

THE JOURNEY OF VODOU FROM HAITI TO NEW ORLEANS: CATHOLICISM,
SLAVERY, THE HAITIAN REVOLUTION IN SAINT- DOMINGUE,
AND IT'S TRANSITION TO NEW ORLEANS IN THE NEW WORLD

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by

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THE JOURNEY OF VODOU FROM HAITI TO NEW ORLEANS: CATHOLICISM,
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Abstract

In my thesis, I am going to delve into the origin of the religion we call Vodou, its influences, and its migration from Haiti to New Orleans from the 1700's to the early 1800's with a small focus on the current state of Vodou in New Orleans. I will start with referencing West Africa, and the religion that was brought from West Africa, and combined with Catholicism in order to form Vodou. From there I will discuss the effect a high Catholic population, slavery, and the Haitian Revolution had on the creation of Vodou. I also plan to discuss how Vodou has changed with the change of the state of Catholicism, and slavery in New Orleans. As well as pointing out how Vodou has affected the formation of New Orleans culture, politics, and society.

Introduction

The term Vodou is derived from the word Vodun which means “spirit/god” in the Fon language spoken by the Fon people of West Africa, and brought to Haiti around the sixteenth century. Vodun is not only a word, but also a religion that preceded Vodou and was practiced by the Fon people. The Fon were an official subject of the Yoruba people of Oyo who would raid the Fon villages in order to supply the slave trade they had with the French and Spanish empires. With the transplantation of the Fon people their religion, and culture were also spread to many other places including Saint Dominique or Haiti. Thus the formation of the Vodou, we have come to know, began. Vodou embodies the spirit of a culture. It is a way of life. It allows one to become a god instead of just being in contact with a god. Vodou was a quintessential part of the success of the Haitian revolution, and to the success of the black community in many areas in the United States.

In this text I will be using Vodun to refer to the original religion that originated out of West Africa before the transition to Haiti. Vodou will be used to refer to the byproduct of the syncing of Vodun and the African culture with a foreign culture and religion. This article will examine three aspects of Vodou: Its relationship with Catholicism, the effects of slavery and the Haitian Revolution on Vodou, and its migration to New Orleans. I will also go into detail about Vodou’s transformation once it reached New Orleans and how it enriched the community, allowing the city and its culture to flourish. Today, Vodou is understood by popular culture, expressed by Hollywood’s portrayals, as a mythical religion that

predominantly casts spells, creates potions, and deals with zombies. Hollywood, and now a large portion of society just group Vodou in with Wicca, the religious belief of witchcraft that is based on harmony with nature and all aspects of the god and goddess divinity, Satanism, a religion with the belief that Satan is an actual deity to revere and worship, as the occult. Which is just another way of identifying them as unknown. One of my main goals for this thesis is to demystify Vodou, and to share enough knowledge about it to make it seem less apart of the occult, and more of a valid religion.

What is Vodou, and how does it Work?

To begin I will define Vodou, similarly to the way Laguerre, the



anthropologist and author of *Voodoo and Politics in Haiti*¹, did as the folk religion created by a merge of indigenous African religions, specifically from the Fon, Yoruba, and Ewe people of West

Africa, and its cultural assimilation and syncretism with a foreign culture. In order to demystify Vodou I feel it is necessary to explain how Vodouist practice their religion with rituals and ceremonies. To clarify there are many rituals, and all of the rites differ, but I will be discussing the public Vodou rituals that are hosted by a houngan or a mambo, the Vodou priest or priestess, the point of a Vodou ritual is to invoke a lwa, a spirit or god, to come down, and possess one of them to

¹ Laguerre, Michel S. Voodoo and Politics in Haiti. N.p.: Macmillan, 1989. Print.

help the people. There are many lwa, and all of them represent different aspects of life. In the beginning of these ceremonies the congregation or Sosyete will commence the *Priye Ginen*, which is a prayer that is sung in to open the ceremony, and welcome the lwa. Also it is important to note that people in the congregation bring libations, and foods that appeal to the certain lwa that they are trying to communicate with.

Depending on who they are trying to communicate with or what they are requesting from the lwa and animal sacrifice may be necessary. One of the most important lwa that has to be sung to in any Vodou ceremony in order to get in contact with all of the other lwas is Papa Legba. Papa Legba is a lwa that is the gate-keeper between the humans and the lwa. Thus if you do not contact Papa Legba no other contact can be made. This is the prayer used to call to Legba to allow him to open the gates:

“Papa Legba ouvri bariè pou mouin, Ago-è. Atibon Legba ouvri bariè pou moin Ouvri bariè pou moin papa pou moin pasè, Lèm rètounin ma rèmèsi loa io. [Papa Legba, open the gate for me, Ago-è. Atibon Legba, open the gate for me. Open the gate for me, papa, so that I may enter the temple. On my way back, I shall thank you for this favor.]”²

This prayer invokes Papa Legba to open the gates and allow communication between the lwa and the humans. It is very necessary to make the lwa feel welcome in the atmosphere in order to have them carry out your

² Laguerre, Michel S. "Living Spirits in the Haitian Environment." Voodoo Heritage. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications, 1980. 48. Print.

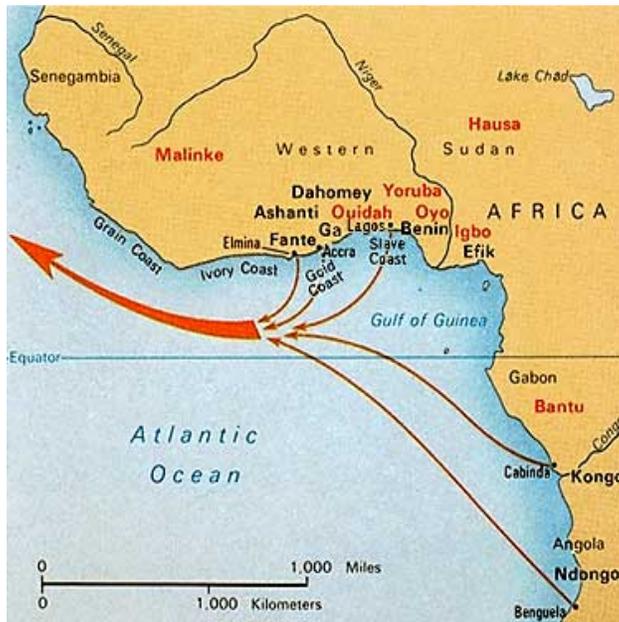
request even though it is said that Papa Legba never denies a request from him to open his gates. After the gates are open the drummers start beating their drums, and the sosyete begin to sing and dance to welcome the lwas they are trying to communicate with to the ceremony. The lwa come down and are able to help the sosyete by prophesizing, healing, cleansing, and blessing the sosyete. The sosyete receives food during the ceremony, but they also continue to sing and dance for each lwa that has possessed one of the members. This kind of a ceremony is held many times throughout the year by a houngan or mambo to solve problems or to celebrate the lwa. The times of the Vodou ceremonies are planned on the dates of the feast for the Catholic saint that is interchangeable with the African lwa the congregation wants to contact.

Roots

Vodun is a religion that is practiced most regularly by the people of Western Africa but Vodou was created in Haiti with the three aforementioned circumstances.

Vodun originated out of Dahomey which would now consist of today's

Togo, Benin and Nigeria. During the earlier centuries there is very little



documentation on the interaction between Islam, and Africa except for a few accounts written by geographers al- Bakri and Ibn

Battuta. Abū 'Ubayd al-Bakrī was an Islamic geographer, and historian, who lived in the 11th century, He wrote *Book of*

Highways and of Kingdoms which

details the people, culture, and often time the political atmosphere of the many areas including regions from Asia, Africa, The Middle East, and many other places. He took his accounts from many merchants, geographers, and explorers.

On the other hand Ibn Battuta was a through and through explorer. Ibn Battuta was a 14th century explorer and geographer that started his journey with a desire to go on a *Hajj*, a Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca, but his journey continued for 29 years. He is regarded by many as the greatest traveler of all time. He traveled to many places including North Africa, the Horn of Africa, West Africa, Eastern Europe, the Middle East, South Asia, Central Asia, Southeast Asia and China.

The Morrocan Sultan requested Ibn Battuta to dictate the tales of his travels to a scribe, and he did which resulted in his book "*Rihl- My Travels*". Also Ibn Battuta stated that he only traveled to countries that had Muslim embassies within them

so possibly there was an established Muslim community before the 14th century.

However, if there was some kind of Muslim embassy in West Africa during that time it was not documented, and cannot be verified. However, our first true insight into the growing relationship of Islam, and Africa is from the 14th century when “The Malian king Mansa Musa brought back from a pilgrimage to Mecca the architect al-Sahili, who is often credited with the creation of the Sudano-Sahelian building style. Musa's brother, Mansa Suleyman, followed his path and encouraged the building of mosques, as well as the development of Islamic learning.”³

So although I will be discussing the heavy influence that Catholicism had on the formation of Vodou I also think that it is very important to note the huge impact of Islam on the religion of Vodun before it reached Haiti. In fact there is a group called the Gnawa that also has its origins in West Africa that practices rituals that are similar to Vodou, however, with Islam references and origins “with Islamized “Iwas”, trances, dances, animal sacrifice, etc., and even Metraux, a renowned Haitian gives reference to their Senegal Iwas that are saluted with salam.” With that being said I would like to go into the details of how Vodou became what it is with its Catholic influences in Haiti. However, Catholicism had two totally different effects on the religion of Vodou within Haiti, and within New

³ Department of Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas. "Trade and the Spread of Islam in Africa". In Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000–. http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/tsis/hd_tsis.htm (October 2001)

Orleans. So in order to properly determine the effects that Catholicism had in Haitian and New Orleans Vodou I will give you the breakdown of Catholicism within the confines of the two different Vodou groups separately to ensure the concept is fully grasped.

Catholicism in Haiti:

The first Africans most likely began to arrive on the island, then Hispaniola, around 1512. This is important because the island was under Spain's control who had missionaries, and Catholic priests travel with them wherever they went. Which is not surprising seeing as the Spanish conquistadors infamous goals were the three G's: Gold, God, and Glory. As a result of Europe's discovery of the New World, Hispaniola, Rome decided to take this as a challenge from God to convert the people of the New World to Catholicism. So the Roman church asked for the youth within the church to become missionaries, and share their faith with the people of the New World. So many young people responded to the call to service that in 1511 Pope Julian II had three bishoprics on the island, and by 1547 Clement VII had made Santo Domingo the seat of ecclesiastical power in the West Indies. However, the tropical heat, disease, and environmental adjustment difficulties all made it hard on the missionaries to spread Catholicism. As well as the long distances that were either walked or rode on horseback in order to reach the different settlements. Also. During this time French was fighting to take control of the colony, in order to obtain the gold that was found in the island, which they partially achieved when they were able to get control of the Western part of the island, which was Santo Domingo. After the signing of the

Treaty of Ryswick on September 20th, 1697 the French gained full control of Santo Domingo which they renamed as Saint-Domingue conversion of the people of the New World. However, the beginning of the creolization of African, French, and Spanish religions had already begun.

Although the zealous conversion did not continue there were still churches, and priests who lived in the settlements kept watch on the Frenchmen, and their treatment of their workers. One of the biggest factors that turned the Africans to the Catholic Church, besides the church being somewhat a place of solace was the Code Noir. The Code Noir was a decree originally passed by France's King Louis XIV in 1685 in Paris that "regulated the social, political, and religious life of all the French colonies throughout the world"⁴. Articles 2 and 6 of the Code Noir required that every enslaved person had to be baptized and that each enslaved person's acceptance had to be preceded by an instruction of the Catholic, Apostolic, and Roman faith. There was also the requirement that enslaved people be allowed to participate in the religious ceremonies, and holidays recognized by the Catholic Church in Article six:

Article VI. "We enjoin all our subjects, of whatever religion and social status they may be, to observe Sundays and the holidays that are observed by our subjects of the Roman, Catholic, and Apostolic Faith. We forbid them to work, nor make their slaves work, on said days, from midnight until the following midnight. They

⁴ Desmangles, Leslie Gâerald. The Faces Of The Gods : Vodou And Roman Catholicism In Haiti. Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1992. eBook Collection (EBSCOhost). Web. 1 Nov. 2015.

shall neither cultivate the earth, manufacture sugar, nor perform any other work, at the risk of a fine and an arbitrary punishment against the masters, and of confiscation by our officers of as much sugar worked by said slaves before being caught.⁵

This gave the Africans a notable amount of time away from the grueling work of plantation work, and the other work that they were tasked with doing. Instead they attended Mass and the catechism that allowed them to adopt the principles of the Catholic Church, but it also gave them a place to secretly practice their own religions. Also the Code Noir allowed the affranchis, free mulattoes born to interracial French and African couples, the same rights, and ownership of properties as the French. The affranchis could hold trials, even against the French, travel freely, and become slave holders. The church also assisted the affranchis in getting an education from the French Universities. Once the free people of color returned from the French Universities with an education many started working towards equality between the Africans, and the French.

Even though the Africans had been required to be put through the baptism and Catholic teaching they still very much practiced their own tribal religion including Vodun which is now making its transition to Vodou with the syncing of Vodun ,and the Catholic Church. The practice of their Vodou was not done overtly in public. Although at this point Vodou ceremonies took place at night in order to keep their rituals secret from the French. The transplantation of an

⁵ Ekberg, Carl J., Grady W. Kilman, and Pierre Lebeau. *Code Noir: The Colonial Slave Laws of French Mid-America*. Naperville, IL: Center for French Colonial Studies, 2005. Print.

African religion into the social and religious climate that existed in Saint-Dominique during the 16th century was able to build a platform from which Vodun could be adapted, and Vodou could be formed. Now it is time to delve into how the influence of the Catholic Church affected the practices of Vodou.

Vodou practices that were borrowed from Catholicism

An example of the coexistence of the two religions is the use of hymns. Songs or hymns are one of the most important aspects of Vodou to a Vodouist, because it is their way to get in contact with the lwas, spirits or gods, but also their way to become god by way of possession. One of the most important public prayers in Vodou is the litany Djo or Priye Ginan (prayer for Guinea). The Priye Ginan is sung to open or start a ceremony for all important ceremonies. It is also known as the Prayer for Africa, and is very powerful in the Vodou community. The litany consists of five sections, and during the first section of litany Djo the Catholic prayers are sung by a houngan, Vodou priest. The priest has to either be well versed in the Catholic liturgy or be an actual Catholic priest. The Catholic prayers must be sung in French, and few prayers that are commonly used are the Hail Mary, Our Father, and the Creed although many more are used as well. After this section, the Priye Djo, is done they continue with the actual Vodou ceremony and call upon the lwa, spirits or god, for which the ceremony was hosted. The church was used as a tool for colonization, maintenance of the slave plantation economy, and a way to spread Catholicism and/or Christianity. However, Catholicism was just another framework in which the enslaved people were able to practice their own African religions. The Africans would often be

caught stealing objects from the church, and using it in their own religious rituals. They also began to use baptism as a purification ritual, and would go to the church asking the priest to baptize them if they became ill.

Also, within Catholicism there was a combination of the saints and lwas, spirits, which are used in Vodou. As a matter of fact if you look at each Catholic Saint, and all of the Vodou spirits carefully you are able to find a corresponding lwa for almost every saint you see within the spirits. Also, Haitian Vodou also had a strong impact on Catholicism with the presence of Vodou in Haiti the African people were able to impart their own spirits into the confines of Catholicism by way of transforming certain African lwa into Saints that did not exist prior to the introduction of the Africans to Catholicism. The introduction of Catholicism into Slave/African spaces allowed them to modify it in a way that they were also able to keep and preserve traditional religious culture during slavery. Within the boundaries of Catholicism the slaves had a safe haven and even became an advocate for the emancipation and the dignity of African lives.

Catholicism in New Orleans Vodou

In New Orleans it is important to note that the African, and Haitian people who were moved to the New World and enticed to learn the religion of their captors used the religion as a platform to practice their own religion, as the Africans in Haiti did as well. They were able to compare the religion that was being introduced to them to their own religion, and syncretize them in a way that brought about Louisiana Vodou. Another thing that is important to note about New Orleans or Louisiana Vodou is that it is not only a result of the Vodou that

was brought from Haiti The Vodou in New Orleans took a different turn from the Vodou in Haiti because of the direct migration of many enslaved people to New Orleans directly from West Africa.

However, despite the persistence to stomp out the “evil heathen” religions of Africa that existed within communities of color the French/European/white colonists were never able to fully extinguish the practice of Vodou. Some of the reasons of this may be because; Louisiana was not a well-formed colony yet which allowed for the formation and growth of the African community.

Also the Embargo Act of 1808 ended the importation of enslaved people from outside North America to Louisiana. So the local colonists and authority figures promoted the growth of the enslaved population by prohibiting, by law, the separation of families. Parents were sold together with their children if they were less than fourteen years of age. The intense oppressive state of slavery in New Orleans, as well as the high mortality rate united the Africans and Haitians, which allowed for their community like atmosphere. Without the division in the enslaved community, and in addition to the community formed by the bonding through the difficulties of slavery, a “coherent, functional, well integrated, autonomous, and self-confident slave community”⁶ was formed. “As a result African culture and spirituality did not die out, but rather thrived in French Creole culture.”⁷

⁶ Murphy, Joseph M.. “Haitian Vodou”. Creole Religions of the Caribbean: An Introduction from Vodou and Santeria to Obeah and Espiritismo. NYU Press, 2011. 116–154. Web...

⁷ Murphy, Joseph M.. “Haitian Vodou”. Creole Religions of the Caribbean: An Introduction from

This created an environment similar to the lakou culture that formed in Haiti after the Haitian Revolution, which allowed for close-knit family like group to form. This environment allowed for the spread, and growth of not only religion, but the spread of culture and music as well. As a matter of fact although it exceeds the scope of this article, an important fact to note is how instrumental Vodou was in the creation of Louisiana culture. In fact one of the most infamous Vodou queens, besides Marie Laveau, Lala, her real name was Laura Hunter, raised Jelly Roll Morton who was an American ragtime and early jazz pianist, bandleader and composer who started his career in New Orleans, Louisiana. Also, In the late 1970s Irma Thomas, a famous New Orleans singer, recorded a song titled "Princess Lala"- that was based on Lala, with some relatively accurate Vodou practices described in the lyrics. These ladies had a huge influence on society in New Orleans, and Marie Laveau is still very well known to this day. The roots of Vodou are deep in New Orleans, and although it has been commercialized, and mythicized the true Vodou still exists in New Orleans.

Vodou and Slavery

The existence of slavery and/or some kind of oppression can be found in each city Vodou is formed within. Slavery was essential to the creation of Vodou because it forced for the union of the different tribes that were taken from Africa as well as for the syncretization of the two different cultures and religions that produced Vodou to occur. In the beginning of this text I talked about the origins of

Vodou and Santeria to Obeah and Espiritismo.

Vodun in West Africa with the Fon people ,who had a patronage to the Yoruba people of Oyo who would raid the villages of the Fon people, and take villagers to give to the French and Spanish as enslaved people. The Fon people eventually conglomerated and created the empire of Dahomey to refute the people of Yoruba. After the Fon people built their empire they were eventually strong enough to pillage other villages, and take their villagers to sell to the French and Spanish as enslaved Peoples.

The reason I am discussing these events is to demonstrate how much these two tribes history fostered a hatred for one another not to even mention that the Creole colonist Mederic Moreau de Saint-Mery who lived in Saint Dominique documented the different tribes that he noticed and noted that he saw Senegalese, Wolofs, Foulbe, Bambara, Quiambas, Aradas, Minas, Caplaus, Fons, Maho, Nago, Mayomber, Mondongues, Angolese, and many other tribes present in the plantations. With this many different tribes, and cultures it would have to take something incredibly strong to force them to have to unite and the horrible conditions of slavery did just that. However, although slavery was a reason for the union of the various tribes of enslaved Africans brought to Haiti the enslaved people used slavery as a tool to further their culture, and agenda. . Pierre de Vassierre, a French paleographer and historian who took up residence in Saint Domingue in the 17th and 18th century, described the Africans participating in communal hoeing and timing the strike of their hoes to the rhythm of African songs. The African culture could also still be seen in the Africans' way of life: the preparation of their food, their burial rites and rituals, their outlook on

life and death, which might have also been influenced by their experience with the cruel conditions of slavery, and their religious beliefs.⁸

Saint-Domingue- French slavery

There were around 500,000 enslaved people on the island of Saint Domingue, and in order to “control” their enslaved population the French government created the Code Noir, which was mentioned earlier in reference to its Article that demanded that all enslaved people be taught in the ways of the Catholic Faith, and be baptized. However its main purpose was to dictate the enslaved peoples activities, treatment, and punishments. The Code Noir was particularly strict on the practicing of any other religion besides Catholicism. In the first article it bans all Jews from living on the island, and in other articles it details that enslaved people were at risk of corporal punishment if caught gathering together during the day or during the night. So the enslaved people used the institution that their captors put them into to transfer messages, and religious or rebellion meeting times.

There were 3 social classes or groups of “black” people on the island: There were the free “blacks”, the enslaved “blacks”, and the maroons, which are the enslaved people who ran away far into the mountains in Haiti and began to live off of subsistence farming. The free “blacks” included the mulattoes who were half French, and half African with most of the cases consisting of an African

⁸ Vaissière, Pierre De. *Messieurs De Joyeuse: 1560-1615*. Paris: Albin Michel, 1926.

mother and a French father. The mulattoes lived on the fringe of society because even though they were free, allowed to own property, own slaves, have an education, and even travel to France to receive an education if they desired to, as these rights were mandated by the Code Noir.

New Orleans- American slavery

New Orleans was a new, and not fully established colony during the time of the Haitian Revolution when there was a huge influx of Haitian refugees and slaves had to migrate to the New World. The United States had only acquired Louisiana in 1803 which was not nearly enough time to prepare for the influx of refugees that came in 1809 a mere 6 years later. The migration brought around 2,371 whites, 3,102 free people of African descent, and around 3,226 enslaved refugees to the city. This essentially doubled the population of New Orleans at the time leaving sixty three percent of Crescent City, New Orleans, inhabitants black. With such a huge population, and the fragility of this new colony there were cracks in the system of slavery that allowed the African and Vodou culture to flourish.

Also, the United States government was afraid of having a slave insurrection similar to the one that occurred in Haiti, and enacted an Act that prohibited the importation of slaves on March 2nd of 1807 but did not take effect until 1808. The enactment of this law went along with the general movement of the abolishment of slavery, but a huge part of it was also the fear of having what happened in Haiti happen in America. So as a result of the decrease of the transferring of enslaved people into America, legally, and with that the authorities

began to try to increase the population of the enslaved people by keeping the families together and eventually the “better” class of slaveholders followed this rule to keep the families together as it was seen as a cruel form of punishment. Although this was only in certain states, and other slave holders were not punished if they chose to separate the families of the enslaved people the times were changing, the number of abolitionists were growing, and there were more laws protecting the enslaved people’s rights being created the time of slavery were slowly coming to an end.

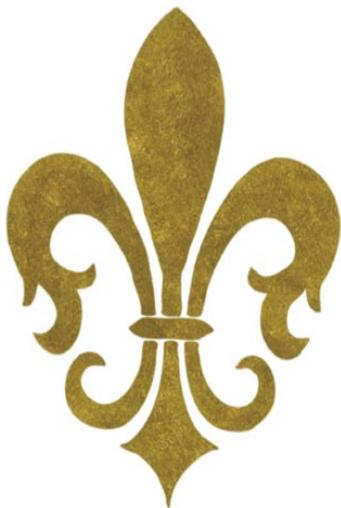
In a number of the states laws were enacted penalizing certain forms of cruelty to slaves; but these were rarely enforceable, owing to the principle, universally held in the slave states, that the testimony of a slave could not be employed as evidence. Local custom was practically the only force mitigating the rigors of the institution. Among the better classes of slaveholders there was a disposition to avoid the separation of slave families, and to grant certain other limited rights to the slaves.⁹

Conditions and details of the slavery that led slaves to rebellion

The conditions of living were extremely harsh on the enslaved Africans they were producing tobacco, manioc, cotton, indigo, and sugar cane, with sugarcane becoming their most popular product. All enslaved Africans, men and women, were to work on the plantation including the

⁹ Colby, Frank Moore, and George Sandeman. "Slaves and the Slave Trade." *Nelson's Encyclopaedia; Everybody's Book of Reference*. New York: Thomas Nelson, 1907. 250-51. Print.

pregnant women. The creation of the indigo was very dangerous to the enslaved Africans as it was easy to be injured dealing with the chemical process that came along with producing the dye, and the production of the sugar cane was incredibly labor intensive which not only forced the need for more workers, but for the enslaved Africans who were already working to put in more hours of work, and to also increase the quota they were forced to have by the end of each day. The only enslaved people who were allowed to do lighter work were the women in their 7th and 8th month of pregnancy, the women who were nursing or taking care of the children, and the elderly, who the plantation owners were obligated to care for by the Code Noir. After the French took over the colony of Haiti in 1625, and the Code Noir was instilled the conditions of slavery or rather the strictness of



slavery was said to have increased quite a bit. One of the articles in the Code Noir dictated that if an enslaved person tried to run away, and become a maroon the first time his ears would be cut of, and branded with *fleur de lys*, which became a symbol of the European, specifically French, monarchy and the Holy Trinity, on one

shoulder. If you have ever been to New Orleans or even watched a Saints football game on television you have seen the *fleur de lys*. It was a brand that symbolized their empire, and marked what was theirs. The second

time a runaway was caught they would cut his hamstring and they would brand him again on the other shoulder with the *fleur de lys*. The third time an enslaved person tried to run away the penalty was death.

The enslaved people were treated as tools and property with the plantation owners having little to no consideration of their well-being only the profit they could bring. The average life expectancy of an enslaved African during this time was around 21 years old because of the harsh conditions they were being put through on a daily basis. A large percentage of the French plantation owners did not adequately feed the enslaved people, despite the fact that their average work day started at 5 A.M. and ended late in the night when it became too dark for them to carry out the production of the crops.

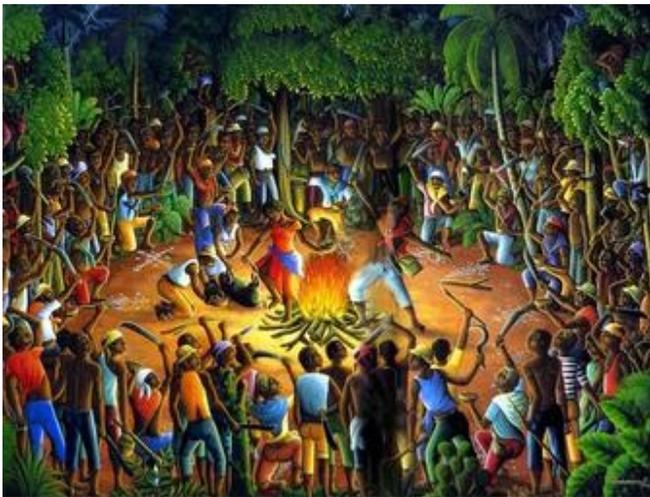
The enslaved people were used for their labor, and then thrown away if they were no longer able to carry out their duty. Many of the enslaved women were custom to a concubinage, whether they agreed to it or not, with the plantation owners who were have said to have been so promiscuous, and lecherous with the enslaved women that the Catholic missionaries, who were sent to Haiti to preach the faith to the enslaved Africans, fought to include a passage into the Code Noir regulating their actions. Also, the Haitian society was rejecting the free “blacks”, and although they were allowed most of the rights as any other citizen there was an obvious distaste for them within the society. The free “blacks” were still living in a society that thrived off of white supremacy, and they knew that their existence in the white society was tolerated at best. They longed for true freedom, and with the start of the French Revolution in 1789 they

got the motivation they needed to start their own revolution.

The Haitian revolution and the migration to the New World

The Haitian Revolution continued on the wave of social liberation after being energized by the new of the French Revolution. Word of the revolution spread like wildfire all throughout the Haitian colony with the calls for “liberty, equality, and fraternity” being demanded in France inspiring and calling many to take action of their own.

One of the people who were inspired was the houngan, Vodou priest, Dutty Boukman, who was enslaved but escaped and became a maroon, with his



large stature and commanding presence, called for a Vodou ceremony to take place in Bois Cayman to address the need for freedom, revolution, and revenge. The actual ceremony took place on the 14th of August

in 1791 with Boukman leading the Vodou rites, and offering a boar as a sacrifice.

He then recited a prayer that perfectly shows the spirit of rebellion that was brewing in Haiti at the time. Bois Cayman was in the north plains of Haiti, and all of the enslaved people from the neighboring plantations were said to be in attendance. Boukman spoke to the enslaved people about liberation from their oppression. He gave them hope with the promise of the support of the lwa. Calling upon the spirits of Africa to free them from their current state he stood in

front of the congregation of people and recited this prayer:

The god who created the sun which gives us light, who rouses the waves and rules the storm, though hidden in the clouds, he watches us. He sees all that the white man does. The god of the white man inspires him with crime, but our god calls upon us to do good works. Our god who is good to us orders us to revenge our wrongs. He will direct our arms and aid us. Throw away the symbol of the god of the whites who has so often caused us to weep, and listen to the voice of liberty, which speaks in the hearts of us all.

This powerful prayer to the lwa inspired the enslaved people; It was no longer just them fighting their oppressors, but the lwa of Africa inside of them as well. Vodou was so important in this role as a catalyst for the up rise of the enslaved people in Haiti because unlike other religions where the God can just be with you or helping you in Vodou the God is inside of you, and takes possession of you. For all intents and purposes you are a God, and if you are a God who can stop you?

Dutty Boukman was killed in the November of 1791, and his head was displayed by the French to the enslaved people on the plantations in hopes of derailing the agenda of the slave rebellion. However, it did quite the opposite only serving as fuel for the fire of the revolution. Many of the French did not believe the enslaved people were capable of carrying out a successful rebellion, and heavily overestimated the capabilities of the French military. At the same time as they underestimated the intelligence of the enslaved people they underestimated

the power of the large population of enslaved people as well. The ratio in Haiti at the time was easily around 20 enslaved persons to 1 French citizen. As they needed a large number of workers for the production of the sugarcane the French imported a large number of enslaved Africans in order to be able to meet the demand of sugarcane. However, this very greed, and overt self-interest is what allowed for the enslaved people to rise up, and rebel without the French being properly prepared to defend themselves.

This prayer started a spark of several rebellions all along the north plains of Haiti. One of these rebellions being the night of fire that took place on August 22nd of 1791. During the night of fire around 50,000 enslaved people came together with machetes and scythes determined to take actions in their own hands and liberate themselves. They killed plantation owners, burned down the houses, barns, and the crops. The fire spread, and as a result of the immensity of the fire Toussaint Louverture, a key player in the Haitian Revolution, was able to see it from his plantation. The power of the rebellion affected him, and he decided to join the rebellion despite his status as a free black man saying. After the night of fire he sent his wife and two children, along with his former master's family, away on boat, and joined the slave rebellion after careful deliberation as a doctor, although he quickly became a general as his military prowess was noticed.

Touissant Louverture, originally François Dominique Toussaint Bréda, born in 1743 was the son of Gaou-Ginou, a man who was rumored to have been the Chief of the Arada tribe from Dahomey, although Louverture gained a lot of

his knowledge from his godfather, an educated enslaved man, Pierre Baptiste Simon. It was said that his father could have been the reason for his advanced knowledge and understanding of militia. It has also been noted that he was able to speak some Aradas. However, he was raised with Pierre Baptiste Simon who taught him how to read, and right in French and Latin, as well as teaching him how to use herbs for healing. When Louverture joined the rebellion the leadership was not strong, and although he was adept at healing, as well as at his position as a doctor, he was aware that if what the rebellion continued as it were it would fail. He began to advise the general Jean Jacques Dessalines telling him that if the troops continued to burn the crops, and fight with just the intention to destroy that the rebellion would not be able to sustain itself or battle the French troops. This advice is what allowed him to be promoted to general, and clear the path for Haitian independence.

In 1802 Napoléon Bonaparte sent 20,000 troops to Haiti to end the revolution, which Louverture fought brilliantly, causing Napoléon to commit another 40,000 before Louverture would surrender. He was promised that he would be allowed to retire and live a civilian life. However he was betrayed, and taken to a prison in the French Alps where he died in 1803. He left a powerful message, before his death, to the French who thought that by betraying and capturing him they had won. He said *"In overthrowing me, you have done no more than cut down the trunk of the tree of the black liberty in St-Domingue-it will*

spring back form the roots, for they are numerous and deep."¹⁰ This statement of Louverture would be proven true when his former general, Jean Jacques Dessalines, would go on to win independence for Haiti officially on January 1, 1804.

The role of Vodou in the revolution, and how it evolved after the independence of Haiti

Although it was well known that Toussaint was a very strict and devout Roman Catholic, and was not an openly avid supporter of Vodou the name that he was called Louverture meaning "the opener of the gate" which could be a reference to Papa Legba who is the gateway keeper. However it could also be the name that the French called him because of his amazing ability to discern the openings in the French army's military strategies and defense. Regardless, Vodou was quintessential to the start of the Haitian Revolution, and it would continue to be a part of the Haitian culture despite the fact that Toussaint tried to suppress the Vodou practice during his time as general. After the independence of Haiti the *nouveaux libres*, the newly free, were each given a land plot that could be shared with a family. The lakou allowed for a community environment to be formed where the families could come together, and for religious purposes worship the lwa together. The lakou made it easy for Vodou to be spread, and grow with the new generation of children that are raised in the lakou watching the

¹⁰ L'Overture, Toussaint. "Toussaint Louverture Historical Society, Inc." *Toussaint Louverture Historical Society, Inc.* N.p., 2001. Web. 21 Nov. 2015.

ritual processions of the community.

As a result of the French control of Louisiana before the Louisiana Purchase in 1803 by the time that America had control of the land Vodou was already a part of the culture. However, when Louisiana territory the president, Thomas Jefferson, attempted to redesign the culture of Louisiana, and integrate the American culture into the newly acquired land. However, within only six years of acquiring Louisiana there was the large migration of Haitian refugees into New Orleans. The mixture of the Haitian Vodou along with the Congo, and Angolese religions that have also been syncretized by the time, and identified as Hoodoo, of the large Haitian migration was a melting pot of culture, rituals, and beliefs.

Conclusion

In conclusion I've found that the very factors that defined, and helped form Vodou are the reasons that the religion has been so misrepresented in the media, and in society. The fact that Vodou originated out of Africa, the practitioners being black, the syncretism with Catholicism, and the empowerment that the serviteurs, the people who practice Vodou, received from the religion. All of these were red flags to the society of Haiti, and New Orleans at the time of introduction. Today it is still misrepresented because of society's unwillingness to acknowledge the relevance and importance of a "heathen" religion. Rather they choose an aspect that is unflattering to the religion, and publicize it. Although, there is evidence that Vodun, or a predecessor of it, has been around at least as long as Christianity has people still seem to believe that Vodou is a quack religion. I wanted to display with my thesis that this religion is very real, and has

historical relevance. This religion was able to create social revolutions, and influence decisions in Haiti, France, and The United States of America. It is such a unique religion, and should be recognized for it's contributions to society rather than it's image that is publicized through media as evil magic.

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