

Syncretism and Vodou Religion

By

Renate Schneider

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Introduction

My very first visit to Haiti included the touring of a Vodou temple. I was surprised to see so many depictions of Catholic saints and not sure what to make of it. The more I got to know Haitians and the longer I stayed, it became clear to me that Vodou is not only a religion, but in many ways defines and molds how Haitians think and how they view the world. If I wanted to truly understand my Haitian friends and Haitian people, I would need to understand not only the influence of Vodou and how it shapes the culture, but also gain a better understanding of the place of Christianity in Haiti and in the lives of Haitians and how religiously and culturally these two religions co-exist peacefully and seemingly without any contradiction. Haitian churches are always full and participation in Vodou ceremonies is always well attended.

Many people speak of Vodou as a syncretistic religion. But is it really? And if not, what is it? Those are the questions I set out to answer.

Chapter 1 tries to look at the meaning of syncretism and the various ways to define it.

Chapter 2 takes a closer look at the history of Vodou, the world view and the religious beliefs that make up the belief system of the majority of Haitians.

Chapter 3 will then try to answer the question of whether Vodou is a syncretistic religion or whether it might be something else.

The conclusion tries to present my own conclusions and summarizes the answer to the questions raised in Chapter 1.

The appendices contain three interviews with Haitians, a Benedictine monk, a school teacher, and an *oungan* – a Vodou priest. They serve to illustrate the issues discussed in this paper. The second appendix takes paintings by Haitian artists with the same intent, to show in an artistic way the side by side existence of two belief systems.

While the primary purpose of this project is to enhance my understanding of Vodou and its relationship with Christianity, since I live, work and minister in Haiti, I hope it will also make a contribution in a small way to the issues of inculturation that are so widely discussed in the larger church, because it is clear that they will have an impact on the way we evangelize and view the future church.

A note on spelling of Vodou: Vodou can be seen in the literature as spelled in a number of different ways due to the fact that Creole was originally an oral language without a written equivalent. To be consistent, I use the spelling “Vodou”, but when citing other authors I will retain their original spelling.

Chapter 1: Posing the Questions – Is Vodou a syncretistic Religion?

The Vodou religion in Haiti has been considered by many a syncretistic religion. Pictures of Catholic saints are in evidence in Vodou temples, the cross is a prominent symbol in Vodou worship and celebrations, and even votive candles and rosaries can be seen in many places where Vodou is being practiced.

According to Wikipedia, “Syncretism is the combining of different beliefs, often while melding practices of various schools of thought. Syncretism may involve the merger and analogizing of several discrete traditions, especially in the theology and mythology of religion, thus asserting an underlying unity and allowing for an inclusive approach to other faiths.”

But is Vodou really syncretistic in that way? Does a “melding” of various traditions really happen? Or is there something uniquely Vodouisant which cannot be penetrated by another religion or belief? Does adaptability necessarily mean change of the core beliefs? Does the fact that Vodou seems to seamlessly incorporate signs and symbols of Christianity mean that the Vodou worldview is changing in a Christian direction?

These are some of the questions that we will look at in the following chapters.

Chapter 2: Issues of Syncretism

“Religious syncretism exhibits the blending of two or more religious beliefs into a new system or the incorporation into a religious tradition of beliefs from unrelated traditions. This can occur when a culture is conquered and the conquerors bring their religious beliefs with them, but do not succeed in entirely eradicating the old beliefs or, especially the practices.” (Wikipedia)

In Christian literature syncretism has always had a negative connotation. Christian religion as one of the “revealed” religions has been fearful that incorporating elements from other beliefs and practices would corrupt the “purity” of its faith.

Religions that are not exclusivist find it easier to incorporate certain “foreign” elements into their own body of beliefs. But more recently the call for inculturation and contextualization has put a more positive spin on this issue while at the same time raising other questions. “If”, as Robert Schreiter says, “contextualization is about getting to the very heart of the

culture, and Christianity is taking its place there, will not the Christianity that emerges look very much like the product of that culture?”¹

Of course any notion of inculturation was far from the colonizers' minds when they forced baptism on the black slaves in Haiti. Rather what happened was that the slaves co-opted the Christian Deity and saints into the Dahomeyan pantheon of Gods, where they retained their outer appearance so to speak but took on a completely different inner meaning, one that was consonant with the African belief system.

In order to understand the dynamic of two cultures and two religions meeting, we will first take a close look at the concept of syncretism. Helmer Ringgren according to Schreiter came to the conclusion that a precise definition of syncretism is impossible. “The phenomenon is amorphous and subject in its interpretation to the judgment and temperament of the investigator.” (Cited in Schreiter, p. 146) Nonetheless we will try here to come closer to an understanding of what is meant by syncretism.

¹ Robert Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (New York: Orbis Books, 1985) 150.

The term “syncretism” first appeared in Plutarch’s *Moralia*. It referred to the behavior of Cretan people who “mixed” together when confronted with a common enemy. The term was later used to describe the coming together of two or more religious systems. “Syncretism is in the first place contested religious interpretation”.² Michael Pye describes it as “the temporary ambiguous coexistence of elements from diverse religions and other contexts within a coherent religious pattern”, and states that the process should be understood “as a natural moving aspect of major religious traditions... A part of the dynamics of religion which works its way along in the ongoing transplantation of the religious traditions from one cultural context to another whether geographically or in time”.³

Yet still today scholars as well as the practitioners of religion disagree as to the meaning of syncretism. Some scholars prefer the term “creolization” when referring to the mixing of various elements as they pertain to religions of the Caribbean and South America. Leslie Desmangles prefers the term “symbiosis.”⁴ Margaret Fernandez Olmos and

² Droogers, *Creole religions in the Caribbean* by M. Fernandez Olmos & L. Paravisini-Gebert (New York and London: New York University Press, 2003), 8.

³ Ibid.

⁴ M.G. Mitchell, ed., *Crucial Issues in Caribbean Religions* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2006) 41.

Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert use the term “Creole religions”. They state, “The complex dynamic of encounters, adaptations, assimilation and syncretism that we call creolization are emblematic of the vibrant nature of the diaspora cultures.”⁵

Using Roger Bastide’s terminology these authors describe three types of syncretism. The first one they call morphological or mosaic syncretism. This is where African elements and Catholic symbols are juxtaposed and co-exist. The second type of syncretism they call institutional syncretism where the Christian and African liturgical calendars are combined. The third type of syncretism is a symbiotic kind of syncretism where an African deity and a Catholic saint become one.

Robert Schreiter⁶ also describes three kinds of syncretism: The first kind is that between Christianity and West African religions. These two religious systems met in the Caribbean and South America as the religion of the colonizers (Catholic) and the religion of the colonized (African religious systems). Vodou in Haiti is an outgrowth of this encounter and is practiced widely in Haiti itself as well as in the Haitian Diaspora in the

⁵ Ibid., 42

⁶ Schreiter, *Constructing local Theologies*, 146

United States, especially in New York and Boston, as well as in Canada and other places. Many Vodouisants maintain an affiliation with Christianity, especially with Catholicism and incorporate Catholic practices into their own worship celebrations.

A second kind of syncretism is described by Schreier as a blending of “Christian and non-Christian elements, but uses the framework of Christianity for its organization.”⁷ An example of this kind of syncretism would be the Independent Churches of Africa and the Rastafarians in Jamaica.

Schreier names a third kind of syncretism where “the religious system is highly selective in its appropriations of Christian elements.”⁸

A closely related phenomenon to syncretism is that of dual systems. In this case people follow the “religious practices of two distinct systems”⁹ but the two systems are kept discrete, and in Schreier’s words “operate side by side.”

⁷ Ibid., 147

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., 145

Very similar to syncretism, Schreier also describes three kinds of dual systems: In the first kind of dual system Christianity and another tradition operate side by side. “People follow both sets of rituals, and see no contradiction in doing so.”¹⁰ A good Haitian friend of mine is a Protestant and attends Protestant services regularly, while also practicing Vodou. In fact, his grandmother was a *manbo* (Vodou priestess). I witnessed another example of this when a woman died in a remote rural clinic, and the Protestant pastor was called in to say some prayers after which some Vodou rituals were performed, and the next day the woman’s nephew, a Catholic priest said a Catholic funeral mass for her. Nobody saw anything strange or bizarre in this, and the three systems were kept quite separate. This raises the question already whether Vodou is syncretistic or whether it is better described as part of a dual system. We will get to answer this in the last chapter.

¹⁰ Ibid., 148

In the second dual system the Christian religion is practiced “in its integrity “¹¹but especially in times of distress sacrifices are made to ancient deities or spirits. It is almost of if the person wants to cover all bases.

A third kind of dual system according to Schreiter has been called “double belonging”. Schreiter points particularly to Asia where it is almost impossible to be a citizen in some countries without also being a Buddhist. In other words the culture is so suffused with the religion that it is impossible to differentiate which is culture and which is religion.

In discussing issues of syncretism and dual belonging one arrives at looking at the question of religion itself. According to Schreiter, “Religion is more than a view of life. It is also a way of life. “¹² Schreiter even raises the question of whether “religion is ultimately a Western or Christian category. It cannot be insignificant that so many languages do not even have a word for what we call religion.” As Schreiter says, “Christianity is not seen as replacing the way of living in the culture, but as enhancing it, giving it a link to the larger world, enhancing access to sources of divine power.” ¹³ How

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid., 149

¹³ Ibid.

can people give up on their tradition when it is so closely bound with their world view and their sense of belonging? How successful can a coming together of two religious systems be when they are not only embedded in their particular culture but one comes from a place of dominance, and the other from a place of subordination?

What takes place according to Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert¹⁴ are, “subtle negotiations necessary for the survival of the enslaved and colonized in the highly hierarchical colonial societies of the Caribbean. The resulting religious systems are fundamentally complex, pluralistic and integrationist.”

While this paper is focused on syncretic elements or dual systems as we see them in Vodou religion, it is important to point out that Christianity has also absorbed elements from other cultures in which it has lived. Judaism and Hellenism have left definite traces as have feast days like the Mexican Day of the Dead.

What are some of the dynamics taking place when one religious system encounters another? One of the things that happen according to

¹⁴ Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert, *Creole Religions in the Caribbean*, 4

Schreier is, “that elements in the invading culture are seen as analogous to elements of the receiving culture.”¹⁵ Schreier cites as an example of this the communion of saints and veneration of the ancestors. Another dynamic that Schreier mentions, he calls “filling the gaps.” “The invading culture provides signs and often codes for dealing with a problem not adequately accounted for in the dominant sign system of the receiving culture.”¹⁶ A third dynamic is indiscriminate mixing. Schreier point out that this happens when the receiving culture is at a “low level of social and cultural organization”¹⁷ or is under stress. But the receiving culture, once it finds its balance is often more resilient than expected. Sometimes it happens that a Christian deity or the Virgin Mary are interpreted as a local deity. This is where syncretism gets it is negative connotation from the point of view of Christianity. A fourth kind of dynamic that Schreier mentions is when the sign system of the local religion has been weakened to the point where the sign system of the invading culture just takes over.

¹⁵ Schreier, *Constructing local Theologies*, 152

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 153

The latter did not happen to the African religions in Brazil and the Caribbean, but it did happen in the United States. The reason for this is that so many more slaves were imported to Brazil and the Caribbean than came to the United States. Schreiter quotes Eugene Genovese in saying that the “average slave holder in the US owned 25 slaves, whereas plantations with a thousand or more slaves were the rule in Brazil.”¹⁸ Given this larger concentration of slaves, the African religious traditions were much better preserved.

Schreiter names as the difference between syncretism and dual religious systems an attitudinal component. “The model of understanding syncretism emphasized the incorporative, harmonizing attempt of the receiving culture, while a model for dual systems would emphasize the conflictual aspects of cultures coming into contact.”¹⁹ We will look at “culture clash” and/or “acculturation” in our examination of Vodou religion. How does the exclusivist Christian thought pattern promote or hinder one or the other?

¹⁸ Ibid., 154

¹⁹ Ibid., 155

One important aspect of syncretism that we have not touched on is the aspect of “newness” when two different religious systems meet. None of the systems are preserved in their purity, but rather than a stew, a completely new dish emerges, an adaptation to a changed reality. We still recognize the elements of the various traditions, but we also taste the newness.

I believe that it is the adaptability to change which determines which religious systems will survive and which will not. In a globalized world where time is compressed and many people live in multiple realities at the same time, it will be those religious systems which show the greatest ability to adapt and at the same time are able to respond to the needs and desires of their adherents that will survive. In a paradoxical way it will be those cultures and religions which at the same time promote change and resist it that will serve as our guides. When I say promoting change I mean adapting our signs, our vocabulary, our rituals to our changing world, imbuing them with deepened understanding and meaning that reflect the realities of our lives. When I say resist change, I mean to stand up to those forces in our modern world which tend to dehumanize and commodify human life and human existence.

This paradox applies to the Creole context in particular, where syncretism has always been a dynamic process rather than something static. According to Mosquema syncretism should designate “something that corresponds more to the concept of appropriation, in the sense of taking over for one’s own use and one’s own initiative the diverse and even hegemonic or imposed elements, in contrast of assuming an attitude of passive eclecticism or synthesis.”²⁰ Andrew Apter sees religious syncretism as a form of empowerment. Slaves have appropriated Catholicism, for example, “to harvest its power within their universe of discourse.”²¹

In the following chapter we will look at Vodou religion with a critical eye on those elements that are usually regarded as syncretistic, to see how they fit into the discussion as has been laid out here.

²⁰ Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert, *Creole Religions in the Caribbean*, 9

²¹ *Ibid.*

Chapter 2: Vodou Religion: History, Beliefs and World View

On December 5, 1492 Christopher Columbus landed in Haiti. The Island was inhabited by the Taino, an Arawakan people who called their island Ayiti or Kiskeya. Columbus claimed the island for Spain, calling it La Isla Espanola, which became Hispaniola.

The arrival of the Spanish brought with it one of the most disturbing cases of genocide and depopulation. Within a few years the native population of Tainos was completely wiped out.

Spanish interest in Hispaniola began to wane as the discovery of gold and silver in Mexico and South America made those countries more attractive. English, Dutch and French pirates filled the void left by Spain, especially in the Western part of the Island. In 1660 the French proclaimed the island for the French crown, and this was made official in 1697 in the Treaty of Ryswick, when Spain officially ceded the western third of Hispaniola to France which renamed the colony Saint-Domingue.

By that time the local Taino population had been extinct and needed to be replaced with African slaves. The system of slavery as it existed in Saint-Domingue was one of the most brutal in the world. In fact the excessive brutality used on the slaves prevented the slave population from

experiencing growth through natural increase, so the need was for a constant re-supply of slaves from Africa. By 1789 500,000 African slaves were ruled over by a white population of 32,000. These slaves came from many different tribes each with their own language.

In 1789 The French revolution had its impact on Saint-Domingue. In 1791 slaves staged a revolt in the northern region of the colony. Thus began the struggle of the slaves for freedom. Toussaint Louverture, Jean-Jacques Dessalines, and Henri Christophe emerged as powerful military leaders, defeated Napoleon's army, and in 1804 Dessalines declared independence. He claimed the indigenous Taino name of Haiti for the new nation.

The independence cost Haiti dearly. France only recognized Haiti's sovereignty in exchange for 90 million gold francs, and it did not receive US diplomatic recognition until 1862.

The early years of independence were beset by internal strife. Two rival entities were created; the northern part was ruled by the authoritarian Henri Christophe, and the Alexandre Pétion in the south. It was Pétion's successor Boyer who was able to reunite the country in 1843.

The slaves, coming from any different tribes and speaking a variety of languages developed Haitian Creole as the tongue they communicated in. According to Wikipedia, there are many theories on the formation of Haitian Creole. One theory states that a form of Creole had already started to develop on West African trading posts before the importation of African slaves into the Americas, and that since many of those slaves were being kept for some amount of time near these trading posts before being sent to the Caribbean, they would have learned a rudimentary creole even before getting there. Another theory states that Haitian Creole was mostly locally developed when slaves speaking languages from the Fon family started to relexify them with vocabulary from the French language.

African people entered into the Caribbean in great numbers via the slave trade in the early 16th century. Large numbers of African slaves were brought to Hispaniola, Jamaica and Puerto Rico. Sugar became a major commodity for export, and human labor was needed to work the sugar plantations. In fact, in the Caribbean Islands around 1650, sugar production superseded tobacco production. The English had their own slave trade and brought 1,900,000 Africans to the Caribbean, the French brought about 1,650,000 slaves into their colonies between 1664 and 1830, and the Dutch brought about 900,000 Africans to the Guyanas.

The Europeans from the very beginning saw Africans as less than human, and therefore looked upon African religions as primitive, heathen, and superstitious. In fact English planters claimed that Africans were incapable of religious sentiments.²² In contrast to this, Leonard Barrett asserts that religion is the most vital institution in Africa: “Religion for Africans was, is, and ever shall be the source of life and meaning. It is in religion that they live, and move, and have their meaning.”²³ Both black and white scholars agree that it is the African world view which helped the slaves survive their ordeal in the new world. Barrett refers to the traditional African world view “as the vision of cosmic harmony in which there exists a vital participation between animate (God, humans, animals) and inanimate things – vital relationships of being between each individual and their descendants, and also one’s God – the ultimate source of being.”²⁴ This African spirituality and world view served as a powerful resistance to the dehumanizing treatment of the Europeans regarding the African slaves.

²² Mitchell, *Crucial Issues in Caribbean Religions*, 17

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

The most prominent influences of African religions came from the Fon-speaking people of Dahomey, the Yoruba of Nigeria, and the Akan of Ghana. According to Mitchell²⁵, “Haiti has one of the most impressive mixtures of African peoples of all the Caribbean Islands”. All of these various tribes had their own indigenous religions. The religion coming out of Dahomey, Vodou proved to have a great capacity for adaptability and assimilated other religious forms seamlessly.

But Vodou cannot be classified as an African religion. Rather, as Desmangles²⁶ puts it, “an African derived religion whose theological development has allowed its adherents not only to rekindle many of their African ethnic traditions, but to transform these traditions according to their environmental, sociocultural, and economic situations. Thus Vodou becomes a Creole phenomenon arising from the historical and political contexts of Haitian history.

Barrett sees five periods in the development of Haitian Vodou:

²⁵ Ibid., 28

²⁶ Leslie G. Desmangles (1992). *The Faces of the Gods*. Chapel Hill & London. University of North Carolina Press, 112

1. The period of gestation (1730 – 1790) in which there was forced baptism of the slaves with a minimum or none of catechesis.
2. Expansion and self-assertion (1790 – 1800) - Vodou grows and becomes a major force in the Haitian revolution.
3. Suppression of Vodou by black rulers (1800 – 1815) by Dessalines and Christophe who feared its power.
4. Diffusion of Vodou among the populace (1815-1850).
5. Era of Francois Duvalier who used Vodou to strengthen his reign (1957-1971).

Haitian Vodou is based upon the belief of an African Pantheon of deities known as lwas. The head of this pantheon is the Supreme Being who is the creator and has power over the lesser deities and spirits: variously named Le Bon Dieu, Bondye, or Granmèt. Unlike the Christian God, the idea of Bondye's holiness implies his profound separateness and aloofness from the world. Although Vodouisants believe that Bondye participates in their lives and that he is good, they say that he is so transcendent that he cannot be bothered with petty human problems. Because Bondye is so remote from the earth, Vodouisants do not pray to

him directly; they offer no ceremonies in his honor, nor do they believe he can possess anyone during ritual.

But the lwas, also known as mystères, saints, anges, or les invisibles, offer help, protection and counsel, and the Vodou practitioners in turn offer them ritual service which is individual as well as communal. The lwas provide the link between human and the divine.

The lwa always called upon first is Legba, because he opens the gate for all the other lwas. All Vodou ceremonies invoke his presence, “Louvri bayè pou mwen.” (Open the gate for me.) Legba is the protector of gates and fences, the guardian of the house, master of the roads, especially of crossroads where offerings are often left for him. He is often represented as an old man who leans on a crutch, but that image is deceiving, in possessions he exhibits enormous strength.

Another important lwa is Agwe, the protector of the ships at sea. He often appears in an admiral’s uniform. His wife, Lasiren, is a mermaid. She is linked in worship and song to the whale, labalenn, and the two are considered manifestations of the same deity. She is believed to bring good luck and wealth from the bottom of the sea.

Zaka is the patron lwa of crops and agriculture and of peasants. He is a good natured peasant from the mountains and is addressed familiarly as “Papa” or “Cousin”.

Danbala, always pictured as a serpent, is one of the most popular of Vodou lwa. He is an ancient water spirit, linked to rain, lightening, wisdom and fertility.

Bawon Samdi is the head of the mischievous Gede family whose activities are confined to the world of the dead. They usually appear last at Vodou ceremonies, and are usually greeted with laughter, because their jokes are often raunchy and quite descriptive and sexual in nature. In fact many Vodou temples have a large wooden phallus available which those who are possessed will use in their dances. Bawon Samdi is married to Grand Brigitte, mother of the Gedes. Devotions to Gede are particularly common on All Saints and All Souls days in November.

Ezuli Freda is the most beloved of Haitian lwa. She is the goddess of love and luxury; she likes to flirt and adores fine clothes. She is pictured as a light skinned Creole. Ezuli Danto by contrast is pictured as a dark skinned peasant woman. There is a bitter rivalry between the 2 Ezulis.

Ogou is one of the warrior lwa represented by a saber stuck in the earth in front of the altar in a Vodou temple. He likes rum and is always depicted with a cigar.

Marasa – Twins. In Vodou twins are endowed with special powers. Their position in the pantheon is one of privilege. In ceremonies they are called upon immediately after Legba. They are said to represent the sacredness of all children.

It is said that the lwas number in the thousands, so what we have described here is only a small number of the most important lwas in Haitian Vodou and gives a very inadequate description of the complexity and richness of the Vodou religion.

The devotees of Vodou or sevité as they are called who serve the lwas will often be mounted by their lwa, which is a kind of possession through which the lwa can be manifested. In that sense Vodou is a very democratic religion which does not really need a mediator to communicate with the deities, but rather the communication is very direct between the lwa and the sevité. While religious leaders are important, there is no central authority and worship is individualized and community based.

There are two major rites in Vodou, the Rada rite and the Petro rite. The lwas of the Rada rite do only good for people, but they act a bit slow and lack some power, while the Petro gods are often frightful and mean, but they are powerful and quick. The Petro rites are more indigenous to Haiti, while the Rada rites are of more pure African origin. "By 1751 some 3,500 blacks had fled to the hills of St. Domingue to escape the rigors of plantation life and the brutality of slavery. The rites which developed among these blacks came to be identified as those of the Petro 'nation'. Some of the Petro deities were of New World origin. They include Dom Petro, Bawon Samdi, Simbi and Azaca.²⁷

The concept of 'nation' is not an ethnic, geographical or political concept, but according to John Murphy "a means of classifying the variety of spirits by the kinds of rites." The lwas are connected to their nation just as humans in Haitian society are linked to their extended family. The concept of nation originally came from the categorizing the arriving slaves into nations. This idea found its way into the Vodou religion.

²⁷ Mitchell, Crucial Issues in Caribbean Religions, 110

Joseph Murray describes Vodou as “a dance of spirits: A system of movements, prayers, and songs in veneration of the invisible forces of life, performed in the elaborate oufo, and led by oungans and manbos who have undergone extensive initiation rites and training according to their respective spirit’s requirements.”²⁸

Dance is central to Vodou and is always connected to drums. In Africa, Leonard Barrett states, “Dance occupied and expressed every significant emotion. There was a dance for every occasion, even death.”²⁹ Barrett continues to say that “the Africans have a complex cosmic metaphysics which could not be expressed in verbal symbols. The dance then is the medium of expression.”

Vodouisants have no formal creed or formal theology. Concepts and practices vary from one locale to another. As Leslie Demangles says, “there are no beliefs in abstract terms but practical ones about interacting with one another, the ancestors, the gods and the world.”³⁰ Alfred Métraux says that “a core of belief – one might almost say a series of philosophical

²⁸ Ibid.,66

²⁹ Ibid.,105

³⁰ Ibid., 107

postulants about reality make a national church unnecessary and irrelevant.”³¹

Nonetheless there are certain beliefs which are central to Vodou. Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert summarize them as follows:

“A veneration of ancestors, who watch over and influence events from the beyond; active supernatural forces that can be invested in objects and are not intrinsic to the object itself; contact between humans and the spirit world through rituals such as divination, initiation, sacrifice, spirit possession and healing; the practice of ‘maji’ in the form of spells.”³²

Homeopathic or ethno-magical medicines are often used in treating illnesses. Healing is essential to Vodou beliefs. Karen McCarthy Brown intimates that in Vodou spirituality and healing are synonymous.

The traditional sense of community is very strong in Vodou and among Haitians in their understanding of themselves and the world. A person is more than an individual, and they are connected not only to family and neighbors but also to the ancestors who joined the spirit world; all of these

³¹ Alfred Métraux (1959). *Voodoo in Haiti*. New York. Schocken Books, 13

³² Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert, *Creole Religions in the Caribbean*, 9

form an inclusive community and have a strong influence on an individual's life.

Vodou practitioners worship in an *ounfo* or temple which is usually led by an *oungan* or *manbo* (female Vodou priest). These *oungans* and *manbos* are highly self-sufficient and not part of a priestly hierarchy. Nonetheless they undergo a rigorous process of initiation and training. The initiation and training lead to *konesans* a special quality of mind “that includes knowledge of rituals, openness to communication with the *lwas* and spiritual wisdom. There are various levels of *konesans* and upward movement through the stages requires different degrees of initiation.”³³ According to Karen McCarthy Brown devotees who go through initiation are willing to take the risk to be healed themselves and thus are able to heal others as well.³⁴

Olmos and Paravisinni-Gebert also mention that Vodou is a combination of monotheism and polytheism. I am not so sure of that. Basically Vodouisants believe in one Supreme Being, and I would rather

³³ Ibid., 107

³⁴ Claudine Michel & Patrick Bellegarde-Smith . (2006). *Invisible Powers*. New York. Palgrave Macmillan, 25

describe the pantheon of deities as a pantheon of lwas. While they have extraordinary powers they are not really gods, but rather close to world of humans, even though in another dimension. Because when the lwa mounts its horse (that is what possession is called) the personality of the sevité is temporarily displaced by the personality of the lwa who acts more with human characteristics than with divine ones. It is this “human” side of the spirits which makes them so much more accessible. Alfred Métraux writes, “The spirits distinguish themselves from men solely by the extent of their ‘knowledge’, or, which is the same thing, their powers. They are all country people who share the tastes, habits and passions of their servants.

It is accessibility and the belief that the lwa understand the daily struggles of life that present themselves to the believer, so that the faithful ask in Alfred Métraux’ words “not so much riches and happiness but more the removal of the miseries which assail them form every quarter.”³⁵ Vodou religion concerns itself more with earthly affairs than with what might happen in heaven.

³⁵ Métraux, Voodoo in Haiti, 60

According to Leslie Desmangles³⁶, Vodouisants never think of themselves as in believing in something in the sense of identifying with a system of thought. “Spiritual reality cannot be the object of academic investigation.”³⁷ “Their religion must satisfy actual needs, rather than merely invite them to high-flown intellectual exercises of theology.”³⁸ Deren writes that Vodouisants have neither the time nor the energy for inconsequential activity. She notes that in Haiti, religion “must do more than give moral sustenance; it must do more than rationalize the Vodouisants’ instinct for survival when survival is no longer a reasonable activity. It must provide more than a reason for living; it must provide the means of living.”³⁹

How then could something that is so polar opposite to Catholicism come to be known as a syncretistic religion? The following chapter will look at those elements that are apparently Catholic, borrowed so to speak, within Vodou religious practices, symbols and signs to consider whether they are syncretistic, symbiotic, and synthetic or something else.

³⁶ Desmangles, *The Faces of the Gods*, 4

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 5

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 73

Chapter 3: Vodou – a syncretistic religion?

In his book *Voodoo in Haiti*, Alfred Métraux writes, “What is Voodoo? Nothing more than a conglomeration of beliefs and rites of African origin, which, having been closely mixed with Catholic practice, has come to be the religion of the greatest part of the peasants and the urban proletariat of the black republic of Haiti. Its devotees ask of it what men have always asked of religion: remedy for ills, satisfaction for needs and the hope for survival. “

Forced conversion was the approach the colonial powers used with the African slaves. Franciscans and Dominicans, later on Jesuits carried out this “missionary” work. While they might have had good intentions, their religious activities were tainted by their association with an oppressive colonial power. The Code Noir of 1685 legislated that all slaves brought to the French possessions in America must receive instruction and baptism within eight days of arrival.

Nonetheless Olmert and Paravisini-Gebert⁴⁰ point to the “guided syncretism” practice of the Catholic Church, where the Church during the

⁴⁰ Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert, *Creole Religions in the Caribbean*, 43

colonial period, “tolerated the existence of a polytheistic idolatry that could be identified with Catholic saints, and considered it a necessary evil, a transitional state that would eventually lead the conquered peoples to the ‘true’ faith and elimination of such beliefs.” But this did not happen. The African gods refused to die. As Olmert and Paravisini-Gebert state, “The conquered peoples embraced Christian forms but with new meanings they themselves had refashioned and at times appropriating them as tools of resistance.”⁴¹ These authors state that “the slaves’ very survival depended on their ability to manipulate and resist their complete absorption into the core values of the plantation masters.”⁴² Vodou copied just enough of the Catholic ritual forms to disguise the religion of their ancestors.

Representing the lwas through received imagery of Catholic saints may not simply be reactions to oppression. Repeating parts of the dominant material culture with “a difference that is almost the same, but not quite”⁴³ may also be a way of appropriating [neo-] colonial power, creating resistance to that power and strengthening group identity.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid., 58

⁴³ ??????????

In many Vodou temples we find lithographs of Catholic saints. But the characteristics attributed to the saints were not taken from biblical or other Catholic tradition. Rather they were drawn from the African tradition of the lwas. For instance St. John the Baptist is regarded as a strict, nervous lwa who was always on the move. He is said to like champagne and black cattle as well as white sheep.

St. Patrick crushing the serpent of Ireland under foot serves as the image for Danbala, the serpent diviner and a much called upon lwa. Ezili Freda who is unhappy in love is often represented by the image of the Mater Dolorosa. Ezili Danto is associated in images with Madonnas and children, like our Lady of Mount Carmel, or Black Madonnas like Mater Salvatoris. Marasa are often portrayed as the twin saints of Cosmos and Damian. St. Nicholas who brought back to life three children, who were placed by the butcher in a salty tub, is portrayed as their father, St. Clare as their mother. To obtain the favor of the Marasa one must appeal to St. Nicholas. St. James mounted upon a white horse and armed with a sword stands for the lwa Ogou who is a warrior.

When we look at the altars in a Vodou ounfò we notice many items of both Catholic and African origin: crucifixes, rosaries, holy water, pictures of

Catholic saints, as well as flowers, foods and alcohol which the lwa like. Elements of Catholic worship are part of Vodou ceremonies. Most Vodouisants are also members of the Catholic Church. But their 'Weltanschauung' is definitely Vodou. Leslie Desmangles summarizes the most commonly held Vodou beliefs in a creed as follow: "I believe in the lwa, the gods of Africa, and all the saints of the Catholic Church, masters of the universe, they are manifestations of Bondye, who sees all things and directs the course of all things, that some have made themselves known to us through our ancestors in Africa, and that others have to come to know, emulate, and serve in our new home in Haiti, that these lwa are potent enough to mount us, their children, in spirit possession, and that through their mounting, they can inspire us as to the needs of our community."⁴⁴

Anthropologist Michel Laguerre describes Haitian Vodou as syncretism between Catholicism and Afro-American cults. He calls it a syncretism of material and magic.⁴⁵ Blessed objects from Catholicism are used in Vodou worship ceremonies because they are believed to possess magical powers. To add these powers to those of Vodou doubles their impact. Leonard

⁴⁴ Mitchell, *Crucial Issues in Caribbean Religions*, 31

⁴⁵ Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert, *Creole Religions in the Caribbean*, 64

Barrett speaks of Vodou as “A conglomeration of various African divinities with further addition of the Christian trinity, plus the roster of Catholic saints, leaving no power outside its orbit.”

Most Vodou services begin with Catholic prayers led by the Prèt Savann, as well as the invocation of Catholic saints, the Our Father, Hail Mary, the Credo, and the Confiteor all in French. After the Catholic prayers are over, the service moves to Creole. Now there is drumming, chanting, dancing, offerings and sacrifices to call down the spirits. It is as if the invocation of the “Catholic saints provides a kind of frame around Vodou, a transition from the exterior world of Haiti to the interior world of Ginen.”⁴⁶ The Prèt Savann is someone who has memorized many Latin and French prayers, he is kind of a curé when Catholic liturgy is incorporated in Vodou ceremonies, but he has no authority and because the authority rests with the oungan.

Funeral customs begin with rites borrowed from Catholic liturgy. But as Alfred Métraux observes, “There exists many practices which are dictated by fear of ghosts and the simple desire to put death at a distance as soon

⁴⁶ Métraux, Voodoo in Haiti, 66

as possible. Strictly speaking such precautions are not part of Voodoo, in so far as “Voodoo” is taken to mean a religious system. They are magic precautions whose exact origin is hard to establish; and they are common to the folklore of both Europe and Africa.”⁴⁷ The prèt savann supervises the lowering of the coffin into the grave, carried out according to Catholic ritual, but before the coffin is allowed to completely settle it is turned around one more time, in order to disorient the dead person so he might not find his way back to his home. Large crosses are visible in the cemeteries. For Vodouisants they represent Bawon Samdi.

Vodouisants see no contradiction in their embrace of certain Catholic rituals and their practice of Vodou. They might spend all of Saturday night in Vodou services and leave to attend 4:00 am Mass on Sunday. Alfred Métraux quotes a peasant as saying, “To serve the lwa you have to be Catholic.” This peasant might not practice Catholicism for Catholic reasons, but he attributes to them magic powers and as Métraux states, “fears that if he were deprived of them, he would lose his respectability.”

⁴⁷ Métraux, Voodoo in Haiti, 243

Desmangles talks about the coexistence of the two religions rather than a fusion. He prefers to speak about symbiosis rather than syncretism. This symbiosis is rooted in Haitian history going back to the period of slavery and has been present since then. Desmangles does not use the term symbiosis in the way it is used in the biological sciences, “as the living together of dissimilar organisms in a mutual beneficial relationship.”⁴⁸ He uses symbiosis in its ethnological sense where it refers to ‘the spatial juxtaposition of diverse religious traditions from two continents which coexist without fusing with another.’⁴⁹

Desmangles speaks about two kinds of symbiosis: symbiosis by ecology and symbiosis by identification. Symbiosis by ecology is an adaptive process to the environment. The slaves once removed from Africa adapted to the new local geographic features and harvest cycles in Haiti to determine their religious celebrations. Roger Bastide talks about syncretism as a mosaic⁵⁰ which is practically the same as symbiosis by ecology. We have the spatial juxtaposition of Vodou elements and Catholic symbols in

⁴⁸ Desmangles, *The Faces of the Gods*, 8

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ Roger Bastide, (1972). *African Civilizations in the New World*, 243

an ounfo, “and we have the ritualistic observances of the lwas on the Catholic holy days reserved for the saints.”⁵¹

The second form of symbiosis Desmangles identifies is symbiosis by identity – “that is a system of identification or transfiguration by which, on the basis of the similarities between African and Catholic myths and symbols, the saints were identified with African gods.”⁵²

All scholars agree that Vodou played a central role in the Haitian revolution. According to Desmangles, “The role of Vodou in these revolutions was one of providing a channel through which ancestral African traditions could be recreated. The emphasis on past religious traditions became vital in inspiring the slaves to revolt against their masters.”⁵³

Roman Catholicism virtually disappeared during the revolution leaving a vacuum for about 60 years where Vodou became even more rooted.

Zachary Macaulay wrote in 1835 that Vodou became completely integrated in the Haitian peasantry and that although it claimed to be Catholic, it “intermixed the legitimate ritual of the Catholic faith with the

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid., 10

⁵³ Mitchell, *Crucial Issues in Caribbean Religions*, 109

mysterious adoration paid to their national fetishes, and the African obi and the Catholic priests both came for a share of their respect and homage.”⁵⁴

Vodou rituals pervade the life of a great majority of Haitian people. Candles are lighted and libations poured at countless family altars every day.⁵⁵

With the concordat of 1860 the Catholic Church returned to Haiti and with that return a great push by the Catholic Church was made to suppress Vodou. In 1896, 1913, and 1941 Catholic priests organized anti-superstition campaigns destroying Vodou temples and massacring hundreds of people who were admitted practitioners of Vodou. During the American occupation of Haiti (1915 – 1934) as well as in the post-Duvalier era (1983 – 1986) Vodouisants were intensely persecuted. The Haitian constitution of 1987 recognizes the freedom of religion. Nonetheless Catholicism remains Haiti’s official religion.

Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert state that “Ironically as Vodou was forced to the margins and became increasingly identified with superstition and ignorance, the life of Catholic beliefs, imagery and rituals came to be

⁵⁴ Desmangles, *The faces of the Gods*,46

⁵⁵ Claudine Michel & Patrick Bellegarde-Smith . (2006). *Invisible Powers*, 16

regarded as special elements in Vodou rites, necessary to the invocation of the lwas.”⁵⁶

In this context we should mention the use of oraisons. These are Catholic prayers which are addressed to Saint Michael, Saint Clare, Saint Bartholomew, Saint Radegonde. Alfred Métraux quotes the prayer to St. Radegonde:

“Radegonde Baron Samdi

Guardian of the cemetery You

Who have the power

Of going into purgatory

Give my enemies

Something to do

So they may leave me alone.”

These prayers are sold in the markets and then put on walls and pinned into pillows.

⁵⁶ Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert, *Creole Religions in the Caribbean*, 105

There is also a very close match between the Catholic calendar and the Vodou calendar. The feasts of the lwa often coincide with the feasts of the saints that they have been identified with. During Lent no Vodou services are celebrated and during Holy Week cult accessories are often covered. Many Vodouisants participate in patronal feasts in the villages.

Nonetheless there are also differences. The Catholic Church has been economically supported by the Haitian state. No state support is given to Vodou. Also Vodou priests are not being trained in theological centers or schools, but rather the tradition is handed to them by a family member. Vodou varies from one place to another both in content and expression. Unlike in the Catholic Church there are no official membership lists. According to Leslie Desmangles, "Their world view does not allow them to consider religion as a formal organization with a list of members with whom they may or may not identify. Their religion is a way of life."⁵⁷

⁵⁷ Desmangles, *The Faces of the Gods*, 4

Conclusion

Vodou thrives on the crucial life issues that have kept it alive and vital to this day. There is much evidence “of the plasticity of a complex institution, its manifold utility, and the very blurred line between the sacred and the secular.” (Foreword, Alfred Métraux p. 12) The fluidity between the secular and the sacred can be illustrated by the fact that sacred objects in Vodou only retain their sacredness during the ceremony and return to their everyday existence after.

The decoration of Vodou peristyles with Catholic saints is essentially superficial and has no impact on how the spirits are presented to the devotees. As Alfred Métraux says, “there has been no real assimilation or common identity. The equivalence of gods and saints only exists so far as the Voodooist has used pictures of saints to represent his own gods.”⁵⁸ Métraux calls this a process of ‘mutation’ which “does not happen in an arbitrary way. It proceeds from some resemblance, in certain particulars, of the picture to the conception which the Voodooists have formed of their lwa and his attributes.”

⁵⁸ Métraux, Voodoo in Haiti, 324

Even the Catholic clergy seemed to have been aware of this 'mutation', because during the anti-superstition campaigns they had no problem destroying the very pictures that in Catholic churches were objects of adoration.

There are similarities which are religious in nature, but are not syncretistic because they are found in many religions. I am talking here about baptism and initiation. Alfred Métraux states, "Initiation is, let us bear in mind, at the same time both death and resurrection. It gives those who undergo it the chance of rising from the profane state to a new life in which they will be dependent upon – but also in the good graces of – the lwa." This echoes St. Paul's proclamation that in Christ we are a new creation. The novice in Vodou is consecrated to a particular lwa, similar to novices who enter religious orders and took on the name of a saint.

Joan Dayan in Haiti, History and the Gods writes that "Slaves learned snippets of Catholicism, including the names of saints.....As they absorbed these new names and new terms, they transferred them to the experience (or heritage) that had never left them, the memories of spirits and ancestors that would now have to fill new vessels (much as the lwa would always choose new and different bodies for their manifestations). If newly baptized

slaves could be renamed as saints, why couldn't their African spirits be identified with, or imbue, a saint? The old gods were called by new names."⁵⁹ The less the slaves actually knew of the saints the easier it was for them to attribute to them "the powerful sustenance of other beliefs."

Because Legba is the keeper of the keys, many Vodouisants have identified him with St. Peter who holds the keys to the kingdom. In Vodou belief Legba holds the keys to human destiny. St. Peter is also often depicted with a rooster, a reminder that Peter denied Jesus three times. For Vodouisants the rooster is a symbol of Legba and at the same time also his faithful companion. A rooster is often offered to Legba during Vodou ceremonies.

While these symbols may suggest a syncretistic relationship between Vodou and Catholicism, the connection is superficial, for Vodouisants have construed the symbols of the lithographs in African terms, as their interpretation of the details clearly shows. In Catholicism Peter is a purely benevolent saint. In Vodou, Legba however, has two functions corresponding to his personae, and one of these is malevolent. Second, as

⁵⁹ Dayan, Haiti, History and the Gods, 74

Demangles shows, “although the symbol of the keys in the lithographs is the principle point of contact between the saint and the lwa, Vodouisants interpret them in African terms. Nowhere else in Vodou do keys appear. And the rooster is not of Christian borrowing, but rather stems from the Fon tradition which several times a year the Fon, like the Vodouisants sacrifice several roosters or chickens to Legba.”⁶⁰

Another example of this is the lwa Gede who is associated with the welfare of his descendants. Vodouisants have identified him with Saint Gerard. Saint Gerard was born to a wealthy family in Venice in the 11th century. He became a monk, thus giving up his family’s wealth and spend his time healing the sick. His lithographs (which circulate widely in Haiti) depict him as dressed in a black robe, holding a bishop’s crosier in his right hand. Vodouisants recognize that lithograph to be Gede, not only because of the saint’s reputation as a healer but because of the color of his robe: black has traditionally been the symbolic color of the saint as well as that of Gede.

⁶⁰ Desmangles, *The Faces of the Gods*, 113

Again what seems to be at first glance syncretism really is not. While both Gede and Saint Gerard concerned themselves with healing the sick, and therefore seem to have a connection, the identification again is based on the much more superficial aspect of the accoutrements of the Saint Gerard in popular lithographs. The rituals performed in honor of Gede recall those of Africa rather than the Catholic tradition. Demangles is very strong in stating that “Vodouisants identify these lithographs with the lwas and not with Catholic saints. In fact they know next to nothing regarding the saints.”⁶¹

Concerning another example of how an apparent syncretism is not really what it appears to be. This example concerns the interpretation of the virginity of Mary in Vodou and how it differs from that of Catholic theology: it does not refer to her physical condition, but to her beauty and transcendence. According to Maya Deren, for a devotee to call Ezili (or Mary) a “Virgin” is to say that she is of another world, another reality, and that her life transcends her devotees’ financial and existential problems. To assert Ezili’s virginity then is to say that she is untouched by the corruptions of the living. Vodouisants do not see her promiscuity as a

⁶¹ Ibid., 124

sign of corruption. The identification of Ezili with Mary is based not on her virginity, but upon her physical beauty and her persona. Virginity is not a value in the Vodou belief system.

There are other elements with regard to Mary which might have one think of syncretism. Vodou ceremonies are held in Ezili's honor on Assumption Day in most ounfos throughout Haiti, but Vodouisants do not know the deeper significance of that day, except that it is devoted to Mary.

And Demangles points out that "The Christ child held by the black Mater Salvatoris is not Jesus but one of Ezili's children born out of her relationship with one of the lwas. The halo around her head, Vodouisants say, is a symbol of her transcendent power and of her radiating beauty."⁶²

Ezili's symbol is the heart which appears in her vèvè. It is quite possible that the heart has been borrowed by Vodou from Roman Catholicism, but it has also been transfigured and given new meaning. According to Desmangles, "it is not a symbol of her love, but represents her womb – both the macrocosmic womb from which humankind and the world derive, and the microcosmic womb of woman in which the individual is

⁶² Ibid., 144

conceived and from which it is born.”⁶³ A similar observation can be made about the letter M engraved on the heart medallions. According to Vodou iconography, it does not stand for Mary but for Metrès, the familiar form in which they speak of her or invoke her.

There are also symbols which are the same in Vodou and Catholicism. One of them is the symbol of the fish. In Vodou the symbol of the fish is often identified with Agwe, the lwa who rules the sea. In Christianity the fish is a symbol of Christ, since the five letters of the Greek word for fish (ichthus) form the word Christ. Vodou fish did not borrow the symbol of the fish from Christianity, however; rather it derived from Fon mythology. Because Agwe’s symbol is the fish, Vodouisants have identified him with St. Ulrich. St. Ulrich is often depicted as holding a fish in his left hand, and he wears a priest’s robe. In the lithographs he is surrounded by poor people whom he instructs in the Christian faith. According to Catholic hagiology St. Ulrich is said to have ministered to the poor and downtrodden. Since Vodouisants do not know the story of St. Ulrich’s life they have interpreted his depiction in African terms. This observation can be supported in several ways. They never mention anything about St.

⁶³ Ibid.

Ulrich in their rituals to Agwe. According to Desmangles, “The saint’s robe which ought to symbolize his poverty has been interpreted as a symbol of Agwe’s royalty as a cosmic lwa.” In addition, “the fish is no longer a symbol of Ulrich’s Christian evangelism, or that of Christ the Savior, but has become the symbol of Agwe’s domain.”⁶⁴ The fact that the entire Vodou ritual devoted to Agwe is non-Christian also speaks strongly against any kind of syncretism.

As can be seen from the above, devotees of Vodou have incorporated the names and personae ascribed to the saints as well as the symbols associated with them into their African ethnic traditions. The choice of a particular saint to correspond to a specific Vodou lwa is based on the superficial outer appearance of the symbols, i.e. the fish in St. Ulrich’s hand, but not on the meaning that symbol carries.

The cross is recognized all over the world as a Christian symbol. So when one sees the cross in Vodou depictions, one assumes automatically that this is an adoption from Christianity. But this is not really the case. Legba’s symbol is the cross. In its form this cross resembles the Christian

⁶⁴ Ibid., 157

cross, but its significance is distinctly African as Leslie Desmangles points out. “The symbol of the cross is central to Vodou ceremonies. Indeed Vodouisants revere it wherever they encounter it, not only when it is traced on the floor of the peristyle, but in their daily lives as well. Vodouisants who pass a sacred edifice like a Catholic church or hospital will cross themselves reverently. To them the Christian cross that dominates the building symbolizes Legba, the medium through which contact can be established with the world of the lwas.⁶⁵ The cross symbol in Vodou did not originate in Catholicism but in African mythology. As Paul Mercier (1968, 219-21) describes it, in Fon traditional mythology in Benin, “the universe is conceived as a sphere transected by two mutually perpendicular and intersecting planes which perceived in a cross section of a sphere, represent the arms of a cross. In the myth, this cross results from the movements of Mawu Lisa, the Godhead, to the four cardinal points of the universe when she created the world.”

The cross represents Vodou cosmology. In religious ceremonies it images the contact between the profane and sacred worlds. The cross indicates that communication between the two worlds is possible. The

⁶⁵ Ibid., 100

cross represents the profane world of the living, and the vertical line the medium of communication with the sacred abyss. The vertical line also represents the other world itself, and according to Leslie “its verticality indicating that the reality there is the inverse of the reality in the profane world of the living. In the Vodou worldview the metaphysical world of the lwa is not vague and mystical, but a cosmic mirror which like the personae of the lwa reflects the images of the profane world of the living and in doing so inverts them.”⁶⁶ While certainly not syncretism, the idea of the cross as a symbol of communication between the sacred and the profane world is not far removed from what the symbolic meaning it has in Christianity. Is not the cross for Christian also a symbol of communication between people and God? The image or idea of the “other world” as a mirror of this one, is also similar to the Jewish world view of the Old Testament.

While the symbol of the cross does not represent a syncretistic relationship between Roman Catholicism and Vodou, but rather is the direct product of African mythology on Haitian soil, it is quite possible, as Desmangles states, “that the African symbol of the cross among the slaves would have disappeared (as did many aspects of African religion) if it had

⁶⁶ Ibid., 104

not been reinforced by the parallel symbol in Roman Catholicism on the island during the colonial period.”⁶⁷

Although Vodouisants use the Christian name for God, many of their concepts of God are African. They look at Bondye anthropomorphically: he is venerable, just, and aged but not aging. Like the president of the country, he is the chief administrator, the executive, the politician, who provides for the welfare and the liberty of his people (see interview with teacher where he compares Bondye to a president). According to Desmangles, Bondye manifests himself in humankind “as a vital force that animates the body. He is also the king of the universe. He is above all humans and all lwas. Events in the world occur, because he ordains them. Without his aid nothing in the world can happen. Bondye can never make mistakes, but the lwas and humans can, and Bondye calls them to his heavenly tribunal to account for their deeds.”⁶⁸ Bondye is said to have more than one thousand eyes which face the four cardinal points of the universe. All good comes from Bondye. Bondye directs their future and their destiny. Vodouisants believe that Bondye will punish the powerful and wealthy since they are

⁶⁷ Ibid., 108

⁶⁸ Ibid., 161

seen as causing the suffering of the poor. That might take time, but it will happen.

If Catholicism is identified with heaven, Vodou is associated with the earth. And if Haitian writers say that the “lwas have to do with the earth,” and hence cannot be uprooted from Haitian life, it is because Vodou fulfills important functions in Haitian society that are distinct from those of Catholicism. Aside from its healing power through magic, it maintains the vision and the hope of the lwas’ assistance in enabling its devotees to cope with the poverty and famine caused by the incessant erosion of arable soil by the torrential rainfall of the tropics. As Karen McCarthy Brown says, “Haitians have no vision of heaven in their religion, no ideology of progress shaping their understanding of history, and virtually no experience of upward mobility in their lives or the lives of their children. Suffering is an expected, recurrent condition.”⁶⁹ Even when problems are absent for a period of time, there is always the sense that this will not last. In life, luck and the absence of luck are repeating continuously. Scarce resources have to be divided between the living, the dead and the spirits. These “gifts”

⁶⁹ Claudine Michel & Patrick Bellegarde-Smith . (2006). *Invisible Powers*, 4

create a network of dependents which provides some sense of protection and control over one's life.

In most all societies, religion plays an important role, because it explains that which is difficult to explain. Less a religion than a spiritual system and discipline, Vodou extends "naturally and easily, permeating all systems, structures, and institutions in the large and subtle ways in which most Haitians view their world and all worlds."⁷⁰ Indeed, Haitians need not be observant, initiated, nor believers to partake of that shared national world view fostered through Vodou.

But Catholicism too is integral to Vodouisants' lives. Not only does the church provide many social services through its schools and hospitals, it also serves as a vehicle for Haitians in general to participate in their official culture. It also provides the means by which Haiti maintains contact with the outside, enabling it to participate with international efforts.

The Catholic Church has a definite role in the life of the 85 to 90 percent of Haitians who serve the spirits. Pilgrimages to various churches and attendance at Mass are integrated into many complicated Vodou

⁷⁰ Ibid., 103

rituals. In addition the church has taken over the major ceremonies of the life cycle. Birth, when it is ritualized, is celebrated through baptism. First Communion is a very important event with pictures of it being shown at every opportunity. While many Haitians do not marry officially for economic reasons, if there is a wedding it is understood that it be a church wedding.

One finds painted biblical scenes on the walls of the many church sanctuaries. These murals, painted by Haitian artists, are colorful presentations of Haitian life. Christ, the saints and the apostles are black. In addition, the church has assimilated Vodou elements into its liturgy. What has been known as Vodou songs now have Christian words attached to them. Priests pour libations of water on the four cardinal points before the celebrations of the Eucharist. Drums are allowed, but only certain rhythms and indigenous statues carved out of wood are replacing some of the European statues.⁷¹ Some of the Haitian clergy's are attempt to creolize the church have brought it closer to Vodou. But even these efforts do not provide a satisfactory substitute for older religious traditions.

⁷¹ Desmangles, *The Faces of the Gods*, 179

Why has Vodou not only been able to survive, but to flourish? Vodou has been much better at adapting to Haitian culture. This has been possible because of Vodou's flexible structure, its non-hierarchical network of the local *oungans* and its inherent ability to incorporate divergent folk traditions into its theology and practice. Catholicism has not been as flexible. If the church is to survive in Haiti in the future, it will need to re-define its mission as well as its function in Haitian society. It will have to become genuinely Haitian, both in doctrine and in practice, and directly engage with Haitian culture. It will need to recognize that Haitians "do not live in a two story universe. God and the spirits are an intersecting dimension of life; they are not 'denizens of a separate realm.'⁷² A church that for so long has maintained the division of body and mind or soul needs to understand that in Vodou and in Haitian culture there is no division in the way the human person is viewed, i.e. there is no division "between the drives or appetites that come from the body - for example hunger and sexuality - and those that come from the spirit or the mind. In fact, sexuality is perhaps the central animating force in all of life. Much of Vodou

⁷² Claudine Michel & Patrick Bellegarde-Smith . (2006). *Invisible Powers*, 16

ritualizing suggests that sexual and spiritual energy come from the same source.”⁷³

I think it is correct to say that two belief systems exist side by side, with “two modes of functioning, two world views, which are separated yet interconnected by a common longing for the divine and never-ending search for a better life for followers and devotees.”⁷⁴

Historically in colonial Saint Domingue it was not so much syncretism, but rather, according to Dayan “the use of the sacred to conceal prohibited practices that concerned secular power.”⁷⁵ But it was more than just concealing; it was also an effort to throw off the restrictive power of the dominant culture, to reduce the stress created by the contact with the dominant culture. But as Desmangles points out “the recreation of remembered past is never identical to the real past, since it is a selective process based on ‘collective memory’.”⁷⁶

⁷³ Ibid., 10

⁷⁴ Ibid., 28

⁷⁵ Dayan, Haiti, History and the Gods, 172

⁷⁶ Desmangles, The Faces of the Gods, 172

Current scholarly consensus, according to Richard Brent Turner⁷⁷ is that there is a synthetic rather than a syncretistic relationship between Vodou and Christianity. Vodou has been able to recognize the conceptual principle common to the ostensibly disparate religious practices of Catholicism and Vodou and has been receptive to integrate compatible elements into its basic structure, transfiguring and adjusting their meaning when necessary to the African tradition. Thus Vodou stands its own ground and allows its devotees to belong to two worlds without contradiction.

⁷⁷ Claudine Michel & Patrick Bellegarde-Smith . (2006). *Invisible Powers*, 120

Appendix 1

Interviews

Interview 1

The following is an interview with a Haitian Benedictine monk.

Q: Do you believe in the lwa?

A: O yes, I do.

Q: What are they?

A: They are spirits, everything has a spirit.

Q: Do you relate to the lwa?

A: I don't serve them, but I know they are there. I am a Christian, so I serve God.

Q: Who created the lwa, did God?

A: God created everything. So I think he also created the lwa.

Q: If you believe in the lwa, are you not then having a bit of Vodou in you?

A: I don't practice. I am a Catholic. It is just that I know they are there. That does not make me a Vodouisant. I know Muslims and Buddhists exist, but I

don't practice their faith. Knowing they exist does not make me a Muslim or a Buddhist.

Q: Do you believe that those who died communicate with us?

A: Oh yes. All the time.

Q: So you believe body and spirit are separate?

A: Yes, our spirit goes on living. In some sense we have eternal life already.

Q: Do you have a lwa? Who is your lwa?

A: I don't have one, or rather I don't know who it is. If you don't relate to a lwa they leave you alone, but if you serve them, they will communicate with you.

Q: Why do they need people to serve them?

A: People want to have protection. They also need to say thank you when good things happen to them. The lwa can be everywhere, even faraway. Each lwa has a feast day, and they can punish you if you do not acknowledge their feast day.

Q: Do you believe you can be a Catholic and a Vodouisant at the same time?

A: You have to make a choice. For Vodouisant Catholic is part of it. But for Catholics it is not so. There is a difference between religion and culture. My religion is Catholic, but culturally I am a Vodouisant.

Interview 2

This is an interview with an Oungan, a Vodou priest who is very prominent in the area. He has a weekly local radio show for two hours, during which he only talks about Vodou. He would like to re-launch a more traditional form of Vodou. He also owns and runs a 'traditional' pharmacy.

Q. Why do Vodouisants not go out and try to convert other people?

A. Because the spirits choose you, you do not choose the spirits.

Q. Do you see a conflict with Catholicism and Vodou?

A. No, not at all. I just came back from the patronal feast in Roseaux. As you know today is the feast of the Immaculate Conception, and I participated in that. I was there all day. The Immaculate Conception is a very powerful force. If you pray to her you will receive the help you need.

Q. What about the Catholic images in Vodou temples? What do they represent to you? Something Catholic or do they have a different meaning?

A. Of course they have a different meaning. Las Casas who was not a bad man, he wanted to bring his religion closer to the slaves. So he brought the

images of the saints to the slaves, and said, here, pray to them. What do you think the slaves imagined? They had no idea of who these people were. They gave these images their own meaning, meaning that they were familiar with.

Q. Many Vodouisants can participate in Vodou ceremonies all of Saturday night and then go to Catholic mass on Sunday morning. Does that present a problem?

A. Not for us, and not really for the Catholics either, because they are all Vodouisants. It used to be that when you would ask somebody what religion they were everybody would answer that they are Catholic, because they felt they had to hide that they were Vodouisants. But now, everybody can freely say they are Vodouisants. Thanks to Aristide we can freely say that. He made Vodou an official religion. Now the constitution guarantees the freedom of religion. I have people coming to me from many religious backgrounds, Catholic priests, Protestant pastors, people from all walks of life and even from other nations, like I have Americans come and see me too.

Q. Do the spirits also act on people who are not Vodouisants?

A. Of course they do, but they choose you, remember. Tomorrow you might see me sitting under the Mango tree out there, but nobody else will see me. That day the spirits choose you. If you resist, you will be in trouble. They do not like it when people resist them.

Interview 3

This is an interview with a 6th grade teacher in a Catholic school. His father is a oungan, his grandmother was a manbo.

Q. What is your religion?

A. I am a Catholic. But while I am a Catholic, I also serve in Vodou. I go to church, that does not exist in Vodou.

Q. When you see images of Catholic saints in a Vodou peristyl, do they mean the same as in the Catholic Church?

A. They have the same meaning. Those images are manifestations of a spirit, those are the names of the spirits.

Q. Do you consider Vodou a religion?

A. Vodou is never 100% a religion. You never go to a Vodou ceremony to hear somebody preach. They do not have ceremonies that take place at a regular time.

Q. Does every person have their own lwa?

A. The lwas can manifest themselves in many people.

Q. Do you choose which lwa you want to serve?

A. No, it is the lwa who chooses you. If you choose the lwa he does not really love you. He will work with you, but he does not like you. When my grandmother died her lwa chose my aunt. When she dies the lwa will choose somebody else in my family. My grandmother's lwa is called mèt granbwa.

Q. Where does God fit in all this?

A. Before the ganga or manbo calls the lwa, they call on Bondye. There is a bible on the table, and they begin, "In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit", and they make the sign of the cross. The sign of the cross is the sign for God. Then they pray the Our Father, and after all that they call on the lwa. In other words, they always put God first.

Q. Why do you think Vodou is considered a secret religion?

A. When you are in it, it is like you made a sacrifice. The sacrifice is the secret; you do not have the right to reveal the secret. Certain things Catholic priests talk about are secrets too. They don't reveal everything they talk about. In Vodou if you reveal the secret you can lose your life.

Q. How do you explain evil?

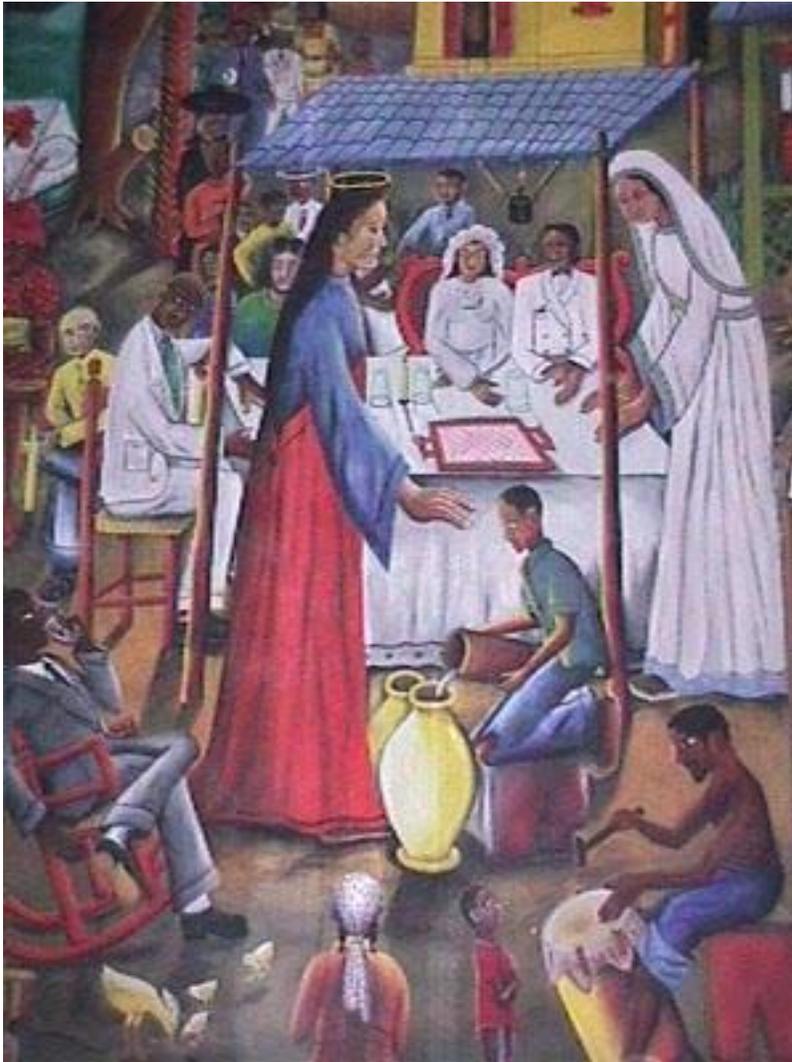
A. Evil comes from the 'djab' (=evil spirits). Among the djab you have a president, a vice president, a secretary, an umpire, a delegate, etc.

Q. How come God permits evil to exist?

A. Lucifer who was like God's Prime Minister wanted to be like God. But God chased him down to earth. Lucifer wanted to kill God, but he could not. Lucifer landed on earth with his two wings. That happened 500 years before Jesus Christ came on earth. It was the ceremony to the djabs which made the French leave Haiti.

Q. Is Vodou an African religion?

A. It came from Africa, but we here in Haiti interpreted it and it evolved. Vodou is a culture that is what it is, a culture.



The Wedding Feast of Cana in a mural in the Episcopal Cathedral of the Holy Trinity, Port-au-Prince, which was destroyed in the earthquake in Haiti January 12, 2010

This is a great illustration of how Christian and Vodou images can appear together.

This mural is an illustration of a cultural adaptation. It is a mural from Holy Trinity Episcopal Church in Port au Prince. It has been destroyed in the earthquake.

It depicts the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan River and many of the daily activities in Haiti that take place at the river.



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