AN ABSENT HISTORY: THE MARKS OF AFRICA ON PUERTO RICAN POPULAR CATHOLICISM

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AN ABSENT HISTORY: THE MARKS OF AFRICA ON PUERTO RICAN POPULAR CATHOLICISM

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ABSTRACT

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Throughout Puerto Rico’s history there has existed both an explicit and persistent implicit denial of African history, culture, and religiosity. Such denial, initiated by Spanish blood purity ideologies and continued by U.S. American hegemony, has resulted in the “othering” of African religious expression, which has yet to be fully embraced by society at-large and by ecclesiastical structures. Instead African religious expression has been integrated into the popular practices of the common class. Informed by this background, this research explores popular Catholic practices of African inheritance in Puerto Rico, examining their history, meaning, and potential contribution for the theological community.
Dedicated to Justo Santana
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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INTRODUCTION

In Puerto Rico a fine line exists between the work of the Holy Spirit and that of brujería. Brujería loosely translates to witchcraft. ¹ While today it is not always used as pejoratively as in the past, it is a word employed by the people to describe the unknown, to give a name to actions and expressions that appear to be religious in essence, but cannot be tied down to a specific recognized and respected religion. ² As such, much of what is referred to as the work of brujería is actually not brujería at all, but religious expression emanating from foreign lands, that which is believed to be inherited from African peoples. This African foreign religious expression manifested within the context of Catholicism and intermingled with the contents of Catholicism, of which brujería is a misnomer, is the topic of this thesis. By analyzing current and past religious practices in Puerto Rico through the lenses of racial discrimination and popular religious expression, I will show the strong effects African religiosity has had on the development of

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all translations from Spanish to English and vice-versa are my own. Since the term and idea of “brujería” will compose a major part of this thesis, it will no longer be italicized for both ease of use as well as to establish vocabulary familiarity. This will stand for other Spanish words and phrases that will require familiarity throughout the text.

² For that reason, it appears the term “Espiritismo” has been employed to give a more concrete shape to such alternative religious expression in Puerto Rico. However, my research has not revealed a definitive answer to the origins of the term in Puerto Rico. Espiritismo, which is explored in more depth in Chapter 4, is a system of beliefs and practices in Puerto Rico (but also manifested with differences in other countries) aimed at connecting with the spirit world.
Catholicism in Puerto Rico and for Puerto Ricans, concluding with how these popular expressions may serve as a point for theological reflection.

_Statement of the Problem_

In Latin America broadly, and Puerto Rico particularly, Black history is little known. Often stereotyped and viewed disapprovingly, Black culture has been suppressed, oppressed, silenced, marginalized, removed, and omitted. For this reason, brujería has become the concept, usually of misnomer, used to identify the enigmatic. This type of racialization, ascribing a negative racial connotation to a group that originally did not identify as such, has been done to the religious practices of Africans in Puerto Rico. In order to overcome these racializations, we must turn to history.

The sheer quantities of Black people brought to Latin America allowed for their cultures, religions, and genetics to resist, find ways around, and penetrate the social barriers intended to impede their transmission. This infusion of African (as well as American indigenous) cultural artifacts and mores into European customs, as it took place in Latin America, deserves equal attention as the more commonly explored transmission of European to non-European peoples. In the case of this research, in order to comprehend how the spreading of Black religiosity occurred, the results of such transmission must be better understood. For this reason, uncovering the denied marks of the transmission of African religiosity to Iberian religiosity (i.e. Catholicism) in Puerto Rico is the central matter of this topic.³

³ All the more complex, Iberian religiosity cannot be abstracted from other European, Arab Moor, and American indigenous influences. Either before or upon its arrival to Puerto Rico, each has impacted the Catholicism of the island.
The result of this transmission has produced a Catholic practice unique to Puerto Rico. Undeniably similar in many ways to the Catholicism in other parts of the Caribbean and Latin America, Puerto Rican Catholicism yet developed in such a way on the island that it holds its own distinction. This distinctive understanding of Catholicism in Puerto Rico, I propose, cannot be understood without attempting to understand the island’s African history and religiosity, and in so doing, the need for theological reflection on this Catholicism comes to light.

African people have invariably influenced the popular Catholic practices of Puerto Rico. Understanding this historical reality allows us to construct an on the ground account of the faith. Furthermore, with a more authentic grasp of the faith, theologians and church officials can better address the needs of the Puerto Rican people. The paucity of theological scholarship on Black religious experience, not only in Puerto Rico, but also in Latin America as a whole, is indicative of how it has already been viewed at-large, which is as “other,” or in the case of Puerto Rico as brujería. By “other” I mean that the lack of empathy by those of authority to attempt to understand African religious expression enables them to treat it as enigmatic and foreign, permitting them to employ brujería as a monolithic illustration.

While today employed by some as a point of pride, the accusation of brujería originating from social elite and the state-associated Church has put the Puerto Rican people in confrontation with ecclesiastical officials. Not all people identify with brujería, however. U.S. American evangelization movements (the early 20th century spread of Protestantism and the Catholic reaction to such growth of Protestantism) have encouraged people to relate to God in more orthodox ways, or at least attempt to do so.
However, the influence of African religious understanding and expression has become so engrained in the Puerto Rican ethos that a large majority still relate to God in ways informed by this background. Yet, as will continue to be emphasized throughout this research, brujería cannot be reduced to Africanisms; brujería is Puerto Rican. By Puerto Rican I mean that while heavily influenced by Africans, that which is called brujería also features actions and expressions which appear to be inherited from the Spanish, as they have been contextualized within the Spanish understanding of religious expression, as well as the native inhabitants of Puerto Rico at the time of Christopher Columbus’ arrival, the Taíno. Historically, the Catholic Church and its representatives have attempted to draw a clear line between “brujería” and what they deem to be acceptable expression of faith and spirituality, but such attempts have created complexities. Censorship of this alternative, or popular, religious expression has created a situation in which the people have to reconcile their authenticity with belonging in the Church.

Research Questions and Statement of Purpose

In light of these issues three specific questions come to mind: First, what Catholic practices in Puerto Rico have been influenced by African people? Second, how has racial discrimination affected and suppressed Black religious expression? Third, what does the recovery of this history mean theologically for the Church and the people? These three questions drive the purpose of this research. In order to understand such Catholic Puerto Rican identity among the people, this research attempts to strip away the negative

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4 This is specific to Puerto Rico. Brujería as a term is also used in other Latin American countries and may describe similar or different practices specific to that context.
connotation of African religiosity in order to take a more honest look at its manifestations within Catholicism.

*Review of Relevant Literature*

Theological reflection upon the African history of Puerto Rico has been slight. Yet this lack of scholarship is more than likely not an oversight but a sign of the effects several centuries of colonization and its related racializations has had on the island. Most of the prominent sources on the Church date back to last century, such as Cristina Campos Lacasa’s *Historia de la Iglesia en Puerto Rico, 1511-1802* (History of the Church in Puerto Rico, 1511-1802) (1977), Elisa Julian de Nieves’ *The Catholic Church in Colonial Puerto Rico, 1898-1964* (1982), and Luis O. Zayas Micheli’s *Catolicismo popular en Puerto Rico: una explicación sociológica* (Popular Catholicism in Puerto Rico: A Sociological Explanation) (1990). For a look at how African religiosity has been integrated with the broader Puerto Rican Catholicism, there are four additional texts I have found helpful: *Black Puerto Rican Identity and Religious Experience* by Samiri Hernández Hiraldo, *Historia De La Esclavitud Negra En Puerto Rico* by Luis Díaz Soler, *Puerto Rico Negro* by Jalil Sued Badillo and Ángel Lopez Cantos, and *Afro-Cuban Theology: Religion, Race, Culture, and Identity* by Michelle A. González. While none of these works are specifically aimed at illuminating the African influence on

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Catholicism in Puerto Rico, they have in different ways laid foundational groundwork for pursuing this research. I will briefly review each of these three works and its relation to my thesis, and then articulate the significance of my proposed effort.

*Black Puerto Rican Identity and Religious Experience* is an ethnographical study of religion and identity in the predominantly Black town of Loíza, Puerto Rico. Hernández Hiraldo, an anthropologist by training, operates as a social scientist who plays the role of participant-observer. Through conversations with Loizans about the role that faith plays in their lives she comes to the conclusion that understanding the faith of the people in Loíza is essential to addressing their marginalized social condition. While Puerto Rico is a mostly mixed race society, Hernández Hiraldo exploits the ways in which the society is still set up to the advantage of those who have a lighter color of skin, or stronger Spanish ancestry, to the detriment of those who are darker. Loizans, like much of Puerto Rico, are also affected by profound poverty. Hernández Hiraldo points outs that many Loizans deal with their social relegation through religious identity—they use religion to help transform their difficult reality. What Hernández Hiraldo’s depiction adds to my proposed research is a look into the racial denial of African ancestry that takes place at all levels of society in Puerto Rico. The effect of this denial is not disassociated from religion. While Hernández Hiraldo divulges that the Puerto Rican Catholic Church is not homogenous at the popular level, evidence shows that it has been and in some respects continues to be run as such institutionally, that is, dominated by Spanish and now U.S.A. preferences and pretenses. This continues to have profound effects on the connection the people feel to the Church. Yet, while her account succinctly depicts the religious experience of black Puerto Ricans in Loíza, it does not entirely deal with how
Catholicism at the popular level is influenced by their cultural subgroup and religious history. My proposed project will take up this matter and examine the racial denial of African influence in Puerto Rican Catholicism.

Díaz Soler, Sued Badillo and Lopez Cantos provide fruitful insight into the history of Black people in Puerto Rico prior to twentieth century. Once again, neither text deals specifically with the topic at hand in this research, but in providing their history they both necessarily deal with the interactions between the Church and African people. *Historia De La Esclavitud Negra En Puerto Rico* details the laws, important events, and demographics involved in Puerto Rican slavery. *Puerto Rico Negro* treats different topics related to the socialization of Black people in Puerto Rico and the impact they had in the formation of a mixed race society. Both texts are among the most significant contributions on the history of Black people in Puerto Rico. They each prove the legitimacy of theories, challenge the legitimacy of others, and add new information to what we know about Black history through their extensive primary source examinations. These contributions are fundamental to this research, most especially in attempting to understand the character and extent of racial discrimination as well as how discrimination was overcome in the spreading of Black culture.

González’s *Afro-Cuban Theology: Religion, Race, Culture, and Identity* is a systematic approach through the lens of liberation theology to the challenges that Cuban and Cuban-American identity and religiosity present to modern Christian communities. Addressing the construction of identity in Latino/a and black theologies, the silence surrounding Black Latinas and Latinos, and popular religion as a source for understanding the Church, she centralizes these points around different Cuban devotions.
such as that to the patroness of Cuba, *La Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre* (Our Lady of Charity). González posits that one cannot understand Cuban culture and religiosity without understanding Afro-Cuban culture and religiosity, regardless of race, “The contemporary era, I will argue, is one where the Afro-Cuban has become so engrained in the broader culture that it is part of the dominant Cuban culture.”

La Caridad, as she is known, plays a theological, political, and cultural role for all Cubans and Cuban-Americans. González explores the Afro-Cuban roots of *La Caridad* and other devotions and the ways in which their origins have been transformed throughout history. This transformation, she argues, is not by chance, but the result of intentional whitening in order to diminish Afro-Cuban origins. González strikingly demonstrates the presence of Afro-Cubans in the formation of the Cuban identity and nation, and raises concerns regarding the implications of a Christianity, both in Cuba and globally, that is constructed by a purely European identity, history, and tradition.

My project intends to draw from González’s work on Cuba but with some differing method. González is thoroughly grounded in liberation theology, which does not figure into this research. Additionally, perhaps unavoidably, she spends much of her analysis of Afro-Cuban religiosity focused on the divine pantheon of what is known as *Santería* and its impact on saint worship. While it has not been non-existent in Puerto Rico, the masking of saint worship, or veneration, behind the image of Catholic saints is not at the foreground of my study of Afro-Puerto Rican religiosity, in part because it has

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10 There is disagreement as to the proper name that should be attributed to the religion. Santería, as it is commonly known, is known amongst its practitioners as Regla Lucumí which means Rule of Lucumi or Regla de Ochá (Rule of Ocha). Some also refer to it as Regla de Ifá. Lucumi is the name practitioners use to refer to themselves and their language.
not been revealed to be as significant. Finally, González is in conversation throughout the text with Black (African-American) theology. Nevertheless, despite its own intricacies and challenges, the similarities between racial denial and expression of popular devotions in Cuba and Puerto Rico make Gonzalez’s text a good starting point for my own research.

As González points out, the presence of African peoples and their participation in Latino history and identity have been downplayed throughout history. Much of the work to date by Latino/a theologians concerns Mexico, Our Lady of Guadalupe, and mestizaje. The black Latino/a experience, however, is markedly insignificant within these narratives and constructions. My proposed project intends to fill some of those gaps within U.S. Latino/a and Latin American theology as well as call to attention the racial tensions within Latino communities. This project also has profound implications for the Church in both Puerto Rico and the U.S.A. The poor economic state of Puerto Rico is a major cause for the rapid migration of Puerto Ricans to the U.S.A. A Church that understands those in the pews and their relationship to God can better attend to their needs. A theology that invites integration between the institution and the faithful may lead to a more flourishing relationship between the two.

Methodology

The objectives of this project place it in both the areas of history and theology, with a particular attention to issues of race and faith in Latin America. The construction of an examination of Afro-Catholic practices in Puerto Rico is done in three ways: through a historical analysis, an ethnographical analysis, and an exploration of popular
Catholicism as a point of theological reflection. Each of these steps are necessary for this study because it is putting together pieces of a narrative that in academic scholarship has gone untold. While there are bits from different texts that when pieced together help to provide insight into the marks of African religiosity on Puerto Rican popular Catholicism, the observation of a culture and insight from first-hand accounts give those pieces the support they need to be substantiated.

Having been raised in a Puerto Rican-American Catholic church, I have been a first-hand witness to many of the practices and ideologies described in this research. I have also discovered expressions of Catholicism that I had not previously encountered. As one can imagine, this material is personal to me. My connection to it has driven me to thoroughly, authentically, and truthfully compose an account of Afro-Catholic practices that also derives meaning. But in recognizing as much, I have also attempted to discount my own assumptions in an effort to present an objective account as best as possible.

A historical analysis of relevant sources related to Black, ecclesial, and religious history in Puerto Rico is the first step of this research. Most prominently, this analysis contributes to a narrative of Black racial denial and discrimination and the Church’s complicit role given its position of influence in Spain’s government. Throughout its history, practices have been enacted in Puerto Rico aimed at suppressing Black people. These suppressive acts, both *de jure* and *de facto*, comprised the fundamental socio-structural impediments Black people faced in the advancement of their knowledge and culture. By *de jure* and *de facto*, I am referring to systems of oppression. *De jure* are the formal standards according to the law, whereas *de facto* are the unofficially sanctioned

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11 Afro-Catholic is a term I will use as a shorten-form for African-derived expressions and practices of Catholicism.
standards adopted in daily life. The relationship between the two are such that the formal laws of oppression are perpetuated and policed by those who dominate the constructions of society, leading to the daily narratives adopted widely. Therefore, because they are so fundamental to constructions of race, suppressive laws and their subsequent effects compose a major part of the historical analysis. By examining some of these laws and the impact they had on the spreading of Black knowledge and culture, a clearer comprehension of how Blackness has been constructed and denied will be attained. Furthermore, in analyzing the laws that were used to censor, some of the otherwise ignored religious practices of Africans are revealed. Henceforth, these results assist in elucidating the significance behind Afro-Catholic practices in Puerto Rico.

An ethnographical analysis further contributes to these narratives while also bringing to light experiences and important practices to the people that have been buried in history. Part of the research conducted in preparation of this thesis took place in three different towns in Puerto Rico—Loíza, Guayama, and Yabucoa. Time in Loíza was spent observing the celebrations of the Feast of Saint James the Apostle, the largest celebrated and most important cultural and religious feast for town inhabitants. In Guayama, a town nicknamed “The Witch City,” time was spent observing the culture surrounding brujería.12 Yabucoa, a small southeastern coastal town, provided an opportunity to observe the daily life of Catholics and popular expression of their faith. Additionally, seven oral history interviews were conducted with residents of five different cities—Arroyo, Guayama, Loíza, Toa Alta, and Yabucoa. The oral histories assisted in both adding to as well as separating my personal lived experience from that of others. Each of

12 “The Witch City” is a translation of “El pueblo de los brujos.”
the interviewees were able to assist in answering the research’s question by adding their understanding of the religious practices most important to them and those which they believe to be connected to African spirituality. Additionally, the gathering of oral histories seems to be most fitting for this research, given the significant place oral history transmission has in African and Puerto Rican cultures.

Exploring popular Catholicism, the third step in this approach, attempts to derive meaning from the outcomes of the previous two steps, which are the revelation of Afro-Catholic practices, ignored by history and questioned by the Church. Afro-Catholic practices in Puerto Rico are popular. What popular Catholic practices in Puerto Rico reveal about the way the people understand and interpret the faith is a starting point for theological reflection, or *locus theologicus*. Orlando Espín and Roberto Goizueta are two theologians who have seriously considered the importance of popular Catholicism as a place of theological reflection.\(^{13}\) In paraphrasing Virgilio Elizondo, Rebecca M. Berrú-Davis states, “attention to the devotions and rituals that are carried out by the people, from generation to generation and with or without the approval of the Church, suggest the ways in which God is encountered.”\(^{14}\) This research picks up on the use of popular Catholicism in U.S. Latino/a theology and applies it to the Puerto Rican context. Like Espín, Goizueta, Elizondo, and Berrú-Davis, the examination of popular Catholic expressions here is used as a way to understand the needs, desires, and hopes of a

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community. What will be shown is that the daily-lived in reality becomes a source for
divine revelation. This examination then enables us to understand how the people, in their
lived faith, understand God.

There are some limits to the design of this research, however. For one, the
spelling out of *de jure* and *de facto* discrimination is just the first step to understanding
how Black people have been suppressed. While such a method is able to convey at some
level the socio-structural barriers to Black advancement, further primary source accounts
can add more depth. Archival research at the General Archives of Puerto Rico was able to
produce some sources in the way of matters concerning the Church as well as slave
registries, but little as it relates to the daily life of Black people in Puerto Rico. With
more time and focused research, archival methods could prove to be more beneficial. For
example, David M. Stark has used parish registers to broaden our understanding of the
slave trade to Puerto Rico as well as life on the plantation and in *Hato* economy lands.\(^\text{15}\)
Moreover, in their Puerto Rican ethnographic studies, Isar P. Godreau and Samiri
Hernández Hiraldo spent even more extended time in Barrio San Antón and Loíza,
respectively, in attempt to understand constructions of Blackness and racial
discrimination.\(^\text{16}\) With additional time spent in Puerto Rico than was available to me, the
results of this research could be enhanced. Lastly, as David K. Dunaway and Willa K.
Baum point out, from a practical perspective there are always limits of oral history such
as consistency in the telling of a story, conformity between reports of an event, and

\(^{15}\) See: David M. Stark, *Slave Families and the Hato Economy in Puerto Rico*,
(Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2017). *Hato* (herding) economy is the term used
for the economic system consisting of livestock ranching, foodstuff cultivation, and
timber harvesting.

\(^{16}\) See: Isar P. Godreau, *Scripts of Blackness: Race, Cultural Nationalism, and U.S.
distinguishing the significant from the insignificant.\footnote{See: David K. Dunaway and Willa K. Baum, eds., \textit{Oral History: An Interdisciplinary Anthology} (Nashville, TN: American Association for State and Local History, 1984).} Nevertheless, while these may be just a few of the limits of my research, I believe that the overall method provides a solid foundation for the continued study of Afro-Catholic Puerto Rican practices.

The methodology of this research is employed as follows. In Chapter 1, I review the history of Black people in Puerto Rico.\footnote{Understanding that not all Black people in Puerto Rico came directly from Africa, it is sometimes more precise to refer to people of African descent as “Black.”} Focusing on how their history, identity, and culture have been denied, this first chapter aims to provide a context for the race-based religious discrimination against Blackness. The censorship and denial of Black religiosity cannot be understood without first examining the origins of Black people in Puerto Rico, the contributions of Black culture, and discriminatory practices, both \textit{de facto} and \textit{de jure}.

Chapter 2 delves into a second form of discrimination—that of Church suspicion of popular Catholic religious expression. The purpose of this chapter is to show the positive contribution that reflecting on popular Catholicism can have in better understanding Puerto Rican Afro-Catholic expression. This is established through an analysis of the Feast of Saint James celebrated in Loiza.

From the first two chapters comes the framework for analyzing the central question of this research. Chapter 3 assesses the key African-influenced religious practices of Puerto Rican Catholicism. In unveiling the practices that can be traced back to African people, I recover histories that have been racially denied and then analyze these popular Catholic expressions, in light of such denial, as a starting point for theological reflection.
Chapter 4 continues the work of the previous chapter through a discussion of an inescapable product of African religiosity in Puerto Rico, Espiritismo. The purpose of adding Espiritismo is to demonstrate how it is a crucial part of religiosity in Puerto Rico that is heavily influenced by African spirituality. Elements of it are practiced by Catholics, giving Puerto Rican Catholicism a variant flavor that impacts, to extents great and small, the worldviews of Puerto Rican Catholics and how they handle the daily struggles of this life.

Lastly, this research will conclude with a reflection on the usefulness popular Catholicism provides for theologically understanding the Afro-Catholic practices of Puerto Rico, using a model provided by Rebecca M. Berrú-Davis.  

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19 Like brujería, Espiritismo and other key Spanish terms that will be used often throughout the text will not be italicized following their first use.

CHAPTER 1
BLACK CENSORSHIP AND RACIAL DENIAL IN PUERTO RICO

“... para mejorar la raza.”

The phrase, “in order to improve the race,” is commonly used throughout Latin America to express the sentiment that African, Amerindian, or other non-White cultural characteristics and phenotypes are inferior to those of European descent. This expression is often used out of ignorance; it is an unconscious preference for that which is considered Iberian, perfectly revealing a way of thinking that has been ingrained in the indiscernible desires of many. The use of the phrase, and the thinking it conveys, commonly appears in regard to relationships. If a person is dating someone of a lighter skin tone, then others will be complimentary, support the relationship, and encourage marriage and reproduction “in order to improve the race.” In reverse, marrying someone of darker features is discouraged. The idea behind this thinking, based on marrying and reproducing with someone who has a lighter color of skin and more European physical features than you, is blanqueamiento, or whitening. Blanqueamiento is itself based in the Spanish concept of limpieza de sangre (purification of blood).

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21 Translation: To improve the race. Mejorar la raza is a phrase that remains in the colloquial language of Latin America that has been used historically as part of Whitening theories. For more see: María Angélica Matoma Gómez, “La Política Internacional Migratoria Colombiana a Principios Del Siglo XX (Colombian Migration Policy at the Early 20th Century),” Memoria Y Sociedad 13, no. 26 (January 2009): 7-17.

22 For more see: Godreau, Scripts of Blackness, 16, 91.
Purification of blood concepts began in 15th century Spain as the nation was coming out of a period of struggle with Jews and Muslims. In May 1449, the “Sentence Statute” was passed in the city of Toledo, which declared all Jewish converts (conversos) to Christianity “incapable and unworthy to have every public and private benefice and office.” 23 This ban would be the first of a series of laws in Spain dictated by blood purity until the 19th century. While the laws dealt with various matters of society, they all inherently controlled sexual relations. 24 The safeguarding of Christianity now also became the safeguarding of Whiteness.

Discourses of blood purity in the colonial possessions of Spain were inescapable. Also inescapable was the Church’s connection to this discourse. While not always in favor of every law aimed at discrimination against Muslims and Jews, the Church still had a stance. In the colonies, Blacks and Amerindians were still new to Christianity; they

23 John Edwards and גון אדוארדס "ברית מחודשת של חוקי טוהר הדם / 'Purity of Blood' Laws Revisited,” Proceedings of the World Congress of Jewish Studies / דברי הקונגרס העולמי למדעי היהדות (1989): 159. When the Catholic crown took control of Spain, Jews and Muslims were either driven out of the country or forced to convert to Christianity.

24 In an 1879 letter written by Ramón Emeterio Betances to his sister Demetria, he details a problematic situation concerning the proposed marriage of their sister Ana to a Spanish man: “As for the baptismal certificate, I thought you knew all about what happened back then. When it became known that doña Ana was marrying don Pepe, since there were a lot of envious parents [padres] (envious of what? Ye gods!), they threw in the family’s face our African blood—which no Betances with any common sense has ever denied. However, then it seems that it was necessary to deny it or, in order to be in line with Spanish law, we would have to provide information about the whiteness of our blood and prove, before the eyes of the world, that we dark-skinned people [gente prieta] were as white as any Pelayo or even as any Irishman, if necessary, and it was finally proved according to the law, which turns midnight into noon.” See: “Carta núm. 67, A su hermana Demetria Betances Alacán,” in Félix Ojeda Reyes and Paul Estrade, Obras completas, vol. II (San Juan: Ediciones Puerto, 2008): 164–167, in María del Carmen Baerga, "Routes to Whiteness, or How to Scrub Out the Stain: Hegemonic Masculinity and Racialization in Nineteenth-Century Puerto Rico,” Translating the Americas 3, no. 20160201 (2015): 121-122.
were recent converts. Just as the Inquisition was used in Spain to vet Muslims and Jews, *probanzas de limpieza de sangre* (certifications of blood purity) were used in the colonies to judge the status of Blacks and Amerindians as new Christians. The deployment of religious purity tests, inherently linked to race, appears to have led to a society where “Whitening” privileged an individual’s status.^[25]

Blood purity laws and discourse in Spain are the driving force behind other laws and discourse that have allowed for colorism, racializations, and racial discrimination of Blackness in Puerto Rico. While today Puerto Rico is a mixed-race society, these symptoms of blood purity laws are still extant. It has led to social meanings attached to dark skin color, including the othering and denial of Black religious expression. As I endeavor to recover African-derived expressions of Catholicism in Puerto Rico, this chapter will begin by attempting to answer in what ways such religious expression has been censored. Through an examination of laws that instituted race-based discrimination in Puerto Rico during the island’s Spanish colonization from the early 16th century through the 20th century, and other practices resulting in the denial of Black culture and identity, this chapter will display some of the forces behind the suppression of African-derived religious expressions, inescapably related to and influenced by ecclesiastical structures.

*African Origins*

In the attempt to construct an understanding of different cultures there is a tendency to reduce them their most prominent cultural artifacts. For example, when one

thinks of Italy, the first thing that might come to mind is the Coliseum, or perhaps pasta. With Ireland, we can recognize Gaelic as their traditional language and the rapid leg and foot movements of their traditional dance. However, in the countries whose stories have not been told, this becomes a bit harder. Their cultural artifacts may be misunderstood, misidentified, or even unknown completely. This is often the case with the cultures of Africa. There is a propensity to generalize the people and cultural artifacts that come from Africa as all of the same origin. Whether from ignorance or apathy, the recognition of the diversity of history and cultures within Europe has not been afforded to Africa. This is evident in the misnomer of brujería for the religious expression of Africans in Puerto Rico, which is not only forgetful of the complexities of cultures that exist within any large region such as a continent, but perpetuates a denial of the unique and valuable differences between the many ethnic groups within the different regions of continental Africa. Yet, due to the disconnecting effects slavery and multiple colonizers had on history, when it comes to studying the origins of African people in the Americas, it is difficult to speak definitively of anything more particular than Africa itself. Therefore, in seeking to examine Puerto Rico’s African heritage, the primary step is to trace what is possible to Africa and then hypothesize what can be further specified. As such, as this study seeks to identify the marks people of Africa have had on the practice of Catholicism, such marks will be referred to not ignorantly, or apathetically, but deficiently as African, with specific cultures identified when possible.

Nevertheless, discerning what history makes possible to understand in regard to which groups have had some kind of mark on Puerto Rican culture is a helpful starting point to provide context to African religious expression. Historians such as Ricardo
Alegría, Fernando Picó, Jalil Sued Badillo, and Luis Diaz Soler have been able to identify pieces of Puerto Rico’s African past through Spanish records, slave registries, and other writings, and with small success have been able to identify individual African groups that have had some sort of presence. Among the people themselves, local oral historians have also been transmitters of the island’s African past. Many believe themselves to be descendants of the Yoruba (a people in present-day Nigeria), the Congo, and the Bantu. Taking all of this into account, the next several paragraphs will serve as a short account of what some of these ethnic groups may have been.

It is well documented in Spanish history that the Moors, a North African group of Berber ethnicity, made their arrival to the Caribbean, and the Americas at large, through the Spanish. Having inhabited Spain since 711 C.E., when the Muslim Umayyad Caliphate conquered a large portion of the Iberian Peninsula, and beyond 1492, when Christian Spain completely re-conquered the area, the Moors impressed on Spain their own culture.²⁶ This culture was carried with the Spanish in their conquest of the Americas.

Outside of the Moors, it is challenging to pinpoint which ethnicities of Africa have had an impact on Puerto Rican culture and society. When the Spanish began the importation of slaves from areas outside of Spain in 1513, there was not a consistently precise keeping of records from where these enslaved people were taken. For one, the records that were kept did not always record the country of origin of the enslaved, rather

²⁶ For more on the Moorish influence in Spain see: Richard, Fletcher, Moorish Spain (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2006).
the port from which the boat they arrived on embarked. Additionally, after Spain came to an agreement with Great Britain to cease its activity in the importation of slaves in 1835, the legal introduction of slaves reduced dramatically so that the contraband trade became the majority source of Africans. Because of this, it was common for many of the slaves to have arrived from other islands in the Caribbean such as Saint Thomas, Martinique, and Guadalupe.

As Díaz Soler notes, the Africans who arrived to Puerto Rico came from all parts of its western coast—Senegambia, Guinea, the Gold Coast, Congo and Angola. Unlike other islands such as Cuba, which has a sizeable and recognizable Yoruba population evidenced in the practice of Santería, there is no clearly identifiable or dominant African ethnicity in Puerto Rico. While some posit that the Yoruba were also prevalent in Puerto Rico, what is currently present of the Yoruba religion is largely due to the immigration of Cuban exiles in the 1950s. What additionally makes this task difficult is the way in which slaveowners adjudicated the placement of Africans on each plantation, attempting to keep those of the same ethnic groups separate. With the inability to communicate through a common language or share in the same culture, slaves were left with little recourse but to accept the Spanish language as a common tongue and Spanish culture as

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28 Díaz Soler, Historia De La Esclavitud Negra, 117.
30 Díaz Soler, 145.
the context within which they would attempt to integrate their own. This was not necessarily always futile attempt. More lax periods of slaves overseeing, such as the 17th and 18th century Hato economy, and the use of cofradas (brotherhoods) allowed Africans to preserve certain shared cultural expressions.  

In continuing to unmask Puerto Rico’s African origins, the task of scholarship is to take what is hypothesized to be African—language, music, food, art, and other forms of cultural expression of Puerto Ricans—and to attempt to identify points of connection between them and those of specific African groups in order to further elucidate meaning behind Afro-Puerto Rican culture. This study intends to add religion to the picture of language, music, food, and art that is already believed to be African. While it is still very plausible that the Yoruba have had their own impact on Puerto Rico, further historical examination of religion, as well cultural artifacts, can possibly reveal a number of other groups. For example, Hector Vega-Drouet has posited the Ashanti and the Congo as influencers of Puerto Rican bomba, an African-derived genre of music, by comparing the rhythms and composition of bomba with those of the traditional music of the Ashanti, Congo, and other African groups.  

While it would be challenging given the scope of this study to identify these same kinds of influences in the religion of Puerto Rico, particularly its largest and most

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dominant one, Catholicism, having a baseline understanding of African culture in Puerto Rico provides some context to understand what African religious expression would look like. Understanding that racism created a void in the recording of African history, a look at laws used to discriminate is another helpful way to get some of this picture.

Before advancing to an examination of the historical barriers to an authentic understanding of the characteristics of Afro-Catholic religious expression in Puerto Rico, I will briefly outline the roles Black people played in the development of Puerto Rican society as well as some specific cultural artifacts that will be helpful in understanding African religious expression.

**Black Lives in Puerto Rico**

Black people—both slave and free—occupied different roles in Puerto Rico. Proportionally, there were more free Blacks than in other countries such as the U.S.A., Cuba, and Brazil.⁴⁴ Because the island did not hold as much importance to Spain until the late eighteenth century, White colonists often left for better opportunities in Cuba, Nueva España (present-day Mexico), and South America. This led to a consistently sizeable population of *negros libertos* (free Blacks) and free mulattos.⁴⁵ Not all Blacks who worked on the plantations were slaves either. In need of work, many free Blacks worked

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⁴⁵ Díaz Soler, 225. Mulattos are generally considered to be ethnically mixed Spanish and African people. However, in Puerto Rico most mixed people also have Taíno or other Amerindian ethnicity due to the miscegenation between Spanish settlers and Amerindians. Keeping this in mind, mulatto will be the term employed in this research to refer to all mixed-race people.
on plantations as day laborers, a job that allowed them to maintain their freedom and receive pay, but which included treatment hardly better than that of a slave.\(^{36}\)

Day laborers and slaves worked the many jobs that it took to run a plantation—some in the fields or with the machines, others, often women, worked in the house as servants. During the 17th and 18th centuries, when the economy was based on less labor-intensive herding (\textit{Hato} economy) instead of sugar and coffee plantations, Africans were able to establish a stronger family life.\(^{37}\) At least on some plantations, slaves even worked as nurses. La Hacienda La Esperanza in Manatí, Puerto Rico, was one of the largest plantations on the island during the 19th century. A census from the plantation in 1870 shows that among the registered slaves was a nurse named María Rosario.\(^{38}\) Nothing more is said about María Rosario, who she was, or stories of her work, but she would have been the person responsible for the care of the other slaves and possibly even the White foremen and workers. The owner of this plantation in particular, Marquess José Ramón Fernández y Martínez, did not actually live at the house. Instead he chose to reside in the capital where he conducted other business and was involved in politics. In his absence, various butlers and foremen, those who at times may even have even been loyal Black slaves, oversaw the slaves. They had discretion to decide the way the plantation was managed and the punishments each slave would receive for acts considered to be disobedient, as well as the activities in which slaves were to be allowed

\(^{36}\) Díaz Soler, 62.
to engage.\textsuperscript{39} Given this particular situation, which also could have been the case on other plantations, it is possible, and even probable, that the slave nurses during this period would have used healing practices familiar to their culture in order to treat injuries, illnesses and diseases on the plantation.\textsuperscript{40} With the possibility of enslaved nurses treating the ailments of all populations on plantations, it is easy to understand how native healing practices, popularly referred to as \textit{curanderismo} or \textit{brujería}, became elements of African culture that have survived throughout Puerto Rico’s suppressive history of African heritage.

Outside of the plantations free Blacks were able to take on many roles in Puerto Rican society. Composing a large percentage of the population throughout its colonization, free Blacks worked as farmers, landowners, industrial laborers, and in smaller numbers as merchants, manufacturers, military servicemen, and professors.\textsuperscript{41} The ability to hold a more respected job such as a merchant or professor often depended upon a person’s status as a baptized Christian.\textsuperscript{42}

\textit{Black culture in Puerto Rico}

Healing practices are certainly not the only inheritance of African culture in Puerto Rico, however. In fact, Puerto Rican identity is steeped in its African heritage.

\textsuperscript{39} Baralt, “Los Últimos Días,” 9.
\textsuperscript{40} The reality of this possibility would depend on many factors, most importantly how many generations removed from Africa the nurse would have been. It would not have been uncommon in Puerto Rico for slaves to have been born in Puerto Rico or brought from other islands in the Caribbean. This no way means that the slaves no longer held onto any semblance of the former culture. Yet still, at La Hacienda La Esperanza records do show that Marquess Fernández bought most of his slaves as imports directly from Africa. See: Baralt, 6.
\textsuperscript{41} Díaz Soler, 256.
\textsuperscript{42} del Carmen Baerga, “Routes to Whiteness,” 111.
Though Spanish is the official language of Puerto Rico, the way it is spoken there is different than the way it is spoken in Spain. Puerto Rican Spanish has various influences coming from three major sources: 1) Spain, and its specific regions most notably Catalonia, Andalucía, and the Canary Islands; 2) Africa; and 3) the indigenous Taíno. Some of the strongest markers of the Puerto Rican accent come from the Africans, who found in Spanish a common language to communicate amongst themselves while on the plantations.

According to María Vaquero de Ramírez, author of *El Español de Puerto Rico historia y presente*, “Apart from the vocabulary, what remains of the African languages in the Spanish of the country is a tone, a rhythm, a cadence, a hidden aura that affects the expression and contributes its unmistakable mood to the Spanish we speak.”\(^{43}\) The aspirant s (está = eh’tá), omission of s at the final position of a word (mujeres = mujere), and the lateralization of “r” at the end of a syllable (carta = kálta) are all features of African linguistics in the Puerto Rican accent.\(^{44}\)

There is no difference when it comes to food. The Christmas season in Puerto Rico cannot be celebrated properly without the feasting of *pasteles* (mashed root vegetables filled with meat, wrapped in a plantain leaf, and boiled), *verduras* (boiled root vegetables such as ñame, pana, and malanga), and *arroz con gandules* (yellow seasoned rice with pigeon peas). Then there is *mofongo*, the island’s most celebrated dish, consisting of fried and mashed plantains seasoned with garlic and oil and stuffed with

\(^{43}\) Maria Vaquero de Ramírez, *El Español de Puerto Rico historia y presente* (San Juan, Puerto Rico: Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña, 2001), 33.

meat. Africans ingrained all of these typical foods in the Puerto Rican diet, and some of their names still remain as African derivations.\footnote{Robert A. Voeks, and John Rashford, \textit{African Ethnobotany in the Americas} (New York: Springer, 2013), 28.}

Music in Puerto Rico is also heavily influenced by Africa. The most popular modern day genres—\textit{salsa, merengue, and reggaeton}—all have elements of the rhythms and melodies of traditional African music. Salsa is a fusion of different musical styles including \textit{rumba}, Cuban \textit{son}, \textit{guaguancó}, \textit{mambo}, and Puerto Rican \textit{bomba y plena}.\footnote{For more information on the influences and complex origins of salsa see: Donald Thompson, \textit{Music in Puerto Rico: A Reader's Anthology} (Lanham, Md: Scarecrow Press, 2002), 114-119.}

The instrumentation of salsa also has African roots. A typical orchestra consists of guitars, \textit{congas, bongos, timbales, clave}, trumpet, trombone, \textit{maracas}, and \textit{guíro}. The percussion instruments—\textit{congas, bongos, and timbales}—are Caribbean variants of the drums that are crafted for traditional African music. These are the most important instruments in the African musical composition. The \textit{clave}, which is an instrument comprised of two wooden sticks, is another main component of salsa. \textit{Clave}, which means key in English, is also the rhythmic pattern used for structure and timing of salsa music. This rhythmic pattern is the same pattern used in many variations of African music traditions.\footnote{Ángel G. Quintero Rivera, “El Tambor en el Cuatro: La Melodización de Ritmos y La Etnicidad Cimarroneada,” in \textit{La tercera raíz: presencia africana en Puerto Rico}, ed. Lydia Milagros González (San Juan, Puerto Rico: CEREPE, 1993), 49.} Like salsa, the instrumentation and rhythms of \textit{merengue} and \textit{reggaeton} also have strong elements of African music traditions.\footnote{\textit{Merengue} is an import from the Dominican Republic that reached widespread popularity in Puerto Rico. \textit{Reggaeton}, is a more recent genre of music mixing the rhythms of salsa, reggae, and hip-hop.}
The towns of Loíza and Ponce are famous for their *vejigante* masks, known as *caretas*, which are traditionally made from coconut husks.\(^{49}\) The masks are painted in various colors. They contain horns at the top or along the sides, may have white fangs in the mouth, and may also be adorned with silver accents. While the vejigante figure can be traced back to Spain and its celebration of Saint James the Apostle’s miraculous defeat of the Moors in battle, the artistic configuration of the mask is identifiable with mask making work found in Africa. The masquerades in Puerto Rico, which take place during *Carnaval* in Ponce and in honor of the Feast of Saint James in Loíza are identifiable with the masquerades that take place during religious festivals in Africa.\(^{50}\) While masks are of great symbolic importance to Puerto Ricans, other forms of art such as woodcarving and jewelry also contain features of sacred African art.

While it is beyond the scope of this study to identify and explain all features of Puerto Rican language, food, music, and art that either directly imitate or replicate with variation an African counterpart, what is attempted to be shown is that the African is no less a part of the Puerto Rican than the Spanish, or the Taino for that matter.

*Censorship, Racializations, and Racial Denial in Puerto Rican Society*

While the integration of African culture with other cultures has taken place at-large, the express promotion of African identity is still censored. African people have made a profound mark on Puerto Rican culture, but the history of how this occurred is for the most part still unknown. The gap in such understanding, due to both explicit and

\(^{49}\) For more on the vejigante see Chapter 2.

\(^{50}\) Ana Villamil, “Los Vejigantes de Ponce,” in *La Tercera Raíz: Precensia Africana en Puerto Rico*, ed. Lydia Milagros González (San Juan, Puerto Rico: CEREP, 1992), 69. For more on the similarities to African masquerades see Chapter 2.
implicit censorship, has allowed for the development of a populace largely ignorant of its own African inheritance. One of the biggest contributing factors to such ignorance, and henceforth the denial of Blackness, are the institutionally accepted laws that suppress Black cultural and religious expression. Some of these laws are hereafter outlined.

In 1501, the Spanish Crown issued the *Instrucción de los Reyes Católicos a Nicolás de Ovando*,\(^{51}\) which contained a license for the newly named governor of the Americas, Nicolás de Ovando, to bring Christianized Black slaves of Spanish origin to the Indies.\(^ {52}\) The exact year the first Black slave eventually arrived in Puerto Rico is unknown, but it is posited by some historians to have likely been no later than 1509, when Juan Ponce de Leon moved from Santo Domingo to Puerto Rico in order to establish a colony and become its first governor under the Spanish crown bringing with him an entourage of 200 people, likely including Black slaves.\(^ {53}\)

Before Black slavery grew on the island, however, it was the native population, the Taíno, who were the first subjects of forced labor by the Spanish. The Taíno were used as slave labor to mine the island for gold under what was called the *repartimiento de Indios* (distribution of Indians) through the *encomienda* system, initiated in November of

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\(^{51}\) Translation: Instruction of the Catholic Kings to Nicolás de Ovando.

\(^{52}\) Díaz Soler, 27.

\(^{53}\) Ibid., 28. While Ponce de Leon did not officially settle with his family in Puerto Rico until 1509, the island’s first settlement, Caparra, was founded in 1508 on an initial visit by Ponce de Leon and 50 other conquistadors. The testimony of Juan Garrido, a Black Spanish conquistador, African by birth, tells us that there were Blacks who arrived in the Caribbean on Spanish expeditions both as volunteers and as slaves. Therefore, the possibility exists that there would have been some blacks with the Spanish on earlier expeditions to Puerto Rico. For more information see Ricardo E. Alegria, *Juan Garrido, el Conquistador Negro en las Antillas, Florida, México y California*, c. 1503-1540 (San Juan: Centro de Estudios Avanzados de Puerto Rico y El Caribe, 1990), 6, 127-38.
1509 by governor Juan Cerón.\textsuperscript{54} In 1510, the Crown granted to Jerónimo de Bruseles the rights to bring two foreign slaves, who would become the first documented slaves imported to the island.\textsuperscript{55} This decree conflicted with the instruction given to de Ovando in 1501, and would override it, as the necessity to import slaves would grow as the Taíno increasingly fled to more remote mountainous areas, or the island entirely, seeking refuge from the encomienda system. Failed slave revolts in 1511 only made matters worse for the Taíno, and disease and plague further dwindled their population.\textsuperscript{56} To address this situation, which had gone unsolved by the licensing for the importation of a limited number of slaves to particular individuals, a royal decree was issued in 1513 to institutionalize slavery through the payment of two ducats for each license.\textsuperscript{57}

By 1526, the Taíno population of Puerto Rico was rapidly going extinct. In response, King Carlos V declared their emancipation on November 17, 1526.\textsuperscript{58} The emancipation of the Taíno created a greater need for bodies to work mines and plantations, as the island’s economy was in the process of shifting from mining to agriculture. Additionally, in the wake of Taíno revolts and a poor economy, many colonists were fleeing Puerto Rico for opportunities elsewhere. The result of the aforementioned persecution, death, and migration was the intensification of African slave importation. Díaz Soler states, “The gap between the mining and agricultural periods points out the complete replacement of those Indians by Blacks. Africans, already entrenched as a fundamental race in the island community of 1530, constitute since then

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., 29.
\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., 30.
\textsuperscript{56} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., 31.
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., 45.
\end{flushright}
one of the forging elements of the insular ethnic structure.”  

Díaz Soler’s statement is supported by the first census taken in Puerto Rico in 1530, which reveals that there was a total of 2,292 Black slaves registered compared to 327 Whites.  

As the century went on Black slavery would continue to constitute a major part of the island’s economy. In the 17th and 18th century, the necessity for slaves would dwindle as Spain focused more on their other colonies, but it would once again pick up in the 19th century as sugar once again became a major crop of Puerto Rico.

The desire to Whiten oneself or others is in some sense a type of self-imposed eugenics ingrained in the ethos of many Puerto Ricans. This is not solely because of slavery but also because of other laws and decrees intended to ensure the success of Spanish colonization, to be outlined here.

From early on in Spain’s governance of the island there was concern over racial mixing. In 1551, Carlos V issued a law prohibiting the union of Whites with Blacks and Blacks, whether free or slave, with Amerindians.  

This prohibition is the most explicit example of the social thinking in Puerto Rico influenced by blood purity ideology. Still, the intermixing of races was unavoidable. For one, early on the majority of women present on the island were either Black or Amerindian, given that only the few Spanish elite were able to travel to Puerto Rico with their wives. Furthermore, with the large number of free Blacks on the island, there was a certain level of tolerance for Black people. But still, as Benedictine monk Fray Iñigo Abbad y Lasierra stated in his 1788

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59 Ibid. Translation from: “El lapso entre los periodos minero y agrícola señala la completa sustitución de las indias por las negradas. Los Africanos, ya arraigados como raza fundamental en la comunidad isleña del 1530, se constituyen desde entonces en uno de los elementos forjadores de la estructura étnica insular.”

60 Ibid., 51.

61 Ibid., 247.
published history of Puerto Rico, “There is no thing more insulting than to be Black or a descendant of them.”\textsuperscript{62} Despite the large numbers of Whites intermixing with Blacks it was still not looked upon positively.

Another clear law aimed at the suppression of Blackness was the Royal Decree of Graces of 1815 (\textit{Real Cédula de Gracias de 1815}). This decree established a “regulation for the population and the promotion of trade, industry and agriculture on the island of Puerto Rico and admission of foreigners.”\textsuperscript{63} The decree was issued at a time when Spain had already lost or was maintaining a tenuous grip on its other possessions throughout Latin America. While some small independence movements were forming, Puerto Rico and Cuba were the only two colonies that were not actively fighting for independence. Additionally, Puerto Rico was one of the least settled and advanced colonies, a position that resulted from its being largely ignored by Spain before the coffee, tobacco, and sugar plantation boom of the late 18th and early 19th centuries.

The desired intent of the decree was, in essence, to Whiten the country. A census taken in 1812 revealed that the majority of the island was non-White. Less than fifty percent (79,662) of the population was White, compared to 103,352 Blacks and mulattos (of which 17,536 were slaves).\textsuperscript{64} As the continued importation of slaves to support the growing agriculture continued to augment the colored population on the island, the decree was intended to make immigration to Puerto Rico attractive to Whites from

\textsuperscript{62} Fray Iñigo Abbad y Lasierra, \textit{Historia geográfica, civil y natural de la isla de San Juan Bautista de Puerto Rico}, 399-400, quoted in Díaz Soler, 248. Translation from: “No hay cosa más afrentosa que el ser negro o descendiente de ellos.”

\textsuperscript{63} Ibid., 247. Translation from: “Reglamento para la poblacion y el fomento del comercio, industria, y agricultura de la isla de puerto rico y admision de los extranjeros en la misma.”

\textsuperscript{64} Ibid., 105.
European countries and other colonies. At this time, the government was in desperate need of addressing the deficit in its treasury, and the Royal Decree of Graces was the solution that could strengthen Spain’s political control of Puerto Rico and improve the island’s commerce. Katherine Bowman writes, “Puerto Rican ports were opened to trade, duties on the importation of slaves and machinery for agricultural production were reduced, and, perhaps most significantly, immigration from allied Catholic countries was encouraged through generous land grant policies.”65 The Spanish Crown, with little trust in free Blacks and mulattos, saw this decree as a lucrative opportunity for foreigners to invest in the island through their immigration, and they did. By 1834, 52% of the population was White.66

People from all over, but most especially Europeans (including Spanish, Irish, and French), Venezuelans, Haitians, and even U.S. Americans immigrated to Puerto Rico during this time taking advantage of the land grants. While the decree also allowed for the immigration of free Blacks, it stipulated that they were to receive half the size of the land that was granted to Whites. Furthermore, those who did emigrate from non-European countries were generally sympathetic to the Spanish Crown as they themselves were often leaving their own countries as a result of slave insurrections. Venezuela, at this time, was engaged in a war for independence, and Haiti was just eleven years removed from its own revolution against slavery and colonialism. In effect, the Royal Decree of Graces of 1815 achieved two ends: it Whitened the island and helped to stagnate the fear of a Black insurrection. How much the direct intent of the Spanish

66 Diaz Soler, 117. This was an almost 10% increase from 1812.
government was Whiten the island is debatable, however, it was clear that they did not believe a prosperous economy could be attained with the majority colored population that they held. Yet still, as more White settlers came to Puerto Rico more plantations were established necessitating the increased importation of slaves, both legally and illegally. All of this combined resulted in a population boom in Puerto Rico bringing the island’s population from 220,892 in 1815 to more than 900,000 by the time Spain lost possession of Puerto Rico in 1898.\footnote{“Puerto Rico Population History, 1765-2000,” Welcome to Puerto Rico, accessed October 24, 2016, http://welcome.topuertorico.org/reference/pophistory.shtml. Before the rise in coffee, tobacco, and sugar production in Puerto Rico, its population was only 44,883 in 1765.} For a little more perspective, the highest number of slaves registered at any point in Puerto Rico was 51,216 in 1846.\footnote{Baralt, 6.} Many of these slaves were brought to coastal towns such as Loíza, Guayama, Arroyo, Ponce, and Mayagüez.

The Royal Decree of Graces of 1815 had a profound effect on the racial composition of Puerto Rico. While certainly not the sole or greatest cause of racial inequalities in Puerto Rico, it sent a message that White foreigners, not Blacks or mulattos were needed in order for the island and its economy to prosper.

Other practices instituted over the years had a similar effect as the 1815 Royal Decree of Graces. One of the more interesting is the 1773 \textit{Ley de Gracias al Sacar} (The Law of Graces for Dispensation), a ruling similar to the one-drop rule in its theory but opposite in its implementation. These dispensations, like the one-drop rule, were aimed at identifying who in Puerto Rican society was legally White and who was not. According to the law, a person who could prove to have a legitimate White ancestor, could be
granted a dispensation which would render them legally White.\textsuperscript{69} Because of the stigma attached to race, many men had sexual relations with women of color, but refused to marry them. This law therefore became especially useful for people who were born out of wedlock. María del Carmen Baerga states, “This process of classifying bodies involved factors such as genealogy, the legitimacy or illegitimacy of a person’s birth, the appropriate marital ties, the sexual behavior of men and women, and the private and public conduct of individuals and families. As a result, this matter of adjudicating racial identities becomes remarkably porous.”\textsuperscript{70} In order to advance, people resulted to many tactics to Whiten themselves, whether they sought this formal dispensation or not. One of the socially accepted ways of doing this was by conforming to White religious and social mores.

In each of these aforementioned matters, results of the desire for racial purity leading to censorship of Black identity, the Church played an influential role. According to Díaz Soler, the Church maintained baptismal books in parish archives in which there were decrees certifying \textit{limpieza de sangre}. In certifying blood purity, Blacks, Amerindians, and mulattos were all considered to be of a bad race.\textsuperscript{71} As the grantors of marriages licenses and baptismal records, two imperative documents in legitimizing a person’s Whiteness, the role the Church played in the social constructions of Whiteness and Blackness was deliberative. In sum, the Church performed a complicit role in the


\textsuperscript{70} del Carmen Baerga, “Routes to Whiteness,” 109.

\textsuperscript{71} Díaz Soler, 170.
socially-constructed Whitening of Puerto Ricans by controlling how people should comport themselves religiously and by giving credence to claims of Whiteness, negating the positive contribution Black religiosity could add to how people express themselves and their relationship to God.

Conclusion

It would not be practical to examine all of the practices of the suppression and denial of African identity in Puerto Rico, but through those examined in this chapter a picture of how blood purity ideology impacted the constructions of Blackness can be had. Though there were certain freedoms granted to Black and mulatto people in Puerto Rico not granted elsewhere, being of color was hardly desirable, even as the country developed into a largely mixed-race society. Though Spanish censuses indicate that a large percentage of the population was White, understanding how constructions of Blackness and decrees of dispensation impacts those numbers is important. Many who sought recognition of Whiteness, whether formally or informally, were actually mixed. Yet still, the de jure and de facto acts of suppression have not prevented African people from making their imprint on Puerto Rican culture and society, only buried it. With a better understanding of who those Africans were, the roles they played in the development of society, and examples of some of their own cultural imprints, their influence cannot be denied. As it relates to religion, Africans have had an equally great influence. Their religious expression has lived in the practices of Espiritismo and, as this research examines, the popular expressions of Catholicism.
The U.S. Census has been a good indicator of the ways Puerto Ricans view themselves. With the ability to self-identify, 80.5% of the population identified as White in the 2000 U.S. Census.\textsuperscript{72} If understanding Puerto Rico as a predominantly mixed-race society based on past historical data, the fact that 80.5% of the population identified as solely White reveals that either there is a necessity for education on how to best fill out the census according to what one truly believe one’s racial identity to be, or that there is indeed a denial amongst Puerto Ricans in regard to their true racial makeup.

Take for example, the \textit{jíbaro}. Puerto Ricans can hardly be accused of taking too little pride in their culture, and a prime representation of this pride is the \textit{jíbaro}, which is the name used to refer to the rural laboring peasants of the mountain regions, today a symbol of the hard-working man who pioneered Puerto Rican culture. Though the term at one time had a negative connotation, and is still used, especially amongst the urban elites, as a way to jokingly denigrate the negative characteristics of others, the term has an overall positive cultural connotation. The \textit{jíbaro} is most commonly depicted in Puerto Rican oral history and art as a White man, a depiction that is not entirely accurate to who the present-day mountain dweller is. Additionally, given that the \textit{jíbaro} is depicted as a White man, it is correspondingly problematic that the \textit{jíbaro} is promoted as the idealized noble Puerto Rican, given the fact that the majority of Puerto Ricans, whether urban or rural, are of mixed-race maintaining Black phenotypes.

As evidenced, the Black person in Puerto Rico is still underrepresented; the space for Blackness is still relegated to other. In a September 2016 interview with Puerto Rican

newspaper *El Nuevo Día*, Black Puerto Rican actor Modesto Lacén verified through his own experience:

[Racism] reaches me more than I would like. Here in Puerto Rico I go to some places and they speak to me in English. I don’t have a problem speaking in English; I’ll speak to you in English, Spanish, French, or Portuguese, but why do you assume that I am not from here and that I am U.S. American? It is very complex because it is as if it is in the air. Now the people assume one thing and then it is up to us, to me or the other Black people or Afro-descendants, to show and teach them.  

Lacén’s experience is just a snippet of the othering Black people experience even today in Puerto Rico. Just as the primary assumption is that this Black man is not native to Puerto Rico, the same assumptions are made about the daily cultural experiences—that is, that the African is nowhere to be found.

For centuries it was said that the Taíno had disappeared or gone extinct. What was ignored was that the Taíno lived on in their descendants who intermixed with the Spanish and left their own cultural imprint on them. Now, Puerto Rico is experiencing a restoration movement of Taíno culture through cultural organizations and groups who are promoting what is known, or believed to be known in any case, about Taíno culture to the

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rest of the island. The same is only beginning to happen with the African culture. Yet there still remains the seeds of the suppression and denial of African identity. The African is still subjugated to third class. To be clear, it is not that people believe that Blackness does not exist in Puerto Rico, it is that they believe it does not exist within themselves. To many, Blackness only lives in certain areas of Black fame, slave towns such as Loíza, Arroyo, Guayama, and the neighborhood of San Antón in Ponce. But if one takes a closer look, such as at popular Catholic expression, African influence can be seen in all areas of the island.

Knowing how African derived religious expression has been suppressed helps this research to move forward in two ways: 1) recovering how it play an important role in the identity of Puerto Ricans and development of the country, which can no longer be ignored; and 2) assisting Puerto Ricans in more deeply understanding their religious expression and how to derive meaning from it.
CHAPTER 2

POPULAR CATHOLICISM: AN UNDERSTANDING OF DEVOTION IN THE
AFRO-CATHOLIC FEASTS OF SAINT JAMES

Introduction

Orlando Espín, a scholar of Latino/a theology and popular Catholicism, has
defined popular Catholicism as the people’s Catholicism: “popular Catholicism is
‘popular’ because it is the people’s own.” Combating the tendency of theological and
social scientific study to define any religion as popular because of its widespread
popularity, or in opposition to official religion, Espín is concerned with evaluating
popular Catholicism as the religion of the people, particularly the marginalized people of
society. According to Espín, the people are those who receive the doctrinal and liturgical
production of the specialists—theologians and clergy. These specialists define for the
adherents of Catholicism what is acceptable and normative, and the people, or the
believers, thence attempt to read these productions in light of their needs and
circumstances. Because of his strong belief that popular Catholicism has something to
say about who God is, it is insufficient for it to continue to be treated simply as a pastoral
or catechetical issue, but should be regarded as a valid topic of theological reflection.
Espín argues for popular Catholicism, or the lived Catholic faith of the people, as locus
theologicus.

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In *The Faith of the People*, Espín meticulously structures and explains how popular Catholicism is the religion of the vanquished. Latinos are the vanquished, the suffering; the heirs of the wounds of dispossession, violence, and marginalization. Religion is seen through the lens of this vanquishing, and their religion, popular Catholicism in this case, is how they make sense of their social standing. Popular Catholicism is the people’s answer to their own suffering, which leads Espín to point to popular religion as a Latino epistemology.

In discussing popular religion as epistemology Espín raises two questions: How do Latinos understand? How do they grant meaning to reality? The majority of scholarship on Latino Catholicism has attempted to answer these questions through examination of Marian devotions. The *Fiestas en Honor a Santiago el Apóstol*, or Feasts in Honor of Saint James the Apostle, in Puerto Rico, a feast that has its roots in a symbol of hope in response to Black suffering, perhaps offers the best example in Puerto Rico from which to understand popular Catholic practice.

The *Fiestas de Santiago Apóstol* are religious celebrations that are undeniably marked by African spirituality. The multi-day feasts, which take place in Loíza, are an exemplar blending of the cult of the saints and African spirit veneration. The intricacies of its processions, the symbolism of its religious artifacts, and expression of its meaning all harken back to a people foreign to Spain. Furthermore, the feasts exemplify popular religion according to Espín in its existential roots in the people, experienced in vanquish, and who turn to Saint James as their community’s spiritual guide and refuge.

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75 Espín, *The Faith of the People*, 163.
76 Hereafter referred to as *Fiestas de Santiago Apóstol*. 
Background – Popular Religion

Early Christian scholars such as Peter Brown and Robin Jensen have noted that Christians of the first several centuries after Christ’s death, influenced by Roman culture, sought ways to commemorate the dead. Such commemoration took place through funeral feasts, which evolved into feast day celebrations, and what Brown overall refers to as the “cult of the saints.” The Church, however, did not always endorse the devotions and celebrations associated with the dead in early Christian Rome, especially those that have developed out of a pagan heritage. In response, bishops, such as Ambrose of Milan and Augustine of Hippo, sought ways to usher Christians away from the perception of pagan worship to what they advocated to be more acceptably Christian expressions of faith and celebration. As the literary evidence reveals, the struggle between orthopraxis, or what is “right practice,” and what is of the people has been part of the legacy of Christianity since its foundation.

Centuries after late antiquity, across the Atlantic, festive celebration of death continues to be religiously problematic for the Church. In Puerto Rico, the foreignness of the nature and form of African religious practices led to their prohibition by the Spanish government in 1862, causing these “non-traditional” and “scandalous” expressions to be practiced from the margins outside of the purview of the state and its official religion.

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Catholicism. As with early Christianity, many of these practices involved devotions to the dead. Yet, despite the strictures placed on these expressions, the interconnectedness of life and afterlife has persisted in their character. Many religious festivals that take place in Puerto Rico continue to carry the spiritual significance of ancestorship, but the struggle that continues between Church and laity regarding appropriate expressions of faith calls for further examination of how to bring into accord Tradition and the lived faith of the community.

As Espín and other scholars of Latino/a Christianities, such as Roberto Goizueta and Michelle González, have explored, popular expression is a major composition of the lived faith of Latin Americans. According to Espín, it is Latinos’ contextualized mediation of an encounter with God interpreted through symbols, language, and more. He states, “Popular Catholicism is one of the most distinctive and pervasive elements in all of the country’s Latino cultures. It is arguably one of their most fundamental matrices, and historically it seems to have acted as bearer of some crucial dimensions of the Latino worldview.” In the Fiestas de Santiago Apóstol, popular expression comes to life. In response to the new context within which they found themselves situated, Africans in Loíza influenced the practice of Catholicism through this expression.

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79 El Bando de Policía y Buen Gobiero de 1862 (The Band of Police and Good Government of 1862). For more information see: Díaz Soler, 172.
81 Espín, The Faith of the People, 93.
82 Espín, 91.
Undeniably, the people, especially the most marginalized, have constructed popular Catholicism in Puerto Rico. The Church established in the Spanish colonies and the elite Spanish landowners who enslaved Amerindians, Africans, and Lados did a poor job in catechizing the enslaved in the Catholic faith. Furthermore, the criollos, who in this context were Puerto Ricans of verifiable Spanish descent born in the colony, often of the working class, had also been the recipients of catechetical neglect. Aside from the slaveowners’ negligence to catechize their slaves, in the rural regions these faithful often did not see a priest for weeks. In all, a lack of fervor to evangelize by priests and landowners, a shortage in the number of priests, and a general apathy for the wellbeing of Blacks and Amerindians resulted in a common class that found ways to modify the Christian faith to fit their daily needs.

While the Catholic Church today has specific criteria that determine what makes someone a saint—someone who lived a holy life—the specificity of these requirements does not inhibit Puerto Ricans from creating saints of their own just as the early Christians did with deceased clergy and martyrs. The social requirements of sainthood in Puerto Rico are less rigid, more folkloric, and can effect in the promotion of “cultural saints” who have impacted a specific congregation, community, or the commonwealth entirely. The tenuous association of the common Puerto Rican with the institutional

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85 “New Procedures in The Rite of Beatification,” The Sacred Congregation for the Causes of Saints, accessed December 5, 2016, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/csaints/documents/rc_con_csaints_doc_20050929_saraiva-martins-beatif_en.html. While these are the general rules for the canonization of a saint, there have been times where the Pope has waived these requirements.
church from the commencement of the island’s colonization has given room for the incorporation of popular practices, including those that incorporate ancestral devotion.

*Afro-Catholicism in the Feasts of Saint James*

Given the fragile relationship between the Church and the people, the cult of the saints has given way to the African cult of the ancestors, and religious festivals that incorporate elements of African ancestor veneration. During the Fiestas de Santiago Apóstol, the playing of *bomba*, which will be detailed in more depth in the following chapter, and masquerading of *vejigantes* (colorful masked costumed characters that represent malicious spirits) become central elements of celebration that incorporate ancestor veneration. Each day of the feasts a different statue figure of Saint James is paraded from one end of the town to the other, ending at the Catholic church in the town square.\(^{86}\) During these processions, those in costume as *vejigantes* tease others by hitting them with *vejigas* (blown up and decorated cow bladders fashioned to a stick) while performing an interpretive battle with costumed Spanish knights.

Although he is not the patron saint of the town, Saint James is the object of much devotion in Loiza. His meaning to people has as much to do with their Catholic faith as with their Afro-Puerto Rican identity. According to Spanish legend, Saint James assisted

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\(^{86}\) There are three different Santiagos. The first day is the procession of *Santiago de los Hombres* (Saint James of the Men), the next day is the procession of *Santiago de las Mujeres* (Saint James of the woman), and the third day is the procession of *Santiago de los Niños* (Saint James of the Children). For more on the festival see: Ricardo E. Alegría, “The Fiesta of Santiago Apóstol (St. James the Apostle) in Loiza, Puerto Rico,” *The Journal of American Folklore* 69, No. 272, 1956: 123-134.
the Spanish in their ninth century battles against the invading Muslim Moors during the Reconquista. In a battle agreed by historians to have been mythical, the Battle of Clavijo, it is said that Saint James made a miraculous appearance leading the Spanish forces to victory. Somewhat ironically, Saint James now represents for the people of Loíza their own liberator. The miraculous appearance of a statue of Saint James in the neighborhood of Medianía Alta has provided a figure of popular devotion through which the people are empowered to express who they are. As David L. Ungerleider Kepler poignantly notes in “Una Re-Mirada a Las Fiestas en Honor a Santiago” (Another Look at the Feasts in Honor of Santiago):

In the feast the everyday takes on profundity. It serves, at least for some Loizans, to express or shout to the ‘afterlife’ their protest of all that they suffer or don’t understand about the ‘present life,’ that is the socioeconomic forces and politics that oppress them.

As a town of former libertos and slaves, Loízans still experience many of the forces of marginalization Black people have received. In response, the celebrations of the feasts have become an expression of the people’s culture and faith, which seek spiritual accompaniment. Tradition is very important to Loizans, and to them tradition is not just

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89 According to a 1950 census, more than 87% of the 7,740 Loizans identified as black. See: Alegria, “The Fiesta of Santiago,” 125.
the visible things people have done in the past, but includes those people who did them as well. In these former family members and former Loízans, they connect their current situation.

Like the early Christians, the townspeople have created a festive celebration out of feast days that incorporates much more than just liturgy and prayers, but a prideful expression of who they are, and their belief in the inseparability of this life from the next. Litanies that copy the structure of call-and-response employed in traditional African music, accompanied by the playing of bomba, remember those saints, legends, African deities, and town heroes who have made an impact on the spirituality of Loízans.90 The costumes of the vejigantes also relate the spiritual significance of the feast. While the performance relates back to Spanish history, the use of masks, their style, and their decoration relate back to West Africa. Ricardo Alegría writes:

Although it is not possible to determine the existence of an artistic tradition in Loiza derived from the vigorous African art, the fact that the masks of the vejigantes show certain similarities with the Yoruba sculpture is significant. Like the Yoruba masks, those from Loíza represent grotesque faces showing extreme expressions, are polychrome, and the details are painted with great elaboration. The facial traits are exaggerated, especially the mouth and the eyes, which are generally ovoid in shape.91

The style of the masks and colors of the costumes are not just similar to African cultures, but their symbolism is as well. For example, Ana Mirem Villamil notes, “In many African cultures, intense-looking white eyes allow the masked person to ‘see’ the life of

the spirits: they provide him with *mystical vision.*” 92 The vejigante masks used during the feasts often maintain this symbolism with exaggerated eyes emphasized by white accents. Given the African influence in the sculpturing and decoration of the costumes, in addition to the often expressed desire for spiritual connection, it appears that the Africans intended to introduce the symbolic meaning behind their costumes to the festive celebration as well.

During the Spanish colonial period, slaves exploited the retreat from work that Catholic feast days provided to forget their troubles through celebration; they were also convenient for the camouflaging of the practice of their traditional beliefs as well as the planning of rebellions while gathered in their *cofradías,* or brotherhoods. 93 After their liberation, these feast days continued to carry significance for the people. As evidenced in the Fiestas de Santiago Apóstol, in addition to other feasts such as *el Día de los Santos Inocentes* 94 in Hatillo and *el Carnaval de Ponce,* 95 celebrated the week leading up to Ash Wednesday, Catholic feasts in Puerto Rico overwhelmingly incorporate and in actuality revolve around popular devotions, in which the homage paid to those who have come before is an integral component.

The Church, however, has not always accepted the popular devotions of Puerto Rico, especially those that have developed out of its West African heritage. In 1894, a public order on religion and morality was published in Loíza including 72 articles on how to be a “good Loízan:” the proper way to carry out religious processions, when and where

92 Mirem Villamil, “Los Vejigantes de Ponce,” 68. Translation from: “*En muchas culturas africanas, los ojos blancos de mirada intensa permiten que el enmascarado vea* la vida de los espíritus: le proporcionan visión mística.”  
93 See note 32 in Ch. 1.  
94 Translation: The Day of the Holy Innocents  
95 Translation: The Carnival of Ponce
one could wear costumes without offending the religion of the state, and where it is permitted to drink alcohol and until what time. The attitude of this law has remained present during the Fiestas de Santiago Apóstol. During the three-day processions, the priest leads the way directing the procession in the traditional songs of Spain. As Ungerleider Kepler reports of the feasts of 1992, “On one occasion a lady from the town commented: ‘…we do it, and we sing, well because we are afraid of the priest.’ Those songs do not inspire joy, but seriousness.” It is at the back of the procession where the life of the celebration exists through the singing and dancing of popular songs. The houses where the three different statues of Saint James are maintained are where the people also gather to sing before his image. The priests are nowhere to be seen during this occasion. According to Ungerleider Kepler:

They criticize the people for participating in those ‘pagan’ acts that have nothing to do with Christianity (that is, with their church). However, the town has its own history and tradition where Jesus, Saint James, heaven and earth integrate their lives. They look for liberation and protection. Together they make their acts of faith, and in those moments, the impossibility of singing inside the church building does not matter. They only want to express together their hurt and hope before their saint and before life.

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96 Ungerleider Kepler, “Una Re-Mirada,” 79.
97 Ibid., 78. Translation from: “En una ocasión una señora del pueblo comentaba que: ‘…lo hacemos, y cantamos, pues porque tenemos miedo al señor cura.’ Es que esos cánticos no inspiran alegría, sino seriedad.”
98 Ibid. Translation from: “Critican a la gente por participar en estos actos ‘paganos’ que nada tienen que ver con el cristianismo (es decir, con su iglesia). Pero el pueblo tiene su propia historia y tradición donde Jesús, Santiago, el cielo y la tierra se integran a sus vidas. Buscan liberación y protección. Hacen juntos su acto de fe, y en esos momentos, no les importa la imposibilidad de cantar dentro del temple. Solo quieren...
Priests in Loíza today are more attuned to the sentiments of the people, but the undertone of the past persists. For some, it has turned them off to the faith; for others, they have continued adapting their practice and expression as they see fit. This censorship of Loizan culture, while presumably well intended, has not distinguished the sacred from the profane from their worldview. To them, it would be favorable for the Church to introduce their own cultural traditions—their litanies, the dancing of bomba, and their devotions to dead—into the mass and other ecclesiastically respective practices.99

Looking into the past, the early Christians went through the same struggle to distinguish orthopraxis from Roman paganism. Whereas Augustine and other thinkers of the early church encouraged a change in attitudes toward death, the celebration of the dead remained religiously appropriate for the people. This dissonance is not only the struggle of the first Christians of Rome or of Puerto Ricans Christians, but of all in this world who have received the gospel of Christ.

Conclusion

Christianity may not have been a foreign religion to all of the West and Central Africans that were brought to Puerto Rico. Before they were baptized upon their arrival to the island, or at their point of embarkation from Africa, some Africans may have already been baptized Christians in their homeland. The Portuguese contact with the Kongo in the late 15th century led to the conversion of ruler Nzinga a Nkuwu to Catholicism one year before Columbus reached the Americas. The entire kingdom

expresar juntos su dolor y esperanza ante el santo y ante la vida.”

99 Luisa, interview by author, Loíza, Puerto Rico, July 25, 2016. Interviewee names have been changed by author for privacy.
eventually became Catholic in the 16th century as more missionaries made their way into the Gold Coast. As such, we do not know what syncretism, Christian or otherwise, Africans may have already brought to Puerto Rico. What we do know is that for the common Puerto Rican of the Spanish colonial era, what was “officially” Christian and non-Christian was more or less ambiguous; the lines between the two were not a present reality. But as the Church paid more attention to their affairs on the island, popular Catholicism, and its practices relating to the dead, became more taboo.

The early Christian tradition can provide a guide from which to see current issues of popular devotions to the dead in Puerto Rico. The similarities in the joyous commemoration of the deceased through stories and songs, the festive honoring of revered spiritual and blood ancestors, and the overall recognition of the interconnectedness of the living and spiritual worlds give grounds for theological exploration of these otherwise seemingly unrelated contexts.

In recognizing the similarities, popular Puerto Rican devotions of African influence may take on an increased meaning. They may be seen as both authentically Christian expression rid of any relegation to cultural otherness, as well as authentically of the people, undeniably African and undeniably Puerto Rican. They do not have to be seen as demonic or superstitious, but as affirmed and illuminated by the spiritual ancestors who also celebrated the relational character between the living and the dead.

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CHAPTER 3

CULT OF THE ANCESTORS: AFRO-CATHOLIC ANCESTRAL DEVOTION IN PUERTO RICO

Introduction

The cult of the saints, which includes devotions and practices dedicated to dead Christians who have lived holy lives, would seem to have offered a somewhat familiar foundation for the enslaved African, under the pressure of obedience, to integrate his own religious practices. As touched upon in the previous chapter, devotion to the dead is an integral feature of popular Catholicism in Puerto Rico, with strong connections to African spirituality. With its ability to allow them to connect their own suffering to religion, popular Catholicism gave Africans in Puerto Rico an avenue to preserve those practices that never lost meaning over the endurance of their oppressive enslavement.

Both under the pressure of forced evangelization and the temptation of reticent resistance, Africans throughout Latin America contributed to the religious landscape of the region divergently: their inherited religious beliefs and practices were both integrated into the mainstream Catholic practice influencing the popular practices of the people and transformed into new diaspora religions that maintained as much of the traditional features of their faith as the restrictive confinements of slavery, time, language, and geographical location would allow. In Cuba, the latter manifested itself in
Regla Lucumi, or Santería as it is colloquially known. In Haiti this would become Vodou and in Brazil it would become Candomblé, to name the most well known. In Puerto Rico, while there is not strong evidence of an organized diaspora religion, the general appellation for the spiritual practices traced back to Africa and the Taíno is Espiritismo, though it is not as coherent a system of religious beliefs and practices as the others. In relation to the former, the amalgamation with Catholicism, the Africans that arrived in Puerto Rico over the course of its 363 years of documented slavery, as well as the many who arrived and existed as libertos, attempted to hang onto the religious beliefs of their birth in large part by integrating their worldview and expressions of it into the dominant religion. This resulted in Espiritismo, which was the masking of their religion in Catholicism, but also resulted in unique Afro-Catholic practices—most prominently devotion to ancestors.

With a background on popular Catholicism, this chapter will now focus in more depth on such devotion to the dead, or what I will refer to as the cult of the ancestors. In order to better understand the cult of the ancestors in Puerto Rico, background to ancestor devotion in Africa is additionally provided. Through comparison, this chapter will explore the features of popular Puerto Rican Catholicism that share a connection to the characteristics of ancestor veneration in Africa. One such feature has already been shared in the Fiestas de Santiago Apóstol. Of a particular focus in this chapter are: the mass, death and funerals, and music. Like other aspects of Black culture outlined in the previous chapters, these histories have been suppressed. The aim therefore of this chapter is to attempt to illuminate their significance as African-derived expressions of Catholicism.
Ancestor veneration in Africa

The supreme being in a multitude of African traditional religions is not the relational creator God the Christian tradition is accustomed to, but a creator distant and removed from the lives of the people. Since there is no concept of a final judgment, supplications and sacrifice by the people are generally not directed to the Supreme Being. Death is not the end of life, but a transition to the next. Instead, traditional African religions tend to have a pantheon of deities, what Jacob K. Olupona calls secondary gods.101 These secondary gods, each relating to the daily affairs of human life (e.g. light, water, love, etc.) are the receptors of supplications and sacrifice, acting as intermediaries between the people and the Supreme Being. They are believed to receive such acts of devotion, and then direct the operation of their forces in the lives of the people. The function of secondary divinities reveal two important characteristics common to African spirituality—knowledge is attempted to be gained through religious thought resulting in the sacralization of the everyday features of life,102 and there is no linear conception of time in which one is led to the next life, but life is cyclical.103

As a result of the roles ascribed to them, ancestral spirits play a large role within the society and cultures of Africa.104 In African spirituality, death is the link between the human world and the spirit world, and it is the ancestors who connect the people to the

world of the spirits. They operate in the human world acting as guardians and in the spirit world as receptors of offerings. Additionally, according to the cosmovision of some groups, rebirth may occur after an ancestor has spent one or up to several generations in the world of the dead.\footnote{Olupona, \textit{African Religions}, 32.} This often is believed to occur within one’s own lineage, thus newborns often bear the name of a forefather or foremother. The distinction between ancestors and divinities can also be ambiguous. The Kongo people believe that as ancestors gradually age they become water spirits called \textit{simbi}.\footnote{Olupona, \textit{African Religions}, 33.} Other groups such as the Yoruba and the Fon believe that twins are divine spirits, attaching divine nature to human beings.\footnote{Ibid.} The validity of these beliefs are made possible by the sacred, connected, and cyclical notion of time and space in Africa best explained by Ogbu U. Kalu as, “…a three-dimensional perception of space: the sky, the earth (land and water), and the ancestral or spirit world, which is located under the earth.”\footnote{Ogbu U. Kalu, “Some Reflections on African Spirituality,” in \textit{African Spirituality: Forms, Meanings and Expressions}, ed. Jacob K. Olupona (New York: Crossroad Publishing Co., 2000), 56.} These cosmological conceptions make it difficult to approach the study of African spirituality and comprehend its influence on other societies from a conception shaped by European Christianity.

The idea of accompaniment is expressive of how the people relate to the honorable dead. Those who have lived good lives (one who has acquired a vast experience of life) and died good deaths (a natural death, as opposed to one resulting
from an accident, disease, or violence) become models for the people and walk with them throughout daily life.\(^{109}\)

Each society has its own special ceremonies and rituals involving the accompaniment of ancestors. Rites of passage often involve the reception of ancestral knowledge from elders of the society. There are also coming of age rituals where children are sent into seclusion in the wild, which is believed to be the dwelling of occult forces. Such processes involve prayers and supplications to ancestors, deities, and a Supreme Being for good luck and success.\(^{110}\) The Yoruba, one of the most well known and studied of African cultures, are one of such groups that give honor to their ancestors. Part of their system of beliefs includes the idea that the spirit of an ancestor may be responsible for the good or bad things that happen to an individual. Therefore, ceremonies dedicated to ancestors become important for ensuring their favor as well as that of the divinities. Some of the core practices of the Dogon, located in present-day Mali, are also based on the cult of ancestors.\(^{111}\) For example, the Dogon are known for the use of Y-shaped wooden ladders of varying lengths, placed next to ancestral altars or on the tombs of the deceased, which are purposed for allowing dead spirits to rise to heaven after death and then come back for the consumption of offerings. According to Dominique Zahan, “These miniature

\(^{109}\) Sometimes a person may be accredited to the level of ancestor even before death if the person represents the socially acceptable “archetypal model” of ancestorship, “This is because death does not represent the end of human existence, but rather a change in its status…This creates a solution of continuity between the living and the dead, a solution marked by the differential distance on the scale between these “creditors” (the dead) and these debtors (their “heirs”). Because this distancing begins even before the last breath of the elderly has been breathed, in certain societies they become ancestors during their own lifetime.” See: Zahan, 10.

\(^{110}\) Olupona, *African Religions*, 57.

\(^{111}\) Zahan, 14.
ladders, as liturgical objects, are intended to master and harmonize trade with the souls of the dead.”\(^{112}\)

While the many pantheons of gods, goddesses, spirits, and other non-human beings are “varied in number and complex in character,” what remains consistent is the veneration of the beloved deceased.\(^{113}\) This consistent feature makes spirituality in Africa interconnected between the world of the living and the dead. While the supreme being of each society is removed from the world, the deities are present, and the ancestors, closest of all, are actively engaged in the affairs of human life. As Olupona notes, “It is most common to find individuals and families committed to relationships of reciprocity with a smaller subset of spirits and ancestors, to whom they offer service and in return can expect assistance in times of need.”\(^{114}\) It can be argued that the cult of the ancestors forms the essence of sub-Saharan African spirituality.

Ancestor Veneration in Puerto Rico

The legacy of the popular cult of the saints is a vital feature of contemporary Catholicism in Puerto Rico.\(^{115}\) Throughout the entirety of Spain’s governance of the island, European colonists who established new lives in the different regions of Puerto Rico unrolled Catholic customs and beliefs that joined heaven and earth. This was a Catholicism yet to be affected by the proceedings of the Council of Trent, which

\(^{112}\) Ibid.
\(^{114}\) Ibid.
according to Espín never truly took root in Hispanic America.\textsuperscript{116} It would be at least a century after the council before Tridentine Catholicism arrived in Hispanic America, and without any nearby conflict with Protestantism, as was the case in Europe, the decrees and dictates of the council never resonated with the Spanish criollos. Pre-Tridentine Spanish Catholicism, of which the Late Antique cult of saints emerged as a strong feature, is the religion that did resonate with the people. It laid the Christian foundation to which Afro- and Taíno-descendant people integrated their own religious beliefs and practices.\textsuperscript{117}

The tripartite relationship between the Catholic Church, the Spanish state, and the people all had an influence on the religious practices that became prevalent in Puerto Rico. With the island under Spanish rule, the Church in Puerto Rico reported directly to the Church in Spain. Erected on August 8, 1511, the diocese of Puerto Rico on the island of San Juan (now called the Archdiocese of San Juan of Puerto Rico) was under the ecclesiastical province of Seville (Spain) nearly 4,000 miles away.\textsuperscript{118} Together, the Church, being both the bishop of Puerto Rico and its suffragan in Spain, along with the Spanish government decided how the Catholic faith would be transmitted in this new context to the people, which included those indigenous and enslaved who had no prior knowledge of Christianity. Over the ensuing centuries, such transmission did not preclude a distinction between institutional and lived religion. Ennis B. Edmonds and Michelle Gonzálezz write:

\begin{footnotes}
\item[116] Espín,\textit{ The Faith of the People}, 138.
\item[117] For more information see: Ennis B. Edmonds and Michelle González,\textit{ Caribbean Religious History} (New York: NYU Press, 2010), 45.
\item[118] The island of Puerto Rico was originally named San Juan by the Spanish. The capital was named Puerto Rico. This has now been reversed and the island is known as Puerto Rico and capital San Juan.
\end{footnotes}
...In spite of the Church’s close ties with colonial power, however, as an institution it remained relatively weak, in large part because of the relatively small number of clergy present in the Caribbean; furthermore, most of these were located in urban settings, where they did not reach the large African populations living in rural areas. The lack of institutional presence led to a Catholicism in the Caribbean that was not defined by the doctrines, sacramental life, and clergy of European Catholicism...\textsuperscript{119}

The local church became one revolving around sacred places, images, relics, local heroes and saints, festivals, and its own unique calendar.\textsuperscript{120}

These aspects of the Catholic faith lend very well to the cult of the ancestors; they give room to practitioners to remember and honor the lives of the dead. Furthermore, the centrality of the ancestral cult to religions in Africa is what made it possible for ancestral devotion to become the primary feature of Afro-Catholicism in Puerto Rico, despite the barriers slavery and racial-cultural discrimination presented to its sustainability.

The way in which Puerto Ricans think regarding saints offers a point from which to understand this. The Catholic Church today has specific criteria that determine what constitutes a saint, or a person who lived a holy life. These criteria include the individual having been dead for at least five years to verify the enduring reputation of their holy lives among the faithful in addition to the working of at least two miracles that can be attributed to them.\textsuperscript{121} In essence, a saint can be looked at as a religious ancestor who has

\textsuperscript{119} Edmonds and González, 45.
\textsuperscript{120} Ibid., 47.
died and is enjoying the fruits of eternal life in heaven. For that reason, saints can listen to prayers and supplications and direct them toward God. In Puerto Rico, however, the specificity of these requirements and limits of their role does not inhibit the people from creating saints of their own.

The requirements of sainthood amongst the people are less rigid, more folkloric, and effect in the promotion of cultural saints. These cultural saints are people who have impacted a specific congregation, community, or the country entirely. According to Olupona, a similar blending of honorific roles takes place in Yoruba society. Many traditional gods blur the lines between divinity and cultural hero as their role in religion is based on a past human life. He writes, “These mythical figures are all examples of cultural heroes because they are celebrated as playing key roles in the establishment of Yoruba culture; moreover they are often honored as having been living people.”

Though there is no official saint from Puerto Rico, those who have played an important role in the development of Puerto Rican culture and society have been given that identity. The Catholic faith in Puerto Rico, as it had been received, developed a practice that ascribes importance to dead figures and family members. Cultural saints can be made out of any person, and within the family the same reverence is given to blood ancestors. Like the Yoruba, the distinction between an ancestor, a cultural hero, and a secondary divinity (perhaps better stated, a saint who shares in God’s divinity) is subtle, if nonexistent. As the faith has developed, the cult of the saints has given room to the cult of the ancestors.

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122 Olupona, African Religions, 19.
123 Although there is no Catholic teaching that saints themselves are divine, their roles as understood by the people are similar to how they would understand a Yoruban orisha (divinity). For more see Ch. 4.
While it cannot yet be said with certainty which ethnic groups had the biggest impact on Puerto Rico, the religious heritage of Puerto Ricans is one imbued with the ideologies and practices, including the ancestral cult, of the groups mentioned in the previous section such as the Bantu, Kongo, and Yoruba.

Ancestral Presence in Liturgy

The Catholic teaching on purgatory, a process of purification for the dead, encourages the offering of prayers for the dead directed to God for their admittance to heaven.\textsuperscript{124} One manner in which this manifests liturgically is through the offering of a mass for the repose of the soul of someone who has died. Within the Puerto Rican community, on the island and of the U.S.A. diaspora, this is a prevalent practice to remember deceased loved ones. This practice in itself is not unique to Puerto Rico. It is not only prevalent there, but in the Catholic community at large. However, the meaning that it may carry could be revelatory of the context in which it takes place, and in the context of Puerto Rico, of the influence of the ancestral cult. A mass offered for a deceased ancestor is not only a way to memorialize them but is also a way to connect to them after their passing from this life, whether that be immediately or on the ensuing anniversaries of their passing.

As in Africa, ancestors are continually present within the daily life of Puerto Ricans. They give comfort in sorrow, celebrate in joy, assist in achieving success, act as guardians over actions, and are vigilant over one’s morality.\textsuperscript{125} The connectedness of the

\textsuperscript{124} Libreria Editrice Vaticana, \textit{Catechism of the Catholic Church}, 2\textsuperscript{nd} ed. (Vatican: Vatican Publishing House, 2000), paragraph 1030.

\textsuperscript{125} Luisa, interview by author, Loíza, Puerto Rico, July 25, 2016.
people to their ancestors throughout daily life creates an ontological understanding of life where the neglect of one’s ancestors is akin to the neglect of one’s own well-being. The offering of a mass for a deceased loved one evokes a sense of sacramentality for Puerto Rican Catholics. A grace becomes present that opens the participant up to an experience of connection with their loved one. Its importance is such that those who have left the Church, or have no affiliation to the church in which it is being offered, will still attend the service in order to offer homage to their ancestor. The grace that lies at the core of the spiritual connection to the dead in these events brings even those with a tenuous connection to the church to participation and transformation, even if just for that moment.

The remembrance of the dead also takes place in the local feasts of Puerto Rico. During the celebration of the Fiestas de Santiago Apóstol, another procession takes place that remembers the Loíceños ausentes, or the absent Loízans. The Loíceños ausentes are those who have emigrated from Loíza to the U.S.A. or other parts of the island who return for the feasts or can no longer partake in them. The parade marches through the town and passes through the cemetery. At the mass that takes place in the town on this day, the same Loíceños ausentes are remembered, given their chance to be a part of the celebrations. When away from their beloved pueblo, Saint James continues to occupy the role of their provider and protector. Similarly, this is an essential aspect of the fiestas patronales, or patronal feasts, which take place in each town throughout the island. The interconnectivity of Puerto Rican society does not allow for those who are physically

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absent to also be spiritually absent. Whether dead or alive, Puerto Ricans remember those who are not with them.

*El baquiné*

The cult of the ancestors is even more pronounced in the traditional practice of the *baquiné*. When a person dies in Africa, his or her friends and family practice ceremonies meant to honor of his or her life. These ceremonies are intended to ensure that the dead have a peaceful passage from one stage of life to the next. What is more, one’s ancestorship is dependent upon the proper carrying out of these ceremonies. In some cultures, the recently deceased are believed to still be present in or around the lifeless corpse for several days. Their presence provides a time for the family to continue conversing and being with the deceased member. As Olupona states, “Because the dead are still spiritually very much alive, the family of the living makes every effort during funeral rites to make sure that their new ancestor in pleased.” In many of these African traditions, the death of a loved one is even treated as a reason for celebration. This was also the case on plantations in Puerto Rico. As Idalia Llorens Alicea states:

The slave did not partake in the funerary bereavement the same as the European colonizers. For Africans death is something like a re-conquered liberty, a final return to their homeland; it was a cause for joy. For that reason, when a slave died they went to their outhouses to play the drums as if it were a great party.

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The celebration of a deceased person’s life, and their passing from one stage of life to the next, as Llorens Alicea describes, would come to be known in Puerto Rico as a ceremony called, the baquiné.

While today it is a tradition that has dwindled in practice, the baquiné has been and still is celebrated throughout the island, especially in areas with large Black populations. The baquiné is a practice that appears to have developed out of the funerary celebrations organized by slaves on plantations. While originally the lives of those of all ages would have been celebrated, according to the accounts examined by Llorens Alicea and Díaz Soler, the tradition grew a special attention for the lives of children. While there are no official rules regarding this popular practice, the baquiné today is generally only celebrated for a deceased child (of no more than nine years of age). It is believed that the death of a child necessitated celebration since the lives of children are innocent. Because it is believed that children die without sin they are considered *angelitos*, or “little angels.” The joyful passing of the child liberates them from the troubles of this world so that they can partake in the harmony of the spirit world with the rest of their ancestors. The children are usually dressed in white to connote the idea of innocence. During the celebration the child is placed on a table or in a coffin at the center of the living room in their home. As the deceased child lies there, the gathered family and friends sing songs, play music, dance, eat food, and consume alcohol.

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*muerte es algo así como una libertad reconquistada, un retorno final a su patria, esto era motivo de alegría, por eso cuando moría un esclavo éstos se iban a sus bateyes a tocar los tambores como si fuera una gran fiesta."

131 Ibid.
132 The music played can be *bomba, plena, aguinaldo* or any other folkloric genre of music. For more on these genres see: Thompson, *Music in Puerto Rico*. 
A baquiné is famously depicted by Puerto Rican artist of the 19th and early 20th century Francisco Oller.\(^{133}\) Oller’s iconic painting called “El Velorio,” or “The Wake,” was completed in 1893. “El Velorio” depicts a rural setting with various characters involved in the celebration. In the piece, the dead child is laid on a table in the center of the room covered in flowers, but no one appears to be paying it any attention. To the left of the painting are musicians playing the guitar, guiro, and maracas. There is also a grieving mother, men drinking alcohol, and children at play. The painting truly captures all that is present during the 19th century rural Puerto Rican baquiné. According to Luisa, a resident from Loíza interviewed during research preparation for this work, “people would wake up singing and dancing the baquiné. For many years they even danced the baquiné in the church.”\(^{134}\) The songs of the baquiné tend to reflect the nature of the gathering, encouraging participants to celebrate the life of the innocent child. One example of such a song is:

\[\text{No le llores, no le llores, no le llores al bebe} \]
\[\text{Vamos a cantarle bomba, vamos a hacer un baquiné.}^{135}\]

A popular song sung during the baquiné that has been adopted by bomberos, groups that play traditional Afro-Puerto Rican drumming music, is “Remeneate.” While at first glance the song peripherally relates to the baquiné, its rhythm and lyrics encourage the joyful celebration and movements of dancing intended to make the ceremony a feast.

\[\text{Remeneate, remeneate, remeneate casco ‘e juey} \]

\(^{133}\) Oller lived from 1833-1917.
\(^{134}\) Luisa, interview by author, Loíza, Puerto Rico, July 25, 2016. Translation from: “Se amanecía esa gente cantando y bailando el baquiné. Por muchos años incluso se bailaban el baquiné dentro de la iglesia.”
\(^{135}\) Ibid. “Don’t cry for him, don’t cry for him, don’t cry for the baby We are going to sing to him bomba, we are going to have a baquiné.”
Remeneate, remeneate, remeneate casco ‘e juey

Si te faltan las patitas, como tu te va menear

Le pregunto a usted señora como lo puede bailar

Another popular element of the baquiné is the *chistes colorados*, or jokes. These as well are employed to lighten the mood and often include satirical jokes about spirits, both good and evil.

Funeral rites such as the baquiné are intended to ensure the loved one’s contentment with the display of love from his or her family. While the baquiné is falling out of practice today, Puerto Ricans are still finding elaborate ways to celebrate their loved ones. Today, it is not uncommon for families to host viewings of their dead dressed in their favorite clothes, “engaging” in their favorite activities, and with their favorite drink in hand. Despite the modernization, these events too aim to not only honor the deceased family member, but also to ensure their joyful passing to the world of spirits.

*Bomba*

Another aspect of the ancestor cult that deserves exploration is the relationship between music and the spirit world. Music, like many things in African culture, has a spiritual nature. It is used during ceremonies and festivals as a tool for passing on religion

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136 Ibid. “Shake yourself, shake yourself, shake yourself shell of crab
Shake yourself, shake yourself, shake yourself shell of crab
If you are missing the feet, how are you going to shake
If you are missing the feet, how are you going to shake
I ask you lady how are you able to dance
I ask you lady how are you able to dance.”
and culture. Olupona writes, “Knowledge about the ancestors, deities, clan history, and local politics is transmitted through storytelling, songs, praise poetry, and face-to-face conversations.”

Music is almost always present during ceremonies because it is used as a language to speak to deities and sacred beings. Llorens Alicea also recognizes the significance of music in Yoruba culture stating, “music in Yorubaland represents an integral part of life in the community and it is through it that harmonious communications is established for every type of event, whether religious or social.”

In addition to the songs that are sung, the instruments that create the music also have religious significance. The drum is one of the principal instruments in Africa, and is considered to be sacred. As such, the tambor in Puerto Rico is one of the principal tools of religious expression the African slaves were able to maintain. Because they were able to disguise its use, the tambor not only became a symbol of spiritual resistance, but also of spiritual freedom. The enslaved Africans in Puerto Rico, therefore, brought their beliefs surrounding the tambor to the island.

One of those beliefs is that the spirit of ones ancestors lives within the drum. As María, a resident of Guayama explained in an interview:

The Africans have a reverence, respect, and belief that those who have passed before are protectors of us. Now, with bomba it is there. A guy made me a drum for my grandson, and when he gave it to me he began to explain the value of the drum and he spoke of the ancestors. He explained that it is very important for

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138 Ibid.
139 Llorens Alicea, 318.
bomberos to respect the drum. This is because it is not just an instrument, but a
way to remember your ancestors.\(^{140}\)

As a Catholic involved in the choir at church, and an enthusiast of bomba, the
interviewee did not see in any way that the music Puerto Rico has inherited from Africa
interferes with her own faith; conversely she felt it her faith supported it.

Others, nevertheless, do see conflict. On the 8th anniversary of the death of famed
composer Catalino “Tite” Curet Alonso, a celebration of his life was to occur in his
hometown of Guayama. His wife and others organizing the event hoped for a mass to be
celebrated in his honor with his own music played during the service. The music Curet
composed was written to the rhythms of salsa and bomba, and often included tribute to
his African roots. Understanding this, the priest at Saint Anthony of Padua in Guayama
agreed to the mass so long as his music was not played during the sacred part of the mass,
the Communion Rite. José, a resident of Guayama and one of the organizers states:

When the process began, there was a protest from two priests – one Puerto Rican
and the other priest North American. One of them said to me that the people of
money and who lived comfortably, they opposed that this type of activity take
place because that Afro-Antillean music was related to Santería, and it had to do
with an African religious base that didn’t fit in Catholicism.\(^{141}\)

The priest who had been put in charge nonetheless continued to support the mass. José
continues, “He told me, ‘My father had a business in Mayagüez where I grew up listening

\(^{140}\) María, interview by author, Guayama, Puerto Rico, July 21, 2016. Bombero is the
name for the musicians of bomba.

\(^{141}\) José, interview by author, Guayama, Puerto Rico, July 20, 2016.
to him, and while I was studying theology the music of Tite Curet lifted me up.”

On the Sunday of the mass, none of the wealthy who protested the mass showed. José states, “But still we came, we had the drums, the music, pictures of Tite. The sacred part we respected. But the rest was the music of Tite Curet and many people felt it. It was something cultural.” The refusal of the wealthy reflects a sentiment of the blasphemous character of African rhythms. This sentiment dates back to the Spanish elite during the colonial period.

In 1845, Manuel Alonso published a book on the jíbaro and the customs of Puerto Rico. In the book he identifies the country’s secular music of the time, which are the societal dance of Europe, and the Garabato dance of the jíbaros, which he identifies as the country’s own. He then mentions a third type of dance which comes from the Africans, which according to Alonso does not deserve to be mentioned with the other two because although it is seen in Puerto Rico, it is not a legitimate representation of the country. The dance Alonso is referring to is bomba.

The slaves used bomba as a tool for spiritual expression, and it has maintained that character to this day. While the influence of the elite, ecclesiastical restrictions, and U.S. American missions has taken some of that meaning away, bomba is still a treasure a Puerto Rican culture closely associated with spiritual expression. Its use during the celebrations of religious feast days and holidays on the island, such as the Fiestas de Santiago Apóstol and the Carnaval de Ponce, give witness to that claim. During these

\[142\] Ibid.

special times the people take to the streets, the *bateys*, or the stage to sing and dance in honor of the religious occasion, and in expression of their own spiritual trials and delights, all the while honoring their ancestors in the beat of the drum.

**Conclusion**

The traditions of the baquíné and bomba have waned throughout Puerto Rico. According to Luisa, the baquíné is now a practice considered to be more pagan.\(^\text{144}\) This assessment calls for further consideration. Laws such as *El Bando de Policía y Buen Gobierno de 1862* (The Band of Police and Good Government of 1862), which prohibited African religious expression, prove that the baquíné has always straddled the line of paganism in the consciousness of the elite. But the rise in U.S.A. Catholic and Protestant missionaries, and the consciousness that they bring, could be a factor in its decline among the common people.

The same consideration must be given to bomba. The censorship of African music has always been an impediment to understanding its usefulness in the spiritual lives of Catholics. The essence of ancestral devotion, however, is yet ingrained in the ethos of the people. As Luisa remarks, people still say things like: “*La mai mía murió pero ella no me suelta* (My mother died but she does not let go of me).”\(^\text{145}\) They still view the dead as caring for them, as protectors.

This chapter has attempted to give new light to the Afro-Catholic religious culture of Puerto Rico for generations going forward. It attempts to show that when one thinks of Black religiosity in Puerto Rico, one can include Christianity in that picture. Black

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\(^{144}\) Luisa, interview by author, Loíza, Puerto Rico, July 25, 2016.

\(^{145}\) Ibid.
religiosity cannot simply be relegated to otherness in brujería, Espíritismo, or Santería, but must also be reflected upon as Catholic. Black Christianity is a major part of the religious milieu of Puerto Rico. If such denial continues, a disservice is done to the theological needs of the people. As María observed, “the Christians churches in Puerto Rico talk a lot about the Word of God and adherence to the rules, but what is disappearing is the culture.”146 As in the controversy over the mass in honor of Curet, culture, linked to their popular practice, adds another element to the worship of Catholic Puerto Ricans creating a desire in them for integration of the official and unofficial.

CHAPTER 4

ESPIRITISMO: HEALING IN PUERTO RICAN CATHOLIC CIRCLES

The need to account for the culture of the common people in Puerto Rico brings us to Espiritismo. Up to this point, Espiritismo has been touched upon as an alternative feature of Afro-Puerto Rican religiosity, but a fuller account of Catholicism in Puerto Rico requires that we focus on it in more depth. The complexity of Espiritismo makes it hard to grasp: is it primarily influenced by Africans? Is it a distinctive religion? What relation does it have to Catholicism and can one genuinely be Catholic if they engage in certain practices of Espiritismo? Answering these questions will provide a clearer picture of the marks Africans have left on the Catholic practice of Puerto Rico.

Divination and healing are two parts of Espiritismo that permeate the culture in Puerto Rico. While not all people are dedicated to Espiritismo, these aspects of its practice continue to inform how the transcendental is experienced. With this in mind, this chapter will show how Espiritismo impacts the worldview of Catholics in Puerto Rico.

*Background – Espiritismo in Puerto Rico*

The complicated history of religion in Puerto Rico is perhaps best evident in the spiritual practices surrounding divination and healing. Before the Spanish arrived, the Taíno survived in a society that developed and maintained its own cosmological beliefs and practices. Due to the destruction of their civilization by Spanish conquistadors, little
is known about the native inhabitants of Puerto Rico, the Taíno. Much less is known about the details of their cosmovision, but it is known that healing was one aspect of the religious life they held.\textsuperscript{147}

Some aspects of what is known about the Taíno religion are similar to those of African religions, particularly the Yoruba. They believed in a protector God who inhabited the skies, whom they called Yocahu.\textsuperscript{148} Subordinate to Yocahu were the \textit{cemis}, lesser gods who they would approach for help. The Taíno believed that when a \textit{cacique} (chief) died they would become \textit{cemis}. Each village also had a healer that was called a \textit{bohite}. The bohite would work to heal sicknesses, which were believed to be caused by evil spirits.\textsuperscript{149} Some of these similarities can make identifying and connecting which religious practices of Puerto Ricans are Spanish Catholic, African, or Taíno difficult; however, the similarities also aid us in understanding how certain practices over others more easily became popularized amongst the people of Puerto Rico, especially the common class.

The popularization of religious practices of the Taíno and Africans over the centuries has come to be known as brujería. Brujería is the colloquial term to describe a particular variant of Espiritismo that is specifically expressive and “uneducated.”\textsuperscript{150} Margarite Fernandez Olmos, Andrés I. Pérez y Mena, Raquel Romburg, and Anthony Stevens-Arroyo have all written about how to understand the context to this term.

\textsuperscript{147} Ricardo E. Alegría, \textit{Historia de nuestros indios (versión elemental)} (San Juan, Puerto Rico: Collección de Estudios Puertorriqueños, 1971), 27.
\textsuperscript{148} Alegría, \textit{Historia de nuestros indios}, 27
\textsuperscript{149} Ibid., 29.
\textsuperscript{150} Raquel Romburg, \textit{Witchcraft and Welfare: Spiritual Capital and the Business of Magic in Modern Puerto Rico} (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2003), x. Romburg does not use “uneducated” pejoratively, but to explain that it is not of the elite.
Pérez y Mena wrote about Puerto Rican Espiritismo as an Afro-Latin religion in flux in “Puerto Rican Spiritism as a Transfeature of Afro-Latin Religion” in his co-edited book with Stevens-Arroyo, \textit{Enigmatic Powers: Syncretism with African and Indigenous Peoples’ Religions Among Latinos}. He addresses the issue of syncretism not as pejorative or happenstance, denying Africans an active role in creating new religious expressions, but as a conscious effort. According to Pérez y Mena, the Africans consciously “established levels of transfeature,” veiling their own belief systems with the practices and paraphernalia of Catholicism. He then proceeds to explain the contact between Spanish Catholicism, Taíno spirit belief, French Kardecian Spiritism (also known as Scientific Spiritism), and African spirit worship, creating what he calls Puerto Rican Spiritism.\footnote{Andrés I. Pérez y Mena, and Antonio M. Stevens Arroyo, \textit{Enigmatic Powers: Syncretism with African and Indigenous Peoples’ Religions Among Latinos} (New York, NY: Bildner Center for Western Hemisphere Studies, 1995).}

In another co-edited book, \textit{Creole Religions of the Caribbean: An Introduction from Vodou and Santería to Obeah and Espiritismo}, Fernández-Olmos gives more attention to the history, variations, and makeup of Espiritismo in Puerto Rico. While Pérez y Mena choose to refer to Espiritismo in Puerto Rico by an English transliteration (Spiritism), Fernández-Olmos chooses to maintain the Spanish. Concise and informative, Fernández-Olmos’ gives an explanation of Espiritismo as what she calls “Indigenous Espiritismo.”\footnote{The term “indigenous Espiritismo” was first used by Mario Nuñez-Molina in his 1987 dissertation “Desarollo del medium: The Process of Becoming a Healer in Puerto Rican Espiritismo,” and is also referred to as “popular Spiritism” by Néstor Rodríguez Escuadéro in \textit{Historia del Espiritismo en Puerto Rico} (1991). This is primarily what this study means when it refers to Espiritismo. Though there may be variants that are more scientific, influenced by French Kardecian Spiritism, such as White Table Espiritismo,} This is the Espiritismo that this study will examine. It is healing-oriented,
integrating “different healing systems and religious traditions that had evolved in Puerto Rico for hundreds of years.”[^153] It is important to Fernández-Olmos to establish that this Indigenous Espiritismo, which is the most popular variant on the island, is native to Puerto Rico and not a single import from Europe, as opposed to Kardecian Spiritism.^[154]

Due to a lack of singularity and structural organization in the development of Espiritismo, each of these scholars had to define what they mean by their use of Espiritismo. This is muddied because constructions of class have attempted to sustain a separation between the multiple influences of Espiritismo, but have maintained a shared usage of the term.

Introduced to the island during the 1860s, French Kardecian Spiritism (Scientific Spiritism) took hold amongst the educated urban class as a movement that could defy the Spanish state, which was closely associated with the Catholic Church. For the social elite, Kardecian Spiritism was advantageous for its identification with progressive social movements in France during the French Revolution, and was used similarly in Puerto Rico to advocate for independence in the late 19th and early 20th century. During the late 19th century, middle and upper class Puerto Ricans who traveled to Europe to study picked up the philosophical teachings of Kardec and brought them, along with *The Book of Mediums* back to the island. Kardec promoted the belief that humans can communicate with the spirit world through the use of intermediaries or mediums. Kardecian Spiritism


[^154]: Fernández-Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert, 187.
went beyond just belief, however. Practitioners organized spiritual centers, libraries, a newspaper, and even health centers, all of which revolved around their goals for political reform. After the Treaty of Paris in 1898, which gave the U.S. control of Puerto Rico, Kardecian Spiritists were able to more freely organize and promote their beliefs because of the religious freedom protected by of the U.S. Constitution.

For a short time, Kardecian Spiritism was exclusive to the urban elite social class in Puerto Rico. Pérez y Mena writes:

But because speaking with the dead was a common phenomenon in the Caribbean both in Taíno forms of ancestor worship as in African ones, the Spiritist phenomenon of the 1870s had fertile ground in which to develop among the lower classes, which began incorporating elements of French Spiritism because it reinforced, in a Eurocentric manner, the spirit belief already present on the island.

Kardecian Spiritism allowed for the lower classes to embrace their indigenous spiritual practices because its European roots legitimized their own system of beliefs. Thus, Kardecian Spiritism became a feature of brujería, the already present African religious beliefs and practices.

The two different offshoots of Espiritismo placed more emphasis on certain influences over others. Yet, in both the refined scientific Kardecian Spiritism and the uneducated Indigenous Espiritismo there are influences of the other. However, the widely

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156 Pérez y Mena, *Speaking with the Dead*, 145.
popular Espiritismo in Puerto Rico today is that which developed initially under the religious amalgam of the African and Taíno, integrated with Catholicism.\textsuperscript{157}

\textit{Espiritismo Healing Adopted by Catholics}

Francesco Cordasco and Eugene Bucchioni’s \textit{The Puerto Rican Experience: a sociological sourcebook}, published in 1973, cite a recent study of 100 slum residents of Puerto Rico that live in extreme poverty. This study found that “nine out of ten are Catholic, but also practice Spiritualism.”\textsuperscript{158} Many of these practitioners do not see any conflict between Espiritismo and normative Catholicism. What this figure reveals is that for a large population of Puerto Ricans, their Catholic identity cannot be separated from Espiritismo. The island is Catholic, but the beliefs and practices encompassed by Catholicism for its people have a different meaning than elsewhere, and more specifically, than the institution.

Nevertheless, while most Catholics incorporate Espiritismo into their faith, there is still a hesitancy to claim it by those who are not chiefly dedicated to its practice. This is because of the stigma attached to it as brujería. Those, however, who do dedicate themselves to the practice of Espiritismo do so with pride, and have come to embrace the usage of brujería.\textsuperscript{159} This is the case in the areas more strongly linked to African heritage.

The city of Guayama, which was officially founded in 1703, is one of those areas. This area of Puerto Rico was important during the Spanish colonial period for its sugar

\textsuperscript{157} Pérez y Mena, \textit{Speaking with the Dead}, 23-24.
\textsuperscript{159} Romburg, \textit{Witchcraft and Welfare}, x-xi.
According to José, a local historian of Guayama, in the 1840s the town had more than 100 sugar mills requiring large populations of slaves to work the plantations. While Spain poorly attempted to inculcate the doctrine and practice of Catholicism amongst the slave populations, the Africans adapted their beliefs to fit within the ecclesiastical model of Catholicism in Puerto Rico. What formed out of the African intermingling of religions became known as brujería, or Espiritismo.

A common sight in the town of Guayama and throughout Puerto Rico is the botánica. Botánicas are stores that sell items of religious interest and folk healing, often regarded as magical—books, statues, herbs, candles, soaps, powders, and more. Puerto Ricans, Catholic Puerto Ricans included, often visit botánicas to buy these items for their home altars, decoration, and for a quick remedy for any sickness that may arise. Many of the products featured in botánicas are for Catholic religious practices, while others are based in African and Taino healing practices. The use of items can range from something as simple as a bottle of holy water to bless a child before leaving the house, or to rub on the stomach to alleviate a stomachache, to a complex concoction of herbs and oils to treat the same symptom, or even worse, a malevolent spirit disturbing someone spiritually or physically.

For the most part, these simpler practices of Espiritismo are performed by each individual in their own home using formulas and recipes that have been handed on. This healing, which can also be known as curanderismo, or folk healing, is generally known to some extent by most Puerto Ricans regardless of professed religious identity. One

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160 The entire southeastern coast of Puerto Rico was used largely for the production of sugar, therefore, some of the largest sugar plantations stretched between the towns of Salinas to Yabucoa (farthest east).
161 José, interview by author, Guayama, Puerto Rico, July 20, 2016.
proprietor of a botánica in Guayama mentioned that she sees all people of the neighborhood in her store, especially Catholics. She passes her days sitting on a chair near the entrance of her shop, with the door propped open to allow the occasional breeze to enter, and greets her neighbors as they walk by calling people into her store to convince them to restock whatever herb, oil, or candle they may need for their home.

When people have trouble or feel spiritually off, and cannot resolve the issue on their own or with common medicine, it is then that they tend to visit a person who is trained in the divination and healing practices of Espiritismo—an Espiritista. The Espiritistas will perform a ceremony, or trance, to determine if the problem is in fact spiritual, “a tormenting, intranquil spirit, difficulty with one’s spiritual protectors, human envy, sorcery, a trial or prueba, sent by God to test one’s moral strength.”

Baths, offerings, and ritual purifications of the home may be part of the healing process, in addition to a consultation to give light to the spiritual problem.

Botánicas are not just common in Puerto Rico. They can also be found in the U.S.A. in cities with large Puerto Rican populations such as New York and Miami. Often the proprietors of botánicas are Espiritistas themselves. One proprietor in Guayama, Jaime, also owns an Espiritista temple. According to this Espiritista, which can also be referred to by some as a cura (priest), they can heal anything that has to do with spirits. Jaime states, “I can tell you if you are sick spiritually, and if you are, then we can heal you spiritually.” However, no person can be healed of any ailment if they are not spiritually purified. Jaime stressed the importance of being spiritually clean. “They can baptize you, you can study, come from a good family, and everything, but if you don’t

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162 Fernández Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert, 197.
purify yourself, don’t clean yourself spiritually, one day you will be a criminal; even if you come from a good family.”

According to Jaime, God will judge each person based on his or her spirit, and what kind of person they are each incarnation, necessitating spiritual purification to become a “good” person. Reincarnation is one aspect of Espiritismo that has been inherited by some from the teachings of Kardec.

While most Puerto Ricans are Catholics who incorporate Espiritismo, Jaime is an Espiritista who incorporates Catholicism. This is possible because the God of Espiritismo is the same God of Catholicism. Jaime says, “As an Espiritista you have to believe that there is a God.” This is because Espiritismo comes from the soul. It is something that is born within you. All other religions according to Jaime, including Santería, are things that you do. That does not mean, however, that one can only be purified by the Espiritista. He continues, “I believe that if you go to the Catholic Church, and you don’t take the host, you wasted your time. You didn’t purify yourself.”

It is important to recognize that what is expressed here by Jaime is not necessarily exactly the same as what would be expressed by other Espiritistas. The variance among the beliefs and practices in Espiritismo is such that there are different sects throughout the island. According to Jaime, the reason Catholics also incorporate Espiritismo in Puerto Rico is because Catholicism is not enough for Catholics; it is not enough because the call of their ancestors is strong.

One example of Puerto Ricans turning to Espiritismo when modern measures are not enough comes from Paula, an elderly resident of Yabucoa. She believes in

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164 Ibid.  
165 Ibid.
Espiritismo because she believes that la maldad (evil) exists. As a Catholic, she does not practice it, she is not involved in it, and she does not even know where it comes from, but she believes in it because she knows that la maldad exists. According to her, in the same way some people are born with the gift of tongues, some are born with the gift of Espiritismo. She told a particular story of a time she had to visit an Espiritista due to the curse of an envious neighbor:

One time when I was in living New York on 102nd, I began to feel sick. There was something wrong with me that I couldn’t explain. So [my husband] took me to the hospital to have me checked. He made an appointment with the doctor that he worked for. We went to the appointment and the doctor did the analysis. I thought I had cancer or something serious, but the tests came back negative. So the doctor said that I was more than likely just paranoid and he told me to see a psychiatrist. I went. The psychiatrist gave me some pills to help with my nerves and I went back for a second visit but stopped going because [my husband] was spending all of his paychecks on my healthcare. Then, my sister-in-law came to visit me, who also lived in the area, and she told me that I needed to see a guy that she knows who could heal me. All that I wanted was to be healthy and O.K., “estar frente de mi casa (stand strong before my household),” so I agreed to go. The guy was an Espiritista (maybe named Juan). He was dressed in white, and he told me to lie on the ground and he prayed. I’m not sure what else he did. Then he told me that what was wrong with me was that I had an evil spirit. He said that the neighbor who lived on the floor below us had put a spell on me because she was interested in [my husband] and wanted to separate our marriage. He asked if the
neighbor had been around a lot, and I said yes, and then he asked if somehow at some point a cookie was left on our kitchen table. I said yes. I thought that it was something [my husband] must have bought the kids, because normally I bought all the food in the house but I didn’t recognize it. So I ate it and that’s what made me sick. So the Espiritista came to our house and he had everyone leave the house while he came in with some plants and began to cleanse the house, because he said that’s where you have to begin. And then he began to pass and hit the plants over my head. That was it and about a month later I felt fine.\footnote{Paula, interview by author, Yabucoa, Puerto Rico, July 22, 2016.}

The story recounted here has similar elements that can likely be repeated by many Puerto Ricans, whether from the island or the U.S.A.

The underlying problem Paula believed she experienced was \textit{la maldad}, or evil wishes. In this case it was envy from another woman. Envy is a common theme amongst believers in Espiritismo. While not all Puerto Ricans actively engage in practices around \textit{la maldad}, they believe it is near and can touch them at any time.

Physical evidence of the belief in \textit{la maldad} lies in the use of \textit{azabache} bracelets for protection. Azabache bracelets are believed to protect from \textit{mal de ojo}, or evil eye, among other things. \textit{Mal de ojo} is a common folkloric belief extant in many parts of Latin America. Exactly where this belief originated is difficult to pinpoint due to the intermingling of cultures that has taken place throughout the region. But belief in \textit{mal de ojo} is not confined to Puerto Rico or the Caribbean. The fact that \textit{mal de ojo} is prevalent in other parts of Latin America, namely Mexico and Central America, does not alone mean that it is a Spanish or Amerindian belief. For one, hundreds of thousands of
Africans were brought to these regions and had an impact on what we know as Mexican Catholicism today. Furthermore, the reality is, many cultures and civilizations throughout world history have held or continue to hold some sort of belief in malevolent desires cursed on a person through the power of an envious glare. Nevertheless, whether it made its way to Latin America through the Spanish, Africans, or others, belief in *mal de ojo* in Puerto Rico has been progressed by the healing beliefs of the Africans.

In Puerto Rican culture, some people who believe themselves to be under the curse of *mal de ojo* seek the cleansing power of an Espiritista to be healed. Aside from seeking out Espiritistas to cure, they also engage in certain practices to prevent. One such example is the azabache bracelet. The azabache bracelet is a gold bracelet with black and red beads and a black charm often in the shape of a fist. It is believed to ward off *mal de ojo*. The azabache bracelet is commonly given to infants to protect them from envious looks.

As recounted by Ramon, a member of a Puerto Rican Catholic community in Cleveland, Ohio, during a period in the 1980s and 90s many parents brought their children to be baptized wearing azabache bracelets as part of their baptismal outfit. For the parents, the azabache bracelet would serve as another means of protection and cleansing for the child, which it would also receive through the new life inherited through the sacrament. The priest of the parish put an end to this practice, however, once he caught on to what was happening.

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167 Bristol, “Black Catholicism in Mexico,” 255. It is almost impossible to trace African elements in Mexican Catholicism in the way that we can in other parts of the diaspora, yet African American Christianity existed in colonial Mexico and influenced what we see as Mexican Catholicism today.

168 Ramon, interview by author, Cleveland, Ohio, July 5, 2016.
Espiritismo faced discrimination from two forces in Puerto Rico: the Spanish Catholic Church, which saw it as witchcraft, and Kardecian Spiritism, which saw it as unsophisticated. Nevertheless, its usefulness to the people has allowed it to still survive. What is more, the legitimacy of Catholicism and Kardecian Spiritism provided the African belief system of spirits entities in which to seek its own acceptability. While that has not necessarily been achieved in full, the incorporation of Espiritismo into the Catholic faith by the marginalized impoverished and working class is evidence of its vitality.

Perhaps a story that reflects these understandings comes from Dolores of Toa Alta:

[My mom] would take a pack of cards like a tarot card reader—here it’s used for playing, not witchcraft, but some way or the other it got mixed into the lot. Then my mother would come and flash them before you and put them in front of you and say, ‘here, cut them into three sets: love, money, and prosperity.’ Then she would tell you grab one from any set, you grab it (she wouldn’t touch it), put it on the table, and she would say some things. She would put black coffee in her cup, a little bit in a white cup, she would move the cup around, examine it, look at you, and then tell them something. The person would come back to Mami and say, ‘Lolo todo lo que me dijo salió (Lolo, everything you told me about happened).’
She would reply, ‘Ay bueno, vete a rezar (Oh, good. Now go pray).’ She learned it from her mom.\textsuperscript{169}

The actions in which Dolores’ mother would engage appear to be a skeleton of divination derived from Espiritismo, but her reply to go pray, intended to be prayer towards the God of Catholicism, displays the fitting relationship the people see between the two.

The negation of Espiritismo is a negation of Blackness. The ancestor veneration, divination, and healing practices present in Espiritismo are all inescapably African. The denial of the African influence on Puerto Rico’s cultural heritage has made it so that many in Puerto Rico today are unaware of this reality. Pérez y Mena writes, “In Puerto Rico, among blacks as well as whites, there was an erosion of understanding of the origins of Black religious practices, making it possible for the population to engage in forms of ancestor worship without considering these practices Black in origin.”\textsuperscript{170} The strand of these discriminatory sentiments remains, however. No matter how many people practice it openly or clandestinely, these practices are considered taboo precisely because they are the practices that have been censored throughout history.

How have they persisted then? According to Jaime, it is because Espiritismo is something that lives within you. He states, “Catholicism is not enough for Catholics because of your ancestors. They believed in things that you no longer have, and you feel a void because of that.”\textsuperscript{171} For Luisa, it is because Catholicism and Espiritismo naturally fit. She says, “I find that Espiritismo has its logic inside the Catholic Church. I base this in the rosary for the dead, the lighting of candles, and they have their ceremonies. When

\textsuperscript{169} Dolores, interview by author, Toa Alta, Puerto Rico, July 25, 2016.
\textsuperscript{170} Pérez y Mena, Speaking With the Dead, 32.
\textsuperscript{171} Jaime, interview by author, Guayama, Puerto Rico, July 21, 2016.
you sit at a table and they pray to the dead, I see this as Espiritismo.” However distinct the two religious practices may be, for many of the common people they are inseparable in the way they relate to God.

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CONCLUSION

All of the information presented hitherto proceeds to a final question: How can theology applied to Puerto Rico be more effective in meeting the needs of the people? In this research, that question is extracted through an uncovering of popular Afro-Catholic practices. Long censored and ignored in Catholic circles, these practices have been given attention with an aim to more accurately and inclusively reveal the deeply held theological bedrocks of the people. As Rebecca M. Berrú-Davis states, “The study of popular Catholicism remains an important source for examining the theological underpinnings of Latino/as faith practices and beliefs.”¹⁷³ In Puerto Rico, God is evidently encountered through the religious inheritance of Africa. More theological reflection is required in order to better understand what that means.

Continuing to use popular Catholicism as a starting point is one way to do so. In “Theologizing Popular Catholicism,” Berrú-Davis offers a model from which to discuss the experience of popular Catholicism. The five topics of her model are: Place, Tradition, Community, Wisdom, and Abundance. Berrú-Davis writes, “These topics are drawn from the generative ideas and themes that emerge as important to the community and suggest the ways in which God is encountered and understood.”¹⁷⁴ Given that each topic offers a

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¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 388.
way to understand God, they serve as categories from which to theologize the faith of the people in Puerto Rico. Relating each of these topics to the beliefs and practices presented in this research, I will offer a critical reflection on their usefulness for understanding the faith. In short, this model is used as a theological framework for Puerto Rican popular Catholicism and its African influences.

Place

In Puerto Rican Afro-Catholicism, daily-lived reality is affirmed as a source for divine revelation. This daily-lived experience, called lo cotidiano by Latino/a theologians, serves as a place from which to do theology. The diversity of expression of Puerto Rican Catholicism reflects its different influences, but also a shared history and context of a community. The popular Catholic practices such as the masquerades of vejigantes, el baquiné, the spiritual playing of bomba, and healing are just some of what emerged. These practices are, “…tactics for navigating the daily, ways of handing on cultural and religious values, and a means of surviving and resisting…”175 Each of the interviewees for this research expressed their understanding of Catholicism in these ways. They may not know with great detail, or any at all, the history of African religious influence in Puerto Rico, but the response in their daily-lived experience articulates their understanding of what it means for their lives and their faith.

In Chapter 1, I looked at the marginalization of Afro-Puerto Ricans during Spanish colonial rule through suppressive ideologies and practices. The enacting of

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blood-purity regulations marginalized Black and Amerindian cultures. Any religious expression that does not align with the dominant culture became second- or even third-class. This daily reality of feeling on the fringes of sanctity has only served to increase engagement in people-developed practices of Puerto Ricans. The devotion to Saint James in Loíza, and other saints around the island, serves as a channel through which the people’s suffering is consoled.

Tradition

The porous boundary between “official” doctrine and “unofficial” practice presents a tradition of mestizaje in Puerto Rico. Mestizaje is a term used in Spanish to describe the mixing of people of different ethnic backgrounds. By its definition, then, this makes mestizaje an inherently complex topic. There is little clarity when it comes to mestizaje, just as there is little clarity when it comes to understanding the complex traditions of Puerto Rican Catholicism. In examining the implications of the complexity of mestizaje, Néstor Medina has called for the accounting of the different ethnic and cultural traditions in Latin America in order to build a more inclusive society—by different he means indigenous an African voices.\(^{176}\) I have attempted to do so by including the African tradition in the milieu of Puerto Rican Catholicism. The struggles of power and the censorship of histories leave us with the task of piecing together the footprints of that tradition. In Puerto Rican Catholicism, the integration of official and unofficial becomes a mirroring of this mestizaje—the conqueror and the conquered, the respected and the marginalized, the sacred and the profane.

Chapter 2 defined popular Catholic expression in Puerto Rico through the lens of the Fiestas de Santiago Apóstol. The fiestas are themselves a visible example of the complex tradition of *mestizaje*. The representation of vejigantes (evil spirits) against Spanish knights in the processions presents a conundrum. In a town that takes great pride in its Black heritage, and as the *pueblo de la tradición* (the town of tradition), how is it that the spirits, embodied by the artistry of African tradition, are on the side of the vanquished? The conclusion of Espín once again comes to mind: Religion in Latin America is seen through the lens of vanquishing, and popular Catholicism is how sense is made of it. Despite the role they represent, the vejigantes are the stars of the show (after Santiago, of course). The faces of the defeated are whom the local artisans craft for tourists. The defeated are whom the children excitedly dress up as. The defeated becomes the conqueror in this uniquely most Catholic, but also most African festive tradition.

*Community*

Popular Catholicism cannot be done in abstraction from the community. Just as the people develop it, so do they implement it within the community. Berrú-Davis writes, “…the experiences of popular Catholicism take place within the community, are enacted by the community, and are carried out for the community.”\(^{177}\) As this research has continuously emphasized, the community of Puerto Rican Afro-Catholicism is not just the living. No reflection on this Catholicism can be effective without taking into account the world of the living-dead and its inhabitants, the ancestors. The interdependence of the two worlds is ever present in the place, tradition, wisdom, and abundance of this Afro-

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\(^{177}\) Berrú-Davis, “Theologizing,” 391.
Chapter 3 explored the world of the ancestors. The African influence in Puerto Rico produced a strong character of Puerto Rican Catholicism oriented toward Ancestral veneration. The cult of the ancestors is evident many practices, and weaves together the worlds conceptualized by Africans into the framework provided by the Catholic faith. In the traditional playing of bomba these worlds come together. Accompanied by spiritual litanies, composed of all traditions, the drums played by the people of the physically present recall to life the people of the past. The two worlds come together in expression of spirituality:

\[ Oí una voz (I heard a voice) \]

\[ Oí una voz (I heard a voice) \]

\[ Oí una voz divina del cielo que me llamò (I heard a divine voice from heaven that called my name) \]

The traditional songs of bomba, such as \( Oí una voz \), bring to life this community and convey its spiritual condition. Bomba takes place within this community, is an acted by this community, and is carried out for this community.

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\[ ^{178} \text{Translation: the beyond.} \]
In the question of how do Puerto Ricans understand, the Afro-Catholic practices explored in this research offer an answer. They understand in the experience of suffering, in the experience of celebration, and in the experience of the ancestors. Wisdom is what is gained from these experiences. Berrú-Davis writes, “Consequently, most Latino/as consider that one gains fuller and deeper experiencia with age.”\textsuperscript{179} In the experience of suffering, Puerto Ricans find solace in the stories of God’s compassion. In the experience of celebration, Puerto Ricans give vitality to the solemn acts of piety. In the experience of the ancestors, Puerto Ricans remember those who through their own experience have imparted wisdom on the community. By their place, through their tradition, within the community the histories, life lessons, and spiritual direction of people past are learned anew.

The baquiné, explored in addition to the playing of bomba in Chapter 3, is another Afro-Catholic practice, enacted by the people, in response to their marginalized condition, filled with the wisdom of African inheritance. The ceremony offers a space to come together in the wake of the suffering of a child. The incomprehensible death of an innocent life becomes comprehensible as the joy of a new angel in heaven watching over. Invoking the spiritual, the suffering becomes celebration. “El Baquiné,” an unpublished narrative by poet Luis Palés Matos laces these themes together in the story of the death of a child in Guayama:

> With the rosary concluded, the songs of the baquiné begin. They are songs with air and a cadence of Christmas carols. In them are pondered the virtues of the

\textsuperscript{179} Ibid., 394. Translation: experience.
child, the sleepless nights of the mother to cure him, and the evil spirits that bewitched his body are exorcised.

\begin{verbatim}
Zape, zape, zape,

espíritu malo (Evil spirit);

vuélvete a la sombra (go back to the shade)

de donde has llegado (from where you have arrived).\textsuperscript{180}
\end{verbatim}

In the transition from suffering to celebration, the conversion of the child to an angelito absorbs the pains of people. The baquiné is a practice developed out of Puerto Rico’s African heritage; it sustains African wisdom in response to life’s experiences of suffering and joy.

\textit{Abundance}

Abundance lies in the aesthetics of African religious expression. The music, masks, processions, funerary celebrations, and spiritual healing all give Afro-Catholicism its expressive character. The beauties of these practices stimulate the senses and create experiences that encourage the participant to fully enter into the transcendental. Berrú-Davis states, “This beauty is significant because it reflects the unique character of popular Catholicism, which blends together aesthetic and cultural elements in a dynamic way.”\textsuperscript{181} Puerto Rican Afro-Catholicism has been considered deviant, sacrilegious, impoverished, and foreign, but when examined for its abundant beauty, it is easier to understand how it is transformative.


\textsuperscript{181} Berrú-Davis, “Theologizing,” 396.
Chapter 4 presented a final mark of Africa in Puerto Rican Catholicism, the spiritual healing practices derived from Espiritismo. The botánicas exemplify the abundant beauty of popular Catholicism in Puerto Rico. In them reside the organic herbs, spices and oils used to heal both physical and spiritual ailments, candles and images of saints used for devotion and promise-making, and water to bless and protect loved ones on their daily journeys. The use of natural remedies and artifacts give life to the beauty of African of healing. Candles, rosaries, and amulets incorporate the beauty of Western Catholic spirituality. With items used in daily life, the wisdom of many traditions comes together in the botánica, modeling the incarnation of a Catholic practice in Puerto Rico full of abundance.

The use of these lenses has provided a summary of the answers to the questions posed at the beginning of this research. Overcoming marginalization, Africans have managed to leave their marks on Catholicism in Puerto Rico, and the people have adopted those marks as their own. This framework has also provided a source for concisely outlining some theological underpinnings of Puerto Rican Afro-Catholicism. These underpinnings provide a starting point to understand how popular Catholicism can contribute to the life of the Church.

Berrú-Davis ends her essay with three further questions, two of which I have attempted to answer in my research. The first is: “Who “owns” the devotion or how rituals are to be appropriately or “accurately” carried out?” The issues of power, authority, and ownership are very present in Puerto Rican Catholic practices. From the beginning of Spain’s colonization of Puerto Rico, Spain exercised its dominance over all

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182 Ibid., 397.
religious expression that is not Iberian. The laws explored in the first chapter give a sense of the ways in which such dominance was exercised. The survival of Afro-Catholic practices, however, displays resistance on the part of the people in how they intend for their devotions to be carried out. The question of ownership, therefore, leads to the people.

The second question is: “How does popular Catholicism align with or detract from the key tenets of the Catholic faith?”\textsuperscript{183} It cannot be denied that there are some differences between how the Church understands the Catholic faith and how Puerto Ricans understand it. The seeking of guidance and protection from ancestors assumes a belief that ancestors are empowered by God to in fact do so, and by its nature they can be empowered to do so because they already share in the fruits of eternal life in heaven. The veneration of ancestors in this matter presents a challenge to our understanding of the afterlife. On the other hand, Puerto Rican Afro-Catholicism enhances the way Catholics understand the connectedness of this life and the next. Carlos Cardoza-Orlandi writes, “The church’s mission and Christian theology incorporate the spirit world, particularly the world of saints who live in the Lord. Moreover, Christian literature of the [early] period points to the relationship between the world of the living and the world of the dead, especially those who have died in Christ.”\textsuperscript{184} Understanding that the world of the spirits is an important aspect of Afro-Catholicism, the literary evidence of how Christians past related to the dead, and how the Church treated such issues, provides a lens through which modern devotions in Puerto Rico can be viewed.

\textsuperscript{183} Ibid., 398.
Beyond these questions, there is much more to understand about Puerto Rican Catholicism in general, and its African influences. The roots of its practices, the depth of its meaning, and its power in the formation of Puerto Rican identity necessitate further study. Additionally, what other expressions of African religiosity in Puerto Rico have yet to be uncovered? The *rosario cantado* (sung rosary), *fiestas de cruz* (feasts of the cross), celebration of *La Candelaria* (Candlemas) and other religious feasts, veneration of *La Virgen de Monserrate* (The Virgin of Monserrate), and other devotions to the dead may be able to add much more to what is here explored of the marks of African religiosity on Puerto Rican popular Catholicism.
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