

AFRICAN GODS AND CATHOLIC SAINTS IN
NEW WORLD NEGRO BELIEF¹

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THE tendency of native peoples who have had long contact with Catholicism to achieve a syncretism between their aboriginal religious beliefs and the doctrines and rituals of the Church has received notice in the case of various folk. Best known in this connection are the Indians of Central America, Mexico, and the southwestern part of the United States, where the phenomenon has been emphasized in the literature. The somewhat more thoroughgoing assimilation of Christian and pagan beliefs which has taken place among New World Negroes has, however, gone in large measure unrecognized. In Mexico and among some Indian tribes of the Southwest, assimilation has generally taken the form of the survival of aboriginal custom in a system of belief and ritual practises the outer forms of which are predominantly Catholic. In the case of the New World Negroes who live under Catholic influence in Brazil, Cuba and Haiti, however, the exchange has been less one-sided, and the elements ancestral to the present-day organization of worship have been retained in immediately recognizable form.

This phenomenon has been studied with care in Cuba and Brazil,² and somewhat less systematically in Haiti.³ In all three countries it is marked by the following characteristics: the Negroes profess nominal Catholicism while at the same time they belong to "fetish cults" which are under the direction of priests whose functions are essentially African and whose training follows more or less well recognized channels of instruction and initiation; the ceremonialism and ideology of these "fetish cults" exhibit Catholic elements more or less prominently; and everywhere specific identifications are made between African gods and Catholic Saints.

It is the last of these characteristics that will be treated in this paper, since here can be most immediately recognized the manner in which these Negroes, in responding to the acculturative process, have succeeded in achieving, at least in their religious life, a synthesis between aboriginal African patterns and the European traditions to which they have been

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² For Cuba: Fernando Ortiz, *Los Negros Brujos*; for Brazil: Nina-Rodrigues, *L'Animisme Fétichiste des Nègres de Bahia* (Bahia, 1900), Etienne Ignace, *Le fétichisme des nègres du Brésil* (Anthropos, Vol. 3, pp. 881-904, 1908), Arthur Ramos, *O Negro Brasileiro* (Rio de Janeiro, 1934), especially Chap. 5.

³ Price-Mars, *Ainsi Parla l'Oncle . . . Essais d'Ethnographie* (Port-au-Prince, 1928), and E. C. Parsons, *Spirit Cult in Hayti* (Journal, Société des Américanistes, Vol. 20, pp. 157-70, 1928).

exposed.⁴ The emphasis, as far as actual data are concerned, will be placed on information gathered in the course of field work in Haiti; but because of the resemblance between Haitian syncretization of African and Catholic gods and that found in Cuba and Brazil, the material from these countries will also be summarized to permit comparisons.

The historical background of the phenomenon is obvious, since efforts were made everywhere in the New World to convert the slaves to Christianity, and in Haiti, at least, baptism into the Catholic church was required for all those who were unloaded from the holds of the slave ships. In Cuba and Brazil, as in Haiti, the course of history has enabled Catholicism to continue to play a major role in the life of the people as their official religion. And it is this fact, together with the present day vestiges of the fear, constantly present in the minds of the Europeans during the time of slavery, that the African cults offered a focus for revolt, that explains the inferior social position held by these "fetish cults" wherever they are found. It is here also that explanation may be sought for the conditions under which African rituals are carried on, since at best they obtain but passive acquiescence on the part of the authorities and, more often, must be conducted under the greatest secrecy.

In the case of these African religious systems, handicapped by social scorn and official disapprobation, the followers are almost inevitably split into local groups, each of which is dominated by the personality of the priest whose individual powers furnish the principal drive toward any outer organization the cult-group under his charge may achieve. This in turn makes it difficult to maintain anything more than a local hierarchy of priests, and is reflected in a resulting confusion of theological concept. Hence in all these countries a general frame of reference concerning the supernatural has been handed down from Africa, and within this a variety of beliefs and modes of worship exist.

In the Haitian *vodun* cult, this takes the form of differences of opinion not alone from region to region, but within a given region even between members of the same group concerning such details of cult belief and practise as the names of deities, modes of ritual procedure, or the genealogies of the gods, to say nothing of concepts regarding the powers and attributes of the African spirits in their relation to one another and to the total pantheon. As a case in point, there may be cited the three separate lists of names of deities which were collected in Haiti from a single valley in the

⁴ In Haiti this synthesis marks practically all phases of the life of the Negro peasant; there is no reason to assume that a similar assimilation has not taken place in Cuba and Brazil. Except for folk-lore, however, all studies of Negro life in these latter countries have been almost exclusively concerned with religious practises.

interior, the valley of Mirebalais. When these three lists were compared with each other⁵ and with the published roster of names of *vodun* deities given by Dorsainvil,⁶ it was seen that while certain designations were found in all lists, there were extreme divergencies as well. Some names were present in all of them, it is true, and these represented the more important deities worshipped over the whole of Haiti, being gods derived from Dahomey and, to a lesser extent, from Nigeria and those other cultures of West Africa which have predominated in determining the form and functions of Haitian *vodun* worship. But the differences between these lists were much greater than the resemblances; and since this had to do only with names of gods, it is not strange that in identifying deities with Catholic saints, an even greater divergence of opinion was found.

Two methods were employed in the field to obtain this material. In some cases African deities were equated with Catholic saints in the course of discussions of general theological problems, or, as has been done in Brazil,⁷ invocations of songs were recorded which coupled the name of a given saint with that of its corresponding pagan god. The other means used to obtain this information was more direct. As elsewhere in the New World the imagination of the Negroes seems to have been taken by the ordinary chromolithographs found widely distributed in Catholic countries, which depict the saints and are hung in the houses of the faithful. It was possible to present a collection of these *images*, as they are termed in Haiti, to the natives and to obtain information concerning the manner in which the saints are envisaged by the people, and those *loa* or African deities they are believed to represent, by asking the necessary questions.

We may now turn to the correspondences themselves. Legba, the god who in Dahomey guards crossroads and entrances to temples, compounds, and villages, is widely worshipped in Haiti where, as in Dahomey, he must "open the path" for all other supernatural powers and hence is given the first offering in any Haitian *vodun* ceremony. Legba is believed by most persons to be the same as St. Anthony, for the reason that St. Anthony is represented on the *images* as an old man, poorly dressed, carrying a wand which supports him as he walks. Some hold that Legba is St. Peter, on the basis of the eminently logical reason that St. Peter, like Legba, is the keeper of keys and opens the door. By most persons, however, St. Peter is usually believed to be a *loa*, or *vodun* deity, without any African designa-

⁵ M. J. Herskovits, *Life in a Haitian Valley* (New York, 1937), pp. 309-19. The setting of the special traits of Haitian culture described here is to be found in this volume, Parts II and III.

⁶ J. B. Dorsainvil, *Vodun et Névrose* (Port-au-Price, 1931), pp. 174-75.

⁷ E.g., Ramos, *op. cit.*, pp. 121, 125, etc.

tion, being called the *loa* St. Pierre, though this again is disputed, the *loa* St. Pierre being held by still others to constitute the spirit that validates the neolithic celts which in Haiti as in other parts of the New World and in Africa, are held sacred as "thunderstones."

Damballa, the Dahomean rainbow-serpent deity, is one of the most widely worshipped and important Haitian *vodun* gods. The question of the active existence of the serpent cult in Haiti is one which cannot be considered in this place, but to the extent that it does exist either in actuality or in the sacredness with which serpents are regarded, their worship is undoubtedly associated with this god Damballa, who also retains his aboriginal character of being the rainbow.⁸ The saint identified with Damballa is St. Patrick, on whose *image* serpents are depicted. Following this logic further, Moses is held to be the "father of Damballa" because of the miracle he performed before Pharaoh when he threw down his staff on the ground and turned it into a serpent.

The Ogun *loa* include several gods who are generally regarded as brothers. Ogun Ferraille is held to be St. James, while Ogun Balandjo, a deity who gives "remedies" to cure the sick, is identified with St. Joseph because the picture of this saint shows him holding a child, his hand raised in the blessing which heals. Gran' Erzilie is by most persons believed to be Mater Dolorosa, though one informant expressed the belief that this saint is another *loa* named Erzilie Freda Dahomey. The wide-spread identification of Gran' Erzilie with Mater Dolorosa, however, is based on the attributes accorded the African goddess, since she is believed to be the richest of all the deities, so that the chromolithographic representation of Mater Dolorosa showing her as richly clothed, surrounded by many evidences of great wealth, and wearing many rings and necklaces, is quite in keeping with the wealthiness of Gran' Erzilie. The Dahomean sea god, who has retained his aboriginal function in Haiti, is equated with St. Expositus. The *marassa*, spirits of twins, are believed to be the twin saints Cosmas and Damien, and St. Nicholas, because of the figures of children on his representations, is regarded as the "protector of the *marassa*." Simbi, who unlike the deities of predominantly Dahomean origin already mentioned is a Congo god, is believed by some to be St. Andrew, though others state that this saint is Azaka Mede, a *loa* which clearly derives its name from that of the river across which Dahomean belief holds that all dead must pass to reach the next world. One special member of the Simbi group, Simbi en Deux Eaux, is believed to be the equivalent of St. Anthony the Hermit,

⁸ Cf. Price-Mars, *op. cit.*, pp. 118 ff.; Herskovits, *op. cit.*, pp. 140-41.

although this again is disputed by those who hold this saint is rather the *loa* named 'Ti Jean Petro.

The Haitian, however, does not stop merely at identifying saints with African gods, for saints are occasionally themselves conceived as *loa*, or as natural phenomena such as the sun, moon, and stars, which are regarded as saints and occasionally worshipped. Thus St. Louis, the patron of the town of Mirebalais where this field work was carried on, is a *loa* in his own right. Similarly two of the kings who figure in the *image* that depicts the Adoration of the Christ Child, Balthazar and Gaspar, are also held to be *vodun* deities. La Sirène, a character derived from European mythology, is believed to be a water goddess and is identified with Nôtre Dame de Grace, while the *loa* Kpanyol, or Spanish *loa*, is equated with Nôtre Dame d'Alta Gracia.

St. John the Baptist is a powerful nature spirit worshipped as the *loa* St. Jean Baptiste, and is believed to control the thunder and lightning. The chromolithograph depicts this saint as a sweet-faced child holding a lamb, in striking contrast to the great power he is supposed to wield, and the irresponsibility that characterises his actions. Yet this identification becomes understandable when it is realized that in Dahomean mythology, which has influenced so much of Haitian belief, as in Yoruban concept, the ram is the emblem of the god of thunder; while the basis of the conception of the *loa* St. Jean Baptiste as the thunderer becomes even clearer when it is pointed out that the ram is the sacrificial animal of this *loa* in Haiti. The following myth is told of this deity:

On a given day of the year, God permits each saint to have control over the universe. St. John the Baptist, however, is so irresponsible, and his rage so violent, that God fears for the consequences were he allowed to exert his power on his day. Plying him with drink the day before, he is therefore made so drunk that when he falls asleep he does not awaken until the day after. When he is told his day has already passed, his rage is terrible, and he causes great storms to flay the earth; and it is a commonplace in Mirebalais that this day is marked by tempests of almost hurricane proportions, with great displays of thunder and lightning. Though he can do some damage, his power is now limited, however, to his own sphere.

Concerning the tendency to regard the phenomena of nature as supernatural beings we find St. Soleil (St. Sun), Ste. la Lune (St. Moon), Sts. Etoiles (Sts. Stars) and Ste. la Terre (St. Earth) among those worshipped under this category. Even the conception of a force such as the power that can bring reverses to a man may be anthropomorphized and worshipped, as the belief in the existence of a supernatural being known as St. Boule-

versé indicates. An *oraison* to this "Saint," well known throughout Haiti, reads as follows:

Saint Bouleversé, vous qui avez le pouvoir de bouleverser la terre, vous êtes un saint et moi, je suis un pêcheur, je vous invoque et vous prends pour mon patron dès aujourd'hui. Je vous envoie chercher un tel; bouleversez sa tête, bouleversez sa mémoire, bouleversez sa pensée, bouleversez sa maison, bouleversez pour moi mes ennemis visibles et invisibles; faites eclater sur eux la foudre et la tempête.

En l'honneur du Saint Bouleversé dites trois Pater et trois Ave Maria.

Satan, je te renonce, si tu viens de la part du démon, que le démon t'emporte et te jette dans l'abîme et dans l'inférieur séjour.

Bête méchante, langue de vipère, langue pernicieuse, si tu viens de la part de Dieu pour me tromper, il faut que tu marche de terre en terre, de coin en coin, de village en village, de maison en maison, d'emplois en emplois comme le juif errant, l'insulteur de Jesus Christ.

Seigneur, mon Dieu, viens chercher à perdre un tel, afin qu'il soit disparu devant moi comme la foudre et la tempête.⁹

The data which have been sketched from Haiti will be strikingly familiar to those conversant with the literature on Cuba and Brazil, though the names of the Haitian deities will be unfamiliar to them, and the correspondences, Catholic saint for saint, and African god for god, somewhat different. Thus Legba, the Dahomean trickster held to be St. Anthony or St. Peter in Haiti, appears under his Yoruban name Elegbara, being held in Brazil to be the equivalent of the Devil, and of the Blessed Souls in Purgatory or the Anima Sola in Cuba. Shango, identified with Santa Barbara both in Brazil and Cuba, is not represented in Haiti by his Dahomean counterpart, Xevioso; it is to be remarked, however, that in Dahomey itself, among those natives of the city of Abomey who are members of the Catholic Church, this same identification is made between Xevioso and Santa Barbara. Mawu, the Great God of the Dahomeans, has not been retained in Haiti in the way in which Obatala, her Yoruban counterpart, has lived on in Brazil and Cuba, and though the Nigerian-Dahomean Ogun (designated Gu in Dahomey) has persisted in all three countries, differences are found in the saints with which he is identified in each. The table that accompanies this discussion shows in concise form the reconciliations that have been effected between gods and saints. It has been abstracted from the available literature on Brazil, Cuba, and Haiti, and in addition is supplemented by data recorded during field-work in the latter country.

⁹ This *oraison* is also given in full by Price-Mars, *op. cit.*, pp. 183-84, together with one of these popular prayers to Ste. Radegonde, regarded by the Haitians as an associate of the god who rules the cemeteries, Baron Samedi.

CORRESPONDENCE BETWEEN AFRICAN GODS AND CATHOLIC
SAINTS IN BRAZIL, CUBA, AND HAITI*

<i>African deities as found in:</i>	<i>Brazil</i>	<i>Cuba</i>	<i>Haiti</i>
Obatala		(O) Virgen de las Mercedes; the Most Sacred Sacrament; Christ on the Cross	
Obatala; Orisalá; Orixala (Oxalá)	(I) (N) (R) "Nosso Senhor de Bomfim" at Bahia; (N) Saint Anne; (R) "Senhor do Bomfim" at Rio ("because of the influence of Bahia")		
Grande Mambo Batala Shango	(I) (N) (R) Santa Barbara at Bahia; (R) St. Michael the Archangel at Rio; (R) St. Jerome (the husband of Santa Barbara) at Bahia (see Yansan below)	(O) Santa Barbara	(M) Saint Anne
Elegbara, Elegua, Alegua		(O) "Animas benditas del Purgatorio"; "Anima Sola"	
Legba			(M) (H) St. Anthony; (W) (H?) St. Peter
Esú	(I) (N) (R) the Devil		
Ogun	(I) (R) St. George, at Rio; (N) St. Jerome; (I) (N) (R) St. Anthony, at Bahia	(O) St. Peter	
Ogun Balandjo			(M) St. James the Elder; (H) St. Joseph (H) St. James
Ogun Ferraille Osun	(N) Virgin Mary; N. D. de Cândia	(O) Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre	
Yemanjá	(N) Virgin Mary; (R) N. S. D. de Conceição (at Rio)	(O) Virgin de Regla	

* In this table, the initials before the names of the saints indicate the sources from which the correspondences have been derived:

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| (H) Herskovits, field data (see also <i>Life in a Haitian Valley</i> , Ch. 14). | (N) Nina-Rodrigues, <i>op. cit.</i> |
| (I) Ignace, <i>op. cit.</i> | (O) Ortiz, <i>op. cit.</i> |
| (M) Price-Mars, <i>op. cit.</i> | (P) Parsons, <i>op. cit.</i> |
| (S) Seabrook, W. B., <i>The Magic Island</i> (New York, 1929). | (R) Ramos, <i>op. cit.</i> |
| (W) Wirkus, F., and D. Taney, <i>The White King of la Gonave</i> (New York, 1931). | |

<i>African deities as found in:</i>	<i>Brazil</i>	<i>Cuba</i>	<i>Haiti</i>
Maitresse Erzulie; Erzilie; Erzilie Fre- da Dahomey			(M) (S) the Holy Virgin; especially the Holy Virgin of the Nativity; (P) Santa Barbara (?); (H) Mater Dolo- rosa
Saponam	(I) the Sacred Sacrament		
Osa-Osé (Oxóssi)	(I) (N) (R) St. George, at Bahia; (R) St. Sebastian, at Rio	(O) St. Alberto; (oc- casionally) St. Hu- bert	
Oloru; Omolú	(R) St. Bento	(O) St. John the Bap- tist	
Agomme Tonnere			(M) St. John the Baptist
Ibeji (Brazil and Cuba); Marassa (Haiti)	(R) Sts. Cosmas and Da- mian		(H) Sts. Cosmas and Damian
Father of the Ma- rassa			(H) St. Nicholas
Orumbila (Odumbi- la?)		(O) St. Francisco	
Loco	(R) St. Francisco		
Babayú Ayí		(O) St. Lazarus	
Ifa	(R) the Most Sacred Sacra- ment		
Yansan (wife of Shango)	(R) Santa Barbara (wife of St. Jerome)		
Damballa		(W) (H) St. Patrick	
Father of Damballa		(H) Moses	
Pierre d'Ambala		(M) St. Peter	
loa St. Pierre		(H) St. Peter	
Agwe		(H) St. Expeditius	
Roi d'Agoueseau		(M) St. Louis (King of France)	
Daguy Bologuay		(M) St. Joseph	
la Sirène		(M) the Assumption; (H) N. D. de Grace	
loa Christalline		(H) Ste. Philomena	
Adamisil Wedo		(H) Ste. Anne	
loa Kpanyol		(H) N. D. de Alta Gracia	
Aizan		(H) Christ (?)	
Simbi		(H) St. Andrew	
Simbi en Deax Eau		(H) St. Anthony the Hermit	
Azaka Mede		(H) St. Andrew (?)	
'Ti Jean Petro		(H) St. Anthony the Hermit(?)	

In a sense, the disparities that exist between the identifications made by the Negroes who live in different countries emphasize the theoretical importance of the materials presented in this paper. Were a given African god everywhere found to be identified with the same Catholic saint, there would be great probability that this had resulted from contacts between slaves subsequent to their arrival in the New World, and thus represented a diffusion from one country to another. As it is, there can be little question that these syncretizations have developed independently in each region where they are found. In the two lands where gods of the same African (Yoruban) tribe predominantly survive—Brazil and Cuba—distance and the absence of historic contacts of any significance make any other explanation untenable. And though Haiti is relatively close to Cuba, the fewness of the contacts between the Negroes of the two countries except in very recent times, added to the fact that in the syntheses that have been achieved in each country the gods of different African tribes figure, make the same point. Considered as a whole, therefore, the data show quite clearly to what an extent the inner logic of the aboriginal African cultures of the Negroes, when brought in contact with foreign traditions, worked out to achieve an end that, despite the handicaps of slavery, has been relatively the same wherever the forces making for change have been comparable.

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