

Chapter 4

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The SOCIAL HISTORY of HAITIAN VODOU

voodooism also voodooism n -s (1): a religion originating in Africa as a form of ancestor worship, practiced chiefly by Negroes of Haiti and to some extent other West Indian islands and the U.S., and characterized by propitiatory rites and use of trance as a means of communicating with animistic deities — called also vodun; compare OBEAH (2): the practice of black magic: conjuring, witchcraft.

Webster's Third New International Dictionary.

The term Vodou, as used here, is one of a group of related terms (vodun, vodoun, vaudoux, “voodoo,” “hoodoo,” etc.) which are names for a religious system, as Webster’s definition suggests. Each word embodies a cluster of meanings and associations as used by non-believers. The terms carry a geographical and a racial association as well. Understandings about little-known events that once occurred on the Caribbean island of Hispaniola (of which Haiti is a part) in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries are mentally condensed in the imagery associated with Vodou. In the words of one of the more thoughtful students of the religion, “Qui dit Haiti, pense ‘Vaudoux’, c’est un fait devant lequel on doit se contenter d’émettre une vaine protestation.”¹

Most Americans and Europeans think they know what “voodoo” means. The meaning of the phrase “voodoo economics,” for example, associated with ex-president George Bush, appears to be understood and is clearly recognized as pejorative, even though it has never been defined. The apparent collective assurance that the meaning of such words and phrases is already known makes it unusually difficult to write informatively about the history of Vodou and about problems connected with the label. There are many experts on Vodou and they do not all agree. In fact, it is easier to provide a sober ethnographic account of a contemporary ceremony (SEE CHAPTER 7) than it is to make good sense of the religion’s history.

Vodou was created by individuals drawn from many different cultures. It took on its characteristic shape over the course of several centuries. It has never been codified in writing, never possessed a national institutional structure — a priesthood, a national church, an orthodoxy, a seminary, a hymnal, a hierarchy, or a charter. It runs no day camps, athletic contests, or soup kitchens. And until the creation of the organization called ZANTRAY, explicitly for the defense of the Haitian cultural tradition, Vodou has never had “public relations” either. It is widely dispersed nationally, in the form of what appear to be local cult groups. It has no geographical center or mother church. Its practice seems to be

4.1. ‘Dessalines Ripping the White from the Flag,’ by Madsen Mompremier. Oil on canvas. 76.2 x 91.4 cm. FMCH X95.22.5.



4.2. 'Conversion of the Indians,' by Serge Moléon Blaise, 1995. Rapid and highly destructive expansion of European society led to the decimation of Native American populations, to war against most, and to the active missionization or proselytization of still others. 60.9 x 11.2 cm. Oil on canvas. FMCH X95.22.2

highly variable locally. Though lacking a national apparatus of any kind, so widely is Vodou practiced and so powerful are the premises of its underlying cosmology that it is usually considered by the Haitians themselves to be the national religion.

Subtle political elements are also involved in the image that Vodou projects. A strong ideological current among Haitians centers on the idea of Vodou's importance in the revolutionary creation of the Republic of Haiti, nearly two centuries ago.² The religion continues to be lauded (and sometimes damned) in contemporary accounts of all sorts.

Since its beginnings in the New World, Vodou has always stood in some counterposed dialectical relationship to other (European) religions, particularly Catholicism. It appears never to have excluded these other faiths from its own means for organizing belief, and for squaring life with the demands of the daily world. But there are differences of opinion concerning the contribution of Catholicism to Vodou, and at least some authorities who discount that contribution.

To document the history of Vodou is to define as much as to explain it. Yet because that history is murky — shrouded not only in myth but also in a million printed pages written by non-practitioners, both infatuated and violently hostile — a comprehensive picture is elusive. Before Haiti became independent, a few observers described aspects of the slaves' religious behavior. But once freedom came, the social context of religious expression changed radically. Hardly any outsiders observed what was happening, or reported on their observations. During half a century following the Revolution, there was

no formal signing of a Concordat with the Vatican; and though there were some Catholic priests in Haiti during that period,³ their collective effect upon Haitian belief was probably negligible.

Yet in the wider world there was some interest in "The Black Republic," its people and their religion. This interest was a coefficient of Haiti's stormy revolutionary history, the (partly) African origins of its leaders and citizens, and its successful war for freedom. Hence various accounts of Haiti's religious life appeared even before the Concordat was signed and finally put in place, in 1860. Though most of these accounts are open to doubt, it is easy to explain why we have them. Surely no other "religion of Negroes" has ever received so much attention, nor was it ever as important to demean its content. That slaves would fight their colonial masters — that masses of uneducated black slaves would wage war against Napoleonic and French dominion — was thought to be morally hideous. But that these "gilded Africans"⁴ would win was absolutely intolerable.⁵ When they did, their religion (as well as their presumed failure to survive without European guidance) had to be exposed. The manner in which independent Haiti appeared upon the world scene inevitably colored everything written about it thereafter; and to some extent this is still true, even today. Its popular religion received similar treatment. Hence what follows is written in the absence of any adequate objective history of this New World belief system.

We cannot initiate a discussion of an historically particular body of belief and behavior (as denoted by the term Vodou) as if we knew at the outset what it stood for. Therefore, we shall comment briefly on the nature of the religion itself, and what scholars have written about it. First, however, it may be useful to state broadly the highly specific conditions under which the religious beliefs of enslaved Africans and their descendants in the New World must have evolved. Scholars are not often prepared to analyze religious systems that have had to undergo reconstitution on a wholly new basis, after near-total dissolution. In the last five centuries, this sort of dissolution has occurred frequently in non-Western areas, particularly in those regions subjected to extreme pressures of the sort that result in depopulation, geographical resettlement or expulsion of large numbers of people, radical changes in the political order, and widespread loss of civil rights. In causing such changes, the West has figured importantly.

The rapid and highly destructive expansion of European society across the Great Plains of North America, for example, led to the decimation of some Native American populations, to war against most, and to the active missionization or proselytization of still others (FIGURE 4.2). Disease and war often killed off so many of the ceremonial leaders that large segments of religious practice were lost — if not forever, then at least in their earlier, "authentic" form.⁶ The extreme nature of such cases makes it appear that total destruction was followed by entirely new beginnings. But in fact the analyses of what actually happened leave no doubt that older materials could be carried forward within the new religions. It would be unhistorical and incautious to claim that the religious systems in such cases always "vanished," or were wholly destroyed.

The case of enslaved Africans is more radical still (FIGURE 4.3). The vast majority of Africans who reached the New World were fated to spend the remainder of their lives outside communities of those who spoke their own language and practiced their own religion, even though they found themselves among other Africans. Slaves on the plantations had to forge common cultural practices out of their highly diverse pasts and within the constraints imposed by their living conditions. Enslavement, transportation, and life under servitude in the New World was a fundamentally *individualizing* experience.⁷ A slave's prior status and the rhythms of his daily life in the society of origin were traumatically broken by enslavement, the Middle Passage, the acculturative process called "seasoning," and the awful demands of the new existence as slave (FIGURES 4.3, 4.4). The old life



4.3. *'Disembarkment of the Slaves,'* by P. L. Riché, 1995. The vast majority of Africans who reached the New World were fated to spend the remainder of their lives separated from those who spoke their own language and practiced their own religion. Oil on canvas. 101.5 x 76.2 cm. FMCH X93.22.3.

and culture were now remote, even if not forgotten.

At the same time, this trauma was also an intensely drastic *resocializing* process: drastic because it proceeded under the constant threat of violence and even death; resocializing because it demanded the learning of wholly different behavioral patterns by its subjects and victims. The "seasoning" of which the planters and slavers spoke was specific to their preparation for work. But in fact the seasoning process actually covered much more. The simplest acts — of eating, of elimination, as well as of dressing and toilette, not to mention courting, establishing kinship ties, or managing life-crises such as birth and death — had to be relearned to fit the new (and mostly very oppressive) circumstances, in the absence of one-society governing principles⁸ based on cultural content. The "right way" to fall in love, to give birth, to bless, to bury had, in this situation, to be fashioned through social acts.

The slaves could not bring with them the material apparatus that sustained their institutions at home, such as ritual objects, particular foods or beverages, distinctive items of dress, weapons, equipment, tools. Even though many of these items might be faithfully reproduced (and doubtless were), to do so required innovativeness, motivation, and probably stealth. Nor could they bring the personnel of any such institution, such as a group of priests, a group of artisans, or a royal family. Coming as they did from many different societies, the enslaved did not share a common language, a common religion, or a single political system. The culturally specific practices that usually enable us to distinguish indi-

viduals from one society from individuals coming from another — Frenchmen, say, from Russians — varied among the enslaved as well, but it tended to vary from individual to individual. It is because of this inescapable variability, created by the history of slavery, that we believe that “one-society governing principles” were absent.

On the other hand the heterogeneity was not as thoroughgoing as commonly supposed. Persons from the same group did on occasion find each other in the same locale, and many broad principles of traditional cultural orientation, principles underlay the culture-specific differences and were in fact conserved.⁹ Indeed, recent work¹⁰ documents the significance of preexisting cultural connections. Despite the lack of a common culture, the enslaved often shared certain fundamental orientations — a “substratum” — toward the universe and toward each other that helped them in reestablishing common cultural ground. But that did not make the pressure less.

Accordingly, it can be taken as an initial premise that the evolving religious life of the slaves in the New World depended on their success in (re)constructing religious systems that successfully “patched” what *had* been believed to what *would* be believed. In order to do so, they were obliged to employ the various memories, insights, practices, and beliefs available, from that heterogeneous group of individuals who would be living in one place, or on one plantation. The initial period of contact among the enslaved on the estates to which they were transported was of crucial importance.¹¹ In the case of the firstcomers, many acts may still have been practiced; and many of those that could not were still vividly remembered. Words, objects, songs, gestures, associations, specific beliefs about nature or agency may be expressed and thereby contributed to a kind of common fund of cultural “knowledge.” From this fund, all may draw, so to speak, until certain specific behaviors become normative — until, that is, such material takes on some common characteristics that all group members acknowledge behaviorally. Particular behavioral features — gestures, words, ways of dressing and undressing, addressing and redressing — thus become embodied in group behavior as norms.

The perpetuation of those features, however, does not rest only upon wide individual recognition, but also upon the emergence of some kinds of specialized personnel: priests, priestesses, healers and herbalists, midwives, soothsayers, ritual assistants, craftsmen such as drum makers, musicians, and so on. In effect, the allocation of tasks and responsibilities among persons who come to be recognized as ritual figures is the ongoing institutional accompaniment to the emergence of a body of coherent and accepted practice.

Until an institutional form becomes visible, even a body of belief that has been transferred coherently has nowhere to attach itself. If we think of an institution as a social instrument for addressing a problem — including under “problems” such things as birth, maturity, sexual union, parenthood and death — its emergence is determined in large part by the readiness of group members to agree on how best such a problem can be handled. It is for this reason that we can speak of group behavior as extending itself along the latticework of institutions that, together, make up a society’s “solutions.” (An event such as birth is always a “problem”; in the same sense, an act such as baptism or circumcision, the choice of godparents or of ritual presiders is always a “solution.”)

While the slave sector of New World societies was not a separate (and separable) society in its own right — materials of all kinds were clearly transmitted across the status and other boundaries that divided the masters from the slaves — these were social groups deeply divided from each other, ideologically and in good measure culturally, even though they were in intimate daily contact. The ancestral cultures from which their members came were certainly different in nearly every way.

Indeed the dichotomy between these two groups, and between their religious



4.4. 'Sufferings Inflicted on the Slaves,' by Michel St. Fleur; 1991. The drastic resocializing proceeded under the constant threat of violence and even death. Oil on canvas. 61 x 76 cm. *Afrique en Creations*.

legacies, has been a persistent theme of the scholarship to date on Vodou (SEE INSET, PAGE 129). Analytic work such as that of Herskovits (1936), Bastide (1967), Desmangles (1992), Larose (1977), and de Heusch (1989) suggests the following points. There is a general recognition that Vodou took on its characteristic shape through whole series of events occurring during slavery and after freedom came, as half a million Africans (and their descendants) brought a new religion into being in the French colony. Authors identify meaningful distinctions of various sorts reflecting the evolution of the religious system itself, over time, and the playing-out of various influences (e.g. the Rada-Petwo duality); new religious ideas (as in the analysis of Petwo by de Heusch, SEE INSET, PAGE 133); contests over authenticity (as in Larose's discussion of Guinea, SEE INSET, PAGE 132) and other processes of change. In nearly every study mentioned, the operative word is "juxtaposition,"¹² since this makes it possible to speak of two systems or subsystems of belief, operating within reach of each other but not assimilated to each other. That, in short, is how most observers see Vodou, since it contrasts organizationally and in content with nearly everything that is Catholic. De Heusch contends that the presence of Catholic elements in Vodou is largely inconsequential. Most other students see the two religions as interactive in Haitian life, even if they cannot be said to form a single body of belief.

Yet missing from most accounts is the study of the relations between this Vodou/Catholic duality and dualities of class. It is in any event clear that what Vodou means, and

how it is employed, varies enormously from the bottom of the Haitian class system to the top. These variations throw special light on the perception and denigration of Vodou as witchcraft.

ON VODOU, WITCHCRAFT, AND POLITICS

Many outsiders, in observing or commenting on Vodou, reduce its compass from what they would call "religion" to "witchcraft." By "witchcraft" is commonly meant "black magic," or the harnessing of malevolent forces with the object of causing harm to other human beings. This conception of Vodou often highlights the racism or ethnocentrism of such distant observers, foreigners and Haitians alike (see for example William Seabrook's *The Magic Island*, published in 1929); but their prejudices are also nourished by the significance of transformative practices associated with Vodou in Haitian life (SEE CHAPTERS 5, 7 AND 12).

Almost all religions include what some anthropologists call "transformative practices," that is, acts which, when performed properly by humans, mobilize "supernatural" forces in order to affect human life. Such transformative practices appear to most outsiders as "magic" regardless of their ethical value — whether they have benign consequences (such as purification) or bad ones (such as the death of an enemy). An American Indian rain dance is an obvious transformative practice; so is a Roman Catholic mass. When a Christian family gathers around the bed of a sick child to pray for her recovery, family members engage in a transformative practice. Likewise, a Christian wedding or a Jewish circumcision can be considered transformative practices. Of course, most transformative practices, like all rituals, require in different degrees the right words, the right setting, the right movements and, especially, the right attitude from the participants. As such, they are also demonstrative practices. Better said, many religious rituals throughout the world have a transformative and a demonstrative aspect.

Two facts signal the significance of transformative practices in Vodou. First, such practices are more common than they are in religions such as Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, or Christianity; and even rituals that are primarily demonstrative tend to have a strong

Scholars Ponder Vodou

For scholars of Vodou over the past 60 years, there has been a pronounced temptation to describe Haitian belief systems in terms of dichotomy, though their oppositional poles are hotly contested. On the following pages are conceptions of five such scholars.

Melville J. Herskovits's *Life in a Haitian Valley*, an anthropological study of a highland village published in 1937, was probably the first sympathetic treatment of Vodou ever written by an outsider. Here Herskovits posed the historical dichotomy created by the differing cultural contributions of Africa and France to the making of Haiti, particularly as played out in religious behavior. In concluding, he set forth his concept of "socialized ambivalence," arguing that the Haitian people exhibit considerable psychic conflict in their behavior, particularly in their religious life, owing to their culturally divided

national history: "As regards the Haitian, it must be recognized that the two ancestral elements in his civilization have never been completely merged." He goes on to suggest that "this socialized ambivalence underlies much of the political and economic instability of Haiti... this type of approach cannot but give insight into such occurrences as that of the man whose unwilling possession by the gods of his ancestors was, as described, brought about through the fascination of their forbidden rites for him, despite his strict Catholic upbringing" (pp. 295-256).

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4.5. 'Djab' or 'baka' figure. Cement, paint. Height, 60 cm. Collection of Astrid and Halvor Jaeger.

transformative aspect. Second, in Vodou, the moral divide between good and evil in the performance of transformative practices is based as much on the goals as on the knowledge of the performers. That is, in Vodou, a transformative ritual is thought to belong to sorcery rather than religion *primarily on the basis of what it does to other human beings*. This second point is relevant to the relation between Vodou and state politics in Haiti.

The abundance of transformative practices is not due, as often believed, to Vodou's dubious association with animism. Anthropologist Alfred Métraux was right when he argued that "vague animist beliefs are to be found floating, so to speak, on the margin of Vodou."¹³ But it must be remembered that the world of Vodou is peopled by numerous spirits, such as the *Marasa* (the Twins), *lemò* (the dead), *mistè* (the mysteries) and especially the lesser gods or *lwa*. All of these stand hierarchically and theologically below the supreme deity, the God recognized by Christians (*Bondye*); but they, rather than He, interact with humans. In practice, this means that the servant of the gods has access to an abundance of forces to solicit.

Indeed, the more nonhuman forces (gods, spirits, saints, angels, etc.) inhabit the spiritual world, the higher the interaction between them and humans, and the higher the number of transformative practices. This is a general tendency of all religions. Gods, spirits, saints, and angels do things for us and we do things for them. The more gods, saints, spirits or angels, the more we are likely to do things for them or with them. Early Christian reformers such as Luther publicly reprovved this tendency. They sought to reduce both the number — and the power — of beings with whom humans could interact (the Virgin Mary, saints, angels). At the same time, they condemned the high number of transformative practices associated with these spirits, such as the purchase of indulgences. Today, in many Catholic countries, the large number of saints and the fact that some of them, and particularly the Virgin Mary, come under more than one persona contribute to an increase of transformative practices (e.g., novenas). It can be argued that the Haitian people "inherited" aspects of many spiritual beings from French Catholicism, probably at least as many as from Africa (SEE CHAPTER 1). To these, however, they added numerous native — which is to say, Creole — ones.

Roger Bastide, the eminent French sociologist of religion, offers another such dichotomy in his work (1972 [1967]), which began with research on an Afro-Brazilian religion. Based on later comparative study, Bastide distinguishes between two principal sorts of Afro-American religion, which he dubs "preserved" and "living." Bastide sees the *candomblé* groups of Brazil, with every feature of ceremony and belief jealously guarded and perpetuated by the religious leaders, as an example of "preserved" religion, "the expression of a threatened culture's will to resist, to preserve its ethnic identity by crystallising tradition and removing it from the flux of history." For Bastide, "This is not the case as regards certain other Afroamerican religions, in particular Haitian Voodoo. In the first place, [Haiti] won its independence at the beginning of the nineteenth century, and this event led

to a breaking-off of relations with Africa, whereas Brazil maintained its African connections. Secondly, independence brought about the elimination of the white population. Consequently the Negroes no longer had to fight against the Europeans' desire to assimilate them. They were not obliged to erect that double barrier of social resistance (such as we find in other Antilles or on the mainland) against racial prejudice on the one hand and the impositions of western values on the other" (pp. 130-131). Bastide believes the absence of that threat after the Revolution permitted Vodou to be a "live" religion. His ideas suggest that Afro-American religions must be viewed in the social context of their formative years — against the demands of the society in which believers lived.

Most of these spirits are inherently neither good nor bad, although some do more good than others, and some are primarily malevolent. Moreover (in theory at least), anyone has access to these largely neutral forces. The difference between good and evil depends on the ways in which one validates access to them and the purposes for which they are put to use. *Lwa erite* (inherited spirits) generally perform good deeds; *lwa achte* (bought gods) perform most malevolent ones. Similarly, to serve the gods "with the right hand" is to call upon their forces to do good, whereas to serve them "with the left hand" is to do evil. In short, the difference between good and evil is realized in practice rather than through some essential manicheism as in Christianity. Quintessential Evil and its manifestations (such as Lucifer, the fallen angel, or the "devil" figure, *djab*) are among Vodou's most Christian legacies — an ironic inheritance, given Vodou's diabolical reputation among Christians (FIGURE 4.5).

Given the limited presence of quintessential evil, it is not surprising that there is no generalized word for "sorcery" in Haitian Creole. If we defined "sorcery" as a transformative practice fundamentally oriented toward evil and recognized as such by the practitioners ("bad magic"), the closest Haitian is *fê mal*, which literally means to do bad but is not restricted to the use of supernatural forces. The noun *chochè* (sorcerer), which may be as recent as the turn of the century, applies more often to females than to males. Both *chochè* and *bòkò* may be used for a practitioner who serves exclusively "with the left hand," but *bòkò* in particular may refer to an individual otherwise recognized as a legitimate priest. Further, taken in context, no clear line of knowledge separates the priest (*oungan*) from the sorcerer, even though some sorcerers engage in practices — and may belong to secret societies — shunned by genuine *oungans*. Most often, the *bòkò* is only an *oungan* "who serves with both hands," "who appears to fulfill his priestly functions" but turns to *lwa achte* when it suits him¹⁴ (SEE CHAPTER 12).

This premium on practice does not mean that Vodou theology does not distinguish between religion and sorcery but, rather, that it does not set them up as exclusive domains. As with most religions, Vodou sustains its practitioners with ethical parameters, but the difference between good and bad is realized, more often than not, on the basis of the deeds performed and the characteristics of action. In that context, one key characteristic of sorcery is expediency.

The absence of a clear ontological line between good and evil spirits and of a publicly recognized division of knowledge between priests and sorcerers has contributed

Leslie Desmangles (1992), following Bastide's earlier interpretations, writes of religious symbiosis: "the spatial juxtaposition of diverse religious traditions from two continents, which coexist without fusing with one another. Just as tiny parts of a stained glass window are juxtaposed to form a whole, so too parts of the Vodou and Catholic traditions are juxtaposed in space and time to constitute the whole of Vodou" (p. 8). For Desmangles, this is not only symbiosis by juxtaposition, but "symbiosis by ecology," both reflecting the divided history of Vodou, Catholic on the one hand, African on the other. But Desmangles takes note of another dichotomy as well (pp. 94-97), existing within the *nanchon* (loosely, "nations") or clusters of gods,

whose designations once referred to geographically sited peoples or tribal groups in Africa. Many believe that the named gods (*lwa*) within the *nanchon* divide into two main groups, Rada and Petwo [Petro], the gods of each group being notably different in temperament and in origin. From the work of Maya Deren (1972) and up to the present, the Petwo *lwa* have been classified as violent, revolutionary, destructive, and even malevolent, when contrasted to the Rada *lwa*. Desmangles, while leaving in place the widely accepted distinction between Rada and Petwo, seeks to correct the belief that the Rada *lwa* are always benevolent, the Petwo *lwa* always maleficent.

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greatly to many foreigners' inclination to reduce Vodou to witchcraft. More important, since the line between religion and sorcery is defined by practice, Vodou has always been left open to exploitation by outsiders of all kinds, especially members of the Haitian urban elites.

The manipulation of Vodou as sorcery by Haitian urbanites stems in part from the historical ambivalence of the Haitian elites vis-à-vis that religion. Herskovits's statement that the two ancestral elements of Haitian civilization have not completely merged may apply more to the elites than to the majority of Haitian peasants. At any rate, few fieldworkers have noted any reluctance among Haitian peasants to acknowledge the importance of Vodou in their daily lives, in spite of two nationwide campaigns of repression. The story is quite different among the elites, whose behavior and values have also directly influenced the urban middle and lower classes. Vodou-related practices have never been socially sanctioned in the urban sphere. This means that most urban families have engaged in such practices only with reluctance, regardless of belief. Vodou rituals were held secretly and only when it would have been detrimental not to do so. Transformative practices were used only when everything else had failed.

This history of ambivalence has encouraged urban — and especially elite — families to use Vodou only as it fits their needs: whenever Vodou's abundance of transformative practices seems immediately convenient and practical. Medical emergencies are such occasions, especially since medicine and religion overlap in Haiti as they do in many other countries.¹⁵ Few Haitians would label such practices "sorcery," just as few fundamentalist Christians would so label a vigil for a sick friend. The relationship is inherently manipulative, however, and characterized primarily by expediency. Quite unlike a Haitian peasant who serves the lwa, or a fundamentalist Christian, the Haitian elites commonly view such religious practices as deeply contradictory to what they claim to be. Few would acknowledge daily and publicly their allegiance to the bedrock of religious beliefs upon which the healing practice is based. Instead, the transformative aspect of Vodou is appropriated for what are only limited practical goals.

It is important to note that this manipulative aspect of the relation between the Haitian elites and Vodou does not depend much upon the strength of internal beliefs among urbanites. Rather, it inheres in the fact that Vodou has never been socially sanctioned in the urban space. While their goals are not always malevolent, Haitian elites engage in Vodou as if it were sorcery. But when the goals are malevolent, such as in the fields of politics, the manipulation of both supernatural forces and of the religious beliefs of the majority become most visible.

The manipulations of Vodou by Haitian politicians are of two kinds, and can be traced back to the nineteenth century. On the one hand, politicians have been known to

Serge Larose emphasizes yet another dichotomy in his study (1977), distinguishing between those who practice "Vodu" [Vodou] (the ancestral religion deriving from West Africa) and those who indulge in magic and sorcery: "Among the peasants themselves, Vodou has a much more precise meaning: it designates a specific ritual concerned with the so-called Vodou spirits. These spirits are worshipped within cult-groups which take much pain to point out the differences between them and other groups mainly pre-occupied with other sets of powers, all more or less related with the practices of sorcery, the 'Petro'

and the 'Zandor' and the 'Matok'. I shall use the term 'magic' to refer to the latter. Haitians do. The pre-eminence of Vodou societies over the magic ones is expressed in terms of loyalty to *l'Afrique Guinée*. Guinea stands for tradition, unswerving loyalty to the ancestors and through them to the old ways and rituals they brought from overseas" (p. 85). "Petro" [Petwo] is included here on the "magic" side of the ledger and the Guinea side sounds oddly like what Bastide would call a "preserved" rather than a "living" belief system.

turn to transformative practices in order to gain or secure control of the state apparatus. On the other, they have used the public's knowledge of their engagement in such practices to further sustain that control, irrespective of their own beliefs in supernatural efficiency. These two kinds of manipulation overlap in practice, but they constitute different forms of religious exploitation.

First, unlike healing practices that aim at the well-being of individual minds and bodies, those aiming to influence state politics are viewed as malevolent by most Haitians. They involve secret and dishonorable alliances. They engage humans with forces bought with money — *lwa achte*, undue promises, and undeserved privileges. In other words, they clearly cross the line into sorcery, as drawn by Vodou practitioners themselves.

Secondly, and more important, as such practices are flaunted by politicians aiming to use the beliefs of the majority to instill fear or awe, they also contribute to the reinforcement of the perception of Vodou as sorcery. In that sense, the use of Vodou by urban politicians is not just a benign example of the cultural appropriation that typifies social history generally. It goes further than the potentially exploitative use of Vodou by foreigners and urbanites facing medical emergencies or other life crises. It is, to a large extent, a cultural embezzlement.

Embezzlement suggests intent, willful misappropriation. Symbolic of the politicians' will to manipulate Vodou as a foreign object is their apparently contradictory behavior. They never hesitated to condemn Vodou publicly, even while secretly engaged in their "bad magic"; yet they make sure that most people do come to learn their "secret." Pressured in part by the Roman Catholic clergy, successive Haitian governments repeatedly banned Vodou practices on the pretext that they were, indeed, equivalent to sorcery. At the same time, the power holders of the day would entertain rumors alleging their involvement in some of the very practices they condemned. That some of these rumors were sometimes false matters less than the fact that they were always perceived as beneficial by the politicians involved. This dual manipulation blurred both in words and in practice the distance between Vodou and sorcery; it also legitimated the public condemnation of Vodou as magic and sorcery. There is a Janus-like quality in a religious system that means one thing to its popular practitioners, and quite another to those higher in the class system who only appropriate bits of its peripheral practice for their personal, instrumental ends.

SANTO DOMINGO - ST. DOMINGUE: EARLY HISTORY

In the preceding discussion of basic concepts in Vodou practice and their inflection according to differences in class position and power, we have not so far tried to link the argument to historical events; not enough is known at this time to make that possible. We

For **Luc de Heusch** (1989) the primary dichotomy lies between the Rada and Petwo elements, in terms of their derivation. Bringing his knowledge of Congolese (Zaire) religious forms to Haiti, de Heusch was "surprised to discover many lwa of Kongo origin in the supposedly Creole petro pantheon" (pp. 292-293). De Heusch links the term "Petro" [Petwo] to the Kongo kings Pedro I, II, III and IV, and the content of Petwo belief to Kongo beliefs. He contends that "Voodoo should be taken to be a bicephalous religion; the structural arrange-

ments of its two components has to do with history" (p. 292) — Dahomey (Fon) versus Kongo as sources for quite different streams of African religious material. He firmly rejects the idea of syncretism between Catholicism and African religious beliefs: "Two distinct religions coexist without merging. Catholic influences are superficial in voodoo, whose reality is African. For voodoo worshipers, Catholicism is a parallel, complementary religion" (p. 292).

try now to provide a more historical account. But the reader should keep in mind that any exact linkage between event and historical process is still beyond reach.

No easier is the task of declaring when we might begin to speak of *a* religion, rather than of a widely-scattered series of local cults *in ovo*, not yet coherent enough to be called a (single) religion by outsiders. We can enumerate and comment on those sparse markers in order to comment on each of them. We aim to report what others have described as Vodou, through time; and to infer, as have so many before us, what *their* inferences mean. Before we can even address these issues, we need some historical background, against which to describe how this new religion is believed to have grown.

When he set sail for Lisbon to return from his first voyage on January 16, 1493, Columbus left thirty-nine men in an infant north coast settlement in Santo Domingo, which he had named Navidad. He sailed again for the New World nine months later. After reaching Samana Bay on the north coast on November 22, he headed for Navidad, but learned from the Indians with whom he spoke beforehand that all of the people in the Navidad settlement were dead.

During the ensuing three decades the Spaniards founded settlements in all of the Greater Antilles. It is not absolutely certain when the first enslaved Africans reached the islands. Some authors have suggested 1501, others 1502¹⁶; and yet others still later dates. There is no doubt, however, that by 1510, there were enslaved Africans on all of the large islands. Soon enough there were sugar mills on all of them, as well; the strange link between sugar and African slavery had been perpetuated across the ocean. But the sugar industry pioneered in the Caribbean by Spain was not to flourish and, indeed, neither were the Spanish colonies there, for several centuries. The link between slavery and overseas commerce was vital. The presence of Africans in the New World was closely linked to the rise — and fall — of the plantation system (FIGURE 4.6).

Though Santo Domingo was the Old World's oldest colony in the New, and got off to a good start with the arrival of Governor Ovando in 1502, it lost population after the discovery of Mexico. The twin attractions of mineral wealth and large exploitable native populations made the mainland irresistible. Thereafter after the Spaniards were hard put to maintain adequate populations in the islands.

In the second and third decades of the seventeenth century, at that very time when the North European powers were beginning to challenge Spain head-on in the Lesser Antilles, their governments witnessed to their satisfaction a movement of European dissenters to the disputed margins of the Spanish Caribbean empire, from which they would challenge Spain more and more impudently. These strange frontiersmen — for this region still contained a frontier — were a motley lot: military deserters, Huguenots, Lutherans, Irish and Welsh resisters, Catholics ejected from Britain, and no doubt many criminals. The "refuse" of many lands and many conflicting policies, they found common ground in Santo Domingo, where effective territorial control by the Spaniards was limited. They established themselves in the sparsely populated northwestern region of the island. When chased by the Spaniards, they took refuge on Ile à Tortue (Tortuga, off the northwestern coast). These interlopers, the ancestors of the buccaneers, constituted the first successful territorial aggression against Spain on the Greater Antilles. Their success culminated in the cession of the western third of Santo Domingo to France by the treaty of Ryswick (1697), out of which the French colony of Saint Domingue was created.

Although France had illegal settlers in this part of the country — and had even dispatched administrative officials there as early as 1639 — the official colony dates from 1697. Though the New World sugar industry began in Spanish Santo Domingo, it remained little developed before about 1680. And though there were many people of part-African ancestry in Santo Domingo, slavery before 1680 had proved to be of little



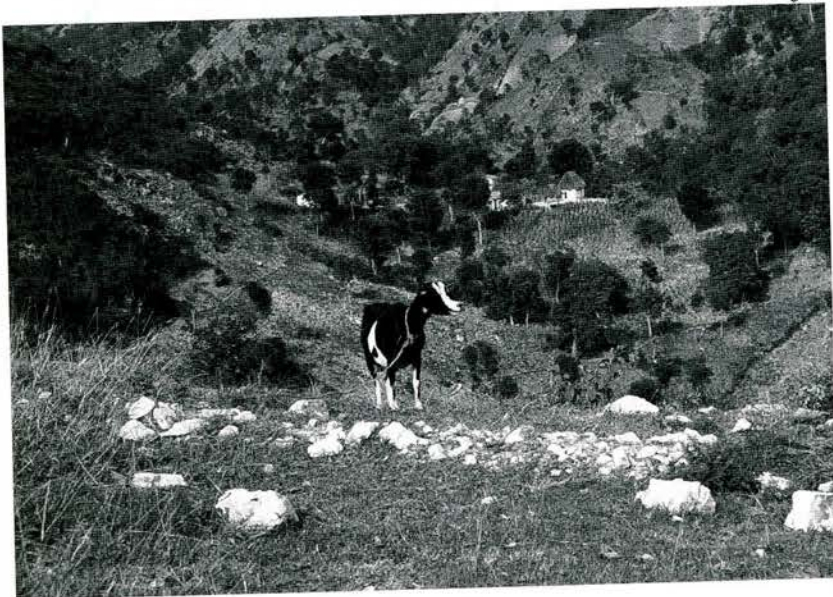
4.6. 'A Cotton Plantation in the Colonial Era,' by Eddy Jacques, 1991. The link between slavery and overseas commerce was vital. The presence of Africans in the New World was closely linked to the rise — and fall — of the plantation system. Oil on canvas. 51 x 102 cm. Afrique en Creations.

economic consequence.¹⁷ From about 1680 onward, however, under French stimulus — illegal, of course, until 1697 — the plantation economy of the west began to grow. That growth is demonstrated by the rapid increase in sugar production (and soon enough, the production of other tropical commodities), as well as by the swiftly mounting number of enslaved Africans. Figures for the immediate pre-1697 period are practically non-existent. But Fick, citing Stein, suggests that during the initial period of growth (1690-1720), the number of slaves increased from a little over 3,000 to well over 47,000.¹⁸ Galloway claims that St. Domingue's slave population in 1680 was 4,000, and in 1791, 480,000.¹⁹ During those 111 years, it is believed that 864,000 enslaved Africans were imported. These figures document the vertiginous rise in the number of slaves, and help us to imagine the terrible conditions under which they lived. They also make clear that the ratio of African-born slaves to "creole" (colony-born) slaves remained high throughout. By 1789, Fick tells us, two-thirds of the nearly one-half million slaves in St. Domingue were African-born.²⁰ We can only guess at the impact of this ratio on the outbreak and nature of the Revolution and on the development of Vodou itself. Suffice it to say here that our stress on the importance of the initial contact period on culture-building in no way denies the constant addition of new materials by slaves freshly embarked from Africa.

Yet some would argue that, at least as important as the African origins of the slaves in making the Revolution that would follow, was the adjoining presence of the nearly-empty, undeveloped Spanish colony of Santo Domingo, which shared the island with French St. Domingue. Twice the area of French St. Domingue, scantily populated and of little interest to Spain, Santo Domingo was an internal frontier of which rebellious slaves took rich advantage. Even the boundary between the two colonies was imprecise, until fixed by agreement in 1777. The runaway slave (*marron*) bands, which had developed on the island long before the Spanish cession of the western third, continued their activities as the plantation colony grew (FIGURE 4.7). By the early eighteenth century, the French had formed a permanent runaway-chasing body (the *maréchaussée*); and toward the end of that century, they were compelled to sign a peace treaty with one of the maroon bands. It is

difficult — without looking at the small islands, such as Barbados, where *marronnage* could never really occur; or at the undivided larger islands in which police power was extended islandwide, such as Jamaica — to give proper weight to the situation in Hispaniola. Without extending its power over the entire island, the French colony was unable to regulate movement. This counted heavily against local authorities, during the scant century between the creation of the colony and the start of internal war.

So much has been written concerning the Haitian Revolution that it is unnecessary to review here the social, political, and economic situation of the colony in 1791, at the moment of the outbreak. Instead we need to turn back, to take note of the events of 1757-58, concerning the slave named Makandal. Makandal has often been referred to as a harbinger of the Revolution, though the events in question took place almost half a century before the outbreak. Makandal's history matters here because of the place Vodou is claimed to play in his story.



4.7. *'Deyo mòn, gen mòn' [Beyond the mountains are more mountains], says a Haitian proverb. The mountains concealed maroon bands of runaway slaves who were also aided by the imprecision of boundaries between St. Domingue and the nearly empty Spanish colony of Santo Domingo. The mountains were thus an important factor in the Revolution. Photograph, Donald Cosentino, 1986.*

A great deal of imaginative reconstruction surrounds François Makandal's personal history. He is thought to have been of "Guinea" origin — some claim of the Muslim faith. It is said that he was enslaved at the age of twelve. (There is to our knowledge no conclusive evidence for any of this.) On reaching Saint Domingue, he was sold to a plantation owner in the north, named Lenormand de Mézy. Years later Makandal escaped and became a runaway, and the leader of a maroon-band. (The circumstances surrounding his flight are not really known; there are many fanciful stories.) Makandal is described as eloquent, highly intelligent, and resourceful. He was also said to have had a large number of followers, and to be an expert manufacturer of poisons. To him was imputed a grand plot to poison the white planters of Saint Domingue (particularly and at first, those of Cap François), and to free the colony of its colonial and slavery yoke. It

appears that there were numerous victims of poisoning, both slaves and masters; some historians have interpreted such poisonings as political in motivation, the work of Makandal's followers. Makandal himself was eventually captured and burned at the stake, in 1758 (FIGURE 4.8).

The presence and importance of Vodou in his story is suggested by the words of a contemporary, the *lieutenant-juge* of the town of Port-de-Paix:

This colony is swarming with slaves, so-called soothsayers and sorcerors who poison and who, for a long time, have conceived the plan of insensibly wiping out all the whites.... These blacks are of a sect or a new kind of religion formed by two leaders, old Negroes, who for many long years have been fugitive and whose names are Macandal and Tassereau: These two sectarians have fortunately been arrested..., but unfortunately they have a considerable number of sectarians and disciples; there are currently over two hundred in the prisons of le Cap: We have roughly a dozen in those of Port-de-Paix since instructions have been delivered a fortnight ago, and twenty-two more have been denounced; and I have reason to believe that those who remain to be discovered in the various quarters of this department are equal in number to those at le Cap.²¹



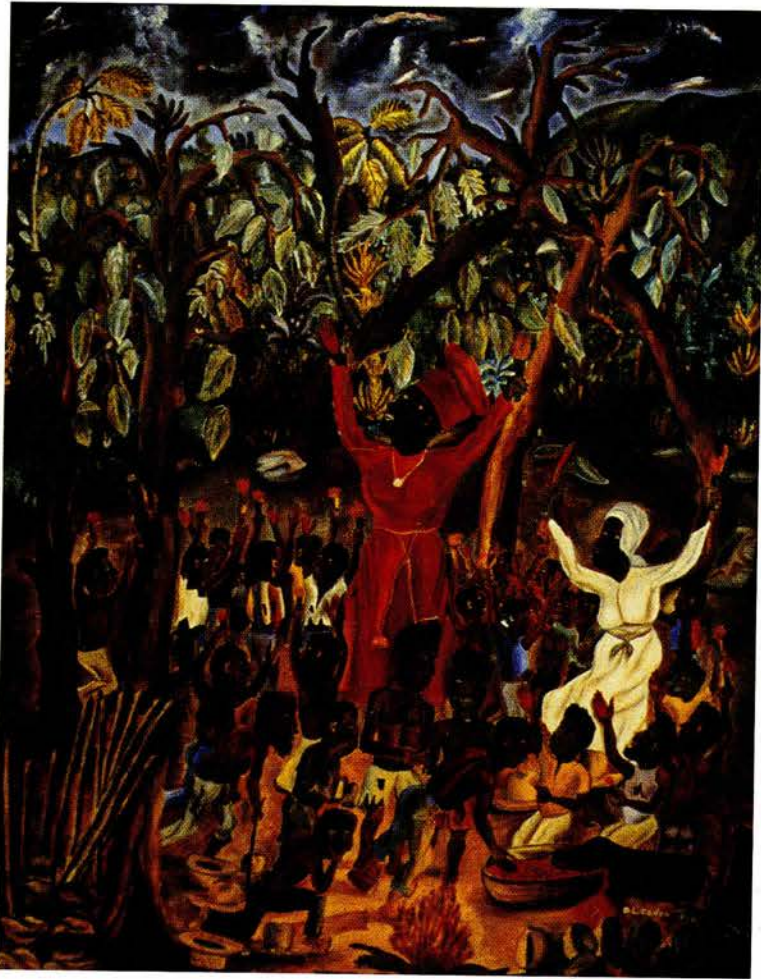
Unfortunately, the story of Makandal is shrouded in considerable uncertainty, aggravated by imagination. We know that he was put on the rack and burned to death because of the alleged widespread plot to poison people, both white and black.

Milscent, writing in 1791, recalled Makandal's conspiracy, but saw no link to the claim of others that a revolution was brewing, and that it had its roots in the past. It is clear, though, that by the mid-eighteenth century, there was grave trouble in the colony. The mortality rates among the slaves were horrifyingly high; the slaves struggled against their condition. Violent acts of resistance, both by slaves and by the maroon bands, became increasingly common. Such violence against the system was occurring in spite of the application of organized terror by the planter class and its servant government.

But in Saint Domingue, of course, the issue was not simply that of slavery. Serious students of the Revolution take note of the deep cleft between the colonial whites of all class levels, and those of color. The great power of the free people of color (*affranchis*) greatly threatened the whites, particularly the poor or landless whites; and numerous laws were passed to circumscribe the power of colored free persons. It was in the context of this political struggle that slave resistance flourished. In crisis, the potential political usefulness of Vodou may have become more evident to the slaves.

The French Revolution altered the balance of forces in St. Domingue. Though opinions differ somewhat about the influence of the Revolution on later events in the colony,

4.8. *'Makandal, the Rebel Slave with Magic Powers, Jumps Out of the Bonfire,' by Wilson Anacréon, 1991. Makandal, leader of a maroon-band forty years prior to the revolution, is credited with a grand plot to poison white planters and free the colony of its yoke. Contemporary accounts suggest leadership of a religious cult was key to his powers. In 1758 he was captured and burned at the stake. Oil on canvas. 61 x 76 cm. Afrique en Creations.*



4.9. 'Ceremony at the Bois Caïman,' by Dieudonné Cédor, 1791. The details of what happened at Bois Caïman... remain elusive, beyond the fact that a pig was sacrificed by a priestess in some sort of religious ceremony in preparation for war. Musée d'Art Haïtien, Port-au-Prince, Haiti.

once the Revolution began in France, events in St. Domingue were inevitably affected. We cannot attempt to touch these matters here, however. We turn instead, briefly, to the famous August 1791 "ceremony at Bois Caïman" and the role of the slave called Boukman Dutty.

As in the case of Makandal, much hearsay and imagination enter into the description of events at Bois Caïman.²² It is said to have been both a religious ceremony and a political event; allegedly, some of the revolt leaders who had gathered earlier near the plantation of Lenormand de Mézy to schedule their revolt for August 22 are said to have attended. Boukman presided in the role of *oungan* (priest), supposedly together with an African-born priestess. A pig was sacrificed, an oath taken, and Boukman and the priestess spoke to exhort the listeners to fight bravely against their oppressors (FIGURE 4.9). Only days later, the Haitian Revolution began.

The difficulties with even this bare outline of the Bois Caïman ceremony are many. Despite the lengthy and detailed accounts provided by, for example, Fick (in 1990) and Deren (in 1953), there is absolutely no reliable historical basis for the story at all.²³ David Geggus, for example, remarks, "The details of what happened at Bois Caïman... remain elusive, beyond the fact that a pig was sacrificed by a priestess in some sort of religious ceremony in preparation for war."²⁴ He argues persuasively that there is no evidence that, before the Revolution, what we now call Vodou "was not in fact a series of separate

ethnic or local cults," a view with which we are strongly inclined to agree. Palmié discusses the chant allegedly sung at Bois Caïman, and demonstrates that the lyrics (which appear in print for the first time in Moreau de St.-Méry's work in 1797-98) not only do not mean what has been claimed, but were being sung by descendants of Bantu-speaking slaves in western Cuba before the Cuban revolution of 1959.²⁵ In this instance, deconstruction has left us with little we can rely on.²⁶

But most important in our view is to recognize that the role of Vodou in the Revolution, and in Haitian life generally, has from the first been subject to non-religious, ideological influences of all sorts (FIGURE 4.12). Though we would firmly contend that Vodou was important in the emerging struggle of the slaves against slavery and of the Haitian people against their French rulers, it seems to us simplistic to make of religious belief the linchpin of the resistance. It is probably more important to try to document the complex social organization of the colony on the eve of the Revolution, before speculating about the importance of religion in the formation of the slaves' resistance to slavery. We believe that the religious orientation of many or even most of the slaves played a part in their resistance to the horrors of slavery. But there were doubtless many individuals and some groups for whom Vodou was not important, perhaps even some who actively rejected it as their religion, yet who played immensely important roles in the Revolution, and in the development of the Republic thereafter.

AFTER 1804

From the Revolution's end until the signing of the Concordat in 1860, the Catholic clergy in Haiti, though not entirely unrepresented, remained practically inactive.²⁷ During



4.10. 'Petro Ceremony,' by Castera Bazile, 1950. Oil on masonite. 58.5 x 49 cm. Milwaukee Art Museum, Gift of Richard and Erna Flagg. M1991.107.

those nearly sixty years, the ideological and emotional relationship between formal Catholicism and Vodou changed radically. What is more, it was during that period that the Vodou religion became stabilized in significantly different form. Forced immigration from Africa, as represented by enslavement, had ended. The economic status of the masses, at first only painfully, but more rapidly by mid-century, began to change for the better.

In their new capacity as peasant landholders, the Haitian people were now able to link their own genealogies directly to the control of land. The declaration of independence in 1804 had been followed by the beginnings of land distribution by the state, particularly under President Boyer, in the period 1827-43. Over time, the lands on hundreds of sugar and coffee plantations were occupied by the Haitian people. It is accurate to say that from about 1825 until mid-century, the second republic of the western Hemisphere was transformed into a nation of peasants. We mean by this that most land in the Haitian countryside was subdivided into relatively modest holdings that became the property of individual families. Such families grew most of their own food, but sold some part of their product to have the means to buy those things they needed which they could not produce for themselves.²⁸ Such small-scale cultivators mostly used family labor or exchanged labor with their neighbors. Their technical means for working the land were severely limited; even the use of the plough was rare. Peasants needed to purchase cloth or



4.11. 'The Severed Head of Boukman is Shown to the Slaves,' by Frantz Zéphirin, 1991. Boukman Dutty, said to have presided in the role of oungan (priest) together with an African-born priestess, is one of the martyred heroes of the Revolution. Acrylic on canvas. 76.2 x 101.6 cm. *Afrique en Creations*.

clothing, most tools and other metal objects, any fuel other than wood, all china, many medicines, and much else.

To do so meant producing salable (and usually, exportable) commodities, such as coffee, vetiver, goats' horns, beeswax, etc. The spread of a peasant mode of existence assumed a typical shape, in which a senior male and his wife, together with several grown sons with their wives and children and perhaps one or two aged, indigent and landless relatives or strangers occupied a single plot of land. Residence in a compound was typically patrilocal; sons brought their wives into their father's compound. But descent was traced through both father and mother. Inheritance was supposed to be equal among siblings. The children of unmarried secondary wives (*plase*) of the senior male were discriminated against in inheritance. Since Napoleonic law was followed, family lands were commonly divided on the death of the senior male. Over time, average holdings decreased rapidly in average size; meanwhile, population continued to grow. Attached to the house of the senior male was some land with a place of worship and ceremony. This ancestral homestead (*lakou*) was also a burying ground for descendants in the patriline. The Vodou lwa who were ceremonially invoked were familial in character, lived in the family's land, and played an active part in family life. Thus land, kinship, and cult were intertwined in belief, in ritual construction, and in practice.

From about the third decade of the nineteenth century onward, this (admittedly idealized) picture came to typify a substantial proportion of the Haitian peasantry. It was subjected increasingly to stress by the declining economic base of rural life, however, and



could no longer be reported as typical by the time that scholars such as Herskovits (1937), Bastien (1951) and Métraux (1959) were writing. We believe, then, that there was a peak period in the history of Vodou as a familial system of ancestral belief, tied to the land and, through the land and through the lwa, to the past. This rooted aspect of Vodou, however, authentic in 1850 and still functioning in 1900, was to undergo considerable change. By the late nineteenth century — and even though land was more widely distributed than in any other country in the Americas — the peasant economy was already in some trouble. But there was worse to come.

HISTORICAL SUMMARY: 1915–1990

The occupation of Haiti by the U.S. Marines put an abrupt end to Haiti's long nineteenth century. It directly affected the Haitian elites, including their assessment of themselves, their country and its people. It directly affected the way of life of most peasants, their social and economic organization, their sense of place and mobility. It also affected the relation between elites and peasants. In all of these ways, the occupation indirectly yet profoundly affected Vodou.

What Haitian elites called “Le Choc” (“The Shock”) — the United States Occupation — was above all the irretrievable destruction of the world of 1804. The Haitian intelligentsia (and, in their own way, the people of Haiti) had long believed that the revolutionary victory had meant an eternal vindication of the black race. But despite sincere pronouncements by Haitian intellectuals about the equality of all humankind, they were more interested in their equality with the elites of Europe than they were in the equality of the Haitian masses with themselves. The Haitian elite had always considered the social norms that supposedly distinguished them from the peasant masses as more important than those which unified them as a nation. The U.S. Occupation forced upon Haiti's privileged classes a painful reevaluation of their own beliefs.

Large segments of the urban middle and upper classes blamed the cultural chasm that divided Haitians from each other for the country's most visible failures, and advocated a more positive assessment of peasant beliefs and practices. To be sure, the “indigenist movement,” which arose after 1915, amounted to much more than a simple reaction to

4.12. Stamps from the 1992 bicentennial ‘Uprising’ series, depicting sugar cane growers in revolt & the Ceremony in the Bois Caiman. The role of Vodou in the Revolution and in Haitian life has been subject to ideological interpretation. Private collection.

the reality of whites in power on Haitian soil. The roots and aims of this movement were not simply ideological: the cultural reevaluation that it called for resonated with the slow but significant changes in Haiti's urban landscape, notably a small but notable rise of the black middle classes.²⁹ But reevaluation there was, and Vodou benefitted from it, notably with the rise of Haiti's first generation of self-trained ethnologists. The professionalization of Haitian ethnology meant that the religion of the masses was no longer taboo. Instead it became an object of study, of display, and of praise, for many educated Haitians and at least some foreigners.

Given that official responses to Vodou in the nineteenth century oscillated from indifference to persecution, the achievement was considerable. Henceforth, public denigration of Vodou would always face at least a minimal challenge from some members of the urban classes. But there was also a backlash, sometimes in the form of state-sponsored terrorism against the servants of the gods. That backlash occurred after the Marines left Haiti; but its particular brutality stemmed from various legacies of the Occupation.

Whereas the Occupation did not seriously undermine the material conditions of life for the urban elites (except for a tiny group of merchants of German origin and their immediate kin and associates), it profoundly disturbed life in the countryside. Small-scale landholders in particular suffered expropriation, and induced and coerced migration to the Dominican Republic and Cuba, where they became migrant laborers on U.S.-owned sugar plantations. At home, the most dreadful form of oppression was the *corvée*, organized by the Marines. At its peak, this infamous forced labor system, enforced under U.S. supervision, saw thousands of peasants tied together by ropes while performing "voluntary" labor on the roads. Understandably, peasant irregulars comprised the bulk of the guerrilla bands that fought the Marines under the leadership of Charlemagne Péralte, a landowner and former officer of the Haitian army (FIGURE 4.13). Péralte's troops may at times have numbered as many as 15,000 peasants. They were crushed by the new Haitian army trained by the Marines, with as many as 2,000 fatalities.

The U.S. Occupation both reduced and increased the distance between the peasantry and the urban elites. On the one hand, the indigenist movement publicly called for a reevaluation of peasant culture, in part as the response to the Marines' presence. On the other, the *corvée* and the military campaigns seasoned some Haitians (and most notably the new Haitian army) to the commission of brutal and repressive acts against the peasantry.

The sudden presence of North Americans in the country also amplified Haiti's bad press abroad (SEE CHAPTER 6). The Vatican and the resident Roman Catholic clergy, composed almost exclusively of French priests, fueled U.S. prejudices and racism. The Bishop of Cap Haïtien testified to Senator Medill McCormick that Vodou's influence on the Haitian masses had increased since the beginning of the Occupation. He added that oungans "were the soul of the insurrection" against the Marines.³⁰ Once the Marines left, the Catholic Church in Haiti made use of the legacy of recent repression and the indifference of most urbanites to attack Vodou openly, launching two nationwide campaigns against it. In September 1935, under pressure from the Church, the Haitian government promulgated a decree condemning "superstitious beliefs" and forbidding associated practices. Only a few urbanites protested.³¹ The church and the government renewed their attack in 1941-42. Both campaigns did great damage to Haiti. Peasants were coerced to renounce (*rejete*) their beliefs in public and to destroy sacred objects and animals. Tens of thousands of objects were destroyed, causing an irreparable loss to Haitian culture.

However brutal the backlash, the ideological and social momentum of the cultural nationalism associated with the indigenist movement and the black middle classes was simply too strong to be set aside. In 1946, the army deposed Elie Lescot (1940-1946), the



4.13. *'The Crucifixion of Charlemagne Peralte for Freedom,'* by Philomé Obin. Landowner and former officer of the Haitian army, Peralte led guerrilla bands of as many as 15,000 peasant irregulars against the U.S. Marines. They were crushed by the new Haitian army, which was created and trained by the Marines. Oil on masonite. 49 x 39 cm. Milwaukee Art Museum, Gift of Richard and Erna Flagg. M1991.159.

mulatto president who had ordered the second “anti-superstition” campaign. With the regime of noiriste Dumarsais Estimé (1946–1950), the Haitian state became a promoter of cultural and racial “authenticity.” Purified versions of Vodou — performances, art, music, and songs tied to the religious and social complex of which it was the core — were displayed to local urbanites and sympathetic foreigners in search of the exotic. Vodou became folklore; and folklore could be sold.

To put it this way is not to impute commercialism to all of the government officials, artists, and entrepreneurs who launched Haiti’s exotic tourist industry in the 1940s and 1950s, or to the Haitians and foreigners now involved in a transnational industry of “Vodou as performance.” Rather, it is to emphasize that the relation between Haitian elites and Vodou has always been marked by expropriation. Seen in that light, the new approach set by Estimé and reinstated now by his current avatars fits a century-old pattern of condescending use. Furthermore, no religion or the practices and beliefs associated with it can remain untouched, when it becomes display for non-practitioners. Elements of its practices and beliefs inevitably become somewhat disassociated from their origins,



4.14. 'A Sick François Duvalier Receives the Oungans at the National Palace,' by Gérard Valcin, 1978. Because of Duvalier's manipulation of Vodou as sorcery, many Haitians and foreigners perceived his government as a champion of the Vodou religion. Nothing could be further from the truth. Oil on canvas. 102 x 91 cm. Centre d'Art Haïtien. Courtesy of Afrique en Créations.

the traditional flaws of Haitian politicians. Because of Duvalier's manipulation of Vodou as sorcery, many Haitians and foreigners perceived his government as a champion of the Vodou religion (FIGURE 4.14). Nothing could be further from the truth. There is not a single official act by François Duvalier's government that purported to champion the religion of the Haitian masses. Rather, while manipulating the Vodou-witchcraft association, the Duvalier regime tried in fact to solidify the ties between the Roman Catholic church and the Haitian state.

Until the 1950s, Haiti had no Roman Catholic seminary. The Petit Séminaire Collège Saint-Martial (C.S.S.P), one of the most prestigious schools in the country, also functioned as a clearing house for boys who intended to join the priesthood. Haitian priests, who were few and primarily of elite background, completed their training abroad. A year after taking the oath of office, Duvalier enacted a convention between the Haitian government and the Jesuits in order to enhance their project of establishing a national seminar. Duvalier gave the Catholic order many financial incentives, including moving expenses from Canada whence most of the Haiti-bound Jesuits came.³³ In 1964, Duvalier's new Constitution, the very one that made him President-for-Life, renewed the discarded nineteenth-century tradition that had made Catholicism the state religion. Roman Catholicism deserved special treatment, "given the faith and the religion of the majority of the Haitian people."³⁴ Duvalier extended his special interest to Haitian Roman Catholic priests in particular, two of whom he appointed to his Cabinet, a first in the history of the Haitian state.

Duvalier's early overtures miscarried primarily because the Catholic church, mired as was the Haitian bourgeoisie in the regime's inflammatory rhetoric of cultural and racial authenticity, failed to see these conciliatory gestures for what they were. The vast majority

acquiring a life of their own. This is as true of Gregorian chants or gospel music as it is of Vodou rhythms. In that latter case, touristic commercialization may have both helped and hurt Vodou practices. Thus, the regime of Paul Magloire (1950-1956), which had no official commitment to Haitian popular culture, for example, promoted the acceptance of some art forms associated with Vodou, mainly for the benefit of U.S. tourists. Such official acceptance reflected positively upon the entire religious complex. Yet one wonders about many practitioners' discovery that aspects of their rituals could be manipulated and sold to others, independent of their beliefs.

The coming to power of François Duvalier ushered in a change in the perception and the practice of Vodou, both in Haiti and abroad. Duvalier was a self-trained ethnologist and, since at least the late 1920s, a vocal advocate of cultural nationalism. Long before coming to power, he had repeatedly praised Vodou as the authentic religion of the masses, the necessary cement of racial identity among Haitians. More importantly, like many Haitian politicians, he was rumored to be an initiate who also served "with both hands."³²

Like many chiefs of state before him, François Duvalier willfully entertained such rumors, but in this domain as in many others, he thoroughly systematized

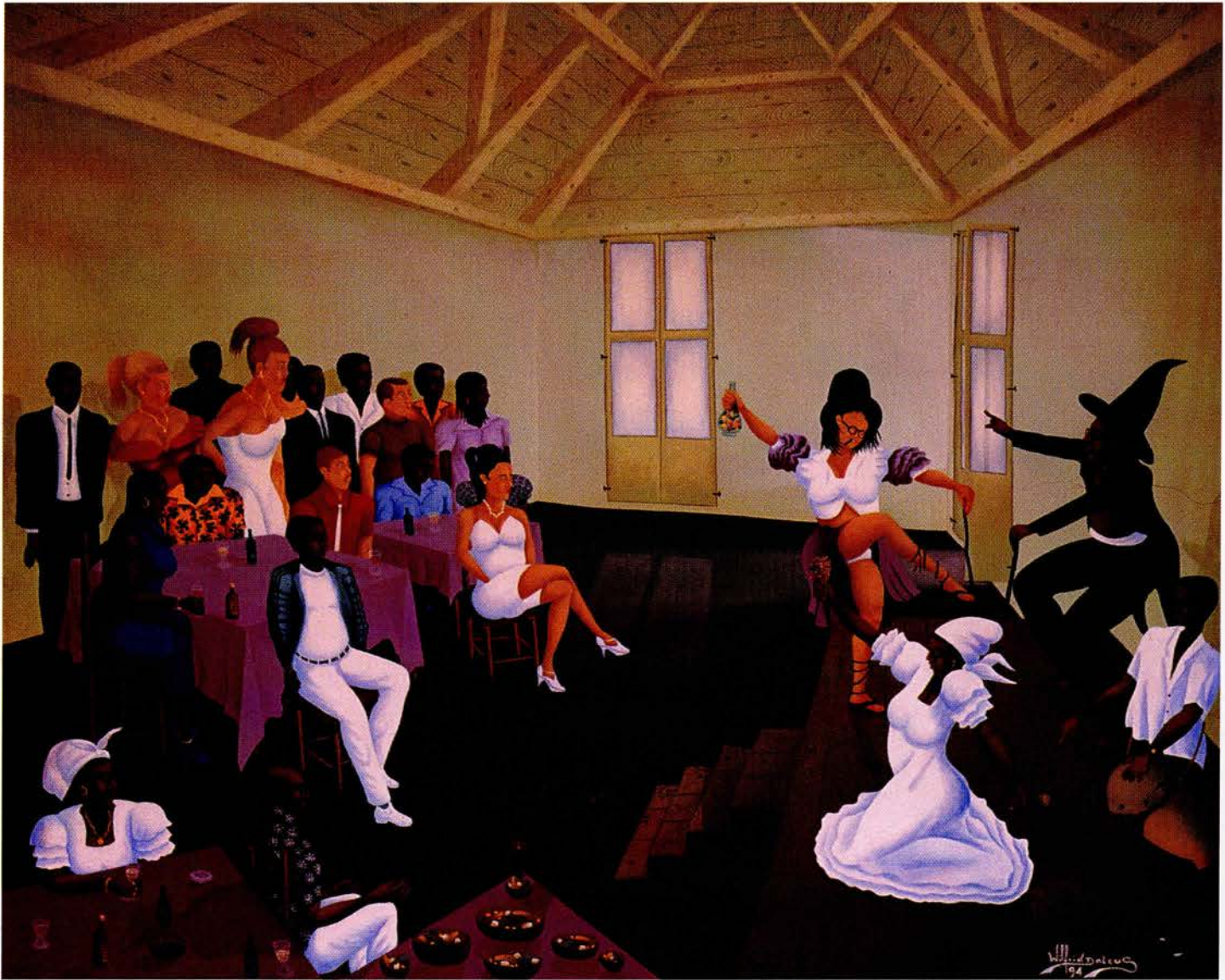


4.15. *'Mardigras at Fort Dimanche,'* by Edouard Duval-Carrié, 1992-95. The Duvalier family is depicted in Fort Dimanche, the torture chamber of the regime. Family retainers include an army general, in-law Archbishop Ligonde, and the Bawon Samdi, Vodou Lord of Death. They are gathered around Jean-Claude Duvalier (Baby Doc) in a wedding dress, a carnivalesque reference to his mother Mama Simone's reputed Vodou initiation, and rumors of his being *masisi* (gay). Oil on canvas. 150 x 150 cm. Collection of Sanford A. Rubenstein.

of the French-born clergy had always been distant from most Haitians, both culturally and socially. Their few Haitian friends and acquaintances were among the elites. Understandably, the church apparatus had supported mulatto candidate Louis Déjoie and most white clerics perceived Duvalier and his cronies as backward and illegitimate leaders. When the regime first increased its repressive tactics in the late 1950s and early 1960s, Duvalier quickly moved to dissipate the previously unchallenged political power of the high clergy. In 1960 Duvalier expelled the French Archbishop of Port-au-Prince and a number of priests, including the director of Saint Martial. Four years later, he expelled the Bishop of Gonaïves, and banned the Jesuits.

The 1960s saw what Duvalier repeatedly described as the most important achievement of his regime: the 1966 Rome Protocol and the nationalization of the Haitian Catholic clergy. Article 4 of the 1860 Concordat between Haiti and the Holy See gave Haitian presidents the right to name bishops and archbishops, pending the Vatican's canonical blessing. In part because of the lack of Haitian priests, in part because of a desire to please, previous governments had hardly exercised that right. But Duvalier actively reclaimed it in 1966, and supervised the consecration of five new bishops. Officials in the ceremonies included one former Bishop of Cap-Haïtien who had repeatedly denounced Vodou and participated in the anti-superstition campaign. Was Rome returning a favor when, years later, the Vatican declared void Michèle Bennett's first marriage, thus clearing the way for the canonical blessing of her wedding to Jean-Claude Duvalier?

Yet it may not be useful to ask how genuinely pro-Vodou or pro-Catholic was the Duvalierist state. As a state form with totalitarian ambitions, Duvalierism has a long track record in breaking down hierarchical systems and rebuilding them to fit its own purposes.



4.16. *'A Gede Ceremony for the Bourgeoisie,' by Wilfred Daleus. Vodou has become less and less the people's religion, and more and more something else. Collection of Tap Tap Restaurant, Miami.*

It did so with the Haitian army. It did so with most of the institutions of Haitian urban civil society, including the school and university systems. Its dealings with Roman Catholicism could be read in the light of that record (FIGURE 4.15). Duvalierism could not subdue Vodou's national hierarchy, simply because Vodou never had such an organized leadership. Beyond rumors that the Duvalierist state tried in vain to create such hierarchy, it is certain that it did successfully induct many oungans to its political networks. The aim of that state was the total absorption of civil society: it left little room for independent networks and hierarchies and left no civil institution untouched.³⁵

It was unfortunate, then, and highly symbolic of Haitian cultural warfare that the fall of the Duvaliers' dictatorship ushered in the last and most massive repression to date of Vodou priests in the Haitian countryside. That an undisclosed number of oungans were members of either the secret police or the civil militia is a fact. But their association with the dictatorship was no deeper than (and certainly not as profitable to them as) that of members of the merchant class, of lawyers, judges, medical doctors, army officials, or high officials of the Christian churches. Yet many Christians used François Duvalier's early rhetoric of cultural nationalism and the widespread rumors of sorcery among officials of the fallen regime to launch a vendetta against Vodou leaders.

The fall of the dictatorship was followed by what Haitians call *dechoukaj* (uprooting).

Mobs went around the country attacking alleged pillars of the regime, but in fact molesting primarily — and killing only — members of the lower classes, some of whom were indeed known as Duvalierist thugs. The Protestant radio station, Radio Lumière, used the violent climate to call for the uprooting of all oungans as pillars of the dictatorship. In the countryside, Christian missionaries of all origins and denominations, Roman Catholics as well as Protestants, foreigners and Haitians alike, passively watched — and sometimes encouraged — the slaughter. Joan Dayan reports: “Temples were desecrated, priests killed — hacked to death or forced to swallow gasoline and set afire.”³⁶ As the uprooting went on, a number of prominent Haitian intellectuals, a minority of Roman Catholic priests and a few Vodou priests launched a national campaign to stop the repression. By then, estimates of the number of oungans killed in 1986-87 had reached as high as 400.³⁷

The repression modified Vodou's position in Haitian society in irreversible yet unpredictable ways. First, a few influential Roman Catholic priests openly denounced either the violence against oungans or the denigration of Vodou as sorcery. Second, and even more important, a few Vodouists from Port-au-Prince — some from well respected middle class or elite families — came out of the closet, openly claiming their allegiance to the religion. More importantly, some of these urbanites joined a number of oungans from the major towns and from the most important Vodou centers of the countryside to create the first nationwide organization for the defense of Vodou, ZANTRAY. The acronym stands for Zenfan Tradisyon Ayisyen (Children of the Haitian Tradition). The Haitian word *zantray* itself means “entrails” (literally) and “heart” (figuratively). Vodou's first official recognition followed, with the popular vote for the 1987 Constitution. In 1991, Father Jean-Bertrand Aristide, a Roman Catholic priest and Haiti's first freely elected president, publicly welcomed Vodou priests to the national palace, where they took part in ecumenical ceremonies celebrating his ascent to power.

CONCLUSIONS

The history of Haitian Vodou has been a reflection, in large measure, of the history of the fate of the Haitian masses. If the emerging religious complex of Vodou was a source of inspiration and faith for most Haitian slaves, it was also a belief system without much interest to Dessalines, Louverture or Christophe. Pétion and Boyer as well were uninterested in it; their successors went to some lengths to restore Catholicism as the state religion. But during the period 1803-1860, while Catholicism languished and the state struggled to increase its power, the Haitian people gained access to land, established themselves in families, and developed their religion on a national scale, though without a national church. By the time that official Catholicism returned to Haiti, the national religion had certainly become Vodou.

From the middle of the nineteenth century onward, however, Vodou has become less and less the people's religion, and more and more something else (FIGURE 4.16). Its sociology today is a function not only of the meaning of life for the peasantry and the urban poor, but also of Haiti's present and future as a tourist retreat, of its capacity to attract the jaded with exotica. What was once a people's religion is now two other things besides: a political divertissement for Haitian political leaders, and a side show for tourist hotels.