RITUAL AND MYTHOLOGY IN HAITIAN VODOUN

Erika Bourguignon
The Ohio State University
Over the years, a rather considerable literature on the ethnography of Haiti has been published. One major place in this literature is occupied by studies of the Afroamerican folk religion of vodoun. Another is taken up by a sizable corpus of oral literature, collected by both Haitian and foreign students. This corpus includes such varied forms as tales, riddles, proverbs, song texts as well as much stylized anecdotal material. There are stories of zombies, werewolves (lou garou), tales of magic, kings, and of personified animals, including much of the Anansi cycle, in the form of stories of the adventures of Bouki and Ti Malice. Story telling and riddling occur in somewhat formal settings, in the evening, with a taboo on daytime performances. Standard opening and closing formulas are used. There is a considerable development of story telling skill, and there is much audience participation. Even teenagers may exhibit a sizable repertoire and a lively style of presentation. One type of narrative, however, is strikingly absent from these collections: In spite of the existence of a flourishing Afroamerican cult, with its many spirits, no myths have been collected, beyond a few fragments. The African spirits are syncretized with Catholic saints, and are represented by a rich iconography of chromolithographs. Yet, Christian hagiography and biblical accounts are poorly known, as are African myths.

In dealing with Haitian vodoun, A. Metraux (1959: 365) speaks of it as a "paganism of the West," and compared to other Afroamerican cults it seems to be "a decadent and rather bastardized African religion" (1959: 360). Herskovits (1937), on the other hand, has stressed the
specific evidence of African retentions found in Haiti, derived from several sources and regions, however with Dahomean materials predominating quite obviously.

How, then, are we to explain this curious gap in the oral literature of people among whom verbal skills rank high? Although there is, indeed, a dearth of mythological narratives to be found in Haiti, this absence is not complete, as we shall see presently. However, even if that were the case, would we have to conclude that Haitian vodoun represents a curious case of ritual without myth?

Pierre Maranda (1972: 13) speaks of myths as "stylistically definable discourses that express the strong components of semantic systems." The "discourses," furthermore, are "articulations of narrative units into plots." It is precisely the scarcity of such discourses, of such articulations of narrative units into plots, that troubles us. Yet, vodoun ritual and its associated paraphernalia clearly reveal a universe of mythological themes, and ritual behavior gives evidence of extensive and widespread knowledge of these mythological themes. In Haitian vodoun, as well as in other Afroamerican religions, characteristics of individual spirits are well known. These include sex, names, (or partial names), physical characteristics, drum rhythms, songs, dance steps, iconography in the form of both vèvè (ground drawings) and chromos, proper sacrifices, a spirit's place in a ritual sequence, appropriate paraphernalia, and much else. This complex knowledge is indispensable for the correct invocation of the spirits on ritual occasions. It is also necessary in order to deal with a spirit that appears, in the person of a possession trancer, without having been called upon. Some
kinds of information, including new songs and dance steps, praise or power names (nomes vaillants), particular preferences in food, clothing, or drink, as well as special and characteristic action patterns, may be revealed by the spirits themselves. Furthermore, the manifestation of a given spirit, say Ogoun Shango, in one person (or "horse") will never be quite the same as that in another. There is thus a basic, widely shared lore, as well as special elaborations or modifications of that lore in individual cult centers, in particular families, and with regard to the role performance of certain individuals. That is to say, information concerning the spirits may be elaborated by possession trancers while they impersonate a given spirit, on the one hand, and by worshipers during dreams (or more accurately, when reporting dreams) on the other. A further source of elaboration may be a priest's interpretation of divinatory revelations, or dreams, or of the behavior of the possessed. In brief, I wish to suggest that vodoun is a religion in flux, in a constant process of change, of elaboration and also of loss, or attrition. Furthermore, because this elaboration and modification occurs on the local level and is not subject to any centralization or formal organizing process, there are often substantial divergences in local practices, individual beliefs and, quantitatively, in the amounts of African retentions in "pure" or syncretized form. These variations are the result of a number of factors; some of them seem to go back to the apparent differential distribution of Africans of diverse provenience in the several regions of the country. Others are related to a variety of pressures from Catholic missionaries, Protestant influences, the degree of isolation and of poverty of a given rural region, or the relative
cosmopolitanism and affluence of the capital, foreign imports such as those stemming from contact with the Dominican Republic, Cuba, or Jamaica, an individual's degree of literacy, influence of the Masonic order, and so on. Still others directly reveal personal psychic pressures and elaborations or modifications of patterns in response to such pressures.

I should like to argue, then, that we may consider these cultic elements as taking the place in Haitian thought of narrative units arranged in plots. We may, indeed, then come to see that "semantic systems" may operate successfully as "collective representations" that are "structured cognitive guidelines," that are themselves "products of historical accretions and of mental processes," (Maranda 1972: 13) without, however, having recourse to formal narratives. Maranda paraphrases both Tylor and Levi-Strauss to say that "the life of myths consists in reorganizing traditional components in the face of new circumstances, or correlatively, in reorganizing new imported components in the light of tradition. (1972: 8). This is precisely what the Haitians have done in utilizing African and Christian elements in their rituals. It is precisely what we study, when we deal with the retention, syncretism and reinterpretation of African, and Christian, elements of ritual and belief in a specific modern Afroamerican context. And this is what Bascom (1972) has done, when he shows both the constancy and the variations in the continued yet diverse presence of Shango in the New World. 1

In what follows, then, I would like to stress the diversity of sources of Haitian belief and ritual, and the consequent uniqueness and novelty of the Haitian pattern. I wish to stress this in contrast to the view that sees in the Haitian situation primarily evidence of the deterioration of the African heritage. Furthermore, it must be noted in
this connection that the behavioral world of the Haitian vodouist is not completely circumscribed and accounted for by what we may define as vodoun, no more than the behavioral world of the American Catholic is circumscribed by Catholicism. Rather, it includes aspects of belief and experience drawn from other contexts as well.

We may proceed with the analysis of a specific example of mythic materials contained in remarks by one individual. In doing so, I should like to present evidence to show that the apparent massive European contribution to the content of mythic themes, particularly that derived from, or connected with, Catholic liturgy and iconography, tends to mask a fundamental continuity of African patterns of thought. Indeed, it is tempting to see this as an area to which "Romor's Rule," as paraphrased by Hockett and Ascher (1964: 137) might well be applied. In their words, "the initial survival value of a favorable innovation is conservative, in that it renders possible the maintenance of a traditional way of life in the face of changed circumstances." In the present context, this would mean that borrowed, and apparently accepted, mythic material is used in such a way as to allow the maintenance of traditional thought patterns, at least to a considerable extent. My example consists of the statement of certain mythic themes by one individual, who laid claim to a considerable degree of cultural competence. He was a laamigoum, a vodoun priest of Port-au-Prince, whom I shall call Jerome. His remarks were made in various contexts, never in the form of a true narrative. They are in some respects undoubtedly idiosyncratic, yet their analysis may prove to be illuminating on various points. Jerome was at least partially literate; he knew some
French and a few words of English. He claimed to have many loa (spirits) perhaps as many as two hundred, he thought, in contrast to country people who have only five or ten. He identified himself as a native of Port-au-Prince and rather looked down on people from other parts of the country. The capital, in his view, is the true center of the vodoun religion, for all the people of the outlying regions leave their spirits there, as did the foreigners, the Americans, the French, the English, and all the others. He also thinks himself superior to most other houngans, whom he considers to be fools. Like many, he is a member of a Masonic order.

Jerome has two hounfor (shrines), one for the Rada spirits and one for the Petro group, as is customary. The shrines are in poor repair, but are covered with a great deal of paint and heavily decorated with stars. The altars contain both Catholic and Masonic imagery, among other items there are: chromolithographs representing saints, a monstrance, a wooden painted hand with a mirror at its center, a straw hat and peasant sisal bag for the loa, Zaka, and so on.

Jerome explains that there are all kinds of loa, including loa canonisée ("canonized" loa), that is to say, deified ancestors. In the prayer said at the beginning of all vodoun rituals, all ancestors "back to Guinee" must be called upon. But, he adds, before that, even before Jesus, Grandpere Dieu must be called on in the person of St. Nicholas. This is so because St. Nicholas "is the sun, in other words, the sacrament. The sun is everywhere, it gives light. Without it, there is darkness. Therefore, the sun is God and more important than Jesus."
Among the ritual objects in Jerome's shrines there is a baton Moise—a staff or rod for Moses. Explaining this object, he refers to the biblical story of Moses and Pharaoh and of the rod that turned into a snake. (However, in this account Aaron is omitted, and it was Moses who turned the rod into a snake.) Thus, Moses has as his animal the snake—Dan, or Damballah. St. Patrick, Jerome said, was a later incarnation of Damballah. Moses used to be the president of all the loa, but he used to stammer and to drink a lot, so he passed the presidency of all the hounfor on to Loko. Moses (or Damballah) remained the chief or master of the ceremonies, watching all that goes on. Because of Moses' stammer, Damballah does not know how to speak. The first of the snake spirits to be called is always Ddan because of the following: a drawing of a T-shaped cross and a snake on it represents Jesus on the cross calling on Dan in langal (the ritual language). Dan climbed up and became Haut Dan (Ddan), High Dan or Dan up there. At the foot of the cross are the three women referred to as the three Marys. Actually, however, they represent Aida. Seeing Aida, Dan descended and entered into her. Thus, Dan bas la (Damballah), Dan down there. In this way, Aida and Damballah became one. As an alliance between himself and Noah, God put them into the sky as the rainbow.

- 7 -
All loa travel in lines of seven and the seventh is always evil. In the Damballah line, the seventh is Damballah Flambeau (Damballah the Torch). These sevenths are evil, but they are not Petro. Other examples are Erzili je rouj (Erzili red eyes) and Ogou je rouj (Ogou red eyes). They do not speak, they stick their tongues out showing that they want blood. Each line also has its own Guede of the Zaka line.

Loa have many names. This is similar to what happens when a man or a woman becomes a houngan or a mambo. They then change names and take on a nom vaillant ("power name"). In this way, a loa can take any name he wants. There is St. Jacques Majeur (St. James the Elder) who is Ogou Badagri, but Ogou Ferraille is St. Jacques Minsur (St. James the Less).

This is a rather rambling series of remarks. What can we make of it? It is tempting to dismiss it as a rather capricious assemblage of ill-digested fragments from diverse sources. This is particularly true because we recognize a large number of the sources of the themes expressed here, note their modifications and are startled by some of the juxtapositions. It seems incongruous, for example, to see an account that mixes elements of the story of the crucifixion with a phallic serpent, and destroys biblical chronology by having Noah and the origins of the rainbow follow the crucifixion! We are puzzled by the identification of St. Nicholas with the sun and with God. Yet, we may ask, is this so different from the ways mythology has grown and changed
in other times and other places? For example, in American folklore, how did the Christ Child (Christkindl) become Kris Kringle, and thus St. Nick? Eric Wolf (1964), in an illuminating essay, has suggested how the Bishop of Myra has come to be Santa Claus. This transformation makes psychological and cultural sense, but it, too, plays havoc with known mythological, etymological, and historical facts.

With regard to the Haitian materials cited above, we can identify some of the sources and note the transformations that have been imposed on the materials that we recognize. We must begin by noting that Haitian ritual, and the mythology which informs it, relates to a Haitian social reality, rather than either an African or a European one. For example, "loa canonisé" is a rather standard expression referring to the process whereby ancestors become spirits. Although the term is borrowed from Catholicism, there is little, if any, specific knowledge of the process by means of which human beings who once lived on earth become saints of the Catholic Church, nor indeed is there any reference to it. The term "saints," incidentally, is also frequently applied to the loa, individually, or is used collectively as synonymous to loa, as is sanj (angels) or mystè (mysteries). Canonized loa, then, like Catholic saints, are individuals who have been turned into a different category of being after death, and this has been done by ritual actions of humans. However, both the mythological premises and the ritual actions differ, of course, from those of Catholic practice. The vodoun process involves drawing the dead from their abode under the water and returning them to the shrines. Such ancestral spirits may possess the living as other loa do. They dance and speak, have names and personal identities, etc. Herskovits (1937:
expresses the opinion that the Petro category of spirits consists for the most part of such deified ancestors. This deification is the result of the ritual activity of human beings, who may act at what are taken to be the commands of the dead ancestors, as expressed in dreams, or in the interpretation by an houngan of the significance of illness or misfortune. In other words, the dead may be discontented and cause trouble. This is clearly in contrast to the canonization process of the Catholic Church, where the dead, to be made saints, must be shown to have had virtues when alive and to have made miracles—that is, the opposite of trouble—after death. Incidentally, the loa canonisé, who may cause possession trance in their descendants, must not be confused with the nameless dead who may be sent by a sorcerer to possess and cause illness in a victim of magic.

The contrast between loa canonisé and Catholic saints is obvious. There is, however, also a contrast between the Haitian and the ancestral African pattern. The loa canonisé are Haitian ancestors of families, not African founders of sibs or lineages. Haitians trace descent in bilineal fashion and loa, canonized or other, are inherited from both maternal and paternal sides. Nor do the major Haitians—those with clearly African names—represent unilineal descent groups. Rather, as groups or "nations"—Rada, Nago, Ibo, Congo, etc.—they reflect the contribution of numerous tribal groups to the Haitian population.

Jerome speaks of the ritual order in which God is called on first, followed by the ancestors. Observation of ritual practice shows that "calling on God" consists of Catholic prayers, and the ancestors are
called on in the "Guinea prayer." Jerome's identification of St. Nicholas with the sun is not idiosyncratic. It appears, for example, in a saying that I heard in the Leogane region: **Lev en ro, couch en ba, St. Nicholas.** (Rise above, set below, St. Nicholas). St. Nicholas is here said to be the sun, rising "above" (in the East) and setting "below" (in the West). The saying represents the statement of an ideal rule, according to which one is supposed to sleep with one's head toward the East.² The reference to the sacrament concerns the monstrance on Jerome's altar. With its circular glass center surrounded by gilded rays, it represents the sun. It should be emphasized here that Jerome's comment was made in explanation of ritual procedure (the prescribed order of prayers) and of ritual paraphernalia (the presence of the monstrance in a shrine for St. Nicholas). We are not dealing with a narrative statement of myth. The monstrance as an object serves to establish the symbolic connection between St. Nicholas/the sun, the sun/the sacrament, the sacrament/God. Yet the connection sun/God appears to be more African than Christian. Note that Courlander (1960: 320) lists the Dahomean-derived Lisa (or Lisha) among Haitian loa.

The remarks about Moses and Damballah are of special interest because of the importance of Damballah as one of the principal loa (or groups of loa). He is generally associated with the rainbow, with rain and springs of water, and with fertility. In his comments, Jerome combines several biblical references with variations on Dahomean themes. Note, however, that he again takes a ritual order of procedures (prayers) and a ritual object (a staff) as the starting point for his comments. Damballah/Moses is one of three spirits with a staff as a cult object.

- 11 -
The others are Legba and Guede. Courlander (1960) shows several photographs of wrought iron representations of Damballah. Some are snakes, others combinations of staffs and snakes. Although Damballah is a snake, we are told that Moses has the snake "as his animal." The chromo representing Moses shows him as an old man, and there is also a snake in the picture. That Moses is the oldest of the Damballah line of spirits fits well with a listing by Herskovits (1937: 280) in which we find him identified with (or as?) "the grandfather of Damballah." Because he is the most ancient, he "used to be president of all the loa" and is called on first. The remark that Moses stammered has biblical authority. It is used here to explain the inability of Damballah to speak, which is evidenced by those ritually possessed by him. Again, the mythic fragment serves to explain ritual behavior. This is in contrast to the description offered by Courlander (1960: 318) who says that the Damballa identified with Moses Fallo, while the one who is identified with St. Patrick does not.

In fact, the Damballah line is a composite of several Dahomean snake spirits. There is Damballa Hwedo, who represents "the ancient unknown ancestors" and "who surpasses all in power" (Herskovits and Herskovits 1933: 58). It is this aspect of Damballah that is ritually called on first. This is expressed in the Guinea prayer, the ritual listing of all the ancestors back to Guinée at the beginning of vodoun rituals, following the Catholic prayers, referred to earlier. The second Dahomean concept is Aido Hwedo, the pair of giant snakes, of which the male lies under the earth and the female is the rainbow. In Haiti this name has become the Aida Wedo, Damballah's mate; both
together are the rainbow. The change of the name to Aida and its reference to the female only seems to result from European influences. In the veve, Damballah and Aida are represented as two snakes, with an egg, their favorite food (Fig. 1). I have found no parallels to Jerome's crucifixion story; however, it is interesting for its multilingual word play and its phallic reference. In ritual possession, Damballah's "horses" climb up into trees and down from them and into pools of water specially built for them. The interpretation of Damballah and Aida as the rainbow is one of the few universally accepted ideas in vodoun belief. Its linkage to the biblical account of the origin of the rainbow seems to be facilitated by the mediating term "alliance:" a covenant between God and Noah, but also a union between Damballah and Aida. *Wodoun*

Another aspect of Jerome's remarks is worth commenting on. The resulting picture we get from Jerome of the Damballah group of spirits appears as follows: Odan/Moses/ancestors/snake, Damballah/St. Patrick/snake--Aida/Three Marys/snake:rainbow. Spirits can take on human and animal form or the form of a natural phenomenon, the rainbow. They can also abolish the distinction between singular and plural: Odan is the ancestors, Aida the three Marys. Spirits are associated with the elements: water in this case, whether in the rainbow, the rain, springs or, for that matter, the basins into which Damballah dives. And finally, which the connection with water and the phallic nature of the snake make association between Damballah and fertility plausible. Since a relation of kin and a ranking with aspect to seniority is believed to exist among the several Afro-Haitian spirits in the same

- 13 -
line, this seems to require a similar relation between their several counterparts whose names are taken from biblical accounts or the list of saints. At one point, Jerome uses the idea of reincarnation—which is neither African nor Catholic—to establish such a connection: "St. Patrick is a later incarnation of Moses." (The chromo of St. Patrick shows him as a bishop with several snakes on the ground before him.)

Order of incarnations is one way of expressing seniority. Similarly, as all Ogouns are related, so must their counterparts be; thus, a relationship is established between several saints called James. Note that it is the African character of the spirits that predominates in ritual and that in almost all instances the saint provides merely a name; those attributes that appear in the Catholic iconography represented by the chromos serve to establish a link between the two identities: a snake for Moses/St. Patrick and the various members of the Demballah group, iron and warfare for the Ogouns and St. James the Elder. There is the further assumption of a link among homonymous saints to reflect the relationship among loa of the same line. A crutch or stick serves to associate Legba with St. Lazarus. The syncretism between saints and African gods has, of course, been noted often. The syncretism among African spirits evident here has been commented on less explicitly, but it is clearly shown, for example, in the transformations of the Demballah group.

The idea that the loa travel in lines of seven is again not unique to Jerome. Courlander's informants similarly held to such an idea, in spite of evidence that a larger number of spirits may actually be listed in a given group (Courlander 1960: 27). One may wonder whether the notion of seven has its root in the seven off-springs of Mawu-Lisa, in the Dahomean sky pantheon. The idea that the last is
evil is perhaps a personal one with Jerome, but in Dahomean mythology
the youngest, Legba, does have a special status as a trickster.

The transformation of Legba from the youngest and the trickster
into an old spirit on a crutch and the development of the Guédés as
tricksters and fertility spirits as well as spirits of death are
beyond the scope of this discussion. They do, however, also provide
examples of "the life of myth," of the transformation of African spirits
in a new and different sociocultural context.

It is clear that this discussion has done no more than to indicate
some of the selective principles at work in the transformation of
African gods and Catholic saints into Haitian loa.

Spirits are grouped into various categories, ancestors are deified,
there exists a ritual order of prayer and invocations. The spirits are
called upon with the use of graphic representations: ground drawings
(vévé) during rituals, and their shrines contain chromos of saints and
various objects that may be used during rituals. The drawings, the
objects, the names of the spirits, and the songs sung in their honor, all
reveal their identities, as does the behavior of the possession trancers.
For example, members of the Danbhallah group do not speak, they climb up
into trees and down into water, they wriggle on the ground, they eat
eggs. Mythic statements, anecdotic remarks of the kind cited here are
indeed no more than marginal notations to ritual. The link between gods
and saints appears to be almost entirely on the level of the accessories
shown in the chromos (snakes, crutches, swords, etc.); the story pre-
sumably told by the chromo seems to have been lost. Even where a
biblical account appears to be known, the story is treated with striking
selective perception. We see this specifically in the reference to
the visit of Moses to Pharaoh and the transformation of the rod into
a snake. The wodouist sees in this a basis for identifying Moses with
the oldest of the Damballah spirits. How different this is from the
use of the same biblical account by American Blacks, where the slavery
of the Children of Israel is identified with their own! It would be
hard to find a better example of the difference in the utilization and
reorganization of the same "new imported components" among related
peoples in distinctively different situations.

In these Haitian mythic themes, we see that actions, in the form
of ritual behavior, and attributes, in the form of ritual accessories,
take primacy over narrative and plot. The reality of the spirits is
a present reality; there appears to be little concern with a mythic
time, a time of miracles, or with the spirits as invisible and trans-
cendent. They act here and now. Their social structure resembles that
of human beings; they are organized into hierarchical groups, and
family lines, they are ranked according to seniority and by types of
power, they specialize in various types of activities. Cult centers
have supernatural presidents and masters of ceremonies as well as
human ones. And spirits have foibles (e.g., they drink) much like
their human servants. African organizing principles, such as seniority,
kin groups, even lines of seven are central to the beliefs concerning
the spirits. It is these underlying principles that appear to be a
good deal more tenacious than the names or identities of given spirits
or specific stories concerning them, which have all but disappeared.
However arbitrary and bizarre Jermaine's comments may sound to us at
first, closer inspection allows us to perceive how a new meaningful
universe may be constructed by the juxtaposition of bits and pieces of
myth and rituals of other peoples and other times, to fit them into a scheme appropriate to the needs of a new society.

NOTES

1. It is interesting to note that this ethnohistorical approach, developed by Herskovits, Bascom and their students, prefigures in many respects the approach to the study of mythology made by C. Levi-Strauss and other structuralists. As far as I am aware, this kinship has not previously been recognized.

2. Note the implicit statement of spatial orientation here, the East equated with up, and West with down, which contrasts with American usage, in which North equals up and South, down.

3. Drot (1974: 67) reproduces a painting by the Haitian folk painter A. Saint Brice, titled Loa vaudou. A partly coiled snake is shown as a link between a large figure of a divinity at the upper part of the picture and several smaller figures below.

4. The idea of the youngest of each pantheon as trickster has survived elsewhere in the New World. See, for example, Eduardo (1948: 79) for reference to such a belief in the Dahomean-derived cult group in São Luís, Maranhão (Brazil).