

Historical linguistic approaches to Haitian Creole Vodou Rites, spirit names and songs: the founders' contributions to *Asogwe Vodou*

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1. Introduction

The captive Africans transported across the Atlantic migrated with African religious traditions that they firmly established in the colony of Saint-Domingue (1697-1803) and in independent Haiti (1804). The devotees of these religious traditions are grounded in a belief in one God, *Bondye*, and they serve intercessor spirits that exist in a cultural system with rich mythological, historical, familial and ritual underpinnings. African spirit-systems, ritual knowledge, and organizational structures migrated with the African captives to Saint-Domingue, evolved in the colony, and persist into the present day. In this chapter I explore Haitian Creole Vodou Rites, spirit names, and songs by means of a historical linguistic approach that is rooted in etymological research. That work in lexicology informs a historical linguistic theory that aims to explain the form displayed in the tradition of *Asogwe Vodou*.

Vodou's Rites and the sacred songs that are sung in the course of their services are in Haitian Creole but they contain many lexical items that stem from West African languages like Fon, Yoruba, Ewe, and Igbo, in addition to West Central African languages like Kikongo and Kituba. African lexical items in Haitian Vodou form a significant part of the religion's lexicon. The identification of the African lexical sources of the religion reveals the exact origins of Vodou traditions, sheds light on the history of the French slave trade, and provides clues about the way in which Vodou took form in colonial Saint-Domingue and independent Haiti. The presence of *diverse* African cultural and linguistic influences in Haitian Vodou demonstrates the religion's emergence as a system that syncretized various African traditions into a cohesive whole. This African religious fusion is especially strong in the *Asogwe Vodou* (Kanzo) tradition whose stronghold is the Department of the West (i.e. Port-au-Prince and Léogâne) in Haiti and that tradition alone is my focus.

Some research has examined Vodou's inclusion of Catholic elements (Desmangles 1992); however, until the publication of Beauvoir (2008a & 2008b), the accretions gained by *Asogwe Vodou* through the syncretism of diverse African religious traditions had been less studied. The syncretism of African religious traditions is a fundamental part of this Caribbean religion (Beauvoir 2008a & 2008b). Vodou Rites, spirit names and songs represent the most abundant cultural record of African origins in Haiti; now with the publications of Laguerre (1980), Beauvoir (2008a & 2008b), Hebblethwaite *et al* (2012), among others, significant source texts of the religion are available. In this chapter, Fon, Yoruba and Kikongo etymological research on key Vodou words is used to identify and explicate the influence of numerous African national religious traditions within *Asogwe Vodou*. On the basis of that linguistic evidence plus historical research, I will attempt a preliminary

reconstruction of the history of the syncretism of diverse African religious traditions and argue that the “African syncretism” represents the fundamental process that gave rise to *Asogwe* Vodou in Saint-Domingue and Haiti.

I will suggest that the phenomenon of *spirit migration* within the Rites of Haitian Vodou sheds light on the Founder Principle (Mufwene 1996): a few important spirits served in the Rites that originate in the Bight of Benin have migrated into the Rites of West Central Africa, a process that seems to have taken place in Haiti but draws from a deeper African tradition of spirit-migration between neighboring cultures. This process provides evidence that the religion’s *founders* from the Bight of Benin exerted a central influence even if pan-African religious inclusivity is a dynamic element of the system they created, *Asogwe* Vodou. Section two below presents basic facts about the organization of Vodou. Section three reviews Moreau de Saint-Méry’s (1797) historical evidence about the populations captured and sold into slavery and his description of the “Vaudoux” religion. Section four explores historical linguistic evidence from Vodou Rites. Section five presents evidence that exists in the form of the names of the Vodou spirits. Section six investigates the etymology of several core Vodou terms and examines evidence found within Vodou songs. The final discussion in section seven sets forth an outline of the geography and chronology of the French slave trade and argues that Mufwene’s (1996) Founder Principle helps explain the influence of traditions from the Bight of Benin in *Asogwe* Vodou. Adding support to this is a brief summary of the population and plantation records of the colonial period (Geggus 1993, 1996, 2001).

2. Basic facts about the organization of Vodou

Before examining the historical linguistic evidence, it is important to grasp that Vodou religion is far from being homogeneous in Haitian society. Vodou has numerous types of priests and practitioners who draw from a range of traditions. One of the most common types of this religion in Haiti is *Vodou makout/makousi* ‘the strawbag Vodou.’ The *gangan* or *manbo* priests in that tradition provide treatments for the sick and hold religious services for family and community (Blot 2012:38). These rural *gangan/oungan* (male) and *manbo* (female) are typically called to the vocation through dreams and family traditions (Blot 2012:38). *Vodou lakou yo* (the Vodou yards) are generally older Vodou communities that date back several generations; for example, Lakou Nan Badjo in Gonaïves is over 200 years old. In *Vodou lakou*, the *sèvitè* and/or *manbo* (Servant/Priestess) is in charge. They hold services but do not attempt healing (p.c. Jean-Claude Noël). The *Sèvitè* priests are common in the region of Gonaïves where the yards hew to a single Rite: Lakou Souvnans maintains the *Dahomen* Rite, Lakou Soukri Danach maintains the *Kongo* Rite, Lakou Nan Badjo maintains the *Nago* Rite, and Lakou Dewonvil maintains the *Banda* Rite, etc.¹ A third, major type of Vodou is called *Vodou Asogwe*. The word *asogwe* is the name of the initiation that promotes a candidate into the priesthood and confers her or him with the *ason* (sacred rattle) and title, *oungan asogwe* and

¹ Note, however, that Vodouists in Gonaïves generally attend services in several of the communities of the region.

manbo asogwe. The southern city of Léogâne and the capital, Port-au-Prince, are centers of the *Asogwe* traditions.² Blot (2012: 39) identifies *Vodou sosyete* (society Vodou) as a fourth category; he claims that this is the “hot” (*cho*) and “angry” (*move*) side of Vodou. In this chapter I am going to focus my analysis on *Asogwe* Vodou since it is one of Haiti’s major traditions and has become the best known thanks to Beauvoir’s (2008a & 2008b) magisterial publications. *Asogwe* Vodou offers the best options for theorizing on the formation of Vodou since it is the gathering of multiple Rites of diverse African origins into a cohesive system.

3. Evidence on captive populations and their religion in Moreau de Saint-Méry (1797)

Moreau de Saint-Méry’s (henceforth MSM) description of Saint-Domingue published in 1797 provides valuable information about the captive populations and their religion. The African populations cited in his book come from a vast swath of the African coast: from Senegal in West Africa, to the Kongo in West Central Africa, to Mozambique in South East Africa, and all points in-between:

Sénégalais, Yoloffes, Poules/Poulards, Bambaras, Quiambas, Mandingues, Bissagos, Sosos, Aradas, Caplaou, Mines, Agouas, Socos, Fantins, Cotocolis, Popos, Fons, Mais, Aoussa, Ibo, Nago, Dahomets, Ibos, Mokos, Congos, Mayombés, Mousombés, Mondongues, Malimbés, Mozambiques, Quiloi

In addition to this information about the colony’s captive populations, MSM (1797: 46) provides some important evidence on the status of “*Vaudoux*” religion in the colony. MSM points out that the *Aradas* people (from *Allada*, a town in Dahomey) were the most ardent practitioners of “*Vaudoux*”. The word *Vaudoux* comes from the word *Vodun* (Deity; spirit) in the Fon language thus the link to the *Aradas* people is geographically accurate (Brand 2000: 89). As we will see, the Kongo population outnumbered the one from *Arada* and the broader Bight of Benin populations well before MSM’s book appeared in 1797, so it is important that he attested to the *Aradas* population’s reputation in the domain of religion.

Other valuable insights include his description of Vodou leadership in terms of a *grand prêtre* ('high priest'), *Roi* ('king') or *Papa* ('Father') and *grande prêtresse* ('high priestess'), *Reine* ('Queen'), or *Maman* ('Mother'). Vodou’s royal African origins and paternalistic-maternalistic/kinship-based hierarchy are still a fundamental part of *Asogwe* Vodou’s culture (Beauvoir 2013, p.c.). To this day, the *oungan* is still called *papa* ('dad') and the *manbo* is called *manman* ('mother') by his or her initiates, regardless of their respective ages. MSM (1797) points out that the term for a community of Vodouists was *Société*, a word that is still widespread today as in, for example, *Société Linto Roi Trois Mystères*, *Société Makaya* or *Société Halouba*. The possession ritual in Vodou is referred to as *monter Vaudoux* (spirit mounting), an expression that is consistent with present usage (MSM 1797: 49; Valdman *et al* 2007). Although MSM (1797:50) refers to the religion negatively as a “school” for “weak

² Candidates to the priesthood travel from various parts of Haiti to Léogâne for initiation (p.c. Oungan Michelet Alisma).

souls" that a "thousand circumstances can render gruesome," his use of the term *school* nevertheless reflects the educational dimensions of the religion. Lastly, MSM also mentions the introduction in 1768 of a type of worship which he calls *Don Pèdre*, likely a reference to the *Petwo* Rite of Kongo origin. Therefore, even though MSM (1797) displays negative judgments about Vodou, his report provides evidence that confirms its close link with the populations of the Bight Benin, the presence of newer Rites (like *Petwo*), and it offers insights into structural and organizational attributes that remain in place today.

4. Historical linguistic evidence of African syncretism from the Vodou rites

Later in this chapter I will return to the geography, demography, chronology and numbers behind the French slave trade. As I introduce the Vodou Rites, it is important to keep in mind some fundamental historical facts as we build the theory of African religious syncretism found in *Asogwe* Vodou. The following locations on the western coast of Africa represent the most important slave trading ports frequented by French vessels (Geggus 2001: 122). The list reflects chronological order:

1. Whydah on the Bight of Benin and Senegambia
2. Malembo (West Central Africa, the second most prominent port)
3. Cabinda (Loango coast in West Central Africa)
4. Loango (Loango coast in West Central Africa)

The Bight of Benin and Senegambia were major sources of captives from the late 1600s to the early 1700s. However, by 1720, populations from West Central Africa (items 2-4 above) already formed one of the major ethnic groups in Saint-Domingue (Geggus 1991: 36). Over the four decades before the Haitian Revolution in 1791, West Central Africa became the main source of captives in the French slave trade (Geggus 2001: 122). This geography and chronology is of importance to the reconstruction of Vodou's formation: the historical record shows that captives from regions in Africa most directly associated with the Vodun/Vodou religion, the Bight of Benin, were the early ethnic majority in Saint-Domingue. Later, West Central African ethnic groups arrived and were gradually grafted into the religion founded by the earlier captives, a matter I will return to in my discussion of the Founder Principle (Mufwene 1996).

Asogwe Vodou is a distillation of hundreds of years of pre-colonial African history and colonial history. The tradition contains national and culture-specific Rites ranging from West to West Central Africa (Beauvoir 2008a and 2008b). *Asogwe* Vodou has set ceremonies over the calendar year and it is built out of Rites that have strong associations with national and cultural traditions. The term "Rite" refers to the services and rituals held for a well-established grouping of spirits. Most ceremonies are held in honor of one of the main spirits of the Rite. For example, a ceremony may be held in honor of the spirit *Ogou Feray* and thus necessarily follow the *Nago* Rite and include the sequential salutation of all of the *Nago* spirits over the course of a ceremony. In addition to the notion of Rite, the parallel term *Nanchon*

(Nation) reflects the awareness within the religion of *Rite as Nation*. Thus Vodouists speak of the *Nanchon Vodou* ('the Vodou Nations [and their Rites]') or, for example, in his community, Oungan Michelet Alisma is referred to as the *Papa 21 Nanchon Ginen* ('Father of the 21 African Nations'). National, ethnic and geographical information is often the central element preserved in the names of the Rites and they are therefore historical records about the religion's diverse builders. The following partial list of Rites demonstrates through linguistic evidence the transatlantic connections that exist in the names of the Rites³:

- ***Rit Anmin (Anminan)*** is from the Mina people in Dahomey (Jil & Jil 2009: 145); *Anminan* may display regressive and progressive vowel nasalization (i.e. *mina* > *ãminã*), a common Haitian Creole phonological feature (Valdman & Iskrova 2003).
- ***Rit Bizango*** is from *Bissango* island near Senegal (Jil & Jil 2009: 160); notice the *s/z* [+/- voice] alternation is common in natural languages (Cohn 2001).
- ***Rit Bosou*** is from the name of the Dahomian kings Kadya Bosou and his son and successor, Achade Bosou (1740-1774) (Hebblethwaite 2012: 221).
- ***Rit Boumba*** is possibly a toponym that stems from the town of Bumba on the Congo River, a significant artery for slave trading (Eltis 1987:174).
- ***Rit Danwonmen*** is the adjective *Dahomian*; note that the Creole faithfully preserves the Fon nasal vowel [ã] in the first syllable, i.e. *Danxome* (Segurola & Rassinoux 2000: 122).
- ***Rit Gede*** is the word the Gedevi people used to refer to a "deity" and its community of worshippers. The entire Gedevi population of the Abomey region (Dahomey) was sold into the French slave trade to Saint-Domingue (Brand 2000: 41).
- ***Rit Ibo*** is from the Igbo people and language of southern Nigeria. Notice the reduction of the co-articulated stop, *gb* > *b*; Haitian Creole bans all co-articulated stops.
- ***Rit Makaya*** is from the Kikongo *makaya* (medicinal leaves) (Laman 1936: 480).
- ***Rit Nago*** is from the Fon term *anagó* which refers to the Yoruba people (Brand 2000: 15).
- ***Rit Rada*** is from the town of Allada in Dahomey. Notice the loss of the initial *a-* in Haitian Creole (apheresis) and the change from the approximant [l] to the voiced velar fricative [ɣ].
- ***Rit Seneka*** from Senegal; notice the [k/g] contrast reflects [+/- voice] alternation (Beauvoir 2008a).⁴
- ***Rit Wangòl*** from Angola; notice the retention of *-angol-* in both words.

This is a partial list of some of the names of the Vodou Rites. They are often toponyms that link to specific locations in Africa or they are terms that reflect African culture. The names of the Rites show the fundamental role African cultural, geographical and national memory played in the constitution of Vodou. The list

³ See Beauvoir (2008:187-196) for a complete list of Rites in Asogwe Vodou.

⁴ The editors kindly pointed out that this voice alternation above in *Bizango* and *Bissango* [z/s] or in *Petwo* and *Don Pèdre* [t/d], provide evidence of the availability of [+/- voice] alternation in language contact and change.

illustrates the fact that the inclusion of Rites from various parts of Africa is a fundamental feature of *Asogwe* Vodou. An examination of some of the spirits that are grouped together within specific Rites also provides insights into Vodou's syncretism of African religious sources, a point I now explore.

5. Historical linguistic evidence in the names of the spirits

Beauvoir (2008a) classifies 401 spirits into 21 Vodou Rites. Within these Rites, the names of the spirits (*lwa*) inform us about the strikingly diverse cultural and geographical dimensions of the founders of the Vodou religion. In some respects, discovering the sources of Haitian Vodou is straightforward. For example, the spirits from Vodou's core Rada Rite, as given in Beauvoir (2008a), are forthrightly associative with equivalent-spirits who are still served in contemporary Benin, as given in Brand (2000). Many of these spirits have names that are visibly related:

Table 1. The spirits of Haitian Vodou's Rada Rite compared with the spirits of Benin Vodun

| The Haitian spirits of the <i>Rada</i> Rite (Beauvoir 2008a) | Benin's equivalent Vodun (Brand 2000) | The Haitian spirits of the <i>Rada</i> Rite (Beauvoir 2008a) | Benin's equivalent Vodun (Brand 2000) |
|--|---------------------------------------|--|---------------------------------------|
| Legba | Legba | Bosou | Kadya Bosou (Jil & Jil 2009: 104) |
| Agasou | Àgasú | Danbala Wèdo | Danbadahwèdó |
| Ayizan | Ayizã | Ayida Wèdo | Ayìdohueqdó |
| Ayizan Velekete | Avlekéte | Sakpata | Sakpatá |
| Èzili | Ázli | Danwezo | Dàn |
| Ogou | Gu | Mawou | Măwă |
| Kebyesou | Xëbiosò, Khèviôsô | Loko | Lókò |
| Papa Lisa | Lisà | | |

The accuracy of the transmission of this religious sub-system (Rite) is shown in the phonological correspondences between the Haitian Creole and Fon names. The preservation of these names shows that Vodou religion is a reservoir that conserves profound historical religious knowledge.

Turning now to the individual spirits, some of their names provide clues about the cultural and geographical origins of the religion's founders and point to an important structural feature of African Vodun and Haitian Vodou: spirit migration. To begin with, there are closely related spirits in numerous Vodou Rites which may suggest that major spirits in the Bight of Benin were served by various ethno-linguistic groups in that region *prior* to colonialism. The presence of words like *loko/iroko* in contemporary Fon or Yoruba, among other languages, also adds some confirmation. One finds spirits like *Loko* in multiple Haitian Vodou Rites that originate in the Bight of Benin region. In the *Ibo* Rite, *Loko* occurs as *Loko Davi*, in the *Mahi*⁵ Rite he occurs as *Loko Mahi Fado*, and in the *Rada* Rite as *Loko Djè, Komè Loko*

⁵ The Mahi are an ethnic group still living in Savalou, Benin.

and *Wa Loko Alade*. The name *Loko* in the Vodun cultures of the Bight of Benin “enters into the composition of the names of diverse spirits called *atinme vodún* (‘tree spirits’)” (Rouget 2001: 100). The Fon lexemes *loko*, *roko*, or *irokò* refer to the African Teak tree, *Chlorophora excelsa* (*Moraceae*). The tree is the abode of spirits and it is itself considered as a *Vodun* (spirit). Likewise, the sap of the *loko* tree is used against sorcerers (Segurola & Rassinoux 2000: 339). In Yoruba, a language community that neighbors the Fon, the *irokò* tree “is believed to be inhabited by a roguish fairy” and white cloths are tied to the tree as an offering and sacrifices take place at its base (Abraham 1958: 316). It is likewise common to hang cloths and flags on large Vodou trees in Haiti today. Similarly, animal sacrifice is common under large trees, as we have seen at Lakou Souvnans in 2012 where a bull was tied to a tree and sacrificed.

It is possible, given current dictionaries of Fon (Segurola & Rassinoux 2000) and Yoruba (Abraham 1958), and from evidence within Haitian Vodou, that *Loko*, as a tree spirit and a sacred tree, had emerged in a number of religious traditions in the region of the Bight of Benin prior to the French slave trade. The attestation of *Loko* or *Iroko* in the Fon and Yoruba languages provides evidence of the word’s broad regional distribution. Given all of the evidence pointing to the origin of *Loko* in the Bight of Benin, how then do we account for the presence of spirits like *Azangon Loko* in the *Petwo Fran* Rite or *Loko Atisou* and *Loko Azanblo Gidi* in the *Makaya* Rite, ones that are both of West Central African origin? The short answer is that “spirit migration” in Haitian Vodou seems to transmit spirits from the Rites of the Bight of Benin into the West Central African ones.

In the cases in Table 2 below the spirits that originate in the Bight of Benin, Legba, Ogou and Èzili (Rouget 2001; Verger 1957; Brand 2000), migrate into Rites of West Central African origin (Beauvoir 2008a):

Table 2. Spirit migration from the Rites of the Bight of Benin into the Rites of West Central Africa

| Bight of Benin | | → West Central Africa | |
|----------------|---|-----------------------|--------------|
| Rite | Spirit | Rite | Spirit |
| Nago | Legba Gwètò | Zandò | Legba Zandò |
| Rada | Legba Atibon, Legba Azouka, Vye Legba | Petwo Fran | Legba Bwa |
| Nago | Ogou | Petwo Fran | Ogou Je Wouj |
| Rada | Èzili | Kongo Fran | Èzili Towo |
| | | Petwo Fran | Èzili Bohan |

The spirit migration that took place in Haitian Vodou is uni-directional: spirits originating in the Rites of the Bight of Benin (Rada, Nago) migrated into the Rites of West Central Africa (Zandò, Petwo Fran, Kongo Fran), a phenomenon that

has historical anchoring. The earlier captive populations from the Bight of Benin, the ethnolinguistic group that was the very source of the word *Vodun/Vodou*, founded the religion in Saint-Domingue, had a well-organized priesthood, culture, and initiatory system at their service, and exerted more influence and enjoyed more prestige in the colony and in independent Haiti. The West Central African Rites were incorporated later into the Bight of Benin-foundation in *Asogwe Vodou* just as the spirits of the Bight of Benin Rites then began migrating, one-way, into the West Central African Rites. This one-way migration symbolizes the saliency, systematic nature and “founder advantage” of the traditions from the Bight of Benin.

6. Historical linguistic evidence within core Vodou terminology and songs

This section introduces the etymology of core terminology and examines a few Vodou songs to illustrate how these domains of language can contribute to the historical reconstruction of the formation of *Asogwe Vodou*. This religion has a Fon core but there is a partial overlay of near synonyms from the Kikongo language. As we saw with the names of the spirits, the terms from the Bight of Benin tend to form the central element in *Asogwe Vodou* but Kikongo elements are also present:

- *Oungan* ‘priest’ (Fon, *hungán*, ‘priest,’ Rouget 2001: 97)
- *Gangan* ‘priest’ (Kikongo, *nganga*, ‘prêtre idolâtre’ (sic) Laman 1936: 683)
- *Ounsi* ‘spouse of the spirits’ (Fon, *hunsi*, ‘initiate,’ Rouget 2001: 97)
- *Andjennikonn/Oungenikon* ‘choir leader’ (Fon, *hunjenukɔn*, ‘choir leader,’ Rouget 2001: 98)
- *Sanba* ‘singer’ (Kikongo, *sámba* ‘to shout with insistence like a *nganga* in ecstasy or under the influence of a charm,’ Leman 1936: 870). *Sámba* also means ‘to pray and worship God’ (Leman 1936: 870)
- *Ason* ‘shaker’ (Fon, *asò*, ‘priestly gourd shaker,’ Segurola & Rassinoux 2000: 66)
- *Vodou* ‘spirit (religion)’ (Fon, *vodiún*, ‘deity, spirit,’ Rouget 2001: 102)
- *Ountògi* ‘drummer’ (Fon, *hùntó*, ‘drummer,’ Rouget 2001: 98)
- *Wanga* ‘spell’ (Kikongo, *wanga* ‘dream, illusion’ Laman 1936: 1092)

While terms drawn from Fon reflect fundamental elements of *Asogwe Vodou*, Kikongo synonyms are also present. The Kikongo word *gangan* is synonymous with the Fon word *ounjan*. The Kikongo word *sámba* (*sanba*) is synonymous with the Fon word *hunjenukɔn* (*andjennikon*). The Kikongo term *wanga* (‘spell’), which appears to have no Fon synonym, is fully incorporated into the Vodou lexical field and is known by all Haitian Creole speakers (Laman 1936: 1092). Like the Rites and spirits, core terminology tends to confirm the *Asogwe*’s foundation in the traditions of the Bight of Benin while providing evidence of the inclusion of later West Central African lexical accretions.

A great deal about Vodou’s history can also be discovered in songs. My goal here is to use three songs to show how they can shed light on Vodou’s origins and test hypotheses on the religion’s formation. Vodou songs fit under the umbrella of the Vodou Rites in the sense that each Rite has its own spirits and its own repertoire

of songs. Like the Rites and spirits, the preservation of ethno-linguistic information is central to most Vodou songs. The song below illustrates the ethnically and geographically-denotative lexicon that is common to this genre:

Yabòdò antaye, ansi an
Ayibobo – Ayibobo, medam.

Nou pral antre nan
sobagi a.
– Abobo!
 Nou pral antre nan **sobagi** a la.
Sobagi ladogwesan⁶ Mina o.
 Anvan n antre,
 fò nou jete dlo.
 Nou pral antre nan
sobagi a.
– E ago e!
 Nou pral antre,
ounsi kanzo
Ladogwesan.
– Abobo!
 Nan **sobagi** a,
 nou pral antre nan
sobagi a la.
Sobagi ladogwesan
Mina o.

--Racine Figuier, 'M ape antre nan sobagi a'
Vodou Lakay

Yabòdò antaye, ansi an
Ayibobo – Ayibobo, ladies.

We are going to enter
 the sanctuary.
– Abobo!
 We are going to enter this sanctuary.
 Oh the sanctuary of the African heritage.
 Before we enter,
 we must pour out water.
 We are going to enter
 the sanctuary.
– Hey ago hey!
 We are going to enter,
ounsi kanzo
 of the Heritage.
– Abobo!
 Into the sanctuary,
 we are going to enter into the sanctuary.
 The sanctuary
 of the African heritage.

The words in bold-face above are ones that are exclusively recognized in Vodou contexts and illustrate terminological specialization. The bold-face lexical items in this song reflect influences from the Bight of Benin, especially Fon. For example, in the salutation that situates the song in the *Rada* Rite, *Yabòdò* is likely related to the Fon exclamation of contentment: *Yabadaooo* (Segurola & Rassinoux 2000: 525). The expression that follows, *Ayibobo* or *Abobo* (as it appears later in the song), is related to the Fon word *awòbóbó* which is a joyful acclamation accompanied by the tapping of the lips with the fingers. In Haitian Vodou, the joyful cry of *Ayibobo!* – roughly equivalent to *Hallelujah!* – specifically marks the *Rada* Rite (from the Bight of Benin) and is interjected between songs in that Rite. Other Fon-specific terms include *sobagi* from the Fon *sogbadji*, a reference to the official residence of Vodun chief Daagbo Hounon Houna in Ouida, Benin (Okanla 2002). *Sogbadji* in Fon is probably related to *Segbeji* (original purity) (Segurola & Rassinoux 2000: 406). The

⁶ The translation of *ladogwesan* as 'African heritage' was a suggestion from Dyeri Jil and Ivwoz Jil (p.c.). In Vodou ceremonies, the *dogwe* is a cyclical part of the ritual in which the celebrants and the audience touch the ground with their right hands and proceed to touch their hearts, a symbolic gesture linking the spirits (in the ground) with the hearts of their followers; by extension, *ladogwesan* is the community that carries out this symbolic religious gesture (see Hebblethwaite *et al.* 2012: 252). The term *Mina*, for its part, refers to the Mina people and language from the coastal region of Benin and Togo.

song references the *Mina*, an ethnolinguistic group that inhabits a region that straddles contemporary Benin and Togo along the Atlantic coast. The text also contains the Fon-derived term, *ounsi* (spouse of the spirit, i.e. initiate). Therefore, this song provides several words that can be traced directly to a precise African ethnolinguistic group.

The next song for Èzili Freda is just as clearly linked to a single region of Africa:

Èzili Freda o Alada Danwonmen,
o kay mwen.
— **Abobo!**
M ape rele mètrès
ki soti anba dlo,
se fanm chans mwen.
— E ago e

Ezili Freda oh Alada Dahomey,
oh my house.
— **Abobo!**
I will call the mistress
who comes from under water,
my good luck woman.
— Hey ago hey!

--Racine Figuier, 'Èzili Freda,' *Vodou Lakay*

This text is also indisputably Fon-influenced. *Alada Danwonmen* refers to the town that is still known as Allada in Benin (formally Dahomey). The name *Allada* was also the source of the word for the (*A*)*Rada* Rite to which the spirit Èzili Freda belongs. The sounds [l] (in *Allada*) and [y/r] (in *Rada*) are both closely related liquid sounds that sometimes alternate in contexts of language contact.⁷ The name of the spirit Èzili is also attested in the word *Ázlì* in the Fon language of Benin (Brand 2000: 7).⁸ In contemporary Benin, *Ázlì* refers to a Vodun aquatic-cult represented by the lake Agonvè, which is situated on the left bank of the Ouémé river (Brand 2000: 7). *Ázlì* is the Vodun spirit who dwells in it. *Ázlì* and Èzili share in common *water* as their resting place, a fact also attested in the Vodou song above in which she is depicted as one "who comes from under the water." While there are elements that *Azlì* and Èzili share, suggesting a common origin, they are nevertheless conceived very differently: *Ázlì* is a leprous male whereas Haiti's Èzili *Freda* is a materialistic mulatto woman. Although this may appear like a contrary indication, it is not unusual for spirits like Èzili or Legba to have contradictory characteristics since these names actually refer to families of spirits; for example, Èzili Freda, Èzili Dantò or Èzili Mapyang, etc., have different personalities (Hebblethwaite *et al.* 2012: 233-235; 254-257)

While the above songs demonstrate a one-to-one relationship between the etymological origins of the lexical items in the songs and African ethno-geography, there also exist a number of songs that combine traditions from the Bight of Benin in traditions from West Central Africa. The mixing occurs in a way that reflects the pattern we saw above: spirits that originate in the Rites of the Bight of Benin (Yoruba, in this case) migrate into the Rites of West Central Africa (Kongo) in Haitian Vodou:

⁷ For example, contemporary Korean and Japanese learners of English often confuse [l] and [r] since they are complementary distribution in Korean and Japanese but contrastive distribution in English (Aoyama *et al.* 2004).

⁸ For more information about *Azlì* see: <http://www.ogd-tourisme-benin.org/articles/communes/zagnanado/lile-dagonve-la-seule-et-veritable-ile-au-benin#decouverte>.

Afoutayi—Yi!
Bila bila—Kongo!
Lè bounda fache, kote l chita?
—Atè!

M g on lwa
ki reklame mwén.
Pandan m nan somèy,
m g on lwa
ki reklame m o!
—**Bilolo!**
—Adye, **Ogou** reklame m, se vre!
Ogou Badagri s on lwa ki danjere.

Afoutayi—Yi!
Bila bila—Kongo!
When an ass is angry, where does it sit?
—On the ground

I have a lwa
who claimed me.
While I was asleep,
Oh I have a lwa
who claimed me.
—**Bilolo!**
—Oh my, **Ogou** claimed me, it's true!
Ogou Badagri is a dangerous lwa.

--Racine Figuier, *Men chay la*

The salutation is the standard formula uttered before songs in the *Kongo Rite*. The Kikongo words *bila bila* mean 'praise' [v.] or 'origin' [n.] (Laman 1936: 37). The expression *bila bila Kongo* means something like, 'praise the Kongo origins.' Another marked Kongo element in the song is the praise exclamation *Bilolo!* which is the Kongo and Petwo Rites's equivalent of *Ayibobo* ('Hallelujah'). *Bilolo* may stem from *bilónço* ('magic remedy of a nkisi [spirit]') or *bilongo-longo* ('superstition') (Laman 1936: 38).

Although the song is replete with markers of the *Kongo Rite*, it addresses a spirit, *Ogou Badagri*, who, from an historical point of view, originates in the Bight of Benin. The name *Ogou* (*Ogoun*, *Ogun*, *Gu*) is among the best known spirits of that region and he is served to this day in Yoruba and Fon-speaking communities. Most agree that he was once a great king but there are disagreements about his exact provenance in the Bight of Benin (Verger 1957: 141-2). As for *Badagri*, to this day it is the name of a coastal town in Nigeria. During the colonial period, it was famous for exporting slaves and it was frequently raided by the Fon-speaking Dahomians in the 18th century.⁹ This spirit from the Bight of Benin, *Ogou Badagri*, has migrated in the context of the formation of Haitian Vodou into a Rite of West Central African origin following the unidirectional pattern introduced earlier. In the last section, I add historical, geographical and ethnic data to the linguistic arguments I have been making about the formation of Vodou from its foundation in the Bight of Benin.

7. Historical, geographical and ethnic evidence for the reconstruction of Vodou's formation

This discussion is informed by numerous disciplines. Since the mid-twentieth century, Vodou source texts in the form of songs and prayers have become increasingly available (Marcelin 1950a & 1950b). Beauvoir (2008a & 2008b) meticulously edits thousands of important Haitian Creole Vodou texts. His books and others, plus the many Vodou compact discs for sale in Haitian shops, provide

⁹ <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/48405/Badagry>.

unprecedented access to the sacred oraliture and literature. The linguistic approaches of etymology and comparative lexical research are essential for identifying the ethnographic sources within Haitian Vodou. Likewise, our fieldwork in Vodou ceremonies in Haiti and Miami are an important backdrop to this discussion.

Attention to historical, geographical, and ethnic lexical evidence is critical to the task of reconstructing the formation of Vodou. As I noted earlier, Moreau de Saint-Méry (1797) linked "Vaudoux" to Aradas slaves (from the Bight of Benin). Still today, 217 years since Moreau de Saint-Méry's book, the *Rada* Rite remains the fundamental "entry way" into the entire *Asogwe* Vodou religious system. At the same time, other Rites, including ones from the Kongo (and their spirits), are also worshiped inclusively within *Asogwe* Vodou. Many—but not all—ceremonies I have attended at *Société Linto Roi Trois Mystères* in North Miami, for example, begin with the *Rada* Rite and switch to *Petwo* or *Kongo* Rites, among others, after three hours or so (and continue for several additional hours). In many ceremonies, both the Rites of the Bight of Benin and the Kongo are equally represented. However, there are some lengthy ceremonies, such as the *Nago* Rite honoring *Ogou Feray*, that are in a single rite.

Historical research on the ethnic composition of the French slave trade to Saint-Domingue provides some empirical support for sketching a preliminary theory in which the period between 1660 and 1720 represents the earlier stage in Haitian Vodou's formation. Research on the relationship of the ethnicity of slaves to their geographical settlement patterns in Saint-Domingue (plains versus mountains) provides additional evidence for the structure of *Asogwe* Vodou (Geggus 1991, 1996, 2001).

Based on Beauvoir's (2008a) list of 401 spirits and their respective Rites, approximately two-thirds of Vodou's Rites and spirits originate in the Bight of Benin with the remainder from West Central Africa. These remaining 135/401 spirits (approximately 33%) are served in Rites like, *Kita*, *Kongo Fran*, *Makaya*, *Petwo Fran*, *Wongòl* and *Zandò* (Beauvoir 2008a). Given this distribution of spirits, the traditions of the Bight of Benin appear to exert greater influence on the overall *Asogwe* Vodou system. This distribution is explicable when consideration is given to the chronology of African ethnic groups arriving in the colony and geographical settlement patterns.

As observed earlier, the populations from the Bight of Benin were the source of the early majority of slaves. By 1720, however, only 23 years after the colony's official establishment, captives from West Central Africa already formed one of the major ethnic populations in Saint-Domingue (Geggus 1991: 36). On the eve of the Haitian Revolution in 1791, of the estimated 599,804 slaves in that French colony, the captives from the Bight of Benin represented 26.3% of the population whereas the captives from West Central Africa represented 49.2% of the population (Geggus 2001: 136). To explain why the Rites and spirits from the Bight of Benin are better represented in *Asogwe* Vodou at the rate of 67% compared to those from West Central Africa at the rate of 33%, it is important to weigh the proportions of ethnic groups by region in Saint-Domingue (Geggus 2001: 136):

Table 2. Sources of Africans landed in Saint-Domingue by French ships in percent

| Region | North | West | South |
|---------------------|---------|---------|--------|
| Senegambia | 6.5% | 6.7% | 8.0% |
| Sierra Leone | 2.5% | 3.8% | 8.8% |
| Windward Coast | 0.4% | 1.1% | 0.9% |
| Gold Coast | 4.4% | 4.4% | 4.3% |
| Bight of Benin | 22.6% | 35.5% | 11.8% |
| Bight of Biafra | 2.6% | 6.3% | 15.2 |
| West Central Africa | 56.6% | 39.5% | 47.9% |
| Southeast Africa | 4.3% | 2.6% | 3.1 |
| Totals | 100.0% | 100.0 | 100% |
| Captives (N) | 312,789 | 213,546 | 55,579 |

As I mentioned, to this day the Department of the West (which includes Port-au-Prince and Léogâne) remains the seat of the Bight of Benin-influenced *Asogwe* school of Vodou. To understand the prominence of traditions from that region in *Asogwe* Vodou, we can theoretically group together the populations of the broader West African region. By adding together the ethnic groups of Senegambia (6.7%), Sierra Leone (3.8%), the Windward Coast (1.1%), the Gold Coast (4.4%), the Bight of Benin (35.5%), and the Bight of Biafra (6.3%), the broad West African populations amount to 57.8%, a combined number that exceeds the total of 39.5% for the West Central African populations in the Department of the West (Port-au-Prince and Léogâne). In the Northern department, the combined West African populations only amount to 39.0% of the total population compared to the larger West Central African population of 56.5%. These demographic differences between the North and the West may explain, in part, why the etymological origins of the Rites and spirits in *Asogwe* Vodou's lexicon tend to correspond to West African traditions in 67% of cases versus West Central African ones in 33% of cases.

Another clue that may help explain the centripetal force of the traditions of the Bight of Benin in the colony can be found in slave settlement patterns in Saint-Domingue. Sugarcane planters, for instance, preferred to purchase slaves from the Bight of Benin whereas coffee planters purchased more of the slaves from Bibi, Mondongue, Igbo, and Congo regions (Geggus 1993: 81). In the plantation records, which involve far fewer individuals than the overall population figures given in the Table 2 above, and are hence less representative, the ethnic composition of the African-born slave population was distributed between sugarcane and coffee industries in the following way for the Kongo, Arada and Nago ethnic groups¹⁰:

Table 3. Ethnic composition of the African-born slave population by province and period for sugar and coffee plantations

| | North 1778-91 | | West 1785-91 | | West 1796-97 | |
|-------|------------------|--------|-----------------|--------|-----------------|--------|
| | Sugar | Coffee | Sugar | Coffee | Sugar | Coffee |
| Kongo | 40.8% | 63.9% | 31.3% | 47.3% | 21.0% | 35.3% |
| Arada | 10.5% | 8.9% | 14.9% | 5.7% | 16.1% | 9.1% |

¹⁰ See Geggus (1993) for a complete listing that includes dozens of ethnic groups.

| | | | | | | |
|----------|-------|------|-------|------|-------|-------|
| Nago | 8.9% | 5.5% | 16.1% | 9.2% | 18.6% | 12.2% |
| N slaves | 2,143 | 973 | 1,059 | 457 | 2,641 | 1,578 |

The data-set collected by Geggus (1993: 81) provide a few hints: since the captives from the Bight of Benin were most desired on the sugarcane plantations, these slaves tended to work in the plains of Saint-Domingue which are located nearer to towns and cities. In contrast, since the coffee farmers tended to buy the captives from West Central Africa who the sugarcane planters declined, these slaves tended to work in the mountains of Saint-Domingue, and thus lived in locations that were more removed from the towns and cities.

The tendency of the slaves from the Bight of Benin to settle in the sugarcane plains closer to the towns and cities like Port-au-Prince and Léogâne, gave them greater access to urban areas and the greater resources and prestige that are associated with them. The relative importance of West Central African populations in northern Haiti, for example, may account for the fact that scholars like George E. Simpson in the 1940s found *Petwo* Rites to be well integrated into Vodou in that region (Geggus 2001: 133). As for the several *Asogwe* Vodou communities whose ceremonies I have observed since 2009, the Rites originating in the Bight of Benin and West Central Africa are robustly maintained by several *sociétés/sosyete*.¹¹ In contemporary *Asogwe* Vodou, a single *société/sosyete* will typically celebrate several Rites in its annual calendar of ceremonies.

Another reason for the success of the traditions from the Bight of Benin in the formation of Vodou may be linked to the earlier arrival of those populations in Saint-Domingue. In the Founder Principle theory of creolization, the “structural features of creoles have been predetermined to a large extent [...] by characteristics of the vernaculars spoken by the populations that founded the colonies in which they developed” (Mufwene 1996: 84). Ethnographic influences like the proportion of newcomers compared to local populations, their attitudes towards one another, and their social status also influence the competition of linguistic features (Mufwene 1996: 86). Thus the founder populations contributed many structural features to creole languages. These structural features had a “selective advantage” because population growth occurred in installments. Arriving population groups formed a minority relative to the speakers of the local creole which was spoken by a “seasoned slave population” (Mufwene 1996: 123). It was more efficient to learn the local vernacular than to change or supplant it. As one reviewer noted, the acculturated slave population served as linguistic and cultural role models or survival facilitators for the new slaves in the threatening colonial setting.

By extension, major structural features of the early slave population are the religious lexical fields from the Bight of Benin (Fon, Yoruba, etc.). The etymological composition of *Asogwe* Vodou’s expansive lexical field provides evidence that a version of the Founder Principle is relevant to a successful explanatory theory of the formation of the Vodou tradition in Haiti. The Fon and Yoruba substrate languages had a great impact on the lexicon of *Asogwe* Vodou and they were prominent

¹¹ Société Linto Roi Trois Mystères, Société Halouba, and Société Makaya in Miami. The *Vodou Lakou* that we have visited include *Lakou Souvnans*, *Lakou Nan Badjo*, *Lakou Soukri Danach*, *Lakou Dewonvil*, *Lakou Kajòj*, and Société Grandizè in Gonaïves, Haiti.

languages in Saint-Domingue's early period (c. 1660-1720). Not only did Fon and Yoruba profoundly influence the formation of *Asogwe* Vodou's lexical field, but some scholars also consider those language communities to be major sources for Haitian Creole morphosyntax (Lefebvre 1998). The examination of the Vodou lexical field provides independent support for Lefebvre's (1998) assertion that Fon and other languages from the Bight of Benin were significant contributors to early Haitian Creolization. My lexical focus cannot directly lend support to the matter of her "relexification hypothesis" wherein Fon and other languages from the Bight of Benin serve as significant influences in Haitian Creole morphosyntactic developments (for example, post-nominal definite determiners). This discussion does show, however, that the languages of the Bight of Benin made the core contributions in terms of the religious lexical fields that date from an early period of Creolization (i.e. 1680-1720).

An additional, system-internal explanation for the success of *Asogwe* Vodou may be found in the hierarchical organization of the religion and the confident authority exercised by its leadership. African Vodun had a royal element that Haitian Vodou has retained (Beauvoir 2008a & 2008b). Dahomian kings fused political and religious power. Vodou in Haiti and Vodun in Benin are initiatory religions wherein practitioners are trained and hierarchically ranked at 3 levels, *ounsi senp* ('beginner spouse of the spirits'), *ounsi kanzo* ('expert spouse of the spirits'), and *ounsi asogwe* ('priestly spouse of the spirits'). Initiates (*pitit* = child) show their subordination to the initiators (*papa/manman*) and pledge loyalty to the initiatory Vodou society (*lafanmi* = the family). The rich culture of ceremonies, dances, rituals, pageantry, songs and prayers, in addition to the kinship structure of the Vodou societies, create groups of intensive religious education and practice. Regular meetings and ceremonies at multiple societies help members bond and develop religious knowledge. The strong leadership and kinship structure are fundamental organizational principles that have withstood the test of time.

8. Conclusion

This chapter has explored historical and etymological evidence to gain insight into the origins of *Asogwe* Vodou. The Rites, the names of Vodou spirits, the core terms of the religion, and the language in Vodou songs provide insights into the origins and cultural influences expressed in *Asogwe* Vodou. Fon (Segurola & Rassinoux 2000; Brand 2000; Rouget 2001), Yoruba (Abraham 1958), and Kikongo (Laman 1964) dictionaries and lexicons provide strong evidence of the respective lexical contributions of *Asogwe* Vodou (Beauvoir 2008a & 2008b). Quantitative data on the ethnicity of captives and the distribution of ethnic groups between the sugarcane plantations on the plains and the coffee plantations in the mountains help explain the prominence of the traditions from the Bight of Benin in towns like Port-au-Prince and Léogâne in the Department of the West (Geggus 1991, 1996, 2001). I have also suggested that the Founder Principle (Mufwene 1996) can help explain the prominence of the traditions from the Bight of Benin in *Asogwe* Vodou. The *Asogwe* Vodou lexical field displays a clear rootedness in the languages of the Bight

of Benin (i.e. Fon, Yoruba, etc.) while also displaying an expansiveness with its inclusion of West Central Africa Rites and their lexical fields.

Evidence of *one-way* spirit migration from the Rites originating in the Bight of Benin into the Rites originating in West Central Africa adds Haitian Vodou-internal evidence of the earlier and pervasive influence of traditions from the Bight of Benin. Research on the syncretism of Catholic elements into Vodou is valuable and reflects a xenophile (inclusive) nature that seems natural to many Vodouists and Catholics (Desmangles 1992). At the same time, a core, but understudied syncretism, is Vodou's inclusion of numerous African traditions in the form of self-standing Rites. Under the conditions of colonialism and creolization, Vodou culture made full use of the powerful cultural trait of absorbency that drew other African traditions into itself, an approach to multiculturalism that enriched and empowered Vodou by unifying diverse African populations within a single religion. *Asogwe* Vodou unified diverse traditions under one standard. *Asogwe* Vodouists settled each national tradition within its own Rite, practicing and protecting diverse traditions. While preserving the West Central African Rites, it is striking that major spirits (like *Legba*, *Èzili* or *Ogou*) that originate in the Rites of the Bight of Benin manage to migrate into the West Central African Rites in a flow called "spirit migration." The form that spirit migration takes in *Asogwe* Vodou is explained in terms of the Founder Principle wherein the language and traditions from the Bight of Benin had a "selective advantage" as they were propounded by important founders of the colony.

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