The Transformation of West African Religions as a Response to Slavery in Haiti and North America

As approximately 11 million Africans were deposited into slavery upon the shores of the New World, their way of life and their collection of religious ways transformed in response to their new conditions [Pradel, viii]. In an attempt to suppress rebellion, slave owners purchased slaves from multiple tribes, creating what they had hoped was an inability to communicate and discordance in lifestyle. Instead, the conditions of slavery brought these West Africans together, adapting their spiritual systems to what is now recognized as Vodun in Haiti and Voodoo in North America.

According to Pradel, all African peoples recognize a Supreme Being that is both transcendent and immanent. This Supreme Being is omniscient, omnipresent, and the creator of all life [4]. There are thousands of names for this being across the continent, the plurality a response to the intense interaction of tribes. The Oyo, Dahomey, and Benin tribes merged between 1400 and 1900 [Pradel, 7]. According to legend, small independent groups of Benin were replaced by a complex system headed by a king. The king's daughter was impregnated by a leopard and this child became the ancestor of all Fon of Dahomey [Pinn, Varieties, 11].

The Supreme Being of these people is Nana Buluka, which is both male and female. Nana Buluka gave birth to many sets of twins, including Mawu-Lisa. In time Mawu-Lisa provided the energy that is the essence of life and created other spirits who are granted their own particular language [Pinn, Varieties, 12]. These spirits were more accessible to humans as they took on the vestments of meteorological phenomena, plants, and animals. These spirits were referred to as orisha by the Yoruba, vo-du by the Ewe, and Wong by the Ga [Pinn, Varieties, 6]. Regardless of their names, the vo-du were contacted to intercede on the behalf of humans. African religions invoked these powerful forces for various reasons, including divination, explanation of the unknown, and to help control the outcome of events [Chireau, 227].

The religious traditions were generally oral in nature and as the slave traders began
raiding the coasts of Africa, the tradition of orality insured the survival of their belief systems as the slaves arrived in the New World [Pradel, 37].

In Haiti, a framework of various African traditions, the Catholic Church, and religions of the indigenous people influenced Vodun. Shaped by the ecology of the plantation, the slaves’ daily schedule, and new housing, food, language, and friends, Vodun attempted “to make sense of a world that had seemingly gone wrong” [Pinn, African Religious Experience, 216]. Due to the geography of the island, missionary work was difficult and slaves were able to hold onto their practices for a great number of years. However, the Code of Noir in 1685 required the forced baptism and doctrinal education of all slaves and outlawed African religious practices [Pinn, Varieties, 16].

The original loa, or spirits, and rituals had been gentle, but fueled by the anger generated by their new conditions, the African slaves required a balance to this gentleness. More aggressive loas and rituals arose which empowered and assisted in the revolution that freed the slaves [Pinn, African American Religious Experience, 217].

In North America, the suppression of African religious beliefs was so effective, virtually nothing of the authentic African form remains. “Voudou doesn’t give people shivers because it celebrates the dead – what religion doesn’t? The shivers come from a deeper chill, a very bad memory; once upon a time, in America, an entire pantheon of gods was murdered. But the deicide was not final. The souls survived” [Davis, XII]. Voodoo of North America assimilated Christianity to a much greater degree than the practices of Haiti, with the representation of loas as Saints fully ingrained in the system. In fact, new saints were created for the specific purposes of the slaves, including St. Marron, Saint of run away slaves. The religious system also incorporated elements of the native Indian culture, European witchcraft, and other non Voodoo African slave religions [Davis, 8].

In 1945, Voodoo was recognized by the World Order of Congregational Churches and today is gaining converts from the African American population. Those wishing to honor and
know their African roots, are now attempting to separate the practice of Voodoo and its Christian influences. They refer to this as orisha Voodoo [Davis, 9]. Others do not feel the Christian church is a useful approach to dealing with life issues. Others approve of Voodoo’s appreciation of the earth [Pinn, African American Religious Experience, 225]. Regardless, only in Africa has the complex system of religious practices retained its un-Christianized lineage [Davis, 11].


