

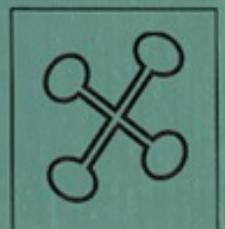
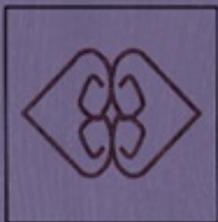


ROOTS

of Haiti's
Vodou-Christian
Faith



AFRICAN AND
CATHOLIC ORIGINS



R. MURRAY THOMAS

Roots of Haiti's Vodou-Christian Faith

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African and Catholic Origins

R. MURRAY THOMAS



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To

Professor Claudine Michel,

*distinguished scholar in the international field of Haitian studies and assistant vice-chancellor for
student affairs at the University of California, Santa Barbara*

Preface

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An historical review of religions confirms the observation that belief systems are not static but are constantly changing. The rate of change can vary from one faith to another and from one aspect of faith to another aspect. The change may be extremely slow—almost imperceptible. Or, the change may be rapid, often resulting in a traditional version of the faith splitting into separate denominations—with some denominations more radically deviant than others from the original version.

In this book, I propose that the Haiti's combined Vodou/Christian religion has identifiable roots and in recent decades has displayed an accelerating rate of change. To document this proposition, I reach back five centuries to inspect the nature of the two religious traditions that have been credited as the most influential sources of the dominant form of Haitian faith. Those sources have been: (a) traditional African religions brought by the slaves who were imported to Haiti to labor in the island nation's fields and mines and (b) the Catholicism promoted by Spanish and French colonial authorities who so affected Haitian culture from the beginning of the 16th century until the present day. Following the description of indigenous African and traditional Catholic religious practices, I describe present-day Haitian Vodou as it relates to those African and Catholic roots. I also suggest what the future may hold for religion in Haiti.

I wish to express my gratitude to Dr. Claudine Michel, a distinguished professor of Black Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara, who inspired me to write this book and who offered valuable guidance in that endeavor.

Finally, I note that the Catholic portions of several chapters of this book have drawn liberally on portions of my earlier volume titled *Manitou and God: North-American Indian Religions and Christian Culture* (© R. Murray Thomas), published by Praeger in 2008.

R. Murray Thomas

Introduction

Two chapters comprise [Part I](#). [Chapter 1](#) describes the purpose and structure of *Roots of Haiti: Vodou-Christian Faith* and [Chapter 2](#) offers a historical sketch depicting political, social, and religious developments in Haiti from the end of the 15th century until 2014.

The Nature of the Book

This book is the result of my first attempt to seek answers to two questions:

*What, precisely, is the dominant form of religion in the nation of Haiti?
From what sources has that religion evolved?*

I began the search for answers by surveying the published literature, an effort that yielded the following sort of information:

It is sometimes said that Haiti is 90 percent Catholic and 100 percent voodoo; this statement is not, of course, entirely accurate, but nevertheless it does emphasize the fact that the duality in Haitian religious history has never been a confrontation between two separate groups of people. Almost all voodoo adherents would call themselves Catholics, and most Catholics practice voodoo. (Nicholls, 1970)

Haitian Voodoo is believed to have started in Haiti in 1724, in the form of a snake cult that worshipped many spirits. The practices of this cult were intermingled with many Catholic rituals and saints, forming Haitian Voodoo. (Dakwar & Wissink, 2004/2009)

According to Jules Anantua, head of the Haitian Ministry of Cults, “Voodoo has always been practiced clandestinely, first by the slaves brought here from Africa, but even after independence [in 1804], because Catholicism became the official religion in Haiti in 1860. In order for voodoo to survive, it had to borrow symbols from the officially recognized religion [Catholicism]. Most voodoo spirits have their counterparts in Christian saints.” (Williams, 2003)

Today, most of the Catholic saints have been appropriated as African loa [spirits] in the minds of the Haitian peasants. Thus Legba, the Vodun god of communications, is also the Catholic Saint Peter, the one who holds the key—the one who opens barriers to communication between God and humans. His symbol is a cross, which, for the vodunsi, represents the crossroads; to the Catholic, it is the cross of Jesus. Damballah-Wedo, the serpent deity of Dahomey, is associated with Saint Patrick—the saint who walked on the snakes. Shango, the god of lightning and thunder, is Saint John the Baptist, who, according to tradition, controls the storm clouds. . . . These are only a few of the subtle borrowings or one-dimensional syncretisms that have operated whenever African religions confront other religions. Unlike Catholicism’s inflexible dogma, African religion is protean, always adding to its form selective aspects of other religions without endangering its function. (Lippy & Williams, 2010)

There are some anthropologists who believe that some Voodoo rites, and especially the Petwo Voodoo rites, might have their origins in [Native-American] Arawak/Taino religion, but this is

speculative. (Corbett, 1988)

In 2012, the *World Factbook* estimated the religious affiliation of Haitians to be: Roman Catholic 80%, Protestant 16% (Baptist 10%, Pentecostal 4%, Adventist 1%, other 1%, none 1%, other 3%). About half of the population also practices Vodou. (Haiti, 2012)

Although I found such observations enlightening, they failed to tell in detail what I had hoped to learn. I now had further questions to ask—ones that I would be obliged to answer by conducting an extensive investigation of the research literature about traditional African religions and Catholicism, thereby generating from the resulting information a series of principles that might account for the curious nature of Haiti's combined Vodou/Christian faith. The chapters of this book explain in detail what I have discovered.

To prepare readers for what to expect in the following pages, I offer guidance in the form of answers to three questions.

What, exactly, is the connection between indigenous African religions and Vodou?

Vodou itself is a belief system patched together from segments of different traditional African faiths that slaves brought from Africa to the Caribbean during the 16th through the 18th centuries. The slaves had been captured from various African ethnic regions where the people of each district or village subscribed to their own particular faiths. When such a potpourri of Africans settled in Haiti, their religious beliefs gradually altered, with some versions becoming more dominant than others and forming a commonly held mix. That mix assumed the title *Vodou*, a Haitian Creole term derived from the West African Ewe word *vodu* or Fon word *vodun*, meaning *spirit*.

In what ways are Vodou and Catholicism alike and different?

The detailed answer will be found in [Chapters 3](#) through [11](#). However, the short answer is that while the two traditions are alike in numerous aspects, their organizational structures are dramatically different. Local Vodou groups are independent and operate on their own. In marked contrast, Catholicism has a monolithic worldwide organization that operates through a hierarchy of decision making that is headquartered in Rome. A second significant difference between Vodou and Catholicism is in their modes of conveying religious lore from one generation to the next and from one place to another. Catholicism is grounded in written documents that are formally approved, whereas African and Vodou beliefs have traditionally been passed orally; such beliefs depend for their authenticity on the memories and motives of both the religious leaders and common devotees.

By what form of logic could rational humans subscribe simultaneously to such contrasting worldviews as those of Vodou and Catholicism?

This question was at the forefront of my mind as I conducted the investigation that led to the contents of [Chapters 3](#) through [11](#). As I worked through those chapters, I generated seven *principles of accommodation* that I believe help render Haiti's Vodou/Christian faith a rational belief system. It was only near the end of my study that I could complete the series of principles. However, I introduced

them at this point in order to alert readers to the basis of the interpretations that close each of the chapters from 3 through 11—interpretations founded on the seven principles.

- *The in-name-only principle*: When elements of two religions have the same meanings but bear different names, those elements can compatibly coexist within a combined belief system.

Example: In both Vodou and Christianity, there is an invisible, all-powerful Supreme Being who created the universe. Therefore, the Vodou name *Bondye* and the Christian name *God* can both be accepted without conflict in Haiti's Vodou/Christian faith ([Chapter 5](#)).

- *The nonconflicting-add-ons principle*: If a novel belief from Religion A does not contradict or violate any belief of Religion B, then the novel belief can be accepted by devotees of Religion B.

Example: The notion of a virgin giving birth is not part of traditional African religions, so the Christian belief that Jesus' birth resulted from an immaculate conception does not contradict any Vodou beliefs and thus can be included within a Vodou/Christian faith ([Chapter 5](#)). Likewise, the African ceremonial tradition of engaging in dances accompanied by drumbeats is not forbidden by Christian biblical lore, so such behavior can be accepted by adherents of the juxtaposed Vodou and Christian beliefs ([Chapter 7](#)).

- *The variations-on-a-theme principle*: Religions that share the same basic belief (same theme), but manifest that theme in different practices, can exist comfortably together.

Example: A basic belief (theme) held in many religions is that a person who ingests a powerful being—such as an animal or human—acquires some of that being's power. In keeping with this theme, a familiar ritual in African religions involves killing an animal, then drinking its blood, and/or eating its flesh. A familiar Christian ritual is the Eucharist, which involves adherents drinking wine that represents Jesus' blood and eating pastry that symbolizes his flesh ([Chapter 7](#)).

- *The tolerance principle*: Religions can differ in the extent to which they accept add-on beliefs and practices. A more-tolerant tradition will permit greater importation of add-ons than will a less-tolerant tradition.

Example: During the centuries of Spanish and French colonial control of Haiti, Vodou practices were either ignored or accepted by the Catholic authorities as harmless amusements. Such tolerance has more or less continued into modern times even though there were periods when Vodou practitioners were actively persecuted by both the state and the Catholic Church. In contrast, Protestant Christians have proven to be less tolerant by systematically rejecting potential add-ons in an effort to keep their doctrine "pure" ([Chapter 2](#)).

- *The separate-compartments principle*: People can compartmentalize their lives in a way that insulates one set of beliefs or activities from another set, thereby allowing inconsistencies and

conflicts between the contents of different compartments to go unrecognized.

Example: In religions, two of the forms of compartmentalization are based on place and time. As for place, an adherent of the Vodou/Christian faith can pray to the Virgin Mary at the Catholic Church and then return home to prepare a Vodou food offering at a Vodou altar to honor the spirit of a dead ancestor without being aware of any conflict between the beliefs underlying the two acts because the two occurred in separate settings ([Chapter 10](#)). As for time, a follower of Vodou/Christianity can celebrate an indigenous African religion equivalent to a summer solstice celebration of cycles of nature and body rhythms that follow patterns of the planets, then six months later celebrate Christmas with its modern consumerism—thus willingly accepting any inconsistency between the meanings of the two events because they happened at separate times ([Chapter 7](#)).

- *The availability principle:* When there are alternative versions of a religious belief or practice, adherents are apt to adopt the version that is most available, that is, most frequently encountered. This principle is supported by social-learning theory (social-cognition theory) which proposes that, to a great extent, individuals acquire their beliefs from observing the consequences that other people experience as a result of those people's actions (Bandura, 1977).

Example: Indigenous African religions offer a variety of proposals about how the universe was created. Those tales have not been a prominent part of most Vodou teachings. Therefore, it seems likely that most Haitians, because of Catholic or Protestant training, are better acquainted with the dominant Christian version of creation offered in the first two chapters of the Bible. We assume that if asked about the world's creation, followers of Vodou would most often cite the biblical version ([Chapter 6](#)).

- *The social-pressure principle:* Individuals are likely to adopt the religious beliefs of the majority of people in their environment because they believe that doing so increases their chance of being approved by the majority.

Example: Because most Haitians apparently subscribe to some version of Vodou while also being members of the Christian religion (baptized, receiving communion and last rites, and living in Haiti), they are prone to adopt the Christian faith as well as rituals and practices of the Vodou religion.

In summary, I suggest that, when the combined Vodou-and-Christian belief system is rationalized by means of the foregoing seven principles, the system becomes a logically comprehensible worldview.

THE BOOK'S STRUCTURE

The book is divided into three parts.

[Part I](#), *Introduction*, is composed of this initial chapter plus [Chapter 2](#), which is a historical sketch tracing political, social, and religious developments in Haiti from the end of the 15th century

until the present day.

[Part II](#), *Religious Beliefs and Practices*, consists of nine chapters, each devoted to a separate aspect of religion:

- The sources of people's religious beliefs and practices
- How religions are organized
- Religions' invisible spirits
- The creation of the universe
- Causes of events and how religious ceremonies relate to those causes
- Religious sayings and tales
- Symbols and sacred objects
- Sacred sites
- Religious societies

The contents of each of the nine chapters are presented in an identical five-part sequence that traces the evolution of Haiti's dominant present-day religion from its two most influential founding traditions—African indigenous faiths and European Catholicism. That sequence consists of the following:

- A definition of the chapter's theme
- The theme viewed from an African indigenous religions perspective
- The theme viewed from a Christian perspective—predominantly Spanish/French versions of Roman Catholicism
- A comparison of African and Catholic belief systems
- The blending of African faiths and Catholicism to produce present-day versions of Vodou/Christian faith

[Part III](#), titled *Postscript*, consisting of a single chapter, offers my estimate of what the years ahead may hold for the Haitians' traditional religion.

THE BOOK'S RESEARCH SOURCES

Material about African indigenous religions was drawn from a broad selection of books and Internet websites focusing on African history and culture. Information about Catholicism was collected from *The Catholic Study Bible* (2006), the *Catholic Encyclopedia Online* (2008), the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1993), and a variety of books and websites describing Catholicism and Haitian history and culture.

To supplement the published sources of present-day Vodou/Christianity, Dr. Claudine Michel of the University of California, Santa Barbara, conducted guided interviews with a pair of university professors who have been recognized as experts on Haitian matters and, particularly, on Haitian Vodou: (a) Patrick Bellegarde-Smith, professor of Africology at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee and (b) Roberto Strongman, associate professor of Black Studies at the University

FOUNDATIONAL ASSUMPTIONS

It is important for readers to recognize two assumptions on which the contents of this book were founded.

First, I assume that the most influential roots from which Haiti's present-day Vodou/Christian religion has grown were (a) primarily indigenous African religions, brought to the Caribbean by slaves, then adapted, evolved, and creolized in the Americas and (b) Catholicism, brought by the Spanish and French who colonized the country from the beginning of the 16th century into the 19th century. Even after Haiti became an independent nation in 1804, Catholic orders continued to determine the official religious practices of most Haitians, while vestiges of African religions were widespread as unofficial beliefs and rituals. Over recent decades, fundamentalist Protestant denominations have rapidly converted adherents of traditional Vodou/Catholicism to versions of fundamentalist Protestantism. This movement has thus created a second potential variety of Vodou/Christian faith—that of Vodou/Protestantism.

Second, I assume that the Vodou/Christian combination has not been practiced as a monolithic religion. I believe that people who can be classified to any extent as Haitian Vodou/Christian adherents will differ from each other in the degree to which their beliefs and rituals reflect African and Catholic traditions. At one extreme, some Haitians may subscribe thoroughly to Christian doctrine, yet they wear an amulet of African origin. At the opposite extreme, some Haitians' belief systems may be predominantly African based, but they also celebrate Christmas. Between these extremes are the majority of Haitians whose religious convictions represent various amounts and combinations of African-based faiths, Christianity (Catholic or Protestant), and personal insights.

The Origin

On October 12, 1492, three sailing ships, traveling westward across the Atlantic Ocean from Spain for 70 days, chanced upon an island, which the fleet's commander, Christopher Columbus, naively assumed was part of the Indies—that is, part of the Orient's spice islands. Unaware that he had reached the earth's western hemisphere—and unaware that there even was such a hemisphere—Columbus mistakenly referred to the island's residents as Indians—a misnomer that continues today as the popular label for descendants of the hemisphere's early peoples.

Modern-day historians estimate that the island on which Columbus landed was perhaps present-day Watling Island or the Semana Cay in the Caribbean Sea's Bahamas cluster. Columbus named the island San Salvador and claimed it for Spain. Over the next few weeks, the Spaniards visited nearby Cuba (called *Juana* by Columbus) and La Isla de Española (later renamed *Hispaniola*).

Today, Hispaniola is occupied by two nations—Haiti on the western one-third and the Dominican Republic on the eastern two-thirds. On December 5, 1492, Columbus had guided the largest of his three vessels, the *Santa Maria*, into a harbor on the north coast of Hispaniola, where he was greeted by the native residents. At the time, an estimated several hundred thousand indigenous Arawak/Taino people lived on the island. The visiting Spaniards set about exploring the territory until, on Christmas morning, the *Santa Maria* ran aground and had to be abandoned. Columbus was then given permission by the reigning Taino *cacique* or chieftain, Guacanagari, to leave 40 sailors there in a fortified settlement that would be named *La Navidad* to signify that it was created on the day commemorating Jesus' birth. The Spaniards' desire to establish such a community had been whetted by Guacanagari's tales of large quantities of gold on the island. Hence, *La Navidad* was intended to be the New World's first permanent Spanish community and gold collecting center. In Columbus's daily journal, he expressed his confidence that the 40 Spanish settlers would be safe.

I have ordered a tower and fortress to be constructed [with lumber from the wrecked *Santa Maria*] and a large cellar, not because I believe there is any necessity on account of [the Tainos]. I am certain the people I have with me could subjugate all of this island . . . as the population are naked and without arms and very cowardly (Columbus, 1962). The [Tainos] would make fine servants. . . . With fifty men we could subjugate them all and make them do whatever we want. (Deep look, 2008)

Columbus then departed for Spain with his two remaining ships, the *Pinta* and *Niña*, to report his discoveries to King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella and to plan a second expedition. But *La Navidad* was an ill-fated experiment. When Columbus returned to the Caribbean in 1493, he found the settlement deserted. He was told by the Tainos that his sailors had mistreated the natives, who then

retaliated by slaying them all. Undeterred by the tragedy, Columbus ordered the construction of a community farther east on the island, to be called *La Isabela*, in honor of Spain's queen. Five years later, the headquarters for Spanish operations in the Caribbean would be moved to the city of Santo Domingo, the present-day capital of the Dominican Republic. From that location, the Spanish would launch the colonization of Hispaniola that proved disastrous for the native population and led to the conquerors eventually importing slaves from Africa to work the mines and fields that the colonists hoped would produce wealth for themselves and their sponsors in Spain.

And so, in late 1492, the Spanish conquest of Hispaniola set off five centuries of events that would produce Haiti's present-day political and social conditions as well as the nation's Vodou/Christian form of religion. This chapter traces the country's history since the Europeans first appeared, including events that contributed to Haitian society's present-day religion. The narrative advances through three eras: (a) the Spanish colony, (b) Haiti under French control, and (c) the independent republic.

THE SPANISH COLONY

Spain maintained colonial control of Hispaniola for more than two centuries before ceding the western third—Haiti—to France in 1697. During those 203 years, the Spanish wrested wealth from the island by exploiting its mining and agricultural potential. At the same time, the colonialists pursued a secondary mission that accompanied all of Spain's conquests throughout the New World—solidly planting Catholicism in the conquered territories.

The Economic Development Plan

The secular part of the Spanish endeavor—wrenching riches from the land—involved organizing gold mining operations and introducing the cultivation of such export crops as sugarcane, which Columbus introduced in 1493 during his second voyage to the New World. Indigo, tobacco, and coffee would also eventually become important export commodities. To find the thousands of laborers needed to conduct the colony's business venture, the Spanish conscripted the island's indigenous occupants, the Tainos.

The Tainos were part of a broader Arawak ethnic group whose members spoke a common language and who extended from Venezuela through the Caribbean and Central America into Florida. Corbett (1988) has portrayed the Hispaniola Tainos as a gentle people with a “lack of guile.” Their culture was “characterized by happiness, friendliness, and a highly organized hierarchical, paternal society.” Their occupations focused on farming, fishing, and hunting such small animals as rodents, ducks, and snakes. In easily maintained gardens, they grew cassava, maize, squash, beans, peppers, sweet potatoes, yams, peanuts, tobacco, and cotton.

The Tainos' religion featured a supreme god, Yocohuguama, and a collection of lesser gods known as *zemi*, who controlled life on earth and manifested themselves through such forces of nature as the sun, wind, and rain. These divine beings were worshipped in song and dance festivals conducted by shamans—tribe members who served as mediums between the visible world and the invisible spirit world. Shamans, when assuming the role of healer, sought the guidance of the *zemi* for treating the ill.

and infirm during public ceremonies (Meier, 1912/1992).

In 1503, Spain's Queen Isabella expressed her compassion for the native peoples of the Caribbean by ordering governors of Spain's island colonies to treat the Indians well, permit them to live in their own communities, protect their rights, tax them at only a low level, erect a church in each community to convert the inhabitants to Catholicism, and build a school where the priest would teach Indian children to read, write, and recite simple Christian prayers. But the islands' governors, such as Nicolás de Ovando in Hispaniola, recognized that the only way the Spanish could extract the wealth they sought was to enslave the natives to perform the labor-intensive work that mining and sugarcane production required. Consequently, the queen's orders were set aside in favor of an *encomienda* system in which lands were granted to Spanish colonists, who would then exploit the natives living on those lands and would completely ignore the colonists' commitment to Christianize the Tainos.

So, the Spanish colonials proved to be hard taskmasters, forcing the Tainos to dig the mines and till the fields to the point of exhaustion. As a consequence, many indigenous islanders died from overexertion and malnutrition. Recalcitrant natives were often killed by their conquerors, and many thousands died from such imported European diseases as smallpox for which the Taino had no immunity. The rapidity with which the Tainos of Hispaniola were wiped out is reflected in estimates that the original hundreds of thousands had dwindled to 60,000 by 1507, to 600 by 1531, and to 150 by 1550 (Haggerty, 1989). "Today there are no easily discerned traces of the Arawak Tainos at all except for some of the archaeological remains that have been found. Not only on Hispaniola, but also across the Windward Passage in Cuba. Complete genocide was practiced on these natives" (Corbett, 1988).

As the supply of local laborers drastically dropped, the Spanish began importing black slaves from Africa. The first contingent that arrived in 1502 consisted mostly of *ladinos*—Spaniards of African descent. However, shiploads soon came directly from Africa. By 1520, African blacks were employed throughout Hispaniola. The African sources of Haiti's slaves were mainly west-central territories where the nations of Togo, Benin, and Nigeria are now located—a region known as the Slave Coast, populated by more than 40 ethnic groups speaking around 250 dialects (Map 2.1).

Black Africans brought substantial economic advantages to the Spaniards' colonial ventures because

They came from an environment where those who survived into adolescence acquired some immunity to such "Old World" diseases as smallpox, mumps, and measles, as well as to such tropical maladies as malaria and yellow fever. This meant they lived three to five times longer than white laborers under the difficult conditions on plantations, and longer still than Native Americans. Also, when Africans ran away they could neither go home nor be mistaken for members of the planters' society. Through most of the years of the Atlantic trade, prices for Africans remained favorable in relation to the price of the crops they produced. They were, thus, the best economic solution for plantation owners seeking inexpensive labor. (Atlantic Slave Trade, 2008)

The process of providing slaves for transport to the New World usually began with members of one African tribe capturing members of an enemy tribe and sending them to the western seaports, where they were sold to European traders for firearms, liquor, and such manufactured goods as cloth

Sugarcane in Hispaniola, processed into molasses that was then converted into rum, would be sent West Africa in exchange for slaves. As David Brion Davis explained,



Map 2.1 Slave Coast and Environs. (Based on Lovejoy in Boddy-Evans, 2009)

The religious and political power structure of West African states was peculiarly susceptible to the corrosive effects of the slave system. In the Niger delta, where the [African religions'] priests had traditionally imposed heavy fines on men who offended an oracle, it was relatively easy to discover an increasing number of offenses which could be expiated only by a payment of slaves, who could then be sold profitably to European traders. . . . Since tribes which captured the most slaves received the most European goods, and were thus best equipped in the struggle for survival, it was only natural that certain ones in the interior, such as the Ashantis and Dahomeans, should rise to power as specialists in the art of enslaving. (Davis, 1966, pp. 182–183)

As a result of this trading arrangement, by 1550, there were an estimated 30,000 African slaves toiling in Hispaniola's mines and fields. From the 16th century well into the 19th, between 10 million and 12 million slaves were shipped to the Americas from Africa. The regions of Africa that were the principal sources of slaves sent to South America, the Caribbean, and North America are shown in Map 2.2. Bantule (2009) estimated that the percentages of slaves from the different regions were approximately:

Bight of Biafra (Nigeria) = 25%

West-Central and South-East = 25%

Bight of Benin (Togo, Benin, Nigeria) = 15%

Gold Coast (Ghana) = 14%

Windward Coast (Ivory Coast) = 12%

Senegal/Gambia = 6%

Sierra Leone = 3%

The Spanish Missionary Effort

Paralleling the Spaniards' worldwide military/economic conquests was their commitment to spread Catholicism in the lands they captured. The priests and lay brothers who accompanied the conquistadores on their adventures were in charge of this religious mission. However, throughout the years of Spanish rule in Hispaniola, the padres' attention focused primarily on the spiritual needs of the Spanish colonists rather than on the Tainos. An exception to this neglect of the natives' souls appeared in Ramòn Panè's attempt to spread the gospel among the Indians. Panè was one of three lay brothers among the 14 members of the Catholic clergy brought to the island in late 1493 by Columbus during his second voyage to the Caribbean. Panè—after learning one of the three native languages spoken in Hispaniola—tried to convert the cacique Guarionex to Christianity. That proved to be a futile endeavor—another instance of the flawed cross-cultural communication that marred much of the interaction between the Spaniards and the Indians throughout the New World.

The religious instruction given by Panè was very rudimentary; he had taught the people the Ave Maria and the Pater Noster and explained to them in simple words that God was the Creator of heaven and earth. The use of religious paintings for this purpose led to a major misunderstanding. The Tainos buried these religious images, since they associated this act with a fertility ritual [that would enhance harvests]. Instead of interpreting the act as a first attempt at inculcating the Christian faith into the world of the Tainos, the Spaniards saw it as an act of desecration, and Bartolomè Columbus [Christopher's brother who governed the island] ordered them to be punished severely. (Meier, 1912/1992)



Map 2.2 Main African Sources of Slaves. (Based on Lovejoy in Boddy-Evans, 2009)

In contrast to Queen Isabella's desire to educate captured peoples in the Catholic faith, the Spanish plantation owners feared that religious education for slaves could undermine the colonists' control over both the Tainos and the blacks from Africa. As early as 1511, the diocese of Santo Domingo was established in eastern Hispaniola, with priests and brothers assigned to look after the welfare of the clergy and the spiritual needs of the faithful among the colonists, but they had no intent to convert slaves to Catholicism. However, the slaves' spiritual needs would not go wanting, for the Africans brought from their homeland their traditional gods—the *loas*—and ceremonies that featured chanting and dances. These practices formed the foundation of the Vodou religion that was destined to thrive in this New-World setting.

THE FRENCH ERA

In Europe during the last decade of the 17th century, a nine-year war was fought between France and a coalition of enemies called The Grand Alliance. The Alliance consisted of Britain, Spain, the Holy Roman Empire, and the Netherlands. The conflict was finally settled in 1697 through the Treaty of Ryswick in which France yielded some districts in Europe to the Alliance but won the western third of Hispaniola from the Spanish. The French named their new colony Saint Dominigue. The Spanish retained control of the eastern two-thirds of the island, which they named Santo Domingo, a title that would be changed to The Dominican Republic in 1844.

The Economic Development Program

The French made their newly acquired colony far more successful economically than had the Spanish. The French introduced coffee to Saint Dominigue from Martinique in 1726, and soon, coffee became an important colonial commodity. By the mid-18th century, Haiti was France's wealthiest overseas colony through the export of sugar, indigo, coffee, cotton, cacao, and logwood. By the 1780s, Haiti was furnishing "about 60 percent of the world's coffee and about 40 percent of the sugar imported by France and Britain. [The Haitian colony] played a pivotal role in the French economy, accounting for almost two-thirds of French commercial interests abroad and about 40 percent of foreign trade" (Haggerty, 1989).

Because growing and processing such products was labor intensive, the demand for African slaves increased. Between 1764 and 1771, the annual importation of slaves ranged from 10,000 to 15,000. From 1787 onward, the colony received more than 40,000 slaves a year. Over time, maintaining the plantations required an estimated 790,000 African slaves. "At all times, a majority of slaves in the colony were African-born, as the brutal conditions of slavery prevented the population from experiencing growth through natural increase" (*History of Haiti*, 2006).

The Spanish had been harsh in their treatment of slaves, but the French were even more brutal. How vicious the French colonials could be was described in the memoirs of a former slave of that era.

Have they not hung up men with heads downward, drowned them in sacks, crucified them on planks, buried them alive, crushed them in mortars? Have they not forced them to eat shit? And, having flayed them with the lash, have they not cast them alive to be devoured by worms, or onto anthills, or lashed them to stakes in the swamp to be devoured by mosquitoes? Have they not thrown them into boiling cauldrons of cane syrup? Have they not put men and women inside barrels studded with spikes and rolled them down mountainsides into the abyss? Have they not consigned these miserable blacks to man-eating dogs until the latter, sated by human flesh, left the mangled victims to be finished off with bayonet and poniard? (Heinl, 1966)

The Social Structure of Haitian Society

The three principal ethnic divisions in the French colony consisted of the white French, the black Africans, and the brown racially mixed mulattos who were referred to as "people of color" (*gens de couleur*). First-generation people of color were usually the offspring of a white planter and a black

slave woman, with such matings often assuming the form of a *plaçage*, a type of common-law marriage. The three-tiered social structure located the French colonists at the top, mulattos in the middle, and African slaves at the bottom.

In 1685, King Louis XIV of France signed an edict titled *Le Code Noir* (The Black Code) that included 59 articles specifying how slaves should be treated in the American colonies. The code included the following provisions:

- All slaves should be baptized and instructed in the Roman Catholic faith.
- No religion other than Catholicism could be practiced in public.
- No Protestants would be allowed to interfere with slaves' Catholic faith.
- No one, including slaves, was to work on Sunday.
- If a free man was not married to any other woman when he had a child by a slave woman, then the man should marry the woman, she would be freed of slave status, and their children would be declared free and legitimate.
- Children born of two slaves would themselves be slaves.
- Freed slaves deserved the same rights, privileges, and immunities enjoyed by freeborn persons. (Arsenault & Rose, 2006)

By 1789, there were 500,000 slaves, 32,000 whites, and a middle class composed of 28,000 mulattos and free blacks who were accorded a variety of privileges not available to slaves (Censer & Hurst, 2008). For example, mulattos and free blacks could own property, so eventually, they controlled one-third of plantation acreage and a quarter of the colony's slaves. As their wealth grew, increasing numbers traveled to France for advanced education. However, in order to keep the members of the middle class in their place, statutes designed by the whites forbade *gens de couleur* from taking up such professions as medicine, holding public office, marrying whites, wearing European clothing, carrying swords or firearms in public, sitting among whites in church, or appearing at social functions attended by whites (Haggerty, 1989). This middle class would figure importantly in the freedom movement that ended French control of Haiti.

The French Religious Endeavor

Although Roman Catholicism was the official religion under the French, it failed to attract many of the colony's blacks, who continued to practice Vodou as a local version of traditional African faith. The French colonists were aware of superstitions within the slave population but regarded the African dances—performed to drum beats—as simply entertainment without religious implications. Yet, the essence of Vodou was actually imbedded in those celebrations. Furthermore, Vodou was a flexible and accommodating worldview, so the slaves were willing to incorporate a variety of Christian practices into their belief system without apparent conflict. Eventually, the practice of Vodou was outlawed, and colonial authorities saw this local version of African religion as a threat to the stability of the white-dominated Saint Dominigue.

The Haitian Independence Movement

In Saint Dominigue, near the end of the 18th century, the rallying motto of the revolution back in France—*liberty, equality, fraternity*—threatened the island colony's prosperity. If liberty and equality were now the foundation of life in France, why not in French colonies as well? Should not slavery be outlawed in Haiti? And if outlawed, how could the plantation system survive without the cheap labor that slavery furnished?

Conditions in Saint Dominigue at the time were ripe for revolution. There were 10 times more slaves and mulattos than whites. Furthermore, increasing numbers of slaves had already threatened the whites' control of the colony by escaping to the mountains, where they armed themselves and attacked plantations to steal supplies and kill whites. Leaders of these runaway maroons were often Vodou priests—*houngans*—such as François Makandal, a one-armed slave from Guinea who escaped from a plantation in 1751. For six years thereafter, Makandal and his followers carried on guerilla warfare against plantations in an effort to overthrow the white regime. The French finally captured Makandal and publicly burned him at the stake. Other forms of slave resistance included mass suicide and infanticide to prevent slaves' offsprings from growing up as slaves, poisoning whites, and setting fire to French property.

In 1790, the pleas in France to grant everyone *freedom-equality-fraternity* led to the National Assembly issuing a decree ensuring equal rights for all peoples under the French flag. An envoy from France traveled to Saint Dominigue to enforce the decree, which would involve freeing all the slaves. However, the governor of the colony, at the urging of plantation owners, refused to recognize the envoy's mission. This refusal produced armed skirmishes between the governor's forces and a group of slaves who were incited by the envoy. The governor's forces defeated the rebels and executed the envoy. Hence, this first attempt to free the slaves failed.

One year later, revolution broke out in earnest as one black leader after another led the slaves in revolt. The first commander was a Vodou houngan, Dutty Boukman, who, along with fellow rebels, signed a freedom pact in August 1791, then launched attacks against plantations and whites that left an estimated 10,000 blacks and 2,000 whites dead and more than 1,000 plantations ransacked and razed. When Boukman was captured and executed by the French, a succession of other leaders took command—Jean-François, Biassou, Jeannot, and Toussaint L'Ouverture (Haggerty, 1989).

Toussaint, a self-educated former household slave, became the most renowned of the group, often portrayed as the father of Haitian independence. During the latter 1790s, Toussaint commanded a well-trained, disciplined army of former slaves to wrest control of the entire island from the French and Spanish by 1801. But he did not declare full independence from France nor did he seek vengeance on the country's former white slaveholders because he believed the French would not restore slavery and “that a population of slaves recently landed from Africa could not attain to civilization by ‘going it alone’ ” (James, 1990, p. 290). However, back in France, Napoleon Bonaparte now headed the government and was intent on maintaining slavery in the Caribbean colonies. To achieve this goal, a large military force from France managed to overwhelm Toussaint's troops and capture him. He died of pneumonia in a French prison in 1803.

Following Toussaint's capture, Jean Jacques Dessalines took command of the rebel forces and, in a series of bloody battles, defeated the French. On January 1, 1804, Dessalines declared Saint

Dominique an independent nation—the world’s first black republic. To solve the problem of racial identity (mulattos and blacks) in Haitian society, Dessalines declared that all citizens henceforth would be referred to as black, and no whites would be allowed to own property. He also renamed the former colony Haiti, a variant of the original Tainos label for the territory, *Ayiti*, meaning “mountainous land.” Whereas Toussaint had shown compassion for white plantation owners, Dessalines did not. He ordered 2,000 Frenchmen to be massacred at Cap-Français, 800 in Port-au-Prince, and 400 at Jérémie. He announced that “We have repaid these cannibals, war for war, crime for crime, outrage for outrage” (Heinl, 1966, pp. 123, 125).

THE INDEPENDENT REPUBLIC

Over more than two centuries—1804–2014—life in Haiti has been marked by the frequent overturning of governments, economic difficulties, and the evolution of a Creole culture that combined African and French traditions.

Political Turmoil

Problems maintaining a stable government began early in the 19th century. After proclaiming Haiti an independent republic in 1804, Dessalines was assassinated two years later through the complicity of a pair of his advisers, who then divided the country into two rival regimes. That division lasted until 1820, when Jean Pierre Boyer reunited Haiti as a single republic and ruled as president until ousted by revolutionaries in 1843. The fate of subsequent rulers over the next 72 years has been summarized by James C. Leyburn (in Haggerty, 1989).

Of the twenty-two heads of state between 1843 and 1915, only one served out his prescribed term of office, three died while serving, one was blown up with his palace, one presumably poisoned, one hacked to pieces by a mob, one resigned. The other fourteen were deposed by revolution after incumbencies ranging in length from three months to twelve years.

In 1915, worrisome conditions in Haiti prompted United States’ President Woodrow Wilson to order U.S. marines to take control of the island nation. One troubling condition was the dominant control that the Germans in Haiti wielded over the country’s economic system. Another condition was the deep debts Haitians owed to American banks.

The American military presence in Haiti lasted until 1934, when the multiple troubles it faced and controlling events on the island convinced the American government to abandon the venture. The United States’ 19 years’ occupation produced a mixture of good and bad results. The positive influences included stabilizing the country’s currency, reducing corruption, establishing a strong police force, improving public roads, promoting agricultural development, expanding education, creating a national health service, and modernizing port facilities. However, a host of negative influences outweighed the positive contributions. The Americans rewrote the country’s constitution, dissolved the National Assembly, put a puppet president at the nation’s head, engineered a treaty that made Haiti a U.S. protectorate, forced peasants to labor on road building projects, permitted foreigners to buy land, and responded viciously to demonstrators who objected to the occupation.

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