



# Spiritual and Physical Borderlands: Exhibiting the Invisible Presence of God and Other Afro-Caribbean Kindred in Old Bank, Panama

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## Abstract

Using my 14 months of ethnographic fieldwork, I analyze how disputed narratives and experiences related to kinship, sorcery and the two different Christian doctrines of Methodism and Adventism overlap in Old Bank, Panama. I focus on a museum exhibition about the local funerary tradition that was designed in collaboration by the dwellers and me in 2016, and argue that Old Bank's community has two specific characteristics. First, it cannot be described as an ethnic unity due to its mixed and alien ancestry and composition. Second, it does not correspond to a unified religious collective. Indeed, the local religious emphasis does not lie in an affiliation to a doctrine, but in disputed Protestant routines, which were inherited from both black Caribbean ancestors and from biblical parents (including God, Adam and Eve). Thus, I describe how the community of Old Bank crosses many physical and spiritual borders, blurring the edges between Methodism and Adventism, Panama and the Caribbean. In so doing, I investigate the possibility of making an analogy between two modalities of invisible presences: on the one hand, the present invisibility of beings such as God, spirits and sorcerers; and on the other hand, the recurrent absent presence of emigrant kindred.

**Keywords:** Spiritual Borders; Community of Old Bank; Methodism and Adventism

## Introduction: *Ui Acostum Fi Ui Community*

It was late... three in the morning according to the clock on the living room wall in the home of my deceased friend, a resident of the village of Old Bank, in the Panamanian region of Bocas del Toro - precisely in the island off the Atlantic coast called Bastimentos. Many hours have passed since people started gathering at the house and the singing started, around nine in the evening. At midnight, the Black, Christian woman who was leading the singing addressed a prayer to God and

the family distributed food to the presents. At sunrise, a final prayer to God would put an end to that final funerary meeting - termed *Nain Nait* (Nine Night) in the native Panamanian Creole English. Most people were already sleepy, despite or because of the consumption of food and drink throughout the night, and the feeling of fatigue was slowly overcoming the pain of grief. The ambience of my deceased friend's Nine Night was still dominated by the Christian hymns being sung in the living room, and by the conversations, animated by alcohol and the playing of domino, coming from the yard.

Gradually, the living room and the yard became less and less crowded, and I remained in the living room, singing with the family and friends of M. She was a middle-aged woman, who had been a good friend of mine and had died after having been sick for almost a year with a disease no doctor could precisely diagnose.

As in the other Nine Nights I attended in Old Bank, I followed the lead of the same three Black, Christian women who always guided the singing of hymns. This singing is the focal point of the funerary meetings and the hymns are chosen from a hymnal locally termed Sankey, in reference to the author of the songbook printed in Jamaica. Only four copies of this hymnbook are still available at the village, and the Black Christian women who own them inherited the books from their Afro-Caribbean ancestors. "*Nain Nait dé ui acostum fi ui comiuniti*", people often state ("The Nine Nights are a tradition of the community"). This tradition corresponds to a sequence of at least three meetings, called *Setop* (Set Up), *Fiuneral* (Funeral) and *Nain Nait* (Nine Night), which follow the death of someone from Old Bank, even if the person dwells elsewhere. The Set Up and the Nine Night are wakes organized by the deceased family respectively in the first and ninth night after death, at their family house (where the deceased lived or at least used to dwell as a child). Friends and relatives who dwell in the village or emigrated elsewhere take part in this organization, and the invisible presence of those who can't make it to the funerary meetings, but send money to help, is as crucial as the visible presence of those who attend them.

Between the first and last funerary meeting, a Funeral is held at Methodist or the Adventist church (the only two religious institutions of the village). The pastor celebrates a service in honor to the deceased person, during which he addresses prayers to God and leads the hymn singing from the church hymnbook, while the presents approach the open coffin to see their beloved one for the last time. Afterwards, the closest male relatives and friends of the deceased carry the coffin to the cemetery and those who were at church follow them in an informal procession that occupies the whole width of Old Bank's Main Street. During the burial more hymns are sung, as the presents start to dissipate, walking towards the family house, where the family distributes food for everybody that reaches, saving some for the many relatives and friends who travelled from elsewhere specifically to attend the funerary meetings.

In the two years since I had begun my ethnographic fieldwork in Old Bank, I had attended the funerary meetings of six inhabitants. The funerary meetings that were held for my friend M., however, were the first that I attended until sunrise, singing for hours after the people in attendance began to fall asleep in the many chairs that were placed in the

living room. Those who did not fall asleep left without saying goodbye, as I did when the meeting was over at sunrise.

"You don't say you are leaving because you don't want the deceased spirit to know that. Otherwise the spirit will follow you to your house!" I was told this by a male friend of mine at a previous Nine Night we attended together. In that case the Funeral had been postponed until the ninth day, so that it would coincide with the final funerary ceremony. I was too tired to wait for the final prayer and announced, inadvertently, that I would go home. After listening to my friend, though, I hesitated for a second, uncertain if I should leave and risk being followed, or if I should stay, but he reassured me, laughing: "Don't worry! It is just our community's tradition. We are with God and have nothing to fear."

I smiled and left, but I made sure to take all the precautions that I had heard people take when they come back from visiting the cemetery or attending a funerary meeting. On my way back home, I rubbed my feet on the ground to clean my shoes sole and make sure that I cleaned them from any cemetery dust accumulated during the Funeral, as this material remanence "could open the door for an undesired spirit." When I reached home, I spun around three times and entered the door walking backwards "to confuse the spirit." Since my friend gave me that warning, I always kept those precautions in mind and never forgot to perform them. After the Nine Night for my friend M., for example, I left her family's house with the small group that had remained awake, singing together until the very end. We did not say goodbye as we dispersed, each walking towards our own house. I do not know if they rubbed their shoes, spun, and entered their houses walking backwards, but I admit that I did it all, uncertain if I was accompanied by the invisible presence of God and I had nothing to fear, or if I was being followed by an equally invisible presence of a spirit that I needed to confuse...

As mentioned in the brief ethnographic description above, the sequence of funerary meetings that together form the Nine Nights are repeatedly defined by Old Bank's inhabitants as a communal tradition. Through the usage of the terms "tradition" and "community", the villagers not only stress the importance of the Nine Nights, but recognize explicitly the centrality that these funerary meetings have in the creation of the collective unity of Old Bank. The locals also emphasized this in three specific actions that they directed at me. First, they informed me about the Nine Nights, assuming that such a tradition would be of interest to an anthropologist. Second, they invited me to attend the Nine Night every time there was one in the village and explained that, if I wished to go, I (and anyone else, including foreigners) would be welcome at the meeting. Third, they designed, in collaboration with me, an exhibition about the

Nine Nights as part of museum about the history and culture of the community.

The museum was conceived by the village's representative, and the community board plan to build in the village. It is currently in its funding stage, but in January 2016 I attended four planning meetings with the village's representative and the group in charge of the museum design. Afterwards, this group wrote the Museum Proposal and started the long process of applying for grants, which is still ongoing nowadays.

By helping design an exhibition about the Nine Nights, attending them and collecting narratives about these funerary meetings, I developed a growing interest for them. Such interest was related not only to the Nine Nights' ability to forge a strong communal experience for Old Bank's population [1-4]<sup>1</sup>. Rather, I was concerned with the following questions: What community do the Nine Nights create? How can this community be defined? What are its forms? How can the boundaries of this community be conceived? How can they be exhibit in a coherent ethnography or in any other form - for example, in a museum exhibition about Old Bank?

Such questions emerged as central issues during my field work due to the following apparent incoherence. On the one side, the Old Bank inhabitants acted together and referred to themselves explicitly as a "community" in relation to their Nine Nights. On the other side, though, the village's population did not match the cluster of people who came together to organize and attend the Nine Nights - which included foreigners and emigrants, as mentioned above. Moreover, the strong experience of community created by the Nine Nights contrasted with the extreme lack of communal identity and action that seemed to characterize Old Bank daily life. The villagers rarely act together or refer to themselves as a collective unity. This lack of communal social identification or action is explicitly recognized by them, who frequently affirm that "most people in Old Bank care only about themselves" and that they "are all family, but don't live like family."

Both my research and the museum were initially based on the territorial unity that is officially named Bastimentos, by the Panamanian government, and is called Old Bank by the villagers. In fact, the museum was intended to exhibit the community's history and culture, but there was no concordance about what the term "community" corresponds to empirically, who it includes, where its boundaries reside,

<sup>1</sup> The ability of a funerary ceremony to forge a strong communal experience is not unique to the *Nain Nait*. Funerary ceremonies are analyzed as essential elements to create and reinforce collective solidarity by the following classic and contemporary authors: Hertz (1909), M. Smith (1962), Turner (1969), Olwig (2009) etc.

and how it should be described. In this paper, I build a bridge between applied and theoretical anthropology as I take the discussion surrounding the design of a museum exhibition about the Nine Nights funerary meeting as a starting point to analyze the forms and boundaries of the village's community.

Using my 14 months of ethnographic fieldwork in Old Bank, I analyze the native concepts of community and tradition that emerge from the Nine Nights. Specifically, I draw attention to the local narratives and experiences related to kinship, sorcery, Methodism and Adventism that overlap in these funerary ceremonies and argue that such overlap is grounded on the mixed and alien ancestry of the population. In fact, this ancestry is precisely what allows Old Bank inhabitants to refer to themselves as a "community" even if they do not identify collectively with a single, unified ethnic or religious group. In the following sections of the paper, then, I show how the community of Old Bank crosses many borders. In the first section, I describe how it blurs the edges among Panamanian, Caribbean and other territories; in the second, between Methodism and Adventism, and also between Christian and African spirituality; in the third, between the physical world of kinship and the spiritual one of religion. Finally, in the conclusion, I investigate the possibility of making an analogy between two modalities of invisible presence: on the one side, the present invisibility of beings such as God, spirits and sorcerers; and on the other, the recurrent absent presence of emigrant kindred.

### Blurring Physical Borders

According to data I collected during fieldwork, 95% of the 1200 inhabitants of Old Bank are of alien Afro-Caribbean ancestry. Afro-Caribbean refers to the idea while they were born in Panama, they descended from Black Protestant West Indians free workers and their first language is the Panamanian Creole English (while the national language, Spanish, is a second language learned at school, together with English) [5,6]. These West Indians arrived to Central America in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, primarily from the British Caribbean, and were employed in varied British and US-American economic endeavors. Examples of these economic opportunities were the construction of the inter-oceanic railroad in Panama and Costa Rica, the building of the Panama Canal, and the operation of the Banana Industry in Colombia, Panama, and Nicaragua. These West Indian's descendants established themselves not only in the Panamanian region of Bocas del Toro, but also in Colón and Panamá, as well as the neighboring Costa Rican region of Limón, as well as other American and Caribbean territories [7-9]. Because of their Afro-Caribbean alien ancestry, 95% of Old Bank inhabitants don't identify with the Panamanian national race (the Latino people, who have mixed white, indigenous and black ancestry). Moreover, due to their alien ancestry, Old Bank inhabitants

don't identify with the largest Afro-Panamanian group either - which scholars and the Panamanian government label as Afro-Colonial, a group formed by Catholic African descendants whose ancestors were brought to Panama as slaves in the 16th century. Thus, while 95% of the inhabitants describe themselves individually as Black and Panamanian, they struggle to identify with the national African Diasporic collective, and by extension, with any global unified African-descended identity.

In fact, the locals do not explicitly identify with any regional African-descended identities, such as Afro-Latin American or Afro-Caribbean. They do not recognize their own African legacy or an enslaved colonial past with the same significance as these regional identities, which are grounded in practices that are traced to Africa and in a common history of slavery, rebellion and emancipation. Rather, their family histories start in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, with the arrival of their ancestors from the Caribbean and also from the Atlantic Central American coast (mainly from Jamaica, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and Colombia). These geographic origins, though, serve only as starting points: the people have no particular interest in their ancestor's original territories and they do not pursue kinship ties to this ancestry. Indeed, despite their Caribbean and Central American ancestry, Old Bank residents do not consider themselves an immigrant community oriented around an alien national identity. They do not emphasize a West Indian identity, but the West Indian heritage in itself, and the historic status of their elders as free Black workers in the Caribbean and Americas. As such, the population does consider itself Black like its West Indian ancestors, but it does not see itself exactly as African-descended and it does not identify as West Indian.

The village's Black inhabitants do not have only a West Indian ancestry, but rather they have a mixed one. The people of Old Bank emphasize in their family histories that they also descended from White Europeans and from Indigenous and Latino Americans (among others), who came to the village after the Afro-Caribbeans and are the primary ancestors 5% of the inhabitants. In contrast to the ethnic majority, the remaining 5% of Old Bank's inhabitants do not identify as Black but mention many foreign nationalities (mainly Chinese, US-American, German, Argentinian and Dutch), as well as varied ethnic identities (White, Latino and Indigenous Ngoebe). Thus, the entire village's population is rooted in multiple ethnicities and physical origins. Such mixed and alien ancestry and composition challenges any attempt to label the community of Old Bank as a single racial/ethnic group or a unified native/original collective of any kind. Most foreigners arrived at the village in the early 2000s, during the touristic boom of Bocas Del Toro region. They created mostly commercial relationships with the established inhabitants, buying land from them (or from the government) to open

shops, restaurants and hotels. Since the beginning of the 2<sup>st</sup> century, many Black and Latino people also became entrepreneurs in the tourist industry. Nowadays, 99% of the population works with tourism and men are usually boat-tour drivers or cooks, while women are generally employed as wait staff, cleaners or cooks.

Old Bank has only small-to-medium touristic infrastructures (3 shops, 12 restaurants, and 23 hotels, each with 15 rooms on average) and receives an estimated 200 tourists daily (Panamanian and foreigners), rising to 700 visitors per day during high season. Every family has approximately two members living outside Old Bank, to study or work in a bigger city (in Panama, Costa Rica, USA or in an European country). These emigrants are often hosted by relatives (both genealogical and affine) who were born in these larger cities and visit Old Bank periodically, where their kindred accommodate them. Therefore the size and composition of the population (formed by locals and outsiders) varies according to presence or absence, not only of tourists, but also of relatives and friends that either emigrate elsewhere or frequently come to the village (and are a recurrent absent presence).

Considering that both dwellers and travelers form Old Bank's community, it does not correspond to the territorial unity that is officially named Bastimentos or to the population reported in any census or quantitative research. Every moment that someone arrives or departs, the community grows bigger or smaller, building a bridge between Panama and multiple national states. In this sense, then, Old Bank is always transnational, even if (as mentioned above), it cannot be described as an immigrant or diasporic community of any kind.

### Blurring Spiritual Borders

The village's community cannot be described as a unified religious collective. Most of the locals (95%) believe in God and perform daily Christian routines, such as quoting Christian expressions, keeping a Bible at home and making sure that their children attend weekly religious services. However, only 10% are active church members, and these are divided between the Methodist and the Adventist doctrines. The majority of the population emphasizes an affiliation not to a church, but to the performance of daily Christian routines. Old Bank should not be characterized generally as a Christian community either, because they stress three differences in relation to Catholicism, the biggest Christian doctrine: they study the Bible, they don't have saints and they have the Nine Nights. Moreover, Old Bank differs from other Protestant groups in the world, because the villagers' religious experiences are only indirectly connected to their universal Biblical parents (including God, Adam and Eve).

Instead, religious identity is directly connected to Afro-Caribbean ancestry, just as is the ceremony of Nine Nights. Both of these experiences are referred to by locals as traditions “received by our elders.” Indeed, they stress that this Afro-Caribbean legacy is in their blood, in their Bible and Sankey books, and in the invisible beings that surround and inhabit their bodies (connected to God, sorcery and the Devil).

The Nine Nights are the only meetings that everybody in Old Bank is expected to go and that are actually attended by most of the people. This is true for foreigners and non-relatives of the deceased, as well as for his or her relatives and friends who emigrated elsewhere (but are a recurrent absent presence in the village). This is also true for the growing number of those who see the funerary meetings as expensive, meaningless and useless. If questioned about the reason to attend the Nine Nights, some would say “to sympathize with the deceased family and share their loss”. However, most would simply state, “this is the funeral of the black people” or “we always hold Nine Nights for our dead”, frequently adding that “if a family can’t organize the Nine Night, the community comes together to help”.

It follows from such statements that the local Nine Nights are associated, not only with the categories of tradition and community, but also of family and black people. In fact, these funerary meetings are qualified with the possessive adjective “our”, and described as something that, simultaneously, belongs to the black people and that the community organizes “for the family”. Thus, it corresponds to something that defines the collective unity of Old Bank’s community, which in turn might be temporarily described as the black people that perform the Nine Nights together and that, if necessary, come together to help the family organize them.

Such collective unity is smaller than the black people as a whole. In fact, the locals are well aware that only the Afro-Caribbean people perform the Nine Nights. In Panama, the Afro-Colonials share with the Latinos a different sequence of funerary ceremonies, termed *novenario*. They correspond to prayer meetings that are held at the deceased house for nine nights and are connected to the Catholic novena tradition, which is present in varied Christian countries in Latin America and elsewhere [10]. In contrast to the funerary meetings celebrated by the Afro-Caribbean people, the Catholic novena does not last until sunrise and it does not revolve around the singing of hymns. Moreover, the Nine Nights performed by the Afro-Caribbean people in Panama and Costa Rica are slightly different than the funerary meetings that receive the same name in other countries [11,12]. The most known and studied Nine Nights are the Jamaican ones, which revolve around the singing of hymns selected from the Sankey hymnbook as well. They also consist

of the distribution of food, the consumption of alcohol, and the performance of actions intended to prevent any threat from invisible spirits – such as the preventions mentioned in the ethnographic description that begins the paper. Despite these similarities, though, Jamaican Nine Nights include the playing of drums and moments of dance, resembling more a party than the Panamanian and Costa Rican ones do [13,14].

The community defined by Old Bank’s Nine Nights does not correspond to the Afro-Caribbean ethnic group (of Panama and Costa Rica or of Jamaica and elsewhere). In fact, when the villagers affirm that their community comes together to perform the Nine Night and to help the family organize it, they do not mean that all Afro-Caribbean people do so. A similar point can be made about the local Christian routines. Old Bank inhabitants often say that “everybody in the community believes in God” and that “everyone in the village has a Bible in their house, but no images of saints, like the Catholics do”. If asked how they learned about God and the Bible, they normally say that “this is a tradition we inherited from our elders”. Like the Nine Nights, the daily Christian routines are associated with tradition and community. No explicit reference is made to family or ethnicity, but local Christianity is described as something that the villagers inherited from their elders as a collective “we”. In addition, such collective unity is defined by a negative religious affiliation (non-Catholic), through which the villagers localize themselves ethnically in Panama, marking their difference from the Afro-Colonial group. However, the community defined by these daily Christian routines does not correspond to the Afro-Caribbean ethnic group. In fact, Old Bank inhabitants do not know if all the Afro-Caribbean people inherited their religious beliefs from their elders, because they cannot know if all of them share the same elders. In contrast, though, Old Bank inhabitants do know that their community shares the same elders and that they inherited their Christianity and their Nine Nights from them.

According to the oral histories I collected throughout my fieldwork and specifically during the four museum planning meetings I attended in 2016, 95% of the narratives about the local families begin with the arrival of a black ancestor in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century. They travelled in the same period and passing through the same paths that brought, from the Caribbean to Old Bank, the missionaries who carried the Methodist and Adventist messages. These oral histories begin precisely in the arrival of these doctrines and ancestors, bringing together information about dead relatives, spirits, sorcery and Christianity. Indeed, the village has had Methodism influence for 200 years and this is precisely the whole time span of Old Bank’s known history. Regarding Adventism, it has been in the village for around 100 years and people know that their families have

been there for this exactly same amount of time. Therefore, African and Christian spiritualities have been together since the beginning of the history of Old Bank and its people. Neither can the missionaries (with their Christianity and Bibles), nor the black ancestors (with their Nine Nights and Sankey hymnbook) be considered more outside or more inside. Likewise, neither is more traditional or more modern. Alternatively, both spiritualities cohere in Old Bank and, specifically, in the Nine Nights and in the daily Christian Routines.

The present day inhabitants of the village repeatedly emphasized that they received the following inheritances from their elders: their blood and last name (shared substances and vital capacities essential to the production of local kinship), and also their Christian Sanky and Bible (books central to the Nine Nights and to their everyday Christianity). Through these books, then, the locals inherited their understandings about how to relate with the living and the dead, as well as an awareness of the existence of the non-human invisible agencies of God, Devil and spirits, which can be manipulated through Christianity and sorcery. The latter is locally defined as the knowledge to manipulate the agency of bad spirits connected to the Devil or to the dead, while Christianity is described as the knowledge to manipulate the agency of the good spirit related to God.

### Blurring Kinship Borders

It is common to hear the villagers affirm that in Old Bank “we are all family”. In fact, 95% of them descend from people who share the same six last names, which are known to be the last names of the six first Afro-Caribbean people who arrived in the village. Therefore, they know that their ancestors are the same six ones and that all of them are related. Kinship, then, is the third element (together with the Nine Nights and the daily Christian routines) in relation to which they refer to themselves as a collective unity. In contrast to the other two elements, though, the locals do not act together as a unity in relation to their kinship, and they state explicitly that “we are all family, but we don’t live all like family”. Conforming to the local notions of relatedness and personhood, every person inherits from their ancestors (both patrilineal and matrilineal) their blood and a set of three kinds of invisible spirits - the soul, the good spirit and the bad spirit. Blood is a vital material substance that makes the body, while the spirits are fundamental life capacities that transform the body into an agent being. The villagers say that everyone experiences on regular basis the presence of these spirits, which are present inside the body (specifically in the mind and heart). In fact, the soul is the individual, unique and free-willing part of the body responsible for desiring, thinking and choosing, while the good and bad spirits suggest, respectively, the good

and bad actions that the person should take or not. Such good and bad spirits, though, also surround the body and can be manipulated through Christianity or sorcery in order to protect or threaten the person.

The soul and the good spirit are connected to God, a holy and almighty non-human being that is the creator of Adam and Eve, who are in turn, the physical ancestors of every person that ever lived and will live. The bad spirits, though, are not linked to God, but one of His spiritual creatures, the Devil. After the original sin of Adam and Eve (who disrespected God’s order) the Devil got inside the once perfect and immortal human body and transformed it into a mortal one, with the Devil’s bad spirit inside. Adam and Eve transmitted their body to all their descendants, who share their blood and their three kinds of spirit. Since all human beings were created by God and all descend from Adam and Eve, all are related. However, the inhabitants would not group together all mankind and refer to this collective unity as a family.

Not all human beings believe in God and recognize that they share the same Biblical, spiritual ancestors and this act of recognition is central to the native concepts of relatedness. The locals only described two people as relatives when both know that they share a common spiritual and/ or physical ancestor. Precisely because Old Bank inhabitants know and recognize that they share the same Caribbean and Biblical ancestors, they affirm that they “are all family”. This affirmation means that they are mutually co-present one inside the other [15]. In fact, they inhabit each other’s body, since the same kind of blood and spirits of one person are present inside the body of the other.

At the same time, though, Old Banks inhabitants say that not all of them live like family, meaning that not all of them share material substances and life capacities between themselves, through ongoing nurturing and caring actions. Such actions might be summarized in three categories: providing food (by fishing, gardening, buying, cooking and/ or breast feeding); communicating (by interacting, telling stories about their Biblical and Caribbean ancestors, and/ or transmitting the Sankey hymnbook); supporting (by transmitting the last name, educating, punishing, forgiving, praying, healing and/ or performing the Nine Night).

The material substances and life capacities shared by those who “live like family” are essential components of the local kinship (just like the blood and spirits). Through them, people become even more mutually co-present one inside the other, inhabiting even more each other’s body and official identity, reaching the level that seems to correspond to the correct or ideal one. In fact, Old Bank inhabitants

frequently say that all those who “are family” “should be like best friends”, explaining that when relatives live like family, they communicate, support emotionally and provide food when they live in Old Bank or elsewhere - for example, when they emigrate. As far as they perform these actions through generations, then, they remain an absent presence in the village and blood relatives will always recognize each other and their descendants will always know and recognize that they share at least one common ancestor. The difference between people who live or not like family is central to the native practices and ideas about relatedness and personhood. I would argue, though, that when Old Bank inhabitants mention this difference in reference to a collective we (like in the expression “we are all family”), they extend its centrality to the concept of community as well. In fact, this difference allows Old Banks inhabitants to use the term family in reference to collective unities smaller than the community and also allow them to apply the term as synonym of community. Those who simultaneously “are families” and “live like family”, are usually referred to as “close family” or as “sister/brother from the church”. “Close family” corresponds to the most common usage of the term family, embracing people that recognize that they share a common physical ancestor and, simultaneously, “live like family” in the same house or have the same last name as those who do. “Sister/brother from the church” corresponds to the collective unity formed by people that recognize that they share a common spiritual ancestor and, simultaneously, “live like family” in the same church or share the same religious affiliation as those who do.

### Conclusion: Old Bank’s Community and Its Invisible Presences

Drawing from the data analyzed in the paper, I contend that understanding the difference between people who live or not like family is crucial to fully address the theoretical and applied questions raised in this paper regarding the forms and boundaries of the village’s community. Such collective unity is formed by Black Christian people who simultaneously “are family” (i.e. have the same blood) and “live like family.” According to this native expression, community is defined as performing the ongoing nurturing and caring acts, which include the Nine Nights and the other daily Christian routines inherited through kinship. Body, family, and community are all formed by the performance of tradition, which is not grounded in a singular identity, but on a mixed and alien ancestry. The Black and Christian collective of Old Bank does not embody all African-descended and Christian peoples, but at the same time, it actively creates space for those who are not Black or Christian, including people from distinct families, ethnicities, and religions. In as far as they “live like family,” they receive the Afro-Caribbean inheritance of the

Sankey hymnbook and the Bible in their bodily performance, even if they do not share the same blood or body. Old Bank’s community, then, points to new understandings about the relationships among religion, kinship, race, and ethnicity. In fact, it blurs the ethnic and territorial borders among Latin America, the Caribbean and Africa. It also blurs the edges among different Christian denominations and African spirituality. Finally, it crosses the borders between the physical world of kinship and the spiritual one of religion. In the village, body, family, and community are all formed by the invisible presence of emigrant kindred, sorcery, spirits and God.

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