



Sacred Expressions: Dance and Movements in the Realm of Spirit

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Abstract

The embodied practice of dance and movement forms an integral part of many African-derived religions in the Caribbean and the diaspora, and it is an essential component of the Spiritual Baptist faith. When voices are raised in word, song, prayers, or through the sounds and pulsating rhythms of drums cracking and other instruments being played, the spirit is activated and becomes manifest. This paper explores ways of worship among the Spiritual Baptists in Barbados and other eastern and southern Caribbean Islands. It analyzes various patterns, gestures, and functionality of the body as seen in the dances and other sacred expressions at Spiritual Baptist services, ceremonies, and celebratory rites. The article outlines the symbolism surrounding the various elements of dance and movements portrayed by this African-derived religion. It specifically highlights various creative and innovative ways that the Spiritual Baptist expresses themselves when in communication with the divine. It seeks to answer the question: What are the main factors that contribute to the dance movements and ecstatic rejoicing that are depicted by members of the Spiritual Baptist community? The analysis speaks to the transformation and change that occur in the atmosphere when the spirit is evoked. The body becomes a vehicle and a percussive instrument as the corporal frame shakes, jerks, sways, and pumps with the power of aspirated breath or adoption. This work compels greater spiritual awareness and invites deeper reflection when unraveling the meanings and intentions

ascribed to these existing artistic sacred expressions and cultural practices. The methodological process includes qualitative analysis from printed and online sources. Books, articles, journals as well as videos and photographs will be perused. The primary data will also be culled from ethnographic exploration of varying church services. Information from field notes, participant-observation, consented interviews, and discussions with spiritual leaders and members of the Spiritual Baptist community will help to build the analysis. The significance of this presentation is that it helps legitimize the spiritual knowledge and contributions of elders who maintained these ancient traditional practices.

Keywords: Afro-Caribbean religions, Spiritual Baptist, Sacred Expressions, Dance and Movements, Catching the Spirit, Doption

Introduction

Sacred Expressions: Dance and Movements in the Realm of Spirit is a written article that explores ways of worship that are synonymous with the Spiritual Baptists in Barbados and other eastern and southern Caribbean Islands. The main aim and purpose of this paper is to analyze the various patterns, gestures, and functionality of the body, as seen in the dances and other sacred expressions at Spiritual Baptist services, ceremonies, and celebratory rites. Outlining the symbolism and the values surrounding the various elements of dance and movement portrayed by this African-derived religion is of keen interest. This article also highlights various creative and innovative ways that the Spiritual Baptists express themselves when in communication with the divine. It specifically seeks to answer the question: What are the main factors that contribute to the dance movement and ecstatic rejoicing that are depicted by members of the Spiritual Baptist community? Rejoicing and walking the roads of adoption, which is also called "doption," are crucial representations of the performative elements and a significant factor of worship that allow the spirit to take form. The term adoption

or “doption” refers to the unique sounds and dance actions made by individuals when under the power and anointing of the holy spirit. When members of the Spiritual Baptist gather on the spiritual field, there is often a dynamic awakening and explosion of creativity that is portrayed in their sacred expressions of dance and movements in the realm of spirit. The transformation and changes that occur in the atmosphere when the spirit is evoked are analyzed and discussed.

Background Overview

Historically, it has been widely documented that many of the dance movements seen among Black Atlantic Religions are part of the retention and continuous sequence of the cultural and ritual practices of Africans who were forcefully transported to the region of the Caribbean and its diaspora. According to Joseph Murphy in *Working the Spirit: Ceremonies of the African Diaspora* “an African diaspora connotes both one and several communities, separated by language and culture, but united in a similar past and future” (177). Hence, even though Africans were scattered across the borders of the world because of migration, the creative expression of dance and other Afro-spiritual practices has become a unifying force among diasporic communities and Caribbean people wherever they reside. As Ennis B. Edmonds and Michelle A. Gonzalez wrote in *Caribbean Religious History an Introduction*, “one of the ways of characterizing contemporary Caribbean culture(s) is to say that, while Europe rules in the official social institutions of politics, economic, education, and law, other ethnic groups, particularly Africans, tend to rule in folk and popular culture, including religion, music, dance, and increasingly, the visual and performing arts” (7). The different media of creative expressions, such as music, dance, and sacred arts, are often relegated to African culture and are distinctly used to tell stories, speak of situations, and portray issues relating to past and present experiences. The embodied practice of sacred expressions conveys various meanings and is based on the environment and the circumstances that exist, whether real

or imagined. The author Keith McNeal affirmed that “the enduring significance of drumming and dancing in Afro-Creole religious and aesthetic forms, stems from reiterating shifts in the meaning of those practices over time in keeping with context of use and experience” (61). Even living through the brutality of hard labor and the traumatic experiences of slavery, semblances of these performative artistic expressions remain in the memories and the cultural fabric of Barbados, St. Vincent, Trinidad, and other Caribbean islands in various forms. Some Afro-Caribbean people are resilient and work hard to maintain the legacy and survival of oral histories, creative art forms, and spiritual ritual practices, as reflected in the various expressions and doctrines of members of the Spiritual Baptist.

The doctrine of the Spiritual Baptist is a syncretic form and is grounded in an amalgamation of drumming, dancing, and ritual healing practices, which point to African spirituality and a range of liturgies and biblical texts relating to European Christian concepts. In discussing the strategies of religious syncretism, editors Margarite Fernandez Olmos and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert, of *Creole Religions of the Caribbean: An Introduction from Vodou and Santeria to Obeah and Espiritismo* noted that, “the active transformation, through renegotiation, reorganization and redefinition of clashing belief systems are consistent with the creolization process” (7). Thus, the merging of varying beliefs and practices is one of the hallmarks and uniqueness of many African-derived religions, such as the Spiritual Baptists. The information gleaned from *Nation Dance: Religion, Identity, and Cultural Difference in the Caribbean* reaffirmed that each African nation in the Caribbean preserved links to particular people, regions, or kingdoms in Africa, and that the Pan-African sensibility was reinforced through contact with Judeo-Christian traditions and ideologies, whether Catholic or Protestant (Patrick Taylor: 4). It must be highlighted that the advent of Africans, Indians, Chinese, and Europeans, brought to the shores of Barbados and the eastern and southern Caribbean during slavery, created multi-racial and multi-faith societies. Consequently, the procedures of modification, close

interactions, and cross-fertilization of cultures created multi-racial and multi-faith societies that helped to influence the practices and belief systems of the Spiritual Baptist and other Arican-derived religions. In further analyzing the beliefs systems of the Spiritual Baptist, Hylton "Pops" Patrick disclosed in *The Role of Religion in Caribbean History from Amerindian Shamanism to Rastafarianism* that "the Shouter Baptist Faith is an African- influenced branch of Protestant Christianity which developed in Trinidad during the nineteenth century (89). Patrick also stated that "they believe in the inerrancy of the Bible, particularly The New Testament, as the revealed Word of God" (89). Delving further, Eric John Murray in *Religions of Trinidad and Tobago* mentioned, the Holy Trinity (Father, Son, and the Holy Ghost) is the Triune God. Murray further explained that God is the eternal Father; His Son Jesus Christ who is co-eternal with Him as Saviour, Redeemer, Mediator, and a friend of sinners; and the Holy Ghost is the Comforter and Teacher of the Saints through revelations, dreams, and visions (218–219). This brief review encapsulates the sacred expressions of dance movements, historical origins of the religion, and some of the belief systems pertaining to the Spiritual Baptist faith.

Significance

This essay offers enlightening perspectives on the sacred performance of the Spiritual Baptist religion in Barbados, neighboring Caribbean islands, and its diaspora. This presentation helps to legitimize the spiritual knowledge and contributions of elders, spiritual leaders, ritual specialists, and other members who toiled with determination to maintain these ancient traditional practices. It helps to establish that the performative and creative expression of dance and movements are part of the cultural legacy and spiritual customs of Afro-Caribbean people. The information provided is a source of edification to members of Afro-Caribbean spiritual traditions, Pan-Africanists, researchers, academics, and the public. This work on the sacred expressions of dance and movement stimulates our awareness and reinforces the

uniqueness of African spiritual practices and cultural heritage that abounds in Barbados, St. Vincent, Trinidad, other Caribbean territories, and its diaspora. This essay provides a gateway and an opportunity to transcribe a comprehensive analysis pertaining to the meaning of various patterns and gestures that are attributed to the sacred expressions of dance and movement in Afro-Caribbean spiritual and ritual ceremonies.

Methodology

The methodological process includes qualitative analysis with primary data culled from ethnographic exploration of varying churches and spiritual gatherings. Information from field notes, participant-observation, consented interviews, and discussions with spiritual leaders and members of the Spiritual Baptist community helped to build the analysis. Books, articles, and journals from printed and online sources as well as videos and photographs were perused. The participant's population for this essay includes male and female members of this Afro-Caribbean Spiritual group between the ages of 25–85 years. Many of the views put forward in this article came from wide-ranging discussions and interviews with respondents from various Spiritual Baptist churches in Barbados, St. Vincent, and Trinidad, during the month of February 2025.

Rejoicing with the Spiritual Baptists

Exploring rejoicing, the ways of worship, and the sacred performance among the Spiritual Baptists is an exciting journey. Multiple explanations are disclosed, in answer to the question relating to: "What are the main factors that contribute to the dance movement and ecstatic rejoicing that are depicted by members of the Spiritual Baptist community?" The Spiritual Baptist is one of the Black Atlantic religions established and practiced in the islands of the Southern and Eastern Anglophone Caribbean. Authors such as Adrian Fraser (89)

and Murray (218) explained that the religions were marginalized and confronted with prohibition ordinances and legislative laws from 1912 in St. Vincent and 1917 in Trinidad, respectively, which were repealed in 1951. However, even in the face of oppression and stigmatization, having gone through many dangers, toils, and snares, the Spiritual Baptists have progressed and remained steadfast in their religious faith. In an article entitled *The Spiritual Baptist Religion*, the author and anthropologist Maarit Forde noted that, "the Spiritual Baptist Religion is indigenous to the Caribbean, where it developed in a highly diverse and hierarchical field of religious formation, beliefs and practices that has changed in evolving political and historical circumstances" (3). When discussing the hierarchical field of the Spiritual Baptist, it must be mentioned that, in addition to the formations of multiple dioceses and councils, various diversities of spiritual gifts were also developed. These include ordained patriarchs, archbishops, bishops, reverends, and deacons. There are also persons who obtain spiritual gifts from the mourning ground (pray and fast ritual) and carry the titles of teachers, pointers, mothers, provers, watchmen, among others. These groups and individuals who function in various capacities are all responsible for the organization and religious administrative duties of the many Spiritual Baptist churches. In addition to Barbados, St. Vincent, Trinidad, Grenada, and other Caribbean islands, the Spiritual Baptists are well established and can also be found among diasporic communities in Countries such as Canada, England, and the United States. Independent scholar James T. Houk clearly outlined in *Spirits, Blood and Drums: The Orisa Religion in Trinidad* that, "the Spiritual Baptist religion is found throughout the Western Hemisphere with churches in many areas, including St. Vincent, Grenada, St. Croix, Venezuela, Guyana, and large urban areas of North America such as Toronto, Miami, New Orleans, and New York City" (71). It must be reinforced that many of the Spiritual Baptist churches found in diasporic communities came because of migration and integration of Caribbean people who traveled and lived in North America and other European countries. Confirming this point, Forde also explained

that "it is the outcome of various cross-oceanic migrations, forced and voluntary, that went into the construction of Caribbean plantation societies and, from the 1890s onwards the heightened mobility of Caribbean people in search of better economic opportunities in the region and in the global North" (3). Houk agreed that "many of these churches appear to have been established as the result of movement to and from as well as inside the Caribbean" (71). These churches and organizations maintain and host meetings and gatherings where devotion, fellowship, and ceremonial rites are held. The primary sites and stages where ceremonies and sacred performances of dance and movement occur include indoor structures, an enclosed building or outdoor space, as during baptism, missions, or open-air services. The white uniforms, head ties, cords, neatly pressed robes, and other colorful spiritual garments worn by this African-derived religious group become part of the costumes and apparel used during rejoicing and sacred ritual dance performances. The set designs in the churches include the different colors of flags, bells, calabashes, lotas with lighted candles, and flowers along with other sacred vestments as seen on the altar, center poles, and areas of the sanctuaries. The shepherd's rod, the cross, the bell, and spiritual clothing are all sacred vestments that lend to the ambience and amplify the visual elements in the sacred theater. Similarly, the grains, oils, and perfumes are some of the paraphernalia that are ever-present and are often used when the spirit is passing through. It is important to note that while dance and movement vary among different religions and cultural expressions, God's spirit is manifold and can be represented simultaneously among the various religions. As a PhD research student who was born into Spiritual Baptist, I have learnt a great deal about the rudiments of the faith from attending services, being present at gatherings, and observing many ceremonies. Much of my knowledge also comes from my position as an insider-outsider interacting and working with many elders and spiritual leaders, including my late Vincentian mother, Reverend Eunice 'Nicey' Edwards, who traveled and lived in Barbados and served as the head of St. Veronica Converted Spiritual Baptist

Church in Silver Hill, Christ Church. Based on my journey and skills shown through the years, my spiritual parents saw it fit to ordain me as a Reverend Mother Superior in 2018 and later in 2022 elevated me as an African Queen Mother Pointer, and I am now managing my own spiritual organization in St. Andrew, Barbados. I am fortunate for the wisdom and talents gained, to be able to transcribe valuable information that offers insight into this Afro-Caribbean Spiritual Tradition to interested people for generations to come.

The embodied practice of dance and movement, which forms an integral part of worship and the performative elements of rejoicing among the Spiritual Baptist and other African-derived religions in the Caribbean and the diaspora, is expressed in various ways. Spiritual Baptist services can be solemn occasions with calm reverence and coolness as seen when someone is on the field preaching the word or during segments of funeral services where there is a feeling of grief and sadness. There can also be a feeling of relaxation and focused attention such as during healing and deliverance ministry or when certain rituals are being performed. The way the text or word is delivered, and the rhythmic pace of the hymns and choruses being sung, are factors to consider. It all depends on how deeply these performances resonate with the spiritual leaders, devotees, and members present in the congregation at any given time. Sometimes the songs and music are a slow rendition where the dance movements are those of waltz and cool steps. On these occasions, members glide and dance around the space with calmness, grace, and delicate poise. At other times, Spiritual Baptist services can be dynamic, hot, and fiery. Sometimes the behavioral patterns of individuals in the charged atmosphere of the environment can be characterized as "bashment", "comess", drama, and pure bacchanal (intense emotions and ecstatic celebrations). Within a spiritual setting, these terms also carry connotations of an intersection of culture and spirituality where aspects of revelation, manifestation, and heightened sacred expressions can emerge. The atmosphere can even become chaotic and wild when bodies move in motion with sounds, dance, and spirit possession. Thus, the ritual

practices portrayed on the spiritual field and stages, along with what transpires behind the curtains on the backstage, are part of the plot that occurs in the sacred theater. It all depends on the operation of the leader of the service, participants, and the issues surrounding the type of service being held. In her discourse, Maarit Forde states, "similarly, in Tobagonian Spiritual Baptist healing rituals, the 'hotness' of the communal dancing and music-making is crucial, and ritual specialists sometimes scold their congregations for not putting sufficient effort into creating a favourable setting for spirits" (20). Therefore, to enable an enjoyable and smooth running of the service, everyone is advised and encouraged to get up and play their part to ensure a successful outcome. During some services, the sacred spaces can become hyped like a spiritual dance party, especially at a pointing on, and shouting of pilgrims as is done during and after a mourning ritual, or when a thanksgiving celebration is being conducted. In her honors thesis, *Praise Him with the Dance: Incarnation Creation and the Sacred Art of Movement*, Mariah Sky Franklyn noted, "dancing, rejoicing and feasting are related in that they are all involved in the event of celebration" (41). It is at these types of ceremonies that festive vibrancy exists and where the spirit can manifest.

It must be highlighted that the spirit can be activated when voices are raised in song, praise, and prayer during worship. The effects of rhythm, word, song, and dance are infectious. The sounds of the chants, the pulsating rhythms of cracking drums, and the other instruments being played merge and synchronize, stirring the vibrations that create the rhythmic body movements of dance. Outlining that "music is used to praise the Supreme Being, the superhuman beings, and the ancestors", the author Aloysius M. Lugira disclosed in *World Religions: African Traditional Religion Third Edition*, that "it is used as prayer in supplication for favours from heaven" (110). A popular Spiritual Baptist refrain states that when the praises go up, the blessings will come down. The constant act of praying, preaching the word, chanting, and melodious singing all encapsulate the ritual of praise and worship to Almighty God. Likewise, Franklyn affirmed that "dancing is an avenue

through which we can embody our convictions to offer to God, not just the physical body, but the whole self, in our worship" (27). The drumming, clapping, stomping, and the playing of the tambourine and shak-shak all generate the music that helps to titillate the senses and cause individuals to rejoice, dance, and move in the realm of the spirit. Stating that "music, either vocal or instrumental, usually accompanies African religious ritual", Lugira also asserted that "the drum is a key and the primary instrument that unlocks communication with the spirit world, and that people beat or play drums to induce oracles from high above, through mediums" (110–111). The sacred expressions of dance and movements convey a sense of liberation. It is while dancing and communicating with the spirit that individuals are in a state of openness where there is a release and a sense of freedom from all restrictions and inhibitions. The drumming, songs, and music help to call the spirit and heighten the energies of the dance. The act of rejoicing among the Spiritual Baptists opens portals that release negative vibrations and encourages persons to "loose oneself" for the holy spirit to pass through freely. An invitation is sent out for the angels and the holy spirit to ride in the sacred space. To invite the holy spirit into the space, there is a process of bell ringing, surveying, and sanctifying. The process of surveying the space is part of the consecration ritual that sets the boundary lines, to separate the sacred location from the profane and allows the holy spirit to enter.

When rejoicing and performing the sacred in the realm of the Spirit, there is an interplay of human action and Spirit work. The body becomes a vessel of translation for the spirit. According to Margeret Fisk Taylor, "The body can be trained to be an ally of the spirit, whether it is merely in learning how to release tensions or in creating symbolic motions" (6). When the spirit is present, the body becomes the percussive instrument where war cries and other piercing sounds are made while persons jump, stamp, and pound their feet on the ground. Others beat their chests, sway and dance the body in motion while the spirit is evoked. When the Spirit is passing through, it is like a mystical and unfathomable revelation to many. As Matthew 13:16

proclaimed, “blessed are your eyes for they see, and your ears for they hear” (King James Version). Persons with insight and conscious awareness have the inclination to unravel the mysteries. Similarly, all those who know, will know, what is meant to be revealed. It is only those who have eyes of faith, the gift of knowledge, and the spirit of discernment that understand the inner workings of Spirit. When the Spirit is activated, the entire space becomes charged, and there is a noticeable transformation that occurs where individuals start to react and move with Spirit within the sacred space. In the context of spirit work, transformation revolves around change, renewal, and rebirth of positive energies. As the rhythms of the songs and music rides, there is an occurrence where the energy shifts and goes from one stage to the next, thus triggering the performance of sacred dance. There is an irresistible feeling that makes a person start to dance and rejoice. There are instances where individuals would be seated or standing with a normal demeanor and then suddenly, they start to move involuntarily with bodies shaking, swaying, and shivering with a type of sharp vigor. The swaying, shaking, and convulsions of the head, arms, feet, and all parts of the body are energetic and ecstatic. The motions and actions become suspended in time and space, which sometimes can develop into unconscious and uncontrollable movements. According to respondent 1, my spiritual teacher Pointer Vernon Douglas from Layou, St. Vincent, “one sometimes cannot control themselves when the spirit is passing through.” The Spirit is an invisible mystical entity and a strong force that touches the core of one’s being. Persons are known to thrash and throw themselves around violently, and their actions can become very erratic, to the point where, care needs to be provided to prevent persons from hurting themselves. A Vincentian Spiritual Baptist female living in Barbados, respondent 2, affirmed, “when I am dancing and rejoicing, something does take over my body and I don’t know what I does be doing.” Therefore, it is recommended to have persons nearby to assist others when and wherever possible. In addition, elders always advise members to stand their ground when the spirit is passing. When the spirit is moving, it creates a shift and changes

the physical and emotional state of individuals present in the sacred space. Individuals are affected by the transporting of energies that creeps and moves steadily through the atmosphere. This transporting of spiritual energies builds the vibrations and creates the frequencies that drive the transformation, causing persons to move from a natural state of existence into manifestations of an altered state of mind. When people are in the Spirit and walking the roads of doption, there is an innate knowing that these persons are being assisted on their journey as they become unrecognizable from the regular or original individual state. As a participant observer at many Spiritual Baptist ceremonies, it was noticed that when there is a spiritual transformation, the persona of some individuals can metamorphosize into unpredictable sounds, gestures, and patterns of movement. It was observed that the energy can shift and build gradually or rapidly, where sometimes wilful or spontaneous movements can occur. Some individuals have mastered the art of "Catching the Spirit" and are very skilful in harnessing the energies when the spirit is invoked. They can welcome, entertain, and charm the spirit to the point where they glide and move with a type of grace that can only be described and relegated as Spirit. It must be mentioned that during the sacred dance, some individuals go deep, travel out far, and are breathless. While some individuals who dance can maintain balance and come out of that spiritual sphere on their own, there are occasions when others must be coaxed back to reality by members or spiritual elders. Sometimes, during the coming-out phase, persons are given three sips of water. Some services are so intense and full of vibrant energy that they cause some members to sweat profusely after the grand dance. Most members usually have a face towel at the ready or a washcloth to mop or wipe away beads of perspiration from their faces.

During the coming-out phase from the intense spiritual dance, some members make sounds of an unintelligible language known as cutting unknown tongue. Talking in tongues during the coming-out and reviving period of the dance is like a conversation people have with each other in the realm of the spirit. Sometimes, there is

a call and response, where persons make sounds which are followed by others who answer with similar or individual sounds. According to most respondents, "we walk and talk with each other while dancing and rejoicing on the spiritual field." A male, respondent 3 from St. Vincent explained that "when you are in spirit and talking in tongues, one will understand what is being said and when one is not in spirit some persons will not understand." When working spirit, the manifestation of sacred performance, is seen through the actions and dance movements of the members and devotees present in the spiritual space.

The manifestation of trance, spirit possession, and walking the roads of adoption are the sacred expressive essence in the realm of the spirit. Trance can cause a person to cross over and go out into the deep; possession generates movement where a person can bring messages and medicine for healing; and doption stirs the dance that wakes up the spiritual field. Doption is music and rhythms of the soul. When under the power of doption, the exciting dance and movements that occur during the spiritual sessions are like rhythmic currents. Hence, within the Spiritual Baptist faith, doption is an important segment and one of the ancient landmarks that forms a unique and significant part of ritual practices in the sacred theaters. Sacred expressions in the realm of the spirit are manifestations of God's holy spirit moving in a mysterious way, his wonders to perform. It demonstrates that all spiritual manifestations of dance and movement are inspirations of God and can take various forms across various cultural platforms.

Dance Patterns and Gestures

The various patterns, gestures, and functionality of the body as seen in the dances and other sacred performances at Spiritual Baptist services, ceremonies, and celebratory rites are a marvelous sight to behold. The dance patterns and gestures portrayed by the Spiritual Baptist are unique and distinct to that faith system, in that members utilize the movements of both their feet to stamp on the ground in an

alternating marching pattern. As the feet hit the ground one after the next, the slow or fast-paced movement becomes synonymous with the rhythm of marching in an army. While keeping time with the songs or music being played, the Spiritual leader or other individuals, plant one foot firmly on the ground and stamp only one foot as the upper torso rocks forward and upward. While that one foot is being pounded in the ground with a one-drop timing, people sway their bodies and pump their hands steadily, in all types of fashion. In this dance movement, the head and back are bent repetitively from the hip in a forward motion and then returning to the centre in the original, upright position. This is seen when they are walking the number 1 road or on an A road to symbolize the beginning of the journey. It must be highlighted that within the Spiritual Baptist faith, numerological and alphabetical aspects are used to create the sounds that are made when walking the roads and "wukking doption." The phrase "wukking doption," which also references adoption, walking roads, or journeying, encapsulates the unique sounds and rhythmic dance movements of persons gripped by the transformative experience and authority of the holy spirit. There are many variations to these dance movements when persons are overtaken by the spirit. Within the cosmologies of the Spiritual Baptist, there is a sense of bodies laboring when journeying in the Spirit. Some movements are like working and toiling hard in the fields, with individuals going down digging the ground and coming back up. Other movements are like that of rowing a boat with body and arms moving forward and backwards. There is also the pump movement of the feet and hands moving in a manner like pumping and pulling water from the well. There are steady movements and an intensity of actions during the sacred dance performances. Though they all dance to the same rhythm, each Spiritual Baptist moves to their own beat, creating their individual movements, depending on where they are mentally during that specific time. In the sacred dance, individuals can strenuously tramp, jump, and walk roads for hours without stopping. There are instances when the vibrations spread through the space, some people let go, lose control, twirl, and shake. When dancing and

rejoicing, there are individuals who sometimes twist, swirl, and move their hips in a gyrating manner. In an Afro-Caribbean context, this type of dance movement is equivalent to the uncontrollable expressions of cultural dance which are sometimes termed as “wukking up” or “whining” (the erratic rolling motions of the hips). Although semblances of the “wukking up” style of dance movements might be seen when some people are rejoicing or “wukking doption,” respectfully, “wukking up” (a cultural sensual rhythmic movement of the waistline) and “wukking doption” (catching the spirit, dancing under a trance or spirit possession) are two separate terms. While some dance moves are not unique to the Caribbean populace, they are an integral part of Afro-Caribbean religions. When journeying in the spirit or walking the roads of adoption, and a junction is reached, such as when there is a lull or a shift in energy, sometimes there are screams, shaking, and stretching. Reaching a junction also signifies that the intensity of the spiritual dance has eased up, come to a complete end, or another journey might be taken in a slower or faster pace. These dances and movements can be done continuously until there is a total cooling down of the spiritual energies in the space.

Creativity and Innovation

Creativity and innovation are crucial hallmarks of the performative expression relating to dance and movement among the Spiritual Baptist Faith. While there might be some similarities in ritual practice and the artistry of operations, no two ceremonies are the same. The dances and movements performed can be unique and authentic based on the frequency and vibrations that exist in the space at any given time. The dance patterns and gestures also inculcate various tribes and nations such as Africa, India, China, and Arabia. While the population in the Caribbean comprises mostly Black people, the communities are also made up of multi-ethnic races. The composition of the different races came from the experience and legacy of the colonial slave trade. This colonial slavery occurred when enslaved

Africans and indentured servants from India and China were brought to the Caribbean region to work in harsh conditions on the sugar cane plantations by the European slave masters. The convergence of the different races in the Caribbean and its diaspora has influenced and transcended into the ceremonies, ritual practices, and cosmologies of the Spiritual Baptist and other African-derived religions. The author Forde emphasized that "the cosmology of Spiritual Baptists in the southern Caribbean and diaspora is a complex spiritual world of various 'nations,' including India, Africa, and China, and Spiritual Baptist healers draw on 'gifts' and knowledge associated with these nations" (13). Hence, when in the sacred theater, the influences of Africa and other ethnicities are interpreted in the design and colors of their spiritual garments as well as their performance and dance movements. Even the languages spoken when dancing and walking roads of adoption can sometimes mimic Chinese, Indian, and African sounds. In taking a close look at some of the dance movements, it was observed that when on an Indian road people lift, twirl, and shake one hand in the air while making a chipping movement with their feet. Some individuals swirl and dance around in circles, portraying various hip and body movements as well. To symbolize a Chinese road, some people carry chopsticks in their heads and would hold and carry a fan which they move in various positions while they dance. These types of nation dances that are conveyed on the spiritual field are a representation of the historical and socio-cultural norms that are integrated into our society. The strong association and connections members of the Spiritual Baptist have with the spirit are multifaceted and are revealed in many ways during the sacred performances when worshiping.

As a representation of Africa, there are certain times during rejoicing sessions that some Spiritual Baptist members are seen dancing beautifully with a calabash of flowers in their hands or on their heads. On other occasions, persons sometimes take up vases of flowers, whole cakes, baskets of goodies, and bowls of fruit from around the center poles and off the thanksgiving table, lifting them in the air while

they sway, spin, and dance around as seen in *Figures 1* and *2*. Coded as respondent 4, the elder Bishop John Prescott from Barbados explained that “dancing with fruits and plants is a gift or an atonement to almighty God”. Another male, categorized as respondent 5, affirmed, “we dance and worship like that to give honour and glory to God”. Therefore, these actions of dancing with plants, fruits, and other items are seen as giving an offering and yielding them up, to the holy spirit of God. It also speaks of serving, laboring in the vineyard, as well as giving thanks and praises to the highest God. These portrayals of the various dance patterns, evident among the Spiritual Baptists, also signal the level of innovation and creativity that occurs.



Figure 1: Pointer Douglas Dancing with a Vase of Flowers on his Head (Bethel Church, St. Vincent 2025). Screenshot Photo Compliments Video Streams from Bethel Spiritual Baptist Church, Layou, St. Vincent.



Figure 2: Queen Mother Ireka Dancing with a Bowl of Fruits on Her Head (Jeremiah Spiritual Baptist Church Barbados 2025).

Screenshot Picture Compliment Junior Greenidge Facebook Live, 2025.

There is also the notion that some of the dances are done to welcome, appease, and entertain the African spirit that comes to visit. While discussing the topic with a group of Spiritual Baptist members, a female, coded as respondent 6, wearing a blue floral head tie and having a serious look of reflection on her face disclosed that “the dances is part of our African roots and culture.” She further asserted that “it is important to perform our ancestral rites.” Therefore, it can be said that dancing in the realm of the spirit is also about venerating and paying homage to our African ancestors. According to another Spiritual Baptist, female respondent 7, “when the African queen comes, she sometimes lights fire by my foot and in response I does lifts my apron, wheel and dance in different forms.” Women dancing and holding the apron is a popular feature of celebration and worship

among the spiritual Baptists, as shown in *Figures 3 and 4*. It must be highlighted that within the cosmologies of the Spiritual Baptists, the apron is a sacred apparel used to denote rank. It is worn by nurses, assistants, and senior mothers as a garment and a source to hold sacred items when working in the spiritual field, and it is always worn in the mourning room. The apron is a symbol of growth, authority, and honor, and is used to hide the shame, embrace, and cover the children and spiritual candidates.



Figure 3: Spiritual Baptist Women Dancing and Holding their Aprons (Bethel Church, St. Vincent 2025).

Screenshot Photo Compliments Video Streams from Bethel Spiritual Baptist Church, Layou, St. Vincent.

Some dance moves can also imitate the natural creation and correlate with animals, harvest, rain, swaying trees, or sailing ships. The movements and sounds can carry vibrations of an engine room or a pumping station. Some dance moves mimic animals like trotting



Figure 4: Spiritual Baptist Mother Dancing and Holding her Apron (St. Andrew, Barbados, 2025).

Photo Compliments of All Nation Wisdom School and Spiritual Healing Temple, St Andrew, Barbados.

horses, camels, or ponies. Spiritual Baptists often reference riding a pony in specific spiritual dances. These dances and doption sounds can symbolize an Arabian riding a camel in the desert or the hoofbeats of a horse, pony, or donkey, representing travel to the spiritual realm. The dance movements symbolize the shared social and cultural history of Barbados and the Caribbean, reflecting everyday activities like horseback riding and donkey carts used for transport. During national festivals like Crop Over, donkey carts carrying canes and other relics are still used as a nuance of sorts, paying homage to our heritage. Sometimes during the spiritual dance, the body is crouched in a position that re-enacts the movements of a jockey riding and holding the reins of a horse. Whether the horseman is trotting or galloping, the torso, hands, head, and feet go according to the speed and rhythm. In addition to other songs, sometimes the choruses "riding on a pony" or "ride on to celestial shore" are sung to make direct reference to these dance movements. The dance movements can speed up a little faster or it can be of a slower pace. The movement of the feet gives you an indication of whether a person is trotting slowly on the horse or

is galloping with speed. There is a glaring uniqueness and complexity to the many variations of sounds, dance, and movements that are performed by the Spiritual Baptist.

Some dance moves are also attributed to visions and dreams gained on the mourning ground. Mourning is one of the key rituals of the Spiritual Baptist faith, where members go to a specially prepared room or sacred space to fast and pray for a specific time, which is usually one week or more. Mourning candidates sometimes bring visions proclaiming that a man or woman came to them in the spirit and taught them how to dance, and at times will even perform and showcase some of the dance moves to the congregation. For example, persons have shared visions, received on the mourning ground where a gentleman who is attributed to Ezekiel dressed in red and black comes and shows them how to dance on one foot. Ezekiel is one of the biblical entities that the Spiritual Baptists and others make mention of and pay homage to. These dances ascribed to Ezekiel are also representative of going through the valley of dry bones or being in a cemetery where crick, crack sounds are made, or sometimes the performance is as if lying in a tomb and breathing life back into the bones. As is written in Ezekiel Chapter 37 of the Bible, God showed Ezekiel, a valley filled with bones and commanded him to prophesy to them. Respondent 8, a female from St. Vincent, was adamant that the spirit comes and shows persons how to dance. Another female, respondent 9, hailing from Trinidad, disclosed that "they must be an allowance for the shifting of the spirit through the body." It must be highlighted that leaders and members of the Spiritual Baptist faith have always advised that in everything, persons must be guided by the holy spirit.

Symbolism of Dance

In analyzing the symbolism and value of the various dance movements portrayed by the Spiritual Baptist, many analogies are given. While many of the sacred performances carry various meanings, there are some people who note that they cannot explain, describe, or put into

words the dances, transformation of spirit, and other ritual actions. However, it must be emphasized that dance and movement have a purpose and are a representation of many things. Like the singing and music of the drum, dance is a language that tells stories and sends messages. Ohadike emphasized that, "For most Africans, music simply is a source of entertainment and a useful tool for transmitting cultural messages" (8). Yet, it can be argued that music is not "simply a source of entertainment" but also an important mechanism that offers solace, generates deep vibrations, and provides the rhythmic tempo that stimulates dance and movement. Thus, through music, the exuberant language of dance is activated, where stories pertaining to cultural, social, historical, and spiritual experiences are told and expressed in a mystical fashion. Dance speaks of agility, fluidness, and flexibility. It is not stagnant or stable but is full of kinetic movement and mobility. Stating the basic definition of dance, Franklin highlighted that it is a basic gesture and movement, carried out with the intention of communicating a message which is perceived through the senses (11). Dance and movement can also send messages that depict various emotions and feelings of anger, strength, serenity, and other aspects of life. The sacred performance of dance is a form of therapy used to ease sadness, pressures, and strains. It is a weapon that helps individuals to overcome trials, tribulations, fight many tough battles, and bring joy to the heart and soul. Dance and movements have been used to express spiritual belief, sorrow, and celebration, as is evident at Afro-Caribbean spiritual ceremonies and gatherings, like those of the Spiritual Baptists. Outside of being an emotion of human thought, dance can certainly be seen as an understanding and interpretation of lived experiences.

Sacred expressions, which include music, visual art, writing, theatre art, poetry, and dance, are deep forms of creative engagements that are used to represent and transcribe the eventualities of human existence. As *Rhythm and Timing of Movement in Performance Drama, Dance and Ceremony* by Jenet Goodridge outlined, "although distinct, theatre, drama, dance, ceremony, and ritual are related performance genres which involve related modes of action" (13). Thus, dance and the other

cultural modules or media outlined are all creative talents within the performing arts that convey profound and serious meaning. According to the author Margeret Fisk Taylor in *A Time to Dance: Symbolic Movement in Worship*, "dancing is a comprehensive language, uniting the whole person- mind, body, emotion and spirit- in the process of expressing meaning" (13). Meanwhile, Taylor also affirmed that "this is one of the primary reasons that dance, as a sacred ritual for the purpose of communicating with God and with other believers is valued in so many different religious faiths" (13). Communion and communication are unifying elements of expressing meaning when having fellowship and devotion with God and are crucial aspects of the embodied practice of dance. Hence, aspects of the dance movements portrayed by members of the Spiritual Baptist community when worshiping can be seen as an expression of reverence. Some respondents think that certain dance moves are given to them by the Gods. For many, dance symbolizes a connection to the divine and is seen as one being in communication with the holy spirit. As the Trinidadian female, respondent 10 aptly affirmed, "dancing is like having a conversation and a way of communicating with the Lord." Carrying the title of an Evangelist, respondent 11, a young Vincentian lady explained that when she is dancing and rejoicing, she feels the presence of God. Mentioning that dance is an expression of her worship to God, respondent 12, a female Spiritual Baptist member from a church in Barbados noted, "dance offers me the opportunity to express myself in a genuine and free manner." Another Trinidadian lady, respondent 13, disclosed, "as David danced before the lord, when I dance, I am dancing for the Lord." In further unravelling the symbolism and value of dance, a Vincentian male, respondent 14, summarized that, "dance allows me to glorify and serve God in an authentic way." One of the refrains repeated regularly by the Spiritual Baptist Faith states that persons must worship God in Spirit and in truth. Thus, the variations of these performative expressions are done with a sense of pureness and honesty, all for the glory and honor of Almighty God. There is no rhyme or reason; it is just the workings of the Spirit.

The members of the Spiritual Baptist community whom discussions and interviews were held while working on this paper, unanimously stated that dance gives them a sense of joy, peace, and happiness. Many of them emphasized that dance is a form of release from stress and pent-up energies. From close observation, even though there might be differences, on most occasions, when the Spiritual Baptist community and other Afro-Caribbean people come together to have devotion and fellowship, there is a feeling of love and harmony. At praise and worship spiritual meetings, there is usually a depiction of oneness, unity, and contentment. In our discussion, male respondent 15 asserted that, it is a good thing to worship, rejoice and serve the Lord. Another female, respondent 16, explained, "I come to Spiritual Baptist praise to worship and give thanks unto the Almighty God for the sparing of my life and the preserving of my body." Likewise, a Vincentian female, respondent 17, outlined, "Me does leave all meh burdens behind, focus on worshiping, having a good time and enjoy myself when me go ah praise." These responses highlight that there are those who look forward to and find pleasure in attending services, spiritual gatherings, and special religious celebrations to worship God and have fellowship with others in the community. In *Sacred Drums of Liberation*, Don Ohadike outlined, "It is important to remember that African music and dance are not all about resistance but is also a medium for expressing personal and collective feelings" (8). Therefore, for the Spiritual Baptists, rejoicing entails feelings of elation, celebration, and making merry. It points to praise, reverence, and jubilation. According to respondent 18, "dance is a personal expression that conveys who you are to the world." Sitting with feet lapped, hands stroking her hair, and hugging around her neck, she explained that she dances within that moment because it brings her a particular type of joy and allows her to be free. She also explained that when she is touched by the spirit, she dances with zero inhibitions because that is the only time that she does not care if she is judged by others. Female respondent 18 further noted, that dance is her own offering to the spirit. It was highlighted that once you are led by the holy anointing, you always feel a difference in your body. Another female

coded as respondent 19, disclosed that “after going through the ritual of dance, the ecstatic movements that occur makes you feel strong and healthy again.” In addition, respondent 19 smiling happily with glee in her eyes, revealed that “the projected energy and vibrations bouncing off in the sacred space gives you that urge that you can go on.” She explained that “when you are led by the holy spirit tiredness doesn’t come because the spirit knows where to take you and when to bring you back.” Individuals usually regain consciousness and come back to themselves after being under the influence of spirit. Music treads you on to higher heights. Sometimes you do not have to preach or sing, but the music and sound of the drum can take people far away and over the top. Respondent 20, a male from Barbados, looking thoughtfully in the distance, agreed that “when you are under the anointing a hymn is raised and takes them to a pinnacle and brings them back.” These statements show that through dance, people travel and journey in the spirit during ceremonies until they reach a junction and come back to reality. The author Murphy emphasized that, “the profound ‘view’ of the relationship between human and spirit, is a refined orientation, an active spirituality and ideas of the spirit which grow from reflection on the movement of the spirit in ceremonies” (180). Hence, based on observation, information gathered from similar researchers and the responses given by participants, the sacred expressions of dance and movements depicted by the Spiritual Baptist and other African-derived Religions are collectively a representation of freedom, emotions, healing, and transformation.

Conclusion

Sacred Expressions: Dance and Movement in the Realm of the Spirit shows that the vibrations are stirred through the different frequency that floats through the atmosphere. The analysis highlighted that rhythms and movements flow together simultaneously and are in harmony with each other. It shows that a sense of liberation, joy, strength, and healing is gained from the spiritual dance. Another important factor

to note is that dance is an offering and communication to the holy spirit of God. These types of actions and responses show that dance and movement have a potent tendency to transcend individuals into the realm of the spirit, as is exemplified during possession, trance, and when engulfed with the power and walking the roads of doption. While all these aspects mentioned above can be internalized and experienced, dance and movement are a form of human innate traits and behavior. In general, the sacred performances of Afro-Caribbean dance and movement encapsulate a way of life, awaken the spirit, calm the soul, and aid in the well-being of individuals.

Author Biography

Ireka Jelani was born in St. Vincent and the Grenadines and is also a Barbadian National with over forty years' experience as a Cultural Practitioner. Ms. Jelani has gained certificates in Event Planning, CXC Art, Dale Carnegie training, Business Management course from BIMAP, Customer Relations from BIDC Workshop and Gender Studies from UWI Cave Hill in 2003. Ireka Jelani won a Commonwealth scholarship that enabled her to travel to Ghana, West Africa 1992–1993. This helped to stimulate and further develop her conscious awareness of African cultural practices and customs. She studied various aspects of visual arts and crafts at the College of Art, University of Science and Technology, Kumasi. One of the hallmarks of that Sojourn was when she visited remote villages and was taught various weaving techniques and methods of preparing different fibers by other artisans in Ghana.

She also gained an Associate Degree and a Bachelor of Fine Arts Degree (Studio) in 2011, at the Barbados Community College, and was awarded a Master of Arts in Cultural Studies at the University of the West Indies, Cave Hill Campus in 2015. In 2018, she was ordained and received a certificate as Reverend Mother Superior under the Spiritual Baptist Faith, at St. Michael Triune Spiritual Baptist Church, Barbados. Ireka Jelani is currently a PhD Student in the Department

of Cultural Studies, Faculty of Culture, Creative and Performing Arts (FCCPA), University of the West Indies, Cave Hill Campus, Barbados.

Recent projects include presentations at Yale University Institute of Sacred Music (ISM), African Sacred Healing Arts Conference (2022), Seminar on Healing Plants at Ross University School of Medicine, Barbados (2022). In April 2023, she also presented a paper on Sacred Spaces among Afro-Caribbean Spiritual Traditions through the University of Miami, Hemispheric Caribbean Studies University Network: Virtual Colloquium entitled "Exploring the Caribbean: New questions, Methods, and Debates."

Ms. Jelani has been featured in various documentaries, including *Healing Roots: Exploring Black Bajan women's use of Roots and Herbs* (2021). *Bush Tea, Herbs, Plants and Barbadian Botanical Stories Ep.1* (2020).

Ms. Jelani continues to stimulate cultural, spiritual, and community awareness. She is hard-working, determined, and always happy to work in various capacities as a teacher, lecturer, consultant, heritage conservationist, and coordinator of events, projects, and developmental programs when called upon

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Coded and Categorization of Respondents

Respondent 1, February 2025, Male
 Respondent 2, February 2025, Female
 Respondent 3, February 2025, Male
 Respondent 4, February 2025, Male
 Respondent 5, February 2025, Male
 Respondent 6, February 2025, Female
 Respondent 7, February 2025, Female
 Respondent 8, February 2025, Female
 Respondent 9, February 2025, Female
 Respondent 10, February 2025, Female
 Respondent 11, February 2025, Female
 Respondent 12, February 2025, Female
 Respondent 13, February 2025, Female
 Respondent 14, February 2025, Male
 Respondent 15, February 2025, Male
 Respondent 16 February 2025, Female
 Respondent 17 February 2025, Female
 Respondent 18, February 2025, Female
 Respondent 19, February 2025, Female
 Respondent 20. February 2025, Male