

Explanation:

This paper came from a prompt to examine the relationship between religion, science, and empire in a specific non-western culture not covered in class. I chose to examine The Haitian Revolution's religious roots and how religion served as a unifying and revolutionary force, as well as technology for resistance in a deeply despairing condition. During my research I was astonished by the intricacy of Vodou beliefs in their relatively understudied academic status, and found that the Haitian model of resistance pushed back against contemporary European scientism and rationalism, as well as European ideological frameworks of resistance. The invocation of a deistic and syncretic religious system, rather than dull the revolutionary subjects as some contemporary European, particularly French and German, intellectuals suggested in their characterization of religions rooting in the Black diaspora as animistic and idolatry, or the dismissal of religion in left-wing revolutions for secular ideologies, became an undeniable force and technology in the process of liberation. These discoveries echoed the study of Hindu traditions in class, which enabled the formation of a shared identity and served as a technology for resistance in India's nationalist and anti-colonial movements.

Since the 16th century, Saint-Domingue had been a stronghold of the French colonial project. Built upon the back of horrific enslavement and displacement of the African people, Saint-Domingue consistently pumps out great riches in the forms of sugar, coffee, and other natural resources. These abhorrent exploitations led to various insurrections and revolutions among the slave communities, culminating in the Haitian Revolution of 1791 and the formation of the first Black republic in 1804. This paper will, in three parts, argue for Vodou as simultaneously a unifying socio-ethical behavior that formed a homogeneous Black Haitian identity in a community largely heterogeneous in cultural origins, a direct dialectic rejection of French scientism and scientific racism through its inclination towards the supernatural and the mystic, and a path to the realization of self-consciousness and agency through theolepsy that ultimately motivated the revolution.

Building upon a collective experience of forced labor and displacement, Haitians belonging to various African tribes united under the religious tolerance of Haitian Vodou and understood the enslaved people as a collective group with a shared social destiny, therefore enabling political cooperation and mass action towards collective liberation. Haitian Vodou is a relatively new religion formed through the process of syncretism, blending various religious traditions of African cultural origins, as such, it validates these distinct belief systems without erasure while integrating them into a specifically Haitian religion and religious community. This is exemplified by the dual-pantheon¹ modality of Haitian Vodou², in which worshipped deities

¹ This paper acknowledges that the term pantheon draws upon Western religious traditions and is not a term directly traditionally used by practitioners of the Vodou faith. However, much of existing literature uses pantheon to characterize the parallel relationship and identities of Rada and Petro deities. See Jean-Marie, Deren, Brown.

² Due to the non-homogeneity of Haitian Vodou beliefs, a strict dual model cannot be established. For some practitioners, more than two nations are recognized. "In some parts of the Haitian countryside, distinct "nations" of Vodou spirits can still be found. These nations generally have names indicating their African origins: Ibo, Nago (Ketu Yoruba), Mandang (Mandingo), Kongo, Wangol (Angola), and Rada (probably for the Dahomean principality of Allada). In Port-au-Prince, however, two pantheons have come to dominate, generally by absorbing the others." Karen McCarthy Brown, *Mama Lola : A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn* (Berkeley, Calif: University Of California Press, London, 2010), 100.

(lwas/loas) are distinguished into two separate pantheons, or nations: Rada (or Arada), typically considered sweet, temperate, and a “guardian power”,³ owing their origins to various West African beliefs, notably even drawing its name Rada from the Kingdom of Allada,⁴ an important source of the transatlantic slave trade; contrarily, there is the Petro⁵ pantheon, which are primarily “hot-tempered and volatile”,⁶ served with “rum mixed with ingredients such as coffee, hot pepper, blood, and gunpowder [...] cracking whips and shrieking police whistles”⁷. It is not difficult to interpret from their harsh behavior and imageries that the Petro lwas take root in the Haitian experience of slavery. Indeed, as Brown concisely writes: “Theirs is the iconography of slavery.”⁸ The simultaneous recognition of both these pantheons allowed for specific cultural heritages to be honored, while constructing a shared religiosity upon the endured brutality of the enslaved people. Concerning the Petro lwas, Deren writes, “Petro was born out of this rage. It is not evil; it is the rage against the evil fate which the African suffered, the brutality of his displacement and his enslavement. It is the violence that rose out of that rage, to protest against it. [...] It is the raging revolt of the slaves against the Napoleonic forces. [...] For it was the Petro cult, born in the hills, nurtured in secret, which gave both the moral force and the actual organization to the [revolt].”⁹ This duality paved the way for Vodou’s role as a motivating social force in the enslaved people: Rada validating each and every heritage belief, resisting assimilation into the Catholic worldview, Petro characterizing the violent and harsh conditions under slavery and the potential reactionary violence it invites.

³ Maya Deren, *Divine Horsemen : The Living Gods of Haiti* (New Paltz, Ny: Mcpherson, 2004), 61.

⁴ An ambiguous and disputed connection, mainly rooted in confusions of transliteration. Allada is variously spelled Arada, Ardra, and more. See Deren, 60. See also Brown, 100.

⁵ Or Petwo.

⁶ Brown, 101.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Deren, 62.

Additionally, the characterization of the deities of the Rada and Petro pantheons serve as allegorical lessons for appropriate conduct, ultimately justifying the armed revolt. Rada lwas form a blueprint for familial connection to the enslaved people ripped from their family, forming a collective identity rooted in solidarity and found family. The Rada lwas are often referred to with familial titles such as Papa or Kouzen,¹⁰ such a characterization led Brown to argue for the binary as a representation of the familial against the foreign, the oppressed against the oppressor.¹¹ This dynamic informed the enslaved people's judgement of the correct courses of action in their socio-political reality too: the Rada lwas, familial and Black, though may not be of one's own cultural origin, should be honored and offered various sweet treats; the Petro lwas, resembling enslavers and colonizers in their aggression and hostility, should be bargained with and constrained such that they "behave".¹² It is no surprise that this ethical binary informed the Haitian Revolution, as Dutty Boukman is reported saying at the Bois Caïmon ceremony: "The whites' God commands crime, while ours desires good deeds; but that God, there, who is so good, ordains for us vengeance."¹³ The contrast of the African-rooted deities' sweet temper and the New World Petro deities echoed the tangible realities of the Haitians. Here we introduce the deity Ogou¹⁴, who does not neatly belong to either pantheon,¹⁵ and militantly carries out the mission of Rada values with methods of Pedro lwas. Ogou is commonly presented as a warrior, served with rum and his sacred machete,¹⁶ and among many communities the most revered Iwa of all. There is obvious parallel between the worship of a warrior God fighting for the righteous

¹⁰ Father and cousin respectively.

¹¹ Brown, 101.

¹² Deren, 61.

¹³ Hérard Dumesle, "Boukman's Prayer," in *Voyage dans le nord d'Hayti, ou Révélations des lieux et des monuments historiques* (Aux Cayes, Haiti: Imprimerie du Gouvernement, 1824), trans. John-Charles Duffy. Cross referenced with The Louverture Project.

¹⁴ Or Ogoun.

¹⁵ Brown, 101. Deren 133.

¹⁶ Ibid.

values and the ultimate militancy of the revolution. Indeed, as a speech given by Jean Jacques Dessalines upon the establishment of the Haitian nation reads: “[...] the justice of God has urged, your hands, righteously armed, have brought the axe upon the ancient tree of slavery and prejudices. [...] You have stripped it of its armour; you have placed it upon your hearts, that you may become (like your natural enemies) cruel and merciless.”¹⁷ The worshipped Ogou’s righteous violence became a rallying cry for the Revolution to not shy away from violence for a righteous cause.

Furthermore, as Jean-Marie outlined, the dual personalities of the Vodou pantheons serve as ethical models governing the conduct of the Vodouist, furthering communal sentiments and tolerance among people of various cultural backgrounds and values. The Rada lwas are considered familial and reasonable, and acting in accordance with their injunctions secures “collective approval”, while the Petro lwas “summon anti-collective behaviors”.¹⁸ The lwas, in addition to being spiritual powers worshipped, became caricatures of ethical conduct, against whom the practitioner’s conduct may be judged. The religious activities and gatherings became a place of collective bonding and ethical alignment, forming communities around the houngan, later *chef de section*,¹⁹ or priest, who taught through spiritual realities the social order. The Vodou priesthood has since its conception come with a typically tripartite function, as spiritual authority, local unofficial governor, and mediator between the people.²⁰ Deren explicitly characterizes the figure of the houngan as “communal father”, who is expected to lead ceremonies, resolve

¹⁷ “PROCLAMATION: LIBERTY or DEATH, JEAN JACQUES DESSALINES, 1804,” Black Agenda Report, October 6, 2021, <https://blackagendareport.com/proclamation-liberty-or-death-jean-jacques-dessalines-1804>.

¹⁸ Jean-Marie, 37-38.

¹⁹ Not to be confused with the culinary title *chef de partie* (head of the section). See also: Comhaire, Jean L. “The Haitian ‘Chef de Section.’” *American Anthropologist* 57, no. 3 (1955): 620–24.

²⁰ Jean-Marie, 35.

disputes, and offer advice on all aspects of life to his²¹ parishioners.²² This multiplicity in the houngan's socio-politico-spiritual role necessarily enables and dictates that Vodou cosmology governs the ethical values of its adherents. Characterizing the African-rooted deities as the appealing, and slavery-rooted Petro lwas as the harsh and undesirable, it should be no surprise that Haitian Vodou and its hougans led their followers to the conclusion of the spiritual righteousness of an insurrection.

Secondly, since the Vodou faith is primarily constructed upon the social conditions of the displaced Africans, its formulation is in direct dialogue with the French colonizers and their scientific, “enlightened” rhetorics: while the Haitian people do not reject (and often welcome) technological advancements and adaptations to their faith, they reject the underlying Eurocentrism attached to contemporary French scientific-philosophical thought and recenter the narrative around themselves. It is no news that the French, along with the rest of Europe, with great economic interest as well as ideological conviction to uphold, developed a set of principles that would simultaneously allow for self-proclaimed enlightenment as well as allow for the continued enslavement of Africans. This became known formally as scientific racism primarily after the Haitian Revolution as a direct reaction against Black self-governance.²³ The guiding principles that enabled the justification, or even the moral righteousness of slavery, had to essentially prove the nonhumanity of Blacks to reconcile slavery's inherent incongruence with Enlightenment ideals of universal human rights. This project was brought to the height of French intellectual discourse by the re-enslavement policies instituted by Bonaparte in 1802.

²¹ The houngan specifically means a male Vodou priest, while his female counterpart would be called a mambo (or manbo), therefore male pronouns would be used for hougans here after.

²² Deren, 158.

²³ Charles, Jean Max. “The Slave Revolt That Changed the World and the Conspiracy Against It: The Haitian Revolution and the Birth of Scientific Racism.” *Journal of Black Studies* 51, no. 4 (2020): 275–94. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26985188>.

Contemporary French social theorist Henri de Saint-Simon is quoted saying: “If they (revolutionaries) had asked men of science, they would have learned that Negro in accordance with his formation, is not susceptible under equal conditions of education of being raised to the same level of intelligence as the European.”²⁴ This ideological position, as time would show, was less of a genuine intellectual discourse as it was a bandage for the French Enlightenment conscience, one that Haitian leaders saw through and tore off. Vodou, in the fight for liberty, became the governing worldview that incorporated Enlightenment philosophy and sciences, while rejecting Eurocentric sentiments. Responding to Kant’s discussion of the colonial enslavement, Jean-Marie notes that slaves were posited as of equal status with iron and coffee—merchandise.²⁵ Similarly, post-Enlightenment philosopher Hegel postulates that the enslavement of Africans in the colonial project, while a horrible prospect, is necessary and justified due to their “moral absence”.²⁶ The European intellectual’s quest to find the truth of humanity is constrained by the colonial slavery project to necessarily define humanity against those who cannot be encompassed.²⁷ The essential understanding of the European pro-slavery intellectual that “Negros” fundamentally do not possess the capacity (whether by species origin²⁸ or by religious convictions) to self-realize and self-govern was heavily contested by Haitian leaders through the lens of theo-philosophy: As European scientism attempts to prove the inferiority of the black race, and its separate identity from what was beginning to be known as humanity, L’Overture wrote to the French General Assembly and called upon universal human rights to be recognized upon spiritual, moral, and scientific grounds: “[...]we can neither see nor find the right that you pretend to have over us, nor anything that could prove it to us, set down on

²⁴ Charles, 287

²⁵ Jean-Marie, 61.

²⁶ Jean-Marie, 47. See also G.W.F. Hegel “Geographical Basis of History”, *Philosophy of History*.

²⁷ Jean-Marie, 62. See also Michel Rolph-Trouillot, “An Unthinkable History: The Haitian Revolution as a Non-Event”, in *Haitian History: New Perspectives*, ed. Alyssa Sepinwall (London: Routledge, 2013). 35-37.

²⁸ Charles, 286

the earth like you, all being children of the same father created in the same image. We are your equals then, by natural right, and if nature pleases itself to diversify colours within the human race, it is not a crime to be born black nor an advantage to be white.”²⁹ Through its incorporation of various religious traditions, Vodou offered an epistemic rejection of the French supremacist notions, while retaining logical progressions of the Enlightenment in accepting and championing universal human rights.

Additionally, the dialectical nature of Haitian Vodou and French scientific-philosophical racism were consequentially integral to the formation of one another. The French notion of scientism expresses contemporary rejection of what was seen as superstition and the supremacy of reason, while the mystical and supernatural inclinations of Vodou directly combats the French epistemically and militarily. The belief of the Vodouist is notably literal, with no inclinations towards the symbolic or the abstract.³⁰ To the Vodouist, it is said that rituals are understood to be literally effective, and the experience of these sacred events in the forms of social gatherings and possessions paved the way for the collective understanding of their potential independence should the gods be on their side, despite innumerable material disadvantages against the French. It is certainly beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the legitimacy of such beliefs, yet simply the belief of supernatural agents encouraging and supporting the struggle for independence was certainly a motivating factor in the Haitian collective unconscious. This literalism in their belief perhaps would explain the numerous tales of shapeshifting and sorcery, many associated with the nationalism project. For example, Francois Makandal, one of the first figures acting against the enslavers cast deep into the national memory, is believed to have transformed into a bird or an

²⁹ Toussaint L'ouverture, *Haitian Revolution*. (S.L.: Verso, 2019), 48. Notably the invocation of the Christian God is not at all incongruent with Vodou beliefs, it is in fact customary for most practitioners of Vodou to invoke the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit at the beginning of each ritual. See Deren 54-57.

³⁰ Deren, 194

insect to elude French troops.³¹ The direct contestation of French colonial rhetorics through religiously informed episteme directly undermined the notion of white supremacy, and rejected the European teleology with one of their own: in which the Vodou priests are the most informed, the followers less so, and the European completely uninitiated. Magic also served to motivate Haitian military efforts, according to early reports based on eye witness accounts, the famous Bois Caïmon ceremony which planned for the revolution was characterized not only by military planning but also with a Vodou ritual. A pig was sacrificed and its blood drunk by the slaves, subsequently its hairs were taken as “protective amulets”.³² As the French championed their scientific superiority, the Haitian dissents developed a re-centered version of the syncretic Christian-African faith and reality constructed to the needs of Haitians, which motivated them in their ideological and militant resistances. As Jean-Marie summarizes: “Vodou rituals granted the slaves a sense of common social destiny and confidence in a potential national identity.”³³

Lastly, to the slave community, Vodou provided an outlet and a model for self-realization and agency which were previously unobtainable to those forcefully displaced, enslaved, and put to labor through theolepsy, which stands at the center of Vodou rituals. As an outlet, the belief in lwas as literal, interventionist supernatural entities enabled Haitians to apply their own agency in their conduct, namely in conjuring different manifestations of the lwas to serve the practitioners’ different ends. As a model, the self-determinant supernatural agents they worship, and channel through their very own bodies, provide a blueprint for the enslaved people to too become self-determinant and practice agency even when slavery attempts to suppress it. Ultimately, the two distinct processes through which Vodou practitioners found a collective yearning for

³¹ Derby, Lauren. “Imperial Idols: French and UNITED STATES Revenants in Haitian Vodou.” *History of Religions* 54, no. 4 (2015): 394. <https://doi.org/10.1086/680175>.

³² GEGGUS, DAVID PATRICK. “The Bois Caïman Ceremony.” In *Haitian Revolutionary Studies*, 81–92. Indiana University Press, 2002. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1bjc3q7.13>.

³³ Jean-Marie, 14.

self-determination and liberation from colonial coercion drove the efforts of the revolution. The Vodou practitioner's rituals are not found in central texts, nor taught through a centralized church: as a relatively innovative religion, its rituals are directly responsive to the grievances and ends of its practitioner and adherents. Previously mentioned Ogou, for example, takes different forms, or manifestations upon different needs: at times a mortally wounded soldier, at times a healer, a strength-giver, a fertility god, a sorcerer, a politician, a liar, a drunk, Ogou's various forms may be conjured up to suit different needs.³⁴ The community of faith therefore experiences a rare opportunity for their agency to directly embody and influence their lives—with the premise of a literalist and interventionist faith system. This process also directly disputes the French colonial rhetoric of the inconceivability of Black self-determination, since the process of Vodou rituals directly correspond to local level governance: should a problem arise, the first step of the practitioner is to identify its cause, its responsible agent, and what remedies could be applied—as previously established, the multiplicity of the houngan's role as spiritual authority and local governor further enhances that connection.

Simultaneously, as a model for self-determination and the expression of agency, theolepsy, or the possession by an Iwa, directly informed the Haitian collective conception of freedom and self-determination. It is important to note that, while possession has historically been seen as a negative infringement upon personal autonomy and the freedom of will in free societies,³⁵ in a slave society such as Saint-Domingue, negative liberty, needless to say, was not guaranteed. The channeling of Iwas through one's own body, therefore, became an enabling template through which the practitioner could express one's will. As Jean-Marie writes:

“Theolepsy captures the concrete expression of collective freedom given the role of the Iwas as

³⁴ Deren, 132; Brown, 118.

³⁵ Particularly in Christendom.

the source of spiritual and social cohesion among displaced slaves.”³⁶ The process of theolepsy in Vodou is not the total submission of one’s will, but rather the experience of the lwa’s will channeled through one’s own body, further propagated into a communal experience. The expression of that will is often reflective of the collective sentiment, since Vodou rituals are built upon communal experiences and desires. The yearning for liberation from slavery, needless to point out, was a heavily echoed theme in these theoleptic expressions. Deren described one particular lwa’s possession as “her entire body contracts into the terrible paralysis of frustration; every muscle is tense, the knees are drawn up, the fists are clenched so tightly that the fingernails draw blood from the palms[...]³⁷, following whose model the adherents formed communal emotional mutualities on the basis of enslavement. The communal experience of theolepsy simultaneously reinforced the Black Haitian solidarity through its collective rituals, and awoken the suppressed will of the self under slavery on an individualistic level. Indeed, as Vodou practitioners embodied the will of the lwas, they too realized their individual power, whether physical or in an ideological, universal humanitarian sense, and that power’s necessary role in the collective’s liberation. To the Haitian, the realization of the individual will and power was never to be divorced from the liberation of the collective: isolated actions were doomed to fail by precedent, only mass action could achieve collective liberation.³⁸

In conclusion, the process of liberation from French colonial enslavement was supported by Haitian Vodou every step of the way: from the formation of a collective destiny and identity, to a mutual worldview in contestation with the French racialized hostility, to the awakening of the suppressed individual and collective will under French rule. Haitian Vodou served as a

³⁶ Jean-Marie, 39.

³⁷ Deren, 62.

³⁸ C. L. R. James, *The Black Jacobins* (Secker & Warburg Ltd, 1938), 86, https://politicaleducation.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/CLR_James_The_Black_Jacobins.pdf

counteractive episteme to the French justification for enslavement, and motivated the struggle for independence morally, technologically, and militarily.

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