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## **Constructing Africa: Authenticity and Gine in Haitian Vodou**

### **Constructing Africa**

Manbo Marie Maude Evans of Jacmel, Haiti, and Boston<sup>1</sup> taught me the following song for the Lwa Ayizan.<sup>2</sup>

*Ayizan Gweto anye o,  
 Ayizan, m pap mouri malere.  
 Ayizan Gweto anye o,  
 Ayizan, m pap mouri malere.  
 Kreyol yo di pa gen Gine anko.  
 Kreyol yo di pa gen Gine anko.  
 Genyen youn tan nap we yo.*

*Ayizan Gweto anye o,  
 Ayizan, I'm not dying of misfortune.  
 Ayizan Gweto anye o,  
 Ayizan, I'm not dying of misfortune.  
 Creoles say we don't have Africa anymore.  
 Creoles say we don't have Africa anymore.  
 There will be a time when we'll see them again.<sup>3</sup>*

Vodou songs, though short, almost always rely on multiple meanings and assume the presence of multiple speakers. For example, this song may be read as a dialogue. Ayizan, a wizened market women, says that she is not dying “*malere*,” a term which means both “poor” and “wretched.” In other words, while conditions are not great, she is surviving. Then, the chorus responds—as though speaking of a different kind of misfortune—that they have lost *Gine*, a word literally translated as “Africa.” Ayizan’s response is grammatically strange: Speaking of *Gine*, a singular noun, she assures the chorus that there will be a time when we’ll see them (*yo*) again.

It is my belief that this song reveals a double consciousness in which Vodouisants construct identity as dependent on, yet simultaneously distinct from, Africa. While the singers identify themselves as Krèyol—that is to say, as “New World” subjects—they express longing for Gine, which they have lost. This construct becomes even more nuanced when one recognizes that the word *Gine*, while indicating ancestral Africa, is also the technical name for the world of the spirits. Through metonymy, *Gine* can be a plural noun, “them,” because it is the seat of a pantheon of divine and ancestral spirits. Within the context of Vodou cosmology, Gine is described, not as a continent, but as a forested island beneath the water where the lwa make their home. Gine is therefore comparable to heaven.<sup>4</sup>

This double entendre—Africa as continent and Africa as heaven—is key to understanding the ways in which ideas of African authenticity are portrayed and constructed in Vodou, and perhaps African diaspora religions more generally. Take, for example, the idea of purity presented by Mãe Aninha, spiritual mother and founder of the Candomblé temple Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá—which is widely regarded as the Bahian temple to have most successfully preserved authentic African traditions. However, as J. Lorand Matory details in his book *Black Atlantic Religion*, these “authentic” African practices were not, in fact, preserved, but rather reconstructed—and in some cases invented—in Brazil during the beginning of the twentieth century. Mãe Aninha worked with Martiniano do Bonfim, who had traveled to and lived in Nigeria, to create a liturgy for her temple. As Matory notes, Mãe Aninha’s decision to choose “authentic African” practices over Brazilian traditions set a precedent which altered the future, as well as the history, of Candomblé.<sup>5</sup>

However, I think Matory underappreciates the extent to which Mãe Aninha manufactured “Africanness” as a desirable aesthetic distinct from “African purity” as related to a continent. After all, Aninha worked closely with Bonfim and was probably aware that the ceremony for the twelve ministers of Xango was his own creation and not something he had witnessed in Yorùbáland. Therefore, for her to cite this ritual as an “African tradition” is either a purposeful act of un-remembering (or deception) on her part—or else, and I think correctly, a reference to Africa as an aesthetic and spiritual sensibility tied to such criteria as efficacy and beauty.<sup>6</sup> In this sense, the rituals of Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá are not a remembering, but a reimagining, of Africa. As a mythic, aesthetic resource, Africanness—or African “authenticity”—has the power to sanctify matter, not in reference to a geographical location, but in reference to heaven.

## Africa as religious capital

In the introduction to his study of Haitian Marian devotion, Terry Rey relies strongly on Pierre Bourdieu's concept of religious capital.<sup>7</sup> While Rey uses this to help explain the dominance of Catholicism in colonial and post-colonial Haiti, it is also a helpful tool for approaching this notion of African authenticity as it is expressed in both Haitian Vodou and Candomblé. According to Bourdieu, religion is a relationship between producers (in the form of church hierarchy and clergy) and consumers (lay people). To gain and keep as many lay people as possible, religions create orthodoxy, a form of capital. Because orthodox behaviors and beliefs have salvific benefits, orthodoxy—which Bourdieu calls “religious capital”—becomes something believers desire to “accumulate” by conforming to it.

Bourdieu's model can also be used to explore “Africa” as a form of religious capital. One can say that Mãe Aninha used her own aesthetic as grounds for generating orthodoxy. Bourdieu's model was made primarily with Christianity in mind. Therefore, orthodoxy generates heavenly salvation; in essence, salvation is the gold standard which backs the religious capital of Christian orthodoxy. It is more difficult to speak of salvation in relation to Candomblé and Vodou, and particularly in connection to African authenticity. Neither religion possesses a clear doctrine of salvation in an afterlife. It may be possible, however, to speak of spiritual homesickness and longing as the insurers of the religious capital of Africa/Gine.<sup>8</sup>

In the song for Ayizan which I discussed at the beginning, Gine is defined only as something which has been lost. Bonfim traveled to Nigeria to recover lost religious knowledge, returning with his “African” rites. Through the performance of these rites, the *terreiro* of Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá becomes imbued with the properties of “Africa”—a place that, by definition, is missing but can be recalled through ritual action. Likewise, Vodou liturgy—through references to Gine and the summoning of spirits believed to come from Gine—is designed to enfold the worshippers in an envelope of African space. It does not matter that this space bears no obvious resemblances to the actual continent of Africa; this judges it by criteria it does not seek to fulfill. Quite simply, Gine, as an aesthetic form of orthodoxy or religious capital, is *something* which is longed for as well as the fulfillment of that longing.

## The rise of the priesthood

In her impressive study, *Migration and Vodou*, Karen Richman identifies two linked historical processes as having contributed substantially to the creation of *Gine* as a form of orthodoxy. First, Richman points out the great

significance of the alienation of the peasant class from their hereditary homesteads. Second, Richman discusses the simultaneous creation of a professional—and increasingly urban—Vodou priesthood.

Although few records are available of the religious activities of the nineteenth century, it is possible through oral history to reconstruct some idea of Vodou during this time. It is very likely that this involved the worship of a limited set of spirits inherited through the family. Most important to Richman's analysis is the fact that these practices did not require the purchased services of a professional priest (*oungan*) or priestess (*manbo*). These speculations appear to be corroborated by other sources. For example, in her essay "The Feasting of the Gods in Haitian Vodou," Odette Mennesson-Rigaud notes that the family of her informant, Mariline, had not required the assistance of a professional priest to serve the spirits.

[Mariline] inherited her cult from her mother and modestly says that she is only a servant who is subject to the will of the loa and the voice of her conscience. For many years Mariline served the *mystères* [spirits] unassisted and only rarely sought the advice of an *hungan* (priest) or *mambo* (priestess) about some illness or accident. Then, a few years ago, she entered the service of the *humfort* (temple) of the mambo where the *mangé loa* described here was celebrated. She now has the rank of *hunsi kanzo* in the *vodu* hierarchy.<sup>9</sup>

Later, Mennesson-Rigaud adds,

According to Mariline's own statement, she may perform the *mangé loa* without the service of a *mambo* because it is only a simple one. Her mother's loa are not accustomed to being served in an *humfort*. (*Si nanchon m'pas habitué servi caill' Mambo.*)<sup>10</sup>

I cite at length from this essay because it provides a rare glimpse into the transition from home-based to temple-based Vodou. Mariline reports that she inherited her mother's spirits in the last decade of the nineteenth century, and explains that her mother had not relied on the services of a professional priesthood to serve her own *nanchon*.<sup>11</sup> However, by the time that Mennesson-Rigaud completed the research for this essay (published 1946, researched in the late thirties and early forties), Mariline had "converted" to temple-based Vodou and now depended upon the services of a mambo to assist with the feeding of her spirits.

This chronology helps to confirm Richman's thesis that the creation of "authentic" Vodou occurred during the early decades of the twentieth century. Her research, based in Léogane (a fertile plain located along the coast, southwest of Port-au-Prince) convincingly ties this to the machinations of the American sugar industry, which defrauded masses of peasants from their inherited homesteads.<sup>12</sup> This coincided with the invasion of Haiti by American Marines in 1915, who occupied the country for seventeen years. Alienated from their lands—the principle site of their religious devotion—peasants turned increasingly to the services of professional priests and priestesses to arbitrate their relationships with the spirits. Simultaneously, the professional priesthood underwent a period of innovation that institutionalized ceremonies like *kanzo* (initiation) and *wete mo nan dlo* (retrieving the dead from the waters)—ceremonies said to be authentic Gine practices inherited from the ancestors. Ironically, these new, authentic ceremonies replaced the *actual* ceremonies inherited from familial ancestors.<sup>13</sup>

Richman's neo-Marxist analysis characterizes the professional priesthood as a bourgeoisie which alienated the peasant class for a second time, separating from their inherited spirits those who had already lost their lands.

Although the temporal frame is unclear, at some point a new cadre of professional gangan [priests] rose to prominence. Their source of power derived from a lengthy and expensive initiation ritual under the guidance of a well-established gangan. The novice was (and is) said to "take the ason" (*pran ason*), the sacred gourd rattle and bell used to "call the lwa" (*rele lwa*)... Through the use of the ason, the professional gangan created a monopoly on new forms of communication with the inherited gods, which, as [Gerald] Murray points out, obviated the pre-existing channels of access to the lwa, dreams and possession, that were open, at least in principle, to everyone.<sup>14</sup>

A possibility Richman does not appear to consider is that the ritual innovations of the priesthood allowed Vodou, previously tied to specific plots of land, to become a mobile, urban religion. In other words, nineteenth century Vodou largely would not have survived under the novel socio-economic conditions of the early twentieth century. The innovations of the professional priesthood allowed it to transform and survive.

I believe that the primary innovation of the priesthood, upon which all of their other innovations depended, was the shifting of authenticity

from being primarily a matter of *place* to a matter of *actions*. Under the *bitasyon* (homestead) system, Gine was something accessed through certain places. Temple-based Vodou, relying on “mass-produced” and reproducible temple environments, made Gine something accessed, not by the implicit virtues of certain places, but by what you *did* in or to these places. At the homestead, offerings for the spirits would traditionally be left at the site of old foundations, wells, and particular trees. In the temple, the *poto-mitan*, the ritual centerpost, could serve the same purpose. While there is nothing inherently “authentic”—or even spiritually interesting—about a pole that holds up the roof, the ritual actions of the clergy have the power to transform this pole into the road which the spirits travel to reach earth. And any pole can be used; in fact, it is sometimes sufficient to simply imagine the presence of a *poto-mitan*. The actions, rather than the things themselves, create sacred space and draw the spirits closer.

### **Scholars, artists, and outsiders**

While Richman is right to emphasize the importance of the priesthood in generating the present face of Vodou, she unfortunately downplays the contributions of others who have been as important. One group she does briefly mention is scholars. She provides a wonderful account, filled out by her own interviews, of a visit paid by Odette Mennesson-Rigaud to the temple of Misdor, a major oungan in Léogane, for a Christmas Eve ritual in 1947. Mennesson-Rigaud brought with her a group of foreign researchers, including Alfred Métraux. Both Mennesson-Rigaud and Métraux later published accounts of this service as an example of authentic Vodou.<sup>15</sup> However, as Richman points out, Misdor was hardly a typical Vodou priest. Possessed of a particularly flamboyant, theatrical style, Misdor encouraged his sons and students to travel to the capital and return to Léogane with elements of the new, burgeoning urban Vodou which was being practiced there. Misdor was also the first oungan in Léogane to “give the ason”—that is, to initiate people into the priesthood who were not relatives, not direct inheritors of his family’s cult of spirits.<sup>16</sup> Richman points out that this theatrical style was especially appealing to foreign observers, who were so moved by the service that they became possessed—an important fact which is omitted from the scholarly accounts.

The foreign academic audience may have contributed to shaping the ritual traditions emerging from Misdor’s “laboratory.” 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. His successors have perpetuated his style. Outsiders from the capital and beyond come to view the spectacle in Ti Rivyè [Léogane], and the Ti Rivyè gangan ason [priests] have gone with their drummers, singers, and other kin to stage “peasant” ritual performances in the capital.<sup>17</sup>

While it is the case that Misdor’s style was his own innovation, the fact that there was an audience in Port-au-Prince interested in seeing “peasant” performances of Vodou rituals speaks to the influence and power of scholars like Mennesson-Rigaud and Métraux. In his recent article, “Secretism and the Apotheosis of Duvalier,” Paul Christopher Johnson rightly identifies scholars like Jean Price-Mars,<sup>18</sup> François Duvalier, and Lorimer Denis—who together founded the Haitian Bureau of Ethnology—as having been leaders of the Haitian Noirisme movement. These men were also instrumental in the publication of *Les Griots*, the seminal journal of Afro-Haitian studies. Through their research and publications, these scholars and social activists reinvigorated Vodou, introducing it to an urban middle class which had previously sought distance from a religion associated with the peasant class.<sup>19</sup>

An even wider American and European audience was introduced to Vodou by the shocking “true confessions” books published by American Marines stationed in Haiti during the United States occupation. William Seabrook’s *The Magic Island*<sup>20</sup> and Faustin Wirkus’ *The White King of Gonave*<sup>21</sup> created an international appetite for mysterious nighttime ceremonies performed by Black natives.<sup>22</sup> Tourists who made the trek to Haiti were greeted with staged performances of “authentic” Vodou. What was “authentic”—that is to say, what was given funding to be performed—was based on what the urban middle class had been exposed to by scholarship or by the new temple-based Vodou practices of the capital, since they had limited knowledge of Vodou as practiced anywhere else. Scholarly description often changes what it purports to describe. In the example just discussed, the publications of scholars had the effect of helping certain styles of Vodou to triumph over others as more authentic—and therefore more celebrated, funded, and available for international observation.

In other cases, scholarship helped to produce a mythos and pedigree for Vodou which had not previously existed. Landmark works by Milo Rigaud<sup>23</sup> and Louis Maximilien<sup>24</sup> sought to “uncover” the African sources of Haitian Vodou. For Rigaud, this meant linking Vodou cosmology to ancient Egypt—an imaginative and false history which nonetheless has had influence upon the learned Vodou priesthood, who read his work and



took to heart his arguments. For example, Rigaud “found” elements of European magic, cabala, and freemasonry in Vodou—an association which acknowledged and also encouraged the growing coincidence, especially in Port-au-Prince, between the Vodou priesthood and Masonic membership.<sup>25</sup> It also meant the increased use in Vodou of symbols from Masonry and the western magical tradition—influences that can be seen on the walls of Vodou temples in Port-au-Prince to this day.

Maximilien’s most significant work, *Le Vodou Haitien*, opens with a chapter entitled “*Genese Vodouesque*” (“Beginning of Vodou”). It begins, “Vodou is a religion constituted of various ancient rites, organically linked by metaphysical ideas, still alive in Haiti, bearing ancient traditions which can be illuminated by ancient texts concerning the Egyptian mysteries and even the works of Herodotus.”<sup>26</sup> He then goes on to cite Egyptian papyri, Greco-Roman mystery traditions, hermeticism, Gnosticism, and the Bible to help explain the origins and the mysteries of Vodou. It is difficult to tell at times whether he is doing comparative work, or actually suggesting real connections between the traditions. In all likelihood, it is a distinction which he did not himself maintain. As with Rigaud, Maximilien’s text was—and still is—read by Vodou clergy, who have (to varying degrees) been influenced by his “findings.”

It is also worthwhile to consider the role which Vodou visual and performance cultures have played in standardizing what Vodou *looks* like. Some of the greatest Vodou priests, priestesses, and visionaries in recent memory—for example, André Pierre, Silva Joseph, Edgar Jean-Louis, and Alcide—have been or are visual artists. The works of these artists, which can be found in galleries throughout the world, also decorate the walls and altar rooms of numerous Vodou temples throughout Haiti and the Haitian diaspora. Interestingly, it was the Russian-American scholar Maya Deren who first encouraged André Pierre to paint more seriously.<sup>27</sup> Her encouragement—based on her outsider’s view of what was noteworthy—led Pierre to international recognition and a measure of economic success.

Of course, one cannot speak of Deren without mentioning her *Divine Horsemen*, one of the most influential works on Vodou to have ever been written.<sup>28</sup> Maya Deren originally came to Haiti as a dancer, under the encouragement of Katherine Dunham, for whom she had worked as a dancer and secretary. Dunham had researched extensively in Haiti, studying the dance styles of Vodou so that she could later incorporate them into her internationally acclaimed dance style and choreography. Dunham’s dance technique was later channeled back into Haiti, and now plays a role in how dance students in Haiti are taught Haitian dance. Dunham was also a scholar, and her book *Island Possessed* remains an important first-hand account of

Haiti during *Noirisme*.<sup>29</sup> Lavinia Williams and Vivianne Gauthier were also integral to the process of standardizing the movement culture of Vodou.<sup>30</sup> Gauthier, trained as a ballet dancer, still continues to teach dance in Port-au-Prince. Students who learn folkloric dance from her have a style that is obviously influenced by the formality and shape of ballet.

Equally important to the musical culture of Vodou has been the contribution of famous drummers and *hounjenikons* (ritual chorus leaders)—Coyote, TiBe, Frisner Augustin, Teiji Ito, to name but four—as well as popular *rasin* (roots) musicians and ethnomusicologists like Gerdès Fleurant (Papi Toto).<sup>31</sup> Fleurant, though Haitian, was not raised in Vodou. A church organist for much of his early life, Fleurant was drawn to Vodou in his adulthood. He subsequently became initiated as an oungan and has since written some of the most important work on the music of Vodou.

One cannot help but note the great number of these scholars and artists who fall into the category of outsiders—either because they are not Haitian or because they were not raised in the religion. I mention this because of the great impact it has on their notion of what is authentic to the tradition. Whereas insiders of the tradition—those raised in it—are likeliest to discuss authenticity on the grounds of what has been received or given to them by their families, outsiders cannot have the discussion in these terms. Instead, authenticity becomes either a question of historical processes—as in the case of this paper—or else aesthetic distinctions. Through the introduction of these forms of reasoning, the question of authenticity has gained numerous other layers of subtlety, making it frequently difficult to understand which process is being glossed when Gine or authenticity are invoked.

### **Modern authenticity**

An interesting example of a group of people dedicated to standardizing and “purifying” Vodou is the Beauvoir family. A dynasty of learned and popular priests, the current generation is headed by Max Beauvoir. Famously fictionalized in Wade Davis’ *Serpent and the Rainbow*<sup>32</sup> and the Wes Craven film by the same name,<sup>33</sup> Max Beauvoir is the founder and head of Le Temple de Mariani in Carrefour, Port-au-Prince as well as Temple of Yehwe in Washington, D.C. (now relocated to New York under the direction of Manbo Nicole Miller). When, under Duvalier, Haiti still experienced tourism, Beauvoir used to host at his temple in Carrefour the performance of Vodou dances for tourists and the curious. It is, in fact, through these performances that Wade Davis became introduced to Beauvoir.

In 2005, Beauvoir founded the *Fédération Nationale des Vodouisants Haïtiens* (National Federation of Haitian Vodouisants, or Federasyon

Nasyonnal Vodouyizan Ayisyen [Krèyòl]) in Mariani, the seat of his priestly power. Named as the “Ati National” in 2008 (a president-like, or perhaps pope-like, role),<sup>34</sup> Beauvoir heads this organization composed of Vodou priests and priestesses (theoretically) chosen to represent their regions. Beauvoir wrote the constitution for the F.N.V.A., in which the goals of the organization are stated as, “to put in place a permanent Vodou structure, to collect opinions, however divergent they may be, in the spirit of tolerance, fraternity and hospitality, and to offer helpful suggestions to the Government...”<sup>35</sup> Although the organization’s goals do not explicitly include the policing of authenticity, Beauvoir is known to have largely excised Catholic elements from his Temple’s liturgy because he deems them to be inauthentic to Vodou.<sup>36</sup>

Meanwhile, Max Beauvoir’s sister, Mathilda Beauvoir, is famous in Paris as a manbo. As one of the first Vodou priests to firmly establish herself in France, Beauvoir exerts considerable control over the French and European Vodou community. Her student Claude Planson published *Vaudou: Un Initié Parle* in 1974, anticipating the public appetite for tell-it-all books on Vodou and much to the consternation of the Vodou community. Planson later wrote *Vaudou: rituels et possessions* (1975), *A la découverte de Vaudou* (1979), *Vaudou* (1987), and *Le grande livre de Vaudou* (1996). These books were authorized by Mathilda Beauvoir and almost exclusively informed by Planson’s work with her. Through Planson’s numerous books, Manbo Mathilda essentially flooded the French-speaking market with easily available and accessibly written books which presented her family’s unique vision of Vodou.

Max Beauvoir’s daughter, Rachel Beauvoir-Dominique, is a scholar and professor of anthropology and sociology at the Faculté d’Ethnologie, the Faculté des Sciences Humaines, and the École Nationale des Arts in Port-au-Prince. She has contributed works of Vodou scholarship to the two most substantial volumes about Vodou arts to have been published in the anglophone and francophone worlds.<sup>37</sup> As founder of the Fondation Ayizan Velekete, Prof. Beauvoir-Dominique has created Fonds Documentaire Odette Mennesson-Rigaud, a website which makes available in electronic format a selection of the field notes of Odette Mennesson-Rigaud, anthropologist and wife to Milo Rigaud.<sup>38</sup> Mennesson-Rigaud did most of the field work which her husband subsequently used to write his books. Her papers are notably devoid of any traces of masonry, Egypt, cabala, and the like. As such, they represent what could be construed as a more accurate record of Vodou during the period in question (1944-1969). By making these documents available, one might argue that Prof. Beauvoir-Dominique has uncovered the more “authentic” source documents for Milo Rigaud’s landmark work. However, as already discussed, Mennesson-Rigaud played her own role in

giving Vodou its current shape. This serves as a valuable reminder that none of these documents exist in a vacuum or are value-free.

### Deconstructing Africa

As a multivalent term, Gine indicates, at its simplest level, Africa. However, in the context of Vodou cosmology, this Africa is not the continent presently identified by that name, but an island residing in the spiritual waters that separate the human world from the world of the divine. Gine is also an eschaton—a place which is longed for, and which one hopes to see someday. It may appear, at first, that this eschaton is none other than the real West Africa, the lost home from which hundreds of thousands of Haitian ancestors were stolen. However, Vodou liturgy makes clear that these places are not identical. Take, for example, this song from the *Priye Gine* (The Prayer of Gine), which distinguishes between the two.<sup>39</sup>

*Wangol o, Wangol o,  
nap monte twa mo priye  
ki soti Afrikan, ki prale nan Gine.  
Di twa Pate, twa Ave Maria,  
Di twa Pate, twa Ave Maria,  
Je vous salue, Marie, ki rele lwa yo.*

Wangol o, Wangol o,  
we will reveal the three words of prayer  
which came from Africa, which go to Gine.  
Say three Our Fathers, three Ave Marias,  
Say three Our Fathers, three Ave Marias,  
I salute you, Mary, who calls the lwa.

Wangol is a spirit whose name likely derives from the word “Angola.” However, *Wa Wangol* (King Wangol), and his female counterpart *Ren Kongo* (Queen Kongo), are more frequently associated with the indigenous Indian spirits of Haiti. They are represented by a stand (shaped like a coat stand) and a large metal triangle which are “dressed” in colorful ribbons and strips of fabric—dress which is imaginatively likened to the clothes of an Indian king and queen. In this song, Wangol says that they will reveal the efficacious series of prayers required to call the spirits. These prayers came from *Afrikan* (Africa), but lead to Gine. The Africa which they lead to is not the same Africa from which they hail. It is the missed, and missing, Gine of the spirits, a forested island that exists simultaneously at the bottom of the cosmic waters (*anba dlo*) and also at the backs of mirrors (*do miwa*).

In addition to signifying a continent and an eschaton, Gine is sometimes used to describe a particular group of spirits and the form of devotion

associated with these spirits. I have purposely left this discussion for last because it is this meaning of Gine which has received the most scholarly attention. Therefore, it is essential to have a full discussion of authenticity and Gine behind us already to place this in context. Within temple-based Vodou, the spirits are typically divided into two main categories, *Rada* and *Petwo*. Most temples will have two large rooms used for ceremonies: One will be devoted to the Rada spirits, the other to the Petwo spirits. Ceremonies must always start with Rada, believed to be the older and more African of the spirits. Rada is associated with the color white, with coolness, and with gentleness. When the point comes in the ceremony to honor the Petwo spirits, everyone will literally move to the Petwo room, often stopping to change into colorful clothes. The service will then recommence. Petwo is often identified as indigenous to Haiti, having its birth in the Haitian revolution. Petwo is associated with the color red, with heat, and with hardness or swiftness. Of these two, it is the Rada spirits who are almost universally identified, by Vodou practitioners themselves, as being more Gine than Petwo.

Scholarship on Vodou, until very recently, tended to focus on speculations about the origins of Rada and Petwo. As early as Herskovits, Rada was generally identified as originating in Dahomean religion.<sup>40</sup> Petwo, conversely, proved much harder to pin down. Beginning with Moreau de Saint-Méry, Petwo was categorized as a pantheon originating in Haiti, perhaps deriving its name from an eponymous founder, Don Pedro, “a Spaniard by birth.”<sup>41</sup> Later, Maya Deren and others argued that Petwo came primarily from Indian sources, “imported” by maroons who encountered the remaining indigenous people in their mountain hideouts.<sup>42</sup> More recently, scholars like John Thornton and Robert Farris Thompson have written on the likely Kongo/Angolan sources for Petwo.<sup>43</sup>

However, taking to heart the critique of Mintz and Price,<sup>44</sup> several scholars have set aside the search for African origins in favor of understanding the unique Haitian processes that have generated both Rada and Petwo. Three scholars stand out as having made particularly compelling arguments: Karen Richman, Andrew Apter, and Stephan Palmié have, respectively, examined the distinction between Rada and Petwo through the lenses of class, creolization, and morality.

In Léogane, where Karen Richman did her fieldwork, people do not generally use the terms Rada and Petwo, but instead substitute *Gine* and *Maji* (magic). Inspired by Karen McCarthy Brown and Serge Larose, Richman identifies Gine and Maji as different “existential options,” rather than distinctions made on the basis of origin. Gine is associated with wealthy, white, and foreign powers (all identified by the word *blan*). Demanding

frequent service, the food offerings made to Gine spirits are expensive and difficult to obtain, but rarely have significant nutritional value. Gine, as it were, can afford to not eat. Additionally, the help of the Gine spirits is generally not sought when miraculous intervention is needed. In essence, the Gine spirits are parasites: They take resources, but will not work in return. On the other hand, the spirits of Petwo, associated with Maji, are frequently sought when assistance is needed. These spirits are often seen as morally dubious, however, because they are bought—that is to say, acquired—instead of inherited through the family line. Offerings for Petwo can be made infrequently—as little as twice a decade—and are composed of an abundance of fortifying foods similar to those eaten everyday by peasants. Although venerable, Gine ultimately does not have much power on its own, and requires the (morally questionable) vitality of Petwo to continue functioning. Richman summarizes, “‘Authentic Guinea’ exists only insofar as it can eclipse—and exploit—another way-of-being-in-the-world.” As such, the tension between Gine and Maji mirrors the tension between the bourgeoisie and peasants, an exploitative relationship in which the first, invested with the *appearance* of power, depends on the alienated labor of the latter in order to survive.<sup>45</sup>

Unfortunately, Richman’s research is very region-specific and difficult to reproduce elsewhere. It is clear, based on the transcripts she includes, that many people in Léogane do in fact think of Gine and Maji in these terms. However, my research into Vodou as practiced in both Port-au-Prince and Jacmel indicates that these views are by no means universal. First of all, the terms Gine and Maji are not used elsewhere as synonyms for Rada and Petwo. Furthermore, the characterization of Rada as dependent on Petwo for its power is atypical. Rather, Rada simply possesses a different kind of power, a point I will return to later.

Apter also identifies Rada and Petwo as related to class distinctions. However, he draws on his extensive research into Yorùbá religion to nuance this distinction. For Apter, Petwo’s power derives from what, in the Yorùbá context, Apter refers to as “deep knowledge.” Deep knowledge can be glossed as divine power that is hot, unstable, transformative, and iconoclastic in nature. In Yorùbá religion, all òrìsà possess deep knowledge, which can be ritually activated by “heating” the god through either proper or improper service—that is, by pleasing or displeasing the god. However, this heated state is undesirable during most occasions because it is unmanageable and dangerous. Therefore, a “cool” state is preferred except in times when swift action is needed. In Vodou, rather than being contained in the same spirits, these two qualities—cool and hot—were divided into the Rada and Petwo

paradigms. Rada, representing the interests of the “mulatto elite,” seeks to control the revolutionary powers of Petwo, thereby preserving its interests.

As Vodou developed under plantation slavery, the revisionary and, indeed, revolutionary principles of deep knowledge were mapped onto polarized class relations, with the heterodox Petwo opposing the hegemonic Rada. I call this mapping “the lowness thesis.” Unlike the Yoruba and Dahomean kingdoms where the structural bases of power competition were rooted in segmentary opposition between political factions, in Haiti such bases took the vertical character of class relations... As the Rada line of Ginen became high and hegemonic within Vodou, identified symbolically with the Haitian elite, the revisionary principles of deep knowledge were emically located in the low, non-Ginen, Petwo line, associated with the hybrid character and transgressive power of revolutionary Creoles.<sup>46</sup>

Although writing specifically about Afro-Cuban religion, Palmié builds on the work of Richman and Apter by suggesting that the distinction between Rada and Petwo is ultimately a moral one. Palmié focuses his discussion on the distinct ways people interact with the spirits of *regla de ocha* (Santería) and *reglas de congo* (Palo Monte). The orishas of Santería relate to their devotees as parent to child. The relationship is nurturing, and through ritual acts and the placement of ritual objects, the orichas are symbolically incorporated into the household and the family unit. While they may, on occasion, make trouble for their children, the orichas are generally even-tempered and nurturing. On the other hand, the spirits of Palo Monte are difficult and dangerous. An *nfumbi*, a Palo spirit, is the spirit of a dead human. Magically “resurrected” and placed in a vessel, the *nfumbi* is made to work for the person who has bought it. The *nfumbi* must often be abused in order to make it work. In exchange for its work, it is fed—not to sustain its life, per se, but to ensure that it will be able to continue to work in the future. Palmié likens this to the relationship between master and slave.<sup>47</sup> This is also very similar to the language used in Vodou to discuss *zonbi*. The *zonbi* is a dead person who has been captured—either in spirit or in body—by a *bokò* (sorcerer), who is then master of the *zonbi* and can make the poor soul work forever. *Zonbi* are said to till fields, harvest crops, and do all forms of menial labor formerly relegated to slaves.

I agree with Palmié that the language of Vodou is suffused with images of slavery—a discourse which functions as a form of living memory and a way of performing history. For example, an *oungan* or *manbo* must

understand how to make a spirit work for him or her. Different spirits require different forms of attention in order to be made to work. Rada spirits respond most positively to promises of gifts and service—in other words, the serviteur will be made to work for the spirit. But Petwo spirits, more hot-headed in nature, are often summoned to a ceremony by the blowing of a whistle and the cracking of a whip. Sensual reminders of the legacy of slavery, these items literally whip the spirits into a state of excitement, making them more likely to work.<sup>48</sup>

However, what all of these scholars fail to note—with the exception of Apter—is that the distinction between Rada and Petwo varies considerably depending on who is asked. Apter makes this valuable critique, writing that “each society sees itself as the guardian of the true way, whatever its relative denomination, and the Petwo cults are no exception.”<sup>49</sup> Furthermore, discussions of the differences between Rada and Petwo tend to reify the distinction between the two. Even Apter, in his critique, accomplishes the same by speaking in terms of “followers and practitioners” of Petwo. In point of fact, virtually every Vodouisant serves both Rada and Petwo; furthermore, virtually every Vodou ceremony transitions effortlessly between Rada and Petwo. In increasingly cramped and urban settings, there is not even the possibility of moving to a different room. Under these conditions, Rada and Petwo are becoming less distinct categories. Moreover, discussions of Rada and Petwo tend to ignore the fact that many spirits straddle these categories. Ezili Dantò, Simbi, Zaka, and Bosou are simply some of the major spirits to often be served in both Rada and Petwo. For this reason, I tend to reject the classic scholarly description of Rada and Petwo as pantheons.

While I agree with the valuable distinctions which Richman, Apter, and Palmié are making, I do not believe that any of these can be said to be the fundamental marker of difference between Rada and Petwo. Rather, I return to my original view that Gine is ultimately an aesthetic sensibility. I posit, by correlation, that the difference between Rada (more Gine) and Petwo (less Gine) is an aesthetic and stylistic distinction. As in Yorùbá religion, Vodou champions things which are cool, slow, relaxed, calm, light, fresh, gentle, sweet, at ease, stoic, and dignified. All of these qualities are glossed as “cool” and as “Gine.” Cool, likened to water, is the ideal resting state. Rada is cool and watery. However, Vodou seeks to use and control states that are hot, fast, tense, nervous, obscure, sweaty, hard, salty, over-worked, hyper-responsive, and uncouth. These qualities are glossed as “hot.” Hot, likened to fire, is the ideal working state. Petwo is hot and fiery. However, Petwo is not the opposite of Gine. There is no opposite of Gine. Petwo simply function out of an aesthetic modality which is less Gine. For that matter, Rada is not Gine—it is more Gine. Strictly speaking, only Gine is Gine.



Dances, drumming, and ritual acts associated with Rada and Petwo confirm these distinctions. Rada dancing and drumming—characterized most notably by *yanvalou*—is calm, open, undulating, and stoic. Petwo dancing and drumming, by comparison, is fast, full, spasmodic, and fierce. This appears not to have changed significantly in more than two hundred years. Moreau de Saint-Méry wrote the following observations about Petwo, a dance he describes as “similar to the Voodoo [*yanvalou*] dance, but more hectic in its movements”:

Sometimes this dance, called the *Danse à Don Pèdre* or *The Don Pedro*, inflicted fatal casualties on the Negroes; and sometimes the very spectators, electrified by the convulsive movements, shared the madness of the dancers, and drove them on, with their chanting and hurrying rhythm to a crisis which, to a certain extent, they shared.<sup>50</sup>

I like this description because it places the difference between Rada and Petwo, even so early, in style—rather than power, class, or morality.

Both cool and hot can be desirable or undesirable states, depending on the circumstances. Otherworldly Gine is difficult to rally and can, at times, be so cool as to be frigid. Therefore Rada, while capable of miraculous intervention, tends to take longer to work and require more encouragement. Petwo, though quick to perform miracles, is difficult to quiet afterwards and may exceed the desired effects. In essence, neither is entirely ideal. Both Rada and Petwo are idiosyncratic and require the finesse of a skilled practitioner in order to achieve the desired results.

## Conclusions

Gine, a word which means “Africa,” has been an important site of contested meaning. As a continent, it is a lost homeland. As heaven, it is a source of longing and a hoped-for eschaton. As an aesthetic category, Gine has served as a form of religious capital through which various competing social forces have attempted to create and maintain orthodoxy. With the rise of the priesthood, Gine increasingly became a resource only the clergy could summon and control. Yet, the clergy’s innovation of ritual acts to summon Gine into any space made it possible for Vodou to survive in the form we know today. Scholars and artists—many of whom were “outsiders”—also played a substantial role in identifying which traditions would come to be seen as the most “authentic” expressions of Vodou.

In spite of these twentieth century developments, the writing of Moreau de Saint-Méry suggests that, remarkably, the basic aesthetic distinctions

between proto-Rada and proto-Petwo were more-or-less established by the end of the eighteenth century. This does not invalidate the efforts of this author and others, for it is clear that various additional distinctions—economic, political, social, and moral—have subsequently been poured into these forms. Nonetheless, it should be humbling to recognize that Vodou early possessed an aesthetic trajectory it appears, in many respects, to have pursued through the centuries, in spite of major and complementary developments.

Ultimately, Gine is an overdetermined symbol. With each modification to the “authentic” tradition, preceding definitions of Gine are not lost but simply overwritten to varying degrees of success. Now thoroughly palimpsest, Gine can be called upon to serve a number of different, and often divergent, ends. Gine can simultaneously be invoked to reinscribe hegemonic values or valorize the enduring spiritual and cultural legacies of the uprooted.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Manbo Marie Maude Evans is a *manbo* (priestess) with more than two decades of experience. A resident of the United States, Manbo Maude regularly holds services for the *lwa* in her temple in Mattapan, a suburb of Boston. During the summer, she routinely travels home to Jacmel, Haiti to conduct services and initiations.
- <sup>2</sup> The *lwa* (spirit) Manbo Ayizan Velekete governs the crucible of the world. Her control of the marketplace is symbolic of her power to manage transactions between the physical world and the world of the spirits. Ayizan was also the first *manbo*. For these reason she is the mother of initiates, and the sacred *djevo*, or initiatory chamber, is under her protection. The ceremony of *chire ayizan* (shredding of the royal palm leaves) is a key part of the initiatory cycle, enfolding the new initiates in the protection and purity that she conveys.
- <sup>3</sup> Manbo Marie Maude Evans and Adam McGee. “Action de Grace: a Vodou service at Harvard Divinity School,” program book (Cambridge, 2007).
- <sup>4</sup> In using the term “heaven,” I am signifying on the work of scholars like Donald Cosentino who have drawn similar comparisons. I am suggesting that the relationship between Gine and heaven is one of simile rather than synonym. While the comparison is not exact, my hope is that it may expand our sense of the meanings of both Gine *and* heaven. Particularly given that many Vodouisants are Catholic, it seems inevitable, at any rate, that the comparison will be drawn.
- <sup>5</sup> J. Lorand Matory. *Black Atlantic Religion: Tradition, Transnationalism, and Matriarchy in the Afro-Brazilian Candomblé* (Princeton, 2005), p. 126.
- <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p.115.

- <sup>7</sup> Terry Rey. *Our Lady of Class Struggle: The Cult of the Virgin Mary in Haiti* (Trenton, 1999), p. 21-26.
- <sup>8</sup> Adam McGee. "Embodied Homesickness in Diaspora Vodou" (unpublished, 2006).
- <sup>9</sup> Odette M. Rigaud. "The Feasting of the Gods in Haitian Vodou," trans. Alfred and Rhoda Métraux, *Primitive Man*, v. 19, n. 1/2 (Jan.-Apr. 1946), p. 8-9
- <sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 11. The sentence in parentheses is Kreyol written in an outdated French-based orthography. In standardized written Kreyol, it would be rendered, "Se nanchon'm pa abitue sevi kay manbo," lit. "It's because my nation [pantheon of spirits] is not accustomed to being served in the [spiritual] house of a manbo."
- <sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 11.
- <sup>12</sup> Richman's fourth chapter, "Peasants and Hidden Proletarians in Léogane," is a superb analysis of this process, which she tells by narrating the story of one particular sugarcane magnate, Joseph Lacombe, who accumulated the vast majority of the land in Léogane to be used as a sugarcane mega-plantation. Richman, p. 85-115.
- <sup>13</sup> This is a condensed form of the argument presented by Richman in her fifth chapter, "Discovering the African Traditions." Richman, p. 116-149.
- <sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 119.
- <sup>15</sup> Odette Mennesson-Rigaud. "Noël Vodou en Haïti," *Présence Africaine* 12 (1951), p. 37-59. Alfred Métraux. "Le Noël Vodou en Haïti," *Bulletin de la Société Neuchâteloise de Géographie* 15 (1954-55), p. 95-118.
- <sup>16</sup> Richman, p. 122.
- <sup>17</sup> Ibid. 123-124.
- <sup>18</sup> Price-Mars was the first person to publish a serious study of Vodou. Jean Price-Mars. *Ainsi Parla l'Oncle* (Port-au-Prince, 1928).
- <sup>19</sup> Paul Christopher Johnson. "Secretism and the Apotheosis of Duvalier," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol. 74, No. 2 (June 2006), p. 420-445.
- <sup>20</sup> William Seabrook. *The Magic Island* (New York, 1929).
- <sup>21</sup> Faustin Wirkus. *The White King of La Gonave* (Garden City, 1931). The original 1931 edition of Wirkus' book gives the following sensationalized subtitle: "The true story of the sergeant of Marines who was crowned King on a voodoo island." Donald Cosentino, ed. *Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou* (Los Angeles, 1995), p. 186.
- <sup>22</sup> Cf. Laënnec Hurbon. "American Fantasy and Haitian Vodou," *Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou*, p. 181-197.
- <sup>23</sup> Milo Rigaud. *La tradition Voodoo et le Voodoo Haïtien: son temple, ses mystères, sa magie* (Paris, 1953).
- <sup>24</sup> Louis Maximilien. *Le Vodou Haïtien: Rite Radas—Canzo* (Port-au-Prince, 1945).
- <sup>25</sup> Cf. Rachel Beauvoir-Dominique. "Underground Realms of Being: Vodoun Magic," *Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou*, p. 161-162. For information about the connection between Masonry and festivals for the lwa Ti Jan, see Donald

- Cosentino. "Introduction: Imagine Heaven," *Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou*, p. 48-49.
- <sup>26</sup> Maximilien, p. 3 (my translation from the French).
- <sup>27</sup> Interview with André Pierre featured in Martina Kudláček's 2002 film *Im Spiegel der Maya Deren* [In the Mirror of Maya Deren].
- <sup>28</sup> Maya Deren. *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti* (New York, 1953).
- <sup>29</sup> Katherine Dunham. *Island Possessed* (New York, 1969).
- <sup>30</sup> Cf. Kate Ramsey, "Vodou Nationalism and Performance: the staging of folklore in mid-twentieth-century Haiti," *Meaning in Motion*, ed. Jane Desmond (Durham, 1997), p. 345-378. For an exploration of the effects which Cuban nationalistic folkloric projects had on the music and dance culture of Santería, cf. Katherine Hagedorn. *Divine Utterances: the performance of Afro-Cuban Santería* (Washington, D.C.; 2001).
- <sup>31</sup> Gerdès Fleurant. "The Music of Haitian Vodun," *African Spirituality*, ed. Jacob Olupona (New York, 2000), p. 416-449. Gerdès Fleurant. *Dancing Spirits: rhythms and rituals of Haitian Vodou, the Rada rite* (Westport, 1996).
- <sup>32</sup> Wade Davis. *The Serpent and the Rainbow* (New York, 1985).
- <sup>33</sup> Wes Craven, dir. *The Serpent and the Rainbow* (1988).
- <sup>34</sup> Marc Lacey. "A U.S.-Trained Entrepreneur Becomes Voodoo's Pope," *The New York Times*, April 5, 2008.
- <sup>35</sup> Max G. Beauvoir. "Fédération Nationale des Vodouisants Haïtiens," <<http://www.vodou.org/FNVA.html>> (Mariani, 2005), accessed 4/10/2007. My translation from the French.
- <sup>36</sup> Author's copy of Max G. Beauvoir's *Lapriyè Ginen from Temple of Yehwe*.
- <sup>37</sup> Rachel Beauvoir-Dominique. "Underground Realms of Being: Vodoun Magic," *Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou*, p. 153-177 and Rachel Beauvoir-Dominique. "Les Puissances Invisibles de l'Être" *Vaudou*, ed. Alain Le Kim (Paris, 2003), p. 52-70.
- <sup>38</sup> Fondation Ayizan Velekete. Fonds Documentaire Odette Mennesson-Rigaud, <<http://www.ht.auf.org/OMR/index.htm>>, accessed 4/10/2007. The original documents are housed in the Bibliothèque Haïtienne des Pères du Saint-Esprit in Port-au-Prince, Haiti.
- <sup>39</sup> The Priye Gine opens all Vodou services, and is the most important piece of Vodou liturgy. Sung as call-and-response, the Priye Gine creates sacred space by naming and honoring God, Jesus, the Holy Family, the saints, the angels, the lwa, the blessed dead, and the community of the living. A complete ceremony in itself, the Priye Gine often takes hours—and can take days—to perform.
- <sup>40</sup> Cf. Melville J. Herskovits. *Life in a Haitian Valley* (New York, 1937).
- <sup>41</sup> Andrew Apter. "On African origins: creolization and connaissance in Haitian Vodou," *American Ethnologist*, v. 29, n. 2 (2002), p. 240, citing Moreau de Saint-Méry. *Description topographique, physique, civile, politique et historique de la partie française de l'île de Saint Domingue* (Paris, 1797).
- <sup>42</sup> Maya Deren, "Some Elements of Arawakan, Carib and Other Indian Cultures

in Haitian Vodoun,” Appendix B, *Divine Horsemen*, p. 271-286.

<sup>43</sup> Cf. John Thornton. *Africa and Africans in the making of the Atlantic World* (Cambridge, 1992). Cf. Robert Farris Thompson. “From the Isle Beneath the Sea: Haiti’s Africanizing Vodou Art,” *Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou*, ed. Donald J. Cosentino (Los Angeles, 1995), p. 101-114.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. Sidney W. Mintz and Richard Price. *The Birth of African-American Culture: an anthropological perspective* (Boston, 1992) p. 41: “It should no longer seem sufficient to maintain that Haiti’s twin cult, or the use of the oracles in Suriname are simply examples of Africa transplanted... Our task must rather be to delineate the processes by which those cultural materials that were retained could contribute to the institution-building the slaves undertook to inform their condition with coherence, meaning, and some measure of autonomy.”

<sup>45</sup> Richman, p. 151. This paragraph is a summary of the main arguments of Richman’s sixth chapter, “The Dialectic of Guinea and Magic,” p. 150-183.

<sup>46</sup> Apter, p. 244.

<sup>47</sup> This paragraph is a summary of the main arguments of Palmié chapter, “Genealogies of Morality: The Afro-Cuban Nganga as Wage Laborer, Slave, Maroon.” Stephan Palmié. *Wizards and Scientists: Explorations in Afro-Cuban Modernity and Tradition* (Durham, 2002), p. 159-200.

<sup>48</sup> Cf. Adam McGee. “Living memory and the trope of slavery in Haitian Vodou” (unpublished, 2007).

<sup>49</sup> Apter, p. 247.

<sup>50</sup> Apter, p. 240 citing Moreau de Saint-Méry.

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