

Recreating Collective Memories of Africa in the Afro-Caribbean Diaspora: 'Spiritual Resistance' in Cuban Santería and Haitian Vodou

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ABSTRACT

Forced to succumb to a life of enslavement, African-turned-Afro-Caribbean slaves developed a collective image of their beloved homeland and forged an unbreakable chain of solidarity among their many ethnicities. The collective recreation of Africa as manifest in the imagination of Afro-Caribbean slaves through the practice of Cuban Santería and Haitian Vodou in sixteenth- to eighteenth-century Cuba and Haiti catalyzed their resistance to European subjugation. In particular, these recreated cultural memories served as a foundation for the enslaved to subvert the dominant culture and resist enslavement. Syncretism fails to properly acknowledge the Afro-Caribbean slaves' efforts in challenging the imperial regime and the role these efforts played in maintaining their African roots. The tumultuous yet hopeful history through which Cuban Santería and Haitian Vodou evolved reveals that the African spirit continuously takes on new forms but never dies.



Keywords: Africa, Caribbean, Afro-Caribbean slaves, Santería, Vodou, enslavement, syncretism

BIO

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Africans en route to the Americas during the Middle Passage lost much of their cultural heritage. The doggedness of European colonial officials in their erasure of lasting cultural memories was largely responsible for the irreversible loss of components of African religions and music.¹ Forced to succumb to a life of enslavement, African-turned-Afro-Caribbean slaves developed a collective image of their beloved homeland and forged an unbreakable chain of solidarity among their many ethnicities. Cuban Santería and Haitian Vodou, both Afro-Caribbean religions originating in modern-day Nigeria², are important manifestations of this newfound solidarity. This research argues that during the sixteenth to eighteenth century, Africans in Cuba and Haiti facilitated the collective recreation of African-ness by practicing Cuban Santería and Haitian Vodou. This allowed Afro-Caribbean slaves to successfully resist European attempts to suppress their religious and musical practices. Through this ‘spiritual marronage,’ – a term coined by Gómes-Cásseres³ – they were able to endure the intolerable brutality of slavery.

Afro-Caribbean Resistance Against European Repression

Though Yoruba prisoners of war with a broad knowledge of religious practices were among the Africans who traversed the Middle Passage during the eighteenth century, European colonial practices significantly reduced the amount of knowledge that they were able to retain and the number of individuals with this knowledge. In Cuba, only twenty out of the hundreds of orishas (gods of Santería) worshipped in Africa survived to have any lasting impact on the religious practices of the Afro-Cubans. Still, African slaves used the orishas that they did retain to suit their present needs. For example, they called on Chango, the warrior orisha in Santería, to withstand the inescapable oppression to which they were subjected. Worshippers of Haitian Vodou also used their Iwas (gods of Vodou) to challenge colonial rule. They called on the Petwo, a group of vengeful and violent creole Iwas originating from Kongo and Angola, to counter their initial displacement and subsequent enslavement in Haiti.⁸ Although Santería and Vodou were formed under slavery and colonization, Afro-Caribbean slaves used the resistive capacities of their deities of a bygone Africa to protest their state of destitution.

¹ Bettina E. Schmidt, “The Creation of Afro-Caribbean Religions and Their Incorporation of Christian Elements: A Critique against Syncretism,” *Transformation* 23, no. 4 (October 2006): 237, <https://doi.org/10.1177/026537880602300407>.

² Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert and Margarite Fernandez Olmos, *Creole Religions of the Caribbean: An Introduction from Vodou and Santería to Obeah and Espiritismo* (New York: New York University Press, 2011), ProQuest Ebook Central, 39.

³ Patricia González Gómes-Cásseres, “Afro-Cuban Religions: Spiritual Marronage and Resistance,” *Social and Economic Studies* 67, no. 1 (03, 2018): 118, h

⁴ Schmidt, “A Critique against Syncretism,” 237.

⁵ Paravisini-Gebert and Olmos, *Creole Religions of the Caribbean*, 41.

⁶ Paravisini-Gebert and Olmos, 36.

⁷ Paravisini-Gebert and Olmos, 125.

⁸ Maya Deren, *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1953), 62, quoted in Paravisini-Gebert and Olmos, 121.

Restricted from openly worshipping their deities in sixteenth and seventeenth century Cuba, Afro-Cuban slaves had to find other ways to oppose European domination. While Afro-Cuban cabildos often served this role, the Spanish imperial regime would often use these separate societies that fostered African solidarity through public gatherings and religious processions to further restrict religious expression. Their first method to achieve this goal was to stimulate interethnic conflict among the Afro-Cubans. Specifically, they allowed only certain dances to be performed in a short window of time on specific days and prohibited the display of African iconography during parades. Aware of this colonial scheme, the Afro-Cubans sustained ties to their African roots and asserted their communal solidarity. The king, queen, and captain, the three most important figures of the cabildos, rallied under an identifying flag while outfitted in royal and military attire – a bold statement in and of itself. Even though each cabildo was associated with a Catholic saint, the Afro-Cubans secretly worshipped their ancestral gods.⁹ Thus, instead of further dividing the Afro-Cubans along ethnic lines, the cabildos allowed them to maintain a sense of religious and political autonomy through their collective memory of Africa. In doing so, they effectively countered the prevailing social order narrowly focused on weeding out their cultural practices.

Unlike the restrictions put in place by Spanish colonizers to restrict African religious expression in Cuba, the laws designed to suppress Vodou in seventeenth and eighteenth century Haiti were unmistakably repressive. Despite the law's attempt to eliminate any trace of this 'devilish' religion, Haitian slaves subverted the social order by taking up arms against whites, congregating in meetings, and escaping bondage. Vodou equipped these slaves with the power to undertake these acts of defiance. If for any reason a slave attacked a white person, they would either be given the death penalty – either broken alive on the wheel, or flogged.¹⁰ Undaunted by these punishments, in 1758, infamous Haitian religious leader François Mackandal attracted a large group of maroons through the transgressive power of Vodou to eliminate whites from the colony.¹¹ These networks of followers across estates were instrumental in attempts to overthrow the colonial framework in Haiti. Though Mackandal's death at the hands of authorities later that year effectively suppressed the rebellion,¹² he rallied enough slaves whose religious convictions were steeped in the power of Vodou and African unity to attempt to supplant the social order.

Though short-lived, Mackandal's Conspiracy inspired slaves to congregate and collectively rebel in spaces free of the watchful eyes of planters. In violation of

⁹ Paravisini-Gebert and Olmos, *Creole Religions of the Caribbean*, 36.

¹⁰ Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, *Social control in slave plantation societies: a comparison of St. Domingue and Cuba* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1971), 79, HathiTrust.

¹¹ Hall, 40.

¹² Hall, 41.

the Police Rulings of 1758 and 1777 which "...prohibited the slaves, under penalty of death, from meeting during the night or day,"¹³ they violently attacked planters and recklessly raided plantations during Vodou meetings.¹⁴ This shared religious solidarity that fueled these insurrections gave rise to slave revolts that would emerge during the Haitian Revolution. During this time, religious conviction fuelled similar acts of resistance in Cuba – though not leading to revolt as quickly. Afro-Cuban slaves similarly resisted slavery by absconding from their owners to congregate. It was in the palenques, fortified settlements on the periphery of society,¹⁵ to which Afro-Cuban slaves escaped slavery and continued to practice Santería¹⁶ using a combination of percussion instruments and coded call-and-response vocals to communicate.¹⁷ In developing strong community networks rooted in a collective representation of Africa, Haitian and Afro-Cuban slaves resisted their conditions to protect their cultural practices from erasure.

Though Haitian and Afro-Cuban slaves escaped to areas where they could safely practice their religions, they remained influenced by a colonial structure where Roman Catholicism was the only religion officially permitted.¹⁸ Steeped in the belief that Santería and Vodou were against everything Christianity stood for, European planters were determined to expunge the slaves' 'strange' practices with "proper Christian behavior."¹⁹ The law both reflected and shaped this mode of thinking. Under Articles II and VI of the Code Noir, every slave had to be baptized and instructed in the Catholic, Apostolic, and Roman faiths.²⁰ But the inability of planters and lawmakers to enter the spiritual realm of worshippers of Santería and Vodou meant that the latter could worship their African gods under the guise of Catholic saints. Roger Bastide recounts how during a Catholic ceremony, Haitian slaves who appeared to be dancing before a Catholic altar were most likely worshipping their African deities.²¹ Under the threat of severe punishment, the slaves went to great lengths to safeguard their memory of Africa, preserve their African religious traditions, and reclaim their humanity.

¹³ Leslie Gérald Desmangles, *The Faces of the gods: vodou and Roman Catholicism in Haiti* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 26, HathiTrust.

¹⁴ Desmangles, 27.

¹⁵ Paravisini-Gebert and Olmos, *Creole Religions of the Caribbean*, 36.

¹⁶ Paravisini-Gebert and Olmos, 40.

¹⁷ Barbara Bush, "African Echoes, Modern Fusions: Caribbean Music, Identity and Resistance in the African Diaspora," *Music Reference Services Quarterly* 10, no. 1 (October 22, 2007): 19, doi:10.1300/J116v10n01_02.

¹⁸ Paravisini-Gebert and Olmos, *Creole Religions of the Caribbean*, 35.

¹⁹ Reed, "Shared Possessions," 7-8.

²⁰ ANP (Archives Nationales de Paris), File F52; File F3, 90: 110-21, quoted in Desmangles, *The Faces of the gods*, 23.

²¹ Roger Bastide, *African Civilizations in the New World*, trans. Peter Green (London: C. Hurst and Company, 1971), 156, quoted in Paravisini-Gebert and Olmos, *Creole Religions of the Caribbean*, 38.

Through the prohibition of musical performance, specifically drumming, European slaveholders attempted to sever the Afro-Caribbean slaves' connection with Africa and its cultural practices.²² Since the drums had the power to blur ethnic divisions among imported Africans and in turn encourage them to embrace their common African identity, these restrictions were felt far and wide. Slave revolts and successful attempts at marronage were opportune moments for the slaves to use the drums to resist colonial rule. Furthermore, through their "...imitation of tone and sound of the Lucumí language,"²³ the drums reminded Afro-Cuban slaves of the strength they wielded over their white masters, which increased their willingness and ability to unseat their oppressors. Even when the "rhythms of resistance" were prohibited, slaves used their bodies to call on the Afro-Cuban orishas and Haitian Iwas for assistance in surviving their seemingly inescapable condition.²⁴ Since the Africans' religions and music existed in a spiritual realm that was largely inaccessible to the Europeans, their recreation of Africa in their collective consciousness was never entirely severed.

Critiquing 'Syncretism' as Theoretical Frame

Even though cultural encounters between Afro-Caribbean slaves and Europeans were characterized by resistance and suppression, this process led to the merg

-ing of old cultural traditions to forge new ones, a process Frederick Ortiz calls transculturation²⁵ "Santería" for example literally means devotion of Catholic saints,²⁶ and each Cuban orisha and Haitian Iwa is associated with a Catholic saint.²⁷ While apologists see this as evidence of the fact that Cuban Santería and Haitian Vodou are syncretic religions, the relationship between the Vodou Iwa Dambala and the Catholic Saint Patrick is one such example that illustrates why the label 'syncretic' is a mischaracterization. In 406 AD, St. Patrick, a man of Romano-British origin, was brought to Ireland by Irish pirates as a slave. He eventually escaped his condition and was reborn into an evangelizer. By linking St. Patrick's experience of slavery, hardship, and freedom with Dambala's, the Master of Waters in Vodou, and their own experience of the same sort, Haitian slaves destroyed the "...imperial dichotomy of...the colonizer and the colonized."²⁸ Syncretism assumes that the dominant religion drives the 'creolizing' process of both religions forward. But the reverse is true. Africans incorporated Christian elements in their religions to continue to "see the world through the religious prism of their African ancestors."²⁹ Thus, the only purpose Christianity served was to further the slaves' cause of liberation against the tyranny of oppression, thereby bringing them closer to their past life in Africa.

²²Schmidt, "A Critique against Syncretism," 237.

²³ Paravisini-Gebert and Olmos, *Creole Religions of the Caribbean*, 79.

²⁴ Bush, "African Echoes, Modern Fusions," 21.

²⁵ Fernando Ortiz, *La africanía de la música folklórica de Cuba* (Havana: Ministerio de Educación, Dirección de Cultura, 1950), quoted in Bush, 19.

²⁶ Schmidt, "A Critique against Syncretism," 236.

²⁷ Paravisini-Gebert and Olmos, *Creole Religions of the Caribbean*, 33, 172.

²⁸ Schmidt, "A Critique against Syncretism," 239

²⁹ Katherine Gerbner, "Theorizing conversion: Christianity, colonization, and consciousness in the early modern Atlantic world," *History Compass* 13, no.3 (2015): 138, doi:10.1111/hic3.12227, quoted in Gómes-Cásseres, "Afro-Cuban Religions," 123.

Conclusion

Afro-Caribbean slaves developed Cuban Santería and Haitian Vodou based on a collective memory of Africa that was “...frozen at the point where blacks boarded the ships that would carry them into the w³bes and horrors of the middle passage.” Using this recreated memory of Africa as a foundation, they subverted the dominant culture and resisted enslavement. They resisted their condition by adapting their gods to the circumstances of an unforgiving environment, preserving their cultural practices in the Afro-Cuban cabildos, inciting slave rebellions and pursuing marronage through religion and music, and discreetly worshipping their gods in place of Catholic saints. Syncretism fails to properly acknowledge the Afro-Caribbean slaves’ efforts in challenging the imperial regime and the role these efforts played in maintaining their African roots. The tumultuous yet hopeful history through which Cuban Santería and Haitian Vodou evolved reveals that the African spirit continuously takes on new forms but never dies.

³⁰ Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 189, quoted in Schmidt, “A Critique against Syncretism,” 240.

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