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The Oxford Handbook of RELIGIOUS SPACE

CHAPTER

19 Mapping the Spiritual Baptist Universe: Black Atlantic Cosmography and the Spatiality of Spirit in Trinidad and Tobago

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Abstract

This chapter considers cosmography to be an especially productive but for the most part unexplored site of critical inquiry into Afro-Caribbean and Black Atlantic religiosity. Drawing on comprehensive ethnographic research with Spiritual Baptist Christians in Trinidad and Tobago, it calls attention to the dimensions of spatiality that orient Afro-Creole cosmologies and inform their ritual logics. By mapping the Spiritual Baptist universe and the sacred geography of Spirit that enlivens it, the chapter shows how complex theological concepts are reified by the faithful—how they take shape through practical substantiations—thereby highlighting the spatial dynamics underlying Spiritual Baptist epistemologies and the novel representational practices central to meaning-making in the church.

Keywords: [cosmography](#), [Spiritual Baptist Christianity](#), [Black Atlantic religion](#), [spiritual geography](#), [sacred crossroads](#), [ritual space](#), [cosmology](#)

Subject: [Sociology of Religion](#), [Religion](#)

Introduction

SPIRITUAL Baptist Christianity, an autochthonous Afro-Caribbean religious tradition in Trinidad and Tobago and its diaspora, can be characterized by its unique articulation of fundamentalist, charismatic, and Catholic Christianities (combining Anglican, Baptist, and Pentecostal conventions), with assorted elements from African and African-derived, Hindu, Masonic, New Age, and Western esoteric traditions. Born of the region's colonial and postcolonial multicultural history and renewed through continual inspiration from religious sources domestic and foreign, Spiritual Baptist Christianity is a distinctive creole complex whose adherents distinguish themselves as both steadfast Christian traditionalists and cosmopolitan doyens of the Spirit: holistic spiritual masons who transcend conventional religious boundaries by incorporating diverse cosmologies and embracing metaphysical unity.¹

In practice, Spiritual Baptists are effectively pluralists (Glazier 2003, 156); regardless of their Christian investments, members might at any time rely on religious concepts, philosophies, or worship methods that have been borrowed from sources as distinct as *Ifá*, a belief system originating in West Africa, to *Kabbalah*, a creolized form of occult spiritism.² Baptist fluidity in this regard is facilitated by a common belief that a single spiritual reality, common to all, allies diverse religious traditions locally and around the world. Different religions, from this perspective, are viewed merely as different approaches or “pathways” to the same divine reality—alternative ways of worshiping the same God.

p. 309 With no official canon to adhere to, theological variation across Baptist churches is the norm rather than the exception (Houk 1995; Lum 2000; Laitinen 2002; Glazier 2003). While several competing orthodoxies exist—from more or less plural and incorporative to deliberately anti-syncretic—no authoritative orthodoxy reigns supreme. Despite this variation, however, the Baptist community in Trinidad and Tobago maintains a strong collective identity united by a core set of shared ritual practices and commonly held beliefs. Notable among these are the customary rites of baptism and “mourning,” essential to the faith's distinctiveness, as well as a remarkably eclectic cosmology distinguished by a novel cosmopolitan spiritual geography.³

Notwithstanding their obvious deviation from mainstream Christianities, Spiritual Baptists identify themselves as biblical literalists, enthusiastically declaring the inerrancy of the Bible and the absolute authority of the Word (Simpson 1966, 537). This strict adherence to Scripture and firm commitment to traditional Christian theological tenets gives Spiritual Baptists a “fundamentalist” cast. Described by native Baptist scholar Hazel Ann Gibbs De Peza as “Christianity with an accent,” these indigenous Christians committed to observing the “ancient ways,” see as their primary mission, according to Reverend Patricia Stephens (1999, 31), “calling sinners to repentance and to Baptism by the Holy Spirit in ‘living’/running water.” Many features of Spiritual Baptist belief and practice set it apart from the crowd, perhaps none more so than this blending of conservative Christianity and flexible pluralism. The combination of fundamentalism and eclecticism—traditionalism and heterodoxy—is what makes the Spiritual Baptist faith an instructive exemplar of Afro-Creole religiosity.

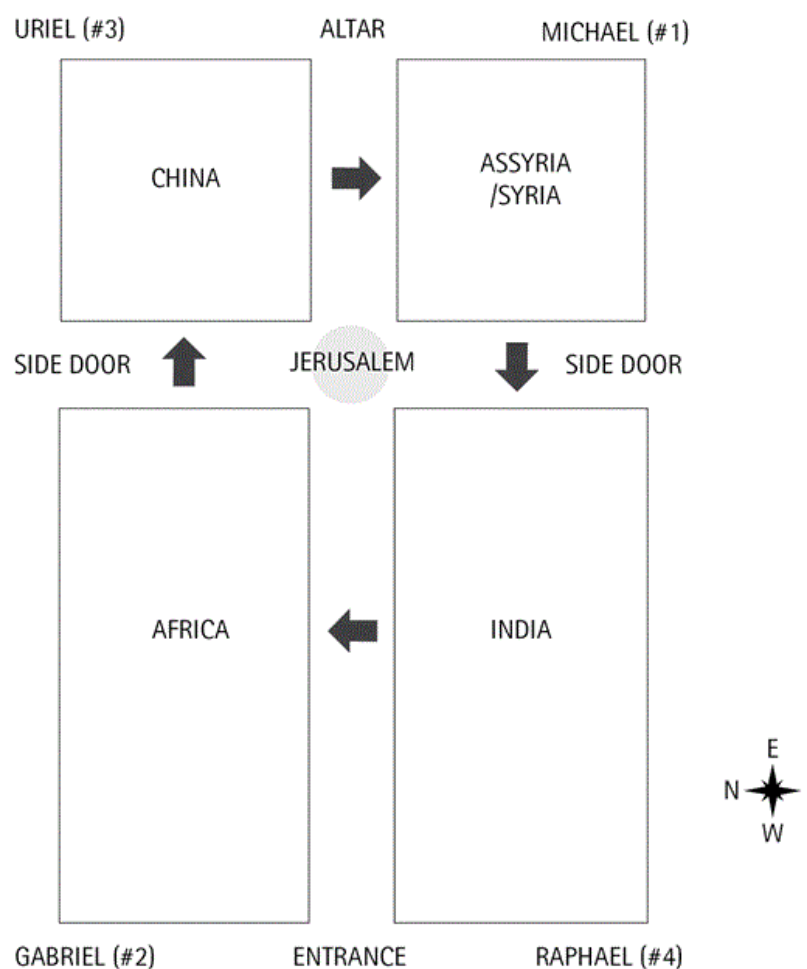
This chapter considers cosmography as a way to untangle the creolized architecture of the Spiritual Baptist faith and to render in greater detail the relationship between theology, cosmology, and ritual space as figured by the faithful. Doing so brings to light a productive but underexplored area of critical inquiry into Afro-Caribbean and Black Atlantic religions. Drawing on comprehensive ethnographic research conducted with Spiritual Baptist Christians in Trinidad and Tobago, I diagram the sacred geography of Spirit animating the Baptist mystical universe and unpack the spatial metaphors informing ritual logic in the church.⁴ By examining the spatial dynamics underlying Baptist epistemologies, I illustrate the novel representational practices central to meaning-making in the church and endeavor to make sense of the conjunctive properties of fundamentalism and eclecticism that categorize the faith.

Diagramming the Spiritual Baptist Universe

p. 310 The diagram in Figure 19.1—a cosmogram composed in consultation with Baptist advisers—depicts a religiospatial conceptual scheme featuring signs of locality and identity that index Trinidad and Tobago’s principal demographic divisions and encodes them as essential spiritual values oriented around a Christian authority. These values—four ethnonational modalities of Spirit that believers refer to as spiritual “schools” or “nations,” namely, Africa, India, China, and Assyria/Syria—comprise the basic subdivisions of the Baptist spiritual universe and together constitute the primary framework within which believers identify and interpret mystical experiences.⁵ This usually implicit schematic formulation guides the faithful in configuring ritual spaces, classifying supernatural phenomena, and naming the spiritual identities they assume along their quest for salvation. Also referred to as “spiritual centers of the universe” or “four separate ideas of godliness,” each designating alternative “sides” or “paths” in the Spirit (see McNeal 2011), these so-called nations make up the spiritual geography of the nonphysical world, which initiates traverse on the mourning ground, visit in trance-like states during worship, and sometimes navigate in dreams or visions.

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Figure 19.1



Spiritual Baptist cosmogram depicting four primary spiritual schools/nations (image by author).

As a symbolic representation of the Baptist spiritual universe, the cosmogram summarizes key concepts, identities, and interrelationships germane to the unique stylings of the faith. As a conceptual map, the cosmogram conveys a geographic identity and spatial order to the immaterial world while affirming the basic principles of association and classification that govern ritual conduct. At its core, Spiritual Baptist cosmography synthesizes the faith’s eclectic spiritual imaginary by squaring its heterogeneous components with an unambiguously Christocentric worldview.⁶

Baptists visualize the spiritual realm as a square or rectangle, oriented by the four cardinal directions and divided into four “corners” referred to as spiritual “schools” or “nations”—Africa, India, China, and Assyria/Syria. With few exceptions, all Baptist churches, permanent or transient ritual spaces (including tent services, thanksgiving tables, baptismal beaches, and mourning rooms), are arranged to reflect this basic conceptual ideal.⁷ The four outermost corners of the church are numbered one through four and associated with the archangels Michael, Gabriel, Uriel, and Raphael, otherwise, the corners may be dedicated to the four evangelists Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John (Simpson 1966, 541; Lum 2000, 43; Laitinen 2002, 240). Revered for their stewardship of the church and its environs, these “keepers of peace,” referenced in Revelation 7, are said to stand at the four corners of the earth, holding back the winds of strife (Stephens 1999, 37). Each corner receives its own ritual attention as part of regular services and may be honored with emblems specific to each saint placed beside it. Aisles leading from the main entrance to the altar and side doors create what is understood to be a Christian cross dividing the nave into four quadrants (the negative space typically occupied by pews or other seating). The church is further partitioned at the beginning of services by “surveying,” a sanctification ritual that involves pouring water and other sacred substances at the four perimeter corners in a sequence that criss-crosses the center area so as to trace the shape of an X, the Roman numeral for ten—representing the biblical Ten Commandments—along the floor.⁸ The superimposition of these two crosses has been interpreted to mean, in the words of one bishop, “Christ’s fulfillment of the Law by his sacrifice and [the idea that] we are under his grace.”

p. 312 The two crosses converge at the symbolic center of the church, where the four nations of the spiritual world meet. This point is conceptualized as “Jerusalem,” the heart of the Christian cosmos and crossroads of the Spiritual Baptist universe. This auspicious junction, indicated in nearly all Baptist churches by a specially marked area or center post, is associated with Jesus Christ and likened to Jacob’s ladder, a mystical conduit joining the earth to the heavens. As a nexus between carnal and spiritual worlds, the center area functions as a channel for conveying Spirit to the congregation and connecting the faithful to mystical forces unseen. Intimating its folk origins in ancient Christianity, the center pole, if present, is said to represent the “timber of Lebanon,” the material purportedly used to construct Solomon’s temple in biblical times (Thomas 1987, 31).

Whether the site of this important symbolic center of the church—and by metonym, the very faith itself—is a pole, an *axis mundi*, reaching from the floor (earth) to the ceiling (heaven), or just a specially marked area designated by a pillar or some other ornamental structure, depends on the church. There are nearly as many variants of pedestals, columns, and other objects used to mark the sacred center as there are Baptist churches; no two are exactly alike. In any case, the sanctified location may be adorned with the full complement of liturgical implements available to congregants, including, especially, multicolored flags representing different spiritual entities and nations, also various vessels containing water, leaves, or flowers, as well as the ever-present *lotah*, *taria*, and calabash along with candles, bells, conch shells, cords, and the like. Many if not all of these items are associated with one or another spiritual school/nation signifying Africa, India, China, or Assyria/Syria. Assembled at the center, this collage of diverse symbols, a spatial juxtaposition of the varied elements of the faith, represents a microcosm of the eclectic cosmopolitan spiritual universe (Figure 19.2).

Along with the altar and the four corners, the center area is the most sacred and ritually important location of the church (Laitinen 2002, 98); it is considered a church's spiritual foundation and is used to chart its proper dimensions (Thomas 1987, 31; Laitinen 2002, 243). Some leaders of the faith claim that when a person receives a church—when they receive the guidance and commission from the Holy Spirit to raise a temple or place of worship—they receive a center pole (or pedestal) with it. Whatever object marks the symbolic center, it tends to be an unmistakable focal point of services. Upon entering the church, Baptists genuflect first at the center pole, where Jesus is said to dwell and where the power of the Holy Spirit is ever present (Stephens 1999, 39). Formal prayers are offered there, dancing and manifestations of Spirit can take place around it, and such rites as the dedication of infants and the pointing of baptismal candidates also occur there (Gibbs De Peza 1999, 81; Laitinen 2002, 243). Churchgoers insist that the center pole is not itself an object of prayer or adoration but rather an index of Christ's law and a critical descension point for the Holy Spirit. "It is a point of contact with the spirit world," explains a veteran Baptist teacher from Port of Spain, "In our faith we do not venerate the pole. But the pole has a spiritual meaning and focus, of course. If done correctly, veneration can happen there. Because the energy of the church is always centered at the center pole. So, it is like if it were a magnet, pulling everything to the center."

Figure 19.2



Base of center pole at a Spiritual Baptist church in Laventille, Trinidad and Tobago (photograph by author).

The Teacher's reference to the center pole's attractive magnetism is not incidental. The pull of the center area draws worshipers to it and focuses their collective attention on calling down the Holy Spirit. Devotion proceeds in a clockwise direction around the center pole as participants encircle the consecrated site in dance and exaltation.⁹ In addition to bringing together a community of worshipers and a plethora of ritual objects, the center area signifies the convergence of all four spiritual schools/nations. The "magnetism" of the center is in this way not just centripetal; it is also unifying because it represents the consolidation of the diverse spiritual universe—the "four separate ideas of godliness"—together as one under the auspices of

Jesus Christ, the center of the faith personified. Metaphorically speaking, then, it is here that diverse ethnonational modalities of Spirit become incorporated functions of a unified Christian complex, located in “Jerusalem,” and administered under Jesus Christ’s supreme authority.

p. 314 The church is therefore an *imago mundi* (Eliade 1959)—a physical representation of the sacred universe. This fairly straightforward conceptualization lends itself to further ↘ levels of abstraction since the center area is not necessarily or even usually located at the actual “center” of the church. Most churches, as mentioned, are rectangular in shape and partitioned by aisles indicating a cross, the intersection of which denotes the symbolic or spiritual rather than “physical” center of the church. Incredibly, some Baptists instruct that, if possible, the center post should be installed according to a geometric formula based on the golden ratio. Following this prescription, the church should approximate what in geometry is called a “golden rectangle,” where the center pole marks the point from which the golden spiral—the spiral of the universe—emanates.¹⁰ Although it is rare to find a church that approaches this ideal, it is nonetheless a compelling proposition for any Baptist to make, especially given the fact that such claims imply a creolized spatial logic to Spiritual Baptist churches that extends well-beyond conventional Christian symbology (and multinational imagery) to include distinctly esoteric concepts, occult knowledge, and extrareligious ciphers that are not always apparent to observers or neophytes.

Spiritual Baptist theories of ritual space are routinely read in ways that reinforce the plural/eclectic imaginary on which the cosmology depends. Some Baptists, for example, point to similarities obtaining between the structural layout of the church and the Tree of Life in Jewish mysticism, observing that the nodes and pathways of the Sefirot map closely onto the sacred four corners, altar, center area, entrance, and side doors of the church. Additional interpretations propose that an analogous correlation also obtains between sacred areas of the church and the focal points of the chakra system as seen in Hindu and Buddhist traditions. Other believers have located the origins and significance of the center pole in Africa, and still others point to a link between the processions around the center pole and Muslim circumambulation of the Kaaba.

For the faithful, these associations do not detract from their Christian identity; rather, they reinforce the legitimacy of their convictions, because the faithful contend that diverse religious traditions share basic underlying principles. The implication is that differences between religions are more or less superficial and that all of them, presumably, speak to the same fundamental truths, no matter how their worship methods may vary. When Spiritual Baptists point to shared ideas or concepts across religious divides, they are also alleging that their cosmology is not just comprehensive and inclusive, but that it is, in fact, universal.

p. 315 Spiritually comprehensive yet subordinate to Christian authority, the physical arrangement of the church—an *imago mundi*—reinforces the terms of the Spiritual Baptist cosmology and underscores important theological stipulations believers hold fast. The cosmogram figured in Figure 19.1 is revelatory of the symbolic ways in which Spiritual Baptists make Christian sense of their diverse spiritual universe. Through the language of space, Baptists regularly assert the preeminence of biblical authority by foregrounding the literal and figurative centrality of Christian symbolism. Even as it accommodates eclectic signs and symbols from across the religious spectrum, the spatial grammar of Baptist cosmology is to a great extent determined by Christian signs and precepts in accordance with Baptist biblical exegesis. Whatever one’s pathway in the Spirit, be it represented by the African, Indian, Chinese, or Assyrian/ ↘ Syrian corners of the church, all roads lead in the end to the same destination: to Jerusalem, and the “wisdom, knowledge, and understanding” it affords the faithful along their spiritual journey.

Ethnonational Modalities of Spirit

For Spiritual Baptists, Spirit has form, function, and identity, made even more authoritative by impressive confirmatory rites and compelling ecstatic practices. It might even be possible to describe Spiritual Baptists as “metaphysical positivists” because for believers the spiritual, nonmaterial world is as real or tangible as the earthly, phenomenal one and can be verified empirically in much the same way. Conventional everyday rituals corroborate for churchgoers the ordinary reality of the spiritual realm around them and the putative efficacy of their theological claims about it by facilitating the experience and direct observation of supernatural phenomena. Embodied spectacles such as speaking in tongues, “catching power,” and astral travel are routine manifestations of Spirit that take center stage during Baptist services and aid in substantiating the incontrovertible authority of the spiritual dimension on the everyday lives of believers.

The Baptist emphasis on Spirit takes many forms, from a capacious notion of spirituality and consciousness of otherworldly matters to a robust belief in transcendent sacred powers, including anthropomorphic entities, and their capacity to influence human affairs. This comprehensive, highly creolized notion of Spirit is not limited to the signs and wonders associated with the early Christian church; nor is it restricted to familiar mainstream concepts of the Holy Spirit. Instead, Baptist epistemologies of Spirit, embellished by a cosmopolitan spiritual substrate, encompass a host of enchanted objects, personages, landscapes, and substances that make up the spiritual world and help define its ethnonational features and geographic boundaries.

Spiritual Africa, India, China, and Assyria/Syria are not only distinct locations in the spiritual realm, but in the Baptist lexicon are also “schools” where the converted are spiritually “educated” during the mourning ceremony (Lum 2000, 223, 41–42). All baptized church members are, at one time or another, encouraged to participate in the formal rite of “mourning,” a higher-consciousness-seeking ritual involving an extended period of prayer, fasting, seclusion, and deprivation. While on the mourning ground—an isolated room near or attached to the church—mourners or “pilgrim travelers,” through the cultivation of trance-like states, traverse the spiritual realm where they explore foreign landscapes and converse with gods, saints, and other beings who convey important messages and give them advice. Later, these spiritual expeditions are “mapped” by the “tracking” of Pointers—usually Leaders and Mothers of the church who are responsible for guiding pilgrims during the ritual—and recorded in summary reports given by mourners upon their return. By “giving their tracks,” an account of their spiritual journeys, pilgrims effectively serve as amateur cosmographers, cataloging the details of ↵ their experiences traveling the spiritual lands and revealing with each subsequent visit more of the mysteries that lie beyond the veil.

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Pilgrims, as a result of these auspicious journeys, receive their “work” or “commission” from the Holy Spirit to “labor in the vineyard” (as Mothers, Nurses, Warriors, Teachers, Captains, Seers, Pointers, Provers, etc.) and gain insight into their spiritual purpose or “path,” which is also understood as their “true nature” or “identity in the Spirit,” a spiritual disposition that is assigned an ethnic quality, such as African, Indian, Chinese, or Syrian, according to the spiritual school where the mourner was educated (Vertovec 1998, 256–257; also see Laitinen 2002, 174).

Which of the four spiritual schools a Baptist is revealed to be in has to do with the realm or manifestation of spiritual consciousness they can access, the guardian angels they walk with, and the elements and powers they work with (to heal, to prophesy, to point, etc.). A person who has been identified with the “Indian school,” tends to enter trance-like states or Holy Spirit possession in “the Indian way” (Laitinen 2002), which might involve mimicking Hindi while speaking in tongues, donning ceremonial garments such as saris or kurtas, or performing mudras and other related ritual movements during ecstatic worship. It follows that Trinbagonians of African descent, who constitute the vast majority of the Spiritual Baptist membership, might be considered Black or Afro-Trinidadian “carnally,” but viewed as Chinese or Indian “spiritually” (Lum 2000, 223).

Moreover, a modeling of the earthly and spiritual worlds is established through ritual items and symbols, dance, and ecstatic worship. This form of mapping is observable in the cosmological layout of churches, as well as in the performative rituals carried out by the faithful that, through their enactment, bring the spiritual world into being. This idea is underlined by the assertion that when one is in trance or “dancing in the Spirit,” one’s earthly body’s movements mirror what is happening in the Spirit realm. Each nation, for example, is represented by a different dance style. Dancing in the Spirit occasions a range of manifestations that are not necessarily or even usually distinguishable as certain powers or anthropomorphic entities (as seen, for example, in Orisha manifestations). More commonly, entranced dancers reflect the spiritual location—Africa, India, China, Assyria/Syria—of the Spirit through their movements (Laitinen 2002, 222), often manifesting behaviors associated with the spiritual environment in which churchgoers find themselves immersed during ecstatic worship. Teacher Michael, an experienced church leader who has instructed me in Spiritual Baptist matters, describes it thusly:

When [someone] starts to get into, what they call “get into the Spirit,” it means she starts to interact in the spiritual realm ... So she’s here, yes, she’s *here*, but her mind, her spirit soul is really tapping into the unseen realm, and so she’s moving [here], and what is happening is that her body is giving [off] the symptoms of what’s going on there [in the spiritual realm]. So, for instance, we might be in a cold room [here on earth] and she might be by a fireside there [in the spiritual

realm], but her body [here] will be sweating ... That's [because of] where she's [located] at spiritually. Your own spirit soul has a direct manifestation in your body.

p. 317 In a way that is akin to astral projection, the physical body is theorized here as separate from the spirit body, or “soul,” which has the ability to travel great distances and to interact in the nonphysical realm. Although travels to the spiritual realm are sometimes described as “visions,” when they take place on the mourning ground or during worship services, they are understood, not as dreams or visions per se, but as out-of-body experiences (“astral travel”), during which one’s spiritual consciousness or spirit body actually visits *real* places.¹¹ It makes good sense, then, that mourners would be called “pilgrims,” and their spiritual travels likened to “being on the road.” It is commonplace, in fact, to hear Baptists discuss “taking a light” (going to mourn) to “walk through India” or to “walk the depths and breadth of Assyria” as a function of their spiritual education.

The spiritual world is acknowledged, brought into being, and continually remade through performative rituals and “travelers’ accounts” that testify not only to the existence of the spiritual realm but also to its ethnonational dimensions, its geographic features, and to the parallel reality it is thought to portray. Through these different forms of empirical evidence, the diverse cosmopolitan spiritual world is constituted in symbiotic and mirrored relation to the earthly world and explored to uncover the mysteries of the Spirit.

Navigating the Spiritual Realm

“Travel” is a central concept in the Spiritual Baptist faith (Glazier 1983, vi). “Journeys” and “voyages” serve as popular metaphors for spiritual growth, rites of passage, and everyday rituals (Laitinen 2002, 266–268). Hymns and sermons often contain travel imagery, and symbols of navigation are abundant and regularly feature nautical themes. The church itself is sometimes allegorized as a ship, and the spiritual world compared with the ocean’s watery depths (Lum 2000, 41; Forde 2008, 109; Duncan 2008, 41–44).

Most churches have a designated “Captain,” a member of the church who is responsible for ensuring that the “ship”—the church while service is in progress—sails smoothly (Gibbs De Peza 1999, 79). Forde (2008, 109) explains that the Captain’s duties include “steering the boat out of the harbor” at the beginning of services, meaning that he “helps to start the service in such a way that the congregation becomes detached from their *carnal* preoccupations and spiritual connections become possible.” It is the responsibility of the ship’s “passengers”—the congregation—to ensure that the vessel remains afloat by calling the Holy Spirit to take charge of the proceedings (Lum 2000, 41). The ship’s destination becomes apparent when participants begin to “get in the Spirit” and reveal, through representative styles of song, dance, and ecstatic worship, their relative locations in Africa, India, Assyria/Syria, or China.

Besides the obvious associations with baptism and water, Spiritual Baptists invest water and water imagery with considerable meaning and importance. The open sea symbolizes the spiritual world; its navigation and mastery are considered emblematic of wisdom and devotion, and its depths recall the outer reaches of the esoteric spiritual ↵ knowledge pursued by the faithful. When nautical metaphors are present, the center pole is sometimes considered the “control of the church” (Duncan 2008, 42). Instead of the traditional balance wheel, a Ship’s Wheel might be installed (either vertically or horizontally). It is used to “steer” the church-ship on its course through the spiritual lands. The Ship’s Wheel and other navigation symbols such as the chart and compass extend the nautical metaphors used to communicate concepts of travel and distance that correspond with Baptist notions of spiritual growth and expanding spiritual consciousness. Reinforced by symbols like the anchor and trident (seen on altars or drawn in chalk seals), nautical themes reinforce a close association between water and spiritual enlightenment.

Metaphors for traveling in the Spirit help to explain the simultaneous *here* (in the church) and *there* (in the Spirit/spiritual realm) aspects of Spiritual Baptist cosmology. The church, a material structure anchored to the physical world, is at once a vessel and a proxy for realizing the parallel realm of Spirit: a space of absolute possibility where converts go to make sense of their lives and to pursue a version of the good life by attaining greater knowledge of God and self through spiritual upliftment. Communion with Spirit is fostered through the embodied practices of churchgoers and their overseas voyages to the spiritual realm. Ethnic signifiers give the entities and locations they visit an identity and sense of place, nurturing connections with the spiritual realm through spatial and temporal registers that collapse the boundaries between here and

there, between now and then, diminishing the distance between human and Spirit to make communication between them possible.

Cosmological Intersections

The religious cultures of the Afro-Caribbean world are more alike than different, forged, as it were, in the same fires of conquest, colonialism, slavery, and peonage that created the multiracial, multicultural societies where these traditions flourish today. The Spiritual Baptist universe, though novel in several respects, shares considerable overlap with other Black Atlantic cosmologies, many of which reflect the complex historical syntheses of classical and contemporary African and African-derived religions with various Christianities and other religious repertoires.

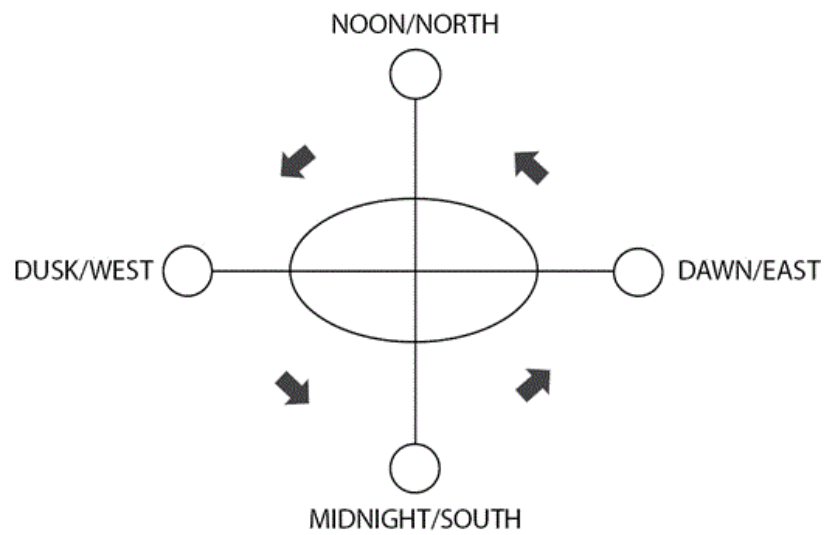
Ritual and aesthetic continuities across the Black Atlantic world are legion and have drawn the attention of scholars for many years (e.g., Herskovits and Herskovits 1947; Simpson 1978; Bastide 1971; Mintz and Price 1992; Murphy 1994; Burton 1997; Barnes 1997; Matory 2005). From similar patterns of ecstatic worship to homologous modes of ceremonial spirituality, Afro-Caribbean religions are remarkably consonant both in how believers define the sacred universe and in how they interact with it. One of the more intriguing parallels is the widespread significance assigned to the *crossroads*—a popular Afro-diasporic religious symbol born in Central Africa that signifies the intersection between physical and spiritual worlds.

p. 319 Consider, for instance, equivalences between the diagram of the Spiritual Baptist universe detailed here and the Kongo sign of the cosmos described by Thompson (1983), MacGaffey (1986), and others. According to classical BaKongo philosophy, the universe is composed of two mirrored worlds—that of the living and that of the dead—separated by a vast body of water. Life is envisioned as a cyclical progression between them resembling the path of the sun such that daytime is analogous to one's physical life on earth and nighttime equal to one's otherworldly or spiritual life among the ancestors. Summarizing this idea is the *yowa* cross (Figure 19.3), a Kongo cosmographic symbol depicting the “four moments of the sun,” with intersecting horizontal and vertical axes set within an ellipse representing the transition between worlds and the repetitive cycle of death and rebirth. Each moment of the sun is identified with a cardinal direction, so that “the summit of the pattern symbolizes not only noon but also maleness, north, and the peak of a person's [physical] strength on earth. Correspondingly, the bottom equals midnight, femaleness, south, [and] the highest point of a person's otherworldly strength” (Thompson 1983, 109). The cosmogram's horizontal axis, a threshold called the Kalunga line, denotes the watery boundary separating the two worlds and gives way to a series of binary oppositions (above/below, day/night, living/dead, man/God) that define the vertical relations between them.

An abbreviated version of the Kongo cosmogram is a simple Greek cross marked on the ground for the purpose of oath-taking, the center or intersection of which indicates, according to Thompson (1983, 109), a “point of contact” between worlds. However similar it is to the Christian cross, the original Kongo cruciform had nothing to do with the crucifixion of Jesus Christ and developed quite independently from Christian civilization (Thompson 1983, 108; MacGaffey 1986, 44–45). Before the arrival of Europeans, it represented for the BaKongo an encapsulation of their ideas about the world and their place in it. In the Americas, where it was likely introduced by enslaved Africans via the transatlantic slave trade, its significance has been augmented by Christian signs and concepts, its ritual import only made stronger through amalgamation and ↵ reinterpretation. The legacy of the Kongo ↵ cross is visible today in symbols used by African-inspired ritual specialists from Cuba to Brazil who acknowledge the crossroads as a powerful medium for eliciting spiritual contact (Thompson 1983).

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Figure 19.3



Kongo sign of the cosmos (image by author, adapted from Thompson 1983, 109).

The Spiritual Baptist and Kongo cosmograms summarize a remarkable array of shared philosophical and religious principles underlying their respective worldviews. Both articulate, in symbolic form, a parallel or mirrored relationship between separate but interrelated physical and metaphysical domains. By projecting the universe onto a two-dimensional plane, oriented around intersecting lines relative to the four cardinal directions, both conceptual schemes invest the crossroads with sacred significance and acknowledge, ritually and diagrammatically, an auspicious point of contact between the material and nonmaterial worlds. For Spiritual Baptists, that connection “point” is established at the junction of the cross, at the center area of the church marked by the center pole and ritually enacted or “traced” through the surveying rites that open services and prepare the church for the arrival of the Holy Spirit. The circle of worship around the center evokes the cycle of the sun and the continuity of life conveyed in the *yowa* cross; the Baptist faithful travel back and forth to the spiritual realm as they ritually move through all four corners of the earth, transcending the limits of the physical world to commune together in Spirit. The pouring of water during rituals, no less than the numerous metaphors equating the spiritual realm with the open sea, harken back to the watery boundary dividing the two worlds in Kongo cosmology. Tellingly, many congregations “travel” by seafaring ship to the spiritual lands, a world that lies across the ocean, just beyond the horizon.

The transcendent significance of the crossroads is a striking feature of Spiritual Baptist cosmology. At one with the Christian cross, it constitutes a powerful symbol that both represents and facilitates a spiritual connection. Forde (Laitinen 2002, 241–242) observes that its ritual significance to Baptists is plain to see in the fact that all roadside preaching and missions are arranged at the “meeting of four roads,” an auspicious junction that regularly invites spiritual encounters. The crossroads are equally significant to the greater Kongo Atlantic for whom the “turn in the path,” according to Thompson (1983, 109), remains an indelible concept as *the* point of intersection between the living and the dead—indeed, between the earthly and the spiritual for successive generations of African descendants and their religious cultures in the New World.¹²

I have considered here several layers of Spiritual Baptist cosmography in order to lay bare the creolized architecture of the faith and to demonstrate some of the unique ways in which believers derive meaningful coherence out of their eclectic, Christian-centered universe. Travel metaphors, fundamental to the spatial grammar of Spiritual Baptist rites, work in tandem with a conceptual framework that defines Spirit in terms of a sacred cosmopolitan geography. Diverse modalities of Spirit come alive in the embodied practices of churchgoers who, through ecstatic worship and regular visits to the spiritual realm, bring to life an enchanted world of people and places endowed with mystical power. The church, a model of the spiritual world—its center an *axis mundi*—is organized around the cross, the authoritative symbol of the Christian universe but no less so a diffuse Black Atlantic symbol of the crossroads signifying and making possible contact with the spiritual realm. By exploring the spatial dynamics underlying Spiritual Baptist epistemologies, I have illustrated the novel representational practices central to meaning-making in the church while shedding light on the dimensions of space that inform Baptist and other Afro-Creole ritual logics.

Notes

1. From here on out, consistent with the vernacular, I use “Spiritual Baptist” and “Baptist” interchangeably.
2. *Kabbalah*, also known as “Circle Work” or “Kabba,” refers to a local Afro-Creole form of occult spiritism that is seemingly unrelated to the Jewish mystical tradition of the same name (McNeal 2011, 116).
3. Creole religions tend to be rich in ways that evade hard, fast categorization. I want to underscore here the heteropraxy that generally defines Spiritual Baptist Christianity. Self-definitions of the religion vary considerably among believers, which has led anthropologist Maarit Forde to suggest that arguments over orthodoxy are themselves a central characteristic of the faith (Laitinen 2002, 299). Nonetheless, Forde concludes that while “there exists a continuum of self-acclaimed Spiritual Baptist churches that share the same basic structures, and although people may avoid visiting churches that do not correspond to their spiritual knowledge and consequent self-definitions as Spiritual Baptist, they can still recognize the familiar structures of the belief system, ritual practice, and church organization” (Laitinen 2002, 310).
4. This chapter draws on data collected from ongoing historical and ethnographic research in Trinidad and Tobago conducted by the author since 2016.
5. Some Baptists refer to spiritual “Assyria” instead of spiritual “Syria.” Both terms appear to be used interchangeably to denote the same ethnonational idea.
6. To my knowledge, the visual representation of the cosmos offered here is unusual in that cosmograms of this kind are not typically drawn. Instead, the spiritual universe is conceptually realized in the organization of ritual space—in particular, in the physical layout of the church itself.
7. The general layout of Spiritual Baptist churches is surprisingly consistent despite regular if often minor deviations from the norm. Whether the altar is situated in the east relative to true north is not at all consistent, and the shapes of churches may vary based on practical considerations (the location and size of the available plot, additions to the church building, etc.).
8. Baptists attribute the practice of marking out a ritual space and sanctifying the four corners to a time when the Shouter Prohibition Ordinance (1917–1951) outlawed free exercise of the faith and services were held in secluded places like forests where there were no clear boundaries and the faithful had to demarcate their own sacred spaces. It persists today as an important purification ritual necessary in preparing the church to receive the Holy Spirit.

9. The directional arrows in Figure 19.1 denote the general flow of activity around the center area. In more “Orisha-oriented churches,” according to one of my interlocutors, the direction may be reversed, and the corners of the church transposed. My own observations, however, suggest that these determinations are less formulaic in practice.
10. A golden spiral in geometry is a logarithmic spiral whose growth factor is based on the golden ratio.
11. According to a Baptist Leader interviewed by Ian Taylor (1993, 32–33), the traveling spirit body remains attached to the physical body by a “spiritual umbilical cord,” which, presumably, enables the traveler’s spirit or soul to find its way back to their body. It is believed that once the cord has been severed, the body is dead. This idea, and, indeed, the very concept of astral travel, may be gleaned from New Age sources based on Western esotericism, though believers themselves point to scriptural support for it in Ecclesiastes 12:6–7.

12. For possible early influences of Kongo culture in Trinidad, see Herskovits and Herskovits (1947); Warner-Lewis (1991, 2003); Lum (2000).

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