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Theater 126

Final Project (Essay #2) / Haitian Revolution

*Vodou as a Revolutionary Force*

In *The Kingdom of This World,* Alejo Carpentier narrates the Haitian Revolution through the lens of historical research and stories of real-life perspectives that he coins as “lo real maravilloso,” or the marvelous real. In it, he details the power of the Haitian people to resurrect from the horrors of slavery and revive both those enslaved and a culture to resist and fight the violence of colonial rule. My reading of Carpentier’s novel in this essay is combined with the teachings of Professor Bayyinah Bello, Millery Polyné, and Priestess Manbo Katy, in order to argue with them that the religion of Vodou and its practices should not be overlooked as a foundational force in the rebellion and the sustenance of the revolution over centuries of struggle. The ritual performances in ceremonies of the Haitian religion Vodou was a form for spiritual and healing connections and a liberating praxis used to assemble cultural community, unity, and ideas of sovereignty that were necessary to empower the Haitian people in their battle for independence during the Haitian Revolution and beyond.

The Vodou religion’s survival throughout history can be drawn back to when Indigenous Africans were stolen and enslaved for the capitalistic needs of European colonizers. The religion traveled across borders and was practiced by those enslaved on Saint Domingue. In Alejo Carpentier’s book, we see how the performances of Vodou functioned as a spiritual practice that enabled people to form political relationships that fueled notable revolutionary events. In the book, we first are hinted at Vodou religion’s influence when a Vodou priestess is visited by Mackandal and Ti Noël after discovering a mushroom that can cause a “dog’s muscles” go “into spasms” and its body “shaken by violent convulsions.” (15) The book refers to her spiritual powers related to Vodou when she “sank her arms into a pot of boiling oil” and later when she “pulled her arms out of the oil, there were no blisters.” (15) It is because of this set up and the essential role this priestess like-figure played that the beginning of a series of events in which animals and slave owners were later poisoned depressed the colonial rule. Carpentier narrated this story to show the marvel of the marvelous, the way in which one’s influence functions through the religious performance of prayer and knowledge of the earth and its miracles. The priestess in a sense performs this miracle in front of Mackandal and through the narration of Ti Noël that highlights the ways a story is told between people as forces of revolution to develop knowledge of the poison’s power to kill the oppressor.

Further into the book, practically a huge turning point in the story and narrated as an essential beginning to the Haitian Revolution itself is when we meet Dutty Boukman, a revolutionary leader guiding the revolt at a Vodou ritual ceremony. He leads the ceremony attended at great risk by hundreds of men and women planning the revolt in an empowering speech explaining how their “…gods seek vengeance. They will guide our arms and give us aid,” (42) illustrating how their spiritual beliefs empowered their motivations and need to revolt. The scene continues with a woman speaking the names of Ogun’s, spirits of the Vodou, before sacrificing a pig to solidify their oath. This Vodou ceremonial ritual performance is the precedent to the start of the slave revolution that brought “death to the owners, the governor… and all Frenchman of the world.” (48) It is this ceremonial performance that united those enslaved and organized them in a way that would successfully take over thousands of armed oppressors. Their religion fueled their beliefs, and their beliefs helped energize their will to dismantle the systems of slavery.

Expanding on the role of Vodou in revolution, the performance of symbolic figures of the religion are just as influential as the ceremonies. According to Professor Bayyinah Bello, a Haitian scholar and historian, when speaking about the revolutionary general and leaders in an interview from the film *Black Dawn and Haitian Pilgrimage Haiti Rising,* she refers to Toussaint L'Ouverture and Jean-Jacques Dessalines as a Legba and Ogun. She says that “Toussaint is a Legba in Vodou, by his name, by his functioning…by everything he did.” She continues by saying that “he is a pure living Legba.” In Vodou, Legba is one of the Loa’s of the Haitian religion. A Loa is what we would consider as spiritual deities that connect the living to the spiritual world. She extends this Vodou embodiment to Dessalines, which she refers to “as an Ogun.” His role as an Ogun was that “Once the collective has established an objective, the Ogun brings this objective quick to materialization.” Bayyinah’s explanation suggests that the performance of these immortal and spiritual gods within coveted revolutionary leaders creates a connection necessary for revolution: belief. One could say that during the revolution, the Haitian people looked at these revolutionary figures as evoking spiritual embodiments of those they worshipped and prayed to. Haitians respected these spiritual leader’s decisions and guidance, thus uniting the enslaved for their liberation. Just like the ritual practice of spiritual possession, Bayyinah’s depiction of L'Ouverture or Dessalines makes it seem like within them were these spiritual symbols, strengthening their image and simultaneously strengthening the Haitian people.

To further the importance of Vodou performances in the history of the Haitian Revolution, I connect two separate accounts of the religion in both the past and contemporary periods. In the CNN article, “Haiti and the Distortion of its Vodou Religion,” Millery Polyné and Elizabeth McAlister examine the historical roots of its practice. They explain that Vodou originated in “the creation of the descendants of African slaves who were brought to Haiti.” The religion was “turned to when they were brutalized” referring to the Haitian people. It was the religion’s performances of ritual and practices that guided them towards empowerment and strength that the “French slave owners considered Vodou a threat,” which shows just how integral the ceremonies were in bringing people together and its importance in both culture and political discourse. Through the suppression of Vodou and colonial pressure on assimilating to the dominant religion of that time, Catholicism, it’s revitalization in contemporary time sustains its powerful influence in liberation and freedom, both past and present.

Just two hundred years later, Vodou Priestess Manbo Katy takes us on her journey to revitalizing Vodou within the Haitian community post-Earthquake of 2010. She explains that the “spirits were calling me to do my service and my work. Vodou comes from the enslaved people of Africa…It was Vodou that liberated them.” The video documents her ceremony and the performance of rituals, such as the spiritual possession, but also shows the exchange of generosity that inspires her humanitarian work. Manbo Katy describes these practices as healing and community-building. We also see an intermixing of religions, with a makeshift cross next to Vodou religious items, showing the survival of the religion throughout the systems of assimilation and the importance of women in its revitalization. It shows the bravery and perseverance of the Haitian people both past and present because of the survival and maintenance of Vodou’s rituals and ceremony performances. These were the forces necessary to fuel revolution and liberation. It is because of the close ties to culture and Vodou that we too can share the importance of the Haitian Revolution in the history of our world.

By learning from the past and uncovering the crossroad of performance and revolution, we can better understand how this can influence the way we move into the future. The spiritual practices of Vodou healed, protected, and empowered those in the Haitian Revolution and in the present, not only builds upon this but figures itself into a contemporary space that unites people and revitalizes culture. It was in the ritual performances that forged revolutionary unity in the past and cultivated a community in the present. In history, while being careful not to compare but learn from one another, there are revolutions that follow a similar model where spiritual practices such as embodied storytelling or dance that overcame colonization are continuously looked toward to establish inspirational stories and cultivate culture. It is the performance of these stories of history that allow people to solidify their belief in themselves and their ideas. We find unity in these stories, ones that bring us together in one world, in one kingdom, that allow revolutions to become sites of influential history, strength, and liberation.

*Works Cited*

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