

Orishas on the Tree of Life:
An Exploration of Creolization Between Afro-Diasporic Religions
and Twentieth Century Western Occultism

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INTRODUCTION

African-inspired religions have found expression in a startling number of ways in the Americas. From the slave trade-driven Diaspora of the sixteenth through nineteenth centuries, the migration of African peoples and culture during and since that period, and the revolutionizing of communication in the contemporary era, African forms of spirituality have intermingled with, and sometimes co-opted, Anglo-European and Native American religions in those areas of creolization where these disparate cultures met, struggled, and fused. Elements of African Diasporic religion are found in such varied expressions as Candomblé, Umbanda, Palo Mayombe, Obeah, Santería/Lucumí, Vodou, “Hoodoo,” and more. In the U. S., for example, a local derivation of Haitian Vodou known as New Orleans Voodoo has been dated to the late eighteenth century or earlier. And in Brazil, some half dozen or so partially-overlapping forms of Afro-Brazilian religion have evolved.

This process of religious creolization continues. A number of practices have arisen that combine African Diasporic religious forms with Western esotericism. This is not entirely new: Brazilian Umbanda, for example, has been heavily influenced by Kardecism, a variety of nine-

teenth century European spiritualism. What are new, however, are some of the hybrid expressions that have arisen in the late twentieth century. In the wake of the ‘occult explosion’ of the Sixties and the ‘New Age’ that followed, syncretic forms of spirituality appeared, blending African Diasporic religions with Anglo-European magical systems such as tarot, qabalah, and ceremonial magical rituals.

Drawing upon primary and secondary sources in anthropology, popular culture, and religious studies, this paper explores some of the new and eclectic practices on the fringes of Afro-Diasporic religious expression. Two case studies will be examined: the synthesis of tarot and Umbanda *Orixá* or spirits¹ (see Zolrak 1994), and the blending of tarot and qabalah with New Orleans Voodoo (e.g., Martinie & Glassman 1992; Glassman 2000). By examining these seemingly disparate systems and the ways their constituent religious and magical elements have been combined, it is hoped that some new understanding will be gained in regard to the ways in which creolized religious practices arise.

The term creolization is commonly understood to refer to the process by which two or more cultures come together to create a new culture. (Romberg 2002) In linguistics, creolized languages are identified as often using the syntax of the dominant culture’s language with the lexicon of the subordinated culture. (Fromkin et al 2007:434-437) As we will see, in many ways this describes the case studies examined in this essay.

¹ I have chosen in this essay to call the *Loa/Lwa* and *Oriša/Orishas/Orixás* “spirits” for simplicity’s sake, though I am aware of the problematic nature of rendering the polyvalent Yoruban word and its New World equivalents in such a simple term.

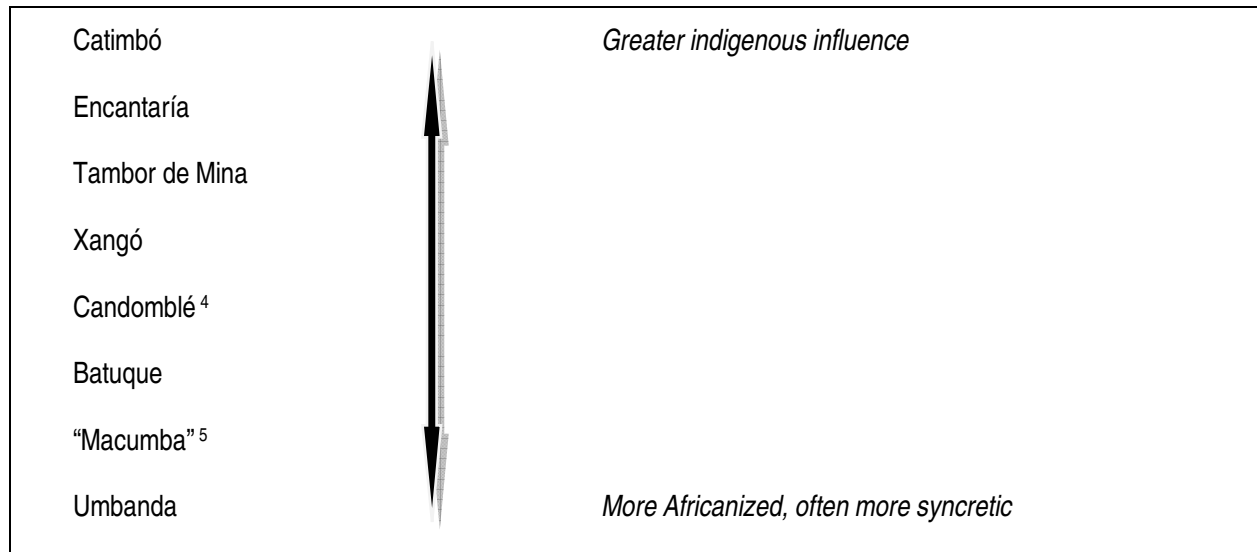
A popular misconception, even among many practitioners, is that African-based forms of religion underwent an initial period of syncretism that ended with the abolishment of slavery.² The perception seems to be that there was an especially active creolization in the first century or so following the arrival of slaves from Central and West Africa in the New World, for example the well-known syncretizing of African Loa and Orisha to various Catholic saints, but that once slavery ended so too did that creolization. In this view, the manifold forms into which Afro-Diasporic religions had evolved became fixed, resisting any new synthesis with other forms of spirituality.

In fact, this syncretism, or better, creolization, continues to be an ongoing development. Vodou practitioners in Brooklyn devise ways to perform rituals without the traditional pouring of rum onto the floor. (Brown 1991) Haitian immigrants in New York, and white American practitioners of New Orleans Voodoo, stage Rara performances that incorporate elements not found in traditional Haitian Rara, such as the use of Jamaican *reggae* rhythms, New Orleans “second line” dancing, and more. (Glassman 2011; McAllister 2002) Brazil has been an especially active ground for ongoing creolization: aspects of other forms of spirituality have been incorporated in a number of important ways both during and since slavery, from romanticized notions of Lakota and Cheyenne practices, to the adoption of New Age ideas about karma, reincarnation, and extra-terrestrials, to the wholesale adoption of the work of Allan Kardec.³

² This seems to be much more prevalent outside Brazil, for reasons which will become evident shortly (*vide infra*).

³ See for example the spirit “Seven Arrows” in Hale 2009:142. Seven Arrows is the name of an extremely popular mass-market book on Cheyenne history and religion. (Storm 1972) For the incorporation of New Age concepts see Hale 2009:62-66; see also the section on the *Tarot of the Orishas*, *infra*. For Kardec’s influence, see *infra*, and Hale 2009:69-73; Wafer 1991:5.

Since the earliest period of the Afro-Brazilian experience, religious practices of African slaves encountered and mixed with elements of native spirituality, giving rise to a wide variety of new religious forms.



At one end of this scale⁶ forms such as *Catimbó* blend aspects of Afro-Diasporic religion with indigenous Brazilian tribal beliefs, including the use of tobacco and psychotropic substances such as *jurema*.⁷ The name may come from the word for a tobacco pipe, *cachimbo*; given the importance of tobacco to indigenous Amerindian cultures and religions, if true this would provide another example of creolization. Clients arrive with problems, and the *Mestre* (“master”) gives out advice, cures, charms, or medicines. The *Mestre* is a shaman: he visits the ‘otherworld,’ performs healings, and receives the spirits – who are also called *Mestres*. These spirits may be

⁴ Candomblé includes a number of other expressions such as Nagô, Ketu, Gege, Angola, Omolocô, and Caboclo. However, see note 6.

⁵ Here in quotes because this is primarily a name pejoratively used by the press and other nonmembers for some of the rituals and beliefs they found “dark” – whether meaning sorcerous, or more African, or an equating of the two. The word is originally of Bantu origin, but has been applied in Brazil to mean anything deemed “black magic.”

⁶ It is important to keep in mind that these categories are extremely flexible, admitting of great variety within each and much overlap between them.

⁷ *Acacia Jurema*, a tree native to Brazil that is a variety of ayahuasca.

humans (either ancestors or archetypes), forest spirits, or dolphins. The dolphin spirits, an explicitly indigenous concept, are said to live in an enchanted city at the bottom of the river, to which they sometimes bring humans. They also will dress up, using magic to hide their true shapes, and attend human gatherings in order to seduce human women. (Hale 2011)

At the other end of the scale are forms such as “Macumba” and Umbanda that give witness to a greater degree of influence from Central Africa (Congo, Angola, etc.) and West Africa (Nigeria, Benin, Ivory Coast, etc.), and incorporate practices from those homelands: polyrhythmic drumming, ecstatic dance, and trance-possession by the Loa and Orixá, spirits of African origin. As noted below, they have also added influences from Christianity as well as New Age concepts. (Hale 2009; 2011; St. Clair 1971; Wafer 1991)

Throughout the range of Afro-Brazilian religions, creolization has given rise to a range of new forms. To cite but one example, possession by African-derived Orixá is augmented in Brazil by the appearance of other spirits including *pretos velhos* (“old slaves”), *crianças* (child spirits), and *caboclos* or spirits of indigenous Brazilian ‘Indians.’⁸ (Hale 2009; 2011; St. Clair 1971; Wafer 1991)

The incorporation of Kardecism into Afro-Brazilian religion is especially pertinent here. Allan Kardec, the *nom de plume* of Léon Denizard Hippolyte Rivail (1804–1869), was the French author of several works on “spiritism” or spiritualism, including *The Spirits’ Book* (*Le Livre des Esprits*, 1857) which gained a huge following worldwide. His work was extremely popular in Latin America, especially Brazil, and had direct influence on such forms of Afro-Diasporic religion as Mexican Curandismo and Brazilian Espiritismo, Umbanda, and others.

⁸ Although caboclo literally means a *mestiço* or person of mixed indigenous and European ancestry, the caboclo spirits are usually regarded as also including the spirits of pureblood indigenous Brazilian natives. (Hale 2011)

(Hale 2009; 2011) Kardec's work also helped catalyze the late nineteenth century fascination with spiritualism in Europe and the Americas (Albanese 2007:480-81), which in turn led to a growth of interest in occultism and medieval magical texts.

Thomas Tweed, drawing upon Deleuze and Guattari's "hydraulic model," notes that varieties of religious expression are "confluences of organic-cultural flows." (Tweed 2006:54 ff) In the case of Afro-Diasporic religions, these flows have moved in both directions. Dominant (European and Anglo) cultures have adopted—that is, appropriated—elements of African-derived religion. Perhaps just as often, however, Afro-Diasporic religions have introduced concepts and practices from the European cultures that subordinated them.

The clearest example of the latter is the syncretizing of the Loa and Orixá with the iconography of Catholic saints. As the opener of life's paths and controller of the gate between the visible and unseen worlds, Legba/Elleguá is identified with St. Peter, holder of the keys to the Pearly Gates. Erzulie Dantor (also *Ezili Dantó*), a fierce protectress, is represented by pictures of the Black Madonna of Częstochowa holding the infant Jesus. Ogoun/Oggún/Ogúm, the warrior-blacksmith, is often invoked in the name of Saint Jacques (*Sen Jak*), whose icons depict the saint wielding the sword of righteousness.

So too, Afro-Brazilian religion eagerly absorbed the "organic-cultural flow" of nineteenth century European spiritualist conceptions in *The Spirits' Book* and its sequels. Allan Kardec may not have set out to become a direct influence upon Umbanda, but practitioners in Rio, Salvador, and elsewhere in Brazil enthusiastically introduced Kardecism into their religious ideas and practices, forever changing the face of Afro-Diasporic religion there.



Figure 1. Tarot of the Orishas, selected cards
©1995 Zolrak & Durkron

THE TAROT OF THE ORISHAS

The Tarot of the Orishas/El Tarot de los Orishas comprises a bilingual book in English and Spanish,⁹ and the attendant deck of 77 tarot cards which it sets out to explain. (Zolrak 1995) Despite nineteenth century romantic notions of the tarot's alleged origins in ancient Egypt (aided by its connection in the popular imagination with equally romantic but mistaken ideas about the supposed Egyptian heredity of the Gypsies, with whom the tarot was associated), the earliest definitive date for the tarot is in the first half of the fifteenth century. At the time called *trionfi*

⁹ Although the author's biographical note claims experience with Candomblé, he appears to be Argentine, not Brazilian, which may explain his writing in Spanish and not Portuguese. (Zolrak 1995:inside flyleaf) See also note 18.

(“triumphs”), the cards acquired the name *tarocchi* a century later, from which the current name of “tarot” was derived.¹⁰

A number of explanations have been proffered for the name ‘tarot.’ These most often draw upon similarities to words in Hebrew, Latin, Hellenicized Egyptian, and—frankly—on pure fancy: for example, the claim that it comes from “*ta ro*,” meaning “royal road” in ancient Egyptian. There is no such phrase in any Egyptian language of any era: the claim was made up of whole cloth. All of these explanations may be considered *ex post facto*. (See S. Kaplan 1978:Vol. I, 1-2)

Although earlier examples show wide variation, by the late nineteenth century the form of the tarot deck had become more or less settled:

1. A set of 56 ‘minor’ cards divided into four suits usually associated with the four classical elements as follows:
 - a. Wands, Staves, Batons, or Clubs (\approx the present-day playing card suit of clubs), associated with Fire¹¹ and numbered from Ace through Ten;
 - b. Cups, Chalices, or Goblets (\approx hearts), associated with Water and numbered from Ace through Ten;
 - c. Swords (\approx spades, via Italian, *spade*, sword), associated with Air¹² and numbered from Ace through Ten;
 - d. Coins, Pentacles, or Disks (\approx diamonds), associated with Earth and numbered from Ace through Ten;

¹⁰ There are earlier references to playing cards, usually in legal documents outlawing their use in gambling. See S. Kaplan 1978:Vol. I, 24 *ff.* One of the earliest references to tarot is in Rabelais’ *Gargantua et Pantagruel*, where it is called *tarau*. (Rabelais [1569] 2009:459)

¹¹ Some systems reverse the elemental attributions for Wands and Swords.

- e. A set of 16 ‘Court’ cards similarly divided by suits, and representing the King, Queen, Knight, and Page of each suit;¹²
2. A set of 22 (more or less) ‘major’ cards, most often numbered from 0 (The Fool) through XXI (The World or The Universe).

In a number of decks the first set (or “Minor Arcana”) are not fully illustrated, being instead represented merely with a number of items matching the suit (five wands, for example, or seven cups). However, the second set (the “Major Trumps” or “Major Arcana”), are almost always fully illustrated even in decks where the Minor Arcana is not. There are wide variations in the names and attributions of the cards of the Major Arcana, but most include such figures as The Sun, The Moon, The Magician, The Lovers, The Wheel of Fortune, The Tower (or Lightning-Struck Tower, House of God, etc.), and so on. (See Crowley [1944] 1998:53-144; Duquette 1995:11-64; S. Kaplan 1978:Vol. I, 2-5; Papus [1889] 1971:51-60, 96-191)

The popularity of fully-illustrated tarot decks has led to the proliferation of literally hundreds of decks currently in print, from the immensely popular Rider-Waite deck, to the *Hello Kitty Tarot*, *Hellraiser Tarot* (from the movie series of that name), and even a set designed by Salvador Dalí. So too the wide latitude for variation has encouraged others to devise decks with Major Arcana featuring non-traditional figures. The *Silicon Valley Tarot*, for example, eschews the traditional figures in favor of “The CEO,” “The Hacker,” “The Double Latte,” and so on.

One such variant deck is the *Tarot of the Orishas*. The designer, inspired by his work with Batuque, Umbanda and Candomblé, has introduced a number of significant variations into

¹² Other variations divide these into Knight, Queen, Prince, and Princess. See for example Crowley [1944] 1998.

this deck, including changing some of the Major Arcana to represent specific Orishas (or Orixás) from Afro-Brazilian religion. I here reproduce the comparison provided in the book (Zolrak 1995:13):

Tarot of the Orishas	Traditional Tarot
Ellegua	No correspondence
Eshu	No correspondence
Pomba Gira	No correspondence
Ogun	The Chariot
Iansa or Oya	No correspondence
Chango or Xango	Justice
Xapana, Babalualle, Omulu	The Hermit
Oba	No correspondence
Oxumare	Wheel of Fortune
Oshun	The Priestess
Yemaya	The Empress
Obatala or Oxala	The Emperor, The Master ¹³
El Babalocha or BabalOrixá	The Magician
The Guardian Angel	Temperance
The Couple	The Lovers
The Man	The Star
The Village	The Tower
The Earth	The World
The Sun	The Sun
The Moon	The Moon
The Expelled	The Fool
Iku	Death
Karma	Judgment
The Devil	The Devil
The Enslaved Prisoner	The Hanged Man

¹³ It is interesting that he includes this term, since *Mestre*, “Master,” is used in Catimbó (sometimes called Batuque) for the priest himself (and sometimes for the spirits invoked). (Hale 2011) Note that Zolrak claims experience in Batuque. (Zolrak 1995)

Zolrak’s deck includes 25 Major Trumps, for which he devises a set of attributions which are his alone. Five of his cards are not attributed to the traditional deck, and there are three traditional cards not listed in his table.¹⁴ In addition, he has changed the members of the Court cards from the King, Queen and others, to the “elementals” and “messages”:

Water	Undines and Mermaids
	Message from Water
Earth	Dwarves and Gnomes
	Message from Earth
Fire	Salamanders
	Message from Fire
Air	Fairies and Sylphs
	Message from Air

The inclusion of elemental spirits clearly indicates an influence from European occultism. Originally found in early texts such as Agrippa (Agrippa [1531] 2003) and various medieval grimoires (e.g., de Abano [1496] 2003; Mathers [1490’s?] 2000), these entities are not encountered in any form of African religion in the sub-Saharan region from which the Brazilian slaves were taken. And while it might not be unusual to find them in a tarot deck—there is a *Tarot of the Fairies*, after all—their inclusion in the *Tarot of the Orishas*, along with cards such as “Karma” or “The Guardian Angel,” indicates the level of creolization the author is promoting between Afro-Brazilian religions and Western occultism.¹⁵

Even more significant, however, are the ways in which the African-derived spiritual entities are depicted. Each of the Major Trumps for an Orisha lists the spirit’s name in English,

¹⁴ These are The High Priestess, The Hierophant, and Strength.

¹⁵ There is a strong possibility that Zolrak was also influenced by ideas about elemental spirits from Kardecism—his biographical note says that he “studied and taught Kardecist Spiritualism” (Zolrak 1994: inner flyleaf)—but I have not been able to conclusively find a reference for this.

Spanish, and Brazilian Portuguese, with a full-color image of the Orisha. (See Fig. 1) The book gives a description for each (in English and Spanish), a brief outline of the Orisha's background, and an interpretation or oracular reading for the card. Some entries also include brief invocations to the Orisha by the author. The following is excerpted from the entry for Exú:

Exú, Echu, or Eshu

This is one of the aspects that Elleguá, Elebbá, or Elegbara may adopt. Many think that Exú is one of Elleguás 21 archetypes. His dwelling is located at the crossing for four roads, which must each be open (without cul-de-sacs) in the four directions for at least seven blocks. He is the "Lord of the Road," who carefully and cautiously listens and attends to our requests and brings them to the high Orixás, for whom he is the spokesman. By performing this important task, he reaches a spiritual light, covering the direst needs or human wants. . . .

Many syncretize him with St. Michael the Archangel and others with St. Peter (the custodian of the keys of Paradise) because Eshú has the keys to access the different psychic roads. His specialty is to "open up pathways" (with regard to work, professional career, or means of living). . . .

He is seen [on the tarot card] walking through a crossroads and smoking his typical cigar, which he "smokes and de-smokes at the same time" (he spiritually cleans and/or releases the energy of those who resort to him), while holding a bottle of his beverage in his right hand and in the other a trident . . .

MEANING:

A virile man, full of vitality and knowledgeable about life, with the innocence of a small boy and the experience of an old man; time seems not to affect him; his energy is constant, he works untiringly and persistently as he tries to attain his goals. . . .

Written and oral communication. Fraternity, association, or lodge. Fraternal and community feeling. Abandonment of material things towards spiritual things.

BADLY AFFECTED BY OTHER CARDS:

Infidelity. Coolness. Lack of sexual appetite, emotional upset. Laziness. Lack of energy.¹⁶

In addition to the descriptions and oracular interpretations for the cards, the author provides chapters on "energizing" the cards, methods for laying out the cards including several that reference motifs from popular New Age imagery such as a "Gizeh Pyramid Layout" and a "Sev-

¹⁶ Zolrak 1995:22-26

enth Chakra Layout,” prayers to the elements, a description of Umbanda,¹⁷ and an apologia titled “Santería Is Not Voodoo.” (Zolrak 1995:229 ff) The book even includes a table associating the Hindu Kundalini Chakras, colors, notes of the (Western) musical scale, elements, and spiritual “forces” such as the previously listed “elementals” and such entities as “Spiritual guides” along with the Orishas. (Zolrak 1995:263-65)



Figure 2. New Orleans Voodoo Tarot, selected cards
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THE NEW ORLEANS VODOO TAROT

Like the *Tarot of the Orishas*, the *New Orleans Voodoo Tarot (NOVT)* is a deck of original tarot cards and a companion book that describes and explains them. It is a collaboration between two

¹⁷ The book’s cover references Candomblé and not Umbanda. It is not clear whether this discrepancy is due to the publisher’s failure to distinguish the two, or if, like many, Zolrak considers Umbanda a subset of Candomblé.

artists with longtime associations with New Orleans-style Vodou, Louis Martinié and Sallie Ann Glassman. Martinié is a writer on a number of occult subjects and an editor for Black Moon Publishing, and is associated with the New Orleans Voodoo Spiritual Temple. Sallie Ann Glassman is a longtime resident of New Orleans, a painter and illustrator for a number of books (e.g., Schueler & Schueler 1989), an author in her own right (Glassman 2000), and a Haitian-trained Vodou mambo, or priestess. She heads La Source Ancienne Ounfó (also written *hounfort*, an *ounfó* is a Vodou temple) which has met weekly for the past 25 years. She has also been extremely active in the post-Katrina efforts to revitalize the city, most recently with the New Orleans Healing Center.

Vodou has been in New Orleans since there have been African slaves there, though it was not always known by that name. According to Robert Tallant's popularized history of New Orleans Voodoo, "As early as 1782 Governor Gálvez of Louisiana prohibited the importation of Negroes from Martinique because he believed them to be steeped in Voodooism . . . [a] decade later Negroes from Santo Domingo were likewise banned." (Tallant [1946] 1983:9) New Orleans has been a melting pot for peoples from different continents for many years—Native American, French, Spanish, English, and African—which is to say that it has been a site of creolization amongst those cultures. The confluence of these different traditions has created a distinctive culture unique to New Orleans.

Likewise, New Orleans Voodoo represents an expression of Afro-Diasporic religion which, while it shares many elements with other such expressions, is unique to the Crescent City. The pantheon of Loa (*Lwa*) includes local variants such as Joe Feray (a form of Ogun Ferraille) and famous New Orleans figures like Dr. John and Marie Laveau. Voodoo practices in New Or-

leans have long included elements of “Hoodoo” or African-American folk magic, and in recent years has been influenced by contemporary New Age ideas and practices.¹⁸

Like New Orleans-style Voodoo, the *NOVT* reflects the convergence of a number of spiritual systems. This reflects a conscious decision on the part of its authors, themselves steeped in a variety of religious and magical backgrounds, to create a tool that would reflect “Voodoo’s multiracial nature and the special characteristics of the loa” by merging a specifically New Orleanian perspective on Voodoo with the tarot. (Martinié & Glassman 1992:3) According to Glassman (private conversation), each Loa was ritually invoked and asked how he or she wished to be depicted in the deck, and the deck itself was constructed so as to combine this Voodoo sensibility with contemporary Western esoteric teachings on the tarot and qabalah. (Martinié & Glassman 1992; Glassman 2000)

Qabalah¹⁹ is a Hebrew term indicating received knowledge or wisdom, originally referring to the oral transmission of the Torah from Moses, who received it on Mount Sinai, to the Elders of the early Israelite state through a succession of priests. According to Joseph Dan, this reception of the word of God included the Tanakh (scripture), the Halakha (laws), and the Midrash (exegesis). (Dan 2006:1-2) To these was added another element in the Middle Ages: “Groups of Jewish esoterics and mystics, mainly in Spain, Provence, and later Italy, claimed to be in possession of a secret tradition concerning the meaning of the scriptures and other ancient texts, expounding them as relating to dynamic processes within the divine realms.” (Dan 2006:3)

¹⁸ Dr. John—not to be confused with “Mac” Rebennack (b. 1940), the musician who uses the same stage name—was a famous nineteenth century Voodoo healer and drummer. Marie Laveau (1794–1881) was an even more famous practitioner and healer, as was her daughter, Marie Laveau II (1827–c. 1895). See Martinié & Glassman 1992: 38-43. For more on Hoodoo, see Haskins 1978. For a look at New Orleans-style Voodoo with a New Age flavor, see Teish 1985.

¹⁹ Various spelled *cabala*, *kabbala*, *kabbalah*, *kaballah*, *qabala*, *qabalah*, etc. The root is the Semitic QBL (קבל), meaning “to receive.”

These men were, as writer Lon Milo Duquette puts it, passionately absorbed in a quest to uncover the word of God which they believed to be hidden within the exoteric texts of the Torah.

(Duquette 2001:xix)

The esoteric understanding of these seekers was based upon texts that purported to reveal the methods by which the God of Israel had encoded the secrets of creation within the scriptures. Indeed, they went so far as to claim that since the Torah said that God created by the power of the Word—“And God said ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light”—the power of creation is in the letters of the alphabet themselves. They devised tables to show the correspondences between the letters and their shapes, numbers, and meanings, and spent years poring over the scriptures for hidden significances.²⁰ This science of letter and number, known as *gematria*, is one of the pillars of qabalah, and relies upon the fact that Hebrew uses the same symbols to indicate letters and numerals.²¹ Since each word can be read as a number, hidden meanings were purported to be revealed by comparing words and phrases that add up to the same number. For example, the words for “lion” (אריה, *aryeh*) and “courage” (גבורה, *geburah*) both add up to 216. When one of these words is encountered in the Torah, the qabalists claimed, the other might be substituted in order to gain additional insight into the Creator’s divine Will.

With 32 mystical paths of Wisdom
engraved Yah
the Lord of Hosts
the God of Israel
...
And He created His universe
with three books:
with text

²⁰ For a modern version of these tables of correspondences, see Crowley 1972.

²¹ I am aware of only four alphabets that share this characteristic: Greek, Hebrew, Aramaic and Arabic. All four of these are etymologically linked.

with number
and with communication

...

Ten Sephiroth of Nothingness And 22 Foundation Letters²²

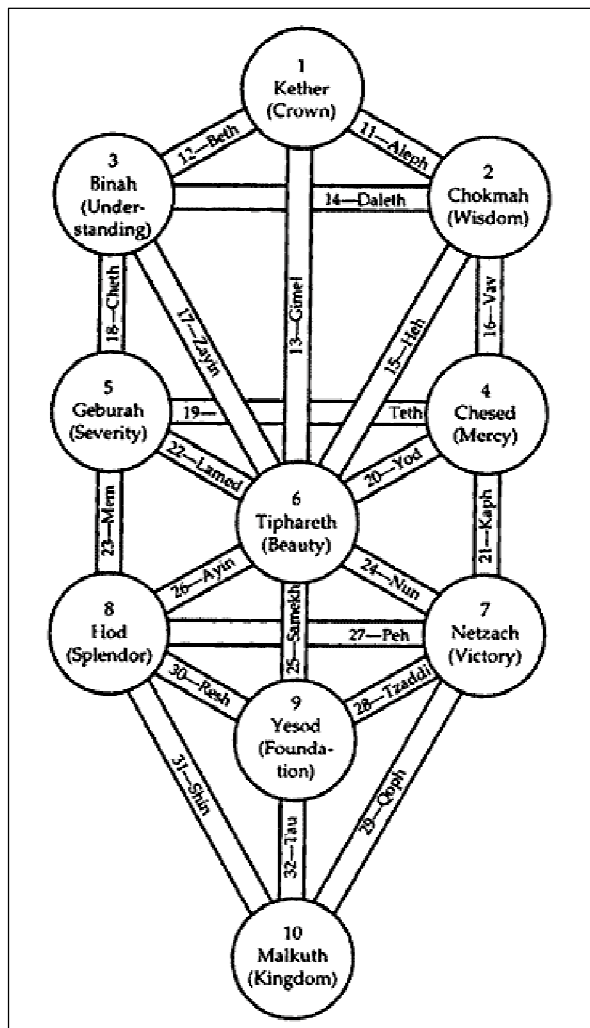


Figure 3. Tree of Life, showing Sephiroth and Paths.
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²² *The Book of Formation (Sepher Yetzirah)*, attributed to 1st century BCE but more likely 3rd or 4th century CE. The first known recension is not until 1562. See A. Kaplan 1990.

In addition to the method of exegesis through gematria, the medieval qabalists devised a graphical system of categorization intended to show the principal powers or “emanations” of God, which has come to be known as the *Otz Chaim*, or “Tree of Life.” It arranges these in a graphical representation comprised of ten *sephiroth* (“vessels,” also sometimes referred to as “spheres”) along with the twenty-two paths connecting them. As there are twenty-two letters in the Hebrew alphabet, the letters were assigned to the paths. (See Fig. 3)

A third major concept developed by the medieval qabalists was based upon the gematria of the *shema* or fourfold name of God, often referred to by the Greek term *tetragrammaton* (“four-letter word”): Yod He Vau He (יהוה). As the Creator’s name, it was seen as imbued with divine properties and was analyzed and applied in a number of ways to the rest of the system. Creation was seen as composed of four worlds (Archetypal, Creative, Formative, and Active²³), the Tree of Life was divided into four zones, and other quadruplicities—the four elements, the cardinal directions, and so on—were mapped onto the four letters of the Name.

י	Atziluth	Archetypal World
ה	Briah	Creative World
ו	Yetzirah	Formative World
ה	Assiah	Active World
		Material World

Nineteenth century interest in the occult saw the rise of a number of mystical fraternities, including the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn (fnd. 1887). Members of the Golden Dawn

²³ These are all still considered to be on the plane of Spirit; the Material or Physical World is pendant to these.

included Samuel Liddell Macgregor Mathers, Arthur Edward Waite, and Edward Alexander “Aleister” Crowley, among others.²⁴

Through the work of translators like Mathers and Waite, concepts from classical qabalah were discovered by the late-nineteenth century occultists of the Golden Dawn and incorporated into their attempts to forge a unified theoretical foundation for magic. Aligning the 22 Major Trumps with the 22 Hebrew Letters and the 22 paths on the Tree of Life, and assigning astrological correspondences to these, they merged qabalah, tarot, astrology, and other forms of magic.²⁵ To this synthesis they added a theory of the structure of the universe informed by a mixture of post-Enlightenment science and notions of spiritual realms taken from Theosophy and spiritualism. As Crowley wrote, “We place no reliance on Virgin or Pigeon / Our method is Science, our aim is Religion.”²⁶ In the eyes of the Golden Dawn members, an Einsteinian ‘grand unified theory’ of the world rested upon a creolization of magical and scientific explanations.

Although Kardecism was not a direct contributor to this synthesis, Kardec’s influence may be traced through his impact upon the spiritualists and Orientalist mystics of the generation just prior to the founding of the Golden Dawn. The theories of man’s dual nature being composed of a corporeal and an etheric body in turn shaped the worldviews of men like Mathers and Crowley.

²⁴ Other members include Moina Mathers (née Mina Bergson, sister of philosopher Henri Bergson), William Butler Yeats, Maud Gonne, E. Nesbit, Bram Stoker, Evelyn Underhill, and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.

²⁵ See Crowley [1911] 1973; Crowley [1944] 1998:278-287; S. Kaplan 1978:Vol. I 2-17; Papus [1889] 1971; Regardie 1984; 1988.

²⁶ This motto was printed on the frontispiece to each of Crowley’s ten volumes of *The Equinox* (1909-1913), subtitled “The Review of Scientific Illuminism.” The “pigeon” is a sarcastic reference to the Christian symbol of the dove.

The syncretic approach that Aleister Crowley learned during his tenure as a member of the Golden Dawn was in turn brought to bear upon his own magical orders, the A.∴ A.∴ and O. T. O. He added kundalini yoga, the I Ching, alchemy, and other systems to the mixture.²⁷ In particular, his own tarot book and deck²⁸ were to greatly influence twentieth century esotericism, including the authors of the *NOVT*.²⁹

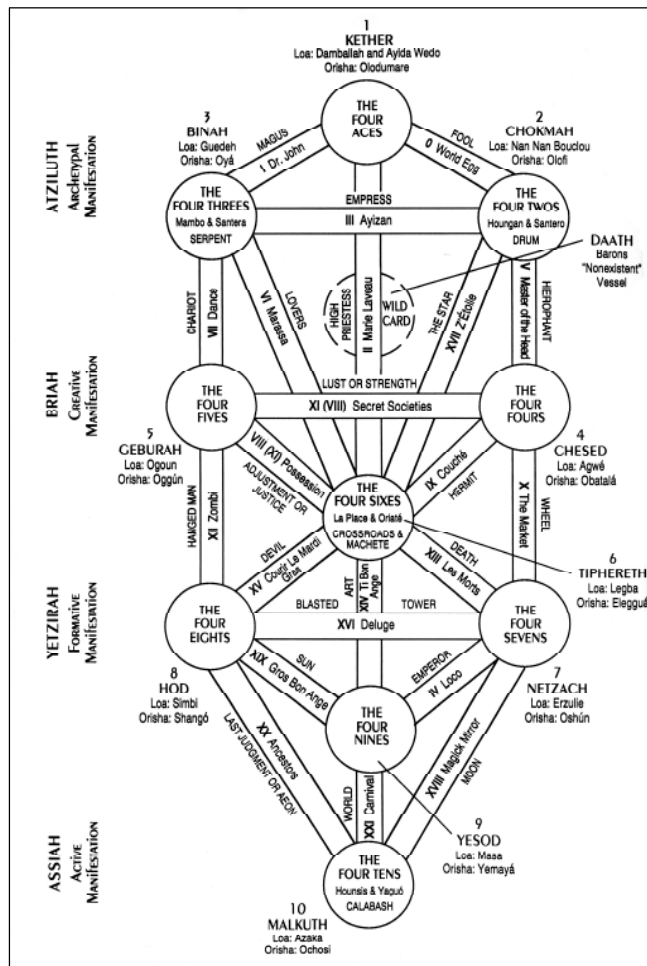


Figure 4. Tree of Life, showing *NOVT* associations.
© 1992 Martinié & Glassman

²⁷ Crowley's table of correspondences runs to some 194 columns and relates the Tree of Life not only to astrology and the tarot, but also to such lists as incenses, parts of the human body, Egyptian gods, levels of Hell in Arabian mythology, and so on. See Crowley [1911] 1973.

²⁸ For the *Book of Thoth* tarot, see Crowley [1944] 1998.

²⁹ Glassman is a former member and high-ranking officer in O. T. O. She left the order in the Nineties to concentrate on her Voodoo work.

As a look at the structure of the NOVT shows (see Fig. 4), the deck is intended to bring together the twentieth century synthesis of qabalah and tarot with the authors’ understanding of some of the principal Voodoo and Santería spirits. By bringing these two cultural flows into congruence, the NOVT seeks to create a new form of religious understanding, while educating the average tarot user in the richness of Afro-Diasporic religion as practiced in New Orleans, and provide a tool for working with a new synthetic or creolized expression of it.³⁰

Unlike the *Tarot of the Orishas* which includes only a few Orishas, the *NOVT* fills most of the deck with Loa and Orishas. The cards not associated with African-derived spirits reflect the New Orleans-flavored expressions of Voodoo by including such figures as Dr. John and Marie Laveau (see note 19, above), and concepts like “Courir Le Mardi Gras.”

NOVT	Traditional
World Egg	Fool
Dr. John	Magician
Marie Laveau	High Priestess
Ayizan	Empress
Loko	Emperor
Master of the Head	Hierophant
Les Marassa	Lovers
Dance	Chariot
Possession	Strength
Couché	Hermit
The Market	Wheel of Fortune

NOVT	Traditional
Secret Societies	Justice
Zonbi	Hanged Man
Les Morts	Death
Ti Bon Ange	Temperance
Courir Le Mardi Gras	Devil
Deluge	Tower
Z’Étoile	Star
Magic Mirror	Moon
Gros Bon Ange	Sun
Ancestors	Judgment
Carnival	World

³⁰ African and Afro-Diasporic religion is no stranger to the use of oracles (see for instance Bascom 1969; Fama 1993; Neimark 1993; Olomo 2002), but the use of tarot cards is, as far as I can tell, a relatively new occurrence.

The forty cards of the Lesser Arcana also reflect Martinié and Glassman’s synthesis of Western occultism and Voodoo, relating the elements to both the qabalistic letters of the Name of God and to the *nachon* (“nations”) of Voodoo spirits. The numbers of the cards in each suit are linked to the spheres on the Tree of Life, and the Loa and Orishas are specifically assigned to these sephiroth based upon their characteristic natures. The Court cards are aligned with the principal officers of the ounfó or Voodoo temple as well: the *Houngan* (also written as *Oungan*) or male high priest to the kings, the *Mambo* (also *Manbo*) or female high priestess to the queens, the *La Place* (also seen as *Laplas* in Haitian Kreyol) or male chief assistant to the knights, and the *Hounsis* (also *Ounsi*) or female assistant and usually Mambo-in-training to the pages/princesses.

The authors have also included concepts from Santería, which they associate with the element of Earth. The Court cards here also reflect the temple hierarchy, listing the *Santero*, *Santera*, *Oriaté*, and *Yaguó* (also called an *Iyawó*, the term refers to a junior initiate; these may be of any gender). There is also one Wild Card not found in traditional tarot: Les Barons (see Fig. 2).

	Element:	Fire	Water	Air	Earth
	Nachon:	Petro	Congo	Rada	Santería
	Shema:	Yod	Hé	Vau	Hé
	World:	Atziluth	Briah	Yetzirah	Assiah
A	Kether	Damballah La Flambeau	Ayida Wedo	Damballa Wedo	Olodumare
2	Chokmah	Nan Nan Bouclou La Flambeau	Gran Ibo	Nan Nan Bouclou	Olofí
3	Binah	Guede La Flambeau	Manman Brigitte	Guede	Oyá
4	Chesed	Agwé La Flambeau	La Baleine	Agwé	Obatalá
5	Geburah	Ogoun La Flambeau	Ogoun Bhalin’dio	Ogoun Ferraille	Oggún
6	Tiphereth	Legba La Flambeau	Shilibo Nouvavou/Dan-i	Legba	Elleguá
7	Netzach	Erzulie La Flambeau	La Sirène	Erzulie Freda Dahomey	Oshún

8	Hod	Simbi La Flambeau	Simbi d’L’eau	Simbi	Shangó
9	Yesod	Masa La Flambeau	Madame La Lune	Masa	Yemayá
10	Malkuth	Azaka La Flambeau	Gran Bois	Azaka	Ochosí
K		Petro Houngan	Congo Houngan	Rada Houngan	Santero
Q		Petro Mambo	Congo Mambo	Rada Mambo	Santera
Kn		Petro La Place	Congo La Place	Rada La Place	Oriaté
Pg		Petro Hounsí	Congo Hounsí	Rada Hounsí	Yaguó

The listings for each card describe the spirit or principle embodied, describe the image on the card and explain the significances of its details, and provide both a “contemplation” or image for meditation and a divinatory interpretation. The following is an excerpt from the entry for Oyá:

Oyá [3rd card of Earth element]

Whirling cloth tears through worlds. Oyá, wild dancer on death’s thin edge, the ancestors rise to your call as the jangling beat of bata guides your feet. Within you the womb and tomb are held in perfect balance. Mistress of the marketplace where all paths meet. Mistress of the Earth’s deep, searing pressures. Mistress of the sky’s hot fire. Sky’s whirlwind tearing into Earth. Mother of storms. All hurricanes in final reckoning bear your name.

In New Orleans, hurricane season is the time of Oyá. All of these storms are named for her sons and daughters.

The power of Oyá celebrated in these cards is the elemental might of earth acting through Binah. She shares the Earth’s power, compacted and ever erupting under the tremendous pressure. Her name itself is associated with tearing. Among the Yoruba, it is she who owns the torn cloth used in the ancestral masquerades of the Egungun. . . .

Her aspect in this card is that of a woman dancing while covered with the torn cloth of the Egungun maskers. She holds lightning to illustrate one of her manifestations, that of Mother of Storms. . . . She dances atop a tomb covered with a growth of eggplant, which is sacred to her.

CONTEMPLATION:

Lightning strikes a tree within the graveyard. It falls and becomes covered with the far-reaching growth of an eggplant.

DIVINATION:

An abrupt change in a situation; gain in the marketplace; turn for the better in matters of business. ³¹

Like the *Tarot of the Orishas*, the *NOVT* describes and explains the cards, offers ways to interpret them in a tarot layout, and discusses their various associations. In addition, Martinié and Glassman provide chapters on “Voodoo and the Western Esoteric Tradition,” and discuss such topics as possession, sacrifice, and ritual. In including these latter topics in a book about a tarot deck whose framework is decidedly non-African, the authors are able to teach readers who are not themselves practitioners some foundational concepts that are key to Afro-Diasporic religions.

CONCLUSIONS

In both of these test cases, we find elements of European-derived esoteric beliefs and Afro-Diasporic religion. Each of these cultural flows underwent years of creolization in the local environments in which they evolved, and a further level of creolization was then applied in their confluence. The result in each case is a previously unknown cultural artifact. Reflecting upon the definition of a creolization as the creating of an entirely new form that most often employs the grammatical structures of one to the vocabulary of the other (see p. 2, *supra*), we see that this closely describes each of our examples.

The *Tarot of the Orishas* presents a novel approach to Afro-Diasporic religion, uniting a European-derived framework with ideas and beliefs from both Western esotericism and Brazilian religious forms such as Candomblé, Batuque, and Umbanda. By bringing together these varied

³¹ Martinié & Glassman 1992:119-120.

spiritual expressions—occultism, tarot, New Age ideas, and spiritism from Europe, the Orixás from Africa and Afro-Brazilian religion, influences from Brazilian culture (Exú, Pomba Gira, “El Prisionero Esclavizado,” etc.)—Zolrak is able to provide a tool that retains most of its Western framework, with a flavor that is unmistakably Afro-Brazilian. At the same time, the *Tarot of the Orishas* also offers a way for those more familiar with the tarot than with the Orishas to learn more about Afro-Brazilian spirituality.

In the *New Orleans Voodoo Tarot*, creators Martinié and Glassman have devised a new tool that brings together the framework of one cultural and spiritual background, i.e., the tarot, with concepts from another, namely New Orleans-style Voodoo. They have taken elements from European occultism including ideas about tarot, qabalah, and magic, and blended them with ideas and practices from Afro-Diasporic religion as it is conceived and practiced in contemporary New Orleans. In doing so, they have created something new: a tool that serves to teach non-Vodounists about New Orleans Voodoo, and which at the same time may be used by practitioners of Voodoo as a practical resource for guidance, meditation, or invocation.

As we have noted, a creolized language is one in which the syntax of a *dominant* culture and the lexicon of a *subordinate* culture fuse to create a third cultural expression. Exploring in greater detail the questions of privilege and cultural imperialism raised by such a discourse are beyond the scope of this paper, but I would be remiss in not bringing them to the attention of the reader.

Both Louis Martinié and Sallie Ann Glassman are white adopters of Voodoo, and thus come to Afro-Diasporic religion from a position of privilege (Glassman especially so as a white American going to a shantytown area of Haiti for initiation). Neither one is a native New

Orleanean. On the other hand, their involvement in Voodoo has not gone unchallenged. Glassman, for instance, has also had to face discrimination herself, with some in the Voodoo community asking whether a white, Jewish woman can ever really be a mambo. (Glassman, private conversation) Nevertheless, there is some room to raise questions of privilege here. One wonders whether a poor Black practitioner of New Orleans Voodoo (still less one from Haiti) would have been able to obtain a publishing contract for a project like the NOVT.³²

In the case of the *Tarot of the Orishas*, it is difficult to say what Zolrak's background is.³³ He is said to be a “priest of Batuque and Candomblé . . . [who] later became a Babalorixá.” The book further notes that he was educated at the Argentina University of Enterprises (a private university in Buenos Aires). His book's preface, written by a Dr. Cosentino (who is identified as a “General Practitioner, Sexologist, Cellular Therapist, and Gynecologist”), addresses him as “Professor Zolrak.” (Zolrak 1994) He is clearly not of the poor, uneducated class—which in Brazil, where Zolrak presumably studied Umbanda and/or Candomblé, are predominantly Black—but beyond that it is impossible to say. While Brazilian society has been highly stratified in a number of ways and continues to be so today, in the contemporary period Umbanda and Candomblé practitioners come from all levels of society. (Hale 2009; 2011) Under these circumstances, it is difficult to say to what extent privilege has played a part in the creation of the *Tarot of the Orishas*.

In closing, let me note some general conclusions about the creolization of Afro-Diasporic religions. First, Afro-Diasporic religions have been a particularly fruitful ground for ongoing

³² I wish to be very clear that I am not accusing Glassman of cultural appropriation. I know her to be absolutely sincere and completely dedicated to Voodoo/Vodou, the Loa, and the community she tirelessly serves, often at great personal cost.

³³ I note with amusement that “Zolrak” is more or less “Carlos” reversed.

creolization. This would seem to spring from the nature of the diasporic experience itself, with the tensions inherent in struggling to hold on to one's cultural background in an environment characterized by slavery, colonialism, and the forced merging with peoples of many other cultures and religious expressions. In such a milieu, the construction of personal and group identities must, in my opinion, rely upon a more fluid sense of "who we are" than in a more homogeneous society where change comes slowly.

Second, the process of creolization that began under slavery has not stopped; to the contrary, it has continued to be an ongoing process even through the present day. Whether reflected in creation of a Brazilian "Sons of Gandhi" organization (Hale 2011; Mundra 2009), or the fusion of European occultism with Afro-Brazilian religions and with New Orleans Voodoo that produced the cultural artifacts seen in this study, creolization is clearly a continuing force in Afro-Diasporic cultures at large.

Finally, the linguistic metaphor has been particularly apt in attempting to model the processes of creolization witnessed in our test cases. The synthesis of ideas from two or more cultures into a new expression not previously encountered, like the production of a creolized language from the meeting of two disparate ethnicities, appears to follow more or less a similar pattern. The power dynamics of such processes vis-à-vis dominant and subaltern cultures also appear to be amenable to further exploration in this regard. However, it is important to note that these flows have not been all in one direction. Rather, the creolization that we find in the evolution of Afro-Diasporic religions is one that evidences cultural flows, between dominant and subaltern, in both directions.

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³⁴ Incidentally, the copy in the Harry Ransom Center book collection at the University of Texas at Austin is a 1922 Paris edition previously owned by Golden Dawn member Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.

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