

Moral, environmental, and physical contamination

Africana religions and public health before and during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract

In 2020, global restrictions on religious gatherings raised questions regarding the extent to which governments could restrict religious liberty to protect the public. Although the COVID-19 pandemic heightened public awareness about such issues, African diaspora religions had already been widely persecuted as “superstitions” that posed a threat to public health from the 18th century to the early 20th century. This article argues that discrimination against Africana religions has continued in the 21st century using similar rhetoric, as private citizens and governments in the Atlantic world have restricted religious practices that they claim threaten moral, environmental, and physical health.

Keywords

African diaspora religions, public health, superstition, animal sacrifice, child custody.

1. Introduction

In October 2010, a massive cholera outbreak began in Haiti. Before the outbreak was contained in 2015, it would kill at least 9,000 people and infect hundreds of thousands (Frerichs 2016:1). In some parts of the country, Vodou (more commonly known as “Voodoo”) priests were blamed for starting and spreading the disease by putting “cholera powder” in the water supply (Grimaud and Legagneur 2011:27). During the first few weeks of the outbreak, lynch mobs attacked devotees in the streets. In the Department of Grand Anse, they killed at least 45 Vodou devotees in the months of November and December alone (Grimaud and Legagneur

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2011:28; Human Rights Council 2011a:39). Most of these individuals suffered very violent deaths; mobs hacked them to pieces with machetes, or poured gasoline over them and set them on fire. In reports to United Nations Human Rights officials, the Haitian government claimed to have the situation under control and promised to hold the murderers accountable (Human Rights Council 2011b:28). However, the government never responded to requests for detailed information on how many people had been arrested and how the government planned to protect Vodou adepts from future attacks (Human Rights Committee 2014:4).

This example provides insight into the ways in which African diaspora religions (also called Africana religions) such as Obeah, Vodou, Santería/Lucumí, and Candomblé have been framed as a threat to public health. These religions, which developed in the Americas from the influences of people of African descent, indigenous populations, Europeans, and others, have been discriminated against since they were first observed by Europeans and given the names by which we know them today. In this article, after briefly describing the historical prohibitions of these religions, I argue that more recent forms of discrimination or restriction continue today, based on assumptions that Africana religions pose a threat of moral, environmental, and physical harm or contamination. I contend that the global COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the hypocrisy of these allegations, as countries that have long persecuted Africana religions because of concerns about moral health and potential or rumored physical harm to others have made accommodations for mainstream religions that posed a tangible and immediate threat to public health.

2. Historical bans on Africana religions

The earliest prohibitions of African diaspora religions were based on two arguments: that religious leaders “duped” others into participating in slave rebellions and that adepts used their ritual and herbal knowledge to harm others. The former argument was based on the premise that priests of Africana religions were charlatans who preyed on the “superstitions” of others. During the period of slavery, legislators would claim that it was not the trauma of forced labor and brutal treatment that led enslaved persons to rebel; rather, they alleged, religious leaders who administered oaths and performed other spiritual rituals were convincing people that they would suffer physical harm if they failed to participate in the uprising or revealed the rebels’ plans.

The most famous example of this sort was Tacky’s Rebellion in Jamaica in 1760. In this instance, so-called “Obeah practitioners” performed rituals to bind the rebels together and to protect them from detection and from bullets (Paton 2015:17-42; Rucker 2006:44-45; Brown 2008:147-50). This large-scale uprising led

directly to the passage of the first anti-Obeah legislation in the Caribbean. These early restrictions on African religious practices were implemented alongside other prohibitions of activities thought to have led to slave rebellions, such as the possession of weapons and moving from place to place without a “pass” or “ticket” (“Act 24 of 1760” 1791).

The notion that leaders of African religions harmed others was also widespread in the Americas and led to the passage of various laws against certain ceremonies and belief systems. In St. Domingue (modern-day Haiti), a man named Francois Makandal, who some scholars believe was a Vodou priest, planned an uprising that involved using his herbal knowledge to poison the water supply. After Makandal was discovered and executed, authorities prohibited the possession of charms known as “makandals” (Burnham 2006:1362-1363; Paton 2012:254-55).

Similar concerns also contributed to the passage of the aforementioned Obeah laws. Plantation owners in the British Caribbean frequently asserted that Obeah practitioners used their herbal knowledge and spiritual authority to intimidate and harm people who angered them. Often unwilling to concede that Obeah practitioners might have any real spiritual power, many colonists lamented that “superstitious” Black people would succumb to wasting illnesses if they believed themselves to be afflicted by Obeah charms or rituals (Paton 2012:239-243). Although people of European descent insisted that they did not believe in such “witchcraft,” they asserted that the proscription of Obeah was necessary to protect the health of others. Obeah laws occasionally mentioned these concerns explicitly (Barbados 1827; Dominica 1788).

Despite these early laws about Obeah, makandals, and other spiritual practices, the most widespread prohibitions of African diaspora religions were implemented after emancipation in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. These laws continued to reflect purported concerns about “public health.” The most commonly expressed justification was that “charlatan” priests promoted “superstition” and corrupted the moral health of the public, especially people of African descent. The best example comes from Brazil, where a penal code passed in 1890, two years after emancipation, banned the use of talismans and the practice of spiritism, fortune telling, or “magic,” especially when used to cure disease or to prey upon public “credulity.” The penal code also prohibited “faith healing” (*curandeiros*) and limited medical practice to individuals who were licensed by the government (Rafael and Maggie 2013:282; Johnson 2001:19). Legal historian Paul Christopher Johnson (2001:20) argues that this penal code was an effort to make Brazil appear more enlightened to the Western world at a time when “progress and modernization were tied to ‘whiteness’; backwardness and indolence to ‘blackness.’”

In a few countries, post-emancipation restrictions on African diaspora religions continued to be connected to allegations that devotees physically harmed others. In early 20th-century Cuba, rumors arose that Black *brujos* (witches) murdered innocent people (usually white children) and used their body parts in ritual practices (Roman 2007:82-106). In addition to stating that they were protecting the physical well-being of others (by preventing ritual murder), authorities also treated these allegations as evidence that the Black population was contaminating Cuba with their “barbaric” religions and that their influence needed to be suppressed or eradicated. Research suggests that these claims about ritual murder or related practices were largely, if not entirely, fabricated.

Scholars have extensively studied the historical persecution of African diaspora religions and the framing of these restrictions as protections of moral and physical health (e.g., Johnson 2001; Roman 2007; Paton 2009; Ramsey 2011; Roberts 2015). In contrast, the study of more recent methods of policing and persecuting Africana religions is still in its relative infancy. A few studies have examined persistent stereotypes of Obeah as a tradition centered on “dark arts” and harming others (Khan 2013; Crosson 2015); however, most research on present-day discrimination against African diaspora religions tends to focus on aspects that are analogous to restrictions on other forms of religious practice, such as controversies about the right to use marijuana as a sacrament and disputes about the role of religion in schools (Mhango 2008; Bone 2014; Andrade and Teixeira 2017). In this article, I demonstrate that concerns about public health remain a central rhetoric in virtually all forms of intolerance and discrimination against Africana religions.

3. 21st-century discrimination

This section briefly outlines some of the primary arguments used to limit or prohibit African diaspora religions in the 21st century. The arguments can be divided into four categories: moral pollution, the “threat” of animal sacrifice, environmental pollution, and the danger these religions allegedly pose to children.

3.1. Moral pollution

One glaring example of the current policing of African diaspora religions is the continued proscription of Obeah in much of the Caribbean. In the 21st century, laws in at least a dozen countries still prohibit the practice of Obeah. These laws were typically passed in the late 19th or early 20th century and have remained largely unchanged since then. It is important to note that the prohibition of Obeah was directly connected to and happened alongside the prohibition of spiritualism and “pretended” witchcraft in England, the United States, and other countries.

However, while legislators in different parts of the world (especially the Anglophone Atlantic) banned many belief systems that included activities such as conjuring of spirits and divination, Obeah was a racialized term that distinguished Afro- and Indo- Caribbean spiritual practices from recognized “religions.”

The continued prohibition of Obeah is anachronistic and racist. Spiritualists, Wiccans, and similar Western belief systems have been decriminalized and recognized as “religions” by most, if not all, of the countries that prohibited such practices in the past (Boaz 2021:141-159). In some places, even Satanic churches have been recognized as official religions (Wecker 2019). Yet efforts to repeal Obeah laws in the Caribbean continue to be met with concerns about the spread of fraud, superstition, and devil worship. Furthermore, even in places where Obeah is not criminalized, courts have refused to grant devotees the same rights as other religious communities, expressing concern that Obeah might be used to harm others or that it simply does not represent the kind of religious expression that benefits society (Boaz 2021:160-179).

Devotees of African diaspora religions have also faced arguments about moral pollution in response to disputes over their rights to wear religious hairstyles and attire. For instance, in recent years, Rastafarians have seen their right to wear dreadlocks in schools restricted. School administrators in England argued that Black hairstyles such as cornrows and dreadlocks would allow “gang culture” to seep into the school (*G v. the Head Teacher* 2011). In the Cayman Islands and South Africa, school authorities tried to ban Rastafarian students from wearing dreadlocks, asserting that it was well known that Rastafarians use marijuana and that admitting students with visible symbols of this religion would suggest that the school promoted illegal drug use (*Grant & Anor v. The Principal* 2001; *Lerato Radebe v. Principal* 2013). In both cases, there was no evidence that the children or their families used marijuana; in the Cayman Islands, the child in question was merely eight years old.

Followers of African diaspora religions have encountered similar issues in professional settings. Judges have refused to allow them to participate in their own court hearings or even observe legal proceedings because they found the devotee’s religious hairstyle or attire to be distracting or disrespectful. In one instance, a judge in Zimbabwe even refused to admit a prospective attorney to the practice of law because he believed that the Rastafarian attorney’s dreadlocks were unprofessional (*In re Chikweche* 1995). In South Africa, Pollsmoor Prison refused to allow Rastafarians and traditional healers to wear dreadlocks while working as correctional officers. They argued that permitting men to wear long hair would promote “lawlessness” and would lead to an escalating series of employment problems. Similar to the schools in the Cayman Islands and South Af-

rica, prison officials also contended that wearing a physical representation of Rastafarian religion would suggest to inmates that the officers might be willing to help them smuggle illegal drugs into the facility and would therefore make the officers vulnerable to manipulation (*POPCRU v. The Department* 2013).

3.2. *Animal Sacrifice*

Another primary restriction on African diaspora religions has been limitations on the ritual slaughter or sacrifice of animals. These limitations have frequently been framed as a component of health and environmental codes. For example, in 2003, the state of Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil, passed a law that governed the “protection” of animals. It stipulated guidelines for the physical treatment of animals, such as the amount of light, air, and space to which they should have access, how working animals can be used, and how animals can be killed (Assembleia Legislativa 2003). The initial version of this bill also targeted Afro-Brazilian animal sacrifices, by prohibiting the use of animals in “sorcery” or “religious ceremonies” (Oro 2006:1-2). However, activists succeeded in having this language removed from the final version.

Similarly, in 2015, legislators in Libertador (a neighborhood in Caracas, Venezuela) passed an amendment to their ordinance protecting domestic fauna that prohibited the ritual sacrifice of animals (“Sacrificio de animales” 2016). Animal rights activists lauded this amendment, citing the purported abuses that animals suffered from Santería/Lucumí sacrifices. Several also mentioned public health concerns. For example, Daniel Cabello, president of the *Fundación de Ayuda y Protección Animal*, acknowledged the constitutional right to religious freedom but argued that such freedom ends when practices such as animal sacrifice are contrary to “morals, good customs and public order” (Guevara 2016). Roger Pacheco, director of an NGO called *AnimaNaturalis*, contended that animal sacrifice should be restricted because of sanitary, environmental, and ethical concerns (Guevara 2016).

Additionally, whether or not such prohibitions are passed as part of a health or environmental code, legislators often use arguments about public health to justify restrictions on animal sacrifice. Rio Grande do Sul again provides an instructive example. Although the language about the use of animals in “religious ceremonies” or “sorcery” was removed from State Animal Protection Code before it took effect, Afro-Brazilian religious leaders feared that remaining sections of the law that required animals to be killed “suddenly and painlessly” and prohibited people from physically harming animals would be used to bar animal sacrifices anyway. A concerned legislator successfully introduced an amendment in 2004 that explicitly guaranteed that the Code would not be used to prohibit the re-

ligious freedom of devotees of African diaspora religions (Assembleia Legislativa 2004). Subsequently, however, Rio Grande do Sul legislators would try to repeal this amendment, and its constitutionality would be evaluated by multiple courts, including the Brazilian Supreme Court in 2019. In the legislative debates and in the courts, opposition to the 2004 amendment frequently raised public health concerns. Perhaps most notably, when Representative Regina Fortunati proposed repealing the amendment in 2015, her justification included claims that animal sacrifice “greatly disturbs society” and that repealing the law would reestablish “good harmonious and peaceful coexistence.”² She described animal sacrifice as something that society is “subjected to,” adding that “one must consider the issue of public health, which is put at risk in the face of the decomposition of the animals that are victimized in rituals in the name of faith.”³

Unfortunately, allegations about the public health threats of animal sacrifice frequently include false information or invented statistics. One example is the case of José Merced in Euless, Texas, USA. Merced is a Santería/Lucumí priest who runs a religious organization known as the Templo Yoruba Omo Orisha Texas. In 2006, authorities tried to prevent Merced from carrying out sacrifices at his home. The city’s expert witnesses claimed that his keeping and disposing of animals would spread diseases including salmonella and typhoid and attract insects, rodents, and other pests (Appellees’ Brief 2008:3, 6). However, Merced had been performing sacrifices at his home for 16 years prior to the city’s intervention, and there was no evidence that he had ever caused any of the public health issues that the city claimed would result.

Policymakers and courts also frequently ignore analogous problems when targeting animal sacrifice. Such disparities became apparent when the Rio Grande do Sul legislature reviewed Fortunati’s proposal to repeal the amendment protecting animal sacrifice (Assembléia Legislativa 2015a). Although Fortunati claimed to be concerned about animal welfare and public health, Pedro Ruas pointed out that more than one million sheep, cows, pigs, and chickens were killed in food production in Rio Grande do Sul each month and that 5,000 animals died in preventable roadway accidents every day in Brazil (Assembléia Legislativa 2015b). Manuela D’Ávila quoted a law student, Winnie Bueno, who argued that, in addition to slaughterhouses, rodeos and product testing posed threats to animals as well. Because Fortunati’s bill focused only on eliminating animal sacrifice, Ruas, D’Ávila, and others believed that her true motive was religious discrimination.

2 “O sacrifício de animais em rituais religiosos em muito inquieta a sociedade e os preceitos de respeito e da boa convivência harmônica e pacífica precisam ser restabelecidos.” (Assembleia Legislativa PL 21/2015).

3 “Há de se considerar a questão da saúde pública, colocada em risco diante da decomposição orgânica dos animais que são vitimados nos rituais em nome da fé.” (Assembleia Legislativa PL 21/2015).

Another particularly ironic example occurred in the state of São Paulo, Brazil. In 2011, legislator Feliciano Filho introduced a bill that would prohibit “the sacrifice of animals in religious rituals” (Assembléia Legislativa 2011). In the bill’s justification section, Filho asserted that his intention was to protect animals from cruelty and to protect the public’s constitutional right to “an ecologically balanced environment,” which is necessary for a “healthy quality of life” (Assembléia Legislativa 2011). But three years later, Filho himself was arrested on charges of animal cruelty after more than 40 mistreated and deceased animals were found at the property of a non-governmental animal protection organization that he had founded (“Deputado reeleito de SP” 2014).

3.3. *Environmental pollution*

Another common complaint about African diaspora religious communities is that they negatively impact public health by polluting the environment. Animal sacrifice bans are usually framed as part of broader protections of flora and fauna and, as in the São Paulo bill mentioned previously, of the general quality of the environment, which requires a balanced ecosystem. Recent efforts to ban Africana religions have also been closely connected to conversations about environmental rights and pollution in other ways.

African diaspora religious communities are frequently charged with creating noise pollution with their ceremonial singing and drumming. In some countries, simple noise complaints have led to police surrounding a home or temple where a ceremony is being conducted and holding the devotees at gunpoint (i.e. Aelion 2008). In Brazil, authorities are often sent to stop ceremonies and arrest religious leaders at Candomblé and Umbanda *terreiros* (temples), sometimes for exceeding sound emissions of a mere 50 decibels or less (e.g. *Sociedade Beneficente v. Ministerio Publico* 2018; De Almeida 2017). By way of reference, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (n.d.) estimate that the average sound emission of a normal conversation or an air conditioner is 60 decibels – a level that causes no physical harm, even with repeated exposure.

Another common claim that African diaspora religions pollute the environment relates to the placement of sacred offerings in public areas. One of the most striking situations occurred in the city of Maceió (Alagoas state, Brazil) in 2012. In many cities, Afro-Brazilian religious communities host one of their largest festivals of the year on 2 February, in honor of the *orixá* (divinity) Yemanjá. Devotees bring various types of offerings – flowers, food, candles, etc. – in beautifully crafted vessels and launch them into the sea in honor of this *orixá* who governs the oceans. In December 2011, just weeks before the annual festival, Maceió imposed strict limitations on where and when offerings could be made, pushing

them to peripheral areas of the city (Souza 2012). This restriction was shocking because the impending 2012 festival was also the centennial anniversary of the most horrific attack on African diaspora religious communities in Brazilian history. In 1912, nearly all the Afro-Brazilian temples in the region were destroyed in a massive riot known as Quebra de Xangô. In addition to the customary annual festivities, Afro-Brazilian religious communities were planning remembrances of the atrocities of 1912 and events to promote respect for Africana religions.

In many cases, these concerns about African diaspora religions harming the environment seem extremely speculative and far-fetched, as if proponents of such bans are searching for public-interest arguments to support their discrimination. For instance, in the late 1990s, the city of Salvador (Bahia state, Brazil) commissioned artist Tatti Moreno to build sculptures of the *orixás* as a part of the revitalization and beautification of Dique do Tororó, the largest body of fresh water in the city. Evangelical citizens and council members protested the installation of the statues, claiming that they would bring evil energies to the city (Dos Santos 2013:9). To support their position, they cited the fact that numerous fish had died during the revitalization process. However, these fish died because the city changed the oxygenation level of the water when it removed certain plants from the area. The process had no connection to Afro-Brazilian religions, “evil energy,” or the statues.

In the most extreme circumstances, devotees of Africana religions have even been blamed for environmental disasters, most notably after a 7.0-magnitude earthquake struck Haiti in January 2010. This tragedy took the lives of more than 200,000 people and displaced at least one million. Immediately after the earthquake, several Christian ministers began publicly blaming Vodou devotees in Haiti for causing the destruction. Like the people who opposed the construction of the statues in Dique do Tororó, they asserted that African diaspora religious practices had brought negative energies and, in this case, incurred god’s wrath with their “devil worship.” (Contrary to such accusations, African diaspora religions do not believe in the existence of the devil or any analogous source of ultimate evil.) The reaction went beyond mere verbal discrimination. Vodou devotees were denied critical resources such as food and shelter in the aftermath of the earthquake, and some Christian missionaries used the situation to coerce Haitians into converting by reserving aid for those who patronized their churches. Vodou devotees also suffered physical attacks, such as being pelted with stones and people urinating on their sacred objects, due to the popular contention that they had caused the earthquake (Boaz 2021:30-32). The attacks on devotees during the cholera outbreak mentioned in the first section of this paper took place less than one year later and can be viewed as part of the same pattern of violence.

As with charges that animal sacrifices harm the environment, these claims are frequently undermined by tepid official responses to analogous issues. Most significantly, rising assaults on Afro-Brazilian religious communities frequently target environmental sites. In Salvador, Brazil, a stone estimated to be two billion years old and surrounding vegetation serve as a site of historical importance for *quilombo* (runaway slave) communities and a sacred site for the *orixá* Xangô, who is honored in Afro-Brazilian religious communities. Between December 2014 and January 2019, unknown persons vandalized this site at least three times, dumping hundreds of kilograms of salt and plastic bags on the stone and the surrounding earth (Garrido 2018, 2019). In this case, both substances are damaging to the environment; salt prevents vegetation from growing.

Additionally, one of the broader patterns of intolerance against Afro-Brazilian religions has been the destruction of plants and trees that are sacred to devotees and used in religious ceremonies. For instance, arsonists repeatedly targeted a sacred iroko tree in the city of Recife, Pernambuco (Lima 2018). The tree, which was more than 130 years old at the time of the first attack, was located on the grounds of Ilê Obá Ogunté Sítio Pai Adão, one of the oldest and most well-known temples in the state. Similarly, in January 2013 and November 2019, mysterious fires destroyed much of the vegetation, including sacred trees, surrounding two historic *terreiros* in Cachoeira, Bahia (Pita 2013; Bahia 2019). The culprits were never caught; however, these fires were part of a series of acts of intolerance targeting these communities. Moreover, in recent years, arson has become a common mechanism for attacking Afro-Brazilian places of worship.

3.4. *Child custody*

Another example of the deployment of so-called public health arguments to discriminate against African religions is the claim that devotees pose a mental and physical threat to children. In animal sacrifice cases, one common argument for banning the practice is the notion that children of devotees would be traumatized by seeing the death of an animal or even that children residing nearby would be negatively impacted by hearing drumming and singing during ceremonies, leading to the realization that animals are being slaughtered (Boaz 2021:72-86).

In Brazil, some private citizens and government authorities are arguing that devotees are unfit parents and should lose custody of their children in even more benign situations. In July 2020, Kate Belintani's 12-year-old daughter was undergoing initiation in Candomblé in Araçatuba, São Paulo, and was staying at the temple for seven days. During this process, Belintani's mother (the child's grandmother) reported to the Guardianship Council (a government authority that handles complaints related to child abuse) that the girl was being abused.

One of her specific concerns was that the child's head would be shaved as part of the initiation process. The grandmother characterized this process as a form of abuse. She also made baseless claims about sexual abuse at the temple. The Council interrupted the initiation process to investigate these claims and temporarily removed custody from Belintani. Ultimately, Belintani was able to regain custody of her daughter after the claims were shown to be unfounded (“Mãe de menina” 2020).

A few months later, in October 2020, a similar case took place in Olinda, Pernambuco. A father reported to the Guardianship Council that his 9-year-old daughter was being abused because she was regularly visiting a Candomblé *terreiro*. The father also made unfounded claims that the child was forced to drink animal blood and that the child's teeth were infested with larvae and had to be removed. Both claims were proven to be false, but not before the Guardianship Council had moved forward with proceedings to grant legal custody of the child to the father. The mother's representatives claimed that religious intolerance was the basis for the Guardianship Council's actions because they accepted the complaints as true without conducting any form of investigation, such as visiting the child in her mother's care or visiting the home. One ironic and unfortunate feature of this case was the fact that the father had no regular physical visitation with the child; she was with him only for rare weekend visits. Therefore, he likely had little basis for knowing the status of the child's health and certainly little claim to custody of the child (Augustto 2020; Moura 2020).

Around six months later, in March 2021, an unidentified person spread similar rumors on social media. The individual posted on Twitter that Winnie Bueno, a Black female researcher who is also a devotee of Candomblé, had imprisoned three young children in her “temple of sorcery” in Belford Roxo, Rio de Janeiro. The author of the post falsely claimed that the children had been kept for two weeks without food and were being prepared to be offered as human sacrifices (Redação 2021).

Each of these claims took place in 2020 or 2021, during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although cases where parents lost custody of their children because they were devotees of Candomblé can be traced back to at least the 2000s,⁴ such controversies seemed to surge during the recent public health crisis. Along with the general claim that attending ceremonies or patronizing Afro-Brazilian temples is harmful to a child, these cases centered on false claims about threats to the child's health such as neglecting their treatment, refusing to feed them, or phys-

4 For example, iyalorixá Rosiane Rodrigues (2021) described losing custody of her two-year-old son under similar circumstances in 2007.

ical abuse. The first case mentioned even included the incredible assertion that shaving a child's head caused physical harm. Ironically, as further discussed below, some Christian churches in Brazil openly defied public health regulations and endangered their communities by holding services with thousands of people in attendance during the pandemic. However, I have not seen a single report where the Guardianship Council investigated a family or removed custody of a child because the family was attending church activities that unreasonably exposed the child to a deadly virus.

4. Conclusion

From the 18th century to the present day, individuals with an unfavorable view of African diaspora religions have often justified placing restrictions on African diaspora religions based on imagined ways in which these religious groups' practices could negatively impact public health. These claims have often centered on emotional or mental forms of "harm," such as Obeah fostering "superstition," Rastafarian dreadlocks encouraging drug use or gang activities, or animal sacrifice promoting "barbaric" behavior. Alternatively, intolerant persons have focused on larger-scale environmental harms that these religions could supposedly cause: that the sounds of their ceremonies could generate noise pollution, that public offerings could dirty rivers and oceans, or that animal sacrifice could damage local fauna. They have even accused devotees of causing natural disasters such as the widespread death of fish and a devastating earthquake.

Where African diaspora religious communities have been accused of damaging physical health, these claims have often stretched the imagination of what could constitute harm. As we saw, one complaint in Brazil characterized shaving a child's head as abuse, leading to the temporary removal of that child from her temple and her home. Complaints that contain allegations of legitimate threats to public health, such as the spread of disease or starvation of children, have been shown to be speculative or complete fabrications. In cases regarding moral, emotional, and physical health, the government has often ignored analogous concerns posed by non-religious activities or by acts of intolerance carried out against African diaspora religious communities.

After several centuries of preoccupation with the ability of religion to harm public health, one might have expected a very concerned and restrictive response to religious activities during the COVID-19 pandemic, which presented the first major example in recent history of a deadly disease that could be spread through social gatherings. Nevertheless, some countries in the Western Hemisphere took a comparatively relaxed approach to religious gatherings

from the outset of the pandemic (Boaz 2020). While many countries in Africa and Asia severely punished religious leaders and adherents who held or attended gatherings in violation of lockdown measures, several countries in the Americas engaged in hotly contested debates over whether religious gatherings were “essential services” that should be exempted from regulation. Moreover, in countries such as Brazil and the United States, leaders of churches who held services with over a thousand people present in the early months of the pandemic were either not prosecuted or very mildly penalized. It seems likely that because Christians led the fight to protect religious freedom during the pandemic, many states that had persecuted African religions for lesser violations suddenly came to view religious liberty as more important than public health recommendations about large gatherings.

Not surprisingly, this protection of religion as an “essential service” was not uniformly applied. During the pandemic, I spent several months interviewing African religious communities in Brazil about the types of discrimination they have faced in recent years and the solutions that they believe would prevent future attacks. Although the pandemic was not the focus of these conversations, many people expressed concern that laws requiring mask wearing and limiting the gathering of people had become a pretext for government authorities to investigate and harass Afro-Brazilian temples and that minority religious communities were the only ones subjected to such scrutiny (for an example of such biases, see Odé 2020).

Moreover, even though Christian churches were by far the most vocal in insisting on their “right” to hold large gatherings, they were not denounced as a threat to public health or harassed and denigrated as the cause of disease. Instead, where religious communities were blamed for the pandemic, such allegations continued to fixate on minorities, including African religions. For instance, one leader of a Christian church in Brazil that refused to shut down during the pandemic started referring to the pandemic as “exu-corona” – a reference to Exu, one of the *orixás* honored in Afro-Brazilian religions (Balloussier 2020).

As we try to understand the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on religious minorities, we should not limit our inquiry to considering who was severely mistreated during this public health crisis. Instead, we must take a broader view of which religious communities have been characterized as a threat to public health and persecuted on tenuous or specious grounds of alleged relationships to the spread of disease. When we look at the bigger picture, it becomes apparent that minority communities, such as African religions, face a perpetual burden of being stereotyped as contaminating influences and are thus vulnerable to suppression in the name of the public good.

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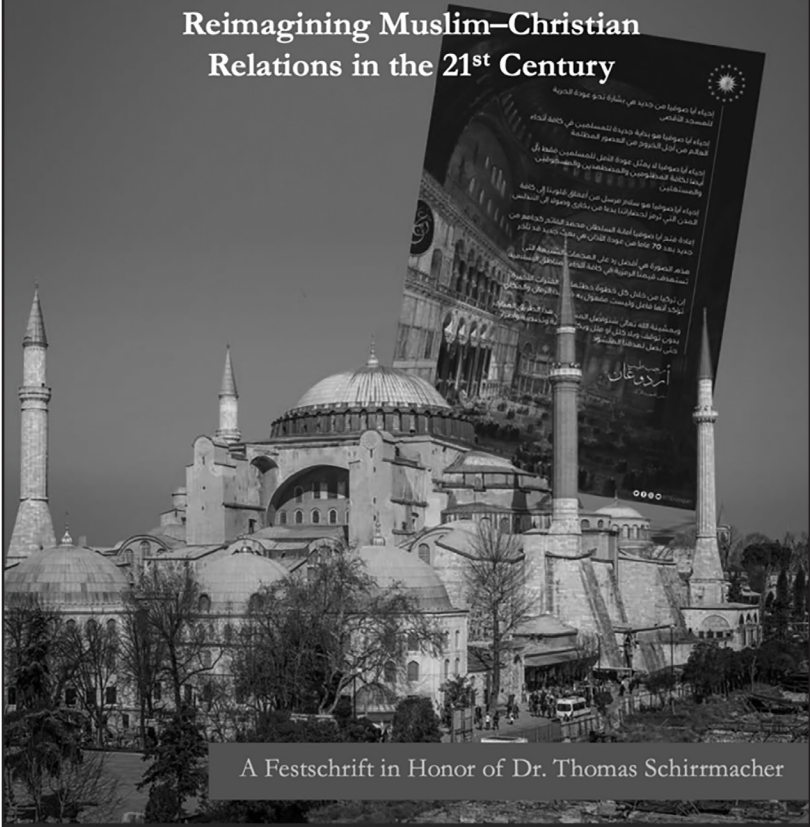
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