

**Bon-Dieu and the Rites of Passage in Rural Haiti:  
Structural Determinants of Postcolonial  
Theology and Ritual**

Gerald F. Murray

**Introduction**

The Catholicism of more than one postcolonial group in the New World has been described as a surface veneer masking a much deeper commitment to non-European cultural forms and values. A number of careful studies have been done of Haitian voodoo and the authors generally allude in passing to the superficial nature of Catholic elements in the cult.<sup>1</sup> My own research among Haitian peasants has turned up a number of important non-Christian elements. But in this chapter, I will show that the religious lives of even the most ardent Voodoo cultists are not only permeated with, but clearly dominated by, the rites and beliefs of institutional Catholicism in a manner that renders empirically untenable, and theoretically questionable, any statements about "non-Western religion." I will further show that such religious subordination has been created, not by the Catholic Church itself, but by Haitian rulers. And I will argue

that the conventional downplaying of these western elements in the analysis of New World folk-cults creates theoretical obstacles to the accurate identification of a major mechanism of postcolonial dependence. In proposing such an analysis, I will be addressing myself to the larger issue of the social and political functions of religion in general, and will hopefully be contributing to a reassessment of other New World postcolonial cults which have also been labeled, perhaps prematurely, as "non-western."

Of the many factors which have changed the conduct of anthropological inquiry in recent years, among the most compelling is a growing disciplinary consensus that in most contemporary settings, local patterns cannot be understood without reference to various external forces which may have shaped, or even engendered, these local patterns. The use of such a perspective is not restricted to the analysis of economic or political phenomena. Even religion -- especially religion, some might say -- can be examined in the light of functional linkages with other spheres.

But even if an analyst accepts one or another variant of this general research perspective, he will soon find himself at a crossroads, forced to choose between two conceptual paths which appear to lead in opposite directions. One option, in an extreme form, would view religion simply as a tool of political domination. With respect to Latin America, the colonial origins of Catholicism, the continuing European or North American provenance of much of the clergy, the demonstrated historical and contemporary links between Church and ruling groups, the generalized messages advocating patience and submission in the context of an other-worldly perspective -- all of these add fuel to a view that dismisses traditional religion as an obstacle to change.

But even within this perspective, an opposite view of religion could find support. Looking at the variety and details of folk-cults in Latin America and the Caribbean, one sees manifestations of what could easily be identified as forms of de facto resistance and maneuver. In this view, the interplay between institutional religion and folk religion could be interpreted as one more window through which to view

the larger drama of less powerful groups coping, adapting, and surviving in the face of external forces. The non-institutional elements may be a survival from some ancient tradition, or they may be new creations which emerge as a response to the presence of alien forces. But in either case their persistence and vigor could be interpreted as a manifestation, on the symbolic level, of a cultural vitality, a refusal to "succumb," which has political and economic dimensions as well. Far from invalidating such an interpretation, the comic disdain with which such cults may be treated by members of the established clergy or by local elites merely reinforces the perception that important stratificational dynamics are being reflected in ritual and theological spheres.

It would be foolish to insist on an exclusive commitment to one or another of the above views -- religion as mechanism of integration/subjugation, and religion as tool of community autonomy. Neither view is inherently more powerful or correct than the other. Each of the frameworks is subject to misuse -- dogmatic debunking on the one hand, indiscriminate romanticism on the other. A more empirically sound approach to the dilemma would consider the instrumental dimensions of this or that cult as a matter to be settled by empirical research. But even this open approach runs into snags, because cults generally cannot be globally assigned with any permanence or conviction to one or another of these broad instrumental frames. Not only can a cult change over time, but even at a given point externally integrative forces and locally adaptive dynamics will be found operating side by side in one and the same cult.

The following pages will deal with this issue by examining the manner in which each of these functions is separately facilitated within Haitian voodoo, and by describing the nature of the compromise that is reached when both themes run clearly in the same cult. The material will be drawn from an examination of Haitian peasant voodoo as practiced in the village of Kinanbwa where I carried out nearly two years of fieldwork.<sup>2</sup> Though voodoo was not the major focus of research in this village of some 1200 people, during the course of fieldwork I attended several dozen

ceremonies of various types (many of which were tape-recorded), gathered quantitative data on the religious participation of all village households, and systematically interviewed selected villagers, asking for explanations and interpretations of cult-related occurrences. These interviews, which frequently entailed several sessions, were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim. It soon became clear that a modified version of the integrative/adaptative paradox was a striking feature of the domestic voodoo of the village. Though the openly revolutionary functions of the cult as reported during the slave-revolt of the 1790s and, much later, in the caco movements that were to be put down by the U.S. marines in the twentieth century,<sup>3</sup> had receded in the context of settled village life, there were a number of impressive, in some ways startling, community-serving functions that the cult had come to take on, adapting itself to certain dimensions of local agrarian existence. But of equal strength was the opposite theme, mentioned above, the theme of continuing integration into larger "Western" structures.

From the details of this particular cult, then, I will attempt to extrapolate some general questions and forge some general hypotheses, specifying which elements in a religion tend to be used by local groups to solve local problems and which features of religion in contrast appear to be used to tie local groups to outside structures. This question is especially appropriate in the case of postcolonial societies where poverty-generated crises in health, livelihood, and other spheres activate local religious activity on the one hand, but where the demands of integration into national structures simultaneously pave the way for the integrating and subordinating functions of religion.

My argument in this paper will be that the instrumental duality of folk-cults -- their simultaneous service to local groups and to larger societal forces -- can be empirically unravelled into discrete domains which specialize in one or the other emphasis. The argument will run as follows: with respect to rituals, it would appear that a persisting dominance of institutionalized elements is more likely to occur in that subset of rituals generally termed the Rites of

Passage. In other words, though there is latitude of maneuver available to the practitioners in healing rituals, domestic rituals, and others, there appear to be stronger constraints in the social Rites of Passage, and these rites will in turn serve as the ritual "handles" used by external groups to impose behaviors and attitudes on local groups.

In terms of theology, there appears to be a special niche in the pantheon of postcolonial cults reserved for the preservation of powerful colonial symbols. This is the niche of Supreme Being. Though the domain of lesser spirits is animated by a variety of local and African spirits, the Supreme Being of many postcolonial cults appears to remain a reflection and legitimizer of the external forces of society, and is less amenable to incorporation into, or manipulation by, folk rites. The basic thrust of this viewpoint is compatible with general anthropological views on religion in state societies with culturally distinct subgroups. But it is the structure of Haitian peasant voodoo that has generated the specific hypotheses, and it is to this cult that I will now turn.

### **Voodoo in Contemporary Peasant Life**

Haiti presents especially appropriate conditions for the exploration of functional duality in folk religion. The five and a half million people -- largely of African descent -- who crowd into the 11,000 square miles of Haitian territory find themselves involved in both of the above discussed currents. Heavily rural (about eighty-five per cent), generally isolated from easy access to modern medical services, the population of Haiti has had ample reason to elaborate a ritual system for the solution of local problems. But the presence of a central government, the objectively maintained and subjectively perceived status of the Haitian peasant as a member of a nation state, has simultaneously maintained conditions for the preservation of the centripetal, integrative dimension of religion.

### **Theological and Ritual Overview**

A discussion of voodoo should perhaps begin with a comment on the term voodoo itself. This word generally conjures up, for English-speaking readers, images of sorcery and magical death. Though such beliefs are present in the folk religion of rural Haiti, they play a subordinate role to other elements which will be discussed here. To avoid incorrect connotations, many analysts have adopted the practice of calling the cult by the creole name vodoû. This practice, however, may lead to the equally incorrect impression that the Haitian peasants call their religion vodoû. They do not. In their vocabulary, a vodoû is simply a type of dance, both religious and recreational, which is merely one element in the cult. They have no name for the cult as such. If one wants to inquire whether an individual is a "practitioner of voodoo," the question is best formulated as: "èské ou kon sèvi lwa," (do you serve the lwa)? The lwa are the major spirits in voodoo, and those who practice the cult are said to be serving their lwa.

How many people in Haiti serve the lwa? Statistics are hard to come by and are not reliable. Not everyone in Haiti -- not even everyone in rural Haiti -- serves the lwa. In addition to a growing number of converts to one or another Protestant sects, there is a substantial number of Catholics who publicly eschew the lwa and their services. These individuals refer to themselves as "pure Catholics" (katolik frâ). In the village of Kinanbwa, most practitioners of voodoo were relatively open about their adherence to ancestral lwa. On being questioned as to their religious behavior, some eighty-five per cent of all village adults of both sexes (N=421) turned out to be Catholics. However, fewer than three out of ten of these Catholics claimed to be "pure Catholics." The others openly stated that, in addition, they were servants of their family lwa. It is not possible to say how representative these figures from a single community are. We can suspect some underreporting, on the one hand. In view of historically recent attacks on voodoo by different governments, dissimulation tends to take the form of denying voodoo

when it is practiced rather than claiming it when it is not. On the other hand, Kinanbwa is located in a region reputed to be exceptionally heavy in voodoo. A conservative estimate would state that almost certainly more than half of the population of rural Haiti, but probably not more than three-fourths, are publicly avowed servants of their lwa.

Who are these lwa, and how does one serve them? Capsule descriptions of voodoo should be used cautiously. More than one houngan (voodoo priest) warned me against believing explanations which his competitors (or ordinary villagers) had given me of voodoo. "There are some [meaning himself] who know more than others." But such claims to special insight are not restricted to houngans. One of the central features of the cult appears to be an enigmatic power to convert even its students into blind men, each convinced that his own handle on the cult at last penetrates to its essence, its secrets, free from the blind-spots that have inevitably led predecessors into peripheral analytic tagents.

A balanced discussion would begin with an important distinction which anthropologist Alfred Metraux makes between "public voodoo" and "domestic voodoo."<sup>6</sup> Public voodoo of special cult centers, generally run by locally prominent houngans, is frequently characterized by elaborate ritual paraphernalia and impressive ritual elegance. Only a fractional percentage of servants of the lwa are in any way affiliated to such a center. The vast majority of people who serve the lwa do so on their own land, and in their own compounds, homes, and domestic shrines. This is domestic voodoo. In terms of ritual and belief, it differs substantially from the public voodoo that one sees in urban centers (and that one generally reads about in the literature). The voodoo to be discussed here is domestic voodoo; perhaps "peasant voodoo" would be a better term.

It is difficult, but not impossible, to sum up peasant voodoo, as practiced in the village of Kinanbwa. Cutting through a morass of ritual and theological detail, one can glimpse the outlines of a cult which has as one of its major focal themes the ritual contacting and appeasing of ancestral spirits.

The lwa are conceived by the villagers to be distant ancestors whose personal names have been forgotten. In addition to serving the lwa, practitioners also pay various types of homage to their dead parents. In terms of theological focus, then, voodoo could be seen as a combined ancestor cult and cult of the dead (features that are probably of African derivation). There are non-ancestral elements in voodoo; some people purchase alien lwa to get rich, to do harm, or for a number of other reasons. But in the rural areas these are still subsidiary and somewhat feared sidelines. Most ritual emphasis in Kinanbwa is given to interacting with one's own ancestors.

As is true with most folk religions, there are local "specialists" who are more skillful than the average person in interpreting and dealing with the spirit world. These specialists are generally referred to as houngans (or mambos if they are women). The peasants of Kinanbwa distinguish between two types of houngans. There is a small number of formally initiated specialists referred to as ouâgâ asô, the aso being the sacred gourde rattle given to those who pass through the initiation ceremony called kâzo. There are also many houngans whose powers came solely through enlightenment by their own family lwa. These were called by the villagers ouâgâ makout (basket houngans) or, significantly, ouâgâ Gîné (African houngans). These two types of houngans differ from each other in many ways. But organizationally neither of them belongs to any hierarchy. And though the initiated houngans tend to have more elaborate cult centers adjacent to their homes, in no real sense do they or the houngan makout have any "congregation" in the community.

To clarify the role of the houngan, it is important to point out that, within the above mentioned framework of theological emphasis on ancestor spirits, it is nonetheless sickness and death which provide the major life-crisis contexts in which voodoo ritual is actually undertaken. The voodoo of Kinanbwa takes on the dimensions of a folk medical system in which illness tends to be attributed to angry ancestors and in which the rituals performed function at a manifest level to appease the ancestors and cure the illness. Several types of rituals can be

distinguished. There are divinatory rituals, whose purpose is to ascertain the cause of illness and the path of appeasement. There are healing rituals, in which a specialist interacts directly with a sick person to cure him. There are propitiatory rituals, in which food and drink are offered to specific spirits to make them stop attacking. There are preventive rituals, in which -- even in the absence of sickness -- one's ancestors in general are given sacrifices to head off possible anger. And there are recreational rituals whose stated purpose is to permit the lwa to dance, act up (bâbôché), and in general, have a good time (prâ amizmâ-yo). These latter ceremonies are the famous "voodoo" dances which so attract tourists who, though they think they are seeing the "real thing" are usually witnessing an embellished version of a ritual which is in fact a light-hearted social finale to the much more serious domestic rituals in which food and drink are offered to ancestors.<sup>8</sup>

Summing up peasant voodoo in an anthropological nutshell, then, the picture that emerges from Kinanbwa is that of a quite unmysterious form of ancestor cult whose principal ritual activities focus on the phenomena of sickness, death, healing, and burial.<sup>9</sup>

### Peasantized Theology

A descriptive summary is merely the first step in understanding a cult. The ethnographic data which permit such an overview will also, when reexamined in the light of the theoretical propositions forwarded in the introduction to this paper, reveal the operation of deeper dynamics as well. It was proposed that a folk-cult such as voodoo has two faces. One face looks inward at, and adapts itself to, the needs of local communities. The other face looks outward and provides a portal through which community-external forces secure a controlling handle on certain aspects of local life and thought.

The absence of formal ecclesiastical constraints during the formative years of Haitian society has endowed local ritual and belief with a leeway that is perhaps unusual even in the Caribbean context. In

many ways, Haitian folk ritual has pursued its own course. One manifestation of this leeway is found, perhaps paradoxically, in the phenomenon which first impressed students of Haitian folk religion; the retention of Africanisms. The virtual absence of European ecclesiastical inputs throughout most of the nineteenth century encouraged a much greater quotient of direct African cultural retentions than is found, for example, in Jamaican religion, where emancipation proceeded under the tutelage of various British religious groups.

The search for Africanisms, so avidly pioneered by Herskovits earlier in this century, has fallen into anthropological disfavor in some quarters. But fieldwork in Kanabwa lends impressive support to the notion that some traits made their way across the Atlantic relatively intact. The theological emphasis on ancestor ritual appears to be incontestably African, as African as the names of many of the spirits that are served -- Dâbala, Ogoû, Bosou. The centrality of drumming as the major musical mode, and other types of percussion instruments as appendages, is of clear African derivation, as is the dancing and choral singing which accompanies the drumming. I am convinced that spirit possession as a major cult feature is also an African retention. There were certainly no models in French Catholicism for this phenomenon.

But analysis may miss important domains, if attention on the African derivations of many elements is permitted to draw attention away from the creative new adaptations that have been worked out. That is, the churchlessness of nineteenth century Haiti removed certain theological and ritual constraints from religious behavior and has permitted the emergence of a folk system that is finely tuned to the structure and demands of the particular agrarian context in which it took root. Stated briefly, what impresses most about ritual Haitian voodoo is not the African derivation of so many elements, but rather the general penetration of a peasantized focus in both theology and ritual, a focus produced as the rural population adapted its religion to the realities of its daily life.

The results of this adaptation can be seen in village theology, in that set of concepts which guide

local understanding of the spirit world. The literature refers to the major lwa as though they were universal spirits. Dâbala Wedo, for example, is depicted as an Africa serpent god. Ogoû Féray is depicted as the god of metal and war. There is presumably one Dâbala Wedo and one Ogoû Féray. The Dâbala who possesses a person in Kinanbwa is the same Dâbala who possesses someone in Port-au-Prince. But this is not the manner in which the villagers conceptualize things.

In village theology there is no such thing as the Dâbala Wedo or the Ogoû Féray. There are thousands and thousands of lwas -- and every family has its own. What has happened is that spirit names such as Dâbala Wedo or Ogoû Féray, which in Africa referred to single spirits (analogous to the Christian term St. Michael, for example), in the theology of Kinanbwa now refer to types -- or nations -- of spirits, and one's own ancestors can turn into a member of this or that nation. The name Dâbala, thus, rather than being like the name St. Michael -- a particular angel -- is now more analogous to the Judeo-Christian term Cherub or Seraph, a type of angel rather than a specific angel.

Thus, in village theology every family has ancestors who have turned into dabalas, ancestors who have turned into ogous, and ancestors who have turned into every other type of spirit -- such as Bosou, Ezili, Azaka, and so on through the whole voodoo pantheon. But the matter goes further: every individual has dabala ancestors on his father's side and a separate contingent of dabala ancestors on his mother's side. When a child is sick, the villager will not usually say, "Bosou is grabbing my child." He will say, rather, "it is a bosou on my father's side." The general use of the indefinite article before the lwa name is indicative of a deep-rooted theological metamorphosis. In its essence, this metamorphosis has consisted of a thorough familialization of local theology. Spirits such as Dâbala and Ogoû, who in Africa were conceived as single spirits worshipped by different kin-groups, have been theologically fragmented in rural Haiti, such that each individual or sibling group is conceived of as inheriting separate dâbalas and ogouûs, just as they inherit separate plots of ground.

The genesis of this theological metamorphosis is

perhaps to be found in the structural transformation that came over nineteenth century rural Haiti. The centrally controlled plantation had ceded to the individually controlled smallholding. As part of the same transformation, ritual itself tended to become familialized, as elder males in each kin-group assumed the role of cult leaders for their particular compound. But if each kin-group had its own separate land, as part of the same dynamic, each kin-group came to be viewed as having its own separate spirits. The spirits were not parcelled off by name -- one kin-group having Ezili, another Bosou, or the like. Rather each kin-group has the full complement of all locally served spirits. But each has a separate contingent, the Bosous which I serve being similar to but distinct from the spirits served by my neighbors. I am suggesting, in short, that the striking shift toward a pantheon composed of separate contingents of spirits may have structural underpinnings on the nineteenth century emergence of kin-based interest in specific blocs of land. Former land abundance has been replaced by land scarcity. Today rituals led by family elders have been increasingly supplanted by rituals in which a paid specialist plays the leading roles. But in the village of Kinanbwa, subsequent ritual changes have adapted themselves to a core of highly familialized theology which may itself have been the product of adaptation to the economic transformation which had given birth to a peasant society.

### Adaptative Ritual

The familialization of much of the pantheon concerns an adaptative shift that took place in the theological sphere. Perhaps even more remarkable, however, is a recently observed pattern by which rural Haitian ancestor rituals, especially those connected to healing and death, serve the latent function of maintaining a constant stream of land available for purchase, while at the same time militating against the intergenerational perpetration of landholding differentials within the rural community. The dynamics of this ritually governed resource control have

been discussed elsewhere and will be briefly outlined here.<sup>10</sup>

Population growth has placed several types of pressure on the local agrarian system. The stress did not manifest itself, however, in the forms of absolute food shortages. The earliest systematic effect of population growth, rather, was to make it difficult for parents to follow traditional patterns with respect to helping their male children into economic autonomy. Traditionally, parents would provisionally lend to males in their late teens one or more plots of land. This custom, which arose during the land-abundant days of the nineteenth century, became increasingly difficult for each generation, as average holding size plunged. The result was a situation in which individuals would have to wait until parents died before gaining access to even a tiny plot of land via the inheritance route.

Far from reacting passively to this situation, the population executed, as it were, a systematic maneuver in which they placed increasing reliance on a different land transfer strategy: one that relies more heavily on mechanisms of sharecropping and land purchasing. Quantitative data indicate that young men now generally achieve economic autonomy by working as tenant sharecroppers on the land of other community members. They start purchasing land in their mid-thirties and early forties, and by the time they are fifty, will themselves be local landlords lending out some of their land to younger tenants on a sharecropping basis. Though the system is still under demographic stress, nonetheless this type of land tenure system maintains a steady circulation of land which in turn maintains the viability of local life by making at least some land available to all households.

Voodoo's role in this process is as follows. This land circulating system has several analytic riddles. The system, in fact, presupposed that people begin to purchase land in their thirties and forties. But there is a logico-empirical issue which concerns the source of the land that is purchased. One would think that land, being so valued in Haiti, would be treasured, used and/or hoarded rather than sold. Who, then, is selling all of this land, and why? Quantitative data clearly indicate that it is the peasants of Kinanbwa themselves

who are selling the land. More surprisingly, however, the data indicate that in some seven out of ten transactions, the seller of the land is liquidating part of his holdings to finance some obligatory healing or mortuary ritual imposed on them by the demands of some ancestral spirit. Anthropologically speaking, we have a clear case of ritual system intervening in the resource allocation patterns of a peasant community. It is this subtle, heretofore unnoticed land circulating function which is one of the major "secrets" of Haitian voodoo, and an impressive demonstration of the ability of folk-ritual systems, when guided by their own dynamic, to address themselves in important ways to the immediate problems confronting the communities in which they operate.

The patterns discussed above constitute, then, the inward looking face of rural Haitian voodoo. In its theological shift toward a pantheon whose most actively courted spirits are familial spirits, and toward a ritual system which subtly regulates the relationship between men and land, the folk religion of Haiti has molded itself to the lifeways and problems of its practitioners, and has placed itself, metaphorically speaking, at their service. In this guise, voodoo emerges as a tool of the community. Having indicated community-serving aspects of voodoo, it would be misguided romanticism to ignore the firm links between religion and external power in the lives of peasants.

### **Structural Determinants of Peasant Voodoo**

Analysts of voodoo have rarely failed to comment on the political dimensions of the cult. Rulers themselves have not been unaware of this dimension. Despite, or perhaps because of, the role voodoo played in the slave uprising of 1791, early Haitian rulers took measures to stamp out the cult. A similar, if less energetic, anti-voodoo stance has characterized most governments throughout Haitian history. The most systematic attacks on voodoo came during the 1940's, in a movement spearheaded by the Catholic Church. The movement is over, and voodoo is to all appearances as strong as ever.

Not all public policy has been adverse. At least two presidents -- Souluque (1843) and Antoine Simon (1908) -- were reported to have publicly accepted voodoo. More recently François Duvalier was accused (generally by critics of his regime) not only of being a voodooist personality, but also of using the cult for his own political ends. That such rumours are not all hearsay is documented in a study by Laguerre of a neighborhood in Port-au-Prince.<sup>11</sup> According to this study, every single houngan in the neighborhood had become a ton ton makout (Duvalier's secret police force). The houngans serve the regime by spying on the households of their followers, by suppressing possible revolts, by informing on, and revealing the hiding places of, fugitives from the police, and by indoctrinating young children in favor of the regime, to mention just a few openly political behaviors. This subordination of folk-religion to a gang of government-paid gun-toting voodoo priests, highly atypical of the country as a whole and even of Port-au-Prince, is attributed by Laguerre to the unusually turbulent political history of the particular neighborhood where he did his study.

Some journalists had already appreciated the colorfully macabre interest value of such governmentally directed shamanism. Before beginning my own fieldwork, I had read a grim account of Haiti by Diederich and Burt.<sup>12</sup> In compiling their long list of horror stories about the Duvalier regime, the authors latch on to several secondhand religious anecdotes to paint a grisly portrait in which every houngan in Haiti has become an active political collaborator and in which every peasant has been brainwashed to quake in religious fear of the new super-houngan in the presidential palace. The entire account turned out to be at total odds with the reality of Kinanbwa, where most houngans -- especially the houngan makout -- were small-scale healers with no more governmental pull than the average peasant, where the peasants themselves appeared not to have heard of the new theology, and where general silence about matters political is maintained more by the rural police than by an theological brainwashing on the part of the regime. The interaction between peasant religious

belief and public institutions unfolds at a deep level not easily affected by the policies of any contemporary politician. It is precisely this deeper interaction which I hope to explore here.

To grasp the externally subordinating elements of Haitian peasant religion, it will be necessary to go beyond the purely folk dimensions of the voodoo cult and examine its zones of interaction with institutional religion. Institutional religion in rural Haiti generally involves the Roman Catholic Church. I indicated above that practitioners of voodoo have no single word for their religion. There is more than simple terminology involved here. If there is no commonly used Creole noun to refer to the cult, it is probably because there is in fact no separate sect or church. The word cult has thus been chosen carefully. In the first place, as was suggested above, the vast majority do not attach themselves to any particular houngan or hounganfor (cult center). On the contrary, a major element in the religious maneuver of the peasant is systematically to switch houngans to minimize the danger of deceit in the diagnosis of illness. Only a tiny minority -- almost certainly fewer than five per cent -- of those who serve the lwa become initiated into a cult-center as pitit kay ("children of the house"). Rural voodoo is for the most part a domestic cult, and the use of congregational terminology such as "Voodoo sect" or "Voodoo church" could be misleading.<sup>13</sup>

This absence of competing affiliation, by itself, would render inappropriate any contrasting of Catholicism with Voodooism as two distinct religions. But of even greater importance is the fact that the practitioners of voodoo do not reject the Catholic Church, as is the case with converts to Protestantism. It is quite the contrary. The peasants of Kinanbwa retain their status as members of the Catholic Church. This is recognized, on the one hand, by the priest in the nearby town. Though he lambasts his congregation with weekly jeremiads against participation in such satanic rites, he recognizes the practitioners of voodoo to be members of his flock in a way that local Baptists or Seventh-Day Adventists are not. But the cult members themselves, when queried as to their



religion, will in their vast majority say that they are Catholics. By no means is this merely devious cloaking of their "true" religious allegiance. Such statements objectively reflect that in the contemporary context the cult itself enjoins on its members obligatory participation in institutionalized Western religion. "To serve the lwa you have to be a Catholic...." This blunt assertion is as true of the voodoo of Kinanbwa as it was of the voodoo in the community of the peasant who first made the statement to Alfred Metraux.<sup>14</sup> The profound structural significance and theoretical implications of this pattern will be a major theme in the pages to follow.

It takes little imagination to detect the presence of Catholicism at most voodoo rituals in Kinanbwa, even those in which participants will be possessed by their ancestral lwa. Tables are frequently prepared very much in the manner of a Catholic altar, and dominating these tables are pictures of Catholic saints. Many rituals begin with Catholic prayers, read out of a prayerbook in French by a literate villager who sprinkles water about much as a Catholic priest with holy water. This villager, who performs a similar function at many rituals, is referred to locally as a pè savân (bush Father). He is not a houngan. In no instance did I observe a ceremony with preliminary Catholic rituals in which such rituals were not done by a separate pè savân (although many houngans are at least semi-literate and could easily learn to read the prayers). By the same token I never observed a houngan function, even temporarily, as a pè savân for the ceremony of another houngan. That is, there is a required slot in many rituals (usually at the beginning) for Roman Catholic prayers read in French, and for aspersions with water as is done in the Catholic Church. And the community has further institutionalized a discrete ritual role for a specialist who carries out these rites.

The fact that such Catholic rituals occur at the beginning of ceremonies could in itself perhaps be used as an argument for the primacy accorded to institutional elements. There is, of course, no law mandating such Catholic rites. Nor is there direct pressure from the Catholic clergy to thus "catholicize"

voodoo ritual. On the contrary, the ordinary priest publicly denounces such Satanic travesties of genuine ritual. It is local custom itself which continues to accord first place, at least chronologically, toward French Catholic ritual.

But viewed in another light, these matters can be seen as a rather superficial intrusion of institutional Catholicism. Participants are frequently inattentive, bored, or even absent during these preliminary rituals. The bulk of the time, resources, group enthusiasm, and group participation will be directed toward later ceremonial moments, when bored inactivity will have ceded to drumming and dancing, and when French litanies have been replaced by Creole chants (châté lwa) that are peppered with puzzling snatches of unintelligible phrases preserved almost intact from African chants of another age. If such elements as described above were the only manifestations of Catholicism in the religious life of the practitioners of voodoo, then Catholicism's place would be weak indeed and voodoo might well be described as a basically "non-Christian" cult. Such a model, however, would be a distortion.

### Bon-Dieu as Ruler

The traditional distinction between the "theology" and the "rituals" of a cult is a convenient starting point for closer analysis. Turning first to the domain of theology, the literature on voodoo tends to dedicate a great deal of attention to the examination of popular conceptions concerning the lwa: the names of the lwa, their classification into groups, the colors, clothes, foods and beverages which each set of lwa prefers, the distinctive personality characteristics which people possessed by this or that lwa typically exhibit.

But a structurally sensitive approach to voodoo theology must first begin by citing the overwhelming ethnographic evidence for the existence of a Supreme Being whose authority and power is believed by the cult practitioners to be far greater than that of the lwa and other lesser spirits.<sup>15</sup> This Supreme Being is usually disposed of in a hasty paragraph or two, as

analysis skips to the more exciting task of describing the personalities and shenanigans of the lwa. Let us here, however, examine this Supreme Being a bit more closely.

The pantheon of many religions is known to lack the concepts of "Supreme Being." Anthropologists have long pointed out the tendency for supreme spirits to be more frequent in societies with a certain level of organizational complexity and political centralization. In such contexts, local and ancestral spirits continue to exist and may, in fact, occupy most of the attention of the ordinary believer. But these lesser spirits are now embedded in the lower levels of a pantheon ruled by a power greater than theirs.

A failure to perceive this structural dimension would result in a crippling distortion of postcolonial folk-theology. In the case of Haiti, the source-traditions -- European as well as West African -- which provided the theological antecedents of contemporary voodoo, stem from structurally differentiated societies whose level of socio-political complexity is in fact accompanied by pantheons topped by Greater Spirits.

The specific theological beliefs of the Saint-Domingue slaves are, of course, not known. But in view of the social complexity of the antecedent societies, and the social complexity of the nation-state that eventually emerged, it would have been highly unlikely for a theology to take shape in which there was no Supreme Being, but only lesser spirits. And this in fact did not occur.

But what did occur should have by now evoked more comment and wonder among analysts than has been the case. If there was ever a New World nation in which a non-Christian spirit might have been enthroned as the highest being in the pantheon, Haiti is that nation. The whites were ejected, their priests fled with them, and the nation was governed by descendents of Africans.

But the undisputed and universally recognized ruler of the voodoo pantheon is emphatically not an African spirit. Rather, even the most devoted servants of the lwa, pay ultimate homage to none other than the Judeo-Christian God -- "Bon-Dieu" -- as the

creator and ruler of all. It is Bon-Dieu, the God preached by the local pê (priest) and pastê (minister), who is believed to have created the lesser spirits, and it is He who rules them. The maneuvers and misdemeanors of these lesser spirits, and the propitiatory attention which they receive from their devotees, all occur at the sufferance of Bon-Dieu. I never heard a houngan challenge the supremacy of Bon-Dieu; nor has any such challenge been reported by any other observer; the Judeo-Christian God has been admitted to the pantheon, not as one spirit among many, but rather as the great master, the Gran-Met.

Is perhaps too much emphasis being given here to a terminological matter? That is, the fact that the villagers call the Supreme Being by the same name used by the priest does not mean they conceive of him in the same way. Why then call him the "Judeo-Christian God"? Definitional dilemmas -- and the beclouding danger of definitional arguments -- can be skirted by focusing on behaviors and processes. It remains a striking fact that despite the sociopolitical leeway of the post-revolutionary years and the proliferation of African-derived and autochthonous spirits at the lower levels of the pantheon, the slot of Supreme Being was allocated to a Deity called by a European name and, most important, ministered to, not by folk specialists, but by European (or American) clergy.<sup>16</sup> By any reasonable operationalization, the Supreme Being in voodoo theology is the "Judeo-Christian God," a view that receives overwhelming evidence -- though puzzlingly little emphasis -- in the ethnographic literature.

But another objection is possible. Why refer to the lwa as occupying the "lower levels" of the pantheon? The Bon-Dieu of the literature is remote, virtually inactive. Most preternatural interventions in human affairs are believed to come from the lwa, not from Bon-Dieu. Is His niche really the "highest" niche in any operational sense?

Yes, it is. On the one hand, the villagers themselves often allude to him specifically as being above -- or, more frequently, "ahead of" (dévā) -- all the lwa. Furthermore, His remoteness in the theology of the villagers of Kinanbwa was not as great as I had

come to expect from reading the literature on voodoo (largely written in urban or town contexts, or in the context of special cult-centers). For example, it took several months of field work to expose the local inapplicability of certain theological assumptions which I had been making. Many written accounts of voodoo generalize the power of the lwa to the non-human world, giving them control over waters, wind, lightning, thunder, crops, and so forth. It eventually became clear, however, that the villagers of Kinanbwa did not in general adhere to this model. It is God who makes the crops grow, the wind blow, the lightning fall. If the lwa had any power in these matters, it tended to be of a negative sort. A lwa cannot create rain for you -- but he can cause normal rain not to fall (maré lapli). A lwa cannot make crops grow on tired ground. But he can cause crops to be magically transferred to the garden of another (ralé jade).

Most importantly, the lwa of the villagers had no power to create a human life, to place a child in the womb of a woman. Only God can place a life there. Quite significantly, the woman believed to be sterile is sent, not to a houngan, but to a Catholic shrine, where she lights a candle. So powerful is this association of fertility with Bon-Dieu, that a diagnostic redefinition has to be made in order to handle childlessness in the context of wombs. Women who remain childless are frequently diagnosed as having become pregnant but subsequently having the child trapped (kêpé) in their womb by an angry lwa. In such cases, a houngan can intervene. But it is significant that the lwa who caused this illness (generally called "perdition") are holding back life that is already there in the womb. They cannot create life from lifelessness, and most villagers queried doubted that they could keep life from being created in the womb, given normal intercourse between a man and a woman. What a lwa could do was to "grab" and trap the fetus only after it was there.

To sum up, the power of the lwa in Kinanbwa was specifically viewed as not extending to certain domains reserved for Bon-Dieu. Though different individuals hold slightly different models of the supernatural, a commonly shared set of assumptions

tended to emphasize the direct activity of the lwa in human beings. To take vengeance for neglect, the lwa do not generally make lightning fall or roofs cave in; they rather make the offender, or his children, physically ill. To help a villager financially, the lwa do not create bundles of money. They rather enlighten a devotee (ba-l jé) to discover money that someone else has hidden or lost. To help a villager avenge himself against theft, they do not generally restore the stolen property. They rather enter the head of the thief and inspire him to increase his malfeasance until he is caught. In short, village theology tends to envision a de facto functional confinement of the activity of the lwa to the bodies and minds of human beings. In a pantheon topped by a Supreme Being, the creator of life and ruler of the world is none other than the Judeo-Christian God.

### The Rites of Passage

The preceding discussion dealt with theology. But the structural dominance of Christian elements can be seen with equal clarity in the domain of ritual. In describing the lifeways of any group, ethnographers generally dedicate one section of their monograph to that subset of rituals which mark the transition of an individual from one locally recognized stage of the life cycle to the next. Cultures differ not only on the details of the ceremonies, but also on the particular stages of the human career which are selected for ritual attention. But most cultures, be they simple or complex, do institute some sort of ceremonialization of entry into new stages of life. Though the rites may be secular in nature, they are probably linked to the theological concepts and ritual traditions prevailing in the particular group.

It is not at all surprising that the religion of the peasant of Kinanbwa includes notions of the desirability of passing through certain life-cycle rituals as affirmations of one's own identity and worth. This, after all, is common in most ethnographically recorded religions. What bears closer examination, however, is the fact that the ceremonies which have been selected are the ceremonies of the Catholic Church. The type

of Catholic ceremony to which I am referring here is not the modified ceremony which is performed by a bush-priest in many voodoo rites. For the important rites of passage even the most devoted servant of the lwa in Kinanbwa accepts no substitute for a public ritual performed by a formally ordained Catholic priest within the confines of the local Catholic Church.

The first such ceremony is the rite of baptism. Within a few months of birth, the parents of a child will invite two persons to be godparents, and the father of the child will secure a birth certificate (batistè) by reporting the birth of the child and paying the requisite fee, in the Bureau de l'Etat Civil of the nearest town. On the appointed day the godparents -- the man with coat and tie, the woman with her finest clothes -- will proceed to the local Catholic Church, where the birth certificate will be shown to the priest. Promises will be exacted of the godparents to protect the child from involvement in the satanic rites of voodoo, and the child will be duly baptized.

Such baptism was viewed as absolutely obligatory by the villagers of Kinanbwa, and in fact all children who survive the first few weeks are baptized. On the one hand, the acquisition of a birth certificate with the name of both parents is the sine-qua-non for the eventual inheritance of parental property. But from a purely theological point of view, the child is not believed to be a full human being -- to have a soul (nâm) -- until after baptism. A child who dies before being baptized will be disposed of in the bushes with little ceremony. Quite significantly, no bush priest or houngan is believed by the villagers to be able to give the child his nâm. For this rite of passage, even servants of the lwa must pass through the portals of the local Catholic Church.

The next major rite of passage is marriage.<sup>17</sup> This differs from the baptismal rite in that not everybody in rural Haiti passes through formal marriage ritual. On the contrary, it is undertaken principally by better off villagers and is in fact to some degree utilized by such couples as a public demonstration of their economic status. In Kinanbwa, the majority of couples -- some seven out of ten -- had not been legally married but were rather living in

free-union, generally referred to as plasaj in Haitian Creole. The statistical preponderance of free unions (in many other Caribbean settings as well as rural Haiti) has led at least some analysts to downplay the local importance of marriage. Such a view does violence to the situation of Kinanbwa. The local status and prestige of individuals rises dramatically when they leave the status of plasaj for legal marriage. And although Haitian citizens are permitted to have only civil marriage, the status increases as the couple is wed by a priest (or minister) in church and complies with other economically burdensome obligations imposed by the informal, uncodified, but powerful force of community expectation. The direct ceremonial costs paid to the priest are miniscule compared with these socially imposed outlays, which include the purchase of expensive clothing and furniture, the construction and embellishment of a house, and the entertainment of the community on both the night preceding the marriage and the morning of the ceremony itself.

Though marriage cannot be described as an obligatory Rite of Passage, since only some villagers pass through it, it nonetheless does continue to be an obligatory entrance-way toward certain types of local prestige. When a village woman gets married, neighbors (and even siblings) will publically address her with the title madâm. Fathers will point out with satisfaction that one or another of their daughters "left home with a crown" -- was formally married to their first spouse. In referring to their own parents, adults will be heard to make the point that "papa té marié ak mâmâ-m" (my father was married to my mother). And when gathering information, interviewers quickly learn that the way to inquire whether a couple is living in free union is to phrase the question: "ou poko marié?", permitting the individual to give the delicate and non-demeaning answer, "Nô, nou poko marié" (No, we're not married yet). Though most couples never get married, those who do, are viewed as having taken a step upward, and those who do not, will construe their present free-union as a temporary condition which will eventually be remedied. And the remedy can be applied, not by a folk-specialist, no

matter how powerful and respected he is, not even by a justice of the peace, who is legally entitled to marry people; but only by a Catholic priest. In other words, the emphasis on Church marriage has a specifically religious dimension that goes beyond the fulfillment of administrative requirements for the legislation of unions.

This is seen quite clearly in other domains of folk theology as well. For example, when a conjugal union is based on informal plasaj rather than marriage, the lwa of the husband and wife remain separate. This means that a man cannot get possessed at a domestic ceremony staged by his wife's kin group, and vice versa. Church marriage changes that. Henceforth, the ancestral spirits of the two partners are united in such a manner that they can possess their children in the ceremonies (and on the property) of either. This theological fusion is effected by the Catholic priest (of course, generally unbeknownst to himself) in a Catholic Rite of Passage.

The last major Rite of Passage -- Christian burial -- shares none of the optional nature of marriage but is rather as central to the local life-cycle as is Christian baptism. Because of the strength of the local ancestor cult, many of the events surrounding death, including the very structure of the véyé (wake), have little to do with the institutional mandates of the Church. But despite the presence of non-Catholic elements, even the most ardent devotees of the lwa cannot be laid to rest without their bodies first having been brought to the Catholic Church. Funeral masses are not the general practice in the research region; briefer ceremonies will be performed over the coffin. But there is no local substitute for this socially mandated final passage through Christian burial rites. One of the severest threats that local priests can level against houngans is the threat of eventual refusal of Christian burial. So serious would such a refusal be, however, that in fact the threat is rarely carried out by the priest in the town near Kinanbwa. Paradoxically, and very significantly, it is thus not ecclesiastical pressure, but rather strong popular pressure, which maintains Christian burial as a mandatory last-step in the local life-cycle.

In short, the religious life of the Haitian peasant manifests a deep cultural cleavage between unmistakably Christian Rites of Passage and domestic/community rituals dominated by local or non-Western elements. Whereas most of the common religious functions -- such as contacting ancestral spirits and healing supernatural illnesses -- are carried out in the context of folk rituals and theology and in defiance of institutional Catholic mandates, the major Rites of Passage continue to be set apart and traversed in the context of totally Westernized symbolism.

On the one hand, this cultural cleavage is immediately apparent in the details of the ceremonies. At voodoo dances the women don kerchiefs and local dresses of different color according to the ceremony. The men put on clean clothes -- but they are the hats and pants of peasants, with a tendency to wear somewhat brightly colored long-sleeve shirts. The language of the common chants is Creole. The cultural tone of the Rites of Passage is dramatically different. At baptisms, the godparents wear western clothes -- coats and ties for the men. At weddings, the bride and groom likewise wear western attire -- a suit and even white gloves for the groom, a white wedding gown and a wig of straight black hair for the bride. At the reception, the best man, similarly attired, will publicly lecture and exhort the couple in elegant French. And at his death, a man is buried in a suit and tie -- though he may never have put one on in his life.

But of even greater diagnostic weight than either attire or language, I believe, is the question of the specialist on whom the ritual depends. Whereas much of local religious life -- even Catholic elements such as prayers before holy pictures on local home altars -- has come to be handled by local specialists, in this critical subset of rituals, these Rites of Passage, the community accepts no substitute for formal representatives of institutionalized religion.

Several questions can be raised here. Does this distinction between "Western" and "non-Western" elements constitute an alien dichotomy superimposed on a system which is viewed by its own participants as a

unified whole? Do the people themselves make this distinction? Even were the people to make no such cognitive distinction, the analysis could still be valid. But the issue is academic since even the actors themselves are kept constantly aware of the distinction between Christian and non-Christian elements in their religious life. The godparents at baptism, the young people at First Communion, the bride and groom at a church wedding -- all will be lectured to and exhorted to confine their religion to this Christian tradition, to abandon the satanic rituals which the priest knows that they or their family practice out in the back-country. There has not, in fact, been a smooth merge between two traditions, a unification that blurs out awareness of the original boundaries, in the mind of the believers. Some aspects of voodoo ritual may be appropriately handled under the rubric of syncretism. But sharp patterns of constantly perceived duality and stratification continue to inform even the deeper layers of the cult.

But other questions could also be raised here. For example, is the voodoo of Kinanbwa, then, a cult that is totally without its own Rites of Passage? The answer is a firm no. Certain rituals described in the literature, such as the initiation ceremony for houngans (kâzo) and the withdrawal of spirits from the head of a devotee at the time of death (désounê) are also known in the village. But to emphasize such rituals to the exclusion of the less "exotic" Catholic Rites of Passage would be an ethnographic distortion. On the one hand, the majority of cult devotees never go through these local rites, even fewer than those who receive Christian marriage. But of even greater qualifying importance, these rituals do not substitute for the Christian rituals. Thus, relatively few villagers pass through kâzo initiation rites, whereas virtually every child is given Christian baptism. Very few villagers, at their death, will be désounê; virtually all will be buried from a church. And even those who are kâzo or désounê must also have received Christian baptism and must also receive Christian burial. Ethnographers have predictably been more interested in describing rites such as désounê and kâzo; but here I

am arguing that in terms of the overall structure of the religious life of the Haitian peasant, such emphasis may be misleading. The only passage rituals which could be said to frame the life course of most Haitian peasants are the rites of baptism, burial, and for some, Church marriage. But in these rituals the Church continues to exercise unchallenged sway.

The first part of this discussion indicted that in the realm of theology the niche of Supreme Being continues to be occupied by the Bon-Dieu of the Judeo-Christian pantheon. It is now clear that, in addition, the social Rites of Passage constitute another focal point from which the power of Western religion continues to emanate. In short, though the process of "syncretization" has resulted in the egalitarian mingling of cultural traditions in some matters, at least in these two spheres, the spirits and specialists of institutional Catholicism continue in a position of clear cultural dominance.

### Analysis and Conclusion

The final task is that of formulating hypotheses which may account for one or another aspect of this synchronic, "structural" explanation, pointing out that the dominance of Judeo-Christian symbols in certain beliefs and rites is merely an appropriate reflection of continuing patterns of postcolonial dependency in economic and political spheres. Such an analysis, though not completely devoid of truth, dodges some important issues of causality. But questions of possible causal origins bring discussion into the domain of colonial and postcolonial history.

There is no evidence that the Saint-Domingue slaves were any less religious than their counterparts on other Caribbean islands. It does appear, however, that they were less subject to direct Christian proselytization. The Code Noir of 1685 called for the religious instruction of the slaves. But such instruction would have had to come either from the clergy or from the slaves' masters. The failure of the former group to fulfill their mission can be at least partially understood by observing who they were. Wimpffen's

complaint that most of the clergy he saw in the colony had been sent there as punishment for some misdemeanor; back home has been supported by later historians.<sup>18</sup> In addition to a small number of secular clergy, at least four religious orders -- Carmelites, Capuchins, Dominicans, and Jesuits -- had representatives on the island. In view of the colony's apparent status as a punishment post for most of them, their general lack of apostolic zeal should cause no surprise. There may well have been little direct ecclesiastical input into the religious life of large groups of Saint-Domingue slaves.

The masters themselves did not rush in to fill the catechetical gap. The reaction of the planters toward the religious instruction of the slaves appeared to oscillate between indifference and hostility. It appears that all slaves were baptized -- Africans as well as locally born Creole slaves.<sup>19</sup> In addition, brief morning and evening prayers appeared to be standard practice on at least some plantations, as well as Sunday Mass, where a priest was available. But the abundantly documented cruelty and profligacy of the Saint-Domingue slave owners justifies skepticism as to the intensity of their efforts to Christianize their charges. Debien introduces his discussion of religious instruction in the colony with the telling comment: "This chapter will be short."<sup>20</sup> And in his lengthy manual, written for the benefit of Saint-Domingue slave owners, Ducoeurjoly goes into great detail about all aspects of dealing with the slaves. Nowhere did I find mention of religious instruction of the slaves, either as a positive or negative tactic.<sup>21</sup> The matter is conspicuous by its absence. The expulsion of the Jesuits in the 1760s appears to indicate fear of Christianization. At least one historian suggests that in the final years of the colony, planters tried to use Catholicism as a tool of pacification, a type of "gendarmierie spirituelle."<sup>22</sup> But with few exceptions, the balance of evidence appears to point rather toward religious indifference and neglect on the part of the planters.<sup>23</sup>

The absence of ecclesiastical input during the years of the colony was, of course, intensified during and after the Haitian revolution. Cabon reports that

several priests who had joined the slaves in their uprising were not only tolerated, but in fact, exercised some kind of power. Toussaint Louverture had a chaplain attached to his army and was solicitous for the baptism of children. Even Dessalines intervened to save the life of a threatened priest. But these isolated incidents hardly suffice to offset the overwhelming evidence for the departure of all clergy in the wake of the fleeing planters. If Haiti was priest-shy during the colony, it was virtually priestless during the years immediately following the revolt. This state of affairs, which began as a type of de facto churchlessness, was officialized when the Vatican rejected certain provisions of the Haitian Constitution of 1805. This situation, which was to last for nearly sixty years, occurred precisely during those critical decades in which a peasant economic base was emerging on the island and in which local religious life was to crystallize into the peasant cult from which contemporary voodoo has arisen.<sup>24</sup>

All of this merely makes more puzzling the dominant role which Catholic theology and ritual have come to play in the life of the Haitian peasant. Let us return then to an earlier question. Why did the uniquely "churchless" situation of postrevolutionary Haiti not lead to the emergence of a religion dominated by an African (or autochthonous) Deity? Why did the newly liberated society not institute Rites of Passage that had been purged of any reminder of a colonial past? The case of Haiti forces us to devise a more refined theoretical model that does not posit direct ecclesiastical proselytization as the sole mechanism of postcolonial religious dependence.

Let us look first at Bon-Dieu. African spirits certainly survived the passage across the Atlantic. At least some of them were higher spirits in their homelands. Why did none maintain that status in Haiti? This particular question does not appear difficult. The social reality of plantation life, and the purposive clustering of linguistically different slaves together by themselves would have militated against the preservation of any Supreme Being from Africa. Under such conditions one would expect a process of theological "homogenization," the compromise reduction

of various Supreme Beings to the level of minor spirits in a new, colonial pantheon.

Giving further impetus to this process must have been the institutionalized differences in wealth and power that were a central feature of plantation organization. Human political and military history are filled with examples of Supreme Beings who have been knocked off their thrones. Few things threaten the theological position of a Deity as effectively as political subjugation to a society with a different Supreme Being. If we look at an earlier mentioned anthropological pattern that entails a "readiness" for a Supreme Being among groups whose social organization has reached a certain level of internal differentiation, it is not at all surprising that the Bon-Dieu of the masters emerged as the front-running competitor for the highest slot. The specific intervening transformations -- as indeed the entire process -- can possibly never move beyond the status of speculation. But the failure of an African spirit to achieve ruling status is, in the material and organizational context of Saint-Domingue plantation life, certainly not surprising.

But why, then, after the revolution, did the new nation not see the rise of African or local symbols to a position of preeminence? The gods of subjugated peoples have been known to be resurrected after political liberation has occurred. Why, after liberation, did the ex-slaves of Saint-Domingue continue to worship the apparently not-so-Bon-Dieu of the departed Europeans? Why did they incorporate fully Westernized Rites of Passage into their own life cycle? The political and military situation appeared to permit a total de-Europeanization of religious belief and behavior. Why did this not occur, even despite the absence of a European ecclesiastical presence?

To begin with, the westernization of religious life must be viewed against the backdrop of a general westernization of economic, political, and social life, at least in the commanding levels of the early Republic. The basic economic design of the early Haitian leaders involved a de facto return to plantation style collective labor, eliminating slavery, but maintaining a quasi-serf status for the majority of the population. Though the scheme never really worked, it

is of critical historical importance to note that the leaders attempted to implement a basically western economic scheme.

But the leaders attempted to Gallicize other domains of life as well. The laws governing the land were direct imitations of the Napoleonic Code. The organization of the military also followed French patterns, including titles, and ranks. Two of the early leaders declared themselves to be emperors-à-la-Napoleon, and one of them, Henri Christophe, established a nobility in his northern kingdom. French was spoken where possible in public; music and dance was also French. The leaders were somewhat embarrassed by the African elements which visitors could see in the countryside, and tried to present to the world an image of European respectability.

These apparent Francophile inclinations on the part of the early leaders themselves have very clear situational underpinnings. From what social sector did these leaders spring? The three most important black generals -- Toussaint, Dessalines, and Christophe -- all belonged to the category of "Creole" slaves, born in the colony, not in Africa. But in addition, Toussaint and Christophe were members of a privileged subset of slaves -- "domestic slaves" -- who not only performed no field labour, but in addition, whose daily contact with masters and overseers exposed them to the language, manners, and stated preferences of the ruling French. Domestic slaves were known to copy, when possible, the behavior of the French. They were certainly not imbued with an appreciation for things African. The mulatto presidents who followed Dessalines had, of course, even less sympathy for African elements in Haitian life. Pétion was educated in France; his successor, Boyer, has gone down in history as the President who purchased Haiti's independence from the Mother Country several decades after his predecessors in office had won it on the battlefield. In short, for reasons that deserve greater exploration, the reins of leadership from the early moments of the Haitian revolt fell to individuals whose background would incline them to general admiration, if not of French individuals, at least of French



institutions, mannerisms, and language.

These considerations might be seen as predisposing factors. Even more important in ensuring a strong Gallic element in early Haitian society were the organizational imperatives that suddenly confronted the new leaders. They found themselves with a society to rule. In looking for organizational models, they referred to the antecedent institutions that had prevailed in the colony.

To these factors of social origins and internal organizational demands can be added yet a third imperative -- the problems of external relations -- pushing toward a westernization of public life. Early Haitian leaders were not rulers of a maroon band isolated in the back country. They were, rather, leaders of a nation which had to establish legitimacy as a national equal in the eyes of neighbors, to convert potential invaders and reconquerors into allies and trading partners. Boyer's remarkable "purchase" of independence from France was a dramatic political maneuver in this regard. But equality has symbolic dimensions as well. Stated simply, the objective structure in which the earliest leaders functioned induced them to court the approval, not of Africa, but of Europe and America, and to value the symbols which they believed would move them away from identification with the former. It is factors such as these which account, I would argue, for the public rejection of things African, and the idealization of things French, by the postcolonial elite.<sup>25</sup>

But now let us take one final analytic step and return to the Haitian peasant. To state that the rulers publicly adhered to French cultural and religious symbols does not explain why the peasant should do so. In particular, it leaves unanswered the question as to why some aspects of the peasant's ritual life fall outside of the pale of institutional Christianity, whereas other aspects of the peasant's ritual life remain firmly embedded within it. Stated in another way, why did the peasant capitulate to the Francophile example of his rulers with respect to the Rites of Passage, but follow the lead of other cultural models for other rituals? Is there perhaps something inherently different about the Rites of Passage? Could

these rites perhaps enjoy some special symbolic quality, some inherent psychological meaning, that would incline believers to insist on institutionally "proper" cultural forms for their realization?

There may well be. But such a hypothesis might lead analysts into a dead end. The Rites of Passage in rural Haiti follow institutionalized western models less for the symbolic meaning of the rituals or the believer than for their practical meaning for the government. Most governments are interested in the size of the population which they control. In addition, early Haitian governments were concerned with putting order into the transmission of property, a task which presupposes mechanisms for establishing paternity and social legitimacy. The vital events most directly related to population size and legitimacy are the events of birth, marriage, and death. These are precisely the events surrounded by the rituals of baptism, matrimony and Church burial.

There is cogent historical evidence which suggests that it is here, in these dynamics of governmental maneuver, that the roots of westernized passage rites, are to be found. Already in the early nineteenth century rural Haitian belief and ritual was following its own centrifugal dynamic. Though it showed little interest in most aspects of the religious life of the peasants, however, at one point the government placed its foot squarely down. In 1816, the Minister of Justice under Pétion circulated an edict which put a brake on local religious autonomy and specifically placed three rituals under close State control. The edict forbade priests

to carry out religious ceremonies for baptisms, marriages, or funerals unless they have first received evidence that the documents required by law have been taken out at the (local) bureau de l'État Civil.<sup>26</sup>

The coincidence is startling, and certainly not accidental. Today's westernized Rites of Passage are those same rituals which early Haitian governments specifically placed under their direct control.<sup>27</sup> Just four years after the initial decree, Pétion's successor

Boyer echoed his predecessor in a law which reads as follows:

Neither priests nor vicars are permitted to administer any baptisms, celebrate any marriage, or bury any deceased person, unless they have first received from the parties in question documents from the civil registry taken out in accordance with the law. Any act of their ministry in defiance of the dictates of this article will be subject to punishment, inasmuch as it would serve to compromise the interests of the families concerned.<sup>28</sup>

What interests? Legitimacy, property rights, inheritance rights, and other domains of State control over peasant households. Where such vital interests have been linked to specific rituals, and such rituals have been brought under public control, the religious life of the peasant adapts itself accordingly.

With respect to Haiti, this has meant that Haitian peasants, as members of any nation-state, enter into periodic administrative interactions with the powers that be, and the powers that be -- like many state-level rulers -- have shown a keen, administrative interest in births, marriages and deaths, and have kept close watch over the rituals that surround these events. If the peasants don their finest Western clothes for these events and surround themselves with symbols of western propriety, it is because they and their ancestors have from the start been governed by western-oriented postcolonial rulers. It is this institutional apparatus which has placed de facto limits on the autonomy-seeking dimensions of folk religion, and has resulted in a voodoo cult dominated in subtle ways by the rites and symbols of Christianity. But the dynamics of the process are as theoretically critical as the end result itself. For paradoxically -- or perhaps not so paradoxically -- it was the State, much more than any Church, whose decisions gave shape and impetus to the continuing survival of these western religious forms.<sup>29</sup>

## Conclusion

There are two theoretical paths of which analysts of folk cults should probably beware. One approach emphasizes the syncretic dimension of New World folk religion, the mingling of different traditions. I have suggested, however, that though a mixture of different cultural forms has indeed occurred, the mixture has not taken the form of simple syncretism, but that the entire process has involved a stratificational dimension as well. In certain critical theological and ritual spheres, syncretism has not occurred. The symbols of the former colonial rulers have remained clearly dominant.

But there is another theoretical cul-de-sac that should also be approached with caution, that of indiscriminately labeling as "non-Western" or "non-Christian" the religious life of those economically marginal groups practicing one of the many folk cults that have been studied. Research which focuses on certain non-institutional dimensions of such cults sensitize us to the potential and persistence of local adaptative maneuvers. But research does little service if it simultaneously obscures the persistence of powerful institutional ties linking believers in various ways to powerful external forces. As with Haitian voodoo, how many of the so-called "African religions in the New World" would not turn out, on closer examination, to be topped by a totally Christian Supreme Being and dominated by totally westernized Rites of Passage?

This means that the researcher in rural Haiti who directs his camera toward spirit-possessed believers, sweat-covered drummers, or a houngan's knife raised to the throat of a sacrificial goat, should also include at least a snapshot or two of the tuxedoed groom escorting a white-gowned, western-wigged village bride down the uncolorful steps of the local Catholic church. And let there be no apologetic caption, dismissing the scene as some sort of public charade, a mere compliant masquerade on the part of villagers whose "true" cultural allegiance is expressed in midnight dances to the ancestral lwa. There is no masquerade here. If the faces of the couple's parents betray

obvious satisfaction, and the gait of the bride is clearly proud, it is because these inheritors of western economic and political forms have indeed accepted as their own certain major dimensions of western theology and ritual as well.

## Notes

1. See for example, Maya Deren, Divine Horsemen: Voodoo Gods of Haiti (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1970); Melville J. Herskovits, Life in a Haitian Valley (New York: Knopf, 1937); Alfred Métraux, Voodoo in Haiti (New York: Schocken Books, 1972), original 1959; and Jean Price-Mars, Ainsi Parle l'Oncle (Port-au-Prince: Imprimeria de Compiegne, 1928). Cf., Harold Courlander, The Drum and the Hoe (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1960); and James G. Leyburn, The Haitian People (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1960).
2. Kinanbwa is a pseudonym. The information on which this paper rests was gathered during fieldwork carried out between October 1971 and July 1973. The fieldwork was supported by an Overseas Population Internship (from the Department of Population Planning, University of Michigan) under the academic supervision of the Division of Social and Administrative Sciences of the International Institute for the Study of Human Reproduction, Columbia University. In-country support was given by the Centre d'Hygiène Familiale, and the first draft of this paper was written while the author was Senior Research Associate in the Institute for Urban and Minority Education, Teachers' College, Columbia University.

3. The revolutionary role of voodoo in the 1790's has been mentioned in numerous works dealing with the cult. A representative statement is that of Price-Mars who, in discussing the slaves, says that "leurs croyances ancestrales furent le levain de la révolte contre l'odieuse oppression" (p. 112). See also J.C. Dorsainville, Vodou et nervose (Port-au-Prince: Imprimerie La Presse, 1931); Herskovits; Métraux; and Michel Laguerre, "The Black Ghetto as an Internal Colony: Socio-Economic Adaptation of a Haitian Urban Community" (Ph.D dissertation. University of Illinois, 1976).
4. For an extended discussion of the term, see Price-Mars, pp. 46-50. Cf., also J.G. Leyburn, The Haitian People (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966), p. 137; and Herskovits, p. 139. In Dahomey the term is used as a noun referring to spirit. In Haitian Creole an interesting semantic shift has taken place. Used as a noun, the term never refers to a spirit of Haiti. Using it as an adjective, however, the villagers of Kinanbwa did use it to refer to a type of spirit. The lwa vodoû of Kinanbwa were among the spirits referred to as lwa rada in the literature. In the word vodoû, and in other words throughout this paper, the circumflex over a vowel indicates nasalization.
5. Early ethnographers, such as Price-Mars and Herskovits criticized earlier psychiatric analyses of voodoo which dismissed possession as a type of neurosis. But the film-maker Deren and the folklorist Campbell both pronounced that anthropologists themselves are incapable of perceiving the true meaning of voodoo, the "facts of the mind," which will be accessible only to those who actually undergo possession and are personally "transformed" by the cult. Deren claims to have been possessed by the lwa Ezili.
6. Métraux, p. 61.

7. The information presented here is adapted from Murray and Alvarez ("Childbearing, Sickness, and Healing in a Rural Haitian Community," Port-au-Prince: Centre d'Hygiène Familiale, 1973). This unpublished field report discussed several generally underemphasized aspects of rural voodoo to be treated here, including the heavy emphasis on healing, the highly familiarized nature of rural folk theology, the structural similarities between peasant livelihood and land tenure on the one hand, and the process of fragmentation and inheritance governing the relationship between spirit world and believer on the other, and the role of "white lwa," and the namelessness of the cult (the term "voodoo" being used rather by outsiders as a name for the cult). The problem of the generalizability of patterns found in a single village immediately arises. The author has done brief fieldwork in the north and in the southern peninsula as well. Of equal importance, fieldwork currently being carried out in other parts of Haiti by several students with whom the author had shared the above manuscript has produced preliminary findings that are strikingly similar to the voodoo of Kinanbwa. Several almost verbatim analogies reported in at least one of these other communities appear to portend well for the generalizability of at least some of the patterns to be discussed here.
8. The labelling of an event as "recreational" does not preclude the presence of non-recreational dynamics. The French recognized this by prohibiting, from the early 1700's on, those nocturnal slave dances which, though believed to be recreational, were viewed as possible occasions for plotting revolt. Even in contemporary context, deeper patterns may be unfolding in the context of the apparently recreational jollity of Saturday night voodoo dances. But the same can be said of what happens at American cocktail parties, golf courses, and other settings which ethnographers correctly class under the rubric of "recreation." The task is to draw a middle ground between dismissing voodoo dances on the one hand, and reading into them all sorts of forced symbolic, psychological, social, or political meanings on the other. That the voodoo dances themselves are highly recreational in content has been recognized by a number of observers (Herskovits; G.M. Simpson, "Magical Practice in North Haiti," Journal of American Folklore 67 [1954]; and F. Huxley, The Invisibles [New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966]). Perhaps the first analyst to recognize this was Price-Mars, who labels them as nocturnal festivals, choreographic creations. He suggests quite correctly that the cult could lose the voodoo dances themselves, with their drumming, dancing, and frequently clown-like possession events, without affecting the central rites, which are those of animal sacrifices to the ancestors.
9. Focal themes such as these probably should not be thought of as permanent features of the cult's "essence," but as shifting emphases which must be empirically determined in each case. It is clear that important changes in emphasis have already occurred. Though the reasons are not clear, the paramount role of snakes, snake spirits and snake worship reported by French observers during the colonial period has now virtually disappeared. Cf., Price-Mars, p. 119.
10. Gerald F. Murray, "The Evolution of Haitian Peasant Land Tenure: A Case Study of Agrarian Adaptation to Population Growth" (Ph.D. dissertation, Columbia University, 1977).
11. See Laguerre.
12. Bernard Diederich and Al Burt, Papadoc: The Truth about Haiti (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1969).
13. The metaphors may be more applicable in Port-au-Prince. The two studies which appear to

adhere most heavily to a congregational model were both done in or near Port-au-Prince, where servants of the lwa are reported to be organized into discrete groups under the leadership of specific houngans, much as converts to Protestantism attached themselves to a specific pasteu. Deren on several occasions refers to the servants of the lwa as "parishoners" of this or that houngan. And Laguerre, comparing voodoo to Black protestant sects in the urban U.S.A. refers in several passages to "the Voodoo Church" and "the Voodoo congregation" (p. 215). In this latter study, some other features of Haitian life are implicitly adapted to the idiom of urban U.S.A. The research neighborhood, for example, is described as a "Black ghetto" and voodoo is characterized as a type of "Black power separatist ideology" (Laguerre, p. 212). Students of peasant voodoo will probably find themselves in need of a somewhat different analytic terminology from that used in the urban studies mentioned above.

14. Métraux, p. 323.
15. See for example Deren, Herskovits, Métraux, Price-Mars, and Simpson.
16. Cf. Leyburn's statement that the "God and saints of Christianity need the intercession of white men" (The Haitian People, p. 129).
17. The rite of first communion appears to be growing in importance among the children of somewhat better-off couples. But it has not yet been incorporated into folk theology in the manner that baptism and marriage are now included.
18. Francois Girod, La Vie quotidienne de la société créole (Paris: Hachette, 1972), p. 161; and Francis Alexander Stansilaus Wimpffen, A Voyage to Saint Domingo (London: Cadell, 1817), p. 280-81.
19. The evidence on slave baptisms is somewhat ambiguous. Some authors believe it was done mechanically and taken lightheartedly or indifferently by the slaves (Price-Mars; Wimpffen, pp. 132-33). But there is other evidence that the slaves came to take Catholic baptism quite seriously. Christian baptism was used by Creole slaves as one of the marks that set them apart from newly arrived unbaptized African slaves, called contemptuously "bossals" or even horses until they were baptized. Thus adult slaves eventually insisted on Catholic baptism, and some delayed baptism for several years until a suitably wealthy or prestigious godparent could be found (Wimpffen, pp. 293-94). All observers agree that slave baptism was universal in the colony. Since the planters ignored too many other religious prescriptions of the Code Noir, universal fulfillment of this item does seem to indicate interest in Catholic Baptism on the part of the slaves themselves.
20. Gabriel Debien, Plantations et esclaves à Saint-Dominique (Dakar: Publications de la Section d'Histoire, 1962).
21. S.J. Ducoeurjoly, Manuel des habitants de Saint-Dominique (Paris: Lenoir, 1802), vol. 1.
22. Girod, p. 168.
23. The absence of direct exposure of most slaves to Catholic ritual (outside of baptism) seems inconsistent with the fact that even during the colonial period, voodoo ceremonies were already peppered with Catholic ritual paraphernalia and behavioral imitation of Catholic rituals (Métraux). But such a Catholic presence would have occurred even if only the cult leaders had been perceived as imitations of Catholic rituals. What outsiders perceived as imitations of Catholic rites may not have been so perceived by many of the participant slaves. At any rate, the presence of Catholic ritual in colonial folk rites does not

- constitute certain evidence of direct observation of Catholic ceremonies by all slaves.
24. The new nation was not totally without priests. Many authors suggest that during this period, the clergy were largely foreign imposters. But Cabon's extended discussion indicates rather that many of these priests had fallen into disfavor for misconduct in their homelands and had been sent to Haiti by their superiors as a form of exile (P.A. Cabon, Notes sur l'histoire religieuse d'Haiti [Port-au-Prince: Petit Seminaire Collège Saint-Martial, 1933], pp. 276-86). During those years in which Haiti governed the Spanish end of the island, many of the clergy in Haiti were Spanish or at least Spanish surnamed (C. Mackenzie, Notes on Haiti [London:Frank Cass, 1971], p. 130). But their numbers were small.
  25. For a dramatic criticism of the Francophile tendencies of early Haitian elites, see Price-Mars, pp. ii, iii.
  26. Quoted in Cabon, p. 100. Translation and emphasis mine.
  27. In conventional western settings, marriage is the ceremony which insures the legitimacy of children. In Haiti, baptism still carries most of the burden of legitimacy. Most conjugal unions being consensual, it is at baptism that the father recognizes a child as his. Baptism continued, of course, to be important in the postcolonial years. Marriage had been actively discouraged among slaves during the colony and was still not common in postcolonial decades. But there is evidence that Catholic funerals had come to take on substantial importance in this period (Mackenzie, pp. 15, 131). The absence of documentation on the matter makes it difficult to say if this was a new development or a continuation, like baptism, of a colonial tradition. The latter model is probably more accurate.
  28. Quoted in Cabon, p. 108. Translation and emphasis mine.
  29. Though his view of the process is somewhat different, Price-Mars also recognizes the importance of early governmental policy as the foundation of Catholicism's role in Haitian life (p. 166). He even makes the somewhat less tenable statement that the very concept of Supreme Being came as the result of postcolonial government policy. For reasons discussed earlier, this is anthropologically improbable.

# **The Catholic Church and Religions in Latin America**

Edited by:  
Thomas C. Bruneau  
Chester E. Gabriel  
Mary Mooney

**Monograph Series, No. 18  
Centre for Developing-Area Studies  
McGill University**