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TOWARD AN ETHNOHISTORY OF HAITIAN PILGRIMAGE

Terry REY *

Combining historiography and ethnography, this article illustrates the various ethno-religious streams that have fertilized Haiti's thriving pilgrimage traditions. With particular focus on the cults and feasts of St. James the Greater / Ogou Feray in La-Plaine-du-Nord and St. Philomena / Lasyrenn in Bord-de-Mer-de-Limonade, and with a careful consideration of Kongolese religious culture (both Catholic and traditional), a convincing case is made here that pilgrimage in Haiti owes much more to Central African traditions than is generally acknowledged by scholars of Vodou, who over-emphasize the religion's West African roots. [Key words : Haiti, pilgrimage, syncretism, kongo, religion.]

Pour une ethnohistoire des pèlerinages haïtiens. En s'appuyant conjointement sur l'histoire et l'ethnographie, cet article explore les différents courants ethno-religieux qui ont irrigué la vigoureuse tradition des pèlerinages en Haïti. À partir notamment de l'exemple des cultes et des festivités en l'honneur de Saint Jacques le Majeur / Ogou Feray à la Plaine-du-Nord et de Sainte Philomène / Lasyrenn à Bord-de-Mer-de-Limonade et en accordant une attention spéciale à la culture religieuse congolaise (à la fois traditionnelle et catholique), il argumente le fait que les pèlerinages haïtiens doivent beaucoup plus aux traditions d'Afrique centrale que ne le reconnaissent en général les spécialistes du vaudou, lesquels insistent trop souvent sur les racines ouest-africaines de la religion. [Mots clés : Haïti, pèlerinage, syncrétisme, Congo, religion.]

Hacia una etnohistoria de la peregrinación en Haití. Con base en la historia y la etnografía, este artículo ilustra las diferentes fuentes etnoreligiosas que han nutrido la vigorosa tradición de la peregrinación en Haití. Centrándose en los cultos y las fiestas de Santiago el Mayor / Ogou Feray en la Plaine-du-Nord y de Santa Filómena / Lasyrenn en Bord-de-Mer-de-Limonade y con atención especial en la cultura religiosa congoleña (a la vez tradicional y católica), argumenta sobre el hecho de que las peregrinaciones en Haití deben mucho más a las tradiciones de África central que lo que admiten generalmente los especialistas del vodú, quienes hacen demasiado hincapié en sus raíces de África del Oeste. [Palabras claves : Haití, peregrinación, sincretismo, congoleño, religión.]

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INTRODUCTION

Pilgrimage is the most popular communal ritual in the syncretic Catholic saint / Vodouist *lwa* (spirit) cults that dominate Haitian religion. With the notable exception of the annual Vodouist paschal celebrations at Souvenance, near the city of Gonaïves, the main pilgrimage events in Haiti all take place in a summer cluster :

- June 27 (Our Lady of Perpetual Help / Ezili Freda and Ezili Dantò), Port-au-Prince
- July 15 (Our Lady of Mount Carmel / Ezili Dantò), Sodo / Ville-Bonheur
- July 26 (Saint James the Greater / Ogou Feray), Plaine-du-Nord
- August 15 (Our Lady of the Assumption / Ezili Kawoulo), Cape Haitian, Les Cayes and Port-au-Prince
- September 5 (Saint Philomena / Lasyrenn), Bord-de-Mer-de-Limonade

Scholarly and journalistic literature generally portrays these cults as a fusion of West African (mainly Fon and Yoruba) spirit cults and Western European (mainly Estremaduran and Breton) popular Catholic saint veneration. While not incorrect, this only tells two-thirds (at best) of their ethnohistory. With few exceptions these depictions completely lack historical and ethnographic consideration of Central African influences (especially Kongolese) on these traditions ¹. Conceived in part to help fill the resultant significant gap in our understanding of Haitian pilgrimage, this paper combines historical and ethnographic analysis to demonstrate that Kongolese popular religion, which has long been in significant part itself Catholic, was not only a taproot of Haitian pilgrimage culture, but that Kongolese influences are among its most vibrant features to this day. This is especially true regarding the traditions of Saint James the Greater / Ogou Feray and Saint Philomena / Lasyrenn, which are highlighted in this paper ².

Throughout the Catholic world, pilgrimage has always been inspired by popular devotion to saints and martyrs. During the Counterreformation, saint cults, which since the Middle Ages had been in something of a recession, were infused with new life and popularity. Notably, this transpired on the eve of the European conquest of the Americas and thus greatly shaped the kind of Catholicism that was brought to the New World. Most historians have therefore opined that the emergence of saint cults and their pilgrimages in the Americas were chiefly determined by ecclesial proclamations made by Iberian clerics, such as the naming of a church or a town for a saint of their choosing. From this standpoint, the earliest New World saint cults were transplanted versions of the Counterreformation Marian devotion of the early waves of Spanish and Portuguese explorers, conquistadors, and missionaries ; subjugated Native Americans and enslaved Africans, according to this view, were forced to become Catholics and

adopted and practiced usually pale and often heretically syncretic versions of European devotions. On the island that the Spanish named Hispaniola, so many churches, bays, towns, and rivers were, after all, named by Europeans for the Virgin Mary.

Along with the Blessed Mother, Saint James the Greater (as *Santiago Matamoros*), patron saint of Spain, would also see his cult flourish in the New World³. As Jacques Lafaye (1976, p. 226) explains, « The first Catholic images given to the Indians were St. James, who appeared to them as a formidable god of war and of thunder, and the Virgin Mary, whose appearance, by contrast, must have consoled the vanquished ». And although the colony in which it was built in 1503 was named for Saint Dominic (Santo Domingo), the first church in the New World was, on the orders of the Catholic Queen Isabela, consecrated to Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception. A year later, the first diocese in the Americas, also in Santo Domingo, would likewise be named after *la Concepcion* (Saez 1987, p. 13).

It might thus seem perfectly sound to begin an ethnohistory of Haitian pilgrimage in Iberia ; however, revisionist historiography of the African diaspora would also, first and foremost, guide inquiry to those regions of Africa whence derived the majority of slaves in colonial Hispaniola. As Paul Lovejoy (1997, p. 1) suggests : « A revisionist interpretation of the dispersal of enslaved Africans in the era of the trans-Atlantic slave trade [...] concentrates on the role of Africa in the genesis and ongoing history of the diaspora. This revisionist approach emphasizes the continuities in African history and the extension of that history into the diaspora ».

Although revisionist to some degree, most historical literature on the African diaspora suffers from its undue preferential treatment of West African over and above Central African influences. This is especially problematic in the Haitian case⁴ because the majority of the victims of the final waves of slave imports into Saint-Domingue were in fact from Central Africa⁵. Nearly all scholars of Haitian religion who do examine Kongolese influence on Haitian Vodou nevertheless ignore, moreover, the question of Kongolese *Catholic* influences. In other words, in their often-successful quests to uncover traditional Kongolese « survivals » in Haitian Vodou, Haitianists have focused almost exclusively on features of traditional Kongolese religion and ignored the possibility of Kongolese Catholic « survivals ». In doing so, they unwittingly de-Catholicize 17th and 18th century Kongolese religious culture in the New World, overlooking the impact of African agency in the creation of Haitian Catholic culture. This imbalance of course not only justifies my revisionist approach in this essay but demonstrates its necessity, for *pilgrimage associated with Catholic saints had a long history in Central Africa before most Kongolese slaves arrived in Saint-Domingue*. Many of them surely had experienced Catholic pilgrimage in the homeland, hence a taproot of Haitian pilgrimage is ethnically Kongolese. Two key features of this taproot, as will be demonstrated below, are Kongolese

Catholic saint cults and terrestrial water spirits called *bisimbi* (plural form in Kikongo for *simbi*)⁶.

PILGRIMAGE IN HAITIAN HISTORY

Taking a revisionist cue, I thus begin this historical summary of Haitian pilgrimage in Central Africa, whence derived the majority of slaves brought to Saint-Domingue in the three decades before Haitian independence in 1804. Father Giacinto da Bologna, an Italian Capuchin who served in the Congo from 1741 to 1747, provides some important insight into the nature of Marian pilgrimage in Central Africa at precisely the time when the largest waves of Kongolese slaves arrived in Saint-Domingue. By then, Catholicism had been a pervasive influence on Kongolese religion for nearly a quarter-millennium. Giacinto explains how devotion to the Virgin was « a most pious custom among the Kongolese », who called her « *Mamanzambi* » (Mother of God). Every Saturday offerings would be left before the church for *Mamanzambi*. In remote places where there was no church, the faithful would simply erect a cross and place offerings there for her, and many practiced the custom of offering the first fruits of their harvest to the Virgin, often traveling long distances in order to do so. On one occasion, the Italian friar visited a rural chapel in the village of Sonho, which housed a statue of Our Lady of Pinda that was popular among Kongolese pilgrims. Because it was termite-infested and on the verge of collapse, the priest decided to take the altar and statue to his mission station for restoration, announcing to the faithful that he intended to later to lead the icon back to its rightful resting place in procession :

Upon this announcement, the population of Sonho was abuzz with excitement, and by their own initiative, they cut a new road through the forest, ample and wide, even destroying their farmland in the process in order that the road be straight and practical... Most brought offerings in abundance : vegetables, manioc, millet, tobacco, fruits and eggs, despite it being a time of famine... In effect, the procession was also made to implore the rain to fall, and the Lord God delivered it to them in abundance, which brought an abrupt and total end to the famine that had already killed so many. (Hyacinthe 1931, pp. 142-143)

A less sympathetic European observer in the 16th century describes a celebration of the feast of Saint James in the Kongo kingdom as follows :

On the feast of the saint, before coming to church to hear Mass the count goes to see the countess, from whom he receives the bow and arrows. In the presence of his wife, who sits on the ground, and together with two of his principal chiefs... he immediately begins to perform a private *sangramento*, this is, to leap about and flourish the bow... On another day there is a public *sangramento* outside the church ; to see so many

Blacks shouting and screaming, you would think you were witnessing a scene from Hell.⁷

These two remarkable accounts (the racism and sanctimony of the second notwithstanding) feature several elements that remain important in contemporary Haitian pilgrimage, such as bringing all sorts of offerings and petitions to the saints, dancing and possession, and laboring vigorously to ensure that the pilgrimage route and grounds are beautified. At the Shrine of St. Philomena in the northern coastal village of Bord-de-Mer (Bord-de-Mer-de-Limonade), for instance, so many people are concerned that the shrine smell beautiful for the saint that the local parish priest has been forced to post a sign above the altar requesting that they not spray aerosol air fresheners while holding lighted candles – an obviously dangerous combination ! Meanwhile at the parish of St. James in Plaine-du-Nord, the pastor keeps the church closed during most of the mid-July celebrations because of the sometimes-rambunctious license that many pilgrims used to take inside the sanctuary (Figure 1).

As these examples illustrate, pilgrimage is one of the most liberal and foregrounded examples of syncretism in Haitian religion. Building upon Roger Bastide's « syncretism in mosaic », Leslie Desmangles theorizes this phenomenon through his notion of « symbiosis by ecology » : once removed from Africa and hence the local geographic features and harvest cycles that determined their cults' spatial and temporal frameworks, African spirits in Hispaniola (as in Cuba, Brazil, and elsewhere) were assimilated with Catholic saints, whose feast day celebrations and pilgrimage sites became the replacement spatial and temporal frameworks for the extensions of their cults in the Americas (see Bastide 1967 ; Desmangles 1992). Because it takes place during a Catholic religious holiday, despite being the least Catholic of Haiti's main pilgrimages, the *fèt daome* (Dahomey Feast) at the village of Souvenance represents one the most forceful examples of such « symbiosis by ecology » in Haitian Vodou. In celebrating all of the *lwas* of the Rada pantheon⁸, moreover, the Souvenance pilgrimage is unique in not symbiotically grafting itself upon any Catholic saint.

Established by freed and escaped slaves from Dahomey just before Haitian independence in 1804, *fèt daome* is one of the oldest pilgrimage traditions within the geographic confines of the Republic of Haiti. Souvenance is not, however, the oldest pilgrimage destination in Haitian religion. Believers on the west side of the island (which was Saint-Domingue from 1697-1804, and has been Haiti since then) have been journeying to Higüey since the 16th century to render cult to Our Lady of Altagracia, patron saint of the Dominican Republic (Rey 1999, p. 136).

In addition to the various cults of Mary that emerged early on the island and determined its nascent pilgrimage calendar and geography, the cult of Saint



FIG. 1 – A Vodou priestess performs a purification bath for a pilgrim in the lagoon adjacent to the Shrine of Saint Philomena in Bord-de-Mer-de-Limonade. All kinds of Vodou rituals, including animal sacrifices, take place in the churchyard even while Catholic Mass is being celebrated within the shrine (cliché Rey).

James / Ogou Feray (Saint James here in the image of Santiago Matamoros, the quintessentially Spanish rendition of the cult of Saint-James the Greater) also became popular in colonial Hispaniolan Catholicism. This was in significant part due to Saint James's being the patron saint of Spain, and to West African slaves' assimilating St. James with Ogou, the Yoruba orisha of iron, because of the abundant metal and militarism in the Catholic saint's imagery and mythology. While of course affirming these ethnic streams into the St. James / Ogou Feray cult, I argue below that it derived at least equal force from the arrival of tens of thousands of Central African (especially Kongolese Catholic) slaves in Saint-Domingue in the 18th century.

St. James's popularity in colonial Hispaniola notwithstanding, it is clear that devotion to the Virgin Mary, however syncretic, dominated early pilgrimage on the island. Some of this devotion, moreover, was surely imported by Central African Catholics like those described by Father Giacinto above. With the formal ceding of the western third of the island to the French in 1697 and the establishment of the colony of Saint-Domingue, Marian devotion would both gain

popularity and witness a marked shift in focus to Our Lady of the Assumption, to whom the first French parish church in the capital city of Cape Haitian had already been consecrated in 1681 (Greene 1992, p. 76). Eventually, the cathedrals in each of Haiti's three largest cities (Cape Haitian, the modern capital of Port-au-Prince, and the southern port of Les Cayes) would also be consecrated to Our Lady of the Assumption, thereby establishing one of Haiti's most vibrant pilgrimage traditions.

The first missionaries in the new French colony were quite struck by how devoted many African and Creole slaves were to the Virgin Mary, surely in large part due to the longstanding Catholic devotion of the Kongolese. Letters written by French Jesuits and the Company of the Daughters of Mary in the early 18th century provide a glimpse of this important foundation of Haitian pilgrimage in Saint-Domingue. One nun, for example, indicated that slaves were always lighting candles before the statue of the Virgin in the new Cape Haitian cathedral, whose construction was completed in 1718 : « Eight candles always burn before her ; such is the devotion of the blacks » (as cited in Jan 1951, p. 226). Admittedly, such devotion was likely highly syncretic, especially for slaves from West Africa and their descendants, who surely assimilated the Virgin with Ezili and other female goddesses of the homeland.

Pilgrimage to the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Assumption in Cape Haitian was politically enhanced after Haitian independence in 1804. Popular Haitian historical imagination credits the 1791 Vodou ceremony at Bois Caïman, led by Boukman Dutty and Cecile Fatiman, with sparking the revolution and their liberation from enslavement ; and because Bois Caïman took place during the night of August 14-15, Our Lady of the Assumption must have sanctioned the revolution because her feast day is also August 15. The mid-August pilgrimage to Cape-Haitian was thus infused with a nationalistic potency that amplified its symbolism and thus its popularity ⁹.

It is of especial significance that during the period from 1804 to 1860 the Vatican rejected the legitimacy of the Republic of Haiti and refused to send priests to the new nation. As a result, Catholic leadership was largely left to Haitians who had never stepped foot in a seminary, along with a scant and dubious priesthood comprised largely of rejects from other Latin American nations, fueling even more licentious syncretism of pilgrimage and other religious traditions. The Feast of Our Lady of the Assumption, described here by one observer of the pilgrimage at the Cape Haitian cathedral in 1840, is a case in point :

From the morning *Angelus* on Saturday, August 15, all the bells tolled, announcing to the faithful the great solemnity of this day, the Feast of Our Lady of the Assumption, *Fete paroissale*. At 2:00 in the afternoon, at the beginning of vespers, the procession of the Virgin began, with a great crowd, brilliance and majesty... Every city quarter was decorated with superb ribbons of light. The church entrance was most tastefully

decorated with glass bulbs of various colors... In the Place d'Armes [in front of the cathedral] there were public dances that lasted through the following morning. For the entire day, after the formal religious ceremonies, there was great public rejoicing. Without encountering the least disorder, one could see the joy painted on all faces, as the frankest gaiety animated everyone.

Reminiscent of feast day celebrations in the Kongo kingdom, the dancing in the Cape Haitian city square continued for the next three days, long after the formal feast for the Virgin had ended. The pilgrimage, moreover, continued to attract people from near and far, as « five or six societies from the plain came to the city, their flags flying with their different decorations, and danced to the beat of their tom-tom, continuing like this for several more days their noisy dances » (Cliquot M. 1844, cited in Jan 1958, pp. 55-54).

Just three years after these colorful events in Cape-Haitian, a strong earthquake shook Haiti's Central Plateau and created a beautiful waterfall near the village of Ville-Bonheur. The falls, which would soon be named Sodo (Saut-d'Eau), immediately became sacred space as a natural shrine for Danbala-Wedo, the Fon-derived Vodou snake-rainbow spirit, no doubt in part because rainbows frequently appear in the cascade's mists. Yet by 1844, five years before the celebrated apparitions of the Virgin Mary that would forever draw thousands of pilgrims annually to Sodo, some Haitians were already associating the miraculous waterfall with the Virgin Mary: Adolphe Cabon notes that « the Saut-d'Eau, or Ville-Bonheur, pilgrimage was instituted from the time of the separation of the Eastern Part [of the island] in 1844, as a replacement for the pilgrimage to Higüey, to which Haitians could no longer go » (Cabon 1933, p. 406). The Higüey pilgrimage, which dates to the 16th century apparition of Our Lady of Altigracia to a young girl there, takes place on and around July 21.

Though one can only speculate as to the forces behind Sodo's unexplained attraction for Marian devotees during the five prior years, the Virgin Mary's apparition there in 1849 to a young man named Fortune Morose, not to mention its political exploitation by the Haitian « Emperor » Faustin Soulouque, would transform Sodo from a local Danbala shrine into Haiti's most celebrated Marian / Ezilian pilgrimage tradition. Morose had been looking for his horse in the woods near the falls when he heard a strange ruffling of leaves in the branches overhead. He gazed above to see the Virgin Mary, and ran aghast at once to the local police station in Ville-Bonheur. Later he returned with a police officer, only by then the Virgin had left. However, she did leave her image on a large palm leaf, news of which the two spread throughout the region :

From this time on, the people of the surrounding area came from time to time to see if the picture was still there and waited patiently until the leaf fell to look at it more closely. About a month later the leaf fell and the picture was not on it. But the same picture was reproduced on another leaf. The news of the apparition of the Holy Virgin

raced throughout the country. The place where the palm trees on which the Holy Virgin appeared is known as Nan Palm. It has become since then a holy place, and every 16 July, pilgrims make a trip to Saut-d'Eau. (Laguette 1981, pp. 88-98)

Whether the sudden geomorphic creation of the waterfall and the apparition of the Virgin Mary at Sodo were in themselves enough to spark this extraordinary pilgrimage tradition is a valid and interesting question, because this may well have required the political boost that it was about to receive from President Faustin Soulouque. An uneducated, hyper-religious despot, Soulouque had himself named Emperor Faustin I in a pompous coronation in 1847, three years after the Dominican Republic had gained independence from Haitian rule. Obsessed with ruling the entire island, he thus sought spiritual legitimation for his ill-fated military campaigns to reconquer the neighboring country. Toward this end, the emperor commissioned his entire cabinet to visit Sodo and, upon their affirmation of the authenticity of the apparitions, promulgated a decree that that a church be erected in Ville-Bonheur, consecrated to Our Lady of Mount Carmel. Her feast day is July 16, and today Haitians flock to Sodo in the middle of July for the occasion. Those who cannot make the trip from the diaspora instead visit churches consecrated to Our Lady of Mount Carmel wherever they are, like the Church of Our Lady of Mount Carmel in New York City's Harlem neighborhood¹⁰.

The events of Sodo and the resultant pilgrimage tradition have made Our Lady of Mount Carmel (usually assimilated in Vodou with Ezili Dantò) one of the most popular Marian cults in Haiti. By the end of the 19th century, however, Mount Carmel and all other Marian cults would be eclipsed in popularity by a new image of the Virgin in the Haitian religious field, Our Lady of Perpetual Help. Strikingly reminiscent of the events in the Congo of 1740 described above by Father Giacinto, the Cult of Perpetual Help in Haiti was born out of the Virgin's response to the faithful's mass procession, offerings to the Holy Mother, and fervent prayers for rain. On Saturday, February 5, 1882, Monsignor Alexis Jean-Marie Guillot, Archbishop of Port-au-Prince, summoned the masses to the church of St. Francis Xavier in the capital's Bel-Air neighborhood. There he said Mass and called upon Our Lady of Perpetual Help, whose cult was theretofore unknown in Haiti, to deliver the nation from the dreadful small pox epidemic that had been ravishing the nation for months, leaving tens of thousands dead in its wake. Miraculously a two-day downpour ensued, ending the unusually long drought that had exacerbated the epidemic. Sixty years later, in 1942, Perpetual Help was declared Haiti's patron saint, making her church in Bel-Air, which had been renamed for her just after the 1882 miracle, arguably the most important pilgrimage destination in Haitian religion, and surely its most nationalistic.

As the remarkable emergence of the cult of Perpetual Help and its « supercedure » of longer-standing Marian cults demonstrate, the Haitian religious field

is quite fertile for the germination and fruition of new pilgrimage traditions. Taking this metaphoric language one step further, ethnoreligious traditions, like European Catholic saint cults, West African orisha cults, and, as will be demonstrated below, Kongolese simbi cults, were the cross-fertilizing seeds planted in this soil, which have fructified as Haitian pilgrimage traditions. This phenomenon was most forcefully manifested in the 20th century in the rise to prominence of the cult of Saint Philomena, who in Vodou is assimilated with Lasyrenn (and her cohort Labalenn [the whale *lwa*]). To wit, just as the cult of Perpetual Help was virtually unknown in Haiti prior to the Virgin's eradication of the small pox epidemic of 1882, so was the cult of Saint Philomena virtually unknown in Haiti prior to her 1950 apparition in a village near Cape Haitian.

Standing on the sea and holding an anchor, one day in 1950 St. Philomena appeared to a man named Toussaint on a beach in the village of Piquolet, just outside of the city of Cape Haitian. She told him to bring her, now in the form of a statue, to the seaside village of Bord-de-Mer, near the town of Limonade, about 40 miles away. Toussaint faithfully heeded the saint's instructions. Subsequently devotion to St. Philomena became wildly popular, and so the poor villagers mustered their resources and energies to begin the construction of a chapel to house the statue. Their initiative received a powerful boost when President Paul Magloire, a devout Catholic and native of Limonade, provided formal support for the shrine. By the summer of 1953, the construction of the chapel was complete. Its consecration took place on September 5 of that year, which remains the local *de facto* feast day of Saint Philomena, despite her centuries-old date in the official Catholic liturgical calendar being August 11. Today the feast of Saint Philomena / Lasyrenn is so popular that a large nightclub has recently opened in the nearby town of Limonade, and it rarely functions outside of the week surrounding September 5¹¹ (Figure 2).

This discussion of the history of Haitian pilgrimage is far from exhaustive, as many other pilgrimage traditions thrive in Haitian religion, such as Saint Francis in Bombardopolis, Our Lady of Charity in Carrefour-Feuilles, Saint Peter in Baint, and so on. Moreover, Haitians in the diaspora, who number roughly two million (about one-fourth of the present population in Haiti), recreate or fashion anew pilgrimage traditions wherever they have established major communities, like in Miami, New York, Boston, Montreal, and Paris. These omissions aside, the foregoing historical outline of Haiti's main pilgrimage traditions effectively contextualizes the following ethnohistorical consideration of two of these traditions: Saint James the Greater / Ogou Feray in Plaine-du-Nord and Saint Philomena / Lasyrenn in Bord-de-Mer.



FIG. 2 – The shrine of Saint Philomena in Bord-de-Mer-de-Limonade was renamed as the Shrine of Our Lady of Perpetual Help by the Catholic Archdiocese of Cape-Haitien in the 1980s in an effort to curb the freewheeling Vodou devotions that take place there. Pilgrims, however, have altogether ignored the Archdiocese’s decree, as on Perpetual Help’s feast day virtually no one attends Mass, while during Philomena’s feast, tens of thousands flock to the shrine (cliché Rey).

SAINTS, SPIRITS, AND SIMBIS AT PLAINE-DU-NORD AND BORD-DE-MER

Thus far I have suggestively outlined the various ethnic streams that have fed and fertilized Haiti’s major pilgrimage traditions : e.g., Kongolese, Fon, Yoruba, Estremaduran, and Breton. There are good reasons, however, to forego attempting any greater ethnohistorical specificity ; chief among them, the blurriness of borders between various African « ethnicities », not to mention European ones. Because such ethnicities, either African or European, are in no way monadic or monolithic, I heed Stephan Palmié’s caution that « the theme park approach »¹² to re-*representing* African diasporic history and culture should be curtailed because it « obscures the history of such cultural complexity » (Palmié 2002, p. 25). Or, as Wyatt MacGaffey (2002, p. 211) cautions : « In the search for trans-Atlantic parallels and connections, one cannot simply help oneself to traits as though Central African culture, or any other, were a sort of plumbers’ supply store to which you can go in search of a widget like the one you have at home ». I thus

proceed with caution in the following discussion of the possible Central African influences on the cults and pilgrimage traditions of St. James / Ogou Feray and St. Philomena / Lasyrenn, but hope nonetheless to provide important new insights into the development of these cults in Haitian religion by reflecting here upon Kongolese contributions that have up to now been widely neglected in the literature.

One of the complexities that the theme park approach to the ethnohistory of the African diaspora obscures is the phenomenon of African traditions' blending with one another both in Africa and in the Americas. The orisha spirits of West Africa, for example, were never the monopoly of the Yoruba, as so much literature on the African diaspora misleadingly suggests¹³, and most, if not all, of the African religious cultures that came to the New World were the products of many generations of indigenous religious syncretism on the mother continent. No scholar of Vodou grasps this complexity better than Lilas Desquiron, whose chronology of African cultural influences on the genesis of Haitian culture, which builds upon the earlier work of Gabriel Debien (1965), is an important contribution to our understanding of the nascence of Haitian Vodou¹⁴. Perhaps because West African influences have emerged as more obvious in Vodou, most scholars have perpetuated the longstanding assumption, one that dates to Melville Herskovits (1937), that Vodou is mainly the creation of West Africans¹⁵. This assertion becomes especially questionable when one considers the important fact that by the time of the Haitian Revolution most of the Africans in Saint-Domingue were Central Africans (mainly Kongo, Mondongue, and Mbundu). Desquiron (1990, p. 103) rightly affirms that the West African (mainly Fon and Yoruba) foundation of Vodou had already been laid by this time, but, she soundly argues, it remained for Central Africans to give the religion many of its most important features, such as its soteriology, ancestor cult, charms, sacramentality, and fresh water spirits : « One thing seems certain, and that is that the Bantu did not modify the Dahomean religious *structure* : they adopted it and enriched it with new elements and sometimes reinterpreted it according to their own culture ».

Both the cult of Saint James / Ogou Feray and the cult of Saint Philomena / Lasyrenn, along with their respective pilgrimage traditions at Plaine-du-Nord and Bord-de-Mer, offer telling examples of this process. The former occurred during the colonial era, while the latter's 20th century occurrence demonstrates the remarkable perseverance of Kongolese tradition, despite traditional Kongolese religion's « precarious priesthood » and lack of « universal spirits »¹⁶. In each case, Kongolese understandings of Catholic saints and other biblical figures, known to the baKongo for more than 200 years prior to their massive transatlantic enslavement in Saint-Domingue, worked to enrich and popularize these two cults, much as they surely did for all Vodou *lwa* / saint cults, and offered important avenues and idioms of reinterpretation. Also influential on both the

Plaine-du-Nord and the Bord-de-Mer pilgrimage traditions are the originally Kongolesse simbi freshwater spirits ; purifying immersions in water (or mud) are among the most powerful religious experiences that pilgrims undergo, and it is the simbi who inhabit and spiritualize terrestrial waters in Haiti, much like they did and still do in the Congo (Figure 3).

Saint Jacques de la-Plaine-du-Nord is one of the oldest parishes in Haiti, dating to before the days of Saint-Domingue plantation slavery. It is likely that the introduction of St. James's image to West African slaves brought Ogou, their « universal » spirit of iron, immediately to mind because of the metal sword held by the saint and the militarism in which Santiago Matamoros was steeped. Here is a prime example of Desmangles's notion of « symbiosis by identification » : « the system by which, on the basis of a similarity, Catholic saints were identified with or "transfigured into" Vodou gods » (Desmangles 1992, p. 8). As Donald Cosentino (1995, p. 246) writes, « There is no doubt that the saint's popularity rests on a perceived iconic correspondence between him and the Fon/Yoruba deity Gu/Ogun »¹⁷. But, as he goes on to note, Saint James was not new to the thousands of Catholic slaves brought from Central Africa, for whom « Santiago played a decisive role in the transformation of Kongo culture » (*ibid.*, p. 249). The cult of Santiago in the Kongo, moreover, was immersed in royalism ever since King Afonso I had a vision of the saint while in battle in 1506, during which the saint miraculously assured his victory over a seemingly overwhelming adversarial force. Saint James, in effect, emerged as the *de facto* patron saint of the Kongo kingdom, conflated for many believers with King Afonso (as regal ancestor), and his Central African devotees who tragically wound up enslaved in Saint-Domingue brought a new dimension to the Saint James / Ogou cult that is ever manifest in the Plaine-du-Nord pilgrimage. Feast day celebrations for Saint James in the Kongo thus would serve as « a process model for what Africans would reinvent in Haiti, a harbinger of the immense influence Kongo would have in Haiti » (*ibid.*, p. 250), especially in the north where there was the highest concentration of Kongolesse slaves¹⁸. Jean-Pierre Willem's (2003) rich description of the Plaine-du-Nord pilgrimage reflects this « process model » actualized :

The beating of the tambours never ceases, accompanied by a choir of *ouns*, the servants of the spirits. Some people are overcome by convulsions as if brought on by electric shock. The first trances occur, and naked bodies, the simplest of offerings, enter the mud. Today it is Ogou who leads the dance. Patron of warriors, he is also thunder, fire, will, and power.

A body of water not quite big enough to be considered a pond, though larger than a puddle and simply called by the faithful « *Trou Sèn Jak* » (Saint James's Hole), is the ritual focus of the Plaine-du-Nord pilgrimage, which draws thousands of pilgrims during the several days leading up to the feast of Saint James on July 25. The *Trou* is the site of countless purification baths and baptisms perfor-



FIG. 3 – Pilgrims leave offerings to Lasyrenn and the Simbi spirits in the ruins of the retreat house behind the shrine of Saint Philomena. The ruins are considered sacred because of their connection to both the Vodou spirits of the lagoon and to the Catholic saints of the shrine (cliché Rey).

med by any of the number of ritual specialists in attendance. In the summer of 1995 I spoke with a man who had undergone numerous ritual baths in the Trou since childhood. When asked what made Trou Sèn Jak holier than any mud hole near his hometown of Bombardopolis, from which the pilgrim travels each summer for the occasion, he replied : « This is the *simbi* water of our liberty in this hole, mixed with the earth of the ancestors », suggestive of another important Kongolese influence on the Plaine-du-Nord pilgrimage¹⁹.

« In Kongo », writes MacGaffey (2002, p. 213), « *bisimbi* (the plural) are spirits of localities, inhabiting rocks, gullies, streams, and pools, who are able to influence the fertility and well being of those who live nearby ». Simbi spirits are the most clearly Kongolese contribution to Vodou's spirit pantheon. Whereas most of the *lwa* have manifestation in the petwo branch of this pantheon, which is affirmed unanimously by scholars as being heavily influenced by Kongo religion, those same manifestations are mainly of « universal » West African spirits, though understood through Kongo idiom in their petwo forms. Being the lords of freshwater bodies, the *simbi* are the closest thing to universal spirits in traditional Kongolese religion²⁰, which goes far in explaining their survival and prominence in Haitian Vodou. It should come as no surprise, therefore, to anyone familiar with Vodou for a believer, like the pilgrim from Bombardopolis, to ascertain that a powerful *simbi* spirit inhabits Trou Sèn Jak. I cannot say how many Plaine-du-Nord pilgrims share this belief, though I have heard pilgrims in Bord-de-Mer make the same claim concerning the lagoon behind the Shrine of Saint Philomena.

Although her conflation with St. Philomena is a relatively recent twist in the history of her cult, devotion to Lasyrenn, popularly depicted and envisioned as a mermaid, is as old as any in Haitian Vodou. As Karen McCarthy Brown (1991, pp. 223-224) indicates, this form of devotion in Haiti is in large part an extension of the cult of Mami Wata in Fon and other West African religious cultures : « Lasyrenn is connected to Mammy Water, whose shrines are found throughout West Africa. Some suggest that the mermaid persona, also common for Mammy Water, was derived from the carved figures on the bows of the ships of Europeans traders and slavers ». St. Philomena appeared, evidently for the first time in Haiti²¹, in 1950 on the shores to which those very ships brought their slaves and other wares.

Her devotion becomes very popular : St. Philomena, like all Catholic saints in Haitian religion, was readily associated with a Vodou spirit, in this case Lasyrenn / Labalenn. This identification likely was the result of both the site of the apparition (the saint was standing on the sea) and the anchor that St. Philomena was holding when she initially appeared to Toussaint²², and which she holds in her iconography. Prior to the construction of her shrine in 1953, devotions took place under a large and shady tree near the ocean, where today the Vodou drumming ceremonies immediately following the Tuesday and Friday 9:30 Mass at the shrine still take place without fail.

The chapel was inaugurated on September 5, which has remained, for Haitians alone, the feast day of St. Philomena. Sometime during the 1950s, two French priests from the Archdiocese of Cape Haitian, built a small house overlooking the marsh in the yard behind the shrine. It was used for retreats and for brief periods of residence, especially during the months of July through September, which is peak pilgrimage season in the north of Haiti, incorporating the feasts of St. James / Ogou Feray, Our Lady of the Assumption / Ezili Kawoulou, and St. Philomena / Lasyrenn. All of these feasts centrally concern St. Philomena, who has become the de facto patroness of pilgrims in Haiti. Prior to the St. James feast day celebrations in Plaine-du-Nord, for instance, hundreds of pilgrims visit the Shrine of St. Philomena in Bord-de-Mer to receive the saint's blessings for a safe pilgrimage. Some, in fact, would never venture on any pilgrimage without doing so.

Much like Trou Sèn Jak, the freshwater lagoon behind the shrine of St. Philomena serves as a natural baptismal fount and a bath for ritual purification. All the while that Masses are taking place biweekly in the shrine, *manbos* and *oungans* (Vodou priestesses and priests) perform healing baths for their clients in the lagoon right where the ruins of the retreat house stand. All that remains of the edifice are its foundation and parts of two walls, one of which runs into the water. Candles burn in their nooks and crannies, and all kinds of offerings in zinc bowls to the simbi, the saint, and the *lwa*, are left on the banks just below. Several people are stripped down to their underpants and undergo purification baths performed by Vodou priestesses, while others sacrifice goats in the churchyard. When I asked him about all of this, Father Emmanuel Pierre responded, « This has been going on for much longer than I have been here, so I tolerate it. The only thing I put a stop to was the sacrifice of animals in the shrine, and I have to hide the statue of St. Philomena after Mass. She would surely be stolen if I left her in the shrine »²³. Once Mass ends and Pierre has taken the statue to safe haven, the drumming begins beneath the tree near the beach, which has been a site of Vodouist ritual for as long as anyone can remember. These scenes repeat themselves twice weekly, as hundreds of people flock to the village to keep vows to the feisty saint. Around September 5, the main pilgrimage event draws tens of thousands to the normally sleepy village.

Much like the Bombardopolis pilgrim had told me about Trou Sèn Jak several years prior, a young oungan at Bord-de-Mer explained to me that the lagoon was a prime site for baptism and spiritual baths because it was inhabited by a simbi spirit. I have since come to reflect upon the influence of simbi devotion on the emergence of St. Philomena as the feisty saint that she is in Haitian religion, concluding (albeit tentatively) that St. Philomena's being a child saint is a vehicle for association with the simbi spirits, who are in Kongolese tradition « « closely associated with, and at times indistinguishable from... sacred children » (MacGaffey 2002, p. 212). MacGaffey (*ibid.*, p. 213) further explains that bisimbi

can « cause trouble if they are not treated with respect. When too many accidents occur on a stretch of road, truck drivers may make small offerings to the bisimbi in a nearby watercourse ». This might help explain, in any case, just how it is that St. Philomena has become the patron saint of pilgrimage in Haiti (Figure 4).

In the summer of 2003, I met a remarkable elderly Vodou priestess after Mass at the shrine in Bord-de-Mer. She was draped in numerous scarves, shawls, ropes, and beads, and spoke freely about her practice. Both her name and her comments to me further bespeak the enduring Kongolese influences on the cult of St. Philomena / Lasyrenn : « I am Manbo of Three Magic and the Three Magi (*Manbo Twa Maji Twa Wa Maj*) ». The « three magics », she explained, « are of St. John the Baptist, St. Philomena, and Lasyrenn ». The three magi are of course the three wise kings who brought gifts to the Christ child in the biblical infancy narratives.

There are two Kongolese connections to be made here, more than 200 years after the last slave ships ported in Cape Haitian. For one, the manbo's reference to, and self-identification with, the three magi hearkens to the proclamation of the Kongolese religious prophet of the Haitian Revolution Makaya, who once declared, « I am the subject of three kings : of the King of Congo, master of all the blacks ; of the King of France who represents my father ; of the King of Spain who represents my mother. These three Kings are the descendants of those who, led by a star, came to adore God made Man » (as cited in Thornton 1993, p. 181). The second hearkening to Kongolese religion is also located in the manbo's reference to the three magi. Milo Marcelin observed nearly 50 years ago that the simbi are assimilated with these biblical figures in Haitian Vodou : « The sanctuary of the simbi gods is equipped with several small altars on which are found the chromoliths of saints the Magi (the three Magi Kings are assimilated with the three Kongo kings) »²⁴. Thus the pilgrimage of St. Philomena / Lasyrenn to Bord-de-Mer is as much about a body of water inhabited by a simbi (and perhaps about distant memories of Kongo kings) as it is about the saint and the lwa, much like the pilgrimage of St. James / Ogou Feray to Plaine-du-Nord.

CONCLUSION

Because their various African and European ethnic roots are so intertwined, complexities abound in the syncretic rituals and beliefs of Haitian popular religion, which is nowhere more powerfully evident than in Haiti's rich pilgrimage traditions. As MacGaffey (2002, p. 223) rightly notes, « Haitian spirits called *lwa*... can be read not only in European Catholic or in African terms, as Herskovits noted, but also in either Central African (Kongo) or in West African (Dahomey/Yoruba) terms ». The ethnohistory of these cults and their pilgrimage traditions must, however, be painted with brushstrokes as broad as those used



FIG. 4 – Pilgrims' devotional rituals for Saint Philomena in Bord-de-Mer-de Limonade are so often physical that the statue's face has been worn off. Everything from tearful kisses to lottery cards have washed away her features. The statue is only brought to the shrine during Mass, otherwise it resides in a secret home for safe-keeping (cliché Rey).

here by MacGaffey (*ibid.*), for in the absence of stronger historical data any attempt at greater specificity runs the risk of obscuring the very complexities that make Haitian pilgrimage so fascinating. Being aware that « each word, idea, or object is embedded in matrices of language, history, and ritual », I have chosen to focus here on the symbolic register of Kongolese Catholic devotions and *simbi* cult traditions to reveal an important Central African source of power in Haitian pilgrimage that is heretofore lacking in the literature. Though scholarship on Haitian Vodou was surely not a concern of whoever composed it, the following Vodou chant reflects this under-representation well enough : « *Simbi o peche poko konne mwen ; Simbi o kreyol poko konne mwen o Kongo* » (« I am Simbi, and sinners don't know who I am ; I am Simbi and people don't know who I am... Oh Kongo ! ») ²⁵. *

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NOTES

1. As Linda Heywood (2002, p. 1-18) explains, this underestimation of Central African influences is not unique to the literature on Haiti but generally plagues African diaspora studies at large, in part because Central African culture had already been « creolized » by sustained contact with Europeans, hence its contributions to American cultures were often less « exotic » and less visible than their West African counterparts.

2. I am grateful to James H. Sweet, Stefania Capone and Deborah O'Neil for their helpful comments on earlier versions of this essay.

3. According to popular Spanish legend, St. James appeared at the Battle of Clavijo in 844, during the *Reconquista*, seeing to a massacre of the Moors, hence his nickname « Matamoros ».

4. For a brief review of this imbalance in Haitian studies, see Terry Rey (2005).

5. For the best indication of the ethnic breakdown of slaves in the Americas, see Eltis *et al.* (1999).

6. « Kongo religion, including the *simbi* cult and its offshoot, the cult of twins and abnormal children, is present in the Caribbean to a greater extent than the classical literature recognizes » (MacGaffey 2002, p. 223).

7. Attributed to « De Lucques, a Portuguese observer » as cited by Cosentino (1995, p. 249).

8. The *lwas* of Haitian Vodou are generally members of any one of three *nasyon* (nations) : Rada (primarily of Fon and Arada origin), Nago (primarily of Yoruba origin) and Petwo (primarily of Kongo and Creole origin).

9. For a discussion on this confluence of political and religious significance surrounding August 14-15 in Haiti, see Beauvoir-Dominique (1991) ; for a broader discussion of the politicization of Catholic saints in Haitian history, see Rey (2002).

10. The Church of Our Lady of Mount Carmel in Harlem is the subject of Robert Anthony Orsi's (1985) already classic book. On Haitian devotion at this church, see Robert Anthony Orsi (1992) and Elizabeth McAlister (1998).

11. A similar nightclub operates at Sodo.

12. By « theme park approach », Palmié (2002, p. 160) means the uncritical designation of ethnic origins to features of African diasporic culture that treat ethnicities in much the same way as a theme park like, say, Disneyworld's Epcot Center treats national cultures.

13. Olabiyi Yai (s.d.) offers a corrective insight to the common portrayal of Yoruba as a monolithic culture whose orishas are its own production, also offering illustration as to the elusiveness of ethnohistorical specificity in Africa, not to mention the African diaspora : « Yoruba religion became global by sharing its orisha with immediate, West African neighbors of the people who have come to be collectively designated as Yoruba, and by adopting some of their deities. Thus the Edo, Yagba, Itsekiri, Nupe, Ibariba, Igbo, Igala, Fon, Gun, Aja, Ewe, Akan... belong to the same global village as the Yoruba ».

14. Desquiron (1990, pp. 17-34) draws upon Gabriel Debien (1965) in developing her chronology.

15. Fortunately this is beginning to change, and not just in the Haitian case, as notes MacGaffey (2002, p. 211) : « After decades of neglect, the Congo-Angolan element in American popular culture is now enthusiastically pursued and discussed ». Donald Cosentino's treatment of the Saint James / Ogou cult (cited above) is an important example of this in the case of Haitian religion.

16. John Thornton (1992) has critically wrestled with the question as to why there is such an imbalance in the scholarly literature on the side of West African influence over and above Central African. Concerning religion, he argues that because Kongolese spirit cults were wedded to local geographic features, their priesthoods were « precarious » because once the congregation moves the priesthood, which depended on the geographic feature in question (say, a spring, or a hill) dies. Unlike Central African traditions, however, West African religions featured spirits that were associated with « universal » things, like water and metal, and hence their cultic priesthoods were not precarious and were thus able to recreate themselves more effectively than those of Central Africa. This is not, however, to say that the Central African influences were any weaker in the Americas, only less obvious. Roger Bastide (1960) makes a similar argument in his *Les Religions africaines au Brésil*.

17. Even the extension of the West African Ogou cult is more complex than Cosentino here affirms. For, as Karen McCarthy Brown (1989, p. 78) indicates, « Sango and Ogun, who are quite distinct among the Yoruba, have merged in Haiti ».

18. On the sugar plantation of Pons au Bas-Limbe, for instance, « Kongos constituted two-thirds [of the slave population] and along with the Mondongues about three-quarters. The Nagos [Yoruba] formed only 10 % and the Aradas 6 % » (Geggus 1984, pp. 22-23).

19. Anonymous, interview with Terry Rey, Bombardopolis, Haiti, August 24, 1995. The pilgrim's reference to « liberty » reflects his awareness that one of the first slave uprisings to spark the Haitian Revolution occurred on the plantations of la Plaine-du-Nord in July of 1791.

20. Alfred Métraux (1972, p. 87) indicates that Kongolese spirits in Haitian Vodou are divided into two classes : « *Congo-du-Bord-de-la-Mer* (Congo of the sea-shore) and *Congo-savane* (Savannah Congo) ». It is almost certainly coincidental that one of the pilgrimage sites that I am investigating in this paper, the village of Bord-de-Mer, has virtually the same name as one of these two classes of Kongo spirits (essentially simbi, though not make explicit by Métraux), though it makes for interesting reflection all the same.

21. Evidently there was at least one later apparition of St. Philomena, this time in Bord-de-Mer, and once again in the form of a statue (O'Neil 2003).

22. Deborah O'Neil (2003) raises the interesting question as to how Toussaint could have recognized the apparition as St. Philomena if her cult were in fact theretofore unknown in Haiti, suggesting an important avenue of historical research here. One could speculate that the saint identified herself verbally, which is sometimes a feature of Marian apparitions worldwide, but in the absence of further historical data, certainty on the matter remains elusive.

23. Father Emmanuel Pierre, interview with Terry Rey and Deborah O'Neil, Bord-de-Mer, Haiti, August 18, 2003.

24. Milo Marcelin, « Le Vodou : religion populaire », *Optique*, March 1956, as cited in Desquiron 1990, p. 121.

25. This chant, whose orthography I have altered slightly from those in the liner notes, is recorded on « Fond-de-Nègres / Fond-des-Blancs : musiques paysannes d'Haïti », *Musique du Monde*, 1999.

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