

Voodoo and Politics in Haiti

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First published 1989 by
MACMILLAN PRESS LTD
Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 6XS
and London
Companies and representatives
throughout the world

ISBN 0-333-46852-X

A catalogue record for this book is available
from the British Library.

10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2
04	03	02	01	00	99	98	97	96

Printed in Great Britain by
Antony Rowe Ltd
Chippenham, Wiltshire

VOODOO AND POLITICS IN HAITI

Also by Michel S. Laguerre

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Introduction

This book, which explains the intricate relationship between Voodoo and politics in Haiti from the colonial period to the present, is part of my ongoing research into the functioning of Caribbean political and urban institutions. When the country achieved its independence in 1804, the majority of its political leaders and army officers ~~and~~ soldiers were still Voodoo practitioners. Although the first constitution proclaimed the Catholic church the official church of the new republic, it remains true that the Voodoo faith could not and did not evaporate overnight, partly because of the strategic, religious and ideological role it played during the Haitian revolution. Voodoo is found to be an ingredient of some weight in the nascent formation and development of post-independence Haitian political process. The itinerary or trajectory of this functional but informal marriage between Voodoo and politics is here expounded.

Ever since the colonial era, the Voodoo church has been an underground political institution in Haiti and the Voodoo priest a political middleman. In fact, the active participation of Voodoo leaders in the Haitian revolution was of critical importance to the early independence of the colony in 1804. On 14 August 1791, a slave and Voodoo priest named Boukman organised a mammoth Voodoo ceremony on one of the northern plantations. During a possession trance, he informed his brethren and associates that the Voodoo spirits wanted their help in eliminating the French from the colony and liberating the slaves. The slave rebellion that followed was headed by several Voodoo priests and maroon – fugitive slave – leaders in various parts of the colony.

After independence, in order to protect their freedom and their land, former slaves and maroons congregated in secret societies around influential Voodoo priests. Throughout the nineteenth century they participated in and organised peasant revolts against the appropriation of their land by influential politicians and army officers. One must also add that they served at times as back-up paramilitary units to the regular army when the country was in a state of alert – both to resist an imminent foreign invasion, and to undertake the invasions of the Dominican Republic. During the US occupation, 1915–34, their existence was made known through their participation in the 'Kako' resistance movement. They launched large-scale guerilla

warfare against the marines and even after their heroic leaders were killed did not disappear from the scene but simply retreated to their home communities.

During the presidential elections of 1957, there were half a dozen secret societies that had almost complete control over the daily life of the Haitian peasantry and urban dwellers. As a kind of underground police force, judicial body and regional government, they issued their members with passports that have ever since been honoured as a diplomatic instrument by local branches of their organisation in various hamlets, villages and cities throughout the country.

Presidential candidate François Duvalier was able to identify and exploit intelligently these networks of relationships to the extent that some Voodoo priests openly used their temples as local headquarters for his campaign. Later, when Duvalier was elected president, he invited a few Voodoo priests and secret society leaders to serve as his special assistants and advisors. When he decided to form the Tonton Macoute force of civilian militiamen, members of the secret societies and Voodoo churches were recruited to serve along with other militiamen. Until recently, several Tonton Macoute units who played a role in national security were headed by notorious Voodoo priests.

Unlike his father, Jean-Claude Duvalier gave the impression of distancing himself from most of the Voodoo and secret society leaders. As a consequence in the weeks prior to the collapse of his administration, a group of Voodoo priests and priestesses made it clear to the president that they could no longer support him – I was actually informed by one of the Voodoo priests that a letter had been circulated amongst them telling them to withhold their support from the regime. The content of the letter was passed on to the president by an influential Voodoo priest in Port-au-Prince, the *porte-parole* of the group.

While the Port-au-Prince Voodoo priests were advising the president on the best course of action to take, others in the Artibonite Valley – especially in the city of Gonaïves and the town of Saint Marc – were actively engaged in the *Déchoukaj* (Uproot) Operation and openly participated in protests against his administration. The empty coffin seen carried on the heads of two protesters with the sign 'Jean-Claude Duvalier, you belong there' was an indication that a secret society wanted to punish him after he had been found guilty by the council of elders. He was seen as having betrayed the promises

made by his own father in courting the local bourgeoisie at the expense of the black masses.

In the minds of many Haitians, François and Jean-Claude Duvalier were able to remain for so long in office because of the support of the Tontons Macoutes, many of them Voodoo leaders in their own communities. After Jean-Claude Duvalier left Port-au-Prince on 7 February 1986, on board a US Air Force C-141 military plane en route to temporary exile in France, several Voodoo priests went underground – prompted by their close association with the fallen regime – while others were harassed, beaten up or lynched by urban and rural mobs throughout the country. The most hated and persecuted Voodoo priests were members of the Tonton Macoute force – notorious for its human rights abuses.

Opération Déchoukaj – and later on to a certain extent *Opération Raché Manyok* (grub up weeds) and *Opération Balérousé* (clear the land) – was not intended to be a persecution of the Voodoo church *per se*, but of identifiable Voodoo priests because of their past abuse of power. In fact not every Voodoo priest was persecuted, but only those who were seen as political exploiters and who had had some dealings with the Duvalier administration. In such a politically motivated operation, no doubt mistakes were made. It was later found by the Director of the Bureau of Ethnology that a handful of those lynched were victims of mistaken identity. The Voodoo priests who suffered the most – we were told by our informants – were those who operated relatively speaking alone, or those who were protected by a weak entourage – those secret society members who were supposed to defend the congregation and its leaders.

Despite the persecution of some of its members, the Voodoo church is still alive and well in Haiti during the post-Duvalier era. During the summer of 1986, while I was conducting a public opinion poll in Haiti to identify the front-runners among the presidential candidates (Michel S. Laguerre, *Electoral Politics in Haiti: A Public Opinion Poll*. Berkeley: Institute for the Study of Social Change, University of California at Berkeley, 1987), I became aware that one of them owned a Voodoo temple. Another influential candidate had strong Voodoo connections and was holder of a secret society passport. Whichever way an analyst looks at it, Voodoo still remains today an ingredient of some weight and importance in the Haitian electoral and political process.

To shed light on the relations between Voodoo and politics a few topics were selected for critical investigation. Chapter 1 discusses the

liberating, integrative and repressive roles of Voodoo in Haitian society. It elaborates on the historical, political and structural reasons why Voodoo – which arose as a messianic movement during the Haitian revolution – became after independence a functional force for the maintenance of the status quo and why it was transformed during the Duvalier era into a force of repression. The relations of Voodoo adherents to other influential sectors of Haitian society are also analysed.

Chapter 2 analyses the development of Voodoo from a household based ritual to an extended family based ritual and finally to a public church. The evolution of colonial Voodoo is seen as related to the transformation in the political economy and the shifts in the demographic structures of the colony.

Chapter 3 focuses on the maroon situation in colonial Haiti and specifically the practice of Voodoo among urban, nomadic and rural maroons. They are seen as having their own brand of Voodoo – in many respects different from, but at the same time having some similar features to that practised in the plantations. The maroons are believed to be the precursors of the secret societies of today.

Chapter 4 documents the messianic role of Voodoo during the colonial era and the heroic participation of Voodoo leaders during the Haitian revolution. The successful outcome of the wars of independence was in part due to those urban and rural *guerilleros* who, through their tactical manoeuvres, were able to keep a military pressure on the French colonial administration which finally led them to defeat. Placing their faith in their Voodoo spirit protectors, the leaders fought the French with great ferocity until the ultimate victory.

Chapter 5 presents a functional analysis of the Bizango secret society. Its *modus operandi* is described and the reasons for its existence are explained. The Bizango secret society is seen as a post-independence outgrowth of pre-independence maroon organisations. Its role as a paramilitary force is also spelled out.

The importance of the shrine of Saut D'Eau as a centre of Voodoo and Christian pilgrimage is presented in Chapter 6. This chapter also documents how politicians have been using Saut D'Eau to advance their own causes and to incite Haitian soldiers to fight – in the nineteenth century against the Dominican army and early this century against the US marines.

Chapter 7 focuses on the Duvalier regime and its use of Voodoo. It delineates how the local Voodoo churches are structurally linked

to the national structure of Haitian politics. It shows that both the Duvalier administrations and the Voodoo leaders gained from the exploitation of Voodoo in local and national politics. From being a liberating force Voodoo had become an oppressive institution. The circumstances that allowed this to happen are also delineated.

Finally, in Chapter 8, the military symbolism in Voodoo as well as the organisation of Voodoo territorial, mystical and ritual space is discussed. Although the post-Duvalierian Haitian Constitution of 1987 revoked in its Article 297a the decree of 5 September 1935, against superstitious beliefs, it falls short of providing a legal status to Voodoo. The chapter explains the policies of the state *vis-à-vis* Voodoo from the colonial era onwards and discusses how the Haitian parliament may go about developing a comprehensive policy toward the Voodoo church.

Some portions of the book have been read at faculty seminars and at national and international scholarly meetings. Chapter 1 was read at the International Conference on 'Haiti: A Nation in Transition' sponsored by Seton Hall University, financed by the New Jersey Department of Higher Education and the New Jersey Committee for the Humanities and held 1-3 May, 1987. Chapter 2 was delivered as a public lecture at the Graduate Theological Union at Berkeley, 14 February 1977. Chapter 3 was presented at the IXth International Congress of Ethnological and Anthropological Sciences, Chicago, 5 September 1973. Chapter 4 was read at a scholarly meeting organised by the Martin Luther King, Jr Program in Black Churches Studies at Colgate Rochester Divinity School and held in Haiti 21-28 January 1974. Chapter 7 was read at an International Conference on 'New Perspectives on Caribbean Studies: Toward the 21st Century,' sponsored by the Research Institute for the Study of Man, financed by the National Science Foundation and held at Hunter College, the City University of New York, 29 August 1984. And finally Chapter 8 was delivered at an International Conference on 'African Religions: Creativity, Imagination and Expressions' organised by the Divinity School of Howard University, and held 10-12 December 1986.

Some chapters have been previously published elsewhere. We have revised, adapted and in some cases enlarged them. For example, Chapter 2 appeared in *Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Centre* 5 (Fall): 47-60, 1977. Chapter 4 was published in *Freeing the Spirit* Vol. III, No. 1, pp. 23-28, 1974. Chapter 5 was a contribution to *Secrecy: A Cross-cultural Perspective* edited by Stanton Tefft, New York: Human Sciences Press, pp. 147-160, 1980. Chapter 6 was

published in *Social Compass: International Review of Sociology of Religion*, Vol. 23, No. 1, pp. 5–21, 1986. Chapter 7 appeared in a French version under the title 'Politique et Vaudou en Haiti: L'Ere des Duvalier 1957–1986,' in *Collectif Paroles*, No. 33, pp. 41–48, 1987. Finally a summary of the book was commissioned by *The Wall Street Journal* and published in the American edition of 18 April 1986, and in the British edition of 22 April 1986.

I am grateful to all who participated in these academic meetings, questioned my assumptions and provided me with the impetus to rethink the issues. I am particularly thankful to Regina Holloman and Norman E. Whitten, Jr who generously read early drafts of Chapter 2, 3 and 4 while I was still in the process of familiarising myself with the grammatical peculiarities and the idiomatic contours of the English language. I also wish to give thanks to Max Blanchet and Linh Do for drawing the figures and to my secretary Elmirie Robinson-Cephas for diligently typing the manuscript. Finally I am grateful to the Committee on Research of the University of California at Berkeley for awarding me a Faculty grant to undertake the preparation of the manuscript for publication.

1 Religion and Politics

Although Voodoo may mean different things to different people, the mass media have apparently agreed to identify the republic of Haiti as the land of Voodoo *par excellence* in the western hemisphere. Several historically identifiable events and circumstances – not least the sensationalist international press reportage and various reports and books by foreign dignitaries in mission in Port-au-Prince – have bestowed that notorious reputation on the old republic. As one reads nineteenth-century accounts by foreigners, one encounters bizarre Voodoo practices, nonsensical beliefs and engrossing stories of zombification and cannibalism.¹ These reports tended to exaggerate in order to make the stories more exciting, and their emphasis is on exotic rituals and concomitant, supposedly criminal, practices.

To the student of Haitian politics, Voodoo cannot simply be reduced to a bunch of mumbo-jumbo rituals. It is a fundamental factor in the rapport of forces in Haiti because it helps shape the structure of relationships between the various sectors of society.

To my knowledge, the political dimension of Voodoo has not yet been studied systematically in all its ramifications. This study – in focusing on the relationship between Voodoo and politics – hopes to fill that void. Historically, the Voodoo church developed as a reaction of the oppressed slaves to the religious and political domination of their colonial oppressors. Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, state domestic politics and policies have affected the organisation of the Voodoo church, which, in turn, has also infiltrated the matrix of local and national level politics. As political and historical circumstances evolved, Voodoo also underwent changes in its religious ideology, ritual practices and modes of interaction with the state apparatus. Thus the politics of Voodoo has so far been one of reactions and responses to structural constraints generated in the wider society.

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, under the peculiar system of slavery, a nativistic movement composed mostly of Voodoo believers developed in French colonial Haiti.² This mass movement evolved in an effort to achieve political, religious and cultural freedom from metropolitan France. As the slaves could not use institutional state mechanisms to publicise their case against the cruelty of slavery, Voodoo became one of the main channels they appropriated to fight

the colonial system. In an effort to shed light on the relationship between Voodoo and politics. I shall identify the different variables that explain the formation and the success of this slave movement.

Although it is possible to make certain general theoretical statements about the relationship between religion and other aspects of socio-cultural organisation, each historical situation is, to a certain extent, unique in its configuration of variables. In the case of Haiti, this unique configuration explains, first, why Haitian religion took a nativist form, second, why it took a mainly political rather than an escapist form, and, third, why it (alone among New World nativist movements) was successful. I see these variables as being the following:

1. The plantation system, which set the pattern both of spatial and social-structural relations within the population.
2. The black demographic revolution, itself related to the particular political economy of the island.
3. The phenomenon of marronage, that is, the development by former slaves of separate communities outside the framework of the plantation system.

Voodoo developed as a politico-religious phenomenon rather than as a strictly religious or psycho-religious phenomenon (which, under other historical-processual circumstances, it might have done) in active opposition to politico-economic domination from metropolitan France and under the conditions previously cited. Voodoo became a successful channel used by both maroons and slaves to express their resistance to the colonial regime.

The French colony of Haiti was not one of 'settlement,' but rather one of 'exploitation' (Best 1968: 286). By that it is meant that the colonists were not interested in staying on the island for life, but only in amassing enough money to return to live in France.³ The colony was characterised by an economy based on the plantation system, field work done by African and Creole slaves, and by colonial status as an overseas extension of the metropolitan economy. Furthermore, in this colonial society, the economy was managed by a minority of whites seeking their own benefits and those of the European metropolis. Yet, over the passage of time, the society developed a separate and unique cultural identity; its inhabitants were acculturated to one another and to the emerging Creole culture.

The course of French colonial Haiti's development as a separate cultural-social unit can be divided into three periods, contrasting in