was present and the conversation at hand.

Findings: Characteristics that Foster Community

Congregation members of both Grace and Spirit Churches continually referred to church as a “community,” “home,” or “family,” suggesting that it was a comforting or familial place or haven. The frequency of these references and the choice in descriptive words towards others who share a similar faith led me to look more closely at what inspires these feelings of connection. Participant explanations suggest three important dimensions: 1) certain demographic characteristics of congregants, 2) spiritual/religious characteristics of congregants, and 3) pan-African cultural characteristics.

Demographic characteristics: Church members noted the importance of culture in explaining why church felt like “community,” “home,” or “family.” Magda, a nineteen year old who emigrated from Tanzania following her parents, told me that Spirit Church “feels like home,” because there are “people from my country” who speak Swahili.
Nationality and language of congregants emerged as the two most salient demographic characteristics participants identified. As Pastor Elijah of Spirit Church explained, Spirit and Grace are part of a network of what he calls “African churches” in the Greater Boston Area. True Light and Grace Churches have Ugandan pastors, and the latter preaches in Luganda. Good Faith Church has a Kenyan pastor, who conducts services in English. The fifth, La Foi, is French Congolese. In other words, he too suggests that the nationalities of the pastors and the language of preaching attract people who identify with those characteristics. In spite of the diversity in maternal tongues among participants, and particularly those that attend Spirit church, I did not notice it as a divisive factor in creating bridging social relationships. They used English or Swahili in many cases as a lingua franca. But that being said, participants did note the importance of having at least a few members of their church speak their same language.

Spirit Church presents a more complex case, because its membership is more diverse than other churches in the network. Attendants come from 11 different African countries and speak a wide variety of languages (with varying proficiencies). So why is it that some Africans choose to attend Spirit, as opposed to another church in the network? One possibility could be geographic proximity between a congregant’s home and the church; however, many congregants traveled the long distance from home to church by foot, car, or public transportation, depending on their financial means. Many congregants often offered to pick up others who did not live within walking distance or have access to private or public transportation. Rather than geographic proximity, migration experience seemed to explain more a congregant’s choice of church. As one Congolese woman pointed out, refugees tend to go to Spirit. Although Pastor Elijah at Spirit at first dismissed migration experience as a factor, he later reconsidered and reflected that more than fifty percent of Spirit members came as refugees to this country. He too came to the U.S. as a refugee from the DRC (also living in Tanzania and Kenya) more than twenty years ago. He speaks four languages, although primarily preaches in English and occasionally in Swahili (church service is simultaneously translated in these languages thanks to church volunteers.) Thus, Pastor Elijah’s multicultural background, multilingual proficiencies, and migration experiences seem to parallel those of his congregants, and thus attract other African migrants like him.

Spiritual/Religious characteristics: In addition to particular demographic characteristics, congregants noted how the spiritual or religious characteristics of congregants played a role in their relationships with others. As the opening vignette illustrates, Sharon’s feeling of “community” had to do with “fellowshipping” — or coming together to worship in a particular way. Likewise, Imani, a woman in her late twenties who emigrated from Sierra Leone in 2006, emphasized that the style of worship mattered. She had been a Methodist but was unhappy with her church in the U.S. and the way they worshipped. She described Methodists as too focused on “doctrine” and “prescriptive or prescribed.” When she came to Spirit, she felt at “home” and more “free.” Her feelings of community, like Sharon’s, emerge from recognizing
and identifying with others who worship in a particular way. Although there is a relative structure to Pentecostal church service each week, testimonies from congregants and the pastor can make it feel more personal, spontaneous, and emotional (Shoaps 2002). It is not unusual for congregants to cry or cry out in response to their conversations with God or hearing others describe their conversations, visions, or experiences. This style of worship is characteristic of Pentecostal and charismatic churches worldwide (Robbins 2004) that many of my participants sought out.

Pan-African Cultural Characteristics: Of the five African churches, Spirit Church has the most diversity in terms of number of countries lived in, languages spoken, and differences in migration experiences. Paradoxically, this diversity is often downplayed by members who gloss over national, ethnic, linguistic, and immigrant status differences among them and identify with other congregation members as “African.” When I asked assistant Pastor Kadmiel why he first attended Spirit, he first pointed to its spiritual/religious characteristics as a church of born-again Christians practicing true Christianity and then added that congregants are “more related to my culture.” He explained that they share similarities since they all come from “Africa.” I questioned his use of the general term, inquiring whether he recognized the cultural diversity on the continent. He pushed back, though, and said that if you put all “black Africans” together, they have a lot of similarities, especially in the way “we worship.” He explained that it is evident in the music, food, dress, and type of preaching. Pastor Kadmiel was not the only one who felt this way. I repeatedly heard Spirit Church leaders and congregants refer to their common “African” heritage and culture during sermons and casual conversation. In the use of the term, people blurred differences in their ancestry. Moreover, they tended to blur any assumed line between culture and religion. As Pastor Kadmiel highlighted above, people are “African” in the way they dress and in the way they worship. Some scholars have even argued that the spread of Pentecostalism in Africa is attributable to some degree to African “roots,” which are evident in the “‘orality of liturgy,’ ‘narrativity of theology and witness,’ emphasis on participation, use of dreams and visions in worship, and model of mind/body correspondence that promotes healing by prayer” (see discussion in Robbins 2004:126). Pastor Kadmiel and others’ willingness to ignore certain differences and identify as “African” reveals how powerful religion is in the development of relationships and the feelings of belonging in a way that non-religious, social organizations or institutions cannot. Religion, and in this case Pentecostalism in particular, affords the opportunity to transcend certain boundaries and connect with others through faith first and foremost. This proves true particularly in the diaspora where there can be great diversity among migrants.

In sum, particular demographic, religious, and cultural characteristics play a key role in the selection of one’s church, which engenders a sense of “community,” “home,” or “family.” In some cases, certain characteristics may go unrecognized, such as type of migration experience; however, in other cases, certain characteristics are fully
recognized, such as specific country of origin, language, denomination, and style of worship, and even homogenized in some cases under the umbrella term of “African.”

It is important to realize that the feeling of connection within this heterogeneous population, particularly at Spirit Church, is no small matter. The congregants of Spirit Church come from a region that has historically experienced interethnic violence resulting in the death and displacement of millions of people. But at Spirit, for example, Hutus and Tutsis, two ethnic factions from the Great Lakes Region, worship and pray together without much, if any, tension (or at least during my fieldwork). Thus, this begs the question of how these heterogeneous, or bridging, social relationships develop (Dryden-Peterson 2009)? Is it just that they are in an unfamiliar environment and thus look for people who share some cultural and/or spiritual characteristics? Perhaps to some extent, but I argue that this is not enough to sustain relationships, nor promote the feelings of community and belonging that my participants expressed. Deeper bonding and bridging social ties are nurtured through particular religious practices of language and interaction. This is more fully examined in the next section.

**Practices that Foster Community**

Even though demographic, religious, and cultural characteristics are powerful enough to initially attract people together, they do not fully explain how meaningful social relationships are fostered, particularly across national, ethnic, linguistic, and/or immigrant status differences, to the point that people refer to one another as a “community” or “family.” Remember, this is not just about where people spend their time on Sunday or any other day of the week, but rather how people make major life decisions, as illustrated by Sharon’s case presented in the opening vignette. I argue that there are certain practices, or processes, that nurture the development of relationships and the feeling of connection and belonging. Many of these practices are unique to religion, particularly Pentecostalism, in contrast to other social organizations. Some practices are cultivated deliberately, or consciously, on the part of church leaders and members; in other cases, processes are unconscious, or at least not made explicit. Regardless, I have identified four practices: 1) social activities and interactions; 2) institutional and faith-related practices; 3) self-othering discourse; and 4) fictive kinship terms.

Social activities and interactions: Both church leaders and members organize activities during which people have a chance to socialize with one another informally and share important life events, holidays, or other special celebrations together. To exemplify how church members “care,” Elinore, a Rwandan immigrant who attends Spirit Church, points to the fact that together church members at Spirit Church celebrate baby showers, cook, attend one another’s weddings, and go to each other’s houses when loved ones have passed away. Many of these events are announced during church service on Sunday, and some of them, like baby showers, immediately follow service. At first, I was surprised that after a lengthy two and a half hour service
that went beyond lunch hour, many people still attended these affairs. But as Pastor Elijah once remarked, “There is fellowship in eating together,” as the church congregation transitioned from Sunday service to a celebratory meal downstairs. Just as a family would, “So as a church, we want to eat together.” The fact that church members are willing to attend social events even after a long service is a testament to the fact that they value spending time with one another. Along with the sharing of food, organized activities around life events, holidays, and other special occasions create opportunities for adults and children to develop close relationships.

Social interactions also happened spontaneously but in equally powerful ways. As Pura, a Ugandan immigrant who attends Grace Church, explained, church members reached out to one another when they needed help. This certainly proved true for Ruthanne (introduced in the opening vignette), who received calls from church members when her mother passed away. In moments of personal suffering, spontaneous outreach serves to bolster close interpersonal feelings among church members. Similarly, church members also reach out to those in the congregation whom they do not know. For example, Pastor Elijah solicited donations of household necessities and cash offerings for newly resettled refugees from his congregation on different occasions. Spontaneous outreach, whether grounded in pre-existing relationships or not, as well as organized social activities are critical practices through which feelings of “home,” “community,” and “family” are fostered.

That being said, it could be argued that social activities and interactions are characteristic of many organizations and clubs and thus not unique in this case. I argue, though, that they do feature prominently and in particular ways among Pentecostals. Pentecostalism promotes a ritualization of life with multiple services throughout the week, long services (some overnight), and a strict moral code that shuns drinking and drugs, among other things, and encourages people to a life of prayer, routine fasting, and mission work (Robbins 2004). At a concert to promote the mission work of one congregant, I spoke again with Elinore about the twenty dollar admission ticket and the one hundred and fifty dollar admission ticket to an upcoming conference sponsored by Spirit Church. To me, these prices seemed steep, especially for immigrants with limited capital. Elinore pointed out, though, “We don’t drink... [or] go to clubs.” Looking around, she continued, “[This] is our happiness.” Thus, social activities not only provide opportunities for congregants to get to know one another better, but also serve to reinforce, albeit perhaps subtly, the religious connection between them and regulate their day-to-day lives.

Institutional and faith-related practices: Even more than organized activities and spontaneous outreach, institutional and faith-related practices and activities serve to strengthen relationships through an explicit spiritual dimension. These particular activities create opportunities for people to reflect, worship, or act on a spiritual mission together on a weekly basis. First and foremost, the act of attending church service on Sunday is a foundational institutional practice, which creates opportunities for
interpersonal spiritual reflection and interaction. The service follows a fairly routine sequence of events. For example, at Spirit Church, we opened in prayer, shared announcements and welcomed visitors, sang a few songs led by a “praise and worship” team of singers, gave tithes and offerings, listened to the Word of God, sang a few more songs, closed in prayer and then adjourned. Although these practices can be interpreted as spaces for individual spiritual reflection, I argue that among born-again Christians in particular they are also important for interpersonal interaction. For example, prayer at Spirit, like at many other Pentecostal institutions, is conducted out loud. In some cases, the Pastor will “lead” a prayer, while attendants simultaneously speak their own prayers out loud next to one another (see also Corwin 2012). In some cases, people become emotional, crying out and weeping. Essentially then, prayers become shared public practices, which “cultivate intimacy” (Bielo 2009). Intimacy is created on two levels in these cases. On one level, people can listen to others’ prayers and learn a lot about their hopes, fears, and private lives. This can happen between two people who simply sit next to each other in church and do not know each other well, or this can happen with people who know each other very well. I have heard the pastors at Grace and Spirit Churches encourage husbands and wives to pray together, as well as parents to pray with their children. In several interviews, parents revealed that they learn a lot about their children through their prayers.

On another level, intimacy is cultivated by the fact that people believe in praying in a similar way. For Pentecostals and charismatics, this is not just about praying out loud but also about praying, or speaking, in tongues. This is a distinguishing characteristic of Pentecostalism, for it is considered one of the gifts that can be bestowed upon believers by the Holy Spirit (Robbins 2004). It happens when a person suddenly begins to speak in another language, which is unintelligible to the speaker or to a listener. It is believed that when speaking in tongues God is literally speaking through someone. Another gift recognized by Pentecostals and charismatics is the interpretation of tongues, which means that when someone is speaking in tongues another person can interpret what God is saying. Believing and participating in this practice, and arguably witnessing it happen, is another way intimacy is cultivated. Thus, I argue that this style of praying is one example of religious practice, and unique to Pentecostalism in particular, that fosters close communal and familial relationships.

Evangelizing, and talk about evangelizing, is another example of a faith-based practice that is particular to Pentecostals, charismatics, and other evangelical Christians (Robbins 2004) and deepens a feeling of connection. Evangelizing is the act of declaring your faith and sharing the Word of God to someone who is not a believer in God and/or Jesus. Although this means that it often occurs in the presence of non-believers, the subsequent discussion of the experience is an important practice in bringing believers together. This often happens in the context of Bible studies, which serve as educational spaces that foster close interpersonal connections, as the excerpt
below reveals (Bielo 2009). In this youth Bible study, Imani, the volunteer teacher, asks students to reflect on their experience with evangelizing:

“How many of you have led someone to Jesus Christ?” Imani asks. Only a few hands are raised in the circle of about 20. Then Yinon asks her what she means. She rephrases, “How many of you have preached with someone?” The majority of the hands go up, some shyly. Kenaz jumps in and says that he once argued with a Catholic girl and got so frustrated that he wanted “to punch her in the face.” The Catholic girl argued that they can go to heaven through Mary. Zachary jumps in to add that he had an argument with others about evolution, because many of them believe that we came from a cell. He asks Imani, “Is it good to argue about religion... [especially] if [you’re] not going to change them?” For example, he says that some Muslim girls think they’re the only “good” ones... Imani replies, “Debate is one thing, declare is another.” She advises, “Don’t be uncomfortable declaring,” but with debate “be careful that you don’t get frustrated.”

In this fieldnote excerpt, the class discusses some of their experiences with evangelizing. Although these instances happen outside of the physical space of church and presumably away from other believers, the discussion of the experience serves to unite people even if the experience is rather frustrating, confusing, and awkward. This is another way that intimacy is fostered: Bible study offers a space within which congregants share the challenges and frustrations they encounter in their daily lives, which in turn promotes feelings of closeness. Discussion about evangelizing, like attending Sunday church services and praying, then is an important faith-based practice that supports the development of intimate relationships and the feeling of belonging. Moreover, these practices create a transcendent community, where material or worldly boundaries like nationality do not matter as much.

Self-othering discourse: Another important practice for the development of social ties is embedded in the example above from the youth Bible study. The practice of evangelizing is also an act of positioning oneself as different from others, and the ensuing discussion about the experience is an act of positioning oneself as similar to others. I call this self-othering discourse. To further explain, let me present the continuation of the discussion from the youth Bible study:

Zachary says that he is “scared of Muslims” because they “worship the Devil.” Imani is surprised and tells him, “You don’t need to be scared...[they] won’t do anything to you.” Salome asks if it is “OK to have friends [who] are Buddhist” or any other religion. Imani says ultimately no, it is not okay to have “close friends” who follow different religions.
She keeps them at a distance. Yinon asks, what if they put faith aside? Imani explains that you “can’t put faith aside,” because ultimately “we see the world differently.” She clarifies that that is not to say that they should not work with others in class or be polite or friendly. But she reminds them of scripture and how you can’t fraternize with the “spirit of darkness.”

In this portion of the excerpt, a few of the youth question with whom they can be “friends.” In the public schools they attend, they interact daily with peers who practice different religions, such as Buddhism and Islam. I would imagine that in the often liberal and secular space of public schools, students are encouraged to get to know and develop relationships with those who are different from them. However, some Pentecostals, like Imani, would argue that this is problematic, for it is antithetical to the life they have devoted themselves to in becoming born-again Christians. As she explains, born-again Christians “see the world differently,” and thus you cannot develop a close personal relationship with someone who holds a fundamentally different perspective than you. Likewise, Pastor Elijah continually emphasized during his sermons, “Either you are a believer or a nonbeliever.” When you become born again, “from that moment, you have declared war against the witches.”

This stark contrast drawn between believers and non-believers is what I am referring to as “self” and “others,” respectively. The message is that one should seek out believers and turn away from non-believers. Formal sermons and informal discussions create a particular discourse that focuses on the need to and the ways to position oneself as a born-again Christian in contrast to others (e.g., through evangelizing) and in connection with others (e.g., by discussing the experience and finding others who share the experience and their similar worldview). Thus, self-othering discourse also serves as a practice for identity work through the erection of salient boundaries to distinguish who is part of a group and who is not. In this process it is important to note that certain similarities among participants are highlighted (i.e. the fact that they are born-again Christians who believe in evangelizing), whereas certain differences are ignored (e.g., national, ethnic, linguistic, and/or immigrant status). Self-othering discourse is also a common feature of sermons, talk among adults, and talk between teachers and even younger children. Positioning oneself as a “believer” out in the world (i.e., non-church settings) can be an alienating experience. However, in

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3 Pentecostalism is known for creating a dualistic worldview, with the present in tension with the past, the church vs. the world, public vs. private life, believers vs. nonbelievers. Thus, those who are not believers and that which is not Godly are cast on the side of the Devil. This is a global characteristic of Pentecostalism (Robbins 2004). It is interesting to note that my participants, who are all African, make a further association between the Devil and witchcraft. I would contend that this is the result of a long legacy of witchcraft (or fear of it) in many African faith traditions (e.g., Comaroff and Comaroff 1993; Evans-Pritchard 1935, 1976).
church, discussion about the experience is an act of positioning oneself as a “believer,” which serves to foster deeper connections among “believers.”

In reality, not all evangelicals proselytize or proselytize all the time. Many of them have close relationships with others who are not evangelicals. But I argue that being exposed to and participating in the discourse at church, even if in debate, serves to foster communal ties. When a person positions himself or herself as an in-group member through certain talk or behavior, it promotes a feeling of belonging, which in turn promotes bridging social ties (Dryden-Peterson 2009) within heterogeneous groups.

Fictive kinship terms: The connection people feel to one another is also sustained through the use of certain linguistic terms in reference to one another. These references go beyond the label of “believer” or “nonbeliever,” as we saw in the examples above, and make use of familial terms. This creates another layer of intimacy through a notion of fictive kinship between people who are not related by blood or marriage. In one sermon, for example, assistant Pastor Kadmiel preached to attendants that we are all “children of God.” Similarly, Pastor Elijah on several occasions encouraged certain acts from church members, such as calling others to ask if they need a ride to church or giving a special offering to newly resettled refugee families, to show that they are “brothers and sisters” in Christ. It could be argued that these phrases are not unique to Pentecostal or evangelical churches; they are certainly characteristic of other Christian denominations and other religions. However, in Pentecostalism, they signify a specific egalitarian connection among congregants. Historically and contemporarily, Pentecostals often establish integrated churches that cross race, class, and ethnic lines (Anderson 2004; Bergunder et al. 2010; Robbins 2004). Religious identity is maximized whereas other differences are minimized. Born-again Christians share the experience of being converted, and this is evident in other fictive kinship terms among them. For example, when a church member has brought another into the faith, essentially playing a major role in their conversion to become a born-again Christian, the church member becomes the “spiritual mother [or father]” of their “spiritual daughter [or son],” who is the new convert. The use of familial terms here signifies the close personal relationship that is created through this process.

In sum, the feelings of “community,” “home,” and “family” in connection to church and its members are explicitly and implicitly cultivated through specific practices: 1) social activities and interactions; 2) institutional and faith-related practices; 3) self-othering discourse; and 4) fictive kinship terms. These practices suggest that religion as an institution and as a system of meaning serve to promote intimacy and thus nurture close relationships among church members. In this study, practices, such as evangelizing, praying out loud, and speaking in tongues, show that Pentecostal and evangelical churches play an important role in the diaspora for African migrants to connect with others and feel like they belong.
Discussion and Conclusion

The feeling of “community” that Sharon and Ruthanne spoke of during mother-to-mother Bible study (described in the opening vignette) was a common metaphor that I heard from congregants at Grace and Spirit Churches. It is a feeling that suggests deeply meaningful social relationships. I have argued that these social relationships are not just predicated on shared demographic characteristics, such as nationality and language, spiritual/religious characteristics, such as being born-again Christians and worshiping in a certain way, or even still pan-African cultural characteristics; rather, these social relationships are fostered in the context of religion through particular practices: 1) social activities and interactions, such as celebrations of life events and personal outreach in times of crisis; 2) institutional and faith-related practices, such as praying out loud, speaking in tongues, or evangelizing; 3) self-othering discourse which promotes identity formation and community boundaries; and 4) fictive kinship terms, such as recognizing someone as your “spiritual daughter.” These practices cultivate intimacy among people (Bielo 2009), which then promote the feeling of community. These social ties can become bonding social ties among people who already share many characteristics, or bridging social ties among people who do not share many characteristics, such as nationality, ethnicity, maternal language, and/or immigrant status (Dryden-Peterson 2009). Although more bonding social ties occur among congregants at Grace Church, a predominantly Ugandan immigrant church, whereas more bridging social ties occur among congregants at Spirit Church, a more diverse church, all participants conveyed feelings of community and belonging when describing why they attend the church. The development of these feelings and actual social relationships is also particularly noteworthy in the case of this subset of the African diaspora since many migrants have come from countries that are currently or historically have been engaged in violent conflict.

These cases also demonstrate the salience of religion theoretically in the context of immigration. As an institution, religion creates a space that promotes social interaction; as a system of meaning, religion promotes the interpretation of personal connection through a particular spiritual lens. These cases also reveal the special role Pentecostalism can play in the diaspora, for it regulates and ritualizes daily life in an unfamiliar environment and encourages practices that promote social relationships through belief and spirituality in spite of difference. In the case of bridging social ties, certain distinguishing characteristics that suggest difference are minimized, whereas others that suggest similarity are maximized. This happens in particular through language socialization practices, such as self-othering discourse and fictive kinship references. Language socialization is about the ways in which people are socialized through language and to use language in order to act and think in certain ways so as to become competent members of a particular group (Ochs and Schieffelin 1984; Schieffelin and Ochs 1986). Thus, a religious community plays an important role in the
psycho-social integration in the diaspora of adult migrants and their children. In these communities, they develop close social ties that promote feelings of belonging.

These cases also demonstrate the salience of religion in the psychological and material success of migrants and their children in their everyday living in the U.S. First, the feelings of connection and belonging satisfy important psychological and spiritual desires that arise when living in an unfamiliar physical and cultural environment. And second, as anthropologists have pointed out over the years (e.g. Bellman 1984; Evans-Pritchard 1951; Fortes 1953; Karp 1986), social and kinship ties often confer certain rights or obligations between two people, which promote material success. In other words, the feelings and actual relationships within a community often enable the material benefits that are measured in other studies of immigrant assimilation and acculturation. This is certainly the case for the African migrants in this study. In addition to the psychological and social benefits I noted during my fieldwork, I also documented tangible benefits, which ranged from informative advice to actual financial support. It included parenting and education information, transportation services, donations of household necessities, monetary donations towards the expense of someone’s wedding, as well as others. Many of these benefits are not only instrumental for everyday living, but also for later economic success.

In sum, developing meaningful social relationships with other church members and feeling connected can lead to important psychological, spiritual, and material benefits. These benefits can ease the emotional transition into a new physical and cultural environment and tangibly support migrant families with the information and resources they need to survive and feel integrated.

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Self, Lwa and Haitianness: The Adherence Process and Reinvention of the Self by Haitian Vodou in Montreal.

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Abstract
Over recent decades, Haitian immigrants who settled in Montreal have introduced the practice of Vodou to the city, both as a religion and a spiritual healing practice. During nine months of fieldwork in Montreal, I examined the manner in which the therapeutic use of Vodou plays a role in the “indigenization” of this religion; that is, how believers utilize it as they adapt to new circumstances and become involved in transnational networks. An analysis of believers’ narratives highlights the key position of the therapeutic use of Vodou in the process of adapting to life in Montreal. As patients search for ways to solve their problems, using Vodou therapeutically to heal, cure, prevent, or remediate becomes a common way to enter the religion. Vodou healing rituals are based on a relationship with spiritual entities, called lwa in Haitian Creole. As such, the therapeutic use of Vodou requires learning about the role and powers of these spirits. The patient’s participation in a ritual process of healing positions them to become more and more involved in religious belief and practice. Vodou offers a system of interpretation for illnesses, issues, and personal problems that leads the client to a “reinvention of self,” which has the characteristics of a conversion phenomenon. As the migrant defines himself or herself within this socio-cultural construction of belonging, two dimensions are important to this process. The first establishes Haiti as a reference point for identity that is constructed and shared in the diasporic community. Secondly, adherents develop a “dividual” self through the practice of Vodou.

Keywords: Haitian Vodou, indigenization, Montreal, transnational religion, medical anthropology

Introduction
Over the last few decades, some Haitian immigrants who have settled abroad have brought with them the practice of Vodou as a religion and a religious healing
system. In Vodou, rituals are based on relationships with spiritual entities, *lwa* in Creole, and the involvement of the patient in the therapy requires learning the specificities of these spirits and the power they have in human life. These entities venerated in Vodou are commonly associated with Catholic saints. They “arrive” in ceremonies by possessing the initiates, *oungan* [Vodou priest], and *manbo* [Vodou priestess], to deliver a message or to provide a treatment for both adepts and spectators, most of the time on an individual basis. As this article deals with the transition between a therapeutic use and a religious practice of Vodou, I do not consider it only as a healing technique or only as a religion; instead, I claim that it is both, depending on how involved the person has become in Vodou. The scope of this assertion concerns specifically Montreal and diasporic Vodou but it could easily be applied to the Haitian context.

Today Haitian Vodou is practiced in several regions outside of Haiti: the French Caribbean Islands (Benoît 2004; Bougerol 2008), Cuba (James et al. 1998), French Guyane (Laëthier 2011), Paris (Adouane 2001), New York City (McCarthy Brown 1991), Florida (Richman 2005), Boston, and Montreal (Munier 2011). These are the main locations where Haitians settled around the Atlantic and are linked to each other by migratory flux. Consequently, an increasing number of scholars describe this organization as a “transmigrant” community (Bash et al. 1994) or as a Haitian diaspora (Audebert 2012; Jackson 2011). This means migrants do not forget their origins once they have arrived in new territories. Instead, they maintain strong links to their homeland either because they return sometimes or because they preserve a living memory of their belonging, and Vodou is one way to do so.

My aim is to show that people’s first step in Vodou is often, if it is not always, therapeutic. If patients conform themselves to the advice that Vodou practitioners tell them, they become adherents. Those who follow this path find in Vodou’s ritual practice a way to build a new Haitianess. This Vodou Haitianess is thereby enacted and asks people to redefine themselves as dividual rather than individual. Finally, this dividuality shared in Vodou rituals may involve the adherent in transnational networks that link Haiti and the diaspora and strengthen the indigenization of Vodou in Montreal.

The Haitian Diaspora and the Indigenization of Vodou in Montreal

In 2006, the Haitian community in the province of Quebec numbered more than 91,000 people, 83 percent of which live in Montreal, including three Canadian-born

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4 As I use the Creole term, I do not write an “s” for the plural.

5 According to the Boston Healing Landscape Project:

generations. There have been several migratory waves beginning in the 1960s (Piché et al. 1983) where communities concentrated in dispersed spots throughout several parts of the city (Dejean 1990). Vodou rituals are performed in practitioners’ homes, and have spread in the peripheral neighborhoods of Montreal such as Rivière-des-Prairies, Laval or Pointes-aux-Trembles.

To understand the meaning of Vodou practice for members of the diasporic community of Montreal, it is particularly relevant to question how they adapt it to their North American urban context. This adaptation can be conceptualized by the notion of “indigenization” (Appadurai 1996). Originally, the concept of indigenization referred to an appropriation of a foreign practice by a new population or in a new geographical location. Although Arjun Appadurai tends to use the term as the transposition and transformation of a metropolitan cultural form in a “peripheral” culture, the meaning of this concept is not bound to a center-periphery trajectory. Here, indigenization is used to describe any type of movement of a cultural form from one specific cultural context to another. The wide meaning of this concept is particularly relevant when one considers the cultural dynamics at work in the context of globalization (Kearney 1995) and, more specifically, those of other religions that spread in different cultural contexts (Bastian et al. 2001; Csordas 2009).

According to Stefania Capone, who applies this concept to “transnational religions,” indigenization refers to the process by which “[religions] adapt themselves to different national contexts, negotiating their position inside the local religious fields and in the heart of national societies” (Capone 2002:15). Consequently, my paper is inscribed in the larger discussion about the main processes involved in Haitian Vodou’s indigenization in Montreal. In other words, I aim to describe the underlying dynamics that allow a Caribbean religion to settle in a local diasporic community. How did Haitian Vodou become a transnational Haitian Vodou? To what extent is Vodou reformulated and indigenized in Montreal?

In order to answer these questions, I explore contemporary dynamics of religious healing, which are becoming more and more globalized. In the field of Vodou studies, this stance seems to be under-represented in comparison to other African American religious healing practices. Aside from a few recent studies (Béchacq 2010; Laëthier 2011; Richman 2005), there are only a few ethnographic accounts of the

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8 For example, but not exhaustively, the works on the transnational dimensions of Santeria (Argyriadis 2005; Capone 2005; Gobin 2007; Mahler and Hansing 2005) or Yoruba traditions (Capone 2005; Clarke 2004; Olopopuna and Rey 2008) are more developed than those about Vodou.
diasporic practice of this religion,\(^9\) and virtually no studies of Haitian Vodou communities in Canada.

This paper is based on my ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Montreal between February and June 2009 and February and May 2010. During these nine months, I observed nine Vodou ceremonies held by various practitioners in several neighborhoods in Montreal. In addition, I conducted eighteen interviews (semi- and unstructured) with Vodou adepts and practitioners.\(^{10}\) During my fieldwork I progressively met more practitioners who connected me to others, which allowed me to have a wider range of contacts in the community.

By analyzing the experience of one of the adherents, I will highlight how the conversion to Vodou is linked to both the therapeutic use of this religion and to the diasporic experience for the adepts. Although this adept is not representative of the whole community of believers, she is representative of one category among them: women who emigrated young, did not practice Vodou when they arrived and became more familiar with Vodou only after a period of integration to Quebecois society. Why these characteristics? During my fieldwork I found that most Vodou adepts are women, as is also reported in many ethnographies of Vodou (Métraux 1958; Brown 1991).

People who immigrated young comprise a large percentage of Vodou adepts in Montreal, for two reasons. First, in practicing Vodou they find a way to redefine themselves as Haitians, so they get involved to make Vodou exist locally. Second, those who already practiced Vodou when they emigrated go back in Haiti for their rituals, involving themselves less in Montreal’s Vodou.

*When the Iwa Strike*

Born in Haiti, Carline\(^{11}\) is representative of the path of conversion to Vodou for many other devotees. Some of her family members have been *oungan* or *manbo* for several generations. Being a pupil in a Catholic primary school, she was forbidden to publicly express any other religious practice. She grew up in a context where Vodou practice, on one hand, was accepted and, on the other, was fought against. She arrived in Montreal when she was sixteen, and with the distance separating her from her family, she only knew about Vodou through her childhood experience.

As an adult, Carline was not interested in Vodou and began her nursing studies in Montreal. She explained that at this point she began to receive signs she could not yet interpret. She twice failed her nursing entry exams. Before the third and last try, she

\(^9\) Some will argue that some well known works on Vodou and migration (such as Brown 1991; McAlister 2002) must be included in this category. They could, but were written prior to the rise of anthropological theories of globalization and do not focus on the link between Vodou practice and transnational networks.

\(^{10}\) Three of the four people quoted in this text agreed to the use of their real first name, the last one preferred that I use a pseudonym.

\(^{11}\) Personal interview, 3/24/2010.
dreamed of a white skinned lady protecting and helping her. She passed her exam but did not pay any attention to her dream and opened a nursing health-care company (one of many in Montreal). As a manager of many employees, she earned enough money to have a comfortable living and obtained a loan to buy her house.

Eventually, her company went through a business slowdown and her income fell, so she was obliged to close her business. At this time she began to have several mysterious dreams but did not really understand their meanings. Her relatives spoke about some Vodou interpretations of such dreams but she remained skeptical about them. When Carline was close to bankruptcy, she had a dream where she was falling and one of her friends encouraged her to seek advice from a *manbo*. The *manbo* told her that she has been neglecting the *lwa* who had allowed her to earn a good living and they were punishing her for the scorn she had showed them. This interpretation made her reconsider the influence of the *lwa* in her misfortune.

In 2002, to be sure that her financial problems had a supernatural origin, Carline went to Haiti for a Vodou divination ritual performed for her by her grandmother. Her parents had converted to Protestantism and her uncles and aunts who were Vodou practitioners had passed away. Thus, her grandmother was the only person who could reveal to her whether the *lwa* had any responsibility in the occurrence of her misfortune.

Her grandmother confirmed that her misfortune was in fact a case of supernatural origin and that she had to “settle her *lwa,*” meaning she had to construct an altar in her house in Montreal. Carline commented on this significant first step, stating that, “Since this time, my life changed.” According to her, if she could keep her house despite the problems she had with the bank, it was because of the protection of her *lwa*. So she began to work again, but this time as an employee. Realizing that her problems were solved by this intervention of the *lwa* in her job recovery, she began to involve herself in Vodou practices and new dreams appeared. She saw the *lwa* explaining to her how to use the *ason*,\(^{12}\) a ceremonial tool for which only high rank initiates know the secret use. This sign of the *ason* indicated to her that she was chosen to become a *manbo*. She commented: “It was already inside of me, even if it awoke a bit late.”

In a few years, she undertook several steps of initiation with an *oungan* in Haiti, and became a *manbo* in the Montreal area. Now she is forty-three and often offers Vodou consultations in addition to her nursing job. Her husband supported her in this endeavor. Her three children did not know anything about Vodou but they accepted their mother’s new ritual activities. They even pray to the *lwa* sometimes. She concluded saying, “I see a lot of changes, when you invoke with faith, with fervor, you can obtain whatever you want.”

\(^{12}\) A sacred rattle used by initiated to summon *lwa* during rituals.
The Adherence Process

In his work on the process and benefits of therapy, John Janzen (1995) describes the patient’s progress as a “therapeutic itinerary.” I borrow this term as it seems to be most fitting to discuss the process of transformation that Carline underwent. The itinerary that led Carline to enter Vodou represents a complete reversal: from a position of refusal of Vodou, she came to occupy an active position by becoming a manbo. It is possible to extricate several points that conducted her from one extreme to the other, as they are frequently present in other practitioners’ religious conversion itineraries as well.

Carline’s original position concerning Vodou was one of distance. Though she had grown up in a family of practitioners, her migratory experience resulted in her exclusion of Vodou from her life. It was her relatives who proposed Vodou as an explanation for the persistence of her problems. The primary role of relatives, recurrent in the accounts given by adepts, confirms John Janzen’s theory that argues it is the “therapy managing group” that mainly guides the therapeutic itinerary of patients (Janzen 1995). This is as true in the original cultural context of Vodou in Haiti (Vonarx 2011:139) as it is here in the Haitian diaspora. This guidance urges Carline to consult the manbo recommended by her relatives. But, as her grandmother is a practitioner, Carline turns to her for further guidance. The instructions to build an altar in her house are an encouragement for Carline to practice Vodou.

It is at this point, when Carline involves herself in the worship of the lwa, that the Vodou interpretation of her misfortune is accepted and the “adherence process” is established. The recovery of her work after establishing adherence validates the lwa’s role in her misfortune. With her practice of Vodou, Carline aims to invert the initial power relationship to her advantage. First persecutory, the relationship with the lwa becomes a source of strength given by the creation of altars and Carline’s initiation in Haiti. This controlling position is enforced by the fact that she acquires the status of manbo.

Having been initiated and now acting as a practitioner, she has a therapeutic power herself, bestowed by her entities, which she uses in consultations and for the benefit of her household.

In an article dealing with the “health seeking process” in the United States, Noel Chrisman (1977) proposes the notion of “adherence” to refer to the last step of the therapeutic process. This concept concerns the way the patient complies (or not) with a healer’s advice and the accuracy with which the patient applies it. Chrisman suggests that factors such as “sex, age, race, marital status, socioeconomic status, or education” are unable to explain the discrepancies in a patient’s adherence. However,

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13 Noel Chrisman was one of the first social scientists to show the importance of the socio-cultural process implied in therapies. By referring to his study on biomedicine, I argue that what happens in biomedical therapies lies in the same socio-cultural processes as in religious healings, such as Vodou. This similarity consolidates the fact that Vodou is first therapeutic for the people.
two more qualitative factors could help to describe this process: the influence of a patient’s relatives, and the communication that is established between the healer and the patient. Concerning the first factor, the author explains that patients who comply more accurately with a healer’s advice are those who know, in their near environment, some people who have already complied with these kinds of instructions. For Carline, it was her family and friends who led her to get closer to Vodou. Then, the consultation with her grandmother convinced her of the necessity to practice, which she finally accepted. Her adherence to Vodou was the consequence of the conjunction of the two groups of relatives. When she says “it was already in me,” referring explicitly to lwa, she also refers to Vodou itself, of which she has activated the interpretative potential after years of ignorance. In addition to the influence of her family and friends, there was an affective dimension lying in this return to a religion she had known in her childhood.

The second idea proposed by Noel Chrisman is that the “quality of doctor-patient communication which may be a major variable influencing adherence [...] implies that the doctor has taken the necessary time to educate the patient or that the two had congruent health and other beliefs” (1977:369). In Vodou, a consultation refers to this communication between healer and patient, in which the healer’s “tricks” (Bonhomme 2005) link closely to the patient’s personal story and the behavior of entities. For Carline, the theme of her spiritual election gave a new meaning to her previous dreams: as she was chosen by lwa, dreams were messages they sent to her. Recall that she said she had dreamed of a “white skinned lady” helping her. It was Erzulie Freda, the feminine lwa associated with wealth and who has the power to give, as well as deprive, one of it.Attributing both her economic success and financial problems to the same entity, this supernatural interpretation allows Carline to hope for an improvement of her situation. In associating the recovery of her work to the “settling of her lwa” (by building her altar at home), Carline switches from a therapeutic use to a more daily practice of Vodou.

Thus, in a period of a few years, Carline has first solicited the practice of Vodou to fix a problem before becoming an adept and then, eventually, a manbo. This progressive entrance into the religion is explained by both the role of her relatives in her acceptance of power relationships with her guardian lwa and the persuasive effect of the consultation. This adherence process then drove her to consider her entrance into the religion as a change of status from a previous period spotted by misfortune to her current life, in which she succeeds in obtaining what she wants through soliciting actions from her entities.

This adherence to a religious diagnosis, after a healing process, shows that Vodou is mostly used as a therapeutic practice. Here, the therapeutic use of Vodou refers less to the use of herbal treatments or strictly healing rituals, which also exist, but more as an interpretative system of success and misfortune. In Haiti, as several authors

14 For more details on this process in Vodou consultations, see Munier 2013.
assert, Vodou has a key position in medical pluralism (Brodwin 1996; Vonarx 2011). As I suggest here, its healing power lies mainly in the principle that “all Vodou healing is a healing of relationships” (McCarthy Brown 1991:331). Broadened to Caribbean religions, this approach is confirmed by recent research that asserts that “the quest for health and relief from suffering sometimes takes the form of totalizing, emotional events involving all senses, where body, mind, social relations and ties to physical or symbolic geography all intertwine and are treated as one” (Brandon and Desmangles 2012:161). In a diasporic context, the position of the self has a central role in this holistic process.

*Therapeutic Use of Vodou and Reinvention of the Self*

Carline explicitly mentions that becoming initiated to Vodou was an event that changed her life. In other words, this feeling of personal transformation represented a conversion phenomenon and could be compared to other religions to better understand the adherence process. During my fieldwork, the majority of people who were initiated reported the same differentiation as Carline revealed between a former and a new state of being, marked by an improvement of her situation. This change could concern many fields of life but is always articulated around two components: therapy and identity, sometimes associated with each other. For Carline, the beginning of her Vodou practice was a way to counteract misfortune. Other adepts or practitioners report their initiation to Vodou as a way to gain strength, enabling them to face problems. For Monique, entering Vodou gave her access to her “real personality.” For Sara, besides the supernatural dimension, meeting the two *manbo* who initiated her was an occasion to “get closer to Haitian culture.” This last point is implicitly present in Carline’s story, given that her entrance into Vodou permitted her to reconcile with a practice that she had previously neglected. This drove her to reconnect with Haitian relatives whose homes she had not frequented for many years.

The transformation felt by new adherents is the direct consequence of the therapeutic process that addressed their problems but also led them to claim a rediscovery of their Haitianess. The Haitianess that is at stake in Vodou is not the same as in Haitian Pentecostal congregations, where it is more present in the preaching (see Brodwin 2003); on the contrary this manifestation of Haitianess relates directly to the key role that possession plays in Vodou. As the following ethnographic report will expose, possession is central in the kind of transformation lived by adepts.

In March 2010, Carline invited me to a ceremony where I witnessed the practical consequences of this reinvention of the self that she has experienced through her years of Vodou practice. This was a ceremony of thanks that two of her regular patients offered to the *lwa* who had relieved them. In the basement of the cozy house where the

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15 Personal interview, 5/08/2009, Montreal.
16 Personal interview, 3/19/2010, Montreal.
ritual took place, in the middle of a dozen of singing people gathered, Carline was suddenly possessed by Erzulie Freda. Other initiates stretched out a white sheet on the floor for this delicate lwa to stand on upon\textsuperscript{18} and, with her typical “ti-ti-ti” shouts, she thanked the couple who offered her two white doves. Then, the lwa left the body of her medium and people sat down with Carline, who slowly emerged as if from a deep sleep. After a few minutes, the ritual continued and several more possessions occurred.

With this brief ethnographic excerpt, I would like to exemplify the capacity of the adepts to accept the possibility that another entity “mounts” them, as they say, or acts through them. This represents the main change – or, at least, the most visible – adepts have to realize when they become involved in Vodou practice. The ability to host a multiplicity of entities within themselves is one of the results of the reinvention of the self, brought about by the adherence process and developed through years of ritual practice. Through this embodiment of multiple lwa, the self that Vodou practice produces could be compared to “dividuality,” which Marilyn Strathern defines as “frequently constructed as the plural and composite site of relationships that produce them. The singular person can be imagined as a social microcosm” (Strathern 1988:13). Applied to a ritual context, “the concept of dividuality refers to one’s obligations to others and one’s spiritual connections to social and spiritual others” (Pyne 2011:281). As the patient becomes an adherent, he/she enters a web of relationships with other adepts and with spiritual entities. These intersecting exchanges are embodied and enacted during rituals, through social relationships and possessions. They form the core of Vodou practice, which constantly represents the making and unmaking of relationships inside and between social and spiritual collectives.

The transformation lived by adepts expresses that Vodou is both a way to overcome misfortune and to solidify a cultural identity. This stance toward a religious practice is close to what is described by Danièle Hervieu-Léger (1999) when she analyzes the current context of “religious modernity.” This context is constituted by a growing need to affiliate to religious groups, produced by a loss of “inherited religious identities” (1999:119-120). The loss of traditional transmission of religious belonging brought by modernity gives way to a more individualistic and conversional entrance into religion. Entering Vodou represents a conversion phenomenon in that adepts gain access to the safety of a “meaning code” (1999:132) provided by their adherence to a new interpretation of events and their life. Hervieu-Léger underlines two main themes in conversion narratives: “one is more characterized by the tackling of a chaotic life and the other by the access to a genuine accomplishment of self” (1999:132).

The first tendency is visible in the managing of problems, an ability brought by Vodou practice, and the second in the ability to access a new identity, namely

\textsuperscript{18} Erzulie Freda is known for her fine tastes as she does not walk on the floor barefoot, or eat without cutlery, and appreciates expensive perfumes and champagne. For ethnographic accounts of this lwa, see Métraux (1958:97-99) or McCarthy Brown (1991:246-252).
“Haitianness.” The four practitioners mentioned here had in common the non-practice of Vodou when they were young, and a way of living that originally led them to drift away from this religion. Three of them were born in Haiti and became interested in Vodou only after several years spent in Montreal. So, the use of Vodou, which is initially therapeutic, becomes a way to build a new identity - a Haitian one - through a constant practice of Vodou. This situation could be linked to what Jean Benoist explains about traditional healing: “those who come to it express, by their choice, an ‘identity pain’” (2004:18). These people stayed away from Vodou, and sometimes Haiti itself, for many years after they arrived in Montreal. The rediscovery of their “original culture,” according to them, means that they felt a loss of a part of themselves during this period, which was more oriented toward integrating into Quebecois society. This means that Vodou articulates the explicit goal of healing to the deeper need to involve themselves in a Haitian-Vodou identity that they look for after a period of integration.

Consequently, this situation leads these adepts to choose Vodou among other possible therapies, especially because of the cultural identity dimension that Vodou offers them. Nonetheless, it is not an exclusive conception of identity. For example, Mirna explained she has “rooted herself” in Montreal, pointing to the poto mitan, sacred center post, of her peristyle temple, and added: “I am fully integrated here in Quebec, I am already Quebecois.” Her conception of a Quebecois identity that uses a Vodou element to define herself clearly shows how there is a meaningful intersection between living in Montreal and being a diasporic Haitian Vodou practitioner. For this manbo, who has a similar therapeutic itinerary as Carlne, this situation expresses the power of the redefinition that Vodou offers to diasporic Haitians in Montreal. In other words, this explicates that the indigenization of Vodou in Montreal lies in the first instance on its therapeutic dimension.

New adherents live a reinvention of the self by involving themselves in a customary Vodou practice, brought by a primarily therapeutic use, that leads them to embody a Vodou dividual self. By the collective enacting of this new self, adepts feel they access a Haitianneess specific to Vodou. Eventually, the sharing of Vodou Haitianness inside adept groups in Montreal solidifies the ties between the diasporic Vodou community and Haiti.

Conclusion

Analyzing the emic explanations of the Vodou practice exposed here by adepts, I showed that the primary meaning given to Vodou is therapeutic. In other words, Vodou is an institutionalized practice that provides a method to find the causes and meanings of misfortune when other explanations fail to give answers to overcoming a difficult situation. The adherence process encourages the patient to reinterpret his/her life with the new conceptions he/she learned and can eventually lead to a regular

practice of the religion. Through worship, the patient finds both a remedy for problems and a way to build a new identity and a new self. The identity is expressed as an explicit belonging to a cultural group while the new self is embodied and enacted.

The link between this process and conversion narratives highlights the profoundly emotional dimension evident in the personal transformation, which Vodou adepts often mention. The narrative of this change is expressed either as an adoption of a new identity or as the beginning of a period free of misfortune, or both. These two interpretative poles are necessary to understand how the acceptance of relationships with lwa permits people to re-interpret their own life.

This analysis leads us to consider the adherence process as a starting point of indigenization of Vodou in Montreal for a population who may be initially non-practicing. Vodou is associated with Haitianess and provides a way to address the question of identity for adepts. These adepts can be either emigrant non-believers from Haiti, or Québécois of Haitian origin. In this way, Vodou allows diasporic adepts to belong to a transnational “imagined community” (Anderson 2006) by their affective involvement in a territorial reference that is shared collectively.

Alongside this belonging process, the acquisition of a dividual self is central in the constitution of the group of adepts and assists in settling Vodou in Montreal. This process is mostly implicit, as it lies primarily in adepts’ actions, but is nonetheless the result of the progressive adherence that begins with the consultation and is achieved through possession.

Eventually, the fulfillment of this dividual self is a means to develop new social relationships with other adepts during journeys in the country for ritual practice, and especially for initiations. These links are particularly important because they introduce novices into networks of actors based in Haiti, Montreal, and other places in the diaspora. Thus, therapeutic use actively contributes to the local settling of this religion in Montreal and to the creation of transnational networks, which allows Vodou to become a transnational religion.

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Drumming for the Orisa: (Re)inventing Yoruba Identity in Oyotunji Village

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Abstract

I explore the ways identity is constructed among a group of drummers at Oyotunji Village, South Carolina. Oyotunji Village was founded by Oba Oseijeman I, born Walter King of Detroit, in 1970 with the purpose of providing African-Americans in the United States with a geographical, political, and cultural space to experience African culture. Modeled after Yoruba culture of southwest Nigeria, members of the community practice a religion known as orisa-voodoo. Throughout the year, festivals are held dedicated to various orisa, “deities,” in which the drummers play a crucial role in the religious experience of the orisa-voodoo adherents. An essential part of Yoruba culture, drumming acts as a musical bridge between humans and orisa, enabling orisa-voodoo practitioners to petition the orisa for guidance and intervention in their daily lives. Drumming traditions at Oyotunji Village provide drummers with a repository of cultural knowledge and practices from which to draw, while at the same time offering them a creative outlet capable of reshaping and redefining those very same traditions. I examine various processes of identity formation among the drummers as part of their musical apprenticeship, during which they learn not only how to play the instrument but also about Yoruba culture in general. I employ an analytical framework proposed by Timothy Rice (2003) involving a “subject-centered musical ethnography” within a three-dimensional space of musical experience including time, location, and metaphor.

Keywords: African diaspora, transnationalism, ritual, orisa, Yoruba

Introduction

At the low-walled entrance to a small courtyard, the midday sun beats down on a group of eight male drummers, all in their mid-twenties or younger, bare-chested and sweating as they pound on their drums and percussion instruments, the dundun, the bata, the shekere, and the agogo. The rhythm gradually builds and grows faster, and suddenly the egungun emerges through the gates and onto the dirt road. The egungun, an ancestral spirit represented in the form of a masked dancer, follows the group of drummers as they proceed down the road. As they walk they pass several shrines dedicated to the various orisa worshipped by the villagers and at each shrine the
rhythm changes, sometimes faster or slower, sometimes louder or softer. Each orisa has a particular rhythm, a particular song, a particular dance.

When the group finally arrives at the courtyard of the Ile-Oba, the King’s house, they are joined by a large group of followers singing and dancing in response to the rhythm of the drums. The egungun begins to circle the courtyard as the drumming increases in intensity and in tempo. The masked figure makes several laps, threatening to enter the crowd, but always backing away at the last second, usually guided by one of several figures carrying long sticks that accompany the dancer wherever he goes. Eventually the drummers call the spirit back to the center of the courtyard. Suddenly, the drums stop and a single voice is heard chanting in Yoruba. The drums and the crowd answer together, and the song is continued as the oba and his family make their entrance into the courtyard. Slowly, the royal procession makes its way around the courtyard, and as the oba passes all of those in attendance bow and touch the ground in a show of respect and subservience. Finally, the oba takes his seat at the head of the courtyard, with the rest of his family and head priests and priestesses taking their seats to either side. The drummers take their position to the left of the oba, and with that the festival of Obatala, patron deity of Oyotunji Village and deity of purity and justice, has begun.

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In this article I explore how Yoruba cultural identity is both learned and expressed in a transnational, deterritorialized setting by focusing on the drumming practices and traditions related to the religious practice of orisa-voodoo as it has developed at Oyotunji Village over the past forty years. I explore identity formation and cultural transmission through an examination of the socialization and training processes of a community of drummers. It is important to examine how these drummers form their own social and cultural identities because of the significance of music and rhythm in providing a spiritual and symbolic connection between the orisa and the orisa-voodoo practitioners. As I will demonstrate, worship of the orisa is the cornerstone of not only the religious practice of orisa-voodoo, but in many ways Yoruba social life in general. The drummers at Oyotunji Village play an important and necessary role in the community. Drumming provides a link between the supernatural world and the physical world by acting as a communicative agent that calls down the orisa in order to provide assistance and guidance to orisa-voodoo adherents.

I apply an analytical framework proposed by Timothy Rice (2003) that produces a subject-centered ethnography to explain musical experience. I focus my analysis on one of the Oyotunji Village drummers in order to extrapolate commonalities within the community of study as well as provide a basis for comparisons across cultures. Within this analytical framework I include a description of the types of drums and percussion instruments played, the process involved in initiation into the drumming society, and the role of the drummers in the various religious festivals and events that take place.
Such an analysis results in a subject-centered musical ethnography that positions the individual in a “three-dimensional space of musical experience” as a way of seeking answers to the general question of how individuals experience music in modernity or modern life (Rice 2003:152). Rice posits that a three-dimensional space is useful to analyze the individual music experience for two reasons. First, the use of three or more dimensions creates a “space” that is based on mathematical concepts that can then be used to position the subject within a larger framework of sociocultural understanding. Second, such an analysis sets up an “ideational space for thinking about music, not the place in which musical experience happens” (Rice 2003:159). This is a different concept of space in that it creates a virtual arena in which the physical concept of location, including “place” and “locale” exist along one axis of the model (Rice 2003:159). It is important to point out that while this framework differentiates between such an ideational space and a physical place, this does not exclude the importance of place within the analysis. In fact, as I will show, the physical location of Oyotunji Village is a vital element to be considered in a successful analysis of musical performance and identity creation.

In order to address this call for a repositioning of theoretical understanding and analysis, Rice proposes a focus on the individual musical experience by starting with the viewpoint that “we are all individual music cultures” (Slobin 1993:ix, qtd. in Rice 2003:156). Furthermore, the individual may be viewed as a wholly social and self-reflexive being interacting in time and space with a community of others, each occupying their own individual subject positions within the same, and sometimes across, cultural or social boundaries.

When positioned in such a way, individual experience is not limited solely to that individual, but is instead acted upon and acts upon a world occupied by that individual as well as others who are present. Through this encounter and these experiences the self is continually (re)formed, eventually ending in not only self-awareness, but perhaps more importantly, in the awareness of others (Gadamer 1975). What becomes the focus of the analysis is not necessarily the individual, but instead the ways “we get ourselves from others” (Bakhtin 1990 in Rice 2003). The foundation for a subject-centered musical ethnography, then, is this “self-reflexive project of self-identity in modernity, understood as a social process” (Rice 2003:158), a social process that is brought about through modernity’s removal of the limitations placed on individuals through tradition by allowing them to venture outside of those traditions by seeking out new sites of identity formation (Giddens 1991). Of interest in this case is that the community members at Oyotunji Village have taken advantage of this very shift in order to consciously choose a “traditional” society upon which to base their social and religious practices, in effect using (post)modernity to return to tradition.

For the Yoruba of western Nigeria, music is an integral and all-pervasive part of their culture. “Without it, the people cannot properly create poetry, record history, educate children, celebrate at festivals, praise or abuse, entertain, marry, or even die”
(Bankole et al. 1975:48). Oyotunji Village, the setting of the scene described earlier, is not located in southwestern Nigeria, traditional home of the Yoruba people. For that matter, it is not even located in Africa. In fact, Oyotunji Village is located in the South Carolina Lowcountry, not far from the South Carolina-Georgia border. Oyotunji Village was founded in 1970 as an attempt to create an African space in the United States. The community models itself primarily after the Yoruba of southwestern Nigeria, attempting to recreate the culture in every way possible. The driving goal of the founder of the community, Oba Ofuntola Oseijeman Adelabu Adefunmi (1928–2005), was to provide a place for African Americans to recapture and reclaim their African identity (Hunt 1979).

One aspect that defines Yoruba culture perhaps more than any other is the religious practice of orisa devotion. All Yoruba are aligned with a specific orisa that is said to “own” their head. Exactly which orisa owns a person’s head is determined through a divination ritual known as Ifa. It is believed that before a person is born, they choose their destiny and their alignment with a particular orisa that will guide them and influence them throughout their lives. After they are born they forget this, which is why divination is required to reveal the appropriate orisa for that person. By divining the orisa that “owns” the head, the orisa-vooodoo practitioner knows who it is that will provide them assistance and guidance when needed and properly petitioned. It is in this way that music, and drumming in particular, becomes such an integral and vital part of the practice of orisa-vooodoo. Performing certain songs on drum and percussion instruments accompanied by singing and chanting allows for the adherent to successfully communicate with the orisa in order to receive help, guidance, or healing. A number of festivals and ritual events take place throughout the year dedicated to the most influential deities, such as Shango, Oya, and Ogun. These ritual events enable members of the Oyotunji community to reaffirm and recapture their Yoruba identity as descendants of the African diaspora. Specifically, the drums and percussion provide a rhythmic framework for the sequence of events and create an atmosphere conducive to worship.

Many scholars have written about the importance of music within a cultural context, and particularly within a religious context, to many social, cultural, and ethnic groups in West Africa in general, and in Nigeria specifically, which geographically encompasses most of traditional Yorubaland (Adegbite 1988; Bankole et al. 1975; Bascom 1969; Chernoff 1979; Drewal 1992; Klein 2007; Herskovits 1958; Waterman 1990). Many of these studies focus on drums and percussion, and the rhythmic properties of the music those instruments create, due to the overwhelming presence and emphasis on percussion-driven musical composition. In the case of the Yoruba, this importance is due to two factors in particular. The first is the technique employed in Yoruba drumming that enables a drummer of sufficient skill and dexterity to literally “talk” with his drum. This is possible because Yoruba is a tonal language, and the specific drums used by Yoruba drummers allow them to mimic the tonal utterances in order to approximate actual speech. The second involves the religious practices
associated with orisa worship. Fundamental to any form of orisa devotion is a symbolic communication with the supernatural, achieved through a combination of call-and-response chants, ritualized forms of dance, and drumming. Of these three components, the drumming dictates much of what takes place and determines the pace at which it will occur. This statement is not meant to undermine or diminish the importance of the singing and dancing, but rather aimed at explicitly positioning drumming, and by extension drummers as performers, as worthy of study and ethnographic research.

I begin with a description of Oyotunji Village social structure and cosmology. I describe the basic tenets of the religious system of orisa-voodoo and its function within the community of Oyotunji Village and within the larger community of Yoruba revivalists across the country. I also explain the role and function of the societies known as egbe, specifically as they relate to the social and cultural positioning of the community of drummers. Next I explore the role of drumming at Oyotunji Village and its importance within the community and to the adherents of orisa-voodoo. I conclude by bringing all of these elements together to offer a synthesis of identity formation within the drumming community at Oyotunji Village and link this “subcultural” identity (Rice 2003) to a larger network of Yoruba revivalist practitioners and communities located throughout the United States and around the globe. By employing Rice’s analytical model I intend to show that ritual drumming at Oyotunji Village is a crucial part of the process of transnational identity formation not only for the musician but also for the practitioner, by musically creating a space for communication with the orisa and the completion of a successful ritual event.

**Village Social Structure and Cosmology**

There are two fundamental sociopolitical institutions that govern and structure the social lives and religious beliefs of Yoruba revivalists at Oyotunji Village and throughout the network of satellite communities. The first are the social societies known as egbes, which organize the constituents according to criteria including gender, orisa affiliation, and (in the case of the drummers) role within the community. The second is the religious system of orisa-voodoo that serves as the primary unifying agent that motivates all of the daily actions of its adherents and acts as the spiritual connection between Yoruba revivalists in the United States and around the world and African-born Yoruba.

**Orisa-voodoo**

Orisa-voodoo is a belief system based on the religious practices of the Yoruba of Western Nigeria and Eastern Benin. It is but one of several varieties of orisa devotion, many of which are popular throughout the Caribbean and Latin America. Other examples include Lucumi in Cuba, Vodun in Haiti, and Candomblé in Brazil (Lefever 2000). One notable difference between orisa-voodoo and many of the other syncretic religions of the African diaspora is the conscious removal of any references to
Catholicism that is so closely associated with these other traditions. It is this purposeful attempt to return to a more “traditional” African belief system that is one of the cornerstones of the community’s existence.

However, this does not mean that orisa-voodoo is a “pure” or homogenous tradition. As the name given to the set of practices that comprise this particular version of orisa devotion suggests (“voodoo” being an Anglicized spelling of “vodun”), there are other cultural elements evident in the ritual practices conducted at Oyotunji Village. One reason for this is directly related to the initial establishment of the community in 1970. Oba Adefunmi I, the founder of Oyotunji Village, was an African-American from Detroit, Michigan who became the first African-American to be initiated into the cult of Obatala in Matanzas, Cuba in 1959. Before founding the village he had returned to the United States to Harlem, New York where he founded a Lucumi temple and began introducing and initiating people to orisa devotion and Yoruba cultural practices. It was only after he became heavily involved in the Black Nationalist movement that he and his followers began to expunge particular Catholic elements, such as the recognition of Catholic saints, from their ritual practices. This process was not complete, as there are still certain elements drawn from Lucumi practices still evident today, such as certain instruments that are played during rituals and, indeed, the very structure of the festival weekends.

In addition to Afro-Cuban elements, there are also other examples of cultural and social life at Oyotunji Village that, although African in origin, are not necessarily Yoruba in origin. This is evident in much of the visual art that is displayed throughout the village that is of East or Central African origin (Omari 1991). The most striking example of this, however, is the annual festival held in honor of Damballah Hwedo, a serpent deity associated with Haitian vodun and having Dahomean origins.

This heterogeneous set of practices and traits is not accidental. It is part of a deliberate and ongoing cultural exchange that is fostered by regular trips of orisa-voodoo practitioners, including the oba and his family, to the Caribbean, South America, and Africa. There are also many visitors to Oyotunji Village by orisa devotees from those same areas that attend the festivals, deliver talks, and conduct workshops dealing with various aspects of orisa devotion. There is also a thriving online community that allows for orisa devotees from around the world to discuss, debate, share, and exchange ideas and practices related to orisa devotion in all its forms.

The cosmology of orisa-voodoo acknowledges a supreme being, Olodumare, who resides above and is quite removed from the everyday lives of the people. Instead of directly worshipping this Supreme Being focus is placed on the worship of the orisa, conceived of alternately as deities, fields of energy, or spiritual embodiments of geographical and phenomenological features including rivers, mountains, wind, and thunder. Various accounts have numbered these orisa at 200, 401, 800, and more, but for the purposes of this paper it is necessary only to address the primary orisa worshipped at Oyotunji Village. In addition to the orisa, there is also a great deal of
importance placed on the veneration of the ancestors, represented in the physical world in the form of the egungun. It is the desire to communicate with these orisa and egungun in order to give offerings and praise that creates the need for the drummers at Oyotunji Village. I will demonstrate that the role of the drummer and the importance of musical performance in a festival setting is a crucial element for not only the success of the festival, but also for the creation and maintenance of identity within a larger diasporic community. In other words, for the devotees to successfully convey their praise and devotion to the orisa and their respect and love for the egungun, they rely on the rhythms provided by the drummers to establish a symbolic link between the physical world and the spiritual world.

The three primary phases of a typical festival at Oyotunji Village consist of a bembe the night before the festival day, the Egungun Parade on the day of the festival, and the appearance of the Oba followed by another, more formal bembe to close the festival. The bembe is a ritual where drummers and singers play specific rhythms and sing specific chants for each individual orisa. This is another example of the connections that exist between the Cuban-based practice of Lucumi and orisa-voodoo, as the bembe is borrowed from Lucumi practices and not directly associated with orisa devotion in Yorubaland. Each song is accompanied by the members of the orisa’s egbe dancing in front of the oba and the altar dedicated to the festival’s honored orisa. The Egungun Parade is always performed before a festival in order to first give thanks to the ancestors. Described in the introduction to this article, the parade consists of a processional in which the official drummers of the village lead the masqueraded egungun through the village, stopping at each of the individual orisa shrines located throughout the village. This culminates in the courtyard of the afin, at which point the Oba emerges from his compound and assumes his throne in the courtyard. The culmination of the festival takes the basic form of the earlier bembe, but with less of a casual and social atmosphere and more directed towards the ultimate goal of calling down the orisa in order to give thanks and praise and to request intervention in whatever areas of one’s life that may need to be addressed, whether spiritual, physical, or mental. The end result being a general feeling best summed up in Victor Turner’s classic description of communitas (1969).

The Egbe

If orisa-voodoo serves as a religious system influencing the spiritual lives of the residents of Oyotunji Village, then the social institution of the egbe serves as the social, political, and economic system that governs their day-to-day lives. In fact the two are intertwined on many levels, and not only serve to structure daily life in the village, but also to maintain and reinforce the political and spiritual ties felt among members of the satellite Oyotunji communities previously mentioned. Through membership in these societies, members of the community establish a connection to their ruling orisa and the other community members aligned with that deity. Equally important are the
relationships formed between members of the other societies whose membership are based on gender, social standing, or civic duty. Another important function of the egbe is to reinforce various gender and age norms with regards to eligibility for membership into a specific society. Such distinctions are made as a further attempt at “capturing” what many orisa-voodoo practitioners referred to in my conversations with them as “the culture,” meaning all things associated with the Yoruba. This apparent reification of the culture concept was viewed not as limiting or confining, but rather as a way of (re)inventing and (re)defining Yoruba culture from a transnational perspective.

According to William Bascom (1969:48-49), in Nigeria these societies developed, possibly out of childhood associations, basically as social clubs consisting of members who were generally the same sex, age, and social standing. Usually these clubs would rely on the guidance of elder men and women, referred to as the “father” and “mother” of the society. These societies primarily gathered together for feasts that took place during festival events. Later on, these informal clubs evolved into more formal social institutions holding monthly meetings, collecting membership dues, and electing society officials. While Bascom placed these types of clubs in a slightly different category than the various religious cults dedicated to specific orisa also observed at that time, he classified both as social institutions capable of cutting across kinship lines in order to forge new social, political, and religious connections among members of various clans and villages. The egbes at Oyotunji Village serve the functions of both of the categories used by Bascom in that they act as social institutions that cross kinship boundaries and serve as religious cult groups dedicated to specific orisa worshipped at the Village.

At Oyotunji Village today, these egbes operate as “fundamentally spiritual institutions that are concretized through rituals productive of relationships of obligation. Both spiritual and social ties are manifest through multiple groupings of organizations that constitute lateral networks” (Clarke 2007:728). Furthermore, these societies work on a deeper level within Oyotunji Village and across a transnational network of Yoruba revivalist communities to connect them through common African ancestry. Of particular importance within this transnational network are Egbe Akinkoju, the men’s society, and Egbe Moremi, the women’s society. These two societies serve as extra-local nodes of community belonging and participation through which ties to both Oyotunji Village and Yorubaland in Africa are negotiated, tested, and concretized through political, economic, and spiritual allegiance.

The society of drummers operates primarily at the local level of village society as a structuring agent for the drummers in the community. All of the members of the drumming society either reside permanently in the village or in the nearby communities of Beaufort, Sheldon, or Savannah and are present at all of the festival events in order to perform as part of the ritual events. While official membership in the society numbers around fifteen active members, the number of drummers who actually perform at festival events is usually between six and ten, depending on the particular orisa.
honored and the choice of instrumentation for the performance. Initiation into this society is typically concurrent with initiation into Egbe Akinkoju. Egbe Akinkoju exists mainly to teach and reinforce male gender roles observed within the village that are taken to be a direct reflection of traditional Yoruba cultural norms and behavior. It is through membership in the drum society that the drummers establish their identity and status as gatekeepers responsible for the success of the festival events through establishing a spiritual connection between the orisa and those in attendance.

Figure 1. Drummers at Oyotunji Village, South Carolina perform during Odun Sango in 2011 (photo by Colin Townsend).

Drumming at Oyotunji Village, South Carolina

Having provided a brief historical, social and cultural background, I turn now to an analysis of the drummer’s role in the performance of identity in a ritual context. I approach this analysis by relating the experiences of Olafemi, a drummer I met during my first trip to Oyotunji Village. Olafemi is fairly typical in regards to demographic descriptions of the drummers at Oyotunji. He is an African-American male in his early twenties who was born in Beaufort, South Carolina, located approximately twenty miles
from the village. He is also typical of many of the younger drummers in the community in that he represents a new generation of “Yoruba revivalists” (Clarke 2004); he was raised in the culture of Oyotunji Village as the son of two members of the community who both joined in the early years of the village’s formation.

Unlike the majority of festival participants who are either not fully initiated into the community or had been initiated in their adulthood, Olafemi was raised at Oyotunji Village since birth. He was, to return to Hans-Georg Gadamer (1975), thrust into a symbolic and physical world in which to forge his own self-awareness as well as his awareness of others. Using Rice’s three dimensions of time, metaphor, and location, I position this social process of identity formation within the context of ritual drumming at festival events in order to further what Rice terms as an endeavor to “bring some narrative coherence to the complex and seemingly fragmented world that many” anthropologists and ethnomusicologists seek to explore (2003:157).

My decision to focus my analysis on Olafemi was not one that I made prior to or even during my field work experience, but instead was one that developed naturally during my analysis of the data I had collected after my period of fieldwork was over. As stated previously, he was not the only drummer that I interviewed or interacted with, but he was the one with whom I had the most contact, my “key cultural consultant” in the traditional anthropological sense. While the following analysis does center on Olafemi’s experiences and interpretations of drumming at Oyotunji Village, I also introduce data gathered from other informants during my fieldwork. I believe this is a necessary tactic in order to effectively analyze Olafemi’s subjective positioning as a member of the community in the process of creating and negotiating identity. Moreover, his status as a lifelong member of both Oyotunji Village and the drum society serves to illustrate the dual nature of drumming at Oyotunji as both a mechanism for creating and maintaining identity as well as a necessary component of religious practice.

Mapping Olafemi’s subjective positioning within this setting means elaborating on some general perceptions of drummers and drumming within the context of orisa-voodoo praxis and Oyotunji Village social structure. Although at times problematic, Oyotunji Village positions itself as a representation of Yoruba culture and society in a transnational, deterritorialized setting in the United States (Clarke 2004 and 2007; Eason 1999; Hunt 1979; Lefever 2000; Omari 1997). Such a position encompasses all aspects of cultural and religious practice.

Time: The Evolution of Instrument Choice at Oyotunji Village

Turning now to the first axis in Rice’s model of musical experience, time, one can begin to situate the ethnographic subject, Olafemi, within this framework. Rice describes two fundamental ways to view the concept of time, as chronological and historical and as experiential and phenomenological. While the former allows for the positioning of musical experience along a forward-moving linear progression, the latter allows for theoretical exploration forwards and backwards along this axis to compare
and explore musical experiences in specific incidences and contexts (Rice 2003:162). In other words, while one interpretation allows for a historical analysis of change and continuity, the other looks at the particular experience of the individual in a musical setting with the knowledge that each particular experience will change not only for the individual involved, but also for those other individuals involved in the same musical experience.

The first application, historical and chronological, allows for a timeline of drumming traditions at Oyotunji Village that reflects choice of instruments played during ritual and festival settings. The choice and selection of drums and percussion instruments at Oyotunji Village has changed several times over the years since its founding in 1970. Olafemi stated that he remembered as a child growing up at Oyotunji, they would play “on some of the weirdest things... different cross breeds of drums, but that was just part of the whole process.” When I first interviewed him in 2007, Oba Adefunmi II, himself a drummer and member of the drumming society, elaborated further on how this process began and was carried out.

You have to remember what Oyotunji is and what it stands for. It is the first attempt by Africans born in America to reclaim their traditional African stories or subjects. And in doing that, because it [the African diaspora] ... has been – in no place [has] the African culture been stamped out worse than in America, you understand? In America it’s been totally obliterated, stamped out. We had to go through different stages of development when it came to drum playing and drum making. Before my team [of drummers] took over, there were drummers who played these round, double-headed, almost tom-tom like drums, like an Indian tom. Heavy wood with thick cowhide, and we would play these those with two sticks.

After a period of time, the drums being used were gradually replaced by more drums and percussion instruments of African origin, including the introduction of the shekere (a large gourd covered with strung beads or shells), the agogo (a paired set of conical bells usually made of steel or iron), and most notably the djembe (a single-headed goblet shaped drum of West African origin capable of producing several tones ranging from a deep bass tone to a high “slap” tone). This choice of drum was part of a larger trend in the evolution of drum selection during the mid-1970s that marked a conscious shift towards playing more traditional African drums in an attempt to “become more traditional with the drumming style,” according to Oba Adefunmi II.

In the early-1980s, the bata drums made their first appearance in festival performances. The bata are a set of three double-headed, hourglass shaped drums of Yoruba origin used in many ritual performances and most closely associated with the orisa Sango. Once again Oba Adefunmi II explained to me during an interview that the
use of this particular type of drum was a conscience choice made on the part of the drummers, as well as other elders and priests in the village (interview 2007).

All of the sudden, everybody was playing djembes here. And one of the chiefs said, well, wait a minute, you know, the djembe beat is hot and it’s nice and it’s on fire, but you know these are not Yoruba drums. The gods and ancestors do not speak through these drums. Even though we are all African, when it comes down to a particular ethnicity then, just like you have a particular ethnicity, you have a particular food, culture, and everything. And so that’s why we had to rigorously get back into Yoruba drumming, because, you know, the djembe almost became a fad thing, you know, everybody plays a djembe. This is good, because drumming is therapeutic, but at the same time they should understand what they are playing and what they are getting into.

Olafemi echoed this need to play Yoruba drums in order to communicate with Yoruba deities. As he told me, he feels that the drum and percussion instruments played at Oyotunji are based on choices that enhance and facilitate communication with the orisa in ritual and festival settings. These choices as expressed in historical and chronological time have a direct effect on the second application of time, experiential and phenomenological. If instrument choice is perceived as having a direct influence over the ability to communicate with the orisa, and by extension over the ability to successfully perform in his role as a drummer, it follows that the musical experience of the earlier generations of drummers would have differed from that of Olafemi and the current members of the egbe. This was confirmed by Olafemi when he expressed to me his opinion that the current drummers at Oyotunji had “really got the drums down to a ‘T’ now” with regards to their instrumental inventory. He went on to explain how the addition of other Yoruba drums, including the dundun and the junjun, has enabled the drummers to play specific drums that are associated with specific orisa, something not possible for the earlier generations of drummers.

This process of instrument selection is another example of the continual dialogue that takes place between orisa-voodoo practitioners, Yoruba from Africa, and other transnational communities of Yoruba. The decisions to include certain types of drums and exclude others have been based on the circulation of cultural knowledge made possible by a modern world system that facilitates the exchange of ideas and practices through physical and digital means. Whether it is by traveling to Yorubaland, receiving Yoruba guests at Oyotunji Village, or watching and disseminating videos online through sites like YouTube, drumming practices at Oyotunji Village are a direct result of a global circulation of knowledge.

The symbolic importance of these additional drum choices allow the drummers to communicate with the orisa in a deeper, more specialized, and ultimately more
meaningful way. However, choice of drum is not the only factor that influences the ability of the drummers to call upon the orisa. Equally important are the rhythms played and the ways in which they are employed. In order to further analyze how this communication takes place, and more specifically Olafemi’s role as a drummer within that process, I move now to the second dimension in Rice’s model, metaphor.

Metaphor: Playing for the People, Speaking to the Orisa

The second dimension of Rice’s model, metaphor, expressed in the form of “A is B,” or in this instance, “music is x,” serves as a means of exploring the fundamental nature of music and providing a basis for discourse on musical behaviors and the strategies used to express them (2003:163). Rice draws on the works of I.A. Richards and Max Black, who separately define metaphors as more than words or rhetorical devices. Instead they are to be viewed as statements that simultaneously highlight and downplay certain aspects of both “primary” and “subsidiary” subjects while broadening the meanings and understandings of both (2003:164). Rice also focuses on the ways metaphor, when perceived as truth, acts to guide both the thoughts and actions of individuals in a society and shape their worldview (Lakoff and Johnson 1980a in Rice 2003:164). This view allows for the exploration of music as a social instrument capable of informing social behavior and acting as a repository for cultural knowledge.

Although he lists several different musical metaphors that may complement musical ethnographic research, I employ only two of them here, music-as-social behavior and music-as-symbolic system. The first metaphor, music-as-social behavior, considers music to be a reflection of the musician's social structure and practice. Because music is created, performed, and interpreted by individuals within these structures, every performance is, in effect, also a performance of “existing or emergent social structures and social relations” (Rice 2003:166). These performances may represent either past or present structures, alternatives to existing structures, or possibilities for new interpretations of structure.

Olafemi’s performance of drumming at Oyotunji Village encapsulates all three of these possibilities. In many ways, the very existence of Oyotunji Village here in the United States offers both an alternative and a new direction for social structure. The purpose of Oyotunji Village is to provide an avenue for African Americans to explore their African heritage through experiencing a particular culture on whatever level they may choose, whether it be full-fledged initiation into the community or simply coming to the village once for a guided tour and to witness an Egungun Parade. In this capacity Olafemi and the rest of the drummers act as “cultural ambassadors” to those coming to the village, perhaps for the first time. As Yvonne Daniel discusses in her analysis of the dance practices of Santeria, “the physical body becomes the social body, both the repository of knowledge from the collective memory of a variety of African ethnic groups, and the sensitized reactor of modern transnational culture” (2001:353). If the same can be said of the musicians accompanying these dancers, then by hearing
Yoruba rhythms dedicated to Yoruba orisa and ancestors, visitors to Oyotunji Village are able to witness first hand an integral and crucial aspect of Yoruba culture.

Olafemi’s position as a drummer is also a reflection of past and present Yoruba social structure in that he is male. It is traditional in Yoruba society that in a ritual context, the men drum and the women dance (Adegbite 1988; Bankole et al. 1975; Bascom 1969). This rule holds true at Oyotunji Village as well. As Olafemi explained it to me, not all African, or even West African, drumming traditions observe these restrictions, but the traditional Yoruba belief as it is interpreted at Oyotunji Villages holds that drumming in festivals and drumming dedicated to orisa is restricted to males. I witnessed this firsthand on several occasions during my visits to the festivals. While there were occasions when a few of the elder priestesses played either a bell or some type of shaker (a hollow gourd or can filled with dry beans or rice to produce a rattling sound when shaken), at no time have I ever witnessed a female playing any type of drum during the festivals. It was not surprising then, when I learned that initiation to the drum society is often times simultaneous with initiation into Egbe Akinkoju (the all-male society), and that part of that initiation entails learning several basic rhythms on both drums and percussion. In this way, Oyotunji Village reflects a traditional aspect of Yoruba culture that ties in to the basis of all their religious practices, even though it is not necessarily a reflection of modern Yoruba practices as they exist in Africa.

Music-as-symbolic system deals directly with the communicative properties of drumming at Oyotunji Village. This metaphor relates to the idea that “music can have referential meanings to things, ideas, worlds, and experiences outside the music itself” (Rice 2003:166). Without exception, every person that I spoke with at Oyotunji Village, when asked about the role of drumming during festival events, told me that the purpose of the drumming was to communicate with the orisa, or in the case of the Egungun Parades, with the ancestors. As Olafemi puts it, “The drums call the spirits down.” The rhythms of the drums, together with the movements of the dancers and the chants of the singers, communicate with the orisa to please them in such a way that they will positively influence the lives of the devotees. This notion of communicating with the spirit world brings with it a heavy responsibility for the drummers. As I previously mentioned, each person is aligned to a specific orisa, and it is that orisa that profoundly impacts that person’s own identity formation and development. Because it is essential for the practitioner to maintain this identity through regular communication with the orisa, the drummer’s job of facilitating that connection is all-important.

Each orisa is said to have its own rhythm, its own dance, and in some cases its own drum. Olafemi told me that it requires all three elements, the drumming, dancing, and singing, to come together in just the right way to call down the orisa. This idea is reflected in the importance of the group over the individual in Yoruba drumming. In fact, in some ways the greatest motivation for a drummer is social in nature, in that there is a desire to conform to social expectations and please the group (Bankole et al. 1975:50). This ideal is partly reflected in Olafemi’s comments that only drumming in a group
allowed such communication with the orisa, and that playing alone was simply “practice.”

**Location: Local Routes and Transnational Roots of Cultural Identity**

The third dimension of Rice’s model, location, allows for the positioning of the ethnographic subject along a continuum of spatial constructs, what Edward Soja refers to as nested “locales” that “provide settings of interaction... Locales are nested at many different scales and this multilayered hierarchy of locales is recognizable both as social construct and a vital part of being-in-the-world” (Soja 1989:148-149 qtd. in Rice 2003: 160). These various “nodes” may vary with each application and may influence the subject’s musical experience while simultaneously helping to construct these locales through musical practice. Rice proposes the following categories of location: individual, subcultural, local, regional, national, areal, diasporic, global, and virtual. I employ the categories of subcultural, local, and diasporic to situate Olafemi within his particular social world. I have chosen these three locations not because they are the only ones applicable to this analysis, but because they most strongly correlate to his drumming practices. The primary role of the drummer at Oyotunji Village is to perform during ritual events held at the village (local) in order to facilitate orisa-vooodoo practitioners (subcultural) communication with the orisa as part of the performance of Yoruba identity (transnational).

According to Rice, the subcultural consists of “parts of societies, defined socially by gender, class, race, ethnicity, age, occupation, interests, and so on” (2003:161). The drummer’s society easily satisfies these criteria. As a member of the drumming society, Olafemi has identified himself as a drummer at Oyotunji Village and with membership accepts all of the responsibilities inherent in that position. Although not the only society in which he is a member, when viewed in relation to the importance of drumming for the success of the festivals it may be his most important and influential role within the community.

The local level of location is taken as the social or cultural unit traditionally explored by most social scientists, that being a particular people, culture, society, or village (Rice 2003:162). It is this level that typically allows for interpersonal communication and interaction, and proved to be the level I most frequently observed these drumming traditions at work. While Rice suggests that the physical location of the musical performance belongs in the subcultural level, I place physical location at the village level, which I believe in this situation is a more appropriate fit owing to the importance placed on the establishment of Oyotunji Village as a physical space for orisa-vooodoo practitioners and others to visit. Drumming at Oyotunji Village is not meant solely for the members of the drum society, but rather performed by the egbe members for the benefit of all of those in attendance. As such, the musical performances I observed all took place within the physical boundaries of the village.
either as a part of a festival or during a festival weekend. I address this level of location primarily to position Oyotunji Village within the larger location of the diasporic.

The diasporic level “refers to the sense of connectedness among populations with a common origin but dispersed widely across the globe” (Rice 2003:162). It is at this level that we can gain a wider perspective of Olafemi’s and Oyotunji Village’s place within a larger network of Yoruba revivalist communities spread out across the United States, including the ways in which the spiritual experiences manifested through the observance of festival events at the village echo throughout the entire network of social and political connections Kamari Clarke (2004, 2007) is referring to in her treatment of these Yoruba revivalist communities. She maintains that these “relationships between and among transnational orisa cultural producers reflect disjunctures and conjunctures in cultural production” reflecting what she terms as “‘discontinuities’ and ‘continuities’ that are simultaneously operative and form the basis for contemporary transnational heritage movements that involve a physical or spiritual or symbolic ‘return’ to a homeland” (2007:729). Furthermore, these patterns in time and space are both “recursive” and “transformative” in that they require devotees to essentially transform themselves into agents who are allied and regulated according to new meanings they themselves help to create, often times reinforcing but just as often subverting those same categories that act to shape them.

**Figure 2.** A sign, depicting a drummer, located outside the main entrance to Oyotunji Village, South Carolina (photo by Colin Townsend).
Conclusion

Using Rice’s model of a subject-centered musical ethnography that positions the individual in a “three-dimensional space of musical experience” it is possible to situate Olafemi within a space of musical performance and identity. He exists in a particular time that is a point on a processual continuum of conscious decision making regarding instrument choice and musical composition, geared toward effecting a greater degree of communication between deity and human. These metaphors of music-as-social behavior and music-as-symbolic system are viewed as taking place within a nested set of locales ranging from the individual to the diasporic as part of an interconnected web of like-minded spiritual and cultural practitioners. In constructing this analysis, I am not attempting to reduce the cultural practices, religious beliefs, or life experiences of any one individual to a set of coordinates on a graph. Rather, I employ an analytical model geared towards creating a clearer picture and a better understanding of the musical experience as it affects both the individual and the group at any given point along those three axes.

Drumming during festival events at Oyotunji Village is one of three components, along with singing and dancing, that is needed to properly communicate with the orisa and thus constitute a successful ritual event. Drumming is unique among these three components in that it acts as a rhythmic base and musical bridge between the singing and dancing. Not only do the drummers “play” the rhythms to which the dancers perform, but they also “speak” the words that the singers are chanting. It is in this way that the drums, and the drummers themselves, unite the singing and dancing in order to call upon the orisa and to honor the egungun.

Olafemi and the other drummers at Oyotunji Village act as agents of cultural transmission and (re)invention through their drumming traditions and practices, including choice of instrument and musical composition. While they have maintained “traditional” Yoruba practices by intentionally playing drums and percussion of Yoruba origin as well as playing rhythms based on those played by Yoruba drummers, they have also altered these traditions in ways that constitute a distinct “Oyotunji” sound. In this way, Olafemi and his fellow drummers construct their identities by learning traditions passed on to them from earlier generations of drummers while at the same time altering those traditions and practices in their own ways. Examples of this can be seen in the addition of other types of drums and percussion into their collection, such as the conga or the djembe, and can be heard in the rhythmic compositions that incorporate other musical traditions including Afro-Cuban and Southern spiritualist influences. These practices and techniques are circulated throughout a larger network of Yoruba revivalist communities through the attendance of practitioners at festival events, or through performances by the Oyotunji drummers outside of the village. Through the use of Rice’s analytical framework I have demonstrated that ritual drumming at Oyotunji Village is a crucial part of the process of transnational identity formation for both the musician and the practitioner, by musically creating a space for
communication with the orisa and the completion of a successful ritual event. Drumming at Oyotunji Village serves as a rhythmic and symbolic vehicle through which cultural traditions and social identities are (re)formulated and (re)invented.

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Rastafari in Germany: Jamaican Roots and Global–Local Influences

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Abstract

The Rastafari movement arose in Jamaica in the 1930s and spread from that small island to a variety of areas around the world. Having emerged as a response to colonial legacies, racialization, and racial oppression, the movement of marginalized black Jamaicans transcended its local Caribbean borders and became a way of life for people of very diverse cultural origins. Rastafari, born within a tradition of resistance in Jamaica, helped its adherents reconstruct their “black consciousness” and African heritage. The worldview of the Afro-Caribbean diaspora challenged established colonial views in the struggle for social justice. Also for many people in the West, this worldview became a source of spirituality as well as a philosophy criticizing Eurocentric assumptions of superiority. The Rastafari philosophy spread in Europe, producing a multicultural phenomenon. I focus on Rastafari in Germany, its peculiarities and similarities to, as well as its differences from, the Jamaican movement. This study poses questions about identity in the Rastafari movement in Germany and explores crucial issues in Rastafari, such as identity transformation, identity work, self-identification, representation, cultural resistance, and globalization. My argument is that “Africanness” and “black consciousness” can be adjusted and interpreted in a European context as a cluster of ideas and symbols that offer German Rastafarians identification and embody social justice.

Keywords: Rastafari, globalization, Africanness, identity formation, strategic essentialism

Introduction

The Rastafari movement arose in Jamaica in the 1930s and spread from that small island to a variety of areas around the world. Born within a tradition of resistance

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20 In this article, the term Rastafari is used to describe the movement and its adherents. The terms Rastafarian(s) and Rasta(s) connote only the adherents of the Rastafari movement. I use the term movement as the most acknowledged term among both Rastafari and non-Rastafari.
in Jamaica, the movement of marginalized black Jamaicans transcended its local Caribbean borders and became the way of life of people from diverse cultural origins. The new religion of the Afro-Caribbean diaspora was also appropriated by Western people and adjusted to Western thinking as a source of spirituality, a philosophy and culture. The Rastafari movement gained wide popularity: “Seldom has such a relatively small cultural phenomenon as Rastafari attracted so much attention from young people, the media, and scholars in the fields of religion, anthropology, politics, and sociology” (Murrell 1998:1). This is true of Jamaican Rastafari, but in Europe, Rastafari has attracted the attention of researchers mostly in the Netherlands (van Dijk 1998:184). The local phenomena, such as German Rastafari, which claimed, on the one hand, to be autonomous from the Jamaican movement and, on the other, to be identical with it, have not been researched in great depth.

In this article, I argue that “Africanness” can be adjusted and interpreted in a European context as a cluster of ideas and symbols that serve for European people as a basis for the construction of Rastafari identity. My assumption is that metaphorical Africanness and identification with various aspects of the Rastafari way of life as well as the symbolic struggle for equality, which the German Rastafari often articulate, represent a challenge to Eurocentrism and racism that the Rastafari, with their egalitarian principles and “global consciousness,” often perceive as an unjust ideology present in local and global contexts. Reinterpretations of Afro-Jamaican religious thought and of black liberation philosophy became for white Europeans a framework for cultural identity as well as a source of identification with black Rastafarians and Rastafari culture, born in Jamaica as a resistance strategy. Initially practiced by oppressed black Jamaicans, this religion was appropriated by white people and is now being articulated in a European context as an alternative, spiritual way of life in a globalizing world and as a universalistic philosophy of unity and justice. In this article, I examine constructions of identity and processes of identity formation among the German Rastafari, as well as the sociocultural mechanisms they employ to build up and articulate Rastafari culture in Germany. To discuss Rastafari identity both in Jamaican and German contexts I will explore theories of identity work, of blackness as a cultural phenomenon, of strategic essentialism, as well as “inborn conception.” Given that the globalization of the Jamaican cultural phenomenon led to the emergence of local forms

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22 Although this ethnographic study discusses important issues of identity in Rastafari, it cannot claim comprehensiveness. It cannot deal with a whole range of global–local adaptations, with the issues of gender relations that have raised much controversy around Rastafari, as well as with Western Rastafari identity in the African diaspora. Therefore, ethnographic research on Rastafari in various local and global contexts as well as research from an internal Rastafari perspective remains on the agenda of academic enquiry.
of Rastafari in various countries beyond the Caribbean, studying these global–local forms is of great significance. This ethnographic study presents an image of a group of Rastafari in Germany. I have attempted to reveal various “glocal” interconnections, cultural adjustments as well as questions of resistance and identity of Western Rastafari with no obligatory reference to the movement’s place of origin, the island of Jamaica.

Research Participants, Research Questions and Methods

The Rastafari philosophy spread in Europe and produced a multifaceted culture with diverse adjustments and interpretations. The central questions of this research are the following: What connections and similarities are there between Jamaican and German Rastafari? What are the differences between them? How do Rastafarians in Germany define their identity and the movement? What role does the movement’s central figure, Haile Selassie I, play for them? What does one of the central themes of the Rastafari movement – repatriation to Africa, “back to the roots” – imply for German Rastafarians? Given the importance of the issue of “black consciousness” in Jamaican Rastafari, what issues and motivations are primary for German Rastafari? Can Rastafari in Germany be described as a religious movement or subculture? What patterns of resistance emerge within Rastafari in the global context, or outside of the Caribbean?

To answer these questions I conducted problem-centered and semi-structured interviews with seven German Rastafarians. In addition, I conducted participant observation at a Rastafari-gathering where I could experience a celebration of Rastafarian traditions.

The protagonists of this research are seven Rastafarians. In contrast to what is common in qualitative studies and according to their preference, I do not present the participants of this study as anonymous: Jochanan, 28, writes documentary and interpretative books about Haile Selassie’s state visits and speeches. Uwe is a 46-year-old reggae artist. Chris, Jah Roc, is 27, and worked as a computer programmer but quit the job in order to do “Jah works” and to “spread Jah vibes” – he creates dub music, organizes Rastafari gatherings and dub gatherings, and administrates the online Rastafari Works Association. Ohla, 21, worked as a pharmacist until recently but also quit her job to work “for Jah,” such as cooking in a vegan restaurant or producing Rastafari artifacts. Maria, Sista Righteous, is 21 and studies African languages and cultures in Hamburg and frequently visits Kenya where she runs a program “Mama Afreeka Repatriation Initiative” for Kenyan families with the motto “Out

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23 Jochanan became my “key informant.” He was the first Rastafarian I was in contact with (via the internet, on a reggae forum); he shared with me information about the community and invited me to a Rastafari gathering.

24 Music events for the community.

25 http://www.rastafari-works.org/blog/

26 She sews clothes, bags, etc., and also makes dreadlocks. She quit her job because she sees pharmacy as an instrument of the government to “make profits” from illnesses.
of the slum – on to the land!”

Dennis is 24 and studies landscape ecology. Carmen is a 29-year-old painter.

All of the research participants were born and currently reside in various parts of Germany, except Maria who was born in Niamey (Niger). All the participants are ethnically German. They do not belong to a Rastafari organization (Rastafari organizations are also called mansions), so they can be described as the “independent intelligentsia” serving to develop the Rastafarian community without a direct attachment to any particular mansion. Their appearances are orthodox Rastafarian: long dreadlocks are often covered; the men have beards; and the women wear long skirts. The colors red, gold and green are also frequently featured in their clothing.

Sistren and brethren usually attempt to use the opportunity to meet each other at the gatherings where they can exchange experiences and praise Jah together. Rastafari gatherings in Germany take place two or three times a year. I was invited to one of these by Jochanan after a few conversations that proved to him my “serious” intentions in studying Rastafari. Before the gathering, Jochanan told me: “You don’t need to bring anything – except openness.” As a sympathizer of the Rastafari movement, I was open to new experiences, new knowledge, and new Rastafarian acquaintances, of whom Jochanan was the first. I was lucky to receive the invitation because the gatherings are largely closed events for the community. Every sistren and brethren is individually invited with the time and place of the gathering. Although it is common for the German Rastas to communicate in new media social networks, such as Facebook, the time and place of a gathering is not publicly announced to avoid “external” interference. To be able to spend three or four restful days in a quiet place, the organizers rent a house near a forest or in a field, where the chances of coming across strangers or “outsiders” is quite small. The gatherings have taken place for several years, and each gathering has welcomed twenty to forty German Rastas as well as guests from the Rastafari communities of nearby countries (such as the Netherlands, Denmark, or Italy). I was welcomed very warmly, and despite Jochanan’s advice not to immediately tell the sistren and brethren about my research, I preferred to let them know that I would later write an essay about Rastafari in Germany. Some of them were skeptical about it, but skepticism is common among Rastafarians in relation to academic research. In their opinion, scholars and media are generally inclined to represent Rastafari in an inappropriate, stereotypical way. Others were ready to tell their stories and answer my questions in interviews.

28 Her parents worked there; they returned to Germany when Maria was a year old.
29 I have borrowed this term from Yasus Afari, p. 212.
30 The most well known organizations (or mansions) are the Niah Binghi, Bobo Shanti (E.A.B.I.C.), the Twelve Tribes of Israel, the Ethiopian World Federation, and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church.
31 The more widespread word for a Rastafari gathering in the diaspora is groundation.
All interviews were recorded, including telephone and in-person interviews. Two interviews were conducted in English, others in German. Most of my interlocutors perceived anonymity as superfluous because they had “nothing to hide,” and the interviews often resembled informal conversations or “reasonings,” as some of my interlocutors called them.32 During these reasonings they shared personal experiences of becoming and being Rastafari.

Key Figures and Concepts of Rastafari

The central figure in Rastafari is Ethiopian emperor Haile Selassie I who is regarded as the “Living God.”33 Many Rastafarians believe that Selassie’s coronation was prophesied by Marcus Garvey, the Jamaican proponent of Pan-Africanism, “Back to Africa,” and other black liberation movements, the founder of the “Universal Negro Improvement Association” and proponent of the rights and freedom of black people. Garvey’s words were crucial to the emergence of Rastafari: “Look to Africa for the crowning of a Black King; he shall be the redeemer” (Andwele 2006:13).34 When Ras Tafari Makonnen was crowned Emperor of Ethiopia on November 2, 1930, he took the name Haile Selassie (“Power of the Trinity”), King of Kings, Lord of Lords, Conquering

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32 Reasoning means sharing wisdom in Rastafari.
33 The Rastafari have asserted Selassie’s divinity both before and after his death in 1975.
34 Garvey’s role is contradictory, since Garvey himself never showed any commitment to Rastafari. Paradoxically, as Price also writes, he “has remained an icon to the Rastafari in spite of his disdain for them” (2009:48).
Lion of the Tribe of Judah, and Elect of God. “Attentive Black Jamaicans” associated these appellations with the Messiah described in the King James Bible (Price 2009.ix). Rastafari derives from Haile Selassie’s given name Ras Tafari. He was the 225th Ethiopian king whose descent can be traced back to Menelek, the son of the biblical King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. Garvey’s followers regarded the crowning of Haile Selassie as the fulfillment of prophecy; Selassie became the long-awaited king and savior of black people (Andwele 2006:13). This idea of black redemption was an interpretation made by the first Rastafarians because in their view the Ethiopian emperor, the Messiah, was first a redeemer of black people, and then of humankind (Price 2009:x). Rastafari emerged as a new community who privileged a positive conception of black identity and culture, challenging the hegemony of whiteness in Jamaica (Price 2009:x).

The central concepts of Rastafari are Zion, Babylon, and repatriation. Zion refers to Africa (particularly Ethiopia), the “paradise” on Earth, and the “homeland.” In contrast, Babylon is largely understood as the Western world system where Africans in the diaspora have been living in exile under oppression. As the Rastafarian author Adisa Andwele puts it, “For the Rasta man, the Western life that was whipped into the African is evil” (Andwele 2006:16). Rastafari interpret themselves as the lost tribes of Israel sold into the bondage of Egypt; black Africans are believed to have sinned in primeval days and to have been punished by Jah in the form of enslavement in a Caribbean Babylon (Davis 1977:72-73). “Back to the roots” and repatriation thus mean “back to Africa” and away from the “Babylon system.”

*Ital livity* is a concept that describes the “natural” ways in which the Rastafari construct their everyday life, which applies to the Rastafari lifestyle and culture in general and also the German Rasta way of life. Rastafari strive for harmony between humans and nature and reject the artificial in favor of the natural (Edmonds 2003:60). *Ital* refers to a vegetarian or vegan diet and to a rejection of tobacco, alcohol, and drugs.35 *Livity* refers to a lifestyle that includes natural organic living and peaceful coexistence, and provides alternative ethical approaches that oppose the individualism and materialism of globalization (Jaffe 2010:32). *Ital livity* is, then, an indicator of Rastas’ “departure from Babylon” (Edmonds 2003:60). As practiced by German Rastafarians, *Ital livity* largely represents anti-consumerist approaches that tend to avoid products of the food industry and mass production of goods.36

*Word, Sound and Power* is another important concept in Rastafari, which refers to a philosophical and aesthetic view of language and of the word. Rastafari believe in

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35 Cannabis used by Rastafari is not considered a drug but a natural herb.
36 In their *Ital livity* they often cook vegetarian or vegan African dishes that are considered “natural” and completely reject such products as fast food, meat, alcohol, and cigarettes. Some of them grow vegetables in a garden instead of buying them, and sew or knit clothes by themselves or buy homemade clothes from other sistren and brethren.
the evocative power of words as well as in the power of names (Alleyne 1988:146). The philosophical concept that language has the capacity to create and to destroy is embraced by Rastafari. A word is both sound and power, with positive and negative forces (Chevannes 1994:227). The most positive force is perception, “physically realised [sic] through the eye by means of the sense of sight and leading to the metaphysical realisation [sic] of the self, the ego, the ‘I’” (Alleyne 1988:148). As Mervyn Alleyne states, in Rastafari words not only symbolize the forces, but embody them; so the “I” as a word and as a sound sequence (a) is used in a variety of linguistic structures, expressing highly positive forces. The most significant examples of such creativeness are Haile (Selassie), Zion, and Rastafari, “pronounced with the ‘eye’ or ‘I’ sound at the end. It is now the most productive derivational device in the Jamaican language” (Alleyne 1988:148). Other examples of the importance of the “I” as word and sound are the following: I and I (meaning “I,” “you,” “we,” and “unity”); Ital (vital); Irits (spirit); Iration (creation); Ises (praises for Jah); Idren (brethren); yes I (yes); and Irie Ites, deriving from the words “free” and “heights,” and denoting highly positive spiritual forces and “vibrations.”

The German Rastafari practice Word, Sound and Power actively, especially when they speak (Jamaican) English. They often code-switch, that is while speaking German they abundantly use Rastafarian English-derived words and phrases that are considered particularly meaningful, such as I and I, Jah Rastafari, Ital, Zion, consciousness, and so forth. In this way, the important words and sounds are made to preserve their positive power in a language different from the original Rastafari tongue.

Rastafari and Questions of Identity

Questions of identity are of particular importance in Rastafari. The Rastafari have, according to Charles Price (2009), their own theories of race: they criticize both white hegemony and oppression, and the oppression black people practiced upon themselves and others. Rastafari psychology, according to Clinton Hutton and Nathaniel Murrell, involves “expressions of self-confidence, affirmation of one’s Blackness and personhood, rejection of Eurocentric understandings of Black people in their cultures, and a longing for liberation and ultimate redemption of the Black peoples of the world (especially the oppressed)” (1998:36). Rastafari psychology is, then, resistance and liberation psychology with a strong emphasis on one’s African heritage and exodus to Africa, though the latter has a largely symbolic character for black identity (Hutton and Murrell 1998:37). This means that “Africa” must be understood here as a cluster of ideas and symbols that are significant in Rastafari struggles for black liberation.

The Rastafari became an example of how identity can be created and actively used. They have consciously made “blackness” a resource of identity. As Price (2009) explains, black identity has been socially constructed and assigned to people, but assignment of an identity does not mean that identity will necessarily be accepted or
that it will be interpreted as the inscribers intended; however, categorizations and prescriptions can influence people’s self-perception. Therefore “being and becoming Black” involves mutual commitment between the ascribed category and the personal awareness of blackness (Price 2009:4). Price’s concept of being and becoming black then, points to how Rastafari identifications are constructed. This conception presupposes that identities have histories and can be transformed in various ways.

As Price (2009) also points out, in understanding that race is socially constructed, the Rastafari have privileged an identification of blackness as a salient and positive feature. Therefore, in so doing they have subverted race as a social category. This is a dialectical process of simultaneous affirmation and negation. This process involves emphasizing blackness as a salient feature, on the one hand, and challenging the assumption of race as a biological and social category on the other. It must be emphasized, however, that blackness, as asserted by Rastafari, should be understood not as “biological” but primarily as cultural. As Paul Gilroy (1993) suggests, the culture of the black Atlantic (as well as black identity) is a “hybrid” of African, Caribbean, American and European cultures. He argues that the black Atlantic does not embody a single black essence, but is created out of many different ideas and cultures. According to Gilroy, identities are changeable, “always unfinished” and “always being remade” (1993:xi). Black identity, on the one hand, is not a single essence, and on the other, it is a “coherent sense of self.” Gilroy writes, “Black identity is not simply a social and political category to be used or abandoned […]; it is lived as a coherent (if not always stable) experiential sense of self. Though it is often felt to be natural and spontaneous, it remains the outcome of practical activity” (1993:102).

As Price similarly explains, blackness is a cultural phenomenon that acquires meaning through symbols, ideas, social memory, self-awareness, and a sense of shared history and experience. These themes define formations of blackness (Price 2009:4). Race formation – the acts of using different ideas and practices to make race socially significant – has been an essential aspect of the development of blackness, which “has shown itself to be a remarkably durable and compelling source of identification in Jamaica” (Price 2009:3). Blackness, as Price contends, is a dynamic condition, worldview, and cluster of cultural resources, which are flexible and can serve many purposes.

Strategic Essentialism: Rastafari’s Revisions of Identity

Emphasizing blackness can also serve a purpose. Presumably, Rastafari’s emphasis on blackness can be viewed as a strategy applied to achieve solidarity and practice successful resistance to cultural oppression.37 This presumption partly refers to the notion of strategic essentialism introduced by Gayatri Spivak. Strategic essentialism

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37 The idea of strategic essentialism as applicable to Rastafari’s articulations of identity was proposed by my supervisor Dr. Annika McPherson.
refers to the “strategic use of a positivist essentialism in a scrupulously visible political interest” (Spivak 1993:3). That is, in order to achieve certain goals, different groups of people may choose to “essentialize” themselves and their group identity. “The strategic use of an essence as a mobilizing slogan [...] is, ideally, self-conscious for all mobilized” (Spivak 1993:4). In strategic essentialism, the emphasis is on strategy, and its usage should be only situational and should pursue certain policies. Rastafari’s black solidarity can be described as strategic essentialism because it serves a purpose of achieving cultural liberation.

Along with theories of race, the Rastafari have developed theories of identity, one of which is called “inborn conception” (Price 2009:141). The idea of inborn conception, as Price explains, describes cultural frameworks for understanding why and how people become Rastafari. The inborn conception presupposes that black people like Rastafari are “predisposed toward peace, freedom, justice, and equality” and that Rastafari identity offers a potential antidote to oppression (Price 2009:143-145). Price’s reading of this theory also suggests a reference to essentialism, which he denotes as “malleable” and which resists cultural oppression of black people whose embrace of blackness is based on “justice motifs.” Price writes, “the theory positively preordains Blackness, while allowing some contingency. This essentialism works as a bulwark, if not battering ram, against counter-essentialisms that denigrate Blackness. By essentialism, I mean the view that Blackness is a “natural” and real phenomenon with central, recognizable features such as the justice motifs. However, this type of essentialism is malleable because it also recognizes the absence of such features, which therefore are worthy of pursuit” (2009:141). Blackness as a “real” phenomenon with the justice motifs implies that Rastafari view African culture, history, heritage, and black identity as essential for achieving black consciousness and, further, human consciousness. Therefore, African culture and black identity are considered essential for achieving social justice and equality. If the notion of strategic essentialism can be applied to Rastafari’s valorization of black identity as a fundamental feature, it is possible to assume that the strategy of valorizing blackness is one of Rastafari’s acts of identity work. This act of identity work is also an act of resistance to cultural oppression.

The Rastafari identity thus implies resistance, and resistance of Rastafari is equivalent to an assertion of black identity. As Price points out, there have been black people in Jamaica who accepted the racial status quo, that is the colonial assumptions of white supremacy and black inferiority. In contrast, the Rastafari recognized the necessity of psychologically “becoming Black” (cf. Price 2009), which means reconstructing and reinterpreting their African heritage and becoming proud of one’s blackness. Affirmative interpretations of African heritage and of blackness became for

38 “Justice motifs” are understood as the perception of blackness as self-consciousness necessary for the cultural liberation.
Rastafarians in Jamaica an absolute prerequisite for psychological and cultural liberation. Positive interpretations of blackness are essential for what Price calls “racial conversion.” Becoming a Rastafarian requires an identity transformation that is a result of a conversion process that is not only religious but also racial (Price 2009:8). Racial identity transformation, religious conversion, and social movement formation are crucial aspects of the Rastafari ethnogenesis: the birth of a new identity and people (Price 2009:124).

The Jamaican tradition of resistance to colonialism and racial oppression drew strength from affirmative interpretations of African heritage. Rastafari identity, born within this tradition in Jamaica, is now a symbol of the struggle for justice and liberation far beyond the Caribbean. In Germany, adjustments to Rastafari thought and reinterpretations of Africanness created new articulations and identities that represent “global consciousness” as a worldview aspiring to universal justice and the unity of humankind.

**Rastafari and the Global Context**

Rastafari are often viewed as both participants in and products of globalization. According to Carole Yawney’s review, the first diaspora of the movement occurred during the 1950s and 1960s through the emigration of Jamaicans to the United Kingdom. The second diaspora began in the 1970s with Bob Marley and other reggae musicians, and the most recent phase of Rastafari globalization has been facilitated by international travel and internet technologies. Meanwhile, there may be more Rastafarians living outside of Jamaica and the Caribbean than in Jamaica (Yawney 1999:158). The history of the movement, according to Yawney, should be observed in terms of a dynamic relationship between local and global influences, namely the contributions of Ethiopianism, Garveyism, and Pan-Africanism. In addition, the international experiences of Rastafari’s leaders and inspirations, such as Leonard Howell and Marcus Garvey, have reinforced this dynamic (Yawney 1999:157).

The global context, according to Richard Salter (2008), has always been important for Rastafari. He makes three historical observations: the Caribbean region has been operating in a global context since Columbus, i.e. since the discovery of the “New World” and the subsequent colonization; Afro-Caribbean religions, and Rastafari in particular, have considered a global context as part of their worldviews; and Rastafarians “were and continue to be intentional participants in and products of a global context” (Salter 2008:2). In other words, the Rastafari were created by globalization and then the movement spread around the world again by globalizing processes. The ‘I-consciousness’ of Rastafari becomes a global consciousness (Salter 2008:22-25) that provides universalistic identifications of solidarity, justice, and equality. Rastafari can also be viewed as a counter-culture and resistance to the dominance of “westernization.” In fact, as Werner Zips (2006) argues, the global anti-globalization movement borrows much from Rastafari. This position of Rastafari, its emphasis on
unity and equality, and the ease with which Rastafari symbols can be reinterpreted in local contexts facilitate the rapid spread of Rastafari around the world (Salter 2008:25).

In this global process music has played a major role. It is a common belief that Rasta culture spread across the world with reggae music, which emerged in Jamaica in the 1960s. Jamaican music is largely associated with the figure of Bob Marley as the symbol of reggae culture. He is often considered the most well known reggae artist and Rastafari prophet who made an immense contribution to the global spread of reggae music. Bob Marley emerged from the ghettos of Kingston and became “the only third world superstar,” as Jason Toynbee describes him (cf. Toynbee 2007). But foremost, Marley was a prophetic social critic (cf. Bogues 2003), Rastafarian, public intellectual, and “herald of a postcolonial world” (cf. Toynbee 2007) who translated Jamaican reggae into international music and thus spread the Rastafari message globally. By the early 1970s, Marley became “the leading voice of the ghetto,” telling of the suffering, defiance, and hope of ghetto dwellers (Edmonds 2003:112). By the mid-seventies, he became the leading voice of the reggae phenomenon that had transformed from a local presence into a global culture.

In James Clifford’s words, Bob Marley and the articulation of reggae have been involved in “globalization from below” (2007:20). His songs could be interpreted both locally and globally; for example, in a global context they could be read in terms of class injustice. As Louis Chude-Sokei suggests, Marley was able to transform local and micropolitical metaphors from Jamaican rural culture into allegories of a global hegemony (2007:139). Eventually, the process of symbolic struggle led Marley to the status of the symbol of Jamaica. His musical legacy still continues to influence people of various cultural origins across the world. This influence is also evident in German Rastafari, as demonstrated by my interlocutors’ statements about becoming Rasta.

Finally, the global spread of Rastafari was arguably facilitated by the movement’s “symbolic insurgency” that has helped different individuals and communities construct a “symbolic counterworld” to the system of domination that can be found anywhere. Rastafari has become a “traveling culture” and has raised a variety of representational dilemmas – those of defining, categorizing, and representing Rastafari. The scale of Rastafari’s claims, beliefs, and knowledge challenges efforts to find an all-encompassing term to define it. As a result, it appears problematic to just define it as a sub- or counterculture, or as a social and religious movement. Given a variety of representational challenges – especially in the global context – ethnographic research on Rastafari is often considered the most appropriate way of approaching this phenomenon, since rather than categorizing and providing definitions, ethnography is

39 I have borrowed the notions of symbolic insurgency and of symbolic counterworld from Anthony Bogues (2003).
40 The term “traveling culture” was introduced by James Clifford (1997).
largely directed toward self-representation and toward reflecting the worldviews of the researched phenomena.

**Rastafari in Germany**

Yes His Name Shall Be  
Praised for I-ver!\(^{41}\)

Descriptions of the process of becoming Rastafari are strikingly similar among my interlocutors. According to all of them, it was a gradual process; some also said that one “is born a Rastafarian,” and actually becoming Rasta only required “discovering” it inside oneself.\(^{42}\) Almost all of my interlocutors “discovered” it in adolescence, largely through reggae music. Only Jochanan’s way to Rastafari had nothing to do with music. Rather, it was the religious background of his upbringing that facilitated his “conversion.” As the ten-year old son of evangelical Christians, he saw a picture of Haile Selassie on the cover of a book, said Yeshua, “Jesus,” and felt “warmth” while looking at the picture. Some six years later during a visit to Jamaica, he found, through seeing other pictures of Haile Selassie and talking to “the brothers from the diaspora,” he finally could find answers to the existential questions that the evangelical church had appeared unable to give him.

Religious upbringing, however, is surprisingly rare among my interlocutors. Few of them, for example, read the Bible in the childhood, but even when they did read the Bible, the religious context was typically not strongly marked in their lives. In some cases, Catholic or evangelical Christian traditions failed to offer identification to the young people in search of identity. The primary factor in the conversion process was attraction to reggae music rather than a religious background. Jochanan, though, has a critical attitude toward the common spread of Rastafari through music, for the reason that in this case most people acquire information only by means of song lyrics, which is not sufficient for “true” knowledge. Yet, the situation is different when music serves as a trigger for further inquiries. Fascination with music and interest in meaningful song lyrics initiated most of my interlocutors’ preoccupation with historical literature on the Rastafari movement, Haile Selassie’s speeches, and the Bible.

Becoming Rastafari involves identity transformation and the process that Price (2009) describes as “becoming Black.” However, the same can be stated in relation to my interlocutors: all of them, in one way or another, experienced identity transformation, and some of them articulate what Price (2009) calls “being and becoming Black” where one must recognize the unity of humankind and maintain

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\(^{41}\) From a Rastafari chant.  
\(^{42}\) This kind of articulation also falls within what Price (2009) describes as “inborn conception.”
Africanness (largely as a symbol) in order to become Rasta. Metaphorical Africanness, which the German Rastafari articulate, falls within what Price (2009) describes as cultural – rather than “biological” – blackness, which should be understood as a worldview. That is to say, blackness is not a social category or biological feature but self-awareness that acquires meaning through symbols. This is made clear by Chris, who says, “for me, to be black is the consciousness, the awareness that we all are black from Creation. We all come from Africa. We are all of the same blood. So I agree that only black people can be Rasta. Only when you accept that you are black from Creation, can you be a Rasta.”

Roots reggae with its critical, yet positive message has been the decisive transformative factor for many of my interviewees. The music’s appeal embodies one’s potential to “be the change,” as Uwe put it. Reggae music also preceded an awareness of the importance of Nyahbinghi music, which is the “heartbeat” of Rastafari. Some others were first attracted by the unusual dreadlock hairstyle and then later by reggae music, its “vibe,” and its revolutionary spirit. Initial signs of identity transformation were largely of a subcultural character, which gradually, and through identity work, became “spiritual” and more religious than countercultural.

Identity transformation that began with music was, nevertheless, seldomly unproblematic for my interlocutors; many of them admitted that they had to go through certain difficulties and conflicts before they could discover their “true self.” For example, changes to dietary habits (rejection of meat or alcohol) can cause conflicts with one’s family or closest friends. At the same time, identity transformation is viewed as rightful and positive: as Maria says, Rastafari “saved her life” by redirecting her way of life from “high heels and makeup” to “love and righteousness.”

**Rastafari as Way of Life**

How do the German Rastafarians define the Rastafari movement and culture? Their descriptions commonly suggest such terms as “spirituality” and “way of life.” The “ancient” elements of Rastafari culture as well as of African culture are often of particular importance, which is an example of a cultural adjustment developed in the processes of globalization, such as the global distribution of popular music. Such adjustments arguably offer my interlocutors and other Western Rastafarians an alternative to the cultural and religious aspects of Western society, which is largely perceived as Eurocentric, materialistic, and consumerist. In contrast, social justice and equality are the values that the German Rastafari repeatedly articulate.

Some of my interlocutors’ characterization of Rastafari suggests a notion of religion and simultaneously implies demarcation from other religious practices. This demarcation is based upon the claim to “truth,” “facts,” and “proof” that other religious

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43 This reference is to the paleoanthropologic “recent single-origin hypothesis,” or the “Out-of-Africa” theory which maintains that humanity originated from Africa.
systems lack. Uwe said, “to me, the difference between Rastafari and other types of
religion is that within Rastafari there is a real proof. […] His Imperial Majesty Haile
Selassie I is the King of Kings, […] which had been prophesied in the old scriptures, in
the Bible, whereas many other beliefs or religions are based upon something that you
cannot really see or have a proof of.” Chris articulates similar views on the “realness” of
Rastafari: “Ras Tafari is reality – he is not a man who sits upon the cloud watching over
you, wearing the long white beard… His Imperial Majesty is the reality to I and I.”

Rastafari represents reality for my interlocutors on the one hand, and on the
other they articulate that there can be no precise definitions of Rastafari. The term is
“too big” to categorize; Rastafari is “knowledge, love, respect, nature, just everything,”
according to Dennis. The definitions are descriptive rather than categorizing; they also
vary according to the differences in individual perception. Often mentioned are the
“truth,” “knowledge,” “reality,” “proof,” and fulfillment of prophecy, which “others are
still awaiting.” This confidence in the rightness of one’s values strengthens the sense of
authenticity of the worldviews and of the self.

Similarly to the Jamaican Rastafari, the figure of the Ethiopian emperor Haile
Selassie I is the key aspect of the perception of reality for the German Rastafarians who
participated in the gathering. At some point during the gathering it became clear and
unambiguous that for these participants, Haile Selassie is God. Indeed, the way the
gathering was organized – with prayers, chants, and worship service – left no doubt of
the emperor’s supreme position to the Idren. Later during the interviews, my
interlocutors commonly confirmed this presumption: they referred to Haile Selassie as
God and as the fulfillment of the Biblical prophecy of the Second Coming.

My interlocutors observe the Sabbath and forbid work on Saturdays because
this day must be completely devoted to Jah. The gathering was no exception. Early in
the morning before breakfast and during a long worship service in the afternoon, they
read from the Bible and praised Jah in Amharic, English and German. Then we had a
lesson in Amharic where the elder Sister Ifua taught us to pronounce Amharic words.44
After that, the sistren cooked Ethiopian food that was eaten in the Ethiopian tradition:
with one’s hands, without using forks and knives.

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44 Sister Ifua also leads a “Rastafari school” where she teaches Amharic to the community
members. She learned the language by herself and also during her visits to Ethiopia.
The gathering had the warm, friendly atmosphere of a family event, where such rules as politeness become superfluous and kind humor is a part of communication. At the same time, the reasonings revealed certain disagreements in their views. For example, some demonstrated more tolerance for different possible non-Rastafarian convictions and ways of life than others did, but all of them seemed to acknowledge each other’s views and treated each other with great respect. From time to time some of them went outside to continue the reasoning while smoking herb. In contrast to the Jamaican Rastafari tradition of the collective ritualistic smoking, the participants in the gathering smoked individually from their own supplies. After smoking the “weed of wisdom,” peaceful reasonings continued, which then gradually turned into long chanting and playing powerfully sounding, massive Nyahbinghi drums that made everything around vibrate. During the Nyahbinghi sessions the large room filled with incense smoke and with an extraordinary aura of deep meditation. The sistren and brethren stood with their eyes shut, repeatedly singing chant verses to Jah, to the accompaniment of the drums. With the help of the forceful Nyahbinghi drums they were praising “the Most High” Haile Selassie and simultaneously “chanting down Babylon.”

Haile Selassie’s State Visits as a Source of Identification

The gathering was dedicated to the coronation of Haile Selassie and the emperor’s first state visit to Germany in 1954. This visit is of great importance for the
German Rastas; it is, perhaps, one of the main local peculiarities of the movement.\(^{45}\) Many Rastafarians view the reactions of many different people during the emperor’s state visits as prophesied in the Bible: “For the kingdom is the Lord’s: and he is the governor among the nations” (King James Bible, Psalms. 22-28). German Rastas claim that the fulfillment of the title of the King of Kings was confirmed by the German people, which is for them another form of available “evidence” and a source of pride. According to Jochanan:

> It is important for everyone, actually. Not only for me or for us but for every German because the importance is in the fulfillment of the title which Haile Selassie had. A title “King of Kings” can only be fulfilled if all the countries and peoples have bowed before him. And one of these countries was Germany […]. Germany is a part of this fulfillment of the title. On the one hand, a king is a king when he makes himself a king. But if the people don’t accept him as the king, then he is just formally the king. The fulfillment of the title of the King of Kings […] must also be confirmed by the people. So this title was fulfilled by the state visits and by the people […]. Not only Germany but also many other countries have shown that.

Haile Selassie’s state visits are thus interpreted as a fulfillment of a prophecy: “Tens of Thousands [sic] of citizens had gathered together to pay tribute to His Majesty”; “The people were stubborn as a wall and waited in the rain for Haile Selassie.”\(^{46}\)

In addition, the fact of the king’s state visit to Germany gives my interlocutors a feeling of personal involvement: “To imagine that I’ve been or can be in a same place where He was is an amazing thing; it is unbelievable to be where He has been. And the fact that He was there makes those places special and blessed.” Thus the state visits, to Germany in particular, are seen as evidence of Haile Selassie’s divinity, in conjunction with the Biblical prophecies. Alternately, my interlocutors describe Haile Selassie as: “the fulfillment of prophecies from Yeshua”; “the recurrence of Yeshua, the prophesied King of Kings, the Lion of Judah”; “the King of Kings, the God of Creation, the God of Jacob, the God of Abraham, read it in the Bible.”

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\(^{45}\) The community published a book that presents a detailed documentary of Haile Selassie’s visit to Germany: “… auf den Spuren Seiner Kaiserlichen Majestät Haile Selassie I. … in der B.R. Deutschland (08.11.1954 – 14.11.1954)”, by Jochanan Fey. There are also electronic books about Haile Selassie by other authors from the community: http://issuu.com/tafariverlag.

\(^{46}\) From the online documentary publication King of Kings, by Jochanan Fey. http://issuu.com/tafariverlag/docs/kingofkings.
Identity Work of the German Rastafari: In Search of Information on Haile Selassie

My interlocutors’ identity work involves awareness of the importance of certain facts, such as Selassie’s state visits or his speeches on various occasions. They search for information in libraries and on the internet and exchange it with each other. To be informed is part of their identity work that is accomplished by other Rastafarian principles such as Ital livity. Access to information is also what makes German Rastafari different from Jamaican ones. One of the differences between the movements in Jamaica and Germany, as Jochanan characterized it, is in the nature of the source of belief and knowledge that “He is the One.” In Germany, there is a high level of access to information, and thus, according to Jochanan, “belief is based upon knowledge,” and vice versa. Moreover, “belief is the first step on the way to knowledge.” This knowledge base is one of the aspects that create a “different direction” and a “different ideology” and is said to distinguish the younger German Rastafari generation from the older Jamaican one. The knowledge Jochanan refers to is acquired from a variety of documents available in libraries and provided by modern technologies, such as the internet. The documents that are very significant for my interlocutors include texts and photographs on the history of Selassie’s coronation, throne, and state visits, as well as the speeches of Haile Selassie that are considered as important as Biblical texts. They all serve as a proof of the emperor’s divinity to the German Rastafari, and similarly to Rastafari around the world.

Identity Work and Demarcation

Identity work also involves demarcation from the norms. In some cases, my interlocutors radically demarcate themselves from a “materialistic” and “consumer” society. Demarcation is not always radically articulated, however. As a Rastafari elder and reggae artist, Uwe often emphasizes the “we” rather than the “I” and the personal perspective. This Rastafarian rhetoric often suggests the word “unity.” This is a strategic unity through which one’s self-conception is constructed. Uwe said: “Within the Rasta movement itself, there are many independent groups, even in Jamaica. All of them are different organizations within the Rastafarian faith, but they all share the Rastafarian faith, you know? They might have different ways of living it, but we all share the same faith and the same spiritual ways. […] That’s why, although we have different groups, it’s also important to remind ourselves that in the end we share the same faith, and that we should stand as one.” Some of my other interlocutors also articulate this kind of Rastafarian rhetoric in which they strongly emphasize the “we” and “unity.” This is the concept of I and I, which is one of the most powerful in Rastafari: “Consistent with the Rastafarian philosophy of one love, self, family, inity (unity), oneness and humanity,

47 Technological progress as a means of acquiring knowledge, therefore, is not regarded as a contradiction to naturalness of Rastafari livity.
the I and I language reflects the Rastafarian concept of one-in-all and all-in-one; the one-for-all and the all-for-one” (Afari 2007:114).

Coping with Prejudices as Identity Work

Identity work and identity transformation are often associated with conflicts caused by stereotypes and prejudices that are spread in society, as was evident from the interviews. Stereotypes regarding Rastafari have persisted on different levels, including within the academy. The most widespread idea is the assumption that Rastafari is merely about listening to reggae music, wearing “fashionable” dreadlocks, and smoking marijuana. Viewing Rastafari through these facets is simplistic and superficial. For my interlocutors, affection for reggae and growing dreadlocks were initial signs of identity transformation leading to a deeper identification with Rastafari. In relation to cannabis, smoking the herb (if practiced) is strictly connected to the notion of consciousness that is the main component of the Rastafari liviety. For the Rastafari, the main argument in favor of cannabis use is Biblical. The herb is considered God’s blessing and gift to humans: “He causeth the grass to grow for the cattle, and herb for the service of man” (King James Bible, Psalms. 104–14). The Rastafari also refer to Ethiopian tales that can be traced back to King Solomon. According to one of these tales, ganja plants grew out of Solomon’s grave, and that is why “to smoke renders one as wise as Solomon” (Hausman 1997:61). In addition, my interlocutors interpret the use of the herb in terms of available scientific information propagating the harmlessness of cannabis as a substance that can be used for medicinal purposes.

As my interviewees articulate, negative perceptions of Rastafari can be often explained by people’s superficial judgments and by the lack of understanding of what Rastafari “really is.” At the gathering I observed the reactions of passers-by during a stroll: indeed, what I observed was curious staring at the Rasta sistren and bretheren. However, this was explainable as the Rastafarians’ appearances differ from the “normal” and thus attract attention, which can be both positive and negative. Although they seem to have become accustomed to the different kinds of attention they receive, sometimes my interlocutors appear to be frustrated by it. People’s suspicions about Rastas’ constant marijuana-smoking and other stereotypical judgments and questions (e.g. as to whether dreadlocks can be properly washed) are frequent in my interviewees’ everyday lives. Suffering from misunderstanding and prejudices is thus part of identity work. In this work, however, the experienced injustices are rewarded by the feeling of strong collective identity and, most importantly, by the “protection and love of His Majesty.”

Reinterpretations of Christianity and Resistance as Identity Work

Identity work also includes subversion of established Christianity. The subversive interpretations of the Bible that, in Jamaica, challenged white hegemony and its versions of history are to a certain extent present in the German Rastafari community
as well, as in the articulations that maintain the divinity of an African king. Therefore, white hegemony can be subverted by any person or group regardless of “race.” Rastafari, then, becomes a unifying force in this process of resistance against social realities, be they race or class relations. The resistance inherent in Rastafari acquires local forms and features, and thereby becomes global.

However, it must be pointed out that none of my interlocutors explicitly admit to “resisting” anything. Rather, they emphasized their primary wish to follow His Imperial Majesty and to live according to “God’s laws and rules,” which indicates the religious rather than subcultural character of German Rastafari. However, in some cases symbolic struggles become evident, as in public calls for social justice (for example, in reggae lyrics or in Facebook communications) as well as in criticisms of the indoctrination (or “brainwashing”) of people by the government and mass media. Thus, in realizing that countercultural aspects are a part of Rastafari worldview, it is possible to assume that resistance, consciously or unconsciously, is also being practiced by the Rastafari in Germany. In the Jamaican context, the specific forms of resistance to colonialism and oppression lay at the heart of the initiation of the Rastafari identity and movement. In Germany, resistance can hardly be assumed to be at the core of Rastafari; rather, certain forms of resistance (that are clearly of a different character than in (post-)colonial Jamaica) supervene with the key ideas and beliefs (that largely represent creative adjustments of the Jamaican Rastafari philosophy). It is also possible to assume that at the initial stage of my interlocutors’ identity formation, resistance to hegemonic culture, that is subcultural or countercultural factors, played an important role. Identification with reggae music and its revolutionary message as well as aspiration to spirituality and, as Rivke Jaffe (2010) puts it, an international tendency toward slow, natural, and ethical living were the initial factors of identity transformation which, through identity work (such as studying and interpreting the Bible and history) led to identification with various aspects of the Rastafari way of life. These aspects, involving certain forms of resistance, include recognition of Haile Selassie’s divinity and thus the challenging of Eurocentric assumptions and of Christianity which is based on them; appreciation of spirituality rather than materiality, and of unity rather than individualism; practicing Word, Sound and Power as a more constructive alternative to standard language; and Ital livity, that is a strictly vegetarian or vegan diet, rejection of alcohol and tobacco, and of artificiality in favor of naturalness. Rastafari culture in Germany therefore challenges Eurocentric hegemony, racism, capitalism, consumerism—in short, what is implied in the notion of the “Babylon system.”

Zion and Babylon: Repatriation to Africa and Reference to Jamaica

One of the central tenets of Rastafari in Jamaica has been repatriation to Africa, back to the roots, to the “motherland” Zion. Interpretations and adaptations of this focus among the German Rastafari are creative and rather diverse. Generally, Jamaica is important to my interviewees as the place of the movement’s origin and as a source
of Rastafari culture, but the major reference is to Africa, as for Jamaican Rastafari. In this sense, the German Rastafari movement is “independent” from the Jamaican one, as Jochanan stated. Chris also emphasized, “we have to look to Africa; we don’t have to look to Jamaica.” Jamaica is “not a holy land” but still “Jamaica has shown the world that Ethiopia is the place where I and I should be.”

Similarly to Jamaican Rastafari, my interlocutors criticize the “system of Babylon” – for example, Western capitalism, the consumerism of society, or the Catholic Church. For many of them, repatriation is a purpose – metaphorically for some, physically for others. They refer to Zion (Ethiopia or Africa in general) as a place where life is closer to nature and simultaneously farther from what is perceived as Babylon. Life is therefore more likely to become a spiritual livi

If you look at humanity in the global sense and look at the fact that the entire humanity is coming from Africa from where it spread all over the world, then of course I could also say that I can kind of repatriate and go back to the motherland. [...] But the issue of repatriation is mainly among Africans whose foreparents were taken away from their homelands by force, against their will. So there is a different quality or form of the desire to repatriate among the people in the West. Many places in Africa need to build up and develop, and I think it should be a duty for every human being who wishes to contribute to this development. Black consciousness definitely plays a major role, but I think it’s more in order to reestablish justice on earth and justice to the humanity, you know?

Struggling for justice and equality is thus vital. Repatriation is accordingly considered an important part and embodiment of this struggle. Also, repatriation presupposes the recognition of the significance of Africa as origin of human civilization. For the German Rastafari therefore, the issue of repatriation, whether metaphorical or physical, is a step on the way to humankind’s liberation from prejudices and division.

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48 For example, Maria is determined to “repatriate” in the near future to her “homeland” Kenya.
Conclusion

One of the central enquiries of this research has been the question of similarities and differences between the Jamaican and German Rastafari movements. The most obvious answer is that there is one major similarity, in spite of a diversity of local features and adjustments. The key unifying force is Haile Selassie and the supreme position that the Ethiopian emperor holds for both German and Jamaican Rastafari. Just like the people in colonial and post-colonial Jamaica, the people born in Germany identify Haile Selassie as the Messiah described in the Bible. There are, however, certain distinctions in this view: if for Jamaican Rastafarians (at the time of their emergence) the Messiah was first a redeemer of black people, then for the German Rastafari (as, obviously, for other followers of different cultural origins), the Ethiopian king is a redeemer of all humankind, regardless of racial, cultural, geographic, or any other boundaries, and this is what makes the Rastafari philosophy “universal” for the German Rastas. As my interviewees articulate, German and Jamaican Rastafari are “one movement” despite much diversity in the historical, cultural, social, and economic backgrounds of the countries. Thus, they commonly emphasize the similarities between the two movements as well as the unity and equality of humankind; that is, they maintain egalitarian principles of being and living.

If Rastafari in Germany were observed in subcultural terms, it would be possible to conclude that their way of life is a mode of resistance to materialistic and individualistic society, to the Babylon system, to global capitalism, to racism and other injustices of the world. In other words, Rastafari would be viewed as a counterculture to hegemonic culture. However, my current vision of German Rastafari is different: if earlier I looked at it through the lens of countercultural characteristics, now I assume that Rastafari exceeds the definition of counterculture. In the beliefs, practices and lifestyles of my interlocutors, the emphasis is on spirituality rather than resistance. Yet it is possible to state that resistance is inherent in German Rastafari, even if its character is more religious than countercultural. The resistance, of which my interlocutors are not necessarily always aware, is largely directed to the system of ideas, beliefs and practices understood as Babylon. Against this system, it becomes essential for the German Rastafari to construct a symbolic Zion, the collective identity, the “we” that is the I and I. If in the Jamaican context repatriation has been interpreted in terms of resistance to oppression, then in Germany ideas of repatriation function as a response to more general issues and problems (that are caused by globalization and capitalism). These ideas involve recognitions of Africa as the origin of humanity and views of humanity itself as sister- and brotherhood. The repatriation goals in Germany, therefore, represent metaphors for justice and equality among humankind.

49 Despite its religious significance, repatriation to “underdeveloped” and “backward” Ethiopia (presented as such by the mass media) can be viewed as “a typical Jamaican response” to social and economic pressures (cf. Nettleford 1970:104).
What seems to be, in the German context, a specific local feature of the globalized phenomenon of Rastafari is the interpretation of Haile Selassie’s visit to Germany. In this global–local variety of the movement, the identity, self-perception, and worldview of the European Rastafari are fundamentally constructed through the figure of the Ethiopian king. Viewing Africa as the cradle of humanity and referring to African culture as a source of identity constitute Rastafari worldview and consciousness. These tendencies are inherent not only within the African diaspora but outside of it as well. The assumption that “we all are Africans,” as Chris put it, refers to metaphorical Africanness and to cultural self-awareness. Arguably, this assumption gives the German Rastas legitimacy and authenticity being Rastafari beyond the African diaspora. The same assumption also reinforces reconsiderations of Christianity. Africanness as a cultural phenomenon and a worldview can be adjusted and interpreted as a cluster of ideas and symbols that offer meaning and identification and represent metaphors for social justice and equality. The recognition of the black God and of Africa as the origin of humanity, the idea of metaphoric or physical repatriation, and maintaining symbolic Africanness are thus essential for becoming and being Rastafari in Germany.

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