

Vodou and Protestantism, Faith and Survival: The Contest over the Spiritual Meaning of the 2010 Earthquake in Haiti

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Abstract: This article explores the spiritual dimension of the Haitian earthquake of January 12, 2010, and argues that some of the quake's most profound reverberations occurred at the level of the spirit. Drawing from oral histories with survivors of the disaster, it reveals that Protestantism and the Catholic-Vodou traditions, which are often seen as being diametrically opposed to each other, actually overlap and influence one another. The development of the Haiti Memory Project, an oral history initiative aimed at documenting the impact and implications of the earthquake among Haiti's popular classes, is also described. Interviews for this project were conducted in Haitian Kreyòl, French, and English. This article features two embedded audio excerpts (one in French, the other in Haitian Kreyòl), as well as a hyperlink to supplementary audio excerpts, that allow readers to experience the multilingual nature of the project. Additionally, hyperlinks allowing online access to three full interviews from the collection appear at the end of the article.

Keywords: earthquake, Haiti, Haiti Memory Project, Kreyòl, Protestantism, spirituality, Vodou

The earthquake that struck Port-au-Prince on the afternoon of January 12, 2010, had a geological epicenter but no epicenter of experience. Every survivor has a claim to interpret its meaning; only the dead cannot contribute. Yet equal

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claim does not lead to equal representation. Traditionally, the voices of elites, outsiders, or colonizers have dominated Haiti's history, with the rural and urban popular classes pushed to the background or treated as historical agents only in groups—peasants, masses, or mobs. While there is an important collective element to the earthquake, for survivors it was first and foremost a deeply personal experience. When we treat the earthquake as an individual, as well as collective, experience, we realize that some of its most violent reverberations occurred on the level of the spirit.

The Haiti Memory Project (HMP) is an oral history initiative committed to documenting the oral testimonies of survivors of the Haitian earthquake. One of the things I have learned from listening to the experiences of non-elite Haitians is that the earthquake rattled sectarian religious lines as fiercely as it rattled the Léogâne fault that runs beneath Port-au-Prince. This dimension of the earthquake cannot be found in many of the Haitian survival memoirs of the disaster published to date; the accounts of Haitians who survived to write about their experience have projected a primarily secular take on the earthquake. By contrast, the disaster's spiritual dimensions were felt most strongly by those least capable of writing about them: members of Port-au-Prince's popular classes, non-elite Kreyòl (Creole) speakers with limited access to education.¹

It is not enough to merely create more a democratic historical record with oral history. We also must grapple with what these new perspectives bring to bear upon our scholarly interpretations. In this article, I flesh out the spiritual dimension of the earthquake and its implications for understanding faith in Haiti. Oral history, with its wandering dialogues and sudden turns, embraces the exquisite messiness of individual worldviews in a way that many methodologies in the social sciences and humanities cannot. By taking individuals' narratives as points of departure, oral historians are well positioned to identify tensions between abstract cultural concepts and their expression through storytelling. In some cases, these tensions may appear as contradictions only because we have yet to recognize the particular logics by which our narrators operate. I was struck in particular by ambiguities in narrators' stories that suggested that despite—or perhaps because of—vigorous identity politics in Haiti, men and women drew creatively from multiple spiritual traditions when constructing meanings of the disaster. Although many Haitians and foreigners consider Protestantism and the Catholic-Vodou traditions to be diametrically opposed, an analysis of the content and form of oral history interviews reveals that, in fact, the two spiritual systems overlap and influence one another within individuals. This requires us to

¹ I use the term Kreyòl to refer to the native language spoken in Haiti, instead of the somewhat more common term Creole, in order to distinguish it from other creoles and emphasize its status as a fully developed language rather than a pidgin dialect.

consider more broadly how Protestantism and Vodou are shaped by each other's presence in the Haitian spiritual and cultural landscape.

The Haiti Memory Project

I started the HMP as a response to the Haitian earthquake as well as to Haitian anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot's famous argument that Haitian history has been "silenced"—not because of a lack of talk or action, but because of power's role in the production of history.² Trouillot highlights the ways that written documentation has taken precedence over oral traditions in the writing of history, which has led to the exclusion of non-elite Haitian voices and the prioritization of European and American perspectives. My experiences as a student of Haitian history have convinced me that the lives and perspectives of non-elite Haitians have been undervalued and underrepresented. The HMP strives to serve as a corrective to this damaging trend.

One consequence of Haitians' lack of opportunities to represent themselves is the pervasive image of Haitians as backward inhabitants of a chaotic and illogical place. Reflecting on media coverage of the earthquake, anthropologist Gina Ulysse writes that Haitians "have often been portrayed historically as fractures, as fragments—bodies without minds, heads without bodies, or roving spirits. These disembodied beings or visceral fanatics have always been in need of an intermediary. They hardly ever spoke for themselves."³ Oral history offers a valuable method for addressing this imbalance by reducing the role of the intermediary. Haitians speak more directly to the listener than they can through the news media. Their complex narratives are not reduced to sound bites, and their memories, preserved as archival records, can be returned to again and again, to be interpreted in multiple ways. The interviews document their hopes and expectations, and the ephemeral experiences that are central to how people perceive the world. Oral histories are not unfiltered or unprovoked expressions of Haitian interior worlds, but they are windows, however clouded, into the cultural, psychological, linguistic, and political cosmos of one of the West's most historically misrepresented populations.

With the invaluable help of two Haitian collaborators, Valérie and Stanley Michaud, I collected more than one hundred interviews in Port-au-Prince between June and December 2010. I first met Valérie as an interviewee, and soon she came to work with me as a translator. When she went back to school in the fall, she introduced me to her older brother Stanley, who continues to collaborate with

² Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995).

³ Gina Ulysse, "Why Representations of Haiti Matter More Now Than Ever," *NACLA: Report on the Americas* 43, no. 4 (2010): 37.

me on the HMP today. The Michauds and I planned interviews around Port-au-Prince neighborhoods in the hopes of documenting how earthquake experiences were deeply tied to specific urban spaces. I was impatient to begin recording oral histories, so we did not use pre-interviews to select participants. Instead, we approached people in internally displaced person (IDP) camps and public spaces. One interview often led to another, as curious bystanders volunteered to tell their stories next. Over the six months I spent in Haiti, we interviewed bus drivers, market women, activists, students, Vodou priests, Christian fundamentalists, mothers, fathers, camp leaders, and members of Haiti's diverse class of the unemployed. Together we recorded interviews in Kreyòl, French, and English. The interviews ranged from twenty minutes to two-and-a-half hours.

Unencumbered by much formality or large equipment, my method allowed for a great deal of spontaneity. With a small hand-held audio recorder, we interviewed in tents, cars, houses, and parks, on benches, and street corners. Interviews took place outside of a cholera clinic and inside the remains of fallen buildings. Heard today, the recorded interviews unfold amid a backdrop of the spontaneous sounds of the cityscape. Trucks belch, vendors call out, gravel crunches underfoot. *Konpa* and hip-hop music blast from neighbors' speakers or passing cars. Each interview testifies to the challenge of creating a fulfilling life under brutal material circumstances. Taken together, the interviews form a collage of the themes and concerns that animated Haitian popular thought and discourse at a critical moment in the nation's history.

One of the elements that distinguish these interviews from many other Haitian archival collections is that so many of them are in Kreyòl. In order to understand how memory and identity function in a specifically Haitian context, it is necessary to interrogate the cultural and linguistic devices that people rely on to express themselves naturally. Some Kreyòl speakers inflect their speech with French or English to add layers of meaning to their stories. By doing interviews in Kreyòl, we learn more about how language switching can also operate as register switching. For those Haitians who have some command of French, the two languages can serve as registers of formality and intimacy.⁴ For example, one narrator, Francoise Erylne, described in French watching her brother flee a classroom when the earthquake began: "My brother was there, he had just arrived. He went out. When he went out I asked 'Wow, my God, what's his problem?' He just comes in and then he leave again, and I say 'Wow, my God.'" Then she switched briefly into Kreyòl to observe that "That guy, he always had that problem."⁵ Her subtle language switch for a passing observation of her

⁴ Kreyòl is associated with informality and personal life, while French is associated with formality and education.

⁵ Francoise Erylne, interview by Claire Payton, Port-au-Prince, June 19, 2010, Haiti Memory Project, Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History, University of Kentucky Libraries.

brother's personal characteristics suggests that Kreyòl rather than French was the language she associated with family and personal life. Studies of linguistics have been a major part of Caribbean history writing, and I hope the HMP interviews can be used as diverse body of evidence for how Kreyòl has evolved in the recent era.⁶

Moreover, by putting the collection online with a website built with Wordpress and Soundcloud, I aimed to make the interviews available to scholars in Haiti and around the world who are interested in Haitian narratives about the earthquake. The decision to put the interviews online connected my project to the growing world of digital humanities. After returning from Haiti, I met Douglas Boyd, a leader in the digital oral history world and the director of the Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History at the University of Kentucky Libraries. Boyd is developing an online, open-source system called OHMS (Oral History Metadata Synchronizer) that correlates audio recordings with written transcripts, making them both searchable for specific moments. Boyd and I started a collaboration, and the HMP, which has been donated to the Nunn Center, is to be one of the first multilingual collections to be processed using this software. Users will be able to search both the transcript and the translation and be linked to the correlating moment in either version, which will make oral history more user friendly for researchers. For the HMP in particular, the translations are essential for enabling the larger scholarly community to listen to these Haitian perspectives. One cause of Haiti's isolation is that few outside of its borders and beyond its diaspora understand its language. Translations into English are crucial for making oral histories accessible to the widest possible audience and facilitating their use as important historical resources among Anglophone scholars.

The HMP interviews offer nearly unlimited entry points to understanding what the earthquake meant to the men and women most directly affected by it. As one might imagine, many of the interviews addressed issues of profound loss and suffering. The interviews with residents of IDP camps in particular often included harrowing accounts of men and women living a human rights disaster without access to adequate shelter or basic services such as toilets or clean water. In these respects the HMP serves as a witnessing project that contributes to efforts to advocate for those most affected by the disaster. By providing opportunities to listen to Haitians' stories about their own lives, the HMP encourages scholars and the public to learn Haitians' priorities for the reconstruction process and for the future of their country. In this article, I call attention to some of the other ways that the HMP can be used to learn about Haitian life and culture. Poverty and suffering are themes commonly associated with Haiti. This is not

⁶ Sidney Mintz, "The Socio-historical Background to Pidginization and Creolization," in *Pidginization and Creolization of Languages*, ed. Dell Hymes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971); Michel Anne-Frederic DeGraff, "Morphology in Creole Genesis: Linguistics and Ideology," in *Ken Hale: A Life in Language*, ed. Michael Kenstowicz (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001).

without cause, as many Haitians face incredibly challenging living conditions. But the wealth of information contained in the HMP reveals much more about the world that Haitians operate in than just its material constraints.

The Earthquake in Haitian Religious Landscapes

According to sociologist Enrico L. Quarantelli, there have been three major historical phases of disaster interpretation. Before the European Enlightenment, disasters were considered supernatural, identified as Acts of God that people were helpless to mitigate. The Lisbon earthquake of 1755 precipitated a new phase, aided by and fomenting the rise of secularism and a deeper understanding of science, in which observers increasingly viewed disasters as Acts of Nature. By making strategic decisions, such as avoiding building in vulnerable areas, humans could try to protect themselves from catastrophes. In the modern era, calamities are more often read as Acts of Men or Women, with human action or inaction at the heart of disaster. This interpretation, predominant in the social sciences today, makes an important distinction between the natural occurrence of an earthquake and human actions, such as building homes out of weak concrete, that result in the destruction of built environments.⁷

The full-length survival narratives of the earthquake published by Haitian survivors adhere to Quarantelli's modern paradigm of disaster. A number of literary first-person accounts have emerged about the quake, in part because the Francophone literary festival "Etonnant Voyeurs" was being held in Port-au-Prince the week of the earthquake. Many of the Haitian diaspora's most talented writers were visiting the capital, and some who survived have written about it, including Dany Laferrière, Yanick Lahens, and Rodney Saint-Éloi.⁸ In their accounts, the earthquake is marked primarily as an Act of Men and Women. Laferrière, a Haitian author based in Quebec, describes how on the night of the earthquake he was soothed by the sounds of "songs and prayers that were like lullabies in the night," but he dismissed the religious fervor of those around him: "[The poor] use God to convince themselves that they're not alone on this earth and that their lives are not just a beadwork of misery and pain."⁹ Laferrière goes on to describe faith among the non-elites as a strategic investment rather than a serious worldview: "I'm always surprised by what

⁷ E.L. Quarantelli, "Disaster Planning, Emergency Management and Civil Protection: The Historical Development of Organized Efforts to Plan for and Respond to Disasters" (unpublished paper, 2000): 3–4.

⁸ Dany Laferrière, *The World is Moving around Me: A Memoir of the Haiti Earthquake* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2013); Yanick Lahens, *Faïlles* (Paris: Sabine Wespieser, 2010); Kettly Mars, *Aux frontières de la soif* (Paris: Mercure de France, 2012); Rodney Saint-Éloi, *Haiti, Kenbe La!* (Neuilly-sur-Seine: Michel Lafon, 2010).

⁹ Laferrière, *The World is Moving around Me*, 67, 122.

intellectuals say about the role of God among the poor. It has nothing to do with spirituality. It's like my mother's chair. It's better to have it in case a visitor shows up."¹⁰

Although Quarentelli organizes the development of the meaning of disaster as a historical progression, he points out that the "average person" of today has not necessarily accepted the dominant social science perspective. Each of these three interpretations—Act of God, Act of Nature, Act of Men and Women—is "held in varying proportions and sometime together by different segments of the population."¹¹ This was certainly true in many of the HMP interviews. Some narrators discussed the earthquake as a natural event, but others experienced the earthquake first and foremost as an Act of God. Occasionally, narrators offered both interpretations throughout the course of a single interview. To understand what narrators meant when they gave spiritual interpretations of the earthquake, we must try to locate them in the complex world of religion in Haiti. The way that narrators situated their stories of survival and their discussion of the disaster's meaning can illuminate how they experience the spectrum of spiritualities that thrive in Haiti today.

Currently, there is not enough research to know with any certainty how many people are affiliated with which religions in Haiti. A common axiom has it that the country is "70 percent Catholic, 30 percent Protestant, and 100 percent Vodou." This cliché is most often used to essentialize the connection between Haitian-ness and Vodou, but it nevertheless touches on the overlapping of spiritual influences across denominational lines. People may also practice different faiths at the same time or hold different affiliations throughout their lifetime. Since even those who serve the *Lwa* (or practice Vodou) also often identify as Catholic and attend mass, Haiti is considered a predominately Catholic country. Roman Catholicism is generally associated with the small elite classes, while Vodou is associated predominately with the rural peasantry and the urban poor. Catholicism and Vodou form a spectrum of beliefs and practices that I refer to as the Catholic-Vodou traditions.

Over the past forty years, Protestantism has grown into a significant religious presence in Haiti. Estimates on the proportion of Protestants range broadly from 15 to 40 percent of the population.¹² Within Protestantism, there is a range of denominations, churches, and charismatic leaders that represent a diversity of spiritual belief, practice, and ideology. The most popular denominations in Haiti are Methodist, Episcopalian, Baptist, Seventh Day Adventist,

¹⁰ Ibid, 122.

¹¹ Quarentelli, "Disaster Planning," 6.

¹² Charles-Poisset Romain, *La Protestantisme dans la Société Haïtienne* (Coconut Creek: Educa Vision Inc., 2004), 7; Claudine Michel, "Of Worlds Seen and Unseen: The Educational Character of Haitian Vodou," in *Haitian Vodou: Spirit, Myth and Reality*, ed. Patrick Bellegarde-Smith and Claudine Michel (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2006), 34.

and Pentecostal.¹³ Melvin Butler, a scholar of religious music in Haiti, argues that between and within the denominations there are struggles for domination “fought ideologically as clergy and laity debate theological positions and battle for moral-spiritual supremacy in the minds of their listeners.”¹⁴ Protestant missions and churches, many of which receive substantial resources from international religious organizations, serve as important sources of food, education, and other development initiatives in the communities they serve. They are also committed to gaining converts to their particular church. Critics argue that the two functions are directly linked: Evangelical missionaries “capitalize on material deprivation and insecurity to advance their theological agenda.”¹⁵

Despite their differences, some of the more extremist Evangelical Protestant churches in Haiti are united in a common project to eradicate Vodou, which they associate with devil worship. Although the accusation that Vodou is Satanic is not new, it was given a prominent voice immediately after the earthquake when the internationally known Christian media figure Pat Robertson said on US television that the disaster occurred because the formerly enslaved had “made a pact with the devil” during the Haitian Revolution and that the nation was “cursed.”¹⁶ His comments perpetuated a pervasive misrepresentation of Vodou with a long history. Beginning with the American Occupation of Haiti (1915–34), a stubborn fantasy of Vodou (known as “voodoo”) emerged in American popular culture featuring zombies, black magic, and exotic sexual rituals. This caricature has little in common with the spiritual practices of millions of Haitians, but these misunderstandings have led American public intellectuals to decry it as a “progress-resistant culture influence” responsible for poverty in Haiti.¹⁷ Yet a cursory examination of the history and practice of Vodou indicates that, far from being a static repository of “tradition,” it has proven profoundly flexible and adaptive.

Like other religions, Vodou is “a system of beliefs and practices that gives meaning to life: it uplifts the spirits of the downtrodden who experience life’s misfortunes, instills in its devotees a need for solace and self-examination, and relates the profane world of humans to that of the incommensurable mythological divine entities, called *lwa*, who govern the cosmos.”¹⁸ It emerged out

¹³ Romain, *La Protestantisme dans la Société Haïtienne*, 11.

¹⁴ Melvin Butler, “The Weapons of Our Warfare: Music, Positionality, and Transcendence among Haiti Pentecostals,” *Caribbean Studies* 36, no. 2 (2008): 26.

¹⁵ Felix Germain, “The Earthquake, Missionaries, and the Future of Vodou,” *Journal of Black Studies* 42, no. 247 (2011): 250.

¹⁶ “Pat Robertson Blames Haiti Earthquake on ‘Pact with the Devil,’” January 13, 2010, video clip, accessed April 13, 2013, YouTube, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S5nraknWoes>.

¹⁷ David Brooks, “The Underlying Tragedy,” *New York Times*, January 14, 2010, accessed February 28, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/15/opinion/15brooks.html>.

¹⁸ Leslie Desmangles, *The Faces of the Gods: Vodou and Roman Catholicism in Haiti* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 2–3.

of the colonial encounter between Roman Catholicism and African traditions, particularly those from the regions of ancient Dahomey and the kingdom of Kongo. This encounter began with the first missionaries to Africa and later continued in the crucible of Saint-Domingue (the French colony that would become Haiti), where the spiritual practice was further transformed by the traumas of slavery and European racism.¹⁹ Slaves brought from Africa borrowed elements from the religion of their French oppressors that they found useful, sometimes to disguise their faith and avoid persecution. The most visible of these is perhaps the use of the images of Catholic saints to represent Vodou spirits. Vodou is a religious tradition that believes in one Supreme God, known as *Bondye*, but places emphasis on the *Lwa*, intermediary spirits who are more present in the physical world. The faith has survived despite centuries of persecution in no small part because it is a highly decentralized religion without institutional hierarchy, a central text, or a single unified doctrine. But the Catholic Church can also play a distinct and important part in the lives of those who serve the *Lwa*, regulating life cycles through baptism, First Communion, marriage, and masses for the dead.²⁰ For many *Vodouizan*, *Bondye* is worshipped at Catholic mass, while people honor and communicate with the *Lwa* at Vodou ceremonies.

While the deep connections between Vodou and Catholicism are well known, some scholars have turned an eye toward the suggestive overlap between Vodou and certain Protestant dominations such as Pentecostalism. In Haitian identity and cultural politics, these different faiths often position themselves in opposition to one another, but this binary obscures the complex interactions between them.²¹ Anthropologist Alfred Métraux observed in 1959 that certain Protestant sects “cultivate religious enthusiasm to the point of mystical trance” and their ceremonies have “an atmosphere something like that of Voodoo [sic] sanctuaries.”²² Possessions are common in Vodou as well as some Protestant sects. Métraux recalled that “a Pentecostal preacher describing his feelings when ‘the spirit was upon him’, listed to me exactly the same symptoms as those which I had heard from the mouths of people who have been possessed by loa [*Lwa*].”²³ These elements may be structural similarities shared across Atlantic Afro-Christian traditions, but no doubt they are reinforced by the

¹⁹ John K. Thornton, “On the Trail of Voodoo: African Christianity in Africa and the Americas,” *The Americas* 44, no. 3 (1988): 261–78.

²⁰ Karen McCarthy Brown, “Afro-Caribbean Spirituality: A Haitian Case Study,” in *Invisible Powers: Vodou in Haitian Life and Culture*, ed. Claudine Michel and Patrick Bellegarde Smith (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 12.

²¹ Elizabeth A. McAlister, “‘The Jew’ in the Haitian Imagination: Pre-Modern Anti-Judaism in the Post-Modern Caribbean,” in *Invisible Powers: Vodou in Haitian Life and Culture*, ed. Claudine Michel and Patrick Bellegarde Smith (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 88.

²² Alfred Métraux, *Voodoo in Haiti* (New York: Schocken Books, 1972), 357.

²³ *Ibid.*

experiences and expectations of those who move back and forth from Vodou to Protestantism.

One recurring theme throughout the HMP interviews was the role of Protestantism and the Catholic-Vodou traditions in narrators' spiritual lives. Karen Richman has recently argued that "Catholicism, Vodou, and Protestantism have defined, mediated, and reproduced one another in the fluid, plural landscape of Haitian religious history for at least three-quarters of a century."²⁴ The interconnectedness of these religions was apparent in some of the HMP interviews when narrators struggled with the spiritual significance of the earthquake and the meaning of their survival. The interviews are sites where we can glimpse the porous boundaries between religions.

Protestant Interpretations of the Earthquake

One of the most powerful stories of Christian faith and survival that I encountered came from Francoise Erylne, whose interview was briefly discussed above. She was a soft-spoken, twenty-seven-year-old university student from Jean-Rabel, in the far northwest of Haiti, whose family lived in a middle-class neighborhood of Port-au-Prince. She and I conducted the interview mainly in French in her tarp shelter, while sitting near a tray of candies and snacks that she sold to passersby. She identified strongly as a Baptist, and her recollection of being trapped in the rubble of her university was very expressive of her faith in God. When the earthquake began, and she saw the walls of her school begin to tremble:

I say, "My God." And everyone begins to run, and me, I stay sitting, saying "Jesus! Jesus! Jesus! Jesus!" And then, I don't know what's going on anymore. I only hear noises, screaming, students who are yelling "Jesus! Jesus! Jesus!" And wires, walls, blocks, all that falls. It was unbelievable. At that moment, I . . . I don't know where I am anymore, what's going on. I just hear very, very loud screaming. Students screaming very, very loudly and me, I'm screaming even more loudly, "Jesus! Jesus! Jesus! Jesus!" There are wires, walls, all that crack, crack, crack, I feel it's like that, so, and after I find myself under the concrete. With my nose filled, my ears filled with grains of sand and everything, and I find there were three other students near me who are screaming very loudly "What are we going to do? How? How can we get out of here?" And they're crying. There are, there are two or three who are crying very loudly, and I said to them, "No, don't cry because God is coming to deliver us this night if it's his will. And if it's his will for us to die, then we will all die here." Then, and after I hear students who are outside,

²⁴ Karen Richman, "Religion at the Epicenter: Agency and Affiliation in Léogâne after the Earthquake," *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses* 41, no. 148 (2012): 149.

and very . . . I hear their voices saying, “Erylne! Erylne!” and there was one of my friends, he answered, “She is here, she is here, close to me! But for her to get out, I have to get out first.” And it was very, very hard, but me, I had faith in God, saying that he was coming to deliver us, and that very night if it was his will. So it was hard. And when, when I got out, when they crushed the walls to get me out, it was then when I got out that I saw what was happening. And it was in that moment I knew there had been an earthquake, I had not known. And when I arrived outside I saw that there wasn’t, wasn’t anything, anything outside. There were no other students from the class. The rest were under the rubble. And it was in that moment that I began to praise God, to say thank you, and re-thank God, I wasn’t hurt at all . . . my feet, my eyes, I was in good shape. So I spent the whole afternoon thanking and praising God for the life that he gave me. It was incredible, God did it for a reason, a well-determined reason, that me, I didn’t know.²⁵

To listen to this passage in French:

Go To Audio Excerpt 1 / Francoise Erylne / (5:23)

http://ohr.oxfordjournals.org/content/suppl/2013/08/16/ohr095.DC1/OHR_40_2_Payton_Excerpt_001_Erylne.mp4

In this passage, Erylne’s survival is a renewal of faith, and she attributes it to an Act of God. It is also revealing that, although she was recounting the earthquake that had occurred six months prior, she used the present progressive tense, a common storytelling device in Haiti, often used in Kreyòl, that makes the story more active by situating the speaker and the listener in the moment as events are unfolding.²⁶ Yet although she saw God’s hand behind the disaster, she remained humble about how it fit into a divine plan:

Well, the earthquake happened in Haiti, so, for me it’s that God wanted it . . . God wanted . . . for a reason . . . well, I don’t know exactly. Maybe there are people who sinned against God. Maybe God did it to show us that he is here, he is here, he isn’t dead, and he will always be here for us, so that we Haitians respect him. And so that we Haitians live for God, for him only.²⁷

Erylne was not confident that God meant to punish Haitians, but it was evident that this idea, available to her in public discourse, was a powerful possibility. Her uncertainty about God’s intentions was reflected in another way as well: When I interviewed Erylne in June 2010, she was sleeping in a tarp shelter in a camp,

²⁵ Erylne interview.

²⁶ Adam McGee, “Dreaming in Haitian Vodou: Vouchsafe, Guide, and Source of Liturgical Novelty,” *Dreaming: Journal of the Association for the Study of Dreams* 22, no. 2 (2012): 88.

²⁷ Erylne interview.

even though her family's home was still in good condition. Sleeping indoors under a cement ceiling provoked nightmares and unbearable anxiety, since she could not be sure what God had in store.

Other Protestants I interviewed were more confident about the causes of the disaster. I got to know Chrispain Mondesir because he was the neighbor of some friends I had made in an IDP camp. He was a sinewy, forty-nine-year-old Haitian Evangelical convert who lived alone in a small tarp shelter with a dirt floor. Having worked for many years in the Dominican Republic, his Kreyòl was peppered with Spanish—a trait that he apologized for repeatedly. Although borrowing from French is common in Kreyòl storytelling, he feared that his use of Spanish would make him seem uneducated. He insisted that he could return to the Dominican Republic at any point, although he was still living at the IDP camp three years after the disaster. In our interview, he recalled being raised in an observant *Vodouizan* family but that his father “allowed his sons to choose whom they wanted to worship.”²⁸ According to Mondesir, the earthquake was a punishment from God:

There is a lot of evil in this country all around. Evangelists preach everywhere, but the people don't listen. Because God, when he does his work, he come to those who are the most evil. He says “that's your problem,” and then he destroys. That is the will of God . . . There is so much evil everywhere in Haiti. A lot of sacrifices happen here. God says, “Well, I'm going come, and there is nothing that can keep me from striking, and I am going to destroy.” It happened in Chile, it happened other places without so much destruction. It's clear that he destroyed the place where there was the most evil.²⁹

Although Mondesir believed the earthquake was meant as a divine retribution, it had other spiritual consequences as well: “People who practice evil, there was a lot that happened to them. There were many people who kept devils in their homes, but those devils fled. They went and hid. Yet despite this you still have people who don't want to repent.”³⁰ These passages are full of standard anti-Vodou bigotry, but they also reveal how Vodou and Protestant spirituality might both shape an individual's perception of the spiritual world. In the first passage, Mondesir was preoccupied with Vodou as a force of evil. The second passage indicates that he perceived Vodou spirits as actors in the world. Even though he described them as devils, he implied they had to be contended with as real entities to be disrupted or forced to flee. He mapped a Christian framework of evil onto the Vodou spirit world, but, even in demonizing the spirits, he

²⁸ Chrispain Mondesir, interview by Claire Payton, Port-au-Prince, July 12, 2010, Haiti Memory Project, Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History, University of Kentucky Libraries.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

lent a certain legitimacy to the existence of the *Lwa*. Belief in the power of evil and Satan is common in many Protestant denominations, but in Haiti it provides a means of incorporating elements of Vodou epistemology into Christianity.

Another passage from Mondesir's narrative hinted in a different way at how Vodou and Protestantism may interact in a single narrative:

My experience of the earthquake: I got up to go to work on Tuesday but on Monday I had a revelation about the earthquake. While I was sleeping I saw myself swimming in water, and then I saw someone pull me out. In the morning I should have gone to work, but I couldn't go, I felt like my heart was so heavy. When I got up I realized I needed to go to church. I went to church instead of going to work. While I was at church there was a pastor who said "a coffin is going to be crushed." When services finished I left church and went home. When I got home it occurred to me that I shouldn't fall sleep inside. I got up to walk outside, and the house fell down. I heard "Pidip! Pidip! Pidip!" The house fell, and my heart trembled. I was still inside the house. I ran and held onto a pillar, then fell. My fingers buried in the ground and my wrist broke. I rose to my feet and saw dust everywhere, everywhere.³¹

To listen to this passage in Haitian Kreyòl:

Go To Audio Excerpt 2 / Chrispain Mondesir / (3:20)

http://ohr.oxfordjournals.org/content/suppl/2013/08/16/oht095.DC1/OHR_40_2_Payton_Excerpt_002_Mondesir.mp4

Although by no means exclusive to Vodou, dreams and their interpretation are a central part of Vodou spirituality and practice. It is through interpreting dreams that people can receive and understand messages from the *Lwa*. It is impossible to know whether Mondesir actually had a prophetic dream the night before the earthquake, but he included it in his story to lend meaning to the story of his survival. The dream's symbolism was striking: in Vodou traditions, the afterworld is located *anba dlo*, under the water. In this interpretive framework, being pulled from the water is being pulled from death. Later in the interview, Mondesir mentioned that the earthquake destroyed his workplace, killing his co-workers. Adam McGee, a scholar who has researched the significance of dreams in Haitian Vodou, has observed that "the *idea* of prophetic dreams about the earthquake has become part of how at least some *Vodouizan* have struggled to embed the earthquake within a meaningful narrative."³² McGee argues that in Vodou traditions, unsettling dreams often "inspire some form of ritual action in which an explanation or relief from distress is sought."³³ Mondesir's dream

³¹ Ibid.

³² McGee, "Dreaming in Haitian Vodou," 98.

³³ Ibid.

inspired him to go to church and participate in services instead of his usual routine. At church, the pastor revealed another prophecy of death deterred. Read through a Vodou framework, we can interpret Mondesir's choice to highlight his prophetic dream and his reaction to it as a display of his healthy relationship with the spiritual world that ultimately protected him by sending him coded warnings.

What would it mean if Mondesir identified as a Protestant, while drawing from Vodou frameworks to provide meaning to his survival? Alfred Métraux and Karen Richman have suggested that conversion from the Catholic-Vodou traditions to a Protestant sect can serve as a strategy of avoiding the burden of an overly demanding *Lwa*, which Métraux describes as "the expression of an exaggerated fear of spirits."³⁴ Thus Protestantism integrates into Vodou frameworks: joining a church can be method of negotiating and re-negotiating Vodou spiritual relationships and obligations. Richman points out, "Even the assertive, separatist stance of some Protestants cannot disguise how firmly their congregants remain within a fundamentally integrated spectrum of mystical techniques and strategies to hold illness and misfortune at bay."³⁵ On the other hand, it is possible that Mondesir's conversion represented a full-hearted embrace of Protestant doctrine, and the apparent influence of Vodou in his story simply represented a cultural grammar derived from his family background and separate from his current religious belief. Claudine Michel, a scholar of Haitian Vodou, has argued suggestively that those who reject Vodou often have "emotional responses so deeply rooted in ancestral traditions that they are only decipherable in the context of a worldview anchored in a Vodou substratum, even if carefully hidden or repressed."³⁶

The presence of Vodou in Mondesir's story may also have represented the growing influence of Vodou on Protestant practices in Haiti. McGee suggests that dreaming is an increasingly important part of Haitian Evangelical spiritual practice, part of a larger process of absorbing elements of Vodou into Protestantism "in its search to become more appealing and meaningful to converts."³⁷ It is also possible that converts generate this transformation themselves by bringing elements of Vodou to the rituals and practices of their new chosen faith. Regardless of the specific relationship that Mondesir was creating between Vodou and Evangelicalism, his oral history is a site where both spiritual traditions interacted with one another, both through the content of his interview and the way he structured his narrative. The tensions between strong religious identity and shifting religious influence are only observable through close analysis of a lengthy and spontaneous dialogue. Oral history methodology

³⁴ Métraux, *Voodoo in Haiti*, 352.

³⁵ Richman, "Religion at the Epicenter," 160.

³⁶ Claudine Michel, "Le Vodou Haïtien est-il un Humanisme?" *Journal of Haitian Studies* 12, no. 1 (Spring 2006): 117. Thank you to Kyrach Daniels who provided this translation.

³⁷ McGee, "Dreaming in Haitian Vodou," 99.

reveals contradictions that require us to consider these overlapping spiritual systems in light of one another rather than in isolation.

Vodouizan Interpretations of the Earthquake

The HMP also contains interviews with *Vodouizan* whose earthquake survival stories overlapped with Protestant narratives but were distinct in important ways. Regardless of whether they served the *Lwa* or practiced Protestantism, people of faith recalled the earthquake as moment of spiritual reckoning. One anonymous narrator, a middle-aged man and long-time resident of Cité Soliel, recalled:

I was in my neighborhood. When I sat down, I saw the ground shake, zzzzzzzzzz, the ground was shaking, I saw the ground was shaking. I realized it was an earthquake. But when I saw that the earth was shaking too much, I made my peace with Death, but I was also nervous. The ground was shaking too much for me. I saw Death in front of me, and the ground shook too much. Houses fell. The ground trembled. When it stopped shaking, I stood and went toward my house. People were dashing onto their knees: “Mother Mary, Jesus, Jesus, save me, save me.” Myself, I did not say that. I prayed to the Earth, because I always say my prayers to the earth. I came from the Earth, and I will return to the Earth. I put my right hand over my heart. I said: “[in French] Earth, you are my love. Be also my protector during this event. I beg you, Lord, that your almighty power aides me, that it purifies my heart, and guards me from misfortune. Amen, Amen, Amen.” I said this prayer three times, and I went back to my house, slowly.³⁸

There are several elements to this passage that suggest that the narrator served the *Lwa*—most tellingly, he directed his prayers to the spirit of the Earth. Although *la terre* is not a particular *Lwa*, Vodou theology posits that all elements of the material world have spiritual dimensions that are more important than physical reality. His prayer was unusual because he switched from Kreyòl to French to recite it, whereas most *Vodouizan* speak to the *Lwa* in Kreyòl. This might have been a performative choice meant to convey to me the sophistication of his spirituality. Or perhaps it accurately reflected his particular spiritual practices. Its striking Abrahamic style fits the Catholic influence on Vodou practice. Although he did not say it directly, his prayer to the Earth in the moment of disaster suggests that, like Erylne and Mondesir, he saw a spiritual force at play

³⁸ Anonymous, interview by Claire Payton, Port-au-Prince, November 10, 2010, Haiti Memory Project, Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History, University of Kentucky Libraries.

in the earthquake and implored it to protect him. Another important indicator of *Vodouizan* identity is the way the speaker contrasted himself against others who called out to Christian spirits while “dashing onto their knees.” To him, the spiritual force at play came from the ground beneath his feet, whereas those on their knees were praying upwards towards the sky. This passage is striking both as a window into the spiritual dimensions of the earthquake and into the complex configurations of Vodou and Catholicism in Haitian spiritual life.

Other *Vodouizan* were conflicted in interviews about God’s role in the earthquake. Fluery Pleusimond introduced himself to Stanley and me as an *oungan*, or Vodou priest. We interviewed him while crouching on cinder blocks outside his tarp shelter in an IDP camp in the Canapé-Vert neighborhood of Port-au-Prince. His wife, wearing a flowing muumuu, sat nearby, occasionally joining our conversation. Pleusimond recounted stories about his life as a healer specializing in childbirth and maternal health until the earthquake took his house and practice. Although the fifty-six-year-old made it out of his collapsed house physically unscathed, the resources he needed to continue his practice were destroyed. The conditions in the IDP camp were too uncomfortable to practice healing. When discussing his personal earthquake experience, Pleusimond framed the disaster as a kind of Act of God and his survival as an indicator of God’s favor:

I believe in God. Why? If I take some leaves to prepare a treatment to give someone to drink, God gives me that. God gives me the route to do good, and to heal people. You see the existence of God. Me, I know what kept me in that bathroom. If I had gone into my room, I would have died. But, I will say that the existence of God held me because of the work that I do, because I do good rather than evil because when someone is suffering, if I pick leaves to give to him, he will not suffer anymore. This is a good deed. God is happy about that.³⁹

In this passage, Pleusimond attributed his survival to his good relationship with God. Throughout his life, he had practiced healing rather than sorcery, and in return God had become a protective force that saved him from physical harm. But when I followed up by asking him what this meant for those who died, he stressed that God’s hand had nothing to do with it and that the earthquake was an Act of Men and Women:

Well! I can say Haiti is a catastrophe . . . when people say it is God that killed people, I say no. It was not God that killed those people. Haiti is poorly built, it is badly constructed. There were a bunch of people who

³⁹ Fluery Pleusimond, interview by Claire Payton, Port-au-Prince, October 15, 2010, Haiti Memory Project, Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History, University of Kentucky Libraries.

died in the earthquake, it was the houses that were poorly built. In the case of my house, if the [neighboring] house hadn't fallen on it there wouldn't have been any deaths.⁴⁰

How should we read these contradictory passages? I would suggest that the passages, taken together, illustrate how he registered the difference between the earthquake as individual and collective event. In the first passage, he regarded his survival as a result of his individual relationship with God, while in the second passage, life and death proved arbitrary. God was active in his personal survival, but other people died at random because of the flawed construction of the built environment. Although he explained survival as a reward for his spiritual purity, he withdrew from the implication that those who died were impure. The dual emphasis on the arbitrariness of mass death and the particularity of his survival may have been one of the ways that Pleusimond tried to give cohesion to his life story while wrestling with the guilt of survival.

Another possible interpretation of the tension between the two explanations of the disaster might be found in the ways the earthquake shook sectarian religious lines. Multiple times throughout the interview, Pleusimond positioned his claim that the earthquake was a secular event as a response to Protestant allegations that Vodou was to blame for the disaster. "Me, when I debate with some Protestants, I say I don't want them to tell me that God killed people, because in reality God is a father, and if his children are making trouble, he punishes them but he doesn't kill them A catastrophe is a catastrophe."⁴¹ The defensive posture of this passage hinted at the power of Protestants in Haiti to set the terms of discussion around Vodou and the earthquake. This passage, as well as his personal story of survival, is intriguing because God in Vodou theology is very distant from the world of mortals. It is possible that this imagery indicates a degree of absorption of a Protestant notion of God.

We may never know if Pleusimond felt compelled to represent the earthquake in secular terms to delegitimize Protestant attacks on Vodou. But I am left to wonder: Was his emphasis on an Act of Men and Women interpretation primarily defensive? In the absence of Protestant criticism, would he have offered a different or additional explanation of the disaster in terms of Vodou theology that complemented the spiritual dimensions of his own survival? Or was it an expression of the tensions between collective and individual meanings of disaster? Perhaps Pleusimond did not feel a tension between secular and religious explanations of the earthquake at all. His different accounts of why people lived and died open up ways for thinking both about the contemporary religious landscape in Haiti and the multiple experiences of catastrophe.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

Conclusion

Afternoon was waning. We shifted on our cinder block seats. I stretched out the audio recorder while Stanley asked Pleusimond one of our routine concluding questions:

Michaud: Is there anything in all of this that we haven't touched on, or that you think is important?

Pleusimond: Well. What could I tell you, what could I ask you. Well, this interview I have given you, the question I would like to ask you is what contribution you see yourself able to give me personally?⁴²

My response was anxious, but after several months of interviewing, I was prepared for this. I replied that we had nothing to offer him personally but that I would try to amplify his story and make it available to others. In the future, if people wanted to learn about Vodou, they would be able to access his story, told in his voice. He replied, perhaps diplomatically:

Yes. That's better, that's better. That's worth more than money, because the history of our country, it's huge. But they don't know the heart of our country's history. Because for me, like when I stop someone who is speaking badly about Vodou, I feel like it also hurts me, it damages me. They say Vodou people are the devil, they are thieves—no! I feel it is a religion that is well formed, well-established, that isn't dirty, that doesn't kill people.⁴³

While Pleusimond might have been making the most of a disappointing response, he also may have seen value in participating in the HMP. Throughout the interview, he expressed passion about educating Haitians and non-Haitians alike about Vodou. There are powerful implications to the misrepresentation of a religion practiced by millions of Haitians, including material consequences for the earthquake recovery process and the future of the country more broadly. As historian Kate Ramsey has observed, if Vodou is treated as one of the causes of poverty and suffering in Haiti, "then clearly [those who practice Vodou] cannot be entrusted with setting the terms of development agendas in their own communities, much less with helping to shape the vision of a new Haiti."⁴⁴ The HMP attempts to correct the misinterpretation that Ramsey criticizes by letting outsiders hear directly from Haitians whose views might otherwise be demeaned or ignored.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Kate Ramsey, *The Spirits and the Law: Vodou and Power in Haiti* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 22.

Yet, the tensions that surround Vodou are perhaps even stronger within Haiti than anywhere else. The HMP oral histories suggest that spirituality was one of the primary modes of experiencing the earthquake. For many, including Mondesir and Pleusimond, the disaster's meaning was visible through the optic of tension between radical Protestants and *Vodouizan*. Hearing how people expressed this tension reveals that the intermingling of religious practices in Haiti has shaped the way individuals perceive the spiritual world. The meaning of spiritual practice in Haiti can only be fully understood when it is considered as parts of a wider spiritual landscape. Practitioners do not live them in isolation from one another.

The earthquake's profound spiritual dimensions are not visible if we rely only on published Haitian testimonies of survival. Many of these accounts were written by Haiti's most powerful literary voices, and they express the viewpoints of educated, secular, transnational citizens. In his memoir, Laferrière invokes Karl Marx to dismiss religious response to the disaster: "The people have all the opium they need. If the day ever comes when there's enough to eat, will they still want to smoke so much?"⁴⁵ But the implication that religious fervor is only a consequence of poverty can underestimate the complexity of Haitian spiritual life. It also undervalues the creativity of the poor to construct elaborate cultural forms that can thrive despite material constraints. It is true that the earthquake's spiritual ramifications were lived most forcefully by people with little access to formal education, computers, international media, or publishing networks. But that should not be a reason to ignore their thoughts on the disaster's meaning. They are, after all, the Haitian majority. By creating the HMP, it is my hope that the experiences, needs, and visions of the Haitian non-elite will be incorporated into conversations about Haiti's future. I hope, too, that these voices will continue to animate Haiti's history as the present era recedes slowly into the past.

Supplementary Materials

Additional audio excerpts from interviews featured in this article, as well as their transcripts and translations, are available at <http://www.haitimemoryproject.org/ohr>.

Online Access to the Mondesir, Pleusimond, and Erylne Interviews Using the OHMS Interface

The interviews with Chrispain Mondesir and Fluey Pleusimond, conducted in Haitian Kreyòl, were indexed in English retaining relevant Kreyòl keywords for multilingual searchability.

⁴⁵ Laferrière, *The World Is Moving around Me*, 88.

Interview with Chrispain Mondesir, July 12, 2010 (01:46:09)

Mondesir, Chrispain, interview by Claire Payton, July 12, 2010, Haiti Memory Project, Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History, University of Kentucky Libraries.
http://nunncenter.org/OHMS-Viewer/viewer.php?cachefile=2011OH071_HMP019_Mondesir.xml

Interview Language: Haitian Kreyòl
Index Language: English/Haitian Kreyòl

Interview with Fluery Pleusimond, October 15, 2010 (01:45:41)

Pleusimond, Fluery, interview by Claire Payton, October 15, 2010, Haiti Memory Project, Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History, University of Kentucky Libraries.
http://nunncenter.org/OHMS-Viewer/viewer.php?cachefile=2011OH116_HMP064_Pleusimond.xml

Interview Language: Haitian Kreyòl
Index Language: English/Haitian Kreyòl

The interview with Françoise Erylne, conducted and transcribed in French, is presented in the OHMS Viewer as a time-synchronized transcript.

Interview with Françoise Erylne, June 19, 2010 (00:20:41)

Erylne, Françoise, interview by Claire Payton, June 19, 2010, Haiti Memory Project, Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History, University of Kentucky Libraries.
http://nunncenter.org/OHMS-Viewer/viewer.php?cachefile=2011OH060_HMP008_Erylne.xml

Interview Language: French
Transcript Language: French

Related Links

Oral History Collection Record: <http://kentuckyoralhistory.org/collections/haiti-memory-project-oral-history-project>
Haiti Memory Project website: <http://haitimemoryproject.org>

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