

(Dé)respecter les vieux de Guinée: Vodou, Class, and Citizenship in Haitian Literature

It is common belief in Haiti that upon death, one returns to Guinea. *Ginen* embodies a spirit and a mythological place in Africa and the netherworld (Murrell, 2010, p. 83). Such cherished belief, embedded in Vodou, speaks to the way transplanted bodies in the Caribbean still yearn for citizenship and belonging. Indeed, from the infamous Bois Caiman ceremony that gave birth to the Haitian Revolution in 1789 to the mundane, Vodou informs all aspects of life in Haiti. Yet, as fissure of class reveals a formidable elite and a marginalized peasantry, Vodou emerges as a force that both unites and divides.

This article examines the ways in which Haitian literature addresses the tensions of class and citizenship around Vodou in the works of Jacques Roumain and Marie Vieux Chauvet. Concentrating on the relationships of the protagonists with themselves and their community, it seeks to uncover and illustrate how they appropriate Vodou in ways essential to larger social discourses of citizenship and belonging. It further explores how Vodou serves as a catalyst that forces protagonists to reckon with issues of class and gender. Ultimately, it will assert that even while moving within the real and imagined, the spiritual and the sociopolitical, in depicting the tensions that surround Vodou, the novels openly air out a repressed symbol that Haitians can and should reappropriate in their own ways.

Vodou has long captured the Western imaginary, while similarly enjoying a complicated presence within the Haitian psyche. In America and Europe, Vodou conjures up sensational images of dolls with pins, animal sacrifices, zombies, spells, and black magic. It is often represented “as the ultimate antithesis of ‘civilization,’ a case of African superstition reborn in the Americas” (Dubois, 2010, p. 92). Recurrent natural disasters, dysfunctional government systems, and neocolonial policies have not alleviated Haiti’s burden as “cursed.” For instance, in the wake of the January 12, 2010 earthquake that killed an estimated 300,000, French-speaking media characterized Haiti as “île maudite” and “pays martyr.” The day after the earthquake, American television evangelist Pat Robertson reminded its viewers that long time ago, “they got together and swore a pact to the devil ... true story ... so the devil said okay, it’s a deal. And they kicked the French out [...] Ever since, they have been cursed by one thing after another” (YouTube video). For outsiders like Robertson, Vodou enters the historical scene as something barbaric and nefarious, while for insiders, Vodou serves as a tool to construct and cement one’s identity.

In digging further into Haitian colonial history, one discovers that the Fulas, Bambaras, Fon-Dahomey, Ibo, Kongo, Yoruba, and other African nations that the French enslaved since 1691 turned Saint-Domingue into the richest colony for France. St. Domingue exported sugar, cotton, coffee, and indigo, providing these goods for half of Europe (Murrell, 2010, p. 61). To maintain and maximize profits, planters submitted slaves to harsh working conditions of sixteen to eighteen hours workdays with sustained and cruel punishment. Consequently, slaves lasted seven years on a plantation and lived an average of thirty years. At the beginning of the Haitian Revolution, two-thirds of the 500,000 slaves were African born. History attests that “[n]ot only were family, communal, and linguistic bonds broken by the act of enslavement, but once slaves were in the colony, concerted efforts were made to rid them of any vestige of their African heritage and to remake them into compliant cogs in the wheel of the colonial machinery” (Murrell, 2010, p. 61). Vodou, thus, became the outward manifestation of paganism that Christian civilization attempted to wipe out, with both state and canon laws (Murrell, 2010, p. 61).

Let us recall that in the colony, the penal and often deadly measures drove the African religion underground. Under the cover of darkness, slaves of various ethnic groups gathered and performed their rituals and dances, creating and forging a pan-Haitian Creole identity with a subversive ideal. It is in that spirit, that they met in Bois Caiman the night of August 22, 1791, where the Maroon leader and Vodou priest Boukman and the mulatta priestess Cécile Fatiman organized a ceremony that galvanized tired, broken, and humiliated bodies into warriors that ultimately wrestled their freedom from the French. The ceremony at Bois Caïman has been universally accepted as the catalyst for the only successful slave revolt in the history of mankind, and in so doing, endows Vodou with a potent symbol of unity, autonomy, and empowerment.

Nevertheless, the spirit of resistance that Vodou embodies, its mysterious elements, and its cultural affinity with Africa has attracted much hostility and censure throughout Haitian history. Haitian literature, notably in Jacques Roumain’s *Gouverneurs de la rosée* (1944) and Marie Vieux Chauvet’s

Amour, Colère, Folie (1968) speak to the ways in which Vodou pervades the land, even as it frays the Haitian social fabric.

Gouverneurs de la rosée tells the story of Manuel, who, after fifteen years of cutting cane in Cuba, returns to his village to find the land desolate and arid, the people divided into two hostile camps, and eventually brings the people together by finding water, sacrificing his life for the triumph of solidarity. Well inscribed in the *indigéniste* movement, this novel is a departure from literature that has previously sought inspiration from French romanticism. With the *indigéniste* movement, Creole rhythms, syntax, and peasant life boldly infuse the text.

Right at the beginning of the novel, dusty wind carries a faint hum to the reader. It is that of Manuel's mother, Délira, whose old and tired body, groans her misery, "un reproche infini à tous les saints et à ces divinités sourdes et aveugles d'Afrique qui ne l'avaient pas entendue, qui s'étaient détournés de sa douleur et ses tribulations" (p. 26). On the one hand, her lasting disappointment points the finger at the detachment of the gods, exacerbated perhaps by the widening distance between Africa and Haiti. On the other, it is also pointed at herself (and her community) with the understanding that they are to be blamed for the shutdown. Moreover, her mixing of Catholic saints and African gods demonstrate how Haitians have long interwoven Catholicism into Vodou in order to ensure its survival. She calls on both of them, finds fault in both of them, pursuing her lamentations, "Ô Sainte Vierge [...] ô Maître des Carrefours, ouvre-lui un chemin sans dangers. Amen," easily gliding between deities and civilizations (p. 26).

In any case, the depiction of Manuel as pragmatic, yet out of touch with his roots contrasts sharply with that of his traditional mother. In a vigorous exchange, Manuel chastises his mother and the characterization of her misfortune as divine: "C'est traite la résignation; c'est du pareil au même que le découragement [...] on attend les miracles et la Providence, chapelet en main, sans rien faire. On prie pour la pluie, on prie pour la récolte, on dit les oraisons des saints et des loa" (p. 49). He continues, "Mais la Providence [...] c'est le propre vouloir du nègre de ne pas accepter le malheur, de dompter chaque jour la mauvaise volonté de la terre, de soumettre le caprice de l'eau à ses besoins ; alors la terre l'appelle : cher maître et l'eau l'appelle : cher maître" (p. 49). In using words like *vouloir*, *dompter*, *soumettre*, *maître*, Manuel reconfigures the power relations between nature and man, placing nature at the mercy of man.

Devoir: Honor and respect for the *Iwa*¹

Both *Gouverneurs de la rosée* and *Amour, Colère, Folie*, demonstrate how the characters honor the ancestral traditions of Vodou, by serving specific *Iwa*, passed on from ancestors or as part of a family and the community. Typically mediated through a houngan and often with a ceremony, the *devoir* or allegiance cut across race and class. Not keeping one's engagement towards these spirits could usher disastrous consequences for oneself or one's family.

In *Gouverneurs de la rosée*, it is again the mother who reminds Manuel about the ceremony she has set up with the houngan, "C'est un grand devoir que nous avons à remplir" (p. 60). She insists, "C'est lui, Papa Legba, qui t'a ouvert le chemin du retour [...] Atibon-Legba, le maître des carrefours. Il nous faut le remercier"(61). The novel provides a vivid example of a ceremony for the reader, starting with the *vêvé*, an intricate drawing of corn meal or flour that "forces a *Iwa* to respond and appear at the ceremony" (Murrell, 2010, p. 80). Legba, which the text describes as "le vieux dieu de Guinée," then mounts someone in the assistance, and speaks through him. The reader discovers that each *Iwa* has their fondness for food. For Legba, it is "épis de maïs boucané, arrosé de sirop et d'huile d'olive, des salaisons, des gâteaux" and liquor to quench his thirst (p. 63). Though Legba appears and speaks, "Je vois que vos affaires vont mal avec cette sécheresse. Mais ça va changer, ça va passer [...] je suis le maître de ce carrefour," a glaring contradiction remains (p. 63). His movement and words belie his oldness, weakness and distance, which the text describes as

¹ Also spelled as loa, here I am using the Creole orthography. In *Vodou, Power, and Performance in Haiti and Its Diaspora* (2002), the critic Elizabeth McAlister elucidates the way practitioners do not call Vodou a religion, rather say "that they *sèvi Iwa* (serve the spirit)" (11). She observes that "Haitians work with a complex pantheon of divinities who both shape and reflect the world for their spiritual 'children'" (11).

“mouvement sénile,” “main tremblait sur la béquille,” “mots essouffés et inintelligibles” (p. 63). In addition to the food and dance, an animal sacrifice takes place, in honor of the *lwa*.

Gouverneurs de la rosée depicts the ritual-laden ceremony as electrifying, with dancing and possessions taking place. It also shows that tense moments can occur, such as when an uninvited *lwa* appears, “Ogoun, le loa redoutable, dieu des forgerons et des hommes de sang,” prompting another *vèvè* to appease and welcome him (65). The disruptive *lwa* ushers a veiled prediction of Manuel’s death, casting a momentary cloud over the festivities. For the most part though, the reader pulsates with the sounds of the drums and senses the liberating energy that infuses the ceremony, old Délira “dansait,” the brave and manly Manuel “dansait et chantait,” “vaincu par la pulsion magique des tambours au plus secret de son sang,” and the villagers “oubliaient leur misère : la danse et l’alcool les anesthésiaient, entraînaient et noyaient leur conscience” (p. 63). While this ceremony invigorates, soothes, and unites, albeit temporarily, in *Amour, Colère, Folie*, Vodou embodies an element of discord between father and daughter.

Marie Vieux Chauvet’s novel, which tackles issues of race, class, and sexuality against an oppressive regime, takes place in a small, nameless provincial city, where three groups, the “aristocrats,” the “petits-bourgeois,” and the “peuple,” live in isolation. The main character, Claire (which means light in French), born to nearly white parents, and of the aristocratic group, finds herself alienated from her family and class as a result of her darker skin. For this aristocratic group, having a dearth of black blood, a direct lineage to noble French colonists, and a lack of contact with blacks turn into tangible markers of their superiority.

Claire’s profound malaise with herself centers on her skin color, the permanent and exterior reminder that she is closer to a population that her parents and her class abuse and despise. It is then incomprehensible for her, during a visit in the country, to see her “mulâtre-parisien” father “paré de colliers multicolores,” head wrapped in a red scarf, keeping his engagement to the *lwa*. The father tells his audience, “Je l’ai élevée comme un homme [...] elle est en âge à présent de tenir mes engagements” (p. 136). The father’s assertion shows the way a *devoir*, started with previous generations, must be maintained, except as the houngan points out, “[t]a fille te succédera à ta mort, seulement à ta mort” (p. 136). One can clearly see the interlocking of race and class at play here.

In the case of Claire, Vodou has always been a “religion honteuse que seul le pauvre peuple pratiquait” (p. 138). The father seems to indicate that his darker skinned daughter is more appropriate to continue such unpleasant tradition, while the daughter, a product of her class, dutifully dismisses his orders: “Il faut qu’elle serve aussi les loas” (1 p. 36). Contrary to Manuel’s mother, Délira, who intermingles Catholic saints with African gods, Claire strictly adheres to her Catholic religion, “Je n’ai qu’une religion [...] je ne servirai jamais les loas” (p. 136). The houngan blames Claire’s refusal on her bourgeois education, “Les prêtres catholiques et les religieuses lui ont farci la tête et lui ont parlé du vaudou comme de la damnation” (p. 20). The beginning of the novel captures the repeated admonition of the French priest to his congregants, “Le bon Dieu est mécontent de vous [...] vous vous adonnez à la superstition, vous pratiquez le vaudou. Dieu vous a punis” (p. 20). Indeed, scholarship abounds on how Catholic missionaries during and after the colonial era characterized African ancestral spirits as evil, which have not deterred Haitians from serving them as Claire notes, “Depuis trente ans qu’il vit dans le pays et qu’il combat cette religion, il n’a pas encore compris que rien jamais ne pourra la déraciner” (McCalister, 2013, p. 207, Chauvet, 2015, p. 20). If the white priest seems hopelessly out of touch, the houngan expresses hope that Claire’s refusal is only temporal, “elle y viendra elle-même comme toute bonne négresse” (p. 136). In so doing, he reconfigures Claire’s social paradigm, conferring and anchoring her within a blackness that has been absent, until now.

Claire’s mind and body become a locus upon which the war between ancestral practices and Christian civilization is waged. Her father violently and repeatedly beats her into submission while her other father, the French Catholic priest tells her, “Résistez, mon enfant [...] Résistez de toutes vos forces. La désobéissance dans ce cas vous est permise” (p. 139). The Catholic father sanctions Claire’s violation of the Ten Commandments, in which it states to honor your father and mother, while momentarily conferring martyrdom upon her. Further, much in the same way Haiti has been blamed for causing her own demise in embracing Vodou, the family grapples with the legacy of Vodou and its ramifications. Claire’s father sees in her disobedience, the unique cause of his losing the presidential election. Her mother, meanwhile, resents the black blood that forces them to reckon with

the peasant religion, “[h]élas ! il a eu l’imprudence de recueillir l’héritage de sa négresse de grand-mère et il a peur de ne pas pouvoir tenir ses engagements (p. 137). This “religion of the black peasantry,” according to the critic Ronnie Scharfman, is a “reminder of an Africa that many gallicized Haitian mulattoes would prefer to forget [...] and a return to the authenticity of its people” (p. 233). Therefore, Claire’s refusal to serve the *Iwa*, is ironic as it temporarily endows her with the whiteness that she desires and returns the father to the blackness that he fears.

In the two novels, Vodou rouses fear that protagonists ridicule or debunk. In *Gouverneurs de la rosée*, Manuel readily acknowledges, as a “nègre,” upon hearing the drums during the Legba ceremony, “j’ai dansé et j’ai chanté mon plein contentement [...] j’ai pris mon plaisir en tant que nègre véridique” (86). Nevertheless, he forcefully denounces the resigned attitude and the blind faith in the *Iwa*, which he calls, “bêtises,” “macaqueries,” “inutile,” “gaspillage” (p. 86). He stresses, “j’ai de la considération pour les coutumes des anciens, mais le sang d’un coq ou d’un cabri ne peut faire virer les saisons, changer la course des nuages et les gonfler d’eau” (p. 86). Manuel does not outright reject Vodou practices, but rather condemns a fatalist outlook that hampers community building and activism.

In *Amour, Colère, Folie*, Claire’s father uses Vodou to manipulate his low-waged peasants, “[j]e règne comme le roi lion sur mes terres [...] les paysans ont peur de mes ‘points vaudous’ et ils ne me voleront jamais” (p. 146). Doubtful, the daughter ponders, “[é]tait-il assez bon comédien pour jouer au vaudouisant de manière à tenir en main ses naïfs fermiers ?” (p. 146) The blatant hypocrisy with which her father deploys Vodou for his gain, reminiscent of Papa Doc Duvalier who employs Vodou “as an instrument of control over the population rather than an affirmation of the culture,” speaks to the ways in which the political and social elite of Haiti pervert Vodou (McAlister, 2013, p. 215).

In sum, through the lens of Vodou, Jacques Roumain and Marie Vieux Chauvet, both light-skinned members of the Haitian bourgeoisie, compellingly examine issues of power, race, and class, long entangled and deeply rooted in the soil of Haiti. The works decry the total abandon and defeatist attitude of some Haitians, antithetical to the spirit of freedom and resistance that Vodou embodies. Further, it illuminates the misappropriation and victimization of Vodou, whether it comes from the Church or the elite. Ultimately, the works suggest a respectable space within which ancestral religious practices could thrive and fruitfully contribute to the cultural and religious experiences of all Haitians.

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