African American Religion and Gender

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Black religion refers to more than solely religions in which persons of African descent identify. While persons of African descent practice a variety of religious practices and traditions, participation in religions such as Buddhism, Hinduism, and Native American religious traditions do not generally fall under the rubric of "black religion." In the context of the United States, the term "black religion" generally references two different categories of religions. The first category understands that during the experience of slavery and colonialism, Christianity and Islam took on a unique expression among persons of African descent. From this encounter comes what is commonly referred to as "the black church" tradition composed primarily of the historically black Christian denominations—National Baptist Convention, Progressive National Baptist Convention, African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church, African Methodist Episcopal Zion (AME Zion) Church, Christian Methodist Episcopal (CME) Church, Church of God in Christ (COGIC)—and secondarily the predominantly black congregations of the various Protestant denominations and Catholicism. Persons of African descent have also uniquely practiced Islam, resulting in the African and African American participation in "orthodox" Islam, as well as the distinctly black interpretations of Islam found in the Nation of Islam and the Five Percent Nation of Islam. One may also include the African Hebrew Israelite variation of Judaism in this category. For many black communities, the practice of Islam and Judaism were not adopted during slavery; rather they were consciously adopted and adapted at an earlier or later stage in history.

In a second category fall religions that are uniquely connected to the historical and spiritual experiences of persons of African descent. This category includes African traditional religions (also commonly referred to as "African-derived religions") and their variations throughout the United States, Canada, and the Caribbean, i.e., Santería, Candomblé, Vodun (or Voodoo), Ifa, Conjure, etc. These categories are not rigid, nor are they the only ways in which scholars and practitioners might describe black religions. For example, some scholars and practitioners consider Rastafari a vibration or expression of Christianity, while others see it as a religion uniquely tied to the experiences and circumstances of persons of African (more specifically but not exclusively, Jamaican)

descent. To further complicate categorization, the practice of black religions often transgresses categories. Many persons who practice Santería or Vodun also consider themselves Catholic and regularly attend Catholic mass services. Likewise, many individuals who practice "conjure" also attend a black Protestant congregation. There are also several documented examples of individuals who take on leadership and ministerial roles in an African traditional religious practice and a historically black Christian denomination.

Gender refers to the assumed societal and cultural differences between men and women. Biological sex identification is based on the presence of certain chromosomes (X-X for female and X-Y for male) and particular genitalia and hormones present on the human body. Gender indicates the roles, behaviors, activities, and characteristics that society assigns and validates for women and for men. One's gender identity denotes one's conception of being male or female, separate from one's biological sex. To identify as being masculine or feminine is to denote gender identification and particular characteristics within the gender. In the patriarchal culture of the United States, women and the roles, the characteristics, and the behaviors associated with them are assigned lesser value than men and things associated as masculine. For example, women are soft and emotional; they cook, clean, and raise children. Men, on the other hand, are hard and rational; they are the primary (if not sole) financial provider for families. These proscribed gender roles typically assume heterosexual relations between men and women.

Feminists generally agree that gender is socially constructed. That is, issues identified as masculine and feminine and most differences between men and women are characteristics ingrained into and perpetuated by society. These are not necessary characteristics of biological sex.

Gender and biological sex are more generally understood as usually considered in binary categories or even in oppositions. Biological sex is generally denoted as male or female; nevertheless, there are numerous individuals—collectively referred to as intersex—who in various ways do not fall neatly into one category or the other. Intersex persons are usually assigned a gender at an early age by doctors, parents, or guardians, choosing a gender identification at a later age. Likewise, gender is generally bifurcated into the categories of male and female or masculine and feminine.

When individuals or groups take on the characteristics of a gender alternatively or even consciously or unconsciously do not perform their expected gender orientation assigned by wider society properly, then they can be seen as transgressing gender boundaries. When one rejects the characteristics widely assigned to one's gender, one might best be called a gender "nonconformist," which refers to situations where a woman works in corporate America, as well as when a man wears clothing or cosmetics associated with women. When this transgression of gender boundaries extends to gender identification, individuals are often considered to be "transgender," which is when an individual who is biologically male identifies as female and vice versa. While some scholars believe that this latter activity is a reification of traditional gender roles, such identification still transgresses the correlation among gender, biology, and social roles and characteristics established by the wider society. Nonheterosexual identification and relationships also threaten the rigidity of gender boundaries in patriarchal societies such as the United States.

The Gender of God

In most black religions, God is referred to in masculine terminology. Although this is not particularly tied to the theology of the religious tradition, it can be very difficult to separate a gender-neutral conception of God from written and oral texts that describe God as having a gender. In Christianity, for example, God is thought of as a "spirit" and does not contain any of the biological indications of sex or gender.

Within Jewish and Christian scriptures, there are references to God using female and maternal language. Progressive varieties of these traditions will refer to God using both genders (Mother-Father God) or using gender-neutral language (Creator God). Nevertheless, the majority of these traditions refer to God in male language. This practice is widely understood as a product of human patriarchal interpretation of the religion. The predominantly male naming of God appears to be typical of monotheistic religions.

In religious traditions that recognize divine plurality, the divine is imaged as non-gendered or as gendered. For example, in Yoruba-based African traditional religions, the high God, Olodumare or Olorun, is not referenced with having one gender or another. Another category of the divine, variously referred to as orisa, orisha, or loa, maintains the genders and activities one finds among human culture. Thus there are male orisha such as Shango, the orisha associated with thunder, Ogun, the orisha of iron and war, or Elegba/Eshu, the orisha of the crossroads and major decisions. There are also female orisha such as Oya, the orisha associated with the whirlwinds, change, and family-based ancestors, Oshun, the orisha of the river, beauty, and love, or Yemanja or Yemoja, the orisha of the oceans and motherhood. While this is not an exhaustive list, this illustrates that some black religions can identify both the male and the female genders with the divine.

Feminist and womanist scholars often argue that the gendered understanding of the divine both reflects and contributes to the roles that the various genders are ascribed within human society. When, for example, God is imaged as male, men have more powerful roles in human society than women. Theologically, this is enforced by the idea that humanity is made in the image of God, and thus the man was created first and is the ideal form of human being. Likewise, many black religions expect human beings to strive to live as God or God's (usually) male representative, unite with God, or become God. When God is imaged as exclusively male, then both male and female human beings are expected to fashion their lives after a male ideal. Many persons argue that this male imaging of God is both a cause and a reflection of the gender roles that religions expect of women and men.

Gender Roles

Differentiated gender roles exist in nearly all religions, black religions being no exception. At the time of the Atlantic slave trade, gender roles in West African societies were more fluid than what many Africans experienced during slavery and in their lives in Western civilization. While most West African societies were patrilineal, which

required women to live with the husband's family, and had political systems dominated by men, women controlled the marketplace, exercised physical labor, and had effective mechanisms of political protest. Western patriarchy held more rigid gender roles and imposed its standards upon African slaves while also refusing them the right to live into them. Among Western society, women were expected to be pure, pious, submissive, and domestic. Black slave women, like their male counterparts, were portrayed as oversexed and expected to do physical labor. Yet within the slave community and African American community, they were expected to perform more Western roles of femininity such as gardening, cooking, and child rearing.

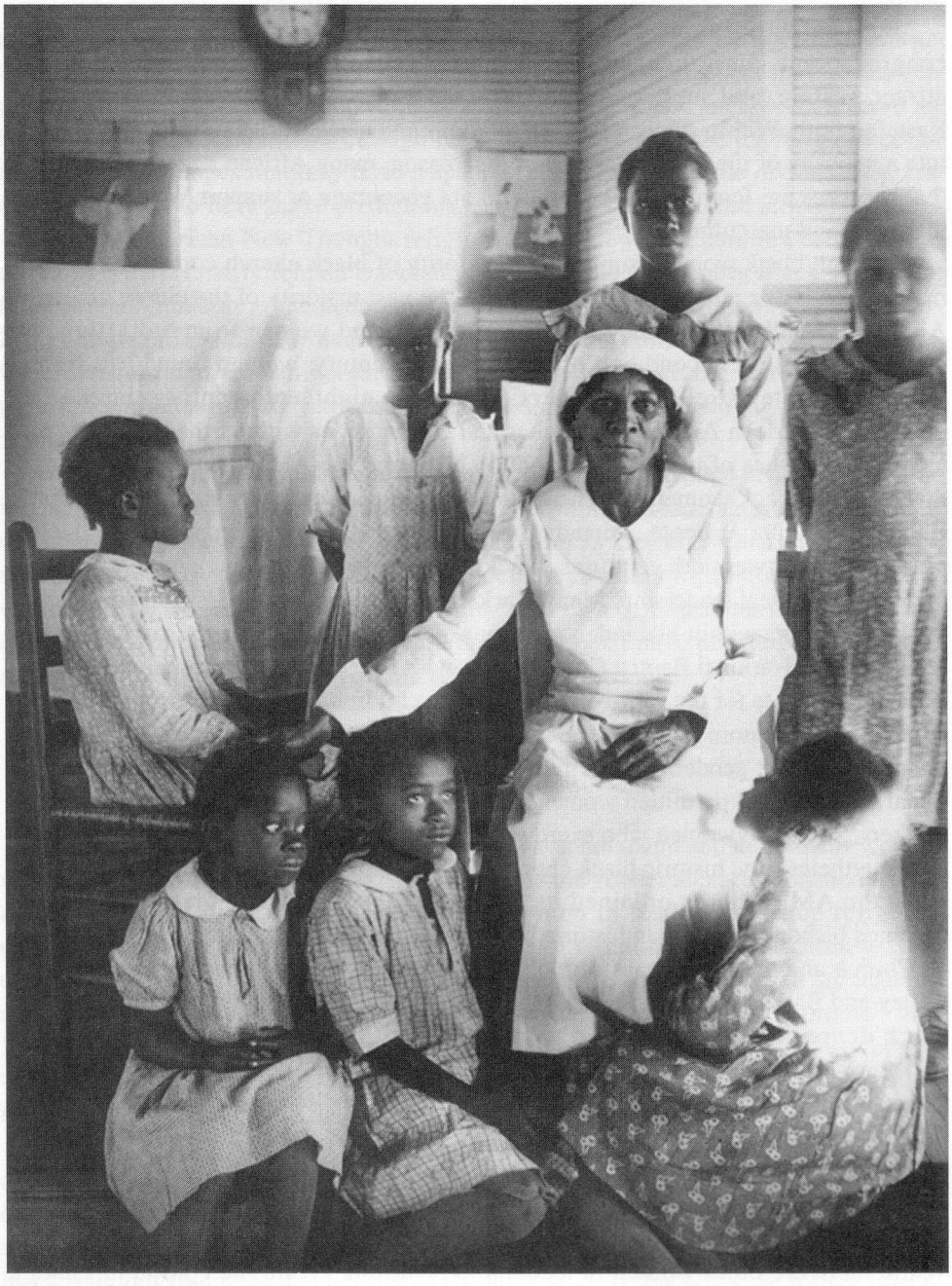
At the same time, white society did not permit African American men to live into the Western ideals of masculine behavior either. Black men were sold away from their families during slavery, forced to impregnate different women for the sake of breeding a growing slave populations, denied meaningful or substantive work, and subjected to laws that gave financial benefit to women raising children on their own. They were not able to provide physical or financial stability for their families as dictated by Western notions of masculinity. Thus many scholars argue that slavery and wider white American society emasculated black manhood.

Within their religious communities, African Americans maintained more Western notions of gender roles. For example, men and women often maintain different prescriptions for attire within black religions. Women are often expected to dress modestly with more conservative traditions expecting women to cover their heads and most of their arms and legs. Other religious traditions insist that men and women sit in different areas during worship. This is as true for conservative branches of Christianity and Islam as it is for African-derived religious practices. Some traditions, such as African Hebrew Israelites, maintain very rigid distinctions between genders, including restricting women from worship with men during women's menstruation. Within nearly all structured religious communities, more often women are assigned the tasks of cooking, cleaning, teaching, working with children, and performing secretarial duties, while men have more public leadership roles.

These Western traditional gender roles tend to be amplified in black religions that permit polygyny, marriages where a man can have more than one wife. This is present mostly in the African American practice of Islam and in some traditional African religious communities. Some women find polygyny to be an abusive situation wherein men are able to take advantage of and oppress multiple women and keep them dependent upon the man. Other women find polygyny to be a liberating relationship with financial benefit, the emotional and child-rearing support of co-wives, and spiritual authentication. In the United States where polygyny is illegal, usually the first wife, if any, is the only woman who has a legal relationship with the man.

Leadership Roles

Black religious communities generally reflect the patriarchal leadership patterns of a wider society that encourages and supports nearly exclusive male leadership. The religion's dominant historical story and sacred texts are often used to maintain



Sunday school at Holiness Church in Jackson, Mississippi, about 1935. (Eudora Welty/ Corbis)

the oppression of women and to provide a rationale for women's exclusion from leadership roles. The Bible, Qur'an, and other sacred scriptures often discuss the silencing of women, the particular dress required of women, and the man as head of the household.

Many black religions still struggle to maintain gender balance within their congregational constituencies. The Nation of Islam is renowned for its ability to attract, sustain, and support African American men. The same can be said of the Rastafari faith. Within African-derived religions and black Christianity, women constitute a majority of the congregation. For this reason, many African American men feel that churches are feminized spaces that do not encourage or support Western ideas of manhood and masculinity.

Although black women compose the majority of black church communities (estimates often hover around 60 to 70 percent), the vast majority of the clergy are male. Although most black church denominations restricted women from ordination into the clergy until the second half of the twentieth century, women found less formal ways to operate as religious leaders. In the late eighteenth century, Jarena Lee preached in African American churches and communities without the support of and against the wishes of her husband and the bishop in the AME Church. Other documented early black women preachers include Rebecca Cox Jackson, Sojourner Truth, Zilpha Elaw, Julia A. Foote, Amanda Berry Smith, and Virginia Broughton. In the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, black churchwomen were increasingly silenced under male clerical leadership. Many black churchwomen founded their own societies and associations within black denominations—such as the Women's Auxiliary Convention of the National Baptist Convention—where they were able to maintain leadership and advocate for the well-being of women, children, and the wider society. Other women became more active in the holiness and Pentecostal movements that, while maintaining strict gender roles in many instances, had a more decentralized organizational structure and permitted women's leadership. This includes the roles of "church mothers," elder laywomen who exercised significant influence within their churches.

Nevertheless, the historic black churches did not begin ordaining women until 1960 when the AME Church ordained its first female preacher. The first black women ordained bishops were not in historic black denominations, but in the United Methodist Church and the Episcopal Church in 1984 and 1989, respectively (Leontine T. C. Kelley and Barbara Harris). In 2000, the AME Church became the first of the historic black denominations to elect a woman, Vashti McKenzie, to the episcopacy. In congregational churches, such as the Baptist and COGIC denominations, eligibility to preach and ordination are based in local churches that have the right to decide eligibility to the clerical ranks. Ordination notwithstanding, women continue to experience gender oppression and inequities in ministry.

African Americans in Islam have been slower to support women's official leadership. Ava Muhammad is the first female national spokesperson for the Nation of Islam. While there are other women in leadership positions within the Nation of Islam's newspaper and other organizations, there are few female ministers within the Nation of Islam. Most other forms of Islam do not allow women to serve as imams.

In African-derived religions, the gender of the leadership depends on the structure and context of the practice. In some practices of African-derived religions, practitioners are organized into houses (iles) headed by a priest or priestess. In these contexts, there is considerable gender equity. Other communities embrace and perpetuate exclusive male leadership insisting that only men can be initiated into

priesthood, and women leaders must work underneath the man's leadership. In less formal communities, women exercise leadership through the respect they garner for possessing special gifts. Healer-women, conjure-women, and seer-women serve as leaders in their communities—through respect and fear—because the religious community acknowledges that they have a special relationship with the divine that gives them the ability to heal, make predictions, or curse the lives of those around them.

African American New Thought religions are the few communities within black religions with primarily female leadership. Whether independent or black congregations of predominantly white denominations such as Unity or Religious Science, many local congregations have women serving as their chief ministers. In 1974, Johnnie Colemon founded the Universal Federation for Better Living that serves as an umbrella organization for various African American New Thought congregations around the world.

Across black religious traditions, women's activity has cultivated civic and organizing skills that black women often translated into political leadership. Although they often face the same patriarchy in the political realm as they do within religious communities, African American women have been the leaders of grassroots movements within existing political structures and formed their own organizations (as in the women's club movement of the early twentieth century) that have promulgated the civil rights of all people, especially African Americans and women.

Transgressing Gender

The presence of women in leadership and religious scholarship and individuals who do not embrace the proscribed gender roles transgress the gender ideals established within and maintained by most black religions. Women in leadership force religious communities to expand and disrupt their notions of femininity and masculinity. New questions are raised: If public leadership is a masculine trait and women are leaders, are women behaving in masculine ways? Or do the definitions of "feminine" and "masculine" need to be revised, expanded, or perhaps left open for self-description? Or perhaps the issues should be completely reframed into questions of responsible moral agency regardless of gender or biological sex identification?

In 1985, Katie G. Cannon borrowed author Alice Walker's term "womanist" to describe the religious scholarship of black women that examines the religious lives of black women who are often oppressed by race, gender, and class. Since that time, womanist religious scholarship has researched and highlighted women's roles within black religious traditions and advocated theological ideas that advocate for the liberation and wholeness of black women and the entire community. Womanist religious scholarship has greatly influenced the religious scholarship of black men, white men, and other women of color. Thus much progressive religious scholarship acknowledges and resists the oppression of women and people of color.

Proscribed gender roles within black religions have not only served to oppress black women systemically, but they also hurt black men. Within these gender roles, black men are expected to live up to masculinist and capitalist ideals that society only deems

viable for white men. Attempting to live into the Western masculine roles within the African American community can contribute to the abuse and mistreatment of women. In these instances, men disallow women from expressing the divinity that is within both women and men. Some men intentionally seek out ways to support women in religious leadership and balanced imagery for the divine. These men feel that it is no healthier for men to worship exclusively male images of God (especially when many of those images are white male images, as in the case of Christianity, and although rarely acknowledged, quite homoerotic for men and heteroerotic for women) than it is for women. Some men co-pastor and co-teach with women and strive to demonstrate balanced forms of leadership for their congregations.

For African American lesbian women, gay men, and bisexual and transgender persons, black religious communities can be one of the most oppressive arenas of contemporary society. The official statements and dominant practices of all black religions condemn homosexuality as unacceptable in the sight of God and community. Nevertheless, many gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender African Americans have historic, cultural, familial, emotional, and religious connections to black religious traditions. Within black church communities, gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender persons, like women, have been relegated to specific arenas of activity—namely ministries of music—with the expectation that they will refrain from expressing their personal lives among the congregation, as do their heterosexual counterparts. This causes many lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender African Americans to live silently and closeted within their church communities or to leave the black church, Christianity, or religious community altogether. Some join predominantly white denominations or congregations that are affirming of all persons regardless of sexual or gender identification. Others have started their own denominations, such as Carl Bean and the Unity Fellowship of Christ Church, or independent local churches that affirm all persons regardless of gender and sexual identification.

There are no significant movements within any black religious tradition that are fighting for the full inclusion of individuals who identify as gay, lesbian, or transgender. Although the HIV/AIDS epidemic of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries gives religious communities relevant occasion to address issues of sexuality and gender, few have done more than condemn persons and behaviors that deviate from proscribed gender roles of a heterosexual and patriarchal norm. Far too often, work against the spread of HIV/AIDS in black religions tends to conflate nonheterosexual and nonconformist sexual activity with disease. Contemporary non-Christian black religions are rather adamant in their condemnation of gays, lesbians, and transgender persons.

Nevertheless, the act of spirit possession in African traditional religions often involves a transgression of traditional gender boundaries. A gendered divine figure may possess a human being with a different gender identification. For example, a male orisha may possess a female human being, or vice versa. The language used during these possessions may also transgress the heterosexual relationships that are generally accepted within the tradition. In the traditional Yoruba religion, for example, an orisha can be said to mount his or her horse. The "horse" refers to the human being.

The language of mounting signifies an intimate, almost sexual, relationship. Thus a male orisha may be mounting a male human being during spirit possession.

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