

OFFICIAL VODOU AND VODOU  
CHURCHES IN HAITI  
THE VODOU CONQUEST OF THE PUBLIC  
SPHERE

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ABSTRACT

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The last decades have seen some new trends within Haitian Vodou such as the first formal Vodou organizations of the eighties, the 2003 presidential decree officially recognizing Vodou as a religion, as well as attempts to ‘structure’, and ‘homogenize’ Vodou on a nationwide scale. This paper explores another, yet related, item among such transformations: namely, public discourse on, and aspirations to create, Vodou churches, marriages, baptisms, and funerals. In this article, such phenomena are foremost interpreted as attributes of the social status and legitimacy of ‘serious religion’ and as having less to do with purely spiritual, or religious, matters. The actual need for such additions—at least, in realized form—however, is less tangible among Vodou practitioners. Here it is suggested that this situation explains why so few Vodou churches are actually established, or marriages celebrated. It is also proposed that through the mere act of entering the public sphere and making their claims heard, Vodou practitioners to a large extent have already rendered the Vodou religion legitimate.

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Keywords: Haiti, Vodou, the official recognition of Haitian Vodou, marriages, baptisms and funerals.

*Introduction*

Look, our problem is that we need a *prêtre vodou*, Vodou priest, who can baptize children, marry people, and who can sing [officiate at] funerals. Then we wouldn't have to get problems with the Catholic Church.

Over the past decades, Haitian Vodou practitioners have aspired to, and attempted to create, Vodou churches which can provide baptisms, marriages and funerals. Such churches and ritual tasks are novel additions to the Vodou tradition. Followers have established some such churches, but they have had difficulties with maintaining their activities. This article explores local approaches to such recent innovations and relates the phenomenon of Vodou churches to its religious and social context. In order to facilitate the discussion, at times I also use the term ‘Vodou church’ to encompass other ritual additions, such as Vodou baptisms and funerals though this use of the term has some drawbacks. As will be shown, local expectations of Vodou baptisms, or churches, are not homogenous. Moreover, some Vodou practitioners reject the term ‘church’ as it evokes associations with Christianity.

The phenomenon of Vodou churches is part of a larger process of social and religious change of Vodou and its context, of which the most striking manifestation was probably the official recognition of Vodou as a religion in 2003 (Appendix 1). Through exploring Vodou churches, weddings, et cetera, the ambition here is also to better understand this larger process of social and religious change. Similar processes of increased formal recognition and organization are also occurring with regard to other Afro-American religions, as well as indigenous religions in Africa and other places (see Capone 2007; Houk 1995; Matory 2005; Palmié 1995; Sulikowski 1993 [1969]; West 2006). Unfortunately, space dictates that this article cannot do justice to a thorough analysis of the peculiarities and universalities of the Haitian case when compared to other settings.

Here I discuss observations of attempts to legitimize Vodou and introduce it among other institutions in the public space of modern society. Vodou churches and weddings are also endeavors to render Vodou's social status equal to that of Christianity through providing Vodou with social, organizational and judicial forms, similar to those of Christian churches. In a sense, one might even speak of a 'syncretism of social forms' as Vodou incorporates organizational structures and social functions of Christianity. Moreover, in my understanding, phenomena associated with Vodou churches such as Vodou marriages or formally registered baptisms, are not primarily anchored in Vodou cosmology, or required by Vodou's spirits. Hence, in this paper I explore these novel phenomena from more of a social perspective than a cosmological one.

Besides the possible needs of actual Vodou churches, I suggest that the process aimed at creating churches, per se, implicitly achieves important changes. Through promoting, and advocating, Vodou churches (or marriages, or a national temple), groups and individuals also enter the discourses and sphere of public and official society. This paper suggests that the latter motive—to partake of the legitimacy linked to participation in the public sphere of society—might be as important, or even more important, than the needs that actual Vodou churches would fulfill. Hence, a guiding reflection of this paper is whether it is possible that the most important facet of 'Vodou church rituals' is the associated discourse and symbolic significance of these rituals' mere existence.

Notably, Vodou marriages and churches constitute a slight segment—a kind of a case study—of a larger process of change over time of the social fact of Vodou in Haiti. There are Vodou practitioners who are not interested in Vodou churches but who nevertheless work in order to mobilize Vodou practitioners into interest organizations. The leader of the Vodou organization Zantray explained to me that even if Vodou marriages might be good, his primary goal was social recognition of Vodou and that the Haitian state should declare that Vodou was not anything devilish, or evil. Another Vodou priest, who had been active in several organizations, expressed his view as follows:

If the Vodou priests could unite and collaborate, we would realize whole series of things. But in order to achieve a single thing we have to attain a unity. Unity—that would be about a standpoint on how we could create a school for a bunch of Vodou practitioners who cannot go to school. How we could create a professional school for Vodou practitioners who cannot find a job. How we could *ankadre*, organize, the surroundings.

Church! When you hear about Vodou priests who officiate at funerals among people on the street, who make stupidities at the *funèb*, funerary parlor—it hurts me... And, when they sing [the funerary

mass] by Saint Michel [chapel at the public hospital]—in front of the church—it hurts me.<sup>1</sup> It's because Vodou priests haven't organized in order to create a church for Vodou practitioners that is open for all... in order to celebrate marriages, baptisms and funerals! Et cetera. All that you find in Vodou should be done in the hall of a Vodou church.

Other Vodou practitioners are not interested in change whatsoever and regard Vodou organizations as well as the official recognition of Vodou with suspicion. My impression, however, is that most Vodou practitioners are positive to the idea of Vodou churches and other formal and common institutions. However, running parallel to support of the general idea of 'Vodou churches', there is considerable discord among Vodou practitioners regarding which individuals or organizations should head such initiatives and in which forms. I should also mention that my view on the issue of novel phenomena such as Vodou churches, or marriages, may have been influenced by the fact that my data derive mostly from the urban areas of Port-au-Prince and Jacmel where there are several Vodou organizations advocating the creation of a 'Vodou church'. To the large majority in these urban areas, however, it is not an issue that one discusses or thinks about every day though the discourses about such churches and other new organizational forms are probably indicative of future evolvments of Vodou.

The data in this paper derives primarily from periods of anthropological fieldwork in Haiti between 1996 and 2007 in the towns of Jacmel, Port-au-Prince, and Petion-Ville. More focused collection of data on religious change took place during thirteen months of fieldwork—mostly in Jacmel—which began during the overthrow of Aristide's reign in 2003/2004, continued during the Latortue's chaotic interim regime, and ended under the democratically elected president Preval in 2007. Especially during these latter four periods<sup>2</sup> of data collection I had the possibility of conducting direct observation and informal interviews from the base of the Jacmel Vodou temple where I was initiated in 2005.

#### *Vodou and contesting interpretations*

Under French colonial rule during the eighteenth century, Haiti went through a remarkable economic boom. The new riches derived from large scale cultivation and the work performed by hundreds of thousands of slaves of African origin. Eventually, colonial society collapsed through a slave revolution, which led to Haiti's independence in 1804.

The Africans brought to Haiti also conveyed thousands of divinities and spirits from Western and Central Africa. Some divinities fell into oblivion and no one remembers their names; such forgotten spirits and ancestors are today saluted as "all those who I don't know" in Vodou litanies. Other divinities subsisted and constitute the base of today's Haitian Vodou religion. The Haitian word for these Vodou spirits is *lwa* ('loa'). At the present, as in the past, Vodou practitioners serve, and work with, the *lwa* in order to obtain their benevolence and support during everyday life. Over the centuries the followers of the African *lwa* also enriched their cults with influences from other African and European traditions. Catholic Saints can today represent several *lwa*—and, Vodou practitioners claim that *lwa* and saints are ruled over by *Bondye*, the Christian God.

The appellation 'Vodou' has primarily been used by outside observers. Practitioners themselves have mostly used the expression "to serve the spirits" when designating the

religion (see Beauvoir and Dominique 2003: 71–2). The term Vodou, however, has become increasingly accepted also among practitioners during the last decades. A partial explanation certainly is found in an augmentation of global contacts and a growing need to define the religion alongside other established religions. Perhaps the increased acceptance of the Vodou designation also reflects tendencies of formalization, institutionalization and essentialization of the religion. A change over time is illustrated by the presidential decree which officially recognized Vodou as a religion in 2003, and which used the term Vodou. On the other hand, the term is absent from the 1987 Constitution which mentions “our African beliefs” in connection with the protection of the cultural and archeological patrimony (Article 215). In previous laws and campaigns that were directed against Vodou, these beliefs were defined as *superstition*—not religion (Peters 1960). A law on ‘superstition’ from 1935 criminalized central Vodou pursuits, such as divination, healing, or “all ceremonies, rites, dances and meetings during which are practiced, while offering pretended divinities sacrifices of cattle or poultry.”<sup>3</sup>

Contemporary initiatives aiming at increasing Vodou’s social standing reflect the background of the religion’s social and legal status in Haiti. As mentioned above, Vodou has been outlawed during much of independent Haiti’s history—just as during the colonial epoch. The upper classes have been culturally orientated towards France, Catholicism, and spoken French. The poor have been associated with Africa, Vodou, and Haitian Creole (Drotbohm 2008: 37). Throughout history, Vodou, alongside other expressions of popular and Afro-Haitian culture, has been socially stigmatized on the public arena and interpreted as a sign, or even the cause, of poverty and underdevelopment. Several Haitian rulers have regarded Vodou as a *honte nationale*, or national shame (Bastien 1966). Souffrant (1993 [1969]: 54) wrote that Vodou is

(...) still today a living religious reality which concerns and involves a majority of the Haitian population. But it is a rebuked reality. Despised. It is conceived and experienced, under the influence of Christian mission, as heathendom and superstition, a personal blemish to remove, a national shame to hide. Through disregarding Vodou in this way one has traumatized the Haitian people and destroyed one of its resources. (...) The Haitian practices Vodou, but this religion is no religion. He speaks Creole, but this language is no language.

The anthropologist Mathieu (2004: 32) summarises what she calls “colonial cultural values”:

Colonizer/European	Colonized (African, Amerindian, Asian, Indian etc.)
<i>Bèl</i> , beautiful	<i>Lèd</i> , ugly
<i>Relijyon</i> , religion	<i>Sipèstisyon</i> , superstition
<i>Bondye</i> , God	<i>Djab</i> , devil or demon
<i>Pale lang</i> , speaks language	<i>Pale dyalèk</i> , speaks dialect ( <i>pejoratif</i> , pejoratively) / <i>charabya</i> , nonsense
Intelligent	Stupid
<i>Sivilize</i> , civilized	<i>Sovaj</i> , savage
<i>Devlope</i> , developed	<i>Soudevlope</i> , under-developed

According to Mathieu (2004), these colonial values thrive also in contemporary Haiti and have been internalized by its citizens. A related pattern was observed by Herskovits (1971 [1937]: 292ff.) who found in Haiti what he termed as “socialized ambivalence”. The phenomenon of socialized ambivalence, in Herskovits’ view, meant that individuals had internalized—and adhered to—both Western and African norms, value systems, and cultural expressions. As these value systems diverge, this situation results in unresolved value conflicts and individuals’ holding ambivalent attitudes towards various phenomena. A person may serve Vodou spirits, but simultaneously accredit higher social status to the Catholic Church and regard Vodou practice as sinful.<sup>4</sup>

As evident in the above quotations, throughout Haiti’s history there have also existed counter-ideologies valuing the African heritage (Tippenhauer 2008). The French diplomat Mollien said of Haitians during the first decades of the 1800 that “with the exception of some ‘men of color,’ who are most happy to remember their European origins, everybody says that they are of the African race, and boast about it” (Mollien 2006 [1830]: 105). Later in the twentieth century, not least the Afrocentric *noirist*-movement appraised the African cultural heritage as a fundamental component of the Haitian nation’s essence. François Duvalier, eventually dictator between 1957 and 1971, was one of the front figures of this movement (Duvalier 1968). The popular Haitian culture that Haitian intellectuals and politicians cosseted at an ideological level mostly included its more folkloristic appearances (Bastien 1966; Cosentino 1995).

#### L’arrêté présidentiel du 4 avril 2003—*Vodou as an autonomous religion*

In 1986, the Duvalier dictatorship was overthrown by popular uprisings and, in 1987, a new Constitution was established. With the 1987 Constitution, Roman Catholicism was ceded as the official religion of Haiti and freedom of religion was declared. Another extremely important change was the elevation of Haitian Creole, *kreyòl*, to an official language beside French (*Constitution de la République d’Haïti 29 mars 1987*). The turbulence in the wake of the Duvaliers, marked a dynamic, though not only blissful, period with regard to Vodou. Some important Vodou organizations were created, partially as a response to persecutions. Vodou, alongside other facets of popular and Afro-Haitian culture, gained increased access to society’s public spheres. Not least, President Jean-Bertrand Aristide (president in 1991, 1994–1996, and 2001–2004) based his power on appealing to the poor majority of Haiti. In a presidential decree, Aristide officially recognized the Vodou religion in April 2003 (Appendix). This was a controversial step in the social and historical context of Haiti where many, still today, opine that Vodou is superstition or sorcery. Moreover, no less unconventional was the fact that the decree also prepared the route for the elaboration of judicial procedures giving Vodou clergy the right to celebrate legally valid marriages and formally recognizing Vodou clergy as officiants of baptisms and funerals. Johnson (2006: 441) comments against the background of his research on ‘Papa Doc’s,’ or François Duvalier’s, use of Vodou for political ends:

The moment remains suggestive. The linking of Vodou to the State was a move that imitated Papa Doc, though toward much different ends. It attempted to transform the practice of the peasant and the urban laborer from its status as Haiti’s popular religion to one of being also its public religion, linking it overtly to the legal-rational legitimacy of the State. Aristide showed the progressive possibilities

of the State's engagement with Vodou, and in doing so at least momentarily gave voice to the muted millions.

In 2003, under Aristide, the Bureau for Structuring Vodou<sup>5</sup> was also created at the *Ministère des cultes* (Ministry of Religious Affairs) as an agency that should facilitate contacts between the State and the 'Vodou sector,' as well as the institutionalization of Vodou. Aristide also arranged several meetings with Vodou representatives at the presidential palace. Reputedly Aristide also supported the Vodou organization BRAV—*Bureau de Raillement et d'Appui aux Vodouisants*. Among other things, this organization arranged a demonstration in front of the French Embassy paralleling Aristide's agenda of obtaining economic 'reparations' from France.<sup>6</sup> Some informants also perceived that BRAV dominated the governmental Vodou agency and for a while BRAV's leader, Euvonie Georges Auguste, also headed that institution. In a news article from 2003 (*Agence Haïtienne de Presse*), Auguste commented on the official recognition of Vodou:

This is good news for practitioners of Vodou who for centuries have been marginalized, Mme. Auguste observed. She sees President Aristide as the new black Spartacus who has understood, she said, the need to place all religions on an equal footing. Like Toussaint Louverture, President Aristide advocates equality among all Haitians, she emphasised. Evrony Auguste also invited the Vodou community to unify itself in order to better defend its newest gains, fearing that other sectors may try to put sticks in the spokes of their wheels following the president's decree.

Auguste<sup>7</sup> and, according to verbal testimonies, some other Vodou priests who had allied with Aristide's Lavalas movement had to flee the country, or their residential areas, when Aristide fell in 2004.

The motives behind Aristide's apparent benevolence towards Vodou have been questioned. Some interpreted Aristide's Vodou policy and especially its strongest expression—the official recognition—as mere populism and an attempt to broaden his power base by reaching out to the poor majority (see, for example, Kawas 2003, and CIS Resource Information Center 2003). Other informants saw it as a frank and ideologically motivated decision by Aristide and his government. Even some Duvalierists and others, who supported the overthrow of Aristide in 2004, felt that Aristide had done "a lot of good things for Vodou".

Aristide's official recognition of Vodou permits two observations. Firstly, the official recognition—even if motivated by pragmatic political strategies—indicates that Vodou is indeed important in Haitian society and a concern of many of its citizens. If it were not so, it would not have comprised a good theme for political populism. Secondly, the official recognition should also be seen as a manifestation of a longer process in Haiti where other expressions of the culture of the poor have gained increased acceptance in the arenas of official society. The official recognition of *kreyòl*, Haitian Creole, as a national language might be the most obvious example. These Haitian developments, I propose, also concur with global discourses on the valorization of non-western indigenous traditions in the First as well as the Third worlds (on Brazil see Álvarez López 2004, 185–6; on the Ivory Coast see Ouattara 2008; on Benin see Sulikowski 1993 [1969]; on India see Nanda 2003; on the pan-Mayan movement see Fischer 2001; also see the comment by Sansone 1999: 7 on 'black cultures' in the New World in general).

Aristide's 2003 decree drew some attention; even in Sweden and other faraway places,

newspapers reported “the official recognition of Vodou in Haiti” (see e.g. *Borås Tidning* 2003; *Expressen-Kvällsposten* 2003). The recognition indeed was a landmark in the history of the relations between the Haitian State and the Vodou religion. However, perhaps the spectacular aspects of the decree—references to Vodou marriages, for example—overshadowed other relevant issues such as religious equity within the frame of a democratic society (see as examples Fleury 2003b or TT-AFP 2003). The Catholic Church in Haiti, which had not made any declarations on Vodou since before the Second Vatican Council 1960–65, broke its silence with an official press release. Among other things, the Church severely criticized the proposition that Vodou priests should perform ‘sacraments’ such as baptisms (Kawas 2005: 100, 226–7). The famous Haitian sociologist, Laënnec Hurbon, stated in a press release that the official recognition was an “absurdity” and that baptisms and marriages have no base in Vodou beliefs (AlterPresse 2003).

Aristide’s decree on Vodou evoked some strong reactions, but I feel these were moderate in comparison to what came later. I visited Haiti in late 2003, about nine months after the decree had been issued. Haiti was in upheaval. Opposition groups, such as *Groupment 184*, arranged daily demonstrations and declared general strikes several times a week (most people did not comply, however). It was rumored that Aristide was soon to fall, and there were violent clashes between the police, Aristide partisans and demonstrators. The university was closed. After the New Year, and very humble celebrations of Haiti’s bicentennial anniversary, so-called rebel armies began to take over cities.

In this context, official recognition of Vodou was still of great interest to many of the Vodou practitioners that I talked to, with considerable uncertainty being expressed as to whether it would be annulled if Aristide departed. Some interviewees, having experienced decades of totalitarian regimes, thought that judicial formalities mattered little compared with the personal interest of the president. Moreover, in several cases, Vodou practitioners revealed an ambivalence towards the decree. On the one hand, they approved the status it accorded Vodou, while on the other, they did not want to give whole-hearted support to the politics, allies, or reforms of Aristide either because of personal ideological convictions, or because of the danger should the following regime persecute ex-Aristide supporters; to strongly support Aristide’s politics at this time was perceived to be unwise. By 2007, the official recognition no longer appeared to be so tightly knitted to Aristide’s person or political constellation.

A relevant incident took place on March 15, 2003, a couple of weeks before Aristide’s decree. Then, a couple married before the national organization<sup>8</sup> *Legliz Vodou dAyiti*, the Vodou Church of Haiti, in Port-au-Prince. This was described in Haiti’s most important newspaper, *Le Nouvelliste*, as a judicially valid marriage under the first page heading *Premier mariage dans un temple vodou* (Fleury 2003a). The ceremony—and ensuing official recognition of Vodou—evoked strong reactions among the readers, and the newspaper’s editorial staff were “flooded” with letters from “numerous Protestant Church organizations, Catholic priests, and members of different religious sects” (Fleury 2003a: 1). When I later spoke with the Director General at the *Ministère des cultes*, he denied that they had sanctioned, and/or formally registered, this marriage in a legal sense. Instead, he explained, the story was a step in a disinformation campaign directed against President Aristide with the aim of creating instability in the country. This was an explanation that did not seem entirely incredible at that time, although I will probably never learn the exact circumstances.

In late 2003 and early 2004, numbers of 'ordinary people', members of Vodou organizations included, believed that Vodou marriages were now judicially valid, with a few referring to the media reports as proof.

That the 'Vodou marriage event' and the idea of Vodou priests performing traditionally churchly rituals draw so much attention is revealing of existing presuppositions of what Vodou is, and where it stands in social terms. The example of the marriage can also be described as a kind of discourse break: the mere possibility of seriously considering or contesting the combination of 'lawful' 'Vodou' weddings indicates a change in Vodou as a social fact in Haitian society. A letter to the journal *Le Nouvelliste* by a person opposed to Vodou marriages also indicated that the symbolic significance of marriages is not a peculiarity of Haiti, or of Vodou and Catholicism. The author rhetorically asked "Does not all this resemble the sin of sacrilege?! (...) Has one really realized all the consequences of this presidential *arrêté*, decree? (...) Does Vodou also accept marriages between two homosexuals (or between two lesbians)?" (*Un Catholique* 2003: 19). The letter-writer thus lifts the debate to an international level and places it in contexts wherever changing views of the marriage institution cause heated debate and have political ramifications.

So far, apart from possible local administrative infractions, there have been no judicially recognized Vodou marriages, and no Vodou priests or congregations have been formally given the right to celebrate marriages having judicial consequences. There are, however, Vodou baptisms and certainly funerals, though as will be shown in the following, while funerals in particular are important, these latter two kinds of rituals have no direct judicial ramifications, and thus seem less controversial, mainly intra-religious affairs.<sup>9</sup>

The question of the judicial and formal standing of Vodou seemed to obtain renewed impetus in Vodou circles in 2007. Among other things, in September a two-day meeting between the State and the Vodou sector was held at the *Ministère des affaires étrangères*.<sup>10</sup> Many leaders of Vodou organizations, the governmental *Bureau de liaison et de structuration du Vodou*, as well as the Prime Minister and other representatives from the State participated (N.n.1 2007; N.n.2 2007; Augustin 2007). Vodou practitioners also formed a committee intended to continue work with issues such as Vodou marriages. One of their primary goals was also to transform Aristide's decree—in modified form—into law through parliamentary vote. Another aim of the committee is to create a national and standardized liturgy for 'official' Vodou ceremonies on the basis of the liturgies elaborated by some of the larger Vodou organizations.

The official recognition of Haitian Vodou as a religion in 2003 was very important, but should be regarded as a step in a slower and not very spectacular process of change relative to the social legitimacy of Vodou more generally. In the following section, one segment of this process receives further attention: namely, Vodou churches and related rituals for baptisms, weddings, and funerals.

#### *Why Vodou churches, weddings, baptisms and funerals?*

The principal question at issue is why numerous Vodou practitioners envision Vodou churches, marriages and other 'new rituals' as desirable. Apparently, motives can be both of a practical and symbolic nature. As one informant complained:



The church that they were supposed to create, should have been so that we could cease to be humiliated by the priests [in the Catholic Church]. Other people always talk like this: “how come that each Sunday when *we* go to church—why don't *you* have a church where you can go, sit down and pray?” We don't pray in the same way as the [Catholic] priest, but we have priests within Vodou that could preach for us.

This is a common theme; several Vodou practitioners have mentioned to me that the churchly institution per se would increase the standing of Vodou in society. The formal Vodou church contrasts to the traditional, informal and non-regularized (from a judicial point of view) Vodou cult group. The ordinary Vodou temple—often referred to as *Kay bokò*, House of the Vodou priest—is in daily speech often associated with poor neighborhoods, little formal education, and placed in juxtaposition to the characteristics of developed society. Vodou in formalized church form, on the other hand, would rank Vodou among the other institutions of modern society. Not least, Vodou in this shape would challenge the Christian Churches' monopoly of the respectable public religious sphere.

Transforming Vodou in the direction of the organization, rituals, and terminology of Christian churches, is ambiguously perceived by many Vodou practitioners, and from an analytical point of view one might query how much Vodou can change along these lines without losing meaning for its practitioners. The picture is further complicated by the fact that many Vodou practitioners explicitly distance themselves from Christianity (Thylefors 2008). The same individuals who envision Vodou churches—with mass, confirmation, preachings, and other expressions of ‘respectable’ religious practice—can object to the use of terms brought in from Christianity, such as *mès*, mass, or *egliz*, church. *Legliz Vodou d'Ayiti* introduced, for example, masses, a day of rest, and a Holy Scripture—*Le livre sacré du vodou*. They also applied different ranks to their members which some felt was an imitation of the Catholic Church's hierarchies. Several Vodou practitioners whom I have met have been of the opinion that *Legliz Vodou d'Ayiti* has become too Christian in its character.

Other interlocutors have emphasized that through a collective church locality, Vodou practitioners would obtain a ‘neutral’ meeting ground. Thus, meetings in connection with common projects would not—as at the present—have to take place at the temples of individual priests. Another aspect is that through a common Vodou church, devotees would be able to demonstrate unity and an ability to carry out common projects. This appears to be important and linked to the social status of the ideology of development. According to local stereotypes, poor and non-schooled people are unable to achieve well-functioning organization.

These are the principal features of debates surrounding formalized Vodou churches. The following section concerns Vodou in relation to baptisms, marriages and funerals. Training Vodou priests to perform these rituals was also a project that the newly founded *Bureau de Structuration du Vodou* at the *Ministère des cultes* promoted in 2004. While they did not get any support from the ministry at that time, the ambition persists and the Vodou organizations *Bode Nasyonnal*, *Zantray*, and *Egliz Vodou d'Ayiti* have also developed forms for Vodou baptisms, marriages and funerals.

## Marriages

Church marriages in Haiti are often large and costly events. Apparently the social dimensions—the display of wealth and generosity in connection to the marriage feast, as well as the respectability linked to the marital status—can be more important than the religious aspects (Bastien 1985 [1951]: 103). However, considerable numbers of the Haitian population do not marry their mates, not least because of economic reasons.<sup>11</sup> Montalvo-Despeignes (in Pierre-Louis 1993: 71) points out that “the Haitian farmer” is unaware of the legal implications of marriage. This is also frequently the case in the urban settings where I have been working. Moreover, a father recognizing his children, and thus passing on his family name, appears to be a more important concern to many individuals than whether parents are formally married.<sup>12</sup>

Haitian law recognizes two ways of becoming married: through religious marriage, *mariage religieux*, and through civil marriage, *mariage civil*. There is no difference between the two in terms of judicial consequences. Legally recognized religious marriage can be celebrated in the Catholic Church and in several Protestant Churches. Thus, the State has delegated the right to function as a representative of a governmental authority to formally recognized ministers of recognized churches. To be judicially valid, a *mariage religieux* has to be registered by the priest in the archives of the proper Church, as well as reported to the local *Officier d'Etat Civil*, or functionary of the Civil Authority. The latter, in turn, registers the marriage in local and national archives. These procedures were established by a law in 1929, altered in 1945 (Lescot 1945: 1; Pierre-Louis 1993: 56; Eugène 1994: 28).

Civil marriage is celebrated by the *Officier d'Etat Civil* at his office and registered in the same way as the religious marriage (but on a different form). The civil marriage has lower social status than the religious marriage. Normally, civil marriages are not accompanied by big feasts for friends and relatives, photography and the like, and economic considerations may underlie the choice. Several informants opined that the civil marriage was something that one might do in connection with visa applications and that one was not considered married in the eyes of the social environment as a result. A few suggested that such a couple may be regarded as fiancés who will eventually take part in a church ceremony. Moreover, there exists a widespread mistrust in the judicial reliability of civil marriages, with Bijoux's research highlighting lapses in record-keeping and annotation of the civil registers (1990: 39–41, 1995: 21–24). In an example of such mistrust, the planned civil marriage of a friend of mine was prevented by his future wife's family because of the ease with which a man could obtain a faulty, non-registered marriage certificate from the authorities through bribery—thereby leaving the woman without any judicial protection.<sup>13</sup> Many also think that foreign embassies are skeptical vis-à-vis civil marriage certificates, significantly in the case of an emigrated partner. If a priest has signed a marriage certificate, on the other hand, the records of the *Etat Civil* and *Archives Nationales* are confirmed by Church archives, the social control that accompanies the public religious marriage ceremony, and God; there appears to be little doubt about the veracity of religious marriages.

Fundamentally, the debate about Vodou marriages is about whether the State should endow Vodou priests with the right to celebrate religious marriages having judicial consequences. Of course, as mentioned below, there are no prohibitions on celebrating Vodou marriage rituals (or baptisms, or whatever) without judicial implications. Among

‘ordinary’ Vodou practitioners—outside the circles of Vodou organizations—very few of my interlocutors have spontaneously raised the issue of Vodou marriages or said that they themselves favoured a Vodou wedding. When I have steered the conversation onto the subject of official recognition of the Vodou religion, however, many Vodou practitioners have felt that Vodou clergy should be given the formal right to celebrate marriages. At present, one can be married by officiates of, for example, *Egliz Vodou d’Ayiti* in Port-au-Prince; thereafter the marriage is registered before the authorities as a civil marriage (i.e. the couple marries again). Comparatively few take up this option, given that Haiti is a country with millions of Vodou practitioners.<sup>14</sup> Possibly, the form of Vodou practiced by the *Egliz Vodou d’Ayiti* does not appeal to the majority of Vodou practitioners though, reportedly, there are also other individual Vodou priests and organizations that celebrate marriages. In 2007, I assisted at a meeting with one such organization where a representative of the governmental *Bureau de liaison et de structuration du Vodou* summarized the situation of Vodou marriages at the present:

At present we cannot perform ‘normal’ marriages in the same way as the Catholic Church and the Protestant Church. But, we can perform (...) the marriage that they call “civil marriage with religious effects”.<sup>15</sup> (...) You can go to an *Officier de l’Etat Civil*—you fulfill all the formalities of the marriage. He signs the form and gives it to you. Then you go to your temple, your peristyle, and achieve the ‘religious effect’ [through the religious marriage celebration]. That way, there are going to be no problems.

Despite this functionary’s encouragement to participants to celebrate Vodou marriages religiously after a civil marriage,<sup>16</sup> such marriages remain rare. In which case—why have Vodouisants promoted the issue of such marriages? Why was that issue included in the decree which recognized Vodou as a religion in 2003? Up until 2007, new initiatives have been made within *le secteur vodou* to obtain the right to celebrate marriages. The reason, I propose, is that through legally valid Vodou marriages the status of Vodou as a religion would become equal with that of Christian churches whose legitimacy is expressly solidified by their right to undertake actions judicially recognized by the state.

#### Baptismal and/or civil registration

A child of a Vodouisant—it has to be baptized. The priest [in the Catholic Church] will not baptize it. If he knows that the child’s father is an *oungan*, a Vodou priest, he won’t baptize it. Imagine if those people had access to baptism in a church for Vodouisants—but we don’t have that church... We’re stuck, *akwòkiye*.

According to the doctrine of the Catholic Church, baptism is “the gateway to the sacraments and necessary for salvation” (Libreria Editrice Vaticana 1983, can. 849). Among Vodou practitioners whom I have met, however, these spiritual aspects are rarely, if ever, mentioned when the issue of baptism is raised. A popular baptism, *andoye*, is often performed quite soon after a child’s birth by folk-Catholic experts who sometimes are also Vodou priests; it is an important protection against hostile spirits and persons and, through it, the child also gets godparents. If at least one parent is a member of the Catholic Church, a church baptism may later be performed. While baptisms do not have any direct judicial implications, those provided by the established churches have indirect consequences in that baptismal

records are widely accepted as confirming an individual's identity. Thus, when discussing Vodou baptisms, the issue of the *batistè*, baptismal certificate, is one raised.

Governmental civil registers are regarded as unreliable: bribery can affect changes to birth-certificate data with one interlocutor suggesting that "you can buy a birth-certificate at the market!" Bijoux (1990: 39–40) has claimed that misspellings and confusion over first and family names on birth certificates are common; a friend of mine learnt as an adult that the authorities had recorded her name as Charlie, instead of Charline, and when another informant wanted to appear older, she obtained a falsified certificate which she also used to procure an identity card. The archives of the Catholic Church are perceived as more reliable as the priest requires a valid birth-certificate and also notes the name, age and parents of the person; moreover, the presence of witnesses at the baptismal ceremony introduces an element of social control. Catholic baptism has high social status and imparts respectability; it is an asset to be able to produce a baptismal certificate when applying for a job, visa, driving license or other identity papers. Vodou practitioners express indignation that their children cannot be baptized, claiming that it is one of several ways whereby the Catholic Church *imilye*, or humiliates, them.

Some informants have spoken about the importance of Vodou churches being able to provide baptismal records that could function as identity papers. This, as informants are aware, demands considerable administrative procedures in order to give such certificates the same reliability as those issued by the Catholic Church. It is apparent that institutionalized Vodou baptisms are not primarily a religious concern—the spiritual portion can be dealt with through rituals brought in from the repertoires of Vodou or folk-Catholicism and does not need to be formalized. Certificates from Vodou baptisms as identity papers appear to be desirable—yet, no administrative procedures have been developed in order to give such certificates a generally recognized and trusted standing.<sup>17</sup> Thus, so far, the importance of Vodou baptisms seems to be mainly symbolic; the fact that Vodou too, can perform baptisms 'with paper' (even if regarded as less reliable) thus expresses Vodou's respectability as a religion.

The United Nations has worked towards improving the civil registers, and has carried out censuses. Not least, this occurred in connection to the 2005/2007 elections when registered voters received a *carte d'identification nationale* valid for ten years.<sup>18</sup> It is possible that such development projects—and the computerization of public administration—will diminish the importance of baptismal certificates as identity papers with time.

### Funerals

Affordable and respectable, Vodou funerals also appear to be the most important life cycle ceremonies that the Vodou sector provides and are more common than marriage and baptism where choice is involved. Funerals, on the other hand, concern all, with no exceptions.

According to Haitian law, no burial can take place without written permission from the local *Officier de l'Etat Civil*, who also registers the death certificate. Churches, such as the Catholic Church, may also register the deaths of their members in their archives. However, Vodou priests—just like any other person—are judicially free to officiate at funeral rites so the formal recognition of this in the decree of 2003 must be regarded as symbolic affirmation of the status of Vodou funerals. The issue is also linked to the desire for a Vodou Church



where funerals could take place in a respectable environment. As mentioned, some of the larger Vodou organizations have elaborated specific liturgies for Vodou funerals—in other instances, there is greater ritual improvisation.<sup>19</sup>

Funerals are linked to social status for Vodou practitioners, Catholics and Protestants alike.<sup>20</sup> An elaborate funeral in the Catholic Church and a nice tomb entails respect. In addition, the death may be announced on local radio, much money invested in a coffin, clothes for the family, flowers, a hearse, and even a brass band. Another expense and status variable is that the corpse should be kept at a morgue before the funeral. Those at the public hospitals can cost about fifty Haitian dollars per day though private morgues charging thousands of Haitian dollars for a week are more desirable. A respectable funeral also includes a *vèy*, or wake, held the night before, where family and friends gather to mourn, with singing, games and refreshments. The more visitors, the greater the recognition for the deceased person and her or his family. Bastien writes that the neighborhood is “without mercy: if one does not find enough to eat and drink at the wake, one severely criticizes the failing kin, and one leaves maliciously repeating: ‘They have buried So and So as a dog!’” (1985 [1951]: 141). The family of the deceased may also hold a reception for a couple of hours at a private funerary parlor.

Economically, Haiti is one of the world’s poorest countries and such expensive funerary traditions, of course, can be difficult to attain and open to criticism. The manager of a funerary chapel expressed his opinion of funerary customs when he told me:

There's one who died last week. Now, they are waiting for his son to send money from New York. After that they say they will hold a funeral for 14,000 Haitian dollars. Well, when he was alive he was dying from hunger. Now, they are about to spend 14,000 Haitian dollars on a coffin in order to make people say "Ah, he was buried there (...) beautiful coffin (...) it's formidable (...) the family has made huge efforts." But when he was ill—what did you do then?

A famous Haitian reverend claims in a widely distributed cassette sermon that the local funerary traditions are about public displays of extravagance that recall 'movie-making'. Métraux (1972 [1959]: 244) writes that "[t]he needs of heirs are pitilessly sacrificed to their duties towards the deceased" and stories circulate about families obliged to sell even the house in order to be able to afford the funeral. Networks of kin are mobilized to share the expenses (Richman 2005). Not rarely, emigrant kin return to Haiti in order to participate at the funeral.

Members of the Catholic Church are not allowed to practice Vodou and church membership is a prerequisite for having a church funeral.<sup>21</sup>

[Vodou practitioners] need a church which includes them as well. Because when a Vodouisant dies they make him endure a lot (*se nan betiz yo pase l*) in order to carry out his funeral. One goes to the priest, the priest says that he won't sing [the funeral mass] for the person as he is an initiate (*kanzo*). They humiliate the *kanzo*. You have to go to the Mormons in order to have the funeral. Or, you can have a folk-Catholic priest (*pè savann*) to sing the funeral. But the priest who is in the [Catholic] church will not carry out the funeral.

Of course, many Catholics practice Vodou in private; I personally knew a Vodou practitioner who was also a member of the Catholic Church. When she died, some parishioners gossiped to the priest about her Vodou practice and it was not until after much negotiation that her church funeral was allowed. One of her brothers suggested that many Vodou practitioners involve themselves in this kind of double-dealing:

When there is a Vodou procession [many Vodou practitioners] don't participate. It is because they are afraid that the [Protestant] pastor will see them, that the [Catholic] priest from the church will see them. That [people] will tell the priest about it. This [Vodou] becomes like not being included in society. There are people who are Vodou practitioners in secret. If they see a 'church brother', they hide. If so and so sees them, he would tell the priest. If that happens, the priest would exclude them [from the church].

As a church member, there might be demands that one "live wholly within the Church", as an informant put it. In one Port-au-Prince church they did not renew the annual membership of those who did not attend regularly. In Jacmel, interviewees claimed that if one is not active enough as a churchgoer, the priest can let a *laïque ordonnée* (ordained layman) officiate at the funerary mass:

Look what else they do! Even if you have your [membership] card, but haven't attended the church another person will sing your funeral. The priest won't sing—it is another church servant who sings—because you haven't come to church every day. The priest says, "You have a card for the day that you fall down—but, you don't come to church."



Even Vodou practitioners claim that it is common to become members of the Catholic Church only in order to have their funeral there. When the funeral is to be held outside the church a folk-Catholic priest can sing the mass and lead the ceremony though when a Vodou priest friend of mine died, the funeral contained no churchly, or Christian, influences at all. The deceased man was poor and had no family that could contribute to the funeral. The Vodou priest who had initiated my friend felt a social pressure to do something. Accompanied by his congregation the Vodou priest brought the corpse from the morgue at the public hospital and arranged a funerary cortege to his Vodou temple out of town, where there was also a small family cemetery. Many who knew the deceased, however, thought that this funeral was too simple, and hence pathetic: it was delayed as initially there had not been the money to claim my friend's corpse from the morgue, no wake had been held and no mass read. One woman said that the Vodou priest had not done 'anything' for his deceased initiate.

There are several private funeral parlors where persons who are not church members can have beautiful, lavish ceremonies though such private institutions are too expensive for the average citizen—prices can range from four thousand up to twenty-five thousand Haitian dollars and more. The Mormons also hold funerals for individuals of all faiths. Many non-Mormons, however, regard Mormon funerals as an ignominious alternative. A Vodou priest claimed that if one serves Vodou throughout one's life and then has a funeral at the Mormon Church it is like "not accrediting Vodou with any value at all."

In the worst case—as in the capital of Port-au-Prince—the poor can be buried in anonymous mass graves if no relatives can pay for the corpse at the public morgue (Roberson

2007). According to rumors the corpses at the public morgue are in disorder and personnel sell body parts to various *malfektè* (evil doers) who need such things for their magic and sorcery. In Jacmel, the municipality constructed a funerary chapel next to the cemetery—*Chapelle funéraire municipale de Jacmel*. This initiative was taken by a former major who had been struck by the problems that face poor Haitian families in times of decease and the chapel is open to all regardless faith. Among those who officiate at funerals are a couple of folk-Catholic priests but funerals in the municipal chapel do not have a very high social status and are quite rare: “There is a prejudicial side among the Haitians—they don’t understand what a human is after death (...) If it is said that there is a funeral at the [communal] chapel, people say ‘ah, it’s an *endijan*, (a poor, pitiable person)’.”

In conclusion, the idea of a Vodou church where Vodou funerals can be held is apparently strongly linked to access to a funerary alternative which is not connected to low social status and poverty. Notably, some Vodou practitioners envisage more or less folk-Catholic, or Catholic, funerals, but without involvement of the Catholic Church as an institution. Similarly, several informants have been of the opinion that suitable priests would be those Vodou priests or folk-Catholic priests who have followed parts of the training to become a Catholic priest. Other Vodouisants—not, least those who advocate that Vodou should be ‘purified’ of Afro-Catholic syncretistic elements—want liturgies based on ‘African’ Vodou of the kind that has been developed by some Vodou organizations (Thylefors 2008).

*Concluding reflections—are the main goals already fulfilled?*

To sum up, few religious or spiritual aspects are mentioned by Vodou practitioners in connection with Vodou churches, marriages, baptisms, or funerals. No Vodou practitioner has told me that it is a sin to live with a partner if not married, or that one will not go to heaven if not buried in the Catholic Church. It can be added that both conviviality and death are surrounded by complex magico-religious beliefs, but the latter do not seem to depend on formal churchly institutions.

Also noteworthy is that Vodou practitioners do not adduce the will of God or the spirits, when advocating Vodou churches and related rituals. Apparently, there are more pragmatic and human concerns behind attempts to form a Vodou church. These pragmatic motives can be both of a practical and a symbolical nature. Practical motives include the access to good and less expensive funerals, or baptismal records. On a symbolic level it appears that Vodou marriages, for example, or the form of churchly institution per se, might also be expected to increase Vodou’s social status, making it an equal of Catholicism. In everyday talk, and on first inquiry, Vodou practitioners generally seem quite pessimistic regarding the status of Vodou in contemporary society. They may point out that Vodou is still marginalized; that there are not yet any judicially valid ‘religious’ Vodou marriages; that there is no well-organized Vodou Church; or, in 2007, that the Government did not appoint a Vodou representative for the Provisory Electoral Council.<sup>22</sup> Pessimistic attitudes towards, and critique of, the present are in no way unique for Vodouisant Haitians, and reflect the many difficulties of contemporary Haitian society.

Nonetheless, I suggest that with regard to Vodou there are many positive developments and, generally, local Vodou practitioners agree with this even if they are quick to point out that much is still to be achieved. Today, for example, as the decree recognizing Vodou



showed, it is possible for Vodou practitioners to publicly claim—in media,<sup>23</sup> and at conferences with politicians—the same judicial rights as those who practice other religions (see e.g. Appendix 1, Augustin 2007; N.n.1 2007; N.n.2 2007). Such claims may be contested or evaded by those in power but they have, nevertheless, now become matter for public discourse. During a meeting with a Vodou organization I suggested that seriously promoting Vodou marriages would hardly have been possible two or three decades earlier years ago, and was interrupted with the comment: “No, they would have thought you were crazy.” Moreover, further positive developments include the creation of a governmental bureau of Vodou—despite all its deficiencies, limited influence and budget. And, de facto, there are Vodou representatives in the *Commission du dialogue national*, and *Commission de Garanties Electorales* (CGE). Even if these organisms are of little importance, their inclusion of Vodou is remarkable considering that Vodou, labeled ‘superstitious practices’, was outlawed well into the eighties.

Apparently, there are some good reasons for creating Vodou churches harboring marriages, funerals and baptisms. Why, then, are there so few of them? One informant claimed:

They have been talking about a Vodou church for more than ten years now—nothing has ever been realized. It’s not during [the rule of] one single president that the Vodou church has lagged behind like this—it’s during several presidents. They mention the Vodou church but it’s never realized.

One elderly man claimed that “already under Duvalier [before 1986], they talked about a Vodou church”, but I have been unable to substantiate this statement.

This article has discussed the paradox that there are so few functioning Vodou churches, despite the strong interest for such churches articulated by at least some Vodou practitioners and their organizations. In this context, I take the liberty of using the expression ‘Vodou church’ as a metaphor which includes also other novel additions to Vodou, such as baptisms, mass, marriages and funerals. When I have asked numerous Vodou practitioners why there are so few Vodou churches, two answers predominated; (i) that Vodou practitioners in general, and especially their priesthood, cannot agree or cooperate and try to cheat one another, and (ii) there is a lack of economic means. Parallel to these explanations people have suggested that the Catholic Church works against Vodou or that the political instability during recent years has delayed its organization and the evolution of its churches. One may add to these difficulties the lack of administrative experience or a tradition of creating formal organizations.

With the exception of the assumed influence of the Catholic Church, it is my opinion that there is much truth in the explanations above though they do not provide an exhaustive explanation. If that were the case, the problems Vodou practitioners are facing should equally concern also other citizens who succeed in creating sustainable organizations and institutions: Protestants, for example, would not be able to organize their many schools, churches and other social activities. Certainly, the Vodou sector can encounter special difficulties as large numbers of followers are economically and educationally disadvantaged. Moreover, members of the political class sometimes disdain Vodou. Nonetheless, there are, de facto, no judicial obstacles to creating such churches; there are no threats of religious persecution, and the ‘big’ Vodou priests certainly could raise the money needed collectively.

Therefore, to the above explanations, I would add the reflection that it is possible that Vodou practitioners have already achieved their primary, though ‘implicitly formulated’,

goal—namely, to place Vodou on the official and public agenda and render Vodou equal to other religions. Now there are fewer goals left to fulfill and the motives to actually create Vodou churches are less urgent; the services that they could fulfill, funerals in particular, appear to be less than purely religious or spiritual, and secular cooperative organizations or funerary parlors could possibly provide the latter just as well as Vodou based associations. One Vodou practitioner, for example, mused that the reason that there were no Vodou churches was that the ‘big’ Vodou priests who can organize such institutions already have the money necessary to have good funerals at the private funerary parlors. Thus, this interviewee reasoned, they had no interest in making Vodou funerals available for others.

Maybe, the case of Vodou churches can also throw some light on syncretistic processes in Vodou and its ‘sister religions’. Previous syncretistic processes in Afro-American religions have been explained as the usurpation and domestication of Christian cosmological forces—manifest in Catholic saints, or prayers—as well as an iconic language that served to disguise African religious practices in a hostile colonial environment (Bastide 1960). In the beginning of this article, I suggested that the phenomenon of Vodou churches evokes images of a “syncretism of social forms”. Put in a historical perspective, present attempts to create Vodou churches, or obtaining Vodou baptismal certificates, can thus be interpreted as a continued syncretistic process, although this time geared towards appropriating the forces of contemporary society, such as formal institutions and judicial procedures.

A Haitian metaphor for something which is difficult to handle is a “cigar lighted at both ends”. I think that Aristide’s decree recognizing Vodou can be described as such an ignited cigar. Giving Vodou the full rights of the Christian religions would be quite a drastic measure which would challenge some conservative camps in Haiti. On the other hand, neither is it possible to discriminate the Vodou religion within a democratic Haiti by not granting it the same rights as Christian churches.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> A few weeks earlier, the interlocutor had assisted a Vodou-wake led by Vodou priests for a deceased peer, at a private funerary parlor. A fight had erupted and the police intervened with drawn weapons. Likely, these events contributed to my friend’s stark choice of words.

<sup>2</sup> These periods of fieldwork were also made possible through financial assistance in the form of a research grant from the Department for Research Cooperation (SAREC) at the Swedish Agency for International Development Cooperation (Sida).

<sup>3</sup> *Décret-Loi du 5 Septembre 1935 sur les pratiques superstitieuses*. Organisation of American States. <[http://www.oas.org/juridico/mla/fr/hti/fr\\_hti\\_penal.html](http://www.oas.org/juridico/mla/fr/hti/fr_hti_penal.html)> (last accessed 11.7. 2008).

<sup>4</sup> See Capone (2007), for a review of the debate on acculturation which situates Herskovits’ theses.

<sup>5</sup> *Bureau de structuration du vodou*. In August 2005 its name was changed to *Bureau de liaison et de structuration du vodou*.

<sup>6</sup> “Après les paysans pro-Aristide de la région métropolitaine, c’était au tour des vodouisants d’apporter leur appui à la demande du chef de l’Etat Jean Bertrand Aristide, le vendredi 9 mai 2003. Cette manifestation, appelée par le Bureau de Ralliement et d’Appui aux Vaudouisants (BRAV), était aussi l’occasion pour les adeptes du vaudou de se montrer reconnaissants envers M. Aristide qui a légalisé cette religion dans le pays...” (Radio Métropole 12th May, quoted in Union Européenne 2003, 11).

<sup>7</sup> Reflecting the new political context, it can be mentioned that Auguste has returned to Haiti and is now the coordinator of the platform Milokan, “composée d’une vingtaine d’organisations et de sociétés vaudoues” (AlterPresse 2006).

<sup>8</sup> Information diverges regarding whether *Legliz Vodou d'Ayiti* was ever registered as a 'church' and religious congregation by the *Ministère des cultes*, or if it was registered just as a secular organization or NGO. Today, the *Ministère des cultes* says that it has never been registered as a proper church. One employee, however, indicated that it indeed had been registered, but in judicially incorrect ways and as a result of corruption. Informants at the *Legliz Vodou d'Ayiti* maintain that it *was* registered as a church at the *Ministère des cultes*, though after "much work".

<sup>9</sup> For example, the funeral of the internationally renowned Vodou priest, Manbo Nerval in 2007, was noted by both media and individuals in her hometown Jacmel. Although the funeral followed Vodou liturgy, no reports portrayed that fact as strange or provocative, *per se*. Similarly, the Vodou funerary ceremony of the Vodou leader Wesner Morency, in Port-au-Prince in 2007, was not noted as a Vodou event.

<sup>10</sup> The *Ministère des cultes* is a section of the *Ministère des affaires étrangères*. When established in 1924, the *Ministère des cultes* largely dealt with foreign missionaries and churches.

<sup>11</sup> Vieux (in Pierre-Louis 1993: 71) estimates that 80% of Haitian couples are not married, while Eugène (1994: 43-4) claims that the majority of Haitians live in "customary" (informal) marriages.

<sup>12</sup> As indicators of the social and judicial importance of registered fatherhood see Art. 262 in the Constitution of Haiti (1987), as well as the law proposal by the *Ministère à la condition féminine et aux droits des femmes* (2008). The latter document also contains interesting background material on marriages in Haiti.

<sup>13</sup> In May 2008, media also reported demonstrations for more efficient civil registers in the rural setting of Savanette. Demonstrators protested, for example, against false birth and marriage certificates (AlterPresse 2008-05-22).

<sup>14</sup> A representative of the organization in Port-au-Prince estimated in 2006 that the organization had performed about 18 marriages, 250 baptisms, and "very many" funerals.

<sup>15</sup> Legal religious marriage can be described in judicial French as a *mariage religieux produisant des effets civils* (Pierre-Louis 1993, 57).

<sup>16</sup> Bastien (1985 [1951]: 103) also mentions folk-Catholic blessings of couples; though he notes, in the late 1940's, that such ceremonies were disappearing.

<sup>17</sup> It can be mentioned here that the Catholic Church in Haiti demands a birth certificate before agreeing to baptize someone—exceptions might be made in urgent cases such as if an infant is dying before a birth certificate has been procured by the parents (cf. Libreria Editrice Vaticana 1983, can. 850 §2).

<sup>18</sup> See the homepage of *Conseil Electoral Provisoire* <<http://www.cep-ht.org/>> (last accessed 20.5. 2007), where it is also explained in detail how voters can prove their identity.

<sup>19</sup> I am aware of two organizations which have officiated at funerals, and which admit improvising. They both, however, have the ambition to develop a written standardized liturgy.

<sup>20</sup> Métraux (1972 [1959]: 243ff) as well as Bastien (1985 [1951]: 140) write that the surviving family's fear of annoying the deceased person's spirit make them spend so much on the funeral. My impression – about sixty years later—is that the spirit of the deceased is feared in the sense that caution is called for. I have not understood this fear, or respect, as a predominant reason for spending excessively on funerals.

<sup>21</sup> The Catholic Church in Haiti today—since the Second Vatican Council—does not have rules and regulations on how to relate specifically to Vodou and Vodou followers. Thus, as noted by Kawas (2005: 102) the churchly approach to Vodou can differ in different localities and depending on individual Church representatives. Kawas also points out that there have been no studies on the extent of "*pratiques pré-conciliaires*", such as the denial of sacraments to Vodou practitioners, though anecdotal evidence suggest that it is common (2005: 105). Both the Vodou practitioners and the Catholic agents to whom I have spoken, seem to agree that it would be very difficult for a Church member to overtly practice Vodou.

<sup>22</sup> *Conseil Electoral Provisoire*, CEP, is an institution overseeing the elections established by the constitution (Art. 289). The CEP includes one representative from the Catholic Church, as well as one from the reformed churches. During the fall of 2007, new representatives were sought to CEP, and some Vodou representatives expressed dismay as Vodou was not invited (Platform Milokan 2007).

<sup>23</sup> An interview in English with the Vodou leader Evoni Auguste may be heard online at <<http://www.pambazuka.org/en/broadcasts/podcasts.php#PZ0037>> (last accessed 8.2. 2008).

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APPENDIX

From Kawas 2005: 182–5.

**L'ARRÊTÉ PRÉSIDENTIEL DU 4 AVRIL 2003**  
**Jean-Bertrand Aristide**  
**Président**

Vu les articles 30, 30–1, 30–2, 136, 234, 236 et 297 de la Constitution;  
Vu la loi du 16 juin 1971 sur les rapports entre l'Etat Haïtien et les Cultes réformés;  
Vu le décret du 18 octobre 1978 réglémentant l'exercice des Cultes réformés;  
Vu le décret du 5 août 1987 organisant le Ministère des Cultes;  
Considérant que le vodou, Religion ancestrale, est un élément constitutif essentiel de l'identité nationale;  
Considérant qu'il est du devoir de l'Etat de protéger le patrimoine culturel de la Nation;  
Considérant le développement croissant des organisations et associations issues du vodou;  
Considérant les efforts de structuration institutionnelle manifestés par les vodouisants représentant une portion considérable de la Population haïtienne;  
Considérant la participation des vodouisants à la formation sociale, politique et morale du Peuple haïtien;  
Considérant qu'il convient d'intégrer l'action du vodou dans le cadre de la philosophie de justice sociale et d'Etat de droit pronée par le Gouvernement;  
Considérant qu'il appartient à l'Etat de poser les bases indispensables à l'établissement de rapports harmonieux et juridiques;  
Considérant qu'il importe de prendre les mesures qui conviennent, pour éviter toute tentative d'inquisition et d'exclusion, pour sauvegarder l'intégrité nationale, défendre les intérêts généraux de la République, promouvoir l'ordre, assurer la paix et le bien-être de toute la population;  
Sur le rapport des Ministres concernés et après délibération en Conseil;

**ARRÊTE**

Article 1.- En attendant une loi relative au statut juridique du vodou, l'Etat haïtien le reconnaît comme religion à part entière, devant remplir sa mission sur le territoire national en conformité à la Constitution et aux lois de la République.

Article 2.- Tout chef de culte vodou, responsable de temples, de hauts lieux sacrés, d'organisations ou d'associations, est habilité à faire une demande de reconnaissance auprès du Ministère des Cultes.

Article 3.- La reconnaissance accordée par le Ministère des Cultes a pour effet particulier de solliciter de toute autorité constituée aide et protection.

Article 4.- Les temples, hauts lieux sacrés, organisations ou associations du vodou, jouissant des droits et prérogatives attachés à leur fonctionnement, peuvent obtenir un soutien qualitatif de l'Etat.

Article 5.- Le chef de culte vodou, responsable d'un temple ou d'un haut lieu sacré, peut être invité à prêter serment par devant le doyen du Tribunal Civil de son ressort. Une fois assermentés, les Chefs de culte vodou peuvent être habilités à célébrer baptêmes, mariages et funérailles.

Article 6.- Le présent arrêté sera publié et exécuté à la diligence des ministres concernés.

Donné au Palais National, à Port-au-Prince, le 4 avril 2003, An 200ème de l'Indépendance.

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