

## The Little Traditions: Selected Christian Religions Native To The New World

### *Baptismal Rites: Religious Symbiosis Of Vodun And Roman Catholicism In Haiti*

Anyone who has either read about Haiti or has visited it has heard the popular maxim that most Haitians are 100% Roman Catholic and 99% Vodunist. These words capture one of the central paradoxes of Haitian culture. For Roman Catholicism is a religion which allows the Haitian peasant to find a place in the official structure of his country; Vodun, on the other hand, provides a means through which he can cope with the problems of his personal life, and those of his daily existence.

That the Haitian peasant must be Catholic "to serve" the Vodun gods (*loas*) seems logical to him, for he sees both Catholicism and Vodun as necessary parts of his existence. He recognizes that the world is governed by dual cosmological forces, represented by the God and saints of the church on the one hand, and by the *loas* of Vodun on the other. For him, the priest in his celebration of the Mass functions as a point of contact with an impersonal Godhead who rules the universe. By contrast the Vodun priest (*houngan*), in his performance of the Vodun ceremony, establishes contact with the minor deities. Hence, the Haitian peasant gives his loyalty to both religions in parallel ways. As a good Catholic, he confesses regularly, receives Holy communion once a year, participates in one pilgrimage annually, parading in the streets of Haitian towns and cities. But his observance of the rituals of the church does not signify his total acquiescence in its doctrines. He is equally devoted to the Vodun temple (*hounfort*). There, he pays his fees to the *houngan*, consults him about the practical problems of his daily life, and participates annually in one pilgrimage sponsored by the *hounfort*. In short, the Vodunist is one who practices two religions simultaneously.

The prominence of Catholic practices in the Haitian peasant's life today marks the success of the Catholic missionaries who went to Haiti during

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the colonial period. For these early missionaries went forth, longing to reenact the miracle of Pentecost and to reach all men regardless of their race. They believed that in Christ there was to be "no Jew, nor Greek, neither free, nor slave" (Gal. 3:28). Filled with this sense of evangelical obligation, the Haitian church moved zealously, setting in motion a series of events which were to leave their mark on Haitian culture. Vodun meetings among the slaves were outlawed. Magical and religious practices connected with Africa were made crimes; and offenders were punished by torture or by death. The severity of such laws as the *Code Noir* (1685), which ordered all masters to have their slaves instructed and baptized in the "Catholic religion, Apostolic and Roman" within eight days after their arrival in the New World,<sup>1</sup> drove African rituals underground, and necessitated the nocturnal character of Vodun, a character that persists today.

The hostility of the Catholic clergy towards Vodun, caused the slaves to mask their African religious traditions behind a *facade* of Roman Catholic practices. Thus Roman Catholicism and African religions made contact in Haiti during the colonial period, and set in motion a process of religious acculturation. In this process, the slaves did not abandon their African religious practices but added to them elements of the Catholic rituals. This subterfuge did not go unnoticed by the missionaries. As early as 1724, Pere Labat observed that "Vodun assemblies intermix often sacred things of one religion with objects of an idolatrous cult."<sup>2</sup> Pere Labat continues,

The negroes [*sic*] . . . intermix Dagon's ark and secretly keep all the superstitions of their ancient idolatrous cult with the ceremonies of the Christian religion. All the negroes have much devotion for the communion wafer. They eat it, only when they are ill, or when they are afraid of some danger. In regards to the blessed water the little bit that is consecrated during the Sunday mass, it is rare that one finds one drop of it when the ceremony has ended; they carry it in little calabashes and drink some drops when they rise (in the morning) in pretending that it will guarantee their welfare against all the witchcraft that might befall them.<sup>3</sup>

Pere Labat's comments seem to suggest that the slaves did not genuinely embrace Christianity but paid lip service to it. They adopted Christianity as a veneer, what Jean Price-Mars called a "Christianisme d'apparat" behind which they practiced their African "superstitions."<sup>4</sup> Behind the facade of Christian practices, the slaves maintained cultural and religious

<sup>1</sup>Pere Adolphe Cabon, *Notes sur l'Histoire religieuse d'Haiti, de la Revolution au Concordat 1789-1860* (Paris; Imprimerie Compiegne, 1920), p. 33ff.

<sup>2</sup>"Vodun assembles meloient [*sic*] souvent les choses saintes de notre religion a des objets d'un culte idolatre. Pere Jean-Baptiste Labat, *Nouveau Voyage aux Isles de l'Amerique*, Vol. IV (Paris: G. Cavelier, 1722), p. 153.

<sup>3</sup>"Les negres [*sic*] joignent l'arche avec Dagon et conservent secretement toutes les superstitions de leur ancien idolatre avec les ceremonies de la religion chretienne. Tous les negres ont une devotion tres grande et une foi tres vive pour le pain benit. Ils en mangent, lorsqu'ils se trouvent mal, on quand ils craignent, quelque danger. A l'egard de l'eau benite quelque quantite qu'on en fasse le dimanche a la grand'messe, il est rare qu'on en trouve une goutte quand le service est finit; ils l'emportent dans de petites calebasses et en boivent quelques gouttes en se levant et pretendent se garantir par ce moyen de tous les malefices qu'on pourrait jeter sur eux." Labat, Vol. VI, *op. cit.*, p. 330-331.

<sup>4</sup>Jean Price-Mars, *Ainsi parla l'Oncle*, (Port-au-Prince, Imprimerie Compiegne 1928), p. 44-45.

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continuity with Africa. The nocturnal Vodun meeting provided a communal spirit and a basis for a sense of identity, an identity that created an inward freedom by which the slaves could withstand the oppressive conditions of slave labor.

Even after Haiti's independence from France in 1804, the Roman clergy expressed embarrassment about the encroachment of what it called "heathen practices" on its theology. Because Vodun's spread was so extensive, it is not surprising that in Haiti's history, the Catholic Church has campaigned intensely to eradicate "fetishism" from the island. Thus in 1860, 1896, 1913, 1939 and 1941 the church renewed its efforts in leading *Antisuperstitious Campaigns* which destroyed and burned Vodun temples throughout the nation.<sup>5</sup>

In Haiti today, the Vodunist's allegiance to two religions fulfills the same communal function it had during the colonial period. Like his slave forebears, the Vodunist cannot be a "single-minded" Catholic. In order to establish a spiritual identity with his community, he uses his public observance of the Catholic rituals as a veil behind which he hides his African religious ties. J. C. Dorsainvil writes that the life of the Haitian peasant is marked by a "war of nerves." Although Dorsainvil, a psychiatrist, is referring to the poor nutritional habits of the peasant, his life in the tropics, and to his Vodun dances with their frenzy of possession, Dorsainvil's statement aptly describes the peasant's religious life as well.<sup>6</sup> Since the Vodunist practices two religions whose doctrines often contradict one another, he is forced to seek correspondences between Catholicism and Vodun in order to deal with these contradictions. In seeking to establish these correspondences between two religions traditions, he has recreated elements of the church rituals in his Vodun ceremonies. By posting chromolithographs of saints on the walls of the hounfort, by making use of Catholic rosaries, crucifixes, and candles, he recreates an entourage which resembles that of the church sanctuary. By such re-creation, he seeks to reduce the frustrations caused by the intransigent hostility which the clergy has so often manifested toward him in the past.

The presence and the use of ritual objects from the church in Vodun ceremonies has caused scholarly writers on Vodun to describe it as a syncretism, by which they mean the fusion of traditional African beliefs with Catholic theology. But a close look at the Vodun rituals suggests that the relationship between Vodun and Catholicism is not a syncretism but a symbiosis.<sup>7</sup> As it will be used in this paper, *symbiosis* is taken in its etymological and ethnological denotations. Etymologically, symbiosis from *juv*

<sup>5</sup>Frank Durant, *Cent Ans de Concordat: Bilan de Faillite 1860-1960* (Port-au-Prince: Imprimerie de la Presse, 1960). The daily events which took place during the last Campaigns can be found in the Catholic newspaper. See articles by Pere J. Foisset *La Phalange*, 1938-1944.

<sup>6</sup>J. C. Dorsainvil, *Vodou et Neurose* (Port-au-Prince: Imprimerie de la Presse, 1934), p. 60.

<sup>7</sup>This term has a different meaning in this paper from that of the biological sciences where it refers to the intimate living together of dissimilar organisms in a mutually beneficial relationship. For further discussion of symbiosis in Vodun, see Leslie G. Desmangles, *God in Haitian Vodun: A Case in Cultural Symbiosis*, Ph.D. Dissertation, (Philadelphia: Temple University, 1975).

means *with (together with)* and *bios* means *life*. In its ethnological context, symbiosis corresponds to what Roger Bastide calls "syncretism in mosaic"<sup>8</sup> — the juxtaposition, the commensalism of two religious traditions which do not fuse with one another.

This juxtaposition or symbiosis can be seen in the Vodun rituals where elements of the Catholic Mass and African rituals coexist with one another. Just as the tiny parts in a stained-glass window are juxtaposed to form a whole, so too parts of the African and the Catholic rituals are juxtaposed to constitute the whole Vodun ritual. This juxtaposition has two forms:

First, symbiosis can be seen in the content of the hounfort where the rituals are performed. When one stands before a Vodun altar (*pe*), all distance between Vodun and Catholicism seems to be abolished. Votive candles, rosaries, and chromolithographs of saints are juxtaposed to sacred rattles, drums, and jars containing the spirits of ancestors.

Second, the priestly hierarchy of the hounfort demonstrates this symbiosis, for this hierarchy includes not only the houngan and his assistants but a figure known as the *pret' savanne* (bushpriest), who recites Catholic prayers and fragments of Christian liturgy during various Vodun ceremonies.

The origins of the *pret' savanne* in Haiti's history are not clear, but his role in Vodun became defined during the years which followed independence. The first Haitian presidents were friendly to the church and sought to make Catholicism a state religion with the president as its head.<sup>9</sup> In response, not only did Rome refuse to recognize Haiti as a black republic, but did not sanction the role of the president as the head of the church. As a result, Haiti entered a period of schism with Rome, and for fifty-six years (1804-1860), the church maintained no seminaries, no missionaries or dignitaries in Haiti. James Leyburn reports that under King Christophe in 1814, there were only three Catholic priests in the north of Haiti, one of whom had been appointed archbishop by the state.<sup>10</sup> With few Catholic priests, the early presidents were forced to appoint to ecclesiastical offices young priests, many of whom had been slaves, others "freebooting" South American exiles who knew just enough of the liturgy to be given charge of a local church. Because these men did not have the evangelical spirit of the early missionaries, many of them willingly occupied an official position in the hierarchy of the hounfort. They went to Vodun ceremonies, "baptizing" houses, doorposts, amulets, and whatever they were paid to do.<sup>11</sup>

From 1804 to 1860, the *pret' savanne* flourished in Haiti. It was not until 1860, the year of the signing of the *Concordat*, a document which reestablished relations between Rome and Haiti, that missionaries returned to the

<sup>8</sup>Roger Bastide, *African Civilisations in the New World*. (New York: Harper and Row, 1971); (*Les Ameriques noires*, Paris, 1967).

<sup>9</sup>James Leyburn, *The Haitian People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 19\_\_\_\_), p. 118.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 121.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 123.

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island and the pret' savannes were disbanded. Some who continued their pseudo-clerical work were arrested and jailed; others hid from the church in the hounfort where they continued their service to the devotees.

Today the pret' savanne is a part of the hierarchy of the hounfort. Although his presence is necessary for the performance of certain rituals in some hounforts, he has no independent power. In fact, his role is perfunctory. Vodunists see him as a representative of the church and hence a symbol of its sanction on their Vodun rituals. He is the symbolic embodiment of the contact between the church and the hounfort. Although present at both rituals, he is active only in those of Vodun, yet is central to neither.

In order to describe the nature of the symbiosis of Catholicism and Vodun, the remainder of this paper will be devoted to an examination of the role of the pret' savanne, focusing especially on the nature of the Vodun rites of initiation, and the function of his role in these rites.

### *VODUN RITES OF INITIATION*

Before turning to the role of the pret' savanne, we must first examine the symbology of some of the rites of initiation in which he functions.

When a hounfort is constructed, the edifice and miscellaneous objects within it are purified and consecrated to the loas. By their initiation, a hounfort and ritual substances are infused with divine power and thus become the physical residences of the loas. Henceforth, the substances will be the doors through which communication can be established between the community of men and the world of the loas.

Like edifices and ritual objects, Vodunists who have been initiated into the service of the loas can be possessed by them. Through the medium of their voices and their bodies the loas can reveal their will and power to the community of men. The initiation of Vodunists is an ordeal which requires the neophytes to submit themselves to physically painful sacrifices lasting through a long training period. Devotees courageous enough to endure the painful stages of this adventure receive certain "graduated" degrees as members of a local hounfort whereby they achieve a closer relationship not only with the loas but with the community of men as well.

Graduated degrees in the Vodun rites of initiation remind the observer of West African religions. And as do the West Africans, Vodunists give to the initiate a new name at the moment of his consecration. In all cases, a person, a ritual object or an edifice, the name is a name of the deity to whom a person or substance is sanctified. Names are of such vital importance to these rites that no ceremony can take place until a name has been ascribed to each substance to be consecrated.

The importance of the name lies in its denotation. Because, both in Haiti and in West Africa, the power of the loas is believed to reside in their names, affixing a name of loa to persons or substances has the purpose of infusing into the power of the loa. Thus, his sacred name is not a mere word but becomes a part of the personal property of the bearer, property which must be protected and whose use is exclusively reserved to him. The name functions as a proxy to its bearer; hence, to pronounce it is to call

not only the person into being, but his very self, the divine essence with which he is undissolvably linked.

The sacred name given to a person is what makes him an individual. It represents a metamorphosis in his state of being. In West Africa, as in Haiti, the mythology conceives of a man not as something fixed and unchanging, but as something in flux, whose being passes through many phases, each phase being reflected by changed in his sacred name. At birth, a man receives a name. At puberty, he received another because the initiation rites which accompany his consecration mark his rebirth; he ceases to be a child and becomes an adult.

A person's names serve not only to mark the stages of development of his personality, but protect him against impending danger. He escapes it by taking a different self, whose form makes him unrecognizable. In this sense, the close connection of his name to that of a deity reflects the source of power through which he can draw the divine substance necessary for such protection. Like the Ewe people of Dahomey, Vodunists give children, especially those whose elder brothers and sisters have died young, a name that has a frightful connotation in order to protect them from death. Hence, they believe that death will be frightened away, or deceived, and will pass them as though they were not human at all.<sup>12</sup>

Not only in naming do the Vodun rites of initiation reflect the survival of West African religions, but in their use of water as well. In Haiti, water is used to purify persons or substances in preparing them to embody the loas. In parts of West Africa, water is the symbol of purification whereby neophytes, shrines, temples and ritual objects are washed and cleansed of their impurities before they can be consecrated to a deity. The Ewe people of Dahomey, for example, believe that their priests are "called" by God and that before someone becomes a priest, he is trained first, and then undergoes the ritual ceremonies of initiation involving the pouring of libations to God, to the ancestors, after which the head of the novitiate is washed, cleansed and consecrated before he can undertake his priestly duties.<sup>13</sup> A similar ceremony is performed during the Vodun initiation rites. A vital part of the ceremony, known as *laver tete* consecrates the novitiate to the service of the loas in the hounfort.

Because these rites include the use of water, Vodunists refer to them as baptisms. Although the term *baptism* itself is borrowed from Roman Catholicism (the inclusion of it in Vodun's religious vocabulary probably dating from the Haitian colonial period), Vodun interprets the rite differently from Catholicism. Although most Vodunists would agree with Catholics that baptism is a rite of purification which introduces the initiates into the sacred community, there is a further meaning in the rite. For Vodunists, baptism also implies infusing a substance with divine essence so that it becomes a vessel in which a loa resides. Vodunists believe that the baptized substance is so thoroughly imbued with the power of the loa that at some

<sup>12</sup>J. Spieth, *Der Religion der Ewer* (Leipzig: Cottinge, 1911), p. 230.

<sup>13</sup>Information gathered during field research in Haiti, 1979.

point during these ceremonies the loa leaves his sacred abode to come to the hounfort not only to baptize the substance himself, but to enter it.

Having set forth the symbology of Vodun baptisms, we can now turn to the role of the pret' savanne. An examination of Vodun baptism is important in studying the symbiosis of Roman Catholicism and Vodun, for in no other ritual are the rites of the church so intermixed with the elements of African religion. In no other Vodun rituals are outward appearances so deceptive. To the untrained eye, Vodun baptism might seem to replay the church's baptismal rites cast in an African setting; and one could easily mistake it for a fusion of Catholic and Vodun practices. But the trained observer sees them differently. What deceives the casual observer is the apparent function of the pret' savanne who, as a tangential member of the temple hierarchy, reads the prayers of the church "from the book" and chants canticles of the church; he also sprinkles the person or substance being baptized with holy water.

A closer examination of the pret' savanne's presence in numerous Vodun baptisms reveals that his role in them is perfunctory. First, while the pret' savanne recites the prayers of the church, the houngan simultaneously performs the Vodun ritual, often rendering many of the pret' savanne's prayers inaudible to the devotees. Second, the houngan has power to summon the loas to manifest themselves in the hounfort; the pret' savanne does not. Third, whenever the loas manifest themselves in the ceremony in the body of a possessed devotee, they pay homage to the houngan with special salutations due to one whose sacred powers have earned him that right. In contrast, the loas offer no salutation to the pret' savanne. Fourth, although the pret' savanne intermittently sprinkles holy water as if baptizing the initiates, the houngan carries out the actual baptism and, at the appropriate moment, ritually washes the objects or the heads of persons being sanctified.<sup>14</sup>

Perhaps the best evidence of the limited significance of the pret' savanne is that he is largely a phenomenon of urban hounforts. In the remote mountains of Haiti, where there are few churches and where Catholic influence is minimal, the pret' savanne is virtually unknown. For example, in baptismal ceremonies observed in the remote sections of Furcy, there were no instances of recitation of Catholic prayers, or of singing of Catholic canticles. The only portion of the rituals which resembled the Catholic ritual was the sprinkling of water on initiates by the houngan. The actual baptism did not, however, occur at the moment that water was sprinkled, but later in the ceremony when the houngan announced to the devotees that he was proceeding with the ritual of consecration itself. After the ceremony, when questioned about the pret' savanne, the houngan was unaware of the significance of the term. Even after I explained the role of the pret' savanne to him, he was uncertain of how the pret' savanne would function in the ritual and appeared embarrassed by what he felt to be his ignorance. Numerous interviews with other houngans in Furcy

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<sup>14</sup>Ibid.

role of the pret' savanne revealed that they had no need for his services "since they had their own way of dealing with the loas."<sup>15</sup>

Thus, the urban hounforts show more clearly the symbiosis of Vodun and Catholicism. There, pret' savannes and hougans go about their business simultaneously. The men themselves and the rituals they perform are juxtaposed in space and time. But in the eyes of Vodunists, the work of the houngan is important whereas that of the pret' savanne is not. Yet the same Vodunists still sense, without understanding why and without seeking to know, that both belong there together, that the presence of the pret' savanne somehow completes the ceremony.

That the pret' savanne's role in the Vodun baptism is indeed tangential seems clear from the following considerations. First, if the rituals of the church and Vodun were really fused, the pret' savanne would have a significant role in the actual baptism and would perform some efficacious act of baptism separately from the houngan. Second, if the role of the pret' savanne were necessary in these rituals, the loas would salute him when they manifest themselves in the ceremonies through the body of a possessed devotee. Third, if he were essential to the baptismal rites, his presence would be necessary in all such ceremonies throughout the country. Finally, if his role had been of consequence, his service as an officiant would receive a concomitant response from the houngan who performed the rites.

Because the church does not approve of Vodun and has attempted so often in the past to suppress it, Vodunists feel the need for some symbol of the church's sanction of their activities in order to identify with the country's official Catholic society. In their effort to imply the approval of the church, Vodunists have attempted to provide within the structure of their rituals what they consider as desirable in Catholicism. On the one hand, for historical reasons which have caused the persistence of African religion in Haiti, Vodunists have not been able to abandon that heritage — a value symbolized by the role of the houngan in the community. On the other hand, the magnificence of the church as reflected in its liturgy and its sacerdotal vestments has taught them to admire Catholicism as well — an admiration symbolized by the role of the pret' savanne in these rituals.

The pret' savanne is, therefore, a symbol of the church in the baptismal rites. His place in the urban hounfort is guaranteed by his ability to bring to the baptismal rites elements of a "competing" religious system which the houngan operating under the framework of African tradition cannot provide, but which nevertheless many Vodunists feel are necessary.

In spite of this analogy, however, the pret' savanne and the houngan are not homologous. His prestige among Vodunists is not as great as the houngan's. His function has placed him between the houngan and the Catholic priest. Vodunists regard him as a supernumerary in the baptismal rites in the hounfort. Moreover, Vodunists distinguish between a baptism

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<sup>15</sup>Leyburn, *op. cit.*, p. 129.



performed by a Catholic priest and the sprinkling of water by a pret' savanne. One distinction they draw is that a Catholic priest must always be white and the pret' savanne black. Even in their view of the clergy, Vodunists feel that they cannot respect a black Catholic priest. Since the days of the colony, most Catholic priests have been white, and the old tradition lingers in the minds of Vodunists that, much like the water sprinkled on initiates by the pret' savanne, "Christian baptism will not stick."<sup>16</sup> Vodunists say that in baptism the Christian God and saints need the intercession of the white priest, but in the Vodun baptism the loa need to be summoned by a native houngan.<sup>17</sup>

### CONCLUSION

By piecing together the details of Vodun baptisms, one can make several observations:

First, the theological concepts behind the Vodun baptismal rites are essentially West African. Although they borrowed the term *baptism* from Catholicism, Vodunists, like some West Africans, connote by it a means whereby a divine essence is infused in a person, an edifice, or an object.

Second, by and large, the Vodun baptisms as rituals have retained their African forms. Through ritual washing, the baptized substance becomes a channel through which the houngan can draw divine energy into the world of men. The name of that substance which embodies the loa is the door through which the divinity can be reached. The key to that door is the utterance of that name.

Third, unlike Roman Catholicism whose ceremonial objects retain their sacredness unless it is removed by special ceremonies of "degradation," the sacredness of Vodun objects is limited to the religious act which accompanies their use; and since action is transitory, the power of a divinity comes and goes according to the instances in which an object is handled. Maya Deren is therefore right in assuming that Vodun has "a quality which can be described as a constant 'disappearingness,'"<sup>18</sup> for when the sacred function of an object is fulfilled, it ceases to be sacred. Thus, a hounfort which, during a ceremony, vibrates with the power of the loa, becomes the morning after a place where chickens and dogs wander about. Women also sit there to gossip, giving no attention to the presence of the loa to whom the entire hounfort and its contents are dedicated.

Fourth, the role of the pret' savanne during the baptismal ceremonies is perfunctory. Not only are his prayers inaudible to the devotees, but the actual ritual washing which infuses the power of the loa is a substance or the person being baptized is performed solely by the houngan. Moreover, the pret' savanne is part of the hounfort's hierarchy largely in areas where a Catholic church is present and where it influences the life of the members

<sup>16</sup>Information gathered during field research, 1978.

<sup>17</sup>Maya Deren, *Divine Horsemen: The Voodoo Gods in Haiti* (New York: Dell Publishing Company, 1970), p. 187.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid.

of the community. In such areas, symbiosis between Roman Catholicism and Vodun takes two forms. First, the presence of the hounfort near a Catholic church accomplishes the spatial juxtaposition of Catholicism and Vodun. Second, the elements of the Catholic rites such as the sprinkling of water, the prayers and canticles chanted by the pret' savanne show the symbiosis of the two religions.