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STEWARDSHIP IN WEST AFRICAN VODUN: A CASE STUDY OF OUIDAH, BENIN

By

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B.A., French, University of Kansas, Lawrence, KS, 2003

Thesis

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

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In Geography

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Stewardship in West African Vodun: A Case Study of Ouidah, Benin

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Indigenous, animistic religions inherently convey a close relationship and stewardship for the environment. This stewardship is very apparent in the region of southern Benin, Africa. The Fon peoples of this region practice a traditional religion termed *Vodun*, which manifested from the 17th century slave trade, and subsequently migrated to the Caribbean and Americas where it transmuted into *Voodoo*, among other religions. The migration of pre-colonial religious canon to the Western Hemisphere has garnered ample study; however, the pioneering religion, *Vodun*, has received far less scholastic attention, despite Benin's recognition of *Vodun* as a national religion. In this thesis, I contend that the Fon exemplify a society that incorporates rites and rituals of their animistic religion into their daily lives expressed through forms of stewardship, particularly as it pertains to the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé*. This fusion of religious tradition with environmental interaction is inseparable, as are the subsequent environmental effects. This thesis discussion entails an investigation of the impacts of Vodun beliefs on environment-society relations. The results of this study are based upon a qualitative study conducted in the summer of 2009 in Ouidah, Benin.

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank, first and foremost, my Thesis Committee. Drs. Gritzner, Halvorson, Borrie, and Shearer were extremely supportive and provided significant guidance throughout my thesis research and writing processes. Their ability to provide pertinent feedback and the dedication of their time are greatly appreciated.

I also wish to thank the residents of Ouidah for their time and energy toward the completion of this project. In particular, I wish to thank Professor Honorat Aguessy, François Aguessy, José Apovo, Père André, Imam Mustapha Adogmejo, Dagbo Hounon, Kpassenon, and all of my interviewees who gave of their time, knowledge, and patience so that I could provide a better representation of their community and religious beliefs.

Lastly, I wish to acknowledge the support I received prior to the undertaking of this project from Michel Fiator, Suzanne Preston Blier, and Edna Bay. Their knowledge of Ouidah and their ability to assist me in the facilitation of this research project are greatly appreciated.

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Chapter One **INTRODUCTION¹**

Introduction

The importance of stewardship in today's globalized society cannot be overemphasized. In a time when natural resources are becoming scarcer, and the population of the world is growing exponentially, those who actively practice stewardship exhibit care for the earth and its preservation. Religion has been found to play a significant role within this process. It should be a responsibility of scholars and religious leaders to utilize religious doctrine to promote and enable environmental care regardless of religious affiliation. The aim of this study is to illuminate the diverse religious and social factors contributing to ethical, environmental stewardship while accordingly espousing an indigenous land care ethos for Vodunsi, religious practitioners of Vodun around Ouidah, Benin. The three primary objectives of this study are (1) to determine the role that history has played in the evolution of Vodun; (2) to display what types of environmental ethics are applied by Vodunsi to the land, and (3) to determine if the environmental ethics possessed by Vodunsi present themselves as a type of stewardship through their behavior toward the Sacred Forest, *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé*.

I aim to portray if and how Vodunsi display stewardship through a reciprocal interaction with the natural environment directly relevant to the preservation of the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé*. While Vodunsi practices of stewardship are not

¹ *Disclaimer: For the purposes of accuracy, textual, historical analyses of dates, figures, and other data have all superseded those related orally. Owing to the nature and bias present in the authorship of most historical texts, careful consideration has been made to ensure the integrity of historical data presented herein*

tautologically positive, the Vodunsi practice of stewardship does represent aspects of stewardship that serve to benefit the development and preservation of the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé*.

The concept of stewardship has various applications and is practiced in various manners. I aim to present in this thesis the manner in which Vodun, as an animistic and traditional religion, can display a practice of stewardship that attempts to work with the natural environment in a reciprocating fashion. Furthermore, I aim to indicate how Vodunsi perceive themselves as members of Nature, components of Nature, not existing independently of nature. By adopting this understanding, and dispelling the human-nature dualism that pervades much of environmental ethics in the West, I will illustrate how the Vodunsi view all Nature as morally considerable. It should be noted from the onset, however, that not all Nature is morally considered within the realm of Vodunsi ideology. I address both the strengths and weaknesses associated with the application of this ethic.

Through effective stewardship practice, Vodunsi are able to display an environmental ethic that provides for a practical understanding of how humans can interact with Nature in a positive and non-destructive fashion. My specific attention upon Vodun environmental ethics will be primarily focused upon one of their sacred sites, the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé*. I will discuss the history of the region, and its impacts upon Vodun, as well as investigate the practices and belief systems of Vodun at the local level using interview data and site-specific observations. Through these processes, I will attempt to uncover evidence of and approaches to Vodunsi land stewardship, while identifying the factors and processes that shape,

influence, and constrain Vodunsi stewardship behaviors so as to satisfy more immediate needs.

Owing to the history of the region where this site rests, it is necessary to first investigate the history and geographic context of the region itself, as this history has greatly influenced the evolution and development of Vodun. I will then express what is meant by the term “animistic” when associated with Vodun. I will present a brief hierarchical representation of the present Vodunsi community, which will serve to provide a greater understanding of the workings of this religious community. Next, I will focus upon the various aspects of stewardship that have been recognized within the literature of environmental ethics so as to provide a clear understanding of the stewardship ethic that is practiced by Vodunsi as it relates to the *Forêt Sacré Kpassé*.

Throughout this thesis I will provide data collected from my fieldwork during the summer of 2009 in Ouidah, Benin. I will detail first-person interviews with Vodun practitioners and non-practitioners so as to develop a greater understanding as to what can be directly recognized as Vodunsi belief and what may present itself as geographically relevant data, not emanating from one’s religious affiliation. This method of inquiry provides data highlighting both positive and negative aspects of Vodunsi approaches to stewardship and how these attributes shape religious life and perceptions of the environment around Ouidah, Benin.

We must first address how religion is understood to exist within the sphere of Geography, how this understanding develops identity for religious practitioners, and how this identity is then manifested through behaviors expressing religious

ideals. Roger Stump notes in his text *The Geography of Religion*, “Religions are generally understood by their adherents as representations of universal truths relating to the nature of reality, conceptions of the superhuman, and associated ideas of right human thought and behavior.”² Additionally, Catherine Bell, a scholar of religion and ritual, notes in her work *Ritual*, “In tribal or local societies, which tend to be relatively closed and homogenous, religion is not something separate from community identity, ethnic customs, political institutions, and social traditions.”³ Both of these scholars note the interconnections present within traditional cultures’ understanding of religion’s role within their own individual and societal identities. These two notions of religion and community cannot be separated within a study of Vodun, as the evidence of Vodun’s influence upon society will indicate. It was, therefore, necessary for me to approach my study with the expressed understanding that one manner in which Vodunsi display their identity is expressed through a relationship with the land. The promotion and acceptance of an ethical approach that serves to encourage active participation in environmental stewardship from the monastery to the marketplace is paramount to Vodunsi individuals and communities alike.

Many environmental ethicists, such as Jim Cheney, believe that an appropriate form of stewardship can be best achieved by examining indigenous religions because the basic tenets of indigenous religions evoke both the responsibility of stewardship and the importance of human-environment relations.

² Roger W. Stump, *The Geography of Religion* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2008), 109.

³ Catherine Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 191.

Stump supports this theory of the importance of traditional religious entities to religious adherents when he notes,

The contextuality of religious belief and practice is perhaps most immediately evident in the primal religions and traditional tribal societies. Such religious systems typically manifest direct ties to their followers' homeland through the worship of localized deities, spirits, and ancestors. Adherents interpret these entities as being integral to the local realm of lived experience, frequently identifying them with specific environmental features or ritual spaces.⁴

I observed this "contextuality" first-hand while conducting my research of Vodun. Vodun's adherents, Vodunsi, follow specific rituals, intertwining actions of daily life with religious expression. During my research and study in Ouidah, the center of Vodun, I observed various Vodun rites displaying fundamental land stewardship. Recognition of these Vodun practices are beneficial in assisting to establish a more complete and productive stewardship ethic that can dispel the theory of dominion over nature and instead replace this patriarchal concept with a more unified approach to human-nature relations, whereby the notion of Nature can be recognized through Vodunsi interactions with the environment.

Approaches, Methods, and Data Sources

The methods that I used to undertake this study of Vodun in Ouidah were based upon qualitative research and observations directed toward assessing local Vodun beliefs in Ouidah. This nuanced approach permitted me to contextualize Vodunsi religious tradition as well as address the stewardship challenges facing Vodunsi. My observations of Vodunsi behavior were used to assess if Vodunsi religious beliefs are in fact expressed by Vodunsi actions, or if these religious

⁴ Stump, *The Geography of Religion*, 109.

notions are merely representative of a framework from which Vodun concepts manifest only in the most ideal situations.

The epistemological approaches to qualitative research presented by Corbin and Strauss in their work *Basics of Qualitative Research* indicate that when studying foreign peoples, action and interaction provide the most functional method in which to gain pertinent knowledge.⁵ This approach is best applied through principles and practices associated with epistemological acquaintanceship and informal interview processes (Interview guides appear in Appendix I). I felt that the nature of my research necessitated not only the collection of interviews within the Ouidah community but also an observational approach that would better indicate if the views conveyed within the interview process were in practice with regard to Vodunsi-nature interaction.

I then proceeded to utilize a hermeneutic approach toward analyzing both sets of data, the interview and the observational, wherein I incorporated historical record and cultural epistemologies to aid in analyzing and interpreting my two data sets. This approach provided me with the ability to investigate the historical and cultural influences upon the evolution of Vodunsi beliefs and behaviors toward the natural world. Prior to my research trip, it was necessary to organize and prepare for my research by developing working relationships with citizens of the region, craft effective interview questionnaires, and obtain as much literary and historical data from the region as possible.

⁵ Juliet Corbin and Anselm C. Strauss, *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory*, 3 ed. (London: Sage Publications, 2007).

Preparation

Upon selecting the topic of Vodunsi stewardship in Ouidah, I contacted several individuals who had previously either lived in Ouidah or had undertaken research in Ouidah. I developed a working relationship with Michel Fiator, a former World Bank executive who is from Ouidah. He currently resides in the Washington, D.C. metro area, and as such, I was able to correspond with him by e-mail and phone quite regularly in advance of my research trip. Additionally, I was in contact with Edna Bay and Suzanne Preston Blier, American scholars of Vodun and the Fon peoples, both of whom I cite within this thesis. They assisted me in establishing on-the-ground relations in Ouidah, and they aided me in my preparation through encouraging my work and providing me with wonderful insights as to potential problems that may arise during my research. Lastly, I was informed through the Beninese Embassy in the United States that Professor Honorat Aguessy had developed a non-profit institute in Ouidah that focuses upon retention of traditional epistemologies, *l'Institute pour le Développement et les Échanges Endogènes* (IDEE). I was in contact with Professor Aguessy several times prior to my arrival in Ouidah and was able to reside with his nephew, François, who currently serves as manager of IDEE, while in Ouidah. Developing these relationships prior to my arrival aided greatly in my ability to adapt to the ways and customs of native residents of Ouidah. By having pre-established contacts in Ouidah, I was able to arrive and begin work immediately. This greatly assisted in my ability to obtain the quantity of data I acquired while in Ouidah.

The most important aspect of my communication with these individuals prior to my arrival in Benin was that this communication enabled me to develop working relationships with residents and leaders within the local community. Professor Aguessy is a highly regarded scholar throughout much of West Africa. When I was crossing the border from Togo into Benin, I was asked the purpose of my trip. After I explained that I was going to Ouidah to meet with Professor Aguessy, the border guards smiled approvingly and asked me to send their regards to him. I believe that this indicates the power and sway that Professor Aguessy holds within a community that extends well beyond the boundaries of Ouidah. I concurrently recognize that my association with Professor Aguessy represented an inherent power. This power may have surfaced throughout my research process, with certain individuals feeling obligated to speak with me; however, this influence was not apparent at any point throughout my research process.

Historical and Geographical Data

The data I analyzed prior to my arrival in Ouidah primarily consisted of French and English texts detailing the geography, demographics, religious preponderances, ethical divides, traditional religious axiology, cultural discrepancies, impacts of colonialism, and environmental issues in and around the area of Ouidah. I explored the rites and rituals of Vodun to the greatest extent possible using texts, journal articles, the Internet, and scholars familiar with this region of the world.

Material at the *Musée de Ouidah*, as well as the cultural interpreters working at this location, provided me with the necessary historical documentation to acquire

and analyze historic Vodun doctrine and data pertinent to rites, ritual, history and dissemination. Much of the information that I acquired outside of the interview process was arrived at through the *Musée de Ouidah*.

Interview Processes

My interview data is comprised of twenty individuals of diverse demographics. My research of Vodunsi included seven female interviewees and nine male interviewees, totaling sixteen Vodunsi interviews. Additionally, I interviewed two Muslim individuals, one of each gender, and two Catholic individuals, again, one of each gender. I undertook this approach in order to identify attributes directly related to Vodun. I also wished to differentiate between geographic perceptions of stewardship and those more closely associated with one's religion. My interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview guide pre-approved by all thesis committee members. The interviews were recorded using a digital recording device and were transcribed later.

My interviewees were selected from the population of Ouidah. Some interview subjects would recommend future interviewees, in what is typically known as a snowball sampling method; however, I was able to locate the majority of interview subjects myself, through social interactions throughout Ouidah. I conducted the vast majority of my interviews in the French language. Many elder interviewees did not wish to speak French, as it is symbolic of a French colonial history. Therefore, it was necessary for me to have an interpreter who would relate my French questions to my interviewees in Fongbe, the native language of Ouidah. The interviewee would then respond in Fongbe and my assistant would translate

their responses into French for me to record. While I am certain that there are aspects of interviews that were not related, or were lost in translation both in French and Fongbe, I felt a necessity to conduct interviews with elder citizens so as to gain access to their perceptions regarding stewardship. Additionally, these interviews were vital in developing a deeper understanding of Ouidah's history. A portion of my research was focused upon generational differences in knowledge, as well as indicating the evolution of Vodun. Neither of these tasks could have been accomplished if I did not have access to an elder interview contingency.

My interview questions detailed demographics and backgrounds such as age, gender, years practicing Vodun, environmental viewpoints, societal perceptions, and religious historical knowledge, as well as questions highlighting indigenous land interactions and points-of-view regarding stewardship and land care concepts. By recording all of my interviews, I was able to reference and more thoroughly analyze my interview material at a later date. In addition, I detailed the interviews in shorthand during the interview process. This process of notation enabled me to identify recurrent themes within a single interview process. This approach provided me with usable data to probe further for more information about these recurring themes. I augmented this interview data with substantial empirical data that I will discuss in the subsequent section.

Empirical Processes

Interaction with Ouidah's citizens on a daily basis assisted me in developing a rapport outside of a designated, formal interview setting. This in turn afforded me the opportunity to augment relationships in a more convivial and informal fashion.

By interacting with my interviewees in a number of locations, such as their homes or fields, I was hoping to provide them a certain level of comfort with me, an outsider of the community. Through this process, I was able to allude to my willingness to better understand Vodun, while concurrently providing the interviewee with comfort and an ample opportunity to relate scenarios or historical proxies which otherwise may have gone unspoken due to the interview locale.

I detailed empirical evidence of my research in a separate area from my formal interviews so as to delineate the relations between what may be conflicting data concerning interviews and what I was able to perceive firsthand. Additionally, I took hundreds of digital photos to assist with specific interview questions and to augment interview data. The separation of my empirical data from my interview data enabled me to address one of my primary research questions by expounding upon the subject of Vodunsi stewardship to determine if Vodun adherents in fact practiced Vodunsi religious beliefs categorically. This manner of separating my data sets served to augment my findings. I found this approach to be a necessary act so as to provide a balance between what my interview subjects were expressing and what was in practice in Ouidah. It is in this fashion that I was able to recognize immediate influences that Vodun has had upon the land firsthand, and consequently, what effect the land has had on the evolution and development of the religion. There did exist limitations within my research study, and they are detailed in the following section.

Study Limitations

My study was limited by time, expense, and my own perceived subjectivity. My research time in Ouidah was approximately seven weeks. During that time, I was able to conduct twenty interviews, with several follow-up interviews. Due to the nature and influence of a global market, many of my interviewees expressed a desire to be compensated for their time and knowledge. Because this project was self-funded, this quickly became an issue as financial resources were quickly depleted.

My fluency in French enabled me to communicate quite effectively with the majority of the population; however, as I have noted above, there is a subset of Ouidah's population that envisions use of the French language as a holdover from colonialism. Therefore, I was forced to rely upon my assistant, José Apovo, to translate my French into the native Fongbe so as to obtain interview data from this population.

The greatest hindrance I encountered while conducting this research was that of being a white, American male. The demographic to which I am a member, that of a white male, is not historically recognized throughout the community of Ouidah as operating in a reciprocal fashion with the community. White males, such as myself, are often viewed as being present to exploit one aspect or another of the community, as this has historically occurred in Ouidah through both the slave trade and French colonialism. This fact was easily recognizable upon my arrival in Ouidah, and I attempted at every opportunity throughout my time in Ouidah to dispel this bias through relating to Vodunsi by expressing my interest and

knowledge of the Vodun religion. I hoped that by expressing my knowledge of Vodun and my concurrent interest in its history and evolution, I could dispel any preconceived notions associated to my physical appearance.

Ken Wilson notes of conducting research in foreign environs, "Undertaking fieldwork inevitably becomes much more than just data collection, because the researcher enters the world of the subjects of the research."⁶ This knowledge necessitated that I approach this study understanding both my physical and cultural limitations and biases. Strongly held preconceptions by Vodunsi were most often apparent when I would attempt to conduct interviews with middle-aged women. There were several instances where potential female interviewees were obviously uncomfortable in speaking with me on a non-interview level, much less in a semi-formal interview fashion with a digital recorder. As such, it became increasingly difficult to locate interview subjects within the female middle-age populace of Ouidah. I was eventually able to locate several women within that demographic who did serve as excellent, comfortable interviewees.

It should be noted that the interview data I did receive might have been skewed when my interviewees presented it. If this did occur, I did not recognize it as bias; however, my interview subjects may have presented their information to me in a different fashion than they may have to another researcher who was approaching this study from a different physical and cultural background. If my interviewees' responses were altered in their presentation, I feel as though this was

⁶ Ken Wilson, "Thinking About the Ethics of Fieldwork," in *Fieldwork in Developing Countries*, ed. Stephen Devreux and John Hoddinott (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1993), 179.

done so as to achieve a greater appeal in the presentation and understanding of their faith to a researcher who they felt might not be capable of understanding the cultural intricacies involved in Vodun.

The greatest asset I had in my repertoire, if issues of my gender or race came into question, was expressed by the relationships I had developed prior to, and immediately after, my arrival in Ouidah. Many interviewees appeared eager to become involved in a project that they knew had the approval of Professor Honorat Aguessy. It is for this reason, and possibly this reason alone, that some of my interview subjects participated in this study. I do recognize, as I addressed above, that my relationship with Professor Aguessy might have been a source of bias, with my interviewees perhaps desiring to participate in a study associated with him out of a need to avoid reprisal or out of a feeling of indebtedness. Nevertheless, this bias never presented itself to me throughout the research process. Without the active participation of all of my interviewees, the intricacies of the Vodun faith and its influence upon Ouidah's history would have been impossible to express.

As a primary goal of my research, I wished to present as diverse and detailed interviews as possible. Wilson also addresses this notion of casting a broad research net when he notes, "Researching in an 'ethical manner' seems not about proclaiming good and evil, but about enabling the reader to hear the voices and appreciate the actions of as many of the different people involved as possible."⁷ While some may view the findings here as presentations of "good and evil," or right

⁷ Ibid., 181.

and wrong, the data presented herein is meant to express the ideas and actions associated with Vodun stewardship. The benefits or detriments associated with Vodunsi actions are left to the reader to assess. I recognize that my positionality as a white, American served as a factor within my research. As Tracey Skelton notes in her essay *Cross Cultural Research*, "We [researchers] are not neutral, scientific observers, untouched by emotional and political contexts of place where we do our research. We are amalgams of our experiences and these will play different roles at different times."⁸ With this in mind, I have endeavored within this thesis to mitigate my positionality and bias, and present the facts as my interviewees related them to me, or as I observed within Ouidah.

The following chapter will address the role Ouidah's history has played in the development and evolution of Vodun. I will then indicate basic characteristics of the Vodun religion and hierarchy as they pertain to Vodunsi beliefs. Next, I will address stewardship, its various connotations, and the method that is practiced by Vodunsi. I will then detail specific environmental degradations that have occurred within Ouidah, and propose a possible explanation for the environment's declining health. Following the explication of environmental degradation, I will specifically focus on the role of the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé* within the Vodunsi community, as well as the overall community of Ouidah. I will conclude by presenting my findings that relate to the three main lines of inquiry undertaken in this study: history's role in the

⁸ Tracey Skelton, "Cross Cultural Research: Issues of Power, Positionality, and 'Race'," in *Qualitative Methodologies for Geographers*, ed. Melanie Limb and Claire Dwyer (London: Arnold, 2001), 89.

development and evolution of Vodun, Vodunsi ethics of stewardship, and the discretion with which these ethics are applied to the environment.

Chapter Two **RESEARCH SETTING**

History and Geography of Ouidah

Vodun is an animistic religion existing in the Dahomey Kingdom of western Africa since the seventeenth century. The first appearance in writing of the term “Vodun” occurred in a 1658 work by the King of Allada to King Philip IV of Spain titled *Doctrina Christiana*.⁹ Many scholars of West African history, such as Robin Law, note that Vodun was first practiced near the modern village of Ouidah, Benin; therefore, Ouidah is commonly recognized as the center of Vodun. Vodun religiosity is exemplified in Ouidah, and the Beninese government adopted Vodun as a national religion in 1996.

Gléhoué is the preferred name of my research area that is used by local residents. The literal translation of *Gléhoué* from Fongbe, the indigenous dialect, to English is “the house of fields,” which is a reference to the fact that it served for many years as the location where the King of Abomey cultivated his crops. The contemporary name of Ouidah is thought to have originated over four centuries ago, having been introduced by colonial traders. This title, Ouidah, has undergone several transformations through its use by Portuguese, French and English merchants. My research at the *Musée de Ouidah*, indicated that the name “Ouidah” is actually derived from the indigenous “XWeD α,” meaning someone who “worships the python snake.” Although the name has been scribed in many fashions – Whyda, Whydah, Hweda, or Hueda – the accepted name that is found on most contemporary

⁹ Suzanne Preston Blier, *African Vodun: Art, Psychology, and Power* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), 37.

maps of the region lists the town simply as “Ouidah.” Historical records date the foundation of the town by King Kpassé to be around 1550, and European contact was first made from this location in 1580.¹⁰

The obvious geographical starting point for the study of Vodun is therefore Ouidah. According to the *World Gazetteer*, the current population of Ouidah is nearly 90,000 residents, while the Beninese population rests around 2.4 million residents.¹¹ According to the Encyclopedia of the Nations, the average income for a Beninese resident is just over \$1,000 USD.¹² Benin ranks 161st out of 182 countries on the Human Development Index.¹³ Ouidah’s history, though not solely responsible for Vodun’s growth, had a profound influence upon Vodun’s evolution and development. This is apparent in the historical record through Ouidah’s association with the slave trade and by the impact of early European colonizers.

The impacts of a European presence in Ouidah have altered the traditional socio-economic dynamics of Ouidah’s residents, transitioning it from a more isolated market to one more globalized. Additionally, the strong presence of a Eurocentric mentality expressed rival notions of how one could, and should, interact with the natural world. The introduction of this alternate line of thinking can be witnessed in how Vodunsi approaches to the land have been changed and to what

¹⁰ Robin Law, *Ouidah: The Social History of a West African Slaving "Port" 1727-1892* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2004), 24.

¹¹ <http://world-gazetteer.com>

¹² <http://www.nationsencyclopedia.com/Africa/Benin-INCOME.html>

¹³ http://hdrstats.undp.org/en/countries/country_fact_sheets/cty_fs_BEN.html

degree this is recognizable. Georges Balandier notes of African communities, "*Une civilisation s'apprend dès les premiers jours. De véritables montages psychologiques se font tout au long de l'enfance et c'est par eux que se construisent les comportements communs, que s'affirme la relative permanence des sociétés.*"¹⁴ The essence of Balandier's quote, which is focused upon African societies, suggests that it is the memory of one's early days within a particular community that provide for a true psychological setting. This setting develops major factors that contribute to the development of a community, as its citizens grow older. By understanding the early days of a community, one is able to better establish a context with which to view contemporary communities. Thus, the following section will focus upon Ouidah, its history, and the impacts of that history upon the contemporary village.

Ouidah

Ouidah is situated on the West coast of Africa between Togo and Nigeria (Figure 1, Appendix II). Ouidah's geographic location was vital in the development of its associations with colonial traders and, more specifically, the slave trade. Robin Law wrote a seminal work detailing the importance of Ouidah's history in which he addressed issues existing both before colonists' arrival and after. In this work he states,

Ouidah is situated in the coastal area of the modern Republic of Benin in West Africa. In origin, it is an indigenous African town, which had existed long before the French colonial occupation in 1892. In the pre-colonial period, it had belonged successively to two African states, first the kingdom of Hueda and from 1727 that of Dahomey.¹⁵

¹⁴ Georges Balandier, *Afrique Ambiguë* (Paris: Librairie Plon, 1957), 17.

¹⁵ Law, *Ouidah: The Social History of a West African Slaving "Port" 1727-1892*, 1.

Law continues his geographical interpretation of Ouidah: “The section of the African coast on which Ouidah is situated, in geographical terms the Bight of Benin, was known to Europeans between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries as the ‘Slave Coast’.”¹⁶ Ouidah’s role in the slave trade is well documented, and most African historians acknowledge that Ouidah contributed the second largest population of slaves to the slave trade, with Luanda, Angola being the port responsible for the greatest number of slaves exported to the so-called ‘New World.’¹⁷ This history of Ouidah’s involvement in the slave trade is responsible for much of the contemporary Vodunsi views expressed toward the natural environment, as the historical relevance of the slave trade instilled values within Ouidah’s community that served to represent a hierarchical order among not only humans, but aspects of Nature as well.

The explanation Law provides to describe why Ouidah was able to play such a “critical role in the operation of the Atlantic slave trade” was the town’s geographic location. He notes that the geography of Ouidah enabled simple exchanges between “hinterland suppliers and European ships, thereby accelerating their turn-round, and also by supplying them with provisions to feed the slaves on their voyage.”¹⁸ Robin Law also addresses the magnitude of slaves who passed through the port at Ouidah in his book; he states, “Given the current consensual

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., 2.

¹⁸ Ibid., 4.

estimate of between 10 and 11 million slaves exported from Africa in this period [1670s to the 1860s], this suggests that Ouidah supplied well over a million slaves.”¹⁹ Suzanne Preston Blier supports this data, put forth by Law, in historical research she has conducted on the region around Ouidah when she states, “Between 1710 and 1810 over a million slaves were exported on English, French, and Portuguese vessels out of the Bight of Benin and what was then called the Slave Coast of Africa.”²⁰ Robin Law continues to expound upon this concept,

The slave trade through Ouidah had reached a volume of probably 10,000 slaves per year by the 1690s, and attained its all-time peak in the years 1700-13, when probably around 15,000 slaves annually were passing through the town; at this period, indeed, Ouidah may have been accounting for around half of all trans-Atlantic exports of African slaves.²¹

The geographical location of Ouidah has consistently been focused upon as the cause for Ouidah serving as a major slave port because many believe that it is situated in a prime oceanfront location, with excellent access to a deep basined port. This is not entirely true. The town of Ouidah rests four kilometers inland from the ocean and is separated from the ocean by a large lagoon region. Additionally, the large commercial vessels involved in the slave trade and other commercial endeavors were not able to arrive closer than two or three kilometers from the beachhead owing to shallow waters and dangerous sandbars that could easily damage or destroy the crafts. It was thus necessary for these large vessels to incorporate the use of smaller, typically African, vessels to shuttle goods and

¹⁹ Law, *Ouidah: The Social History of a West African Slaving "Port" 1727-1892*, 2.

²⁰ Blier, *African Vodun: Art, Psychology, and Power*, 23.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 30.

persons to and from the large vessels to the beach for exchange (Figure 2, Appendix II). The consequences of this need to utilize auxiliary vessels and the fact that Ouidah rests inland four kilometers from the beach necessitated the creation of *La Route des Esclaves*, the Route of Slaves. This is a four-kilometer road that stretches from the market in Ouidah to the beachhead. Thus, once slaves were sold, they were then forced to march this four-kilometer distance to the beach, shackled and downtrodden.

The role that the slave trade played in the construction of Ouidah's history cannot be minimized, as is noted in Suzanne Preston Blier's work about African Vodun when she speaks of the "Danhome" region, which encompasses Ouidah; "To a large extent the Danhome state economy was based upon annual raids and military expeditions against neighboring groups and villages, the primary purpose of which was to capture men...who could be sold for profit."²²

Contemporary efforts by the Beninese government saw recent political endeavors attempt to capitalize on aspects of the towns' negative history. Again, Robin Law notes,

In the 1990s a systematic attempt was made to exploit Ouidah's historical role in the Atlantic slave trade for its promotion as a centre of 'cultural tourism,' with the development of monuments to the slave trade and its victims along the road from town to the beach where slaves were embarked, now designated '*la route des esclaves*'.²³

Two of the monuments to which Law refers to can be seen in Figures 3 and 4, Appendix II.

²² Ibid., 23.

²³ Law, *Ouidah: The Social History of a West African Slaving "Port" 1727-1892*, 2.

This attempt by the government to exploit a negatively associated history is but one example of the Beninese political machine. During my research in Ouidah, I was able to view firsthand the manner in which the Beninese government has attempted to capitalize upon the negative aspects of Ouidah's history, while concurrently failing to contribute economic resources to perpetuate Ouidah's history or current economy. One example of a positive spin used by the government was the reconstruction and adaptation of the infamous Portuguese fort near the center of Ouidah. This location is now the *Musée de Ouidah*. It houses many of the historical artifacts of the region, most of which represent the history and evolution of Vodun, while also serving as a regional interpretation site for tourists where one can learn the full extent of the slave trade's influence upon the region. The Beninese Department of Tourism touts the relevance of this site in brochures and guidebooks. This action by the Department of Tourism exemplifies how the government, for its own self-interest, has used the role of the European forts to appeal to tourists. It is necessary to observe the role that these forts played in society in order to have a better understanding of their relevance, and at times, significance to the at-large community, and more specifically the Vodun community.

Colonial Forts

A complete understanding of the Vodun religion must include, at the very least, a brief exploration into the various colonial entities that have impacted Ouidah's community by sheer virtue of their presence. As I have noted above, the presence of European colonists, and the beliefs they brought to Ouidah, often conflicted with the traditional values held by the Vodunsi. This can be most easily

expressed by understanding that during the period of colonization, European approaches to the land tended to express a concept of dominion and resource exploitation. This was not in accord with traditional Vodunsi views of the land that are predisposed to express the human-environment relationship as emanating from a place of mutual respect, and one in which Vodunsi view themselves as pieces of Nature.

At one time, there existed five operating European forts within the city limits of Ouidah: French, Portuguese, British, Danish, and Dutch. Of these five, the French, English, and Portuguese profited the most from their slave trade within the Ouidah region. One positive and historically influential aspect that colonial forts did provide rests in the detailed record of their ventures. Law writes, "The most informative sources for the eighteenth century are the records of the permanently organized fortified factories [of the French, British, and Portuguese]."²⁴

The forts were responsible for the organization of commerce throughout Ouidah, and the grand scale under which commerce was undertaken can be recognized as the first foray for Ouidah into a global economy. African scholar Kofi Awoonor notes,

One significant result of the trading operations in the towns of Africa was urbanization along European lines, which transformed the traditional structures drastically. The traditional village structure with a few well-ordered compound houses gave way to sprawling townships.²⁵

²⁴ Ibid., 7.

²⁵ Kofi Awoonor, *The Breast of the Earth* (New York: Doubleday, 1975), 14.

The traditional structures that were affected can be witnessed firsthand in Ouidah. Particularly, one can observe that the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé* that once rested well outside the town's limits is now found within Ouidah proper. The role of the colonial forts cannot be downplayed either in the expansion of the village's size, or in the manner in which traditional commercial networks were usurped by colonial influence. In the words of Robin Law, "The forts in Ouidah operated as secure places of storage for goods and slaves, rather than exercising any serious military power over the local community."²⁶ Although these constructions did present themselves as harbingers of immoral conduct, each of the three main forts (Portuguese, French, and British) became central to the town, thus making it what Law has referred to as, a "multi-centered" town, focused on the three forts.²⁷ Law notes that the areas where these forts existed were commonly referred to as, "the French, English, and Portuguese quarters" respectively.²⁸

These forts symbolize oppression. Although the colonial inhabitants of these forts are not directly responsible for the kidnapping of slaves throughout the region, as indigenous entrepreneurs committed most of the slave acquisition, they still represent a negative history of Ouidah's involvement with the slave trade. Edna Bay notes in her work detailing *Asen*, the traditional Dahomean ironworks, "The quotidian impact of colonialism on southern Benin was relatively less brutal than in many other areas of French rule, for Benin lacked obvious natural resources to be

²⁶ Law, *Ouidah: The Social History of a West African Slaving "Port" 1727-1892*, 36.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 42.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 37.

forcibly exploited.”²⁹ Nevertheless, the relative proximity to the ocean certainly assisted Ouidah in its economic growth.

It is true that the economic value of these forts was responsible for the successes of Ouidah to a certain extent; however, the primary purpose of these forts was not to ensure the economic vitality of Ouidah but rather to utilize Ouidah as a staging ground from which all commercial endeavors, both ethical and not, could be planned and carried out. The colonial forts brought with them not just economic opportunity but also new religious perspectives. Therefore, one can associate the influence of an expanding economy with the diffusion of European religions into the area.

The most common religion practiced by the colonizers was Catholicism, and as such, Catholicism has played an important role in how Vodun has evolved within the community of Ouidah. Europeans publicly criticized many Vodunsi for their religious views when they first arrived in Ouidah. Thus, it became necessary for Vodun, as a whole, to publicly incorporate certain Catholic ideals into their own religious practices so as to avoid blatant persecution. The most recognizable aspect of this can be found in the Vodunsi adoption of certain Catholic holidays to mirror their religious ceremonies. This can be witnessed on 17 March, where Vodunsi celebrate their snake deity on the same day that Catholics celebrate Saint Patrick, who is recognized for having driven snakes from Ireland.

²⁹ Edna G. Bay, *Asen, Ancestors, and Vodun: Tracing Change in African Art* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 81.

The records of the Portuguese and French forts remain accessible and flush with data for the contemporary researcher. Unfortunately, the records kept by these forts are heavily influenced in Catholic biases and do not contain a wealth of references to Vodun. The Portuguese fort was the final of the five forts to be abandoned, and this did not occur until a pair of Portuguese missionaries finally ceased exercising a colonial/religious agenda and deserted the fort in 1961, over seventy years after the abolition of the slave trade. The Portuguese fort was mysteriously lit afire shortly thereafter and is claimed by some, such as Nouréini Tidjani-Serpos in his work *Ouidah: La Route de L'Esclave*, to have been burned down by its last director.³⁰ The fort was, however, rebuilt as a cultural center, the *Musée de Ouidah* discussed above, in 1967. I was informed by a cultural interpreter at the *Musée de Ouidah* that the re-construction of the Portuguese fort was undertaken because of the insensitive manner in which the French had chosen to depart from their fort in Ouidah.

It is important to recognize that the presence of colonial regimes, as well as the construction of colonial forts, influenced Vodun. The history of Ouidah, entrenched with its colonial history, serves as a major contributor to the development and ultimate dissemination of Vodun. French authorities demolished the French fort of Ouidah in 1908 because the French government believed it to be representative of a past they would prefer to disregard. The demolition of the fort, however, had a negative effect upon the community. As noted by Law, the fort's

³⁰ Nouréini Tidjani-Serpos, *Ouidah: La Route De L'esclave* (Porto Novo: Ministère de la Culture et de la Communication de la République du Benin, n.d.).

demolition, “provoked protests from the community that it was a valued monument of local history, and in particular of its [Ouidah’s] long history with France.”³¹ Therefore, one must conclude that because the majority of slaves were being removed from the interior of Benin, and neighboring countries, and only those residents of Ouidah who were in the disfavor of the King were being sold into servitude, Ouidah accepted its history in the slave trade, and its residents were willing to embrace the economic value it provided their community for several centuries. To better understand the acceptance by Ouidah’s residents of their past an analysis of residents’ perceptions of Ouidah’s history, and how varying religious views of the town’s history affect these historical perspectives is necessary. I included several interview questions meant to indicate to what degree Ouidah’s traditional and colonial history has affected the evolution of existing religions, Vodun particularly. By analyzing the results of these questions, I was able to determine the effects of a European presence within Ouidah as it pertained to individual religious groups.

Resident’s Perspectives on Ouidah’s History

The interpretations of Ouidah’s history differs greatly based upon with whom one speaks, as religion and family heritage within the region play important roles in how one views the town’s history. In order to develop a broad understanding of how various aspects of history and religion contributed to Vodun, I attempted to capture local narratives of place and history. The perspectives of Ouidah’s history related to me by the twenty study participants varied drastically. I

³¹ Law, *Ouidah: The Social History of a West African Slaving "Port" 1727-1892*, 13.

conducted interviews with Catholics, Muslims, and Vodunsi to understand what role they believe their religion has played in the historical record of Ouidah. I sought to understand if these views emanate from individual religious narratives, or if the accounts of Ouidah's history reflect broader interpretations and are thus accepted by a majority of the population regardless of religious affiliation. In this regard, two of my interview questions that were posed to all interviewees, Vodunsi and non-Vodunsi, stated "What is the history of [your religion] in Ouidah?" and "How has the practice of [your religion] influenced Ouidah?"

The first interviews I wish to address come from Catholic practitioners. Their views of Ouidah rest in Ouidah being an unorganized area until Catholicism arrived and brought with it "God and the truth," as one Catholic practitioner related to me.³² This "truth" enabled organization to arise. This is possible, as religiously based communities are often quite adept at organizing regions in manners which best suit the faith; however, because it is documented that the first two Catholic missionaries, one Italian and one Spanish, did not arrive at the beach of Ouidah until 1861, and as I previously noted King *Kpassé* is believed to have founded the town around 1550, then this disconnect does not account for over three-hundred years of the town's existence and development.

It is more plausible that people following the Roman Catholic faith recognized the organizational capacity of the Catholic Church. The early Catholic community's beliefs supplanted what they viewed as the laissez-faire organizational qualities of Vodun's sixteenth century indigenous faith. Catholicism usurped Vodun

³² Marie Taewanu, in discussion with author, July 2009.

organization through the attitude that a hierarchical order of a many centuries practiced faith, such as Catholicism, was more effective than Vodun's traditional order. Furthermore, as African scholar Kofi Awoonor notes of missionary presence in Africa, "The missionaries served essentially as harbingers of European political powers. Where the missions went, the military arm of its country of origin followed to protect the lives of the missionaries."³³ Awoonor continues to suggest the historical implications of missionaries in Africa, "This gunboat diplomacy was to be perfected by later imperialist regimes."³⁴ Thus, we can see the overall impacts of missionaries and introduced religions. Additionally, we can note the affects that these impacts had upon traditional African communities through the accompaniment of their religious rhetoric with imperialistic notions.

A Roman Catholic Church leader in Ouidah informed me that the church brought with it "Message and comprehension," which could be adopted by Ouidah's residents to better understand the esoteric and transcendental nature of man's relationship with the divine.³⁵ These concepts included "love and charity," as well as, "reconciliation and pardoning."³⁶ I found this contemporary ideology to be exemplary of the continued suppression of traditional Vodun beliefs and values. These values were already in practice by Vodunsi prior to the arrival of Catholicism; however, through consistent accusation by the Catholic community of the

³³ Awoonor, *The Breast of the Earth*, 13.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Père André, in discussion with the author, July 2009.

³⁶ Ibid.

deficiencies present within the Vodun faith, these concepts are presented as new character attributes, not existing within Vodun ideology but rather brought from outside and implemented within Ouidah as new, better values. As is both historically practiced and accepted, a continued recounting of false or misleading information tends to lead to social acceptance of such lore.

Islam has also played a role in the development of Ouidah. Through my interview process, I wished to indicate Islamic perceptions of Ouidah's history. This enabled me to then separate and analyze characteristics of the town that may be associated with a particular faith, from those aspects that could be recognized as existing in a more secular plane. The Islamic community's views of Ouidah are relatively consistent with the Catholic account of Ouidah in that they describe a desolate, unorganized region as existing prior to Islam's arrival. Islamic views about Ouidah's history did provide certain unquestionable information, despite an existing contradiction between my two interviewees as to when Islam arrived in Ouidah. My most significant finding from my interviews with Muslim practitioners was that Islam has directly affected Ouidah through its passive, non-violent introduction, unlike the introduction of Catholicism, and its acceptance as a religion by the at large community of Ouidah. This is not to suggest that Islam is equated with either Catholicism or Vodun, as it pertains to number of practitioners or socio-political sway, but rather that Islam is a sufficient contributor to Ouidah's community even as it exists in a minority role.

Islam arrived in Ouidah overland from Nigeria by way of Mecca. Yoruba slaves were being brought to Ouidah and sold in the late seventeenth century,

primarily arriving from modern day Nigeria.³⁷ Presently, the Islamic community is well represented, with three separate mosques functioning within the city, the largest of which boasts a congregation in excess of 800 followers (Figure 5, Appendix II). The role that Islam holds within Ouidah's society is not comparable to that of the Catholic and Vodun communities, as Muslims account for a small proportion of Ouidah's citizens, while the Catholic and Vodun communities have followings in the thousands. Thus, as I noted above, I was able to conclude that although Muslims are a minority in Ouidah, they are still capable of influencing Ouidah from a socio-economic perspective.

The oral history of Ouidah varies according to individual speakers, as family lore and influence serve to create multiple narratives and interpretations that play considerable roles in the expression of local history. As has been expressed above, historical records exist describing the arrival of two major religions in Ouidah within 150 years of each other. These historical records, however, also illuminate how disconnected the history of Ouidah can be both perceived and interpreted according to the manner in which one views one's own faith and the role that a particular religious tradition has played in the development of the town. This dilemma was addressed through the interview questions previously described, in an attempt to minimize the biases previously suggested.

The resulting impacts of these new faiths affected the community at large by providing options for religious practice and belief. This resulted in a division of the

³⁷ Alain Sinou, *Le Comptoir De Ouidah: Une Ville Africaine Singulière* (Paris: Editions Karthala, 1995), 159.

Vodun churches' following, and a resulting division in religious ideals. The religious tenets espoused by these new religions were not always in accord with those held by the Vodun community, particularly as pertains to views on human-human and human-nature interaction. The historic role of the slave trade brought with it ancillary effects, namely recognition of a hierarchy existing between the slave traders (Anglo-Europeans) and the traded (marginalized Africans). Therefore, with the introduction of Islam and Catholicism, the value that the Vodun place upon Nature was being challenged and subjugated by the values expressed through Muslim and Catholic practices and teachings.

The social impacts of these new religions to the region were supported through the slave trade and colonial expansion and as such are seen by those outside of the Vodun community as ancillary effects to a colonial presence within Ouidah. I was not able to observe religious division, however, within Ouidah's community. A high-ranking Vodun official informed me that the Catholic Basilica in downtown Ouidah rests upon land donated by a Vodun follower.³⁸ Additionally, it is accepted by all residents of Ouidah, regardless of religious affiliation, that Vodunsi aided in the construction of the Basilica. This example of Vodunsi assisting in the construction of the Catholic basilica is exemplary of how Vodun is open to other religions present in Ouidah, while Catholicism and Islam are not as open to the practice of Vodun, instead remaining more reticent in conveying their approval of Vodun.

³⁸ Dagbo Hounon, in discussion with author, June 2009.

All interview subjects, Vodunsi and non-Vodunsi, collectively claim that Ouidah and Vodun were present long before the invasion of Catholicism and Islam. They furthermore uniformly assert that Vodun was responsible for the organization and vitality of Ouidah prior to European arrival. When this scenario was posed to a leading Vodun figure, his response was, "Ouidah is the first village. It's where whites were first seen, the Vodunsi came from everywhere and congregated in Ouidah."³⁹ This same individual readily informed me that although he is a leader of the Vodun faith, he is also a baptized and confirmed Catholic who could still recount the name of his Confirmation priest. This exemplifies how Vodunsi do not choose to solidify their understanding of Ouidah's history solely through the lens of Vodun, but are instead accepting to the roles and influences of introduced religions. I found that the histories related by my Catholic and Muslim interviewees tended to be largely oriented to their own faiths' presence in Ouidah, thereby de-emphasizing Ouidah's pre-contact history. It is therefore necessary to recognize the bias that is present within the Catholic and Islamic texts detailing Ouidah's history. Consequently, use of texts from both colonial forts and Catholic and Muslim records of the region were not pursued within this research project. The nature of their bias was too great to effectively present how history has affected Vodun and how Vodun has affected Ouidah's history.

To expound upon Vodun's willingness to accept complimentary religions, I posed the same question to the leaders of the three religious communities. The responses indicated an interesting disparity. When I asked these leaders, "Can those

³⁹ Dagbo Hounon, in discussion with author, July 2009.

who practice your faith also practice another?” the answers provided by the Catholic and Islamic leaders were staunchly anti-polytheistic.⁴⁰ When the same question was posed to the *Vodun Chef*, however, his response was, “Vodun does not prohibit the practice of other religions, it is other religions that prevent the compliment of Vodun. Muslims don’t like their children to go elsewhere.”⁴¹ I found this statement to identify a distinction existing between the religious communities within Ouidah. From the interview data provided above, one can conclude that there appears to be varying levels of tolerance, as Vodun religion is far more accepting of Catholicism and Islam than either of them are of Vodun.

Ouidah’s history is also misunderstood through data I collected expressing gender differences amongst the Vodunsi. This misunderstanding has collectively been part of the oral tradition for many generations, thus serving to validate communal support for the narratives. Among the seven Vodunsi females I interviewed, three did not know the role Vodun had played in the evolution of Ouidah; conversely, nine male interviewees all readily shared their views on Vodun’s influence upon the history of Ouidah, with most of the respondents asserting that Vodun was the primary religion of Ouidah and intrinsically representative of Ouidah’s history and heritage.

Women’s reliance upon men’s interpretation for historical accuracy about Ouidah has unfortunately devalued some female oral tradition. As such, I was able to observe that the minority female population, those who possessed knowledge

⁴⁰ Père André and Imam Mustapha Adogmejo, in discussion with author, June/July 2009.

⁴¹ Dagbo Hounon, in discussion with author, July 2009.

detailing Ouidah's history, consisted of the more respected elders. There were three female Vodunsi outliers who could not relate any aspects regarding Ouidah's history, and all three of these individuals were between twenty-two and thirty-five years of age. This suggests perhaps a generational disconnect between elder females and those of a younger generation who are unable to recount any concept associated with Ouidah's history.

The history of Ouidah is embedded in the history of West African commercial activity. The diverse religions present in Ouidah have all contributed, and continue to contribute, to the dynamic culture present in Ouidah. These religions have served to divide the community to a certain degree, and this divisiveness can ultimately be viewed as a factor for decreased focus upon the environment. Arun Agrawal and Clark Gibson note that divisions within a community do not aid in the development and practices of stewardship, "If communities [as a collective] are involved in conservation, the benefits they receive will create incentives for them to become good stewards of resources."⁴² It can be noted that the religious divisions within Ouidah have the potential to serve to undermine the potential for a uniform ethic to emerge by dividing community ideals as to the appropriate manner one should undertake regarding interaction with the environment.

The religious records of Islam, Catholicism, and Vodun ensure some historical textual validity, when they are cross-referenced for historical parallels. Significantly, religious ideology is reflected in these documents in the form of bias

⁴² Arun Agrawal and Clark Gibson, "Enchantment and Disenchantment: The Role of Community in Natural Resource Conservation," *World Development* 27, no. 4 (1999): 633.

and leads to multiple and sometimes confounding representations of Ouidah's history. An analysis relying solely on religious texts of the region is limited as far as establishing a historical record of the region. Field observations and interview data suggest that there are multiple and sometimes conflicting narratives of Ouidah's religious history, as well as the role of religion within Ouidah, that are linked to the different religious communications present. It was, therefore, necessary to conduct interviews with the population in order to further establish the historical perceptions of Ouidah's history as this process illuminated religious biases as well as provided a greater understanding of religious communities' willingness to accept other religions. The next chapter will focus upon Vodun, specifically highlighting its hierarchy, origins, and evolution.

Chapter Three VODUN

Vodun

The origins of Vodun vary depending upon which of the forty-one deities one worships. Members of the Vodunsi community collectively agree upon the evolution of the religion. Within this chapter, I will highlight Vodunsi traditional ecological knowledge, which is defined by Berkes as “a cumulative body of knowledge, practice, and belief evolving by adaptive processes and handed down through generations by cultural transmission about the relationship of living beings (humans included) with one another and with their environment.”⁴³ I will indicate how the role of evolution of religious ideas within this process of traditional ecological knowledge is pertinent to Vodunsi practices and beliefs.

Describing Vodunsi, formerly referred to as “Dahomeans,” Melville Herskovits wrote in 1933, “the key to the Dahomean’s ideology as it relates to his religious concepts is to be had in the organization of his daily life.”⁴⁴ For the Fon peoples of the former Dahomey Kingdom who practice Vodun, quotidian behaviors tend to mirror their religious beliefs. For Vodunsi, *Mawu*, a Vodun deity, is said to be the chief-diviner who provided the gift of the Earth, and it is for reverence and respect to *Mawu* that stewardship is a religious responsibility. Belden Lane expresses this line of thinking, as it pertains to the gift of Nature, when he states, “We must attend... [to] the unjust advantages enjoyed for so long by First World

⁴³ Fikret Berkes, Johna Colding, and Carl Folke, “Rediscovery of Traditional Ecological Knowledge as Adaptive Management,” *Ecological Applications* 10, no. 5 (2000): 1252.

⁴⁴ Melville and Frances Herskovits, “An Outline of Dahomean Religious Belief,” *American Anthropological Association* 43 (1933): 9.

Humans. Nature must be acknowledged as ‘the new poor’.”⁴⁵ Envisioning Nature as historically suffering the tribulations of a First World agenda is one of the first steps one must undertake in order to understand that the gift of the Earth requires our active participation in its preservation. Therefore, it should be noted that another aim of Vodunsi is to preserve the integrity and stability of this gift so that it can be enjoyed by future Vodunsi, which I will discuss in detail later in this thesis.

The organization of the Vodunsi community is fairly straightforward, with a male leader, Dagbo Hounon, (Figure 6, Appendix II) and a female counterpart, Nagbo Hounon. There are forty-one separate cults represented in Vodun; all revere a separate deity. Yet, collectively, Vodunsi uniformly adhere to Vodun religious ideology. As was previously noted, the term “Vodun” first appeared in 1658. Etymologically the term represents several aspects to Vodunsi: spirit, god, Supreme Being, etcetera. To those who do not practice Vodun, the term merely denotes the religion.

As previously mentioned, the history of Ouidah and Vodun are intertwined. I will provide first hand accounts of what “Vodun” represents to residents of Ouidah, both Vodunsi and non-Vodunsi. Additionally, I will indicate how practitioners of the Vodun faith tend to express their religious ideals through interactions with Nature.

Vodun Hierarchy

Roger Stump, a scholar of the intersection of religion and geography, notes of religious community, “Followers of many religions identify, at least at some level,

⁴⁵ Belden C. Lane, "Open the Kingdom for a Cottonwood Tree," *Christian Century* 114, no. 30 (1997): 983.

with an imagined community of fellow believers encompassing all of the adherents of a particular tradition. Perceptions of religious unity appear..."⁴⁶ The hierarchy of Vodun follows the observation that Stump has put forth. Within Vodun there is one *Chef-Suprême*, named Dagbo Hounon. He is responsible for the management and facilitation of all facets of Vodunsi life, and he oversees all forty-one cults. His compliment, Nagbo Hounon, is not related to Dagbo Hounon, yet serves as the female counterpart to his reign. Serving as the self-proclaimed "Pontiff of Vodun," Dagbo Hounon is recognized as the social ruler of the Vodun kingdom, both within Ouidah and in places such as Haiti, Brazil, France, as well as other locations where individuals practice Vodun, and not one of its evolved forms, as a religion. This study does not focus upon religions that have developed out of the framework of Vodun through the slave trade (notably Candomblé, Voodoo, or Santería) but rather is concentrated upon the original Vodun faith.

Based upon my research, Nagbo Hounon serves primarily as a female-figurehead, whose duties are minimal but who is responsible for overseeing certain female-only rights. Dagbo Hounon is a title passed down from one *Chef-Suprême* to another. The Dagbo Hounon I interviewed has been serving in this role for three years at the time of our meeting. Although he states that he was, "Born into Vodun," he also admits to being a confirmed and baptized Catholic, as I noted earlier.⁴⁷ He lives quite well, residing in an elaborately decorated compound in the heart of Ouidah. A portion of his wealth is tied to remittances from any and all Vodun

⁴⁶ Stump, *The Geography of Religion*, 109.

⁴⁷ Dagbo Hounon, in discussion with author, June 2009.

followers for the privilege of conducting ceremonies at one of the two sacred sites (the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé*, or the beachhead), or for his act of bestowing simple blessings to adherents.

Beneath Dagbo Hounon and Nagbo Hounon are many priests and priestesses serving individual cults. I was not informed of the exact number of priests and priestesses who represent these cults. I was, however, able to interview both a priest and priestess, and from those interviews was able to deduce that serving in the role of a priest or priestess within Vodun is reserved for elders of the religious community. These individuals are responsible for holding ceremonies specific to their cult deity. Another prominent role within Vodun society is that of the *Bokonon*. These individuals are responsible for conducting religious ceremonies. I will discuss their role within the Vodun society in a more in depth fashion later within this thesis.

Directly beneath the priests and priestesses are “family heads.” These individuals are responsible for the quotidian actions of their specific cults. They reside at the residence where their cult shrine is located, termed the *couvant*, and from my observation, rarely leave these sites. The age of these “family heads” is quite diverse and not dependent upon gender. I interviewed one female “family head” who stated that she was twenty-two years of age; however, in appearance she looked to be younger in age.⁴⁸ Other family heads, both male and female, were well over fifty, with some nearing the century mark. There was one interesting dynamic I encountered while interviewing the young female “family head.” She had been

⁴⁸ Na Avokpe, in discussion with author, July 2009.

established in the position as the “Head of *Dan*” (*Dan* is one of the forty-one Vodun cults) since the year 2000, yet her knowledge of Vodun was highly erratic. She could not express many basic concepts surrounding Vodun, which I found other, “non-family heads” could easily explain. Having resided in Ouidah her entire life, her knowledge of the region was quite lackluster. When asked “What is the history of Ouidah?” her response was, “I do not know.”⁴⁹ I found her lack of knowledge to be indicative of the generational divide of familiarity with the religion’s history present among the female community that I previously addressed.

As previously noted, there are forty-one cults within Vodun. Beneath the “family heads” are the adherents of these cults. There are specific tasks and duties that each individual adherent must accomplish for the cult. In so doing, the cult is able to function more fluidly, and each adherent, or Vodunsi, is able to contribute to the religious community and establish an identity within the community. There is an interesting aspect of female Vodunsi associated to the *couvant* that presented itself within the context of my research. An interview subject informed me that the “family head” could summon any number of females to the *couvant*, for any reason; yet, it is a specific ceremony of scarring that I found to be most intriguing.

One sensitive issue that was challenging to probe had to do with the scarification process. After the process was explained to me by one of my guides, I was finally able to surmise the reasoning behind the persistent evasion by many Vodunsi females regarding my questions about this process. My guide explained to me that the “family head” at the *couvant* conducts the scarring ceremony. Women

⁴⁹ Ibid.

arrive at the *couvant* and are given great quantities of intoxicating liquor. After they have lost consciousness, the “family head” proceeds to carve scars into their skin with a razor blade. The number of scars, the severity, and their significance are all left to the discretion of the “family head,” but their significance is such that they are representative of an identity. The scars serve to indicate to outsiders, such as myself, membership to a Vodun cult (Figures 7 & 8, Appendix II).⁵⁰ Furthermore, the scars serve a physical purpose for the individual in that they assist in the expression of one’s faith. When the women regain consciousness, typically the following day, they return to their homes having received a “blessing,” an identifier, that other Vodunsi can tangibly view. Adherents are not allowed to ever count the number of scars that are carved into their bodies, and in fact when I questioned one woman about her scarification, the concept of counting the markings was not only unheard of, but also considered by her to be blasphemous.

This scarification process presented for me, an example by which the hierarchy within Vodun is exercised. By not permitting female Vodunsi to count the scars present on their own bodies, Vodunsi family heads are physically asserting control over their adherents’ bodies. This is a prime example I was able to observe whereby the Vodun hierarchy was controlling adherents’ physical existence and not solely contributing to their mental awareness of the faith. It should be noted, however, that through controlling Vodunsi physical appearance, “family heads” are also providing these female adherents with a tangible recognition of their membership in the Vodun community. The scarification process is such that further

⁵⁰ José Apovo, in discussion with author, July 2009.

action is unnecessary for women to be able to recognize their identity. The scars are physical manifestations of their Vodunsi identity.

Vodunsi express their religiosity at two primary locales: the beach outside of Ouidah and the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé*. Where one expresses his or her faith is dependent upon which of the forty-one cults one belongs. The greatest sacred site, by sheer volume of constituents and cult affiliation, is the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé*. This area has been established as a cultural site by the government of Benin, whereas the beachhead is on the “Tentative List” of UNESCO world heritage sites due to its global significance, specifically its association with the slave trade.⁵¹ Because the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé* represents a sacred site for the greatest number of Vodunsi, I will address its importance in depth within chapter six. The arrival of Vodun to Ouidah will be the focus of the following section.

Origin of Vodun

A complete understanding of the origin of Vodun is a daunting task. One must take into account all diverse historical aspects of the community in order to establish a framework of inception. Vodun’s inception and dissemination was not documented in any text and thus relies on oral history to answer many of the questions revolving around its foundation. This textual absence further complicates the task of attempting a complete understanding of Vodun’s origin. What can be determined about the origin of Vodun is the same as can be stated about the origin of many religions who rely upon oral traditions to express their religious history. Roger Stump notes how religions that are place-based tend to arise:

⁵¹ <http://whc.unesco.org/en/statesparties/bj>

Religions continually develop in relation to the specific places in which they are articulated and lived by communities of believers. The reproduction of active patterns of religious faith takes place primarily through social and cultural processes organized at the scale of everyday experience, such as communal worship or the performance of customary rituals. Through these processes, adherents routinely interpret, negotiate, contest, and adapt their religious system within the context of their particular circumstances. Religious systems consequently possess intrinsic connection to the situations in which they are enacted. Although they may draw on an idealized and absolute body of doctrine, religions in practice find expression through distinct manifestations rooted in the life and character of particular places.⁵²

The place specificity of Vodun revolves around the term “Vodun,” which can signify “spirit” as well as “creator.” Owing to the fact that “Vodun” can represent spiritual entities as well as the religion itself, one must recognize that many of Voduns’ “spiritual beings” reside within the landscape. Protection and preservation of these spirits can be noted as one of the primary reasons that Vodunsi undertake such a stringent stewardship ethic. This fact is particularly true with respect to the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé*, as it is viewed as the place where spirits rest when not called upon. The acceptance and understanding of spirits residing in the land is also responsible for many of the theories I propose within this thesis with regard to Vodunsi concepts of stewardship toward the natural environment. Any attempt to divide the two concepts surrounding the term “Vodun,” as either spirit or the religion, would be frivolous and hint at an ability of mutual exclusion existing between divine spirits and the religion itself. Because it is not possible to separate the two entities, one must additionally understand that Vodun is an evolving religion that arose over centuries and possesses no origination or creation text. The

⁵² Stump, *The Geography of Religion*, 109.

religion continues to evolve, and as such, I have chosen to base the concept of Vodun's origin upon first hand accounts of Vodunsi.

While my sample size of female Vodunsi is small, including only seven interviewees, I feel as though it is necessary to express the differences in origin belief as it pertains to both the male and female populations of Ouidah. Female concepts surrounding the origin of Vodun emanate from its arrival outside of Ouidah. My interviewees stated that it had been brought to Ouidah from a variety of locations, Mahi (near the present-day village of Savalou, Benin),⁵³ Togo village (north of Ouidah ~50 kms.),⁵⁴ Tado (in the Southeast of Togo),⁵⁵ and one interviewee stated that Vodun had arrived in Ouidah when her grandfather brought it from Adjadoumé (a town in the southern region of Benin).⁵⁶ Female responses to the origin of Vodun, although vague and somewhat contradictory, seem to highlight the fact that Vodun's origin is not as important as what Vodun represents. The diverse answers can also be seen as representing locales from where their specific cult *fétiche*, the cult spirit, is known to have arrived. This *fétiche* represents the particular spirit of Vodun as it applies to each cult and each deity. For the Vodun adherent, the significance of an origin site is not required to impart a concrete history of evolution and migration of the Vodun faith; instead, Vodun is capable of imparting knowledge in the absence of a birthplace. Through my research, I

⁵³ Houédanu, in discussion with author, July 2009.

⁵⁴ Hugbonouto, in discussion with author, July 2009.

⁵⁵ Na Avokpe, in discussion with author, July 2009.

⁵⁶ Tekoten Sedjro, in discussion with author, July 2009.

understood that the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé* serves as the unifier for the Vodun community, and while not serving to provide a birthplace for their religion, it is a physical feature with which all Vodunsi can identify and recognize.

Male accounts of Vodun's origin are just as diverse. I was presented with altering accounts ranging from its arrival in Ouidah from Hevié (20 kms. to the east of Ouidah),⁵⁷ to an individual who was in agreement with the female subjects, stating that Vodun arrived from Mahi.⁵⁸ Other male interviewees instead attempted to focus on the meaning of Vodun in detailing from whence it had arrived: "Vodun was born at the same time as the earth," said one interviewee.⁵⁹ Another noted, "One lives with Vodun constantly [its arrival not being important]."⁶⁰ One male subject stated, "Vodun is a dynasty [seemingly extant from time immemorial]."⁶¹ Still another Vodunsi male said, "The King of Hweda brought the Vodun to protect us; he blessed objects and sent them out into his kingdom,"⁶² thus expressing not only its arrival in Ouidah but also its prevalence throughout the region. Still another interviewee claimed that Vodun's arrival in Ouidah was owing to one mortal

⁵⁷ Hounkpe Ahouanga-Hinto, in discussion with author, June 2009.

⁵⁸ Avossé Nassara, in discussion with author, July 2009.

⁵⁹ Hougan Zonon, in discussion with author, June 2009.

⁶⁰ Dakossi Gandomessi, in discussion with author, June 2009.

⁶¹ Sourouganji Humboganji, in discussion with author, June 2009.

⁶² Serge Rustico, in discussion with author, June 2009.

individual: "King Kpassé brought it and gave it to Ouidah."⁶³ Lastly, one interviewee simply stated, "the Great Father left it."⁶⁴

These diverse and conflicting accounts, from both women and men with regard to the history of Vodun and its arrival in Ouidah, suggest that there is no solid narrative of origin that can be acknowledged by a consensus Vodunsi population. Instead, an alternate explanation proposes that several religious and cultural ideals converged to form a single religious practice that then spread out from Ouidah. Once this faith became more concentrated, its influence upon society could be perceived as a tool useful for social influence; Vodun became not just a religion but also a manner in which influence could be expressed through a collective social group. This notion of religion affecting society is expressed in much of the work by sociologist Émile Durkheim.⁶⁵

Initiation

The act of being accepted into one of the forty-one Vodun cults is equal part rite of initiation and rite of passage. Oftentimes, Vodunsi "family members" will be accepted by a cult to whom their maternal family does not belong. I found in my research several instances in which daughters or sons were accepted into the paternal line of religious adherence, whereupon it was understood that contact with their maternal side would be dissolved. This theme is not ubiquitous; however, it did arise in five of my sixteen Vodunsi interviews. In these instances, the maternal

⁶³ Kpassenon, in discussion with author, June 2009.

⁶⁴ Togbe Akounto Chabassi, in discussion with author, June 2009.

⁶⁵ Émile Durkheim, "Sociology of Religion," *L'Année sociologique* 2 (1899).

side of the family often did not openly practice Vodun but instead followed Islam or Christianity (this occurred in three of the four female interviews in which the female was welcomed into the paternal line of the religious community). This can be perceived as a lasting effect of European colonization and trade. If European and Arabic contact had never been made, then the prospect of one's family members practicing different religions would be greatly diminished. History has affected Vodunsi family dynamics through this type of scenario.

Contrary to claims made by some scholars, adherents are not born into the Vodun faith. It is necessary to undergo a ritual conducted by a *Bokonon*, a religious healer and spiritual guide. These ceremonies can be conducted at birth; however, there are several instances I found during my interview process in which Vodunsi were not welcomed into a cult community until later in life. The possibility of one becoming Vodunsi later in life provides opportunity for individuals who may not be accepted into the community immediately. This possibility lends itself toward individuals who have not, as yet, been accepted into the community still practicing Vodunsi ideals and concepts of reciprocity in the desire to one day become a recognized member of the Vodunsi community. It is through this possibility of future acceptance as a Vodunsi that the Vodun community does not exclude an individual from the community indefinitely. By establishing the possibility of future acceptance, Vodunsi are able to impress their ideologies upon those desiring to become Vodunsi, whereby a prospective Vodunsi will behave in accordance with Vodunsi religious doctrine so as to garner the respect and admiration due a proper Vodunsi, in the hope to one day be recognized as such. This is noticeable in the

manner in which Vodunsi approach and interact with the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé*, viewing it is a pivotal aspect in their faith. One of my male interviewees expressed to me that he had not yet been accepted into the faith, after numerous attempts with ceremonies conducted by a *Bokonon*; however, he still considered himself to be Vodunsi in that he practiced Vodun ideals, while not yet being recognized as a formal member of the Vodun community.⁶⁶

Of my seven female interviewees, five were welcomed into a Vodun cult shortly after their birth. The remaining two individuals were accepted into the faith at much later ages: twenty-three and twenty-five years of age. To further complicate the initiation processes, I was informed that the number seven is sacred to Vodunsi females. It is therefore, in theory, necessary to wait until the age of a female is divisible by the number seven before an initiation ritual can be conducted. A local cultural interpreter who works at the *Musée de Ouidah* relayed this information to me. I consider him to be a highly reliable source for information such as this. He possesses much knowledge of the Vodun faith; however, as noted above, this individual had not been admitted to any Vodun cult despite numerous attempts to do so through a *Bokonon* ceremony. As can be noted by the ages I have represented above of female initiates, the information provided to me displays a profound disconnect between Vodun theory and my actual interview data. This is a prime example of how Vodun doctrine is not always in accordance with Vodun practice.

⁶⁶ Serge Rustico, in discussion with author, June 2009.

Male Vodunsi hold the number nine to be sacred. Initiation, if not occurring immediately upon their birth, is similarly reserved for an age divisible by that sacred digit. Of my nine male interviewees, only two individuals stated that they were “born into” the faith, signifying that their ceremonies were conducted shortly after their birth. Of the remaining seven individuals, one indicated that he was accepted at age seven, again conflicting interview data with Vodun theory on gender specific sacred numbers. The majority of the remaining subjects either did not identify the age at which they were accepted into the faith or did not recall the age at which they were accepted. The disconnects represented above are important to understand in that they represent specific inconsistencies existing between Vodunsi belief and Vodunsi action.

One male interviewee did provide an interesting explanation as to why many contemporary, older individuals, appeal to the *Bokonon*. That interviewee expressed that when he was twenty-four years of age, he had many problems in his life, and he recognized that it was time for a change. He appealed to the *Bokonon*, a ceremony was conducted, and he was accepted at that time.⁶⁷ Several other individuals who I interviewed repeated this reasoning, including one male the age of forty, and two females, ages: twenty-five and thirty-five. This recurring theme of life struggle leading one toward Vodun is indicative of self-realization and a desire for change.

This theme of self-realization can be found across many religious lines. This self-realization is easily identifiable on a global scale, the most contemporary and

⁶⁷ Togbe Akounto Chabassi, in discussion with the author, June 2009.

recognizable of which is a “rebirth,” from the Greek *anōthen*, claimed by many Christian Evangelical communities, that is meant to signify one’s starting anew.⁶⁸ Of the four individuals who appealed to Vodun as a sanctuary from their personal strife, none expressed negative implications from their decision. I found this to signify the ability of the Vodun religious community to accept new members, and, owing to the understood requirement of possible dissolution of contact with blood-family, it also represents how well the Vodun community in Ouidah welcomes recent converts. Additionally, by the act of the Vodun religious community accepting new members, these new members are thus inclined to conform to Vodun’s religious practices. One of these practices is the relationship developed between Vodunsi and the environment. Through acceptance into the Vodun community, recent converts now must identify as Vodunsi and act accordingly. This serves to shape and influence the behaviors of converts so that their actions are aligned with Vodunsi beliefs.

Bokonon are highly regarded across all Vodunsi cults lines, and their work is so respected that a school has been established in Ouidah to teach the prospective *Bokonon* the necessary rites and rituals of all Vodun faith. When I inquired of the *Chef-Suprême* how long *Bokonon* students remain in the academic environment, he informed me that it is entirely dependent upon ones’ aptitude toward understanding the numerous ceremonies, their significance, and their ability to recount these ceremonies as necessary. He stated, “students remain at this school

⁶⁸ <http://www.searchgodsword.org/lex/grk/view.cgi?number=509>

for at least one year.”⁶⁹ Yet, he followed this statement by expressing that some prospective *Bokonon* remain at the school for as many as four years. The suggestion is that one’s ability to master the numerous ceremonies determines one’s length of stay. This fact is important to recognize in that it provides stability within the Vodun religious community in that all *Bokonon* will be in possession of similar skills, and Vodun ceremonies will be conducted in a uniform manner.

Fa is the Vodun deity responsible for deciding into which cult an individual is accepted. When an individual (or for newborns, their guardians) decides that he or she wishes to become Vodunsi, *Bokonon* are summoned to the residence and lots are cast. In a geographically appropriate manner, as they are grown locally, the lots cast are kola nuts (*Cola*). The *Bokonon* chew the nuts into several pieces and then spit them out onto the ground. The *Bokonon* then interprets the kola shards. The *Bokonon* next determines whether the individual is to be accepted by any of the cults, and if so, which specific cult. The fee charged by the *Bokonon* is miniscule, and I did not come across any instances in which an individual felt as though it was not money well spent. This includes the previously mentioned interviewee who had undergone this ceremony numerous times and, at the age of thirty-eight, still had not been accepted as a Vodunsi. He harbored no ill feelings toward the processes necessary to become Vodunsi but instead saw them as a necessary rite of passage into the religious community. The irony surrounding this individual emanated from his vast wealth of Vodun knowledge that encompassed much more tangible and supportable evidence than many persons I had interviewed who had been Vodunsi

⁶⁹ Dagbo Hounon, in discussion with author, June 2009.

for decades, or their entire lives. Additionally, the information he shared with me about his own approaches toward the environment paralleled those espoused in Vodunsi doctrine. I believe that this is another example of how Vodun, and in particular one's desire to be received as a Vodunsi, has influenced the manner in which one approaches daily life in Ouidah. This individual, while not yet a recognized Vodunsi, still approached care for the environment in the same fashion as those who had been received into the Vodunsi community.

First Vodun Experience

The ability to recount one's first religious experience cannot be over-emphasized, as I believe that the manner in which one recounts a religious event symbolizes a foundation upon which an individual's religious character is constructed. In this study, interviewees' recollections represent tangible points in their life. Establishing a "starting point" in the interviewee's religious life enabled me to better understand the values held by each individual. While another religious occurrence may have occurred previous to the one explained to me in our interview process, it was the experience that was recounted to me as the primary experience that serves as possessing the most representative and memorable aspect to my interview subjects. Interviewees' invitation, by me, to express their oldest Vodun memory, enabled them to establish a continuum upon which later questions could be built within the context of our interview. In order to establish the depth and association one feels toward Vodun, I found the question detailing one's first experience with Vodun to be indicative of a greater understanding and relation to the faith as a whole that could easily be related from an individual perspective.

Furthermore, the occasion for inquiry presented a prime opportunity to understand which specific ethics are related to Vodunsi from a very young age.

One of the most intriguing and telling aspects of Vodun arose when I asked interviewees to describe their first memory of Vodun. Many female Vodunsi shared that their first experience revolved around the *couvant*, the sacred room at the shrine of their cult deity. The largest proportion of female Vodunsi related that they were expected to spend a continuous year at the *couvant* without ever leaving, for any reason. They were brought food and drink, and the intent of their stay there was to submerge them into the ideologies and beliefs surrounding their cult.

Oftentimes, my interviewees were not the only individuals who were at the *couvant*, as there were other females undergoing this rite at the same time. Of my female interviews, five of the seven women remembered the *couvant* event as their first Vodun experience. It was here that they received the wisdom of their deity, and it was within the *couvant* that they became a true female Vodunsi. The outlying two women also possessed interesting memories of their primary Vodun experience. One fifty-seven year old woman said that her first memorable account of Vodun was when her parents assisted her in finding the “proper life.”⁷⁰ She remitted money in thanks for the salvation that *Mami-Wata*, a popular female deity believed to live in the waters of West Africa, provided. She did not identify the recipient of the money, or to what ends the money was meant; instead, she spoke of this action as a sort of act of gratitude. The other female who did not recount the *couvant* as her first Vodun memory related that her first memory of Vodun arose when “the suffering of

⁷⁰ Amingassi Djabassi, in discussion with author, June 2009.

not being Vodunsi subsided.”⁷¹ Her conceptualization of the Vodun faith revolved around previous suffering and subsequent salvation through becoming Vodunsi. This recurring theme of one’s salvation associated with acceptance into Vodun, as previously discussed, suggests a positive impact upon the lives of those who joined the Vodun faith later in life. Furthermore, this concept of salvation can be viewed as incentive to actively and appropriately practice Vodunsi teachings. This would include the manner in which one approaches Nature.

Accounts of primary Vodun experience for male Vodunsi are far more diversified. This is most likely owing to male adherents not being required to reside in a specific locale for a pre-determined amount of time. Two individuals recounted highly influential ceremonies as their first memory of Vodun. Two other males remembered their first Vodun lesson as “good begets good,”⁷² and that “one should not do bad [to another].”⁷³ We often refer to this in Western society as the Golden Rule.

This philosophy seems simplistic at first mention; however, it illuminates the influence that principled ideology can have upon impressionable converts to any faith, as many across religious divides hold this belief. One outlying male related to me that he could not recount his first memory of the faith, as the “emotions were so strong, because you have to be chosen [into the faith].”⁷⁴ Another individual

⁷¹ Huedan Nansarra, in discussion with author, July 2009.

⁷² Avossé Nassara, in discussion with author, July 2009.

⁷³ Hougan Zonon, in discussion with author, June 2009.

⁷⁴ Sourouganji Humboganji, in discussion with author, June 2009.

recounted his first memory as when he became a worker for the *fétiche*, one of the forty-one Vodun deities or spirits. He therefore directly related his first memory of formal practice to his ability to serve the religious community in a tangible fashion, organizing ceremonies, being responsible for the presentation of gifts to the *fétiche*, etcetera.⁷⁵ Still, another male interviewee recounted his first experience as when he “shared a meal with the *fétiche*.”⁷⁶ The experience of dining with the divine forged a lasting impression on the memory of this adherent, and as such, ensured a relationship between the spiritual and the terrestrial. The final two individuals recount their primary experience of Vodun as a relationship they had with *Fa*, the Vodun diviner previously discussed.

These explications all serve to establish a connection between the transcendental spirit and the terrestrial human. By establishing a relationship as existing between these two parties, I am indicating the manner in which Vodunsi associate their actions as existing in accordance with those of a higher power. Because Nature was provided as a gift to the Vodunsi by these same celestial powers, their interaction with Nature should be expressed in equally reverential terms. I will address in the subsequent section whether any of the rites and rituals of Vodun have altered, and if so, for what purpose.

Alteration of Religious Ceremonies

One question posed to all of my interviewees dealt with the changing, or updating, of religious rituals. I was interested in discerning if Vodun ceremonies

⁷⁵ Hounkpe Ahouanga-Hinto, in discussion with author, June 2009.

⁷⁶ Serge Rustico, in discussion with author, June 2009.

have changed over the course of the past few centuries to become more contemporary, be it through the use of technology, or resulting from social changes such as population growth and globalization. Additionally, the question I posed to my interviewees provided a prime opportunity to discern if the ideas introduced from outside religions could be seen as directly relevant to the manner in which Vodunsi approaches to the natural environment have altered. And if so, to what degree this was recognizable.

Female interviewees responded to this question with a near unanimous “No, all the ceremonies are the same as they have always been.” There was, however, one female, a high-ranking priestess, who explained to me that she can alter any ceremony to her liking, so as to bring about the desired result “according to circumstances.”⁷⁷ This same woman stated earlier in the interview that she could arrange for any family member to become Vodunsi at any time, in the absence of a specific age or date. The sway that she held within the community was highly regarded by those within the Vodun community as well as outside of it.

While I was in Ouidah, she was holding a lesser-recognized, yet equally important ceremony at her home on 21 June to purify Vodun adherents of her cult. This date is not recognized by all Vodun cults; however, her cult holds two dates, 21 June and 10 January, to be equally important. Additionally, it provides another opportunity for sacra-social gathering for uniform ends, namely purification and renewal of oneself. The ceremony can also be perceived as a reaffirmation of one’s identity. This act of self-renewal and purification enables a Vodunsi to perform

⁷⁷ Amingassi Djabassi, in discussion with author, June 2009.

these ritual tasks in a communal environment wherein they are able to share in their renewal and purification with other, likeminded participants.

Male subjects were nearly as unanimous as females in their confirmation of religious tradition, expressing themes such as “they do not change, so as to respect tradition,”⁷⁸ “they do not change, but ceremonies have augmented in number,”⁷⁹ “[ceremonies] do not change, we continue to worship like our ancestors.”⁸⁰ There was one disconnect within the male population with reference to religious tradition. A Vodunsi elder explained, “[Ceremonies] are not the same thing because people have changed and teachings have changed accordingly to be more practical.”⁸¹ The same individual does conclude this statement by expressing, “Yet they are nearly the same.”⁸² Lastly, an individual who adamantly expressed that ceremonies do not change related that although the ceremonies themselves may not change, access to religious paraphernalia has increased exponentially. He recounted that when he was younger, twenty years ago, the price of a Kola nut used in religious ceremonies was 10 CFA (roughly \$0.02 USD), and it could now not be procured for less than 300 CFA (roughly \$0.60).⁸³ Although I cannot account for the former price of the Kola nut, I can confirm that this interviewee accurately states its current price in Ouidah.

⁷⁸ Dakossi Gandomessi, in discussion with author, June 2009.

⁷⁹ Avossé Nassara, in discussion with author, July 2009.

⁸⁰ Sourouganji Humboganji, in discussion with author, June 2009.

⁸¹ Kpassenon, in discussion with author, June 2009.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Serge Rustico, in discussion with author, June 2009.

This suggests a commoditization of religion or religious practice in which economics, specifically supply and demand, have influenced Vodun at large; however, I found it interesting that only one of my sixteen Vodunsi interviewees found it pertinent enough to express. While it can be perceived that the socio-economic situation in Ouidah is changing, through the processes of globalization and demographic shifting, this relative omission by my other interviewees suggests that the cost of expressing one's religious devotion is not yet so exuberant as to warrant its omission in religious practice.

From a strictly historical perspective, I should note that there are ceremonies that did exist, which do no longer; namely, a ceremony that was related to me by a historical interpreter wherein forty-one slaves were sacrificed annually to celebrate the King's birthday. The forty-one slaves historically represented the forty-one Vodun deities. I believe that this shows how contemporary ideologies have impacted Vodun not through the alteration of religious ceremonies but through their omission. The impacts of outside influencers such as globalization and the presence of Catholicism and Islam, being the most identifiable, are most likely the reason for this ritual's omission.

The statement from the male Vodunsi expressing the creation of newer ceremonies illuminates how Vodunsi have attempted to adapt to a global society. In an attempt to appeal to a larger audience, while concurrently disposing of rituals that may not appeal to a larger moral climate, Vodun has adapted, through both the creation of new ceremonies and through the dissolution and omission of older ceremonies. Vodunsi are undertaking actions to moderate global impact upon their

traditional religion, while concurrently attempting to appeal to a larger population existing outside of Ouidah. It should be noted, however, that none of the ceremonies existing to express reverence to the natural environment were addressed as either diminishing in number or being omitted because of social changes. Since none of my interviewees' suggested ceremonial alteration pertaining to the environment, it can be presumed that the influence of the above-described factors has yet to modify Vodunsi relations with the environment. This leads me directly into the manner in which Vodunsi focus upon the ethic of stewardship, and how Vodunsi choose to express this concept.

Chapter Four **STEWARDSHIP**

Stewardship

“Stewardship” is a dynamic term. Its applicability and recognition varies from one group of individuals to another; therefore, its definition is difficult to articulate in a finite manner. It should be noted from the beginning of a discussion on stewardship that stewardship is an anthropocentric idea suggesting that humans can and should serve as caretakers of the natural world. Jennifer Welchman suggests that through approaches of “enlightened anthropocentrism,” one could be “motivated to resist the destruction of the world.”⁸⁴ If indeed one accepts that stewardship is anthropocentric, I would affirm that Vodunsi approaches to stewardship reside in Welchman’s realm of “enlightened anthropocentrism.” Regardless, the establishment of this hierarchical arrangement will not be addressed within this thesis; however, the presence of the hierarchy implied by the term stewardship should be fully understood as expressing a notion of dominion. These notions of dominion conflict with Vodunsi approaches to stewardship; therefore, I will endeavor to express how traditional concepts of stewardship can be observed within Vodunsi practices of stewardship in absence of notions of dominion.

⁸⁴ Jennifer Welchman, "The Virtues of Stewardship," *Environmental Ethics* 21, no. 4 (1999): 414.

Peter Baaken notes of stewardship, "Stewardship is likely to remain a persistent but contested concept within theological environmental ethics."⁸⁵ J. Baird Callicott says that stewardship is "a relationship between man and the rest of the world whereby humans serve as caretakers of the master's garden."⁸⁶ This position is close to the understanding that Vodunsi have of stewardship, as it includes the notion of caring for the Earth, what Callicott refers to as the "master's garden"; however, it does not fully express the dynamics involved in Vodunsi stewardship.

Edward Echlin, a Christian scholar who focuses upon African Christianity, notes that stewards "share in a responsibility for God's Earth."⁸⁷ This view of stewardship aligns with Vodunsi perceptions, as they do actively pursue stewardship out of a responsibility to care for *Mawu's* gift of the Earth to them. The Vodunsi notion of stewardship, however, is still not yet completely identified. To understand that Vodunsi stewardship actively pursues a responsibility toward caring for the "garden," as it is a gift from god(s), one must also understand that there exists a desire for this garden to exist both for future generations and for itself. Welchman addresses this notion of stewardship when she states,

Stewardship is a social role individuals adopt toward some other, a role sustained over time. To be a steward is to devote a substantial percentage of

⁸⁵ Peter W. Baaken, "Stewardship," in *Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature*, ed. Bron Taylor (London: Continuum, 2005), 1597.

⁸⁶ J. Baird Callicott, "The Indigenous World or Many Indigenous Worlds," *Environmental Ethics* 22, no. 3 (2000): 297.

⁸⁷ Edward Echlin, "An African Church Sets the Example," *The Ecologist* 30, no. 1 (2000): 1.

one's thoughts and efforts to maintaining or enhancing the condition of some thing(s) or some person(s), not primarily for the stewards own sake.⁸⁸

This perception is in accordance with the manner in which Vodunsi undertake the act of stewardship. There do exist two remaining concepts that must be included within Vodunsi stewardship. One is presented by Eric Freyfogle when he states that there exists “ a right to enjoy...but not to damage or consume” as this would negate the possibility of future enjoyment.⁸⁹ This perception of “future enjoyment,” or future reverence, is easily identifiable within Vodunsi practices of stewardship. Lastly, the concept of stewardship possesses immediate effects upon communities at large. Tyson and Worthley note this when they express “stewardship behavior [can effect] perceived threats to individual and community.”⁹⁰ Vodunsi undertake approaches to stewardship expressly intent on present and future community benefits, which I will address later within this chapter.

Vodunsi stewardship exists such that there is a responsibility to ensure that the Earth is not damaged but rather preserved or enhanced for the benefit of present and future community, the benefit of present and future adherents, and the benefit of the Earth itself, while displaying an appreciation for the gift of the Earth from *Mawu*. This is the notion of stewardship that I will utilize within this thesis in order to address Vodunsi stewardship's ideals and practices.

⁸⁸ Welchman, "The Virtues of Stewardship," 415.

⁸⁹ Eric Freyfogle, *Bounded People, Boundless Land* (Washington D.C.: Island Press, 1998), 145.

⁹⁰ C.B. Tyson and T.E. Worthley, "Managing Forests within a Watershed: The Importance of Stewardship," *Journal of Forestry* 99, no. 8 (2001): 5.

I have defined the term stewardship herein to refer to an act of care directed toward the preservation or enhancement of Nature. The term Nature (emphasis place on capitalization) is understood within the concept of this thesis to express the role of humans as included in nature, just as mountains, rivers, trees, and rocks. The term Nature should be understood as representing all that exists upon the Earth; it is all-inclusive. Furthermore, for the purpose of this thesis as it pertains to Vodunsi, one should accept that the pieces that compose Nature possess no intrinsic value within Vodunsi ideals; however, I will illustrate how the sacralization of the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé* negates this notion as it develops a hierarchy within Nature, thus revering specific areas over others. Michael Ruse suggests this when he notes, "there is no way of getting value without human interests."⁹¹ This sentiment of the necessity of an evaluator is echoed by Holmes Rolston III's claim, "There is no value without an evaluator...a comprehensive environmental ethic reallocates value across the whole continuum."⁹² Vodunsi are not evaluators but appreciators. In Vodunsi thought, no human is to be perceived as more or less valuable than any tree or mountain stream. Utilizing this term, Nature, diminishes the possibility of a human-nature dualism, and also quells the belief in intrinsic value as it pertains to Vodunsi.

Vodunsi perceptions of Nature are such that to speak of humans is to speak of an aspect of Nature, not an entity removed. Furthermore, to speak of Nature is to

⁹¹ Michael Ruse, "Stewardship for the Earth," *Bioscience* 53, no. 9 (2003): 877.

⁹² Holmes Rolston III, "Challenges in Environmental Ethics," in *Environmental Philosophy: From Animal Rights to Radical Ecology*, ed. Michael Zimmerman, et al. (Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 1998), 142.

also speak, in part, of humans. To recognize Vodunsi perceptions of stewardship is to comprehend the role of “steward” or “caretaker” as it pertains to Vodunsi. Vodunsi perceptions of a steward are approached with the understanding that humans are members of the Natural community. Furthermore, successfully expressing one’s role as a caretaker has the intended ends of a conscious recognition of the complexities of all elements of Nature wherein humans are members of a biotic community and not its governors holding dominion over it. This definition of Vodunsi stewardship should illustrate a definition of stewardship that is applicable to and representative of Vodun directly, and which serves to preserve the integrity of the natural environment for future generations, as this is a primary goal of Vodunsi stewardship.

Of what is stewardship comprised? How does one espouse the virtues of stewardship, and to what end is stewardship directed? John Murray claimed in 1993 that stewardship is an ideal that “carried with it the sense of passing on the earth not as a jealously guarded plat of private property, but as a priceless shared gift to posterity.”⁹³ This concept of posterity is one of the basic tenets associated with Vodunsi stewardship. Vodunsi understand stewardship as the care one takes to provide the least amount of negative effect on an environment while considering the effects of both action and inaction. I acknowledge that the stewardship ethic practiced by Vodunsi is a combination of both of these concepts, as they share many parallel ideas; yet, I assert that the creation-centered view of stewardship holds

⁹³ John Murray, "On Stewardship," in *Sacred Trusts: Essays on Stewardship and Responsibility*, ed. Michael Katakis (San Fransisco: Mercury House, 1993), 265.

more sway with respect to the Vodunsi approach to stewardship than does the dominant Eurocentric and anthropocentric model prevalent in most Occidental religious practices wherein perception of the natural world is as a resource to be utilized, and with which a reciprocal relationship is severely diminished. This Western approach to stewardship, in which a human-nature dualism is expressed, primarily results from notions of dominion as it pertains to human-environment relations.

If Vodunsi were to adopt this dominion-oriented application of stewardship, the results would be such that Vodunsi would suffer just as non-human nature would suffer. Richard Sylvan and David Bennett address this notion when they state, “There is an internal tension in the Dominion Thesis – ultimately to dominate nature means to destroy it and to destroy it means to destroy humans.”⁹⁴ The relationship that the Vodunsi have to the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé* represents an understanding of a cyclical temporality. When Vodunsi care for the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé*, they understand that they are caring for their ancestors, as the spirits of their ancestors are reincarnated into *Loko* trees (Nago Iroko). Furthermore, Vodunsi recognize that they too will one day require care from their kin once they have arbor-morphed into *Loko* trees. This is one reason that the dominion notion of stewardship is not in practice by Vodunsi. Time is perceived to be more cyclical within Vodunsi ideals. Those Vodunsi who I interviewed perceive themselves as the caretakers of their ancestors, who are represented by *Loko* trees, within the *Forêt*

⁹⁴ Richard Sylvan and David Bennett, *The Greening of Ethics* (Cambridge: White Horse Press, 1994), 70.

Sacrée de Kpassé. When they have transitioned into *Loko* trees, they will also require care and protection from their kin. This is an unending cycle from the viewpoint of Vodunsi, and a primary reason for their undertaking of stewardship within the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé*.

Another reason I have dispelled the notion of dominion-oriented stewardship is expressed by Wendell Berry when he addresses the contemporary dualistic approach undertaken by Occidental faiths in his essay *God and Country*, “The churches, which claim to honor God as the ‘maker of heaven and earth,’ have lately shown little inclination to honor the earth or to protect it from those who dishonor it.”⁹⁵ I have, therefore, chosen to negate this application of the dominion theory of stewardship as it does not pertain to Vodunsi. Vodunsi, on the whole, actively care for the preservation of the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé* and seek to protect it. In lieu of this notion of dominion, I have adopted herein a concept of stewardship more recognizable as a reciprocity existing between humans and nature wherein humans view themselves as aspects of Nature, and concurrent caretakers for the gift of the natural world.

Catherine Bell addresses this notion of reciprocity in her work *Ritual*, when she states of the Hindu practice of puja, “The reciprocity underlying Hindu puja is relatively low key. Devotional offerings to the deity are not meant to result in direct or immediate concrete benefits, although they are understood to nurture a positive

⁹⁵ Wendell Berry, *What Are People For?* (New York: North Point Press, 1990), 95.

human-divine relationship.”⁹⁶ I believe that this nurturing view provided by Bell accurately represents the Vodun approach to stewardship.

This approach to stewardship is also supported in the writing of John Hart, as he notes of stewardship, “In the stewardship perspective, people are viewed as managers of creation on behalf of the creating Spirit, who entrusts this role to them.”⁹⁷ Thus, we must recognize that humans are seen in the Vodunsi perspective as stewards of the land; it is their responsibility to preserve the gift of nature for future enjoyment; however, Vodunsi also recognized the aspect of stewardship associated with viewing oneself as an aspect of Nature, not separate from it. This should not be understood as a uniquely Vodun approach to stewardship, but rather one that manifests itself out of the animistic nature of Vodun and the concepts of animism associated with community. Carol Rose addresses the necessity of perceiving Nature as a gift of common property when she notes, “gifts may be approached with a special kind of care and respect, and it is in this sense that the vision of the environment-as-gift might help to supply some norms of self-restraint in the use of commons.”⁹⁸ We can apply Rose’s statement to Vodunsi actions by recognizing the notions of community associated within Vodunsi’s animistic teachings.

⁹⁶ Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions*, 110.

⁹⁷ John Hart, *Sacramental Commons: Christian Ecological Ethics* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), 70.

⁹⁸ Carol M. Rose, “Given-Ness and Gift: Property and the Quest for Environmental Ethics,” *Environmental Law* 24, no. 1 (1994): 7.

One must consider what principles are held by “animistic” religions that differ from those to which Berry refers above. I will address this topic by first explaining basic religious tenets surrounding animism, as animistic practitioners express different values toward the environment than are held by many other contemporary faiths. I will then focus upon how religious morality effects society through the manifestation of social law. Next, I will address the concept of care as it applies to stewardship; and lastly, I will detail the manner in which Vodunsi choose to express stewardship.

Animism

Edward Tylor popularized the term “animism” in 1871. He borrowed the term from George Stahl, a German physician and chemist, who defined it as a “deeply lying doctrine of Spiritual Beings, which embodies the very essence of Spiritualistic as opposed to Materialistic philosophy.”⁹⁹ Half a century later, Tylor furthered this sentiment stating, “The general belief in spiritual beings, is here given to Animism.”¹⁰⁰ According to the contemporary animist scholar Graham Harvey, Tylor developed the term based upon his “study in Spiritualism;” and although Tylor’s intent was to have animism focused upon “a theory of souls rather than life forces,” the concept of “the belief in spirits or souls” was still conjoined with the “belief in life-energies.”¹⁰¹ These “life-energies” should not be understood as existing in

⁹⁹ Edward B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Language, Art, and Custom*, 2 vols., vol. 1 and 2 (New York: Bretano's, 1924), 425.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 426.

¹⁰¹ Graham Harvey, *Animism: Respecting the Living World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 7.

isolated locations but rather as existing where religious adherents recognize them, regardless of geography. An example of this from my research is that all Vodunsi recognize the sacredness of the python snake outside of, as well as within, Ouidah.

Tylor's 1871 work attempted to convey facets of religion as holistic, non-compartmentalized, and existing, when necessary, apart from geographical location. After years of studying the motives and intents that drive religion, Tylor concluded that all religions, at their most basic level, were composed of an essence in the "belief in Spiritual Beings."¹⁰² Vodunsi practice a system of belief wherein all entities, sentient or not, possess the possibility of a soul, and this soul possesses a spiritual element. We can then confer that Tylor's accusation, while rejected by some scholars of religion, is in fact applicable to the Vodunsi belief system owing to their belief in spiritual beings. Additionally, the scholar Robert Lowie notes of Tylor's work, "because such a belief had been reported from all adequately described tribes on the face of the globe, Tylor inferred the universality of religion."¹⁰³

The work of Mircea Eliade, where he details the existence of either a "sacred" or "profane" element within all aspects of the human-religious tradition, also serves to support this theory; Eliade notes, "For religious man, space is not homogenous...some parts of space are qualitatively different from others."¹⁰⁴ Eliade

¹⁰² Robert Lowie, *Primitive Religion* (New York: Liveright, 1948), xiv.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred & the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1959), 20.

continues to discuss how space is allotted its status; yet he affirms that all space is designated a status within societies, be it “sacred” or what he terms “a formless expanse [i.e. “profane”].”¹⁰⁵ Acknowledging the universality of religion, as both Tylor and Eliade do in their own fashions, represents a uniform understanding and existence of fundamental concepts such as stewardship. Furthermore, universal concepts such as these can be perceived as existing within diverse theological teachings. This observation, however, of religious universality was not nearly as important as the recognition of a basic religious theology associated with the spiritual. Tylor’s identification of spiritual beliefs existing irrespective of religious affiliation contributes to basic, fundamental concepts of religion, and this leads to an overall better understanding of universal religious beliefs. The practice of stewardship can be perceived as one of these inter-religious ideologies.

Based upon the above definition provided by Tylor, I have developed a definition of animism that I will use here. For the purposes of this thesis, animism is defined as the attribution “of life, soul, or spirit” to animate as well as inanimate objects. This definition leads to the acceptance that animistic religions, and particularly Vodun, innately practice stewardship more readily because they recognize an extant relationship between humans and the environment.¹⁰⁶ Traditional religions, like Vodun, convey care for the environment without the interference of esoteric religious tenets; instead, care and stewardship for the environment is conveyed inherently through everyday practices. In lieu of

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ David Chidester, “Animism,” in *Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature*, ed. Bron Taylor (London: Continuum, 2005), 78.

articulating a complex theology, animistic practitioners suppose that all entities may possess a spirit or soul, regardless of sentience. This possibility of a spirit lends itself to the adoption of a specific set of ethics where adherents recognize a potential reverence for all entities and therefore will not purposefully act in a detrimental fashion toward any entity.

Albert Plotkin claims that it is this spirit that carries with it the “seed of ethics”¹⁰⁷; “ethics...flows out of the religious consciousness transformed by the sense of the holy.”¹⁰⁸ Paralleling the social theory of Émile Durkheim, who posited that religion directly influences society, Plotkin states, “The holy develops into a sense of moral and religious ideas and then becomes codified in an ethical form.”¹⁰⁹ This “ethical form” is first expounded upon from a religiously identifiable entity to a socially identifiable construct. Because Vodunsi believe that all entities possess the possibility of a soul, social admiration must thus be afforded to all, regardless of orthodox rationale or physical sentience.

There was a time in the past when the majority of religions were recognized as being animistic due to the manner in which they interacted with the natural environment; however, newer, esoteric religions have surfaced and prospered in recent centuries, particularly around Ouidah. These religions have, for the most part, drawn focus away from association with earthly, spiritual beings, choosing instead to focus upon more recondite spirits. This has resulted in the development

¹⁰⁷ Albert Plotkin, *The Ethics of World Religions* (Lewistown, N.Y.: EMText, 1993), 6.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

of a valid relationship between Westernized humans and nature being usurped by agendas purporting social progress.

Stewardship, as I noted above, can be understood as a responsibility emanating from a religious imperative; however, it can also be recognized as a voluntary manner in which one may convey a sense of ones religious devotion to the Creator. John Hart states, "*Stewardship* means that humans responsibly take secondary charge of Earth, Earth's goods, Earth's creatures...on behalf of and in trust from the Spirit, their primary owner."¹¹⁰ He continues to note, "At its core 'stewardship' is still an anthropocentric concept with cultural and practical shortcomings."¹¹¹ This latter statement by Hart expresses that while humans may perceive themselves as the caretakers of the gift, by doing so they are inherently developing a hierarchy within nature whereby humans are viewed just below the Creator and above the remaining natural elements. Eugene Hargrove notes this tendency toward anthropocentric hierarchical arrangement when he states, "An anthropocentric point of view [exists] in which humans receive special or superior attention because of their [supposed] special or superior status."¹¹² Lloyd Steffen also addresses the implicit hierarchy exemplified through the notion of "stewardship;" he states, "Stewardship continues to point to a power relation, an

¹¹⁰ Hart, *Sacramental Commons: Christian Ecological Ethics*, 119.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 120.

¹¹² Eugene Hargrove, "Weak Anthropocentric Intrinsic Value," *Environmental Ethics* 75, no. 2 (1992): 202.

actual hierarchy of power at odds with dominion. Stewardship reflects the reality of alienation and is never realized.”¹¹³

Animism attempts to unify these separate ideologies of humans’ approach to nature and to dispose of the concept of dominion. Animists approach nature in an expression toward reverence for the created and, alternately, as a devotion toward protecting the gift. This is undertaken through concepts associated with a mutuality existing between humans and Nature that enables a more open relationship to exist through aspects of reciprocity between humans and Nature.

Vodunsi recognize that they receive the ability to sustain life from the gift of the Earth. They also acknowledge that the preservation and care for this gift is necessary in order to convey appreciation and reverence for the created. Therefore, Vodunsi have developed a reciprocal relationship with Nature whereby Vodunsi actively pursue the preservation of Nature’s integrity while Nature continues to provide sustenance for the Vodunsi. This is typical of animistic religious ideals, as those who practice animism approach interaction with the land as a piece of Nature, not removed from it, and not acting above it.

Animism serves to contrast contemporary, mainstream religions that do not direct their immediate attention into a foundational religious responsibility directed toward environmental reciprocity where humans work with Nature in a symbiotic manner. As noted above, animists tend to afford attention to all entities, regardless of sentience. This is a manner in which appreciation for the whole of the gift can be expressed equally with reverence. Specifically, the significance to Vodunsi of duty-

¹¹³ Lloyd Steffen, "In Defense of Dominion," *Environmental Ethics* 14, no. 1 (1992): 78.

driven, active stewardship within everyday life can be neither deemphasized nor analyzed from an Occidental standard.

Referring to animism, Pamela Smith proposes a theory of the dangers that can arise through the failure to address the cohesive properties of the natural environment. In her work *What Are They Saying About Environmental Ethics*, Smith notes, “Human arrogance or ignorance of the withiness of things can prove deadly.”¹¹⁴ “Withiness” is used here to represent the intricacies of Nature existing between all entities in uniform functionality. Smith’s argument of the “withiness” of society, as well as the intricacies of the environment, has existed for millennia. Her statements draw upon ancient ideas espoused by previous scholars such as the early Greek philosopher Zeno:

All inhabitants of this world of ours should not live differentiated by their respective rules of justice into separate cities and communities, but that we should consider all men to be of one community and one polity, and that we should have a common life and an order common to us all, even as a herd that feeds together and shares the pasture of a common field.¹¹⁵

Yet, the views this Western philosopher espouses have been replaced over time by more exploitative and narrow ideologies, intent upon ends differing from one that “shares the pasture of a common field.” These ideas of separating and delineating the environment are typically associated with notions of private property versus common lands. Jim Cheney addresses this change in perception from an ethical perspective when he notes,

¹¹⁴ Pamela Smith, *What Are They Saying About Environmental Ethics?* (New York: Paulist Press, 1997), 72.

¹¹⁵ Clarence Glacken, *Traces on the Rhodian Shore* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 23.

It is the contextual nature of ethical decisions, the fact that they occur in the context of web-like relations of care and responsibility – together with the fact that we cannot care effectively in *all* cases – that makes for differential moral regard. It is *not* (or at least not fundamentally) a difference in value, worth, or rights of the objects of our moral concern that calls for differential moral regard.¹¹⁶

Cheney continues in this vein to state, “The idea that all living things are morally considerable is pernicious when conjoined with the extensionist and atomist view that some are morally more significant than others.”¹¹⁷ I contend here that Vodunsi views morally consider all of Nature; however, not all of nature is morally considered. The focus of Vodunsi stewardship is immediate. They do not, from my research experiences, pray for the welfare of a river in Colombia or a tree in Oregon. Vodunsi ethics are more locally focused, and therefore more locally applied.

This “withiness,” or complementarity suggested above by Smith and others, is readily recognizable within Vodun specifically and animism more generally because of the recognition of a reciprocal relationship existing between animistic practitioners and the natural environment, both living and non-living. By recognizing a relationship as existing between humans and the environment, Vodunsi are providing an example of mutual reciprocity between humans and nature, living and non-living. This is most recognizable in the manner in which Vodunsi interact with trees in the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé*. Because they believe that the trees represent the souls of their ancestors, they approach the care for these trees with the concern that they would approach an elder. Owing to the fact that it

¹¹⁶ Jim Cheney, "Eco-Feminism and Deep Ecology," *Environmental Ethics* 9 (1987): 138.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 144.

is not recognized which trees harbor the souls of which ancestors, all trees within the forest tend to be cared for equally, with those whose reverence has been well-established receiving more attention than others. By promoting specific trees over others, however, Vodunsi are inadvertently exercising a hierarchy within their own religious system, revering specific entities over others, be they living or not.

Specifically, when addressing the worship of non-living entities, Edward Clodd notes, "Non-living things are worshipped or feared not in any symbolic sense...but as the supposed home of a spirit, or as in some sense a vehicle of power."¹¹⁸ Today the term "animism" has been modified to represent a broad range of beliefs including the belief in spiritual beings usually associated with traditional religions.¹¹⁹ This ideal can be perceived in contemporary Vodun through recognition of value being conveyed upon inanimate, insentient objects such as the locations of the *Temple des Pythons* or the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé*. A specific Vodun perspective upon reverence can be found in the writings of Melville Herskovits. He notes that for Vodunsi, "Trees have souls which materialize not as men, but as *Aziza*, ape-like creatures who give magic to man."¹²⁰

I gathered information through extensive interview processes conducted throughout Ouidah expressing that true believers of Vodun never die but are merely transformed into saplings in the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé* where they can continue to

¹¹⁸ Edward Clodd, *Animism the Seed of Religion* (London: Archibald Constable & Co. LTD, 1905), 78.

¹¹⁹ Chidester, "Animism," 78.

¹²⁰ Herskovits, "An Outline of Dahomean Religious Belief," 15.

aid future generations. Of this phenomenon, Herskovits relates specifically of the *Loko* tree [*Nago Iroko*], which is sacred to the Vodunsi, "Since these trees [*Loko* trees] are thought to never be planted by human hands, this is, therefore, regarded as the deed of a god."¹²¹

It should be noted that my research indicated that according to all Vodunsi adherents, ancestors never die, but are rather transformed into *Loko* tree saplings. This recognition of the transformative process from human to another element of nature can be understood as a Vodunsi understanding of the interrelationship existing between humans and various elements of nature that serve to collectively form Nature. It is therefore necessary to recognize that if human hands never plant *Loko* trees in the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé* then the continued presence of *Loko* saplings in the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé* is directly related to the Creator's continuous presence. This recognition of the continued presence of the Creator by Vodunsi has, therefore, a continued effect upon the Vodunsi and their actions toward the natural environment. By recognizing that the Creator plants *Loko* saplings, Vodunsi are directly and continuously reminded of the need to care for these gifts provided by the Creator. The action of a deity in assisting in the transformation of humans into trees is somewhat esoteric; therefore, one must address how religion plays a more tangible role in the lives of its adherents.

Analyzing the Influence of Religion upon Society

Religious practitioners have historically articulated legal codes by equating morality and law. Émile Durkheim, a preeminent sociology scholar, noted that

¹²¹ Ibid., 36.

religion, owing to its association with the spiritual, affords society a moral education. Through Durkheim's argument, it can be understood that society holistically gains from the benefits of religious community. These gains serve to display morals that may not be in direct relation to all community members within larger societies, yet tend to be perceived as valid by the majority of citizens. "Religion contains in itself," notes Durkheim, "... all the elements...which have given rise to the various manifestations of collective life."¹²² Durkheim continues, "From ritual practice were born laws and morals. One cannot understand our perceptions of the world, ... of life, if one does not know the religious beliefs which are their primordial forces."¹²³ Societies are a reflection of the religions contained within them; they tend to reflect the basic morality of their communities, and because Benin has formally recognized Vodun as a national religion, along with Christianity, the ideologies of Vodun have directly affected the country at large.

The *Chef-Suprême* of Vodun expressed that Vodun has a committee that meets with government officials on a regular basis so as to ensure that Vodunsi values receive public attention and recognition.¹²⁴ The realities of Vodun's influence upon greater governmental policies in Benin directly support Durkheim's theory of socio-sacral unity. Furthermore, the efficacy of this committee's ability to influence government directive is reflected in the adoption of 10 January (a Vodun holy day) as a national holiday celebrated by the secular and the sacred alike throughout

¹²² Émile Durkheim, "Sociology of Religion," *L'Année sociologique* 2 (1899), ii.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Dagbo Hounon, in discussion with author, June 2009.

Benin. I find this organized approach to be very similar to the actions of United States lobbyists, although lobbyists' motives are typically economically and not spiritually driven.

It is true that some Beninese practice other religions. The sway and power, however, held by Vodunsi have assured that Beninese law is in accord with the majority of Vodun doctrine. By officially recognizing Vodun, Benin's leaders have created a society in which individual morality conforms to the rules and regulations of Vodun religious institution, while concurrently upholding ethical tenets of the 21st century. In support of this claim, the recognition of 10 January by the government was a direct result of the Vodun community's power within Benin. The government has influenced Vodun to a certain degree, and, correspondingly, Vodun has pressed forth its agenda within the government.

Society develops laws by which its citizens are expected to abide; yet, those outside of the community constantly assess these laws. Andrew Brennan argues for the role that traditional societies play in a global community when he states, "Traditional cultural values are potent tools for the resistance of global change."¹²⁵ This resistance, while valued by most traditional peoples, is often challenged by more socially progressive Occidental theologies. Despite this contestation, Vodunsi have managed to stave off some outside influence to their religion. In assimilative fashion, as I have noted above, Vodunsi have adopted many Roman Catholic customs and adapted them to the needs of their religion. These actions were undertaken to

¹²⁵ Andrew Brennan, "Globalization, Environmental Policy, and Ethics of Place," *Ethics, Place and Environment* 9, no. 2 (2006): 136.

enable Vodunsi to continue practicing Vodun during colonization without fear of persecution and oppression. Additionally, the role of globalization has provided an influx of ideals that may exist in contrast to Vodunsi values. While, as I have previously noted, many traditional values continue to be held by the Vodunsi community, there are noticeable changes that have occurred within Ouidah that are due to the influence of globalization.

The most recognizable impact can be seen in the manner in which the Vodunsi now promote tourism of their *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé* as an economic benefit to be explored and sometimes exploited for monetary ends. I would suggest that by promoting the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé* as a tourist destination, far more people are seeking out this area only to satisfy their curiosity, and not to pay reverence to this traditional religion or one of its sacred sites. The impact of increased tourism, while serving to monetarily benefit the Vodun community, does display a negative impact that can be witnessed by the effects of increased tourism on the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé*. Principle among these effects is the disintegration of the physical integrity of the area due to increased traffic within the Forest.

An example of Vodunsi synergy of Catholic customs can be best expressed through an interview I conducted with a local Roman Catholic priest of Ouidah. He stated that there were “no individuals” who practice both Catholicism and Vodun.¹²⁶ Further conversations with the priest, however, contradicted his former statement.

¹²⁶ Père André, in discussion with author, July 2009.

He stated that those who practice both of these religions do so only out of “fear.”¹²⁷ He continued to explain his statement, suggesting that when one falls on hard times, or becomes ill, the downtrodden attempt to find solace in these two separate religions by praying to the Catholic God, as well as the Vodun gods. An appealing irony is present in this statement, and that can be found within the physical geography of Ouidah. The Catholic Basilica in Ouidah, *Basilique Immaculée Conception*, rests on land donated to the Catholic Church by a Vodunsi, and sits directly across the road from a Vodun holy site, the *Temple des Pythons* (Figures 9 & 10, Appendix II). It is often difficult to physically distinguish between adherents of the two faiths in public spaces, with the only exception being at times when mass is being held at the Basilica and Catholics arrive in their most distinguished Western garb.

Other occurrences of religious simultaneity were easily found within Ouidah. While touring the Old Portuguese Fort, where the first Catholic Church in Benin was erected in 1856, *L'Église Jean-Baptiste*, my guide and local historian informed me that the Catholic population of Ouidah was so large because one was able to easily practice Catholicism in public without ridicule.¹²⁸ He continued to explain that while Catholic iconography such as statues of the Virgin Mary and other saints were typically present on the tops of household tables, all Vodun icons were just beneath the table, hidden well-enough from the scrutiny of the overzealous, but easily

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Serge Rustico, in discussion with author, June 2009.

acquired for presentation and practice with the appropriate parties.¹²⁹

This statement, and my witnessing of its validity throughout my time in Ouidah, forces me to question the true social acceptance of Vodun, despite its adoption by the national government. But what influence has Vodun had upon society at large, even if it may not be practiced as openly as purported? The response to his question can be as simple as the formal recognition by the government of Vodun's importance to the community, or it can be answered by detailing some of the complexities associated between the relationship between humans and nature that have been implemented on a scale existing outside the realm of Vodun that can still be found within the community in Ouidah on a secular level. One example of this is the solid waste program that has been established throughout Ouidah, which I will address later, but which was implemented at the beginning of this millennium, long after similar processes were undertaken to preserve the integrity of the *Forêt Sacré de Kpassé*. These processes are directly related to Vodunsi concept of stewardship. Stewardship, and its attendant care for the environment, will be the focus of the ensuing section.

Care Ethic

Care for the created is often misunderstood as non-obligatory; however, as a polytheistic religious tenet, stewardship, and its accompanying care ethic, presents itself to Vodunsi as a moral responsibility associated with care being extended to all entities despite sentience. The Vodunsi concept of care is directly related to the manner in which stewardship is undertaken. Vodunsi view the Earth as a gift from

¹²⁹ Ibid.

Mawu; as such, care for this gift is necessitated so as to display one's appreciation for the gift as well as to exhibit one's identity as a Vodunsi.

Wendell Berry states of the preservation of Nature, "[Nature] can be preserved only by true religion, by the *practice* of a proper love and respect."¹³⁰ Merely serving as an overseer, a spectator or observer does not begin to fulfill the complete role of a steward, one who is responsible for caring for an entity. "Practice" as Berry notes, can be actively pursued, as is exemplified by Vodunsi actions toward the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé*, although, as my data will indicate, this practice is less apparent outside of the confines of the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé*.

As Lynn White has noted in his now infamous 1967 article describing the fundamental reasons associated with environmental degradation, "Despite Darwin, we are *not* in our hearts, part of the natural process. We are superior to nature, contemptuous of it, willing to use it for our slightest whim."¹³¹ Pamela Smith addresses this line of thought, noting that depicting nature as the "other" only serves to permit humans to act with a sense of "dominion" toward it.¹³² William French remarks in his essay *Ecology*, "As the stress on creation waned, the traditional ethic of dominion with its notion of stewardship duties tended to give way to an ethic justifying an unrestrained domination of nature."¹³³ French states

¹³⁰ Berry, *What Are People For?*, 96.

¹³¹ Lynn White, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis," *Science* 155, no. 3767 (1967): 1206.

¹³² Smith, *What Are They Saying About Environmental Ethics?*, 72.

¹³³ W. French, "Ecology," in *The Blackwell Companion to Religious Ethics*, ed. W. Schwieker (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 470.

that this results from a lack of appreciation for a “sense of nature’s holiness.”¹³⁴ I have already previously refuted this concept of dominion as being expressed by Vodunsi interaction with the natural environment. I would suggest here that the Vodunsi do recognize “nature’s holiness,” as French stated, and that Vodunsi act toward the natural environment in a manner befitting such beliefs.

One could argue that both White and French approach the concept of stewardship far too subjectively, and that while Smith’s understanding more accurately parallels Vodunsi beliefs and actions, it also fails to provide an adequate foundation appropriately describing Vodunsi stewardship. The concept of dominion has, as John Hart notes, provided attitudes wherein “people are believed to have a sovereign right over Earth.”¹³⁵ However, if we analyze these above statements in accordance with Vodun religious tenets and not from a dominion oriented perspective, then these statements lend support for the practices of many animistic religious adherents, Vodunsi included, through the relationship that they encourage to exist between humans and the environment.

Scholars have indicated several manners in which environmental destruction can be avoided on a global scale. Aldo Leopold’s land ethic has been a guidepost for many contemporary, global environmental ethicists. His land ethic posits, “A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise.”¹³⁶ J. Baird Callicott, a scholar of

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Hart, *Sacramental Commons: Christian Ecological Ethics*, 70.

¹³⁶ Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac: And Sketches Here and There* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1949), 224.

Leopold, notes in his book *Earth's Insights* that an ethic revolves around the precepts of “mutual forbearance, justice, compassion, and so on.”¹³⁷ I assert that stewardship directly relates to religious ethics, whereby one’s adopted ethics are a predictor of behavior. Therefore, one can assert that the manner in which Vodunsi tend to interact with the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé* is representative of the collective expression of a Vodunsi environmental ethic.

Environmental ethics provide a tangible likelihood of behavior toward the natural world. By understanding behavioral patterns, one is able to develop a succinct prediction for presence or absence of virtuous action associated with the environment. Therefore, I assert that Vodunsi ethics toward the natural environment align themselves with a preservation ethic that ensures the enjoyment of the gift of the Earth for future Vodunsi. Callicott continues to emphasize the importance of establishing ethics and values that serve to influence human action. Actions can then be judged by societal members to address how well they meet socially and religiously accepted dogma. “Ideals do measurably influence behavior,” writes Callicott.¹³⁸ He continues on, stating:

We are just as unlikely ever to attain a complete and perfect harmony with nature as we are to realize a utopian society, but the existence of an environmental ethic – partly encoded in laws, partly in manner of ethical sensibility and conscience – may draw human behavior in the direction of that goal.¹³⁹

¹³⁷ J. Baird Callicott, *Earth's Insights* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 3.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

I am not here suggesting that Vodunsi environmental ethics are a panacea suggesting a better manner in which to apply environmental ethics. Based upon my research, I was able to witness that the Vodunsi express a type of environmental ethic that does not exist in the majority of non-animistic religions. This different ethic attempts to interact with Nature in a mutual fashion that expresses an understanding of humans as members of Nature, not as its rulers. The practice of this ethic, as it is expressed in the context of the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé*, diminishes the overall negative impact that humans can have upon the environment. This is easily recognizable, as the presence of *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé* since 1661 suggests. This ethic entails a conscious effort to reverse contemporary directives of human-environment interaction founded upon ideas of domination and subservience of the natural environment and instead willfully chooses to proceed in a more conscientious manner.

While there has been a decrease in the original size of the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé*, this has resulted from outside pressures associated with population growth and the influx of outside religions. The government's construction of the east-west highway was responsible for some of the forest being removed, while citizens who practice a faith other than Vodun are not willing to recognize the sanctity of the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé* as influential enough in their own lives to prohibit the exploitation of its timber for general household needs. Vodunsi ethics should be recognized as an exercise in traditional behavior that has been existence within their religious community for many years, while it can be usurped by more immediate needs such as feeding one's family, the foundation of Vodunsi ethics

provide a prime example as to how a sacred site can be preserved for nearly four centuries.

Behavior is influenced by attitudes, and attitudes and beliefs are typically developed through personal and social experiences. Religious laws, as Durkheim suggested above, lead to social laws, and all social laws exist under the expectation that religious followers who assisted in the manifestation of these social laws will adhere to these defined laws. They are meant to develop a benchmark, a guide by which individuals and societies can judge the efficacy of one's adherence and consequent piety. Adherence to these religious guidelines typically requires respect for other people; however, in the case of Vodun, it requires the consideration of all entities.

The role of stewardship in religion has been adopted by many faiths. Peter Baaken notes of stewardship, "[Stewardship] has been increasingly used in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam as a basis for a religious environmental ethic."¹⁴⁰ Stewardship, in this fashion, can be perceived as a fundamental concept by which religious adherents display their religiosity through action tending toward environmental preservation while consciously avoiding environmental degradation.

Religious canon emphasizing respect for the environment is highly visible in Vodunsi culture. Pamela Smith echoes the above work of Leopold by remarking, "every human is obliged to behave in a genuinely human fashion, to do good and

¹⁴⁰ Baaken, "Stewardship," 1598.

avoid evil.”¹⁴¹ Therefore, I assert that Vodunsi stewardship presents a prime opportunity to actively pursue religious responsibility toward the Vodun community, while developing habits that benefit the whole of Ouidah’s society.

Control or direction toward a potential outcome can be achieved only by way of active participation. One’s absence of action does not preclude negative consequences. Additionally, I assert that the act of non-action, as it pertains to stewardship, possesses equal ramification and responsibility, while forfeiting any organized, participatory aim. This can be recognized through one’s inaction toward the preservation of the natural environment that directly lends itself to environmental destruction. One must ask, “Is it better to actively pursue an end, retaining direct influence over possible outcome, than it is to blithely submit to indeterminate ends?” By actively participating in the evaluation of socio-environmental issues Vodunsi are able to practice effective stewardship toward the Earth, and the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé* more specifically.

Vodun adherents tend to behave in a manner in which they work with their immediate environment in a beneficial and reciprocal fashion. This is most recognizable in Vodunsi interactions with the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé*. Vodunsi are thus not reliant upon a transcendental salvation to repair or restore a harmed gift of Nature. Allen Thompson supports this line of thinking when he states in the journal *Ethics, Place, and the Environment*, “Failing to change the status quo just is harming to nature... We cannot allow people to bear less responsibility from simply doing

¹⁴¹Smith, *What Are They Saying About Environmental Ethics?*, 68.

nothing.”¹⁴² Accepting that the act of inaction does not excuse one from active participation in environmental degradation is a prime step in recognizing the role of stewardship within religion. Again, Allen Thompson, referring again to land care, states, “One’s moral responsibility is to satisfy duty...the most important duty.”¹⁴³ Thompson’s reference to stewardship as “the most important duty” is indicative of the mentality inherent in traditional Vodunsi religious values and how they are conveyed from one generation to the next.

Active examples set forth by elders will typically find resonance in the younger members of the community, but passive examples are far less easy to understand and emulate. Melville Herskovits notes when speaking of a Dahomean’s death and the relationship to generational epistemology, “His descendents will, in their turn, continue on earth the practices he has observed during his life.”¹⁴⁴ It is this continuity and recognition of the value of stewardship that provides Vodunsi with the framework to care for the environment using traditional methods, generation after generation, in an active, participatory fashion.

Establishing stewardship as the single most important environmental ethic emphasizes the significance active land care holds to all living and non-living members of a global community. Michel Dion’s environmental philosophy states that, “Environmental ethics are ethics applied to the unfolding of intrinsic value in

¹⁴² Allen Thompson, "Environmentalism, Moral Responsibility, and the Doctrine of Doing and Allowing," *Ethics, Place and Environment* 9, no. 3 (2006): 270.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 275.

¹⁴⁴ Herskovits, "An Outline of Dahomean Religious Belief," 74.

natural beings.”¹⁴⁵ With this knowledge one can then establish a greater understanding of the “withiness” and web-like intricacies within an environment to which Smith previously referred. Dion raises concern, however, that not all intrinsic values are equal. Instead, he argues, value is currently arrived at “through human eyes.”¹⁴⁶ Dion argues that, “The universe is not going on in order to make it possible for human beings to grow. There is no anthropocentric aim in the universe. We should never consciously try to measure and assess the universe through our human needs and interests.”¹⁴⁷ This is important because, as I have previously expressed, Vodunsi do not instill intrinsic value upon aspects of Nature so as to gain a desired ends. They view all Nature as possessing indeterminate yet equal value based upon its potentiality; however, this is not true with Vodunsi perceptions of sacralization, particularly as it pertains to the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé*, as this area has garnered far more significance in the lives of Vodunsi than have other regions around Ouidah. I do not know how Vodunsi navigate this limitation that they have inadvertently imposed upon themselves by sacralizing one area over another.

Dion proposes an alternate method of understanding interaction that is far more succinct with Vodunsi beliefs. He avers, “Environmental ethics should try to create an anthropological/paradigmatic change in *Homo sapiens*, that is, a shift of

¹⁴⁵ Michel Dion, “The Moral Status of Non-Human Beings and Their Ecosystems,” *Ethics, Place and Environment* 3, no. 2 (2000): 221.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 223.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 227.

self-consciousness from the 'owner of the land' to 'a component of the land'."¹⁴⁸

Vodunsi self-recognition as an attribute of Nature is quite pertinent to this line of thinking. To undertake such a shift in environmental consciousness would enable a more effective and reciprocating relationship to exist between humans and nature across religious boundaries while understanding that all beings effectually alter their environment.

Vodunsi heed Dion's theory by recognizing their role in the environment as one piece of a much larger community, no one piece more important than another; as such, Vodun ideology provides the possibility of spiritual value to all entities. Vodunsi actions toward the *Forêt Sacré de Kpassé* that I observed while in Ouidah tended to display a non-exploitative ethic that is concentrated upon interaction with the land and not imposing human-oriented ends upon the land. These actions disable anthropocentric tendencies while concomitantly promoting a holistic mentality, viewing humans as components of Nature, as Dion averred above. The Vodun are but one example of a religious group displaying a holistic understanding of the human-nature mosaic, which distances itself from more prominent ideals of anthropocentrism recognized in other religions that practice a dominion-oriented approach to human-nature relations. Because traditional religions have been practiced in Africa for many centuries, focus upon care for the land has tended to be an accepted and readily practiced concept that is not specifically differentiated from the religions themselves but rather intertwined in an understanding of the relationship existing between humans and the gift of nature.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

Anthropocentrism has led some, such as Eric Katz, to suggest that, “There is no intrinsic value, instead things are endowed with value” anthropocentrically.¹⁴⁹ Katz continues to suggest, “There is no divine hierarchy in the universe. Every species has, to some degree, an intrinsic value,” and, “All beings follow from the same absolute.”¹⁵⁰ Vodunsi’s desire to dispel of the notion of hierarchy, accompanied by an understanding of the intricacies of Nature, display an ethic that is more accepting of the role that humans play in Nature, as well as the role that Nature can exhibit toward humans. This absolute does not observably pursue negative effects save for conscious human actions. Dion openly contradicts Katz’s pragmatic rationale saying, “Reason has been over-emphasized, so that it has become dictatorial and has contributed to the erasure of our animal consciousness.”¹⁵¹ It is precisely this “erasure of animal consciousness” which promotes anthropocentrism, but for the Vodunsi, the retention of this ideology encapsulated in the “animal consciousness” serves to enable a unique and holistic dogma that is both appreciated and promoted. In recognizing oneself as an animal and not as a human, removed from the workings of the natural environment, Vodunsi are espousing an existence that removes the dualism that can be so detrimental within human-nature relations. Furthermore, I would propose that this is not in fact a disconnect between the theories of Katz and Dion but rather a focus

¹⁴⁹ Smith, *What Are They Saying About Environmental Ethics?*, 73.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ Dion, "The Moral Status of Non-Human Beings and Their Ecosystems," 227.

upon the hierarchy previously discussed that can emanate from notions associated with stewardship and its inherent hierarchy.

Lloyd Steffen addresses the dangers of adopting the term “stewardship” in its current environmental use, “When translated into environmental terms, the stewardship concept entails a view of Earth as property and upholds the value of anthropocentrism; the steward serves the manager by mastering or managing the household.”¹⁵² This view of stewardship is not the view held by Vodunsi. They do not perceive their interactions with the environment, as it specifically pertains to the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé*, as emanating from perspectives of property and mastering but rather from concepts of community, mutuality, and reciprocity. While outside influencing factors, such as population growth and globalization, have negatively influenced the natural environment around Ouidah, the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé* has not been affected to the same degree, as have other parts of the community. There has been some degradation that has occurred within the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé*, as described above; however, the majority of the impacts have been mitigated so as to retain the integrity of this sacred locale.

Preservation, however, does not solely include untrammelled lands but also refers to the necessity of understanding the influence that humans have upon a constructed environment. Roger King, a renowned environmental ethicist, has noted that, “An environmentally responsible culture should be one in which citizens take responsibility for the domesticated environments in which they live, as well as

¹⁵² Steffen, "In Defense of Dominion," 78.

for their effects on wild nature.”¹⁵³ King continues, at length, to express that our knowledge and outlook upon the world at-large affects the manner in which we, as humans, interact with the natural world through a social contract,

The human-nature dualism has supported a dominating stance towards the natural world, but it has also served, more recently, as a tactic for reining in human exploitation of nature...However, the dualism also emphasizes the ‘otherness’ of nature – its alien character – and thus robs humans of the chance of being at home in nature. If this distinction is not useful for all our needs, this too is a fact about our social condition.¹⁵⁴

As King notes above, the ability to recognize Nature as an influencer on the human environment indicates an understanding that our knowledge of the natural world extends beyond humans’ direct influence upon it. This recognition, which is accepted by Vodunsi with regards to the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé*, in fact dispels human-nature dualism.

An alteration in our perception of Nature, so as to more readily act on behalf of the natural world as a whole and not immediately gratify our own human interests, is needed. King proceeds to note, “The overcoming of the human-nature dualism requires that environmental ethics address, not only the nonhuman world, but also what it means to be human in the world.”¹⁵⁵ This can most easily be accomplished through the adoption of a care ethic centered upon the ideology previously proposed by Aldo Leopold, namely, “A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong

¹⁵³ Roger J. H. King, "Environmental Ethics and the Built Environment," *Environmental Ethics* 22, no. 1 (2000): 115.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 125.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 126.

when it tends otherwise.”¹⁵⁶ This ideology proposes a simple yet effective manner by which one’s actions can be deemed “right” or “wrong.” King addresses this care ethic when he notes of humans’ modification of the natural environment, “The built environment should grow from place and work with, rather than neglect, natural forces in the community.”¹⁵⁷ When King expounds upon this concept, he leads directly into a basic tenet of stewardship: preservation of the natural world for future generations, “The [human] built environment should show respect for its users, both contemporary and future.”¹⁵⁸ It is this adoption of a care ethic that is most pronounced for Vodunsi. A desire to preserve the natural environment for the benefit and enjoyment of future Vodunsi is a primary motivating factor for Vodunsi interaction with the land. This is in addition to an understanding by Vodunsi that to care for the land is to care for one’s ancestors.

Nel Noddings is a renowned scholar who addresses the concept of care surrounding intentional actions. She notes, “Caring implies a continuous search for competence. We want to do the very best for the objects of our care.”¹⁵⁹ When addressing care for the natural environment, the object of care is implicitly Nature, consisting of all elements of the environment, humans included.

Religiously motivated stewardship denotes a system of ideas founded in the concept of caring for the natural environment because it was a gift from a

¹⁵⁶ Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac: And Sketches Here and There*, 224.

¹⁵⁷ King, "Environmental Ethics and the Built Environment," 129.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 130.

¹⁵⁹ Nel Noddings, "Teaching Themes of Caring," *Education Digest* 61, no. 3 (1995): 24.

deity/deities. The reciprocity accompanying this gift is such that care for this gift indicates an element of gratitude as well as assurance that future adherents will be able to enjoy this deified offering of the natural environment. Although this care ethic has been suppressed in most major progressive societies, owing to a desire to subjugate the natural world or exercise dominion over it, adherence to this principle is exemplified in many traditional religions. Jim Cheney, the aforementioned scholar of Deep Ecology, has noted that, "Tribal communities seem to have thought of their relationship to nature not after the model of an organism, but after the model of a community or a confederation of communities."¹⁶⁰ This recognition of Nature's intricacies can occur in the absence of religion; however, due to the ethos of animistic religions, the understanding of "a confederation of communities" is implicit and highly recognizable in Vodun. While there are elements within Ouidah's community that can deter from exercising basic Vodunsi tenets evoking care for the created, these elements arise from outside factors and are typically associated with necessities such as a need for food or space. Therefore, it is necessary to address how, and when, Vodunsi apply the concept of stewardship.

Vodunsi Stewardship

Acclaimed anthropologist Melville Herskovits has noted that for the Dahomeans, "The human body, it is said, is made of earth, the proof being that when a grave is opened nothing is there save earth and bones."¹⁶¹ By viewing oneself as a piece of Nature, a mere component of all the entities that comprise Nature, Vodunsi

¹⁶⁰ Cheney, "Eco-Feminism and Deep Ecology," 126.

¹⁶¹ Herskovits, "An Outline of Dahomean Religious Belief," 50.

view themselves as pieces of the sacra-environmental mosaic. To hold dominion over the earth would also mean that, as components of the Earth, dominion could be held over them. Given the history of Dahomey and its historical association with the Slave Coast discussed previously, it is evident why dominion is an unwelcoming concept. Instead, Vodunsi choose to focus upon the responsibilities included within the context of *Mawu's* gift of the Earth and how this gift should best be preserved for future generations of Vodunsi.

Stewardship for the Vodunsi is not separate from religious observation; instead, it is included in the manner in which they revere their surroundings and express their religiousness. To Vodunsi, non-living, as well as living objects possess the possibility of a soul. The act of designating a space as inferior would inherently convey a belief that one space is intrinsically less valuable than another. There are sites within Vodun that possess significant spiritual status, the greatest of which are the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé*, and the beach outside of Ouidah (Figures 11 & 12, Appendix II); however, there are, as is necessary, other areas designated for solid and human waste. This paradox is not easily understood. It is an example of how sacralization within the Vodun community must also lend itself to designation of specific places as less sacred for societal needs. I do not know how they navigate this limitation in determining which areas are suitable for reverence and which must be attributed a lesser value in order to satisfy communal needs. I instead choose to focus here upon the attention of Vodunsi stewardship toward the revered site of the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé*.

To comprehend the relevance of the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé* to Vodunsi, it is helpful to understand that Vodunsi will not enter into the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé* outside of Ouidah to perform spiritual rites without specific consent first being given by either the King of Ouidah, *Kpassenon*, or the *Chef-Suprême*. To do so could be perceived as a blatant act of sacrilege, and while exploitation of the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé* does occur by Vodunsi, although now much less frequently, my data suggests that it is due to individuals merely attempting to survive in Ouidah by any means necessary. This desire for survival does, occasionally, force one to take from the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé*; however, under no guise does the Vodunsi community promote or accept the harvesting of fodder or pursuit of game in the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé*. Nevertheless, as I noted above, this does occur, typically out of a necessity to feed one's family.

Nouréini Tidjani-Serpos, a Beninese scholar and UNESCO Deputy Director-General, describes this as a Vodunsi policy that promotes the environment, "The cult of Vodun already has a policy to safeguard and protect the environment."¹⁶² While Vodunsi promotion of the environment is referenced by Tidjani-Serpos, there are current issues of overpopulation and urban sprawl related to the region surrounding the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé* that have resulted in its size diminishing significantly over the past three decades (I will address this in the following chapter). Nevertheless, by reserving a specific place within their community, Vodunsi have signaled the sanctity of that locale. Owing to its socio-sacral significance, non-Vodunsi may only enter the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé* by admission

¹⁶² Tidjani-Serpos, *Ouidah: La Route De L'esclave*.

through remittance, or with the Kings' permission, as I was granted. This act enables the community to then receive funds for the preservation of a communal sacred site. This application of reverence is consistent with Durkheim's theory of socio-religious influence, whereby areas are afforded the respect and reverence due them by all members of society, including temporary visitors. The beach, because of its global historical significance, can be visited with liberty as a UNICEF site. Every 10 January, Vodunsi arrive from locally and abroad for a Vodun celebration at this beach site. Ceremonies are performed, and Vodunsi participate in ritual festivities of purification and affirmation of their faith. Additionally, as my interview data indicated, Ouidah's various religions other than Vodun are tolerant of the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé*, just as they desire their sacred venues to be tolerated by Vodunsi.

The social acceptance of Vodun in Ouidah is understandable via the social toleration of Vodun by those who practice other religions within Ouidah. Society, in Ouidah, has evolved from a belief in only Vodun, to an acceptance of other religions. These other religions, for their part, are presently tolerant of Vodun, although, as was noted in a previous chapter, this was not historically the case. The influence and ethos of Catholicism was not, at first, tolerant of Vodun, instead viewing it as a pagan religion that should be replaced with a, in Catholic practitioner's opinions, more forthright and true religion.

The Vodunsi ideology of stewardship may appear overly simplistic to outside viewers. When viewed, however, as existing in combination with the rigors of religious belief, the existing relationships and subsequent behaviors toward the recognition of this relationship with the environment are formidable. The material

“forbearance” previously alluded to by Callicott describes the social construction theories developed by Durkheim, which can be seen in practice by Vodun’s influence upon society at large. I recognized this relationship as expressing a form of reciprocity wherein Vodunsi recognize both what the Earth provides for their needs as well as what humans are able to provide to help sustain and preserve the Earth. The gift of the Earth, in Vodunsi views, is to be cared for out of appreciation and admiration for all that it provides. Humans are included in this gift; however, as I have previously noted, they do not exist in a realm above any other aspect of the Earth, instead they represent an equal component of Nature, as do trees, rocks, and rivers.

Within the constructs of Callicott’s “forbearance” reside implications upon society at large. The specific relevance of these socio-religious concepts can be best understood in the Vodunsi belief that the inability of one Vodunsi to act in accordance with sacred tenets will invariably lead to negative, environmentally related reactions by the gods and consequent susceptibility of the entire Vodun community. This is not to express, however, that Vodunsi stewardship is undertaken so as to avoid negative effects; rather, the possible negative effects serve as an auxiliary motivator for actions of stewardship. The concept of individual community members’ actions affecting the community at large can be found throughout many traditional cultures, specifically many Native American tribes of North America adhere to this principle of individual action affecting entire communities’ well being. Hence, the moral code of one shall be in direct accordance with that of the many: social structures shall be based upon religious ideals. The

human geographer Clarence Glacken claims, "The unity of the microcosm, the human body with all its diversity, may well have inspired the idea of an all-embracing unity in the macrocosm."¹⁶³ It is this "macrocosm" that Vodunsi value, as any entity within the "macrocosm" may possess a soul. Therefore, it should be accepted that by valuing the whole, care for the parts is a presumed necessity.

Traditional religious practitioners, such as the Vodunsi, display a unity between humanity and the natural world. This results from the manner in which traditional religious practitioners such as the Vodunsi perceive Nature. Among the Vodunsi, there is a communal understanding of the relationships extant between religion and Nature; however, this highly prescient thinking of unity through community tends to escape the forward thinking of mainstream theologies. "The Dahomean...feels in no way oppressed either by the sense of his duties toward the supernatural, or by the terror of its forces. The individual, save for a few skeptics, is deeply religious," notes Herskovits.¹⁶⁴ Responsibility and reverence are the *raison d'être* behind Vodunsi action. Moral obligation toward active, appropriate stewardship is but one aspect of Vodunsi religious expression. This has been illustrated by the continued preservation of the Vodun Sacred Forest, *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé*, which will be addressed later. And while there are actions undertaken by the Vodunsi that do harm the natural environment, these appear, from my research, to only occur out of necessity.

¹⁶³ Glacken, *Traces on the Rhodian Shore*, 17.

¹⁶⁴ Herskovits, "An Outline of Dahomean Religious Belief," 73.

The most common occurrence of environmental degradation by Vodunsi could be seen in the removal of forested land to plant crops in order to feed one's family; however, as I have noted, this is an extremely rare occurrence as it pertains to the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé*. Nonetheless, its sheer occurrence does provide a prime example as to the ethics of Vodun being usurped through a necessity to survive in a changing, global environment.

The definitions of "ethics," as developed by J. Baird Callicott and Aldo Leopold, directly correlate with the practices and principles of Vodunsi, in spite of possible cultural differences that may exist between Western theorists and African religious practitioners. Vodunsi actions support Callicott's theories through systems of communal deference, social compatibility, and religious adherence, specifically when addressing the restrictions that have been placed upon the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé*. Leopold's theories can be witnessed in practice through Vodunsi's aversion to environmental degradation and active, duty-driven land care, whereby a natural community, the gift of Nature, is preserved for future adherents. This can be best understood through the Vodunsi's preservation of the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé* since its 1661 inception.

Comprehending Vodunsi care for the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé* is best understood as care for the parts totaling the whole, the whole being Nature, inclusive of all its elements, including humans. It is true that Vodunsi believe in one diviner, *Mawu*. It is also true, however, that they believe that in the absence of the orders of lesser deities, *Mawu's* efforts would have been futile. Melville Herskovits notes, "For the Dahomean does not conceive of a single deity as performing all the

functions of each of the elements. He rather envisages a group of deities, with each group forming a pantheon.”¹⁶⁵ Herskovits’ notes on Vodunsi religious ideology echo the generalized statement previously expressed by Glacken referencing the organization of the macrocosm through the microcosm, and further serve to solidify the importance of Nature’s intricate balance to Vodunsi.

There are, as I previously noted, forty-one separate deities extant within Vodun. Figure 13 (Appendix II) depicts one of these gods, the male god of lightning, *Hevioso*, in statue form in the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé*. These deities are divided into hierarchies and separate families or cults. Vodunsi social contracts were developed so that all members of the religious society would adhere to the foundational religious tenets of Vodun, regardless of cult affiliation. These social contracts have led to the establishment of a system of veneration whereby Vodunsi assist in the amelioration of oneself and society at large simultaneously.

Furthermore, ethics, as has been expressed by both Callicott and Durkheim, tend to lead toward the preservation, and not just amelioration, of society. Vodunsi actions become thus recognized as ethics as they tend to preserve Vodunsi society. This includes the preservation of their sacred sites such as the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé*. This preservation does not indicate stasis but rather a unique, traditional form of progress or advancement within society. This advancement cannot be understood in the development or progressive use of the term advancement; instead, one must understand it to be the advancement of a people through conscious action. The actions of Vodunsi directly affect conservation and

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 9.

preservation of their natural environment on an immediate and local scale. Not permitting natural resources to be exploited for immediate economic gain is but one example.

This manner of thinking in Vodun society is a depiction of how resources can be held as intrinsically valued. This is separate from the understanding that Nature possesses instrumental value. Andrew Brennan notes of intrinsic value, “The self comes to be extended to embrace the things around it; not all my parts are under my skin. But if I am valuable, then so to is the system within which I exist, for I am – in some mysterious way – one with it.”¹⁶⁶ One can see, via Brennan’s quote and my previous descriptions of Vodunsi, that this is exactly the manner in which Vodunsi view themselves and their relationship to Nature. There is recognition of the connection of oneself as existing outside of the skin. By understanding this aspect of humans, Vodunsi are able to recognize an extant relationship between themselves and Nature, not removed from it instead existing as part of Nature’s functioning. This belief lends itself toward a Vodunsi desire to preserve the whole of the parts of Nature. Thus, a two-fold affectation results: these lands are preserved for future use by all, and the gift of the Earth will continue to receive future appreciations owing to its understood sacra-cultural importance. This occurs within Vodun society concurrently as hierarchical, intrinsic value is not applied to all entities; instead; Vodunsi perceive, in Brennan’s ideas, their skin as extending beyond that of their body.

¹⁶⁶ Andrew Brennan, *Thinking About Nature: An Investigation of Nature, Value, and Ecology* (London: Routledge, 1988), 143.

This viewing of oneself as a member of the greater community of Nature fulfills the requirements of the previous definition of animism provided above, as well as providing an exemplary account of how Vodunsi actively affect positive ends toward the preservation of the natural world. Additionally, this betterment of society ultimately serves as a recognizable form of stewardship to the Vodunsi. One of the principles I previously defined as implicit within stewardship noted the need for the preservation of the natural environment for future generations. By preserving the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé*, Vodunsi are able to express their religiousness while concurrently benefiting their community. Because the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé* represents a sacred site for the Vodunsi, I would assert that they are more prone to its protection than they are to the preservation of other areas. This is most likely owing to the fact that Vodunsi cannot attempt to preserve all lands around Ouidah, particularly those lands owned by individuals who practice other faiths; therefore, Vodunsi have consciously chosen to focus their attention upon the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé* and its preservation because of what it represents and provides for Vodunsi, namely a place of solace, reflection, and sacredness. The protection of the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé* occurs in lieu of undertaking an overwhelming task of caring for land to which Vodunsi do not have rightful access. Additionally, these other lands, those outside the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé*, may not possess the souls of their ancestors or the spirits of their *fétiches*.

Understanding the natural environment, and its intricacies, is something that can easily be overlooked; however, when I spoke with the *Kpassenon*, the King of the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé* (Figure 14, Appendix II), he expressed to me the need to care

for the environment. In particular, he said, “Water is the source of life, and the land provides trees and medicinal plants for the world to exist.”¹⁶⁷ By stating this obvious ecological fact, the *Kpassenon* was indicating that no piece of the natural mosaic should suffer at the expense of any other, as all pieces in the natural mosaic possess value toward all other parts of the mosaic, thus creating a balanced natural environment. Although the *Kpassenon* readily admitted that he was entirely unaware of other religions’ views regarding the environment, he sees himself as a “steward and caretaker,” not solely as a Vodunsi, but as a person.¹⁶⁸ The *Kpassenon* continued to explain that there are certain rituals the Vodunsi conduct so as to protect the natural environment wholly and the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé* specifically. He notes a simple yet profound concept when he states, “Without water, man cannot live.”¹⁶⁹ Through its context within the interview, I understood this not as a reference to any specific water source but rather to all water sources, all hydrological pieces of the mosaic.

According to the *Chef-Suprême*, there are four elements of Vodun divinity: “Earth, Water, Fire, and Sea.”¹⁷⁰ It is imperative that all of these elements receive equal attention so as to preserve the balance of Nature. He stated that the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé* serves as a site that, “Protects the environment as a whole, by

¹⁶⁷ Kpassenon, in discussion with author, June 2009.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

¹⁷⁰ Dagbo Hounon, in discussion with author, June 2009.

people making prayers there.”¹⁷¹ This statement is not entirely outside the realm of other, more Occidental religions, as often times within those faiths, one goes to a sacred site to appeal to divinities. These appeals, however, are often directed to locations outside of the immediate, whereas the prayers recounted within the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé* are most often said to help preserve or revere the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé* and the spirits residing therein.

So who are the stewards of the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé* in particular, and Ouidah as a whole? Who expresses care for the natural environment, and preserves it for future generations? The responses given by my interviewees to this question, “Who serves as the steward/caretaker of the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé*?” were not in agreement. First and foremost, the *Kpassenon* was the only individual to state that he in fact is an acting steward, responsible for the preservation of the environment as a whole, and the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé* specifically.¹⁷² Three other interviewees echoed his proclamation, expressing that the *Kpassenon* is the individual responsible for the perpetuation and protection of the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé*. Conversely, two different subjects expressed that it was the *Chef-Suprême* who held the responsibility of caring for Nature, while he himself stated that, “There does exist some caretakers [of the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé*],” although after requesting and being denied access to their identity, I immediately doubted the legitimacy of his statement.¹⁷³ Three other individuals, all elders, one male and two female, indicated

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

¹⁷² *Kpassenon*, in discussion with author, June 2009.

¹⁷³ Dagbo Hounon, in discussion with author, June 2009.

that there were people whose responsibilities included caring for the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé*, preventing it from undue harm, and ensuring its preservation. There is represented, however, a final, majority of interviewees who noted that the spirits of Vodun would protect the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé*. These six individuals, both older and younger, men and women, conjectured theories such as, “There are sacred spirits within the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé* that will protect it”¹⁷⁴; “The divinities, the divinities will protect it”¹⁷⁵; “The *fétiche* who represents the *Chef*, he will protect it”¹⁷⁶; and finally, “The Voduns [spirits] of the forest will protect it.”¹⁷⁷

These views of stewardship expressed by those within the Vodun community were collectively and apathetically benign, with only the *Kpassenon* accepting individual responsibility for caring of the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé*. Nevertheless, the concept of active care was not negated by any of my interviewees, as they expressed that either a living human [i.e. the *Kpassenon*] serves as caretaker or the religious spirits of their faith work to protect the sanctity and integrity of the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé*. This lack of expression by my interviewees does, however, call into question the true actualization of Vodunsi stewardship ethics. If only the *Kpassenon* is forthright in his expression of serving as a caretaker, then we must assume that the remaining respondents do not view the Forest’s preservation with equal necessity or responsibility. This disconnect between Vodunsi ideals, as they have been

¹⁷⁴ Togbe Akounto Chabassi, in discussion with author, June 2009.

¹⁷⁵ Serge Rustico, in discussion with author, June 2009.

¹⁷⁶ Hounkpe Ahouanga-Hinto, in discussion with author, June 2009.

¹⁷⁷ Mahenou Nasarra, in discussion with author, July 2009.

presented to me, and how the ethic is practiced, are in conflict. Not all Vodunsi stewardship ethics are followed tautologically.

Globally, orthodox ideologies have historically perceived traditional values as existing in conflict with their progressive, contemporary agendas. Unfortunately, this mindset is overly prevalent throughout the post-colonial environment of West Africa. Richard Evanoff contends, "Because ethical beliefs are culturally constructed they may be subject to critical evaluation."¹⁷⁸ Also, according to Evanoff, "praxis informs theory."¹⁷⁹ If we accept Evanoff's claim regarding action informing an evaluative philosophy, then the previously noted absence of individuals claiming to serve as caretakers, or stewards, of the environment indicates a glaring void in active Vodunsi stewardship. However, to make this statement would be to discount the possibility that "Vodun spirits" were in fact, actively serving as stewards of the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé*. To do so would disavow an entire set of ideals strongly held by the Vodunsi community.

To circumvent this condemnatory approach, I claim that it is indigenous culture, rather than traditional religion, which poses the greatest threat to progressive society, as it is indigenous cultures that tend to interact with the land in a non-exploitative fashion. It is therefore indigenous culture that is evaluated by progressive society critically and not specifically traditional religion. This evaluation, while threatening to indigenous culture, can serve to completely eliminate traditional religions. Indigenous cultures rationalize a conservation ethic

¹⁷⁸ Richard Evanoff, "Bioregionalism and Cross-Cultural Dialogue on a Land Ethic," *Ethics, Place and Environment* 10, no. 2 (2007): 142.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 143.

that attempts to preserve as many values as possible in a changing global environment, be they secular or sacred. Unfortunately, the public expression of religion is much more easily identified and eradicated, as was alluded to previously by Vodunsi keeping their icons beneath their household tables and not on top of them. One can therefore understand that the social acceptance of all aspects of Vodun by the at large Ouidah community is not uniform and complete. There are aspects of Vodun that are not accepted by the at large community, namely the need to preserve a parcel of land for what outsiders may term its symbolism, instead of permitting it to be accessed and resources removed from it so as to ensure livelihood.

Development oriented, theocratic societies, such as are prevalent throughout European colonized regions, constantly portray the ideologies and rituals of traditional peoples in a somber and savage light, often alluding to a misuse and mismanagement of natural resources, particularly when resources are not exploited by their society. Callicott address this when he notes of traditional cultures' approach to Nature in a non-exploitative fashion, "It differs from a typical World Bank-financed-industrial development project by conserving, not converting, the forest."¹⁸⁰ The pessimistic view of traditional peoples typically emanates from a belief that progress is in direct correlation with the exploitation of natural resources for human ends. As Callicott noted above, this mentality of conversion versus conservation is heavily influenced by the dominion attitude toward Nature that is

¹⁸⁰ Callicott, *Earth's Insights*, 154.

held by many; however, I have already nullified this approach as existing within the context of Vodunsi stewardship. It should therefore be understood that traditional religious philosophy, specifically with respect to Vodunsi, approaches land stewardship differently, adopting a more utilitarian perspective where interaction with Nature should serve to benefit the greatest number of elements within Nature and not be solely focused upon human interests.

Bryan Norton explains the ideology behind traditional religious interaction with the natural world:

Each of these patches [of the environment] must be managed according to methods appropriate to the goals that define its use, but those methods must also be designed to enhance, or at least not destroy, the values sought elsewhere in the mosaic.¹⁸¹

Vodunsi understand that it is the “mosaic” of complementing natural entities that enable Nature to function at its utmost potential. When interviewing two Vodunsi elders about their religious views toward the “mountains,” “valleys,” and “farmlands,” they were perplexed as to the intent of my line of questioning. They responded by stating that, “one cannot separate one brother from another; it is not possible to speak of the mountains independent of other lands.”¹⁸² Statements such as this often serve to perplex Westerners. How is it that one does not differentiate between separate geographic features within a region? The response to this query is that traditional peoples view their relationship with the land as developing out of a totality of the land and not simply emanating from the separate pieces that form

¹⁸¹ Bryan G. Norton, *Toward Unity among Environmentalists* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 189.

¹⁸² Sourouganji Humoganji and Sourouganji Souna, in discussion with author, June 2009.

the landscape. Yet, the Western observer tends to associate these traditional views depicting an inseparable totality of Nature as deriving from traditional perspectives of polytheism, a supposed deference to physical wealth, and a presumed naïvety toward the proposed benefits associated with social progress.

As Norton notes, focus should instead be directed toward the balanced management of natural resources represented by indigenous cultures. Norton's quotation provides an example of how intentional perception should be paid to Vodunsi reciprocity with the land, as well as the non-exploitative manner in which Vodunsi tend to utilize natural resources present within the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé*. It is through the Vodunsi approach to the natural world that a recognition of the pieces of the environmental "mosaic," the intricate web of nature, cooperate the best. There does exist in Vodun society, however, instances wherein nature is abused, and it is the detriment to the natural world by the Vodunsi that will be addressed next.

Chapter Five **ENVIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION**

Environmental Degradation

Thus far, I have indicated the role that history has played in the evolution of Vodun through contact-period events, specifically the slave trade. I have also presented the manner in which Vodunsi recognize and practice stewardship. I have presented examples wherein Vodunsi view themselves as part of the environment, not removed from or evaluated as more valuable than other components of Nature. There are instances that I observed during my time in Ouidah that display a separate practice not aligned with Vodunsi stewardship tenets. These examples will be the focus of this chapter. I will highlight the manners in which Vodunsi ideology conflicts with Vodunsi practice, and I will put forth an explanation to identify the factors and processes that help explain these contradictions.

Environmental preservation enables an ecosystem to carry on in a natural fashion whereby the biotic community self-regulates. When actions are taken by humankind that inhibit this preservation, the result will be a suffering natural ecosystem, the ability to balance the intricacies of itself will have been removed, and the effects can be disastrous. The end result is what I term herein “environmental degradation.” The intrinsic quality and character of the ecosystem suffers and can, if appropriate actions are not taken, spiral into an entirely unrecognizable cast of what previously existed. Examples of environmental preservation can be found throughout Ouidah. They have also specifically affected the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé*. The primary culprits of negative affectation in Ouidah stem from population growth and globalization, typically driven by economic forces.

The Reassessment of Economic Endeavors

“Land is, today, difficult to come by,” states the *Chef-Suprême*.¹⁸³ I was able to witness firsthand the lack of arable land in and around Ouidah. The nature of Ouidah’s economy revolves around land-based cultivation directed toward a subsistence ideology. Families grow the majority of their own food, primarily maize (*Zea Mays*), and sell the surplus either at one of the local markets or as street side vendors. The scarcity of arable land has directly influenced the ability to satisfy the requirements of feeding ones’ family in recent decades. Land scarcity can be attributed to residents of Ouidah having much larger families, and these family members living for a much longer time than in previous generations.

Research I conducted prior to arriving in Ouidah placed the 1970 population around 10,000 residents. As was noted above, the current population has greatly augmented in forty years’ time to be around 90,000 residents. The introduction of Western medicine, combined with the ability to more readily travel to Cotonou and receive medical attention for ailments that would previously have resulted in a shortened lifespan, have placed undue and unprecedented pressure upon the local ecosystem. There are bush taxis constantly leaving to carry one from Ouidah to Cotonou for any reason, and this has had the unintended consequence of also taking with it much of the local commerce as well as the younger population.

When traveling the 40-kilometer route from Ouidah to the modern metropolis of Cotonou, I witnessed a stretch of perhaps 400 meters the entire trip which was not cultivated, or serving as a storefront for any combination of

¹⁸³ Dagbo Hounon, in discussion with author, June 2009.

amenities: food, car parts, *Western Union*, bars, and clothing shops. This observation was contradictory to what I had previously believed, after studying several maps of the region, to be an open, farm-based area. The trip from Ouidah to Cotonou follows the main west-east highway of Benin, and perhaps the easy access to this area is responsible for its massive economic growth. When this corridor was transformed into a market-based economy, however, the persons who previously farmed the area were forced to find new parcels of land to cultivate. To the south of the highway rests the ocean and other uncultivable land adjacent to numerous estuaries. This area is completely unfit for the harvesting of crops; therefore, tenant farmers have been forced to move inland, north of the road. This land is now highly sought after and too expensive for the average tenant farmer to acquire.

One of my interviewees, a Vodunsi, lived twelve-kilometers north of Ouidah. While traveling to his home for our interview, I witnessed the results of population explosion and competition for land. Ouidah, on maps, appears very consolidated, perhaps seven-kilometers in diameter; however, this representation is misleading. Of the twelve-kilometer journey to his home, only perhaps the final five-kilometers were open farmland. The remaining lands were peri-urban sprawl, just as one witnesses in other developing nations such as Brazil or India. This sprawl can also be witnessed in most industrialized nations. These were not “suburbs,” as we may tend to describe them; rather, they were homesteads that had long rested on the periphery of the town, but now, so as to accommodate the increased population, these lands have been incorporated into the town itself. This population explosion has affected Vodun through an increase in overall populace. This increased

population has brought with it a stronger contingency for the expression of ideas that may not concur with Vodunsi beliefs. The influence of these differing ideas has tended to influence the manner in which Vodunsi approach care for the land in that interaction with Nature may no longer be held as more valuable than acquiring economic gain. The ability of one farmer to feed his or her family well may necessitate sacrificing certain religious ideals held by that farmer so as to make her/him more competitive with neighboring farmers who may not hold equal reverence for the land.

Farmers' approaches to cultivation have remained the same; however, the parcels, which originally were easily capable of serving as proper providers for families, have been subdivided to an extent that they no longer sustain families. Fathers give to their sons a portion of their title when they become married, or old enough to responsibly work the land, and because families are now having more children than previously, and because these children are no longer succumbing to remediable maladies, these plots have become very consolidated and over-cultivated. As a result, farmers no longer have the leisure of leaving an area fallow but rather they must continually till and harvest the same plots of land. This action of continuous working of the same land has, unfortunately, resulted in many plots no longer possessing the nutrients and ability to produce a quality of crop that was once afforded the harvester.

According to field observations and local accounts, former farmers have abandoned the traditional way of life, instead directing their energies and attentions into new ventures. These ventures can be illegal, such as the production of the local

alcoholic drink *Sodobe*, or they can be more contemporary, such as driving a taxi or moto-scooter. Social alteration of this sort necessitates that an individual now garner enough wages to completely support her or his family through a money-based economy, which includes purchasing goods that were formerly self-obtained. The adoption of a new lifestyle also includes the taking up of new expenses, such as the need to purchase petrol for ones' vehicle, or the need to construct a still for the distillation processes involved in the manufacturing of *Sodobe*. Lastly, when an individual is no longer a farmer, that land is then sold or given to another individual. If a Vodunsi is the individual who is leaving the profession of farming, it is possible that her/his land will become the land of a non-Vodunsi. This shift in proprietors may result in the land not being cared for in the same manner as it had been previously, based solely upon religious ideals.

Adoption of Westernized professions lends itself to Western repercussions. Jim Cheney addresses this issue when he notes, "Dominant Western conceptions...are value laden in the direction of domination and control."¹⁸⁴ It is this concept of domination, or dominion, that Vodunsi traditionally have avoided with respect to their everyday actions. Thus, one must posit if dominion will become more apparent as Vodunsi are forced, through population growth and with the growing influence of global economic markets, to alter their approaches to the natural environment from one existing in reciprocal interaction with the environment to one displaying more dominion-oriented ethics. The greater

¹⁸⁴ Jim Cheney, "Universal Consideration: An Epistemological Map of the Terrain," *Environmental Ethics* 20, no. Fall (1998): 267.

question persists, “Will global market alterations and the influence of Western ideals serve to alter the stewardship ethics associated with the Vodunsi, or will Vodunsi adopt the economic approaches of the West solely for economic purposes while retaining their traditional religious perspectives?” This is a question that can only be answered through the impetus of time.

What can be said factually of the current state of affairs in Ouidah is that where there once were few automobiles there are now hordes of taxis and Moto-scooters providing services to nearly any destination in West Africa. There are now also many auto accidents and much more air and noise pollution affecting the immediate region. While in Cotonou, the tainted quality of the air in the area provided many with the incentive to wear protective respiratory masks. Although I did not witness any persons in Ouidah taking this precaution, I did notice a measurable difference in the air quality of Ouidah when I would return from outside the city limits. It is necessary to also recognize the trend in which not just the terrestrial environments but also the marine environments have been negatively affected, and this will be the focus of the following section.

Marine Degeneration

Aside from the traditionalists whose ancestors relied heavily upon the cultivation of their own foodstuffs, there is represented a smaller, yet equally important economy in Ouidah revolving around the fishing industry. The families who have resided near the ocean for centuries continue to practice fish harvesting in a traditional manner, using seine nets and small boats called *pirogues* (Figure 15, Appendix II) just off the shore of Ouidah and in the adjoining estuaries; however,

because of the nature of an evolving economy, combined with increasing population, the fishing industry has suffered. William Easterly notes the impacts of overfishing upon communities when he states, “Overfishing is a classic example used for the tragedy of the commons.”¹⁸⁵ Easterly continues to note that the occurrence of overfishing in Benin is especially important due to Benin already existing as a nation that is “resource-poor.”¹⁸⁶

When I inquired as to the current fishing harvests, I was told that both the quality and quantity of fish harvested have declined. I was able to support this statement by observing firsthand the fish available for purchase in town (Figure 16, Appendix II). Rarely, if ever, were there fish that exceeded thirty centimeters. This could be owing to the areas that are being fished; however, it is more likely due to large, commercial fishing vessels that have greatly depleted the marine habitats off the coast of Ouidah. Whereas the traditional fishing communities could readily trade with the inland cultivators in order to augment their diet, now the quantity and quality of fish being harvested from the estuaries outside of Ouidah, and from the ocean itself, are rapidly depleting.

There are a number of women who sell dried fish along the main arteries of Ouidah; however, I found that what was once a reliable endeavor, is now sporadic and at times completely absent. According to local residents, commercial fishing vessels now intrude upon the waters of the gulf, forcing traditional fish harvesters to either adapt and invest in an entirely new form of fishing or to abandon their

¹⁸⁵ William Easterly, *The White Man's Burden* (New York: Penguin Press, 2006), 94.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 126.

traditional manner of providing for their families. These commercial fishers are entrenched in a market-based economy whereby procuring the greatest tonnage of fish is not only desired but a necessity to continue competing with other commercial vessels in the region. This approach to harvesting marine life has only one possible result, the decimation of marine habitat and populations. This can be seen throughout Ouidah, as several individuals who worked as fishermen in Ouidah recounted to me the dire straits that they are currently facing with respect to harvesting fish and supporting their families in their traditional methods. These Vodunsi traditional methods that are being replaced possess a sense of interaction with Nature that is not found in actions that mandate the greatest quantity of fish being harvested in the shortest period of time at the least expense. This is the influence of globalization upon Ouidah. The new market economy has necessitated a reevaluation of what is necessary to sustain life. No longer are Vodunsi fishermen able to be with the marine environment harvesting sustainable quantities; they now must act upon the marine environment so as to remain competitive, and ultimately, to ensure their survival.

Ouidah's fishermen swim out hundreds of meters into the ocean, set their nets with buoys, and haul in their catch, collecting as many fish as possible. As is indicated in photo 16, Appendix II, these fish are often smaller than 30 centimeters, and provide little nutrition in the diet of the Beninese. They instead are used primarily as a flavoring agent for sauces on rice dishes. The sizes of the nets being used for this endeavor register around 400 meters in length; yet, the resulting harvest is often quite minimal. Because the traditional fishermen of the region tend

to sell off their surplus, my friends who worked for the fishermen were often paid in buckets of fish instead of money. Owing to the nature of their residence in Ouidah, they are Nigerian Ogoni refugees, it was not socially acceptable for them to trade or sell their fish payments. Therefore, as the only persons who would employ these individuals were fishermen, and the Ogoni were not legally permitted to hold any other post in the community, the Ogoni must reconcile their role within Ouidah's society as non-residents and take any employment that is offered to them. Their diet consisted entirely of their wages in fish that was then augmented by whatever herbs and vegetables they were able to gather from the area around Ouidah. This resulted in them being forced to forage large swathes of land in order to obtain enough food for the 300 refugees residing in one of the three Ogoni refugee camps in Ouidah.

Perceptions of Social and Environmental Change

My interviews were developed as a method to establish Vodunsi views of environmental stewardship; however, I felt it necessary to conduct follow-up interviews with individuals in order to clarify any discrepancies that may have been brought to the fore throughout my interview process. One of the major questions that remained to be addressed within the context of my research was the issue surrounding social change, or more specifically, what were the views held by Ouidah's residents as to why certain aspects of the environment were beginning to exhibit deterioration.

In my follow-up interview with the *Chef-Suprême*, he expressed to me that the true reason that the environment was being destroyed around Ouidah was

because, “Too many evangelists have moved into the area and destroyed it. Vodun struggles with the onslaught of imported religions, because they usually don’t abide by the ‘rules of nature’.”¹⁸⁷ This statement exemplifies the theory I previously put forth in which animistic religions interact with the land in a more conscientious and reciprocal fashion, while it is more Occidental faiths that possess an interaction with the land that is not conducive to a prosperous, balanced environment. The growing presence of Ouidah’s evangelical community, combined with the growing environmental detriment occurring, can be attributed to each other; however, I am not able to state herein that this is the sole factor affecting the natural environment, merely one of the contributing factors that I was able to witness firsthand through my time in Ouidah.

I can affirm that by the presence of an evangelical sub-community within the greater Ouidah community, these outside religions have had a marked influence. Different ideas on how one should interact with the environment have accompanied diverse manners in which one interacts with the environment. Because the non-Vodunsi religious communities of Ouidah do not view the environment in the same fashion as Vodunsi, they are more apt to interact with the environment from a more dominion-directed perspective. This ideology is directly represented through Père André’s assertion to me that “The environment was created by God, for man to dominate and transform.”¹⁸⁸ This statement illustrates the extant distinction between Vodunsi beliefs and Christian beliefs as they pertain to the natural

¹⁸⁷ Dagbo Hounon, in discussion with author, June 2009.

¹⁸⁸ Père André, in discussion with author, July 2009.

environment in Ouidah. Illuminating the disconnect between the ideals of the Catholic communities' leader and Vodunsi ideology, however, should not be accepted without further analysis, as there are examples of degradation that have occurred to the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé* by Vodunsi.

I had witnessed and photographed a portion of the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé* that had been cleared of its timber so that a plot of maize could be planted in its place. Typically, this would serve to support the *Chef's* argument, as many of the residents who live on the immediate outskirts of the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé* are members of the increasing evangelical community (this is indicated by the presence of evangelical accouterments found on the outsides of individuals' home compounds); however, in the center of the deforested parcel was a marker indicating its harvest belonged to a *Bokonon* (a mural of a *Bokonon* appears as Figure 17, Appendix II). When I showed this image to the *Chef-Suprême* on my digital camera (Figures 18 & 19, Appendix II), he at first attempted to discount it as the doings of an individual of another faith; however, when I indicated the marker at the center of the plot, his response changed, "There are good and bad who are *Bokonon*. I cannot be expected to stop all from doing things."¹⁸⁹ This mentality, while understandable, indicates a contradiction between the preaching of the *Chef-Suprême*, as the leader and guide of all Vodunsi, and instead incorporates an ideal wherein harmful acts are not the direct responsibility of the religious leader, but rather are the actions of an estranged spiritual adherent. Therefore, I assert here that while Vodunsi stewardship is practiced through the development of a positive

¹⁸⁹ Dagbo Hounon, in discussion with author, July 2009.

relationship with the environment in a reciprocal fashion, it should be understood that outside influences effecting individual community members can, as this example displays, lend itself toward a usurpation of a Vodunsi stewardship that is always practiced despite outside factors.

Several examples of environmental decline are present within Ouidah's community that directly relate to those who practice other faiths. In particular, I noted that the trash bins that had been placed outside of the Basilica in Ouidah were overflowing with rubbish for several days' time. I brought this to the attention of the priest during our interview. After he said that, "The environment was created by God, to be dominated and transformed by man," I inquired to whom the responsibility of caring for the Basilica grounds, including the overflowing trashcans, fell. He continued to express that, "Ouidah is a proper village. It was given the title of the first proper village in Benin."¹⁹⁰ I later was able to confirm his statement, that Ouidah in fact was afforded the first title of "*une village propre*," in all of Benin.¹⁹¹ The following day, while traversing past the Basilica, the trash bins had been emptied and there were several women out front sweeping the grounds. This was the only time I observed a mass cleaning effort on display at the Basilica; however, I must admit that the grounds inside the walls of the Basilica were immaculately well kept.

One other disconnect was made apparent through my interview process. During an interview with a female Muslim practitioner, I inquired as to what

¹⁹⁰ Père André, in discussion with author, June 2009.

¹⁹¹ <http://www.nouvellesmutations.com/?p=3487>

“problems or threats existed that could have a negative effect upon the environment?” She responded quite astutely that, “One should take care to better the land. One should increase the size of the forests [restore them to their previous dimensions] instead of cutting them down. We should act so as to protect the environment from the errors of scrub brush.”¹⁹² Seemingly the presence of “scrub brush” was indicative of deforested land where new foliage can now be witnessed, and the “scrub brush” she refers to is the first biota to arrive in recently deforested lands. If this had been a statement provided by a Vodunsi, there would be an obvious sacra-environmental relationship; however, this response came from someone who practices a faith that several Vodunsi expressed to me harbored principles that did not complement the natural environment. Interestingly enough, I did not receive any responses from Vodunsi that would allude to a parallel environmental ethic, with a few exceptions being those who recommended measuring the forest to ensure its size remains the same. Three Vodunsi interviewees did express that the major problem facing the natural environment was “deforestation.” Their opinions on how to combat this, however, were not expressed within our interview.

While a significant proportion of interviewees suggested that the threats to the environment could be blamed upon evil spirits, the vast majority of Vodunsi interviewees claimed that are “No problems or threats” to the environment in and around Ouidah. One final individual echoed the statement put forth by the *Chef-Suprême* when he suggested that the environmental degradation was due to the

¹⁹² Mohamadou Samiratou, in discussion with author, June 2009.

“arrival of new religions.”¹⁹³ These new religions, while undoubtedly converting residents who already resided within Ouidah, also bring with them their own adherents. The introduction of new religious philosophies has not been met with the same contentiousness, as has the prevalence of more individuals espousing these ideas. It is the increase in population that can be held responsible for much of the environmental degradation that has occurred in and around Ouidah, and it is this aspect that will be the focus of the following section.

Malthusian Dynamics

The *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé* has decreased in size from its original measurement of over five hectares at its inception in the seventeenth century to now just less than three hectares. While the national east-west highway is responsible for a significant proportion of the Forest being developed, there are five family compounds that rest on land that was once inside of the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé* (Figure 20, Appendix II is a photo of one of these compounds).

I approached all five of the households that now rest on the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé* land to inquire as to who provided them with permission to build on the land. They all answered the same: they were merely renting the homes from the owners who lived out of town. Upon inspection of the proprietary placards that must be placed upon the outside of all houses in Ouidah, which provide information as to the owner, their permanent residence, and, occasionally, when the building was constructed, I was able to confirm their assertions. The owners of these properties lived in France, Cotonou, or Lomé, with none of the proprietors residing

¹⁹³ Kpassenon, in discussion with author, June 2009.

in Ouidah. This absentee landlord relationship accomplished two results. First, the residents could not provide any information to inquirers as to who had given them permission to build their homes within the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé*, as they were merely tenants. Secondly, the owners of the homes could avoid all inquiries for an indeterminate period of time until they could be located abroad, if indeed other persons wished to speak with them regarding their construction on *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé* lands. One final accompanying effect persists owing to these households' presence within the grounds that were once included in the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé*, and that is the need for them to cultivate some of the land adjoining their homes for their own subsistence. This renders even more of the area devoid of the ancient forest, as it has been compromised in order to provide cultivable land for the homes (Figure 21, Appendix II).

The small assortment of houses that were once in the neighborhood of the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé* are now a large collection of homes that abut one another. As the *Chef-Suprême* expressed to me, and as I was able to easily confirm through observation, "The *petite ville* that was once in the area of the Sacred Forest is now a full village."¹⁹⁴ This "full village," similar to the lack of arable land around Ouidah, is resultant from overpopulation. As I have previously noted, the population of Ouidah grew by 900% from the statistics of 1970 to the present day. Accompanying the expansion of Ouidah, a slew of auxiliary effects have arrived, namely how to responsibly dispose of waste for a town that has grown exponentially in size since gaining independence in 1960. The *Kpassenon* supported this observation in our

¹⁹⁴ Dagbo Hounon, in discussion with author, June 2009.

follow-up interview when he stated, “The increase in trash is directly related to the increase in population.”¹⁹⁵

Immediately adjacent to the walls of the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé* are large piles of household trash, discarded into the street and left for the dogs and goats of the village to rummage through (Figure 22, Appendix II). These piles of trash do provide ample justification for the need to complete the wall surrounding the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé*; however, as Figures 23 and 24 (Appendix II) indicate, the walls’ adequacy is, in certain locations around the perimeter of *Kpassé*, moot. The efficacy of the wall, however, and the concurrent reverence for the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé* held by Vodunsi can be easily observed through the well-kempt manner in which the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé* is now managed.

I have indicated how the processes of population growth and globalization have negatively impacted the degree to which individuals must now interact with the land, as well as highlighting how the introduction of a large, more diverse populace has impacted the manner in which Vodunsi must interact with the environment. I will turn now to specifically address the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé* because one must understand just what the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé* is before one can attribute to it the respect and veneration that is provided it by Vodunsi throughout the region. This is the focus of the subsequent chapter.

¹⁹⁵ Kpassenon, in discussion with author, June 2009.

Chapter Six
FORET SACREE DE KPASSE

The *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé*:

There was a King by the name of Kpassé. He was the first descendant of the Royal family Kpassé. He died but not into the earth; he transformed into a tree called the Loko Tree [*Nago Iroko*]. This tree lives to form visions and when one forms visions, things of a positive nature will arrive. And when one forms these visions, one touches [the tree] with the left hand, then with both hands. One touches the soul inside of the tree and one will gently receive a response as to what one should do. If you receive no response, it did not work and you have enemies. If you still desire protection for your body, one touches the tree in the fashion where ones' back is against the tree and the two hands (palms toward the tree) are placed upon the tree. One remains there for a good minute, or three minutes, in that position; then removes oneself from the tree. You then note your passage into the forest and what you have deposited into the interior of the area. It is this that you have deposited that is in charge of helping your future betterment.

This is the explanation provided to me by a Vodunsi guide of the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé*, as to how the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé* came into existence, as well as the meaning behind its continued significance to Vodunsi. Figure 25 (Appendix II) depicts the author next to the centerpiece of the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé*, the original Loko tree that is understood to be King Kpassé. Robin Law notes of the history of the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé*,

[*Kpassé*] is said to have metamorphosed into a tree that still survives as the focus of his shrine, in what is known as Kpasezun, 'Kpase's Forest', located in the Tové quarter, or rather, originally in the bush beyond Tové, but nowadays absorbed within the town.¹⁹⁶

It is on this spot that the *Roi Kpassé* avoided his enemies by transforming himself into this tree in 1661, thus initiating the lore of arbor-morphology within Vodun that is still expressed through the previous mention by several interviewees that their ancestors never die but rather are transformed into saplings of the Loko tree.

¹⁹⁶ Law, *Ouidah: The Social History of a West African Slaving "Port" 1727-1892*, 21.

Thus we can recognize that even today Vodunsi acknowledge the continuous frequency of this divine achievement and respect the role of this tale accordingly. Additionally, from Law's quote one is able to establish agreement that the town's size is augmenting, with the forest previously located outside of town but now existing within the town's limits.

While it is not necessary for Vodunsi to transmute specifically into Loko trees, it is imperative to understand that the transition from human entity to arbor being is wholly accepted amongst Vodunsi, and that King *Kpassé's* transformation is paramount for the establishment of the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé*, as well as for its continued representative benevolence. Roger Stump addresses the concept of sacred space when he notes, "Religious belief informs the basic meanings that adherents attribute to many of the spaces that they construct and use, so that the spaces themselves represent articulations or extensions of the adherents' faith."¹⁹⁷ This can be understood by the manner in which the majority of Vodun's adherents perceive and engage with *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé* in a reverential and non-destructive manner.

Understanding the importance of *Kpassé* to the community of Ouidah can be best done through the description of the powers residing within the Forest *Kpassé*. The *Chef-Suprême* explained, "Our ancestors live in the Sacred Forest, there are leaves in the Sacred Forest that can cure illnesses, including AIDS."¹⁹⁸ Describing why it was necessary to preserve the natural elements within the *Forêt Sacrée de*

¹⁹⁷ Stump, *The Geography of Religion*, 221.

¹⁹⁸ Dagbo Hounon, in discussion with author, June 2009.

Kpassé, he stated, “The water within the Sacred Forest is for the blessing of Vodun deities.”¹⁹⁹ It is for this reason, he notes, that any resources should not be removed from this sacred space. All of these resources serve a practical purpose for the expression of Vodun religiousness. The *Chef-Suprême* concludes this line of thought by stating, “The Sacred Forest represents for me a place of ceremony and prayer, very hidden.”²⁰⁰ This statement illustrates how the forest is perceived by one of its most honored adherents and recognized leaders not as simply a space to worship, but rather as a place from where worship emanates.

While several of the Vodun cults, as I have previously noted, do not worship their cult deity at the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé*, instead worshipping marine deities at the beachhead, even Vodunsi members of these cults revere the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé* for its symbolic representation to the entirety of the Vodun community. Stump refers to this dichotomy when he states, “The religious focal point of most communities of adherents is the communal place of worship, although other religious institutions may possess central social functions as well.”²⁰¹

Those cults, which hold the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé* to be the Axis Mundi, the point where the transcendental meets the terrestrial, envision it as the location from which their faith emerged and continues to thrive. A high-ranking female priestess of Vodun, who worships her cult deity at the beach, noted of the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé* that it is, “a necessary place for all Vodunsi and possesses much power.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

²⁰¹ Stump, *The Geography of Religion*, 225.

Deceased ancestors never die, they are transformed into trees within the Sacred Forest.”²⁰² I find this to exemplify the importance that the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé* holds for all Vodunsi regardless of cult affiliation.

Many of my interviewees expressed that the forest is symbolic of the Vodun religion and is not to be understood as being “physically benevolent.” One interviewee expressed that the *Kpassé* holds for him a “representation of the times, a father-son relationship. The Sacred Forest is not for amusement but a location where respect yields respect.”²⁰³ This symbiotic relationship was echoed by many of my Vodunsi interviewees. The Forest is a physical representation of one of the main principles of Vodun, which states, “good begets good.” Other interviewees expressed that the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé* is a location where one can “meet and connect with god,” and that it is a “reservoir of life.”²⁰⁴

When asked how the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé* is important to each individual, the responses continued to reflect the importance to the at-large religious community. Interview subjects responded in the majority “It brings people together.” The *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé* must therefore be perceived as a spiritual location serving to provide solace through prayer, while concurrently serving as the residence of many Vodun deities. Additionally, the Forest serves as a site where those of a common religion can come together in faith and express their religiosity in a uniform environment.

²⁰² Amingassi Djabassi, in discussion with author, June 2009.

²⁰³ Sourouganji Humboganji, in discussion with author, June 2009.

²⁰⁴ Dakossi Gandomessi, in discussion with author, June 2009.

Protecting the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé*

Nearly all of my interviewees expressed concern for the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé*, as they have observed encroachment upon it and its transformation into something far less holy and esoteric. Its diminution has affected Vodunsi in that there is far less sacred space within the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé*; however, its decrease in physical size led several of my interviewees to insist upon it being symbolic and not necessarily physically exemplary of the power held within. “The size,” I was informed “does not reflect the power held within.”²⁰⁵

The vast majority of interviewees also noted of the significance of the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé*, that part of its benevolence is due to it serving as the residence of all the Vodun spirits. Roger Stump approaches this concept academically when he notes,

In enacting and reproducing their religious systems, believers necessarily imagine and construct a variety of places and spaces of religious significance. Such geographical entities are an essential part of religious systems, both within abstract conceptions of doctrine and faith and in the more immediate contexts of lived religious experience. The resulting spatiality of religious systems represent a primary concern in the geographical study of religion, particularly with regard to understanding religious belief and practice from the ‘inside,’ from the perspective of the believer.²⁰⁶

To fully understand the inside perspective, it is necessary to accept, as all Vodunsi do, that if Vodunsi spirits have not been called to one of the *couvants* throughout Ouidah for a ceremony, they are to be found at the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé*. One of

²⁰⁵ Amingassi Djabassi, in discussion with author, June 2009.

²⁰⁶ Stump, *The Geography of Religion*, 221.

my female interviewees stated, “All Voduns are found in the Sacred Forest,”²⁰⁷ while another stated, “Everyone has a different Vodun [spirit] therein.”²⁰⁸

Accepting that Vodunsi spirits reside in the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé* is a significant attribute to the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé*'s reverence. This enables one to more fully understand the role that the *Kpassé* plays within Vodun society. There is a need not just to protect the environment of the forest; there is also a need to preserve the integrity and stability of one's ancestry, in addition to protecting the spirits who reside therein. A male interviewee expressed of the importance of the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé*, “We see the Sacred Forest as housing our ancestors.”²⁰⁹ This is an obvious allusion to the understanding that ancestors never die but are instead transformed into tree saplings in the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé*, as was noted above by a previous interviewee. “Vodunsi recognize the Sacred Forest as a natural sanctuary,”²¹⁰ expressed one male elder, while another chose to focus his opinion on the value of the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé* by expressing that certain acts are not permitted to occur within the confines of *Kpassé*, “to acknowledge its sanctity, drinking [alcohol] and poking around are not tolerated.”²¹¹

The King of Ouidah, *Kpassenon*, notes that the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé* began to decrease in size when “outside, new religions arrived because they do not respect

²⁰⁷ Houédanu, in discussion with author, July 2009.

²⁰⁸ Huedan Nansara, in discussion with author, July 2009.

²⁰⁹ Dagbo Hounon, in discussion with author, June 2009.

²¹⁰ Sourouganji Humboganji, in discussion with author, June 2009.

²¹¹ Kpassenon, in discussion with author, June 2009.

the forest because they view the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé* the same as any other lands.”²¹² This led the *Kpassenon* to order the construction of a wall, several decades ago, so as to prevent further encroachment upon this sacred site. Unfortunately, the wall has only been completed on two sides of the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé*.

The value of the wall, where it exists, is identifiable. The wall serves to protect and delineate from what Eliade and Stump would agree is a separation of the revered from the regular. Just as recognizable is the effect of not having the wall on the remaining borders. The walls’ height ranges from three meters down to less than a meter as I have indicated in Figures 23 and 24 in Appendix II. Where the wall is lower, environmental degradation continues to occur with rubbish continually thrown behind the perimeter (Figure 26, Appendix II). Whether or not the detritus present is from Vodunsi or non-Vodunsi, I was not able to confirm throughout the course of my research. I made several observations where soil had been moved up the sides of the wall so as to make it easier to discard waste over the wall. Owing to the nature of the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé*, and its dense vegetation, one could only observe the massive quantities of waste discarded into the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé* if one were to walk the perimeter of the Forest and make the observations, as I did. To attempt to reach the perimeter of the forest from within would be highly laborious owing to its dense vegetation.

The advantage of the wall can be witnessed most readily when one observes the wall from its promontory. At three meters in height, the wall is far too high for persons to discard their waste, and also serves as a formidable deterrent for those

²¹² Ibid.

wishing to remove timber or other natural elements from within the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé*. Thus, one could suggest that while the wall defines the perimeter of the sacred space of the forest, it also provides a physical boundary for what is acceptable behavior within and outside of the forest. The wall serves as a physical reminder of the manner in which interaction with the environment can occur in a positive and protected manner, on the inside of the wall, and the manner in which dominion can be expressed toward the natural environment, directly outside of the wall. The *Kpassenon* informed me that the completion of the wall protecting the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé* would cost \$33,000 USD.²¹³

Kpassenon also expressed to me in our interview that, “the local and national government has done nothing to assist in the protection of the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé*. It is only me that protects it.”²¹⁴ Countless government tourist brochures laud the history of Ouidah and encourage tourists to visit all of the traditional Vodun sites in and around Ouidah. Included in these promotional materials is the significance of the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé*. The King continued to express to me the need for partnership to exist between the Minister of Tourism for Benin, the local mayor, and himself, by noting, “Both the Minister of Tourism and the mayor have tourism projects that would apply to conserving the Sacred Forest. The Sacred Forest serves two purposes: the spiritual side and the tourist side.”²¹⁵ While this does commercialize the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé*, I believe, from analyzing my

²¹³ *Kpassenon*, in discussion with author, July 2009.

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*

interview data, that this is being undertaken so as to acquire the funds necessary to complete the construction of the wall and further protect the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé*. One must then conclude that commercializing the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé* is seen as a lesser evil than would be its complete destruction. Therefore, the economic stimulus afforded by increased tourism is more important to the preservation of the gift of the Forest than is the economic exploitation necessary to ensure its preservation.

Envisioning and promoting the sacred site of the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé* as a global site of interest could greatly assist the Vodun community in establishing and enacting further protective measures for the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé*. Additionally, it could provide some of the resources necessary to ensure its preservation is provided by outside, governmental sources. The effect that active promotion of the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé*, in order to achieve an increase in tourism, would have upon Vodunsi perceptions of the value of the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé* can only be speculated upon. Yet, there exist ancillary effects of designating this space a “Sacred Forest.” This will be the focus of the following section.

Corresponding Ramifications

This designation of sacred space does give rise to an ancillary affect, namely the need to designate inferior space for societal requirements such as disposal of human and solid waste. The manner in which this is conducted is not clear with respect to the Vodunsi, as my observation of the presence of a toilet within the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé* demonstrated (Figure 27, Appendix II). However, a household solid waste program has been instituted in the last few years throughout Ouidah.

Still, other, possibly beneficial, possibly harmful effects exist. By naming the forest “sacred,” what unintended results can affect the people of this region, as well as the designated site? John Murray asks in his essay *On Stewardship*, what effects arise from designating an area “wilderness.”²¹⁶ This particular designation creates a necessity to obtain camping permits and adhere to trail quotas so as to mitigate the effects upon this site. It is true that these results are meant to prevent destruction from occurring to a designated area, be it “sacred” or “wilderness.” However, unintended consequences oftentimes interfere with the rationale present behind the original designation, resulting in these locales being sought after because of their distinction alone. Thus, one must question what are the unintended consequences of designating Ouidah’s *Kpassé* forest as a “Sacred Forest”? Does the forest intrude upon the welfare of regional residents, does it impede upon citizens’ ability to feed and clothe their families, or do the positive attributes of such a title outweigh the negative implications associated with the designation?

I have illustrated previously that the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé’s* existence has indeed hindered the ability of Ouidah’s citizens, Vodunsi and non-Vodunsi alike, to cultivate crops. This can be perceived through the deforestation, construction, and cultivation that have already occurred on the site of the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé*. Nevertheless, the expression by many Vodun interviewees noting that the size of the forest is not indicative of the power and reverence held therein should be viewed as a contemporary attempt to positively address the issue of *Kpassé’s* decreasing dimension, while continuing to preserve its integrity. If, in fact, the Forest continued

²¹⁶ Murray, "On Stewardship," 264.

to be destroyed, and eventually was completely overtaken by the spreading masses, would the Forest still hold the spiritual significance it once did? I believe that the construction of the wall alludes to the possibility of this occurring. The wall is present to prevent the complete destruction of the Forest because while *Kpassé* may be symbolically powerful, its decimation would not provide a location of religious expression for Vodunsi, nor would the absent Forest be able to house ancestors' spirits or Vodun spirits.

I have indicated in this section the manners in which Vodunsi adherents practice stewardship toward the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé*. While I have addressed the discrepancies that exist between Vodunsi thought and action, it is necessary to note that protection of the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé* is undertaken out of a desire to revere one's ancestors, as well as to preserve the gift of the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé* for future adherents and those Vodun spirits residing therein. While Vodunsi actions are not always perfectly aligned with Vodunsi beliefs, Vodunsi actions do tend to exhibit a majority held opinion that to destroy the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé* is to destroy an aspect of their religion, as well as to go against a Vodunsi ethical principle. I will now conclude this thesis by recounting my findings based upon the above data.

Chapter Seven CONCLUSION

Conclusion

Vodunsi religious ideals express a reverence for the natural world that exists in aspects of reciprocity and appreciation for the gift of Nature. While these tenets can be applied to all of Nature, I have chosen to discuss their applicability toward the *Forêt Sacrée Kpassé*. As one of the two revered sites around Ouidah, the preservation of this area far surpasses the preservation of the region in general. I have addressed here the questions as to how history has influenced Vodun, what Vodunsi stewardship entails, and whether or not all Vodunsi constantly express this notion of stewardship.

The role of traditional ecological knowledge has provided the Vodunsi with a history deeply entrenched in Ouidah's community. Takuya Takahashi has noted the benefits of this type of knowledge toward developing a better relationship within local communities. Takahashi notes, "As shown in the case of traditional ecological knowledge, local and traditional knowledge was and will be useful for...ecosystem management practiced all over the world."²¹⁷ This statement provides support for the assertion that Vodunsi indigenous knowledge currently present within Ouidah is the most qualified and appropriate provider of information as it pertains to manners in which one might best interact with the environment. Acceptance of the theories surrounding traditional indigenous knowledge would suggest that the detriment projected upon the environment of Ouidah could be attributed to the

²¹⁷ Takuya Takahashi, "Csr That Incorporates Local and Traditional Knowledge: The *Sanpo-Yoshi Way*," *Environmental Ethics* 4 (2009): 116.

influence of outside factors. These factors, while not completely responsible for environmental degradation, have served to provide an alternative approach to interaction with Nature, and thus usurped the traditional methods that had been existence for many centuries prior to European arrival.

History has influenced Vodun primarily through the impacts of European trade. As Easterly notes, “the previous imperial era did not facilitate economic development. Instead, it created some of the conditions that bred occasions for today’s unsuccessful interventions: failed states and bad government.”²¹⁸ This bad government has led to the dissolution of traditional manners of existing. One can now witness in Africa a desire by governments to exploit their natural resources so as to compete with Western capitalistic notions. These capitalist ideals include different concepts as to how one should view one’s role when interacting with Nature. It can thus be stated that these ideals tended to be contradictory to traditional religious views, and that these new views accompanied the change in economic pursuits.

Oftentimes, new religious notions were mandated upon the residents of Ouidah, namely the replacement of Vodunsi values for those more in line with the Christian values brought by European colonizers. The colonizing mind was attempting to “civilize” those who practiced religions that were deemed inferior. The lasting effect of this influence is that some families in Ouidah are now comprised of individuals who practice different faiths. As was indicated previously, Vodunsi religious notions are not averse to one practicing more than one faith;

²¹⁸ Easterly, *The White Man's Burden*, 272.

however, as was expressed by Père André and Imam Mustapha, poly-religious undertakings are not acceptable within the scope of Catholicism and Islam. This has thus served to divide families along religious lines.

The theories put forth by Vodunsi that express reverence for all entities were in practice by the majority of adherents; however, I witnessed firsthand within Ouidah the subjugation of this theory of all entities possessing equal value. I found its usurpation to emanate from the introduction of other, outside elements such as availability of arable land, increase in population, economic interests, and religious diversity. These factors are being introduced by concepts of globalization and a demographic shifting. No longer are farmers or fishermen able to practice their traditional subsistence methods. Owing to globalization and a shifting in the socio-economic framework, traditional methods of interacting with the land/sea are being displaced by a need to compete in a global economy. Ultimately, these factors are contributing to the manner in which concern for Nature and actions of stewardship are being suppressed by an immediate need to accommodate socio-economic changes within the region so as to ensure survival.

Stewardship is a concept whose foundation rests in neither the secular nor sacred realm. It is an ideology that expresses that the earth should be preserved and cared for because it is a gift. Richard Sylvan and David Bennett note that stewardship is undertaken to preserve this gift as “our moral obligation to posterity.”²¹⁹ Specifically, Vodunsi regard the Earth as a gift from god(s) and perceive it as a provider of life. The manner in which peoples’ daily actions reflect

²¹⁹ Bennett, *The Greening of Ethics*, 72.

the teachings of their respective religion provides recognizable evidence as to their religiosity. Many religions accept that god(s) bequeathed the gift of the earth to humans; the gods, reciprocally, demand respect and care be provided for the preservation of their gift. Principles of responsibility to the earth accompanied this gift so as to ensure its proper care and preservation. This proper care requires active responses from religious devotees. The extant Vodun ideology presumes that by actively caring for this gift, future religious adherents will be able to enjoy this divine offering, and the religion will continue.

The preservation of the natural community for future enjoyment is a main tenet associated with the concept of stewardship. Thomas Dunlap notes in his book *Faith in Nature*, "God gave us dominion over nature, but our situation was one of 'obligation and service' to others, future generations, and the earth itself."²²⁰ While Dunlap does note the aspect of dominion associated within the human-nature dynamic, he quickly addresses the need to dispel it as a foundational purpose of stewardship and instead states that we should focus upon preservation for "future generations" as well as the "earth itself." I have also dispelled the notion of dominion as being applicable to Vodunsi concepts of stewardship. It is this manner of approaching stewardship, one that does not adhere to notions of dominion, which will be more effective in preserving Nature, this gift, for future generations' enjoyment. This method of constantly recognizing oneself as interacting with Nature, of existing as a part of Nature, could be considered a proper method in

²²⁰ Thomas R. Dunlap, *Faith in Nature: Environmentalism as Religious Quest* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2004), 63.

which to care for the gift of the environment. This proper care expresses how god(s)' gift can then be enjoyed by future religious adherents, thereby assisting in the growth and development of a faith.

Alain Sinou wrote in his book *Le Comptoir de Ouidah*, "*La nature toute entiere est sacralisée dans le système de pensée Vodoun;*" translated, Sinou is expressing "All of nature is held as sacred in Vodun thought."²²¹ This approach to the natural environment, as I have indicated, serves to preserve specific areas held sacred to Vodun adherents for the benefit of future Vodunsi. Additionally, it enables Vodunsi to display a care ethic for Nature that exists in a realm more beneficial toward, and understanding of, the whole of Nature.

While there are Vodunsi who undertake actions that have destroyed the environment to a certain degree, I would argue, once again, that these are brought about by outside influences such as population increase and globalization, and are not representative of Vodunsi ideology as a whole but rather exemplify desperate actions performed by despondent individuals whose livelihood could cease if all Vodunsi ethical actions were upheld without mortal consideration.

Through my research, it became apparent that the act of preserving the natural environment is extremely important to the community at large. However, the symbolism and sanctity surrounding the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé* holds a supplementary importance to the entire economy of Ouidah, which benefits from the revenue brought in by tourists interested in visiting this religious site. Even more so, it is indisputable the importance that the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé* holds to

²²¹ Sinou, *Le Comptoir De Ouidah: Une Ville Africaine Singulière*, 67.

the Vodunsi who believe it to be a foundational pillar of their religious community. I have noted that the increase in tourism is displaying a negative effect upon the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé* due to the increase in visitation. Nevertheless, the response by the Vodunsi community to promote this site for visitation has been necessitated by a desire to preserve the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé*. Because the funding to complete the construction of the wall can arrive from tourist fees, the Vodunsi leaders view this as a tangible method with which to acquire the requisite funds to ensure the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé's* protection in perpetuity.

The requisite needs of previous generations, the benevolence of Vodun spirits, and the act of paying homage to the gift of the Earth are the motivators of Vodunsi stewardship. They do not undertake care for the land as a mere tangential arrangement with the deities. Action to protect and conserve the natural environment is the intent of Voduns' adherents. One's ethics are measured within Vodun society by one's ability to adhere to social norms. I have expressed how these norms within society often result from religious ideologies. Perceived action can elicit the determination of value one places upon these religious beliefs, as it does for the Vodunsi through their expression of the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé* as more important to their religious community than is the land outside of the Forest.

For Vodunsi, stewardship is more than a weekly sermon; it is an everyday practice. The relationships that Vodunsi have with their environment in general, and the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé* in particular, exemplify this notion. The actions of individual Vodunsi indicate an establishment of oneself as a member of a much larger community. The *Chef-Suprême* of Vodun expressed to me in our final meeting

that acceptance of ones' role within the Vodun community is imperative for the proper functioning of the entire religious community.²²² Melville Herskovits noted the importance of this when he wrote, "The supernatural world, integrated with the life in the world of man, forms a unified whole that, peopled with deities, ancestral spirits, familiar spirits, and human beings, make the Universe of the Dahomean."²²³ The relationships that Vodunsi have with their deities and spirits, their animate and inanimate environments, collectively denote a manner in which effective stewardship can be practiced. By dispelling the notion of dominion and instead adopting an environmental ethic predicated upon a reciprocity with the land, Vodunsi express stewardship as existing within a realm wherein humans view themselves as aspects of Nature and not a separate entity acting upon nature to achieve its own ends.

In so far as Vodun ideology is considered by some to be rudimentary, owing to it being a traditional religion, the fundamental principles of Vodun express a strong understanding of the living world and the intricacies of its parts. Vodunsi recognize their relationships with all aspects of Nature as existing in reciprocity, and they accept that this is the best method they can undertake to display reverence and appreciation for the gift of the Earth, while preserving it for future generations. While there do exist inconsistencies within Vodunsi ideals and the practices of all adherents, the preservation of the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé* for nearly four centuries, when compared to the desecration and destruction of other lands around Ouidah, is

²²² Dagbo Hounon, in discussion with author, July 2009.

²²³ Herskovits, "An Outline of Dahomean Religious Belief," 74.

indicative of the successes that can be attained by the practice of Vodunsi stewardship.

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Appendix I
INTERVIEW QUESTIONNAIRES

Interview Questions for Vodunsi

I. “My name is Hayden Janssen and I am a graduate student at the University of Montana. I am interested in the Vodun religion and how Vodunsi relate to the environment through Vodun doctrine. I have prepared a set of interview questions that I wish to ask you.” After this, I will relay to the interviewer an oral confidentiality agreement expressing that their name will not be used in the analysis of the data.

Next, I will document demographics such as gender, approximate age, and detail the interviewees’ occupation so as to establish relevance with possible land ownership and frequency of land interaction.

Construct: Determination of *Religious Historical* significance to the region and the individual as it pertains to Vodun, gender roles, and social acceptance.

- 1) How did you first become Vodunsi?
 - a) Which members of your family are Vodunsi? Which are not?

 - b) What was your first experience of Vodun like (Rituals & Ceremonies)?

- 2) What is the history of Vodun in this area?
 - a) How did your ancestors practice Vodun?

 - b) Is this area a place where people have a long tradition of practicing Vodun?

 - c) What is the history of Vodun?

 - d) How has the practice of Vodun changed over time or through generations?

II.

I am especially interested in vodunsi views of nature. My next 2 sets of questions are about this interest.

Construct: Determine *social and individual axiology* as it pertains to nature by way of assigned values and inherent values, as compared to other religions practiced locally.

- 1) How do Vodunsi view the environment?
 - a) How would you describe the Vodunsi community?
 - b) What particular value is placed upon the water or the land within your religious community?
- 2) How do these views differ from other religions in this area?

3) How do Vodunsi express the value of “X” to their religious community?

“X” =

- i. Mountains
- ii. Water
- iii. Forests
- iv. Animals
- v. Land
- vi. Sacred Forests
- vii. Vodunsi heritage
- viii. The Ocean
- ix. Wind
- x. Light

a) How is “X” important to you personally?

b) What actions do you undertake to demonstrate reverence for “X”, for example rituals, ceremonies, etc.?

III.

My last set of questions is intended to further illuminate Vodun’s sense of land care and stewardship.

Construct: Define societal threats as they apply to Vodun and establish contexts in which vodunsi, through senses of *duty and responsibility*, are attempting to combat these threats.

1) What are the problems or threats that could negatively affect “X”?

“X” =

- i. Mountains
- ii. Water
- iii. Forests
- iv. Animals
- v. Land
- vi. Sacred Forests
- vii. Vodunsi Heritage
- viii. The Ocean
- ix. Wind
- x. Light

2) Are there any actions that you can take so as to address these problems or threats with regard to “X”? Why, or why not?

Interview Questions for Non-Vodunsi

I. Introduction:

“My name is Hayden Janssen and I am a graduate student at the University of Montana. I am interested in the Vodun religion and how vodunsi relate to the environment through Vodun doctrine. I have prepared a set of interview questions that I wish to ask you.” After this, I will relay to the interviewer an oral confidentiality agreement expressing that their name will not be used in the analysis of the data.

Next, I will document demographics such as gender, approximate age, and detail the interviewees’ occupation so as to distinguish from the general populace and vodunsi. These questions are meant for those who have influenced the region through colonialism (i.e. Catholic priests, Muslim Imams, and others associated with colonial mandates, not all of which must pertain to religious license).

Construct: Outline *historical presence* and implications intrinsic within the specified religion as it pertains to the region.

- 1) Which religion do you practice?
 - a) How long have you been practicing this faith in this region?
 - b) Which members of your family conform to the same religion?
 - c) Do they live in this region?
 - d) How did you learn this religion?
- 2) What is the history of your religion in this region?
 - a) Do you know the history of your religion in this area?
 - b) Is this a place where your religion has a distinguished history of influence?
If so, how?
- 3) How has the practice of your religion transformed in this region over time?

II.

I am especially interested in your religion’s view of the environment. My next set of questions aim at distinguishing your religion’s views toward the environment from that of the Vodunsi.

Construct: Detail the *nature of value* placed upon nature according to the specified religion, and how Vodunsi values of nature are perceived by this specified religion.

1) How does your religion perceive the environment?

a) In your opinion, does this differ from the manner in which Vodunsi perceive the environment?

2) How does (your religion) express the value of “X”?

“X” =

- i. Mountains
- ii. Water
- iii. Forests
- iv. Animals
- v. Land
- vi. Sacred Forests
- vii. The Ocean
- viii. Wind
- ix. Light

a) How do you perceive Vodunsi view “X”?

b) What does (your religion) do to demonstrate an appreciation for “X”?

III.

Finally, I wish to ask you a few questions regarding stewardship and land care as it pertains to your community as a whole.

Construct: Define threats to nature as they pertain to the community at large, and illuminate fashions in which senses of *religious duty and monastic responsibility* can serve to ameliorate these threats.

1) What are the problems or threats that could negatively affect “X”?

“X” =

- i. Mountains
- ii. Water
- iii. Forests
- iv. Animals
- v. Land
- vi. Sacred Forests
- vii. The Ocean

2) Are there any actions that you can take so as to address these problems or threats to “X”? Why, or why not?

Appendix II FIGURES

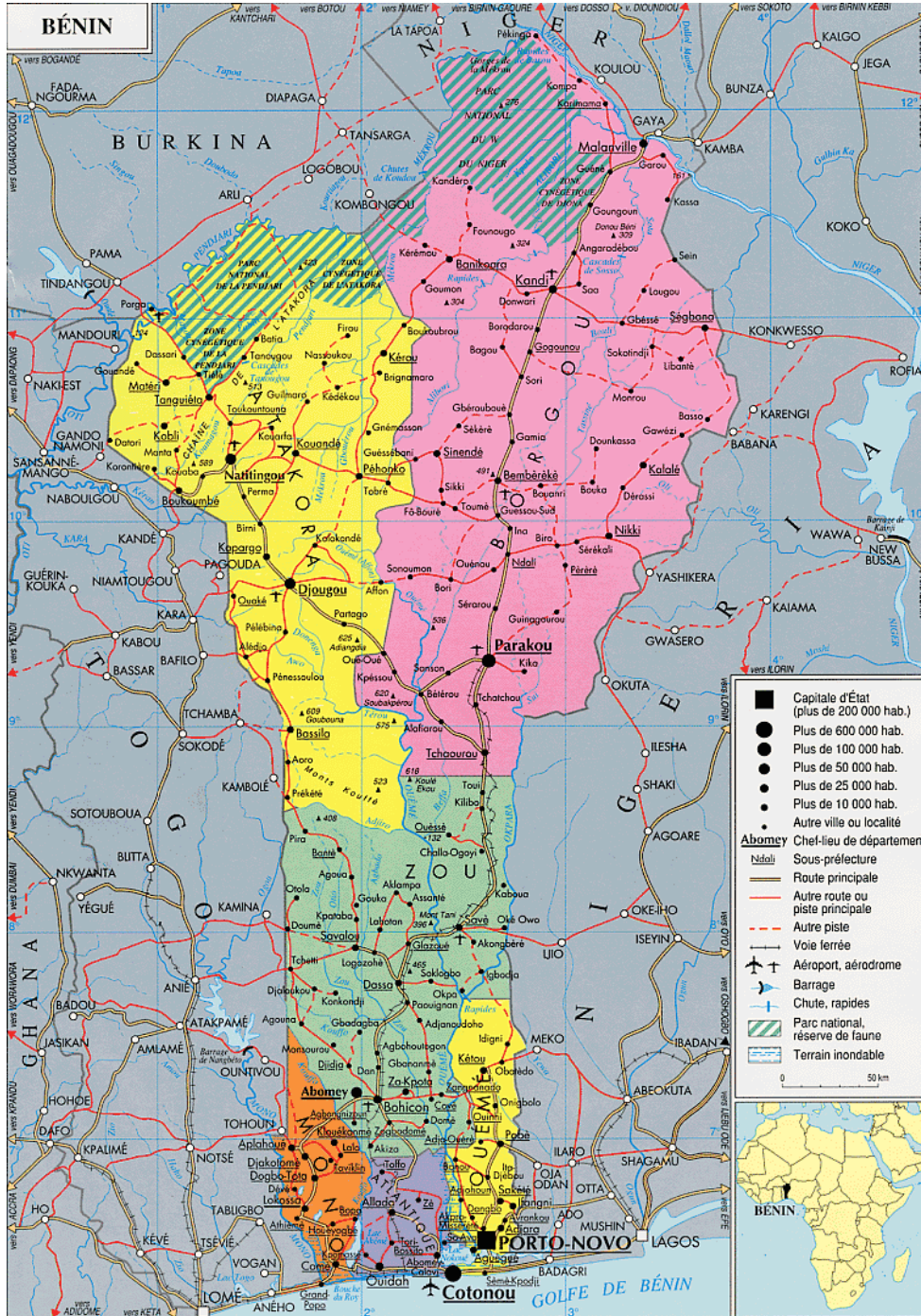


Figure 1. Map of Benin (Note Ouidah in the southwestern corner. Source: <http://www.izf.net/upload/Documentation/Cartes/supercartes/benin.png>)



Figure 2. Ocean *Pirogue* used off the coast of Ouidah



Figure 3. Monument Displaying the *Arc En Ciel* along the *Rue des Esclaves*



Figure 4. Monument along the *Rue des Esclaves* depicting the *Arc En Ciel*



Figure 5. Ouidah's *Grande Mosquée*



Figure 6. Author with Dagbo Hounon (*Chef Suprême* of Vodun)



Figure 7. Scarification on Vodunsi interviewee



Figure 8. Scarification on female Vodunsi



Figure 9. *Basilique Immaculée Conception*



Figure 10. Temple of the Pythons entrance



Figure 11. *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé* entrance



Figure 12. Author at the UNICEF beach site outside of Ouidah



Figure 13. Young Vodunsi girl in front of male god of lightning, *Hevioso*, in the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé*



Figure 14. Author with *Kpassenon*



Figure 15. Man using *Pirogue* to harvest fish in the estuary outside of Ouidah



Figure 16. Dried fish for sale along the roadside in Ouidah



Figure 17. Mural of *Bokonon* painted on Vodunsi home in Ouidah



Figure 18. Maize cultivation where *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé* land has been removed



Figure 19. *Bokonon* property marker in the middle of maize crop in Figure 18



Figure 20. Household compound constructed on *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé* land



Figure 21. Maize cultivation by tenants of compound in Figure 20, also within *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé* land



Figure 22. Rubbish pile immediately adjacent to *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé* wall



Figure 23. Author standing in front of the highest point of the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé's* protection wall



Figure 24. Author adjacent to the lowest existing point of the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé's* protecting wall



Figure 25. Author next to the central focus of the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé*, the *Loko* tree into which King Kpassé was said to have transformed in 1661



Figure 26. Rubbish behind the wall in Figure 24



Figure 27. Toilet located in the *Forêt Sacrée de Kpassé*

All Photos property of author, except for Figure 1.