

Recreating the Kongo in post-Independence Haiti

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Abstract

This paper studies the Kongo rite of Haitian Vodou in order to understand how Kongolese former slaves and their descendants used spiritual rituals and material objects to recreate and remember “home” in the wake of the Haitian Revolution (1791-1804). By the time of Haitian independence, Kongolese men and women comprised the majority of the population in many areas of the former French colony. Though the Haitian Revolution has traditionally been seen as an extension of the French Revolution, post-emancipation Haitian society was characterized by distinctly non-European cultural forms: the *lakou*, the Haitian Kreyol language, and the Vodou religion. Scholars have failed to account for the fact that these new cultural forms emerging from the Haitian Revolution were created by a largely homogenous demographic group: west central Africans.

In this paper, I use a sociolinguistic methodology to investigate how the Kongolese used Kongo and Yombe spiritual technologies – including empowered objects – to recreate communities following emancipation and independence. In my dissertation research, I showed that the Kongolese in Saint Domingue originated from the Loango Coast kingdoms and the Mayombe rainforest. Knowing where Kongolese men and women came from will allow me, in this paper, to shed new light on the religion of Haitian Vodou. In particular, I will investigate how Vodou played a crucial role in the social organization of post-independence Haiti. My goal is to show that the Kongolese used cultural practices as tools to recreate a “home” that had been decimated by slavery on both sides of the Kongolese Atlantic world. By studying these cultural tools – including material objects, rituals, and Vodou songs – we can gain insight into the experience, ideas, and goals of the Kongolese founders of the Republic of Haiti.