

6 “Our Government is in Bwa Kayiman:” A Vodou Ceremony in 1791 and its Contemporary Significations

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The Haitian Vodou religion has evolved alongside the Haitian nation state and the local interpretations of a linkage between national identity and Vodou appear strong – also in comparison with other African-American religions. This paper explores representations of Vodou’s role during the Slave Revolution which resulted in the declaration of Haiti’s independence in 1804. The article specifically addresses the Vodou ceremony which presumably took place at Bwa Kayiman in northern Haiti in 1791. Against this background, contemporary uses and repercussions – not the least among Vodou practitioners – of the historiography of Vodou and the Revolution, as well as their consequences for the Vodou religion are discussed.

Keywords: Haiti, Vodou, revolution, Bwa Kayiman, Bois Caïman

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La religión haitiana del vodú ha evolucionado paralelamente con el estado-nación haitiano. Las interpretaciones locales de una relación estrecha entre la identidad nacional y el vodú están también presentes en otras religiones afroamericanas. Este artículo investiga las representaciones del papel del vodú durante la Revolución de esclavos que tuvo como resultado la declaración de independencia de Haití en 1804. Como ejemplo se puede tomar la ceremonia que supuestamente tuvo lugar en el bosque del Caimán, en el norte de Haití, en 1791. El artículo investiga también los usos y las repercusiones contemporáneos de la historiografía del vodú y la Revolución, así como sus consecuencias para dicha religión.

Palabras claves: Haití, vodú, revolución, Bwa Kayiman, Bois Caïman, Bosque del Caimán

Introduction

This article¹ explores representations of Vodou as crucial for the independence and birth of the Haitian nation state. The Republic of Haiti was declared in 1804 and was the result of a successful slave revolution (1791-1803). According to several sources, Vodou was vital in inciting the Revolution which supposedly began with a meeting and a Vodou ceremony at a place called Bwa Kayiman² in 1791. The importance of Vodou in attaining Haitian independence, as well as the historiography of the Bwa Kayiman ceremony, have been articulated largely by Haitian and foreign intellectuals as well as other observers. This article further intends to give examples of how *Vodouisants*, or Vodou practitioners, in the popular setting³ make use of narratives about Vodou's role in the creation of Haiti to legitimize the religion and depict it as inextricably merged with Haitian national identity. At the end of this article, I discuss the possible bearings and consequences of such representations of a "revolutionary Vodou" upon the position of Vodou and its devotees in today's Haitian society. This perspective is relevant in the light of local public discourse which often returns to the need for reconciliation and increased dialogue among various social, economic and religious categories, as well as political factions, in what is described as a fragmented country (see as an example, St Fleur and Beaubrun, 2007).

At the core of the Vodou religion are the spirits referred to as *lwa* (*loa*). Most of these spirits have origins in West and Central Africa and were brought by slaves to Haiti under French colonial rule. As with other Afro-Latin American religions, Vodou practice centers on "serving" the spirits in order to ensure their benevolence and help in everyday life. Other features of Haitian Vodou include animistic traits as well as the agency accorded to the ancestors and spirits of other departed humans.

In the minds of many Haitians, Vodou is also closely linked with Haitian identity. Few seem to deny such associations, even if they reject Vodou and see it as a cause of underdevelopment, an expression of mental backwardness, or even as invoking God's punishment on the country. Others

– whether or not they practice Vodou – describe it as a positive expression of a mixed African heritage which renders Haitians unique. Some also appreciate Vodou as a composite of true "Haitian-ness" while distinguishing between constructions of a supposedly "traditional, pure and rural Vodou," in contrast to a "contemporary, degenerated, commercialized and magically dangerous Vodou" said to be practiced by the urban poor.

If Vodou has been incorporated in constructions of national identity, Vodou in return incorporates the nation. In Vodou temples there are national symbols such as the red and blue of the Haitian bicolor, small paper flags and, occasionally, presidential portraits. The national coat of arms – with its guns and revolutionary cap of liberty – is painted on drums and, according to *Vodouisants*, is recaptured in the ceremonial drawing for the important Vodou spirit *Ogou* (cf. Brown, 1989).

...Haitian, it is the Vodou which is for you.
It is in your guts, in your ancestors, in your
blood, in your veins. It is *vaksin* (musical
instrument), drums, and *banbou* (musical
instrument), which is our culture – we the
Haitians.

Vodou priest outside Jacmel



Figure 1: Vodou temple. The spirit *Ogou's* ceremonial drawing here includes Haitian flags (photo by the author).

The above quotation suggests that Vodou forms a primordial part of the very physical being of Haitians, that Vodou is "in the blood." Moreover, the predominant opinion is that a person's Vodou spirits are acquired through bloodlines and inheritance.

If there is a particular event in Vodou's history that has been decisive for shaping Vodou as a social fact, it is probably the Vodou ceremony at Bwa Kayiman on August 14, 1791. Presumably, this ceremony launched the Haitian Revolution which resulted in the abolition of slavery and an independent Haiti in 1804. This is one description of the ceremony by the famous Haitian writer and historian Dantès Bellegarde in 1953 (in Geggus, 2002: 81):

During the night of 14 August 1791 in the midst of a forest called Bois Caïman [Alligator Wood], on the Morne Rouge in the northern plain, the slaves held a large meeting to draw up a final plan for a general revolt. They consisted of about two hundred slave drivers, sent from various plantations in the region. Presiding over the assembly was a black man named Boukman, whose fiery words exalted the conspirators. Before they separated, they held amidst a violent rainstorm an impressive ceremony, so as to solemnize the undertakings they made. While the storm raged and lightning shot across the sky, a tall black woman appeared suddenly in the center of the gathering. Armed with a long, pointed knife that she waved above her head, she performed a sinister dance singing an African song, which the others, face down against the ground, repeated as a chorus. A black pig was then dragged in front of her and she split it open with her knife. The animal's blood was collected in a wooden bowl and served still foaming to each delegate. At a signal from the priestess, they all threw themselves on their knees and swore blindly to obey the orders of Boukman, who had been proclaimed the supreme chief of the rebellion. He announced as his choice of principal lieutenants Jean-François Papillon, Georges Biassou, and Jeannot Bullet.

Haitian ex-dictator François Duvalier (president, 1957-1971) also referred to the Bwa Kayiman ceremony in his *Éléments d'une doctrine* (1968). His case is noteworthy in light of his extremely influential position:

... [T]hey celebrated the ceremony of Bois-Caïman during which they all swore to take vengeance against the White colonizers by iron and fire. A grand Vodou priest called Boukman became the terrible organizer of the slave revolt. Hallaou, Hyacinthe, the La-fortunes, all Vodou priests made fanatic by their African beliefs, pulverized the Northern plains of Haiti so that the burning flames of a thousand glowing houses could be seen as far as the Bermuda Islands.

The African beliefs thus served to gather the slaves in the face of the conquest of the Independence of Haiti. (Duvalier, 1968: 278-279, my translation)

Similarly, ex-president Jean-Bertrand Aristide – who officially recognized Vodou as a religion through a presidential decree in 2003 – mentioned the Bwa Kayiman ceremony in his dissertation (2006: 345):

To free themselves from the bonds of slavery, our forefathers turned to the Ancestors in the ceremony of Bois Caïman, in August 1791. In other words, to become free, the slaves prayed not to the God of his master but to the God of Ancestors.

The event of the Bwa Kayiman ceremony forms an important part of Haitian national identity as it relates to the very genesis of Haiti. Moreover, the Vodou constituent of the Bwa Kayiman ceremony also manifests a particular cultural, or ethnic, dimension of the Haitian Revolution and ensuing declaration of the Republic of Haiti. Thus, it is not surprising that the event is taught at school, referred to in public debates and appears in popular songs (cf. CHAR, 2007; cf. AHP, 2007; cf. Fombrun, 1980). References to the revolutionary birth of the Haitian nation are also often heard in Vodouisant discourse:

Whatever Haitian you are, since you're Haitian; be it a Catholic priest – you're Vodouisant, be it a reverend – you're Vodouisant. Because when you say "Haiti," you say "Vodou." When you say "Vodou," you say "Haiti." Because this little terrain, *this* little piece of earth right *here*. I believe that two hundred years [ago] – Vodou gave it its independence. Do you understand? You recognize this?

Vodou leader and priest in Cayes-Jacmel

The Haitian state commemorated the centennial and bicentennial (under President Jean-Bertrand Aristide) of the Bwa Kayiman ceremony. In connection with Haiti's bicentennial in 2004, ceremonies were also held at the site which is today identified as Bwa Kayiman. The symbolic value of Bwa Kayiman is further demonstrated by Protestant extremists who have performed so-called crusades to Bwa Kayiman, aimed nominally at purging the site. On the internet site⁴ of the Florida based Seed of Abraham Pentecostal Church, one such "crusader" and missionary explains in extremist Protestant jargon:

On August 14, 1791 a leader named Boukman called for a secret meeting with many other slaves in a forest called Bois-Caiman near Cap-Haitien where they had a satanic ceremony, killed a pig, and drank the blood, swearing and dedicating Haiti to serve the

devil. All Haitian historians believe and teach that Haiti's independence in 1804 came from that satanic ceremony.

For 206 years Bois-Caiman has been a very sacred high place for the devil where no one could ever set foot, except the witch doctors when having voodoo services. Every year for 206 years on August 14 all witch doctors would meet there to offer sacrifices to the devil. In 1991 the government renewed that contract with the devil.

The renewed "contract with the devil" in 1991 as well as the "witch doctors," conceivably refer to the bicentennial celebrations of Bwa Kayiman and Vodou priests, respectively. During later years the police have intervened to hinder Protestant crusades.⁵ These can be considered as a more dramatic manifestation of the everyday strategies of those who do not like Vodou – e.g. Protestants. Instead of questioning if "Vodou spirits exist," or if "Vodou was important during the Haitian Revolution" they attack the practice of Vodou, while simultaneously recognizing Vodouisant views of belief and history.

Bwa Kayiman revisited

In the world of scholars there is an ongoing debate regarding the role Vodou played in the Haitian Revolution. The Bwa Kayiman ceremony, whether it ever took place and, if so, in what form, is a case in point. Some scholars, such as Price-Mars (1973),



Figure 2: Protestant publicity beginning "Make the experience of a Retreat of Power, Victory and Delivery in the Presence of God." Even if Protestants may criticize Vodou, few seem prepared to support activities such as crusades to Vodou sites (photo by the author).

Rigaud (1953), Menneson-Rigaud (1958), Laguerre (1989), Desmangles (1992) and Mathieu (2004), embrace the Bwa Kayiman ceremony and emphasize the role of Vodou during the Haitian Revolution. Of particular interest is the ethnologist Rigaud's *La tradition voodoo* (1953) which, along with other books on Vodou, also has reached Vodouisants in the popular setting. Geggus mentions that Rigaud's work "may have shaped vodou as much as reflected it" (2002: 83), and Cosentino adds that it is "immensely popular" (1995: 30).

Other researchers are skeptical to the importance of Vodou as a "motor" during the slave Revolution. Métraux (1972: 41) opines that Haitian nationalists claimed that Vodou's "influence had been all-important on the men who had won independence for the country." Such claims were made not the least by intellectual groupings such as the negritude-influenced *noirists* who endeavored to show the African heritage of Haitians – Vodou being the ultimate expression (for related examples in the larger region, see e.g. the discussions of Matory, 1999, or Capone, 2005). Cosentino (1995: 32) writes that "...Haitian intellectuals propagated mythical theories which synthesized Vodou with African culture and religion." One of these intellectuals was François Duvalier, president between 1957 and 1971, and these Afro-centric teachings left their imprint on what Halward (2004: 27) terms as Duvalier's "*voudouiste* nationalism."⁶

In a related vein, Pluchon argues (1987) that it is above all Haitian researchers who reproduce the legend of the Bwa Kayiman ceremony. However, also several non-Haitian authors like C.L.R. James (2001[1938]), Simpson (1945), Rotberg (1976), Davis (1988), Suttles (1971), and Fick (1990) point to the Bwa Kayiman ceremony as decisive for the onset of the Haitian Revolution. Moreover, Haitian researchers like Dayan (1995) and Hurbon (1995) hold that the Bwa Kayiman ceremony is largely a construction, but that the event as reinterpreted in today's Haiti is significant enough *per se*.

Skeptical reviewers of the history of the Bwa Kayiman ceremony and its significance include the historians Pluchon (1987), Hoffman (1990), and

Geggus (2002). I will only briefly recapture their critique of the historiography of Bwa Kayiman.

As a major coup to French colonial interests, the onset of the slave Revolution and the weeks before it are extremely well documented (Hoffman, 1990: 10). Still, no contemporary sources mention neither the Bwa Kayiman forest where the meeting should have taken place, nor any religious ceremony. Thus, one problem is to identify the location of Bwa Kayiman, and consequently, there has been some competition between diverse places in northern Haiti that claim being the site of Bwa Kayiman: "[e]ach small group of vodouisants in the north concocts fabrications so that, when the great day comes for commemorating the bicentenary of the famous ceremony..., their temple will be adorned at the expense of the state" (Julien in Geggus, 2002: 85).

According to Hoffman (1990), a large and important meeting *did* take place at the Le Normand plantation, close to Morne Rouge, on August 14, 1791, which gathered slaves from over a hundred plantations under the "pretext of a meal" (Geggus 2002: 85). This was not a secret meeting and the slaves had received permission from their owners to attend. Yet, during this get-together, several historical documents show, plans were made to begin a revolt, probably on August 22 (Geggus, 2002). Thus, Geggus suggests that it "is therefore entirely fitting that August 14th should be celebrated as an anniversary of national significance" (2002: 92). There is, according to Geggus, however, no evidence that a Vodou ritual took place during this gathering. Pluchon (1987: 120) contends that the slaves were aware of their support from French revolutionaries. This political fact – not Vodou – he claims, started the insurrection.

The first publication to mention a religious ritual at a place called "Kayiman" was written by Antoine Dalmas, a French doctor and "*colon raciste*" (Hoffman, 1990: 16). He was in Haiti during the first stage of the Revolution, though his book was published in 1814. Dalmas, describes "a kind of feast, or sacrifice" involving a black pig that was celebrated by slaves (Dalmas, 1814: 117-118; Hoffman, 1990). This event took place on August 21,

ten kilometers away from Morne Rouge, the location of the revolutionary meeting which occurred one week earlier, also mentioned by Dalmas (1814: 117; Geggus, 2002: 86-87). Geggus (2002) and Pluchon (1987) suggest that these two meetings were confounded into a single one by later writers. Thus Geggus (2002), in contrast to Hoffman, argues that there was in fact a Vodou ceremony preceding the Revolution, but maintains that later descriptions of this event are largely constructions.

The next important description of the pre-revolutionary meeting was that of Civique de Gastine published in 1819 (Hoffman, 1990: 15; cf. de Gastine, 1819: 104-106). A colorful French radical and anti-slavery activist, de Gastine had not yet visited Haiti, and conceivably, his work relied extensively, though freely, on Dalmas' description. de Gastine was also the first to combine the political meeting of the slaves planning an insurrection with a religious ceremony, all taking place at Morne Rouge. de Gastine's short outline of the so-called *cérémonie superstitieuse* introduces several rudiments of what has become the Bwa Kayiman legend, such as the romanticist attributes of a rainstorm and lighting that "shot across the sky," an oath, a ritual leader and an orator (de Gastine, 1819; Hoffman, 1990).

More elaborate descriptions of the Bwa Kayiman Vodou ritual first appeared in print in 1824, in the poetic account of the Haitian writer Hérard Dumesle, a deputy from the southern town of Les Cayes. It was also Dumesle who brought in what has become one of the most famous elements of the Bwa Kayiman ceremony – the "Boukman-prayer." Dumesle claimed that the prayer was a literary recreation of a prayer that was supposedly uttered by the priest leading the ceremony. Several later writers have, however, claimed that the prayer was actually spoken verbatim at Bwa Kayiman (Hoffman, 1990: 20). (Dumesle did not claim that the officiating priest was Boukman). This is how the prayer is translated into English by C.L.R. James (2001: 70-71):

The god who created the sun which gives us light, who rouses the waves and rules the

storm, though hidden in the clouds, he watches us. He sees all that the white man does. The god of the white man inspires him with the crime, but our god calls upon us to do good works. Our god who is good to us orders us to revenge our wrongs. He will direct our arms and aid us. Throw away the symbol of the god of the whites who has so often caused us to weep, and listen to the voice of liberty, which speaks in the hearts of us all.

The "Boukman prayer" is widely referred to in various works. The Bwa Kayiman ceremony and the "Boukman prayer," have traveled far, both in time and space. In Sweden, the prayer was reproduced on the wall of the Vodou section at the Gothenburg Museum of World Cultures' inaugural exhibition in 2005.⁷ In Haiti in 2007, I heard the "Boukman prayer" proclaimed to the gathered media at the opening of a press conference organized by the Vodou organization Association, Vodouisants Sud-Est. The Catholic bishop heading the Conférence épiscopale d'Haïti, also used elements from the "Boukman prayer" in his speech at the nationwide celebrations of 65th anniversary of Haiti's consecration to Our Lady of Perpetual Help (Kébrau, 2007: 36). The bishop's rhetorical twist, or open-mindedness, outraged some of my Vodouisant acquaintances who saw it as a Catholic attempt to appropriate the events at Bwa Kayiman.

The Boukman-prayer is an ideological statement and ascribes to the revolutionaries a "specifically anti-Christian coloring" (Geggus, 2002: 89). However, it is unclear whether the prayer's call to "throw away the symbol of the god of the whites"⁸ really captures the religious orientation of the rebelling Vodouisants, or, actually reflects the critical consciousness of Dumesle himself. Revolutionary leaders like Toussaint and Dessalines might have practiced Vodou, nevertheless their Catholic allegiances are well-established. Macaya and Romaine-la-Prophétesse were two other rebel leaders who made eclectic use of both Christian and African beliefs. Romaine even claimed being the godson of Virgin Mary (Rey, 2002: 270-271). Rey suggests

that Central African interpretations of Catholicism brought to Haiti through the slave trade held a central place in the "ideological undercurrent of the revolution" (2002: 273; see also Fick, 1990: 264).⁹

Boukman's presence at the Bwa Kayiman ceremony is mentioned for the first time by a French abolitionist in the 1840s. Boukman as a revolutionary leader is well documented, but his identity as a religious leader or Vodou priest was not established until the writings of the historian Ardouin fifty years after the event (Geggus, 2002: 81-92). Other writers have stated that revolutionary leaders such as Toussaint, or Dessalines, assisted the Bwa Kayiman meeting.

"The young virgin" taking on the role of Vodou priest, introduced by Dumesle, becomes a "tall black woman" in Bellegarde's account quoted above. Another text mentions a green-eyed *mulâtresse* (Fick, 1990: 265), and Rigaud (1953) specifies an old Black woman. The sacrificial pig has, depending on the author, also been described also as a ram and a bull (Hoffman, 1990). In one oral version that I recorded in Croix-des-bouquets in 2004, a captured French soldier took the place of the sacrificial animal. Haiti's ex-president Jean-Bertrand Aristide, writes apropos of the sacrifice during "the ceremony of Bwa kay Iman" that: "[a]ccording to

worshippers: 'As in the bible where Jesus offered himself in sacrifice in place of a lamb, a slave named Jean Viksamar offered himself in place of a pig, in sacrifice to God in order to free the country from slavery'" (2006: 304).

Using the Bwa Kayiman as the underpinning of theological hypothesizing is not uncommon among Vodouisants at the local level. Some believe, for example, that the female priest must have been possessed by the spirit Ezili Dantò, as a black pig was sacrificed. One of my informants embellished the narrative by claiming that the pig was sacrificed at the roots of the *palmiste de la liberté*, palm tree of liberty, found on the Haitian coat of arms. Another quite widespread theory, perhaps with roots in the U.S. Diaspora, introduces a Muslim element to the Revolution by suggesting that the word *Kayiman* should be interpreted as "house (*kay*) of the imam."

Vodouisant appropriation of Bwa Kayiman

The account of the Bwa Kayiman ceremony is today definitely widespread among the ranks of Vodouisants and has been integrated into Vodou's lore (for an example, see Davis, 1988: 266). The issue of the ceremony, as well as the general importance of Vodou to liberate Haiti, was often raised when I spoke with people about Vodou. By portraying Vodou as a cultural and religious heritage inextricably merged with the history and independence of Haiti, practitioners also legitimize Vodou and its place in Haitian society. In 2006 and 2007, for example, I attended three press conferences with Vodou representatives and the issue of Bwa Kayiman was mentioned at each of these occasions (cf. Platfòm Milokan, 2007).

My interlocutor in the quote below is not representative as he is quite well-educated though financially poor. Still, as a leader of a local Vodou organization he is a person of some influence. While all Haitians are aware of the Bwa Kayiman ceremony, not all can cite its details, or the Boukman prayer, as follows below:



Figure 3: Young Vodouisant, dressed as the spirit Baron, poses behind Baron's cross at a Vodou temple (photo by the author).

[W]e even won the battle with the Vodou. During maroon-hood we had a grand Vodou priest called Boukman. The head of the revolt... After the battles for our independence, the country was proclaimed independent on the 1st of January 1804. First Black and Negro republic of this world. Well, during [the presidents] Pétion and Boyer, France made us pay for the independence so that we were never to return into slavery again... even according to Christianity it is a sin, it is a sin because we had battled. Today, well, you tell me that you believe in God. What God? The God of suffering? That's because of this we Vodouisants respect, we all respect the prayer of Boukman at the moment of revolution. What does he say? He says:

"*Granmèt*, God, who makes the sun shed light on us up there, who makes the seas rise, and unleash the rainstorm,... he watches us and he sees all that the White do to us. The *Bondye*, God, of the Whites demands crimes, but the *Granmèt*, God, who is so good, prescribes us vengeance. He will conduct our arms..."

The latter paragraph is a quite literal recapitulation of the Boukman prayer as it appeared in print for the first time in 1824 (see Dumesle in Pluchon, 1987: 119). The quotation reveals how the narrative of Bwa Kayiman has been appropriated by Vodouisants and entered the local discourse, although in slightly altered form.

As another example I would like to mention a

Year 1503 (Lan 1503, Zantray n.d.: 5)

<p>Vodou-priests, we're fatigued We have to put our heads together So that we can save the country Batala (a spirit) we're engaged In 1503 they took us in Ginen (Africa) They put chains around our necks They put chains around our waists To make us slaves for them here They presented us with the cross They said we had to baptize They said we had to convert They said we are savages here We made our Bwa Kayiman We made our Revolution We created our Flag So that we could have our liberty here</p> <p>Under President Geffrard They signed the concordat They said they would make schools They said they would build churches So they could civilize us</p> <p>In 1915, foreigners came and took the country The Vodou (spirits) were not happy It sent Charlemagne It sent Batraille They killed both of them They said they were Macandals</p>	<p>During President Vincent The reactionaries of the Church They forced the Chamber To ratify a Law (implying that) The Vodou, it is doing sorcery here</p> <p>Under President Lescot, They arouse the army They made them reject them (the spirits) They cut down our trees (abodes of spirits)</p> <p>They smashed our Vodou temples They arrested our Manbo (female Vodou priests) They said we were werewolves here</p> <p>With our dear Duvaliers Who said he is of the people Who said he was into Vodou He brandished the laws of Vincent (against Vodou) He massacred our pigs He sold out the country to their religions (Christianity) here</p>
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song called "Year 1503" from a photocopied booklet issued by the Vodou organization Zantray (n.d.). Since the late eighties, many Vodou organizations have been created in Haiti and Zantray was the first and probably most influential one. Organizations such as Zantray have also contributed to the shaping of Vodou as a social fact in the public sphere and medias. I quote the song at some length since it resumes much of Vodouisant discourse on history, and Vodou in relation to the nation.

The patriotic touch of the song interweaves references to Vodou with the history of the Haitian nation and people. Using several examples, the singer – supposedly a convinced Vodou practitioner and member Zantray – claims that "we made our Bwa Kayiman" and that "we made our Revolution." The Zantray booklet (n.d.: 10) also mentions the duties of Zantray delegates: "They should always insist on the Bwa Kayiman ceremony which took place on the 13/14 of August 1791," and that "They should always insist on this truth: the 21 nations of African Ginen [spirits] came together in order to snatch Haiti from under the claws of the French foreigners." On their homepage, Zantray refers to Vodou's involvement in the liberation of Haiti in the following terms, "the Bwa Kayiman Ceremony during which we had united all our African and Native mystical strengths to give liberty to all on this land, after we had liberated the people from slavery by the white colonials."¹⁰

The song – or rather the Vodou practitioners who composed it – also "claims" the two national heroes Benoît Batrville and Charlemagne Péralte who led the so-called *Cacos* rebellions against the U.S. occupation of Haiti 1915-1932. These two heroes are also "Vodouized" as they are equated with the maroon leader Macandal who was active during the mid 1700's. Macandal, in contrast to Charlemagne and Batrville, is strongly linked to spirits and "Vodou" in the popular consciousness (Pluchon, 1987; Dayan, 1995). Indeed today, the word "macandal" can also signify various charms as well as a secret society (cf. Dubois, 2004: 51).

Following the ethos of the song *Year 1503*, criticizing Vodou becomes criticizing the very Hai-

tian nation. Zantray's homepage makes this quite explicit: "We, Children of Haitian Traditions, will never stop saying it aloud: National Identity and Cultural Identity are the same. Our national culture is Vodou, thus our national identity is Vodou... The government should declare officially: 'Vodou as part of the National Culture'."¹¹

Vodou in the Revolution

Even those who critically scrutinize the Bwa Kayiman ceremony, or the literary representations of it, do not generally deny that African religious beliefs were important among the revolutionaries, but they do not perceive those beliefs as having incited revolution. Some researchers emphasize the importance of Vodou as a principle of social organization of the revolutionary slaves. Beauvoir and Dominique (2003: 142-144) convincingly suggest that Vodou as expressed in the organizational form of secret societies, such as *Sanpwèl*, was crucial during the Revolution. Fick, who emphasises the role of Vodou during the Revolution, nonetheless observes that in southern Haiti, "curiously, there seems to be no evidence at all of voodoo as an organizational vehicle, either in the Port-Salut conspiracy or in the Platons rebellion" (1990: 244).

Most authors who mention Vodou and the Haitian Revolution also refer to the "psychological effects" of African beliefs on the revolutionaries. An oft-mentioned example is that some revolutionaries believed that if they died in battle their soul would return to Africa (Peyre-Ferry, 2005: 218).¹² Revolutionaries were also reported to have worn protective amulets that helped to induce courage (Laguerre, 1989; Dalmas, 1814: 118). Some writers, such as Métraux (1972), are of the opinion that while it is highly plausible that Vodou was important during the Revolution, there is no abundance of documentation which supports this view. During my overview of the literature on the issue, I have been struck by the fact that most works seem to return to the same, relatively few, documented cases of Vodou during the Revolution.

Nonetheless, given the importance of Vodou for devotees during critical situations today, it is hard

to believe that Vodou did not play a vital role for the individuals living through the revolutionary war of independence. Though I personally realize that it is difficult to prove with historical records the existence of a large paramount Vodou ceremony that set off the Revolution at Bwa Kayiman, I am also convinced that innumerable Vodou rituals often preceded revolutionary activities, at least at the level of local cult groups, plantations, rebel units, and maroon camps.

It is also crucial to consider for whom the factual veracity of a Vodou service at Bwa Kayiman is important. Is it not really the meaning given today to the Bwa Kayiman ceremony that matters – as well as the processes that led up to diverse representations of the Bwa Kayiman? As Dayan (1995: 29) notes:

What matters is how necessary the story remains to Haitians who continue to construct their identity not only by turning to the revolution of 1791 but by seeking its origins in a service quite possibly imagined by those who disdain it.

Concluding reflections

Vodou has apparently been inscribed – or emphasized – into the Bwa Kayiman narrative by both Haitian intellectuals as well as foreign writers. In doing so, did they render the Vodou religion a service? Or, has the Bwa Kayiman narrative consigned Vodou to a primitivistic and exotic otherness?

Grassroots Vodouisant agency should also be recognized. Vodouisants have purposefully fitted the legend of Bwa Kayiman into their narrative framework. Bwa Kayiman and the legend of Vodou's importance to the birth of the Haitian nation have been used to legitimize the Vodou religion. No doubt Vodou's revolutionary past has in some regards contributed to securing some social and judicial recognition of Vodou within the Haitian nation state.

On the other hand, perhaps the historicity of the legend of Bwa Kayiman also carries with it some less obvious, or unforeseen, consequences. During

one interview, a Vodou priest sang me a song that began: "Our government is in Bwa Kayiman, we mention your names, we will not turn away from you in Bwa Kayiman."¹³ Vodou chants are not normally to be interpreted literally; nevertheless these lyrics struck me as revealing a possible alienation from this world's political life and the recognition of the government of the spirits, as well as of a glorious, though distant, past.

Another observation is that the coupling between Vodou and Revolution also indirectly links the religious identity to – albeit justified and heroic – violence and war. The narration of the Bwa Kayiman ceremony emphasizes Vodou's fierce aspects. That characterisation might be a backdrop to attempts to integrate Vodou into a peaceful society. At several occasions, I have heard Haitians regret that too many of their compatriots still follow the revolutionary adage of the leader Dessalines, "cutting heads – burning houses" (cf. Dayan, 1995: 20). Perhaps, as a response, and an interesting indicator for future evolvments, several of today's Vodou organisms emphasize non-violence. For example, in 2005, one of the largest Vodou organizations organized a conference entitled "Bwa Kayiman, Vodou et Paix." In 2006, the organization La Maison de Dahomey led a peace march from the capital of Port-au-Prince, and Platfòm Milokan¹⁴ arranged a "peace prayer" involving several representatives from Vodou organizations.

Notes

- 1 This article draws especially on the findings of the project The Official Recognition of Haitian Vodou: An Anthropological Study of Social and Religious Change, funded by a research grant from the Department for Research Cooperation (SAREC) at the Swedish Agency for International Development Cooperation (Sida).
- 2 Also spelled in French as Bois-Caïman.
- 3 In Haiti, the term *popilè* (Haitian Creole), or *populaire* (Fr.), is often used by members of all social classes to indicate that a phenomenon – e.g. a social movement, tradition, or behavior – belongs to the “popular milieu” as opposed to the economically and socially better off strata of society.
- 4 <http://sdabraham.tripod.com/id17.html> (2006-01-13).
- 5 See e.g. the article ‘Haitian Vodouisant Majority Opposes Right-Wing Protestants’ in *Haiti-Progress* (<http://members.aol.com/racine125/bwaprogr.html> [2006-01-12]).
- 6 It can be added that despite François Duvalier’s political use of Vodou, he did little for the Vodou religion or its practitioners. For example, he did not create any institutional or judicial framework for Vodou. Nor did he effectively document Vodou as a cultural heritage – there is, for example, no governmental Museum of Vodou in Haiti.
- 7 On the museum’s web site, the prayer is also found under the heading “Words from a vodou priest, 1791” (<http://www.varld-skulturmuseet.se/smvk/jsp/polopoly.jsp?d=1084&ca=4249&p=1> [2007-07-16]).
- 8 According to James (2001: 80) the “symbol” is the Christian cross. Dumesle’s (in Pluchon, 1987: 119) 1824 original phrase in “frenchified Creole” reads “jetez portraits Dieu blanc,” thus it refers to “portraits” in plural. Perhaps James (2001) relied on the French translation of Price-Mars (in Pluchon, 1987: 119) which reads “Brisez l’image du Dieu des blancs.” See also Laguerre (1989: 62) for a “singular” version based on Sannon’s 1920 publication. These details appear more important when the extent of the use of Christian images in today’s Vodou is taken into consideration.
- 9 Hurbon (2004) also shows that the allegiances of the Catholic clergy during the Revolution varied. Out of 26 Catholic priests in northern Haiti, 16 sided with the revolutionaries; and three, or four, were executed because of this (Hurbon, 2004: 105-10).
- 10 http://www.zantray.ht/pozisyon_zantray_en.html (2007-06-25).
- 11 http://www.zantray.ht/pozisyon_zantray_en.html (2007-06-25).
- 12 This, in fact, is the only reference to African beliefs of this French Grenadier captain in his long report from the French expedition to colonial Saint-Domingue (Haiti) in 1802 and 1803.
- 13 Gouvenman nou nan Bwa Kayiman, nou lonnen non nou, nou pa detounen nou nan Bwa Kayiman.
- 14 See also *Alter Presse* (2006-11-20) ‘Haïti: Des fidèles du vodou prient pour la paix.’ (http://www.alterpresse.org/imprimer.php3?id_article=5378 [2006-12-08]).

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