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Exploring the African Haitian Slave Religious Experience

Contemporary academic and societal discourse on African American religion centers itself around the Christian belief system. As an African American myself, I scarcely knew the many varieties of religious practices African Haitians historically have partaken in. Throughout my work, I will refer to the current inhabitants of Haiti as African Haitians and the slaves of Haiti as African Haitian slaves due to their African heritage and Haitian nativity. After delving into scholarly research, I can attest that while the research-based company, Global Religious Futures, has circumstantiated the notion that Christianity is the primary religion of African Haitians, the historic account of African Haitians’ religious experiences throughout time supersedes both a monolithic and a static narrative. In the words of Charles Long, “the Christian faith provided a language for the meaning of religion, but not all religious meanings of the black communities were encompassed by the Christian forms of religion” (Pinn 7).

To formulate my understanding of the subject matter, I have postulated author Anthony B. Pinn’s description of religion and surmised it within the framework of my own personal beliefs. For the purpose of this work, religion can be tentatively described as a term to express the guiding principles, rituals, and patterns individuals and groups implement as an instrument to conceptualize human existence. Religion in practical application can be conceived as an intricate philosophy used to orient lives according to beneficial practices circumscribed to the contextual state at which one is positioned in. Essentially meaning that the religious beliefs used to govern actions are overwhelmingly subject to modification and fluid interpretation dependent upon the environmental and situational factors in someone’s life. The manner in which the individual or group practices said religion is inconsequential in my opinion due to the necessary allowance for an element of plurality in accordance with the various needs and cultural characteristics of differing individuals and groups.

Through my work I intend to use the narrowed scope of religion provided by the previously developed definition to examine the rationale behind slave religious conversion amongst African Slaves, missionaries, and slave holders in Haiti. The aim for my work is to provide logical reasoning for the claims that African Haitian Slave experiences with religion is complex and fluid with respect to the historical time period primarily due to the intrinsic relationship between the governance of the state and the beliefs of the church. I believe that western occupation on the island by the Spanish Crown, the French, and the US as well as Haitian native leadership following independence, agitated cultural identity and political stability; thus, heavily impacting the ambiguity at which African Haitian religious philosophies were defined and individual motivations behind religious associations were seen. It is my desire to cultivate interest in expanding scholarly conversation and personal beliefs surrounding the duplicity of African Haitians’ religious experiences.

In his travels, Christopher Columbus came across a lush Caribbean island he named Hispaniola. Upon discovery, the Spanish government was particularly enraptured at the prospect of enriching their economic prosperity by taking control of the island and its natural resources. Western occupation introduced political conflict, disease, and slavery for Hispaniola’s native inhabitants, which lead to the essential decimation of their population. Without native slave labor, the Spanish began outsourcing to Africa, and by “1517, natives from West Africa were being imported whole-sale” (Pinn 16). The steady supply of slave labor generated a booming economy for the Spanish.

While it is true that the Spanish Crown held its primary interests solely in economic gain, the roman catholic church was a prolific influence on Spaniard political figures. Therefore, Spanish political actors on the island heavily concerned themselves with the religious practices of African Haitian slaves and encouraged missionary work on the island. African transplants brought with them various traditional African elements that persisted through time, Vodou religious practices being one of the most steadfast nonmaterial elements to maintain its presence. Spaniard political figures were intent on denaturing the very fabric of existence from the slave population in order to gain a subservient and palatable workforce. They chose to accomplish their goals by attempting to abolish all aspects of native African behavior such as religion. In the words of Leslie Desmangles “The syncretic nature of vodou was disturbing to the church. Vodou assemblies were a cause for alarm among the colonists, for not only were they profane in their use of objects stolen from the church, but the planters feared that they would serve as catalysts for slave insurrections” (Olmos 103). Therefore, the Spanish political actors believed the most appropriate course of action to maintain control of the African Haitian slave population was to eradicate the native African religious practice Vodou completely.

The political system implemented by the Spanish dictated intensive measures to indoctrinate Christian faith within the slave population, which produced a noticeable change in African Haitian Slave religious philosophies and motivations. Code Noir was erected in 1685, and “forced baptism and doctrinal education and outlawed African religious practices and superstitions” (Pinn 16). Cultural perceptions such a Vodouphobia and Afrophobia were also propagated in an effort to stigmatize the native practices. Vodou began to be associated cross-continentally with “barbarism and…. bloody ritualistic practices and cannibalism in Euro-American narrative and scientific discourse” (Joseph). The Roman Catholic church and the state worked in tandem to exterminate Vodou in anti-Vodou campaigns where “Vodou temples were searched and seized, and religious objects were destroyed and burned” (Joseph). Spaniard initiatives regarding the removal of Vodou practices were consistent and all encompassing for the African Haitian Slave population; thereby, making it difficult for Vodou to be openly practiced, taught, and kept integrated within their culture. Even with these difficulties and barriers, covert methods of practice kept Vodou alive and the unique structure of Vodou allowed for the syncretism of the Christian faith to occur, resulting in African Haitian slaves who identified as Catholic, but maintained Vodou beliefs and practices. It was over this historic time period that Catholicism became a primary religion. The Spanish held a delicate balance, but after experiencing losses in political capital, Spain relinquished the western half of Hispaniola to the French in 1700 with the Treaty of Ryswick, which became what we know today as Haiti.

The French colonists held different ideals concerning the religious practices of African Haitian slaves where they enacted a rather permissive approach to indigenous African religious cultural practices. The French sustained pure financial motives for their occupation of Haiti, and “were not interested in staying on the island for life, but only in amassing enough money to return to live in France” (Laguerre 8). The removed central government allowed a unique societal development of a unified cultural identity amongst African Haitian slaves. Catholicism maintained its status as Haiti’s official religion and the western hemisphere continuously stigmatized Vodou, but geographic constraints arouse for the newly divided Hispaniola and the lack of prioritization by the French government prevented intensive missionary work, which led to a resurgence of uninhibited Vodou practices. Slaves remained in hostile plantation environments but “while France was busying herself with war at home, the Vodou groups became cells of political organization for revolutionary blacks and mulattoes” (Laguerre 33).

Haiti’s independence was won with rebellion and unity amongst social groups within the country; independence a form of cultural freedom the African Haitians had not seen before. Independence in Haiti brought liberation in many forms, but also amplified crippling societal disorder, economic disparity, and caste prejudice. The Haitian rebellion is said to have been majorly fueled by Vodou due to the procession of a “Vodou ceremony that included the use of a wild boar” where participants “swore their sacred oath to overthrow their French slave masters” (Olmos 103). I theorize that in this era of rebellion, an additional explanation for the rampant practice of Vodou religion was the hope and inspiration the Vodou faith community provided African Haitian Slaves and freedmen that their dreams for society would reach fruition if they did their due diligence and stayed pious. Subsequentially, after the continued persistence of the rebellion, Haiti earned independence.

The carnage resulting from the rebellion included the essential decimation of the complex network of sugar plantations the country’s economy thrived on, which produced repercussions for the Christian and Vodou faith communities (Olmos 101). Haiti lost most of its primary agricultural economic supply and combated this by consolidating land grants to former slaves and attempting to re-build their farming prowess. The rural nature of this new economy “organized itself around small villages that … opened a new space for the preservation of African-Derived Creole religion” (Olmos 103). Vodou was overwhelmingly dependent upon the needs of the community and developed differently according to the idiosyncrasies of the village; resulting in great variance amongst Vodou congregations (Olmos 104). As Vodou practice flourished, the Roman Catholic Church grew incensed with the syncretic nature of Christian faith within Haiti and removed their priests from the island a year after independence was gained in protest (Olmos 104). The removal of formally taught priests did not remove Christian faith from the island, rather it allowed for the further amalgamation of Christian teachings due to the allowance of African Haitians to preach and alter truths and dogmas of the religion (Olmos 104). Independence curated change within the society and provided opportunity for changes in governmental leadership.

The Duvalier regime went from 1957 to 1986 and relied heavily upon the influence of Vodou within the political sector to remain control of the state and the people. “Papa Doc” ruled Haiti with the desire to appreciate “the Africanness of Haiti and to reflect this in the Catholic Church and its officials in Haiti” (Pinn 34). The scenario is now flipped with Christianity being marginalized and Vodou being pushed as the country’s official religion. The use if Vodou as a political element to control and comply with Papa Doc’s desires provided a warped version of Vodou practice that shifted the balance and order historically seen in Vodou (Pinn 34). Author Harold Courlander describes Papa Doc’s exercises over Vodou as “political, but they make him in effect, the head of a soci-religious institution that rarely has had a single nerve center” (Courlander 20).

Following the end of the Duvalier Regime, the United States briefly occupied the state as an outside governing body with economic interests on a level similar to but exponentially lesser than that of the French. US occupation intended on overseeing a “transition to a civilian government” (“Haiti Profile - Timeline"). The overall cultural impact US occupation had on religion was indecipherable. However, the chaotic governing system provided societal stress, degradation of economic wealth, and further civil conflicts. The reliance upon religion in both the Christian and the Vodou faiths continued to prosper as an avenue to uplift and provide stability for the common working man with daily struggles he can never seem to escape (Courlander xiiii).

The religious proceedings within Haiti amongst working-class African Haitians and African Haitian slaves have had similar yet contrasting religious climates. From Christian boasting state governors displayed by the Spanish Crown, major indifference displayed by the French, freedom impacted by circumstance throughout initial independence, and Vodou-isms promoted by the Duvalier Regime, Haiti has traversed through decades of widely varying religious narratives with intriguing complexities. Prevalent across time was the continued prosperity of religious affiliation amongst the African Haitian people regardless of their hardship and turmoil. Determination and stubborn values made for the syncretic melding of religions, and steadfast African cultural practices that generations to come will value.

# References

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