



TRACES OF VODOUIN HAITIAN FREEMASONRY

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ABSTRACT

The inquiry in this research builds on certain insights to uncover how various institutions of Vodou¹ practices take shape, converge, and become rearticulated in the networks of transnational linkages within and in relation to Freemasonry in Haiti. Some scholarly sources connote the issue with a close assumption examining the symbolic similarities that, European Freemasonry is readily adopted into Vodou. This article, furthermore seeks to reach a coherent whole, in the idea that, there might be a connection between Haitian national identity and Freemasonry, through Vodou practices. Even though significant literature, reveals the impacts of both Freemasonry and Vodou on each other in Haiti and the major claim is that Freemasonry and the principal masonic utopias, paved the way to transnationalism in Haiti; the primary objective of the study is, not to examine the theological substructure of syncretistic Haitian religions. Nor it will be the major interest to trace here, the formation of Vodou as a religion on the Hispaniola Island. Nevertheless, in order to depict a realistic historical perspective of cultural emancipation of Haiti, Vodou is stressed in corresponding aspects.

Keywords: Haiti, Haitian evolution, Vodou, Freemasonry, transnationalism.

TRANSNATIONALISM IN HAITI

First and foremost, it is proper, to touch on, the term “transnationalism”, which is the flexible movement of people, between the traditional borders of the country and the establishment of social, political, cultural and economic ties, with more than one nation and society. Generally speaking, the diasporic societies and the migrant groups, –at least for quite a period of time- can be considered as transnational societies.

Although Haiti, having a transnational society is depicted by some scholars as seemingly “an Africa far away from Africa” on the basis that, the country is inhabited by a dominant percentage of Black population, this determination can be considered reductive and problematic. (Simms, Rodriguez, Rodriguez, Herrera, 2010)² It is obvious that genetic heritage has no intrinsic relationship to contemporary social and national practices or characteristics. However in terms of easy scanning of a transnational and cultural linkage with Africa, it should be noted that Haiti is genetically composed of 96.5 percent Sub-Saharan Africans.

Although scholarly circles will have heard ad nauseam that Haiti is one of the poorest countries in the world by means of corruption, lack of health care and education with an eleven million of population, the intention in this article is not to blame the blame on the country itself, ignoring the centuries of unequal global power relations and exploitation. Nevertheless it is stated that “corruption in the country has become such a national and social norm that it consistently ranks among the world’s most corrupt countries in the Corruption Perceptions 2019 Index.”³ Haitians speak Kreyòl, also called Haitian Creole, as mother tongue which is not considered as a subset of

French. They are mostly Christian with a majority of 87 percent Catholic and Haiti is, the only country in the world, to have been established as a result of, a successful slave revolt.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF HAITI

Spain discovered the island on 1492, during the first voyage of Christopher Columbus; named La Española and ruled it until the early 17th century. The island was home to the indigenous Taino people. It is known that the Taino cultural patterns, who passed from the mainland to the islands, lived in the Greater Antilles from around AD 1200. These indigenous indians were the only settlers to have lived in this area for three hundred years in large and small groups (Rouse, 1992)⁴. In his book *The Other Slavery, The Uncovered Story of Indian Enslavement in America*, historian Andres Reséndez states that by the arrival of Columbus, the population of Hispanola Tainos, estimated at one to eight million, had been reduced into from to 25.000 – 60.000 within a fifty years (Reséndez, 1993)⁵.

The growing demands of sugarcane cultivation, prompted the importation of slaves. France received the western third, on 1697 and subsequently named it Saint-Domingue, the French equivalent of Santo Domingo. They imported thousands of slaves from Africa. “Trade reforms led to an inevitable increase in the population from 6.000 in 1737 to 125.000 in 1790 (Haggerty, 1989)⁶. As to make a comparison “during the Royal Proclamation which formally ended the Seven Years War and transferred French territory in North America to Great Britain the French inhabitants of North America in 1763, were less than 65.000 (Ward, 1976)⁷. In the north of the island, slaves were able to retain many ties to African cultures, religion and language. Over time, the black population reached ten times the whites.

The French Revolution of 1789, not local slave revolts, emancipated the natural reserve of the *affranchis*⁸. The blacks sought to overcome the minor racial irritations of colonial social apartheid and they wished to become *citoyens actifs*⁹ as the revolution had promised (Michel and Bellagarde-Smith, 2006)¹⁰.

Toussaint L’Ouverture, a former slave and the leader in the slave revolt, drove out the Spanish and the British invaders, who threatened the colony. The conflict within Haiti, between the black Haitians led by Louverture and the free people of color, led by André Rigaud devolved into the War of the Knives in 1799 and 1800.

After Louverture created a separatist constitution, Napoléon Bonaparte who was at the height of his power in 1802 sent an expedition of 20.000 soldiers under the command of General Charles Leclerc, to retake the island. “Within a few months, although most of the French had died from yellow fever, including eighteen generals, they captured Louverture and transported him to France, for trial (Peterson, 1995)¹¹. Louverture was imprisoned at Fort de Joux, where he died in 1803 of tuberculosis. Upon his death, he was succeeded by his lieutenant, Jean-Jacques Dessalines, who defeated the French troops, leading the first ever successful slave revolution and declared Haiti’s sovereignty and became the first Emperor of Haiti, Jacques I. In 1806, he ordered the murder of most whites. Almost the entire white population -between 3.000 and 5.000 people- has been massacred within a few months.

Beginning in 1821, president Jean-Pierre Boyer, reunified the two parts of the island of Hispanola, and ruled the entire island with iron rule, ending slavery in Santo Domingo. After Santo Domingo achieved independence from Haiti, it established a separate national identity, that is Dominican Republic. In 1825, France formally recognized the independence of Haiti. The US did not officially recognize Haiti, until after the start of the American Civil War in 1861.

Until then, despite various attempts of occupations -including the US between 1915 and 1934- Haiti, has reached today, as a sovereign and independent country.

VODOU AS A SYNCRETISM AND A TRANSNATIONAL IDENTITY IN HAITI

Vodou, as a religion having its genesis with African roots, originated from West African Vodun during colonial times, is popularly described as, not simply a religion, but rather an experience, that ties body and soul together. “Vodou is strongly estimated to incorporate elements and symbolism from various African peoples, including the Yoruba and Kongo. It is also claimed to have a significant connection with native Taino beliefs. Besides it is stated to embody Roman Catholicism, and European spirituality and mysticism (Cosentino 1995, Fandrich 2007, Clarke, 2007)”¹².

In the traditional African religious thought, it is usually believed, that there once existed in the sky, a supreme being, who gradually ceded, his will of creating, to some of his decendants, such as the god of rain, the god of fertility etc. and mostly lost his self respect. John Mbiti, Kenyan philosopher and writer who also considered the father of modern African theology notes that “the strict universe of African individuals is thickly populated with soul creatures, spirits, and the living dead or spirits of the progenitors. Some impersonal powers control the order the universe. The living things are, at the mercy of some generous or wicked users of powers (Mbiti, 1996)”¹³. This Omnipotent God’s, delivering his deeds, to low rank deities, implies polytheism. With this respect, Vodou can arguably be considered as a polytheistic religion. Haitian American novelist and short story writer Edwidge Danticat suggests in her article American weekly humor magazine *The New Yorker* that “Vodoists venerate death. They believe in afterlife and moreover, death symbolizes a great transition from one life to another. Some Vodou practitioners assume, that an individual’s soul leaves the body, however is caught in water, over mountains, in caves or elsewhere a voice may call out and echo for a specific time frame. After at that point, a solemn commemoration ritual, reveres the perished, for being delivered into the world, to live once more (Danticat, 2013)”¹⁴.

In his book *The Faces of the Gods: Vodou and Roman Catholicism in Haiti*, Haitian scholar Leslie G. Desmangles, focusing his research on religion in Haiti, while criticising Catholicism’s overbearing and marginalizing clerical nature, highlights the influential role it played over Vodou’s syncretistic ground. The author notes:

Vodou in effect is a reaction to oppression caused by intransigent hostility of the Roman clergy. Moreover, the present content of its theology, which includes both Catholic and African religious traditions, derives from the contact between the two cultures of two continents on Haitian soil (Desmangles, 1992)¹⁵.

Desmangle also convincingly stresses on the dominance of some African rituals. He argues that baptism in Vodou is originated from West Africa rather than Catholicism as it is used to denote a means whereby divine power is instilled in a person, an edifice, or an object (Desmangles. 1992)¹⁶ Another author Paul Mercier in his article published in 1954 *The Fon of Dahomey*, alleges that the cross symbol in Vodou does not derive from Catholicism but from African mythology. He states: “In Dahomey, the universe is conceived as a sphere transected by two mutually perpendicular and intersecting planes, which, perceived in a cross-section of the sphere, represent the arms of a cross (Mercier, 1954)”¹⁷.

“Since the religious syncretism between Catholicism and Vodou appears to be concentric, “it is difficult to estimate the number of Vodouists in Haiti (Barrington, 2010)”¹⁸. In the mean time “it

is argued that it is considered to be superstitious, primitive, devilish and uncivilised in many aspects by the Haitian Protestants¹⁹. Vodou is deciphered by numerous Haitian Protestants as a religion of the Devil whereby its supporters go to icons that permeate them with spirits of evil. “In Haiti, some Roman Catholics’ consolidating their confidence with Vodou rituals, is reproved as diabolical by the majority of the Haitian Protestants (Rey, Stepick, 2013)”²⁰.

Even though there is no central authority or “pope” in Vodou, since every mambo and houngan is the head of their own house, it is mentioned that “François Duvalier, former president of Haiti -also known as Papa Doc- assumed a functioning part in lifting the situation with Vodou into a national doctrine (Apter, 2002)”²¹. Alongside since 2015 there is “Konfederasyon Nasyonal Vodou Ayisyen (The National Confederation of Haitian Vodou)” a Haitian civil organization which seeks to defend the practice of Haitian Vodou from defamation and persecution. Apart from these, there is nothing related to European based medieval “demonology, witchcraft, sorcery, exorcism, black Magic or pact” in Haitian Vodou. This mostly appears to be most particularly the USA’s demonizing Haiti according to its political accounts. According to Greenough-Hodges “Haitian Vodou is grossly a misunderstood religion and merits accurate and unbiased explanation to those unfamiliar with it. The writer points out that that, it should be universally recognized as a legitimate religion”²².

“Duly, unique kind for its combination of different societies and ethnic variants, with its strict roots in different West African cultural diversities and impacts of French and Roman Catholicism, Haitian Vodou isn’t just a symptom of the African Diaspora, but it is also a result of 17th century colonialism, globalization, and transnationalism. Accordingly it goes about as an outflow of the meeting up of various people groups, cultures and traditions within the global arena (Kamerling and Gavitte, 2016)”²³. Roland emphasizes that “Haitian Vodou as a religion, seems by all accounts, to be the expression of the racial and social obstruction of a persecuted class of individuals inside an antagonistic society (Roland, 1977)”²⁴. As they were subjected to converge to Christianity, the African slaves were obliged to disguise their spiritual figures, as an element of a syncretistic process. “In Code Noir by King Louis XIV of France in 1685 sixty articles, regulated the life, death, purchase, religion, and treatment of slaves by their masters in all French colonies. It provided that all the slaves who will be in French Islands will be baptized and instructed in the Catholic, Apostolic, and Roman religion and educated in the Catholic faith. This edict seriously restricted the capacity of oppressed Africans in Saint-Domingue to rehearse African religions. Desmangles states that, the edict constrained all slaveholders to change their slaves over to Catholicism in eight days of their arrival in Saint-Domingue (Desmangles, 1990)”²⁵.

Article III: We forbid any public exercise of any religion other than the Catholic, Apostolic, and Roman; we wish that the offenders be punished as rebels and disobedient to our orders. We prohibit all congregations for this end, which we declare "conventicules," illicit and seditious, subject to the same penalty which will be levied even against masters who allow or tolerate them among their slaves (Code Noir, 1685)²⁶.

“Creolist Benjamin Hebblethwaite assesses in his book *Vodou Songs: In Haitian Creole and English* that under this strict suppression, images and practices of Vodou were camouflaged inside Catholic customs, such as the use of chromolithographs (Hebblethwaite, 2012)”²⁷ “In consequence of this severe Catholic pressure, European holidays such as Halloween and Christmas have been transformed into Vodou culture (Deren, 1953)”²⁸.

HAITIAN FREEMASONRY

In Haiti, the Craft arrived through the Grand Lodge of France and furnished a social space. In 1749, two lodges in French administration were authorized and a Provincial Grand Lodge was consecrated in 1778 under the direction of the Grand Orient of France when the chartered regular lodges began to increase between 1763 and 1775 (Mackey, 1996)²⁹.

Historian Sally McKee noted that “Scottish-Rite Freemasonry linked the colony of Saint-Domingue and Bordeaux. The newly established French Caribbean Masonic lodges were part of a transatlantic network, whose mother lodge was in Bordeaux (McKee, 2017)³⁰”.

Writer, ethnographer and folklorist, Tony Kail in his blog article *Masonic Symbolism in Haitian Vodou*, sheds light to 17th century French Freemasonry by giving significant information upon its reflections in Haiti. Kail suggests that “both theurgist and theosopher Stephen Morin, the allegedly founder of ‘AASR (Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite)’ and Martinés de Pasqually the founder of the esoteric order known as ‘*Elus de Cohën* (Ordre des Chevaliers Maçons Élus Coëns de l’Univers)’ established several lodges in the island. Elus de Cohën’s structure has brought together and consolidated angelic operations, ceremonial magic and Scottish Rite Freemasonry as a way to return man to his state before the Adamic fall. It is mentioned that, Morin while being a member in Bordeaux lodge and in Saint-Domingue started an ‘Ecosais’ or ‘Scots Masters’ lodge in the city of Le Cap Français (Kail, 2019)³¹”.

It is mentioned that “The French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars, had a profound affect on the act of Freemasonry in the Caribbean (Gordon, 2015)³².” “Freemasonry immediately turned into a prominent part of culture in Saint-Domingue. According to writer Kenaz Filan, one out of three French citizens were active Freemasons. Moreover, Haitian politics did not stay away from this circle. Freemasonry was criticized and attacked by the Catholic Church in 1884 when it was pointed out by the archbishop of Port-au-Prince that the current president, Lysius Salomon, and all of the cabinet members were Freemasons (Filan, 2010)³³.” “On the other hand, a portion of the Freemasons in colonial Saint-Domingue supported colonial rule and even slavery against the majority, which was an issue fervently contested between the Brothers of the Craft (Robinson, 2013)³⁴.” Jansen argues that “the historical backdrop of globalizing Freemasonry (and various fraternities) was from the earliest starting point, set apart by a basic pressure between an ostensibly inclusive ideology and elitist membership practices (Jansen, 2015)³⁵”.

Initially, merely white French colonists were accepted in the Craft, due to the fact that they were “free” men and this is a core prerequisite according to the Masonic regulations; this appearance tended to evolve according to the current sociological and demographic facts. Over time “sex between French masters and female slaves has gotten exceptionally normal and became a common practice. which led to the emrgence of what would become a seperate class of mixed-race children called ‘gens de couleur’, ‘free people of colour’ (Ferguson, 1988)³⁶.” In *The Haitian Vodou Handbook. Protocols for Riding with the Lwa* Kenaz Filan states that:

It was common practice for fathers to free these children, which afforded them more privileges and opened the door for acceptance as candidates into Freemasonry. In addition to this emerging class, ‘affranchis’ (free Blacks) became Freemasons during travel to France, where lodges were more racially integrated, and established their own organizations once returning to Saint-Domingue (HV 74).

“When Haiti won its independence from France and completely abolished slavery at the end of the 1791-1804 Haitian Revolution, Freemasonry was so penetrated deeply into local culture that,

the all-black revolutionary government inherited the craft for granted amongst their other spoils of war (Richter, 2014)”. “The most prominent figures of the time such as Vincent Ogé, Toussaint L’Ouverture, Légar Félicité Sothonax and Jean-Jacques Dessalines were all Freemasons and they held crucial and active roles in colonial politics (HV 74 – 78)”.

“Toussaint L’Ouverture, the most important figure leading and directing the revolution movement the French, presumed to have been a pride Freemason. L’Ouverture signed his name with a distinctive pattern of dots. This allegedly seems to attest to the fact, that this signature mimics a popular masonic shorthand symbol of the time. Richter assesses, “In fact, some sources claim that Freemasonry was so integral to Haitian culture and leadership, than any president of the country who was not a mason prior to office was ordained on the occasion of their election (Richter, 2014)”³⁷.

Another of Haiti’s founding fathers, “Jean-Jacques Dessalines, the self-styled ‘Emperor Jacques I’ was also a Freemason. Artifacts such as his sword and scabbard, clearly carved with square and compass motifs, are located at the National History Museum in Port-au-Prince. Jelly-Schapiro with a remote possibility claims that Haiti’s original name—which its black founders borrowed from a native Taino word for their ‘land of high mountains’—may even reflect a Masonic interest in Native American languages and wisdom. In Haiti today, Freemasonry keeps on flourishing among the paragons of middle-class respectability (Jelly-Schapiro, 2018)”³⁸. “Joseph Cerneau, leading to a turbulent period with his contradictory actions was one such French-Haitian Freemason who lived in Haiti and Cuba. Cerneau Cuba’s first lodge in 1804, the Cuban Theological Virtue Temple (Las Virtudes Teologales) in Havana (Richter, 2014)”³⁹.

“Haiti in fact, attracted one of the most radical French Masonic lodges of the 18th century—which was home to prominent figures like Voltaire, Benjamin Franklin—known as the Nine Sisters (Les Neuf Soeurs) who founded a lodge there, as the revolutionaries designated with its Greek name the Circle of Philadelphians. This lodge was one of the few European institutions, that admitted and initiated black members.

The turbulent and cosmopolitan ports of the New World provided a fertile ground for Masonic activities in the Caribbeans. By this means, unmoored men not only reached the opportunity to build fraternal ties helpful to business, but also to investigate human history deeply, to sanctify universal knowledge.

In French Saint-Domingue, Masonic ideas held, great interest for the colony’s freed slaves, and Freemasonry likewise appeared, to have overlapped, in untraceable, yet intriguing ways (2010)”⁴⁰. In *Saint Jean d’Ecosse de Marseille: Une puissance Maçonnique méditerranéenne aux ambitions Européennes*, French historian Pierre-Yves Beaurepaire states: “Lodges tended to defy the ‘nationalization’ of the Masonic institution and the claims to territorial sovereignty from ascending national grand lodges by maintaining and extending their own international networks (Beaurepaire, 2006)”⁴¹.

“The Masonic community had a discourse of civilization and privilege. Being initiated to a distinguished society, was viewed as a characteristic of differentiation to recognize individuals from the country’s elites and numerous statesmen. The overwhelming majority of nineteenth-century Haitian presidents, were initiated into Freemasonry (Clorméus, 2014)”⁴².

“The enthusiastic Masonic life many Saint-Dominguan affranchis occupied with where they

settled – with Masonic activities, formulaic correspondence, ceremonies, and processions in ritualic costumes – were not just a mere cultural peculiarity. They were an expression of escapism from the racial and social crisis. This was an excellent feature of how refugees deal with and shape their situation (Jansen, 2019)”⁴³.

INTERGROWTH OF VODOU AND HAITIAN FREEMASONRY

In scholarly circles, the connections between Vodou and Freemasonry are stressed, mainly criticising the Haitian Freemasonry for remaining inactive in anthropological researches. According to Clay Robinson,

Freemasons would be doing themselves a disservice in the pursuit of enlightenment and historical knowledge of their Craft by not examining the historical and cultural practices of Haitian Freemasonry in the context of Vodou rites, practices and symbolism (FV 46).

In order to to examine the localization of liberation as a transnational idea in Haitian culture, it is necessary to discern the linkages between Haitian Vodou and Freemasonry. In Haiti, the Vodou of colonial period, was seemingly a secret cult, because of the breakdown of all familial and clan organization, and most importantly the prohibition of public meetings, organized by the slaves. In the Antilles, the policy of the masters, was to force their slaves, to give up their own culture and to assimilate to, a new one. Under slavery, African culture and religion was suppressed, lineages were fragmented, and people pooled their religious knowledge, and from this fragmentation, they became culturally unified. In his popular article, *Picturing Haiti's Freemasons* writer and geographer Joshua Jelly-Schapiro asserts that,

Vodou, as a system of belief and rituals has long incorporated Masonic elements. Masonic imagery and language, far beyond the Masons' lodges in Haiti, still pervades visual culture by humans (Jelly-Schapiro, 2018)⁴⁴.

Also as discussed loosely the blog site *Visup* that, apparently there is a huge amount of, old world Masonic imagery, which suggests, that perhaps four hundred years ago, slaves were initiated by imperialists (2010)⁴⁵. As one looks deeper into the Vodou culture in Haiti, they can see numerous common practices, symbols and rituals. First of all, in Freemasonry it is necessary to believe in a supreme being to be initiated in the Craft. This Supreme Being is symbolically named as “Grand Architect of the Universe”. Unlike polytheistic and pantheistic systems, this deity is emphasized with its will of creation more than any other faculty in all degrees. Thereby, one can consider the masonic God as a monotheistic deity as it is in Abrahamic religions. Just as the vast majority of Freemasons' god refers to a one single supreme being, many different cults of Vodouism believe in *Gran-Mèt* which essentially appears as a single supreme being.



Figure 1: Papa Legba to the left and a stylized symbol of “Le Grand Mèt” on the wall at the Field Museum’s Vodou exhibit. Life-sized Bizango Lwa, warrior spirits from a secret society, appear in the background.

“A trained eye can find a plethora of Masonic symbolism in Vodou vèvés—ceremonial sigils traced on the ground or floor of a temple or other space of religious worship where the Lwa will be honored; they are literally the ‘calling cards’ to summon individual Lwa—alone, making for a fantastic visual mandala meditation, if nothing else”⁴⁶.

“In Haitian Vodou there are clergy whose duty it is to preserve the rituals and direct the ceremonies (McAlister, 1993)”⁴⁷. Similarly, in Blue Lodge Freemasonry there are the office bearers called “holy books bearer” and the “director of ceremonies”. Their tasks are, separately to protect the holy books (in most cases the Bible, Qur’an and the Torah) meticulously, place them over the sacred altar and to take the responsibility of the ceremony for the smooth flowing of ceremonial and ritual.

According to the hierarchical structure, there are the clerical figures called *hounsis* below the *houngans* and *mambos*. The *hounsis* are also initiates and they act as assistants during ceremonies. They are dedicated to their very personal mysteries.

In Haitian Vodou, a *hounsi* who is exalted to *houngan* or *mambo* (priest or priestess) status is venerated with the *asson* (calabash rattle) symbol (McAlister, 1993)”⁴⁸. Likewise, in every degree of Freemasonry, there is a symbolic hierarchy through holding particular titles in performing the rituals and certain tasks.

Whereas there can be found numerous common signifiers in both symbolic lexicons, it is suggested that in the context of Haitian Vodou, the three subjects including Masonic symbolism in particular are *Marassa Vèvè*, *Ayizan Vèvè* and *Loko Vèvè*.

Marassa Vèvè

In her essay *Developing Diaspora Literacy and Marasa Consciousness*, literary critic Vèvè A. Clark “argues for the development of *marasa* consciousness as a means of perusing contemporary African diasporic literature. Clark notes that, *marasa* is a mythical theory of textual relationships based on the Haitian divine twins, the *marasa* (1991)”⁴⁹. Deren suggests that in the context of Haitian Vodou, the *Marassa* is a manifestation of the balance and complexity of human instincts. It reflects the cosmic unity of man’s bilateral nature: ‘half matter, half metaphysical; half mortal, half immortal; half human, half divine’. The *vèvè* for *Marassa* in Haitian Vodou is represented by a three figures (*Marasa-Dosu-Dosa*), as seen in Figure 2. The importance of the trinity is further ritualistically elaborated on by the *Marassa-Trois* as a triangle where the legs represent a ‘vertical segmentation into male and female; and these legs are each, in turn, horizontally subdivided into the physical body and the metaphysical soul’ (Deren, 1953)”⁵⁰.

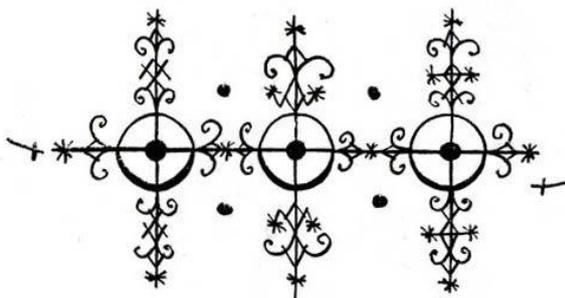


Figure 2: Marassa Vèvè.

In their book explaining Freemasonry through its symbols, Beresniak and Hamani suggest that “Freemasonry also shares a proclivity for the force of three and its relationship with the intricacies of man and as a symbol of divine. Work within a lodge starts with the setting of the three greater lights and the lighting of the three lesser lights. The greater lights are symbolized by a volume of sacred law, most commonly the three abrahamic religions’ books Holy Bible, Qur’an and Torah; the square and the compass, each of which has their own symbolism differing from ideals of religious tolerance to the concept of the universal totality of the ‘Supreme Being’. The three lesser lights are usually represented by three candles placed atop three separate columns, forming the shape of a triangle around the sacred altar in the geometric center of the temple (see Figure 3) (Beresniak and Hamani, 1997)”⁵¹. Similarly the dualistic approach of Freemasonry embraces the contradictive totality of the human nature by emphasizing the need for complete darkness interrupted by a dazzling light, the black and white floor tiles.



Figure 3: Altar in the Masonic temple.

AyizanVèvè

“AyizanVeleketete acts as the protector lwa of the Vodou temple, ensures purity in rituals and responsible for protecting ethical values. It is symbolized with the royal palm frond or palm kernel that represent power and freedom in its emblem. Her sacred resting plant and the superimposed initials A. V. whose jambs intersect which are derived from her name (Hebblethwaite, 2012; Platoff, 2015; Marcelin, 1947)”⁵² as seen in Figure 4. “The palm kernel appears in the arms of the Haitian Republic designed by the first president of the Republic of Haiti, Alexandre Petion. The palm kernel was also painted on the altars of the motherland which stood, before the American invasion, in public places (Marcelin, 1947)”⁵³. Similarities between A. V. logo and the most popular and identifiable symbol of Freemasonry (Figure 5), the square and the compass are obviously apparent and quite remarkable.

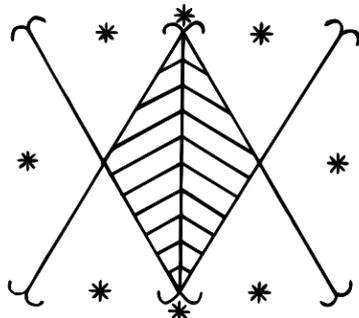


Figure 4: AyizanVèvè



Figure 5: Square and Compasses.

“This comparison is quite astonishing that, maybe not unintentionally, the square and the compass that is the single most identifiable symbol of Freemasonry also addresses ideas of immaculateness, righteousness, and moral values. In speculative Freemasonry, the square is a

symbol of morality and virtue within Freemasonry in which the phrase ‘we must square our actions by the square of virtue with all mankind’ is common among Freemasons (Mackey, 1996)⁵⁴.

LokoVèvè

“Loko is the protective lwa of Vodoun [sic] clergy and the pillar of justice. His vèvè is distinguished by the stylized letter L (see Figure 6), and is represented by a large stone within Vodou temples (Hebblethwaite, 2012)”.⁵⁵

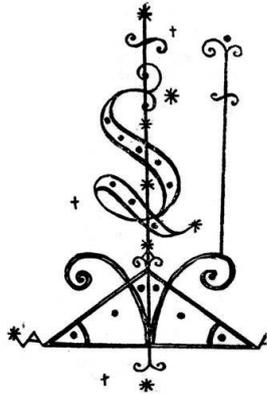


Figure 6: Loko Vèvè.



Figure 7: Level.

“Loko, the guardian of the deepest secret is also known as the god of trees and forests. Marcelin argues in 1947 that, it is assimilated to Saint Joseph. Loko is an old ‘claw’, (god) at first sympathetic and usually dressed in a formal uniform. One can never see him without his pipe and his cane. Loko can also take the form of a chameleon, anole or a butterfly. He is represented in the houmforts by a large stone (Marcelin, 1947)”.⁵⁶

“When analyzing the lokovèvè from a Masonic point of view, the highlights of the level and plumb are effectively recognizable (Figure 7). Quite naturally, within Freemasonry the level and plumb, resembles the values of the Lokovèvè by representing equality and totality respectively (Beresniak and Hamani, 1997)”.⁵⁷ “These images to be reflected inside the vèvè of these essential lwa suggests an evident relationship between Freemasonry and Vodou during the colonial period, the period of rebellion and independence and the subsequent evolution in Haitian culture (FV 49). Clay Robinson states:

To this day, it is not uncommon to see symbols of Freemasonry on display throughout Vodou rites or printed upon Vodou paraphernalia. The influences of Freemasonry can be seen throughout Vodou culture with such examples as houngans and mambos referring to Bondye as ‘Gran Mèt’ or Great Master, a Masonic title; the coffin, skull and crossbones and shovel seen in the Gede vèvè which is recognized among Freemasons as a symbol of rebirth and resurrection and the secret handshake exchanges within kanzo that runs directly parallel to the ‘grips’ used by Freemasons as means of discerning membership (HV 80)”.⁵⁸

“In Vodou, there are some handshakes and rituals, that one need to know, just as in Freemasonry (2010)”.⁵⁸ Donald J. Consentino, professor of English and World Arts and Cultures at UCLA observed that “when competing, houngans meet at the beginning of ceremonies, they greet each other with elaborate Masonic handshakes (Consentino, 1995)”.⁵⁹

“In Haitian Vodou, the term Grand Master used to describe God or ‘Grand Met Bondye’ the ‘good God’ (Kail, 2019)”.⁶⁰ “Filan assesses that “even the oaths sworn in the *djevo*⁶¹ are closely

identical to the oaths sworn by the applicants of Freemasonry (*HV 80*)”. Likewise, Robinson states that considerable number of Haitian lodges “have taken on a more Vodou flavor in décor and discussion more than anywhere else in the world, for the majority membership of these lodges being Vodouists (*FV 49*)”.

This strong triangular interpolation within Vodou, Freemasonry and Transnationalism in Haitian imagery also shows up very often in visual arts. Michel Lafleur, a prominent figure of Atis Rezistans movement of Port-au-Prince “has depicted a red and gold skull and square and compasses in a wooden coffin-cover. For it is known that coffin is emblem of mortality in the master Masons’ degree, “and one also features in André Eugène’s contribution, a typically spooky piece involving a doll’s head and scrap metal. Eugène and Lafleur’s associate Molej Zamour, a woodworker, has fabricated three Masonic columns modeled on a similar trio from the eighteenth century that Lafleur has painted with three principles—“Foi” (faith), “Espérance” (hope), and “Charité” (charity)—and their associated Masonic symbols. It’s hard to go far in Haiti today without seeing one of these words painted on a storage depot or tap-tap (Jelly-Schapiro, 2018)”⁶².



Figure 8: An installation view showing three Masonic columns by Michel Lafleur and Molej Zamour, the Clemente Center, New York City, 2018.

“Legrace Benson in the work of Nou La, We Here: Remembrance and Power and Power in the Arts of Haitian Vodou discusses how the ‘Masonic All Seeing Eye’ can be found in many of the elaborate sequined flags and banners used in Haitian Vodou. Benson claims that the image is brought to Haiti by European Jesuits and Freemasons. There are some authentic, historical records that discuss examples of esoteric imagery such as the Tetragrammaton and all Seeing Eye found in the ritual décor of Haitian Vodou Temples (Kail, 2019)”⁶³.

Beside many stipulations and restrictions against slaves, European Freemasonry came to serve as a substitute for the missing piece of African religious heritage. “Its religious tolerance and fortitude, provided a safe zone to escape from mistreatment. Besides its European mystery custom reflected the initiatory transitional experiences of African mystery social societies and impacted the improvement of Vodou and Haitian mystical secret societies such as *Sanpwe*⁶⁴ and *Bizango*⁶⁵. Under the traditional masonic virtues of freedom, liberty, justice and the power of free thought, Freemasonry provided a venue from which Vodouists could socialize and discuss, which could possibly provide insight into the influences that prompted the slave rebellions in 1751 and 1791 (*HV 16, 74*)”. In this setting “Vodou formed the basis of the unity of the main forces in Haiti, because it helped shape the construction of relationships between the significant sectors of society (Laguerre, 1989)”⁶⁶. It became more than just a religion and “the political messianic significance of Vodou was a unifying factor in the struggles for liberation. Prophets emerged

with such claims and commitments that, they represented Vodou spirits, and they were given the mission to liberate Africans from the domination of the colonists (Kamerling and Gavitte, 2016)⁶⁷. “The slaves have utilized Vodou power a mighty, moral weapon to fight against their French masters, in order to maintain their liberation. This inconsistency drove them to engage the African deities for help to free them from French subjugation (Louis)⁶⁸. “The African slaves re-organized their beliefs and practices in a complex process of creolization, embracing parts of Catholicism as well as elements of Freemasonry, French occultism, and African Islam (McAlister, 2006; Michel and Bellagarde-Smith, 2006)⁶⁹. On the other part, even though the French colonists were not explicitly reluctant in modelling and ministering the religious affairs of the black population, they were lagging to grasp the fast-growing theological demands of the gens de couleur. More importantly they were far from comprehending the transnational linkage between Vodou and Catholicism. Laguerre emphasizes that “Haiti as a French colony was not a ‘settlement’, but rather one of ‘exploitation’. By that it is implied that the French were not keen on remaining in the island forever; but simply in improve their economic condition to return to live in France (Laguerre, 1989)⁷⁰.

As a matter of fact, both Vodou and in the background the Freemasonry, seemed to be the glue, to hold Haitians together. “At the point when Haitians accomplished their independence in 1804, the majority of its political leaders -who some of them were also Freemasons- and army officers and soldiers were also Vodou practitioners. Vodou turned out to be an intersection point of an element of some weight in the early formation and development of post-independence Haitian political panorama⁷¹. It is stated that “these two cultures have become so interlaced that it is almost impossible to differentiate where a distinction between Freemasonry and Vodou can be made and which influenced the other in a particular symbol, ceremony and practice (FV 49).

“The evolution of emancipation and the Freemasonry in Haiti and the those of the Haitians experienced is far beyond what it is seen and broadly spoken. Freemasonry has infiltrated and incorporated into Haitian culture in all aspects (Kamerling and Gavitte, 2016)⁷² Essentially, Freemasonry had an influence, on the Vodou oriented mythology of the lives of slaves. This illustrates well, the transnationalist feelings and concept of Masonic light, flowing out, into the public in Haiti, through Vodou practices.

CONCLUSION

As a conclusion, traditional ethnography, and the making of “culture” within and outside of the borderlands, reconceptualize the Haitians’ relations, to new spaces through re-Africanized heritage movements, that emphasize difference. Nevertheless, they shared, many of these modes with Freemasonry, which was a diverse organization that engendered ties of loyalty, often stronger than loyalties to nation and state.

Although, this syncretistic upheaval of diasporic values, is not exactly a physical or spiritual “return” to a homeland, as Zerubbabel did in the fifteenth degree⁷³, it is a symbolic reincarnation. Even though, they could not make their way back to Africa, as the Israelites did, they have passed over the Gabara Bridge and obtained the political and cultural independence of their own.

It appears that there are indeed influences of Freemasonry on Vodou that await further research and writing. Vodou arguably has played a pivotal role, historically, in sustaining the African cultural continuum and in promoting Haitian liberation, from colonial domination. Within this context, the Vodou perpetrated and penetrated Haitian Freemasonry, constructed itself as a self-sufficient transnational movement. And, lying thousands of miles from the westernmost tip of Africa, Haiti, has reconstructed, the symbolic imagery of its syncretistic

codes, mostly through Freemasonry.

Notes

Acknowledgments: Some works are able to reveal input with high informative value in the formation of empirical data. Through the results of these studies, one can go confidently deep into the subject. Clay Robinson's article *Freemasonry and Vodou* has revealed such a result in this aspect. It played a crucial role in cementing the diversified historical facts and strengthened my assumptions.

¹Also written as Voodoo and Vaudou. Even though there are many variations on the spelling of the word, in this study, when referring to the Haitian religious practice, the more widely accepted spelling "Vodou" is used and it is also capitalized, in order to avoid misinterpretations.

²Simms, Rodriguez, Rodriguez, and Herrera. "The Genetic Structure of Populations from Haiti and Jamaica Reflect Divergent Demographic Histories", 2010, 49.

³*Corruption Perceptions 2019 Index, Transparency International, The Global Coalition Against Corruption*, ISBN: 978-3-96076-134-1, 2, 3. <https://www.transparency.org/cpi2018>

⁴Rouse. *The Tainos: Rise and Decline of the People who Greeted Columbus*. 1992.

⁵Reséndez. *The Other Slavery, The Uncovered Story of Indian Enslavement in America*, 2016, 17. Reséndez's book pushes the reader to examine the scope of violent capture and enslavement of native peoples in Americas, as well as the ill-defined grey areas where debt peonage bled into something akin to the other slavery.; Deagan, Cruxent. "From Contact to Criollos, The Archeology of Spanish Colonization in Hispaniola", *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 1993, 71.

⁶Haggerty. *Dominican Republic and Haiti: Country Studies*, 1989, 8.

⁷Ward. *Colonial Self – Government, The British Experience 1759 – 1856*, 1976, 5.

⁸A former French legal term denoting a freedman or emancipated slave, but was a term used to refer pejoratively to mulattoes.

⁹Active citizens.

¹⁰Michel; Bellagarde-Smith, *Vodou in Haitian Life and Culture, Invisible Powers*, 2006, 4.

¹¹Peterson. "Insects, Disease, and Military History: The Napoleonic Campaigns and Historical Perception", 1995, 147 – 160.

¹²Cosentino(ed.). *Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou, "Introduction: Imagine Heaven"*, 1995, 25 – 55; Fandrich. "Yorùbá Influences on Haitian Vodou and New Orleans Voodoo", *Journal of Black Studies*, May, 2007, 775.; Clarke. "Transnational Yoruba Revivalism and the Diasporic Politics of Heritage", November 4, 2007, 721 – 726.

¹³Mbiti. *African Religions and Philosophy*, 1969, 75.

¹⁴Danticat. "A Year And A Day" *The New Yorker*, Popular Culture Collection. Web., September 26, 2013, 19.

¹⁵Desmangles. *The Faces of the Gods: Vodou and Roman Catholicism in Haiti*, 1992, 7.

¹⁶Ibid., 90.

¹⁷Mercier, "The Fon of Dahomey". In *African Worlds*, ed. Daryll Forde, 1954, 210– 234.

¹⁸Barrington. *Caribbean Religious History: An Introduction*, 2010, 112.

¹⁹Bertin. "Haiti's Pact with the Devil?: Bwa Kayiman, Haitian Protestant Views of Vodou, and the Future of Haiti" *Religions*, USA, 5 August 2019, 3.

- ²⁰Rey, Stepick. *Crossing the Water and Keeping the Faith: Haitian Religion in Miami*, 2013-08-19, 9.
- ²¹Apter. "On African Origins: Creolization and Connaisance in Haitian Vodoo". *American Ethnologist*, December 8, 2013, May 2002.
- ²²Greenough-Hodges. "Haitian Vodou: "Pwen" (Magical Charge) In Ritual Context", vii.
- ²³Kamerling, Gavitte. *More Than a Misunderstood Religion: Rediscovering Vodou as a Tool of Survival and a Vehicle for Independence in Colonial Haiti*, February 25, 2016.
- ²⁴Roland. "Caribbean Religion: The Vodoo Case". (*Sociological Analysis* 38, no. 1, 1977), 25, 36.
- ²⁵Desmangles. "The Maroon Republics and Religious Diversity in Colonial Haiti". *Anthropos*.1990, 475 – 482.
- ²⁶The "Code Noir", 1685.
- ²⁷Hebblethwaite. *Vodou Songs: In Haitian Creole and English*.
- ²⁸Deren. *Divine Horseman: The Living Gods of Haiti*, 1953.
- ²⁹Mackey. *The History of Freemasonry*, 1996, 303.
- ³⁰McKee. *The Exile's Song: Edmond Dédé and the Unfinished Revolutions of the Atlantic World*, 2017.
- ³¹Kail. *Masonic Symbolism in Haitian Vodou*. 2019 <https://medium.com/@tonykail/masonic-symbolism-in-haitian-vodou-70faa1a9ee40>
- ³²Gordon. *Loge L'Amitié des Frères Réunis no. 1*, 2015.
- ³³Filan. *The Haitian Vodou Handbook. Protocols for Riding with the Lwa*. 2010. Subsequent citations will appear paranthetically in the text as *HV*.
- ³⁴Robinson. *Freemasonry and Vodou, The Journal of Vodou Archive*, 2013, 46. Subsequent citations will appear paranthetically in the text as *FV*.
- ³⁵Jansen. *In Search of Atlantic Sociability: Freemasons, Empires, And Atlantic History, Research Fellow*, 2015), 95.
- ³⁶Ferguson. *Papa Doc, Baby Doc. Haiti and the Duvaliers*, 1988, 3.
- ³⁷Richter. *Freemasons of the Caribbean*, 2014.
- ³⁸Jelly-Schapiro. *Picturing Haiti's Freemasons*, 2018. <https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2018/06/02/picturing-haitis-freemasons>
- ³⁹Richter. *Freemasons of the Caribbean*, 2014.
- ⁴⁰<http://visupview.blogspot.com/2010/11/haitian-lodge.html>. Wednesday November 24, 2010.
- ⁴¹Beaupaire. "Saint Jean d'Ecosse de Marseille: Une puissance Maçonnique méditerranéenne aux ambitions Européennes" (*Cahiers de la Méditerranée*, 2006) 72, 61 - 95. (my translation).
- ⁴²Clorméus. "La Soutane contre le Tablier, Au Cœur des Tensions entre le Clergé Breton et la Franc-maçonnerie Haïtienne au XIXe Siècle (1867-1900)", *Histoire, Monde & Cultures Religieuses* N. 29, Mars 2014, 33. (my translation).
- ⁴³Jansen. "Brothers in exile: Masonic lodges and the refugees of the Haitian Revolution, 1790s–1820", *Atlantic Studies, Global Currents*, 11 July 2019, 355.
- ⁴⁴Jelly-Schapiro. *Picturing Haiti's Freemasons*.
- ⁴⁵Wednesday, November 24, 2010 The Haitian Lodge, <http://visupview.blogspot.com/2010/11/haitian-lodge.html>

- ⁴⁶<https://amoretmortem.wordpress.com/2014/12/12/go-see-the-vodou-sacred-powers-of-haiti-exhibit-at-chicagos-field-museum-of-natural-history/>
- ⁴⁷McAlister. “*The Jew*” in *The Haitian Imagination: Pre-Modern Anti-Judaism in the Post-Modern Caribbean*, (1993), 10 – 27.
- ⁴⁸Ibid.
- ⁴⁹Clark, Vèvè A. “Developing Diaspora Literacy and Marasa Consciousness.” *Comparative American Identities: Race, Sex, and Nationality in the Modern Text*. Ed. Hortense Spillers, 1991. 40 – 61.
- ⁵⁰Deren. *Divine Horsemen, The Living Gods of Haiti*, 40.
- ⁵¹Beresniak, Hamani. *Symbols of Freemasonry*, 1997), 24.
- ⁵²Hebblethwaite. *Vodou Songs: In Haitian Creole and English*; Platoff. *Drapo Vodou: Sacred Standards of Haitian Vodou*, *Flag Research Quarterly, Revue Trimestrielle de Recherche en Vexillologie*, 2015, 12.; Marcelin. “*Les Grands Dieux du Vodou Haitien*”. *Journal de la Societe des Americanistes*, 1947, 62. (my translation).
- ⁵³Ibid, 62.
- ⁵⁴Mackey. *The History of Freemasonry*, 1996.
- ⁵⁵Hebblethwaite. *Vodou Songs: In Haitian Creole and English*, 259.
- ⁵⁶Marcelin. “*Les Grands Dieux du Vodou Haitien*”, 1947, 101. (my translation).
- ⁵⁷Beresniak, Hamani. *Symbols of Freemasonry*, 28.
- ⁵⁸Wednesday, November 24, 2010 The Haitian Lodge, <http://visupview.blogspot.com/2010/11/haitian-lodge.html>
- ⁵⁹Consentino. *Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou*, 1995.
- ⁶⁰Kail. *Masonic Symbolism in Haitian Vodou*, 2019.
- ⁶¹A term used to define most sacred interior space of a peristyle in Haitian Vodou.Greenough-Hodges. “*Haitian Vodou: “Pwen” (Magical Charge) In Ritual Context*”, 165.
- ⁶²Jelly-Schapiro. *Picturing Haiti’s Freemasons*.
- ⁶³Kail. *Masonic Symbolism in Haitian Vodou*.
- ⁶⁴ “*Legrace Benson documented the leader of a Sanpwèl society adorning his temple with photographs of himself in Masonic regalia as well as various lodge symbols. She also observed the leader wearing a white Masonic apron while creating a spiritual bath. Benson also observed wooden coffins used by many of the secret societies that are placed by sacred altars. The coffin is a symbol in Freemasonry used to represent death and resurrection*”. (Tony Kail. *Masonic Symbolism in Haitian Vodou*).
- ⁶⁵“*Masonic references abound in these cultures with the membership in both societies observing 33 ranks as in Scottish Rite Freemasonry. Members of these societies utilize a number of forms of coded recognition. Anthropologist Wade Davis notes that many of the societies such as the Bizango society utilize a number of signs and signals upon entering and exiting ritual spaces and in greeting each other. There is an interesting use of symbolic ‘reversal’ in giving and receiving such signs*”. (Tony Kail. *Masonic Symbolism in Haitian Vodou*).
- ⁶⁶ Laguerre. *Voodoo and Politics in Haiti*, 7.

- ⁶⁷ Kamerling, Gavitte. *More Than a Misunderstood Religion: Rediscovering Vodou as a Tool of Survival and a Vehicle for Independence in Colonial Haiti*.
- ⁶⁸ Louis. *Voodoo in Haiti: Catholicism, Protestantism and a Model of Effective Ministry in the Context of Vodou*, 177, 289.
- ⁶⁹ McAlister. “*The Jew*” in *the Haitian Imagination: Pre-Modern Anti-Judaism in the Post-Modern Caribbean*, 10 – 24.; Michel, Bellagarde-Smith. *Vodou in Haitian Life and Culture, Invisible Powers*, 4.
- ⁷⁰ Laguerre. *Voodoo and Politics in Haiti*, 1989, 8.
- ⁷¹ “During the presidential elections of 1957, there were half a dozen secret societies that had almost complete control over the daily life of the Haitian peasantry and urban dwellers. Presidential candidate François Duvalier was able to identify and exploit intelligently these network of relationships to extent that some Vodou priests openly used their temples as local head quarters for his campaign”. (Laguerre. *Voodoo and Politics in Haiti*, 1 - 2).
- ⁷² Kamerling, Gavitte. *More Than a Misunderstood Religion: Rediscovering Vodou as a Tool of Survival and a Vehicle for Independence in Colonial Haiti*, 2016.
- ⁷³ On the 15th degree ritual of the AASR (Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite) the year 586 BC Prince Zerubbabel helps the Israelites crossing the Gabara Bridge. On the arches of the bridge, L. D. P. Letters for the abbreviation of the French clause “Liberte de Passer” or “Liberte de Penser” (The Passage to Freedom and Freedom of Thought) is engraved. Gabara Bridge symbolizes, crossing from captivity to liberty, from darkness to enlightenment, from thinking to acting. Through this historical-Masonic passage, Jews who had been led into Babylonian captivity for seventy years, return to their native land and rebuild their temple. That means it is not possible to keep people in slavery, once they know the value of liberty and can decide for themselves how to defend it.

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