Vodou and History

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Haitian Vodou has long been viewed through a distorted lens by outsiders. In the nineteenth century, as the Republic of Haiti suffered from a unique degree of economic and political isolation implemented and enforced by the powerful slaveholding empires and nations that surrounded it, Vodou was commonly represented as the ultimate antithesis of "civilization," as a case of African superstition reborn in the Americas. During the U.S. occupation of Haiti from 1915 to 1934, images of Haitian Vodou as a terrain of demonic possession, absurd superstition, and zombis proliferated in the United States. At the same time, the twentieth century has also seen the publication of several careful ethnographic works about Vodou. During the 1930s, Melville Herskovits published his *Life in a Haitian Valley,* which argued that the Haitian religion had West African roots. During the same period Zora Neale Hurston wrote her less well-known *Tell My Horse.* Both of these works attentively described aspects of Vodou, as did Alfred Metraux's classic 1959 text *Voodoo in Haiti.* The next year Harold Courlander's *Drum and Hoe* provided detailed examinations of Haitian ritual music. The filmmaker and dancer Maya Deren published her at times experimental *Divine Horsemen,* which drew on Joseph Campbell's theories in seeking to describe the theological system of the religion. Another dancer, Kathryn Dunham, also described Vodou in her *Island Possessed,* published in 1969. The obstinate, broader stereotypes against which these works were articulated influenced the ways in which all these authors wrote about and interpreted the religion. These texts, notably those by Metraux and Deren, fought a battle for Vodou, confronting the idea that was it was little more than a "cult" or the expression of "superstition," with carefully crafted descriptions of the belief systems and ritual of what they showed to be a complex and deeply rooted religion. This work on Vodou developed alongside other works on "Afro-Atlantic" religions, such as Cuban Santéria, and Brazilian Candomblé, as well as on the African influences on Afro-American Christianity.[1]

This scholarly production in many ways left unchanged the broader North American stereotypes about Haitian Vodou. During the 1980s, notably when Haitian boat people were blamed for bringing AIDS to the United States, stereotypical and denigrating portraits of Vodou dominated most public discussions about the religion. The publication of Wade Davis' popular *The Serpent and the Rainbow,* and its transformation into a horror film directed by Wes

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Craven, contributed to this process.[2] In the 1990s, however, a shift occurred in the way Vodou was written about and represented both in ethnography and in the broader culture. This was the result of a connected set of processes that occurred in universities, museums, and in the cities of the United States and Canada, where Vodou, Santeria and other Afro-Atlantic religions have become increasingly rooted and visible. Indeed, these religions have drawn converts from outside the Caribbean populations in such cities. The presence of Haitian Vodou in New York was powerfully documented in Karen McCarthy Brown's important work *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn*, which since its publication in 1992 has been widely discussed and taught and has contributed in profound ways to the shifting of perspectives on the religion.[3] A new wave of scholarship has incited a change in terminology—the traditional "Voodoo" used by Metraux and Deren has ceded (with various detours through "Vodoun" and "Voudoun") to the now-canonical "Vodou," which is used both because it is closer to the Creole pronunciation of the word and as a way of distinguishing the religion from the stereotypes that have haunted it.

In this essay, I will explore four recent works that make new contributions to the study of Haitian Vodou. Three of these are edited collections which showcase a range of new approaches to Vodou and other Afro-Atlantic religions—*The Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou*, a museum catalogue edited by Donald Cosentino; a new edition of Sandra Barnes' *Africa's Ogun: Old World and New;* and Margarite Fernandez Olmos and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert's *Sacred Possessions*. The fourth and final work, Joan Dayan's *Haiti, History and the Gods*, provides a compelling challenge to previous interpretations of Vodou and raises important questions about the intertwined study of religion and history. Together, these works suggest the promise of combining the approaches of history, literature, and anthropology for the study of Vodou. In so doing, they highlight the difficult questions of interpretation raised by a religion that has emerged from, and bears the profound traces of, the system of Atlantic slavery and the complex social and economic forces it unleashed.

A brief history of Haitian Vodou may help to situate the contributions made by these works. In an address given at Harvard University in the fall of 1998, at the conference "Africa in the Americas," Michel Rolph Trouillot used the history of Vodou as an example of the complexities of the history of the "Creole Americas." He called on the audience to imagine what it meant for slaves from various parts of Africa, having survived the middle passage, to reconstitute their religion in exile on the plantations of colonial St. Domingue. The huge sugar plantations of this French colony represented, during the eighteenth century, the height of industrial labor, employing hundreds of slaves in what was often an around-the-clock harvesting and processing schedule, and imposing the dehumanizing nature of slavery that made them legal objects without rights. The practice of African religion, of course, was one way of fighting against the dehumanization of this system, of creating relationships and possibilities that

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the system consistently sought to shut down. Yet the slaves of St. Domingue, like others in the Caribbean, found themselves in a historically unique and difficult position. Bought from different ports of Africa, they came from an array of what slave traders and slave owners called "nations," speaking different languages. Some might be able to understand one another's native languages, while others could only communicate through the island's evolving creoles. Sometimes gathering as a particular African "nation," other times joining with Africans from other "nations" or with Creole (American-born) slaves, African slaves and their descendents on plantations and in towns, as well as in maroon communities, carved out spaces for worship, adapting their religions to the New World. They did so for the most part hidden from the eyes of planters and administrators who might have documented the process.[4]

By the end of the eighteenth century, the pace of slave imports to St. Domingue was so high that the majority of slaves, and therefore the majority of the population, had been born and often spent much of their lives in Africa. When the Haitian Revolution made the colony an independent nation at the end of the eighteenth century, these Africans—often called "Congos"—were a crucial part of the struggle. In their struggle to unite across differences, the slaves of St. Domingue developed new forms of religious coherence, bringing together rituals and imbuing them with revolutionary significance. The "Bois-Caïman" ceremony, which according to many historians launched the revolution—and whose very existence the scholar Leon-François Hoffman called into question a decade ago[5]—is a symbol for this gathering of "nations" in the pursuit of freedom, a gathering which is evoked by *oungans* (priests) today and powerfully represented in the structure of the religion itself. Haiti, the second independent nation in the Americas and the first to lay the foundation of that independence on the elimination of slavery, represented a unique and unrepeated historical situation. Isolated by Europeans and North Americans fearful of the contagion of rebellion, and also by the Vatican, Haiti developed during the first half of the nineteenth century with few foreign Catholic priests present. Forms of religious practice that developed within slavery, and in dialogue with Catholicism, evolved and took root in a culture in the midst of a major transformation from a plantation economy to one based on the farming of small plots of land. New genealogies of ancestors, those who settled the land that belonged to certain families, became part of religious worship. And new political conflicts that arose out of the contradictions of the Revolution itself provided new grounds for suffering and the search for understanding and redemption.[6]

This is only the beginning of the story; to be complete it would have to continue through the re-emergence of the foreign priesthood in Haiti, the development of the urban centers, the U.S. occupation of 1915–1934, which incited new revolts and new cultural developments, the Duvalier dictatorship and the *dechoukaj* that struck many *oungans* and *manbos* (priestesses) in its wake, not

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to mention the creation of a massive Haitian diaspora which itself is auguring a new set of transformations in the religion. And it is only the beginning of the story in the sense that to a large extent this tale is a conjecture, a play of imagination, rooted in a rich array of contradictory facts that often resist clear interpretation. For the history of Vodou is—like the broader history of Haiti of which it is a part—in its very structure layered with silences. Vodou's emergence out of a plantation society in which slaves were excluded from writing and making documents meant that its history was not written down. Indeed the planning of revolt necessitated silence, which seems to have been secured through oaths taken at religious ceremonies. The history of Vodou is part of a history through which the objectified slaves of St. Domingue became citizens of Haiti. It is a piece of a story of a triumph of representation, and for this very reason it frustrates the methodologies of traditional history. And yet it is a story that cannot be—and has not been—left in silence.

The rich and complex set of problems raised by the study of Haitian Vodou demand, and have incited, a variety of imaginative and synthetic scholarly approaches. *The Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou*, the catalogue of an exhibit by the same name, showcases much of the best work that has been done about the religion in recent years. First shown at the UCLA Fowler Museum for Cultural History, which published the catalogue, the exhibit has had unexpected success, circulating not only to those cities that were originally planned, such as Chicago and New York, but also to Detroit and Baltimore. The catalogue presents beautifully illustrated pieces by many of the most important scholars of Haitian Vodou. The combination of the extensive illustrations taken from the exhibit—paintings, Vodou flags, altars, photographs of ceremonies—with the wide-ranging articles separated by one-page descriptions of various *lwa* (gods), makes for a multi-vocal work that is a pleasure to read. Among the highlights in the book is an article by Sidney Mintz and Michel Rolph Trouillot called "The Social History of Haitian Vodou," which usefully traces the various moments in the religion's development from colonial times to the present day. Karen McCarthy Brown contributes a discussion of the "ritual economy" of Vodou, as well as contributing a discussion between herself and Mama Lola about the latter's altar in her Brooklyn home. Marilyn Houlberg provides a discussion of the mystical importance of twins and other children in the system of Vodou, as well as an interview with a Vodou practitioner named Georges Réné who describes his "mystical marriages" to two *lwa*. Suzanne Blier and Robert Farris Thompson provide examinations of the African aesthetics present in Haitian Vodou, while Tina Girouard and Randall Morris discuss respectively the "sequin arts" of Vodou and the metal sculptures of the Haitian artist Georges Liautaud. Patrick Polk's "Sacred Banners and the Divine Cavalry Charge" analyzes Vodou flags and suggests links between eighteenth-century military iconography and contemporary Vodou. Elizabeth McAlister, who also produced a CD called "Rhythms of Rapture" that was released as an accompani-

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ment to the catalogue, provides a detailed reading of a decorated bottle of the kind that are of great importance in the religion.[7]

Another important contribution made by this collection is in the presentation of articles by two Haitian scholars whose work has until now been for the most part unavailable in English. The noted Haitian anthropologist Laennec Hurbon, author of numerous works on Vodou, including the important *Le Barbare Imaginaire*,[8] provides an excellent overview of the evolution of the North American vision of Haitian Vodou in his "American Fantasy and Haitian Vodou." Rachel Beauvoir-Dominique, author of a still unpublished creole-language study on secret societies in Haiti, provides an impressively wide-ranging historical and ethnographic account of "magic" in Vodou. The work as a whole, then, is of great scholarly importance; it is also of value for those who practice the religion. An *oungan* (priest) of Vodou living in Paris, Erol Josué, to whom I presented this book as a gift, told me that "this is the first true book Vodou has had."

Among several pieces in the collection *The Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou* written by the editor, Donald Cosentino, is an exuberant piece entitled "It's All for You, Sen Jak!" which examines the history and present of the deity Ogou in Haiti. The history of Ogou, and of his representation through the image of Saint James of Compostella, provides a fascinating example of the complexities of cultural intermixing present in Vodou. As Cosentino describes, when the Spanish drove the Moors from Grenada in 1492, Saint James of Compostella appeared on the field of battle and helped lead Spain to final victory. In the decades that followed, Portuguese merchants who set up trading posts on the African coast had a particular devotion to Saint James, who was sometimes portrayed as he had appeared on the field of battle, with his sword raised. As Catholicism encountered the religions of West Africa, a correlation was drawn between that figure of Saint James and Ogun, god of iron, who was worshipped in societies whose expansion had depended on working the valuable metal. By the time Ogun disembarked in the Caribbean with African slaves a connection had been made between the two figures. Through the conflicts of the past centuries, Ogun has taken on new characteristics, and new names such as Ogou in Haiti and Ogum in Brazil. As Karen McCarthy Brown describes in her article in the collection *Africa's Ogun*, the contradictory presence of the military in Haitian life—both as liberators during the Haitian Revolution and in other contexts, and as oppressors, notably in the wake of the fall of Duvalier—has been embodied and performed through Ogou's "possession-performances" in Vodou ceremonies. As Cosentino highlights, this contradictory figure is still commonly worshipped in the form of a chromolithograph of Saint James of Compostella, which shows him on a white horse, sword aloft, trampling Moors underneath, an icon of the conquest of a purified Spain transformed into a symbol of the continuing complexity of the religions of the Caribbean.

The figure of Ogun—in his various manifestations—obviously calls for se-

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rious examination, which has been delivered in Sandra T. Barnes's *Africa's Ogun: Old World and New.*[9] The first edition of this collection, published in 1989, provided detailed information about the worship of Ogun in African and American contexts. Barnes' introduction presented an overview of the history of Ogun, and her article "Ogun, the Empire Builder," written in collaboration with Paula Girshick Ben-Amos, provided crucial clues from precolonial Africa for understanding the figure he has become in the Americas. Pieces by Robert Armstrong, John Pemberton III, Adeboye Bablola, Bade Ajuwon, J. D. Y. Peel, and Henry John Drewal contributed additional ethnographic, linguistic, and historical perspectives on Ogun in Africa.

The earlier collection also included a number of important pieces about Ogun in the Americas. Margaret Thompson Drewal provided a comparative reading of dances to Ogun in Yorubaland and Brazil. Renato Ortiz's "Ogum and the Umbandista Religion" used fieldwork done in Brazil to present an account of the deity's place in a religion that provides a useful comparison point for Vodou. The 1997 reissue of *Africa's Ogun* is an expanded collection that includes a number of new articles about the forms this god has taken in the Americas. These additions, concentrated in Part III of the work, include an article by Donald Cosentino that examines the changing figure of Ogun in the U.S. through the practice of a *santero* in Los Angeles; Philip Scher's examination of the deity's presence among Orisha practitioners in Trinidad and Tobago; John Mason's examination of the Lucumi religion in Puerto Rico, Cuba, and the United States; and a broad visual analysis of representations of Ogun written collaboratively by John Mason and Henry John Drewal.

The collection *Sacred Possessions: Vodou, Santeria, Obeah and the Caribbean* examines a broad range of religious practices localized in the Caribbean and presents a number of important articles that seek to make connections between these various religious practices. Many of the articles in this collection are written by literary critics, but the collection as a whole is infused with an interdisciplinary approach that seeks to use ethnography and literature as windows into the spiritual practices of Caribbean peoples in various contexts. Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert, one of the collection's editors, offers an article about zombis in Haitian Vodou, focusing in particular on literary and cinematic representations of women as zombis. Anna Wexler's interesting article examines the practice of Vodou flagmaking through an account of one artist's work.

The next three articles form a section on Cuban Santeria that is similarly rich, including an essay by Miguel Barnet, the Cuban intellectual best known for his publication of Estaban Montejo's *Biography of a Runaway Slave,* a photo-essay, and two interesting articles which explore various aspects in Santeria, notably Ifa divination, as literary practices. There is also an essay that examines British representations of Obeah at the turn of the eighteenth century. The last five essays in the collections examine representations of Afro-Atlantic religion in various novels from the French, Spanish and British Caribbean. On

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the whole, *Sacred Possessions* delivers a range of articles about Afro-Caribbean religion and highlights the importance of using the boundaries between literature, history and anthropology to explore and understand these religions.[10]

The article that begins *Sacred Possessions* is by Joan Dayan, the scholar who has produced the most important monograph on Haitian Vodou to be published in the last few years, *Haiti, History and the Gods.* In the autobiographical meditation that begins this unique work, Dayan recalls a moment in 1970 when she held in her hands a ball and chain, an artifact of slavery that had become an object of ritual importance in the practice of one *oungan* in Haiti. This moment in some ways condenses what is most powerful about Dayan's interpretation of Vodou, which propels the discussion of the religion into new and in many ways uncharted territory. Sidestepping the usual discussions about Vodou's African roots, Dayan instead delves deep into the foundations of Haitian history itself in order to understand the practice of the religion. Through a complex narrative that weaves together history, ethnography and literary criticism, Dayan seeks to understand how the violence, terror and sexuality of slavery and revolution forged the practice of Haitian Vodou and continue to animate it today. "Vodou practices," Dayan claims, "must be viewed as ritual reenactments of Haiti's colonial past, even more than as retentions from Africa." Rather than seeing the lwa primarily as African imports, in the tradition of Melville Herskovits, she suggests that the forms of religious practice that developed into Vodou were "responses to the institution of slavery," and "to its peculiar brand of sensuous domination." "A historical streak in these spirits," she continues, "entirely this side of metaphysics, reconstitutes the shadowy and powerful magical gods of Africa as everyday responses to the white master's arbitrary power." Vodou, then, is in a sense an archive of slavery itself, of the tortured human relationships it produced.[11]

"To reconstruct a history of the spirits in Haiti is no easy matter," admits Dayan. "How do we get from now to then, to a history beyond the reach of written history?" "Facing what remains to a large extent an unreconstructible past—the responses of slaves to the terrors of slavery, to colonists, the New World—I try to imagine what cannot be verified," she announces. She does so by using a variety of experimental and transdisciplinary approaches in order to understand "not only the historical functions of vodou—its preservation of pieces of history ignored, denigrated, or exoticized by the standard 'drum and trumpet' histories of empire—but the project of thought, the intensity of interpretation and dramatization it allowed." Dayan explores the concrete presence of the histories of post-independence Haiti—for instance, the demise of the revolutionary leader-turned-dictator Jean-Jacques Dessalines—and connects them with contemporary practice, notably the presence of the deity Ogou Dessaline in contemporary ceremonies. Through possession, which she describes as "rituals of history," the lingering past haunts the present. "These rituals of memory could be seen as deposits of history," she writes. "Shreds of bodies come back,

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remembered in ritual, and seeking vengeance." Dayan most powerfully illustrates her case through an examination of the lwa Erzulie, who has among her manifestations the white-skinned, French-speaking Ezili Freda and the black, voiceless, violent Ezili Danto. Extending the explorations she began in an article entitled "Erzulie: A Women's History of Haiti," Dayan suggests that we take Ezili as a "medium" for understanding the complex dynamic of sexuality and domination that emerged in colonial St. Domingue.[12]

Having laid out this provocative approach to the study of Vodou in her first chapter, Dayan continues to circle around similar issues in the rest of her book, exploring the work of the little-known Haitian author Marie Chauvet, then using a variety of sources to delve into the profound violence of the final days of the French presence in St. Domingue on the eve of Haitian independence. In her final chapter, "Gothic Americas," Dayan completes the work with an exploration of the dynamics of race and representation surrounding St. Domingue, suggesting the powerful traces left upon Enlightenment culture by the silenced presence of slavery within it. She compellingly suggests, for instance, that the model for Marquis de Sade's *The Hundred and Twenty Days of Sodom* was "slavery in the French Antilles, a fact ignored by all critics of Sade."[13] Through this kind of analysis, Dayan suggests the need for a much more profound trace of the interlinked cultural, emotional and intellectual histories of Europe and the Americas.

Taken as a whole, these works do not present a particularly coherent strategy or program for the study of Haitian Vodou. Rather, they suggest the necessity and vitality of approaches that bridge anthropology, history and literary analysis in seeking to understand this complex religion. In many ways they move beyond the traditional approach of focusing on either African retentions or the often-examined syncretism between African deities and Catholic saints. Instead, the emerging scholarship on Haitian Vodou situates the religion within a broader Afro-Atlantic historical and cultural context, one reshaped by the economic and social effects of the slave trade, the intense cultural encounters forged in the Caribbean, and the difficult development of human relationships within these contexts. Combined, this work ultimately resituates the questions that need to be posed of Haitian Vodou, suggesting that the religion itself, far from being the antithesis of "modernity" that it has often been posed to be, in fact provides a window into the profound aftereffects of the processes of enslavement, migration, production and cultural confrontation that have shaped today's Americas.

NOTES

1. Melville Herskovits, *Life in a Haitian Valley* (Garden City: Anchor Books, 1971); Zora Neal Hurston, *Tell My Horse: Voodoo and Life in Haiti and Jamaica* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1990); Alfred Metraux, *Voodoo in Haiti* (New York: Schocken Books, 1959); Harold Courlander, *The Drum and the Hoe: Life and Lore of the Haitian People*

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(Berkeley: University of California Press, 1960); Maya Deren, *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti* (New York: McPherson and Company, 1953); Katherine Dunham, *Island Possessed* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1969). Among the classic broader studies of African religion in the New World are Roger Bastide, *African Civilizations in the New World* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), and, more recently, Robert Farris Thompson's *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy* (New York: Random House, 1983).

2. See Paul Farmer, *AIDS and Accusation: Haiti and the Geography of Blame* (Berkeley: University of California Press); Laurent Dubois, "A Spoonful of Blood: Haitians, Racism and AIDS," *Science as Culture* 26 (1996):7–43; Barbara Browning, *Infectious Rhythm: African Culture and the Rhetoric of Contagion* (New York: Routledge, 1996); Wade Davis, *The Serpent and the Rainbow* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1986).

3. Karen McCarthy Brown, *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

4. See Carolyn Fick, *The Making of Haiti: The Saint Domingue Revolution from Below* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1986), for an overview of slave society in St. Domingue; see the first chapters of Leslie Desmangles, *The Faces of the Gods: Vodou and Roman Catholicism in Haiti* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992) and Howard Sosis, "The Colonial Environment and Religion in St. Domingue" (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1971), for examinations of the history of religious practice in eighteenth-century St. Domingue.

5. Léon-Francois Hoffman, "Un mythe national: la cérémonie du Bois-Caïman," in eds. Gérard Barthélemy and Christian Girault, *La République Haïtienne: Etat des Lieux et Perspectives* (Paris: Editions Kharthala, 1993), 434–48.

6. For an account of nineteenth-century Haitian history, see Michel Rolph Trouillot, *Haiti: State Against Nation: The Origins and Legacy of Duvalierism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1990).

7. Donald Cosentino, ed. *The Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou* (Los Angeles: UCLA Museum of Cultural History, 1995); Laennec Hurbon, *Le Barbare Imaginaire* (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1988).

8. Laennpl Hurbon, *Le Barbare Imaginaire* (Paris: Cerf, 1988).

9. Sandra T. Barnes, ed. *Africa's Ogun: Old World and New* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989).

10. Margarite Fernández Olmos and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert, *Sacred Possessions: Vodou, Santería, Obeah, and the Caribbean* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997); Miguel Barnet, *The Autobiography of a Runaway Slave* (London: Macmillan, 1993).

11. Joan Dayan, *Haiti, History and the Gods* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), xvii–xx, 35–6.

12. Dayan, *Haiti,* 30, 35–6, 58; she also her "Erzulie: A Women's History of Haiti," *Research in African Literatures* 25:2 (Summer, 1994):5–31.

13. Dayan, *Haiti,* 212–4.

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