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Komfa Work:

Ritualizing Racecraft and Nation in Guyana's Spiritualist Faiths

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the  
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy  
in Culture and Performance

by

Jeremy Jacob Peretz

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## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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Professor Allen Fraleigh Roberts, Chair

This Dissertation offers ethnographic exploration of Komfa, ritual engaged to “entertain the ancestors” that is central to the way of life of Spiritualists in Guyana. Komfa involves profound introspections and elaborate communal celebrations dedicated to “the Seven Nations” of spirits who represent colonial British demography. Practiced primarily by Guyanese women of African descent and considered an Africa-derived or -inspired tradition, Komfa worldview draws upon cultural inheritances of various Guyanese backgrounds. Embracing Komfa worlds serves as historical and genealogical inquiry into often indistinct, polysemous pasts, wherein ethnographically identified and identifying spirit-guides lead devotees through emancipatory journeys of familial and personal (re)discovery.

In dance, drumming, altar-making, and spirit possession, devotees cultivate transformative relationships, including those reaching beyond the grave. Through this “Work” of deep relatedness, Spiritualists confront specters of ethnic and racial exploitations of the past—as

well as their intersections with dynamics of gender and sexuality—that continue to haunt their everyday existences within pluralist postcolonial Guyana’s politics of ethnonationalism. In communion with the dead, mediums bring past-generational life experiences to bear on their manifestations of recuperated futures. Embodying long-departed presences has encouraged practitioners to repossess complexly layered, expansive selves based in intimately interconnected subjectivities, and to thus open themselves to the ambiguities of ethnoracial assemblages, “transgressive” gender identities, and “noncompliant” sexualities.

The study interrogates Komfa’s socially situated histories and contemporary meanings and value within practitioners’ lives. A key concern throughout is Komfa’s role in supporting Guyanese—specifically as descendants of colonized, enslaved, displaced, and indentured peoples of mainly African, Indigenous, and Asian heritages—in challenging and redirecting the basis of their subjugation under Europeans’ regimes of production that endeavored to commodify people as possessable property. As Guyana’s Creolese language term for “spirit possession,” Komfa has provided a ritual means through which Spiritualists have rejected and reformulated customary and legal dispossession of personhood through engendering multiplicities of being(s) whose humanities are not grounded in the labor of the plantation, but instead in the intersubjective Spiritual Work of social interrelatedness. For devotees, “Spiritual life,” after all, “is life *with* the spirits,” a social understanding that generally presupposes the humanity of the revived dead, and one that also, inadvertently or not, tends to envision unending permutations of Guyanese ancestries at Work in the lives of their mediums and other members of their Spiritual families. Like all memory, spirits become manifest in the present moments of their re-membering—in ritual performance, divination, dreams, visions, prophecy, and everyday insights—and so the legacies they recall are fundamentally lessons for contemporary times.

The dissertation of Jeremy Jacob Peretz is approved.

Frederick M. D'Aguiar

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University of California, Los Angeles

2020

## **Dedication**

*Livicated*

to Enoch

and to Fama and Shola

Hughie and Sunshine

Big Paul and Garry Guada

Milton, Ray, Renee, and Bernie

and to the blessed memory of

Mary “Polly” Nooter Roberts

*Lead us on our journey*

*Be Thyself the way*

*Through terrestrial darkness*

*To that heavenly day*

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Kabbalist:

To get back to what—  
(*A group of four Hasidim enters.*)

First Hasid (*singing soulfully*):

My mama told me  
To pick apples from a tree . . .  
But a Jew is too small,  
And a tree is too tall,  
And I never picked  
Any apples at all.

First Philosopher:

Semiotics!  
Idiotic!

Second Philosopher:

According to Ecclesiastes,  
Life is foolish, vain, and nasty!

Second Hasid:

If you ask me,  
Dancing's better than talking.

*(The Hasidim form a circle with their hands on each other's shoulders and begin to whirl around, breaking into song. The dancing circles of men and women sing along with them.)*

First Hasid:

Dancing is a mighty thing!  
You don't have to think!  
You don't have to know!  
Just step out of your body and leave it below!

Circle of Hasidim (*clapping their hands*):

Bom-bom!

Circles of Dead Men and Women (*stamping their feet*):

Clomp-clomp!

Second Hasid:

Dancing is a mighty thing,  
It has every advantage!  
I ask no questions when I dance,  
Because right off I'm in a trance . . .



Dancing Circles:

Bom-bom! Clomp-clomp!

Third Hasid:

Dancing is a mighty thing!  
Trust in God and kick your feet!  
Once you get into the spirit,  
All your sins become good deeds . . .

Circles of Dancers:

Bom-bom! Clomp-clomp!

Fourth Hasid:

Dancing is a mighty thing!  
Ask no questions! Never doubt!  
Let philosophy debate  
What everything is all about!  
When we whirl  
And twirl  
And swirl,  
We only know the dance goes well. . .

[...]

Jester (*overhearing them*):

Come on down and join us, brother!  
In joy and sorrow,  
Be our guests—  
Everyone's equal  
Since everyone's dead!  
It's our night,  
There's no one beside us . . .  
*(The statues obey him, climb down, and head for the dancers.)*  
Hey, open the circle,  
And let them inside it!  
They're two of our leading citizens—  
Tonight there are no differences!  
Mix and mingle,  
Hug and kiss . . .  
Ha ha ha,  
What a night this is!

—I. L. Peretz (or Yitzhok Leybush Peretz)

From "A Night in the Old Marketplace"

Translated from Yiddish by Hillel Halkin (2002 [1907]: 418-421)

### Note on Language

I dont need no axe  
to split/ up yu syntax  
I dont need no hammer  
to mash/ up yu grammar  
—John Agard<sup>1</sup>

The first language of most Guyanese, and their primary language of daily use, is either Creolese (Kriyoliiz or Guyanese Creole) or one of the nine languages of Guyana’s Indigenous peoples. Still, contrary to numerous international human rights conventions and educational mandates, English is the official—and “national”—language prescribed for use in schools and all other governmental infrastructures, largely to the detriment of students and citizens generally. Decades of research points to the societal benefits of realizing “linguistic sovereignty,” particularly for formerly and still-colonized peoples. Guyana’s governments continue to legitimize English normativity, yet Creolese reigns as what poet-historian Edward Kamau Brathwaite (1984) calls “nation language.” Similar activism and scholarship support decolonial pedagogical strategies including teaching students—at least initially—in their primary language. UNESCO urges that “at least six years of mother tongue instruction is needed to reduce learning gaps for minority language speakers.”<sup>2</sup> Yet UNESCO’s reference to “minority” is misleading in Guyana’s context. As Creolese and Indigenous language speakers, a *majority* of Guyanese experience systematic forms of linguistic discrimination in their everyday interactions with the apparatus of the state.

Cultural struggle and inequalities surrounding language use persist in Guyana, factors that reinforce the continued role of Creolese as an explicitly oral form of communication in most people’s lives. For various reasons, however, encouraging the use of written Creolese and Indigenous languages is critical to promoting both educational equity and cultural decolonization

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<sup>1</sup> From “Listen Mr Oxford don” (1990 [1985]: 44), one of Agard’s poems that is included in U.K. standard curricula.

<sup>2</sup> See UNESCO, “If you don’t understand, how can you learn?” (2016).

more broadly. Thankfully, in recent years dedicated activist-scholars within Guyana’s education and arts sectors—primarily poets and linguists with the University of Guyana’s Guyanese Languages Unit—have advocated on behalf of Creolese and Indigenous language speakers with ever-increasing force and efficacy. Still, politics informing, and precluding, the development and implementation of a “universal” standardized orthography for Creolese, and for certain Indigenous languages as well, present daunting obstacles that have yet to be overcome.

In quoting Creolese speakers, this Dissertation employs a variety of forms of written Creolese and English to best represent speakers’ intents. Characteristic of what Guyanese linguist Hubert Devonish (2003) has aptly dubbed “conquest diglossia,” Guyana’s multilingual landscape manifests a wide range of speech varieties, including micro-localized forms of Creolese *and* of English.<sup>3</sup> Transcriptions of quotations, regardless of speech varieties used, are provided overwhelmingly in a standard English orthography, in contrast to Creolese, simply for accessibility for readers both in Guyana and elsewhere, including the United States. I nonetheless commend the linguists and advocates of Creolese who continue to mount vital cases justifying the need to institutionalize a standard, or multiple standard, Creolese orthographies in Guyana.

Due to the preceding concerns, readers should expect to encounter a degree of inconsistency within the Dissertation regarding such central vocabulary as “Komfa” (or “Comfa,” “Cumfa,” “Confou,” etc.), particularly as I have retained authors’ original spellings of Creolese, Indigenous, and other language terms when quoting throughout. I have adopted a Creolese orthographic spelling of “Komfa,” following the example of Michelle Asantewa. Nevertheless, many other terms are anglicized, including “Creolese,” which many people understandably elect to spell as “Kriyoliiz.”

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<sup>3</sup> See Devonish on “Language Advocacy and ‘Conquest’ Diglossia in the ‘Anglophone’ Caribbean” (2003).

Other expressions like “Komfa People,” “Spiritual,” and “Work” (or “Wuk”), for example, I employ in following the applications of my Guyanese interlocutors. Chapters 2 and 3 explore distinctions that Spiritualists and Faithists tend to draw amongst themselves, but in most other contexts throughout I use the terms “Spiritualist,” “Faithist,” and “Komfa People” interchangeably. Not substitutable, however, are the various spellings used to refer to what is today known officially as the Co-operative Republic of Guyana. The spelling “Guyana” is employed to denote the postcolonial sovereign nation-state, while I primarily use “British Guiana” to mean the colony under British authority prior to 1966, and in some instances to the three separate colonies of Berbice, Demerara, and Essequibo that the British unified in 1831 as British Guiana. Occasionally herein I use “Dutch Guiana” as a way to refer collectively to the Berbice, Demerara, Essequibo, and Suriname colonies when under Dutch rule in the period prior to 1803. “Guiana” and “the Guianas” are principally used here to refer to the colonies of the region as a whole—also called “Guayana”—mainly referencing eras before 1966, or 1975, when the now-sovereign nation of Suriname became politically independent from the Netherlands.<sup>4</sup>

The concepts, entities, and keywords “Work,” “spirit,” “Spiritual,” “Spiritual Work,” “play,” and “entertainment” are all unpacked initially in the Introduction and Chapter 1, as well as throughout subsequent chapters. However, it should be understood from the outset that I am using these English cognates in their Creolese forms to signify Guyanese knowledges, ideas, relationships, philosophies, and theories. Lastly, I use the capital “C” for the proper noun “Creole” in referring to individuals and to the ethnic groups so identified, and use a lower case “c” for the adjectival form “creole” and in describing processes of *cultural* “hybridity,” “fusion,” “syncretism,” “symbiosis,” “metamorphosis”—and so forth—as “creolization.”

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<sup>4</sup> See insightful essays in a volume edited by Neil Whitehead and Stephanie Alemán titled *Anthropologies of Guayana: Cultural Spaces in Northeastern Amazonia* (2009).

## VITA

### EDUCATION

2015 MA Culture and Performance, Department of World Arts and Cultures/Dance, UCLA  
2009 BA Anthropology, Department of Anthropology, UCLA, *Cum Laude*

### PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE (SELECTED)

2020- Graduate Student Research Fellow in Justice and Equity at WAC/D, UCLA  
2013- Teaching Apprentice for undergraduates at UCLA in WAC/D and other programs  
2018-2020 Co-Curator of exhibition on Central American masks at UCLA Hammer Museum  
2017-2018 Lead Curator of exhibition on Surinamese arts at the Fowler Museum at UCLA  
2016-2018 Research Assistant to Distinguished Research Professor of Law at UCLA  
2014-2015 Clinical Intern at American University of Complementary Medicine  
2009-2013 Behavioral Therapist with LAUSD and CA Dept. of Developmental Services  
2008-2009 Center Assistant and Clerk at UCLA Art and Global Health Center

### TEACHING EXPERIENCE (UNDERGRADUATE COURSES at UCLA, SELECTED)

2019, Fall *Re/Presentations: Theories and Practices*, WAC/D, Teaching Fellow  
2019, Fall *Aliens, Psychics, and Ghosts*, WAC/D, Teaching Fellow  
2019, Spring *Art as Moral Action*, WAC/D, Teaching Fellow  
2019, Winter *World Arts / Local Lives*, WAC/D, Teaching Fellow  
2019, Winter *Food Politics: Cultural Solutions / Political Problems*, WAC/D, Teaching Fellow  
2017, Fall *Day of the Dead Ritual*, Dept. of Chicana and Chicano Studies, Teaching Associate  
2015, Spring *Perspectives on Disability Studies*, Disability Studies Program, Teaching Associate  
2015, Winter *Indigenous Worldviews*, WAC/D, Teaching Assistant  
2014, Fall *Introduction to World Arts and Cultures*, WAC/D, Teaching Assistant  
2013, Fall *Arts in Inclusive Classrooms*, Visual and Performing Arts Ed., Teaching Assistant

### AWARDS, GRANTS, AND FELLOWSHIPS (SELECTED)

2018 *Best Paper Prize*, Guyana Institute of Historical Research, Tenth Annual Conference  
2017 *2nd Place Prize*, Ethnographic Poetry Competition, Society for Humanistic Anthropology  
2016 *Ralph C. Altman Award*, Fowler Museum at UCLA, for fieldwork in Guyana: 2016-2018  
2016 *Research Grant in Ethnic Studies*, Ralph J. Bunche Center for African American Studies at UCLA and UCLA Institute of American Cultures, for fieldwork: 2016-2018  
2016 *Roter/Bluma Appel Research Grant*, UCLA Alan D. Leve Center for Jewish Studies  
2016 *Maurice Amado Research Travel Grant*, UCLA Alan D. Leve Center for Jewish Studies  
2015 *Graduate Scholar Award*, 5th International Conference on Religion and Spirituality, UCB  
2015 *Graduate Research Mentor Fellowship*, for fieldwork in Guyana, Suriname, and Trinidad  
2014 *Graduate Summer Research Mentorship Grant*, for fieldwork in Guyana and Suriname

### COMMUNITY AND UNIVERSITY SERVICE (RECENT, SELECTED)

2018- Student Member, UC Inter-Campus Faculty Working Group on Black Atlantic Religions  
2017-2018 Volunteer, Creative Writing Teacher in LAUSD high schools, UCLA Writer's Den  
2015-2016 Co-Organizer, Graduate Conference of UCLA Center for the Study of Religion  
2014-2018 Member, UCLA Graduate Student Working Group for the Study of Religion  
2014-2016 Co-Editor-in-Chief, *Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies*  
2013-2014 Editorial Board Member, *Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies*

## **PUBLICATIONS (PEER-REVIEWED, SELECTED)**

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- 2020 “Manifest Heritages of Family and Nation: Embodying ‘All the Ancestors’ in Guyanese Komfa.” *Journal of Africana Religions* 8 no. 2: 232-265.
- 2019 “Cubans in Guyana: Peripheral Economies Transact.” *International Journal of Cuban Studies* 11, no. 1: 8-12.
- 2018 “Inherited ‘Ancestors’ Collections’ of a Devoted Curator: The Museum of African Heritage in Georgetown, Guyana.” *Karib: Nordic Journal for Caribbean Studies* 4, no. 1.

## **PUBLICATIONS (CREATIVE WRITING, RECENT, SELECTED)**

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- 2019 “Golden Shovel Series.” *African American Review* 52, no. 4: 394-395.
- 2019 “To be Known. & To (Not) Know Why.” *Caribbean Quarterly* 65, no. 2: 306-307.
- 2018 “Wild Child / Wail Chail.” *Postcolonial Text* 13, no. 3.
- 2018 “McCowen-Carpenter-Hudson.” *Westwind: UCLA’s Journal of the Arts* (Spring): 27-29.
- 2018 “Ai-tal Haikuu / I-tal Haiku.” *Obsidian: Literature and Arts in the African Diaspora* 44, no. 1: 56.
- 2018 “Calabash Microcosm.” *Anthropology & Humanism* 43, no. 1: 139.
- 2018 “Eshu Is That You.” *Moko Magazine: Caribbean Arts and Letters* 13.
- 2018 “Jefferson.” *Indicia: A Journal Curating Literary Arts* 2, no. 2: 21.

## **ACADEMIC PRESENTATIONS (SELECTED)**

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- 2019 “Embracing African Gods and Latin American (Queer) Femininities: Borderlands and ‘The Spanish Nation’ of Spirits in Guyanese Komfa.” First Continental Conference of the Afro-Latin American Research Institute at the Hutchins Center, Harvard University.
- 2018 “Who are *Fiiman*, and What is *Tembe*?” Gallery Talk presentation for exhibition titled “*Fiiman Tembe: Maroon Arts from Suriname*” at the Fowler Museum at UCLA.
- 2018 “Language Attitudes, Education, and Cultural Competencies in Conducting Field Research.” Handing-Over of Master’s Thesis Ceremony, University of Guyana Library.
- 2018 “Performing Decolonial Spirits, Embodying ‘All the Ancestors,’ and Dancing Komfa as Radical Healing Arts.” 3<sup>rd</sup> Biennial International Dance Conference, Errol Barrow Centre for Creative Imagination, The University of the West Indies, Cave Hill, Barbados.
- 2017 “Body Politick.” Invited presentation in poetry workshop and ceremony honoring United States Poet Laureate Juan Felipe Hererra with the UCLA Medal. UCLA.
- 2015 “Obeah, Politics, and Emancipation in Guyanese Cultural Struggles.” 39<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference of the National Council of Black Studies. Los Angeles, California.
- 2015 “Re-Envisioning Contested Freedoms: Visual, Performative, and Narrative Cultures in Guyana’s Public Festivals.” *Spirits of the City: Refabulations, Mobilities, Underscapes*. A Graduate Conference and Workshop. University of California, Santa Barbara.

## INTRODUCTION

### “In Service of the Ancestors: Past, Present, Ongoing”<sup>5</sup>

back burning from the canefield  
heart squeezed by history  
remain unflinching in your memory of self  
firmly rooted in the universe like a star  
you surrender to the Mother of Time  
who transforms the sweat of your labor into her sweet milk  
and you blossom like a lotus on these mud flats

and those seeking your wisdom beyond death...  
—Stephanos Stephanides<sup>6</sup>

...where everything seemed purposely to turn life into death,  
but a death more vibrant than anything life offered. ...

The dead do not die, my mother knew. The earth was squirming with spirits.

...where white domination mattered more than life.  
—Colin Dayan<sup>7</sup>

and everywhere there were skulls  
white of beaten iron and guns and  
white with the ancestors’ praises and  
white with the breath of the whites on our land  
—Dionne Brand<sup>8</sup>

We all can be more certain that witchcraft exists than that witches do.  
The same holds for racecraft and races.  
—Karen E. Fields<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> This chapter title is drawn from the oral liturgy of a Komfa Church functioning near Georgetown, recited in commencing weekly Sabbath services, which most Komfa gatherings observe Friday nights through Saturday.

<sup>6</sup> From Stephanides’s field-poem titled “Yet I Still Celebrate You Lotus of the Mud Flats” (1989: 120).

<sup>7</sup> These are quotes from Dayan’s memoir, *In the Belly of Her Ghost* (2018: 19, 116).

<sup>8</sup> Brand composed these lines in a poem titled “Canto I” (1989: 95).

<sup>9</sup> From Fields’s essay “Witchcraft and Racecraft: Invisible Ontology in Its Sensible Manifestations” (2001: 292), and also published in *Racecraft: The Soul of Inequality in American Life*, by Karen and Barbara Fields (2014: 203).

A deeply communal practice, Komfa is a central unifying feature of what are known as Spiritual Churches in Guyana and abroad where Guyanese live.<sup>10</sup> People who attend these churches, often called gatherings, houses, or flocks, refer to themselves as Faithists, Spiritualists, Spiritual People, or Komfa People. Practitioners are overwhelmingly women, and they often comprise tight-knit social groupings—or Spiritual families—that serve many purposes in devotees’ lives beyond heightened contexts of ritual or “churchical” activities, as Komfa People say. These include holding functions attributed in Guyana to “secular” self-help societies called *lodges*, which share intersecting histories and contemporary expressions with Komfa Spiritual Churches.<sup>11</sup> Such functions include organizing social events like dominoes, bingo games, or barbecues; fundraisers for church-building or other projects; “informal” microcredit lending systems; communal work projects; and arranging care for children, the elderly or recently widowed, and the deceased.<sup>12</sup> According to attendees, though, the primary and most fundamental

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<sup>10</sup> The idea that more Guyanese live in New York than remain in Guyana is a common refrain. “Guyana’s emigration rate is among the highest in the world—more than 55% of its citizens reside abroad,” according to the United States’ Central Intelligence Agency (2019). For perceptions and significance of Guyanese “rediasporization,” see Gillian Richards-Greaves (2013a). Komfa practices and communities have migrated to or formed anew in locales outside of Guyana, processes which are beyond the scope of this project and will not be addressed in any sufficient detail here.

<sup>11</sup> Histories of *lodges*—Freemasonic, Order of Free Gardeners, Ancient Order of Foresters, and so on—and Spiritual Churches in Guyana are interconnected in ways scholars have yet to thoroughly document. However, oral histories attest to the deep stratigraphies of these connections. In my experience, a significant number of Komfa People are also presently active in various lodge organizations in and around Georgetown. On Komfa and lodge histories in British Guiana/Guyana, see Chapter 6, “Glory Heights.” Also see Barbara Josiah (2004), Maurice St. Pierre (1999), and F. Wells and D. Wells (1953).

<sup>12</sup> On lending economies known as *box-hand* in Guyana (or *meeting-turn* in Barbados, and *susu* in many other parts of the Caribbean), see Caroline Hossein (2014). Note that in Guyana’s Creolese language, the term *susu* can also function as a homophone referring to “gossip,” as well as to “rotating credit [...] financial associations,” as with the Temne term *esusu* (Schuler 2000). Scholars have understood such communal “responses,” particularly concerning labor, as legacies of plantation and free village cooperative work initiatives, but they may also represent precolonial ways of socially relating. See Chandra Jayawardena (1963) and Walter Rodney (1981). Maintaining canals, kokers, and waterways is vital to Guyana’s below-sea-level agricultural and residential lands, and much of this infrastructure relies heavily on neighborly cooperation, as water flows from one yard, plot, polder, or property to the next.



activity of Spiritual Churches is Komfa. From Guyana's Creolese language, "Komfa" is typically translated—and recognized by most Guyanese—as "spirit possession."

Komfa is also simultaneously understood as a form of dance, often performed in ritual attire around a devotional shrine. In Komfa services, or "Works," food and drink, candles, flowers and leafy branches, vessels of various waters and perfumes, and assorted other items are arranged to form elaborate assemblages. Altars dedicated to particular ancestral spirits, or to families or "nations" of spirits, are permanent fixtures within Spiritual Churches. However, at least one separate shrine on a table or the ground is constructed fresh for the "Spiritual Work" of each service to honor and entertain ancestral visitors who participate in the revelry. Spirits "manifest" by entering the bodies of their living human hosts as they circle around the main altar executing a variety of dance movements to drums, saxophone, keyboard, and often other instruments. They also use, consume, and distribute the various items gathered on and around the altars and the shrines fashioned for divinities and the dead.

Komfa events are community gatherings held for many reasons. Services of different kinds secure individual and communal betterment while giving thanks and recognition to God and different ancestral spirits for blessings awaited or already received. Many practitioners hold birth anniversary service, for instance, to give thanks for blessings bestowed and obstacles averted in the previous year, and to ask for ongoing guidance in coming days. In many ways, Komfa is about "knowing one's self, to know one's ancestors," and vice versa, as Spiritualists often say. Through such logic, one must "know"—and in effect, *become*—their forebears in order to maintain harmonious, reciprocal social interaction with them for success in meeting the challenges of present and future endeavors, throughout tremendous inequities of life. In a study of Winti religion and alternative female relationships called "*mati* work" among Afro-

Surinamese women, Gloria Wekker (1997: 352) identifies a “psychic economy of female subjectivity” that “induces working-class women” to embrace forms of “critical agency.” For Wekker (ibid.: 331, 352), the “multiplicitous, layered conceptions of subjectivity” encouraged through both Winti ontologies and *mati* work, similarly induce “women to act individually and collectively in ways that counteract the assault of a hegemonic knowledge regime that privileges men, the heterosexual contract, inequality, and a generally unjust situation.” Komfa provides Guyanese women and other practitioners with parallel “decolonized oppositional script[s]” as those recognized by Wekker in Suriname (Alexander and Mohanty 1997: xxxvii).

While practiced primarily by Guyanese women of African descent and widely considered an Africa-derived tradition, Komfa worldview draws on cultural inheritances of Guyanese from various backgrounds (Asantewa 2016; Gibson 2001). Yet Komfa presents forms of devotion, knowledge, and philosophy initially generated out of earlier cultural resources marshaled to meet the existential needs of enslaved and formerly enslaved African people and their descendants in contending with and countering catastrophic life circumstances of dehumanizing subjugation. Popularly called “the Land of Six Peoples,” a name glorified in Guyana’s national anthem, Guyana’s demography reflects complexly layered histories of coerced colonial labor relocation systems, including the transatlantic (and other) slave trades and indentureship, primarily from India but also from China, Portugal, and West and Central Africa. Currently, roughly 10 percent of Guyana’s population is of Indigenous heritage, while 40 percent are of South Asian, overwhelmingly Indian, descent.<sup>13</sup> Representations of Guyana and the nation’s party politics commonly foreground relations between the two majority African- and Asian-descended segments of the society, who reside primarily along the flat alluvial Atlantic coastline. Other

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<sup>13</sup> Figures are derived from Guyana’s Bureau of Statistics (2016).

critics, such as Michael Gilkes (1986: 5) for example, recognize that “there are in fact, two Guyanas”—not two distinct “Indo-” and “Afro-” Guyanas, but rather, “Aboriginal and urban, interior and coast” (also see Whitehead 2009).

### **The Land (and Waters) of Many Guyanas**

Guyana, with Suriname, is among two former colonies, and a still-colonized territory (French Guiana) on South America’s imperially ravaged northeastern shoulder. The region—often collectively called the Guayanas—stretches from eastern Venezuela, where Ciudad Guayana is the most populous city in the easternmost state of Bolívar, formerly known as the Province of Guayana of New Spain, within the Spanish Empire. The three Guyanese territories extend southeastward along the Atlantic Caribbean coast and southward into the Amazon rainforests. There, Brazil’s current Amapa State was once “Portuguese Guyana.” Systematically murdering, enslaving, and displacing Indigenous peoples of the Guayanas from the 1500s onward, Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch, French, and English clashed over centuries along what they called “the Wild Coast” and its many major waterways vying for hegemony over a burgeoning plantation economy.<sup>14</sup> Based largely on mining and later sugar production on the expropriated lands of Indigenous peoples, these European imperial industries were likewise founded on the brutalizing labor of enslaved Africans who were “imported” en masse to generate the wealth that was in turn exported to Europe. With European settler-colonizers on the coast, Indigenous and African people overwhelmingly sought refuge—when feasible—in the vast hinterlands at an often-precarious remove from the depredations of coastal settlements.

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<sup>14</sup> For references to “the Wild Coast” or “Wilde Kust,” a common European name for the Guayanas region used from an early period with unclear origin, see, for example, the full titles (in Bibliography) of works by Jan Jacob Hartsinck (1770) and John Gabriel Stedman (1796). “Wild Coast” continues to be widely employed, for instance, in titles by Jan Carew (2009 [1958]), John Gimlette (2012), Cornelis Goslinga (1971), and Marjoleine Kars (2020).

Much of the region was under Dutch imperial authority prior to around 1803, when, at the start of the Napoleonic Wars, British forces gained control of the separate Berbice, Demerara, and Essequibo colonies. These were all three Dutch settler-colonial *possessions*, as was Suriname, the now-independent state to Guyana's southeast. Southeast of Suriname is French Guiana, which remains an Overseas Department of France (as are a few other small territories around the world such as the island of Réunion in the Indian Ocean). In 1831, just a few years before Great Britain moved to abolish the system of slavery in their Caribbean colonies, the three formerly Dutch territories of Berbice, Demerara, and Essequibo were merged into the single jurisdiction of British Guiana, which subsequently became the independent nation of Guyana in 1966, and in 1970 achieved full republic status—the first postcolonial British Caribbean state to do so—as the Co-operative Republic of Guyana.

Because of histories shared with their island neighbors, as societies so heavily impacted by sugar-plantation industries based on enslaved and later indentured labor, many Guyanese consider themselves “Caribbean” as much as or more than they feel they are “South American.” The largest ethnoracial demographic group in Guyana today comprises “East Indians,” as the census refers to Guyanese of South Asian ancestry. As parts of the British Empire, India and Guiana, as well as Trinidad and Jamaica to a lesser extent, have been inextricably connected. In the wake of the abolition of slavery in Britain's Caribbean colonies in 1834-38, plantation owners sought new sources of labor to undermine wages that newly “freed” African Guyanese were to receive. Between 1835 and 1918, nearly 350,000 people were brought from India under contracts of indenture to replace the previously enslaved laborers that made British Guiana's sugar plantations the most profitable in their empire in the decades leading up to abolition (Bahadur 2014; Draper 2012). Planters also lobbied to bring indentured workers to British

Guiana from China as well as from Madeira, Portugal. Chinese and Portuguese make up small but culturally and economically significant communities within Guyana's plural society which emerged in the era after emancipation and prior to independence.

Narratives of Guyanese pasts—as well as contemporary sociopolitical realities and envisioned futures—tend to rely heavily on the discourse of “race relations.” Such accounts have typically functioned to obfuscate the fundamental role that *racism* has played in shaping Guyanese histories and defining the current inequalities that many Guyanese face in their day-to-day lived realities. In the wake of plantation existences, Guyanese lives remained and remain structured by logics of race and actions of *racism*—“the theory and practice of applying a social, civic, or legal double standard based on ancestry, and the ideology surrounding such a double standard” (Fields and Fields 2014: 17). In better understanding the “collective imagining” of Guyanese ancestries—whether in Komfa ritual or “secular” social life—it will prove essential, however, to pay explicit attention to the Work/work of “*making*” and unmaking races and “*doing*” and undoing racisms, or what Karen and Barbara Fields (2014: 200, 203) have termed “racecraft.” They write that racecraft—like Komfa and other “invisible ontolog[ies]” made manifest—is “one among a complex system of beliefs, also with combined moral and cognitive content, that presupposes invisible, spiritual [‘i.e., nonmaterial’] qualities underlying, and continually acting upon, the material realm of beings and events” (ibid.: 203). As “figments” of historically constructed social imaginaries, or “reason’s raw materials,” for most Guyanese the existence of both “spirits” and “races” is obvious and applicable to most settings—as “they come to us, and must come to us, as certainties ubiquitously evidenced” (ibid.: 201). As will be discussed in much further detail in the chapters to come, regarding the consequential effects that

both racecraft and Spiritual Work have in Guyanese people's lives, "doubt is not obviously sensible" (ibid.).

During Guyana's decolonial nationalist movement of the late 1950s and into the 1960s, a new national anthem was composed to project aspirations of harmonious transition for "the land of six peoples," a phrase and idea made popular by a line from the lyrics. Komfa People hold, however, that humans are in fact divided into *seven* variously ethnicized, racialized, and sexualized "nations," and that early Guyanese nationalist songwriters miscalculated that fine point. Within Komfa cosmologies, the seven "races" to which most Guyanese subscribe re/present the spectrum of humanity, with Guyana understood as a microcosm of human "diversity." These seven ethnoracialized categories of the living are likewise affirmed by the manifestation of returned ancestor spirits who identify with one or more of these same seven "Spiritual Nations."

### **Komfa in the Postcolonial Nation**

Such bifurcated, plural, nationalistic, and (de)colonial conceptions of ethnoracial difference—fixed within Guyana's historical landscapes—were fostered through the nation's integrated movements for independence from Britain (see D'Aguiar 2007; Jackson 2012; R. Smith 1995; and Swan 1957). As precolonial and colonial models of social relationships are remembered through and incorporated into Komfa's pantheon of ancestral spirits, ideas about Guyanese people's varied heritages have become central to Komfa and to how Spiritual People conceive of their worlds. Such developments parallel Solimar Otero's (2016: 93) observations regarding Cuban Espiritismo's ritual "séances" known as *misas espirituales* (spiritual masses), noting that "since spiritual interlocutors arrive as doubles, multi-raced, ethnically ambiguous, and

religiously promiscuous they question and push against an isolated and ‘authentic’ Cuban nationalism.” Like the spirits of Guyanese Komfa, “the majority of the dead that conjoin with mediums in the *misa* clearly emerge out of the performance of the legacy of slavery and race in Cuba” (ibid.: 100). Before Guyanese independence from Britain in 1966, Komfa’s critical attention to the functioning of racecraft bolstered certain integrative modes of anticoloniality that sometimes led to significant political mobilizations defining emerging nationhood (Roback 1973; Shilliam 2016). For example, integrated labor organizing among cane and other agricultural workers was supported in large part by Spiritual People.

As in the past, Spiritualists, Faithists, and Komfa practitioners organize themselves into distinct yet overlapping autonomous groupings, with “the Jordanites” preoccupying Guyanese collective imagination and public discourse.<sup>15</sup> Also known as the White-Robed Army due to their highly visible “lily-white” ritual garments, Jordanites have long been a major presence in and around Georgetown, where members preach at public markets and along crowded roadsides (Roback 1973, 1974; cf. Drakes [Nehusi] 1982). During the first half of the last century, Jordanite public services sometimes included slightly veiled speech using scriptural references to oppose colonial authorities in British Guiana, throughout the European imperial world, and particularly in sub-Saharan Africa. Spiritual People’s public displays of Pan-African or Black local, national, and transnational solidarity and anticolonial sentiments involved preaching, protesting, and what occasionally led to “riots.” Such remonstrations also included dancing, drumming, singing, marching, and other ritual undertakings associated with Komfa performances.

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<sup>15</sup> While popularly called “Jordanites,” the main gathering’s rightful name is the Church of the West Evangelist Millenium Pilgrims, or WEMP, based in Agricola village, as it has been for nearly a century. See Chapter 6.

Numerous scholars have considered how Caribbean religiosities have served as “religions of resistance” to enslavement and colonial debasement.<sup>16</sup> Komfa practices and knowledge—including, significantly, *empowered ways of socially relating to one another*—subverted political, social, economic, and physical domination by colonial authorities and so-called “slave masters.” In many ways, such earlier stances have nurtured decolonial ambitions to reharmonize ways of being in the worlds embraced by Spiritual People and their communities today. As Walter Mignolo (2011: 54) details, at the core of decoloniality is “both the analytical task of unveiling the logic of coloniality and the prospective task of contributing to build a world in which many worlds will coexist.” Fundamental to Komfa too is an embrace of multiple worlds and multiple ways of occupying those worlds that unveils a thriving afterlife, inheritance, and ongoing contestation with ghosts of coloniality—that “matrix of power through which world order has been created and managed” (ibid.: 171; see Quijano 2000).<sup>17</sup> Komfa practitioners are often explicit in their quests for new worlds and new orders of authority in their worlds, sometimes deconstructing and delinking from colonially entwined fabrics of power while sometimes still clothing themselves in the hardened “epistemological armor of the West” (van Wyk 1993: 81).

While Komfa cosmologies have in various ways reified “race” and European racial ideologies as central to social life and human subjectivities, colonial authorities—and some Afro-Americans themselves—demonized “African” rituals and related dance and drumming

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<sup>16</sup> For a range of pertinent examples, see Barbara Browning (1998), Miguel A. De La Torre (2001), Brian Sandberg (2006), and Mercedes Cros Sandoval (2007).

<sup>17</sup> These are ideas heralded by Aimé Césaire (2000 [1955]: 33, 35) when he wrote “that it is a good thing to place different civilizations in contact with each other; that it is an excellent thing to blend different worlds. [...] First we must study how colonization works to *decivilize* the colonizer, to *brutalize* him in the true sense of the word, to degrade him, to awaken him to buried instincts, to covetousness, violence, race hatred, and moral relativism.” On “ghosts” of coloniality see also Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1995) and Brackette Williams (1991). And on “afterlives of slavery” and colonization, see Saidiya Hartman (2007: 6) and Christina Sharpe (2016).



practices in colonial Dutch and British Guiana *because* these forms of communal action represented the most established and efficacious institutions among enslaved and free Black people. Lived religiosities like Komfa provided cohesion, stability, and mobility in the face of legal oppression, cultural marginalization, and above all, the existential threats of “social death” and realities of lethal violence (Patterson 1982; cf. Brown 2009). Similar conditions are likewise noted as foundational by W. E. B. Du Bois (1903a: 196) in tracing the development of “the Negro church” in antebellum North America, where “the chief remaining institution was the Priest or Medicine-man,” who, “within the narrow limits allowed by the slave system, rose [as] the Negro preacher.” For Du Bois (*ibid.*), “association with the masters, missionary effort and motives of expediency gave these rites an early veneer of Christianity,” yet he notes that these healing rituals had also sustained the ascendancy of “the former group life,” which could be “roughly designated as Voodooism.”<sup>18</sup>

For many of Guyana’s Spiritualists, as well, Komfa is all about “the group life,” and the primacy of sociality particularly between living and dead counterparts—gods, spirits, ancestors, and their incarnating manifestations among still-breathing, kicking, and dancing human communities. Yet for non-practitioners—a vast majority of Guyanese—Komfa is generally

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<sup>18</sup> To provide the quote in its entirety, describing that “social death” of enslavement in what is now the United States, Du Bois (1903a: 196, emphases added) writes that

it was a terrific social revolution, and yet some traces were retained of the former group life, and *the chief remaining institution was the Priest or Medicine-man*. He early appeared on the plantation and found his function as the healer of the sick, the interpreter of the Unknown, the comforter of the sorrowing, the supernatural avenger of wrong, and the one who rudely but picturesquely expressed the longing, disappointment, and resentment of a stolen and oppressed people. Thus, as bard, physician, judge, and priest, *within the narrow limits allowed by the slave system*, rose the Negro preacher, and under him the first church was not at first by any means Christian nor definitely organized; rather it was an adaptation and mingling of heathen rites among the members of each plantation, and roughly designated as Voodooism. Association with the masters, missionary effort and motives of expediency gave these rites an early veneer of Christianity, and after the lapse of many generations the Negro church became Christian.

While Du Bois titles this chapter “Of the Faith of the Fathers,” and refers to “men” throughout, neglect of attention to (Medicine-)women’s significant roles in cultivating, propagating, and nurturing faith communities may have been an oversight or inaccuracy. Contrarily, the role of women is central to Du Bois’s study *The Negro Church* (1903b).

*denigrated* (or “blackened,” from Latin) as a form of Obeah, or “Voodoo,” in the globalized English language sense of the word refuted by Du Bois. A “ghost” of what Brackette Williams (1991: 155) identifies as Guyana’s pasts of “Anglo-European hegemony and the culture of domination,” stigmatization of Komfa and its practitioners persists as an unmistakably stable current in Guyanese societal waters. Central to the Spiritual Work of reimagining and reoccupying transformed worlds is disrupting the norms of Guyanese being and thinking that underwrite antiblackness. European imperial ideological precepts have over generations conjoined concepts of “race” with “religion,” and in Guyana’s contexts conjoined concepts of “African” religious (and cultural, and moral) so-called “inferiority” specifically with Komfa’s Afro-Guyanese-ness. Examining the cultural politics and colonial afterlives sustaining discriminations that practitioners endure is critical to unsettling those assiduous conditions. Consequently, as an intentional decision, this project structurally centers Komfa People’s “voices” and perspectives on their own lives and practices first and foremost. However, to more fully appreciate Spiritualists’ perceptions and the manifold predicaments they face in their ongoing labors for recognition, in-depth considerations of wider societal landscapes through which Komfa People navigate will be necessary.

### ***Komfa Work: The Dissertation***

As a whole, this Dissertation presents open-ended explorations of Komfa’s socially situated histories and contemporary meanings and value within practitioners’ lives. A major concern throughout is Komfa’s role in supporting enslaved people and their descendants—and other Guyanese—in challenging and redirecting the basis of their subjugation under Europeans’ racial capitalist regimes that commodified and *possessed people*—explicitly (though not exclusively)

non-Europeans. As Guyana's Creolese language word for "spirit possession," Komfa is a ritual means through which practitioners have rejected and reformulated legal dispossession of persons through repossessing "multiplicitous selves" whose humanities are based not on the forced productive and reproductive labors of the plantation, but instead on the intersubjective *Spiritual Work* of inter/relatedness (cf. Ortega 2016; Wekker 2006). In *reworking* European imperial dominion over property and people, coerced labor and (im)migration, and Enlightenment notions of a "possessive individualism," early and later Spiritual Workers reconceived powers of producing persons as intimately entwined with one another, and inherently multiple, expanding, and polyvalent (Macpherson 2011 [1962]).

As will quickly become clear, this project is informed in large part by methods associated with historical ethnography, while remaining resolutely interdisciplinary. The principle means of conducting field research that I employed throughout twenty-two months in Guyana consisted of what Clifford Geertz (1998) has termed "deep hanging out," and encouraged as an indispensable ethnographic practice. I spent substantial time in those months attending daily Spiritual services and ritual Works with many different gatherings, conducting informal interviews, and listening to life stories of practitioners—and, importantly—their spirit-guides. Theories of performance and of corporeality have also proven especially valuable to this study. Considered alongside more-conventional historical accounts, the bulk of the Dissertation traverses memory embodied by practitioners and their ancestral guides in manifesting and narrating divergent Komfa genealogies. Following the idea—and lived-reality—of "many Guyanas," or The Land of Many Waters, as "Guyana" is said to mean, I foreground Komfa People's "first-voices," as mentioned, while also ruminating on co-complicated heritages and present-day perspectives inclusive of

Guyana’s “many peoples.”<sup>19</sup> As such, in support of exegeses and in contextualizing ethnographic data, I have consulted and herein reference an ample array of sources, many of which—like materials gathered on a Komfa altar—otherwise seldom intersect in a single work.

After explaining the scope, structure, and general theses of the project in this Introduction, Chapter 1 then makes the specific contribution of demonstrating how Komfa can be better understood through cross-cultural comparison with other Black Atlantic and African diaspora cosmologies. The remainder of the chapters are generally less comparative, while ethnographic approaches are employed throughout. Overall, *Komfa Work* is organized in three sections, guided by the intersecting themes of “politics,” “roots,” and “culture.” Following my friend I Sheba Bacchus’s explication, as she learned during a stay in Suriname, “the Roots is the teaching and the Culture is the practice.” The “politics,” or *politricks*, as I Sheba observes, can be insightfully—if somewhat reductively—captured in her impression that “when the Spiritual People do their thing we black people does say is Obea. So what we really asking now,” she wonders, “for the same Jesus they leave us with?”<sup>20</sup>

The initial section is titled *Politricks / Dutty / Forces*. It concentrates broadly on Guyanese social politics and politics of culture, from local-level interactions among the many branches of Spiritualist “houses,” to competing conceptions of nationalism and what it means to be Guyanese; a Guyanese woman; a “mixed-race”—or *Dougla*—Guyanese; a queer, trans—or *antiman*—Guyanese; or any intersection of the above, particularly for Komfa People who are largely marginalized in their communities and society. Since formal political independence, and prior, a majority of Guyanese formulations of nationalism have been tethered to transnational

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<sup>19</sup> “Guyana” or “Guiana” is commonly said to be an Indigenous “Arawak” word meaning “the land of many waters,” although linguistic substantiation is lacking—some say it means “water people” (see Marco 2013 in *Stabroek News*).

<sup>20</sup> I Sheba’s fuller thoughts on the matter are shared in the epigraph to Chapter 2, to start the “Politricks” section.

diasporic identities that—through postcolonial political mobilizations—have often supplanted Indigenous Guyanese with Euro-, Afro-, and Asiatic models of the nation-state’s cultural pasts and geopolitical/moral-epistemic presents and futures. Considering Guyana’s religious vistas most broadly, Chapter 2 begins by looking at the United Nations’ World Interfaith Harmony Week and local Guyanese iterations of the annual events, which began in 2010. These occasions provide insights into understanding how nationalist ideological projections of Guyana’s multiculturalism and religious diversity have often masked the ways that the “secularist” state continues to marginalize religions like Komfa and Kali Mai through the deep political and cultural precedents of a colonizing Christianity, and later, a hegemonic Hindu orthodoxy. Spiritualist practitioners have been overwhelmingly singled-out as “unchristian,” “African,” and *antiman*, marking them as an ultimate “racio-religious” Other within Guyana’s tense ethnonationalist-bloc formations, which largely disregard Guyana’s Indigenous peoples (Williams 1996a).

Similar dynamics are expounded in Chapter 3, starting with an examination of Georgetown’s 2017 Harmony Village, an annual event organized by the national government in an effort to showcase and promote Guyanese “social cohesion,” for which there is also a dedicated national ministry. As with the chapter that precedes, Chapter 3 moves between first-voice accounts of Komfa People and more generalized overtures into the cultural politics of the nation writ large, including in this case electoral politics. Engaging with Guyana’s recent highly disputed and protracted 2020 general and regional elections provides a view of certain critical attitudes Guyanese have expressed towards their government, particularly the Ministry of Social Cohesion and the national Ethnic Relations Commission. In some instances, as a survey of post-election Facebook commentary reveals, Komfa People have been openly targeted in malicious

attacks typically founded on entanglements of racial and religious chauvinisms, and colonially instilled hatreds ultimately based in white supremacy.<sup>21</sup>

Chapter 4 deals most overtly with Guyanese “afterlives of slavery” and colonization that inform anti-Komfa and anti-Obeah sentiments and discriminations *as* anti-Black and anti-African in both their underpinnings and their ongoing expressions. Komfa People carry with them the memory of “historical catastrophe, or trauma,” as faced by their ancestors and members of their Spiritual families of past generations, many of whom were incarcerated and otherwise abused by the colonial state because of their faith (Connerton 2011: 17). Colonial Christian “morality” forged the ideological bases for pervasive anti-“African” sentiments held by many or most Guyanese (including Afro-Guyanese) in regard to religion. Consequently, some *Faithists*—or those practitioners who generally do not “entertain the dead”—tend to distance themselves from those who identify as “Spiritualists,” who are more likely to also be scorned as “Obeah People” for the ways they relate socially beyond the living. And while Chapters 2, 3, and 4 of this first section revolve most explicitly around “politics,” the idea of “the nation”—of national belonging, and negation—informs all chapters to follow as well.

The two chapters of the second section—*Roots / Routes / Rings*—focus most explicitly on histories and historiographies. The first, Chapter 5, pays particular attention to both Euro- and Afro-hegemonies and narratives of Indigenous Guyanese displacement, in part through tracing intercultural trajectories of a deity known locally as Wata-mama. Beginning to explore

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<sup>21</sup> Very few Guyanese self-identify as “White,” with the 2012 census recording “White” as the “ethnic group” to which the least Guyanese subscribed (a total of 415 persons, or .06% of the population). See Bureau of Statistics (2016). As such, Brackette Williams (1991: 292n3) refers to “Anglo-European hegemony *as a ghost*,” mentioned above, “because its physical representatives and their direct coercive actions are now absent from the national arena; however, just as a ghost has powers that the living being does not possess, the continuing influence of this past pattern” of White domination “is in many ways more powerful now than when the Anglo-Europeans lived in Guiana” (emphasis added). As of 2020, foreign Whites have become increasingly present, and directly active, in Guyanese socioeconomic realities as employees of ExxonMobil and other multinational, extractive corporations.

contemporary syncretic connections between Indo- and Afro- faiths is also important to this chapter, as collaborative ruminations of members of a Spiritualist Kali Mai mandir help direct the conversation. Chapter 6 then looks more specifically at European Christian and missionary influences on coastal plantation communities during enslavement, as well as the roles of popular “religious” and “secular” forms of culture—especially music and dance—that formerly enslaved people brought with them as they settled in postemancipation cooperative villages, and in Georgetown and its coastal surroundings. As the two chapters of the section collectively demonstrate, contemporary Komfa “traditions” reflect myriad cultural backgrounds, the stratigraphies of which mean and have meant very different things to Spiritualists over countless generations.

The two chapters of the final section that follows—*Culture / Head(s) / Jumbie*—rely primarily on ethnographic accounts to address Komfa cosmologies and ritual formations. Chapter 7 examines Guyanese mortuary cycles and the centrality of motherhood in incarnating Komfa’s Spiritual families. Recalling an event featuring funereal rites in honor of a departed Spiritual Mother of a Georgetown-area church provides the ethnographic social context and important theoretical framing regarding the supreme pertinence of the dead, and particularly, the divinized feminine dead. Chapter 8 then moves to illuminate how Komfa practitioners embrace ambiguities of “noncompliant” genders and “transgressive” sexualities through embodying spirits who identify—and are identified—specifically with the Spanish Nation of ancestors. While Komfa gatherings are generally gynocentric spaces, they also often provide nonconforming Guyanese with a refuge from societal discriminations through which they transform conceptions of selfhood by embracing the agencies and lived experiences of “non-Guyanese” *Spanish*—or Venezuelan—spirits within a “symbolic economy of alterity.”

## Ritualizing Personhoods and Interrelatedness in Guyana

Spiritualists describe their gods, their spirits, and their ancestors as “Nations,” as “special forces,” and often as “family” or “families” bound by “blood.” Like Europeans, Africans in colonial Guiana also understood themselves as *possessing*—or being *born* into—natal heritages based in common cultures, languages, lands, and political identities, to the extent possible given the brutalizing depravities of enslavement that were calculated to undermine most modes of filiation and communal affiliation. “Nation,” after all, in its original Latin etymological connotation (*gnasci*) means “to be born,” as in, to be born into

an extensive aggregate of persons, so closely associated with each other by common descent, language, or history, as to form a distinct race or people, usually organized as a separate political state and occupying a definite territory.<sup>22</sup>

While this 1907 entry in the initial *New English Dictionary* (subsequently *Oxford English Dictionary*) conflates both a broader and earlier “race”-based and a narrower, later “political” definition of the term, most subsequent lexicographers have distinguished between these connotations. The English language term “nation” in the sense of a “political society” emerged—along with European imperialism—sometime prior to the 1500s, but likely not before the late-1300s, and seems to have been adopted from Islamic scholarship of North Africa and Iberia by northwestern European Christians such as Hugo Grotius and Thomas Hobbes (see Al-Dawoody 2011; Haskell 2011: 273-74; Wilson 2008). This more recent politicized construction “has gradually predominated,” while “the older sense is preserved in the application of *nation* to the native North American peoples ([c.] 1640s),” and other non-Europeans, globally (Harper 2020; cf. Horne 2017, 2020; Mills 1997, 2017). In creating the Guianese settler-colonies, and later

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<sup>22</sup> W. A. Craigie (1908: N30). Originally published in 1888, the volumes containing entries for L-N were first released in 1908 in what later became the *OED*, and was at that time still titled *A New English Dictionary on Historical Principles*. Craigie’s volume containing “M-N” entries is dated 1908 but the section for “N” is dated 1907. For *gnasci* and “to be born” see *American Heritage Dictionary* (2020) and Douglas Harper (2020).



postcolonial nation-state, both European colonizers and Guyanese colonized marshaled the powers of production—or *work*—in their aggregating of persons into “races” and “nations.” Labor—historically forced of non-Europeans by Europeans through the most viciously sadistic machinations of enslavement, and later, of mass-indentured immigrant servitude—created colonial Guiana and the postcolonial nation. Labor was likewise mobilized as a political ideology to produce colonial subjecthoods, as well as Guyanese nationalist citizenries.

Merciless work, life, and death of the plantation was mediated by many enslaved people through their ritual labors of Spiritual Work, often involving drumming, dancing, singing, and performances of communal divination and healing. Many European observers of “plantation life” perceived these African-derived and inspired practices specifically as “play,” recreation, or entertainment. Within numerous sub-Saharan African cultures, however, concepts of and terms describing “play” and “ritual” often overlap in ways that confound Eurocentric binary distinctions “dividing the world into sacred and profane” realms of experience (Durkheim 1915: 182). “What Yoruba mean by play, *ere* [noun] or *šere* [verb],” as Margaret Thompson Drewal (1992: 15) explains, for instance, is “difficult to communicate because of the cultural baggage the capitalistic notion of play carries, which often sets it in opposition to work.” For Komfa practitioners, Spiritual Work is generally synonymous with “play,” as it is even more directly in Afro-Surinamese rituals called Winti Play or Winti Prey (Wooding 1981). Komfa services are specifically understood by participants as occasions to “entertain the ancestors,” but are considered as entertainment for living attendees as well. For most Spiritualists, the labor and sacrifice demanded by Spiritual Works cannot be separated from the enjoyment and pleasure derived therein.

Komfa's ritual processes of expanding personhoods is manifest through special relationships mediums cultivate with spirits of the dead. In enslavement, African and Indigenous people were ritualized as dead—legally and civilly, if not at times also socially—while also being routinely, systematically murdered and so made to experience horrendous physical deaths all too often, and all too often too young. Rituals of enslavement were predicated not on dehumanization, *per se*, but on recognizing one's humanity through capacities for production, and reproduction for women, and typically through only those two exploitable qualities. Colonial precepts established subjectivity through productivity, and biological reproduction, or what Shona Jackson (2012) has termed "labor for being." Komfa traditions transformed such thinking as practitioners deployed Spiritual Work—or their devotional labors—to bear and memorialize spirit-persons of those killed or otherwise passed on from the world of the living.

In embodying ancestral guides through Komfa ritual, Spiritualist mediums have counteracted ritual dispossession enacted through enslavement and neo/colonial subjugation by generating entangled networks of deep social interrelatedness unrestrained by imposed partitions between death and birth, work and play, "sacred" and "profane," or "religious" and "spiritual." Through the communion of mediumship, Spiritualists channel the dead into life, birthing "nations of ancestors" within themselves, and thus, simultaneously recreating who they are as individuals and as communities. Komfa has worked to repossess subjectivities, lives, and beings through powers of Spiritual labor, wherein "Spiritual" can be best understood—following Guyanese Spiritualists—as explicitly signifying social relations; "Spiritual life," as practitioners say, is "life *with* the spirits." As is evident in the performed biographies of mediums' ancestral guides, for generations Komfa People have centrally "organized their social lives in accordance with not only" living relations, but also with the reclaimed presences of the dead (Shorter 2016:

433). The “nations of ancestors” that Komfa People recognize within affirm for them all people’s inherent, inextricable interrelatedness, especially between living and dead, and particularly for people of “local origin.” As temporary cyclical states, progenitor spirits of the past are remembered and birthed back into being as living posterities, all while recently departed are delivered from death into ancestordom—also through remembrance.

“Local origin” is meant—throughout the Dissertation—to relate to cultural heritages geographically and temporally situated in Guyana’s past, while recognizing that degrees of “pastness” and of “Guyanese-ness” can be endlessly contested, whether through reference to theories of Creolization or ethnogenesis. “Ethnoracial” identities, including those of the long dead, have been and continue to be constructed—*crafted, conjured, rationalized, and reified*—through such ceaseless negotiations. “Ethnicity” can function without “race,” and often has in precolonial contexts. However, in the world of contemporary politics and throughout colonial histories, *ethnoracial* identities have been made most salient.<sup>23</sup> Especially in the context of Caribbean (and other settler-colonial) societies, attempting to define what is of “local origin” and the parameters of such definitions has been closely related to popular logics, national projects, and scholarly theories of “Creoleness.” As Chandra Jayawardena (1963: 3n1, emphasis added) observes, the term “Creole”

was originally used by the South American Negroes *and* Spaniards to distinguish their own children from Negroes and Spaniards freshly arrived from Africa and Spain. This meaning has now been extended to refer to *any item of local origin*, distinguishing it, on the one hand, from what was recently imported from Europe, Africa, China, or India, and on the other, from what is aboriginal.

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<sup>23</sup> “Origins” and perpetuations of communities based in senses of ethnic belonging have been studied from many perspectives, including nationalisms based in ethnicity (Gellner 1963, 1983), realizations of “institutional completeness” (Breton 1964), the establishment and maintenance of ethnic group boundaries (Barth 1969), “primordial sentiments” (Geertz 1967), invention of traditions (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1992), and the transformative emergences of new ethnicities (Hall 1992; Eriksen 2002), to name a few. As considered further in the chapters of Section I, and throughout, analyses often center ethnic change and not ethnogenesis (cf. Fennell 2007).

To illustrate such conundrums, one can compare Jayawardena's statement regarding "creole" in its original usages as distinguished "from what is aboriginal," to Shona Jackson's (2014) more recent and convincing (de)construction of Guyanese "Creole indigeneity," as mentioned above, and as will be discussed more thoroughly in Chapter 5, in particular. Such dynamic processes are not "Caribbean" per se, but instead, as George Marcus and Michael Fischer (1986: 78, as quoted in B. Pérez 1998: 239) write,

most local cultures worldwide are products of a history of appropriations, resistances, and accommodations [... that demands] a view of cultural situations as always in flux, in a perpetual historically sensitive state of resistance and accommodation to broader processes of influence that are as much inside as outside the local context.

And while Marcus and Fischer are here describing "most local cultures worldwide," one can also assume that their formative field studies of "social change" in Guyana and Jamaica, respectively, likely contributed much to informing their "postmodern" critique. After all, as Antonio Benítez-Rojo (1996: 17, 151) argues, Caribbean "Peoples of the Sea" have always and already "live within the psychology of postmodernity."<sup>24</sup>

### **Dancing Komfa / "Performing Memory"<sup>25</sup>**

bringing equal rights and justice to the brothers  
a fearless cumfa mashramani to the sisters whispering their free/zon  
that grandee nanne's histories be listened to with all their ancient fleches of respect  
—Edward Kamau Brathwaite<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Also see Sidney Mintz (1993a) and David Scott (2004). On postmodern concerns first broached in ethnographic reports, see Peter Manning's "Analytical Induction" (1982), Arthur Vidich and Stanford Lyman (1994: 39), as well as David Shorter (2003).

<sup>25</sup> "Performing Memory" is the title of a seminar that was created by Polly Roberts. Following Polly's work with Bilumbu diviners among Luba people in Central Africa, fundamental to the course were examinations of spirit possession and other "art forms that embody memory." As with much of Polly's research, writing, and teaching, the seminar sought to "articulate the very close epistemological connections between memory and action, and to demonstrate how memory is not something confined to the past, but rather is always performed in the present."

<sup>26</sup> From Brathwaite's "Poem for Walter Rodney" (1981: 27).

Writing of Trinidad and Tobago's "complicated, dynamic, poly-ethnic" *callaloo*, Bridget Brereton (2007: 193) observes that "the past is very much alive."<sup>27</sup> Many of Guyana's Spiritualists wholeheartedly agree, as the "flux" of cultural "pastness" comes to play an exceedingly active role in the Work of Komfa when entranced practitioners reanimate lives lived long ago by their special "forces"—"nations" of ancestors, deities, loved ones, and as-yet-unknown dead. Spiritualists would likely also appreciate T. S. Eliot's (2009 [1919]) memorable notion of a "historical sense," "a perception," he writes, that is aware "not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence." Conceptions of the past perform crucial political, socioeconomic, and symbolic functions in any society. Yet, Brereton (2007: 193) notes that "competing" histories provide "a key arena for contestation" in processes aimed at shaping the Caribbean's many "restless, recombinant" polyethnic societies, as Paul Gilroy (1993: 31) might say. After all, "history is always a problematic and incomplete reconstruction of what is no longer...a representation of the past" (Nora 1984: xix, quoted in Roberts and Roberts 1996a).

Through an ambiguous polysemy, the English and Creolese term "history" is used to denote both the concepts of "history-as-lived, and 'representations of pastness'" (Tonkin 1995 [1992]: 2). Such language necessitates identifying the critical distinctions between what Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1995: 2) describes as "'what happened' and 'that which is said to have happened.'" Codifying and mobilizing particular political or ideological concerns, histories

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<sup>27</sup> Brereton does not explicitly use the term "*callaloo*" in the article cited, but many scholars interested in ethnoracial dynamics in Trinidad and Tobago use the term, as do many Trinbagonians and Guyanese. While Guyanese eat *callaloo*, most prefer to describe their national conceptions of ethnoracial hybridity as "*cook-up*" rice. Odayson Ashby recently wrote in *Kaieteur News* (11 June 2020), for example, that "Guyana is made up of six races, we are a diverse melting pot, think of the best cook-up you have ever had, that is Guyana, an amazing blend of various cultures." See Gillian Richards-Greaves (2012, 2013) on *cook-up* in Guyana and Aisha Khan (2004) and Viranjini Munasinghe (2001) for *callaloo* in Trinidad. On the politics of culinary metaphors employed in characterizing Caribbean societies more generally, see Stephan Palmié (2013). Conceptions of "plural societies" introduced through J. S. Furnivall's (1948) language of "a medley of peoples" can also be interpreted through Palmié's thinking with Fernando Ortiz on cultural nourishments and processes of consumption, digestion, assimilation, and critique.

dislodge the actual happenings of the past—the *things people did*—from their reasons for doing them, and the contexts in which they were done. History as such contributes to a distancing of “the act from the meaning” (Taylor 2003: 22). What is conceived as “history” is not “pastness” as lived, but rather interpretations of what once transpired guided by frameworks provided by the contemporary moment of fixing “a problematic and incomplete” rendering of pastness as “history.” “The past is something we can never have. We can only represent it,” writes John Gaddis (2002: 3, as quoted in Eze 2008: 181). *Memory*, then, as “the raw material of history,” is vital to any sincere consideration of the past, and, as Komfa mediums instruct, particularly to making sense of persistent *presences of pastness* (Le Goff 1992: xi, quoted in Roberts and Roberts 1996a: 27).

As Polly and Allen Roberts (1996a: 26) write, “it is truer to lived experience to consider the past as represented and assigned value according to its purposes for group identity and political legitimacy in the present, and memory is always now.”<sup>28</sup> Like people in all societies, Caribbean people, Guyanese, and Spiritualists specifically, demonstrate a determination in contending with their pasts to “continually reconfigure nationalist and local histories to meet emerging needs of political economy” (ibid.). For Komfa People, like others, memory and “counter-memory” provide “a key arena for contestation” of their marginalization in society, whereby conceptions of the nation and of their precarious position within it can be refracted through the prisms of their Spiritual worlds (Brereton 2007: 193). Memory, as social process, is fundamental to the Work of Komfa performances and in many ways, Spiritualists’ ritual Work is

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<sup>28</sup> Compare to V. Y. Mudimbe (1988: 195), as well as Jacques Le Goff (1992), Pierre Nora (1984), Elizabeth Tonkin (1995 [1992]), Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1995), and Jan Vansina (1985).

likewise a form of memory-work.<sup>29</sup> Not only in possession are processes of memory *worked*, but the heightened dramas involved in visitors manifesting from the depths of Guyana’s pasts afford a particularly efficacious forum for re-presenting pastness in a most creative, vivid, and visceral way.

Memory becomes significant for understanding the instrumentality of trance in contesting national and local histories for a number of reasons, not least of which involves the role of dramatic performance, wherein people—living and dead—work together in the present moment of ritual with resources of the past to reconfigure more promising futures. That Komfa is a collaborative, intersubjective, and often physically and emotionally demanding undertaking is crucial—encouraging people in fundamental ways to *work* together, laboring with their bodies and souls. Corporeal and affective dimensions of performance are central to memory work, which, after all, is “embodied and sensual, that is, conjured through the senses” (Taylor 2003: 82). As such, memory is also “always located on the borderline of the body, at the threshold of self and other(s)” (Roberts and Roberts 1996b: 86), a physical reality that contributes greatly to the forms of intersubjectivity at the heart of Komfa Work. People come together, using their bodies to invite presences of the past to join in re-creating their world, re-membering and commemorating Guyanese histories of national turbulence and triumph, as well as of the trials and traumas—and mystical raptures—that are more specific to the memory of their Spiritual tradition. Based in past experiences both weighty and weak, of pain, exultation, wonder and worry, and far more, memory works equally through processes of remembering and forgetting.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> For considerations of mediumship as forms of memory-work, also see Andrew Apter and Lauren (Robin) Derby (2010), Michael Lambek (2002), Keith McNeal (2010), Elizabeth Pérez (2011), Patrick Polk (2010a, 2010b), Polly and Al Roberts (1996b), Paul Stoller (1995), and Carrie Viarnés, (2007, 2010).

<sup>30</sup> On early historical conceptions of memory processes, Roberts and Roberts (1996b: 47) tell us that “remembering and forgetting as the interdependent, coexistent sides of memory were acknowledged in archaic Greek history with

Recall and oblivescence are mutually indispensable to understanding the work of meaning-making more generally, especially in ways memory gets employed in creating efficacious communities of belonging and shared recognition—even in spite of the most horrendous of “bare life” experiences (Weheliye 2014: 75, 118; Connerton 2009, 2011).

Theories concerned with the explicit crafting of hegemonic histories to forward the consolidation of nationalist projects in Europe and elsewhere have been thoroughly developed in part by Maurice Halbwachs (1950), Marc Bloch (1973), and many others (Coser 1992).<sup>31</sup> In critiquing Halbwachs’ “failure to address the *processes* through which memory becomes social, especially across generations,” Paul Connerton (1989, 2009, 2011) expanded Halbwachs’ nationalist approach through his own studies of collective memory (White 2017: 21).

Connerton’s (1989: 38-40) scholarship has brought distinct attention to what he refers to as “acts of transfer,” such as enacted through possession performance wherein a collective conception of pastness can become embodied and often critically evaluated, and in turn, broadcast between participants. Connerton’s (*ibid.*: 39, 41) considerations of modes of “transmitting memory” associated particularly with the performing body have led to a range of valuable insights. The field of performance studies takes a guiding cue from Connerton’s reading of memory-work as

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two gods deified as Remembrance and Forgetting, Mnemosyne and Lemosyne.” Also see essays in a volume edited by Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana (2007), and Paul Connerton (2009).

<sup>31</sup> Much scholarship has contributed to studies of nationalisms’ fashionings through reconceptualizations and redeployments of senses of pastness. For Guyana, see Vere Daly (1974), and on Caribbean studies generally, see Brereton and Kevin Yelvington (1999), Robert Carr (2002), Paul Gilroy (1993), and Eric Williams (1964 [1962]). Along with somewhat-usual suspects (cited subsequently), also note the work of Norman Eustace Cameron (1903-1983), the British Guiana born and Cambridge University trained professor of mathematics, playwright, and scholar of Black histories and cultures, and in particular his *The Evolution of the Negro* (vol. 1 in 1929, vol. 2 in 1934, reprinted 1970), which “traces African medieval civilization, slavery and development among blacks since emancipation” (Creighton 2005: 178). General examples are too numerous to provide even an *illustrative range*, and beyond the scope of this Introduction, and Dissertation (however, see Bhabha 1990; Blyden 1994 [1888]; Chatterjee 1986, 1993; Delany 1993 [1852]; Du Bois 1903, 1924, 1945; Fox 1990; Guha and Spivak 1988; Hobsbawm 2005 [1962-1994]; Hobsbawm and Ranger 1992; Mosse 1985; Tambiah 1996b; Thompson 1963; and Walker 1829).



necessarily organized around bodies engaged together in action (Schneider 2011; Taylor 2003). These bodies—as actual people, with feelings, desires, and needs—are regularly advancing national and local political claims and counterclaims, building identities and places of belonging, revisiting distressing pasts, and envisioning fairer futures, all through processes of performing memory.

Studying performance as a form of memory-work has led to important understandings of *types* of “transfer,” and Diana Taylor’s (2003) distinction between archival knowledge and repertoires of corporeal memory has proven a substantial intervention. As means of memory-work and history-making, the roles of both “the archive” and “the repertoire” are central to shaping political and cultural knowledge-production around the world. For Taylor (ibid.: 19-20), the archive consists of “supposedly enduring materials” such as “texts, documents, buildings, [and] bones,” while the repertoire “enacts embodied memory: performances [...and] ephemeral, non-reproducible knowledge.” Perhaps seeming to impose an unfortunate novel binary, Taylor’s distinction affirms examples of *interplay* among the work of memory and that of histories. Taylor (ibid.: 16) holds that both archive and repertoire operate as valued sites of past knowledge and active “transmission,” and recognizes a need to work against the ways that “writing has paradoxically come to stand in for and against embodiment.” Ultimately, in seeking to span a long-imposed rift between “archive” and “repertoire,” Taylor also disrupts an envisioned “battle” raging between memory and histories as they impact upon people’s lives (cf. Nora 1989).<sup>32</sup>

Thinking of performance as a uniting feature of meaning-making—in the present utilizing “the raw material” of the past—can help shift focus to the *people* who are doing the re-

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<sup>32</sup> Nora (1989: 8-9) writes, for example, that “memory and history, far from being synonymous, appear now to be in fundamental opposition. [...] History is perpetually suspicious of memory.”

membering of those *people* who came before them: the lives and life-stories of the ancestors that will inform more felicitous futures for generations to come. Most Komfa ritual specifically centers around recollecting, recreating, and reliving the previously lived experiences of the dead. Mediums open themselves to become guides who return to often recount tormenting tribulations, while also being treated to the best food and drink, fine perfumes, flowers, healing waters, incense, and candle lights to brighten their path as they continually circumambulate their shrine, dancing the ring of continuity and thanksgiving. Reaching beyond “the borderline of the body” through (re)possession, and bridging “the threshold of self and other(s),” Komfa’s Entrees—those “living fossils” understood by practitioners to present “figments” of Guyana’s “seven nations”—indeed *are* memory, and so they too become “conjured through the senses.”<sup>33</sup> In Komfa’s resplendent banquets, all ancestors are welcomed to the table to commune with, entertain, and be entertained by those gathered. As a consequence, the repertoires performed together by the dead and living in these events are known to *skin-up* participants, revealing unexpected pasts, and startling insights into accruing expectations. Sometimes these revelations can be so weighty as to urge practitioners to reconsider who they are, from where and whom they came, and which of their “blood seeds” might come to sprout and to guide their understanding of themselves as a unique “flower” in Guyana’s “beautiful garden” of envisioned—yet unmet—equality in diversity.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> These are quotes which were all referred to above, excepting the reference to “living fossils,” which is from Wilson Harris (1983), as discussed in chapters to come, including Chapter 1. For other quotes in this sentence, see Roberts and Roberts (1996b: 86), Fields and Fields (2014: 200-201), and Taylor (2003: 82).

<sup>34</sup> On “blood seeds,” see Jan Carew (1994), as quoted on the following page, and for Minister of Social Cohesion George Norton’s remarks on the “beautiful garden where each flower is *equal* in value,” see discussion in Chapter 3, as well as the minister’s speech quoted in the *Guyana Chronicle* (24 March 2017).

## CHAPTER 1

### Manifest Heritages: Embodying “All the Ancestors”

Maturity is the assimilation of the features of every ancestor.  
—Derek Walcott<sup>35</sup>

While one can do nothing about choosing one’s relatives, one can, as an artist,  
choose one’s “ancestors.”  
—Ralph Ellison<sup>36</sup>

All the restless wayward spirits of all the aeons (who it was thought had been embalmed  
for good) are returning to roost in our blood. And we have to start all over again where  
they began to explore. We’ve got to pick up the seeds again where they left off.  
—Wilson Harris<sup>37</sup>

My great-gran Belle used to tell me that there are ghosts in our blood, and that we’re  
lucky because the lowliest, the ones who suffer most in the world of the living, are  
always top dogs in the spirit world. So African and Amerindian spirits rule that spirit  
world. And those ancestral spirits whisper warnings, whenever we’re about to do  
something reckless or foolhardy. [...] We’re blessed with the blood of the most  
persecuted folks on earth—Africans, Caribs, Portuguese Jews, French convicts from  
Devil’s Island, Highland Scots, and only the Lord alone knows what else—so whenever  
we cut ourselves, we can see the ghosts of those others peeping out from among the  
African and Amerindian blood seeds.  
—Jan Carew to Malcolm X<sup>38</sup>

Spirit guides resurfaced within the phenomenal world as much to critique its familiar  
social and political patterns as to savor its pleasures. Why else would those once at the  
bottom of society—Native Americans, Roma, slaves, migrants—bother to revisit the site  
of their individual and collective undoing? According to mediums, experience had given  
the spirits wisdom, and they wanted to make up for some bleak episodes in their  
checkered pasts by helping their sympathizers. The deeper the wounds recorded in their  
mytho-biographies, the more profound the healing they were thought to be able to effect.  
—Elizabeth Pérez<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> From “The Muse of History: An Essay,” in *Is Massa Day Dead? Black Moods in the Caribbean* (1974: 1).

<sup>36</sup> Ellison recorded these sentiments in “The World and the Jug” (1995 [1964]: 140).

<sup>37</sup> Quote comes from Harris’s third novel, *The Whole Armour* (1962: 115).

<sup>38</sup> From Carew’s *Ghosts in Our Blood: With Malcolm X in Africa, England, and the Caribbean* (1994: 57, 62).

<sup>39</sup> Quote is from Pérez’s essay titled “Spiritist Mediumship as Historical Mediation: African-American Pasts, Black Ancestral Presence, and Afro-Cuban Religions” (2011: 351).

Freedom Day on August 1, 2018, a Guyanese national holiday, marked the 180th anniversary of the 1838 emancipation of enslaved Africans in British Guiana's plantation economy. It was the third Emancipation Day I had experienced, and in the lead-up to the holiday, Georgetown seemed more energized than usual. On Main Street, vendors had set up stalls to sell wares made of African-print fabric and many other "culture items" that in one way or another indexed "African" connections. Included were imported and local wood carvings; clothes and banners emblazoned with the likenesses of Nelson Mandela, Haile Selassie I, and Barack Obama; and Cuban and Brazilian statuettes of the "Seven African Powers" based on Yoruba orisha.<sup>40</sup>

One vendor who is out year-round, not just in "the African season" of July and August, sells local artifacts such as colonial ceramic and glass "Dutch bottles," "Dutch coins," Amerindian cooking pots, "monkey jars" or traditional clay water vessels, and other Guyanese heirlooms. As I passed his mat of goods, he showed me a set of two orange stoneware Dutch bottles he had recently acquired. I had seen similarly shaped and colored flagons once before, incorporated into an elaborate shrine in a church where I work not far outside Georgetown. When I told the vendor-friend that, he was not surprised, yet he started to defend the bottles, explaining to me that they were not for doing "Wuk," or "Spiritual Work," also called Obeah in Guyana and elsewhere in the anglophone Caribbean. Instead, he said he sold them for customers to keep on a shelf or table in their homes like other ornamental items. I remember thinking that

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<sup>40</sup> Stephan Palmié (2013a) has sensibly cautioned against uncritically referencing "Yoruba origins" of orisha/*oricha/orixa* practices throughout the world, and insights he develops concerning the complexities of such labels as endorsed by practitioners and scholars alike readily apply to this discussion. Also pertinent are Raquel Romberg's observations on the role commercial entrepreneurs play in revaluing "Africanity." Through "Yorubaization," these "spiritual" merchants "have manufactured the idea of 'The Seven African Powers' and materialized it in a host of relatively recent ritual commodities sold at botanicas in the Americas and the Caribbean" (Romberg 2015: 231). Much as Paul Johnson (2013: 519) observes of other "religions of the African diaspora," Komfa in Guyana tends to "reduce the wide range of *orichas* to 'Seven African Powers,'" namely, Chango, Elegua, Obatala, Ochun, Ogun, Oya, and Yemaya. These are not to be confused with Komfa's seven "nations" of ancestors, discussed below, but instead comprise representatives of "the African Nation."

displaying these honored objects on altars built for and used together with their ancestors, who likely once handled items like the ones the vendor had for sale, *is* what “Spiritual People” do!

A woman selling clothes at the nearest stall came over to remark on the bottles, sharing that based on what she had learned since childhood, such vessels were used to house vengeful “zombielike” “dwarf” spirits called *bacoo*. As a result, this man was endangering the entire city through his trade in such “demonic” implements, which he buys from people who unearth them all over the country.<sup>41</sup> The concerned woman selling African-style clothing for the holiday went on to say, however, that she was also aware of “good,” well-intentioned Spiritual People and that “not all them Spiritual People does do bad Wuk and use bottle.”

The bottle vendor did not necessarily agree, but the woman went on trying to persuade us. She told the vendor and me about a certain “Obeahwoman” in her neighborhood whom everyone knows and who, she explained, was honestly there for people who sought her help. She said she had just heard the woman’s birthday was coming up. A special service would mark the occasion, and she said that I should go meet the woman and ask to attend. I asked where the event would be held, and when she told me the street in Albouystown, a low-income and historically interracial—both African and Indian—neighborhood, I knew the person she was talking about.<sup>42</sup> The clothing vendor confirmed it: the woman was a Mother-Bishop who leads a vibrant church called the House of St. Peter. I had previously attended a number of Spiritual services with this gathering and was glad to learn of the Bishop’s birthday.

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<sup>41</sup> As this typical reaction evokes, Guyanese who are not practitioners of Komfa (or Kali Mai, Obeah, mystical Islam, or related idioms) are commonly averse or even hostile toward “Spiritual Work” of all sorts, *especially* such Work involving bottles and *bacoo*, the two of which are connected in the thinking of most Guyanese—with both understood as highly volatile and dangerous. See Pires, Strange, and Mello (2018).

<sup>42</sup> Wordsworth “Mac” McAndrew (1970: 122, 124), a keen observer of Guyanese “folkways,” wrote in 1970 that “the heart—the cultural heart—of Georgetown is said to lie in Albouystown[,] that famous southern section of the city. And where jostling with cumfa, santapee music, masquerade bands, etc., we find another strongly practised ritual—that of the Spiritual Church (which is really another, more Christianized form of the cumfa).”

Indeed, the special Thanksgiving Service mentioned above that the vendor was indirectly inviting me to attend was for Komfa, not a typical birthday party. Still, the Bishop did have cake and many candles to summon the spirits of ancestors to come to their assistance, as most Spiritual Komfa services do.<sup>43</sup>

### **Locating Komfa as Black Atlantic Cosmology**

By beginning to unpack the many significances Komfa holds in people's lives, this chapter provides an opening comparative view, paying particular attention to mediumship and possession. Foregrounding Black Atlantic religious practices that have been often treated as adjacent or auxiliary to “the big three”—namely, Candomblé, Lukumí (or Santería, La Regla de Ocha), and Vodou—will be especially fruitful. Frameworks developed for interrogating, for example, the incorporation of *caboclos* in Candomblé, Umbanda, and Brazilian folk Catholicism; the articulation of the *muertos* in Espiritismo or Palo in relation to Lukumí; and the work of *zonbi*, *lougawou*, *baka*, and other agents of transformation that are a part of (or apart from) Vodou, all situate Komfa and the spectrum of practices and approaches the category has encompassed. After first further introducing Komfa in its own right, I argue that existing literature on Cuban and Puerto Rican Espiritismo furnishes especially critical perspectives

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<sup>43</sup> For a creative fictional account featuring cake in a Komfa service, see Pauline Melville's short story titled “English Table Wuk” (1998: 208), depicting an outdoor service held beside a burial ground to “appease the spirits of the English dead.” “Pride of place in the centre of the table was given to a rich dark plum fruit-cake with plenty of whisky in it, resplendent on its tall, silver-plated cake-stand” (ibid.: 206). For more on foods in Komfa see Kean Gibson (2001); and on cake and sweets generally in Guyana and Guyanese food histories, see Candice Goucher (2013) and Richards-Greaves (2012, 2013b). As scholars have noted, Sidney Mintz (1986) most memorably, sugar, icing, and cake became important symbolically—as well as materially—to Europeans and Africans alike as commodities of ritual production, exchange, and consumption, representing, among other things, Europeans' global hegemony through (often color-coded) food items. Raw green sugar canes are often incorporated into Komfa altars, particularly those called *gandas*, which are constructed on the ground, not raised tables, and often contribute to services known as “Earth Works,” or “Dig Dutty,” with “dutty” meaning “dirt” in Creolese.

through which to understand Komfa, perspectives that are more adequate than scholarship on Black Atlantic religions consulted by researchers studying Komfa thus far.

Bearing in mind ways that multiethnic spirits operate in Komfa, which will be described further in this and following chapters, the tradition is *not* best understood according to well-established rubrics developed for the study of Haitian Vodou or Cuban Lukumí, but instead through locating those same Black Atlantic religious formations as constituent pieces within the workings of their respective wider cosmological arenas.<sup>44</sup> Writing about the coexistence of Kabbalah practices among Trinidad and Tobago’s Spiritual Baptist *and* Orisha devotees, Maarit Forde, for example, draws insights from similar comparisons. Forde (2018a: 182) notes that in Trinidadian rituals, spirits of the dead “relate to other, higher spirits or deities in the cosmologies of ritual practitioners, orishas or saints, in a way that resembles the relationship between the spirits of the Congo-inspired palo and the Yoruba-inspired *regla de ocha* in Cuba, or the *djab* and the *lwa* in Haiti.” Komfa People “develop” their ancestors, after all—be they “unidentified, potentially malevolent spirits, or *jumbies*”—into the “higher” spirit guides central to Komfa practice (ibid.). Paying close attention to the dead, who “have been pushed to the margins of already marginalized religious systems,” will be important to building any comprehensive understandings of either Komfa spirit worlds or Guyanese social worlds (ibid.: 181).

Komfa serves as what Vikram Tamboli (2017: 254, 271) has called social and “cosmological fascia,” working un(der)recognized subsurface to connect, attach, separate, enclose, and stabilize Guyanese individual and community lives. The same can be said of Espiritismo practices, which have been understood to “catalyse religious commitment” and

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<sup>44</sup> Space will not permit discussion of Brazilian Spiritism, and scholarly sources are too numerous to include here. Even discussion of Candomblé, Lukumí, Palo, Vodou, and “adjacent” idioms will be limited, and contained mainly in this introductory comparative chapter.

“effectively constitute ‘modes of subjectivation,’” turning “participants” of Lukumí, Palo Monte, and Catholicism as well “into servants of the spirits” in “seldom straightforwardly didactic” ways, as demonstrated in the work of Elizabeth Pérez (2012: 362, quoting Foucault 1985: 28) and others. As Diana Espírito Santo (2015: 39, 108, emphasis added) observes, within Cuba’s “myriad existential and religious ‘worlds,’” “the development of idiosyncratic *muertos*” through Espiritismo “forges, as well as constitutes, *a connective tissue* that enables transits and associations between practice domains, cosmologies, and ritualities,” as Komfa does for Guyanese worlds.

### Crossing Cosmic Divides and “Sociohistorical, Genealogical” Ones<sup>45</sup>

Doan tell me 'bout Guyana.  
 I barn deh in t'irty-t'ree.  
 Meh great-gran'fadda wuz a black man  
 grandmudda wuz a puttagee.  
 Meh gran'fadda wuz a coolie: ah draw Buck, white an' Chinee.  
 Deh call it 'land of six peoples'  
 but is seven, 'less you doan count me.  
 We had timber, bauxite, diamon' an' gol'.  
 Sugar wuz king o' de crop,  
 de Union Jack did flyin' pon ev'ry flagpole  
 an' class deh pun class, so, wid the white man pun top.  
 —Michael Gilkes<sup>46</sup>

Available archival reports and other documentation, including oral histories, make clear that high-profile roadside and village “preaching,” politicking, and labor agitation were significant aspects of Komfa’s public reception in colonial British Guiana and have remained visible organizing tactics in postcolonial Guyanese society (Gibson 2001; Roback 1973). Starting from

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<sup>45</sup> See Anselm Min (2005: 844) on crossing “from difference to the solidarity of others,” although Min’s use of the Hegelian concept “sublation” denotes more of a *unification* of worlds, turning many to one, in contrast to a *multiplication* of recognized, honored, cherished, and co-complicated worlds.

<sup>46</sup> Gilkes (1989: 241) wrote this poem, titled “Son of Guyana,” for his fellow Guyanese poet John Agard.



the years directly after emancipation (1838) and closely associated from its beginnings with the often-stigmatized practices of Obeah, Komfa flourished in the semiprivate ritual settings of Spiritual Churches and in the homes and yards of practitioners and their “Spiritual families” or “flocks.”<sup>47</sup> Such intimate “underground” spaces remain the most vital points of community engagement for groups in and around Georgetown. Worlds of ancestral forces and living persons are connected or reconnected through the “work” of Komfa performance: imploring, thanking, comforting, gathering, fêting, and “entertaining the spirits” and one another.

Writing about the practices of emancipated Central Africans brought to British Guiana after slavery had been abolished, Monica Schuler (2002: 346) asserts that “maintenance of contact across the cosmic divide represented by water or the grave seems to be the main point of the Komfo ritual in Guyana.”<sup>48</sup> Maintaining such forms of otherworldly social connection remains a “main point” of Komfa, but its focus shifted dramatically following changes in the British Guianese population in the wake of emancipation. With decades of dislocation and the relocation of “new” peoples from diverse parts of the world who were brought to Guiana by

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<sup>47</sup> Komfa was practiced in and around the Georgetown area as early as the 1850s, twenty years or less after Emancipation, and likely earlier. See for example a story published in the *Daily Chronicle* in 1888, wherein an observer describes “A Komfo Dance” that took place in 1854 in the Georgetown neighborhood of Alberttown. The author writes that a “dancer is said to have ‘got komfo’ which I take to be possessed with the devil of obeah.” “Komfo-men,” the author adds, “are those who are the high-priests of the art,” referring to Obeah (*Daily Chronicle* 8 July 1888: 4). On moral and legal discourses surrounding Obeah, and Komfa through association, see Randy Browne (2011, 2017), J. Brent Crosson (2015), Juanita De Barros (2004; 2007), Marie Meudec (2017), and, especially, Diana Paton (2015), Alexander Rocklin (2015, 2019), and Dianne Stewart (2005).

<sup>48</sup> On significances and uses of water and gravesites in Afro-Atlantic traditions, see, for example, Yanique Hume (2018: 123-24), Kimani Nehusi (2016), and Schuler (2005). Chapter 7 discusses a memorial service for a leader of a Georgetown-area Spiritual Church during which the top surface of the deceased Mother’s occupied casket became a platform for constructing a Komfa altar that functioned as the locus of ritual activity for hours. “Coffins” have been documented as being incorporated within “Kumfo” ritual in the western Essequibo county of what is today Guyana, then a separate British colony, since at least the mid-1880s. For example, an article from 1885 published in the neighboring Demerara *Daily Chronicle* warning of “the prevalence of superstition amongst our Creole peasantry,” goes on to note that “for several nights past the dance known as ‘Kumfo’ has been kept up with more or less vigour at Bush Lot, Essequibo, by a certain clique, and much to the annoyance of the more respectable class of inhabitants. Prior to the commencement of dancing two empty coffins are placed in a yard, around which the ‘Kumfo’ man, in a state of partial nudity, dances, making hideous contortions of the body. [...] The object is simply to ‘catch some evil spirit’ to work obeahism with” (*Daily Chronicle* 18 November 1885: 3).

European planters, Komfa spiritscapes of necessity changed, reflecting human and cultural variances and consistencies.<sup>49</sup> The notion of a hierarchy of ethnically or racially identified spirits or “nations of ancestors” can be traced to this postemancipation period, and such thinking still represents a nearly omnipresent configuration in Komfa worldview and ritual praxis.

For most Guyanese today, the Creolese word “Komfa” either belongs with a verb, such as to “catch Komfa,” meaning to enter the state of possession (what practitioners generally call “manifestation”), or it is used as an adjective: a “Komfa drum,” “Komfa dance,” “Komfa Church,” or “Komfa People.” For those who engage such practices, Komfa as a word and concept is much more amorphous, expressing the whole atmosphere, “vibe,” or “synaesthetic totality” of the ritual performance.<sup>50</sup> Heavily costumed devotees embodying “entrees,” or spirit representatives of the seven major racialized groups of colonial Guiana, dance each to their own ethnically identified repertoire of songs around a lavishly decorated and stocked table or altar—sometimes a *ganda*, on the ground—that serves as rallying point of those between-worldly connections. According to practitioners, what happens *around* these altars is most important and instrumental.

Embodying racialized ethnic spirits is the most profound way in which Komfa People enact their cosmologies and their worldviews, dancing, often in trance, to perform the spirit archetypes of “all” Guyanese people’s ancestors. Simultaneously, as many hold, these same nations of spirits represent all of humanity. Stereotyped movements of ad hoc choreographies correspond to one of the “seven nations” of ancestors (African, Indian, Amerindian, English, Dutch, Chinese, and Spanish), as do accompanying music, dress, food, drinks, and other items

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<sup>49</sup> On “spiritscapes,” see Polly Roberts and Allen Roberts (2016).

<sup>50</sup> While Guyanese say “vibe,” the concept of “synaesthetic totality” of performance has been attributed to art historian Arnold Rubin (1974: 6), and further theorized by Polly Roberts (1994).

comprising the altar and ritual space.<sup>51</sup> These seven nations of spirits, or who Komfa People often distinguish as their “special forces,” reflect what Elizabeth Pérez (2012: 368) considers “one of the characteristic features of Espiritismo: its racially, ethnically, and religiously differentiated ‘cast’ of spirit guides,” who do not correspond too closely to the “royal” “Yoruba” (or “African”) orisha/*orichá/orixa* or to Vodou’s pantheon of *lwa*.<sup>52</sup> As in Espiritismo *misas*, dancing the “nation dances” of other groups through Komfa endorses philosophies of equality across cultural difference, harkening back to deep-rooted social-relational models of ethnic egalitarianism enacted through *pre*-emancipation “nation dances.” Earlier “nations” were variously remembered, reconstructed, and invented African geographical and cultural designations, made real (again) in their new contexts of use, such as “Kongo [...], Akan (Kormantines), Popo, Igbo, Mandinka, Chamba, Moko, [...] Temne and Fulbe” (Schuler 2000).<sup>53</sup> Archival sources reveal that in colonial Dutch and British Guiana such “nation” or “country dances” were also referred to as Komfa dances.<sup>54</sup>

Given the immense social and political restrictions on enslaved and free Black people’s lives in plantation societies, it is significant that Komfa presented practitioners with means to subvert and reenvision what were otherwise lethally stringent boundaries of segregation marking

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<sup>51</sup> Occasionally, but infrequently, Portuguese replaces Spanish. Chapter 8 focuses on Komfa’s Spanish Nation.

<sup>52</sup> For Vodou, one can consider “the difference between *lwa* and *pwen*,” including the authenticating power of “Africa” within “the Guinea-Magic dialectic,” or distinctions between nations of Rada, Petwo, and the Maji of bokors (Richman 2005: 150-51, quoting Mercina D’Haïti).

<sup>53</sup> Using an 1819 register of enslaved people in Berbice (then a separate British colony, now part of Guyana), Monica Schuler (2000) has listed “African groups” in order of number recorded, starting from “Kongo and related West Central Africans,” as the largest. For uses of such “ethnonyms” (which is really a misnomer in certain cases), see for example J. Graham Cruickshank’s 1917 article in *Timehri* titled “Among the ‘Aku’ (Yoruba) in Canal No. 1 West Bank Demerara River.” Also see Marjoleine Kars (2016), Jessica Krug (2014), Robin Law (1997, 2005), Lorna McDaniel (1998), Schuler (2000, 2002, 2005), and Maureen Warner-Lewis (1991, 1997, 2003).

<sup>54</sup> Usually with variant spellings, including *comfa*, *comfoe*, *confou*, *cumfa*, *comfo*, *komfo*, and the like, as discussed more thoroughly in Chapters 5 and 6.

value and difference. Indeed, Komfa exposed an underlying universality of practices and peoples from whom they derive. Yet, Komfa's world of spirits does provide hierarchical relationships of authority positioning certain nations above and before others in terms of ritual work, as well as through the various titled "ranks" attained by individual church members who enact the nations. Paradoxically though, within this stratified world spirits and people express equalizing intentions through the work of "catching Komfa." All can "receive all the ancestors" from the seven ethnically identified nations, for "we all catch the force the same," as I have been told. However, to receive particular ancestral forces adherents must be adequately exposed to and dutifully assent to "modes of subjectivation" ensuring they will know how to engage felicitously with spirit visitors (Foucault 1985: 28). As Pérez (2012: 362) observes of Espiritismo however, "in misas, it was not primarily one's own desires and memories to be exposed in the course of self-discovery, but those of the cosmopolitan spirit guides within one's cuadro espiritual," or spiritual portrait, the distinct set of guides "attached" to an individual adherent.<sup>55</sup>

Through such explanations of their rituals, practitioners are not necessarily demonstrating that Black religions, cultures, or people need to mobilize to achieve, or *be bestowed*, social equality in their own right. Rather than considering Komfa as prompting direct interventions in Guyana's past or current politics, countless Spiritualists have expressed that *all people* and their cultures, in a universalistic sense, are equally legitimate, "human," and deserving of mutual human recognition and respect.<sup>56</sup> This is not social equality in law or state-sanctioned "rights,"

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<sup>55</sup> The language of "spiritual portraits" follows "the tenets of Spiritism codified by Kardec" and popularized in Cuban and other forms of Espiritismo (E. Pérez 2012: 364, 370). Allan Kardec was the nom de plume of Hippolyte Léon Denizard Reville (1804–1869), remembered as the primary systematizer of Spiritism, although he and his legacy are largely unknown to Guyanese.

<sup>56</sup> Or rather, a pluriversalistic sense. See Ramón Grosfoguel (2013), Mignolo (2011), and Bernd Reiter (2018). This is not to say that Komfa and Komfa gatherings are apolitical, as that would be a misrepresentation. Certain Komfa houses have been particularly open about their political affiliations and collectively support parties/candidates in local and national contests for leadership positions, through secular and Spiritual work.

but in honoring common worth. In certain respects, Komfa can perform and embody equivalencies, or negotiate and test asymmetries, whereby “an egalitarian morality [can] work in concert with hierarchical principles” (Khan 1994: 249).<sup>57</sup> Contests among egalitarian and hierarchical ways of relating point back toward the interplay of connecting people, spirits, beings, and presences across divides, whether that be the “cosmic divide,” the *kalunga* line, the Middle Passage, *kala pani*, or life, death, and rebirth.<sup>58</sup> Through manifestation, all parties—colonizer and colonized of all seven nations—share in such existential human dilemmas of subjugation and mortality (cf. Memmi 2013 [1974]).

My Komfa interlocutors have often emphasized that, for Guyanese, racial and ethnic identifications and markers, “bloodlines” as people say, are now and have been for generations extremely malleable and “vexed” (D’Aguiar 2000).<sup>59</sup> Guyana-born Canadian novelist and

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<sup>57</sup> Numerous social theorists working in the southeastern Caribbean, Guyana and Trinidad particularly, have drawn attention to “competing sets of precepts” of egalitarianism and hierarchy, or “negotiation between egalitarian and hierarchical forces” at play within these societies (Williams 1991: 114; Khan 1994: 245). According to Brackette Williams (1991: 114), “any action” made by one of her informants in 1970s Guyana presented the “potential for double-edged interpretations,” “rais[ing] the question whether the person [was] trying to adhere to egalitarian norms of equality, solidarity, and generalized reciprocity, or to hierarchical norms of inequality, individualism, and competition.” Whereas individualistic competitive “precepts” emerged through “forces” of European Enlightenment–influenced lethal plantation agricultural production, the norms of equality, solidarity, and reciprocity have been traced to similar origins among “plantation communities, [where] on the basis of their shared poverty, powerlessness, occupations, and lifestyle, the community of common laborers developed an ideology of egalitarianism” (Williams 1991: 94, citing Jayawardena 1963). Also see Harold Hickerson (1954), Jayawardena (1968), and George Marcus (1970).

<sup>58</sup> *Kalunga*, or what Todd Ochoa’s (2007: 485) Palo practicing interlocutors call “the vast sea of the dead,” can be spatially demarcated by the horizon when looking toward the ocean, or the *bush*—the “*kalunga* line, the watery frontier between the visible and invisible worlds” (Cosentino 1996: 24). The concept and “sign” of Kalunga traveled with Bakongo and other Central Africans enslaved and carried across oceans, with Kalunga in the diasporas often metaphorically representing the transatlantic Middle Passage. However, “the energy” that is Kalunga, “believed to have created all life, [... is] a source of power, a sensation of movement, and an agent for spiritual cleansing” (Martínez-Ruiz 2013: 71 quoted in McAlister 2014: 416). “*Kala pani* or ‘black water,’” as Brinda Mehta (2010: 1) writes, “refers to the crossing of the Indian and Atlantic Oceans by thousands of economically disenfranchised Indian agricultural workers under a pernicious system of indentured labor that lasted from 1838 to 1917.” Mehta (ibid.) observes that these *kala pani* “narratives of indenture have received minimal attention in the overall scheme of postcolonial literature, particularly in the Indian and Indian diasporic contexts.”

<sup>59</sup> The idea of racial multiplicitousness was presented to me by at least one Guyanese in the form of a well-known and often-repeated proverb: “All cassava get same skin, but all not taste same way.” While this particular phrase is invoked by Guyanese to reference the duplicity of the visual generally—or to deny racial essentialisms so

scholar, Tessa McWatt (2019: 25), centers her memoir around similar questions of ancestral multiplicities and traumatic inheritances, beginning with, “What does knowing give us?” “Like most families,” McWatt (ibid.: 16-17) writes, “mine is steeped in myth and the anecdotes of grandparents and parents who recount their histories through the lens of desire, aspiration, loss and shame. [...] Of course there are the grandparents I knew,” she goes on, “and many uncles and aunts, blood-related and not, but I can only imagine those that went before them. I know from stories that my ancestry includes Scottish, English, French, Portuguese, Indian, Amerindian, African and Chinese forebears. And there are rumours of hidden bloodlines—that possible French Jew,” she adds. “Surely *being* is more complicated than thinking that we know the answers. And divination and imagination often seem more powerful than science in framing how societies live” (ibid.: 25). According to McWatt (ibid), “stories make meaning for us.”

Practitioners similarly advise that it often proves impossible to “know” someone’s family background simply by “looks” or physical features, and that all Guyanese (like all people around the world) have multiple family “lines” of inheritance from disparate cultural or geographical backgrounds—some closer, some farther.<sup>60</sup> “Every boundary line is a myth,” one character portends in the first novel of Guyanese writer and theorist Wilson Harris (2010 [1960]: 22), as his surveying party journeys geospatially, as well as psychically, into the country’s “interior.”

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normalized in Guyanese society, more specifically—in the context of the telling in question, my interlocutor made clear that through directly referencing “skin,” the proverb was “originally” intended to index racial (that is, “phenotypic”) ambiguity. The enthusiasm of this proverb-teller aside, such speech acts are *always* multireferential, and purposefully so, as well as notoriously difficult to historicize. For more on Guyanese proverbial speech, see Richards-Greaves (2016).

<sup>60</sup> Similar lines of thinking are discussed by Palmié (2016: 10), as, for example, “heterozygosis in sexual reproduction” means that *everyone* is what Guyanese call *douglá*, or “racially mixed.” Also see Palmié (2007a). Brackette Williams’s (1991: 98) interlocutors shared similar sentiments with her during fieldwork in Guyana in the late 1970s through early 1980s, recognizing that “despite individual claims of racial purity, all Guyanese have ‘mixed blood’” and thus are “all one people”—or as Guyanese folklorist poet Marc Matthews has it, “all a-we is one” (quoted in D’Aguar 2007).

Examples abound. But regularly repeated ones include reference to “deceptive” last names of acquaintances, such as a person who “looks African” with a family name of Singh or Wong. Some stories involve a set of siblings sharing both parents and similar looks in childhood who later “choose to be” “Indian” or “African” or “Amerindian,” variously, through how they live their lives, carry themselves, dress, and accessorize; the people they associate with; the types of work they do or aspire towards; their marital or family circumstances; and so on.<sup>61</sup> For practitioners, recognition of the unstable, contextually contingent, constructed, and multiplicitous aspects of racial designation and interpellation become embodied, lived, and made explicit through the performance of Komfa possession.<sup>62</sup> To quote from a practitioner commenting on her fellow devotee’s ancestral manifestation during a service: “She always getting a *Coolie* [Indian] spirit ’cause she father *douglá* [‘mixed’ African and Indian descent]. Don’t worry she look *Black-black*. You see she sister and niece[s]? Bare Coolie-wom[e]n!”<sup>63</sup>

Through such considerations of what possession is—how and why different spirits come into people’s lives, incarnating themselves within and among their bodies—Komfa People come to “understand themselves to live at a crossroads of multiple beings,” as J. Lorand Matory (2010) says of Black Atlantic religious practitioners more generally. Living this ritualized “multiplicity of being” empowers critical capacities for interaction and empathic comprehension across boundaries of time and space, and across those of community and social identification (Beliso-De Jesús 2015: 9, 113, 127). Such “fluidity” of “plural” historical and ontological awareness

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<sup>61</sup> Tellingly, one critic commenting on characters represented in Harris’ novels notes that “there are brothers, twins even, yet of different races” (Sparer 1968: 34).

<sup>62</sup> On “multiplicity” of personhoods within Afro-Atlantic cosmologies, see Gloria Wekker’s (2006) insightful analyses, in particular an essay titled “Winti, an Afro-Surinamese Religion, and the Multiplicitous Self.” Also highly important is Roberto Strongman’s *Queering Black Atlantic Religions: Transcorporeality in Candomblé, Santería, and Vodou* (2019).

<sup>63</sup> By and large, Creolese does not employ a final “s” to denote plurals.

represented by Komfa's array of ethnically identified, racialized, and often sexualized spirits "create[s] conceptual openings," as Aisha Beliso-De Jesús (ibid.: 9) observes of *orichá* in Santería, whereby "copresences are not simply dead or missing persons but rather are social figures of a past still present."<sup>64</sup> Komfa's "copresences," those spirits that move through life along with practitioners, facing their triumphs and tribulations with them, are likewise conceptually situated in that potent arena of sensation where one knows something to be *real*, yet others may not share a similar *sense* of that reality.<sup>65</sup> In negotiating the indeterminacies of social life, gaining access to the repertoires of Komfa's special forces provides what Polly Roberts (2000: 64) aptly characterizes as "the necessary moment of 'suspension,' the cognitive rupture during which" spirits and their hosts collectively make meaning from resources of the past. Much as processes of meaning- and reality-making accomplished through divination have been described and understood, spirit possession (as divination) offers Komfa groups and their members means through which to visualize and physicalize—"act out" and "think through"—roles, scripts, circumstances, and relations of power that are significant in their "secular" lives beyond the contexts of church. This bridging of social worlds is in large part why Spiritual People tend to reject the label of "religion," explaining that Komfa is their "Spiritual way of life," or *livity*.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> For "pliability" and "*plurality* of ontologies," also see Espírito Santo (2015: 67, 95, 160, 209).

<sup>65</sup> "Evidentiary regimes," including "spectral evidence," are perceptively considered by Palmié (2002: 12, 2013b) and Rosalind Shaw (2002: 264). Also see Mary "Polly" Nooter [Roberts] (1993).

<sup>66</sup> *Livity* is a term and concept used by Komfa People, adopted from Rastafari, that represents a form of "intersemiotics" of *livities* (Rasontologies?) and systems of deep knowledge (Komfepistemologies?) among Rastafari and Komfa People. Compare this to Deryck Murray's (2009), Trinidadian "Tukontology" and Frederick Ivor Case's (2001) Guyanese "intersemiotics of Obeah and Kali Mai." One interlocutor explained to me that Rastafari are "quite obviously the most Afrocentric of Guyanese," and are thus both emulated and ridiculed.



### **Espiritismo as “Guide” (to Understanding Komfa)**

Both Komfa and Espiritismo have been conceptualized as “guiding” and “channeling” members of their respective societies into the lifeways of Black Atlantic cosmologies, in ways that scholars have begun to elucidate within the contexts of Espiritismo’s milieu of practice. The following selective review of scholarly literature, relating primarily to Espiritismo, demonstrates how this body of scholarship can offer insights to the study of Komfa. One salient way to approach such comparisons is to begin by examining how participants in these traditions understand and relate to divinities and to the dead in varying yet interconnected ways, before then looking at how living humans engage and interact with these differentiated categories of beings.

We can start by considering an instructive proverb popular in Cuba: “Sin los muertos, no hay santo” (“Without the dead, there is no saint”). In contexts of practice, Kristine Juncker (2014: 6) tells us, this idea is rendered more accurately as “Without the dead, there are no *oricha*.” Stephan Palmié (2002: 195) justifiably instructs that “the term *muertos* points to an ambiguous category of being.” This category’s opacities are unpacked in Diana Espirito Santo’s ethnographic studies of how “developing the dead” can simultaneously be a practice of encountering, discovering, and developing the *self*. As a result, Cuban Espiritismo “functions as a motor for the production of persons” (Espirito Santo 2018: 215). Espirito Santo shows that in cultivating meaningful, ongoing relationships with the dead, *espiritistas* come to sense, envision, connect with, and “develop” multiple spirits, or *muertos*, and through such work extend the horizons of the self toward individually and collectively efficacious ends. Important to Espirito Santo’s (2015: 65) argument is delineating “the difference between the *oricha-santo* and the *eggún* or *muerto*,” which, she explains, “is often posited as a purely quantitative one—a matter

of grades of ‘evolution’ and ‘light’ (often articulated in this Kardecist language), where the *orisha-santo* is an undeniably superior kind of *eggún*, much like a Catholic saint.” Considering the interrelationships between these different beings and ways of being is important to appreciating Komfa’s “connective”—interrelational—capacities. As Cubans do, Guyanese present “subtle and often competing explanations of the ontological distinctions between the world of gods and that of the dead, and of the nature of their indissociability and partnership,” whether that partnership is between gods and dead or between godly dead and receptive living beings—or mediums (ibid.: 64).

Elizabeth Pérez’s (2016) research with Black North American practitioners of Afro-Cuban religions who employ Spiritist ritual along with or within their predominantly Lukumí practice shows how Santería, Palo, and other idioms are often intimately intertwined with and through Spiritism. Carrie Viarnés (2007: 130-31) writes of the popular conception in Cuba of an “*escalera* (staircase) of spiritual development that begins with spiritual practices (e.g. different varieties of Espiritismo)” before ascending to the heights of “Reglas de Congo or Reglas de Palo” and then reaching the “apex” of “Regla de Ocha.”<sup>67</sup> Todd Ochoa (2010: 47) has observed that, in Cuba, *espiritistas* are important interreligious “mediators of the dead,” instructing Catholics as well as Palo and Lukumí participants about the lives of the departed by summoning them back, “‘re-remembering’ colonial experience as performances that are temporally heightened and politicized” (Otero 2016: 88, citing Ochoa 2010). Espiritismo/Spiritism provides practitioners with the critical capacities to expand their religious subjectivities. Through Spiritist modes of knowing and interacting with the dead and their earthly revenants, be they

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<sup>67</sup> Palmié (2002: 164) concurs with countless other sources that “initiation into a congo cult must precede initiation into regla ocha,” with Espiritismo as the “base.” Yet interrelationships among these ritual practices are diverse and do not always follow prescribed patterns, such as described in the *escalera* metaphor.

“priestly dead” or otherwise, practitioners come to understand not only histories but “ontological distinctions” between entities—and what such distinctions can mean for their lives (E. Pérez 2011: 330; Palmié 2002: 165; cf. Polk 2015).

In Guyana, as elsewhere in the Afro-Atlantic, people of the general public who are not necessarily practitioners also appreciate ways in which “afterworlds entangle with the world of the living, as spirits linger in, or traverse, the communities they used to be a part of—in spite of the substantial amount of energy and resources invested in some mortuary rituals to guarantee them safe passage to the hereafter” (Forde 2018b: 13). Most Guyanese have some awareness of the “differently dead,” usually known as *jumbie* or *forces*, as in much of the anglophone Caribbean (Cosentino 1998: 12).<sup>68</sup> Spiritual People, however, are regularly solicited for assistance with those persistent, loitering, oftentimes distressing spirits, and they also sometimes intentionally seek them out. Unwillingly “catching a force” or being “troubled by a jumbie” is in many cases a prerequisite for what Espírito Santo (2015) calls “encountering” spirit.<sup>69</sup> Many people hold that they came into Spiritual life after assenting to locally well-known means of mollifying a spiteful spirit they had inadvertently “awoken.” That participation usually involved the “development” of their selves through simultaneously pacifying their afflictive *jumbie* and learning about potentially beneficent ancestral guides.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> For “differently dead,” see Don Cosentino’s *Vodou Things: The Art of Pierrot Barra and Marie Cassaise* (1998: 12), and on “*jumbie*,” see Richard Allsopp (2003: 317–19), Jay Dobbin (1986), Forde (2018a: 182), Gibson (2001), and Khan (2004). *Jumbie* is used in Creolese as a singular and plural noun, as reflected throughout this Dissertation.

<sup>69</sup> In such ways, *jumbie* resemble “‘alien’ *muertos*” who, according to Palmié (2002: 165), “are regarded, not only as morally ambivalent, but as potentially malignant.”

<sup>70</sup> Komfa relies on similar sorts of “crass” oppositional relationships drawn between Spiritual Work and that termed “Obeah,” including Working with *jumbie*, which Palmié (2002: 165) notes between Palo and Lukumí, observing that “*ocha* and *palo* work off each other in at least two ways. On one level, they are treated as functionally differentiated ritual technologies. Different problems, people will say, require different solutions. At the same time, however, *palo* and *ocha* circumscribe images of sociality that, though part of an aggregate of knowledge that embraces both complexes, stand in a relation of crass opposition.”

Komfa spiritscapes incorporate these depersonalized *jumbie*-dead in the form of disincarnate earthbound souls understood to inhabit, or “patrol,” subterranean realms of Mother Earth’s bowels—that is, when not occupied in the affairs of their still-living counterparts. As turbulent “graveyard spirits,” *jumbie* are less-known to practitioners than are their “familiar” terrestrial guides representing the seven nations of ancestors. In important ways, they are akin to “*bozal*” spirits, *muertos*, *eggún*, *nfumbi*, and Kalunga, as well as Brazil’s “rowdy caboclo pantheon of cowboys and Indians” (Brazeal 2009: 269).<sup>71</sup> “While *egun* persist as the divinized dead in Santería and Candomblé, they no longer bear the identity of individualized ancestors,” writes Don Cosentino (2010: 8). “Nor do the Gedes of Vodou,” he adds, “who indeed represent categories of the dead (idiot lawyers, corrupt politicians, mincing pastors, wanton whores, and others), but do so as principles rather than persons” (ibid.).<sup>72</sup> *Jumbie* too comprise “a throng of [...] unnamed and undifferentiated dead,” in contrast to Komfa’s knowable, often individually identifiable, and—importantly—approachable spirits of the seven nations (McLean 2017: 197).<sup>73</sup> Yet in practice, these are far from discrete ontological categories of beings, as entities undergo gradual shifts or rapid metamorphoses, beginning as “wild” enigmatic forces and “developing” into coherent, comprehensible, lucid ancestors through the course of individuals’ transformations as Spiritual People. Again, paralleling Espíritu Santo’s formulations, knowing one’s guiding

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<sup>71</sup> According to Ochoa (2010: 273n4), the term *bozal* was “one among a series used to describe an African slave’s [lacking] proficiency with Spanish.” Such “terms carried an implicit commentary on a slave’s intelligence [...] with *bozal* meaning slow or awkward” (citing Ortiz 1975). The term *nfumbe/nfumbi* “derives from Kikongo: *mvumbi*, ‘corpse,’” with similar etymological roots as *jumbie* and *zonbi* (Palmié 2002: 332n14).

<sup>72</sup> On Gede, also see Cosentino (2018) and Katherine Smith (2010, 2012).

<sup>73</sup> *Jumbie* as a category are not altogether “undifferentiated,” however, as many Guyanese would include as *jumbie* sorts of entities distinguished as *Baccoo*, *Churile*, *Dutchman ghost*, *Chiney ghost*, *Ole Higue*, *Massacouraman*, *Moongazer*, *Sukwanti*, *Wata-mama*, and *White-lady*, among myriad others. Guyanese historian Brian Moore (1999: 73n49) writes that “the *jumbi* is a spirit which is vaguely anthropomorphous but without a distinct individuality.”

spirit or spirits becomes essential to knowing one's self, and vice versa. Such knowledge comes through comprehending often subtle, embodied physical and affective differences between spirits who manifest in dreams or in possession, and who may be erratically hostile haints or familiars from the seven nations. Notwithstanding how "possession by the dead is ritually and discursively distanced from possession by higher spirits," without the dead there are "no oricha" (Forde 2018b: 19). Likewise, without *jumbie* there are no Komfa nations of ancestral spirits.<sup>74</sup>

While Cosentino writes that the Gedes of Haitian Vodou "represent categories of the dead," the same is not altogether true of *jumbie*, who are a wholly "anonymous mass of the dead," as Ochoa (2010: 14-15) describes Kalunga, "the ambient dead" of "Palo thought," which "resides nowhere specifically, yet saturates discrete forms, like bodies" and *prenda-nganga-enquiso* cauldrons. *Jumbie* do become in/dividuated, however, in ways similar to Palo *nfumbe*, spirits of "the *reglas de congo*" whom Palmié (2002: 164) writes manifest "with an image of violent motor behavior, uncouth speech, and generally 'uncivilized' demeanor," like a *jumbie*.<sup>75</sup> For Komfa, the "higher" spirits of the seven nations more clearly represent "categories of the dead" as racialized, sexualized, and ethnically determined revenants of Guyana's past. Like "archetypal personalities" reflected in the orisha, Komfa's seven nation spirits are developed "divinized dead," who, while often understood in stereotypical terms and referred to by generic appellations, also have more intimate names, personalities, and life experiences that might only be disclosed to their mediums and those close within their gathering (González Pérez 2003: 200,

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<sup>74</sup> Pertinent comparative distinctions "between the potentially malevolent *recent dead* and the often-benevolent distant dead, or the *ancestors*," are described and analyzed by Johnson (2018: 49–51n5).

<sup>75</sup> As individuals, Ochoa (2010: 168) writes that "nfumbe have names. Each nfumbe has a name and it must be known for each prenda."

quoted in Viarnés 2007: 132).<sup>76</sup> By “developing” and “sympathizing” with their spirits, and likewise themselves, Komfa People, like Cuban *espiritistas*, “do important work that relocates race and ethnicity in an ethno-historical theater of possession [... in] performances [that] re-purpose the ideas of transmigration and transculturation” (Otero 2013: 88). For such reasons, Elizabeth Pérez (2012: 368) tells us, “misas have not only set a place at the white table for Native Americans—‘Indians’ sometimes classified according to specific nation or people—and Africans—Congo warriors, ‘Guinea’ slaves, Madamas—but also created room for Europeans (especially Roman Catholic clergy); Roma (‘gypsies’); East and South Asians; Arabs; and, more recently, Black North Americans, to act as ancestors and spirit guides,” an array as diverse as Komfa’s. “Since the advent of Spiritism,” Pérez (ibid.) continues, “practitioners have endowed these *comisiones*, or categories of spirits, with well-defined tastes in sounds, sights, smells, textures and flavours mediated by such factors as perceived skin colour, physiognomy, national origin, gender, legal status, and social location. Sympathy for the spirits,” she adds, “has thus always involved contending with racial, ethnic, gendered and class-based taxonomies” (ibid.).

Komfa People come to know spirits through similar “forms of attunement” to sensory and other “perceptive regimes”—recognizing race, ethnicity, gender, and class as perhaps only the most salient features, with preferred songs and dances, foods and drinks, and clothes and accessories “mediated” by these aforementioned factors (Johnson 2018: 33, citing Wirtz 2014a and Irvine 1982). Spirits are also discerned through temporalities, whereby, as Ysamur Flores-Peña (2004: 90) observes of Puerto Rican Espiritismo, local and regional histories are reflected in “the composition of the altar and séance.” In a way that is similar to how Komfa All-nation services, or “Banquets,” are performed—during which ancestors of all seven nations are

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<sup>76</sup> On spirits’ names, and “generic” stereotypical slave names used in Cuba and elsewhere to conceal a spirit’s “secret, original name known only to the devotee,” see Viarnés (2007: 332).

entertained in an unchanging sequence tethered to their proximity to Guyanese-ness—in Puerto Rican *misas* “the religious performances of the different manifestations parallel the migration patterns, allowing spirits to descend into the temple in the same order that they arrived in the Caribbean” (ibid.). “By ritually codifying history,” Flores-Peña (ibid.) goes on to note, “the Spiritist séance gave presence to groups who lacked a voice in society. It is true that Indians had also put in appearances at the séances of the elite, but their presence there alluded to the Romantic notion of the noble savage. In the popular devotions of the people, all races came to share a place in heaven.”<sup>77</sup> Numerous scholars have observed “the hierarchies of Espiritismo,” such as those encoded within spatial arrangements of *bóvedas* or Mesa Blanca altars and through the order of appearance of spirits within rituals based on their ethnicity (Cosentino 2010: 15). Yet Flores-Peña, like others, holds that through manifesting “all the ancestors,” mediums develop means of sympathizing with “Others” marginalized within their respective societies, whose histories and life circumstances they otherwise might not seriously consider, or consider *as their own*.<sup>78</sup>

Possession by an array of distinctly “cosmopolitan” spirits, embodying life histories of often long-forgotten peoples of the Black Atlantic world, can be understood constructively as more than an “*interpretation* of the other by mimesis,” but an *appropriation* of and reciprocal

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<sup>77</sup> On “*espiritistas* and *brujos* of today” imagined as the “neo-noble savage,” and other “stereotypical views produced about them” within Puerto Rican society, see Romberg (2003: 162).

<sup>78</sup> Such conceptions of the intertwining and coconstitution of self and other bring to mind Buddhist interpretations of the *yin-yang* symbol, holding within its divided sphere “a beloved community where being connected to the other is seen as the foundation for a healthy self” (powell 2012: xviii-xix). In particular, “development” from *jumbie* possession to ancestor manifestation resembles the idea of transforming conceptions of “the racial other” to be “seen not as the infinite other, but rather as the other that is always and already a part of us” (ibid.).

becoming with various Others and selves (Kramer 1993: 250, emphasis added).<sup>79</sup> Such processes of appropriation and mutual becoming emanate through “the mimetic faculty,” but also through “developing” deep sympathetic understandings with “wild” and “malevolent” Others who then become—and in fact, always were—essential and indivisible aspects of one’s self (Taussig 1987, 1993). “Vodou also deploys sympathetic magic or mimesis in which the power of the original is channeled by reproducing it,” Lauren Derby (2015: 396-97) tells us.<sup>80</sup> And in instances of possession, such “magic” works through mediums channeling the power of an “original” other who may begin as a prototype persona, but in the process of reanimating that power *along with the dead*, both medium and spirit transform, expand, and cocreate themselves anew.

### **Meeting a Guide**

On multiple occasions during my field work in Guyana I had the opportunity to interview a spirit. This happened once in 2018 during a conversation I had with Henriette, a woman I know from a Georgetown-area Spiritual Church. About an hour and forty-five minutes into our two-and-a-half-hour talk, I sensed a palpable shift in mood, first through her speech, which deepened and slowed and then changed altogether to an unfamiliar language. The other language went on for less than a minute, but the sonorous voice continued as she explained to me, in typical interspersed Creolese and English, that I was no longer speaking to Henriette. She was now “Henriette’s guide,” a woman from the Congo, an ancestor, brutalized, torn from her family,

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<sup>79</sup> One can consider “appropriation,” as has Rahel Jaeggi (2014) following Georg Hegel, as “an activity or process in which consciousness confronts what initially presents itself as given or ‘other’ and then endeavors in some way to make it its own—to strip its object of its alien, merely given character” (Neuhouser 2014: xiii).

<sup>80</sup> As Michael Taussig (1993: xiii) writes, also quoted by Lauren (Robin) Derby (2015: 421), “The wonder of mimesis lies in the copy drawing on the character and power of the original, to the point whereby the representation may even assume that character and that power.” Also see Karen Richman’s essay on “imitations,” “Authenticity, and Mimesis in Haitian Vodou Art, Tourism, and Anthropology” (2008).



enslaved over a century ago in her homeland then shipped to Guiana's shores to suffer the remainder of her days in the cane fields. After another thirty minutes or so hearing Henriette's guide recall intimate treacheries of her bonded life, as well as her triumphs, the interview ended. I thanked Henriette and her guide; they thanked me, invited me back, and showed me off.

I did return, and Henriette and I—and her guides—spoke more. In those follow-up conversations she explained that while many Spiritual People have one main guiding ancestral spirit, most people tend to have a set of three—or what one informant called her “personal mystical triune.” Henriette's were, along with her primary Congo guide, an Indian spirit from “Calcutta” and an Englishman who was once an Anglican priest.

The transformative social drama of Komfa performance necessarily presents apprehension, in that both afflictive and curative aspects of possession are recognized through ritual management and treatment, and through celebration honoring the empowerment spirits can bring to people's lives. Komfa People's relationships with their spirits often begin when the person is afflicted with misfortune attributed to the unacknowledged spirit's desire for recognition, compelling the anguished neophyte to seek greater involvement with those—both living people and dead—they trust to teach them about such things. Prior to the arrival of her guides during those interviews, Henriette had shared with me some of the background circumstances leading to her initiation into “Spiritual life.” She revealed that she had lost her adult son to a violent, senseless death just a few short years earlier. From there, things got worse when she began to behave erratically—so she was told—not making sense when speaking and causing people to worry about the assortment of bottles, jars, bowls, and baskets of “trash” accumulating in her home, veranda, and yard. She recalled with shame the embarrassment she

felt in learning that family members and friends would “talk-name,” or gossip about her, telling one another that she had “catch a force” and was “behaving like a jumbie.”

While Henriette had some familiarity with Komfa traditions from exposures of various sorts since childhood, she did not at first associate the unrelenting challenges she had recently faced with anything she could potentially redirect and benefit from. That is, until, as she recalled, she “met” her “gods.” In doing so through her first Spiritual work, and welcoming the spirits’ copresences with her throughout her days, Henriette says she learned “about where [she] come[s] from, where we all come from, and can be going, *together*.” Through meeting and “seeing” her guides’ faces—their adorned bodies as they danced, and the particular rhythms that moved them—her newfound insights were revealed and seemingly insurmountable problems gradually retreated. Komfa People tend to understand ancestral spirits as ancestors of Guyana, progenitors of the nation, and thus as reflecting a set of discrete, archetypical, colonially instilled ethnonational categories.<sup>81</sup> But spirits are also understood by practitioners as empowering confidantes whose alliance, while often indicative of familial lines of heritage, affords opportunities to see, move, and interact in worlds beyond their “familiar.” Such conceptions of spirit-work can then represent a “disruption of lineal descent [with] the emphasis put on what” Édouard Glissant calls “*métissage*, the interbreeding of races in relation as equals” (Wing 2018: 124).

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<sup>81</sup> Comparisons can be drawn to Kristina Wirtz’s (2014b: 14) work deconstructing the racialization of folkloric Afro-Cuban performances wherein “Blackness,” for example, “is a configuration of signs that can mark physical bodies, social persons whether as individuals or groups, material artefacts, social locations, dispositions and practices, and cultural forms.”

***More-time: Passed Horizons, Future Selves, and Permanent Possibilities for Refiguration***<sup>82</sup>

Walk good on you way and good duppy walk with you.  
—Louise “Miss Lou” Bennett-Coverley

Spirits and Spiritual Work can bridge boundaries, including metaphysical ones of mortality (life/death/rebirth), time (past/present/future), or space (here/there/nowhere), as well as similarly normative social boundaries of gender, sexuality, class, nationality, (dis)ability, race, or religion. For many practitioners, embracing knowledge of Komfa spirit worlds serves not only as historical and genealogical inquiry into indistinct and polysemous pasts, but also as a guided journey into manifold present social worlds that would likely otherwise remain difficult to approach. Certain of these dynamics underlie other Black Atlantic ritual complexes as well, including cosmopolitan arrays of spirits who encourage progressively deeper, critical appreciations of marginalized pasts and past figures through nurturing intimate sympathies with others, all while discerning those others as already within one’s expanding self. Future scholarship should not shy away from such comparative analyses and should look towards related practices and cosmological formations that, like studies of *Espiritismo*, hold valuable potential for advancing understandings of Komfa.

In particular, comparative attention to *cajón pa’ los muertos*, another adjacent and “undertheorized” idiom, could illuminate Komfa as a similarly “hybrid ritual form that invites the participation of persons and spirits from across religious boundaries” (E. Pérez 2012: 361, 365). Practiced in Cuba, Puerto Rico, and elsewhere as Spiritist-inflected “ceremonies for the dead, which combine *Espiritismo*, *Palo*, and *Santería*, among other religious practices,” *cajón pa’ los muertos*, like Komfa, is grounded in the “coexistence of multiple religious tenets” and

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<sup>82</sup> This subsection subtitle borrows from and slightly paraphrases Roger Canals (2017: 8), who is in turn partially quoting Taussig (1997: 169).

agencies (Warden 2006: ii, 80). As such, *cajón* “accommodates Cuba’s religious pluralism” by including practitioners of various religious affiliations, “whether those practitioners are living or dead” (ibid.). *Muertos* who “descend at a *cajón*” inclusively represent “all ancestors,” much in the same way as Komfa’s spirits—returned dead who “touch and dance with the people, hold and caress them in ways that the *orichas* normally do not” (Viarnés 2007: 146).

Studies of Komfa might also be served through comparisons to ritual institutions in the Dominican Republic and Venezuela, where less research has been conducted on Black Atlantic faiths compared to the work done in Brazil, Cuba, and Haiti. Much as Komfa’s guiding spirits are understood by practitioners as apportioned into seven distinct nations, embracing “all ancestors,” human, Guyanese, or otherwise, conceptions of Las 21 Divisiones in the Dominican Republic have been explored as they articulate with Dominican Vodú and folk Catholicism. Within Dominican worldviews, Las 21 Divisiones functions as a correspondingly comprehensive yet pliant typology comprising “families of African-derived and creole deities [...] encompassing [those] ‘born’ in the New World, deities of Native-American Taíno and other cultural origins, as well as elevated spirits of the dead” (Davis 2007: 76). Much as Cubans’ cosmopolitan assemblages of spirits reflect and refract precolonial, colonial, and more recent ideologies of racial democracy, and in much the same way as Komfa’s seven nations deconstruct and reify Guyana’s post/colonial standard of plural nationalism, “the complex, multicultural pantheon of so-called *vodú*” as represented by Dominican “families” of Las 21 Divisiones points likewise to alternative ways of organizing the past and of aspiring toward improved futures (ibid.: 75).

In Venezuela, which is geographically closer to Guyana than the Dominican Republic, Lukumí and Palo have grown increasingly popular in recent decades. Moreover, the country has

its own African-inspired devotional traditions that have been historically connected to Komfa in ways yet to be thoroughly documented. One such faith, linked to Komfa's Spanish nation of ancestors, is the "cult" of María Lionza, "the autochthonous goddess of the nation, symbol of Venezuelan history and identity" (Canals 2010: 226). Kean Gibson (2005a: 209) has argued that Komfa plays a similar role in Guyana, inasmuch as it "is the focal point for the expression of national and cultural identity," both for those who embrace it and those who do not. As Michael Taussig (1997) observes regarding the dialectical relationship between María Lionza and the Venezuelan state, the "cult" has not functioned as merely oppositional, but rather as a mutually co-constitutive structural aspect of the state, which employs María Lionza to define and reproduce the state itself in juxtaposition to the "cult's" imagined alterity. Komfa performs a related role in symbolically representing Guyanese histories and identities *for* the powerful, yet it specifically serves this function also for the most precariously positioned Guyanese—living practitioners, as well as their reanimated collaborators. For generations, as a "particular[ly] woman-centered religion," María Lionza has provided "a refuge for the excluded sectors of Venezuelan society (prostitutes, Afro-descendants, homosexuals, or poor people, among others)," including, importantly, Black and indigenous women (Nichols 2006: 76; Canals 2017: 15, citing Pollak-Eltz 2004 [1972]). Komfa has likewise served marginalized people of the past and continues to do so today, often in its contemporary capacity as a "place where different streams of 'subjugated knowledge' have found their most visible and spectacular expression" (Ferrándiz 1992: 35). Komfa's diverse ways of "producing persons" has continuously assisted adherents in realizing themselves, securing their places in the world "beyond social classes and ethnic differences," as has been noted of María Lionza as well as other Black Atlantic devotional practices (Canals 2017: 15). For what "characterizes the goddess," as well as Komfa's special

forces, is “her permanent ‘possibility for figuration,’” nurturing in mediums “an endless capacity to become” (ibid.: 8, quoting Taussig 1997: 169).

Cultivating relations and selves beyond ordinary horizons has been a core tactic that mainly Indigenous and Afro-descendant “women have pursued in Venezuela as a means for challenging the ‘hierarchical’ orders of society,” be they patriarchal, anti-Black, Christian supremacist, or so forth, values also deeply entrenched in Guyanese social life, as elsewhere (Canals 2017: 15, quoting Nichols 2006: 76). Initiating, magnifying, and maintaining “contact across the cosmic divide” is a dynamic process presenting potent openings through which practitioners in countless traditions have engaged worlds distanced from those they considered “their own” (Schuler 2002: 346). That is, until they themselves are changed and expanded through learning more of the world and the people in it—people who, if one has sought deeply enough, may already be there within oneself waiting to be greeted, recognized, perpetually remembered, and praised. Through this deeply interpersonal and communal Work, Komfa spirits and their Spiritual families choose to honor common humanity through death, while unrelentingly reckoning with living humanity’s collective, ongoing failings.

Despite formal enslavement’s abolition over one hundred and eighty years ago in British Guiana, people are still all too often pitilessly dispossessed of their sovereign beings—through legal or extralegal *postcolonial custom* (cf. Chin 2012; Dayan 2001). And so Komfa spirits are also still *Working* for their contemporary devotees by repossessing lives in multiples within otherwise unitary human bodies and communities constructed as “racially,” “ethnically,” or “religiously” distinct. Ancestors thus manifest to incarnate their many pasts into ever-multiplying perspectives on the imminent future, and, particularly, the “weight” of those pasts on the unfolding of destinies (Lambek 2002). While seemingly anchored in hazy histories of the long-

ago dead, practitioners draw on Komfa's efficacies primarily in contending with present and forthcoming concerns they face. Not only are these *exceptional* rites of the ancestors, then, as they also represent contemporary Spiritualists' *everyday* means of surviving within the fraught cultural politics of their national and local community lives.

**Section I.**

***POLITRICKS / DUTTY / FORCES***



## CHAPTER 2

### **“Guyana is a model of interfaith harmony”: World Religions, Little Traditions, and Masked Marginalizations of the Nation-State**<sup>83</sup>

From the time I was growing up I know something was wrong and not until I went to Suriname I see my culture and was wondering why is only the Amerindians practicing this culture and I ask one of the brethren over there and he said I n I have to stand up to our roots and culture so I ask him what is roots and what is culture are they not the same? He then said the Roots is the teaching and the Culture is the practice. This make I know that black people in Guyana have no culture. This is what has been Stolen from us Long time now . The Amerindians is the only ones and the Indians still worship their gods but when it comes to black people we are lost. I am blaming England for this . Burhnam [sic] was right return to your culture . Why you feel Mr Burhnam [sic] use to go to Cuffy and Worship , but when the man go, we same black people does say is Obea he working . So whatch a thing here now .... WHERE IS THE BLACK MAN CULTURE ?... When the Spiritual People do their thing we black people does say is Obea . So what we really asking now for the same Jesus they leave us with?  
—Simone “I Sheba” Bacchus<sup>84</sup>

A mourner in the Mohurrum  
Procession, mixing blood with  
Mud, memory with memory.  
—Agha Shahid Ali<sup>85</sup>

So begins our journey into *Politricks / Dutty / Forces*, or the sly and barefaced politics of “soil,” “blood,” and powerful religious dynamisms of the nation (cf. Arendt 1963). Concentrating broadly on Guyanese social politics and politics of culture through the three chapters in this initial section will help situate the contexts through which Komfa practitioners navigate in their

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<sup>83</sup> Quote in the title is from President David Granger’s address at World Interfaith Harmony Week’s opening “Prayer Breakfast” on February 1, 2017. While I was present for Granger’s address and have my own transcript, here I quote from the record made available through the Ministry of the Presidency. See <https://motp.gov.gy/index.php/2015-07-20-18-49-38/2015-07-20-18-50-14/1697-guyana-is-a-model-of-interfaith-harmony-president-granger>.

<sup>84</sup> Facebook, public post, 13 March 2020. Punctuation and spelling have been left unaltered. I Sheba is a dear friend, who introduced me to the first Spiritualist gathering I ever attended, in July 2014 in Agricola village.

<sup>85</sup> From Ali’s “Bones,” the initial poem in his first collection, *Bone-sculpture* (1972), and as also quoted in Marina Carter and Khal Torabully’s *Coolitude: An Anthology of the Indian Labor Diaspora* (2002: 110).

daily lives. While active Spiritualists are said to comprise a small fraction of the Guyanese populace, representations of Komfa have played outsized roles in popular constructions of the nation and of Guyanese subjectivities. Taken together, these chapters provide an understanding of how nationalist ideological projections of Guyana's cultural and religious pluralism have typically masked the ways that the "secularist" state continues to structurally marginalize Komfa and its practitioners. Discriminations informed by the policies and practices of colonial and postcolonial regimes continue to harm many Guyanese in their quotidian struggles for forms of existential recognition. Yet Spiritualists are perhaps tormented by the state and its conflicted ideologies of "harmony in difference" more so than most all other segments of their co-citizenry, despite the recent work of governmental bodies like the Ministry of Social Cohesion, the national Ethnic Relations Commission, and the Inter-Religious Organisation of Guyana, all considered below. At certain brief moments, these "political" discussions might seem to stray from directly addressing the issues most central to Komfa communities. However, from reviewing pertinent events surrounding the nation's most recent elections, to episodes of "ethnic conflict" and "race riots" in the lead up to and after independence, these treatments furnish necessary groundwork for analyses of Komfa's positions—and Komfa People's positionalities—within Guyanese socio-historical terrains. Such wider considerations will also then contribute to more nuanced examinations of the explicit significances Komfa brings to people's lives, which remains the guiding emphasis throughout all sections and chapters to follow.

### **United Nations World Interfaith Harmony Week**

The contentious grounds of religious cultural representation within Guyana's politics of nationalism are brought into sharp relief each year during a week-long series of events associated

with United Nations World Interfaith Harmony Week (WIHW). Held annually in Georgetown and other areas of the country in the first week of February since its inception in 2011, these UN-sponsored activities are geared towards celebrating Guyana's local religious diversity, while likewise bolstering the state's purported status as international exemplar of interreligious concord. During events surrounding WIHW, the political ideals of nationalist pluralism are paraded and fêted. These same ideologies often also become directly questioned and challenged by participants at such occasions, particularly those professing marginalized faiths, who demand not just a seat to listen in on the various forums, but a voice at the mic for policymakers, press, and publics to consider. For if, as President David Granger has recently said at one such event, "Guyana is a model of interfaith harmony," then why do many Guyanese report feeling discouraged in openly performing their faiths or publicly identifying with their own devotional cultures?<sup>86</sup> Exploring the incongruities between national ideals of plural statehood will prove instructive, as well as how such prescriptions play out within the lives of those comprising the Guyanese body politic, onto whom such an ethics of "interfaith harmony" has been projected.

As one of the twenty-nine original co-sponsoring signatory nation-states, Guyana has recognized the UN's global program of "interfaith harmony" since the initiative was first proposed in 2010. Adopted by the UN General Assembly less than a month later on October 20, 2010, the resolution was introduced by King Abdullah II bin Al-Hussein and Prince Ghazi bin Mohammed bin Talal of Jordan. In a speech presenting the draft initiative before the General Assembly, Prince Ghazi dramatically outlined a call for social institutions around the world to support the promotion of peaceful nonviolence through "the Confucian concept of 'harmony.'"<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> David Granger at Umana Yana, 1 Feb 2017, as discussed below.

<sup>87</sup> A complete transcript and video of Prince Ghazi's October 20, 2010 proposal addressing the U. N. is available through the official WIHW website. See <https://worldinterfaithharmonyweek.com/h-r-h-prince-ghazi-bin->

Prince Ghazi told the Assembly in New York that “our world is rife with religious tension and, sadly, mistrust, dislike and hatred. These religious tensions can easily erupt into communal violence. They also facilitate the demonizing of the other which in turn predisposes public opinion to support war against peoples of other religions.” He related that “tolerance” is inadequate, as the concept tends to “suggest that the other is so negative they have to be ‘tolerated.’”<sup>88</sup> Similarly, the Prince stated, “we cannot use ‘acceptance’ because it implies that religions accept each other’s doctrines rather than their right to those doctrines,” and likewise, “we cannot use the term ‘peace’ alone because it suggests merely the absence of war, and not necessarily the absence of hatred.”

Along with serving as King Abdullah II’s Personal Envoy, Special Advisor, and Chief Advisor on Cultural and Religious Affairs, Prince Ghazi is also a professor of philosophy. In 2007, two years after being appointed to Full Professor at the University of Jordan, Prince Ghazi penned an open letter from global Islamic leaders (138 cosigned) and addressed to Christian leadership, specifically Pope Benedict XVI and other “Patriarchs of the Orthodox Churches.”<sup>89</sup> Prince Ghazi’s letter, titled “A Common Word between Us and You” (usually “A Common Word”), served at the time to intervene in the ever-growing rift between Muslim and Christian communities worldwide that had been recently exacerbated when Pope Benedict publicly quoted Byzantine Emperor Manuel II Palaiologos’s highly critical sentiments regarding the Prophet Mohammad’s teachings. In turning that moment of increasing strife into a teachable lesson on

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[muhammad-delivers-kings-world-interfaith-harmony-week-proposal-at-un/](#). All subsequent statements quoted from Prince Ghazi are references to this transcript.

<sup>88</sup> One can compare Prince Ghazi’s sentiments to those presented by Wendy Brown in *Regulating Aversion* (2006), where she argues for more critical attention to the “dark” side of “tolerance.”

<sup>89</sup> See the 2009 publication of The Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought, titled *A Common Word Between Us and You*.

“the forces inciting inter-religious tensions (notable among them being religious fundamentalisms of various kinds),” Prince Ghazi’s letter served for many Muslims and Christians as a meaningful mediation into the politics of “extremist terror.”<sup>90</sup> So successful was the Prince’s “A Common Word” initiative thought to be, that when he and King Abdullah II proposed an annual weeklong global recognition of the need for interfaith harmony to the UN, including wording from the letter, the resolution was quickly adopted by the General Assembly.

As the background to implementing WIHW demonstrates, the UN’s program is based on what was initially an intervention into a much more narrowly drawn—yet globally heightened—context of interreligious “tensions” between Christians and Muslims. Prince Ghazi made his attention to rising Islamophobia and reactions to it around the world clear in his resolution proposal speech when he quoted “the results of...one of the largest international religious surveys in history.” The 2008 Gallop poll he referred to found that “53% of Westerners have ‘unfavorable’ or ‘very unfavorable’ opinions of Muslims and 30% of Muslims polled worldwide hold negative views of Christians.”<sup>91</sup> While no such surveys exist for assessing Guyanese “favorable” or “unfavorable” attitudes regarding different local religiosities, it is likely the case that in Guyana more than thirty or even fifty percent of the populace would report to “hold negative views of” Spiritualists, especially if identified in such a poll as either “Komfa” or “Obeah” practitioners. Furthermore, the whole notion of “A Common Word” upon which the resolution was based holds that these *two* faiths, Islam and Christianity, share in a long-revered textual tradition that is illustrated by the resolution text’s “mention of ‘Love of God and Love of

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<sup>90</sup> Quote, including parentheses, is from the transcript of Ghazi’s U. N. address, cited above.

<sup>91</sup> Gallop began tracking religion on its daily survey starting in 2008. See Frank Newport (2016) and <https://news.gallup.com/poll/157082/islamophobia-understanding-anti-muslim-sentiment-west.aspx>.

the Neighbor, or Love of the Good and Love of the Neighbor, ” drawn from Prince Ghazi’s letter to Pope Benedict.<sup>92</sup>

As the United Nations’ website documents, the first event marking WIHW took place in 2012, when an “interfaith forum gathered Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Hindu and Buddhist faith leaders to talk about the teachings of their respective faiths as it relates to peace and harmony.”<sup>93</sup> That first forum, which as the website’s narrative makes clear focused representation on “the Big 5” global faiths, was co-sponsored by Ethiopia’s Permanent Mission to the United Nations and was organized in large part by the United African Congress. So while the initial premise of the initiative sprang from distinctly Christian-Muslim conflict, by the first event the scope had broadened to include those other people of “the Book,” namely Jews, as well as Hindus and Buddhists. These “Big 5,” or what Max Weber (1991 [1948]) considered “the world religions,” represent the customarily legitimate subjects of the disciplinary study of Religion (singular with capital “R”), the boundaries of which have long foreclosed “Other” devotional traditions, or religions, to the margins as “cults,” “sects,” “superstition,” or “magic,” not to mention such sincerely faithful practices which scholars, colonial administrators, and lay people alike have characterized as “sorcery” or “witchcraft.”<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Quote from Ghazi’s address to U. N., 2010.

<sup>93</sup> See the WIHW timeline page titled “Building Bridges Across Boundaries” on the U. N. official website, at <https://www.un.org/en/observances/interfaith-harmony-week>.

<sup>94</sup> Though Weber’s (1991 [1948]) “world religions” include Buddhism, Christianity, Hindu, Islam, Judaism, and Confucianism. For Weber, Judaism is the outlier, not Confucianism, and he includes Judaism “because it contains historical preconditions decisive for understanding Christianity and Islamism [sic],” among other reasons. Thinking about histories of how the category of “religion” has been distinguished (from what?), located, and contained become important here, and one can follow the incisive example of John Burris’s *Exhibiting Religion* (2001) which reconstructs the creation of the World Parliament of Religion through interrogating its massive exhibitions in London and Chicago in the late-1800s. Burris (2001: 126) shows how the discipline of anthropology had constructed Indigenous American Indians as “cultural” objects of study which prompted the newly established field of religious studies to consider as their objects those groups said to have “religion,” fundamentally disregarding Indigenous Americans as “ethnic” or “cultural” rather than “religious” and authorizing such conceptions of difference exemplified by Weber’s distinguishing of “the world religions.” For similar processes of

It did not take long, however, before those organizing the UN's nascent activities surrounding WIHW realized the exclusionary premises of their original initiatives. In 2013, organizers attempted to remedy the structural exclusion built into the first year's events by, as the UN website states, "extending this gathering to include the faith and value systems of indigenous peoples by inviting an African spiritual leader" representing "the Dosso faith" who came from Guinea to UN Headquarters to attend.<sup>95</sup> "Extending" the gathering again, the 2014 events were dedicated to the memory of Nelson Mandela, while in 2016 the organizers "invited Native American Spiritual leader, the ceremonial ritualist from the Mohawk Nation to participate with the other faith leaders."<sup>96</sup> While recognizing the noble intentions of the UN and other organizers, still, in what ways can the inclusion of representatives from long-stigmatized and terrorized communities of faith translate into tangible forms of "harmony" within the lives of these same people, not merely "extend" "tolerance," "acceptance," or "peace" alone, the avowal of which Prince Ghazi tells us, may obscure the presence of submerged—or very candid—forms of "hatred?"

### **Guyana's World Interfaith Harmony Week**

The growth of Guyana's local events marking WIHW has not necessarily followed a similar trajectory as modelled by the UN in gradually incorporating those "demonized" religious Others to which Prince Ghazi alludes in his UN speech. While the first UN forum marking WIHW was not held until February 2012 according to their website, as a co-sponsor of the original

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disciplinarily de/legitimizing categories of "religion"/"culture" in sub-Saharan African contexts, see David Chidester (1996, 2014). For an important comparative account from Trinidad and Tobago, see Alex Rocklin (2019).

<sup>95</sup> Quote is from U. N. webpage titled "Building Bridges Across Boundaries" cited above. On Dosso people and their religion, one can see Paul Lovejoy and J. S. Hogendorn (1990).

<sup>96</sup> Quote is also from U. N. website titled "Building Bridges Across Boundaries" cited above.

resolution, Guyanese authorities were eager to begin honoring the initiative. On February 1, 2011, roughly three months after the resolution's formal adoption by UN General Assembly, the Guyanese government organized a well-attended inaugural event hosted on the lawns and gardens surrounding State House on Georgetown's Main Street. Built in 1858 as Government House and serving as the official residence of the Governor of British Guiana, upon independence in 1966 the imposing wooden structure and grounds were renamed as State House and it became residence of the President.<sup>97</sup> An opening ceremony was officiated by Prime Minister Samuel Hinds, after which a number of local religious leaders offered prayers and shared their thoughts on themes of "respect and tolerance, underscoring the oneness and unifying potential of religion" (*Guyana Chronicle* 2 February 2011).

Important to note, and reflecting Guyana's "plural" religious landscape, is that this very first Guyanese iteration of WIHW already included a wide range of representatives of Guyana's many faith groups, including, as the *Guyana Chronicle* (2 February 2011) reported at the time, "Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Baha'is, Indigenous Peoples, Mystical Apostolic Council [sic] and Rastafarians." The peculiar sounding "Mystical Apostolic Council" [sic] refers, reductively and euphemistically, to Komfa People and practitioners of other idioms that relate to Komfa in complex ways to be explored further below. As a clue to understanding the ambiguous positions Komfa holds in Guyanese society, however, the newspaper's deployment of "Mystical Apostolic Council" seems to signal attempts by those holding institutional forms of authority to circumvent "naming," identifying, and otherwise recognizing those faith groups and individuals comprising them. The vague and unfamiliar title "Mystical Apostolic Council" as used (erroneously) in the

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<sup>97</sup> Although, certain national leaders, including Forbes Burnham and his successor Hugh Desmond Hoyte, have chosen to reside elsewhere. During their terms in office, both Burnham and Hoyte lived in Castellani House, which now is home to Guyana's National Gallery of Art, situated adjacent to the Cuffy monument, discussed below.



quote above seems to obscure more than it honors the practitioners and traditions it seeks to label, particularly in how the phrase disguises and attempts to erase those local practices which have long been vilified specifically through terms such as “Komfa” and “Obeah.”

As Obeah and associated practices have remained formally criminalized in Guyana, as in much of the Caribbean, since at least the wake of Emancipation, official sources such as media outlets are reticent to call people “Obeah” -men or -women, nor are such practitioners often forward in self-identifying as such. That is, publicly and to certain official sources, as a number of members of the Guyana United Apostolic Mystical Council (GUAMC), as the organization is officially known, have been forthright in explaining that what they *do* through their faith practices can be justifiably called “Obeah,” although not in the pejorative senses extended by European colonizers nor upheld through Guyana’s current legal codes. Never have I seen reportage on WIHW in the decade of its existence that mentions participation by “Obeah” practitioners, and seldom are “Spiritualists,” “Faithists,” or “Komfa People” mentioned as such, with reference to and inclusion of GUAMC members often omitted.

Following the initial events at State House, a parade was held on February 3, 2011, starting from Georgetown’s WWI memorial Cenotaph on Main Street and ending at the Promenade Gardens, across from the open field that once served as the colonial Militia Parade Grounds.<sup>98</sup> Dubbed the “Harmony Walk,” the day’s events included much live music and dancing, both along the route led by the local Salvation Army band and at the Gardens, where presentations were made by various faith leaders. Bishop Juan Edghill led the parade as well as

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<sup>98</sup> The Parade Grounds is a site of “historical catastrophe,” where the British Guianese administration conducted military rituals including the execution of enslaved and other colonial subjects. The grounds served in particular as a location for exhibiting the remains of executed persons, most memorably after what is known as the 1823 Demerara Revolt, discussed in Chapter 6. Many years of activism calling for a memorial to be created at the Parade Grounds were answered in 2017 when President Granger announced plans to commission a public display in remembrance of the significant historical rebellion. On Granger’s announcement, see *Guyana Chronicle* (22 August 2017).

the prayers and talks to follow. Bishop Edghill had also chaired the proceedings two days prior at the initial event, after Prime Minister Hinds's opening remarks, while then-President Bharrat Jagdeo was out of the county at the time.<sup>99</sup> *Kaieteur News's* (4 February 2011) coverage from the event that day tells us that “present were leaders from the Muslim, Christian, Hindu, Baha'i and Rastafarian faiths,” and the *Chronicle* (4 February 2011) reported that “Guyana's cultural, ethnic, and religious pluralism [...] was celebrated very beautifully and poignantly in the Promenade Gardens.” While GUAMC members' presence at the parade and proceedings was omitted from *Kaieteur News's* reportage, *Guyana Chronicle* (ibid.) noted that “the magnificent drumming of the Guyana United Mystical Apostolic Council [sic] had everyone tapping their feet,” likely a reference to Komfa drumming.

During the presentations and discussion following the parade, Bishop Edghill noted that the events thus far had been very well attended and enthusiastically received. He also stated that “not very often you would find all religious organisations coming together in one place to celebrate, but this week was exceptional” (*Kaieteur News* 4 February 2011). The *Kaieteur* (ibid.) article goes on to relate certain senses of acceptance and concern expressed by Ras Simeon, President of the Guyana Rastafari Council, on behalf of members of “the Rastafarian faith.” Ras Simeon thanked the organizers, conveying that “being accepted and allowed to be a part of ‘World Interfaith Harmony Week’ has given even more recognition” to Rastafari from Guyanese citizens and state, adding further that while Rastas “are pleased with most practices of the Inter-Religious Organisation,” they still have “some issues which they will be pursuing, such as the

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<sup>99</sup> A controversial figure, Edgehill became a Member of Parliament with the PPP/C in 2013, as he remains as of this writing, and was in 2011 first made a Junior Minister in the PPP's Ministry of Finance. In the early 2000s, Edgehill is said to have influenced then-President Jagdeo into not signing laws that were unanimously passed by Parliament, which would have removed legal discriminations against LGBTQ people, and is remembered today for his relationship with Jagdeo and his alleged, more recent role in benefiting from illegitimate practices under the PPP.

sacramental use of the ‘holy herb’” (ibid.). The Inter-Religious Organisation of Guyana (IRO), a major supporter and organizer of WIHW, is a nongovernmental entity whose “objective is to foster the collaboration of all religious organisations with a view to bringing about the spiritual, intellectual & economic advancement of the people of Guyana.”<sup>100</sup> The IRO has developed an often fraught relationship with the Guyanese state, its role in advocating for harmony among Guyana’s faith groups being “largely supplanted” by the interests of the Ethnic Relations Commission (ERC), which the government established in 2000 (U. S. Dept. of State 2007).<sup>101</sup>

Further to the point, Ras Simeon shared with those gathered his distress over felt injustices as he and “other dedicated persons to the faith are not being allowed to practice their religion, as it is in the case of others,” alluding to the plights of similar African-inspired local religiosities, like Komfa (*Kaieteur News* 4 February 2011). “We are not being given equal opportunities and this is unfair,” Ras Simeon asserted (ibid.). In conversations, Ras Simeon has directly equated the struggles faced by Rastafari today with those imposed on their Komfa-practicing, enslaved and formerly enslaved, forebears, whose forms of devotion were violently suppressed and—in some cases remain—legally forbidden. Not all Rastafari in Guyana are unguarded in speaking of the intimate interconnections between their own faith and that of their ancestors, and many are unwilling to entertain the idea that “Komfa” or “Obeah” could be a part of *their* cultural heritage. “*Rasta no deal in spirit and dead,*” I’ve been told, “*only in life, not in dead.*” Yet in our own discussions, Ras Simeon and others have been quick to acknowledge the many dimensions of Rastafari faith, particularly of the Nyabinghi Order, that resonate with, and no doubt share intersecting pasts with Komfa, including but not limited to a central focus on

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<sup>100</sup> Quote is from the IRO website (hosted by Facebook).

<sup>101</sup> Also see “Ethnic Relations Commission Tribunal Act” of 2000, Laws of Guyana.

drumming while chanting/singing and dancing in a ring together with other participants around a hallowed altar-space, all through the night and into the morning.

So while Guyana's initial foray into implementing the UN's agenda of "interfaith harmony" included "extending" the platform to certain marginalized faith groups, the strategy that press and government utilized in morally "sanitizing" their representations of those who refer to themselves as "Komfa People," "Spiritual People," "Spiritualists," or "Faithists," continued to further marginalize those participants. Likewise, just because the umbrella organization thought to speak for the interests of Komfa's diverse gatherings (GUAMC) was invited to participate, does not mean that Komfa people, as individuals or communities, felt that their concerns were addressed through such events. Similarly, at the first "Harmony March," one individual from the Guyana Maha Kali All Religious Organisation presented a *bhajan* (devotional song) to invoke "'the protective blessings of the universal mother on the children of the world' because," as the *Guyana Chronicle* (4 February 2011) explains, "Hinduism is a way of life for the family of mankind." As an adjacent and correspondingly stigmatized practice in comparison to Komfa, Kali Mai devotees comprise a substantial constituency, though they do not necessarily always consider themselves "Hindu."<sup>102</sup> Nevertheless, Kali Mai seems to have been represented at this first WIHW parade through their "umbrella" organization, which—like GUAMC for Komfa People and Faithists—functions largely as a bureaucratic channel through

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<sup>102</sup> I refer to "Hindu practices" or "Hindu forms of devotion," and so forth, throughout, to avoid the infelicitous construction "Hinduism," because as much historical scholarship has detailed, these are polycentric traditions exhibiting unities through diversities, with "Hindu" being a geographical and cultural term. See, for example, Arvind Sharma (2002). Case in point, Kali Mai devotion, discussed most centrally in Chapter 5, is thought to have come to Guyana from "pre"-Hindu Dravidian practices brought by bonded South Asian "Madrassi" laborers as the Goddess Mariamman (or Mariyamman), who for many practitioners is still considered distinct from what are known locally as "Hindu" deities and practices, although Kali is often also claimed as a Hindu deity. For varying accounts regarding historical constructions of these particular South Asian religiosities as "Hindu" devotional and identity practices, see Dennis Bassier (1987), Stephanie George (2018), Stephanie Jackson (2016), Sinah Kloß (2016a, 2016b), Morton Klass (1960), Keith McNeal (2003, 2011, 2012, 2013), McNeal, Kumar Mahabir, and Paul Younger (2014), Teruyuki Tsuji (2009), Steven Vertovec (1993, 1994), and Paul Younger (2002, 2010).

which *certain* practitioners and *certain* communities of practice endeavor to secure forms of recognition and support primarily from Guyanese state bodies but also from nongovernmental interests.

While some religious groupings and some particular organizations and individuals had opportunities to voice their collective or personal concerns vis-à-vis “religious tolerance” and national religious representation, others did not. Indigenous Guyanese, for example, *never* seem to have their Native faiths recognized nor honored—let alone made present—through WIHW or related events. Perhaps imagined to be even “farther removed” from the validated category of “world religions” than either Komfa or Kali Mai which continue to be associated with Christian and Hindu practices respectively, Indigenous “Amerindian” religions remain particularly misunderstood and maligned in Guyanese popular discourses. Not everyone can be invited to speak or perform at such national occasions, and, as is certainly true of Komfa and Kali Mai, all faith traditions entertain degrees of internal inconsistencies and *intrareligious* divergences, which makes sharing all perspectives practicably impossible. This celebration of pluralistic, multicultural inclusion, however, which all the while masked the marginalization faced by those whose views and faith traditions were not given presence, remained a repeating feature of WIHW events in subsequent years, as we shall see.

### **Paradoxes of “O Beautiful” Guyana’s “deep reverence for God”<sup>103</sup>**

In the years since Guyana’s first WIHW in 2011, events marking the occasion in the first week of February have persisted and expanded, even while the politics of national leadership have undergone dramatic shifts. The opening ceremony of Guyana’s second annual WIHW, in 2012,

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<sup>103</sup> “O Beautiful Guyana” is from a patriotic “national song.” “Deep reverence...” comes from Amna Ally, who at the time of the quote was Guyana’s Minister of Social Cohesion (in Samaroo 2016). See discussion below.

was presided over by the newly elected President Donald Ramotar, who like his predecessor Jagdeo, represents the People's Progressive Party (PPP), which has traditionally drawn much of its support from the Indo-Guyanese populace. The event was held at the National Culture Centre, Guyana's premiere venue which is a massive building seating 2,000 that was constructed during the Presidency of Forbes Burnham, longtime leader of the People's National Congress (PNC), the political party that has traditionally received much support from Afro-Guyanese. Patriotic odes were sung, including the National Anthem, "Dear Land of Guyana, of Rivers and Plains," as well as what are known as "National Songs," including "O Beautiful Guyana." Prayers were presented, and remarks offered by the various religious leaders whom organizers gathered for the occasion, namely, "from the Hindu, Rastafarian, Christian, Muslim and Baha'i faiths" (*Guyana Chronicle* 2 February 2012).

Much emphasis was placed by speakers at the event on the envisioned special position Guyana maintains as a harmonious, multicultural, and "interfaith" nation. As the *Chronicle* (2 February 2012) reported, "Guyana holds the reputation as a country highly tolerant of religious diversity, and according to President Ramotar, is setting the precedent for other countries where devotion to faith comes at the cost of persecution." "Our people have absolute freedom to observe and celebrate their faith," President Ramotar declared in his address (*ibid.*). "That freedom is not only guaranteed by our Constitution, but there is a genuine respect for religious freedom on the part of the government," he claimed, taking "the firm stand that Guyana rejects the notion that 'any person or any people can be stigmatised or prosecuted because of religion,' and that the government will repudiate any government, organisation or person to subject people to policies that restrict the pursuit of their faith" (*ibid.*). As a mainstay of both Guyanese colonial and anticolonial nationalist political rhetoric, perhaps now reinforced through the events

surrounding WIHW, reference to some distinctive form of Guyana-specific religious tolerance is not new to Ramotar and certainly did not end with his administration either.

Indeed, as early as 2008, at an “inter-faith conference” organized by Guyana’s Ethnic Relations Commission (ERC), President Jagdeo made reference to Guyana’s preeminent position in supporting religious freedoms and interreligious concord. “We have something to teach to the rest of the world,” Jagdeo stated, “and here in this land we need all of our people working together to achieve the ideals and dreams of our people” (*Kaieteur News* 21 November 2008). The event, held at the Guyana International Conference Centre on the East Coast Demerara, was titled “Propagating One’s Faith in a Multi-Cultural, Multi-Religious Society.”<sup>104</sup> *Kaieteur News* (ibid.) reported, implausibly, that the conference “saw participation from religious leaders in all faiths from all the regions of Guyana.” Urging those religious leaders and others present to recognize Guyana’s unique status, Jagdeo stressed that countries around the world “struggling with religious issues” had much to gain from following Guyana’s example (ibid.). “We can teach them about good governance and tolerance in the area of religion, and not stereotyping people based on the way they look, or because of their religion,” the President told those gathered (ibid.).

Still, President Jagdeo recognized in his remarks that day that as a “plural” postcolonial society, “forged out of foreign intervention,” Guyanese continued to face many obstacles in their daily lives, “and foreign hands play a significant role in shaping the challenges that are being faced today,” he added (*Kaieteur News* 21 November 2008). Despite such problems, “religious leaders should be the ones leading the people to enlightenment, peace, harmony, tolerance and respect,” according to *Kaieteur News* (ibid.). “Because,” as Jagdeo told the crowd, “in this world,

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<sup>104</sup> Now called the Arthur Chung Convention Centre, after Guyana’s first President who was elected when Guyana became a republic in 1970 under the leadership of Prime Minister Burnham.

not having multi-cultural skills, not understanding other people, not having tolerance is darkness” (ibid.).

On a whole, Guyanese tend to consider themselves highly devout and religiously oriented in their moral outlooks, regardless of denominational affiliations. One can consider the notion of “visual citizenship,” whereby Guyanese express their allegiance to nation and national identity—at least in part—through modes of popular material religious (re)presentation, with Psalms, other sacred texts, and Gods and Goddesses extolled on display everywhere one looks, particularly on cars, buses, and businesses (A. Roberts 2017).<sup>105</sup> Politicians and other government workers, schoolteachers included, as well as faith-based and other community leaders, often “remind” others of this self-ascribed, heightened national piety.<sup>106</sup> “Guyanese are a religious people,” is the common refrain, and when such a sentiment can be ushered to meet the moral demands of a particular moment, it will surely be called forth. Paradoxically, however, is that such forms of steadfast devotion potentially engender both inflexible, dogmatic, and doctrinaire hostilities towards those professing “other” faiths, as well as senses of equality, correspondence, and reciprocal recognition.<sup>107</sup> Guyanese being “a religious people” does not inescapably equate to “interfaith harmony,” and moreover can and often does, as Jagdeo noted, result in conflict, violence, and immeasurable loss.

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<sup>105</sup> One can also consider the compelling work by Mirzoeff (2002 [1998], 2014), and others, on visual cultures.

<sup>106</sup> To illustrate by way of (a somewhat dated) regional comparison, one textbook on religious education in the Caribbean claims that “there are more churches per person in Jamaica than in any other country in the world” (Keene 2003: 4). Similarly, an author in *Christianity Today* wrote in 1999 that “there are more churches per square kilometer on this island nation [Jamaica] than anywhere on earth” (Olsen 1999). Guyanese might be prone to argue that, per capita at least, Guyana has more, yet these differences are hard to quantify, especially as Jamaica’s census records—according to *The Gleaner*—do not provide “a count of local church buildings” (Chisholm 2012).

<sup>107</sup> Aisha Khan (2004: 6) describes a similar paradox in relation to “Trinidadian concerns about mixing and its antithesis, purity,” in that like tensions surrounding religious identities, ethnoracial identities can be mobilized in nurturing equality and in reinforcing social and cultural hierarchies. As Khan’s work demonstrates, racio-religious identities can serve as intertwining instruments of equality and exploitation.



At an event to launch Guyana's 2016 WIHW, then-Minister of Social Cohesion, Amna Ally, "reminded" the crowd that "Guyana has always been a country with a deep reverence for God" (Samaroo 2016). The recent transition of national political leadership following the contentious elections of mid-2015, was still hot on many people's minds. In light of that apprehensive atmosphere, Minister Ally suggested that as a national "approach to development," "there was an increasing role for religion and goodwill in fostering social cohesion" (ibid.).<sup>108</sup> Inter-relational and societal tensions often mount accompanying elections, and particularly when a significant shift of leadership or national party-rule ensues.

In May of 2015, retired Brigadier General and former Commander of the Guyanese military, David Arthur Granger, who is also a widely published historian of the Caribbean, led his multi-party coalition to a close victory over the PPP, which had held continuous power since 1992. Granger's coalition, A Partnership for National Unity (APNU) and Alliance for Change (AFC), of which the PNC is the largest constituent, was at the time of the election promoted as a "multiracial bloc," with their success was seen as disrupting the ethnoracial dualism long entrenched in Guyana's party politics, the emergence of which predates even Guyanese statehood.<sup>109</sup> In inaugurating the first WIHW under his presidency, on February 1, 2016 Granger used his morning keynote address to call on religious and other cultural and civic organizations

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<sup>108</sup> Opinions differ on the matter, and longtime *Kaieteur News* columnist and local journalistic activist Freddie Kissoon (2017) has publicly questioned if "God has turned his back on Guyana" in "juxtapos[ing] the Guyanese statistics on religious people with our practice of sin." Kissoon (2017) feels that "per capita [...] compared with other countries, Guyana must have one of the highest rates of [immorality]" as evidenced by the number of "incest accused; child molesters, reckless drivers, homicides, suicides, young sadistic robbers, divorcees, unprofessional police officials, corrupt politicians, gamblers, industrial violation cases, human rights atrocities etc."

<sup>109</sup> For characterizations of APNU+AFC as a "multiracial bloc," and "fusion between the traditional black party and a smaller third party," whose campaign platform consisted of a proposal to "break" the PPP's "hegemony," see Marks (2015a, 2015b) and *passim*.

to recognize that “interfaith harmony is an obligation if Guyana is to advance social cohesiveness.”<sup>110</sup>

Emphasizing the sort of political rhetoric which got him and his “multiracial bloc” elected, Granger reminded the crowd—and nation—through his first WIHW speech that “Guyana is a multi-ethnic and multi-religious State. Guyana is proud of its religious diversity. Our diversity is our strength, not a source of weakness,” he announced. “We cannot be a happy people or enjoy a ‘good life’ in the midst of discord, distrust; disharmony and social conflict. [...] The causes of most conflicts are varied and seem interminable. Many, however, have arisen out of religious intolerance.” Recognizing the potential role religions play in fostering social animosities, still, President Granger quickly returned to acknowledging that “Guyana is proud of its record of religious tolerance,” going on to note certain spatial and other realities of Guyanese “interfaith” dynamics, wherein “Churches, temples and mosques, in many communities, stand side by side.” In a next turn applauding Guyana’s alleged history of “tolerance,” Granger stated, quite deceptively, that “there have never been religious riots in Guyana. Guyana has been spared the agonies of religious fratricide.” While the overenthusiasm and optimism surrounding Guyana’s past and present state of “cohesion” as regards different religious groupings seems ubiquitous to the country’s political panglosses and pollyannas, conceptions of religious difference have long motivated and justified the vehement persecution of what Rhoda Reddock (1996, 1998), following Robert Redfield (1956) and Arthur and Juanita Niehoff (1960), has called local Caribbean “little traditions.”

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<sup>110</sup> A transcript of Granger’s February 1, 2016 speech is available through the Ministry of the Presidency’s website. All of the following quotes from Granger’s address that day are references to the MoTP’s website. See <https://motp.gov.gy/index.php/2015-07-20-18-49-38/2015-07-20-18-50-14/695-guyana-s-diverse-population-demands-greater-social-cohesion-president-at-launch-of-world-interfaith-harmony-week-in-guyana>.

## Secularist Nationalisms' Denials of "the Little Tradition/s": "The problem of coevalness"<sup>111</sup>

The opening event for 2017's WIHW, a "Prayer Breakfast" and interfaith symposium, was held at the newly reconstructed Umana Yana complex on Georgetown's Main Street near the Seawall, which in 2014 was destroyed by fire. Originally constructed under the aegis of Burnham as a venue for the international Non-Aligned Movement's Foreign Ministers Conference held there in 1972, Umana Yana is a large—fifty-five-foot-tall—*benab*, modelled after the traditional palm-thatched conical structures of Waiwai people, one of Guyana's nine (recognized) Indigenous groups.<sup>112</sup> In his address to those gathered for the Prayer Breakfast at Umana Yana, President Granger redeployed sentiments similar to those he had shared the year prior. He began by recognizing the nation-state's diverse demography, noting that "Guyana is a cosmopolitan state," before then focusing more directly on Guyanese religiosities.<sup>113</sup> "The majority of our people adhere to one of the world's major religions – Christianity, Hinduism and Islam," Granger remarked. He went on next to claim that "Guyana is a model of interfaith harmony," reframing Jagdeo's outlook from 2008, that "we [Guyanese] have something to teach to the rest of the world" in terms of "religious tolerance" (*Kaieteur News* 21 November 2008). Granger also echoed his own sanguine opinion from the previous year, maintaining that "the religious diversity which we enjoy has never degenerated into violent conflict," which was no "accident,"

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<sup>111</sup> "Little tradition" is from Redfield (1956), Reddock (1996, 1998), and Niehoff and Niehoff (1960: 156), and "the problem of coevalness" is from Fabian (2014 [1983]).

<sup>112</sup> Notwithstanding that the 2017 event was held at Umana Yana, no Waiwai or other Indigenous people were formally represented nor given an opportunity to speak through the symposium proceedings. Reports state that Burnham had a group of around sixty Waiwai people construct the original Umana Yana *benab* in 1972, and while Waiwai were also commissioned to rebuild the structure in 2016, the builders were not paid by the government for their work until a *Toshao* (tribal leader) "complained bitterly" to the national press (Chabrol 2016). Umana Yana is said to mean "meeting place of the people" in Waiwai language (Guyana Public Communications Agency 1990).

<sup>113</sup> All quotes from Granger's February 1, 2017 remarks are references to the transcript available through the official U. N. WIHW website. See <https://worldinterfaithharmonyweek.com/interfaith-harmony-and-the-cohesive-state/>. Other speakers quoted from that day in the following pages are references to my field notes, except where noted otherwise.

he assured, as “policies were purposefully pursued to promote peaceful coexistence by fostering interfaith harmony.”

In stark contrast to Granger’s rosy illustrations, many Spiritual People attest to how Guyana’s “religious diversity” can still today generate the kinds of “violent conflict” that state policies were purportedly produced to thwart. Practitioners have shared countless testimonies of abuses they and their predecessors have faced, some which will be related shortly and detailed further in the following chapter. I have also been witness to these cruelties firsthand: at a major public event marking a national holiday, while riding on a bus with acquaintances wearing their “lily-white” ritual robes, and during a sermon at an Evangelical Christian church. Albeit the mistreatments I observed might be deemed of a relatively milder form than many of those experienced by Komfa People of the past, and of the present whom I have not seen nor heard from, still, recounting these stories will be important. Not only do such demeaning experiences demonstrate how widespread misgivings and animosities shown towards Komfa people and their practices have directly harmful—often devastating—impacts in people’s lives, but these stories also illustrate how such *popular* polic(y)ing of religious difference is informed by “secularist” nation-state politics and their colonial precedents (cf. Rocklin 2019).

In his 2017 WIHW opening remarks, Granger offered support for his claim that interfaith “policies” had been established by the state “to promote peaceful coexistence” through reference to Guyana’s Constitution. In particular, he mentioned that the Constitution (Article 145) explicitly prohibits encroachments upon religious freedoms as he called for continued “tolerance of religious diversity” in the country. “Guyana is, under its supreme law – the Constitution of the Cooperative Republic of Guyana – ‘a secular state,’” he told the crowd. So although Guyanese consider themselves highly religious, as a “modern” nation-state in the tradition of classical (and

neo-)liberalism, Guyana has embraced the structures of “secular” governance. Constructions of postcolonial secularist nationalisms must be interrogated in light of their contextual specificities as the precepts of secularist political ideologies will be circumscribed and determined by these contexts. As Charles Taylor contends in *A Secular Age* (2007: 22, 157), universalist political philosophies that over-simplistically imagine secular modernity as the disenchanting national remnants which remain after religious illusion’s exorcism, serve merely as insufficient and ineffective “subtraction stories.”

Politicians noting their approval of religious diversity through listing off the “Big 5” “world religions” as represented in Guyana construct similar tales of negation in narrating the country’s paths taken towards “modernity.” Left out are Guyana’s many “little traditions,” and particularly egregious, is that religions which are indigenous to the country have become the most disregarded in such conceptions of national “progress.” Western scholarship, particularly in political science, anthropology, and related fields, is still confronting its deeply embedded social evolutionary thinking which has long relegated “the Other” to a lesser model of “natural” or “universal” temporality removed of “modernity.” Johannes Fabian (2014 [1983]: 32) compelled scholars decades ago to question the idea of “the traditional” (as in “little tradition,” in contrast to “world religion”) as “premodern,” perpetually stuck in an “allochronic” limbo of stagnated time. Fabian sought to problematize the value-laden language of social scientific and lay discourses of “modernity” that deny senses of “coevalness” between different peoples, primarily between Europeans and non-Europeans, often through deploying everyday tropes of “progress,” “development,” “tradition/al,” and “primitive.” As Fabian (2014 [1983]: 17–18, quoted in Milbourne et al 2015: 73) explains,

a discourse employing terms such as primitive, savage (but also tribal, traditional, third world or whatever euphemism is current), does not think, or observe, or critically study

“the primitive”; it thinks and observes in terms of the primitive. “Primitive” is essentially a temporal concept, a category, not an object of Western thought.

Cultural and denominational representation in the past decade of WIHW events has clearly displayed Guyana’s national disregard for the country’s “little traditions.” Particularly condemned have been those religions of Indigenous peoples and those thought to be of “local origin,” as politicians and “interfaith” organizations continue to frame these religions as “folk” practices left behind in a time standing still—that is, when such religions are mentioned at all. In Guyana’s moral order of religious politics, secular nationalist precepts have constructed “the world religions” as not just tolerable, in Prince Ghazi’s sense, but as promotable, wherein the Big 5 *ought* to be “helped to advanced” by the state on par with one another. Such “subtraction stories” leave the “local” or “little tradition” remainders—often belittled as “folk practices,” “*spiritual*” or “superstitious traditions,” “ancestral customs,” or the like—to be overlooked, veiled, suppressed, and/or, as in the many post/neo/colonial and nationalist “anti-superstition campaigns,” dematerialized and vanquished.<sup>114</sup> To be clear, Weber’s view of modernity fits squarely within evolutionary models of social science countered by Fabian and others, whereby

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<sup>114</sup> Haiti in 1941-42 comes to mind (see Ramsey 2011), as with Trinidad in the late-1910s into the 1920s, when gatherings then known then as “Shouters” (which is also a Guyanese Creolese synonym for “Komfa,” [see Swan 1957: 105]), who are in Trinidad today identified as Spiritual Baptists, were criminalized under the 1917 “Shouters Prohibition Ordinance” (Rocklin 2015). Also note, to give a few examples, that the Center for Inquiry based in Washington, D. C. has as recently as 2009 launched an “anti-superstition campaign” focused on West Africa with an aim “to combat superstition and to uncompromisingly defend rationality and good science” (Allen 2009); while in Maharashtra state India, a law known popularly as the “Anti-Superstition and Black Magic Act” (correctly, “Maharashtra Prevention and Eradication of Human Sacrifice and other Inhuman, Evil and *Aghori* Practices and Black Magic Ordinance, 2013 [Mah. Ord. XIV of 2013]”), has prompted various other Indian jurisdictions to begin enacting similar legislation (Gejji 2020; cf. Barry 2013); and see literature on China’s nationalist secular “reforms” of the 1920s-30s which attempted to legally differentiate between “superstition” and “religion” in attempts to suppress the former (Nedostup 2009).

the global expansions of “the big” “world religions” charted the course of modernity’s unidirectional “progress.”<sup>115</sup>

Examining the intertwined trajectories of nation-states and “world religions” helps to explain how Guyana’s secularist government continues to validate the Big 5 while simultaneously denying the existence of—including pervasive discriminations perpetrated against—“the local” and “the traditional” faiths. Weber did not necessarily consider such intersections in his writings on religion or state politics. He deployed his concept of “the world religions” to better understand how, as globalizing systems, these particular faith traditions extended themselves in ways that allowed them to subsume other religions with which they came into contact and thus, in their assimilative systematicity, act “relentlessly to homogenize the world” (Austin-Broos 2003: 4). In many ways, Guyanese have understood certain of their local religious traditions to be subsumed in the name of the modernizing nation through the extended embrace of a number of “the world religions” (namely Christianity, Islam, and Hindu practices). Komfa, for example, has “become” for many (although not all) *another* merely derivative form of Christianity, while Kali Mai devotion is likewise considered by some (and not by others) to be one among thousands of iterations of Hindu piety. Likely the institutionalized affront to Indigenous peoples and their religions as demonstrated by their structured absences during WIHW can be attributed to Indigenous practices’ assumed lack of fundamental connections to one or more of “the world religions,” as both Komfa and Kali Mai have been understood.

Guyana’s postcolonial politics having been dominated by the dualism of competing ethnonationalisms, both Indian- and African-descended Guyanese have held national power and

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<sup>115</sup> Such an assertion is not intended to undervalue or displace Weber’s (i.e. 1991 [1948], 1964 [1947]) contributions to, or continued influences on, contemporary political and symbolic anthropologies and on neo-marxisms, in particular. See Löwith (1993) and Eriksen and Nielsen (2001), for example, and compare to Banton (2007).

so have had opportunities to contribute in direct ways to reconstructing the moral boundaries of independent nationhood. Included among the political prospects for authorizing the moral orders of the state, is determining what gets to count as “national culture” and, relatedly, which forms of “local” religious culture can be endorsed by the secular state for assimilation into the sanctioned categories epitomized by “the world religions.” Likewise, those in power also contribute to determining and reinforcing whose traditions remain outside the bounds of modernity and so beyond the concerns of the nation’s “rational” and “objective” politics of cultural recognition and representation. If Indigenous Guyanese were not relegated to being governed and instead held forms of national political power equivalent to those held at various times by both Indo- and Afro-Guyanese interests, then perhaps Indigenous peoples’ *religions* would be recognized as such and not left out of country’s celebrations of faith. Or, perhaps, if Indigenous people gained national leadership roles they would use that power to follow their compatriots’ liberal secularist and ethnonationalist models of extending the purview of “the world religions” to encompass, or subsume, those Indigenous religions in order to “modernize” them, making them acceptable for national veneration.<sup>116</sup>

Lacking state support such as national public holidays (of which Hindus and Muslims each have two, and Christians three, legislated by Burnham), Indigenous religions, Kali Mai, Komfa, and other marginalized faiths still find means through which to make their practices recognized as “contributors to the nation” and to national culture (Paton 2015: 284; Roback 1973; Quinn 2005). Without their *own* holiday honored by the state, a slight about which Komfa People often complain, they have in many ways instead turned Emancipation Day into *their* day. As members of a Spiritualist church who lead “Freedom Day” events in their East Coast

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<sup>116</sup> One can compare to Paul Christopher Johnson’s (2005) account of three distinct ways in which African diasporic religions vie for forms of state-mediated legitimacy, namely, *simulation*, *sedition*, and *seduction*.



Demerara community shared, “Government got no time with we! They rather see we giving to the pastor them, or rather not see we at all! At all at all!” When I asked about the (insubstantial) material support her group received from Guyana’s Department of Culture within the Ministry of Education, she explained that,

we get nothing from them. All year round they gone giving out to the [Christian] church and the Hindu them, and the Muslim—all them getting duty-free and no tax and ‘nough help man, you know this—but we, we ain’ got but even a holiday for we celebrate, take off work and keep them children home school and all. So that’s why Freedom Day is we own. ‘Cause if everyone else want take off and wear they African clothes, or not, is we gone take up the mantle and really do the thing proper.

Komfa groups have long taken the lead in organizing local village celebrations throughout the country as well as national government-sponsored observances in the capital. Yet they often do so through their own initiative and using their own sparse resources, even when managing to obtain some meager support from state channels through “accommodating” their faiths to fit state structures. Many Komfa People now have one main annual celebration around Emancipation Day whereas in the past these services would be at least four times a year, and often monthly or fortnightly with the new and/or full moon. “Yeah we get a little something from the Ministry them to help on August First, and we use it for pay the musician them, the drummer and all,” the church leader went on to say. “But,” she clarified, “is just that one time, one time a year. And it ain’ much, not even for pay them drummer them.”

This same leader explained later that she felt as if the government support her church received for their Freedom Day efforts was not only too little and too infrequent, but was also disingenuous. For her, the small contribution served to appease Spiritualists and others claiming that the government has been biased in how it differentiates between religious groupings. Public holidays are respected as national symbols reflecting the empowered ideologies of the nation, and memorializing Emancipation is a significant aspect of postcolonial nationalism from many

Guyanese. Still, Emancipation Day is considered an “African” occasion (while Hindu and Muslim holy-days are overwhelmingly considered as “Indian”), and public officials and others do not want to be seen as partial towards particular ethnoracial constituencies.<sup>117</sup> After all, as Leo Despres (1975: 109) has written, “practically all Guyanese declare themselves in support of a political system which defines the rights and obligations of citizenship without reference to ethnic considerations,” an observation which still holds true. In the midst of the electoral crisis of 2020, one acquaintance reminded participants of a heated post-election Facebook forum that “a ruling Government do NOT belong to a particular section of the community!,” a charge which such strong ethnoracially determined political affiliations can easily obscure.<sup>118</sup> Through the lens of ethnonationalist ideologies, while provisions are made to assist “Indians” through their religious institutions, which are “getting duty-free and no tax and ‘nough help” from the government, “Africans” are not understood to organize through similarly legitimated racio-religious structures recognized by the state, only the Komfa little tradition (Williams 1996b). As the majority religion of the country instilled through colonization, while many Afro-Guyanese are Christians, so too are many Indo-Guyanese, making Christianity not “African” in the sense or to the degree that Hindu religion is considered “Indian.”

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<sup>117</sup> Such local Guyanese conceptions of Islam as “belonging” to “Indian” culture tend to overlook the significant presence of Muslims of sub-Saharan African descent in what became Guyana prior to the arrival of South Asians to the colony. See Raymond Chickrie (1999), Aisha Khan (2004, 2015), and Aliyah Khan (2020). In the second of three volumes of James Rodway’s *History of British Guiana* (1891-1894), he reports evidence of Arabic used among enslaved people on Guianese plantations, particularly as a form of concealed communication related to rebellious activities. Rodway writes that in 1807, a document written in Arabic was recovered and used as evidence in a trial which saw nine people executed for their roles in organizing an alleged plot that was planned for Christmas Eve that same year. The letter inscribed in Arabic was purportedly to be used in disseminating knowledge of the “serious riot” throughout the Essequibo colony. Yet, “as no one in the Court could read it its purport was only guessed at” (Rodway 1893 v2: 297). For analysis of Rodway’s account, see Sylviane Diouf (2013 [1998]: 190).

<sup>118</sup> Zarena Z. Ali, Facebook, 9 March 2020.

While the majority of Guyanese are self-described Christians, there is much ambiguity and contradiction involved in both Afro- and Indo-Guyanese Christianities, in large part emanating from predicaments involved in adopting a religion that served integral ideological functions in the subordination of one's foreparents, and in some cases, continues to maintain an often strained relationship to other facets of one's identity.<sup>119</sup> From a historical perspective, the ancestors of Guyanese of South Asian heritage were brought to British Guiana's post-Emancipation plantations as bonded labor after processes of Christianization and anglicanization had already been entrenched in Afro-Creole culture. While "the clergy were well established among the slaves by the time emancipation came," in the lead up to the official ending of Guianese slavery on August 1, 1838, colonial authorities organized an "enormous expansion" of Christian institutions with conversion serving as "the chosen instrument for the stabilization and reintegration" of Africans and their descendants in the "free" colony (R. Smith 1976: 312, 326). As Lee Drummond (1980: 359) explicates in his study of "internal variation" within Guyanese conceptions of race and ethnicity, "East Indian indentured laborers...entered a society in which both the dominant minority ["English" and/or Whites] and the subordinate majority ["Africans" and/or Afro-Creoles] shared a set of religious values" in Christianity. Important to this shared moral outlook was, crucially, the disavowal and denunciation of "the 'pagan' beliefs of Hinduism and Islam," as well as Obeah, as practiced by Afro-, Indo-, Anglo-, and other Guianese (ibid.). Much scholarship has documented how South Asian laborers were confined both physically and socially to life on plantations as consequences of the terms of their indenture and were also culturally segregated from Whites and Afro-Creoles through language, religious, and

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<sup>119</sup> The significant parallel here is between Afro-Guyanese who embrace non-Christian religions—like Komfa—and Indo-Guyanese generally who are likewise perpetually suspect by secularist Christian nationalist ideologies of thwarting collective "development" towards "modernity" thus "reverting" the "progress" of the nation. See Keith McNeal (2011), Viranjini Munasinghe (2006), and Alexander Rocklin (2019).

other differences (cf. Bahadur 2014). As Drummond (1980: 359) notes, in such a context of Christian de/moralizations, “to be East Indian or ‘coolie’ was [...] a great liability,” as was to be African or African-descended and *not* profess Christianity.<sup>120</sup>

Since independence in 1966 a vast majority of “English” or White Anglo-Guyanese have chosen to live elsewhere, leaving Guyanese of African descent as the primary Christian subjects to pick up the mantle from fleeing colonists and “become English” (Drummond 1980: 359). For many Afro-Guyanese and some other Guyanese as well, upholding a colonial Christian ethos in the absence of colonials has served important continued functions, not least of which has been policing the boundaries of “religion,” particularly those marking Christianity—and in the postcolonial “secularist” period, other “world religions”—as distinct from the so-called “pagan” little traditions which Guyanese of various heritages have also maintained and transformed. Such historical circumstances have stimulated a “peculiar inversion of identity whereby blacks have become English” and thus default reinforcers of global White supremacist ideologies couched in Christian morality (ibid.; also see Beliso-De Jesús and Pierre 2020; and Mills 1997).<sup>121</sup> Many Indo-Guyanese, seeing a path towards their own upward class mobilities in their “Afro-Saxon”

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<sup>120</sup> Raymond Smith (1976: 328) notes that while “evidence on the exact nature and extent of African forms of religious belief is scarce and difficult to evaluate, [...] it is clear that few, if any, blacks [in British Guiana’s postemancipation colonial period] denied the validity of Christianity and openly claimed to be the adherents of a rival religion.” See further discussion in Chapters 5 and 6.

<sup>121</sup> As Charles Mills (1997) notes, one need not identify or be identified as White to condone, support, or benefit from White supremacy as a global political system. Aisha Beliso-De Jesús and Jemima Pierre (2020: 65) have more recently demonstrated that “to speak of global white supremacy is to point to the *racial* dimensions of an international power system that includes an ideology of white (broadly defined) racial superiority and its related sets of practices. However,” as they rightly argue,

it remains difficult to operationalize the historical reality of white supremacy within anthropological theory and practice. For even as mainstream anthropology has acknowledged the significance of race, it has yet to thoroughly engage the role of white supremacy, especially global white supremacy, as part and parcel of the baseline understanding and functioning of the modern world. In anthropological treatments of the postcolonial state, the emergence and consolidation of neoliberalism, or even in current popular trends, such as work on the “Anthropocene” and the “ontological turn,” an analysis of white supremacy is often missing. This is so even when there are mentions of race and racialization. How can we as anthropologists speak of neoliberalism, for example, without keeping in constant view the context of white privilege and power that structure both global capitalism and (post/neo)colonialism? (ibid.)

Christian compatriots' emulations of Englishness, and no such future through continuing to labor the land, opted to educate their children in schools that until independence were officially controlled by the Anglican church (Munasinghe 2001).<sup>122</sup>

With the domination of Christian colonial values in the educational system and professional occupational spheres, Indo-Guyanese aspiring towards socio-economic uplift associated with the “modernizing” colony/nation, often came to adopt Christianity, anglo names, and other markers of “English” culture and White ethnoracial identity in attempts to overcome stigmas associated with their “Indian-ness,” much as many Africans and their descendants had done in generations prior. The strict demarcations separating South Asian “Coolies” from English and other White colonizers inaugurated and ingrained through the system of indentureship has largely broken down in light of the social and identity transformations that have ensued since 1838. Hence, as Drummond (1980: 360) notes, “while the ‘coolie’ and the ‘blackman’ possess distinct cultural images, those images overlap in the important areas of religious and occupational status.” For both ethnoracial “nations,” especially before Independence, to be “English” was best, and one’s Englishness was best demonstrated through being a Christian and a professional, and not being a “pagan” or field “hand.”<sup>123</sup> As such,

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<sup>122</sup> The term “Afro-Saxon,” attributed to Lloyd Best (1965a, 1965b), remains pervasive in Guyanese vocabularies. According to Maharajh (2000: 96), Best’s formulation was not intended to be pejorative, “but a descriptive analysis of the ruling class then, that had adopted, absorbed and internalized the values of the White colonial masters.” For Best, this acculturative process was “a natural phenomenon” of accommodation (ibid.). Allsopp (2003 [1996]: 13) notes that the term is “derogatory.” Hutton (2007: 146n10, 2005: 94) offers a number of similarly local alternatives, including “what Marcus Garvey calls ‘*mental slavery*’ and is variously described as ‘*Black skin, White heart*,’ ‘*Colored Men Standing in the Way of Their Own Race*,’ ‘*Europeanised Ethiopian*,’ ‘*Black Skin, White Masks*,’ ‘*Bafioti*,’ ‘*roas bredfruut*’ and ‘*oreo cookie*.’” More significantly, Hutton (2007: 146n10) writes that “in African diasporic metaphysics and socio-political culture,” such senses of self “can be argued to be the possession of the head of the African by the European, by Whiteness.” Note that Lloyd Best, a Trinidadian economist trained at Cambridge University, worked as an economic advisor to Cheddi Jagan’s administration in the 1950s (Girvan 2006).

<sup>123</sup> For an example of the ongoing use of the term “hand” to denote manual labor in specific reference to Indo-Guyanese subjecthoods, see a 2020 *New York Times* article which refers to Indo-Guyanese as “the descendants of Indian farmhands,” not the producers of enormous European sugar-wealth (Kurmanaev 2020).

especially with the development of post-independence inclusions of “the world religions” within the pale of secularist Christian national morality, Indo-Guyanese have perhaps surpassed Blacks in their Englishness—and “the ‘coollieman’ is now the most ‘English,’” Drummond (ibid.) observes—as they are the Guyanese increasingly in economic control, “steadily buying up Georgetown businesses put on the market by Portuguese and English business[owners] opting out of Prime Minister Burnham’s Cooperative Republic.”

### **Ethno/Nationalisms, Ethnic-bloc Formations, and Exclusions of an *All-nation* Nation**

As Ralph Premdas (1996: 2) has argued of the Caribbean generally, belying superficial façades of homogeneity and “nation-ness”—“the fiction of a collection of persons”—are the manifold identities intersecting axes of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, culture, language, religion, region, and so on. Histories of “political mobilization” have exacerbated and in instances even instantiated “these cleavages,” especially as regards ethnoracial and religious differences (ibid.: 4; cf. Khan 2004). One result is “that ethnic sensitivity and assertiveness pervade these states like blood the body. In public discourse few issues are definitionally free from ethnic motifs, and in some instances these are flagrantly and inflammatorily articulated” (ibid.). According to Premdas (ibid.), “practically every week, in the southern Caribbean in particular but also elsewhere, some sort of interethnic strife surfaces from the cleavages in the plural societies of the region.”

Guyana’s secularist nationalisms demand modes of ethnoracial subjectivation, but also religious-moral conformities that take the subjectivated form of one of the hegemonic, “authorized” categories of religious identity.<sup>124</sup> Pressures and requirements for moral and religious conformity

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<sup>124</sup> Following Michel Foucault and Judith Butler, Elizabeth Pérez [2016: 202] describes a “paradox of subjectivation” wherein “the very processes and conditions that secure a subject’s subordination are also the means by which she becomes a self-conscious identity and agent.” So while modes of racio-religious subjectivation demanded by the nation-state secure subjects’ subordination, they do so through also subjectivating self-conscious,

do not necessarily or usually stem from theocratic political ideologies, although with the rise of an India-imported Hindu nationalist movement and the growth of fundamental Wahabist Islam in Guyana, sometimes they do.<sup>125</sup> Processes compelling Guyanese to obey religious and moral orders instead are bolstered through the state's variously competing strands of (anti/)colonially influenced nationalisms and ethnonationalisms, which have so far since independence mainly cohered in a polarized manner.

The usually unquestioned foundations of Christianity and Christian morality undergirding Guyana's national politics of "secularism" emerged through the socio-historical contexts of British colonization. Africans and Asians and their descendants in Guyana, as well as Indigenous and other Guyanese of all backgrounds have had to contend in varying ways with Anglicanism or the Church of England and other forms of Christian religion's hegemonic reach within Guiana's plantation societies as a central—but still singular—component in the overall "superimposition of 'Englishness' on their way of life" (Gomes 1998 [1979]: 149). The previously separate colonies of the Dutch (Essequibo, Demerara, and Berbice) were unified and in important ways *culturally* amalgamated by the British with the consequence that "English"

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agentive persons with complex, intersecting, and often uncontainable social identities. Through her work with practitioners of Lukumí and other Black Atlantic Religious formations, Pérez (ibid.) has insightfully extended Foucault's (and de Certeau's [1984]) thinking in examining everyday "micropractices" motivating the religious subjectivation of individuals, rather than individuals, who are "capable of accommodating multiple contending agencies," illuminating Foucault's paradox "of contradictions posed by religious subjectivity—that mastery proceeds from surrender."

<sup>125</sup> Premdas (1996: 33) notes that "in a struggle among Muslims, Hindus, and Christians in any particular combination of conflict, the lines of allegiance and the sources of support are likely to derive from both intraregional and extraregional confessing communities. Hence, a religious conflict can easily gather incendiary support outside the boundaries of the state, internationalizing a conflict." On Muslim nationalisms in Guyana see Chickrie (1999), who writes that

in essence, denying one's Indian-ness helps to bring one closer to the 'Arab-ness' of Islam. Arabic and Arab-ness, it would seem today in Guyana, legitimizes Islam, and South Asian 'cultural Islam' is now viewed as un-Islamic and polluted with innovations. As in Mauritius, Suriname, Trinidad and Tobago, the process of sunnification in Guyana took place under political competition between Hindus and Muslims. This process of Islamization or the revivalist movement, whose impact has been felt since the 1979 Iranian-Islamic revolution, is an expression of a need for a separate identity. In many of these countries Hindus and Muslims have had an antagonistic relationship.

culture became the revered moral standard by which upward class mobilities were largely determined (R. Smith 1962). By the late-1940s and into the 1950s, nascent anticolonial movements calling for formal severing of colonial ties to Britain prompted many colonized subjects to begin questioning the moral assumptions entailed in continuing to glorify English culture as their standard of achievement in their prospective liberated sovereign state.

Politics surrounding the calls for Independence coming from various sectors of society also reinforced and propelled local and transnational movements directed towards Black Consciousness, or *Négritude*, as well as *Coolitude*, or Asian labor diaspora consciousness.<sup>126</sup>

Another consequence of the push for sovereignty and the momentum gained by both Black and “Coolie Consciousness” (Rastogi 2008; Pyndiah 2015) was the entrenchment of a new form of hegemonic *anticolonial* pluralist nationalism based in a symbolics of “oneness” out of

“many.”<sup>127</sup> The contradictions of nationalism writ large, the constructing of *a single* majoritarian

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<sup>126</sup> Often attributed to Martinican poet Aimé Césaire (1947), and associated prominently with Fanon, Senghor, and other francophone thinkers, *Négritude* is “a concept that denotes the positive features of blackness among people classed as, or self-identifying as, ‘black.’...It provides a single term by which to assert the positive power inherent in, and the positive aesthetic forces of, ‘blackness,’ leaving many avenues open for the definition of what and who is, and what and who is not, to be considered ‘black’” (Torres and Whitten 1998: 7). Through these positive powers and forces *Négritude* has supported widespread forms of ethnoracial collective belonging, yet as Price-Mars’ (see Coulthard 1962) scholarship and activism among Haitians during the U. S. occupation of his island (1915-1934) shows, in its nationalist manifestations *Négritude* can and has reflected processes of whitening, as when “the powerful, literate elite of Haiti saw themselves as mulatto” (Torres and Whitten 1998: 9).

“Coolitude comes at the side of Négritude,” as Khal Torabully (Carter and Torabully 2002: 215) has said, the Mauritian poet to whom the term and concept *Coolitude* is attributed. As Torabully (ibid.) specifies, “Négritude was able to take the word ‘negro’, an insult thrown by the West in the faces of the sons of mother Africa. Coolitude searches in its turn to take on the word ‘coolie’... to bring its indispensable brick to the edifice we have been in the process of constructing for centuries: créolité.” For extended conceptualizations of Coolitude and “Coolie consciousness,” see, along with Torabully’s seminal *Cale d’étoiles: Coolitude* (1991) and the “anthology” coauthored by Marina Carter and Khal Torabully (2002), Véronique Bragard (1998, 2005, 2008), Gitanjali Pyndiah (2015), Pallavi Rastogi (2008), Rashi Rohatgi (2014), Verene Shepherd (2005), and Nitin Varma (2007). Similarly, on conceptions of créolité/creoleness that are more localized to Guyana and the Southern Caribbean, see compelling discussions of “dougl’a poetics,” imagining bridges in-between and beyond Négritude and Coolitude, in Gabrielle Hosein (2016), Mehta (2002, 2004a, 2004b, 2008), Shalini Puri (1999, 2004, 2006), Jennifer Rahim (2010), Sheila Rampersad (2002), and Rhoda Reddock (1999, 2014).

<sup>127</sup> Yet, as Thomas (2011: 27) observes of Jamaica’s and the U. S.’s mobilizations of “nationalist aspirational” slogans that privilege “unity,” such as “Out of Many, One People,” and as will be shown is also the case in Guyana, this ethnicity-dominated democratic political ideology “masks the centrality of violence as an organizing principle of state formation” in these and many other societies.





Fig. 2.1 A float sponsored by the Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development for the national Mashramani holiday in 2018. Conceptions of Guyana as “The Land of Six Peoples” are foregrounded by the float.

identity with the republic or national society as the principal means of orientation, become exemplified by the contrast between configurations of categorical ethnoracial difference within “the body politic” and the amalgamating sentiment which distinguishes that “citizenry” from those “outside” of the concern of the nation-state. In Guyana, this postcolonial paradox is made most explicit in the divergence between the republic’s National Motto—“One People, One Nation, One Destiny”—

and the maybe even more-popular line from the National Anthem, proclaiming Guyana as “The Land of Six Peoples.” This national ethos of *singularity forged from multiplicity* can perhaps best be understood in relation to ideologies of *mestizaje*, or “racial mixture,” which prevail as “explicit master symbol[s]” within the politics of most—if not all—Latin American nation-states and many Caribbean ones too, although in countless cognates and varied forms (Torres and Whitten 1998: 7; cf. Khan 2004)

In theorizing ideologies of Latin America and Caribbean racial cultures, Arlene Torres and Norman Whitten (1998: 13) emphasize such “processes of pernicious pluralism.” They demonstrate how in these racialized contexts, ideologies like Guyana’s imagined *singularity forged from multiplicity*, work to “activate and perpetuate the clash of three dynamic, paradigmatic symbols of nationalism as manifest in *mestizaje*, *indigenismo*, and *blanqueamiento*” (ibid: 13). These three nationalist symbols, as modes of conceptualizing and exploiting notions of “racial intermingling,” form “one side of the nationalist–ethnic-bloc

ideological polarity” (ibid: 7, 13).<sup>128</sup> On the other side, two forms of “ethnic-bloc liberation – *négritud[e]* and *autodeterminacion indigena*,” are likewise brought about through the same contradictions of conceiving a national “oneness” (“One People” as in the Motto) out of a “plurality” of “races” (“Land of Six Peoples”) (ibid: 13). While “*négritud[e]*” and “*autodeterminacion indigena*” have equally important local Guyanese varieties of ethnic-bloc mobilizations, Guyana’s racialist topographies also feature Asian-specific organized claims for political liberation/domination, or what might be called a “Coolitude” ethnic-bloc, as well as a distinct local Hindutva or Hindu nationalist ideology that is closely allied to Indian national politics (cf. Coulthard 1968).<sup>129</sup> In such ways, nationalist ideologies—in a most general sense—develop their own symbolics of internal consistency, or “oneness,” utilizing locally justified classifications of racial difference that create a moral ordering of peoples. Simultaneously, and through complementary means, nationalist ideologies draw oppositions between and among these differentiated peoples through exploiting discourses of “cultural exaggeration” that generate a symbolic and conceptual interplay between notions of “mixture” and “oneness”/“purity” in reference to the nation and national populace (Boon 1982 [cited in Torres and Whitten 1998]; cf. Khan 2004; Williams 1991). Ethnoracial stereotyping, which plays a dominating and instrumental role in Guyanese society, is thus also a central unifying feature of Guyana’s many contending strands of nationalisms.

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<sup>128</sup> Geertz (1973: 234-310) provides a classic interpretation of similar processes in analyzing “ethnic-bloc formations,” which Ronald Stutzman (1981), Norman Whitten (1985) and others have expanded through exploring such processes in various “racialist topographies.” Discussion here is also informed by Tambiah (1996a, 1996b).

<sup>129</sup> On Guyana’s varying nationalist and ethnic-bloc ideologies of *indigenismo*—specifically as *distinct* from *autodeterminacion indigena*—see for example Shona Jackson’s (2012) work on “Creole Indigeneity,” and Michael Niblett (2013, 2019) on interactions between Guyanese indigenous ecologies and world-ecologies of resources like sugar, gold, oil, and rubber in formations of “modernity” and contemporary Guyanese identities. And for a comparison to movements for Guyanese Indigenous self-determination, see Bulkan (2016, and *passim*).

While politics of *mestizaje/métissage* function as a commanding force of exclusion and subordination for both Black and Indigenous people throughout Latin America and much of the Spanish- and French-speaking Caribbean, in Guyana and parts of the English-speaking Caribbean, ideologies of racial mixing work in a different manner (Wade 1993). In Guyana, as in Trinidad, contemporary dominant discourses of race mixing, which increasingly see Guyana as a *Dougl* nation, or *All-nation nation*, continue to overwhelmingly marginalize Indigenous peoples as with ideologies of *mestizaje*. *Dougl* nationalism privileges both Afro- and Indo-Guyanese, with the imperative proviso that “Other” Guyanese become, to varying degrees, displaced from narratives of—and material and symbolic representation within—the nation. However, *Dougl* forms of nationalism also attempt to circumvent the persistent (colonialist) impulses that continue to insist “African” and “East Indian” cultural elements be subsumed by “Englishness” through “proper” acculturative mechanisms, which represents a form of lightening, Whitening, or “*blanqueamiento*,” and a local confirmation of international political orders of white supremacy (Mills 1997).<sup>130</sup> “Whitening” in this context can be understood as a psychosocial process realized primarily through emulating “Englishness,” and remains an important aspect of the ideological spectrum encompassed by Guyanese ethno/nationalisms. Whiteness then can be located on one end of a spectrum, opposing the predominant Afro- and

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<sup>130</sup> Walter Rodney, who presaged a form of *Dougl* consciousness, understood “Black” in its many political and social formations to include both African and Asian descendants and he organized in support of intersecting forms of subaltern consciousness-raising. See in particular, *The Groundings with My Brothers*, which—published in 1969 when he was only twenty-seven years old—“in short order,” according to Michael West, “became the single most influential Black Power text in the Caribbean as well as the region’s most notable ideological contribution to Black Power globally.” As Rodney (2019 [1969]: 24) writes,

today, some Indians (like some Africans) have joined the white power structure in terms of economic activity and culture; but the underlying reality is that poverty resides among Africans and Indians in the West Indies and that power is denied them. Black power in the West Indies, therefore, refers primarily to people who are recognizably African and Indian.

And yet, as Sinah Kloß (2016a: 166) writes, “on a general level, most Guyanese Indians find it insulting to be defined as ‘black.’” Also see Malcolm Cross (1980), and compare to insights presented by Vijay Prashad (2000).

Indo- ethnic-bloc formations on the other end. Yet, these differing political stances can still best be understood as “racialist ideologies influencing the complimentary processes of nationalism and ethnic-bloc formation,” which continually contribute to and contest one another’s and the nation’s unending re/constructions of ethnoracial difference (Torres and Whitten 1998: 11). Therefore, like *negritude*, *Dougla* and in certain respects “Creole” forms of ethno-political “Consciousness” produce at least two seemingly divergent implications. In one sense, a nationalist sense, *Dougla*- and Creole-ness represent processes of lightening wherein “Negroes” and “East Indians” may *become* “*Coloured*” or “*Mulatto*,” identities which function somewhat like *mestizo* in many Latin American contexts. In the other sense, the ethnic-bloc sense, *Dougla*- and Creole-based political ideologies have sought to free local postcolonial nationalisms from their European foundations in Whiteness and ongoing projects of Whitening wherein “power elites,” upwardly mobile, and aspiring classes have sought to re-envision themselves as “mixed,” “*Coloured*,” and “*Mulatto*,” as opposed to, and at the expense of those identified as, “*Dougla*,” “*Red*,” “*Negro*,” or “*Coolie*” (Gomes 1998 [1979]).

Oftentimes in Caribbean contexts, dynamic inter- or transculturative processes—those “extremely complex transmutations of culture” (Ortiz 1995 [1947]: 98) arising through “culture contact” and “fusion”—have been theorized through the rubric of “creolization,” expanding or metaphorizing a linguistic concept for applicability to cultural transformations more generally (cf. Mintz and Price 1992 [1976]; Bolland 1992, 2006). Yet, the Creole concept has largely functioned to exclude Asian, Indigenous, and other non-Afro or -Euro “aggregates” throughout Guyana’s colonial and postcolonial periods (Puri 2004; Reddock 1999; Munasinghe 2006). In such ways, “*créolité*” has often functioned like “*mestizaje*” has in excluding some of the populace from the national embrace, namely Indigenous, Indo-, and other Guyanese, as well as

positioning European influence as a foundation upon which all other cultural “inputs,” including those attributed to African antecedents, are construed as “additional” interactive components (Khan 2007; Jackson 2006; cf. Eriksen 2007). In many ways too, these local identities constructed, revised, and rehearsed through nationalist contentions for recognition and influence, also reach beyond the nation-state, engaging regional and transnational pathways to power and senses of belonging.

**“If ‘Guyana stands tall as mother of religious peace,’ then she can’ be *we own Mudda*”<sup>131</sup>**

2019’s WIHW opening occasion was titled “Fostering Social Cohesion in Guyana,” and the feature address was presented by Dr. George Norton, the national Minister of Social Cohesion. Guyana’s Ministry of Social Cohesion (MOSC) was first established as a new branch of government by President Granger’s APNU+AFC coalition directly after being elected to office in May 2015. Initially heralded by many as a welcome addition to the national cabinet when first announced, the MOSC was thought of as a necessary alternative for the non-permanent, transitory Ethnic Relations Commission (ERC) which had been indefinitely suspended since 2011 under the previous PPP/C (coalition with the Civic party and PPP) government. As of January 2018, however, Guyana’s General Assembly elected to also reconstitute the ERC, appointing a new board of officials with a mandate “to promote good relations, harmony, peace, tolerance and understanding between our peoples; provide equal opportunity between persons of different ethnic groups; and proscribe ethnic discrimination,” among other aims (Dept. of Public Information 2018).

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<sup>131</sup> Quote is from an acquaintance who is quoting Minister of Social Cohesion George Norton’s speech at a 2019 WIHW event, as discussed below.

Guyana's original ERC was established as a constitutional body in 1998 through the Herdmanston Accord, an agreement reached between the then ruling PPP/C and the opposition PNC, and brokered by the Caribbean Community (CARICOM). The call for international mediation resulted from the aftermath of the December 1997 general elections in which the PPP's Janet Jagan, the US-born widow of former president Cheddi Jagan, was elected as president to replace her late husband.<sup>132</sup> The PNC contested the results as fraudulent, refusing to recognize Janet Jagan as President, and mounting a prolonged antigovernment campaign during which opposition party MPs would not attend Parliament for seven months.<sup>133</sup> Tactics employed in the PNC's post-election protest also involved organizing "illegal street demonstrations" from early-1998 through mid-year, many of which reportedly lead to violent altercations including murder of civilians committed by police ranks and others.<sup>134</sup> The so-called "Ethnic Riots" of January 12, 1998 are remembered as a particularly malicious episode during which more than two-hundred Indo-Guyanese were assaulted on Georgetown's public streets "by members of the African-Guyanese community; in full view of the police, yet no arrests were made," according to some sources (Dev 2018; and *passim*).

There remains an ongoing need for official investigation into the decade or more of ethnonationalist violence that followed that contentious election, which also includes the period of the 2001 election, such as through a formal Peace and Reconciliation Commission or

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<sup>132</sup> On justifications for international intervention, see "Guyana Country Report on Human Rights Practices for 1998" (U. S. Dept. of State 1999).

<sup>133</sup> In 2001 a Guyanese High Court judge ruled that the 1997 elections were null and void due to fraudulent voting rules and missing ballot-boxes. Janet Jagan had won another term as president through the election, though the presiding High Court Justice declared her 2001 ruling could not change the outcome of the 1997 election nor the government in power. See *AP News* (2001).

<sup>134</sup> According to a 1999 report from the U. S. Department of State, "police committed extrajudicial killings, although fewer than in previous years," noting that "the Guyana Human Rights Association (GHRA) reported that police killed 9 civilians through August [1998], compared with 27 in 1997 and 18 in 1996."

Commission of Inquiry (COI) as has been suggested by Samuel Hinds and others. Hinds, founder of the Civic party that joined with the PPP for the 1992 elections, served as Prime Minister at the time of the 1997 elections and 1998 “Ethnic Riots,” as well as Vice-President and interim-President along with, in-between, and after both Jagans, from 1992 through to 2015 when the PPP/C lost national leadership to the APNU+AFC.<sup>135</sup> Hinds was interviewed in early-2018—and later wrote a public editorial—about his knowledge of the government’s role in organizing or otherwise sanctioning the protracted violence of this period.<sup>136</sup> Specifically, Hinds was formally questioned by representatives of a preliminary government board charged with probing events surrounding one particular incident that occurred in 2008 at a gold and diamond prospecting concession called Lindo Creek in which eight miners were killed and their bodies partially incinerated.<sup>137</sup>

The ruling APNU+AFC government announced that the COI into the “Lindo Creek massacre,” as it was dubbed, would be the initial inquest into the “2000s crime wave” with more planned to follow.<sup>138</sup> In his statement addressed to the public, former-Prime Minister Hinds (2018) praised Granger’s government for their initiative in launching these official examinations of the past, however, he criticized their methods, noting that “the period from 1998 to 2008 should be enquired into as a whole, and that would naturally be in chronological sequence.”

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<sup>135</sup> On calls for such investigations, see Hinds (2018) and Dev (2018).

<sup>136</sup> In reference to Hinds’ characterization of relations between the government of Guyana and societal forces and individuals underwriting violence, a leaked classified cable from the U. S. Embassy in Georgetown dated February 1, 2006 states that narco-magnate Roger Khan, reportedly responsible for widespread violence in the country and closely associated in many people’s minds to then-President Jagdeo and the ruling PPP, “has bought off countless people in Guyana. Through this patronage he [Khan] is able to operate with impunity. It is believed that GoG [government of Guyana] is compromised to such an extent that it will not pursue Khan, despite paying lip service to the fight against narco-trafficking” (U. S. Embassy Georgetown 2006). Discussed further below.

<sup>137</sup> For coverage of the COF into the 2008 “Lindo Creek massacre,” see, among other sources *Kaieteur News* (10 March 2018) and *Guyana Chronicle* (15 March 2018).

<sup>138</sup> See *Kaieteur News* (12 August 2019).

Hinds (ibid.) goes on to express his suspicions regarding the APNU+AFC government's long-deferred decision to initiate inquiries of this sort, as well as their choice to do so through "spliced-out pieces, starting near the end and proceeding in an order known only to them." An important point for Hinds (ibid.), along with emphasizing the sustained duration of the "submerged subterranean killing wave," was that the atrocities under question were not productively nor accurately characterized as "Jagdeo era killings"—as Granger repeatedly had—for Jagdeo was only elected in 1999 after the January 1998 "Ethnic Riots" and related climate of conflict emerged following the December 1997 elections.

The Herdmanston Accord and Guyana's creation of an ERC in 1998 as a direct result of the unrest surrounding the 1997 elections were seen by many, however, as ineffective measures in intervening into the nation's deepening ethnoracial and political polarization.<sup>139</sup> Such contentions gain support when the period is examined through broader temporal and socio-cultural perspectives, as Hinds suggests, especially when considering the emergence and steady escalation of terror advanced by Guyana's so-called "Phantom Death Squad," an organization or set of organizations associated with convicted weapons- and drug-trafficker Roger Khan, whom United States authorities have considered as "Guyana's own Escobar," referencing Columbia's in/famous narco-terrorist-*hero-bandit* (in a Hobsbawmian sense).<sup>140</sup> While (re)captured by

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<sup>139</sup> A Constitutional Reform Process (CRP) was also instantiated through the Herdmanston Accord as a means to update Guyana's 1980 Constitution which was criticized for overextending the executive powers invested in the President and making it nearly impossible to remove someone from holding that role if found to be unfit through misconduct or violating the Constitution. See *Kaieteur News* (27 February 2018).

<sup>140</sup> A cable sent from the U. S. Embassy in Georgetown, dated February 1, 2006, summarizes that Shaheed 'Roger' Khan (DOB: 13-Jan-72), Guyana's number one narco-criminal, threatens to exert control over the fragile Guyanese state akin to Pablo Escobar's erstwhile control over Colombia. Khan is presently active in drug trafficking, money laundering, and arms smuggling. His so-called legitimate economic interests include construction and forestry. Vermont has an outstanding warrant for Khan's arrest on weapons charges.

See Hobsbawm's (1959; 1969) classic studies of "social banditry" and applications to Escobar and others in Bowley (2013), Fricano (2013), and Tilton (2010). Deborah Thomas (2019) has taken a different approach in understanding how the capture of Christopher "Dudus" Coke in 2010 by the Jamaican state impacted those residents of Tivoli



Surinamese authorities in 2006 and extradited via Trinidad and Tobago to the US to face charges, Roger Khan's reign did not end with his apprehension or detention, even though the ERC stagnated by the time of the 2008 violence and by 2011 was unceremoniously suspended.<sup>141</sup>

A Phantom Squad contingent, perhaps under a new name and modified leadership, was also thought to be responsible for the 2008 Lindo Creek murders, as well as numerous other unsettling episodes of brutality carried out prior and since, although Khan's links to the Lindo Creek killings and many other accusations remain widely questioned. The "narco-terrorist" organization's purported links to the government and particularly the PPP have been similarly scrutinized, as exemplified through the keen public interest surrounding Hinds's key "insider" testimony made public through the 2018 COI.<sup>142</sup> For many Guyanese, however, the significant link is not necessarily—or only—the one connecting Khan and his Squad to the PPP and the state, but also and more pervasively felt in people's lives, is the conceptional linkage between the extralegal power flowing from Khan's network and senses of Indo-Guyanese identity and socio-economic positionalities—imagined and realized—particularly vis-à-vis the state and contests for ethnonationalist dominion. For both Afro- and Indo-Guyanese, Khan came to epitomize a

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Gardens (Hobsbawm's "peasants"?) where seventy-five people were killed, as well as in other "garrisons" where citizens "negotiate the entanglements among nationalist governments, imperialist practices, and local articulations with illicit international trades" ("Four Days in May" 2018). Also compare to journalistic literature on Desiré "Dési" Delano Bouterse, President of Suriname, who, for example, "has been charged with murder, convicted of drug trafficking, and accused of leading an international drug cartel. So," many international observers ask, "why is he in power?" (Stone 2011). Others note that "no other politician here is as skilled at tapping into Suriname's populist vein, partly by denouncing the Dutch. As a light-skinned Creole who claims indigenous ancestry from Suriname's American Indians, he has bridged ethnic divisions" in Suriname, some claim (Romero 2011).

<sup>141</sup> Khan was released to Guyanese carceral authorities in September 2019 and remains in custody of the state as of this writing.

<sup>142</sup> Far from denying PPP involvement with Khan, Hinds referred to statements made by Jagdeo at the time where Jagdeo expressed that his "administration appeared [to] be 'walking in parallel directions' with Khan and his 'Phantom Squad.'" When asked if the PPP/C offered "silent approval to Khan and his squad," Hinds replied that "it would be 'hard to fight those arguments,'" maintaining before the commission, however, "that the situation was not one of 'our own making.'" See *Kaieteur News* (6 February 2018).

phase of Indian ascendancy conceived broadly within the (Afro-)Creole postcolonial politics: as cultural, economic, ethnonationalist, and theologico-political power, which many felt was cut-short by the APNU+AFC's "multiracial bloc" win in 2015.<sup>143</sup> By 2020's general and regional elections, however, the vacillation among what many analysts have called a "bipolar" ethnopolitics would continue (Milne 1981).<sup>144</sup>

While much of Guyana's ethnoracially charged violence, or that which gets characterized as such, tends to coalesce and pivot around the nation's general elections, many Guyanese—particularly those in positions of authority—often minimize the internally generated quality of these crises and disturbances. Religious identities are also often overlooked when considering underlying inducements to Guyana's episodes of unrest, as intersecting attributes of "ethnic" identity which might (strategically or otherwise) not be analytically disentangled from other features. Politicians especially have found convenience in emphasizing Guyanese's *religious* concord even while recognizing ongoing struggles to cope with pervasive, if intermittent, *ethnic*

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<sup>143</sup> By "theologico-political" entanglements of social power, I refer more to "pragmatic issues in the politics of the everyday," than to national or local institutional party politics of the nation-state (de Vries and Sullivan 2006: x). See Gil Anidjar (2002, 2003), who does not necessarily draw on Spinoza (1670, see Steinberg 2019) in rethinking "theologico-political" complexities, but instead more directly on the work of Carl Schmitt (1996 [1922], 2005 [1932], and *passim*), Giorgio Agamben (1998), and Jacques Derrida (1998, 2006 [1994], and *passim*). In philosophy more generally, and more specifically in the interdisciplinary fields engaging critical theory, a "turn to religion" was identified by a number of critics including post-structuralists in the 1990s. That intellectual movement has more recently been re/deployed through wide scope in theories of "political theology" and "post-secular" studies (de Vries and Sullivan 2006). *Political Theologies: Public Religions in a Post Secular World* (2006) provides a recent account of developments and literature in this area, which has in many ways refuted the notion that European Enlightenment secularization shifted religious ideologies into private spheres of devotion in any complete or even meaningful way. Instead, the editors—and many contributors—argue that "religion's persistent role" in politics has positioned "secularist political theory" as providing deficient and ineffectual conceptual frameworks to make sense of religions' persistent imports to politics (ibid.: x). Religion has always already informed and been constituent to the "theologico-political" in practice, yet de Vries and Sullivan (ibid.) call for "collective effort, aided by intellectual tools and interdisciplinary methods and inquiries that [...] reach beyond the equally urgent interrogation of pragmatic issues in the politics of the everyday." Note that "post-secular" is to be understood contextually and situationally rather than as a chronological construction—not as a "return" to a religiosity that has been made distant, but as a "return" to a cognizance of faith which was always already present.

<sup>144</sup> On characterizations of Guyana's politics as "bipolar," see Robert Milne (1977, 1981, 1988) in particular, but compare to accounts in David Hinds (2010), Ralph Premdas (1996), Stephen Spencer (2007), Raj Vasil (1983), and Stacey-Ann Wilson (2012).

“conflict.” When specifically religiously related acrimony is acknowledged, they tend to be attributed to non-Guyanese circumstances, persons, communities, or organizations as potential “outside” dangers foreign to Guyana’s religiously inclusive landscape. Guyana’s WIHW provides a clear example of how national ideological projects conceived to “celebrate” diverse heritages and endorse “multiculturalism” in its unending forms, can still and very often do function through principles and practices that produce decidedly exclusionary effects (cf. Munasinghe 2001).

In Dr. George Norton’s feature address to open 2019’s WIHW at the National Culture Centre, Guyana’s Minister of Social Cohesion again echoed similar sentiments as Granger had in the years prior and as Jagdeo had over a decade before. Minister of Social Cohesion since 2017, Norton is of Indigenous Lokono (who many Guyanese call Arawak) heritage and was raised in a traditional village community in the Upper Demerara.<sup>145</sup> After attending Queen’s College in Georgetown, Minister Norton trained as an ophthalmologist in Cuba and then worked in Guyana’s national public health sector before becoming a Member of Parliament in 2001. In his remarks, Minister Norton charged all Guyanese, particularly religious-minded people, with contributing to the realization of “social cohesion in Guyana.” “This administration is fully cognisant of the fact that inclusion, respect for diversity and peaceful dialogue are essential for the survival of humanity,” he insisted (*Guyana Chronicle* 2 February 2019). Yet as Minister, he could not advance this vital agenda alone, and so was calling for wide support from leaders of various communities to help in advocating the value of social inclusion, respecting differences, and peaceful coexistence.

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<sup>145</sup> For an account of Norton’s childhood and Indigenous community upbringing, see *Guyana Chronicle* (8 September 2019).

In the face of the society's significant cultural diversity, Norton boldly told the crowd that "Guyana stands tall as mother of religious peace" (*Guyana Chronicle* 2 February 2019). To illustrate his point, the Minister described the nation's religious "plurality" as a village or neighborhood landscape "where we can see a mandir, masjid and church neighbouring each other," much as Granger had earlier boasted that "churches, temples and mosques, in many communities, stand side by side" (*ibid.*).<sup>146</sup> "This is a massive feat for Guyana," Minister Norton proceeded, "but this status should not be taken for granted because there are threats lurking just beyond our borders," implying that such dangers stemmed not from within (*ibid.*). "This is why all Guyanese must actively participate in the process of achieving social cohesion," he insisted, with collective efforts toward collective ambitions to thwart such "outside" perils to Guyana's otherwise harmonious society (*ibid.*). "World Interfaith Harmony Week serves as a reminder that you, the members of the religious community, play a significant role in helping to cultivate a culture of unity" (*ibid.*). With Guyana understood as a deeply religious and religiously harmonious society, Norton charged faith leaders and followers to encourage a standard of "religious peace" which would serve as a guiding example for how "unity" can extend beyond religionists, encompassing and drawing on other facets of Guyanese cultures, histories, and personhoods (*ibid.*).

Not everyone concurs with Dr. Norton's impressions regarding Guyana's "religious peace." Nor do all Guyanese feel that the MOSC which he heads has met its potential for benefitting the country. Rather, many Guyanese from all backgrounds have come to see the MOSC as a superfluous and fruitless branch of Granger's government, which continues to draw

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<sup>146</sup> Granger's remarks made during his February 1, 2016 speech, as mentioned above, are available through the MoTP at <https://motp.gov.gy/index.php/2015-07-20-18-49-38/2015-07-20-18-50-14/695-guyana-s-diverse-population-demands-greater-social-cohesion-president-at-launch-of-world-interfaith-harmony-week-in-guyana>.

heavy criticism from the opposition PPP/C, as well as from the public.<sup>147</sup> More recently, PPP parliamentarians have shared highly critical views of the work of the MOSC, particularly now that the ERC has also been reestablished. While the 2019 WIHW was like most years officially organized by the Inter-Religious Organisation (IRO) along with the government, that year's Harmony Week was associated in particular with Dr. Norton and his MOSC. Reactions from a group of Komfa practitioners—some of whom attended the proceedings and witnessed Dr. Norton's speech firsthand, and others who heard and read coverage of the event—are telling of how differently situated constituencies identify with national projects purporting to “celebrate diversity,” including how some groups and individuals must contend with these projects' exclusionary effects.

While discussing preparations for an upcoming Spiritual Service in honor of the Passover holiday, which many Komfa People celebrate, an Elder mentioned that she had been to the opening of WIHW that year. She explained that she liked to attend, and as in past years, felt it was a “duty” to represent her “faith among the camp of tents,” as she interpreted the gathering. However, after being disillusioned by an apparent lack of meaningful inclusion at previous occasions, she had not attended for the past few years. “Is really a Christian thing. Christian and Hindu, and of course they must get them Muslim there too for not cry foul,” she told me. “And ‘nough time they get ‘*Faithist*,’ like they does like for say, they there for beat drum and wear robe and all, maybe say a Psalm or read a verse. And it must be Bible they saying too right,” the Mother explained, whereby a Spiritualist might “play-up” their “Christian side.”<sup>148</sup> But what did

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<sup>147</sup> For examples of such criticisms as represented in the press, see *Kaieteur News* (9 December 2018) and *Guyana Times* (6 December 2019).

<sup>148</sup> Komfa, Faithist, and Spiritualist practices indeed (re)present a “continuum” (Gibson 2001; cf. Drummond 1980 and Bickerton 1975), yet whether it is prudent to characterize such a continuum as “creole” is a multifarious predicament, as is to attempt to distinguish “different types and degrees of syncretism,” or “syncretistic *stages*” (Mitchell 2006: 42; Ringgren 1969: 8; cf. Stewart and Shaw 1994, Stewart 1999, and *passim*). Often described in the

such a “token” presence amount to, she was asking. “They there there for show the government looking for deal with them, but is all, they ain’ really deal with them in no nice way, still. No is no nice way from the government for we at all,” she said, “just a show thing,” for those in power to “save face.”

Reena, a middle-aged member of this particular Mother Elder’s Spiritual circle, added to the critical commentary being shared regarding WIHW and specifically Dr. Norton’s national address on “fostering social cohesion in Guyana.” The women were laughing and repeated a few times the Minster’s slogan characterizing Guyana as an exemplar of “religious peace.” Then Reena made a comment that made the others present take a more serious and somber tone. She told us that, “If ‘Guyana stands tall as mother of religious peace,’ then she can’ be *we own* Mudda,” implying that as Komfa People, they did not experience the maternal embrace which

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literature as religious “creolization,” “mestizaje” (cf. Fernández Retamar 1989), or “cruzado” (Ochoa 2010: 145) by practitioners and scholars alike, Leslie Desmangles (1992: 8) has also written of Caribbean religious “symbiosis,” referring “to the spatial juxtaposition of diverse religious traditions from [many] continents, which coexist without fusing with one another.”

For Patrick Taylor (2001: 3), “symbiosis helps pull together two apparently opposing schools of Caribbean social and cultural thought: the creolists and the pluralists.” Taylor (ibid.) notes that “whereas creolization focuses on the developing unity of the new formative nation, pluralism emphasizes the social and cultural differences that divided and continue to divide a conflictual Caribbean region.” Still further, Aliyah Khan (2012: iv) has offered the concept of “metamorphosis” which, “in contrast to creolization, mestizaje, and other hybridizations, various forms of metamorphosis, including mimicry and doubling, provide agency in the colonial and postcolonial context.” Additionally, Khan (ibid.) sees in metamorphosis “ways of intervening in the historic ethnic and political divides in postcolonial Caribbean nations like Trinidad and Guyana.”

Komfa’s manifold practical and cosmological continua *include* a “Christian side,” but also much more. Christianity’s continued hegemony in Guyana often obscures other(ed) “sides.” Some gatherings and individual practitioners have reported undertaking intentional efforts to “de-Christianize” or “(re-)Africanize,” “Hinduize” or “Indianize” (often through Kali Mai “traditions”), or otherwise consciously transform (metamorphosize?) their conceptions of “Spiritual life.” Others are very much sincere in their Christian devotion, usually Anglican or Protestant-oriented, some Catholic, with such practitioners often referring to themselves as “Faithists.” Concepts of Caribbean religious symbioses and syncretisms, particularly between “Christianity” and “Komfa,” can be used in describing this “side” of the continua, as has Kean Gibson. Gibson (2001: 60) writes that “the focus of spiritual lessons of the Faithist church[es]” with whom she worked, was “the Holy Bible.” Such is *not* true for many gatherings, yet, to attempt to characterize a “Christian side,” Faithists, and some Spiritualists,

believe that their form of worship is Judaic. They make reference to Jesus Christ in the sense that he is part of the Trinity and is thus also God; they may invoke the presence of Mary the Mother of Jesus at ceremonies. But they do not celebrate the birth of Christ... They do not celebrate his death either. But they celebrate his Last Supper with the disciples, and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. Although the latter two events are Christian celebrations, it is considered Judaic because Jesus was a Jew. (ibid.)

their nation extended to its other religionists. If Guyana was truly the accepting society politicians proclaimed it to be, then either Komfa served as a morally delegitimated vestige of a “premodern” Guyanese past, or, alternatively, Guyana was not a sincere nor caring “mother” for her Komfa practicing children. Komfa practitioners, Reena seemed to be saying, could not embrace a sense of national belonging that did not reciprocate their “claim” by deeming Komfa an honored facet of Guyanese-ness. Likewise, as the Mother’s comments alluded to earlier, Komfa’s perceived appropriateness for attaining national forms of recognition should not only be judged through the practice’s proximities to Christianity, or to other of “the world religions” for that matter. Those gathered appeared to concur, and the Mother asked, rhetorically it seemed, “so is we not Guyanese no more, or what, like is lie Norton selling?” At that, we all laughed again, and Reena added, “lie? All lies! Whenever them politician talking ‘cohesion’—bare lie!” “Poli-tricks!” she concluded, borrowing from the widely adopted Rastafari language, also known as Iyaric, Livalect, I-talk, or Dread Talk (Pollard 2000 [1994]; Slade 2018, and *passim*).

### **“American Idol...in a African style”: Redirecting Rejection and “Support”<sup>149</sup>**

In November of 2017, a ceremony of rededication was held at St. Peter’s African Apostolic Cathedral, located in the village of Eccles just south of Georgetown on the East Bank Demerara. St. Peter’s is considered by many Spiritualists as their “head-church,” although just as many if not more would contend that there is no “official” structural hierarchy distinguishing between gatherings and certainly no recognized inter-gathering “leader(s).” Still, as St. Peter’s is the default home of GUAMC, the organization which claims to represent pan-Komfa communities and concerns, many people—as well as the state—see this “African Apostolic Cathedral” as the

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<sup>149</sup> Quote is from an acquaintance describing her impression of the “aura” of Georgetown’s 2018 Emancipation Eve celebrations, as discussed below.

central institution of Faithists, Spiritualists, and Komfa People alike. Yet, while countless practitioners have derided the gathering that meets at St. Peter's as "Bible-Faithists" for being "too Christian" and so perceived as inauthentic or insincere in their principles and practices, many nonpractitioners see the church as a headquarters of "Obeah," and resolutely avoid directly passing the area altogether.

At the rededication ceremony, President Granger made what was for some an important appearance and address to the "Faithist" community.<sup>150</sup> Granger used the opportunity to reiterate messages that generally emerge during WIHW, but he tailored his sentiments to speak more-directly to "Faithists," who are often vocal in protesting against their lack of state-based forms of recognition. First, however, he declared that all Guyanese and all "churches" share the same entitlement to freedom of worship as "an inalienable and irreversible right," which he affirmed would continue to be respected by his government.<sup>151</sup> Granger went on to tell those gathered that,

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<sup>150</sup> Political party officials attending such events is not a new development, but stems from "clientelistic networks" (Thomas 2016) fostered through the decades of Burnham's rule. For an example of a comparable event in 1971, see the *Sunday Chronicle* (4 April), which reads:

A new church built by self-help for the West Evangelical Millenium Pilgrims (Jordanites) at Fourth Street, Agricola, East Bank Demerara, will be dedicated on Sunday at 11 a.m. Mrs. Jane Phillips-Gay will be chairman [sic] of the proceedings, and Minister of Home Affairs, Mr. Oscar Clarke will represent the Prime Minister. Past and present members of this church are requested to assemble at the Agricola Community Centre at 9:30 a.m.

For an insight into the functioning of social processes furthering Burnham-era "clientelistic networks," see in addition an article titled "Jordanites anoint Burnham" in the *Sunday Graphic* (17 June 1973: 3).

PRIME Minister Forbes Burnham was anointed with holy oil by a group of Jordanites at their main church at Agricola, Greater Georgetown, during a special service Friday night while on his meet the people tour. Others anointed with the Prime Minister were Miss Margaret Ackman, PNC chairman [sic], Cammie Ramsaroop, and out-going Speaker of the House of Assembly, Mr. Sase Narain. The 45-minute long sacred service attracted hundreds of villagers to the scene.

At the close of the impressive service, [a] leader of the church group made the following request of the Prime Minister: (1) A plot of land to erect homes for 40 families of the church, (2) A loan to build the houses, and (3) Another plot of land to be used for rice planting by members of the church.

[Thank you to Judith Roback for making me aware of these two events and for so many other helpful suggestions. Thanks too to Pamela Anglin, Iris Dowridge, Rosie McAndrew, and Wordsworth McAndrew for locating and sending these and other sources to Judith.]

<sup>151</sup> All quotes of Granger's remarks at the St. Peter's event referenced here are available through the website of Guyana's Dept. of Public Information (2017).



more specifically, people associated with GUAMC, including their own congregation, “are valued member of society” whose claims to “the enjoyment of his or her own freedom of conscience” are guaranteed by Guyana’s Constitution.

Unlike in any WIHW events I have attended or seen covered, Granger also used the St. Peter’s rededication as an occasion to bring attention to past experiences which have made



*Fig. 2.2* St. Peter’s African Apostolic Church, now Cathedral, on the East Bank Demerara, south of Georgetown. St. Peter’s is the “head church” of the Guyana United Apostolic Mystical Council (GUAMC), an umbrella organization of Faithist/Spiritualist gatherings, 2018.

Spiritualists feel devalued as members of society, and worse, state-supported measures that have worked to vilify practitioners for wielding their “own freedom of conscience.” Granger explained how throughout the period of colonization, “Faithists” and those groups now associated with GUAMC were

“spurned” by governing authorities as well as by “the traditional Christian churches,” with many condemning “their way of worship as irreligious.” He then suggested that the movement for political Independence had also inspired ambitions for cultural independence and self-determination, with the new transitional government beginning in 1964 being “opposed to religious discrimination” and in favour of promoting “citizens’ constitutional rights.” “I’ve come here to reinforce the message of the Government and message of my certitude and belief in the sincerity of your faith,” he assured the congregants. “We must not encourage in our children, we must not encourage in people of other faiths, the type of ridicule and derision that existed in colonial times,” directed as it was towards Komfa, Obeah, Kali Mai, and other “little traditions” perceived as non-European in origin.

Granger alluded to “Faithist” origins in his speech, noting that the St. Peter’s rededication event also coincided with the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the “emergence” of the movement in British Guiana. He was referring to the oft-mentioned attribution of “Faithist” beginnings to 1917, when at some point during that year a middle-aged laborer of African descent had a spectacular—and disconcerting—vision while at work in an East Coast Demerara cane-field. That man was Nathaniel Jordan, after whom the “new” religious configuration which he established and advanced, as well as its adherents, have become popularly christened. Still, while there are those practitioners who actually identify as “Jordanites”—who most often prefer the label “Faithist”—many if not *most* practitioners I have come into contact with do not consider themselves “Jordanites” or “Faithists,” but instead choose to call themselves “Spiritualists,” “Spiritual people,” or “Komfa People,” emphasizing the “internal” distinctions they feel are most significant.

Based on her extensive work in the late-1960s and early-1970s with groups who primarily identified as “Faithists,” Judith Roback (1974: 235) writes, tellingly, that “while all ‘gatherings’ of the White-Robed Army have been influenced to some extent by the teachings of Nathaniel Jordan (hence the popular name ‘Jordanite’), there is considerable variation among gatherings with respect to doctrine.” Since then, “variation among gatherings” has likely only proliferated. Roback (1974: 235) further notes that “those outside the movement tend to characterize as ‘Jordanite’ any religious activity conducted by black people in white robes,” that is, if those nonpractitioners do not first and foremost consider such activity as “Obeah.” Whether in robes or not, when a Guyanese—particularly a Black Guyanese—is observed conducting seemingly non-Christian or what gets perceived as “African” rites, a more-“charitable” interpretation would be to claim they were a “Jordanite,” while overwhelmingly they would be

deemed as performing “Obeah.” As such, Granger concluded his remarks that day by affirming his position that Faithists’ practices, including their distinctive manner of dress which Spiritualists share, should not be reviled by society or ill-judged by the state, as their religion reflects “serious, sincere belief in the power of almighty God. [...] Let us keep the flame of Faithism burning strong,” the President resolved before departing.

What can be considered the intra-Komfa variations, divergences, and disagreements ensuing between Faithists and Spiritualist, which involve GUAMC as a mediating body with a particular—if partial—orientation, will be considered in further detail in the following chapter. In certain ways, however, these intra-relationships are seen as impacting upon how Faithists and Spiritualists collectively engage and are collectively engaged by the state and its bureaucratic, unequal mechanisms of apportioning material or ideological “support” for Guyana’s diverse publics.<sup>152</sup> As with comments I heard from Spiritualists following Granger’s 2017 St. Peter’s rededication speech, practitioners who consider themselves Spiritualists or Komfa People tend to share feelings of general disapproval and disappointment with their government’s efforts to celebrate WIHW, and in particular, to celebrate “Faithists” through the occasions associated with WIHW. While Faithist-identifying practitioners often have more agreeable experiences at these events and feel “their” tradition is being afforded reverence by the state, for Spiritualists such displays are “all talk,” conveying no meaningful support through inclusion in state policies and

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<sup>152</sup> Gibson (2001) and Asantewa (2009; 2016) have often characterized Komfa, Spiritualist, and Faithist practices as synonymous. For Asantewa’s (2009: 6) part, her analyses “use Gibson’s work to provide an overall account and analysis of Comfa,” which “Gibson [2001: 1] writes is ‘the generic term for the manifestation of spirits’ and ‘refers to anyone who becomes spiritually possessed on hearing the beating of drums, or who becomes possessed without apparent reason.’” Asantewa (2009: 6) adds that “in Guyana this is referred to as ‘ketching comfa’ as opposed to the more explicit term of ‘spirit possession,’” which Guyanese do not typically use. Asantewa (ibid.) goes on to note that “the word ‘comfa’ is a derivative of the Twi (the generic language spoken in parts of Ghana, West Africa) word *o’komfo*, ‘meaning priest, diviner, soothsayer.’ Comfa also refers to the Guyanese religion of ‘Spiritualism’ or ‘Faithism,’ the organising body of which is the Faithist Church. ‘Faithism’ is historically linked to another African-Guyanese religious group the Jordanites or ‘White-Robed Army.’”

programming, nor structural forms of material or ideological assistance. Reflections on such “national” events provide moments when Komfa People can articulate their frustrations with feeling “left out” of transforming configurations of the nation.

Spiritualists with whom I attended 2017’s opening of WIHW expressed similar feelings of resentment and exclusion at being falsely represented by, or “mistaken” as, “Faithists.” From their perspectives, through continually inviting only Faithists and the GUAMC to WIHW and repeatedly neglecting to acknowledge the difference in religious identification that Spiritualists feel is a significant one, the government and the sponsoring Inter-Religious Organisation were guilty of perpetuating the erasure of “African” culture from Guyanese society. “Why they always mistake we for Faithists, every time?” one friend asked the group of six middle-aged to elderly women and me as we sat in the audience under the shade of Umana Yana’s thatch. “We Black, we get we robes, must be we Jordanite, nah,” she remarked, as the others agreed. “Well we is, but we ain’t. Not the same,” she said. “Not the same *real* culture thing. That’s why we does say Spiritualist. Not the same.” She was a bit perturbed as a few minutes earlier three young girls approached our group to offer a comment on the women’s ritual clothing. “We like your robes!” they yelled, after feeling they were caught staring, and then giggled and shrieked as they ran away back to their seats on the other side of the *benab*.

After Granger’s speech, in which he characterized Guyana as “a model of interfaith harmony” for the world to emulate, this group of women launched into a striking discussion implicating histories of Guyana’s recent nationalist politics in light of their own plight to “fit” in the nation as religious, racialized Others. One of these women asked the group as we sat together, “why Granger can’ be like Burnham? Is Black-man government now,” she claimed, referring to the fact that 2015 saw the end of the PPP’s twenty-three-year hold on national rule,

which began in 1992. “Spiritualist still needing we president for come,” the same women demanded, as she felt Granger’s agenda of compromise through promoting only Faithists was inadequate. Yet during his St. Peter’s rededication speech later that same year, Granger alluded to Burnham in passing in a rather furtive way by saying that the transitional Independence government was responsible for first instantiating a policy of recognition towards Faithists,’ including their right to religious freedom. Granger specifically mentioned that the political shift supporting religious tolerance began from 1964, two years before Independence, when Burnham withdrew from Cheddi Jagan’s PPP, forming the PNC and winning the general elections, with the ignoble support of the UK and US (Rabe 2005; Horne 2007b; Waters and Daniels 2006).<sup>153</sup> Granger attempted to align himself with the legacy of backing Spiritualists and other Afro-centered aspects of Guyanese society for which Burnham is remembered, by some at least. Yet for this group of Spiritualists, Granger fell short.

A highpoint of Burnham’s contributions to Afro-Guyanese and to Caribbean people’s senses of social uplift in the process of *psychic* decolonization for the newly-Independent nation-states came, from some perspectives at least, through his “freeing up” of Obeah in 1973. In a speech Burnham delivered that year, he emphatically declared his intention to repeal colonial-era anti-Obeah laws from Independent Guyana’s official statutes. Because of this speech, many people today still commonly understand, ambivalently, that Burnham did in fact “*free-up* Obeah” in Guyana, an agenda still being pursued in many other Caribbean polities (Paton 2015: 283-285). Not all Guyanese or Caribbean people of course viewed or view Burnham’s *proposed*

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<sup>153</sup> “Support” might be poor word choice here, as much Cold War meddling, political disturbance, and violent repression of local movements was involved on the U. S. and U. K.’s part in empowering Burnham to Premiership over Jagan, as Jagan’s avowed Marxism represented a “greater threat” to Western interests than did Burnham’s “Black socialism,” which he developed primarily *after* attaining power. See analysis by Gaiutra Bahadur (2015), and Waters and Daniels (2006), as well as documents archived with the U. S. Department of State released by the Office of the Historian 2001-2009 titled as “Foreign Relations, 1964-1968, Volume XXXII, Dominican Republic; Cuba; Haiti; Guyana,” at <https://2001-2009.state.gov/r/pa/ho/frus/johnsonlb/xxxii/44659.htm>.

extension of “religious freedoms” as a step toward national “progress,” especially while Guyana’s shifting moral orders continue to disparage Obeah and its practitioners as “dangers” to Guyanese sociality and “harmony.” Many see Obeah—and Komfa—as inherently and inextricably tied to Black nationalist political ideologies represented—if not explicitly or implicitly espoused—by Burnham, who also maintained his own personal Spiritualist practice. Many Guyanese feel uneasy about imagined and existing interconnections between Burnham, Black nationalist political mobilizations, and Komfa, particularly within contexts of contemporary neoliberal, secularist politics of ethnoracial “objectivity” and “impartiality” (Quinn 2005).<sup>154</sup> Alternatively, for many Spiritualists Burnham continues to serve as an important theologico-political icon, symbol, or index of their past and impending struggles with the state and beyond.

For some Faithists gathered at St. Peter’s for the 2017 rededication, Granger’s presence alone was forceful, particularly when viewed through his role as PNC successor to Burnham and Burnham’s legacy of Spiritualist patronage. With the relatively new “Black” government back in power after over two decades of “Indian rule,” much political anticipation surrounded Granger’s rise to the presidency, especially among Spiritualists.<sup>155</sup> However, they felt primarily let down in the intervening years through Granger’s tenure, perhaps as a result of his “multiracial” agenda which they felt disregarded Spiritualists just as the PPP had previously. Dashing their hopes,

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<sup>154</sup> John A. Powell has brought significant attention to the damaging roles played by notions of “objectivity” in politics—including and centrally, in theories and practices of law—as a European fable constructed through Enlightenment social scientism. See especially Powell and Menéndez (2010), and Powell (2012).

<sup>155</sup> Gillian Richards-Greaves (2012, 2013, 2016), in her studies of Guyanese proverbs, racialized foodways, and Afro-Guyanese pre-wedding *Kweh-kweh* performance, describes the late-1990s period of PPP rule as one of (re)entrenchment of not only “Indian” culture but also Afro-“folkways,” including Komfa. This “upsurge” in *Kweh-kweh* and adjacent “folk” forms attendant to the rise of the PPP followed after a decade or more of alleged cultural stagnation or repression during which *Kweh-Kweh* “began to dissipate, due in part to a failing Guyanese economy, urbanization, religious conflict, and migration” (Richards-Greaves 2016: 414).

Spiritualists perceived no renewed forms of recognition offered by Granger's administration that they felt consisted of tangible means to forward their circumstances. As the group of women attending WIHW in 2017 demonstrated in their conversation, they felt that they were "Black people" whose "Black culture" was not being reciprocally supported by the "Black government" who they supported to (re)gain power.

At the 2017 WIHW, the women I sat with presented a glimpse into the sorts of supports that they felt were lacking, albeit through rehearsing certain odious examples of Islamophobic and anti-Indian rhetoric. Presumably still thinking about the young girls' backhanded compliment, one of the Spiritualist women remarked on the considerable presence of Muslims visible at the event. "See how many Imam and *Fula-man* they get there," she asked us.<sup>156</sup> "No one say nothing 'bout *they* robes 'cause they looking like good Muslim them," she defensively explained. Her comment led another women in our gathering to regard the status of Muslim Guyanese communities as a counterpoint within their ongoing discussion of how Spiritualists' pleas are undermined through Granger's typical optimism regarding the fairness of state-mediated religious representations. "Them Muslim getting all the help," she began to explain, adding, "you see the renovating on the big mosque on Church Street [Queenstown Jama Masjid]? Must getting enough duty-free, bring in them equipment and them material and all kind a help from Granger," she told us. "Them Muslim get enough respect here in Guyana," she added, while positioning herself to face more towards my direction. "And even with them being the ones them making terror for you Americans and the rest of the world, even right here in

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<sup>156</sup> "Fula" (or "Fullah") is used in Guyana to describe Muslims regardless of ethnoracial identities, and is said to have come to the Caribbean with enslaved West African Fulani, or Fulbe people. As Odeen Ishmael (2013 [2005]: 104) writes, "while the practice of Islam that came with African slaves did not totally survive the conditions of slavery, the name 'Fula' came to be used as a descriptive of indentured Indian Muslims and their descendants. The Africans who labelled them Fulas clearly knew Fula-speaking Africans who were Muslims."

Guyana. You know we get terrorist, right here?” she asked me before turning back to the group. “Them say Roger Khan get enough inside help, from all them masjid, and mandir too. Indian people, them does stick together, you know.” Everyone in the group nodded, laughed, or seemed to express some form of agreement.

While likely inaccurate to characterize Khan and his Squads as inciting a religiously based or specifically Muslim-affiliated or -informed brand of domestic terror and transnational impropriety, there are religious dimensions of Khan’s story and that period that deserve mention. With Independence, Hindu and Muslim religions were afforded a greater degree of tolerance and state protections than had been the case under colonial rule. These religions also, and maybe more importantly, gained political backing in the post-Burnham era through the resurgence of the PPP in 1992. With the revalorization of “Indian” ways—especially religious and “folk” culture—that accompanied the PPP’s victory over Burnham’s successor Desmond Hoyte and the PNC’s hold over the nation since Independence, a new opening emerged to reassess the long-entrenched devaluing of Hindu and Muslim practices and subjectivities. The colonially instilled bias privileging “English” religious culture in the form of Anglican or other Christianities became more widely questioned and often inverted, including at structural levels. Hindu and Muslim institutions, particularly in the private education sector, were expanded and supported by the government in new ways (Chickrie 1999). Khan is said to have had a role in certain of these developments, as well as attaining forms of preferential status with the ruling PPP administration (Bahadur 2015).<sup>157</sup> Channeling his illicit proceeds through governmental and non-governmental bodies, including his timber and other extractive concessions in the country’s interior, Khan supported many different local organizations—particularly religious ones—financing the

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<sup>157</sup> Also see U. S. Embassy Georgetown (2006). Although, PPP leader Bharrat Jagdeo and others continue to deny such claims, for example in the *Stabroek News* (22 February 2019).



activities of mosques and masjids especially, and bequeathing scholarships to Guyanese Muslims to study theology and related fields abroad. In doing so, Khan was praised by the government, by President Jagdeo, and by many Guyanese for his displays of generosity and allegiance.

If one example of contemporary state support for Komfa could be pointed to by Spiritualists and Faithists alike, notwithstanding their differing outlooks, as producing meaningful outcomes in their lives, it would be the Emancipation Eve celebration of 2018 held in Georgetown's Square of the Revolution, better known as "Cuffy." Emancipation, or Freedom Day, as the holiday commemorating the formal ending of slavery in British Guiana, is always a very dear occasion for Spiritualists, who have held Libation and other ritual events at Cuffy for decades. The most prominent landmark in Georgetown, Cuffy is a towering bronze figure representing Coffij, the formerly enslaved African and governor of Berbice who led a nearly-years-long revolt against Dutch rule throughout most of 1763.<sup>158</sup> Upon Independence from Britain, Burnham invoked "Cuffy" as the nation's first National Hero and later called for the statue to be erected in the center of the capital. The monument was designed by acclaimed visual artist Philip Alphonso Moore (1921-2012), who—importantly for many Guyanese—was widely recognized as a Jordanite devotee.<sup>159</sup> For Spiritualists, weeks before the August First holiday, and often the entire month of August, are devoted to recognizing the ancestors, specifically those of "the African Nation." However, 2018 was a special year, marking the 180<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the

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<sup>158</sup> On Coffij, or "Kofi Baadu," and histories of the 1763 rebellion/revolution, or "Berbice Slave Uprising," see a deeply insightful (and award-winning) essay by Marjoleine Kars (2016), as well as Kars' book (2020), and Anna Cameron (2007), Cleve Scott (2007), R. T. Smith (1962), Alvin Thompson (2009 [1998]), and Brackette Williams (1990). Note that Dutch records name the rebel leader of 1763 Berbice as "Coffij," and most Guyanese use the spelling "Cuffy," or alternatively, "Kofi." Kofi Baadu is a fictional character—who many Guyanese associate with Cuffy the national hero—who was created by Walter Rodney (1980) for an educational book about coastal West Africa and the transatlantic slave trade aimed at young readers.

<sup>159</sup> For more on Philip Moore and the creation of the Cuffy monument, as well as on Komfa included as a major aspect of public Emancipation Day celebrations, see Peretz (2015).

British Caribbean's abolition of African enslavement in 1838, and for this reason or others, the government sponsored a major happening at Cuffy that was disproportionately grander than those organized in previous years. Whether intended as a "boost" for Spiritualists and Faithists, or not, Komfa People expressed gratitude to the APNU+AFC, and in ways "redirected" the government's efforts to align with their own aspirations.

In years past, and since the 2018 megaevent, Spiritualists and other interested revelers generally meet on the evening before Emancipation Day to honor the holiday at Cuffy as it turns to midnight. Sometimes the proceedings begin outside the Demico Building near Stabroek Market and the Bus Park, with a procession of drumming, singing, and dancing leading down Brickdam street to Cuffy where the Libation is held. 2018's event did not begin at the Big Market nor did it feature a march along Brickdam. Instead, the evening began earlier than usual at Cuffy, but in the place of the typical few large white tents and assemblage of folding chairs arranged on the parapet adjacent to Cuffy, there was an incredibly professional large stage set up complete with lighting and substantial sound-system. Cuffy, who is usually the center of the night's attention, was behind and in many ways overshadowed by the massive platform as well as by the continual entertainment parading the proscenium. Performances ranged from organized choreographies and live old-time band "folk" music numbers, Komfa drumming, reciting of Psalms and verses and singing hymns, as well as various informational presentations and others to offer thanks to different organizations, made by elders and youths alike.

A large proportion of the night's activities was conducted by children, and a majority of the event centered on "showcasing" what Komfa People considered as *their own* culture and history, but also African and Afro-Guyanese culture more generally. Yet, many nonpractitioners, and many not-necessarily "African" Guyanese, were in attendance, exuberantly. For many

Spiritualists, the event demonstrated how Guyana can—as a nation—recognize them and their communities and practices. One friend with whom I shared part of that evening commented on the potential for a major national function like this one to impress positively upon coming generations and other Guyanese who may under normal circumstances be disinclined to participate in Emancipation or in what might be perceived as “African” or Komfa-related experiences. She started by saying, “look, you could be a Spiritualist, you does do the real thing, but you could still promote it to the youth them, in a way them children gone want to be involved. They must get excited by it,” she said, adding that “you know how them children stay nowadays.” She went on to commend the enhanced technological aspects and theatrics of the night’s arrangements, saying “is good. Give them they American Idol. But you see, is in a African style,” pointing to the ways that such instances of state-support—including for Euro-American imported cultural hegemonies—can be tempered by, and even exploited in service of, their own initiatives. Someone else who had joined our conversation agreed with her sentiments, and added, “let them see that what we does do is not just ‘Obeah,’” but instead, is something which might also take a more popular, entertaining form, one which they may well appreciate and endorse once they had now seen the state do so.

For Spiritualists, rejection and support from the state and from Guyanese generally come in manifold, often duplicitous and compromising, forms. The paradoxes of the “secular” nation-state’s professed religiosity, and interreligious and ethnoracial “cohesion,” ultimately contribute to denying the moral legitimacies of African, Indigenous, and certain Asian and other cultural heritages in Guyana. As the next chapter addresses, these issues of ethnoracial and religious discrimination continue to be inextricably intertwined in how they function to marginalize Komfa People in particular—as Guyana’s consummate racio-religious *Others*.

## CHAPTER 3

### Transforming Guyana into “Harmony Village”: “Social Cohesion” and Racio-Religious Nationalisms on Display

*DH: What is African religion? That is, have you experienced it?*

EK: What was African religion like? Did it exist? Many educated people have agreed that it exists, but they then dismiss it as “obeah.” This is how I believe a very well educated Prime Minister of Guyana thought of it when he promised in 1973 to legalise it. [...] The departed Robin Ravales, poet laureate of Surinam, a real African and a real nationalist and humanist, was telling us how he responded to the authorities who tried to co-opt him. He said, “If I do that I will lose my obeah.” You could not talk like that in Guyana. And he was a Brother who respected all the races of Surinam. He called them Many races, One people.

*DH: What did he mean? Lose his obeah? In Guyana he would be called an obeah man.*

EK: [...] I was seen as an obeah man of some sort, not because of African culture but because of my eating habits. [...] I was no more than three of four when Gang Gang told me daily, “Picknie, Congo ah high nation”. [...] I began to learn that the Comfa observers or worshipers were hunted and harassed by the police. They had to find [...] sacred groves. [...] The images in my young mind were of black water, and of moonlight and of police raids. [...] We at school called the votaries “The Powers.” That is how the village knew them. More tales of police raids and breaking up of services circulated in the school. The people we teased were firm and purposeful and did not show any embarrassment.

—Eusi Kwayana in conversation with David Hinds<sup>160</sup>

#### **Creating Harmony Village on Main Street**

In March of 2017, the Guyanese government, under the auspices of the Ministry of Social Cohesion, organized the country’s first “Harmony Village.” Held on the grass and concrete verge lining the center of Georgetown’s Main Street, the all-day event featured over thirty booths and tents representing a range of religious, cultural, and artistic groups; local and international organizations from the non-profit sector; some businesses; and a number of governmental bodies

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<sup>160</sup> These sentiments were recorded in a conversation between Eusi Kwayana (formerly Sidney King) and David Hinds and published as *The Legend: Post-Emancipation Villages in Guyana: Making World History* (2016: 68-71).

aside from the MoSC. To name just a few among the many groups presenting, there were Rastas gathered in a tent selling beaded jewelry, African black soap, and other “culture items,” as well as informing attendees about their various local denominations, or “Mansions.”<sup>161</sup> The Ministry of Education had a booth displaying—among other materials such as puzzles and storybooks—



**Fig. 3.1** Display inside the Ministry of Education’s tent at the first Harmony Village event in Georgetown, 2017. The Ministry is promoting a narrative of nationalistic “ethnic diversity” or pluralism as “harmony” through recognizing “the six peoples of Guyana” in their highly racialized ethnic personae.

six plastic and cloth dolls labeled to each represent one of Guyana’s “six peoples.” Members of the Chinese Association were exhibiting lanterns and other “handicrafts,” apparel, calligraphy, and cuisine.<sup>162</sup> An assembly of Spiritualists wearing long flowing

robes arranged themselves in a tent around a folding-table upon which they placed a collection of ritual items including bottles of perfume, hand fans, food and drink, candles, statuettes of deities (many in the form of orisha), and holy books, namely, a Christian Bible, a Quran, a Bhagavad Gita, and other more esoteric texts.<sup>163</sup>

<sup>161</sup> On Rastafari Mansions (or Orders), see Michael Barnett (2005).

<sup>162</sup> The Chinese Association, officially founded in 1920 at Lot 3, Brickdam, Georgetown, where it is still located, has aimed “to promote the social and economic development of Chinese in Guyana; To foster unity among all Chinese; To improve the Chinese in social matters,” among other ambitions (Rules of the Chinese Association of Guyana 2001).

<sup>163</sup> Texts displayed by the Spiritualist group that day also included a number of booklets about the orisha that sell at a few local “Spiritualist” boutiques in Georgetown’s public markets, stalls which I have been told were much more active in the past but today lack substantial patronage. Still, some trade in these textual materials must persist as the examples I saw displayed were bootleg versions created at the photocopy shop. Included were *Ochosi: Ifá and The Spirit of the Tracker* (1993), *Oshun: Ifá and The Spirit of the River* (1993), *Obatala: Santeria and the White Robed King of the Orisha* (2000), as well as many other titles by these same and different authors. Along with the short, popular accounts of Yoruba divinities were also a number of Christian-oriented, esoteric occult tracts which Patrick Polk (1999: 115) notes are “closely associated with European magic and sorcery,” including *Prince of the House of David*, *The Greater and Lesser Keys of Solomon*, *The Forgotten Books of Eden*, *The 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> Books of Moses*, *The*

A large and enthusiastic crowd of patrons convened at nine-thirty that morning at the Cenotaph to hear Prime Minister Moses Nagamootoo's opening remarks, which were followed by those of George Norton, Minister of Social Cohesion. After the formal presentations concluded, and throughout the day until the event's conclusion at six in the evening, many additional participants would filter through to spend time lingering about the booths, and the affair was considered overall to be a well-attended success. Promoted as a "pilot event," Harmony Village has now become an annual occasion held on Main Street each Spring, as well as at a number of other locations outside of Georgetown throughout the year.<sup>164</sup>

According to Sharon Patterson, who as Programme Coordinator within the MoSC is largely responsible for organizing the ongoing events, "Harmony Village is intended to be a microcosm, a representation of what the entire society is. So, it is about how we co-exist and how we work together in unity. Whether it is the business community, the cultural community, youth groups and so on" (quoted in Braithwaite 2018). At a "sensitisation" and planning meeting held in the weeks leading up to the second Main Street event in April 2018, Patterson explained that Harmony Village presents an opportunity for the MoSC to provide much needed community

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*Aquarian Gospel of Jesus the Christ*, and *Oahspe: A New Bible*. Added to these were (authorized reprints of) books like Lew Wallace's *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ* (1880) and Lloyd Douglas's *The Robe* (1942) and *The Big Fisherman* (1948).

Another book displayed, which I have encountered among other gatherings, is a slim volume written by the congregational leader of the Hebrew Family of Guyana, Cohane Michael ben Levi, titled *Israelites and Jews: The Significant Difference* (1997). Ben Levi's text is not only foundational to the Hebrew Family—a local Black Hebrew Israelite group—but also to many Spiritualists, who, like African Hebrew Israelites, tend to identify themselves as Israelites and not Jews or Christians. On Black or African Hebrew Israelites, see Jacob Dorman (2013), John Jackson (2013), and Tudor Parfitt (2013, and *passim*).

One more text deserving mention not displayed that particular day is *The Book of Black Magic and Pacts*, which many Spiritualists keep but are less inclined to bring to undue attention. On the presence and use of such esoteric occult texts in adjacent ritual idioms of the Black Atlantic, see Polk (1999: 117) who—unlike most scholars—explores how "Africans and African-Americans interpret" and value these texts "as a source of sacred knowledge," their uses as "liturgical device[s]," and their historical relationships "to both African and European religious traditions."

<sup>164</sup> The wording of "pilot event" refers to Minister Norton as quoted in the *Guyana Chronicle* (24 March 2017: 3).

outreach, informing the public about what functions the Ministry holds and how services they provide might be supportive to Guyanese, most of whom remain unaware of their programming, as she acknowledged. A major goal of the MoSC that Harmony Village is thought to help in accomplishing, is to facilitate the public's understanding of what "social cohesion" is, what such a concept can amount to in their lives, and how it can be conceived and implemented as "an approach to community and national development" (Braithwaite 2018). Elsewhere, Patterson has described the original impetus behind the event as "born out of a desire to showcase the collective mixture of differences, as well as similarities of the various religious and cultural practices" of Guyanese people (*Guyana Chronicle* 24 March 2017).

### **Political and Spiritual Gyaffs**

Following the theme of the day—"Beauty in Diversity, Celebration Guyana"—in their remarks, both Minister Norton and Prime Minister Nagamootoo dwelt on the idea(l) of recognizing "similarities" among Guyana's "collective mixture of differences." Nagamootoo specifically invoked the conflicted gulf between conceptions of Guyana as the "Land of Six Peoples" and, simultaneously, as comprising "One People, One Nation," with "One Destiny," as proposed in the National Motto, urging Guyanese to evoke the sense that "all a-we is one."<sup>165</sup> "We have transcended the history of those who came from African and Asia," he told the crowd. "We have left behind the distinction and embarrassment of caste... We are proud of our ancestry, free from the bondage of the past and blessed to be Guyanese," the Prime Minister declared, before going

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<sup>165</sup> From Fred D'Aguiar (2007, quoting "Guyanese poet and folklorist," Marc Matthews). Also see Judith Roback (1974: 254) and Ramaesh Bhagirat-Rivera (2018). A few Spiritualists and Rastafari have mentioned their ideas regarding similarities between Guyana's National Motto and that of the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), which had at least three branches in British Guiana holding enthusiastic, and sizeable, local memberships. By many accounts, a large proportion of UNIA members were Spiritualists/Faithists/Komfa People or became Jordanites starting in the mid-to-late-1920s. See Roback (1973) and Nigel Westmaas and Juanita De Barros (2011).

on to defend the notion that “diversity” is what makes Guyana “rich” and what “allows” Guyanese to “forge a bond irrespective of our differences,” or so he reassured those gathered (*Guyana Chronicle* 24 March 2017).

Minister Norton, for his part, was sure to also emphasize the appeal of embracing difference, not only seeking out, and often exaggerating, perceived similarities in generating a collective sense of national unity. “A variety of flowers make for a beautiful garden,” Norton offered by way of illustration, “where each flower is *equal* in value,” he stressed (*Guyana Chronicle* 24 March 2017). “Each of us is unique in our own way and we should value each other, not despite our differences, but because of them,” he said, before listing “ethnicity, religion, gender, age, political affiliation, and socio-economic status” as “just some of the forms of diversity” to which he was alluding (*ibid.*). As such, Minister Norton suggested that Harmony Village, as an annual occasion, would create much-needed opportunities for a wide-array of people to “depict Guyana’s rich culture” for others to observe (*ibid.*). Such opportunities are important, according to Norton, in helping “Guyanese to have a greater appreciation for their culture, and to learn more about the culture of their brothers and sisters,” discovering the richness of multiplicity and variability among “flowers” within the Guyanese “garden” (*ibid.*).

After listening to the Prime Minister’s and Minister of Social Cohesion’s speeches, and strolling through the tents to see which different organizations were present and what they had to offer, I spent much of the remainder of the day *gyaffing* at the Spiritualists’ table. *Gyaff* is a Creolese word for conversation, usually referring to a reasoning, or deep discussion, but can also be used similarly to “hanging out.” *Gyaff* is often employed in distinction from the word *lime*, which more closely reflects idle banter. Yet *lime* carries highly salient gendered, ethnoracialized, and class-based connotations. Drawing on Gary Brana-Shute’s (1979) work on community



“social life” among “lower status Creole males” in Paramaribo, Suriname, Linda Peake and Alissa Trotz (1999: 129) demonstrate how “Caribbean masculinities are privileged in public places that are sites of male socialisation. In these spaces,” they write, “masculinities are continually reinforced to prevent men from being stigmatised as what they are not, i.e. anti-men,” or *auntiemán*, a term used to pejoratively refer to LGBTI and otherwise non-conforming Guyanese.<sup>166</sup> Peake and Trotz (ibid.) elaborate that “liming, the occupation of public space usually centred around recreational drinking, allows ‘true’ Afro-Guyanese men to develop their masculine reputations and keep on showing women, other men and themselves that they are masculine.” Quoting Peter Wilson’s (1973:150) influential—and highly criticized—gendered account of Caribbean “respectability” and “reputation,” Peake and Trotz (ibid: 129-30) add that

it is through his reputation that a man ‘... achieves a place in the world of others where he is both an equal and unique person.’ [...] Men’s visibility in the lime makes clear they are not spending all their time working, neither are they in the home under a woman’s thumb. Liming not only establishes their independence from women and difference from Indo-Guyanese men, but also confirms them as men who have money to spend (with and on other men) and provides a space in which they can relate their sexual adventures to other men, thereby corroborating their (hetero)sexuality and verifying ‘the lime [as] a liminal space for Caribbean men.’

Their last quote comes from a paper presented by Guyanese-Bajan scholar Linden Lewis (1996: 17, 2004: 264), who has elsewhere written that “to ‘lime’ in the Caribbean is to ‘hang out,’ to congregate or to pass the time in some location. This activity is not restricted to men; women can also lime. Liming can also be a pastime which is shared by a mixed group of men and women, depending on the circumstance or occasion.”<sup>167</sup>

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<sup>166</sup> Guyanese sexual and gender subjectivities, particularly in relation to Komfa practices, are explored in greater detail in Chapters 7 and (especially) 8.

<sup>167</sup> Compare *gyaffing* to Clifford Geertz (1998) on “deep hanging out” as ethnographic method, one which, as mentioned in the Introduction, thoroughly informed the research that led to this Dissertation. Also see Ben Walmsley (2018) on the merit of “deep hanging out in the arts,” more specifically.

Already being familiar with a number of the Spiritualists from various services I had attended, the group warmly invited me to join them in their tent. About ten women, all middle-aged and up, were each donning their long robes complete with colored waist-tie cords and head-coverings. They were joined by one elderly man, the husband of one of the Mothers, who likewise wore a body-length robe, although unlike the women, his head was uncovered, and also unlike the women, he kept to himself, even napping in his chair at one point. As we sat together under the shade of the vinyl canopy, the all-day-long *gyaff* only became intermittently interrupted when one of the women would engage with an occasional customer, as four of the women were also offering “African” comestibles for the Harmony Villagers to indulge, which many did. They enjoyed ginger beer and *mauby*, as well as banana leaf-wrapped *conkie*, coconut milk-rich *metem*, and sweet and sticky cassava *pone*.

While many Guyanese designate these particular food items as presenting “African culture,” others note that some have their origins in Indigenous “Amerindian” foodways, for example *mauby* and *pone* have both been attributed to local Indigenous traditions, and similarly with “cassava culture” such as represented by *metem(gee)*. *Conkie*, on the other hand, has more demonstratable sub-Saharan African antecedents, with the word itself attributed to the West African Twi term for a “boiled” “cake”—“*ɲkanɲkye*” (Allsopp 2003 [1996]: 134). Candice Goucher (2014: 74) notes further that “the *conkey* (sweetened) and *kankey* (savory) of the Caribbean and the *kenkey* of the Akan, Ga, and Ewe people of coastal West Africa hail from the same maritime routes.” Yet, as Gillian Richards-Greaves (2013: 77, 2012) observes, ethnoracialized conceptions of foodways can be a particularly contentious arena within the “richness to the Guyana cultural fabric.” As Richards-Greaves (2013: 77) contends, “food has

been, and continues to be, a powerful weapon in the ongoing negotiation for national political control among the racial groups that comprise Guyanese society.”

A good number of people—about twenty I witnessed—stopped throughout the day to partake of the “African” refreshments, which are often sold around the Emancipation Day holiday and into August “vacation,” when schools are closed. However, customers were quick to be on their way after making their purchases, as if to avoid unnecessary contact with the Spiritualists. Some people were excited to obtain their food and/or drink, but very few seemed willing to otherwise visit the women in their tent. And rarely did a passerby stop to speak with them about anything relevant to their faith—the ostensible reason for their presence that day.

Still, the women enjoyed themselves, as did I, immersed in stories and reminiscences, jokes and gossip, as well as certain moments of deep reflection regarding the Harmony Village event, the state’s role in mediating “cohesion”—or “policing culture”—as one of the women had it, and more generally, on public perceptions and national receptions of their faith. A few of the more boisterous of the group expressed a fondness for Norton and the messages he shared, as the event on a whole was largely associated with him as head of the MoSC. More than once his metaphor of the Guyanese garden of diversely delightful flowers was evoked; “each unique, each equal,” someone recalled for the group. The Spiritualists were also pleased by the turn-out from the public, and were quite enthusiastic about sharing the presence of their fellow presenters. “Set a lovely booth they get there,” one woman remarked, encouraging others to leave their table and “go see we competition,” she suggested as everyone else laughed. “You know is why none a them coming here?” another asked. “’Cause they get ’nough nice thing out there—game and craft and music,” she told them. “And ’nough food, you see it? Food looking more nice than we own,” she teased.

Yet in the more serious moments of deliberation, these same women who voiced their general satisfaction with the event and their approval of Minister Norton's narrative of celebrating Guyana's "Beauty in Diversity," also shared what they felt were the major shortcomings of the day, and of the MoSC, everyday. Like similar and ongoing discontentment articulated by Spiritualists regarding WIHW, the rhetoric of inclusion and cohesion pervading Harmony Village was also thought to be "all talk." One of the women submitted to the others that "Norton [was] making a big show" out of the event, "but wha's the point in this all really?" she wondered. What were the tangible results expected from such a "show?" Someone else added in agreement that, "you can' drink mauby and belch beer," a common proverb usually interpreted to mean that little effort amounts to little success. "He do a good job setting the place and gathering up all a we," one women stated, seeming to sum-up the others' sentiments. "But is play thing when you turn 'round and it bare war, in the market, on the road, on the bus, in we school for we children! Bare war, so how's this show gone help?"

**"You have to understand your own culture...to work together in unity"<sup>168</sup>**

This Harmony Village event was received in a similar way by Spiritualists as was the 2018 Emancipation "victory," through which many Komfa People felt that they had been honored on par with other Guyanese racio-religious groupings vis-à-vis state-bestowed entitlements. Their inclusion in the first-ever Harmony Village was understood by many as significant for Komfa and for those who considered Komfa as *their own*. These important "inclusions" signaled for Spiritualists that the current government was directing sincere efforts toward their "betterment" and "upliftment," as the women gathered under the tent described their envisioned situations.

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<sup>168</sup> As discussed below, this quote comes from a practitioner.

Yet, as one of the women, Mother Gladys, later confided, these same displays of professed acceptance and state-mediated support tend to fall flat when most Guyanese do not “buy into” the state discourses of “cohesion” or “harmony” when it comes to Spiritualists. “It might work for the rest of them,” Mother Gladys suggested, “but can’ work for we,” as the stigmas associated with Komfa are “too deep,” too ingrained in the Guyanese psyche. Centuries of colonial Christian maligning has *marked* Spiritualists as “superstitious,” “heathen,” and “demonic,” with the result that such moral distancing “does become a part a they thinking, they does stay so ‘cause it does *go along* with they religion for hate us,” as the Mother explained. “So they feel as like they must forsake they own God, they own religion, just for *not* lick we down each time they see we,” she clarified further, adding that, “is like until we *is* the nation, we’s jus’ nobody.” For this practitioner and others, their own positions in society make clear to them that Komfa can only gain the equality promised by the government, by the Constitution, and by the “secular” nation-state, if more Guyanese who are not already practitioners themselves choose to embrace the faith and become Spiritualists. Through entering “the fold of the cloth,” Guyanese who have previously only feared their Spiritualist compatriots can “loose-up the shackle of they mental slavery,” according to Mother Gladys. “For Guyanese is like we’s [Spiritualists are] unbelievable, a shame, is like we should a be left in the past...Just more Elders dying and none a them children them even interested. No one care,” she lamented. Hopes of moral redemption through generational succession or conversion, then, remain distant and wistful.

Many Spiritualists complain that “them youth” show no interest in their traditions. Elders often criticize younger generations and individuals in their families and communities for “paying no mind to Spiritual life,” never or rarely attending church functions, refusing to follow dietary customs and therapeutic traditions, and, most significantly, neglecting the ancestors. Most often,

the perceived decline of the faith, of active membership and participation in ritual events, is blamed on “the youths’ big-headedness,” or “arrogance,” also understood as young people’s pretensions of “going foreign” and abandoning Guyana and its folkways. Yet, as one friend astutely explained, with words reminiscent of Peter Tosh, the ongoing repetition of narratives that “blame the youth” for their lack of commitments to the faith tend to evade all forms of responsibility.<sup>169</sup> “My personal opinion,” Sister Dawn Stewart offered, “is that we’ve failed them. Because is not about them being involved, is about *you teaching them*, and you have to teach them from birth, right, to understand their culture, to understand themselves.” She went on to add that “if you don’t teach them, they will be confused, you know: ‘Who am I, where am I, who am I supposed to be?’ And that’s a natural thing for any person that’s growing that doesn’t have a solid foundation... You have to feel comfortable with ‘who am I,’ because if you don’t know who you are then you’re nobody.” In another discerning turn, Sister Dawn went on to describe how “invoking the spirit of our ancestors, communicating with that spirit of the ancestors for leadership... as guiders of our life and our destiny... through the drums and the dancing and everything we get a guidance.” Such forms of ancestral direction strive to fulfill “a need for our children to understand and to be grounded,” Sister Dawn said, because “to be good humans you have to understand your own culture, and you have to be comfortable with your culture to be comfortable with someone else’s culture, and to work together in unity. If you’re

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<sup>169</sup> As Peter Tosh sang, with the Wailers,

You teach the youth about Christopher Columbus / And you said he was a very great man / You teach the youth about Marco Polo / And you said he was a very great man / You teach the youth about the Pirate Hawkins / And you said he was a very great man / You teach the youth about the Pirate Morgan / And you said he was a very great man / So you can’t blame the youth of today / You can’t fool the youth / [...] All these great men were doin’ / Robbin’, a rapin’, kidnappin’ and killin’ / [...] So you can’t blame the youth.

Original session outtakes from *Equal Rights* (1977), released as “You Can’t Blame the Youth” on EMI’s 2002 remastered *Equal Rights*.

not solid with your culture you can't work with another culture *in unity*. You always afraid of that culture, you always wanna persecute them because *of the fear*.”

For the Spiritualists with whom I shared in experiencing Guyana's first Harmony Village, all in all, the program and activities were pleasurable and somewhat gratifying to the degree that the women felt honored to be invited to participate among the other cultural, bureaucratic, and entrepreneurial groups who were chosen by the government to be present.<sup>170</sup> However, they tended to agree amongst themselves that nothing much of value to them was expected to arise from the event, nor from the MoSC. While “it seem like a good idea,” another Mother rationalized, “nough people them gone not bother for come,” she said. “And them who does come, you see, they must walk right past we,” as I had indeed observed throughout the day. “You been here and how many people you see come stop to talk with we?” she asked rhetorically, furnishing her own reply before I could manage. “All day been ‘bout what, three, four them stop. And none want really know nothing anyway, you see. Just stop with them big-eye skin-up looking like, ‘ay, so’s like you is real nah, huh,’” the women said, imitating the many Harmony Villagers who we had witnessed pass the Komfa tent with faces full of disbelief. One passerby had seemed to spit on the parapet about five feet from the women's table directly in front of them after supposedly giving a disgruntled “twist-face” look to the group. While the women who claimed to have seen the act spent a minute or two trying to persuade the others of the passing woman's ill-intent, whether the gesture was intended to meet them as a slight, or *eye-pass*—a blatant sign of disrespect—or not, they collectively chose to ignore it. “Let she be,” one

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<sup>170</sup> Their invitation to participate was extended directly from the MoSC's organizing body to one of the Mothers present at the event, whose sister-in-law happens to work under Programme Coordinator Sharon Patterson. Without such an “inside” connection, it remains doubtful that *this particular group* of Spiritualists would have had the opportunity to participate in the capacity they did. However, in all likelihood, as an alternative MoSC would have selected GUAMC representatives in this group's stead.

of the women said. “If she want she can still come for talk with we, with she *dutty* mouth-water and all!”

Without innovating and instituting creative, challenging, and courageous interventions into Guyana’s state of social and political division, then the MoSC is likely to keep repeating the pattern of “putting on a show” of unity in difference, while never managing to help marginalized individuals and groups like Spiritualists achieve their desired, and deserved, “upliftment.” Such forms of “betterment” require structural transformations, not mere displays of diversity and quests to detect similarities. Likewise, some Spiritualists feel they must transform their own ways to meet the demands of a “modernizing” nation and generation of youth. Not everyone has expressed support for the MoSC, nor do they feel that the periodic cultural spectacles the Ministry hosts amount to much in the grander scheme of Guyana’s often-charged ethnoracial and political gulfs, which sustain the unfortunately not-always-so-cohesive society that has, purportedly, *required* a national ministry to address such “underlying” social stresses.

**Polic(y)ing “Ethnic Relations” and “Social Cohesion”:  
Public Criticism and the 2020 General and Regional Elections**

Sentiments that were critical of the MoSC and the ERC came to the fore during the aftermath of the highly contentious general and regional elections held on March 2, 2020. While in most cases not directly related to Spiritualists’ concerns, these critical evaluations provide context that can help inform a fuller discussion of the work of the MoSC and Guyana’s discordant ethnoracial social politics more generally. The professed lack of national social cohesion, particular as regards Indo/Afro politics, has been understood as necessitating a ministry distinctly devoted to intervening in the societal disunities of the nation-state. Such socio-political concerns impact heavily on Spiritualists in their daily lives, especially through how their religion has been



represented in society. The vacillation of what many analysts have called a “bipolar ethnic politics” continued in 2015 when the PPP/C lost national elections to the APNU+AFC coalition.<sup>171</sup> While Indo-Guyanese continued “ascendency” seemed insecure, Afro-Guyanese perceived an opportunity for altering conditions under which they had felt subject for the roughly two decades of “Indian rule.” The opening for Afro-Guyanese transformations to national politics, however, would be jeopardized as Granger lost a vote of no-confidence in the National Assembly in December 2018, only halfway through his term as president.

During the roughly three years of APNU+AFC rule prior to Granger being recalled, the “multi-racial coalition” government he united had not always maintained its togetherness. Granger and his PNC party seemed to be running the show at the minor parties’ expenses, which for many revealed the charade of the “multi-racial” campaign and early coalition rhetoric. The vote to recall Granger arose after the opposition PPP/C’s protests over the administration’s mishandling of negotiations with U. S.-based petro-magnate ExxonMobil, who in 2015—just as Granger was elected—made the “world’s largest oil discovery” in many years off the coast of Guyana (Global Witness 2020). Guyana’s national ministers from all parties, including within the APNU+AFC coalition but primarily from the PPP/C, complained that the contracts agreed to between the Guyanese state and multinational corporations were unfair and exploitative towards the small and impoverished country which had no previous experience in handling major revenues or infrastructures for petrol production. As Jonathan Gant, Senior Campaigner at Global Witness, said in early 2020, “it is shocking that Exxon would seek such an exploitative deal in one of the Western Hemisphere’s poorest countries,” adding that “Guyana’s urgent development needs—such as building new hospitals and schools, and protecting itself from

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<sup>171</sup> Again, see Milne (1977, 1981, 1988) on comparative characterizations of Guyana’s “ethnopolitics” as “bipolar.”

rising sea levels that put 90% of the population at risk—will not be met by Exxon walking away with an extra US\$55 billion in its back pocket” (Global Witness 2020).<sup>172</sup> In the end, Granger lost the no-confidence vote after a single minister in his coalition, Charandass Persaud, switched his allegiance leading to a 33-32 vote in the 65-member Assembly. Persaud is quoted as saying at the time that “this is a conscious vote. [...] We are sitting in Parliament as yes men,” he told reporters. “We have not blended,” he said, in reference to the coalition’s internal politics (Krauss 2018). Law mandated that national elections be held in no more than ninety days.

However, the Attorney General filed a motion in court arguing that the no-confidence vote had been invalid for a number of reasons, one among them being that Minister Persaud was ineligible to hold his position in parliament as he had obtained citizenship in Canada, a status which according to the constitution revoked his Guyanese nationality. Lengthy legal battles over Persaud’s eligibility and other issues ensued, which reached all the way to the Caribbean Court of Justice (CCJ), the highest jurisdiction for Guyana’s court system (*Kaieteur News* 8 June 2019). The CCJ’s final decision reaffirmed the vote as valid and elections were scheduled to be held in March of 2020. The PPP/C soon announced former Housing Minister Irfaan Ali as their presidential candidate after Jagdeo was deemed ineligible to rerun for presidential office. Granger, however, would run against Ali in attempts at a renewed term. Still, the AFC chose a new potential Prime Minister, Khemraj Ramjattan, who would replace Moses Nagamootoo in the case that Granger was re-elected. Campaigns from both parties were strong, although Jagdeo, as Leader of the Opposition PPP/C, was much more visible throughout than was his party’s candidate, Ali. A number of issues arose throughout the campaigning period wherein members of both major parties were reported as making prejudicial comments and nonphysical “attacks”

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<sup>172</sup> Also see the report produced by Global Witness titled *Signed Away* (2020).

regarding their opponents and opponents' supporters, which were often based in forms of ethnoracial stereotyping (*Stabroek News* 18 January 2020).

The ERC responded by pressuring officials who had been accused of committing such offences to publicly apologize, and for all such occurrences to cease immediately to ensure the elections would be peaceful. Much of the Guyanese public appreciated the ERC's firm stance in reprimanding the legislators for their discriminatory indiscretions and aggressive, polarizing politics. As noted in the *Guyana Chronicle* (Holland 2020), "such assertive action taken by the ERC received praises from sections of society." According to ERC Chairman John Smith, some of the divisive comments consisted of statements such as cries to "chase them out" in reference to the incumbent coalition administration; that the country needs a "war break" to remove the current government; and that if elected, officials claimed they would be "giving jobs only to my people" (*Kaieteur News* 12 January 2020).<sup>173</sup> In a report the ERC released detailing their concerns with the campaign and their various responses, they summarize that they investigated "various incidents of intimidation, abuse and assault on Guyanese while they were engaged in activities to sensitize people to political messages reflective of the political parties they represent" (*ibid.*). "Regrettably," he noted just weeks prior to election day, "their effects are still being felt" (*ibid.*).

Election day posed few problems, although reports of irregularities circulated and police were called to calm tensions at a number of polling stations throughout the country (cf. Chabrol 2020). In one instance, as voters lined up at the polls in Goed Intent village on the West Bank Demerara, it was reported that supporters of the PPP/C had been attempting to distribute "fake ID cards" and encourage people to vote multiple times. (*Stabroek News* 3 March 2020). Police,

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<sup>173</sup> It is unclear if reference to "my people" in the Chairman's statement was directed at acknowledging the formidable import of political party affiliations or of ethnoracial identifications, for Guyanese, generally.

accompanied by members of the Carter Center's international observer mission, reached the scene to gather accounts, yet the alleged perpetrators had vanished. Overall, the day was generally anticlimactic, although tensions began to rise quickly after as no winner was announced. By March 5, of the country's ten regions, nine had declared their results. At that point, the PPP was reported as leading by around 51,000 votes. The only region left unaccounted for, however, Region Four, comprised the most populous district, which includes Georgetown and many adjacent communities.

Trouble began when complications were identified with the official Statement of Poll results compiled by Region Four's chief electoral official, or Returning Officer. Allegations by the PPP/C and other minor parties in the contest alleged that unsanctioned spreadsheets were used in lieu of the standard methods prescribed by law, and that a data-entry staff of the Electoral Commission (GECOM) was in possession of a suspect laptop and flash drive.<sup>174</sup> The opposition PPP/C obtained a court injunction to prevent the Region Four Returning Officer from publicly declaring any final results until all parties' designated observers could first verify that all procedures had been followed as mandated by state electoral legal structures. Yet the results were released to various media sources by GECOM indicating that the APNU+AFC had won by nearly 60,000 votes, a result that would have secured a one-seat majority in the National Assembly for their party. Party and international observers criticized GECOM further for the lack transparency surrounding the tallying of votes for Region Four, and in particular that the official poll record of Region Four votes bore the signature of Volda Lawrence, then Minister of Health in the APNU+AFC administration, instead of the signature or stamp of the Returning Officer (Ramdass 2020).

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<sup>174</sup> See opinion and reporting in *Stabroek News* (5 March 2020), *Stabroek News* (6 March 2020), *Guyana Times* (6 March 2020), and *passim*.

In the meantime, Guyanese on all sides were upset. They entered an indeterminate, interim limbo period between casting their votes on March 2, and the as yet to be announced final outcome, as results were leaked, announced, and retracted without rituals of state office actually being enacted. Under pressure from CARICOM, the U. K., U. S., and Canada, Granger held off on proclaiming victory, yet civil demonstrations were held in a number of communities and villages mainly by PPP/C supporters who were encouraged by Jagdeo’s vociferous reprimanding of “the election riggers.”<sup>175</sup> At least one person was killed in protests, a young man who was shot by police at the demonstration in Cotton Tree village on March 6 after he had reportedly assaulted an officer.<sup>176</sup> Many other acts of violence were also reported in the days and weeks following the vote, and at the community level of local politics, Guyanese reported a devastating increase in ethnoracial animosities even among neighbors who have lived peacefully side by side for years.

Party officials and their supporters were demanding full, or region-specific recounts, while teams of international observers were not shy in displaying their own exasperations in pleading for peaceful political transition and transparency. Most of the international visitors chose to leave, in effect abandoning their “missions,” but continuing to produce statements in the international media calling for Guyana to take or not take certain measures. A joint statement produced by British, United States, and Canadian governments, as well as the European Union,

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<sup>175</sup> The language of “rigging” has been pervasive, not only from PPP officials and supporters, but also from Guyana’s Private Sector Commission and other institutional bodies. See for example, *News Room* (13 March 2020).

<sup>176</sup> At least two deaths were reported as resulting from the March 2, 2020 elections. Along with Seedat “Devon” Hansraj, the eighteen-year-old from Cotton Tree village who was killed by police after allegedly assaulting two officers with a *cutlass* (or machete) during post-election protests in his village, another young man named Reaaz Hollander also died in the aftermath of the elections. Hollander gained notoriety after he had obtained the crucial legal injunction from the High Court that blocked the announcement of the winner of the March 2 elections, and in the weeks following was found dead in his home outside of Georgetown, with suicide reported as the cause of death. See *News Room* (28 March 2020).

questioned the results reported for Region Four, and expressed these countries’ united “deep concern over credible allegations of electoral fraud” while beckoning Granger “to avoid a transition of government which we believe would be unconstitutional” (“Joint Statement” 6 March 2020).<sup>177</sup> U. S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and others insinuated that Guyana would be likely to face sanctions over the election. Through his Twitter account, Michael Kozak, the Assistant Secretary for Western Hemisphere Affairs in the U. S. Department of State, threatened that “under U.S. law and practice, those who participate and benefit from electoral fraud, undermine democratic institutions and impede a peaceful transition of power can be subject to a variety of consequences” (*Kaieteur News* 18 March 2020).

On March 12, the Guyanese Supreme Court ruled for a partial recount in the election results, specifically ordering that Region Four representatives continue to verify votes through GECOM. As the BBC (12 March 2020) reported, “Judge Roxane George also ruled the electoral body should not declare a winner before the recount is finished.” And according to *Stabroek News* (15 March 2020), “an independent high-level Caribbean Community (CARICOM) team is [...] to supervise a full recount of the ballots cast in all ten regions at Guyana’s elections based on an agreement by President David Granger and Opposition Leader Bharrat Jagdeo.” Yet, as would end up being the case both with and without international pressures, months passed while still no resolution emerged. It was not until August 2—five months after election day—that President Irfaan Ali was sworn into office.

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<sup>177</sup> The “Joint Statement on Elections” (6 March 2020) released by the U. S. Embassy in Georgetown, the British High Commission in Georgetown, Canadian High Commission in Georgetown, and the Delegation of the E. U. is available at the U. S. Embassy in Georgetown’s website. The “Statement by the Caribbean Community on the Tabulation Process of the Guyana Elections” (6 March 2020) is available through CARICOM’s website. Also see coverage in *Al Jazeera* (6 March 2020), BBC (6 March 2020), and *The New York Times* (Kurmanaev 2020).

## **Palimpsestic Lineages of Historical Catastrophe<sup>178</sup>**

Given the recent unrest and fatal violence surrounding the 2020 elections, perhaps Prime Minister Nagamootoo's remarks that Guyanese had "overcome tribalism and casteism," with which he opened the inaugural Harmony Village in 2017, were spoken prematurely, were unrealistic, overly optimistic, or mere projection of how politicians, and most Guyanese alike, would like to see their country in the future (Dept. of Public Info. 2017). Certainly, many Guyanese experienced the outcome of the recent elections as forms of what was being locally labelled "tribalism," "racialism," and a reignited "race war."<sup>179</sup> Public statements circulating in local newspapers, particularly in the open-comments sections following online election coverage, as well as in innumerable social media channels, demonstrate the extent to which formal party politics in Guyana remain intimately tied to ethnoracial bases. During election "season," when racialized partisanship generally become exacerbated and community tensions and violence become most acute, so too does the public's perception that their government has not adequately organized measures to preclude the atrocious outcomes which seem to repeatedly transpire.

Guyanese and British Guianese violence surrounding elections tends to erupt within the context of previously established communities' politics. Often such local level politics in Guyana are informed by "clientelistic networks" linking both political party and labor union affiliations, as well as many other domains of public life, that tend to encourage the formation of what Deborah Thomas (2016) and others have identified in Jamaica and elsewhere as political "garrisons." While not merely a physical space, garrisons "became territorially rooted

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<sup>178</sup> This section title paraphrases the words of both Faizal Deen (in Cummings, Mohabir, and Deen 2018: 12) and Paul Connerton (2011: 17), whose works are discussed together below.

<sup>179</sup> On "race war," see Claude Benbow's piece carried by Trinidad's *Daily Express* on 11 March 2020 titled "Please, no race war in Guyana," and *passim*. Benbow is a prominent Trinidadian attorney who was born in Guyana.

homogenous voting communities where political support was exchanged for contracts and other social welfare benefits. These exchanges were institutionalized, and even codified as part of general procedures for the distribution of paid work among constituencies” (ibid.: 182). A large body of literature describes and analyzes “transformations in the ongoing process of garrisonization and ‘tribal politics’ in Jamaica,” and much focuses on the role of violence in elections and democratic procedures (ibid.: 195n11).<sup>180</sup> According to the U. S. Department of State records, Bharrat Jagdeo’s successful 2006 (re-)re-election campaign represented Guyana’s “first non-violent elections held in more than 20 years” (“Guyana [07/08]” 2007-2008).<sup>181</sup>

In the week directly following the 2020 elections during the contentious period before any clear results or directions forward had been officially endorsed, one person on Facebook expressed the view that the Guyanese government’s lack of support for “the arts” in particular—which could serve as tangible pathways for intercultural dialogue and understanding—has contributed to the current state of social division. Without intending to “blame” the MoSC, the Facebook poster juxtaposed an image of the satisfactory work on the state in *materially* “developing” Guyana, with that of the state’s inadequacies in advancing creative programs to “foster cohesion” among Guyanese.

While the Ministry of Public Infrastructure has been doing an outstanding job on building roads and bridges across Guyana’s physical landscape, the Ministry of Social Cohesion should’ve been just as busy building inroads and bridges throughout and between our diverse communities and cultures - and even on the heels of MoPI. This is not to lay

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<sup>180</sup> Also see Christopher Charles (2002), Rivke Jaffe (2013), Amanda Sives (2010), and Carl Stone (1980).

<sup>181</sup> On governmental and non-governmental approaches to intervention which account for deeply embedded histories of electoral violence in Guyana, see for example, Centre for Public Impact (25 March 2016), Chaubey et al. (2012), Myers and Calder (2011) and Westmaas (2009). The U. S. Dept. of State (“Guyana [07/08]” 2007-2008) records claim that Jagdeo’s successful 2006 (re-)re-election campaign represented Guyana’s “first non-violent elections held in more than 20 years.”



blame but to highlight how investment in the arts are crucial, particularly for diverse societies such as ours.<sup>182</sup>

Guyanese of all backgrounds were calling for peace as the results were being reverified under international pressures, and as politicians of the two main parties were planning their tactical approaches. Many Guyanese responded with claims of neocolonial intervention, with a few friends suggesting that the U. S. and U. K. neocolonizers had their own ongoing political disorder to worry about with President Trump and Prime Minister Johnson. Or as one acquaintance expressed, “perhaps the Carter Centre Observers may consider going home to pronounce on indications of voter suppression related [to] America’s [sic] forthcoming elections.”<sup>183</sup> The 2020 electoral crisis also viscerally reminded people of Guyana’s past “ethnic conflicts” surrounding contested elections, and prior even to the 1997-1998 misfortunes (discussed in Chapter 2). One friend living in Maryland posted a plea on Facebook days after the election reading, “Please don’t let this boil over into another 64 disturbance! Half my family was forced to flee Mackenzie during that tragic period in Guyanese history! History appears to be repeating itself...”<sup>184</sup>

In early 1964, the height of the transitional period into independence, Guyanese ethnoracial tension escalated considerably, in large part due to the hesitantly retreating colonial government’s opposition to labor organizing among the colony’s still-active-sugar estate workers. When in February half the workers on Leonora estate were turned away for lack of

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<sup>182</sup> Kojo [Chukwuma] McPherson, public Facebook post from 7 March 2020, five days after the national elections in the midst of uncertainty as to the outcome. Chukwuma McPherson is a Guyanese filmmaker associated with Dred Scotsman Productions.

<sup>183</sup> Joan Louisa Cambridge, Facebook, 7 March 2020. Joan is author of the novel *Clarise Cumberbatch Want to Go Home* (1987) and a friend from Charlene Wilkinson’s Kriyoliiz Klaas at the University of Guyana.

<sup>184</sup> Ta’seti Efuntola-Osunlade [aka Brent De Nobrega-Sullivan], Facebook, 7 March 2020.

work, they began a strike in which other cane-cutters across the colony joined. Agricultural workers had for a number of years been demanding polls among workers to determine union representation, but the colonial administration had undermined these efforts considerably (Waters and Daniels 2010). Still, the strike was overwhelmingly successful and as a result sugar production was deeply affected, promoting the Sugar Producers' Association (SPA, who had helped block union representation) to hire temporary replacement workers to substitute for the strikers. Due to historically engrained, ethnoracialized patterns of labor in British Guiana, after emancipation—including up through the 1960s and today, most sugar workers tend to be of South Asian heritage, while African-descended Guyanese typically avoid employment on the estates.<sup>185</sup> As such, when the SPA hired primarily Afro-Guyanese scabs to undermine the labor stoppage and continue their production, the regular estate workers—being mostly Indo-Guyanese—for forced to either concede to the powers of the capitalist-driven colony, or to confront head-on their fellow Guyanese workers who were subverting their movement (ibid.). Worse yet, many of the temporary Afro-Guyanese workers were also hired by estate management as “vigilantes” to purportedly protect property from being damaged by unruly protesters. Those hiring these “vigilantes,” however, also encouraged them to incite conflict and violence within the estates, where many of the regularly hired Indo-Guyanese laborers not only worked, but also lived, following patterns established during the period of indentureship (ibid.).

The frictions widened from the estates, and many instances of ethnoracially motivated violence occurred throughout the coming months all over the colony. According to former Guyanese Ambassador to the U. S., Odeen Ishmael (2013 [2005]: 592), in early 1964 “violent attacks involving beatings and murders occurred mainly on the East Coast Demerara,

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<sup>185</sup> Born in British Guiana in 1926, author Roy Heath (1990: 33) observes in his memoir that “anything connected with slavery was despised and avoided, even the breadfruit, a highly nutritious food.”

Mahaicony, West Demerara, Wismar-Mackenzie and Georgetown, and the entire country was in a state of tension. In Georgetown, Indians were brutally beaten on the streets, and some business places were looted and set on fire.” The violence was directed “both ways,” according to Ishmael (ibid.) and others, as “reprisal beatings [...] and killings occurred with great frequency. Indians attacked Africans and Africans attacked Indians.” Janet Jagan, who was then Minister of Home Affairs, explicitly accused the police of negligence and complicity for not preventing the violence erupting in communities all throughout the colony. By late-May of 1964, the inaction of the colonial administration was made most evident, in the event which my friend above attributes to the cause for half his family having needed to abandon their hometown. The origins of the disaster are unclear but widely speculated on, referred to by my friend as the “64 disturbance,” by many others as the “Wismar massacre,” or simply, “*the racial conflict.*” What unfolded over the several days beginning on May 24, is also still highly contested, yet a report (1965) from a commission of inquiry held months later gives one rendering of the horror.<sup>186</sup> We must keep in mind, however, as Alissa Trotz (2014: 298) counsels, that “reconciliation is not to be found via a search for a single, sovereign account of what actually happened. Instead,” she suggests, “we might ask how the events of 1964 are remembered and what meaning is given to them from the space of the present” (ibid.).

When on May 24, 1964, Minister Jagan demanded the Police Commissioner send reinforcements and even British soldiers stationed in Guiana to the town now known as Linden, then Mackenzie-Wismar-Christianburg, the authorities refused her calls to prevent any further escalations of what was already being reported as dehumanizing violence in the streets—directed

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<sup>186</sup> See, S. Ropan Singh (“Chairman” of the commission) et al. 2004 [1965 (29 January)].

overwhelmingly at the local Indo-Guyanese community and particularly at women. Reading the colonial commission's report, Ishmael (2013 [2005]: 592) writes that

beatings, rapes, looting and arson were being committed in broad daylight and it was not until late in the afternoon that the Commissioner agreed to ask for a contingent of British troops to go to the area. In the aftermath of the attacks on Indians there, five persons were killed, hundreds were injured, many females were raped and brutalised, and over 200 houses and business places owned by Indians were burnt to the ground. The British troops from the following day assisted with the evacuation to Georgetown of Indians in the area. In all, 744 families comprising 3,399 persons (1,249 adults and 2,150 children) were evacuated.

In protest against the partiality displayed by the Police and the Volunteer Force, Janet Jagan resigned as Minister of Home Affairs on 1 June 1964.

From the space of the present, my friend's memory of family being evacuated serves, among many things, as a call to prevent similar tragedies of politicized division from recurring.

Specifically, the call comes from a memory made present in the height of postelection turmoil, when the exigencies of the moment demand reconciliations that may or may not be encouraged by those repeating memories of trauma (Trotz 2014; cf. Schoolman 2020).

In the days and weeks following 2020's election, as community tensions rose and no solutions emerged from the politicians, many Spiritualists held fasts and prolonged—days-long—sessions of prayerful service, with their respective gatherings and in secluded isolation. Some of these fasts continued weeks later as the emerging global threat of Covid-19 became a local Guyanese reality. Faithists in Georgetown and other parts of the colony similarly observed periods of fasting for weeks at a time following the 1964 tragedies in Mackenzie and elsewhere, both as a form of solidarity in grieving with those most affected, and as a means of *directly* intervening to preclude further violence, death, and deterioration of lives and communities.<sup>187</sup>

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<sup>187</sup> See a 1972 *Chronicle* (16 July) article profiling Elder Ferdinand Furry—then new leader of the WEMP, or “Jordanites,” who replaced Elder James Klien, the successor to Nathaniel Jordan, who had recently passed—where mention is made of a fourteen-day fast held “during the racial conflict.”

When Komfa People come together to “hold a fast,” the oftentimes lugubrious, introspective, burdened Work is tempered by recollections of past observances of fasting and of the social contexts that demanded them, often comparing their previous experiences of how many days they had lasted, from where they drew their strength to endure, and—most importantly—the efficaciousness of their past efforts. Oral histories hold that fasting and prayer by congregants liberated Elder Jordan numerous times, and others, from the cruelties of colonial detention, that fasting and prayer forced the Queen of England to reinstate Guiana’s constitution in 1957 and to “leave” in 1966, and that comparable fasting and prayer was instrumental to the subsiding of the calamitous “racial conflict” of 1964.

In his warning through remembrance, my friend whose family was displaced also expressed a sense of mourning for “historical catastrophe,” a kind of bereavement “where the benefit of rituals and rules do not obtain and cannot be drawn upon as a repertoire of practices and an emotional response” (Connerton 2011: 16-17). Many conceptions of history-making—determining “what meaning is given [...] from the space of the present” (Trotz 2014: 298)—are grounded in notions of legitimacy, whereby the production of narratives of the past is understood as an attempt “to legitimate a present order of political and social power” (Connerton 2011: 1). Yet, as Paul Connerton (*ibid.*: 17) has suggested, in contexts lacking formal customs that “ritualise and contain” and reconcile responses to “loss and grief,” people instead “turn to histories in order to cope with an otherwise uncontainable experience.” People seek meaning through recounting historical trauma, not (only or necessarily) to legitimate “single, sovereign accounts” of the past as with much history-making (Trotz 2014: 298). Alternatively, often through sharing senses of indebtedness or “fear of annihilation,” historical catastrophes “pose questions of identity and call for ways of coming to terms with the losses they impose and the

legacy they leave” for survivors and those who continue to evoke their memory (Connerton 2011: 17, 22).

Accounts which ought never be made single or sovereign from scrutiny—of such tragedies as occurred in British Guiana in 1964, for example—demonstrate the “weight of the past” as felt by Guyanese in their daily lives (Lambek 2002). Commenting on this sense of pastness made present through proleptic poems contained in his second collection, *The Greatest Films* (2016), Faizal Deen characterizes Guyana as “a place of palimpsestic violence” (Cummings, Mohabir, and Deen 2018: 12).

By the time we arrive in a place like Guyana, the interior and the coast have already witnessed the marginalization and the supplantation of Amerindian populations, but more directly the genocidal activities of the sugar slave plantations. We [indentured South Asians] arrive on Plantations to be housed in barracks that are already rankled by what I can only conceptualize as the anger of very, very restless spirits. (ibid.)

Deen goes on to discuss how such angry spirits have remained restless throughout the decades, as “coming to terms with the losses” and grief such specters (re)present is not often easy work (Connerton 2011: 17). He references Guyanese poet Mahadai Das’s brilliantly haunting poem titled “They Came in Ships” (1977), as well as Wilson Harris’s (1983) cross-cultural theory of “absent present” “living fossils” that are restlessly entombed in the landscape. Deen (2018: 12) discerns that “the beauty of Das’s poem is to acknowledge that the coolie—the East Indian—arrives already into ‘a womb of space,’ to borrow Wilson Harris’s term, that is already haunted by acts of historical violence for which we have not found any kind of corrective measure or any imaginative gesture of healing.” Echoing Connerton (2011: 17), Deen (2018: 12) sees the absence of “corrective” means to “ritualise and contain” these past traumas as contributing to their recurring remembrance—even commemoration—in present constructions of individual and

collective subjectivities. “So you are already arriving in a historical lineage of catastrophe,” Deen (ibid.) writes, adding, “now what does that mean for the 1970s?”

Recollections of British Guiana’s labor and “racially motivated” instabilities and violent episodes of 1964 also reveal overlapping, *palimpsestic* parallels to the 2020 “disturbances.” In particular, the memories and historical connections drawn between these time periods highlight what many Guyanese see as a continuous, *neo-imperial* relationship to global political power to which the sovereign state is subject. Especially for older Guyanese, threats of international intervention made by “Western Superpowers” seemed all too familiar from past “historical catastrophe, or trauma: those large-scale events so widely recurrent in the histories of peoples” (Connerton 2011: 17).<sup>188</sup> Even for Guyanese who had not lived through such past experiences, the ways that they and their political impasse were being portrayed both locally and abroad was felt as shaming. Overwhelmingly, as one young man put it, Guyanese were speaking of each other and hearing in the news that they were “just a oil-greedy people,” willing to divide the country and themselves along “racial lines” in a battle to see who will control the new political economy of “oil.”<sup>189</sup> And yet, although sometimes easy to forget, there is always more to

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<sup>188</sup> The past traumas inflicted through foreign intervention in Guyana’s national and local-level social politics are very real. In 2011 a number of significant documents were released by the British intelligence agency and later too by the U. S. Department of State, which revealed the depth of the U. S. and U. K.’s combined efforts to control British Guianese and Guyanese affairs in the lead up to independence and afterwards. As these documents show, roughly US\$2.08 million was expended on “covert action programs” in British Guiana and later independent Guyana between 1962-1968. As Gaiutra Bahadur (2015) writes, in the lead-up to the 1964 elections “the CIA and AFL-CIO were on the ground, allegedly inciting racially charged strikes and riots. ‘The U.S. fostered violence and death in British Guiana,’” as historian Stephen Rabe, author of *U.S. Intervention in British Guiana: A Cold War Story* (2005), told Bahadur. “‘U.S. money fueled this violence and death,’” according to Rabe’s and others’ research (Bahadur 2015). Widely known by Guyanese at the time, and now disclosed, these subversive measures were part of the U. S. and U. K.’s successful bid to “overthrow” Jagan’s socialism. See John Prados and Arturo Jimenez-Bacardi (2020).

<sup>189</sup> For examples of this sort of rhetoric in the news media, see for example an article in *The Economist* with a headline claiming that “Guyana’s dodgy poll is all about oil” (19 March 2020). Also see *Kaieteur News* (26 March 2020), and for a call from Guyana’s African Culture and Development Association (ACDA) for “foreign diplomats not to intervene in Guyana’s electoral process,” see *News Room* (13 March 2020).

imperialism than just capital. Some people expressed less concern with having their social and national politics depicted as being “only about the oil money,” and instead took issue with the customary and demeaning rendering of Guyanese as a “racial people” who consistently just cannot get along.

Local Guyanese pastor and Facebook personality, Nigel London, offered a relevant critique in the week following the election. London is a controversial and often hate-filled figure, particularly regarding his highly inflammatory webcast sermons which tend to be saturated with anti-LGBTQ rhetoric based in alleged Christian theology. On the occasion in question, London used his virtual pulpit to decry the “foreigners” attempting to meddle in Guyana’s democratic process.<sup>190</sup> “There are...representatives of nations in our country who hate us as a people,” he addressed the camera, adding that “they are prepared to use any side as cause in their bid to have absolute control over us as a people.” London went on to question the silence of other religious and secular leaders of the nation, particularly singling out the Ethnic Relations Commission Chairman for not sounding an alarm over what London alleges are “outside [international] forces” behind the recent postelection “race war.” He asked, “where are...the bishops, apostle bishops, and deacons? Where are the prophets, the venerable brothers, the servants of god?” before then invoking “John Smith, ERC head Chairman...Where is he? ...Where are you now Mr. John Smith?” London queried his Internet parishioners. Yet as evidenced by the recurring thematics of his past sermons, London is likely most upset about outside “control” over Guyanese moral and legal conceptions of sexual and gender non/conformity. He and other local

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<sup>190</sup> All of the quotes from London contained herein are references to Nigel London, Facebook, 7 March 2020. A pastor/Apostle/Bishop of an evangelical Christian church in Linden known as Come As You Are Ministries, London is widely known for promoting discrimination against LGBTQI people and organizing local demonstrations against gay rights, such as a 2017 public protest billed as a “march against sodomy.” See for example, *Guyana Times* (27 August 2017) and Michael Younge (20 August 2017).



antigay activists expressed grave public outrage at the U. S.'s apparent embrace of gay rights, including marriage equality, under Barack Obama and they decried the idea that Guyana would move in similar directions as neoimperial. While it is unclear what role if any international operatives—"Russians or other[s]," as London specifies—might have played in stoking Guyana's 2020 postelection ethnoracial hostilities, his attention to the lack of response by the government, and the ERC in particular, was widely shared by many across the country.

Such blatant inaction by the government and specifically by the ERC was noted with force in an editorial published in the *Guyana Chronicle* twenty days after the election, written by the former mayor of the town of Linden, Carwyn Holland. Holland (2020) states that "clearly, Chairman John Smith, a man of integrity, has eschewed divisive and insidious rhetoric, and endorses national unity." Still, Holland (*ibid.*) goes on to contend that "collectively, the ERC is yet to condemn the public and obnoxious racist behaviour during and after our general elections by many prominent Guyanese."

Moreover, the onslaught of vile racist rhetoric, including social media content, have been met with a LOUD DEAFENING SILENCE from many, including the Ethnic Relations Commission (ERC). One would recall that prior to the elections, the ERC called on individuals...to apologise for actions and utterances it deemed divisive and counter-productive to the valiant efforts being made to foster national unity and harmony... However, the post-elections period has witnessed many prejudicial and other undesirous statements that have created and fueled animosity among our peoples, and have the potential of creating a hostile environment. Where is the ERC in all of this? By equal measure, the racism spewed in this season should be condemned by the ERC. (*ibid.*)

Some Guyanese alleged that the ERC remained silent because members of the PPP sitting on the ERC board were themselves accused of intimidations and abuses that their commission had condemned (*ibid.*). Others claimed that only when Black people were killed would the ERC speak up (*ibid.*). And for others still, the lack of government foresight in precluding community frictions could not rest solely with the ERC—which had only been reinstated two years prior.

Many also observed that the current government could not be blamed for the entirety of the election fiasco, as has largely been the case, especially when Guyana’s present realities of ethnoracial dissonances—and congruences—are rooted in deep pasts personified by both the ecstasy and “the anger of very, very restless spirits” (Deen 2018: 12).

### **Seven Ponds Wuk**

In popular opinion and also among a great number of Guyanese Hindus, such concepts are often stereotypically associated with ‘Vodou’ or ‘Obeah’ practices. They are excluded from the realm of Hinduism. [...] Most of these practices are often regarded as ‘superstitious,’ especially in societies identifying themselves as ‘modern’ and ‘civilized.’  
—Sinah Theres Kloß<sup>191</sup>

At roughly 11AM on March 18, just over two weeks after the 2020 elections during the tenuously indeterminate period before any definitive plans for a recount had been established, a new post was made by the administrator of a Facebook group called GuyaneseTing’zz. The page is dedicated to sharing “funny things coming out of Guyana,” as their “Our Story” blurb informs visitors, of which there are many, boasting nearly 200,000 followers.<sup>192</sup> The public post made on that Wednesday morning featured seven still images titled together under the following brief caption, quoted here in full as originally posted.

Former Minister Of Health Volda Lawrence in attendance with Denise Miller they organized this spiritual “wuk” at the Seven Ponds resting place of Forbes Burnham !!!!.

Just when you thought guyana couldn’t have gotten anymore crazier.<sup>193</sup>

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<sup>191</sup> From Kloß’s study *Fabrics of Indianness: The Exchange and Consumption of Clothing in Transnational Guyanese Hindu Communities* (2016a: 235).

<sup>192</sup> See <https://www.facebook.com/GuyaneseTingzzOfficial>. All of the following quotes referring to GuyaneseTing’zz come from this source.

<sup>193</sup> See <https://www.facebook.com/GuyaneseTingzzOfficial>.

As prefigured by the final line of the posted text, a majority of the dialogue produced by responding commenters was exceedingly critical, disapproving of the very premise of “spiritual ‘wuk’” and of the politicized context surrounding this particular manifestation of ritual, as well as disparaging those involved these and like practices. As of this writing, the post had received almost 700 comments and been shared over 250 times. Each of the seven images posted also received its own fair share of comments, adding to the hundreds made in response to the general message. About ten minutes after this post was made to GuyaneseTing’zz, a story based on similar content was published by *Action News Guyana*, which, lacking a dedicated hosting site, uses Facebook as their primary online platform.<sup>194</sup> The post made by *Action News* was more direct in attributing the “SPIRITUAL WUK” to the party politics of the day, specifically naming the APNU+AFC coalition as behind the endeavor to invoke the dead president’s spirit in swaying the outcome of the yet-inconclusive polls. Again, the text from *Action News Guyana*, which included a thirty-four second-long video of the ritual, is included here in full and unaltered.

#### APNU/AFC SPIRITUAL WUK TO REVIVE BURNHAM’S SPIRIT

APNU/AFC TURNS TO THE SPIRIT OF FORBES BURNHAM AKA KABAKA TO HELP THEM WITH THE 2020 ELECTIONS THAT HAS BEEN DEEMED AS FRADUALENT

In the “spiritual wuk” at the 7 Ponds, Botanical Garden where Burnham’s mausoleum is located persons can be heard chanting “...Come on Kabaka [Burnham], we call your presence.....to deliver these elections...”

Forbes Burnham is associated with a period of dictatorship in Guyana and rigged elections from the late 60’s, 70’s into the mid 80’s during which the country plunged into a devastating social and economic crisis.

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<sup>194</sup> See <https://www.facebook.com/actionnewsguyana/>. All of the following quotes referring to *Action News* or *Action News Guyana* come from this source.

The 2020 elections has plunged the nation into a similar crisis with International Countries threatening serious sanctions on APNU/AFC officials who are accused of attempting to rig the elections with the help of Guyana Elections Commission officials and the Guyana Police Force.<sup>195</sup>

Through an out-of-focus and unsteady frame, the brief clip posted by *Action News* shows a gathering of Komfa People beside the Place of the Seven Ponds, a national monument located in Georgetown's Botanical Gardens. Also known as the Place of Heroes, Seven Ponds was erected in 1969 after the interment of the late-Governor General Sir David Rose, who served from Independence in 1966 until 1969 when he was killed in an accident in front of Whitehall Court, Westminster while in London to relinquish his position in the new government. Subsequently, three other Guyanese "heroes" were buried at Seven Ponds: National Poet Martin Carter and former-presidents Arthur Chung and Desmond Hoyte, as was President Burnham, whose mausoleum complex was built adjacent to Seven Ponds in the Botanical Gardens.

The actual whereabouts of Burnham's physical remains, however, remain a matter of much speculation for many interested Guyanese. People like to say that Burnham is "the only leader in the world to have been buried twice," as it is claimed he "was buried days after his death and again one year later, when his body was returned from the Soviet Union where it was sent to be preserved" (*Kaieteur News* 9 August 2016). Others have argued that by the time the late-Founder Leader's body left Guyana en route to the USSR, it had already begun to deteriorate to such a degree that he was made to stopover in England, where he was buried with dishonor and a wax model made by Madame Tussaud's museum was shipped back to Guyana in his stead. Some people insouciantly hold that the Burnham Mausoleum has in fact never held Burnham's remains, and instead is home to the British wax imitation that rests under the chill of a

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<sup>195</sup> See <https://www.facebook.com/actionnewsguyana/>.

perpetually running, state-of-the-art, built-in cooling system. As some comments on Facebook wondered, what then might these Spiritualists hope to gain from their attempt to “revive” the dead executive comrade if his body was not genuinely resting beside Seven Ponds? The uncertainty surrounding Burnham’s final days (or year) only added to the puzzlement and derogation exhibited by public commenters responding to this highly politicized ritual performance.

In the video posted by *Action News*, a majority of the clip shows the four concrete columns of the towering structure poised in the central water feature of Seven Ponds, as well as the water-lily-filled pool itself. Only after halfway through does the frame pan to focus on the Spiritualists and the ritual they are engaged in performing, the sounds of which can be heard in the background throughout. In particular, one voice emanating from a body not seen in the video comes through strongest above the drums, horn, and melodic singing, which repeats “come on Kabaka, come on Kabaka, come on Kabaka. Come on Odo, come on Odo, come on Odo...” One among a large collection of such “call names,” as *Action News* notes, “Kabaka” is used to honor—or otherwise identify—Burnham and is said to be a Creolese term for “chief,” “king,” or village “head” deriving from the Luganda language of Baganda people in present-day Uganda (Poynting 1985 v2: 686). The name “Odo” heard in the clip, also referring to the late-leader, is of even more hazy origins but may come from a similar background as the same word in Sranan Tongo, the Creole and primary language of Suriname, where “odo” means “proverb” (Wekker 1997: 330-31; 2006: 111). In Sranan Tongo, *koti odo*, literally to “cut” a proverb, is a common phrase meaning to recite this form of orature with the intention “to teach someone something” (Languages of Suriname 2003). As such pedagogical functions of proverbial speech are largely drawn upon by—and attributed to—older Guyanese in demonstrating their authority to younger

charges, often children, grands, or others, perhaps Burnham found a fitting moniker in the association with revered traditions that “old people does say.”<sup>196</sup>

As with the seven images included on the popular GuyaneseTing’zz site, once *Action News*’s video turns to focus on the Spiritualists at Seven Ponds, the fleeting scene shows a small gathering of mostly empty chairs, with around a dozen people standing all clad in long white clothes including head-coverings, some with purple or gold waist-ties and other adornments. After focusing on the Seven Ponds sculpture, the video quickly passes over the area around which the group’s attention is focused, in the center of which can briefly be seen a table covered in white cloth and holding a few candlesticks, also white. After only one to two seconds, the angle of the footage is again directed away from the center of the gathering to show a couple unoccupied seats and one young man with a wide golden band of cloth girdling his abdomen above his white robe. An elderly woman can be seen in the background knocking a tambourine against her hand in turn with the drumming and singing, before the video abruptly ends. The images provided by GuyaneseTing’zz afford a better view of the table altar, upon which are assembled a number of items common to Komfa ritual, including candles, vessels of water and other liquids like perfume and liquor, live plants and cuttings, and oversized sticks of incense. The images also show that women seem to make up the majority of those gathered.

Certain of the comments made in response to these Facebook posts exemplify the range of reactions they produced, so dwelling on only a limited number of these public statements will be necessary, and possible, due to the sheer volume. Yet, these public statements also provide a

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<sup>196</sup> Guyanese typically preface their proverbs and other forms of “traditional” speech acts with the phrase “the old people say,” “dem big people say,” “them does say,” “dem bai [boy] seh,” or some variation. The quote above, “old people does say,” comes from a Digicel advertising campaign targeting Guyanese—Digicel being the major provider of cell phone services throughout the Caribbean. On Guyanese proverbial speech acts, including on this traditional prefacing framing device, see Gillian Richards-Greaves (2016). In Suriname, as Wekker (2006: 111) writes, “odo are a women’s art form, transmitted through the female line of families” and particularly among “working-class” “Afro-Surinamese women.” In Guyana, proverb-telling is a not a clearly gendered domain.

revealing portrayal of how Komfa is often mis/understood in popular Guyanese culture.<sup>197</sup> As examples of some of the rhetoric espousing so-called “Christian” and “Hindu” senses of morality in contradistinction to the Spiritual “wuk” on display, consider the following. Responding to the Seven Ponds “wuk” story, one commenter posted to the *Action News Guyana* page, “The blood of Jesus on all of them. There is a special part of hell for those who practice witchcraft!!!”<sup>198</sup> Another held that “Some people are confusing religion with witchcraft. Jesus is lord and savior the beginning and end.”<sup>199</sup> Someone else wrote, “Only Jesus can help this country and its people. We all need to pray to Him alone.”<sup>200</sup> In response to GuyaneseTing’zz’s post, one commenter with a first and last name of clear South Asian derivation, wrote “That will never work my gods are more powerful dan that.”<sup>201</sup> One Facebook user asked “Who are these people,” while in response someone wrote back “SOME JUMBIE..👹👹👹👹👹,” with “jumbie” meaning “ghost,” “spirit,” or an ill-intentioned living person, as well.<sup>202</sup>

Specifically connecting the “evil doing” which commenters were associating to this Spiritual “wuk” with “Africa and Haiti,” the following post clearly demonstrates how conceiving

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<sup>197</sup> *Stabroek News* columnist Mosa Telford (25 July 2020) has recently written a brief critical account of this event, where she rightly notes that “African spiritual practices were again demonized. This is a norm in our society.” She relates that “a couple of months ago there was an incident where Guyanese who practice African spirituality were [...] engaged in a religious ceremony in the Botanical Gardens and were mocked and criticized because it was thought they were invoking spirits and therefore engaging in practices which many deem ungodly” (ibid.).

<sup>198</sup> [Name withheld], Facebook, *Action News Guyana* page, 18 March 2020. Note that derogatory, demeaning, and ethically questionable comments in the context of this analysis will be rendered here anonymously.

<sup>199</sup> [Name withheld], Facebook, GuyaneseTing’zz page, 18 March 2020.

<sup>200</sup> [Name withheld], Facebook, *Action News Guyana* page, 18 March 2020.

<sup>201</sup> [Name withheld], Facebook, GuyaneseTing’zz page, 18 March 2020.

<sup>202</sup> [Name withheld], Facebook, GuyaneseTing’zz page, 18 March 2020. “Jumbie,” discussed in Chapter 1 and throughout, can be reductively translated as “ghost” or “spirit.” Richard Allsopp (2003 [1996]: 317) notes, as have many other scholars, that the word has Bantu, and specifically Kikongo etymologies. Allsopp (ibid.) adds that Sigismund Koelle (1963 [1854]: 75) “lists eleven languages and dialects” in the Kongo-Angola linguistic grouping in which “there is a *nzambe* ~ *ndšambe* ~ *ntsambi* ‘God.’”

“Obeah” and thus Spiritual work as part of Guyana’s “African” cultural heritage can function to sustain anti-Black stereotypes and racist conceptions of religion. The commenter in question wrote in response to the GuyaneseTing’zz post, “That is why they got to punish. Look at Africa and Haiti and Zimbabwe Angola Nigeria. evil a knock dag there that is why they got to punish st because of their evil doing sk.”<sup>203</sup> Another commenter, apparently offended and distressed by the previous statement, brought attention to the inequitable view proffered, and—likely seeing the “Indian” name of the offender—challenged that Hindu or “Indian”-related rituals are also common and often highly visible aspects of Guyanese life. Referring to the widespread practice among Indo-Guyanese and others of leaving sacrificial offerings at the sea, this person rejoined, “so what yall does really do at the Atlantic Ocean with all the fruits floating on water eh . This is the African traditions so shut yuh mouth.”<sup>204</sup> The commenter who made the initial post returned to defend their position, stating,

you gonna understand if I say we are going there to worship our Devine [sic] Maa Ganga for sickness and health. She is the mother of nature y’all. Even white folks believed in her when we got earthquake and all kind a disaster we all go to her for her blessings even they white peoples called upon our Devine [sic] at the sea and river.<sup>205</sup>

Clearly, the commenter’s statement drawing approval from “white folks” for their own practices surrounding Hindu divinity Maa Ganga demonstrates the extent to which colonial ideologies of “white,” English, and Anglo-European cultural superiority maintain hegemonic affect in Guyanese people’s lives, regardless of racio-religious affiliations. Embedded in the comment are also implied understandings concerning what constitutes “religion,” what “religion”—opposed to

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<sup>203</sup> [Name withheld], Facebook, GuyaneseTing’zz page, 18 March 2020. In Creolese the phrase “to knock dog” means “plenty” or a large amount of something.

<sup>204</sup> [Name withheld], Facebook, GuyaneseTing’zz page, 18 March 2020.

<sup>205</sup> [Name withheld], Facebook, GuyaneseTing’zz page, 18 March 2020.



say “Obeah” or Spiritual “wuk” conceived as “evil doing”—can do for people, in terms of healing and protection from such ills as sickness and natural disaster. As a Hindu, this commenter seems to express confidence that their own practices involving therapeutic and protective rites can undoubtedly be deemed as “religion,” exemplifying the power of legitimacy conferred by conceptions such as Weber’s (1991 [1948]) of “the world religions.” Yet, this same commenter feels that people participating in comparable rituals in “Africa and Haiti and Zimbabwe Angola Nigeria,” or in Guyana for that matter too if they are Afro-descendants, instead, have “got to punish” for their “evil doing.”

Guyana’s elections also coincided with the initial global spread of the Coronavirus pandemic. In a less demeaning tenor than those quoted above, someone on the *Action News* page posted, “I don’t know who kabaka is... but can you please ask him/her to keep us safe from Covid19?”<sup>206</sup> In a similarly jocular fashion, yet further condescending toward Spiritualists, someone else responded to the previous inquiry by stating, “I done ask Kaba Kaba nah worry gal 😞😂😂😂 if we have to die, we gon dead somehow whenever that time is but not by Kaba kaba rituals 🙄🙄.”<sup>207</sup> Another commenter wrote in to inform the above posters that, “kabaka is the one time dictator linden sampson forbes burnham [sic]. His image made of wax is at the seven ponds where those satanic people are doing their dirty work.”<sup>208</sup>

One theme that represented more of a political contention that repeatedly reared its head in responses to the Seven Ponds “wuk” coverage was the incongruity between how commenters perceived the ethical legitimacy of political parties’ participation in and organization of public

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<sup>206</sup> [Name withheld], Facebook, *Action News Guyana* page, 18 March 2020.

<sup>207</sup> [Name withheld], Facebook, *Action News Guyana* page, 18 March 2020.

<sup>208</sup> [Name withheld], Facebook, *Action News Guyana* page, 18 March 2020.

religious observances, and in particular, what gets considered as ritual “work.” In their Facebook article, *Action News Guyana* was explicitly claiming that the APNU+AFC had planned the event at Seven Ponds with the purported objective of intervening in the impending outcome of the elections. For some commenters, the alleged connection between APNU+AFC and this instance of Spiritual “work” called to mind the PPP’s annual pilgrimage to the resting place of past presidents Cheddi Jagan and Janet Jagan at the Babu John Cemetery in Port Mourant, East Berbice-Corentyne, also the natal village of the former. Each year PPP dignitaries host a grandiose memorial service honoring both Jagans at an event which has become known by the name of the burial grounds where it takes place, usually comprising a number of activities like bicycle races and student scholarship competitions, often along with some of the PPP’s most weighty political speeches of the year.

Many Guyanese, however, question what other potential sorts of activities might occur at these annual tributes. Perhaps due to the location of the events, many people are under the impression that whatever does transpire at Babu John each year played a decisive role in maintaining the PPP/C’s previous twenty-three-year stretch at heading the national. Other more sinister speculations hold that the sorts of otherworldly works performed at the Jagans’ annual memorials have not just helped the PPP/C to sustain their political sway in past political seasons, but that these events also serve as “Indian” convocations wherein plans and preparations to ensure “African” suffering and even death become envisioned for implementation. As one Facebook commenter wrote, while also defending the Spiritualists’ “wuk” at Seven Ponds as “our culture,” “Bharat [sic] and his bugger party does go Babu Jon [sic] and every time they come Berbice and do their wuk black people children does dead so try something else. That is

our culture and it's very strong know what you saying about black people.”<sup>209</sup> In an attempt to vindicate those meeting each year in honor of the Jagans, and emphasizing the religious inclusion supposedly featured on these occasions, someone responded to the previous statement saying, “for thise of you who dont know every year them indians does go babujohn [sic] to celebrate the life and times of cheddi them does not do no service there all three religion will say a prayer and then followed by speches every one are invited there ok.”<sup>210</sup> Tellingly, this commenter makes reference to their impression that adherents of “all three religion[s]” are “invited” to participate, further demonstrating the hegemonic authority bestowed upon “the world religions” in ideologically setting them (or the Big 5) apart from all *other(ed)* religions practiced by people the world over.

Similarly affirming that Christians and Hindus alike participate in the PPP/C's Jagan memorial service, one commenter also felt it necessary to include mention of race in the form of hair texture, in a comment that was taken by others as “racist.” “We going to there [Babu John] to worship our lord Shiva. And Jesus because we all got straight hair,” the person wrote.<sup>211</sup> Someone responded to the comment, “well guh long nah and Lowe we!!!,” with “lowe” here meaning “lower,” as in “disrespect” or “belittle,” and “we” in this context taken to denote Black people generally, or those individuals without “straight hair,” including “mixed,” or “*dougl*a” people, and others.<sup>212</sup> To that, the original poster defensively replied, “look please I am not lowing y'all.please we all got and we only want the best for them especially our children and

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<sup>209</sup> [Name withheld], Facebook, GuyaneseTing'zz page, 18 March 2020.

<sup>210</sup> [Name withheld], Facebook, GuyaneseTing'zz page, 18 March 2020.

<sup>211</sup> [Name withheld], Facebook, GuyaneseTing'zz page, 18 March 2020.

<sup>212</sup> [Name withheld], Facebook, GuyaneseTing'zz page, 18 March 2020.

grandchildren. I am not a racist . Please understand me will ya.”<sup>213</sup> Still, their intention behind the allusion to hair made in their original post remains unclear, as does the statement made next which seems to be a reference to “racial mixing,” in that “we all got...them,” meaning “children and grandchildren” who may not have “straight hair” like their mother and/or father. Another likely interpretation, connected to the first, would rest on the idea that PPP supporters largely comprise an Indo-Guyanese base with Indigenous and other Guyanese adding to the numbers, with very few Afro-Guyanese. Perhaps the commenter meant that those in attendance at Babu John each year, while both Hindu and Christian, are nonetheless most-all “Indian,” and like the PPP, recognizably lacking “African” and “*dougla*” backers, who have tended to champion the APNU+AFC’s “multiracial” posturing.

Others who commented on the alleged involvement of the incumbent government in the Seven Ponds “wuk” voiced their opinions that all people and political parties should be left free to utilize their religious traditions as they see fit. One person even seemed to resent how many other commenters suggested the Spiritualists were misguided and should be instead “cover[ing] themselves in the blood of Jesus,” as someone else wrote.<sup>214</sup>

Y’all study why ppl going Babu Jaan [sic]. Even if she’s [APNU+AFC Minister Volda Lawrence] there that’s here culture. She’s African I don’t see why she should call on Jesus ( first slave ship) when she should be honouring her ancestors. Get by the blasted books so we won’t be offended when ppl say we wuking obeah. I don’t care who say what I’m not religious if you come round me funny I’ll break your neck.<sup>215</sup>

Still, others expressed the contention most recognizable from the political rhetoric espoused by the MoSC and especially called forth during WIHW, holding that regardless of context or

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<sup>213</sup> [Name withheld], Facebook, GuyaneseTing’zz page, 18 March 2020.

<sup>214</sup> [Name withheld], Facebook, *Action News Guyana* page, 18 March 2020.

<sup>215</sup> [Name withheld], Facebook, GuyaneseTing’zz page, 18 March 2020.

ethnoracial and religious identities, all Guyanese ought to feel empowered to express themselves religiously through their own freedom of conscience as protected by constitutional law. One example of such thinking is a post which states, “So I guess it’s ok for other ethnic groups in Guyana to practice their rituals but it’s not ok for another. What about having appreciation for all whether your views are different. No need to immediately say they’re ‘wuking evil’ all because we don’t know.”<sup>216</sup> Another commenter wrote, emphatically, “!!!!!!!!NO PERSON SHOULD CRITICIZE OR MAKE FUN OF ANY RELIGION or belief that is different from theirs. EVER!!!!!!!!Shame on you all.”<sup>217</sup> Someone else, whose comments can be read as quite contradictory, advocating respect for others’ traditions while simultaneously condemning, wrote that “Yall ms [mother scunt] disrespecting ppl practice but yet some of yall is being Christians n celebrating phagwah,diwali etc n these stupid ms who is being giving food to deities in the sea n worshipping idols like hanuman n such. Yall need to stop disrespecting ppl belief n practices yall ms.”<sup>218</sup> While perhaps duplicitous and deceitful, the last comments also demonstrate the ambiguities, opacities, and acts of violence inherent in attempts to morally differentiate between or among religions or religious aggregates and groupings, moral distinctions which were inculcated through colonization and which continue to be sustained in many circles and facets of post-Independence Guyanese life.

One Spiritualist who lives and practices in Georgetown, known as Elder Humphries, suggested to me in a recent conversation that, in all likelihood, the entire framing of the Seven

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<sup>216</sup> [Name withheld], Facebook, GuyaneseTing’zz page, 18 March 2020.

<sup>217</sup> [Name withheld], Facebook, GuyaneseTing’zz page, 18 March 2020.

<sup>218</sup> [Name withheld], Facebook, GuyaneseTing’zz page, March 18, 2020. Possibly Guyanese’s favorite Creolese expletive, “mother scunt” (or “ms” in text messages and online) is somewhat similar in sentiment to English’s “motherfucker(s),” in the context the quoted usage. “Scunt” on its own is even more pervasive, and functions in most senses like contemporary English’s “cunt,” but so also like “pussy,” “ass,” “fuck,” “fucking,” and “fucker.” On such comparisons, see Jeremy Poynting (1996: 204, on David Dabydeen [1988: 23]) and John Rickford (2019: 26).

Ponds “wuk” exploited by *Action News* and others to suggest APNU+AFC involvement was “purely” political “manipulation.” The *Guyana Times* (19 March 2020) ran an “Eyewitness Feature” on “the rigging circus” that even made brief mention of the ritual event, observing that “last Sunday at Seven Ponds, she [Minster Lawrence] invoked Burnham as ‘Odo’ and the ‘Kabaka’. To help with the elections rigging!!” the article concluded. Elder Humphries agreed that “invoking” Burnham’s spirit to intercede on the incumbent government’s behalf would indeed be a worthy endeavor, as “is strength Granger strengthening we with” and, moreover, because “Granger following Burnham footstep” in “uplifting the whole a we, Black, Indian, all Guyanese.” As such, Elder Humphries advised that the most beneficial Spiritual “work” involving the late Founder-Leader to be attempted at that particular juncture of political and social precarity would not be to pursue Burnham’s assistance to re-elect Granger, but rather, to help Guyanese embrace one another to avert any further violence and suffering through what had already become a treacherous transitional period. “If you ask me,” Elder Humphries said, “must be them Wuking Burnham spirit for make we all come together now in this time of tribulation, like he already done try for do, but now he gone get a next chance to succeed.” By this Elder’s thinking, invoking Burnham to “Wuk” the election is anything but divisive or partisan, and instead represents sincere ambitions for universal upliftment for all Guyanese, or at least, both Indians *and* Blacks.

For many Spiritualists and others, Burnham’s is an important legacy. After all, he is considered—by *some* at least—as the “father of social cohesion in Guyana,” as President Granger remarked at Seven Ponds in 2016 during a memorial service honoring the thirty-first anniversary of the leader’s death (*Kaieteur News* 9 August 2016). Laying a wreath on Burnham’s mausoleum, Granger paid tribute to his party mentor in a speech during which he characterized

Burnham as “the author of social cohesion and architect of national unity, who transformed Guyana from a divided colony to a more united and less unequal country” (Ministry of the Presidency 6 August 2016).<sup>219</sup> Furthermore, in his commemorative address, Granger maintained that Burnham “established order out of chaos and conciliation out of conflict...He fought against the marginalisation and segregation of the colonial regime into which he was born and sought to create a society of equality and inclusivity for posterity,” the president declared, adding that it was through Burnham’s “visionary leadership and wise stewardship that the foundation of a just and cohesive society was laid” (*Kaieteur News* 7 August 2016). As exhibited in the reactions to the Spiritual work held at Seven Ponds, many Guyanese disagree with Granger’s assessment of Burnham and his supposed legacy of instituting national unity and equality. For many Guyanese, particularly those of South Asian descent, Burnham is remembered for doing quite the opposite, in instigating the initial rupture in 1955 that severed the intercultural anticolonial impetus represented by *both* Burnham and Jagan in alignment under the banner of the original PPP (cf. Socialist Workers Alliance of Guyana 2017). As one columnist in the *Guyana Times* (16 March 2020) wrote, “a party that boasts it introduced ‘social cohesion’”—as Granger did of Burnham’s PNC during his 2016 memorial service—represents bare “hypocrisy” at “levels that deserve a new name to describe it!!”

Many Guyanese—regardless of ethnoracial subjectivities—associate Burnham in one way or another with Obeah, whether they understand him to have been an “Obeahman” himself, as many do, or just that through his own African identity and politico-cultural Afrocentrism, he has been seen as embodying an ethos attributed to (Afro-)Creole Guyanese “folk” sensibilities. As mentioned previously, a considerable number of Guyanese and other people throughout the

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<sup>219</sup> Also see coverage in *Kaieteur News* (7 August 2016).

Caribbean, and the world, remember Burnham's promise to "free-up" Obeah in 1973 at the height of what he referred to as the postcolonial Co-operative Republic's "Cultural Revolution" (Seymour 1977). Promoted through the (de)colonial politics of nation-building, he proposed the decriminalization of Obeah as a means towards achieving cultural and juridical autonomy from past dictates of Dutch and British hegemonies. Burnham's proposition only confirmed for many—Indo-Guyanese in particular—the president's partiality for inequity *and* iniquity. Through suggesting Obeah be legalized as a primary political objective for the nation, he also verified for many of his constituents that he embraced a form of "Obeah politics," which reinforced his ongoing rule (cf. Vidal and Whitehead 2004). Yet for Komfa People and those practitioners of other "little traditions," as well as for decolonial-thinking nonpractitioners alike throughout the Caribbean of the early 1970s, Burnham's cause célèbre of religious cultural self-determination was thought to match the national "co-operative" self-sufficiency his government embraced through their socialist policy agendas (Reddock 1996, 1998). How much of a tangible difference Burnham's call for decriminalization made in the lives of Komfa—or Obeah—practitioners, if any, is also not altogether clear. A few Spiritualist elders have actually reported facing increased antagonisms shown by their fellow Guyanese towards their practices in the months following Burnham's pronouncement. What is evident is that over many generations, religion—and Obeah specifically—has become a defining element in how Guyanese frame conceptions of their nation and of themselves within the moral frames of the national body.



## CHAPTER 4

### Suppressed Spiritscapes: Colonial Christianization and Religious Racisms

We are born with the dead:  
See, they return, and bring us with them.  
The moment of the rose and the moment of the yew-tree  
Are of equal duration. A people without history  
Is not redeemed from time, for history is a pattern  
Of timeless moments.  
—T. S. Eliot<sup>220</sup>

...a creature invented *for the sake of labor and labor alone*, as well as a useful metonym for describing the experiences of black women living under patriarchy's unremitting pressures.  
—Joshua Bennett<sup>221</sup>

The word "creature" is decisive here. The dreamer knows that this creature creates light. It is a creating creature.  
—Gaston Bachelard<sup>222</sup>

Of course, a lot of these oppressive ideals stem from the violently instilled religion of the slavers, Christianity [...]. Today, we continue to label Voodoo, Obeah and other African beliefs and practices as being the work of the devil. The forcing of Christianity onto Africans was not done because Massa cared about saving African souls from eternal damnation. It was intentionally done so as to make them more docile and accepting of their enslavement and of the white man as master.  
—Akola Thompson<sup>223</sup>

... and either I'm nobody, or I'm a nation.  
—Derek Walcott<sup>224</sup>

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<sup>220</sup> From "Little Gidding" (1991 [1942]: 208). Wilson Harris includes these lines in *The Secret Ladder* (1963: 236).

<sup>221</sup> These are words from Bennett's *Being Property Once Myself: Blackness and the End of Man* (2020: 116).

<sup>222</sup> From "Lamplight," an extract from Bachelard's *La Flamme d'une Chandelle* (1991: 160).

<sup>223</sup> Thompson shared these views in an illuminating Emancipation Eve column in *Stabroek News* (31 July 2020).

<sup>224</sup> From Walcott's "The Schooner *Flight*" (1986 [1977]: 346).

**“Dem W’ite Man mek Obeah wan wrang t’ing”<sup>225</sup>**

Pervasive vilification of Spiritualists in Guyanese society is one among many lamentable legacies of colonization and enslavement. A deep-seated abhorrence of Komfa expressed by many Guyanese, as revealed plainly in the public Facebook comments considered above, is often directly or indirectly justified through one’s religious outlooks, be those informed by Christian, Hindu, Muslim, or other ethical foundations. Christianity, however, has had the most prolonged and profound impact on Guyana’s national culture and has likewise produced the most distressing consequences for Spiritualists and their traditions. As Raymond Smith (1978: 341) has written, “Christianization was a deliberate piece of social engineering” used by the authorities of British Guiana in subjugating Indigenous, African, Asian, and Creole populations, including through juridically and morally debasing their traditional practices. As expressed in numerous comments made regarding the Seven Ponds “wuk,” much of the animosity directed towards Spiritualists arises from forms of Christian demonology—sometimes transposed to meet Hindu or Muslim doctrines—that conceives of Komfa as inherently impious, blasphemous, sinful, and so an “anti-religious” threat to moral order.

Whether such senses of sinfulness result from assessments of the substance of the practices in question, or from judgements regarding the practitioners who engage them, is another question. As “afterlives” of colonization and enslavement, the popular demonization of Komfa and the subjugation of Black Guyanese are indeed inextricably interconnected processes of suppression and devaluation. To take one more example from social media, in the immediate societal fallout following the indeterminate elections of March 2, 2020, an appalling Facebook post made the rounds among certain friends, all of whom condemned the sentiments. Given the

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<sup>225</sup> Quote is from an article titled “Wuk pon she” in the *Guyana Times* (10 October 2018).

politically inflamed context, that the author—with a seemingly “Indian”-identified name—directed their comments to a group called “PPPC Family,” seemed for the commenters to



confirm public narratives of “racial voting” prompting an impending “race war.” More specifically, the Facebook post demonstrates how ideologies constructing ethnoracial identities continue to be informed by conceptions of “religion”—with “divine figure heads” juxtaposed to “voodoo worship”—in ways that underwrite “an ontological credibility” of racio-religious

*Fig. 4.1* A public expression of Guyanese antiblackness as religiously informed racism surrounding the 2020 elections. Facebook, March 10, 2020 [name withheld].

personhoods (Peake and Trotz 1999: 9-10). Without conforming to colonial Christian or “world religion” exemplars, those comprising “the black race” have, for this Facebook user at least, been deemed utter nonpersons through a form of racio-religious negation (Dayan 2001). Revealingly, Indigenous people remain altogether absent from this particular schematic of religious racism.

The “afterlife of slavery” is a critical conceptual framework that has been constructively defined by Saidiya Hartman (2007), and further articulated by Christina Sharpe (2016), as an incessant state of precarity, susceptibility, and endangerment of Black people’s lives, which determines the present in ways that reveal and reproduce the restrictions and deficits of notions of “freedom.”<sup>226</sup> “Black lives,” Hartman (2007: 6) writes, in Guyana, in North America and Europe, and the world-over, “are still imperiled and devalued by a racial calculus and a political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago.” Thus, the afterlives of slavery are perhaps most evinced through the persistence of the continuously unaddressed demand that “Black Lives

<sup>226</sup> Also see Gwen Bergner and Zita Nunes (2019), Orlando Patterson (1991), and Deborah Thomas (2019).

Matter” and can no longer be rendered socially or civically “dead”—subject to “skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment” as has been the case for far too long (Hartman 2007: 6).<sup>227</sup> That Guyanese feel emboldened to publicly profess their convictions—en masse—that there exists “a special part of hell” for “satanic people” involved in Komfa, represents far worse than mere slander or individual prejudice, but tells of a profoundly embedded, long state-sanctioned, political and religio-moral ideological entanglement that has unambiguously resulted in incarceration, further impoverishment, and even death for Komfa People, most of whom are Black Guyanese.

In many distinct ways, anti-Komfa or anti-Obeah sentiments and discriminations, are anti-Black and anti-African in both their foundations and their ongoing expressions. Colonial Christian “morality” forged the ideological bases for pervasive anti-“African” sentiments held by most Guyanese (including Afro-Guyanese) in regard to religion. What Guyanese deem as “African” religion—Komfa, Obeah, Orisha/Ifá, and like practices—is considered the complete inverse of “English” religion, and so *epitomizes* non-Christianity, or non-legitimated “religion,”

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<sup>227</sup> Scholars from Melville Herskovits (1941) and before him have found it necessary to legitimize African and enslaved peoples’ socio-cultural heritages that “survived” from periods prior to their enslavement (Mintz and Price 1992 [1976]; Yelvington 2006a: 7-11). Yet, the notion of “social death” questions enslaved people’s capacities for engaging in ongoing social and cultural solidarity and production altogether. Orlando Patterson’s (1982) highly influential conception of social death also implies a continued socio-cultural “pathologization” of formerly enslaved people, and more generally, their Black descendants (see Brown 2009: 1234). Alexander Weheliye’s book *Habeas Viscus* (2014) insightfully reconsiders interconnections among political violence and constructions of the very category of “the human” through interrogating the role played by “racializing assemblages” in such constructions of personhood over time. In doing so, Weheliye (2014: 38) recognizes that “[a]lthough Patterson provides the preliminary tools for thinking through the specific disjointed forms of life inhabited by the enslaved, his notion of social death emphasizes mortality at the cost of sociality, no matter how curtailed it may be in this context, and it fails to incorporate in any significant manner the messy corporeality of bare life.”

For an instructive discussion of theoretical distinctions between categories of “human” and “person,” see Mills (2011, also quoted in Weheliye 2014: 166), who offers that “‘person’ is not co-extensive with ‘human’ because to be human is neither necessary nor sufficient for personhood. Non-human entities exist that count as persons while human entities exist that do not count as persons. Not all humans have been granted the moral status to which their presumptive personhood should have entitled them.” Frankfurt (1971) provides an influential account justifying such conceptions of human non-persons and non-human persons. Mills (1997) also argues elsewhere that what he calls “the racial contract,” which establishes and maintains the political system of global White supremacy, creates an overriding, modern conception of the human that is synonymous with Whiteness and Whites’ supremacy.

while Islam and Hindu traditions have largely attained postcolonial socio-moral validation. Local Indigenous religions, on the other hand, continue to be regarded in much the same light as “African” religions, representing a “deficit” of Christian, or world religion, “influence.” Yet for many non-Indigenous Guyanese, who come into contact with Indigenous culture far less frequently than with African culture, Indigenous religious practices seem more “distant,” and less of an immediate socio-moral threat than “Obeah,” which is said to lurk in all coastlander (and Creole) communities.

While Guyanese generally tend to—disparagingly—emphasize antisocial, “sinister,” and violent aspects of Indigenous worldviews, such as forms of *kanaimà* “assault sorcery,” these practices are also considered less perilous and removed from the lives of most non-Indigenous people living on the coast (Vidal and Whitehead 2004; Whitehead 2002). Many Guyanese tend to understand Indigenous religions through analogy to African religions, with which they are likely more familiar. African and Amerindian religious cultures share a similar status of moral subjugation, yet Indigenous peoples remain the most structurally disregarded of Guyanese, overlooked in policy and in Guyanese national consciousness through all governing regimes (Jackson 2012; Trotz and Roopnaraine 2009). Still, Guyanese look to “Obeah” as their counterexample through which to know Christian morality. As such, Indigenous peoples’ religions tend, if not to be *only* feared, then to be ignored, or even, in a backhanded way, “absolved.” Guyanese overwhelmingly view “Amerindians,” or *Buck*, through a demoralizing ideology of temporal and spatial “remove” that denies their coeval existence in the “modern” nation, and characterizes Indigenous peoples’ so-called “lack” of assimilation to Euro-Christian

culture as excusable (Fabian 2014 [1983]; Jackson 2012; cf. Thomas 2016).<sup>228</sup> The same is not true for Afro-Guyanese. Indigenous peoples, as many Guyanese describe, did not contribute to humanizing the colonial landscape through their (European-exploited) labor as Afro-, Indo-, and other non-Native Guyanese are said to have done, and as such, are largely rejected from recognition of equal human status in reaping the national rewards of the postcolony (Rodney 1981; Jackson 2012).<sup>229</sup>

African-descended Guyanese may not be alone in facing widespread religious and other forms of social stigmatization, but still, what Guyanese consider *signs* of “African” culture continue to hold distinct functions in terms of demarcating religio-moral boundaries, particularly on a symbolic level. Christian demonologies that inform popular abhorrence for Komfa stem in no small measure from dominant conceptions of Komfa and Obeah as “Spirit Wuk,” wherein practitioners are understood to conspire with agencies of the dead through manifestation and other means, such as “spirit entrapment.” Still, the notion of incorporating spirit within oneself, or, allowing one’s “self” to be temporarily “displaced” by that of a dead person or other entity, is certainly not foreign to Christianity, Islam, or Hindu practices. Yet many or most Guyanese would consider equating Christian, Muslim, or Hindu traditions *with* “Obeah” to be a highly inflammatory proposition. Through Christian doctrine and colonial Christianization, as well as local Guyanese Hindu and Muslim orthodoxies, many Guyanese—including Faithists—understand “working (with) the dead” to amount to an exceedingly morally suspect practice, and one that inherently must involve “demons,” *jumbie*, or wayward spirits “sent” to do “bad things”

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<sup>228</sup> Consider that even within the etymology of the pejorative epithet lies evidence of Guyanese attitudes toward Indigenous people, with *Buck* coming from the Dutch word “bok” or “bokken” meaning “wild,” childlike, and/or, “nimble animal” (Menezes 2019 [1979]: 4).

<sup>229</sup> Along with and in comparison to Rodney’s historical analyses, see Alan Adamson (1972), Rawle Farley (1953, 1954), Jay Mandle (1973), Philip McLewin (1987), Kimani Nehusi (2018), and Maurice St. Pierre (1999).

to others. Not all such notions of doing “bad Work” are necessarily Christian in origin, however, as some also represent *precolonial* conceptions of what anthropologists and others have reductively called “sorcery” or “witchcraft.”<sup>230</sup> Widespread colonial, missionary, and anthropological diffusions of these aforementioned terms (which are primarily avoided in this Dissertation) instilled a hegemonic “modern” vision conceiving of these practices and “forces as by definition linked to Evil and opposed to all Good” (Geschiere 1997: 13). The ways Komfa People understand and *use* these powers tend to be much more ambiguous and illustrate “the need to nuance” the moralizing dualistic distinction long used to disparage and criminalize non-European religiosities (ibid.; cf. Hodge 1990; Gibson 2006). “Wukin’ Obeah” or “dealin’ wit’ jumbie” are primary means used by Spiritualists for *healing*, and they often describe their curative practices as such among themselves. The ambiguities arise as certain Works—even healing ones—may entail forms of counteractive measure, what some call their personal “war-” or “warrior-medicine.”<sup>231</sup> Still, Guyanese today most often perceive such *afflictive therapeutics* through a colonial Christian framing largely informed by the ruthless racial dynamics of plantation society that conjoined “evil Wuk”—and other work—specifically to “African” culture and Afro-descendent people.

Returning to Raymond Smith’s (1978: 329) account of religion in the colonial British Caribbean, he writes that “the legal suppression of all forms of non-Christian ritual and the

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<sup>230</sup> Indigenous American, African, Asian, and European traditions of “sorcery” likely have influenced both popular conceptions of Obeah and Spiritual Work, as well as Spiritualists’ practices. On “sorcery,” “magic,” and “witchcraft,” especially useful are Comaroff and Comaroff (1993), Meyer and Pels (2003), Parés and Sansi (2011), Vidal and Whitehead (2004), and Whitehead (2002).

<sup>231</sup> Wyatt MacGaffey’s (1986: 156) Bakongo correspondents characterized certain kinds of *minkisi* in a similar way as “cursing charms” that “healed by attacking the witch responsible for the affliction.” Stephan Palmié (2002: 177-178) also quotes from MacGaffey on this point, adding that among many Central African peoples, “the definition of incidents of mystical aggression as witchcraft—and not, for example, the exercise of chiefly power—is a matter, not of intention or effect, but of the social valuation of its ends.”

relegation of African beliefs to the category of superstition was extremely important” to the “formation of West Indian society.” No wonder then that Komfa remains highly devalued, socially marginalized, and juridically circumscribed when in colonial British Guiana “all apparently African belief and practice tended to be classed together as *obeah* and characterized as superstition or devil worship” (R. Smith 1978: 328). Missionaries largely “usurped” the role of local healers, diviners, and other Spiritual workers, while at the same time condemning their works as Obeah. Through such historical processes, the cultural space allowing for “good” Obeah works diminished as all forms of “work” came to be defined distinctly as “superstition,” “witchcraft,” or “black magic.” Yet, through its very persecution by colonists—and colonized as well—the cultural space and demand for Komfa “warrior-medicine” also expanded during this same period. According to Brian Moore (1999: 66), in this period “the churches, though in competition with the *Cumfo* societies, were a much more influential agent of acculturation [than schooling mandated through the compulsory education law of 1876] and certainly did play a major role in this regard as religious dogma and secular British culture were inextricably intertwined.” Neil Whitehead (2002: 166) writes of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century missionization among Indigenous Guianese—Patamuna, Makushi, and Akawaio in particular—as resulting in a similar dynamic, as missionaries’ “culturally inept suppression” of Indigenous “healing, beneficial piya,” and Christian-influenced Aleluya (Alleluia) practices, simultaneously “opened up” the cultural “space of kanaimà death.” While colonial legal precedents criminalizing Obeah and other practices labelled as “witchcraft” may not be widely enforced in postcolonial Caribbean states, as they remain on the books they continue to inform ordinary ethics of the nation (Paton 2019; cf. Lambek 2010). Discrimination, harassment, and violence faced by contemporary Spiritualists typify the consequences of having one’s practices



collectively and comprehensively condemned for generations as “diabolical” and threatening to the religio-moral order of both local communities and the state. That Spiritualists’ practices remain “menacing” to many or most Guyanese is a reality that becomes all-too apparent when *signs* of “African” (or “Amerindian”) religiosity emerge in day-to-day life.

Hearing a drum beat-out a Komfa rhythm, especially as sun sets or it is already dark, is commonly considered a frightening, aggressive, and inauspicious portent of perils within one’s own purlieu. Many mothers call in their charges to return home upon hearing those drums. Seeing a white-robed parishioner pass can and often is also taken as a sign of danger, a reminder that such forms of “superstition or devil worship” *persist* in one’s quarters (R. Smith 1978: 328). Similar reactions to Spiritualists, such as spitting in front of a group invited to participate in a state function, demonstrate the “afterlives” of colonial Christianization. As “symbols derived from African traditions have been pushed into a subordinate position and identified with witchcraft, idolatry, and devil worship,” so too have African-descended and other people who embrace these traditions been subordinated and subject to the outcomes of a “social engineering” based in colonial Christianization (ibid.: 340-41).

### **“Is ‘cause we heal they say we does kill”: “Semiotics of blood” and Rumors of Obeah<sup>232</sup>**

The association of men with sorcery and women with healing may also be based on cultural stereotypes about the sexes. [...] Obeahmen are feared because they work in secret, with malicious ghosts (duppies), and cause harm or misfortune. Women, in contrast, are portrayed as peaceful, benevolent, nurturing, caring, responsible, and trustworthy. [...] Their purpose is to counteract Obeah and malicious ghosts.  
—William Wedenoja<sup>233</sup>

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<sup>232</sup> This first quote is from a practitioner, and the second is from Lara Putnam (2012: 256), both addressed below.

<sup>233</sup> From Wedenoja’s study of mothering and Balm healing in Jamaica (1989: 87).

When asked about histories of Spiritualist churches and Komfa in Guyana, central to elders' recollections of the past are traumatic experiences of prejudice, sometimes of the most horrendous kinds, oftentimes involving incarceration, impoverishment, and even death. As with Komfa practices themselves, stories recalling discriminatory abuses and persecutions endured by practitioners of the past are often handed down generationally within Spiritual families and extended- or "constructed"-kin groups. Certain of these recollections do indeed reach far back to the times of enslavement, as well as often evoking the era of Nathaniel Jordan's (d. 1928) expansions of Guyanese "folk" religiosities that often conflicted with—or preached against—the strictures of the colonial state.<sup>234</sup> More often, however, Spiritualists' stories of abuses faced by their predecessors, and sometimes themselves, focus on more recent time periods, including the tumultuous decolonial movement in the lead-up to independence, as well as the era directly following Guyana's attaining of statehood, times during which the contours of an emerging national morality were in great flux.

Spiritualists report that during the early- to mid-1950s, a time of unprecedented political upheaval in British Guiana, many of their coreligionists were targeted for assault, accused of various wrongdoings, and that even a number of their churches and items inside were destroyed. While political or other motivations inspiring these attacks and the general increased persecution of Komfa People at that time is unclear, that both state-supported and community-based actors instigated these occasions of oppression is evident. The early 1950s through to independence saw periods of prolonged political and social turmoil in Guiana, including much championed by the U. K. and the U. S. In October 1953, after 110 days in power, Winston Churchill had British Guianese governor Alfred Savage dismiss the colony's first democratically elected

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<sup>234</sup> Histories of Jordan and his church, the West Evangelist Millenium Pilgrims (or WEMP), are discussed more thoroughly in Chapter 6.

administration—the PPP headed by Cheddi Jagan—and suspended the constitution to retake full control of the colony (Fraser 2004; Ramcharan 2005). British military presence was strong in the months and even years to come, only to be supplanted by U. S. interests, namely the CIA under Kennedy’s administration (Rabe 2005). After the British reinstated the colony’s constitution, and both Janet and Cheddi Jagan were released from incarceration, in the 1957 and 1961 elections leading up to independence, Cheddi won again. Yet Kennedy enlisted the CIA to undermine his government and empowered Burnham to become prime minister (ibid.; Bahadur 2015; Prados and Jimenez-Bacardi 2020). Disruptions of the period may have contributed to discriminations against Komfa People, as well as increased anti-Black sentiments coming directly from England, where by the late-1940s, the presence of a generation of West Indians in the U. K. had fostered white supremacist movements such as led by fascist Oswald Mosley (Keough 2005: 44).

Likewise, that violence and other forms of abuse Spiritualists were forced to confront in the 1950s were direct successors to similar cruelties faced in earlier periods is also clear. One Spiritual Elder who had “come to the faith” as a young man during that era recalled that coinciding with the increase in popularity of decolonial political ambitions among some British Guianese subjects, other factions of the populace were less than enthusiastic, and revived certain reactionary rhetorics of the past. The Elder explained that “they was scared, ‘nough a them was frighten’ a independence, frighten’ to leave from under we ‘Mother Country protection,’ and most scared a them Africans!...What independence they gone get once they get it? Independence for do Blackman thing, for Wuk Obeah! That’s what they thinking! That the country gone go corrupt with Obeah when come independence!”

The entrenchment of antagonism toward African culture, specifically religious culture, in the decade or two prior to formal independence from Britain, was in specific ways directed at

Komfa People and their communities of practice. Much of the popular discourse vilifying Spiritualists at that time reflected earlier misconceptions of Afro-Guyanese religiosity, specifically those surrounding aggressive and violent practices thought to be—and in some cases actually—incorporated into Komfa and Obeah, in the pre-emancipation era, and today. As the same Elder quoted above testified in 2016, “when I first come to this [Spiritual] life, when I’s a boy really, I just start work at the waterfront. I’s a porter on the wharf, you know,” the man said, “and everybody else there, all them men I working with all day, they does just talk and talk bad-bad ‘bout Obeah all day. Saying how ‘this people does Wukin’ Obeah and then this people by them done dead.’ Saying all this and that... ‘bout Obeah murders. You does know, saying ‘bout we does sacrifice children them and all this stupidity!” the man exclaimed. “So I never say nothing to them about my new Spiritual life, no,” he laughed, adding, “I keep quiet. But I also a little frighten’ my own self too, wondering ‘bout what it is really I gettin’ myself into just now! But that’s a test a faith! You know,” he told me. “There’s ‘nough test and trial in this life here. And in Spiritual life you must hold firm.”

There was in fact a highly publicized and much discussed purported case of what was then and still is called “Obeah murder” in 1950, which may have informed or reinvigorated popular misperceptions of Komfa in the period preceding independence. The case involved a young Indo-Guyanese girl named Lilawattie living with her parents in Stanleytown, New Amsterdam, who was allegedly killed by her Afro-Guyanese neighbors living in the same yard, tenants of the girl’s parents (Swan 1957: 104-06). As the story goes, recorded in court documents and widely circulated in newspapers at the time (including, interestingly, covered in papers around the world), the fatal episode began when Kathleen Fullerton had a dream in which a spirit-visitor informed her of a cache of “Dutch gold” hidden in her yard. The “demon-like man”

in her dream instructed her on how to locate and retrieve the treasure, but, as Fullerton is said to have testified under oath, the spirit required she sacrifice a child in the process (Jordan 2019). Eager to find the gold, Fullerton told her brother Jeremiah about the dream who enlisted known Spiritualist Eric Benfield and Benfield's wife, Dorothy Brutus, to assist in accomplishing the task to acquire the buried wealth.<sup>235</sup> Together on New Year's Day the four are said to have lured the young girl, whose parents rented a house to Benfield and Brutus, to their backyard séance before strangling her in a ritual act. Benfield was accused of raping the girl as well, prior to the group throwing her body into the yard's latrine once her mother, living adjacent and hearing drumming, noticed her daughter had disappeared (Swan 1957: 105; Coddett 2012).<sup>236</sup> Three of the four conspirators were eventually hanged and the incident as a whole left a deep impression on the social consciousness of the nation, just as discussions of political and cultural decolonization were gaining momentum.

Central to the legal inquest into the murder of this young girl, according to reportage, was testimony given by one Albert King, who claimed to have intimate—and condemning—knowledge of Spiritualist practices including the declared role of “human sacrifice” in such rites.<sup>237</sup> This key “expert witness” alleged in his deposition to have grown up in an East Bank Demerara “Cumfa Spiritualist church,” serving previously as an “altar boy” and “follower” from “1936-1944,” when he renounced his commitments to the faith (Swan 1957: 105-07; *The*

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<sup>235</sup> According to some accounts, “all the accused in this trial were followers of a religious sect known as the Jordanites,” as Guyanese tend to describe *all* Spiritualists (Latchana [no date]).

<sup>236</sup> Some sources state that a postmortem examination later concluded that Lil(l)awattie/Lilowatee/Lelawati had drowned, apparently in the outhouse, and not been strangled. She may have fallen in without anyone's knowledge.

<sup>237</sup> See for examples, “Voodoo Murder of Child Charged in British Guiana” in *The Sydney Morning Herald* (13 August 1950: 4), “Human Sacrifice Story in Court,” in *The Newcastle Sun* (5 August 1950: 1), “African Mystics in Cumfa Murder,” in *The Barrier Miner* (7 August 1950: 3), “Head of African Cult, 3 Other Held in Murder,” in *Palladium-Item and Sun Telegram* (30 January 1950: 2), and in *The Daily Times* [New Philadelphia, Ohio] (30 January 1950: 12) and *Circleville Herald* [Circleville, Ohio] (28 January 1950: 1).

*Newcastle Sun* 1950). In King's sworn statement he contends that a significant feature of the "cult" involved "offering living sacrifices" at an annual feast, which a "head-man," "Elder," or "Bishop" can "order [...] whenever his followers want money or spiritual influence to injure their enemies or prominent people" (*The Newcastle Sun* 1950). As King (quoted in Swan 1975: 105) states, "the feast does be an ordinary feast for the poor, rice and greens does be cooked; no meat nor fish." Yet, as King goes on, he explains that "whenever that Bishop is having a feast he must have a sacrifice," clarifying for the court, "that is to say if he ask his spiritual God Lucifer, the Devil of a human sacrifice. That sacrifice will be a boy or girl between the ages of seven to eleven years," he testified (Swan 1957: 106). For practicing Spiritualists—who still discuss the details of this case—what is truly disturbing is how the damning evidence seems flagrantly fictitious and fabricated. Practitioners are quick to point out that no "altar boys" or altar girls are known to Komfa circles, and moreover, that they have never heard of a Spiritualist entertaining "God Lucifer" or "the Devil," and certainly claimed to be unaware of any forms of *human* sacrifice involving death in any of the many varieties of practice with which they were familiar. They do share that up until about the early-1950s, blood sacrifice of fowls, goats, and pigs was common among Spiritualists, but that the practice faded fast in the decade leading to independence. As dynamic traditions, transformations have occurred both gradually and in pace to meet the immediate felt needs of Komfa communities, and perhaps—as metaphor *or* actuality—human offerings, like those of other animals, became a "vitiating abstraction" to be abandoned and replaced (Fernandez 1986: 142). More likely it seems, however, that deeply embedded ideas in Guyanese society linking Spiritualists, Obeah, and "child murder" come from a philosophical and/or political position far removed from the concrete practices that Komfa People have maintained, and unendingly transformed, over centuries.

Rumors of human sacrifice connected to Obeah, and to African religious practices generally, are far from a reactionary innovation of the independence era, and instead seem to rely on centuries of ideological precedent. However, these narratives did take on heightened meaning locally and in the imperial metropolises not just directly before independence, but decades prior. As Lara Putnam (2012: 254) writes, “stories of the ritual murder of white children by brujos, voodooists, and obeah men skyrocketed to prominence in print cultural production about witchcraft in the Caribbean in the second and third decade of the twentieth century, with commentators stridently insisting that the atrocities reflected deep-rooted African traditions unleashed by the weakening of civilized controls.” One such case that was written about in England, the U. S., and elsewhere for years to come, took place in 1917 at the village of Noitgedacht on the West Bank Demerara.<sup>238</sup> The incident began with the disappearance of Molly Schulz, the two-year-old daughter of John Schulz, who was a White estate manager working for the sugar firm Booker Bros., McConnell & Co, Ltd., better known simply as Bookers, the largest producer and landowner in British Guiana at that time (Morrill 1920: 190).<sup>239</sup>

After nine days of frantic searching by the colony’s police force and others for the missing girl with “blue eyes [and] dark brown curly hair,” as the widely circulated reward notice described her features, she was found dead “not 200 yards away from the footpath which many feet had trodden since the time of the child’s disappearance” (Veerasawmy 1919: 117-18). Reports state that the body had been disfigured, and that “those diabolical demons took the eyes

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<sup>238</sup> As noted by Veerasawmy (1919: 116) in reporting on the murder, “there are three Noitgedachts in British Guiana. One in Wakenaam Island, one at Anna Catherina on the West Coast, Demerara, and the third on the West Bank of the Demerara River. It is at the last mentioned place that the crime was committed.”

<sup>239</sup> Some sources use the more common spelling of “Schultz.” On legacies of Booker Bros. and the later Booker Guiana company, including the prestigious Man Booker Prize for English literature, see Ben Richardson (2019).

from the child while she was still alive” (White 1922: 79).<sup>240</sup> A number of factors make this case a fascinating one, not least of which was the explicit juridical attention to contemporaneously circulating societal perceptions regarding Obeah. In retrospectively covering the case, J. A. Veerasawmy (1919: 124), a prominent Guianese attorney at the time, wrote that “it was common knowledge—as had been shown by the Attorney General in opening the case that Obeah took a very prominent part in the proceedings.” In fact, the defense for one of the accused of the group of “middle-aged East Indian” sugar estate laborers, including an “alleged obeahman,” successfully argued that due to popular misgivings regarding the defendants’ traditional practices (i.e. Obeah), that the hitherto selected jury must be disregarded, and a special jury would be necessary to convene to ensure justice was properly achieved. A bill was even soon passed based on the case that altered the process of the colony’s jury selection system allowing for the appointment of co-called Special Juries under the discretion of the Attorney General and the Supreme Court of Demerara. After a second trial, four men were found guilty and hanged, of which the “alleged obeahman” was not one.<sup>241</sup>

While overwhelmingly considered “African culture,” Obeah has indeed been practiced and formed by Guianese of all backgrounds, including “East Indians.” As Elliott Percival Skinner (1955: 251) notes in a study of “ethnic interaction” in early-1950s British Guiana, “Obeah historically has been closely associated with the Africans but the first information I received of it came from an East Indian and apparently, through acculturation, it has become an East Indian trait as well.” Skinner (1955: 253) goes on to note, quoting from an anonymous

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<sup>240</sup> For another—likely highly fictionalized and certainly racialized—account of the case that focuses on the victim’s eyes, see Nicol Smith (1941: 79-80): “‘Molly Schultz,’ said the captain, ‘was a very nice little girl. About five years old. A sweet little girl. With so wonderful eyes! Oh, so blue were they! Deep blue, like the flower of the flax, yes? Always she was dancing and skipping about, all day long she was happy.’”

<sup>241</sup> On this case also see *Reports of Decisions in the Supreme Court of British Guiana during the year 1919 and in the West Indian Court of Appeal Sitting in British Guiana* (1919).



source writing in *Timehri*, that “the obeahman may be a coolie, but is more often Negro, and his consultants may be members of his own or another race; next to Negroes, I should say the people who most frequently resort to these scoundrels are the Portuguese.”<sup>242</sup> Not only South Asians and Madeiran Portuguese Europeans practiced or sought help through Obeah, but Europeans of all national backgrounds did as well. As Sidney Mintz and Richard Price (1992 [1976]: 91n8, quoting Van Lier 1971: 83-83) note of late-1700s Suriname (as elsewhere), “in cases of illness Europeans often consulted the witch doctors [sic] of the Negroes. A number of cases of Europeans exercising pressure on converted [Christian] slaves who formerly enjoyed some fame as experts in this field to revert to their former practices are also mentioned.”

Regarding Obeah’s intercultural, interreligious dynamisms, Nathaniel Murrell (2013: 66) writes that

during slavery, Obeah was practiced among the Maroons, slaves, free Africans, and poor whites. Later, it knew no boundaries; it found reception among people of different faiths, ethnicity, and social standing. Its practitioners were Jamaican Myalists, Pocominists, and Kuminists; it is among the Trinidad and Tobago Spiritual Baptists and Orisha (or Kabbalists) avatars; it is found in Guyanese Hindu Kali Mai Pujah, as well as Muslim and Christian sects. Obeah appeals to descendants of indentured immigrants, people of African and European descent, and other creole peoples; so Obeah is not a religion of illiterate maladjusted Africans. Caribbean people of all hue and faith may visit Obeah men.

Yet ideologies adamant on framing Obeah as “a religion of illiterate maladjusted Africans” incessantly persist, as they have over generations. Rumors of “Obeah sacrifice” came to the fore again just after independence in the late-1960s, when a series of kidnappings and murders tormented Guyanese communities across the country, resulting in eight deaths over fourteen months before Harrynauth Beharry, a thirty-year-old fisherman, confessed to the brutal killings.

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<sup>242</sup> Skinner inaccurately attributes this quote to “Veerawamy” [sic], but it was written by “X” in the entry following Veerasawmy’s account of Schulz’s murder trial in an article titled “Stray Notes on Obeah.” See “Contents of Volume VI,” *Timehri* VI, 1919 (September [“Third Series”]).

Throughout much of 1969 and into 1970, when Beharry was apprehended, Guyanese widely speculated that they were facing a string of “Obeah murders,” whereby the missing adolescents were said to be required for sacrificial Komfa rituals (Jordan 2018). Yet, not only during sensational and catastrophic events like serial murder do Spiritualists find themselves accused of killing or otherwise harming their fellow Guyanese. Known or suspected Spiritualists—particularly elderly and widowed women termed as *ole higue* (or “old hag”)—tend to be the most commonly targeted suspects in a community when someone has gone missing, been found drowned, or if some other form of furtive foul-play is thought to be involved. Women generally, and those fitting the aforementioned categories more particularly, likely become targeted as they tend to be more candid in revealing their associations with Spiritual life. Raymond Smith (1956 [1965]: 164-65) notes that individuals who are “secretive and unfriendly, or ill-tempered and ill-mannered may be singled out” as an “old hag,” “‘suck man’ or ‘suck woman’ (meaning to suck blood).” Similarly, “a person who is mean and selfish or who is suspected of making a lot of money which he keeps secret and does not spend in entertaining others; a person who lives alone and has few friends; or a person who is a stranger to the village. All these may be singled out for accusation” (ibid.: 165).

While murder typically involves secrecy and deception, in many Guyanese communities Komfa People are considered the chief proprietors of secrets, and especially of the hidden sorts of knowledge that can prove dangerous—or, conversely/complementarily, *therapeutic*—to others. Some Spiritualist gatherings have reported undergoing multiple government inquiries over the years after members of their flock passed away while observing healing rites such as fasting, using *bush* medicines, and extended periods of meditative seclusion. As a primary means of treatment often sought out prior to visiting government or private clinics or hospitals (if such

becomes necessary), practitioners say that, while rare, people in their care who have died were being treated and had refused to be taken for institutional emergency medical treatment when it became clear that they required such. While they resent the legal scrutinization and accompanying community stigmatizations that resulted from these already tragic circumstances, Spiritualists have said that they are willing to accept those consequences of honoring their vows to strive to help those who seek their assistance. “Is ‘*cause* we heal they say we does kill,” one elder lamented.

When the tragedy of a drowning does strike a village or neighborhood, as another example, people who are often most affected or closest to the deceased frequently attribute the death to a *jumbie*. Citing the many creatures inhabiting Guyanese cosmologies and folk-story traditions, people gathered by the canal or creek where the body was recovered often decry the wrath of Massacuraman, Wata-mama and her Water People, or an unnamed *force* sent to do the predatory *bad Wuk*.<sup>243</sup> Such a form of affliction as drowning is unfortunately all too common in “the land of (many) water(s),” where it represents the leading cause of death for children (Pan American Health Organization 2012: 379). Important to Guyanese cosmological and ontological frameworks, however, is the notion that such afflictive *jumbie* Work in concert with, on behalf

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<sup>243</sup> Consider, as Mark McWatt (2008 [2003]: 136) suggests, “a nice list of these entities in David Dabydeen’s novel *Disappearance* [2005 (1993): 36-37], where the protagonist, a civil engineer constructing sea-dams and canals is confronted by a populist leader of the peasant workers, who tries to warn him about these ‘spirits:’”

‘Let me see now,’ he said, stretching out his fingers to count the spirits, ‘Churile, Massacuraman, Dutchman, Moongazer, Ole Higue, Bakoo, Fairmaid, Sukhanti, Dai-Dai [...]’

‘You don’t expect me to believe in your superstitious stories? Keep them for your low-caste illiterate folk.’

‘Well sir, believe or not they are still waiting to trap you, drown you, gobble you, suck you, sex you, blind you, cripple you. That’s why you will never build dam proper, because you are sophisticated city man. You moving bulldozer to gouge canal without respecting the spirit living there. If you dealing with water, is Fairmaid you got to pleasure. You got to leave out food and flower by the river outlet, otherwise is drown you drown rass. If you dealing with mountain, is Dai-Dai you watch out for, otherwise they eat you whole and not even spit out the bones for a decent Christian burial.’

“Thus, the imagination multiplies the real dangers, perhaps in order to keep the mind focused and prepared for the worst,” McWatt concludes. One can also compare to the account of massacouraman and a European biologist deemed an Obeahman in Cyril Dabydeen’s *Dark Swirl* (1988) and in Aliyah Khan’s (2015) provocative analysis.

of, for even transform between living-human counterparts. So while “Watermamma” may be publicly blamed for the calamity while one is expressing grief at the waterside or grave, the subtext of such a claim—understood by those present to varying degrees—is that *someone* is responsible. And that someone being often indirectly accused has the special, and “Spiritual,” abilities to engage entities like *jumbie* that are widely attributed to Komfa People. The reasons underlying accusations of murder and human sacrifice levelled against Spiritualists are complex and historically rooted.

After all, as Lara Putnam (2012: 254) observes, themes of child sacrifice and cannibalism became the “centerpiece” of literatures about “black people’s black magic in the Caribbean” penned by European and North American authors in the early twentieth century.<sup>244</sup> However, Putnam (2012: 254) cautions not only against interpretations that see “Obeah murder” and human sacrificial practices as “deep-rooted African traditions,” but also those that assume instead a “European fantasy of African thirst for white babes’ blood” as similarly “deeply rooted in the Atlantic past.” In a deft analysis of the circulation of ideas about Obeah in the Greater Caribbean from 1890-1940, using print sources as well as legal records and autobiographical works, Putnam (2012: 262) argues that the idiom of ritual child murder represented the latest European trope in the popular Obeah narrative genre, *not* “the last lingering vestige of African belief.” That last “European addition” can be traced, however, to what at first seem unlikely and much earlier foundations, or prototypes, in European anti-Jewish propaganda that were transferred to the Caribbean with British and other Europeans in a much later period of

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<sup>244</sup> Ideas linking Caribbean peoples to cannibalism go back to the times of the very naming of the region by Europeans. As Neil Whitehead (2011: 12) demonstrates, Columbus’s “ethnographic proposal for enslaving the native population” of what became the Caribbean islands and mainland South America was founded on “the notion that cannibal *caribes* inhabited the Caribbean, as the very place-name suggests.” Consider also the character Caliban of Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, based upon early reports of European entrepreneurial-imperial-ethnographers in the Caribbean, whose name is thought to be an anagram for “cannibal” as the sort of people to be found in such parts of the world. Also see W. Arens (1979), Benjamin Schmidt (2007), and Whitehead and Michael Harbsmeier (2008).

colonization and Christianization. In the postemancipation period as well, “reports of children being sacrificed in India in what was described as ritual murders” spread widely in British Guiana, contributing to the flow of analogous rumors emerging from European metropolises (Campbell 1976: 7).

As Putnam explains, however, ideas linking child murder to Africans and African ritual practices did not gain salience until just after 1900, as before then no references can be found to curative or other “supernatural” properties attributed to White children’s lifeforce. Yet, Putnam (2012: 256) contends that “a semiotics of blood through which Jews and Christians defined themselves in contrast to each other over millennia” provided a likely model for ideas that were transferred to the Caribbean (cf. Bauer et al. 2015). While notorious “blood libel” accusations holding that Jews killed Christian children to use their blood in preparing ritual foods had been disseminated since at least 1144 in England, rumors of this type saw a proliferation in circulation around the 1880s, when anti-Jewish rhetoric and violence increased, particularly in eastern and southern Europe (ibid.). Accounts originating in the Mediterranean and eastern Europe of Jewish bloodletting rituals were widely published in Caribbean newspapers in this period and offered a model through which Euro-Caribbeans and others interpreted what was being reported as a general upsurge in Obeah and related practices throughout the region.<sup>245</sup> Guyanese Spiritualist practitioners were certainly not alone in incurring the wrath unleashed through the local pairing

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<sup>245</sup> On the continued proliferation of Obeah in British Guiana after abolition despite increased suppression, see Bronkhurst (1883: 382-83) and Brian Moore (1999: 65), the latter writing that in the late 1850s fears were expressed about the rise of radical black (racial) consciousness, and a ‘reversion to barbarism’ as Creoles were reported to be once more embracing their African culture, particularly the Cumfo religious rites and obeah. To stem this trend, expenditure on the institutions of law and order was increased, and draconian legislation was passed to curb the increase in the practice of obeah (which included the public flogging and imprisonment of practitioners).

Like Moore, Handler and Bilby (2012: 18-22) and Paton (2015) suggest that strategies intended to criminalize Obeah proliferated in the postemancipation era as Obeah practices burgeoned, or as they came to be considered by both observers and practitioners *as* “Obeah.”

of blood libel and African ritual in this period as the infamous Cuban case known as *el crimen de la niña Zoila* (1904) exemplifies, which “touched off a quarter century in which members of black fraternal societies were accused in dozens of separate incidents of kidnapping white children to use their blood to cure the black brujos’ diseased bodies” (Putnam 2012: 260).

**When “eye-water fall like sky-water”<sup>246</sup>**

Ol’ woman wid de wrinkled skin,  
Leh de ol’ higue wuk begin.  
—Wordsworth McAndrew<sup>247</sup>

Discriminations faced by Komfa People today—as in the past—also take many diverse forms that are often unrelated to extremes of direct or indirect accusations of abduction, murder, and mutilation. Spiritualists often find themselves inculpated of various lesser wrongdoings and censured in demeaning and publicly humiliating ways for merely engaging their own practices that are harmless to others. Komfa People suffer numerous adverse impacts on their lives stemming from the widespread prejudice they face in society. Many practitioners report that they never wear their ritual garments outside of their Spiritual church to prevent the stigmatizations accompanying being seen as an “Obeah person.” Some have said that if it were not for their employers they would choose to wear their robes not only at church, but feared being seen at the market or elsewhere by acquaintances who might then share such knowledge of their affiliations with coworkers, which could cost them their jobs. Discrimination in employment is a major concern for Spiritualists whether due to clothing choices or other issues, but is a concern expressed by another Afro-Guyanese religious constituency, namely Rastafari, whose dreadlocks

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<sup>246</sup> As referenced below, this quote is from a Spiritualist Elder.

<sup>247</sup> From McAndrew’s oral poem titled “Ol’ Higue” (1989: 30).

are a visual, embodied religious signifier that is much less situationally modifiable (or concealable) than robes.<sup>248</sup> Many Spiritualists wear locks, and many people “move between” Rastafari and Spiritualist practices and circles. Spiritualists tend to “move between” other faiths as well.<sup>249</sup>

One woman I know from a church on the East Bank Demerara reported that a few years earlier she had been unexpectedly let go from her job as a “sales girl” at a large furniture store in downtown Georgetown. When she queried a coworker friend after the fact, the friend shared a disheartening development. Their boss had complained to all the other workers on the day the woman was fired that they had not informed their managers that their coworker was a Spiritualist. The boss was said to have told the workers that he thought the woman was a Rasta because of her hair—and that was “bad enough”—but on learning that she attended an “Obeah church” decided plainly then and there that she had to be dismissed. According to the friend, none of this thinking was hidden from the other employees or considered in any way unmerited or unjust—by the managers or coworkers. Rastafari and others wearing locks have been intimidated and attacked in Guyana as elsewhere by police and members of the general public repeatedly over the decades, particularly in the 1970s and 80s when the movement burgeoned in Guyana. I have spoken with people who grew up in those times and remember thinking it was

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<sup>248</sup> Because of this discrimination, many Rastas and Spiritualists report that they choose to work as vendors, farmers, or other self-employed profession.

<sup>249</sup> One can compare this notion of “moving between” faith domains, as practitioners say, to Stephen Glazier’s (2003: 149-150) account of Trinidadian “Spiritual Baptists who become Rastafarians and then become Spiritual Baptists again [...] and vice versa,” which he contends, “is not a common occurrence.” Still, as in much of the Black Atlantic world, Glazier (ibid.: 150) also observes that in Trinidad “adherents do not feel that they must break all ties with former religions prior to becoming involved with a new religious group. For many, it is possible to belong simultaneously to multiple religious organizations,” a feeling which certainly holds true for many Guyanese, including those who identify as Spiritualists. “The religious lives of Caribbean people—like the religious lives of people throughout the world,” Glazier (ibid.: 150) writes—“are punctuated by periods of intense religious involvement followed by stretches of relative inactivity sometimes interpreted as a ‘falling away’ from faith. Spiritual Baptists and Rastafarians who are inactive still identify themselves as Spiritual Baptists and Rastafarians, respectively.”

normal to see Rastas harassed or assaulted by police, having their locks cut from their heads on Georgetown sidewalks and hung on nearby fences to exhibit to passersby. As recently as 2017, Sister Woziero Esther Gittens, a central member of the local Nyahbinghi Order and Secretary of the National Reparations Committee, confirmed that such abuses are still carried out by state actors. Speaking at an event held at the University of Guyana, Woziero Esther related how Rastafari continue to be persecuted by police due to their religious practices, marijuana use being one among a number of examples she shared. She spoke of her own experience being arrested for marijuana and recalled for the audience that while she was imprisoned “she nearly had her locks cut off by overzealous prison guards” (Sharples 2017).

Spiritualists and Rastas also both confront hostilities concerning their dietary choices, as members of both groups tend to abstain from meat or animal-derived products, as well as salt and often sugar and (refined) flour. As Norman Cameron (1950: 137) recorded in 1927 after he and his spouse interviewed Elder Jordan at the WEMP’s Agricola village compound, “all were to forego the use of alcohol, tobacco, flesh. On admission” into the faith, Jordan told Cameron, “members were to make a vow and keep it all their life. Since it is in Genesis that the animals were created before man,” Jordan “concluded that the animal is ‘man’s elder brother.’ His members are therefore vegetarians. They eat rice, vegetables, greens—borah, pe[a]s, etc., but no meat.” When facing incarceration (often due to related forms of discrimination) or through participation in other institutional programs such as public schools or hospitals, Komfa People and other religionists have often found themselves in positions where their faith-based practices must be compromised, either to avoid exposing themselves as practitioners, out of sheer necessity, or from others misunderstanding their faith to such practices as insincere, or as Obeah. Many Spiritualists have shared testimonies about challenges they or others have faced in



maintaining food and related customs while encountering distressing situations. One Elder told me that in the past it was common practice for authorities to send Komfa People to the Public Lunatic Asylum at Fort Canje in New Amsterdam, Berbice, for even the slightest improprieties or eccentricities, including merely wearing white robes and engaging their practices in public. According to this Elder, that is precisely what his predecessor—"Brother La-shus"—was doing when he was apprehended on the roadside while preaching and admitted indefinitely for "treatment" at the Berbice asylum. While there, the Elder reports, Aloysius De Souza, or "Brother La-shus," was denied food that would have sustained "his Spiritual strength." Instead, he was forced to consume meat, salt, and other taboo items in what the Elder described as a deliberate attempt to "break the brother's spirit" and "tie he to that evil place" as a captive to live out his days, denied from further spreading his Komfa gospel.

Being forced to break dietary taboos or other proscriptions and prescriptions represents only one example of the persecutions Komfa People have endured over generations, but it is one that is salient in people's minds and reflects submerged "afterlives of slavery." In a 1985 conversation between three Kongo descendants on the West Coast Berbice recorded by Monica Schuler (2000: 18), "magical powers of escape came into play" when one of her interlocutors "touched on a common theme about people who found slavery intolerable and were able to fly off the ship because they had observed a salt taboo despite the distribution of salted fish and meat on slave ships." Schuler (2000: 18) goes on to explain that through their "counter 'science'"—as a synonym for "Obeah"—certain "slave ship captains, slaveowners or employers who understood the deadly nature of salt deliberately plied Africans with it to destroy their occult powers. This is implied, however," as Schuler notes, "by emphasis on some slaves' deliberate abstention from salt." As Brother Aloysius's successor attested, the need to "escape"

the dehumanizing conditions of the plantation did not necessarily cease with the demise of enslavement, as the “racial calculus” and “political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago” largely remain in effect, necessitating inspired and *Spiritual* means of survival (Hartman 2007: 6). Referring to days of Aloysius’s youth, likely around or shortly before the turn of the twentieth century, the Elder solemnly declared that, “you know, them times eye-water fall like sky-water,” adding that “you mightn’t be a slave, but you still ain’ able be you own self,” including in present times when Spiritualists endure ongoing animosities.<sup>250</sup> To maintain tactics of survival inspired by the ancestors also presents an additional challenge to “be you own self...when they done forbid you from staying like how you mother stay, she own mother, and going back” generationally, he said—describing the “natal alienation” of enslavement and postplantation regimes of capitalism (Patterson 1982; cf. Guenther 2012; Thomas 2019).

Aloysius did eventually leave the asylum and go on to nurture a still-devoted flock. Many other practitioners were also incarcerated in Berbice’s asylum and in lockups, jails, and prisons elsewhere throughout the country. Stories are also still told about Elder Jordan’s experiences being confined in Mazaruni Prison, where he too was forced to eat meat and salt as authorities attempted to “weaken” his Spiritual and physical resolve. People remember that these Komfa leaders and practitioners were primarily vegetarians, and when confronting such dire situations as incarceration, they tried to fast from the institutional sustenance they were provided. In succumbing or being forced to consume the “flesh” (called *renk*, more commonly) and/or salt or “salt-foods,” they are said to have lost many of their powers and motivations, leaving them exposed to other greater harms associated with their confinements. One story told of Jordan holds that despite being locked up and allegedly made to suffer far worse conditions than other

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<sup>250</sup> In Creolese “eye-water” are tears and “sky-water” is rain. See Allsopp (2003 [1996]: 221).

inmates, he was still able to “manifest” a rat in his cell to eat his prison rations in his stead. Upon fasting for enough days without being noticed by guards, he mounted a broad-daylight escape over the main fence, swimming free from the island prison and making his way back to Georgetown, where he was later re-apprehended.

The Berbice Lunatic Asylum, however, the only such institution in the colony, holds heightened histories of religious and other discriminations faced not only by Spiritualists, but also by Hindus and Muslims, in particular, who likewise often observe certain dietary restrictions regarding meat and other comestibles. Dr. Robert Grieve (1839-1906), the Scottish former superintendent of the Berbice Asylum, was considered a progressive intellectual and physician, and an astute reformer of British Guiana’s public health institutions (L. Smith 2014: 98-99). Taking up his charge and relocating to British Guiana in 1875, Grieve quickly set about remedying the “extremely poor” public provisions for mental healthcare and other forms of medicine in the colony (Gramaglia 2010: xiv). As part of his medical practice, Grieve wrote and published *The Asylum Journal* for a number of years beginning in the early 1880s, disseminating reports of his various innovative clinical methods. In an early volume he wrote about forcing immigrant Indian laborers under his care, who were vegetarians on being admitted, to eat meat for their own fitness. “In the Asylum,” Grieve (2010 [1881]: 118-19) observed, “the beneficial effects of good feeding are very plainly seen, especially amongst the coolies. Here they have a diet in which is a fair proportion of animal food, butcher’s meat of some kind given every day, and under its influence they almost invariably and rapidly gain weight and improve in their bodily health.” While Grieve might not have still been around when Brother Aloysius was admitted, the doctor’s approaches to treatment were perhaps still in place, as oral testimony demonstrates.

Interestingly, but not surprisingly, Dr. Grieve also wrote in his journal about Obeah as practiced at the asylum and neighboring communities of Berbice, and Guiana more broadly. In one instance he began with a general account. “That a firm belief in obeahism is widely diffused amongst the people of this colony any one who is brought into intimate contact with them is not long in discovering,” he insisted (Grieve 2010 [1882]: 208). Countering certain stereotypes about the practice, and reinforcing others, Grieve added that “this belief is not one in obeahism only as a mode of secret poisoning, a materialistic and gross view of the craft, but in it, as a form of enchantment after the style of that of which we read in the Arabian Nights. By its means it is believed that the fortunes of men can be made or marred” (ibid.). Alluding again to the “work” of Obeah, Grieve (ibid.) holds that “when anyone wishes to wreak his vengeance on his enemies without danger to himself it is to the obeah doctor he applies.” Grieve (ibid.) then recounted an episode that “so strongly illustrates both the belief in obeah and its mode of working as to be worth relating,” and I include the anecdote here in its entirety.

One morning the senior attendant a fair skinned almost white man and one of fair intelligence made a complaint that an attempt had been made to obeah him. He said that early that morning an obeah bottle had been found upon the doorstep of his cottage and as he was the first person likely to pass it, it must have been intended for him. Although he made the complaint he was as loud as usual in his expression of unbelief in obeah. How could he a Christian believe in such a thing? At the same time he showed great reluctance to bring the bottle and only did so after a good deal of pressure had been put upon him. He treated it much after the manner one can suppose an infernal machine is handled when its character is known. It was afterwards found out that he had before leaving his cottage that morning looked out of the window and saw the thing of horror upon his doorstep. At once a hue and cry was raised to bring assistance from outside as no one dare pass it. A woman living near came and undertook to exorcise the demon of the bottle which she did by performing the usual rites of invocation and a liberal application of salt and water. When examined the terrible thing was found to be an ordinary eau-de-cologne bottle filled with a heterogeneous collection after the approved style of necromancy. Here were:

Eye of newt and toe of frog  
Wool of bat and tongue of dog  
Adder’s fork and blind worm sting  
Lizard’s leg and owlet’s wing.

or their local equivalents. Conspicuously standing above the cork was a hair certainly much like one from the head of the attendant who complained and its presence was said to act as a guide to direct the mischief towards him. The bottle was afterwards used as a test of the belief in obeahism amongst the attendants and its effects were very marked. The application of the test was in this manner. First came the question. Have you had anything to do with this obeah business? Do you believe in it? Oh sir! How could I believe in such a thing!! It is a good thing you don't believe in it for then you will be able to tell me what you think of this? On which the bottle suddenly appears. The abrupt start, the tremor and change of complexion, in one instance a bolt made for the door, showed that the heart did not confirm the denial made by the tongue. The bottle is still in existence but its contents have dried up so it is feared that the virtue may have departed from it. (ibid.: 208-209)

While here dealing only slightly with the attendants' and inmates' own local Guianese "emic" understandings of "obeahism" and its functioning in their lives, at other times Grieve devoted more attention to such issues. He also revealed his peculiar perceptions of the racialized dynamics surrounding British Guianese Obeah as "African." Continuing with his literary flourishes, and writing of life in the institutionalized world he regulated, Grieve (ibid.: 196) wrote that

as for poetry there is not a scintilla of it to be discovered either in feeling or words. People there [in the asylum] are who having delusions of grandeur fancy themselves to possess great wealth or even to partake of the Divine nature. But the dignified air, the courteous manners, the kindly even if imaginary dispensation of favours which go to form the Asylum monarch or hero are never displayed. Wealth seems only to be associated in idea, with the power of unlimited eating and drinking, and position with the right to swear at every one around them. Delusions of persecution which too are often met with, commonly it may be said invariably, take the form of a belief of having been obeahed by the person who is the object of distrust.

As he went on to observe, disclosing some of the racialized rudiments informing his medical practice, that "mania in the case of Africans is characterized more by emotional than intellectual perversion, irrational and over-displayed anger is its most common symptom," he wrote (ibid.). Illustrating conditions roughly forty-five years after emancipation, the superintendent noted that the "mania" displayed by Africans and other of his inmates, came also in the form of "delusions

of persecution” that they “invariably” associated with Obeah. One must wonder if the colonial doctor himself may ever have served as “object” of his deluded charges’ “distrust?” Either way, he seemed not to be hampered by *their* Obeah, or hold much regard for their self-diagnoses of “having been obeahed.”

A particular case from his clinical record, “diagnosed as one of phthisical insanity,” is also worth revisiting (Grieve 1882: 210).<sup>251</sup> In 1882, “J.G.,” identified as a “black creole woman” in her thirties, was admitted into Grieve’s care at the Berbice asylum with no previous medical history and promptly “certified as insane owing to her incoherence, violent conduct and tendency to indecent exposure of her person” (ibid.: 209). In describing J.G.’s “attacks of excitement”—which Grieve (ibid: 209-10) feels have a “distinct erotic tendency”—as well as her “depression,” aural “hallucinations,” “crying out,” and “throwing herself on the floor,” he claims that she is entirely “incoherent”; with the exception that, “it could be made out that she had a belief that she had been obeahed (delusions of persecution),” he writes. In introducing her case, Grieve (ibid.) observes in passing that the woman’s wrists and ankles bore “marks caused from having been forcibly restrained by the use of ropes or fetters,” but he never returns to mention the “marks,” if he had inquired of the patient as to their origination, or if and how such circumstances might have contributed to J.G.’s declined condition. The notes do mention, however, that upon being admitted she “had a most miserable appearance” and was “emaciated,” recorded as weighing “only 77 lbs.” for her “5 ft 2½ in. in height” (ibid.).

Along with his distress that “she tried to strip herself,” Grieve (1882: 209-10) also registers his concern regarding J.G.’s tendency to speak to herself, conducting an ongoing “imaginary conversation with people outside” her cell. He attributes his patient’s soliloquizing,

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<sup>251</sup> Regarding this archaic diagnosis—“phthisical insanity”—of which the main proponent was Scottish psychiatrist Thomas Clouston, President of the British Child Study Association from 1898, see G. E. Berrios (2005).

at least in part, to what he diagnosed as her “deafness”—“extreme in the right ear” (ibid.). The “attendant” who directly cared for J.G. had reported, however, that she also “suffered occasionally from attacks resembling fits that in them the



*Fig. 4.2* An interior view of British Guiana’s Tuberculosis Hospital. From John Haslam’s doctoral public health survey of rural Guiana written for the University of Edinburgh (1924: 121).

eyes were fixed[,] that there was convulsive action of the hands, foaming of the mouth and loss of consciousness” (ibid.). Yet none but her personal caregiver was ever present to witness these episodes, so Grieve writes that he remained unsure what to make of them. Then, after roughly six weeks in the asylum, “one morning she suddenly became unconscious and died,” Grieve writes (ibid.). Shortly thereafter—nine hours—the doctor performed a “necropsy” as part of regular procedure, revealing what he then recorded as the primary cause of death: “tumour of brain (tubercle).” Silenced in Grieve’s archive, there is of course no way to now know what J.G.’s own ideas regarding her condition may have been, nor what circumstances led her to being admitted in the state she was. Presumably some form of violence had occurred, leading to the “marks” on her body and likely far worse.

The “persecution” she faced was unquestionably more than “delusional.” What J.G.’s doctor and attendant describe as symptoms of “phthisical insanity”—speaking to “herself” continuously and fits of “convulsive action of the hands, foaming of the mouth and loss of consciousness”—however, while signs of a brain tumor to both British colonial and “modern

medicine,” all also resemble common features of Komfa possession performance (cf. Dossey 1999). After all, when the founding leader of the Faithist movement commonly known as the Jordanites was “struck down by a shaft of light” in a visionary experience around 1917, some interpreted Elder Jordan as being “a ‘seeing’ man,” while many in his village thought that instead of an “epiphany of light and revelation, [...] ‘Jordan must’ve had an epileptic seizure’” (Carew 2014: 70; Roback 1973: 40). There is a possibility of construing J.G.’s incoherence, disrobing, seemingly uncontrollable movement and speech, and—a finale of cathartic rest—as “epileptiform convulsions” (Grieve 1881: 123) *or* as a form of Spiritual entrancement. Yet for Grieve, “Obeah” as such was incompatible as etiology, sign, symptom, *or* therapy. Likewise, as J.G. is said to have expressed a “belief that she had been obeahed,” which her doctor disregarded, the potential remains that whatever abuses she faced directly prior to her confinement, and ultimately her death, were indeed inflicted through some kind of *bad Wuk*.

Regardless of the actual background to this woman’s tragic story, which, at least from Grieve’s records, can never be satisfactorily traced, as Janelle Rodriques (2018; 2019) and others have argued, discourses ideologically linking women and Obeah—as well as disability—have been crucial to colonial and postcolonial constructions of moral subjectivity in the Caribbean, moderating conceptions of citizen and state (cf. Kennedy 2015). “Both women and Obeah threatened paternalistic imaginings of ‘modern’ West Indian nationhood,” Rodriques (2018: 202) writes, “and as such were often narrated as volatile outliers that had to be subdued and/or ridiculed in order to maintain some semblance of national cohesion.” Grieve’s work as superintendent confirms the centrality of racialized and gendered aspects of constructing and regulating “religion” in a “plural” and “secular” colonial society, as well as a later postcolonial “creole nationalism,” that was and in many ways still is fundamentally substantiated through “the



pursuit of respectability and the acceptance of a paternalistic patriarchy” (Thomas 2004: 252).<sup>252</sup>

Despite Guyana’s “matrifocality,” patriarchy reigns.<sup>253</sup> According to the authors of the country’s first-ever national survey on gender-based violence (Contreras-Urbina et al. 2018: 8),

violence against women and girls (VAWG) in Guyana is widespread, driven by an intersection of cultural, economic, social and political factors that undermine women’s position in society and reinforce notions of female subordination and male domination. [...] Patriarchal norms in which the social status of men and boys is higher than that of women and girls (who are seen as subservient to—and subject to the authority of—their male counterparts), are a primary driver of VAWG.”<sup>254</sup>

Along with ethnoracialized abuses faced by generations of Komfa People, stemming in large part from colonial precedents, Spiritualists have also endured and confronted discriminations aimed more directly at regulating their expressions of gender and sexuality, proceeding from similar legacies of enslavement and colonization. As will be discussed in greater detail in Chapters 7 and 8, women, as well as queer and gender-nonconforming Guyanese, make up a significant proportion of Komfa practitioners, realities which tend to heavily inform Spiritualists’ representation as a group in society. That many are gay, bi, lesbian, trans, intersex, or nonconforming in other ways contributes to the stigmatization Komfa People face from the generally homophobic and patriarchally heteronormative Guyanese public in their attempts to “subdue” these “volatile outliers” (Rodriques 2018: 202). As doubly, triply, or quadruply disadvantaged persons due to their intersecting marginalized subjecthoods, queer Black women Spiritualists, who are many in Guyana, live—and too-often die—at a crossroads of

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<sup>252</sup> For other accounts of “both women and Obeah” as “volatile outliers” and threats to moral order, see Janelle Rodriques (2018, 2019) below, and Loretta Collins (1995), Jeffrey Cottrell (2015), Diana Paton (2015), Maritza Paul (2000), Eugenia O’Neal (2020), Ana Ozuna (2017), Nathaniel Murrell (2013), and Dianne Stewart (2005).

<sup>253</sup> On the concept of matrifocality and its practice in British Guiana and Guyana, see Raymond Smith (1956 [1965], 1996), and more generally see Andrew Apter (2013), Edith Clarke (1999 [1957]), Stéphanie Mulot (2013), Robert Quinlan (2006), and Helen Safa (2005).

<sup>254</sup> Also see Peake and Trotz (1999), Trotz (2014), and B. Williams (1996b). On homophobia and transphobia, see below.

precarities (cf. Tinsley 2018). As one such practitioner confided, “I does feel like I must hide so much of myself from everybody,” because if she revealed her genuine complexities as a person, “it’d be a death sentence,” she feared, quite justifiably.

Guyana has a regrettably extremely high incidence of reported gender-based violence, and other forms of violence, with abuses against LGBTQI people rampant and often unquestioned (Carrico 2012; Jackman 2016, 2017).<sup>255</sup> As the woman quoted above expressed, queer Spiritualists often face the worst forms of hostility and so tend to conceal their identities and affiliations, even within certain Komfa gatherings. Generally, many gay, trans, or otherwise nonconforming practitioners find accepting communities in whom they can safely confide, and countless have reported that they open up in such ways only among their Spiritual “family,” never in public even if at an event associated with Komfa. Others of course are more intrepid, undaunted by the possibilities—and likely realities—of meeting enmity when presenting themselves as they so choose wherever they so choose. Unfortunately, they often face challenging and even brutal consequences for being themselves.

During one incident I witnessed, which serves as a near-benign example of what might in other circumstances have turned fatal, a gay Spiritualist Bishop was attacked during a heavily attended public Service held in Georgetown’s busiest location. This was a part of the first Emancipation Day celebrations in which I had participated, on the night of July 31, 2014, convened in front of Demico building at the Stabroek Market Bus Park. A large crowd had gathered in anticipation of the ritual proceedings, some in white or other colored robes, and

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<sup>255</sup> Additional sources, figures, and analysis relating to violence and discrimination directed at LGBTQI Guyanese can be found in a report by Georgetown Law Human Rights Institute (Schoenholtz, Gómez-Lugo, and Armstrong 2018). In terms of self-violence, according to the World Health Organization, in 2014 Guyana was reported as having the highest rate per capita of suicide of any nation globally. See *Kaieteur News* (21 March 2017), Rawlins and Bishop (2018), and for accounts historicizing Guyana’s high rates of self-violence and gender-based violence, see Bahabur (2014) and Hertzman (2017).

many in African-print fabrics. At the center of the mass of people stood a group of five or six practitioners who were attending to a small shrine assembled on the pavement, resting on a large solid block of wood and consisting of a variety of items: plants including flowers and green sugar canes, liquids, fruits, candles, calabash bowl-lamps, a palm broom, and much more. Just as the drums began to roll and the Bishop began to announce the commencement of the rites with a Spiritual hymn, a huge commotion broke-out.

At first unsure what had happened in the tumult, I quickly realized that something had been heaved from above to intentionally disrupt the Spiritual Work. Then I saw that those gathered in the middle surrounding the Bishop, as well as the altar, were soaking wet and standing in an enormous mound of ice. Most of the shrine items had been knocked over or covered in ice cubes, and the Bishop had barely remained on his feet. Many in the throng of people were laughing and craning their necks for a glimpse of the perpetrator(s) on the roof of Demico, who seemed to be long gone. But from among the laughter in the crowd could be heard cries denouncing the Spiritualists and their “Wuk” as Obeah. Yet, what caught me most off-guard in the incident were the shouts of antigay epithets condemning the Bishop specifically as an “*anti-man*” or “*auntie-man*,” and accosting the gathering more generally for their public expression of religiosity. One very vocal remonstrator pleaded to the still-snickering and disbanding crowd, that children should not be present for such an event, and that their parents were negligent for bringing or allowing them to attend “some battyboy Obeah show.”<sup>256</sup>

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<sup>256</sup> “Battyboy” is a disparaging epithet used to identify gay men specifically, whereas “*antiman/auntiem*” is often employed regardless of (perceived) gender or sex to demean gays and lesbians, or those identified as such. “Batty” can be translated as “booty,” or one’s posterior, connecting maleness, in adolescent form, with the criminalized act of “buggery,” or anal penetration, which remains punishable by life imprisonment in Guyana, as elsewhere in other parts of the Caribbean and the world. Rajiv Jebohdh (2018: 118) notes that “in England, sodomy ceased to be a capital offence in 1861 but was still punishable by life imprisonment. Since sodomy was performed in private, it was often impossible to prove the commission of the crime, and as a result the authorities felt it pragmatic to target associated conduct, with section 153(1)(xlvi) promoting such an objective.” Also see Christopher Carrico (2012) and Mahalia Jackman (2016, 2017). The concept of *antiman/auntiem* is considered in greater detail in Chapter 8.

***Intrafaith Disharmonies: “Why ain’t the ‘A’ in GUAMC for ‘African’?”***<sup>257</sup>

Despite politicians’ many repeated references to Guyana’s histories and contemporary realities of “interfaith harmony,” it seems injudicious to deny that Spiritualists have long faced dreadful forms of maltreatment in their society. President Granger’s remarks in 2017, for instance—that thanks to state policies that “promote peaceful coexistence,” “the religious diversity which [Guyanese] enjoy has never degenerated into violent conflict”—comes across as ill-advised, deceptive, or blatantly unfounded.<sup>258</sup> When the experiences of Komfa People are taken into account, and taken seriously, the degrees to which Guyanese religious discriminations rage in society become evident. Yet, local perceptions of “African” culture and the attendant ideological constructions informing Guyanese popular (or normative) views of Komfa practices—as Obeah—are likewise often affirmed or internalized by practitioners themselves. One consequence is the array of doctrinal divergences at the tradition-wide level, as well as within individual gatherings themselves. While differences in practice between and within gatherings are countless and ever-transforming, one subject stands out in many people’s minds as bifurcating “*the tradition*” into two distinctly diverging camps: those who *do* “Spiritual Work”—or “Obeah”—and those who *do not*.

Needless to say, divergences exist too in delineating just what the category “Spiritual Work” means, as well as in determining what entails participation in such forms of ritual labor. For nonpractitioners, these internal distinctions mean little, as anyone aligned in any way with the tradition tends to be understood as a Spiritual—or Obeah—Worker, regardless of affiliations

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<sup>257</sup> This quote is from a Spiritualist acquaintance, as discussed below.

<sup>258</sup> Granger presented these remarks on February 1, 2017. See chapter 2, section titled “Secularist Nationalisms’ Denials of ‘the Little Tradition/s’: ‘The problem of coevalness.’” A transcript is available through the official U. N. WIHW website at <https://worldinterfaithharmonyweek.com/interfaith-harmony-and-the-cohesive-state/>.

or orientations; if they wear a white robe, attend a gathering, visit with a known practitioner, or openly consider themselves a “Faithist” of any kind, they are commonly thought to *do Wuk*, a label carrying all the antisocial connotations associated with the stigmatized persona of the Obeahman or -woman. Practitioners themselves will disparage one another using those or similar terms as well, particularly those who consider themselves “Faithists,” as distinct from “Spiritualists” or “Komfa People.” “Faithists,” as such, will often distinguish themselves as those who do not do Spiritual Work, which they attribute to Spiritualists or Obeah Workers. As much within the Services and other practices conducted by so-called Faithists and Spiritualists appear similar in many respects, often what a Faithist means by “Spiritual Work,” is precisely spirit possession, a practice in which Faithists do not engage but Spiritualists do. In general, Spiritualists and those who embrace the agencies of ancestors through manifestation, will also accept the label of “Faithist,” “Jordanite,” “Komfa Person,”—or “Obeah Worker” too among themselves—but Faithists often take being referred to as a “Spiritualist,” or any of the other aforementioned titles, as an insult.

Notwithstanding these differences, which often do generate contention and animus between individuals and between and within gatherings, as a whole, practitioners tend to express a sense of commonality, shared purpose, and distinctiveness as a “peculiar” Guyanese people, as they themselves say—those who keep the faith of the ancestors alive, whether through manifesting their presences in ritual performance, or not. They often convey a consensus of togetherness, or belonging, through acknowledging the fortitude their predecessors marshaled in enduring the hardships of enslavement and colonization. Senses of solidarity uniting Faithists and Spiritualists into a common “tradition” also emerge out of a recognition of their shared position as a collectively marginalized racio-religious minority within Guyana’s heavily

Christianized, yet secularist, national politics of pluralism. Therefore, many practitioners see pan-Faithist public or private events, such as those organized by GUAMC—their St. Peter’s Cathedral rededication, for example—as opportunities to demonstrate their faith through participating, potentially “exposing” themselves to people they might not have come into contact with before in such contexts.<sup>259</sup> These same sorts of combined community occasions then also present ample openings for hostilities to be formed and voiced, as well as to be tussled out and, sometimes, substantively addressed. GUAMC has no say in directly dictating what gatherings do in terms of their religious commitments, practices, or configurations. However, as the tradition’s primary channel of interaction with the national government, practitioners have certain structurally reinforced incentives for gaining membership or affiliations with GUAMC or participating in their various functions.

Imagined, constructed, or otherwise existent proximities to “Africanness” and to Christianity contribute in part to certain of these divergences in thought and practice which obtain between and among gatherings. In a reductive and imperfect, yet somewhat effective characterization, the practices of Faithist groups can perhaps be represented by what George Simpson (1978) has called “revivalist” syncretic Caribbean religion, whereas Spiritualist practices align more with Simpson’s categories of “neo-African” and “ancestral cults.” That is to say, Faithist practice seems to have arisen through greater acceptance of, reliance on, or accommodation to Christian forms of devotion and theology, such as use of the bible, hymns, and recognition of saints, “patriarchs,” angels, and prophets. Spiritualist practices, on the other hand, incorporate Christian elements on a much narrower scale, but also tend to integrate a wide variety of elements from Guyana’s many other religious traditions—Hindu ones in particular—

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<sup>259</sup> See Chapter 2, section titled “‘American Idol...in a African style’: Redirecting Rejection and ‘Support.’”

but also including other (Othered) “little traditions.” While certainly a deficient typological comparison as applied here, these differences between “Black religions in the New World” that Simpson defines are quite salient to practitioners, and Spiritualists often speak of their Faithist counterparts as being “too-Christian” in their ways, and so suspected of “playing Whiteman” (Austin-Broos 1992).<sup>260</sup> For such reasons, “the religious sects and movements that follow in a chain from emancipation”—Diane Austin-Broos (1997: 38-39, also quoted in Sheller 2012: 68) argues of Jamaican’s colonial religious formations—chart a range of local “attempts to supersede the persona of the Christian black.” Through being seen as “staying like Christians,” Faithists are—often critically—understood by Spiritualists as distancing themselves from their Africanness in ways that adversely impact all in the tradition through contributing to—and not opposing—the prevailing Guyanese “climate of antiblackness” (Sharpe 2016). Through failing to embrace the African roots of their own tradition, Spiritualists say of Faithists, they not only miss political opportunities to forge social betterment for Black people. Instead, Spiritualists feel that Faithists’ Christianity and class-based aspirations for national economic and social belonging also necessitate that Faithists forgo possibilities of obtaining their upliftment directly through and together with the ancestors—who, Spiritualists say, require and deserve the utmost upliftment as they have endured the greatest suffering.

For Spiritualists, then, to be more Christian is to be less African. And somewhat conversely, for many Faithists and nonpractitioners generally, to be a Spiritualist or Komfa Person inherently means, for them, that the person also accepts an Afrocentric, anti-“English,” or otherwise antiestablishment or counterhegemonic social and political outlook. And as an Obeah

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<sup>260</sup> One can compare to Jamaica, where Austin-Broos (1992), Burton (1997: 98-99), and others have observed that stereotypes of “the Christian Black”—as “sanctified Quashie [...] with reverence for ‘precious Massa Jesus,’” as for “his representative on earth, the smiling benevolent white missionary”—which were instilled over generations, created barriers for emerging Afro-Christian and other Africa-inspired religions “well into the twentieth century.”

Worker—along with indexing these other transgressive potentials—people generally feel that any Spiritualist, at any given time, is likely to draw upon their subversive stances in their dealings with the dead. Likewise, then, to be a Spiritualist is to be “African,” or embrace a conception of “African” culture—which in relation to religion, for Guyanese—is to be an Obeah Worker. Through a colonially established racialized religious imperative demonizing Obeah as antithetical to moral social life and “the developmental progress” of “the modern nation,” Spiritualists have become “impossible” citizens, even for people whom most Guyanese consider members of their own faith. Through deceptively deploying *African* “magic as the antithesis of modernity” rather than “explicitly of modernity,” colonizing ideologies have denied the coevalness of African cultures and of Black people—positioning contemporary Spiritualists in particular as vestiges of a “premodern” African past (Pels 2003: 4, quoted in A. Roberts forthcoming; Fabian 2014 [1983]). These legacies of a Christianizing colonization have caught Komfa People in an anti-Black dilemma of nation and culture. If only *bad* people (“African” culture embracers, “English” culture deniers) do Spiritual Work, then all Spiritual Work must be *bad*, and so deemed Obeah. While many Spiritualists do concede that *some* forms of Obeah are *bad*, they understandably resist accusations charging that Spiritual Work is intrinsically intended to do wrong or cause harm. For many Spiritualists, a European instilled Christian morality is suspect to the same or similar charges of motivating whatever *bad* it is that Guyanese face.

The language Spiritualists and Faithists use in speaking about one another and the Work each group is thought to do, or not do, is revealing of the social, political, and moral complexities practitioners navigate. Conceptions of “degrees” of Christianity and of Africanity—and proximities to heritages and contemporary ethnoracial and religious identities—guide much of Guyanese people’s thinking on all manner of subjects (Williams 1991; Drummond 1980; Mazrui



2002).<sup>261</sup> Like other Guyanese in other contexts, Komfa People pay keen attention to any traces marking or commenting on class, race, sexuality, and particularly religion, among other things, that are expressed through everyday speech acts and other performative behaviors they encounter. At 2017's World Interfaith Harmony Week opening event, while I sat in the audience with a group of enthusiastic Spiritualists, a minor argument arose soon after the "Prayer Breakfast" began. Their conversation and contentions illustrate some of the incongruities between Faithists and Spiritualists, how conceptions of national pluralism play into the marginalization they often feel, and the role enacted by GUAMC as arbiter of access to state-mediated forms of recognition—both material and moral—regardless of how diminutive those forms may be.

When the slight row among the group broke-out, a Faithist and GUAMC leader named Mother Williams had just been announced to come to the podium to deliver remarks. A number of other speakers had already been invited to address the large gathering in Umana Yana, including an Imam and a Pandit, each representing their local religionists with a prayer in Arabic and Sanskrit, respectively. A member of the Georgetown Bahá'í assembly also gave remarks, in Creolese and English, and the entire affair was led jointly by a Protestant "minister" who is also a member of parliament representing the PPP and a Protestant "pastor" who heads the Inter-Religious Organisation of Guyana. Mother Williams must have been running late, as the pastor announced her turn but after a short delay instead had United Nations Resident Coordinator for Guyana, Mikiko Tanaka, take the stage. The Japanese UN diplomat made a short formal presentation, without offering any prayer as the former speaker had done. In her remarks, Tanaka

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<sup>261</sup> Ali Mazrui (2002) deals explicitly with the intersecting legacies of Christianity as a colonizing force and indigenous African religions as sources of counterhegemonic identity formations in sub-Saharan Africa. Mazrui also taught at the University of Guyana, and his work is informed by his Guyanese experiences. On "Africanity" as a term and concept more generally, also see Maquet (1972), Sundiata (1996), and Winegar and Pieprzak (2009).

beseched those gathered, saying that “we all have to resist cynical efforts that try to divide communities and portray neighbors as ‘the Other.’” She went on to note that “people everywhere need to feel that their cultural identities are valued and at the same time to have a strong sense of belonging to their community as a whole. As societies become more multi-ethnic and multi-religious,” she said, “cultural and economic investments and cohesion are required so that diversity is rightly seen as richness, not a threat.”<sup>262</sup>

In the delay before Tanaka began her presentation, the women with whom I sat were busy discussing the announced—but missing—presence of Mother Williams. As her name was called through the microphone, and before it became apparent that she had not arrived as of yet, one woman exclaimed, “oh good! Look they get Williams come. I’s thinking we’d get no showing,” she told the group. But as she did, another woman interrupted her to contradict her sentiments entirely. “Wha’! How you say ‘is good’ they get Williams, nah? Is not good,” the older woman chided. She explained further that “Williams, is always Williams! Or one them Faithist them,” she complained, as others in the group seemed to agree. “Only *Faithist* them, council people them, never us Spiritualist, like them ashamed’ a we,” she said dismayed. And she was referring not only to the organizers of events such as WIHW, but specifically to the GUAMC, which she and others present felt does not adequately include Spiritualists in the purview of their programming. The same woman went on to say, “we own council ashamed’ a we, can’ make sense. Can’ be good for we,” and now all the others sitting with us, even the women who made the initial comment, all affirmed. “If already everybody else thinkin’ we wrong, then why them council must move so?” she asked. “Council eye-pass we. I no want nothin’ with them, I stay far

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<sup>262</sup> Tanaka’s comments are also available through the Ministry of the Presidency (1 February 2017).

from they service and they meeting,” she said, as Mikiko Tanaka was just beginning her speech from the stage.

While Tanaka spoke, the women I sat with grew quiet again, their attention on the speaker. When Tanaka finished, however, and Mother Williams had apparently arrived to take her place at the podium, the women began again. The same woman who had begun the last bout returned to her earlier suggestion. “Well, is better we get something than nothing, right?” she said in anticipation of Mother Williams’s appearance on the stage. Many of the women seemed unsure of whose side to take, and for the most part kept quiet. The older woman whose opinions had been so forcefully demonstrated moments ago, seemed to be withholding her ire, awaiting the occasion to strike back. In the meantime, Williams made her way down the long aisle to the front of the crowd wearing her full-length shining-white robe, complete with white waist-cord and head-tie. As she passed, a few of the Spiritualists sucked their teeth, or *shtewpsed*, and otherwise made their disapproval clear to our small group, and maybe a few nonpractitioners sitting nearby. Others who sat with us were silent and motionless.

Mother Williams greeted the audience and announced that she was from the GUAMC. She said a prayer, referring to “Jesus” and “Father God” repeatedly, and then quickly recited Psalm 133: “Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity...” She concluded by suggesting a hymn for the whole gathering to sing together there in Umana Yana, but her plan failed, as when she alone began to sing through the microphone, no one was familiar with her selection, and she swiftly abandoned the exercise, fleeing the stage. The Spiritualists were amused, and a few of them had even begun to sing her hymn, very softly to themselves, as maybe the only attendees who actually knew the song. They seemed more than pleased to allow her show of “unity” to disappoint. Likewise, throughout her entire presentation,

brief as it was, the Spiritualists were busy contributing their own commentaries, particularly the older woman who had been so vocal previously.

In what seemed a deliberate attempt to undermine Mother Williams's speech, that older Spiritualist began to speak to the group again only once Williams was talking, and praying. During the prayer, the woman remarked to the group, "see, listen she! Always Jesus! Look how she showing off she self! Look she now!" the woman said loudly, gesturing towards the stage where Mother Williams had her neck bent up gazing through the thatched roof above our heads. "She looking like one them big time preacher on TV! Look she! Like she think we in one them *megachurch* how she praying! Praise Jesus!" she said, as the other laughed along. Directly after Williams's attempt at the communal hymn, there was a brief lull in the programming as a group of local students prepared to take the stage to perform a set of religiously themed songs. Perhaps Williams's suggestion was taken as a call to alter the schedule of the program, and the students were thrown off. Either way, the pause allowed the group of Spiritualists a moment to reflect on Williams's "show."

The most vocal of the women, again, shared how she thought Williams's performance was "more Christian than them pastor them," referring to the Protestant leaders who had offered prayers fitting well within the Anglican standards many Guyanese are accustomed to, especially older Guyanese who—prior to independence, and still somewhat afterwards—were required to pray in a school system run by the Church of England.<sup>263</sup> Williams, it seemed however, had not arrived in time to witness those prayers. "Is like she want people thinking we's Christian just like them, like that gone help we," the same woman observed, "when what we really need from she is

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<sup>263</sup> Drummond (1980: 359) writes that "the churches held the colony in their grip throughout the colonial period, and it was only gradually that an independent Guyana was able to wrest control of the school system from ecclesiastical hands." Claims of government schools' teachers continuing to make their students pray persist. See Bisram (2017) and *Stabroek News* (12 April 2017).

the opposite, to show the rest a them that we's *not Christians*, and that's okay. She need for speak up to Granger and them and get we we support, you know, like them other religion get," she demanded. Others in the group agreed, and someone added, "we don't need for be Christian. What we need is for be Guyanese. That's what we need, for Granger and them for give us what's we own. For make we a respectable people here in this land, again," she said. The group seemed in agreement, appreciating the last contributor's views, and repeating, "yeah, we ain't need be Christian...we's Guyanese...we deserve what's we own already, just so..."

Before the children began with a few *bhajans*, or Hindu sacred songs, and later ended with a Christian hymn that all attendees seemed familiar with ("Rock of Ages"), the Spiritualist women continued deeper into their critical discussion. The woman whose comments about being Guyanese that were so agreeable to the group moments before, returned to the older woman's prior comments. She said, "you know, you's right is always GUAMC, and they ain't fair, nah not at all-at all. Is like they is ashamed' a we. You hear when she say she from 'the Guyana United Apostolic Mystical Council,' nah?" she asked the group referring to Williams's brief speech. "Well," she went on, "you ever think, why ain't the 'A' in GUAMC for 'African'?" she queried. The group fell silent for a few seconds, but then the older woman responded, with a slight chuckle. "You's right girl. You know, enough a this thing here got to do with just that!" the elder exclaimed. "I say they's too Christian, they 'shame a we and we Wuk. But you know girl, you's right. Is we's too African for them," she told the group, and they all agreed, especially the last contributor. "Is they want play like they some *Christian Faithist* and we's some *African Spiritualist*! Sound like 'nough-nough Obeah to me!" the same elder woman laughed, and a few others repeated, laughing, "African Spiritualist! 'Nough Obeah!"

Then the women who made the effectual comment—that the “‘A’ in GUAMC” is not “for African”—spoke again, saying, “this’s what I mean to say. Yes. That’s right, Momma. Give thanks unto you,” she began, before adding, “that’s right. You’s right. They want make we Black-black, you know, like we’s the Black-black ones them. Then, they get no reason pay us no mind, at all!” she said. “They make we the real Black one, then Granger, no new government for come, no one them gone deal with we,” she told the others, “when ‘nough of everybody still thinking, ‘oh, is them the Obeah People them.’”

The women’s conversation illuminates how distinctions that practitioners draw amongst themselves (Faithist/Spiritualist, Christian/African...) come to be made meaningful within their lives and their everyday interactions. In particular, their comments are telling of how Spiritualists understand and contend with their position of marginality and rejection vis-à-vis other ethnoracial and religious groupings in society, and how perceptions of their religion—stereotypical or otherwise—pivot on their racialized relationship to the state. They tend to express that in light of the challenges of antiblackness and the challenges to their Blackness, as well as the Blackness and Africanness—perceived or existing—of their tradition, *their* culture has been expunged from “the national culture,” where they feel they once shared a place of belonging, regardless of how tenuous and contested it may have been. Colonial and postcolonial ideologies constructing and constraining ethnoracial classifications and categories of religion have been and continue to be altogether entangled processes, whereby identifications of Blackness and Africanity have too often functioned as morally disqualifying assessments for a particular cultural assemblage’s inclusion as an authorized iteration of “religion” within the secular state (Rocklin 2019; cf. Burris 2001; Chidester 1996, 2014).

While these women delivered incisive critiques and interpretations of the politics involved in their group's representation in society, as a final note, and in all fairness to GUAMC, the council's "head-church" is named St. Peter's *African* Apostolic Cathedral. Likewise, the council's considered or unconsidered choice to not include "African" in the GUAMC title could be alternatively interpreted as an attempt to encourage intercultural inclusion, extending their circle of concern, in name at least, to other-than-Afro-Guyanese practitioners. There are many such devotees who may not necessarily consider themselves "African," yet understand the tradition in which they participate, *their* tradition, as an African one. As with all practitioners, Afro-descended and not, "the Africanness" of the tradition can be both embraced with pride and dissociated in shame, with many conveying equivocal senses of vacillation between these poles as situations evoke various modes of alignment and realignment, duplicity and re-imaginings of "multiplicitous" selves (Wekker 2006). After all, as will be discussed much more thoroughly in the chapters of the coming two sections, cultivating relationships with Komfa spirits typically—and often necessarily—changes one's conceptions of one's self, one's pasts, and one's *present* and projected socio-historical identities. Nurturing deep relations with the dead then, also informs mediums' future interactions with living persons, and their conceptions of others' identities, and of the past formations of human subjectivities more generally.

**Section II.**

***ROOTS / ROUTES / RINGS***



## CHAPTER 5

### Wata-mama's Limbo: Depths of Komfa Pasts

Protect our Mother / Water is Life.  
—#IdleNoMore<sup>264</sup>

Terrestrial spirits live in water. [...] Water *is* life.  
It is Water which brings/carries the “Pure Spirit.”  
—Kean Gibson<sup>265</sup>

Water is an element “which remembers the dead.”  
—Elizabeth DeLoughrey<sup>266</sup>

According to local lore the rivers of Guyana are inhabited by women called Water People or Fairmaid. On moonless nights they might be seen in the vicinity of sluice gates—known as kokers—singing and combing their hair, which hangs in tresses from a fleshless skull. Occasionally one of them falls in love with a human, on whom she lavishes gifts, but demands in return that he visit her at regular intervals. A defaulter is reminded of his obligations by various signs; and if such warnings go unheeded, the Fairmaid makes her appearance in the world of men in order to settle accounts.  
—Roy Heath<sup>267</sup>

Tāne/Māui and Legba (as well as Arcadian Hermes) are personalities that embody the creative cultivation of deep relation. Their magic, i.e. their decolonial science, binds different domains together—individual, social, geographical and spiritual—in the pursuit of restitutive justice. We will, [like these gods,] dwell in the [...] problem caused by the European colonial science of segregation, which stands opposed to the decolonial science of cultivating deep relation.  
—Robbie Shilliam<sup>268</sup>

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<sup>264</sup> Idle No More is a First Nations-led protest movement for Indigenous sovereignty and environmental justice.

<sup>265</sup> This quote is from a presentation Gibson made in 1996 at the Catholic Life Centre in Georgetown, titled “Comfa in Guyana,” and subsequently published in the volume *Race and Ethnicity in Guyana* (2000: 197).

<sup>266</sup> DeLoughrey (2010: 704) is quoting from Gaston Bachelard’s *Water and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Matter* (1983: 56). This quote also appears in Christina Sharpe’s *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (2016: 20).

<sup>267</sup> Heath includes this description of the Guyanese spirit “women called Water People or Fairmaid” on the unnumbered initial page of his first novel, *A Man Come Home* (1974).

<sup>268</sup> From Shilliam’s *The Black Pacific: Anti-Colonial Struggles and Oceanic Connections* (2015: 18-19).

## Possessing Guyanese Cultures

Komfa presents unending variation in forms of practices, doctrines, and conceptions of devotion expressed by different gatherings and among individuals comprising these communities. Such divergences exemplify the entangled “roots,” shifting trajectories, and circuitous “routes” through which Guyana’s contemporary Spiritualist faiths have emerged. The following two chapters of this second section—*Roots / Routes / Rings*—focus most closely on histories and historiographies, while also increasingly drawing on the “first-voices,” perspectives, knowledge, and experiences of Komfa People themselves. Likely guided by the imminent dangers of negotiating racio-religious identifications in Guyana, as discussed above, many people attending Spiritual Works have told me that they are not even Spiritualists, that they do not consider themselves Faithists, or Komfa People, but instead declared themselves Christians, Hindus, and Muslims. Still, these “non-adherents” articulated their desires to be present for services and that they felt compelled to contribute so as to potentially benefit personally from the communal Work. For these Guyanese, it is their prerogative to participate, regardless of how they might otherwise conceive of their religious identity. As one such attendee of a Spiritual birthday service held in 2018 said, “I still does come and give my sister them a little strength. And who know, maybe when I gone, I reach home, and I does feel a strength too. Come right back to me.”

While Komfa Thanksgiving services such as held for birthday anniversaries are indeed *parties*, those people who come do so for reasons other than mere enjoyment. They typically say they come not to amuse *themselves* but to entertain the dead, as many people understand that there is much to be gained from such an endeavor. “Plus,” the Christian woman at the birthday Work added, “I come too ‘cause I also ain’ never want know what happen when I decide I ain’ goin’ go!” she said. “I love me pastor, and he hate the thing! But I come ‘cause I always did

come, since I a girl, with me Granny. And ‘cause I know, ‘cause me Granny say, that’s how the thing does stay. Since way back long time now. A ancestor thing. So who is I for burn the thing now? No-huh, not me!” she exclaimed. “No pastor goin’ make me let me eye pass me own Granny, me own ancestor. No, not me. So when me can come I does come every now and again and I does bring a little thing to share,” the woman explained, before concluding that she “never does dance though, really. I just does stay in me corner, holdin’ a prayer. And them spirits does never bother with me.”

Not all people who attend Spiritualist services expect nor desire to personally interact with or manifest—and temporarily *become*—an ancestor. Yet honoring the dead, including one’s immediate forebears like “Granny,” is fundamental to Komfa Work. Even for those people who may feel averse to Spiritualist practices and particularly to performances of ritual possession, Komfa holds active links to the past which many Guyanese deem significant to their lives. In attempting to understand what sorts of efficacies people coming from various backgrounds draw through Komfa Work, it serves to start, as Sandra Barnes (1989: 21, quoted in Polk 1993: 77) suggests, “from the premise that several religious traditions may coexist in one context, and that participants may be bi-religious,” or poly-religious, “and to work through the complexity that ensues from these reoriented perspectives.” While overwhelmingly considered an “African thing,” or a tradition maintained by Africans brought enslaved to Guiana and then by their descendants, people come to Komfa from various backgrounds and positionalities, including from diverse ethnic heritages and religious outlooks. As a subterranean yet thoroughly pervasive aspect of Guyana’s “folk” culture, even nonpractitioners and Guyanese who do not know what “Komfa” is still understand the world in certain ways that are informed through what practitioners consider to be Komfa cosmologies.

Countless reorienting perspectives emerge through Spiritualists' as well as nonpractitioners' considerations of Komfa's pasts. While Guyanese tend to argue that "'things English' belong to everyone," they likewise struggle over asserting "special claim" to various "features of Guyanese culture," including to "cultural products such as religions, cuisine, rituals, and economic roles" (Williams 1991: 176, 185). Because in contemporary society Komfa is predominantly practiced by Afro-Guyanese, most identify the tradition as "African," even though, according to Kean Gibson (1992: 99), only about ten percent of African-descended Guyanese openly or regularly participate in ritual gatherings. Many more maintain their own personal practices apart from more-formalized meetings with others. Regardless of historical processes marked by interculturative transformations, Guyanese "cultural products" like religious and ritual assemblages "are conceived of as 'belonging' to one ethnic segment or another" (Williams 1991: 176). As Brackette Williams (*ibid.*) describes, ethnoracial "possession" of cultural "items" becomes reified "either by reference to a historical link to a national origin outside Guyana or to a predominance of one group's involvement in a role or in the use of an item in Guyana." Still, as stereotyping social constructions, ethnoracial "ownership" of a particular aspect of Guyanese culture "never fully coincides with actual patterns of behavior," and many non-Afro-Guyanese consider the tradition as rightfully their "own" (*ibid.*). Perhaps because of the preponderance of Black Guyanese involved in Komfa, people intent on presenting reorienting perspectives on ethnic ownership do so through reference to historical links of Komfa's origins outside of Africa, and particularly, inside Guyana—either as an Indigenous Guyanese cultural "survival" or as a locally creolized Guyanese national creation.

Despite unending variation in contemporary practices and in practitioners' conceptions of their traditions' pasts, most everyone involved in some way in Komfa Work seems to agree on

one thing: that Komfa is a gift bequeathed by the ancestors. Through what seems to be a sort of Darwinian logic, practitioners contend that since those who came before them managed to endure the treacheries of their days, one would be foolhardy or arrogant to now disregard a principle means of survival employed by one's predecessors. Moreover, disavowing one's "Spiritual inheritance" amounts to being "tricked" by the established order of subjugation, duped into ceding one's foreparents' treasures to the enemy—to *massa*, the enslaver and colonizer. Recognized as an inherited "weapon of the weak," Guyanese of all backgrounds who practice tend to portray Komfa as a tradition that survived Europeans' wholehearted attempts at annihilation and which continues to bear the wounds of generations of hurt (Scott 1985).

Referring to "them Christian Africans, you know them that does say what we does do is Obeah," a practitioner named Rochelle shared that "is they, the Barnabas Judas done sell-out, them Afro-Saxons who give up they parent power for the Whiteman without thinking how it is the Whiteman gone turn and use it. They get they *Obeah too*."<sup>269</sup> Another person shared, invoking the words of Marcus Mosiah Garvey made legendary by Bob Nesta Marley's "Redemption Song," "you know *them*, they right here all 'round we, mental slave, say 'them at the Obeah church, is them steal the thing, is them rape-off the girl, is them murder in the village.' I saying is them say them thing on we. Christians, them Africans, but them mental slave." Such sentiments also illustrate the widespread and confrontational contempt Spiritual People face in Guyanese society, as well as the social marginalization and discriminations they and their practices generally endure.

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<sup>269</sup> Jeremy Poynting (1985 v1: 75) writes that the term "Afro-Saxon," thought to be coined by Lloyd Best, describes "the Black middle class who are concerned with Negro advancement but in terms of a modernizing, Euro-centred Caribbean which either suppresses or sanitizes Afro-Creole or Indian cultural elements." Also see Best (1965a, 1965b). Regarding "the Whiteman" or "massa's Obeah," Monica Schuler (2005:189) demonstrates that "the counter 'science' of slave ship captains, slave owners or employers who plied Africans with salted food" and other hazardous commodities "to destroy their occult powers" were "important themes" in Afro-Guyanese oral histories into the 1980s.

While some Spiritualists chastise other Guyanese of African descent who distance themselves from Spiritual Churches for “selling out” their heritage, capitulating to the engrained social politics of neo/post/colonial “respectability,” most practitioners, perhaps counterintuitively, tend to also hold that the gift of Komfa was bequeathed to all humanity alike, by ancestors of “all” backgrounds, including Europeans. For many Komfa people, unlike most cultural items or societal roles, “Spiritual life” is often presented as “a human thing,” as is commonly proclaimed, as a universal experience of divine communion to which all people have potential access through relationships they nurture and the “Work” they do with others—especially with the “special forces” of other-than-human and other-than-skin-bound persons.<sup>270</sup> Komfa is a bequest *to* and *from* “all seven nations,” to use the language that Spiritualists employ in conceptualizing the social distribution of all humanity. Distinctions of ethnicity, race, religion, and gender do not lose their meanings nor import through the transitions accompanying bodily death. Instead, for practitioners these facets of personhood tend to become further pronounced as spirits are often known first and foremost through perceived stereotypical characteristics, as well as through more-nuanced projected and self-identified designations (cf. Polk 2010b).

Rochelle, a middle-aged Black woman who is highly involved with one particular gathering, expanded during a conversation on how “*all people* them a part of Spiritual life, everybody get a part for play and for contribute, for make the thing come-true[/through].” In referencing a local term for mediumship—when one’s ancestral spirit(s), and so desired end(s),

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<sup>270</sup> Through what Debora Battaglia (1995) has termed a “rhetorics of self-making,” European Enlightenment-guided logics brought into being a “modern” philosophical and legal entity attributed “universal” human personhood, yet based in White European male dominion over property (cf. Wynter 1984, 2006). Quoting Battaglia (1995: 5), Stephan Palmié (2006: 855) writes that “such a creature” arose through “the development of a particular form of ‘rhetorics of self-making’ centered on isolating ‘the skin-bound individual as the primary site of moral control,’ and investing it with what Locke (1963:328f., i.e. book II §27) identified as ‘every Man’s’ primary, and inalienable property: a rationally structured, interest-maximizing and, most important of all, autonomously embodied self—or self-controlled body.” Komfa corporealities explicitly contest such delimited and “autonomously embodied” selves. Also see Clifford Geertz (1974), Marilyn Strathern (1988), and Roberto Strongman (2019).

“come true/through” during rituals of relatedness—this practitioner emphasized the collective efforts necessitated by Spiritual Works.<sup>271</sup> She elucidated how the success of rituals themselves arise in no small part from Komfa’s comprehensive reach, deriving from and serving as it does all people throughout time and physical and social space. Komfa Works are efficacious “‘cause is come from everybody, everywhere, everybody traditions. Is so we all must make the thing work,” she explained. “And is that what does make the Spiritual Church bring the people them together. ‘Cause is all a we thing. All nation.”<sup>272</sup> Not only does the tradition “come from everybody,” but as many devotees hold, it typically takes an intersubjective, counter-factional, collaborative effort to fruitfully channel the spirits’ instrumentalities, or to make Komfa Works *work*.

After Rochelle shared such a compelling account, I pressed on the issue of origins and representations, asking, rather bluntly, “why is it that Komfa is considered a part of ‘African culture,’ that most Guyanese say Komfa is African?” She first replied by stating that, “well, all people is African really. Is Africans gone to India first, gone to China, gone to England, and to Guyana and all over,” she told me. “So is African yes. Africans bring they culture and make it there in India too.” Rochelle went on to clarify, “but here in Guyana, now today, you see, is mostly us Africans who *keep* the tradition, who ain’ scared, well just some a-we now,” she laughed, shaking her head in disapproval. “But we’s Africans mostly ‘cause you know is our

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<sup>271</sup> Komfa is itself sometimes referred to as “*come-true*” or “*come-through*” ceremonies. On “KUM-fuh, and its counterpart come-true, pronounced KUM-tru,” see Ovid Abrams (1997: 349-370) and Eusi Kwayana (2001).

<sup>272</sup> Poynting (1985 v1: 47) similarly refers to a “shepherd” who “explained that Cumfa excluded no-one; anyone could become the host of the spirit.” Although, this particular leader also held that “only those who possessed the higher knowledge of the cult could induce the Gods to be present” (ibid.). Differences between god/desses and spirits, as well as among other kinds of *jumbie*, angels, prophets, and “friends and family” of variously divine beings, are seldom sharply defined distinctions for most Spiritualist practitioners. Faithists, on the other hand, whose services do not generally condone manifestation, tend to be more explicit in drawing out who represents which class of entity to avoid what might be deemed by some as inappropriate relations with the spirit of an “undesirable” dead.

ancestors *need* for dance, for sing, and be together through all they sufferation and pain. And torture.”

Directly connecting the tradition’s past and continuities to existential endeavors to sustain life through enslavement, Komfa is often understood simultaneously as both an *African thing* and an *All-nation* or *Dougla thing*. While Guyanese use “All-nation,” and “No-nation,” to refer to individuals and cultural items as “mixed” and so associated with and/or thought to derive from multiple ethnoracialized heritages, “Dougla” is employed more precisely—and all-pervasively—in referencing Afro-Indo hybridities. More sanguine conceptualizations of *Dougla* subjectivities, politics, and poetics present potentials for an increasingly “tolerant and hybrid Guyanese future, but the *dougla* is also located in discourses of impurity and contamination,” write Linda Peake and Alissa Trotz (1999: 10-11; see Puri 1999). They further note that “in the national arena” of Guyanese politics, “it is significant that ‘different and equal’ has always taken precedence over the ‘douglarisation’ of culture in the projection of a Guyanese identity” (Peake and Trotz 1999: 11). Following Brackette Williams (1991), Peake and Trotz (1999: 11) identify “this tension between racialized difference and national loyalty” as having underwritten the historical construction of “competing claims to entitlements and efforts to enumerate, stage and authenticate ethnic contributions as equally worthy of creating ‘Guyanese-ness.’” For Komfa People, the nationalistic precept of “different and equal” has been enshrined in cosmological structures distinguishing among seven nations of ancestral forces, while the complexities of historical cultural interplay between these groups is typically rendered less relevant.

All people are invited and welcomed to participate in Komfa Work and ancestors of all nations are said to have “contributed” to the traditions’ foundations and formations. Yet the specificities indexing “African” social circumstances of past and present remain most salient,



with abundant, interwoven logics offered in justification. Rochelle, the practitioner quoted above, went on to say that “you know, is them Africans who really suffer bad-bad, so is them who need the strength, who keep up the thing ‘cause you know they need it, for strength, for thank God through it so they know they get a reason for thank God still in the end.” Rochelle’s account illustrates how practitioners can reorient the idea of “Africa” to meet ever-evolving needs, as well as contend with characterizations of who gets perceived as “rightful owners” of these traditions. Yet her rendering of Komfa’s and Guyana’s pasts, in repeating a move common among many Spiritualists and others, also undeniably disregards the historical conditions in which Indigenous people were enslaved by Europeans, circumstances which preceded and coincided with Europeans’ enslavement of Africans in establishing colonial Guiana.

According to countless Komfa practitioners, Africans were able to persevere through their enslavement by upholding certain senses of devotion and related practices, while they were likewise able to in variously remarkable ways sustain their devotional senses through the debilitating debasement of subservience. “That God, the ancestor, they spirit, still looking good on they for they work, you know [...] what they done in life here,” that despite their abysmal trials, her ancestors could still thank God and their lineages—and be recognized by them—as Rochelle concluded, made all the difference. The capacity to thank God through the “sufferation and pain and torture” of being enslaved—to maintain one’s dignity, one’s self, one’s *life* through such trials—required labors beyond those undertaken to gratify *massa* and his overseers. Spiritualists tend to hold that the powers required to withstand unimaginable torture, remain grateful for existence, and not succumb to the depraved inhumanity of enslavers and colonizers explicitly took the form of Spiritual Work. Still, many people who participate in Komfa Work, including those of African descent, see that it has been not only “Africans who really suffer bad-

bad,” and that “all nations” have in various ways “benefitted” from and “contributed” to Komfa’s elaboration of indispensable “arts of survival” (Harris 1998: 24).

### **African Sufferations and “Amerindian” Gifts: Tropes of Anti-Indigeneity<sup>273</sup>**

In Brazil the primitive Indian slipped away when the Portuguese appeared.  
—Fernand Braudel<sup>274</sup>

In coming of age in the “disorder” of 1930s Georgetown and New Amsterdam, Wilson Harris (1998: 24) writes that he was forced to recognize the necessity for Guyanese and other colonized peoples to work together in meeting “shared responsibilities within the unfinished genesis of arts of survival.”<sup>275</sup> Salvaging lives and livelihoods, communities of people and ways of being through the devastations of genocidal enslavement, displacements, and colonial subjugation, Indigenous Guianese and Africans brought to Guianese colonies imagined and created existences beyond Europeans’ “brooding death wish” (Harris 1970: 21). For Harris, these imaginings and creations of means of existential fortitude amounted also to the beginnings of mutual ongoing obligations—among colonized and colonizers alike—particularly as many Guyanese people understand their heritages as comprising elements from both of these dialectically opposed yet intertwined domains. Reflecting on her own late-1970s and early-1980s Georgetown upbringing

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<sup>273</sup> This section title draws in large part from an essay by Maximilian Forte titled “Extinction: The Historical Trope of Anti-Indigeneity in the Caribbean” (2005a).

<sup>274</sup> From Braudel’s *The Structures of Everyday Life* (1981: 98).

<sup>275</sup> Regarding the “disorder” of the 1930s Caribbean, Jamaican labor historian and a founding member of Jamaica’s People’s National Party, Richard Hart (2007), writes that “the principal causes of working class unrest and dissatisfaction were the same throughout the region: low wages; high unemployment and under-employment; arrogant racist attitudes of the colonial administrators and employers in their relations with black workers; lack of adequate or in most cases any representation; and, no established structure for the resolution of industrial disputes by collective bargaining,” all within the contexts of “increasing general distress and dissatisfaction regionally [with] the world economic crisis which had started in the USA in 1929 and by the early 1930s was having a residual effect internationally.” For more on 1930s British Guiana labor histories, see Nigel Bolland (1995: 174-180), Nicole Burrowes (2015), and Hart (1999).

within a family “which looked Afro-Guyanese,” Shona Jackson (2012: xi) writes in the Preface to *Creole Indigeneity: Between Myth and Nation in the Caribbean* that, “while many Guyanese admit that they are mixed, we figuratively close the shades on other parts of our blood, ignoring the meeting of worlds within us in order to assert our identities as historical continuity and not as ‘limbo.’”

Elsewhere Wilson Harris (1999 [1970]: 175) describes an intercultural “architecture of the imagination” that “remains in a state of latency by and large,” due in no small part to both Afro- and Indo-Guyanese attachments to uniflorous identities of “historical continuity” used to rationalize their political positions of power in the postcolonial nation. “Yet the mysterious fauna and flora of legend,” Harris writes, “in which philosophies of time gestate, may offer a continuity from the remote past into the future.” Much of Harris’s writing elucidates that the mysterious landscapes and plant and animal beings to which he alludes include the empowered waterways and *bush* abodes of the spirits, as well the localized ancestral presences themselves and the ritual practices that have helped Guyanese to remember these specters of past generations. In reading Harris, Saidiya Hartman (2007: 264n98) observes that colonization and enslavement “entailed not only dispossession but also the promise of a new architecture of cultures and the remaking of dismembered men and gods,” for both Indigenous Guianese and Africans, and often, together. Harris (1999 [1970]: 169) believes that generative “dislocations which point away from” the stasis of “historical convention” have been memorialized within “areas of folk obscurity such as Negro *limbo* or phantom limb of the dismembered god and slave.” A conception of the past that closes the shade on intercultural ritual arts of survival “possesses no criteria for assessing profoundly original dislocations in the continuous pattern of exploiter/exploited charted by the historian,” he writes (*ibid.*). For Harris, the “profoundly original” Caribbean ritual knowledge

and practices that have nurtured relationships with the ancestors and with “the mysterious fauna and flora of legend,” such as Komfa and limbo dancing (which has roots in Trinidadian funereal rites) continue to hold immense potentials for dispelling the fictitious, unidimensional, mythic conventions of self and of nation that prefigure “exploiter/exploited” relationships as inert historical identities.<sup>276</sup>

Wilson Harris’s (1999 [1970]: 175) idea of a deep, conceptual limbo-time of cultural gestation that potentially extends “a continuity from the remote past into the future” is reflective of sentiments expressed by Rochelle recounted above, particularly her impressions of ancient, epochal African—and so *human*—global mobilities and the meanings of those histories today. In the same essay on “Continuity and Discontinuity” in the “cleavage between the historical convention and arts of the imagination in the Caribbean,” Harris (*ibid.*) also evokes an idea common among Guyanese that has often helped to instantiate an erasure of Indigenous pasts, including of genocide, from Guyana’s postcolonial histories of colonization and enslavement. He writes of precolonial Indigenous Kalinago and Kalina peoples, or Island and Mainland Caribs, respectively, as “the Conqueror[s] of the ancient West Indies and the ancient Guianas,” adding that “the post-Columbian-Carib, in a way, carried on this role of conqueror at an inferior level. The post-Columbian-Carib became the mercenary of the Dutch and French and the English. Therefore,” according to stereotypical constructions, as Harris (*ibid.*: 170) points out, “one has

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<sup>276</sup> Limbo dancing was “in years gone by,” writes Molly Ahye (2002: 247), performed by “people of African descent in Trinidad and Tobago” “during ceremonies for the dead such as wakes and, in particular, the ninth and fortieth night after death.” On Guyanese wakes and Nine-night and Forty-night mortuary services, see Chapter 7. Other scholars trace Limbo’s roots further into the “performance geographies” of the Middle Passage, such as Kamau Brathwaite (1973: 274), who reports that Limbo “is said to have originated” as “a necessary therapy.” Sonjah Stanley Niaah (2008: 345) writes that “as a consequence of lack of space on slave ships, the slaves bent themselves like spiders. [...] In the dance, consistent with certain African beliefs, the whole cycle of life is reflected.” Following Harris, Brathwaite, and Ahye, Stanley Niaah (*ibid.*) observes that “the dancers move under a pole that is consistently lowered from chest level and they emerge, as in the triumph of life over death as their heads clear the pole. The slave ships, like the plantation and the city, reveal(ed) particular spaces that produce(d) magical forms of entertainment and ritual.” Also see Geneviève Fabre (1999) on interpretations of Limbo as a “Slave Ship Dance.”

apparently a continuous historical line, a continuous historical character coming out of the pre-Columbian world into the post-Columbian world and, in fact, we know that there are projections by people today who think of the Amerindians as a people who were intercepting or catching slaves,” rather than (also) themselves being enslaved by Dutch, French, English, Spanish, Portuguese, and other European colonizers (cf. Whitehead 1988). “Much of this projection upon *all Amerindians*, irrespective of tribe,” Harris (1999 [1970]: 170) adds, “is related to the continuous historical line associated with the Caribs,” and is often indiscriminately mobilized in referencing “African”—opposed to “Amerindian”—ancestral “sufferation.”<sup>277</sup>

Rochelle likewise echoed a related “historical convention” in claiming that Komfa traditions comprise “Africans mostly ‘cause you know is our ancestors need for dance, for sing, and be together through all” the *sufferation*, pain, and torture they and their predecessors have endured. While the immense afflictions Africans in colonial Guiana were made to suffer are particularly horrendous historical realities, those traumas do not displace the analogous histories of Indigenous peoples, nor of Asians or others who faced enslavement, indenture, and various European colonial predations. While Guyanese often consider similarities and contrasts between historical forms of exploitation and domination that their ancestors confronted as groupings differentially subordinated through colonization, the victimizations borne by Indigenous peoples in Guyana’s pasts and contemporary sociopolitical configurations have been made exceedingly less discernible and relevant within normative narratives supporting sovereign, postcolonial nationhood. Early racializing regimes of European-predicated coloniality produced

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<sup>277</sup> Also see Harris’s essay on “Amerindian/European/African Relations” (1981 [1970]: 10-11) where, in probing “the ghostly, sometimes apparently irrelevant footnotes in the history books which one has to examine closely in the context of events to begin to perceive their enormous significance,” he describes a “long-standing archaic treaty which went back to earlier times than English rule—Spanish, Dutch, and French—when the Indians consented to perform the function of a policing body: they went after runaway Negro slaves and helped to put down rebellions.” Such histories also impact heavily on contemporary “relations” between Suriname’s Maroon and Creole peoples.

differentiation between new categories of non-European *Native* (non)personhood through variously taxonomizing “African” and “(Amer)Indian” people/s while concomitantly nullifying those distinctions in recognizing both Africans and Indigenous Americans *as possessable*: as *fungible* means of extractive colonial production, sources of exploitable labor, land, and knowledge, and so as subhuman resources, inferior Others under the command of White power (Hartman 1997: 19-21, 26, 52; cf. King 2016, 2019; Quijano 2000; Spillers 1987; Whitten 2007).

Similar forms of imperially entrusted logic, as Shona Jackson specifies, following Brackette Williams, are often marshaled by Afro- and Indo-Guyanese in their justifications for their claimed positions as legitimate *indigenous* ethnic possessors of the postcolonial nation. What Jackson (2012: 174) refers to as “the valorization of the colonial subject,” those whom Forbes Burnham established as “the *small man*” and celebrated as the *laboring* “modern national and native subject (the Creole—masculine and middle class),” is an ideological construction that has worked alongside a colonially inherited and redeployed nationalist “dual representation of the native as premodern yet essential for the modern sovereignty of the nation-state.” Jackson (*ibid.*) reveals how these politicized and conventionalized narratives of Guyana’s pasts, and of subject groupings’ uneven and unequal “relation to manual labor there,” have served to position “*native indigeneity*” as “the edge or marker of difference” through which “*Creole indigeneity* or belonging,” as well as possessive political powers over the state apparatus, have been largely established and retained. “Native indigeneity” of Guyana’s nine Indigenous peoples—or Amerindians to most—“thus comes to mark a condition of otherness, difference, or exteriority with regard to the true subject of the state who is fully capable of being represented within political processes and for whom culture *works*,” as Jackson explains.

Quoting Sister Mary Noel Menezes (2011 [1977]: 295), Jackson (2012: 12) relates that for British Guiana's colonial administration, "the policy of the Combined Court was to have no policy towards the Indians, for they were outside the body politic and economic and were of negative value, good for nothing." As Menezes (2011 [1977]: 294-95) argues further, "the only policy that absorbed the local legislature was connected with cheap labour and the monomania for saving the estates" from collapse due to "runaway and rebellious Negroes." After all, when in 1803 "the British inherited from the Dutch a territory and a policy which was to bind the Indians to them by presents and annual subsidies," these "gifts" were allegedly furnished in return for Indigenous cooperation in enforcing African enslavement through apprehending and often executing Maroons—terms which "included payment of '20 fl. [guilders] for the hand of a Negro killed while resisting capture'" (ibid.: 294; Menezes 1992: 13, as quoted in Jackson 2012: 19). "With emancipation the usefulness of the Indian ceased," Menezes (2011 [1977]: 294) writes, and so "the presents and subsidies were abolished, and the welfare of the Indian [was] submerged by the scramble for immigrant labour" to replace the *still-rebellious*, now free "Negroes," whose decisions to not work the plantations were blamed for producing economic ruin. While many Guyanese today generally find contrasts—not similarities—to be most salient when revisiting pasts of Afro-, Indo-, and Indigenous colonial subjugation, scholarship has also emplaced a "deep-seated divide" within studies of Blacks, Indians, and Indigenous peoples in the Americas (Wade 1997: 25; Munasinghe 2007). Still, as Jackson (2012) contends, Indo-Guyanese have followed their African-descended compatriots in embracing forms of "Creole indigenous" being and belonging by specifically distinguishing themselves from Indigenous Guyanese "Amerindians" through the forced and voluntary physical work Indo- and Afro- ancestors are said to have disproportionately performed on behalf of Dutch and British colonizers. These

historical conventions impact how Komfa pasts are conceptualized, as African *and* Asian, as well as European antecedents, are often readily identified with Spiritualist traditions while roles played by Indigenous people and their cultures in establishing, revivifying, and transmuting various historical forms of ritual praxis into what is today known—by some—as Komfa, is principally overlooked.

Walter Rodney’s pathbreaking studies of colonial *underdevelopment* bring important attention to forms of subaltern anticolonial interculturations that were resistive to European hegemonies.<sup>278</sup> Rodney (2018 [1972]: 95-96) specifically foregrounds intimate connections between the struggles of Africans and Indigenous Americans in referencing Karl Marx’s well-known argument “that what was good for Europeans was obtained at the expense of untold suffering by Africans and American Indians” in the nascent quickening and expansion of capitalist compelled colonization. Marx, as quoted by Rodney (ibid.: 96), wrote that “the discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in mines of the aboriginal population, the turning of Africa into a commercial warren for the hunting of black skins signaled the rosy dawn of the era of capitalist production.”<sup>279</sup> Rodney’s *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* offers critical theoretical vantages beyond Europe and Africa through its fundamental emphasis on the “underdevelopment” of nation-states, social groupings, and individuals as outcomes of systemically regulated, exploitative processes of domination and subjugation, opposed to as resulting from some essential, natural, or otherwise sacrosanct

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<sup>278</sup> Again, as mentioned in Chapter 2, one can consider the ground-up tactics of Walter Rodney (2019 [1969]) who foresaw a form of *Dougla* politics and “poetics” in support of intersecting forms of subaltern consciousness and personhood.

<sup>279</sup> For the original text see Marx, “Genesis of the Industrial Capitalist,” chapter thirty-one of *Capital*, Volume One.



*ontological alterity*—a non-European *Otherness of being* that somehow inhibits “development,” despite obligatory “doses of the European concoction” of coloniality (ibid.: 164).

At “the crux of the dialectical process of development and underdevelopment” that Rodney (2018 [1972]: 217) advanced is an instrumental absence of “social interdependence,” specifically within the production and circulation of commodities and services—“*distribution* was not social in character,” he writes. Instead, beginning in the late-1400s, “the fruits of human labor went to a given minority class, which was of the white race and resident in Europe and North America” (ibid.; cf. Horne 2017, 2020; Mills 1997). As a consequence felt globally, through their dehumanization and “morcellation,” *Native* non-European *producers* suffered cataclysmic ruptures of their worlds, devastations understood in Andean *Runasimi* (*Quechua*) as *Pachacuti*, in Swahili and English as the *Maafa*, and for many Indigenous Caribbean people, such as Taíno Chief Jorge Baracutei Estevez, as a “paper genocide” (Ani 1988 [1980]; Branche 2008; Estevez 2019). For Chief Estevez (2019), Native people(s) of the Caribbean who were not slain through brutal conquest or other invasive European pathogens were essentially disappeared “on paper,” as he writes that, after being declared “extinct” in the 1500s on the island of Hispaniola (later Haiti and the Dominican Republic), “the 1787 census in Puerto Rico lists 2,300 pure Indians in the population, but on the next census, in 1802, not a single Indian is listed.” In other parts of the Spanish Caribbean and their mainland colonies, as Chief Estevez describes, since Spain had early on abolished “Indian slavery,” slaveowners who were loath to free the Indigenous people they held captive “would simply re-classify them as African” for purposes of official documentation (ibid.; cf. Forte 2005a; 2005b).

Past leaders of both of Guyana’s two major contending national political parties, and members of both of their predominantly “African” and “East Indian” bases, have sought *partial*

agendas of social and “economic egalitarianism”—and mutual “development”—through securing Guyana as an Afro—and later Indo—inheritance of enslaved, indentured, and free “laborers who collectively challenged their exploitation to European domination” (Jackson 2012: 178). Since contemporary Guyana has a sizable Indigenous population, unlike most other parts of the Caribbean, aspects of the material and ideological processes instituting and validating Guyanese *Creole* indigenities have involved *culturally* supplanting and dispossessing Indigenous peoples of their Guyanese “folk” patrimonies in order to “consolidate Creole identity as indigenous within the postcolonial state” (ibid.; cf. Mentore 2007). Guyana’s political and cultural movements for decolonial nationalism have also entailed revalorizations of traditions of past colonial subjects—often recast as “Creole folk culture”—and primarily (at first at least) in ways that willfully underwrote Black, or Afro-Creole, hegemonic conceptions of postcolonial Guyanese-ness *as* national culture (cf. Munasinghe 2001). These highly politicized “historical conventions” have affected Komfa traditions and specifically the ways that practitioners and Guyanese more generally, as well as interested scholars, have conceptualized Komfa’s convoluted and densely imbricated pasts. For most Guyanese, for many Komfa practitioners, and for researchers as well, it seems difficult to imagine Komfa as holding anything but “African” cultural pasts and precedents. While for others, considerations of the traditions’ many emergences and transformations can only be open-ended, enlisting the overlapping and disjunctive trajectories of “all seven nations” into their histories, and often through invoking the memory of their divinely dead guides who experienced those multitudinous pasts firsthand. Certain practitioners have thus instituted, and likely inherited, subversive ways of *opening* the shades on other/ed parts of their “blood” and their being by refusing to ignore “the meeting of

worlds within,” embracing the dislocative limbo of infinitely expansive selves (Jackson 2012: xi; Harris 1999 [1970]: 169).

### **Komfa as “African Thing,” as “*Dougl*a Thing,” or as “*All-nation* Thing”**

...each sign as a postcard from the land of the dead...  
—Susan Stewart<sup>280</sup>

Recounting a particular interaction I had with a young Spiritualist devotee can help illustrate what it means for people’s lives to open oneself to heritages suppressed within family “bloodlines,” or similarly, to those pasts obscured within collective “coastal” (i.e. Afro-/Indo-) Guyanese projections of nationhood. Spiritualists often confront these quandaries of personal, familial, and wider community belonging—and even citizenship—through their understandings of Komfa’s pasts and of the life-histories of their ancestors and other spirits who present themselves in rituals of manifestation. Yet, Spiritualists also study their pasts and (re)configure the histories of their traditions through engaging with various forms and sources of information, usually through interfacing with human—or spirit—teachers, but also from what is deemed as “book-learning,” and increasingly, “Internet-learning.” For over six months I visited a certain gathering twice a week, and would spend well over an hour each stay sitting by the computer, books in hand, in the company of an exceptionally thoughtful friend—Minister Joell.

Joell, in his late-twenties, is a rising star within his Georgetown flock and has embraced a role as primary ritual assistant to the group’s leader, who is known variously as Babu or Black Pandit. As a collective, the gathering typically tends to describe themselves as a Kali Mandir, a religious community centered around devotion to Mother-Goddess Kali, although individual members more often than not identify as “Spiritualists,” and usually refer to manifestation of

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<sup>280</sup> From Stewart’s *On Longing* (1993: 173).

deities and spirits in their rituals as “Komfa.” Likewise, members of this gathering do not generally identify themselves or their tradition as “Hindu,” nor do many self-identify as “Indian” or “Indo-Guyanese,” apart from a few, including Babu’s wife, Baundelle or Mother Bonnie. Yet many identify—or are identified—as *Dougla*, or as “mixed.” Minister Joell, and his mother and sisters who attend, are all often referred to by other congregants as *Dougla*, usually tenderly, or in a “neutral” sense. Most of the mandir’s regular participants are Black, like Babu—yet, as Jackson (2012: xi) says—like “many Guyanese,” they would most all likely “admit that they are mixed.” Still, the flock comprises a highly heterogeneous “mix,” with one core ritual attendant known by all as Chiney, due to the elderly woman’s seemingly East Asian features, and a considerable number of families of Indigenous heritage who consistently participate in services on Sundays. Aside from Mother Bonnie, however, there is a conspicuous lack of Indo-Guyanese presence and rarely any Hindus who attend functions at this particular mandir.

Situated in south Georgetown, a few blocks from the cemetery, the Kali Mandir occupies the *bottom-house*, or expansive, semi-enclosed area underneath the aged wooden home where



*Fig. 5.1* Altar-room of a Spiritualist Kali Mai mandir. Mother Kali, Durga, and other deities look on as devotees perform a ritual using coconut and camphor.

Babu, Bonnie, their daughter, and her children live. The *bottom-house* is divided into three main sections, the largest being an area with bench-seating used mainly for Sunday morning services, which Babu describes as the “church part” of the group’s

public weekly agenda. People tend to congregate in this area, which is also home to the gathering's pet parrot. People sit on the pews to eat and chat in downtime enjoying the breezy air



*Fig. 5.2* Altar-room, or “inner-sanctum,” of Spiritualist Kali mandir. An assemblage of gods and goddesses—and their protectors—lines the walls. A devotee in the foreground is greeting the deities, particularly Mother Kali, as another practitioner can be seen in the background awaiting an opportunity to receive a divination reading and other personal Spiritual Work.

compared to the more enclosed “meeting room,” a furnished hallway used for small *gyaffs* throughout the week, particularly for what the group calls “secret society meetings” that take place on Wednesday

evenings. The meeting room leads to the mandir’s main ritual space, or “altar room,” where an assemblage of gods and goddesses, and their many “protectors” and aides-de-camp, lines the walls of the “inner-sanctum,” as Babu and others say, but which can also be considered as a kind of Guyanese iconostasis. The multitude of *deities* and *spirits* enlivening the chromolithographs, *murti*, and other *idols* and *icons* residing in the altar room, also present themselves through physically *manifesting* within individual mediums’ bodies there in the ritual space.<sup>281</sup> The altar room and meeting space are similarly used for divination, generally conducted by a medium in trance, which this group performs using ignited camphor, coconut, cucumber, and lime passed over an inquirer’s head and then placed by their feet. Once through burning, the positioning of the items and the inscription of amorphous carbon traces left behind are studied and interpreted

<sup>281</sup> All of the words emphasized in italics in this sentence are used by the attendees of this mandir.

in light of the life circumstances surrounding a devotee's questions, concerns, predicaments, or misfortunes motivating their inquiries.

On many Sunday afternoons after services and ritual Work, and on Wednesdays prior to meetings, Joell and I would sit in the mandir's meeting room at their desktop computer *gyaffin'* as he diligently executed his book- and Internet-learning duties on behalf of the flock. I learned much from Minister Joell's lessons, as have many members of the gathering, which during the months of my visits at least, often involved elaborate hagiographical exegeses on Uriel, Nuriel, Raphael, Gabriel, and various other archangels, angels, gods, and more localized "folk" spirits and Guyanese *jumbie*. On one particular occasion, Joell said he had something to share that he thought would be especially appealing to me and the concerns of my project. "You so interested in Obeah," he told me, likely referring to questions I had repeatedly posed, "so here come look, see this one I get for you." Joell showed me a book with a compelling title and cover.

Coordinates of a map crisscross the blue of Caribbean Sea, with green Gulf Coast, Floridian peninsula, and islands—some real and some of legend—all designated by their Indigenous names. Above "Cubanacan (*Cuba*)" and to the left of "Coaybay (*Island of the Dead*)" is also a whirlwind-armed image of "Guabancex (*The Hurakan*)," a Taíno *cemí* (or *zemí*) goddess known also as the "one whose fury destroys everything" (Moroka 2017: 3; cf. Pané 1999 [ca. 1498]: 29).<sup>282</sup> The book is called *Ticky-Ticky's Quest: The Search for Anansi the Spider-Man*, written by Michael Auld (2016), and I was indeed intrigued to find out what Joell had in mind.

He opened the book to a page titled "CHARACTERS IN THE THREE-PART SERIES," and pointed us to the entry describing "Cuffy the Obeah-Man" (Auld 2016: 2). There it relates that "in Jamaica, obeah is an African practice similar to voodoo, voudo, or voudon. Also in

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<sup>282</sup> Guabancex continues to be venerated in contemporary traditions of Puerto Rican Espiritismo Sanse and in the 21 Divisions of Dominican Vudu. See for example González (2018) and Luis (2013).

Jamaica, the Ghanaian Asanti (Ashanti) day-name, Kofi (for Friday) was changed by island-born enslaved Africans to ‘Cuffy,’ a newly arrived person from the African continent, considered a person without class” (ibid.). Joell and I read these lines together, and he remarked, “not just Jamaica,” with a laugh, “is right here too, our national hero! No class?” he protested. Before stopping to add anything else, Joell pointed down to another entry in the *dramatis personae* and turned to the next page where the origins of the character “Opiyel, a.k.a. Opiyelguobirán” are explained: “He was a Taíno dog whose bark could only be heard by opias, spirits of the dead” (ibid.: 2-3). Joell clarified, following Auld’s description of this character/*cemí*/god/dog, that “*Opiy*” is the “Amerindian name for the dead, for jumbie,” while the suffix “-el” means “son.” Thus, Opiyel is a Taíno word for “son of the dead.”

I was admittedly a bit confused at first. Joell turned back the page and said, “look, is right here, written in the book. How’s Obeah goin’ be Ashanti, like Cuffy, when *opia* is Taíno to begin with?” he emphatically probed. “Look, I goin’ show you a next set a thing, let you really see what I talkin’,” he said, and handed me the book as he pivoted his body towards the computer and started typing. Next thing I knew, Joell was on Wikipedia directing me to look at the entry for “Hupia.” Again, we read together that, according to Wikipedia authors, “in Taíno culture, the hupia (also *opia*, *opi’a*, *op’a*, *operi’to*) is the spirit of a person who has died.”<sup>283</sup> “Look,” Joell said, “‘hupia’ or ‘opia’ must be ‘Obeah.’ Is the spirit of the dead.” We went on to the next lines, which assert that “in Taíno spiritual beliefs, hupias (ghost spirits of those who had died) were contrasted with goeiza, spirits of the living. While a living *goeiza* had

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<sup>283</sup> References to the “Hupia” entry on Wikipedia can be found here: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hupia>. The entry cites one source, Maria Poviones-Bishop’s unpublished manuscript titled “The Bat and the Guava: Life and the Afterlife in the Taíno Worldview” (2001), and also lists five other suggested sources, including Michael Crichton’s *Jurassic Park* (1990), which fictionalizes “hupia” in a Costa Rican context. One can also consult Poviones-Bishop’s (2002) master’s thesis, which argues that “historians have minimized Taino influence” in the early development of the “cult of La Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre in Cuba,” also known to Cubans and others as the orisha Ochún—goddess of rivers and *sweetwater*. On Ochún and La Caridad del Cobre in Cuba, also see Jalane Schmidt (2015).

definite form, after passing away the spirit was released as a *hupia* and went to live in a remote earthly paradise called Coaybay.”

“Wait, so you’re saying that ‘Obeah’ comes from the Indigenous, the Amerindian, ‘hupia?’” I asked Joell.

“Well, it must, nah” he replied, and then added, “but that’s not the real thing. What I saying, is that, yes, sure, maybe is true Obeah’s a Buck thing, come from the Amerindians, even the word. But is more than that, that’s what I saying. Is so much more, more to this thing here, that we all ain’ never want pay no two mind towards. This a deep thing here. So much roots it does get. Just watch!” he said, and turned back to the computer.

I offered my sincere agreement, and almost felt validated. “You’re so right, Joell,” I told him. “I seriously doubt there’s anything more complicated than trying to really think about Spiritualist histories,” I said. “It has to be such a comparative thing. Like you’ve gotta learn all about different things at once. Hindu, Christian, Muslim, Kali Mai, so many African faiths! And so *you’re saying* people neglect the Indigenous—the Amerindian—side?” I asked Joell.

“Yes, that’s it. You must compare and learn about everything, everyone history, ‘cause Guyana such a mix-up-mash-up place, you know, and that’s how Spiritualist Way is,” Joell explained, while continuing to input new searches in the web browser. “But yeah, of everyone, like the Buck them get the least love. For true, nah? And people does say they get the least Spiritual power, too. I know you must hear this. So, is like you say, them get *neglect*. Even by us Spiritual People, people who should know better.”

“What about in the Amerindian Nation of spirits?” I asked. “You know, how you all do recognize the Indigenous ancestors in ways. What do you think about those Works?”



“Well, you right for true,”  
Joell responded. “But even for we  
Amerindian Wuk, which you know  
don’t happen much right, still then, is  
how much we does *really know*?  
Right? Just ‘cause we goin’ put up  
some orange or some pink flag and  
thing them, we goin’ say is



**Fig. 5.3** Most Spiritualist churches are marked with banners, typically of seven colors, each representing an ancestral “Nation.” Colors, on flags, clothing, and other items, play an important role in identifying Komfa spirits.

Amerindian? Ha! Too besides look, even *if* there’s Buck thing that we all—Spiritualists—does do and know about, we ain’ realizin’ it yet,” he said. “Like ‘Obeah’ nah? Right! We all does say is African, Akan, Ashanti word—just like Cuffy and ‘Nancy-story. But look now, can’ be so.”  
Joell was casually scrolling through the blog of a Puerto Rican “brujo” and had stopped to read a section explaining “hupia,” the search-term that brought us to the page. “All I sayin’ is, look, see it can’ be all one Blackman thing, when you know Blackman and Buckman them both living together, taking lash the same way from them Whiteman,” Joell told me. “So you know, it make a whole lot a sense, when them Whiteman call them Buck and them Black the same thing, a Obeahman! Right?” We were both laughing, but also recognizing the profound implications of Joell’s reasoning.

“I just tellin’ you, you mus’ open you own eye too,” Joell encouraged. “An’ no take you mati eye for see,” he told me, meaning I would benefit from continuing to look into the matter on my own. We both laughed again, knowing well that his ample use of proverbs in our past lessons had posed challenges for me. Now we were scrolling through the text of *The Mythology of All Races*, Volume XI, on Latin America, which Joell accessed through Archive.org (Alexander

1920).<sup>284</sup> Performing a keyword search for “opia,” Joell led us to a section on “Antillean beliefs” where it is explained that “the disembodied soul (opia) haunts the night [...], as if night were its native season” (ibid.: 31). After a few minutes of silent reading, Joell said, without looking up from the screen, “is not that I thinkin’ Spiritualist Way of Life could be *all* Buck, but you know, it must be more Buck than what we all does think,” he suggested. “And can’ be all together African too besides, like we all does know already. So why is never a Buck thing? You understand already.

‘Cause this thing here is a Buck thing too. *Not just*

*Dougla*,” he emphasized, “but why you think I does say *All-nation thing*,” the implication being that “*Dougla*”—as Afro/Indo (-Creole) “racial admixture”—is insufficient for describing Komfa’s, or Guyanese, cultural hybridities (Naipaul 2001 [1951]: 122-123; Krishnan 2020: 53).

Joell eventually flipped ahead to the volume’s chapter on “The Orinoco and Guiana,” where something seemed to catch his eye right away. He read to me out-loud about *botuto*, described as an Indigenous “sacred trumpet” (Alexander 1920: 275). The two facing pages we had open on the screen presented an impressive assortment of influential European observers of Indigenous culture, such as Humboldt, im Thurn, Schomburgk, Garcilaso de la Vega, and more (ibid.: 276-277). John Boddam-Whetham (1879: 224) is quoted regarding the “botuto,” and it



**Fig. 5.4** Flags in front of a Spiritualist church. Many Hindu homes also have colored *jhandi* flags displayed in their yards, making Komfa churches somewhat discreet.

<sup>284</sup> For the exact facsimile version we consulted, see <https://archive.org/details/mythologyofallral1gray>.

was these lines that grabbed Joell’s attention. “Horn-blowing was a very useful accomplishment of our guide,” Joell read, “as it kept us straight and frightened away the various evil spirits, from a water-mama to a wood-demon” (Alexander 1920: 276). “Ha, look, course we all does already know ‘bout Wata-mama,” Joell deduced, that “of course she does be Buck.” He swiftly moved ahead to accounts of “the dreaded ‘kanaima,’” “the magic rattle of the ‘peaiman,’” and “the wild



*Fig. 5.5* An altar dedicated to the Indigenous nation of ancestors displayed prominently in a Spiritual Church in Mahaica, 2017.

hooting of the ‘didi’ (the ‘didi’ is supposed to be a wild man of the woods, possessed of immense strength and covered with hair),” we read together (ibid.). “Wow,” Joell said. “You know what I thinking?

Well, ‘bout how we all does know

these spirit, the folklore spirit. Is jumbie them. *Of course* they Buck spirit,” he declared. “But is how come—like you ask ‘bout the Buck Wuk—is how come now we don’ entertain none a these Buck spirit?” Joell asked. “‘Nough time—*nough- nough time*—someone come for the church cause Wata-mama. Wata-mama troubling she and she and she. So they does come. But same time, we don’ *never* Wuk no Wata-mama right here,” he explained, and asked me, “you ever does see Spiritual Church Wukin’ Wata-mama? Or Bush Dai-dai?” as we both chuckled.

“No, never,” I told him. “Especially not Bush Dai-dai. I only ever hear about that as a joke. Like when some Bongo Congo Rastaman gets called Bush Dai-dai at the market,” I said, and Joell laughed.

“Exactly,” he said. “And ain’ no Spiritual Church Wukin’ Wata-mama.”

“I think you’re right,” I responded, “but you’re also seriously right about Wata-mama *bringing* so many people into Spiritual life. I hear that all the time,” I confirmed for him, as quite often people have told me of their trying experiences with forces who are subsequently identified as Wata-mama. They report being “pushed” by Wata-mama to take their lives seriously—or else they would have it taken away—and so they often choose to enter the folds of Spiritual life. Many such people are understood to be facing various crises, which tend to also foment episodes of mental or emotional instability, and practitioners have often said that Wata-mama or another entity had made them “go mad” prior to beginning their journeys of Spiritual Work. Yet, as Joell says, Wata-mama is not a goddess whom mediums manifest in their rituals, but rather, they tend to seek out her presence when necessary in her own surroundings—canals, trenches, creeks, rivers, lakes, savannah marshlands, and *bush*. Joell and I seemed to concur on these characterizations of Wata-mama’s instrumental, yet distanced, roles in facilitating the Work of Komfa healing, including the dangers she presents to people’s lives.

“So is like we *need* them Wata-mama, but they just can’ come right *here*, by we,” Joell advanced. “Is like Wata-mama just get too much power for come ‘round we all the time, and she must stay right there in the bush! Maybe she’d drown we if ‘nough people start manifesting she right here in we Wuk,” Joell wondered.

“Wow, you’re right,” I told him. “It’s just like Amerindian people themselves too, not just Wata-mama. Like Guyana and Guyanese people *need* Indigenous people, and their land, and water, and resources, and their knowledge and all, right? But just don’t want them *here*, in Georgetown and on the coast with all you *coastlanders*,” I suggested, and Joell seemed to agree. “And like you said also, even the Indigenous Amerindian parts of Komfa—like the ‘Opia’—just get taken as ‘African.’”

“That’s it. Yeah,” Joell said. “They do something for we, and then *bap!* Goodbye!”

We kept talking and searching online for a bit while absorbing what I considered to be these searing perceptions on his part. I again agreed to follow up with Joell on the insights and thanked him for sharing. Soon enough, it was time to join the others in the altar room and we made our way inside. A few minutes later, however, while attendees were preparing items and themselves for the upcoming Work, Joell turned to me and said, “macaw ask parrot if mango ripe.” I likely gave a puzzled look, unfamiliar with the saying, as, at first, I thought he was referring to Babu’s pet bird in a cage in the other room. He just said “one, one,” replying as parrot, I gathered, and meaning that a few mangos here and there were ready to eat. Presumably sensing my continued confusion, Joell offered one final clarification. “Talk half,” he said, and the other half he left unspoken, as I then understood he must have also done with the lessons on relegated Indigeneities, Wata-mama, and Obeah—or *opia/opiy/hupia*.

### **Wata-mama and Mami Wata**

They simply followed the line of the African coast.  
It was child’s play to reach cape Bojador.  
—Fernand Braudel<sup>285</sup>

As Joell would have it, and most Spiritualists would likely agree, Komfa’s roots and routes lead to and from countless overlapping entangled directions. Yet, Joell is also right to recognize that most practitioners—and researchers—tend to overlook the streams of influence that Indigenous Guyanese have brought to Spiritualist worldviews and practices of the past and present. Rituals of dance, drumming, and divination performed in honor of Wata-mama by both Indigenous Guianese and Africans and their descendants who were enslaved on Guianese plantations,

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<sup>285</sup> Again, from Braudel’s *The Structures of Everyday Life* (1981: 409).

exemplify the intercultural interfaces that have contributed to Komfa's elaboration over generations. Likewise, exploring more contemporary Wata-mama devotion among Guyanese Spiritualist and Indigenous communities, and Mami Wata practices in various contexts throughout the African diasporas, also presents insights into persistent tropes of anti-Indigeneity that are prevalent in Guyanese society and elsewhere.

Water spirits, and particularly those gendered as female, play leading roles in countless ritual assemblages throughout the Caribbean and often feature prominently in various oral and other folklore traditions of the region. Attesting perhaps to their ever-evolving, untamable trajectories and powers, Caribbean devotees and observers know these goddesses by many names, including "Watramama (Suriname, Guyana), Mamadjo (Grenada), Yemanya/Yemaya (Brazil/Cuba), La Sirène, Erzulie, Simbi (Haiti), Lamanté (Martinique) etc." (van Stipriaan 2003: 327).<sup>286</sup> No list can claim to be exhaustive, nor even much begin in characterizing the many faces, qualities, and efficacies of these aquatic forces. In Guyana alone they go by innumerable monikers, popular ones aside from Wata-mama being Minje Mama, River Mama, Mermaid, and

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<sup>286</sup> Watramamma in Suriname is discussed further in this chapter. On Mamadjo in Grenada, see Patrick Polk (1993). Literature abounds on orisha "Yemanya/Yemaya," who is also identified in Trinidad and Tobago and Guyana as "Amanja," as noted by Jan Carew (1977: 7) and quoted in an epigraph to Chapter 6 (also see Herskovits and Herskovits 1947: 336). On "La Sirène, Erzulie, [and] Simbi" in Haiti, see Don Cosentino (1995: 148, 300), Georges René and Marilyn Houlberg (1995), Jenny Sharpe (2020: 65, 73-89, 166), and Robert Farris Thompson (1995: 105-06, 109). "Lamanté" may be from the French for "the manatee," or *lamantin* ("sea-cow" in Guyana), which have long been associated with water deities in the Caribbean, mainly by Europeans, it seems (van Stipriaan 2001: 87).

Note that in colonial Guianese newspapers one can find countless mentions of enslaved and free Africans, typically males, identified by the personal name "Mamadou." These can potentially be references to ritual specialists associated with Guiana's water spirits, as the Martinican Mami Wata's name suggests. However, and much more likely, is that the appellation "Mamadou" sometimes recorded in Dutch and British colonial Guianese archival sources as "Mamadjo" refers to the Arabic language name common in West African Muslim communities, Amadou, a gallicized variant of Ahmad or Ahmed, meaning "highly praised." For example, "Mamadju" is listed as one of twenty-three named (and three unnamed) "Runaway and Arrested Slaves" advertised as held "in the Stocks of Demerary" on January 17, 1807, as this person would be listed again in these daily records sixteen more times before the end of May that same year (*Essequibo and Demerary Gazette* 17 January 1807, and *passim*). Note that the spelling of this person's name was typically rendered "Mamadou," and one can ascertain that it was the same individual arrested in each instance as "Proprietors" are also listed, in Mamadou's case, as one "Edmonstone," probably John Edmonstone, who was likewise the legal "owner" of one of Charles Darwin's later instructors at the University of Edinburgh, a formerly enslaved Guianese man also named John Edmonston(e), like his "proprietor." See R. B. Freeman (1978) and Peretz (2019).

Fairmaid, reflecting European folk contributions—like the name La Sirène—as well as common conceptions of these divinities’ “fair” complexions, lack of melanin, and perhaps their own European homelands.<sup>287</sup> The name Minje (or Minge) Mama is also said to point to African, and specifically Cross River or Kalabari cultural origins, as in Ijaw languages of enslaved people brought to Berbice and elsewhere, “minje” means “water” (Gill 2009; Robertson 2012). Within Jamaican Kumina traditions and other “Revival movements” on that island, as George Eaton Simpson (1970: 195-96) describes, the title “water mothers” was used to honor “queens” who served the “river spirits” known variously as “River Maid,” “River Mumma,” and “Rubba Missis” (see also Cassidy and Le Page 2002: 382-383).

Often conceived as taking the half-human form of a “beautiful” woman with piscine or reptilian lower extremities, these figures of feminine divinity are considered by many people—including practitioners and scholars—as originating “in a combination of Amerindian mythology, European mermaid lore, and the water-spirit beliefs brought” to the Caribbean, Guyana, and elsewhere by enslaved Africans (Niblett 2019: 81; cf. De Barros 2004; Gill 2009; Warner-Lewis 1991: 179). As such, like their sub-Saharan African “sisters” widely identified as Mami Wata, Caribbean water goddesses are often theorized as embodying the vicissitudes of the early modern period, and specifically, the enduring results of the brutalities of “colonial encounter” and lethal capitalist penetrations of global proportion and microlocal consequence (Drewal 2008a; 2008b; 2012; Salmons 1977). Epitomizing histories of “creolization” and (potentially) transculturative “contact zones” of European colonization in the Americas, Africa, and Asia, as Barbara Paxson (1983: 417) writes, “Mamy Water often occurs at that critical

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<sup>287</sup> The name “Fairmaid” was possibly brought to Dutch Guiana by Scottish immigrant workers, sailors, and slaveowners, as Highland Scottish folklore features mermaid characters known by that name, and many people from that area of Scotland owned or worked on plantations in Guianese colonies and on transatlantic routes. See David Alston (2015) and Hugh Miller (1853).

juncture in a society when it is changing from a gift-giving to a money economy, with all the accompanying shifts in values and patterns of behavior” (cf. Pratt 1991; Niblett 2019). Despite



*Fig. 5.6 Water Mama* (2008), painting by Lokono artist George Simon (1947-2020), from a series of “water spirits.” National Culture Centre, Guyana.

her “new-world” and African personifications of specifically European powers of invasion and commercial exploit, and of “beauty” and persuasion, Africanist scholars such as Johannes Fabian (1996: 197-98; 1978) have claimed that “mermaids are among the most ancient and widespread symbols in Africa,” and that while these spirits have “gained global currency” in large part through the forced dispersion of Africans within and beyond the continent, mermaids “remain the foremost image of African culture on both sides of the

Atlantic.” Attention to African *and* European precedents

for mermaid-like spirits in the Americas has also long worked to obfuscate Indigenous foundations and subsequent transformations to traditions of devotion honoring water goddess of local landscapes.<sup>288</sup> Indigenous cultural pasts and life experiences of Indigenous people have also been “neglected” due to the historical reality that most initial ethnological research concerned

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<sup>288</sup> Much previous scholarship on Mami Wata and related divinities throughout Africa and the Caribbean and Indian Ocean world has explored the image of the mermaid in the context of water spirits, often refuting or obscuring the mermaids as indigenous to the African continent. Salmons (1977), Hecht (1990), Drewal (1988; 2008a), and others offer visual and ethnographic accounts demonstrating that the oldest extant representation of Mami Wata sculptural art—a pre-1901 image of a “water spirit headdress” from the Niger River Delta town of Bonny—derive from “Der Schlangenbandinger” (or The Snake Charmer), a chromolithograph produced in Germany in the 1880s featuring “a Samoan girl who worked as a snake charmer in a circus-like travelling exhibition of exotic people” also described as “the exotic, long-haired, snake-charming wife of a Hamburg zookeeper” (van Stipriaan 2003: 329; Siegel 2000). Reproductions of the popular chromolithograph that were sold in West Africa in the 1950s originated in India and Britain, and the woman’s image was often identified with economically prominent merchants of South Asian heritage living in coastal West Africa (Salmons 1977: 11-13; see Drewal 1988: 169-71; Hecht 1990: 82-83; Gore 1997: 108-09).



with Caribbean folklore and religiosities largely emphasized both “African survivals” and “Native extermination”—predicaments that unfortunately still hold true in many ways for the majority of scholarship that has followed.<sup>289</sup>

Because of Guyana’s sizable Indigenous communities in comparison to most other parts of the Caribbean, it has proven more of a challenge to colonial and later nationalist narratives of the past to subjugate Indigenous people and ignore their cultures or erase their histories, including the perspectives of Indigenous people living in Guyana today. Contemporary Indigenous Guyanese continue to revere—and fear—Wata-mamas, as they are usually called in Creolese, but these entities are also understood by various names in Guyana’s nine officially recognized “Amerindian” languages. While Indigenous understandings of these forces and their powers have likely undergone similar, and historically interconnected, processes of homogenization and creolization with their European, African, and Asian “mermaid” counterparts, Guyana’s Indigenous peoples hold varying relationships to water spirits that are anything but “standardized” and equivalent to one another nor to normative “coastlander” notions of these ambiguous forces and their capacities to both heal and harm. Contrarily, some have argued that Mami Wata in



**Fig. 5.7** *Orehu* (2008), painting by George Simon. Held by the National Culture Centre, Guyana.

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<sup>289</sup> See Lauren (Robin) Derby’s (forthcoming) essay on *zemis*, *zombies*, and legacies of Indigenous healing on Hispaniola for a compelling critique of how scholars’ presumptions about underlying African originations of and influences on Caribbean cultures, particularly healing rites, have obscured the historical and contemporary persistence of Indigenous material culture and knowledge, and shrouded enduring “African-Indian” intercultural “articulations.”

West Africa “developed from a local water goddess within a wider pantheon of gods connected with various societies, into an almost standard, pan-African deity with an autonomous cult, part of a mainly urban and popular folk culture” (van Stipriaan 2002: 93; cf. Drewal 2008a).

Guyana’s Indigenous Wata-mamas—“Ori-yu or Orehu (Arawak), Hoaránni (Warrau), Oko-yumo (Carib),” “*twingramyamu*,” or “Tuenkaron” (Makushi), and endless others—are each their own culturally situated entity and present highly localized practices and forms of knowledge (Roth 2011 [1915]: 216; Whitaker 2018: 124; Whitaker 2020).<sup>290</sup> Nonetheless, they tend to share features with and cross- and intercultural links to one another, as well as to what are considered “Afro-” or “Creole-” coastal conceptions of Wata-mama.

Unlike in other parts of the Caribbean, accounts by European explorers, settlers, and other colonizers in the Guianas typically equated “Water Mama” or “Watramama” with both African *and Indigenous* ritual knowledge and ways of relating to one another and to the social worlds of spirits. Following Boddam-Whetham’s (1879) narrative of his travels in British Guiana’s “interior,” in 1887 Mabel Peacock (1887: 319) conveyed to readers of the (still) popular *Folk-lore Journal* that

the Indians firmly believe in the reality of these mermaids, or ‘water-mamas’ as they are called in Dutch-Creole; and where they are supposed to have their caves or nests there great danger awaits the traveller. Some are related to be extremely beautiful and possessing long golden hair, like the Lorelei, and whoever casts his eye on them is seized

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<sup>290</sup> British colonial administrator and prominent Guianese ethnologist Walter Roth details Warrau and other Indigenous people’s relationships with water deities. “The Warraus, especially a swamp-inhabiting tribe, seem to have made several distinctions in their [Water] Spirits: they had their Ahúba, Ho-inarau or Ho-aránni, and Naba-rau or Naba-ranni,” according to Roth (2011 [1915]: 216), who adds that “the Ahúba is the ‘Fish-mamma,’ the chief of all the fish—one male and one female. The two live in underground water; their heads are like those of people, but their bodies resemble those of fish though they are provided with all the different kinds of feet belonging to land animals.” Roth (ibid.) writes that these hybridized “Water People” are known to “work evil on mankind; when shipwreck takes place they eat the bodies.” Similarly, “the Ho-inarau and Naba-rau represent the Water Spirits of the sea and the rivers, respectively; they are sometimes like people, sometimes like fish, and were once good and kind, but the Warraus have made them bad. Indeed, there was a time when these Water People used to live in amity and friendship with the Land People,” Roth was told (ibid.). “There are two reasons for the termination of this ideal state of existence. The Warraus used to exchange wives with them in those days, that is, a wife would be taken as required alternately from the one and the other tribe. The Warrau supply ran short, however, and the Water Spirits accordingly became vexed and angered with them” and continued to retaliate against their “withholding” (ibid.).

with madness, jumps into the deep water, and never returns. Others are hideous, snakes being twined about them.

Europeans understood practices surrounding these water spirits through reference to their own demonological Christian, “folk-” religious, and nascent racial scientific cultures based in ideologies of socio-temporal stagism (Whitehead 2002: 44-45; 2007; cf. Taussig 1987). Following such logics—of what Walter Mignolo, Enrique Dussel (1993: 65) and others term “colonial modernities”—Europeans came to equate Wata-mama “beliefs” with demoralized “non-European alterity,” and often with “Natives” hostility directed towards colonizers’ encroachments and sadistic abuses (cf. Dube and Banerjee-Dube 2019). Over time colonizers juridically established Wata-mama practices—along with the performance of related “dances,” rituals of divination and healing, and other ways of relating to one another and to the social world of spirits—as synonymous with, or variants of, Obeah (or Vodou, Candomblé, Santería, etc.) and more generally, “magic” (or brujería) and “witchcraft” (Browne 2017; De Barros 2004).

A French report penned anonymous in 1700’s Hispaniola that Janheinz Jahn (1961: 30) identified as “the earliest indication of the survival of African cults in Haiti,” for example, relates that

the slaves are strictly forbidden to practice the dance which in Surinam is called “Water-Mama” and in our colonies “Mae d’Agua” (Water mother). They therefore make a great secret of it, and all we know is that it highly inflames their imaginations. They make immense efforts to do evil things. The leader of the plot falls into such transports that he loses consciousness.<sup>291</sup>

These rituals, also known as Komfa and Winti dances in early colonial Dutch and British Guiana and Suriname, were typically aimed at healing and resolving communal conflicts and other struggles within communities and between individual members—both living and dead. Still, as

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<sup>291</sup> Michel Laguerre (1989: 59) writes that the source of this quote, titled *Essai sur l’Esclavage et Observations sur l’Etat Présent des Colonies*, was “probably published in 1750.”

Michael Mullin (1994: 177) rightly points out, “it should be emphasized that slaves often regarded matters of health and fortune in a social rather than a personal context, that is, as problems of a family’s welfare,” with “family” generally conceived as a wide-reaching unity of not-necessarily-formal kinship. The extreme inadequacies of material, social, and psychic existence under the conditions of enslavement, particularly the forced dissolution and regulation of enslaved people’s families and other societal structures, also fostered internal accusations of social wrongdoing and “sorcery” among enslaved communities.<sup>292</sup> Identifying malefactors in communal displays of restorative healing and justice, as an also intrinsically hazardous act, always held potentials that loved ones or even one’s self could be falsely indicted (Browne 2017). Consequently, “Obeah” came to be used by enslaved people and colonial authorities alike as a highly indeterminate way of describing rituals of recovery and regeneration, as well as of enactments of harm, cruelty, and social and physical destruction (Paton 2009, 2015).

Yet as this “earliest” account attests, European witnesses to these practices were often few and generally far from impartial in their observations and evaluations. Later narratives similarly suggest that these “dances” were performed during plantation enslavement in highly guarded, clandestine contexts and that the rituals stimulated experiences of ecstatic *imagination* and bodily—physical and metaphysical—*transports* to the point of both losing and (re)gaining profound forms of *consciousness*. An account from the 1770s provided by John Gabriel Stedman (1796), a soldier in the Dutch military assaults on Maroon societies in Suriname, describes how both enslaved people and Maroons related to deities known in Suriname as “Watra Mama, a powerful spirit they believed lived in the colony’s rivers” (Browne 2012: 31). Stedman (1796 v2:

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<sup>292</sup> Or, as Mullin (1994: 177) argues, “to excel in communities of severely limited means, where the source of everyone’s wherewithal is the same, is to invite accusations of witchcraft that served, among other aims, to cut down to size the selfish who enjoyed ‘unnatural’ success.” Compare to Brackette Williams’s (1991: 56, 113, 188) analyses of similar sentiments expressed by Guyanese in the 1970s.

273) notes that, while difficult to observe these performances “of excessive fanaticism” as they are “forbidden by law in the colony of Surinam, upon pain of the most rigorous punishment,” still, they are “often practiced in private places.”

Stedman (1796 v2: 273) writes that the ritual “here called *winty-play*, or the dance of the mermaid, [...] has existed from time immemorial,” but perceives the important role these practices had within enslaved and free communities, as well as “the sway obeah practitioners had among their peers” (Browne 2012: 31). He portrays both a crew of “*Locomen*, or pretended prophets, [who] find their interest in encouraging this superstition, by selling [. . .] *obias* or amulets,” as well as “sage matrons,” who he describes as “a kind of *Sibyls*, who deal in oracles” (Stedman 1796 v2: 272). “These sage matrons,” as Stedman (*ibid.*: 272-73) describes, performed rituals consisting of

dancing and whirling around in the middle of an assembly, with amazing rapidity, until they foam at the mouth, and drop down as convulsed. Whatever the prophetess orders to be done during this paroxysm is most sacredly performed by the surrounding multitude; which renders these meetings extremely dangerous, as she frequently enjoins them to murder their masters, or desert to the woods.

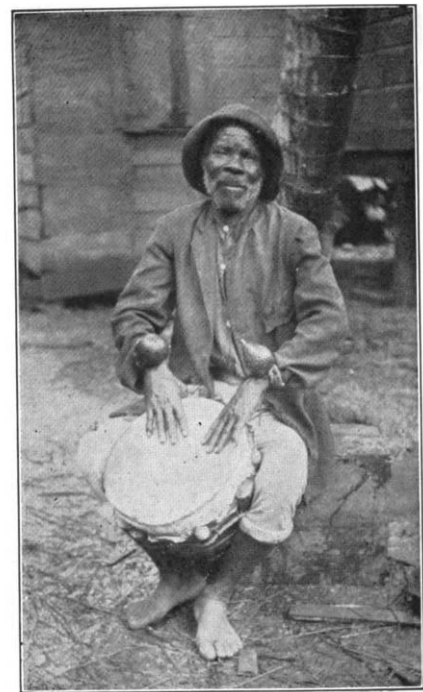
Documentary accounts of Wata-mama devotion, Komfa, Winti, and “Minje Mama dance in preemancipation Berbice are rare,” as Browne (2012: 32) notes, likely because they were “illegal and enslaved people tried to keep such dances a secret.” Stedman reports that colonial authorities in Suriname had criminalized “watermama and similar African dances” by the 1770s, while by the early 1800s in Berbice officials had “similarly found the Minje Mama dance threatening enough to go to the trouble of having the legal prohibition of the ritual publicly ‘read and explained to the gangs of different estates on the river’” (*ibid.*, quoting van Stipriaan 2008: 527; *Trial of a Slave in Berbice* 1823: 42). Injunctions against these dances and their linkage to the “bad” or “dirty work” of Obeah extended well into the late postemancipation period and were

imposed even by Afro-Guianese themselves within their villages, as documented by Raymond Smith (1965 [1956]: 17).<sup>293</sup> Within the 1865 “Rules for the Administration of St. Paul’s section, August Town” (ibid.), on the West Coast Berbice, two of the twelve policies read as follows:

9<sup>th</sup> And be it known to all shareholders that no ungodly dance shall be held in the village Mingy Mamma Mingy drumming, persons found in such act to be carried before Magistrate of the district.

10<sup>th</sup> Should any person be found practicing Obeah or receiving money under false pretense to be dealt with according to law.

While Smith (1976: 332n34) notes elsewhere that “mingy” may have been a misinterpretation of the more common word “winti” or “Wind (pronounced ‘wine’),” and meaning a spirit presence as well as the rituals through which mediums manifest spirits, subsequent scholarship demonstrates that “mingy” likely derives from the Ijaw language of contemporary Nigeria and Cameroon where it means “water” (Moore 1995: 138; Gill 2009; Robertson 2012).<sup>294</sup> Likewise, Minje Mama, Wata-mama, Komfa, Winti, and many other labels were all generally employed interchangeably by observers describing these “dances,” “plays,” or “orgies,” which they typically considered as



A Kongo Musician.

**Fig. 5.8** Photograph of a “Kongo” drummer in British Guiana from prior to 1919. In J. Graham Cruickshank’s essay on “African Immigrants.”

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<sup>293</sup> Also see Kean Gibson (2000: 198-99) on characterizations of Spiritualist ritual as Obeah, and, specifically as “dirty work,” especially “ceremonies where direct descendants are involved” in manifesting *their own* ancestors.

<sup>294</sup> Sustained scholarship has yet to trace genealogies of the all-pervasive contemporary term “wine,” referring to a form of dance and other bodily comportments in the Caribbean and elsewhere, particularly as such histories relate to the much older rituals of dance which the word described (cf. Allsopp 2003 [1996]: 606-07). Winti in Suriname’s Sranan Tongo language denotes religious assemblages of coastal Creoles and Surinamese Maroons, as well as certain deities and spirits within these cosmologies, and the rituals in which these “wind” presences manifest (Wooding 1981).

“Obeah.”<sup>295</sup> As will be discussed further below, ritual practitioners themselves also tended to use these terms in indefinite, and often substitutable ways, including in spurning “Obeah” as a form of “bad Work.”

### **The “Water mamma dans” of “a real Obiah man (Confou man)”<sup>296</sup>**

Most European observers, and some Africans themselves, were inclined to deem these rituals as inherently “evil,” “dangerous,” antisocial, and unchristian. For others, however, including many Indigenous Guianese, performances of dance, drumming, and spirit possession served vital communal functions, often as curative processes aimed at identifying and routing sources of interpersonal and bodily strife. There was a great need for various forms of healing—physical and social, emotional and psychic, and more—for enslaved people living within Caribbean plantation societies. Barry Higman (1995 [1984]: 261) argues that the historical reality that “European medical knowledge [...] rested on weak foundations” negatively impacted the health and lives of enslaved people more so “than did the aggregate number of doctors” (De Barros 2004: 30; cf. Sheridan 1985). Leading theories of medicine at the time were based in “the Ancient belief in a quaternary of phenomena,” described “alternately as the ‘Four Elements,’ the ‘Four Humors’ and the ‘Four Temperaments,’ a conception of reality that governed not only how the ancients imagined the universe, but also how they imagined their bodies” (Myers

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<sup>295</sup> On “Kumfo Orgies,” see an untitled article in the *Daily Chronicle* (24 November 1885: 4) that refers to an 1880s “work” in Essequibo. Also see Rev. Bronkhurst (1883: 386).

<sup>296</sup> These quotes comes from the records of a court trial that took place in Berbice in the early 1820s, discussed below. Diana Paton (2015: 85) notes that “the phrase ‘Obiah man (Confou man)’ seems to be an interpreter’s idiom.” Notwithstanding that observation, that court-appointed interpretation of Berbice Dutch Creole reveals potentially intriguing historical clues regarding Komfa, especially if, as Paton (ibid.) contends that “Confou man” (or Komfa woman) may have been “a more familiar term for a spiritual worker than ‘obeah man’” for enslaved people in pre-emancipation Berbice, a contention which is “supported by the fact that ‘Confou man’ appears much more frequent in the trial records than does ‘obeah man.’”

forthcoming).<sup>297</sup> Humoral and climatic theories of medicine, which merged with ascendance of racial science, and their attendant treatments of “heroic” bloodletting, blistering, purging, and emesis “constituted a real threat to patients’ health and ensured that ‘the doctors killed more often than they cured’” (De Barros 2004: 30, quoting Higman 1995 [1984]: 272). As Juanita De Barros (2004: 30) describes, “these methods were applied on estates in Berbice and Demerara-Essequibo,” or the three colonies that in 1831 formed British Guiana, “as they were elsewhere” throughout the Atlantic plantation colonies well into the postemancipation period.<sup>298</sup>

De Barros (2002; 2004) documents the important roles enslaved and free Africans served as hospital-based medical practitioners, including those titled as “slave doctors” and “sick nurses” within structures of treatment on plantations. Yet these same practitioners and others also served their communities in non-hospital-based therapeutic settings that typically involved what Komfa people today would describe as “Spiritual Work,” often through rituals of dance, divination, and spirit manifestation. Certain of these practices were performed within the framework of plantation hospitals, and De Barros (2004: 32) notes that “in Berbice, Willem, a slave who was convicted of practicing obeah, treated sick slaves in the estate hospital, ritually washing and ‘flogging’ them” with branches. Just as European medicine could often prove dangerous if not fatal, not all forms of healing rites performed by enslaved people were understood as such by Europeans or by other Africans and their free and enslaved descendants. Willem, who was born in late-1700s Berbice, was considered by his peers as “the Water Mamma

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<sup>297</sup> As Bob Eberly Myers’s (forthcoming) work demonstrates, according to such thinking “a healthy person = a balanced body,” an idea which “becomes important for later generations writing after Thomas Hobbes” whose theories “speak about the significance of the ‘Body Politic.’”

<sup>298</sup> De Barros (2004: 30) notes that in colonial Guiana, enslaved people’s “complaints to the fiscals are filled with tales of being dosed with a variety of purgatives,” most commonly salts, that tended to exacerbate their conditions and discourage people from reporting they were ill or stopping work. Conventional forms of such torturous “treatments” used on Guianese plantations for common ailments included “tartar emetic and salts,” “a combination of ‘salts, jalap and calomel,’” and “salts and a vomit” (ibid.).



[...] or the river spirit,” “the ‘Attetta Sara,’ ‘Monkesi Sara,’ ‘the Minje Mama,’ ‘God Almighty’s toboco,’ and ‘a real Obiah man (Confou man)’”—terms which Randy Browne (2012: 28-29) attributes to the “recognition of his authority” as a healer, a reputation Willem developed early on in his short life (De Barros 2004: 37). At around twenty-three years of age, Willem was executed after being “convicted of practicing obeah” and of murdering an elderly enslaved woman while attempting “to set things right” during an epidemic on a Berbice estate (De Barros 2004: 34).

A terrible spell of sickness and death swept through coastal Berbice in 1819 and again in 1821, which principally afflicted people on plantations Demtichem and Op Hoop van Beter. Willem was one among two healers called on by enslaved estate “drivers” to seek mediation and resolution to the tragedies, particularly through their roles as diviners capable of “identifying the person responsible and preventing the spread of further sickness” (De Barros 2004: 34). As De Barros (*ibid.*) writes, “these healers led the estate populations in a dance, a collective ritual designed to uncover the wrongdoer (the ‘obeah’ man or woman),” as participants later testified in court hearings.<sup>299</sup> And while “colonial authorities held the two healers—Hans and Willem—responsible for orchestrating the ‘evil’ ceremonies, the two men were part of a larger, collective ritual which illuminated the efforts of enslaved Africans and Afro-creoles to respond to a social crisis.”

When in 1819 the scourge struck Plantation Demtichem, one of the “drivers” named January sought Hans to come “put everything to right” as “so many deaths had occurred,” as January reported later to the court (De Barros 2004: 34). As Randy Browne (2012: 52) writes,

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<sup>299</sup> Accounts of Willem and Hans come from *Trial of a Slave in Berbice* (1823), and are treated at length in numerous secondary sources. See Randy Browne (2012, 2017), Emilia Viotti da Costa (1994), Juanita De Barros (2004), Gordon Gill (2009), Barry Higman (1984), John Lean (2002), Michael Mullin (1994), Deryck Murray (2009), Diana Paton (2015), and others.

Hans described himself as “a Congo” who had “learned to heal in his ‘own country,’ where his abilities set him apart.” As Hans described, “every one there [in his ‘own country’] is not gifted with this power, but only a few which comes from God” (ibid.). According to Browne (ibid.: 52n83), Hans was likely “a Kongolese *nganga ngombo*, a diviner or spirit medium who helped others locate lost items or identify the cause of death or sickness” (cf. Thornton 1998: 243; 2002: 81). As such, when he was called to help those on Plantation Demtichem in 1819, Hans was to expose “the bad people [from] the estate,” as the driver reported (De Barros 2004: 34).

January had the estate residents—men, women, and children—gather at his house. A night of singing and dancing followed, culminating in the identification of the estate carpenter, Frederick, as an “*obeah* man,” the one responsible for poisoning the children. Frederick reported the events to the estate overseer who called in the attorney and launched a search for Hans. Hans, January and Frederick’s accuser, Venus, were tried and convicted. All three were sentenced to be whipped; as well, Venus was to work for 12 months in chains, while Hans was to be branded, jailed for a year, and afterwards made to “work in chains for life ‘for the benefit of the colony.’” (ibid., quoting Wray 1819)

The “driver” January, who had brought Hans, commenced the ritual “proceedings by drinking rum from a ram’s horn and ordered a ‘dram to be given to the officers,’” who De Barros (2004: 34) notes were likely the other estate drivers. Hans then collected money from everyone present before introducing the first stage of the ritual. After sacrificing a fowl, Hans placed the chicken’s feathers into the hair of the children in attendance before then inserting “a bell, an ‘Image and some other things,’” as someone later testified, into “a tub of water, along with part of a wild cane root which he claimed to have brought from ‘his country’” (ibid.). Hans then ritually bathed the children’s faces with the water ‘from [his] Country belief...that that would make the children come good’” (ibid.). Hans “anointed everyone who gathered, either ‘sprinkling’ their faces or ‘washing’ their heads” (ibid.).

Hans' next charge was to locate "the bad thing which had destroyed the Children," as Hans described (Browne 2012: 36). In a communal attempt to expose the identity of the alleged wrongdoer, Hans orchestrated the gathering in a ritual of singing, dancing, spirit manifestation, and a form of divination.

Hans sang his "country song" and was joined by the others who sang its "chorus." Hans then sang "the dance called Water mamma dans" while everyone danced, some eventually falling into convulsions as if possessed. Venus felt her "head beg[i]n to turn, as if [she] were mad"; others, "whose heads turned in such a manner, . . . fell to the ground." According to January, those gathered "became as if crazy, some thr[o]w[ing] themselves in the mud [while] others jumped." Hans and another man (apparently under the latter's orders) "flogged" the "most turbulent" with "wild canes" and bamboo that seemed to have been gathered for that purpose. He also put "guinea pepper in their eyes which he [had] chewed." A circle formed, and Venus – after dancing within it – accused Frederick of being the poisoner, the "bad man on the estate"; she saw this "from the water that ha[d] been sprinkled over [her] face and eyes." She then led the crowd to Frederick's house to find the "poison." Once there, Hans directed a child (Gabriel) to stand over a hole in the floor (which the others had dug), holding a pot of water; he covered her head and the pot with a piece of cloth. Pompandour removed the cloth, revealing blood, "negro hair," nail clippings, a snake's head, and "other things" in the pot. Hans told those gathered that "the stuff in the horn was the bad thing which destroyed the children, but it would do so no longer." (De Barros 2004: 34-35)<sup>300</sup>

Rituals such as this 1819 "Water mamma dans" served a primary function of identifying and assuaging injurious factors causing harm in the community, and so were both socially efficacious and charged with volatility and peril.<sup>301</sup> The account demonstrates a "determined indeterminacy" between healing and harming presented in terms of how both participants and contemporaneous observers characterized these rituals—as well as for scholars looking back on such events

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<sup>300</sup> Browne (2012: 36) suggests that the horn and objects found inside are preparations "commonly associated with obeah and Kongolese *minkisi*," and that the title used by certain people who testified at the trial to describe Hans—"Monkesi"—similarly was a court stenographer's rendering of *minkisi*. The term "Monkesi," which is also used in the trial records to describe the "Watermamma dance," could also be a rendering of "Makushi," an Indigenous Guyanese people, also known as Macushi, Macusi, Macussi, Makusi, Makuxi, Teueia, and Teweya people (Eberhard et al. 2020).

<sup>301</sup> The spelling "dans" in connection with Wata-mama is potentially a reference to the deity Dan from what is now coastal Republic of Bénin—as the great horned serpent, sometimes called Dan Aida Wedo (or Dan Anyidohuedo, Dambala Aido Wedo) and associated with the rainbow and, especially, with Mami Wata. See Dana Rush (2013).

(Chatlos 1990; Babb 2000 [1986]: 190). As Browne (2012: 43, 46) persuasively argues, forms of interpersonal violence “played a central role in Hans’s performance of the Minje Mama dance and his construction of authority,” as “Obeah practitioners [...] derived their authority from both spiritual and physical powers.” Within the ritual proceedings Hans used bamboo and cane to “beat” all the participants in the dance, he applied “guinea pepper” to their eyes, and “threatened to flog or kill Gabriel, the young girl who helped him find the poison in Frederick’s house, if she cried” (ibid.). Browne (ibid.) notes that while such actions were “painful,” they were also “essential to the Minje Mama dance’s success: Venus was able to identify Frederick as the poisoner, and several witnesses testified that they were able to ‘recover.’”

Those deemed Obeahmen, such as Hans and Willem, as well as Obeahwomen such as the “sage matrons” whom Stedman (1796 v2: 272) describes, and likely countless other ritual practitioners among Guianese plantations “appropriated slaveowners’ technology of control and terror to buttress their already impressive authority as spiritual experts” and to suppress opposition among skeptics (Browne 2012: 46). The specific forms of corporal force that both Hans and Willem employed constituted the primary methods used by slaveholders and managers to torture and persecute the people they enslaved. Furthermore, Browne (ibid.: 45) contends that flogging, whipping, applying pepper to sensitive areas, and other abuses were and are not typically found among West or Central African ritual assemblages intended to identify or mollify those accused of “sorcery” or “witchcraft,” which “suggests” for him “that the Minje Mama dance was a Caribbean phenomenon, not a watered-down African survival or retention.”<sup>302</sup>

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<sup>302</sup> It should be noted, however, that contrasting with Browne’s argument, in Central Africa a great many “convulsive” “witch-finding” movements swept back and forth over the centuries when the transatlantic slave trade was causing such internal havoc throughout sub-Saharan African societies. Hans’ methods may have been influenced by practices of these movements as key knowledge people brought with them across the Middle Passage. They may have been similar to—perhaps even mimicked—the brutalities of plantation masters, but identifying malefactors in Central Africa was and still is not gentle business. When all benign prognostication and healing failed, a last resort would be to call in someone to identify the “bad guy(s).” The results could lead to the widely

Browne (ibid.) distinguishes that while “cosmological origins” might lead to “various parts of Africa,” the brutalizing forms of physical violence accompanying these rituals were learned in enduring similar tortures that encompassed life for enslaved people in the Caribbean (cf. V. Brown 2008).

“The routinization and normalization of violence” imposed through centuries of enslavement endured into the postemancipation period and particularly informed the depravities of regimes of indenture, as well as other ways in which the colonial and later postcolonial state has objectified its subjects and citizens as means of imperial or national “production” (Trotz 2014: 360; Bahadur 2014). These ideological legacies and embodied histories structure physical aggressions as endemic within contemporary Guyanese society, specifically informing the devastating rates and forms of gender-based violence, police brutality, and a heavily militarized state (Henry 2020; cf. Danns 1982; Mars 2002; 2009). Widespread vilification of Komfa practices and practitioners so common today can also be attributed in part to afterlives of cruelties perpetrated by slaveholders—and to a degree, by enslaved people themselves, particularly those deemed as Obeah workers by colonial authorities or by those within their own communities. Projections of violence onto Komfa and Obeah traditions, including ongoing accusations of “Obeah murder,” have sustained social stigmatization of Spiritualists as living *jumbie* and as *ole higue* (or “witches”), and more generally as “bad worker” and “bad people.” After all, as Richard Allsopp (2003 [1996]: 68) observes specifically regarding Guyana’s Creolese language, the term “bad-people” refers to those “reputed to dabble or deal in obeah” and is synonymous with “obeah-people”—usually used in reference to “a family.”

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used poison oracle and/or to more direct homicide. On this vast topic, see Mary Douglas (1970), M. G. Marwick (1950, 1963), and Audrey Richards (1935), as well as Karen Fields (2014), Peter Geschiere (1997), Wyatt MacGaffey (2000), and Al Roberts (1994).

Komfa continues to be interpreted by nonpractitioners as a “dance” conveying affliction and “madness” through possession from a spirit identified as Wata-mama or any number of other *forces* who are thought to be evoked by “African” drumming. To be discussed further below, yet worth noting here—following Brian Moore (1995: 118)—is that even in postemancipation Guiana “*Cumfo* and *Watermamma* were one and the same,” and both were typically associated with Obeah. These ritual performances—whether divination, entertainment, or likely both, and much more—were known through an expansive array of names, and for colonial observers, and perhaps for practitioners themselves, not much was typically understood as distinguishing rituals engaged by Indigenous Guianese from those performed by Africans and their Creole descendants. For Methodist missionary Rev. H. V. P. Bronkhurst (1883: 386-87), for example,

the Tchibounga, the Comfoo, the Racoon, the Joe and Johnny, the Somma-Somma, the Shiloh, the Shake-shake, the Drupoid, the Water-Mamma or Mermaid, the Meringa, and other dances are all [...] connected with the practice of Obeahism. The Aboriginal Indians of the Colony, in like manner, have some dances peculiar to themselves. When a male member of the tribe dies, they hold a festival called *Macquarie*, and a dance called *Mocquarie* for his memorial; and when a female dies, they have a dance called *Hauyarie*.<sup>303</sup>

Other accounts propose more intimate connections between Indigenous Guianese practices and those of enslaved and later free Africans and Afro-Creoles. Some have claimed more specifically that Blacks learned about Wata-mama from Indigenous people. For instance, Rev. William Henry Brett (1868: 369), an Anglican missionary, writes that “one of the Obia dances of the blacks is commonly called the ‘*water-mama* dance’ from the appellation usually given by them to their adopted patroness, the Orehu of the Indians.” While Brett (*ibid.*) goes on to note that

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<sup>303</sup> The dance “Tchibounga” mentioned by Bronkhurst is most likely a term derived from central Bantu language(s). Im Thurn (1889: 281) writes of “macquari” practiced among Guianese “Arawaks” as “the whipping game, [...] the most essential feature of which [is] mutual whipping.” It remains possible that floggings associated with Wata-mama rituals mentioned above were influenced by Indigenous practices too, not only European or African ones, particularly as other “games” that Im Thurn (*ibid.*: 276-278) identified with “Macoosi” people continue to be performed today by Afro-Guyanese. The British Museum possesses a number of “Macquar(r)i” “whips” acquired in Guiana in their collections, some labelled as “funerary equipment” (see objects Am.367, Am.2484, Am.2485, etc.).

“many of the superstitions of Obia (or Negro witchcraft) are of a dark and malignant character,” he also observes that “there are some ideas which the blacks seem to have borrowed from the Indians, and others which they have communicated in return.” Attempting to clarify, Walter Roth (1915: 241), a “Protector of Indians” for the colonial administration of British Guiana in the early 1900s, and an eminent ethnologist, wrote that while “some of the Water Spirits have been repeatedly described by certain authors as the Water-mamma, they have nothing whatever to do with the African-Creole superstition represented under that designation.” Yet Roth’s view of an unyielding mutual exclusivity between “African-Creole” and (Amer-)“Indian” rituals directed toward the local deities of the deep is highly unrealistic (Gill 2009; van Stipriaan 2003). For instance, Moore (1995: 118) argues that “Creoles could have adopted” Indigenous practices—including “*Cumfo* and *Watermamma*” rituals—“in the same way they adopted the Amerindian dish ‘pepperpot’” and other culinary and agricultural technologies “ever since the period of slavery when there was greater contact” between Maroon and Indigenous communities outlying the coastal plantations.

Still, despite such historical processes of appropriative intercultural “borrowing” and “adopting,” or *love and theft*, “Komfa”—as the Creolese word for “spirit *possession*”—tends to be understood overwhelmingly as a practice “belonging” to and utilized by “Africans” (Lott 2013 [1993]). Guyanese today also fear the potential that specifically “Amerindian” identified (and “East Indian,” as well as “European,” usually “Dutch”) *jumbie* can cause affliction through unwelcome forms of manifestation. In contrast to conceptions of Komfa possession, Wata-mama and both the afflictions and blessings she is said to bring, are typically thought of by Guyanese as representing “Amerindian” culture (and specifically “folklore”—as ideologically distinguished from, say, “religion,” or what through a Christian framing Guyanese would deem sincere

“religious” faith). Considering such idea can help bring light to relationships that my friend Minister Joell identified as obtaining between Komfa and Wata-mama, namely, why “Wata-mama just get too much power for come ‘round we” and why “she must stay right there in the bush.” Spiritualists commonly describe troubling and often life-threatening experiences they have had with Wata-mama as primary impetuses for their coming into Spiritual life as Komfa People. Yet they do not honor her within Komfa services or Works performed within their church spaces. Instead, to recognize her role in endorsing and promoting the newfound ways that practitioners “stay,” they typically journey to be with the goddess in her own environs on pilgrimages that work to both bring Spiritualists into the “wilds” of trenches, rivers, creeks, and *bush*, as well as to keep the volatile goddess at bay. In other words, many Spiritualists understand themselves as having been initiated into Komfa traditions through the agencies of an Indigenous copresence made absent.

Interestingly, for many contemporary Indigenous Guyanese, the inherent dangers and potentials for death attributed to Water Mamas are—much like Mami Wata elsewhere—often associated with these spirits’ affiliations with Europeans and Europeanness, namely as ambassadors of vicious neo/colonialist and exploitative capitalist intrusions into Indigenous social and material worlds. James Whitaker (2020: 35) describes how for Makushi people with whom he worked in the northern Rupununi of central Guyana, histories of “contact and interaction with Europeans (particularly the British and Dutch)” are “reflected in folklore concerning water mamas,” or “mermaid-like beings that are thought to inhabit the local landscape.” Whitaker sees these spirits—known as *twingram* in Makushi, but more commonly as “water mamas” in English, the language used by most of his Makushi collaborators—as “similar to mermaids” found in “folklore” around the world, as “they are believed by the Makushi to live



in rivers and lakes and to entice or abduct human beings.” Still, “like other regional water spirits, water mamas are unfixed entities, as Mark Harris eloquently puts it, ‘around which meanings gather’” (Whitaker *ibid.*, quoting Harris 2014: 114).

Whitaker (2020: 35) details how in conducting fieldwork intermittently from 2012-2015 he “was surprised by the frequency with which [his] Makushi interlocutors described water mamas as being ‘like you guys’—referring to Europeans.” While for Whitaker (*ibid.*) the repeated references made by Makushi to the equivalency of water mamas’ and his own Europeanness reflected “a belief that water mamas are white or light-complexioned (the Makushi tend to say ‘fair’) and lighthaired,” he “eventually” came to see these positions as Makushi generational ruminations on their “historical encounters with Europeans.” One Makushi woman named Alexandria explained that “the water mama is the white man, they are *prankuru* [a term used to refer to certain Europeans], because *prana* is the sea and *kru* is the person that appears. So, *prankuru* is a person that comes from the sea. They say that the water mamas are white and reproduce by capturing people” (*ibid.*: 36). Abduction, which often starts with dreaming about water mamas, as it does for Komfa People, is central to Makushi relationships with these spirits. Maria, another Makushi woman, told Whitaker (*ibid.*: 38) that “they would mostly come at night when all of us sleeping and just carry you away, and you would just wake up next to the river.” Yet, some report that they would have chosen to not have emerged from the watery foreign land of wealth they encountered as captive-pilgrims. Gertrude, for example, reported that “Some people say that they [water mamas] are like in a city where they live. It has everything, like a city, car, plane and everything—fancy house” (*ibid.*: 40).

Whitaker (2020: 44) writes that “early Dutch–Amerindian colonial interactions are characterized by the use of matrimonial relations of affinity to form strategic alliances,” yet that

these so-called “relations of affinity” were also “coupled with and frequently replaced by relations of exploitation and enslavement over time” (cf. Menezes 2011 [1977]: 59; Whitehead 1988: 201, 221). Dutch authorities had to a certain degree suppressed the enslavement of Guiana’s Indigenous peoples to avoid interruptions to their colonial production and global commerce, and in 1793 they moved to abolish “Indian slavery” in much of what became Guiana’s interior regions (Menezes 2011 [1977]: 215, 218-21). Still, there remained increasing demand for enslaved Indigenous peoples on Guiana’s coastal plantations and interior timber and mineral extraction schemes, and “the Caribs and Akawaios emerged as the primary proxy slaving groups allied to the Dutch, with Makushi as “frequent targets of these slaving raids” (Whitaker 2016a: 33-35, 40; Whitaker 2016b: 82-83; Hilhouse 1825: 37; Whitehead 1988). Despite formal abolition, Makushi and other Indigenous people continued to be kidnapped, commodified, and sold, often by people from other Indigenous groups, to Dutch or other European traders or more often in the later period into Brazil. As the Schomburgk brothers (1922-23 [1847-48] v1: 325–26; v2: 40, 50, 118; 2010 [1840]: 51-52) described, “Caribs” and “Brazilians” maintained their raiding of Makushi communities and their trade in Makushi people well into the 1830s, and likely after formal abolition of slavery on British Guiana’s coastal plantations (Whitehead 1988).

Certain parallels between Makushi and Komfa understandings of water *mamas*/Wata-mamas can be emphasized, including her (classical) role in luring unconscious targets of her affection to submarine ecstasies and utopias whose glistening surfaces reflect treacherous pasts of European exploitative “contact” and “exchange,” as well as latent hazards to one’s present life and wellbeing. For Indigenous *and* non-Indigenous Guyanese, including Komfa People, Wata-mamas *kill*, if not potentially also heal, and drownings are typically attributed to her when no other cause can be readily detected. Gibson (2001: 29, 32) writes that “Watermamma” was “a

member” of Guyana’s “spiritual universe” up until the 1950s, but argues that the ritual complex’s “individualistic rather than communal nature” meant that “Watermamma could not survive White cultural domination” as an “Afro-Creole”-identified tradition. Yet she does live on, among Afro-Guyanese Komfa People, Makushi, and many other Indigenous and non-Indigenous Guyanese communities. Still, the forms she takes, the efficacies and dangers she bears, and the histories and cultural “ownership” attributed to her vary extensively.

Among Suriname’s more-contemporary Winti practitioners, for example, Alex van Stipriaan (2001: 91) has identified “Watramama” as having “lost her prominent and, for many, threatening position and character,” just as in earlier generations she had “lost her specifically Papa identity”—Papa (or Popo, Pawpaw, Paupau, etc.) being “a generic name for slaves shipped [from] between West Nigeria and Togo,” mainly Ewe, Fon, Yoruba, and related peoples (Oostindie and van Stipriaan 1995: 91).<sup>304</sup> Eclipsed in power by “Mother Earth, Mama Aisa,” who “developed into the prominent goddess she is in today’s winti pantheon,” Watramama was displaced due to the “decline in the importance of water in everyday lives of the slaves, while the role of the soil increased: it was in the soil that successive generations lay buried,” van Stipriaan (2001: 91) writes. He goes on to note that Watramama still manifests in several enduring aspects, as she has more recently come to “take on Cormanti [Akan] elements as well as Papa, and might

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<sup>304</sup> Alternatively, scholarship has shown that in early colonial Berbice, adjacent to Suriname, a majority of enslaved people were taken from the ports of Bonny or Kalabar where Igbo, Ibibio, Ijaw, Efik, Ekoi/Ejagham, and others were most prevalent (Robertson 2012). Berbice’s early “Dutch” Creole language largely featured an Ijaw lexicon and related grammatical structures. See further discussion in Chapter 7, section titled “Circling the Dead.” These “Kalabari Nation” peoples brought with them the Ijaw language word “minje,” meaning “water,” and likely also conveyed aspects of their devotional practices associated with water spirits, which were highly significant aspects of these cultures. And while Berbice and Suriname were distinct colonies, they shared a common border—marked by the Corentyne River—that was extremely porous. On early Berbician Minje Mama dance rituals see Randy Browne (2017), Gordon Gill (2009), and Ian Robertson (2012); and on water spirits in the religions of Kalabari and other Niger Delta, Cross River area, and adjacent peoples, see especially Robin Horton (1960, 1962, 1963, 1969), G. Tasié (1977), and Nimi Wariboko (2010).

inadvertently speak through the mouths of possessed dancers in an esoteric Luango [Loango] language” (ibid., citing Wooding 1972: 179).

And in yet another of her many personas, Watramama also “emerged in the hierarchically less prominent terrain of ‘Indji’ (Indian) winti,” or those spirits who practitioners understand as representing Indigenous Surinamese origins (van Stipriaan 2001: 91).<sup>305</sup> It seems likely that in this last aspect—as a Surinamese “Indji” Winti goddess—practitioners with intentions such as Joell’s might recognize their own Indigenous Guyanese Komfa Wata-mamas. In all of her various guises and identity transformations—borrowings, adoptions, love, and theft—van Stipriaan (ibid.) sees Watramama as having undergone “an unmistakable process of creolization” through her continued remembrance in Winti practices. Wata-mama in Guyana has likewise transformed over generations as practiced within Indigenous communities and among Spiritualists. Alongside these “African” and “Amerindian” transculturative traditions, throughout its emergence, expansions, and contractions, Komfa has similarly embraced aspects of and contributed to ritual practices brought by Asians in the postemancipation period, as well as “creolizing” and incorporating abundantly from Christian and other European cultural elements throughout the colonial and postcolonial eras.

### **“Black Pandit” Babu’s “Buck Parrot”**

“How come I ain’t black like you is, Mammy?” he asked one night when they were alone in the cabin, and gulping, Kizzy said, “Peoples jes’ born what color dey is, dat’s all.”  
—Alex Haley<sup>306</sup>

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<sup>305</sup> In Suriname, “Indian” generally refers to Indigenous people, whereas “Hindustani” is used to denote Surinamese of South Asian descent.

<sup>306</sup> From Haley’s *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* (1976: 445).

One day while sitting with Minister Joell in the meeting room of his mandir, we heard a major commotion out in front by the pews where a small group had gathered in preparation for the day's scheduled Work. We learned that a few of the children had accidentally knocked the cage of the mandir's pet bird off its stand while they were running around entertaining themselves. While the cage lay splayed open on the concrete, seed and water spilt, the bird remained on its perch—sideways—we were told. I had heard members of the gathering refer to the aged, medium-sized green bird before as “Babu's Buck parrot,” yet it never occurred to me to inquire why the leader of the mandir's pet was often attributed an Indigenous qualifier—or ethnoracial identity—in place of, or affixed to, its name. So I asked Joell. After laughing at the question, he began to reflect on the bird's background. Joell said that Babu and Mother Bonnie had taken care of the bird for at least some twenty-five years, and that it was supposedly older than their eldest daughter, who began caring for it as a young girl. The bird had already been “in the neighborhood,” Joell said, when a nearby family offered it to Bonnie and Babu, and particularly to their daughter. Over the years it had become “the mascot” of the mandir, according to Joell, and more than that. “Really,” he affirmed, “that bird's a Spiritual force.”

Joell expounded on the bird and its special relationships to the mandir and its members. He explained that “the parrot older than me too. She's here even long before I start coming with mommy to church here. And I was small then. Small-small,” he recalled. “She used to be out, right there sitting on Babu desk or Babu arm,” Joell said, remembering how the bird had previously not been confined to a cage.<sup>307</sup> Many Guyanese keep parrots and other birds as pets and as competition song-birds (see Rueb 2015). Parrots, and especially macaws, are often *trained*

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<sup>307</sup> I am unsure of the bird's species, but it may be *Forpus passerinus*, or green-rumped parrotlet, which Guyanese typically call “parrot” along with a range of other species and subspecies. As domestic pets, sources report that these birds' “expected lifespan is 20-40 years, provided their needs of daily exercise and healthy nutrition [are] met” (<https://www.beautyofbirds.com/parrotletsinfo.html>).

(or “tamed”) to not *abandon* their *owners’* homes through a process of “familiarization,” while generally not being kept in enclosures (cf. Norton 2015). Macaws sitting outside on open verandas are a common sight in Georgetown and more so elsewhere in the country. Joell said that only “in the past couple years we put she in there. ‘Cause she keep on crashing around and bothering everyone like she used to never do before.” He thought that maybe “she gone blind,” but others in the gathering, he told me, had “said she getting angry with she age, and start takin’ on everyone” there at the mandir. And while Joell said that he too had *always* heard congregants refer to the bird as “Buck,” he noticed that “more recent since she start attacking,” people use that particular name more often. Joell then said that over the years of performing Work with the mandir, he learned that the parrot is a specifically “Buck force,” and one that is perhaps remembered *as* Indigenous through the ways that members of the flock relate to the bird, and that the bird relates to them.

Joell said that while “most a we does call she ‘Babu’s pet,’” at the same time, “we all know it’s not his ‘pet.’ And that it’s not all a we ‘*pet*.’ It’s only since she get old, and in the cage, that she’s like a pet, now,” he elucidated, “‘cause before, she never stay so.” Joell said that in the past, the parrot was always “out and about,” with “the flock” of parishioners, entangling herself in their affairs while they went about their services and Spiritual Works. “She was she own self,” he recollected, “but now we got to keep she in she cage and all. Or she might hurt she self bad,” Joell reasoned, “or hurt someone else.” Marcy Norton (2015: 29) brings crucial attention to “divergences between European and Amerindian cultures’ ways of organizing inter-species relationships.” Norton (*ibid.*) contrasts Europeans’ central “organizing principles” of “human/animal and hunting/livestock binaries” with Indigenous Caribbean and Guayanese peoples’ “fundamental dividing line [...] between wild and tame beings.” As she writes, in

certain profound ways Europeans learned about “pets” from Indigenous peoples, for whom “the transformation of wild into tame, of enemies into kin, of prey into ‘pets,’ was a central and desirable pursuit. The adoption and taming—or ‘familiarization’—of non-human animals was ubiquitous among Caribbean and lowland South American indigenous groups” (ibid.). Possibly Mother Bonnie, Babu, Minister Joell, and others at the mandir understood their parrot’s Indigeneity through recognizing her as “*not* all a we pet.” Instead, Joell emphasized that “she was she own self” before requiring confinement, at which point some characterized her behavior as erratic, “wild,” and so *stereotypically* “Buck.” And yet she has “always” been “Babu’s Buck parrot,” even when she was previously “tame” while “out and about” flying amongst the mandir’s flock during their important Works.

As Norton (2015: 29) demonstrates, “European principles of maintaining proper boundaries between humans and beasts and adhering to a hierarchical taxonomy of kinds of animals” juxtaposed markedly with Indigenous forms of relationships that “bridged and superseded the human/non-human binary, grouping human kin and tamed animals on one side and human enemies and prey on the other.” Babu’s parrot, as “tamed animal,” was kin to the gathering, for much of her life. Yet in her older years, due to her purported “wildness,” the bird was subdued as a totalized “pet.” Norton (ibid.) notes that “some individuals of non-human species, ranging from parrots to peccaries, were hunted and consumed; other individuals of the same species were tamed and cherished as *iegue*, a Carib term that can denote a tamed animal or an adopted human child. Likewise,” Norton (ibid.: 29-30) writes, “the same logic organized many Caribbeans’ and South Americans’ interactions with non-humans prior to European acculturation. Hunting and warfare were understood and enacted as analogous activities in which a primary goal was to obtain captives who would be subject to either the regenerative death of

predation or the social birth of adoption.” Cultural memory linked to specifically Indigenous relational models likely informed Bonnie and Babu, their daughter, and the rest of the mandir in “adopting” the parrot as a non-human child, an *iegue*, and a “Buck” ancestral presence, while their more-recent rebuffing her rowdiness as “Buck” seems to follow Guyanese popular stereotyping. Despite the transformed status the parrot has taken on in her old age, Joell expressed that “she still a special force” as far as he is concerned.<sup>308</sup> “I know she still there in she heights,” he said, “‘cause sometime, when Babu looking real stressed, somethin’ troublin’ he bad, there he is still talkin’ wit’ she. He take she, and she sit there on he arm. And then like before they all does say Babu look like a pirate.”

On a different occasion, I shared my deep gratitude with Joell for his encouragement of my project, and specifically for advocating wider, fairer—more inclusive and equitable—perspectives on Komfa and its pasts. The ways he chose to take Indigenous peoples and their cultures and histories seriously in advancing his Spiritualist Life was inspiring for many around him. His work is highly significant in light of the ways that Guyanese nationalistic conceptions of Creole indigeneity have over generations repeatedly attempted to subsume Indigenous people’s lives and livelihoods, cultures and histories. Joell’s position was also a bold and oppositional one, considering that, on the one hand, Spiritualists have overwhelming centered Africa—and African pasts and cultural antecedents—in their philosophies, while alternatively, postemancipation and postcolonial cultural space has been increasingly afforded to Indo-Afro-specific “creolizations,” i.e. *douglaiizations* (Basheir 2013; Shibata 1994). Through what Jackson

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<sup>308</sup> Consider also that throughout the Atlantic world enslaved people and their descendants “embraced and adopted emblems of indigeneity as signs of autochthony and authenticity” (Derby forthcoming). Similarly, in locating Kongo and Indigenous iconographies in Cuban Espiritismo altars, Judith Bettelheim (2009: 296) writes that for both Espiritistas and Paleros, Indigenous “Indians are the first owners of the land, a people who resisted and continue to resist occupation. They are, in fact, the original ancestors of the Americas.” Also see Bettelheim (2001, 2005).



(2012: 174) perceives as their “dual representation” in Guyanese postcolonial society, Indigenous people have been generally disregarded “as premodern yet essential for the modern sovereignty of the nation-state.” Black and Indian Guyanese have striven to *become* indigenous through Creolization, as Jackson argues (ibid.), while endeavoring to “leave” Guyana’s Indigenous “Amerindian peoples” in the “past.”

While Joell and I sat at the mandir’s computer, he returned to the idea of Indigenous Obeah, or “Hupia/Opia.” While he did not retract his previous findings, he also granted that “really, we can’t know. Obeah could be from anywhere,” he said, as the computer screen before us displayed a dictionary of the Twi language. I told him that I had recently read that the word “Komfa” might be Fon, closely related and interactive over many centuries with Twi, and that I had also come across references attributing the word “Obeah” to an Edo language (Bastide 1971: 100). Joell was intrigued as ever, and soon we were browsing an Emai dictionary, a dialect of Edo, spoken by around 30,000 people on the plateau between the Edion and Owan rivers of present day Edo State, Nigeria (Schaefer and Egbokhare 2007: vii). We ascertained that “òbìà” is an Emai noun and verb meaning “work,” while “òbì” is Emai for “poison” and “venom” (ibid: 294). Interesting indeed, we both agreed, but then Joell reminded that “we can’t forget what we learned about Amerindian Obeah.” I told him that I wholeheartedly agreed, and that besides, “words could only get us so far.” Ours and others’ etymological exercises, Joell concurred, were likely futile “when we dealin’ with *hatred* for Buck people,” an animosity that has been fundamental to postcolonial Guyanese-ness, as we jointly identified. I told Joell not to lose his faith—his drive for justice and dedication to his own truth—trying to reciprocate the ways he had always fortified my morale throughout our conversations.

Then I asked to pull up a page, and showed him an article I had recently revisited. There was a passage that made me think directly of Joell and our dialogues when I had read it alone, and I was eager since then to share the author's ideas with him. Joell and I sat in the mandir's *bottom-house* and read these lines together.

Although there is an ever-growing literature on what is popularly called obeah, I know of no studies that explore the African-Amerindian (and, often enough) East Indian syncretisms in the supernatural beliefs of the Guyanese interior. The “water momma” tales are generally accepted as a standard feature of Caribbean culture, and an Amerindian group's familiarity with them as an index of its “acculturated” status. Yet, as with so many aspects of interior life in Guyana, it is an open question as to who acculturated whom. A systematic comparison of Guianas Amerindian beliefs in water spirits and West African / Caribbean folklore has yet to be done, but it is my impression that the two have been fitted together in complementary ways so that the resulting stories, while perhaps appearing on the surface to be familiar African items, are in fact complex syncretic creations that carry the thrust of the indigenous belief system at least as much as that of Africa. (Drummond 1977: 865n21)

Joell seemed to appreciate the perspective, and chuckled, as he repeated “yeah, right, is who acculturate who now? The man right to say it's ‘complex syncretic creation,’” Joell reread, “and that it's as much Indigenous as African.” Recognizing that the article was written in the late-1970s, he remarked that “things still the same-old same-old though. Still no one thinking like this. Except some people—Buck people—Amerindian themselves. And people like me,” Joell said, “who know better. That's mostly people who know we get Amerindian blood, you see. We know it, but we not real enough with we own self to allow it.” Joell was living his “limbo,” asserting himself as *many* through “figuratively” lifting “the shades” on Othered aspects of himself—his “blood”—instead of, as Shona Jackson (2012: xi) explains, “ignoring the meeting of worlds within.”

The following chapter explores some of the many streams that have contributed to the emergence of contemporary Komfa worlds, as generations of past practitioners *worked* to unsettle their dispossession at the hands of colonizers and enslavers. While criminalized since at

the late-1700s as discussed above, Komfa was embraced in various contexts of practice that influenced cosmological and ritual formations, as well as the ways that Spiritualists and their Work have been (mis)understood and (de)valued in their society more generally. As formerly enslaved people settled in Georgetown and its surrounding coastal communities, including postemancipation cooperative villages, they brought with them and met new forms of popular “religious” and “secular” culture—especially music and dance—that have proven vital to the many divergent paths of Spiritual life. For practitioners today, contemporary Komfa “traditions” reflect myriad plantation, and pre- and postplantation, cultural backgrounds that mean and have meant very different things to Spiritualists over countless generations. And while many of these pasts are in various ways “shaded,” Joell is certainly not alone among practitioners pursuing personal and collective historical rediscoveries of self—and so also of “Others” within and outside of one’s self.

## CHAPTER 6

### Glory Heights: From Plantation Backdam to Yard, Lodge, Dancehall, and Church

Dancing is also a favourite diversion. Creoles, white, black, and brown, all dance spontaneously; they require no teaching. The black people dance beautifully; I never saw better waltzing in my life than at some of their dignity balls. Dances are frequent in Georgetown.... The Africans (Congos, Kroomen, etc.) have some native dances which they perform at times, such as the kumfoo and others; but these are of a grossly lascivious nature and not often to be witnessed.

—Henry Kirke<sup>309</sup>

A moonlight night is preferred.... Chief among the African dances kept up in the Canal are those in memory of—or to—the dead.... The African dance is not merely, or chiefly, physical exercise. The “ganda,” or dance-ring, is really the African theatre. Dramas, comedies, and tragedies are all acted there; accompanied by songs in the African tongue which (even in America) go near to the heart of Negroland.

—J. Graham Cruickshank<sup>310</sup>

He told his stories obliquely, resurrecting secret gods and devils from a forbidden Afro-Amerindian pantheon. Jordan seldom left Agricola. What he had in common with the Prophet was this: he never hesitated to bring biblical characters into his pagan mythopoetic folk legends—Judas, Amanja, and the Amerindian Kanaima were fused into one, Elijah, Legba, Master of the Crossroads, and Amalivaca, the Christ of the Arawaks became a composite character.... This symbiotic relationship between people, gods and folk archetypes gave to the New World African a cultural resilience that made a significant contribution to ... survival.

—Jan Carew<sup>311</sup>

To the possessed  
you are the gift  
of enlightenment.  
To the dispossessed  
you are the scale  
of judgement.  
—John Agard<sup>312</sup>

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<sup>309</sup> From Derby, England, Kirke was a Guianese high court magistrate, attorney general, and sheriff of Essequibo from 1887 to 1892 (Shepherd 2010: 129n23). Quote is from *Twenty-Five Years in British Guiana* (1898: 65-66).

<sup>310</sup> This quote comes from Cruickshank’s essay titled “Among the ‘Aku’ (Yoruba) in Canal No. 1, West Bank, Demerara River” (1917: 78). Images in this and the previous chapter are also drawn from Cruickshank’s essay.

<sup>311</sup> Carew recorded these reflections on his early childhood in 1920s Agricola village, when Nathaniel Jordan’s “Jordanite” WEMP church was burgeoning, in “The Fusion of African and Amerindian Folk Myths” (1977: 7-9).

<sup>312</sup> From Agard’s poem “Tongue” (2004: 17).

**“Eboe Kumfoism,” “Kramanti Dances,” “Yoruba Dance-Rings,” and “Congo Kings”<sup>313</sup>**

Guyanese today come to Komfa from many different backgrounds and for innumerable reasons, seeking manifold interventions into misfortunes and expecting various outcomes for their lives. For many practitioners, “taking up the mantle” of Spiritual life is understood as a necessary passage towards their fulfilment of familial responsibilities, as a tradition bequeathed by the ancestors—whoever they may be. Such is even the case for the many people who have reported being compelled to attend Spiritualist churches and Komfa Works by the often-extreme acts performed by forces like Wata-mama. These afflicting *jumbie* are said to remind people in their dreams and through ominous portents in their day-to-day lives of their lapsed attention to the dead, and their reciprocal—cyclical—obligations of remembrance and regeneration. For many Guyanese who participate in Spiritualist traditions, remembering the physical, social, and other torments of servitude and colonization that their predecessors endured through seeking the succor offered through ritual is central to their continued honoring and entertaining of ancestors. Occasionally, such concerns with pasts of colonized subjugation—and contests to those demeaning conditions—are extended to include the experiences of Asian immigrants who suffered under indenture. But by and large, Komfa People dwell on the idea of Komfa as “a part of African culture,” as an “African thing,” because African “ancestors need for dance, for sing, and be together,” as Rochelle commented, a practitioner quoted above. Although sometimes conceded as “*Dougla*,” Minister Joell also pointed to what he sees as a predicament wherein many practitioners maintain that Komfa is “for and from all people,” yet continue to overwhelmingly emphasize Komfa’s continuities with African pasts to the exclusion of other “Nations.”

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<sup>313</sup> These are all terms designating various assemblages of “African Nations” in colonial Guiana, as discussed below.

In speaking about their traditions' pasts, Spiritualists tend to bring attention to the roles Komfa and analogous practices served within plantation and colonial social life as ritual forms brought with enslaved people from West and Central African homelands that endured through meeting the changing needs of practitioners' new, precarious, life-threatening circumstances. In many ways, accounts told by Spiritualists are paralleled by those of historians who have written about Komfa (or, more often, Comfa, Cumfo, etc.). Early historians often provide fleeting accounts that are generally reductive and ethnocentric—guided by the social scientific fictions of European superiority. In a widely circulating account, for example, preeminent colonial historiographer of British Guiana, James Rodway (1897: 287), described the “Cumfoo dance” as “one of the finest institutions in the world for producing nightmare,” adding that “this and other dances are connected with Obeah, the witch cult of the African.”<sup>314</sup> About a decade earlier, someone responded to an article in British Guiana's *Daily Chronicle* (18 November 1885: 3; 24 November 1885: 4) about an act of “Superstition in Essequibo [sic]” involving two “coffins” and hundreds of candles placed by a riverside in attempts to uncover “buried treasure.” The anonymous author refers to the ritual as “Eboe Kumfoism,” in a ostensible reference to Igbo people of contemporary Nigeria, but more likely as a pejorative means of “Africanizing” the “Creole” practice in which South Asian “coolies” are identified as participants as well as “negroes” (ibid). Still, as Douglas Chambers (2000: 57) has argued, “social and cultural artifacts termed ‘Ibo’ or ‘Eboe’ in the New World are signs of a historical Igbo presence, varied in different times and places” (cf. Byrd 2006). Igbo—and *many* other sub-Saharan African cultural

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<sup>314</sup> Rodway was a British born and trained botanist and historian, and a fellow of the Linnaean Society, and co-founder of the British Guiana Museum and The Agricultural and Commercial Society of British Guiana, for which he served as editor of the society's influential journal, *Timehri*. By the time of his death in 1926, he had lived in Guiana for over fifty-five years. On Rodway's preeminence among historiographers of colonial Guiana, see, for example, Bridget Brereton (2003: 593n7).

presences were vital aspects of Guiana’s plantation societies, particularly in the period of enslavement prior to the arrival of Asians, Portuguese, and others who likewise brought their own “social and cultural artifacts” to the colony.

During enslavement on Guiana’s plantations, as well as in free and Maroon villages of the era—as elsewhere in the Atlantic world—Africans and their descendants organized themselves through often-elaborate social configurations. Given the extreme measures of control that slaveholders exerted in restricting the scope of enslaved people’s lives, it remains remarkable that, to the extent possible, Africans and Afro-Creoles (re-)created sustainable and effective means of social organization and even political institutions, often based in the



Group of Kongos, Mahaicony, Demerara

*Fig. 6.1* A photograph from prior to 1919 titled “Group of Kongos, Mahaicony, Demerara,” included in J. Graham Cruickshank’s article on “African Immigrants After Freedom.” Many “liberated Africans” came to British Guiana after slavery.

remembered and re-created knowledge and practices of their homelands. Most commonly referred to in the literature and by enslaved people themselves as

“nations,” these “were fluid communities of

people who came from the same general geographic area in West [or Central] Africa and who could communicate because they shared a language” (Kars 2016: 47n26). According to Marjoleine Kars (*ibid.*), “nations did not reflect particular ethnic identities in Africa; rather, they were diasporic institutions forged in the Americas for social and religious fellowship.” Yet as

Chambers (2000) and others argue, the newly emerging forms of identity represented through Afro-*nation* societies certainly carried “signs” of historical sub-Saharan African “ethnic” presences as “diasporic institutions” (Konadu 2010; Law and Lovejoy 1997; Thornton 1998, 2000; Warner-Lewis 1991, 1997, 2003, and *passim*).

Returning to Guianese colonial historiographer James Rodway, in his classic *History of British Guiana, from the year 1668 to the present time* (1893 v2: 297), claims that “it had been customary for years for the negroes of every nation in a district to choose head-men or ‘Kings,’ under whom were several subaltern officers of the same nation.” Among the “nations” or “Companies” of “negroes” that Rodway (*ibid.*: 295, 297) identifies are “Eboes,” “Coromantees,” “Congoes,” and potentially others. “From the confessions of the Congoes,” he writes, “it appeared they had a ‘King,’ Governor, General Drummer and a Doctor or Lawyer” (*ibid.*: 298). Rodway (*ibid.*: 297) notes further that “the duties of the ‘Kings’ were to take care of the sick and purchase rice, sugar, &c., for them, to conduct the burials, and see that the corpse was properly enclosed in cloth, and that the customary rites and dances were duly observed.” The Guianese mutual-aid and burial societies that Rodway documented, predecessors to what Guyanese today call “self-help lodges,” were founded by enslaved people from various West and Central African backgrounds. As communal—largely egalitarian—organizations owing to their shared realities of *equality in bondage*, members of these groups often had the capacity to unseat their “kings,” “queens,” or other leaders (cf. Williams 1991: 94-95, 1996a: 155n4). As Rodway (1893 v2: 297-98) writes,

an end was put to these “Companies”—as they were called—among the Congoes, by a quarrel between them and their “King,” who at a certain burial declared that he had no money, although the people believed he had enough for the purpose, as it was impossible that their contributions could all have been exhausted. [...] The “Company” was abolished, and on each estate they [Congoes] had since taken care of their own dead.



Signs of Igbo, Kongo, and *many* other sub-Saharan African cultural presences and diasporic “nations” can be traced within Komfa’s pasts. However, a majority of Spiritualists and scholars have concentrated on what are considered Akan antecedents—“social and cultural artifacts” thought to derive from those whom many contemporary Spiritualist refer to as their Ashanti Nation of ancestors (Chambers 2000: 57). After all, as the Director General of Guyana’s Ministry of the Presidency, Joseph Harmon, has been recently quoted as saying, “most Afro-Guyanese identify with the Akan” (*Stabroek News* 12 June 2019).<sup>315</sup>

Consider, for instance, a “characteristic escape narrative” of “mass flight” recorded by Peter Kempadoo (1974: K104) in early-1970s Guyana in which a group recalls local memory of an event that happened generations ago when hundreds of enslaved people of the “Kramanti” nation (or “Akan-speakers exported from Ghana”) refused their torturous captivity and flew away from the Philippi plantation in Berbice (Schuler 2005: 189). According to one of Kempadoo’s (1974: K104) interlocutors, after gathering by the waterside among some “Kramanti trees,” “over 500 or 300” people began a ritual of drumming, singing, and dancing through which they had previously “learn[ed] to fly. They know to fly,” as one person explains. In the ritual, “people would dance” to “a particular sound of the drum, [...] they mark a circle, and they [stand] back to back,” and “stay just like that and start to dance on their head and all those kind of thing” (ibid.). The same speaker also mentions that “they call it Komfa,” memorializing a specifically “Kramanti,” or Akan, cultural provenance—or at least connotation—to rituals of “mass flight” and by extension to more encompassing “Komfa” traditions of spirit manifestation invoked through drums, singing, and dance (ibid.; also see

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<sup>315</sup> On April 25, 2020, the Ministry of the Presidency (MoTP) announced that Harmon would no longer serve as Director General of MoTP and that President David Granger had appointed Harmon as Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of the National COVID-19 Task Force (NCTF).

Schuler 2005: 189-90). The group also mentions that “this flying business is to go ‘way [from enslavement], but people use it to suck” (ibid.). “As he said,” someone else clarifies, “the evil part of it is to suck,” as many Guyanese refer to forms of “mystical aggression” and afflictive therapeutics, which are overwhelmingly characterized as Obeah (ibid.; Palmié 2002: 178).<sup>316</sup>

A common refrain linking Komfa directly to “Ghana” draws much reinforcement from the popular notion, and memory, conceiving of most or many Afro-Guyanese people’s ancestors as having Akan heritage. Reflecting a narrative that I have heard told repeatedly by Spiritualists, one practitioner explicitly explained that

Komfa come from Ghana, the Akan people—Ashanti—just like Obeah too you see? Or what they does say is Obeah beside. Well Ghana get a word, they own word “Komfa,” that does mean pastor, Spiritual master, and guide—for the court, for the chief and he family and all, for the village—for guide they through, guiding wha’s right wha’s wrong, guiding this guiding on that. ... A advisor, a spiritual advisor for the people them. That’s wha’s a Komfa [/a-komfa]. Is a person, a title. For them Ghanaian is a special thing, a special person, “a-komfa,” they does say. They the ones who know the gods.

Precisely as this practitioner stated, in the Twi language spoken by many in the contemporary Republic of Ghana, and around the world, “*akomfo*” is a term that generally designates “Akan priests and priestesses” (singular, *okomfo*) (Rosen 2020: 3; cf. Konadu 2004). While serving their communities as “pastors,” as my friend said, the primary social significance of *akomfo* is their vital roles as mediums and “servitors of the *abosom*” (McCaskie 2002 [1995]: 122). *Abosom* are “considered to be the emissaries or children of *Onyankopon*,” or “the Creator,” but are also often regarded “as ‘shrines’ or ‘deities’ (the power thereof), even though these English cognates are culturally inaccurate” according to Kwasi Konadu (2004: x-xi). European observers on what was for them “the Gold Coast” typically regarded *abosom*—and specifically *suman*, “the potency

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<sup>316</sup> Regarding Central African “cursing charms” that “healed by attacking” people and forces “responsible for the affliction,” see Wyatt MacGaffey (1986: 156).

within certain objects”—as “fetishes,” and composed accounts disparaging *okomfo* as “Fetish Priest[s]” (Konadu 2004: xiv; McCaskie 2002 [1995]: 124; Pietz 1985: 16).

Some scholars, such as Roger Bastide, Dale Bisnauth, and others, have characterized Akan *okomfo* in contrast to *obayifo*, and argued that Caribbean Obeah practices derive largely from the role of the latter. Bisnauth (1989: 89) writes that West Africans “guarded themselves against the machinations of the *obayifo* by wearing *suman* (amulets or charms) which were often provided by the *okomfo*. Sometimes the aid of a *bonsam komfo* (witch doctor) was enlisted to unearth the *obayifo* and to render his work ineffective.” Consequently, as Bastide (1971: 103) contends, the Caribbean “term signifying magic, *obeah*, is quite certainly derived from the Ashanti word *obayifo*, which bears the same meaning. The ‘*obeah*-men’ are generally male, but there do exist a few ‘*obeah* women’ too,” Bastide dubiously declares. “Their business is to prepare objects that are meant to kill, or cure, or procure someone’s love. Such objects are called *obi*,” he writes, adding that “we should not forget that the Ashanti priest in Africa is known as *Obi O Komfo*” (ibid.; cf. Morrish 1982: 44). In exploring the complex interplay between Jamaican Obeah and Myal practices—which mirrors relationships between Obeah and Komfa in Guyana—scholars like Orlando Patterson and Dianne Stewart have instead located linguistic antecedents for “Obeah” in the Twi word *obeye*. Stewart (2005: 49), for instance, following Patterson (1975 [1967]: 185-95), is persuaded that *obeye* “is a more fitting cognate in that it signifies the concept of ‘moral neutrality’ in its original usage and because it is closer in terms of pronunciation to the Jamaican term ‘Obeah’ than *obayifo*” (cf. Barrett 1976: 64; Bilby and Handler 2004: 155).<sup>317</sup>

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<sup>317</sup> As Nathaniel Murrell (2010: 231) cogently explains, “*obi*, *obeye*, *okomfo* and *obayifo* are geographical (not moral) African sources in the evolution of the word *Obeah-man*.”

While the Guyanese word “Komfa” may well have origins in the Twi word “*akomfo*,” for centuries the term has encompassed a diverse range of practices that are both indigenous to Guyana and that were brought there from many different cultural backgrounds and geographies beyond those of the Gold Coast. Still, along with Komfa and Obeah heritages, Akan cultural



**Fig. 6.2** Grocery shop advertising with the Creolese term *nyamish*, meaning “hungry,” and “connected with *nyam* (eat), *yam* (root food), *nyame* (name of god)” in a number of West African languages, including Twi. Quotation is from Kamau Brathwaite’s *Mother Poem* (1977: 121). Paramaribo, 2015.

influence is felt acutely in Guyana through a number of extant traditions, including Twi terms that have been adopted into Guyana’s Creolese language.

Many food items continue to carry Twi designations, personal names among Afro-Guyanese can still reflect Akan day-naming practices, and widespread remembrance of *Anansesem*, or ‘*Nancy-story*, are all important examples of Akan diasporic cultural presence in contemporary Guyanese society (cf. Konadu 2010). However, many practitioners express that they feel little connecting *their* Komfa tradition, as a contemporary Guyanese form, to the religion(s) of their brothers and sisters across the Atlantic, specifically in Ghana, even if they conceive of their practice as “coming from” Asante, Kramanti, or Ghanaian “origins.” They do not often say that Komfa lacks sub-Saharan African—and precisely Akan—cultural forebears, but rather that their traditions are just too “*mix-up-mash-up*,” too “*simi-dimi*,” or too “*dougla*” for them to distinguish what might be Akan features from any others (cf. Khan 2004: 101-120). Some also report that their practices are ultimately “too Christian” and even “too English” to hold traits that are recognizably “African” in any sense of *specific* cultural continuities. “Is a Creole thing,” I was told when asking someone what constituted “too simi-

dimi” or “too Dougla,” for them. “I say ‘Creole’ ‘cause you can’ really call the thing ‘Dougla’ when you does look at it and see all the Christian part we does do,” the person explained. “Really a Whiteman thing more so than what we all does think when we all here callin’ it ‘African’ all the time. But that’s good too,” the practitioner shared. “‘Cause is a culture thing too beside, nonetheless.”

Spiritualists’ reflexive ruminations on their traditions’ interculturative backgrounds reflect histories of “creolization,” or “hybridity,” and the reality that—like “Obeah”—over time many parallel religious traditions were constellated under the label of “Komfa” as the practices themselves came to encompass localized assemblages of culturally and regionally diverse features. Gibson (1992, 2001, 2013), for example, has sought to demonstrate Komfa’s inheritance of explicitly Kongo and other Central African cultural elements that gained prominence as more enslaved—and indentured—people were brought from those regions, while the practices they engaged was still referred to as “Komfa.” In other words, as demographics of the colony changed and local saliences of various regionally or culturally defined practices waxed and waned, the originally Twi word meaning an “Akan priest”—transformed into “Komfa” and likely associated from early on with the dances of the Kramanti nation—endured as a “catchall” term encompassing all African-associated rituals, particularly those involving dance, drumming, and spirit possession. Along with the juridical regimes of the plantation that codified Obeah—and by extension Komfa—as (“African”) “black magic” in part through criminalizing the practice often by punishment of death, the influence of European Christian doctrine and institutional structures of Christian churches also contributed greatly to Komfa’s coalescences.

**“Black ministers. Black shopkeepers. Black merchants. Black planters, everything Black”:  
“English” Hegemonies, Subaltern “Revivals,” and “Anti-Portuguese Riots”<sup>318</sup>**

A Christian missionary presence of any significance arrived to colonial Guiana only in the three or four decades prior to the formal ending of enslavement, with Georgetown’s first Anglican church opening in 1810 (R. Smith 1976: 320; Rodway 1983 v2: 250-60). Part of these developments involved a transition from Dutch to British sovereignty over the three colonies that would later become British Guiana in 1831, just years before the colony officially abolished slavery. Much more important for colonizers was the idea that “teaching” enslaved people Christian religion would make them less resistive to their positions of commoditized servitude and less likely to rebel against slaveholders who enforced that subjugated status of presupposed nonhumanity. For such reasons, as Raymond Smith (1976: 326) describes, “the clergy were well established among the slaves by the time emancipation came” through efforts—by the late-1820s—to “prepare” enslaved people for “freedom.” From the start of the 1800s through to emancipation in 1838, much of the British Caribbean “went through a period of readjustment in which Christianization came to be accepted as the principal means of rendering slaves tractable” (ibid: 320). A major uprising that took place in the Guianese colony of Demerara in 1823, however, was largely attributed to the progressive influence of missionaries’ presence there, and much debate followed among slaveowners regarding Christianity’s roles of suppression and liberation in the lives of enslaved Africans (Bryant 1824; Costa 1994).

Smith (1976: 319, 326) characterizes the period leading up to abolition in British Guiana as one of “mass conversion” during which an “enormous expansion” of churches and church-run schools “affected virtually every person” in the colony, which in 1841 was just under 100,000

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<sup>318</sup> These sentiments were shared within an 1856 correspondence between affiliates of London’s Methodist Missionary Society, as quoted in Moore (1999: 72n38) and discussed further below.

people—of whom roughly 85,000 were just three years prior counted as property.<sup>319</sup> During much of the period of enslavement, there was a distinct lack of formal Christian institutions in Dutch and British Guianese colonies, with “no indication that any plantation had a chapel” or other dedicated church structure (ibid.: 317). Prior to around 1800, there was only “one Dutch and one English clergyman” in all of Demerara, according to Smith (ibid.), and they “conducted separate Sunday services in the same room under the courthouse.” Still, some slaveowners held daily prayers and many likely included the people they held on their plantations within their familial rituals—especially their domestic “house slaves” (ibid.). Furthermore, enslaved people’s lives were in many tangible ways organized around not only the demands of economic production, but also the Christian calendar. Rodway (1893 v2: 43) writes of a set of ordinances from the late 1700s that beleaguered plantation owners, which forbade them under penalty of fines “to work slaves on Sundays and holidays, except in cases of necessity, such as a breach of the dam, or, by special permission, under peculiar circumstances.” Sundays, therefore, along with allowing for rest, sustenance, and commercial endeavors like marketing, also served as vital moments in the cycles of plantation life and death, often set aside for burials or other significant occasions that the *everyday* brutalities of enslavement typically did not afford time to recognize.

Christian holy days, and in particular Christmas and Easter, also became important celebrations for enslaved people that were central to their marking of time as well as of community commitments. Christian holidays, including Sundays, provided openings for engaging in rituals and other activities that helped foster communal forms of relating among people both living and dead, and assisted in the establishment of crucial practices within enslaved communities. In all Caribbean colonies, Easter, and especially Christmas and New

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<sup>319</sup> Figures are compiled from *British Guiana Blue Book 1841* (1841), Robert Duff (1866), and Robert Schomburgk (2010 [1840]).

Year's, had become the chief annual festivals during which enslaved people typically had more public freedom to demonstrate their faiths and solidarities—with one another, and with their divinities and dead (Frey and Wood 2003: 397-98; Zoellner 2020: 69-71; cf. May 2019). In British Guiana, Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost masquerades and processions were common, as they also were for funerals and other events throughout the year (see Bolingbroke 1809: 44; R. Smith 1965 [1956]: 9-10). Certain slaveowners and their hired White plantation managers also tended to permit—or enslaved people demanded—occasions for recreation and respite aside from these set intervals, and they likely took these opportunities to perform their most important responsibilities, typically involving rituals of dance. As Rodway (1893 v2: 43) notes of the same collection of late-1700s “slave laws,” “dances might be allowed once a month, not including the holidays, but never kept up later than two o'clock in the morning, on pain of a fine of the same amount” (“f150,” or Dutch guilders). Numerous accounts attest that these day-into-night events offered chances for enslaved people to enact ritual performances deemed critical to their very existence, including rituals of dance in recognition of their ancestors and staging the courts of the various nations' kings and queens and other royalty and ennobled offices. And while “Christian ceremonial gradually permeated the whole” of British Guianese society in the lead-up to and after Emancipation, “African elements” also pervaded these nominally Christian festivals as they would “gradually permeate” more formal Christian edifices as well (R. Smith 1976: 318).

Predecessors to Komfa and other “nation dances” were well established long-prior to the emergence of institutional Christianity that immediately preceded the end of enslavement (cf. Taylor 2001). Informal European Christian practices, however, had long been a part of plantation life and the structures enforcing regimes of labor and permitting moments of leisure, including mandatory work stoppage on (most) Sundays and other annual Christian holidays. Yet with the



colony-wide promotion of a prescribed Christianity that came along with “freedom,” attendance and membership in church, including “conversion” and baptism, came “to symbolize progress,” as Smith (1976: 327) demonstrates, and identifies “in the West Indian vernacular” as “upliftment.” “Emancipation [...] brought new imperatives,” Brian Moore (1999: 64) writes, and “the removal of the whip and draconian slave laws pointed in the direction of greater emphasis on the cultural assimilation of the ex-slaves (although the local whites were slow to recognize this), while continuing to denounce their African heritage as barbarous.” Affiliations with Christian churches, and so schools, “created avenues of social mobility for the ex-slaves—avenues which tied them in directly with the highest status levels of the total society” (R. Smith 1976: 327). Those elites were former-slave-owning Whites, and specifically, Anglicans, a distinction which grew increasingly salient as “freedom,” and a massive Christian influence that came with it, also brought a vast change to the colony’s demography. When plantation owners demanded the British Empire assist them in securing new bases of inexpensive—exploitable—sources of human labor in the immediate wake of emancipation, imperial officials conceded and plans were made to entice indentured workers from Asia, Europe, and Africa. Albeit, “planters” had already been compensated for the financial losses they endured through abolition, with the British Crown granting over twenty million pounds sterling to former slaveowners for their state-appropriated “properties” (Draper 2007). Those who claimed possession of people (or “slaves”) in Guianese colonies took the lion’s share of the total allotment, as slaveowners successfully argued that these *enslaved properties* were “disproportionately productive” when compared to those in other British colonies, as Guianese sugar “outputs” were unparalleled in the decades prior to emancipation (Draper 2012: 68).<sup>320</sup>

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<sup>320</sup> While Jamaica had the highest number of claims on enslaved people by far, those from Berbice, Demerara, and Essequibo were disproportionately “overvalued” in the compensation process compared to enslaved people in other

So while many “new” peoples and their cultural traditions were brought to Guiana in the postemancipation period, “English” culture remained hegemonic in many important—and fundamentally oppressive—ways. One of the means through which English Christianity came “to symbolize progress” and social statuses of “upliftment” within the lives of formerly enslaved people and their still-indentured counterparts was through explicitly juxtaposing what was deemed European Christian “civility” with non-European, *un-Christian* religions—specifically those of Africans, Asians, and Indigenous Americans. Religious traditions of these non-Europeans were correspondingly deemed “heathen” and “primitive,” and made to symbolize impediments to European concepts of “progress” that materialized in non-European people’s lives as real challenges to their “upliftment.”<sup>321</sup> All schools in British Guiana were run by the Anglican Church or another government-approved Protestant body, so legally mandated education inherently involved forms of Christianization through to Independence (Drummond 1980: 359). And while “African” Obeah (and Komfa) and “Amerindian” Kanaimà (and Piya)

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British colonies because, as Guianese planters argued, they had lost more *potential* value in having their enslaved property “seized” as sugar production in Guianese colonies generated greater wealth. See Nick Draper (2012: 68).

<sup>321</sup> “Primitivism,” as Fabian (2014 [1983]: 17-18) demonstrates, and discussed in Chapter 2, is a troubling concept based in culturally determined and politically motivated conceptions of temporality that shares much in common with notions of the “savage[,] tribal, traditional, third world or whatever euphemism is current.” Scholarship guided by the rubric of “primitivism” abounds, however, and one is apt to begin any study with Said’s *Orientalism* (1978). Fairchild’s *The Noble Savage* (1928) offers an early comparison of primitivist themes drawn on by the poets of Romanticism. In the 1930s, Lovejoy and Boas (1935; 1948) and Whitney (1934) all worked together in categorizing representations of “the primitive.” Also pertinent are Goldwater’s *Primitivism in Modern Art* (1938), Baudet’s *Paradise on Earth* (1965), Bell’s *Primitivism* (1972), Dudley and Novak’s edited volume *The Wild Man Within* (1972), Diamond’s *In Search of the Primitive* (1974), and Street’s *The Savage in Literature* (1975).

In the mid-1970s began a proliferation of research regarding colonialist discourses of primitivism embedded in classic English and other European literatures, in many ways ushered in by Achebe’s (1977) study of Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1899). For accounts that can be considered alongside Fabians’ (2014 [1983]; 1996; 2000), also see the contributions of Stocking (1968; 1987; 1992; 1995), Asad’s (1973), Clifford and Marcus’s (1986), and Manganaro’s (1990) edited volumes, Taussig (1986), Solomon-Godeau (1986), Clifford (1988), Brantlinger (1988), Torgovnick (1990; 1997), Barkan and Bush’s (1995) volume, Carr (1996), and Connelly (1999). A helpful—and much more extended—review and compilation of literatures regarding primitivism represented in art can be found in the volume edited by Flan and Deutch (2003). Many additional, and more recent, works of relevance are available. For a compelling look at contemporary transformations in representing “the new primitives,” for example, see Etherington (2017, 2018).

practices had been stigmatized for generations and likely centuries in Guiana's pasts, with emancipation the religions brought by South Asians, and particularly Hindu and Islam, as well as Catholicism of Portuguese immigrants, became new loci of attack and marginalization in British Guiana's politics of respectability (ibid.; Whitehead 2002; Rocklin 2019). In light of this proliferation of diverse practices brought by people from many parts of the non-Anglo-European world, the forms of Christianity institutionalized in Guiana were made meticulously "English." Smith (1976: 327) writes that "church services, music, speech, and subsidiary associational activities were kept very close to British patterns, and clergymen from Britain were preferred by the congregations." In many sectors, "English" culture prevailed (also see Moore 1987; 1995; 1999).

While such conditions might seem un conducive to the expansion and ongoing transformation of Komfa—and similarly situated non-European ritual idioms—the heightened motivations for acceptance of Christianity could not have been totalizing or uniform in their effects. Just as these practices were sustained through the often-unconceivable deprivations of enslavement, Guiana's subterranean traditions continue to thrive in the postemancipation period, often reinforcing and contributing to one another as well as to locally incipient forms of Christianity. Smith (1976: 328) argues that "elements of belief and practice which appear to be African," but may just as likely hold substantial Indigenous American, Asian, and European cultural facets, "such as witchcraft, drumming, and dancing, persisted into the later nineteenth century and still exist[ed]" in 1970s Guyana, as they do today. "The reason for their preservation in relatively unmodified form is, paradoxically," Smith (ibid.) writes, "that Christianity remained both strong and orthodox, so that instead of syncretism one got the parallel existence of two types of belief and practice," namely, those legitimated as properly Anglo-European, and those

rebuked as “non-European alterities” (Dussel 1993: 65). As a result, much dynamic interchange has often characterized relationships between those colonially disdained, *un-Christian*, religious “little traditions,” as Rhoda Reddock (1998: 70) has interpreted such “subordinate level interculturations.”

While certain evidence can be presented against the claim, Smith (1976: 329) argues that “during the slavery period little attention was paid to African dancing and drumming” by overseers or colonial authorities. Not until the postemancipation influx of South and East Asians were Obeah laws in British Guiana re-promulgated to exact harsher castigations, as means of preventing the “bad influence” that “heathen coolies” had on the newly Christianized Afro-Creole and Indigenous populations of the colony (Bronkhurst 1883: 244, 364; Duff 1866: 320; cf. Moore 1995: 145). Even if often *associated* with criminal acts identified as “Obeah,” rituals involving “dancing and drumming” considered as “African” were pervasive within Guiana’s plantation society, and they are mentioned by many writers in the decades after Emancipation, although, not often in detailed descriptions. Numerous accounts demonstrate that, despite what Smith (1976: 319) depicts as a period of “mass conversion,” Obeah, Komfa, and related ritual practices remained vital to many people’s lives. Whites in Guiana, and particularly missionaries working there, often portrayed Obeah and “negro dances” in their writing, and at more than one point in the postemancipation period certain of these commentators attempted to expose what they interpreted—and feared—as Obeah “revivals” and marked expansions of Black ritual practices *and* political consciousnesses. Histories of religions and colonial politics have thus been made inseparable.

For instance, the decade immediately following emancipation in British Guiana was one of intensified struggles for formerly enslaved people to gain recognition *as people*, and not

merely as laborers whose duty as “free” colonial subjects was to “contribute” to plantation production along with their indentured and otherwise subjugated counterparts. Moore (1999: 65) depicts British Guiana in the 1840s as presenting an embittered battle “between the new free working and the old-fashioned despotic planter classes for control of the labour market” that led to two major colony-wide strikes in 1842 and 1848. In the second of these massive plantation-worker movements, the owners of the estates—with the full backing of the colony’s administrators, missionaries, and merchant-class—proved triumphant in the end. One result was that in 1848 plantation owners were able to cut workers’ wages by nearly one-third, which, as Moore (*ibid.*) describes, “not only impoverished the ex-slaves, but undermined their confidence in the missionaries, the principal agents of British culture.” He also notes, crucially, that “until the early 1860s when a Christian, mainly Methodist, religious revival swept the colony, there was a drift away from institutions of white civilization, most notably, the church and school,” which both saw a dramatic decline in “Creole” participation during the 1850s that “coincided with” both a marked “increase in the practice of obeah” and “significant social unrest” (*ibid.*).

In 1856 there were a series of “anti-Portuguese riots” aimed at undermining the mainly Madeiran immigrant communities’ near-monopolization of the colony’s commercial sector. Portuguese—who arrived under contracts of indenture that were soon after abrogated—were in large part enabled by colonial officials to gain positions of prominence as a means of ensuring that Afro- and Indo- people were confined to agricultural labor, and not “advancing” as merchants (Moore 1975). The British military was mobilized to suppress the uprising against Portuguese and their businesses, as well as to attempt to quell what Moore (1999: 65) calls “defiant black political militancy against new” legislation affecting the villages that Afro-Guianese established through purchasing failing plantations. By some accounts, the 1856 “riots”

were largely instigated by a man named John Sayers Orr, who, while born into enslavement in British Guiana, had in the 1850s traveled widely in the United States and Britain where he was known as a “street preacher,” or “anti-Catholic orator,” before returning to Guiana at the end of 1855 (Chan 1970; Green “104: John Sayers Orr”). In Boston Common, Orr’s “rampant anti-papistical froth and lies” were reportedly directed at local Irish-American communities, and a mob he is said to have incited in Bath, Maine attacked a Catholic church (Green “104: John Sayers Orr”). By 1855 he had made his way to Scotland, where the *Daily News* (6 April 1855) of London reported that “John Orr, the street preacher (known, in Scotland and America, as ‘The Angel Gabriel’),” had been imprisoned for sixty days for “breach of the peace” (ibid.). Roughly two months later the *Scotsman* reported that “‘there was no disturbance’ when Orr was in Edinburgh in mid-July 1855” and that when he later sued for “wrongous imprisonment” he was awarded “considerable” recompence (ibid.).

Yet when Orr returned to Guiana, his preaching was directed specifically at exposing Portuguese economic exploitation, not only their “popery,” while also serving as an explicit challenge to the colony’s local regimes of White power. British newspapers began reporting in March 1856 about “rioting” in Guiana “incited by the ravings of a fanatic named Orr, a creole of the colony, who some of our readers may remember under the name of the ‘Angel Gabriel’” (Green “104: John Sayers Orr”). As tensions increased, within days “the militia had been called out,” according to Jeffrey Green (ibid.), and

a ship hurried off to Barbados to collect additional troops for the four dozen of the West India Regiment were vastly outnumbered. The *Daily News* and *Morning Chronicle* of London gave much space to the riots which had spread into the countryside, with Portuguese-owned shops and property looted. Orr and more than one hundred others were arrested. [...] Orr had been charged with holding an unlawful assembly, libel, and exciting a riot. He was sentenced to three years in prison.

Yet, in December 1856, numerous global news sources reported that Orr—a “creole” whose mother was “a respectable coloured woman”—had died while incarcerated. In one instance an account stated that “John Sayers Orr, better known by his congomen [as] ‘the Angel Gabriel,’ is no more. He died of dysentery in November, at the penal settlement, where he was undergoing his sentence of imprisonment with hard labour” (ibid., quoting *Daily News* 18 December 1856).<sup>322</sup>

While to journalists and residents of Glasgow and of Boston and New York, Orr was an anti-Catholic “fanatic,” his narrative connected Catholicism to the Portuguese immigrants of his home colony as unambiguously complicit with British White domination and antiblackness. Orr—as Archangel Gabriel, with trumpet in hand during his political sermons—shepherded his religious capacities toward furthering a anticolonial Black workers agenda of aggressive opposition. In such ways, Orr “presented the Creole population with the first semblage [sic] of effective political leadership since emancipation,” as Moore (1975: 13) writes, “which was evidently interpreted not simply as a confrontation with the Portuguese, but as a potential threat to the white social and political supremacy in the colony, especially in view of Orr’s proven ability to mobilize the Creole labouring population.” Over one hundred years before the founding of the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense in the United States, Moore found evidence that in 1850s British Guiana “some blacks became so radical as to agitate for black power,” with Whites complaining about calls for “‘Black ministers. Black shopkeepers. Black merchants. Black planters,’ in fact everything Black,” as one missionary wrote (as quoted in Moore 1999: 72n38).

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<sup>322</sup> As Green (“104: John Sayers Orr”) notes, Orr’s death was reported in the *Daily News* on December 18, 1856, in the *Morning Chronicle* the following day, the *Leeds Mercury* and *Manchester Times* on December 20, the *Aberdeen Journal* and *Bradford Observer* on December 24, and even the London “showbusiness weekly,” the *Era* on January 4, 1857, and the *Montreal Gazette* and *Caledonian Mercury* in February 1857.

Throughout the decades following Emancipation, colonials expressed fears and anxieties about what they observed as an intensification in the “Creole” populations’ practices of “Obeah”—which included the rituals of all non-European peoples specifically—but also those engaged by Europeans



A YORUBA DANCE-RING.

Photograph by F. Baptista

**Fig. 6.3** Photograph of “A YORUBA DANCE-RING” from prior to 1917, included in Cruickshank’s article on “Aku” living in Canal No 1 village, on the West Bank Demerara. See the drums, *shak-shaks*, and white clothing.

themselves and that derived in various ways from European cultural precedents. Yet Obeah was typically deemed a “Black problem” by Whites, and others. Obeah’s ostensible increase coincided with what was seen as a “rise of radical black (racial) consciousness, and a ‘reversion to barbarism’ as Creoles were reported to be once more embracing their African culture, particularly the *Cumfo* religious rites and obeah,” as Moore (1999: 65) demonstrates. Reverend Robert Duff (1866: 320), a Presbyterian missionary, portrayed a “revival of *obeah*” in 1860s British Guiana, which he credited to the charity of colonial authorities in sanctioning the “performance of the heathen rites practised in open day by the coolies and the Chinese, at their annual festivals, [which] encouraged the creoles to return to the foolish and degrading practices of Obeahism.” Duff (*ibid.*) goes on to describe how

thousands of the peasantry may be seen, from the rural districts for miles around, congregating in the places dedicated to midnight revelry, now no longer secretly and by stealth, but openly and in defiance of the law and the police authorities. Collisions between the latter and the deluded votaries of Obeahism and Watermammaism frequently take place, and though a few of the ringleaders may be secured and brought before the



magistrate, from want of evidence they can only be convicted of riot and assault, not of practising Obeahism.

The dedicated places—or sanctuaries—that Duff describes are mostly associated with the “free villages” that Afro-Guianese established on the grounds of the plantations where they and their ancestors once lived, worked, and suffered. These were often, at first, communally oriented “joint-stock villages” with common lands for agriculture and recreation (Moore 1995: 114).

Not only had Emancipation fostered a surge in overt and public forms of religiosity, including Komfa dances in village yards and maybe even in Christian churches, but missionaries



A Yoruba Farmer in his own Yam Patch.

*Fig. 6.4* Image of “a Yoruba farmer” cultivating agricultural lands in a “free” communal village that were established by formerly enslaved Guianese on the grounds of “failed” plantations.

and other clergy’s alignments with the White power regime of colonial production through the labor disputes also encouraged Blacks and Asians to distance themselves from Christian establishments, including churches and schools. Yet much intercultural exchange had already transpired between the various religious practices of subaltern and elites. Decades earlier, just two years after Emancipation, the leading official of British Guiana noted the opportunities that mass missionization had afforded local “Creole” popular religious formations, such as those espoused later by the

transnational “street preacher” Orr—the Archangel Gabriel. Governor Henry Light (1840) reported to the Secretary of State for the Colonies in 1840 that “Obeah practices, mixed up with portions of scripture, and repetitions of prayer, have come to my notice in the last few months; they seem to pay so well, that no opening should be allowed to the knavish negro, to assume the sacerdotal power.” So while the early 1860s Protestant revival may have “brought many Creoles

back into the British cultural net,” still, as Moore (1999: 66) contends, “Christianity had to coexist with *Cumfo*” and related ritual assemblages competing for cultural space in this period of ongoing transitions.

***African and Churchical Forms:  
Obeah Dances, Dignity Balls, Tea Meetings...and Jordan’s Emersion***

Along with “thousands of the peasantry” coming from rural areas to attend dances and other rituals and entertainments in coastal villages, after Emancipation people resettled away from the plantations of their pasts and often close together with families and communities they knew. From the 1840s onward, a mass movement of people flocked to Georgetown and villages along the Demerara River and the coast seeking opportunities for employment, housing, and to build new forms of community (Josiah 1997). Georgetown itself emerged as a city “carved out of plantations,” with the accommodations of former enslaved people—called “slave villages”—as well as the colonial administrative center, serving as the initial neighborhoods of the capital (De Barros 2002: 16). Within these novel spaces, Afro-Guianese found additional means of openly and defiantly embodying their social and devotional lives, often along with their Asian-, and sometimes Euro-descended, and Indigenous, compatriots. Vibert Cambridge (2015: 34) notes that by around 1910, “almost 50 percent of the mixed-race population was to be found in Georgetown,” while roughly one quarter of “all Africans” had settled in the city by then as well. “From the rural African villages,” Cambridge (ibid.) writes, “came the music/dance complex associated with births; marriage; birthdays; ‘moon-light night’; wakes; and the religious works associated with Cumfa and other African-based syncretic religions.” Importantly, this “music/dance complex” emerging out of “African villages” and into the city was widespread and

admired by many, and as Cambridge notes, was inextricably connected to Komfa as a specifically “African” yet “syncretic” Guianese religious formation.

According to many accounts, although provided primarily by prejudiced observers, Komfa and related practices tended to become entrenched in two overlapping ways during the transitional period after slavery. In one respect, Komfa found homes and communities as a practice identified most strongly with dance and drumming in the context of village yards and *backdams*, and in the city’s and coast’s emerging dancehalls and popular music venues. On the other hand, Komfa simultaneously became grounded in the physical spaces and ethico-onto-epistemic structures of churches, although these were generally located in leaders’ and members’ *bottom-houses*, as well as their yards.<sup>323</sup> Still today, some Komfa participants generally only attend major “Works” and Thanksgivings—that take place at night—and avoid routine daytime *churchical* services and sermons. Others, contrarily, seem to *avoid* “Work” altogether—especially those that take place at night—and only join gatherings for weekend and holiday prayer services. Such a distinction in practice and in worldview is often presented through the cosmological binary of Heights and Depths, or Celestial and Terrestrial Realms (Gibson 2001). While Spiritualists overwhelmingly understand themselves as living their lives with inhabitants of both of these worlds, some identify as strictly “Celestial Workers,” likely to avoid associations of “dealing” with the ancestral Depths considered by many as constituting a form of Obeah. And while different performance contexts such as churches, yards, and dancehalls were and remain important in influencing the forms of religiosities that become enacted in these social spaces, equally significant is the reality that each performance *event* also differs—providing openings for

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<sup>323</sup> Regarding theories of “ethico-onto-epistem-ology,” see the work of Karen Barad (2007: 90), especially an essay titled “Nature’s Queer Performativity” (2011).

ever-shifting reconfigurations of “Work” and “entertainment,” and of the powers of the Heights and the Depths (Schechner 1985; Jackson 2005).

As the practice of “Obeah” allegedly increased, or became less concealed in the wake of emancipation, colonial authorities amplified “expenditure on the institutions of law and order” and enacted “draconian legislation [...] which included the public flogging and imprisonment of practitioners” (Moore 1999: 65). An ordinance from 1855 specifically targeted drumming and “noisy nuisances” associated with Komfa and other ritual performances, as well as Afro-Guianese dance parties portrayed in many accounts as “black fancy dances” and “dignity balls” (Bronkhurst 1883: 387). Police were routinely sent to harass participants and break up their gatherings, with organizers and others being fined, arrested, and often incarcerated. Oftentimes distinctions are hard to draw between these various dance, drumming, and other devotional traditions which have all contributed through various routes to contemporary forms of Komfa, likely because they were combined in different ways as expressed in different contexts. Bronkhurst (ibid.: 386), for instance, writes that “all the dances carried on or practised by the black people of the Colony are more or less connected with Obeahism and superstition.” He describes further that, “especially among the vulgar, there is frequently an entertainment held in the evenings called ‘The Dignity Ball,’” and that

each individual who wishes to attend it and have a dance in the room must pay a certain sum at the door. Sometimes a few stray respectable characters find themselves enjoying the sport with the unwashed throng of the community of the city of Georgetown. There is also another institution, of a pseudo-religious character, which is largely patronized by the natives especially in country districts, and that is the “tea meeting.” Instrumental music [opposed to drumming(?)] is allowed in these tea meeting gatherings; and the people sing heartily and lustily enough to the sound of the music. Only sacred (or, as some are pleased to call it, “secret”) music is allowed, and every thing goes on well for a time, but by-and-bye the musicians (“musicianers”) play a sacred march, and the friends take up the musical strain by keeping time with their feet or by marching round with a limitation to the number of hops in each bar of the music. Sometimes the Ministers of the

Gospel also take part in dancing entertainments connected with their Sunday and Day Schools. (ibid.: 387-88)

Importantly, while *all* Black dance might still be Obeah to some, certain Christian and specifically Anglican worship traditions became key components of Komfa liturgies and ritual structures, in both pre- and postemancipation British Guiana. Komfa's presence in what were considered "secular" dancehalls and other forums for live popular music is also documented in the early-1900s and likely earlier.

Included in elements that contemporary practitioners often term "*churchical*," are forms of dance that Bronkhurst associates with "tea meetings"—namely the "sacred march" in a "round" which Spiritualists perform together within their Works in-between manifestations of their Entrees—or guiding spirits. Typically, a sharp staccato is produced by a snare and other drums along with fast-paced melodies on brass instruments as the participants "march" as "soldiers" in step together around the table-altar or *ganda* space marked on the ground. While likely incorporating West and Central African religious traditions, as well as Indigenous ones, like other *churchical* forms, "tea meetings" provided a legitimated structure through which Komfa and allied cosmologies could re-emerge in new settings. Similarly, balls, dance parties, and concerts offered settings where ancestors could manifest and during which Komfa was reported—often with varying degrees of dismissal. As "African" religiosities deemed Obeah represented a wide spectrum of situational expressions, practices, and "secret" knowledges throughout Guiana's cultural pasts, Komfa remains anything but a delimited, discrete "*tradition*" in a singular sense, and instead continues to become actualized in people's lives in countless ways.

Observers were aware of both the diversity and certain specificities of the practices criminalized as Obeah. Duff (1866: 139) writes, for example, that "the ceremonies vary in form,

but they always consist of a dance, sometimes called the cabango, comfoe, or catamarrha.” He also describes “certain ceremonies” dedicated to “water mamma” as “like witchcraft in all its forms—*the worship of the Devil*—and totally inconsistent with the belief in, or an enlightened profession of, Christianity” (ibid.). Still, he notes that “water mamma and Obeah dances prevail everywhere,” including in the Christian forms mentioned by Bronkhurst in later decades (ibid.). Duff (ibid.) writes that “water mamma ceremonies,” “comfoe,” and “Obeah dances” triumphed in the 1860s, and that “notwithstanding the severe penalties, imposed by law, on those who practice Obeahism, large sums of money are freely given to those who have acquired a name as Obeah-men.” Providing a brief and biased—yet revealing—sketch of what such practices commonly entailed in his day, Duff (ibid.) specifies that “during this dance, the performer throws himself”—or *herself*, as other accounts demonstrate—“into every possible variety of attitude; tumbles, jumps, and foams at the mouth, while the assembled multitude follow him singing some nonsensical words understood neither by him nor them.” As Rev. Duff (ibid.: 139-40) goes on,

when all have, by the physical effects of such gymnastics on their nerves, reached a sufficient degree of frenzy, the special worshippers are beaten with a brush rope, a piece of root, often until the blood flows, to punish them for their neglect of the water mamma worship, or some offense that they have given to her.

When this has been sufficiently done to appease the anger of the water mamma, a calabash of water, after certain mumblings, is thrown on them while kneeling, and the performer then informs his dupes that the water mamma’s favour as been secured, and that he will meet her alone in the bush and obtain what is wanted; generally, the name of the person who has been the cause of some one’s sickness, of some disease among stock, or some death in a family.

The dances take place at night, and are accompanied by scenes of vilest profligacy, to describe which would render this paper unfit for publication.

While censoring himself and demoralizing Others in proper alignment with elite Victorian values, Duff’s account nonetheless sheds light on certain continuities within these practices as they were transformed through enslavement, and others that persisted for decades to come, even into the contemporary moment. Physical abuses learned by Spiritualists’ enslaved ancestors are

nowadays—in my experience—reconstituted through non-harmful means, while the “gymnastics” and what Duff describes as “foams at the mouth” endure even if also in what are likely metamorphosized forms.

In reading Duff’s account, and others of similar content and context, Raymond Smith (1976: 331) perceives “virtually no blending of Christian elements into these ritual performances [...] of] drumming, dancing, and spirit possession.” Smith (ibid.) also identifies what “appears to have been little change in the main outlines of this cult activity in over a hundred years,” as in 1952 he observed a “*cumfa* dance” in a West Coast Berbice community among whom “a frequent complaint was that of being ‘troubled’ by spirits.” He writes that while “most of the villagers were at least nominally adherents of either the Anglican or the Congregational churches [...], there was a powerful undercurrent of belief in magic, spirit intervention in everyday life, and witchcraft” (ibid.). Smith (ibid.) describes a scene in which “a dance square, or *ganda*, was set up and for several days and nights the drummers and dancers held sporadic sessions in which they sought to bring out the propensity [...] for spirit possession” in a young woman who was being ostensibly “‘troubled’ by spirits.” To assuage the ill-willed forces confronting the woman, ritual specialists tried “to create an atmosphere in the *ganda* which would induce spirits to come and possess the girl and lead her down to the sea where she would encounter a ‘fairmaid’ or water mamma, who would give her a token in the form of a valuable object (gold jewelry in this case) and impart to her special occult powers and esoteric knowledge” (ibid.: 331-32). The group understood one major “indication of the girl’s power” to be “if she were able to ‘dance on her head,’ which would show that she had caught ‘Wind,’” as “these dances are sometimes known as ‘Wind’ dances,” a word connected to Surinamese Winti, as well as to popular contemporary Caribbean dance known as winin’ (ibid.).

While Smith (1976: 332) emphasizes that this particular rural Berbician community's "cumfa dance" included "elements [...] which were apparently of African origin with no Christian elements at all," for decades prior to the 1950s Komfa practices had also come to be expressed through specifically Christian-informed institutions—Spiritual Churches. The leading example of these emergent movements, later known as the Jordanites, was even founded in Berbice and very popular by the 1950s. Albeit, evidence suggests that initial formations of Jordanite faith did not entail spirit possession *within* their formal services. Many other early iterations of Spiritual Churches certainly included rituals of mediumship and possession, often termed Komfa, yet for some movements, like Nathaniel Jordan's, direct manifestation of forces did not seem to be a sanctioned *churchical* activity. "Work" involving possession was—and is, for some gatherings—relegated to remain practiced in yards, *bottom-houses*, village *backdams*, and, when opportunities arise, dancehalls. Like most interpretations, Smith also never considers Indigenous "elements" in arguing for "African origin[s]" and a lack of Christianity represented within the 1950s Work for Wata-mama that he witnessed.

Smith's observations highlight ambiguities in defining what Komfa is—and has been—and through which contexts of practice its performances have emerged and continue to manifest. While Komfa is today—as it has been for at least one hundred years—a ritual performed by Spiritualists *in their churches* and yard gatherings, the word also continues to be used in describing "possession" and "dance" that takes place in "secular" contexts. At live music concerts, for example, it is not uncommon for someone to "catch wind," "catch Komfa," or "catch a force" while moving in ways that people still describe as "dancing on her head" or "spinning her head." More often than not, elderly women are the ones reported as performing such "dances," which are typically associated with "African drumming." In contemporary



Guyanese music scenes, however, what are identified as “African drumming” traditions are prevalent within many popular performance genres, as they likely have been for centuries. Particularly in Komfa circles, but also in mainstream musical cultures, “African” hand-drums and *shak-shak* maracas are used along with what are deemed as more conventional—or “English”—“big-band” or “ole-time” band instruments like flutes, saxophones, and trumpets, keyboards, guitars, and drum-sets.

Much evidence suggests that public performances, “street preaching,” and political demonstrations associated with Komfa and early formations of Spiritualist churches represented some of the earliest attempts by Blacks in Guiana—along with their beleaguered comrades—to utilize popular music and dance as organizational tactics against their oppression. Guiana’s 1905 “Ruimveldt Riots,” in the southern part of Georgetown carrying the name of the former plantation situated there, was initiated by an unsuccessful strike among the city’s stevedores (Rodney 1993). Demonstrations are said to have included “the music of the working class,” probably consisting of “drums and pipes/fifes,” as well as flags, and in all likelihood incorporated forms of Spiritual Work (Cambridge 2015: 28). The interracial working-class solidarities of the 1905 riots helped usher in British Guiana’s labor union movement the following year, headed primarily by middle-class Afro-Guyanese like John M. Rohlehr and Hubert Nathaniel Critchlow (Josiah 2011: 123). Hazel Woolford writes that “Critchlow was the first secular African Guyanese leader to have brass band concerts at the public meetings and as part of its open air concerts geared to mobilizing and strengthening the nascent trade union movement” (quoted through pers. comm. in Cambridge 2015: 28). Woolford also notes, however, that “the ‘Faithist’ or Jordanites, up until then, were the ones who utilized brass bands as part of their meetings” (ibid.). And while *founding* “Lord-Elder” Nathaniel Jordan did not

come into his Spiritualist faith until around 1917, clearly those Faithists to whom Woolford alludes were long-employing a variety of musical accompaniments within their ritual entertainments and Works.

The roots of Jordan's highly influential church—known as WEMP, or the West Evangelist Millenium Pilgrims, but much more popularly called the Jordanites—lie both long before Jordan's own transformative visionary experience, as well as outside of Guianese soils. As Jordanite histories suggest, it was in Trinidad in 1882 that the formative meetings took place between two devotees of highly divergent backgrounds—a young Grenadian plantation overseer named Joseph MacLaren and a laborer said to be from Varanasi, or “Benares,” in northern India, called either Bhagwan Das or Chatto Maharaj (Roback 1973: 39). As the faith's oral histories attest, “the two men discussed religion and the interpretation of the Scriptures, and MacLaren, an Anglican,” who is also remembered as “Lowloodas,” “became interested in a new faith” that Maharaj had “apparently founded” (Roback 1974: 236-37). MacLaren was baptized into the faith, and in 1895 travelled to Guiana where he began a mission of preaching to communities in Berbice, where he is said to have been “able to gather a following of sixty-five baptized members” (Roback 1973: 39). Among this new flock was a Barbadian man named Bowen, whom MacLaren anointed as Elder of the Berbician gathering before returning to Trinidad.

When discussing Komfa pasts with practitioners, accounts typically begin with reference to Elder Nathaniel Jordan, and for many people the most important—and sometimes only— aspects of Komfa's pasts worth noting are the contributions they attribute to Jordan. For those who consider themselves “Faithists” and/or “Jordanites” in particular, in distinction from “Spiritualists,” Komfa histories tend to both start and stop with Jordan. Yet as the foregoing account demonstrates, some people have long recognized that Jordan does not emerge in this

lineage until roughly two decades after Bowen's anointment as Elder. It was around 1917 when Jordan, a middle-aged plantation worker born in the colony, was "in a cane-field on the East Coast of Demerara one day" and he heard a presence that told him

to look up in the clouds, and warned him to leave his job. Hoping to evade the warning voice he collected his belongings and began to look for work elsewhere. Passing a house, he noticed a man looking at him through a window, and was astounded to recognize the face he had seen in the clouds. The stranger, Elder Bowen, interpreted Jordan's visions to mean that Jordan was a "seeing man" and was meant to do God's work. Jordan began to preach for the Church of the West Evangelist Millenium Pilgrims (WEMP), as the gathering begun by MacLaren was called, and Bowen returned to Barbados. (Roback 1974: 237)

Judith Roback (ibid.) observes that "by all accounts it was under Jordan and not MacLaren or Bowen that the body of belief and ritual which now characterizes the movement was built up, and it was under Jordan's leadership too that the White-Robed Army came to the notice of the people of Guyana." Roback is correct to identify Jordan as a key figure in the codification and institutionalization of the religious assemblages which spread across the colony beginning in the 1920s, known as the Jordanites. However, as Roback concedes, what most consider to be *Jordanite* "belief and ritual" has for generations been indiscriminately associated with *other* Faithist and Spiritualist formations that emerged concurrently if not earlier than the WEMP gatherings of the 1920s, although in less-documented, more-concealed, contexts of practice.

Many practitioners today attempt to draw distinctions between their practices as either "Faithist" or "Spiritualist" *paths*, with Jordanites associating more consistently with the former designation, and the latter often also identifying as "Komfa People." And while Jordan likely played an instrumental role in "creolizing" and "churchifying" a diverse set of practices to meet the needs of his particular gatherings, he also clearly built on an already formidable foundation, leading back much further than Bowen, MacLaren, or Maharaj. Much of "the body of belief and ritual" characterizing Jordan's contributions was apparently at its core already entrenched

Guianese “folk” traditions drawing from the colony’s diversity of cultural heritages. In particular, Jordan sought to unify “African” and “Anglican” sensibilities, while continuing to draw on certain “East Indian,” and especially Hindu, elements as likely had his predecessors before him. Yet in “creolizing” Faithists’ ways to include various Guianese approaches to devotion, Jordan also had a role in establishing “the White-Robed movement” as, what the “leaders of ASCRIA [African Society for Cultural Relations with Independent Africa] and the Government of Guyana” soon after independence called, “a ‘black people’s faith’ which emphasizes African upliftment, in the form of activities by and ostensibly for Africans” (quoted in Roback 1973: 231-32).

A major component of “upliftment” offered through movements like the WEMP church had for generations been tied to demonstrating the legitimacies of African and Afro-Guianese religiosities—and humanities— through their apparent Christianization, as well as Hinduization, in later periods (cf. Johnson 2005; Rocklin 2019). Because Komfa has been considered “Obeah,” and remains marginalized and criminalized as such in contemporary society, for over two centuries practitioners have found ways of emphasizing commonalities between their own religions and those of Europeans, whose Christian practices have been structurally sanctioned *as* “religion,” as opposed to “superstition,” “witchcraft,” or the “vilest profligacy” (Duff 1866: 140). With the decolonial movement and political independence in the 1960s, some Spiritualist churches and other cultural initiatives began to dissociate from certain elements of their practices they deemed as “Christian.” Yet the language that nearly all gatherings continue to use in describing their “Work,” while informed by the racial capitalism of plantation production, also draws heavily on Christian—specifically Anglican *and* anti-Anglican—doctrinal and liturgical terminologies and related concepts. Early efforts of European missionaries in the colonies of

British Guiana in the decades prior to the abolition of slavery, as well as in the postemancipation period, contributed considerably to local Guianese people's institutionalization of Spiritualist churches long before the expansions attributed to Elder Jordan's movement.

**Holy "Days of Humiliation and Thanksgiving":  
Missionaries, Rebellion, and Imperial "National Prayer"<sup>324</sup>**

The first mission in the West Indies to be established by the London Missionary Society (LMS) was in Tobago in 1808, and the second was in Demerara later that year.<sup>325</sup> Under Dutch rule, Moravian missionaries had previously attempted to serve enslaved people living on estates on a very minor scale, but they were rejected by slaveowners and so instead tried to convert Indigenous Guianese (R. Smith 1962: 31). The LMS "was the first religious organization to minister to the colony's enslaved population," other than their own religious leaders (De Barros 2001: 89). The initial missionary sent by the LMS, Congregational minister John Wray, started a church nearby Georgetown at plantation Le Ressouvenir and specifically served enslaved people (R. Smith 1962: 31). Soon he was joined by Rev. Davies who started a school nearby. By 1813 Wray established another mission in Berbice, and by 1817 there were four LMS missions in what would become British Guiana. At first, "many planters welcomed the activities of Wray and Davies," Raymond Smith (*ibid.*: 32) writes, "believing that they would in fact make the slaves more tractable." Soon enough, however, slaveowners' attitudes would drastically change.

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<sup>324</sup> "Days of Humiliation and Thanksgiving," as addressed below, were Protestant and Puritanical forms of devotional praxis, and are also very common ways that Komfa People describe their rituals. See Hambrick-Stowe (1982: 100). On "national prayer" traditions in Britain and its empire, see Joseph Hardwick and Philip Williamson's essay titled "Special Worship in the British Empire: From the Seventeenth to the Twentieth Centuries" (2018).

<sup>325</sup> Until 1818 the official name of the organization was "The Missionary Society." References to the LMS Archive can be located at the Council World Missionary Archive, London Missionary Society, Unit 12 on West Indies and British Guiana (GB 102 CWM/LMS/12). See <https://archiveshub.jisc.ac.uk/data/gb102-cwm/cwm/lms>.

Importantly, these churches were not necessarily associated with the Church of England as the LMS was originally a “non-denominational body” (R. Smith 1962: 31). Rather, the missionaries they sent to Guiana were largely Congregationalists, and so decidedly independent and autonomous in their affairs (De Barros 2001). This status had a major impact on their ministers’ relationships with both enslaved people and their enslavers, and today many Komfa practitioners remember missionaries as essentially benevolent figures and as having “taught slaves to read.” Much historical evidence supports their claims. When in 1813 Rev. Wray was transferred by the LMS to minister to the government-owned “Crown Slaves” of New Amsterdam, Berbice, his post at Le Ressouvenir near Georgetown was left vacant for a number of years. In 1817 the vacancy was filled by a minister sent from England named John Smith, who would go on to be remembered as “the Demerara Martyr” for his role in a crucial rebellion of enslaved people in 1823 that began at Le Ressouvenir and an adjacent plantation named Success (Wallbridge 1848). According to numerous accounts, against explicit orders by the colonial regime’s elites, Smith had taught enslaved people about the debates raging in London and North America over abolition, while others at the time argued Smith was responsible for circulating “rumors of freedom,” that were in actuality “grounded on events taking place in England” (Costa 1994: 177).

After the missionaries had been resident a number of years, colonial administrators and plantation owners (who were one and the same in most cases) grew to resent their presence and their philosophies, accusing them of infiltrating their plantations on behalf of London abolitionists and indoctrinating their enslaved property with “liberal” religious and political teachings that could underwrite their rebellious aspirations (Costa 1994: 182). Brutal suppression of the rebellion left over 250 Afro-Guianese dead, while an equally inhumane set of sentences

was dispensed to those survivors thought to have participated in various ways, including whippings, solitary confinement, and death by manifold tortures (Bryant 1824: 58, 87-88, 109-111). Enslaved people themselves were made to decapitate those accused of complicity as slaveowners forced them to “affix” their compatriots’ “heads [...] to poles in front of the estates” of Le Ressouvenir and Success (ibid.: 58). Those who lived to face trial were made to walk in “procession [...] at a slow pace, the [militia] band playing a dead march” before they were tortured and executed in Georgetown’s Parade Ground, where a contemporary Guyanese activist-led movement is pushing for the erection of a commemorative monument (ibid.: 61-62). Rev. Smith was condemned to hang, but died in holding before the sentence could be carried out. His “chapel at Le Resouvenir was seized and used by the Anglican church,” who established a greater presence in the colony following the near ouster of LMS affiliates (R. Smith 1962: 37).

Yet even missionaries sent to Guiana by the Church of England in the wake of the 1823 Demerara “uprising” who were trained and ordained in avowedly Anglican teachings also tended to “side with the slaves” in numerous instances (Jordison 2015). For instance, one Rev. Leonard Strong arrived in Demerara in 1826 at the behest of the LMS, after he had first renounced his duties to the British Navy through which he had served in the West Indies as “a fearless young man” and almost drowned (Cross 2008). Soon after arriving in Guiana, Strong similarly relinquished the rewarding salary of his Church of England post when he was “disillusioned by the pride and apartheid which confronted him” on the plantations (ibid.). Professing human equality, “Strong devoted himself to work among the slaves, braving the wrath of the planters, who were so enraged they threatened to shoot him” (ibid.). Nonetheless, Strong is said to have quickly created his own ministry in a huge coffee-drying structure that could hold two thousand attendees, and soon established similar churches in different parts of the colony that would all be

associated with the Plymouth Brethren (or Assemblies of Brethren), a non-conformist Protestant (Anglican “low church”)

movement started in Dublin in 1827 (Shuff 2005). As Edwin Cross (2008) argues, due to the work of Rev. Strong and the faith of those to whom he provided ministry, “Guyana may be regarded



as the cradle of the so-called ‘Brethren Movement,’” where many assemblies continue today, as does a thriving Congregationalist following. Many Komfa People today identify with both of these churches and some actively participate in their services.

*Fig. 6.5* “Brethren” Assembly Hall in Alberttown, a neighborhood in Georgetown. The Brethren Movement is still strong in Guyana, and many Komfa People are congregants or regular attendees of these churches.

The “oppositional possibilities” that these and other contra-Anglican Protestant movements held for enslaved people were vast, especially when one considers, as Monica Schuler (1988) and Juanita De Barros (2001: 90-91) have, that “the relationship between African beliefs and Congregationalism is ambiguous for the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.” Still, even in the early- and mid-nineteenth century, there was considerable interaction between Komfa and these Christian church traditions, as well as others. Rev. John Smith—“the Demerara Martyr”—for example, recorded in his personal diary that on Christmas 1817, as well as many other nights, “negro drumming” and other unspecified activities were held in his chapel, and followed afterward all through the night (Van Cooten, et al. 2000). “Prayer meeting at 8. Preached at 12 from Gal.4.4.5[.] The chapel was well attended but not crowded; many of the people being at work. Not a white person present. This evening we had plenty of



negro drumming &c. Service in the School Room” (ibid.). In the following entry from the next day, Smith writes, “Negroes drumming & dancing all last night” (ibid.). At very least, Brethren and Congregationalist “chapel[s] created a space where slaves from different plantations could *legitimately* assemble to celebrate their humanity and their equality as God’s children,” through both Christianity and their own rituals, which was no small accomplishment given the restrictive existential circumstances under which enslaved people lived (Costa 1994: vii, emphasis added). For as Rev. Leonard Strong is said to have preached to these same communities following Smith’s death, “‘One is your Master even Christ and all ye are brethren’ (Matt. 23:8)” (Cross 2008).

The language of “pilgrims,” as found in the WEMP name and other early-1900s Spiritualist churches, as well as the use of “brethren” and “sistren” to refer to devotees, can be seen in relation to these influences, as can Faithist concerns with “pre-millennial dispensationalism,” a concept originating in Plymouth Brethren teachings (Ruthven 2015: 372).<sup>326</sup> Brethren and Congregationalists are also both known as puritanical “house church” movements, whose opposition to the Church of England forced them to maintain “underground churches” in England and in exile in Holland, and, famously, North American colonies like Massachusetts (ibid.). Yet, these Anglo-oppositional Christian sects also sought refuge—and converts—in South America and the Caribbean, and around the European imperial world. Perhaps Afro-Guianese “house church” movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries drew inspiration from these Christian models.

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<sup>326</sup> Other gatherings—including ones that potentially predate Jordan’s WEMP—used the language of pilgrims and of millennial dispensation, such as the group known currently as the Gideons, who have for generations met in Victoria village at a location known as Pilgrims’ Rest, where devotees Work in-waiting for the “coming of times.” This group is distinguished in its embrace of Catholic—and Portuguese Nation—assemblages, and an early leader was Aloysius “Brother La-shus” De Souza, also mentioned in Chapter 4. Around 1965, Pilgrims known as the Gideons established the Aliko Co-op Land Society, through which they built a boat on the village Community Centre ground.

Major contours of “the body of belief and ritual” engaged by Spiritualists and Faithists have taken shape through Anglican-specific forms as well, as is apparent in the primary Works that gatherings perform together, which they call “Thanks,” “Thanksgiving,” or “Thanksgiving Services,” as well as their highly significant “Fasts,” “Fasting Days,” and “Humbling Days,” and “Watches,” “Watch Nights,” and “Guard Nights.” These terms and accompanying rites all derive from Anglican precedents that were likely already practiced on plantations prior to the emergence of missionization, as slaveowners were compelled, in some instances by law, to participate in British forms of “national prayer” including “public days” of thanksgiving and of “fasting and humiliation” (Bates 2012). As Lucy-Ann Bates (2012: 9) describes, British “nationwide fast and thanksgiving days were specific, extraordinary days set apart for prayer across the nation,” as well the world. Slaveowners in Guiana and other colonies, as British citizens or subjects, were mandated to observe this “distinct and special form of common prayer” which linked the British empire through worship (ibid.; Hardwick and Williamson 2018). Oftentimes, slaveholders would include the people they enslaved in these highly significant activities, especially those people who were forced to work within their homes (Hardwick and Williamson 2018). Some slaveowners, particularly devout Christians, were also less likely to compel the people they enslaved on their estates to work on these “national public days.”

While often associated with Puritanism in the United States, thanksgiving feasts and humiliation fasts were and in some instances remain features of English theologico-political structures, dating back to at least 1009, when King Æthelred the Unready mandated national days of prayer (Bates 2012: 31). Re-emerging in later centuries to counter Catholic precedents, early Protestants fashioned these intermittent, sporadic holy days in contrast to the routine calendric system of Rome’s fixed holidays (ibid.). A day of humiliation or fasting, in

Protestantism, was a day proclaimed by state authorities (Church, Crown, or Parliament) for public and private fasting, prayer, and attendance of church services in response to a major occurrence discerned as a sign of God's dreadful judgement, such as natural or human-caused disasters like famine or war (Hambrick-Stowe 1982). In contrast, a day proclaimed for thanksgiving was officially reserved for public and private displays of worship, singing hymns, reciting Psalms, and feasting for events thought to indicate God's divine favor and "special mercies," like the ending of wars, recovery from epidemics, and agricultural and material bounty—including that coming from the colonies (ibid.: 100). Komfa People continue to hold days of "Nation Prayer" on behalf of their entire country's wellbeing, and oftentimes for the sake of the whole world. "Holdin' a Fast" is also a typical way Spiritualists describe certain of their devotional approaches, and while I have never heard mention of "humiliation," they often speak of "holdin' a day of humblin'" or a "fastin' and humblin' day" or "night." Thanksgivings, on the other hand, serve as Spiritualists most fundamental Works.

Along with holding fasting and thanksgiving days frequently, at irregular intervals, throughout the year, Spiritualist and Faithist gatherings also observe holidays based on a calendric ritual cycle, although each group tends to "do as they please," and certainly no fixed standard exists among churches. Some gatherings observe most Christian holy days, while others decidedly avoid honoring those days. After all, as Judith Roback (1973: 5) demonstrates, Faithists in particular rely "heavily on the Books of the Old Testament of the Bible, especially for the substantiation of beliefs and justification of practices which characterize the movement." Similarly, Faithists and Spiritualists often identify *as* Israelites—descendants of those "tribes" of the Old Testament—and "consider themselves to be closer in doctrine to the ancient Jews of the Bible than to contemporary Christians" (ibid.). Following these identities—their "ancient

way”—in autumn, many groups celebrate a major thanksgiving service for what they refer to as “the Feast of Ingathering,” “the Feast of Tents,” or “Sukkot,” and some hold all-night “Prayer Watches” in tents constructed outside for the occasion. Many gatherings hold special thanksgiving services in springtime for Passover or what most call “Passover feasts,” which can include roasting a whole lamb on an open fire. Passover feasts



*Fig. 6.6* A Passover Work. Most Spiritualist gatherings observe Passover, and some perform a ritual roasting of a whole lamb. Many understand themselves as Israelites and honor “Old Testament sacraments.” East Bank Demerara, 2017.

often coincide with Easter, which is a holiday that a number of Spiritualist groups do not recognize. Almost all groups, however, hold services fifty days after Easter (or roughly seven weeks after Passover, for those not observing Easter) for what many call Pentecost, but many others refer to as “Whitsun,” (in Anglo-Saxon “Old English”) or as “the Feast of Weeks,” “Shavuot” (in Hebrew), or as “Pinkster” (in Dutch). All these names are currently used, but Whitsun is most common after Pentecost.

While Pentecost, or Whitsun, is a Christian festival day that was widely celebrated in colonial Guiana, the holiday derives from the Old Testament precedent of the Feast of Weeks. The remembrance of these holy days also evidences early Black Israelite religion as it was practiced, and likely developed, in colonial Guiana. Elder Jordan and others drew on what were already locally popular currents of Afro-Israelite identity and religiosities in codifying, “creolizing,” and propagating their faith movements. Historical accounts reveal that some Black Guianese understood themselves *as* Israelites going back to at least the earliest decades of

missionization, and probably earlier, including in documentation surrounding the 1823 Demerara Uprising, as well as in both Rev. John Smith's and Rev. John Wray's personal diaries (see Costa 1994). Adding to these Christian inspirations, as well as to the role of Anglo-Israelism which was also present in colonial Guiana, are Jewish influences that likely contributed to enslaved Guianese people's early interactions with Old Testament ideas, terminologies, and rituals (cf. Dorman 2013: 71-73). While much research has focused on histories of colonial Jewish communities in neighboring Suriname, less has explored the important presence of Jewish plantation owners in Guyana's pasts, who were many, especially in the Dutch period of Guianese colonialism (see Ben-Ur 2020).<sup>327</sup> As slaveowners in Guiana, Dutch and Portuguese Jews are likely to have imparted their own religious conceptions to the people they held enslaved, who in some cases, as in Suriname, chose to adopt the faith of the families who enslaved them (see Davis 2016; Schorsch 2004, 2009, 2019).

Still, Whitsun, and Whitsuntide—the week leading up to Pentecost—as well as Pinkster, were major annual spectacles within colonial Dutch and British Guiana's cultural landscapes. It seems likely that the significance the day holds for contemporary Spiritualists can be attributed more directly to influences of the public celebration of these Dutch and English Christian festivals than to Jewish or Black Israelite traditions, although as Sojourner Truth reveals in her *Narrative* (1850), such distinctions are sometimes difficult to draw. Only “a few months” after illegally departing from the confines of slaveowner John Dumont in 1826, a man who had assaulted her, sold her child, and repudiated his claim to grant her freedom, Truth (1850: 43-44) wrote of her “desire to return” to see “the excellent people” of Dumont's plantation, “that, at

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<sup>327</sup> One notable example is “Wolfert Katz, the largest slave-owner in British Guiana” at emancipation, who Thomas Staunton St Clair (1834: 326), then a young Scottish soldier, described in 1807 as a “little man [who] had been formerly a Dutch Jew, and had arrived in this colony [Berbice] with a pedlar's box hung round his neck” (Draper 2007: 89; Burnard 2018: 50; Rupprecht 2012: 441).

least, she might enjoy with them, once more, the coming festivities.” Truth (*ibid.*: 43) explains that she “‘looked back into Egypt,’ and everything looked ‘so pleasant there’” as she imagined the upcoming week of celebrations that she knew “by none but the Dutch name, Pinkster,” which, “must have been Whitsuntide, in English.” Jeroen Dewulf (2017: 3) argues that this “irresistible allure for Truth of the annual celebrations during the week of Pentecost (Whitsuntide) reveals the importance of the Pinkster festival for slaves living in parts of New York and New Jersey that had once formed the Dutch colony of New Netherland.” And as Edwin Olson (1941: 71) has also contended, Pinkster was African Americans’ “greatest festival until the Civil War period.” Part of the “irresistible allure” that made Pinkster, Pentecost, and Whitsuntide the “greatest festival” for enslaved Blacks in the (Dutch) Americas, according to Dewulf (2017: 3), is that during these weeklong festivities, “slaves were given”—or they took—“exceptional liberties by”—or from—“their Dutch American masters,” including choosing to “enjoy unrestrained dancing,” and to “organize a procession in honor of their ‘king[s]’” and queens. Olson’s and Dewulf’s observations hold true in considering the importance of Pinkster for people who were enslaved in other Dutch colonies, including Guiana and Suriname, which share important histories with New Netherland.

Reinforcing and contributing to the significance of Pinkster and Whitsuntide in Dutch and British Guianese contexts, and many others, was the deeply entrenched presence of “fraternal orders” and “friendly societies,” generally called lodges in Guyana as elsewhere. Many such lodges, including some Freemasonic traditions, have for centuries chosen the week of Pentecost to celebrate their organizations. In the early 1800s these celebrations took to the streets in England as “reformed customs,” according to Edward Royle (2012: 284-85), who notes that the Anglican Church had, “since time immemorial, sought to substitute its own calendar of ritual

for that of tradition” in its “war against” the “paganism of popular culture.” Whitsun, “never remembered as Pentecost,” Royle (ibid.) writes, “was one of the great popular festivals of the year. Traditionally a time for revels, maypoles and moral laxity, it was reborn during the nineteenth century as an occasion for Sunday school processions and friendly society parades.” In contemporary Guyana, the week of Pentecost—remembered as Whitsuntide—remains a time of “revels” and parades for many different lodges, including Masonic lodges, and for some Spiritualist churches. Some Guyanese communities continue to perform “maypole” dances as well during that week or sometime in late-spring.

“The idea of fraternity, and how to organise it, was one of nineteenth-century Europe’s invisible exports to the ‘New World,’” according to David Fitzpatrick (2005: 277), and yet lodges were also distinctly sub-Saharan African and diasporic institutions, such as Abakuá

brotherhoods of Cuba, or Cabildos organized around Catholic saints, Yoruba orisha, or others deities throughout much of the Afro-Latin American world (Brown 2019 [1981]; Miller 2009). They often

provided an interface through which African and European

social structures converged (see Dewulf 2017; Moore 1995: 115). Friendly society lodges were also present in the Caribbean long prior to the 1800s, starting with Freemasonry, which, soon after being established in “late Renaissance” Scotland, as historians concur, quickly spread prior



**Fig. 6.7** Saffron Flower Lodge (Ancient Order of Free Gardeners) and Angelic Lodge (Loyal Order of Ancient Shepherds), Georgetown. Inside stands Ms. Simpson, who has lived in the building since she was sixteen years old. Now in her nineties, Ms. Simpson shared that in the intervening seventy-five years (since the mid-1940s) these two lodges have never ceased their weekly functioning.

to the early-1700s with Scottish, Irish, English and other laborers and slaveowners (Ramsay 2011: 2; Stevenson 1990: 7; cf. Jacob 2006). A major Freemasonic lodge was established in Barbados around 1740, but records exist of earlier branches on that island, as well as in Jamaica, Montserrat, and Antigua (Ramsay 2011). Freemasonry spread throughout the Caribbean in the 1700s, including in Guianese colonies, and other societies and orders expanded soon after, typically as reformulations of “nation” groups and plantation-based burial societies established by Africans and their descendants in transcending the torments of enslavement. Moore (1995: 115) observes that in Guiana’s late pre-emancipation and early postemancipation periods, friendly and burial societies—indiscriminately called “lodges”—“were often organized in connection with the churches,” and especially “non-conformist” denominations, “under the supervision of priests. The outward form was European” and Christian, “but the cooperative spirit which made” these groups “functional was Afro-Creole,” as were many of the interiorized and likely concealed forms of accompanying devotional praxis.

Initial Freemasonic lodges in the Caribbean were largely anti-Black institutions that were segregated by race, and explicitly denied membership to women and anyone born into enslavement (Ramsay 2011: 2).<sup>328</sup> The first Freemasonic Lodges were thus White male spaces of plantation societies’ elite slave-owning classes. By the period immediately following Emancipation and into the mid- and late-1800s, Freemasonry took on the transforming racial, gendered, and class-based orders of Guianese and other Caribbean colonies more generally. As Aviston Downes (2002: 288) writes of Barbados’ Masonic lodges of this period, “while poor whites and middle-class blacks and coloured had secured their places, women and the black

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<sup>328</sup> Nonetheless, these were from their start said to be religiously inclusive and highly culturally heterogeneous organizations—“creole” institutions drawing *inspiration* (and possibly membership) from many sources—described as “a kind of spiritual Esperanto” (Short 1990: 48). As the Board of Grand Lodges of England, and many others, have long maintained, “a Freemason’s God remains the God of the religion he professes” (Di Bernardo 2020: 77).



working class remained excluded.” Yet, the non-Masonic lodges that also quickly grew multitudinous in the postemancipation Caribbean served as major social institutions for Africans and their descendants—and in some instances specifically for women (Snoek 2008: 55).<sup>329</sup> The celebrations held by these many lodges, in Guiana at least, provided means for members and others to enact Komfa performances and other rituals in highly visible venues through their impressive processions.<sup>330</sup> Lodges’ public spectacles were also geared towards organizing or supporting political demonstrations such as those over labor rights for the colony’s mostly agricultural workforce.

The expansion of lodges of all stripes also took place at a time of religious “revival” among formerly enslaved people and their children. Today many Spiritualists, especially men, are active in lodge organizations, and some see their dual commitments to their Komfa gathering and their friendly society as intimately interrelated pursuits. The “upsurge of enthusiastic forms of religion” that Raymond Smith (1976: 330) identifies with the early 1860s, and Moore (1999: 65, 115) characterizes as “a Christian, mainly Methodist, religious revival” that “swept the colony,” was concurrent with the rise of Guiana’s lodges. These religious and secular movements were also both identified with an increased prevalence of what were deemed as Obeah practices, although observers had been expressing their opinions about Obeah’s pervasiveness since emancipation, and prior. What seemed to be different about the 1860s, and onward, was the intense imbrication of these “creole” traditions of Obeah, Komfa, and “nation”

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<sup>329</sup> Lodges in England “admitted” women with “full membership” as early as the mid-1700, and in British Guiana women were vital members of lodges soon after emancipation, and by the mid-1800s at the latest (Moore 1995: 326n191). In early-1900s Trinidad it was reported that two lodges of Independent United Order of Mechanics admitted only women, the “‘Vashti’ Lodge No 1 (Female) and ‘Naomi’ Lodge (Female)” (Hills et al. 1922: 13).

<sup>330</sup> Such was the case for celebrations held by these groups to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of Emancipation on August 1, 1888, when over a dozen “friendly societies and lodges, comprising about 1400 participants, took part in a grand parade in Georgetown” (Moore 1995: 326n191).

societies, with the emergent structures of lodges and expansive charismatic Christianities. After all, as Smith (1976: 330) notes, following Philip Curtin (1955: 170-72), this religious revival was not only affecting Guianese, but was also “spreading throughout North America, Britain, and the West Indies” more generally, and was likely connected to the tail-end of the Methodist-inflected Second Great Awakening, or the start of the Third (cf. Erskine 2014: 167-68).

### **“This way spirit holds communion with spirit”: Pentecostal Flows<sup>331</sup>**

Anglican and other European missionaries were not the only devout conveyed to Guiana’s shores through transnational mobilities of the nineteenth century. As Lara Putnam (2013: 52) describes, such movements also “brought together divergent traditions grounded in partially shared African pasts,” and others, “as when Afro-North American immigrants in Jamaica and Trinidad introduced the enthusiastic Christianity developed by slave communities in the U.S. Second Great Awakening.” These Afro-Protestant traditions, which are said to have had a major impact on the establishment of Spiritual Baptist religions of the greater southeastern Caribbean, as well as Jamaica and elsewhere, were also likely highly influential within Guianese religious assemblages of the time (Edmonds and Gonzalez 2010). Faithists’ oral histories seem to attest to such, particularly concerning formative meetings remembered as taking place in Trinidad in 1882 between Bhagwan Das and Lowloodas, or Joseph MacLaren, the latter who would go on to spread the WEMP church in Guiana in the 1890s (Roback 1973). Trajectories of these religionists and other pilgrims can also be charted in reverse of those Putnam so compellingly details, and one example—concerning roots and routes of early Pentecostalism—is telling (cf. Watkins-Owens 1996: 72).

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<sup>331</sup> This quote comes from Everard im Thurn’s *Among the Indians of Guiana* (1883: 348), as discussed below.

Many influences contributed to the rise of Pentecostalism. Still, as Jacob Dorman (2013: 91) contends, “the Pentecostal movement, like Black Israelite churches of the 1890s, could not have happened without the combination of Holiness churches and a fascination with discovering the proper identity of the Israelites.” The refractory Methodist missionaries of the Second Great Awakening, who formed the Holiness movement, and many other Christians of the late 1800s, sought an oftentimes Orientalizing objective of identifying—and identifying *with*—the contemporary successors of the Israelites of the Old Testament. Looking particularly toward Palestinian “Natives of the Holy Land,” but also to “natives” of empire all over, “fervent Holiness missionaries fanned out across the globe to spread their message of perfectionism,” and in doing so, “they came face-to-face with both Africans and so-called ‘Orientals’” (ibid.: 91-92). In Dorman’s (ibid.) account, “it was this encounter, and the linguistic and cultural synapse it created between East and West, that sent a jolt through Holiness communities, sparking the innovation of the gift of tongues that initiated Pentecostalism.” A number of influential Holiness ministers—the foremost being Charles Fox Parham—and their students are remembered as initiating Pentecostalism as a distinct movement “around the turn of the twentieth century,” a time “rife with millennial expectations” (ibid.).

As a United States-based church and missionary movement intent on spreading “the ‘saving message of Christ’” far and wide, Holiness preachers not only followed U. S. imperialists and their interests, but also *led* the “American gunboats,” merchants, and other agents of empire (Dorman 2013: 92-3, quoting Charles Fox Parham 1899). Holiness missionaries had established presences in the Caribbean and Pacific Ocean islands, as well as in China, India, and other colonies and nations, prior even to the U. S. War(s) of 1898 against Spain, Cuba, and the Philippines, which secured much of the Caribbean and elsewhere for U. S. dominations

(Dorman 2013: 92; cf. Horne 2007a, 2014). Starting in the 1890s, groups such as the Church of God in Anderson, Indiana, which was, according to Dorman (2013: 92) the Holiness movement's "largest" organization, began establishing missions "throughout Europe, Jamaica, the West Indies, Panama, British Guiana, China, India, Japan, Syria, and Egypt." The International Apostolic Church of Cincinnati, Ohio, for example, also "operated in South Africa, British Guiana, and the Lesser Antilles" (ibid.). So even while Holiness missionaries had a globally expansive reach, evidence suggests that specifically Indigenous American and Afro-American devotional approaches, including Indigenous and Afro-Caribbean ritual assemblages identified with/as "Obeah," infused outsized impacts within the Holiness movement's "encounter[s]" with Otherness that "initiated Pentecostalism" (ibid.; cf. Edmonds and Gonzalez 2010: 136).

Guyanese social and cultural contexts might be obscure to many in contemporary North America and other people around the world, yet the Guianese colonies were well-recognized, perhaps disproportionately so, within British and Anglo-American constructions of cultural and religious alterity in the nineteenth century, and centuries earlier, as circulations of tales of "Eldorado" attest (Schmidt 2007). In the late 1880s, Scottish poet, historian, and ethnologist Andrew Lang, "was the first to attach special importance to [a] field of research" that he called "Savage Spiritualism," and "to present a selection of the more accessible data relating to it," as his work was widely read (Webster 1914: 120). "We seem to need a name for a new branch in the science of Man [sic]," Lang (1885: 805) wrote in 1885, suggesting "the Comparative Study of Ghost Stories" as a possibility. Hutton Webster (1914: 120), describing Lang's work in 1914, contends that "professed anthropologists" like E. B. Tylor, "so busily engaged in the elucidation of primitive religion, have paid only scant attention to spiritualistic phenomena among savage and barbarous peoples," an ethnological "problem" identified by Lang a quarter-century earlier.

Lang, who popularized the idea of “Savage Spiritualism” in his late-1800s writings for North American and western-European audiences, was interested in “*Peayism*” and “*séances*” of dance and healing performed among Guiana’s Indigenous peoples (1885: 805). He was particularly drawn to an account of these practices recorded by Everard im Thurn around 1880, in which Lang (1894: 39) feels “fortunate” to have found “an educated observer who submitted to be *peaiied*.”

Retelling im Thurn’s (1880) experiences *Among the Indians of [...] the Interior of British Guiana* (1883), as the botanist, colonial officer, and later Governor of Fiji’s opus is titled, Lang (1894: 39) describes relationships between Indigenous “mediums, or ‘Peay-men,’” and “the *kenaimas*, or spirits,” with whom they interact. Yet for Lang what is most significant is that im Thurn chose to participate in an Indigenous healing process. In his original account, im Thurn (1880: 479) recalls how “a Macusi” “peaiman, or medicine man, offered to cure” the “slight headache and fever” he experienced during his travels in Guiana’s “interior.” The account serves as a means for im Thurn (1882: 366-67) to later “explain the system of *peaiism*,” wherein the healer’s “chief problem” involves channeling the capacity to “send his spirit” away from his body, as well as the “power to separate the spirits of other men and other beings from their bodies.” Although Lang (1894: 40) dwells on the idea that “Mr. Im Thurn’s headache was not alleviated!” by the Makushi ritual, he also draws explicit attention to an important reflection of Im Thurn’s.

It seems to me that my spirit was as nearly separated from my body as is possible in any circumstances short of death. Thus it appears that the efforts of the peay-man were directed partly to the separation of his own spirit from his body, and partly to the separation of the spirit from the body of his patient, and that in this way spirit holds communion with spirit. (Lang 1894: 40, slightly paraphrasing im Thurn 1883: 348)

Noting that in “British Guiana, where, as elsewhere, hysterical and epileptic people make the best mediums,” in his popular writings Lang (1894: 39) also emphasizes im Thurn’s personal understanding of “this way spirit holds communion with spirit,” resounding preliminary Pentecostal notions of baptism *in* Holy Spirit that Lang identified with “Savage Spiritualism.”

The same, or a very similar, account of Indigenous Guianese healing has also been attributed to seminal German anthropologist Adolf Bastian (1890: 6-9), although it remains possible that Bastian was indeed referring to im Thurn’s recollections (Ellenberger 1970: 4; Kawai 2010).<sup>332</sup> Nevertheless, in an influential text, *The Discovery of the Unconscious*, Henri Ellenberger (1970: 4) writes that “during his field work in Guyana [sic], Bastian happened one day to suffer from severe headache and fever and he asked the local medicine man to treat him with his usual method.” Through these experiences with “primitive psychotherapy,” according to Ellenberger (*ibid.*: 4, 730), Bastian is said to have “developed a theory of ‘elementary thoughts’” and of “the psychic unity of mankind,” which in turn, are purported as having major impacts on the ideas of Carl Jung and others. Also worth noting is that Andrew Lang, as a contemporary fellow member of Britain’s Society for Psychical Research with both Jung and Sigmund Freud, had impacted the thinking of both with his essay on Guianese “Savage Spiritualism,” where Lang (1885) characterizes “spirit” as “unconscious self” prior to either Jung or Freud (Hubbard 2017: 52).<sup>333</sup>

Pentecostalism is thought to have emerged through Wesleyan Methodism and the Holiness movement, nurtured first by enslaved and free Africans and their descendants during

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<sup>332</sup> Translation from the German of Bastian’s original text may have generated initial confusions, although Bastian does not cite im Thurn’s account. Bastian conducted considerable fieldwork in the Caribbean, and he died on the island on Trinidad at roughly eighty years old. See Bastian (1890: 6-9) and Ellenberger (1970: 4, 48n1).

<sup>333</sup> This account is from Tom Hubbard, editor of Lang’s *Selected Writings* (2017: 52), although details are unclear.

the Second Great Awakening of North America before spreading worldwide—in part facilitated through the Los Angeles-based Azusa Street revival after 1906. Influences like the Salvation Army are equally important but tend to be considered less frequently in Pentecostal histories (see Robinson 2014). The Salvation Army, originally a form of Holiness mission, became a major force in colonial Guiana within a few decades of its founding in England in 1865 by Methodist minister William Booth and his spouse Catherine Booth as the East London Christian Mission (Coutts 1977). By 1878 it emerged as the Salvation Army and soon spread to Ireland, Australia, and the U. S. in the increasingly inhumane aftermath of the Reconstruction era, as well as establishing branches in Guiana by the 1880s (*ibid.*; Merritt 2006). And while Catherine Booth, officially known as “Mother of the Salvation Army,” is said to have been inspired in her understanding of the Holy Spirit by U. S. Methodist evangelist and author Phoebe Palmer, there is also reason to believe that early Salvationists—like ethnologists—drew on (what they imagined to be) Indigenous and Afro-American understandings of spirit communion, and specifically Afro-Guianese religious traditions (Read 2014).

Evidence of such interactions can be gleaned from histories of the movement, as “the first predominantly black Salvation Army corps,” established in Fredericksburg, Virginia in 1886, was led by a British Guianese man remembered as W. S. Braithwaite (some say William Smith Braithwaite, father of acclaimed poet William Stanley Beaumont Braithwaite) (Alexander 2011: 79-80; Maye 2008: 43-44).<sup>334</sup> Since the organization’s emergence, African Americans had seen the Salvation Army as a White institution, as it primarily served Whites in its outreach missions, but did not explicitly exclude Blacks, and many were early members of the Army’s corps of

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<sup>334</sup> It remains unclear if this Braithwaite, referred to as both W. S. and S. W., was father or otherwise related to poet and anthologist William Stanley Beaumont Braithwaite, whose father, William Smith Braithwaite, was also born in Guiana and studied medicine in England and Boston (Gross and Gross 2009: 67). Yet “Braithwaite’s autobiography mentions no employment held by his father,” who died in 1886 when young Braithwaite was eight years old (*ibid.*).

musicians (Wisbey 1955: 61). Still, as more African Americans joined by the 1880s, the Salvation Army's White organizers could no longer ignore the fact that their professed missions of "war" on "poverty and spiritual neglect" had to center struggles against forces of antiblackness that were reaching new heights in the period immediately following Reconstruction in the U. S. (ibid.: 60; Spain 2001: 110-11). By the early summer months of 1885, Salvationists commenced "an all-out campaign 'to save the colored people, and to make that a living, practical reality, which the grand deeds of twenty years ago [had] so far only succeeded in making a written right,'" as stated by Commissioner Frank Smith, "commander" of U. S. Salvation Army missions at that time (quoted in Wisbey 1955: 61).

Into this fight stepped Braithwaite, said to be from a privileged Georgetown, Guiana family of mixed Afro-Euro heritage, who—after being expelled from the colonial Queen's College for refusing a beating from his "English master" (or instructor)—was sent to England by his father to study medicine (Edward Braithwaite [no date]: 1-2). Yet he rejected schooling at Oxford and elsewhere, and returned to the colony of Demerara to quit studies at the local hospital as well. Instead, after some time of "idling," Braithwaite was sent to the U. S., where in Asbury Park, New Jersey he "accepted a Salvation Army commission" and "over the years, rose to the rank of captain" (ibid.; Wisbey 1955: 62; Alexander 2011: 80). Remembered as an "outstanding officer, born and converted in British Guiana," who "had studied medicine in England and in Boston, where he was aided by Wendell Phillips and William Lloyd Garrison," Braithwaite was also "an ordained minister of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church" before taking up his role in the Salvation Army (Wisbey 1955: 61-2). Braithwaite was encouraged to "spearhead" the Army's "Great Colored Campaign and Combined Attack" initiated in 1885, and by the following year he had established the first Black corps, both in



Virginia, one in Alexandria just outside of Washington D. C. (Alexander 2011: 80). Soon other Black Salvationist leaders were commissioned as well, and it is unclear if later that year in 1886 Braithwaite died (as did the poet Braithwaite's Guianese father that same year) or he was killed, or if he abandoned his commission as with his other pursuits. Nevertheless, growing up in Guiana as a Wesleyan Methodist, Braithwaite rekindled his Holiness devotions when he reached the United States, and went on to leave his mark on the Salvationist movement—and maybe even Pentecostalism—particularly through encouraging the Army's dramatic military musical processions, likely suggested by lodge and “nation” spectacles he knew as a child in Georgetown.

Guyana's contemporary lodge parades are certainly formalized affairs, during which groups of members, generally in highly elaborate uniforms and other regalia, gather and publicly march in Georgetown's streets and Guyana's village roads, typically accompanied by brass bands, drums, and other instruments. Oftentimes, drums deemed “African,” as well as *shak-shak* calabash rattles, which Guyanese also associate with “African” music and ritual, are incorporated into lodge and other public parades, as has been reported for over a century in Guyana/Guiana (see Crowley 1958; Moore 1995: 115). Likewise, Komfa rituals, including but not limited to those based in drumming, feature in lodge processions. Marchers are often “anointed” and their organizations “consecrated” as a whole through libations of rum, “*bush*-medicine,” and holy blackwater at the commencement of parades, while “African”



**Fig. 6.8** A “traditional” Komfa drum made with goat skin drumhead and *camoudi* snake skin around the solid wooden frame. *Camoudi* is a Creolese word for the green anaconda (*Eunectes murinus*). From the private collection of Kean Gibson.

drums, regardless of the contexts in which they are played, heard, or felt, are known to make spirits manifest in bodies nearby. It remains possible that the creolized combinations of popular Guianese ritual performed within European-oriented evangelical processions and colonial military-style band parades were an inspiration to Braithwaite when he encouraged the Salvation Army leaders to diversify their attempts at generating engaging performative presences through the “Great Colored Campaign and Combined Attack” of the late 1880s. Rituals involving drumming and spirit possession also became important to Georgetown’s and the coast’s emerging popular music venues and dancehalls, scenes which Braithwaite is said to have participated in during his “backslidden’ life” after leaving school and prior to his departures from the colony for England and the United States (Maye 2008: 44; E. Braithwaite).

**“Savor the flavor of a rural and rustic cumfa”:  
Village and (George)Town Dance Cultures, Dancehalls, Drumming, and Komfa Concerts<sup>335</sup>**

For many Guyanese, “seemingly secular entertainments” of parades and dance parties, “dignity balls” and lodge meetings, could all be experienced in fundamentally “religious” ways that have often involved Komfa (D’Costa 2014: 20). Jean D’Costa (ibid.) writes that public “celebrations” such “as carnival, John Canoe, and other” Caribbean performance traditions “generate a quality of participation and audience enthusiasm that go beyond European carnival” and European distinctions between so-called “religious” and “secular” dimensions of life. People are known to “catch Komfa” at these “secular” events that are not typically structurally related in any way to Spiritualist Churches. Relationships with spirit, and with gods and ancestors, permeate everyday Guyanese life, but even more so in spectacular performances, because “behind these” traditions,

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<sup>335</sup> This quote is from Ewalt Ainsworth’s (2012) recollections of a 1972 Little Jones Band performance that followed an “Easter Sunday picnic” in Britannia village, Berbice. “Jonesy” was known to make people “dance on their head.”

D’Costa (ibid.) observes, “stand such religious survivals as Haitian *vodun*, Trinidadian *shango*, and Jamaican *cumina*.”<sup>336</sup> In drawing an enthusiasm of spirit out of revelers, public demonstrations encourage people who are not-necessarily practitioners to witness rituals and in some instances to be moved to partake and participate themselves. As colonial Georgetown’s and the Guianese coast’s popular dancehalls and concert venues became well-established fixtures in postemancipation cultural landscapes, Komfa materialized in new contexts and had an even greater presence in many people’s “secular” lives (cf. Moore 1995: 117-124). However, this amplified *exposure* also increasingly marginalized Komfa—and Obeah, and other forms of “African” religiosities that were commonly linked specifically to dance.

As is the case at present, certain lodge processions and friendly society gatherings, as well as national holiday and other public celebrations, are known to have been accompanied by forms of Komfa-related Spiritual Work. As in earlier colonial periods, such as when all subjects were mandated to recognize imperial “special days” of prayer and atonement, when dances and lodge processions became important to Guianese public life, people used these opportunities to participate in ways that they themselves deemed most appropriate, as they did for wakes, weddings, and other rites of passage, and for holiday festivities. From their beginnings in the late 1840s, Afro-Creole lodges based on European structures were largely dominated by Georgetown’s middle-class and so were institutions of social mobility that afforded members access to networks of employment and education, often through the colonial civil society and the church, respectively (Moore 1995: 115). Still, lodges’ public days of procession and their programs of outreach typically drew participation from wide swaths of the population, which

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<sup>336</sup> Smith (1976: 334) notes that, in relation to other Jamaican ritual assemblages, “the *cumina* cult is the most apparently African in its derivation and most clearly comparable to Guyana’s *cumfa* dance cult.”

was not the case for their more-exclusive private meetings and functions such as those “commonly referred to as ‘dances of social decorum’” (ibid.: 120).

Of far greater importance to Komfa histories, and “very popular among working-class Creoles,” were urban affairs called “dignity balls” that “were apparently held ‘almost every night’” in parts of Georgetown, and lasted until morning (Moore 1995: 121). Organizers rented large halls, mostly from Portuguese business owners, and hired musicians primarily from the colony’s militia band who played an assortment of dance music genres. Africans who had been born and enslaved in Africa and arrived to Guiana as “liberated” indentured workers, as well as Afro-Creoles in rural villages in the late 1800s and early 1900s all tended to participate in “African dance,” but in the city and its immediate surroundings what was considered “African” dance and drumming was largely marginalized. As a result, these early dancehalls tended to be even less enthusiastic about including Komfa-related Work than were the “respectable” lodges in their public parades. Still, as more rural Creoles visited and moved to Georgetown, “African” dance and rituals became increasingly present in the city’s music scenes. “Dignity balls brought Afro-Creole dance styles, considered vulgar, into the city,” which Moore (ibid.) characterizes as “the heart of the European cultural sphere in the colony.” A majority of the people relocating to Georgetown and surrounding communities were Creoles of African descent, and Africans, as most South Asians tended to remain in their estate villages during this period, and Portuguese and Chinese were for the most part already resident in the city (De Barros 2003). Still, as with village dances and the earlier nation dances of plantations, those which took place in the city’s dancehalls “represented the essence of creolization” (Moore 1995: 121). These were integrally interculturative performances “involving a fusion of African styles and European dance forms,” as well as Indigenous American and Asian influences. Rural villages continued to hold yard

entertainments and rituals for wakes and weddings in particular, but also for any occasion, which generally included participation from and traditions of Indigenous people, Indo-Guianese, and others. Many coastal villages also became host to large concert venues and dancehalls that were typically much more open to non-European music, dance, and culture more generally, in comparison to the “dignity ball” halls of the city.

Describing histories of the important East Coast Demerara village of Buxton in the *Guyana Chronicle*, residents told Alex Wayne (2014) that “on August Monday,” or the first of August, “Old Conga people would march around the village in the early hours of the morning, drumming, singing and dancing” and that “lodges also had regular processions through the village” on that and other special occasions. As one of the first communities established through Guiana’s postemancipation Village Movement, Buxton was purchased by formerly enslaved Africans and Afro-Creoles in 1840, roughly two years after slavery had been outlawed on August 1, 1838. “It was developed into the largest and one of the most efficient local authorities in the country,” Wayne (*ibid.*) writes, and became extremely important to autonomous senses of Creole—and not *just Afro-Creole*—culture on the East Coast as a counterbalance to the nearby European “heart” that was Georgetown. “The Buxton village dances were extremely popular” according to Wayne’s (*ibid.*) Buxtonian interlocutors, as these performances

attracted people of all races. They came from the city, the East Coast and further afield. These balls were held at Tipperary Hall, the Anglican School, Glassy Floor and Club 65. Many bands, called orchestras in those days, played during these social events. The Mootoo Orchestra from Berbice, the Little Jones Orchestra, The Lucky Strike, Washboards, Harry Mayers and Harry Banks were some of the minstrels that entertained patrons in Buxton. There was the [Shia Muslim] Taja Indian Festival which was very popular in the village. These were held only on moonlight nights, full moon to be exact. The roads would be packed with vendors selling all sorts of goodies. Everyone thoroughly enjoyed themselves. There was always lively music by the Estate band.

Judging from the musical acts mentioned, Wayne's friends were likely remembering days in the 1960s and '70s, yet the intercultural traditions they recall go back much further. Today at least five Spiritual and Faithist Churches function in Buxton, as do numerous *bush* healers, and a lively Emancipation Day celebration is organized annually by the First of August Movement (FAM), whose leaders consist of the Mothers of these five local churches. Tipperary Hall and other venues also persist.

Tipperary Hall was established in 1909 as the headquarters of the Buxton-Friendship Benevolent Burial Society, and rebuilt in 2010-2012 (Younge 2010). Yet the building's main function for the community—and those surrounding which it served—was for many decades to provide a premier cultural space at least partially insulated from the Euro-“sphere” of Georgetown. Reference to “the Little Jones Orchestra” in particular, whose members were operative by at least the 1950s, provides a glimpse as to the sorts of activities that accompanied dance concerts in places like Buxton's Tipperary, or in Georgetown's many halls. Little Jones was a popular band that used *ole time* instruments like a drumset, guitars, keys, horns, and accordions, as well as Komfa drums in their performances that are notoriously remembered as “making” audience members (mostly women) “dance on their heads” and “catch Komfa.” “Well back in those days,” my friend Terry explained, “Little Jones used to be one of the most popular bands in Guyana that had a lot of people from all walks of life interested in the drum beat, 'cause they play the drums for more religious people,” Terry said. “Some people call them Obeah workers or Obeah people, but we know they are culture people.” He added that “the Little Jones Band is the band that used to play at all these big functions where the religious, *cultured* people used to be. The culture-heads.”

Ewalt Ainsworth (2012) recalls a 1972 Little Jones Band concert at a hall named Cox in the West Coast Berbice village of Britannia, roughly twenty-five miles east of Buxton along the Atlantic coast. The show followed a picnic on Easter Sunday, however, it was cut short minutes before one in the morning when the power in the hall failed—or was terminated by the authorities—which made the audience of around four hundred “bust and scatter” (ibid.). Prior to the interruption, the “ten-piece” “SID AND THE SLICERS” band was in fierce competition with the “four piece JONESY,” as both were “tearing up” Cox hall, which “since time immemorial is painted in a shocking pink; you just can’t miss it,” as Ainsworth (ibid.) describes. By nine-thirty, all the microphones were facing the Jones Orchestra, when the band unexpectedly transformed the event into “a Sunday night mass” (ibid.).

It was a beautiful Easter Sunday picnic and then is when for the first time in my life I experience a black out during cumfa in a public place and public space. I will have to tell you more so that you can savor the flavor of a rural and rustic cumfa. [...] Brittainia [sic] is the kind of village where almost everybody come from some other place originally. Brittainia [sic] is also the kinda place where everybody mix with something else; nobody is straight Black, Indian, Chinee, Putagee or Buck. There were no known whites in the community and if there was, as I said, h/she got displaced and misplaced in the mix. Brittainia [sic] was mix and mix and sometimes re-mix. Man and woman, coolie and douglar; douglar and buck; Chinee and putagee everybody start getting it [cumfa]. Elsie Bastiani was there and she run in with a bottle a high wine and sprinkle the kittle and give the drummer some. The high wine lock off he throat and befoe [sic] he spew it out he start to head-butt the goat skin. This shock the crowd a dancers who were half way up and another set half way going down. Was drum. [...] And then the spirits start to annoy some of the younger folks. It is a good thing they had on pants unlike the older women who wore flowing dresses and clean red panties. The band break into the Negro spiritual...LOVE LIFTED ME. I and all do a little do-dah but never ventured into the magnetic circle. All this time, is kerchief waving in the air and wiping away on the ground the next spot on the ground to shelter the next anta-banta [cumfa] victim. (ibid.)<sup>337</sup>

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<sup>337</sup> “Guyanese might speak of someone ‘catching antahbantah,’” writes Harold Bascom (2015: 85), meaning “that someone has fallen into some kind of demon-possessed stupor. In this hypnotic-like state the individual threshes about in a violent, uncoordinated choreography.” For many, “anta-banta” is synonymous with “catching” Komfa.

Once the “blackout done the sport as if it was measured, an equal amount of people turned right and the same amount turned left in organized groups” to avoid a panicked departure. “There are codes of behavior after blackouts” Ainsworth (ibid.) writes. “Everybody makes sure everybody from each village even though separate, are all equal and have to be taken care of.”

Even if the police had shut off the electricity (which is likely as Ainsworth [2012] remembers an angry baton-wielding officer amongst the crowd, as well as a truck from the power company repeatedly passing the venue), still, the Little Jones Band seems to have also been esteemed by the government of newly-independent Guyana in the late-1960s and into the 1970s, even if “respectable” Guyanese felt contrary. Some of the “cultured people, [...] the culture-heads,” whom the Little Jones Band was hired to entertain “at all these big functions,” included the prime minister and his ruling party, the People’s National Congress (PNC). Forbes Burnham patronized “Jonesy” and had the band play at numerous personal and state functions, including during Guyana’s national “mass games” (see Kwon 2019). Burnham was himself a proponent of forms of African Guyanese cultural heritage and affiliated with Spiritualist practices, and Obeah, according to some. As a Guyanese “folk” music band, Little Jones’s explicit incorporation of Komfa ritual in their popular performances represented traditional “Afro-Creole folk culture” which was appealing to the PNC’s postcolonial ideological constructions of nationhood, and was thus mobilized in certain of Burnham’s political approaches (Moore 1995; cf. Jackson 2012).

The Little Jones Band repertoire drew from many sources, but key to their popularity was the incorporation of village-based “African” drumming traditions and, specifically, the participatory responses of their audiences in the form of Komfa possession. While innovative in important ways, Little Jones was also inspired by the great Guianese Shanto musician Augustus



“Bill Rogers” Hinds, who is remembered as “the first promoter to put the traditional ‘Comfa Dance’ on stage” (*Caribbean Entertainer* 1972: 14). Rogers senior, whose son “the Young Bill Rogers” Hinds is a contemporary Shanto, Soca, and Chutney Monarch, was the first Guianese to obtain a record contract—in 1933 with RCA in New York—and he won accolades at Trinidad’s carnival competitions in 1934, originating the Guyanese “folk” genre called Shanto (Cambridge 2015). While documentation has yet to reveal how dominant ritual might have been in Rogers’ acts, he is said to have incorporated Komfa drumming, dancing, and folklorized “Spiritual Wuk” into his humorous and risqué vaudeville shows and magic acts (Hinds 2018 pers comm.). In the 1930s, however, Komfa was already an important aspect of local popular dance scenes in Georgetown and in rural villages, as we have seen, so Rogers’s innovations likely involved bringing some particular displays of Komfa performance onto the stage when he toured. According to his son, Young Bill Rogers (*ibid.*), the most vital aspect for his father was securing drummers, as “once the Komfa drums there, people goin’ dance on they head,” as Guyanese persistently say of the Little Jones Band.

Drumming is an essential aspect of Komfa ritual, and drummers, as well as other musicians, are central to Guyana’s Spiritualist communities and churches. Drummers and drumming traditions have also been critical to the spread and transformation of Komfa and Spiritualist churches’ many formulations. Master Drummer Akoyaw Rudder, who was born in New Amsterdam but now resides in New York, recalls some of the influences in his training (Emanuel 2013: 35). Growing up in the West Coast and Bank of the Demerara in the 1950s, Rudder specifically remembers the outdoor “concerts held in Den Amstel” village at the “Four Corner Bridge” where he was first inspired to learn to drum (*ibid.*). He also recalls that his grandmother, who “was a member of the Jordanite faith” and to “whose home Little Jones, the

spiritual band, would come to play,” would bring young Rudder to church with her (ibid.). While Spiritual People are overwhelmingly women, men typically serve as drummers and other musicians for services, although I have met some women drummers. All drummers with whom I had a chance to speak reported learning the craft as a child, usually—like Rudder—in accompanying their grandmothers, mothers, aunties, or other female relatives to services. Others are “raised in the church,” like my friend Lester Andrews, a Master Drummer who is widely sought out by Georgetown-area churches to play for their Works. Some days, particularly Saturdays, he plays drums for three or four services, back-to-back, which typically last hours. Brother Lester says that during these lengthy Works, while drumming he is “just not tired. Even if I have to play two, three days straight, I will play music all the time,” he said, “all because the drumming is a Spiritual thing. When you playin’ drum, the angels come gather ‘round,” Lester said, referring to both “invisible” angels, as well as those “manifestin’ in people.”

Lester’s grandmother, who raised him, was the Mother of a south Georgetown Spiritualist gathering until 2018 when she passed away. “I’ve always been a part of Spiritual life,” Lester affirms, and “grew up playing drum in church” starting at age six, the year after his mother’s death. Attending services on weekends and observing and participating in various Works that his grandmother administered for her community throughout his weeks, Lester was drawn to the drum from the



*Fig. 6.9* Master Drummer and teacher Lester Andrews (center) plays at a Spiritualist Work as an attendee “manifests” an ancestral presence while dancing in front of the drums.

beginning, he says. “Elder folk” and “uncles” taught him how to play during Works, and since that young age he has been fascinated by the efficacies of the Komfa drum. “I love playin’ to see people manifest,” Lester says, as possession performances “make people know themselves, you know? Make people understand who they really are.” While Lester primarily plays drums during Spiritualist Works, he is also hired to perform at “cultural presentations,” parties, weddings and pre-wedding rituals called Kweh-kweh, funerals and wakes, and “normal birthdays”—referring to those not associated with Spiritual Thanksgiving services. Even at these occasions unrelated to Spiritualist Churches, Lester says that he is intent on making his Komfa “drum Wuk.” “When I playin’ somewhere and I don’t see them manifest, I don’t feel good,” Lester told me, as he knows those listening could also be feeling better through the drums.

I even go and play in Pentecostal churches. Sometime the Pentecostals will have a concert or something and I go play there. And sometime they would have an old string band, and they have a conga drum a part of the band too. [...] They manifest in a kind a different way, you know. They won’t get down so deep, like the Spiritual church. [...] But they do a thing too, and they enjoy the drumming too.

And while Lester says drumming in Guyana’s Pentecostal churches and at public events is not new, he perceives a greater sense of acceptance for Komfa and “African drumming” among Guyanese non-Spiritualists. “Is not like before, when people used to think all different things, when from the time they hear drum playin’ somewhere they say, ‘Oh, these people Wukin’ Obeah here.’ Now they realize,” Lester said, “they understand people playing drum for their own Spiritual upliftment.”

Still, Lester reported that most non-Spiritualist events he is hired to perform at are “African culture shows” and other Afro-Guyanese-specific occasions, the most prominent being around Emancipation Day. The last weeks of July and the whole of August are Lester’s busiest weeks of the year, as they are for most of Guyana’s Spiritualists. The August First

commemoration of the formal ending of enslavement, also known as August Morning or August Monday, or officially as the Freedom Day national holiday, has increasingly regained importance



*Fig. 6.10* An Emancipation Day display of mannequins wearing “African-print” fabrics, with a basket of “African foods,” arranged in a Georgetown grocery store, 2017.

for many Afro-Guyanese and others in recent years. Emancipation has also for generations—likely since 1838—been central to Komfa and to the ways Spiritualists have marked the passage of time through annual and epochal cycles. As in Buxton, residents of Sandvoort village on the Canje Creek, just outside of New Amsterdam in Berbice, have been honoring Emancipation Day since the community’s founding as a “self-governing village” in the years just after slavery’s abolition. Sandvoort is known widely in Berbice for its Freedom Day festivities, as it has been for over a century (Ullah 2014). The original cooperative village

was situated on the former-plantation grounds a few miles up the west bank of the Canje, adjacent to its current location, where three distinct “nation villages” had already been active that are remembered by residents as “Oku, Quashy and Congo [...] Quarters” (ibid.).<sup>338</sup> Reflecting renewed “national” (imperial) alignments and histories of colonial impositions, when the “free” village was established, residents again settled according to cultural and linguistic characteristics that they shared. “The village was divided into two sections after the Dutch and the English and

<sup>338</sup> “Oku” is likely a reference to Aku Yoruba peoples, while “Quashy” is a common—and pejorative—means of designating Akan peoples. See Graham Cruikshank (1917) and Jerome Handler (1996).

was thus called Dutch Quarter and English Quarter. But the people lived and worked together,” as Shabna Ullah writes (*ibid.*).<sup>339</sup> Soon after a third section was also established, known as Congo Town, as it remains today.

Janelle Williams (2015) recounts that Sandvoort village “was once known for its rich African cultural heritage, drumming traditions and its overt annual celebration of emancipation.” In conversation with Williams (*ibid.*) in July 2015, lifelong Sandvoort resident Agnes Levi, now in her eighties, “reminisced about growing up in the village.”

The culture was rich. All like how Emancipation coming up, the men would clean the village from the burial ground right down to Rising Sun (a neighbouring village, now abandoned [due to failed sea-defenses and flooding]). [...] During the week, we had special drum men, who would start with the drumming to liven up the village and as schoolchildren, after school finish we would run, and go there and listen and do we lil dancing. (*ibid.*)

On Emancipation Eve, the “serious drumming” would commence, and continue through the night and into daybreak. Bright and early on August First, villagers would gather at the recently-dismantled Orange Chapel Church for services and food that was prepared by male residents. “It was customary for the men to cook while the women and children attended a special service, after which the whole day was spent together eating and making merry” (*ibid.*). Men “would kill a bull or two, according to its size, and they would cook on the land which is now occupied by the school,” Levi reported. From the church service, “we would march and go to Rising Sun where we had the big sun koker tree, where the men use to make tents and we would sit there and have our tea consisting of cassava bread, quiches (a sweet cassava cake with dyed shredded coconut in the middle), cassava pone, sweet bread,” or, as Levi discerned, “all the things our ancestors were denied during slavery,” yet also those signifying specifically Indigenous

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<sup>339</sup> As Brackette Williams (1990: 149) notes, “contemporary Guyanese informants use characteristics and representations of the history of Anglo/Dutch relations to formulate the content and structure of the rituals in which Dutchman ghosts”—and many other “nations” of spirits—“participate.”

ingredients and knowledge. Some Guyanese remember cassava bread as a food associated with “runaway slaves,” and in such ways recall vital historical relationships between Maroon and Indigenous communities that were important refuges until the start of the 1800s, by which time “all the settlements had been destroyed” by brutal force (R. Smith 1965 [1956]: 11; cf. La Rosa Corzo 2003: 46). Punitive expeditions of mercenary “slaves and Amerindians” were employed or coerced to raid “the Bush Negro settlements” of Demerara, Berbice, and Essequibo, and “members [...] got 300 guilders for every right hand they brought in” (R. Smith 1965 [1956]: 11).

Agnes Levi remembers that as a child in Sandvoort village in the 1940s, Emancipation Day celebrations only began with a church service and major “breakfast party,” while the main event of the day was a parade. Villagers, and those from nearby communities, would don “their finery to participate in a ceremonious procession” that peaked with a meeting of the two “village queens,” one of the English Quarter and one of the Dutch Quarter (Williams 2015). “Where I am living is the Dutch Quarter,” Levi said, “and we would march and go and meet the Dutch queen and then we would form a procession and march straight to the turn where the English queen would be waiting [for] us there” (ibid.). According to Levi, for several years of her youth, “the Dutch queen was Mrs La Fleur and the English queen was Mrs Wayne. Both were African-Guyanese women, but the English queen was lighter skinned.” When they met in procession on Emancipation Day, the two queens “would embrace each other in a symbolic greeting involving the use of a sceptre,” before marching through the village with all “their respective loyal subjects [...] trailing behind them waving flags and singing songs” (ibid.). The procession would then culminate at the center of the village where another feast was being prepared. “We go in and when the men are ready with the food, the children eat first, and the adults after. We had all the

food you can think about,” Levi recalls (ibid.). “We would spend the remainder of the day there hearing about life back in Africa from stories passed down by our foreparents, doing our traditional dances, singing our folk songs, and learning how to do the head wraps” and other ancestral customs, and re/invented traditions (ibid.; Hobsbawm and Ranger 1992).

Along with Emancipation Day events, Sandvoort “held a yearly thanksgiving which bonded the residents. It consisted of music, drama and storytelling along with prayers” (Ullah 2014).<sup>340</sup> With music, “traditional dances,” drumming, and oral traditions, both Sandvoort’s annual Emancipation Day and Thanksgiving celebrations featured Komfa performances. In “mourning the loss” of Sandvoort’s “African culture,” a resident named Juliet Moriah reported that “they use to get two sets of drummers, a junior group with the small boys and a senior group with the older men and Christmas time they use to get masquerade with people coming house to house” (Williams 2015). She also mentioned that “when we get Queh-Queh [pre-matrimonial rituals] they use to get people drumming. I see people dancing on their heads already under the influence of the drums. Literally dance on their heads,” Moriah explained (ibid.). “People use to ketch nuff cumfa,” she added. Yet, “if the young people not interested to learn they culture, how could we shove it down their throat?” she wondered. “They get their cellphones with their earphones in their ears and they are on Facebook all the time, so they have no time for other stuff,” she complained. Likewise, due to forces she attributes to “Pentecostal” Christian “influences” in the village, Moriah argues—in contrast to master drummer Lester—that people

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<sup>340</sup> Centered on memories of enslavement and colonization in eighteenth century Berbice, Brackette Williams (1990: 149) has analyzed Guyanese rituals of “African spiritual thanksgiving based in Christianity” as one “element” within a contemporary “syncretic blend” that also included “*Sanatan Dharma jhandi* and *Shiva-Linga pujas*, *Kali Mai* (Mother *Kali*) worship, [...] and other general Christian beliefs. Rituals of this type vary in their complexity, in part, in relation to the knowledge and skill the medium brings to the task.” In “the most complex version” Williams (ibid: 149-50) observed, the ritual was performed by “an East Indian of South India descent (known in Guyana as Madrassi)” who “had been taught to conduct the service by an African woman who operates a spiritual church in Georgetown. He had his own practice, regularly participated in *Kali Mai*, and continued to act as an assistant to his African teacher during thanksgiving services she conducted.” Also see Sinah Kloß (2016a, 2016b).

in Sandvoort “don’t want to hear drum beat now and so after time, certain things had to tone down” (ibid.). She also notes, however, that the village no longer has “any drum beater anymore nor its own drums” (ibid.). Specifically because of this lack of drumming, Moriah stopped attending and participating in her village’s Emancipation Day activities. “I tell them, you can’t keep an emancipation service with singing without any drums, like they head ain’t good,” she protested (ibid.). Like many other villages that lack their own local ritual specialists commonly do, Moriah insisted that in the future organizers should make an effort to hire some drummers from outside the village to come perform for their Freedom Day and other important events.

Brother Lester, who is admittedly “very passionate where drumming is concerned,” recognizes that while some people are becoming “conscious” of drumming and Komfa Work, others “would think different about it. But it doesn’t matter,” to Lester, “because you can’t expect everybody to like everything. Some people would and some people don’t. Some people frighten of the drums,” Lester explained. “When the drums playing they frighten, ‘cause the drums playin’ and got them. The drums too heavy for them,” he described. “People don’t want to come forth when the drums playing, cause they frighten the drums might make them manifest. ‘Cause when you playing, the drums play a message. Africans used to send messages with the drums,” Lester recalled, adding that when he plays it makes both “angels” and “people gather around. Drums attract people,” he said. They “have an attraction” that draws people—living and dead—to Komfa Work, even those who might be weary of the practice and consider it “Obeah.” People unfamiliar with Komfa, Lester observes, are alarmed by drumming because hearing it might attract a presence to inhabit their body—“to change them,” or who they previously thought they were.



“But they not afraid like before,” Lester contends. “Now is not like before. Long ago, people used to think a whole lot a different manner about this Life. But a lot a people seem to choose to get conscious now, ‘cause they actually seeing where they came from,” according to Lester. “They realize that this is a part of their culture, regardless of what background you came from, what religion you came from, people would understand that this is we background, and we all still have to acknowledge the drumming, ‘cause this Spiritual thing is where we ancestors came from.” Lester emphasized that Komfa, “see, is a *all Guyanese* thing—regardless African, Indian, Amerindian—we all Guyanese came from the drumming. So don’t need to be ashamed.”

The transformative ecstasies and forms of “shame” that practitioners and non-practitioners associate with manifestation are explored in greater depth in the coming two chapters of the final section—*Culture / Head(s) / Jumbie*. Drawing heavily on ethnographic experiences and first-voice interpretive perspectives, these last chapters address Komfa cosmologies and ritual formations most explicitly. Recall that for my friend I Sheba and her Surinamese mentor, “the *Culture*” can be fruitfully understood as “the practice,” maintained by *Roots-teachers*—or *culture-heads*—of the past, who today reincarnate as *jumbie*. I Sheba further explained that such a conception of “culture” as “practice” means, for her, “that black people in Guyana have no culture,” as it was “Stolen from us Long time now.” While “Amerindians” and “Indians still worship their gods,” she felt that “black people we are lost,” and was intent on “blaming England for this” theft and loss. I Sheba also gestured toward Burnham—a *culture-head* of the more recent past—as being “right” to encourage Afro- and other Guyanese to “return to your culture,” as Lester perceived many are doing in embracing the drum.

In examining Guyanese mortuary ritual and the cyclical regeneration of the dead, both of the following chapters emphasize the centrality of motherhood in incarnating Komfa’s Spiritual

families. Revisiting events surrounding the funeral of a departed Spiritual Mother of a local church provides ethnographic context and critical theoretical framing regarding the supreme pertinence of the dead, and particularly, the divinized feminine dead. As the final chapter demonstrates, men as well as women manifest female spirits—as most Komfa entities are identified or themselves identify. Unpacking dynamics of this transformative ritual process helps illuminate how Spiritualists embrace ambiguities of “noncompliant” genders and “transgressive” sexualities in similar ways to how their practices can assist them in (de)constructing historical ethnoracial identities. Komfa gatherings are generally gynocentric spaces, and most attendees and leaders are women. Yet these communities also often provide nonconforming Guyanese with sanctuaries from societal discrimination. In these intimate spaces Komfa People transform conceptions of community and self by embracing the agencies and lived experiences of the dead, and especially for queer practitioners, the experiences of “non-Guyanese”—typically Venezuelan—ancestral spirits of the Spanish Nation.

**Section III.**

***CULTURE / HEAD(S) / JUMBIE***

## CHAPTER 7

### **“When a Mother does pass, she children dread”: Spiritual Family Beyond the Grave**<sup>341</sup>

Half in sunlight, half in shadow,  
Here the swinging palm leaves sway.  
—Leo [or Egbert Martin]<sup>342</sup>

The magnificent palms  
of Le Repentir  
strut beside a narrow bridge of life  
channeling a city  
through the quiet corner of its dead.  
Their shadows lengthen over tombs  
in the evening.  
At night they become the spirits  
of those buried there;  
our long dead fathers, standing in line  
as men here have always stood,  
waiting. And the women,  
they too are dredged nightly  
from the river beds of memory  
to flaunt their style  
in the impenetrable shade of the palms:  
fragile in lace, or massive  
in the sackcloth of my conscience –  
mothers, all of them,  
their endless commandments  
now leaking through the fissures of their flesh  
into the swamp.  
—Mark McWatt<sup>343</sup>

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<sup>341</sup> From remarks delivered by a Spiritualist archbishop during a funeral service held for a Mother-leader of a Georgetown-area church, detailed below. The archbishop may have been referring to the song “Motherless Child.”

<sup>342</sup> These are lines from Egbert Martin’s “Palm Leaves” (2010: 61), originally published in Georgetown in 1886. Martin used the pen-name “Leo,” which, for David Dabydeen (2010 [2006]: xi-xii, xvii), was an “ironic” gesture “in light of the Classical names—Caesar, Horace, Juno, etc.—given mockingly to slaves; in light, too, of Martin’s frailty,” as “from early youth he was confined to an invalid’s bed, as a result of illness” (also see Williamson 2020). Martin died in 1890 at twenty-nine from what was then called “phthisis” (tuberculosis) (Dabydeen 2010 [2006]: xii).

<sup>343</sup> This is the first of two stanzas from Mark McWatt’s poem titled “The Palms in Le Repentir” (1993: 82, 1994: 28). In a revised poem by the same name, which appears in McWatt’s 2009 collection—*Journey to Le Repentir*—the first lines instead read as: “The magnificent palms / of Le Repentir / strut beside the daystream of the living /

Morality, like funerals and weddings, was a public affair.  
—Roy Heath<sup>344</sup>

***Playin' Fool for Catch Wise: Arts of Surviving Death***<sup>345</sup>

Over centuries and countless generations, Komfa has been practiced primarily as a subterranean, nocturnal tradition, forced into concealment and invisibility to counteract the wrath of the enslavers' gaze. Yet Komfa, and cosmological understandings concomitant to Komfa worldview, have also permeated Guyanese society throughout colonial and postcolonial upheavals, even if often under other, more benign guises, such as “folk” culture or “entertainment,” or even as Christian worship. The creative and subversive performance of self and of communal determination, through dramatic rituals of “folk” theater or storytelling, music and dance, was profoundly important to the everyday sociopolitical being of enslaved people as they contended with the realities of brutalizing regimes of bondage, labor, and torture. In *To Be a Slave*, Julius Lester and Tom Feelings' (1998 [1968]: 101) classic for young readers, Lester writes that to withstand the atrocious, dehumanizing experiences of their servitude—in fashioning their own social and political beings, regardless—enslaved people “developed their abilities to be who they weren't to a fine art.” This “art of performance, of flattery, mimicry/impersonation and deception, of feigning characters and roles, of code switching” (Hutton 2007: 129), was described by the enslaved in the U. S. South, Lester (1998 [1968]: 101) tells us, “in a song: Got one mind for the boss to see; Got another mind for what I know is me. They created among themselves a way of life that was different from the one the slave owner wanted them to have,”

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ushering a city / through the quiet corner of its dead” (116). On both versions of this poem, and others in McWatt's *Journey to Le Repentir*, see Jane Bryce (2010).

<sup>344</sup> Heath expressed these sentiments in his memoir, *Shadows Round the Moon* (1990: 27).

<sup>345</sup> “Play fool for catch wise” is a common saying in Guyana, sometimes associated with the trickster Anansi, or ‘Nancy, in Guyana.

Lester (*ibid.*) writes, “and everything the slave owner taught them they learned in a way he hadn’t intended.” Guyanese today describe a similar dynamic of deceptive/creative duplicity—a “double consciousness”—in relation to Obeah, whereby people often *play fool for catch wise*, so they say, denying any *belief* (or involvement) in Obeah as a means of initially *testing the waters* of their interlocutor’s receptiveness (Du Bois 1903a).

While the day-to-day lives of enslaved people were overwhelmingly regulated and detrimentally circumscribed by the lethal, punishing conditions of plantation societies, the religious formations Africans brought with them and that they re-formed and transformed were central to the ways of life that they created in opposition to their enslavement. Prior to post-emancipation consolidations of anti-Obeah sentiments and law, the disapproval of African religiosity “was limited in effectiveness” in part because of enslaved people’s performative “abilities to be who they weren’t,” as well as “because the African was thought to have a religion unworthy of the name, when in fact,” as Sterling Stuckey (2013 [1987]: 25) writes, their “religious vision was subtle and complex, responsible for the creation of major—and sacred—artistic



**Fig. 7.1** *Slave Play in Surinam* (ca. 1706-1707), an oil painting by Dirk Valkenburg, depicting the scene of a Winti Play dance ritual held on a Surinamese estate in the early 1700s. National Gallery of Denmark.

forms.” When not threatening to the strictures of social order, or deemed “insurrectionary” as with perpetual rumors of “Obeah poisonings” and sacrificial murder, enslaved people’s *public* religious lives as embodied through various art forms were often belittled by their captors and other colonizers as *mere* forms of “amusement,” “entertainment,” or “slave play.”<sup>346</sup> The historical instances when “Obeah” was judged as explicitly complicit to plans for or realizations of rebellion often provoked White colonizers to reconsider their simplistic conceptions of the cultures their captives had created for themselves, and certainly prompted juridical responses in the form of ever-evolving Obeah laws backed by vicious modes of punishment (Handler and Bilby 2012; Paton 2015).

Consider, for example, circumstances and reports surrounding a major rebellion, or revolution, that was planned for late 1736 on the British-controlled island of Antigua, which shares many features with both earlier and later eastern Caribbean “slave conspiracies,” including one roughly twenty-six years later in Berbice (now Guyana). While the details of the Antigua occurrences have been distorted through perverse means of colonial legal procurement, as documented in archival sources, recent historiographic accounts remain conflicted in their interpretations of these events.<sup>347</sup> Still, Richard Burton (1997: 230) tells us that when colonial authorities became aware of the “plot,”

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<sup>346</sup> See image above of *Slave Play in Suriname* (also titled as *Slave Play on the Dombi Plantation*), a painting by Dirk Valkenburg (ca. 1706-1707), which depicts the scene of a Winti dance ritual held on a Surinamese estate. Alex Bontemps (2001) writes that “for its time,” Valkenburg’s painting “is unparalleled as an observation of slave life in the Americas,” and that while the depiction is “exceptional, its ethnographic value is not unique in the pictorial record that has survived from the first two centuries of widespread European colonization in the Caribbean.” Regarding conceptions of ritual “entertainment,” also note that among many West and Central African people “play” was and is used to speak about ritual practices including spirit possession and these notions were brought with enslaved people to the Americas, as in Suriname where religious gatherings and ritual activities associated with Winti are known as “plays” and/or “preys.” Similarly, in Brazil one is said to “play” capoeira angola, a “game” which takes place in a circle called *roda* (Hofling 2019). Kali Mai possession is called “playing” with the Devi, the Mother, or Kali (McNeal 2011).

<sup>347</sup> See, for example, Michael Craton (2009 [1982]), David Gaspar (1985), Kwasi Konadu (2010, 2017), Walter Rucker (2015), Jason Sharples (2012), and John Thornton (2000), some of whose accounts are discussed below.

Whites were stunned to learn that what they had taken as a piece of innocent masquerade by the slaves had in reality formed both the organizational basis and the means of concealment for the attempted overthrow of white rule on the island and its replacement by an independent Akan-style kingdom run by the slaves.<sup>348</sup>

The leader of this island-wide movement for rebellion, an enslaved man from the Gold Coast known to planters and official records as “Court,” although identified more commonly by his own community as “Kokuroo Takyi,” was a prominent member of Antigua’s “Akan nation” who is today known as Prince Klaas in Antigua where he is considered a national hero (Dash 2013; Konadu 2010, 2017; Rucker 2015).<sup>349</sup> Prince Klaas (Takyi, or Court) was also known by other enslaved people as an “Obey Man” (i.e. Obeahman), as some reported before a tribunal held to investigate the plot after its exposure. In the immediate leadup to the revelation, on the afternoon of October 3, 1736, Klaas was enstooled as King by his “Coramantee Countymen” in an extravagant coronation ceremony that was “centered around an *ikem* (or shield) dance” and drumming procession, which had the new King carried on a litter by a retinue of “officers and

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<sup>348</sup> In many parts of the British Caribbean, Guiana included, enslaved people of Akan and other Gold Coast heritages were generally considered to more effectively organize themselves in collective efforts to overcome their enslavers than were enslaved peoples of other backgrounds. In other instances, ethnicity played a divisive role among enslaved Africans and their descendants in ways that prevented resistance to enslavement. In examining Berbice’s 1763 rebellion, Marjoleine Kars (2016: 47n26) writes that “the Amina were behind many rebellions in the New World, such as on St. Jan [John] in 1733 and in British Jamaica in 1760. In both cases, they intended to create a West African state with themselves on top.” In Dutch colonies such as Berbice in 1763, the terms “Amina,” “Elmina,” or “Delmina” were used to refer to Akan and Gã speakers from what was then called the Gold Coast as well as its hinterlands, where people would not have regarded themselves as comprising a “nation,” “as they would have belonged to different ethnicities and political polities. Thus, nations did not reflect particular ethnic identities in Africa; rather, they were diasporic institutions forged in the Americas for social and religious fellowship” (ibid. emphasis added). In British Guiana and much of the British Caribbean these same Gold Coast peoples were known as “Coromantee” or often “Kramanti” in Guyanese Creolese, and were typically labelled as “Mina” among Spanish and Portuguese speakers. Also see, and compare to Kwasi Konadu (2010) in particular, as well as Jessica Krug (2014), Robin Law (2005), Rebecca Shumway (2011: 17–21), and John Thornton (1998: 321–334, 2000).

<sup>349</sup> According to Rucker (2015: 109), “Court” was so-often referred to by his peers as “Tackey,” what Rucker identifies as “a Ga royal lineage or office,” that colonial observers and more recent scholars have taken “Tackey” to be his personal name. Konadu (2017) clarifies, however, that what he and others have previously written as “Kwaku Takyi,” “Kokwu Taki,” or “Cocquo Tackey,” can be best transliterated as “‘Kokuroo Takyi’ (Great Takyi). ‘Kokuroo’ is an Akan/Twi adjective for ‘great, large, big,’ modifying the noun or proper name ‘Takyi,’ which is Akan, not Gã.” Either way, Prince Klass/Takyi is said to have not liked the name that Whites gave him, “Court” (Dash 2013).



lieutenants” with great canopy umbrellas to shield him from the sun (Rucker 2015: 109).

“Loyalty oaths” and forms of divination were enacted as Klaas assumed his seat at the royal stool, enclosed by “his Generals...his Generals on each side, his *Braffo* [‘officers’] and Marshal clearing the Circle” (ibid.).

John Thornton (2000: 195) has argued that the *Ikem* “shield ceremony” that empowered Klaas as Antigua’s Coramantee King in the presence of over two thousand Africans and their descendants—and many Whites—likely represented a form of socioeconomic “ennobling ceremony” used for Gold Coast merchants that was “disguised as a coronation.” Other historians such as Michael Craton (2009 [1982]: 123) and David Gaspar (1985) hold that Klaas’s enstooling represented a “war dance” whose charge to rebel was explicit to the enslaved and indeed concealed to their enslavers (Konadu 2010: 134). While details of what Klaas and other organizers across the island intended to *do* through their public ritual demonstrations are obfuscated in part by their own doing, as well as by ruthless colonial legal mechanisms and the processes of the archive, we can discern quite a bit about how those who inscribed the official records of these events understood their meanings and social contexts at the time. That this definitive call to war, according to authorities, was presented as a public display was—for the judge charged with investigating the case—the “‘Masterpiece of the plot,’ namely that Whites ‘might be spectators, and yet ignorant of the meaning; The Language and Ceremonys used at it, being all Coramantine” (Burton 1997: 230; Gaspar 1985: 251). Records of the legal proceedings detail that on the day of his coronation, after he “walked in Procession as King,” as “Court” rested beneath “a Canopy of State, surrounded by his great Officers,” he was adorned in “a particular Cap, proper for the Kings of his Countrey” featuring “green Silk imbroidered with

Gold, and a deep border either of black Fur, or black Feathers, and three plumes of Feathers in it” (Gaspar 1985: 249-52).

The coronation, *Ikem*, or “war dance” was also discovered to have been the height of many prior months of preparation, consisting of lesser ceremonies and ritual gatherings on estates across the island that included important rites aimed at securing the enslaved rebels’ victory over their captors—referred to by the authorities as “Damnation Oaths” (Gaspar 1985: 245-46). These communal assurances were performed along with ingesting empowered/empowering medicines, or “‘Oath Ingredients’ (grave dirt and cock’s blood),” according to court informants and testimonies of the accused (Burton 1997: 230). The presiding judge reported that these pledges and other insurrectionary preparations were often performed in plain sight at “Entertainments of Dancing, Gaming and Feasting...coloured with some innocent pretense, as of commemorating some deceased Friend by throwing water on his Grave, or Christening a House, or the like, according to the Negro Custom” (Gaspar 1985: 245-46). Again, without being able to discern the intentions of those organizing and partaking in these months of planning and ritual groundwork, it is clear that for White observers these activities enslaved people heeded among themselves were long considered innocuous forms of “entertainment,” amusement, and revelry. Likewise, the major coronation/*Ikem* event was thought of at the time as “a highly elaborate and formalized version of the slave ‘play,’” that is, prior to Whites’ detection of the “plot” and their reconceptualizing of “innocent pretense” as incitements of war (Burton 1997: 230).

Archival evidence of this episode also records that hundreds of enslaved people faced forms of coercive torture, abuse, and death before the investigations were through. In the end, a total of thirty-two people confessed to having some prior knowledge and role in the objective,

and 132 people were condemned on grounds of participation (Dash 2013). Of those convicted, five—including Prince Klaas—were put to death on a breaking wheel, six were gibbeted and made to die of thirst or exhaustion while hanging in iron shackles, and another seventy-seven people were burned alive at the stake (ibid.). As Marjoleine Kars (2016: 42) explicates in her study of Berbice’s 1763-64 revolution, most organized attempts at resistance by enslaved people, such as in Antigua in 1736, were discovered before they could be realized, and “even ‘major’ rebellions were usually crushed quickly, leaving little evidence about how members of the larger enslaved community were engaged or affected.” Berbice’s Akan-led struggles lasted roughly fifteen months, not including all the ensuing legal proceedings, tortures, and inhumane executions (ibid.: 47). Relying on the records produced during these trials, and subsequent accounts, Kars’ (ibid.: 44) work reveals how “controlling women, and their productive and reproductive capacities, became an integral part of political power,” not just for slave owners and plantation managers, but also “among male rebels” in the midst of protracted warfare.<sup>350</sup>

### **“Social Death” and “Spiritual Life”<sup>351</sup>**

Agonizing cruelties, torment, and murder at the hands of slaveowners, overseers, and others, was not only a presence after such largescale societal upheaval and legal inquisitions. Instead, death

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<sup>350</sup> As Kars (2016: 67) demonstrates regarding the events in Berbice in 1763-64, “warfare turned women into spoils of war in men’s competition for prestige and status. As an emancipatory process, armed insurgency was profoundly gendered and fostered the subordination of women to men. For women, rebellion proved much less liberating than we have assumed.” In contemporary Guyana such historical circumstances are generally unknown and not considered in commemorations of the “event” (or period) or in narratives constructing the significance of the rebellion to Guyanese pasts. Also see Kars’s monograph on the Berbice rebellion (2020).

<sup>351</sup> “Social Death” is the titular concept of Patterson’s highly influential study, as discussed herein. “Spiritual life” is the language many Komfa practitioners use in describing “how [they] stay,” and how they understand a (Spiritual) person *ought* to “stay,” as a primarily ontological statement that also speaks to epistemological and axiological concerns. This subtitle borrows from Vincent Brown’s important book (2008) on Jamaican “mortuary politics,” and specifically from the title of his equally vital essay, “Social Death and Political Life in the Study of Slavery” (2009).

was a continuous, unrelenting, coterminous aspect of life on Caribbean, Guianese, and other American plantations. Endless elucidating interpretations and insights can be drawn from even a cursory account of the events of late-1736 in Antigua. A major point to emphasize is the ubiquity of death within the lives of enslaved people, the ever-present reality that physical, bodily demise could come by the most horrid means at any arbitrary moment for oneself or for one's loved ones, as well as the related specter of what Orlando Patterson (1982) has called "social death," the threat of being uprooted from all one knows, alienated from all forms of meaningful social bonds and made to live as a dead object, a "utilitarian," fungible chattel.<sup>352</sup> The "plot" to rebel led by Prince Klaas also demonstrates the significance of corporate belonging to enslaved communities and *dividual*—opposed to individual—attachments and ambitions as means of defying White societies' expectations of Black subhumanity.<sup>353</sup> In *Slavery and Social Death*, Patterson comes to a "distillation" (Brown 2009: 1233) of three features which he found to

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<sup>352</sup> In theorizing "social death" of enslavement, Patterson is following the work of French anthropologist Claude Meillassoux (1975). For Meillassoux's subsequent work following Patterson's influential study, also see Meillassoux (1986, 1991). Comparing these two on "social death," Patrick Manning (1988: 151) writes that while Meillassoux's work is "based on a far narrower range of comparison than [...] Patterson's massive [study, Meillassoux's] is ultimately a more significant contribution [...] because he focuses more firmly on the material realities of life with slavery, in contrast with Patterson's primary focus on ideology." For further theorizations of "bare life" material and immaterial exigencies of enslavement, see Alexander Weheliye (2014).

<sup>353</sup> The concept of "dividual," also understood as a "lateral development of 'personhood,'" was introduced by McKim Marriott (1976) in studies of Hindus in India whose selves were composed of "composite" social relations and externally originating materials (Taguchi and Nakazura 2014; cf. Deleuze 1992: 5; Gell 1998). Ethnographers of Melanesia reformulated Marriott's conceptualization of Hindu "permeabilities" of personhood in accounting for how some Melanesians understood themselves, and persons generally, as pliable and "partible," with aspects of their personhoods indebted to others that could be divulged and interchanged with others' "parts" (Strathern 1988).

Ethnographers of Amazonian Indigenous societies, and African diasporic religions have followed these leads, and Elizabeth Pérez (2016: 202) writes that social relations among Lukumí practitioners—and their spirits—with whom she works "strongly confirm [...] the notion of persons as composite or 'dividual,' rather than individual—and capable of accommodating multiple contending agencies." Other pertinent examples are introduced in the volume *The Anthropology of Love and Anger: The Aesthetics of Conviviality in Native Amazonia*, where various authors suggest that a society based explicitly on philosophies and "aesthetics of community" cannot be analyzed effectively by continuing to employ "dualisms" instantiated through European Enlightenment ideologies separating people from the social realities which so centrally inform their worlds (Overing and Passes 2000). Similarly, Nurit Bird-David (1999: S78) "points out that Cartesian objectivism, by accentuating separated individuality, consistently fails to make sense of indigenous people, whose lives are typically organized around the existence of relations with other humans and other-than-human persons" (Shorter 2016: 435).

characterize individual and institutional processes of enslavement through his expansive, and pathbreaking, transhistorical and cross-cultural analyses. Defining such processes of slave-making in personal terms, Patterson (1982: 13) writes that “slavery is the permanent, violent domination of natively alienated and generally dishonored persons.” Together these factors bring about what Patterson (*ibid.*: 14, 19, 212) considers the underlying condition of enslavement—his *metaphorical* “social death”—whereby utter and permanent alienation from all family and social ties, combined with general moral debasement, lead to a complete lack of personhood, aside from “utilitarian” function.

More recent scholarship, particularly emerging out of critical race studies, has since examined ways in which enslaved people were—and Black people in many ways in varying contexts still are—conceived as being juridically “dead,” lacking personhood in civil and legal matters due to an “attainted” status, considered perpetually “stained in blood” and so denied protections like “freedom” in rights or law (Chin 2012; Dayan 2001; Harris 1993; Miller 2007: 1011; Myers 2014: 217). In exploring the “sorcery of law” involved in constituting legal “negative personhood,” Colin Dayan (2001: 3, 5-6) traces “the claims of civil death into the genealogy of slavery and incarceration.” In doing so, Dayan (2001: 6) proposes a historical “continuum between being declared dead in law, being made a slave, and being judged a criminal.”

Dayan’s work (2001; 2011) relates how centuries-old historical precedents for an institution of “civil death” known in both English and U. S. common law as “attainder” sanctioned complete alienation from legal recognition as punishment for conviction of treason and felonies. Those attainted and sentenced with “corruption of blood” lost all rights to property and to hereditary titles, as well as rights to pass on such properties and titles to would-be heirs. In

the fifteenth century when attainder laws in England “came into frequent use,” conceptions of these “corruption of blood” laws were, according to Dayan (2001: 9-10), not necessarily related to “race”—“ethnicity or biology”—and instead were largely promulgated to secure for the state the property of those attainted. Yet, as the institution(s) of transatlantic (and other) slave trade(s) escalated in Europe’s new overseas colonies, as well as in Europe itself, Europeans “requir[ed] the justification of the inner depravity of those enslaved,” and it was only then that “color counted as presumption of servitude” (ibid).<sup>354</sup> In this way, “tainted blood extended down through the generations” (ibid: 10). Dayan’s (ibid) reading of colonial legal histories provides a rich understanding of “how the construction of race (and racial stigmatization) served as the ideological fulcrum that allowed a penal society to produce a class of citizens who were *dead in life*: stripped of community, deprived of communication, and shorn of humanity.”

British common law precedents informing the U. S. Constitution, and Guyana’s—as well as other postcolonial states’ governmental frameworks throughout the world—have systemically erased enslaved, formerly-enslaved, and Black, Indigenous, and other subjugated peoples’ *civil* personhood through legal means. Recognizing this “sorcery of law” as it functioned in the past and present is crucial to understanding colonialism and enslavement, and their continued roles in shaping society and lives. Productive theories tracing specific connections between conceptions of personhood in the past that have attempted to legally incapacitate certain people need not also necessarily follow a theory of “*social death*,” as posited by Patterson. In the most generous reading of Patterson’s thesis, emphasis should be weighted on the *metaphorical* dimension of his

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<sup>354</sup> English settlers spread the institution of attainder throughout the British Empire, where in the Caribbean the laws were also used by colonial states to seize property—often including enslaved people—of planters, managers, free Blacks, and rebels of all ethnoracial and legal status charged with treason for conspiring with Blacks or others against White rule. In the aftermath of what is today known as Fédon’s rebellion, for example, “in August 1795 the Grenada Assembly passed an Act of Attainder listing over 400 supposed rebels—French-speaking whites, free persons of color and slaves—declaring them guilty of high treason” (Anderson 2010: 209).

conception of social death through enslavement. To be legally enslaved or denied statutory rights and forms of personhood, while a significant historical fact, is alone not equivalent to social, cultural, or political “annihilation,” although, such denials certainly entail(ed) degrees of social, cultural, or political alienation to the point of *threatened* annihilation (cf. Brown 2008, 2009: 1233).

As provocative and influential as Patterson’s account remains, it has also drawn considerable criticism for universalizing enslaved people and their experiences (and ultimately, in some readings, Black people more generally) as “agentless,” abstract non-persons “rooted in a static New World history whose logic originated in being property” (Cooper 2005: 17; Bennett 2006: 142). As demonstrated in the Antigua case briefly described above, and nearly *any* account of enslaved peoples’ experiences, these were people who were far from socially, politically, or culturally “dead.” While plantation owners and their overseers crafted rituals of brutalizing violence and exhibitions of power meant to instill in enslaved people overwhelming senses inferiority as nonpersons—as possessions—recall Lester’s (1998 [1968]: 101) insight that “everything the slave owner taught them they learned in a way he hadn’t intended.” Africans and their enslaved descendants refused their subordinated status as “dead,” even if in deceptive and illusory ways that resembled submission or “play” to their captors. They fashioned their worlds “despite inhumane conditions,” as Alissa Trotz and Linda Peake (2000: 192-193) write in their study of British Guianese women’s histories, as “slaves forged families and kinship ties of enduring significance,” as well as self-determined economic structures and vitally important socioreligious institutions of communal wellbeing. Still, the culture of death on plantations—enduring perennial loss, mourning, burials, and endeavors of remembrance—was central to enslaved people’s beings, to their survival, and to the worlds that they forged in refusing the

White world's conception of them as "utilitarian" *possessions*. As demonstrated by the Antiguan colonial judge's casual mention of the "Negro Custom" of "throwing water on the Grave" of a deceased "Friend" as a means of commemoration, rites of passage surrounding death and memorialization of the dead that enslaved people created and reworked from their cultural pasts became community focal points of meaning-making and founts of immense instrumentality.

States of violent, permanent social or familial alienation and dishonor, which comprise the central components of Patterson's understanding of enslavement, were critical dangers if not daily actualities for most enslaved people in the Americas. As Vincent Brown (2008: 4-5) notes however, in his study of "mortuary politics" in colonial Jamaica, "death is as generative as it is destructive." Those same *threats* of alienated precarity, atrocious uprooting, and general debasement were throughout people's enslavement also fundamental incitements for them to maintain, generate, and reconfigure their social and cultural lives in profoundly meaningful and often subversive ways (cf. Mack 2019). "Alienation," after all, as Bob Myers writes in an essay entitled "The Phenomenology of Rebellion" (forthcoming: 8), is an "experience [of] an impoverishment of meaning." Recognizing one's dignity through rebelling against alienating and other abusive functions of the political system of global white supremacy is central to both rejecting subjection and to re-crafting alternative meaning-making tactics and "worldviews." After all, "Africans in any New World colony," write Sidney Mintz and Richard Price (1992 [1976]: 14), "began to share a culture only insofar as [...] they themselves created them." As paradoxical as the idea may seem at first, the threat and realities of death, isolation, and "deracination" (Patterson 1982: 7, 309-311, 369) were and remain fundamental sources of generative power within many cultures of the African Americas (Brown 2008, 2009). As Brown (2009: 1244) writes, and as exemplified by enslaved people's exertions of rebellion against their



social, civil, and bodily death, “the violent domination of slavery generated political action; it was not antithetical to it.” Similarly, as demonstrated through accounts of the 1736 Antigua episode more specifically, for enslaved Caribbean people, “political action” was not necessarily conceptualized as categorically distinct from what Enlightenment-derived epistemologies might otherwise characterize as slaves’ “social-,” “economic-,” or “religious action.”

### **“Mother-childness” and Gender in a Guyanese Mortuary Cycle<sup>355</sup>**

They not only call her “Mother” but also relate to her as children do to their mother. She, in turn, acts like a mother toward them. [...] In addition, the androgynous character of Jamaican healers seems to be due to the fact that Jamaican mothers often have to play maternal and paternal roles in child care and family life.  
—William Wedenoja<sup>356</sup>

The inescapable, “total climate” of death in colonial plantation societies could not socially incapacitate Africans and their descendants in the Americas (Sharpe 2016). Rather, the ubiquity of absurd violence and death in enslaved people’s lives prompted deep scrutiny and action, and further instilled within them the significance of preserving harmonious social relationships with living communities of “slaves” *and* “masters,” as well as with the ever-expanding communities of the dead. Mortuary practices and accompanying rites of bereavement and commemoration became essential to enslaved people’s worlds and to their survival. Rituals of death were imperative to both sides of the “stark contest between” the enslavers’ “will to commodify people and the captives’ will to remain fully recognizable as human subjects” (Smallwood 2007: 5). Legacies of these rituals remain prevalent in Guyanese and other post/plantation societies through regrettable forms of persistent, systemic, and often state-mediated violence, but also

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<sup>355</sup> On conceptions of “mother-childness” and the complexity of maternity and relationships between mothers, their children, and others in sub-Saharan African cultures, art, and philosophies, see Herbert Cole (2017a).

<sup>356</sup> From Wedenoja’s study of mothering and Balm healing (1989: 87, 96).

through much more uplifting contemporary funereal and memorial cultures. After all, in colonial Guiana's "dehumanizing regimes of conquest and plantation" (Forde 2018b: 2), and elsewhere, as Vincent Brown (2008: 4) writes of Jamaica, "death structured society and shaped its most consequential struggles." Heavily informed by these historical circumstances, the culture of burial and memorialization among the bereaved remain significant organizing features of many Caribbean societies, including Guyana's into the twenty-first century.

Ontological conceptions of death, of the dead, and of their continued relationship to the living that coincide with Spiritualist worldviews permeate Guyanese thinking. Guyanese ways of relating to the dead represent one of the few (remaining) facets of "secular" "public" life in Guyana that involves Komfa and draws upon Komfa philosophies. Even if typically deemed "Obeah," "superstition," or "folk culture," expressions of such knowledge, including recognizing ongoing social relationships with the deceased, are generally (or at least provisionally) accepted by Guyanese nonpractitioners within the context of burial rites, bereavement, and rituals of memorialization. Most Guyanese continue to talk about *jumbie* and other *forces* who live among them and their communities, however, many today are not familiar with the term "Komfa," and some are not aware that Spiritualist gatherings exist either, wherein these Guyanese traditions of deep relational knowledge form a distinct "way of life."

A widely espoused phenomenon recognized among Guyanese of all backgrounds, however, is that certain individuals, usually by birth, hold particular gifts—capacities for "Spiritual" sensitivity and insight—who are commonly referred to as *see-far* people. These sanctified few are understood by their families and communities as possessing heightened abilities to sense or otherwise know the presence of spirits, to facilitate meaningful forms of communication and communion between the living and their dearly departed, and even to

traverse the boundaries of metaphysical worlds, themselves moving to be with the ancestors and, sometimes, retrieving them as *jumbie* to temporarily rejoin their living counterparts. Many such people eventually find their place within Komfa flocks, while others do not. Recognition of these abilities tends to evoke fear, and even disbelief among many Guyanese today—that people *continue* to do such things, they say—as well as inciting amusement and not uncommonly, ridicule. Seldom too are the widespread “beliefs” in *jumbie*, possessing *forces*, and visiting ancestors ascribed to the local epistemic category of “religion.” These ways of knowing and being in the world are, however, often ideologically linked to Africa and African “folk” culture, namely, to the category of *Obeah* as “created [...] in the image of European ‘antonyms’ or ‘precursors’ to religion” (Crosson 2018: 39). For many Guyanese then, the professed *practice* of Obeah remains conceptually and morally linked to its colonially codified origins, yet the *cosmological* foundations upon which those practices rest are omnipresent and largely unquestioned.

In exploring “the creative ethos” of enslaved Afro-Americans and a range of “performance aesthetics” they deployed in countering Whites’ rituals of death and commodification, Clinton Hutton (2007: 134) writes that “the strictly secret possession rituals which were so critical to the culture of repossession and freedom and were observed since the precursory stages of *Vodou*, *Myal-Revival*, *Santería*, *Candomblé*,” and Komfa, as well as “throughout their evolution, had simultaneously, a more publicly scripted display of repossession rituals under the more non-threatening rubric of play, of revelry, of entertainment.” Most Komfa Work continues to take place in the dead of night, in the bottom-houses and yards of devotees, and, on especially auspicious occasions, still in village backdams and sheltered groves, by creeks, rivers, and kokers, and by the sea and seawall. Faithists used to have a presence on

Saturdays and Sundays at markets and roadside gatherings in Georgetown and elsewhere in coastal villages from around the late-1920s through to the 1980s when they largely curtailed their public discourses and sermons.

Few public occasions remain in which Komfa plays a substantial part, but those that do are often allied to procession institutions and masquerade, such as for Emancipation Day and formerly more-common around Christmas and New Year's, as well as since the 1970s, for Mashramani.<sup>357</sup> Much more frequently within the routine of people's lives and the landscape of Georgetown and coastal communities, however, are procession or *marchin'* traditions accompanying funerals that are often performed in association with "self-help" lodges. While overt Spiritualist Works remain largely "secret" affairs, the historically constitutive role of "death and the dead in the formation of different selves and communities" throughout plantation pasts contributed to the widespread remembrance of "Komfa ways" within more broadly conceived Guyanese "folk" cultures (Forde 2018b: 3). Through openly recognizing the reciprocal responsibilities obtaining between the living and the dead within the context of wakes, funerals, memorial services, and other phases of the mortuary cycle, Guyanese nonpractitioners often provide an opening for public demonstrations of Komfa philosophies and of more explicit

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<sup>357</sup> Mashramani, or *Mash*, also known as "Guyana's Carnival," in an annual holiday celebrated on February 23 that recognizes Guyana's attaining of politically sovereign status as a republic in 1970. With highly disputed origins, the word "Mashramani," as taught in Guyanese schools, is said to derive from an Indigenous language, usually designated as "Arawak," and said to mean "celebration after cooperative work" or "after hard work," although no such word exists in any local Indigenous languages. The closest word, as noted by native Lokono speaker and lexicographer, John "Canon" Bennett (1991), "Mashramani" "was coined to name the festival for the celebration of Guyana's Republic Day" (Creighton 2020). Bennett identifies "a Lokono word which means 'coming together to work' or 'a cooperative effort,'" which is the term "mashirimehi" (ibid.). According to Bennett, "there is no word in the indigenous language for community or collective sporting, and rather than merriment or celebration after cooperative work, in the original usage of mashirimehi 'the emphasis is on work.' He further listed the meaning of the word as 'voluntary work done cooperatively' or simply as 'labour' (ibid.). On *Mash*, also see Salkey (1972: 174-176) and Hopkinson (2018). Guyana's annual Ghana Day celebrations, in honor of Ghanaian independence on March 6, 1957, often also features Komfa drumming and dance, as it did on Sunday, March 5, 2017 at Congress Place, headquarters of the PNC. On Komfa included as a major aspect of public Emancipation Day celebrations, see Peretz (2015).

Spiritualist Work. As Roy Heath (1990: 27) describes in his memoir, for Guyanese of the past as in the present, funerals are public affairs, as is “morality” more generally.

Events surrounding the passing of a Mother-Leader of a Georgetown-area Spiritualist Church in late-February of 2017 help to illustrate certain of these points. Mother B., as she was widely known, was an exuberant woman in her mid-seventies, and was loved and respected by many, including Spiritualists who were not necessarily regular members of her flock and individuals who might not necessarily consider themselves to be Spiritualists. People sought Mother B.’s guidance as a mentor, as a teacher, and as an advisor on all manner of life’s issues as she was known to bring exacting wisdom to bear on the oftentimes distressing *forces* that draw people to pursue intervention through “Spiritual” means. I refer to “Spiritual” here (as I have throughout the entirety of this Dissertation) in keeping with Guyanese ways of employing the term and concept, which—as with many Indigenous people’s conceptions throughout the world—can be favorably translated to mean “related,” “relatedness,” or “relation(al)” (Shorter 2016).<sup>358</sup> When Guyanese identify a circumstance as “Spiritual”—usually a problem but sometimes a development felt as empowering—typically they also refer to *jumbie* or ancestral forces, and almost invariably to issues emanating from relationships with the dead or other not-necessarily-living agencies. The judicious counsel, direction, and healing blessings sought from Spiritual workers like Mother B. and other *see-far* people are predicated on their superior intersubjective capacities. Mother B.’s wisdom, as such, was not a *personal* attribute all of her own but rather lied in her unequaled aptitudes for *relatedness*, with her own personal practice serving as a passage through which others—living and dead—could affirm crucial social

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<sup>358</sup> In tracing theological and philosophical constructions of the notion “spirit” in studies of Indigenous peoples’ religions, and troubling the binaries that these constructions have often imposed—which “separated matter from the immaterial, and thus the knowable from the illogical”—David Shorter (2016: 433) has instead proposed “replacing the adjective ‘spiritual’ with the word ‘related’ in describing indigenous world views.”

connections. Spiritual People are “Spiritual” because of their consummate intersubjective abilities to relate—most importantly, to the ancestors—but also because of “their abilities to be who they [a]ren’t,” as Spiritualists can become the ancestors too through some of the most intimate forms of intersubjectivity (Lester 1998 [1968]: 101).

Before even Mother B. passed, while she was being cared for at Georgetown’s public hospital, visitors never stopped streaming in to see her. They offered gestures of encouragement in the form of words, stories, prayers, hymns, flowers, *bush* (herbal and other medicine), candles, perfume, incense, food and drink, and other Spiritual gifts—those sentiments and things *related* to the Work of the ancestors. She was surrounded by her “Spiritual family” when she did pass, those members of her gathering to whom she was closest, or her “Spiritual children.”<sup>359</sup> They had already arranged to have her body transported to a nearby funeral home, one situated within Georgetown’s sprawling cemetery, Le Repentir, which forms a distinctively “wild” or *bush* counterbalancing quality within the city’s otherwise urban landscape.<sup>360</sup> Most burials of

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<sup>359</sup> As a comparison, in working with Spiritual Baptists in Trinidad and Tobago, Grenada, and New York, Maarit Forde (2019: 221) describes these communities as “structured not only by the hierarchy of spiritual statuses, but also by the allegory of family.” Forde (ibid.) notes that “perhaps the most commonly used metaphor of the church is the ‘spiritual family’ consisting of a spiritual mother, father, and spiritual daughters and sons. Many, if not most, spiritual families—or congregations”—with whom Forde worked, “are transnational, in that one or more of their members reside abroad but participate and contribute to ritual practice.”

<sup>360</sup> Georgetown’s Botanical Gardens are just four blocks north (and east) of the cemetery and roughly the same size and dimensions, yet the gardens feature orderly well-maintained landscaping whereas Le Repentir for the most part does not. As reported in the *Guyana Chronicle* (24 January 2016), in 2016 the Georgetown city council announced an extended Cemetery Restoration Programme, as “over the years, much emphasis was not placed on the management of the cemetery, and this had led to the area being overrun by bush.” Years later, residents still complain about the cemetery’s unkempt status, often citing crime and violence as resulting from the conditions. As the city’s Town Clerk, Royston King, suggested in 2018, the “movement of dangerous reptiles, criminals secluding themselves in the high bushes and the general unhealthy state of affairs at that facility” persist (Ramdass 2018).

Physical elements of Georgetown’s landscape figure into local conceptions of different types of spaces that hold different potentialities for morality and ethical action, or what Brackette Williams (1996: 156-57n9) terms “the status geography of space.” See Williams (ibid., 1991) on local Guyanese “symbolism of geographical space labels, according to which the interior regions of Guyana and the spaces external to the village communities, relative to the urban areas, are defined as bush and are associated with a wildness and an absence of civility that is ‘catching’ if one is too long exposed to it. Once ‘caught,’ such reversions to wildness may socially contaminate those around the infected party.” Le Repentir presents a space that while internal to the city, is deemed external to the “civility” of the (living) community, “overrun” as it is “by bush” and *jumbie*, according to Georgetown’s Town Clerk and residents.

Georgetown's dead take place in Le Repentir, as they have beginning in 1861, and in a few days a service would be held there for Mother B. (Rodway 1920: 14, 133). In the meantime, while she rested at the mortuary home, an "African" wake was held in Mother B.'s honor in the church-space beneath her home that she had sanctified for roughly four decades. In times past, the days-long wake would have included her physical presence to a much greater extent, as the body of the deceased would have continued to be cared for by the bereaved within the "wake-house" or -yard, where food would be brought and contributed by relatives, neighbors, and community members while affectionate stories about the departed would be shared.

Spiritualists—particularly in the rural areas of the country—sometimes wait to hold a funeral service until ten days have passed after a death or after the burial, although this practice is increasingly rare today. In the past, however, it was much more widely accepted that not until the ninth night after a death would the spirit, or *jumbie*, of the deceased dissociate from their bodily vessel to partake in the celebration of their own wake, before then departing on a forty-day final visitation and atonement period in the living realm followed—hopefully—by a journey to the world of the hereafter. Consequently, the day after the traditional Nine-night wake service would be the burial, followed weeks later by the final phase of the mortuary cycle, the Forty-night service during which the bereaved and the spirit would be entertained with an extravagant *dénouement*, and the *jumbie* entreated to go along on their voyage and to find contentment and resolve in their new surroundings and with their old relations. A death anniversary service would be the recurring phase of the cycle wherein communication with the departed would be encouraged, but not necessarily visitation with their physical presence through trance possession. Manifestation of the dead at that point would still tend to be disfavored, as it could be perceived as a sign that the deceased had yet to find their place of belonging in the otherworld. As in much

of the Caribbean and Black Atlantic world, Guyanese understand “the potency of the corpse as a symbol of unregulated spiritual power” that requires containment, purification, and elevation, and to be “sent off” on its “journey from duppy,” or *jumbie*, “to ancestor” (Hume 2018: 120-23).

As in many African diaspora cultures, conceptions of *the* “soul” or “spirit,” like *the* “self,” are not typically grounded in notions of singularity or fixity, as in European, Euro-American, and other Enlightenment-influenced, globally hegemonic ontologies (Strongman 2019). Likewise, “the multiple soul-concept” identified by John Pulis (1999: 393) as constituting “Afro-Jamaican cultural construction of social being,” is recognized by Yanique Hume (2018) as central to ritual processes involved in rural Jamaican Nine-night—or Dead Yard—ceremonies. Paralleling Guyanese views on death, birth, and being, in everyday speech Jamaicans tend to collapse “the terms ‘duppy’ and ‘spirit’” to both mean “an apparition,” much as Guyanese use the words “jumbie,” “spirit,” and “force” (Hume 2018: 120). Yet for Guyanese Spiritualists, and for rural Jamaicans within the context of their mortuary complex, these are “considered distinct entities” contributing to one’s overall personhood and “social being” (ibid.). For Jamaicans, as Hume (ibid.) writes, “a duppy is equated with the soul of the newly deceased corpse or the spiritual force inside the body,” and particularly residing in the head according to Komfa People. “The shadow or spirit,” on the other hand, “is the lingering energy or entity,” what Guyanese often call an “aura,” which mortuary rites are intended to “metaphorically plant [...] into the earth,” while the *duppy* is encouraged to journey beyond (ibid.).

In Jamaica’s Nine-night ceremonies, Hume (2018: 121) discerns that “the psychosocial work” enacted through “rites of separation” that remove the body from its familiar, familial dwellings, present a form of “inversion of postpartum rites.” When a baby is born in rural Jamaica, they are first brought into their new home through a rear entrance “head first and



remain secluded with their mother for nine days. This seclusion ensures that these two vulnerable beings are protected from harmful spirits or anyone with ‘the evil eye,’” or what Hume (*ibid*) describes—as would many Guyanese—as “an envious or ‘bad-minded’ person whose potent gaze may cause harm.” On the baby’s ninth day in the world, “or sooner if the umbilical cord has sufficiently dried and fallen off, the child is bathed for the first time in a purifying solution of rum and water and welcomed fully into the folds of the family once the navel string is buried on the land” (*ibid.*: 122). Guyanese observe these same postpartum traditions of entering a rear door—or entering the home in reverse—with baby head-first, as well as ritual rum or *bush* purification, seclusion, and burying the *navel string* under a newly planted tree, what Barry Chevannes (2001: 130) describes as “two gifts of nature twinned in the struggle for survival and the richness of possibilities together, forever.” Like their Guyanese counterparts, a Jamaican newborn

thus moves from the spiritual world of ancestral spirits through the womb of his/her mother into the seclusion of a domesticated space-house, in which the infant remains for nine days until publicly received by community and planted in the earth/yard. Conversely the spirit of the deceased is traditionally propitiated over nine nights of public communal rites so that it may be secluded in its tomb, the spirit’s new house, and incorporated into the new world of ancestral kin. (Hume 2018: 122)

This instance of “ritual reversal” provides a compelling illustration of how Africans and their descendants in the Caribbean have brilliantly embodied their understandings of “death [as] an inversion of life,” and vice versa, which Hume so compellingly details in rural Jamaica (*ibid.*).<sup>361</sup>

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<sup>361</sup> On Guyanese comparisons to Jamaican postpartum rites, as well as their connections to the dead and to “jumbies,” see, especially, R. T. Smith (1965 [1956]: 129-34), where the “nine days” of “confinement” for the mother and child are described; the bathing of “both the child and the mother [...] in warm water in which both rum and silver money have been placed”; the “umbilical-cord burial” in “the house-yard,” along with “the placenta”; as well as the “sprinkl[ing of] rum around the room as an offering to the spirits of the dead ‘house-people’” “as soon as the labor pains start.” Smith does not mention mothers or newborns entering the home through a rear door or headfirst, as he notes that home births were standard in the Guianese villages where he worked. Also see Ovid Abrams (1997: 268-71), as well as Kumar Mahabir (1997) on Trinidad with some comparisons to Guyana.

Most Guyanese, including Spiritualists, do not currently observe Nine-night wakes, but rather—like for Mother B.—hold a wake for two or three nights and one major Wake-night prior to burial. Even fewer Guyanese observe Forty-night services, but of those who continue to do so Spiritualists comprise the overwhelming majority. For those who do observe Nine-night and Forty-night Services, cyclical conceptions of the journeying and birthing of “souls”—or *jumbie*—into “ancestordom,” as well as back to living humanity, remain central to their commitments. Similarly, all Guyanese, regardless of background, hold funeral or memorial services for their dead, and if not burials then cremations, which are also common especially among Hindus and Asian-descended Guyanese. Most Guyanese, again of all backgrounds, also continue to hold wakes on the night prior to a funeral (or cremation), which are typically substantial undertakings including immense social gatherings—parties really, as most Guyanese will say. Funerals—which take place during the day in open air and are public events—are more massive than nighttime wakes. Funerals also tend to punctuate the weeks of the month, as they occur frequently, more so than weddings or holidays, and in that sense they also function like parties, dances, shows, and other formalized social gatherings. In my experience, Spiritualists seem to only observe services for birth anniversaries with more frequency than they do burials, as birthdays are their most common form of gathering aside from weekly meetings. Many Guyanese also remark on how funerals are not just more common in their lives than are weddings, but that of these two kinds of events funerals hold much deeper, more momentous, meanings—sentiments which may themselves reflect on enduring afterlives of threatened “social death” during pasts of enslavement.

While Patterson (1982: 186, 190) rejects David Brion Davis’s (1966: 104-105) contention that “marriage is incompatible with chattel slavery,” Patterson writes that “where the plantation

economy was dominant, demand for slaves high, external supplies available, and males in the majority among both masters and slaves, slave unions and households tended to be highly unstable.” Such were the conditions for Dutch and British Guianese plantation societies during much of the period of slavery. While raising children was overwhelmingly understood as “woman’s work,” it was still “defined as secondary by planters to the role of female slaves as labourers, and local reproduction of the labour force was not an initial priority since replacements were made via the transatlantic trade in human cargo” (Trotz and Peake 2000: 192; cf. Costa 1994).

Yet, as Trotz and Peake (2000: 193) illustrate in regard to Guianese enslaved people’s lives, “the form that the household took did not exhaust the meaning and range of family, and commonly exceeded the spatial limits of the plantation. Women drew heavily on the support of extended confederations of female kin for assistance with domestic chores.” Likewise, they note that women heads of households “with children engaged in relationships with men, slave and free, on and off the plantations” and that

many had children with different men, a pattern which, when combined with women’s responsibility for child rearing, and the inheritance by children of their mother’s legal status without regard for paternity, in all likelihood forged the primacy of the mother-child bond over one specific male-female relationship. (ibid.)

In all likelihood as well, Komfa’s Spiritual families—which infinitely exceed “the spatial limits of the plantation”—as women-headed, or rather, Mother-headed devotional movements, were institutions forged in countering the patriarchal regimes of enslavement that continue to define the expansive conceptual range of the category “family” for descendants of the enslaved.

That the “mother-child bond” remains most significant for Guyanese is evidenced by the reality that these intimate relationships endure death, as most Komfa spirits—like practitioners—are mothers, aunts, grandmothers, great-grands, and so on, forming mighty matrilineal

dynasties of the dead.<sup>362</sup> Furthermore, as Kean Gibson (1992: 102) described in the 1990s, “about 90% of Comfa practitioners are women,” and the remaining ten percent, I would add today, are primarily drummers and other ritual musicians, although male leaders and lay members are also important to devotee communities (cf. Hucks 2006). It remains crucial in such contexts, however, as Trotz and



**Fig. 7.2** Mothers and babies surround the government Medical Officer at an “Infant Clinic” in a coastal British Guiana village in the 1920s. From John Haslam’s doctoral public health survey of rural Guiana written for the University of Edinburgh (1924: 118).

Peake suggest—following Hortense Spillers (1987: 79-80) and others—to keep in focus how enslaved mothers were incessantly positioned *as fathers*—those “monstrosities” from whom children inherited their names and social status through the legal doctrine *partus sequitur ventrem*. Still, in the same sense that the totalizing, dehumanizing violence of enslavement generated and profoundly reinforced the preeminence of forms of “ancestorism” within the lives of the enslaved, accompanying plantation regimes of brutalizing, femicidal patriarchy generated

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<sup>362</sup> Also important to consider are widespread precolonial sub-Saharan African conceptions of the social and moral “primacy” of “mother-childness,” particularly called *badenya* among Mandé peoples, as noted by Charles Bird and Martha Kendell (1980), Patrick McNaughton (2008: 181), and others. Herbert Cole (2017b: 112, 2017a) writes that “*Badenya*, the Bamana concept of ‘mother-childness,’ links with centripetal social forces of stability, unity, and cooperation, that is, those traits that pull a person back into the group, effectively toward the hearth and mother.” Regarding conceptions of and ritual practices embodying “female power” in Yoruba societies, often through the agencies of living and ancestral women known as “our mothers,” see below on the work of John Henry Drewal and Margaret Thompson Drewal (1990 [1983]; 1992), as well as Rowland Abiodun (2014: 102), Babatunde Lawal (1996), and Teresa Washington (2014, 2015 [2005]).

and greatly fortified preexisting notions of a distinctly matriarchal ancestral tradition of relatedness.<sup>363</sup>

Burials are events that also tend to disproportionately feature male devotees as leaders of funerary services. A number of reasons are given for men's amplified presences when it comes to directing the rites of the dead. A common explanation holds that "diggin' grave" has always been "man wuk," along with providing entertainments of storytelling, singing, and drumming for the bereaved and their guests—including other dead visitors who often join wakes and funerals—while women were to care for the deceased's body and *jumbie* through rites intended to secure a benevolent and conclusive departure. Some explain that due to the "wild" social quality of burials and of the environment of burial-grounds, men feel more "free to free-up theyselves" and to disregard how others might perceive their participation in "Wukin' the dead." Others say that more men tend to assist in funerals because "sons care they mother," and "*mati* does care *mati*." As the most significant event in one's lifecycle, people say that men feel obligated to participate in leading roles in funerals—even if not for their own mother—to exemplify the respect which their mother instilled within them. After all, in elucidating "the construction of Afro-Guyanese gender and domesticity in the aftermath of slavery," Brackette Williams (1996a: 129, 138) observes that "well-mannered children are a credit to their parents in general and their mothers in particular because their behavior indicates that the parents have respect for *mati*."

An all pervasive Creolese term thought to derive from relationships forged in the Middle Passage—as "*shipmates*"—and sustained through the treacheries of plantation life, today *mati*

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<sup>363</sup> Philosophies and practices of "ancestorism," or the "ability to incarnate destiny," as maintained in Afro-Atlantic religious formations, and as discussed below regarding Komfa, are what Thompson (1974: 28) identifies as the ninth of ten formal features characterizing sub-Saharan African dance practices.

(or *mattee*) “essentially defines those presumed to share equal social status and poverty” (Williams 1996a: 155n4). “Ties between such persons, rooted in their shared equality of opportunity, resulted in expectations of amity, cooperation, and solidarity with *mati* as members of a close-knit social group within which minor material differences were considered to result from luck rather than from any ascribed or achieved superiority” (Williams 1991: 94-95).<sup>364</sup> In contemporary Afro-Surinamese cultures, *mati* and *mati work* describe relationships particular to women, often based in “egalitarianism [...]—‘We have to feel equal,’” as well as in “the stuff that eroticism is made of” (Wekker 2006: 235, 16).<sup>365</sup> Worth noting too is that (Spiritual) abilities of relatedness such as ascribed to *see-far* people in Guyana and Suriname are considered to result from forms of “mystical unfoldment,” not “from any ascribed or achieved superiority”

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<sup>364</sup> As noted above, motherhood and morality—particularly as engendered through egalitarian forms of relatedness—are inextricably linked ideas, practices, and subjectivities in Guyana as in numerous West and Central African cultures, including Yaka people as demonstrated in the work of René Devisch (2012: 93), who writes that “the mother-child dyad and the uterine blood bond” form “the root model” of Yaka “culture’s *axiological and moral order* regarding life’s basic concern with *unescapable and sustainable reciprocity*.”

<sup>365</sup> In current Guyanese Creolese the term *mati* is used regardless of gender. The term was used widely among enslaved people in the Dutch and later British colony of Berbice, today eastern Guyana. As John Lean (2002: 212) writes, that in Berbice “slaves were ‘shipmates,’ ‘countrymen’ or ‘mattees’ [was] recorded without remark from the clerks and the officials, and managers or slave owners did not appear to interfere in such relationships.” For a comparison to Suriname, Richard and Sally Price (1991: 396n51) write that among Saamáka (Saramaka) Maroons “*máti* is a highly charged volitional relationship, usually between two men, that dates back to the Middle Passage—*mátis* were originally ‘shipmates,’ those who had survived the journey out from Africa together.” That *mati* relationships were and are typically formed between men and not women is questionable, or is a reality particular to Saamáka people or to Suriname’s past, as in contemporary usage among Afro-Surinamese *mati* generally refers to relations between women (Wekker 2006). The Prices (1991: 396n51) add that “by the eighteenth century,” in Suriname “*máti*” described “a lifelong relationship entered into only with caution and when there was strong mutual affection and admiration.” Also compare to Andrew Apter (2013) on “Carriacou lesbianism.”

While Gloria Wekker (2006: 174-178) accepts that “slaves arrived in Suriname with the concept of *mati*,” and that for them it referred “to the special relationship of shipmates,” she also identifies the Dutch word *maatje* as offering “possibilities for convergence” as the Dutch term means “‘buddy,’ the diminutive of ‘mate.’” Wekker (ibid.) also demonstrates that the Sranan Tongo or Surinamese Creole word “acquired” its current “sexual meaning” of special relationships “for both Creole men and women” by the 1850s and likely earlier. More specifically, within the historical context of Suriname’s plantation societies, *maatje/mati* was used among enslaved people and Whites to describe two sorts of relations, a “girlfriend” and a “term of address for a housekeeper who is a slave” (ibid.: 174). In Suriname and Guiana, “free housekeepers or concubines replace[d] the housewives” of most slaveowners and overseers, with these “housekeepers” establishing relationships among themselves, as they “eat alone or they invite *vriendinnen* (*maatjes*) over,” as noted by August Kappler (1983 [1854]: 23, quoted in Wekker 2006: 175).

(ibid.). Men *Wuk* burials in large part because of the cosmologically consequential qualities of these events, which derive overwhelmingly from a social understanding of *mati* as extending beyond the grave, wherein egalitarian intersubjectivities need not desist due to death alone.

### **“Marchin’ the Ancestors” and Watching/“Washin’ the Guards”**

Wakes are processes. [...] They are the watching of relatives and friends beside the body of the deceased from death to burial and the accompanying drinking, feasting, and other observances, a watching practiced as a religious observance. [...] In the wake, the semiotics of the slave ship continue.  
—Christina Sharpe<sup>366</sup>

When the day came for Mother B.’s burial, a procession was arranged to “rally the living for go meet the dead,” as described by Winston Noel, a high school teacher in his forties, and the friend who invited me to attend. The “march,” as it was called, began just a few blocks from the entrance to the cemetery that is closest to where the mortuary home is located where Mother B.’s body lay in repose, awaiting her family to gather. A major aspect of Guyanese burials of the past, and still somewhat in rural areas, included carrying the body of the deceased from their home to their final resting place, often in a dramatic performance of actions generated by the dead from within their coffin through compelling the pallbearers’ movements. These divinatory displays were of great community interest and concern, both for entertainment and for the welfare of the bereaved and the departed, as well as their wider networks. Before the dead could go in peace, it was necessary to reconcile old social wounds that may still have been festering between the newly departed and their still-living counterparts, and as such, the dead might direct their own funeral procession to stop at a particular person’s home in the community to “have a gyaff”—and hopefully work things out—before moving the crowd on to the burial ground. While such

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<sup>366</sup> From Christina Sharpe’s *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (2016: 21).

practices are rare today in Guyana, even in “the country,” similar arrangements continue to be observed in Suriname, and in West and Central African, from where important comparative observations can be drawn.<sup>367</sup>

For Mother B.’s march, only living family members—Spiritual family, that is—moved together to go greet her, and no ancestors or other sorts of *jumbie* seemed to manifest along the short route, although many arrived with the other guests once at the funeral home. Still, while



walking together with ceremonial decorum, people remarked that they were “marchin’ the ancestors home.” The procession was short, no doubt because most of the forty-odd participants

*Fig. 7.3* Procession for Mother B.’s funeral preparing to march toward Le Repentir cemetery. were quite elderly women, and the morning sun was fierce just before midday. Timing is important to most Komfa Work as well, with the four cardinal points of 3, 6, 9, and 12 o’clock presenting the liminal moments, or “junctures in the sands of time,” as my friend Winston explained, when a “Spiritual changing of the guard” takes place and “ancestors shift their positions.” Mother B.’s service was

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<sup>367</sup> According to Kofi Agorsah (2006: 70), for example, funereal divination in processions carrying the corpse is—“like a coroner’s inquest in other societies”—performed by Nchumuru people of the northern Volta Basin in Ghana. Maarit Forde (forthcoming, citing Douglin 1986: 190) notes that an 1846 letter written by Stipendiary Magistrate Dowland which describes “protective charms and other examples of the ‘abominable Custom of Obeah’” as practiced in pre-emancipation Tobago, also “mentions coffin divination, a ritual of assessing the cause of death by allowing the spirit of the deceased to lead the coffin-bearers to the culprit.” For Surinamese comparisons, historical and in recent decades, see especially H. U. E. “Bonno” Thoden van Velzen and Wilhelmina van Wetering (1988; 2004), as well as Rogério Pires (2019), Richard Price (1990), and, more generally, Vincent Brown (2008: 67, 215).



to start by—or exactly at—twelve noon, when “the horizon of here and there can meet together,” and when “the ancestor gone be most likely for open the gates with love” and “not torment we” while conducting Mother B.’s final rites, as Winston described. A Spiritual “child” of Mother B., he was one of seven or eight men to attend the procession, with three leading the two files of women and about five men—including an archbishop and a bishop in formal, sumptuous regalia—“sealing off” the group at the tail-end. Leading the procession was a small lorry which towed a band of musicians who were seated on the truck-bed, comprising two male Komfa drummers, a woman on a drumset, and a man playing saxophone. One trusted devotee directed the entire spectacle from in front of the lorry, a young man in a long, flowing purple robe with a white head-covering, white patent leather shoes, and lily-white gloves, wielding a glistening sword.

The women in the procession all wore white robes, head-ties, and mantles with matching purple sashes draped over their right shoulder or tied around their waist and all carried in their hand a frond from a coconut palm. One bishop at the end of the line wearing a deep-mauve

velvet robe complete with embroidered gold fringe and massive hood, also carried a bouquet of what is locally known as “jumbie-bead” or “buck-bead” (*Coix lacryma-*



**Fig. 7.4** Bishop at the end of the funeral procession carrying a bouquet of green “buck-bead,” also known as “jumbie-bead” or “Job’s tears.”

derive from the plant’s typical habitat in landscapes that have been previously “disturbed” by

human activity such as the outskirts of agricultural fields and garden plots, along trails in backdams, in abandoned urban and rural lots, and—most prominent in many people’s minds—in cemeteries and burial grounds, including Le Repentir.<sup>368</sup> Grounded in local Guyanese “symbolism of geographical space labels” and the attendant moralizing “status geography of space” (Williams 1996: 156-57n9), the interchangeable Creolese terms “jumbie-bead” and “buck-bead” symbolically link Guyana’s Indigenous people to tall-grass growing in what Michael Taussig (1987: 4) has identified as “death space,” “a threshold that allows for illumination as well as extinction.” As such, these local phytonyms confer deeply embedded biases, forms of human “morcellation,” as well as historically situated viewpoints on the enduring predicaments of colonialisms’ pasts and present that Guyanese face in their daily lives. For Komfa People, these particular *bush*, including their pejorative plant names, aid in relating to ancestral forces—*jumbie*—and especially those spirits considered by many as comprising the founding generations to inhabit the local landscape—Guyana’s Indigenous, or “*Buck*,” people.

The coconut fronds that the Sisters carried on the way to the cemetery served as physical manifestations of Mother Earth, sometimes called Mama Aisa, Mama Lisa, Mama Lata, or any

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<sup>368</sup> Allsopp (2003 [1996]: 314) notes that the common (and Latin) name “Job’s tears,” as a reference to the Old Testament figure Job, “may be due to the tear-drop shape and mournful [‘grey’] colour” of the seeds. Yet the notion of “suffering,” or *sufferation*, is also attached to this plant due not necessarily to the seed’s shape or color, but also because of its traditional uses as a “famine food” or “poverty food” in many parts of sub-Saharan Africa, East and South Asia, and elsewhere, where the soft-shelled edible variety of job’s-tears is cultivated for food when and where rice or other staples are unavailable (Burkill 1994: 636). For an account of “buck bead” as “obtained from a weed that grew prolifically in any field, but mainly the cemetery,” see Helena Martin’s memoir, *Walk Wit’ Me...All Ova Guyana* (2011: 179). In Guyana and many other parts of the Caribbean the term “jumbie-bead” is also used to refer to other species, particularly one that Guyanese tend to call crab-eye seed or red sandalwood (*Abrus precatorius*).

Guyanese also use “jumbie” and “buck”—often interchangeably—as descriptors for other plants (and fungi) such as “wild banana,” also called Buck-banana and jumbie-banana, the palm-like leaves of which are used in funereal preparations, specifically to line the grave prior to the coffin being lowered; “wild coffee” is called Buck-coffee or jumbie-coffee; a berry usually known as bura-bura (*Solanum stramonifolium*) is also called jumbie-bubby, with “bubby” meaning “breast”; jumbie-basil, also called jumbie-balsam, holy basil, or most commonly, tulsi (*Ocimum canum* or *Ocimum tenuiflorum*); and countless other examples like jumbie-umbrella or jumbie-parasol, terms which Guyanese and other Caribbeans use to refer to mushrooms and various fungi (see Thompson [1958] for an engaging linguistic account of West Indian “Mushrooms, Umbrellas, and Black Magic”).

number of names.<sup>369</sup> More specifically, the fronds were objectified blessings bestowed upon the procession, the burial rites, and on Mother B. for her great journey. As Gibson (2001: 94, 96, 115) observes, the coconut tree—and emanations deriving therefrom, including coconut fruit “meat” and the milk made from it, the fruit’s inner water, boughs and branches, and the



**Fig. 7.5** A devotee moves around a table-altar, dancing with an empowering “broom” made of the *manicole* palm. Handmade palm brooms, especially from *manicole*, are highly valued instruments in protective and prophylactic Works.

empowering *pointer-brooms* constructed of the “spines” of the leaves—are for Faithists all symbols of Mother Earth’s purity, virtue, and compassion in “caring her children.”<sup>370</sup> Coconut plays a central role in Komfa rites of healing and thanksgiving, and in terms of *bush* offerings, is perhaps only matched or exceeded in importance by sugarcane—as raw canes, burnt canes, processed as sugar, as molasses, as rum, as high-wine, or prepared as *sweeties* (candy), in sweet drinks, and on cakes coated with the thickest sugary frosting. In all these many forms, and more,

<sup>369</sup> These names for Komfa’s Mother-Goddess share similarities to other regional and distant potentially parallel traditions. In Suriname’s Winti faith, for example, Charles Wooding (1979: 35) writes that “the head of all the pantheons, the most supreme, is Aisa, the mother goddess of the Earth” (cf. Wekker 2006: 85, 91, 94-95). In Trinidad and Tobago, for both Orisha and Spiritual Baptist traditions, the deity known as Mama Lata, or “Mama Laaté, and Mother of All Nations,” represents “the Mother of the Earth,” and may derive her name from the French Patois for such—*Maman de la Terre* (Simpson 1962: 1206; McNeal 2012: 124; see also; Crosson 2017; Forde 2019: 240n70; Lum 2000; Simpson 1970). Pertinent parallels for Mama Lisa seem more opaque, yet Mawu-Lisa, the dual female-male creator God/dess of Fon and Ewe peoples of coastal Bénin comes to mind, yet for them Lisa presents the male aspect. Some have contended that the Fon term “Lisa” derives from “orisha” in the Yoruba language. See Melville Herskovits (1938), Bronwyn Mills (2016), and Robert Pelton (1980).

<sup>370</sup> Along with *pointer-brooms*, which are generally used in every Guyanese household for sweeping, *manicole* palm (*Prestoea tenuiramosa*) brooms, which are far less-common and typically not used for cleaning, are considered by many as inherently Spiritual, and are highly valued instruments in Komfa protective and prophylactic Works. Many Spiritual Churches and homes of practitioners have *manicole* brooms guarding thresholds. See *Figure 7.6* below.

sugarcane serves as the primary botanical power of Komfa Work, a status reflecting memory of sugar's hallowed supremacy within the plantation's regimes of production.

“Jumbie-bead” or “buck-bead” is less common in Spiritualist rituals and, as mentioned, tends to be reserved for uses related to the recently dead and the mortuary cycle in particular, as



*Fig. 7.6* A practitioner swings a censer to consecrate a threshold during a Spiritual Work. Notice the manicole palm “broom” positioned above the door.

well as for what Komfa People refer to as “*Buck-wuk*,” or services dedicated specifically to honoring and entertaining the “*Amerindian*” or “*Buck*” Nation of Native Guyanese ancestors. The bunch of “buck-bead” was an “offering of goodwill,” the bishop who carried it in the procession explained, to be submitted to the spirits who directly oversee Le Repentir’s grounds. Specifically, he said the *bush* was for the “boundary guards of the cemetery” who “patrol” the perimeter and “mind the gates” and countless passageways that are frequented by school children and other pedestrians as shortcuts through these

imposing wilds of Georgetown. These “boundary guards,” the bishop said, “Wuk for the *real* owner of the cemetery them.” After “marching the ancestors” together for a few blocks through the neighborhood north of the grounds, called Lodge, while singing a number of Anglican hymns and Guyanese “folksongs,” we crossed Princes(s) Street and approached one of the entrance roads to Le Repentir. A flat bridge serves as a discreet threshold marking access to and from the burial grounds that passes over the drainage canal lining the extent of the northern boundary of the cemetery. As the stream of a mourning yet excited flock advanced over the bridge into the

verdure, the bishop at the end of the line paused momentarily and bowed-over the edge to dip the buck-bead into the gentle flow of the trench. After dunking the grasses and vigorously shaking off the water four times, in each instance facing east, west, north, and south, respectively, the bishop lightly cast the grass into the trench before moving on to catch up with the group, who had already almost reached the chapel.

Along the short path to the funeral home, referred to as both a “chapel” and a “mandir” due to the structure’s unique architecture, the bishop explained a bit further about the buck-bead



Fig. 7.7 Mother B.’s funereal procession crossing over Princes(s) Street into the cemetery.

offering. He told me that in immersing the *bush* in the trench and dispersing the droplets into the air, he had “washed the guards” of the cemetery in

“Guyana’s blood,” which he also described as “baptizing” and “consecrating the earthbound spirits of the burial ground.” As a result of this display of concern for the highly localized, site-specific agencies of the dead, the bishop said that Mother B.’s rites would more likely be successful and that now “the guard gone Wuk for we [...] and stop all them other wanderin’ force from findin’ they way in for we own party, for Mother B[.]’s Wuk. ’Cause we can’ have none a them troublin’ we when we doin’ a Celestial thing there,” the bishop clarified. “Once we there in there we need full seriousness, for all the ancestor them. Not no play-thing we here for play,” he insisted, but rather, “that’s why I walk wit’ the bead them an’ in the trench done the washin’ so right here them Repentir spirit gone know is no joke burial we come for bury [...] You must trust me,” he went on, “them

graveyard spirit that does live right here, they'd a mess wit' we mess bad. *Bad-bad*. But them guard, them *ole-ole big* guard, they can' resist the washin'. Is only they could *control* all the rest a-we. They wait right there in the trench for I come with the consecratin'. Is like them Buck they-own-self," the bishop offered, "you see them line-up front the church them for take baptism? Like missionary they line-up they-own-self!" he concluded with a hearty laugh. By then we had reached the building where most guests were already inside.

Waters from different sources are crucial instruments in Komfa Work, and in vessels on altars serve as channels through which a variety of ancestral presences can be accessed and retrieved. After all, a majority of Komfa's Spiritual forces are understood by practitioners to reside in the "many waters" of Guyana. Waters, like liquors and perfumes, are related in

qualities, functions, and forms, to *bush*, and often are considered as comprising forms of *bush medicine*. As mentioned, coconut water is used for invoking and working



**Fig. 7.8** A devotee praying before an altar during a Spiritualist Work. She holds a black candle and a glass of blackwater—also called holy water—that comes from certain of Guyana's many rivers, creeks, canals and other waterways, often originating in the Amazonian highlands.

with Mother Earth and other entities, including for many healing rites. Seawater and rainwater are used for particular purposes as well, and often incorporated within shrines held in crystal vases and tall glasses. Blackwater, *blackawata*, or *blacka*, the minerally, tannically, and botanically rich waters emanating from sources deep within the Amazonian highlands, is near-

universal in its efficacious applications in socially relating with the spirits (Sioli 1975). *Blacka* is present on all altars, used in nearly every Komfa service, and in most acts of Spiritualist healing, yet it is also more-intimately linked to Works dedicated to the African, Dutch, and “Amerindian” Nations. While today it is more common for Spiritualists to bring *blacka* to their churches and homes to contribute to their Works, they also continue to make pilgrimages to particularly significant locations and sources for their “holy water,” as *blacka* is commonly understood.<sup>371</sup>

Some such sites are located in Georgetown and many more within the surrounding coastal and rural villages, agricultural areas, and the isolated *bush* adjacent to many of these communities. Empowering locales are not visited only to collect vital



*Fig. 7.9* A partially submerged punt in a *backdam* southeast of Georgetown. These small barges are linked together in “water-trains” towed along the same trenches created by enslaved Guianese to bring cut sugar cane to processing facilities.

provisions, including other *bush* medicines, but instead, some of the most important rites conducted by Spiritualists occur at sources of water and particularly of blackwater, but also other forms of fresh or *sweetwater*, as well as at the sea. Baptism by immersion is one of these most important rites, and is very often observed in one of Georgetown’s many canals and creeks, or in the Demerara and other rivers that—following their mighty journeys from *the interior*—empty into the Atlantic after first winding their ways through coastal communities.

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<sup>371</sup> As Gibson (1992: 103) describes, “Comfa practitioners consider the water [held in vessels on altars] to be life, and black water collected from the creeks is symbolic of spirits who can cure illnesses.”

As Elder Nathaniel Jordan described in 1927, and Faithists continue to maintain today, Spiritual baptism presents a replication and an emulation of Christ's own ritual action. "Mr. Jordan said that he believed in imitating Our Lord," is how Norman Cameron (1950: 137) explained the "Lord Elder" Jordan's devotional commitments. "Baptism was an outward sign of the inward feeling and state of mind, and as Our Lord was baptised in the River of Jordan, so his members should be publicly baptised in trenches or the Demerara River," Jordan told Cameron and Cameron's wife, Lurline Daly, in a 1927 visit to the WEMP's head-church in Agricola village (ibid.). Elsewhere Cameron (1949) has written about the postplantation legacies of Georgetown's and the coast's landscape with particular reference to the city's vast network of waterways. He writes that "to the visitor" arriving in the colony from abroad, certain "peculiarities stand out," one being "the number of canals or trenches which run through the town. These were far more numerous in the past," Cameron (ibid.) explains, adding that

all of our avenues are filled-up trenches—East Street, Main Street, Carmichael Street, Hadfield, etc. The trenches are one of the features which remind us forcibly that almost all of Georgetown was once estate land, the cultivation being sugar or cotton. The trenches belong to the drainage system of the estate hence, also, some of the streets are still called "Dams." Brickdam was the middle dam of an estate. Kelly's Dam and Packwood Dam were "backdams" of estates. Company Path was a common dam between neighbouring estates. The railway lines were "company paths."

Perhaps returning to the colony from England as he had in 1926—after being raised in New Amsterdam, educated in Georgetown, and then earning a master's degree from Cambridge—contributed to Cameron's marked cognizance of the city's spatially structured "afterlives of slavery" (Hartman 2007). Such thinking, after all, heavily informs his two-volume opus, *The Evolution of the Negro* (1970), first published in Georgetown in 1929 and 1934, respectively. Even the bishop's comments regarding his "washing" of "them *ole-ole*, *big* guards" who "wait



right there in the trench,”  
 demonstrate understandings of  
 Guyana’s pasts of conquest,  
 genocide, enslavement,  
 displacement, and colonization,  
 as do his sentiments regarding  
 “them Buck” who “line-up front  
 the church [...] like  
 missionaries.”<sup>372</sup> Conceptions



**Fig. 7.10** Archival photograph captioned as “African (?) workers filling in” a trench, by Edward Pigott Minett, Assistant Government Bacteriologist in the British Colonial Medical Service (ca. “1910/1920”). Held by the Wellcome Collection.

of Indigenous people’s proximities to both “wildness” and Whiteness are important to how Guyanese—and many people throughout the Americas—make sense of the terrors, and the entitlements, of the past that continue to hold enormous implications for their lives. As “Santiago Mutumbajoy, the Indian shaman,” asked Taussig (1987: 170) and their friend Rosario in the Putumayo foothills in 1980, “didn’t I tell you that the Indian is more Christian than the white?”<sup>373</sup>

<sup>372</sup> One can interpret the bishop’s reference to the guards as “ole” and “big” to mean, in Creolese, as Allsopp (2003 [1996]: 99-100) explains “adult or adolescent,” or “the more or most important” of something. Spiritual People often describe themselves as children in relation to the ancestors, who are “*big-people*,” “*adults* or *grown-ups*” (ibid.). For example, when a practitioner is considered as “feigning” trance possession they are said to be “playin’ big” or to “mash-up [step on] big-people foot.” In this context, “big guards” could be a reference to Indigenous people’s position as ancestral “parents” to all who dwell in Guyana, as conceived through Komfa cosmologies, hence their being the “only” ones who “could *control* all the rest a-we,” according to the bishop’s reasoning.

<sup>373</sup> Compare Mutumbajoy’s sentiments and those of the bishop regarding his “washing” and “them Buck” who “line-up front the church [...] like missionaries,” with those expressed around 1910 by an Indigenous Guianese Arekuna (Pemon) man identified as “Abraham” by A. Hyatt Verrill (1929: 125-26), as well as Verrill’s reaction.

“Mebbe this feller worthless peoples, Chief,” replied the Arekuna. “Mebbe no likeum Arekuna, no likeum other kind buck men. Mebbe see um buck come, thinkum Kenaima, make for killum. No make killum white man, him all same God. This fellers no Christians, Chief; no sabby Communion an’ Jesus an’ Sacrament all same me.”

I laughed. Considering that Abraham believed implicitly in good and evil spirits, that he had absolute faith in the “water-mama,” that he had sublime confidence in the half-mystical, half-supernatural powers of the peaimen or medicine-men, and that he never started on a voyage, a hunt or any other

## Circling the Dead

When the bishop and I had reached the building most of the Sisters were already inside, but other guests who had not marched with us were still just arriving. Outside, on one side of the entranceway to this exceptionally Guyanese bipartite-building, stood one of the young men who had led the procession and on the other side stood a woman who had also marched, both securing long swords in their grip, taking their place as sentries at the door.

Featuring a distinctive pair of facades, the structure housing the



*Fig. 7.11* The “chapel” and “mandir” at Le Repentir cemetery in Georgetown, which architecturally represents two of Guyana’s “world” religious traditions.

Memorial Gardens Funeral Home and Crematorium, a private business within the municipal cemetery, functions as both a “Chapel and Hindu temple,” according to the company’s website ([memorialgardens12.com](http://memorialgardens12.com)). Within one wing of the building can be arranged a “full and complete Christian service,” while in the other extension—featuring a *sikhara* spire to balance the chapel’s

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undertaking without first resorting to a charm or beena to ensure success, his reference to his own “Christianity” and his contempt for the other Indians’ paganism was amusing. (ibid.)

Consider also an account from the diary of a Lieutenant Gullifer of the Royal Marines, who, on an “expedition” that left Georgetown in 1828 for British Guiana’s ‘interior,’ “laughed off the warnings of the Amerindians about the ‘water-mama’ spirit” inhabiting a pond where he and his travel companion, Smith, wanted to bathe (Burnett 2000: 182). Being warned by Indigenous locals that “the water harbored a vengeful spirit that would kill them,” the two decided to “bathe publicly, to dramatize the power of their Christian beliefs” for the “natives” (ibid.). Yet, in “fulfillment of the prophecy of the place-myth,” Smith perished of fever once they crossed the Rio Negro and Gullifer died by suicide in a Trinidadian church after completing his journey alone (ibid.: 183).

Graham Burnett (ibid.) comments that by writing about his laughter at the “Amerindians’ beliefs,” Gullifer was making “a bid [...] to refute not just a single superstition but an Amerindian cosmology and the relationship with the territory that implied. Their laughter,” both Smith and Gullifer, as well as the many “explorers” who followed these two men into Guiana’s *bush*—fascinated by tales of their fate—served as an “assertion that the space of the interior was familiar, an extension of their expectations; their laughter was, in effect, a denial of the lay of the land and an effort to install the stage conventions of colonial space,” which, as Johannes Fabian (2014 [1983]) demonstrates, means linking differences in space to differences in time. See also Eric Leed (1991: 207), and Chapter 2, section titled “Secularist Nationalisms’ Denials of ‘the Little Tradition/s’: ‘The problem of coevalness.’” Following Greg Dening (1992: 262, 393), Barnett (2000: 183) concludes that “when they bathed in water that was supposed to kill them, they were staging a small theater of possession, unseating a genius loci.”

bell—“all Hindu Customs Traditions & Rites [can] be observed similar to the traditional Open air Cremations sites” of the Indian subcontinent that were recreated on Guianese plantations in earlier generations (ibid.).

Following a characteristically pluralist socio-spatial schema, Le Repentir, more generally, has dedicated “sections for various religious organisations,” including, according to the *Guyana Chronicle* (24 January 2016), “Muslims, Hindus, Roman Catholics, Anglicans, Chinese, Baha’is and Presbyterians.” A newly restored facility, only reopened in 2014, as described by the owner Dr. Carl Niamatali, the crematorium was specifically “created to meet the burial needs of all Guyanese regardless of their religious persuasion or social standing because as we all know of recent, there has been some difficulty associated with burying the dead. This project was created to ease that burden” (*Kaieteur News* 20 July 2014). As the main resting place for the capital city’s dead for over 150 years, the dense necropolis has been overcrowded for decades, with residents’ tombs often being replaced or displaced by more-recently deceased settlers, or, alternatively, with the dead being forced to learn to share their dwellings communally.

In front and inside of the church-side of the funeral home, everyone, including the Sisters, were hurrying to thrust themselves into the crowd gathered to view Mother B.’s open casket in the center of the large gallery. The guards at the door did not interfere with any of the guests or seem to mind the commotion, and the attendees likewise seemed not to notice their diligent poses—standing steadily in place with *cutlasses* drawn.<sup>374</sup> These are weapons meant to counteract any uninvited Spiritual presences that might intend to “trouble” the Work. Two men likewise stood guard inside, one at Mother B.’s head, the other at her feet, each extending a

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<sup>374</sup> *Cutlass* is the general Creolese term for any blade, especially machetes, perhaps the most common of Guyanese tools. A small pocketknife can be called a *fine cutlass*. For an illuminating historical examination of the *cutlass* in relation to gender-based violence in the Caribbean, particularly Guyana and Trinidad, see Kaneesha Parsard (2016).



Fig. 7.12 Spiritualists draw together their swords above a table-altar assembled for a congregant's birthday anniversary Work at a gathering in Georgetown, 2017.

sword over her body for nearly the entire length of the nearly three-hour service, only pointing toward the ground when appropriate, for instance when *invited* spirits manifested.

Eventually, people were told to take their seats after about ten minutes of viewing as more

guests arrived and packed themselves into the chapel. From the forty or so who had marched in the procession, now the room was filled with well-over one hundred people. No one seemed to mind the swords, likely as they had attended Spiritual funerals or services before, and due to the fact that such displays are fairly common and not restricted to Spiritualist events. Local “self-help” *lodges*, which are particularly important as forms of “burial societies,” include the use of swords in their public processions, as well as in their mortuary and other rites.

All of the folding-chairs encircling Mother B. were occupied, and even more people massed in the aisleways and towards the back walls on all sides. More guests lingered outside where there was a breeze, and a crowd gathered at the main doorway and one outside each of the windows looking in on the proceedings. The band of musicians and Komfa drummers who had led the procession from the truck-bed were now positioned inside the hall and continued to play hymns, sankeys, and folksongs during the viewing period prior to the archbishop's formal commencing of the ceremony, and throughout as called for. Following a boisterous rendition of “Jesus Lover of my Soul,” as the music and singing stopped the archbishop began his remarks,

first by thanking God for everyone’s presence to honor Mother B. “Mother B[.] we are here, and we are here for you, today on this your day!” he thundered. “We are here for you today like you was there for us, for so many us, for so many of us. You was a pillar!” the archbishop continued.

You was a body we believe in, a mountain of trust and faith. And so in you we put our trust and our faith, because you return it one hundred-fold! And is so much more you give than what you take from we, Mother B[.], in your turnin’, in your passin’, in your flight on high. So we does continue to believe in you. We know you as a living Mother and is now we know you as a passed one, yet in spirit an ancestor you shall forever remain as your children continue to know you, to call on you and to seek your promise, your wisdom, your kind, beautiful, loving heart, Mother B[.]. You was a pillar! And you was a mountain! A tree plant beside the water! A rock! And you is a rock! From which we all draw strength, and strength, and more strength, Mother B[.]! Because from you we draw life, and from us, you gone continue to know this world, to know wha’-go-on—wit’ you family, wit’ you Spiritual family—to know life, Mother B[.], because we gone continue to love you as you love us. So many a us, you children, who’s here today, we love you, and we missin’ you right now in this instant as you takin’ you turn. We here, we here ‘cause when a Mother does pass, she children dread. So you musn’t lef’ you children, Mother B[.] Like a rock you gone stay! Like a mountain you can’ be moved! And we gone stay givin’ you wha’s you-own. Offerin’ you, libation of love. For you to sip an’ sop, an’ soak up from on high, like the clouds, like the rain, like the Earth, like the Mama you is. Soak it all up, you rock! You rock of the Earth! Bless you Mother B[.]! Bless you! And give thanks!<sup>375</sup>

“All, everyone, we all give thanks!” the archbishop shouted, as those assembled burst into cheers and cries and wails and repeating of thanks. “Thank you, Mother, your children thank you.”

“Soak you rock!” someone else yelled, while another added “You mountain! No she can’ be move!” And another woman, above all the others, bellowed out “Live! No dead yet! Live! Live!”

Just as the archbishop finished, while guests were still crying and calling out their responses to his stirring remarks as they had also done while he spoke, the drummers burst into a pulsating rhythm that ignited the commanding momentum of the Work. Immediately, the archbishop was joined in front of Mother B.’s shining-white casket by the bishop and two other men who had marched in the procession, all in magnificent purple and white robes—the

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<sup>375</sup> As with most of the statements of my interlocutors quoted throughout this Dissertation, I documented the archbishop’s eulogy for Mother B. using a digital audio recorder, while also writing notes.

archbishop also wearing a tall miter-headdress adorned with a six-pointed star, or Seal of Solomon. The men positioned themselves into a ring around Mother B. and were likewise encircled by the seats of the crowd. Moving their bodies in unison to the fast pace of the drums, rocking their upper torsos briskly while bouncing up and down in their knees, the men broke into a dance progressing around the casket-altar and the two swordsmen standing guard, who themselves were simultaneously dipping and bobbing in place with the same comportment as the others. As the men circumambulated Mother B.’s resting body, the attendees were also standing and moving to the beat of the drums, many still weeping and shouting towards the dancers, and to Mother B., the mountain.

The head-panel of Mother B.’s casket remained open for the entirety of the service, while the portion of the casket’s “crown” that covers the lower-half of the body—or the foot-panel—



*Fig. 7.13* Mother B.’s open casket with an altar assembled on top. Guards stand by with swords, as loved ones offer words and pay their respects to the dearly departed.

was closed. A number of vital ritual implements were arranged on that closed panel of the crown, essentially transforming the casket into a Spiritualist table-shrine—a compressed point of Spiritual energy, and a container and conductor of ancestral presence(s). An array of small swords was placed on the altar above Mother B.’s feet, while next to them stood one tall glass of clear water and another holding a bouquet of lush green *bush*. A brass bell with wooden handle, as well as a set of three “Dutch” perfume bottles, were also displayed in the assemblage, which at the center had three white

was closed. A number of vital ritual implements were arranged on that closed panel of the crown, essentially transforming the casket into a Spiritualist table-shrine—a compressed point of Spiritual energy, and a container and

candles. The candlesticks were secured directly to the casket, and as the men moved together around the circle, they took turns lighting the candles with a fourth candlestick which they passed amongst themselves. The bishop periodically took a branch out from the glass on the altar and—first dipping it into a crystal basin of empowered waters which he held—splashed the casket, and then the dancing men, as well as the other guests in a wide sweeping motion. Individuals would also come approach the bishop to receive personal “consecrations” with the *bush*-conveyed holy water, as well as sprayings of perfume, as were all also already applied to Mother B.

At that point the archbishop signaled for the drums to quiet, and numerous guests were called on to offer words of praise for Mother B. and celebrations of the fortitude and grace she had inspired in their lives. As they spoke, the archbishop stood in front of the open casket while the bishop stood opposite him on the other side. With a swordsman at her head and at her feet, and the bishop and archbishop by her sides, these leaders created a cross- and/or diamond-shaped field through and or around Mother B. and they remained in that configuration throughout the service, only leaving it while dancing a ring around her. In many ways reminiscent of the Kongo cosmogram, *dikenga*, or *yowa* cross—through dance and bodily arrangements in space—this Spiritualist ritual may (re)present forms of Central African philosophical inspiration and remembrance. The *yowa* cross, as Robert Farris Thompson (1983: 109) conveys, is “the Kongo sign of the cosmos and the continuity of human life.” Wyatt MacGaffey (unpublished, as quoted in Thompson 1983: 108) adds that for Bakongo, “the simplest ritual space is a Greek cross [+ ] marked on the ground, as for oath-taking. One line represents the boundary; the other is ambivalently both the path leading across the boundary, as to the cemetery; *and* the vertical path of power linking ‘the above’ with ‘the below.’ This relationship,” MacGaffey describes further,

“in turn, is polyvalent, since it refers to God and [humans], God and the dead, and the living and the dead. The person taking the oath” (for example, as this ritual configuration has near-universal uses for Kongo “mediation of spiritual power between worlds”), “stands upon the cross, situating [themselves] between life and death, and invokes the judgement of God and the dead” (ibid.).

Consider also that Central Africans comprised the largest—or if not then near-so—grouping of Africans and their descendants in British Guiana in the period leading up to emancipation as well as in the immediate-postemancipation period (Schuler 1986; Warner-Lewis 2003). Many more thousands of Central Africans arrived in Guiana as “liberated” laborers in the decades after slavery’s abolition as well, through to the 1880s (Schuler 2002). Similarly, as Thompson (1983: 132, 143), Stuckey (2013 [1987]), and others have argued, “Kongo-Angola influence on the New World” is perhaps most “pronounced,” most “profound,” in “black traditional cemeteries” and funereal practices, particularly as found “throughout the South of the United States,” but also identified in “the Berbice area of Guyana,” and among “the Djuka,” or Okanisi Maroon people of Suriname. In working with Guyana’s Faithists, Gibson (2001: 35; 1992) also identified countless Kikongo words and phrases remembered within ritual Komfa lyrics, and particularly within those songs most associated with burials, mourning, and the dead, which for Gibson “is indicative of a Bantu orientation.” Furthermore, elsewhere Gibson (2013: 179) has written that “Comfa is essentially Kongo in origin,” a claim that might hold true for certain aspects of these practices, particularly those involving death and permanencies of reciprocal relatedness with the dead. For Thompson (1983: 132), the “continuity” between Afro-American and African—specifically West Central African—mortuary cultures of death, bereavement, and “ancestorism,” “might be characterized as a reinstatement of the Kongo notion of the tomb as a charm or sacred medicine, charged with activating ingredients—a human soul,



spirit-embodying and spirit-directing objects. In the case of a burial site,” Thompson (ibid.) adds, “the coffin and the mound [or tomb] are the obvious containers; the soul of the deceased is the spark.”

Like their Kongo ancestors, and like other Kongo-descended and -influenced people throughout the Americas, in their rituals Komfa People demonstrate what Dianne Stewart (2005: 160) in her work among Jamaican Kumina practitioners has called an “incarnational emphasis,” similar to what Thompson (1974) elsewhere labels “ancestorism.” As John Janzen and MacGaffey (1974: 34) relate, “Bakongo believe and hold it true that man’s [sic] life has no end, that it constitutes a cycle. The sun, in its rising and setting, is a sign of this cycle, and death is merely a transition in the process of change.” Thus, for many Komfa People too, death is understood as the most significant aspect of one’s life—as a *birthing* into the ancestral world, only to be reborn again in a future generation, and only possibly as another human incarnation. For many Spiritualists as well, the significance of Christ, of his sacrifice for humanity, and of his holy deeds, lies not in his death but in his everlasting life. “The Kongo *yowa* cross,” as Thompson (1983: 108) similarly illustrates, “does not signify the crucifixion of Jesus for the salvation of mankind [sic]; it signifies the equally compelling vision of the circular motion of human souls about the circumference of its intersecting lines.” Furthermore, within the “Kongo cruciform,”

the horizontal line divides the mountain of the living world from its mirrored counterpart in the kingdom of the dead. The mountain of the living is described as “earth” (*ntoto*). The mountain of the dead is called “white clay” (*mpemba*). The bottom half of the Kongo cosmogram was called *kalunga*, referring, literally, to the world of the dead as complete (*lunga*) within itself and to the wholeness that comes to a person who understands the ways and powers of both worlds. (ibid.: 109)

“God is imagined at the top, the dead at the bottom, and water in between,” writes Thompson (ibid.). And like the four men standing in place around Mother B.’s casket-container-shrine, and

dancing around her in a counterclockwise, circular direction, “the four disks at the points of the cross stand for the four moments of the sun, the circumference of the cross the certainty of reincarnation: the especially righteous Kongo person will never be destroyed but will come back in the name or body of progeny, or in the form of an everlasting pool, waterfall, stone, or mountain.”

As suggested by the example of standing on a cross marked on the ground as a empowered/empowering space for oath-taking, for Kongo people the materialization of their understanding of the social universe—of people’s and the ancestors’ place within it—was most importantly (re)presented through embodied ritual performances. Moving in space enacted a profound understanding of the world. In such contexts of ritual, the inscribing of the cosmos onto the earth (or other surface) was often manifest through *dancing* the circle and “polyvalent” cross that bridges God and humans, God and the dead, and the living and the dead. Kongo-influenced “mystical ground-drawings” and inscriptions of “mystical points,” “signatures,” “seals,” and “marks,” are central to incarnational emphases within many Caribbean religious and social formations, notably in Cuban Palo and Abakuá traditions, among Spiritual Baptists in Trinidad and Tobago and within St. Vincentian Spiritual Baptists’ “Shaker ‘mourning’ ritual,” as well as of course in the *vèvè* of Haitian Vodou, and within Guyana’s Faithist practices (Thompson 1983: 111; Gibson 2001: 59, 61). Cuba’s Abakuá society, for instance, utilize “Afro-Caribbean calligraphic art” forms including as “funereal body-painting and drawn upon the earth at funeral ceremonies” (Thompson 1983: 111, 258). Similarly, “the *gandó* or signatures of the ranking priests of Abakuá” comprise “complex funereal signs” that “map and indicate passage to the other world” (ibid.: 257).

Important to note, however, is that the roots of Abakuá societies' traditions—like those of Komfa—lie not in Kongo or Central African cultural pasts alone, but instead represent highly polycultural amalgamations “structured according to the creolizing genius of the Abakuá” (Thompson 1983: 257). In particular, *gandó* and other *anaforuana* signatures of Cuba's Abakuá derive in large part from creolizations of *nsibidi*, a writing system created or used by Igbo, Efik, Ekoi (Ejagham), and other peoples of the Cross River area of southwestern Nigeria. Thompson (*ibid.*) observes that “*nsibidi* emblems of death among the Ejagham and the clans of their neighbors often appear in material media of stark and dramatic force.” Certain of these elaborate material creations made to memorialize and invoke the dead involve palm fronds and other emblems of “height” that are made to “droop earthwards,” as well as a “tradition whereby members of the Nsibidi Society mourn the passing of a brother by cutting down plantain stalks behind his house” (*ibid.*). While *explicit* ground- or other “drawings” do not play a central role in Komfa's rites of death and mourning, the ring created by the dancers around the altar or casket and the cross inscribed through the positioning of their bodies in space constitute a form of cosmogram, Kongo or not. Like all of Komfa's practices, those concerning ongoing relationships between the living and the dead have emerged from countless sources and through unending processes of infinitely creative “creolization” inspired in large part through the conditions of plantation life encompassed by death, as it was. Philosophies of life (and death) and ways of engaging in the world enacted through Komfa—by Spiritualists recognizing Mother B.'s passing *and* her enduring—have been handed down and transformed over the generations of many suns' risings and settings.

Still, in Guyana's earlier period of Dutch conquest, colonization, and enslavement, many—and again many if not at that time a majority—of enslaved Africans were brought by

Dutch and other slavers from the Bight of Biafra, a designation covering “nearly 370 miles of the western coast” (Finch 2015: 25; Higman 1995 [1984]). As Aisha Finch (2015: 25) observes in a study of anticolonial resistance among enslaved and free people in western Cuba, “the Bight of Biafra produced some of the largest numbers of slaves in the entire transatlantic trade,” and while “most Biafran captives were taken from the Niger and Cross River Deltas, the region also encompassed large portions of contemporary Nigeria and Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea and Gabon, and several of the islands off the coast.” Many enslaved people from this vast region came to be called Carabalís or members of the Carabalí—or Calabari—Nation, because they were largely trafficked out of “the ports of New Calabar (also known as ‘Elem Kalabar’), Old Calabar, and Bonny” (ibid.). The Guyanese language called Berbice Dutch Creole, which since 2015 has been considered by specialists as “extinct,” comprised a lexicon, grammar, and other linguistic features that were largely Ijaw (“eastern Ijo” or “Kalabari”) in derivation, including, for example, the important word *minje* (or *mingi*), meaning “water,” used by Guyanese to refer to the entity Minje Mama, otherwise called Wata-mama, and rituals invoking her as the Minje Mama dance.<sup>376</sup> For much of the eighteenth and into the nineteenth century, this heavily Ijaw- or Kalabari-influenced Berbice Dutch Creole language comprised the primary form of communication in what is today eastern Guyana.

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<sup>376</sup> On Ijaw in Berbice and Minje Mama, see Gill (2009), Kouwenberg (1994), Robertson (2012), and Smith, Robertson, and Williamson (1987). Princess Sauers, a woman born in British Guiana at Dubulay on the Berbice River, “the same spot where Abraham van Peere, the leader of the Dutch settlers in 1627, established his plantation, Peereboom,” who was considered the last living speaker of Berbice Dutch Creole, passed away in March of 2015—“just one month shy of her 99th birthday” (Guyana Languages Unit 2017). For an extraordinary interview with Albertha “Bertha” Bell, who was initially identified as the last speaker of Berbice Dutch Creole, conducted in March 2004 by Guyanese scholar Ian Robertson and the Language Unit of the University of the West Indies the year before Bell passed, see Di Jameikan Langwij Yuunit (2010) here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5PH1TvEE8Vw>. In the video, Bell can be heard repeatedly replying with the word(s) “dote te,” meaning “dead,” as Robertson queries her about names of families coming from her region (ibid.).

All Komfa ritual spaces are referred to as *ganda*, a term which also and usually describes an Earth-work altar that is assembled on the ground opposed to on a tabletop (or casket). In Earth-work, Ground-work, or Dig-dutty—services typically reserved for honoring African, Dutch, or “Amerindian” Nations (sometimes Indian too)—a large circle is often marked on the floor or earth (if outside) using flour or chalk around a shrine that was created for the occasion. Michelle Yaa Asantewa (2016: 63) observes that the Komfa term *ganda* is “notably similar to ‘ganga,’” or *nganga*, the Kikongo-derived word for priests, as well as for the containers, cauldrons, “jewels,” or *prendas*, that are central to Cuban Regla de Palo (Ochoa 2010: 267n19). Yet, the word Guyanese have long-used to describe their ritual spaces—*ganda*—is also notably similar to the Cuban Abakuá term for the signatures, or “maps”—*gandó*—inscribed to “indicate passage to the other world” that are “drawn upon the earth at funeral ceremonies” (Thompson 1983: 111, 257-58).<sup>377</sup> Also interesting to note is that certain Abakuá *gandó* and other *anaforuana*, as well as their predecessor *nsibidi* in the Cross River area, include(d) the motif of the feathered calabash, a sign corresponding in its appearance, and in certain uses and meanings, to Kongo-Cuban Palo *nganga* and their Kongo and other Central African predecessor *minkisi* (Brown 2019 [1981]; Thompson 1983: 253). Such relationships of resemblance and philosophical parallels in all likelihood contributed profusely to forms of comparative “intersemiotics” and creolization bridging the many diverse African cultural heritages of the people who were forcibly made to coexist, as well as Indigenous, European, and later Asian

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<sup>377</sup> As Ivor Miller (2009: 211) notes in his study of Cuban Abakuá, “-gando/-gandu are noun roots in many so-called Bantu languages.” In a number of southwestern Cameroonian languages (i.e. Balondo, Mòkpè [Bakweri]), the terms *ngando*, *yangando*, and variants specifically refer to crocodiles, but are also used as “a personal name meaning Caiman/Alligator in coastal southwestern Cameroon” (ibid.). Interestingly, some Komfa People refer to their table-altars as an “alligator back(side),” meaning the shrine seems to be inert, inactive, and a mere assemblage of inanimate objects, until unpredictably the “table move,” as practitioners move around it interacting with those various “objects” of devotion. Black caiman (*Melanosuchus niger*), called “alligator” in Creolese, are pervasive within Guyana’s land/waterscapes, even within Georgetown’s many trenches.

traditions which were all likely as important to the formation of Guyana's and Komfa's social and Spiritual worlds.<sup>378</sup>

**“Wayward Forces,” Seed-Filled Plumed Calabashes, and an “antiman scene”<sup>379</sup>**

“For Jehovah the blood of Africa,” she continued in a grave voice, pouring a libation of rum on to the floor. “For Jehovah the body of the Nation,” and she scattered a handful of the rice round her. “For Jehovah, flowers strewn on his paths, his paths without number throughout the world.”

[...]

“You approve of her brand of religion?”

—Roy Heath<sup>380</sup>

One of the guests who was called on to eulogize Mother B.—to extol her virtues as Mother, as the archbishop, bishop, and many others at that point had already epitomized—was the dead Mother's niece. A middle-aged woman who had quietly and somberly walked with us in the

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<sup>378</sup> Certain of Guyana's Indigenous groups, particularly Warrau (or Warao) and Wai-wai people, utilize plumed or feathered calabashes and headdresses as ritual objects and bodily adornments in ways that resemble West-Central African “motifs,” and philosophies materialized through *minkisi*, *nganga*, *mboko*, and the like, as well as through the “feathered headdresses worn by important chiefs and priests in Kongo. Feathers in Kongo connote ceaseless growth as well as plentitude,” as noted by Thompson (1983: 121). “So if the earth within the charm affirms the presence of a spirit from the dead—from the underworld,” as Thompson (*ibid.*) writes, “feathers capping the charm suggest connection with the upper half of the Kongo cosmogram which represents the world of the living, and the empyrean habitat of God.”

While Guyana's “Cacique's Crown” (or chief's headdress) is a national symbol of pride in “Amerindian” “origins” emblazoned at the apex of the heraldry of the nation-state's Coat of Arms, still most Guyanese are unfortunately unaware of *any* cultural significance such objects hold for their Indigenous compatriots. As Walter Roth (2011 [1915]: 334-35) described of Kaliña (Carib), Lokono (Arawak), Makushi, and specifically Warrau peoples of Guiana, feathers that shamans wear on their heads are spirits of birds that assist them as personal guides who they “recruit” upon concluding initiatory training prior to their re-assent into the upperworld of the living. That is one reason why “an Arawak medicine-man assured” Roth (*ibid.*) “that the feathers must not only be those of a special kind of parrot (*Psittacus oestivus*), but that they must be plucked from the bird while alive.” Similarly, *Hebumataro*, or the feather-tipped calabash rattles of Warrau *Wishiratu* shamans, also called “Master of Pain,” function as cosmograms wherein the gourd is the earth and the stick-handle is an *axis mundi*—bridging the threshold of worlds (Wilbert 1993: 135; Roth 2011 [1915]: 335). Roth (2011 [1915]: 335) writes that “according to a Kaliña, the power of the *maráka* [feathered calabash rattle] lies in the stones contained therein,” pebbles of “quartz-crystals or a species of agate,” that—along with “small pea-like seeds”—facilitate communication between the shaman and their spirit-guides when the gourd is shaken and a whirling sound produced. Indigenous calabash rattles also resemble the *shak-shak* “maracas” that are central to Komfa drumming and to the rhythms initiating and sustaining states of trance possession.

<sup>379</sup> These quotes are from public comments made regarding the funeral service discussed herein.

<sup>380</sup> From Heath's novel *One Generation* (1984 [1981]: 76).

procession, Mother B.'s niece was also a Sister of the church and that day wore white robes and a purple sash like her Sisters. Yet, in coming before the crowd to offer her words of praise, after a brief and courteous introductory greeting, thanking the attendees for their presence, the woman was suddenly seized by a manifesting spirit. Her hitherto calm and collected demeanor brusquely broke-out into a fierce display of vigor. Her arms waved at her sides as she swung her body in the space before Mother B.'s casket, moving in all directions and nearly colliding into seated members of the audience and the still-standing swordsmen. As she whirled and dashed and spun in the tight ring between Mother B. and the crowd, the woman—or spirit now within her—also moved in an indirect, back-and-forth flurry, all the way around her resting auntie in the same direction as had the men. While she traversed the circle, the woman began to shout at the other attendees in her path, and then at her aunt as well. “Why you gone! Why you gone so soon Auntie!” she cried, in ways belying her Spiritual persona.

Then the spirit turned its attention more directly to the gathered Spiritualists, to the Sisters and the Elders and specifically the group of men who led the rites. “She just couldn’ deal wit’ it, wit’ all the vexation among the church, is too much war!” she yelled, referring to Mother B.’s plea for unity among Guyana’s various strands and houses of Faithists and Spiritualists. Other speakers that day had suggested that one of Mother B.’s defining legacies was her unwavering stance in support of inter-Komfa concord. There was also one Sister who briefly mentioned in her remarks the exemplary benevolence that Mother B. modeled for other Spiritualists through her “open heart” regarding her “attitude about gays,” and said that “many” Guyanese “mother and father learn for love they children them from Mother B.,” referring to homophobic parents of gay or otherwise nonconforming kids. That was the only mention of

homosexuality throughout the formal proceedings of the funeral, yet the topic would emerge again in conversations outside among spectators, when a different spirit manifested.

The presence being channeled by Mother B.'s niece, however, had more to offer the gathering, and continued to address the crowd. "Too much war!" she protested. "Too much war among the gathering them! You know she dead you dead she!" the spirit screamed, suggesting the "war" among Spiritualists somehow contributed to Mother B.'s parting worlds.

You know we does try an' we try, but is we we-own self, all a-we, is we do this here. Is all a-we kill she! You can' see? What you can' see I seen! And is all a-we kill she wit' we own stupidity, with this fighting we get among we-own self right here, this war! Is a Spiritual war we fightin', a Spiritual war among we own-self! Tearin' we own-self down. Tearin' we-self apart! This body and that body, tearin' at us all! A war kill she! She a warrior and she done dead for we! How we gone move pass that? How? Ain' no Mother B[.] for come save we now, save we from we-own self. You gone miss she now! You gone miss she! Watch me now! You gone miss she! The war gone get more dread for we! You gone feel it! Hot-hot you gone feel it! More fire you gone feel! Watch now! Dread!

As the spirit was concluding her scolding lecture, one of the swordsmen standing by drenched the woman with a consecrating bath using the *bush* and basin resting on the casket before him. Both of the guards had lowered their arms while the entity took the floor, and now they were equipped to see-off the spirit and comfort her human vessel, who appeared physically exhausted from the ordeal. A few of the Sisters joined the bishop and the swordsman in helping Mother B.'s niece back to her seat, where she sat with her body folded, head buried in her lap, with a few Sisters at her sides fanning vigorously.

Another attendee was asked to present a memorial address while the bishop, archbishop, and others hastily began preparations for a ritual that I was later told was intended to temper the "wayward forces closing in on the gates" of the mortuary hall, a circumstance being foretold by the emerging presence of not-so-kindly intentioned guests such as manifested through Mother B.'s niece. Other Spiritualists in attendance had previously complained that since they felt the



service did not rightfully begin until after noon, the Work was already made vulnerable to intrusive and ill-willed forces. Refuting that the service began after noon, still, the leaders wished to forestall any potential disruptions and so devised an impromptu precautionary mechanism to defend the premises. Each with a calabash in hand, four Spiritual assistants—two men and two women—were dispatched from the chapel to administer a “Ground-work consecration.” Without speaking a word, with full attention on the gourd bowls in their hands, the four workers steadily progressed in a line out the door. They parted ways as they exited the chapel, each moving in a measured gait to a different corner of the mortuary home compound within the cemetery. I accompanied Sister Iris down the short dirt path leading into the burial grounds, where at a small, overgrown fence she stopped, stood erect, and cast her gaze downward.

The calabash Sister Iris cupped ever-so gently in her hands carried an assortment of seeds, maize, dried peas, raw rice, and a few glistening stones. Pointing up from the collection of kernels and gems was a set of feathers arranged around one half of the brim of the bowl. Most of the feathers resembled those of the *sensa fowl*, a kind of Guyanese “country hen” with distinctly patterned black and white plumage.<sup>381</sup> Said to derive from the Twi language of contemporary Ghana, where “*asense*” are “fowl with curled ruffled feathers,” throughout much of the Caribbean the *sensa* is known “for its relation to obeah” (Cassidy and Le Page 2002: 401). Mixed in with the black, white, and gray mottled feathers were also a few small and straight, sharp-green ones, these seeming to be from a kind of local parrot.<sup>382</sup> After standing for a few solemn moments by the southern end of the grounds, Sister Iris spoke her prayers aloud, for “the

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<sup>381</sup> Native to sub-Saharan Africa and commonly known around the English-speaking world as guineafowl, these are species in the family *Numididae*, and probably *Numida meleagris* in the instance in question.

<sup>382</sup> Many kinds of parrots coexist in Guyana, but it is possible that the green feathers were from a common species called *Forpus passerinus*, or green-rumped parrotlet, also discussed in Chapter 5.

spirit of the ancestors [to] hold our Mother tight. Guide she in this coming days, days of punishin' on she journey. May she find she way, and may she find she home when she reach. May she find those she looking for” Sister Iris pleaded. She then offered, “Amen. Ase. And may it be, on earth as in heaven,” to which I replied, after a moment, “Ase. Amen.”<sup>383</sup>

At that point Sister Iris began to tenderly shift the calabash within her hands, which created a rhythmic clatter as the many seeds and few pebbles knocked against the inside of the bowl. She then reached into the gourd, and while slowly pivoting her body around in a circle, she cast the contents into the air in handfuls, dispersing them onto the earth all around us. Next, she turned the calabash over, letting the remaining few grains and all the feathers fall to the ground. At that, she gave me a smile, a nod, and repeated, “Ase. May it be,” and then proceeded with the empty calabash back towards the chapel. Along the way, I asked Sister Iris about the ritual offering, and she advised that, even though “they in there trying for protect the place, make sure no one does trouble the Wuk,” that “this here what we done was something special for Mother B[.], give she a little extra something-something that you does know she gone need. A long journey she taking,” Sister Iris told me. I asked about the seeds and the feathers, and she laughed, “what, she ain’ gone need provision, something for keep she along she way? The feather? What you think? Is for she to fly away home back for she home,” Sister Iris said, and laughed some more. “She needin’ all the little bit a help she can get. A long way. You *know* is to Mama Africa *she* going. Is Mother B[.] we talking!” she exclaimed, with more laughter. Then, as we strolled

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<sup>383</sup> *Ashe*, *ache*, *axe*, or *àşẹ*, is a Yoruba word and concept that Rowland Abiodun (2014: 53) describes as “lifeforce” and “effective energy,” while Thompson (1983: 9) has called the concept “untranslatable.” Thompson (ibid.: 5) writes that within Yoruba cosmologies, the Orisha, or “various spirits under God, [...] are messengers and embodiments of *àshe*, spiritual command, the power-to-make-things-happen.” As “divine force incarnate,” *àshe* also “literally means ‘So be it,’ ‘May it happen’” and so is used as a call-and-response participatory vocal agreement within Yoruba (and many other diasporic) ritual contexts (ibid.: 7; Clarke 2004: 218).

very slowly through the cemetery, Sister Iris starting to sing: “Fly away home, to Zion, fly away home. One bright mornin’ when this wuk is over I gone fly away home.”

As we re-approached the building, Sister Iris was still singing. Inside, we could also hear that drumming had begun again. There was a large crowd gathered in front of the chapel, and a number of vendors had set up small tables and coolers offering snacks, drinks, cigarettes, and other items. People were *limin’* out-front—talking, drinking, eating, and smoking—and increasingly more attendees were drawn outside from the hall to collect refreshments and catch some fresh air. Sister Iris stood in front waiting, as we could see that two of the other Spiritualists who had enacted the consecration were walking back towards us on the opposite path, each holding an empty calabash. The fourth Sister to observe the Work at the closest point to the entrance had already gone back inside. While we awaited the other Sister and Brother’s approach, a man called out to Iris from within a gathering *limin’* in the shade of a tree. We were only standing a few paces from them, and the young man asked her, “‘ey auntie, wha’ is it you get there in the ‘bash? Y’all gone in di bush an’ kill a fowl, or wha’?” he inquired. The five or six people gathered under the tree with him all broke-out in laughter, and Sister Iris, who had begun to move towards them with the man’s question, immediately stopped and gave a mighty “*schtups*,” or *suck-teeth*. “Come let we go stand over there,” she suggested to me while turning her body away from the *limers*.

We could still hear them clearly though, and the same man was telling the group that “if not for Auntie Suzanne [Mother B.] I’d a gone longtime now. Set a antiman here, done nothin’ but molestin’ she. How she gone rest peaceful?” the man was asking his gathering. Sister Iris moved back closer to them, keen on hearing what they had to say. “This here no *peaceful* thing,” he went on, “not at-all at-all. Wit’ all they dancin’ so, dancin’ an’ jumpin’ so all ’round she. A

set a stupidity!” he determined. The group was still laughing and indicating their agreement with him. A woman in the gathering added that for her, “is bare stupidity! I don’ know why you wan’ do this thing here. No, not me,” she said, “that’s why Coolie people don’t do them thing. Just stick to God.” Of all the people in the group, the woman who spoke last had the most apparent “Indian” visible features, and seemed to identify herself as such, while the others seemed to be predominantly “African,” like Mother B. and Sister Iris. The woman went on to tell the group that “it can’ be good what they doing here, is like playing game wit’ the dead. How you gone go on playin’ game wit’ the dead, ring game!” she yelled to everyone’s amusement. “Like lil’ gyal! Here playing ring game! Schoolgirl!” Someone else started singing the popular folksong, that goes along with the children’s game of the same name, “brown-girl, in the ring, tra-la-la-la-la-la...” and again, the group seemed to find it hilarious.<sup>384</sup> First they questioned the “Africanness” of the service—with dancing around the casket-altar creation, and what they identified as some sort of stealthy, concealed *bush* sacrifice. Next, they spoke disparagingly about the perceived sexuality of those in attendance, and referred—in all likelihood identifying the male leaders of the Work—to *antiman/auntieman* as young schoolgirls engaging in blasphemous child’s play or ring games with the dead.<sup>385</sup>

Sister Iris clearly did not appreciate their demeaning of her faith, her ancestral traditions, and her Spiritual family members, and as she saw her Brother and Sister in their white robes approaching us on the path, she might have felt emboldened to mount a quick response. Or

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<sup>384</sup> “Brown Girl in the Ring” is a “Guyanese folksong” associated with a children’s song game by the same name. Ring games and songs are popular children’s pastimes throughout much of the Caribbean. See Lomax, Elder, and Hawes (1997) and Hope Smith (2013).

<sup>385</sup> The Creolese term(s) *antiman/auntieman*, which will be discussed in further detail in the following chapter, refers to socially marginalized gender and sexual subjectivities as forms “of Guyanese queerness or of queer Guyanese-ness” (Cummings, Deen, and Mohabir 2018: 19). Typically undifferentiated and used interchangeably, “the *antiman* is both a negation of man but also an *auntieman* as in a womanish man—a man who keeps company with aunties, with women” (ibid.).

possibly, the response was not hers at all. “Stop wit’ you foolish singing! Not no ring game we playin’ here!” she shouted, and they all began to laugh with renewed force. “This here the Work of the ancestors! Pay some respect!” Sister Iris challenged. The same woman who spoke earlier called out to Iris, “carry you skunt back in there!” and the men she was with roared their approvals. “Yea carry you skunt an’ let we be,” she told Iris. “An’ mind you-own damn self you jumbie! No bother wit’ we! Go back in you antiman scene!” she demanded, and added, “go on back in, wit’ you Blackman-t’ing, Wukin’ the cemetery Wuk!” And again, the gathering of *limers* jeered at the spectacle, ostensibly encouraging the woman further.

Sister Iris, however, seemed infuriated, particularly by the woman’s last comments, and she immediately retorted. “Sister, don’ get racial wit’ me now, wit’ you ‘*Blackman-t’ing*,” Iris repeated back to her. The group was laughing again, but Iris gave a quick shout, a shriek, louder and more forceful than any of her previous remarks to this crowd. As she yelled, her body also twisted and jolted as she stood in place, and the hecklers seemed to instantaneously cease their laughter. Sister Iris, or the spirit she had suddenly manifested, continued to holler while now vacillating her arms passionately. The calabash was still in one hand as her body swung towards the group of visibly fearful *limers*. It seemed as though she were going to knock the woman who had offended her with the bowl, or possibly throw it at her. Yet just as suddenly as Iris began to shout and turn, her body calmed and her voice began to speak again, although now with a rough, nasally quality that was not her usual tone.

“Look me skin,” Iris—or the spirit—demanded, gesturing in the woman’s direction. “Look me skin, nah! Me great-gran’ come from India, just like you own,” she said. The gathering was silent, and by now Iris’s Spiritual Brother and Sister were standing by her side, apparently curious as to find out what had developed, and to aid their Sister if need be. “Yes a

Blackman-t'ing, wit' love, for everybody," Iris told the woman in a deliberate and poised cadence. "'Cause you don't know who there in me blood just like me no know who there in you own," Iris added, before swiftly shuddering again, screaming, and vigorously waving the calabash. In a few more moments her body seemed pacified, and the spirit began to speak to the group further, still directly addressing the woman who had referred to "Coolie people."

When I come from India you think mati's not mati? Jahaji not jahaji? All a-we's takin' lick together, an' all a-we's pickney belly need full. So you gone let massa make we not plant? Not sow the provision? Clear the trench? Trade the provision? Let we sit down there together, by the fireside, gyaff, an' boil the cook-up, together? Is you t'ing too beside, no my sister? You t'ing an' a Blackman-t'ing. An' what, you's not Christian, too? 'Cause you great-gran' don't like that! She say no matter, but she rather you there doing this Black-t'ing here, than the Whiteman-t'ing anyway! Christ get Mary yeah, but Hindu, we get all them Goddess! This Blackman-t'ing here, is bare mother too! Look, you nah see, is Mother we buryin'! All them man, Blackman and whichever man, is like they left this t'ing here for us great-gran', for us real mother.<sup>386</sup>

Sister Iris was sweating profusely, and starting to wind her body again, waving the calabash at her side. Her Spiritual Brother and Sister each grasped hold of one of her arms and the Sister also embraced Iris's torso. They attempted to hand her a bottle of water, but instead poured the contents out over her head. At that, the spirit-presence's liveliness largely subsided, and they led Sister Iris back into the chapel to sit and recover, and to rejoin the service. First, however, her Brothers consecrated her with the bouquet of *bush* and holy waters resting on Mother B.'s casket—while her Sisters surrounded her with fans. The bishop then came over and gently

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<sup>386</sup> *Jahaji*, like *mati*, is said to derive from special relationships Asian indentured immigrants created and sustained together as "shipmates" through their transoceanic odysseys across the Dark Waters of the *Kali Pani*, with *jahaj* meaning "ship" in Hindi (Bahadur 2014: 46, 54; Reddock 1999). "Great-gran" here is likely meant as "great-grandmother/s." Semantically similar to "grandmother" (and "grandfather"), Guyanese use these words not only to describe kin relations but also in "semi-adjectival" form "added as an intensifier of sense before or after a noun" to mean "a very big, nice, attractive, etc[.] one (of whatever item it applies to)," as in, "*this is going to be fight grandmother, a fight to watch*" (Allsopp 2003 [1996]: 266). In such ways Guyanese use "grandmother" and "grandfather" to mean "great." So while Sister Iris, or a maternal spirit she manifested, referred to "us great-gran" as corresponding to "us real mother[s]," she may have been polyvalently speaking of (and becoming) specific kin-related matrilineal forebears, as well as speaking of (and becoming) the "very big," "great" or "grand," "real mother[s]"—Komfa's ancestral "special forces" more generally.

placed a feather in Iris's hair, just above her forehead, where spirits are said to enter and depart from their hosts.

**“If the mothers are annoyed, they can turn the world upside down”<sup>387</sup>**

The status of “mother” is an important and desirable one in the social system.  
—R. T. Smith<sup>388</sup>

One way that Spiritualists—and scholars like Colin Dayan (2001: 3; 2011: 39) and Clinton Hutton (2007; 2019)—have understood spirit possession is as modalities of “repossession” through which enslaved people and their descendants formulated potent ritual means of counteracting the barbaric European commercial logic and legal “sorcery” incessantly attempting to treat Africans as property, to dispossess Black people of their humanity. Afro-Caribbean traditions maintaining repossession rites like Komfa have enshrined the social primacy of *being* within eternal cycles of cosmological regeneration. For after all, as enslaved Jamaicans once “articulated in a funeral dirge sung” for the departing souls of their newly dead, “*Baccra can't catch Duppy*,” meaning “European can't enslave African spirit” (Hutton 2007: 143). If Whites could attempt to commodify Africans' flesh, still, their *duppy* could never be caught, and were often understood as journeying “back to Africa” upon one's death, “to reach Mount Zion land,” Prophet Bob Marley sang as the “duppy conquer.”<sup>389</sup> As Vincent Brown (2009: 1241) suggests, “if social death did not define the slaves' condition, it did frame their vision of apocalypse.” Rituals of repossession were and are a means of conquering social death and of rebelling against the absurd alienation of human fungibility. Perpetual peril to one's physical and immaterial

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<sup>387</sup> A. Eḍun, “Priestess of Are,” expressed these sentiments to Drewal and Drewal (1990 [1983]: 8) in 1975.

<sup>388</sup> From “The Kinship System and Marriage” in Smith's *The Negro Family in British Guiana* (1965 [1956]: 167).

<sup>389</sup> Bob Marley and the Wailers, “Duppy Conqueror V/4,” *Soul Revolution* (Kingston: Maroon and Upsetter, 1971).

being, and to one's entire social world—the terrorization of familial dispersion, of “natal alienation”—inspired expanded ways of perceiving and practicing kinship, as well as expanded notions of what constitutes personhood, more generally. Rites of birth and rites of death—including inversions, reversals, and other interplay between these vitally significant social processes—have remained central to how descendants of enslaved people have generated worlds affirming their humanity long after enslavement.

In Bob Myers's study of early U. S. physicians' pathologization of African Americans and of enslaved peoples' pursuits of rebellion as “insanity,” Myers (forthcoming: 10; 2014) productively employs “the interpretive schema of ‘alienation’” towards understanding acts of rebellion as “practical matter[s] which reflected genuine needs.” Following G. W. F. Hegel, as well as critical revisions to Hegel's dialectical logic expounded in Rahel Jaeggi's book *Alienation* (2014), Myers (forthcoming: 8) writes that alienation is an “experience [of] an impoverishment of meaning; you feel disconnected from what you do voluntarily.” From such a disconnection, a schism between one's own conception of reality and that alternate reality of subjection being enforced by legal or powerful social means, arises the confusion from which discontent and eventual rebellion swells. The displacement from making choices in one's life, an alienation central to Patterson's thesis, leads to the absurdity that through enduring an alienated existence without rebelling “one is co-author to one's own demise” (ibid: 19). Yet in the confusion of absurdity entailed in understanding one's place in perpetuating one's own alienation and subjection, social “solidity,” as well as self-recognition, “prefigures” rebellion as one acknowledges their own self-worth and dignity in the face of “social death” (ibid: 19-20).

“From this confused moment” of an enslaved individual recognizing the absurdity in their own complicity in perpetuating their alienated existence, “bursts onto the scene a kind of self-



value,” as Myers (forthcoming: 20) writes, whereby “recognized dignity becomes expressed obstinacy.” In other words, “[o]bstinacy is an eruption of recognition,” and such obstinacy is instigated first by alienation, confusion, and absurdity—or “madness”—which in turn fosters solidarity and perhaps eventual rebellion. As Sizzla Kalonji chants, “Poor people have to rebel when them can’t see a way out / and them don’t know where them next meal a come from.”<sup>390</sup> Through such processes of self and collective recognition manifesting out of alienation, enslaved people, like Fredrick Douglass (1995 [1845]: 42) and so many, rejected their “career as a slave,” and “made” themselves free humans. “The over-arching goal of actual freedom,” Myers (forthcoming: 23) writes, “is liberation from alienation, and the way to achieve this is by appropriating the world on your own terms.” Lack of recognition as a human-being, and being made to endure the absurdity of that rejection, encouraged rituals enacting deep cosmological and social embeddedness that explicitly rejected social death. Participating in such forms of existential contemplation and emplacement likely entailed confronting one’s own position within systems of subjection that in turn might well have quickened the burst of individual and communal dignity inspiring one to rebel.

Through their various performative, material, and healing “arts of survival”—through extended families of (Spiritual) interrelatedness—Komfa People continue to embody tactics of regeneration and incarnational imperatives that frustrate the forces still attempting to undermine their very being (Harris 1998: 24; Stewart 2005). Antiblackness remains a critical threat to Afro-Guyanese and to Spiritualists specifically, who—through “how they stay”—are inextricably linked to “Africanness” through what is perhaps the most vilified aspect of local “African” culture—*Obeah*. And yet threats to one’s being based in racialized conceptions of history and

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<sup>390</sup> Popcaan, featuring Sizzla and Teflon, “Way Out” (Notnice Records, 2015).

identity have been simultaneously bolstered and instantiated through threats based in deeply patriarchal gender ideologies and heterosexist societal commitments. Stigmatized due to their perceived proximities to Obeah and by synecdochal extension to Africanness, in how Komfa People “stay” and “rebel” they are likewise maligned as *antiman*. Such aspersion, as it is meant, is largely a consequence of Spiritualists nurturing those Guyanese engaging in same-sex intimacies and or presenting nonconforming gender identities in ways that other local religious cultures are thought to discourage. In the instance recounted above, Sister Iris and her spirit mounted a challenge to an intersection of customarily entrenched aversions, and hatreds, including some which were “self” -directed and -projected by her interlocutor upon “themselves.” Of course many Afro- and other Guyanese disidentify with Obeah, and thus with a locally constructed conception of “Africanness” and particularly *male* Africanness, as Afro-Guyanese culture as a whole “is deemed a male product,” and a “continually degenerating” one, as Brackette Williams explains (1996a: 145-46). In doing so, Afro-Guyanese men and women—consciously or not—distance themselves too from maternalistic, gynocentric, and often *queer* conceptions of the cosmos and humans’ ever-shifting positions within it.

Even if the production of Afro- culture is largely deemed a male enterprise, Guyanese comprehend Obeah as overwhelmingly “women’s Work,” as with administering or trading in *bush*, “dancing” Komfa in public, and attending Spiritualist gatherings. Men who frequently engage in these activities *and* professions may be admonished by their family, peers, and patrons for “staying like a antiman.”<sup>391</sup> Whether through explicit invocation of “Obeah” or not, when Guyanese accuse someone of specifically Spiritual malevolence or malfeasance, or of *being* a

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<sup>391</sup> Tellingly, men who do sell or otherwise work with *bush*, including as healers, often advertise their specialties as treating male-specific conditions of impotency or dealing primarily in products that address such phallogocentric concerns. Women on the other hand generally deal with “everything,” including what are deemed “*man problem*.”

*jumbie*, a “witch,” or an *ole higue*, a woman is more often inculcated than is a man.<sup>392</sup> However, for Spiritualists and some other Guyanese, the feminine powers attributed to the merciless deeds of *ole higue* and other Obeahwomen represent merely “one face” of the rebellious female force which also creates and nurtures life and livelihood for all.<sup>393</sup>

Komfa thinking regarding women, and especially their Mothers and other female elders in the tradition—living and ancestral—reflects widely held West and Central African conceptions of gendered dualities and particularly those ideas prevalent among Yoruba and related peoples from contemporary Nigeria and Bénin. As Margaret Thompson Drewal (1992: 177) writes, “according to Yoruba belief, the concentration of vital force in women, their *aṣẹ*, their power to bring things into existence, to make things happen, creates extraordinary potential that can manifest itself in both positive and negative ways. Phrases such as ‘one with two faces’ (*olaju meji*),” which is strikingly similar to how Spiritualists describe their Mothers’ *ase*, as



*Fig. 7.14* Parry Bancroft-Wallerson’s painting titled ‘*O’l Higue #2*. He says that “Old Higue is the woman and the Firerass is the man,” but both shed their skin to fly around as fireballs by night.

<sup>392</sup> Some say that *ole higue* can be female or male (R. Smith 1965 [1956]: 165-67), while most people understand these entities unequivocally as women. Visual artist Parry Bancroft-Wallerson, for example, affirms a common distinction holding that “de Old Higue is the woman and the Firerass is the man” (quoted in Bascom 2020 in *Kaieteur New*). See Bancroft-Wallerson’s representation of ‘*O’l Higue #2*, above.

<sup>393</sup> These creating/destroying and healing/harming (dualistic) “faces” of Komfa’s Mothers present Spiritualists with potent cross-cultural parallels or “intersemiotics,” particularly concerning Kali Mai Puja, including often intercultural transformations with refabulated practices intent on “fusing” Kali Mai and Komfa (cf. Case 2001; A. Roberts 2007). At least two Spiritualist gatherings I have worked with explicitly expressed their desires and past efforts to “seek she,” “learn more about Kali Mai” and “honor her as *the* Mother of the Indian Nation” (cf. Williams 1990: 149-50). Many Guyanese are highly averse to such “mixing,” or *douglaiizations* (see Tamboli 2017: 215-222). Similar to Komfa conceptions of Mother-Goddess, Kali Mai “represents the life-forces of the various gods [of South Asian traditions], or the life-energy from which all the other gods originate,” and she is known in a constructive, “kind” form, as well as a “dreadful and destructive form” (Abraham Khan 1977: 36).

Drewal (ibid.) explains, “aptly express[es] this duality and allude[s] to their alleged powers of transformation.” She goes on to note that

the Yoruba word for these special powers and a woman possessing them is *aje*, which has been translated in the literature as “witchcraft” or “witch.” All elderly women are *aje*, as are priestesses of the deities, wealthy marketwomen, and female title-holders in prestigious organizations. Collectively, such women are affectionately called “our mothers” (*awon iya wa*). The positions they have attained, it is felt, are evidence of their power. [...] Unlike the predominantly negative connotations of the English word “witch,” elderly women and female priests are not necessarily either antisocial or the personification of evil. Rather, they form an important segment of the population in any town and are given respect, affection, and deference. (ibid.)

Komfa Mothers like Mother B. and Sister Iris are, like Yoruba *aje*, or “our mothers,” charged with *ase*—an (omni)potent Spiritual grace coupled with profound determination.<sup>394</sup> Vested with this *ase*, Spiritualist Mothers and women more generally, are considered “closer” to Komfa’s nations of ancestors and to other Guyanese spirits, gods, and goddesses in particular, such as Wata-mama and Mother Earth. Similarly, “because of their special power,” as Drewal (ibid.) describes further, *aje* “are thought to have greater access to Yoruba deities,” or orisha. For many Yoruba, the empowered collection of women known as *our mothers* “occupy a position subordinate to Olodumare,” who is a “genderless” godhead, and also subordinate “to Orunmila, the divinity of divination” (ibid.). Yet, *aje* are considered “equal, or even superior, to the deities” (ibid.). As Drewal (ibid.) writes, “in their roles as mediums,” these powerful women elders “are thought to exert a certain amount of control over” male, female, intersex, and genderless orisha.

That Yoruba sacred gendered philosophies and practices are perhaps mirrored in Guyanese Komfa likely reflects historical processes attendant to the transatlantic trade in

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<sup>394</sup> While “untranslatable,” this characterization of *ashe/ache/axe/àşẹ* owes much to the teaching of Don Cosentino. For many Yoruba the term *aje* is “generally pejorative” and “used rarely and with caution,” which is one reason why the euphemistic phrase “our mothers” is so crucial to social practice (Drewal and Drewal 1990 [1983]: 9). Also see David Doris (2011: 60).

Africans, as well as “the creolizing genius” of those Africans and their Guyanese descendants (Thompson 1983: 257). Yoruba people were brought to Guiana and elsewhere in the Americas in vast numbers, and not only as enslaved people, but also in the postemancipation period. “The Yoruba who settled in British Guiana and Trinidad between 1838 and 1870 came not as slaves but as immigrants,” writes David Trotman (1976: 2). These were previously enslaved people who “were recruited from the large number of Africans who had been liberated by the [British] Royal Navy from slave ships bound for Cuba, Brazil, and the United States and settled in Sierra Leone and Saint Helena,” before being coerced into indentureship and remigration to the West Indies and mainly British Guiana (ibid.). In Guiana, Yoruba people were often referred to as Nago or Aku, contemporary Yoruba “subgroups” or Yoruba-speakers relocated to Sierra Leone, and as a way of differentiating them from Kru people who typically comprised the majority of indentured Africans in Guiana (ibid.; cf. Cruickshank 1917). In an article investigating Yoruba diasporas and “Orisha worship in Trinidad and British Guiana” in the wake of abolition, Trotman (1976: 1) challenges the notion that “Yoruba religion apparently remained ‘so faithful to its ancestral traditions’” that its new-world manifestations should represent “one of the most frequently cited examples of an African survival.” For Trotman, the social conditions of Trinidad’s plantation society assisted enslaved and formerly enslaved Africans in cultivating Yoruba-inspired orisha-centric practices, which are widespread on that island today, whereas Guiana’s circumstances prevented similar processes of cultural transmission and reinvention (cf. Castor 2017). Yet, Yoruba language and other cultural practices remained features of rural Guyanese life through independence, and Spiritualists continue to employ Yoruba terms, particularly in the lyrics of their ritual songs (McAndrew 1978).

Trotman (1976: 7), however, contends that “Yoruba in Trinidad worked only on estates conveniently located to available land and market facilities for their own enterprises” which fostered their collective cultural cohesion, while in Guiana such options for land-labor-living arrangements were less forthcoming. He also notes that the dearth of women among Yoruba immigrants and the opportunities available to those Yoruba women who did come greatly affected the ways in which Orisha traditions “survived” (ibid.: 5-9). Yoruba men who married non-Yoruba wives tended to not raise orisha-devoted children, whereas Yoruba mothers reared orisha-minded families regardless of their children’s father’s ethnicity (ibid.). Furthermore, in Trinidad Yoruba and other African women were extremely active in the island’s local commerce, which according to Trotman (ibid.: 7) afforded them opportunities to also maintain their devotional lives to a larger extent than those women who did not have access to such forms of non-plantation-based income, such as Yoruba women in British Guiana. In Guiana in this period Portuguese immigrants dominated small- and medium-scale commercial ventures, which largely impeded African and African-descended marketwomen’s possibilities. In a “pan-African” effort of rebellion against “the Portuguese monopoly,” Afro-Guyanese people’s “ethnicity and religious symbols,” Trotman writes (ibid.), “were of minimum use and had to be de-emphasized.” As Keith McNeal (2011: 221) argues in tracing Yoruba and other influences within Trinidad’s Orisha practices, and Guyanese influences on the island’s Shakti devotion traditions, “with a weak economic base and surrounded by a Protestant majority, Guyanese Yorubas found themselves vulnerable on all fronts and had little room to maneuver. They were more rapidly and thoroughly absorbed within the locally evolving Afro-creole cultural matrix.”

The argument might help explain why Trinidad has a pervasive Yoruba-inspired religious culture and Guyana does not—even though fewer Yoruba immigrants were brought to Trinidad

than were to Guiana (Trotman 1976: 5). The thesis does not necessarily bring clarity to continuing significances of Yoruba-inspired culture to Guyanese Komfa. Interestingly, Caribbean funereal traditions—including Nine-night and Forty-night services in particular—have also been identified with Yoruba cultural precedents. Among “Ettu communities” of Nago Yoruba descendants in Jamaica’s Hanover and Westmoreland parishes, for example, Forty-night services comprise one of “two types of Ettu” ceremony, the other being called “dinner play,” with both “meant to placate the spirits, referred to as *oku* or *duppies*” (Weise 2019: 286). Correspondingly, Margaret Drewal (1992: 19) defines the word *etutu* used in contemporary Nigerian communities as “Yoruba rituals,” containing the root *tu*, meaning “cool,” as in to pacify “the deities, ancestors, spirits, and human beings” through “propitiatory performances.”

Yoruba people observe many different kinds of rites for their dead, often decided upon by family members based on the perceived causes and circumstances of the death and the deceased’s age, social, and religious affiliations. For elders dying of what are deemed natural causes, “they involve seven days of ritual (*etutu*) performed to convey the spirit of the deceased to its otherworldly realm, where it remains along with other ancestral spirits” (Drewal 1992: 38-39). For friends of the family, such funerals are primarily “a time of dancing and feasting in celebration of the elder’s long successful life” (ibid.). The family of the newly departed, however, often must go through enormous sacrifice, effort, and “expense to ensure the continued beneficence of the elder’s spirit toward those still on earth” (ibid.). The interment of the corpse is understood as merely preliminary to the overall mortuary process, or *isinku*, and the funereal rituals themselves “may therefore occur anywhere from a month to a year, or more, after burial,” providing family members time for preparation while “the deceased spirit lingers in the world, disembodied” (ibid.). As Yoruba “concepts of female power to a large extent derive” from

characteristics that women “are said to possess,” such as “patience (*suuru*), gentleness (*erọ*), coolness (*itutu*), and endurance (*iroji*),” “it is primarily women who nurture the gods” (ibid.: 184, 188). And whereas women “dominate the sphere of the deities” through their role as mediums, “men in Yoruba society mask” and so also embody ancestors, gods, and goddesses, including—as in Gèlèdè masquerades for “our mothers, the witches, the nightbirds”—often personifying women through “cross-dressing” and more sustained “gender transformations” (P. Roberts 2004: 408; Lawal 1996: 239; Drewal 1992: 184, 190). Central to Yoruba mortuary and divination rituals—and “at the basis of Yoruba ontology and being”—are “participants’ concern with the continuity of the human spirit from birth and death to reincarnation,” a cyclical process which “can be accomplished only through progeny” (Drewal 1992: 186). Through this position of vitality in which women are fixed, as “childbearer and nurturer” of families and spirits, “Yoruba construct female gender” (ibid.).

And yet, Guyanese women often report being dissuaded by Komfa’s philosophical and practical investments in the female powers to not only create life, but women’s enhanced capacities to mediate between life and death—holding the “secrets of the cycle” as they do, according to Spiritualists. Still, men are feasibly more deterred from participating in Komfa due to the unambiguously feminine authority which the practice is known to manifest. Such powers impact the perceived and real *a(u)nti(e)man ways* allied with Komfa’s Spiritual life, as men who participate often must yield their conceptions and enforcements of male dominance to the supremacy of the Mothers. The power of the Mothers to disrupt normative genders and sexualities is made most explicit when male medium’s manifest spirits, who are often female, and “the concentration of vital force in women” enters them, with the man presenting as—or temporarily becoming—a woman (Drewal 1992: 177). While an overwhelming majority of



Komfa mediums are women, as are their spirit guides, men who become involved often encounter deeply meaningful ways of understanding themselves, and in particular, the complexity of their concomitantly racialized and gendered being. Male Spiritualists often find opportunities through mediumship to interrogate and even “learn *who* the female is within” themselves, as Hortense Spillers (1987: 80) explains, “the infant child who bears the life against the could-be fateful gamble, against the odds of pulverization and murder, including her own.” Through rebellious rituals of repossession, the Guyanese man can also “regain” “the heritage of the mother,” as Spillers (*ibid.*) writes, incorporated as “an aspect of his own personhood—the power of ‘yes’ to the ‘female’ within.”

Perhaps because they recognize the complex heritages of their Spiritual Mothers as their own—and through mediumship also *become* these powers—Spiritualists who present as men, such as those who led Mother B.’s funeral rites, regardless of their sexual orientations *and* gender identities, are often perceived as hyperfeminine. As will be discussed further in the following chapter, categorical labels such as “gay,” “queer,” and even “antiman” are typically less salient to Guyanese conceptions of self, and less significant as identity constructions within Guyanese people’s lives. Instead, practical dimensions of relatedness are deemed most relevant, especially to Spiritualists—the ways that different forms of intimacies are nurtured, how models and feelings of kinship become “extended,” and thus Spiritual families conceived. These are all issues of not only polyvalent social relationships among living family, friends, and lovers, but also those between living human beings and God, between “God and the dead, and the living and the dead” (MacGaffey unpublished, as quoted in Thompson 1983: 108). As such, cultivating Komfa families often amounts to blazing paths which lead across boundaries, some to the cemetery, to the ancestors and to (other) deities, to the divine, and some leading to other “wilds,”

territories over the horizon, past neighboring villages and *bush*, perhaps farther than foreign metropol(is)es. In bridging beyond the grave, Komfa's special means of supporting relatedness are ultimately also ways through which people learn about themselves, about their histories, and their place within the cosmos, and how critical revaluations of their past might challenge the future. In embodying "the heritage of the mother [...] within," *becoming our Mothers*—and other ancestral copresences—Komfa People learn to *dance* beyond their own and others' prejudgments about the world, about the people living and dying within it, and simultaneously about their own ever-becoming selves.

## CHAPTER 8

### **“Put a brassiere on the Cross”: Queer Fem(me)inities, *Bush Borderlands*, and “The Spanish Nation”<sup>395</sup>**

There was something superstitiously holy about such an unholy woman. They were glad that nature and the tiger had done the trick. Magda had invited them to the wake. They would drink her rum and eat her food all night. They would laugh and curse and rebuild their self-confidence by admonishing her and embracing her with their very gaiety and presence.

[...]

A phantasmagoric obsession grew to follow the beast to its lair. Was it indeed a woman-tiger? Might it not be a man-tiger? The demon’s sex and gender was as confusing as the origin of the chase. Was it half-man, half-woman they pursued? Could any creature truly change its sex at will and take on a different subtlety and cruel intention?

—Wilson Harris<sup>396</sup>

“She isn’t human. She’ll stamp on us and hold us down if we don’t fight her and keep on fighting.” He trembled. “You don’t know what we’re up against in that creature.

She even works *obeah* nowadays.”

—Edgar Mittelhölzer<sup>397</sup>

Queer Guyana is a borderland. [...] The marginalization that encompasses life in the borderland has resulted in a counterstance.

—Renatta Fordyce<sup>398</sup>

“Spanish” spirits, the primary subject of this last chapter, provide Komfa practitioners a direct means of exploring creative gender and sexual identities, as well as access to the transgressive potentialities that possession by certain spirits can present practitioners to embody diverse

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<sup>395</sup> As discussed below, the quote in this chapter title is from a practitioner regarding a ritual assemblage constructed during a Spiritual Thanksgiving birthday service.

<sup>396</sup> These lines are from Harris’s third novel, *The Whole Armour* (1962: 50, 90). Regarding this important Guyanese “beast”/“demon,” Harris has elsewhere said that “the tiger appears, it is a symbol which comes from the ancient past in the South and Central Americas. It is a very important image of creation on the one hand and also of destructive powers and resources on the other,” much like Wata-mama and Kali Mai (Harris and D’Aguiar 1986: 23).

<sup>397</sup> From Mittelhölzer’s *Children of Kaywana* (1959 [1952]: 215).

<sup>398</sup> This quote is from an essay by Fordyce titled “The Anti-Man Aesthetic: The State of LGBTQ Political and Social Issues in Guyana Post Marriage Equality in the United States” (2018: 143).

noncompliant personhoods. “Noncompliant” and “transgressive” refer to ways that practitioners embrace conceptions of self, personhoods, and identities beyond those generally constrained by normative heteropatriarchy as expressed through Guyanese societal strictures (Peake and Trotz 1999; Williams 1996a). These latter persist in many ways as postcolonial legacies of European, particularly British, hierarchical social orders (Williams 1991). Presenting an ethnographic account will assist in framing a discussion of transgressively gendered and sexualized practices exemplified by Komfa spirit possession—or “manifestation,” as practitioners say—with particular regard to “Spanish” spirits.

### ***A(u)nti(e)man Altar-Performance***

A Spiritual service I observed in 2018 at the invitation of a church group in Georgetown presents pertinent issues. These are elaborate rituals, so *one moment* in this all-night-long event will be considered here, as hosted in honor of a local Bishop’s birthday attended by about twenty-five people—mostly women. Many were dressed in body-length robes of white, blue, or colors as created from “African” print-fabric. They sat on folding-chairs and wooden benches around a spectacular table-altar. In his opening remarks, the Bishop presiding, Nolan MacPherson, explained that he had created the shrine to invite the presences of “Yemanja, Mother of Waters, and the Spanish Nation,” as his first-ever attempt to perform such Work.<sup>399</sup>

This *moment* occurred at the end of a routine interlude in the ritual proceedings, after the initial “Celestial” portion of the Work had concluded and just prior to the commencement of the “Terrestrial Nation Work” of ancestral spirits (see Gibson 2001). Hymns had been sung and Bishop Nolan began lighting the many candles and incense sticks, anointing those gathered with

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<sup>399</sup> Orisha, typically known as “African Powers” in Guyana, are conceptualized within Komfa as representatives of the African Nation, one of seven ethnically identified “Nations” of ancestors.



*Fig. 8.1* Bishop Nolan dancing before the table-altar assembled and consecrated for the Bishop's "birth anniversary" service. 2018.

oils, perfumes, and liquors assembled on the altar. After about thirty minutes of this Celestial Work, the mostly Anglican songs ceased as the Bishop withdrew from the ritual space. Drinks and snacks were then distributed to guests by helpers close to Bishop

Nolan, and music was started on a

portable sound-system. Within a few minutes of the Bishop's retreat, before all the guests had been offered their first-round of refreshments, Bishop Nolan reappeared in the far corner of the room, no longer in blue robe with white fringe and now carrying a bouquet and beer bottle in one hand and a small *cutlass* in the other, cigarette between his lips.

Most attendees had not even noticed the Bishop had reappeared when someone in the crowd yelled out, "*Them Spanish spirit arrive!*" Someone else added, "*Put a brassiere on the Cross!*" which was met with much laughter from the guests. A reggae-soul version of Ben E. King's "Spanish Harlem" immediately started blazing through the speakers as the drummers scurried to the seats by their Komfa drums, and saxophone and keyboardist began playing along. I heard someone from among those seated around me say disapprovingly and loudly that, "*They make a antiman altar.*" I noticed then that someone had placed a lacey purple bra atop the horizontal beam of the large wooden Cross sanctifying the round Celestial altar off to one side of the room.

Others nearby snickered at the comment, but no one seemed to object to the divine impromptu assemblage. Rather, the "bra on the Cross" quickly became a locus of community

attention, a crux between cosmological and temporal realms, as altars and items comprising them are generally understood. Bishop Nolan responded to the comment and the laughter, clarifying for those gathered in a rather forthright manner, that “*Is not a antiman altar. Is a Spanish altar. Not a Catholic Spanish. You know who I mean. Them Spanish girl altar. [Suck teeth] you could call it antiman if you want.*” Later in the night as the remaining ritual proceedings unfolded, more Spanish spirits arrived, and in their dancing and singing and sharing of material and immaterial effects (i.e. food, liquor, perfumes, prayers, stories, songs), many performances included the momentary donning of the sanctified purple bra by women and men alike.

Bishop Nolan’s concession that, after all, “*you could call it antiman,*” seemed to signal the sort of re-valuative transformations that otherwise went unspoken throughout the night, and which practitioners never seem to emphasize *to me* in their explanations of how Komfa supports pursuits of “*knowing thyself.*” This assemblage and the devotional performances it prompted, however, remained on peoples’ minds, and I continued to hear mention of it as an agreeable and amusing innovation for months after the event.

The term “*antiman*” can be understood polysemously, designating both *anti*-man (against or opposing “*man*”) and *aunty*-man, as in aunt and uncle, with “*Aunty*” being the primary Creolese honorific used to address all adult women regardless of relation (Burton 1997: 154, 269; Fordyce 2018). Many LGBTI and queer Guyanese have accepted and redirected the once and still most-often derogatory epithet, “*a(u)nti(e)man.*”<sup>400</sup> Still, the Bishop not only

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<sup>400</sup> In conversation with Faizal Deen and Nalini Mohabir, Ronald Cummings (2018: 19) queries how “particularities of Guyanese queerness or of queer Guyanesehood...become[] articulated in [Deen’s] poetry through the figure of the antiman.” Deen explains that “the antiman is both a negation of man but also an auntieman as in a womanish man—a man who keeps company with aunties, with women. That’s how I understood the antiman when I was growing up in the 1970s. I have noticed these days the default is the antiman but I grew up with both spellings and both ideas” (Cummings, Mohabir, and Deen 2018: 19). “Queer” in this newer sense is not in wide circulation among Komfa People or Guyanese generally, in my experience. For “Aunty-man” glossed as “hermaphrodite,” see Quow [Michael McTurk] (1899: 39), and “Antiman” as “a sodomite,” see Henry Kirke (1898: 348). For “Aunty Men” as

transvaluated commonly held homophobic and hyper-heterosexist conceptions of *antiman* as unwell, immoral, and “demonically possessed,” but did so through linking *antiman* sexuality with “Spanish” ancestral ethnicity (Carrico 2012; *Sade’s Story* 2013). In Creolese, “*Spanish*” generally refers to Venezuelans living in Guyana, the significance of which will become clearer shortly.

### **Manifesting Queer/Racialized Selves**

...what is messy is often transgressive and,  
by implication, at once powerful and threatening...  
—Adeline Masquelier<sup>401</sup>

Practitioners often describe Komfa as a practice of deeply understanding—*knowing* and continually *becoming*—one’s “ancestors,” and so, one’s self (cf. Espírito Santo 2015). Through ancestor spirits, and other divinized dead, practitioners embrace ambiguities and inherited trauma of racialization, ethnic self-identification, and interpellation by others (cf. E. Pérez 2011). Komfa People rarely explicitly extend such thinking about race to gender and sexuality. Their ritual performances, however, demonstrate that spirits have much to teach the living about the role of gender creativity and nonheterosexualities in the lives of the spirits, in the social contexts during which they lived, and among the survivors they continue to visit.

Possession presents a particularly important means for Spiritualists to interrogate and historicize social categories that generally remain unquestioned, or unquestionable, as

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“those very fond of acting as if they were of the opposite sex,” see coverage of an 1884 marriage ceremony between two men in Georgetown (*Demerara Daily Chronicle* 28 September 1884: 3).

<sup>401</sup> From Masquelier’s introductory essay to the volume *Dirt, Undress, and Difference: Critical Perspectives on the Body’s Surface* (2005: 23).

“natural.”<sup>402</sup> Many come to know themselves through trance as heritors of complexly layered personal heritages, though their ancestors may not have direct biological, genealogical, or lineal connections. Such performance *events* cannot be restricted to one of the six or seven “available” racialized ethnic designations.<sup>403</sup> Through embodying the spirits, practitioners often come to recognize ancestries as multiple and mutable, and so they tend to “entertain” “all the ancestors” alike, as their own (see also Gibson 2005: 210).

Sexual and gender ambiguities are likewise built into ritual processes of spirit manifestation and underlying ontological notions supporting possession and mediumship. Spiritualists understandings of gender and sexual diversity tend to contrast with typical heteronormative and homophobic Guyanese attitudes, which continue to be reinforced through legal precedents that criminalize sexual acts between consenting adult men, among other legacies of British and Dutch rule (Jackman 2016; 2017; Jebodh 2018). Guyanese who present non-normative genders and sexualities are commonly pathologized through pejorative associations with cross-gendered spirit—or “demon”—possession (DeRoy with Henry 2018: 167; Providence 2015). Such senses of queerness have foundations in imperial European juridical thinking, but also in widespread conventions of conservative/Evangelical Christians, Hindus, and Muslims, as doctrines espoused by most Guyanese (Carrico 2012).

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<sup>402</sup> As Patrick Wolfe (2016: 6) demonstrates, “the well-worn piety that race is a social construct does not get us very far.” Komfa People likewise recognize that “rather than a conclusion, this general premise founds a set of questions,” which they interrogate through ritual Works, often trying to explain: “how are races[/genders/sexualities, etc.] constructed, under what circumstances, and in whose interests” (ibid.)?

<sup>403</sup> Following Michael Jackson’s (2005: xxvii)—and Max Gluckman’s (1940) much earlier—call for an existential, event-oriented anthropology, one can consider both “the ways an event gradually or dramatically illuminates what is at stake for those involved, and [...] the ways it carries ethical and practical implications that far outrun specific individual intentions and awareness.” Also see J. van Velsen (1979).



While *some* Komfa communities do serve as a refuge, many other Komfa Churches uphold normative discriminations against LGBTI people.<sup>404</sup> Some leaders warned me: “*You must be careful going by them and them and any-old-body. There’s a whole set a antiman in this thing here. You might not know it, yet.*”<sup>405</sup> However, a common conception shared by many Komfa People and expressed poignantly by a friend holds that “*Those Spanish ways are part and parcel of our national and spiritual inheritance.*” By describing them as “Spanish ways,” my friend was making sure I understood that these *antiman ways* were to be embraced and honored like other features of the “national and spiritual” ancestors.

Labels like “queer,” “gay,” and “lesbian” are not self-embraced in Guyana as they have become in many global contexts. As in much of the Caribbean, many Guyanese do not see such identities as pertinent to their lives and conceptions of self. Prolific Surinamese writer Astrid Roemer (quoted in Wekker 1993: 154) describes how “simply doing things, without giving them a name” helps in “preserving rituals and secrets between women.”<sup>406</sup> Roemer (ibid.: 153) explains that “in the community from which I come, there is not so much talk about the phenomenon of women having relations with other women. There are, after all, things which aren’t to be given names—giving them names kills them.” Tellingly, she goes on, “But we do have age-old rituals originating from Africa by which women can make quite clear that special

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<sup>404</sup> Scholarship on adjacent Black Atlantic religious formations has begun to explore the place of gender and sexual diversity within these traditions. For examples see Andrea Stevenson Allen (2012), Aisha Beliso-De Jesús (2015), Randy Conner and David Sparks (2004), Alejandro Escalante (2019), Elizabeth Pérez (2016), Roberto Strongman (2019), and Gloria Wekker (2006).

<sup>405</sup> Politics of rumor, gossip, and other “fugitive speech,” including acts contributing to/arising from sometimes-vexed inter-gathering relations, have been instructive to navigate throughout my fieldwork experiences because of these differing attitudes. On the utility of rumor and other forms of fugitive speech for studying Caribbean histories, see Lauren (Robin) Derby (2014).

<sup>406</sup> Wekker (1993: 152) is quoting from a “public discussion” between Roemer and Audre Lorde held in Amsterdam in the summer of 1986. As Deen attests above, circulation of LGBTQI identity terms has likely shifted some in the decades since Roemer’s comments (Cummings, Mohabir, and Deen 2018).

relations exist between them. For instance, birthday rituals can be recognized by anyone and are quite obvious” (ibid.: 153-54). To circumvent a “naming game” as such is not to be read as disempowering or a mere capitulation to prevailing homophobic violence of society, but is rather the opposite, as Roemer (ibid.: 154) says, through “remaining loyal” to self and “to the ways in which expression has been given from of old in my community to special relationships between women.” “Expression,” yes, but not through the prism of non-local identity labels or categorical notions of self.

### **Hinterland Horizons and “The Spanish Nation” of Ancestors**

In neighboring Venezuela, whence Komfa’s “Spanish” spirits descend, gender and sexual identities have developed and been institutionalized in ways different from those of Guyana. Transsexual and transgender Venezuelan women refer to themselves as *transformistas*, constructing a much more salient and socially defined identity category than local Guyanese interpretations of gendered personhoods afford (Ochoa 2014). The same is true for neighboring Brazil, where a large body of scholarship has explored *travesti* identities and social positionalities, especially as trans Brazilian and Venezuelan sex workers continue to move to Europe, and particularly to Portugal and Spain (Kulick 1998; Silva and Ornat 2015; Vogel 2009).

Performing sexual alterity becomes an active channel through which Komfa People harness the ambiguities of intersecting historically and culturally determined notions of self in a very small republic sandwiched between very different societal realities due to colonial and earlier histories. Komfa People’s practices and attitudes towards sexuality and gender inherently “contributes to a queering of Caribbean history and a de-centering of the West in global histories of sexuality” through looking to, and charting, South-South intercultural exchanges (Chin 2019:

324; cf. Lionnet and Shih 2005). Foregrounding such translocal dynamics likewise evades “homoimperialist tactics,” politics, and logic, whereby programs led by North American and European transnational advocacy groups have often misrepresented life-experiences of Caribbean people, undermining the work of homegrown activism (Attai 2017: 113; cf. Puar 2001). Looking toward Guyanese neighbors also avoids “positioning queerness as originating in Euro-American discourses and imposed on the Caribbean” (Kumar 2018: 123; see also King 2008 and 2014; Tinsley 2008 and 2018; Gill 2018), as well as uncritically privileging “African retentions” such as those Roemer (quoted in Wekker 1993: 153-54) mentions above as the only or most helpful genealogical starting points for understanding diverse sexualities and expressions of gender supported through rituals of spirit possession.

Spirits come from the past, but the Work they do is in the present for the future.<sup>407</sup> While people’s relationships with their spirits actively encourage improvements and benefits to their current and upcoming endeavors in life, spirits are old, so interrogating the historical contexts of their emergence within Guyanese spiritscapes is important to understanding what they mean and do for Komfa People who continue to manifest them. Komfa’s Spanish spirits can be traced to a set of social circumstances and locations connecting colonial Guiana and newly independent Venezuela, which inspired a liminal borderlands that still obtains.<sup>408</sup> This legal and social

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<sup>407</sup> For, as Michael Lambek’s (1978: I, 80, quoted in Roberts and Roberts 2018) work demonstrates, “spirits operate...on the cutting edge of history,” aiding practitioners in imagining, locating, “activating,” and “bearing” the past through embodied performances. Looking toward the “pioneering studies” of Robert Baum (1999), Rosalind Shaw (2002), and others, Andrew Apter and Lauren (Robin) Derby (2010: xx) call for increased attention to Black Atlantic practices “that excavate memories of slavery and colonization in ritualized arenas of spirit possession and sacred space.” On mediumship as memory-work, also see Lambek (2002), Keith McNeal (2010), Elizabeth Pérez (2011), Patrick Polk (2010a, 2010b), Polly Roberts and Al Roberts (1996), and Paul Stoller (1995).

<sup>408</sup> Along with Lara Putnam (2014), Vincent Crapanzano (2004: 14) offers compelling directions for conceptualizing “borderlands” more broadly, such as considering what might be gained from instances when “we lose...our self and boundary,” as in spirit possession. Crapanzano (2004: 13-14) is not interested here in “geopolitical borders,” nor their “enforcement, supersession, dissolution, and porosity,” but rather in “frontiers as horizons that extend from the insistent reality of the here and now into that optative space or time—the space-time—of the imaginary.”

understanding of the region has long encouraged the “informal flow” of people, goods, and ideas, including precisely those about sexualities and genders.

Mobility has always been a part of people’s lives in this region, known as the Essequibo after an Indigenous name for the mighty river extending to the Atlantic via tributaries rising deep within the Amazon rainforest. Much of the territory floods seasonally, necessitating certain geo-cultural patterns of movement. Georgetown and the surrounding below-sea-level coastal agricultural belt would still be subject to such natural forces, to a greater degree than is the case currently, had Europeans not forced enslaved Indigenous and African workers to “reclaim” the land, as many historical accounts phrase such coerced labor, excavating “100 million tons of soil” by hand, shovel, and bucket to establish the still-functioning sea defenses and irrigation infrastructure (Rodney 1981: 3). While at first, and in many ways *still* a sort of “backwater” in an already obscure and distant colony, the Essequibo became important to Dutch, Spanish, and later British, Venezuelan, and Guyanese economic interests through the rich mineral and other resources discovered in the region that were once understood as a fabled location of “El Dorado.”<sup>409</sup>

Vikram Tamboli (2019) has characterized this permeable borderland dynamic, following Lara Putnam (2014), as a historically central and understudied location that has long promoted an “illicit” flow of contraband. People enslaved in Africa were brought to or through the Essequibo territory, including after the Slave Trade Act of 1807, and Indigenous and other people were forcibly moved throughout the region and beyond before and after formal abolition

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<sup>409</sup> Struggles over control of Essequibo resources continue today, as does the Venezuela-Guyana border dispute over sovereignty of the entire Essequibo region. See Vikram Tamboli (2019) and Jacqueline Braveboy-Wagner (1984).

(Eltis 1972; Horne 2007a; O'Malley and Borucki 2017).<sup>410</sup> Commerce or traffic in “bush” medicines—tonics, oils, and other *materia medica* of plant, animal, and mineral origin—for local



**Fig. 8.2** A “bush vendor’s” table displaying wares on Georgetown’s busy Water Street, 2015. Bush medicine is vital to Komfa Work.

and export uses and markets, as well as the knowledge and knowledge systems in some cases that go with such medicines, were and continue to be significant “trade” items circulating in and out of the region (DeFilipps et al. 2004; van Andel et al. 2015). As discussed in the previous chapter, such means of therapy offered

through “bush” are important facets of life for many Guyanese, Komfa People in particular.

Considering the Essequibo borderlands and other Guyanese hinterlands in the development of the colonies and later Independent states is instructive. Mines and camps surrounding them, as well as certain villages, became an extension of (and in many ways *prototypes* for) plantation economies and labor regimes—political structures regulating productive and reproductive labor through which male control of women’s bodies played central material and symbolic roles (Russell-Wood 1977; Thompson 1987). The harsh conditions of Amazonian mining operations, particularly for small-scale independent prospectors drawn by the 1890 “goldrush,” meant that very few women left the populated coastal belt for interior villages and camps (Josiah 2011).

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<sup>410</sup> Tituba, the infamously maligned woman of Salem, Massachusetts, being a possible example of an Indigenous Guianese enslaved and sent to North America via Barbados. See Elaine Breslaw (1995), Chadwick Hansen (1974), and *passim*.

Accounts hold that the skewed sex ratio that ensued encouraged rape, forced prostitution, and sex work, primarily, at least at first, of Indigenous women and girls from communities nearby mining activities (Forte 1998). Guyanese have tended to stereotype women working in “*the bush*” as “prostitutes,” and by extension associate Venezuelans, or “*Spanish*,” and often Indigenous “*Amerindian*” women and girls as well, with *that* work (Trotz and Roopnaraine 2009). Similar stereotypes project attitudes surrounding sexuality onto those who may or may not engage in sexual labor, but also those who merely identify or *are identified as* “*Spanish*” or Indigenous. With the currently unrelenting economic crises facing Venezuela, and even prior, Venezuelan women make up a considerable proportion of the sex workers who currently labor in and around Georgetown, and they are joined in their endeavors by an equally considerable number of other Spanish-speaking women, primarily from the Dominican Republic, but also Cuba and Colombia (Tamboli 2019: 431; see also Kempadoo 2004; Red Thread 1999). This last point only adds to contemporary associations between “*Spanish people*” and *Spanish* spirits, as well as understandings of both categories’ modes of gender performance and sexualities, including the sexual and Spiritual Work(s) they do.

### **Embracing Queer/Translatina Fem(me)inities through African God/desses<sup>411</sup>**

West Africa and the Afro-Caribbean, influenced so profoundly and for so long by European power and domination, have demonstrated a version of equality in some population sectors that European societies, with their quite basic view of *women as property*, neither understand nor accept.

—Sidney Mintz<sup>412</sup>

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<sup>411</sup> On “translatina” as a concept and subjectivity, see Alexandra Rodríguez de Ruíz and Marcia Ochoa (2016).

<sup>412</sup> From Mintz’s essay, “Black Women, Economic Roles and Cultural Traditions” (1993b: 243).

Further considering general Guyanese understandings of spirit possession's implication in gender and sexual non-conformity will be helpful before focusing again directly on Komfa. In a 2011 article in the first issue of Guyana's *Spectrum Vibes*, a journal dedicated to sharing LGBTQI news and perspectives, a Georgetown activist-author interrogates local constructions of trans identifications, asking readers, and *himself*, "Am I Trans"?

I don't like curtains and things to do with fixing up house and so on. The cooking thing... I like cooking and I have a sweet tooth. Another woman had told me about a man who was possessed by a girl spirit, and was calling for pear [avocado], and sugar cake and fudge and 'ting dat girl like.' So... I thought, I got two girl spirit in me because I like all of that too and plenty of it. It's funny, because I know plenty girl who like green mango and salt, and caraila and so on [i.e. 'man' food]. (Vidya [Kissoon] 2011: 5)

Generalized constructions of gender through food preferences can bring to mind analogies for non-Guyanese social contexts. The ontological status attributed to processes of spirit possession is of note, whereby an individual's performance of gendered self is read through agencies of "spirit," not one's own agency. Even in such "secular" contexts unrelated to Komfa ritual or Spiritual Churches, Guyanese people often comprehend the creativity of gendered identification and expression through spirit possession and affirm a "transcorporeal" appreciation of personhood that seems to feature in many African diaspora social worlds.

Roberto Strongman has developed theories of transcorporeality in *Queering Black Atlantic Religions* (2019) and elsewhere. Strongman (ibid: 7, 21) presents African diasporic ontologies in contrast to European-Enlightenment-derived and currently hegemonic/normative Western understandings of personhood which espouse a Cartesian "unitary self that is fixed within the body," or a "unitary soul within the hermetic enclosure of the body." Black Atlantic cosmologies to which Strongman draws attention, including Candomblé, Santería, and Vodou, instead facilitate conceptions of self and soul as "removeable, external, and multiple," not singular and unchanging, nor encased within one's material body. "The transcorporeality found

in the religious tradition of Vodou” for example, “enables the assumption of cross-gender subjectivities,” particularly through rituals of spirit possession, wherein practitioners “manifest” a spirit who is gendered differently from how that medium self-identifies when not in trance (Strongman 2008: 17). Komfa practitioners, or perhaps their spirits, purposefully deploy the creativity and ambiguity of gender and sexuality, tran(ce)scending (some of) society’s rigidities and hostilities through mediumship, supported through this “African Diasporic discourse of personhood” (Strongman 2019: 21).<sup>413</sup> Likewise, Alejandro Escalante (2019: 387, 394) notes that “spirit possession reveals subterranean genderqueer modes of being”—or “trans\*” ontologies—that point to “the fugitive ways that black people have moved throughout society in an attempt to survive.”

Aliyah Khan provides a compelling view of Guyanese religious-sexual-racial intersections of “subterranean” being in writing about her *small days* growing up in Georgetown.

The veranda where I used to watch them bright yellow buttercup and pink bougainvillea ‘cross the street grow and grow. Where I see Mistah Mac glide by in a red and gold sari! Yes! Ah telling yuh true. Mac was a black man but he convert one time to Muslim and next time to Hindu, and he light diya on Diwali too. I had big ears and I hear big people watch he and suck they teeth and whisper, antiman. But nobody used to trouble he. He live quiet. (Khan 2019)

Khan’s description is of a “black man,” understood by adults around her as an “*antiman*,” who had converted one time to Islam and another time to Hindu practices, and who observed Diwali, the Hindu festival of lights. While Diwali is a national holiday in Guyana, most non-Hindus do not observe the ritual practices of lighting lamps, nor do they dress up in saris, particularly *men*,

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<sup>413</sup> “Tran(ce)scending” follows Victor Turner’s (1967; 1988) emphases on the “trance-formative power of spirit manifestation” within processes of ritualized social drama and the inherently trance-gressive orientations engendered through mediumship (Asantewa 2016: 182). Lee Siegel also offers felicitous neologisms regarding South Asian “hypnotism” in *Trance-Migrations* (2014), such as “trance-formations,” “trance-actions,” and “trance-mutations.”



and “glide” or *dance* in their homes for Diwali or other Hindu or Muslim holidays. While Khan’s childhood anecdote demonstrates Guyana’s religious and sexual diversities, it does so to an even greater extent if one considers that the neighbor she describes may have been a Komfa



**Fig. 8.3** A medium manifesting a spirit representing Komfa’s Indian Nation of ancestors, dancing in front of a shrine during a Spiritual service. East Bank Demerara, 2016.

practitioner. Perhaps “Mistah Mac” had not “convert[ed]” one time here and one time there, but rather was embodying the cosmopolitan array of spirits who comprise Komfa’s Seven Nations, manifesting various ancestors in ritual costumes and through dance, sometimes including “the assumption of cross-gender subjectivities” that young Khan glimpsed from her verandah (Strongman 2008: 17). She and her family may also have witnessed an apparition of a Spanish spirit across the street, merely considering it their *antiman* neighbor being his *queer* self.

Other than the *diya* oil-lamp, however, Khan does not describe ever seeing the many shrines and diverse material invocations of divinities and ancestors that many Komfa People keep in their homes. Although, most of these same people often feel reticent towards indiscriminately showcasing their alignments with Spiritual life, and for many, Komfa is a “secret.”<sup>414</sup> Due to centuries of colonial persecution of non-Christian religiosities—and the resulting repression of such practices, particularly in the Caribbean those thought to derive from

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<sup>414</sup> Roemer (1998: 44) has similarly written of an Afro-Surinamese religion sharing much in common with Komfa, “as the secret bearing the name *Winti*,” further characterizing *Winti* as “the secret which more or less breaks up our Creole families. Secrets evoke fear” she goes on, and “a subculture that is nurtured on feelings of fear is sometimes violently oppressed and silenced—actions that evoke even more fear.”

Africa labeled as “Obeah”—Komfa Work is usually only discussed openly among likeminded practitioners.

Following the insights of numerous theorists, in particular those practitioners with whom I work, one can consider “the bra on the Cross” and other such altar-creations—including the material and immaterial objects comprising them—as physical extensions of social relationships cultivated between spirits and their mediums, as well as among devotees. Writing about the “agency-relations” exemplified by Kongo *minkisi*, Alfred Gell (1998: 59, 62) suggests that “an instructed person” who approached a “power sculpture” as such, would “not see a mere thing, a form” to be engaged *only* “aesthetically” (Strother 2000: 63). Rather, in approaching this object of devotion and insight, one might experience a “compressed performance” (Pinney 2004: 8, quoted in A. Roberts 2019: 4). As Gell (1998: 62, quoted in A. Roberts 2019: 4) holds, this “instructed person” would momentarily witness “the visible knot which ties together an invisible skein of relations, fanning out into social space and social time.” Altar objects—like the bodies and persons assembling and tending them—are primarily neither symbolic nor *representative*, but are instead actively agentic presences that share in the *mediating* functions that mediums furnish through their bodies, providing a transitory bridge between the lives of devotees and the insights of the dead through their material presence (Espírito Santo and Tassi 2013; Johnson 2014). Perhaps reflecting Guyana’s limited “Spanish colonial experience,” as well as the marginalization faced by many “Spanish” people and their lingering spirits in Guyana, this ancestral Nation tends to compel the least material—and bodily—(re)presentations in Komfa Churches and in ritual practices (Khan 1993: 191).

Kean Gibson (2001: 80) reports that during her field studies with practitioners in early-1990s Guyana, she was never “privy to an invitation” to a service dedicated specifically to Spanish ancestors. Gibson (2001: 80) also affirms that many practitioners shy away from entertaining the Spanish Nation, characterizing such spirits as “prostitutes” and those mediums who manifest them as “promiscuous homosexuals and lesbians.” From my experience working with numerous church groups and attending many of their services, I have also observed a stark contrast between material re/presentations of Spanish and other Komfa Nations. Spanish receive far fewer altar-constructions and rarely a dedicated, permanent shrine, while other Nations typically have altars within Spiritualist churches. While I was invited to partake in the aforementioned performance of Spanish Work, that event was one of the rare times I witnessed a Spanish spirit “arrive,” other than in All-Nation Banquets during which spirit representatives from all seven Nations are entertained (Gibson 2005: 210). The instance of “the bra on the Cross” was also one of the few times I observed a material creation index/invoke Spanish spirit presence. The “brassiere” was an ephemeral assemblage, while other Nations tend to be well-represented through permanent altar installations. Quite infrequently, I have observed small ceramic statues



Figure 3.7 Serial Possession 4: A Spanish Flamenco Dancer

**Fig. 8.4** A “Spanish Entree” manifests at an All-Nation Banquet. From Kean Gibson (2001: 1-7).

or cloth dolls on altars that devotees identified as “*Madamas*,” or “old Spanish” “slave” women.<sup>415</sup>

### Embodying Doña Madama

My mother was the color of papaya and bananas,  
her smile could weaken the strongest of men. ...  
What I remember of her going-home ritual is that  
complete strangers said nice things about her and  
the casket was not open.  
—Haki Madhubuti<sup>416</sup>

Komfa People typically develop remarkably intimate,  
enduring relationships with the spirits they manifest,  
as well as those frequently channeled by mediums

they see regularly at ritual events. Sustaining  
relationships with these ancestors, particularly with

those one personally manifests, often amounts to lifelong journeys of *self*-discovery and  
unfoldment, wherein spirit “copresences” inspire devotee-descendants to deeply examine the  
lives of their spirit-guides, and their own. Spirits encourage practitioners to study the precedents  
informing their experiences—and in the process, in one’s own ways—to live up to the many  
different expectations and ambitions one’s predecessors aspired towards (Beliso-De Jesús 2015).  
Through such practices one not only gains knowledge of “thysself,” but perhaps more  
significantly, does so through transcorporeally accessing insights of the ancestors. As such,  
Komfa People devote themselves to continually “becoming one’s ancestors,” always



*Fig. 8.5* One of very few objects in Spiritual Churches said to re/present “Spanish” ancestors, these statues are generally known as “*Madamas*.” Georgetown, 2018.

<sup>415</sup> Patrick Polk (2010a: 405n2) notes that in Black Atlantic religious formations of Cuba, Brazil, and elsewhere, particularly those traditions influenced by Kardecist Spiritism, “adherents routinely embody masculine and feminine entities variously called *congós*, *madamas*, *negros*, or *pretos velhos* that are broadly categorized as African.”

<sup>416</sup> From Madhubuti’s memoir, *YellowBlack: The First Twenty-One Years of a Poet’s Life* (2006: 29, 112).

emphasizing an unending plurality of antecedents (cf. Espírito Santo 2015). By presenting the past lived-experiences of trans sex workers, *antiman cocoa panyols*, *cockson creoles*, *porkknocker ladies*, and *bush women* of all stripes, spirits of the Spanish Nation encourage practitioners to re-member family and community histories that have been long repressed and obscured through generations of grief and defenses of survival.<sup>417</sup>

Like other spirits, those of the Spanish Nation demand recuperations of memory and resuscitations of soul through the sacrificial performance of tendering one's faith, one's body, and one's destiny for the god/desses to animate. Spanish spirits play an instrumental role in helping Komfa People to revisit proud memories of sexual and economic liberties, as well as traumatic pasts of debilitating social and corpor(e)al confinements. Through the temporal, spatial, and social departures extended to practitioners by their Spanish predecessors, Spiritualist also learn about the ways that the boundaries of gender and sex have been both instantiated and destabilized by ancestral acts of intimacy, duplicity, eccentricity, and *queerness*. For as Rosamond King (2008: 193) demonstrates, "black and brown Caribbean women's sexualities have always been considered 'queer,' odd, and less moral by European (and often by 'colored') elites." Building on Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley's (2008) work considering the origins of a "queer Black Atlantic" arising from sex-segregated holds of slave ships crossing the Middle Passage, Christina Sharpe (2016: 30) writes that "we might add that the Black and queer Atlantic have always been the Trans\*Atlantic."

Nihils Rev and Fiona Geist (2017: 112) recognize that, while most scholarly literature and popular accounts of sex workers center their portrayals and analyses on the experiences of cisgender women as subjects, "the trans sex worker" features in these same accounts as "an

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<sup>417</sup> These Creolese descriptors, pejorative in some cases, will be discussed further below.

often-mentioned, complex, and titillating curiosity: positioned as both sideshow oddity and pitiable rhetorical object in much writing on sex work.” While such representations “customarily allude to the latent entanglement between trans identity and trans sex work,” seldom are the multifaceted “connections between trans lives and sex work” explored and contextualized in any meaningful way (ibid.). Much as when other Entrees manifest in Komfa ritual to work against, work through, and/or deconstruct perennial stereotypes of ethnic and racial identities, Spanish ancestors present themselves—often as trans sex workers of old—to implore their interlocutors to take seriously such historically entangled sentiments and their ramifications for gender-, race-, and religion-based oppressions persistent today. Uncritical references to trans women within narratives of sex work, after all, can easily perpetuate widespread stigmatization of trans individuals, whose mere embodiment in public might incite attention from law enforcement and men looking (to pay or not) for sex, at best, but also much too often vehemence, physical altercation, and murder.<sup>418</sup> Violence against trans women and other LGBTI people is rampant in Guyana, no doubt in part due to popular conceptions transferring marginalization and persecution faced by sex workers onto those who identify as trans, and in Guyanese contexts, also as gay, *antiman*, queer, or non-conforming—as subjectivities all morally linked to sexual labor (Ceccanese et al. 2018; Trotz 2014a).

Spanish spirits, like certain of their queer living counterparts, present themselves with attention-grabbing displays, and typically enjoy sporting fabulous outfits of fine fabrics, often with sequins, lace, and embroidery, among other indulgences. One of the ways participants of

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<sup>418</sup> Through what is widely known as “walking while trans,” “transgender women of color are often profiled by police as engaging in sex work for simply being outside and going about their daily routines” (Strangio 2014). Contrastingly, men, including trans men, as sex workers are largely ignored and made invisible, including in most scholarly and general accounts, as are women as consumers. On the scale of violence—including murder—committed against Black trans women in the United States, recently declared an “epidemic” by the American Medical Association, see Rick Rojas and Vanessa Swales in *The New York Times* (2019), and Riley Snorton (2017).

Spiritual services initially identify a manifesting ancestor as Spanish is through their choice of footwear, which tend to be high-fashion designer brands, with patent leather, gleaming buckles, rhinestones, and/or other conspicuous features, including often having heels. Most Spanish spirits I have encountered are women—or presented as such—while the few Spanish men I have witnessed manifest also required that their shoes be changed early on in their “arrival” at the service. Ancestors of other Nations also expect their attire to be changed or shoes removed entirely, as is the case with many African and Dutch spirits whose feet remain bare during rituals, gesturing to the legal and customary exclusions that prohibited enslaved people from wearing or owning shoes in colonial Guiana and elsewhere.<sup>419</sup> Tinsley (2018: 49) describes how “footwear has been a highly regulated commodity” particularly for women of African heritage in the Americas both during slavery and after formal abolition. In exploring how a wide variety of artistic and performative “engagements” with Vodou goddess Ezili harness her “explanatory power in understanding gender,” Tinsley (2018: 4-5) notes how Ezili’s shoes are merely one of many factors supporting Elizabeth McAlister’s (2000: 132) contention that the sensual “mulatta creole” *lwa* (divinity) of love and beauty, Ezili Freda, helps her devotees “recall” the lives lived by Haitian women who comprised a colonial “class apart of mistresses, concubines, and sex slaves of the wealthy white planter men” (cf. Kempadoo 2003; and Mohammed 2000). Like Freda, the “mixed” and hyper-fem(me)inized spirits of the Spanish Nation present life-histories of ancestors whose past navigations of racialized genders help to fortify practitioners through current and impending quandaries and adversities.

In illuminating the origins of her own Spanish spirit-guide, an elder practitioner with whom I have grown familiar, Mother Myrtle, explained that “being a slave, working the field,

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<sup>419</sup> For shoes as “‘the badge of freedom’ for slaves,” see Mary Karasch (2019 [1987]: 130).

you can't be a woman for do man's work, while you still must care the children them and mind everybody[']s need[s].” Correspondingly, scholarship has drawn ample attention to the extensive ways in which enslavement in the Americas has denied Black women's female-ness (Snorton 2015; Keeling 2007; King 1975).<sup>420</sup> Mother Myrtle continued with her incisive oral-historical account, sharing how “is from Black wom[e]n, slaves, them not being allowed to be woman, or woman-like, here in Guyana, make they stay like them Spanish lady, them that come over from Vene[zuela] and Trini[dad]...and they must come from Brazil too.” Tinsley (2018: 32) observes how “black queer women's exclusion from femininity is doubled, as black lesbians are always already assumed butch by virtue of their race *and* sexuality.” Mother Myrtle's narrative reveals much about not only the development of Komfa's Spanish Nation, but also about histories of Black queer genders and the flux within racialized hierarchies of sexuality. The “Spanish ladies” of colonial Guiana whom Mother Myrtle describes

c[a]me for work, and once they there here, enough gone for live with a Buck, or what they used to call Boviander...[and] Cobungru...and work in the bush and make they own house, or a ranch, you understand? Them mind cow, and horse, and them thing. Must work gold...or keep a shop...Well enough was just woman come alone, bare woman, for work. You know enough a them come together, just woman, and they make they way together, working, working, you understand?<sup>421</sup>

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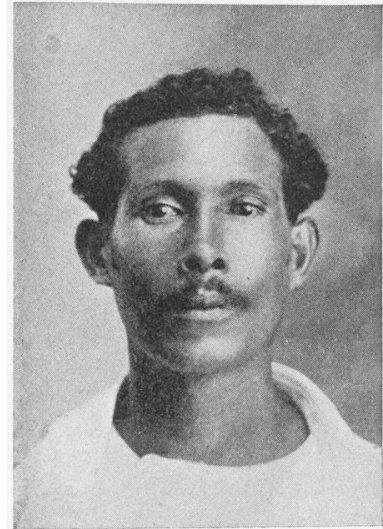
<sup>420</sup> Angela Davis (1983 [1981]: 5, quoted in Lewis 2019: 342) writes that enslaved people in the Americas, more broadly, were “genderless as far as the slaveholders were concerned.”

<sup>421</sup> On “*Buck*” and “*Boviander*” (or “*Buffiana*”) as pejorative Creolese terms used to describe, respectively, Indigenous people in Guyana, and those who descend from Indigenous and non-Indigenous people living in colonial Guiana, particularly “Dutch” settlers and enslaved and formerly enslaved free Blacks, see Camille Hernandez-Ramdwar (1997) and Rhoda Reddock (1999: 595n9). For discussion of *Boviander* communities as refuges for Maroons, as well as their other “highly rebellious” efforts, see Walter Rodney (1979: 281), as well as a fictionalized historical account by Edgar Mittelhölzer (1951: 193). On “allegedly hot-blooded [...] ‘boviander’ women,” see Haslyn Parris (2013: 8). Evelyn Waugh (1985 [1934]: 33) refers degradingly to Bovianders as “like the water rat in *Wind in the Willows* ‘messaging about in boats.’” “*Cobungru*” or “*Kabukru*,” while uncommon today, as Richard Allsopp (2003 [1996]: 113) notes, potentially share etymological pasts with the much more pervasive term “*Caboclo*.” For “*Cobungru*,” see Everard im Thurn (1880: 468) and Michael Swan (1957: 186).



Mother Myrtle holds that she acquired her depth of historical awareness through profound communion manifesting her Spanish ancestor, Doña Madama, over many years of devotion. Though she is not clear where the copresence she knows as Doña Madama might fit within her own genealogical background, the spirit has revealed that she was born as a male into slavery just a few years before emancipation in the height of Venezuela’s revolutionary period. She remembers as a young boy growing up that her father—a “Black Spanish Creole” and former cocoa estate “driver”—left for what seemed like years, returning with tales of leading formerly enslaved forces into battle under the command of Pedro Camejo, famed “Negro Primero” as the only officer of African descent in Simon Bolívar’s ranks (Ross 2009). While subtle in ways, and astounding in others, Mother Myrtle’s account echoes McAlister’s (2000) reading of the repertoire of Haitian memory performed by Ezili Freda (Taylor 2003). Emphasizing racial, sexual, and class dynamics, and referencing local contemporary language to describe sex work, Mother Myrtle added that this class apart of “mixed” “Spanish” women in Dutch and later British Guiana to which Doña Madama belonged were

collecting a fare, yeah, but making a real money just the same...Is cause they Creole, what they call Panyol...Spanish, get a more European blood, and a high-color, so they make enough money. Remember, is them times we talking...And is cause the work so strong, they all living, that some m[e]n come too for do this same work, for work, and for live, as like they themself wom[e]n.<sup>422</sup>



285. A TYPICAL “BOVIANDER” OR UP-COUNTRY SETTLER  
Half Amerindian, quarter Dutch, quarter Negro

**Fig. 8.6** “A TYPICAL ‘BOVIANDER.’”  
From a visualization of racial categories presented in Sir Harry Johnston’s *The Negro in the New World* (1921 [1910]: 328).

<sup>422</sup> On histories of “*Panyol*” as a local ethnonym, see Sylvia Moodie-Kublalsingh (1994) and Camille Hernandez-Ramdwar (1997). See Aisha Khan (1993) on “Spanish” in Trinidad more generally.

We will return shortly to examining the roles played by spirits like Doña Madama as “brilliant social critics of gender” in remembering “them times,” as well as in applying to the future lessons made available through revisiting those days today (McAlister 2000: 139, quoted in Tinsley 2018: 51). First, it will prove helpful to further consider why Spanish spirits’ presentations of hyper-fem(me)inized genders and their commonly cited association with sexual labor are central to their personhoods and to the Spiritual Work they are called on to perform. Preity Kumar (2019: 4) has contextualized the gender performance of “femme-ness” embodied by “light-skinned,” “middle-class” LGBTQ Guyanese women as a means of counteracting anti-*cauxin* discriminations and associated violence to which non-conforming *Dougla*, or “mixed,” and Black women, as masculinized-females, are predisposed (Peake and Trotz 1999; Reddock 1999). *Cauxin*, also commonly spelled *cockson* or *coxen*, is a gendered Creolese alternative to *antiman*, a term which is also structurally gendered but is consistently used to refer to men and women, as well as those whose gender identity might be more difficult to discern (Kumar 2018; Red Thread 1999: 288n12). *Cauxin*, on the other hand, is employed as a pejorative means of condemning what are more-specifically perceived as overly masculine or “butch” attributes presented by women, often queer or non-conforming individuals, especially those known to maintain intimate and/or sexual relations with other women (Kumar 2019).

Through reanimating their Spanish ancestors in ritual, and as copresences throughout their days, Komfa practitioners “*intentionally mobilize*” responses to *cauxin* subjectivation as they “embody and deploy femme-ness to resist the high levels of violence that are meted out against them as sexually non-conforming” people, forming for themselves “an ideological, psychological, and physical safe space” (Kumar 2019: 2). The “*strategic femme-ness*” to which Kumar (2019: 8) draws attention varies from North America contexts in that the Guyanese

women she worked with “embody and interpret their femme-ness as a shield of protection from colonial heteropatriarchal violence” directed at those perceived as *cauxin*, *antiman*, or other stigmatized gender and sexual subjectivities, often justified through conceptions of cross-gender “demonic” possession. Through the subversive act of embodying “strategic femme-ness,” non-conforming Guyanese “re-write scripts and take ownership of their sexuality,” their choices in partners, and their gendered expressions, while often continuing “to *conceal* those choices within a culture of violence” (Kumar 2019: 8). As mentioned, while Komfa gatherings often do serve as “safe spaces” for Guyanese to express themselves genuinely, still, many Komfa People and their communities are perhaps *hyper*-heteronormative in their outlooks as a reaction to popular perceptions linking Spiritualists to queerness and to non-normativity more generally. Spirit possession, as an “anonymous speech genre,” also inherently presents “the ultimate *indirection*” in facilitating channels of concealment (Derby 2014: 124; Bourguignon 2004: 572, emphasis added). Mediums cannot necessarily be held to account as individuals for the behaviors, attitudes, and often-transgressive perspectives conveyed through their manifesting personages. Practitioners explain such ambiguities involved in attributing authorial agency to the things spirits and/or their mediums do and say as a key feature contributing to Komfa’s significance as a site of “counter-memory,” where reckonings with subjugated pasts can be imagined-into-being through “subversive...ontological alternatives” that encourage people to feel histories as their own (Roberts and Roberts 1996: 30; cf. Nora 1989). The ancestors’ experiences thus become constitutive of the ever-becoming self (cf. Espírito Santo 2015).

## **Shantos and Folksongs, Folktales and *Porkknocker Story/s***

There are two other important sites of creative memory that have long fostered the continued presence and performance of historical subjectivities comparable to those represented by Komfa's Spanish Nation. Particular sex workers—specifically from among those operating outside the coastal Georgetown-area in the hinterland *bush*—have over generations been memorialized as sometimes-“celebrated” personalities within Guyana's robust “folksong” and storytelling traditions (Alleyne 2013). Shanto, a Guyanese musical form popularized in the early-1920s through its incorporation into local vaudeville shows, has been an especially important source documenting histories of these workers and their communities, including the social conditions in which they labored (Cambridge 2015). Shanto and later calypso bands began touring the “semi-permanent” *porkknocker* camps, as independent gold and diamond prospectors are known in Guyana, and villages of the interior by the late-1930s accompanying a variety of performers and other “itinerants” hoping to raise a living entertaining entrepreneurial settlers—primarily Afro-Guyanese from the coast (Josiah 2011).<sup>423</sup> Several artists composed lyrics during long tours of these interior circuits relating their experiences back to audiences in Georgetown, and internationally. As Vibert Cambridge (2015: 76, 87) notes, popular tracks of the time such as Ralph Fitz Scott's calypso “The Bushwoman Come to Town,” provide compilations of “the graphic names of some of the hinterland prostitutes who came to [George]town” for such opportune events as the revelry surrounding King George and Queen Elizabeth's coronation in

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<sup>423</sup> Komfa and shanto share intertwining histories that have yet to be substantively explored. As Guyanese “master drummer” Menes de Griot (2019, pers. comm.) holds, shanto “music has its roots in West African riddims and style of singing, [and when] after 1838 British Guiana brought Portuguese, Indians and Chinese as indentured servants their music was adopted into the Shanto style which was heavily influenced by the Komfa drums.” Folkloric versions of Komfa performances were also incorporated into shanto-vaudeville shows, with Bill Rogers [born Augustus Hinds] (1906-1984), purported “original exponent” of shanto, also remembered as “the first promoter to put the traditional ‘Cumfa Dance’ on stage” sometime in the late-1930s-early-1940s, according to Rogers's son, who is himself a contemporary shanto star known as The Young Bill Rogers [Roger Hinds] (*Caribbean Entertainer* 1972: 14; Hinds 2017, pers. comm.).

1937 (Gibbs 2015: 66). Along with shantos and calypsos, songs performed during traditional Afro-Guyanese *Kweh-kweh* pre-wedding ceremonies highlight discord between lovers, with the dominating subjects explored in Guyanese folksongs as a whole being issues of intimate partner abuse and “the likelihood of domestic violence in marriage” (Richards-Greaves 2015: 87).<sup>424</sup>

A local oral genre known as “*porkknocker story*” also records important aspects of the lives of “porkknocker ladies.” This still common designation includes women prospectors who have always been less numerous than their male counterparts, but nonetheless always present in the actual extraction, and certainly trade, of gold and diamonds (Josiah 2011: 45-47; Danny 2012). “Porkknocker ladies” also—and more frequently—refers to the many women working to support activities in these isolated communities in manifold ways: from domestic labors of providing food, washing clothes, and treating familiar illnesses, to more specialized jobs, including but certainly not limited to, sex work. While oral narratives known as porkknocker stories are not necessarily *about* the miners themselves, but rather “tales believed to have originated among them or told by them,” “*bush-women*” feature prominently as characters portraying both everyday and extraordinary experiences of “*bush-life*” (Creighton 2014; Braithwaite 2009).

Singing folksongs and reciting folklore, including shantos and porkknocker tales, are central—yet often under-regarded—elements of Komfa performances. Certain gatherings regularly sing the “old-time” songs together and retell their versions of folk-stories as ritual interludes between the hymns, communal prayers, and more-immediately religious-oriented teachings within their Spiritual services and other meetings. This is especially frequent for these

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<sup>424</sup> During one public Komfa folksong performance session, the presiding leader, Bishop Andrew Irving, preemptively announced that a particular song would not be sung that night as the lyrics express *support* for protagonist “Sancho” in evading capture by the police after he “lick ‘e lovah pon de dam / an’ de gal ah hallah murdah.” For lyrics, see Lynette Dolphin (1996: 27) and M’lilwana Osanku (2003).

groups as the night gets late, or the morning comes, and the ancestors require and bestow intensified “entertainment.” In more exceptional instances, practitioners repurpose the “graphic names” of “*bushwoman*” featured in these aural representations as “*false-name[s]*” or affectionate appellations for their own Spanish spirit-guides and those of their companions. As with devotees’ relationships with other spirits, Komfa practitioners initially come to know their ancestor-guides as archetypical personas, often with a generic name—such as “Doña” and/or “Madama” for a female Spanish spirit—and a nebulous biography, only to be *fleshed*-out and developed through perpetual processes of unfoldment, usually involving revelatory dreams, visions, and trance possession.<sup>425</sup> The repetition of folksongs and porkknocker tales helps practitioners in concrete ways to build vital initial connections with their imminent *Spanish* guides, providing tangible links to reawaken “memory [as] the raw material of history” from which the lives of forebears become reenacted, spawning embodied, performative “counter-narratives” of the past (Le Goff 1992: xi, quoted in Roberts and Roberts 1996). Or, as Édouard Glissant (1992: 128) has described comparable “Creole folktales” of the French Caribbean, these stories and songs articulate “a kind of counterpoetics” (Derby 2014: 123).

### **Re-engendering Memories of “other *bush-woman*”<sup>426</sup>**

Stillborn in death, their memory is not ours,  
In whom the spasm of birth

Gendered oblivion. To chart empty savannahs,  
Rivers, even with a guide, conceives an earth

Without us, without gods: Guiana or Guinea,  
An aboriginal fear, lie Orinoco

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<sup>425</sup> See Carrie Viarnés (2010: 332) on spirits’ names and “generic” stereotypical “slave names” used in Cuba to conceal an ancestor’s “secret, original name known [possibly] only to the devotee.”

<sup>426</sup> Quote in the section title is from *Mother Myrtle*, as discussed below.

Disgorging from a mouth brown with tobacco  
Deaths that cannot discolor the great sea.  
—Derek Walcott<sup>427</sup>

Notions of transgressive embodiment and “alterities of desire” undergird many of the “counter-discourses,” “counter-memories,” and “repertoires” deployed through Komfa Work in confronting those meta-narratives dominating conceptions of ordinary moral social life in Guyana (Pinthongvijayakul 2019; cf. Guha 1983; Lambek 2010; Roberts and Roberts 1996; and Taylor 2003). Komfa People do not merely learn and teach about the generations of marginalization faced by sex workers, LGBTQI people, and women more generally, who came before them. Rather, they aspire towards *becoming* these *impossible* Guyanese, genealogically incorporating their otherwise dismissed subjecthoods into their past, present, and future selves-in-the-making. As Strongman (2019), Escalante (2019), and Visisya Pinthongvijayakul (2019: 101) all demonstrate in quite divergent contexts, “ritual performance by spirit mediums materially vocalizes an expanded and more diverse repertoire of desire” through the experiential variances that multiplicity of personhood makes accessible to practitioners and their guides. Embracing alterity within oneself, and specifically the enigmatic power inherent in *assimilating dissimilarities* and “apprehending otherness,” often entails forms of defiant revalorization of dispossessed *ways* of being in the world, not only socially determined identities or historically engrained *categories* of being (Dean 2001: 135).

Komfa People often express dissatisfaction in knowing a guide only through their distant, ethno-racialized personas, and strain to summon patience, devotion, and insights necessary to develop more profound recognition of the empathic, intersubjective *becoming together* which the spirit has offered through their presence. Practitioners tend to describe such deep aspirations to

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<sup>427</sup> From Walcott’s “The Voyage Up River,” which the poet dedicated to Wilson Harris (1965: 50).

become their guides as an affective yearning, a process of learning to *feel* as one’s guide feels, sensing and otherwise experiencing the world as they once did, and now have an opportunity to once again through their relationship with their medium. Such an affective process is, as Brian Massumi’s (2002: 118) work demonstrates, based in conceptions of the body that accentuate an “openness to human and nonhuman forces vibrating through the flesh” (Pinthongvijayakul 2019: 104). Pinthongvijayakul (ibid.: 110) explains that “in mediumistic ritual, religious and sexual ontologies melt into the same bodily organs and zones of skin” through a transcorporeal expansion of becoming with honored Others. For mediums manifesting Spanish spirits, the feelings one learns to discern—and “religious and sexual ontologies” one newly inhabits—often involve embracing intimately sensuous desires of the sort disparaged in most Guyanese settings as *antiman* and/or *dougl*-minded. *Dougl*, as an all-pervasive, primarily pejorative Creolese term, describes the broad-scoped Guyanese concept of “mixed-race,” as well as those individuals identified, and increasingly identifying themselves, as such (Bharrat 2013; Reddock 2014; Richards-Greaves 2012; *Stabroek News* 19 July 2016). Incorporating notions of foreignness within oneself can again be an empowering maneuver of Komfa ontologies.



**Fig. 8.7** A shave-ice vendor called “Dougl” at Georgetown’s Bourda Market, 2015. Notice one inspirational slogan on his cart reads: “STOP KILLING OUR WOMEN.”

Lauren Derby’s (2015) work on shape-shifting sorcery, transnational French occultism, and the lingering spirit-presences of United States Marines, reveals much about Haitian Vodou’s



incorporation of signs of foreign power. Within “the bipartite symbolic divide” frequently noted by scholars and practitioners of Vodou, the Rada Nation comprises “family gods, handed down by one’s ancestors,” while the Nation of Petwo *lwa* are “patently strangers” whose instrumentality comes specifically through “their association with exotic technologies” (Derby 2015: 398). “Foreign from their very foundation,” the Petwo Nation’s origins are traced by Vodouisants (practitioners) to its “eponymous ancestor,” who happens to be “Don Pedro, a Spaniard” (ibid). While Komfa’s Spanish spirits are often invoked through “key export commodities...that linked Haiti [and Guyana, as well as Venezuela and Trinidad] to the world during the triangle trade,” such as “spiced rum, coffee grounds,” and cocoa powder, Haitians consider these first two items “characteristically Petwo” (ibid.). As “peasants” of mixed European, Indigenous, and African heritages, including formerly enslaved people, who came to Guyana primarily as a result of labor demand fluctuations in Venezuela and Trinidad’s cocoa and coffee plantations (some of which were owned and managed by “Creole” women, and of course *worked* by them too), the export products associated with these *Cocoa Panyols* remain testaments and “signs” of their “*Spanish*” ancestral origins (Brereton 1993; Lewis 2000; Moodie-Kublalsingh 1994).

In a now-classic essay asking “What is ‘a Spanish’?,” Aisha Khan (1993) interrogates the ambiguities of “mixed ethnicity” within Trinidad’s plural society, which shares much with Guyana. Khan (1993: 181-82) shows how for Trinidadians, as for Guyanese, “Spanish” operates to distinguish among locally salient “intermediate categories (that is, ‘mixes’),” chiefly contrasting with “coloured” to signal a fusion “beyond ‘black’-plus-‘white.’” This *something* additional—alien, yet an(other) ingredient of the “callaloo nation”—occupies “a particular symbolic space in Indo- and Afro-” relations, representing a “diluted or ‘softer,’” not necessarily

*Europeanized*, but nonetheless Whitened “form of ‘African’ or ‘black’ identity,” unlike how Chinese or Portuguese are locally understood, who came, like South Asians, under terms of indenture (ibid.: 184).<sup>428</sup> Due to Trinidad’s (and Guyana’s to an even greater extent) limited “Spanish colonial experience,” which Khan (ibid.: 191) suggests “holds a qualitatively different kind of place in contemporary estimation than that of the British” (or Dutch as well for Guyanese, see Brackette Williams [1990]), “the Spanish” are identified “as a more or less neutral, or benign, colonizer”—not a straightforward importer nor exploiter of (those who became “Guyanese”) ancestors.

As with enslaved- and indentured-labor-produced commodities exported from Haiti and Guyana, products, people, and ideas once *brought* to Haiti from abroad are likewise potent “signs” of the Petwo Nation. Gunpowder, which “as an import is alien to Haiti,” is “a central element in many rites,” reflecting the “hot power” of Petwo, and by association, “the Spanish” (Derby 2015: 398). And while Ezili in her Freda manifestation is usually considered a familial Rada divinity, not a *lwa* of the Petwo Nation, her own “hot power” reflects that of Komfa’s Spanish spirits, who like the Petwo are also “foreign from their very foundation,” being “non-Guyanese.” As the “Land of Six Peoples,” nationalistic conceptions of Guyanese identity fostered through the colony’s independence movement do not hold ideological space for “Spanish” as a recognized “contributor” to pre/national “development” (Despres 1975; Swan 1957; Williams 1991). Likewise, while Spanish are recognized as one of Komfa’s Seven Nations

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<sup>428</sup> In both Guyana and Trinidad, “European” is conceived as a circumscribed ethnoracial category excluding “Portuguese,” who comprise their own “kind” apart, as do “Spanish.” See Brackette Williams (1991), Aisha Khan (1993), and Rhoda Reddock (1999). Reddock (1999: 590) notes that in the Caribbean “racial mixture has traditionally been seen as a basis for social mobility,” yet for certain demographic groups “this has not been the case...as ‘douglas’ in Trinidad and Tobago and Guyana, ‘cocoa panyols’ (or ‘Spanish’) in Trinidad, and ‘bovianders’ of Guyana are examples of marginalized multiracial groups who have not benefited from their mixed ancestry.” On “Whiteness” as distinct from “Caucasian” or “European” in Trinidad and Tobago, see Aisha Khan (2004: 75), Ravi Dev (2000), and Shirley Anne Tate and Ian Law (2015).

of Entrees, they are conventionally considered representative of “non-Guyanese,” or “mixed,” ancestors.

What might be gained if “a more suitably generous definition of technology” were to be employed by historians considering the shaping of the Atlantic world, Marcy Norton (2017: 18) has recently asked. Could such expanded conceptions embrace the sorts of *practices* characteristic of Komfa, namely the trance(per)formative work of mediumistic ritual, or, as Norton (ibid.) proposes, other “communication devices and literacies, auditory and kinesthetic arts like music, dance and prey stalking?” Recognizing the transactive exchange of subjecthoods—in particular of “religious and sexual ontologies”—as well as those religiously, sexually, or otherwise-situated ways of being in the world themselves, *as technologies*, is favorable in a number of ways. First, such thinking foregrounds “subaltern agency,” “perspectives[,] and experiences,” while also centering notions of “entanglement,” or “the interconnectedness of various kinds of agency in an interdependent world” (ibid.). Developing a more-inclusive, decolonized understanding of technologies as such assists in grasping the instrumentality that Komfa People derive through their receptiveness to the “exotic technologies” of “foreigners,” “aliens,” and “strangers” as spirit-presences (Derby 2015: 398).

Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (1996: 188-190), and other scholars before him and since, have characterized Indigenous Amazonia’s “symbolic economy of alterity” primarily in terms of its “predatory” processes of exchange “that cross cultural boundaries and thus play into the definition of collective identities” (Whitehead and Wright 2004: 11). This notion of “predatory spiritual transactions” with cultural “outsiders” is often positioned in contrast to the analytic frame of “the moral economy of intimacy,” which has explored Indigenous social worlds through everyday practices and philosophies of a more altruistic sort (McAlister 2010, quoted in Derby

2015: 399). Yet, as Peter Rivière (2000: 264) notes, such dichotomous thinking misses the point that within these moral-symbolic ways of being socially entangled to/within the world, “love and hate both have a place [...] and they are both strong enough emotions to power a symbolic economy.” Similarly, for Komfa practitioners the “difference” at both periphery and *center* of Guyanese social worlds tends to become internalized, assimilated, and self-possessed, refracting the “predation” involved in appropriating *someone else’s* being through an intimacy only the body can ostensibly conduct.

Gay, lesbian, and bisexual Guyanese, trans, intersex, and gender queer folk, as well as sex workers of various orientations and identities, *and* often those who love and care for people who identify in differently intersecting ways with these aforementioned subjectivities, all see themselves represented through various aspects of the lives of Komfa’s Spanish ancestors. For, as Mother Myrtle reports, “remember now...and not even all them Spanish spirits is Spanish! Understand? Enough a them is just *other bush-woman*...and enough more even never yet seen the bush!”<sup>429</sup> Whereas Aisha Beliso-De Jesús (2013: 45) emphasizes that “the homosexual *santero* is simultaneously imagined as both a cursed *and* necessary subject in Afro-Cuban Santería,” Komfa People who “entertain the Spanish” principally express inclusive, empathic identifications with these guides that are knowingly founded on their sincere appreciation of these spirits’ queerness, *and* often the queerness of their mediums. Albeit, “queerness” here then must be applied more generally toward propensities for crossing gendered, sexualized, *and other* correspondingly pernicious boundaries of society, which devotees can—at least provisionally—

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<sup>429</sup> For one telling example of the heterogeneous cultural makeup of *bush-life* from which the life-stories of “Spanish” spirits are born, one can read of a “mobile female workforce” in North and South America and the Caribbean in Hungarian writer Maria Leitner’s German-language “journalism, autobiography, and travelogue” reportage from the interwar years (Poore 2000: 140, 146). Leitner (1932) describes “working women of many nationalities on the move” throughout the Americas, and the world, “such as a woman from Poland who had immigrated to New York, gone along with a friend to Venezuela, and ended up as a prostitute in the mining areas of British Guiana” (Poore 2000: 146, 148).

circumvent through transcorporeally becoming these transgressive ancestors throughout their days. If anything, Komfa's Spanish Nation teaches that there remains a great deal to be learned about the interplay among post/colonial constructions of race, gender, sexuality, class, and religion through developing more nuanced transnational historiographies of the sort charted by Doña Madama. Recounting the lives of Spanish spirits provides much-needed substance to the otherwise "scattered information about West Indian [and other] women's responses to the transition from subordination to an owner to subordination to a husband/father" that accompanied emancipation, wherein people who had for generations had their social and reproductive relations controlled by overseers and colonial law could begin defining those relations for themselves (Williams 1996a: 131). Seeking more detailed accounts of post-emancipation transitions of gender and related ideologies is particularly relevant for Guyana and the small, closely related states of the southeast Caribbean, where standard approaches to writing national histories fail to convey the significance of forms of mobility—geospatially, socially, temporally, ontologically, or otherwise—within people's lives (Putnam 2014).

Incorporating conceptions of alterity into their ritual performances honoring "Spanish" ancestors, Spiritualists draw power from relationships they cultivate with spirits from "elsewhere" who bestow novel and creative means of addressing circumstances of crisis and personal distress in their lives. Through the expanded horizons of being(s) that Spanish Entrees imagine together with their mediums, Komfa People manifest "spirit technologies" to actively protect themselves against the brutalities they face in society, particularly LGBTQI practitioners, who are many (J. Roberts 2006: 231-32). The Spanish ancestors also offer healing, for preemptive protections can go only so far, especially as devotees express that much of the individual and collective pain they face emanates from generations-old traumas that continue to

be reproduced and resurfaced. Devotion to Komfa's Spanish Nation exemplifies how practitioners communicate and commune with spirit-presences—through empowered objects on altars, in ritual performances, and using divination. More profoundly, such devotion exemplifies what it means to intersubjectively, empathically, and corporeally *become* someone “else.” The Spanish “Other” is not only a non-Guyanese “*alien*” presence—a “mix” but not of wholly locally endorsed “parts.” Rather, “the Spanish” is also a “woman,” as are most practitioners—and often a trans woman, an LGBTI/*antiman*/queer person, or a sex worker. Within Komfa performances of alterity, communities advance philosophies of transaction, and particularly of exchange of knowledges and practices that convey devotion through the sensual appeals of spirits (Stoller 1989). Ultimately, acts of possession and mediumship are processual exchanges, continuous offerings and seizings of selves that help protect, heal, and revitalize Komfa communities by re-engendering social intimacies and revalorizing subjugated personhoods.

## CONCLUSION

### “In the Land of the waters flowing over me”: Pluralist Paradoxes of Post/Neo/Colonial “Secularist” Nationalisms<sup>430</sup>

Although myths like that of El Dorado do undergird, to a great extent, colonial labour and economic formations in Guyana, [...] in the postcolony there is so much syncretic overlap among the discretely folkloric, religious, and spiritual ideologies of place of Africans, Indians, and indigenous peoples that the force of the resulting environmental cosmology of belonging produces, in Guyanese literature, the land itself and land-based spirits as active agents in determining human citizenship.  
—Aliyah Khan<sup>431</sup>

Red slaves (native-Americans) are used only for domestic work in Surinam, because they are too weak to work in the fields. Negroes are thus needed for fieldwork. The difficulties in this case are not the result of a lack of coercive measures, but the natives in this part of the world lack ability and durability.  
—Immanuel Kant<sup>432</sup>

It was predicted of him that he, too, when he was emancipated, would die off like the rest, but he shows no sign of any such intention. The modern system of things, whatever its defects, agrees certainly with the negro constitution.  
—James Anthony Froude<sup>433</sup>

In the name of an antiliberal liberalism, the Enlightenment hope of “perpetual peace” is put to an extreme test.  
—Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze<sup>434</sup>

No man, or body of men, has been known yet to relinquish voluntarily powers of which he was in present possession.  
—James Anthony Froude<sup>435</sup>

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<sup>430</sup> “In the Land of the waters flowing over me” is a line from a poem titled “Weroon Weroon” written by Guyana’s national poet, Martin Carter (1954: 13), as quoted by Doris Harper-Wills (2013: 29), who adapted, “by kind permission of the poet, [...] for choral speaking and dance to enhance the Legend of Amilivaca.” Harper-Wills, who is also a renowned Guyanese poet, storyteller, and songwriter, added “In the” to this line of Martin’s original poem.

<sup>431</sup> From Aliyah Khan’s essay “Indigeneity and the Indo-Caribbean in Cyril Dabydeen’s *Dark Swirl*” (2015: 211).

<sup>432</sup> These sentiments were expressed in Kant’s “Von der verschiedenen Racen der Menschen,” translated as “Of the Different Human Races” (2000 [1777]: 17fn3).

<sup>433</sup> From Froude’s *Oceana, or England and Her Colonies* (1886: 302-303).

<sup>434</sup> This sentence is from Eze’s *On Reason: Rationality in a World of Cultural Conflict and Racism* (2008: 179).

<sup>435</sup> Again, from Froude’s *Oceana* (1886: 190).

## Spiritual Nations and the Ritual Work of Citizenship<sup>436</sup>

Religious cultures of the enslaved—*inspired* through their memory of African pasts, yet transformed to meet the existential needs of the present and those as prophesied to come—were grounded in notions of labor, kinship, and passage. Whether between Ghana and Guyana, between different “Spiritual lands,” worlds of living and dead, ancestors and spirits, or between different subjectivities and compositions of one’s self and one’s people(s), the journey as a process imbued with meaning-making potentials has formed a central organizing principle for many Afro-Caribbean religions (Zane 1999; Espírito Santo 2015; Strongman 2019). Deeply nourishing a “consciousness of connectedness (‘Why are *we* . . . *here* . . . *together*?’),” African and Afro-Creole religiosities held seemingly boundless potentials for enslaved people in their imagining and manifesting of expansive, concerned communities, through practices often grounded in senses of *communitas* (Anderson 2006 [1983]: 56). Enslaved peoples’ religious cultures functioned in large part through collectively embodied recognitions of nation-ness, including understandings and enactments of a profound cyclical relationship to past and future generations. Much of the *Work* of Komfa amounts to (re)charting such passages through time, through lived, experiential memory, and through the interconnected bodies of mediums—and their spirit-guides.<sup>437</sup>

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<sup>436</sup> This section title draws on Fadeke Castor’s idea of *Spiritual Citizenship* (2017), the titular concept explored through her ethnographic work among Ifá/Orisha practitioners, as well as Spiritual Baptists, in Trinidad.

<sup>437</sup> As Stuckey (2013 [1987]: 44-45, emphasis added) demonstrates, Africa-inspired relationships “to the future” were and are determined by relationships “to the young,” with relationships “to the past determined by” relationships to one’s “parents.” “The maintenance of this continuity from generation to generation is justification for [. . .one’s] being and the basis on which [...] proper behavior” is determined, he writes, adding that “the needs, physical and spiritual, of the actual concrete human being are recognized as important, and an attempt is made to satisfy them in African societies: those needs were *multiple* before Christianity became a part of the African’s faith. The absorption of aspects of Christianity [...] did not mean they ceased being multiple, as can be seen in burial and other ceremonies in slavery.” Compare to ideas shared by Dawn Stewart (Chapter 3) and Juliet Moriah (Chapter 6).



Europeans in Guiana and elsewhere documented their familiarity with encountering enslaved people who “were divided into so many ‘nations’ and ‘countries,’” as well as those who established for themselves leaders vested as “kings” and “queens” of their compatriots (Thornton 1998: 184, 201-205; Dewulf 2016). As detailed in Chapters 5 and 6, very often too these African and Afro-Creole ethnic collectivities were closely associated with particular religious and ritual formations, with leadership roles and other specialized functions attributed to members of different nations based largely around intersecting “political” and “religious” considerations. As Melville and Frances Herskovits (1934) found in their research with Surinamese Maroon peoples, or “Bush Negroes” as they wrote and as many Maroons prefer to refer to themselves, their ancestors had “retained” important aspects of their precolonial epistemologies, ontologies, and religio-politico cultures, which were not necessarily viewed by Maroons and other Afro-Americans as categorically partitioned ways of knowing and being in the world. The Herskovits’s (1934: 105, 217, 307, 325) detailed work describes that among aspects of culture “retained” by Suriname’s Maroons from their ancestors, in this case particularly identified with the Gold Coast as “Kromanti” people, were vital priestly functions performed by adepts known as *Komfo*.

Afro-Caribbean religions, while they became largely stigmatized through the “mark” of their Blackness, have also long served to animate social solidarities, unities, and interpersonal and intercultural dynamisms among Africans and their descendants in the Caribbean, as well as with the regions Indigenous peoples and those of diverse heritages with whom they came to share their colonies and later nation-states. Forms of nation-ness that Africans celebrated among themselves and that non-Africans were well aware of from very early periods of enslavement, were fundamentally intertwined to what Europeans would eventually come to distinguish as

“slave religion,” but more commonly deemed “superstition,” “witchcraft,” “devil” or “ancestor worship,” and similarly shaming expressions. As discussed in many contexts above, demonizing conceptions of “African traditional religion(s)” have remained significant, well-established ideologies of many Caribbean and other societies (Shaw 1990).<sup>438</sup> Yet, such thinking did not become widely accepted among Africans and Afro-Creoles until well into slavery, and in British Guiana, not until the period of emancipation when far-reaching campaigns of Christianization swept the colony’s many plantations and villages (R. Smith 1978). Prior to emancipation in Guiana, enslaved and free African and Afro-descended people were much less hostile to African Guianese religious forms, as many accounts demonstrate that Komfa and other ritual practices often labeled as Obeah served as vital institutions for communities built around estates and adjacent villages, including Maroon and often Indigenous communities as well. As Randy Browne (2017: 137-38) writes in a study of slavery in Berbice, “as early as the eighteenth century, colonial observers recognized the central role the Minje Mama played in enslaved people’s efforts to survive the daily threats of living and working in a brutal slave society.” And as “images of the past and recollected knowledge of the past are conveyed and sustained by (more or less) ritual performances” (Connerton 1989: 38), one can be sure that memory-work figured centrally in the Work of Minje Mama, Wata-mama, “Confou,” and other “collective divination and healing ritual[s]” that were “organized around a water spirit [and] performed in moments of crisis” (Browne 2017: 138).

The period of intense Christianization imposed on British Guianese subjects through Europe’s many “civilizing missions” abroad, was experienced by Komfa practitioners in

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<sup>438</sup> On conceptualizations and positionings of “African traditional religion(s)” within restrictive confines of postcolonial nationalist moral orders, also see Hernandez-Ramdwar (2013), Robbins (2007), Rocklin (2015), and Stewart (2005).

manifold ways above and beyond their resistances and accommodations to the increasingly marginalized status of their practices *as Obeah*.<sup>439</sup> Eugene Genovese's (1974) classic study of the worlds enslaved people created on plantations of the Southern United States, while perhaps overemphasizing the extent to and means by which enslaved people embraced Christianity, provides certain key insights. Genovese (*ibid.*: 278) describes the political motivations of enslaved individuals and groups as deeply interconnected to their communal religious lives, noting that "even in the Christian Era, with its organized communities of the faithful, the prophet appears as an individual agent of challenge to the religious and secular order." More profoundly, he writes that "the black variant of Christianity laid the foundations of proto-national consciousness and at the same time stretched a universalist offer of forgiveness and ultimate reconciliation to white America" (*ibid.*: 284). Through arguing that religion provided a model and vision for enslaved people's realization of proto-nationalist consciousness, Genovese brings attention to a heightened level of autonomy among enslaved communities that many scholars before him tended to disregard. Nevertheless, he likely here also underestimates the degree to which enslaved people shared national "consciousnesses of connectedness" that were overwhelmingly substantiated and embodied through their ongoing responsiveness to their *Africa-inspired* faith traditions—be they "black variant[s] of Christianity," or not.

Performative rituals of dance and possession have been identified as particularly important in nourishing early formations of Black solidarity in all senses, including "political."<sup>440</sup>

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<sup>439</sup> As Browne (2017: 137) also notes, "the multiplicity of terms used to describe" these practices and their practitioners "reflect the ethnic diversity of Berbice's slave population and reminds us that there were a variety of lenses through which Africans and Afro-Caribbeans interpreted spiritual power. And the fact that enslaved people used such terms more often than 'obeah' [...] suggests that 'obeah' might not have yet been the most significant term for spiritual power for all enslaved people in early nineteenth century Berbice." See Paton (2009, 2015).

<sup>440</sup> As noted earlier in the Introduction and Chapter 1, authorities socially and juridically disparaged African ritual and related dance and music practices in large part *because* these forms of communal action represented the most established and efficacious social institutions among enslaved and free Black people, providing cohesion, stability,

The language of “nations” is a central feature of Afro-Creole conceptions of ethnic identity expressed most profoundly through “religious” institutions comprising, for example, “nation dances” and “nation songs” performed with “nation flags” and other ethnically identified accoutrements by participants who acknowledge, or often “elect,” their own “kings” and “queens.” The performance of indissoluble intercultural conglomeration and devotion in spite or because of diversity has been fundamental to enslaved people from their earliest moments of capture and through their violent passages as people from a vast array of backgrounds found themselves repeatedly asking “‘Why are *we...here...together?*’”

Bearing in mind the intensity and depth of enslaved people’s experiences with forming new ways of life shared with individuals of many different ethnic backgrounds, Genovese’s contention seems fitting. The focus on communalism illuminates certain dynamics of Komfa that seek forms of national—and cosmological—reconciliation among people of diverse heritages with differing structural positions of power. Guyana’s contemporary Spiritualists, like the Afro-Christians Genovese describes, whether considering themselves “Christian” or not, similarly strive to make the gospel of common human equality proclaimed by Christianity, and by the secularist state, into a universal reality within all people’s lives worldwide—Whites and colonizers included. The haunting persecutions of their Blackness, and of the Africanness of

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and mobility in the face of oppression, cultural marginalization, and above all, the existential threats of “social death” and realities of lethal violence. Again, see Du Bois (1903a: 196), who writes that the bare life existence of enslavement “was a terrific social revolution, and yet some traces were retained of the former group life, and the chief remaining institution was the Priest or Medicine-man.” One can also consider the role of nationalist ritual in the Universal Negro Improvement Association’s (UNIA) public formations, although it can be argued that Marcus Garvey brought a complex relationship to religion into the politics of the movement. As Robert Hill (2014) has argued, scholars have been hesitant to address Garvey’s religiosity, and in particular his followers’ perceptions of Garvey’s religiosity and their identification of him as a prophetic figure. Hill notes that in late-March 1936, in his “final journal” titled *The Black Man*, Garvey “wrote an editorial prefacing the reprint of an extensive newspaper account of Pocomania revival in Jamaica” where he asserts that “man without religion is no better than the beast, and man with a bad, or foolish, religion is the same. Man’s religion is revealed to him through his intelligence.” Garvey goes on to denounce “Pocomanists,” or Pukkumina practitioners, as still unable to “find this true and living God and worship Him in the proper way” (ibid.). For insight into UNIA ritual, see Gabriel Selassie I (2020).

their culture, as “volatile” antitheses of “modernity,” did not only compel practitioners to seek shelter in “invisible” lodges, *backdams*, and “sacred groves” in the *bush*. These forms of oppression attempting to dominate enslaved people’s lives also cultivated within many of them and their descendants an uncompromising, “universalist” vision of cross-cultural forgiveness and “ultimate reconciliation.” The same sentiments held true just after emancipation, although with renewed purpose and force—for some—as the unprecedented arrival of “new” immigrant labor (re)introduced a panoply of Asian, European, and African ethnoracial groups into the preexisting—predominantly sub-Saharan African—“medley” of Guianese Creole plantation society. With new nations asymmetrically incorporated into a “terrain differentiated by linguistic, religious, and ethnic cleavages,” renewed forms of imagining and performing connectedness *and* difference were necessitated (Tambiah 1996a: 125; Comaroff and Comaroff 1987: 307; 1992: 54). While capital-driven settler-colonizing forces monopolized conceptions of ethnoracial distinctions, accounts suggest that enslaved and colonized peoples simultaneously created ways of instantiating—and often spanning—such chasms, particularly through their faith in and devotion to what Komfa People today call Spiritual Work.

**“They mix but do not combine”: Medleys, *Callaloo*, *Cook-up*<sup>441</sup>**

The African and the Asiatic will not mix.  
—James Anthony Froude<sup>442</sup>

Guyana has been considered an ideal-typical example of a “plural society.” Colonial administrators, sociologists, anthropologists, and political historians who initially developed the concept through studies of this and other European imperial regions in the late 1930s found that

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<sup>441</sup> “They mix but do not combine” is a quote from John Sydenham Furnivall (1948), as discussed below.

<sup>442</sup> From Froude’s *The English in the West Indies, or, the Bow of Ulysses* (1888: 74).

their economic and social theories developed in and for European nations “did not apply” to the “multi-racial, multi-cultural character of the colonial societies in the tropics” (Rauf 1974: 11).

John Sydenham Furnivall, a British imperialist and writer who worked in Burma for much of his adult life, as well as in the Dutch East Indies, is credited by Jamaican anthropologist M. G. Smith (1965: 75) as being “the first to distinguish the plural society as a separate form of society.”<sup>443</sup>

As R. T. Smith (1961: 155) notes, however, “the general idea of a ‘*plural society*’ is as old as the idea of society itself, but Furnivall gave it a peculiarly sharp definition when discussing the Far Eastern societies in which he had worked as a colonial administrator.” Indeed, through rethinking training he received at Cambridge in natural sciences, and his career in economics, Furnivall developed and transformed the concept to meet his Burmese and Javanese contexts, as a wholehearted colonizer, “public servant,” and so political operative of empire.

Applying his market-driven theories and analyses of political economy, Furnivall (1948) did not entirely overlook social and cultural aspects of these societies and of Dutch colonial rule, which he studied in particular. Although, cultural considerations were a major shortcoming of his theory that were later developed in relation to Caribbean contexts (by the likes of M. G. Smith, R. T. Smith, and others). In a book titled *Colonial Policy and Practice*, Furnivall (1948: 304-305) summarized his thinking as follows.

The western superstructure is only one aspect of a distinctive character, common to all tropical dependencies, that cannot fail to impress even the most casual observer; the many coloured pattern of the population. In Burma, as in Java, probably the first thing that strikes the visitor is the medley of peoples—European, Chinese, Indian, and native. It is in the strictest sense a medley, for they mix but do not combine. Each group holds by its own religion, its own culture and language, its own ideas and ways. As individuals they meet, but only in the market-place, in buying and selling. There is a plural society, with different sections of the community living side by side, but separately, within the same political unit. Even within the economic sphere there is a division of labour along

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<sup>443</sup> What were the Dutch East India, or Netherlands India, colonies (1800-1949) is present-day Indonesia. Furnivall worked on the island of Java.

racial lines. Natives, Chinese, Indians, and Europeans all have different functions, and within each major group subsections have particular occupations.

Furnivall readily admitted that aspects of a plural society did present themselves outside of the “tropical dependencies” where he lived and worked, and studied and administered the “medley of peoples” on Britain’s behalf. In North America, Australia and New Zealand, South Africa and elsewhere, aspects of what he identified as pluralism could be recognized. Yet, Furnivall (ibid.) argued that in these postcolonies, “when the influx of alien elements threatened national life,” policies were enacted to restrict further in-migration, which served to intensify already deeply ingrained forms of “pluralism” as central to practical and ideological “national life.”

As detailed in Chapters 5 and 6, histories of labor migration and the colonial imposition of a rapidly expanded “plural” cultural landscape came to be (re)presented and refracted through postemancipation shifts in Komfa practices and cosmologies. Through such transformations, Komfa “nation dances” performed by enslaved people came to converge with the Seven Nations of Guyanese ancestors known to practitioners today. In an important respect, Komfa serves as a highly creative means of performing embodied repertoires of memory that recreate intercultural exchanges and relationships remembered from amongst the moments and events of the tumultuous colonial and national pasts. As such, Komfa engenders counter-memory as alternatives and correctives to hegemonic, unidimensional histories recorded in archives and elsewhere (cf. Roberts and Roberts 1996). These unipolar, dominating accounts of the past often treat the multiplicity of historical narratives conceived by ethnoracialized groupings and local and regional communities as threats to the homogenizing, “paternalistic imaginings of ‘modern’ West Indian nationhood” that must “be subdued and/or ridiculed in order to maintain some semblance of national cohesion” (Rodrigues 2018: 202). Additionally for Guyanese, due to locally constructed biosocial stereotyping persistent in their society, many express a *fear* that, if

not “checked” (i.e. “subdued”), African descendants and their culture would take over—or “*vantage*” Guyana—subsuming all other ethnoracial or racio-religious aggregates (Williams 1996a: 145).<sup>444</sup> As Brackette Williams (ibid.) details, “in these summary stereotypes African man is to nature what African culture is to its ethno-religious group competitors: an inferior variant.” According to Guyana’s “complex of historically developed cultural stereotypes,” African women are themselves thought to be “hardworking,” yet they cannot “control or significantly alter” the alleged traits of their African male counterparts that make Guyanese feel that “African men, when compared to men of other racio-religious cultural segments of Guyana, will work only as long and as hard as they must to survive” (ibid.). “Consequently,” writes Williams,

Afro-Guyanese culture, although assumed to result from the interaction between men and women, because the character of all male/female interaction is shaped by the struggle to control innate tendencies in males, is deemed a male product and, as such, an inferior product, and, therefore, inadequate to serve as the foundation for a national Guyanese culture. (ibid.)

(Stereo)typical historical narratives produced by postcolonies of the Caribbean and elsewhere, both before and after their attainment of formal independence, tend to emphasize a courageous (male) anticolonial exertion that obliged the granting of their nationhood by former colonizers, while disregarding or obscuring the many internal and ongoing divisions of race and ethnicity, and of gender, class, religion, and region.<sup>445</sup>

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<sup>444</sup> There is also an “Indocentric narrative” that, according to Ryan (1999), in its more radical iterations posits “the triumph of Hindu civilization in Trinidad ([and Guyana but] maybe not in Tobago!) as inevitable because of its inherent superiority to all others; Hindu hegemony is karmic” (Brereton 2007: 187-88). See Gibson (2002, 2005b).

<sup>445</sup> As Shona Jackson (2005: 86) writes of Guyana’s decolonial period, “shortly before independence,” and again directly prior to Burnham’s death in 1985 (see Majeed 2005), “the two leading political black and East Indian figures for much of the twentieth century, Forbes Burnham and Cheddi Jagan, respectively, once shared the hope of a unified politicocultural vision for the nation.” By the mid-1970s, however, the “erection of the statue in Cuffy’s honor became not just a symbol of the country’s long history of anti-colonial struggles. It also symbolized the consolidation of Afro-Creole nationalism in the country” (Jackson 2005: 86). For an account of such processes of constructing national (stereotypical) histories in Suriname, see Hoefte (2013, 2014) and Oostindie (2005), and on



Yet, as Bridget Brereton (2007: 171) observes, “the emergence of ethnic or regionalist narratives, especially in highly pluralist societies like Suriname, Mauritius, and Trinidad & Tobago, would inevitably destabilize the linear nationalist histories created around the time of independence to counter the older colonialist versions.” Memory performed through the repertoires of Komfa guides can destabilize hegemonic histories of Guyana’s “highly pluralist” pasts, and in so doing has often *redirected* imperial and nationalist impositions of “pluralism,” and their attendant assemblages of bio-sociocultural prejudgments. Komfa ritual events tend to circumvent normative structures of Guyanese sociality as devotees embody the lives of the colony’s most marginal figures—as well as the most privileged—side-by-side and hand-in-hand, gathered together although “different,” honoring the incalculable lineages “of old.” Crucially, Komfa ancestors do not merely congregate despite their diversities, but they do so *within* the material bounds of practitioners’ bodies. Such processes often transform Spiritualists’ conceptions of themselves and their interiorized pasts of ethnoracially “mixed” intimacies in ways that fundamentally question, deconstruct, and even deny nationalist symbolics of social and corporeal purities and contaminations.

### **Ethnonationalisms, Creole Nationalisms, and “Creole” Religious Cultures**

“I do not want to be cruel, Mr. Savage, but we have no room for lies in our system.  
No place for in-betweens.”  
—Michelle Cliff<sup>446</sup>

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Jamaica see Johnson (2003, 2007) who has examined efforts “to replace loyalties to Britain and her empire with a nationalist ethos forged through the creation of an authorized Jamaican historical narrative with formally enshrined ‘national heroes’” (Brereton 2007: 170). On Trinidad and Tobago, see Brereton (2007) and Eriksen (1992), and for Barbados see Nanton (2007) and political commentators in Beckles et al. (2001).

<sup>446</sup> From Michelle Cliff’s second novel, *No Telephone to Heaven* (1987: 99).

As ample scholarship has detailed, the very concept of a plural society—like nationalism itself—is a political innovation of colonization (Hoefte 2013, 2014; Reddock 1998; Robertson 2017). Whether through well-established strategies of “divide-and-rule” diplomacy/subjugation (*divide et impera*), or the more-covertly deployed trope of “safeguarding cultures,” the colonial state served to demarcate ethnoracial groups and their legitimate interactions, coercively recruiting laborers globally and redistributing seized space, land, work, and value locally—though never uniformly so among differentiated subject-groupings (Christopher 1988). While pluralist accounts have generally tended to substantiate narratives of colonial or nationalist paternalism and homogeneity (whereby the emergence of “ethnic division” in the postemancipation period was a “demographic problem” arising “naturally” from the replacement of enslaved African laborers with indentured Asians), imperial agents were never “neutral.”

In a classic study of Guyanese social stratigraphies, Dennis Bartels (1977: 396) tells us that “throughout Guyanese colonial history, the ruling class applied a policy of disproportionate allocation of economic benefits and burdens to different subordinated ethnic groups.”<sup>447</sup> The colonial state was neither impartial nor “objective” in addressing the needs of variously racialized and delimited groupings of people from across the globe whom Europeans had brought under their domination. Policies prescribing such unevenly distributed forms of social control were “justified in terms of ruling-class racial stereotypes of Indo- and Afro-Guyanese, and resulted in social and economic disparities between these groups. Although there was

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<sup>447</sup> Many critics of the plural society model, particularly as conceived by M. G. Smith, often argued that sociological theories of stratification apply to all (“complex”) societies, including what have been called—since Furnivall—“plural” societies, and as such models of social stratification can be applied to what other scholars have since distinguished as “plural,” “post/colonial,” “multicultural,” “multiracial,” “heterogenous,” and so forth, sorts of societies. For example, see especially R. T. Smith (1961, 1966, 1970, 1988, 1996), but also L. Braithwaite (1960), Morris (1967), Rubin (1960), and Tuden and Plotnicov (1970). Also note that M. G. Smith’s formulations have been specifically criticized because they were originally based on his analyses of Caribbean societies which have been considered among the *least* “plural” (Carriacou, Grenada, and Jamaica), whereby Guyana, Suriname, and Trinidad and Tobago have since been recognized as “the models” of sociocultural pluralism (Reddock 1998: 63).

periodic cooperation between Indo- and Afro-Guyanese workers in struggles against the ruling class,” Bartels (ibid.) adds that these same subordinated groups “often used ruling-class racial stereotypes in attempts to strengthen their social and economic positions vis-à-vis each other.” While the theme of ethnoracial stereotyping as governing ideological precepts for Guyanese society has since been thoroughly developed by Brackette Williams (1991, 1996a) in her ethnographies of an East Coast Demerara village in the late-1970s and early 1980s, Bartels (1977: 396) holds that “pluralist and cultural-ecological approaches to Guyanese society seldom take these [racialized colonial] processes into account.” Indeed, the imperial and anthropological model of pluralism has long been deployed in obfuscating the depth and significance integration between differently ethnoracialized communities has played in sustaining the lives of subordinated peoples.

Dutch and later English legal structures imposed in Guiana did not establish the same discrete juridico-bio-logics tethering ethnoracial status to blood quantum, as was the case with the infamous French colonial *Code Noir*; the “one-drop” law of hypodescent, or “three-fifths” clause of the United States Constitution; or Spanish and Portuguese colonial legal codes delineating *casta* categories as means of advancing the political imperatives of *mestizaje* through processes demanding *limpieza de sangre* (Munasinghe 2006; Puri 2004). As Orlando Patterson points out in his classic account of *The Sociology of Slavery* (1967), despite British Jamaica’s “passage of a Slave Act in 1696, the relationships between masters and slaves were governed by customs rather than laws” (Thomas 2019: 8). While Guiana’s planter-based governing bodies strove to define and closely regulate the economic and other social roles that differently racialized and gendered groupings were to perform in “contributing” to the colony’s modes of

production *and* reproduction, no local standardized legal definitions of race categories were instituted in attempts to maintain segregation or “antimiscegenation.”<sup>448</sup>

Narratives typically coincide on the general contours of the idea that Afro-Guyanese ancestors suffered unimaginably through slavery, which included a most brutal system of displacement and relocation and a “humanizing” of the Guyanese (coastal) landscape at the expense of their own humanity (Rodney 1981; cf. Jackson 2012). Yet, parallel pasts of Indo-Guyanese ancestral agonies remain widely speculated upon in their particular correspondences to those experiences of Africans and their descendants, even if most Guyanese agree there was an abundance of such agonies involved in the “creation” of the colony *after* slavery’s abolition. While many Guyanese—especially many Indo-Guyanese themselves—as well as some historians, feel that South Asian-descended Guianese ancestors sustained a comparable, even equal, degree of dejection as had Afro-descendants through similar forms of colonization and “A New System of Slavery” rebranded as indenture, many others do not concur (Tinker 1974, 1977; cf. Bahadur 2014; Tomich 1988, 2017).

As an example representing a thoroughly prevalent formulaic logic, I was once rhetorically asked the following question by an acquaintance who identified himself as “African...with some Coolie blood...and some Buck.” “You see why Coolie them stay so...proud?” he queried, quickly furnishing the answer. “’Cause they even get they mandir right there in slavery when they come, build by the massa them...they ain’t never get it like we back then...so look, they still walking straight and tall like they does own the place.” Even if one might comprehend Indo-Guyanese histories of indenture *as* enslavement, as this man

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<sup>448</sup> For accounts emphasizing the significances and substance of Africans and their descendants’ responses in colonial configurations of legality and control over enslaved people, see Natalie Zemon Davis (2011) on Suriname in particular, and more generally see Vincent Brown (2008, 2009), Randy Browne (2017), Trevor Burnard (2004), Ariela Gross (2001), Michael Mullin (1994), and Sterling Stuckey (2013 [1987]).

depreciatively demonstrates, more specific collective memories sustained through intergenerational or “hereditary transmission” relate details of the different conditions of bondage and of the varying roles played by colonizers in exacting those brutalizing conditions (Connerton 1989: 85-6). That British Guiana plantation owners and imperial authorities “encouraged the Indians to practise their religions, and even donated land and money to help them build their temples and mosques,” is today common knowledge among many Guyanese (Ishmael 2013 [2005]: 207 and *passim*). Less commonly conceded, by many Afro-Guyanese at least, is that *all* aspects of Indo-Guyanese indentured laborers’ lives, including their devotional lives, were overwhelmingly circumscribed by the same brutally violent and racist colonial regime under which Afro- and other Guyanese survived and perished (Bahadur 2014). Along with demonstrating the ongoing centrality of comparing and contesting pasts of enslavement and indenture, this man’s comments also exemplify in distinct ways how—as Alexander Rocklin (2019: 12; 2015) has written—“the category of religion is inseparably interlinked with the histories of forced labor migration in the Caribbean.”

While many Euro-Guyanese might intend to frame their ancestors’ arrivals—or their own or their relatives’ “white flight” from the colony in the leadup to and directly after independence—as a forms of “forced” political or economic comings and departures, a majority of Guyanese are unsympathetic to such interpretations. Europeans’ movements *to* and *from* the Guianese colonies largely represented substantively “free(er)” forms of colonially regulated (and/or encouraged) migration than their non-European counterparts experienced in their coerced migrations to the colonies, even if (considerable) variation in the kinds and degrees of “coercion” Indo-, Afro-, and Indigenous Guyanese of the past are understood to have faced, both together and in separate times and quarters of the colonies and “homelands.” Portuguese-Guyanese,

however, are typically not considered by their countrymates as “European,” specifically because they did not come to the colony under conditions of “freedom” identified with White Europeans, but rather, like both Indo- and Afro- counterparts, were relocated through forms of coercion or “force,” and made to fulfill compulsory arrangements of labor. That is, at least they were ostensibly *made* to work, as Portuguese indentured immigrants were for the most part *liberated* from enduring certain types of labor considered degrading to Anglo-Europeans. Namely, Portuguese were structurally discouraged from participating in work in the fields of the estates, as the colonial administration commenced an agenda of annulling their contracts of indenture soon after their arrival in British Guiana and instead routed them into “respectable” commercial trades through offering preliminary financing and other privileges not extended to other colonial subjects (Moore 1975).

Indigenous Guyanese pasts unquestionably also include atrocities of enslavement, forced migrations, and seized land and other resources, the last being a catastrophe to which Indigenous people still are subject. Yet, these realities are too often overlooked and undermined by non-Indigenous Guyanese in their reconstructions of and contests over the past. The marginalization Indigenous Guyanese continue to face in so many aspects of their lives stems in no small part from those pasts of subjugation. Stereotypical notions surrounding the ideas of labor and movement, land and family, as filtered through local relationships to power, also contribute significantly to Indigenous peoples’ demoralization. One common trope concerning “Amerindian” local histories that underwrites both their persecuted status and ideas shaping nationalist ideologies, holds that rather than having themselves been enslaved by Dutch, British, Spanish, and other European colonizers (as they were), instead, Indigenous peoples assisted those same colonial authorities “as ‘interior police’ for the capture of runaway slaves” (Menezes

2011 [1977]: 42; Whitehead 1988). As such, having not been enslaved (or indentured) to create and work the coastal plantations (to the same degree) as both Afro- or Indo-Guyanese were, and considered as having not “appropriately appropriated”—by European standards—their own Native lands and resources, Indigenous Guyanese have been ideologically and physically “relegated to the interior and then defined as noncontributors” to the colony and later nation’s “development” (Williams 1991: 140; cf. Rodney 1981; Jackson 2012).

Anglo-European hegemony in Guiana relied heavily on exaggerating *cultural* differences between subject colonized groupings of people within their plural colonies more so than codified racial “castes,” as with the Spanish, Portuguese, French, and United States (cf. Wilkerson 2020). In studying access to and contests for “cultural power” in British Guiana, Brian Moore (1987, 1995) demonstrates how ideologies that stressed the salience of “cultural” differences among Guiana’s “six peoples” served to instantiate the symbolics of class status competition constituted through emulation of a stereotypical “Englishness” as the “civilized” standard of middle- and upper-class Creole respectability. Directly after emancipation, British Guianese and imperial authorities had instituted strategies to attempt to “Whiten” the colonial population through encouraging and coercing migrants primarily from Portugal, Ireland, Scotland, and countries in eastern Europe, but also Chinese and other peoples positioned to alter Guianese conceptions of and proximities to Whiteness (Moore 1975). Unlike their Afro-, Indo-, and Euro- counterparts, Portuguese and Chinese in colonial British Guiana, like Indigenous Guyanese, are considered as having either “avoided” or “lacked” what Walter Rodney (1981: 178) has termed “an indigenizing experience”—referred to more commonly as “creolization”—that was compelled through a shared social and *cultural* process of attuning oneself to the realities of the plantation. Colonial plural societies, by definition, were considered as presenting a deficit of commonly

shared standards and practices among the varied ethnoracialized groupings comprising creole societies and were thought to be made cohesive through the influence exerted by a privileged—White—minority (M. G. Smith 1965, and *passim*).

And yet despite ideological pressures stressing the legitimacy and stringencies of divergences between Guyanese of different backgrounds, the symbolics of struggle and opposition could not impose what Furnivall discerned in Java as a “medley of peoples.” Instead, describing Guyana’s “cultural continuum” as a dynamic “intersystem,” Lee Drummond (1980: 359) writes incisively that

if Guyanese society were divided into Christian blacks and Hindu or Muslim East Indians, a case could perhaps be made for some type of pluralist interpretation. The actual cultural processes are, however, not that straightforward, and to describe them as the effect of conflict between discrete groups with discrete traditions merely repeats the folk wisdom of ethnic stereotypes without analyzing the connecting themes, or transformations, that make Guyanese culture a ‘dynamic system,’ in Bickerton’s phrase.

Thankfully, there have been numerous scholars who recognize the centrality of intercultural (and interethnic and interracial) processes for Guyanese sociality, and that not all stereotyping informs or has informed prejudicial actions or outcomes, but can also be *transformed* in meeting the needs and vitalities of Guyana’s “cultural intersystem.” Derek Bickerton and Brackette Williams can both also be included among those thinkers to question the ideological precepts of plural models of society, with Bickerton’s *Dynamics of a Creole System* (1975) presenting a formative study of Creole language that focused in large part on the intercultural “performance features” of Guyana’s “bewildering diversity” of linguistic and other cultural forms. Guyana’s interculturative religious configurations, however, have not typically been a focus. Nor have the roles of nonconforming sexualities and genderqueer identities that have also long contributed to the diversities of Guyana’s cultural “intersystem” been emphasized by scholars, particularly as these forms of subjectivity intersect with local ethnoracial assemblages.



## Post/Colonial Predicaments of Plural-Creole-Plantation Societies

Rigid distinctions emplaced between Guyanese of different backgrounds, especially Indo- and Afro-Guyanese, can be traced to European preoccupations with the geopolitical, economic, and other powers inherent in taxonomizing their worlds, such as through “race,” “class,” and “gender.” Still, Guyanese people’s internalizations and redirections of “ruling-class racial stereotypes” and other essentializing “givens” come in many divergent forms. Born in British Guiana in 1921, Wilson Harris (1998: 24) recalls of his childhood that

creoleness made me aware of the complex labyrinth of the family of humankind into which I was born in the twentieth century. I felt myself peculiarly involved with the tenants who threw their fictional stone at the Creole landlord—involved in their deprivations and disadvantages. They were African Guyanese, East Indian Guyanese, sometimes poor white Portuguese Guyanese.

People’s understandings of themselves are not only deployed in efforts to “strengthen their social and economic positions” *against* one another, but can also stimulate senses of connectedness that are “euphoric and full of promise” (Bartels 1977: 396; Tambiah 1996a: 125). Continuing his reflections, Harris (1998: 24) describes how “the wounds, the vulnerability of the Creole bring a different emphasis into the human comedy.” Coming of age in New Amsterdam, he writes “I found myself on the edges or margins of a world, the estate of the world, that were shifting into numinous disorder in order paradoxically to alert us to shared responsibilities within the unfinished genesis of arts of survival” (ibid.). “Creolization”—as cultural concept and political theory, as social reality to be practiced, and as identity to be claimed—has offered its deliverances from the rigidities and clashes of pluralism, and has also reinforced them. As Kathleen Balutansky and Marie-Agnes Sourieau (1998: 5, emphasis added) note, Barbadian historian and poet Edward Kamau Brathwaite was “one of the first to posit that the *liberating* process of creolization originates from the unrestricted interaction of cultures,” and in doing so

Brathwaite directly questioned the colonialist plural models of Caribbean society. In “liberating” creolization, Brathwaite and other theorists to follow also began to interrogate the ways that colonial ideologies of difference impacted conceptions of the nation through anticolonialism, and in particular, ideas of universal, homogeneous, bipolar, and plural “creole” cultures.<sup>449</sup>

Brathwaite developed his understanding of creolization most profoundly in *Contradictory Omens: Cultural Diversity and Integration in the Caribbean* (1974), where he details the emergence of a “creole society” through cultural processes of “creolization” that result from the dual mechanisms of “acculturation” and “interculturalization.” He described the first as the “absorption” of one culture by another, and the latter as “a more reciprocal and spontaneous process of enrichment and intermixture on both sides” (Reddock 1998: 64).<sup>450</sup> Brathwaite interpreted Caribbean Creole societies as arising from both the coerced assimilation of Africans and their descendants to the hegemonic European colonial culture and “the inadvertent interculturalization of Whites into African-derived norms and behaviours and vice versa” (ibid.). As Rhoda Reddock (ibid.) writes, quoting Brathwaite (1974: 11, 19), “this creolisation process was facilitated through socialization, for example through the seasoning process during the slave period, as well as through ‘imitation, native creation or indigenization, language, sex and amorous influences.’”

Brathwaite’s groundbreaking contribution redefined creolization as a process through which a subordinated majority could meaningfully influence their “elite” antagonizers.

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<sup>449</sup> As Patterson (1991) details, the historical conceptions of “freedom” and “liberty” have themselves only gained meaning through definitions of personhood constructed in contrast to experiences of enslavement.

<sup>450</sup> Note that Brathwaite was not the first to pose the contradictions of cultural diversity and integration in Caribbean societies through such terms, as many thinkers in the Spanish and French Caribbean had already done so, Ortiz (1995 [1947]) for example, with his theory of transculturation. Another—later—example comes from Surinamese scholar Charles Wooding (1972, 1979), whose concept *fromu* is good to consider as a local variant theory to cultural creolization and religious syncretism.

Creolization had thus been deployed as an intensely imaginative generative process of persistent re-creation that includes what Brathwaite (1974: 64) calls “lateral creolization,” or the intercultural crossroads “between, say, poor white and coloureds; between Syrians, Chinese and Jews; between these and blacks; between blacks and East Indians and between East Indians and others,” such as the regions Indigenous peoples. Brathwaite’s formulation then implicitly, and explicitly, rejected the plural society model supported by M. G. Smith and others as a “colonial rather than a creole contribution” (quoted in Bolland 1992: 60). Recognizing how practitioners and their practices have been actively changed by their surrounding social worlds while simultaneously transforming and re-appropriating worlds in which they themselves navigate and interact, including Europeans’ worlds, has been central to redirecting thinking surrounding creolization, and to characterizations of Black Atlantic religions as *creole* and *creolizing* traditions (see Cosentino 1995: 47, 53).

Creole theory has also been questioned on the grounds of its Afro- and Eurocentricities—particularly foregrounding a dualism of Afro-Euro interactions and cultures at the expense of Asian and Indigenous American people’s histories and current material realities (Bolland 2006; Munasinghe 2001, 2006). John Hodge (1990: 89) details how moralizing ideologies based in “dualism” often “help[] create and sustain oppression by enabling it to appear rational.” For such reasons, many Indo-Guyanese, Indigenous Guyanese, and others throughout the Caribbean and the world often find the term “Creole” unsuitable as an identity label, and oppressive as a socio-political framework structuring society, “strongly identified” as the term is “with Afro-creole culture” (Reddock 1998: 65). Likewise, many see creolization “as a process of cultural domination” (ibid.).<sup>451</sup> As Hodge (1990: 89) notes further, “a conception of human equality

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<sup>451</sup> One can also compare such dynamics of Guyana and Trinidad to “Creoles” in other parts of the world. Creoles in Mauritius, for instance, do not share a similar cultural hegemony as Creoles in Trinidad, and mostly find it

stands in opposition to the dualistic justifications of oppression.” Not only does the historical ideology of an Afro-Euro Creole society dismiss Asian, Indigenous, and other peoples, but in its re-instantiated Indo-Afro postcolonial formation, Creole dualisms have denied equality and justified widespread social, political, and material oppressions. To return to Wilson Harris (1998: 24), “in the eyes of the deprived tenant of the New World creoleness was so internalized yet suppressed that scapegoats became the order of the day. Creoleness became a form of self-deceptive division even as it harbored within itself a potential for the renaissance of community.” As could have been the case, the nascent anticolonial politics of the day did not necessarily encourage Guyanese in their “shared responsibilities” to revisit those “unfinished [...] arts of survival” birthed by their ancestors (ibid.).

In contemporary Caribbean and other societies, the unqualified (unmarked) term “Creole” continues to normativize “Afro-Creole” male personhood, a reality that has been inspired and inculcated through colonial and imperial precedents, nationalist politicizers (political theorists, politicians, and activists), as well as by scholars. As O. Nigel Bolland (1992: 53, also quoted in Munasinghe 2001: 209) writes, “the creole society thesis” helped to reinforce

emerging Caribbean nationalism of the third quarter of the twentieth century. More specifically, the cultural and populist aspects of the creole society viewpoint, with its emphasis upon the origins of a distinctive common culture as a basis for national unity, constitutes the ideology of a particular social segment, namely a middle-class intelligentsia that seeks a leading role in an integrated, newly independent society. The creole society thesis, then, is a significant ideological moment in the decolonization process of the Caribbean.

Understood as both “liberating process” and “basis for national unity,” creolization theories worked to initially disrupt and destabilize the idea of unyielding ethnic and cultural divisions in

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unbecoming to be referred to as “Afro-Mauritians,” as some anthropologists have attempted (see Eriksen 2007: 159-160). For a somewhat divergent conception of “Creole hegemony” as “accepted” by Surinamese of South Asian descent, or Hindustanis, see Ruben Gowricharn (2015).

Caribbean societies. Viranjini Munasinghe (2006: 557) observes that in Trinidad, “decolonization went hand in hand with the positive reevaluation of formerly despised Afro-Creole lower-class cultural forms,” which holds true to a lesser extent for Guyana’s decolonial contexts. The postcolonial positive reevaluation of “African” culture in Guyana proved less successful than in Trinidad in terms of religious little traditions, as in Trinidad, “Shouters” became formally and widely recognized by their chosen name— Spiritual Baptists—and similarly, “Shango” practices, or “worship,” became known more consistently as Orisha and/or Ifá.<sup>452</sup> In Guyana, Obeah remained Obeah, as many Guyanese today report not even recognizing the word “Komfa,” or so some say, just as others claim not to have heard of “Spiritualists” or “Faithists.”<sup>453</sup>

“Given this reevaluation,” as Munasinghe (2006: 557) further demonstrates regarding Trinidad, “the task for theorists of creolization was to recenter formerly marginalized populations in their critique of colonialism [...] through inclusion of lower-class Afro-Creole cultural forms.” Underlying political concerns of the creole society model, then, when applied through postcolonial nationalist movements of Trinidad and Tobago, and to some extent elsewhere, largely served to emphasize and recognize those identifying themselves with African

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<sup>452</sup> On Trinidad, see Castor (2017), Duncan (2008), Forde (2019), Glazier (1983, 1996), van Koningsbruggen (1997), Rocklin (2012; 2015, 2019), and Stuempfle (1996). Note that practitioners formerly known as “Shouters” in Trinidad are not to be confused with St. Vincent island Spiritual Baptists who also call themselves the Converted, and whose observers were long known as “Shakers.” In Guyana, Komfa gatherings were also frequently referred to as “shakers” (see, for example, Swan 1957: 105). On St. Vincent and the Grenadines, see Cox (1994), Fraser (2011), Keeney (2002), Polk (1993), and Zane (1999). These groups are also not to be confused with, but perhaps historically connected to, “the Shaking Quakers” of 1700s England or “the Shakers, officially known as the United Society of Believers in Christ’s Second Appearing, [...] a millenarian religious movement still active today in the United States, whose roots can be traced back to the English evangelical Awakening” (Laborie 2019).

<sup>453</sup> Similarly, one Guyanese academic told a friend that since childhood he had always thought the *mysterious* people in white robes and turbans were called “the George Knights,” and wondered who they were and what they did.

heritages.<sup>454</sup> Many Indo-Caribbean people's distanced and reticent regards shown towards the politics of independence, "and their leaders' increasing dependence on India (after the 1940s) for cultural inspiration only served to alienate them from all those forces collaborating toward building an explicitly anticolonialist nationalist project" (ibid.). To quote Bolland (2006: 8) again, "to identify and be identified as Indian in Trinidad and Guyana, for example, suggests an adherence to the culture of ancestral origin which implies that they are less 'national' than those who are 'completely creolised.'"

Conceptualizations of creolization advanced in this period were thus intimately interconnected to the heightened ideological fervor of the moment. "A perverse, yet apparently natural, order of political fiction tended to grip the populace," writes Harris (1998: 24).

Creoleness was a badge of blood and mixed descent from wicked plantation owners who had made astronomical fortunes by sweated labor or by slaves in previous generations. Whatever historical truth lay in this, the tragedy was in reinforcing a fixation with protest, a suppression of profoundest creativity to throw bridges across chasms, to open an architecture of space within closed worlds of race and culture. (ibid.: 24-25)

Disentangling distinctions and parallels between the experiences of "free" and "forced" migration and labor remain central to Guyanese constructions of and contestations over the past that have had major ramifications for people's present lives and prospective futures. While, for example, many people may not readily associate contemporary privileges or predicaments they face concerning international travel (i.e. visas, passports) with afterlives of empire, most Guyanese understand quite intimately how colonization created the conditions through which their predecessors endured and they continue to live—whether ensuing from forced *or* free forms of labor on expropriated lands, *and* from forced *or* free forms of migration to or from similarly stolen territories. How these conceptions of work, movement, and sovereign proprietorship

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<sup>454</sup> On this point, mainly as regards Trinidad, also see Bolland (1992), Mohammed (1988), Munasinghe (2001), Puri (2004), Reddock (1996, 1998), and Safa (1987).

become (re)defined in different ways in disparate contexts generates much of the perennial disagreement said to underlie Guyanese social relations, including those revolving around the vexed category of “religion.” As prominent understandings of Guyanese ethnoracial identities are tethered to histories and memories drawing in large part from collective pasts of enslavement, indenture, and involuntary displacements, dispersals, and thefts of the most traumatic kind, Guyanese’s stereotypical conceptions of one another largely concentrate on notions of *work* or *labor*, as well as on *land* access, and *family*, including centrally, *possession* and transfers of property (Rodney 1981; Williams 1991).

Recent scholarship such as from Radhika Mongia (2018: 3) effectively establishes how the creation of colonial migration regulation in particular was “dependent upon, accompanied by, and generative of profound changes in normative understandings of the modern state.” Interrogating histories of nation-states’ monopolistic, sovereign control over their citizens’ movements—a reality all too clear today—Mongia focuses on the regulation on colonial Indian migration in the period between emancipation in 1834, and 1917, when the colonial system of South Asian indenture migration was abolished. Through a compelling analysis, Mongia (2018) shows how central features of contemporary migration regimes, such as the very idea of state sovereignty as manifesting the legal power to command or delimit ones movements, as well as the advent and spread of passports and migration bureaucracies, are the outcomes of complex debates surrounding colonial migration that persist as unquestioned fundamentals of the modern nation-state. Included in the state’s dominion over its citizenry’s mobility—enshrined through colonization—is the integration of ideas regarding kinship relations into “migration logics,” through which familial bonds, “particularly monogamous, heterosexual marriage, constitute a chief modality for potential access to mobility” (ibid.: 20). In considering Guyana’s pasts—and

the unending contests over determining whose renderings of that past become valued—perhaps the most useful insight to be gleaned from Mongia’s work and others addressing similar concerns involves the colonial regimes’ establishment of that pivotal juridical division between “free” and “forced” migration. In plotting how state authority over people’s movements was essential to transforming “a world dominated by empire-states” into a global politics “dominated by nation-states,” Mongia (*ibid.*: 3-4) defies the idea that an unambiguous distinction can be drawn between the colonial and modern state—and instead maps their many enduring entanglements.

The notion of being possessed by the state or by someone enforcing the power of the state, or post/colony, is one that carries much potency for Guyanese thinking and greatly informs conceptions of subjectivity and of nationalism—the pasts of the six (or seven) peoples, and each one’s differential and deferential “place” in the present and future of the Co-operative Republic. Drawing on Jean and John Comaroff’s (1987, 1992, 1993) theorizations of the socially practical and abstract-conceptual applications of the category “ethnicity,” Diane Austin-Broos (1992, 1997, 2006) describes the workings of a politics of moral order within colonial and neo/postcolonial Aboriginal Australian and Jamaican national contexts. Austin-Broos shows how the moralizing of socio-cultural differences reduces structural disadvantage to socio-cultural “pathology.” This imposition of politics as a moralizing force leads to the stereotyped portrayal of particular peoples’ “distinctive sociality” overwhelmingly in terms of deficit or pathology. Included in such ideological processes, as well, is the reality that possessors of power can and habitually have—institutionally and systematically—used their moral authority to compel labor and movements, “kinship logics” and social configurations, and countless other forms of human, material, and immaterial resources. Likewise, a similarly potent notion for Guyanese envisions, imposes, and glorifies a symbolic temporal and moral division associated with the more tangible



political divergences that accompanied the decade or so leading up to independence, when the colonial-state shifted to the nation-state, and those subjects formerly “possessed” by the colonial-state conspicuously transformed into “possessors” of their own physical and political domains. What binds Guyanese so strongly to such thinking amounts to the ideological underpinnings of their emergence of nationalism, or what Stanley Tambiah (1996a) might call “a tale of two nationalisms.”

The idea of a “western superstructure” of imperialism that Furnivall (1948: 304) characterized as but “one aspect of a distinctive character” shared by Europe’s colonies and postcolonies, is a concept expanded on in great detail by Tambiah (1996a; 1996b). He describes “two models of nationalism” that interact and contend for viability, which, if not “synthesized” within people’s lives as citizen-subjects comprising political nations, present an ensuing existential crisis for people and politics the world over (ibid.). Tambiah (1996b: 4) is interested in the role of “ethnicity” in constructions of nationalism, particularly situations which have led to unfortunate, ongoing instances of “ethnic conflict,” such as he identifies between “East Indians and Creoles in Guyana.” With the global ubiquity of inequity and violence based in ideologies of race and ethnicity—or ethnoracial “conflict”—and its seemingly exponential proliferations in intensity, frequency, and scale, Tambiah (ibid.: 6) writes that “the classic definition of the state as the authority invested with the monopoly of force has become a sick joke.” Certainly, in postcolonial Guyana there are many authoritative “forces” competing—often through cultural struggle, but also violently—for “viability” of the state, primarily informed through locally constructed, intersecting idea(l)s of ethnoracial, gender, sexual, and religious identities.

## Dangerous (Im)Purities and Curative (Ad)Mixtures

Within these incipient, contentious politics of postcoloniality, Komfa has continued to furnish “bridges across chasms” in its function as intersubjective connective tissue, as intercultural “cosmological fascia” channeling people of diverse ancestral heritages into meeting their “shared responsibilities” to one another through grandiose, communal displays of belonging (Harris 1998: 25; Tamboli 2017: 254; Espírito Santo 2015).<sup>455</sup> While remaining overwhelmingly stigmatized throughout Guyana’s movements towards independence and into postcoloniality, Spiritualist practitioners represented a wide ethnoracial swath of Guyanese—not only Afro-descendants, but many of their Indigenous, European, and Asian compatriots augmented their gatherings. The diversity of Komfa’s practitioners further entrenched—and was seen to necessitate—the practice’s continued functioning as a subterranean, “invisible institution” of the disprivileged masses, a status that was instilled through the conditions of enslavement (Raboteau 2004 [1978]; Drakes [Nehusi] 1982).<sup>456</sup> Retaining its popular associations with African culture, still, the practice had already represented an intercultural plantation-, village-, and urban-based institution. Thus, the era of nationalist decolonial politics did not necessarily help in promoting widespread revaluation of Komfa as Afro- or as Guyanese “folk culture.” Instead, the universalist, secularist politics of Guyana’s anticolonial movement tended to further polarize many Indo- and Afro-Guyanese against Komfa and related polycultural “arts of survival” (Harris 1998: 24).

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<sup>455</sup> See discussion of Komfa as a “bridge” in Chapter 1, and throughout. One can also consider Thompson and Joseph Cornet’s (1981: 35) account of Bakongo conceptions of the *dikenga*, or “four moments of the sun,” such as represented in the ritual cross-staff—also used by Komfa practitioners along with the crooked-staff—as “a tree across the water’s path, a bridge that mystically put the dead and the living in perpetual communication.”

<sup>456</sup> For socioeconomic analyses of Komfa, also see Drakes [Nehusi] (1982), Skinner (1955), Roback (1973, 1974), as well as Gibson (2001: 56), who writes more recently that Faithists “are generally members of the lower socio-economic class of society.”

The significance of “subordinate level interculturalizations” between Indo-, Afro-, and Indigenous “little traditions” in this period cannot be overstated (Reddock 1998: 70, 1996). In particular, the *mixing and combining*, fusing and hybridizing, and mutual metamorphoses of both Komfa and Kali Mai “folk” religiosities over a century and more of shared “indigenizing” plantation experience, did not help most Creole nationalists see a common colonially “despised [...] lower-class cultural form” to be decolonized (Munasinghe 2006: 557; Rodney 1981). Those theorists of creolization tasked with recentering and positively reevaluating the emergent nation’s “little traditions” through a politics of decolonization could well have drawn on the shared moral sensibilities, systems of knowledge and value, and practices that Indo-, Afro-, and other Guyanese practitioners had long cultivated *together*. For as Frederick Ivor Case (2001: 50) demonstrates through a study of the “intersemiotics” obtaining among these Guyanese traditions, “Obeah and Kali Mai Puja intersect in their epistemology and their phenomenology. Grounded as they both are in an ethos of the dispossessed, they have come to create a common axiology and often differ only in their lexical choices.” Yet most Guyanese—Christians, Hindus, Muslims, and others—remained united in their opposition to extending recognition to these maligned ritual forms.

Still later after independence, as Diana Paton (2015: 276) has argued, Caribbean “authoritarian populist leaders” of the immediate postcolonial era, including Burnham, “made symbolic use of obeah to help consolidate their power.” Burnham’s own Obeah—or Komfa practice, really, as well as Kali Mai Puja, which he is remembered to have participated in—may have contributed to his capacity to maintain decades of rule, but public perceptions of his personal and political embrace of Obeah never fared well among the majority of Guyanese (Vidal and Whitehead 2004). Perhaps encouraged by his creolist-thinking partisan comrades

(seen as *Afro-Creole* by Indo-Guyanese and others) to make a show of his “critique of colonialism [...] through inclusion of lower-class Afro-Creole cultural forms,” following the first CARIFESTA, in 1973 Burnham heralded his plans to rescind colonial-era anti-Obeah laws.<sup>457</sup> Yet his pronouncement was met with much local (and international) skepticism, disapproval, and scorn.<sup>458</sup> Many Guyanese at the time expressed outrage at being portrayed to the rest of their attentive Caribbean neighbors—and the world—as “backward” Obeahmen and -women who *senselessly* continued to maintain their ancestral cultures.<sup>459</sup> Burnham’s proposal to “free up obeah” was widely interpreted as a misstep in “progress” towards “developing” the “modern”—and so “secular” and “rational”—nation.<sup>460</sup> At around the same time in Grenada, the equally “authoritarian populist leader” Eric Gairy also “came to be associated with the use of obeah” (Paton 2015: 277). In opposing Gairy’s rule, political activists known as the New Jewel

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<sup>457</sup> Quote is, again, from Munasinghe (2006: 557). On Burnham’s Creolist (read *Afro-Creole*) circum-Caribbean cultural politicking surrounding CARIFESTA, see Ramaesh Bhagirat-Rivera (2018).

<sup>458</sup> On reactions to Burnham’s announcement, see news coverage, particularly articles like one headlined “Caribbean Opinion Divided Over Guyana’s Burnham’s Proposal to Legalize Obeah” (*Nassau Guardian* 20 November 1973), as well as an article in the *Virgin Islands Daily News* (7 November 1973). Also see Bilby and Handler (2004: 169-170) and Paton (2009, 2015).

<sup>459</sup> Guyanese tend to face discrimination from other Caribbean people, so they are sensitive to negative portrayals of their national culture. Peake and Trotz (1999: 9) write that “people who are quasi-familiar with it commonly depict Guyana as a scary place. Stories abound of a land with no electricity or running water where people barely survive on handouts from relatives and international aid organisations, and of dense bush teeming with malaria, snakes and *jumbies* (spirits). It is portrayed as a backward, primitive space in which wayward sects and communes flourish in the atmosphere of corruption and misinformation that characterise public life.” They also note that “elements of truth form the basis of these scenarios, but the myth-like proportions they have taken on result more from the economic downturn of the 1970s and 1980s than from any empirical facts” (ibid.).

<sup>460</sup> Note that not all accounts portray this period as one of increased or even sustained marginalization for Obeah, and Kean Gibson (2001: 16-19 and as quoted in Bilby and Hander 2004: 170) has reported that “although the obeah law was not repealed in 1973, many people believed that it was, and Burnham’s widely circulated statement, Gibson emphasized, ‘gave elite sanction to the practicing of obeah.’ With the belief that obeah was legalized, ‘obeah became a lucrative and competitive profession.’” Yet many Spiritualists four or five decades later do not remember Burnham’s announcement as generally “sanctioning” their still-criminalized practices.

Movement denounced him as an Obeahman, “in the process also denouncing popular ‘superstition’” (ibid.).<sup>461</sup>

In many respects, like Gairy’s, Burnham’s Obeah backfired as his proposal was understood by many as being “too African,” and so further marginalized both Komfa and Kali Mai practitioners within their communities and within conceptions of the nation. Kali Mai may be defined by Guyanese as reflecting “Indian” ancestral culture, but it is still overwhelmingly identified as Obeah and so plays into contests over the practice, especially among Indo-Guyanese. And while Rhoda Reddock (1998: 70) writes that in Trinidad “most Indian cultural resistance [...] has to be seen as resistance to this dominant Afro-Saxon acculturative mode and less to the subordinate African-derived mode,” Indo-Guyanese continued through the anticolonial movement to marginalize Obeah *and* Kali Mai, characterizing the latter as an “unorthodox” or “unbrahmanical,” and so “impure” “Madrassi” “Creole” variety of the former. Discrimination faced by Kali Mai practitioners, as well as by people self-identifying or identified as Madrassi, is fundamentally anti-Black, and stems in large part from these “*South Indian*” or “Dravidian” people and their practices being associated with “Africa” and “Africanness.” As Sinah Kloß (2016b: 102) describes of her work among a range of Guyanese Hindu communities, “at times my informants [...] refer to ‘Madras’ in terms of caste identity. In this context, Madrassis or South Indians are usually described as ‘darker’ in terms of skin color [‘*varna*’] and in comparison to North Indians, and their hair as ‘curly.’” For Kloß (ibid.), “these proposed characteristics indicate a link that is created between Madrassis and Guyanese Africans, which—

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<sup>461</sup> One can also compare Burnham and Gairy, and the religious and political contexts of the early 1970s, to the Duvaliers’ regime in Haiti, especially thinking of the mid-1980s “popular *dechoukai* (Creole for ‘uprooting’) of the Duvaliers” from national office and from the island, and the attendant terrorization of Vodou practitioners (Cosentino 1993: 100). Also see Andrew Apter (2002) and Paul Christopher Johnson (2006).

from the perspective of some ‘North Indian’ Guyanese—reinstates lower Madrassi status.

Accordingly, Madrassi rituals are often denoted as ‘low-nation’ practices,” or as Obeah.<sup>462</sup>

Furthermore, Burnham’s attempts to invoke Obeah in creating a postcolonial “distinctive common [(Afro-)Creole] culture as a basis for national unity” contributed to the obfuscation of interreligious dynamisms among subaltern traditions and their variously racialized practitioners (Bolland 1992: 53). As Afro-Guyanese were encouraged by the Prime Minister to embrace their African heritages, still, people of *all* backgrounds—but especially Indo-Guyanese—distanced themselves and their ritual assemblages from association with Obeah.<sup>463</sup> Non-Afro-Guyanese practitioners are particularly ostracized by their nonpractitioner family and communities for engaging in African- or Obeah-identified religious culture. And yet, Guyanese of all sorts do choose to confide—typically among their flocks—that they are indeed “Obeah People.” Such revelatory disclosures and insights into one’s self and one’s community are not generally performed in public, but instead within the special anti-structural spaces Spiritualists continually craft: *bottom-houses* where gatherings meet; in “sacred groves” by blackwater creeks; *aback* old estates where cane gives way to *bush*; at the Seawall where everyone’s ancestors are said to have arrived; and similar spots where the lineages of all Guyanese together call out for remembrance.

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<sup>462</sup> On distinctions among South Asian-inspired religiosities in Guyana, particularly the social positioning of Kali Mai “Madrassi traditions,” Kloß’s (2016a, 2016b) work is particularly insightful. While Kloß (2016b: 83) characterizes Kali Mai as a “subgroup” of the various traditions of “Hinduism in Guyana,” she notes that Kali Mai is distinguished from hegemonic forms of Sanatan Dharma and Arya Samaj Hindu traditions, and is considered as “Madrassi.” “Influenced by various historical conditions and the dominant Christian influence,” Kloß (ibid.) writes that “members of the so-called Sanatan tradition have sought to establish their practices as the ‘Great’ or Sanskritic Hindu tradition. [...] In this context, specific practices such as possession rites and animal sacrifices were defined as inappropriate and excluded from mainstream Hinduism in Guyana. [...] These ‘inappropriate’ practices were consolidated in what is today known as the Madras tradition or Kali-Mai Puja, a shaktistic tradition which continues to be marginalised and stigmatised in contemporary society.” Also see Kean Gibson (2002, 2005b).

<sup>463</sup> Animal sacrifice, for example, has been attributed to both Kali Mai and Obeah/Komfa practices, specifically offering of goats. Yet as Kloß (2016b) notes, Kali Mai Pujaris, like Spiritualists, curtailed their use of “blood sacrifice” around this independence period of cultural struggle. On this point also see Case (2001: 47-48).

**“We’s six children, of seven nation, wit’ a whole set a too many past ...  
dancing together toward we destiny”<sup>464</sup>**

*Obosom a onni komfoo no, yeto no abuo.*  
If a god has no priestess, we put it on one side.

*Yoon ye gye no komfoo ano.*  
When a priest or priestess is dancing,  
whatever they say is true.  
—Twi proverbs<sup>465</sup>

Amounting to fundamental sources of prospective wellbeing, Komfa’s sanctuaries and “invisible churches” are visited by Guyanese of all backgrounds when Work is felt necessary. They come to embrace their multitudinous selves, often finding the only channel in their lives through which to honor subjugated aspects of themselves—“blood seeds” planted within—pointing through dreams, visions, and entranced performances of divination to their countless intertwining positions in “the complex labyrinth of the family of humankind” (Carew 1994; Harris 1998: 24). Many people who might not have considered themselves “African” or any other ethnoracial identity before embracing Spiritual life, have also often reported “learning” to recognize that shaded facet of their multiplicitous subjectivity through their Komfa practice. Albeit, many only disclose such perfections of self—at first at least—to those sympathetic members of their own gathering—their Spiritual family.<sup>466</sup>

One “Indian”-identifying practitioner explained this multiplicity of personhood through a vision merging political and Spiritual perceptions, expressing that “is through Spiritual Work I

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<sup>464</sup> This is a quote from a practitioner, as discussed below.

<sup>465</sup> The first is from Uati Lorraine Osewele (2012: 10), and the second was told to Mana Borenstine (1999: 24) by Emmanuel Kwame Gyamfi in Jamasi, Ghana. Notice that both use the word “komfoo” for “priestess”/“priest.”

<sup>466</sup> While the idea of “perfecting selves” is pervasive, and at times Eurocentrically conceived and deployed, one can compare to sentiments expressed by Bayyinah Sharrieff (as quoted in Curtis 2006: 108), who “is a significant, but largely unknown figure for the study of Africana religions in the twentieth century” (Curtis and Johnson 2017: 71). Also see Espírito Santo (2015) on developing dead persons to perfect living selves in Cuban Espiritismo practices.

Work I did learn what the [national] motto really ‘bout ... ‘cause we’s six children, of seven nation, wit’ a whole set a too many past, [and] all them past ... combine up in one body ... dancing together toward we destiny.” She went on to explain further,

Same way like a band must march all in line them, together. Well all a we Guyanese must move as one, they say, nah? Well same way all them piece—them platelet—get there in my blood, must all move as one. All them past what does make me up, you understand? ‘Cause when they fighting inside me, like they does do here for election time, that’s when me must come for Work. Catch myself, [and] let all them piece *inside* me know me love ‘em. That there’s what let all them Guyanese piece a shit *out* there know we love ‘em all too beside.

The woman who shared these affecting sentiments regularly manifests ancestors from the Chinese and African Nations during ritual performances, with her Chinese spirit guide particularly sought after by congregants for the healing wisdom she is known to command. However, the woman is most distinguished in her role as Kali Mai Pujari, through which she instills in her flock “the ways of the Indian Nation,” which are seen as vital features of this gathering’s devotional praxis. Her singular position within this group also illustrates an unfortunate dynamic of ethnoracialized stereotyping identified by Viranjini Munasinghe (1997: 73) as “the culture/non-culture dichotomy,” whereby in the transition to independence in Trinidad in particular, but also Guyana, “the civilization/savagery dichotomy of nineteenth-century British colonial race discourse became transformed into one of ‘culture-bearers’ and ‘culture-creators.’” Through a process heavily informed by colonial racialist caricatures, Indo-Caribbean people took on a popular image of cultural “saturation” in contrast to the “culturally-naked African,” statuses which contributed to Afro-Creoles’ purported roles as “contributors *par excellence* for the emerging nation” (ibid.: 81).

The implementation of creole theory as nationalist ideology, as with pluralism in imperialist thinking, governing, and exploitation, has largely operated through “the



epistemological collapse of the empirical field (noun = Afro-Trinidadians = Creoles) into the theoretical concept ('creolization')" (Munasinghe 2006: 557; cf. Bolland 2006; M. G. Smith 1961). In combatting the antiblackness of plantation legacies, of modern political white supremacist hegemony, the plural postcolonies of the Southern Caribbean often also divided their new nations further in the name of "creoleness"—"a form of self-deceptive division even as it harbored within itself a potential for the renascence of community" (Harris 1998: 24). This political deployment, as Munasinghe (2006: 557) contends, "has functioned not only to define East Indian as outside the nation of Trinidad but also has produced the East Indian figure in lay, political, and (most) academic discourses as culture bearer or assimilator but rarely as creator." Munasinghe's point holds true for Guyana, and yet an inspiring aspect of the "common cultural equipment"—as Raymond Smith (1962: 198) might have said—found among Kali Mai and Komfa practitioners is their recognition of "Indian" "culture-creators." Understood as ancestral and present-day adepts of the Indian Nation, Indo-Guyanese identifying individuals have transformed both Kali Mai and Komfa in addressing the anxieties and aspirations of the dispossessed of all heritages. Most often through rituals of (re)possession, "East Indians" have sought the power to redefine themselves—and other subjugated Guyanese—as indispensable to the nation (Hutton 2019: 209; cf. Dayan 2001). Guyanese "common cultural equipment" of trance rituals have played a significant role in not only "fostering social cohesion" among diverse Guyanese or helping Creoles to "discover" and "propagate" postcolonial creolized national culture. Instead, the intercultural Work of ancestral manifestation has also positioned non-Afro-Guyanese as creators of a still-marginalized—subnational—Spiritual culture. At the same time, however, the woman's practice as described through her comments above, and the "fusions" of Kali Mai and Komfa more generally, both challenge formulaic, politicized "images of East

Indians as ‘unmixables’” and of Komfa as a “last lingering vestige of African belief” (Munasinghe 1997: 80; Putnam 2012: 262).

Central to this practitioner’s account, and to social processes underlying Guyanese trance ritual performances, are notions of power—which pieces of blood does one honor, or can one access? Who controls which pasts are danced toward whose conceptions of a “national” destiny? And how does the Work of placating one’s rebellious insides bear effects on “all them Guyanese ... out there,” particularly at “election time?” To seek insights into such matters, one can consider that, as Ivan Karp (1989: 96) suggests, “access and control are only the surface features of power relations” while a deeper “dimension [...] involves differences in the capacity to exercise and create power.”<sup>467</sup> And like power, capacity is also “socially defined and created, sought and lost in social process, and often expressed in those local idioms we call cosmologies” (ibid: 97). Within the discourses of power enacted in Spiritualist’s rituals and reflected in their worldviews, normative structures and strictures denying ethnoracial and religious connectedness often give way for those with the capacity to entertain “too many pasts” that simultaneously “combine up in one body ... dancing,” as the practitioner explained (cf. Masquelier 1993). More often than not, Komfa cosmologies work to empower “social anti-structure” as practitioners perform and identify themselves with multiplicities of pasts, together, loosening the bounds of a stratified, plural—and so supposedly non-combining—society.

Differential structural relationships to the power of the colonial state discouraged solidarity between these “dissimilar groupings” (*divide et impera*), so social contexts of what Victor Turner (1969, 1974) identifies as “anti-structure” would have been important sites for

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<sup>467</sup> Karp (1989: 96-97) further states that he has been “led to wonder how accounts might change if observers were to listen more seriously to the assertions and meanings enacted by their informants. Perhaps they would begin to examine a second dimension of power.”

fostering community consciousness and essential to nurturing “*communitas*.” Benedict Anderson’s argument mentioned above is less focused on the experiences of the nonelite, laboring segments of the population in the colonial protonational administrative units of New Spain and how they correspondingly embraced and resisted the “new cultural homogeneity” being “imposed” through “a single language-of-state,” or through other equally stultifying, or far worse intimidating, means. Working peoples of Guiana and the industrialized Caribbean plantation societies—enslaved and indentured, or “free” but otherwise bound through labor to the colonies’ regimes of production—had forged their own “Creole” languages, creole polycultures, and creole social institutions. They did so not through the language of “print-capitalism,” but indeed through corporeal practices and shared experiences, including those of circuitous “journeys”—transoceanic and transcontinental, as well as through local waters and proximate lands.

Komfa Works of ritual intensity encourage a departure from prescribed social realities like racial discrimination *or* belonging, as ancestors of any and all heritages are apt to present themselves *as kin*, in “a bond uniting” all practitioners present and all Guyanese contemporaries and progenitors “as people over and above any formal social bonds” (Turner 1974: 45). In these liminal encounters, bridging pasts and present identities, practitioners redefine their capacities to create “race” and “nation,” and often “gender,” through both deconstructing and reshaping their own social and political subjectivities. In doing so, Spiritualists also redefine the capacities other people have to determine identities for them, and how those identities become implicated in constructions of the Co-operative Republic.

Ethnoracial identities were produced (and continually re-produced) out of colonial encounter, with the inscribing of groups’ names (ethnonyms) functioning to index geographical

origins; to conjoin notions of culture and biology (phenotypes); to regulate access to means of production (which includes resources, as well as cultural and biological *reproduction*); and to define static positionalities in a color, class, and religiously stratified socio-political system (Williams 1991). As Linda Peake and Alissa Trotz (1999: 10) observe of Guyana's colonially inscribed ethnoracial moral order, "it is this very plurality, and the attribution to it of an ontological credibility, which has come to dominate Guyana's recent history." Anticolonial and postcolonial nationalisms overtly denounced the sociopolitical inheritances of racialized identity pathologization, yet fundamentally retained colonized ways of *being* and of re/presenting Guyanese and the nation. Still considered "the land of six (or seven) peoples," what many apprehend as an "ontological credibility" of ethnoracial difference persists, despite the unifying—and homogenizing—call of the National Motto. While Komfa's Spiritual Nations in large part reiterate these categorical subjecthoods, in performance events devotees and spirit guides often question and deconstruct the prefigured, ahistorical, universal, and compulsory "nature" of restraining social classifications.

Performing the presences of archetypal revenants of Guyanese pasts encourages mediums not only to embrace "race"—as "purity" or "hybridity"—but also often to reject the odious dread of afflictions that ethnoracialized personhood and collective belonging have too often affirmed in their lives. "To conceptually transcend race through critical understanding of its conceptual motility," as Eze (2008: 177) writes, "is thus to unmask race's claims to all kinds of empirical and normative legitimacy; it is to hope that, by thinking through the permutations of the idea, damage done to individuals and social identities in the name of race may be judiciously exposed." Spiritualists seek the empowering, critical capacities offered by their ancestral spirits to infinitely imagine new ways of relating in the world that bridge long-imposed divides within

communities and ruptures of personal being. They open the shade on all those pasts, letting the pieces dance inside them—bearing both griefs and gladness—while trusting that those flickering fragments and memories, when reanimated, might inspire a unanimous love of interior and exterior conciliation.<sup>468</sup> As an acquaintance told Robert Farris Thompson (1974: 28) in Dahomey as the two admired a performance together, “it is our blood that is dancing.” Thompson (ibid.) notes that within his companion’s keen observation lies “evidence [...] that the ancestors [...] continue their existence within the dancer’s body. They created the steps; the dancer moves, in part, to bring alive their name.” In incarnating and repossessing their monikers, Spiritualists also endeavor to dance alive their ancestors’ manifold complexities beyond *nation*, and so transcend and unmask race’s categorical claims over their lives—past, present, and impending—including for their coming generations of youth.

Komfa is a dance that makes the intimate yet ineffable ancestors tangible and present. Meeting the dead, whether of one’s own familial lineages or not, can be both fearsome and existentially rewarding for practitioners. Nurturing social relationships with Komfa spirits can *skin-up* present-day societal injustices, repressed memory, and generational traumas, revelations that often also offer channels for reconceiving newly empowered multiflorous selves and

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<sup>468</sup> Selwyn Ryan (1971, 1999) writes of Trinidadian and Guyanese “cultural fragments.” More evocatively, Harris (1983) describes an “absent presence” of “live fossils” contained within “the womb of space,” a conceptual location that Hena Maes-Jelinek (2006: 520) tells us is

inspired by the dense landscape of the jungle, which conveys its livingness and capacity for renewal. It is both the concrete refuge of hunted Amerindians and Maroons and a metaphor for the repository of neglected history, nevertheless susceptible of rebirth, as “womb” makes clear. Again in keeping with the variety of approaches to this fictional substance, the “womb of space” is designated by different terms such as “spirit,” a “deposit of ghosts,” the unconscious, “living text,” “otherness,” “the sacred,” the mythical, the archetypal. Though related, they are not synonymous but different aspects of a wholeness and deep-seated cultural reality towards which Harris’s characters move. He also calls it “the submerged territory of the imagination.”

For a deeply engaging exploration of “the ethnographic fragment,” see Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1998). Also recall Anderson’s (2006 [1983]: 19) formulation regarding the decline of “sacred languages” such as Latin among Christian religious communities in Europe which became “*fragmented, pluralized, and territorialized*,” which led to standardization *and* new means of imagining connectedness, and eventually to “secularization,” as well as nationalization of local languages and European religious cultures.

expanded senses of communal interconnection, care, and obligation. Komfa Work therefore involves much more than confronting spirits of a daunting past, as through repossession Spiritualists *become* the dead, and so render forward unending iterations of past struggle into a social world of seemingly unidimensional power. If the basis of Spiritual life is, as many say, living one's "life with the spirits," then the expression must also be understood to mean living one's life *as* the spirits.

Ancestors are reborn in the lives of their devotees, compelling determined aspirations to revisit and often rectify misgivings over the past. Yet, like all memories, spirits become manifest in the present moments of remembering, and so the legacies they recall are fundamentally lessons for contemporary times. Komfa spirits and their mediums express a particular concern with "modern" inheritances of abysmal precedents for dehumanizing forms of relationships that they in life once endured—or inflicted. Ancestors bring their deep experiences, as traces of the past made present, to bear on the life possibilities anticipated by their Komfa children and those descendants to come. Through the Spiritual Work of relatedness—manifesting unending personages of the past as permutations of Guyanese being—Komfa dead oblige their living counterparts to dance awake more just prospects for all Guyanese posterity.

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