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Scholarly interest in the history of Haiti has resurfaced in recent years, largely focused on the Haitian Revolution. There is, of course, also a plethora of scholarship on Vodou in Haiti. Kate Ramsey’s *The Spirits and the Law* should not be overlooked as a run-of-the-mill addition to either body of work. Ramsey’s award-winning first book offers a valuable perspective on both the broader history of Haiti and the sociopolitical role of Vodou as she examines the creation and enforcement of laws that restricted ritual practices between the colonial period and the fall of the Duvalier regime. She proposes that these laws were not implemented consistently or successfully for two reasons: first, the government repeatedly failed to differentiate between *le vaudoux*, a form of spiritual practice, and malevolent magic—two distinct concepts in the minds of practitioners. Second, attempts to enforce these laws were subverted and manipulated insofar as it served local populations.

*The Spirits and the Law* examines the Haitian government’s approach to vaudou as a potential threat to order and civil society, and the international community’s view of it as evidence against Haiti’s modernity. The government’s concerns about spiritual gatherings and practices were amplified by outside forces, namely the Catholic Church and the US military. The greater the attempts to exert control over ritual practice, the more distorted and perverse became their perceptions of vaudoux, and vice versa.

Ramsey addresses the debated etymology of the term *le vaudoux*, clarifying that it refers to a specific type of performance in service to the...
spirits (*loi*). *Ginen* refers to the larger spiritual and moral belief system incorporating African, Catholic, and Haitian elements. In the law, prohibited practices were termed *les sortilèges*, which indicates sorcery or spell-casting. Ramsey goes on to demonstrate why such confusion of terminology left the meaning of the law open to citizens’ interpretation and manipulation.

In chapter 1, Ramsey begins with the role of ‘magic’ and ritual during the colonial era and the revolution. From the inception of the Code Noir in 1685 to the revolution in 1791, slaves and people of color were forbidden to gather in large groups or to possess certain symbolic “magical” objects. However, Dessalines’ perpetuation of laws against magic and vaudoux during his leadership indicate this was an issue, not just of race or culture, but of political control; a connection had been formed between vaudoux and rebellion.

Chapter 2 looks at Haiti’s growth as a nation and its attempts to be accepted internationally as a sovereign state. To promote an image of ‘civilization’ in keeping with 19th-century ideals, the government continued attempts to suppress “superstition” and *sortilèges* in the *Code Pénal*. By law, citizens had to obtain permits for gatherings, which could be denied if the local official suspected a spiritual purpose. However, in practice, a police officer or local official may well have been a priest or practitioner of vaudoux himself. In the complex web of Catholic, African and indigenous belief and practice that had developed in Haiti over two centuries, few symbols, words, or acts had one meaning only. Adherents of Ginen and vaudoux interpreted the state’s laws in a way that benefited them, e.g. as injunctions against those who were suspected to have poisoned, murdered, cannibalized, or cursed others. Thus, ironically, the belief in the supernatural or spiritual was perpetuated by the laws against it; why would the government bother to outlaw ‘sorcery’ practices if they could not harm anyone? Thus the law and the spirits (both expressed by the word *loi*) influenced each other multilaterally.

In Chapters 3 and 4, Ramsey thoroughly investigates the creation of the sensationalized concept of “voodoo”—and concurrent efforts to suppress it—during the US occupation of Haiti from 1915 to 1934. The US sought to control Haiti through oppressive measures that included forced labor, martial law, and selective enforcement of the Haitian laws against certain spiritual gatherings and practices. US administrators disregarded much of Haitian law, but retained those statutes which banned *les sortilèges*, taking up and expanding the rhetoric that said “superstitious” practices prevented Haiti from modernizing, contributing to civil and moral degradation. Vaudoux became a potent, lurking threat in the military imagination, creating a mythos of murder and cannibalism which soldiers used to justify violence against Haitians. However, practitioners
resisted and subverted US rule by concealing vaudoux ceremonies and interpreting the law to their own use. Marines complained they were obliged to enforce the law in a way that encouraged vaudoux, or at least contradicted the US purpose for persecuting it. Citizens continued to utilize the law in a manner which seemed to confirm the legitimacy of vaudoux.

After the occupation, the Haitian government created new laws banning ‘superstitious practices’. However, they also adopted Haitian folk culture and performance as part of a cultural revival, constructing a sanitized exotic past that could be paraded in contrast to modern Haiti. Staged ritual dance performances became popular and were sponsored by governments, so that stylized vaudoux dances surreptitiously acquired an international audience. However, performances of any ritual or vaudoux dances were outlawed in 1943, and the ban on ‘superstition’ continued. Vaudoux had been driven further underground over the first half of the 20th century, and would not be legalized until 1987.

Ramsey constructs her narrative deftly, combining government records, private documents, and media sources with pertinent theoretical considerations. She utilizes the classic works of Jean Price-Mars and Laënnec Hurbon for substantive information on vaudoux and its historic role in Haitian culture, and the theories of Taussig and Foucault in her social and political analysis. She also acknowledges the influence of Michel-Rolph Trouillot’s exploration of the silences in Haitian history. Ramsey’s discussion opens up potential for discourse on power relations in popular spirituality, and for closer examination of Haiti’s 19th and 20th century history. With renewed attention on Haiti following the 2010 earthquake, scholars of Haiti’s history, society and politics have an opportunity to uncover and analyze the triumphs and injustices that have led to Haiti’s current state, and to promote continued engagement in Haiti’s future.

Note

1 Berkshire Conference of Women Historians - First Book award.