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They Fought the Lwa and the Lwa Won: The Persecution of Haitian Vodou
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Introduction

Haitian Vodou comes from long standing African religious traditions which predate the independence of the former slave colony. During the earliest years of the religion’s formation in Haiti, as well as several time periods since, Vodouists have worshipped in secret due to severe persecution from various groups of both secular and religious origin. The forced secrecy of Vodou practices has further compounded the misunderstanding and fear of this religion which has led to additional persecution in a self-perpetuating cycle of conflict. At various times through history Vodou has also been a favorite scapegoat for any and all of Haiti’s woes, with practitioners often paying a heavy price for such allegations. Even today, the eradication of Vodou for the supposed benefit of the society remains a publicly professed goal of many groups, while Haiti’s major, underlying societal problems often remain unaddressed.

Pre-Independence Prohibitions on Haitian Vodou

In 1685, King Louis XIV of France issued the Grande Ordonnance sur les Colonies, or Code noir, which would have far reaching impacts on the fledgling religious system of Vodou. The Code noir restricted ownership of slaves in Haiti and other French colonies to Roman Catholics only, while also mandating slave owners to instruct slaves in the ways of the Roman Catholic faith. The Code noir also forced all French-held slaves to be baptized and buried according to Roman Catholic prescriptions, as well as given the appropriate sacraments and compulsory observance of religious holidays. The most serious affront to Vodou by the decree, however, was the absolute prohibition of all religious practices by the slaves, except for Roman Catholicism (Breathett 1988: 7-10). The repressive religious measures of the Code noir forced Vodou underground even before it was fully formed in order to escape the harsh punishments of the French slave owners. These restrictions on Vodou, along with the declaration of Catholicism as the de facto religion of all slaves, were likely an initial spark of the syncretism between these two religious systems. Slaves found they could preserve their cultural traditions by masking them with the white imagery from the Catholic practices they were permitted to openly perform (Desmangles 1992: 26-27; Michel 2007: 29). Most practice of Vodou remained highly secretive after the issuance of this decree and would remain so until the start of the revolution and outright war in Haiti.

Post-Revolutionary Persecution of Haitian Vodou

During the Haitian Revolution, Vodou was often practiced openly and proudly, with ceremonies serving as a source of inspiration for the soldiers fighting against French colonial rule. Most historical accounts even attribute the Bwa Kayiman Vodou ceremony as a major catalyst from the Haitian Revolution (Thylefors 2009: 74). After the French were defeated and Haiti gained independence, many revolutionary figures and several early Haitian presidents distanced themselves from Vodou due to concerns with their image among the white aristocracy of European powers. Some authors also cite conflicts between early Haitian rulers and Vodou “chiefs” who may have presented a threat to the consolidated political power of early regimes.
Haitian Emperor Jean-Jacques Dessalines would go so far as to execute Vodouisants who challenged his authority and discouraged the practice of Vodou during his rule, despite protections in his earlier constitution which declared the freedom of religious practice. In 1835, Haitian President Jean-Pierre Boyer officially labeled Vodou a superstition and declared an outright criminalization of its practice (Arthur and Dash 1999: 256; Tann 2012: 78). Despite a schism with the Catholic Church beginning in 1805, early Haitian rulers Henri Christophe, Alexandre Pétion, and Jean Pierre Boyer all embraced Catholicism as the state-religion of Haiti and shunned Vodou (Desmangles 1992: 43).

Despite these internal betrayals of Vodou, the practice again continued underground and in rural Haiti, enjoying brief respites of sanctioned open practice, such as during the rule of the Vodouisant Haitian Emperor, Faustin Soulouque. Some scholars speculate the fear of Vodou’s potential to unite and motivate the Haitian peasantry led to Haiti’s 19th century reunification with the Roman Catholic Church at the behest of the country’s elites (Nicholls 1974: 13).

The United States’ Occupation and Misrepresentation of Haitian Vodou

The United States’ occupation of Haiti from 1915 to 1934 would usher in a new era of persecution and misrepresentation of Haitian culture and Vodou in particular. During the first year of the occupation, the United States-backed government of Haiti denounced Vodou as superstition and fetishism and enacted laws against it. Although initially the occupation forces signaled they had no qualms with Vodou, they reversed their stance when they realized many resistance groups were linked with Vodou communities (Greene 1993: 106). At the command of occupation administrators, members of the Marine Corps began enforcing a ban on Vodou ceremonies, but often used exemptions from the ban to bribe local leaders and grease work on development projects. Marine forces executed brutal crackdowns on Haitians who refused to comply with the demands of the occupiers, leading continuous raids on Vodouisants and their places of worship. Marines also seized untold numbers of Vodou artifacts, including sacred drums, during their occupation in order to profit from their sale to collectors in the United States interested in the unfamiliar Haitian culture (Renda 2001: 212-13). Besides their direct action in Haiti against Vodou and Haitian culture, many Marines and occupation administrators also returned to the United States and published sensationalized and slanderous accounts of the Haitian people and Vodou to ravenous American audiences who were fascinated with the myths (Renda 214-28). These misrepresentations of Vodou by American occupiers created a false understanding of the society and its customs which still exists in the United States today (Dubois 2001: 92).

The Roman Catholic Church’s “Anti-Superstition” Campaigns

The Roman Catholic Church has historically found itself at odds with Vodou many times since the 18th century. Even before Haiti gained independence from France, the Church sought to prohibit the colony’s slaves from practicing Vodou, because they feared its potential to inspire sedition among the slave population (Desmangles 26). After Haiti won independence from France, the Church became angered by the autonomous declarations of Jean-Jacques Dessalines, triggering a 56 year schism between 1805 and 1860. During the Church’s absence, Vodou became an even more intrinsic element of Haitian society, one the Church would try to dislodge when it finally returned to Haiti (42-43). On at least three occasions, the Catholic Church led
anti-superstition campaigns against Vodou in an attempt to regain spiritual control over the Haitian people. In the three major campaigns of 1896, 1913, and 194, the Church and its followers destroyed countless sacred Vodou objects as well as Vodou places of worship (52). Undoubtedly, the most tragic aspect of these campaigns was the ruthless slaughter of hundreds of Vodou ounan and manbo by anti-Vodou mobs.

The 1896 campaign was instigated by the Bishop of Cap-Haïtien who spent several years gathering information on Vodou societies, rallying sympathizers, and launching an organization called the ‘League Against Vodou.’ The Bishop also won the approval of the Pope in the fight against Vodou, as well as support from the Haitian government which gave authority for police to crack-down on Vodou ceremonies. The same Bishop would again seek the backing of the government and the military in 1913 when he incited another anti-superstition campaign which targeted Vodouisants. It is during this campaign that the Church worked with American occupation forces to attack Vodou (Greene 100-2). The 1941 campaign was backed by the administration of Haitian President Élie Lescot, who declared his government a Catholic one and allocated state resources and police forces to assist in the persecution of Vodouisants (Desmangles 53, Nicholls 11). The Church would again be accused of inciting anti-Vodou violence following the outing of President Jean-Claude Duvalier, with one news report at the time even relaying the story of a priest in northwest Haiti who distributed machetes to parishioners to hunt down Vodouisants (Greene 213, 222).

**François Duvalier’s Co-Opt of Haitian Vodou**

The motivations for Haitian President François Duvalier’s involvement with the Vodou community are murky, but it is clear the ruler publicly embraced Vodou during his time in office. Even before ascending to the presidency, Duvalier founded a pro-Vodou organization ‘Les Griots’ and was known to advocate for preservation of Haitian cultural traditions, including Vodou (Greene 30). After becoming President, Duvalier began to cultivate a public image associated with the Vodou spirit Bawon Samdi, often appearing publicly wearing Bawon’s customary outfit of a black suit with dark glasses, and smoking cigars, which Bawon also enjoys (Greene 111, Wilentz 106). Regardless of whether Duvalier intentionally developed this image to attain support from rural Haitians who practiced Vodou, it certainly had that effect for a time. The uniform of Duvalier’s paramilitary force, the tonton makout, was also drawn from the attributes of a Vodou spirit, Azaka Mede. The makout donned his denim pants and red bandana (Douglas 2009: 125). Besides the use of Vodou imagery, Duvalier also employed certain Vodouists to work on his behalf as well. Duvalier loyalists infiltrated Vodou communities throughout Haiti to act as spies and enforcers for his regime; some ounan even served as members of the tonton makout force (Wilentz 106). Rumors also circulated among the people that Duvalier held Vodou ceremonies at the palace and “zombified” political opponents (Greene 33, 112). Although Duvalier may not have directly persecuted Vodou himself, his exploitation of and association with the religion for political gain left it vulnerable after his son was ousted from the presidency. Following his son’s exile, a popular movement swept Haiti to remove perceived remnants of the regime; because of Duvalier’s association with Vodou, it was also targeted. As in the Catholic anti-superstition campaigns, mobs executed ounan and manbo accused of supporting Duvalier, and destroyed drums, sacred objects, and houses of worship. Some Haitians abused Catholic and Protestant exploitation and escalation of these events to weaken Vodou’s influence (Wilentz 106-10).
20th and 21st Century Protestant Campaigns of Vodou Persecution

Protestant Christianity has been present in Haiti for at least two centuries, but it is mostly over the past three decades that these groups have amplified their efforts to eradicate Vodou in Haiti. Some scholars contend these Protestant efforts in Haiti are part of a larger design to supplant all indigenous religions in the Global South (Germain 248-49). These groups work surreptitiously and openly to provide material assistance, health-care, and education to needy Haitians willing to embrace the Christian faith and forsake Vodou (250-52). One Evangelical movement in particular is focused on the destruction of Vodou and the belief Haiti won its independence through a pact with the devil at the Bwa Kayiman Vodou ceremony which sparked the revolution: the ‘Spiritual Mapping’ movement. These proselytizers, such as the infamous American televangelist Pat Robertson, believe Haiti will languish forever unless the Haitian people renounce Vodou and embrace the tenants of Christianity (McAlister 2012: 2-4). Not all Protestant opponents of Vodou make a solely spiritual argument for the necessity of its destruction in order for Haiti to progress. Some, such as Chris Ampadu of the Evangelical Disciples Nations Alliance, attach all manner of misrepresentative qualities to the religion and Haitian culture, labeling it fatalistic, defeatist, and fetishistic; all the while transposing the incompatible dualistic philosophy of Christianity onto Vodou (Ampadu 2012: 2-5).

Conclusion

Despite several centuries of persecution, today Haitian Vodou remains a central element of Haitian culture. Vodou’s plasticity and syncretistic tendencies have not only allowed it to survive these challenges and tragedies, but even to expand throughout the course of Haitian history. Today Vodou remains a reflection of the Haitian spirit, strong and determined, just as it was during the time of Bwa Kayiman and the Haitian Revolution. Vodou continues to function as a pillar or potomitan of Haitian society, guiding its adherents through the difficult trials of life; if history is any indication, Vodou will persist in this way despite whatever new persecutions it may face in the future.
Works Cited


The Negative Portrayal of Vodou
Alisa Conser, University of Florida

A negative stance towards Haitian Vodou has been present since its initial stages of growth in St. Domingue. Throughout Haiti’s history, internal forces have attempted to oppress Vodou. These internal forces include the Haitian government and politics. In addition to internal influences, outside sources of oppression have also been present through Haiti’s explosive history. These external forces that have perpetuated negative aspects of Vodou include colonization, occupation, evangelical missions, and popular culture.

Historically in Haiti, Vodou has been blamed for many of the country’s problems (Pierre 2006: 309). There have been forces that have come to Haiti that have encouraged the myth that Vodou practices are evil. The beginning of Vodou’s journey as a perceived evil force was during the French colonization. The French attempted to suppress Vodou. Under the French, the slaves were forbidden from practicing Vodou. This oppression of the religion by the French was due to a variety of reasons. Besides the basic intolerance of what is different, the French also felt that anything that united the slaves was a threat to their power, and indeed Vodou did ultimately succeed fueling the revolt. After the Haitian Revolution, in which Vodou played a major role, the continuance of negative propaganda and feelings toward Vodou persisted. In addition to the French colonizers effort to oppress Vodou, there have also been religious groups attempting to alter the Haitian people’s faith.

There have been conflicts between the Vodou religion and Christianity, in both the Catholic and Protestant traditions. Many Catholic Priests were of the opinion that Vodou was problematic even before arriving in Haiti in the latter half of the 19th century. Many were horrified to find out that many Vodouists considered themselves practicing Catholics and that the beginning of their ceremonies were usually Catholic prayers. One priest writing from Haiti described the “diabolical meetings” of the religion claiming that Vodou participants sprayed sacred items with human blood (Dubois 2012: 160). During the 1940’s, an anti-Vodou campaign began after religious conflict had been “simmering in Haiti for several decades” (Dubois 2012: 307). The Catholic Church along with the Haitian government and United States missionary delegations mounted a ruthless attack on Vodou (Brett 2004: 21). During this attack, many Vodou altars and shrines were burned. In addition to this, many temples and religious objects were destroyed and priests were persecuted. According to Dubois (2012: 308), even the Marxist Jacques Roumain said that the Catholic Church was inhumane and counterproductive in their anti-Vodou campaign. This type of response makes it clear that there is a deeply rooted rift between the Catholic and Protestant Christian faiths and Vodou because of negative actions directed at Vodou.

In addition to Catholics mounting an attack on Vodou, Protestants have also tried to alter Haitians’ preference for traditional practices in favor of their own. According to Brett (2004: 21), evangelism is a major threat to Vodou today. Brett (2004: 21) feels that aggressive right wing United States based missionary groups are the main source of this threat. He makes the claim that these groups hinder the practice of Vodou. An interesting fact to note is that Vodou is non-apostolic, meaning Vodouists do not try to recruit people to practice Vodou. This contrasts with the ideology of many Protestant Christian groups. Brett (2004: 21) says that much of the time, the services provided by these Christian groups are only offered after people forsake Vodou and convert to their branch of Protestantism. These services include health and
educational programs. Brett continues to argue that these types of efforts create a problem in the lives of the Haitian people. These misguided policies, according to Brett (2004: 21), create a rift between the converts and their families. It also separates the Haitian men and women from their traditional practices. Brett feels like the policies of certain evangelistic groups are driving a wedge between Haitians and Vodou and in the process their overall culture. This wedge is created because Vodou is a vital part of many music and artistic traditions. Without Vodou, Brett explains, Haitian music and art would not be the same. The push to separate Haitians from Vodou by evangelical Christians thus separates them from their native traditions. Brett (2004:21) concludes his argument with the sentiments that Haiti has suffered enough from external sources.

The evangelical nature of the Christian faith is to spread Christianity to the people who are unaware of God. It does not help the Haitian people that the Vodou religion is considered by many Christians to be devil worship. Many of these Protestant groups blame Haiti’s misfortunes on punishment by God for Vodouist “devil worship.” A popular example of this viewpoint is the televangelist Pat Robinson. Robinson mused that the 2010 earthquake may have struck because the ancestors of today’s Haitians made a pact with the devil. Pat Robinson’s negative statements toward Vodou were highly publicized on television. This occurrence is an example of how outside forces can be detrimental to Vodou in Haiti.

The misrepresentation of Vodou by the media and popular culture has proven itself to be detrimental to Haiti. The occupation of 1915-1934 by the United States reiterated many of the negative stereotypes of Vodou. There were several popular writings in the US that claimed the military was forced to perform brutal actions because of the "backward habits" of the Haitian people. Vodou religious practices were included in this category of regressive customs. These misguided writings that were published in the United States reaffirmed many stereotypes about Haiti, including perceived negative aspects of Vodou. Vodou was represented as a "secret world of dark sorcery." Dubois (2012: 296) feels that this type of erroneous classification of Vodou by outside sources continues to this day. Many of the writings from outside sources about Haiti in the early 20th century during and after the occupation are not informational. Rather, these accounts of Vodou in Haiti are vivid exaggerations. Examples of this include a work called The Magic Island by William Seabrook in 1929 (Arthur 1999: 85). His depiction of his interactions with Vodou became a best seller. In reality, his depictions of his experiences are highly exotic and bizarre (Dubois 2012: 296). Another author named John Craigie wrote a novel called Black Bagdad and a sequel called Cannibal Cousins. Craigie’s information came from his time during the occupation, but his depiction of his time in Haiti comes across as a “humorous romp through a strange and exotic society” (Dubois 2012: 297). These types of works continue to fuel the misguided stereotypes of Vodou in Haiti.

Later in 1934, a film called White Zombie was advertised to be based on personal observations by American writers and researchers living in Haiti. The film claimed to be a kind of documentary. Because of its depiction, Haiti continued to be viewed as a place of sorcery and dark ritual (Dubois 2012: 298). This misrepresentation of the concept of zonbi has been an ongoing theme in popular culture. The perception of zonbi in Haitian Vodou has been greatly misrepresented in American media. The zonbi is a powerful symbol in Haiti but by morphing the concept of zonbi into a monster of generic horror movies, it mutates the Haitian folklore (Dubois 2012: 298). Dubois (2012: 298) laments that people have taken the religion of Vodou and misrepresented it into a sign of barbarism. This shows, according to Dubois (2012: 298), that many outside of Haiti feel that the country could not progress without the control and guidance
of outsiders. These incorrect depictions of a major Haitian religion have a detrimental effect on the perception of Vodou by outside cultures.

There has been internal strife against Vodou within Haiti. Politically, Vodou has been vilified in various ways. Inside Haiti, the government and various political leaders have made efforts to degrade Vodou. There have been periodic attacks on Vodou from the 1860's, 1940's, and in 1986. In addition to this, there have also been many cases of the criminalization of Vodou practices. An example of this is 1835 when President Boyer declared that "all makers of ouanges, caprelata...and all other spells will be punished by one to six months of imprisonment." Punishment for this included a fine, and they could incur more serious punishment if the other "crime or offenses" were committed in "preparing or carrying out their evil spells." Continuing in this fashion, the law prohibited "all dances and other practices that are of a nature to maintain the spirit of fetishism and superstition in populations." Boyer also prohibited substances that "without causing death, produce a lethargic effect," which is clearly an aim at zombification (Dubois 2012:159). These anti-Vodou laws were rarely enforced until the leadership of President Geffrard and his administration. With the help of the new influx of Catholic priests, Geffrard was able to confront Vodou more feasibly than his predecessors (Dubois 2012: 159). "Let us rush to eliminate the last vestiges of barbarism and slavery-superstition and the shameful practices surrounding it-from our land" he commanded in 1863 (Dubois 2012: 159).

Another example of negative political activities directed at Vodou are the actions of President Lescot in 1941. There was a performance planned by United States organizers in which a traditional musical group would perform Vodou songs. President Lescot was wary of how authentic rural Vodouists would act in front of Americans, so instead he proposed that a group of young dancers from wealthy families perform instead. It is an ironic position that Lescot's order managed to put the dancers in because in preparation for their performance, the group visited a Vodou ceremony, which was illegal at the time. When they visited the ceremony they were arrested. The orders of the Haitian state led the group to break the state's own laws (Dubois 2012: 306).

Also, during Duvalier’s dictatorship, Duvalier used Vodou to control the peasantry. Duvalier wanted to revive Vodou so he could better control the rural Haitians. This association of Vodou and the Duvalier dictatorship has contributed to the negative judgment of Vodou by outsiders (Abbott 1991: 133).

Vodou in Haiti has been under attack since its origins. Nonetheless, Vodou has been able to thrive despite numerous attacks on it. During the French colonization, Vodou was suppressed due to fears of uniting slaves and the subsequent overthrow of their French slave owners. Later, during the 18th and 19th century, there were attacks on Vodou by colonial powers in an attempt to vilify the religion in order to degrade Haiti. This began a tradition of the vilification of the Vodou religion. During the occupation of Haiti by United States forces, there was a variety of literature written about the perceived negative aspects of Vodou. The majority of the time, these authors were either completely misinformed or misunderstood what they had witnessed.

There have been religious attacks on Vodou on multiple occasions throughout its history, including the anti-Vodou campaigns of the 19th and 20th century. Both Catholics and Protestant Christians have attempted to suppress Vodou in Haiti through evangelism. Internal forces such as the Haitian government have also struggled to subdue the religion through anti-Vodou campaigns and laws. In addition to this, popular culture has slandered aspects of Vodou and
elevated fear of the religion. It is clear to see through Haiti’s history that regardless of the harmful occurrences against the religion, Vodou will continue to thrive despite negative assaults.
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Vodou Flags and Their Rising Popularity in the International Art Market
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Introduction

Every religion has sacred art to depict beliefs and to be worshiped. Most often, the works of art produced that gain popularity are in mediums like painting, as evident with art depicting the figures and stories of the Christian faith. For example, the Madonna and Child image has been painted throughout history by artists spanning from Raphael to Salvador Dalí. Though the image represented remains the same, the style of this depiction has changed, as these artists come from different eras and artistic backgrounds. Raphael may have been commissioned by a church to paint his Madonna (Figure 1), whilst Dalí, a more modern, surrealist artist, may have painted his Madonna for commercial value (Figure 2). Nevertheless, it is an image that many Christians recognize. In the case of Vodou, textiles have caught the attention of the art market—as opposed to painting—especially with the art depicted on Vodou flags, or drapo. Similar to the transformation of the Madonna and Child to be more commercialized, Vodou flags have undergone a change in style to keep up with the demands from the art market. Like the Madonna, the images depicted on Vodou flags still relate to the faith, yet the way the image is executed has changed drastically throughout the years. Throughout this essay, I will discuss the importance of flags in the Vodou religion, and their rising popularity in the international art market.

Background Information on Flags

Throughout history, flags have been used to show power and authority. This is especially evident with the use of flags in combat and when claiming new lands, as the British and French had done to exemplify their status as a world power. With the introduction of banners from Europe to the nations of sub-Saharan Africa, the flag traditions of Africa developed to demonstrate the relationship between Africa and Europe.1 Such traditions expressed the blending of African and European military, political, and religious traditions, as well as recognized spiritual leadership.

The way that these traditions came about in Africa was through numerous commercial, martial, and missionary organizations sent from Europe, which aided in the production of ceremonial flags and localized banners for various African communities.2 As Vodou is one of the best known religions practiced in the Afro-Atlantic region, it would appear reasonable that the utilization of flags became a prominent aspect of their religion beginning in the 1600’s, as the use of flags grew in importance in sub-Saharan Africa at this time.3

A commonly misconceived religion of evil and black magic, Vodou is the complete opposite. Vodou is a practical religion with various deities, or lwa, who are called upon to help those who seek assistance from them, ranging from being healed from ailments to providing sustenance for the community. The most common lwa who are called upon are Ogou, Danbala, Ezili Freda, Gede, Loko, and Ayizan—ranked in order of importance—according to oungan

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2 Polk, Haitian Vodou Flags, 8.
3 Ibid., 8-9.
(Vodou priest) and flagmaker, Joseph Fortine. It is believed that in an ideal setting, a society would possess flags for said lwa and utilize the flags for each one of them. In such rituals, the *drapo* is used as a liturgical object, representing the mysticism of the spirit, their strength, power, and their presence within the *ounfò*. This is evident in Benjamin Hebblethwaite’s video, “The Presentation of the Drapo Vodou (Iwa’s flags),” in which the *laplas* (master of ceremonies), *pòt drapo* (flag bearers), and oungan are shown engaging in a cycle of salutations for the Vodou flags. The *laplas* holds a machete and is flanked by two *pòt drapo*, they salute the four cardinal points, *potomitan*, drums, and then the oungan. The *pòt drapo* hold the flags over their shoulders throughout most of the ceremony, as they follow the *laplas* around the temple. The oungan and *laplas* then engage in what Maya Deren calls a “mock battle,” where the oungan’s *ason* and the *laplas*’s machete appear to be fighting, causing the *ason* to retreat, and to prove the power the lwa has over the oungan. The *laplas* and oungan then mirror each other’s movements, as the *pòt drapo* now have the flags rolled up and held in their arms. The *laplas* and flag bearers then bow down and kiss the earth as a sign of respect to the oungan, as the oungan simultaneously kisses the machete and flags. Doing so, the oungan recognizes that he is subject to the lwa and the community.

The central motifs and images represented on the *drapo* are the *vèvès*--or the symbol of the lwa--and chromolithographs for the Catholic saints with each lwa. Though the decor of the flags started out as relatively simple--mostly fabric with few sequins--the style has changed drastically to meet the demands of the art market. This is evident in Haiti’s capital, Port-au-Prince. A bustling city and tourist attraction, Port-au-Prince has gained large demand for embellished flags. The production of these lavish flags full of sequins has gained support from the tourist trade and upscale galleries, and has helped flag makers establish a name for themselves in the art world. As for the rest of Haiti, where a lack of decorative materials exists, many *drapo* remain quite unadorned. With such a divide between simple and lavish flags, *drapo* has stemmed into two categories: ceremonial flags and art flags, in addition to two different styles: old and new.

Motifs, Styles, and Differences between Ceremonial, Art, Old, and New Style Flags

Vodou flags are generally made of textiles such as satin, rayon, and velvet, and are most often embellished with sequins and beads. The lavishness of adding bedazzlements is to convey the vivid energy of the lwa, and with the rising popularity of such embellishments, the commercialization of *drapo* has soared. As stated previously, Vodou flag motifs are generally *vèvè* or chromolithographs. In addition, the colors on the flag would relate back to the lwa.
When the production of *drapo* commenced, flags were constructed with one or two pieces of different colored fabric with little to no embellishment, and depicted symbols of the lwa being praised.\textsuperscript{12} Today, that is no longer the case. As these colorful and bedazzled flags have caught the attention of the art market, the style of *drapo* has changed to put more emphasis on uniqueness and the complexity of the design.\textsuperscript{13} This has resulted in much more detailed, colorful, and embellished flags.

The background and borders of most *drapo* are geometric and often bisect to form triangles of various colors. This pattern may be reminiscent of the parquet floors found in Vodou temples. In this sense, *drapo* may be a visual representation of a Vodou ceremonial environment, with the symbol of the lwa on the flag being symbolic of the presence of the lwa within the *ounfo*.\textsuperscript{14} Flag makers take this concept to produce a kaleidoscopic perspective of sacred space and ritual movement within a two-dimensional image on fabric.\textsuperscript{15} The style in which this concept is executed branches into two categories: ceremonial flags and art flags, with sub-categories of old and new styles.

Art flags differ from ceremonial flags in a plethora of ways. As these flags are created for art collectors rather than Vodou practitioners, these flags are much more elaborate and imaginative than their ceremonial flag counterparts.\textsuperscript{16} They do not bear decorative fringes around the borders, as well as lack bindings for staves. Instead of being raised on a pole like most flags, Vodou art flags are meant to be hung on walls as they are conceptualized more as paintings than they are as flags.\textsuperscript{17} The steering away from fringes is comparable to the steering away of traditional Vodou ceremonial flags into art flags. Fringes were adopted from military and national flags, which served as a model for which traditional Vodou flags were derived.\textsuperscript{18} The removal of the fringe can thus evoke the change of flags becoming a commercial entity, rather than a strong symbol of power. In addition, art flags are made in a variety of sizes outside of the traditional 40”x40” dimensions.\textsuperscript{19}

When making a flag, flag makers have the choice to create their ceremonial flag or art flag in two different styles: old or new. The old style is modeled after traditional *drapo*, bearing diamond shaped fields, maintaining a space where the composition is placed, lacking embellishments, and are made by artists who want to keep the roots of the original Vodou flag making tradition alive.\textsuperscript{20} On the other hand, the new style is completely covered in embellishments, and has round, square, or rectangular fields.\textsuperscript{21} Such a change has become more attractive to the eyes of Vodou practitioners and tourists alike, and has put the art of Vodou flags on the map in the art world.

As Vodou flag makers caught onto this concept of shifting to the new style and lucrative aspect of art flags, several artists have emerged and have made a name for themselves as renowned Vodou flag makers.

\textsuperscript{12} Polk, “Sacred Banners and the Divine Cavalry Charge,” 326.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 326.
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 329.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 329.
\textsuperscript{16} Polk, *Haitian Vodou Flags*, 22.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 22.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 22.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 22.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 23.
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 23.
Vodou Flag Makers and Artists and the Rising Demand for Vodou Flags

Among the world renowned flag makers and artists to emerge from Vodou flag making are Clotaire Bazile, Silva Joseph, Yves Telemak, and Antoine Oleyant, to name a few. Clotaire Bazile, a respected oungan, has become known as one of the greatest contemporary Vodou flag makers. With experience in the faith conducting ceremonies for Iwa, he is able to generate great symbolism to his artistry when creating drapo. His understanding of the faith has allowed him to transform the flag from a ritual form into a commercial art object, while still remaining true to the original Vodou flag ideals—scarce embellishments, vèvè, and a diamond-shaped field (Figure 3). Another artist who sticks to traditional Vodou imagery is Silva Joseph. Like Bazile, Joseph is an experienced oungan whose flags bear vèvè amongst a solid background and are bordered by a geometric design. Instead of making flags under the old style as Bazile does though, Joseph’s flags are more under the new style designs—completely embellished with more square fields (Figure 4).

Yves Telemak and Antoine Oleyant, on the other hand, are two flag makers with no oungan experience, and create flags strictly for commercial value. Though Yves creates drapo for Vodou societies, his flags bear complex geometric patterns and wide polychromatic borders, as well as central motifs inspired by religious traditions of his family, instead of vèvè or chromolithographs. In addition, he signs his works with “Art Y.T.,” or “Y.T. Art,” to suggest his works as commercial art rather than liturgical objects (Figure 5). Similarly, Antoine Oleyant breaks from traditional Vodou flag making ideals. His drapo are composed of multiple figures and images of the spirits that he imagines from his experiences at Vodou ceremonies (Figure 6). Moreover, his flags have become so well received that they even greet all those who arrive at the Port-au-Prince airport in Haiti, exhibiting his flags in a commercial sense rather than ceremonial.

This shift in flags to be more commercialized has gained recognition in recent years. The rich historical and aesthetic aspects have attracted art collectors for their ability to provoke strong emotions in individuals. Unlike other artistic mediums, flags have the power to make people act—to take up arms or to follow certain religions. Flags have become more like paintings, and appeal to people of various classes and backgrounds. In this sense, they are able to reach a wider audience, and therefore, tell a story and spread knowledge of the subject portrayed in ways that other artistic mediums cannot.

23 Wexler, For the Flower of Ginen, 4.
25 Polk, Haitian Vodou Flags, 27.
26 Polk, Haitian Vodou Flags, 32.
27 Ibid., 32.
29 Ibid., 372.
31 Murphy, “Arts in America.”
Conclusion

The Vodou flag, or drape, has evolved greatly since its birth from European traditions. At first symbolizing strictly the Vodou faith with little artistic merit, the drape has drastically transformed to keep up with modern demands. Despite the fact that the imagery portrayed has shifted to not strictly convey vèvè or chromolithographs, the subject of drape compositions still relates back to the Vodou faith. Instead of representing the symbols associated with lwa, artists have taken it upon themselves to portray the effect that Vodou has on them, as Yves Telemak and Antoine Oleyant have exemplified in their art. This relates back to Raphael and Salvador Dalí’s representations of the Madonna and Child, where Raphael sticks to the church’s vision, and Dalí makes the vision his. Altogether, the metamorphosis of Vodou flags from ceremonial object to commercial entity has aided in the recognition of the Vodou faith. As flags hold the power to capture and relate to a wide audience, the rise in popularity of flags has assisted this commonly misconceived religion to be better understood by all.

Figure 1. Raphael, *Madonna and Child Enthroned*, 1504, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, [http://www.metmuseum.org](http://www.metmuseum.org)

Figure 2. Salvador Dalí, *Madonna of Llegat*, 1950, ARTstor Slide Gallery, University of California, San Diego.


Figure 5. Yves Telemak, *Maitre Grandbois*, 1994, ARTstor Slide Gallery, University of California, San Diego.

Figure 6. Antoine Oleyant, *Guede Ceremony*, 1990, http://www.ridgeart.com/Antoine4665c.html
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Santeria and Vodou: Exploring Some of the Similarities
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Introduction

Secrecy: enterprise that has driven Afro-Caribbean religions to be internationally criticized and viewed negatively by those who do not take the time to dig deeper before making their own opinion. In reality, these religions are fascinating, filled with a mythology, magic, and the warmth of a welcoming family. As a practitioner of Santeria, I was received with open arms into the practice and until now I have not regretted my decision. Because I do practice the religion, it was a little hard for me to write this paper. There are a lot of things that I am not allowed to talk about but I will do my best to be as informative and concrete as possible.

Through my research I learned that there has not been a lot of academic work written with the purpose of comparing Afro-Caribbean religions. Most of the ideas I will present to you are based on my investigations, which are built upon my contact with the religions in a separate manner. I intend to compare and contrast the deities venerated in Santeria, practiced in Cuba, and Vodou, practiced in Haiti, based on the characteristics and personalities that are attributed to them. As far as I know, this is something that has not been done before and I think it is due to the fact that the African influences on the religions come from two different ethnic groups, making it extremely hard to tie two deities together and say that they are one and the same. The latter is not my intention with this paper. Rather, I want to share my observations on the similarities and differences of Vodou and Santeria when it comes to the deities that each religious group worships, mainly focusing on the similarities. I want to expose that despite the differences that exist between the religious practices, there is a parallelism to Vodou and Santeria worthy of juxtaposing and that more than likely, even if the spirits have different names, practitioners of the religions are worshipping related spiritual beings.

Origins

Santeria and Vodou, in part, originated from different regions in Africa, which gave way to the differences between the two Afro-Caribbean religions. Santeria’s main influence comes from the Yoruba, Bantu, and Kongo tribes while Haitian Vodou is dominated by the traditions observed by the Dahomey and Kongo ethnic groups. In the early seventeenth century, the Dahomey kingdom was invaded by the Ewe people, forcing the Yoruba ethnic groups to migrate to Nigeria. The Yoruba traditions, at some point in history, were observed in the Dahomey kingdom, supporting the theory that Vodou and Santeria share certain aspects. Santeria’s roots can be found deeply-seated in Nigeria, along the Niger River, from where the Yoruba people were brought over to the New World during colonization. (González-Wrippler 2001:1). One of the most interesting factors of the religion is its mosaic pantheon and its similarities with that of the ancient Greeks. (González-Wrippler 2001:2). The deities in the Santeria culture are referred to as Orishas and they are the secondary divinities worshipped in said doctrine. This concept of spirit worshipping can also be found in Haitian Vodou. Instead of orishas, Voduists refer to the spirits as Lwa. Lwa, like orishas, are the spiritual entities that oversee the world and everything in it and around it.
Syncretism

As slaves from the different tribes were distributed in the Americas, their beliefs were influenced by the traditions they were submerged into. These assimilations led to similarities between the deities worshipped in Vodou and in Santeria. (Wrippler-González 2001: 2). I personally attribute some of the approximation to the ethnic area both religions have in common, Kongo, and the similar Dahomey background.

Tribes did not only borrow traditions from each other, but also, in order to survive, they had to borrow some traditions from the oppressors that forced their exile from their motherland. This was not done voluntarily, but as a result of cultural Darwinism. The concept of syncretism became the salvation of Vodou and Santeria’s African roots. In order for the traditions to survive, the slaves had to find a way to camouflage the true nature of their practices. Due to the Catholicism that dominated the Americas at the time, slaves syncretized their deities with Catholic saints. When the owner believed the slaves to be worshiping and praying to a Catholic holy being, they were actually venerating their own deity.

I want to make it a point that the saint behind the orisha or lwa should not be seen as a major difference between the two religions. The saint is but a cover-up that, due to history and tradition, has not changed. When practitioners of the religion are honoring which ever saint it is, what matters is the deity it represents. For example, Oggou in Vodou is syncretized with Saint James and Oggún, whom I believe is Oggou’s counterpart, in Santeria is syncretized with Saint Peter. The saints are different, but the orisha or lwa is what is actually being worshipped. The saint is a veil that was used to cover up what needed to stay secret. Nowadays the secrecy is not necessary, but it is kept because of tradition, the backbone of Vodou and Santeria. However, as much as I believe tradition to be important, I do sometimes blame it for the negative panorama it paints of the religions to the public. I have to agree with González-Wrippler (2001) when she attributes the differences between the saints syncretized with the deities to the fact that Haiti was French colony for a very long time, while Cuba was a Spanish colony. Although Catholicism was prominent in both European nations at the time, the main saints being venerated were different due to what the saints represent and the different needs between the two imperialistic countries.

The Concept of God

Earlier I referred to the deities worshipped in Santeria as secondary divinities. I did this to foreshadow the concept of a primary divinity, God. When this Supreme Being created the world, he retreated and left it in the hands of his overseers: lwa and orishas. Orishas and lwa, just like saints, are messengers of this ultimate spiritual being. (Asante and Mazama 2009: Lwa). Putting it all into perspective, God is the CEO, orishas and lwa are the managers, and the practitioners of the religion are the laborers who work to please the Supreme Being.

To Santeros, the name given to those who practice Santeria, God is known as Olodumare. Olorun is another name associated with Him. As Olorun, he is the owner of the heavens and the sun, entities known in Santeria as orun. Olofi, the term referring to the creation itself is the most common term used by Santeros to refer to God. He is the link between orun (heaven) and ayé (earth). Olodumare, just like God in Christian based religions, was never
created and can never be destroyed. He has always existed. In Santeria, there are different names associated with the Supreme Being depending on the concept it represents. *Oloddumare* is God as the Almighty and *Olorun*, as the Creator (González-Wrippler 2001: 24-25).

In Haitian Vodou, the concept of God is not as complicated. He is called *Bondye* and like *Oloddumare*, he was never created because has always existed. *Bondye*, according to the “Encyclopedia of African Religion,” is sometimes referred to as *Olohoum or Olorun* by some Voduists, from the Yoruba word *Olorun*. He is the “Gran Mèt, the Master of all masters.” *Bondye* is not worshipped directly, but rather through the worship of the *lwa*, his messengers. (Asante and Mazama 2009: Bondye) This concept that a Supreme Being is the ultimate beneficiary of all worship and offerings can be also found in Santeria and many other religions around the world.

**Creation Theory**

To my surprise, the creation theories in both Vodou and Santeria, involve the same deity: *Obatalá*, in Santeria, and *Danbala Wèdo*, in Vodou. Although the stories behind the creation of human kind are somewhat different in nature, the fact that it was created by the same spiritual being is an exceptional similarity between the two religions.

According to the Vodou tradition, Danbala, created all the bodies of water on the earth, hills, valleys, and also created all the planets. After the world was created, some of the deities decided to descend to earth, to the city of Ife, located in Nigeria. Ife is also a sacred city in Santeria because this is where some the *orishas* resided after *Obatalá* created the world and humans.

In Santeria tradition, *Olofi* delegated the task of creating solid ground to *Obatalá*, the creator of human kind. *Olofi* sent him to reign as the king of Earth. (Bolivar Arostequi 2008: 107). At this time, earth was just a “marshy-ground.” In order to accomplish his task, *Orúnmila*, the great diviner of Yoruba religious traditions, told him that he would need a cat, loose earth in a snail shell, a long gold chain, a hen, and a palm nut. He descended right below the sky, into the marsh, by using the long gold chain. He held on to it with just one hand and used the other to pour some of the earth from the snail shell into the wet ground. Then, *Obatalá* let the chicken go and it started to peck, which dispersed the earth to all directions. Water became solid ground if it was touched by the earth. Once there was a great area covered by solid ground, *Obatalá* let go of the chain and started his life on earth, in a city by the name of Ilé-Ife. He planted the palm nut and it grew into a shady palm tree and the cat was his companion until later on he helped create humankind. (González-Wrippler 2001: 26-27).

**Popular Orishas with Corresponding Lwa**

*Elegguá/Legba*: Even though in Santeria he has a life path where he is represented as a child, it also has a path where he is a very old man. In Vodou and Santeria, *Legba* rules crossroads and paths, including that of life and death. He is one of the most venerated *lwa/orishas*, and is always greeted first, in order for the doors between the spiritual world and the human world to be opened.
Obatalá/ Danbala Wèdo: One of the oldest lwa/ orishas, Obatalá, or Danbala Wèdo, is associated with wisdom, purity, and birth. In Santeria, Obatalá can either be a male or a female depending on his path. But in Vodou, the spirit is separated into Danbala Wèdo, the male version, and Ayida Wèdo. One of the animals associated with him in both religions is the snake.

Changó/Chango: Ancient king of Òyó. He is related to thunder and lightning in both Vodou and Santeria. Known as a hot spirit, he is very powerful and has a bad temper. He is also associated with justice and correcting errors.

Oggún/Ogou: Seen as a symbol or war and defense in both religions, this deity is one of the most popular ones and is also feared as an enemy in both Santeria and Vodou. He is associated with iron and all defense weapons made of metal. He is also associated with justice.

Oshún/ Ezili-Freda: The deity that represents love, pleasure, grace, jewelry, luxury, and beauty. She is known to have a number of love affairs. She is often represented as a voluptuous mulatto with seductive ways. (Hebblethwaite 2012: 233). She is the embodiment of femininity and a mistress according to different legends found in both religions (Deren 2004: 138; Gonzalez-Wrippler 1987: 122).

Conclusion

In Africa, religion is not only a concept or belief about spiritual beings, it is the way of life and for most ethnic groups, and it defines their culture. One of the most influential things brought over on the transatlantic slave trade was a set of beliefs based on natural forces and fascinating spiritual beings. Although there are more differences than similarities between Vodou and Santeria, there are many similarities that are worth exploring.

The secrecy associated with Vodou and Santeria makes it an easy target for criticisms and fear from outsiders, even from those with the same ethnic background. But the two doctrines represent a community and their culture; their past and ancestors, traced all the way back to Africa. Just like science or any other religion, Santeria and Vodou seek truth and aim to explain human existence on this earth.
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How the Marasa Became Divine
Michelle Gray, University of Florida

Introduction

Africans were first brought to the Spanish colony of Hispaniola in the early 16th century as replacements for the Spaniards’ rapidly diminishing labor source, the native population of the Taíno. Until the Haitian Revolution, ending in 1804, African slaves were continuously brought to the Caribbean islands in order to support the rise of the French monopolies on coffee and sugar. Despite the horrors that encompassed human exploitation in Haiti, the immense amounts of diversity between the varying cultures were brought to the Americas. While Europeans used ethnic differences to their advantage, they were unable to truly anticipate the conglomeration of multiple religions as Vodun transformed into Vodou.

Vodou today encompasses three spiritual levels. At the highest, and therefore most distant is Bondye, which is the Haitian Creole term for God. Between Bondye and the numerous Iwa, lies the Marasa, otherwise known as the Divine Twins (Hebblethwaite 2012). The Marasa are often considered the first children of Bondye and are a step above the Iwa in importance. As much of Vodou, the Marasa derives from the African mythology transplanted to the Americas through means of the slave trade. Yet the origins of how exactly the Marasa became the divine beings of today requires tracing back, over 300 years prior to the Dahomey, Kongo, and Yoruba kingdoms of 17th and 18th century Africa.

African Origins

Three main regionally cultural groups poured into Haiti throughout the 300 years of slavery, the Yoruba, the Kongo, and the Fon. Each supplied Haitian Vodou with its own interpretation of different aspects of ritual and mythology. The parallels that exist between the African religions and Haitian Vodou are undeniable and represent a vast site for diachronic and synchronic investigation.

Yoruba

Beyond the Yoruba translation of the Nago deities into the evolving Haitian Vodou, was the ever-present belief of “Twoness” (Murphy 2010: ¶11; Lawal 2011: 82). The reference to duality is best expressed through the Yoruba saying, T’ako,t’abo, èjìwàpò, which translates into “The male and female in togetherness” (Lawal 1995:45). These male and female components derive from the Yoruba’s perception of the creation of the cosmos. The Yoruba view the cosmos as a gourd with two even parts, the ako (male) and the abo (female), together these represent the igbá iwà. The ako contains the realm of the sky and heaven and therefore contains the spirits and ancestors of the Yoruba religion. The abo represents the foundations of the physical world (ayé) (Lawal 2011:82). These two halves of the igbá iwà are the fundamental representation of the inseparable natural duality present in Yoruba mythology. The power of twoness continues as the Yoruba hold a particular belief that every individual has a spirit twin that dwells in the realm of ako. This invisible twin, otherwise known as ikeji, is born with the physical twin, eleda, which dwells in the ayé and stays interconnected throughout the life of the individual (Lawal 2011:84-85). The presence of twins are common among the legends of the Yoruba people such as the story of King Ajáká’s twins. At the time of the legend, twin infanticide was rampant due to belief
that the birth of twins could potentially bring the *ikeji* into the physical world as the individual’s literal twin, an unnatural occurrence. Instead of executing his twin children, Ajáká sent them into exile. Years later the children became the kings of important cities within the Yoruba kingdom (Lawal 2011: 87-88). The Yoruba concept of twoness varied from the origin story of the cosmos to the individual person, but always maintains an understanding that there is always oneness in twoness (Lawal 2011).

**Kongo**

The Kongo Kingdom, an already prosperous nation, first encountered the Europeans in 1484 (Mukenge 2002:19). Several years later, in 1491, the Kongolesi king, Nzìnga Nkuwu was baptized, cementing Catholic influences on the kingdom (The Washington Post 1993). Despite the infiltration of Christian themes in Kongo religion, there is a story that expresses concept of the twin pieces of an individual. According to the Kongo, God the creator created Mahungu, the first man. The Manhungo is a bigendered being, essentially both male and female, capable of self-procreation. Due to God’s frustrations with Manhungo’s laziness, God retreated from the interests of man, leaving all management in the hands of the Manhungo (Ray 1999: 8). While this story eventually leads to the Kongo understanding of death, the components of a dual being who is the first of men and the distant being that is God are important factors to consider when looking at Haitian Vodou today.

**Fon**

While the Yoruba and Kongo hold values of twoness, duality, and twins, it is the Dahomey Kingdom of the Fon people in Benin that carries the most intriguing similarities to Haitian Vodou’s Marasa. The story of Akaba, Hangbe, and Agaja begins with the understanding that Akaba’s, the ruling king at the time, sudden death left a vacancy for the next leader. A power struggle then ensued as Agaja, the brother of Akab, conflicted with his nephew, Agbo Sassa, the son of Hangbe, Akaba’s twin sister for title of king. Closer evaluation reveals that Agaja’s original name was *Dosu*, child after twins (Bay 1998: 54-55). Overall this story, regardless of its validity in history, confirms an understanding of a male and female twin and the child that results after the twins, similar to the three components of the Marasa in Haitian Vodou (Hebblethwaite 2012).

Within the Vodun religion of the Dahomian Kingdom lie the spiritual beings that bring structure to the religion. Of these deities, one of particular importance is the spiritual entities Mawu-Lisa. Adopted from the Aya country, Mawu-Lisa took the role as a “creator vodun” and held precedence over the numerous Fon gods. Mawu, representing the female and Lisa, the male, together form the heterogeneous pairing of two opposing factors that appear as a unified front (Bay 1998: 92-95) (Hebblethwaite 2012: 266). Mawu-Lisa is often referred to in the text as the first deity, from which all deities originate (Deren 1953: 55, 146). Mawu-Lisa’s creation of the deities included the formation of the original seven Iwa, including Danbala and Legba, delegating a realm of control for each Iwa (Hebblethwaite 2012:16). Mawu-Lisa provided structure to the numerous spirits of the Fon religion by creating a lineage of power, a system that travelled with its people across the Atlantic to the island of Hispaniola.
Marasa’s representation and importance in modern Haitian Vodou

Characteristics of the Marasa

The Marasa are seen as the first children of God, Bondye, and are subsequently the origin of all Iwa. Due to its precedence over the Iwa, the Marasa must be served prior to any of the other Iwa. The Marasa also maintain a sense of naivety by portraying themselves as children Iwa, retaining the spiritualistic image as “children of God”. Therefore the rituals, which cater to the Marasa, involve adolescent-esque food and possessions that result in childish behavior (Deren 1953: 38-39).

The celebratory period for the Marasa can be narrowed down to a month, from December 6th to January 6th. The festivities begin with the Feast of Saint Nicholas, said to be the father saint of the Marasa. While celebrations can occur at any time, especially during this particular month, December 28th marks the Feast of the Massacre of Holy Innocents sharing a strong connection with the innocence of the Marasa as the feast honors the deaths of many innocent children slaughtered at the hands of King Herod in an attempt to eliminate the newborn Jesus. The month concludes with the Adoration of the Magi, celebrating the arrival of the three kings, bringing gifts for the infant Jesus. As the texts discuss, the time-frame of the celebratory period for the Marasa surrounding the Christmas season has to do with the correlation of celebrating youth, both living and dead, that is shared among both Vodou and Christianity (Houlberg 2011:280). The influence of Christianity on Vodou could therefore be better expressed as the ways in which the two religions have synchronized through celebratory events such as the feast mentioned above, and more generally as the superimposition of the Christian saints into Haitian Vodou.

Adoption of Christian Saints and the Link to the Marasa

While the slave trade brought together many diverse African cultures, allowing for the development of Haitian Vodou, the influence of Spanish and French Catholicism on the religion is incredibly evident. Most of the Vodou Iwa are associated with a Catholic saint, whose life or chromolithograph holds similarities to the characteristics of the Iwa. Due to the twinned nature of the Marasa, the twin Saints Cosmos and Damien appear to be the most fitting. These twin brothers were known for association with medicine and were martyred for their Christian loyalty. According to the texts, the chromolithograph of the twin saints shows them holding palm fronds, representing herbal remedies. This correlation continues to state that the medicinal aspect of the twin saints ties into the fact that twins tend to need more medical attention and care due to a lower birth weight (Houlberg 2011:277).

In addition to the twin saints, the Marasa are also connected to Saint Nicholas who is portrayed as the father of the twins. This connection is made visually through the interpretation of Saint Nicholas’s chromolithograph. Saint Nicholas stands next to a salting tub, containing two to three children, depending on the version. This represents the story of how Saint Nicholas saved these children from a cannibalistic butcher and in connection to Vodou, the children are represented as the Marasa and Dosou/Dosa (depending on the version). Saint Nicholas is also associated with Christmas celebrations. His underlying general purpose towards the protection of young children appeals to the protective desires of Vodou his portrayal as the father of the
Marasa continues to confirm the order of spiritual importance of Haitian Vodou (Houlberg 2011:278)

While not as common as the twin saints and Saint Nicholas, the Marasa are also sometimes associated with the Three Graces: Faith, Hope, and Charity. This is due to the Catholic chromolithograph of three girls together among the clouds. Their violent death through beheading carries on to the chromolithograph as they are only shown shoulder up. What is intriguing is that their death occurred during their preadolescence, suggesting that the age of the Three Graces would never exceed childhood (Houlberg 2011:278-279). Their perpetual youth parallels the child-like characteristics of the Marasa, a uniting theme between the two deities.

Conclusion

In response to an interview question concerning the position of Vodou in the context of Protestant and Catholic religions, the Ati Nasyonal of Haitian Vodou, Max Beauvoir, once said, “I think the real question of presenting the Bible as if it is the last word, when the Bible has stopped speaking…is a mockery.” (Beauvoir 2012) While the remark may be directed towards Christianity, the underlying statement that Haitian Vodou is not limited by a written canon, expresses its continual growth. The Marasa grew from the contributions of the Yoruba, Kongo, and Fon religions as they fused together under the forced migration and oppression of slavery. While the combination of duality combining polar opposites, presenting it as two halves of a whole, can be found in all three cultural groups, it is how this sense of twoness has been expressed within the religions, whether it is part of the origins of the cosmos, origin of man, or a socio-cultural concept of twins, that has formed the Marasa.

The development of the Marasa cannot be solely attributed to the influence of African ethnic groups in Haiti. Christian influences on how the Marasa are visualized through the association with the Saint chromolithographs have created a more relatable perception of the Marasa. By applying a humanistic description to the spirit of the Marasa, the concept of its duality leaves the world of abstract concepts.

An example of how the twin culture continues to grow and expand could be expressed in the special statuses delivered to those considered avlekete. These individuals have extra digits on their hands or feet or both. The legend behind the avlekete states that these individuals were originally twins in the womb, yet one twin overtook the other, leaving the extra digits as evidence. While, scientifically, the extra digits are a result of a genetic mutation, the avlekete are held in great spiritual esteem. The mysticism behind their existence is a physical application of the spiritual power of “oneness in twoness” (Houlberg 2011: 280-283)

The Marasa often go by the English name, “The Divine Twins,” and their long history of transforming and adjusting to new cultures and environments led to their development from human to Divine Being.
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Kisses and Tears: An exploration of the Character of the Lwa Erzulie
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The fascination with Erzulie extends far beyond the mere intrigue of exploring she who masters the unmasterable, beyond the desire to understand and conquer the intricacies of love. My study of Erzulie stems from an inherent desire to find a self, perhaps my own, from the complex figure that my head, if not my heart, identifies with. In this search, my hope is to clear out the misconceptions and juxtapositions overlapping an identity which, I, among many others, idolize as well as misunderstand. I will study the intricate character and juxtaposing yet interrelated roles of the Erzulie family. Additionally, I will provide persona reasoning behind Erzulie’s complex character based on feminist ideology. The Danwonmen, Kongo-Petwo, and Rada appearances of Erzulie will be discussed through the participation of all members of the Erzulie family, with the exception of Grann Ezili, who holds little pertinence to the self-exploration of my young soul. Erzulie Freda, Danto, Mayane, Mapyang, Je Wouj, and Maitresse will serve as the focuses, and for the purposes of this study, which aims at studying overlapping characteristics and personalities; the Erzulies are treated as a collective.

The Lwa, at a Glance

When looking at Erzulie at a glance, the lwa of love is expectedly tender. She is an endless ball of emotions, butterflies in your stomach personified. Her coquettish, materialistic, jealous, and selfish nature is only matched by a side equally as selfless, nurturing, and protecting. She is overindulgent and a perfectionist. But though Erzulie is perfection, she is simultaneously the impossibility of it. In Erzulie, a myriad of opposing characteristics come together to make an impossibly complex character. To no surprise, the basics of Erzulie are often times too oversimplified in an attempt to portray one image of the lwa. Furthermore she is made to represent a truly complex concept, a mysterious and obscure emotion with bipolar attitudes and a double edged sword, love. On Erzulie, society has piled the sole burden of the waste basket of emotions (Deren 1983: 138-239).

The simplest way to understand Erzulie comes by viewing possessions by her. Ritual procedure for Erzulie provides special insight into her character, what she likes, dislikes, etc. Additionally, observing the behaviors of her chwal are integral in seeing her as a living entity, with a distinct personality. Possessions by Erzulie, specifically Freda, capitalize in cleanliness, in indulgence, and in perfection. Almost always, her possessions include the use of toiletries such as clean linens, powder, perfume, all in the best quality that can be provided with special emphasis on herbs such as basil and olive oil (Hebblethwaite: Video Clip). She is endlessly fanned at an attempt at keeping her “cool.” Devotees to Erzulie shower her with cakes and goodies, jewelry and other indulgences. (Deren 1983: 140-142) When mounting a chwal, she does so gracefully, and dances playfully yet with an air of calmness, kissing and caressing those around her. Other times, in the cases of Danto and Je Wouj, her possessions are ferocious, aggressive, and sad, and her chwal have been known to stutter violently, and lament inconsolably (Hebblethwaite 2012: 234) These extreme differences in possessions demonstrate the two opposing behaviors of Erzulie.
It would be foolish to speak of Erzulie without speaking of lovers. As lwa of love, and indulgence, Erzulie indulges in lovers. She enjoys a polygamous marriage with the lwa Ogou, Agwe and Danbala, each represented by a ring on her finger. Immense controversy exists as to the nature of her polygamous relationship and whether these relationships show Erzulie’s selfishness or selflessness. It may be considered selfish to acquire so much love for one person alone. Nevertheless, little is more selfless than giving love, all the love that one can give. Erzulie is associated with a level of sexual fluidity not seen in most other lwa. She is loved by many and flirts with many openly in her possessions (Hebblethwaite 2012:234). Additionally, she is one of the lwa most married to human devotees. Erzulie alludes to an acceptance of homosexuality and sexual looseness, she has been accused of spoiling men and turning them gay and strong devotion to her from prostitutes and sexual workers in Haiti makes her their patron (Deren 1983:143).

Due to her status as the lwa of love within the pantheon of Vodou lwa, Erzulie has often been compared to Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of love. Similar in various respects, both Erzulie and Aphrodite are considered to be beautiful and embody inspiration, muse, beauty, and art. Both enjoy polygamous relationships, as well as extra marital relations at leisure. They are self-obsessed, vain, and accept and spread love through intense affection and sex. When compared to Aphrodite, the aforementioned worship of Erzulie by prostitutes is interesting, as ancient Greek temples of Aphrodite, housed “priestesses of Aphrodite,” who originally virgins, surrendered their sexuality to the goddess for her to use freely. Within these temples, the priestesses would perform sexual acts with worshippers of Aphrodite, as an act of kindness, and spread love and devotion to the goddess of love (Powell 1998:197-199). When only looking at one end of the spectrum of Erzulie’s character, Aphrodite seems to be a perfect fit. Yet looking closer one can see that Erzulie is not merely the Cupid-bow throwing, sexually overindulgent goddess of “love”, Aphrodite. She is ferocious and complex in nature and she extends beyond the sweet and caring complexion of a white woman to the dark and strong face of a hurt mother with a like for revenge and a pierced heart of gold.

It is this element of strength and simultaneous weakness, this utterly human feeling, which adds to the complexity of Erzulie and distinguishes her from Aprodite. In fact, the weeping Erzulie of Vodou possessions is most similar to none other than the Virgin Mary. Chromolithographs of Erzulie include Mater Dolorosa (Mary of Sorrows) and Mary Magdalene (Bruzelius 1999: 216). Her incredible sorrow acts as the defining characteristic in her Christian representations. As described by Maya Deren, (Deren 1983:42-143) most of Erzulie’s sadness stems from feelings of inadequacy, dissatisfaction and never having enough. Though she be the most loved and venerated lwa, she believes herself to be betrayed, not loved enough, not worshipped enough. Her dissatisfaction with her love conquests and herself are evident, and in her possessions, this anger is often seen turned not just on the community, but on herself, digging nails into her own fists. Deren traces Erzulie’s deep rooted feelings of inadequacy to the expectation men have placed on her, and through her, on all women. Erzulie’s grief has also been associated with stories pertaining to the loss of a child. Stories of a daughter named Uresle, or a son by Ogou, Ogou Badagri, who was lost at sea give Erzulie additional cause for weeping (Hebblethwaite 2012: 233).
Erzulie is considered to be pure of heart, a more important characteristic than bodily purity. Though associated with sexual looseness, Erzulie is also associated with chastity, a chastity that is demanded of her devotees on days sacred to her and a chastity and innocence of heart that is “inaccessible to flesh and its corruptions” and unattainable by man (Deren 1983:143). Erzulie contains something Deren calls, a “cosmic innocence,” a childlike innocence and a childlike rage. She is distraught by the simple terrors in life, the pure injustice of life. Erzulie questions everything, and when finding insufficient answers, weeps, she weeps for herself, weeps for the world, and weeps for the lack of, or insufficiency of love. She, who represents the unattainable dream of indulgence, cries at her inability to provide it to everyone, and for the burden set upon her.

Analysis on Juxtaposing Roles

As shown, there are many different overlapping yet opposing characteristics in the personality of Erzulie. The examining of her roles reveal what she represents to the community around her. To her audience, Erzulie provides solace and an outlet. Erzulie is the go to lwa, for all those suffer, and all those who love, neither of which are mutually exclusive. By representing these two universal emotions, Erzulie appeals to the whole human race, as love and suffering are unavoidable feelings. Erzulie represents hope; for the poor person, the hope of luxury; for the lonely, hope of love. She provides and outlet to those in sex work and sexual deviants, creating an area in society where the taboo on sex and sexuality is suspended, even if for only moments, and sexuality is celebrated as an integral part of life. Her role of motherhood is an important tool in nationalism and a uniting factor for the community. It represents the unity of family, of country, and the strong need to nurture and protect one another. Finally, Erzulie appeals to women, on a level of interdependence, where she is but a representation of them, so when she changes, so have they.

Erzulie and Shaping Womanhood

Because the character of Erzulie represents women, one can look to her to understand the developing attitudes towards women of the culture, or the necessary role women are needed to fit during different periods of time. A look at history and the events of a country may have called for a change in the archetype for women to more loving, fiery, angry, or nurturing. This is all reflected in Erzulie. Erzulie adapts the characteristics society needs. One example of a current event that demanded a change in the behavior of Erzulie is Bwa Kayiman. During a time of revolution people searched for the safety and fire of a protecting mother and looked to Erzulie. Making her fiery, aggressive and strong, Bwa Kayiman used Erzulie as the mother to unite her children for a cause, and the cause for which to fight for. Additionally, the juxtaposing character of Vodou says much on the heterodox nature of Vodou, as it incorporates an influx of Christian notions of womanhood with African ones. This is interesting seeing as the binary iconography of Erzulie shows both a white woman, Freda, modeled after the European standard of beauty, and black woman, Danto, voluptuous and representative of African beauty standards.
Conclusion

The previous paragraph describes the reasoning behind Erzulie’s many often opposing characteristics. Erzulie is but a creation. She is a representation of society and the role of womanhood society needs women to emulate. In short, she is what everyone makes of her. And yet, if she is a representation of all women, then all women are but what society makes of them. At this, she weeps, I weep. Erzulie fills her endless roles to perfection, piling on more and more duties to supplement humanity in what it needs. Similarly, women today do so, adapt their womanhood to a changing environment, become more active and vocal in the face of rising economic and social equality, adapt protective roles of motherhood forced by a rise in absentee fathers, become vainer as consumerism sky rockets, and become more sexualized, as the taboo on sex diminishes. I treated Erzulie as a collective in the piece for this very reason. To me, there is only one Erzulie, adapted and transforming over and over again. Attempts to make distinctions are countless, attempts to place her in a family with a million names, ruled by different concept and rites are numerous, but all are quite unnecessary. Beyond all of her many characteristics, opposing or not, names, and concepts, the root for Erzulie’s complex character is this: Erzulie is woman; and being so, it would be perfectly understandable that I should understand and identify with her complex, juxtaposing nature, more than because she rules my head, but because she shares my gender.
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Indigenous Influence on Haitian Vodou
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Abstract

Hundreds of years prior to the arrival of Columbus, the Arawaks and Caribs inhabited the Caribbean (Mitchell 2006: 2). Shortly after the arrival of Columbus, many West Africans were extracted from their homeland and brought to the Caribbean to work as slaves on plantations. To what extent did the African slaves and indigenous people come into contact? How did this contact influence the evolution of Haitian Vodou? Interaction between the Arawak, Caribs and Africans in the Caribbean did occur and it also contributed elements to what we know today as Haitian Vodou. Exploring the commensurable relationship between the indigenous and African slaves with a thorough examination of historical data, reasons supporting interaction and cohesion, as well as similarities in religious practices supports this assertion.

History of the Carib and Arawak-Taíno

The Carib and Arawak-Taíno were initially migratory people. These indigenous peoples moved throughout South America and the Caribbean, inevitably coming into contact with other civilizations during their journey (Mitchell 2006: 2). Throughout their migration, the Caribs were hypothesized to have been influenced by various aspects of the Aztec, Inca, and Mayan cultures, in addition to the beliefs of people who were held captive by these civilizations. Instead of destroying the concept of the gods and spirits of tribes they had conquered, they were pardoned, held in high regard, but also placed away and no longer worshiped as they had been before. (Deren 273) The Carib and Arawak-Taíno were animisits who believed natural objects had souls separate from their material bodies. They had an incontrovertible fear of their ‘gods’ (Bisnauth 1996: 9). This fear may have influenced the decision to respect all gods, native and foreign.

The Arawak, also known as the Taíno were generally peaceful people who maintained their livelihood through agriculture. Their staple crop was cassava. The Arawak-Taíno preferred negotiation and commercial exchange in lieu of war (Mitchell 2006: 7). They maintained a paternal hierarchy and engaged in the practice of polygamy. The highest god in their belief system was the creator god known as Yocaju, who shared creative powers with his mother, the goddess Atabex (Mitchell 2006: 8). The Cemi were spirits and were in closer contact with humans than the creator god was. They were represented as different aspects of nature. The Cemi facilitated a balance between humans and nature enabling them to live harmoniously. Religious services and rituals were held specifically for the Cemi. Festivals were an important part of worship; they consisted of drumming, dancing, the feeding of the spirits and the feasting of the community (Mitchell 2006: 8). The Arawak were some of the earliest settlers in Haiti and the Antilles and were eventually conquered by the Caribs (Deren 1970: 272).

The Caribs were known for their warring tendencies as well as their bravery. Any threat to the lifestyle and productivity was considered a just cause for war. The central figure in the Carib religion was maboya. The maboya was a god that was understood to be in control of everything. Each person had their own maboya and it was generally considered to ward off evil. In addition to the maboya, each person had a good god, which was referred to as a chemmen and was understood to be stronger than the maboya. In the event of sickness or tragedy, it was
believed that a hex was placed on a *chemmen* by an enemy *maboya*. This practice is similar to the experience of illness among Vodouists. Ceremonies to rid the evil spirit were held, which consisted of food offerings, incantations towards the good god, blowing of tobacco smoke, herbal remedies and community support. The Caribs believed in life after death and had elaborate burial rituals. They also maintained a great respect for the sea (Mitchell 2006: 5-6).

When Christopher Columbus arrived in the Caribbean, life for the Arawaks and Caribs experienced a drastic change. The conquistadors looked to expand the land holdings for the Spanish government while priests sought to spread their religious beliefs. The European initiative to spread Catholicism did not play out well with the Indians at first. Initial contestation eventually evolved into a more open-minded view of the European religion. The Indians began to find similarities between the two religions, drawing parallels in order to gain a stronger understanding (Mitchell 2006: 11-12). This assimilation of Catholicism is also seen amongst African slaves.

**Evidence Supporting the Interaction and Influence between Indians and African Slaves**

The first slave ship arrived in Hispaniola in 1510. Hundreds of thousands of slaves were imported from West Africa. They attempted to bring their religions to the New World with them. Islam, in addition to traditional African religions, attempted the voyage. Islam did not survive the Middle Passage due to lack of resources required to maintain the religion, such as the Quran, Imam and other artifacts. Vodou and other practices in contrast survived and evolved while still maintaining the basic backbone of African religions (Mitchell 2006: 17). Vodou inherited its basis from Africa and was brought to the New World. The non-prescriptive nature of Vodou helped ensure its survival overseas. The religions in West Africa had a propensity for integrating deities from friend a foe (Brown, 340). Because of its generally decentralized structure, the growth of the religion has been inevitable. The religion has adjusted accordingly to meet the needs of the individuals who practice it (Galembo 1998: xxix).

Upon arrival, Africans were placed on plantations to work, in the beginning they were often alongside enslaved Indians (Mitchell 2006: 16). After just twelve years, the first slave revolt occurred. The French term for the type of revolt African slaves took part was “*marronage*,” which means seeking refuge in the hills. It is approximated that around 3,500 slaves gained their freedom this way by 1751 (Deren 1970: 64). The Caribs were familiar with the hills and landscape of the Caribbean and would have most likely sought refuge in the mountains as well (Deren 1970: 272). African slaves who ran away into the hills were destined to come into contact with the indigenous people who resided there.

Deren (1970, 272) suggests two reasons for the constructive interaction that took place during the Spanish period. Both groups detested the white oppressor, and they also shared a similar “primitive mentality,” which we call “pre-industrial” today. The basis of this religious belief is the belief in a deity as first source, ancestor worship in addition to other elements. In addition to Deren’s proposals, the dwindling numbers of Caribs due to warfare and disease could have contributed to the natural camaraderie among African slaves. The Africans who were new to the environment probably relied heavily on the teachings of the Caribs in order to sustain life.

African slaves and the indigenous of the Caribbean shared similar environments. This harsh context and hostile atmosphere perpetuated conditions conducive to religious

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32 Author error: this source is not included in the Works Cited.
amalgamation. The bellicose environment that the Carib people lived in ultimately led to the creation of hostile spirits (Bisnauth 1996: 10). African Slaves shared a similar rage. The Petro rite of Haitian religion is said to have emerged as a response to the malevolent treatment and transposition of Africans by slave owners. The Petro spirits are characteristically hot Iwa and are known for their violence (Deren 1970: 62).

Haiti received its name from the term in the Arawak language, which means “mountainous land.” This name was especially appealing to the African Independence Fighters who gained momentum in the mountains, resulting in ultimate victory over the French (Galembo 1998: xx). Haiti was the second country to gain independence after the United States. The revolution that was initiated in the mountains had strong cultural and religious roots. The alliance of indigenous tribes and African slaves was a result of similarities in religious beliefs experienced under colonialism, in addition to a strong hatred for oppression. These notions helped to shape what we know today as Haitian Vodou (Mitchell 2006: 13).

**Similarities in Religious Beliefs and Practices**

There are significant similarities in belief and ritual between indigenous culture in the Caribbean and Haitian Vodou that point to a conclusive influence. The similarities can be traced through parallels among various deities as well as symbols used when serving the Iwa. There are a significant number of words used in the Petro rite that have Spanish or Indian origin. For example, the Crabinier dance that frequently closes ceremonial dances is considered to be of Indian origin. The name clearly comes from the word “Carib” (Deren 1970: 275). Another example is the Creole word for an intoxicating drink called *tafia*. The Orinoco, the immediate foregathers of the Caribs and Arawaks, refer to this same drink as *tapana* (Deren 1970: 262). Damballah and Legba are referred to as Grand Chemin. This name has a possible French translation, but it also presents a case for Carib origins. The Carib word emin or chemin is used to refer to “the great spirit” or “sky god” which references Damballa’s importance (Deren 1970: 277). Azaka is the Iwa who oversees agriculture and farmers (Hebblethwaite 2012: 214). To date, he has not been successfully traced back to Africa. His name is hypothesized to derive from one or multiple Spanish-Indian words, for example the Indian word *azada*, which refers to hoeing and plantation digging (Deren 1970: 280). The strong emphasis on agriculture among the Arawak shows potential for influence on this particular Iwa. In lyrics by Theodore (Lolo) Beaubrun. Azaka is referred to as “he who holds the secret of the alliance between the Arawak and Africans” (Galembo 1998: 24). This fact presents evidence that the origin of Haitian Vodou must have occurred during a period when the Spanish were in power. (Deren 271) Although there are a large number of similarities that can be drawn between these cultures, the following are some of the stronger possible connections.

The **ason**, the sacred rattle of the priest, has origins in Africa. The African derivation of the **ason** is acknowledged but the link is simply cosmetic. In Africa, the **ason** is used primarily as a musical instrument. In Haitian Vodou, there is a magical nature prescribed to the instrument. It is sacred, similar to the incorporation of the **ason** in Indian culture (Deren 1970: 274). The sacred rattle is used to summon or pacify the Iwa (Hebblethwaite 2012: 211). Another form of communication with the Iwa is through a sacred language used by priests. This language contains words that cannot be attributed to ancient Spanish. It does, however, resemble many Indian words phonetically (Deren 1970: 275).
Damballah is the serpent deity with Dahomian origin. He shares a multitude of similarities to Indian myth. The Caribs believed that the first member of their tribe originated from a serpent (Deren 1970: 272). The Orinoco referred to him as the serpent of the sky and was understood to nurture the cosmic eggs. Ayida, Damballah’s female counter-part, is associated with the rainbow. Among the Andean, Damballah was associated with the rainbow. Among the Mexican-Aztec legends, he is represented as the double serpent, or the double headed serpent (Deren 1970: 172). Conceptions of Danballah and Ayida in Haitian Vodou have significant references to serpent images. The double snake is used to represent Damballah and Ayida, often in association with an egg (Deren 1970: 277). These similarities in concept promote striking similarities that are most likely not coincidental.

According to Maya Deren, the Indians maintained a practice where the souls of people, ”zemis,” could be stolen. This concept is attributed to the Haitian belief in zombies. The living dead among the Indians are discernible based on their non-reflective pupils. Ghede wears sunglasses and if a person is possessed by Ghede, the ability to withstand a sharp, burning liquid put into their eyes without blinking suffices as evidence. The Indian living dead would walk around at night and had a preference for tobacco. Ghede’s essential accoutrements consist of cigarettes or cigars. Ghede has a particular preference for cassava which is an Indian bread.

Conclusion

There are several forms of evidence that point to the syncretism of indigenous and African religions. Various aspects of the Haitian Vodou religion cannot be traced back to Africa, and others have seen differences in emphasis. The similarities in addition to historical support concerning indigenous tribes of the Caribbean, allow for insights about the significance of influence to be drawn. Based on evidence presented in this research, indigenous influence has contributed to the current practice and understanding of Haitian Vodou.
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Private Ceremonies in Haitian Vodou

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Introduction

Although community, public services, and ceremonies play an important role in Haitian Vodou, private rituals are also a vital aspect in the journey through the tradition. The lwa plays important roles in these private ceremonies through creating personal relationships with individuals as well as resolving any requests a Vodouist might have.

Spirit Marriages

Spirit marriages in Vodou are special ceremonies that connect Vodouists with the spirits on a more private level than community sphere. According to Voodoo and Afro-Caribbean Paganism, an individual cannot choose to marry a spirit, but instead must be chosen by the spirit. The practitioner must be called to the lwa through dreams, visions, or other forms of spiritual connection. To prepare for the ceremony a room in the hounfor is set aside for the consummation of the marriage. Then, the Vodouist waits in isolation for the lwa to arrive, and if the union is approved, the lwa will possess their new spouse. Following this, a more traditional ceremony is completed where vows are said and a marriage license provided throughout Haiti is signed and issued. This part of the marriage in many ways resembles Catholic weddings including the purchase of rings, appropriate traditional clothing, cake, musicians, and a wedding feast. This is a personal ceremony intended for people to gain an intimate relationship with spirits in which they can obtain a close relationship. The spouse must abstain from sexual relationships with any other partner on the designated day for the lwa. In addition, after the marriage it is common for a room in the spouse’s home to be transformed into a space dedicated specifically to the lwa. These relationships are important in Vodou because they show how committed followers are to their service to the lwa (Dorsey 2005, 45-46).

Wanga, Wanga Items, and Their Connection to the Spiritual Community

Wanga, in Haitian Vodou are magical spells performed by houngans and mambos that are developed to resolve an issue that a client may be facing. Every Vodouist has a distinct way of performing wanga depending on teachings of their community as well as the teachings of the lwa. People turn to the use of these magical spells because service to the lwa involves expectations and responsibilities. Wanga give clients reassurance about their responsibilities to the tradition and can signal that the lwa is happy with your performance. Voudouists depend on this intervention as a way of asking the spirits for assistance in their daily life and to feel more positively connected to lwa (Barnes 2005, 180-182). Practitioners of the tradition expect involvement of the spirits and want to call upon them for assistance in their romantic lives or other components they seek to be successful. For example, the role of the lwa in making a candle love wanga is vital because the individual trusts the lwa to bring them the kind of love they need in their own life. Although the Vodouist has freedom to formulate their individual wanga, a basic structure already exists. To start the candle, Vodouists advise using a plain white candle that can be removed from its holding. Then, magnetic sand should be placed at the bottom of the candle holder to draw love towards the individual. In addition preparation should also include anointing
the candle with honey, cane syrup, and rose water to symbolize sweetness, attracting a lover into the life of an individual. Lastly, one must talk to the candle expressing reasons why the lwa should choose to grant the client their wishes. According to *The Haitian Vodou Handbook*, mambo and houngan suggest that the client tell the candle a list of qualities that they find appealing so that the lwa can send them a person suited to that description. The candle should be lit and the ritual should be repeated throughout a seven day process. Afterwards, the candle needs to be taken to a crossroad in order for Papa Legba to deliver the request (Filan 2010, 230-40). Although not required, the process should be completed with the assistance of mambo and houngan because they are most knowledgeable about the details lwa require when making wanga. The person seeking the wanga asks for this request because of personal matters, making the ritual more secluded than if done within the Vodou community setting. This allows for the person wanting the wanga to have a more involved role in their religion without relying exclusively on a group experience.

The role of the lwa in the performance of this private ritual is further emphasized through wanga items. These items are made with the energy of the lwa that is brought into the home by the burning of candles in various rituals such as the candle love wanga. These items are created with energy from specific lwa and thus this energy can be used to serve as a form of protection granted by the spirit. These items originated in Petwo ceremonies and come from the Kongo Kingdom in Africa. They are commonly called *paket* and are said to have the power to stimulate lwa and connect them to the client. Popular *paket* include the Dambala *Paket* for Peace and Danto *Paket* for Protection. The role of the lwa is more specified through these wanga because the energy is created and directed towards one lwa for a request.

For example, the candle offered to Dambala is for tranquility and protection. First, one must wash the candle holder with Pompeii lotion and rose water ensuring that all the black soot has been removed as Dambala does not like the color. The process continues as the individual must fill the holder with clear stones and wrap satin cloth around the holder. This is presented to Dambala as a request for harmony in the home. It is vital that the piece be placed on a high shelf and respected as this item is created with energy to attract the lwa. The lwa will work to fulfill the request when possible, but it is important to remember the role of the lwa and to also regard honor towards Dambala. For example, when one is naked or participating in sexual activity in view of the *paket*, it must be ensured that a screen will be put around it, blocking unfavorable activity from the energy of the lwa. Also, smoking should not be done in the room with the *paket*. This private Vodou ritual exhibits individual acts that can be maintained in Vodou to connect with lwa and ask for requests. The trust and relationship between the lwa and the individual grows with the creation and process of wanga (Filan 2010, 235-45).

**Initiation as a Personal Experience**

Another personal ceremony in Haitian Vodou is the initiation, where an individual becomes a more involved member of the Vodou community. It helps the traditions of the lwa stay preserved and perpetuated while spiritual energy is brought to the life of the Vodouist undergoing the initiation. Through this private process an individual learns the fundamentals of Vodou and bonds with the lwa and community they are about to enter. According to Vodouists
this is done through the alignment of the participants with the lwa whose power is responsible for the situations that present themselves in their lives. There are several parts to the initiation process to ensure the security and preparedness for the initiate’s new role as a working member of the Vodou community (Saint-Lot 2003, 68). Although there are many reasons a person may undergo the process, including pure appreciation for Vodou, other common decisions are made because of family obligations to lwa or a vision in which the lwa calls a person to serve them. However, some relate the experience of initiation as a negative experience because negligence to serve has led to misfortune and the need to undergo initiation. The cycle of the initiation begins with the *kouche kanzo*, also known as the *antre kanzo*. Once all the preparations are made, the initiate undergoes ritual cleansings. First, the *kouche* requires a head washing ritual to restrict the unsettled spirits in the mind of the initiate so that they are prepared to receive the lwa. This part of the ceremony is also known as the “sleeping rite” because the inductee is required to spend time in isolation symbolizing a spiritual sleep and connection with lwa. When they awake they have been spiritually reborn and can begin learning the secrets of initiation. The lwa is now said to have manifested itself in the inductee and can be a guide for them through the arduous ceremonial traditions. *Potèt* are then introduced to *ounsi* initiates as they walk through a procession with the ceremonial jars on their heads as representative of the place the lwa now has in one’s consciousness (Murrell 2010, 86-87).

Although the *kouche* can be combined and incorporated into the seven day ceremony where inductees are isolated from society, it leads to the process and begins the final leg in their initiation before being presented as formal degrees in the Vodou religion: *hounsi senp, manbo/hougan sou point*, and *manbo/hougan asogwe*. On the final night of the *antre kanzo*, inductees will perform dances to properly awaken the spirits and allow these lwa to enter into their lives as they learn the mysteries of special Vodou rituals. During this dance the initiates will be dressed completely in white and begin by getting back massages to relax. They are encouraged by the rest of the members of the community to relax and feel comfortable. Then they are blindfolded and put in a line. Together, they follow one another and dance around the *potomitan*, each trusting one another and embracing one another for support. Also during the ritual process, other forms of respect are presented to both the spirits and the hougan. For example, an initiate can be told to kiss the ground to show admiration as well as subordination to the lwa. Also, touching the hougan shows reverence for their spiritual father. After this dance is over, the initiates are lead to the *dejvo* and are not seen again until they are presented at *leve kanzo* (Hebblethwaite 2013). The initiates exit the seclusion ceremony dressed in white with a straw hat. Here the role of the lwa is in the form of Ayizan protecting their eyes and minds from the sun. The new initiates are encouraged to continue their search for knowledge in the realm of Vodou. The final part of the *kanzo* process occurs during the *baptém*, or baptism. These initiates are now welcomed as a full member of their community with support from their *marèn* and *parèn* who act as godparents and help and guide them with spiritual questions. An essential part of the initiation during the *baptém* is the initiate’s wardrobe. Traditionally, each individual will wear the colors of the lwa to which they feel most drawn. This is important because different lwa play a key role for each Vodouist. Some spirits will be more involved with one person than others depending on personalities and requests. For this reason, the teachings and connections made through the initiation process are vital for the success of anyone interested in becoming integrated in the Vodou community (Filan 2010, 220-25).
Conclusion

Private ceremonies are essential in Vodou communities. Although they do not directly work with large groups, these rituals still work to connect their followers to the religion. They are vital in forming the basis of personal experience with the lwa which bonds people to the tradition. It enables people to grow and learn about their beliefs as well as gives them the opportunity to be active in the Vodou community. This is because private rituals give a person the opportunity to focus on their own growth within the religion as opposed to the communal goals of community based ceremonies; instead, the practitioner solidifies their beliefs and connection to the non-human world.
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Freemasonry and Vodou

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From the beginning of colonial rule in Haiti, European influences have shaped the Haitian culture. From a Haitian Vodou perspective, however, few European practices have been so readily adopted by and adapted into Vodou as the practice of European Freemasonry. The influences of European Freemasonry within Vodou culture can be explored through the analysis of historical evidence, symbolic similarities, and shared cultural environments in an attempt to expound upon the intertwined cultures of Freemasonry and Vodou. As is the nature with symbolism-heavy practices, whether in a school of religion or instruction, a symbol's meaning varies with the innumerable number of ways in which the symbol is represented and the context in which the symbol is used. With that in mind, these symbols have multiple meanings and those used analyzed are done so to highlight similarities found between just a few of the known meanings and the ways in which they are used.

A Historical Context

Since the landing of Christopher Columbus in 1492, slavery has served a fundamental role in the economy in Haiti. During the period from 1492 to 1625, the native people of what became known as Hispaniola were forced into servitude under Spanish rule. In 1542, after disease and harsh working conditions mostly wiped out the local tribes of Hispaniola, the African slave trade largely replaced the servitude of the local populace. (Ferguson 1988:2) However, it wasn't until 1697 that slavery on the island received a major boost after the French gained control of the western part of the island and established Saint Domingue. (Ferguson 1988:2) In 1681, the estimated number of African slaves in Saint Domingue was approximately 2,000 and grew to almost half a million by 1789. (Ferguson 1988:2-3) Naturally, during this period traditional African religions followed the slaves to the New World and began to blend with local Hispaniola tribal customs and Christian influences, giving birth to modern day Haitian Vodou.33

It is during this period of French colonialism that Freemasonry established itself in Saint-Domingue. In 1749, two Lodges under French control were authorized and a Provincial Grand Lodge was formed in 1778 under the direction of the Grand Orient of France after the increase of chartered lodges between 1763 and 1775. (Mackey 1996:303) Freemasonry quickly became a prominent part of culture in Saint Domingue where, by some accounts, as many as one out of three French colonists were active Freemasons. (Filan 2010:74) With one core prerequisite for Masonic membership being that a man must be "free-born", African slaves were largely excluded from acceptance into Lodges and the teachings of Freemasonry. However, sex between French masters and female slaves became a common practice which led to the emergence of what would become a separate class of mixed-race children called gens de couleur, "free people of color". (Ferguson 1988:3) It was common practice for fathers to free these children, which

Note: I believe Ferguson was referring to the tribal natives of Hispaniola

In order for a Lodge to be universally recognized as legitimate, it must gain recognition by and receive a chartering from a recognized Grand Lodge. For the most part, Masonic history accounts for chartered Lodges, so the number of unchartered Lodges during this time could possibly be much higher.
afforded them more privileges and opened the door for acceptance as candidates into Freemasonry. In addition to this emerging class, *affranchis* (free blacks) became Masons during travels to France, where Lodges were more racially integrated, and established their own organizations once returning to Saint Domingue. (Filan 2010:74) However, it should be noted that despite becoming more privileged than the slave class, the *gens de couleur* were still subjugated under the French whites, creating tensions that would eventually lead to the world's first successful slave revolt and subsequent Haitian independence.

Under the Code Noir, French slave owners were required to baptize their slaves and provide them with Catholic instruction and traditional African religion practices became illegal. (Filan 2010:57) Under this religious suppression, symbols and practices of Vodou were disguised within Catholic traditions such as the use of chromolithographs (Hebblethwaite 2012:225) and the adaptation of European holidays such as Halloween and Christmas. (Deren 1953:38) However, despite these disguised efforts, much of the secret knowledge and practices that were once shared through traditional secret societies within African culture was partially lost to the slaves of the New World. European Freemasonry came to serve as a substitute for this missing piece of heritage as its religious tolerance provided free sanctuary from persecution and its European mystery tradition mirrored the initiatory rites of passage of African secret societies and influenced the development of Vodou and Haitian secret societies such as Sanpwel and Bizango. (Filan 2010:16) Under the traditional Masonic teachings of freedom, liberty, justice, and the power of free-thought, Freemasonry provided a venue from which Vodouists could unify and converse; which could possibly provide insight into the influences that led to the slave rebellions in 1751 and 1791 (Filan 2010:74) and the Haitian War of Independence. Many notable figures of the time, such as Vincent Ogé, Toussaint L'Ouverture, Légar Félicité Sontonax, and Jean-Jacques Dessalines, were active Freemasons and heavily involved in the colonial politics. Freemasonry has held such a strong influence in Haitian politics that it came under attack from the Catholic Church in 1884 when it was pointed out by the archbishop of Port-au-Prince that the current president, Lysius Salomon, and all of his cabinet members were Freemasons. (Filan 2010:74-78) However, for the sake of accuracy, it should be noted that some of the Freemasons during the colonial period supported colonial rule and even slavery, which was an issue hotly contested between the Brothers of the Craft.

**Comparative Examples of Symbology**

Vodou and Freemasonry are filled with symbols from which entire books could be and have been written to describe their individual and collective meanings and specific nuances. This paper will focus on three subjects within Haitian Vodou from which Masonic symbolism can be found: the Marasa *vèvè*, Ayizan *vèvè*, and Loko *vèvè*.

**Marassa Vèvè**

In the context of Haitian Vodou, the Marassa is a celebration of the balance and complexity of human nature. As Maya Deren suggests, the Marasa represents the cosmic totality of man's twin nature: "half matter, half metaphysical; half mortal, half immortal; half human, half divine." (Deren 1953:40) The *vèvè* for Marasa in Haitian Vodou is represented by a figure of three (Marasa-Dosu-Dosa), as seen in Figure 1. The importance of the trinity is further
ritualistically elaborated on by the Marassa-Trois as a triangle where the legs represent a "vertical segmentation into male and female; and these legs are each, in turn, horizontally segmented into the physical body and the metaphysical soul". (Deren 1953:40)

Freemasonry also shares an affinity for the power of three and its association with the complexities of man and as a symbol of the divine. Work within a Lodge begins with the setting of the Three Greater Lights and the lighting of the Three Lesser Lights. The Three Greater Lights are represented by a Volume of Sacred Law (i.e. Holy Bible, Quran, Torah, etc), the square, and the compass; each of which serve their own symbolic purposes ranging from ideals of religious tolerance to the concept of the cosmic totality of the "Supreme Being". (Beresniak and Hamani 1997:24) The Three Lesser Lights are typically represented by three candles placed atop three separate columns, forming the shape of a triangle around the alter in the center of the Lodge (see Figure 2). As described by Beresniak and Hamani, the "Lodge is thus lit up, but not flooded with sunlight, which would be as blinding as darkness". (Beresniak and Hamani 1997:25) This concept serves to represent the complexity of humankind by emphasizing the need for darkness in order to perceive the light and that true enlightenment is established from an embracing of the totality of nature. Beresniak and Hamani emphasize this point by saying "the lodge is a place of light and shade so that everyone can catch a glimpse of the stars". (Beresniak and Hamani 1997:25)

Ayizan Vèvè

Ayizan Velekete serves as the protective lwa of the Vodou temple and ritual purity and acts as the defender of morality. (Hebblethwaite 2012:212-213) Her vèvè representation takes on the form of palm fronds, her sacred resting plant, and the initials "A. V." which are derived from her name (Hebblethwaite 2012:213), as seen in Figure 3. Ayizan serves as one of the most important lwa in Vodou ritual and initiation.
Similarities between the Ayizan vèvè and the most identifiable symbol of Freemasonry, the square and compass (seen in Figure 4), are obviously apparent but what makes this comparison interesting is that, perhaps not so coincidentally, the square and compass also represents the concepts of purity, virtue and morality. The square acts as an emblem of morality and virtue within Freemasonry in which the phrase "we must square our actions by the square of virtue with all mankind" is common among Masons (Mackey 1996:233) and has even made its way into common usage by non-Masons in phrases like "getting a square deal". Likewise, the compass serves as an emblem of wisdom, conduct, and purity; exemplified by the common Masonic phrase "the strength to circumscribe our desires and keep our passions within due bounds" (Mackey 1996:234), thus preserving the moral purity. When the square and compass are placed together and used as the focus point for action, peace and harmony is the implied result.

Loko Vèvè

Loko serves as the protective Iwa of Vodoun priesthood and the upholder of justice, his vèvè is distinguished by the stylized letter L (as seen in Figure 5), and is represented by a large stone within Vodou temples. (Hebblethwaite 2012:259) Like Ayizan, Loko is considered to be one of the most central and important Iwa in Vodou ceremony.
When viewing the Loko vèvè from a Masonic perspective, the features of the level and plumb are easily distinguishable (Figure 6). Not too surprisingly, within Freemasonry the level and plumb mirror the values of the Loko vèvè by representing equality and integrity respectively. (Beresniak and Hamani 1997:28) Furthermore, the large stone (or ashlar) serves a very special role within Masonic symbolism as it is often used to represent the character of man himself. (Mackey 1996:240) Under Freemason tradition, a Mason must use the level and plumb to work his ashlar towards perfection, ever seeking to exemplify the virtues of justice and equality.

Ayizan and Loko

A special point should be made of the fact that both Ayizan and Loko, arguably two among the most important lwa's in Vodou ritual, are symbolized by vèvè containing two of the most recognizable and important symbols in Freemasonry, the square and compass and the level and plumb. Within Freemasonry, the square and compass and the level and plumb hold the most essential roles in Masonic education by dealing with the very nature of human morality and integrity. For these symbols to be reflected within the vèvè of these essential lwa suggests a significant association between Freemasonry and Vodou during the colonial period, the period of rebellion and independence, and the subsequent evolution of Haitian culture.

Freemasonry and Vodou Today

To this day it is not uncommon to see symbols of Freemasonry on display throughout Vodou rites or printed upon Vodou paraphernalia. The influences of Freemasonry can be seen throughout Vodou culture with such examples as houngans and mambos referring to Bondye as "Gran Mèt", or Great Master, a Masonic title; the coffin, skull and crossbones, and shovel seen in the Gede vèvè which is recognized among Freemasons as a symbol of rebirth and resurrection; and the secret handshake exchanges within the kanzo that runs directly parallel to the "grips" used by Freemasons as means of discerning membership (Filan 2010:80). Even the oaths sworn in the djevo are almost identical to the oaths sworn by candidates of Freemasonry (Filan 2010:80). Likewise, many Lodges within Haiti have taken on a more Vodou flavor in decor and discussion, due to the majority membership of the said Lodges being Vodouists. The two cultures have become so intertwined that it is now difficult to discern where a distinction between the two can be made and which influenced the other in a particular symbol, ceremony, or practice.

Final Thoughts

In conclusion, the connections between Freemasonry and Vodou are as numerous as they are diverse and are lacking serious research within anthropological scholarly literature. The adaptation of Masonic symbolism by Vodou priests could provide a depth of insight into the fundamental meanings of Vodou culture. At the same time, Freemasons would be doing themselves a disservice in their pursuit of enlightenment and historical knowledge of their Craft by not examining the historical and cultural practices of Haitian Freemasonry in the context of Vodou rites, practices, and symbolism. This paper merely skims the surface of the connections that can be found between the two and an in-depth study of just one symbol could reveal a wealth of knowledge that could lead towards a path of unlimited discovery for both Freemasonry and Vodou.
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The Aswins and the Marasa:

A comparison of the Divine Twin in Indian Mythology and Haitian Vodo

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Steve Jobs once said, “I think different religions are different doors to the same house.” Jobs may not have been far off since religions around the world docontain many similarities that cannot be ignored. Throughout these world religions there are common divine figures, ideals, and the notion of a supreme God. These commonalities extend to the pantheons of Indian Mythology and Haitian Vodou. These are two religions that couldn’t be any further apart and yet they both contain Divine Twins within their pantheons.

The Divine Twins of Indian Mythology are recognized as the Aswins of the Vedic pantheon. Knowledge of Vedic deities, early Indian Mythology, stems from the Vedas, a collection of hymns (Ions 1967: 14). In Vodou, a religion that serves the lwa (spirits), the Divine Twins are known as the Marasa. Knowledge about the Marasa can be inferred from the many Vodou songs dedicated to them and from what the Marasa share or reveal during spirit possession and in dreams; spirit possession and the appearance of lwa in dreams are common features of Vodou. A more comprehensive understanding of the relation between the Aswins and the Marasa can be uncovered by comparing their mythology, or lore, including their attributes and functions, as well as their status within society and within their respective pantheons.

Mythology of the Aswins and the Marasa

The birth of the Aswins isn’t entirely clear; there are several versions and interpretations. The most prominent is the Rig Veda variant, in which they are the horsemen born to Vivasvat, the rising sun and embodiment of morality, and a nymph, Saṁjñā. Saṁjñā took the shape of a mare of solar light and practiced austerities for Vivasvat, who searched for her and upon finding her the twins were born (Daniélou 1964: 129). Other interpretations credit Surya, the chief sun god, as the father. This may not be entirely wrong since later Vivasvat became an aspect of Surya (Ions 1967: 21). And still, they are believed to be the sons of Dyaus, the sky or heaven. Either of these stories is plausible when considering the twins various connections to celestial light and appearance before dawn (Daniélou 1964: 129). Despite this, they are deities associated with the Earth realm, and travel it as they help mortals.

They are generally described as ancient yet eternally young, handsome, lustrous, and brilliant male figures (Macdonnell 1966: 42). They are also inseparable, viewed as one unit, but not one figure. The Aswins are also known as the physicians of the Gods, with a wide knowledge of plants or herbalism which they use to heal the sick. Perhaps their most well-known power is the ability to restore youth. In the tale of Cyvana, the Aswins restore Cyvana’s youth. There are many tales of their kindness towards men. In the Mahabharata of Krishna-Dwaipayana Vyasa the Aswins restore Upamanyu’s eyesight after he becomes blind (41). In Hymns from the Rig Veda, translated and selected by A.A. Macdonnell, he mentions that they saved Bhujyu from drowning; the hymn he provides dedicates the fifth verse to summarizing the feats of the Aswins:

Once from old age ye two released Chyavāna;
With a swift courser ye presented Pedu;
Ye rescued Atri from distress and darkness;
The fettered Jáhusha ye placed in freedom.

(Macdonell trans. Rg Veda VIII, 71. 5: 42-43)

According to the verse, in addition to Cyvana, Upamanyu, and Bhujyu they rescued three others, Pedu, Atri, and Jáhusha; though, how exactly and from what these men were rescued from is not explicitly said in the hymn. Despite being one unit and inseparable, it is believed that the Aswins represent separate functions; one representing the warrior and the other fertility, serving as one symbol for seemingly opposing notions (Puhvel 1970: 197).

The Marasa’s birth or origin seems clearer than that of the Aswins. In Vodou, the Supreme Being, God or Bondye, created all the lwa, including the Marasa. The Marasa are considered the twins of God (Hebblethwaite 2012: 266). In the Fon culture, a source of Vodou, God is represented by the twin supreme beings, Mawou and Lisa; the Marasa reflect the notion of twin supreme beings (Hebblethwaite 2012: 266). They, like the Aswins, are viewed as one, but unlike the Aswins they are one figure not just one unit. According to Maya Deren in Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti, the twins shouldn’t be separated into “competitive, conflicting dualism” (41). In the Aswins case, according to Puhvel, they are intended to represent dual natures, the warrior and fertility (domesticity). In Deren’s numerology, one and one makes three, the and acting as the third part completing the whole and relationship (Deren 1953: 41). This can be seen reflected in the Marasa as well, who, unlike the Aswins, have a third counterpart, the dosou or dosa. The dosou or dosa represent the male or female child that follows the birth of the twins. The offering made to the Marasa is usually provided in a three part clay or wooden bowl called the plat Marasa, which reflects the inclusion of the dosou or dosa. The food offered usually involves sweets, other children’s foods, and sugared water, which they are known to demand (Hebblethwaite 2012: 279, 264).

The sex of the Marasa, when invoked, can vary or is ambiguous. However, they generally are perceived as children; Vodouisants possessed by the lwa Marasa imitate the gestures of children, eat constantly (mainly sweets and food reserved for children), cry, and have temper tantrums (Hebblethwaite 2012: 264). They also, based on Deren’s own observations and research, play children’s games, like marbles. As infants or children, the Marasa tend to have limited functions despite having the potential for great power. They have positive and negative abilities that they can abuse, but their negative powers can be stripped upon signs of misbehavior; if asked, they can make someone mildly ill or cause a toothache (Hebblethwaite 2012: 264). They can also release one from illness after receiving an apology (Hebblethwaite 2012: 264). They are well known as a symbol of fertility and in accordance with this they may be invoked during childbirth to ease the process. They also represent family. In the Kanzo ceremony, the Marasa fulfill the role of parents when they baptize the initiate and are considered the ancestors of every family line (Deren 1953: 40). There are countless songs where the Marasa are called family, the most memorable being the songs from the collection of Jean Price-Mars’:

I don’t have family, I come from Ginen,
who is going to speak for me? I don’t have family.
The songs in Price-Mars’ collection reflect the loss felt by parentless children due to various tragedies that have struck Haiti.

**The Status of the Divine Twins in Society and Pantheon**

The Aswins are very popular with the people of ancient India. They feature prominently in the *Rig Veda*, with more than fifty hymns and parts of several others dedicated to invoking the Aswins (Macdonnell 1966: 41). The hymns serve as both prayers and offerings to the Aswins; the second verse of Macdonell’s translation best exemplifies this:

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To you this thought, this song is offered, Aśvins,
This hymn of praise enjoy, ye mighty heroes.
From us these prayers have gone, to you directed.
Ye gods protect us evermore with blessings.
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(Macdonell trans. Rg Veda VIII, 71. 2: 43)

The hymn ends with the request for protection, which may be one of the main reasons for their popularity; the other being that they symbolize fertility. Many Vedic hymns invoking the Aswins praise their ability to promote fertility (Puhvel 1970: 198). They may have also been enthusiastically worshipped because of their ability to grant eternal youth, this made them more popular than even Ushas, the dawn, who is among the most popular Vedic deities (Ions 1967: 21).

Within the pantheon, however, the Aswins are not very high in the hierarchy as they are only Earth deities. They are even looked down upon by other gods, for being “ritually impure” because of their interactions with humans. The most notable instance of this discrimination is in the tale of Cyvana when Indra (chief of the gods) refuses to allow them to drink Soma, the sacrificial substance from which the gods get their power, and join the other Soma drinkers because they are physicians and of the working class (Daniélou 1964: 128). The Aswins do end up partaking of Soma and so are elevated within the pantheon to be equal to the higher realm gods.

The Marasa, too, are popular among Vodouists and Haitian society. This is most probably due to their connotations as being spiritual family to Vodouists. The veneration of the Marasa also bleeds into the treatment of twins in society; it is said to explain the reverence of Haitians
for twins and multiple childbirth (Hebblethwaite 2012: 264). While twins in Haiti are certainly doted on, it is unclear if the Aswins’ reputation affects the treatment of twins in India; though, in Asian cultures, including India, twins are usually viewed as a double blessing because they are so rare.

The Marasa, while not necessarily placed above the other Lwa always seem to be placed outside the other Lwa. They seem to have their own ambiguously ranked category because they are referred to separately from the other Lwa. In Milo Marcelin’s songs for the Marasa this separation is evident:

Pray for the saints!
Cry abobo for the Lwa!
I serve the saints and the Marasa!
I serve the Marasa and the saints!
Pray for the saints!
It is God who will guide us!
(Hebblethwaite 2012: 116)

The saints referred to in the song might relate to the fact that many Vodouists are also Catholic and so praying to the saints is equally important as praying to the Lwa; it may also be that the saints are associated with the Lwa and during times of persecution were used as representations for the Lwa. Saint Cosmas and Saint Damien are associated with the Marasa as they were thought to be twins (Hebblethwaite 2012: 264). The Marasa are specifically named, as is God, and don’t appear to be included with the Lwa or saints the song sings about. While it may seem like the Marasa would be on the same level as God because he/she is also given a specific mention, it is not so. God (Bondye) retains the most power and is therefore higher in the hierarchy than the Marasa. Some believe that the Marasa are stronger than the Lwa and should therefore be saluted first; Deren goes so far as to describe the Marasa as the first ancestral Lwa (39). Nonetheless, it’s typical the Marasa are actually saluted second in Vodou ceremonies; first is Legba, Master of the Gates, and after him the Marasa. Then Loko and Ayizan are saluted, the Lwa that preside over the priests and temple, respectively. And yet, in Karen McCarthy-Brown’s novel, Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn, the Marasa are saluted after Ayizan and before Loko (55). This may not be any more significant than the fact that different Vodou communities have different ways of doing things; the Marasa, after all, are still among the first to be recognized in a ceremony.

Conclusion

The Marasa and Aswins appear to be radically different with only a few key similarities. They both symbolize fertility, which is common for twin figures since multiple births are a sign of fertility. They both are viewed as one: two parts of a whole. Or as sometimes is the case with the Marasa, three parts. The Divine Twins of both religions interact with humans in a positive manner. The Aswins save, heal, and protect people more often than not. While the Marasa can
relieve people of sickness, they are also usually the ones to have caused it. They are also markedly child-like lacking the grace and age of the Aswins. And while both are popular amongst their respective societies, the status within their pantheons differs; where the Marasa appear to be above the Iwa, possibly due to their association with the Supreme Being, Mawou-Lisa, the Aswins had to struggle to be recognized by higher Vedic deities.

The locality of religion and influence of distinct cultures may account for these differences, though. Time, as well, may have unseen effects in the evolution of the mythology surrounding the Divine Twins. In ancient India, the Aswins functions may have better reflected the needs of the society at that time, while the Marasa reflects the needs of Haitians now, despite being an old religion too. The similarities that are found could be considered remnants of a common religion. More likely, they mirror universal beliefs of fertility and the duality of nature, twins being an expanded natural metaphor. Certainly the Divine Twins have affected how society views twins today; while in some places, such as Kenya, twins are feared or believed to be cursed, in Haiti and possibly India they are celebrated.
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Religion is a universal concept and therefore is found in varying forms worldwide. These different forms are often compared to one another. Haitian Vodou, in which the plethora of lwa (spirits) are worshipped and served, is usually compared to Animistic religions. Animism is the belief that everything, all natural objects, animate and inanimate, contain spirits or have souls; Vodou is often likened to Animism because the lwa are believed to inhabit trees, water, the sky, and ground (Hebblethwaite 2012: 13-14).

However, Maya Deren, one of the foremost scholars of Haitian Vodou, disagrees and believes that Vodou is not animistic because many major lwa would be lost if they were organized by the major elements (Deren 1953: 86). So, why then is Vodou considered animistic in nature? By comparing Vodou to Shinto, a popular animistic religion of Japan, one may ascertain the similarities and differences that may influence Vodou’s comparison to Animism. Analysis of each religion’s mythology and pantheon, sacred spaces, objects, and organization as well as aspects of their worship will explain why this association is often made.

The Mythology and Pantheon of Shinto and Vodou

In Shinto, the kami are worshipped. Kami can be used to describe not only a set of supernatural beings, or deities, but also a broad spectrum of spirits and supernatural forces or essences; it can also be considered as an honorific title that implies devotion for the aspects of these sacred spirits (Littleton 2002: 23-24; Ono 1962: 6). The names, number, and exact origins of the kami vary according to the different texts; Littleton cites the Kojiki as saying that eight million kami exist and explains that in Japanese mythology, eight refers to ‘many’, and so it can be assumed to express an infinite amount of kami (2002: 24). But, no mention is made on how the kami came to be. Ono states that some were birthed in the creation myth of Izanagi and Izanami (1962:4). Both Ono and Littleton also believe that every kami have their own distinct traits and are worshipped as the guardian or cause of some natural quality, phenomenon, object, or animal. Equally important are the venerated ancestral kami, which in the past served as guardians of clans, but now serve as guardians of a region, due to the dispersal of clans (1962: 7, 9; 2002: 24, 27).

Interestingly, while the kami seem to pervade all aspects of Japanese life, they do not seem to directly or actively interact with their devotees. The only instance where the kami were believed to directly interact with humans, discussed by Littleton, was during the “Age of the Gods.” In the Kojiki and Nihonshoki, stories of humanized or personified kami are given detailing their time on Earth establishing the rule of their human descendants and then leaving back to the heaven. Heaven, considered to be the divine realm, is where the kami reside; like in the “Age of the Gods” it is believed that the kami periodically descend from heaven in order to visit shrines and other hallowed grounds (2002: 24-25; 27-28).

Spirits or lwa are worshipped and believed to inhabit natural spaces and represent both natural forces and moral principles (Deren 1953: 16). Indeed, the lwa, like the kami, are also personified, with distinct personalities, preferences, and histories; their histories as well as their powers, symbols and icons relate to aspects of Haitian culture. However, unlike the kami, the
Iwa do not permanently reside in the water, sky, air, or ground; they flow through it. Their permanent abode is Ginen or Africa (Hebblethwaite 2012: 14). People can also become Iwa and often in Haiti, heroes become deified, like General Dessalines, who led Haiti to its independence; in Shinto ordinary people are believed to also become kami when they die, but are only venerated by their family (Littleton 2002: 27).

There are hundreds of Iwa; the order and importance varies among Haitian communities. Bondye, the Supreme God of Vodou, created the Iwa (Hebblethwaite 2012: 259). In Shinto, there is no Supreme Being, only a chief deity, the Sun Goddess, who did not have any hand in creating the other kami and defers to them for advice (Ono 1962: 8). Hebblethwaite, describes the ever-changing pantheon of Iwa and reasons behind those changes. Each Vodou community and family has their own distinct group or “pantheon” of Iwa which they serve. These Vodou societies add or subtract Iwa based on personal preferences and experiences. The pantheon also grows or evolves as more Iwa reveal themselves through possession or dreams (2012:13). The Iwa exercise their powers and desires through possession of Vodouists (Deren 1953: 16). Possession is, therefore, a common occurrence and a form of active interaction with Vodouists.

Sacred Spaces and Objects of Shinto and Vodou

While all of Japan is considered sacred, worship revolves around the shrine, where the kami may be enshrined (Littleton 2002: 67). Considering Japan is sacred, it is not unusual that many natural aspects of the landscape, such as mountains, rivers, and waterfalls are considered sacred and suitable for rituals (Littleton 2002: 74-75). Nature is an important aspect of Shinto, so most Shrines appear in a natural setting of trees (Ono 1962: 98). The Torii, the gateways to Shinto shrines, mark the boundary between the realm of humans and kami (Ono 1962: 28). The torii are elaborately described in Sinto Shrines (Zinsya), they are formed by two vertical beams and two horizontal beams; the number of torii built for a kami is unlimited. Originally the torii were very simple, but upon the arrival of Chinese influence they became more elaborate; the best example of this is the numerous red torii of Inari shrines (1938: 19-21). The main buildings of a shrine are the sanctuary and the oratory. Outside the oratory is a stone basin where one is required to purify oneself by washing their hands and rinsing their mouth; at the front of the oratory there is a bell, which is rung to gain the attention of the enshrined deity (1938: 32,40). The sanctuary consists of two chambers the outer chamber, holds the sacred gohei, or symbolic offering, consisting of a wand and strips of paper that hang at either side. The inner chamber holds the “divine body” which represents the deity to which the shrine is dedicated (Ono 1962: 24, 21). In most cases, the “divine body” is represented by a mirror, yet another sacred object in Shinto. The mirror is sacred because it is reminiscent of the holiness and purity of kami (Shinto Shrines 1938: 42; Ono 1962: 23)

Vodou ceremonies occur in temples (ounfò); some natural spots are also used for ceremonies. The ounfò, the sacred space of the Iwa, covers more than just the ritual area but includes all the rooms, structures, ritual equipment and personnel under the power of a priest; it may also simply refer to the altar room (Deren 1953: 47). The ounfò may also double as the priest or priestess’ home and it is also used for healings (Hebblethwaite 2012: 23).The temple is an open space, maybe round, with a potomitan in the center. The potomitan, a crucial object in Vodou, stands in the center and acts as the axis through which Iwa can travel. The walls may be painted with Vodou symbols or kept white depending on the preference of the ougan or mambo.
The potomitan is often painted with the serpent Iwa, Danbala Wèdo and Ayida. Vèvè, mystical diagrams traced on the ground with a certain substance by the priest or priestess, represent a certain Iwa and sanctify the ceremonial space. An important room is the djèvo room; it is where initiates undergo the kanzo initiations. The other important room is the altar room, which holds the ason, or sacred rattle used to invoke Iwa, govi, the clay jars that contain Iwa and ancestors, clay initiation packets or pots that represent novices, Vodou flags, chromolithographs, and a variety of other symbolic Vodou items that serve as the Iwa’s accoutrements (2012: 23-25).

Worship and Organization of Shinto and Vodou

The prayer of an individual at a shrine is the most common form of worship in Shinto; one can even pray at home via a home shrine that is made up of a miniature sanctuary and called the “god-shelf” or kamidana (Littleton 2002: 73). Worshippers can go offer a personal prayer at a shrine as described in Sinto Shrines; they are symbolically purified upon walking through the torii, and then must cleanse themselves at the stone basin before the oratory. Afterwards, they go into the oratory and pull the bell and clap their hands twice to gain the attention of the enshrined deity (1938: 32, 40). After praying they clap theirs hands to show that they are done and make an offering of money to the offertory box; offerings are also presented in home shrines, and are done daily (Littleton 2002: 72; Ono 1962: 51).

Shrines are served by priests who are expected to be able to conduct ceremonies, rituals, and festivals. Each shrine is appointed a head priest under whom other priest and priestesses serve. Originally, priesthood was hereditary but later became appointed, like other civil servants, by central and prefectural governments during the eighteenth century when Shinto was the State religion (Sinto Shrines 1938: 60-61; Littleton 2002: 18). Today, however, things are only slightly different. It is not the government that appoints priesthood (State Shinto was disestablished in 1945), but the president of the Association of Shinto Shrines. In order to be appointed to one of the four ranks of priesthood by the Association one must attend sponsored classes or a seminar (Ono 1962: 42).

Ceremonies in Vodou involve different rites and usually begin with the Rada rite followed by the Kongo-Petwo or Nago rites. The Rada rite is generally considered a “cool” rite that consists of gentle and benign Iwa. Both the Kongo-Petwo or Nago rites are “hot.” They consist of more aggressive Iwa (Hebblethwaite 2012: 249,269,282). The ceremony usually lasts through the night and into the morning and involves drumming (rhythmic music for trance), dancing, and singing (prayers). All these elements are meant to call the Iwa and induce possession, during which an offering and symbolic equipment are provided to the Iwa present (Hebblethwaite 2012: 31). At the end of the ceremony a feast is held. Domestic Vodou ceremonies are led by the father and the great-grandfather is possessed by the Iwa (Deren 1953: 153).

Ougan or mambo perform these rites of Vodou. Priesthood is either inherited or achieved through initiation. There are ranks of priesthood, beginning with the hounsi bossale, which implies little control over the Iwa. Following that, after being educated by an ougan about all aspects of Vodou, there is the hounsi kanzo; these are initiates who have undergone the kanzo ceremony (fire ordeal) and have comparative control over the Iwa (Deren 1953: 154-155).
highest and final rank, is the asogwe; it involves the bestowal of the ason and signifies a long standing relationship with a temple and extensive training (Hebblethwaite 2012: 27-28).

**Conclusion**

While the priesthoods of both religions are similar in structure worship is markedly different. Worship in Vodou is more lively than the solemn approach of Shinto. Though both provide offerings and ask favors of to their respective spirits, only in Vodou do the spirits actively participate. The organization of the shrine or temple differs, but could easily be attributed not only to the different needs but cultural influences. Both religions find that there are holy places in nature that could also serve as a place of worship. In the case of Vodou, sometimes the temple is in the home, while in Shinto there only exists a miniature home shrine to worship their ancestral kami as well as others.

In Vodou, while ancestors can become lwa, only national heroes tend to be deified. There is not a heavy emphasis on worshipping one’s own family as in Shinto. In addition, there is no Supreme Being in Shinto as there is in Vodou. In Shinto, the Sun Goddess is the chief deity but does not reign supreme over the other deities (Littleton 2002: 28). The most important similarity is that both pantheons contain a multitude of spirits. The key difference is that the lwa do not permanently reside in nature, they only act as temporary repositories for rest because the lwa flow through matter. These key differences set Vodou apart from Animism. Vodou seems more suited as a “cosmological monotheism,” defined by Malinar, as the various lower deities being aspects of the Supreme god (Jacobsen, Basu, Malinar et al. 2009: 238)
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The Vèvè as an Interpretive Tool
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Introduction

Vodou is a dynamic religion, involving many ceremonial aspects that work together to create a mystical atmosphere conducive to the calling of Iwa, or Vodou spirits. Within the Vodou religion there are songs, drums, dancing, costumes, the potomitan, offerings, altars, and, of course, the human component that makes it all function. Much of the religion is based in symbolism, and one expression of this is the vèvè, the symbols associated with specific Iwa. Vèvè are tied to the Iwa in a cosmic way, in that they are simultaneously forms of expression and the avenue through which the Iwa can enter into the ceremonial space. These symbols represent the Iwa; many of the vèvè include motifs and concepts that are used to define the spirit, but they are also a sort of magnet that attracts Iwa during a ceremony. Careful examination of a vèvè presents a story of the Iwa through the symbols associated with him or her, as well as the major themes he or she represents. Most of all, these vèvè are tools which can be used to interpret and reveal fundamental aspects of the Vodou religion.

The Function of the Vèvè

Along with chromolithographs – the pictures of saints used to represent certain Iwa – the vèvè is part of Vodou iconography. Unlike chromolithographs however, vèvè are integral and interactive parts of the Vodou ceremony. They come into being within the ceremony and once they are used, they become obsolete (Férère 2005: 20), showing that their importance lies in the meaning ascribed to them, not just in the physical shape. Vèvè serve as both a spiritual focal point and a physical action that aids in the creation of a sacred space (Hebblethwaite 2012:298). The symbolism within a vèvè is a shared aspect of Vodou tradition, proving this tradition has historical depth. The vèvè plays a primeval role within Vodou (Férère 2005: 78), and it represents a deep sense of tradition and culture, in addition to its historical precedence. This connection to Vodou’s past makes the vèvè part of a sacred scripture which is emphasized by the fact that learning how to trace the vèvè is a primary component of manbo and oungan training.

There are several theories by reputable anthropologists as to when and where the vèvè tradition started. Alfred Metraux believes the practice to be purely Dahomian in origin. Louis Maxmilien believes vèvè were influenced by the Native Americans and the French, as well as by Medieval Christian traditional symbols. René Benjamin also sees the French influence in the vèvè, but he mostly attributes their creation to a universal use of symbolism found in all religions (Férère 2005: 20 and Deren 1953: 316). Joseph Campbell views the vèvè as a type of ground altar based in Indian culture, and the candle that is lit during the duration of its tracing transforms the diagram into a mouth through which the Iwa emerge (Deren 1953: 316).

The vèvè is required for a Iwa to visit, as it channels the “astral forces” (Férère 2005 78) that bring Iwa into the designated ceremonial space. After it has achieved this purpose, the vèvè ceases to have any power, and their destruction becomes part of the ceremony. For example, practitioners scatter and disturb the design with sacrifices, offerings like libations, and with their feet during dance (Deren 1953:205).
The Physical and Spiritual Aspects of a Vèvè

The vèvè is more than just the physical drawing. Every aspect of a vèvè—its materials, the act of drawing it, and the symbols within the vèvè itself—are all charged with meaning, and each of these elements reflect some part of Vodou cosmology. For the lwa, it is a “celebration... a public feat displayed in its honor” (Deren 1953: 205). The physical tracing of a vèvè is both difficult and meticulous, as the chosen substance is slowly released from between two fingers of one hand in order to create the design (Wilcken 1992: 27 and as seen in “Ritual Cycles of Papa Loko” via dloc:10-11). Vèvè can be created with a variety of materials dependent on the lwa for whom it is being drawn. Like the diagram itself, the material holds spiritual significance. For instance, cornmeal is often used for Azaka Mede, as it is his favorite food (Hebblethwaite 2012: 213), and the vèvè of warrior lwa often require gun powder (Férère 2005: 20). In addition, ground coffee, wheat flower, talc, sand, charcoal, and ashes may be used (Férère 2005: 20). Sometimes ashes are referred to as Ginen, a word also used to refer to Africa, and this implies the deep historical roots of in vèvè (Hebblethwaite 2012: 240).

The physical aspect of a vèvè is tied to its spiritual implications. They are used to call lwa to a ceremony, along with the drums, dance, and songs (Wilcken 1992:93and 98). Vèvè act as the gateway through which the lwa enters the ceremony, emerging from the primordial realm into the world of humans (Deren 1935: 205). Vèvè can also exist outside the Vodou temple, such as in sacred natural spaces or within homes (Férère 2005: 20). In addition to calling the lwa, vèvè can also be used for ritual purposes and healing (Férère 2005: 20). However, vèvè only truly exist when imbued with spiritual purpose. Vèvè on walls and on drums are only decorative, yet this practice shows their symbolic power within Vodou (Férère 2005: 20).

The zen is a vèvè used in the boule zen, the name for the traditional Vodou funeral ceremony, and it is traced next to the vèvè of the main lwa the deceased person served (Hebblethwaite 222). The zen is also used for any service that involves elevating someone in rank, such as the initiatory rites of an ounan, manbo, or ounsi kanzo (Hebblethwaite 302). Acting as a supplementary vèvè, the zen features many common symbols and themes found in the vèvè of the most important spirits, including two snakes to represent Danbala and Ayida, a crossroad motif to suggest Papa Legba, and a heart for Ezili.

Vèvè within the Vodou Ceremony

The vèvè fulfills its primary purpose when it is used within a Vodou ceremony, where it comes into existence and assumes its spiritual role. Wilcken notes that only in the Rada rite does the tracing take place during the ceremony (Wilcken 1992:27), but because of its significance and spiritual importance and its instrumental role in calling the lwa tracing the vèvè seems like it would always be part of the ceremony. This is backed by video evidence as seen in “Ritual Cycles for Papa Loko,” where the tracing does not take place until the tenth minute of the ceremony. Either before or after the ceremony has started, the manbo or ounan takes whatever substance is going to be used to create the vèvè and addresses the four cardinal directions with the container, just like many other ritual objects that receive a similar salutation (Deren 1953: 204). The ounan or manbo starts tracing the vèvè at the base of the potomitan, a ritual activity called trase vèvè (Wilcken 1992: 27), starting with the middle of the diagram and moving
outwards (Férère 2005: 20). The tracer starts with the central axis of the vèvè – usually a set of symmetrical intersecting lines – and then moves on to the main motifs, such as the dagger in Ezili Danto’s vèvè, and then he or she completes the pwen, or the decorative details that surround the central picture (Férère 2005: 20).

After the initial tracing, the vèvè get greeted in the same way as the drums, the cardinal directions, and the potomitan, an exercise that implies its role within the ceremony is just as significant as the rest of the ritual objects. In addition, the vèvè also receives a beze, a kiss given on the ground, a practice also used in respect to the potomitan, the manbo and oungan, and the drums (Hebblethwaite 2012: 219).

The vèvè is used to call the lwa, along with songs, drumbeats, dancing, and the shaking of the ason, or the sacred rattle (Hebblethwaite 2012: 267). The vèvè acts as a sort of beacon to the lwa, encouraging them to come and participate in the ceremony, and the vèvè itself is often interacted with in a way that reinforces its connection with the spirits. The vèvè is seen as an invisible funnel through which offerings can be given directly to the lwa (Deren 1953: 205). For example, sometimes the blood of an animal sacrifice is sprinkled on the vèvè during the ceremony (Hebblethwaite 256). In addition to calling lwa, vèvè can also be used to prevent baka – a negative type of lwa – from appearing at a ceremony (Hebblethwaite 2012: 215).

A milokan is formed when a group of vèvè is traced around the potomitan (Hebblethwaite 2012: 268 and Deren 204). The collection represents a sense of unity and cooperation within the ceremony and between the lwa (Hebblethwaite 2012: 268). Maximilien views this circle as a magic entity that keeps harmful spirits and people way from the potomitan (Deren 1953: 315).

**Interpreting Vèvè**

Vèvè come in many varieties, but many of them share similar characteristics, some of which are rooted in tradition (Deren 1953: 204). Even vèvè attributed to specific lwa can change from temple to temple or rite to rite and within families of lwa, and personal style accounts for much of the variations seen in different representations of vèvè (Deren 1953: 204). Families of lwa often share the same basic template with different details that set it apart from others in its family. For example, the vèvè for Ezili Freda, Ezili Dantò, and Ezili Mpyang all feature a heart, but details like the dagger in Ezili Danto’s vèvè express her more aggressive personality.
The two major categories of vèvè design are the figurative vèvè – those that represent actual scenes or objects – and abstract vèvè – those whose meaning often relies on the interpretation of symbolic components and linear decoration. Figurative vèvè, like Azaka Mede’s and Bawon Samdi’s, depict an actual object or scene, and many of them provide insight as to important themes in the Vodou community. Azaka Mede’s vèvè shows a neatly-tilled field, along with images of a farmer’s tools, like the scythe, machete, and a bag. Abstract vèvè, like those of Legba and his family of lwa, rely on iconic symbolism and lines. In these vèvè, stylized flourishes and shapes, such as the eight-pointed star and the V-shape overlaid with an inverted V, reminiscent of Ayizan Velekete’s vèvè, constitute the majority of the image.

There are many common motifs and themes present within the assortment of vèvè. The most notable is the kalfou, or the crossroads (Hebblethwaite 2012: 298), which can be found in almost all vèvè, including some of the most important ones, such as Legba, Agasou, and the Marasa (Fèrère 2005: 20). The crossroads embodies the connection between the dead and the living (Hebblethwaite 2012:256), as well as representing the mutually beneficial exchange between the ancestors and the living, as evidenced in an old Haitian proverb that says “If the crossroad doesn’t give, the cemetery doesn’t eat” (Hebblethwaite 2012: 256).

Freemason motifs can also be found in several vèvè, and this illustrates the long history of Vodou and Freemasonry relations. In fact, many Vodou priests are Masons, and even if they are not officially members, they are often familiar with Mason texts, ideas, and symbols (Hebblethwaite 2012:265). Some of these motifs include skull and crossbones, the all-seeing eye, and the crossed compasses, which is known as the Masonic Universal (Hebblethwaite 2012:265). Bawon Samdi is considered a Mason, and his outfit, which includes a top hat, jacket, tails, spats, and skull-and-crossbones decorations, are influenced by the Freemason aesthetic (Hebblethwaite 2012:265).

The snake is a common vèvè motif and is one that reflects elements of Vodou cosmology. Snakes and serpentine embellishments represent Dambala and Ayida, two lwa that share the same vèvè which always depicts two snakes. These lwa represent fertility, love, life and harmony (Fèrère 49), so when the snakes are used within another vèvè, it can be assumed that the lwa also has life-giving implications. For example, Loko is associated with healing and life, and his vèvè features a stylized L which resembles a snake. The inclusion of certain lwa-specific motifs within other vèvè is a testament to the universality that characterizes Vodou. Papa Legba’s vèvè shares some elements with Bawon Samdi’s vèvè, and Azaka Mede’s vèvè resembles that of Ogou Badagri.

**Conclusion**

Vèvè are ephemeral and...
sublime, and their role within Vodou is vital. In addition to being a part of Vodou iconography, the vèvè represents the importance of both tradition and nuance when it comes to Vodou. Much of the religion can be traced back to Africa, but Vodou’s ability to evolve with the times have allowed it to endure. While many aspects of the vèvè remain cryptic, perhaps with further investigation and increased understanding of Vodou, the vèvè can illuminate more of the religion’s dynamic and vibrant history and culture, as well as reveal some of the fundamental concepts and core values that have kept Vodou around for so long.
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The Current State of Pre-Religion: a look at early pagan beliefs and current Haitian Vodou

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An odd and puzzling byproduct of monotheistic religions—notably Christianity—appears to be colonialism accompanied by religious missionary work. Although this is a hefty generalization with numerous cultural and political implications the necessity to convert and demonize polytheistic religions remains evident in history. Bloody religious crusades should prove this point, as history shows Christianity stretching out of Europe and into Central America, India, Africa and even further into northern Europe in an attempt to proselytize. Violently uprooting religions—often literally—aside, there is peculiar evidence for this in a simple and oft misunderstood word, pagan. Drawing from its linguistic roots we find the word pagan derives from both Latin and Greek translating roughly as “villager” and “belief”, or “the beliefs of villagers” (Dowden, 2000:3). This is a humble understanding of the word. However, what the word comes to mean is closer to non-Christian; a notion that gets further pushed to signify heathen, barbaric, and primitive (Iwuagwu, 1998:37). This linguistic history represents the xenophobic tendency of Christianity. However, this tendency would appear problematic in that these religions labeled “primitive” may prove to be the origin of current Christianity. The types of religions which provide interesting insight into this hypocrisy are the European pagan traditions and Haitian Vodou and their relationship to original African religion.

Early Africa

Africa is the origin point of human life as a whole. A substantive publicly funded endeavor, the Human Genome Project, found that human genes could be used like GPS units of our ancestors. It subsequently traced all major human evolution to Africa at around 50,000 years ago, with variation occurring with migration around and away from Africa (though, evidence also shows early hominids migrating at earlier times they were not fully evolved) (Stremlau, 2009:16). Though there is a necessity to prove that culture and religion traveled with early humans and evolved.

First, an evolutionist theory of religion must be formed. Augustine O. Iwuagwu avers that traditional African religions are the remnants of primordial times. Original religion is theorized to have started as a form of animatism, the belief in objects possessing qualities of life. This is believed to be a reactionary understanding of the world by the earth’s earliest human inhabitants. Animatism can then be said to have evolved through the stages of animism, an extension of animatism that incorporates spirits, polytheism and ultimately monotheism (Iwuagwu, 1998:47-51).

Appropriate acknowledgement to sheer size of Africa must be made as well. There exist in current Africa dozens of representations of traditional African religions. But, each exists in a kind of solidarity and unity; each acknowledging a Supreme Being with the name varying by language and region (Iwuagwu, 1998:20). Some may argue that the acknowledgment of a singular creator exemplifies a monotheistic tradition, but oral tradition shows the significance of many deities to the Yoruba, Ewe, and Dahomey which represents the girth of areas formerly studied due to the high volume of slaves that would be transported from these more coastal areas to the Americas (Booth J., 1997:159). It can be assumed that though the sample size is small in comparison to Africa as a whole, since religious practices have been found overall similar across
the continent that the majority of traditional African religions followed a framework close to those three. Evidence for this can also be drawn by noting the migration of people to these areas; it is believed that modern Benin was settled by groups moving from Egypt, where much of the tradition would have been formed and then later adapted and spread (Belcher, 2005:304).

As mentioned, the movement out of those areas occurs much later in history when compared to initial progression and evolution out of the continent. Movement from Africa to Haiti takes place during the slave trade of 1800’s. Early man (*Homo ergaster*) made the dubious trip into Europe around 50,000 years ago. Nevertheless, Haitian Vodou represents religion which parallels European religions found with roots dating 1500 BCE (Jones and Pennick, 1995, 7). This relationship shows common ancestry with Africa. With this in mind specific comparisons can be made.

**Importance of Nature**

Earlier animatism was described as a reactionary process between humans and natural phenomena. Animism and polytheism adapt these early reactions and attribute spirits, deities, and Gods to these occurrences in a more involved attempt to explain the natural world. Thus, the importance of nature and natural environments is imperative to polytheistic belief systems. Early European paganism was steeped in appeals to nature. For instance the Druids lived sequestered in thick uninhabited woods and worshipped their gods in the heart of nature without the use of elaborate temples—nature was their sanctified space. Similarly, the Celts performed rituals in nature, but maintained a temple space as well (Jones and Pennick, 1995:81). This is not unlike Vodouists practicing their religion in public temple settings around the potomitan, while also having private household ceremonies by alters, and also participating in ceremonies at outdoor temples crafted by nature such as trees and waterfalls.

Both European and Haitian polytheism hold high regards for trees in the religion. Haitian Vodou holds that spirits, lwa, dwell voluntarily within trees. As such, ceremonies are often performed at communally recognized trees to pay homage to the lwa believed to be residing in it (as opposed to giving credence to the life-energy of the tree, which would be a form of animism). Likewise most of the European polytheistic cultures held ceremonies at and around trees, often pouring libations of wine on roots or even offering sacrifices. There are noted sacred trees spanning from Rome to Iceland (Dowden, 2000:66-73).

Like trees, water serves an important natural element in religion. Not only were the slaves taken from coastal areas, they were brought to the island of Haiti. As such, water plays a role in the religion and how those cultures understood the natural world. The lwa Agwe rules the sea and marine life, presenting himself during possession with an oar. Agwe is nearly completely analogous to the Celtic god Manannan mac Lir or Barinthuis who dwells in the ocean depths aiding in navigation and maritime activities (Stewart, 1990:74). Island life almost dictates this appeal and credence to the sea as a giver and a taker of life. But, in Europe the worship of springs, streams and especially wells was prevalent amongst all polytheisms. Water represents in these cultures a sense of purity and cleanliness that creates a link to the spirits. And the spring and wells were seen as living water sources (Dowden, 2000:41).

When examined, it can be noted that polytheism post-animatism is a feature of agricultural societies. It could thus be argued that nature is highly intertwined in religion because the livelihood of the community is so highly tied to agriculture—Vodouists going so far as to
recognize a lwa of farmers, Azaka. Trees could have played an important role in early religions because of their longevity. Certain species of trees could well outlive multiple generations. This gives credence to an oral tradition, offering something seemingly eternal and tangible that coincides with the belief structure. Though these connections are understandable, it does not explain away a connection to Africa or a central relationship. Traditional African religions have much of the same practices. But, at the heart of African religion, as the Yoruba describe, is the belief that the creation of the Earth was completed by the planting of a divine palm tree. Arguably the popularity of nature is more than coincidence; it is evidence of a strong bond at the core of these beliefs that would later evolve into unique religions (Iwuagwu, 1998:55).

Ceremony and ritual

It should be said that the Vodou lwa are similar in concept to many European polytheistic deities. There are 1,000’s of lwa encompassing numerous rites of Vodou. But, they are thought to have been created by the Supreme Being to aid humans in their lives (Asante & Mazama, 2009). Norse traditions have an identical understanding of Familiar Spirits and Attendant Spirits which were also created by the Supreme Being and assigned to each person to provide assistance (Munch, 1942:32). However, though these supernatural deities are intended to aid humanity they require worship and respect because they still hold a stature above humans.

With literal translations and implied meanings of the word pagan already offered, there is more to the word than the implication of pre-Christian religion. Ken Dowden offers a colloquial understanding of paganism that entails: eating, drinking, and dance. These are prominent components of rituals and ceremonies in both Europe and Haiti (at their respective times) (Dowden, 2000:159).

Dance is a key component of Vodou ceremonies. Along with drumming, dance aids in the creation of a trance-like state that allows for closer connection to the lwa. After numerous reviewed videos it could be said that dance is one of the key lynchpins of Vodou, as it not only sets the tone and atmosphere of the ceremony but also allows for communal participation. Early Christian writings reveal the importance of dance in European polytheism as well. Dance was so important that even after the spread of Christianity in Europe, complaints of pagan dance rituals being performed at Christian churches were reported. Dance here followed similar logical purpose in ceremony; it offered a means to connect with deities that are not found in regular prayer or worship (Dowden, 2000:161-163).

Though dance was confounding to Christian believers, it was not the least of their worries. An aspect of ceremony which is vastly misunderstood in both early European polytheism and Haitian Vodou is sacrifice and offering. Animal sacrifice is a prevalent component of Vodou ceremonies as a means to appease the lwa. It is a phenomenon stemming from Africa wherein different lwa prefers certain sacrifices in specific ways. Iwuagwu notes at least five different sacrificial ceremonies in traditional African religions (1998:125-127). Vodou ceremonies are also concluded with a feast of the sacrificial offering. European polytheism held much of the same ideas about sacrifice and its function in ceremony. The two even hold common ideals for animals, which should be domesticated and well fed to better appease the spirits. However, Europeans held that their gods and saints preferred inedible and sacrificed tokens; likely not wanting to waste food. Ironically, the European traditions of sacrifice prove more controversial to western viewers than those of Haiti. Celtic tradition involves using skulls as
drinking cups during ceremonial feasts, and in Norse temples it was expected to drink some blood during the feast of the sacrifice (Dowden, 2000:168-175).

The act of sacrifice serves as a community enhancing function in both religions. In areas and times where food sources prove scarce, providing food during ceremony is a tactic for increased community interaction with religion. Ken Dowden also asserts that there is a thrill and guilt loop. This is described as the excitement leading up to the sacrifice and the displaced guilt from the act which is diminished by being dispersed throughout the community equally. This is associated with the act which is greatly heightened in a group setting, providing food, worship and entertainment in a singular event. This reinforces the notion of community and communal identity (Dowden, 2000:169). This theory could be applied to Haitian culture where a notion of a Vodou community needs reinforcement against an aggressive backdrop of Christianity.

In reality sacrifice is not as radical as the western world would lead one to believe. The western world is far removed from food. Catholic tradition of consuming the host is symbolic consumption of the flesh and blood of Christ which is reserved as a right in the religion. This lust for metaphoric human flesh is equally jarring to an unaccustomed viewer. But, it still shares in traces of connection with the polytheistic rituals described.

**What does this prove?**

In accepting both human migrations from Africa and evolutionist theories of religion it can be seen first that European religion is the product of African traditions. The real proof for this though are the similarities between European religions and Vodou because they exist drastically separate in time which indicts a commonality from Africa and diminishes the reasoning behind xenophobia. Global religions were most likely all founded in Africa and disseminated outward with human movement. Taking into context the idea of these polytheistic religions being “pre-Christian,” it can be assumed that these polytheisms were mingled and fused into religion in the same way Haitian Vodou was.
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Haitian Vodou is typically misunderstood by non-participating individuals and in its history it has faced many challenges. Challenges such as the early 2010 earthquake in Haiti and the cholera outbreak later that year, both of which claimed many lives, tested the capacity of Vodou to resist persecution and possible extinction. The earthquake and cholera outbreak lead to the death of Vodou priests because Vodou was used as a scapegoat for the problems that Haiti incurred in 2010. Those events were not the first time that Vodou has faced hardship and persecution. Vodou experienced hardships during French colonial rule where the French attempted to extinguish Vodou through forced conversion. This paper is not meant to be all encompassing but it will abstract elements from Vodou and compare it with another religion, Shinto. Through comparison we can evaluate similarities with the Shinto religion and provide a foundation to understanding Vodou as a world religion.

Origins of Haitian Vodou and Shinto

Haiti is a country that shares the island of Hispaniola with the Dominican Republic. Hispaniola is divided between the two countries with Haiti located to the west and the Dominican Republic on the east. The island of Hispaniola is one of many islands located in the Caribbean. The French occupied Haiti, previously known as Saint-Domingue, in the 17th century but the first arrival of slaves from the slave trade was during the early 16th century in Hispaniola. The transport of these slaves not only brought a work force, but also the culture and traditions of the individuals from a variety of areas. Slaves from the slave trade came from various regions of West Africa like those of Yoruba, Dahomey and Congo. The slaves from these regions didn’t share a unified religion with each other so in order to quell future unification the French only needed to separate tribesmen from each other. Although the French attempted to convert the slaves to Christianity, the amalgamation of the religions present in Saint-Domingue gave rise to Haitian Vodou. Haitian Vodou contains aspects from various African religions, Christianity, and Native Indians (Deren 1983:58-64).

The word Shinto originates from the Chinese words shen (deity) and dao (way) (Grapard). Shinto does not have a founder or sacred scripture but does have two texts that date back to the eighth century CE. Emperor Temmu ordered that the ancient stories be committed to memory and then in turn his successor Empress Gemmyo had these oral histories written down. The oral history was recorded in these texts Kojiki (“record of ancient matters” and Nihon Shoki (“Chronicles of Japan”). These two texts serve as a foundation for the Shinto religion (Hartz 2009:16).

Creation story of Haitian Vodou and Shinto

Most sacred texts contain an origin story. Haitian Vodou does not have a sacred text like the Bible, Quran, or the Torah but uses Vodou songs as the medium for transmission of beliefs. This does not mean that Vodou does not have an origin story. Maya Deren (1983:21-23) illustrates some flaws with oral transmission of myths. From the origin of the myth, details can degrade over time, which is the nature of oral transmission. Passed from generation to
generation, each adding and taking away from what was recorded to memory. Depending on who is telling the myth, there may be variations but there are some constants. Deren abstracted one constant that states there was an event that led to the creation of all and out of the void a manifestation of elements formed a cosmic egg. Like an emulsion of water and oil each component is seamlessly one until each part separates from the mixture to form distinct and individual parts. Vodou’s belief system and hierarchal order of supernatural beings consist of a God, the Supreme Being. God, or Bondye, created the lwa and the lwa act as intermediaries between humans and God (Hebblethwaite 2012: 220).

Shinto, like Vodou, does not have sacred texts that govern through scripture but it does have two highly revered texts. The Kojiki and Nihon Shoki contain the creation story of Japan. The creation story starts with the universe in existence but in disarray. It eventually separated into three parts. From the separation of the sky, Yomi-tsu-kuni (land of darkness), and the middle (earth) level, which was still covered by the sea, arose three kami (spirits). As the elements separated from each other, the sky (heaven) became the ultimate destination of the three kami. In heaven, the kami would stay and give birth to other deities. Not until the fifth generation of deities would the kami interact with the physical world. The fifth pair of kami to be created was a brother and sister, Izanagi and Izanami. This pair was tasked with the job of creating land. With his jeweled spear, Izanagi dipped it into the abyss of the sea and pulled out one drop of water. As this drop of water returned to earth it materialized to form the mythical island Onokoro (Hartz 2009).

The rites and rituals of Vodou and Shinto

Haitian Vodou rites such as the Rada, Petwo, and Kongo serve not only as ritual services to salute the lwa but the functions of the rites allow physical manipulation of the world. Vodouists must properly salute and serve the lwa to not incur the wrath or misfortune of improper servitude. This process is a preventative measure in hopes of keeping the lwa satiated with appropriate libations because they are ever present in the physical world in the Vodou belief system. Although each rite varies in topography from one temple to the next, they share general commonalities and goals. Each rite has an appropriate color, which is represented in the environment and the attire of the Vodouists. Like people, lwa have preferences and the appropriate libation must be offered: specific foods, drinks and items that are representative of the lwa. Salutations are made to the cardinal points, potomitain (center post), the altar or altar room, drums, and lwa.

Shinto purification rituals vary according to the season and are used to purify oneself before interaction with the kami. Purification is a very important aspect of the Shinto religion and is even documented in the two Shinto texts. The Shinto texts illustrate that upon Izanagi’s return from the underworld from which he attempted to save Izanami, he felt impure and washed himself in the river and as he washed himself he gave birth to additional kami. These kami would become important kami such as Amaterasu. This myth is believed to be the first purification ritual performed. From this, Shinto extracted the purification ritual used today. Typical salutation to the altar and the temple proceed in preparation for salutation of the kami.
Hierarchy within Haitian Vodou and Shinto

For both religions, Haitian Vodou and Shinto, there is a hierarchy among the internal structure and organization. The hougan or mambo are the highest ranks that are achieved within Vodou. Below the rank of hougan or mambo are the ounsi. For Shinto, the shinhoku is the priest that officiates all shrine ceremonies. Unlike Vodou, there are many more ranks and titles according to job and rank of those who work at the shrine in which the ceremony is taking place. There are many ranks according to the responsibilities within a Shinto shrine. Sheer numbers do not denote complexity of the religious ranking system but only give an arbitrary status within the religion. Shinto separates individual tasks, but within Haitian Vodou, the majority of tasks are officiated by the hougan or mambo.

Comparing aspects of Haitian Vodou and Shinto

While both religions are unfamiliar to a nonparticipant, similarities of the two religions can be abstracted from each. Both believe in the omnipresence of spirits in the physical world and that these spirits interact with humans. Maya Deren (1983: 86) rejects that Vodou is an animist religion. Material objects are animated by spirits is an abridged definition of an animist religion. Deren opposes labeling Haitian Vodou as an animist religion on the basis that the spirits are not bound to one specific object, concept, or element. This gives the spirits flexibility to move from one to another although specific lwa do have an affinity for specific elements. On the other hand, Shintoists believe that everything has a kami.

Additional similarities can be found within the lwa and kami. Haitian Vodou and Shinto both have zoomorphic and anthropomorphic figures that represent each spirit. An example of a zoomorphic figure for Haitian Vodou and Shinto would be Danbala and Ryūjin respectively. Danbala is depicted as a snake figure while Ryūjin is shown as a dragon. An anthropomorphic example of Vodou’s Papa Legba is described as a very old man who uses a crutch to walk. Whereas in Shinto, Amaterasu, the sun goddess, is usually described as female and most pictographs have sun rays emanating from her head.

Another similarity between Haitian Vodou and Shinto is the fact that neither is bound to a specific text like Christianity. Not adhering to text produces xenophilic tendencies in both religions. Vodou is an amalgamation of various religions from West Africa, Christianity and Native Indians and it draws different aspects from each religion. Elements from Christianity can be seen in the use of chromolithographs or representations of saints, and Christian prayers during the rites. Shinto has a close relationship with Buddhism. Although Buddhism is not considered a typical religion structured like Christianity, Hinduism, or Islam, Shinto draws some elements from Buddhism. Syncretism of both religions does not restrict membership or acceptance into the religion and allow each religion some flexibility in practice or participation. This does not mean that either religion is secular but it allows for melding of other religions. Neither religion requires devote worship or following to a specific god. Vodou and Shinto can be supplements to an already existing religion used simultaneously. This aspect of both religions gives each the ability to change and flow with a changing environment. As the needs of society change, so can the religions.

Also, within both religions, religious rituals can be performed at the home with use of personal shrines, or ogatwa (altar in Vodou). This means that these rituals do not need to be
officiated by a priest in order to pay tribute to the spirits. Shinto, like Vodou, is not the national religion of the country of origin but is practiced by the people that embrace the religion.

Shinto has not endured the same particular hardships that Vodou has experienced. It has been accepted by most in Japan. One of the leading video game publishers, Capcom, introduced a game for the Play Station gaming system called Okami. In this game, the player plays the protagonist, Amaterasu, the sun goddess in Shinto. Although it is a video game, it allowed Shinto to capture a wide audience and provided a slight introduction to Shinto myth. Through this medium of distribution, the game does not portray Shinto in a negative perspective unlike the Hollywood depiction of Vodou as evil, zombies, and curses.

It is through differences that judgments are made, whether good or bad, and it is through a comparative method that we can draw links from the two religions with origins a world apart and yet strikingly close. Through comparison and an understanding of some basic features of Haitian Vodou and Shinto, one may further an understanding of the religions. By comparing it with a religion that has not been blanketed with as much negative publicity, we can draw similarities between Vodou and Shinto. Putting Haitian Vodou on equal footing with Shinto or vice-versa allow for acknowledgment of both as world religions.
Work Cited


