

SERVING THE SPIRITS: THE PAN-CARIBBEAN AFRICAN-DERIVED RELIGION IN NALO HOPKINSON'S *BROWN GIRL IN THE RING*

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Set in the Caribbean-Canadian community of Toronto, Canada, Nalo Hopkinson's *Brown Girl in the Ring* reflects the unique ethnic and national identities of the Caribbean diaspora. Both literary scholars and Hopkinson herself note the ways in which Hopkinson uses language to identify both the different national distinctions within the Caribbean immigrant community and the relationship that the Caribbean community has to the larger Canadian society. However, it is through her description of "serving the spirits" that *Brown Girl* describes a pan-Caribbean identity within the Caribbean diaspora of Toronto. In the concept of "serving the spirits," Hopkinson draws together various African-derived religious traditions found throughout the Caribbean into one religious practice. By dissolving the boundaries in religious practices, "serving the spirits" functions as the basis for a unique pan-Caribbean identity for the characters of *Brown Girl*.

Brown Girl in the Ring is set in the future decaying inner city left when Toronto's economic base collapses. The city center is inhabited only by the formerly homeless and poor, now squatters, and is ruled by drug lord Rudy and his posse. The protagonist, a young Caribbean-Canadian female named Ti-Jeanne, lives with her grandmother, who runs a business in herbal medicine that has become vital to the disenfranchised of the Burn. Ti-Jeanne's grandmother, Mami Gros-Jeanne, is a faithful follower of the spirits. Ti-Jeanne, on the other hand, believes that the herbal medicine and African-derived spirituality of her grandmother should have no role in the lives of sane and practical people. Jeanne must finally face her spiritual heritage or risk her life and family. In the climactic scene of the book, Ti-Jeanne summons the powerful Yoruba *òriṣà* by name connecting the earthly world with the spiritual world. Then she is able to end the evil that plagues the inner city, and begin the work of recovery and healing.

Although the presence of a Caribbean immigrant community in Canada stems from Great Britain's historical position as the colonizer of both Canada and several Caribbean islands, the production of a distinct Caribbean community in Toronto did not take place until the 1960s. The significant increase in Caribbean immigration to Canada was the result of three primary factors. First, Great Britain introduced a series of restrictive immigration acts as its postwar labor demands decreased. Second, Canada repealed legislation that discriminated against Caribbean immigration. Third, the children of many Caribbean immigrants in Britain felt dissatisfied with conditions in Great Britain and underwent a second migration to Canada for more opportunities (Yon 488).

The Caribbean community of Toronto negotiates among several cultural identities. In some cases, members of the Caribbean community maintain the identity

of their particular nation of origin. Sociologist Daniel Yon writes that island and class associations are still relevant in the urban Toronto context:

As new identities are forged following immigration, traditional class barriers which are pervasive in the Caribbean become blurred, at one level, but they do not disappear at personal levels. The question, Which school did you go to back home? is commonly posed to situate fellow islanders in more ways than one. (491)

Brown Girl reflects the same distinctions—particular characters are identified by their country of origin. Hopkinson writes of Tony in this way: “Ti-Jeanne knew that [Tony] was a city boy, had been born in Port of Spain, Trinidad’s bustling capital, and had come to Toronto when he was five” (84). When not explicitly identified, the characters’ language reflects their nation of origin. Literary critics Gregory Rutledge and Alondra Nelson note the ways in which Nalo Hopkinson uses language to reflect the multiple identities of the Caribbean Diaspora in Toronto. At times, Hopkinson uses dialect to identify the national origin of her characters. Spelled out phonetically in the novel, characters may speak Trinidadian Creole or Jamaican patois, or a peculiar combination of different Creole languages. Hopkinson states that she intentionally uses these languages to reflect the cultural diversity of Toronto (qtd. in Nelson 103).

Members of the Caribbean community in Toronto also have to navigate their identities as both Caribbean and Canadian. Distinctions do exist. Rutledge notes that Hopkinson also uses language to reveal the hybridized world of Caribbean-Canadians. Hopkinson often has characters code-switch between various language usages when they are needed. For example, Mami Gros-Jeanne abandons her typical Creole for a more standard Canadian dialect when she is interacting with white Canadian street children who come to her for medical assistance: “‘Come. Bring [the injured girl] inside,’ Mami said switching to the more standard English she used when she was speaking to non-Caribbean people” (Hopkinson 63). Mami Gros-Jeanne adapts to her Canadian setting with a type of bilingualism. We see the same issue in Tony’s attempt to impress Ti-Jeanne when they wander into a Caribbean restaurant: “Showing off as always for her benefit, Tony switched into the Creole his parents had spoken to him when he was a child. Tony had been raised in Toronto by Caribbean parents’ and his speech wavered between Creole and Canadian” (19). For Tony, there is a particular pride in being able to speak a Caribbean Creole, yet he also understands that standard Canadian English is also necessary. Yon writes about this in sociological terms, “Thus expressions of pride about group identity, symbolized by speaking Patois and other Creolized languages, must also be balanced with a similar pride which is expressed about speaking ‘Canadian’” (Yon 490). In *Brown Girl*, language is the medium through which the characters negotiate their identity as both Caribbean and Canadian. Hopkinson says, “Children of immigrants do a peculiar-sounding . . . thing where their accent and word choices sound neither completely of the old country nor

completely of the new. That's how Tony speaks" (qtd. in Rutledge 599). In *Brown Girl*, language is a recognized medium through which the characters negotiate their identity as both Caribbean and Canadian (Rutledge 600).

This dual identity as Caribbean and Canadian is also revealed in *Brown Girl's* discussion of the use of herbs for healing. There are times when the characters of *Brown Girl* maintain a Caribbean identity, and other times when they adapt to the Canadian context. Mami Gros-Jeanne treasures the gift of a book, *Caribbean Wild Plants and Their Uses*, that is described as "a real find" (Hopkinson 12). Other times, Mami Gros-Jeanne requests the assistance of white Canadians in learning how to use northern herbs for healing because the Caribbean remedies she knows come from plants that simply cannot be found in the colder Canadian climate: "She missed the tropical herbs she could no longer get in Toronto, both for healing and for cooking, but no help for that. Romni Jenny and Frank Greyeyes were teaching her about northern herbs. In time, she'd have a more complete arsenal" (141). Mami Gros-Jeanne understands that life as a member of an immigrant community necessitates being conversant—in language and in medicine—in both Caribbean and Canadian culture.

There is, nevertheless, a sharing and communication that occurs across cultural distinctions within the Caribbean community that forges a pan-Caribbean identity which acknowledges the differences within the community while maintaining a boundary between the Caribbean community and the larger Canadian community. Yon also notes that the marginality and racism of wider Caribbean society helps to produce such a pan-Caribbean identity: "Thus we see Caribbean black subjectivities and identities being forced as a reaction to marginality, exclusion, racism and Eurocentricism and to differential incorporation to the Canadian 'multi-cultural ethnic mosaic'" (491). We see one example of the distinction between Canadian and Caribbean culture when Ti-Jeanne acknowledges Tony's fear of obeah religion: "Ti-Jeanne knew that for all his medical training and his Canadian upbringing, he'd learned the fear of Caribbean obeah at his mother's knee" (Hopkinson 26). Although Tony has embraced a Western (Canadian) understanding of illness and healing, he maintains a view of obeah religion that was inculcated to him as part of his Caribbean heritage. The pan-Caribbean identity is evident in the novel's use of the term "obeah" for describing the spiritual beliefs of many of the characters.

The term "obeah" denotes a Pan-Caribbean understanding of African-derived spiritual practices. "Obeah" is a term used throughout the English-speaking Caribbean to express belief in "the power of spiritually endowed individuals, on behalf of the self or another, to manipulate spiritual forces to procure good or to activate evil or to counter evil" (Eastman 404). Womanist Caribbean theologian Dianne Stewart refers to obeah as "the most common and popularly referenced African-derived [religious] practice in the Caribbean" (Stewart 119). Obeah is not a religion with devotees and adherents. Obeah is "a set of hybrid or creolized beliefs dependent on ritual invocation, fetishes, and charms" (Olmos 131). There are two categories of practice in obeah. The first form involves casting spells for numerous purposes—protecting self, property or family; attaining love, employment or other

personal goals; harming enemies. The second category of obeah involves using knowledge of herbal and animal properties for the healing of illnesses (Olmos 131). Tony's fear of obeah is typical of a Caribbean understanding of the spiritual practice. Stewart affirms this when she writes, "Obeah is principally viewed as 'evil magic' and feared by the average person until some treacherous personal circumstance compels an individual to forfeit her/ his suspicions and seek counsel from the nearest well-known Obeahist" (Stewart 119). Stewart attributes this fear of obeah to Christian missionaries in the Caribbean who held a negative view of obeah and all other remnants of African religions in the Caribbean. British ambassador to Haiti Sir Spencer St. John made the following observation in 1884: "And if it can be doubted, that the individuals, without even common sense, can understand so thoroughly the properties of herbs and their combinations, so as to be able to apply them to the injury of their fellow-creatures, I can say that tradition is a great book, and that they receive these instructions as a sacred deposit from one generation to another, with further advantage that in the hills and mountains of this island grow in abundance similar herbs to those which in Africa they employ in their incantations" (qtd. in Barrett 188). While St. John clearly disdains the practitioners of obeah, he does accurately understand obeah as an herbal practice that has a spiritual/religious source.

Obeah was used to both heal people and to rebel against slavery. Religious historian of the Caribbean, Leonard Barrett describes the actions of the enslaved Africans in this way: "It also appears that much of the religious practice during slavery was directed against the supposed sorcery of the white man" (Barrett 190). Obeah is understood as the source of knowledge for slaves who poisoned their masters with poisonous herbs, or ground glass into the masters' food (Olmos 132). Slaves did what they had to do to survive, using the resources at their disposal. At times, their survival meant healing their wounds and illnesses. At other times, herbal knowledge was one of their strongest weapons against slavery. For the cause of survival, the slaves came together to pool their knowledge: "It now appears quite clear from the records that rather early in the period of Caribbean slavery there occurred a fusion of the various African tribes and the new groups centered around the religious specialists" (Barrett 190).

Caribbean governments made no distinction between the creative and destructive uses of obeah. As a result, the practice of obeah was outlawed and practitioners were severely persecuted. One 1787 Jamaican law states, "Any slave who shall pretend to any supernatural power, in order to affect the health or lives of others, or promote the purposes of rebellion shall upon conviction thereof suffer death, or such other punishment as the Court shall think proper to direct" (Olmos 132). As a result, the practice of obeah went underground. Mami Gros-Jeanne affirms this when she says to Ti-Jeanne, "I used to hide it from you when I was seen with [practitioners]. I don't really know why, doux-doux. From since slavery days, we people get in the habit of hiding we business from we own children even, in case a child open he mouth and tell somebody story and get them in trouble. Secrecy was survival, oui" (Hopkinson 50). Through an underground secret network, obeah

survived in the Caribbean and its diaspora: “Practitioners are numerous across the Caribbean, the United States, England, and Canada, many of them working out of storefront consultation rooms in urban settings or discreetly out of their houses” (Olmos 133). Although she lives in Canada, Mami and other Caribbean residents of *The Burn* bring their practice of African-derived religions with them across the ocean. The mention and practice of “obeah” indicates a pan-Caribbean perspective of African-derived religions.

While language identifies and distinguishes the Caribbean and Caribbean-Canadian backgrounds of the characters in *Brown Girl*, the concept of “serving the spirits” functions in the opposite manner. Using religious markers, rather than linguistic ones, Hopkinson blends various African-derived religions from the Caribbean to establish a pan-Caribbean identity particular to diasporic communities.

Brown Girl’s pan-Caribbean community comes together around shared African-derived religious traditions. Before she understands her grandmother’s spirituality, Ti-Jeanne makes observations about the community of people who gather to worship with her grandmother: “Ti-Jeanne could hear them speaking. Mostly Caribbean English, but some spoke Spanish and others the African-rhymed French of the French Caribbean islands” (87). In the spirit of Pan-Caribbeanism, Mami Gros-Jeanne is not particular about the particular national names of her African-based spirituality. When explaining her beliefs and practices to her granddaughter, Mami Gros Jeanne summarizes different African-derived religions into one larger category of “serving the spirits”:

The African powers, child. The spirits. The loas. The orishas. The oldest ancestors. You will hear people from Haiti and Cuba and Brazil and so call them different names. You will even hear some names I ain’t tell you, but we all mean the same thing. Them is the ones who does carry we prayers to God Father, for he too busy to listen to every single one of we on earth talking at he all the time. Each of we have a special one who is we father or mother, and no matter what we call it, whether Shango or Santeria or Voudun or what, we all doing the same thing. Serving the spirits. (126)

Without making particular reference to Africa, Mami Gros-Jeanne refers to the African-derived Haitian religion of Vodun¹ and the loas, its Cuban analog of Santería and the òriṣà, its Trinidadian manifestation of òrṣà worship in Shango and Orisha, and its Brazilian version in Candomblé and the orixa. *Brown Girl* fuses various Caribbean manifestations of African-derived religion into a worship, leadership, and religious community that borrows and blends from the many African-derived religions of the Caribbean.

As the Caribbean community in *Brown Girl*’s Toronto focuses on the similarities among the various African-derived religions of the Caribbean, the reader can note that even the ancestors do not maintain the distinctions of the particular Caribbean manifestation of traditional Yoruba-based religions. When Ti-Jeanne

asks an ancestor spirit about Mami Gros-Jeanne, the ancestor replies, “Yes, it have plenty names for what Gros-Jeanne was. Myalist, bush doctor, iyalorisha, curandera, four-eye, even obeah woman for them who don’t understand. But you what she woulda call it, if you had ask she . . . Gros-Jeanne woulda tell you that all she doing is serving the spirits” (219). Thus, the commonalities of African-derived religions of different Caribbean peoples allow for a new identity, a pan-Caribbean religious identity referred to as “obeah” or “serving the spirits,” to blur other boundaries of nation, language, and particularity.

Mami’s concept of “serving the spirits” reflects the fact that Caribbean communities uniquely retain a shared African religious heritage. This shared religious tradition can be attributed to the patterns of slavery and evangelism in the Caribbean. Yoruba, Akan, Fon / Dahomey, and Kongo religious elements dominate the African religious landscape of the Caribbean because the majority of enslaved Africans came from these tribes: “The early slave trade dealt mainly in Africans from the highly developed kingdoms of the Kongo, the Gold Coast, Dahomey [Benin] and Nigeria” (Barrett 183). In fact, the term “obeah” has etymological roots in the Asante language—indicating the strong Akan presence among the Caribbean slaves (190-1). These various traditions share common themes: a communal conception of the divine that includes the worship of a high God under various spiritual powers or entities; the belief that the spirit lives on after death in the form of spiritual knowledge ancestors and that these ancestors should be honored, venerated and consulted; the belief in divination—access to spiritual knowledge that will assist in solving problems in the temporal world; the belief that offering food and animal sacrifices amplify prayers to the divine and the ancestors; belief in a neutral power—sometimes contained in herbs—that can be used for benevolent or malevolent purposes; that spirit possession, ritual song and dance are crucial forms of communication with the divine (Edwards 3-4). These common themes are found in Haiti’s Vodun, Cuba’s Lucumi (Lukumí) and Santería, Jamaica’s Kumina (Cumina), Myalism, Pocomania² and Revival Zionism, Brazil’s Candomblé, Nagô and Umbanda, Trinidad’s Shango, Orisha Worship and Shouters, St. Lucia’s Kele, Grenada’s Big Drum and African Feast, Quimbois in the French-speaking Caribbean (especially Guadeloupe and Martinique), and even the masquerade carnivals³ of several Caribbean countries. The missionary patterns of the Caribbean enslavers also amplified the African retention among Caribbean religions. In British Jamaica, the Christianization of the slaves was a low priority: “The Church in the British slave colonies denied the Africans religious instruction for well over 200 years” (Barrett 193). Among the French and the Spanish colonies, African religions found similarities with the Catholic saints and thrived under the syncretic blending of the two religious systems: “The syncretism between Orisha [Worship] and Catholicism developed in part because of the multiplicity of saints who could be identified with Orisha deities” (Henry 1). The pattern of the slave trade and the method and type of Christian evangelism allowed African traditional religions to remain a vital part of many Caribbean religions. “Serving the spirits” focuses on these similarities among the various African-derived religions of the Caribbean.

Allow me to give a couple examples of the pan-Caribbean roots of the many elements of Hopkinson's "serving of the spirits." I will speak in particular of Hopkinson's description of the various manifestations of the Yoruba òrìṣà Eṣu and the concept of the duppy spirit.

Eṣu is a Yoruba-based òrìṣà identified as the great trickster, the messenger of the high God Olódùmarè, and the gatekeeper of the crossroads. Although Eṣu is best known as a trickster, *Brown Girl* focuses on Eṣu's role as a mediator, gatekeeper, master of the crossroads and the portal between the spiritual and the temporal, death and life. Eṣu's oldest role is that of a mediator negotiating the relationship between the high god, Olódùmarè, and the other òrìṣà and Olódùmarè and humanity. Eṣu is a gatekeeper and the one who sits at the crossroads. Eṣu opens and closes pathways. It is common to see an artifact of Eṣu—especially the popular cement head with eyes and mouth of cowrie shells—near the doorway of the home or business of a Yoruba devotee. Eṣu lives in the streets, outside the houses. Eṣu's role of master of the crossroads extends beyond his place as a street-dweller. Eṣu also sits at the gates of the cemeteries mediating between the living (the temporal world) and the dead (the spiritual world). One scholar describes Eṣu in this function: "Eṣu is the possessor of the entrance to the cemeteries of which he is the custodian and the owner of the keys" (Cortez 128). This Eṣu is said to live among the dead. He is the "Prince of the Cemetery." As the gatekeeper and master of the crossroads, Eṣu must be consulted and given an offering before any important decision is made. As guardian of the streets, the crossroads of life and the boundaries between life and death, the presence of Eṣu often connotes the need to negotiate one's relationship to the living and the ancestors.

Eṣu has multiple manifestations. Throughout the Caribbean, Yoruba's Eṣu is known as Vodun's Legba, Santería's Eleggua, Eshu-Elegba, and Brazil's Exu or Legbara. Within each specific tradition, Eṣu has even more names and manifestations. In Yoruba-based religions, Eṣu is said to have over 200 manifestations representing the many dimensions of his character (Cortez 129). As the worship of Eṣu was adapted from the Yoruba context to other parts of Africa and the Caribbean, he became known as both an old man and a young child, as both benevolent and malevolent. When Eṣu is present, he is depicted as both a cunning child and a capricious old man (Cosentino 262). When the Yoruba pantheon migrated westward to the neighboring Fon of Dahomey, Eṣu was represented as Legba, a "loa" with a high sex drive. Although Legba maintains the same qualities of the Yoruba Eṣu of presiding at the crossroads and the borders between the spiritual and temporal worlds, Legba takes the erotic energy sometimes associated with Eṣu and transforms it into a sexually insatiable appetite. Among the Dahomean slaves of Haiti, Fon's sexually intense Legba is transformed into the impotent Papa Legba of Vodun (265).

Although Vodun's Papa Legba is a crippled old man, he is linked to two shadow sides, Maît' Carrefour and the Ghede, who represent the strength, virility, and evil capabilities of Eṣu. According to Vodun historian Maya Deren, when Papa Legba possesses a devotee of Vodun, he is an old man: "They say that he is an old peasant

who has worked his fields hard all his life and is now at the end of his powers. When he possesses a person, the limbs are crippled and twined and terrible to see” (99). Also a master of the crossroads, Maît’ Carrefour sits opposite Legba at the gates. While Legba regulates the loa of the day, Maît’ Carrefour regulates the loa of the night. Maît’ Carrefour can “loose upon the world the daemons of ill chance, misfortune and deliberate, unjust destruction” (101). Unlike the feeble Papa Legba, Maît’ Carrefour is strong and virile: “Carrefour is huge and straight and vigorous, a man in the prime of his life. His arms are raised strongly in the configuration of a cross. Every muscle of the shoulders and back bulges with strength” (101).

Eṣu is also present in the Ghede. The Ghede is the Legba who has crossed the thresholds into the underworld and lives in the cemetery. Transformed by knowledge of death, this Legba is known as the Lord of the Underworld and God of the Dead (Deren 100-102). Ghede is the master of the inevitability of death. Ghede has the power to animate the dead as wandering spirits, and yet he is also a great healer, the one to whom one goes as a last recourse against death. Ghede is manifest at the end of a Vodun service after Papa Legba has removed the barriers and the other loa have had an opportunity to possess devotees. Ghede appears in a top hat, a long black tail-coat, sunglasses, with a cigarette or cigar, and a cane with a hysterical “ke ke ke” laugh (Deren 107). Donald Cosentino describes these Vodun manifestations of Eṣu as “brothers of the Crossroads and Cross” who “complete all the possibilities inherent in the complex figures of Legba / Eshu Elegba” (269). Papa Legba, Maît’ Carrefour, and Ghede are manifestations of Eṣu that indicate the duality of Eṣu. Eṣu is young and old, virile and feeble, the guardian of life and of death. Eṣu is neither good nor evil. Eṣu is both sides of the same coin. Eṣu is present when dealing with the living and the dead.

In *Brown Girl*, the antagonist Rudy perpetuates his evil domain of the city by a destructive manipulation of his knowledge of African-derived religions. Rudy has learned about traditional African religions from his ex-wife, Mami Gros-Jeanne. This knowledge teaches Rudy how to get revenge. Rudy tells Ti-Jeanne that he calls an ancestor spirit to teach him to how to exact his revenge: “Some people call that spirit the One in the Black Cape, seen? Him does always dress in a funeral colours. Him is the one you call when somebody work an obeah ‘pon you and you want revenge. I call him” (129). In this particular case, Rudy is referring to the òriṣà, Eṣu. Rudy calls upon Eṣu in order to introduce evil and revenge into his life and The Burn. Rudy must call upon Eṣu to have access to the type of power that will allow him to seek revenge and manipulate the dead. Rudy describes his actions in this way:

Me soul did already flying free from all the [drugs] what me slash,
and me reach out from them heights there, and me call, drumming
the rhythm on the ground with me one good hand that leave . . .
Finally him come, and me tell him me want him to kill everybody
that do me bad. And imagine this: blasted Eshu tell me no! Him
tell me say revenge is one thing, but him nah go help me to kill, for

nobody I vex with aint kill nofffbody of mine. *But killing is what me want*, me say to him. *And if you don't give it to me, I go keep drumming you back here until you do it.* And me do it, seen? So him go 'way, so me drum him back. Three times. (132)

Rudy's actions are affirmed by the stories about Eṣu. One poem about Eṣu states, "If there be no drums / He will dance to the pounding of mortars" (Gleason 175). Reluctantly summoned by Rudy, this Eṣu, the Ghede or Prince of the Cemetery, tells Rudy what he wants to know. He tells Rudy how to animate the dead into wandering spirits. Because Eṣu has knowledge of the boundaries between the living and the dead, he knows how to invoke the dead into the world of the living. Rudy seeks to destroy, and Eṣu reluctantly teaches Rudy how to make a duppy.

A duppy is the spirit of a dead person whose power can be harnessed for good or evil. The concept of a duppy appears to have Jamaican roots. Kumina devotees describe a duppy as one of two human spirits. Each person has a personal spirit and a duppy spirit: "The personal spirit is the life force within the person, [his or her] personality; the duppy spirit is the shadow or protective forces around [the] body" (Moore 266). A duppy spirit remains with a person in the grave, but comes out if it wants to, or if it is summoned. For the most part, duppies wander at night (Chevannes 21). With a duppy, one can carry out personal feuds against one's enemies (Leach 213). Since Rudy wants revenge, Eṣu teaches Rudy how to make a duppy. Rudy recalls, "Him [Eshu] tell me I must find a dead in the cemetery, somebody who just cross over. Him tell me must call the dead man duppy, and make him serve me. Him tell me how to keep the duppy by me, and what to feed it" (Hopkinson 132). Each day after his lesson from Eṣu, one of Rudy's enemies is dead. Selfishly, Rudy also asks the duppy to make him the new leader of the posse. Within a year, this has been achieved.

Ti-Jeanne also contends with the spirits of Caribbean African-derived religions. As the novel opens, Ti-Jeanne is plagued with visions of death and dreams of haunting spiritual creatures. Walking by a group of drug dealers, Ti-Jeanne is able to see how they will die terrible lonely deaths. As she walks through the streets, she sees a vision that includes a devilish figure:

A figure came over the rise, leaping and dancing up the path. Man-like, man-tall, on long wobbly legs look as if they hitch on backward. Red, red all over: red eyes, red hair, nasty, pointy red tail joking up into the air. Face like a grinning African mask. Only not a mask; the lips-them moving, and it have real teeth behind them lips, attached to real gums. He waving a stick, and even the stick self-paint-up red, with some pink and crimson rags hanging from the one end. Is dance he dancing on them wobbly legs, flapping he knees in and out like if he drunk, jabbing he stick in the air, and he knees in and out like if he drunk, jabbing he stick in the air, and

now [she] could hear the beat he moving to, hear the words of the chat: “Diab’-diab’! Diab’-diab’! Diab’-diab’!” (17-8)

Ti-Jeanne does not recognize the Jab-Jab, a devilish creature of Jamaican and Trinidadian carnival that can also be understood as the Prince of Cemetery manifestation of Eṣu.⁴ All Ti-Jeanne knows is that she keeps seeing the future deaths of those around her and frightening creatures are haunting her. Visions such as these are common for Ti-Jeanne, but she finally seeks Mami’s assistance when she has a nightmare that is all too real. Ti-Jeanne sees “a fireball whirl in through the window.” The fireball settles on the floor and turns into “a old old woman, body twist-up and dry like a chew-up piece a sugar cane. She flesh and wet and oozing all over, she ain’t have no skin” (44). Ti-Jeanne dreams of the Soucouyant of Trinidadian and Quimbois folklore. With roots in the African Fula and Sonyinke,¹ the Soucouyant is a mythical woman who strips off her skin at night and roams the streets looking for the blood of babies and animals to survive (Pradel 151-2). The legend says that she leaves her skin at home at night and she can be defeated if her skin is salted while she is away. Akin to the European vampire, she can also be defeated if she is exposed to sunlight before returning to her body. Like the vampire, the Soucouyant can be delayed by the impulse to count. In Ti-Jeanne’s nightmare, the Jab-Jab comes to her assistance by beating the Soucouyant and throwing rice grains on the floor that the Soucouyant stops to count. The Jab-Jab helps Ti-Jeanne by telling her to reveal the rising sun, the light of which destroys the Soucouyant.

With dreams of death and the pressing need to make a decision about her relationship to traditional African religions, Ti-Jeanne’s patron spirit is revealed as Eṣu. Manifestations of Eṣu move around Ti-Jeanne. In one instance, Ti-Jeanne sees the Ghede in the backyard: “She saw a tall figure outside in the park, heading up the pathway that led to the cemetery. Its long legs stalked eerily . . . The man’s face was a skull. It grinned at her. The thing tipped its top hat to her and kept walking” (80-1). Terrified, Ti-Jeanne dismisses this sight as a vision and runs. As Mami performs a religious ceremony, she appeases the cement-head figure of Eṣu with rum, candy, chicken blood and drumming. She later realizes that Eṣu is possessing Ti-Jeanne:

[Ti-Jeanne] rose smoothly to her feet and began to dance with an eerie, stalking motion that made her legs seem longer that they were, thin and bony. Shadows clung to the hollows of her eyes and cheekbone, turning her face into a cruel mask. She laughed again. Her voice was deep, too deep for her woman’s body. Her lips skinned back from her teeth in a death’s-head grin. ‘Prince of Cemetery!’ Mami hissed. (94)

Through Ti-Jeanne, Prince of the Cemetery, the Ghede, tells Mami that Ti-Jeanne is his daughter. This is evident, Prince of Cemetery says, in her visions of death.

It is a different aspect of Eṣu than the Eṣu that visits Rudy, but a manifestation of Eṣu nonetheless.

Eṣu visits and protects Ti-Jeanne to lead her to the crossroads to make a decision. After Ti-Jeanne has rested from her experience of possession, Mami tells Ti-Jeanne about her father òrìṣà: “Prince of Cemetery is a aspect of Eṣu, who does guard crossroads. Prince of Cemetery does see to the graveyards . . . It mean you could ease people passing, light the way for them. For them to cross over from this world, or the next” (103). On yet another occasion, Ti-Jeanne is possessed by a manifestation of Eṣu:

And then Ti-Jeanne chuckled in a deep, rumbling voice, the same unearthly sound that she’d made in the chapel. ‘Brothers, brothers, don’t fight! It have plenty of me to go around.’ She suddenly seemed much taller than [the drug dealer]. She broke his hold with ease, reached to her own neck with long, long arms, and grasped the head of Crapaud’s [weapon . . . As the] Prince of Cemetery, [she] picked him up like a baby and *cradled* him to its bony chest. (117)

With the strength of the Maît’ Carrefour aspect of Eṣu, the possessed Ti-Jeanne tells Rudy’s bruised and beaten posse members to return to Rudy and not to hurt Ti-Jeanne: “Tell Rudy him know me [—] the one he call so long now and never send away. Tell him this horse is my daughter. Him not to harm she. You go remember my name . . . Legbara. The Eshu da Capa Preta” (118). Referring to the Brazilian name for Maît’ Carrefour and the Ghede, the same “Exu da Capa Preta” who is used for creating duppy spirits and taking the dead over to the other side, protects Ti-Jeanne.

In the end of the novel, the climax ends with the Ghede who closes out religious ceremonies: “The elevator dinged. The door opened, and there he was, tophatted, skull-faced, impossibly tall. He held a pretty sprig of nightshade coyly in front of his mouth and giggled along with her” (225). Now Ti-Jeanne understands her dreams, her vision and her call: “She laughed, because now she knew who the Jab-Jab was . . . Papa Legbara, Prince of Cemetery. Her Eshu. The Jab-Jab” (225).

In these examples from *Brown Girl in the Ring*, we see Hopkinson combine traditional African-derived religious imagery from Haiti, Jamaica, Guadeloupe, Martinique, and Brazil into one pan-Caribbean religious system. This pan-Caribbean religious system, “serving the spirits,” ends up being the greatest resource for the characters of *Brown Girl*. As Mami, her followers, and Ti-Jeanne serve the spirits, they “try to live good”—they respect life, help one another and heal the living. In the decaying futuristic Toronto, diverse communities of Caribbean people from various islands come together around their shared religion, and triumph over evil.

¹ There is no universal agreement on the spelling of this religious tradition. It is also denoted as Voodoo, Hoodoo, Voudon, and Vodou.

² Also written as "Pukkumina."

³ Eastman connects carnival traditions to African traditional religions: "Masquerade occasions have also involved the practice of African spirituality. This is because masquerade groups have grown out of secret societies on the West African model . . . Some masquerades represent spirits: the *jab molasi* or *jabjab*, based on the Efik *ekpo* ancestor masquerades" (Eastman 404).

⁴ Jamaican patois for "devil," Jab Jab is also referred to as Jab Molassie, JabJab, Djab Djab, and Diab Diab.

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