

The Race and Ethnicity Hub

An introduction to African Caribbean religions and cultures

Hilde Capparella:

Good evening, everybody. Good afternoon. Thank you to be here today. I'm Hilde Capparella. I'm a PhD student for religious studies at the Open University. And today, I'm going to present the history and development Afro-Caribbean religions and culture in three different islands such as Cuba, Haiti and Jamaica.

This session will break into 45-minute presentation, followed by 50 minutes Q&A. I'm asking to all of you if you don't understand any particular word I'm going to say or any particular term, to write you down and ask me at the end of the presentation. I hope with this presentation to decolonize the negative meta narrative that surround for many centuries Afro Caribbean religions. And I hope that I will be able to show you that Afro-Caribbean religions are actually the outcome, a form of resistance and accommodation to a context—to an European context on the other side of the Atlantic that was quite violent and awful, like the context of slavery and plantation societies.

Unfortunately, as you can see from this slide, the slave trade begun with the-- no, sorry-- the Afro-Caribbean religions developed, the inception of Caribbean religions laid on the slave trade. Millions of Africans were taken, enslaved on the other side of the Atlantic. Millions of them lost their life during the passage. And the one that didn't lose their life, unfortunately, they lost their life, name, and identity as African forever.

I want really you keep this in your mind while I'm talking about Afro-Caribbean religions because they born and grow in a context, they develop in a context, very violent and very sad. Actually, an inhuman context. Then slave trade was a triangular trade that was going from Europe to Africa into the Caribbean and back. Europe was-- actually, the slave trade started with the Portuguese in the 1526. It was joined by the majority of European countries.

They were taking goods from Europe to Africa in exchange of slaves. Of course, we cannot forget that is important that with the European taking people on the other side, there was even the complicity of local leaders, of local African leaders. Because, of course, they wanted to keep their political religious hegemony in Africa. And that was a way to get rid of their enemy or whoever could somehow interfere in their political and religious power in Africa.

As we can see from this slide, those Africans deported in the Caribbean belonged to different ethnic groups. They spoke different languages, embrace different practices. Not only regarding Afro-traditional religions, but the time of the slave trade, some of them embraced also Christianity and Islam. Actually, they were the favourite to be sent over in the Caribbean because of course they were the one that-- they were the one that were compromising more the local political authority of African leaders.

So, as we can see from this slide, this is the embarkation of very different ethnicities that were sent to the Caribbean. And when we think of them, we have to think of them not only as people deported in another place, but it was not only a translocation of people, but was even a translocation of beliefs, object, and practices-- sorry-- in the new world.

So, the influence, as we can see from this map, the different tribes were displaced in different islands. And it's important to keep in mind that different islands had a different European hegemony, political and religious. So, they found, in their arrival in the Caribbean a different context in different islands.

Today, we're going to talk about Catholic islands such as Cuba and Haiti and Anglican Protestant island as Jamaica. Of course, there is the developing in the Caribbean of many of the religions. Let's say that Santeria in Cuba, the Vodou in Haiti and Rastafari in Jamaica are the main at the moment, and the one that are predominant among all other Caribbean religions.

So Caribbean traditional religions once arrived in the Caribbean the enslaved, anyway, despite they were, as we see in the previous slide, from different tribes, they were speaking foreign language. They were following different practices. Anyway, they have something in common. They share some similar beliefs and practices.

Among them, there is the notion of 'Communotheism'. 'Communotheism' correspond the community of deities, invisible being, ancestors, that leave between the material word and the invisible world. They can be called with offers, they can be called with drumming, with possession, with divination, for divination.

Another concept that is very important within and embraced by all African traditional religions is the concept of Ashe. Ashe-- that is called even Axe`, depends where it localized-- is a mystical power, the divine power that is in everything. It's in me, it's in you, it's in a object. They believe it's even in words. That is very important, especially when we are going to talk about Rastafari.

So, as we said, the development of-- there is-- no, sorry. In this slide, we can see the advent of different Caribbean religions in different islands. These developments were the result of the clash mixing and blending of African and European religions, cultures, languages and traditions.

So as we said before, the development in different island dependent on the context that they found, once, when the enslaves arrived in the islands. In the Catholic islands, the one thing that is very important to underline-- they were constricted immediately to convert to Catholicism. So, what happened, that Catholicism in this island was already very strong.

And we can't forget that in this time in Europe, there is the revival of the Cult of Saints that was very strong during the Crusades. The Cult of Saints is based on cosmology of deities like the Yoruba or the Dahomey Pantheon. So, for them, was very easy for the enslave to adjust their own beliefs and practices with the Catholic saints.

They had very similar practices like the saint need to be-- they work as a mediator between gods and the believer. Or the saint like the deities of the Yoruba and Dahomey Pantheon, they need offer to respond to the questioning or needs of the practitioner. In adopting a mixing with Catholicism, African traditional religions relocate-- were re-created. So, they develop as their own form, like a new form of religion in their own right.

Now we will see the process of changing from Afro-traditional religions to Caribbean religions. So when the-- as we saw from previous map-- actually, I will go back to show you. Yeah, in Cuba, we have the presence of Yoruba, Kongo, Dahomey and Bantu. But among them, the one that actually were stronger, maybe their presence was more, was the Yoruba Pantheon.

When-- we have to understand that Yoruba, the Yoruba religion is based-- believes in-- sorry, let's go back here. Yeah. Despite the Yoruba religion that actually is the religion of the actual Nigeria, but I think it's expanded even in Benin in all that area. Anyway, this religion, this African traditional region in Africa change from town to town like different-- like maybe they follow different Orisha, so they offer different things to the Orisha.

But one very important thing-- they all believe in the Orisha, this are their deities, they have a particular characteristic. There is the Orisha that protect you from-- I don't know-- they can protect you from other negative people, there are the Orisha that are for healing, there are the Orisha that are called for love. They all believe in a supreme being, in the ancestors, and in a form of divination that's called Ifa.

Of course, within the Yoruba practice, there are only two way to reach the divinity. One is possession and the another one is offering. So, however, in Cuba, these religions once

localized in Cuba changed because they were constricted to adapt their religion and their culture to Catholicism. It changes to the point that the Yoruba divinities, they assume the form of local-- of Roman Catholic saints-- sorry.

So, in mixing and adapting to the cosmology of the Catholic saint develop, Santeria was developed. The Orisha, as we said before, as the Catholic Saint needs to be fed with offering food, drinks, or object-- and it's very important to understand that in Cuba, when the enslaved arrived, they were taken in-- they were organized by the Catholic church in Cabildos. This Cabildos were working as a sort of confraternities among the enslaved. And this Cabildos, despite they were controlled by the Catholic church, but they were helping anyway these ethnic group to keep their language, tradition and religion partially alive.

One important thing of this picture that I would like you to notice that these two figures here-- one is looks like the Madonna, and the other San Lazaro. Actually, they represent the Madonna and San Lazaro. This picture was taken by me in Cuba during a holiday field work. But they are not the Madonna or San Lazaro. Actually, they are Yemaya and-- sorry. I can't find the name- Ah, yes. In Santeria, San Lazaro is called Babalu Aye.

Now, what is very interesting, is that San Lazaro that in Cuba is called-- is both San Lazaro is Babalu Aye, in Nigeria in the Yoruba tradition, it's called Saponu. In Congo, in the Fon tradition, it's called Sakpata. In Congo, in Gabon, among the Ewe it's called Anygbatu. So, what is very important is not that its identity, its name change.

Actually, his name changed, but its identity as a healer doesn't change because these saint within the Catholic Church is a saint for the people-- the people call for when they are sick. So it's the healer. And the same is in-- it was—and is in the Yoruba pantheon. So it's very interesting the synchronicity that they-- that helped, actually, the enslaved once they arrived in the Caribbean to-- not in the Caribbean-- Cuba in particular to still practice. They were able to still practice, even in a secret way, their own religion.

The main ritual within Santeria is the Ifa divination, because within Santeria, any decision can't be taken by the diviner-- sorry-- by the practitioner without their consent of the Orisha. So sometimes, the community possession is used, in fact, within the Santeria community to know what the Orisha think about a specific matter or about the community itself.

And drumming is essential and is part of any Afro-Caribbean religions even at the moment, because it is believed that when the drum sound, the Orisha are invited to come and join the community. It's significant in this picture-- as you can see, there is a woman dressed in white. She is doing a painting, a symbol on the floor. That is called Veve within Santeria. And it is a

symbol that is used in order to open the door with the invisible world to let the Orisha coming over.

This symbol in particular actually is always this symbol that get drawn in order to call the one that opened the door which is Saint Peter for Catholics because he's the one that got the key of the Paradise. And that is Ogun within Santeria. As we will see, it is called Papa Legba within Haitian Vodou. So, it's the essence of the deities more than the name that is important and make us understand the similarity between Catholicism, Cult of Saint and the development of Santeria in Cuba.

So now we go through the-- we pass to the French islands. And similar to the Cuban islands because they were Catholic islands anyway, once arrived in Haiti, the enslaved were constricted to convert to Catholicism. Actually, in Haiti, this was even stronger because they didn't have Cabildos and because they had actually the French Code Noir. According to this code, the enslaved, they needed to convert to Catholicism within eight days to their arrival in Haiti.

Differently from Santeria, the Catholic saints, they start to be amalgamating and mixed with the Dahomey Pantheon of deities which are called Loas, not Orisha, but Loas. This is because even in Haiti, at the time of the disembarkation were arrived enslaved from different tribes of Africa with different languages and cultures. But probably because it was the most dominant presence probably because they had a more flexible Pantheon that the Dahomey religion become dominant comparing to other religions. It is the one that actually synchronized with Catholicism, with the Cult of Saint.

So, as we can see from this picture, the syncretism between Vodou and Catholicism was mainly on a syncretism of material and magic. In fact, as we can see in this picture, there are object, paintings, gesture and holy water, candles-- all these things where appropriated by the Dahomey people and they were taken and conceived as to possess-- sorry-- magical power.

So very important, actually, is that-- no. I want to go back one moment behind, because of-- actually, I cannot see properly the PowerPoint and I forgot to explain you about Rada e Petro Vodou, because Vodou develop in two way in Haiti. One-- in accommodating the Dahomey culture and religion to the saint, to Catholicism. So, this is called the Rada Vodou. While there is the development also the Petro Vodou that was based-- was developing, actually, among the Maroons in the hinterland of Haiti.

The Maroons, if you don't know, they were run away enslave that often were living in the hills of these islands. They were often the one that started the slave revolt against the European hegemony. This future, this-- sorry- these characters, these leaders, they were both spiritual

and political leaders among the enslaved. They were, we will see, they were pivotal to slave revolt and revolution.

I want to read you a pass of Metraux in his book of Vodou in Haiti, he describes how on the night of the 14th of August of 1791, an enslaved African Jamaican born vodou priest named Boukman prepared a major vodou ceremony. We had to know that Boukman before to be in Haiti, he was born in Jamaica, but he travelled, was able to travel to Dahomey to Africa. Actually, the legends say that the high priest of vodou in Dahomey, they told told him that he must to liberate Haiti.

So, he prepared this major vodou ceremony. And during the ceremony, he entered into a state of possession trance and told the slave community that the spirit of vodou wanted their support in liberating the enslaved and expelling the French the entire island. So, as we can see, spiritual leaders were very important and fundamental to the slave revolt and to the success.

In fact, we can't forget the vodou has forged the history and culture of Haiti especially in the light of the Maroons vodou collaboration, which was essential to the Haiti revolution and through which Haiti become the first Black Republic in 1804.

This is as well why Haiti has such a negative narrative on top, because they defeated the European and political religion hegemony already in the 18th-- in 19th, at the beginning of the 19th century when all the other Caribbean island, they were still under the hegemony of Europe and in a state of slavery for the African enslaved.

What is very important as well is to know that today, Santeria and Vodou are not practices only in Cuba and Haiti, but they are practiced in America because people emigrate there. And actually, it's very interesting because many practitioners now had opportunity to go back to Africa so to discover again the real roots of their religion that changed so much in the Caribbean. And it is very interesting as well, but this is the need for the studies, the development of these religion within social networks.

So now, we will see how actually Afro-Caribbean religion develop in a context of Anglicanism and, or a context of the British islands. I will take as example Jamaica because it's impossible, in 45 minutes, explain to you all the different religion in the different islands.

So, in Jamaica, as in every British island, actually the enslaved they were not forced to conversion to Christianity, at least until the beginning of the 19th century. So, there is, we can assist to the development of different religions such as Myal, Obeah and Kumina. They're all

Afro-Caribbean creations and despite they have their roots in the Yoruba, Ashanti, Congo religion.

They have developed from a unification of many different African beliefs and practices and languages. And as we said, as I just said, the Christianity was not imposed. The conversion of Africans to Protestantism is-- when they started to be obliged to convert to Protestantism, lead to the formation of new type of Afro-Caribbean movement such as the Native Baptists, Revival Zion, and the 21st Century Rastafarianism.

This is because when they convert, actually, they were not considerate by the English, Christians. So, they were obliged to develop their own way of Christianity, their own form of Christianity, separated by English or British Christians. And they mixed Christianity with Myal, Obeah and Kumina, and that's how we have the developed of new type of Afro-Christian movement in Jamaica.

Atlantic religion identity is in constant process of mixing and reshaping themselves. We can see that these happen even in the 20th century with the event of Rastafari.

So Marcus Garvey-- first, I want to underline that don't call Rastafari Rastafarianism in respect to the people that follow Rastafari because they believe that any -ism or -ian in any word-- this go back to the concept of Ashe` that, that the divinities in everything, even in words-- is a form of oppressive tools from Babylon, from the system. So, because they believe that even the language is an oppressive tool used by the European, the Western hegemonic system to down press African diasporic Caribbean people or American people.

Marcus Garvey is considered by many the founder of Rastafari because he prophesied the coming of the Black redeemer. He actually dedicated his whole life to black emancipation. He founded the UNIA, the Universal Negro Improvement Association. And he was the one to seek for Repatriation to Africa. He wanted that all the people deported to America and to the Caribbean, they had the opportunity if they wanted to go back to Africa.

In the meantime, he was living in America for a long time despite he was Jamaican. When he goes back to Jamaica in 1927, he started to prophesize the coming of a Black Messiah. And when in the 1930, King Selassie of Ethiopia was crowned as the King of King, the Lion of Judah. This sound to many Jamaicans as the fulfilment of a prophecy. Plus, they found these-- they found confirmation of these within the Bible. You can go to check in Revelation 5:2-2 or 19:19 of the book of Revelation.

Why they found King Selassie in the Bible? First of all, because King Selassie looks like to be the 265th descendant of the David and Solomon throne. Second, he was crowned as King of

King, the Lion of Judah. The one that in the Bible actually is the one that opened the seventh seal and is the Christ coming back.

But the crowning of King Selassie was even a huge event for Jamaican people because he replaced both the white God and the white British King with a more African version, a Coptic version, of a Black king then finally was crowned. And especially in this time-- because when King Selassie was crowned, we can't forget that Africa was under colonialism. Ethiopia was the only country that wasn't colonized, a part for five years Italian unfortunately colonized Ethiopia.

And so, for Jamaica-- for many Jamaican, they saw in King Selassie, their Messiah had finally come to liberate African people. Of course, the Rastafari developed around Jamaican island. It was developed by different leader. But the main one that-- the one that is considered the first Rastafari is Leonard Howell. Leonard Howell founded the first Rastafari community in Jamaica that last until from the 1930s to the 1950s. So, it last more or less 20 years. Sorry.

And his community was a community auto-sufficient community. He engaged, in this community were engaged different traditional Caribbean practices and traditions. Like they were speaking and using Indian language because we can forget not only the African were enslaved by the Europeans, but even many Indians, they were deported from India to the Caribbean, and also many Chinese.

I don't know more about that part of the world. But I know that-- I mean, I found the presence of Chinese and Indian in Jamaica quite high. And the Pinnacle was still embended of African traditional religions. In fact, they were using many words coming from the Kikongo language that is a language belonging to Congo. Or in their drumming and chanting, they were using the Kumina style that was, as we see before, part of African traditional religions going to-- sorry, yes. sorry. The Kumina was a Caribbean African tradition that developed in Jamaica during the slavery time but was coming anyway from Ghana. Part of the beliefs and practices, they were coming from Ghana.

When The Pinnacle, Howell community, was destroyed unfortunately in the 1960s, Rastafari changed totally. We can see the advent of new Houses, as they're called, like the Boboshanti, the Najabinghi, the Twelve Tribes. Despite, they all believe in the divinity of King Selassie, they anyway, have different practices, or even different internal beliefs.

Like for example, the Bobo Ashanti. The founder of Bobo Ashanti, King Emmanuel, he believes-- or the Bobo Ashanti believe anyway that he is part of the Trinity with King Selassie, Marcus Garvey, and Prince Emmanuel I. Or for example, we can see in the '60s, the development of the Twelve Tribes that contrarily to all the other houses, they were open to

white people. Contrarily why? Because actually, Rastafari born as Black moment for repatriation of Black people in Africa.

So, we see that in 1960 as well, something different happened. People-- Rastafari started to adopt the Rasta symbols that we can see nowadays that they are adopting like the Ethiopian flag, like the dreadlocks, like the dreadtalk, the Lion of Judah. What is very interesting is the development of dreadtalk. The dreadtalk is a form of resistance against the language of the European hegemony in order to positivise-- sorry-- positivise words.

So, for example, instead to say, I understand you, Rastafari say, I over stand you. Instead to say, I appreciate you, because appreciate go inside the word hate, they say, I love you. So, they try to make everything positive even in the language. And the one that actually spread the language of Rastafari, their beliefs and practices around all the world, is Bob Marley. He became the prototype of the Rasta man globally, because with his music he spread the Rastafari beliefs and practices.

One thing I forgot to tell you actually-- let's go back to the previous slide-- is that generally Rastafari, they followed the biblical Nazarite code. But this is from the 1960s. Because at Howell's Pinnacle, they were not following the biblical code specifically.

Not all the houses of Rastafari followed the Nazarite code. Many, like the Twelve Tribes for example, they follow the Levitical code that is a bit more less orthodox, let's say, of the Nazareth code because the Nazareth code actually is founded on different law like you cannot eat meat, you cannot brush your hair, you have to dress modestly. So, it is a very hard orthodox practice.

And many people, they think-- when people think about Rastafari, they always think about these Rasta men, very happy, in the Jamaican hills, smoking his spliff of marijuana, because marijuana-- smoking marijuana as well is a practice within Rastafari. Actually, this is a real wrong idea of what really Rastafari is, because Rastafari is a very serious and orthodox religion. It actually to follow the Nazareth code, it's very hard!!!

And I found it very hard to follow. I mean, I study in particularly Rastafari, and I had to say that I've been surprised how the people really are in it, and they do everything to follow these Nazarite law. The Nazarite law as well is very important within Rastafari to make us understand the fact that the one that were following the Nazareth law in the Bible were actually the people of the High Order of Melchizedek. So, they were the highest priests within Judaism. So to be a high priest in Judaism, and instead be considered like a very unthoughtful person, just smoking marijuana on top of the hills, there is a very big difference.

So, going back to Bob Marley-- he uses in his songs the dreadtalk, believing that words, sound and language has effect on people and mind. This is the main concept with the Rastafari that is word sound, power. Go back to the concept, African concept of Ashe for which the divinity is in everything, and even words have a divine power that can be transmitted to people.

Today, Rastafari is embraced by many people around all the world probably thanks Bob Marley music. But even thanks to the fact that many people immigrate from the Caribbean, from Jamaica, to England, or to America. And is embraced around all the world as well because thanks to-you know- with the new net, with internet, with the social network, people can communicate and can learn about any religion at any time. So many people are starting to learn and embrace these movement in different way, or on internet or having contact with Jamaican people directly.

And all the songs, all the content behind Bob Marley music was, as Rastafari is, a form of resistance toward the European hegemony, toward a 'down pressing' system, that 'down press' these people for 400 years.

So, in conclusion, I hope that this presentation helps you to see Afro-Caribbean religion in a more positive way that has been narrated until today. And it is important that we understand Afro-Caribbean religion as the outcome-- but as a beautiful and creative set of religions, but even as the outcome of a form of resistance and accommodation to an inhuman context, such of the context of slavery and colonialism in the Caribbean islands.

Actually, I would like to leave you wondering why we don't study Afro-Caribbean religions or Afro-tradition religions. I mean, in the University, we study New Age, Druidism, but there is no presence or much presence of Afro-Caribbean religion or culture, or African tradition and culture and religions. So, I want to leave you with this wonder today.

SPEAKER 1: Thank you very much for attending. Thank you very much, Hilde, for doing this presentation

HILDE CAPPARELLA: Thank you very much. Thank you very much to you.