

Introduction to Afro-Caribbean Spiritualities

As you know, the first section of our course has been devoted to a study of Neopaganism. Neopaganism is an increasingly popular spiritual movement that draws upon a number of sources, the most dominant being the religious beliefs and rituals of pre-Christian peoples. When the term Neopaganism (or simply Paganism) is used, it almost always refers to varieties of spirituality that are based in the religious beliefs and rituals of pre-Christian European traditions. Obviously, from our study of Wicca, Druidry and Heathenism, we can see that contemporary practitioners of these faiths have modified these pre-Christian beliefs to a greater or lesser extent. This is the result of a number of factors, including the lack of a complete picture of what these earlier faiths were like, (since the contact with Christianity in Europe happened more than 1500 years ago, and only partial accounts of the indigenous faiths remain), and including the changed circumstances of the modern world. Nonetheless, the religious beliefs and practices of these pre-Christian European peoples provides the primary inspiration for the Neo-pagan movement today.

In addition to the forms of Neopaganism that we have been studying, there is another form of spirituality which draws much or most of its inspiration from pre-Christian forms of religion. This form of spirituality is rarely referred to as Neopaganism, however. Instead, these forms of spirituality are referred to collectively as Afro-Caribbean spiritualities. Afro-Caribbean spiritualities draw most of their inspiration from indigenous forms of religion practiced in Africa prior to the contact with Christianity, particularly the religions of the Yoruba and Dahomean peoples of sub-Saharan Africa. The Afro-Caribbean traditions that we are going to explore emerged in the Caribbean (and in South America) during the slave trade period, and so the term Afro-Caribbean represents a description of the origins of the movements.

There are a wide variety of Afro-Caribbean spiritualities that we could look at in our course, but we are going to focus on the two varieties that are best known and most widely practised in the North American context. These are the religions of Vodou and Santeria. Both traditions have a lot in common, and so what I would like to do in this section of our course is take a look at the main historical precursors that these traditions share.

African Religions

The first historical precursors to Vodou and Santeria are of course the religious beliefs and practices of the African peoples who were brought to the Caribbean as slaves in the 16th through 19th centuries. There are a huge variety of religious traditions and linguistic traditions in Africa. In the case of Vodou and Santeria, the religious and linguistic traditions which influenced these religions were drawn from the areas of Africa which are now called Nigeria and the Republic of Benin. There are two main linguistic and religious traditions within these regions: the first is referred to as Dahomean (named after the old African nation of Dahomey), and the other as Yoruban. The religion traditions of the Yoruba and Dahomean peoples are not identical, although they are very similar. Haiti, the birthplace of Vodou, was influenced primarily by the Dahomean people brought as slaves between the years 1517 - 1791, the year of the Haitian revolution; Cuba was influenced more by the Yoruba peoples, particularly those brought as slaves to the island in the 19th century.

Dahomean Religion

The religion of the Dahomean people was comprised of belief in kind of structured hierarchy of existence. At the top was a high God, named Nana-Buluku, who was understood to be both male and female. Interestingly, Nana-Buluku is not a major figure in Dahomean worship: he/she is too distant from the world of human beings to be of much relevance to daily

living. Some descriptions of Dahomean religion ignore Nana-Buluku altogether. After Nana-Buluku comes his/her twin children, named Mawu (a woman) and Lisa (a man). When the twins Mawu and Lisa were born, Mawu was given dominion over the night, and Lisa was given dominion over the day - Mawu is therefore thought to be the moon and to live in the west, while Lisa is the sun, and inhabits the east. Mawu is thought of as the main god, while Lisa is thought of as the god of creativity, linked as an aspect of Mawu. There is debate about the extent of worship directed towards Mawu-Lisa, but it is clear that they did figure strongly in the art and mythology of the Dahomean peoples. Twins are very significant in this region, for apparently more twins are born in this part of Africa than in any other part of the world, and they are considered to be very lucky. Mawu-Lisa, sometimes shortened to simply Mawu, are the divine twins, and they are believed to have provided the cosmic energy that makes up the essence of existence - this spiritual energy is called **ache**, and it underlies all life and all existence, and makes up the energy of the human soul and of all the other gods and spirits. The divine twins are also the creators of the world. Interestingly, the early Christian missionaries to the Dahomey region translated "Jesus" as "Lisa" to the Dahomean people - since Lisa was subordinate to the feminine Mawu, that would make an interesting twist on Christian theology for those hearing this message!

After Mawu-Lisa on this hierarchy comes the divine serpent Da, who is symbolized by the rainbow. Da is the child of Mawu-Lisa, and helped them create and sustain the world. Da is conceived of as a great snake, who circles the world and supports it as it floats on water. Da has 3,500 coils above the world, and 3,500 coils below the world. There was considerable worship directed towards Da, in that he symbolized the power which sustains the world. Christian

missionaries to the Dahomean regions mistakenly interpreted Dahomean religion as a “snake-cult” because of the emphasis placed on the rainbow serpent Da.

Below the divine twins came other gods and goddesses, who were thought to be the children of Mawu-Lisa. These gods and goddesses are called Vodou. In addition to Da, the most important “second generation” Vodou are Legba (a trickster and messenger god), Sakpata (earth goddess), Sogbo (sky god), and Agbe (water god). These gods can punish wrongdoing with things like smallpox, lightning, and drought/floods. Of these, Legba was the most significant, for Legba is the intermediary between the gods, and between the gods and humans. Dahomean religion taught that each god or goddess had their own individual language: they could not therefore communicate to one another, without the assistance of Legba. Similarly, human language was different from that of the gods, so Legba was the intermediary through which the gods’ wishes are translated to humans, and human wishes are translated to the gods. So Legba is vital, and must be approached in any ritual before any other god. Legba is associated with the Dahomean system of divination, called Fa, which can give insight into an individual’s destiny.

Below the gods in the Dahomean hierarchy of existence come spirit beings, including nature and water spirits, followed by ancestors, humans, animals, and objects, in that order. When it comes to ancestors and humans, humans were believed to have three separate “souls”: the first is the soul that one inherits from their ancestors - it pre-exists the existence of the body, and in fact “hunts out” the clay from which the body will be formed, and guards it until the next soul takes up residence in the moulded clay. The second soul is a person’s individual or personal soul - their personality. After it takes up residence in the “clay” that forms the body, a third soul arrives. The third soul is a portion of Mawu-Lisa that comes to dwell in each person - it is

thought of as a person's mind and instinct, and is believed to report a person's deed to back to Mawu-Lisa. When a person dies, their body returns to the earth to become the clay from which another body will be formed, and the souls separate - the third soul returns to Mawu-Lisa, the first and second souls go to the ancestors. Ancestors continue to watch over their descendants, and if properly remembered and taken care of, protect their descendants from harm. Ancestor worship or respect is therefore a central component of Dahomean religion.

Yoruba Religion

The religion of the Yoruba peoples is very similar to that of the Dahomean peoples, but there are differences, also. For example, the names of the gods and goddesses differ, and the concept of the soul differs. For the Yoruba people, the cosmos was conceived as having two realms - the first, called **aye**, is the material world, or the visible world of the living, and the second, called **orun**, is the spiritual world, where spirits, ancestors, and gods dwell. These two worlds are thought to exist simultaneously, and they are interdependent - they cannot be separated. Anything that happens here, effects there. Things that happen there, effect here. For example, if a person falls ill, it is likely because the Orisha are displeased with them. If food is scarce, or poverty strikes, it is probably because of an unsatisfied ancestor. Every event, and every day, is seen in light of this two-tiered structure of the cosmos.

Within this two-tiered view of the cosmos, the Yoruba conceived of things in a hierarchical fashion very similar to the Dahomean peoples. At the top was the supreme deity-named Olodumare, or Olorun. He is the creator and sustainer of the universe, but he is remote, not active in human affairs. He has neither priests nor temples, and is not even thought to have human attributes. Below Olodumare are the Orishas, who are superhuman beings or gods, and who interact with humans on a regular basis. The Orishas are worshipped. Some are thought to

be spirits that pre-existed the creation of humans, others are humans elevated to Orisha level through heroic action. The Orishas are the guardians of individual human destiny. Orishas are often symbolized by objects, rather than images.

Below the Orishas in the spiritual hierarchy are the ancestors, called Egungun, or ara orun. The ara orun are venerated in household shrines and through community rituals. These are the immediate ancestors of the Yoruba people, and they are thought to be very active in family life. They are the upholders of moral and social order, and punish wrongdoing with sickness. A type of priesthood was dedicated to them, called “egungun maskers” - they would mask themselves as ancestors, and act as judges in disputes over moral and social rules, and as healers to cleanse the community of evil.

Below these spiritual beings in the hierarchy came human beings. Humans, including humans believed to have special powers, such as kings, witches, twins, priests, and babies about to be born, were considered essential to the balance of the universe. Only humans can do ritual, so only humans can restore balance to universe when necessary, only humans can invest objects with spiritual power, called **ashe**. Humans act for all other beings, because we are located in middle of the hierarchy - we are dependent on Olodumare and the Orishas and egungun, who are above us, and are also dependent on plants, animals, rocks, trees below us in the hierarchy.

After humans within the Yoruba hierarchy came plants and animals, who were thought to be the children of Onile, the earth goddess. Knowledge of plants and animals was thought to bring success and healing. Recognition of the interconnectedness of all things, including our relationship with plants and animals, was believed to be necessary for harmony with Onile. Onile had a priesthood of her own, to care for her rituals. Below Onile’s children then came what we would call “non-living” things, such as clouds, rivers, iron, etc. All of these things

were considered living in Yoruba context. They have minds, willpower, intentions, action, and existence of their own.

The Slave Trade and “Creole” Precursors

There are a lot of truly horrendous events in the history of human civilization. The invention of “racial” slavery in the 17th century has to be counted as one of them. Slavery has existed as an institution throughout human history, and continues to exist in certain places even today. However, until the mid 17th century, the concept of racial slavery was absent. Prior to this point, certain people were counted as slaves simply by virtue of being sold into slavery - war captives, debtors, children of poor parents who sold them to support the rest of their families, etc., all became slaves, but the colour of their skin was irrelevant. Also, in most places, slaves had legal rights, could own property, earn money, could even own other slaves, and had the hope of being able to buy themselves out of slavery. In addition, when they had children, their children were born free - multi-generational slavery was rare. After this point, in North America, people were counted as slaves by virtue of their skin colour alone. Those who had been slaves under the old system lost their rights, and their children lost their rights to freedom also. There are a lot of reasons for this change, but the biggest one is the demand for labour that resulted from the shift in agriculture in North America and the Caribbean towards sugar, coffee and cotton. Land owners needed slaves, and they didn't need slaves with rights and freedoms. And so racial slavery was born.

The history of the slave trade in the Caribbean and North America begins before the African slave trade became dominant, and so there are some elements that contribute to Santeria and Vodou that are drawn from non-African sources. The first of these are the Native American

influences that can be traced to pre-existing native populations on both Haiti and Cuba. The natives on these islands were mainly Arawak & Ciboney: they were the very first American Native peoples to have contact with Europeans. They were used by the very first Spanish settlers as slave labour. Perhaps not surprisingly, they would not survive the experience. In Haiti there were an estimated 60,000 native peoples on the island in 1508, but forty years later (1548) only 500 remained. Similarly, when Columbus landed on Cuba in 1492 there were approximately 60,000 natives living there: by 1550 (58 years later), only an estimated 1,000-2,000 of them were left. Despite this shocking attrition, some elements of Native culture and spirituality survived to influence Vodou and Santeria, particularly the practice of smudging to ritually purify, and the use of many native herbal remedies to heal.

Added to the Native American element in the background of Vodou and Santeria is a European element drawn from the European slave trade. Although most of our familiarity with the slave trade in the New World emphasizes the African trade, there was also, in the early 1500's, a sizeable slave trade in European "undesirables." Those sold into slavery included many Jews, Muslims, Moors, Spanish peasants, practitioners of "heretical" faiths (i.e. Greek Orthodox, Russian Orthodox, etc), and the mixed-race descendants of earlier African slaves in Spain and Portugal known as "ladinos." These slaves left their mark on Vodou and Santeria by contributing a lot of folk-religious ideas, including an emphasis on such things as the cult of saints, pilgrimage, and faith healing. We are going to discuss folk-Catholicism as an historical precursor to Santeria and Vodou in more detail below.

The biggest group effected by the slave trade were of course the African slaves, captured and sold into slavery by Europeans. In Haiti, the population of Europeans was originally quite small, and consisted of small-land farmers, hunters and prospectors searching for gold. The need

for slaves was minimal: most of the original slaves were drawn from the native populations, and only 200 African slaves per year were imported. Around the year 1730, however, the economy shifted to large plantations and to the export of the huge cash crops of sugar and coffee. That meant that huge numbers of slaves were needed. By 1740, 500 ships a year were bringing cargoes of slaves from Africa, and picking up cargoes of sugar and coffee to take to Europe. By 1790, more than 4,000 ships anchored there each year. Between 1730-1791 (a period of 61 years), 800,000 African slaves were imported into Haiti.

A similar story can be told about Cuba's economy. Originally, the European settlement's economy consisted of artisans, small-land farmers, and frontiersmen, and made most of its money in the export of tobacco and beeswax in a limited international market. These crops did not require huge populations of slaves to support. For the first 270 years or so of the colonization of Cuba, (1511-1788), approximately 360 slaves per year were imported onto the island (for a total of 100,000 over the 277 year span.) After 1781, however, when the economy of Cuba followed that of Haiti and shifted to the production of sugar and coffee, huge labour forces were needed. As a result, larger and larger numbers of slaves were brought from Africa. From 1788- until 1865, when the slave trade ended, close to 7,000 slaves a year were sent, for a total of almost half a million.

Most of the slaves sent to both Haiti and Cuba were males. The land owners wanted healthy male workers, rather than women, old people or children (although some female slaves were always imported for household duties - the ratio of male to female slaves was perhaps 15:1). In Haiti and Cuba, there was no attempt made to "breed" slaves (unlike the American colonies) - when slaves died, they were replaced by new slaves from Africa. It is shocking to consider that between 8-10% of slaves sent to the new world died on the ships on the way over,

and another 8-10% of slaves working on plantations died every year, because of poor working conditions, including overwork, accidents with machinery or boiling sugar, epidemics of small pox, cholera, and yellow fever, and through punishments and outright murder. It was not until the 19th century, in the 1840's, when the price of slaves was increasing dramatically, that an attempt was made in Cuba to “breed” new slaves, and as a result, female slaves in greater numbers were brought to Cuba. Bringing female slaves into Cuba changed the structure of the slave society. In the 1850's, seven out every fifteen slaves brought to Cuba were women. Bringing in female slaves allowed a family structure to develop, and a more “normal” social life and social system to develop. It also meant that the possibility of passing down one’s own religious traditions to children became possible in a way that had not been possible previously.

The Impact of the Slave Trade

The slave trade is a significant historical precursor for a number of reasons. Clearly, the impact of the slave trade on the shape of African indigenous religion is one of them. The religions of the Dahomean and Yoruban peoples experienced some radical changes as a result of the slave experience in the 16th through 19th centuries. Several elements that were central in the religions as practised in Africa were abandoned in the New World, because they simply could not be sustained. For example, in both the Dahomean and Yoruban contexts, the worship of earth deities was an important aspect. This aspect was lost in the New World, because African slaves felt cut off from the land of their birth. After all, the land that had nurtured them was now thousands of miles away, never to be seen again, and the New World was foreign and definitely not benign. The forced labour on plantations was not conducive to reverence of a nature deity, and so this dimension of African religion did not survive the translation.

The cult of the ancestors which was so central in Africa for both the Dahomean and Yoruban peoples was also largely abandoned. Central to ancestor worship was the idea that the souls of ancestors needed to be revered through specific ritual means, including altars which contained relics of the ancestors, and objects thought to embody the souls of ancestors. Because these things were left behind in Africa, the ancestors were lost and left behind in Africa also. Slaves therefore felt bereft of them in the new world. Although reverence for ancestors did survive in the New World, the actual religious structure devoted to them, with a priesthood of its own, did not. Instead, the veneration of ancestors in the New World took on Spiritist dimensions. We are going to talk about Spiritism as an historical precursor to Vodou and Santeria below.

Another change that resulted from the slave trade was that a whole new level of the spiritual cosmos was discovered: called “Ginen,” (the name of a sea port on the slave coast of Africa, often the last part of Africa ever seen by the slaves), it came to be conceived of as the land of the gods and ancestors, which existed across the waters, and had to be made manifest in the new world before communication with African spiritual forces became possible. In the African traditions, only two levels of the cosmos had been appreciated: the spiritual realm, and the worldly realm.

Another result of the experience of slavery was the introduction of “angry” gods and goddesses into the pantheon of Vodou and Santeria. This is particularly true in Vodou’s case, where a whole second pantheon of beings emerged as a result of the experience of slavery and the Haitian revolution. For example, prior to slavery, Dahomeans worshipped beings who were calm and relatively peaceful. After the experience of slavery, Vodou incorporated beings like

Erzulie Red Eye - a Vodou spiritual being who represents the rage and wish for vengeance of raped and mistreated women.

Yet another change that resulted from the slave trade was a changed system of transmission of African beliefs. In Africa, the Dahomean and Yoruban traditions were largely passed down in one of three ways:

1) Worship of a particular Vodou or Orisha could be inherited from parents, either the mother or the father, whose religious duty specifically required the teaching of that deity's worship to their offspring. 2) Worship of a particular deity could be assigned at birth, in exchange for successful delivery of difficult pregnancy or labour. In this case, it might be a deity that the mother or father do not worship, but the child would be raised to do so. 3) Worship of a particular deity could be assigned by a healer, as part of a cure or in thanks for a cure. Inheritance of worship was the main practice in Africa, therefore: the other two modes of transmission came only when life-threatening crises arose, and required the aid of different divine beings to resolve. What this meant is that in Africa, the religious institutions were based primarily on a system of inherited priesthoods. Once the slave trade came, however, the African slaves were unable to maintain this system of passing down religious worship, because so few children were born. Another system had to be found, and so in both Vodou and Santeria there emerged the practice of "adopting" people into a lineage of worship, so that the worship of particular Vodou or Orisha could be maintained.

And so the effect of the slave trade was enormous, even though much of the belief systems of Africa did remain intact in the New World.

Forced Christianization and Folk Catholicism

One of the amazing things about the African slave trade is that the African peoples sold into slavery were assumed to have no true religion of their own - as far as Europeans were concerned, they only had "superstitions," and so once they were sold into slavery, they were forcibly converted to Christianity. What this means is that they were baptized without knowing in many cases what the ritual meant, and then were forced to attend Christian religious services. They were often given Biblical names by their owners, as if they had no names of their own. Converting the slaves to Christianity was considered to be the moral duty of the priests, and also of the slave owners. Catholic priests argued that converting the slaves to Christianity would decrease thieving, laziness, disobedience, and murder, by teaching them to be resigned to their fate as being part of God's plan. Both the French and the Spanish attempted to control the religion of their slaves by forcing them to become Christian. In French controlled territories, for example, including Haiti, a law called the Code Noir was passed in 1685, which required the forced baptism and doctrinal education of all slaves, and outlawed African religious practices and superstitions. Further regulations imposed under the Code Noir in 1758 and 1777 enforced the Christianization of slaves by restricting their ability to socialize with one another: under penalty of branding, whipping, and death, slaves were not to meet except in the presence of a priest, and were not allowed to gather near the home of their master or in remote spaces. Owners who allowed their slaves to congregate were fined 100 crowns, to be paid to the Church. A second offense could result in the owner being sentenced to life imprisonment on the Galley warships (although I was unable to discover if anyone was actually sentenced in this way). Although it is apparent that slave owners resented these regulations, because of the time and money lost by policing their slaves so closely, and in giving up work time for religious

instruction, it is also clear that serious efforts were made to control the slave population in Haiti. Similar attempts were made in Cuba.

In addition to such restrictions, catechism-based religious indoctrination was used by religious leaders to associate vodou-type practices with the demonic even after slavery was abolished. In the 19th century, for example, the following questions and answers were added to the Catholic catechism taught to slaves:

31. Who is the principal slave of Satan'? – the principal slave of Satan is the houngan [vodou priest].

32. What are the names given by houngan to Satan? – The names given to Satan by houngan are loas [the term for the gods], angels, saints morts [venerated ancestors], and marass [the divine twins].

33. Why do houngan give Satan the names of angels, saints, and morts? – Houngan call Satan after saints, angels and morts in order to deceive us more easily.

34. How do men serve Satan'? – In sinning, casting spells, practicing magic, giving food-offerings, manger les anges, manger marassa.

37. Are we allowed to mingle with the slaves of Satan? – No, because they are evil-doers; like Satan himself they are liars.”ⁱ

Clearly, the Church went to considerable lengths to stamp out any kind of African or syncretic religion. Equally clearly, however, some elements of African spirituality remained. Regardless of the church's efforts, a lot of the traditional African beliefs were maintained by the slaves, but these beliefs were intermixed with the religion of their captors. For example, one Catholic priest wrote:

The Negroes have no scruples.... They intermix Dagon's ark and secretly keep all the superstitions of their ancient idolatrous cult with the ceremonies of the Christian religion.

All the Negroes have much devotion for the communion wafer. They eat it only when they are ill, or when they are afraid of some danger. In regard to the holy water, the little

bit of water that is consecrated during the Sunday Mass, it is rare that one finds one drop of it when the ceremony has ended; they carry it in little calabashes and drink some drops when they rise (in the morning) and pretend that it will guarantee their welfare against all the witchcraft that might befall them."ⁱⁱ

This complaint by a Catholic priest is interesting because it reveals the degree to which the African slaves kept alive their spirituality within the confines of Catholicism. This was made possible because of the similarity of African spirituality to many elements of folk Catholicism. As many of you probably know, official Catholicism consists of seven sacraments: baptism, confirmation, matrimony, extreme unction, Eucharist, penance, and holy orders. In addition to these official elements, however, Catholicism contains a vast array of other elements that are considered “popular” or “folk.” This is particularly true of Spanish Catholicism in the 17-19th centuries. Spanish Catholicism was centered in something called the cult of personages, or the cult of saints. The cult of saints included a strong emphasis on things like miracle stories, intercession stories, especially healing intercessions, and a major focus on the figures of Mary, and Jesus, as well as other saints. The folk Catholicism that was brought to Haiti and Cuba was largely independent of Church control. The Church officials could not control how people worshipped the saints in their own homes or slave quarters, nor could they control how people viewed the saints (often seeing them as more significant in terms of individual spiritual solace and aid than God or Jesus). As a result, the saints came to be equated in African eyes with the Vodou or Orishas - the gods and goddesses of Africa. After all, the Vodou/Orishas were also subordinate in a spiritual hierarchy to a high god, and could be asked to intercede with one with higher spiritual powers.

Folk Catholicism also included a strong emphasis on devotions and religious symbols as mediations to God. It emphasizes the presence of God in nature, in images, in places, and in material things like beads, prayer cards, statues, paintings, holy water, candles and relics. The objects themselves were seen to help one attain God's grace. This tied in very well with African ideas about the nature of sacred objects. Within both Dahomean and Yoruban spirituality, objects were understood to be the repositories of Ashe, the spiritual force of the universe. The material emphasis within folk Catholicism was easily integrated with African beliefs.

Folk Catholicism also included a strong sense of the presence of God in everyday life. God was believed to intervene continuously in favor of the faithful, and it was believed that this intervention could be prompted by promises and by certain devotions. One did not need the intercession of the priest to attain God's aid. As a result, feasts to honour saints, pilgrimages to particular places thought to be holy, and prayer itself had great importance. Likewise, in African spirituality, the gods and goddesses were believed to intervene and interact with humans on a regular basis. Feasts, pilgrimages and prayer were all elements known to African spirituality.

Folk Catholicism also had a strong public element - as expressed in large public events like processions, pilgrimages, and mass celebrations of Good Friday and Christmas. This public element fused very nicely with the African idea that religion is something that is communal and family rather than individually based.

Folk Catholicism emphasized the religious meaning of life and death. The crucial stages of human life were thought to have meaning related to Christian ritual, so that the beginning of life (birth), the transitions of life (matrimony), and the end of life (death) were surrounded by ritual. Death especially became a major focus of religious ritual. This element of folk Catholicism

blended seamlessly with African faith. The importance of initiations, and the importance of ancestors, was present for both Dahomean and Yoruban religions. The Cult of Saints was in some ways a Cult of Death, in that the Saints were usually martyrs. African spirituality had no difficulty encompassing this element.

Finally, folk Catholicism upheld the religious value of the weak. The very poor, the sick, the elderly, and children were thought to be the locus of God's presence. Folk Catholicism stressed the point implicitly that attitudes towards the weak reflect our relationship to God and with goodness and evil. This message clearly resonated with the African slaves, who could see themselves as the downtrodden children of God, and hence having a special relationship to the divine that their overseers lacked.

The Haitian Revolution

Another historical precursor that influenced both Vodou and Santeria is the Haitian Revolution, which began in August of 1791. In this year, the ratio of black slaves to white slave owners was almost 100:1 on the plantations, and 15:1 in the cities and towns. The treatment of slaves was very poor, and many slaves tried to escape into the countryside. In Haiti, the number of escaped slaves grew rapidly in the years prior to the revolution, because Haiti was under the control of the French, and the English and French were at war. The English would capture French slave ships, and put their cargoes ashore to cause havoc for the French. The Haitian revolution apparently began within the escaped slave population. It was led by a man named Boukman, who was both a runaway slave and a religious visionary. Over the next three weeks, Haitian slaves burned every plantation throughout the fertile regions of Haiti and executed all Frenchmen they could find. The French population responded with atrocities of their own, including the execution of Boukman. In 1797 a new leader of the rebellion emerged, named

François Toussaint L'Ouverture. He was fifty years old when the war broke out, and had spent his whole life in slavery. He didn't participate in the burning of the plantations or the executions of the slaveowners, but he did train a small military force to repel the Europeans he knew would try to regain Haiti. France did indeed send troops to regain control of the island (40% of France's economy was dependant on Haiti), and the Haitian rebels trained by Toussaint responding with guerrilla tactics that decimated the french troops. Toussaint was then captured by the French, however, and died in prison. He was followed by a man named Jean-Jacques Dessalines. It is Dessalines who successfully defeated the French forces sent to reclaim the island, led by men named Victor LeClerc and Jean-Baptise Rochambeau. The war fought between the French and the Haitians was brutal. The French decided to simply execute blacks whenever and wherever they found them, regardless of whether they were combatants or not. Dessalines ordered the execution of all Europeans that opposed the new revolutionary government. Finally, on November 28, 1803, the French surrendered and the Republic of Haiti was born. By that time, 70,000 French soldiers were dead, and an equal number of African-Haitians.

The Haitian Revolution is significant for several reasons. First, it is significant because it resulted in the creation of a nation where slavery was abolished, and where the forced Christianization of Africans and the suppression of African based spiritualities were abandoned. This resulted in an environment where Vodou could flourish, although Christianity also continued to flourish there (without European control, for about 30 years). It is also significant because it resulted in the spread of Vodou outside of Haiti to Cuba and the United States. Scholars are not entirely sure where Vodou originated, whether it originated among the escaped slaves, or the plantation slaves, or the urban black population. But it is clear that Vodou existed

prior to the Haitian revolution, and when the revolution broke out, (and also during the years before it was successfully won in 1803), many plantation owners fled Haiti and moved to Cuba, taking their slaves and the religion of Vodou with them. In 1809, these immigrants were expelled from Cuba, (at least in part for having brought Vodou and revolutionary thinking with them with their slaves), and so they moved to Louisiana. Once again, they brought their slaves, and Vodou, with them. And so the Haitian Revolution resulted in the spread of Vodou to Cuba, where it influenced Santeria, and to the United States, where it continues to be practiced today.

Spiritism

The final historical precursor that I want to explore is the religion of Spiritism. Spiritism is a religion that grew out of the broader religious movement called Spiritualism, which emerged in the middle of the 19th century. Spiritualism involved the belief that it was possible to communicate with the spirits of the dead through seances. This religious movement was tremendously popular in the 19th century, and resulted in a huge interest in the “scientific” explanations that could be offered for spirit communication. In the 19th century, of course, science and technology were burgeoning, and many 19th century North Americans and Europeans were convinced that spirit phenomenon were genuine, and that they could be fully explained using scientific means. The founder of Spiritism, a man named Hyppolyte Leon Denizard Rivail, (1804-1867) was a person who was convinced that spirit phenomenon were scientific in nature. He later changed his name to Allan Kardec, a name revealed to him by spirits as his name in a past life. Through Kardec’s investigations into spiritualist phenomenon, he became convinced that there were cross cultural and universal spiritual messages being communicated by spirit entities. He wrote a book titled Le Livre des Esprits (or The Spirits’ Book) which was published

in 1857 in which he outlined these teachings. Although his book, and the religion which emerged from it and subsequent publications did not have much impact in Europe, some of his followers took his teachings to Latin America, where they were tremendously influential.

Some of the central teachings revealed to Kardec in his study of spirit messages involved the nature of the souls of deceased humans, the structure of the spirit world, and the nature of God. According to Spiritism, there are three types of souls; there are the souls of the recently dead (which are awaiting either reincarnation or spiritual evolution to a higher spiritual realm); there are souls within each living human being, which have been reincarnated from previous lifetimes; and there are evolved souls, called spirits of light, which are human souls so spiritually evolved that they no longer need to incarnate on the earth. These souls act as teachers and guides for the rest of us.

According to Spiritism, there are many levels or worlds of beings in the spiritual cosmos: the Earth where we dwell is the 3rd world; lesser evolved spirits dwell on levels one and two: higher evolved spirits live on the levels above ours. Karma is the mechanism which governs spiritual evolution: humans cannot escape the consequences of their actions. The spirits of light dwell on the 7th and highest world.

God within Spiritism is conceived of as distant from human concerns; the spirits of light, on the other hand, are closer to us, and help us on a regular basis. The spirits of the recently dead also help us, out of care for their loved ones left behind, and to gain 'karma points' to help ensure a better life next time for themselves. When these spirits of the recently dead help us, it is usually through the assistance of a spirit of light. A Spiritist medium (someone who goes into trance and communicates with the spirit world) usually gets possessed by a spirit of light - that

spirit then communicates the messages of other spirits to the medium, and from him or her on to the rest of the congregation. A Spiritist service is called a Misa: they are seances with possession trance, messages from the dead.

Spiritism clearly has a lot of parallels to both traditional African spirituality and to folk Catholicism. The spirits are similar to both the Vodou/Orishas and to Catholic Saints. The idea that it is possible to communicate with the spirits of the dead, and that the spirits of the dead continue to care for and watch over their living relatives is very much in accord with African beliefs. With the introduction of Spiritism into Latin America and the Caribbean, a new means for the veneration of ancestors was introduced. As you recall, one of the elements of traditional African religion that was damaged in the New World was the aspect of ancestor veneration. Today, many practitioners of Santeria and Vodou therefore borrow heavily from Spiritism when it comes to communication with and reverence for ancestor spirits.

This entire mix of historical elements is why some scholars argue that both Vodou and Santeria are “syncretic” religions. Syncretic means the fusion of elements from two or more different traditions, to make a new synthesis. Other scholars argue that Santeria and Vodou are not really syncretic, that they are instead simply African spirituality with a “gloss” of Catholic and Spiritist, etc. elements. Whether one argues for or against syncretism, however, it is clear that all of these elements are significant for both Vodou and Santeria.

Worldview:

The worldview of Afro-Caribbean spiritual traditions is Monistic, in that Vodouists and Santeros conceive of the universe as being created from a cosmic energy called Ashe. Ashe is

the cosmic energy that comes from God, and permeates all things, both animate and inanimate. Within Vodou and Santeria, this means that both objects (such as stones, shells, or even dolls) and humans are repositories for ashe. Both objects and humans can also be depleted of ashe, causing illness or even death in the case of humans. Magic within these traditions is the result of the manipulation of ashe. For Vodouists and Santeros, ritual is believed to have concrete effects: the proper conducting of a ritual action WILL result in the desired effect, because the spiritual energy WILL have been manipulated. Improper conducting of ritual actions, or even everyday actions, can bring negative consequences, again because of their effects on ashe.

The worldview of Vodou and Santeria is also Animistic and/or Panentheistic. As we have discussed before, animism is the belief that nature is imbued with spiritual entities. Panentheism is the belief that the gods themselves dwell in nature. Vodou and Santeria can be considered either animistic or panentheistic, depending upon whether the loa/orishas are considered spirit beings, or gods. Many of the loa or orishas are associated with aspects of nature. As we discussed with reference to the historical precursors to Afro-Caribbean spirituality, one of the effects of the slave trade on African spirituality in the New World was the loss of the worship of a nature deity: the slaves felt disconnected from their own natural environment, and the forced labour and foreign land were not conducive for nature spirituality. Nonetheless, many of the African-inspired spirit beings are associated with some aspect of nature; Ogou/Ogun for example is associated with iron, Damballah in Vodou and Yemaya in Santeria with water, and Erzulie in the Vodou tradition, the goddess of love, has an alternate persona called LaSirena, the Siren, in which she appears as a mermaid. And so although Vodou is not hugely nature-centred, there are some elements of panentheism and/or animism still apparent in the theology of the religion.

The worldview of Afro-Caribbean traditions is also Multi-tiered: as we have discussed in the past, this means that both Vodouists and Santeros conceive of the cosmos as having multiple levels of existence or reality. In the case of Vodou, these worlds are called Heaven, where God, the angels and the saints dwell; our world, and Ginen, the land of the lwas and the dead, which is thought to exist across the waters, a kind of spiritualized version of Africa. The central symbol of the Vodou temple is a pole, which is thought to unite these three worlds. Ritual action in Vodou is designed to facilitate communication between these three realms, in particular to bring the loas up from Ginen so that they may communicate with their devotees here on earth.

Finally, the worldview of both Vodou and Santeria is Relational. Within these traditions, the universe is conceived of as a complex web of relationships, and everything that happens, both good and bad, is the result of these relationships. Important relationships which govern events in the cosmos are those between God and the loas or orishas; between the loas/orishas and humans; between humans with each other; and between humans and the natural world. One implication of this aspect of Afro-Caribbean worldview is the conviction that faulty relationships are thought to be the cause of most hardship. If someone is suffering bad luck or ill health, this is often traced back to a flawed relationship, either between human beings here on earth, or between an individual person and their guardian loa or orisha. Healing of hardship or ill health therefore focuses on healing of relationships.

Another implication of this aspect of Afro-Caribbean worldview is that the concept of “proper behavior” changes depending upon the relationships involved. Within Vodou, for example, different humans are thought to have different personality types, as indicated by their different affiliations to the various loa. A person who is “like” Ogou, for example, is forthright,

aggressive, militaristic, and protective. Certain behaviour types are therefore expected of this person that would not be expected, and would not be “right,” for someone who is “like” Damballah, for example, who is calmer, wiser, and more oriented towards orderly action. The same is true within Santeria. People who are “like” Chango are expected to act in certain ways, and to expect them to act more like another personality type would be considered irrational. Human beings are therefore defined in terms of their relationships to divine; this subsequently governs their relationships to other people. Within this Relational system, there is no such thing as a “solitary” practitioner of Vodou or Santeria: even if a person does not belong to a religious community, they are not solitary in that they are governed by these systems of relationships to both the divine and the human worlds.

Endnotes

ⁱ Metraux, Alfred. Voodoo in Haiti. Translated by Hugo Charteris. New York: Oxford University Press, 1959, pp. 336-337.

ⁱⁱ Desmangles, Leslie G. The Faces of the Gods: Vodou and Roman Catholicism in Haiti. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992, pp. 26-27.