

From Benin to Haiti: Exploring the Trans-Atlantic ‘Voodoo’ Diaspora

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Around the world, the word ‘Voodoo’ often conjures images of hypnotic trances, mysterious hexes, pin-stuck dolls, and hordes of undead zombies. Despite this portrait in our collective psyche, few nonbelievers understand the religion in all its spiritual complexity. In fact, Voodoo, as most of us know it, is nothing more than a Hollywood-created phantom, a far cry from the actual spiritual beliefs of Vodun and Vodou practiced around the world. Although experts disagree on official nomenclature, for the purposes of this paper ‘Vodun’ will denote the religion practiced in Benin, and ‘Vodou’ will denote the spiritual system of Haiti. I will use the word ‘Voodoo’ when discussing the spiritual and contextual commonalities that tie Vodun and Vodou together as a common belief system. Originating in what is now modern-day Benin, Vodun is a complex set of animistic beliefs that are widely practiced by the Fon and Yoruba peoples of West Africa. Vodou, on the other hand, is a religion found primarily in Haiti as a syncretic derivative of Beninese Vodun, courtesy of the trans-Atlantic African diaspora. This particular spiritual system is the one encountered most (and subsequently misinterpreted and feared) by outsiders in academia and popular media. This study aims to demystify Voodoo as a spiritual practice and explore the complex historical and cultural ties forged between Benin and Haiti over the centuries.

VOODOO IS SYNCRETIC

Understanding syncretism is integral to understand the Voodoo tradition. Voodoo is a syncretic belief system. It absorbed existing beliefs

and rituals from established traditions into a new religious system. One of the most well-known examples of syncretism can be found in the Abrahamic religions—Christianity, Islam, and Judaism—which all recognise Abraham as their founding patriarch. In a similar manner, Voodoo practitioners picked up bits and pieces of various belief systems that they encountered—either through colonisation, trade, or war. In contrast to the three Abrahamic religions, one reason why Voodoo is so open to syncretism is that it is mostly an oral tradition with no set of religious texts.¹ Redfern and Steiger make the case that even though Voodoo is technically open to everyone, 99 percent of all priesthoods are passed down from generation to generation.² This practice means that with each generational retelling, Voodoo philosophies are free to evolve into what religious scholars consider a “living religion.” Thornton makes the case, however, that the merging of religions is more complicated than just “taking a piece of this” and “sharing a piece of that.” Instead, it requires that the two religions find a common philosophical ground on which to share ideas. As I will explain later in this paper, this merging is how traditional Voodoo spirits became associated with Catholic saints: both are thought to exercise control over certain domains of human life (e.g., death, gateways, fire).³

THE HISTORICAL ORIGINS OF VOODOO

In order to fully understand Voodoo’s current state and the relationship between Benin and Haiti, it is important to explore the historical origins of the Voodoo belief system. Part of the reason that there is widespread misunderstanding of the religion is that there are few resources available on Voodoo written by actual practitioners. Additionally, since both modern-day Benin and Haiti are francophone states, there are even fewer sources written or translated into English.⁴ Consequently, Bellegarde-Smith’s chapter on Voodoo will be heavily cited, for he is a practicing *houngan asogwe* (initiate priest of Vodou) and can speak accurately on the origins and nature of his religion. The remaining academic sources employed in this paper are from verified scholars in either Haitian or Beninese studies, religious studies, or anthropological studies. Just because a source is written by an academic, however, does not make it reliable. Even academics have a hard time sorting fact from fiction regarding Voodoo, and many historical sources written on the topic have proven unreliable and uninformed. It is also important to

note that many zealous practitioners insist that Voodoo is not a magical, animistic, or spirit-based religion; it is simply a way of life.⁵

THE VOODOO DIASPORA

The trans-Atlantic Voodoo diaspora took place during the Dahomean Empire; it is there that Voodoo has its origins. Located in modern-day Benin, Dahomey was not a centralised kingdom. Instead, at its height in the beginning of the seventeenth century, it was a loosely-connected yet highly organised group of peoples who relied heavily on each other for trade and economic stability.⁶ This stability was disrupted in the eighteenth century when the Fon and Yoruba peoples, who still inhabit Benin today, suffered from successive waves of Portuguese, French, and Dutch settlers. The aim of these settlers was to exploit the region's rich mineral resources and find a steady supply of slaves to export to their colonies in the Americas. Much to the chagrin of the Dahomean kings, the country was eventually absorbed into the French Empire as a semi-autonomous state. After nearly seventy years of direct French occupation, the Republic of Dahomey gained its independence in 1960. Fifteen years later, the country was renamed Benin.⁷

It is no secret that West Africa was one of the main sources of slaves for the colonies in the Americas. In fact, it was colloquially known as the 'Slave Coast,' a testament to the millions of African peoples forcibly deported from their homes to be enslaved halfway across the world. Hundreds, if not thousands, of slave traders descended upon African shores seeking cheap and exploitable labour to help facilitate their luxurious lifestyles and expansive exploits abroad. According to Métreux, the Kingdom of Dahomey proved to be a veritable slave emporium for these unscrupulous Europeans. He claims that upward of ten thousand slaves were sold annually out of Dahomean ports at the height of the Atlantic slave trade. In the years before French occupation, the various kings of Dahomey expanded their territory by conquering smaller and less powerful kingdoms and selling their people to the white invaders.⁸ Many of these people were also of the Fon and Yoruba tribes but were under the leadership of different kingdoms. Almost all Dahomeans were Fon or Yoruba, but not all Fon and Yoruba were Dahomean. At this point, Vodun was not restricted solely to the Kingdom of Dahomey, and many of the conquered peoples were also Vodun practitioners. This allowed Vodun to thrive on the African continent while simultaneously

being transported to the Americas, where it later became Vodou.

It was through the trans-Atlantic slave trade that Vodun was brought to Haiti as early as 1517, beginning Haiti's history with Vodou.⁹ Slaves from different parts of the African continent were thrown together in one part of a tiny island in the middle of the Caribbean basin. After the Code Noir was passed in 1685 by the French Empire, these slaves were forced to convert to Christianity under the threat of death. This legal act forced baptism on any and all 'pagans' (i.e., the Indigenous peoples and African slaves) in French-controlled territory and outlawed any non-Catholic religious beliefs.¹⁰ It is through this combination of factors that Vodou became syncretic. In 1804, the Haitian Revolution was successfully waged against the French Empire in order to create Haiti, the first independent Black Republic and one of the only successful, large-scale slave rebellions in recorded history. After almost three hundred years of a brutal plantation economy, Haiti won its freedom. Vodou, as a distinct spiritual practice separate from the original Vodun, grew out of this history. Influences from Catholicism, Taíno rituals, and beliefs from the Congo are all present in the practices of Haitian Vodou.¹¹

VOODOO AND THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

At the height of the Kingdom of Dahomey, well before the mass trans-plantation of African slaves to the colonial plantation economies of the Americas, Vodun could have already been considered a syncretic religion. This syncretism is exhibited through the complex pantheon of deities and ritualistic practices that the Fon and Yoruba peoples shared with the neighbouring Mahi and Keto tribes.¹² In fact, Dhwti claims that the word 'Vodun' means 'spirit' in both the Fon and Yoruba languages, speaking to the interconnectedness of the two cultures.¹³ According to Bellegarde-Smith, Voodoo has no set hierarchy and is generally regarded as a decentralised religious system. While there may be strict hierarchies within individual communities, there is no overarching or dogmatic religious body. Beliefs and practices can differ widely from community to community, regardless of their geographic proximity. Due to this sharp contrast with the hierarchies of Catholicism and the colonial system as a whole, Voodoo was often regarded with suspicion, fear, and outright hatred by colonisers.¹⁴

Despite this marked contrast, Beninese and Haitian Voodoo had become intrinsically linked to the Catholic faith due to centuries of

colonialism by the French. People in both countries regularly participate in Voodoo ceremonies and Catholic mass, often on the same day. Voodoo and divinity are so connected that it would be considered a sacrilege to only attend the “white man’s church” without also serving the spirits (*loas/lwas* as explained later) in traditional ways.¹⁵ In fact, many of the traditional spirits have merged with their equivalent Catholic saints over time. Under colonialism and the Code Noir, when Voodoo was outlawed, practitioners nominally called themselves Christians while still adhering to their traditional beliefs. To practice Voodoo surreptitiously, they began to call their spirits by the names of the Catholic saints. Over time, these changes became an integral part of the faith. For example, the spirit *Legba* is associated with St. Anthony, guardian of doorways. *Dan* is associated with St. Patrick, purveyor of wisdom. Saints as obscure as Altagarcia to figures as well-known as Jesus Christ have been assimilated into Voodoo practices.¹⁶

A REVERSE DIASPORA

The flow of spiritual ideas was not unidirectional. At first, the beliefs swept across the Atlantic Ocean from Benin to Haiti, but after the fall of slavery in the eighteenth century and during the twilight of the colonial empires, many Haitians made their way back to their ancestral homelands to rediscover their roots. It was in Ouidah, Benin, and other coastal communities that Vodou was transported back to the land of Vodun.¹⁷ To summarise this complicated history of cross-cultural migrations of both people and ideas, the Fon and Yoruba peoples were first taken out of modern-day Benin during the trans-Atlantic slave trade in the sixteenth century. They were transported to Haiti, among other places, and Beninese Vodun became Haitian Vodou. After Haitian independence in 1804, many Haitians returned to French-occupied Benin to rediscover their roots. Hence, in a roundabout way, Vodun created Vodou, which eventually came back to influence modern Vodun practices.

SUPPRESSION AND GROWTH

Even though Benin is halfway across the world from Haiti, a similar system of religious suppression developed in both countries over the course of French colonisation. Outlawed by both the French and successive, semi-independent dictatorships, Voodoo was systemically repressed in

the two countries. Practitioners and priests were often killed or imprisoned, their sacred places of worship destroyed, and Voodoo was outlawed as a threat to Euro-Christian hegemony.¹⁸ In Benin, Vodun has only been freely practiced since the country elected its first democratic government in 1989. In 1996, Vodun was declared Benin's official state religion, with around 40 percent of the population registered as believers.¹⁹ Contemporarily, an estimated thirty million believers live in Benin, Togo, and Ghana.²⁰ In Haiti, Vodou was officially recognised in the 1987 constitution. Nevertheless, it was only in 2003 that Vodou was legally recognised as one of the state's official religions, with up to 90 percent of the population as practitioners.²¹ Because so many Haitians mix Voodoo with Christian beliefs, there is a popular saying that Haitians are 70 percent Catholic, 30 percent Protestant, and 100 percent voodoo.²²

"VOODOO IS OLDER THAN THE WORLD [...] VODOO IS EVERYWHERE"²³

According to Davis, Vodun was more than a religion in Dahomey; it was the "centuries-old organizing principle of society" and "a complete way of life, including culture, philosophy, language, art, dance, music, and medicine."²⁴ The royalty of the Fon and Yoruba peoples were often priests, and according to traditional beliefs they were allowed to rule only through the will of the spirits and ancestors. Therefore, overseas during the diaspora, those with spiritual knowledge often became leaders in their communities and actively pushed for rebellion and revolution.²⁵ According to Girard, the Haitian Revolution of 1791 was plotted during secret, Voodoo gatherings with Toussaint Louverture, and his generals all admitted to being Vodou practitioners. Voodoo was therefore associated with rebellion and resistance, leading outsiders (i.e., white Westerners) to misinterpret Voodoo as black magic. According to the theocracy of the French colonial system, any deviation from the "divinely-ordained" colonial empire departed from the wishes of God.²⁶ Similar Voodoo self-governing practices are present in both Benin and Haiti today. In Benin, *zangbetos* (Vodun guardians of the night) act as informal police in rural areas. The Vodun priests of the community follow a secretive process in order to fall into a trance, which allows possession by a benevolent spirit who then delivers justice to criminals.²⁷ In Haiti, a similar system of governance is called '*govenman lannuit*,' (which means 'nighttime government' in Haitian creole). These Vodou secret societies (such as *Zobop*, *Shanpwel*, *Bizango*, and *Vlinbindingue*)

meet at night and act outside the official purview of the Haitian government in order to maintain the peace in local Vodou communities.²⁸

VOODOO AS A COPING MECHANISM

As Timothy M. Robinson describes, Voodoo's emphasis on the undead also served as a coping mechanism in both Benin and Haiti during the time of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Stories of the undead helped explain why millions of men, women, and children left the continent, never to return. It was easier to hold a supernatural power responsible for the fact that millions of families were separated and destroyed than to accept reality. Likewise, the possibility of a person arising from the dead as a benevolent zombie gave families hope that they may see their loved ones again. The connection from spirits to zombies is easy to make, but zombies are more tangible and therefore give hope that families could be spiritually and physically re-united. It is important to note that the undead, in whatever form they took, were never described as having been killed. This speaks to the resilience of the human spirit after such large-scale suffering. It also speaks to a degree of hope that has embedded itself into Voodoo spiritual belief. Nothing is impossible, for even death itself can be undone. The following excerpt is taken from Robinson's own recount of Saidiya Hartman's study:

Everyone told me a different story about how slaves began to forget their past. Words like 'zombies,' 'sorcerer,' 'witch,' 'succubus,' and 'vampire' were whispered to explain it. In these stories, which circulated throughout West Africa, the particulars varied, but all of them ended in the same – the slave loses the mother. Never did the captive choose to forget; she was always tricked or bewitched or coerced into forgetting. Amnesia, like an accident or a stroke of bad fortune, was never an act of volition.²⁹

VODUN AS A UNIFYING ELEMENT

The spiritual commonalities between Benin and Haiti are where their cultural bonds are strongest. As mentioned earlier, Haitian Vodou can be considered a syncretic derivative of its predecessor, Beninese Vodun. Even though specific rituals and beliefs differ from country to country, Vodou retains many of the main tenants of Vodun at the core of its spiritual practice. The largest and most prominent commonality is the way Voodoo practitioners view the universal planes of existence.

According to Bellegarde-Smith, Voodoo views the universe as existing on two separate planes and as part of an interpenetrating column: one for spirits (vertical) and one for humans (horizontal). In opposition to the dualism of Western theological thought, there is no hierarchy or distinction between the mortal and the divine. In both Beninese and Haitian Voodoo thought, the distinction between divine and nondivine is blurred, if present at all. Simultaneously, the divine surrounds humans with the spirits that inhabit every rock, tree, and creature, and it is part of every person. In order to truly understand the divine, one must become the divine. This is where ritual possession comes into play.³⁰ As stated by Bellegarde-Smith in an excerpt from Wade Davis' book on zombies:

In Haiti, as in Africa, there is no separation between the sacred and the secular, between the holy and the profane, between the spiritual and the material. Every dance, every song, every action is but a particle of the whole, each gesture a prayer [...].³¹

In a similar fashion, the human body is animated by two distinct 'spirits': the *gro-bon-ange* and the *ti-bon-ange*. The former would typically be considered a soul, while the latter is the impersonal cosmic consciousness. When we die, the *gro-bon-ange* becomes a glorified ancestor, one that will lead future Voodoo practitioners down the right spiritual path. At the same time, the *ti-bon-ange* rejoins the cosmos and becomes 'recycled' into another being through reincarnation. In this way, the finality of death exists alongside eternal life; they are not mutually exclusive, rather they exist as two sides of the same coin. But even this phenomenon is mutable, for the dead can be risen and inhabited by benevolent spirits. Death is anything but final. As with most Voodoo beliefs, there are no hierarchical systems in place for these spirits. The *ti-bon-ange*, which roughly translated to 'little guardian angel,' is just as important as the *gro-bon-ange* or 'large guardian angel.' The main idea in this cosmology is that there are many seemingly opposing beliefs that can exist alongside each other without issue; in Voodoo, all that is required is some mental gymnastics.³²

In Benin, spirits are called '*loas*,' meaning 'mystery' in Fon and Yoruba. In Haiti, the orthography changes to *lwas*.³³ Despite this difference, their essence remains the same. In both traditions, they are spirits that exist in and around everything. Each spirit relates to and has

control over a particular domain of everyday life, from love to health to death. For example, *Legba*, the guardian spirit of crossroads, gates, and doorways is an integral part of both Vodun and Vodou rituals.³⁴ According to Pinn, *Legba* was made the mediator between the spirits and the Dahomey people and must be approached before summoning any other spirit or deity. This ritual is still widely practiced in Benin and Haiti, where *Legba* controls the entrance of spirits from one plane of existence to another. In the possession rituals mentioned above, one must always consult *Legba* before crossing the planes of existence. *Legba* can prevent one from truly experiencing the divine and block benevolent spirits from crossing over into the mortal world. Hence, practitioners of Voodoo always ensure this spirit is appeased by leaving valuable offerings called fetishes, which include food, clothing, and jewelry.³⁵

Despite centuries of historical, ancestral, and cultural connections, the political links between the Beninese and Haitian governments are negligible.³⁶ Aside from both states belonging to larger organisations, such as the United Nations and La Francophonie, Benin and Haiti seem to be largely indifferent to one another. One might expect a strong bond between these closely connected countries given the sheer number of people who have migrated back and forth between them. However, politics often functions differently than everyday society. As such, sources addressing the political and economic ties between the two states are sparse; the following section on Beninese-Haitian relations is based on the single, francophone journal article available. The reason for this striking fact remains unclear, but it is conceivable, given the placement of both countries in the United Nation's 'Least Developed' category, that there are simply no resources available.

Other than a joint Voodoo ceremony held in Ouidah, Benin after the devastating 2010 earthquake in Haiti, Beninese and Haitian politicians seem to have little interest in each other. Despite the fact that the Haitian embassy was one of the first in the newly independent Benin, they only reopened their doors in 2004 after more than thirty years of diplomatic silence. This was due, in part, to tensions between the countries while nationalistic dictators were simultaneously in power. Since 2011, however, there has been an influx of government-sponsored Haitian students to Beninese universities. This binational education program aims to increase social ties between the two counties, thereby fostering a collective identity in young professionals.³⁷

A DISTORTED LENS

Such a positive view of Voodoo, however, is not universal. Voodoo has been “sensationalized by Hollywood, demonized by Christian missionaries, and parodied in New Orleans tourist shops.”³⁸ This negative view has impacted Voodoo practitioners in both Benin and Haiti.³⁹

According to Girard, who generally blames Haiti’s under-development on the Haitian people, Vodou is to blame for the country’s ills. He writes:

Yet, sociologists, such as Max Weber in his *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1920), have shown that a nation’s main religious affiliation can determine its economic success. [...] One cannot help but think that Voodoo’s popularity has hindered, rather than facilitated, Haiti’s development. [...] Because of its focus on the omnipresence of supernatural forces and on a loa’s ability to solve one’s daily problems, Voodoo serves as a substitute for a rational assessment of the difficulties a parishioner should face alone. Voodoo hinders Haitians’ entrepreneurial spirit by portraying godly intercession, not human activism, as the most efficient method of human betterment.⁴⁰

Unfortunately, this is a common argument. Outsiders, especially Westerners, are quick to misinterpret Voodoo and blame it for many of the trials of Haitian society. This phenomenon is likely based on the notion that Voodoo is inherently rebellious, stemming from the frequent misunderstanding of its concepts from a Eurocentric perspective. For example, possession in Voodoo is seen as one of the most important and holy experiences. From a Eurocentric viewpoint, however, possession is seen as the ultimate evil and a sign of the Devil’s temptations. The contrasting nature of Voodoo and Christianity has led to a number of dangerous misinterpretations. Christian missionaries continue to vilify Voodoo and attempt to convert practitioners. However, they admit that Voodoo’s cultural pull is too strong and the religion so pervasive that Christian converts often revert back to it.⁴¹

Likewise, authorities from both countries have claimed that Voodoo is holding people back from achieving their full potential as a society. They argue that traditional ways of knowing are not as productive in our capitalist and globalised society, going so far as to claim that Voodoo is regressive.⁴² In order to compete with the advanced Western nations, citizens must accept modernity rather than cling to outdated, superstitious

traditions. Haiti's first Roman Catholic cardinal, Chibly Langlois, calls Voodoo a "big social problem" and argues that it provides "no real solutions to a population deprived of justice and political voice."⁴³ For Haitians who accept this view, Voodoo is an enemy. They interpret the elimination of Voodoo as a shaking off of the last vestiges of the dictator Duvalier, who regularly used and distorted Voodoo images to instill fear in the populace and his political enemies.⁴⁴ Unsurprisingly, the government authorities, who are propped up by Western governments for co-operation in trade deals, do not have people's best interests in mind—they are more interested in lining their pockets. Bellegarde-Smith makes the following ultimatum concerning Haitian Vodou, which is also applicable to Beninese Vodun:

Beyond a continuation of the precarious equilibrium of the status quo, there can be but two outcomes. The first would be an indigenous Haitian solution involving a democratization of Haiti and the validation of Vodou as the national ethos. Alternatively, a victory for Western Christianity would involve a loss of Haitian self-identity and cultural heritage and make the people spiritually and politically paralyzed and dependent, a form of zombification.⁴⁵

Despite centuries of syncretism and the religion's deep cultural roots, cardinal Langlois has declared that Haitians cannot follow both Catholicism and Voodoo. His pronouncement strikes some as hypocritical, given the Church's historical acceptance of slavery, and insulting to Haitian self-determination.⁴⁶

In conclusion, regardless of limited political connections today, Benin and Haiti share a long, intertwined history. Centuries of ancestral, historical, and cultural links have left similar patterns of religious development in the two countries, especially regarding Voodoo. As a fluid, animistic religion, Voodoo can be difficult to understand due to its seemingly complete juxtaposition to modern Western society. But it is just as valid a religious system as Christianity, Islam, or Judaism. Education plays a role in changing these damaging and negative stereotypes. Understanding and demystifying Voodoo in order to shake off distorted views of the religion is an important start.

NOTES

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