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"Modernizing God" in Haitian Vodou?

Reflections on Olowoum and Reafricanization in Haiti

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Abstract. – This article explores processes of religious change within Haitian Vodou from the perspective of "reafricanization" and "desyncretism." As a case in point serve attempts to introduce Olowoum as the Vodou Godhead, thus replacing the Christian *Bondye*, or Lord. While the introduction of new elements, such as Olowoum, into Vodou seems fraught with little opposition from practitioners, the same can not be said regarding attempts to exclude religious elements (such as Catholic saints) from Vodou. A guiding reflection is also that reafricanization and desyncretization are best understood as contemporary expressions of Vodou's long-standing tradition of religious adaptability. *[Haitian Vodou,* Olowoum*, reafricanization, desyncretization, anti-syncretism]*

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During the twentieth century, practitioners of Afro-American religions such as Candomblé, Santería, and Haitian Vodou have become increasingly explicit regarding the need to revitalize an African heritage through representing and reshaping their religions in accordance with an ideal "African" tradition (cf. Lamur 2001). On the basis of Afro-Brazilian material, Capone (2007: 220 ff.) makes a distinction between the two movements "desyncretization and reafricanization." Even if both movements share the ambition to reject "Afro-Catholic syncretism," there is a difference. The desyncretic movement strives to recover the authentic "African" religion preserved but supposedly diluted by extrinsic influences in Brazil. The reafricanization movement, on the other hand, promotes the incorporation of religious principles brought more directly from Africa – predominantly represented by the Yoruba culture of Nigeria (Capone 2005, 2007; Parés 2004). This quest for "ritual purity" and knowledge of African religion may involve, e.g., traveling as well as the study of relevant literature on the religious traditions of Africa (Capone 2007).

This article explores the phenomena of "reafricanization" and "desyncretization" in relation to Haitian Vodou. Capone's (2007) distinction is good-to-think also when approaching the Haitian case, although desyncretization and reafricanization appear as two discernible tendencies rather than distinct movements. As elsewhere in the region, such agendas of change are mainly introduced by a minority of influential priests and leaders of religious, or Vodou, organizations. This article largely departs from the example of the appearance of the West African Yoruba Godhead Olorun in Haiti, in the late 80s or early 90s. The case of Olorun – renamed Olowoum by Vodouisants – has both desyncretic and reafricanizing aspects. As will be discussed below, at least those who first introduced the Yoruba Godhead did so with the intention to replace the Christian Bondye, Lord, with Olowoum. Some comparisons will also be made with more specifically desyncretic attempts to eliminate Catholic elements, such as saints, from Vodou. The inclusion of new elements, such as Olowoum, is acceptable to many Vodou practitioners. On the other hand, the desyncretic

exclusion of Catholic elements – such as Catholic saints – from Vodou, appears to find less support in the popular setting. This article investigates some possible reasons underlying this situation, which also indicates Vodou's "additive" ability and syncretic potential. As well, it is suggested that contemporary attempts to make Vodou "more African" represents a continuation rather than the demise of Vodou's tradition of religious adaptation and dynamism.

"Reafricanization" is a current term in scholarly discourse on the Afro-Americas, especially regarding the Brazilian context.[1] The fact that the term gained its prominence in a particular ideological context entails both disadvantages and advantages. On the one hand, the concept is problematic in that it presupposes that Afro-American religion has lost some of its African essence – an assumption that would be rejected by some practitioners. Moreover, it can be debated whether reafricanization actually renders a religion more "African" – in any case from an etic or "objective" perspective. On the other hand, the term reafricanization, with its connotations to a particular debate, also signals the same problematic aspects. This can not be said about the related term "africanization" which has more often, though not always (Houk 1995), been used while referring to changes of demographic patterns (see, e.g., Webster 1893 or Stoller 2002). I will also use Shaw and Stewart's (1994) term "anti-syncretism," interchangeably with "desyncretization" used by Capone (2007). With the latter two terms I denote the exclusion of Catholic elements from the Afro-American religions. I have not encountered any of the above terms among Vodou practitioners in Haiti.

Judging from literature and field visits in Haiti, both anti-syncretism and reafricanization in the New World are advocated by a relatively limited number of religious leaders and their close followers. Looking to the majority of practitioners in Brazil, Cuba, or Haiti, my guess is that most are familiar with these ideas, but also that comparatively few apply, e.g., anti-syncretism, in their own day-to-day religious practice (cf. Palmié 1995; Wafer 1991).

Endeavors towards a revitalization of an African heritage are found in all branches of Afro-American religion, but there are differences depending on the national contexts. Not least, Brazil stands out in this regard and Matory (2005: 172) writes that:

> the institutional solidity of Candomblé and the Quêto/Nagô nation's relationship with the Brazilian state have made Brazil an anchor, an exemplar, and a growing exporter of materials and ideas to Black cultural nationalists worldwide. Bahia has become a major destination for Black North American and Afrophile *nuyorican* pilgrims and heritage tourists.

Practitioners of Haitian Vodou, until recently, have been "lagging behind" with regard to collective efforts of organizing Vodou and articulating policies for religious expression. For example, in Brazil, the Union of the Afro-Brazilian Sects of Bahia was founded as early as 1937. The organization "intended to guarantee the fidelity of Candomblé priests to African-centered traditions" (Matory 2005: 162), as well as protecting practitioners from police harassment.[2] The first formal Vodou organization in Haiti, Zantray, was formed in 1986, and forwarded an agenda of some resemblance to that of its Brazilian predecessor (Blot n.d.; Hurbon 2001). The reasons behind Vodou's "late awakening" in the official and international setting is probably a context of poverty, dictatorship, and, perhaps, language barriers.

However, the last decades, and reflecting a shifting political context, Vodou and other expressions of popular culture have come to take up a more prominent role in the public and official spheres of Haitian society. The strongest manifestation of this process was probably in 2003, when Vodou became officially recognized as a religion through a decree by president Jean-Bertrand Aristide. Today there are also many formal Vodou organizations, although of differing degree of cohesion and level of activity. Moreover, Vodou has also attained some forms of official representation of limited, or humble, importance – nevertheless, these feats are remarkable in the light of the history of strained relations between Vodou and the State.

It can also be mentioned that the main concern of Haitian Vodou organizations, and many practitioners, today is to "structure" their religion and establish common institutions. Despite several Vodou leaders' sympathetic attitude to

1 See, e.g., Greenfield (2001), Wafer (1991), Álvarez López (2004), Parés (2004), or Sansone (1999), for examples. Shujaa (2003) and Nah (1998) attribute the concept of "reafricanization" to Amilcar Cabral who used it in the early 1970s. The concept "is defined as a process of reclamation that African people colonized by Europeans (Portuguese, in this case) of necessity must undergo to appreciate their cultural heritage" (Nah 1998: 536). The term has also been used in various contexts before and after that (see as examples, e.g., Touré (1959) regarding Africa, and Cannon (1977), as well as Wilde (1995), regarding the U.S. setting).

2 Cf. Matory (2005: 161 f.); Landes (1940: 268); Carneiro (1940: 278).

anti-syncretic measures, or to make Vodou more "African," other concerns appear more urgent. I also doubt that Vodou practitioners in general regard the issue of Olowoum *per se* as very important. The question of African heritage in national culture and Vodou, however, is a topic of great, not to say enormous, interest to many Haitians regardless of their religious affiliation.

Vodou and Catholicism: Syncretism

When approaching desyncretization and reafricanizing measures, such as Olowoum, a brief overview of Vodou conceptions of God as well as Afro-Catholic syncretism is called for. Most Vodou practitioners also follow Roman Catholicism – the religion introduced by the Spanish and French colonial powers – and Catholicism has influenced Haitian Vodou (Métraux 1972).[3]

> Since it's pure *ginen*, "Vodou tradition," you make this [the sign of the cross]. You announce Bondye, God, before you do the work you're about to do. *Ginen*, the traditional spirits, do not come down on you without prayers (Vodouisant).

Vodou has co-opted Christianity's Creator God, usually referred to as Bondye[4] by Vodouisants and "uniquely Christians" alike. Prayers to, and invocations of, the Holy Trinity saturate Vodou practice. Several authors, however, claim that even if Vodou practitioners nominally serve the Bondye, or God, of Christianity, their conceptions of that God differ from Christian notions. For example, Hurbon (1987), Brown (1991), and Desmangles (1992) show that Vodou practitioners tend to see God as more distant – a *deus otiosus*. Some opine that such notions are survivals of African religions. Métraux (1972: 83) also points out that in Vodou "the idea of God seems to get mixed up with the idea of a vague and impersonal power, superior to that of the *loa* [i.e., spirits] ... something like we understand in present-day usage, by the word 'fate' or 'nature'."[5]

Beauvoir and Dominique (2003: 74 ff.) underline heterogeneity regarding Vodou conceptions of God. They mention that individual Vodou practitioners may variously conceive of God as male, female, or genderless; that there are several gods; or that God is constituted by the sum of the numerous *lwa*, or Vodou spirits. They also mention the fact that Vodou practitioners rarely talk about the details of God.

One local model, which I have encountered in slightly different versions, is one with two *dye* (gods); one remote Godhead, and one slightly lesser God that deals with the physical world of the humans. In some cases, the this-worldly God is equaled with Lucifer. The view of Lucifer as a particularly strong *lwa* spirit is also widespread. It should be pointed out that in the Vodou context, Lucifer is not the uniquely evil spirit of Western mainstream Christianity, but rather a powerful spirit being connected with "hot" magical capabilities (cf. Kelly 2006).

My view is, however, that alternative models of God do not usually exclude Afro-Catholic syncretic elements from religious practice. Also those Vodou priests who advance models including two gods, tend to rely on Vodou's syncretized "standard repertoire" of prayers, litanies, and images of a Catholic origin. One Vodou priest – who served both Lucifer and Bondye and believed in the existence of Olowoum – mildly admonished me, while also entering the politics of religion:

> You yourself, you may not believe in Jesus Christ because there are a lot of Whites who do not believe in Jesus Christ. But, if you believe in magic, you should believe in Jesus Christ. It's not the Americans who invented Jesus Christ.

The Vodou worldview is also open-ended and flexible – not least when approaching less experience near and more abstract issues, such as the nature of God. Assumedly, humans are simply unable to know all the details of the spirit dimension. Elsewhere, I have suggested that, metaphorically speaking, a "subjunctive mood" characterizes a good deal of Haitian discourses on spirit-related matters (Thylefors 2002). Thus, even if informants may recapitulate alternative versions regarding the nature of God(s), I believe it calls for caution not

3 As well, the practices connected to "serving the *lwa*" have, in turn, left their imprints on the vivid folk Catholic tradition.

4 "In the Creole language of Haiti, Vodouisants use 'Bondye' to designate the Christian and Vodou Godhead. It derives from the French 'Bon Dieu,' meaning 'Good Lord'" (Desmangles 1992: 191, chap. 1: fn. 2).

5 Comparisons between Christian and Vodou views of God should also take account of the difficulties to find a homogenous Christian perspective. Moreover, the practice of both Vodou and Christianity either parallelly or in mixed form begs the question if a person really changes his worldview depending on the setting. Stating that Haitians (Vodouisants, or uniquely Christians) perceive of God in other ways than that of established "Western" Christianity is, of course, ethically problematic when the informants themselves define their religious practice and belief as in accordance with the established churches.

to reify local statements that perhaps are intended foremost as hypostatization making part of an ongoing ontological "debate" about the world (cf. Kirsch 2004).

The Catholic saints, moreover, are used by Vodouisants to represent various *lwa* spirits. Whether the identities of *lwa*, and saints, have really amalgamated or if the names and chromolithographs of the latter are mere symbols of *lwa* of an essentially African nature, has been a matter of debate (Desmangles 1992). From a Brazilian horizon, Greenfield makes a facile but important observation regarding the "mixing or syncretism" between saints and *òrìsà* spirits in Candomblé (2001: 122):

> Whether the former slaves and their descendants kept them separate, relating each to its own pantheon and cosmological scheme, or merged them would be something that only could be determined empirically for each participant at a given time and place.

Albeit the fact that saints have been part of Vodou tradition since centuries, it is also conceivable that over time some saints have been added, while others have sunk into oblivion (Rey 2002b: 530 ff.). As I will mention below, those practitioners who wish to "reafricanize" Vodou may also contest the presence of Catholic saints in Vodou.

Vodou and Catholicism: Ambivalence and Antagonism

Generally speaking, Roman Catholicism has a high social status among the majority of Vodou practitioners. A Church wedding has more cultural capital than a common law marriage as does a Church baptism compared to a folk baptism. Even devout Vodou practitioners may recount with pride if their children have received communion or married at the Catholic Church. Catholic clergy, as a category, are respected not least because of their education and high degree of literacy. Some also point out that clergymen have a lot of supernatural knowledge which they can employ in magic such as sending saints to kill people. Still, many Vodou practitioners harbor ambivalent attitudes towards the Catholic Church. People remember the Christian anti-Vodou campaigns of the last century. Known Vodou practitioners are not allowed to become members of the Catholic Church. Church membership, in turn, is also a requirement for extremely important undertakings such as having an "honorable" Church funeral, or sending children to Catholic schools which are usually among the better ones. Reportedly, being able to show a Catholic baptismal record is of great help when applying for an identity card, visa, or some job positions. Consequently, several Vodou practitioners hide their Vodou practice from representatives of the Church.[6] Several times I have heard Vodouisants claiming that the Catholic Church "humiliates" Vodou practitioners, through, e.g., refusing them access to Catholic services.

More politically conscious Vodou practitioners may also verbalize that Catholicism is the oppressors' and colonialists' religion. Such Vodou practitioners endorse a separation from Catholicism and may view positively on the Catholic exclusion of Vodou practitioners. The Catholic Church as an organization was by many Vodou practitioners perceived as working against the sake of Vodou – e.g., that Vodou clergy should receive legal licenses entitling them to perform civil ceremonies such as marriages.[7] That was the case of the interviewee cited below and who explicitly linked Catholicism to slavery. Noteworthy in the following quotation is also that he emphasizes a past rupture with African culture when he asks for the identity of "the God of the Haitians":

> How is a religion born? As an ethnologist, you already know. A religion is born in a country following its customs, its mores, and the gods. It chooses the god in the name of the father of independence of the country ... it knows that the spirit of that man, who brings independence of the country, communicates with the grand architect ("God"). For example, the god of China is called Buddha. Buddha is the liberator of China, right? Well, the religions are born like this! Who is our god, to us, the Haitians?
>
> MT: ... *Granmèt*, God [lit. Grand Master]?
>
> Hehehe ...
>
> MT: There's Olowoum.
>
> Olowoum. But Olowoum, we know who Olowoum is. Its after that we traveled to Africa. ...

6 One woman who worked for a development school project recounted that during the application process all children stated that they were Catholic or Protestant. Nevertheless, this woman recognized several of her pupils when attending Vodou ceremonies. An anthropologist, who worked as an interpreter for the immigration services in the United States, told that, despite years of professional experience, she had only met refugees and immigrants claiming to be Protestant or Catholic – never Vodouisant.

7 According to one Catholic priest, the Catholic Church in Haiti has no unified policy regarding Vodou, and Vodou is not on the curriculum of the training of priests. I met two Catholic priests who were positive about the idea of a Vodou Church – not least, they argued, Vodou practitioners then would lose interest in Catholic Church funerals and other rituals.

From "Inclusive Africanization" to Reafricanization

Reafricanization and anti-syncretism of the radical kind advocated by the Haitian Vodou organizations Zantray and Legliz Vodou dAyiti, or the Yoruba Movement in the United States and the leaders of Brazilian Candomblé, is relatively new in Haiti. Yet, there are other forms of attempting to make Vodou more "African" and which go far back in time. One example recurs at the level of emphasizing African traits while *representing* or *describing* Vodou. Several researchers as well as early Afro-centric noirist writers have sought to show that Vodou's essence is in fact African, while European influences are perceived as superficial adaptations to the colonial slaveholding regimes and their successors.[8]

There is also what I think of as a kind of implicit "inclusive africanization" which comprises to redefine phenomena as "African." Both writers (see, e.g., Holly 1919, or Rigaud 1953) and several of my informants have pointed out that Christian elements are not extrinsic to Vodou, as Christianity is a religion which derives from Africa and ancient Egypt. The ethnologist Milo Rigaud, whose works still influence Vodou, writes that "Moses is as close to Voudoo as he is to Roman Catholicism" (1953: 89). Fifty years later, in a memorandum from the registered organization Bureau National du Vodou Haïtien (BNVH) one can read that "since the culture of the black people, that is the Vodou, became oral, Jehovah due to his intelligence in his capacity of God, sent Israel to Africa for motivational and civilisational training lasting for over 430 years" (*BNVH* 2005).

There is also the strong tendency that some informants – normally the poor and less schooled – define "clearly" Western (alongside, e.g., Amerindian) phenomena as *ginen*. *Ginen*, or *Lafrik Ginen*, refers to both a mythical land of the spirits and the Africa where the ancestors of today's Haitians lived. As well, *ginen* can denote the traditional Vodou spirits themselves. The word can also be valorized and express the "traditional," or moral.[9] Images of saints, white spirits with idealized Western manners, books on magic, and perfumes are things that can be *ginen*. At the grassroots level, one also finds this "inclusive Africanization" on a day-to-day basis when practitioners argue for the purity, or authenticity of their rites and their accordance with the *ginen* tradition – e.g., that some spirits should be served with *contredanse* (fr.), fiddle, and accordion, but not drums. The phenomenon of "inclusive Africanization" thus becomes a cornerstone of what is normally labeled syncretism – at least from the etic, or "objectivist," perspective mentioned by Droogers and Greenfield (2001: 31).

Contemporary advocates of reafricanization of Vodou contest the eclectic and inclusive uses of the *ginen* concept. Instead they want to make the *ginen* concept more congruous with conceptions of the "real" Africa and/or, so to speak, the Africa described by ethnographers. Capone writes that "the African tradition changes, therefore, from an apparently irrational practice to a real scientific attitude" and that "one of the characteristics of the processes of reafricanization . . ." becomes "the attribution of a scientific quality to religious practices" (2007: 229; cf. 2005: 327 f.). Of course, despite scientific ambitions reafricanization entails a number of problems – at least from the "objectivist" perspective – such as: which African religious traits to include, from what historical period, and how to relate them to the social and cultural settings of the New World?

Attempts of actually making Vodou practice more similar to "real" African practices – e.g., by excluding the Catholic saints – are probably rare and more scarcely documented. The temple of the famous Vodou priest and leader, Max Beauvoir, is, however, described by Cosentino (1995: 43):

> A more accessible, cosmopolitan version of "African" Vodou is practiced at Peristyle Mariani on the road to Leogane. Before fear of AIDS and overt political violence ended tourism, buses from Port-au-Prince lined up at Mariani for ceremonies presided over by Max Beauvoir, an oungan with national influence and an international clientele. Stripped of all "syncretic excrescences," . . . No ecstatic madonnas. No retrofited whiskey bottles. No feathered crucifixes . . .
> In place of colonial elaborations, Vodou at Mariani or Souvenance has been reshaped by images of Africa recovered through the romantic historicism of Negritude. Or, for those oungans influenced by Milo Rigaud's immensely popular *Secrets of Voodoo* (1953), an Africa accessible through the cabalistic imagery of Theosophy or Rosicrucianism . . .

I also suggest that the contemporary "objectivist" strive among some Vodou practitioners toward

8 Price-Mars 1928; Duvalier 1968; Herskovits 1971; cf. Duck 2004.

9 "*Ginen* . . . Guinea; West Africa; ancestral homeland of the Haitian people; dwelling place of the Voodoo spirits; proper spiritual and moral living; faraway place(s)" (Freeman 2004: 339). "*Liv Ginen* book supposedly coming from Africa and intelligible only to Voodoo priest(ess)" (Freeman 2004: 339).

"African authenticity" is a continuation rather than the cessation of the dynamic and adaptive potential of Vodou. Has not Vodou practice always been about, through different means, recreating and accessing the African *ginen* in colonial and postcolonial Haiti?

Introducing Olorun

> Most West African religions have a high god who is also a sky god. But he is often a withdrawn high god, a *deus otiosus* ... He is said to be at the origin of all things, often as a creator; he is all-knowing and all-powerful; he introduces order into the chaos of universe; he is the final arbiter of right and wrong. The other gods are under him and share in his power, though how they do so is not always well defined. But in spite of these attributes the high god is not usually directly worshipped; he has no priests and no shrines are dedicated to him; people may make a token offering to him in every sacrifice but hardly ever do they offer a sacrifice directly to him (O'Connell 1962: 67).

Olorun, or Oludomare, is the High God of the traditional religion of the Yoruba-speaking people who live in today's Nigeria. In Brazilian Candomblé, Cuban Santería, and Trinidadian Orisha religion with origins in Yoruba beliefs Olorun and Oludomare are the accepted names for the Godhead. Similarly, Olorun is found in Afro-American religions practiced in the United States due to the influx of Yoruba beliefs from other parts of the Black Americas and/or Nigeria.[10] Haiti never received the same concentrations of Yoruba slaves – or maintained postslavery contacts with Nigeria – as did Brazil and Cuba (Matory 2005). Moreover, in Haitian Vodou the names for the Creator God have been derived from French, not African languages.[11]

Olorun is a "remote god and takes little interest in human affairs" (Wedel 2004: 82). These traits, as we saw above, also characterize Bondye or Granmèt, the Vodou/Catholic High God in Haiti (Murphy 1994; Desmangles 1992).

Haitian Vodou practitioners altered the name Olorun to "Olowoum," which is more in accordance with Haitian Creole orthography and pronunciation. The organization Legliz Vodou dAyiti also uses the version "Olohoum." I have not found very much data exactly on how, or by whom, Olowoum was first brought into contact with a larger group of people in Haiti. Two of my key informants, however, attributed the introduction of the name Olowoum to the Vodou organization Zantray and its now deceased and legendary founder, Hérard Simon. Both of these interviewees had been involved with Zantray – one as a regional leader – and other Vodou organizations. One of these interlocutors also claimed that Hérard Simon had learnt of Olowoum through his research, as well as contacts with Benin. The preface to "Le livre sacré du vodou" (*CONAVO* n.d.) also specifies that it was Hérard Simon who "taught" the Vodou practitioners about Olowoum or Olohoum:

> They have understood that their God is called OLOHOUM, they have remembered that Hérard Simon taught them that, the oral tradition had failed to bring that revelation, and the Vodouisants had almost forgot that the supreme energy had communicated an extremely important message to them: learn to see him through their own glasses. OLOHOUM made his name emerge from the entrails [of the earth][12], decided to create ZANTRAY in order to tell people of the Caribbean and the entire world, of all races, that he is OLOHOUM, the master of the masters, he who is all, ... [he who makes everything], the light which clears on those who believe. OLOHOUM has emerged from the entrails [of the earth] all that which forces Vodouisants to take charge of their own destiny regardless of all those prejudiced, the wickedness which hampers the hearts of all those who have not received the message.

Zantray is an abbreviation of "Zanfan Tradisyon Ayisyen" (Children of the Haitian tradition). The word *zantray* also means "entrails" or, metaphorically, "essence." The organization was created in the Gonaïves area, as a reaction to the ongoing persecutions of Vodou practitioners in the wake of Duvalier's exile in 1986 (Hurbon 2001). The organization Zantray also emphasizes the African legacy of Haitian Vodou and advocates that Vodou should be recognized as Haiti's "national culture." Reportedly or ideally Zantray "is not into *Bondye*, God, at all," but only Olowoum. The organization

10 Brandon 1993; Matory 2005; Houk 1995.

11 Some researchers (e.g., Thornton 1998) suggest that Yoruba notions of a Godhead have been influenced by early Muslim and Christian mission (see also Meyer 2004: 60–66, regarding the case of Ewe in Ghana). The lack of African names for the Creator God in Haiti seems to support this argument. The slave trade to Haiti ended in the 1790s but went on for a considerably longer time to other regions of the Americas, notably Cuba and Brazil.

12 "Le livre sacré du vodou" is bilingual in French and Haitian Creole – square brackets are insertions from the Haitian Creole version of the preface and which facilitates the understanding.

has also issued the "Zantray prayer"[13] out of which one section follows:

Olowoum pa pouvwa-l
Banm responsabilite pou mwen
Mennen
Respekte ak jwi tout sa mwen ka wè
Ak tout sa mwen pa ka wè sou latè-a

Sou kontwòl ou menm Olowoum

Ki mèt tè
Ki mèt dlo
Ki mèt dife
Ki mèt van

Olowoum by his[14] power
Gives me responsibility
So that I
Respect and enjoy all that I can see
As well as all that I can not see on earth

Under your control Olowoum

Who is the master of earth
Who is the master of water
Who is the master of fire
Who is the master of the wind

Although Vodou's terminology is vast and proper names exist in large numbers of variations, I have never read about the name Olorun being used in Haiti before the usage advocated by Zantray (see also *Zantray* n.d). Some informants corroborated that Olowoum/Olohoum has gained terrain relatively recently, but also claimed that "Olowoum" had been around in Haiti for a longer time, but discreetly so. One interviewee claimed that in the past, the name Olowoum was *merveilleuse* (fr.), which in this context translates as enchanted in a supernatural and enigmatic sense.

CONAVO (Commision National de structuration du Vodou) and its church branch Legliz Vodou dAyiti also makes thorough usage of the name Olowoum (spelled Olohoum). A follower of Legliz Vodou dAyiti is called Olohoumit and Olohoum permeates the pages in "Le livre sacré du vodou" by Wesner Morency, the founder of Legliz Vodou dAyiti.[15] The organization Federasyon Nasyonal Vodouyizan Ayisyen (FNVA) also refers to Olowoum in the funerary chanting they have developed. The FNVA-interviewee, a regional leader, however, meant that Olowoum should mainly be addressed in the funerary context and that it is not Vodou practice in general.[16] Based on several particular cases, my impression is that the leaders of the Vodou organizations – at national as well as at local levels – often have been involved in several organizations. This situation facilitates the dispersion of ideas between specific organizations as well as in society at large.

Hurbon (2001), to my knowledge, is the only scholar who mentions Olowoum in Haiti. He writes that excerpts of Fon and Yoruba mythology were read at the services of Legliz Vodou dAyiti in the capital of Port-au-Prince (2001: 259). To my knowledge, however, Olowoum has not been accompanied by attempts to introduce any comprehensive Yoruba cosmology in which to situate Olowoum.[17] Hurbon also writes that Vodou "has it supreme God, which is hereupon called Olohum and which is distinguished from the God of the

13 *Mwen se Ayisyen / Nèg ki soti nan zantray lafrik Ginen / Nèg yo bwote vin nan peyi d'Ayiti / Mwen mele san mwen ak endijèn / Ki te premye mèt tè-a / Mwen mele san mwen ak blan / Kite vin fè nou tout esklav / Mwen se Ayisyen / Moun ki fèt avèk kò / Ki fèt avèk nanm / Ki fèt avèk bon zan'y / Olowoum pa pouvwa-l / Banm responsabilite pou mwen Mennen / Respekte ak jwi tout sa mwen ka wè / Ak tout sa mwen pa ka wè sou latè-a / Sou kontwòl ou menm Olowoum / Ki mèt tè / Ki mèt dlo, Ki mèt dife / Ki mèt van / Se gras a nou menm moun / Nou gen pouvwa pa nou sou late-a / E se sa menm ki lavi-a / Pa pouvwa Atibon Legba / Tout fòs Kosmik yo / Antre nan nou / Eklere je nou / Pou nou bay Zantray / Ak Vodou-a / Fòs, pouvwa, Linyon / Pou nou fè travay / Ginen-an nan lapè ak kè kontan / Abobo! Abobo! Ayibobo!* (<http://www.zantray.ht/lapriyezantray.html>; 2007-10-05, I have replaced the original paragraph breaks with slashes).

I have also received a similar prayer, called the "Priye Vodou," (several passages are identical) from the Vodou organization CONAVO, as well as assisted meetings with the organization FNVA where a reminiscent version of the prayer was read.

14 The Haitian pronoun *li*, or *l*, covers he, she, and it. The translation of *l* as "his" is thus mine – I have not received data on if Olowoum is regarded in gendered or anthropomorphic terms by Zantray. CONAVO (nd.), however, as mentioned below, refers to Olohoum as "father."

15 "Le livre sacré du vodou" specifies no author on the cover, though the preface is signed CONAVO (Commision National de structuration du Vodou). All asked, however, attribute this work to Wesner Morency, the founder of CONAVO and its subsection Legliz Vodou dAyiti. One person said that Morency edited the statements of several knowledgeable Vodou priests, Hérard Simon included. The book is an attempt to create a common desyncretized Vodou doctrine and ethics (cf. Hurbon 2001: 259). Interviewees, who worked close with Morency, say that the present version is not final, but that a more comprehensive version is on its way. In the past, Morency studied to become a Catholic priest. Ironically, some criticize Legliz Vodou dAyiti with its preaching, written doctrine, and church services for being too similar to Western churches.

16 Olowoum, however, was mentioned also in the communal prayers and chanting ending some FNVA-meetings that I assisted.

17 In fact, only one informant mentioned that Olohoum is a name of Yoruba origin.

Christians which is a foreign god" (2001: 259). Representatives from Legliz Vodou dAyiti as well as some other interviewees explained to me that Olohoum was only one of several names of God, and that each people must chose a name which is appropriate within their cultural system – "to see him through their own glasses," as put in the CONAVO citation above. Names such as Jehovah, Buddha, Allah, and Olowoum, I was told, all refer to the same Supreme Being, called Bondye in Christianity. This perspective implies that besides the name there is little difference between Olowoum and Bondye regarding essence.

"Le livre sacré du vodou," a text which I believe is representative regarding the discourse of those who introduced Olowoum, reinforces this impression. It mentions that Olowoum is almighty and "the father and the creator of the world," and that a Vodouisant's belief "leads to a true monotheism" while recognizing the "spirits as intercessors" (*CONAVO* n.d.: 2–4, 93 f.). Thus, from this perspective, the Olowoum name seems foremost to have been incorporated as an alternative to the Bondye name with its Christian connotations. Even if it is simply a change of names, it is an operation which prepares the route for the exclusion of other Catholic elements from Vodou, as well as lessening the dependency of the Catholic Church as an institution. However, names *per se* are significant in Afro-Haitian religion and, as we will see below, some have assigned Olowoum other places than that of the Godhead in their folk models.

Even if the active proponents of the Olowoum name are comparatively few, the name seems relatively widely distributed by word of mouth and Vodou emissions on radio where Olowoum is mentioned, e.g., in chants. As an example I can also mention that I participated in an emission on national television which included a version of the "Zantray prayer." The emission was seen by several Vodou practitioners that I met eventually.

Adding and Interpreting Olowoum at a Grassroots Level

What happens, then, when Olowoum enters such an open-ended worldview as that of Haitian Vodou? Below, I will recapitulate how some local-level Vodou practitioners related to my asking of Olowoum. I knew most of my interlocutors since some years and – except one – all of them live in the vicinities of the southeastern town of Jacmel, and they know one another, at least by name.

First, I will mention the instances of two "big," or influential, Vodou priests who both had been members in organizations using the name Olowoum. The first priest revealed ambivalence regarding the issue of Olowoum and other reafricanizing measures. He did not oppose his organization's use of the name Olowoum, and his dream was to go to Benin and learn the "true principles" of serving the *lwa* spirits. African clothes were common at his temple. Haitian Vodou, he opined, was an "impure" mix of Amerindian and European magic as well as African religion. Nevertheless, he made extensive and virtuoso use of Catholic prayers, litanies, and the name Bondye – never Olowoum – in his own priestly duties which I have followed extensively.[18] He also explained that the Catholic saints were adaptations to colonial oppression but defended their place in Vodou. A partial explanation of this man's ambivalent attitudes might be that he could not abandon his own religious and syncretized expertise for professional reasons – despite being influenced by "reafricanizing" discourse.

The other priest regretted the use of the name Olowoum altogether. On the one hand, he thought it complicated things for his nonschooled followers who "did not understand such things." Furthermore, reminding of a contemporary anthropologist, he saw Vodou as a fundamentally syncretistic, or "Creole," religion and thought it a pity to exclude some of its (Christian) sources. He used the parable of "it's all the different spices which give the okra its taste." He discarded those who went to Africa and brought home religious elements as these would be "out of their system" in Haiti. This priest had previously been involved with a large Vodou organization but now dismissed the Vodou organizations with the invective *boulchit*.

Yet, another, less influential, priest distinguished between *Dieu tout puissant*, God Almighty, or Bondye, and *Dieu puissant*, Mighty God. God Almighty had "created the world." The second, Mighty God, according to this priest, was Lucifer or Olowoum.

Two other priests revealed uncertainty regarding the exact nature of Olowoum. The first priest

18 This priest – previously a Freemason – also opined that there are two gods; one god who rules this world, but who also reports to the *Être suprême*, or Supreme Being, who is the highest God. He added that all spirits except the Supreme Being could incarnate through spirit possession. This priest regarded the name of the secondary god as secret and did not tell it to me. This priest had also performed many baptisms following the liturgy established by a large Vodou organization which uses the name Olowoum.

distinguished the "true" and Almighty God who lived in the air in the *mond espirityèl*, spiritual world. There was also the god of the earth, or *mond materyèl*, material world – "God Lucifer," *Dye Lisifè*. Even if this priest seemed unsure of how to categorize Olowoum, he nonetheless claimed that Olowoum and Lucifer were connected as "brothers." He also perceived of Olowoum as "God which lives in the material world." The other priest shared this view of Lucifer as a most powerful spiritual being – though he did not call Lucifer a god. He was not sure regarding the nature of Olowoum, though he opined that Olowoum was the "God of Vodou." He also thought that both "Bondye" and "Olowoum" should be invoked ritually and concluded that "we should respect all that we can not see." In a similarly eclectic way, he did not dare to enter into the business of God and Lucifer – as did the evangelicals – but recognized the value of both of them.

One last priest simply explained that Olowoum was another name for Bondye. An experienced Vodou drummer said that he did not know much about Olowoum. He had heard about Olowoum for the first time in the funerary chanting of a "delegation of Vodou priests" from the capital of Port-au-Prince. Still, he meant that "when a person says Olowoum, he addresses every single one of the nations [of Vodou spirits].[19] When a person says, 'In the name of Olowoum,' it means that he receives all the nations in the prayer he is going to make."

An informant friend in the capital revealed a similar belief in the spiritual potentials of names, though his conclusion in the case of Olowoum differed. He was well aware of Olowoum and commented that *y'ap modenize Bondye*, or "they are modernizing God." He was skeptic of the Olowoum name's ritual efficiency and meant that it was primarily something "for people to hear" – i.e., a superficial move with little content. He was convinced that also those Vodou priests who publicly advocated the Olowoum name used the Bondye appellation in their private religious practice. All magic had to include homage to God or Bondye[20] – and if one does not call him by his correct name, my friend continued, he will not hear and the magic will fail. It would be as futile as "calling Jean if you need to see Paul."

Judging from the above statements – and my own periods of direct observation in the field over a number of years – it appears that Olowoum has not influenced local-level religious practice considerably. One aspect is that Vodou is, after all, focused on serving the *lwa* spirits and not the Creator God, or Godhead. For those in more specific need of the Lord, or Jesus, there are always the Christian churches which specialize ritually on that. Also noteworthy is that few individuals seemed to discard or oppose the introduction of Olowoum. Rather, Olowoum appears to have been added, perhaps quite uninterestedly so, to the local pantheon.

Before concluding, we will take a brief look at attempts of eliminating the Catholic saints from Vodou. The Catholic saints are used to represent Vodou spirits. Vodou practitioners also name saints in prayers and chants, undertake pilgrimage to saintly abodes as well as receive saintly revelations. Possibly, saints originally served simply as "white masks" of African spirits (cf. Bastide 1971: 156; cf. Rey 2002a: 269). Today, however, saints make part of the Vodou tradition and, depending on the believer, may take the form of a deeply entrenched aspect of *lwa* spirits.

The Elimination of Saints: A Comparative Example

An anti- or desyncretic measure advocated by some members and leaders of Vodou organisms (e.g., Fondation Vodou Sans Frontières, Legliz Vodou dAyiti) is to exclude the Catholic saints from Vodou practice. Arguments for excluding saints are that the saints, along with other Catholic elements, are extrinsic to the Vodou tradition. I have also met a few Vodouisants as well as Catholics, who have argued that if Vodou is to be recognized as a "serious religion" it cannot be dependent on Catholicism and Catholic elements.

Besides curbing the cult of saints in the form of prayers, church visits, and pilgrimages, the anti-syncretic approach involves the physical removal of the images of saints from altars and Vodou temples – thus changing their appearance quite dramatically. Some are of the opinion that images of the different *lwa*'s *vèvè* (ceremonial drawings) might be used as a pictorial replacement in-

19 The Vodou spirits are thought to belong to different "nations" which often reflect specific ethnic origins (e.g., Ibo, Wangol, Dawome, Nago, Kongo, Mondongue).

20 Magical works normally include prayers or consecrations to God. However, according to some, for truly evil magical works God is not invoked. Several Vodouisants seem to think that despite the fact that God gives humans the power to do evil, he does not approve.

stead.[21] Here it can be added that, of course, many Haitians think that neither the representations of *lwa* nor of saints can be established as they are spirits. Some Protestants remark with reference as much to Vodouisants as to Catholics that there were no cameras during biblical times and that the images of saints are made by humans.

I asked three advocates of the exclusion of Catholic elements if they did not think, it would be difficult to convince Vodou practitioners in general to dispose of the saints. They agreed and meant it should be a very slow process and that it would probably be impossible to persuade old people. One person opined that as soon as the Vodou sector arrives creating an attractive Vodou Church (including Olowoum), Vodouisants would lose interest in Catholicism and its saints.

I have met comparatively few Vodouisants who say that they do not use saints in their religious practice, and I have encountered no case where I can confirm a completely desyncretized religious practice through direct observation. The following two examples illustrate that the saints might be excluded from some domains of magico-religious practice while retained in others. One example was that of a "big" and most respected Vodou priest outside Jacmel. When he showed me around his temple, there were no saints, neither in the form of murals nor in the form of paper lithographs in the spirit houses. This elderly priest explained that he thought that the saints do not belong to Vodou. However, in the same breath he continued that occasionally he used images of saints in (magical) "works."[22] Another example was when I visited the office of a large Vodou organization. The high functionary of the organization who received me was very concerned about eliminating all Christian influences from Vodou. After our conversation he invited me to see the organization's spirit room next to the office and where they also received clients in need of magic and healing. To my surprise, on the altar, I saw an ongoing magical work before the *lwa* spirit Ezili Dantor, involving the image of the dark-skinned "Our Lady of Czestochowa," a burning oil lamp, a dagger, and a handwritten note. I commented "Oh, there's an image"; an embarrassed silence followed and we left the room. The two examples show that, at least to some practitioners, the elimination of saintly forms or aspects of Vodou spirits are motivated by ideological reasons rather than the belief that the "saints" are ineffective when working with the spirits.

Anti-syncretic tentative and/or knowledge thereof, as mentioned, is more often found among "big" or influential Vodou priests and those of the better-off strata. Lower-income informants with less schooling sometimes had difficulties comprehending a clear division between folk Catholic elements such as saints or Christian prayers and other Vodou practice. One of my economically poor informants, for example, meant that the saints and the *lwa* simply were the same. As an argument he explained that the *lwa* which visited him in his dreams looked just like the saints on the images (this is a common appearance of *lwa* in dreams). The mere thought of a strict division between saints and *lwa* seemed unsettling and provocative to him. Another, unusual, example was that of one illiterate person, who I know very well, and who was unaware that the picture used to represent the *lwa* spirit Ezili Dantor also represented a Catholic saint with a different name.

When I commented that I, for example, had met people in Port-au-Prince who wanted to exclude the saints, some people even got angry and shouted things like "then they do not understand Vodou very well," or that "it's the same people who bring folklore and gays into Vodou!" One interviewee commented in the following way on those who "put the saints at the outside":

> There are priests who don't use them [images of saints], but they are ignorant. Because, the image of the saint is important, you have a patron saint. You may say "It's Sacré Coeur who's my patron saint" ... It's normal to use her image at your house. Every saint accompanies a *lwa* spirit. If you serve, you have to use its photo, image, in a normal fashion ...
>
> MT: Do you now if they put *all* things Catholic at the outside?
>
> Look, they should. If they don't have images of saints at their house – they are supposed to. When they do a bunch of things at their house they shouldn't salute, *Notre Père*, Our Father. Because when you read Our Father – with whom are you speaking? It's with the saints. When you say "*Je vous salue Marie, pleine de grâces, le Seigneur est avec vous*." But where is your Mary image at your house? You put it at the

21 These ceremonial drawings are probably influenced by freemasonry (cf. Cosentino 1995). Obviously, freemasonry and Vodou have exchanged some ideas in Haiti. The ceremonial drawings used today are largely based on the collections made by the ethnographer Milo Rigaud. Some informants say that older ceremonial drawings were simpler, and/or less symmetric (pers. comm. with Rachel Beauvoir, 2006-11-17).

22 At least once, he also adhered to the common practice of closing one step of the initiation ceremonies with a folk Catholic baptism (I godfathered one of his neophyte Vodou priests). Possibly, initiates demanded such a baptism, despite the priest's personal reluctance.

outside. According to me, [then] you're working in the emptiness, you lack vision, you don't have a true objective.

Concluding Reflections

Generally speaking, Vodou practitioners appear a lot more confident and inspired when talking about the characteristics of particular spirits than the ontological nature of God. In the light of the discussion on Olowoum above, it is noteworthy that the issue of excluding the saints provided more detailed answers. Interlocutors gave personal opinions and motivated them with ethnographic detail on attributes of, and correspondences between, saints and *lwa*. Extremely few Vodouisants appear to have excluded the saints from their practice. My impression also is that the saints, alongside other Catholic elements, will subsist for a long time to come in the beliefs and practice of the majority of Vodouisants.

Vodouisants seem to accommodate the novelty of Olowoum – either as a separate God or as an alternative name for Bondye – with relative ease. In my experience, Olowoum did not evoke any particularly strong feelings or opinions among Vodou practitioners. Outside the nucleus of organizations such as Legliz Vodou dAyiti, Olowoum appears to have been adding to, rather than replacing, more Catholic interpretations of Bondye or God. In a similar way, recognizing Lucifer as a "God of the material world," does not eliminate Vodou's "classic" Catholic prayers to God or litanies to the saints.

The saints are closer to the practice and experience of people than God and/or Olowoum. Vodou is primarily about serving the spirits, not God. Consequently, abandoning Catholic-derived phenomena such as the saints would have drastic implications for everyday religious practice. Adding Olowoum, on the other hand, in the popular setting, may involve non-demanding acts such as briefly mentioning him in prayers or esoteric discussions with friends. In sum, the "movement of desyncretization" – which involves the exclusion of traditional practices – will have problems with becoming successful. The "reafricanizing movement" of bringing in new influences, in contrast, seems fraught with little opposition. Thus, the "movement of reafricanization" as formulated by some religious leaders and organizations in Haiti, also seems to have been reformulated at the local or grassroots level so that it can coexist peacefully with Afro-Catholic syncretic elements.

In sum, the case of Olowoum also suggests the openness of Vodou cosmology which in turn is a cornerstone of its syncretic capacities whether regarding the incorporation of Western or, as in the case of Olowoum, African elements. Some writers have claimed that reafricanization, or other attempts to revitalize ethnic and cultural heritages, may actually lead to a break with long-standing traditions (see e.g., Wafer 1991: 56–58). I, however, propose that in one sense, ideas such as reafricanization or desyncretism, in fact, are quite "traditional" or "authentic" in that they reproduce the dynamism and adaptability which so often have been pointed out as characteristic of African-American religions (cf. Houk 1995). In that way, reafricanization also appears as a continuation rather than a rupture of Haitian Vodou practitioners' tradition of evolving the means for communing with the spirits from the ancestral *Lafrik Ginen*.

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