



# Exploring the Cultural / Spiritual Histories of the Q'echi' Maya and Yoruba-Caribbean People in the Americas: Maya Feminine Spirituality and Shango as Symbols of Cultural / Spiritual Preservation and Transnationalistic Unity

Hudson D.

Colorado School of Mines, UNITED STATES

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## Abstract

This review article utilizes the concept of oppositional consciousness to shed light on how the Q'echi' Maya of northern Guatemala and people of Yoruba ancestry in the Caribbean actively resisted and preserved their cultural/spiritual traditions in the face of Roman Catholic Christianity in the Americas. Specifically, this article will sketch the spiritual/cultural histories of the Q'echi' Maya in the northern highlands of Guatemala, with focused attention given to the Q'echi' Maya of Copal'aa and Coban, communities located in Alta Verapaz, and Yoruba-descended people in the Caribbean. This controlled comparison will highlight the similarities of how these two peoples resisted and transformed attempts by colonial powers to pacify them with Roman Catholic Christianity and instead transformed Roman Catholic icons and symbols into symbols of resistance and activism. Moreover, this work will argue that both the Q'echi' Maya in northern Guatemala and people of Yoruba ancestry in the Caribbean were able to effectively resist Roman Catholic Christianity because of the presence of a highly developed pantheon of energies and deities in their own spiritual traditions. Finally, this work will demonstrate how these peoples drew upon the feminine aspects of their spiritual realities in their traditions which emphasize a dynamic of complementarity when they were either forced to engage with Roman Catholic Christianity or incorporated their Indigenous spirituality with Roman Catholic Christianity. This work seeks to make these connections more explicit and thus contribute to the growing field of Hemispheric Studies.

**Keywords:** Oppositional consciousness, resistant spirituality, activist spirituality, q'echi' maya, yoruba, shango, saint barbara, santeria, gendered complementarity, transnationalistic unity, nuales.

## Introduction

**An Invitation to Reclaim Humanness. Resistant spirituality and activist spirituality to explain spiritual reclamation amongst the Q'echi' Maya and Yoruba-Caribbean people in the Americas:** While there is a vast literature on Maya spiritual preservation in Guatemala and Yoruba spiritual preservation in the Caribbean in their respective cultural/spiritual histories, there is substantially less scholarship and research that reveals a common pattern of *resistant* and *activist spirituality* that occurred and is occurring between the cultural/spiritual histories of Indigenous peoples and people of African ancestry who were brought to the Americas as slaves. The institutions of colonial domination, such as chattel slavery and other related processes, created a dynamic interaction within Indigenous and African cultures. Utilizing the analytical lenses of *resistant spirituality* and *activist spirituality*, this article will explore how Indigenous people and people of Afro-Caribbean ancestry created *oppositional consciousness* in the face of cultural and spiritual oppression. Specifically, this article will sketch the spiritual/cultural histories of the Q'echi' Maya in the northern highlands of Guatemala, with focused attention given to the

Q'echi' Maya of Copal'aa and Coban, communities located in Alta Verapaz, and Yoruba-descended people in the Caribbean. This controlled comparison will highlight the similarities of how these two peoples resisted and transformed attempts by colonial powers to pacify them with Roman Catholic Christianity and instead transformed Roman Catholic icons and symbols into symbols of resistance and activism. This oppositional consciousness gave voice to the historical trauma suffered by these cultures as a result of colonialism and the related processes of cultural and spiritual imperialism. The attempts to decimate Maya and Yoruba cultural/spiritual realities set the stage for *activist spirituality* and agency for "decolonizing spiritual space". Moreover, this work will argue that both the Q'echi' Maya in northern Guatemala and people of Yoruba ancestry in the Caribbean were able to effectively resist Roman Catholic Christianity because of the presence of a highly developed pantheon of energies and deities in their own spiritual traditions. Finally, this work will demonstrate how these peoples drew upon the feminine aspects of their spiritual realities in their traditions which emphasize a dynamic of complementarity when they were either forced to engage with Roman Catholic Christianity or incorporated their Indigenous

spirituality with Roman Catholic Christianity. This work seeks to make these connections more explicit and thus contribute to transforming the story of humanity by returning to the wisdom of the cultural/spiritual histories of the Q'echi' Maya and Yoruba-descended peoples.

Linking the stories of resistant and activist spirituality of the Q'echi' Maya of northern Guatemala and Yoruba-descended peoples in the Caribbean strengthens the emerging scholarship that reveals a transnational "space" that has been a repository of unity of Indigenous peoples and the people of African descent in the Americas<sup>1</sup>. Common experiences have forged a transnational and united "consciousness" since both groups were forcibly displaced and/or resettled into chattel slavery in the Western Hemisphere during the late 15th Century<sup>2</sup>. This work adds to the scholarship that articulates how the Maya employed what some have termed *complementarity* to articulate the balance between the masculine and feminine attributes of spirituality and Yoruba-descended peoples in the Caribbean used Catholic symbols such as Saint Barbara to preserve the spiritual energies of Shango. This work is commensurate with other scholars who have made contributions in this regard such as Gloria Anzaldúa, in which she articulates an in-between space as *borderlands/fronteras*. Moreover, Walter Dignolo advocates this space as *border gnosis* and Arturo Aldama develops this in-between space as *disrupting savagism*<sup>3</sup>.

## Research Methodology

In the era of neocolonial postmodern globalization relations, issues of identity are urgent for peoples positioned as 'Others' or subalterns by the violent histories of colonialism. Even today, many of these spiritualities and spiritual practices are under attack, and there continue to be attempts by governmental apparatuses, often encouraged by religious officials in these institutions, to eradicate and delegitimize many of these spiritual traditions. But such attempts have been unsuccessful because the *activist spirituality* driving these spiritual practices is keeping them very much alive. Additionally, this *activist spirituality* has been transmitted to other parts of the world as adherents migrate to other countries to include the United States, Central America, Mexico, Canada, the Caribbean, as well as major metropolitan centers in Europe and Africa. In the case of the Q'echi' Maya of northern Guatemala and people of Yoruba ancestry in the Caribbean, we cannot discuss who 'we are now' without understanding the continued legacy of imperial violence and the strategic and spontaneous resistance and activism relative to the forces of material and discursive colonialism. Like Arturo Aldama, who argues elegantly in his work, *Disrupting Savagism*, this research seeks to employ a methodological approach that continues to place the Q'echi' Maya and people of Yoruba ancestry at the center of *self-representation*. Drawing upon the groundbreaking work of Chela Sandoval's *Methodology of the Oppressed*<sup>4</sup>, this work employs a methodological device in which she calls "the differential." The differential, as one reviewer puts it, is like the

manual transmission of a car. It is the mechanism that allows gears to shift based on changing terrain. The differential is what makes the car adaptable. Like this transmission, this article must be knowledgeable about and be prepared to use multiple methods in its pursuit of social change. Building on this definition, this work employs a methodological tool of analysis which is termed *resistant* and *activist spirituality*. As they are defined here, resistant and activist spirituality suggest that Q'echi' Maya and Yoruba-Caribbean spirituality "must be a liberation theology and theology of resistance, and as such, it must speak out of its uniquely political [and economic] analysis. Thus, it must begin and end its spiritual journey with political [and economic] analysis." Since aspects of Maya and Yoruba-Caribbean spirituality were born in the social context of political and economic oppression, it forces upon them a spiritual journey or they get lost in the chaos of oppression and attempted cultural annihilation under the yoke of colonialism and imperialism. The relentless attempts of eradication of Q'echi' Maya and Yoruba-Caribbean spirituality suggests the necessity of a spirituality of resistance and activism that has been sustained for over 500 years in the Americas. Stated very simply then, resistant spirituality is defined as "...the process of overtly and covertly resisting attempts to assimilate, surrender, accommodate, or appease to imposing cultural and/or religious institutions. This process can take the form of pretending to take on the religious practices of the oppressor, developing stories, songs, folklore, etc. that mask the "oppositional consciousness" that remains hidden from colonial powers," to identify one example. Activist spirituality builds on the repository of resistance that has been sustained for over 500 years amongst Q'echi' Maya and Yoruba-Caribbean peoples and creates new 'liberationist spaces and places' that cut across nation-state boundaries, which are in many aspects, boundaries of division, violence, and subjugation. This new differential is creating a transnational unity of peoples in the Americas and indeed, 'world citizens' who are increasingly aware of the need to move beyond the westernization and modernization project of the last 500 years. Finally, it is important to highlight that this work does not employ the term *syncretism* in this work as that term has tendencies to benignly assume blending and *mutual respect* of various spiritual and religious traditions as they came into contact with each other in the Americas. It must be recognized that religious institutions, namely Roman Catholic Christianity, attempted to eradicate and annihilate Q'echi' Maya and Yoruba-Caribbean spiritual traditions and that these peoples had to, out of necessity, develop a resistant spirituality under colonial and imperial rule. In the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, there still continue to be attempts delegitimize this legacy but now, these traditions and the peoples who have maintained them are moving past survival to autonomy and creating new spaces of liberation<sup>4</sup>.

**These two methodological tools will be used as this article proceeds by responding to the following questions:** i. Utilizing the definitions of *resistant spirituality* and *activist spirituality*, how did the Q'echi' Maya of the northern region of

Guatemala and people of Yoruba ancestry in the Caribbean maintain their cultural/spiritual histories in the face of systemic colonialism, especially with the onslaught of , ii. Why is the presence of a robust array of energies amongst the Q'echi' Maya significant relative to Roman Catholic symbols that emphasize femininity?, iii. Why is the presence of a pantheon of deities in the Yoruba spiritual tradition significant relative to Roman Catholic iconic symbols such as Saint Barbara?, iv. Finally, why is this demonstration of a common pattern of *resistant spirituality* and *activist spirituality* relevant for transnational unity and autonomy for the Q'echi' and people of Yoruba ancestry in the Caribbean in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

Woven into the questions posed above, this article will proceed with a historical/cultural analysis and summary of the Q'echi' Maya people from the village of Copal' aa and in the areas surrounding Coban, both located in northern Guatemala, and people of Yoruba ancestry in the Caribbean, followed by a synopsis of the arrival of Roman Catholic Christianity to the respective regions under consideration. Then, utilizing the analytical tools of resistant spirituality and activist spirituality, this work will provide a narrative of how these peoples utilized aspects of feminine spirituality and the presence of a robust pantheon of energies and deities to effectively resist and maintain their spirituality.

This work is not attempting to merely tell a story of history. Of course, historical accuracy is paramount as a starting point, but this work is utilizing the methodological tools to uncover patterns of resistance and activism in the spiritual traditions considered in this article. This work's methodology executes a socio-cultural and religious analysis and interpretation. The *religious issues* are examined and interpreted, elaborated and explored against a backdrop of historical, social, political, and economic settings, but this work is not attempting nor think it is appropriate to use technical or objective methods of historical, economic, and political investigation, expertise and analysis. These latter methods privilege Eurocentric aspects of the symbols and histories that will not be helpful in the process of *reclamation*. Again, Sandoval reminds us that this work is uncovering and creating "oppositional consciousness" that has "quietly influenced the history of U.S.- European consciousness throughout the twentieth century." It is from the rhetoric of centuries of resistance to oppression that the ideology of reclamation emerges. This work "breaks with [dominant] ideology," decolonizing centuries of oppression.

These backdrops produce work that is descriptive, comparative, and interpretative from a cultural and critical spiritual/religious standpoint in which to illuminate the spiritual resistance needed today to reclaim the history and unity of Indigenous and people of African ancestry in the Americas. Books, films, travel to various countries of Africa, the Caribbean, Central America, Mexico, and various parts of the American southwest, direct observations and gathering of data, and personal interviews were used in this work<sup>5</sup>.

**Q'echi' Maya Spirituality and Catholicism: Resistant Spirituality through Identification with the Sacred Feminine. The Development of the Q'echi' Maya in Mesoamerica and Their Spiritual Worldview:** The Q'echi' Maya of Mesoamerica, along with the Aztecs of Mexico and the Incas of Peru, made up the so-called high civilizations of the American Indigenous societies at the time of the Spanish conquest. The Aztec and Inca empires developed relatively late compared to the Maya, about 1300-1533 A.D. Additionally, these two empires were decidedly patriarchal and hierarchical in nature by the time of the Spanish arrival to Mesoamerica in the early 1500s. These two attributes of patriarchy and hierarchy made conquest of these two empires easier, relative to the Spanish, whereas the Maya had a substantially longer period of cultural continuity and a less-defined hierarchical structure spanning more than 2,000 years, from 1000 BC to 1542 AD, and even after centuries of conquest, many significant aspects of their culture continue to the present.

After the downfall of Merida under the heels of Francisco de Montejo in 1542, most of the sacred writings of the Maya were destroyed by the Spanish authorities. However, groundbreaking scholarship in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century reveals that the *PopulVuh*, the sacred book of the Maya people, was written by anonymous members of the Quiche-Maya nobility, a branch of the Maya that dominated the highlands of western Guatemala prior to the arrival Spanish conquerors in 1524. The *PopulVuh* highlights important and significant aspects of Maya spirituality and cosmology that have been preserved through the practice of their rituals.

Turning towards a brief discussion of the Maya spiritual worldview, the Maya, along with other Indigenous cultures in the Americas, hold the view that the earth is sacred and that it belonged to the gods, the cosmos, and the spiritual order. Humanity's cosmic responsibility is to care for and be good stewards of the earth and keep it in balance and harmony for the enjoyment of all humanity. Balance, clarity, and harmony are some of the most important attributes in this cosmic order. Moreover, in the case of the Maya, the earth is referred to as feminine and many of the attributes used to describe and understand the earth's dimensions are feminine.

Additionally, the Maya often refer to the moon with feminine energies and attributes. To cite one specific example, the elders and communities of the Q'echi' Maya of Copal' aa often remind followers of "The Mission"<sup>6</sup> that Mother Earth "hid" the Q'echi' in the highland regions of northern Guatemala during the Spanish Conquest and again during the civil war that ravaged many communities like the Q'echi' in the mid- to late-20<sup>th</sup> century. Furthermore, these communities encourage followers of The Mission to appreciate that "Grandmother Moon" governs the rhythm of the earth's seasons and everything in it, to include humanity. There is clearly a strong conceptualization of the feminine in much of Q'echi' spirituality

and cosmology that has enabled the Q'echi' to engage in the 'oppositional consciousness' over the centuries.

#### **Roman Catholic Christianity and Spanish-Mayan Relations:**

As has been alluded to in the prior section, the arrival of a few hundred Spaniards in Guatemala in 1524 brought about an immediate confrontation with the 500,000 to 800,000 Maya living in the highland region and perhaps 1-1.5 million if the Peten and coastal regions are included<sup>7</sup>.

Even though Roman Catholic Christianity believed that the conversion of the Maya to Christianity was an important goal, some branches of Catholicism held different views on how to accomplish this end. When Roman Catholic leaders came to the highlands of Guatemala, many of them had already been involved in the proselytization of Indigenous and peoples of African ancestry in many parts of the Caribbean, such as Hispaniola and Cuba. One of these leaders of was the Dominican friar Bartolome de Las Casas. Las Casas had been in the Caribbean and Latin America since 1502 and had witnessed firsthand the near complete genocide of the Indigenous populations of Cuba and Hispaniola. Convinced he could catch more converts with "honey rather than vinegar" and horrified at what he<sup>8</sup> had seen in the Caribbean, Las Casas appealed to Carlos V of Spain to stop the violence. Las Casas described the fatal treatment of the population in his influential tract *A Very Brief Account of the Destruction of the Indies*.

Las Casas, along with others from the Dominican order, changed attitudes relative to the Maya and their culture as they had done in the Caribbean. Las Casas, and many others from the Dominican Order, advocated that while it was important to win converts for the Church, the Dominicans also believed that the Maya should be allowed to continue to practice their spiritual traditions. This practice of 'benign neglect' of the Dominican Order relative to allowing the Maya to continue their spiritual and cultural traditions was yet another factor that permitted the Maya to engage in the 'oppositional consciousness' to preserve their traditions throughout the Spanish conquest period.

#### **Conquest Revisited: The Guatemalan Civil War and Persecution of the Maya in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century:**

Even with the formal end of Spanish Conquest in the 1800s, the Maya were subjected yet again to oppression by the Guatemalan state in the 20<sup>th</sup> century<sup>9</sup>. In addition to the devastating effects of the war, Guatemala was hit with a devastating earthquake of 1976, which killed 22,000 and left one million homeless. Moreover, military suppression of antigovernment activity reached a new peak by the 1980s. The manifestation of this suppression was particularly horrific under the presidency of General Efraim Montt, a self-professed evangelical Christian, who came to power by military coup in March, 1982. Significant numbers of people, mostly Maya men in the rural areas, were murdered in the name of anti-insurgency, stabilization and anticommunism. Many in Guatemala refer to this period as *la escoba*, the broom, because of the way the reign of terror swept over the country.

While government officials did not know the identity of the rebels, they did know where the locations were of rebel activity, which were mainly in poor, rural, and Mayan areas. The government opted to therefore terrorize the population in these areas to kill off support for the rebels. Over 400 villages were razed and most of the inhabitants were massacred.

One of these villages that was razed is the area now called Copal' aa, nestled in the northern highlands of Guatemala. Most scholars, human rights observers, and others estimate that over 15,000 civilians were murdered during the Montt years, in addition to the estimated 100,000 Maya who fled to Mexico. Moreover, the government forced Maya villagers to form Civil Defense Patrols (CDPs) to do most of the army's dirty work. These CDPs were ultimately responsible for some of the worst human rights abuses during Rios Montt's rule<sup>10</sup>.

Finally, Alvaro Arzu of the center-right Partido de Avanzada Nacional (PAN), took office in 1996. Arzu continued negotiations with the URNG, and finally, on December 29, 1996, a "Firm and Lasting Peace Agreement" was signed at the National Palace in Guatemala City. During the 36 years of civil war, an estimated 200,000 Guatemalans had been killed, over one million made homeless, and untold thousands disappeared. The Peace Accords, as they came to be known, contained provisions for accountability for the human rights violations perpetrated by the military and the resettlement of the one million displaced Guatemalans, the vast majority being the highland Maya in northern Guatemala. The Accords also addressed the rights of the Maya, women, education, health care and other basic social services, and the abolition of obligatory military service. Many of these provisions remain unfulfilled. United Nations development indicators still reveal that 60% of the Maya are still marginalized by discrimination and violence. When utilizing human development indices such as income, life expectancy, school enrollment and literacy, Guatemala is ranked at 116 out of the world's 193 countries, and holds the dubious place of having the lowest rank of any North, Central, or South American country. The triple pillar of lack of education, basic preventive healthcare, and poverty are more concentrated in the rural and highland Mayan regions of the country.

The systematic plans of military counterinsurgency caused acute dislocations in traditional Maya societies throughout the country. In spite of these profound cultural transformations, many of the Maya have not surrendered their cultural and spiritual traditions. One such example of this cultural preservation are five repatriated linguistic<sup>11</sup> groups who live in the village of Copal' aa. Our discussion now turns to these Indigenous Maya communities in the northern highland Guatemalan region.

**Q'echi' Gendered Complimentarity in the Midst of the "Separation of Heaven and Earth":** The Q'echi' Maya conceptualization of gendered complimentarity is implicit in the many traditions of folk Catholicism that attempt to retrieve the

female principle systematically undermined in orthodox Christianity. The feminine principle is conceptualized in the description of the earth, of the relationship of “Grandmother Moon” relative to “Father Sun” and is strongly developed in one of the Mayan twenty energies of light and clarity, an energy known as *Imox*, which has water as its feminine element. Of the twenty Q’echi’ Mayan energies in their “pantheon,” this energy has the quality of seamless interconnection between intellect and spirit, with male and female qualities.

In addition to this dynamic of gendered complementarity, the Q’echi’ Maya also acknowledge the energy of ants and bees in myths that recount how the collective strength of these insects overcome formidable opposition. The Q’echi’ Maya recognize that ants, like bees, are able to proceed about their business because their actions are often undetected. The cell-like organization of the honeycomb has provided an ideal model for Q’echi’ Maya resistance during the colonial and independence periods. It exemplifies Q’echi’ ideals of governance, with each unit acting autonomously in accord with a collective organization. This strategy maximizes flexibility, enabling the Q’echi’ Maya to preserve their forces when threatened with annihilation. The activities of myriad protagonists, each autonomously pursuing an agenda agreed upon the group, have enabled the Q’echi’ Maya to escape detection during centuries of resistance and protest.

This phenomenon was directly observed amongst the Q’echi’ Maya communities in Coban and Copal’aa, two communities that are part of the larger Highland Maya communities in the Alta Verapaz region of Guatemala. The community of Copal’aa was established after the brutal civil war era in the early 2000s. The Q’echi’ Maya of Copal’aa are one of five major linguistic groups to resettle the area. These five Maya groups all have their own council of elders. In doing work amongst the Q’echi’ Maya, this scholar had to undergo an extensive “vetting” process, meeting with the Council of Elders on several occasions and being in communication with the Council on various matters, from participation in community activities to more serious considerations to participate in the community’s spiritual observances that are in accordance with the Mayan calendar and cosmological spiritual worldview which has sustained the people for hundreds and thousands of years. On one occasion, a conversation ensued when observing an ant colony that had been established on a quarter-mile caravan on the grounds of a Q’echi’ community center in Coban. To paraphrase one of the elders of the Coban community: “...you see how these ants are able to go about their affairs, even when there appears to be no ‘leader’ or ‘teacher’?...so it is with us, there are no teachers, ‘sha-mans,’ leaders...only the community walking together in light and clarity.” This ant colony represents the ability of the Q’echi’ Maya to maintain their cosmological and spiritual grounding, even when outsiders cannot discern who the “leaders” are in the community. Like that ant colony, the Q’echi’ Maya have been able to quietly

continue observing their traditions, even under the constant threat of annihilation.

As was indicated earlier, Copal’aa is located deep in the north central highland region, in Alta Verapaz. Coban is the nearest metropolitan area. After the end of armed conflict, upwards of 5,000 Maya have relocated to this village and surrounding areas. As these communities continued to rebuild their livelihoods, they have been met with increased hostility from the government in Guatemala City. The Q’echi’ Maya elders and community leaders desired to teach the youth in their native tongue, and to engage their students in significant aspects of Maya spirituality and culture<sup>12</sup>.

Like De Las Casas centuries ago, a critical mass of Catholic priests in the late 1990s took a stance against the government to advocate that the Q’echi’ Maya be allowed to practice their spiritual and cultural traditions that had been preserved in vital aspects of the *PopulVuh*, in which the Q’echi’ employed the principle of gendered complementarity to rely upon the feminine aspects of their spiritual and cosmological order to preserve their traditions, and their flattened organizational structure that allowed the culture to behave like “bees” and “ants” to have an order when it might appear to outsiders there was no discernible leaders present in the local culture.

In a particularly poignant revelation, ethnographic research revealed that local Catholic authorities defended the Q’echi’ Maya to retain jurisdiction over their sacred sites scattered about in the Coban area in the 1990s. The civil war was still raging, so the stance of these Catholic authorities is all the more striking, given that many have died at the hands of the government as a result of taking such stands to speak for the Q’echi’ Maya and others in the region. One such site, located on the outskirts of Coban, has a Roman Catholic cross in the same space as the Q’echi’ Maya ceremonial site, such as the circle for the four cosmic pillars of humanity, a common feature of Q’echi’ Maya spiritual observances. This site is a clear example of how the Q’echi’ Maya have been able to use the principle of “oppositional consciousness” through the centuries to resist the Spanish Conquest, Roman Catholic Christianity, and the Guatemalan civil war era to emerge as a relatively coherent culture in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century.

**Yoruba Spirituality and Saint Barbara: The Resistant Spirituality of Shango in the Caribbean, Arrival of African Peoples into the Caribbean and Their Spiritual Influences and Interactions:** In this section, we now turn to the legacy of resistant spirituality by turning our attention to the Caribbean and how the arrival of Africans to the region interacted with Indigenous people and European attempts of conquest and annihilation. This part of the article will discuss the arrival of Africans into the Caribbean and the spiritual traditions they brought with them and highlight the interactions of Europeans with the Indigenous inhabitants of the Caribbean, the Arawaks and Caribs.

The massive entrance of Africans into the Caribbean began in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century by means of the African slave trade, instigated by the Portuguese in the late 15<sup>th</sup> century. The first African slaves were brought to the Caribbean in 1510. After 1517 large numbers were brought to Hispaniola, Jamaica, and Puerto Rico. It was the development of sugar plantations that created the dire need for labor and encouraged the massive importation of African slaves to Brazil, where the first sugar plantations were developed by the Portuguese, and afterward to the Caribbean. By 1580 Brazil was the most important source of sugar for Europe. Over time, other European powers eclipsed the Portuguese influence, to include the Dutch, English, and French.

Between 1640 and 1655 the Caribbean Islands were transformed into sugar colonies. The English imported approximately 1,900,000 Africans to the Caribbean; the French, 1,650,000; the Dutch, 900,000. Some of the areas from Africa were from Senegambia, Sierra Leone, the Windward Coast, the Gold Coast, the Bight of Benin, and portions of southern Nigeria. Slaves coming from Sierra Leone and the Windward Coast were mostly Mandingoes. Those from the Gold Coast included Koromantyns. Papaws came from the Bight of Benin. Additionally, Fon-speaking peoples came from Dahomey, Akan peoples from the Gold Coast, and the Yoruba from Nigeria. As we will see, all of these peoples brought their collective memories of their spiritual traditions with them, and they would have a profound effect on the Caribbean region.

The Europeans, as they did with the Indigenous Caribs and Arawaks, promoted and perpetuated grossly mistaken and distorted notions of African religions from the very beginning of contact with these peoples. Some denied that Africans “knew” any religion. English planters denied that Africans had a system of beliefs that could be described as religion and denounced their beliefs as heathenish superstition. However, Africans had very complex and sophisticated religious systems and the reality of life for Africans is that religion was a way of life and was permeated in every facet of life. Europeans, in contrast, had religious systems that were more focused on doctrine and religious days were reserved for special events and occasions. Spirituality among the African slaves was brought with them from their various homelands and included their spiritual traditions and aspects of Islam, though Islamic practices did not long survive the rigors of the Middle Passage, as there were no structures to facilitate them<sup>13</sup> such as Imams, the Qur’an or other Islamic iconic symbols. But Indigenous and traditional African spirituality could and did survive the difficulties of plantation life.

Many scholars and observers suggest that although Africa had culturally developed in the areas of agriculture, trade, economics, art, morals, law, social and governmental bodies, religion and spirituality is the most vital institution of Africa. “Religion for Africans was, is and ever shall be the source of life and meaning. It is in religion that they live, and move, and

have their meaning.” The traditional worldview as the vision of cosmic harmony in which there exists a vital participation between animate and inanimate things—vital relationships of being between each individual and his/her descendants, family, brothers and sisters in the clan, antecedents, and also one’s God—the ultimate source of being. God is seen as the source of all power, the lesser deities function to see that the world is in balance, harmony, and clarity, and ancestors see that their descendants act morally, heads of families are next in authority (nearest to ancestors), and other members of the family fit into the hierarchical scheme in the order of their age and importance.

While there were many African spiritual expressions that were brought to the Caribbean by the slaves, three were the most prominent. These expressions tended to dominate because of their large “pantheon” of deities that would prove useful in the resistance process with Catholicism. The three religious expressions to come from Africa were from the Fon-speaking people of Dahomey, the Akan of Ghana, and the Yoruba of Nigeria. Through the continuing exercise of these traditions and others we see that the soul and spirituality of Africa has been retained and has served as a strong resistance to the dehumanizing influences of European powers. In their encounter with Christianity, the Africans took the essence of the Christian religion and resisted them with their traditional practices and beliefs and created new spiritualities, appropriate to the needs and demands of their New World identities and cultures.

The Supreme Being in these three major spiritual expressions is viewed as the author and preserver of all creation, who is almighty, omnipresent, omniscient, infinitely good, transcendent. The Supreme Being is not often worshipped directly, with the Akan people being a notable exception. For the Yoruba people, worship was accorded to the lesser deities, who were closer to humans in existence. The Yoruba have historically called their devotion to lesser gods *orishas*. Orishas had powers over various aspects of nature and existence and could assist people with daily living. Major Yoruba orishas include Obatala (the sky god), Ogun (god of war and iron), Ifa (god of divination), Eleggua (god of the crossroads), Oya (goddess of the cemetery), Ochun (goddess of the river, female beauty and power), Yemaya (goddess of the ocean), and Shango (god of fire and thunder).

What contributed to their survival was the adaptability of these spiritualities to the new environments and the resisting of their spiritual beliefs and practices with Roman Catholic beliefs and practices, as has happened in Trinidad, Haiti, Cuba, Brazil, and other places in the Americas. Because the Yoruba had a strongly developed pantheon, they were able to use the African powers to their advantage in a hostile world in this life, such as the slave revolts. Slaves were able to bond together from different ethnic groups and identified along geographic lines, depending on where they were placed on slave ships in Africa. In conclusion, then, Barrett summarizes the indigenization of African religion in the New World:

The Africans in the New World fell into two separate groups. The first werethose with a highly developed pantheon, in which the deities played a dominant role. In this category are the Fon people of Dahomey and the Yoruba, generally called Nago, of Nigeria. Wherever these people are represented in large numbers, their religion with their pantheon of numerous deities predominated. Examples of this are found in Haiti, Brazil, Cuba, Trinidad, and New Orleans. The second group of Africans emphasized a religion with a strong ancestral cult, but a weak pantheon of gods. This group seems to have blended their form of ritual with the dominant Fon and Nago-speaking peoples. Thus we hear little of the Akan and Bantu gods, but much of Shango, Ogun, Damballa and Vodun<sup>14</sup>.

#### **Saint Barbara's Story in Roman Catholic Christianity:**

Before we begin an analysis of how Afro-Caribbean people resisted Roman Catholic and Protestant Christian attempts to erase their spiritual traditions, it might be useful to ask: Who is Saint Barbara? At first glance, she may appear to be a more obscure figure in the pantheon of saints in Roman Catholic Christianity, especially in contrast to Our Lady. Because she is less well known, a short synopsis is appropriate to tell her story.

Saint Barbara's feast day occurs on December fourth and she has come to be seen as one of the transcending gender figures in the Yoruba traditions from western Africa and representing the strong sacred energies of determination and commitment. In the Yoruba tradition, those who sought to achieve in competitive and adverse settings where strong will would be needed often invoked Shango, one of the most powerful orishas in the Yoruba deities of gods, in the form of Saint Barbara.

Saint Barbara was a maiden of great beauty and had a long line of suitors at her door. Her father, a rich merchant in the Roman Empire, was unimpressed with these suitors and decided to lock his daughter away in a tower. His elitist attitudes raised concerns in his mind about his daughter's indulgence in wanting to help the poor.

Barbara's father was loyal to the Greco-Roman religious system. He was aware of the underground activities of a new religious sect called Christianity, and this new movement was nibbling at the margins of Roman society. Particularly, what appeared to be most disturbing was that this new religion was taken up by the poor and downtrodden. Barbara's father, like many in the merchant class, held this new movement and the people in it with contempt and disdain. This personal prejudice, coupled with the political reality was that association with this outlawed religion would hurt his grain business.

According to the story, Barbara spent years in the tower. Her father began to bring suitors of his choosing to her but Barbara had lost all interest in marriage. Barbara normally received food and other necessities by way of a basket on a rope. One day, a stranger put a book in the basket. This book was about the new religion of Christianity. As Barbara read the book she

wanted to know more about the religion. Of course, she could not obtain more information about it and she became very ill. Her father, in desperation, requested that a doctor come to see her. When the doctor arrived, Barbara's father was agitated and desperate. The doctor visited with Barbara. What the father did not know was that this visit was to baptize Barbara into Christianity.

Soon after the priest's visit, Barbara's father had to leave home for a trip. While her father was away, Barbara asked the men who maintained the estate to build a third window in her tower. When her father returned home, he confronted his daughter as to why she had directed the men to build her the third window. Barbara confessed that she had converted to Christianity and wanted three windows in her tower to remind her of the names of the Trinity.

Barbara's fate at the hands of her father is harrowing. When Barbara refused to renounce her new faith in Christianity, her father handed her over to the Roman authorities. She was tortured, but continued to proclaim her religious beliefs. At one point, the authorities tried to shame her by parading her through town naked. During these ordeals, angels sent a fog that completely hid her from view.

Eventually, the authorities ordered her father to kill her. He tried to end her life by a variety of means, but Barbara managed to slip away each time. Finally, her father seized her hair and beheaded her. At that moment, bright flames flew out of her body and a moment later, lightning struck her father and killed him.

The story of Saint Barbara will be revisited when the article engages in a discussion of how the principles and values of her story would be appropriated into the Yoruba spiritual worldview. But first, we need to provide a synopsis of European interactions with the Indigenous and Africans in the Caribbean.

#### **European Interactions with the Caribs, Arawaks, and African Peoples and their Spiritualities:**

The first major European power to enter the New World were the Spanish. In addition to bringing economic and political power, they also brought their religion of Catholicism. The missionaries and priests who often accompanied the *conquistadores* sought to introduce what they considered to be the blessings of European<sup>15</sup>.

civilization to the Indigenous peoples and to incorporate them into the fold of Catholicism<sup>16</sup>. With total disregard for the legitimacy of the culture and religions of these host peoples, these conquerors imposed their ways and wishes on these Indigenous people in the most brutal ways. The Arawaks, who were an accommodating culture, were the first to feel the savage blows of the Spanish, although they resisted as best as they could. The Caribs, who were a more militant culture, resisted for the entire period of colonial subjugation of various European powers.

Forced conversion to Christianity accompanied the colonial process. The first missionaries to get involved were those belonging to the Catholic orders of Franciscans and Dominicans, followed by Jesuits and others. Admittedly, there was a seriousness in the religious commitment of the missionaries, for they established schools and agencies by which to do a good religious work according to the best in their traditions. However, their religious expressions and activities were part of a system and institution which was interested in self-perpetuation and expansion of power and control. The Spanish Crown commended Indians to Spanish conquistadores with the understanding that these *encomenderos* would have the right to exact labor or tribute from the Indians. In return for this favor, the *encomenderos* were to provide religious instructions for their Indians and to offer them protection, presumably from their fellow Indians. It is clear that this system was designed to exploit the Indigenous peoples and enrich the Spanish citizens. As the missionaries carried out their Christianizing strategies, what began to happen in a natural way in terms of religious interaction and understanding between the Indigenous peoples and the Catholic religion was that the Indians began to understand and appropriate Catholic beliefs and practices by correlating them with parallels they could make with their own spiritual traditions. According to one observer, "God the Father, of Catholic belief, [the Arawaks] identified with the creator-god, Wamurreti-Kwonci, whom they otherwise knew as the benign Jocahuna [Yocayu]. Sometimes they identified Jesus Christ with Jocahuna; at other times they believed him to be the son of Jocahuna...and the Virgin Mary, whom they confused with Arabei [Atabex, Atabeira], a Goddess of Arawak belief.' This is one reflection of what took place between the Indigenous Arawaks and Christianity, especially Catholicism.

**Saint Barbara as a Stand-in for the Yoruba Deity Shango:** Barrett describes the Afro-Caribbean religions as redemption cults, which, within the context of the reactions of slaves to captivity, offered sustained resistance that continued throughout the slave period. They invoked their African Gods, as the Jews did under the bondage of slavery, especially Ogun and Shango, a Yoruba god of lightning and thunder. Shango is regarded as the greatest of the hero-gods in the Yoruba tradition. They used their own culturally approved techniques of resistance by practicing deception, by reinterpreting their native folklore, especially "trickster lore" which has lengthy descriptions of escape by disguise and trickery. The Christian God became an African God who was perceived to be at least as powerful as the African God. The Christian angels were identified with the lesser deities of Africa. The Christian message of salvation included deliverance from oppression, which was seen in Christ as liberator but also a carryover from the Exodus story.

## Conclusion

**The Reclaiming and Uniting of Spirits Among Indigenous and Afro-Caribbean People:** Of what is one to make of so much religious vision and insight as seen in the various

expressions and manifestations of what has been called resistant and activist spirituality amongst Indigenous and Afro-Caribbean peoples? As was discussed, the story of Saint Barbara is a somewhat obscure story, even within the Catholic tradition. What our analysis has shown, however, is that what is more obscured about the story of Saint Barbara is the *resistant and activist dynamics* between two diverse religions and spiritual beliefs of the Europeans and Africans that came together in the Americas. Her image takes the place of Shango, an African deity from the Yoruba tradition in western Africa. Shango represents the strong sacred energies of determination and commitment; needed qualities to endure centuries of slavery. And, in Mesoamerica, the Q'echi' Maya have utilized the spiritual energies of gendered complementarity and their extensive "pantheon" of energies to sustain their cultural and spiritual traditions throughout the Spanish Conquest and the Guatemalan civil war<sup>17</sup>.

This article has sought to build on scholarship that *reclaims* the common resistance and unity of Indigenous people and people of African descent in the Americas. As this becomes more known and coherent, it will continue to transform humanity from the 500 years of colonial conquest that has been the privileged and oppressive narrative well in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century and still persists in the early 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

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