African-Atlantic Cultures and the South Carolina Lowcountry

African-Atlantic Cultures and the South Carolina Lowcountry examines perceptions of the natural world revealed by the religious ideas and practices of African-descended communities in South Carolina from the colonial period into the twentieth century. Focusing on Kongo nature spirits known as the *simbi*, Ras Michael Brown describes the essential role religion played in key historical processes, such as establishing new communities and incorporating American forms of Christianity into an African-based spirituality. This book illuminates how people of African descent engaged the spiritual landscape of the Lowcountry through their subsistence practices, religious experiences, and political discourse.

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Prologue

Apparently, in places that became part of the United States, "the gods of Africa died."[1] Scholars and other interested observers have often commented on the striking contrast between the religious cultures of African America and those of the larger African Diaspora, especially Cuba, Haiti, and Brazil. Explanations for the differences have focused on the relative influences of European-derived religious institutions or on the population characteristics of the trans-Atlantic trade in captives and plantation communities. An extraordinary range of factors external to the actual relationships people had with potent spirits has been entertained and examined to account for the death of African gods in North America, in part because it appeared that little or no evidence existed of these relationships. Yet, one variety of an African god arrived on these shores and made an enduring abode of the freshwater springs of the South Carolina Lowcountry. This kind of god was seen as a category of nature spirits known in Kongo as the *simbi* (*basimbi* or *bisimbi* in Kongo speech). People in the Kongo communities of West-Central Africa knew and relied on these powerful spirits to address all of the most critical aspects of daily life. They were so important to Kongo people that they also made the journey across *Kalunga* (the Atlantic Ocean) to Cuba, Haiti, Brazil, and as it turns out, the South Carolina Lowcountry. The simbi in the Lowcountry did indeed die, but they did so only after many generations of African-descended people passed into the land of the dead after becoming part of Lowcountry Protestant Christianity and twentieth-century political and

[1] Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South*, updated edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 86.

economic agendas destroyed their natural abodes. The story of the simbi in the Lowcountry reminds us that African-American religious cultures are very much a part of the spiritual world of the African Diaspora, and that the appearances of the cultural present do not always reveal the complexities of the cultural past.

Exploring the story of the simbi requires first being able to see them. This book begins that endeavor by placing the simbi in the Lowcountry and engaging ideas about how to interpret their presence and transformations over time. As expressions of the spiritual cultures of African-descended people, the simbi reflected the ways that Africans and their diaspora-born progeny managed cultural dialogues between the diverse peoples dispersed throughout the Atlantic world. Further, the simbi become most visible when we view them in those contexts where perceptions about the natural environment intersected with ideas and practices conventionally associated with religion. Doing so opens vantage points on African-inspired spiritual cultures often obscured by limited visions of religious experience that overlook the enduring significance of nature spirits.

Following the first chapter, the next three chapters examine the historical and cultural ties of the people and spirits shared by the Lowcountry and West-Central Africa during the era of enslavement. Chapter 2 assesses the transport and settlement of captive Africans in the Lowcountry from the 1670s through the 1740s, and the meanings of this process to Africans new to these lands. At the same time that they built the plantation landscape and created communities in the original settlement zone along the Ashley, Cooper, and Stono Rivers, captive Africans introduced the foundational elements of their notions about the physical and spiritual landscapes that linked the Lowcountry to Africa. One of the concepts that informed the perceptions of Africans concerning their place on South Carolina's physical landscape was an ancient "frontier ideology," through which West-Central Africans and West Africans understood the spiritual and social meanings of inhabiting new lands. Nature spirits such as the simbi that were central to this ideology comprise the focus of Chapter 3. This chapter outlines the contours of the Kongo spiritual landscape in which people conceived of the "land of the living" (the visible, physical world) and the "land of dead" (the invisible, spirit world) as embedded in the features of the natural environment. We proceed to a detailed appraisal of characteristics and functions of Kongo nature spirits, particularly the simbi, with special attention given to changes in the relationships between communities of the living and nature spirits stimulated by the

detrimental effects of Atlantic trade on West-Central Africa. This wealth of knowledge about the enduring meanings and evolving characteristics of the simbi accompanied captive Kongo people into the diaspora, where these spirits became part of the physical and spiritual landscapes of the Lowcountry. Chapter 4 examines the ways that African-descended people engaged the physical and spiritual dimensions of the Lowcountry's natural environment. They not only toiled in the fields of the plantations but also cultivated their own gardens, which they filled with African plants known by African names. They also ventured beyond the confines of the plantation to hunt and fish, using terms and techniques that Africans brought to South Carolina. The ideas and methods employed in these endeavors included objects and observances that acknowledged the spiritual aspects of farming, hunting, and fishing. The fourth chapter concludes by explaining the historical processes through which African newcomers placed the simbi in the freshwater springs of the Lowcountry and contemplating the meanings these nature spirits held for Africans and indigenous people enslaved in early Carolina.

The remainder of the book extends the connections revealed in the first four chapters to analyze the remarkable transformations of the simbi in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Chapter 5 identifies the simbi in the process known as "seeking," through which young people experienced spiritual transformation and earned acceptance into local Christian communities. During the period when African-descended communities in the Lowcountry began elaborating their own understanding of Protestant Christianity, the simbi made the transition, too, by becoming white beings, white bundles, and white babies encountered in the visions of seekers. The move into the imagined spiritual landscape of Christian novices, however, signaled a slow death for the simbi in this realm of religious experience. By the time that Protestant Christianity gained ascendancy, the white beings, bundles, and babies had lost relevance to Christian forms of spiritual change, and the simbi disappeared altogether from the process of seeking. Looking outside of the context of Christianity, we find another transformation of the simbi, in which these nature spirits took on the identity of mermaids in stories told by African-descended people about episodes of turmoil in the nineteenth century. Chapter 6 analyzes Lowcountry narratives that presented mermaids as agents of destruction who unleashed the power of nature through the rain and sea to punish people who held the mermaids captive. This innovation in the way people talked about the simbi appeared in similar expressions in other parts of the African-Atlantic world, including West-Central

Africa, Brazil, Cuba, and Haiti, where people also associated African water spirits with mermaids. In all of these cases, African-Atlantic mermaids possessed great authority and embodied qualities associated with motherhood and feminine power directed toward helping their spiritual children. By emphasizing the same characteristics, narratives about Lowcountry mermaids served as critiques of enslavement and oppression that allowed African Americans to express such subversive notions under the cover of "folklore" and fanciful tales. The book concludes by describing the destruction of the place where the simbi and African-descended people had coexisted for more than two and a half centuries following the completion of a hydroelectric project during the late 1930s and early 1940s. The inundation of the simbi abodes, displacement of the communities near them, and devastation of the natural environment that had been home to the simbi and their people marked the end of the story of the simbi in the Lowcountry.

Constructing a history that connects people, places, and spirits over vast distances and extended periods of time requires an equally broad range of sources. Discussions of society and culture in the Lowcountry from the late seventeenth century into the mid-nineteenth century rely on land warrants, probate inventories of estates, plantation records, newspaper advertisements, data on trans-Atlantic voyages, missionary reports, memoirs, and personal diaries. For the same period in West-Central Africa, writings by European missionaries, merchants, colonial agents, and other travelers provide information in Portuguese, French, Italian, and English. We must keep in mind, however, that the voices of African-descended people were often muffled, if not silenced, by the European and Euro-American authors of these documents. This changed, however, when Africans and African Americans had greater opportunities to contribute their own explanations of their cultures. They did so in the early decades of the twentieth century through ethnographic essays in Kongo and through recorded and transcribed interviews about folklore and spiritual culture in the Lowcountry. Balancing the strengths and limitations of all of these sources – whether written or oral, endogenous or exogenous – remains the challenge for any scholar of the past and especially for those attempting to research the elusive cultural histories of African-descended people in the diaspora. I have chosen to be as inclusive as possible with sources and to combine the array of materials in ways that amplify their explanatory power. In the end, my guiding principle has been to find and use evidence that allows this story of the simbi and their people to be seen and heard once more.

Acknowledgements

I begin by giving thanks to my ancestors. They opened paths in the wilderness in their lifetimes and continue to do so now.

I would like to thank several institutions for providing funds, facilities, and other forms of assistance during the past two decades in support of the research that informs this book. The Department of History at the University of Georgia provided travel funds that allowed me to begin archival work. I received generous support for research and project development through two endeavors sponsored by the United Negro College Fund/Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Programs, particularly the UNCF/Mellon Faculty International Summer Seminar in 2002 and a UNCF/Mellon Faculty Doctoral Fellowship in 2003. The Office of Academic Affairs and the Department of Philosophy and Religion at Dillard University awarded grants in 2003 that extended my access to materials on African-Atlantic spiritual cultures. When I was at Northwestern University as a Katrina Fellow in 2005, the Alice Kaplan Institute for the Humanities supplied housing, office space, and access to the holdings of the Northwestern University Library, most notably the materials housed in the Melville J. Herskovits Library of African Studies. The College of Liberal Arts and the Department of History at Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, provided support for travel on several occasions since 2007 and course release in 2011. Finally, I offer thanks to the archivists and other staff members for expert and friendly assistance at the South Carolina Historical Society, the South Caroliniana Library at the University of South Carolina, the South Carolina Department of Archives and History, the Southern Historical Collection and the Southern Folklore Collection at the University of North Carolina, the Will W. Alexander Library at

Dillard University, the Melville J. Herskovits Library of African Studies at Northwestern University, the Indiana University Archives of Traditional Music, the Howard-Tilton Memorial Library at Tulane University, the J. Edgar and Louise S. Monroe Library at Loyola University New Orleans, and the Morris Library at Southern Illinois University, Carbondale.

This book draws from many relationships cultivated over many years in many places. I will not presume to reveal the nature of all those relationships here. I hope that the people named below will readily recall our connections and enjoy knowing that they helped make this book real. My early years in the academic world at South Carolina State College/University allowed me to get to know Alex Azad, Winston Denmark, Dawn Evans, Stanley Harrold, Ricky Hill, William Hine, Cornelius St. Mark, and all the other Bulldogs that made State my home. The churches and people of the 7th District of the African Methodist Episcopal Church provided a nurturing context to explore spiritual matters, and I grew a great deal from observing and talking with the Reverend Allen W. Parrott and the Reverend John H. Gillison. The community I belonged to at Bowling Green State University was built around Lillian Ashcraft-Eason, Djisovi Eason, Lawrence Friedman, and Tom Klein, who were much needed during that transition. The University of Georgia presented me with the opportunity to work with exceptional scholars and colleagues including Steve Estes, Michael Gomez, Peter C. Hoffer, Mark Huddle, John Inscoe, Sonja Lanehart, William McFeely, Diane Batts Morrow, John Morrow, Eve Troutt Powell, Robert Pratt, David Schoenbrun, and Michael Winship. Many people at Dillard University in New Orleans provided encouragement and friendship, especially Reverend Gail Bowman, Sylvia Carey, Al Colon, Isabel Cristina Ferreira dos Reis, Dan Frost, Henry Lacey, Donna Patterson, Darryl Peterkin, Rhetta Seymour, Dorothy Smith, Marshall Stevenson, Barbara Thompson, Chiquita Webb, and Kerrie Cotten Williams. My affiliation with Dillard led to ties with Cynthia Neal Spence and Gabrielle Samuel-O'Brien at the United Negro College Fund/Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Programs office at Spelman College. Through my participation in the UNCF/Mellon Faculty International Summer Seminar in 2002, I had the chance to work with Wole Soyinka, Arturo Lindsay, Kokahvah Zauditu-Selassie, and Opal Moore.

The fall of 2005 marked a fundamental break in my life, as the failure of the levees in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina changed everything. In addition to being fortunate enough to carry relationships from life before Katrina into life after Katrina, I have had the pleasure of creating

new ties in difficult circumstances. Elzbieta Foeller-Pituch and Darlene Clark Hine made Northwestern University a comforting and productive academic home during my first exile from New Orleans in 2005. My second exile took me to Southern Illinois University in Carbondale, where I have come to rely on a number of people including Michael Batinski, Father Joseph Brown, Randy Burnside, Andrew Bynom, Kay Carr, Mariola Espinosa, Holly Hurlburt, Robbie Lieberman, Rhetta Seymour, Alan Vaux, Jonathan Wiesen, and Natasha Zaretsky.

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people. I hope that the final version of the work truly represents their invaluable contributions. Any errors that remain despite their dedicated interventions are solely my responsibility.

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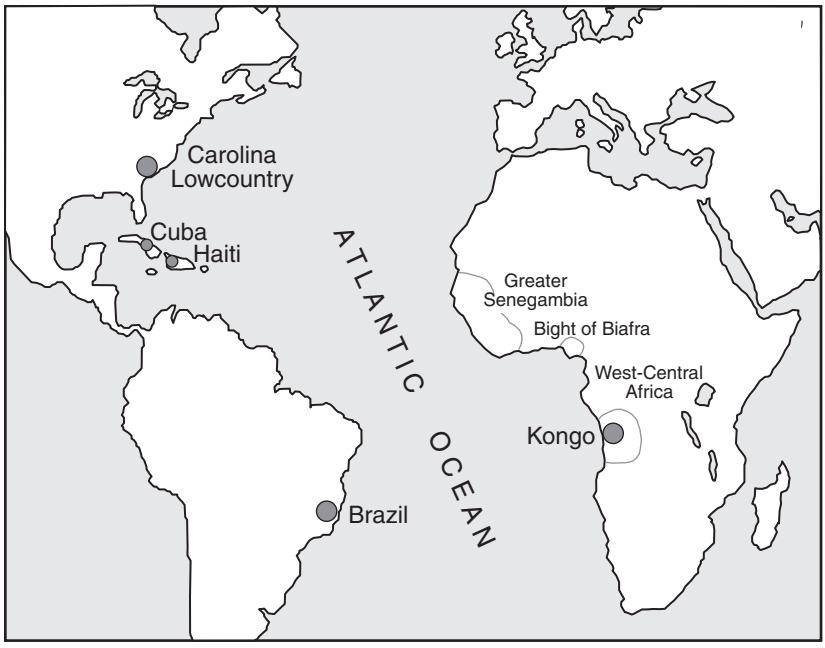
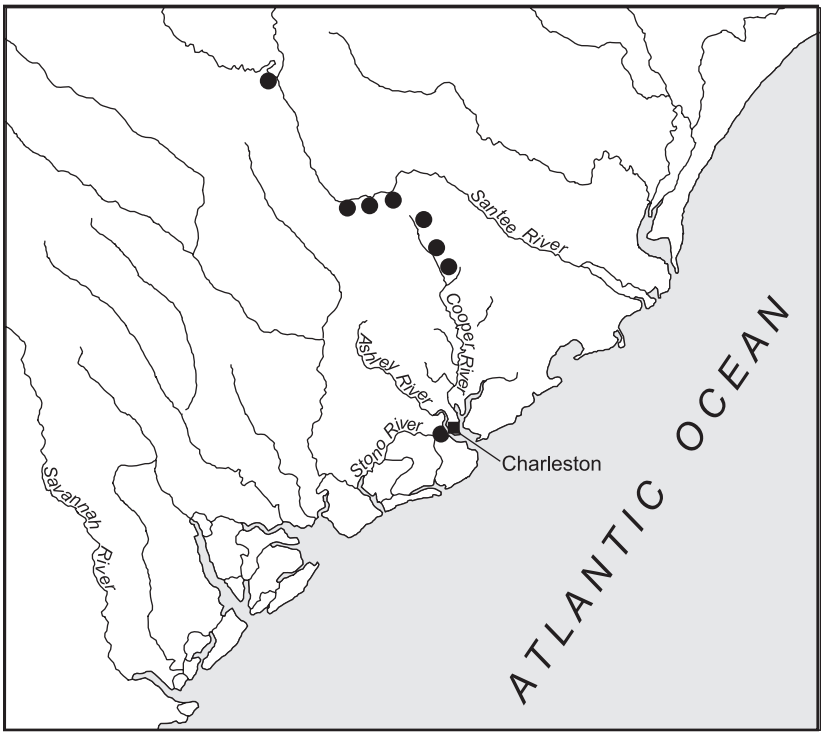
Abbreviations Used in Notes

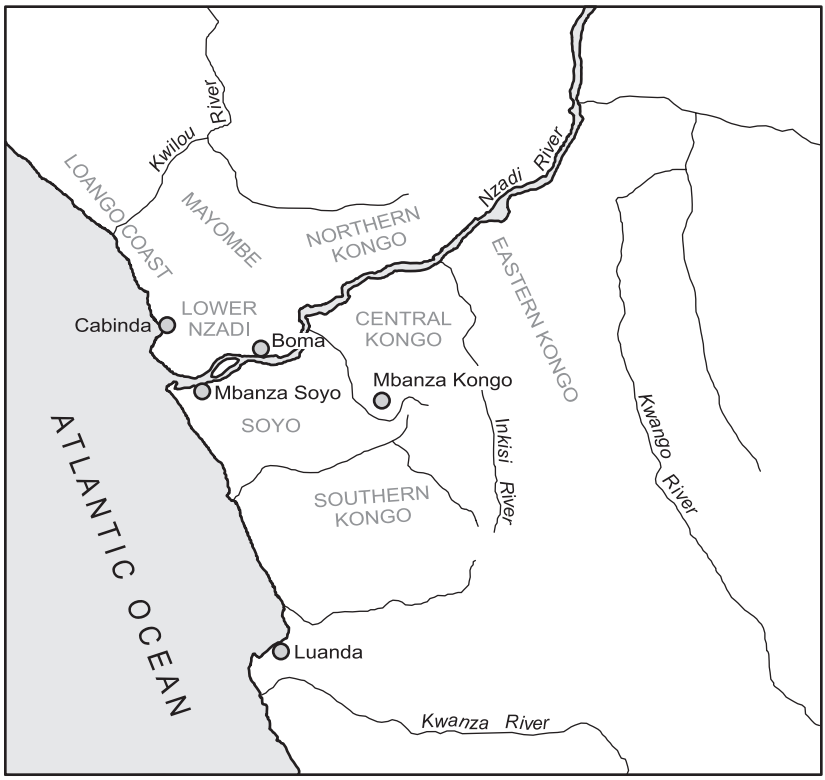
LDTC	Lorenzo Dow Turner Collection, Georgia and South Carolina, Sea Islands, 1931–33, Indiana University Archives of Traditional Music (Bloomington)
LDTP	Lorenzo Dow Turner Papers, Melville J. Herskovits Library, Northwestern University (Evanston, Illinois)
RASP	*Records of Ante-Bellum Southern Plantations from the Revolution through the Civil War* (microfilm), edited by Kenneth M. Stampp (Frederick, MD: University Publications of America, 1985)
RSP-SCDAH	Inventories of Estates and Miscellaneous Records, Records of the Secretary of the Province, South Carolina Department of Archives and History (Columbia)
SCG	*South Carolina Gazette*
SCHS	South Carolina Historical Society (Charleston)
SCL	South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina (Columbia)
SFC	Southern Folklore Collection, University of North Carolina (Chapel Hill)
SHC	Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina (Chapel Hill)
Voyages Database	Voyages Database, 2009. *Voyages: The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database*. http://www.slavevoyages.org
WPA-SCL	Works Progress Administration, Federal Writers' Project, Manuscript Collection, South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina (Columbia)



MAP 1. The Simbi in the African-Atlantic World. Prepared by Kay J. Carr.



MAP 2. South Carolina Lowcountry and Simbi Locations. Prepared by Kay J. Carr.



MAP 3. West-Central Africa. Prepared by Kay J. Carr.