

# JOURNAL of FOLKLORE RESEARCH

*Spiritual Merchants: Religion, Magic and Commerce.* By Carolyn Morrow Long. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2001. Pp. xxix + 251. Appendix, notes, index, 60 black-and-white photos. \$38.00 cloth, \$19.00 paper.

Carolyn Morrow Long adds to the growing literature on religious material culture and iconography with this book on mass-marketed versions of traditional folk remedies and magical charms in African-based New World religions. Almost anyone who has wandered into a *botánica* or religious supply store has seen oils, sprays and candles that promise to bring good luck, chase away negative influences, or win love, money, and court cases. In Los Angeles, even regular supermarkets sell candles dedicated to the *siete potencias Africanas*, the seven African powers.

Sometimes these items are marketed as "curios" to deflect accusations of fraudulent advertising. But for many practitioners of African-based religions such as Lucumi (Santería), Vodun, and Palo, as well as for some African-Americans in the rural south, these objects are quite serious. With the passion and attention of a long-time curator at the Smithsonian, Long explores the roots of these products in traditional African and African diasporic magical practice and traces their development into modern commodities.

The book first explores the historical roots of magical objects in African religions. In their original contexts, as part of a detailed system of ritual and cosmology, they served to heal physical or spiritual illness and to protect the bearer against magical attack. Most magical objects consisted of natural materials---roots, herbs, and stones---selected according to the principles of imitative or contagious magic. Long begins with the Yoruba, Fon, and Kongo religions brought to the New World by enslaved Africans, following their trail through the thicket of European influences and into contemporary practices: Lucumi and Palo in the Latin Catholic colonies, Vodun in Haiti and New Orleans, and conjure or rootwork in the American south. The chapter on New Orleans Voodoo contains some particularly interesting new

hypotheses about the infamous Marie Laveau, the so-called "Voodoo Queen" of New Orleans.

In the book's second half, Long examines the commodification of traditional magical objects. Her fieldwork is based on visits to more than sixty spiritual shops in various regions of the United States, interviews with merchants, questionnaires mailed to the owners of companies that manufacture spiritual products, and some interviews and participant-observation with the products' users. She demonstrates how the mass production of spiritual products, which began around the turn of the twentieth century, parallels the commodification of many other items during the same period. As commodification intensified during the 1920s and '30s, new imported ingredients began to replace the traditional botanicals once used by spiritual specialists. Today, most oils, sprays, floor washes, incenses, and candles contain none of the natural products used in the past. Instead, their efficacy is based on a system of correspondences mostly associated with color, scent, and highly suggestive titles. As one might expect, no rituals are performed during the manufacture of these products; instead, except for their names, they are similar to ordinary household cleaning products, air fresheners, candles, and incense.

Chapters 6, 7, and 8 examine mail-order suppliers, web sites, botanicas and yerberias, and the manufacturers themselves; Chapter 7 is particularly evocative in its thick description of the interiors of these shops, their owners, and their clientele. The final chapter traces a single product---High John the Conqueror root---from its African origins as a curative chewing root to its current incarnation as a mass-marketed spiritual product. The reader discovers that any number of natural roots have been known by this name and that there is little agreement even among spiritual practitioners about the identity of this magical substance. The principal thread of continuity is the name, which is also of unclear origin. As part of her fascinating discussion, Long examines the iconography of High John the Conqueror---how a spirit of African origin came to be represented as a white medieval king on packages marketed to a predominantly Black clientele.

Despite expanding sales, these spiritual products represent a small, specialized niche in American marketing. Still, for anyone interested in religious material culture, iconography, and the history of African-based religions in the New World, this book makes a engaging read. It represents an important contribution to the understanding of religious worldview through the examination of its artifacts.

Sabina Magliocco, California State University - Northridge