**The Vodou Archive: Curating and sharing the sources of Vodou religion and culture**  
Benjamin Hebblethwaite

**Introduction and goals**

This project seeks to improve the understanding of a central Haitian and Haitian-American spiritual tradition by gathering the audiovisual and textual sources of Vodou communities, by interpreting what we collect, and by diffusing the knowledge via an open access website. The project is part of a long tradition of scholarly work stretching back to the early 20th century that has sought to counter reductionist and racist visions of the religion through ethnography, analysis of visual culture and music, and an exploration of Vodou’s language and history. Such work has turned to the central texts in Haitian Vodou: its Creole-language songs. Building on Hebblethwaite’s (2011) *Vodou Songs in Haitian Creole and English*, this project focuses on making that knowledge available in Haitian Creole and English along with substantial interpretative scholarly apparatuses. The Vodou Archive will be the first extensive multimedia digital library to deliver a diversity of Vodouist perspectives and complement them with rich scholarly exegesis that situates the source materials in their national and international historical and cultural context. In the English-speaking world, Vodou sources are underserved and emerging areas of research. This project is launching an e-library that will fill major gaps in knowledge about the religion and serve as a springboard for research.

This proposal is one of three seeking support for the Vodou Archive. In September, 2011, we (Hebblethwaite and Dubois) submitted a related proposal to the ACLS Collaborative Fellowship competition and in December, 2011, we will apply to the NEH Collaborative Research Grant. The Humanities Scholarship Enhancement Fund will strengthen those applications because it will allow us to assemble an impressive foundation to attract funding.

**What is Vodou and where does it come from?**

Vodou is the hereditary spiritual tradition of African descendants in Haiti (Jil and Jil 2009). Until the mid-twentieth century, when scholars and practitioners began writing down songs, Vodou was transmitted orally from elders to children and from priests to initiates. Vodou, or serving the *lwa* (spiritual beings and forces), is a religion, philosophy, culture, and way of life that mainly comes from two major regions in Africa: Dahomey and the Kongo. Dahomey was a large African kingdom and empire that lasted until 1892 and included parts of the countries currently known as Ghana, Togo, Nigeria, and Benin, the seat of its power. Dahomian ethnolinguistic groups were the most numerous populations in the early colonial period of Saint-Domingue (c. 1680–1750; Bellegarde-Smith 2006). The second major influence came from the Kongo, which supplied the majority of slaves in the late colonial period (c. 1750–1791) (Blier 1995:83; Jil and Jil 2009:199; Riguad 1953:26). Vodou songs and traditions are important historical records in their preservation of many African historical (i.e. *Bosou, Achade*), religious (*Legba, Danbala*), cultural (i.e. *lwa, ounsi, ason, ounGAN*), and geographical (i.e. *Rada, Savalou, Boumba*) terms. Although African influences are fundamental and tangible in Vodou, they are creolized or blended into a coherent Haitian religious and cultural system (Brand 2000:15; Michel 2006:30; Monsia 2003; Rouget 1991, 2001). This system is one among a series of such religions within the Atlantic perimeter—places like coastal West Africa, Bahia, Brazil, Haiti, Florida, and New York—where there are diverse groups that inherited, maintain, or adopted African religions and philosophies (Murrell 2010: 1). Vodou songs are a testament to the tenacity and creativity of the ancestors who taught and practiced these ancient traditions in the dreadful conditions of Saint-Domingue.
Foci of the Vodou Archive

All of the materials to be edited and curated by this project are of major literary, historical, cultural, and religious significance. The oral and textual corpora of songs are the authentic and living traditions of the Vodou religion. They are primarily the songs that are sung in the context of Vodou worship in public and domestic ceremonies and they constitute the sacred literature of the religion. Vodou songs address the mythologies and characteristics of the lwa, and they describe their relations with humans. Vodou songs are also time capsules that reveal the history and origins of the Haitian people in Africa, their journey to the Americas in the French slave trade, and their lives in the French colony. Due to their sacred nature, they are very well-preserved records of African, colonial, and Haitian history.

Vodou song texts comprise the largest corpus of Haitian Creole literature in existence. As they intertwine with Haitian culture, identity, and history, they are a key resource for anyone interested in studying, teaching, and understanding Haiti. Vodou songs are also the best preserved repository of African cultural memory in Haiti and hence they are of great importance to the academic disciplines of religion Haitian, Caribbean, and Latin American studies, African and Haitian Diaspora studies, linguistics, ethnomusicology, history, literature, and anthropology.

While some songs, particularly those associated with initiation, are not shared outside the religion, the majority of them are sung in open ceremonies, often recorded and distributed by practitioners themselves, and a number of them have formed the basis for forms of Haitian popular music. One can also view clips of Vodou ceremonies on YouTube, but little of the material is translated or explained and the viewer is left with no guidance or context. Our goal is to offer access to audiovisual and textual material in order to improve the public’s access to and comprehension of Vodou by means of a rich multimedia corpus.

The open access website will ensure the flow of knowledge to a broad public. The website’s ability to facilitate sophisticated search and data mining will also serve researchers and social scientists who want to discover, quantify, aggregate, and disseminate evidence on Vodou. The rich body of sources will ensure that the search functions provide robust evidence. The result will be a website that allows deeper analysis across more disparate sets of data than hitherto available. The construction and curation of Vodou sources provides a platform for further research. One of the long term research projects is the preparation of a Vodou dictionary by means of the corpora assembled in the Vodou Archive.

The need for empirical work on Vodou sources

Anyone familiar with Haiti understands the profound importance and rootedness of the religion within the broader culture. And yet Vodou is still subject to extremely negative and stereotypical representations. Ignorance and negative ideas about Vodou are not only costly for practitioners themselves. They also undermine efforts on the part of scholars, development experts, and foreign organizations to understand contemporary Haiti and develop effective and sustainable community-based projects.

One reason Vodou is easily victimized is because very little Vodou sacred literature or commentary about it is available. From a comparative point of view, research and exegesis on Christianity, Islam, or Judaism are literally founded upon the study of the New Testament, the Koran, and the Hebrew Scriptures. While several Creole-language and Creole and French-language volumes have been published (Roumain 1943; Marcelin 1950 & b; Rigaud 1953; Beauvoir 2008a & b; and Jil & Jil 2009), efforts to make a sizeable portion of the sources of Vodou available in English have been scant with the exception of the out-of-print Courlander (1939; 1960), the out-of-print Laguerre (1980), and Lomax (2009). The collection, transcription,
subtitling, translation, and interpretation of digital sources are prerequisites for serious research on Vodou traditions in the English-language world (Olupona & Rey 2008). The Vodou Archive will provide the resources needed for serious study; all texts and audiovisual recordings will be presented bilingually and include extensive commentary in English (click here for examples of the presentation of texts in the Vodou Archive).

Hebblethwaite (2011) strives to be a standard and multidisciplinary publication on Vodou sources in addition to being a tool for the study of the Haitian Creole language and culture. Yet it only taps into a small portion of the massive corpus of Vodou songs and only in a textual format. A remarkable array of printed, recorded, filmed, and photographed source materials remains unavailable to researchers and readers. The multimedia corpus assembled in the Vodou Archives, therefore, will represent a significant expansion in terms of the possibilities for analysis and understanding of the religion. It will highlight the striking audiovisual dimensions of Vodou and provide access to texts in multiple genres, sound recordings, films, photographs (with commentary) and critical apparatuses, all of which are crucial for grasping the context and meaning of Vodou songs and worship. The materials to be curated are divided into three types:

- Audiovisual sources that will be transcribed, translated, subtitled, and explicated
- Textual Sources available as facsimile, updated modernizations, and translations
- Critical apparatuses such as commentary, exegesis, etymology, etc., available in English

This project builds on long-term research carried out by Hebblethwaite, and will involve both the presentation of materials he has already collected and the collection of new materials. This proposal will create the best possible platform for archiving and sharing the materials. It will also represent the foundation for a larger project that will include a wider network of participants who will continue expanding the archive and the preparation of a Vodou dictionary.

**Methods of data collection and treatment**

Hebblethwaite and a Research Assistant will travel to Vodou ceremonies in Miami and they will record them with handheld digital audio recorders in addition to video cameras (IRB approval pending). One problem with existing sound recordings made in Vodou temples is the failure of researchers to position multiple microphones (mics) in various places. Existing field recordings (by Deren, Boulton, Courlander, and Hebblethwaite) suffer from the use of a single mic and, lacking mixing capabilities, powerful drumming adds gain and distortion to the recordings, making transcription of the lyrics challenging. We will record ceremonies by means of a sound board so that the drum volumes can be controlled in the recording process. In order to be as unobtrusive as possible, the team will use directional wireless mics that transmit to wireless receivers. Noise cancelling headphones will allow us to accurately set the volume levels on the sound board. We will double-check our transcriptions with choir members and we will elicit a cappella versions of Vodou songs to facilitate transcription. After the fieldwork, the collected data will be transcribed, translated, and contextualized via annotations on computers.

Final Cut Pro software will be used for video editing and subtitling. Sound files will be archived as high quality WAV files. They will be available online along with MP3 versions to support access even if bandwidth is limited. The text files will appear as page images, searchable text, and PDFs for a variety of user needs. All materials are freely accessible to the public during and after the project. Finally, the UF Digital Library Center (DLC) has already worked extensively with Hebblethwaite and will provide long-term support to the Vodou Archive website.
Five-year history of Hebblethwaite’s applications for grant funds, whether successful or not, and any publications resulting from awards received:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Competition</th>
<th>Date submitted</th>
<th>Successful or not</th>
<th>Publications</th>
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<tr>
<td>NEH Collaborative Grant (Hebblethwaite, P.I., Dubois, co-P.I.)</td>
<td>To be submitted December 8, 2011</td>
<td>Pending</td>
<td>Vodou Songs in Haitian Creole and English (Temple U. Press, 2011)</td>
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<tr>
<td>International Research and Studies Program, Department of Education: The production of beginning and intermediate-advanced learning materials for Haitian Creole. (Albert Valdman, P.I., Hebblethwaite, co-P.I.)</td>
<td>March, 2011</td>
<td>After Albert Valdman and I submitted this grant proposal, the Department of Education cut Title VI funding in 2011 and announced that no new proposals would receive consideration</td>
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<tr>
<td>Center for European Studies Course Development Grant: La linguistique de la chanson française</td>
<td>February, 2011</td>
<td>Declined</td>
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<tr>
<td>Florida Medical Malpractice Joint Underwriting Association Wears, Bob and Benjamin Hebblethwaite, co-PIs. Beyond Babel: Safer Care for Floridians with Limited English.</td>
<td>July, 2009</td>
<td>Declined</td>
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<td>UF’s Center for the Humanities and the Public Sphere</td>
<td>April, 2009</td>
<td>$1774.73 for library book purchases</td>
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<tr>
<td>International Research and Studies Program: An Intermediate Haitian Creole</td>
<td>March, 2009</td>
<td>Declined</td>
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<tr>
<td>UF’s Center for Latin American Studies Course Development grant: Introduction to Haitian Vodou</td>
<td>January, 2009</td>
<td>$3,500</td>
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(2) The UF Scrabble Glossary will soon be submitted to Educa Vision  
(3) This YouTube video ([click here](#)) also shows our work in Haiti on this project |
| Partner University Fund: The Haitian Creole Scrabble Project: Expanding the Tools of Literacy in Haiti | December, 2008 | Declined | |
| UF International | February, 2008 | $3,000 | |
Center:
*Internationalizing the Curriculum (travel and research in Guadeloupe)*

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Bibilographic references


A. SALARIES AND WAGES (list all individuals separately)

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Position</th>
<th>FTE</th>
<th>Start/End Date</th>
<th>Amount</th>
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<tr>
<td>Hebblethwaite</td>
<td>Assistant Professor</td>
<td>.76</td>
<td>July 1 – August 15, 2012</td>
<td>$4460</td>
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<tr>
<td>Undergraduate</td>
<td>Research Assistant</td>
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<td>May 2012 - August 2012</td>
<td>$2000</td>
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B. FRINGE BENEFITS

26.9% Salaried personnel **$1226.64**
2.6% non-student OPS personnel _____________
8.3% Graduate Assistant Fringe _____________

TOTAL SALARY $___________

C. TUITION____________ (for graduate students)

D. EQUIPMENT

4 VocoPro VHF-3300 Wireless Microphone System (2 mics) for $296; 1 Yamaha Stereo Mixer for $99; 4 tripods for $76; one used camcorder for $351; Tlex Suite lexicographical software for $380. **(Subtotal: $1202)**

E. MATERIALS AND SUPPLIES

F. TRAVEL (be specific)

Travel from Gainesville to 7 different ceremonies in Miami (Car rental + fuel, 14 days x $60 = $840)

Food & lodging in Miami (14 days x $100 = $1,680) **(Subtotal: $2,520)**

G. OTHER DIRECT COSTS (itemize)
TOTAL REQUEST $11,408.64

Estimated Minimum Support Level for a Viable Research Effort $9,408

**Total amount not to exceed $12,000**
Personnel

The salaries compensate Hebblethwaite and one undergraduate research assistant for the work they carry out recording Vodou ceremonies and interviews, selecting highlights from the recordings, editing, transcribing, translating, and subtitling the materials, and developing commentary about them.

Equipment

The audiovisual recording equipment (i.e. the wireless microphones, the stereo mixer, and the tripods and the camcorder) is essential for the fieldwork proposed herein and, to my knowledge, unavailable for rental at UF. UF libraries have flip cameras that can be checked out; however, they are low quality camcorders. The UF Digital Library Center has an excellent sound recorder I can use. The lexicographic software is going to be used to generate word-lists from our Haitian Creole Vodou corpora; this software allows for the efficient preparation of a dictionary. Vodou lexicology and lexicography are long term projects related to the expansion of the Vodou Archive.

Materials and Supplies

Travel

I will travel to 7 Vodou ceremonies over the course of the summer. The car rental plus fuel at $60 daily is for Miami-Gainesville travel. Since Vodou ceremonies are periodic following a fixed calendar, it makes the most sense to go on 7 different two-night trips. The food and lodging at $120 daily is normal for a city like Miami.
Other Direct Costs
BENJAMIN HEBBLETHWAITE, hebble@ufl.edu
Assistant Professor in Haitian Creole, Haitian and Francophone Studies
Department of Languages, Literatures and Cultures
University of Florida
301 Pugh Hall
PO Box 115565
Gainesville, FL 32611-5565

PEER-REVIEWED BOOKS

PEER-REVIEWED PUBLISHED & FORTHCOMING ARTICLES
• 2001. The Unfolding of the Preposition and Affix de in Latin, Gallo-Romance, French and Haitian Creole. Revue roumaine de linguistique 46.45-68.

PEER-REVIEWED BOOK CHAPTERS

PEER-REVIEWED COLLECTIVE PUBLICATIONS


UNREFEREED PUBLICATIONS


PENDING AND DEVELOPING GRANT PROPOSALS

• ACLS Collaborative Fellowship and the NEH Collaborative Research Grant, *The Vodou Archive: Curating and sharing the sources of Vodou religion and culture*


SELECTED CONFERENCE PAPERS

• 2/2011. Social Movement Governance, the Poor and the New Politics of the Americas, University of South Florida. *French vs. Haitian Creole in Haiti’s Schools and State: Language Policy and the Underlying Causes of Poverty or Progress*.


