

7. The Quest for Spiritual Purpose in a Secular Dance Community: *Bèlè*'s Rebirth in Contemporary Martinique

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“*Bèlè* gives so much to us. It gives socially, politically, even financially . . . but we fail to realize how it gives spiritually. We take, take, take from *bèlè*, and we never offer anything in return” (interview, May 1, 2014). These words were captured as I interviewed Izaak, a longtime cultural activist in his early fifties, formerly an agricultural laborer and now a music teacher of Martinique’s *bèlè* drum-dance tradition.¹ In recounting his testimony of spiritual maturation through *bèlè*, Izaak confessed that when he first became involved in the *bèlè* revival movement over thirty years ago, he exploited *bèlè*’s function of protest and resistance to indulge his ego, advance his political ideologies, and establish his reputation as a militant. This former atheist admits that he never gave anything back to *bèlè* spiritually. He described the years of suffering and psychological turmoil he endured, eventually hitting rock bottom and temporarily abstaining from *bèlè* activities. Once he acknowledged his relationship to *bèlè* as a divine connection, he later returned to the *bèlè* movement with a more profound sense of the drum’s spiritual potential and a deeper respect for his Creator and ancestors. It was almost as if through confession, repentance, abstention, and deliverance, he had finally arrived at a place of emancipation.

In contemporary Martinique, a French territory located in the Lesser Antilles, *bèlè* is not simply the name of an ancestral dance practice; the term *bèlè* is used to describe a way of life, or a subculture organized around a rich complex of Afro-Creole drum-dance traditions.² The African and European practices that converged in Martinique form the basis of *bèlè linò*, the most

popularly performed variation of *bèlè*, hailing from the northeastern town of Sainte-Marie. *Bèlè linò* merges the French quadrille square-dancing configuration with African footwork, bent body posture, African percussion, and Creole-language call-and-response singing. It is a communicative dance with courtship-style choreography involving four female-male couples, danced with varying degrees of intensity based on the style of song (Cyrille 2006). During the enslavement era, some Africans would dance *bèlè* as a sign of status and social integration, to present themselves as equally respectable to their French counterparts. Colonial observers, however, characterized *bèlè* as Africans' poor imitation of the more elegant and graceful French ballroom styles (Moreau de St. Méry [1796] 1976). Other hypotheses posit that enslaved Africans used *bèlè* to camouflage different forms of African worship through the appearance of court dancing (Y. Daniel 2009). Therefore, throughout Martinique's colonial history and well into the twentieth century, the practice of *bèlè* was repressed by the Catholic Church and eclipsed by France's national model of assimilation, nearly erasing the tradition from public life. Throughout its eclipse in the mid-twentieth century, *bèlè* survived on the peripheries through theatrical folkloric performance by professional troupes, such as the Groupe Folklorique Martiniquais, whose staged renditions catered to the tourist market (Bertrand 1968). Over the past thirty years, however, cultural activists and artist intellectuals have mobilized at the grassroots level to revive *bèlè* as an honored community tradition and have placed it at the forefront of local struggles around cultural heritage preservation.

In this chapter I use a dialectical approach to analyze *bèlè*'s rebirth as a multifaceted revitalization movement—one with a variety of spiritual interpretations that have evolved in response to the grievances of French national assimilation and neocolonial distress. Although *bèlè* is commonly understood as a secular/nonreligious dance tradition, debates have emerged among *bèlè* community members over its spiritual functions in the everyday lives of practitioners. Some dancers, drummers, and singers make claims of numinous experience, emotional transcendence, and ancestor veneration that are facilitated by music and motion and perceived to have a therapeutic healing purpose. These claims contradict the popular notion that *bèlè* has no sacred significance and that those elements of African religiosity and religious syncretism have dissolved out of Martinique's expressive culture—a perspective that has persisted in the discourse of *bèlè* until recent times.

Anthony Wallace first theorized a “revitalization movement” as the formation of new or revived religious practices that emerge as a result of deprivation and stress; he defined such a movement as the “deliberate, organized, conscious

efforts by members of a society to construct a more satisfying culture” (1956, 265). Though Wallace’s framework of revitalization movements has been most salient in studies of American Indian communities grappling with the consequences of assimilation, we can see parallels to such phenomena in France’s overseas departments (*départements d’outre-mer*).³ Epidemiological and anthropological research in Martinique points to increasing rates of depression, suicidal tendencies, and generalized anxiety (Massé 2008). From a comparative perspective, the mental health data in Martinique may not present a stark contrast with mental health in other Caribbean island societies. What is distinctive about the Martinican case, though, is the peculiar set of structural forces contributing to mental and social suffering.

The seminal text *Black Skin, White Masks*, by the renowned Martinican philosopher and psychiatrist Frantz Fanon ([1952] 1967), is a timeless commentary on the intersections of colonization, race, and the psychopathology of Black colonized subjects. Fanon’s observations of French colonial racism on his native island pointed to troubles of inferiority and deep-seated feelings of anguish that underpin the dual identity of being Black and French. Richard Price’s influential ethnography *The Convict and the Colonel* tells a story of (neo)colonial madness and struggles over cultural memory and identity in the context of Martinique’s high-powered modernization and assimilation projects, following the 1946 transition to departmental status (Price 1998). Martinique’s subordination to and dependency on France are understood by scholars as a structural cause of psychological distress, mental suffering, and mood disorders among island residents. The ways in which people respond to what medical anthropologist Raymond Massé (2008) calls *détresse créole* (Creole distress) are very much rooted in Martinique’s cultural specificity, characterized by the perplexing reality of being both French and Antillean. William Miles’s neo-Fanonian analysis of Martinique argues that the “political attempts to institutionally repair the fraught relationship with France by redefining Martinique’s juridical status will not salve the deeper identity-based grievances” (2012, 10). In other words, the fight for greater autonomy or independence from France will not rectify the widespread psychological imbalances found among islanders.

In my field research conducted from 2009 to 2018, I found that many *bèlè* practitioners claim to have turned to the tradition to reconcile feelings of alienation, dispossession, and vulnerability associated with Martinique’s so-called identity crisis. I argue that despite *bèlè*’s reputation as a secular practice, some *bèlè* practitioners find sacred meaning in the emotional transformation experienced through *bèlè* from a range of religious and spiritual orientations. I present a sample of cases that reveal three different types of spiritual engagement

gaining ground among *bèlè* practitioners in recent years. The first involves those who advocate for the increased visibility of *bèlè* performance in the Catholic Church, a relatively new genre called *bèlè légliz* (church *bèlè*) that attempts to refashion the Catholic liturgy with Afro-Creole cultural references that were once prohibited by the dominant religious order. The second set of perspectives is found among those practitioners who draw inspiration from the cosmologies of African and Afro-Atlantic religions, such as Haitian Vodou, Cuban Santería, Brazilian Candomblé, and other traditional African practices. The third dimension is the idea that *bèlè* is a “*laïque* (secular) spirituality” in and of itself—one that does not rely on any particular theistic religious framework but has a divine quality that encourages holistic wellness, helping to mend the wounds of emotional distress inflicted by Martinique’s ongoing colonial subjugation to France. When considered for their liberatory potential, these spiritual interpretations engaged by *bèlè* proponents challenge the popular conceptions of secularism inherent to French national belonging and offer alternative paths to defining the terms of Martinique’s relationship with France.

This research contributes to the body of African diaspora dance and music scholarship that problematizes the sacred/secular dichotomy, demonstrating the fluidity of Black expressive culture across secular and sacred interpretations and performance contexts (Covington-Ward 2015; Y. Daniel 2011; Henry 2008; Tucker 2007; Valnes 2015). Other forms of secular but still spiritual or religiously associated movement traditions have been documented in diasporic sites. For example, in Afro-Cuban rumba, creative synthesis and innovation can be observed through the mixing of secular and religious performance styles and gestures. In making this observation, dance anthropologist Yvonne Daniel writes about the sacralization of rumba with orisha-based movements and argues that “there is little separation between what some would call the sacred and the secular in many Afro-Cuban contexts. The particular mixture of sacred and secular in rumba affirms Afro-Cuban notions regarding spirituality” (1995, 113). In the case of Brazilian capoeira, particularly capoeira Angola, anthropological analyses challenge the notion of capoeira as a nonreligious martial art form and sport, pointing to certain capoeiristas’ engagement with the spirit world and supernatural entities and the overlapping logics of capoeira Angola that are shared with, but exist separately from, the Candomblé religion (Varela 2017; Willson 2001).

This research also presents an opportunity to explore debates around *laïcité* (secularism) and French national belonging in a context outside the metro-pole.⁴ Debates around *laïcité*, and its racist and xenophobic subtexts, typically focus on the contested nature of Islam in France (Fernando 2014; Jouili 2015;

Scott 2007). Rarely do we consider how the demand to embrace secularism as an emblem of French national identity shapes the discourse and practice of Antilleans living in France's overseas departments. Thus, we gain from this research a deeper understanding of Martinique's asymmetrical relationships with the French state, the Caribbean region, and the African diaspora at large. The project aims to pull Martinique from the margins of African diaspora religious scholarship to show how the perception of *bèlè* as a secular expression is changing and adapting to contemporary desires and demands for spiritual healing.

Bèlè's Rebirth

French national belonging is ideologically premised on a model of assimilation that extends to Antillean citizens living in the overseas departments (Agard-Jones 2009; Bonilla 2015; Browne 2004; J. Daniel 2001). The island's nonindependent political status as an overseas department accords Martinican residents the same rights and privileges afforded under French citizenship in metropolitan France (the vote, parliamentary representation, social security, and public services). Since Martinique's 1946 departmentalization, a strategy for decolonizing through political and economic incorporation into the French state, this island society has witnessed tremendous pressure to assimilate through a heightened valorization of French values and norms, alongside local struggles to define and assert Martinican cultural sensibilities (Beriss 2004; Price 1998). Local traditions, such as those associated with *bèlè*, *danmyé*, and *kalennda*, were abandoned in favor of European high culture—what Martinican intellectuals Aimé Césaire and Édouard Glissant referred to as “cultural genocide” or “genocide by substitution” (Burton 1995, 5; Glissant 1981, 173).⁵

In the early 1980s, a group of young (mostly male and middle-class) activist-intellectuals returned to their island home following years of university study in Paris. Disillusioned by their experiences with racism, cultural alienation, and second-class treatment in the metropole and newly radicalized by secular Marxist political ideology (a style of leftist *militantisme* that was very popular in France at that time), these activists went back to Martinique with a mission to “culturalize their anticolonial politics” (Geoffrey, interview, July 28, 2014). In collaboration with other local youth organizations, they cultivated relationships with elders and tradition bearers who passed on their knowledge of the *bèlè* culture, which had nearly vanished from Martinique's public life. Setting themselves apart from professional folkloric performance troupes, the revivalists used a grassroots-oriented approach to challenge exploitative, touristic

representations of Martinican culture and promote bèlè through the formation of various community-based cultural associations.

Since the 1980s launch of the bèlè revival movement, cultural activists have worked to reverse negative stereotypes and promote more affirming images of the bèlè tradition. They have created several bèlè schools and developed a rigorously codified dance pedagogy based on the repertoire of bèlè movements and gestures. They maintain the public performance of these traditions through the *swaré bèlè* system—participatory nocturnal ritual events in which “initiated” dancers, drummers, and singers (those who have an advanced command of the repertoire and can perform comfortably to any of the styles improvised by the lead singer) come together on a scheduled date to play bèlè until the early hours of the morning. Unlike professional folkloric troupes, which perform Martinique’s traditional culture in staged, choreographed renditions (often criticized by bèlè activists for reinforcing exoticized stereotypes of Antillean culture), the *swaré bèlè* function through an unscripted rotation of initiated practitioners. For the most part, these practitioners span three generations, categorized by *la jeunesse* (the youth), *les djoubaté* (the revivalists), and *les anciens* (the elders). Most of the elders come from modest, rural backgrounds, having worked as agricultural laborers in the past. Many of them are also Creole monolinguals with low literacy in French. The revivalists and youth who were initiated into bèlè through participation in contemporary class settings, however, come from all social strata and educational backgrounds. Nonmembers of the bèlè community are often surprised to learn that doctors, lawyers, teachers, and other *fonctionnaires* (civil servants) are even remotely interested in bèlè, given the longtime stigma of bèlè as a practice of the rural working class.⁶

Though the *swaré bèlè* space is not explicitly connected to religious practice, it is ceremonially organized to uphold a distinct set of values and ethics that are instilled in bèlè schools, fostering a unique sense of community belonging and cultural citizenship. These events are typically organized by a coalition of over twenty bèlè cultural associations from across the island that coordinates and governs bèlè activities, called the Coordination Lawonn Bèlè (Coordination around Bèlè).⁷ The leaders of this coalition have implemented protocols to ensure the success of bèlè events, citing their moral and ethical commitments to collective work, mutual aid, and solidarity, as well as the values of humility and respect for elders. Devoted practitioners are expected to adhere to this code of honor, especially when it involves the hierarchy of age and skill level in the performance rotation. The *swaré bèlè* space is enlivened by reverence for the ancestors and protests against the legacies of racism and colonialism. The rituals and ethical codes that shape contemporary bèlè performance inspire in danc-

ers an embodied resistance to oppression and suffering, channeled through the spirit of the ancestors and fervently safeguarded by present-day bèlè activists. Although there are some mild rivalries between bèlè associations, as well as conflicting perspectives around how bèlè should be transmitted, the coalition is generally united in the mission of empowering the people of Martinique.

When I first traveled to Martinique to pursue research on the cultural politics of the bèlè revival, I did not anticipate that my project would evolve to address questions of spirituality and religion. Bèlè had commonly been perceived as a secular/nonreligious tradition and was treated as such in the existing literature. Leaders of the bèlè revival initially focused on the transformative potential of bèlè for refashioning political, economic, and ethical sensibilities; raising social consciousness; empowering the youth in school settings; and promoting solidarity and an ethos of resistance to the French neocolonial presence on the island.⁸ Given their radical-left political identities—shaped in Paris and informed by Marxism, socialism, and French liberal ideals of secularism—many militant bèlè activists of the 1980s had more atheistic inclinations and were not motivated by religious or spiritual meaning. Therefore, the scholarship on bèlè's resurgence in Martinique has focused almost exclusively on its secular functions in protest manifestations or folkloric performances for tourists (Cyrille 2002; Gerstin 2000; Pulvar 2009).

In recent years, the bèlè movement has become a stronghold for new sacred meaning-making that emerges through performance rituals, interpersonal communication, and public discourse. When one treats the drum as a divine entity—an instrument that facilitates emotional transcendence through bodily movement—bèlè becomes a tool for self-preservation, as well as a form of devotion and reverence for the ancestors and some deities belonging to African and Afro-diasporic religious pantheons. Many anthropological studies point to the drum and bodily movement as keys for mediating communication with the spirit world, creating the conditions for emotional transcendence, and unifying individuals who share common beliefs and values. However, this scholarship has appeared most prominently in studies of Haitian Vodou (Dunham 1969; Hurston [1938] 1990; McAlister 2002), the Orisha traditions of Cuba and Brazil (Y. Daniel 2005; Hagedorn 2001; Matory 2005), and the Maroon and Kumina traditions of Jamaica (Bilby 2008; Dje Dje 1998). Martinique's drum-dance heritage remains an underanalyzed part of this intellectual conversation, which invites one to question the politics of religiosity and secularism that are at play under French universalist nationalism.

As Greg Johnson (2011) argues in his research on Indigenous religious claims in Hawai'i, the politics of secularism that is intended to restrict religious claims

actually stimulates cultural and religious generativity. New religious claims emerge and gain momentum under what Johnson refers to as “friction” (arguably provoked by the state) rather than some “newly achieved cultural consensus” (283). These claims become ever more emboldened, expansive, and variegated among Indigenous stakeholders, leading to the articulation of new religious meaning, expression, and identity—an observation of Johnson’s research that can be applied to my analysis of Martinique.

In the French national and overseas contexts, norms of secularism are expected to regulate cultural production and restrict religious expression in the public sphere, defining what is legitimate and acceptable as limited to nonreligious culture. We must therefore consider the contested terrain of legitimizing *bèlè* as an Afro-Creole spiritual tradition, if its place in Martinique’s cultural landscape is to remain devoid of sacred meaning. French republican ideals of *laïcité* compartmentalize social phenomena, thereby reinforcing particular binaries of sacred/secular or religion/culture, which are perhaps incongruent or in friction with some *bèlè* practitioners’ longing for spiritual connectedness. As my research continues to unfold, it will be important to question whether *bèlè* can withstand the pressures associated with *laïcité* as the ancestral dance becomes more integral to contemporary Martinican public life, while also becoming more overtly spiritual. Before getting into the ethnographic data from which my inquiries emerge, I first provide an overview of the place of religion in Martinican society.

Contextualizing Religion in Martinique and Its Meaning in *Bèlè*

Today Roman Catholicism is the predominant religion of Martinique, although evangelical Protestant denominations are on the rise. With approximately 85 percent of the total population (396,000) practicing Catholicism and an archbishop presiding over sixty priests, Catholic holidays and feasts for the saints are observed regularly on the island, and Catholic adherents make an annual pilgrimage to the island’s Sacred Heart Church in Balata (a one-fifth-size replica of the Basilica of the Sacred Heart of Paris). Hinduism came to Martinique with nineteenth-century immigration from South India, although most ethnic Indians in Martinique also identify as Catholic. There are also small Jewish and Islamic faith communities.

The 1685 Code Noir established by King Louis XIV in the French colonies enforced the conversion and baptism of enslaved Africans, and religious educa-

tional orders and catechism became especially intense in the years immediately preceding the 1848 emancipation (Ramsey 2011; Schmieder 2014). Despite the success of such orders in converting Martinique’s majority Afro-descended population to Catholicism, the *quimbois* conjuring and folk healing tradition went underground and continued to exist alongside Christianity.⁹ As William Miles points out, “against the long tradition of Roman Catholicism—nevertheless mitigated by deep-rooted Africanist folk practices (*quimboiserie*)—there is a French cultural overlay of *laïcité*, or secularism” (2014, 121). That is, Martinicans maintain cultural commitments to tradition, such as Catholic observances and the more obscured practices of *quimbois*, but the French national culture of *laïcité* also has an influence on the island.¹⁰

Most people agree that some earlier variant of *bèlè* dancing served ritual functions in African religious worship during the enslavement era, such as fertility and fecundity rites and harvest dances. However, this belief cannot be substantiated with reliable evidence owing to early colonial-era campaigns to eradicate African religious practices, as well as the racist Eurocentric bias found in written accounts of African dances. Thus, the question of spirituality in *bèlè* was not taken seriously as a legitimate field of inquiry and has even become a point of contention among some community members. Skeptics find spiritual conceptions of *bèlè* to be frivolous attempts to construct sacred meaning in a practice that is largely considered recreational, where religion no longer exists or perhaps never existed at all. They tend to criticize spiritual interpretations of the practice as “New Age-y,” misguided, or outright exploitative inventions that distort the narrative of *bèlè*’s transmission. It is not my goal to validate or disprove the belief that *bèlè* has a spiritual purpose. What is more important, and much more interesting to analyze, is how and why ideas about religion and spirituality in the context of *bèlè* are becoming more conspicuous, as evidenced by the range of sacred notions and embodied practices analyzed in the subsequent sections of this chapter.

Bèlè Légliz: Taking It to the Church

The first point of analysis involves the increasing visibility of *bèlè* performance in the Catholic Church, a fusion genre called *bèlè légliz*, which aims to refashion the liturgy with recognizable, locally inspired cultural references. *Bèlè légliz* was initiated at different periods in Martinique’s postdepartmental era, dating back to the 1960s, when the Second Vatican Council implemented changes bringing about liturgical reforms that encouraged “inculturation”—the use of

local music, dance, and vernacular language in worship services. In 1962 priests in Martinique attempted to restyle the liturgy with Martinique's local heritage and the Creole language, but they were unsuccessful at integrating *bèlè* into worship activities owing to the drum's negative association with alcohol consumption, Vodou, and *djab* (the devil). *Bèlè légliz* did not become a marketable genre and achieve wider appeal until around 2009, when albums devoted to the *bèlè légliz* project were produced, featuring artists such as Victor Treffé, K'zo Jean-Baptiste, and Stella Gonis, and *bèlè légliz* performance groups began giving concerts.¹¹ *Bèlè légliz* music and liturgical dance can now be found during Mass in some churches across the island, even though many Catholics outside of the *bèlè* community still find it shocking and offensive that the drum now has a place in the church.

Proponents of *bèlè légliz* define it as a creative adaptation of traditional *bèlè*, using *lespri bèlè* (the spirit of *bèlè*) and the repertoire of drum patterns and dance movements as a framework for developing Catholic liturgical expressions. The *bèlè légliz* team draws their inspiration from Bible verses such as Psalms 96:1–3 and Psalms 150:1–6, which instruct devotees to sing for the Lord and to praise the Lord with dance and the sound of instruments.¹² Because the church historically forbade the drum as a tool of the devil's work, the *bèlè légliz* team now emphasizes the utilization of the instrument as a tool for glorification. The liturgical movement styles found in *bèlè légliz* performances are modified (and some might argue sanitized) from the styles of movement found in *swaré bèlè* contexts, to make them palatable to Catholic audiences.

The *bèlè légliz* platform asserts that “the inculturation [of the church] must permit Martinicans to truly be themselves in connection with their faith,” as articulated by Father Montconthour in a 2006 documentary entitled *Bèlè Légliz*.¹³ In his explication of *bèlè légliz*, this priest employs vocabularies of freedom and liberation, well-being, and faith to envision and articulate a new framework for strengthened Christian identity, where spirituality, expressive culture, and sense of self converge. To quote one of the creators of the *bèlè légliz* genre: “God asked us to dance for him, so we do it with what we have here: *our* bodies, *our* instruments, *our* culture” (Clerc, interview, July 25, 2014). He argues that Martinique should not have to import gospel expressions from the United States or elsewhere when Martinicans have the cultural resources to develop their own liturgical styles of dance, music, and Creole translations of religious texts, such as hymnals and Bible verses. His emphasis on “we” and “our” suggests a sense of cultural autonomy to creolize Catholic worship with local markers of Martinican identity that historically had been prohibited.

Tracing African and Diasporic Cosmological Thought

The second line of thinking deals with African-inspired philosophical orientations to religion and spirituality that a subset of *bèlè* activists engage. The cosmologies and traditions of African and Afro-Atlantic religions, including Haitian Vodou, Cuban Santería, and Brazilian Candomblé, have become important sources of authentic spiritual validation for these individuals who reject the dogmatic nature of the Catholic Church and the church's connection to Martinique's colonial history. It is no surprise, then, that they are inclined to critique or oppose the *bèlè légliz* project.¹⁴ These practitioners of *bèlè* chart historical and symbolic connections with Africa and the wider diaspora in how they experience *bèlè*, embracing extralocal emblems of religious identity to stake their claims of cultural distinctiveness from France.

During my fieldwork I witnessed a number of discrete acts, such as the pouring of libations as an offering to the ancestors in *swaré bèlè* settings and the smudging of incense to purify the air for the spirits during dance lessons, leading me to question the claim that *bèlè* is strictly secular and to wonder what spiritual meaning it carried for certain individuals. Over time, my data revealed that very specific elements of African and Afro-diasporic religions held a significant place in the broader imagination of those individuals. Some interlocutors shared narratives that highlighted the sacred relevance of the circular procession that opens the *bèlè* dance sequence as a physical enactment of the Kongo cosmogram. Some emphasized the spiritual functions of sensual expressivity and flirtatious play in the dance, interpreting *bèlè* as a fecundity rite that encourages the human life cycle and celebrates the feminine erotic power of women practitioners— notions that overlap with the mythology of Oshun, the Yoruba goddess of fertility and love. Whenever such conversations occurred, I was reminded that these interpretations are deeply personal and that the narratives vary from one individual to the next.

Take, for example, Amadou, a fighter of *danmyé* (Martinique's martial art combat dance), a drummer, and a dancer in his late thirties who was an outspoken critic of Western Christianity and a vehement defender of both Vodou and Lucumi religious practices. On Amadou's drum, one finds an artistic fusion of both traditions. He describes the image that adorns his drum as a symbol for conjuring, inspired by the *vévé* (religious symbol) drawings of Vodou, which he has painted in red and white as a way of honoring his *orisha* Shango, the Yoruba warrior deity of strength, thunder, music, and dance. One also finds a thin rope that stretches across the face of the drum, which, according to his explanation, helps to produce sounds with special frequencies and vibrations that may

enable altered states of consciousness among bèlè dancers and danmyé fighters. As a fighter of the martial art danmyé tradition, Amadou carries out special rituals to prepare his mind and body for fighting in special danmyé events (interview, May 17, 2014).

Another example is Gérôme (in his late thirties), who associates bèlè with the Haitian Vodou *lwa* (spirit) Kouzen Zaka—the spirit of agriculture and protector of farmworkers in the pantheon of Haitian Vodou. According to elders of the bèlè tradition, bèlè is “une danse de la terre” (a dance of the earth) that was practiced by agricultural laborers to promote land and human fertility; they toiled on plantations to the sound of the bèlè drum and danced as a source of release after a hard day’s work. Many of the dance movements in the bèlè repertoire are representative of movements executed in agricultural field labor, such as grating manioc and cutting sugarcane. Gérôme has spent the past few years researching possible links between Martinican bèlè and the lore of Kouzen Zaka in Vodou. Writing about Kouzen Zaka’s dances in Haiti, dance anthropologist Yvonne Daniel describes a dance called *mayi* (from the Mahi nation), which is danced to announce the arrival of Kouzen Zaka’s spirit in Vodou ceremonies: “Mayi . . . is a quick-paced, foot-slapping, agriculturally-rooted dance within Rada rituals and is immensely important in Haiti’s agricultural society” (2005, 112). Another dance in Haiti, called *djouba*, is danced for Kouzen Zaka, and it is performed to a drum that Haitians call the *matinik* (Cally 1990, 18–19; S. Johnson 2012, 151). This drum is played in the same manner that the bèlè drum is played in Martinique, and the movements of *djouba* resemble some of the movements found in Martinique’s bèlè repertoire: “For playing *djouba*, the drum is laid on the ground and played with hands and feet, because *djouba* spirits live in the earth” (Averill and Wilcken 2008, 130).

According to Gérôme, this overlap between Haitian and Martinican folklore is not mere coincidence. He implied that this aspect of Caribbean religious heritage has flourished in Haiti, free from the restraints of extended colonial repression that caused the disintegration of African-based belief systems in Martinique. In recent years, organizers of the biennial bèlè festival have renamed the four-day festival event Bèlè Djouba to honor this aspect of their culture. At Bèlè Djouba festival gatherings in 2016, I witnessed fruit offerings thrown into the sea and plant offerings installed in the ground while dancers moved with fire torches around the concrete statues of the Anse Cafard slave memorial.¹⁵ Much like the significance of Kouzen Zaka’s lore in Haiti, bèlè has become a conduit through which Martinicans can express their spiritual devotion to the earth, land, and soil and memorialize their ancestors, who possessed special

systems of knowledge of the natural landscape for their communities to prevail under incredibly harsh circumstances. That spirit of survival, resilience, and solidarity lives on in the collective memory of activists today.

Another perspective, which draws heavily from Egyptian cosmic knowledge, suggests that members of the *bèlè* performance ensemble are responsible for receiving and carrying solar and/or lunar energy to the spirit world. As my interlocutor Izaak explained, this is why the drummer should position the drum so that its head faces the sun or moon. The dancers open the *bèlè* sequence by dancing counterclockwise, consistent with the moon's orbit of the earth. The dancers then reverse their circular procession, moving in a clockwise direction, however, because they must go back and gather the positive cosmic energy that descends from the moon as it orbits the earth. Izaak explained that cosmic energy is transmitted through the inverse triangle that is formed by the drummer's foot and two hands as they strike the drum, passing through the body of the drum to the spirit world; therefore, it is the drummer who gives the offering of cosmic energy to the ancestors. I recall that on the day I interviewed Izaak, he responded to my astonishment by concluding, "Our ancestors were so intelligent. . . . These are extraordinary things. *Bèlè* is a *High Mass, Madame!* You can't have the 'culturel' without the 'cultuel' [worship], and one cannot be a good practitioner of *bèlè* if they do not integrate worship and devotion into their practice. This means that when I do *bèlè*, I give worship to the divinities around me, the elements of nature, the stars and the moon—and all of these elements are in *bèlè*" (interview, May 1, 2014).

Izaak was the only person I encountered in my fieldwork who shared this very specific, riveting interpretation of *bèlè* as a sacred practice. From our conversation, I got the sense that he had discovered these connections through a combination of research and meditation, reading various sources in an attempt to uncover the origins of *bèlè* but also praying for clarity and deeply contemplating the stories of the oral tradition he had learned throughout his life, which contained pieces of Martinique's African past. Each of the cases that I have presented here, in fact, speaks to individuals' vested interests in researching, adopting, and valorizing the worship practices and religious beliefs of Africa and its diaspora, particularly those that resonate with *bèlè*'s values and performance elements. This synthesis of spiritual engagement, with Africa at its center, represents a special kind of resistance that is not familiar to or championed by most Martinicans. It demonstrates a commitment to decolonial philosophies and an allegiance to a diasporic religious heritage that was systematically erased from Martinique.

Bèlè as Secular Spirituality

Doktè ka ba la djèwizon, mé bèlè ka djèwi mwen san fason.

Doctors can give the remedy, but bèlè heals me without medicine.

—Noémi, a longtime *danm bèlè* (female dancer), July 25, 2013

One evening in July 2013, I organized a focus-group interview with eight women whom I had most frequently focused on at bèlè classes and in swaré bèlè gatherings over the course of my field research (I had known some of them since 2009). During the four-hour discussion, in which these women revealed the different spiritual and therapeutic aspects of bèlè practice, they shared how the power of the dance and the drum's sounds transport them to higher states of joy and pleasure, especially when the energy is high and the right elements are in place. Most of them agreed that there are times when bèlè is the perfect remedy for relieving stress and tension and making them feel better in emotionally trying circumstances. A friend whom I will refer to as Noémi, a woman in her mid-forties who has danced bèlè since she was a teenager, commented, "Some people prefer to go lay down on a couch in a psychologist's office to find solutions to their problems, but me, I go to bèlè." She went on to describe her process of prayer while in the swaré bèlè dance space: "When I'm dancing in my *carré* [square formation of four dancers], I find my Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, and while I'm doing my *monté o tanbou* [salute to the drummers], I pray. . . . I either give thanks, or I deposit my problems" (interview, July 25, 2013).¹⁶ Noémi's statement suggests that bèlè in secular swaré bèlè performance contexts has the same transcendental healing effect as Christian praise and worship, outside of the formal institutional framework of the church.

Here I examine the third perspective, which conceptualizes bèlè as a *laïque* (secular) spirituality. Ideas about spirituality and religion in the bèlè revival movement have evolved over time as many of today's practitioners discover sacred meaning in what has long been treated as a secular practice. Beyond the realm of political mobilization and economic solidarity, bèlè is said to have a tremendous impact on participants' emotional health and spiritual growth, which are treated as interdependent variables affecting a person's well-being, rather than mutually exclusive categories. Some bèlè practitioners seem to legitimize or make sense of their transformative experiences by mapping different spiritual narratives onto a performance practice that does not have an explicit connection to any particular religious heritage. The designation *laïque spirituality*, an expression that is gaining popularity among members of the bèlè

community, seems suitable for encompassing the range of spiritual and emotional journeys one might undertake through participation in *bèlè*.

Though the idea of a secular spirituality may seem like an oxymoron, it is currently undergoing serious discussion and exploration among certain leaders of the movement. This term exposes the extent to which the practitioners who endorse the term are shaped by French liberal ideals of secular modernity and are perhaps uncomfortable with the idea of religion in the *bèlè* context. In using the term *laïque spirituality*, are they subconsciously seeking to gain recognition for *bèlè* through a framework of French secular normativity? Or do they consciously reject the idea of religion owing to its association with hierarchical organization, dogma, and doctrine, in favor of liberal concepts (such as “self” and “freedom”) offered by spirituality (Mitchell 2011)? The term allows them to challenge the idea that *bèlè* is purely a cultural product or recreational activity that has no sacred meaning but to do so by employing a concept that renders *bèlè* legitimate in the context of *laïcité*. On numerous occasions, my interlocutors told me that *bèlè* is not religious but is without question spiritual, and I was frequently advised not to get the two categories confused in my analysis. In unpacking the distinction between religion and spirituality, Kerry Mitchell (2011) draws from Michel Foucault’s definition of spirituality, which locates personal transformation and “care of the self” within larger operations of power. Mitchell argues that the proclivity to focus on (and even celebrate) the concepts “self” and “freedom” in spirituality discourse obscures our understanding of the social constructedness of spirituality—that it is shaped by fluid social relations and power dynamics (see Foucault 2005).

Conclusion

Actors in the *bèlè* movement have done tremendous work in encouraging its followers to uphold a system of values, morals, and ethical guidelines rooted in the ancestral heritage of Martinique. The tradition is said to comprise its own set of convictions and principles, and participation in *bèlè* has helped to craft an alternative worldview, diverging from that which has been imposed through French colonial hegemony. Participants congregate for weekly, monthly, and annual rituals and ceremonial gatherings to rejoice, socialize, give reverence, and promote the spirit of *bèlè* as it was inherited from generations past. Occasionally, I came across *bèlè* practitioners who claimed to have experienced trance while dancing *bèlè*, and for many, *bèlè* performance is an emotional release that serves as a healthy alternative to talk therapy, meditation, or yoga. A woman once explained to me how she cried during her entire *carré bèlè* and

monté o tanbou sequence at a *swaré bèlè* as she grieved the loss of a loved one. As we can see, the *bèlè* dance space has the capacity to become one's altar or prayer bench, where one can give grace, offer prayers of invocation, and release feelings of pain and tension.

Although spiritual experiences in *bèlè* are indeed personal and vary from one individual to the next, the spaces where these experiences occur are very much social, relational, and community oriented. The inclination to resist larger structures of colonial power is a political one, which reinforces Mitchell's call to read spirituality through a Foucauldian lens. *Bèlè* as a sacred practice, experienced at the individual and group levels, cannot be detached from its political implications, whether it is interpreted through Catholic liturgical expression, Afro-syncretic cosmology, or *laïque* spirituality.

The quest for sacred purpose in the *bèlè* tradition, with both Christian- and African-inspired religious interpretations, as well as notions of secular spirituality, represents a new form of subversion of the legacy of French colonialism. One could argue that these different orientations to spirituality are incompatible or in conflict with one another in the struggle for legitimacy. Some skeptics deny the spiritual function of *bèlè* altogether and choose to engage *bèlè* for strictly social and recreational purposes. Perhaps rival perspectives about how the tradition is to be developed and transmitted could hinder the larger objective of empowerment. But rather than debating the legitimacy of these perspectives, I see this as an occasion to situate Martinique's drum-dance heritage and spirituality politics in an ever-expanding intellectual conversation about the complex anthropological subject we call Afro-Atlantic religion. This examination contributes to our understandings of *laïcité* in a nonmetropolitan context, from the contested field of *bèlè* performance, where the binary of religion/culture is unsettled from a range of perspectives.

This research is influenced by the recent scholarship on Afro-Atlantic religion and spirituality that critically examines how ethnographers *and* practitioners of African-inspired religions in Latin America and the Caribbean conceive, construct, reframe, and write about religious expression in the quest to recover "pure" or "authentic" African origins (Capone 2010; P. Johnson 2007; Matory 2005; Palmié 2013). These interventions problematize the essentialization of Black religiosity and call attention to how religious economies and the "commerce of memory making" (Johnson 2007, 45) shape the complexity of Black religious experience. My research, particularly the examination of *bèlè légliz*, also confronts the tendency in anthropology to dismiss or overlook Christian-based cultural movements in Caribbeanist and Latin Americanist scholarship. The "disciplinary bias" against Christianity (Louis 2014, 10) is most likely due

to overarching generalizations of Christianity as a tool of oppression and domination. This tendency ignores new currents pointing to the region's increasing religious pluralism and spiritual diversity, shifting religious markets, and the influence that other religious orientations are having on Christianity, and vice versa.¹⁷

This project is further enriched by the body of scholarship that interrogates the French tradition of militant *laïcité* for its role in marginalizing religious minorities. How are French Antillean *bèlè* activists, as overseas subjects of the French state, impacted by the republican ideals of secularism in their search for sacred meaning in an African-derived ancestral practice? French Antilleans of African descent have always had to wrestle with the double consciousness of their Blackness and Frenchness, and research shows that French Antilleans in metropolitan France are divided on which identity holds greater importance (Constant 2012). Even though French Antilleans, in theory, meet all the conditions for successful assimilation through their devout practice of Catholicism or their allegiance to the liberal ideals of secularism, they continue to face discrimination, marginalization, and poor treatment as second-class citizens.

To revisit Wallace's theory of revitalization movements, conceptualized as new or revived religious practices that emerge in response to widespread distress, *bèlè* activists are indeed making "deliberate, organized, conscious efforts . . . to construct a more satisfying culture" (1956, 265). One could go so far as to argue that *bèlè* is a new syncretic religious practice in the making, but it may be too early to tell. If we envisage *bèlè*'s rebirth as a revitalization movement, it is one that is uniquely multifaceted, transmitting a variety of spiritual interpretations with the unified mission of healing and unshackling the psychological chains of colonialism in Martinique.

NOTES

1. Throughout this chapter I use pseudonyms in place of real names to protect the anonymity of my interlocutors.
2. The *tambour bèlè* (*bèlè* drum) is made from a repurposed rum barrel and a goatskin drumhead.
3. For further reading on American Indian revitalization movements, see White (2009).
4. *The metropole* refers to metropolitan France, or the part of France in mainland Europe, in contrast to the overseas territories of France.
5. *Danmyé*, also known as *ladja*, is a combat/martial art tradition danced by two combatants in the center of a circle, musically accompanied by the *bèlè* drum and call-and-response singing. One version of *kalennda* involves competitive interplay between a drummer and a solo dancer in the center of a circle. Another variation of *kalennda* (*kalennda lisid*) is a group dance with an unlimited number of participants dancing in playful harmony with each other while accenting steps in sync with the rhythmic sequences of the drum.

6. Most of the bèlè revivalists' parents prohibited them from practicing bèlè when they were children (assimilation was quite strong in the 1960s). Bèlè practice was long stigmatized as *bagay vyé nèg* (a pejorative Creole expression for old, rustic, unsophisticated aspects of Black rural life) or *bagay djab* (devilish, associated with evil).

7. Although each member organization of this coalition maintains its own identity and governing structure, the Coordination Lawonn Bèlè has an executive committee of elected leadership posts (the *komitè lézalié*), consisting of a coordinator, secretary, treasurer, and so on. The Coordination Lawonn Bèlè and its member organizations are all registered as *associations loi de 1901* (nonprofit organizations).

8. For example, during the thirty-eight-day general strike and political unrest of 2009, bèlè street performance was used as a medium for igniting the public in protest repertoires and demonstrations. See Maddox (2015) and Gilbert Pago, "The Time of Anti-capitalist and Anti-colonial Contestation," *International Viewpoint*, April 14, 2009, <http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article1648>.

9. Quimbois is Martinique's tradition of conjuring and folk healing. It is comparable to American hoodoo or Jamaican obeah and is largely dismissed in public life as old superstition and witchcraft.

10. As Vanessa Agard-Jones (2009) articulates in her work, the French liberal rights framework and the norms of *laïcité* ostensibly protect LGBTQ communities in the French Antilles from homophobic attacks that are founded on conservative Christian principles and tend to restrict and/or criminalize homosexuality in other Caribbean island societies. However, tensions persist among elected officials of the socialist party in Martinique on the issue of gay marriage, with religious conviction at the root of the discord (5).

11. These albums were produced by Fred Jean-Baptiste of Mizik Label in Martinique.

12. The *Bèlè Légliz* (2009) album liner notes refer to 2 Samuel 6, about King David dancing before the Lord and playing instruments with the Israelites.

13. Father Montconthour, "Donner la chance à Jésus d'être Créole" [Give Jesus a chance to be Créole], 3:17, *Le Jour de Seigneur* video, excerpt from *Bèlè Légliz*, dir. Philippe Fusellier and Eric Pailler, 26 mins. (CFRT, France2, RFO, 2006), accessed May 15, 2015, <http://bcove.me/hnvpdvos>.

14. Bèlè associations do not officially endorse or reject bèlè légliz or any particular African-inspired religious interpretation of bèlè. Competing perspectives and critiques are mostly a matter of one's personal opinion and experience. Views and commitments regarding bèlè's sacred elements tend to vary across youth, activists, and elders.

15. Anse Cafard is a slave memorial located off the Caribbean coast of Diamond Beach in the southern town of Diamant. The monument consists of twenty concrete statues standing eight feet tall, overlooking the sea, memorializing the enslaved Africans who lost their lives when a slave ship capsized in 1830.

16. In the choreography of bèlè from Sainte Marie developed from the quadrille, the *carré bèlè* is the square-dancing segment of the sequence, whereby two female-male couples dance face-to-face in the formation of a square and swap positions so that the dancers may exchange partners. The *monté o tanbou* is the segment of the dance se-

quence following the square dancing, whereby each couple takes a turn dancing together in a moment of playful display, and they accompany one another dancing toward the drummer as a way of greeting and giving thanks to the drummer.

17. John Burdick shows, for example, how progressive Catholics (Burdick 2004) and evangelicals (Burdick 2013) in Brazil are implicated in contemporary struggles around Black identity politics. Expressions that are traditionally associated with the African presence in Brazil (such as samba, capoeira, and the instrumentation of Candomblé music) have had a considerable influence on contemporary liturgical performance in Christian settings. Bertin Louis's (2014) work on the Haitian Protestant diaspora is also useful in understanding contemporary Caribbean religious diversity.

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