Peasants, Migrants and the Discovery of African Traditions: Ritual and Social Change In Lowland Haiti

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Abstract
Observers of Haitian popular religion have defined Vodou as the authentic African religion of Haitian peasants. In fact, Vodou's congregational forms and practices evolved in and around Port-au-Prince during the twentieth century as the local peasantry was being coerced into wage labor. This paper deals with the incorporation of these ritual innovations in a particular hamlet in Léogane. The agents of ritual diffusion appear to have been not only redundant peasants and neophyte proletarians circulating between the capital city and the nearby plain, but also ethnologists who moved between privileged sites of the Vodou laboratory. The scientific valorization of the heroic slave religion was a centerpiece of the Haitian ethnologists' counter-narrative to European cultural hegemony and North American colonialism. Though their approach to Vodou was part of counter-hegemonic, nationalist discourse, it nonetheless recapitulated a modern view of tradition-bound primitives.

Keywords
Religion, Haiti, peasants, modernity, nationalism, ethnology.

Introduction

_Vèvè-lò_ it is the _ounsi_ who makes the _gangan_
_Onsi_ falls down; the _gangan_ then gets up
_Vèvè-lò_ it is the _ounsi_ who makes the _gangan_
Métraux (1972: 165).

In his renowned mid-twentieth-century study of Haitian religions, Alfred Métraux wrote, "The little I was able to see of rural Vodou convinced me that it was poor in its ritual compared to the Vodou of the capital… Vodou deserves to be studied not only as regards the survival of Dahomean and Congolese
beliefs and practices, but also as a religious system born fairly recently from a
fusion of many different elements’ (Métraux 1972: 61). Métraux further
asserted that ‘the domestic cult is losing importance daily to the profit of the
small autonomous cult groups which grow up around sanctuaries [and are]
more numerous and prosperous in Port-au-Prince (Métraux 1972: 60-61). The
spectacular, codified styles of worship that were displacing the modest,
kin-based practices of Haiti’s peasants were, Métraux suggested, urban innova-
tions, and they were recent. Métraux, unfortunately, did not develop his
intriguing observation about the relationship of Vodou to modernity. Observ-
ers of Haitian popular religion have continued to interpret Vodou as the
authentic religion of Haitian peasants.

This paper takes up Métraux’s challenge to argue that the congregational
forms and practices authorized as Vodou were not the authentic African reli-
gion of the peasants (as if there ever were one), but rather conventions of an
evolving peri-urban institution. As the capital city of Port-au-Prince swelled
with displaced rural migrants, these temples became anchors for their ritual
practices. The temples were owned and managed by a new cadre of profes-
sional priests, whose source of power derived from a lengthy and expensive
initiation. The priest commanded a new congregational structure based on
individual voluntary association unrelated to kinship (though kinship terms
of address were used), elaborate and expensive rituals carried out by female
initiates and a separation between the roles of performer and spectator. This
modern style of temple organization and practice spread from Port-au-Prince
to the densely settled lowlands of Cul-de-Sac and Léogane as these areas were
undergoing massive economic and social upheaval, which culminated in the
transformation of the peasantry into producers of migrant labor and consum-
ers of migrant wage remittances. This paper deals with the way in which these
innovations were incorporated into ritual practices and recast as authentic
African traditions in a particular hamlet in Léogane, called Ti Rivyè (Little
River).

In Ti Rivyè, the agents of diffusion of temple customs appear to have been
not only redundant peasants and neophyte proletarians circulating between
the capital city and the nearby plain, but also ethnologists who moved between
privileged sites of the Vodou laboratory. The scientific valorization of the
heroic slave religion was a centerpiece of the Haitian ethnologists’ counter-
narrative to European cultural hegemony and North American colonialism.
Though their approach to Vodou was part of counter-hegemonic, nationalist
discourse, it nonetheless recapitulated a modern view of tradition-bound
primitives. The ethnologists portrayed Vodou as a coherent set of beliefs about
universalistic, nature spirits and the spectacular ritual practices to worship
them. In the case of Ti Rivyè, the ethnologists’ study of Vodou seems to have encouraged the encroachment of the very invented traditions they were documenting. The dynamic interactions between performers and students of Vodou and the effects of these (unequal) exchanges on local ritual practice seem to have escaped the scrutiny even of Alfred Métraux, who was escorted to Ti Rivyè to observe a ceremony in the 1940s by a Haitian government ethnologist. Despite Métraux’s provocative inference in *Vodou en Haïti* regarding the relationship of modernity to Vodou, he singled out his visit to the unnamed temple in Ti Rivyè as an example from the countryside of the purer practices of the domestic cult.

Land and labor in early twentieth-century Léogane

When Métraux arrived in Ti Rivyè in 1946, the local, kin-based ritual practices of a free-holding peasantry, which he referred to as the ‘domestic cult’, were already losing out to the ‘profit’ of temples. The peasantry had emerged from the slave revolution of 1791. Although the revolution was a massive and repeated rejection of coerced labor, free people and their descendants continued to face obstacles to freedom even after slavery was abolished. Political leaders, eager to revive the plantation economy, attempted to force them back onto plantations to labor as little better than slaves. Paradoxically, the practices of the still weak state instead abetted the citizens’ access to land and, therefore, a means to control their own production. Short of currency, the government compensated military officers and civil servants in land and these grantees in turn put their concessions up for sale. In addition, the state turned to selling eminent domain to generate revenues. Through this legal mechanism the masses moved swiftly to constitute themselves as a smallholding peasantry and to resist pressures to force them to labor on plantations in the name of reviving the national economy (Mintz 1974, Moral 1961 and Murray 1977).

The Ti Rivyè community, which I began studying almost forty years after Métraux, occupies the northern, coastal margin of the eastern side of the Plain of Léogane and is about 25 miles from Port-au-Prince. Ti Rivyè was once part of a colonial sugar plantation founded by six Dominican frères who came to Haiti in 1696 by way of the island of St Croix. After 1804, the plantation reverted to state property under the principle of eminent domain. It was granted to Charles-Mitan Marie, a colonel from Archaie, but, according to my informant Camolien Alexandre (see below), neither Marie nor most of his heirs wished to maintain the estate, and 95% of it was sold to settlers who
were the apical ancestors of local descent groups, and known as 'the first testaments' (prenye tèstaman yo).

The recollections of Camolien and other village elders, archival documents and the records of the landscape (cemeteries and remains of dwellings) show that in the second half of the nineteenth century the plantation was divided among smallholders whose estates averaged less than ten carreaux. However, within only a few decades, the property map was transformed by Joseph Lacombe, a cosmopolitan coffee-sugar magnate, by lawful racketeering of the judicial system and manipulation of the discrepancies between the formal and the legal codes. The myriad small estates of three, five or a dozen carreaux were consolidated into vast, undivided plantations, with peasant habitations scattered and squeezed among them and crowded especially into the marginal lands by the shore.

Ti Rivyè's peasants responded to the encroachment by becoming sharecroppers on Lacombe's vast holdings. They intercropped sugar cane, whose harvest they split with Lacombe, with food crops, which they kept for themselves to eat and to sell. Some local residents responded by leaving for Port-au-Prince, where they pursued opportunities in servicing the bourgeoisie (as cooks, maids, house boys, gardeners, dock workers), learning trades like tailoring, trading in the internal marketing of food and wares, a mainly female occupation and, at the same time, schooling their children. There were few schools in the rural areas. Worse-off Ti Rivyè parents, feeling pressured to feed their children, sent them to serve as domestic servants with slightly better-off relatives in the city in exchange for room and board and, sometimes, schooling.

Port-au-Prince's population grew from 26,000 in 1861 to 101,000 in 1906; one third of the residents came from Jacmel and Léogane (Saint-Louis 1988: 117 and Moral 1959: 39). The growth of the capital epitomized the broad processes of centralization and corresponding provincial decline that had been fostered by the increasing foreign mercantilist domination. The United States Occupation, which began in 1915 and displaced German and French business competitors, intensified the processes of centralization and rural upheaval. In 1920, the Haytian American Sugar Company (HASCO) took over the railroad connecting the plains of Cul-de-Sac and Léogane to the Port-au-Prince wharf and constructed a modern sugar mill on the north side of the capital with easy access to the wharf. Thus was Léogane incorporated into an expanding American sugar empire, an empire which designated and structured Haitian labor generally as a cheap, mobile work force in the Caribbean region.

Among the legislative actions of the Occupation to benefit American capitalists was the imposition of changes in the Haitian constitution to allow foreigners to purchase land and to gain rights to putatively vacant areas of the
HASCO purchased 2,600 carreaux in the Cul-de-Sac, but it did not buy land in Léogane, with the exception of sites for the railway and depots (Lebigre 1974: 90). Rather HASCO gained direct access to Léogane’s sugar plantations by renting from the biggest landowner in the Plain, Joseph Lacombe (West India Management and Consultation Company 1916: 17). In 1920, HASCO took out forty-year leases on all of Lacombe’s lands with the exception of the thirteen carreaux surrounding his mansion and the courtyard of the seventeenth-century plantation’s chapel.

HASCO’s immediate offers of employment to dig irrigation canals, cut trees and plant and cut cane initially drew many of the evicted sharecroppers. Their enthusiasm waned, however, as they began to realize that HASCO’s compensation of twenty cents a day was not a living wage. Corrupt salaried employees worsened the workers’ plight by skimming their wages in a ruthless system that dominated the economy of Léogane for sixty years. Thus the arrival of American sugar capital returned capitalized monocrop sugar production to the Plain. Exploitation of local labor’s comparative advantage induced more profound rural upheaval: monetization of labor, removal of land from food production and internal and international migration.

Hence, around the turn of the last century, the peasants in the Léogane Plain found themselves squarely in conflict with the processes transforming the Haitian peasantry generally into a supplier of a regional mobile labor force. Not long after winning their land revolution and their economic autonomy, the peasants’ gains were recouped by outsiders, members of the cosmopolitan elite descended from French colonists, who commandeered their ancestors’ lands. The expropriation of these lands, the symbol and instrument of peasants’ hard-won liberation, hastened the ultimate betrayal of the revolution. Descendants of people who fought to free themselves from plantation labor returned to the plantation as dependant wage laborers on the very lands their ancestors purchased and left for them.

In the wake of these displacements, a transformed kinship/ritual unit emerged: the ‘family’ (fanmi) or ‘inheritance (group)’ (eritaj). While Lacombe and HASCO were sitting on portions of the inherited lands and offering wage labor at artificially depressed rates to the very people who were its rightful owners, the descendants of the nineteenth-century freeholders Tonton Ogoun, Mme Andre and Michél Pè and their affines were discovering their ‘authentic African’ (fran Ginen) corporate character. The claim to African authenticity veiled and compensated for the increasing monetization of labor, social stratification and dislocation. The following section takes up the emergence and effects of these invented traditions in Ti Rivyè during the early to mid-twentieth century.
Peasants, hidden proletarians and the monetization of ritual

Although there is no documented history of religious change in Léogane, there is an analysis of such change in the Cul-de-Sac Plain, whose history is intimately linked to Léogane’s. Gerald Murray’s (1977 and 1980) description of the diffusion of modern religious practice there provides a fruitful starting point for this discussion. Murray suggests that a major lever in the displacement of domestic ritual practice was the shift in ritual roles from charismatic, clairvoyant shaman to professional priest, known as a houngan or gangan, whose source of power derived from a lengthy and expensive initiation. The novice was (and is) said to ‘take the ason’ (pran ason). The ason is the sacred gourd rattle and bell used to summon the spirits, who are called lwa or sen (saint). Through their exclusive use of the ason, the professional gangan created a monopoly on new forms of communication with the inherited gods. This innovation obviated the existing channels of access to the lwa, dreams and possession, which were open, at least in principle, to everyone. As a result, ‘possession . . . lost its oracular function’ (Murray 1980: 300).

The loss of the oracular function of possession in Cul-de-Sac had already been mentioned (in passing) by Harold Courlander, who conducted his research between 1937 and 1955, in Cul-de-Sac and Port-au-Prince. Courlander quoted one aged man from Belladère who was quite cynical about the rise of the gangan ason. The man’s analysis of what had changed was that people could no longer talk to their inherited lwa (except by means of the professional priest).

Some of the things that are going on down there in the Plain [of the Cul-de-Sac] are not right. They are not the old way. In the old days we did things differently. We did not always run to the houngan. The grande famille knew how to talk to the [lwa]. Up here we don’t do things the way they do them down below in the city (1960: 71-72).

I had the great fortune to befriend Camolien Alexandre when he was in his nineties and, though the second oldest living member in the village, still in excellent health. Camolien identified himself as a ‘Florvil person’ (mounn Florvil) because he was born during Florvil Hyppolite’s presidency (1889-1896). He did not know his exact date of birth. Camo was respected for his esoteric knowledge of the long past ‘foreigner period’ (lè blan), and for his competence in the idiom he called ‘Africa talk’ (pawòl Ginen)—the old rituals, songs and tales taught to him by the ‘old time people’ (gran mounn lontan-yo). In my conversations with him about long-term ritual change in Ti Rivyè, the monopolization of spiritual communication was similarly emphasized. In his ninth
decade, Camolien had a cynical view of the evolution of religious leadership in Ti Rivyè over the course of the century. He recalled when people like his father, rather than an elite few, ‘knew everything’ (papa m te konn tout bagay) to protect and nurture themselves and their families. He felt increasingly alienated from the organization of ritual practice, which he dismissed as a ‘business’, and instead continued to rely on what his inherited lwa told him in his dreams:

What I know, the gangan [ason] do not know. As soon as the lwa speak to me—you won’t find me at dances or anybody’s prayers. I don’t go to the gangan. I didn’t grow up seeing my father involved in it…I am my own gangan. If I should do this, if it’s that ‘root’ [lwa], I see it all in my sleep. After that, I have nothing to do with the lwa.

Sa m konnen an, gangan pa sa konnen. Depi lwa pal avè m, m pa nan dans, prie pèsann. M pa al kay gangan. M pa leve juwenn papa m ladan n. Mwen se gangan tèt muen. Si se fè sa, si se raiss sa a, m wè sa tout nan dòmi. Apre sa a m pa konn afè lwa.

As for the ason, the rattle and bell apparatus used by the gangan to summon the lwa, Camolien clarified that the language of ‘giving’ and ‘taking’ the ason obscures what is, in fact, an act of selling and buying. He said that, before, gangan absorbed their knowledge directly from Guinea (Ginen). Some were thought to travel there (in their dreams and in trance) to the far-off homeland ‘across’ or ‘under the water’. Some of their Guinea ancestors were said to be shaman who brought their magical objects with them in a sack. (Contemporary shaman who are not initiated and do not run temple-like congregations are sometimes called gangan makout or houngan makout, literally ‘gangan with a sack.’) Camo’s African ancestor, Christophe, for example, supposedly carried in his sack a sapling of the magically potent silk cotton tree (ceiba pentandra), which he planted in a rural section of Léogane.

Christophe himself came from Africa. He was a gangan. He came with a little mapou tree in his sack. He planted it and it became large. The mapou is still there but it is far from us, in the Gran Rivyè rural section.


Today the priests ‘buy’ their credentials. Camolien called their qualifying ason ‘a purchased thing’ (bagay achte). He dismissed the gangan ason’s secrets as ‘a bunch of lies’.

The gangan of the old days had real knowledge but the gangan here have a lot of lies. Those gangan, they didn’t give the ason. The lwa was the one who gave it to you. You
went to get it under the water. That was called the Guinea ason. The ason these gangan give today is something you buy.


Although the gangan ason’s power was something purchased, it came to be substantiated by kinship ties to the descent group, the inherited land and the lwa. An (inherited) lwa is said to be the one who asks the gangan to ‘take the ason’, while Loko, another ancient, African Guinea lwa, presides over the initiation. Moreover, ‘calling the lwa (and the dead) with the ason’ came to be deemed necessary for the most important and ‘traditional’ rituals involving the descent group, the ancestors and their lwa. Through the formalization of new rites of passage, the gangan ason guided the transformation of the descent group as a ritual and corporate group and positioned themselves as managers of the shrines on all the large estates.

In Ti Rivyè, the catalyst for these profound shifts in the ritual management of the descent group was an extremely charismatic and powerful gangan ason named Misdor, who succeeded his father and grandfather in the role of gangan. But he was the first in his line, to use Camolien’s words, to ‘buy’ his secrets and then ‘sell’ them to others. One of Misdor’s sons estimated in a conversation with me that his father ‘gave the ason’ to more than one hundred and fifty ‘students’ (élèv). His use of the term ‘student’ aptly captured the modern character of the rite of passage. Like his three brothers, he eventually became a gangan ason. Misdor’s sons, who were schooled in Port-au-Prince, and were among the few of their generation in Ti Rivyè who were literate, helped mediate the introduction of new practices coming from urban shrines. Aiscar proudly told me, for example, of the local celebration on All Souls Day, a raucous dance honoring the Gede lwa: ‘I was the one who brought the Banda here. I was at school in Port-au-Prince. I saw how they danced the Banda. I came here, and I did it here’ (Se mwen ki mennen Banda isit. M te lekòl Port-au-Prince. M te wè jan yo tap danse Banda la-a. M vin isit, me fi-I isit.)

Misdor’s sons succeeded him after his death in 1967. The eldest, Victor, was widely regarded as the most powerful gangan ason in Ti Rivyè, despite his declining health (he suffered from diabetes and died in 1989 at the age of seventy-two). Victor succeeded his father at the shrine on their paternally inherited estate and he also managed two other shrines on maternally inherited land. Aiscar, a younger son by a different mother, managed a shrine about five kilometers away after replacing his maternal uncle in the role of gangan ason. As Victor declined, Aiscar asserted his authority to ensure that other
local gangan ason, most of whom were his father’s, brother’s or his own disciples, remained faithful to the traditions (however recently introduced) of his father’s ‘house’. Pointing to the temple where his father presided, Aiscar told me, ‘Misdor gave the ason to everyone (every gangan ason) here. Everything they know comes from this house.’

Misdor’s most profound influence on ritual practice in Ti Rivyè may have been his introduction of two rites of passage from temple voodoo: post-funeral mortuary rites and the initiation of women (kanzo). These practices were incorporated into the charters of local descent groups, transforming the representation and enactment of their corporate identity. In the following sections, I discuss Misdor’s introduction of these rites of passage and their incorporation as authentic African traditions into the charters of the families descended from the peasant founders of the settlements.

The new mortuary rites of passage

Death rites practiced throughout Haiti today generally include wake, funeral (in a chapel, if possible), procession to the cemetery and burial, if the ‘dead’ (mò) wishes to avoid eternal social disgrace, in an above-ground tomb. After a church funeral and burial begins the nine-day mourning period, in which relatives and neighbors of the deceased gather nightly to mourn, chant Catholic texts, socialize, recreate and cajole the dead (with food) to take leave of the living for the world of the ancestors. The culminating ‘final prayer’ (denye priyè) may precede or coincide with an elaborate and generous banquet for the guest of honor—the dead himself or herself—and for scores of discriminating relatives and neighbors equally presuming to be received with generosity and grace. Because this reception requires a huge capital outlay, it may be postponed until survivors muster the funds and assemble the key participants, who may be working outside the country.

To this ritual funerary structure, the gangan ason annexed the temple customs of ‘sending’ and ‘retrieving the dead from the water’ (voy-e/wete mò nan dlo). Thus in Ti Rivyè, after ‘the final prayer’, as part of a relatively modest ritual, the gangan ason today performs the ceremony known as dragozen which ‘sends’ the spirit of the deceased ‘under the water’ (anba dlo) far below the earth’s surface. Before departing, the spirit of the deceased typically attempts to speak to the family but his/her fragile voice, sounded through that of the gangan ason, fades out before he/she can communicate anything substantive. The family is resigned to wait until the ancestor emerges to ‘speak’ at the far more elaborate and expensive ‘retrieval from the waters’ ceremony to learn more fully the circumstances of his/her death.
No sooner than a year and a day, but sometimes as long as several years later, the *gangan ason*, assisted by a corps of initiated female servitors (*ounsi*), performs the ‘retrieval’. Because of the high expense, kinsmen often collaborate to retrieve several of their dead relatives at the same time. Although each family must purchase their own ritual objects and a new set of white garments and shoes for the dead, they may share the burden of fees for the *gangan ason*, offerings and food and drink for guests. This collaboration lowers the cost for each unit. The voice of the ancestor is heard from inside a white tent, where at least two *gangan ason*—I have seen as many as four—are sitting. The main Guinea spirit authorizing the rite is Loko, the same spirit who confers Guinea authority to the *gangan ason*. Loko responds to the rhythmic language of the *ason* beseeching him to go and fetch the dead under the water. Speaking through a *gangan ason*, Loko narrates his journey to a far-away body of water where he encounters the ancestor who only reluctantly agrees to move from the liquid oblivion into a basin of water which has been placed inside the tent (the dead’s element is fluid; they cannot move around on the earth).

The retrieval of the dead provides the frame for a ‘social drama’ (Turner 1957). Everyone expects the ancestor to settle personal accounts as his or her spirit individually addresses each relative and close friend he or she left behind. The ancestor is thought to have been in a kind of time warp and to have no knowledge of what has transpired since being sent into oblivion. Neither is the ancestor able to see who is present. Hence the ancestor typically addresses persons who have since died or emigrated or who chose not to attend. The assembled answer in their stead, bringing the ancestor up to date on their fates or excusable absences. An unexcused absence may be interpreted as an admission of guilt.

The reclamation rite progresses with the *gangan ason* mediating the conversation between the bereaved and the ancestor until the *lwa*, Loko, barges in to terminate the dialogue. The departure of the dead leaves the microphone available, as it were, to certain key *lwa* with whom the deceased was known to have shared a special relationship. These *lwa* take turns addressing both individual members of the descent group and the group as a whole. At least one *lwa* can be expected to remind the assembled of the dead’s outstanding ritual ‘debts’. The threats by the *lwa* to harm the descent group if they fail to collaborate to ‘pay up’ typically elicit repeated, earnest pledges on the parts of the assembled. The same *gangan ason* is likely to be the one to consult when the heirs begin to fall sick, to divine the *lwa’s* continued displeasure as the source of the afflictions and to direct the ceremonies required to acquit the heirs of the debt.
Once the lwa finish settling their scores with the family, the gangan ason and the ounsi perform a ceremony that uses fire to consecrate objects or people. Known as ‘burning pots’ (bwule wazen), this frequently required Guinea transformation ritual can only be carried out by specialists who have ‘taken the ason’. At the close of the ‘burning pots’, a vessel consecrated for the ancestor is set upon the altar of the shrine next to those of the other ancestors. Henceforth, whenever a descendant needs to communicate with the ancestor, he or she may go to the shrine and employ the gangan ason to summon the ancestor to speak in the jar.5

I inadvertently learned about Misdor’s introduction of rites for reclaiming the dead during a conversation with Ten ten about reclamation rites for his brother, Breton, which was conducted by Misdor’s eldest son and two other gangan ason. Ten ten mentioned that he had witnessed the first ‘reclaiming of the dead’ in the village, a fact of which he was genuinely proud. I asked him to explain. With great enthusiasm, he proceeded to recount the story of how Misdor removed his paternal great-grandfather and apical ancestor, Tonton Ogoun, from the waters below the earth. It was around 1937; Ten ten said that he must have been about fifteen years old at the time.6 Ten ten recalled that

they pitched the tent in front of the mouth of the well. Misdor and his assistant went inside—there weren’t a lot of gangan [ason in those days who might accompany him inside as they would today]. He went inside with the ason in his hand. He called the lwa with his ason. Papa Legwa, Papa Loko—they have to come first. Papa Loko… went to fetch him. Papa Loko said, ‘The man doesn’t want to come out!’ He preferred to stay and make trouble.


Suddenly there was a loud splash that wet the people standing nearby, yet no one observed anything falling into the well. Because the ancestors are thought to need water—recall the basin of water inside the tent—the splash was a tangible sign of the ancestor’s presence. The spray of water from the well convinced Ten ten that what the skeptics said about the gangan ason was untrue:

That’s why, when people say they don’t believe in what the gangan do, I say, ‘it’s because you don’t understand.’ It’s the real thing. There is no science—they say they [the gangan] lie. They do real things. They really do take people out of the water.

Although in contemporary practice the period of the ‘dead’s’ submersion in the abysmal waters rarely lasts more than two years, approximately sixty years passed before Misdor advised his heirs that it was time to retrieve Tonton Ogoun from the water. I asked Tenen why his family had waited so long to retrieve Tonton Ogoun’s spirit from the abysmal waters. According to Tenen, until Misdor’s introduction of the reclamation of the dead, his family had not practiced the custom of retrieving the dead from the waters: ‘Long, long ago, they didn’t take dead out of the waters. When someone died you left them there.’ (Lontan, lontan, yo pat retire mò nan dlo. Mounn nan mouri, ou kite l la a.)

Tenen explained that his grandparents ‘did not understand the African Guinea ways back then (yo pat konprann afè Lafrik le a).’ Even though Tenen had frequently professed to serve ‘authentic Guinea’ (fran Ginen) in the way of his ancestors (who were direct descendants of Africans), he was now asserting that those very ancestors were not familiar with the genuine Guinea practices. During the mortuary ritual, he heard the ancestor, Tonton Ogoun, imparting new ritual instructions to the assembled family, even though he now seemed to be asserting that Tonton Ogoun himself was not enlightened to these same ritual practices. Tenen’s apparent innocence of the contradictions posed by that statement suggests just how convincingly the professional gangan ason had laundered the changes in ritual practice.

The emergence of the custom of performing the two-phased mortuary rite signaled a shift in the ritual ‘function’ of the dead. Instead of being ‘out there’, the ancestor could now be ritually transformed through the flames of the ‘burning pots’ ceremony, contained in a vessel and managed through the language of the ason. When the dead spoke through the clay vessels inside their shrine, it was to give ritual instructions. The ancestors now functioned, in other words, to solicit the fidelity of descendants to their (the ancestors’) newly discovered authentic Guinea legacy.

The introduction of rites for retrieving the founding first testament may well have been the single most pivotal social innovation during the first half of the century. The mortuary rites of passage facilitated transformations of ‘the eritaj’, the incorporation of a formal charter and the annexation of a professional temple voodoo hierarchy. These changes in the minimal definition of ‘the eritaj’ in Ti Rivyè account for the ascendance of a few ‘families’ and the disappearance of many more who lacked the organization necessary to fulfill the ‘Guinean’ spiritual legacies of their founders.
The *kanzo*: initiation rites for women

Misdor’s influence on ritual practice in Ti Rivyè is also felt in the incorporation of temple voodoo’s formalized ritual roles for women into the African traditions of the *eritaj* (descent) groups. At the end of the ten-day initiation the novices achieve the rank of *ounsi*, qualifying them to perform a specialized role in the lineage’s core rituals under the direction of (male) *gangan ason*.

When I interviewed Camolien about the ritual innovations introduced by the *gangan ason* over the last half-century, the topic of *kanzo* seemed to exasperate him more than any other. In his view, the practice of *kanzo* was a racket for the *gangan ason*, who benefited not only from fees collected from the initiates, but also from their unlimited supply of ‘free’ labor whenever the *gangan ason* was hired to direct a descent group’s rites. Camolien said that

> Long ago there weren’t a lot of *ounsi*. My mother wasn’t an *ounsi*. We didn’t have people who were *ounsi*. My mother—they inherited the *lwa*, they served the *lwa*. Now, there is no lack of *ounsi*. It’s so the *gangan* can make money, beat the drums, pay—Long ago we didn’t have this—all this nonsense. Now there is all this business. That’s why I don’t pay attention to them.


The formalization of the woman’s role of *ounsi* had to do with the *gangan ason*’s consolidation of communication with the inherited *lwa* and the countervailing decline of the oracular function of possession. There appears also to have been a shift in the usage of metaphors for possession: from possession as a means of speech to a mode of dance. The oracular sense of possession, conveyed by the image of ‘to speak in the head of someone’ (*pale nan tèt*), for example, ‘Ezili Dantò speaks in the head of Sirina’ has been replaced by a metaphor of display, that is, ‘to dance in the head of someone’, e.g., Ezili Dantò dances in the head of Sirina.

Thus when I asked a *gangan ason* (who ‘took the ason’ from Misdor) why there were no women in the community who had become fully fledged ritual leaders (*manbo ason*), he responded, ‘Men take the *ason* here and *lwa* dance in the heads of women.’ (*Ist gason pran *ason*; *lwa danse nan tèt fi*.) (In fact women came from elsewhere to take the *ason* from Misdor and his son but they did not ‘practice’ locally.) It was less acceptable for men to become vessels for the *lwa* at public rituals, as Ravenscroft (1965: 178) found during his fieldwork with Misdor and his family. Occasionally a *gangan ason*’s body would quiver
momentarily or appear to totter off balance. I was told that these involuntary motions meant that a lwa was attempting (in vain) to ‘mount’ the gangan ason.

When the lwa manifested themselves through ounsi, it was not primarily to talk to the descent group, but rather to dance to the drums and songs. Put to silence, the lwa became virtuoso performers. However profound the truths that can be communicated through dance, possession-performance has been transformed into the least congenial setting for the lwa to speak directly to the heirs. The lwa dance and gesture rather than speak. When they do converse it is through pantomime. The male gangan ason supplies the words to interpret the ‘charades’ for everyone else.

Access to the lwa was now restricted to two channels controlled by the gangan ason: the language of the ason (more often heard from across the wall of a tent or shrine) and initiated ounsi women. ounsi had become the appropriately mute ‘horses’ for the lwa at increasingly spectacular and costly ‘services for the gods’ (sèvis lwa), replete with drumming, singing, flag bearing, parades, etc. It was rare for a lwa to overtake the body of an heir who was not either an ounsi or preparing to become one. But it was not uncommon to see a lwa overtake a guest of the gangan ason, that is, someone who was not a member of the descent group and whose lwa was not specifically invited to the ceremony.

The kanzo initiation today is a ten-day rite of passage during which novices ‘lie down’ (kouche) in the altar room of the shrine in utter submission to the old, venerated, African, male spirit named Danbala Wedo. ‘Lying down for Danbala’ (kouche pou Danbala) does not symbolize sexuality as much as symbolic death in preparation for rebirth into a new identity. The novices are dressed in white cloth and are treated as though they were delicate, vulnerable newborns. The social expectation that every woman go through kanzo notwithstanding, it is assumed that a lwa ‘claims’ (reklame) a woman to go through the rite of passage. The spirit Danbala Wedo typically communicates this request by ‘holding’ (kenbe) her, that is, by making her sick. He temporarily releases her once she makes the commitment to get initiated.

In contrast to the severe, life-threatening afflictions caused by gods of the ‘hot’ or ‘bitter’ pantheons, illnesses sent by Danbala and other members of his relatively ‘cooler’ and ‘sweeter’ pantheon tend to be non-acute, chronic and to affect any part of the body. These afflictions are diffuse enough to accommodate a broad constellation of symptoms which nevertheless respond to one, and only one, remedy: kanzo (the term is used as noun, adjective and verb).8

Today, between the months of June and October, most local gangan ason conduct annual kanzo rites. Until the early 1980s, Misdor’s eldest son, Victor, held three kanzo a year in order to accept all of the ailing women needing to be ‘cured’. The public ceremonies and dances accompanying the retreat of the
novices, and their emergence as *ounsi* at the end of the rite of passage, were the most important and festive social events of the summer season. They were attended by hundreds of white-clad *ounsi* and their relatives. Initiation rites were also competitive occasions for the *gangan ason* and their *ounsi*. People ranked the *kanzo* according to the 'heat' of the music and dancing, the refinement of the ritual, how many attended and the generosity and etiquette of the hosts and hostesses, etc. (cf. Deren 1953: 161).

The conspicuous expenditure of financial resources by the novices is a significant social achievement. Everyone is keenly aware that such-and-such a woman has succeeded in amassing the considerable funds associated with the *kanzo* initiation: fees to the *gangan ason*, drummers, a lay Catholic priest and the novice's ritual 'mother' and purchases of ritual objects, three sets of new garments, sacrificial victims, various offerings to the gods, and food and beverages to be served to scores of guests on four separate public occasions. Not to be ignored as a cost is the loss of the novice's labor for almost two months, which means foregoing income and/or compensating someone else to take her place.

Even by local standards (elsewhere in Léogane), this particular Ti Rivyè community has a reputation of being especially disposed toward the *kanzo*. One individual's perception that 'every woman was initiated' (denye fi *kanzo*) was supported by my calculations that fully half of the adult women had gone through this expensive rite of passage and the majority had done so within the past decade. Some *ounsi* novices were young girls who had not yet been 'claimed' to be initiated but rather accompanied their mothers into the altar room. Among the eight novices being initiated at Tonton Ogoun's shrine in 1983, for instance, were four adult women and four girls ranging in ages from nine months to fifteen years old. The mother of the three-year-old told me that she decided to take advantage of the reduced rate to initiate her daughter. She fully expected that the girl would eventually need to *kanzo*. Ironically, it was becoming increasingly common for *ounsi* to submit to the *kanzo* ordeal a second time, it having been divined that immunization conferred by the first initiation had lost its effectiveness.

The extent of *kanzo* initiations in this community provides evidence of the profound success of Misdor, his sons and their 'students' in disciplining people to be good and loyal producers and consumers of new ritual 'products'. Women fulfilled their duty to 'the family' by becoming *ounsi* and then expending enormous amounts of their labor in the performance of ritual duties. But they also learned—as did their spouses, children and siblings—the 'good' habits of contributing lavishly to ever more codified and spectacular rituals. More than other 'children of the *lwa*, *ounsi* and their close kin can be expected to contribute regularly and generously to the *lwa*.
The novices’ confinement ends on a Sunday morning with a cheerful and festive rite of incorporation. The novices emerge from the altar room dressed in crisp, new dresses of sky blue but still under cover of large straw hats and towels. (Because of their heated condition, they are particularly susceptible to exposure to cold.) The novices have not only recuperated; they are more beautiful than before. While standing among relatives and friends attending their emergence, I recall hearing flattering comments as to how healthy the various fattened-up individuals looked.

After the lay priest baptizes the new ounsi, they fall into rank behind the gangan ason, his assistant (laplas), and the two flag-bearers in an enormous processional of white-clad ounsi and their families. When the descendants of Tonton Ogoun and his neighbor, Mme André, carried out this parade, their destination was a fresh-water spring at the edge of the sea, the haunt of their respective Danbala Wedo(s). At the spring they would perform a ceremony invoking the divine water serpent. Two or more Danbala would appear in the persons of already initiated ounsi to welcome the new ounsi into the fold. The ‘serpents’ would fall into the water with a great splash and wriggle around until ready to creep onto land, where they would be helped to stand by the gangan ason. The Danbala would perform the devotional greeting to the gangan ason, an acknowledgment of the authority of the latter, and then each new ounsi would greet the spirit(s).

On their way to the spring, the procession would pause to perform ceremonies at certain sacred places (demanbre) that symbolized the history and charter of ‘the family’: various trees which were ‘depots’ (depo) for the ancestral lwa and the remains of the homestead of the apical ancestor—a piece of the foundation to his/her house, the ruins of a well, or the stump of a tree (cf. Lowenthal 1987: 275-283). The ceremonies included tracing flour blazons (vèvè) identified with individual lwa, libations, chants, flag waving, and often possession. As they knelt to kiss the flour blazons of the lwa identified with each of these sites, the novices were physically identified with the landscape of the original peasant estate and initiated into the spiritual legacy of ‘the family’, united in a single web of connection with the lwa, the founder, the ancestors and the family land.

At the climax of a kanzo initiation rite in August 1984, a lwa served by Mme André, the founder of a local descent group, mounted one of the heirs. Just as the participants arrived at the site by the beach where Mme André’s house once stood, an ounsi named Yanpwin, who had been initiated by Misdor five decades before, was overcome by Mèt Olokán. The lwa paraded back and forth over a narrow space loftily proclaiming ‘This is my first testament! This is my first testament!’ (Se prenmye tèstaman m! Se prenmye tèstaman m!)
Mèt Olokan/Yanpwin’s declarations could have been heard as a proud and forceful affirmation of collective identity, a stirring testimony of the unity of the lwa, the descent group and their land. The great lwa did not, however, announce that powerful outsiders had commandeered the testament and reduced it to a third of its original size. Neither did Mèt Olokan/Yanpwin mention the unequal distribution of the land that remained, nor the relatively disadvantaged position of Yanpwin herself. Yanpwin’s first (cross) cousin, Yvon, was the gangan ason of the fanmi. Yanpwin ritually addressed him as ‘papa’ even though he was eighteen years her junior. He could count on this ounsi to re-enact the ‘history’ of Mme Andre’s estate. Significantly, Yanpwin underwent a ‘second’ kanzo initiation by Yvon the following year. Misdor had initiated her along with her mother when she was a young child. At the age of sixty-eight she again ‘laid down for the lwa’ at the shrine established during the sixties by Yvon’s father, who had been a ‘student’ of Misdor.

The Guinea Prayer

The eritaj appropriated new, invented temple voodoo traditions into its authentic African charter. This charter is solemnly recited during the Guinea Prayer (Lapriè Ginen) at the beginning of virtually every ritual conducted on the estate. The exceedingly somber and reverent style of the Guinea Prayer proceeds in marked contrast to the exuberant drumming, singing and dance which immediately follow. Accompanied only by the percussion of his ason, the gangan leads the group in drone-like antiphonal chanting of invocatory formula.

The Guinea Prayer is rendered by repeating a strophe in the esoteric ritual idiom called langaj, spoken only by lwa and gangan ason, into which a genealogy of names is sequentially inserted. The gangan ason solicits the assistance of the participants to complete the genealogy, who duly display their ‘genealogical erudition’ (Lowenthal 1987: 251).

Listening to the descent group’s ‘genealogical myth’ gives one the impression of an uninterrupted continuum of descent from the time of Guinea and the lwa, through the moment of purchase by the First Owner of the Estate (Prenmye Mèt Bitasyon), the generations of his or her descendants, and, last but not least, the temple staff mediating the descent group’s connection with its Guinea legacy. Thus the formalized temple roles have been completely integrated into the substance and identity of ‘the family’ in Ti Rivyè.

In Ti Rivyè, as we have seen, the catalyst for the introduction of temple practices and their successful incorporation into local practice was Misdor.
Under his guidance, heirs of Tonton Ogoun, Michèl Pè and other descent groups ‘discovered’ their ancient and authentic Guinea traditions. Temple rituals and roles were incorporated into the substance and charters of these ‘great families’ and henceforth mediated the enactment of descent. The perception of Misdor’s ritual innovations as authentic Guinea traditions handed down by the ‘first owners of the estate’ concealed the fact that they were bagay achte, ‘things you buy’, born out of money. Ritual practices had been thoroughly monetized, elaborate and spectacular. Professionals mediated access to the ancestors and the lwa; a member of ‘the family’ had to employ the gangan ason to ‘talk’ to the ancestors and inherited lwa because possession and dreaming had lost their oracular functions. The concept of ‘claiming’ was redefined such that an inherited lwa ‘held’ a person to buy power, that is, to get initiated. Loko, the refined, priestly, inherited lwa who legitimizes the gangan ason’s authority and rescues the ‘dead’ from the abyss, is said to ‘claim’ his ‘godchild’ (fiyèl) to purchase his privileged access to the Guinea cosmos. The metaphor of the Catholic ritual godparent-godchild relationship is apt. In a godparent-godchild relationship, a contractual relationship (which may overlap with kinship since godparents are often close relatives) becomes substantialized. The children of ritual co-parents refer to one another as ‘brother’ and ‘sister’ and they and their children are prohibited from marrying one another.

In the wake of the turbulent incorporation of peasant land and labor into the expanding American empire, the descent group was being redefined as a traditionally African Guinea ritual unit. By the time Tonton Ogoun’s heirs retrieved him from the abysmal waters, for example, the Haytian American Sugar Company was sitting on half of the estate (which they leased from Joseph Lacombe) and offering wage labor to the very people who were its rightful owners (at artificially depressed rates insuring the corporation’s comparative advantage). Even as outsiders violated the founders’ estates, ‘the family’ accorded their founders the status of deities (but not lwa). The shrine, which became a constitutive symbol for the descent group, housed the spirit of the ‘first testament’ in a clay jar surrounded by vessels containing the spirits of all other ancestors whose spirits had been reclaimed from the waters below the earth. Places where the first ‘testament’ (tèstaman) once dwelled or fetched water or served lwa became sacred sites (demanbre) worshiped during ‘the family’s’ core rituals.

**Relations of performance and observation of ritual practice**

It is not coincidental that the ritual leader who ushered modern forms of ritual communication and worship into Ti Rivyè was very familiar with foreign and
elite Haitian ethnologists studying the popular religion. Nor is it accidental that his ‘house’ hosted a regular stream of foreign researchers, including Alfred Métraux, Erika Bourguignon (1976 and 1979), Kent Ravenscroft (1965) and Diane Wolkstein (1978) and remains the point of contact between local participants and foreign voyeurs as outsiders from the capital and beyond come to view the spectacle at the temple, and the temple staff occasionally travel to wealthy neighborhoods of the capital to stage authentic peasant rituals.  

The person who escorted foreigners to observe the rituals at Misdor’s temple was Odette Mennesson-Rigaud, a self-taught French ethnologist who was associated, along with her Haitian elite spouse, Milo Rigaud, with the national Bureau of Ethnology. Misdor’s son recalled how Mennesson-Rigaud brought foreigners to a particular 24 December ritual, known as maji (magic), in the early 1950s. Indeed both Mennesson-Rigaud (1951) and Métraux (1954-1955 and 1972) wrote about a maji service celebrated in December at Misdor’s shrine. Mennesson-Rigaud’s (1951) article, ‘Noël Vaudou en Haïti’, is a detailed description of the maji ritual, in which she praises him for his virtuoso playing of the lead drum and his elder brother for his soaring lead vocals in the antiphonal sacred singing (Mennesson-Rigaud 1951: 46-7). Their father, though, received Mennesson-Rigaud’s most effusive praise in Mennesson-Rigaud’s article. She describes the charming Misdor welcoming his foreign visitors.

Friendly and conscientious, he put us at ease right away. He is a peasant with an open mind, who is happy to welcome you at his house and make you feel at home. Immediately, we had the same feeling as relatives who, on a happy occasion, would come to spend a few hours in a familiar surrounding (Mennesson-Rigaud 1951: 38). Misdor’s charismatic sons have obviously mastered his skills in mediating relations across class and culture. Having observed them in various interactions with individuals from the urban elites, I can attest to their subtle ways of charmingly confirming dominant outsiders in their superiority. One son recounted to me how he charmed a Haitian diplomat in order to get a job as his property manager. Proudly demonstrating his taste for dramatic presentation, he told me that when he met the diplomat, who had come to Léogane to look over his new purchase, he pretended to be a simple, illiterate peasant, even though he had lived and gone to school in the capital city. He strategically let the diplomat discover that the peasant could read time on a watch. Having projected an ideal model of the competent but deferential caretaker, he got the job and the valuable political clout that went with it.

To what extent did Misdor and his sons project an image of peasant ritual that foreign researchers desired to consume? The elite’s appetite for ritual, or
Misdor’s perceptions of their expectations, reinforced the trends toward codification of elaborate ritual performance. Misdor encouraged his foreign visitors to participate in the spectacle, even to the extent of ‘experiencing’ trance. According to Misdor’s son, Mennesson-Rigaud escorted a group of foreigners to a 24 December ritual around 1950 (probably the one described in her article). He took pride in his ability to manipulate the foreigners’ desire to embody ‘real’ Vodou. In such hallowed ethnographic texts as *Divine Horsemen* by Maya Deren and *Island Possessed* by Katherine Dunham, trance is the consummation of the subject’s desire to know the Other. It is a quintessentially modern experience, which is inwardly directed at knowing the autonomous self. This notion is of course far removed from local ‘traditional’ ideas of spirit possession-performance whose only moral purpose is ritual communication between spirit and members of the descent group. Misdor’s son in effect admitted this sleight of psycho-cultural hand when he recounted how his playing of the lead drum helped make the music so ‘hot’ that the foreigners lost consciousness.\(^\text{12}\)

Mme Milo Rigaud used to take foreigners here during Magloire’s term (1950-1956). Magic was jamming at Misdor’s shrine—the 24th of December. Everyone lost it. Mme Milo had escorted fifteen foreigners. All of them lost it. . . . The Magic (music) overtook them, entered them. The Magic took over everybody.

In light of Misdor’s son’s account, Métraux’s report of what he witnessed at the ritual is all the more revealing. Métraux’s report is a thoroughly voyeuristic account of the spectacular aspects of the rite. Curiously entitled ‘Christmas in the Countryside’, it gives the erroneous impression that the exaggerated spectacle he describes is typical of domestic or rural practice.

The other question raised by the re-examination of Misdor’s interactions with researchers concerns the possible impact of the ‘professional’ audience on the study of, and perhaps even the shape of temple Vodou emerging from the Port-au-Prince, Cul-de-Sac and Léogane ‘laboratory’. There was fluid movement between the sites of recreational and religious Vodou by paid performers, managers, professional (academic) and recreational observers, including well-off Haitians and European and North American tourists. By the 1940s, Haiti had become a fashionable tourist site and Haitian fashion was all the rage (Plummer 1990). Members of the ‘folkloric troupes’ were also (or later became) priests and priestesses. The most renowned of the latter was the dancer and ethnologist, Katherine Dunham. Drummers for these troupes
moved between recreational and religious Vodou, I learned from Ti Marcel Jean, who had accompanied Dunham’s troupe. According to Lois Wilkin (1992), research was apparently carried out at local hotels observing, monitoring, recording and studying the practices of ‘authentic’ adepts.

An important sponsor of this research was the Haitian state’s new Bureau d’Ethnologie Haïtien (Haitian Bureau of Ethnology). The Bureau’s sponsorship of studies of the peasants’ religion and folklore provided the material for promotion of an authentic Haitian identity rooted in African culture and relocated in Haitian peasant religion. Local and foreign ethnologists, some of whom had professional ethnological training, answered the call for the black nation to assert an anchor of identity that challenged the hegemonic narrative. This anchor was found in Africa. Nicholls (1979) and others have argued that Haitians’ humiliating encounter with the cultural imperialism and racism of the Americans who occupied their nation-state between 1915 and 1934 (the longest military occupation in the region), inspired the search for an alternative national identity. Yet similar movements were transpiring simultaneously elsewhere in the Americas. With the encouragement of the Brazilian Ministry of Culture, for example, a similar Africanist project was unfolding (Sansone 1999:13) that focused on the African essence of Candomblé. A medical doctor and ethnologist, François Duvalier, who later became Haiti’s first pro-Vodou president, was a central member of the Bureau D’Ethnologie, and he authored or co-authored with Lorimer Denis several studies of the peasant religion. Yet the quintessential scholarly article authorizing an original, black, counter-hegemonic Haitian identity was ‘Le rôle du Vaudou dans l’indépendence d’Haïti’ by Odette Mennesson-Rigaud (1958).

Outside of a very limited Haitianist circle, Odette Mennesson-Rigaud’s influence on the study of temple Vodou is insufficiently recognized. Ethnomusicologist Harold Courlander studied in Haiti from the late 1930s through the 1950s. Mennesson-Rigaud was, he told me during a 1993 interview, ‘the ultimate insider, the outstanding non-Haitian. She knew everybody. She was the best informed of all researchers and scholars.’ Erika Bourguignon, who conducted her research in 1947, echoed Courlander when she reflected on the personality of her host and mentor (in Haïti). ‘Odette Mennesson-Rigaud set herself up as the official guide to and interpreter for Vodou’, Bourguignon told me in 2005. Mennesson-Rigaud’s influence, she suggested, resulted from the fact that she ‘operated on a variety of (social and cultural) levels. And she had a car, which few people did. She had access to whatever level she wanted to get to.’

Mennesson-Rigaud led Maya Deren, newly arrived in Port-au-Prince, to the temple in Cul-de-Sac that was the basis for the famous text, Divine Horsemen.
Mennesson-Rigaud introduced Alfred Métraux to the Port-au-Prince manbo, Lorgina, who, as a priestess and head of an urban temple, was a central source for *Voodoo in Haiti*. She later brought Erika Bourguignon to the same manbo. Over three decades, Mennesson-Rigaud, as noted above, led a stream of researchers to meet and observe Misdor and his sons in Ti Rivyè.

Just as Mennesson-Rigaud linked professional researchers from Port-au-Prince to the surrounding plains, where they allegedly witnessed ‘rural Vodou’, she also linked plains people to the capital, as they joined the ranks of ruined peasants whose resources had been devastated by expropriation of lands, low wage labor and the reintroduction of intensive sugar cane production. Mennesson-Rigaud found jobs for members of Misdor’s family in the city. She helped his niece Antoinette, for example, find work in a hotel. In 1946, when Erika Bourguignon arrived in Port-au-Prince to begin fieldwork, Mennesson-Rigaud introduced her to Antoinette, who became her Creole teacher and a key informant. Bourguignon accompanied Antoinette to Ti Rivyè to continue her research there.

Mennesson-Rigaud’s ‘access to whatever level she wanted to get to’ and her routes from urban to peri-urban shrines leads to consideration of the visitors’ impact on the practices that were becoming standardized in the peristyles. Reflecting on their possible impact does not imply that the researchers diluted or polluted pure ritual forms (if there ever were such forms). Nor does it suggest that local actors were passive receptacles. Rather our attention is drawn to how foreign researchers and local performers were creatively involved in mimetic interplay. Did this ‘play’ contribute to the disappearance of some ritual forms and the transformation and promotion of others, including new forms that researchers misidentified as traditional African legacies and which the new professional ritual leaders imbued with the authority of precedence and authenticity?

A further issue is to what extent did the performers at Misdor’s temple imitate an idea of what they thought the voyeurs—academic or pleasure seekers—wanted to see? We can speculate on the role the ethnographers played at these temples by giving performers something to imitate and, by acting as social scientists, using their discipline to reify and stabilize the results. It is worth thinking about how these studies may have shaped understandings of what constitutes Vodou and what practices and objects are worthy of being studied and collected. Sansone’s (1999) analysis of the ‘Use and Abuse of Africa in Brazil’ offers intriguing parallels to this case. He argues that research justifying African roots of Candomblé devalued hybrid elements of practice that appeared less African and thus, less authentic and may have helped to hasten their disappearance.
Rijk van Dijk (1998: 155) has argued with regard to discourses on tradition in Africa, ‘we have to shift our perspective from nostalgic theory to a theory of nostalgia.’ The imagination of Vodou’s African timelessness suggests a sort of fundamentalism that is common in modernity’s discourses of history and ‘primitives’. The modernity of Vodou is reinscribed in the application of the term itself. Even today, some rural dwellers are confused when outsiders (mis)use this specific ritual term to indicate a broad and coherent set of beliefs and practices. Neither do they recognize its contents as assimilable in the same category. The Creole term, vodou, refers to a genre of sacred music and dance performed in worship of a particular pantheon. Indeed the ritual and cosmological importance of this pantheon greatly increased in the last century. Loko, Danbala and other spirits of the pantheon authorized the power of the professional priests and temple organization that emerged in Port-au-Prince in the early decades of the twentieth century and spread to the nearby plains of Cul-de-Sac and Léogane, displacing simpler and more egalitarian ritual practices. These religious dislocations were both the subject and the object of the study of Vodou in Haiti and a fleeting point of Métraux’s prescient but ultimately duplicitous interest.

References


Notes

1. One carreau equals 3.14 acres or 1.49 hectares.

2. Sales of garden plots financed these costs. Murray concluded that by putting land into circulation among members of the same socio-economic stratum, this religious innovation indirectly resolved the Kinanbwa peasants’ land shortage problem. This pattern did not appear to apply to Ti Riviè a decade later. Rituals for the *lwa* and funerals were financed with cash, provided almost entirely by migrants.

3. Thanks to the recent, massive labor migrations of Ti Riviè’s young, few of those at home have to worry any longer about repose under the ground.


5. Lowenthal (1987: 361) writes that several authors have mistakenly claimed that the secondary mortuary rite transforms the ancestor into a *lwa*. Ancestors, who link the living members of the descent group to their spirits, are clearly distinct from *lwa*.

6. Tenten's residence in Ti Riviè at the time was partly the result of his defiance of his family's plan for him to be a domestic slave (*rèstavèk*) for a female relative in Port-au-Prince. He refused to endure the beatings of his mistress and returned home.

7. As for dating the introduction of the *kanzo* initiation elsewhere in Haiti, Herskovits (1937) writes that initiations of servitors (*ounsi*) were not being carried out in more remote Mirebalais but were taking place closer to Port-au-Prince in the Cul-de-Sac. Dorsainvil (1931) and Maximilien (1945) describe these rites. (None of these authors specifies a loca-
For later descriptions of the kanzo confinement see also Métraux (1972: 192-212) and Deren (1953: 154-155, and 216-224).

8. Our census of all of the households in the community included questions about ritual affiliation. The senior woman in each house was asked whether she was an ounsi, where she got initiated, her age at the time, the name of the gangan ason leading the rite of passage and his relationship to her. (The same series of questions was asked about any other ounsi in her immediate family: mother, sister, child.) The next question posed to her was ‘why did you get initiated?’ The uniform response was ‘I was sick.’ The seventy-one respondents identified headache as the most common ailment leading to the decision to kanzo (41%), followed by respiratory problems (11%), fever (10%), digestive ailments (10%), sudden blindness (9%), sudden weight loss (4%) and other suffering (15%) including toothache, hearing loss, emotional crises and pain in body and limbs. See Richman 2005 for an extended discussion of gender relations and affliction in kanzo.

9. A review of various descriptions of the African Prayer in the literature suggests that Misdor employed a version of the Africa Prayer mediating urban, congregational and rural, kin-based systems of substantiation. The temple voodoo versions do not present a genealogy linking the participants to the founder while the domestic voodoo examples do not include the temple hierarchy. See Maximilien (1945: 98-101), Brown (1976: 54-58), Métraux (1972: 206) and Deren (1953: 208), Mennesson-Rigaud (1946) reports a service sponsored by a trader from Miragoane who lived in the capital and belonged to an urban shrine. The manbo (priestess-shaman) rendered the Prayer by invoking her own inherited lwa and official temple roles and relied upon the sponsor to recite names of her ancestors and her particular lwa. Mennesson-Rigaud translates mait’bitation (mèt bitasyon) as ‘master of the house’ (or shrine), rather than founding ancestor of the family’s cultivable land. In contrast to these examples of urban performances of the Africa Prayer, Lowenthal’s (1987: 250-251) account from the rural area of Fond des Nègres is a genealogy of all of the remembered ‘dead’ members of the descent group. Names of the lwa are not integrated in the Prayer; neither are the ranks of the temple hierarchy since these formalized roles are relatively rare in the region. Larose’s (1975b: 506) description from a community in Léogane is, as we would expect, the closest to the Ti Rivyè version, with the important difference that a temple hierarchy is not invoked. The Bois L’Etang Prayer includes an enumeration of ‘all the spirits worshiped by the family (which he defines as a cognatic descent group)’, ‘those of prominent ancestors’, the ‘founding ancestor’ and even the ‘French plantation owners’.

10. When I first visited the shrine in 1983, it was as a guest of some of the poorer cousins of Misdor’s sons. Since his sons were the established brokers between the insiders and foreign researchers, my arrival through unexpectedly humble channels and without a request for them to be my guides did cause some initial puzzlement. They were also surprised by my ignorance about the relationship between their temple and the ethnography of Vodou in Haiti. That ignorance was mainly the result of the authors having disguised the names and places in their texts.

11. Métraux (1972: 236-243) provides a lively description of the same ceremony. The closeness of the two texts suggests that some of Métraux’s (1972) may have been borrowed from Mennesson-Rigaud’s (1951) without proper citation.

12. Métraux (1972: 236-243) provides a lively description of the same ceremony, though some of his text appears to have been borrowed from Mennesson-Rigaud (1951) without proper citation. Bourguignon (1976) also describes this ritual. There is no mention in any of these accounts of foreigners going into trance.