Creole African Traditions

Santería, Palo Monte, Abakuá, Vodou, and Espiritismo

The late colonial era in the Caribbean was marked by an explosion of religious traditions that both drew from and challenged the normativity of Christianity. The importation of large numbers of Africans for slave labor on the plantations introduced numerous ethnic groups and their cultural heritages to the Caribbean. In an attempt to negotiate their own diversity and their contact with Europeans, Africans created religious traditions such as Santería, Palo Monte, Abakuá, and Vodou, with adherents that crossed ethnic lines. Among Spanish colonists, the religio-philosophical system of Espiritismo became an alternative for Catholics who were becoming increasingly alienated from the institutional Catholic Church.

Research on these religious traditions varies greatly, with Santería and Vodou sharing the greatest body of scholarship. A fundamental aspect of the development of these religious traditions is their African roots, which are central for understanding their transformation into creole traditions in the Americas.
Vodou and the Struggle for Survival

Vodou posits a dynamic and organic view of reality, in which all events and conditions, whether natural, spiritual, or social, are believed to be animated by spiritual forces. While recognizing a Supreme God called Grand Mèt or Bon Dieu (also Bondyè), Vodou centers on the lwa or spirits that are the active agents Grand Mèt has placed in charge of the ongoing operation of the world. Collectively, they are the repository of the invisible power or energy that animates the world. All natural, social, and human phenomena, conditions, qualities, and activities are in some way expressions of their power and character.

A lwa should really be considered a family of spirits or a collectivity of various emanations or aspects of the same spirit. The Gedes (headed by Bawon Samdi), for example, is a family of spirits associated with the dead. The family of Ezili represents various aspects of womanhood, sexuality, or femininity: Ezili Dantò manifests the persona of protective mother; Ezili Freda embodies a flirtatious female sexuality; Ezili Je-Rouge exemplifies female anger or rage; Grann Ezili takes on the persona of an elderly woman; and Ti-Jean Dantò is an aspect of Ezili Dantò associated with trickery. Legba, the spirit of transition, who guards and opens gates, doors, and crossroads, as well as the path between the human and the spirit worlds, appears as Papa Legba, Atibon Legba, and Mèt Kalfou. The Ogou family is associated with the exercise of power; thus war, iron, and technology come under its control. The peasant lwa, Azaka (Kouzin Zaka, Papa Zaka) is lord of subsistence agriculture and a symbol of family. These and many other lwa are at the center of the Vodou cult. Furthermore, the integrative impulse of Vodou has led also
to a fusion of the personalities of the lwa with their counterparts in Catholic hagiography, creating additional personae for the lwa.

Ceremonies and rituals are probably the most vital aspects of Vodou through which humans align themselves with the lwa whose power and energy are responsible for the events and activities of our world. This alignment takes place most forcefully through initiations ceremonies, ceremonies honoring the lwa, and healing ceremonies.

Initiation ceremonies cement and develop the individual relationship with the Vodou community and with the lwa. Vodouisants (adherents of Vodou) undergo a series of initiatory rites that progressively deepen their relationship with the lwa and provide them with the knowledge (konesans) of the working of the world of the spirits. Initiation ceremonies usually involve a ritual cleansing of the head (lav têt) to strengthen and prepare it to receive the spirit of the lwa, a period of ritual and physical isolation (kuche) during which the initiate undergoes ceremonial death and rebirth, and investment or seating of one's governing lwa (met têt) in one's head. Through these ceremonies, vodouisants assume the responsibility to honor and serve the lwa and secure the privilege of calling upon the lwa to assist them with life's challenges.

Vodouisants hold a numbers of ceremonies, collectively called services, in which they honor and feed the lwa and draw on their power to strengthen the community and its members to deal with their life circumstances. These services are convened on various occasions: on feast days of Catholic saints identified with corresponding lwa; when demanded by individual lwa during possessions or in dreams; according to family traditions of honoring and feeding its lwa and ancestors at certain times; and as expressions of gratitude to a lwa for their assistance in providing healing or some other good fortune. The services are convened in the sacred space of the ounfo (temple) called the peristil. At the center of the peristil is the poto-mitan, the center post, which is the symbolic nexus of sky, earth, and the underworld and the conduit through which the lwa enter the peristil to the take possession or “ride their horses.” The high points of services are the manjè-lwa and the dansè-lwa. The manjè-lwa refers to the sacrificing of animals and the offering of the blood and portion of their carcasses, as well as other foods, as gifts to the lwa. During dansè-lwa, vodouisants dance to the drums’ rhythms and sing songs of each lwa honored in the ounfo. During the playing of their rhythms, the lwa usually arrive to mount one or more of their “horses” (usually persons in whose head they have been seated during initiation). The possessing lwa temporarily displace the personality and consciousness of the persons who
serve as their horses and use their bodies to communicate with the community. The possessed exhibit the mannerisms associated with the possessing lwa, speaking in their characteristic manner and dancing with their characteristic movements. Because of the volatile temperament of many lwa, the oun gan or manbo (priest or priestess) controls and regulates their coming and going with the ason, the ritual rattle that is the symbol of the priest’s or priestess’s power.

The various healing rites of Vodou address physical and psychological maladies, problems with human relationships, issues of economic hardships, and all kinds of misfortune. Healing takes place in the context of individual consultation with Vodou priests (oungans or manbos) known for their ability to channel the power of the lwa to solve human problems. Healing rituals include diagnostic readings (usually using playing cards), ritual baths, various offerings to the lwa, the preparation and ingestion of various herbal concoctions, and the preparation of charms and protective packets (called wangas and gardes). The underside of Vodou is also populated with rituals, in which practitioners of sorcery known as bokos deploy supernatural forces to harm or heal.

Though its basic cosmology and orientations of Vodou are West African at its core, Vodou has woven a tapestry that includes Taino, Catholic, Masonic, and other elements. While Africans from numerous ethnic groups were represented among the enslaved in Haiti, religious elements from the Fon/Dahomey, the Yoruba, and the Kongolese came to dominate in Vodou. Most of the major spirits or lwa, a number of rituals and rituals implements (e.g., govi, ason, drums), and much of Vodou’s vocabulary, including the word “vodou” (meaning spirit, invisible force, mystery) have their origin in the Fon/Yoruba religious system. The Kongolese (and the Angolans) also contributed a number of lwa, mostly of the petwo (“hot” or “fiery”) variety, ancestor veneration, the cult of the dead, various charms or gardes, and the practice of sorcery to the Vodou ethos. Though the Tainos did not survive colonialism as a distinct ethnic group, traces of their culture survive in world of Vodou. For example, scholars have traced Azaka, the beloved peasant lwa of agriculture, the vèvès as symbolic representations of the lwa, the use of sacred stones as repositories of the power of the lwa, the use of the ason as the sacred symbol of the priest’s power, and the belief in zombies or the living dead to Taino origins. The Catholic influence on Vodou is extensive, but the most readily observable elements are the identification of Vodou spirits with Catholic saints. For example, the Virgin Mary is regarded as a manifestation of Ezili, St. Jacques as Ogou, and St. Patrick as Dambala. On Vodou altars
pictures and figures of Catholic saints often represent the lwa. In addition, Vodou services honoring the various lwa generally follow the Catholic ritual calendar, and Vodou ceremonies have adopted the lighting of candles, the use of holy water, the singing of hymns, the use of Latin words in the ritual language, and the recitation of Christian prayers and litany of the saints.46 Another significant influence on the formation of Vodou is the Freemason secret society. Vodu appropriated the masonic title “Gran Mèt” or “Grand Master” to refer to the Supreme Being and the masonic handshakes and secret passwords as a form of ritual greetings. The most dramatic appropriation of masonic symbols is probably the black outfit and top hat associated with the persona of the lwa of the cemetery, Bawon Samdi.47

Vodou may thus be regarded as a form of cultural bricolage constructed from the broken pieces of Haitian history and society. For the masses of Haitians, it has become the only coherent system that provides them with a sense of themselves in the world. But this is not a static system that has remained frozen since its construction. It is remade and modified according the exigencies of the times. That is why Donald Cosentino, editor of Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou, ascribes to Vodou an aesthetic that, like jazz, is “improvisational, never ‘finished.’”48 This “improv” has continued throughout a history of repression and resistance.

The first Africans began arriving in Hispaniola (as the Spanish called the whole island) in the early 1500s. Since the Spanish did not develop large-scale plantations on the island, their numbers remained relatively few until the western third of the island was ceded to France in 1697. During the next century, France made St. Domingue (Haiti) the most profitable sugar producer in the world. In the process, it secured the services of approximately 864,000 African slaves.49 The harsh realities of plantation life are abundantly demonstrated by the fact that slaves lived an average of seven to ten years under the rigors of the system.50 Though the French brought more than 860,000 Africans to the colony in the hundred years they ruled it, at the time of the Haitian Revolution, fewer than 500,000 were in the colony, an estimated two-thirds of whom were African born.51 These statistics reveal that colonial Haiti was a virtual death camp for its huge African population.

Equally damaging to the African population were assaults on its cultural identity. Africans were subjected to concerted attempts to rid them of any vestige of their Africanness and to remake them into docile, compliant cogs in the wheel of the colonial machinery. To this end, the code noir (black code), which boasted a humane face allegedly for the protection of slaves’ rights, demanded that all slaves be converted to and instructed in Catholi-
cism. It further prohibited all religious practices except Catholicism. When African culture, especially religion, managed to rear its head, it was relentlessly suppressed and denigrated as full of superstitions, idolatry, and sorcery. Constant fear of slave uprisings led to the outlawing of slave gatherings, drumming, and dancing, and infractions led to arrests, fines, and corporal punishment.

Despite the repressive nature of the plantation society, Africans nurtured the desire for both physical and cultural freedom. To this end, they employed whatever means were available to them to preserve and perpetuate their sense of self. Ignoring the interdiction and condemnation of their religious practices, they sneaked into the woods in the middle of the night to perform their rituals and dances. These gatherings not only preserved African religious traditions and cultural identity but also served to establish a communal bond among people with diverse backgrounds. Even when they were inducted into Catholicism through forced baptism and indoctrinated in segregated parishes, the slaves soon learned to pursue their African religious practice within the ambit of Catholicism, especially through the association of the Catholic saints with \textit{lwa} and the invoking of their powers according to their African religious outlook. As Cosentino suggests, the real conversion was not of the Africans to Catholicism but of elements of Catholicism to buttress African religiosity.\footnote{52}

Another means of resistance was to abscond and join with others to form maroon communities in the interior of the island, which was mostly inaccessible to the European authorities. Maroon communities were a constant threat to the stability of colonial government and the plantation system. These communities often served as bases and provided the leadership for rebellions and other forms of resistance against slavery. In the second half of the 1700s, the most famed maroon leader, François MacKandal, generated great fear among the slave masters and the colonial authorities, because of his reputation as a sorcerer who concocted potent magic potion and his ability as a charismatic leader who inspired rebellion among the slaves.\footnote{53}

Both maroon communities and Vodou were pivotal in the outbreak of the Haitian Revolution. Dutty Boukman, the initial leader of the revolution, was both a maroon leader and a Vodou priest. He and Cécile Fatiman, an elderly priestess, presided at the \textit{petwo} ceremony at “Bois-Caiman” that served as a catalyst for the revolution in August 1791. According to tradition, the elder priestess, possessed by \textit{Ezili Kawoulo}, \textit{lwa} of lightning and thunder, sacrificed a pig and presented the blood to all those assembled while Boukman enjoined them to pledge to resist slavery to the point of death.\footnote{54} The spirit
of resistance that Vodou embodied burst forth in a wave of violent activities that produced the most successful slave rebellion in the historical records of humankind.

In spite of Vodou's pivotal contribution to the revolution, it found itself subjected to repression and suppression by the political leadership that emerged from the revolution. Motivated by a desire to rid Haiti of its reputation for primitiveness and superstition and by the fear of the "revolutionary potential of the Vodou ceremonies," which could not be controlled institutionally, Toussaint L'Ouverture, Jean Jacques Dessalines, Alexandre Pétion, and Henri Christophe, who were leaders in Haitian Revolution and who served as the first five heads of state of independent Haiti, all embraced Catholicism as the national religion and sought to suppress Vodou in order to gain international recognition and respectability. While President Jean-Pierre Boyer (1818-1843) paid little attention to Vodou in the early years of his rule, his penal code, enacted in 1835, named Vodou among the superstitions that were illegal. Vodou, however, was too deeply entrenched to be uprooted.

The Vatican's refusal to acknowledge Haitian independence and to send priests to fill the parishes left vacant by priests who died in the revolution or who fled the country reduced the influence of the Catholic Church to an all-time low. In this atmosphere, Vodou thrived among the Haitian populace, though most people openly professed to be Catholic. Ironically, the policies of Haitian political leaders in the early 1800s contributed to the entrenchment of Vodou in the rural areas. Dessalines's "militarized agriculture," forced labor aimed at reviving the devastated agricultural economy; Petion's land grants to soldiers; and Boyer's 1826 rural code, which restored to mulattoes lands lost during the revolution drove many into deep rural areas, where they eked out a marginal subsistence from the land but were relatively free to engage in and develop their practice of Vodou.

During the presidency of Faustin Soulouque (1847-1860), a Vodou devotee, Vodou enjoyed a reprieve from official repression. After the overthrow of Soulouque, in 1860, the new president, Fabre Nicolas Geffrard, and the Vatican were able to resolve the conflicts between the state and the Church, thus opening the way to a renewal of the influence of the Catholic Church on the life of the nation. In tandem, the Church and the state carried out repeated campaigns aimed at stamping out the religious superstitions and political threats of Vodou. Concerted campaigns were carried out in 1864, 1896, and 1912. During the U.S. occupation from 1915 to 1935 and shortly thereafter (1940-1941), Vodou was again the object of repressive measures. In response
to the corvée, a forced-labor system employed by the U.S. Marines for a public infrastructure building program, the peasantry, under the leadership of Charlemagne Peralte, rose up in a revolt inspired by the spirit of resistance in Vodou. Since the Marines associated the rebels with Vodou, their campaign against the uprising was in a sense a campaign against the practice of Vodou. In the aftermath of the U.S. occupation, the Haitian social, religious, and political elite joined together in yet another effort to dislodge Vodou from Haitian peasant life.58

Beginning in the 1920s, some Haitian intellectuals of the noirist (black consciousness) movement began to advocate a reappraisal of Vodou, contending that it represented the authentic culture of the masses and should be made the basis of Haitian nationalism. Eventually, in 1946, a noirist, Dumarsais Estimé, became president of Haiti, succeeding Élie Lescot, who was the architect of the 1940 to 1941 campaign against Vodou. Under Estimé, Vodou was no longer subject to political suppression and was celebrated as the culture of the Haitian people. However, staged Vodou ceremonies with chants and dances for the entertainment of tourists and the urban elite tended to “folklorize” the religion.

François Duvalier, a member of the noirist movement, was elected president of Haiti in 1957, and after changing the Haitian constitution to make himself president for life, his dictatorial rule lasted until his death in 1971, after which he was succeeded by his son, Jean Claude Duvalier. While Duvalier was an advocate of Haitian nationalism based on the culture of the black masses, he seemed most interested in coopting and controlling Vodou as he did the army and the Catholic Church. He portrayed himself as the embodiment of Vodou powers to instill fear in the peasant class and enlisted numerous Vodou priests into his vast network of secret police organization, called the Tonton Macoutes, who used terror to quell the smallest inkling of opposition to the Duvalier regime.59 When Jean-Claude Duvalier was exiled in 1986, a wave of terror was unleashed against Vodou in general and Vodou priests in particular. As part of the dechoukaj (uprooting), the attempt to rid Haiti of all those believed to be complicit in the horrors of the dictatorship of the Duvaliers, mobs murdered numerous Vodou priests and destroyed Vodou temples, sacred implements, and symbols.60

Surviving the dechoukaj, Vodou has once again gained recognition as an essential component of Haitian culture. Freedom of religion enshrined in the new Haitian constitution of 1987 and the support of Father Jean-Bertrand
Aristide, elected president in 1990, have ensured the right of vodouisants to practice their religion without political and religious reprisal. Haitian politics remains volatile, as exemplified by the political career of Aristide, who was overthrown and exiled in 1991, returned to power between 1994 and 1996, was re-elected in 2001, and served till 2004, when he was forced into exile again. However, Vodou continues to enjoy official religious freedom and some Vodou priests have been granted the rights to perform marriage ceremonies and the privilege to officiate at civic and state ceremonies. Vodou has thus traveled the long road from the clandestine, nocturnal meetings of African slaves on the plantations and from the cloistered meetings of their maroon counterparts in their interior hideouts, through waves of suppressions, campaigns of terror, and ideological assaults, to a more accepted, if insecure, existence in Haitian society. Though the continued fragility of Haitian political, economic, and social life makes the return of terror a constant threat, for the moment Vodou is not only accorded the right of religious freedom but is celebrated for its contribution to Haitian culture, particularly in music and the visual arts.

Espiritismo

Though not exactly a religion per se, Espiritismo is one of the most distinctive dimensions of Caribbean religion. Espiritismo is best described as a religious metaphysics or worldview. The story of Espiritismo and its arrival in the Americas is a fascinating tale of the belief systems of an elite, educated in Europe, that transformed the religious landscape of the population as a whole. Espiritistas believe that there is a spirit world that interacts with the material world. Spirits exist in a hierarchy: the lower spirits remain attached to the material world, are ignorant, and try to do harm to human beings; the highest level of spirits, called *espiritus de luz* (spirits of light), protect humanity through their higher state of spiritual perfection. Espiritismo embraces a dualistic model of humanity in which people consist of a body and spirit, though one’s essence is located in one’s spirit. After death, one moves on to another plane, yet one’s spirits still have the ability to develop both morally and spiritually. Espiritistas also believe in reincarnation and the notion that actions in one’s past lives shape one’s present one. Spirits also have the ability to control human beings, sometimes in a very negative fashion. The material world in which humans live has a direct relationship with the spiritual plane. Spirits interact, communicate, and influence people. Caribbean Espiritismo has its roots in France, where the writings of a French educated...