# EMBODYING BLACK RELIGIONS IN AFRICA AND ITS DIASPORAS

YOLANDA COVINGTON-WARD & JEANETTE S. JOUILI, EDITORS

*Embodying Black Religions in Africa and Its Diasporas*

RELIGIOUS CULTURES OF AFRICAN AND AFRICAN DIASPORA PEOPLE

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# Foreword

JACOB K. OLUPONA

The chapters in this volume collectively observe that the body, as expressed in embodied practices, ways of knowing, and spiritualities, rightly warrants increasing amounts of scholarly attention. As Yolanda Covington-Ward and Jeanette S. Jouili remind us in their introduction, in African and African diaspora religions there is a new way of understanding that calls into question the mind-body dualisms inherited from Western models of interpretation, which have long influenced the way scholars construct religious realities.

Most impressively, the contributors to this work bring recent scholarship on embodiment to bear on a host of disciplines under current scholarly investigation in the humanities and the study of religion. I name only a few of the broader themes here. *Embodying Black Religion in Africa and Its Diasporas* addresses the ways in which conceptions of self and personhood are intricately caught up in ritual and bodily practices. A much-needed focus is given to embodied selves as relational beings and to the processes and factors that influence, give shape to, and constitute intersubjectivity. At several points in the volume, critical appraisals of the body and modes of bodily representation are set forth, including the radicalization of bodies and their presence in different religious, political, and cultural contexts.

The work also offers insightful reflections on the subjects of embodiment and the arts, communal formation, ethnicity, funerary rites, health, immigration, gender, sexuality, spiritual beliefs, and spirit possession. Consequently, it succeeds, as the title hints, in furthering a welcome discussion between African studies and African diaspora scholarship. The reader will pick up readily and

easily enough on these generous gleanings in the introduction and in the essays that make up this volume.

What I offer here is a reflection on the concerns of the various authors in this work, who agree with a central thesis: only by taking the body paradigm seriously will we be able to bring embodied practices into the understanding of the totality of religion, particularly practices that are often marginalized in Western traditions because they do not neatly fit into the models and modes of Western religious interpretation. By presenting African and African diaspora religious practices in a new way, this volume enables us to truly see ourselves! Consequently, the understanding of African indigenous religions as embodied traditions might turn out to be not an alternative but a central method of understanding African spirituality, cultures, and societies.

Throughout my career, my mindset and scholarly approach have led me to the understanding that there are multiple ways of being religious. While texts and myths are incredibly valuable, a significant entry into the understanding of African religion is through praxis—the lived traditions that are embodied in sacred festivals, ceremonies, and rituals, and the material culture that animates African spiritual traditions. Indeed, in the past decades, even scholars of the so-called world religions have turned to these ways of interpretation and genres to provide a more in-depth understanding of their respective traditions, demonstrating their recognition of the importance of embodied practices and relationships in religions.

The phenomenological interpretation of religious traditions with which I began my academic journey in the late 1970s—particularly the works of Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty—recognized the pivotal importance of religious experience and practices, particularly as they relate to the body, intentionality, and relationality. Forms of African indigenous religions are deeply embedded in the imagery of the body, especially as revealed through many cultural expressions. The body provides the most cardinal metaphors and symbols for understanding how one encounters and relates to the multiple deities, devotees, and sacred persons and officiants of the religious community we encounter.

One way to observe and analyze this centrality of the body is through the study of oral traditions and histories, particularly proverbs, the wisdom texts of African elders and the *open sesame* to African worldviews and cultures. For example, when an elderly person has a faraway look and sighs deeply in the presence of a group, the Yoruba will quickly say as a response: "Oro gbe inu agba se hun!" Literally translated, this means "The word (or thought) is embedded in the deep stomach." That is, the painful and joyful silences of the elders

as expressed in deep sighs are presumed to be kept in the stomach, which is conceived as the womb and the home of wisdom. In other words, it is the stomach, not only the brain as in the Western context, that houses our intellectual capacities. The Amharic word for "lover" is *hode*, which means the stomach—thus, in Ethiopia, interrelational experience is connected again to the stomach, not to the heart!

A major expression of embodied practice is the ritual of spirit possession. I agree with Paul Stoller's (1995) critique of the Western fascination with and fixation on spirit possession, particularly on spirit possession as text. While this is an important dimension of embodiment, it is only one aspect of religious phenomena that not everyone necessarily has access to. Zones of contact between Islam and indigenous religion, for example, include subversive elements of possession with regard to gender and identity. For example, women in some African Muslim cultures are able to gain access to different sectors of society through possession. As such, there are elements of embodiment and relationality in the phenomenon of spirit possession that could be highlighted here, including in modern-day Pentecostal and evangelical traditions and Sufism. Similarly, we are reminded of the fascinating study conducted by Aisha Beliso-De Jesús (2015) on the centrality and pivotal role of possession in Orisha traditions.

Embodiment, as an object of study, cannot be divorced from the discussion of an individual's relational connection with the human, animal, nonhuman, and natural world around them. In general, Africans frown upon a life of loneliness devoid of relational connection to others. There is a tree that grows in the western region of Africa that by nature stands alone in the forest without the benefit of sharing space with other trees. This loner tree, the opposite of other trees growing together in the forest, is referred to by the Yoruba as *oko*—that is, "the oko tree that grows alone." Not having any connection with others, it is often employed to describe the relationship of avoidable loneliness that causes an individual to detach from his or her community and turn into an antisocial human being.

So how should we understand African traditional and diasporic practices that Western epistemological theories have not been able to decipher and that do not fit within Western Protestant-centric conceptions of religion? These include empirical observation of such traditions and practices as in twin cultures (*Ibeji*), so-called magical practices (*Oogun*), born-to-die children, children of repeated birth (*abiku*), the display of medicinal power, and actively spoken words that alter our understanding that words not only have meaning but enforce a practical action and effect (the ritual specialist on his way to the farm uses his extrasensory gift to perceive danger in the forest; he faces a tree, and

like a prophet says, "This tree is harboring something negative" and then curses the tree, and by the evening, when he returns from the farm, the leaves of the tree have withered). Why is a tradition (such as African Christianity) willing and able to attest to such a miraculous event when cited in the biblical scriptures and yet either denies its authenticity in African religion or condemns it as purely diabolical? These are occurrences and activities that I grew up witnessing and experienced as a teenager living in African villages and towns. Western scholarship has come up with vocabularies to suggest that these are "magical" things, excluding them from the domain of proper religion. The epistemological violence done to the understanding of African ways of being religious by the Western mindset is immeasurable and reflects why today appointed texts, often termed *classic readings*, are chosen for the education of graduate students of color that do not have relevance to their lived experiences or to the realities of their lives.

When African studies was beginning to emerge as a credible field of knowledge, philosophy and religion focused on systems of thought and beliefs. Scholars paid very little or no attention to the significance of the practice of religion, and when they did, in the context of anthropological studies, they left out the centrality and importance of the body in ritual discourse. In fact, many books describing African belief systems were shaped by conversations in Europe, where religious worldview scholarship was tailored toward the understanding of God and belief in the Western philosophy of religion. The critical discipline of the philosophy of religion arose from this context and mindset. These trends resulted in the absence of embodiment-oriented analysis in the study of African indigenous religion and a disciplinary focus on myths and orature, which in turn reflected the text-oriented methodology employed for the study of Abrahamic traditions.

In the remaining section, I explore how Africans, particularly the Yoruba in West Africa, deploy messages of the body to explain religious sentiments, philosophies, and practices. I argue that the embodied practices of African religious traditions provide not only alternate modes of interpreting experiences of being religious but also central modes of being religious. The authors in this volume argue that only by taking them seriously will we be able to bring these practices into the picture, practices that are often marginalized in Western traditions because they do not neatly fit into the models and modes of Western religious interpretation.

In Yoruba cosmology, *ori*, often termed the source of wisdom in Western philosophy and primarily seen as an embodied spiritual part of humans, has the most important and influential presence. There are two forms of ori, the physical

ori, which is the outer head, and the spiritual ori, which is the inner head. In Yoruba oral tradition, both are regarded as relational, and, as such, both are spiritual. However, it is believed that the inner head acts as a conduit for the physical head. References like *ori mogunje* ("It is one's ori that guarantees the potency of the ritual specialist's/healer's medicine") and *ori l'onise* ("It's one's ori that assures one's fortune in life") illustrate that ori is central to determining one's success in life.

In one of the Yoruba myths of creation, after Obatala, the Yoruba deity, molds human beings, they travel to the home of Ajala on their way to the earth, where they pick their ori. It is assumed that one's choice of ori will determine one's fortune in the world. Similarly, in a situation of stiff competition among the group, the one with the strongest ori will win. This, of course, touches on the question of predestination and choice. Consequently, diviners pay a lot of attention to how one's ori dictates one's fortune in the world. Even in naming ceremonies, ori forms prefixes in names such as Orimolade ("ori is the one that knows who will be the king"), Orire ("good ori"), and Orimolusi ("ori knows the future").

In fact, it could be argued that ori, also a deity in the Yoruba pantheon, is regarded as more sacred than the rest of the deities (*Orisha*), and that is because the ori is a true physical manifestation, more visible and tangible than the other orisa. While the orisa may reveal themselves via images and material objects and sometimes in human representations of kings and twins, they are not humans but rather superhumans who are above human temporalities. The significance of the ori suggests that the Yoruba cosmology posits that humans are potential gods, which in turn reflects divinization of the human body.

That Matter matters is a truism in African religious traditions—in fact, matter is central to religious experience. Material practices are not a manipulation of the sacred, but the sacred itself. The so-called taboos are a worthy illustration of this point. Food taboos are very common in the African context; different individuals, as well as communities and settlements, have to follow certain food restrictions. As Lawrence E. Sullivan rightly puts it, "Because the mouth controls contact with the cosmic powers that order one's shape and meaning, the symbolism of diet distinguishes groups and qualities of relations within a given society" (1988, 295). Beliefs surrounding food and dietary restrictions clearly demonstrate the materiality of religion, where food is understood not simply as a source of sustenance in a physical sense but rather also in a spiritual sense. Moreover, food taboos are linked to totemic concepts and ideas and therefore are not to be overlooked in religious practice. As Émile Durkheim explains in his *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1961), totems are the symbols of

god and the symbols of the clan; hence, obeying totemic restrictions is an expression of utter respect.

For example, as a twin in Yoruba traditions, I am forbidden from eating the flesh of a monkey, partially because of the religious affinity between twins and the colobus monkey. Twins and monkeys are both held sacred by certain Yoruba, and twin lineages represent multiple births, which are revered in Yoruba traditions. Among the BaKongo, twins could not eat the double-spotted leopard, which was considered to mediate between the visible realm of humans and the invisible realm of spirits. To speak more broadly about communities, in the city of Ile Oluji, Nigeria, the inhabitants are forbidden from eating buffalo meat because of the belief that the buffalo led the inhabitants of the city to safety in the past.

Beliefs regarding food function both in a direct sense (i.e., food taboos) and in an allegorical sense. As James Aho argues in *The Orifice as Sacrificial Site*, "The experience of our personal bodies reflects the workings of our social arrangements." Private entry and exit zones, that is, our orifices, are "doorways out of and penetration routes into the social bodies of which we are members" (2002, 10). In the Yoruba context, the proverb "ona ofun, ona orun" (the way to the belly is also the way to heaven/death) teaches that gluttony can lead to physical and social death. The idea here is that one should fend for what one eats, since gluttony can lead the consumer to betray their community. When a pot of porridge is accepted by an individual in exchange for the group interest, it is interpreted as not only a betrayal of the whole but also a form of social death. In short, as Aho explains, "the personal body . . . is a metaphor of the social body; orifices in particular stand for a group's weak spots. The more defensive and exclusionary a group is, the more pressure is placed on its members to police what goes into and what comes out of the bodies" (11).

### The Body and Ritual Process

The ritual process can be entirely reimagined as an embodied practice. African rites of passage, the ideology and rituals of sacred kingship, festivals and the ceremonial calendar, and worship of the deities are all tied to the signification of the body. The body becomes a special agent through which those performances and ritual actions take place. Given what we now know through empirical research, we can boldly construct a new paradigm that we could label as the "spirituality of the body."

Embodied deities run through the entire African cosmology. In the cosmogonic myths of many African societies, we come across assemblies of deities who

not only are represented as human-like—they eat, dance, and fornicate—but also manifest deep meanings and metaphors through their embodied imagery. If we take the example of Obatala, the most senior deity in the Yoruba pantheon of 201 gods, we can see that the deity is represented as the epitome of purity, as revealed in the use of white clothes among members of his household. More significantly, Obatala honors those with disabilities and physical differences—who are collectively regarded as *eni orisa*, that is, "people of the deity," meaning that they are beloved and protected by Obatala. As a Yoruba proverb says, "Owo orisa lafi nwo afin" (It is the honor given to Obatala that we extend to the albino). Albinos, for instance, are regarded in many African societies as spiritual agents of the deities. Among the Yoruba in Nigeria, these individuals are given so much freedom that if they show up in traditional marketplaces, they will be showered with gifts because it is believed that they are a good omen for a successful business. Obatala is praised as a perfect fashioner of human beings—"eni soju, eni semu, orisa ni ma sin" (he who fashions eyes and the nose, it is the orisa that I will worship)—and thus the Yoruba are careful not to make fun of individuals with disabilities or peculiar physical traits such as protruding teeth, because those individuals are fashioned by the orisa. If we take this point further, we could even argue that a significant relational role of Obatala and the disabled in the Yoruba divine economy is providing the theological rationale for protecting these individuals.

But in the ideology and rituals of sacred kingship, we see the strongest evidence of embodied beliefs and practices. Among the Baganda of Uganda and the Akan people of Ghana, the king is regarded as sacred, and his sacred body is held in reverence. From his hair to his toes, all segments of his body are sacred and therefore tabooed against profanity. In a number of cultures such as the Benin, Fon, and Yoruba, one must keep an informed distance from the king—one relates to the king not like a human being but like a deity. Greetings and interactions must reflect these relationships. As such, the Yoruba say, "Mo sun m'oba egbeje, mo jina s'oba, egbee fa, enit o ba ri oba fin, ni oba npa." (I move close to the king, two hundred times six times, I keep a distance from the king, two hundred and seven times. He who disrespects the king, the king kills.) In other words, it is crucial to keep an informed distance from the Yoruba sacred kings if one wants to live long. As the example illustrates, in this context, relationality is an ontological process—the need and ability to maintain ritual distance, while at the same time having secular interactions, emphasizes the importance of the body in ritual and relationship. The king covers his head at all times (also, in Ghana, the kings cannot touch the ground with their feet); in ritual, the king dips his left toe in the blood of the sacrifice, which represents

the continuity and maintenance of the ancestral relationships from which he derives his authority and power once he has ascended the throne of his father.

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# Introduction: Embodiment and Relationality in Religions of Africa and Its Diasporas

YOLANDA COVINGTON-WARD AND JEANETTE S. JOUILI

Melodically rocking Sufi bodies remember God on a former plantation in South Carolina, reconnecting with ancestors and an imagined homeland. Dancers in Martinique use the sound of the *bèlè* drum to achieve emotional transcendence and resist alienation caused by centuries of French assimilation. Devotees of Mama Tchamba in Togo use shuffling steps, dress, and ritual to placate the spirits of formerly enslaved people from the North whom their own ancestors bought and sold. All of these examples foreground one thing: the role of the body specifically in the shaping, transmitting, and remaking of African and African diasporic religions and religious communities.

*Embodying Black Religions in Africa and Its Diasporas* is an edited volume that critically examines the role of the body as a source of religiously motivated social action for people of African descent across the geographic regions of the African continent, the Caribbean and Latin America, the American South, and Europe. From a variety of religious contexts—from Pentecostalism in Ghana and Brazil to Ifá divination in Trinidad to Islam in South Carolina, Nigeria, and London—the contributors investigate the complex intersections between the body, religious expression, and the construction and negotiation of particular social relationships and collective identities. A series of case studies explore how embodied practices—such as possession and spirit-induced trembling, wrestling in pursuit of deliverance, ritual dance, and gestures and postures of piety—can inform notions of sexual citizenship, challenge secular definitions of the nation, or promote transatlantic connections as well as local and ethnic

identities beyond the nation-state. Together these chapters offer a substantial contribution to understandings of relationality, embodiment, and spirituality within the context of various global Black experiences.

The turn to the body and embodiment over the past thirty years within religious studies and related disciplines in the humanities and the social sciences has led to a reappraisal of the body's role in social and cultural practices. While embodied religious practices have been studied in scholarship on religion and in anthropology from early on, they have been disregarded (following the Cartesian body-mind paradigm) as inconsequential or symbolic or, especially when encountering the non-Western other, used as markers of difference and primitivism (Asad 1997; Baker 1998). Thus, articulations of the body-mind were from their inception used to organize and order the world in hierarchies, not only between Europeans and non-Europeans, between colonizer and colonized, and between white, Black, and brown but also between men and women. Here reason not only defined the West (at least its white male inhabitants) but also became the basis for defining humanity (the "cogito") in highly *racialized* terms. An excess of embodied practices signified a lack of interiority, rationality, discipline, and morality—and was thus a sign of not having a "real" religion and lacking in humanity (Maldonado-Torres 2014; Wynter 2003).[1] Hence, the new attention to the body has engendered a veritable epistemological shift that discloses the ontological relevance of corporeality.

Critical race, postcolonial, and feminist scholarship's engagement with poststructuralism, phenomenology, and/or praxis theory but also non-Western philosophical and religious approaches has provided scholars with analytic tools to revalorize embodied practices, allowing them to more completely grasp bodies' potential for shaping selves and society, religious life and religious communities. Over the past three decades, scholars of religion have deconstructed the body-mind dichotomy and its underlying assumptions (Asad 1993; Masuzawa 2005; Smith 1998). Having turned from body-mind dualism to recognition of our "mindful body" (Schepers-Hughes and Lock 1987), scholars have at long last begun to fully do justice to Marcel Mauss's understanding of the "biological means of entering into 'communion with God'" (1973, 2; see also Asad 1997, 48). A flourishing literature on religion and the body now takes seriously the "somatic quality of . . . piety" (Bynum 1991, 16), the "intense ambiguity of the individual body as locus both of potential sanctification and of defilement" (Coakley 1997, 9), examining "how religions speak to . . . body-oriented human concerns" (McGuire 1990, 284).

Yet the empirical world is still struggling with powerful modern narratives that have been globalized since the advent of European hegemony. Without

being overdetermined, let alone fully oppressed, by these narratives, non-Western religious practitioners are still grappling with these legacies, which have downgraded their religious traditions and questioned their humanity. However embodied practices were reevaluated—whether suppressed, altered, reaccentuated, or reinvented—the body has always mattered in various forms of religious expression and practice. Indeed, the body continues to creatively transform people's shared spiritual lifeworlds in multiple ways. This situation is particularly true for people of African descent, the concern of this volume.

While scholars of African and African diasporic religions have focused for many years on the role of the body, they have only rarely been in conversation with each other. Furthermore, their conversations about religious embodiment were limited by a focus on particular religions (i.e., Santeria, Islam) or by geography (African religions, Caribbean religions, African American religions). This debate has additionally been divided by contested understandings of what counts as African diasporic or "traditionally African" religions, where often traditions like Islam or Christianity have not been considered to be authentically African (see Carter, this volume; see also Matory 2005; Routon 2006). Bringing these different areas of research together in one volume is not merely a response to a geographic disconnect; the objective of this volume is to transcend often-ideological divisions in academic debates in order to enable different analytic perspectives. Structural conditions are also relevant to this discussion, as Africans on the continent and throughout its many diasporas are dealing with related historical and current social and economic challenges. These are the consequences of colonialism, enslavement, global racial hierarchies, and racial oppression, as well as social exclusion and marginalization, both within nation-states and within global systems of power. As a result of neoliberal reforms—such as structural adjustment programs, the reduction of social services, and the outsourcing of industrial jobs—people of African descent on the continent and elsewhere endure massive deteriorations in the social fabric of often-vulnerable communities. Religion has come to play a major role, both historically and in the contemporary moment, in coping with these changes and also causing larger social transformations. In this volume we examine how these related structural conditions have impacted spiritual embodied practices and religiously defined forms of sociability and solidarity in African and African diasporic religions. We also question to what extent the investigated practices of embodiment and relationality partake in the constitution of a Black Atlantic (Gilroy 1993) or larger global Black social imaginary.

## Theorizing the Black Body in Religions of Africa and Its Diasporas

There are several trends in scholarly studies of embodiment and the body in the religions of Africa and its diasporas. By placing these trends into dialogue with each another, we aim in this volume to illuminate connections, divergences, and myriad understandings and practices that help us to expand studies of religion and embodiment in new and exciting directions. We home in on thematic connections across Africa and its diasporas in certain key texts that illustrate broader trends in the field concerning embodiment in relation to the politics of representation, healing, spirit possession, affect, and memory. Our volume extends discussions around these existing themes, while also refocusing attention on (1) materiality, (2) mobility, and (3) relationality, belonging, and community formation in studies of embodiment in the religions of Africa and its diasporas.

Existing research on embodiment in the religions of Africa and its diasporas contributes to understanding the politics of representation and the ways it informs religious and spiritual beliefs and practices. The long history of enslavement, colonialism, segregation, apartheid, and other forms of racialized oppression over the past five centuries has created a context in which European misconceptions and representations of the bodies of people of African descent have shaped and continue to influence Black people and their religions in myriad ways. Across time and geographic space, the Black body became the site of interrogation for larger judgments about morality and even questioning whether people of African descent were fully human. Fanciful European travel narratives about deviant, monstrous, and idle African bodies were used to justify the slave trade and European colonialism in Africa (Morgan 1997). On the other side of the Atlantic, discourses about Black people as irrational, immoral, and sexually deviant, having bodies with superhuman strength and higher thresholds for physical pain, proliferated throughout the era of enslavement (W. Johnson 1999; Pernick 1985; Roberts 1997). M. Shawn Copeland (2010) has highlighted the relationship between Christianity and perceptions of Black women's bodies as objects of property, production, reproduction, and sexual violence in slavery, such that Black women were seen as incapable of rational thought and the interiority that defined Protestantism at the time. Discourses about Black religious practices that described them as "'heathenish observances,' 'insane yellings' and violent contortions of the body" were used to categorize Black people as an Other in juxtaposition to whiteness and support their ill treatment and exclusion from citizenship (Evans 2008, 69). Indeed, theologians Anthony Pinn (2010) and Stephanie Mitchem (2014) explore these

troubling histories as the reason for a lack of attention to the body in African American theology (see also CERCL Writing Collective 2017).

In the African context, religion as an aspect of culture became a critical marker of difference in European-African relationships (Pierre 2013). Cases such as the Tswana ethnic group in South Africa encountering European Nonconformist missions highlight how negative perceptions of African belief systems and practices shaped Western missionary attitudes toward African spirituality and religions while also helping to bolster Western claims of superiority, modernity, civilization, and the supposed benefits of the colonial empire (Chidester 2014; Comaroff and Comaroff 1991). In Latin America and the Caribbean, nation-states and proponents of certain forms of Catholicism and Protestantism used discourses about "paganism" and "evil" to actively suppress African-inspired religions such as Santeria, Candomblé, and Vodou and Abrahamic faiths such as Islam, both during and after enslavement (Diouf 2013; Matory 2005; Palmié 2002; Ramsey 2011). The control of both bodies and embodiment played a central role in all of these efforts.

Religious communities and individuals of African descent have reacted to these stereotypes about Black bodies and embodiment and these proscriptions against certain embodied practices in various ways, whether in Chicago, Colombia, or Côte d'Ivoire. In the United States during the nineteenth century, for instance, "black religious capacity became the lens through which blacks were judged as fit or unfit for participation and inclusion in the nation" (Evans 2008, 5). Thus, Black people often used their own self-presentation and worship practices to disrupt prevailing narratives of degeneracy and difference. For instance, Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham (1993, 190–191) explores how Black Baptist women in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century United States resisted being categorized as "the embodiment of deviance" by emphasizing "respectable behavior," using their dress, conduct, manners, and morals to present "alternate images of black women." Marla Frederick's (2003) more recent ethnography of Southern Black Baptist women even shows how religious body politics impacts sexual intimacy as another form of respectability for single and married women alike. Embracing respectability is one among many manners of addressing Western stereotypes about Blackness and Black bodies in worship, both in Africa (Ross 1999) and in its diasporas (White 2012), and both historically and contemporaneously. However, it is not the only option, as other Black religious communities have opted to create more oppositional cultures where white conceptions of Blackness are intentionally decentered, rejected, and marginalized. Rastafarian religion in Jamaica is one example where adherents profess an unabashed love for Blackness and self-elevation and wear their hair

in unruly dreadlocks as an intentional break with notions of proper appearance and respectability (Price 2009). Historical studies of African religions (especially relating to the colonial era) tend to pay more attention to the politics of representation than do contemporary studies; however, these concerns continue to influence religious practices across the continent in different ways. All of these responses clearly illustrate the impact of external gazes and perceptions on Black religious expression. Accordingly, *Embodying Black Religions in Africa and Its Diasporas* pays attention to the many ways that religion directly responds to, subtly engages, and even ignores processes of racialization and stigmatization on both sides of the Atlantic. The chapters explore how the social context shapes understandings of and reactions to the politics of representation in Black religions across the globe. Moreover, this volume highlights how misconceptions and stigmas related to certain forms of religious embodiment are internalized or even explicitly rejected.

Scholarly studies of spirit possession and religious and spiritual healing in the religions of Africa and its diasporas are another fruitful area for examining the relationship among religion, relationality, and embodiment. This is especially the case in disciplines such as anthropology, where spirit possession has "long been an explicit topic of inquiry" (Boddy 1994, 408). While much valuable research has emerged from studies of spirit possession, we recognize that outsized scholarly attention to such practices over others is not without its own problems, as it leads to questions about the privileging of perceived "exotic" religions or an emphasis on difference in the religious communities that scholars choose to study (Ware 2014), adding another layer to our previous discussion of the politics of representation. Nevertheless, this caveat does not diminish the value of classic texts such as *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn* (Brown 1991), *Wombs and Alien Spirits: Women, Men, and the Zar Cult in Northern Sudan* (Boddy 1989), and *Body of Power, Spirit of Resistance: The Culture and History of a South African People* (Comaroff 1985), all of which illustrate the effectiveness of privileging the body in studies of everyday religion. More recent volumes, such as *Spirited Things: The Work of "Possession" in Afro-Atlantic Religions* (P. Johnson 2014), investigate the politics and power dynamics of spirit possession in everyday life. Other research has emphasized spirituality and religion as a source of healing for both the individual physical body and the larger social body (Douglas 1970).

In the existing literature, one significant difference seems to be that research on spirit possession and healing in Africa often focuses on more social aspects of healing, examining processes for healing larger communities and individuals, especially through examining their relationships with others. In contrast,

research in the diaspora tends to focus more on individuals, with less emphasis on healing families or communities. Studies of mind-body healing and biological mechanisms in Brazilian Candomblé (Seligman 2014) and African American folk healing practices (Mitchem 2007) illustrate how religion and spirit possession can be utilized to heal individual selves. Similarly, studies of the interrelational politics of affliction in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (Janzen 1992), traditional healing practices in Tanzania (Langwick 2011), and spiritual healing in charismatic Apostolic churches in Botswana (Werbner 2011) highlight how spirituality-based healing is enmeshed in social and spiritual relationships and plays a key role in repairing social discord and healing the body politic. However, these trends are not absolute, as more recent work on the global spread of Pentecostal and charismatic religions across Africa stresses how the breaking of social relationships is emphasized in discourses of success and prosperity (Meyer 1999). These questions concerning individuality/dividuality (Coleman 2011; Klaits 2011), relationships with human and spiritual beings, and illness and health continue to be explored in this volume as our contributors consider collective aspects of healing and spirit possession across the Atlantic divide.

The recent turn to emotion, the senses, and affect has also influenced studies of spirit possession and healing. In her work on Santeria in Cuba and in the United States, Aisha Beliso-De Jesús notes that practitioners say Orishas are "sensed and felt on the body" through what she calls copresence between the person and the deity. These shared experiences of copresence then help to foster a religious community as "an embodied epistemology of copresence enables unification through sensing diaspora" (2014, 519; see also Beliso-De Jesús 2015). Overall, healing and spirit possession are used to create new relationships and larger communities within diverse contexts across the religions of Africa and its diasporas. These religious practices and communities can also be better understood in relation to one another, as one goal of this volume is to bring studies of Africa and those of the diaspora into dialogue. For example, studies of African diasporic religions often focus on Africa as a past place of origin for beliefs and practices rather than seeing Africa as coeval (Herskovits [1941] 1990; Pierre 2013), while studies of African religions often fail to make reference to African diasporic religions. Several chapters in this volume disrupt these tendencies by highlighting trends and connections across geographic space in understanding embodiment and relationality, an approach that has been championed in a few recent studies (Matory 2005).

Other typical approaches in studies of embodiment and relationality in African and African diasporic religions include attention to memory. Genealogy

and perceived connections to familial or spiritual ancestors inform the character of embodied practices that come to define membership in religious congregations. Examples include Ethiopian Jews and African Hebrew Israelites in the United States (Jackson 2013; Weisenfeld 2017) and Kongo prophetic movements and churches in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (Covington-Ward 2016). A common use of kinship (whether real or imagined) connects these different works, which create new social identities and stake political claims on larger sociopolitical contexts of racial oppression and social exclusion.

Other approaches to memory in African and African diasporic religions highlight embodied practices and belief systems as ways to actively reestablish connections to ancestors and specific geographic and linguistic spaces (Daniel 2005; Olupona 2011). Like in studies of spirit possession in African diasporic religions, attention to memory in religions in the diaspora often privileges looking back to a distant, unchanging African homeland in the past. In the case of Africa, the memories that are invoked often emphasize time (e.g., the precolonial era or early twentieth century) rather than both time and space, while also revealing dynamic transformations in beliefs and practices. This volume places these perspectives and regions into conversation with one another by highlighting mobility as a concept that helps us to move beyond the limitations of either approach.

The contributors also build on and extend these existing trends (politics of representation, spirit possession, healing and affect, and memory) in scholarship on embodiment in the religions of Africa and its diasporas by emphasizing relationality and social processes of religious community formation. Moreover, by exploring materiality, mobility, and local political and social contexts, they highlight a vast continuum of articulations and strategies around embodiment and relationality for people of African descent. They consider a range of expressions from the explicit and intentional employment of embodiment pursuing particular aims to approaches shaped by existing social structures and power dynamics to reactions that lie beyond the realm of consciousness and draw on habitual memory.

## Embodiment: Self-Formation, Epistemology, and Intersubjectivity

The theoretical musings among scholars of religion enabled through a body-centered perspective are vast. For the purpose of our volume, we want to foreground in particular three distinct but related insights that are fundamental for the shared theoretical perspectives elaborated throughout the different chap-

ters. These insights refer to (a) the significance of the body for self-formation, (b) the acknowledgment that the body generates knowledge, and (c) the role of the body in producing relationality and intersubjectivity.

The first fundamental insight developed by the literature in regard to the ontological status of the body underscores the centrality of bodies for understanding the self, personhood, or subjectivity (Bynum 1991; McGuire 1990), which has even caused some scholars to argue for a "conflation of subjectivity and embodiment" (Furey 2012, 13). These claims point to the capacity of the body in shaping interiority, rather than merely being material that gives expression to the already realized interior self. Whether inspired by a poststructural emphasis on discipline, learning, and habituation (see, for instance, Asad 1993, 2003; Mahmood 2005) or a phenomenological focus on experience and consciousness (see Csordas 1993, 2008; Stoller 1995, 1997), scholars have demonstrated that the body is a key site for fashioning and refashioning interiority and selfhood.

Scholars of religion have studied how religious practitioners, through a vast array of embodied practices ranging from dietary practices, dress styles, spirit procession, dance, and trembling to prayer chant or pilgrimage, employ their bodies to self-cultivate, transform, remold, perfect, and heal their selves and realize various kinds of religious selves (Covington-Ward 2016; Jackson 2013; Jouili 2015; Seligman 2014). In turn, these cultivated bodies represent and resignify the religious self (Jouili 2015; Abdul Khabeer 2016). By making these claims, scholars furthermore have questioned understandings of agency as located within consciousness. In place of being read in terms of "oppressed subjectivity" (Keller 2005, 5), the religious body has emerged as a locus of agency.

A second crucial aspect developed in this literature is the challenge to epistemologies underlying the duality between body and mind, which locate reason, understanding, and knowledge within the mind, while cognition is produced only linguistically. In contrast to this view, scholars have paid extensive attention to how our human "bodies are involved in our various ways of knowing" (McGuire 1996, 111–112; see also Csordas 1993; Sullivan 1990). This insight has proved especially fruitful for researchers of religion who investigate how the body (as well as its culturally elaborated senses) is engaged in generating religious knowledge, spiritual ideas, alternative states of reality, mystic experiences, and in "knowing" the divine. A number of studies have furthermore shown how bodies produce knowledge of the past and thus become a locus of collective memory (Connerton 1989; Covington-Ward 2016; McCall 2000).

Scholars have provided ample evidence in a variety of religious and spiritual contexts of the human body's significant capacity to produce different

kinds of knowledge, leading scholars to speak of "embodied" or "sensory" epistemologies—or of "knowing bodies." At the same time, this should not be taken as an understanding of *primordially* knowing bodies. As Talal Asad (1997, 48) has astutely observed, knowing bodies have to be trained to know and have to learn to generate knowledge. In other words, the question of bodily knowledge also always brings up the question of "bodily ignorance" (Dilley 2010). In addition to drawing on culturally shaped body habits or techniques, religious practitioners quite often set out to consciously train and retrain their bodies. The recent study by Rudolph Ware on embodied learning in Senegambian Qur'anic education has powerfully demonstrated the intense training that enables bodies to "archive, transmit, decode, and actualize religious knowledge" (2014, 67). He further challenges still-existing binaries between textual and embodied learning by arguing that rather than texts being learned and acquired through the mind, in West African Qur'anic schooling the body can be equated with the text, and the text can be taught "via the body" (67).

Central to the present volume's underlying theoretical framework, the third and most significant contribution of the literature is the shift in studies on embodiment from a focus on individual bodies, subjectivity, and individual personhood to a better recognition of the relational character of subjectivity—namely, *intersubjectivity* (Beliso-De Jesús 2015; Covington-Ward 2016; Jouili 2015; Ware 2014). In other words, the initial critique of the body-mind split and the foregrounding of the embodied self does not automatically lead to a thinking that transcends the isolated, bounded, independent ego. Even studies that recognized the social or societal impact of embodied practices still often analyzed embodied (individual) selves as only secondarily and contingently entering into communication and interaction with others, as Thomas Csordas (2008) critiqued. The ongoing difficulty of thoroughly grasping the relational nature of the self is, as Constance Furey puts it, connected to a general misconception of the self, standing in contrast to the social: "The split and fragmented subject is still more often studied in relation to society, the material world, social norms, and physical constraints and conditioning than as part of a relational dynamic, in the context of intimate and influential relationships" (2012, 21). Such an understanding also has consequences for how agency is frequently theorized as oppositional to the social (see Mahmood 2001). At the same time, Furey cautions against conceptualizing these relationships naively or romantically. Relationships do not eschew power because "power is relationally internalized, enacted, and transformed" (Furey 2012, 21; see also Asad 2003).

The recognition that the self is embodied and relational has furthermore prompted discussion about intersubjectivity being related to "intercorpore-

ality" (Csordas 2008). As Gail Weiss has noted, "To describe *embodiment as intercorporeality* is to emphasize that the experience of being embodied is never a private affair, but is always already mediated by our continual interactions with other human and nonhuman bodies" (1999, 5). This insight has allowed for a more capacious understanding of how human bodies, nonhuman material bodies, and nonmaterial entities (e.g., spirits, divinities, and deities) interact with each other, which is crucial for the study of religion. While scholars writing on non-Western societies have furthered the critique of the modern Western ideology of the self as singular, exposing different ideas and practices of selfhood, some scholars have also rightfully cautioned against postulating a simple binary between the individualist or individuated Western self versus the non-Western (for example, African collectivist or relational) self (Coleman 2011).

Together these studies have enabled a deeper sense of subjectivity as embodied, an understanding of the relational dimension of the embodied subject, and an appreciation of the knowing capacities of human bodies. These three arguments are by far not the only important insights these studies on religion and embodiment have contributed. Nonetheless, these three strands are to varying degrees the focus of the individual contributions to this volume.

## Chapter Routes and Circuits

The twelve chapters in this volume are organized thematically into four parts that investigate different aspects of the relationship between embodiment and religion in African and African diasporic religions. In the first part, "Spiritual Memories and Ancestors," contributors interrogate how material bodies have become the locus for remembrance of the past, including collective histories and ancestors. They also consider related processes that build new connections, identities, and communities. In chapter 1, "Spirited Choreographies: Embodied Memories and Domestic Enslavement in Togolese Mama Tchamba Rituals," Elyan Hill examines Ewe dance rituals in Togo, in which the descendants of slave traders commemorate the domestic slave trade through celebrating Mama Tchamba, a pantheon of enslaved spirits. Hill demonstrates not only how these dancers mobilize their bodies to (re)produce narratives of the past through associative, metonymic strategies but also how, through this remembrance, they are able to diagnose obstructions to collective unity and self-examine historical and social disjuncture within their communities. Through these rituals, Hill argues, established power relations are inversed by destabilizing boundaries between master and mastered, enabling new ethical relationships.

Youssef Carter discusses in chapter 2, "Alchemy of the *Fuqara*: Spiritual Care, Memory, and the Black Muslim Body," how African American Muslims pursue spiritual healing of the past through the cultivation of a particular embodied West African Sufi discipline. The mosque he investigates is situated on land that was formerly a slave plantation in South Carolina; today it belongs to a transatlantic Sufi Order that originated in Senegal and operates as an important site for remembrance among African American Sufi Muslims. Carter examines how remembrance of the past is imprinted on their bodies through the enactment of specific embodied Sufi disciplines that retrain bodies and spirits via specific bicoastal collaborations, whether through remembrance of the enslaved Muslim ancestors that populated the Carolinas, of the dead and living Sufi saints, or of God and his Prophet. These forms of remembrance reconnect African American Muslims to a tradition of inward spiritual mastery that functions to cleanse them of their race-based trauma. For the practitioners, these practices therefore constitute techniques of self-care and are also embedded in concrete discourses of healing.

In chapter 3, "Spiritual Ethnicity: Our Collective Ancestors in Ifá Devotion across the Americas," N. Fadeke Castor examines a Yorùbá religious conference in Trinidad in order to reflect on the tensions that can emerge when a particular *spiritual ethnicity* is produced across ostensibly disparate racial assemblages through participation in embodied spiritual performances. Her analysis shows that, on the one hand, embodied movements enacted by practitioners from across Latin America, the Caribbean, and North America serve to reinforce a ritual collectivity established on the grounds of a shared imagined religious heritage. Through embodied rituals for the ancestors, historical memory is created that locates the practitioners within the African diaspora. On the other hand, she also shows how racial formations and the lived experience of heritage cannot always be fully transcended.

The three chapters in part II, "Community, Religious Habitus, and the Senses," consider how a variety of different embodied and material practices contribute to producing a religious habitus or shaping a particular kind of pious sensorium. Chapter 4, entitled "Faith Full: Sensuous Habitus, Everyday Affect, and Divergent Diaspora in the UCKG," by Rachel Cantave, deals with the expansion of Pentecostalism in traditionally Catholic Brazil. Here the adaptation of ecstatic practices used in traditional Afro-Brazilian religions, which are re-dressed as evangelical, has proved to be highly attractive to Pentecostal church members. She examines how Pentecostal practitioners in Salvador de Bahia work through a variety of intersubjective affective registers (including touch and sight) to develop a particular pious sensory experience that affiliates them to their faith—

and, paradoxically, ultimately reaffirms an individualist discourse. Through a discourse among practitioners about the role of feeling, Cantave shows how ideological and embodied knowledges are internalized by Afro-Brazilian adherents and rearticulated as a form of divergent Blackness, connected to a quest for social uplift.

In chapter 5, "Covered Bodies, Moral Education, and the Embodiment of Islamic Reform in Northern Nigeria," Elisha P. Renne explores the religious politics of Islamic dress by examining the significance of cloth coverings in the embodiment of Islamic religious practice. In Zaria, Kaduna, and Kano in northern Nigeria, which are home to numerous Islamic institutions and schools, the injunction for men and women to cover their bodies has been widely observed, although distinctive forms of dress and head covering are associated with different Islamic reform groups. Paying specific attention to the Islamic reform movement Jama'atu Izalat al-Bid'a wa Iqamat al-Sunna—known as Izala—Renne examines the gendered implications of Izala's emphasis on dress within its broader educational approaches. Moreover, Renne underscores the interconnectedness of spiritual, bodily, and material religious practice in the moral education promoted by the Izala movement.

In chapter 6, "Embodied Worship in a Haitian Protestant Church in the Bahamas: Religious Habitus among Bahamians of Haitian Descent," Bertin M. Louis Jr. is concerned with a context of massive conversion, in this case a traditionally Catholic migrant population converting to Protestantism in their host country. Louis uses the case of Haitian migrants in the Bahamas to show that conversion entails not only a reworking of a religious habitus but also the reworking of a cultural Haitian habitus. In the context of Bahamian xenophobia and anti-Haitian sentiments, Haitian religious expressions—hybrid Catholic Vodou—are deemed backward, primitive, and too African; becoming Protestant in the Bahamas also means to become, through bodily work, less markedly Haitian. He describes particular forms of individual and collective self-remaking through embodied practices, which allows Haitian Bahamians to negotiate their different contested identities. On the one hand, they resist the constant marginalization of their community and integrate certain altered forms of Haitian cultural practices. On the other hand, they seek, through their newly adopted Protestant identity as it manifests in a reformed embodied habitus, to increase their chances for citizenship and cultural belonging in the Bahamas.

Part III, "Interrogating Sacredness in Performance," investigates how dance and spoken-word performances deploy, work through, or recover a variety of different spiritual and religious identities. Chapter 7, "The Quest for Spiritual

Purpose in a Secular Dance Community: *Bèlè*'s Rebirth in Contemporary Martinique," by Camee Maddox-Wingfield, describes the ancestral dance practice *bèlè*, brought to Martinique by enslaved Africans. Bèlè was repressed by the Catholic Church and discouraged by France's national model of assimilation, but it has witnessed a cultural revival in recent decades, instigated by cultural activists and artist intellectuals. Maddox-Wingfield challenges popular accounts claiming that all elements of African religiosity have dissolved from Martinique's cultural landscape by showing the spiritual and religious significance bèlè can carry for practitioners who are searching for healing from feelings of alienation, dispossession, and vulnerability associated with Martinique's so-called identity crisis. Ultimately, she reads the bèlè revival as embodied resistance to the French colonial, secular assimilation project.

In chapter 8, "Embodying Black Islam: The Ethics and Aesthetics of Afro-Diasporic Muslim Hip-Hop in Britain," Jeanette S. Jouili turns her attention to the quickly growing Islamic hip-hop scene in urban Britain, a phenomenon that has been spearheaded mainly by British Muslims of African descent. She particularly examines how Black British Muslim hip-hop artists, by employing their bodies in particular ways, strive to outline a Black Muslim authenticity. Forms of corporeal conduct on stage, such as dress, gestures, and movement, become consequential for a performed embodied ethics that builds on Islamic *and* Black liberationist traditions of social justice and criticizes global structures of racial oppression. Jouili further shows how such an understanding of the body as ethical material transpires particularly in hip-hop lyrics by Black Muslim female artists. These lyrics challenge racialized discourses by recentering the (Black female) body, which in turn becomes a key conduit to formulate a socially engaged and racially aware Islamic ethics.

In chapter 9, "Secular Affective Politics in a National Dance about AIDS in Mozambique," Aaron Montoya investigates a form of secular body politics that proliferates within state productions that promote certain types of secular religiosity in Mozambique's capital, Maputo. Produced in the late 1990s, *Amatodos*, a state-sponsored dance performance piece, promotes proper religiosity conducive to neoliberal rule by performing contrasts between proper AIDS-free subjects as restrained, disembodied, and interiorized and complicit, downright criminal subjects who are unrestrained, ecstatic, promiscuous, and African. Montoya argues for further attention to this state-sponsored secular religiosity while also acknowledging how Mozambicans continue to engage in embodied spiritual practices in secular performances that promote a notion of intercorporeality as well as commenting on precarity, violence, and dashed expectations brought by the neoliberal regime.

The final part of the volume, "Religious Discipline and the Gendered and Sexual Body," examines similar questions with respect to gender and sexuality. In chapter 10, "Wrestling with Homosexuality: Kinesthesia as Resistance in Ghanaian Pentecostalism," Nathanael Homewood takes up the question of homosexuality within Ghanaian Pentecostalism. Going beyond studies that analyze the role of religious institutions in opposing homosexuality discursively, Homewood examines how embodied rituals within Pentecostalism are at least as relevant as discourses for understanding what he calls an increasing "antiqueer animus" in Ghana. He opens with a particular deliverance session performed by a Pentecostal prophet aimed at freeing two young women from the "spirit of lesbianism." He then reflects how, through physical exchanges in deliverance, sexuality is not only publicized but also constructed materially and metaphysically. But he also shows how bodies are able to resist the scripts that are written onto them and encrypted in deliverance. From this observation, he argues how embodied affect produced for a specific purpose can always take on a life of its own, exceeding and even reversing the intended outcome, enabling bodies to become sites of resistance.

In chapter 11, "Exceptional Healing: Gender, Materiality, Embodiment, and Prophetism in the Lower Congo," Yolanda Covington-Ward explores how the routinization of nonmainstream religious embodied practices such as trembling impacts the role of women in the Dibundu dia Mpeve Nlongo mu Afelika, a small Protestant African independent church in Luozi, a town in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Trembling indicates the embodiment of the Holy Spirit in the bodies of members and can be used to heal and bless others. In this church everyone may receive the Holy Spirit, yet only men may channel the Holy Spirit to heal and bless others. Covington-Ward shows how ideas about purity in regard to material culture restrict women's roles but also how the potential for embodied trembling allows women with spiritual gifts to continue to practice healing, especially as they are embedded in a larger prophetic tradition in the region. Her chapter highlights the sometimes-ambivalent relationship between material culture and embodiment for studies of African and African diasporic religions.

Casey Golomski concludes the fourth part of the volume in chapter 12, "Dark Matter: Formations of Death Pollution in Southeastern African Funerals," discussing funerary rites in southeastern Africa. He compares rites in the neotraditionalist Kingdom of Eswatini (formerly known as Swaziland) and neighboring cosmopolitan, urban South Africa by focusing on the local perceptions of *sinyama*, a dark penumbral emission akin to symbolic pollution. By tracing multiple reformulations of practices related to sinyama, Golomski shows how

histories of racialization have transformed the value of darkness as a negative quality of materiality in religious ritual, affecting human bodies and places, with particular consequences for women. He argues that, as a gendered and racialized religious formation, this inauspicious spiritual penumbra is a manifestation of ongoing ethical and embodied engagements with a changing world, materially shaped by modernity and life in the postcolony.

NOTE

1. When we use conceptual terms like *Western* (and, alternatively, *non-Western*), we refer to the geopolitical North Atlantic region, which—through a range of epistemological, cultural, economic, and military-expansionist practices—has legitimated its supremacy and globalizing power over the past several hundreds of years and continues to shape the contemporary present of people and societies across the globe.

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