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Abstract
Shortly after the catastrophic earthquake that crushed Port-au-Prince and the surrounding towns on January 12, 2010, The New York Times published an article in which columnist David Brooks claimed that “voodoo” is a “progress-resistant” cultural influence because it spreads the message that “life is capricious and planning futile.” Alongside Brooks, many authors promote similar views, especially Christians. I argue that Vodou does not negatively affect progress in Haiti. Rather, there are historical, linguistic, and governmental policies that limit progress. In reality, Vodou practitioners enhance progress in their attention to the planning and giving of ceremonies, in the hierarchical organization they establish in communities, in their ritual and language, and in the education imparted through inheritance, teaching, and initiation. The scapegoating of Vodou by Brooks and others perpetuates a racist colonial legacy, and it betrays an ignorance of the community and the abundant research about it.

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Introduction
On January 14, 2010, 2 days after the catastrophic earthquake that crushed Port-au-Prince and the surrounding towns, The New York Times published an article in which columnist David Brooks claimed that “voodoo” is a “progress-resistant” cultural influence because it spreads the message that “life is capricious and planning futile.” This, he claimed, was one of the underlying cultural influences—along with “social mistrust,” a lack of internalized “responsibility,” and “child-rearing practices”—that caused the poverty and poor building standards that ultimately led to the immense loss of life on January 12, 2010. Brooks’s (2010) suggestion that “voodoo” is “progress-resistant” and a system that expresses the message that “life is capricious and planning futile” invites closer inspection since it does not bear a resemblance to the portrayals found in the scholarly literature, nor is it reflected in our fieldwork in Vodou communities. Baseless claims by media pundits are common, but it is necessary to check their power with facts and debate false claims. Moreover, since The New York Times exerts great influence on public opinion, and because there is a long history of prejudice toward Vodou, it is important to refute questionable and damaging claims when empirical evidence exists to the contrary.

Vodou Enhances Poverty and Vodou as Satanism Arguments
Several Christian authors promote arguments linking Vodou to poverty along the lines of Brooks (2010); for example, DeWitt’s (2010) book titled Give Your Best: How Willem Charles Transformed His Haitian Village From Poverty in voodoo [sic] to Prosperity in Christianity reflects this school of thought. These authors attempt to demonize Vodou religion and blame Vodouists for Haiti’s poverty.

The recurring claims can be summed up as arguments focused on (1) Vodou as a cause of “poverty” and (2) Vodou as “satanic.” The claims in (1) below suggest that Vodou culture encourages poverty and is incoherent because of its culture of oral transmission:

(1a) “Voodoo” is “progress-resistant” (Brooks, 2010), drives “poverty” (DeWitt, 2010), and “offers magic and no real solutions” (cardinal Chibly Langlois cited in Lall, 2014).
“Written preservation” transmits “a well-founded faith” unlike “Vodun,” which is “an assortment of beliefs created and based on superstition.” Written culture is superior to oral culture (Olivier, 2007, p. 104).

Claim (2) below is frequent among Evangelicals (i.e., DeWitt, 2010; Félix, 2009; Louis, 2007; Olivier, 2007; Robertson, 2011):

(2) Vodou is an expression of “satanic power.”

I begin with Argument (2) as it is the easiest to discard. The idea is inconceivable from a Vodou point of view. According to those who sèvi lwa (“serve the spirits”) or Vodouists, Bondye (“God”) created the universe and the lwa (“spirits”). God is the “Creator and Maintainer of the Universe” (Beauvoir, 2008b, p. 51). The omniscience and greatness of Bondye are a constant theme in Vodou songs; the Supreme Being Bondye is recognized and honored throughout the tapestry of Vodou songs and in Vodou’s idioms: Bondje sèl Mèt (“God the only master”), si Bondye vle! (“God willing”), Padon Bondye (“Forgive me God”), m a rele Bondye (“I will call on God”), mèsi Bondje (“thank you God”), nèg pa Bondje! (“men aren’t [equal to] God”), and so on (Beauvoir, 2008b, p. 51). However, the figures of “Satan” or “demons” are not anchored as the diametrical foes of God in the religion’s mythology in the way they are in Christianity.

Even if the religion’s plethora of spirits takes the breath away, Bondye is of the greatest importance in Vodou. To show this, Tarter and Hebblethwaite (2014) counted the most frequent terms in a corpus of 641 Vodou songs containing 24,846 words of which 1,772 were individual (unique) words. The word Bondye was ranked 65th in frequency of occurrence in the corpus, and only a few lwa were more frequent. Bondye’s slightly lower frequency of occurrence compared with a handful of central spirits in no way diminishes the Supreme Being. Vodou songs frequently acknowledge the Supreme Being while the spirits make the Supreme Being’s attributes accessible (Beauvoir, 2008b). Deren (1953, p. 55) suggests that no temple is built in God’s honor in Haitian or African religions, but it is certain that the acknowledgment of Bondye is one of the pillars of Vodou language and ritual. For Vodouists, the existence of God is unquestionable (Beauvoir, 2008b). The name Bondye hallows Vodou ceremonies and is woven into the speech of most Haitians regardless of creed.

Beauvoir (2008b) argues that 6 out of every 10 of the 1,763 Vodou songs he collected address the Supreme Being or aspects of the Supreme Being. Given the centrality of God and the absence of a diametrically opposed enemy of God such as “Satan” in Vodou religion, the representations of Louis
(2007), DeWitt (2010), Félix (2009), Olivier (2007), or Robertson (2011) reflect a superimposition of Christian and especially Protestant ideology and imagery onto a religious system in which equivalent notions do not exist.

Argument (2), then, is as an example of “begging the question” (i.e., *petitio principii* = “assuming the initial point”), involving a logical fallacy in which a proposition relies on an implicit premise within itself to establish the truth of the proposition and is thus an assertion that cannot be proven. In this case, the proposition is that Vodouists follow the spiritual being that the Protestants believe is the enemy of God, Satan. Vodou is viewed from within Protestantism’s dualistic theological system. The mythological composition of Protestantism is projected onto Vodou and used to reject it. The employment of this strategy, however, “begs the question” because the God-Satan dualism is Christianity’s worldview, not Vodou’s. Moreover, this religious dualism, like most religious constructs, cannot be shown with empirical methods.

Arguments (1a) and (1b), however, that “voodoo” is “progress resistant” (Brooks, 2010) and linked to “poverty” and “illiteracy” (DeWitt, 2010; Félix, 2009; Louis, 2007; Olivier, 2007) are material, historical, sociological, and economic claims that are worthy of consideration because they are falsifiable—that is, as claims related to this world (as opposed to the spiritual world), they fall within empirically testable parameters. Arguments (1a) and (1b) are expressed by many Haitian American Protestant students at the university where I work, and thus, they have relevance to issues of Haitian identity and interfaith dialogue. Arguments (1a) and (1b) speak volumes about legacies of prejudice toward black religion—Haiti’s problems are better explained with a historical, sociological, political, and language policy analysis that does not intersect directly with Vodou. Contrary to Brooks (2010), I argue that Vodouists demonstrate a commitment to progress and social harmony given the social, ritual, and intellectual structures of the religion.

**Vodou or Christianity as “Progress-Resistant” Forces in Haiti**

This section examines the events of Haiti’s history of religions in order to shed light on “progressive” or “anti-progressive” trends. Vodou is an ancient culture thriving in the present. It is a religion that helped integrate slaves from a multitude of African nations and languages within a cultural system that preserved important elements of a diverse African ethno-linguistic tapestry. This tapestry takes form in the distinct Rites linked to national traditions (i.e., *Rada, Petwo-Kongo, Nago, Ibo*, etc.) and their respective spirits (*lwa*; Beauvoir, 2008a). Madiou (1847, cited in Zavitz & Dubois, 2014), Haiti’s
first major historian, points out that several leaders such as Boukmann, Jean-François, Biassou, Jeannot, Romaine la Prophétesse, Hyacinthe Ducoudray, and Halaou drew inspiration from “African superstition,” an unfortunate term that denotes African religious traditions (Vodou). Trouillot (1977) argues that Vodouists—unified under a spiritual system that preserved their cultural diversity—helped build, lead, and motivate the armed groups that ultimately established Haitian independence. Vodou resistance—like Makandal’s poisoning campaign of the 1750s or the general insurrection that engulfed the Northern plains after the Vodou ceremony of Bwa Kayiman in 1791—was a progressive tactic against an abominable colonialism established by the French.

The claims made by Louis (2007), Olivier (2007), Félix (2009), Brooks (2010), and DeWitt (2010) that Vodou is “progress resistant” and linked to “poverty” and “illiteracy” grossly ignore the historical and linguistic realities of colonial Saint-Domingue and independent Haiti. Saint-Domingue’s earliest French settlers arrived around 1625. Saint-Domingue rapidly grew as a colony that exploited industrial plantation slavery. Industrial plantation slavery was built out of a massive slave workforce and a small number of overseers who managed properties and businesses for, in many cases, French absentee investors. A colonial administration composed of bureaucrats, soldiers, and police maintained the status quo for the plantation owners, business owners, and shareholders in France. The Roman Catholic religion was the only legal religion, following Article 3 of the 1685 Code noir (“Black Code”; Castaldo, 2006). Article 2 in the Code noir makes conversion compulsory: “All the slaves who will be on our islands will be baptized and instructed in the Catholic, Apostolic and Roman religion” (Castaldo, 2006, p. 38). Forcing slaves to convert to Catholicism, or any religion, can only be construed as “progress-resistant.”

On the eve of the Haitian revolution in 1791, the resident population included approximately 500,000 black and mulatto slaves, 30,000 free whites, and 28,000 free mulattos (Geggus, personal communication, August 1, 2013). In 1791, the slaves of Saint-Domingue, many of whom served the Vodou spirits, rose up against captivity (Trouillot, 1977). Most people today agree that organized resistance to slavery constitutes progress toward establishing basic human rights. This moral struggle against the evils of racism and slavery gives meaning to questions about the character of our humanity and of our religious and political systems: Did we enslave people or did we liberate people from slavery? Throughout colonial history, Vodouists resisted slavery and took a leading role, like Boukman Duty and Cécile Fatiman in 1791, in planning and carrying out uprisings to win freedom (Hebblethwaite et al., 2012; Madiou, 1847).
Vodouists incorporated African religious practices from disparate regions, various ethnic groups, and multiple languages to overcome divisions among slaves. Vodou unified an astonishing diversity of slaves and gave them the confidence and conviction to fight (Trouillot, 1977). My fieldwork and a full range of research show that Vodou priests are respected leaders in the communities where they work; they serve as ritualists, keepers of tradition and mythology, healers, counselors, therapists, bone-setters, midwives, negotiators and community leaders, farmers, teachers, among other roles (Murray, 1980; Vonarx, 2011). People worship within the Vodou system—as they would within any other system—for a multitude of reasons, including the following: for the attainment of spiritual goals; for physical needs; for social bonding; for esthetic, musicological, cultural, and ritual interests; due to the inheritance of familial or temple traditions; and to give meaning and depth to their lives. Vodou’s contributions to spiritual inspiration, cultural unification, social networking, and healing are clearly progressive features. Even the expensive ritual obligations of Vodou and the land sales they may necessitate can be analyzed as parts of a land-circulating system (Murray, 1980).

Over the march of centuries, the governments of Saint-Domingue and Haiti have dealt blows to Vodou practice and culture in seemingly endless cycles. Ramsey (2011) shows how Vodou has always been treated like a parallel political power that threatens the hegemony of the state and the state’s religion, Christianity. After the publication of the 1685 Code noir (“Black code”), there were several anti-Vodou decrees and ordinances in Saint-Domingue, including in the years 1755, 1758, 1772, and 1800 as ordered by Toussaint Louverture (Ramsey, 2011). The Haitian presidents Boyer (1818-1843), Geffrard (1859-1867), and Pierrot (1885-1886) also passed laws that criminalized aspects of Vodou (Ramsey, 2011). Political and legal opposition to the religion kept practice clandestine and private. Vodou was banned by governmental laws from contributing to the public domain well into the 20th century (Deren, 1953; Dubois, 2013; Ramsey, 2011). Vodou had to eke out an existence in a deeply “progress-resistant” society.

A few, widely broadcasted news stories popularized a horrific representation of Vodou in international news. During the Bizoton murder trial of 1864, several Vodouists who were accused of killing and cannibalizing a 12-year-old girl admitted to the crime under torture and were executed by firing squad. This international news story was an early exemplar of exploitative narrative about Vodou and Haiti that emphasized negative portrayals (St. John, 1884; Dubois, 2012). During the U.S. occupation (1915-1934) of Haiti, the prejudice of the U.S. administrators against Vodou reflected a tendency long evinced—but seldom enacted—by Haiti’s elite. The U.S. occupation forces fought Haitian caco resistance fighters who sometimes served Vodou
spirits. U.S. authorities understood that Vodouists opposed the occupation and drew inspiration to resist from the religion. The U.S. marines therefore enforced preexisting Haitian anti-Vodou legislation far more aggressively that the Haitian government ever had. For example, worshippers captured during a Vodou ceremony by the U.S. Marine unit led by Faustin Wirkus were sentenced to 6 months hard labor in the project to construct a new police headquarters (Dubois, 2012). Raids of that nature were common during the occupation, as were raids involving the burning of Vodou objects. The occupation of Haiti by the U.S. marines for 19 years was a period that spawned a multitude of U.S. popular culture misrepresentations of Vodou in the form of movies, comic books, and novels. The occupation of Haiti by the U.S. marines enforced prohibitions on Vodou practice, and the subsequent exploitation and demonization of Haiti’s religious and folkloric cultures by the North American entertainment industry have hindered the contributions of Vodouists and, of course, damaged the religion’s reputation among the millions who watch such media. For example, one website lists over 40 films that relate to “Voodoo” and they are all in the horror genre.8

The “progress-resistant” persecution of Vodou continues into the present period. The attacks on Vodou in 1940-1941, dubbed the “anti-superstition campaign,” were carried out by the authorities of the Haitian state and the Roman Catholic Church, among other antagonists (Ramsey, 2011). Soldiers, Catholic priests, and pastors engaged in raids, destroyed private property (for example, destroying altars, sacred objects, drums and cutting down sacred trees) and imposed an oath of renunciation. Another period of persecution includes the post-Duvalier period after 1986 when Vodou priests who were aligned or perceived to be aligned with the deposed Jean-Claude Duvalier regime were attacked (Beauvoir & Dominique, 2003). Recently, more than 40 Vodou priests and Vodouists were killed in 2010 at the beginning of the cholera outbreak. They were scapegoated for the disease and killed by angry mobs (British Broadcasting Corporation, 2010; Hebblethwaite et al., 2012). On several trips to different parts of Haiti over the last dozen years, I have tuned into Protestant radio broadcasts, which include angry anti-Vodou preaching and prayers. A religion that is illegal, persecuted by powerful members of society, subjected to mob violence, stereotyped by influential foreigners, and aggressively attacked in the name of “spiritual warfare” on radio airwaves does not enjoy the same opportunities to contribute to material or social “progress” on a par with religions that are legal, conferred with freedoms, and, in the case of Roman Catholicism, given substantial advantages. How can Vodouists thrive while the ambient society and powerful groups in the international community are hostile toward it?
The most important example of the Haitian state’s preferential allegiance with a religion must be President Geffrard’s signing of the 1860 Concordat with the Roman Catholic Church. The agreement provided the Church with official state recognition in Haiti. Several Catholic orders arrived over the course of the 1860s with educational objectives (Tardieu, 1990). Already, by the end of the 19th century—only 30 years after their return—these Catholic schools directed by foreigners “dominated the educational scene in Haiti” (Tardieu, 1990, p. 140). The privileges enjoyed by the exclusively European leadership in the Catholic Church caused nationalist Haitians to argue that the clergy had come to form a state within the state (Nicholls, 1979). As Tardieu (1990) notes, the use of the French language was imposed without discussion by the Catholic orders that built Haiti’s elite schools in the late 19th century. This language policy established in the state, its schools, and the Catholic Church’s schools represents what Trouillot (1990) called the state against nation, one of the major factors in maintaining underdevelopment in Haiti. The state’s minoritarian language policy is a prime suspect for the exacerbation of underdevelopment. That “progress-resistant” government policy hinders development in Haiti. For its part, Vodou is the cutting edge of the development-oriented Haitian Creole language movement.

The Linguistic Exclusion of Haitian Creole-Speaking Haitians and Vodouists

A lack of “progress” is often evoked by outsiders such as Brooks (2010) when assessing development issues in Haiti. When the concept is used, little historical and cultural contextualization accompanies it. In this way, Brooks (2010) scolds Haiti for not functioning as well as Barbados or the Dominican Republic when they share the “same basic environment.” The “history of oppression, slavery and colonialism” and “the ruthless dictators, corruption and foreign invasions” that the triad shares macrocosmically actually diverge greatly in the details. Haiti, Barbados, and the Dominican Republic had very different cultural, environmental, and demographic conditions, crucial factors determining the distinct ensuing histories of the nations. One among several reasons why Haiti’s development index is depressed compared with Barbados and the Dominican Republic is because Haiti’s language policy gives preferential treatment to the French minority language whereas Barbados and the Dominican Republic use majority languages in their school systems. Moreover, it is also erroneous of Brooks to lump the forms of enslavement found in Spanish, English, and French colonies into one category.

The measurement of progress must weigh the fact that the majority of Haitian ancestors toiled in a violent slave society that strictly banned literacy,
with the exception of the slave owner’s name, which was branded on the slave’s chest (Fouchard, 1953/1988). After independence, education remained a low priority compared with the maintenance of a large military and the construction of defenses such as La Citadelle Laferrière to prevent any return by the French army (Dubois, 2012). Early 19th century rulers such as Henri Christophe, Alexandre Pétion, and Jean Pierre Boyer did establish and fund dozens of schools, but they were exclusively for the children of the Francophone Haitian elite. Popular education only became a goal during the tenure of Maurice Dartigue, a leader in education in the 1930s and Minister of Education from 1941 to 1945 (Tardieu, 1990).

The first Haitian statesmen wanted to trade with powerful economic partners abroad and they viewed the use of French—or English, in the case of Henri Christophe—as key instruments in that effort (Dubois, 2012). Intellectuals embraced the French language to access larger book markets and as a means of transmitting Haitian ideas abroad. Many 19th century Haitian intellectuals, such as Anténor Firmin, spent time in France and engaged in significant international debates. However, in spite of the Francophone triumphs of Haitian authors from Firmin (1885) to Roumain (1943/2007), by building on French, Haiti’s rulers and intellectuals put into place what is arguably the real obstacle to progress in Haiti. Dejean (2006) and Hebblethwaite (2012)11 argue that the use of French in the Haitian state and schools is one of the main causes of underdevelopment in Haiti. Haitian language policy is literally “upside down” because the French minority language spoken by 5% to 10% of the population dominates schools and the state at the expense of the Haitian Creole majority language (Dejean, 2006, p. 7).

Because of Haiti’s unreasonable language policy, the majority of the Haitian people are isolated from their own state and schools. Monolingual Haitian Creole speakers, who form the rural and urban poor, are affected in a disproportionately negative way by this state policy. The rural Haitian Creole-speaking monolinguals, representing a significant portion of Haiti’s Vodouists, are structurally excluded from the state and schools. Beauvoir (personal communication March 2, 2012)) points out that there has never been a school system for Haitian Creole speakers.12 Given the long-standing history of linguistic and religious exclusion in Haiti, to suggest that the cause of underdevelopment emanates from the very communities that have been excluded negligently overlooks the tangible causes of Haiti’s problems: A powerful minority in Saint-Domingue and Haiti has, over the course of centuries, deprived the speakers of Haitian Creole and the practitioners of Haitian Vodou of the equal rights they are entitled to, respectively, as a language and religion. Basically, Brooks (2010) blames the victims of historical crimes such as slavery, racism, and exclusion for the long-term negative legacies that those crimes put into place.
Vodou as an Oral and Textual Religion: Progress Toward a Corpus of Books

During the “Schism” that lasted from 1804 until the early 1860s, the Vatican cut off ties with the Haitian Church while an independent Haitian Catholicism took root (Heinl & Heinl, 1996, p. 211). In spite of the periodic prohibitions of the 19th century, Vodou’s traditions were transmitted robustly. The majority of the population living in the margins has been able to pass Vodou traditions through specialist priests across generations until this day in Haiti and, in recent decades, in the Haitian diaspora. Haitian Vodou’s survival and success are partly because of its strong oral culture, which is built around memorization, recitation, and song. The culture is rooted in systematic principles, rituals, and a coherent theology. Spirits are enmeshed in vivid symbolisms (i.e., the vèvè and the characteristics of the spirits) and categorized within a complex system of Rites. Vodou has rich mythologies, a huge diversity of ceremonies replete with song, dance, spirit interactions and symbolisms, and initiation systems through which new or experienced members are acculturated to the traditions of the religion and promoted to higher rank. There is an extensive culture surrounding the 7- to 9-day kanzo initiation: The public antre kanzo (kanzo entrance) and the leve kanzo (kanzo completion) ceremonies, the private rituals, training, fasting and seclusion within the initiation, special clothing, implements, and study are required in preparation for the kanzo.13 Kanzo initiations also require that initiates pay considerable fees—and this is normal given the challenging work of conducting initiations for several days (O.M. Alisma, personal communication, July 15, 2012). It is evident to scholars of Vodou that the initiators place great importance on order, discipline, detail, intellectual and spiritual readiness, and dedication in the self-effacing service to the spirits and God.

Historically, oral religions such as Vodou disseminated sacred knowledge in ways that differ from religions that are built on texts such as Judaism, Christianity, or Islam. Religions that transmit knowledge primarily through oral and experiential initiatory traditions lack nothing in substance. Of course, in its oral form, Vodou cannot disseminate transnationally with the same momentum and degree of accessibility compared with a religion that is diffused via text. And yet, Vodouists are not preoccupied with proselytizing but emphasize establishing a spiritual imprint on the people who receive familial traditions or who join Vodou societies and groups.

Contemporary Haitian Vodou still emphasizes the oral transmission of knowledge and memorization and practice are key learning methods. However, it is no longer an oral-only religious tradition by any means. Since the mid-20th century, the numerous publications in the field of Vodou studies
show that an important new trend is underway in the transmission of Vodou knowledge. The books of Roumain (1943/2007), Marcelin (1950a, 1950b), Rigaud (1953), Laguerre (1980), Beauvoir (2008a, 2008b), Jil and Jil (2009), Hebblethwaite et al. (2012), Mambo Komande (2013), the Vodou Archive, and so on are all published resources that provide Vodou sacred literature mostly in the form of songs. Vodouists and Vodou scholars embrace the prestige of writing and books. There is therefore no evidence that Vodou lacks a textual culture, contrary to the claims of Olivier (2007). Haitian Vodou texts only began appearing in the mid-20th century due to historical reasons: The growth in the Haitian Creole publishing movement is itself a 20th-century phenomenon, an early example of which is Sylvain (1903/1929). There are relatively few Haitian Creole texts of any kind prior to the 20th century. Given the appearance of Haitian Creole Vodou texts in Roumain (1943/2007) or Marcelin (1950), one can argue that Vodou sacred literature has always been a part of the progress-enhancing, democratic, and majoritarian Creole movement.

**Principles of Organization, Education, and Esthetics in Vodou**

An examination of Vodou reveals an organized system that in no way resembles the characterization of Brooks (2010) that it “spreads the message that life is capricious and planning futile.” In terms of organization, Vodou religion is hierarchical, and it has ranks and titles based upon degrees of initiation, level of instruction, and role in ceremonies. Each community is organized in a familial model of spiritual kinship in which the main priest, oungan or manbo, initiates the candidate who in turn becomes their pitt (spiritual child). The priest becomes a spiritual papa (father) or manman (mother) and is addressed by initiates with this respectful title. This kinship culture reflects the tight-knit and long-term relationships members of Vodou “families” have with each other. Spiritual blood ties are considered as strong as natural ones in Vodou. Surely, this type of spiritual bonding and social support system cannot be viewed as “progress-resistant.”

When considering the personal qualities of the oungan (male priest) or manbo (female priest), the claim of capriciousness falls apart. Deren’s (1953) insights are rooted in lengthy relationships and participatory observation in Vodou communities. My point of view is also informed by relationships with Vodouists since 1996 and observation at ceremonies. Leadership in Vodou must demonstrate maturity: Experience and reputation are important. Vodou priests often tell those who consult with them exactly how many years they have served the spirits and the community. As the spiritual father or mother
in the community of spiritual kinship, he or she must avoid favoritism. Priests must be capable of resolving complex spiritual, social, psychological, and physical problems; the priest is responsible to the community and the lwa (Deren, 1953). Respected Vodou priests are often literate in a culture where semi-literate and illiterates\textsuperscript{14} are common; not only do they recite from printed sacred texts but they are also called upon to write letters for illiterate members of the community (Deren, 1953). In contemporary Miami, for example, there are Vodou societies, such as Oungan Michelet Alisma’s \textit{Société Linto Roi Trois Mystères}, that have printed initiation manuals replete with sacred texts and knowledge. Such manuals illustrate the “progressive” dimensions of Vodou initiatory education. Haitian Creole Vodou texts are enjoying a renaissance in our period; however, Vodouists have always cherished the power of letters, words, and texts such as Coret (1851). Even some of Vodou’s \textit{vèvè} (symbols for spirits traced on the ground in ceremonies) have letters within them. For example, the letters “A” and “V” appear in Ayizan Velekete’s \textit{vèvè} in Figure 1a and a serpentine “L” appears in Loko’s \textit{vèvè} in Figure 1b:

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{figure1.png}
\caption{(a) Ayizan Velekete. (b) Loko.}
\end{figure}

In my fieldwork and in the reports of Deren (1953), the \textit{oungan} or \textit{manbo’s ounfô} (temple) is an expertly planned space that defies Brooks’s (2010) assertions. The inside and outside of Vodou temples are well planned and maintained. Trees that serve as the dwelling places for specific spirits form natural altars in which the environment serves as a receptacle for the holy. The sacred trees create a shaded and cool atmosphere that represents the spiritual world.
Courtyards are well-swept and edged with flower beds. Walled in by banana trees, pigeons, white doves, chickens, and fowl roam the grounds (Deren, 1953). Temples have attractive shrines, basins, altars, and buildings are white-washed or painted and sometimes decorated with religious art or inscriptions. Many Vodou yards (lakou) intersect with agricultural and economic activities (such as dairy and yoghurt production at Lakou Nan Badjo in Gonaïves), thus to suggest that the religion disdains planning is unfounded.

For long-standing observers of Haitian religion and culture, Brooks’s (2010) claim that Vodou is a “progress-resistant” cultural influence that spreads the message that “life is capricious and planning futile” reflects an unexamined “received tradition” circulated through the media, politicians, churches, books, and audiovisual sources that point to an old colonial motif which remains influential in the United States: disrespect for African and black religious and cultural expressions. This narrative inherited from colonialism and Christianity persists in the writing of many authors who publish pieces on Haiti.

**Conclusion: The Empirical Reasons for Underdevelopment in Haiti**

This essay aims to show that Vodouisants are not “progress-resistant” but live in a society with numerous “progress-resistant” features generated by the government or the international community. Vodouisants are dedicated to the ideals of progress, education, employment, health care, commerce, farming, and industry. Vodou does not spread the message that “life is capricious and planning futile,” as Brooks (2010) asserts. Vodouisants insist that life is precious, and planning is fundamental. I have argued that printed religious texts are not a reliable measurement of “progress” in religion. One need look no further than the endless destructive outbursts of the textual monotheistic cultures of Judaism, Christianity, or Islam for evidence of this claim. Oral culture is not below written culture, it is parallel to it. Vodou provides strong evidence of the fidelity of oral traditions given its resilient mythology and initiatory systems, vast corpora of songs and musical traditions, and ritual knowledge that remain fully intact to this day (Beauvoir, 2008a, 2008b). Alongside Vodou’s oral traditions that date from time immemorial, in recent decades, there has been the growth of an important body of printed sacred texts and research about the religion. Contrary to the polemical claims of the critics, Vodou religion is not “progress-resistant.”

Haitian Vodou has been marginalized by legislation and subject to persecutions led by the state, the Catholic Church, and Protestant groups from the
earliest days of French colonialism until the current period. The first prohibi-
tions against non-Catholic religions were enacted in the 1685 Code noir (Castaldo, 2006). It was only with the Constitution of 1987 that prohibitions against Vodou were dropped. In published legal documents, therefore, prohibi-
tions were imposed for more than 300 years. Given the long history of legislative prohibitions, it is unreasonable to scapegoat Vodou as the source of poverty in Haiti. As Schmidt (2011) bluntly states, those who blame Haiti’s problems on Vodou display a “cognitive separation” (p. 20) from historical and empirical reality.

Among authors in Haitian studies, there is agreement about the sources of poverty in Haiti (Murray & Bannister, 2004; Dubois, 2012; Schuller, 2012; Katz, 2013). Haiti’s poverty is rooted in “a tragic demographic history” reflected in the genocide of the Amerindians, more than a century of French race-based slavery, and a horrific 13-year revolution and war (Murray & Bannister, 2004, p. 384). The monoculture farming practices of the extractive colonial plantation system, limited fertile lowland plains, exclusive depend-
ency on France, excess culling of hardwood forests, the absence of investment in schools during the colonial period, the awful living conditions of slaves, and immense debts to France to “refund” land owners who lost prop-
erties and slave holdings are some of the important causes of Haiti’s chal-
lenges (Murray & Bannister, 2004, p. 384; Dubois, 2012, pp. 97-105). The isolation of Haiti by France, the United States, the Vatican, and other hostile world powers further stunted economic development for decades after inde-
pendence (Dubois, 2012).

The Haitian state’s educational language policy that benefits the bilingual minority (5%-10% of the population) and excludes the monolingual majority (90%-95%) represents an obvious hindrance to development in Haiti (Dejean, 2006; Dubois, 2012; Hebblethwaite, 2012). The “minoritarian” language policy of the Haitian state is economically and developmentally counterpro-
ductive because it imposes inefficiency of communication throughout the state and society by restricting communication to a small “elite” group. Other problems such as the kleptomania of the political class, a culture of nepotism, militarism and private militias, bureaucratic corruption, poor building tech-
niques and corruptible or absent code enforcement, difficult farming condi-
tions, a weak judicial system, deforestation, erosion, massive natural disasters, global climate change, the absence of a robust transportation infrastructure, sparse delivery of electricity, and an instable and predatory political culture are the empirical features of the nation that prolong poverty (Dubois, 2012; Katz, 2013; Murray & Bannister, 2004; Schuller, 2012). Given this complex list of historical, demographic, geological, material, and institutional causes for Haiti’s problems, the impulse to blame Haiti’s poverty on the practitioners
of a systematically excluded religion such as Vodou is ludicrous. Brooks’s (2010) claims reflect the author’s use of stereotypical and xenophobic rhetorical tropes from a received tradition, one connected to impulses stemming from the colonial period in which a culture of racism, exclusion, and slavery inflicted much harm on African religions.

While Vodou has been marginalized and illegal for much of Haitian history, since the adoption of the Constitution of 1987 and Jean-Bertrand Aristide’s Presidential decree of 2003, some things have changed. In the present period, outsiders and foreigners are received graciously in Vodou communities. Serious research and writing on Vodou have flourished in the 20th and 21st centuries. The release of dozens of books of Vodou sacred literature provides a vast array of cultural information that illustrates a broad-based commitment to progress and humanistic goals. Like nearly all Haitians, Vodouists pursue progress through education, science, health care, and a vibrant economy built on hard work. Over the span of history, Vodouists faced formidable obstacles such as slave raiders and traders, the transatlantic journey by boat, slave markets, enslavement on plantations, the torture of the French colonial system, forced conversion to Christianity, the prohibitions and pogroms of the French and Haitian states, constant hostility from the advocates of Christianity, vilification by uninformed enemies and critics in powerful countries, and a school system and state that undervalue the national language of Haitian Creole. In spite of these tribulations, Vodouists continue to defend their right to religious expression and free assembly.

Those who fall back on the stereotypes of received tradition do injustice to the bearers of a rich and noble religious tradition. McAlister (2012) describes the fabrications of Vodou’s evangelical critics as forms of “mythmaking” (pp. 192, 211). They are also ill-willed convolutions that impose the superstitious imagery of Christianity on Vodou; they are fictions that ignore the problems of colonialism and the bad policies of the Haitian state, itself an institution oriented against Vodou and its primary language, Haitian Creole. Brooks (2010) engages in the scapegoating of a sorely marginalized religion; he blames a religion practiced by the poorest Haitians for the development challenges faced in Haiti. Does Brooks really believe that Haiti’s problems with dictatorships, state kleptomania, corruption, bribery, absent code enforcement, nepotism, political instability, militarism, state violence, criminal gangs, kidnapping, and so on are rooted in the religion of Haiti’s most precarious peasantry and proletariat? The falsifications thoughtlessly churned out by Brooks (2010) and many others, in my opinion, extend a long history of racism and intolerance and distract readers from identifying the actual culprits of Haiti’s woes. Although I have focused on the empirical causes of
Haiti’s challenges, I have also insisted, following Dejean (2006), that great potential for long-term improvements resides in the promotion of the Haitian Creole language in the schools and the state.

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Notes

1. Of course, fundamentalists show hostility to practices found in other religions. In the social sciences and religious studies, however, the judgment of Vodouists about Vodou is the most important source for research. Academic research on a given religion is not founded upon the point of view of rival religious or philosophical groups.

2. Note that the word dyab is used in Vodou and is etymologically linked to the French word diable “devil”; however, the word is synonymous with lwa “spirit” and refers to spirits with “hot” and “dynamic” attributes. In Vodou, Bondye (God) has no diametrically opposed counterpart whereas Christianity asserts the existence of God and Satan. Vodou does posit the existence of demon-like forces called baka, but they are not worshiped. More research is needed to discover whether, according to Vodouists, Bondye (God) created all the good and evil spiritual beings in the Vodou cosmology; certainly, Allah (God), in Islam, created Sheitan and all the good and evil djinn (Ünal, 2013).

3. I thank Michel Weber for his feedback about petitio principii.


5. It would be comparable with saying that Christians have made a pact with the baka (malicious forces that cause illness in Vodou) because they do not worship the lwa (spirits), another preposterous idea that cannot be proven.
6. Industrial slavery is often compared with the “paternalistic” slavery of the Spanish side of the island where slave owners worked with small groups of slaves.

7. Rough estimations suggest that absentee ownership may have been 40% of all properties; others note that 52% of sugar estates were absentee-owned whereas cotton and indigo plantations were 5% (Geggus, personal communication August 1, 2013).

8. Click on this link: http://www.movieretriever.com/videohound_lists/90137/Voodoo


11. In Hebblethwaite (2012), I list the following reasons why the Haitian state should promote Haitian Creole: (1) In the poorest nation in the western hemisphere, resource deficiencies permanently prohibit effective French instruction. (1.1) The Haitian government does not have the money, personnel, or resolve needed to train, place, and retain adequate numbers of French teachers. (1.2) The majority of Haitians do not have the time and resources to acquire French because of severe infrastructural and economic constraints. (2) Haitians are linguistically isolated on a regional basis since no neighboring state uses French and they are linguistically isolated from the state apparatus and from the school system inside of Haiti. (2.1) The need for an international language is contradicted by the many small states that successfully employ autochthonous languages; (2.2) Haiti, thanks to Haitian Creole, is linguistically and culturally cohesive. (3) Haitian Creole has a coherent spelling system and an impressive corpus of high quality books. (4) First-language education will greatly expand literacy and the implementation of standards which are multipliers linked to development (Coulmas, 1992).

12. Our interview with Ati Max Beauvoir can be viewed in the Vodou Archive at this web address: http://www.dloc.com/AA00015254/00005?search=max+=beauvoir

13. Approaches to learning include memorizing the lineage of the temple, its pantheon of lwa, the attributes of the spirits, and songs for the spirits, in addition to French-language texts that originate in Roman Catholic sources. The memorization is of course anchored in the practice of study, recitation, and singing.

14. Illiteracy is currently 39% for citizens over the age of 10 years according to the Institut Haïtien de Statistique et d’Information (see http://www.ihsi.ht/rgph_resultat_ensemble_education.htm).

References


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