

# Ethnological Counterpoint: Fernando Ortiz and Jean Price-Mars, or Santeria and Vodou

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## Abstract

This article is a comparative reading of Ortiz's *Los negros brujos* published in 1906 and Price-Mars's *Ainsi parla l'oncle* published in 1929. This reading goes back to the beginning of the 20th century and also takes into account more recent Santeria and Vodou scholarship in an effort to determine if these religions are still cooking (Palmie) now that anthropology has happened.

## Keywords

humanities, Africa, area studies, humanities, comparative history, history, history of philosophy, foreign languages, language studies, literature, religion, philosophy, world religions, religious studies, social anthropology, anthropology, social sciences

Fernando Ortiz and Jean Price-Mars coincide in space, time, as well as in scholarship and ethnological studies of Afro-Caribbean people and religions. Ortiz was born in 1881 in Cuba and died in 1969, whereas Price-Mars was born in 1876 in Haiti and also died in 1969. This could very well be where the coincidental similarities end. Ortiz was White, Price-Mars was Black. *Los negros brujos* was first published in 1906 in Havana, merely 20 years after the Spanish colony of Cuba had abolished slavery, when Ortiz was 25 years old, and the Republic of Cuba was in its infancy (8 years old). *Ainsi parla l'oncle*, on the other hand, was published in 1929, when Price-Mars was 52 years old, Haiti was occupied by the U.S. Marines, and the Republic of Haiti was 122 years old. The year 1804 marked not only Haiti's independence but also the abolition of slavery. In this sense, Haiti is a much older country than Cuba, just as *Ainsi parla l'oncle* is a work of maturity and *Los negros brujos* is a work of youth.

Enough numerology, now is the time to weigh the colonial against the postcolonial approach to the people and the religions of African origin that thrived in the Caribbean environment. Rather than an attempt to compare two similar yet distinct Afro-Caribbean religions, or to find the interface between these religions and the study of these religions, this is a comparative reading and interpretation of Fernando Ortiz's *Los negros brujos* and Jean Price-Mars's *Ainsi parla l'oncle*. Although this article is a reference to Ortiz's *Cuban Counterpoint* published in 1940 in Miami, Florida. I will be focusing on an earlier Ortiz here: the Ortiz who wrote *Los negros brujos* (*The Black sorcerers*). Although Ortiz would eventually be considered part of the negritude movement and even coin the concept of transculturation, when he published *Los negros brujos* at age 25 his thought process and outlook contained all the remnants of a slave holding society.

To begin, Ortiz's *Los negros brujos* was to Cuba what Price-Mars' *Ainsi parla l'oncle* (*Thus spoke the uncle*) was to Haiti in the sense that both were ethnological texts that focused on the culture, the folklore, the religion, and the society of, respectively, Cuban or Haitian people of African ancestry. Both texts also explained, analyzed, and explored the past, the present, and the future of what, for the time being, I will refer to as Afro-Catholic-Caribbean religions.

Initially, Price-Mars set out to give the Haitian people a sense of identity and self-worth by rehabilitating their folklore. Critics such as McAlister (2013) see Price-Mars's efforts to put Vodou back where it belonged—in the heart of Haitian popular culture—as a response to the U.S. Marine occupation of 1915–1934, and “in step with decolonizing cultural, movements throughout the Americas, including negritude and Pan-Africanism” (p. 215). To “shift African cultural traits to occupy a position of positive value” (p. 215), Price-Mars (2009) first sought to distinguish Vodou from magic and give it the status of a religion by relegating magic to a primitive stage ascending march toward the light and making religion, as the critic André Corten (2009) believes, the result of a process of rationalization.

André Corten (2009) writes that Price-Mars succeeded in rendering Vodou respectable. In other words, Vodou and Catholicism were much the same in their beliefs and their rituals. Unfortunately, the point of arrival is a belief that Vodou will—if not disappear—eventually become nothing

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more than a folkloric curiosity having been totally replaced by the Christian faiths. What Corten sees here is a false revolution as well as an involuntary effort on the part of Price-Mars to continue being accepted by the Haitian elite, a class to which he belonged.

En rendant le vaudou respectable Price-Mars a dévoilé l'absence d'hégémonie dans la société haïtienne et la vulnérabilité de cette société à une idéologie totalitaire [ . . . ] L'exaltation du peuple peut l'enfermer et l'enfoncer. (Corten, 2009, p. 355)

By rendering Vodou respectable, Price-Mars revealed the absence of hegemony in Haitian society and the susceptibility of this society to a totalitarian ideology [ . . . ] The exaltation of the people can box the people in and sink them). (My translation)

Unlike Price-Mars' approach described above, Ortiz's point of departure was to demonstrate that the Cuban underworld differed from the European underworlds because of the African influence. Initially, Ortiz set out to describe this particular segment of the population whom he labeled fetishists and social parasites. Therefore, on the one hand, there is Price-Mars' resignation, and on the other, Ortiz's impatience to be rid of what he judges to be a social parasitism. Although, as Jorge Ramírez Calzadilla (2005) explains, Ortiz will gradually introduce new theoretical and methodological perspectives in his studies, texts such as *Los negros brujos* "[ . . . ] reveal prejudice, erroneous appreciations, and imprecisions regarding fetishism, witchcraft, amoral religions, religious indifference, Afro-Cuban religions, and negative racial bias" (p. 197).

In spite of the stances taken by Ortiz in 1906, the ethnographer Stephan Palmié (2013) states in his recent book, *The Cooking of History*, that what Louis Pasteur did for lactic fermentation was what Ortiz did for Afro-Cuban religion. The term, or the construct, or for that matter the label Afro-Cuban religion, however, is very problematic as far as Palmié is concerned and merits much analysis and questioning. Likewise, the study of Haitian Vodou has undergone similar research and reassessment in the past few years. For that matter, Palmié's description of the number of acquisitions catalogued under BL2532.S3 (Santería) could easily be applied to Vodou because innumerable studies of Vodou have been published in the past 20 to 30 years. The number of volumes published demonstrate that "anthropology happened" (Palmié, 2013, p. 262), so in the very recent past it has become necessary to revisit the interface of the study of these religions and the religions themselves precisely because anthropology did indeed happen.

This comparative reading of Ortiz and Price-Mars, however, constantly goes back to the beginning of the 20th century, two dates, 1906 and 1928, the dates of publication of the two ethnological texts. Nonetheless, this comparative reading also serves as a means of determining if the two thinkers were in fact correct in their forecasting of the fate of

these religions or if these religions are in fact dynamic phenomena that, in Palmié's words, are historically "still cooking."

What is most surprising in this comparative reading is that the conclusions that Ortiz draws are not much different from Price-Mars': the idea that intellectual progress will debilitate and eventually do away with superstition. In other words, science is the answer (Ortiz 1973). Both thinkers also believe that there will be a progressive de-Africanization of these religions and, according to Ortiz (1973), once Santería ceases to be considered a religion, only its healing and divining characteristics will remain, and these call for a more developed intellect than that of the Black sorcerers. In the end, however, the Black healers and diviners will be unable to compete with the White healers and diviners. In other words, as an evolutionary flaw, *brujería* will eventually disappear and, along with it, its primitive and immoral practitioners, "salvages traídos a un país civilizado" (p. 230; savages brought to a civilized country). Ortiz therefore calls for a social sanitization, cleansing society of *brujería* and eradicating its parasites. (If I am using the term *brujería* in this particular instance, it is because it is not so much because I hesitate as to which term I should use; this is how Ortiz refers to Santería.)

With that last parentheses in mind, and before I proceed to the comparative reading, I would like to say that if I appear tentative in the naming of these religions it is because the present interferes. As Palmié pointed out, more and more studies of African-derived religions are being published. Even the term *syncretism* that has been polemical for centuries is now being reconsidered by critics such as Palmié. Fernández Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert (2003) trace it back to the 17th century when it was used to define true religion against heresy and later applied by scholars to the early forms of Christianity. Fernández Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert affirm that syncretism is not a value-free concept. "The identification of Creole religions as syncretic is problematical and disparaging: a Eurocentric bias limits the definition to non-European religions, negating their full legitimacy" (p. 9). Consequently, Fernández Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert choose to replace a term such as *syncretic* with the term *creole*, a term first used in the Americas to refer to native-born persons of European ancestry, and argue that, "Creolization—that is, the malleability and mutability of various beliefs and practices as they adapt to new understandings of class, race, gender, power, labor, and sexuality—is one of the most significant phenomena in Caribbean religious history" (p. 4).

The Haitian Leslie Gerard Desmangles (2006), on the other hand, does not appear to contest the notion of syncretism, and simply begins the essay titled "African Interpretations of the Christian Cross in Vodou" by stating that scholars who have written about Vodou have called it a syncretism, in other words an amalgam of various religious traditions. "This religious syncretism developed into a

system of correspondences between the largely Dahomean elements and Roman Catholicism of Europe” (Desmangles, 2006, p. 41).

Such terminological debates have rendered the classification of these religions and cultures all the more problematic. In fact, with every new volume they tend more and more to elude classification and to defy simple definitions. Such difficulties render this historical approach more challenging, in the sense that the terms and the labels used in the past, by both Ortiz and Price-Mars, are no longer acceptable today and must therefore be constantly justified and explained.

As far as labeling and classification goes, Price-Mars (2009) writes that around 1860 the religion of the slaves still lacked a name. Fifteen years later, Moreau de Saint-Méry (1958) gave these religions the designation of Vodou and offered a short description of the dances and practices in *Description de la partie française de Saint-Domingue*. In fact, only seven out of a total of 1,422 pages are dedicated to Vodou in Moreau de Saint-Méry’s formidable text, and they are nestled between the description of the slaves’ tendency to perform abortion and consume drugs, and their prowess at whistling, their love of the night, their fear of zombies, and their incapacity to remain faithful to one sexual partner.

The term Vodou itself merits in-depth thought. Kate Ramsey (2011) affirms that both the orthography and the etymological debate over Vodou have now been settled. Today, Vodou is the name by which these religions are known in official Kreyòl orthography and most recent scholarly writing (Métraux, 1972, for example, uses the orthography Voodoo.) The critic Karen Richman (2013), in turn, writes that in Kreyòl the term Vodou refers to a genre of ritual music and dance and, that as a legacy of the African cultural past, the term is the Fonje (Benin) word for spirit. Instead of saying, “I practice Vodou,” or “I believe in Vodou,” practitioners speak of being Catholic and serving their spirits (sèvi lwa; Richman, 2013, p. 118). Karen McCarthy Brown (2006) adds that Haitians do not often call their religion Vodou, a term that still refers to a particular dance and ritualizing. Instead, the Haitians refer to an activity, they say they serve the spirits. McCarthy Brown believes that human suffering is a major impetus for serving the spirits.

The spirits are called lwa, pronounced like the French word loi (law). Fernández Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert (2003), in turn, begin by distinguishing the multiplicity of meanings conveyed by the term Vodou: as only the rites derived from the Arada and Nago; as a complex of rites including others clustered around the Arada and Nago, such as the Ibo; and as all Afro-Haitian rites including those of the Congo and Petro. It is to the last one of these definitions that they adhere.

As to the etymology of the word Vodou, while the American folklorist William W. Newell traces its origins back to the Vaudois, a heretical sect in medieval Switzerland and France (Ramsey, 2011), Jean Price-Mars argues that the word in fact came from the former Dahomey. The critic

Suzanne Blier (1995) elaborates on this by explaining that the cultural origins of Vodou reside in the lower areas of Benin (formerly Dahomey) and Togo, a region known to early European travelers as the Guinea Coast or the Slave Coast. Desmangles (2006) also traces the word Vodou back to Dahomey and defines the word as “company” or “family of the gods” (p. 40).

If, to this point, reference is not being made to one religion but to several, it is because there is not one African religion, quite the contrary. Not only has the origin, the meaning, and the interdependence of certain African beliefs not been established, as Price-Mars (2009) writes, but, “[ . . . ] les nègres n’adorent point le même dieu” (p. 129; Blacks do not adore the same God). Moreover, slaves taken from Africa were of very different national and cultural origins. According to the critic Paul Lovejoy (2006), of approximately 467,000 slaves sent to Latin America in the 17th and 18th centuries, 42,240 came from West Africa, 352,590 came from West Central Africa, 6,096 came from Southeast Africa (countries such as Uganda, Kenya, Rwanda, and Tanzania), and there were another 65,997 whose origins could not be identified. Because there is no hard and fast borderline dividing West Africa from West Central Africa, in contrast to the rather clear distinction between sub-Saharan Africa and Northern Africa, countries such as Ghana, Togo, and Nigeria could belong to both West and West Central Africa, in geopolitical terms. West Africa is comprised of 16 countries, from Mauritania and Mali in the north to Senegal and Guinea in the west, Niger and Nigeria in the east, and Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea, and Gabon in the southernmost regions of this non-Bantu speaking area composed of people who spoke a variety of languages, including Gur, Kwa, and Mande. On the other hand, West Central Africa could begin where the non-Bantu speaking West Africa ends: with the Bantu languages that originate from countries such as Nigeria and Cameroon and that were also spoken in Angola and the Republic of the Congo. The result is a certain homogeneity and at the same time a plurality of identities and cultures that make it difficult, if not impossible, to establish the cultural origin of the African religions transplanted to the Americas.

In an effort to pinpoint the origins of Vodou, Price-Mars (2009) begins by finding similar beliefs and rites from the coasts of the Atlantic Ocean, to the Indian Ocean, all the way to Somalia, and onto the border of the northwestern and eastern deserts. Thus, Price-Mars draws an arbitrary line separating an animistic Africa from a “more or less” Christian or Muslim Africa (p. 49). This dividing line, however, is broken at times. A good example of the soft border that separates animistic Africa from Islamic Africa is the syncretic God Obatalá, a fusion of the African Obá and the Islamic Allah: Further proof of the synchronicity of the African religions and also of the impossibility of determining which slaves came from which nation once they had been transported to the new world. In fact, there was no effort at all made to preserve the slaves’ identity: The masters much preferred to

separate slaves of similar national and cultural origins precisely in an effort to erase their identity.

Consequently, there was to be a fusion of African religions among these religions themselves, and also a fusion of African religions with Islam, with Native American religions and Catholicism as well. The result is a hybrid religion or religions, whose constant characteristic has been a proximity to nature and also a strong conviction that the saints or the gods, as well as the key to man's well-being or doom, are in the plants and trees of the forest as opposed to the heavens. As a result, the ties that bind religion and ecology are evident, and they are constantly expressed in the literatures and ethnological texts of the nations of Latin America. As a matter of fact, not only were the Afro-American religions considered to be closer to nature, but the practitioners were as well, as is so obvious in Fernando Ortiz's *Los negros brujos*.

While the terms *brujería* (sorcery or witchcraft), *santería* (saint worship), and *Obeah* are used to designate the religions of African ancestry in Cuba, these same religions merged to become Vodou (spirit worship) in Haiti.

The complete title of Ortiz's work is *Los negros brujos* (*Apuntes para un estudio de etnología criminal; con una carta prólogo de Lombroso*) (*The Black sorcerers* [notes for a study of criminal ethnology; with a prologue/letter from Lombroso]). Cesare Lombroso was an Italian criminologist who believed that criminality was an atavistic defect that was inherited and that could be detected in certain physical defects. In the short letter that serves as a prologue to *Los negros brujos*, Lombroso applauds Ortiz's work and suggests that perhaps Ortiz could gather some information relative to the cranial and physiognomic abnormalities, as well as to the tactile sensitivities, of a certain number of delinquents and sorcerers, and in an equal number of normal Blacks.

Ramsey (2011) finds it striking that formalized ethnological studies of Haitian popular ritual did not have their beginnings in Lombrosian criminal anthropology as they did in the early works of Ortiz. What also warrants attention, but that Ramsey considers beyond the scope of her book *The Spirits and the Law* is the extent to which Ortiz's "own reevaluation of Afro-Cuban culture was stimulated by and/or stimulating for that which the indigéniste writers and Jean Price-Mars were advocating at the same moment in Haiti" (p. 180).

Lombroso's prologue/letter sets the tone for *Los negros brujos*. In the first chapter, titled "La Mala Vida Cubana" (The Bad Cuban life), Ortiz begins by asserting that although beggars, delinquents, and the full spectrum of sexual vices can be found in all the great civilized capitals of the world, in Cuba some of the factors contributing to the "mala vida" (bad life) cannot be found anywhere else. Ortiz (1973) adds that these particular factors have in many ways molded the Cuban psyche, "*hasta en las más inferiores capas de nuestra sociedad*" (p. 9; . . . even the most inferior layers of our society). Ortiz proceeds slowly and carefully: The Cuban criminal underworld differs greatly from the criminal underworld

of other countries, and this difference is of an anthropological nature. Before explaining this assertion, Ortiz finds it opportune to provide a description of Cuba's racial components: the White race, the Black race, the Yellow race "que significó psicológicamente poco en la sociedad cubana" (p. 14; of little psychological significance in Cuban society), and the Copper or American race "de casi nula influencia" (p. 10; of little or no influence). Therefore, having ruled out the influence of the Yellow and Copper races, the two races that Ortiz takes into consideration in this ethnological study are the Black race and the White race.

After providing a brief description of the White race in Cuba, descendants of conquerors, explorers, and settlers, Ortiz introduces the Black people of Cuba, the descendants of those who found themselves in a strange country, slaves with no country of their own, without family or society, "con su impulsividad brutal comprimida frente a una raza de superior civilización" (p. 13; with their brutal repressed impulsiveness resisting a more civilized race). At this point, Ortiz has not yet explained how the Cuban criminal underworld differs from the criminal underworld of other countries. As I mentioned before, Ortiz proceeds very slowly and carefully: Armed struggles and conspiracies against Spain certainly contributed to this difference, as did the deficient regimen of the colonial government, as did immigration, as did slavery. In fact, for Ortiz, the anthropological focal point in the Cuban "bad life" is slavery and its consequences. However, if Ortiz is denouncing slavery, it is not so much because it strips human beings of their freedom and dignity, but rather because it has a negative influence on the slaveholders: "La misma esclavitud en que tenían que vivir los negros y hasta los chinos, al menos durante largo tiempo, influyó desfavorablemente, contribuyendo al atraso moral de los blancos que estaban más en su contacto, haciéndolos más rudos y crueles" (p. 14; The state of slavery under which the Black people, and even the Chinese, had to live produced a negative impact, and contributed to the moral backwardness of the White people who were in close contact with them and rendered them [the White people] crude and cruel).

To defend this thesis, Ortiz cites Marivale and Humboldt who both believed that civilizations declined under the influence of slavery because of the daily proximity to slaves, in other words because of the slaves' negative influence. But not only does the Black race undermine and taint the White race by sheer proximity, Ortiz explains that there is yet another factor differentiating the Cuban underworld from the European underworld: miscegenation, the mixing of bloods and the mestizos who are a result of this racial admixture. Ortiz alludes to the lasting unions between White men and Black women in the past 50 years (since 1856), and insists on these unions being between White men and Black women, not the contrary. To justify this declaration, Ortiz quotes the French anthropologist M. de Quatrefages who explained that in these unions the father was almost always the one belonging to the superior race because White women did not usually descend as low. Furthermore, the mestiza born of those



unions was usually proud of her father's blood and consequently refused to mix her own blood with the blood of someone belonging to the Black race.

Ortiz did admit that the White race could be prone to banditry, and attributed this somewhat negative trait to the spirit of the adventurers and the conquerors. But the point that Ortiz is trying to get across is that it was in fact the Black race that was largely responsible for the Cuban *bad life* (*mala vida*), and this because of the Black race's superstitions, such as *brujería*, organizations, languages, dances, and illegitimate children. The term *illegitimate children* was used both literally and figuratively by Ortiz, meaning that, for Ortiz, in 1906, the religion known by names such as Lucumí, Santería, Regla de Ocha, in other words the religion practiced by the people of African ancestry (as well as by the descendants of slaves, by the descendants of unions between White masters and their slaves, or between White people and Black people, or mestizos and either White or Black people, and even by White people) was also defined as an illegitimate child. Furthermore, according to Ortiz, this religion is one of the principal characteristics of the Cuban underworld.

Thereafter, Ortiz (1973) draws the following conclusion:

[ . . . ] la inferioridad del negro, la que le sujetaba al mal vivir era debida a falta de civilización integral, pues tan primitiva era su moralidad como su intelectualidad, como sus voliciones, etc. Este carácter es lo que más lo diferencia de los individuos de la mala vida de las sociedades formadas exclusivamente por blancos. (p. 21)

The inferiority of the Black people, which subjected them to the bad life, was due to their integral lack of civilization, so primitive were their moral standards as well as their intellects and their wills, etc. This is what differentiates the individuals from the underworld from the societies composed exclusively of people of the White race.

If I have lingered on the first chapter of *Los negros brujos*, it is to better contrast it to the beginning of *Ainsi parla l'oncle*. This is in no way an attempt to rehabilitate Price-Mars, merely to show the trajectory of two different thinkers. As I mentioned before, Ortiz begins with much prejudicial judgment, only to end with the notion of transculturation in the 1940s. Price-Mars, in turn, begins with an effort to demonstrate to the Haitian people the value of their folklore, and ends up siding with the tyrannical dictatorship of François Duvalier. In this sense, I agree with the critic Rodney Saint-Éloi (2009) who writes that there are grounds for killing the Uncle and taking upon oneself the approach to identity, race, culture, and Africa, “[ . . . ] il y a lieu de tuer l'Oncle, et d'assumer sa propre parole sur l'identité, la race, la culture, et l'Afrique” (p. 262).

Kate Ramsey (2011) explains that the violence that terrorized Haiti can be attributed partly to the fact that the elder Duvalier was well known for his efforts to “iconographically appropriate, ideologically manipulate, and institutionally co-opt the popular powers of Vodou” (p. 12). Ramsey then adds

that defenders of Vodou such as Price-Mars paved the way “for the emergence of the sign of Vodou as an indispensable object of political identification and struggle” (p. 13). This could very well be one of the many intersections where Duvalier and Price-Mars meet: the elder Duvalier himself having been an ethnologist who published articles along with his collaborator Lorimer Denis in *Les Griots* and the *Bulletin du Bureau d'ethnologie* in the late 1930s and 1940s. According to Patrick Sylvain (2013), three thinkers formed the trinity of Duvalier's intellectual, spiritual, and political life: the first two were Lorimer Denis, a fellow student and collaborator; Jean-Price Mars, both Denis's and Duvalier's social studies teacher; the third thinker being Dumarsais Estimé, Duvalier's Mathematics teacher. In fact, Duvalier began his career as an ethnologist “who invested in efforts to recuperate a Haitian identity that would be pro-Black and identified with African culture” (McAlister, 2013, p. 215). Such social and historical confluence will forever link Price-Mars to the era of Duvalier. Interestingly, the scholar Karen McCarthy Brown (2006) takes the patriotic and political character away from Vodou by affirming that healing is the primary business of these religious systems. “In fact, it is not an overstatement to say that spirituality and healing are synonymous in the Afro-Caribbean” (p. 2). This approach appears to contradict the opinion of critics such as Louis Maximilien who consider Vodou to be “un culte du drapeau” (a cult of the flag; Wexler, 2006, p. 71).

In passing, it should be mentioned that Louis Maximilien's (1945) classic work *Le Vodou Haïtien* was dedicated to Jean Price-Mars. Although Price-Mars appears to have ended up in a politically compromised place, and Ortiz to have been totally rehabilitated, for the time being I would like to stop and consider these two texts side by side: Where Ortiz saw atavism, Price-Mars saw Bovaryism; where Ortiz blamed, Price-Mars described, defined, and set out to restore pride in Haitian identity, culture, and religion; where Ortiz pointed to a primitive, amoral mentality, Price-Mars saw folklore; where *Los negros brujos* began with the intention of pointing an accusatory finger at the people and religions of African ancestry, *Ainsi parla l'oncle* began with an effort to define African folklore. Often, the two thinkers arrive at the same conclusions, but they always approach the problem from totally different angles.

Price-Mars (2009) begins by posing a simple question: “Qu'est-ce que le folklore?” (p. 11; What is folklore?). This is an attempt to define two Saxon words—in this case words borrowed from a foreign language—to determine the literary and scientific value of Haitian folklore that includes traditions, legends, stories, beliefs, poetry, oral histories, and superstitions. To proceed in this investigation, Price-Mars sets out to discover the symbolic dimension of the lore of the people and to compare them with those of either more or less civilized societies: what amounts to a method known as comparative ethnography. However, it should be taken into serious consideration that the Haitian critic P. Bellegarde-Smith (2006) believed that the elites preferred to view Vodou as

folklore in an attempt to render it relatively harmless as a curiosity, which might continue to inspire music and dance. Bellegarde-Smith remembered his mother telling him on numerous occasions when he was a child that the Haitian ethos had refused to die to become true folklore.

With that caveat in mind, I will pursue this reading of Price-Mars' rendering of folklore. As religion falls under the rubric of popular beliefs, and is consequently to be included in the lore of the people, Price-Mars asks another simple question: What is religion? First and foremost, for Price-Mars religion is not, as the etymon of the word suggests, *religio*, *religare*. Price-Mars even judges this etymology to be of a doubtful nature. Rather than the notion of the ties that bind man to God, Price-Mars much prefers Emile Durkheim's sociological vision of religion that establishes a division rather than a binding or a *religio*. Such a division establishes the separation of the sacred and the profane. At this point, Price-Mars sets out to demonstrate that Vodou can be considered a religion because it satisfies all the requirements of a religion, and this for several reasons including the belief in spiritual beings, as well as a hierarchy of priests, a society of followers, temples, altars, ceremonies, an oral tradition, and an attempt to explain natural phenomena.

In this effort to rehabilitate Vodou, Price-Mars analyzes the objections to Vodou being a religion, the first one being that Vodou is amoral. This notion of amorality versus morality comes into play both in *Los negros brujos* and in *Ainsi parla l'oncle*. Price-Mars argues that all religions contain their moral standards that are tied to the mental evolution of a group. If the degree of moral standards depends on the quantity and network of interdictions in a chosen religion, then Price-Mars argues that Vodou cannot but be considered a religion. Just to list a few of the taboos and commandments of Vodou: There is to be no exceeding the 8-day deadline for the baptism of a newborn; there is to be no pronouncing the baptismal name of the newborn, especially at night; there is to be no incest; there are to be no irreverent acts performed near the fountains where the spirits reside; there is to be respect of the elderly; no wearing black when mourning a child; no burying the dead without washing and without certain talismans.

But yet another objection to Vodou being a religion has to do with Vodou's ties to magic and sorcery. Price-Mars (2009) admits that it is difficult to determine where religion ends and magic begins:

[ . . . ] si la magie est l'autorité que se confère l'individu et grâce à laquelle il se croit en mesure de disposer de toutes choses et principalement des forces qui l'environnent [ . . . ] alors nous nous demandons de quel nom il faut appeler l'acte de tous ceux qui, forts de leurs prières adressées à la divinité chrétienne, promettent processionnellement l'image de tels saints en vue d'arrêter les tempêtes. (p. 45)

If magic is the authority that the individual gives himself and thanks to which he believes himself capable of disposing of all

things, especially the forces that surround him [ . . . ], then we wonder by what name we should call the act of those who, empowered by their prayers to the Christian divinity, parade in processions the image of such and such a saint in an effort to quell the tempests.

Ortiz, in turn, states that all the African regions from where slaves originated were bastions of fetishism. By definition, a fetish is any object regarded as having magical potency. For Ortiz, who states that even the Afro-Cubans who call themselves Catholics are in fact fetishists, fetishism is religion in its most primitive form: It is simply an attempt to explain natural phenomena that culminate in an anthropomorphization of these same natural phenomena. The result is that wind, water, fire, rocks, and trees are infused with life, a magical way of approaching and interpreting the environment.

Price-Mars (2009), in turn, approaches fetishism with a simple question: "Mais qu'est-ce que le fétichisme?" (p. 99). After explaining that the word comes from the Portuguese *feitico*, which in turn comes from the Latin *factitious* (artificial), and was used by the Portuguese navigators who had observed that in the western coast of Africa the natives appeared to worship rocks and shells, Price-Mars (2009) explains why this conclusion is, if not erroneous, at least incomplete:

Non, ce n'est ni la coquille, ni la pierre, ni l'idole en bois sculpté, ni même les animaux que l'indigène d'Afrique adore. Le plus arriéré de ces hommes peut être convaincu qu'un élément impondérable, une force occulte s'incarne quelquefois en tel objet ou tel animal, de même que la forêt, le tonnerre, le fleuve, la mer, la terre lui paraissent doués de volonté, de désirs, de passions [ . . . ]. (p. 100)

No, it is neither the shell, nor the rock, nor the idol sculpted in wood, nor even the animals that the African native adores. The most backward of these men can be convinced that there exists an element beyond his understanding, an occult force that is sometimes incarnate in such and such an animal, in the same way that the forest, the thunder, the river, the ocean, and the earth appear to be endowed with willpower, desires, passions . . .

What Price-Mars is indicating is that even the most primitive people are confronted with the same ontological and moral questions as the most civilized people: Is there a supreme being? What is the meaning of life? What is man's relationship with the world in which he lives? Where can one find the answers? According to Price-Mars, questions such as these induce both primitive and civilized people to envisage a theogony, the difference being that while civilized people seek the direct intervention of God, more primitive minds believe that the tutelary divinities are unconcerned by mankind's petty needs, hence, the fetish, the intermediaries, the spirits that can be found in the elements of the natural world, the river, the tree, the shell.

As far as fetishism goes, Ortiz and Price-Mars arrived at very similar conclusions, although they approach the issues differently. In spite of his attempts to rehabilitate Haitian identity and culture, Price-Mars does suggest that fetishism or animistic African religions are in fact inferior and primitive and often cites Lucien Lévy-Bruhl's ethnographic text titled *Les fonctions mentales dans les sociétés inférieures* (Mental Functions in Inferior Societies). Just like Ortiz, Price-Mars (2009) draws the conclusion that there is indeed a primitive mentality that confuses ideas and emotions, as well as the image and the object:

Le Noir estime que, dans tout phénomène de la nature [ . . . ] il existe une puissance spirituelle, ou esprit dynamique ou efficient (niâma en mandingue) [ . . . ] de là le culte des génies personnifiant les forces naturelles et celui des mânes des défunts [ . . . ]. (p. 108)

The Black man believes that in all the natural phenomena there are spiritual powers, or a dynamic and efficient spirit (a niâma in Mandingo) [ . . . ], thus the cult of spirits that personify natural forces and the spirits [mânes] of the dead . . .

Both Ortiz and Price-Mars agree that these rites and beliefs are surrounded by a veil of secrecy. Ortiz alludes to the secrecy that allows the cults and beliefs to preserve their prestige, their value, and their importance, whereas Price-Mars explains secrecy as an attempt to recruit souls through fear, and concludes that secrecy is what most distinguishes magic from religion: There exist religious communities, there are no magical communities. Although Ortiz reiterates that the rites and practices of these primitive religions were confused and bastardized in Cuba, he does affirm that the one African religion that triumphed in Cuba and Brazil was the religion of the Yoruba or the Nagos known as lucumí.

Price-Mars, in turn, begins by asking where Vodou comes from, but instead of designating a place in a geographical zone or space, he initially points to a place in time: Bois Caïman, Lenormand de Mézi's plantation, August 14, 1791. This is the backdrop for what is known as *le serment du sang* (the oath of blood). Thus, began a revolutionary that was to last 11 years and culminate on January 1, 1804, with the abolition of slavery and a proclamation of independence. According to E. McAlister, all the elements of Haitian independence fell outside the European conceptual frame of reference and therefore outside the realm of possibility. "Europeans' racial assumptions of the fundamentally lower state of civilization of Africans, for example, made it impossible for blacks to overthrow whites" (McAlister, 2013, p. 210). For that matter, McAlister adds that pagans could not vanquish Christians.

The oath, pronounced on a dark and stormy night, was a total rejection of the God of the White man and an acknowledgment of the Vodou God. It could very well be that similar oaths were pronounced elsewhere, perhaps in Cuba, in Brazil, or in the Dominican Republic, but the oath at Bois

Caïman was the only one recorded and has remained in many ways inalterable. Such an oath prompted the evangelist Pat Robertson to draw the conclusion that Haiti deserved the February 12, 2010, earthquake because the Haitian people had made a pact with the devil in 1791.

Indeed, Vodou and Santería can be used to cause harm and provoke imbalance. Just like the Greek gods, the tutelary divinities propitiated in these religions have human characteristics: They may be envious, or resentful, or hateful, but they can also be kind and understanding. The negative personality of these orishas or mânes or niâmas has given these religions a reputation of devil worship, but the description of Vodou that can be found in Moreau de Saint-Méry's text and the pantheon of gods presented by Price-Mars, as well as by Ortiz, shed a totally different light on these religions. If the Greeks did not worship Satan, neither did the slaves. Besides, it is not very difficult to understand why the slaves rejected the White man's God: Worshipping this God amounted to spending a lifetime in chains. At a given moment, the only two options were liberty or death, a hubristic alternative pronounced, whispered, and shouted by all the silenced people of Latin America.

As a means toward an end, as a cry of freedom, as a denunciation of injustice, the religions of African ancestry may at times be considered amoral and hateful, but there was no other choice. Furthermore, the Satan of Catholicism could simply be the enemy, or in this case another peoples' tutelary divinity. Price-Mars explains that a Vodou king and a Vodou queen preside over ceremonies and act as interpreters to the divinity who is none other than the snake. But this is not necessarily the snake of the Garden of Eden. Price-Mars considers this to be a much more subtle ritual, a spiritual incarnation, homage rendered to the divinity, the snake, followed by songs that serve as a *cri de guerre* (death rather than enslavement) and dances, known as *monter vaudou*, where the divinity seats itself in the head of a chosen practitioner.

Much of this knowledge of the practices of Vodou that Price-Mars presents to the readers of *Ainsi parla l'oncle* does not, however, appear to be first-hand. To describe the Vodou dances, Price-Mars quotes extensively from the first volume of Moreau de Saint-Méry's monumental work, *Description topographique de la partie française de l'île de Saint-Domingue*, that was first published in 1797. As to Moreau de Saint-Méry's wealth of knowledge, it is the result of much archival research. In the short biography of Moreau de Saint-Méry that precedes the *Description topographique*, Professor Blanche Maurel points out that thanks to his social and political contacts Moreau de Saint-Méry was able to accumulate a wealth of documents that was inaccessible to the general public, particularly the archives of the Marine Department, of the Counsels, of the Ministry of Agriculture, and of predecessors such as Lefebvre-Deshayes. The question is whether this takes authority away from the Uncle, and also why the Uncle felt that it was sufficient to quote from a late 18th-century text. Granted, Price-Mars believed that Moreau de



Saint-Méry's text was the only authentic document containing serious facts relative to the religious practices of the Blacks of Saint-Domingue, but 150 years separated Moreau de Saint-Méry's findings from Price-Mars' investigations, 150 years of history, which meant that the practices could have in no way remained stagnant; in Palmié's words, *they were still cooking*. After all, the Uncle was referring to practices that had survived.

One aspect of the Vodou rite that Price-Mars believed had been abolished with time was snake worship. To substantiate this, Price-Mars refers to his own personal experiences with Vodou and the fact that he had been present at perhaps 100 ceremonies and had not once witnessed any type of homage rendered to the snake. Comparatively, according to Ortiz, although Vodou—or what he labels as the cult of the snake—took roots in Cuba, it did so quite superficially. Ortiz adds that the only reference to Vodou in Cuba can be found in Henri Piron's text *L'Ile de Cuba* published in Paris in 1889. Piron warns of the harms that the *vodús* cause and refers to Vodou as an infamous sect.

However, the Cuban dances and rituals that Ortiz describes much resemble those of the Vodou ceremonies. What mainly differentiates Ortiz's description from Price-Mars' is that Ortiz makes frequent allusions to the sexual nature of these dances and Price-Mars does not. In one instance, Ortiz refers to the lascivious movements of the dance; in another, he describes the sweaty Blacks who remove their shirts and show off their lustrous busts and bronzed arms. All this culminates either in what Ortiz labels as sexual irritation and consequently an orgy, or a truly religious experience, a quasi-epileptic trance resembling demonical possession, where a participant is possessed by the saint. This is known as *subirse el santo a la cabeza*, literally a saint climbing up to someone's head, much like *monter vaudou*. Ortiz likens this to the term *subirse el alcohol a la cabeza* (alcohol going up to one's head).

Ceremonies such as the ones described by Ortiz and Price-Mars may suggest that these religions are turned toward darkness. Price-Mars writes that the Vodou ceremonies demand complicity of the night as well as secrecy. The fact that Vodou worships or worshipped the snake makes Vodou all the more suspicious. Although Ortiz firmly believes that Vodou was of little or no influence in Cuba, except in the most corrupt spheres of *criollo* society, he does describe a *baile de la culebra* (serpent's dance) danced around a boa to words sung in a mixture of Spanish and African: *La culebra se murió, sángala muleque*. This particular dance was performed specifically on the *Día de Reyes* (Three Kings Day, or the day the wise men brought gifts to the newborn Jesus), a day reserved by Blacks for the celebration and ritual pantomime of their temporary freedom, which consisted of carrying an enormous artificial snake through the streets of Havana and of stopping at houses asking for their bonuses (much like trick-or-treating at Halloween).

The critic Vera Kutzinski writes that the above-mentioned practice was suggestive of various snake cults, and subsequently quotes the Cuban poet Nicolás Guillén vividly recalling the day on which he wrote the poem *Sensemayá: Canto para matar una culebra* (Sensemayá: Song for Killing a Snake): January 6, 1932, the *Día de Reyes*. Sick in bed, a popular Negro song composed for killing snakes kept resounding in Guillén's head: *Sámbala, culembe, sámbala culembe*. In an attempt to understand why this song had come to mind, Guillén arrives at the conclusion that it was because he had been reading Ortiz's *Los negros brujos* at the time. Kutzinski believes that this was a dimension that escaped critics such as Keith Ellis who saw in the snake a symbol of imperialism.

"On the one hand, *Sensemayá* seeks to reenact an ancestral ritual designed to reaffirm and strengthen the slaves ties with their African heritage" (Kutzinski 140), Kutzinski writes before pointing out that *matar la culebra* (killing the snake) is synonymous with *matar el tiempo* (killing time) and that killing time, in turn, is synonymous with keeping time, or "keeping alive a tradition in the timeless space of tradition" (p. 140). Furthermore, Kutzinski judges that the poem generates a message similar to the one articulated in the execution scene in Alejo Carpentier's (2006) *The Kingdom of This World*, a homage rendered to the slave revolts in 18th-century Haiti. At the origin of these revolts was the houngan, or Vodou slave/priest François Mackandal who was executed on a Monday in January (an allusion to Three Kings Day) for having initiated a wave of poisonings and revolts in the northern part of the country. Legend had it that instead of being burnt at the stake Mackandal took the shape of a butterfly, rose up in the air, and was saved. Thereafter, packets of poisons used to cause upheaval and economic damage were known as *macandals*. Here, we come full circle: the ties that bind santería and Vodou, and the alleged darkness of these practices.

In defense of ophiolatry, or snake worship, Price-Mars argues that it was a concrete form of deification at a given period of the evolution of humanity: Didn't Moses transform his wand into a serpent that was worshipped in the temple of Jerusalem until 700 BC? Price-Mars then adds that this expression survives in snake worship, in a collective fear of killing snakes, as well as in liturgical dances, in ecstasy, and in sacrificial rites. However, these elements form only a part of Vodou. Price-Mars is of the opinion that Vodou has undergone a historical evolution that ties it to Catholicism. At times, it seems that the Uncle is attempting to rehabilitate Vodou by announcing its progressive morphing into Catholicism.

Once again, Ortiz and Price-Mars agree, the only difference is that to demonstrate the ties that bind Santería and Catholicism, Ortiz (1973) likens Santería to an insect that is trapped and eventually chews off one of its legs to be free and survive.



[ . . . ] el fetichismo se desprendió de algunas de sus partes secundarias, para alcanzar una vida más segura y duradera [ . . . ] El culto católico practicado en Cuba no era en efecto esencialmente distinto del fetichista [ . . . ]. (Ortiz, 1973, p. 154)

Fetishism let go of some of its less essential parts in exchange for a more secure and lasting life [ . . . ] The catholic cult practiced in Cuba was not essentially different from the fetishist cult.

Ortiz writes, before proceeding to list the many similarities between Catholicism and fetishism and perhaps even suggesting that Catholicism itself is a syncretic religion.

Some of the analogies include orisha worship and saint worship; the worship of statues and images; the importance of colors; the cult of relics, of scapularies, of amulets, of cords, of blessed palm fronds; animal worship and symbolism, for example, the snake and the lamb of God. Albert Métraux (1972) also believes that Vodou ritual borrowed heavily from Catholic liturgy: the singing, the praying, and the kneeling to stir up the lwa (Métraux's orthography); the use of holy water, the profanation and stealing of the Host, and the coincidence of saints' days and lwas' feasts.

The newly converted slaves immediately adopted and understood the catholic cult of the saints. The result is that Obatalá soon became the Christ and the Holy Sacrament, or vice-versa, Shangó became Santa Barbara or Santa Barbara became Shangó, and Yemanyá became the Virgen de Regla. "[ . . . ] sumaron a su panteón todos los orishas católicos, algunos de los cuales se asimilaron totalmente a los suyos" (Ortiz, 1973, p. 158; they added to their pantheon all the catholic orishas, some of which were totally assimilated with their own orishas).

Price-Mars (2009) lists this correspondence of Catholic saints and African tutelary divinities as well. Just to provide a few examples: Legba, the father, the great master, who became Saint Anthony; Ougou Badindjo who became Saint James the Elder; Agomme Tonnerre, the spirit of thunder, who became Saint John the Baptist; Maîtresse Erzulie who became the Holy Virgin or more specifically the Holy Virgin of the Nativity; the Sirène, or the Siren, who became the Assumption of the Virgin Mary; and Pierre d'Ambala who became Saint Peter. "Il est évident que l'olympie vaudouesque est chargé d'une plus riche déité. Nous n'avons voulu citer ici que les dieux dont les attributs et les noms ont été confondus avec les saints du calendrier romain" (p. 197; it is obvious that the Vodou Olympus has more gods. We only wanted to cite as examples those names and attributes have been confused with the saints of the Roman calendar).

Also known as mystères, anges, saints, or les invisibles, the lwa, as Olmos and Paravisini (2003) state, provide the link between the humans and the divine. "Their Protean nature and the multiplicity of their possible avatars or manifestations can be disconcerting to those unfamiliar with the

religion and its practices" (p. 120). Consequently, the multiple emanations of a lwa could very well explain why some lwas are mentioned in one pantheon and others are not.

Absent from Price-Mars' pantheon of lwas are Shangó, the god of thunder, and Ogu, the warrior god, unless Shangó is Agomme Tonnerre and Ogu is Ougou Badindjo. But it could very well be that these lwas were known by another name in Price-Mars' pantheon. As to the assimilation of lwas and saints, Métraux (1972) is of the opinion that it was superficial in Vodou and that the one and only example of a Catholic saint being substituted for an African God is that of Saint John the Baptist who took the place of Sogbo and Shangó in the role of storm god. As to Ogu, there are several different manifestations of this lwa. For example, there is Ogu the warrior God who is Ogún in *Los negros brujos*, also a warrior God and brother to Shangó, the second great orisha and God of thunder. Métraux also mentions Ogu-badagri, master of lightning and storm; Ogu Badindjo, the sea God; Ogu-yansan, a petro lwa; Ogu-ferraille, the warrior God identified with Saint James the Elder. Although Métraux believes that the assimilation is superficial and that there is only one example of substitution, there seems to be a difference between substitution and representation because Métraux does establish a representational link between Saint Patrick of Ireland and the snake God Damballah-wèdo because of the snakes at the feet of this saint, between our lady of Sorrows and Ezili-Freda-Dahomey because of the jewelry with which Our Lady of Sorrows is decked, and either Saint Lazarus or Saint Anthony and Legba because the two Catholic saints are generally shown as old men. Ortiz, in turn, identifies Ogún with San Pedro, Saint Peter.

Either the correspondence between the African lwas and the Christian saints was not yet extant in Moreau de Saint-Méry's time, or Moreau de Saint-Méry does not consider it to be of great significance as it does not appear to be mentioned in the *Description topographique*. What Moreau de Saint-Méry does dwell upon are dangers involved in the practitioners' quasi-hysterical fears of the Vodou king as well as in the frenetic nature of the trances and dances, two aspects of Vodou that Price-Mars will approach scientifically.

Once established that snake worship belongs to colonial Vodou and that the only remnants of colonial Vodou are the dances, the ecstasy, and the sacrifices, Price-Mars puts forward the thesis that Vodou is a neurosis and, to better discard this thesis, quotes Dr. J. C. Dorsainvil who wrote in 1913 that Vodou was a racial and religious neurosis characterized by a split personality with functional alterations of sensitivity and mobility. Price-Mars has some reservations as to Dr. Dorsainvil's conclusions and turns to Charcot, Babinsky, and Janet who analyze these manifestations in light of a theory of hysteria. What Price-Mars is in fact doing is summoning psychiatric medicine to examine mysticism and mystic experiences. The conclusion is that the pathological nature of these

manifestations is in fact hereditary and this explains why the Vodou trance or crisis is transmitted from family to family.

In this sense, both Ortiz and Price-Mars are of the same opinion: The dances and trances are atavistic remnants of a primitive, uncivilized past. The gaze is colonial, and Ortiz's interpretation and relegation of African religious practices to social parasitism is colonial as well. Price-Mars, in turn, aims at a postcolonial interpretation and acceptance of the religions that were taken by force from Africa and transported to the Americas where they thrived. But the question is as follows: Does Price-Mars miss his mark? Maryse Condé (2009) is of the opinion that although Price-Mars rehabilitates Vodou, he does arrive at a surprising conclusion that Condé attributes to the prejudices of his times: The idea that Vodou will eventually disappear. Condé's reaction is, "Non, le vaudou ne disparaîtra pas, pas plus qu'Haïti!" (p. 273; no, Vodou will not disappear, no more than Haiti will!).

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In the words of Michel Foucault in *Archaeology of Knowledge*, there are documents that turn into monuments. Documents such as these were penned by Moreau de Saint-Méry, by Price-Mars, and by Ortiz, and they need not be perfect documents. Just as Gustavo Pérez-Firmat (2006) declared in *The Cuban Condition* that Ortiz was not a good scientist, likewise both Moreau de Saint-Méry and Price-Mars are not necessarily good scientists. Their documents, however, act as portals because they always suggest a new dialog. Ortiz's *Cuban Counterpoint*, for example, is in favor of agricultural diversification, and similarly these ethnological documents are in favor of religious and cultural diversification: They create a need to see the world transculturally. If nations are never made, neither are religions and cultures. It could very well be that failure came from seeking independence instead of interdependence. After all, as Ortiz suggests in *Cuban Counterpoint*, even sugar was mulatto.

Now that anthropology has happened, the questions still linger: Is science the answer? Has there been a de-Africanization of these religions? For that matter, are these systems of faith disappearing? And are there now more anthropologists than practitioners? Will the holistic medical systems of Vodou and Santería be replaced by modern medicine? As Bellegarde-Smith (2006) points out, Vodou did survive the Middle Passage. So it could very well be that secrecy is still part of the recipe.

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