

Trotter Review

Volume 17
Issue 1 *Literacy, Expression and the Language
of Resistance*

Article 5

September 2007

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Recommended Citation

Michel, Claudine (2007) "Tapping the Wisdom of Our Ancestors: An Attempt to Recast Vodou and Morality through the Voice of Mama Lola and Karen McCarthy Brown," *Trotter Review*. Vol. 17: Iss. 1, Article 5.
Available at: https://scholarworks.umb.edu/trotter_review/vol17/iss1/5

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Tapping the Wisdom of Our Ancestors:

An Attempt to Recast Vodou and Morality
through *the Voice** of Mama Lola and
Karen McCarthy Brown

Claudine Michel

Introduction[†]

In no other area of the world has the African been more dynamic or more influential in keeping the ethos of the motherland alive than in the Caribbean. Out of these small islands have come the culture-bearers, freedom-fighters, artists, and apostles of Africa in America.¹

Morality as an aspect and derivative of religious beliefs is difficult to appreciate when looking across cultural divides. Trying to establish universal principles of ethics and to ascertain the existence of absolute moral standards is an attempt to objectify morality at the

* The paper will make clear why “voice” is in the singular.

† This paper was written before I met Mama Lola and Karen McCarthy Brown. I subsequently had the good fortune of meeting both of them. If anything, my interaction with these women has further reinforced the views that I previously held. I wish to express my gratitude and appreciation to both of them for their great wisdom and their inspiration. I also wish to thank my family for the support provided during those long hours of work. I gratefully acknowledge the assistance of the William Monroe Trotter Institute and the support of James Jennings, the Institute’s former director.

expense of contextual reality—a reality that can only be apprehended through the filters of subjective perceptions, influenced by ideas, cultures and ideologies. If one rejects the traditional definitions of Kant, Habermas, Piaget, or Kohlberg, who equate the more complex and abstract with an objective standard of the more right and moral, it seems that the notion of universal rationality, as a basis for morality, must be abandoned in favor of a contextual morality—one that is grounded in the individual histories and cultures of various people.

In this essay, I demonstrate that morality is culture-specific and contextual. To illustrate this point, I focus on Vodou, a religion that has been almost entirely misrepresented in the West, foremost because of its African origins, and that is perceived as having no legitimate basis for morality. I attempt to interpret morality in Vodou by presenting a model of ethics construction based on the true meaning of the religion rather than on the *exotica* of its myths and ritualizing. My analysis is based on the fact that Haitians seem to have turned to their ancestral religion and to their African past to survive isolation and ostracism from the West—consistently using the Vodou religion as a tool of both resistance and continuity. In that respect, Vodou is a microcosm that reflects a reconstructed form of the traditional African world view and the moral values inherent to it.

What is Vodou?²

Vodou is a conglomeration of beliefs and rituals of West African origin, which, having incorporated some Catholic practices, has come to be the religion of the greater part of the peasants and the urban proletariat of the republic of Haiti as well as members of the Haitian elite and some foreign nationals. Its devotees ask of it what people have always asked of religions: A basis for daily living, a remedy for ills, help in times of hardships, satisfaction of needs, and hope. McCarthy Brown states that: “Vodou is the system that [Haitians] have devised to deal with the suffering that is life, a system whose purpose is to minimize pain, avoid disaster, cushion loss, and strengthen survivors and survival instincts.”³ Courlander wrote: “In short, [Vodou] is a true religion which attempts to tie the unknown to the known and establish order where there might otherwise be chaos. For those who believe in Vodou, no event or episode is a thing in itself. In birth and death, good fortunes and bad, the loa⁴ are somehow involved.”⁵

Bellegarde-Smith's⁶ encompassing definition of *Vodun* sheds light on the true meaning of the religion:

Vodun is a coherent and comprehensive system and world view in which every person and everything is sacred and must be treated accordingly. In Vodun, everything in the world—be it plant, animal, or mineral—shares basically similar chemical, physical, and/or genetic properties. This unity of all things translates into an overarching belief in the sanctity of life, not so much for the *thing* as for the *spirit* of the thing. The cosmological unity in Vodun further translates into a vaunted African humanism in which social institutions are elaborated and in which the living, the dead, and the unborn play equally significant roles in an unbroken historical chain. Thus, all action, speech, and behavior achieve paramount significance for the individual and the community of which the individual is part.⁷

The American ethnobiologist, Wade Davis, also unveils some interesting truths about the Haitian religion:

[Vodoun is] a complex mystical world view, a system of beliefs concerning the relationship between man, nature, and the supernatural forces of the universe. Vodoun cannot be abstracted from the day to day life of the believers. In Haiti, as in Africa, there is no separation between the sacred and the secular, between the holy and the profane, between the material and the spiritual. Every dance, every song, every action is but a particle of the whole, each gesture is a prayer. . . . Vodoun not only embodies a set of spiritual concepts, it prescribes a way of life, a philosophy, and a code of ethics that regulate social behavior.⁸

The followers of the ancestral cult refer to their religious beliefs and practices by the phrase *sevi lwa yo*—which can best be translated as “serving the spirits.”⁹ An adept of Vodou simply says, “I serve the spirits,” which in itself is a revealing statement about the nature of the

religion, the importance of withdrawing the self and serving *others*, and about the spiritual connections existing between living human beings, their ancestors, and their gods. Also, an understanding and knowledge of African religions and philosophy allows one to read even more into such a phrase: It clearly connects this religion of the New World to the African ethos and world view.

Courlander offers yet another compelling definition, which further exemplifies Vodou's African connection, resilience, and pervasiveness:

Vodou permeates the land, and, in a sense, it springs from the land. It is not a system imposed from above, but one which pushes out from below. It is a thing of the family, a rich and complex inheritance from a man's own ancestors. It is not the priests of Vodou who control and direct its course. They, like the poorest peasant simply move about within it and make use of its resources. Vodou is strong and it cannot die easily. . . . You cannot destroy something with such deep genuine roots. You may warp it, twist it, make it crawl along the ground instead of growing upright, but you cannot kill it [especially] in light of the inner history of the race.¹⁰

C. L. R. James wrote in *The Black Jacobians*: "Left to themselves, the Haitian peasantry resuscitated to a remarkable degree the lives they had lived in Africa . . . and above all their religion. . . . All this was Africa in the West Indies. But it was Haitian."¹¹ In a work focusing on the persistence of African religions in the Americas, Barrett comments: "The slave master was able to claim the body of the slave, but the world view of the African was nurtured in his soul and this soul was impregnable."¹² Barrett explains how religion was the motivating and unifying force for the many different ethnic groups who found themselves in the New World¹³ and he acknowledges Vodou's "noble history" as a catalyst for the revolutionary accomplishments for which Haiti is known.¹⁴ It is well documented that through their traditional religion and world view, Haitians have survived oppression, found modes of expression, and recreated a modified African society and ethos which have to some extent Africanized the American continent. Thompson wrote that "vodun was Africa *reblended*."¹⁵

For years, scholars have pursued the possibility that the term Vodou is of Dahomean origin, derived from the *Fon* word for "god" or "spirit." This is one means by which Vodou has been distinguished from "Voodoo," the sign of the fabulous creation of the Euro/American imagination. Increasingly, with the aim of reclaiming the West African origins of the religion and for the sake of authenticity, a number of scholars are rejecting all Western spellings, including Vaudou, favored in the francophone world, and Vodou for the terms Vodun or Vodoun. Different spellings suggest different meanings. Bellegarde-Smith, for example, favors *Vodun*, which, according to him, derives from two words *vo* and *du*, which mean "introspection into the unknown." He writes about a Zulu teaching, which, like other forms of African humanism, stresses the need for further self-exploration: "The challenge of being human is forever to explore myself. I challenge the universe to show me a being higher than myself."¹⁶ Bellegarde-Smith further explains the introspective communion with higher beings and possessions: "One who has not become a divinity should not worship. Anyone worshipping a divinity without first becoming one will not reap the fruit of that worship."¹⁷ The renaming of the religion as *Vodun* or *Vodoun* should be placed in the context of an even larger movement to redefine, recast, and reconstruct the origins, the meaning and the sociopolitical significance of the religion of the Haitian people.

"Voodoo," the Euro/American-created term, never fails to spark excitement. It suggests distorted images of superstitions, sorcery, blood sacrifices, and sexual orgies. In particular, in novels and films, American popular culture dwells on images of Voodoo's malevolence, on zombies and snakes. Writing about Vodou and morality may therefore seem paradoxical since Voodoo is usually presented in the West in opposition to true religion; that is, Christianity. It is often said that Haitians are 85 percent Catholic, 15 percent Protestant, and 100 percent Vodou believers. The same saints who decorate the altar watch over the *hounfort*, or the Vodou temple.

In the United States, the word Voodoo is used in a casual and derogatory manner to indicate, on the one hand, anything magical or miraculous and, on the other hand, anything from the deceptive to downright evil.¹⁸ Such constructed views, widely shared in the West and in the foreign press, are used as evidence of Haitian backwardness and represent ethnocentrism at its worst.

The wide distribution and negative cultural impact of such demeaning characterizations of Vodou and of Haiti are exemplified by their appearances in various media—a dictionary, a popular magazine, and a scholarly book chapter.

[Voodoo encompasses] a body of primitive rites and practices, based on a belief in sorcery and the power of charms fetishes, etc., found among natives of the West Indies and in the southern United States, and ultimately of African origin.¹⁹

It is Voodoo that is the devil here. It is a demonic religion, a cancer on Haiti. Voodoo is worse than AIDS. Did you know that in order for a man to become a houngan he must perform anal sodomy on another man? No, of course, you didn't! So what can you expect from these people?²⁰

The ancestor cult appears to be fundamentally apolitical.²¹

The Cultural and Political Ideology Surrounding Vodou

Laguerre, Bellegarde-Smith, Desmangles, Davis, McCarthy Brown, and other scholars have attempted to penetrate Vodou's true meaning and to recast the real significance of the religion. Using new epistemological foundations and methodological approaches, their work aims at re-constructing the essence of the Vodou religion, which, in turn, sheds light on Haitian traditional values as well as on social and political realities.

The anthropologist Michel Laguerre is among the scholars whose work has consistently refuted, among other false depictions and misrepresentations, the contention that Vodou is apolitical. He has published a number of studies²² establishing the close connections between Vodou and Haitian politics and substantiating, for example, how secret societies are a "paramilitary group connected to the voodoo temples."²³ While Desmangles devotes a significant section of his latest book, *The Faces of the Gods*, to the historical and political setting that shaped the Vodou religion, the argument is not new.²⁴ One of the first scholars to have suggested the revolutionary role of Vodou was C. L. R.

James who declared that "Voodoo was the medium of the conspiracy."²⁵

In *Passage of Darkness*, Wade Davis showed the complex role of the Vodou secret societies in first sustaining, and then in overthrowing the Duvalier regime.²⁶ He also retraced the political ideology of these societies to the maroon communities of the colonial era. He explained how zombification²⁷ is the ultimate form of sanction imposed in the Vodou world as a means of maintaining social and political order in local communities. Bellegarde-Smith called these societies "a government lannuit" (nighttime government) that governs while the official government is asleep.²⁸ He explains how in the Haitian countryside, away from the control of the official government, the vodun communities are respected more than feared "as they mete out justice in a *democratic* setting (if democracy is defined as being of and for the people). They run what is a parallel judicial system to that of the elite-controlled government."²⁹ In his book, *Haiti: The Breached Citadel*, Bellegarde-Smith sustains the argument that the significance of the Vodun religion in Haitian history is profound and undebatable.³⁰

Western Objectivity: Obstacle to the Truth?

Maya Deren in her important work on Vodou, *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti*, questioned the very notion of Western "objectivity":

Is it not worth considering that reverence for *detachment*—whether scientific or scholarly—might be primarily a projection of a notion of a dualism between spirit and matter? . . . Is it valid to use this means to truth [Western objectivity] in examining Oriental or African cultures that are not based on such dualism and that are, on the contrary, predicated on the notion that truth can be apprehended only when every cell of brain and body . . . is engaged in that pursuit?³¹

In the same vein, Karen McCarthy Brown explains how, in some traditions, people write history books to remember their ancestors and capture past experience, while in others they call *gede*³² and other *lwas* to hear about their forefathers in a lively and relevant fashion:

Whereas in our eyes truthfulness is the paramount virtue of any historical account, in theirs [the Haitians]

what matters most is relevance and liveliness. . . . I am part of a culture that seeks to capture experience, historical and otherwise, in books. So I write a book about Mama Lola. But in doing so, I try to remember that she is part of a culture that serves Gede . . . the one who tells the ancestral tales in the form of fictionalized short stories and in so doing plays with truth, seeking to bring it alive for its immediate audience.³³

In *Writing About "the Other,"*³⁴ McCarthy Brown related how she stopped seeing the mambo, Mama Lola, as the other, how she herself became *the other* in the academic world because she could no longer be a totally detached and objective researcher, and how their voices became *one voice*³⁵ through which is revealed the beauty of the social and spiritual message of their religion. Despite real differences inherent in their origins, class, and level of education, they had much in common and were able to reach a level of friendship and symbiosis which is communicated via the craftsmanship of McCarthy Brown, who steps back as often as necessary to let Mama Lola speak and, through her, to tap the wisdom of the ancestors.

Standards of truthfulness, objectivity, and clarity were less important to Karen McCarthy Brown than those of fairness and justice toward her primary informant, Mama Lola. In spite of the canons of anthropological methods and despite the fundamental cultural epistemological dilemma that she faced, she set out to do justice to Vodou, which gave her a "rich, unblinkingly honest view of life" and to Mama Lola, the one whom she calls mother, a traditional title of respect for one's Vodou teacher.

Her mission was larger than the mission her academic training prescribed: She was determined to study Vodou in its own right. She wrote:

I felt compelled to do justice to Alourdes³⁶ and to her world in my writing. Both moral and aesthetic judgments came into play, for example, in choosing the telling detail or the revelatory incident designed to capture definitive aspects of her life.

Justice as a goal in my relationship with Alourdes has

always meant, among other things, that I could not exploit her, misrepresent my intentions, or turn away from her once I had what I needed. Financial obligations, like those of time and energy, could not be limited to what was necessary to grease the flow of information in the book. A true friendship is not over because a writing project is done. . . .

I could not have written *Mama Lola* if Alourdes had not challenged me, trusted me, and become my friend. Through our friendship, we have served scholarship's end of deepened understanding, in this case by showing Vodou at work in the intimate details of one person's life. We both hope that our risk taking will help to counter the distorted image of this ancient religion.³⁷

The Dancing Voice of Mama Lola and Karen McCarthy Brown

To elucidate some of the forms that morality takes in Haitian Vodou, I have chosen to investigate the work of Karen McCarthy Brown, scholar of religion³⁸ and Vodou initiate,³⁹ because of her rather special approach in this area of scholarship. In particular, I focus on her book, *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn*, a ground-breaking work,⁴⁰ in which she presents Vodou as it is lived, as it is incorporated into one's daily existence, as it shapes and "balances"⁴¹ one's psychological, social, and moral world. She wrote to that effect: "I have chosen to enter the public discussion of Vodou by another route: constructing a portrait of this religion as it is lived by Alourdes and the people closest to her."⁴²

As McCarthy Brown stated, her intent was to let Vodou speak in its own terms though, at times, she interjected some analysis in her narrative. Despite the brilliance of her comments and remarks, clearly, analysis and theory building were not her primary concern. This latter task is what I endeavor to do here. Using McCarthy Brown's texts and narratives, her comments and remarks, her observations, her account of Alourdes's fictional family tales and life experiences—often reported in Mama Lola's own words—I propose a framework within which morality in the context of Haitian Vodou can be analyzed. Here I am using Mama Lola and Karen McCarthy Brown's many combined voices as a primary source of data⁴³ that provided me with the insiders'

comments, views, insights, and feelings that I needed to develop my model of analysis.

To the extent that some form of morals and ethics constitutes the essence of all religions, Mama Lola's life, her deeds and tenets—as an individual and as a priestess who orchestrates religious gatherings for the benefit of her Vodou family—reflect the moral beliefs of those who *serve the spirits*. These beliefs, which originate from a world view deeply rooted in a traditional African value system, represent a code of ethics, though not a rigid, prescriptive, or written one. This complex code is passed down from generation to generation and people have to learn to interpret it and transmit it. McCarthy Brown had to understand and *live* this new vision of morality in order to attempt the formidable task of describing it to her readers.

Combined here is a wealth of data and voices: the various personae of Karen McCarthy Brown—the scholar, the writer, the feminist, the initiate—which communicate through her scholarly voice, distant enough to identify patterns and relationships and to stress the significance of events and behavior, but sufficiently immersed in the fluidity of Vodou not to be limited by logically coherent molds. Also combined here are the many voices of Mama Lola, the Haitian, the one who lives in a foreign land, the mother, and the priestess, along with the cohort of voices coming from the spirits who dance in her head and balance both her inner self and her public figure. The many voices of Mama Lola, combined with those of McCarthy Brown become one voice that has done and continues to do justice to the Vodou religion and to the African ethos, one voice that is dancing⁴⁴ with all their personae and that is inviting us to partake—that is, to find our own rhythm and balance, the only means in Vodou cosmology to lead a moral and ethical life. All this is the voice that helps sustain the theoretical foundation presented in this essay and, in particular, the notions of resistance and African continuity in Haitian Vodou.

Morality in Vodou Religion as Shaped by the African Ethos

In the introduction to *Mama Lola*, McCarthy Brown sets some parameters to understand how morality operates in the Vodou religion:

The spirits talk with the faithful. They hug them, hold them, feed them, but also chastise them. . . . Ogou/Saint James . . . not only liberates his people but also betrays

them. Ezili Danto/Mater Salvatoris, the mother, cradles and cares for her children but also sometimes lashes out at them in rage. The Vodou spirits are not models of the well-lived life; rather, they mirror the full range of possibilities inherent in the particular slice of life over which they preside. Failure to understand this had led observers to portray the Vodou spirits as demonic or even to conclude that Vodou is a religion without morality—a serious misconception.

Vodou spirits are larger than life but not other than life. Virtue for both the *lwa* and those who serve them is less an inherent character trait than a dynamic state of being that demands ongoing attention and care.⁴⁵

The Vodou world manifests a particular ethical orientation reflected in life lessons shared in the pages that follow and grounded in an African ontological conception of women and men and in their modes of interactions. Many of the monotheistic religions—Christianity, Islam, Judaism—are prescriptive and are accompanied by a book of law. From sacred texts, people extract general principles as measures of moral quality found therein. Things are more complicated in Vodou. Since Vodou does not have a prescriptive code of ethics, people have to find and define their own morality.

Adepts of the Haitian religion have to *balance* their lives in order to follow a moral path, ever guided by the overarching African ethos on which their religion is based. In Vodou cosmology, morality is dynamic, fluid, and contextual, as is life itself. The moral life of those who serve the spirits revolves around the following perspectives: Communal Emphasis, Respect for the Elders, Wholeness of Being, Black Aesthetics, and Healing and Coping Strategies. Their moral life also revolves around a form of collective self-consciousness where the inner self and the outside world converge, where content and form merge in one aesthetic. However, it is reasonable to say that Vodou offers no absolutes, no generalities, only trends and thematic modalities of lived ethical life.

- **Communal Emphasis**

*"Sim salalam, sa salawu [You in, you in]"*⁴⁶

" . . . human connection is the assumption; it is separation that requires both effort and explanation."⁴⁷

A form of communal humanism could explain the dependency of Haitians on one another. In the Haitian world, people derive both energy and their concept of selfhood from interactions with others. Individual personhood and the unique life history are suppressed in favor of the collective self. Traditionally, Haitians are not individualists: They have difficulty identifying themselves as separate individuals. As McCarthy Brown wrote:

The moral wisdom of Vodou lies in its teaching that it is precisely in responsive and responsible relation to others that one has the clearest and most steady sense of self . . . [that] leads not to self-sufficiency but to stronger and more sustaining social bonds.⁴⁸

This idea is echoed by Mama Lola's down-to-earth wisdom: "You eat with people, you always have food. You eat by yourself, you don't have nothing."⁴⁹ For her, the way to a well-balanced self is to gain respect from the collectivity by maintaining responsible relationships with community members and by not harming others: "When you do bad to people, that return—right on your back!"⁵⁰

Family is the first unit where communal sense manifests itself. It is a highly valued institution that prepares the individual for integration into the community. Children—one's own, nephews, nieces, cousins, neighbors—are central to the well-being of a household. Early on, people learn that children are needed to continue the chain of human beings and that dying childless is probably one of the worst curses. Haitians, in particular women—mothers and grandmothers alike—assume that the children born to them belong to them and are their responsibility until they are grown, and even after. Grown children do not usually leave the family home until they marry and they are expected to contribute to the financial well-being of the group, even when they have the responsibility of their own children and household. Older siblings are expected to assume a large part of the financial and moral responsibility for the education of their younger brothers and sisters. Great respect and care

are routinely accorded both the elderly and children, who are treated as precious gifts from God. A number of Haitian proverbs express some of the societal values associated with children: "One child is not a child" (in the sense of one is not enough) and "children are wealth." McCarthy Brown acknowledges this cultural phenomenon when she states: "During my visits in the late afternoon and early evening, children clamber over me."⁵¹

Nothing is ever immoral if it allows someone to fulfill responsibilities towards one's children. Mama Lola, for example, told McCarthy Brown: "Woman got to do all kinda thing. Right? I do that [working as a Marie Jacques⁵²] to feed my children. I'm not ashamed. . . . You got to put that in the book. Because that's the truth."⁵³ In Alourdes's code of ethics, morality in the absolute sense can never be placed above the welfare of the collectivity—in this case her children.

The extended family is without any doubt the dominant characteristic in Haitian society—both in Haiti and abroad. It defines status, makes choices, appropriates and divides time, controls assets and wealth, and distributes praise and blame. Mama Lola lives with two of her sons; her daughter, Maggie; the latter's two children; and often offers accommodation to members of her Vodou family who are in a period of bad luck, and to clients who are undergoing treatment. One of her sons, William, has a mental deficiency; the thought of putting him in an institution has never crossed her mind. The elderly, the sick, the handicapped traditionally have their place in the Haitian household. The rules that govern hospitality are strict: Mama Lola, for instance, could not conceive that McCarthy Brown would not spend the night of the spirits' birthday party at her place: "I don't care. Even you got to sleep on the floor, even I got to make a bed on top of my closet. . . . I always find a place for you, sweetheart!"⁵⁴

Tales and memories are held preciously and collectively in the family. The forefathers' stories and their words of wisdom are often told and quoted. Mama Lola's great grandfather, Joseph Binbin Mauvant, in reference to one's obligations toward the Vodou family, used to utter these African words: "*Sim salalam, sa salawu. Pa salaam, pa salawu* [You in, you in; you out, you out]."⁵⁵ This also shows how hard it is to penetrate the "family unit" to become one of them. McCarthy Brown explains, how, for example, as a *blan* (a white person) some were at first quite suspicious of her and fairly unwelcoming when she started visiting

Alourdes' house. But, once you are accepted, "You in" as Karen is now often reminded: "You are family."⁵⁶

Allegiance, love, prayers, support, and faithfulness are automatically due to the members of the group under all circumstances: You in, you in! Communal support takes the form of reciprocal gift giving and sharing among the living and between the living and the spirits, reinforcing the idea that they belong to the same world, although they are at a different phase of their spiritual journeys. Rituals allow the bridge to be crossed, so the ancestors actually meet the living. The services⁵⁷ are an opportunity to partake in the life of the Vodou family and to offer sacrifices and other types of gifts in appreciation and support. What one gives—that which goes from the material to the spiritual—is determined by hierarchy, status, and financial means:

Virtue is achieved by maintaining responsible relationships, relationships characterized by appropriate gifts of tangibles (food, shelter, money) and intangibles (respect, deference, love). When things go as they should, these gifts flow in continuous, interconnected circles among the living and spirits of the ancestors. In the ongoing cycle of prestation and counterprestation, each gives and receives in ways appropriate to his or her place in the social hierarchy—an overarching, relentless hierarchy that exempts neither the young child nor the most aged and austere spirit. Moral persons are thus those who give what they should, as defined by who they are.⁵⁸

More than in the West, where social conventions do prescribe concern for others, there are major communal expectations in the Vodou world. Ignoring family responsibilities, jeopardizing communal interests, and neglecting the *lwas* are serious moral matters and major offenses that trigger the disapproval, even the ostracism of the group, but moreover, that may diminish the care and protection of the spirits.

- **Respect for the Elders—Those Who Have *Konesans***⁵⁹

You coming after I don't see you for six months—no, almost a year I don't see you—and you don't even say, "Hello, how are you Mommie Lola?" Right away you

telling me what I got to do for you! ⁶⁰

The child who mimics the words of the mother and claims them as her own is the child who pretends to what she is not yet.⁶¹

This latter statement came as a result of McCarthy Brown's reflecting on an occasion when she may have been somewhat "out of order" for letting her Western feminist views direct her thoughts during an encounter with her Vodou mother. She had told her: "I am the one responsible for my life," which brought Mama Lola "into a stony silence that lasted for the better part of the day." McCarthy Brown noted: "When [Alourdes] spoke with others, words 'would drift my way. . . . 'Karen say *she* the one responsible for her life. Ehh!'"⁶² This was certainly a faux-pas; one never speaks like this to an elder—any elder for that matter—and, in particular, to someone who is, because of her very role as a priestess, responsible for people's life, responsible for bringing about *balanse* in and among members of her Vodou family and in the community in general.

The same goes for the first statement that Alourdes uttered to Theodore, a young Haitian, who had befriended Karen McCarthy Brown and who was bringing her to Mama Lola's house for the first time. What arrogance from this young fellow who, after being absent for six months or a year, had the audacity to show up at her door, telling her that he had brought a stranger, and what she could do for his friend. Mama Lola stated "and, you don't even say, 'Hello, how are you, Mommie Lola?' " This statement is yet another example, where the words mean more than what meets the ears. Theodore most certainly greeted her upon entering the house. Her statement probably referred to what she perceived as a lack of respect and deference exhibited by Theodore's casual greeting, which, in her estimation, did not pay her due respect by showing genuine concern for her and by inquiring at length about the details of her life, her health, or her family.

Her warmth came back later as she hugged him and said: "Theodore like my child! Even I don't see him; I know he thinking about me."⁶³ It is important to display affection to loved ones, and, importantly, no opportunity is ever lost to remind the younger generations of their duty toward the elders who, by virtue of their

seniority or status (both often come together), deserve absolute respect in Haitian society. An African-American proverb says: "You don't get old being no fool" while an Igbo proverb states: "What an old man sees sitting down, a young man cannot see standing." With age, come experience, wisdom and *konesans*, which bring about profound respect from the younger generations. To be virtuous is to provide for the elderly, to give them care, food, money, clothing, but also to show them love, respect, deference, and appreciation.⁶⁴

Vodou honors all bearers of *konesans*, which include the spirits, the ancestors, and the departed who communicate their wisdom through dreams and possessions. Respecting them, honoring them, serving them is inherent in the very essence of the religion. Although visits to the cemeteries are frequent, ancestors are mostly saluted during ceremonies and ritualizing—the Vodou services. On the other hand, the *lwas*, the gods of the Vodou pantheon, protect the living, watch over them, and serve as mediators between God, Bondye, the supreme being, and the humans with their real life problems (such as health, matters of love, work, finances, family difficulty, and the stressful life in general).

In binding reciprocity, the *lwas* serve humans as much as the living humans serve them. . . . Gods without worshippers are a sad lot indeed! For their part, the ancestors enforce reasonable laws, and the entire Vodun belief system is designed to provide a collective morality.⁶⁵

Failure to properly serve the *lwas* and the ancestors, failure to respect the elderly, and ill-treatment of the poor are morally destructive for the entire community. This may attract imbalance in the life of the person who has departed from the traditional values of the society, bring about "bad luck" for her or his family or, else, result in a form of "lashing out" against the living.

● Wholeness of Being

"I don't eat today."⁶⁶

"Vodou operates as a moral system not because it takes up what is good in life and human behavior and accentuates that, but rather because it takes up all of life

and intensifies it and clarifies it.”⁶⁷

The concept of wholeness of being is grounded in the idea of oneness and unity of all forces of nature, in the idea of interdependence and interconnectedness of these forces, and in the premise of supremacy of totality over individuality. We must seek out the idea behind every force of nature for all things have their philosophy, their meaning, and a connection with other entities:

From God to the least grain of sand, the African universe is a seamless cosmos. Each living force is in necessary union with other forces. . . . It is inserted in a dynamic hierarchy in which everything is interdependent. Thus, we are introduced into a universe of correspondences, analogies, harmonies, interactions.⁶⁸

The Cosmic Universal Force, Being itself,⁶⁹ explains how all things are forces in harmony and interconnected “since things that are contemplated, experienced, and lived are not separable.”⁷⁰ Moreover, Bellegarde-Smith commented that, “Intelligence, wisdom, energy, and power are born of the flesh of their origin, and the divine continues to inhabit the flesh. Morality, too, is born of matter.”⁷¹

Whereas morality in modern Western societies is almost always based on the concepts of individual rationality and personal responsibility, which stem from Cartesian philosophy (“I think, therefore I am”), “We are, therefore I am” is a paradigm that better expresses the dominant essence of ethics in an African context by showing the ties that link humans to one another. We are part of the human web, and each of our actions and deeds influences the balance of the outer world. We are not only responsible for our individual acts, we are responsible for the sake of others, and for the world around us. Acting morally implies keeping things balanced and respecting nature’s harmony.

Jean Manolesco explains in *Vaudou et Magie Noire*⁷² how, after initiation into Vodou, a person becomes one with all other living creatures as well as with the four main forces of nature: air, fire, water, and earth. Then, and only then, does the initiate lose forever the will and the desire to impose his ego on others. McCarthy Brown, as she described her psychological state after her Vodou initiation, echoed a similar idea:

All of us [North American feminists] have sought a spirituality that is more about empowerment than about gaining power over others . . . We have searched for a spirituality that enriches life without leading us to pretend that we know things we do not know or that we have a truth which rules out the truth of others. We have searched for a moral vision that is not abstract but interpersonal, with a complexity that does not paralyze and a tolerance that is not abdication of responsibility. In this difficult balancing act, we have at times acted as if we had to reinvent the wheel. What Vodou has shown me is that there are living traditions . . . that have long experience with the sort of spirituality we seek.⁷³

She further stated:

Vodou empowers women to a larger extent than the great majority of the world's traditions. As Haitians struggled to survive and adapt both during and after slavery, women gained social and economic power, gains that are mirrored in the influence of women within Vodou.⁷⁴

However, as in most elements that characterize Vodou, there is fluidity, imbalance, conflicts among poles—conflicts that keep us questioning: “Why, then, Gede, who is so flexible in other aspects of his character, held on so firmly to an ideology of male dominance?”⁷⁵ This question constitutes a catalyst to continued thriving to create harmony and recreate equilibrium in the area of gender. As McCarthy Brown wrote, “[we] . . . anxiously await Gedelia’s emergence from the cocoon of Haitian history and religion . . . a full-blown Gedelia [who] will be more than a Gede who happens to be female.”⁷⁶

Moreover, from the concept of wholeness of being derives the fundamental idea that the Vodou spirits are not saints because they are good, but because they are all-encompassing, global, full, complex, and because, as such, they mirror human life. They are whole and real and reflect life conflicts—which are always manifestations of disturbances in the web of human relations, manifestations of existing contradictions, and signs of imbalance. “The point is not to make conflict go away, but

to make it work for, rather than against, life.”⁷⁷

The spirits as they mount their *chwal*s⁷⁸ during possession-performances do not always appear fair, even-tempered, humble, level-headed, and self-sacrificing. They comfort, but also chastise; they console, but also ask for support; they give, but also make demands. And, during the ritualizing, they clarify things for the participants: They help us see what we may otherwise be oblivious to in our respective lives. It is often for the participants to realize how the particular images evoked by the spirits apply to their individual situation.⁷⁹ The *lwas* do not introduce what is not there already; they help us find equilibrium in the midst of a multiplicity of truths. In fact, “The Vodou participant does not turn to religion to be told what to do, but rather, to be shown how to see.”⁸⁰

Mbiti wrote that “the essence of African morality is . . . ‘societary,’”⁸¹ an observation that certainly applies to the Vodou religion. Creating dissonance in society’s polyrhythms, disturbing the harmonious flow of things, bringing about division in the community, are all acts that represent moral transgression in the Vodou world. Due to the web of interconnectedness, a person’s moral violations distract, disturb, and perturb the outer world, which ought to seek restoration of its harmonious state and rhythm. Vodou communities have their own set forms of restitution and punishment imposed for moral harm or offenses committed against customs and implicit rules regulating obligations and responsibilities towards the collectivity and the entities that compose it—the spirits, the ancestors, family members, society, or even nature. Morality, for those who serve the spirits, is a constant effort to maintain social cohesion, harmony, and balance. What is “right” in the Vodou world is not a function of abstract reasoning but is relative to what will achieve unity.

• Black Aesthetics—Fluidity/Balance/Rhythm—as Creator of Moral Style

“Don’t put money on the bed.”⁸²

“You cannot pray to Ogou alone. He is too hot. Light a candle for Damballah too.” A moral person . . . is thus one who can balance, “dance,” in the midst of forces pulling in opposing directions without missing the beat.

The moral person is one who has a strongly developed metronome sense—that is, a strongly developed sense of self. Yet . . . no rhythm, not even one's own, has any meaning outside of relationship."⁸³

"Don't put money on the bed!" yelled Alourdes at McCarthy Brown who one day was emptying the content of her purse on a bed. One should never do that, never. A bed and money belong to antithetical poles and, therefore, could be objects of conflict and sources of dissonance. McCarthy Brown was reminded that money, like the *ason*,⁸⁴ can be an instrument of coercive power and thus, of potential immorality and, as such, it should never be put on a bed, a place where people *kouche*,⁸⁵ "the place where children are made and born, the place where family begins."⁸⁶ Objects in vodou are not just things; they have a meaning that goes beyond functionality. There are prescribed ways to behave, rituals that highlight the function, purpose, and usefulness of any particular object or act. By acting, a person gives life to what is being acted upon. Objects and things have a soul and a life of their own originating from the cosmic energy infused in them in the making or through usage. Haitians, for example, believe in the power of the crossroads. The horizontal plane is said to be the mortal world and the vertical plane to be the metaphysical. Thus, the significance of the place where they meet, the *carrefour* or *kafu*—the crossroads—in Vodou cosmology. Deren wrote, "The crossroads, then, is the point of access to the world of the invisible which is the soul of the cosmos, the source of the life force, the cosmic memory, and the cosmic wisdom."⁸⁷

Vodou cosmology emphasizes uniformity, conformity, group cohesion, support for one another. Initiation ceremonies are a primary conveyor of this world view. To be initiated, to *kouche*, represents, in the most simplistic term, the death of the old self, and the birth of a new self, originating from a type of non-individualistic collective consciousness. During the days of seclusion, one is forced to regress into infancy and childhood—and, consequently, is treated as is appropriate for these stages—only to be brought back, through rituals designed to overcome fear, pain, and selfishness, to a new state of adulthood and maturity. McCarthy Brown wrote:

It was hard to become a child again, to let go of being in charge of myself, to give the care of myself over

to another. Most difficult was letting go of words, of the appearance of control. . . I bit my tongue to stop the *How? and When? and Why?* questions that pushed up inside me. I knew that they would be ignored or met with evasive answers. . . . Entering the chamber was like dying. Friends and family cried as they lined up to kiss the initiates goodbye. The genuineness of their tears gave me pause. The drums were pounding as they had been for hours with urgent, intricate, exciting Petro rhythms. . . . Seven times I raised my hand and then the darkness. . . . I was thrown off-balance in order to learn to find balance. . . . Ever so briefly I died.⁸⁸

When the initiates leave the chamber where they are secluded, their heads are covered. They must remain so for forty days after initiation.⁸⁹ Clearly, the how, the exercise of the art of initiation, is a moral message in itself: The forces of life and death are reckoned with, the limits of knowledge and power are challenged, truth and faith are revalorized through the initiation process—which is, to say the very least, an experience in humility and brotherhood. At these ceremonies, people voice their life conflicts—what would be called in the Western world, moral dilemmas. The task of the moral leader is to orchestrate the process (the energy of the participants, the choice of the songs, the rhythm of the music, the arrival of the spirits, the possession rituals) by which Vodou addresses these moral dilemmas and clarifies choices for the participants. Moral leadership is attributed to the spirits, never to the person mounted by a *lwa*, nor to the *hougans* or *mambos*. Therefore, the challenge of the moral leader is to be skilled at orchestrating the reception of that message. And that is where Alourdes truly excels. As she often says about her ministrations, her leadership, and her life in general: “I got plenty confidence in myself.” As an accomplished Vodou priestess, Mama Lola is a superb orchestrator of Vodou services, and therefore, in Haitian cosmology, a true moral leader. She presides to restore harmony and bring about equilibrium; her ritualizing style makes her a truly powerful technician of the sacred world of Vodou. She “serves” with style, “in order to lead” and is a teacher of distinction. McCarthy Brown, having witnessed many of Mama Lola’s “heroic” performances, and reflecting on the role of the moral leader, concluded:

The moral problem is not evil but imbalance, both within and among persons. In the context of this pluralistic and conflict-centered description of life, the moral leader is not one who sets her own life up as a model of imitation. It is rather that person who, as a subtle and skilled technician of the sacred, can orchestrate ritual contexts in which each person discovers how to dance his or her own way through a process of dynamic balancing with others who dance in their own way.⁹⁰

- **Healing and Coping Strategies**

"You just got to try. See if it works for you."⁹¹

"There is no Vodou ritual, small or large, individual or communal, which is not a healing rite."⁹²

In addition to the perspectives already discussed, there is in Haitian Vodou a very down-to-earth and utilitarian component grounded in the history of poverty and oppression of the small Caribbean nation. "It is no exaggeration," comments McCarthy Brown, that "Haitians have come to believe that living and suffering are inseparable."⁹³ Alluding to the incredible accomplishments and resilience of the Haitian people, she wrote elsewhere, "The wonder of Haiti is that its people seem to have responded to suffering throughout history by augmenting their stores of aesthetic and spiritual riches."⁹⁴

Trusting that the spirits will help in their struggle for survival, people turn to Vodou to secure a better life for themselves and their families, to heal their souls and their wounds, and to find hope for this life and the afterlife. Unlike other faiths, Vodou does not have a concept of a Golden Age, of an Eden or Heaven. The afterlife may turn out to be as harsh as present living conditions. Consequently, no value is more important than survival in this lifetime—survival of the self and survival of the group. Thus healing for immediate survival becomes a core element of the Vodou religion.

People bring to Vodou—as they do in all religions—their burdens, difficulties, and sorrows. The moral function of a ceremony becomes apparent as it turns into a collective healing service: "The

drama of Vodou . . . occurs not so much within the rituals themselves as in the junction between the rituals and the troubled lives of the devotees. . . . There is no Vodou ritual, small or large, individual or communal, which is not a healing rite."⁹⁵ At Vodou ceremonies, crucial community bonds are reinforced through the airing of group and individual problems. Through interactions with the spirits, misunderstandings are clarified; "good luck" and protection given; and herbal treatments, divination, card reading, and preparation of charms are put to work as part of the ancestral cult. McCarthy Brown describes the range of Mama Lola's healing practices as follows: "She deals both with health problems and with a full range of love, work, and family difficulties. . . . Alourdes combines the skills of a medical doctor, a psychotherapist, a social worker, and a priest."⁹⁶ Healing in Alourdes's world is never one thing or some work to be done. It is much more encompassing: It is an attitude and, moreover, a dance with the spirits.

In a Haitian setting, even children are toughened so that, later, they are able to cope with life's inevitable disappointments and deceptions. "You got to make them tough," said Maggie to Karen after an encounter that would have disturbed more than one Westerner. A child was promised that he could go with Karen if he ate his dinner—which he did. When time came for him to put his coat on to go out as promised, he was told to "sit down" because Karen "was not going to take him."⁹⁷ Mock promises, changes of plans, excessive authoritarian measures are used often in the Vodou world to teach children that life is not a bed of roses and that, at times, you don't get what you were promised, even after you have worked for it. During rituals, children often hear people singing about "*Travaj, travaj* [work, oh, work]," the single leitmotiv of a Vodou song, which honors the value of hard work as much as it conveys the resignation and sadness of a people who have not always reaped the benefit of its labor.

"You just got to try. See if it works for you," Mama Lola told Karen, who was then considering the possibility of further involving herself in the Vodou religion. Karen was not asked whether she believed in the religion; she was not asked to make a commitment to the faith; it was only suggested that she try it to see if it helped her in the serious personal difficulties she was facing at the time. Vodou is not a doctrinal religion that one may systematically study; it has to work for you to be valuable. As Karen later realized, had she "brought less to this Vodou

world, [she]. . . would have come away with less." She confided: "If I persisted in studying Vodou objectively, the heart of the system, its ability to heal, would remain closed to me."⁹⁸ After her initiation, Mama Lola further instructed her "daughter" on the power that she herself may exercise by listening to the spirits:

That your power. That your *konesans*. That how it works!. . . . You got a feeling you not suppose to do something, you listen, you don't do that thing. But, if you got a feeling the spirit telling you to do something. . like you want to help somebody. . . . Then, you do it, that person is going to be okay.⁹⁹

When to do what? What to use? When to use it? Whom to listen to? When to listen? These are questions to which experience and time bring answers. One has to learn to use good judgment in order to maximize power to one's advantage and for the benefit of others we wish to assist. As the various personifications of Ogou show, there is a potentially destructive force in the use of power: "Power liberates, power corrupts, power destroys."¹⁰⁰ Using power negatively creates disharmony in society and nature, but also, as Mama Lola believes, doing wrong to people comes right back onto you. This further exemplifies the pragmatic side of the ancestral religion: Self-protection and self-preservation should temper our actions. Alourdes, the empathic person, the giver, also exhibits a down-to-earth side, necessary for the survival of her kin:

Alourdes is a strong woman who provides the main financial and emotional support for a hard-pressed family. She is a fighter, a survivor who has had a hard life but nevertheless shows little trace of bitterness from her sufferings. She is a presence to be reckoned with, someone who commands the respect of others. And her self-respect is palpable. But Alourdes is also a giver, a caring and empathic person who takes pleasure in helping others. By necessity, she has to become adept at balancing this desire to help others with the need to care for herself.¹⁰¹

Like the *lwes*, Mama Lola is not a moral exemplar, she is *whole*,

with strengths and weaknesses. Her known moodiness and unpredictability, her capriciousness and changeability, her sullen withdrawal simply highlight her human nature. McCarthy Brown wrote about the number of times that she waited to no avail: "During the early period . . . she never seemed particularly happy to see me. More than once, I waited for hours while she talked on the phone or worked with clients, only to be told that she did not feel like talking that day."¹⁰² Sai Baba, an Indian religious leader, is reported to have a similar temper and to exhibit the same unpredictability.¹⁰³ Could their behavior be yet another manifestation of their divine mission? Could it be that they find themselves in another dimension less apparent to human awareness? Could it be that they try to emulate the behavior of "playful gods"? Things are never that simple in the arena of religion.

Mama Lola's reputation goes further than the boundaries of the Haitian community. She has performed "treatments" throughout the United States and Canada and in several places in the Caribbean and Central America. In that respect, the international impact of her ministrations is quite unusual, although many other technicians of the Vodou religion share her worldly approach and interest. Alourdes is not afraid to incorporate elements from other cultures into her own world view. This new ethos manifests itself in more areas than one. For instance, one day, sitting in Mama Lola's living room, as she drifted away from the conversation for a moment, Karen noticed:

Shelves covering one wall were filled with souvenirs from her clients: Ashtrays, dolls, feather flowers. . . . On the opposite wall were color photographs of Maggie and. . . . Johnny, along with pictures of movie stars and Catholic saints. Over the door a Vodou charm to protect the house hung next to a horseshoe entwined with a Palm Sunday cross. Dominating the room was a colorful plastic cut-out of the word *love*. Vodou and Catholic, American and Haitian—the elements were disparate, but the aesthetic was unified.¹⁰⁴

In Vodou cosmology, as I demonstrated using the voice of Mama Lola and McCarthy Brown, life is about movement between people, movement between cultures, and about balancing differences to create global harmony and peace. This explains why the Haitian anthropologist

Michel Laguerre contended that because of Vodou's continuous development, it is a living rather than a preserved religion.¹⁰⁵

Conclusion: Vodou as a Medium of Resistance and Continuity

Vodou is a way of life for most Haitians. It is embedded in both the history and the daily existence of its devotees. It permeates and sustains their entire being as was illustrated in this essay through the experiences of two devotees. Haitians are very religious, maybe more so than most people from other African-based former colonies, and continuous and pervasive African retentions are more recognizable in Haitian Vodou than in some other forms of New World African religions such as Bedwardism in Jamaica, Kali in Guyana or Rada in Trinidad. Vodou's close ties to its African origins are primarily a result of Haiti's virtual isolation from the rest of the world for nearly a century following its 1804 successful slave revolution. Haitians have consistently had to turn to their ancestral power and their African roots to cope with Western isolation, ostracism, and betrayal. To maintain their sovereignty and to prevent the annihilation of their culture, the Haitian masses have had to continuously resist, and this ongoing resistance was made stronger by their African past and communal values.

One of the most remarkable aspects of Vodou is that it has survived the ideological onslaughts accompanying slavery, colonialism, modern capitalism, and class oppression. It is at one and the same time, resistance and continuity, adapting and preserving a moral and spiritual universe from those ruptures that would constitute cultural and psychological genocide. The new situation encountered by the African slaves on the island of Haiti created a form of "Americanized" African religion—Haitian Vodou—which has shaped the lives of generations of Haitians, including those of the nearly seven millions now living. The voyage over the Atlantic physically removed Africans from their land, their culture, and their families. But most traumatic for the slaves was the realization that the old order could not be recreated in the New World since they came from different ethnic groups and lacked a common linguistic platform. To re-stitch their past as they knew it, they had to develop a definition of family, no longer based on blood or tribal appurtenance, but one grounded in a new religion—Vodou—and in their common aspiration for liberty and freedom.

Suggesting that a long history of oppression forces people to

organize and to create new communities, Charles Long wrote:

Many of the manifestations related to opposition, to imperialism and other forms of cultural and economic-political oppression find expression in the construction of alternative communities among the oppressed. Such communities are often centered around a forthrightly religious enterprise.¹⁰⁶

Thus, Vodou became not only the means for revitalization through ancestral African traditions but also the channel to air complaints, to organize, and to act. In an attempt to stop the practice of the Vodou cult, slaves were forbidden to organize public gatherings of any sort. The imposition of European values and religion by force and repression took many forms, from baptism of the slaves to harsh punishments imposed on the "wrongdoers." Thus, the slaves were forced to hide allegiance to their ancestral religion and to worship their African deities in secret. These repressive measures along with the clandestine nature of Vodou ceremonies led to the revalorization of the very African cultural values that Europeans had tried to suppress, and to the creation of new communities such as the maroon societies and the secret societies, which played key roles in Haitian political life. This regrouping around a common past and ideal fueled a number of slave revolts, culminating in the war for independence.

The persecution of Vodou practitioners, far from ending when independence was gained, took new forms: various systematic attempts to assimilate and acculturate the Haitian people. Roman Catholicism there was headed exclusively by Westerners until the Duvalier presidency, always had the political and financial support of the state and was the sole official religion until the 1987 Constitution recognized Vodou as the national religion. Haitian history is marked by a number of infamous antisuperstitious campaigns—in particular those of 1896, 1913, and 1941—responsible for the massacre of hundreds of *mambos* and *houngans*, for the destruction of Vodou shrines along with other ritual objects, and for the persecution of those who openly admitted their adherence to Vodou. These raids to eradicate "superstition" left terrible marks on the country and on a people who responded through a conscious effort to sustain the same African values that the genocidal campaigns had sought to annihilate and were then supplanted by

Catholic belief. Though governments have turned their backs on the Haitian masses, Vodou seems to continue to support them spiritually and to offer some counsel on matters affecting survival as well as cultural continuity. Nevertheless, under such adversarial conditions, sustaining these values was quite a challenge.

Despite their history of resistance, sociopolitical realities have prompted many Haitians to integrate Catholic elements into their Vodou cosmology, in an act of harmonious fusion of heterogeneous cultural and religious elements—a phenomenon called “syncretism” that is not unique to Haiti. For instance, Haitians have incorporated into the Vodou religion Catholic prayers and hymns, often chanted and recited at the beginning of Vodou ceremonies, elements of hagiology, the iconography, and the Gregorian calendar, which honors the days of different saints. That calendar is now used in Vodou to celebrate the *fet* of the *lwas* [day of Vodou spirits] who have been symbiotically linked to the iconography and hagiology of various Catholic saints.

Until recently, Vodou remained unofficial and was practiced secretly. Vodou priests and priestesses do not wear recognizable garb; there is no listing of members, no written documents, no formal place of worship. Adepts of the Vodou religion gather in *hounfòs* (temples), which may not be readily identifiable as places of worship and are often located near churches—yet another element of spatial juxtaposition of Haiti’s two religious traditions. It is not unusual for people to leave a Vodou ceremony early in the morning and proceed to the four o’clock service at a nearby Catholic church, where they might hear a sermon about the need for “eradication of superstitious beliefs.” The Haitian elite sneer at Vodou in public and practice it in private. But such a formal distinction between the two systems has no room in the world view of ordinary Haitians—religion can never be about organization and systems, about rationalizing and philosophizing. Their religion must satisfy immediate needs and help provide a means of living. Often to be seen in the Catholic church was a form of self-protection against possible persecutions, a preventive measure against “bad tongues” as well as an extension of their quest for protection from the saints and the omnipotent *Bondye* (God).

But the rage of the *lwas* coupled with a certain form of *prise de conscience* from the Catholic church (typically an ideological weapon in the hands of the bourgeoisie and a force for Haiti’s Westernization),

contributed without doubt to the overthrow of the Duvalier regime and to the ascension of former President Jean-Bertrand Aristide—an advocate of “Liberation Theology” and a leader of the grassroots “base communities,” the *ti légliz* movement.¹⁰⁷ Such an alliance between intelligentsia and peasantry had not taken place in the country since the early revolutionary days and held great promise for the democratic struggle and the cultural revalorization of Haiti’s African past.

Though this attempt at democratizing the Catholic church seems to have aborted, Desmangles commented that we may well witness a new phenomenon:

If Haitian society remains stable and free of political revolutions that have plagued it since Baby Doc Duvalier’s departure in 1986, Catholicism in Haiti may well become more creolized, gradually “de-Europeanizing” itself by growing more flexible in its ritual observances and in its theology, and appropriating indigenous folk traditions into that theology.¹⁰⁸

Moreover, he commented:

If Catholicism is to survive in Haiti, it will have to . . . accelerate its eventual “Haitianization” (or remythologization) in its direct engagement with Haitian culture. It must allow Haitians the opportunity to exercise its own resourcefulness in their religious practices, to take their destiny into their own hands, and to determine once and for all the fundamental choices necessary to ensure the formulation of, and adherence to, their own genuine religious traditions—whether these be purely Vodou, or a Vodounized Catholicism.¹⁰⁹

Bellegarde-Smith goes further to state that the ancestral religion and the Creole language are the pillars of Haitian society, and that democratization will never occur in Haiti without the full inclusion of these cultural elements in all aspects of government life and social institutions. He further states that “Haitian democracy will occur only when state institutions are made to reflect the national culture.”¹¹⁰ The country has been forced to stay at odds with its African cultural heritage and social institutions in a typical situation where a dominant culture

(the West and the Haitian elite who abide by Western values) has tried to impose, by political and social pressures, its values on the oppressed. Revamping Harold Cruse's¹¹ argument about the interconnectedness of cultural oppression and political and economic subjugation, Bellegarde-Smith argued that history and culture should always be seen as a coherent whole—namely, an “unbreached citadel.”

I too believe that the survival of the Haitian masses is contingent upon their African culture and religion being valued, respected, and made an integral part of the country's civil and political life. Vodou, with its strong democratic tradition, its history of revalorization of Haitian traditions, and its contribution to the struggle for national identity and racial pride, might well be the thread needed to restitch the loose seams of Haitian culture and politics. Vodou in Haiti clearly provides continuity, but it also provides a means of resistance and organization. It has been employed to resuture social identity, cultural integration, and moral authority in the face of social and historical forces that have tended toward annihilation for the slaves, and, in modern times, destruction of the oppressed Haitian masses. In this essay, I allowed the Africanism of the Haitian religion to be presented as an entity in itself, as part of the reality and dynamics of life in the Vodou world rather than as a mere mode of survival or form of historical residue. The lives, deeds, and words of Mama Lola and Karen McCarthy Brown served as well by helping to demonstrate how the structure of African religion, recreated and recontextualized in Haitian Vodou, is capable of taking various histories and tensions into itself, into a realm of meaning, resistance, and affirmation.

Notes

1. L. Barrett, “African Religion in the Americas: The ‘Islands in Between’.” In N. S. Booth, ed., *African Religions. A Symposium*. (New York: Nok Publishers, 1977), 213.

2. “Voodoo” (sometimes pronounced “Hoodoo”, especially to refer to the form of Vodou practiced in New Orleans and other Southern U.S. cities) and what it evokes is a creation of the West. “Vodou” remains the term most commonly used for linguistic convenience by Haitian and non-Haitian scholars. This is the spelling that I use, except when discussing the Western depiction of the religion

- (Voodoo) or when quoting authors who favor “Vodun” or “Vodoun.” The Haitian word “Vaudou” designates specifically a ritual dance.
3. K. McCarthy Brown, *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn*. (Berkeley, CA: The University of California Press, 1991), p. 10.
 4. Loa(s) or Lwa(s) are the Vodou spirits of the Haitian pantheon. They serve as intermediaries between the ultimate God, *Bondye*, and the humans.
 5. H. Courlander, “Vodou in Haitian Culture.” In T. L. Stoddard (Ed), *Religion and Politics in Haiti* (Washington, DC: Institute for Cross-Cultural Research, 1966), 12.
 6. This author is often quoted here because of his major contributions to rehabilitating Vodou in the West, especially in his book, *Haiti: The Breached Citadel*, 1990.
 7. P. Bellegarde-Smith, *Haiti: the Breached Citadel*. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1990), 13.
 8. W. Davis, *The Serpent and the Rainbow*. (New York: Warner Books, 1985), 72–3.
 9. Bellegarde-Smith wrote that the *lwes* “represent the cosmic forces that are integral to the Haitian experience and yet transcend it.” (*Haiti: The Breached Citadel*, 22.). Each *lwa* is an archetype of a moral principle that he or she represents. Among the *lwes*/spirits most frequently “served” and invoked in ceremonies are: Dambala, supreme, oldest, most respected, who is represented by a snake; Aida Wedo, his wife; Legba, the spirit of the crossroads who must be invoked to “open the gate” for the other *lwes*; Ogu who does not tolerate injustice, but who can be mean at times; Erzili, representing sexuality, lesbianism, motherhood; Azaka, the peasant, the worker, the one who controls money; Baron Samedi and Gran Brigit, guardians of the cemeteries; and Gede, the spirit of death and sexuality.
 10. H. Courlander, *Haiti Singing*. (New York: Cooper Square Pub, Inc., 1973), 7.
 11. C. L. R. James, *The Black Jacobins*. (New York: Vintage Books, 1963), 394.
 12. Barrett, “African Religion in the Americas,” 184.
 13. It is reported that in Haiti alone over one hundred different ethnic groups found themselves on the island and were able to unite only through the re-created African religion, Vodou, which somewhat compensated for their lost (family, clan, land) and brought them closer to *Guinea*—a word which is still used in Haiti today to refer to Africa.
 14. Barrett, “African Religion in the Americas,” 198.
 15. R. F. Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit: African & Afro-American Art & Philosophy*. (New York: Vintage Books, 1983), 164.
 16. Bellegarde-Smith, *Haiti: The Breached Citadel*, 13.
 17. Ibid.
 18. For example, George Bush, Sr., criticizing a political contender, referred to the person’s economic plan as “voodoo economics.” The phrase has since been widely used, for example in a book by Kay Nelson aimed at maximizing

productivity for Mac users, entitled *Voodoo Mac. Tips & Tricks with an Attitude*, 1992. The subtitle is as disturbing as the title. Euro-Americans often despise African-Americans because of their "attitude," making reference to a life style and behavior that may at first glance appear to be different from their own.

19. Definition from the *Webster's New World Dictionary* (1964). Two decades later, the *Webster's Ninth Collegiate Dictionary* (1986) still offers an ignorant definition of "vodoul": "A religion derived from African ancestor worship, practiced chiefly by Negroes [sic] of Haiti, and characterized by propitiatory rites and communication by trance with animistic deities."

20. *Life* magazine (August, 1987, 62). Answer of a U.S. missionary in Haiti to a question about AIDS asked by a visiting physician. A *houngan* is a priest and a *mambo* is a priestess in Haitian Vodou.

21. Quoted in G. R. Smucker in a chapter he wrote on the social character of religion in Haiti. In C. Foster and A. Valdman's *Haiti Today and Tomorrow* (1984, 54). This statement denies the role that Vodou played in the Haitian Revolution, in the resistance to the American Occupation, and later, in the Duvalier government and in the overthrow of the regime itself. Also, the Vodou religion is known to be closely tied to issues of land (division, administration, and resolution of conflicts), and to matters of economy as it relates to the *lakou* (name given to urban residential areas). As recently as October 11, 1993, when U.S. marines were stopped from coming ashore, Haitians reported that they drove away foreign journalists with a powder meant to cause the foreigners to itch terribly—a powder prepared by vodou practitioners and made of dead frogs and snakes. The masses are not armed and, remembering the horrors of the American Occupation of 1915, it was reported that the people had prepared a few such concoctions to drive the Marines away if, indeed, they set foot on Haitian soil. Haitians—both supporters of the army and of Aristide—seem united in their refusal to see a foreign intervention. On many walls in the country, I saw written last September: "A BA MILTTE BLAN [down with foreign military]." This seems to be the people's will and it is reported that Vodou is being put to use—by the various factions—to see their agenda prevail. Saying that Vodou is apolitical indicates a lack of understanding of some fundamental characteristics of the religion. This statement is very surprising, especially coming from G. R. Smucker a "consultant on economic development currently residing in Haiti" [listed as such in the book] but, moreover, someone who has a reputation for being one of the rare socially and politically aware anthropologists and development consultants committed to helping Haiti and its people outside the patterns dictated by Western imperialism. He is not perceived as one of those foreign experts who "help" people and cultures that they do not understand. For example, Smucker speaks Creole like a native speaker—indeed, a very rare phenomenon.

22. M. Laguerre, *Vodou and Politics in Haiti*. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989).

Also see, M. Lahruerre, "Politics and Vodou Still a Potent Combination in Haiti," *Wall Street Journal*, April 18, 1986, 19; and M. Laguerre, "Voodoo Heritage," *Sage Library of Social Research*, vol. 98. (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications).

23. M. Laguerre, *American Odyssey: Haitians in New York City*. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984), 19.

24. L. G. Desmangles, *The Faces of the Gods: Vodou and Roman Catholicism in Haiti*. (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1992.)

25. James, *The Black Jacobins*, 86.

26. W. Davis, *Passage of Darkness: The Ethnobiology of the Haitian Zombie*. (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1988).

27. "Zombification" refers to the extremely rare cases when in Haiti a person is made into a zombie. A poison is administered to an individual who is subsequently pronounced dead—the potency of the drug makes the vital signs disappear. The person is later awakened and put to work for a sorcerer. That process is said to cause complete amnesia in the zombie and to create other physical and mental deficiencies. What is interesting in terms of our work on morality is that the person who is made into a zombie is a public outcast. Someone who has committed crimes against family and community may be brought to court. The people's court then rules to punish him or her severely through the process of *zombification*. It is a form of people's justice, what in Kenya for example, is called "mob justice" and which is practiced quite frequently. Then, the question that I ask is the following: Is this form of "capital" punishment imposed by the will of the people, very different from the death penalty favored in some other societies?

28. Bellegarde-Smith, *Haiti: the Breached Citadel*, 19.

29. *Ibid.*, 169.

30. *Ibid.*, 9.

31. M. Deren, *Divine Horsemen: The Living God of Haiti*. (New Paltz, NY: McPherson and Co., 1983), 9.

32. Gede is the playful trickster who is the spirit of death, life and sexuality. Poles like right and wrong, good and evil, black and white do not quite fit in African cosmology-and Haitian thought for that matter. Gede, by representing both life and death maintains a sense of balance, placing things in a continuum and a fluid state of continuity. In that respect he plays an important role among the *lwas*.

33. McCarthy Brown, *op. cit.*, pp. 19–20.

34. McCarthy Brown, K. "Writing about the 'Other'." *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, April 15, 1992, p. A56.

35. This is why I have kept "voice" in the singular form in the title of the essay.

36. Mama Lola's full name is Marie Therese Alourdes Macena Margaux Kowalski.
37. McCarthy Brown, "Writing about the 'Other'," op. cit.
38. See, McCarthy Brown, K. "Olina and Erzulie: A Woman and Goddess in Haitian Vodou ." *Aminia*, 5, 1979, 110–16. Also see, McCarthy Brown, K. "Alourdes: A Case Study of Moral Leadership in Haitian Vodou" In J. S. Hawley (Ed), *Saints and Virtues*. (Berkely and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1987a), 144–67; McCarthy Brown, K. "Mama Lola and the Ezilis: Themes of Mothering and Loving in Haitian Vodou." In N.A. Falk and R.M. Gross, eds, *Unspoken Worlds: Women's Religious Lives*. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1989a), 235–45; McCarthy Brown, K. "Women's Leadership in Haitian Vodou". In J. Plaskow and C. Christ (Eds), *Weaving the Visions: New Patterns in Feminist Spirituality*. (San Francisco, CA: Harper and Row, 1989b), 226–34; and McCarthy Brown, *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn*, op. cit.
39. McCarthy Brown, K. "Plenty Confidence in Myself: The Initiation of a White Woman Scholar into Haitian Vodou." *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, Vol. 3, No. 1. 1987b, 67–76.
40. To my knowledge, Karen McCarthy Brown offers to date, the most accurate portrayal of the Vodou religion as *lived* day by day by some followers of the religion--and, in particular, a Vodou priestess. The rare information that she presented, the confessions and observations that she gathered could only have been collected by an insider. McCarthy Brown's data resulted from over ten years of close interaction with members of her Vodou family. It is unique in that such material has not been communicated before in such a manner to a scholarly audience. See McCarthy Brown, *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn*, op. cit.
41. The Creole word *balanse* means to bring about equilibrium, to harmonize; it implies metaphysical elements not rendered by the English word "balance."
42. McCarthy Brown, *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn*, op. cit., 14.
43. My interpretation of the material was made easier by my own knowledge of the religion.
44. For those who *serve the spirits* and in African cosmology, *dancing* means *creating and maintaining balance in all aspects of life*. For example, Bellegarde-Smith wrote to describe the state of balance that he achieved through and because of his initiation: "My ancestors dance with me." From Bellegarde-Smith, P. "An Introduction, Pawol La Pale: Reflections of an Initiate." *Journal of Caribbean Studies*, 9, nos. 1 & 2, 3–9.
45. McCarthy Brown, *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn*, op. cit., 6–7.
46. Joseph Binbin Mauvant, Mama Lola's great grand father, in McCarthy Brown, *ibid.*, 70.
47. McCarthy Brown, *ibid.*, 12.

48. McCarthy Brown, "Alourdes: A Case Study of Moral Leadership in Haitian Vodou," op. cit., 162.

49. McCarthy Brown, *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn*, op. cit., 43.

50. Mama Lola does not use her knowledge of Vodou to harm others. She sees, serves, helps, and heals. See McCarthy Brown, *ibid.*, 188.

51. *Ibid.*, 9.

52. To work as a Marie Jacques is a form of prostitution in Haiti. Unlike other types of prostitution, money is never discussed. However, it is expected that the men will leave some money for the lady at the end of their encounter. Alourdes worked in this way to feed her children for a few years.

53. McCarthy Brown, "Writing about the 'Other'," op. cit. A56.

54. McCarthy Brown, *Mama Lola: a Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn*, op. cit., 39.

55. *Ibid.*, 70.

56. This is reminiscent of the experience of Carol Stack, another white female anthropologist who described her own appropriation and acceptance into an African-American family (*All our Kin*, 1974) which eventually named her *white Carol* since a Black woman with that name already existed in the family.

57. A Vodou ceremony is called a "service" which, in itself indicates the intent behind the gathering. Other Vodou ceremonies have more specific names such as "*manje les anges*" [ritual feeding of the spirits/the lwas], "*manage marassa*" [ritual feeding of the spirit of the twins], "*manje pov*" [ritual feeding of the poor]. The food offered give the spirits an opportunity to participate in human life and strengthen the relationship between the living and the dead. The "*manje pov*" is an occasion to invite the less fortunate to share a meal but, also an opportunity to receive a blessing from the poor and the beggars--those whose family is not there to cushion them against suffering and bad luck, those who, "by the inversionary logic of Vodou . . . can stave off misfortune for intact families" (see McCarthy Brown, *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn*, op. cit., 201).

In Haiti, eating is a life-sustaining activity in more ways than one. It is a means of maintaining ties. In lieu of formal introduction, when Mama Lola wishes to let people know about her closeness with McCarthy Brown, often, she simply says: "She eats in my house". (See McCarthy Brown, *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn*. op. cit., 43).

58. McCarthy Brown, *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn*, op. cit., 6-7.

59. Konesans in Creole means knowledge, but is a form of knowledge accompanied by wisdom which usually comes from experience. Elders have *konesans*, but also it is a characteristic of the departed, the ancestors, the spirits who often share their wisdom and *konesans* with us through dreams and possessions.

60. McCarthy Brown, *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn*, op. cit., 2.

61. McCarthy Brown, "Plenty Confidence in Myself: The Initiation of a White Woman Scholar into Haitian Vodou," op. cit., 74.

62. Ehh! This interjection means in Haitian Kreyol: unbelievable! inconceivable! It expresses strong disbelief about something completely off balance; *ibid.*, 74.
63. McCarthy Brown, *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn*, op. cit., 3.
64. Though a few African-Americans are starting to place their elderly parents in homes because of the harsh realities of life in the United States, in the Black world, such behavior is still considered totally immoral and unacceptable.
65. Bellegarde-Smith, *Haiti: The Breached Citadel*, op. cit., 16.
66. This statement does not mean that Alourdes had not actually eaten that day. Karen McCarthy Brown confessed that it took her years to realize its full meaning. Mama Lola used it to indicate that she was depressed and upset, showing how mind and body are interconnected for her. She is upset, her whole system is affected; she does not feel that she has been fed (though she has eaten). From McCarthy Brown, *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn*, op. cit., 44.
- 67 McCarthy Brown, "Alourdes: A Case Study of Moral Leadership in Haitian Vodou." op. cit., 166.
68. Erny, P. "Childhood and Cosmos". *The Social Psychology of the Black African Child*. (Washington, DC: Black Orpheus Press, 1973), 15.
69. This concept is what Jahn called *Ntu*. In his book *Muntu: The New African Culture*, he wrote "place and time are forces and the 'modalities' are forces. Man and Woman, . . . dog and stone, . . . east and yesterday, . . . beauty and laughter are forces and as such are all related to one another" (New York: Grove Press, 1961), 100. His book represented one of the first attempts by a European to present African culture and philosophy in their own rights. For that alone, it has value, although much has been written in the area since then. I find useful the terminology that he used to express some fundamental elements of the African ethos. I refer here to the concepts of *Ntu*, *Muntu*, *Kuntu* in particular. *Kuntu* will be explained in the section on Black aesthetics. The concept of *Muntu* (a Bantu word often translated as "man") is an inclusive categorization to express the unity existing between the living and the dead, the ancestors and the deified ancestors (18).
- Maya Deren expressed similar ideas regarding the unity of things in *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti*: "The entire chain of interlocking links-life, death, deification, transfiguration, resurrection--churns without rest through the hands of the devout. None of it forgotten: that the god was once human, that he [she] was made god by humans, that he [she] is sustained by humans"(New Paltz, NY: McPherson and Co., 1983), 33.
70. Jahn, op. cit., 96.
71. Bellegarde-Smith, *Haiti: The Breached Citadel*, op. cit., 17.
72. Manolesco explains that the goal of vaudou initiation is to liberate the neophyte from three obstacles that can hinder his evolution: self love, doubt that needs to disappear to increase faith and superstition created by fears. After that

- the person is one with all other living creatures (Editions du Jour, Montreal, Canada, 1972) 88.
73. McCarthy Brown, "Plenty Confidence in Myself: The Initiation of a White Woman Scholar into Haitian Vodou." op. cit., 75.
74. McCarthy Brown, *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn*, op. cit., 75.
75. Ibid., 380.
76. Ibid., 381.
77. McCarthy Brown, "Alourdes: A Case Study of Moral Leadership in Haitian Vodou." op. cit., 166.
78. The *chwal* of a lwa is someone who has been possessed by the god, someone whose *gro bonanj* (guardian angel/spirit/soul) has been displaced by that of the spirit who mounted her. The person possessed is in a state of trance. She is not conscious and is no longer herself but the incarnation of the *lwa*.
79. In a later section, this will become clearer as we recount the encounter of a young man with the spirit Ogou.
80. McCarthy Brown, K., Alourdes: A Case Study of Moral Leadership in Haitian Vodou, op. cit., 154.
81. Mbiti, J. , *African Religions and Philosophy*. (New York: Praeger, 1969), 214.
82. McCarthy Brown, *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn*, op. cit., 69.
83. McCarthy Brown, "Alourdes: A Case Study of Moral Leadership in Haitian Vodou," op.cit., 161.
84. The *ason* is the beaded rattle that gives hounsans and mambos leverage in the world of the *lwas*. They receive it after undergoing the fourth and highest level of initiation which confirms them as healer, as priests or priestesses, as leaders of the vodou communities.
85. The word *kouche* is the term most commonly used to describe initiation into Vodou. *Kouche* in Creole means to lie down, to sleep, to make love, to give birth, to die, and to be reborn (in the sense of having undergone the Vodou initiation). The bed (or its substitute when people cannot afford a bed) is therefore to be respected for what it represents: life and death, two faces of the same coin.
86. McCarthy Brown, *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn*, op cit., 69.
87. Deren, *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti*, op. cit., 35. Along with other Vodou concepts, the notion of crossroads is often misused.
88. Although one is not allowed to reveal the secrets of Vodou initiation, Karen McCarthy Brown was permitted to write about her reactions to the process. She cautioned , however, not to "over-interpret" her "metaphoric speech." From McCarthy Brown, K., Plenty Confidence in Myself: the Initiation of a White Woman Scholar into Haitian Vodou, op. cit., 72-5.
89. Like a baby's skull, the new head, *the new self* is believed to be vulnerable and, as such must be protected.

90. McCarthy Brown, "Plenty Confidence in Myself" the Initiation of a White Woman Scholar into Haitian Vodou." op. cit., 1670.
91. McCarthy Brown, *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn*, op.cit., 11.
92. Ibid., 10.
93. Ibid.
94. Ibid., 5.
95. Ibid., 10.
96. Ibid., 5.
96. McCarthy Brown, "Plenty Confidence in Myself: The initiation of a White Woman Scholar into Haitian Vodou," op. cit., 72.
98. McCarthy Brown, *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn*, op. cit., 10.
99. McCarthy Brown, "Plenty Confidence in Myself: The initiation of a White Woman Scholar into Haitian Vodou," op. cit., 75.
100. McCarthy Brown, "Alourdes : A Case Study of Moral Leadership in Haitian Vodou," op. cit., 150.
101. McCarthy Brown, *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn*, op. cit., 9.
102. Ibid., 7.
103. Babb, L. A. "Sathya Sai Baba's Sainly Play," In J. S. Hawley, ed, *Saints and Virtues*. (Berkley, CA: University of California Press, 1987), 168-86.
104. McCarthy Brown, *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn*, op. cit., 107.
105. Laguerre, M. "Voodoo Heritage." *Sage Library of Social Research*, Vol. 98. (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications, 1980), 22.
106. Long, C. *The Emergence of Religious Value Systems at the level of Popular Religions in the Pacific Rim*. Proposal submitted by the Center for Black Studies to *Pacific Rim Research*. (University of California: Center for Black Studies, 1993), 11.
107. Although the literal translation of the *ti legliz* movement is small church's movement, this grassroots movement is in no way small. The political climate in Haiti in 1994 seemed to indicate that a large portion of the Haitian proletariat was, indeed, determined to see changes come about—changes which would bring some form of justice and democracy for the Haitian masses.
108. Desmangles, L. G. *The Faces of the Gods: Vodou and Roman Catholicism in Haiti*, op. cit., 55.
109. Ibid., 181.