

Tracing the Vèvè, Healing the Nation: Exploring Bakongo Cosmologies in Haitian Vodou

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Argument:

The ability for Africans in the Americas to retain, reshape, and reinvent elements of their African religious identities has long been studied in relation slavery in the Atlantic World, the spread of Christianity, and the European colonization of the Americas. The religious beliefs, traditions, and legacies of enslaved Africans reflect the resilience of oral histories and narratives as legitimate sources of historical record. Despite the enslaved Africans experiences of brutal chattel slavery, abuse, familial separation, and dehumanization, these African people maintained a connection to their memories of African spiritual practices, beliefs, and rituals. To explore more of the connection between spirituality and the creation of a new identity in a strange and faraway land, this paper explores the embodiment of the spirit within the Petwo or Kongo derived rites in Haitian Vodou. Through the analysis of Bakongo cosmological traditions, this paper investigates the role of the spirit as a place for enslaved people to retain their African cosmological beliefs on personhood, explore the spirit's manifestation in rituals, and finally how enslaved people constantly revered ancestors in their connection to the African identity. Thus, I argue that the Petwo rite of Vodou with its close association to Bakongo elements such as *nkisi*, are a consistent place of healing for Africans in the diaspora. I choose to describe the ability for the spiritual conceptualizations from West Central Africa to travel and guide African people through the uncertainty of the Middle Passage, the horrors of enslavement and colonization, racial segregation and police violence as immortally liberated.

Conceptualizing the spirit is debated among historians, anthropologists, and theologians, but, specifically the debate regarding the manifestation the spirit through possession of a devotee has been privileged within the genealogical studies of the African-Atlantic and in exploring Afro-

Diasporic religion. One recent work by anthropologist Christopher Paul Johnson explores the intellectual concept of possession. In: “Toward an Atlantic Genealogy of “ Spirit Possession ” Johnson explains what he terms an ‘orienting’ proposition for the field of spirit, possession, and the Atlantic: “At this juncture, I propose an orienting proposition: Spirit possession, the ownership or occupation of the body by unseen agents, emerged out of an analogical relation with material possessions and lands, even as perceived possession by spirits also complicated the lawful exchange of possessions and lands.”¹ In this case, the concept of possession is relation to a being, yet, though Johnson discusses the misrecognition and meta-category of African spirituality, the process and action of ‘possession’ was in fact a European construction. Consequently, Johnson’s studies on the concept of possession are lacking African perspectives and more importantly, traditional African religious theologians who use the African experience as a source of theological narrative. In Johnson’s establishment of his argument in this chapter, his focus is on the role that the ongoing historical event and rising importance of property, contracts, and thus the growth and economic wealth of a country, ultimately overshadows any observation of African cosmology as in existence pre-European contact. While the discussion of European ideas on the spirit and the economic context within the Atlantic World is contextually important, by situating the bulk of his discussion in a European context, Johnson is in fact, reinforcing a Eurocentric model in his discussion of the spirit and its function. Consequently, the reader quickly loses sight of the African person as an independent, living, thinking ‘being’ and is instead encouraged to consider African spirit possession as an object of the European intellectual imagination.

¹ Johnson, Paul C. (Paul Christopher). *Spirited Things: The Work of "possession" in Afro-Atlantic Religions*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2014, 35

The appropriation of European ideas on possession within the African context has immense consequences for the field of African studies and further delegitimizes the current scholarship from African scholars who view possession as a tool of resistance and an extension of African cosmologies in the New World. As Johnson continues, he constructs a European focused economic and social analysis of the Atlantic world as he builds his argument that spirit possession in relation to the African as other was largely dependent on a growing world of ideas about the self, possession, and property. Johnson references Enlightenment thinkers Kant and Hobbes to discuss how specifically ideas on agency and contracts would have contributed to a growing body of beliefs that viewed possession as negative. Though, in the worldview of the Bakongo, possession was not reminiscent of the dispossession discussed in Johnson's explanations of contracts relative to authenticity, identity, and agreement as to mediating authority are all rendered uncertain by spirits' occupation of bodies."² In the BaKongo cosmologies, the spirits of ancestors and those twice-dead often referred to as *basimbi* [*simbi* in plural], were essential components of the reverence and significance of the cosmology. In Michael Ras-Brown's text, *Afro-Atlantic in the Lowlands*: he assesses the relationship between the *simbi* and their manifestations. The Kikongo word *simbi* implies a possessive nature, and is translated as: 'hold, keep, preserve,' and also, 'take hold of, to seize' and "support."³ In any translation, it is clear that the concept of a specific relationship between spirits and nature was essential to this specific African cosmology and by extension its social and religious structures.

² Johnson, Paul C. *Spirited Things: The Work of "possession" in Afro-Atlantic Religions*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2014, 33

³ Brown, Ras Michael. *African-Atlantic Cultures and the South Carolina Lowcountry*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2012, 133

Methodology:

Traditional African theologians privilege the lived experiences, proverbs, narratives and myths within specific African ethnic groups as the foundation of religious beliefs and rituals on the African continent. As a result, a methodology which is rooted in African Traditional religious experiences is essential to any discussion on the role of the spirit in the African diaspora. The foundational text to contextualizing the field of African traditional religion is religious studies scholar, John Mbiti's *Introduction to African Religion*. Mbiti's discussion on African cultures and the traditional function of spirit is fruitful to this methodology. In his description and definition of culture, he elucidates both the individuality of ethnic groups, and their shared qualities: "Each African people has its own cultural heritage. Some aspects of our cultures are fairly similar over large areas of our continent. There are also many differences, which add to the variety of African culture in general."⁴ Later, Mbiti discusses the specific function of the spirit in the African context, this function then, is compatible with the Bakongo cosmological view of humanity and the role of the spirit in the composition of a human. Mbiti explains: "It is held in African societies' that a person is made up of body and spirit (or soul, life, breath, shadow or double.) There are other parts but these two are main ones. They have to be joined together to make a living person."⁵ Ultimately, a theological and historical lens rooted in the African context gives context to the origins of African spirit possession before European contact constitutes the African as an autonomous being independent of European influence.

⁴ Mbiti, John S. 1991. *Introduction to African religion*. Oxford [England]: Heinemann Educational Books, 7

⁵ Mbiti, 136

In addition to a discussion rooted in African traditional religion, a historical approach which acknowledges the genealogy of spirit possession is essential to contextualizing the role of the spirit and understanding its development across cultures. Historian Geoffery Parrinder's 1954 text *African Traditional Religion* is both historical and culturally relevant to the discussion of spiritual leadership, he mentions the role of mediums and priests found in his study of African religions. The practice of possession Parrinder describes is evident of the structure and value of community, deference to religious leaders, and ultimately order. He explains the priest's role as such: "Priests themselves may be possessed, in some parts of Africa but not in others. Sometimes they prefer to have a number of mediums under their control, who are consulted by order and whose possession is carefully regulated. The mediums may thus be dependent on a priest. Very frequently they set up as freelances and go into trances when being consulted by those in need of guidance."⁶ The guidance Parrinder describes can also be found in the process in which mediums undergo in order to perform possessions. He notes that in Dahomey another region in West Central Africa, specific convents were established and mediums and assistants often remained for months and years while undergoing training.⁷ The training of mediums, close oversight of local priests, and the immense time required for specific possessions are all examples of just how methodological spirit possession were in many traditional African societies.

To explore the role of the spirit through cosmological views, religious rituals, and the role of ancestors in identity making, comparative theology offers an entrance into the processes of meaning-making in the African context and later in the Haitian context. Comparative theology

⁶ Parrinder, Geoffrey. *African Traditional Religion*. London: Hutchinson's University Library, 1954, 102

⁷ Parrinder, 102

also assists in a nuanced discussion of namely the sources of theology in the African context and the positionality of the enslaved person's experience as a source for the creation of a theological model which posits the religion (traditional or otherwise) has a primary function to bring liberation to its devotees. The historical legacy of Atlantic slavery, the widespread conversion of African peoples to Catholicism, and finally the consequences of colonialism in the Caribbean reveal the essentiality of a methodology which considers history. Further, in addition to historical considerations, one must also consider the lived experiences of Black women within these historical events. Womanism which authenticates Black woman's lived experience as a source of theology is a generative and inclusive framework which acknowledges all genders and sexualities in the creation of a theology to liberate. Theologian Emilie Townes notes a series of questions which are paramount to employing this lens for our purposes the following are the most significant: "How does this source portray blackness, darkness and economic justice for non-ruling class people? What are women doing in this text? Are women infantilized, pedestalized, idealized, or allowed to be free and independent? Identify "spirit helpers," indigenous people who create opportunities of transformation."⁸ This paper utilizes a womanist lens to authenticate and explore the spiritual relationships that Black women construct in Vodou both historically and in modernity.

In addition to Townes, theologian Karen Baker Fletcher's definition of womanist theology gives life to the analysis of Black women within the context of the Atlantic World. Specifically, Baker's definition is generative alongside Townes's questions of 'spirit helpers' in providing a theological framework to explore the concept of the spirit in both West Central

⁸Townes, Emilie, *Womanist Theology Encyclopedia of Women and Religion in North America*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006, 171

African and the Caribbean. Baker describes her interpretation of Womanist theology and posits: “Womanist theology begins by considering the revelation of God in the lives of black folk historically and in the present, particularly in the lives of ordinary women of African descent. It may take the form of a Christian theology, Islamic theology, or non-organized religiosity and spirituality. Womanist theology asks, “Who has God been in the lives of black women historically and today?”⁹ For the purposes of this discussion, our questions alongside of “Who has God been?” must also be reconciled with “*How* has God been present in the lives of Black women historically and today?”

The elements of the spirit which materialize into objects, drums, or *minkisi* necessitate an ethno-historical analogical framework in object analysis.¹⁰ Ethno-historical analogy gives space to analyze both socio-political elements of the West Central African reality to the creation of the new Haitian lived reality. *Ethnogenesis in the New World*, outlines this process in his chapter on a Model for a Diaspora. Anthropologist Christopher Fennell in his text *Cosmologies and Crossroads and Cosmologies: Diasporas* contends that the first step in an ethno-historical model is to demonstrate that the cultural system selected to provide the source information is relevant to the subject of material culture to which it will be applied.¹¹ In this case, through artifact analysis of first-hand ethnographic accounts from historians and anthropologists, using a comparative lens, I then identify which elements of Bakongo religion were retained and manifested in Haitian

⁹ Baker-Fletcher, Karen. 1998. *Sisters of dust, sisters of spirit: womanist wordings on God and creation*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 109

¹⁰ *minkisi* are objects which hold ancestral spirits, medicines, or other healing elements.

¹¹ Fennell, Christopher. 2007. *Crossroads and cosmologies: diasporas and ethnogenesis in the new world*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida. <http://site.ebrary.com/id/10476973>, 47

Vodou, or conversely, which elements of Bakongo religion and cosmology were inverted and repurposed for a new socio-political reality in Haiti.

Finally, to observe and study spiritual concepts of the African people in the Americas through a lens which acknowledges the impact of creolization, the syncretism of Atlantic religions, and the transformative process of these religions and their subsequent creation of new identity formation is essential. Further, this new identity formation was one developed under the presence of French Catholicism in Haiti, and in Portuguese Catholicism in the Kingdom of Kongo, therefore in exploring Bakongo religions, the Western frameworks and restrictive sacred and secular binaries are not applicable. Therefore, to properly analyze the conceptualization of the spirit in Afro-Diasporic religions, the Western Judeo-Christian binary of sacred-profane must be abandoned in exchange for an African cosmological lens which emphasizes the worlds of the visible and invisible.

Historical Context of Vodou in Haiti:

The significance of the function of spirit which links African peoples to their African identity was established in Haiti prior to its independence from France. The slave revolt between the years of 1791 and 1803 resulting in the creation of the first Black republic traces its origins to the Afro-Caribbean religion of Vodou. Haitian folklore traces the origins of the revolution to a small *vodou* ceremony, on the Gallifet estate that was known to have incited a revolutionary spirit.¹² In an account from Antoine Dalmas, a young doctor of the Gallifet estate, he describes the ceremony and the centrality of a black pig to be what incited slaves to overthrow their white masters, “An entirely black pig, surrounded with fetishes and loaded with a variety of bizarre

¹² Geggus, David, *The Haitian Revolution: A Documentary History*. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2014, 78

offerings, was sacrificed to the all-powerful spirit of the black race. The religious ceremonies that accompanied the killing of the pig were typical of the Africans, as was their eagerness to drink its blood and the value they placed on getting some of its hairs as a sort of talisman that they thought would make them invulnerable.”¹³ Dalmas’ misconceptions about the religion are revealed in his belief that the ‘hairs would make them invulnerable.’¹⁴ The hairs in this context are likely referring to a *kongo paquet* which are similar to *minkisi* and embody ancestral power and healing for practitioners. This commentary of ‘bizarre offerings and fetishes’ is consistent with French beliefs of African traditional rituals as inferior and further failing to identify them as religions whatsoever. Historian Kate Ramsey catalogues the history of Vodou, French colonialism, and the law in her text *Spirits and the Law*. Ramsey outlines that in the wake of increasing slave rebellions the French colonial administration enforced harsher punishments for slaves gathering without their master’s permission, but moreover, slaves were forbidden to carry their spiritual packets: “free people of color as well as slaves were forbidden from: ‘creating, selling, distributing, or buying Garde Corps or Macandals, on the penalty of being extraordinarily pursued, as profaners and seducers.’¹⁵ Both accounts which penalize the spiritual practices essential to maintaining the cosmology of the enslaved Africans in Haiti epitomize the fear of non-Catholic religious practices and ultimately the attempt to retain power in the empire’s most profitable colony.

¹³ Geggus, 79

¹⁴ Geggus, 79

¹⁵ Ramsey, Kate. *The Spirits and the Law: Vodou and Power in Haiti*. 2015, 35

Defining Spirit:

To begin, the definition of spirit closely uses the lens from the Petwo rites element of Vodou which has elements found in traditional Bakongo religious practices and cosmologies. The conceptualization of physical and spirit self is foundational in Bakongo cosmologies and their articulation in philosophies are exceedingly clear. The construction of the self consists of three entities: *nitu*, *kisi*, and *mwela*.¹⁶ The first entity is *nitu*: the physical, visible body, or the ‘death-body.’¹⁷ Then, *kini* is the invisible body which is seen as a shade of the *nitu*. Finally, the self consists of *mwela*: which is seen as the soul with no bodily form. In the Bakongo beliefs, *mwela* is the only level of self which can operate independent of the physical and invisible body.¹⁸ The Bakongo conception of *mwela* is incompatible with European perspectives on thinking, embodiment, consciousness and the civil person which Christopher Johnson highlights in his texts. For example, we can compare the independence of *mwela* to Locke’s discussion of what determines consciousness. For Locke, humans are defined by consciousness: ‘what makes the person is consciousness, not soul (thinking substance that which “thinks in us”) or body.’¹⁹ Specifically, it is consciousness dispossession he describes as a result of being possessed, clearly, these two concepts are incompatible and further emphasize the cultural differences between European concepts of spirit, reason, and materiality to the African worldview in which the line between the sacred and profane are flexible. Further, in the larger cosmological order, as one’s physical *nitu* passes away the engagement with the *simbi* remains essential in facilitating the

¹⁶ Bockie, Simon. *Death and the Invisible Powers: The World of Kongo Belief*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993, 147

¹⁷ Bockie, 147

¹⁸ Bockie, 147

¹⁹ Johnson, 36

transition from the land of the living to the land of the dead. Thus, while European enlightenment thinkers were postulating on the role of reason, primacy or inconsequentiality of the soul, a highly complex cosmological order and belief system in the majority of West Central Africa exemplifies that the soul, to many African people was essential. Further, the African worldview asserted that without the soul, an embodiment of the spirit through the performance of possession, one could not fully exist.

Given the abstractions surrounding the concept of ‘spirit’ the analysis of its manifestation is best observed in its duality: in cosmological narrative and in physical manifestation through rituals. In the New World, enslaved Africans retained their beliefs and practices surrounding one’s engagement, embrace, and possession of a spirit. Further, enslaved Africans interpreted the role and manifestation of the spirit which reflected African traditional religious beliefs. Specifications on which type of spirit albeit ancestral, natural, or deified were embedded Haitian Catholicism, but largely the function of spirit remained intact. Within Central African societies like that of the BaKongo, often the spirit was not solely a religious construction, but it also governed political and social interactions. In David Gordon’s text, “Invisible Agents of the Spirit” he outlines the historical significance of the essentiality of the spirit in relation to nature and society. Gordon points to oral and material accounts of a tangential Bantu group, the Lunda in this discussion: “In south-central Africa, remnants of Luba and Lunda oral and material cultures describes spiritual interventions in society and politics.”²⁰ The presence, manifestation, and cosmologies of African spiritual systems were essential to the survival and humanization of the African people throughout slavery. The role of *Basimbi* (spirits) in Bakongo cosmology,

²⁰ Gordon, David M. *Invisible Agents: Spirits in a Central African History*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2012, 9

prioritizes the connection to the spirit and communication and reaching towards God would have been through an intermediary, thus, the relationships between the spirit and the African people as to give a voice. The manifestation of spirit and communication with the divine is further embodied in the process of utilizing ground markings called *vèvès* to communicate with deities. Graphic writing has roots in traditional Bakongo cosmology as a tool for practitioners to communicate with the land of the living and of the dead. In Barbaro Martinez-Ruiz “Kongo Graphic Writing and Other Narratives of the Sign,” he notes that as a result of the Bakongo worldview which was based on maintaining harmony between the two worlds, priests used graphic systems to communicate between the two worlds.²¹ *Vèvè* are similarly utilized in communication, but can also function in some spaces as art. In Art Historian Robert Farris Thompson’s *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art & Philosophy*, he discusses how *vèvès* are often sites of spirit possession themselves and are a part of continuous artistic tradition in Vodou:

“Everywhere in *vodun* art, one universe abuts another—the gathering of the ‘chromos’ of saints upon the altar walls; the standing of embottled (sic) souls upon the altar; the flash of the double *vodoun* flags and swords about the peristyle; the coming of the deities, responding to this brilliance through the pillar at the center of the dancing court. Luminous force then radiates, so it is believed from the bottom of this pillar in the form of the blazing chalk-white signatures of the goddesses and gods. These signs, these *vèvè*, are then erased by the dancing feet of devotees, circling around the pillar, even as, in spirit possession the figures of these deities are redrawn in their flesh.”²² In this way, *vèvès* facilitate the connection between *vodouisant* and deity and exemplify the blurring of sacred and profane which reflects the adaptation of an overtly Bakongo cosmology in the creation of Vodou.

²¹Barbaro Martinez-Ruiz. *Kongo Graphic Writing and Other Narratives of the Sign*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2013, 31

²² Thompson, Farris Robert: “Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro American Art and Philosophy” *Flash of the spirit: African and Afro-American art and philosophy*. 1st Vintage Books ed. New York: Vintage Books, 1991, 211

A Note on Vodou

The centrality of *spirit* to *voudousaints* is revealed in its name *vodou* which invokes the interactions between the divine and humanity. The word *vodou* itself means god or deity in the Dahomean language.²³ Harold Courlander, an American anthropologist whose work analyzes spiritual, literary, and political history of Haiti is useful in identifying the wide range of the word ‘*vodou*.’ In the following ways: 1) *Voduou* as only the rites derived from the Arada and Nago ethnic groups 2) *Vodou* as a complex of rites including others clustered around the Arada and Nago such as the Ibo 3) *Vodou* as all Afro-Haitian rites including those of the Congo and Petro.²⁴ Identifying Haitian Vodou using the terms which *vodouisants* themselves use are fundamental in further scholarship on the religion. Africology professor and *oungan* Patrick Bellegarde Smith summarizes the connection between the definition of Vodou and the religion’s world view. In “Vodou Cosmology Worldview: Haiti The Breached Citadel” he explains: “Vodou is a coherent and comprehensive belief system and worldview in which every person and everything is sacred and must be treated accordingly. This unity of all things translates into an overarching belief in the sanctity of life, not so much for the *thing* as for the *spirit* of the thing.”²⁵ Ultimately, the most efficient way to understand this ‘spirit of the thing’ as it manifests in Vodou is through song, dance, rituals and prayers. The concept of the spirit appears materially through the *paket kongo* which is a both a translation of a Bakongo *nkisi* representing a physical, sacred, and material iteration of the spirit. Practitioners connect to their own spirits, ancestors,

²³ Desmangles, Leslie G. 1992. *Faces of the Gods: Vodou and Roman Catholicism in Haiti*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press., 9

²⁴ Murphy, Joseph M. *Working the Spirit: Ceremonies of the African Diaspora*. Boston, Mass.: Beacon Press, 1994, 15

²⁵ Bellegarde-Smith, Patrick *Haiti: The Breached Citadel* Toronto Canadian Scholars Press, 2004: 24

and wounded selves using these physical materializations which grounds practitioners to the earth, the spirit realm and ultimately, their humanity. Here, the *vèvè* is essential in facilitating the healing process by opening the lines of communications from practitioner to divine being.

In the Bakongo world view, the spirit is a universal connection between humanity and the Supreme Being. “Death and Invisible Powers: The World of Kongo Belief” illustrates the primacy of the spiritual connection between humanity, the intermediary ancestors, and the impersonal Supreme Being Nzambi Mpungu through the creation story of the Bakongo: “General detachment of the figure of God which is evident in the creation story of Mahungu as the first human being with both genders and possessing knowledge of God’s secrets, he as irresponsible and so god allowed humans to suffer – then he took pity on them and brought them death so they could return and gradually become like God again – they are ‘little gods.’ Further, the term ancestor is reserved for this group of beings. When ancestors lose their earthly existence embodied by their descendants’ remembrance and are unremembered they then become incarnated in newcomers called *nkukunyunugu*: light.²⁶ In Haitian Vodou, this process of ancestral remembrance is embodied in the funerary rites and the rituals surrounding death. It is believed that the body is composed of two parts: The *gwo-bon-anj*: which is motion and the driving force of one’s actions in a physical body [comparable to the Bakongo *kinu*]. In this way, the presence of the physical material world is shown through the root of one’s being, blood, creativity and consciousness thus ensuring material life.²⁷ The counterpart is the *ti-bon-anj* [little good angel] which is the person’s conscience or morality [mirrors the *gwo-bon-anj*] ‘demonstrates moral behavior, that psychic element in the self that makes it possible to detach

²⁶ Bockie, 134

²⁷ Desmangles, 69

oneself from the pressures of the world in order to make morally upright and responsible decisions.²⁸ Though both parts have differing functions, they are viewed as dual, twin, or mirrored entities which further defines the Bakongo world view of collective meaning making; which is to say, the *gwo-bon-anj* and the *ti-bon-anj* are interdependent and cannot exist without the other—much like the belief that African people cannot exist individually, but their meaning, their life is derived only through their interaction and collective identity together.²⁹

Collective Identity:

Despite the brutal dehumanization of French colonialism, enslaved Africans in Saint-Domingue kept their connection to Africa through a reconceptualization of their African spiritual practices. The ethnic diversity of Africans in the Americas is evidenced best by records of British, French, and Dutch slavers. The port of entry of human cargo was essential to identifying specific ethnic groups in West Central Africa. It is important to note however, that many Europeans misidentified and arbitrarily identified African with ethnic groups based on their physical features or perceived languages. Thus, while the use of records from specific slavers is significant, it must also be corroborated with specific ports on the west coast of Africa and societies who actively participated in the slave trade. In his work on the composition of the French Slave Trade, David Geggus notes that upwards of 60% of the enslaved Africans in colonial Saint Domingue were referred to as *Congos* in the period before the Revolution.³⁰ Thus,

²⁸ Desmangles, 69

²⁹ Desmangles, 69

³⁰ Thornton, John K. "'I Am the Subject of the King of Congo': African Political Ideology and the Haitian Revolution." *Journal of World History* 4, no. 2 (1993): 181-214. Accessed April 16, 2021, 185

the retention of Bakongo traditional religious practices can be directly traced to the presence of the Bakongo ethnic groups in colonial Saint Domingue. In addition to these Bakongo groups, colonial Saint Domingue recorded African people from the Yorùbá / Dahomey groups as well. Vodou then reflects the incorporation of Yorùbá, Fon, and Kongo deities and practices which reflects the creolization enslaved Africans underwent in Saint Domingue. Though not solely a phenomenon in Saint Domingue, the remnants of all three ethnic groups are preserved explicitly in the practices of the *Rada* and the *Petro* rites of the faith. Thus, the collective identity of *Vodouisants* is tied to their diverse African origins, the preservation of religious practices which grounded African people to their cosmological origins in West Central Africa.

To explore African traditional religions and cosmological origins, we must privilege narratives, creation stories and myths as invaluable sources in the construction of African theology. Creation stories are fundamental to both development of the spirit and the meaning of religious experiences in the African context. In relation to the function of the spirit, specific creation stories from Yorùbá traditions, highlight the Yorùbá beliefs on death and living, and also the significance of the spirits. One significant belief establishes the significance of the Supreme Being; in short, Oludumare the supreme being created solid earth – gave Obatala [Orisa Nla] a handful of earth a cockerel and a palm nut and he created solid earth, Obatala released a pigeon to spread sand for dry land, the palm kernels became trees. As a collective, *orishas* are highly personified, and their presences are in other Afro-Diasporic religious traditions, namely in Lucumi in Cuba. The devotees are connected to the spirit in that they allow devotees to ‘possess’ them and take over in order to perform extraordinary feats or give blessings. In the Yorùbá context, possession is welcomed and represents a presence of an *orisha* during a celebration or festival. Though not as hierarchical as Judeo-Christian theological systems, the Yorùbá tradition

does differentiate between the Supreme Being, ancestral spirits, and the *orishas*. The ancestral spirits known as *egungun* are representations of the ancestors and another indication of the cyclical nature of traditional African religions – in many traditions, and especially in Yorùbá, Bamana, and BaKongo ones, the role of the ancestors is significant.³¹ In Yorùbá traditions, the ancestors hold immense power and their return to the earth are celebrated in yearly festivals. The return of ancestors is celebrated in the yearly *egungun* festivals where masks are worn to celebrate the ancestors. It is believed that the marks are powerful and anyone who wears their family masks is believed to have possession of their ancestral spirit. Men possess the masks in the processions, but women are instrumental in singing praises to the *egungun*. Ultimately, during the ancestor manifestation donned in *egungun* attire, the devotee is endowed with spiritual powers of their ancestor.³²

The Yorùbá *orisha* Ogun emerges as Papa Ogun's in his role as a warrior and protector spirit of African peoples. His presence as a dominating spiritual figure emphasizes that despite being dispossessed, enslaved Africans were guided by protective spirits like Ogun. While many other deities from the Yorùbá tradition were lost in the journey across the Atlantic, the fearless and protective spirit of Ogun was foundational to the establishment of a new religious identity in the New World. Known as Sen Jak, Papa Ogou, or Ogou, he is revered as an iron god. In Plain-du-Nord, pilgrims visit the church which is revered with spiritual power and embodiments of Ogou's.³³ Donald Cosentino explained his observations upon arriving at the festival which are

³¹ Badejo, Diedre L. "Unmasking the Gods: Of Egungun and Demagogues in Three Works by Wole Soyinka." *Black American Literature Forum* 22, no. 4 (1988): 663

³² Olupona, Jacob K., Abiodun, Rowland.; *Ifá Divination, Knowledge, Power, and Performance*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016. 73

³³ Cosentino, Donald J. "It's All for You, Sen Jak!" *Vodou in Haitian Life and Culture*, 2006, 200.

held most Thursdays of the year and during the Lenten season and in tradition with the collective identity of *vodousaints* he observed a wide range of people participating in the festival:

“At this festival, all is synchronic. The bull falls to his knees. Nearby, pilgrims overcome with emotion and spirit, fling themselves into the mud and lie face down, not visibly breathing. They arise, looking like primal creatures. Bystanders are moved to offer alms to the beggars in the mud. Three groups of drummers playing Petwo rhythms are situated at cross-points around the Trou [Sen Jak].”³⁴

Prior to Cosentino’s work, however, the memory and imagery of Ogun was prolific in anthropologist Katherine Dunham’s text *Island Possessed*. Dunham in her social anthropological study of Haiti, dance, and African culture traveled to Haiti in 1936 to immerse herself in Haitian Vodou. She undergoes an extensive initiation into the Rada-Dahomey cult, and her work is centered on the ethnographical engagement with elements of dance, movement, and possession in Haitian Vodou. In this case, Dunham as an African-American with no lineage in Haiti or the Caribbean functions as an exemplar of both the role of transnational spiritual transformation and engagement, but also, explores the connection between African-Americans and the island of Haiti.

In one of her observations, she noted how Vodouisants still embody the power invoked in the iron associated with Ogun: “one of the village boys stood fingering the *ogan*, the iron bell, which must have been handmade, and very old, from slavery times. He struck it from time to time with a long iron nail tied to his wrist. I wonder by what means the slaves carried these sacred objects from Nan Guinée.”³⁵ Guinéeé also spelled as Ginen has a profound meaning for voudisants in that it represents their origins as African people. Haitian-American artist Margaret

³⁴ Cosentino, 200.

³⁵ Dunham, Katherine. *Island Possessed*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994, 125

Mitchell Armand describes Ginen as “a sacred ancestral force, a sacred place as Haitians proudly locate themselves when they acknowledge, ‘*Mwen se vré Ginen*’ meaning I am grounded in the knowledge of the ancestors.”³⁶ Here, Armand unpacks the imagined Africa in the Haitian worldview. As the origin of the Haitian people, the cosmologies, beliefs on ancestors, and the spirit, returning to Africa is the ultimate destination to the Voudousaint. Upon entering the ancestral world, all rituals are curated carefully to ensure a safe passage of the *gwo-bon-anj* back to their imagined African homeland.

Dunham’s findings from her fieldwork in *Island Possessed* reveal a transnational dialectic on Blackness and spirituality in the Caribbean. Dunham’s first visit to Haiti as a field researcher in 1939 began her love affair with the island and desire to return and conduct ethnographic research on Vodou. In her observations of various *houngans*, *vèvè* drawings and possessions, she found many rites as restorative places of healing for both *vodouisants* and herself. In her field notes, she mentioned the growing spiritual connection she finds with other initiates: “I was beginning to feel at home with them, to sense the tie of kinship that must hold together secret societies the world over. We were associated in things not common to all men...”³⁷ Despite her growing kinship, Dunham’s identity as a Black American, at times made others in the *houngan* hesitant to fully embrace her. Yet, Dunham’s observations of religious items and the constructions of meaning making in Vodou, locate her in a sort of historical re-enactment of how enslaved peoples may have felt during the Middle Passage across the Atlantic. Dunham notes in the course of her final day of the confinement period all initiates undergo until they are fully embraced into the *houngan* [religious community]:

³⁶Armand, Margaret Mitchell. *Healing in the Homeland: Haitian Vodou Tradition*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2013, 74

³⁷ Dunham, 79

“Here, three thousand miles from my center of learning, either for my own awakened and undefined needs, or under pretext of fulfilling a mission, or a mixture of both, I was deep in the most banal and, at the same time, most esoteric of secret society inductions, that into ceremony, ritual, secret pact, blood sacrifice, into the *vaudun* or *voodoo* of Haiti. There we lay, scarcely breathing, waiting, listening, sense alert, packed like sardines much as the slaves who crossed the Atlantic, motionless as though chained, some of us afraid.”³⁸

In this passage, Dunham emotively articulates the historical assemblage of enslaved peoples, and in doing so experiences an intimate historical religious moment. The juxtaposition of Dunham’s academic learning ‘center’ which at this time was under renowned social anthropologist, Mehlville Herskovits, was the University of Chicago. It is notable that Dunham includes her geographical distance in what equates with her core beliefs on learning. Much of Dunham’s commentary and narrative throughout this ethnography question both her role as an anthropologist and the meaning and significance of race and psychology in understanding Blackness. Dunham’s discussion of a perceived mission could be either academic, which in this time was the completion of her fieldwork, but specifically it is significant that Dunham herself cannot specifically name what her possible ‘needs’ at this time may have been. In this case, her field observations and second-hand proximity to multiple spiritual possessions through her initiation process served a dual function; to help Dunham name parts of her own being which were spiritually deprived, and further, to connect Dunham to the fellow initiatives whose national identities varied from her own.

Despite Dunham’s American identity, she encounters the divine in her initiation in a profoundly moving series of spiritual encounters. Cultural Anthropologist Aisha De Jesus discusses the impact of spiritual presences among transnational Africana religious practitioners. While De Jesus focuses on the Yorùbá, the possibility that Dunham in fact experienced a deep

³⁸ Dunham, 79

spiritual experience during her first visit to the island is likely a result of what DeJesus calls: “co-presences: “Co-presences do not distinguish between an African in Trinidad, Benin, or Chicago, but instead describes: ‘practitioners regardless of ethnic or racial designation, are remade through complex rituals of making *santo* [priesthood] that hail blackened epistemologies.’³⁹ In this way, Dunham in despite her relatively privileged position in Haiti, would not have barred her from her initiation nor fully embracing the *lwas* based on her nationality. Dunham encounters an affirmation of the clairvoyance of one priest, Antoine, which both piques her interest in the community and grants her access to explore the funeral rites and spirits related to the “Congo” gods. In her encounter with Antoine she notes: “Antoine told me all about my family, delivered messages from my brother and dead mother who bore me, predicted by marriage to Damballa and cautioned me about the jealousies that would result from this union, and the jealousies that would pursue my adult life, personally and professionally.”⁴⁰ Prior to this encounter, the residents in Thomazeau had no forewarning of Dunham’s arrival nor the details of her upbringing. As a result, Dunham feels deeply connected to the *houngan* and her subsequent observations reveal a growing sense of connection to *houngan*. Dunham recalls: “Now the spirit would have to be fed, food brought before the bed, and feasts eaten by the acolytes and family. There would be a long recitation of the vitae of the bocor and his most outstanding achievements, then ancestral prayers, and the group would return to the silence of the room to untie the kerchief which bound the jaws of the old man, thus freeing the spirit to speak and give further instructions to the new priest.”⁴¹ At the end of the ritual, Dunham returns to the

³⁹ Beliso-De Jesús, Aisha M. *Electric Santería: Racial and Sexual Assemblages of Transnational Religion*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2015, 4

⁴⁰ Dunham, 34

⁴¹ Dunham, 37

compound but notes specifically how impactful the encounter was and she distinguishes this particular encounter of the bocor's spirit leaving his physical body from prior spiritual experiences. *Island Possessed* as an ethnographic narrative is essential in establishing the early transnational dialogue between descendants of enslaved Africans in the United States and in the Caribbean. Dunham's invocation of her esoteric experiences in the Haitian context both countered the ignorance surrounding Haitian Vodou and affirmed the religion's essentiality to Haiti's national identity.

Haiti at the Crossroads:

French Saint-Domingue rebranded itself as Hayti to honor the indigenous Taino but also proclaimed its independence from France and reclaimed their African heritage. As the first Black republic in the New World, the Haitian Revolution was heralded as the only successful slave revolution which resulted in the creation of a newly independent state. The Haitian in the post-revolutionary period (post 1804) was tasked with undoing French colonial structures, creating a multi-racial, multi-linguistic nation-state, while concurrently grappling with the economic burden of war debts.

Oungan and religious history scholar Patrick Bellegarde-Smith notes the economic and social context of Haiti in the wake of the revolutionary period:

“One notes the extremely difficult relationship that existed between Haiti and the world powers at the time soon after independence. And then we have added to this the connection between Latin America and Haiti in terms of the former's independence, as with the great powers of the day: England, France, and later the United States. We have the onerous, punitive, 113,000,000 francs owed to France, which imposed severe limitations on the infrastructural development in Haiti.”⁴²

⁴² Bellegarde-Smith, Patrick, Alex Dupuy, Robert Fatton, Mary Renda, Ermitte St. Jacques, and Jeffrey Sommers. "Haiti and Its Occupation by the United States in 1915: Antecedents and

The symbolism of the Haitian state at a crossroads accurately defines the political context of the republic in the period following its independence from France in 1804. The country's founders L'Overture and Dessalines had to contend with the nascent republic's political identity and establish an official state religion. Later, as the country transitioned from L'Overture's to Dessalines, a reexamination of the republic's relationship to the Catholic Church emerged. The semiotics of the Christian cross and the political crossroads of a nascent republic are both powerful summations of the post-revolutionary period. This image of a political, social, and economic crossroads translates directly into identifiable elements from the BaKongo derived Petro rites of Vodou. In the staking of the *poto miteau* [center post] which comprises the visual representation of the *lwa* and a connection to the material world, the *voudouisant* stakes their connection and relationship to both the earth and also to Africa. As the connection, both to the material world and the imagined world of Guinee is established, and the creolized deity of Lord Simbi are prioritized in the sketching of the cosmogram.⁴³

The first line drawn in the earth is a representation of the Kongo derived Lord Simbi who is seen as the highest lord of the death realm. Simbi himself as a deity is an embodiment of Haitian creolization of its Kongo and now Haitian identities. Simbi Andezo in the Vodou pantheon is known as the highest lord of the death realm and is largely derived from *vodousaints* with no direct BaKongo counterpart. In the BaKongo cosmological order, *simbi* are generally known as spirits. According to their interaction with the living, *simbi* often embody different names and forms. Notably, the *simbi* in Haitian Vodou, is an extension and intermediary between the living and the

Outcomes." *Journal of Haitian Studies* 21, no. 2 (2015): 10-43. Accessed April 14, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43741120>, 13

⁴³ Simbi act as an intermediary to connecting Vodou practitioners to the next life cycle, being the reunion with ancestors in Ginen.

dead. As such, *simbi* are primary linkages between Vodou practitioners, the next life cycle, and the reunion with ancestors in Ginen. This creation of Simbi Andezo as a new deity demonstrates gendered and relational dynamics within Vodou. Nonetheless, in both Haitian Vodou and the BaKongo traditions, *simbi* are essential for a soul in order to pass from the land of the living and the dead. The traditional BaKongo context posits that there is a passage across water which connects these two worlds, known as *n'langu, m'bu or kalunga*. However, in Vodou this passage is reimagined as the reunion of ancestors in the imagined Ginen which is derived from *Guinea*.⁴⁴ Therefore, elements of traditional BaKongo cosmologies manifested in the retention of specific KiKongo names of deities, but, the ultimate spiritual reunion between the two worlds in its reimagining of Ginen as a place of origin reflects the social-political context of post-revolutionary Haiti.

Flag in Spirit

Haiti was at a political crossroads in the wake of the Revolution which ended in 1804. The new republic faced the task of establishing the Haitian state in the Atlantic World while attempting to preserve elements from the country's origins. The symbol of the *drapo* emerges as a materialization of spirit, nationality, and the legacy of African history in the new world. The process of flag-making of the Haitian *drapo* is comparable to traditional Kongo flag presentations. This continuation of embodied spirit in a material form is indicative of the prevalence of the BaKongo worldview that Haitians now adapted for their new republic. Art historian Robert Farris Thompson's work in "Flash of the Spirit" unpacks the significance of flags in the Haitian context. Farris discusses the S-shaped cross-guards found near the staves of Haitian flags to the crossroad

⁴⁴ Robert Farris Thompson, *Africanizing Haitian Art*: in *Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou*: Consentino, Donald Los Angeles, Calif: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History, 102

image in Kongo cosmologies: “crossroads pose—right hand up to heaven, left hand parallel to the horizon line.”⁴⁵ In this case, the parallel horizontal line refers to the *kalunga* demarcating the land of the living from the land of the dead. As with *simbi*, Haitians adopted their Kongo beliefs to the American realities in the use of flags in social culture. In Haitian Vodou the flag staff is different from its use in the traditional Kongo informal gesturing to military and religious associations; Thompson explains: “the S on the Vodou flagstaff reverse that of the handguard on the saber held by St. James, identified as Sen Jak the chief of the Haitian Ogun.”⁴⁶ There is a spiritual significance in the *drapo* that if it has not been spiritually ordained and deemed sacred, it is then rendered invalid to the voodooist: “unbaptized flags do not have soul or energy, unlike consecrated *drapo* which can acquire even *plis nanm* (more soul) *fos* (force) and *kouraj* (courage).⁴⁷ In this case, a piece of cloth is meaningless without the embodiment of *fos* breathed into it from the Vodouist.

In addition to *drapo* the use drawing of *vèvè* in Vodou ceremonies in order to invite the *lwa* into communication with its devotees, another retention of BaKongo cosmology is presented. Each individual *lwa* has its own unique drawing which encompasses their personality and imagery related to their own personal histories the process of drawing the *vèvè* is discussed in Robert Farris Thompson’s *Africanizing Vodou Art*: “the Vodou king traces a grand circle (on the earth) in a blackish substance [carbon black] and positions within it the person to be initiated. In the hand of same he places a packet composed of herbs, horse hair, pieces of animal horn, and

⁴⁵ Wexler, Anna, *Yon Moso Twal Nan Bwa (A Piece of Cloth on Wood): The Drapo Vodou in Myths of Origin in Vodou in Haitian Life and Culture: Invisible Powers*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006, 68

⁴⁶ Wexler, 66

⁴⁷ Wexler 66

other objects.”⁴⁸ This packet composed of herbs, horse hair, and other objects is known in Vodou as a *kongo paket* which serves the same functional and religious purpose as the BaKongo *nkisi* (singular, or *minkisi* plural). *Nkisi* are the physical embodiment of *simbi* and in the traditional BaKongo social-religious context, only a specified group of people were endowed the spiritual authority to oversee *nkisi*. This same *nganga* [healer] role is not completely replicated within the Vodou context, but, what is notable is that the physical embodiment of spirit through *kongo paket* highlights the profundity of the BaKongo cosmological system in the making of Vodou.

The preeminence of a Kongo-derived deity reimagined as Simbi Andezo in the staking of the *poto miteau*, definitively reveals despite the overwhelming presence of both Yorùbá and Dahomean deities, the BaKongo worldview and imagery were, indeed transferred to the New World with the thousands of BaKongo were enslaved in Haiti. Further, the retention of cosmographical meaning making in the form of *vèvès* and their demarcation of a line separating the land of the living to that of the dead were also comparable to BaKongo *kalunga* which draws out the meaning of the spiritual world. In a religious ceremony where devotees aim to ‘bring down the *lwa*.’ BaKongo primacy is evidence from the first drawing of the *vèvè*. The first line of the *vèvè* symbolizes: “the line guides the spirit from the island beneath the sea even as in Kongo, Lord Simbi highest class of the dead.”⁴⁹ This ancestral linkage to the Kongo land vis-à-vis the fluidity of water and the embodiment of the Lord Simbi as the highest deity representative of the land of the dead further reinforces the Bakongo worldview in Haitian Vodou. Though Bakongo land was reimagined as Guinea, the role of Simbi Andezo as a prominent creolized deity

⁴⁸ Thompson, 102

⁴⁹ Thompson, 102

reimagines a Haiti which remains linked to the Kongo. The reimagining of Kongo as Guinea but linked by Simbi Andezo's divinity effectively transported the BaKongo cosmological order to the new social-political context of the Haitian state.

Conclusion

The connection to humanity and the creation of meaning-making explored in the cosmology of the Vodou are not unique to Haiti. Across the African Diaspora, African people have created and re-created meaning in their new worldview as they adjusted to the New World. The legacies of these systems of religious and spiritual meaning-making are mostly reflected through the creation of written and material expressions. This section explores the meaning and expression of the *vèvè* and *nkisi* as sites of knowledge, healing, and liberation for both practitioners of Vodou and non-practitioners. Moreover, the desire for Africans in the diaspora to connect and engage with their heritage either biologically affirmed or imagined has resulted in the production of art which seeks to legitimize African traditional religion and authenticate the lived experiences of African people. Thus, I argue that the Petwo rite of Vodou with its close association to Bakongo cosmological elements such as *nkisi*, continue to act as a place of healing for Africans in the diaspora.

In her discussion of her experiences living as a Haitian child, the late artist and scholar Margaret Mitchell Armand explores the traditional narratives and the significance of storytelling as a reclamation of power and personhood. In *Healing in the Homeland: Haitian Vodou Tradition*: Armand reflects on the role of storytelling in decolonizing former colonial subjects: “storytelling emphasizes meaning and experience from an introspective view of self as well offering insights into the enemy within—that is, the mental colonization experienced by the

bourgeois, elite Haitian society.”⁵⁰ Armand’s text is a weaving together of *vèvès* alongside stories from Haitians on the island and in the diaspora. She carefully curates specific *vèvè* and *lwa* which reflect the historical issues of the participants but further, she uses *vèvè* as a narrative to tie ancestor veneration and the embrace of Haitian Vodou as the antidote to the colonial mindset plaguing the Haitian people.

Along with the embrace of Haitian Vodou, Armand prescribes that for Haiti to move forward and continue to detach itself from French colonialism it must return to Vodou. Notably, Armand ties social progress with an African worldview and communication style, she points to a *vèvè* [graphic drawings] of one *lwa* with roots in the Igbo language which unites the Haitian people: “One *vèvè* of the stanzas of the *milokan* incantation states: “United we are in the ancestors’ realms, honor to all the saints and the ancestors.”⁵¹ This union between the saints and ancestors reflects the impact of the living dead on those in the land of the living. During the transition and dissolution of the physical body, many African ethnic groups maintain a belief that the ancestors and those who are living must remember their ancestors and include them in prayers. Mbiti explains: “it is custom in some parts of Africa to mention the names of departed relatives when one is praying to God. These departed members of the family are believed to relay the prayers to God, since it is considered rude in those societies to approach God directly unless it is absolutely necessary.”⁵² The distance between the living and the Supreme Being in many traditional African religions is bridged with ancestors who act as intermediaries. In this case, the ancestor bridges the living practitioners to the supreme being, Bondye.

⁵⁰Armand, Margaret Mitchell. *Healing in the Homeland: Haitian Vodou Tradition*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2013, xix

⁵¹ Armand, 107

⁵² Mbiti, 143

In the Haitian Diaspora to the United States, connections to Haiti and Vodou are profoundly instrumental in retaining national identity and a sense of pride despite the historical legacy of tense Haitian-American political relations. The 2010 earthquake which devastated the island and claimed the lives of over 200,000 people has impacted the diaspora as well. As a sort of fractioning, many Haitians in the diaspora turned to Africa and art as a way to begin healing. As Art Historian Kantara Souffrant explains in “Circling the Cosmogram: Vodou Aesthetics, Feminism, and Queer Art in the Second-Generation Haitian Dyaspora” her art reflects specifically how the earthquake shocked those in the diaspora, but moreover how returning to Kongo and Yorùbá methods of healing would bring the nation together. Souffrant explained: “I use my own work to mark the ways that reclaiming African Diasporic-derived rituals and reclaiming African Diasporic-derived aesthetics are mutually constituting-actions; that one cannot take up aesthetics without attending to rituals of healing and art creation, and that one cannot take up rituals of healing without engaging with the aesthetics of the African Diaspora.”⁵³ In this way, despite geographical location, Haitians are bound in their collective identity and thus any return to these rituals would facilitate healing for those in the diaspora.

The magnitude of an overt connection with the African continent is further expressed in contemporary art in the diaspora. The value and historical significance of the healing power of materializations of spirit such as *nkisi or kongo paquet* are replicated despite geographical location. In her piece *Splitting*, Souffrant explains the disembodiment that Haitians feel as a result of their attempts to distance themselves from their African identity in attempt to gain Western approval. This disembodiment as demonstrated in the Kongo cosmology engraved in a *vèvè* serves as the

⁵³ Kantara Souffrant *Circling the Cosmogram: Vodou Aesthetics, Feminism, and Queer Art in the Second-Generation Haitian Dyaspora* in *Vodou in the Haitian Experience: A Black Atlantic Perspective*. Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2016, 52

key to Haitian people tracing their lineage and ultimately their healing back to the African origins. Notably, as Souffrant embodies the spiritual practices and significances of the materiality of *nkisi* she sees her art as a transformative and deeply healing process for her country in the wake of a natural devastation but also in reverence to her ancestors. For Souffrant, the experience of the earthquake physically split the country due to the seismic shifts, but, imaginatively, Souffrant in the diaspora was also split from experiencing the event from afar: ‘The split body is representational of my splitting as I witnessed and experienced the earthquake and its subsequent events.’⁵⁴ Souffrant’s use of *nkisi* to demonstrate the living and spiritual elements of the material world review the Bakongo cosmologies which determine that in their function *nkisi* are the embodiment of *simbi* and are tools for healing regardless of one’s physical location.

Resilience is merely insufficient to describe for the lives and histories of African peoples in the Americas, so too, is resistance. Here, a return to an African traditional theological lens is particularly useful; “Africans are notoriously religious,” has been a frame to explore the spiritual and religious traditions of the African people and the essentiality of religion to the African person.⁵⁵ We see that regardless of national origin, African people forged paths to connect and reconnect to their spiritual identities, but specifically in Haitian Vodou, their identities as BaKongo peoples. Dunham’s religious encounters in the course of her fieldwork, further reveal national identities do not inhibit one’s spiritual encounters with the BaKongo or other Dahomean/ Yoruban derived cosmologies. Finally, the power of a spiritual connection to a deity or place is one which has sustained African peoples throughout their histories of enslavement,

⁵⁴ Souffrant, 56

⁵⁵ Mbiti, 27

colonization, and oppression. As a result, the African spirit which dwells in all African people both on the continent and in the diaspora, remains a source of healing and an embodiment of the immortality of their liberation.

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