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**Aspects of Gender in the
Spiritual Baptist Religion in Tobago:**

Notes from the Field

© Maarit Laitinen

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EDITORIAL NOTE

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ASPECTS OF GENDER
IN THE SPIRITUAL BAPTIST RELIGION IN TOBAGO
Notes from the field

Indigenous to the Caribbean region and pointedly Afro-Christian, the Spiritual Baptist religion stands out as a small minority among the various western-originated denominations in Tobago.¹ The religion portrays a relatively open mythology and cosmology, and features of different religious traditions like the Roman Catholic, Protestant, Yoruba and Orisha religions have been combined and developed in its ritual practice during its century-long history (Herskovits 1947, Houk 1995, Lum 2000). Tobagonian Baptist mythology and ritual practice offer interesting statuses and roles as far as gender is concerned, and it is my purpose here to examine this aspect of the religion in the light of ethnographic examples.² I also show how gender is negotiated upon in social interaction, and conclude by raising the issue of body and sexuality in relation to the dogma and the ritual practice of the Spiritual Baptist religion.

1. Religious hierarchies and gender

1.1 Administrative structure

The Spiritual Baptist church is a highly hierarchical religious organization. There are twelve incorporations, known as archdioceses or missions, in Trinidad and Tobago. Each archdiocese has its Archbishop, Bishop, Dean, Archdeacon, and Ministers. (Gibbs de Peza 1999, 52-53.) The officials do not receive any financial compensation for their duties from the diocese or from their congregation, so that the entire organization consists of volunteers. Most, but not all, Baptist churches in the country are affiliated to one of the dioceses. The administrative organization was first introduced in 1942, when The West Indian United Spiritual Baptist Sacred Order (WIUSBSO) was founded (Gibbs de Peza 1999, 51). At that time the Spiritual Baptist religion had already been practised in Trinidad for over 50 years (Jacobs 1996, 21)³ in independent churches without any general administration. The administrative structure, along with the names of specific offices, resembles the universally standardised structure of the Anglican church organization, and as such is not uniquely Spiritual Baptist or even Caribbean.

In Tobago, the higher administrative offices of the dioceses are occupied solely by men.⁴ Congregations, however, consist mainly of women, to the extent that more than two thirds of the participants in services and other functions are female. My intention is to show that issues of gender, power and authority within the religion are far more complex than the male bias on the level of administrative organization would lead one to expect. By only paying attention and giving value to the male-dominated administration, we fail to recognize how Baptist women and men of different backgrounds actually interact.

The official positions entail certain responsibilities. Tobagonian Bishops and Deans are supposed to supervise the churches in Tobago that belong to their archdiocese. In practice this means attending services in different churches as frequently as one's responsibilities as a Leader of one's own church allow. People also like to invite the Bishop or the Dean to their Thanksgiving services, and churches send invitations to these officials to attend their Harvest or Thanksgiving ceremonies. Nevertheless, people with no administrative rank are also invited to such functions because of their Spiritual status: Leaders, Mothers, Captains etc. visit other churches' services as often as Deans and Bishops.

The administrative officials are also expected to participate in administrative meetings of the diocese. These meetings take place in Trinidad, and Tobagonian representatives have to travel and lodge at their own expense. Dean Robinson has frequently expressed frustration over the financial strain forced on Tobagonian officials and their subsequent low level of attendance at the meetings. On the other hand, dioceses do not arrange meetings very often, since Baptist churches function fairly independently and joint efforts, services or happenings are rare.⁵

All in all, the administrative offices of Bishops, Deans, and Archdeacons connote mainly symbolic authority. The offices are recognized and respected, so that Bishops are greeted first in services, or they may be given the final word in preaching sessions as last preachers. Nevertheless, it is difficult to say whether it is the office of Bishop or the Spiritual position of an experienced Leader that is given most value. There are Leaders without any administrative office, like the old Leader Brothers of St. Rita's SBC, who are held in the same high esteem as Bishops or Deans.

1.2 Spiritual hierarchy

The male dominance at the level of administrative organization is not reflected in the social practice or in the Spiritual hierarchy of the Baptist religion. On the contrary, the Spiritual Baptist belief system and social practice offer equal statuses to men and women alike, and also provide possibilities for women to function in statuses higher than men within a particular church or ritual. To discuss male and female statuses and roles in actual religious practice, a short characterization of the Spiritual Baptist belief system is necessary. Unfortunately, there is no space in this paper to offer any sufficient description of it as a mythological order, and I only raise those features that are relevant to issues of gender.

The Tobagonian Spiritual Baptist mythology is a complex realm of cosmological and doctrinal knowledge that cannot be reduced into any one sacred text or oral canon, although the King James translation of the Bible is a central source of dogma (and ritual language). The mythology is understood to be a secret order of meanings, only parts of which are to be learnt from sacred texts, and knowledge of which is otherwise revealed to Baptists through ritual practice. Visions, praying and meditation, possessions and special rituals, like *Mourning*⁶, provide connections to the Holy Spirit, and through these connections information on the mythology is gradually accumulated. Such Spiritual experiences are embedded in a distinctive environment, a Spiritual world with various *Nations*, namely India, Africa, China and Syria, Biblical locations such as Jerusalem, Zion, Canaan, River Jordan and Egypt, and local Tobagonian sites like the Scarborough market or beaches, rivers and forests. This landscape is inhabited by Saints of God, who come from different Nations, and other Spiritual beings, such as angels, Orisha deities, ancestral spirits, and creatures of the local lore, such as jumbies, supernatural animals, mermaids and fairy maids, or Papa Bois, to mention some. Unspecified entities like spirits of the air and of the earth as well as evil spirits, like spirits of delusion, are also part of the Spiritual Baptist mythology. It is essential to note that Baptists only worship God and become possessed by the Holy Ghost, who may take the form of different Saints, but the other beings mentioned are nevertheless present in the same landscape with the Saints and can encounter and even possess an unwary Baptist.

Both men and women have equal access to the Spiritually acquired religious knowledge of the belief system and its mythology and cosmology through ritual practice. This kind of individually acquired knowledge is tested by special ritualised mechanisms to prove its authenticity; it is contested,

replicated and circulated in the Baptist churches and their rituals, and thus some of this originally personal knowledge eventually becomes part of the more general mythology. Thus the Spiritual Baptist belief system draws on individual experiences and personal knowledge of the Spiritual world, and such knowledge is highly respected and valued. Since all initiated (i.e. baptised) members of the church are entitled to perform the Mourning ritual, secret and valuable knowledge is available to men and women alike.

Based on the amount and quality of the accumulated knowledge of the religious mythology and cosmology, Baptists acquire Spiritual ranks that form a complex hierarchy. These ranks are given to mourners during the Mourning ritual by different personifications of the Holy Spirit, most often by Saints of God. They cut across the administrative offices mentioned above, and unlike the latter, the Spiritual ranks do not indicate gender-based dominance in the church organization. Ranks and positions that can be acquired by both men and women include, for example, Shepherd/Shepherdess, Warrior, Teacher, Pointer and Inspector. There are also gender-specific positions, such as the male Captain, Baptiser and Leader and the female Mother and Mother Superior. Within Tobagonian churches' internal hierarchies, Teachers, Pointers, Leader-Baptisers and Mothers are the topmost ranks. Men with administrative statuses like Bishops or Deans are always Leaders in the Spiritual hierarchy.

Leaders and Mothers

The leadership of the church is ideally shared between a male Leader and a female Mother, which is the case in most Tobagonian churches. Some churches only have a permanent Leader with no female counterpart with the status of a Mother, while others are headed by a Mother, sometimes with the assistance of occasionally visiting male ritual specialists to conduct, say, Baptism. Leaders' and Mothers' roles as Spiritual heads of the church are very similar: first of all, Baptist churches are founded by a Mother or a Leader, or by both. Because of the vast emphasis laid on personal Spiritual knowledge and on instructions received from the Holy Spirit by an individual, the structure of the Baptist church enables women as well as men to establish their own churches, either connected to their own residence or as a separate church building. Many among the prominent Tobagonian churches have been founded by a Mother, like Mother Miriam's St. Francis SBC in Goodwood, Matron Stewart's Mt. Manasseh SBC in Mt. Thomas or Mother Eileen's Mt. Olive SBC in Canaan. A church is often referred to by the name of the Mother of the church - "I'm

going to Mother Cleorita's church," or "She left Mother Miriam to go to Mother Joycelyn." The reputation of certain Mothers is island-wide.

The official status of Minister, available only in churches affiliated to one of the above-mentioned incorporations, can be assigned to both men and women alike. Therefore, women with a high Spiritual rank, like Mothers, can become ministers (Reverend Mothers) and are thus able to conduct rituals recognized and standardised by the state, such as funerals. Worship in services can be conducted by any male or female Minister, although men are more commonly seen in this role in churches with both male and female elders. Nevertheless, prominent Mothers often control the Minister's performance: for example, a Thanksgiving service in St Francis SBC may be conducted by the Leader or by another Reverend, but in the end it is Mother Miriam, the founder and Mother of the church, who signals when to move on or to stop. Mothers also often take over the lead during the most intense, most Spiritual part of services. The Holy Spirit can manifest through, for example, Mother Cleorita or Mother Eulah for hours, and in this dimension they are able to control and monitor the manifestations of the Spirit through others, as well as the general proceeding of the service. The Mother's input can therefore be more in-depth, more Spiritual, and perhaps also more specifically Spiritual Baptist, than the male Leader's more formal contributions. Certain Mothers' Spiritual leadership is appreciated to such an extent that when they are away, like in the United States, and the church is left for other elders, very few, if any, attend services.

The central role of Mothers in ritual practice is clarified in the following sketch of a Thanksgiving:

It is the African night in the three-day thanksgiving in St Peter's SBC in Bethel. At seven in the evening the church is full, mostly with women dressed in red Spiritual clothes and red and white headties. Sister Janice arrives in red lace from head to toes, a magnificent headtie on top; then comes Mother Eulah, the Mother Superior of the church, wearing yellow, red and green. Flowers, leaves, candles, altarcloths and tablecloths match the red and white colours of dresses, headties and sashes. Teacher Elsa opens the service and greets all the elders and members of the congregation. She is wearing a blue and pearl African gown and large headtie with a stylishly ruffled bow on the right side. She explains what the service is going to be like, speaks about giving thanks to God, and starts the song service by announcing and leading hymns and choruses. She is standing and dancing in front of the altar with Mother Eulah. After several hymns it is time to *survey*, to symbolically cleanse the ritual space and to invite the Holy Ghost and the Saints of God to the service. Five women proceed to all the four corners, then to the corners of the Thanksgiving table and to the altar with their vessels and bottles – a sister carrying a calabash with red ixora, chrysanthemums, white blossoms and green leaves, incense sticks and a white candle leads the procession, followed by others who carry the *lothar* pot, the *taria*, talcum powder, Kananga water and olive oil. Three of the women are *rejoicing* in the Spirit, bending down, jumping, shaking and calling in high voices as they survey the corners. The bell is rung all the while. After surveying is completed Teacher Elsa speaks again and announces prayers - Bishop Anthony, the Archpriest, Mother Superior and seven other women kneel around the Thanksgiving table and pray. Most of the congregation is kneeling too. The prayers go on for a long time. Sister Janice is still rejoicing, marching on her knees, bending and sawing the air with her hands. Women in the congregation raise soft chants and hymns

as the praying continues. Soon all the people kneeling and praying are rejoicing; the Spirit has taken over. Four boys beat drums, sisters beat tambourines and everybody claps as a hymn arises. Then Teacher Elsa takes the lead again, announces *lessons*, and a sister comes to read Scripture. This is followed by Elsa's reading of the evening's *lesson for edification*, the main Scripture of the service on which the sermons will be based. Of the eleven preachers who then speak to the congregation about Thanksgiving and related issues, seven are women. As a chant and a rhythm arise in the background of the last speaker's sermon; many are deep in the Spirit. Elsa is dancing around the table waving a large red flag; we get up, sing and clap and dance. After the music stops many speak in African tongues, from which a new rhythm soon rises in the form of groaning mouth drums and soon the boys' drums start again. Elsa and Mother Cleorita from the neighbouring village converse in tongues, gesticulating and changing tones. The rhythm carries them into a stunning African dance. Hymns and choruses go on, and other Mothers and Sisters become possessed by the Spirit. The floor in front of the altar is crowded by dancing women in their flowing dresses, eye-glasses now taken off, headties a bit wrinkled. Mother Eulah dances with the large flower calabash on top of her head; Mother Cleorita who loves the drums beats the air with her hands. The music, tongues, dancing and mouth drums go on for almost an hour. Finally the Spirit starts to leave the women, they sit down one by one. The service ends as the Archpriest and the Bishop speak and the Mother Superior blesses the thanksgiving table. Finally some sisters serve bread and fish and mauby to everybody.

So, this important and public service was conducted by women, and women performed the significant rituals; they also dominated in the most intense and meaningful parts of the service. This female dominance is typical of most Baptist services and functions, even when male leaders actually conduct the service; the most central, powerful and specifically Spiritual Baptist parts of the service tend to be carried out by women. Moreover, women prepared, cleaned and decorated the church and they cooked and served the food. The church secretaries in charge of inviting people to public services like Thanksgivings are women, and as in all services, the vast majority of participants are women.

Certain highly esteemed Mothers conduct services with exceptionally large congregations, like Thanksgivings. Mother Cleorita in St. Philomen SBC was the conducting Minister in the funeral service for Eric Charles, a famous pan man and cultural figure who died in March 1999, and the entire function portraying a Baptist Mother preaching and praying on the altar was covered by national television. Also, the annual Spiritual Baptist Day service at Shaw Park on the 30th of March 1999 was conducted by Mother Pearl of Mt. Zion SBC, who led the worship quite comfortably in front of hundreds of Baptists from different congregations.

The positions of Leader and Mother entail authority over the rest of the Spiritual family of the church, so that they can decide over the proceedings of the church, like when to organize services and common rituals like church Thanksgivings or Pilgrimages, and plan the overall content of such events. The authority of Mothers and Leaders is based on their extensive knowledge of the Spiritual Baptist belief system. Mothers' authority in the church can take even aggressive forms. It is often

the Mother who scolds the congregation for unruly behaviour, lack of activity in the ongoing service or other such things. At times quite severe words and tones of voice can be heard. Male elders do this far less frequently. "Chirrun of St. Francis, allyou get yuh act togedder!" shouted Mother Miriam in a voice that caused the congregation of a Baptismal service immediately to pull their weight in the service. Many Mothers have such charismatic and almost overpowering presence that their mere entering into the church causes people to get up if they are sitting, start singing more loudly or to become a bit more alert.

Ritual specialists

The positions of Baptiser and Pointer refer to ritual specialists. Baptisers initiate people to the faith by baptising them, whereas Pointers are responsible for the lengthy and demanding Mourning ritual. Only men are supposed to perform Baptism. Nevertheless, women who have mourned several times and thus acquired substantive amounts of Spiritual knowledge, like Mothers, can also obtain the information necessary for the ritual. Mother Cleorita explains how she has actually instructed a young, aspiring Leader-Baptiser on the proper way to conduct the ritual, taking him to the beach with her and teaching him the necessary details, like "measurements for de water, de fathom." Another highly respected Mother, Matron Stewart of Mt. Manasseh SBC, has conducted Baptism, as no male Baptiser was available and her initiates, *candidates*, were ready. Both these women have received the knowledge required for the ritual, complete with the secret passwords to be delivered to the candidates, from the Holy Ghost.

Pointers, on the other hand, can be either men or women. The role of a Pointer as a ritual specialist responsible for the Mourning ritual is crucial, given its central importance to the Baptist mythology, rituals and social order. Pointers have acquired the capacity to ritually prepare and send mourners for their Spiritual journeys, to steer their travelling by giving advice, and to see that the entire week-long (or even longer) ritual is properly performed. In such a role Pointers have access to the most secret and sacred knowledge of the religion, such expertise enhancing their position not only within their church but in the wider religious community as well: Baptists from as far as Trinidad or even the USA contact Tobagonian Pointers, male and female, in order to come and perform the Mourning ritual under their guidance.

Ritual specialists hold complete authority over the initiates as well as over their assistants, known as *labourers*. Time-consuming and physically and mentally demanding rituals like Mourning must be conducted with utmost seriousness, and the responsibilities of the Pointer in such prolonged and Spiritually charged rituals are heavy. Pointers are therefore known to be quite stern. Even physical punishments are not uncommon. A short description of an incident during a Mourning ritual illustrates the authority of a Mother Pointer:

Labouring with an elderly male mourner

On Wednesday evening, on our routine check-ups, I and Tante Thelma catch the pilgrim with his bands off and his eyes open. He tries to explain that the bands just dropped from his head, and that he tried to tie them back himself. Our first reaction is suffocated laughter mixed with horror, and we call Mother Cleorita who is very disappointed. She leaves the pilgrim unattended until it is time to retire, explaining to us and the visiting members of the congregation that Number One is not putting enough effort to the ritual, and in case he does not bother to try harder, it makes no sense to keep him inside the room for more than the required minimum of seven days. Pilgrims who really try to pray and meditate and still have problems in *getting on the road* are kept in the Mourner Room until they finally start to have visions, but those who are not serious to begin with are merely wasting their own, the Pointer's and the labourers' time and are taken off on the first Sunday.

We give the hapless pilgrim his evening tea, after which Mother Cleorita gives him a taste of the severe authority connected with Pointers in Mourner Rooms. She gives the pilgrim a good scolding, shouting at the man and forcing him to stay on his knees throughout the admonishment. "Number One, yuh not a chile but a big man, so why yuh actin' like a chile? Yuh skylarkin' with God, yuh not serious!" The pilgrim tries to defend himself and explains that he is very serious and the bands just dropped off, but Mother Cleorita quiets him immediately - "Doh answer me back, yuh hear!" She goes on to explain how she has beaten up big men in Mourner Rooms before and how such a treatment would serve Number One right. After the reproaching finally stops, Mother Cleorita ties the pilgrim's bands anew and orders him to lie on his belly. As he weakly protests about the position, complaining that his back is aching, Mother Cleorita bluntly tells him to pray to God to take him to Zion hospital.

The labourers who assist the Pointer to conduct the Mourning ritual, as well as the nurses assisting Baptisers are, almost without exception, girls and women, young sisters as well as more mature Teachers or Mothers. I know of two men, a Shepherd and a Deacon, who sometimes labour with mourners. Also the visitors, who come to keep services for mourners, tend to be female rather than male. Thus the secret *Inner Chamber*, the respected and even feared Mourner room, is mainly frequented by women. Because the Mourning ritual is associated with sacred and mystical knowledge, it can be claimed that due to their predominance in the ritual, women have better access to such knowledge, and subsequent Spiritual statuses, than men.

The gift of healing and doing Spiritual work⁷ is received through repeated Mourning rituals, and most healers and experts of Spiritual work in the Tobagonian Baptist community are Mothers and Leaders well advanced in age and in the church hierarchy. Quite often such specialists have the

status of a Pointer as well. Most experts in Spiritual work are Mothers. This ability creates a certain aura of intimidation around these Mothers, to the extent that many people are scared of them. Male elders seldom have similar threatening prestige about them.

I have described feminine predominance in the Spiritual realm of Baptist ritual practice through several examples. Women invite the Saints to the services by performing the *surveying* ritual, and *entertain* them during the Spiritually intense sections of the service. It has also been mentioned that women participate in the Mourning ritual in far greater numbers than men, not only as initiates but also as *labourers*, ritual assistants to the male or female Pointer. And, indeed, it is the women who *catch power* most often. It would be wrong to suggest, however, that Baptist women are more exposed to Spiritual possession than men. The Holy Spirit manifests through Brothers as well, some engaging in particularly lengthy and forceful possessions, and most Leaders, with or without administrative titles, catch power in important services. Women's numerical majority is probably therefore the main reason for most possessions being female.

The female dominance in the Spiritual realm could be due partly to the fact that many Baptist women attend church all their lives, starting from childhood, advancing step by step in the field of Spiritual experience and knowledge. This prolonged presence in the church implies accumulated personal and social experiences that cannot be attained in haste. The number of young girls in congregations well surpasses the number of boys. Many men, on the other hand, become converted in adulthood, and thus the actual length of their religious lives is considerably shorter than that of a woman who grows up within the faith. Several Leaders of churches in Tobago, including a Bishop and a Dean, have completely changed their lifestyles and become converted when well into their adult years.

Old-time religion and male supremacy

The above ethnographic accounts illustrate ritual practice in which patriarchal power relations, fixed in the administrative structure of the church, are countered by equal statuses and roles for men and women in the Spiritual Baptist ritual practice. However, this practice also aims to support and maintain male dominance in many ways. The "King James" rhetoric used in services - in greetings, preaching, prayers and creeds - is quite male-biased. "Men and brethren," a speaker may

address a congregation, 80 % of which are women. Speakers invariably greet male elders first - "Pleasant good evening to my Bishop, to the Dean, to the ministers on the altar, to Mother Queen, to all the Mothers and to all the co-workers in the vineyard" is a typical way to start a sermon or a lesson. (It has to be noted, however, that in more than one instance the speaker has not been able to remember the names of the male elders, but has greeted the Mother with both her title and her first name.) Moreover, serving order in functions like Thanksgivings is another example where male elders are shown special respect: they get their food on large plates and are served first, whereas all others, including younger or less prestigious men, get their dinners in cardboard boxes. It can even happen that the Mothers are left with no food at all, because the visitors have to be fed first.

Division of labour in the upkeep and decoration of the church and preparations of rituals is not dogmatically gendered, and both men and women are allowed to perform similar chores; nevertheless, most of the workload rests on women's shoulders. There are dedicated Shepherds and Captains who help in the upkeep of churches, for example by sweeping the floors or polishing the sacred *lothar* pots and *taria* plates. As a weekly routine, however, it is the younger sisters who clean and decorate the church building. Organizing and preparing Thanksgivings, Pilgrimages, Harvest festivals and regular church services are predominantly a female responsibility; Mothers and younger sisters take care of the cleaning, cooking, washing, decorating and general organizing of the events. When any member of the St. Philomen church keeps a Thanksgiving, Mother Cleorita and her granddaughters come on the previous night to help the women of the house, and early on the following morning other women of the church arrive and start to work. The men of the family do their share, they put up the tarpaulin in the yard, cook *yardie*, carry chairs from the local Community Centre and arrange them in the tarpaulin tent and so on, but brothers or elders from the church seldom come to help. And, as mentioned above, most labourers in Mourning rituals are Sisters and Mothers.

These instances of male dominance do not indicate an all-penetrating gender bias in the religion, however. The linguistic archaisms of the King James Bible as well as the diligence in women's work should be viewed in relation to a deliberate striving towards *old-time religion*, a more severe, physically and Spiritually demanding faith that is taking place in many Baptist churches in Tobago. And, in some elders' opinions, recognition of male supremacy in the Church is part of the "proper"

Spiritual Baptist religion, although according to many older Baptists' accounts, women have always had quite strong positions in the religion. For example, Matron Stewart, born in 1909, founded her first church in Tobago in the 1950s and has thus been a Spiritual head of a church for almost fifty years. Supporting claims for male supremacy with old-time gender roles do not therefore seem tenable. Nevertheless, such claims do give an insight into the ongoing discursive *construction* of what proper Spiritual Baptist religion has been and should be.

The tendency to hold on to old ways may be a reaction against the strong Pentecostal influence and competition, as well as against the secularization of younger generations. Losing members to other denominations, mainly to the growing Pentecostal congregations, is a constant threat to the small Baptist churches; furthermore, inclinations to embrace features of Pentecostal practice in Baptist rituals are considered dangerous to the independence of the religion. Hence the attempts to "bring back the old-time religion," to define the specifically Spiritual Baptist doctrine and practice. This process of religious and cultural self-definition covers a vast range of areas, gender roles being merely a part of it, but for the purposes of this paper I restrict my discussion to them. I do, however, analyse the wider process of Spiritual Baptist self-definition in my forthcoming Doctoral dissertation.

All things considered, given the essential importance of Spiritual knowledge as the basis of the Baptist church hierarchy, and the availability of such knowledge through the Mourning ritual to dedicated members of the church regardless of gender, it can be concluded that the structure of the Spiritual Baptist church entails no gender bias as far as Spiritual statuses and roles are concerned. Moreover, given the essential significance of the Spiritual hierarchy in the ritual and social practice, the male bias of the administrative structure does not penetrate the most central spheres of the Spiritual Baptist religion.

In the following section of this article I describe negotiations over these statuses and roles, as well as over authority, within Spiritual Baptist ritual and social practice.

2. Negotiations on gender

The conventions of gender in the Spiritual Baptist church and religion are not constant or stable. They are continuously moulded, challenged and supported in various *interactions*, to borrow Eudine Barriteau's concept (1995), between different individuals. Interactions in the Baptist context take place in the form of conversations, bad-talking, arguments and fights, or ritualised communication like sermons, speeches and teachings; they can also be non-verbal, like acts, expressions and gestures, including such complex styles of being as "the way you carry about yourself" or dress code. Interactions also take place in visions, dreams and revelations, and in ritualised or informal accounts of such connections with the Spiritual world.

Given the dynamic nature of Baptists' interactions, power and authority cannot be understood as constant entities that a certain individual or a group either possesses or not. They are lived experiences, and are therefore always context-dependent. In other words, power is not attached to any fixed status in the religion.

Let us now have a look at how gender norms and conventions are moulded in different interactions, first by looking at some verbal exchanges. Paul's 1st letter to the Corinthians 11:3 declares "But I would have you know, that the head of every man is Christ; and the head of the woman is the man; and the head of Christ is God." Genesis 2:21-22, on creating Eve out of Adam's rib, is another frequently quoted part of the scripture to prove that man indeed is supposed to be superior to woman and that the leadership of an organization must be male. Baptist church officials in Tobago, such as the Dean and an Archdeacon, have often drawn upon these Bible verses in sermons, speeches and informal conversations. On the other hand, Galatians 3:28, where Paul argues that "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond or free, there is neither male nor female; for ye all are one in Christ Jesus," is frequently quoted to contradict the claims for male dominance. A fervent discussion rose between Leader Gerald and Mother Cleorita at the hall of the St. Philomen church as Mother Cleorita was cleaning peas and Leader Gerald relaxing after seeing to the pigs in the pen next to the church. Mother Cleorita asked her husband in a challenging manner what he had to say about the verse in Galatians, and they talked about the issue for a long while, drawing on various arguments from different books of the Bible. In another instance a Leader was preaching in a Thanksgiving service that a Reverend Mother was conducting, and he said something about how

the "Marys" of the church are important but the men must have the leading position, and started to sing *Peter You Got the Key, Open the Door*. After the singing and drums and shack-shacks died down, the Mother spoke in her highly authoritarian manner and claimed that Peter is long gone and today it has to be the Marys who take charge; many shepherds just leave their flock in the forest and the shepherdesses must come and lead the sheep home. This speech drew enthusiastic support from the dominantly female crowd.

Open criticism towards both male and female elders is not unusual outside the actual church environment, like at home or in other secular situations, but also within ritualised settings, like relaxing at the church after a Mourner Room service. It has to be kept in mind that Spiritual Baptists are not only Spiritual Baptists - a religious status is but one part of an individual, and therefore religious power relations may become complicated with other, secular ones. Given the small scale of the Tobagonian Baptist community, most members of the churches know each other, many are relatives, others have worked together or been employed by other Baptists, and so on. These relationships cannot be shut outside the religious context of the church. For example, in case of married couples the domestic roles of a husband and wife can be reflected on the religious roles of a Leader and a Mother, and private power struggles penetrate the public sphere of the church.

Age and accumulated religious experience are other important factors that have to be acknowledged when analysing male and female statuses in the Spiritual Baptist religion. Elders are respected because of their Spiritual advancement regardless of gender. Bishop Daniel, the Leader of Mt. Paran Perseverance SBC, holds the elderly Teacher Margaret in high esteem, and she often preaches in a special slot. Another instance of age-related authority was seen in a Church Thanksgiving, where a young Baptist Leader, a visitor from another church, was preaching. The time limit for each preacher was ten minutes, because the services tend to last very long - up to seven hours - if the preachers do not *keep it short and sweet*. As the Leader raised a chorus as part of his sermon, Teacher Claudette who is a prominent member of the Tobagonian Baptist community and some fifteen years older than the Leader, just danced to the front where he was preaching, hugged him and took his place on the floor.

3. Body and sexuality

I conclude this short ethnographic presentation of gender statuses and roles in the Tobagonian Spiritual Baptist belief system and ritual practice by investigating the aspect of body and sexuality. The female body especially carries symbolic connotations that deserve to be mentioned here, and the specific dress code of the religion offers an interesting angle to approach the topic.

Dress code is one of the most evident markers of the Baptist religion to the larger society and an important mode of self-identification. Along with religious identity, Baptist church clothes give intertwined messages of age, gender, ethnicity, religious status, social status and even sexual orientation, as well as of the ways norms and conventions of the religion are either maintained or challenged. Such rich symbolism is embedded particularly in women's clothes, but again, I have to restrict the discussion to the gender-specific aspects of the dress code.

Women's clothes are also more visible than men's to the larger society, because women travel to church and back in their Spiritual clothes, whereas men often change into Spiritual shirts or gowns at the church. The woman's dress is much more clearly marked than the man's: long dresses with aprons and headties are quite unambiguously Spiritual Baptist clothes, whereas men's attire is most often normal pants and a shirt. So, Baptist Sisters are much more recognizable in public than Brothers.

The headtie, so characteristic of the religion, is compulsory for women on entering church. Even in rituals where the head needs to be washed or anointed, the headtie is re-tied as soon as possible after the operation. Under the headtie women wear ritually acquired and symbolically very significant *bands*.⁸ Men, on the other hand, are not supposed to cover their heads, although turbans and sashes that leave the top of the head uncovered are often used. This gendered norm is understood to derive from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians: "But every woman that prayeth or prophesieth with her head uncovered dishonoured her head: for that is even all one as if she were shaven. (---) For a man indeed ought not to cover his head, forasmuch as he is the image and glory of God: but the woman is the glory of the man" (1 Cor 11: 5,7.) The function of the headtie as a gendered marker also implicates normative heterosexuality: should a man put on a headtie, as has repeatedly happened, Mothers would immediately remove it or re-tie it to leave the top of the head

uncovered, because a woman's headtie on a man indicates homosexuality. Other sanctions to such "cross-dressing" may include ridiculing the person in question and gossiping about his sexual preferences.

In addition to the head, the female body has to be carefully covered. Although men, too, are expected to wear long pants and preferably long-sleeved shirts in church, women enhance the covering with layers of clothes. The church dress covers the body from neck to ankles and is often long-sleeved. Under the dress the Baptist woman wears respectable, covering underwear and a slip. Most wear tights. On more festive occasions the women put on stockings or a pantyhose. An advanced Mother may wear sanitary pads all the time, and the norm in many churches is that female persons performing the Mourning ritual wear sanitary pads. Additional covering of the female genitalia is provided by large aprons tied over the dresses; especially in the most sacred area of the church compound, the Mourner room, it is compulsory for women to wear aprons in most Tobagonian churches. Also female mourners, initiates performing the Mourning ritual, wear extensive clothing, whereas men mourn in a simple shirt and pants. Mother Cleorita explains that one "can't go to God naked," and that therefore female mourners have to cover their bodies properly. Women are also washed more often than men during the mourning ritual; whereas female mourners may be washed three or four times, men are usually cleansed only once, if at all.

The female body, so carefully covered, is never directly addressed in ritual practice, but there are performances where feminine corporality has a specific symbolic function. It is not rare to see Mothers, possessed by the Spirit, dancing over a burning fire, lifting their hems and stepping over the flames. This usually takes place in Thanksgivings and Pilgrimages, where a fire of coconut shells or pieces of wood may be burning in the yard or on a beach, but can also be performed inside the church building, as women step and dance over a coal pot. I have never seen men taking part in this. Another example of the specific ritual symbolism of the female body is the practice of Mothers lifting their apron and covering a kneeling pilgrim (initiate in the Mourning ritual) or a Baptismal candidate with it. Both performances seem to draw on the symbolic power embedded in the same area of the female body that the ritual clothing covers most - the genitalia. This is noteworthy, because otherwise the sexually marked areas of the body are never emphasized. There are countless examples from other religions of the symbolic significance of female sexual organs, but instead of offering a comparative analysis, I merely draw attention to two things: first, although the Spiritual

Baptist belief system does not explicitly stress the specificity of the female body and its reproductive capacities, the meticulous and routine covering of the body and the sexual organs is in itself symbolically meaningful.⁹ Secondly, in a parallel belief system indigenous to Tobago, Obeah, the female genitalia and bodily fluids connected to it, like menstrual blood, are powerful instruments with various functions.¹⁰ My intention is by no means to equalise the Spiritual Baptist religion and Obeah, but merely to suggest parallel areas of symbolism between them.

The menstrual cycle has symbolic meanings in the Baptist belief system and ritual practice, and some elders, like Leader Brothers, refuse to allow women who are seeing their periods into the Mourner room. This ban, with the perception of women's bodily uncleanness behind it, is criticised by other Pointers, such as Mother Cleorita, in whose opinion periods are a healthy aspect of being a woman – “if yuh doan see dem yuh go to hospital!” She claims that the “old patriarchs” do not approve of women labouring while seeing their period, and tells about a Baptismal service where Leader Ramsay had Sister Marceline sit in the back bench because she “was unclean,” menstruating. The Holy Spirit possessed Sister Marceline, however, and she led the entire congregation from the church to the beach, herself clearing the way. After the candidates had been baptised, Sister Marceline was still with the Spirit and cleansed the whole church with seawater. Later on Leader Ramsay asked Mother Cleorita what spirit had really taken the unclean sister. “De Holy Spirit,” answered Mother Cleorita, understanding that menstruating does not make women improper for the Spirit. Since that she has not even inquired of her labourers in the Mourner Room whether they are menstruating or not.

On a Spiritual level the notion of gender and sexuality gains yet another dimension. In the Spiritual Baptist faith the Holy Trinity - Father, Son and the Holy Ghost - is believed to manifest through different Saints. The extent to which these Saints are personified varies, so that whereas many Tobagonian Baptists acknowledge the Saints as entities with personal characteristics and understand Spiritual possessions to be manifestations of a particular Saint, some others may perceive the Holy Spirit in a more abstract manner. In the former case, each Baptist who successfully goes through the initiation ritual of Mourning is supposed to acquire her or his own Guardian Saint and communicate with this Saint in visions and dreams. Like Catholic Saints and Orisha deities, these Saints are anthropomorphic and have personal characteristics: for example, St. Philomen is connected with the colour pink and with water, being the mother and ruler of the sea

and the oceans. She is a sweet woman with a lovely voice and appearance, and usually gentle in nature. She likes nice scents and tastes, and prefers gold. Such characteristics are completed with the unique cosmology of the Spiritual Baptists, so that each Saint represents features of either India or Africa; there are anthropomorphic spiritual entities connected to China as well, but these are not called by names of Saints.¹¹

A woman may have either a male or a female Guardian Saint who protects her, gives her advice in visions, and may manifest through her, along with other Saints, in possessions. Baptist women can therefore *entertain* St. Michael and St. John as well as St. Catherine or St. Philomen. Nevertheless, should a man claim that he has a female Guardian Saint, or entertain, say, St. Philomen in a possession, he would receive serious scolding and reprimands, because that would imply homosexuality. As Mother Cleorita puts it, "I say he gone to de odder side, dat he like man." Only male Saints are appropriate for Baptist men. This detail has several consequences: it shows how the Saints and thus the Holy Spirit are understood as integral parts of the individual, affecting or reflecting their identities to a profound extent. It also reflects the fairly absolute condemnation of homosexuality both within the religion and the Tobagonian society as a whole.¹² Women may display masculine features and yet not have their sexual identity called into question, but for men a female Spiritual principle would signify unacceptable abnormality. Several Mothers' reactions towards men and female Saints, aggressive condemnation of the implied sexual tendency as a "mistake" that must be corrected and cured, clarify the predominantly negative attitude towards homosexuality within the Tobagonian Baptist community. Negative opinions on other than heterosexual tendencies are also often brought up in sermons and informal conversations.

Given the accessibility of all the Saints, of each type of manifestation of the Holy Spirit, to Baptist women, female elders have a privileged position compared to male elders. Spiritually advanced Mothers can be referred to as *nation people*, which means they can entertain any of the Saints, displaying all the Spiritual nationalities. A man, however, cannot show similarly comprehensive Spirituality, since he is not able to entertain female Saints. This is another example of female dominance in the field of Spiritual expertise.

4. Conclusion

Through the course of this paper I have been attempting to show that power and authority within the Spiritual Baptist religion are not concentrated in any fixed group of people; they have to be understood as shifting, fluid principles, processes rather than characteristics. Different individuals and groups hold certain power over others in certain contexts. The male dominance in the administrative structure is countered by women's and men's equal access to ritual practice and to secret knowledge of the mythology and cosmology of the religion, including consequent Spiritual ranks. It has become clear that in the Spiritual Baptist religion, women have quite central roles as ritual specialists, which is quite rare in other Tobagonian denominations. Within the Spiritual realm of the religion, as opposed to the administrative, constant negotiations and interactions between men and women of different ranks, ages, social classes, personalities etc. keep the power relations between men and women in flux. Therefore, authority in the Spiritual Baptist religion is not attached to gender, but has to be approached through close analyses of interactions among individuals in different positions.

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GLOSSARY

to catch power to become possessed by the Holy Spirit, usually in the form of a Saint

to entertain the Spirit to be possessed; dancing, marching, speaking in tongues, shaking, shouting, applying sacred emblems etc.

lothar a small brass bowl; as a sacred vessel in the Spiritual Baptist faith it is filled with water, leaves and usually yellow flowers, candles and incense sticks. The lothar represents India the same way the calabash does Africa. It is used in Trinidadian Hindu rituals as well.

mouth drumming rhythmic sound formed by the mouth, either by hard breathing or groaning down in the throat.

Obeah Magical practices in the Anglophone Caribbean are called obeah. Obeah is rampant and feared in Tobago, and often connected to Spiritual Baptists.

Orisha An Afro-Caribbean religion particularly prominent in Trinidad, but also practiced in Tobago. The belief systems and practices of Orisha and Spiritual Baptist religions form a continuum, and drawing a line between the two is impossible, although constant efforts and negotiations over this are common on both sides.

to rejoice to be possessed; see, entertain the Spirit

taria a brass plate filled with grains: rice, black-eyed beans, corn, garlic, lime, flower petals, chive and sometimes also flour, salt and sugar. The taria has Indian connotations and is used in Trinidadian Hindu rituals.

ENDNOTES

¹ Spiritual Baptists have not been included in the *Population and Housing Censuses* of Trinidad and Tobago. According to my estimates, in the 42 Spiritual Baptist congregations of Tobago there are approximately 1600 members, whereas the total population of Tobago is ca 60 000 (*Population and Housing Census* 1990). Larger churches draw congregations of up to 150 people, depending on the type of service, but these include members of other Baptist churches along with those baptized in the church in question. Smaller churches may only have congregations of 10-20 people. Then there are people who have been baptized but do not attend any church. Only rough estimates can therefore be given of the total number of Spiritual Baptists in Tobago. James Houk (1995, 211, 213) estimates the Trinidadian Spiritual Baptist community to amount to 11 000.

² My research is based on extended fieldwork (1996-1997, 1998-1999 and continuing) in Tobago, during which time I have lived in the household of Mother Cleorita and Leader Gerald Robinson and participated in over 150 rituals in 22 different Baptist churches, as well as in the everyday life of the Baptist community. I am an initiated member of the church myself, having gone through the rituals of Baptism and Mourning in 1997.

³ Tobagonian elders date the beginning of the Baptist faith in Trinidad much earlier; for example, Matron Stewart knows of Baptist worship in 1844.

⁴ In Trinidad, female Bishops and Archbishops are not rare, and Archbishop Barbara Burke has even been elected as a Senator. Also, Rev. Mother Bishop Ethencer Stewart, better known as Matron, is a matriarch who has had her own church in Tobago for decades, and has received the official status of a Bishop in Trinidad.

⁵ Some Tobagonian churches, like Mt. Paran Perseverance SBC, have fairly regular relations with particular Trinidadian churches, and thus arrange visits, youth outings etc. with one another. Nevertheless, functions uniting an entire diocese situated on the two Sister Islands are very few.

⁶ In short, *Mourning* is a ritual of self-denial and sensory deprivation during which a *pilgrim*, the initiate, travels in the Spiritual world, seeking "wisdom, knowledge and understanding" through prayers and meditation. The ritual starts with a special *pointing* ceremony, after which the pilgrims are taken into a small room in the church compound, the *Mourner room*, where they lie on their back for at least seven, though not more than twenty-one days. During this time they are blindfolded, not allowed to speak, bathe, eat or drink, save three sips of water twice a day and a cup of aloes or bush tea in the morning. They lie on stony floor with a stone or a tile as their pillow. After their journey is complete, their return to the world is embedded in a Sunday service in the church, where they finally recount their *tracks*, important features and events of their journey, to the rest of the Spiritual family. Mourning is essential in unfolding the mysteries of the faith, learning about the various symbols, Saints, good and evil. Baptists also receive personal advice during the ritual, such as medication for illnesses or directions and comfort in problematic situations in life. It enables believers to progress both in their personal Spiritual career as well as within the church hierarchy. Also the gift of healing, doing Spiritual work, is acquired or fortified in Mourning.

⁷ Spiritual work refers to a large area of religious expertise including skills of healing (both physical and mental), clairvoyance, driving away of evil spirits (e.g. *jumbies*), performing Spiritual cleansing for people, objects or houses, or helping to solve problems like disputes or unfair treatment of employees at the workplace, to give some examples.

⁸ Bands are coloured pieces of polyester cotton used as headties or tied around the waist. Bands are acquired in the central rites of passage of the religion, Baptism and Mourning. The Baptiser or Pointer usually purchases the material, cuts it into triangle-shaped pieces, folds them into long, rectangular bands and sanctifies them by drawing sacred *seals* (symbolic marks) on them, perhaps sprinkling Kananga or Florida water over them and by dropping candle grease on top of the seals. Baptismal candidates' and mourners' heads are tied with these bands, and they can be used in church or even at home after the rituals are over.

⁹ The symbolic meaning of the female genitalia, portrayed in ritual performances like dancing over fire or covering an initiate with one's apron, cannot be reduced into any simple explanation. Baptist women themselves are normally possessed by the Spirit while performing these rituals, and have therefore no personal motives for doing so. Commonly used in other ritual performances, fire and smoke as well as the Mother's entire presence are

generally acknowledged to have cleansing and sanctifying functions, but this does not offer any sufficient explanation for the above-mentioned practices.

¹⁰ For example, menstrual blood or vaginal fluids mixed with food, like rice, or in drinks can be applied to "tie dong" a man, to make him stay with the woman in question.

¹¹ The Spiritual Baptist cosmology portrays a Spiritual world of different Nations, namely Africa, India, China, and Syria, and of Biblical locations, such as Jerusalem or Zion, as well as of local Tobagonian sites, like beaches and rivers. This world is inhabited by various Spiritual entities, including Saints. It is in this Spiritual world that Mourners travel during the long Mourning ritual, and most Baptist rituals, religious paraphernalia, symbols like colours or signs, possessions and music are representations of this world. I offer a comprehensive description of the mythology, cosmology and rituals of Tobagonian Baptists in my forthcoming doctoral dissertation.

¹² Sexual orientation has attracted little research in the Caribbean. David A.B. Murray (2000, 261-270) describes the double lives of self-identified Martinican gay ("gai") men and the society's severe condemnation of what is considered abnormal sexual tendencies. My unpublished Master's thesis (Laitinen 1997) shortly discusses Tobagonian girls' and womens' attitudes towards homosexuality, and the general opinion is quite reprimanding. Of fiction writers, for example Nigel Thomas (1996) describes normative heterosexuality and consequent plight of homosexuals on "Isabella Island" that could be St. Vincent. Negative approach to homosexuality is therefore not a specifically Spiritual Baptist position, but seems to be characteristic of many Caribbean societies.