

BY MICHAEL LAGUERRE *

An Ecological Approach To Voodoo

The whole process of creolization, which started with the Spanish colonization of Haiti, affected every aspect of the slave's life. The emerging nativist religions had also borne the mark of the emerging creole culture. In different regions, in relation to the type of plantation prevalent and the African origin of the slaves, various type of creolized Afro-cults emerged. Haitian historians and ethnologists, as disciples of Dr. Jean Price-Mars, a theorist of Negritude, have always argued that differences that existed in voodoo in the beginning of the Eighteenth Century disappeared by the time of the Haitian Revolution. According to these historians and ethnologists, during the regular voodoo meetings in which Maroons and slaves participated, the voodoo cult was unified and standardized, as a cohesive factor for revolutionary Blacks and Mulattoes.¹ The underlying assumption in their writings is that ritual uniformity was necessary for racial solidarity and political unity. Data provided by colonial historians, missionaries, and travelers allow us not only to test this hypothesis, but also to reject it. Indeed, these data show rather the diversity of the cult during the whole colonial period.² This observation would be a very casual one if understanding the functioning of voodoo did not depend on the recognition of this pluralism and if contemporaneous voodoo cults had failed to appear differently from each other.

In this ecological approach to creolized Black religious cults during the French period of the colonization of Haiti, I have three main purposes. First, I will document that the Haitian plantation system, ecologically different from the West African milieu, served as a base for the emergence of various forms of voodoo cults. Second, I will show that, because of the specific ecological niching of the plantation milieu, differing from one zone to another by their geographical situations, the number and origin of peoples involved in plantation work, and the type and size of the plantations, various forms of creolized Afro-religious cults emerged and evolved by following three distinct stages, all directly related to the three different periods in the development of the political economy of the island. Third, I will demonstrate that the

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¹ Jean Price-Mars, *Ainsi Parla l'Oncle*, (Port-au-Prince, 1928), pp. 114-18; Denis Lorimer and Francois Duvalier, "Evolution Stadiale du Vodou" in *Bulletin du Bureau d'ethnologie*, p. 21; Jean Fouchard, *Les Marrons du Syllabaire*, (Port-au-Prince: Henry Deschamps, 1953), p. 18.

² Saint-Mery de Moreau. *Lois et Constitutions des Colonies Francaises sous le Vent, de 1550 a 1785*. 6 Volumes. (Paris, 1785-1790), pp. 60-70; Malenfant. *Des Colonies et Particulierement de Celle de Saint-Domingue: Memoire Historique et Politique*. (Paris: Chez Audibert, 1814). p. 217; De Bercy Drouin. *De Saint Domingue: de ses Guerres, de ses Ressources*. (Paris: Hocquet, 1814), p. 178; M. E. Descourtilz. *Voyage d'un Naturaliste en Haiti*. (Paris: Librairie Plon, 1935, p. 380.

syncretism that resulted in voodoo was mainly a magical syncretism, that is to say, there was no formal religious acculturation as such, but mainly material acculturation. By material religious acculturation, I mean the process by which certain material elements borrowed from Catholicism and Indian religions were incorporated into the voodoo cults, simply by juxtaposition. Such elements were incorporated as parallel magical elements to strengthen the magical and religious power inherent in voodoo.

The term "voodoo" is being used here as a generic term, covering all the creolized Black cults of French colonial Haiti. It is used in the same manner that one may use the term "Christianity" to describe the religion of any Christian church. Just as various sects within the Christian world believe in Christ, so then do different cults of voodooism believe in *Gran-Met* (the Supreme Being).

FROM WEST AFRICAN ENVIRONMENT TO THE HAITIAN PLANTATION MILIEU

The traditional African religions could hardly be perpetuated in the New World because of the vast differences between both milieux. These religions grew in specific niches provided by the West African environment. The traditional West African religions were linked to biogeographic environment, such as the tropical forest and savannah.³ The cult reflected the political structure of the tribe or clan and the polygamous patterns of family life. The organization of the cult was controlled by the community. The cult calendar followed the cycle of seasons and appropriate ceremonies marked the period of harvest. Living in the settlement of a tribe gave individuals the right to participate in its cults. Membership in an ethnic group could be gained by birth or by marriage.

The traditional African religions, evolved in agricultural areas and shaped by the socio-economic system, were strongly rooted in the household. These were not only the religions of the living, but also of the dead. The cult of the ancestors played a role of first importance. The function of the priest was not only to perform or preside over ceremonies, but also to be a good medicine-man. The priests, knowing quite well the West African fauna and flora, were able to use them for therapeutic purposes.

In many respects the Haitian plantation milieu was different from that of West Africa. Slaves coming from the same region were carefully divided between different plantations in order to avoid possible rebellion plots. A large number of African countries provided slaves for the New World. According to a Jesuit missionary, Pierre Francois-Xaver de Charlevois, there were:

The *Senegallois*, of all the Blacks the best fashioned, the easiest to discipline, and the most adapted for domestic service; the *Bambaras*, tallest of all, but

³ Roger Bastide. *Les Religions Africaines au Bresil*. (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1960), p. 37.

thieves; the *Aradas*, those who know agriculture best, but who are the proudest; the *Congos*, the smallest and the most apt at fishing, but who were most prone to desert their masters; the *Nagos*, the most human; the *Mondongos*, the most cruel; the *Mines*, the most resolute, the most capricious, and the most subject to despair of themselves.⁴

Although many African regions contributed to the development of the black population of Haiti, the region of the Gold Coast and more particularly that of Dahomey seems to have been the main supplier. Paraphrasing a quotation from *The Reports of the Lords of the Committee of Council appointed for Consideration of all Matters Relating to Trade and Foreign Plantations* (1789), Jahn wrote:

The reason why it was the religious conceptions of Dahomey in particular that came to prevail in Haiti is apparent from a London Report of 1789 which tells us that ten to twelve thousand slaves were exported yearly from the kingdom of Dahomey. The English exported only seven to eight hundred of these, the Portuguese about three thousand and the French the remainder, in other words more than six to eight thousand a year, who were shipped to the French Antilles, above all to Saint-Dominigue, as the principal French colony of Haiti was then called.⁵

Another observation—a linguistic one—confirms that hypothesis. Even today, voodoo possesses several words of Dahomean origin. Indeed, some of the words which characterize the function of the voodoo hierarchy are from the Fon language:

The word *vodoun* itself is Dahomean in origin. Among the Fon speaking peoples of West Africa it signified "spirit" or deity. . . . The cult priest is usually referred to as a houngan, a Fon (Dahomean) title signifying "spirit chief". . . . He also is known by the title *bocor*, which seems to be derived from *bocono*, the diviner or priest of the Dahomean Fa cult.⁶

The plantation milieu, incompatible with the survival of socio-economic African institutions, was the matrix within which creole culture emerged. The social and structural pattern created by slavery influenced at one level or another the slave life from one period to another. Salient factors which shaped this pattern were: forced christianization in certain areas, the impossibility for slaves to reconstruct and make viable the African polygamous life, the rhythm of life regularized by the interests of the colonists, the participation of the slaves in the cultural life within the slave quarter, and absence of political power or total dependency upon the colonists. Other ecological factors, such as the differences in environment and in population between rural areas and urban zones, as well as between the sugar and coffee plantations, also affected the slave culture or the emergent creole culture. In these different environments various creolized African religions emerged.

It is not possible to understand and explain fully the way in which these religious cults evolved without a careful analysis of the plantation system that set the pattern both of spatial and social structural relations

⁴ Melville J. Herskovits, *Life in a Haitian Valley*, (New York, 1971), p. 16.

⁵ Janheinz Jahn, *Muntu: An Outline of Neo-African Culture*. (London, 1958), p. 29.

⁶ Harold Courlander, *The Drum and the Hoe*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1960), p. 10.

within the population. The history of the Black man in Haiti during the period of Spanish and French colonization is the history of his resistance to economic exploitation and cultural assimilation. By his vigilant resistance, he was successful enough in creating a politics of survival. Thus, emergent religions bore in their roots both a religious and political dimension. These two dimensions were strongly present in voodoo during the entire slavery period. The plantation, day-by-day, shaped the boundaries of the cult. The legal holidays, which ordinarily followed the Christian feasts, served as regular calendars for voodoo dances.

These religions were a symbol of racial solidarity and no ethnic boundaries could prevent anyone from taking part. The sacerdotal classification was not mainly linked to lineage, but to the expertise of these slaves, knowledge of the therapeutic use of herbs, and the showing of some charisma. Until the period of the Haitian Revolution, nativist religions were practiced secretly under the guise of dances. Some households served as the center for the family cult. The African ancestors were not overshadowed by the addition of creole ancestors. Toward the end of the Eighteenth Century, some slave groups in the North invoked Makandal, a former maroon and voodoo prophet, as one of the *loas* (spirits) of their pantheon.

As the economy of the plantation grew, the slave population also grew; the increasing proportion of the Blacks to the whites created more tension, and the relations between the classes became more difficult. This tension created an atmosphere for growing group consciousness among the slaves. In the beginning, the voodoo dances were interpreted as innocent dances by colonists. Then, when contradictions inherent in slavery exploded, these dances were perceived as a religious-political phenomenon. The creolized African religions expressed by those dances passed through three periods, directly related to the economic growth (not the development) of the island and the Black demographic revolution. The colony progressed from small property holdings to large sugar plantations and finally to the fall of the sugar industry.

FORMATION OF VOODOO DURING THE PRE-SUGAR REVOLUTION PERIOD

The pre-sugar revolution period is mainly characterized by a subsistence economy. This period extends from the beginning of the colonization to the end of the Seventeenth Century. The economy, based on small plantations, influenced the social relations between races. On those small plantations, cocoa, cotton, coffee, and sugar were cultivated for local consumption and contraband trade. At this early stage it seemed imprudent to colonists to possess larger individual plantations because of political circumstances, such as the possibility of invasion by the Spanish and English. Analyzing documents relating to the French settlers, Gabriel Debien wrote:

The early concessions were small; those at Leogane in 1680 measured 150 x 600 steps and had an area of 9 *carreaux* each (the *carreaux* is an old French unit of land, with dimensions of 100 steps to a side, equivalent to about 3.15 acres). A concessionaire was supposed to develop his land in order to retain it; once he had it under cultivation he could request another concession.⁷

During this entire period the Black population was smaller than the white population. The native Indian population diminished. In the beginning of the Spanish colonization, in 1507, according to Spanish records, "60,000 Indians remained". The first years of the Spanish colonization were disastrous for the Indian population. As Rainey pointed out:

Estimates of the population of the island at the time of the discovery range from 200,000 to 3,000,000, but by the time of Benzoni's visit in 1541 strife with the Spanish as well as enforced labor on the plantations had reduced the natives to 4000.⁸

The Indian genocide did not stop until their extinction. A brief survey of the population of certain parishes confirms this assertion. In 1631, in the South there were 1,074 whites, 752 Blacks and 128 Metizos, mulattoes and Indians.⁹ The census of 1681, which is the first official census of the French section of the island, gave for the population of Jeremie the following numbers: 163 whites, and 117 Blacks, mulattoes, metizos and Indians; for Tortuga: 168 whites, 89 Blacks and 17 mulattoes and Indians; and for Leogane, 973 whites, 625 Blacks, among them 34 Indians.¹⁰

Since the white colonist population numerically surpassed the Black during this period, the colonists did not perceive slave revolts as a great danger. There were individual revolts from time to time, and the development of maroon communities was at its earliest stage. However, in certain Maroon settlements Indians surpassed Blacks in number. In Bahoruco, for example, the first Maroons to settle there were Indians, and small groups of slaves joined them. On the whole, slavery had not yet reached its peak of cruelty.

Despite the rigors of the trip from West Africa to the West Indies, certain slaves were free to practice magic on board, making the sea captains afraid of them. Fr. Labat, Dominican friar, reports that slaves were successful in stopping one ship by magic, and the captain was obliged to make some concessions.¹¹ This report would have been considered a legend if the proceedings were not signed by English officials with Fr. Labat as the commentator.

⁷ John M. Street, *Historical and Economic Geography of the Southwest Peninsula of Haiti*. (University of California, 1960), p. 117.

⁸ Froelich G. Rainey, *Excavations in the Fort Liberte Region, Haiti*. (Yale University Publications in Anthropology, 1941), p. 15.

⁹ Saint-Mery de Moreau, *Description topographique, physique, civile et politique et historique de la partie française de l'le d'Haiti*. (Paris, 1958), vol. II, p. 708, vol. III, p. 1400.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, vol. II, p. 708 & vol. III, p. 1400.

¹¹ J. B. Labat, *Nouveau Voyage aux Isles d'Amerique*. (La Hague, 1722), vol. IV, p. 138.

The slaves did have talismen which they wore to prevent illness. The talisman was considered as having magical powers. Labat attests to this practice:

A Black slave asked me to give him a little bag that I had taken from him before baptizing him. I was informed by his master that he was known as a sorcerer.¹²

One of the functions of the sorcerers was to be a medicine-man. Knowledge of the herbs was doubtless partly learned from the Indians and by oral tradition passed from generation to generation. His visits as medicine-man were made secretly to avoid the reaction of the colonists, but, in the slave community, his identity was known. Labat observed a medicine-man while working for a patient:

I was informed one night that there was a slave medicine-man in the hut of a sick woman. My first reaction was to punish him and to drive him away, but being close to the door I stooped to see what he was doing. I saw the ill slave lying on a mat. A small grotesque figure, *zemi*, was on a little seat in the midst of the hut and the medicine-man was on his knees and seemed to pray seriously in front of this figure.¹³

These Indian figures (*zemis*), found almost everywhere on the plantations¹⁴ were probably added to cult objects for their magical efficacy. Certain elements from Catholicism, such as the sign of the cross, were certainly incorporated into the early voodoo cults. The cult was at its first stage of development and the religious and healing dimension surpassed the emergent political dimension. The idea of a possible, successful revolution was still remote, but the awareness of racial solidarity and class exploitation came with time, and the forces of historical circumstances.

DEVELOPMENT OF VOODOO CULTS DURING THE PERIOD OF THE SUGAR REVOLUTION

At the end of the Seventeenth Century, the western portion of Santo Domingo became officially a French possession. The size of the sugar cane plantations increased and this provoked large importation of Blacks, which now outnumbered the white population. In its economic and demographic parameters, this period is different from the preceding one. There was a transition from a subsistency economy to an economy oriented mainly toward sugar exportation.

The sugar plantation favored the concentration of a large number of Blacks, caused the desertion of slaves to Maroon settlements, increased the slaves' awareness of their economic exploitation, and caused a racial solidarity to be built among slaves conscious of their status.

The Indians were almost completely exterminated as an ethnic group. Most of the Indians living on the island were the 500 Natchez Indians

¹² Ibid., Vol. I, p. 488.

¹³ Ibid., Vol. I, p. 496.

¹⁴ Saint-Mery de Moreau, *Description topographique, physique, civile et politique et historique de la partie française de l'île d'Haïti*. New Ed. (Paris, 1958), Vol. I, p. 244.

that the governor of Louisiana, Mr. Salvert, sold to French colonists.¹⁵ Most of the Indians were women, employed as domestics. At the eve of the French Revolution, the population of the island presented the following spectrum: 30,826 whites, 36,000 free colored, and 670,000 slaves.

It was during this period that the creolized religious cults started to be more systematically organized. The plantations took their permanent form and there was more stability in the choice of crops raised. The possibility of an outside invasion was no longer a preoccupation of the colonists. A certain number of variables played a part in the development of these creole cults, even if they did not influence the cults with the same intensity. These variables can be summarized thus:

1. The type, location, and size of the plantation. We have earlier pointed out that the coffee plantation niche (mountains) was different from the sugar plantation niche (plains). The difference is marked in terms of geographical situation and size of the slave population.

2. The composition of the slave population—the number of Africans in relation to the number of creoles—is significant, as it was related to the ethnic origin of the larger group of slaves in the area or in the plantation.

3. The presence or absence of former African priests. These priests were known as such in Africa and continued to keep their privileges on the plantations.

4. The presence or absence of trained leaders from other Islands. For example we know that Makandal and Plymouth, two Maroon leaders, came from Jamaica, while Santyague and Don Pedro, two voodoo priests, came from Santo Domingo. Another Maroon leader and voodoo priest, Padrejean, who was influential in the region of Port-de-Paix, also came from Santo Domingo.

5. Proximity or remoteness and size of Maroon Communities. In certain regions, Maroons participated very often in voodoo dances organized by plantation slaves. Also, in Bahoruco, the Maroons shared the settlement with Indians which explains the presence of some Indian artifacts in the voodoo cult practiced in this region.

6. The slaves of the religious orders. These slaves were more exposed to Catholic rituals than other slaves. Religious orders such as Carmelites, Dominicans, Franciscans, Brothers of Charity, and Jesuits started to settle in Haiti by the end of the Seventeenth Century and the beginning of the Eighteenth Century. In Cap Francais before the first expulsion of the Jesuits in 1764, a Jesuit missionary, Fr. Boutin, known as the pastor of the slaves, started to organize them and instruct them in catechism. It is probable that the first bush priests who went through the country around 1797 came from this group.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 95.

The diversity of cults among the slaves was clearly revealed for the first time by an anonymous author around 1750. He wrote:

They become excessively exalted when they meditate a wicked plan. The chief of the plot becomes so ecstatic that he loses consciousness; when he regains consciousness, he claims that his god has spoken to him and has commanded the enterprise, but as they *do not worship the same god*, they hate each other and spy on each other reciprocally, and these plans are almost always denounced.¹⁶

Fr. Charlevoix gives some details about the African religious background of the slaves:

Congos were converted to Christianity by the Portuguese 200 years ago; their kings have always been Christians since this time, and many of those Blacks are baptized. Some Senegalese close to Morocco are Muslims and circumcised. The Aradas are in the darkest darkness of idolatry and worship the snake.¹⁷

The presence of Muslims among the slaves was also reported by Colonel Malenfant: "Some colonists assured me that they possessed Muslim slaves".¹⁸

Toward the middle of the Eighteenth Century, a large number of slaves from Whydah were brought to the island. This region is famous for the role played by the snake in the cult:

In 1727 the King of Bahomey 'smashed' the little kingdom of Whydah and turned its capital into a huge slave emporium which was frequented by slavers right up to the second half of the last century. It has been reckoned that 10,000 slaves were sold annually at Whydah. To cross the few miles of dune and marsh which divides this town from the coast, is to fall prey to a vision of those long caravans of men, women and children, who here took their last steps on the continent of their birth.¹⁹

The arrival of the slaves from the Whydah brought another element to the Afro-cults practiced in certain regions. The snake was present where Whydah slaves formed the majority or where one of them officiated as a priest in the region.

Information on voodoo during the colonial period is second-hand. Only Blacks and Mulattoes could participate in the voodoo ceremonies. Moreau de Saint-Mery himself recognizes the fact:

The reunion for the true voodoo, that which has least lost its primitive purity, never taken place except secretly, when the night casts its shadows, in a secure place, and under cover from every profane eye. . . . When they have made sure that no busy-body has gained admission to the enclosure, they begin the ceremony.²⁰

From second-hand information, Moreau de Saint-Mery describes two types of voodoo practiced by the slaves. He evidently speaks about the cults which were primarily known in the region of Port-au-Prince

¹⁶ Jean Mars-Price, *Ainsi Parla l'Oncle*. (Port-au-Prince, 1962), p. 113.

¹⁷ Francois-Xaver Charlevoix, *Histoire de l'Isle Religieuse d'Haiti*. (Port-au-Prince, Haiti, 1933), p. 366.

¹⁸ Alfred S. Malenfant, *Des Colonies et Particulierement de Celle de Saint Dominique. Memoire Historique et Politigue*. (Paris: Chez Audibert, 1814), p. 215.

¹⁹ Alfred Metraux, *Le Vaudou Haitien*. (Paris: Galimard, 1958), p. 26.

²⁰ Saint-Mery de Moreau, *Description topographique, physigue, civile et politigue et historique de la partie rancaise de l'Isle d'Haiti*. New Ed. (Paris, 1958), p. 62).

and Cap Francais where he lived while in the colony. Referring to Black Aradas who practiced the first form, voodoo "signifies an all powerful and supernatural being on whom depends whatever goes on in the world".²¹ There are two ministers, recognized as inspired and representative of the spirits, and known as queen and king. The faithful manifested blind obedience to them. A box containing a snake is exposed to the view of everyone. Before the ceremony takes place, "with hands placed in those of the king and queen, they renew the promise of secrecy which is the foundation of the association, and it is accompanied by every thing horrible that delirium has been able to devise to make it more impressive".²² The ceremony consists of the offering of food, evocations in which each asks the god to fill his needs and sacred dances which lead some to be possessed by spirits.

The second cult that Moreau de Saint-Mery describes was somewhat different from the first cult as exemplified by the Don Pedro Dance:

Who will believe that voodoo gives place to something further which also goes by the name of dance? In 1768, a Black of Petit-Boave, of Spanish origin, abusing the credulity of the Blacks, by superstitious practices gave them an idea of a dance, analogous to that of the voodoo, but where the movements are more hurried. To make it even more effective the Blacks place in the rum, which they drink while dancing, well crushed gun-powder. One has seen this dance, called Dance to Don Pedro, or simply Don Pedro, induce death in the Blacks; and the spectators themselves, electrified by the spectacle of the convulsive exercise, share the drunkenness of the actors, and hasten by their chant and a quickened measure, a crisis which is in some way common to them. It has been necessary to forbid dancing Don Pedro under grave penalty, but sometimes ineffectually.²³

The description by Colonel Malenfant also has its singularity:

There exists among the voodoo priests a private big snake, put under the soil, in a big wooden box, that one shows during the ceremonies. One promises secrecy to the priestess. Dances drive to the crisis of possession.²⁴

The description of voodoo that we have from the colonial period will allow us to clarify the variables upon which the cults were organized.²⁵ It is clear that the creolized Afro-cults share a certain number of common features, and are distinguished from one region to another by some uncommon specific features. There are six main elements that one may find in any Afro-cult in colonial Haiti:

1. The belief in monotheism, that is to say, in a Supreme Being;
2. The crisis of possession as the climax of every ceremony;

²¹ Ibid., p. 62.

²² Ibid., p. 64.

²³ Ibid., p. 68.

²⁴ Alfred S. Malenfant. *Des Colonies et Particulierement de Celle de Saint-Dominique: Memoire Historique et Politigue.* (Paris: Chez Audibert, 1841), p. 216.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 217; Bercy de Drouin. *De Saint Dominique, de ses Guerres, de ses Ressources.* (Paris: Hocquet, 1814), p. 178; M. E. Descourtilz, *Voyage d'un Naturaliste en Haiti.* (Paris Librairie Plon, 1935), p. 380; Saint-Mery de Moreau, *Description topographique, physique, civile et politique et historique de la partie française de l'île d'Haiti.* New Ed. (Paris, 1958), pp. 60-70.

3. The center post through which occurs communication with the god;
4. Religion as a danced ceremony;
5. The *vere* (drawing), symbol of *loas*; and
6. The offering of food to the *loas* (*manger-loas*).

Some elements found in certain regions are absent from others. Some of these elements are:

1. The development of the ceremony: the ritual is different from one niche to another with no standardized ritualism;
2. Hierarchy and function of the priest: the presence of a priest and/or priestess. The priest is a spiritual and political leader, and/or a medicine-man;
3. The symbolic number of drums;
4. The composition of the voodoo pantheon and the attributes of the *loas*: in certain regions and certain *loas* are venerated while in others they are unknown. The color of the *loas* and the type of food offering differ also from one place to another.
5. The incorporation by juxtaposition of elements of Catholic ritual due to the presence of particular churches in these regions; and
6. The presence or absence of the snake or of a symbol of the snake. Where it did exist, the snake had a symbolic meaning, like the dove and the fish in Christian liturgy. It is less the animal which is important than the symbol which it represents. It is as incorrect to say, as colonial writers thought, that slaves served snakes as to affirm that Christians serve fishes and doves.

The variables influenced to some degree the formation of the various cults and were the source of political conscientization of the slaves. Colonists, as soon as they perceived the political role played by slave dances, outlawed them and prosecuted both those who allowed them and those who participated. In certain regions, principally the cities, voodooists showed great prudence in the organization of their underground activities. Others well situated in terms of guerilla warfare—the Maroons—are better known as the first singers of “Black Power”. The voodoo cults became the first organized foci of open resistance to slavery. As Drouin De Bercy observes:

Don Pedro, like voodoo, is a very dangerous secret society. The goal of its members is to kill or expel all the whites from the colony. Members never reveal the secrets of the group to non-initiates.²⁰

The voodooists formed autonomous groups. There existed no voodoo Pope to regularize the cult, to decide the orthodoxy of the doctrine, or to standardize the ritual. While France was busying herself with a war

²⁰ Emmanuel C. Paul, *Panorama du Folklore Haitien*. (Port-au-Prince, 1962), p. 236.

at home, the voodoo groups became cells of political organization for revolutionary Blacks and Mulattoes.

EXPLOSIONS OF VOODOO CELLS

The ceremony of Bois-Caiman which occurred on August 14, 1791 marked the decline of the economy of the colony. At this point, the contradictions inherent to the slavery system had been pushed to their extreme, and ended in explosion. The Black and Mulatto population outnumbered by far the small group of colonists. Fires started by slaves forced a great number of colonists to leave. The rise of the Black population had paralleled the decline in the economy. The national wealth in 1789, evaluated at 175,990,000 livres, fell in 1801 to 65,-352,039 livres.

In 1793 the emancipation of the slaves was recognized by the law. The atmosphere and work in the plantations underwent significant changes. Maroons mingled with the newly freed population. Voodoo was practiced more openly.

It was also during this period that the first bush priests appeared. These were probably former slaves belonging to religious-order plantations who knew about Catholicism and other Christian rituals. Toussaint Louverture himself learned Latin while he was working at the Hospital of the Brothers of Charity in Cap Francais. Father Constantin de Luxembourg, former apostolic prefect, in a letter to Reverend Gregoire (April 9, 1799), affirms to have known "Toussaint, slave at the Hospital of the Brothers of Charity, where he used to be a waiter when I came there to get dinner". The function of the bush priests was to recite psalms and Catholic Latin prayers, recognized for their magical powers.

The first voodoo temples appeared during this period. In the Maroon settlement, voodoo sanctuaries appeared earlier. As soon as households were formed, spirit protectors of these households were venerated by its members. The various voodoo traditions were not standardized. Reciprocal acculturation and syncretism occurred, yet each voodoo cult kept its traditions without being strict, borrowing features from other traditions.

Political circumstances caused neighboring voodoo priests to gather around influential political leaders of the same region. This compromise did not, however, cause ritual uniformity in voodoo. There was unity on the goal to be reached—liberation from metropolitan France. For greater efficacy, the unity of political action was perceived as essential. Voodoo priests of various religious traditions accompanied leaders such as Biassou, Halaou, and Romaine La Prophetesse²⁷ on the battlefield. There was competition between priests around the same leader, political prestige being regarded as vital for attracting followers.

²⁷ Odette Rigaud-Mennesson, "Le Role du Vaudou dans l'Independence d'Haiti" in *Presence Africaine* No. 18-19, (Fevrier Mai. 1958), pp. 63-4; Placide Justin, *Histoire Politique et Statistique de l'Île d'Haiti*. (Paris, 1826), p. 62.

RELIGIOUS ACCULTURATION OF THE SLAVES

The religious traditions of the slave were the product of a slow and long process of creolization. Slaves were not acculturated to the European cultures as such, but to the emergent creole culture. The colonists themselves were also affected by this process of creolization.

This religious acculturation caused the formation of several cultural foci. Despite the will of the colonists to separate slaves coming from the same region, neighboring African priests kept them together by organizing the cult around a known god of their country. Other spirits were incorporated, but with a secondary status. More important than the number of slaves of the same origin was the prestige of the priest and his birth place.

Since no great mobility has occurred in Haiti since the independence, voodoo centers can be a good index to identifying cultural foci in Haiti. The observation of Mennesson-Rigaud is perceptive in some respects and needs to be tested from other grounds:

Blacks, being little by little rooted in Haiti where they were brought, created foci of belief which reflected their African origin that until the present day can be found because of voodoo. Thus one finds Anmines in Artibonite and Ester, Ibos in the South West (around Anse a Veau, L'Asile . . .), Kita around Cayes, Congos in La Valley region, Jacmel Bonaives and Leogane; Mandingues in the plain of the North, and finally Aradas predominate in the North Eastern part of Port-au-Prince, Cul-de-Sac.²⁸

It is quiet evident that in the regions mentioned above, there was divergence in religious patterns. Because of the paucity of materials collected on voodoo practices in the south, Tortuga and the Artibonite region, it is still too early to show in detail what the differences are.

The proximity of Christianity and Indian religions meant that elements were borrowed from these religions. The presence of Catholic saints in a voodoo center cannot be interpreted as corresponding to voodoo *loas*. There was some magical juxtaposition of saints to spirits, regularized by the environment and only saints venerated in the region were incorporated in those voodoo centers.

To understand the symbolism of the creole religions, a description of the cult centers in terms of objects present there is insufficient. It is as important to analyze the *weltanschauung* of the worshippers, as to study their behavior under extreme duress, such as death or illness. When a slave died, secret voodoo prayers were offered to protectors *loas*, but in the same token slaves asked a Catholic priest to say a mass for the dead. Here mass is understood as a magic ritual, and symbolically chickens were presented to this priest. The mass became then a second *manager-loa* (food for the *loa*). Father Labat well described this feature even if he did not understand its meaning, when he wrote:

All the friends and compatriots of the dead did not miss to come as soon as they can do it and to go and pray God on his tomb, and if they have some money or chickens, they give it to the pastor to say mass for the dead.²⁹

²⁸ Mennesson, *Presence Africaine*, p. 53.

²⁹ Labat, *Nouveau Voyage aux Isles d'Amerigue*, p. 162.

The historical records that we have do not show the behavior of slaves in various extreme situations. However, as an example, we have chosen the Haitian Revolution during which Blacks burned Catholic churches. This example indicates that Catholicism was not considered superior to the voodoo cult, and that there was no danger in its being so thought. Cabon, quoting Fr. Lecun, a missionary who lived in Haiti during the troubles, wrote:

All the churches, except those of Port-au-Prince, Saint-Marc and Cayes, have been burned a long time ago; the last three will be burned certainly.³⁰

The god of the whites is accepted as secondary. Catholicism was perceived as the "magic of the whites".³¹ During the periods of conflict with the colonists, their religion also had been rejected. Slaves had more confidence in the god of their ancestors, who represented their interests.

We have already mentioned the fact that Indian artifacts such as *zemis* were certainly used in some Maroon settlements, particularly in Bahoruco, where Indians and Blacks lived together for a long time. Those elements were incorporated for their magical power. Until the present day, in the region of Jacmel, one finds Indian artifacts in the voodoo temples.³²

The *veve* is also an adaptation to the ecology of the island. For more magical efficacy, Christian crosses were added to it. In a letter to a Haitian ethnologist, the well known specialist of West African religions, Geoffrey Parrinder, wrote:

The word *veve* comes from the languages of the Fon of Abomey and Porto Norvo, sister languages. The *veve* means: *farine de maïs assaisonnée d'huile de palme* (flour of corn mixed with palm-oil). Altars and symbols of God are often covered *vy veve*.³³

Christianity was accepted by some only as magical ritual, auxiliary to the ancestors' cults, rather than as a way of life. Christianity was simply perceived as a parallel or alternative religion. A recognition of the Christian religion as superior would have been an acceptance of the status quo, insofar as it was perceived as representing exclusively the interests of the colonists. The response throughout the slavery period was one of resistance. If certain traits of Christianity were selected and incorporated, this process was due to eco-socialization, that is, a continual adaptation to a milieu in continual process of creolization.

The acculturation of whites to creole food was simply a biological adaptation, while the borrowing of the picture of a saint, or the presence of a rosary or a *zemi* in a voodoo sanctuary had a political meaning. Thus, resistance to slavery and the politics of survival are meaningful to understanding the process of religious acculturation of the slaves.

The syncretism was more a magical than a profoundly religious one.

³⁰ Cabon, *Notes sur l'Histoire Religieuse d'Haiti*, p. 91.

³¹ Laguerre, *Perspectives Sociales*, p. 113.

³² Courlander, *The Drum and the Hoe*, p. 113.

³³ Paul, *Panorama du Folklore Haitien*, p. 300.

By this we mean there was a simple accumulation of gestures (the sign of the cross), formulas (psalms, Catholic prayers), and images (of saints or other material elements). This magical syncretism is a kind of precaution: it is better to rely upon two magical elements instead of one.

SUMMARY

From this discussion of the formation and the development of voodoo cults in French colonial Haiti we can isolate three ideas:

First, no traditional African religions succeeded in surviving in their integrity because of the difference between the social organization in the West African environment on one hand and the slavery system in the New World plantation milieu on the other.

Second, in the Haitian plantation milieu, various voodoo cults emerged, related to specific niches. These cults shared some common features, but also had some differences that allow us to classify them as distinct. The development of these various cults passed through three phases, singularly related to economic development and the demographic evolution of the colony. During the first stage, the accent was more on the role of the priest as a medicine-man; periodic voodoo meetings occurred and contributed to the politics of survival of the slaves. In the second phase, voodoo carried out both a political and religious function, favored the political group-consciousness of slaves, and enforced and strengthened their racial solidarity. In the third phase, voodoo became the focus of political and underground activities, and served as the channel to carry out the political ideology of the leaders, which was the total and unconditional liberation of Haiti from France.

Against the Haitian ethnologists, such as disciples of Price-Mars, who argue that in the beginning of the colonization there was diversity in the cult but by the time of the Haitian Revolution the cult was standardized by political circumstances, I assert that doctrinal unity and ritual uniformity in voodoo never existed. There was, however, unity among the slaves based on race/class solidarity for an effective political action. It is clear that the Blacks of the south (bastion of the Mulattoes) had very little contact with those of the north. Even when slaves gathered around a regional leader, it was not the desire of ritual uniformity that motivated them, but the sharing of political goals. Thus, voodoo has to be considered as a generic term, covering these various creolized cults.

Third, contact with Indian and Christian religions has not necessarily caused a formal religious acculturation or a religious syncretism. There was rather a magical syncretism, accumulation of relics because of their magical potency. This syncretism is related to the environment in which it occurred (proximity to Indians, Catholic saints venerated in nearby places), and the belief that it is better to be safe than sorry.