Journeys to the Spiritual Lands

THE NATURAL HISTORY OF A WEST INDIAN RELIGION

Wallace W. Zane

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I WOULD LIKE TO NAME THE hundreds of Converted people whom I interviewed. For a number of reasons, all of my respondents must remain anonymous, but I hear their words and see their faces before me as I write. With every word, I have remembered the Converted of St. Vincent and New York who provided me with gracious hospitality and continuous good will. And the assistance came from all of the Converted whose churches I visited, not only those whom I specifically interviewed. Sometimes the clear singing of an individual I did not know helped me to stitch together a hole in the data, or someone acting under the direction of the Holy Spirit in a specific action made many things clear. Sometimes an ordinary member standing at the front of the church to offer "a word to the stranger" put things in a way that clarified many disparate points. My thanks must go to all of the Converted people of St. Vincent and to those Vincentian Converted who live in New York. I am grateful to the people of St. Vincent and the Grenadines, the Vincentians abroad, and other West Indians with whom I had contact in the Caribbean and in the United States.

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Introduction

I WAS A LITTLE NERVOUS AT MY first Converted church service. I sat on the unpainted bench trying to adjust to the humid weight of the tropical air while the congregation said the opening prayers. Presently the pastor gestured to me and invited me to introduce myself to the church. As I stood, he stopped me and said, "Would one of the sisters . . . ?" A song in polyphonous harmony sprang from the congregation, "All the Way from Africaland, Coming to Hear them Singing, All the Way from Africaland, Coming to Hear them Sing." The song continued for five minutes while two older women danced with me at the front of the church. I was later told, "That is a greeting song. We don't have one for America. So we give you that."

Journeys to the Spiritual Lands

This book is about a people and a religion called "the Converted" on the Caribbean island of St. Vincent. Also known as Spiritual Baptists, Believers, the Penitent, and by a number of other names, they occupy a special place in Vincentian society and are noted for their distinctive dress, their beautiful music, and their dramatic rituals. Converted people dedicate themselves to a life of service to God and to their fellow Vincentians. Much of that service takes place in a spiritual world unseen by ordinary people.

Colonial experience is reproduced in a spiritual world in which tens of thousands of Christian believers—the Converted—travel and conduct spiritual work. Converted religion is a sort of shamanistic Christianity that emerges as a distinct expression of the culture and history of the Caribbean as it is found on St. Vincent. In its combination of shamanic technique and Christian ideology, the religion is dramatically new to anthropology. Historical and comparative data show that Con-

verted religion is not merely opportunistic syncretism, but an invention of colonialism in its local idiom. The present study has three aims: (1) to describe the spiritual work and travels of the Converted; (2) to demonstrate that the experiences of the Converted in the spiritual world are derived from the local context; and (3) to explain how Vincentian culture and Converted religion are each a part of the other. The main body of the text is divided into three sections that emphasize those ideas.

Spiritual Baptists are widespread in the Eastern Caribbean. The Converted (that is, Vincentian Spiritual Baptists, formerly called Shakers) make up a minimum of 10% of the population of St. Vincent. It is a Christian religion similar to Pentecostalism in theology and practice. In addition, African influences are strong as well as elements taken from the physical setting of St. Vincent and its status as a British colony. The most distinguishing characteristic of Converted religion is the emphasis on spiritual travel on a regular basis for all adherents to the religion. All, also, are required to do spiritual work as a result of this travel.

Converted cosmology is completely a Vincentian cosmology derived from Christianity and the colonial context. It is not African, not European, but something produced out of the peculiarly Caribbean circumstances that make St. Vincent what it is. For one example among the curious many, *The Pilgrim's Progress* is used as a sacred text that serves as a template or guidebook to the spiritual realm in which the Converted travel. But they are not limited to Bunyan's imagination. The Converted also travel in Biblical lands as well as to the sources of British colonial labor: Africa, India, and China. Though the religion is not syncretic in philosophy (it is exclusively and totally Christian), it may be considered so in the manner in which it expresses the Christian philosophy.

The latter half of the fieldwork on which this book is based was undertaken among Vincentian Converted in Brooklyn, New York. I went to Brooklyn because I hoped to document how the religion had changed with the people who took it with them in migration from St. Vincent. In fact, it had changed little. The colonial structure of the religion is its essence; for that to change, the religion itself would become something different. Data from Brooklyn are included in the description of Converted religion in general. Patterns of difference and similarity between Vincentian Converted practice in St. Vincent and Brooklyn are described in a separate chapter. The colonial nature of the religion and the colonial influences to which it responds are as present in Brooklyn as in St. Vincent.

The Research Setting

St. Vincent and the Grenadines is a nation composed of 32 islands and cays in the Caribbean Windward Islands. The island of St. Vincent, referred to locally as "the mainland," is 18 miles long by 11 miles wide and had a population of 106,499 people in 1991. Sometimes the locals call the island "Hairoun," its Carib name. It means "the blessed isle."

St. Vincent may indeed be the "most beautiful of the Caribee islands" (Martin 1937:212). The whole aspect presents the lushest of tropical settings. Kingstown, with its natural harbor, sharply rising mountains in the center of the island, deeply cut valleys, striking volcano, and black sand beaches stretching into the raging Atlantic on the windward coast and into the calm Caribbean on the leeward coast, all add to the effect. More impressive than everything else is the verdure. A local saying claims, "If you plant a nail in St. Vincent, it will grow."

St. Vincent was one of the last Caribbean islands to be colonized by Europeans. The aboriginal Caribs existed there in sufficient force to hold off European incursions until the eighteenth century. In the early seventeenth century, the Black Caribs emerged on the island—a population composed of the descendants of Caribs and African maroons from other islands (and several shipwrecks)—who quickly came to outnumber the original (or Red) Caribs.

European vessels had been watering and victualing on St. Vincent since the 1500s, and eventually some Frenchmen settled on St. Vincent as guests of the Caribs and Black Caribs. In 1748, St. Vincent and three other of the Windward Islands were declared neutral between England and France and were left to the Caribs. However, in 1763, the Treaty of Paris granted St. Vincent to the British, who quickly set up plantations with large numbers of slaves. Many of the Frenchmen remained and Vincentians today may have French as well as English names. The Carib lands in the northern part of the island had been excluded from expropriation by the British, but the promise of profitable sugar cultivation led to encroachment by planters and eventually to two Carib wars. After the Second Carib War (1794–1796), the entire population of up to 5,000 Black Caribs was ordered removed to Central America, where they remain today (in Belize, Guatemala, Nicaragua, and Honduras) as the Garifuna. A remnant of the Red Caribs was left. Their descendants make up the more than 3,000 Caribs who currently live on St. Vincent.

Despite the supposed removal of all the Black Caribs to Honduras, small groups of both Black Caribs as well as Red Caribs remained on the island. They cannot be ruled out as one of the sources of Converted religion.[1] In 1876, Ober (1880) spent several months in St. Vincent. His encounters with Caribs at that late date record many of the practices that are found today among the Black Caribs of Central America, but no longer in St. Vincent.

Gullick wrote in 1971 that the Shaker (Converted) religion was "mainly confined to the few remaining Carib Indian settlements" on St. Vincent (Gullick 1971:7). But he did not see much connection between the aboriginal religion and the Converted. Instead, he felt it was ironic that Amerindians should adhere to a religion described as "African." The Caribs on St. Vincent today are as culturally Vincentian as anyone else on the island.[2] Converted religion is a religion that appeals to poor Vincentians because it developed out of the experience of poor people on St. Vincent. The Caribs are the poorest people on the island, and it makes sense that Converted religion should be "the chief Carib sect" (Gullick 1985:19).

Although slavery had probably already existed in some form among the Caribs, it certainly came to St. Vincent with the French settlers around 1720. By the time

the English took over the island, some accounts indicate that the slaves of the French outnumbered both the Red and the Black Caribs. In 1764, there were 1,300 Frenchmen and 3,400 African slaves, whereas there were only 3,000 to 5,000 Caribs. By 1831, not 70 years later, there were still only 1,300 Europeans on the island, but the number of African slaves had increased to 22,589 (Madden 1835:54; Boucher 1992:106). The Red Caribs had been reduced to a few hundred. Slavery and its effects, as elsewhere in the Caribbean, have been the main social force in Vincentian society—in 1831 as well as in the 1990s.

The population in 1991 was 106,499, with over 82,000 describing themselves as "African/Negro/Black" (77.1%); 3,341 as "Amerindian/Carib" (3.1%); 1,477 as "East Indian" (1.4%); 511 as "Portuguese" (0.5%); 982 as "White" (0.9%); 17,501 as "Mixed" (16.4%); and 140 describing themselves as "Other" (St. Vincent 1993: 28). Most of my respondents who were listed in the census as "Mixed" identified closer with Black Vincentians than with other Vincentians. They said, "If you born in St. Vincent, we figure you have some African blood."[3]

The categories listed in the census provide a sort of history lesson of the island. The Caribs derive from the remnant that was not deported at the end of the Carib wars. The Blacks represent descendants of slaves. The East Indians and Portuguese were indentured after emancipation to make up for labor shortages. The Whites were also brought in to make up a labor shortfall (only a few are from planter families). Most of the Whites in the census are descendants of those who came from Barbados in the 1860s as laborers. They actually have a lower social and economic status than most of the Blacks on the island.[4]

The population I worked with was rather homogeneous—poor Black people living close to the capital. I did notice the class-based stratification discussed by Rubenstein (1976; 1987; 1991), Fraser (1975), and V. Young (1990; 1991; 1993), but my contact was mainly with poor people. The complex layers of stratification identified by Rubenstein, Fraser, and Young seemed to have little impact on the people I studied (the poor majority), because everyone who was not poor was placed by them in the same class as, for instance, the Prime Minister. In other words, to my respondents, one was poor or one was everyone else. To illustrate, when I was on the island, unemployment was 52% and the employed were overrepresented by the middle class.

As elsewhere in the Caribbean, the plantation in St. Vincent is the symbol of privilege and exploitation. As late as 1954, plantations in St. Vincent were fighting the local legislature to continue to employ child laborers (Lewis 1968:152). A peasantry supporting itself (incompletely) by the land employs 24,000 people working for themselves on small plots of land (Mintz 1985:144). Nonetheless, plantations remain. In St. Vincent, 40 farms control 54 percent of the land, whereas most farms are of only one to five acres.

The current pattern of land distribution and use began during slavery and as an adjunct to it (Marshall 1991). All locally grown vegetables are still called "provision" as they were by the planters during slavery. The same food prescribed by Collins (1803:93–94) for slaves nearly 200 years ago is the same as most Vincentians eat

today: yams, Indian corn, plantains, beans, peas, tannies or eddoes, flour, salt-fish, herring, beef, pork, rice, breadfruit, cassava, and farine (cassava flour). Staples of the twentieth century he did not mention are pineapples, guavas, mangos, peanuts, and chicken.

Fishing, through highly visible to the tourist, does not make a significant contribution to the subsistence of most Vincentians. Poor Vincentians view fish and other meat as "relish," often a rarity (Rubenstein 1987:167). However, whaling has a special cultural significance to Vincentians. St. Vincent is one of the last whaling nations on Earth. The primary whale caught is the pilot whale, called "blackfish." All whales are hunted, but only pilot whales and killer whales were caught while I was in St. Vincent. Iaconetti (1994) reports that Bequia has been granted aboriginal whaling status by the International Whaling Commission; however, the status of St. Vincent is uncertain (*Searchlight*, St. Vincent, June 9, 1995).[5]

In St. Vincent, a feeling of a lack of local control is prevalent and seems to have increased in the last several years. Grossman (1993) shows that importation of food has risen with the emphasis on banana export; land that could be used to grow subsistence is used for income-production. The entire banana industry, in turn, is heavily dependent on financial aid from Great Britain (Grossman 1994:168). The next most important sector of the national economy, tourism, is also at risk: An international group has threatened to lead a boycott on tourism to St. Vincent because of the practice of whaling (*Searchlight*, St. Vincent, June 9, 1995). In the 1995 Carnival, "ground provision" and "blackfish" were two symbols of Vincentian resistance to U.S. hegemony in calypsos—"No, Uncle Sam, we will not give up blackfish," and "Ground provision is our security." Ground provision and whaling are Vincentian; bananas and tourism are a function of external control.

The region-wide pattern of a decline of the importance of agriculture and a rise in reliance on tourism and emigration is expressed in St. Vincent. *The 1994 World Almanac* (1993:305) indicated, "The entire economic life of St. Vincent is dependent upon agriculture and tourism." That is not strictly true, but it reflects the gross figures regularly available. Remittances from abroad form a significant portion of the national income.[6] High prestige is placed on emigration, and St. Vincent is included among the "migration-oriented societies" (Rubenstein 1987:197). Given the reliance on remittances by the local economy, family members on the island have a positive association with emigrated members. Additionally, kin networks in metropoles ("mother-countries" of colonial powers) are important for assisting members in St. Vincent to emigrate as well.

St. Vincent is classically dependent and underdeveloped. The island is largely agricultural. Bananas and arrowroot are the main export crops, and some local vegetables are exported to Trinidad. Food staples must be imported—all of the sugar, rice, wheat, and nearly all of the chicken. During my last month on the island there was a chicken shortage, because the regular shipment of chicken parts from the United States had failed a health inspection and been dumped.

Tourism is not a big factor in St. Vincent itself (most of the arrivals are in the Grenadines). The tourists that (poor) Vincentians do meet reinforce the conception

of St. Vincent as a site of economic and cultural subordination. These feelings of inferiority often surface as violence (cf. Hadley 1973). The tourist commission of St. Vincent reported that the high incidence of hostility and outright violence toward tourists was a threat to tourist-derived income (*The Vincentian*, August 4, 1995; cf. Kurlansky 1992:25, for neighboring St. Lucia). Violence against foreigners is a significant indicator of the sort of frustration that, for many Vincentians, is moderated by Converted religion. Although I often felt hostility from Vincentian men and women, I never did from Converted of any age or sex. For non-Converted Vincentians confronted with their own powerlessness, violence against a momentarily powerless tourist may be a means to even the balance of power. For the Converted faced with impenetrable oppressive structures, their religion serves the same purpose. Both the spontaneous violent acts of "road boys" and the deliberate rituals of the Converted mediate the situation of the poor Vincentian individual with the (neo-) colonial world system.

Colonialism, Religion, and Ritual

Much of this book deals with the idea of colonialism and its relationship to Converted religion. Although this work is not intended specifically as a study in colonialism, it could be viewed as such, and the following paragraphs are included to give the reader an orientation to where I stand on this complex and fascinating topic. I conclude this section with a discussion of previous research on Caribbean religions and on the Spiritual Baptists.

Colonialism is problematic when it is used to apply to present-day situations. Fifty years ago, most of the current nations of the world were colonies. Today, actual colonies are almost extinct. However, the means by which colonial powers exerted authority still function. For the most part, these amount to extra-local control over significant elements (political, economic, social, military, etc.) of otherwise sovereign territories, a condition easily observable in formerly colonized countries. "Colonialism" in the text will refer to the "ways" of colonialism. For the purposes of this study, neocolonialism, postcolonialism, and other terms descriptive of continuing inequality in relations between controller and controlled on an international level are all subsumed by me under "the ways of colonialism" or simply "colonialism." Although colonialism seems to have ended, its methods persist. St. Vincent ceased to be a colony in 1979, but colonial processes continue to operate. For example, before the end of slavery, the sugar trade and its subsidies were controlled from England. The legislative assembly of St. Vincent continually lobbied the crown for assistance. In the 1990s, the economics of the single prime earner, the subsidized banana trade, are determined by England (and to some extent by the United States and the European Union). The government of St. Vincent, though independent, continually lobbies the metropoles for assistance.

One influential approach to colonialism pays attention to the creation and contestation of boundaries between the colonizer and the colonized "other."[7] The iden-

tification of a debased other is essential for control of that other. In the Caribbean, the African has been the censured alter. Converted religion was persecuted and eventually made illegal in St. Vincent in 1912 because of its "traits of African barbarism" (Fraser 1995, April 20). It was only when an astute Vincentian politician, 53 years later, identified himself with Converted religion because it was a Vincentian rather than a foreign institution that a bill was finally passed to legalize the religion. However, the colonial attitudes prevailing in 1912 still operate among the elite and much of the rest of the population, and Converted religion is widely despised in St. Vincent (but not without some fearful respect).

Other significant work on colonialism addresses the encroachment of the dominant powers and the overt and covert efforts at resistance by local people. South Asia, the other most important area in the British colonial world (along with the West Indies) is the source of much of this research. The aim of the Subaltern Studies Group, for instance, was to draw out from the colonial records the hidden histories of suppressed groups (e.g., Guha 1987; Spivak 1988). Prakash's (1992) critique of the *Subaltern Studies* effort argues that the analytical structures of subaltern analysis are still the structures of the colonizing histories that the Subaltern Studies Group tries to address. This is important for my thesis, because it shows that even intentional breaks from the dominant ideology may yet be structured by that ideology. Like the unintentional Vincentian response to colonialism in the form of Converted religion, the subaltern studies operate in a constrained dialectic established by the controlling entity.

The same thing happens elsewhere. Beckett's (1993) description of a native history of the world displays dramatically the internalization of colonial structures among colonized peoples. Walter Newton, an Australian aborigine, tells the history of the world; he combines selections from the Bible, local aboriginal histories, and colonial political notions in his uncritical presentation of world history. That world, as Beckett shows, is Australia; Newton's experience includes nothing else. The Converted do exactly the same thing. In the same way that Newton's history of the world is an expression of his lived experience as a colonized subject, the cosmology and practice of Converted religion is likewise a colonial product.

In my thinking on the subject, I have been most influenced by those studies that portray local populations as effecting ritual amelioration of their subordinate position in colonial (and neocolonial) circumstances.[8] Rituals are performances that stand for something else—a memory, a spiritual reality, or a change in status. When oppressed people are unable to better their situation by political or military means, they often use performative mechanisms to enact the termination, or reversal, of their oppression. Dirks (1987), in his study of Christmas in the British West Indies, shows that such rituals often led to insurrection. Many aspects of Converted religion can be traced to these annual rituals of inversion and license. The temporary ritual of reversal became permanently enacted in the institution of Converted religion.

This study shows the cosmology of the Converted to be a response to colonial structures. Converted religion was not built on a native substrate. Like all West Indian societies, St. Vincent (and Converted religion) is the product of a recent

historical event: The advent of Europeans in the Americas and the effects of their colonial policies. British colonial society is reproduced in the spiritual world; the spiritual world reflects not only British organizational structures, but recognition of the many cultures—African, Indian, Chinese, North American—that make up the colonial experience. Colonialism has not strictly ended in St. Vincent. As a member of the Commonwealth of Nations, St. Vincent and the Grenadines still must honor the Queen of England as its queen by celebrating her birthday and acknowledging her sovereignty at sessions of the Legislative Council. To further emphasize that Vincentians do not have the final say over their lives, the Queen maintains a Governor General in the island and court decisions may be appealed to the Crown in England. Of course, these ritual vestiges of colonialism have less real impact than the economic hegemony of the numerous recently emerged metropoles of the world free market, for example, New York, Tokyo, London.

In the rich body of literature that has developed on religions of the African diaspora, the African origins of most of the expressive elements of those religions are emphasized.[9] In a recent article, Besson and Chevannes (1996:223) contend that "any attempt to polarize the debate around Caribbean culture into an African continuity versus creole creativity position is misplaced." Nonetheless, that has been the way the discussion of Caribbean culture—and Caribbean religion in particular—has been framed (especially by Herskovits 1958; and his students, e.g., Simpson and Hammond 1957; but also by others—e.g., Thompson 1984; Murphy 1994). Certainly both continuity and creativity are happening with the Converted. However, the Converted are a dramatic example of the latter, to the point of obscuring African elements in the religion. Indeed, following this approach, the Spiritual Baptists of St. Vincent are cited for their lack of African traits (Bourguignon 1970; Pollack-Eltz 1993:21);. As Besson and Chevannes point out, the dynamism inherent in the continuity of African traits appears to obviate the question; the historical and environmental factors should be the focus. That does not mean the African elements are not there, only that they are situated in Caribbean culture as other traits are. Converted religion does appear to be African-derived, as its adherents claim. It also seems to be completely Christian as the Converted say. It is also shamanistic in style and practice.[10]

It is not a problem to find African religions in the Caribbean. We should expect to find them. For instance, it is probably true that spirit possession religions in the Caribbean derive their spirit possession from African sources (Simpson and Hammond 1957). Yet, when we find spirit possession with identical movements, sounds, and local exegetics in many different places in the world, we are led to ask questions about the nature of spirit possession in general and not just African spirit possession. Consequently, particularly because the African origins of most aspects of Caribbean religions have been celebrated to the obscuration of elements common to many diverse cultures, most of the comparative examples I use are from cultures that are not strongly influenced by Africa. I want to show that the context of Converted religion is larger than its historical derivation. The African origins are important, but they are not the whole story. This study, therefore, shows a religion that, though

expressing African influence, appears to be a local creation embodying selections from all available cultural materials—European and African as well as those that arise from human biology and human ways of living in the world.

Spiritual Baptists have been of interest to anthropologists since the publication of Herskovits and Herskovits' (1947) *Trinidad Village*. Most of the research on Spiritual Baptists has been done in Trinidad, with shorter studies on the religion in Grenada, Tobago, and Barbados.[11] Previous research on the Vincentian Spiritual Baptist, whose traditions are different from those on other islands, consisted of a two-month visit in 1966 (Henney 1968), supplemented by one other short visit in 1970 (Henney 1971; 1974; 1980). The present work represents the first anthropological study of the religion in St. Vincent based on traditional long-term fieldwork. Rather than seeking to explain the spiritual experience as hallucination derived from sensory overload (Ward and Beaubrun 1979) or sensory deprivation (Henney 1974; Sargant 1974), this study takes the experience as a starting point. With this approach, Converted cosmology is clearly laid out and the nature of the religion as a response to colonialism is easily seen.

In the postmodern world, the discrete boundaries of primitive and modern have come undone. Anthropologists "look at a world in which all the cultures are flowing together in most curious ways, and symbols have become world travelers" (Anderson 1995:72). The Converted is one such case. The explanation I give in these pages is one that addresses the international and intercultural flow of symbols, whose selection and combination are predicated on long-standing structures and processes.

Methods

The findings I report are based on data gathered during 14 months of fieldwork among the Vincentian Converted in St. Vincent (April–September 1995) and Brooklyn (October 1995–June 1996). I visited 17 churches in St. Vincent and had contact with many others. I went to meetings in private homes and yards, and in the market square in Kingstown, and attended several baptisms at different beaches. In Brooklyn, I attended four of the five Vincentian churches there at the time of my study (the number and makeup of the churches in Brooklyn changes frequently). In the 14 months of fieldwork, I attended over 150 Vincentian Converted meetings. I also attended a Spiritual Baptist convention in Grenada with delegations present from Trinidad, St. Vincent, the United States, England, and Canada. In Brooklyn, I visited several Trinidadian and Grenadian Spiritual Baptist churches and one Jamaican Spiritual Baptist church.

I selected the Kingstown area in St. Vincent for its easy access to several villages in the surrounding hills. My method beyond that may be described as both comprehensive and accidental. I visited every Converted church within walking distance of my residence. I chose three churches in three adjacent villages as the ones on which I would concentrate most of my attention. Church schedules vary by church (usually several meetings a week) and I was able to attend most of the important

rituals that occurred during my fieldwork in each of the three churches. In Brooklyn, I also selected three churches to be the main ones I would attend and made visits to the others. Converted churches, both in St. Vincent and in Brooklyn, have a tradition of visiting each other as congregations. In this activity, I was able to travel with the regular churches I attended and to visit many others. More than half of my time during the fieldwork was spent among Vincentian emigrés in New York. However, the religion, even in New York, remains firmly grounded in the island of St. Vincent.

While I was careful to be attentive to all aspects of Vincentian culture, I found that most of the ethnographic work had been done already. No fewer than 16 anthropologists have made extensive studies of St. Vincent and the Grenadines.[12] This was a tremendous benefit to my research, because I was able to concentrate on the small focus with which I had come.

I did not go to the field expecting to find travels in spiritual lands. They had not been described as other than hallucinations in the previous literature. However, my aim was to get an understanding of Spiritual Baptist experience. My constant question was, "What is it like to be a Spiritual Baptist?" The answer often involved travels in the spiritual lands. Although I did find some respondents to be especially easy to talk to, or to have particularly clear ways of explaining Converted phenomena, I did not rely on a few key informants. I talked to hundreds of Converted and conducted interviews with scores of them.[13]

While I outline the colonial restraints on the Converted worldview, there is room in their world for invention. Like Hollan and Wellencamp (1994:215), I recognize "the anthropological subjects as actors, actively and creatively engaged in the construction of meaning, rather than as passive recipients of a cultural tradition." While actively creating meaning, the Converted also receive a cultural tradition, one that has been constructed by the Converted who came before them; people build a ritual house, but they must use materials around them to do so. The focus of the present study is on that construction in a larger sense, in the identification of norms of that experience, but acknowledging that the experience of individuals "whether shared or idiosyncratic, may clash with cultural expectations as well as be consistent with them" (ibid:214).

The Researcher in the Research

One day in St. Vincent, I met a Spiritual Baptist woman on the road. When I told her I was writing a book about the Spiritual Baptists, she said, "I hope you do not write too many bad things about us." I was surprised to find that her reaction was common. At a church service the evening before, after I had introduced myself to the congregation, the *pointer* admonished the people, "This man is writing a book. Is this what you want him to say about you, that you sat down and did not sing?" A pointer in another church on another night said to the congregation, "Look this man here. A writer! From California! Don't think he going to see you do something

wrong and he isn't going to write it down." My presence in the church services was always noted. I learned that if I was expected at a church service, the members behaved in the way they felt was most proper. This turned out to be a good thing because I could compare the services where I was expected with those where I was unexpected. It allowed me to learn what was considered important behavior to the Converted themselves. It also made me very aware of the effect of my own presence in the fieldsite.

In Eliade's book *Ordeal by Labyrinth* (1982:121), he and Claude Rocquet talk about the Western researcher's encounter with non-Western religion. Rocquet says, "So one has to hold on to one's own identity and also to maintain one's reason against the terrible forces of the irrational?" Eliade replies, "[T]he power of the irrational is certainly lurking there." It seems to me that the power of the irrational is strong for those who have not accommodated it, or conquered it, in their personal life. Bastide, for instance, found it necessary to be initiated into Candomblé (including possession) in order to understand the religion (Price in Bastide 1978:vii–xii). Many researchers in spirit-possession religions find it useful or compelling to join, or initiate into, the religions they study—including the Spiritual Baptists (e.g., Houk 1995:81; Goldwasser 1996:162).

At this point I need to situate myself in the research. In my teen years, I was a Pentecostal street preacher and a chaplain to a (nonaccredited) Christian school. I had the complete Holy Spirit possession experience and taught it to others. For fully ten years prior to the research, I had been (and still am) a sturdy apostate. The irrational was not lurking when I went to the field. It had been addressed and dismissed. The irrational holds appeal to me only as a resource for immense creativity. I did have to deal with the evangelical concerns of my respondents. I did not say that I was not a Christian unless asked and Christianity was usually assumed. I struggled with that for a good part of the research as I felt that anything less than full disclosure might approach dishonesty. When I realized that my prayers in church, said when requested out of respect for the Converted, and my singing and dancing in church, done for the genuine pleasure of it, convinced Converted that I was "really a spiritual person, no matter what" I said, I stopped telling the Converted that I was not a Christian. I did tell those Converted whom I got to know fairly well of my apostasy. Most of them did not believe me anyway. I never became comfortable being mistaken for a Christian. However, as the Converted are said to be able to see into the hearts of men and several told me, "You at peace" (that is, they could see that I did not have a psychological need for conversion), I eventually stopped trying to make everyone sure exactly where I stood on matters of belief.

Academically, I must confess to a (somewhat postmodern) positivism in my dealing with the data. My primary research assumption is that the purpose and test of knowledge is prediction. If it predicts, it is useful knowledge. I do find the poststructuralist, deconstructionist, and textualist inquiries to be energizing critiques of anthropology. My avoidance of direct engagement with them in this work reflects my view that there is a reality—a predictability—that, though not exact in social science, may be close enough to provide a good idea of what to expect. That is,

useful knowledge is there—we use it every day—and we know it is useful because our predictions of what it will be are fulfilled. I mean this in the most practical manner: the sun rises in the morning; it sets at dusk; we go about our daily lives.

I am not in the camp of Olivier de Sardan (1990), who says that deconstructionism and textualism are fashions that will and should pass. He claims that in the former the ethnologist becomes his own hero, while in the latter, she cannot say anything for herself. It is my view that deconstructionism, textualism, and the other postmodern critiques are essential to the making of a sharper analytical knife. In the meantime, the old tool, though worn, may, with careful use and a little polishing, still cut cleanly.

Despite the claim to an adjusted positivism, I am an "ironist" in Rorty's (1995: 100) sense of the term. That is, I can never take things too seriously, because I am always aware of the contingency of language (and experience). It was precisely that sense of irony that allowed me to approach a religion that a round dozen other anthropologists had considered and to see in it not only what the others had seen, but also (approximately) what the participants in the religion said they could see. Rorty opposes irony to common sense. When the Converted said that they went to Africa while the whole time they lay on the floor in a little room, I did not emphasize hyperventilation and hallucination like the common sensualists. Instead I said, Why not? and, Tell me how.

The Structure of the Text

The three distinctive features of Converted religion—the shamanistic work, the experience in the spiritual world, and its colonial nature—are all closely related. The text is divided into three parts. The first details the spiritual work of the Converted. The second part describes the experiences of the Converted in the spiritual world and shows them to arise from the local context. The third part situates the religion, explaining it as a consequence of Vincentian culture—socially and historically—and comparing Converted religion with shamanism and other religious styles. Chapters of vivid description of typical events alternate with those of comparative analysis. Shifting points of view from experience to close examination is intended to enable the reader to get the feel of the religion as well as the "why" of the religion.

The Introduction is in two chapters. This one sets the stage and the next puts the reader in the action. The next chapter of the Introduction, chapter 2, describes a *shouting*, which is usually the first way that ordinary Vincentians are exposed to the Converted. All of the important features of the religion are exhibited at a shouting; the rest of the text can be seen as an explanation of each of those elements.

In Part One, I concentrate on the spiritual work of the Converted. Chapter 3 discusses the types of work the Converted do, the tools they use, and the types of tasks and titles assigned to different Converted workers. Chapter 4 examines the main spiritual tool of Converted religion, its music. Music is used to enter into and

travel in the spiritual world. It is used to accomplish actions, both in the spiritual lands and in the physical realm. Chapter 5 describes a *banning*, an important ritual where the concept of work is most articulated and most easily observed. The banning requires joint effort by numerous Converted workers. The purpose of the ritual is to prepare one or more Converted people for extended travels in the spiritual world.

Part Two takes a close look at Converted travels and actions in the spiritual lands. In chapter 6, I describe the spiritual lands and the beings who inhabit them. Chapter 7 details the process of *mourning*—the days-long ritual of prayer, isolation, and spiritual journeying.

Having established the main characteristics of the religion in Parts One and Two, I contextualize the religion in Part Three, showing how Converted religion is a product of Vincentian history and society. Part Three contains material that is usually placed at the beginning of an anthropological monograph rather than toward the end. Because the meaning of the religion is found in its historical and cultural matrix, I felt it was important to lay out just what it is that is being explained (Converted cosmology) before saying why and how it got to be what it is. Chapter 8 discusses Converted religion in reference to shamanism and describes a wake performed by the Converted. The wake is an important way that the religion is integrated into and serves the rest of Vincentian society. Chapter 9 identifies elements in the common experience of Vincentians as sources for specific Converted traits. In chapter 10, I outline the history of the religion in St. Vincent and compare it with religions elsewhere. Converted religion is shown to be resilient in the face of persecution because it speaks to the people of St. Vincent in their own terms.

Chapter 11 looks at the religion in Brooklyn, at the pressures for change outside of St. Vincent, and at the response of the Converted to those influences. The self-definition required of the Converted in the foreign land (New York), one that is not necessary in St. Vincent where the Converted are so much a part of the local culture, provides a concise summary of the religion. Chapter 12 reviews the main points and suggests areas for future research.

"The Converted," "Converted people," and "Converted religion," are terms referring to the religion identified in legal documents in St. Vincent as Spiritual Baptists, and formerly as Shakers, Christian Pilgrims, Pilgrim Baptists, or Wesleyan Baptists. In the text, I alternate between the three terms most commonly used in St. Vincent—Converted, Spiritual Baptists, and Baptists. I refer to the people I studied as "respondents" rather than "informants," because all information I received from individuals in the field came in response to direct or implied questions. With the exception of historical figures, all names and identifying information of individuals have been changed. General statements of practice or belief reflect the view reported most often by my respondents or what I observed most often in churches I visited. While norms can be identified, the revelatory nature of the religion leads to a wide range of variety in practice.

All unattributed quotes are from my fieldnotes and were said by one or more Converted. Converted terms are italicized the first time they are used and may be found in the glossary. Quotations around a word or a phrase are not to indicate that

I think it is specious, but to denote that while I heard it from one or more Vincentians, it is not necessarily a term in general use. It should be noted that Vincentians have a unique accent and that many of them speak in *dialect* (or *dialek*), the Vincentian dialect. When I quote Vincentians, I spell the words the way that Vincentians spell them. For instance, although the word "there" is pronounced by most Vincentians as "dey," they spell it "there." However, I do not add words that were not said (e.g., the copula). I feel that the use of phoneticized orthography in writing Vincentian speech unnecessarily exoticizes the Vincentians. Their pronunciation departs no more from the written form than that of standard English. Many elements in the Vincentian Spiritual Baptist tradition are not customarily written, and for those I asked a number of Baptists to suggest a spelling and I have used the spelling indicated by the majority.

When referring to ethnic identification, the words *White* and *Black* are capitalized. In the text, I tend to use the words White and Black to refer, respectively, to people of European descent, and to people of African descent, because that reflects the usage of the Vincentians with whom I had contact. Although there is some debate as to which words should be used by anthropologists and how they should be spelled (e.g., Houk 1993), I use "White" and "Black" as proper nouns (or as adjectives derived from proper nouns) and capitalize them as such.

All quotes from the Bible are from the King James Version, the translation used by the Converted. I have removed the italics that the translators of that version use to indicate words and phrases not found in the original Hebrew and Greek. I capitalize the word *God* to refer to the Christian god, as Converted and other Christians use the term. Uncapitalized, *god* refers to an unspecified deity.

Throughout the text, I use the term "ritual experience." By this I mean all experience that is mediated or represented by ritual, not necessarily the ritual alone. Therefore, experiences in the spiritual world, which may take place in a ritual setting or in an ordinary dream, are all ritual experiences. The way of experiencing the spiritual world is established by ritual even when the ritual does not precipitate the experience (e.g., in a dream). Thus, ritual experience is in the perception of the experience, the performance of the rituals, as well as in the use of ritual goods and ideas apart from the ritual setting. Lakoff and Johnson (1980:234) say of rituals: "The real-world objects stand for entities in the world as defined by the conceptual system of the religion. The coherent structure of the ritual is commonly taken as paralleling some aspect of reality as it is seen through the religion." Both sides of the metonymy are included in my idea of ritual experience.

In the introduction to his history of religion, LaBarre (1972:4) suggests that the best one can hope for in understanding someone else's worldview is to see the same thing the teller sees when he points to it. As that is the aim of the Vincentian Converted (pointing out to others a richness in experience of life—ritual and eternal), good pointing is also my goal.

A Shouting

IMAGINE, IF YOU WILL, that the sky is dark like deep sea velvet, that the hill is steep like a water slide, that the legion crickets' chirp chirp is testing your ability to think your own thoughts, that the inky shadows in shrubs and trees are hiding men and monsters to challenge your way. If you were a Vincentian, this could be any night of any day of any year. This is a Vincentian night. On sundry evenings, you might also hear, as the clock ticks over to nine o'clock, in any part of the island, a ringing of bells and a singing vibrating from the hills that defeat all other sounds. You would know from friends and neighbors and by the vanloads of arriving visitors in Converted uniform that it is a *shouting*. If you live nearby, within a quarter mile or so, you might as well go watch.

Color and sound and bright catchy movement gleams from the windows and doors of the little church, about the same size as your own little house. You would likely know most of the people in the church, and as you approach, standing outside the windows with friends you have known all your life, other nonbelievers, you will hear sometime appeals to "those outside" to come into the joy of the Lord. There is something compelling about the way these folks represent that joy. As you arrive, they are "jumping spirit," "working *doption*." The congregation is singing an abruptly vigorous tune—no words, just the tune with polyrhythmic clapping, hummed and shouted melodies sitting on top of each other and rolling through the church like ocean waves. Seven or eight in the congregation are shoulder to shoulder, bouncing, eyes closed, beating the earth with one foot in time, breathing heavy in time, their cleaned and pressed uniforms shaking in time. The rest are urging them on—driving them on with the tune. As one "outside," all you know, perhaps, is that they have caught a spirit. Others outside mock them, imitating the movements, turning them into a sort of Calypso dance—the word "Soca Baptists" is ejected. Derision of the Spiritual Baptists, of the Converted, is normal behavior: These are the backward people, the poor people, backsliders, and sinners, dressing up like they