Secretism and the Apotheosis of Duvalier

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“Secretism” refers to the active invocation of secrecy as a source of a group’s identity, the promotion of the reputation of special access to restricted knowledge, and the successful performance or staging of such access. This essay examines a case in which a secretist religion became a public force. The case is that of Haiti and the religion of Vodou, as it was merged with political objectives by François Duvalier during his tenure as “president-for-life” from 1957 to 1971. Duvalier represented himself in his discourse as being possessed of the historical spirit of the revolutionary hero Jean-Jacques Dessalines, and in his style impersonated the Vodou Gede spirit, Baron Samedi. Since his death he has by some reports himself become a spirit, Loa 22 Os. Whereas much previous work has endeavored to explain states’ control of secret religions, this essay considers secretist religion’s capacity for infiltrating procedures and esthetics of the State and its uses in totalitarian rule.

The hypnotic power exerted by things occult resembles totalitarian terror: in present-day processes the two are merged.


I have a taste for the secret, it clearly has to do with not-belonging; I have an impulse of fear or terror in the face of a political space, for example, a public space that makes no room for the secret. For me, the demand that everything be paraded in the public square and that there be no internal forum is a glaring sign of the totalitarianization of democracy.


The real mystery of the totalitarian Leader resides in an organization which makes it possible for him to assume the total responsibility for all
crimes committed by the elite formations of the movement and to claim at the same time, the honest, innocent respectability of its most naïve fellow-traveler. The totalitarian movements have been called “secret societies established in broad daylight.”

—Hannah Arendt (1948)

I am already an immaterial being

—François Duvalier (1966)

IN ITS BROAD SENSE SECRECY IS NOT RARE but is rather constitutive of social relations in general. Restrictions in the flow of information (Shils 1956), and the selection of subjects to whom information is withheld or released, are basic social processes that distinguish degrees of trust and intimacy (Simmel 1906). Though the analytical term “public religions” has been used effectively to describe the politicization and de-privatization of some groups in recent decades (Casanova 1994), religion as a general category universally entails secrecy. As a distinct domain of action it is predicated on the assumption that human access to superhuman powers is sporadic—occasionally and partially revealed in propitious moments, places, and people but otherwise hidden (Lincoln 1994). Secrets, then, are basic to social formation. To speak of secrecy more specifically, however, is to raise questions about the relative lack of transparency in comparison with an established ideal or norm and the relative stridency with which claims to secrets are made. It is to ask, that is, about secretism.

“Secretism”—a term I adopt from Simmel’s own neologism, Geheimnistiutuerei—refers to the active invocation of secrecy as a source of a group’s identity, the promotion of the reputation of special access to restricted knowledge (Johnson 2002; Simmel 1906: 486), and the successful performance or staging of such access (Goffman 1959). Because everyone bears secrets, perhaps the most useful comparative issue lies not in determining and publicizing the specific content of restricted knowledge—which is either impossible or immoral (Urban 1997)—but rather in accounting for how and why some secrets, or the reputation of their possession, acquire social significance as sources of attraction, desire, and power, whereas most secrets do not.¹

¹ This essay will treat secrets not only as discursive events but also, even especially, as disciplinary procedures that resist notation (Benítez-Rojo 1996: 77; Bourdieu 1977; Connerton 1989; Goffman 1959, 72–76; Johnson 2002). Most graphically in the case at hand, secrecy is ritually performed through procedures of “closing” and protecting potentially public networks perceived as dangerously “open” to penetration from “foreign” elements. From the perspective of secretist practice, secrecy is perhaps not best viewed as an interruption in the flow of information so much as the physical containment of disciplined bodies—the enforcement of the rule not to speak.
In this essay I ask how secretism, the staging and circulation of the reputation of holding secrets, was applied to national and state formations and, in particular, to one case in which a secretist religion became a public force. The case is that of Haiti and the religion of Vodou, as it was merged with political ends by François Duvalier during his tenure as “president-for-life” from 1957 to 1971. One might suspect that issues around secrecy are most manifest in terms of states’ control of secret religions. But in this instance the dynamic runs in the other direction; secretist religious performance infiltrated the construction of national identifications and state apparatuses.

BACKGROUND

Like many African and African-diasporic religions, Vodou is an initiatory religion. Advancement within the Vodou religious system entails a gradual progression through initiations into increasing levels of religious knowledge (konesans) of negotiating relations of exchange with the loa, also called the spirits or mysteres, which exert influence over one’s luck in health, prosperity, and love. Esoteric knowledge acquired in advanced stages of initiation is restricted from practitioners in the lower stages, even as the foundational beliefs entailed in Vodou practice are widely known by all. The disjunction between general knowledge about konesans and the more restricted knowledge of the content and practice of konesans is what generates authority and hierarchy within the religion, differentiating priests and priestesses from common participants. Under Duvalier, the authority of Vodou’s initiatic knowledge was theatrically staged and, as an appearance and reputation of special access to power, pressed into nationalist uses. Duvalier’s very physiognomy, accoutered in black hat, glasses, and cane as a Gede, a member of the spirit family that guards the borders between life and death, and even speaking in that spirit’s typical nasal tones, was a bridge that linked representations of religious power and national authoritarian power.

Indigenous Versus Indigenist

To think about this bridging process more closely we can start by considering the elective affinity between secrecy and indigenous religions. This is because secrecy, the restriction of information in the face of putative poachers, both expresses and helps build a shared identity based on the maintenance of boundaries vis-à-vis outsiders. As the epigraph from Derrida suggests, secrecy may be linked to the sentiment of not-belonging and the fear of absorption and erasure in the “open” public sphere, because the rules of public space are never neutral. Secrets are the
discursive boundary against “terror in the face of a . . . public space” for indigenous religions, whose performers often understand themselves as imprisoned within historically hostile nation-states. Yet under certain conditions, indigenousness and its secretist discursive boundary may themselves become public, in the sense of being appropriated for and harnessed to bureaucratic state formations.\(^2\) States differ from indigenous nations in that they seek to formulate, invent, or impose a set of shared sentiments and “history” that will in at least superficial fashion unite diverse social groups and loyalties under a single ideological umbrella. Locating disparate groups in relation to a unique foundational narrative of origins attempts to secure such a center. But this means that indigenizing efforts of states to unite dissonant voices in a single choir singing praises to a given fusion of folk and territory render essential the distinction between State-building indigenist and State-resisting indigenous articulations (Ramos 1998).\(^3\)

In the case of Haiti, the difference between the terms is important and was salient early on. Jean-Jacques Dessalines, the first Emperor, who replaced the French title of “St. Domingue” with the indigenous “Haiti” (from the Amerindian Taino, “the mountainous place”) on 1 January 1804, referred in the first Constitution to all those born in Haiti as indigènes and, by national definition, “black” (Dayan 1995; Dubois 2004: 300). Yet while Dessalines is said in popular tales to have practiced Vodou, and by now has even been made a spirit himself through the perceived close association of his character with that of the fierce Yoruba/Vodou deity of iron and war, Ogou, in fact he openly hunted down practitioners of the indigenous Haitian religion. In other words, the indigenous religion of Vodou was not part of the indigenizing process of state-making.

\(^2\) This has been shown in detail for the case of Australia by Povinelli (2002), and for Brazil by Ramos (1998). A useful summary of analytical constructions of the “public” by Jeff Weintraub (1997) includes (1) the liberal-economic model, where public denotes the domain of influence of the nation-state; (2) the classical model of the public as a political community of citizens, distinct from both the market and the nation-state; (3) the “public” as a general sphere of face-to-face interactions and social intercourse, such as in a café, a bar, a train-station, or the street; and (4) the public as the market economy, often gendered as “male,” in distinction to the domestic areas of home and family, often gendered as “female.” Here I rely upon the first of these.

\(^3\) As Povinelli notes, settler states (a category that includes all of the Americas along with Australia) have an interest in protecting indigenous or “autochthonous” religions, if not indigenous law more broadly, at least when religion is constructed as a largely private sphere unrelated to states’ primary concerns of territory or violence. Povinelli speculates why: “What is it about the thing of ‘indigenous tradition’ that produces sensations, desires, anxieties, and professional, personal and national optimism?” Settler states are vested in indigenous religions as an ideological and commercial cornerstone of nation building. “As the nation stretches out its hands to an ancient aboriginal law in order to embrace its own ideal body, indigenous subjects are called on to perform a complex set of semiotic maneuvers in exchange” (2002: 55).
as envisioned by Dessalines. By contrast, as we will see, under François Duvalier the distinction between the two terms was blurred.

This essay seeks to understand how an indigenous and secretist religious group once marginal and even persecuted within the State became indigenized as iconic of the State, both constitutive of it and a cipher of it, but always without official recognition. In the terms of secrecy, we might phrase this as a question of how a secretist society became “public” (Laguerre 1989; Taussig 1999)—a network well known to all, and one visibly engaged with the political sphere—even though its existence remains officially unspoken to outsiders, and concomitantly how, in this transfer, secrets can move from being a source of resistance to a source of oppression. To ask how this transfer may occur, I review the rise to power of François Duvalier, who became president in 1957, in part through his secretist relationship with the religion of Vodou. I call this relationship “secretist” because he maintained, and strong-armed, Catholicism as the state religion even as he circulated the reputation of his access to the restricted knowledge of Vodou (Desmangles 1992: 50–56; Mintz and Troillot 1995: 133). His tactical use of this secretist religion—his widely circulated but officially unspoken special access to Vodou—was important in his concentration political power.

Duvalier marshaled and encompassed for himself Vodou’s cachet as a national, indigenous, and noiriste religion expressing resistance within an elitist and neocolonial State, a resistance value strongly developed in the early twentieth century as the “other” to Haitian elites, the Roman Catholic Church, and occupying U.S. Marines. To accomplish this, he created a new, national meaning of Vodou that reinforced and built upon a few selected aspects of Vodou itself. For example, the idea of Vodou as resistance to foreign encroachment could become persuasive not only because of the message’s repeated iteration, or to the objective fact of Haiti’s colonial and neocolonial exploitation, but also because of the worldview of Vodou itself, which invokes a “constant state of alert” to potential spiritual attack or molestation by rivals (Bastien 1966: 47). But Duvalier revamped this religious “state of alert” in political terms. He transferred Vodou’s prestige and ethos of the need for defense against foreign intrusions to the State by yoking linking political claims to religious sentiments of vulnerability to destruction by massive unjust forces. In the hands of Duvalier, Vodou came to represent not a religious subnation under siege by an antagonistic state, and state-religion (Roman Catholicism), as it in fact was for more than half of the twentieth century but rather the State under siege by an antagonistic world.

This was no mean feat. Through Vodou Duvalier built what had perhaps not existed since the Revolution: a nation-state of “the people.” This achieved, the State would now again be turned on “the people” but now, insidiously, in “the people’s” own religious tongue. The hope of any
neat schema of secrecy-as-resistance and secrecy-as-oppression cracks on the shores of Haiti.

Valences of Secrecy

Alexis de Tocqueville depicted populist religious forms as a democratic fountainhead. Many scholars have treated African diaspora religions in just this light, as religions “of the people,” crucial in resistance to colonial and neocolonial encroachments. In this view, the capacity to sustain distinct imagined worlds in the face of more powerful ruling ideas comprises secrecy’s positive historical role for many subnations during the colonial period. Here, secrecy provides not only the legitimation of the authority of specific groups within a single society, often ranked by age, gender, or levels of initiation (Barth 1975; Bellman 1984; Keen 1994; Powers 1986; Taussig 1999), but also as a “hidden transcript” (Scott 1990), a buffer and counter against the juggernauts of colonization, slavery, modernity, globalization, and the market economy (Apter 1992; Benítez-Rojo 1996; Brandon 1993; Harding 2000; Sodré 1988; Taussig 1980).

This line of thought is often used to view African diaspora religions—which in many though not all cases can be broadly construed as secret societies protected by grades of special initiation (Johnson 2002; Motta 1998)—as comprising a repertoire of resistance to oppression. Recently, for example, Karen McCarthy Brown (2003) quite brilliantly demonstrated how Vodou’s ideas and practices of wanga magic were crucial in diaspora Haitians’ protests against the abuse of Louima by the New York City police in 1998.

It was in the sense of Vodou’s perceived emancipatory role in catalyzing the Revolution of 1791–1804—both as popularly remembered and academically legitimized (Duvalier 1966; Hurbon 1995; James 1963; Price-Mars 1928) quite apart from that claim’s status in historians’ evaluations (Dayan 1995; Dubois 2004; Geggus 2002; Mintz and Trouillot 1995)4—that

4 The legendary Vodou ceremony at Bois Caiman, the Alligator Woods, almost certainly occurred sometime around 14 August 1791. The main sources are two, the best being Antoine Dalma’s *History of the Revolution*, published in 1814, but supposedly written in 1793–94 (Geggus 2002: 82), and an oral report from a mulatto woman named Cecile Fatiman, a priestess (*manbo*) who was at the event (as told to her grandson and thence to Etienne Charlier, who published it). Based on the book by Dalma, David Geggus has argued that there were two meetings, one on Sunday night of the 14th, another the following Sunday, the 21st, with the revolution beginning the day following. The meeting was run by one Boukman, a coachman from the Mezy plantation—and most of the organizers were such elite, and creole slaves, who “got around.” Toussaint may have been there. He too was a coachman, he spoke the African tongues, and he was from the region. Also there was a female priestess, who sacrificed a black pig. The blood was used as an oath-taking event, and the hairs of the pig were taken and used as amulets in the fighting to come. But to say that the ritual directly motivated the rebellion is speculation. What is important is that at least since the publication of Jean-Price Mars’ *Ainsi parla l’Onclé* in the 1920s, the Vodou ritual has been popularly linked to the onset of the Revolution as the standard national history.
Haiti’s 1987 Constitution reinstated freedom of religion and legitimized Vodou. It declared (Article 30) that, “everyone is entitled to profess his religion and practice his faith, provided the exercise of that right does not disturb law and order.” Vodou has by turns been symbiotically linked to the State—as under François Duvalier the president became a larger-than-life “culture hero” in part through his Vodou affiliations (Dunham 1969: 161)—and persecuted, under U.S. occupation from 1915 to 1934, during the Catholic Church’s “anti-superstition” campaign of 1941 and after the fall of the second Duvalier regime in 1986.

Yet the case of Haiti under the Duvaliers (“Papa Doc” and his son who succeeded him from 1971 to 1986, “Baby Doc”) suggests the need to maintain a tempering critical perspective on the idea of secret religions-as-resistance as well. Secrecy may be viewed as the enemy of civil society and a healthy public sphere based on free and open speech. As Simmel noted at the beginning of the last century and others from Arendt (1948) to Foucault (1979) confirmed toward its close, secrecy has been as useful to fascist and other regimes imposing their authority as to those who would resist it.

Moreover, “public religion” and “secret religion” can become a reified opposition obscuring a key issue in the study of religious secrecy, namely its historical, unstable, transitional structure. There are historical conditions under which secrecy is activated, particularly in the face of the perceived threat of outsider penetration. Secrecy as self-conscious defense mediates between historical moments of a given religion’s status as persecuted, prohibited, or marginalized from a dominant cultural center and that same religion is becoming a public religion valued, at least for instrumental purposes, by the metropole, or the inverse transition, from public valorization to exclusion on the periphery (Johnson 2002: 5). Secrecy in this sense offers an “intermediate station for progressing and decaying powers” (Simmel 1906: 472). The question is how such shifts occur, and this question Simmel did not answer.

To pose Arendt’s (1968: 376) citation (in the second epigraph) of Alexander Koyré describing totalitarian regimes as “secret societies in broad daylight” as a research question rather than given, how can a initiatic religion be publicly staged and harnessed to the State, appearing “in broad daylight,” and thus transferred from a secret set of practices into a secretist set of practices?

**NOIRISME AND THE AUTHENTIC IN THE FORMATION OF DUVALIER**

Many scholars have told Duvalier’s story, and I summarize relevant issues and episodes from them in what follows (Bastien 1966; Diederich and Burt 1969; Ferguson 1987; Greene 1966; Laguerre 1989; Nicholls...
(1979): (1) whether he really sought council from the spirits while sitting in his bathtub in the National Palace, wearing the top hat of the Gede spirit master of the cemetery, the loa Baron Samedi; (2) whether he actually kept the head of his enemy, army captain Blucher Philogènes, to receive from it his enemies’ plans; (3) whether he studied goats’ entrails in the Salon Jaune of the Palace (Diederich and Burt 1969: 354–356)—all of this is spectacular rumor. But what is clear is that Duvalier himself fomented the circulation of these kinds of rumors through gossip networks (Dunham 1969: 161–172; Laguerre 1993), making his actual versus alleged engagements with Vodou, and likewise his “real belief in” versus mere “use of” the religion, ultimately intractable questions.5

Born in 1907, son of a schoolteacher (father) and a bakery employee (mother), the latter institutionalized for mental ill health during most of his childhood, François was just eight years old when the U.S. Marines arrived on 28 July 1915. He was taught in high school by, among others, Jean Price-Mars, whose Ainsi Parla l’Oncle (Thus Spoke the Uncle) (1928) was the first sympathetic account of Vodou, and Dumarsais Estimé, future president of Haiti from 1941 to 1946. Price-Mars’ work was key to Duvalier’s intellectual formation, presenting the “authentic” Haitian nation as symbiotically related to Vodou, Creole speech, and black identity and its valuation in the movement called noirisme. Price-Mars’ star rose, like Duvalier’s own ethnographic investigations that followed, in part as an anti-colonial response to a U.S. occupation that used Vodou—as symbol of Haiti’s backwardness—for its justification. Narratives of “voodoo” savagery were after all wildly successful among U.S. audiences, generating bestseller profits for novels like William Seabrook’s The Magic Island (1929), Lt. Faustin Wirkus’ The White King of Gonave (1931), John Huston Craig’s Black Bagdad ([sic], 1933), as well as for movies like White Zombie (1932) and Jacques Tournier’s I Walked With a Zombie (1941). But it also contributed to a backlash in Haiti that dovetailed with intersecting pan-African movements from Haiti to Brazil and from Cuba to Harlem.

Duvalier absorbed this legacy through his teachers but was slow to become politically engaged himself. He was a shy, slight, awkward, and terribly nearsighted boy who blossomed late. Yet blossom he did. As a

5 (Bastien 1966: 59), like (Dayan 1995: 39) and many others, writes of Duvalier’s mercenary “use” of Vodou. But this assessment often arrives after already rendering judgment on his dictatorial politics. Earlier evaluations of Duvalier’s interests in Vodou, rendered at the outset of his political rise, are less definitive and more sympathetic. Alfred Métraux’s (1959) Voodoo in Haiti, to wit, casts Duvalier as a victim, slandered by opponents accusations of his “Voodooism” (55). In general analytical terms, moreover, the division between “real” religion and the spurious “use of” religion cannot be determined and is best left to venues outside academe.
medical student in his early twenties, Duvalier became active in student strikes and in the nationalist poetry movement. He befriended Lorimer Denis, a 24-year-old mystic who, like Price-Mars, linked national identity strongly to a “spiritual essence” of the people through ethnographic studies of Vodou. In the 1930s they co-authored works calling for the writing of a nationalist literature that would dethrone the French canon, above all as part of an intellectual avant-garde called, like its literary publication, *Les Griots*, which took as its title the Franco-African word for the African itinerant musician or poet.

Following the U.S. departure in 1935, in 1937 occurred the terror of the Vespers, in which the Dominican dictator Rafael Trujillo rounded up between 20,000 and 30,000 Haitian sugarcane workers in Dominican territory for mass execution. Central in Trujillo’s vengeance was the issue of race, with Haitians cast as a black scar on the Dominican national body and Vodou again derided as a central mark of the polluting black presence.

In 1941 the Catholic Church instigated an “anti-superstition” campaign under the Haitian mulatto president Lescot—widely viewed as a puppet of the neighboring strongman Trujillo—invading Vodou temples and destroying drums, altars, and ritual implements and symbols in an attempt to purge the religion. So brutal was the campaign that it led Alfred Métraux, the Swiss anthropologist, to press for protections for Vodou, as well as its serious intellectual study, urging the novelist Jacques Roumain to found the Bureau of Ethnology as a counter to the 1941 campaign (Mintz 1972: 3). Jean Price-Mars served as the bureau's first director. In 1942 Duvalier’s research partner Lorimer Denis was named assistant director, and Duvalier himself became active in the Bureau. It was in this period that he built his arsenal of friendships with Vodou priests (*houngans*) and priestesses (*manbos*) and reinforced his ideas about Vodou as the heart and soul of the Haitian peasantry.

What is key to note here is the repeated humiliation, to Duvalier’s eyes at least, of the Haitian national spirit, most deeply represented in Vodou. The traditional mulatto elites of Port-au-Prince had always disparaged the black peasantry and their “black religion.” But to this was added thirty years of new foreign domination by the U.S. occupation, the Dominican Vespers massacre, and the repeated Catholic anti-superstition purges.

Duvalier’s view of the U.S. would always remain mixed, however, tempered by that country’s apparent control of the miracles of technology. In 1944, based on his medical training and limited English skills, Duvalier was selected among twenty Haitian doctors by the Inter-American Affairs Commission to study at the Graduate School of Public Health at the University of Michigan (Diederich and Burt 1969: 50; Ferguson 1987). This was a U.S.-led medical campaign against yaws, a degenerative disease
that ate away the body like leprosy, and rampant among Haitian peasants. Duvalier passed two semesters in Ann Arbor. Through his tireless efforts in the vaccination tours of Haitian villages that followed, his reputation among the poor grew. The shy country doctor was becoming a peasant hero, Papa Doc, one who could both cure yaws and speak to the spirits.

In 1946 the Mouvement des Ouvriers at Paysans (MOP; Movement of Workers and Peasants) was founded, politically mobilizing blacks against urban mulatto elites. With his combination of ethnographic and public health training, Duvalier became secretary-general of the MOP, then under the leadership of the populist hero of Port-au-Prince, Daniel Fignolé. Instead of the MOP candidate, however, the erudite Dumarsais Estimé was voted in by elites in control of the National Assembly. As a previous protégé of Estimé in his younger student days, Duvalier was appointed Director of Public Health, thereafter Under-Minister of Labor (1948), and finally a member of the Cabinet, as Minister of Public Health and Labor (1949). The presidency of the distinguished and black Estimé was viewed by noiriste intellectuals as the just redemption from previous mulatto domination. Utterly honest by reputation, Estimé was revered as beyond reproach, the leader who would return Haiti to political integrity even while solidifying its authentic popular base—despite his antipathy toward Vodou as peasant mystification, according to his former lover, Katherine (Dunham 1969: 26). The coup d’état that ousted him after just several years therefore came as a severe shock to Duvalier and presented a bitter lesson on power and the military. Again, the “true Haiti” was repressed and put down by force. The doctor learned from this that the armed forces could never be trusted. Alternative police forces, more easily and centrally controlled, would be needed if one were to endure in office.

Following the coup d’état of 1950, Paul Magloire, a black general with his ear bent to elites and to the wishes of the U.S., presided over a brief “golden age” funded almost solely by foreign aid (Trouillot 1990: 141). Magloire’s sparkling military couture landed him even on the cover of Time magazine, and tourism boomed. The star cultural attraction was Vodou. Noted Métraux, “every American who disembarks there has but one word on his lips—‘Voodoo’; and one wish—to see ceremonies which he imagines to be orgiastic and cruel” (1959: 56). As a former cabinet member of the deposed regime, Duvalier remained internally exiled from public appearance, remaining hidden, even from his wife Simone and young son Jean-Claude. During this period he engrossed himself in the study of literature; allegedly primary among many favorites was Machiavelli’s The Prince (Diederich and Burt 1969: 66).

By now Vodou, like Haiti, had become fashionable, having received an imprimatur both from tourists and from anthropology. That tourism of the
exotic was fueled by the religion’s spectacularization in novels by former U.S. marines and the films based on them, as well as a growing shelf of ethnographies by foreign scholars (Alfred Metraux, Maya Deren, Harold Courlander, Katherine Dunham, and Melville Herskovits, among others). Yet General Magloire’s glory soured and Haiti’s touristic golden age turned gray as Magloire’s lavish displays contrasted starkly with a deepening national debt and economic depression. Ultimately he too was forced from office.

New elections were set for the summer of 1957. Duvalier’s reputation as a student of Vodou gave him credibility among urban intellectuals, even as his public health training in the U.S., along with his malleable demeanor, endorsed his future candidacy to watchful U.S. officials. The elections of 22 September 1957 brought Duvalier to power just after the death of Lorimer Denis, his mentor and co-ethnographer of Vodou.

Duvalier’s rise to power can be summarized in broad strokes: He succeeded by exploiting to great advantage the radical disjuncture, both actual and perceived, between “state” (urban and elite, white and mulatto, and Catholics) and “nation” (rural and poor, black, and Vodouisants) (Trouillot 1990). He won by calling upon masses of people who had until then been politically disenfranchised, not only peasants but also peasant women. This was clear in election results, where he carried the rural sectors but lost solidly in Port-au-Prince. He supported women’s votes and established the Faisceau Féminin, the Feminine Torch, a group devoted to Duvalier’s election. One young activist in the group, Rosalie Bosquet, later became Madame Max Adolphe, commandant of the unofficial peasant secret police, the tonton makoutes (Abbott 1988: 64). At the same time, he quickly conveyed that women were not immune from violence and terror under the new order (Trouillot 1990: 153). He successfully mediated the elite–peasant gap by posturing himself overtly as Catholic (citing his Jesuit schooling, supporting state Catholicism, importing Jesuit priests from Quebec) while circulating by reputation and gossip his implicit and well-established support of Vodou and his vehement opposition to the anti-superstition campaigns of the Church (Mintz and Trouillot 1995). In fact, though he imported many Catholic priests, he

6 The tonton makoutes, literally “Uncle Satchel,” refer to a mythic bogeyman who tucks people into his bag never to be seen again. These were Duvalier’s alternatives to the military, who he had already learned to distrust. Instead, he organized and armed a secret police force of peasants, many of whose leaders were Vodou leaders, to carry out all unofficial missions of intimidation or the elimination of rivals. A tonton makoute in typical uniform wore a soft hat, denim pants, a red bandana, and sunglasses. This is also precisely the sartorial code of the loa Azaka, the peasant spirit also named “Kouzen” (cousin), who carries a straw satchel. The secret police were therefore staged as being “of the people” through the imagery of the most populist loa, even as they were tools of repression.
also moved quickly to expel any potential political opponents in the Church (Bastien 1966; Desmangles 1992; Greene 1993).

He summoned, for the first time, the political force of Vodou networks, drawing on his time at the Bureau of Ethnology and his studies with Denis (on the existence of Vodou political “networks” rather than autonomous, disjoined, and decentralized houses of practice, see Laguerre 1989, in contrast to Bastien 1966 and Courlander 1966: 13). He presented Vodou as the cipher of the “true ethnicity” of the Haitian masses, “the trustees . . . of the authentic traditions of the race” (Duvalier in Dayan 1995: 126). This latter point is clearest in the writings of Duvalier himself, above all in his essay from his former days, “L’evolution stadiale du Vodou: De la Culture Populaire et des Origines Ethniques du Peuple Haïtien”: “But Vodou is at once a religious and politico-social fact . . . To the degree that it’s not too strong to say that the more one penetrates the mysteries, the more the history of Haiti will reveal her secrets.”

Vodou, then, is “une religion spécifiquement haïtienne” (ibid.: 54) (a religion specifically Haitian) and vice versa—Haiti is a nation specifically of Vodou. Rémy (Bastien 1966: 61) described the doctrine of Duvalier in the simplest terms: (1) Haiti is Black and must be ruled by Blacks; (2) ethnic cohesion requires its own religious symbol, Vodou; and (3) the national faith must have a national leader. Again to follow Duvalier’s own words, Vodou is the “prise de conscience nationale et raciale” (1966: 167) (realization of national and racial awareness), “suprême facteur de l’unité haïtienne” (supreme factor of Haitian unity), and “autentique de la race” (ibid.: 177) (authentic to the race).

7 “Mais le Vodou est à la fois un fait religieux et politico-social . . . Au point qu’il n’est osé d’affirmer que plus on pénètrera les mystères, mieux l’histoire d’Haïti nous livrera ses secrets” (Duvalier 1966: 163).

8 Duvalier’s own articulations from the 1930s to 40s should be seen as part of an international movement comprised of on one hand noirisme, a black solidarity movement, and on the other indigenism, the inversion of the presumed negative valences of racial miscegenation to forge nation-building sentiments. In this latter sense, we might in certain respects compare Price-Mars’ work and Duvalier’s writings to those of Fernando Ortiz in Cuba and Gilberto Freyre in Brazil. All marked and articulated national distinctions precisely in their non-Europeanness and their rejection of evolutionary models of race. Yet the two movements—noirisme and indigenism—also stand in marked tension. While noirisme indigenized national identity in close proximity to notions of national and racial essences, spiritualizing national “destinies” in relation to specific peoples’ “core qualities,” national indigenism was based on the idealization of miscegenation (taking cues from Boas, Weber, and Herskovits, among others), and sought to unhinge culture from essentialist notions of race. Both were anti-colonial in tenor and premised on the dissimilarity of the Americas from Europe and European models, but Duvalier’s approach was rooted in the older, evolutionary model now inverted to place blackness at its pinnacle (Dayan 1995: 126). Nation, race, and religion were authentically and essentially fused through Vodou. What remained to be done was to make the State the legitimate expression of that essence.
But how was Vodou under Papa Doc transformed from the exaltation of Haiti’s national (authentically African) heritage into a secretist form, the “whip of internal colonialism” (Bastien 1966: 66), whereby the religion would be turned against those who voted it into power? The mechanics appear to have been relatively simple. First, Duvalier purged the armed forces of possible rivals. He began by firing his friend, General Antoine Kébreau in March 1958, the same friend who had helped orchestrate his election victory (Trouillot 1990: 156–158). This strategy of rotating officers in and out of positions of authority quickly and capriciously prevented the settling of too much authority on any single person beside himself. Shortly thereafter, following a minor failed coup plot, the president strictly controlled access to weapons, removing them from common soldiers and instead concentrating them in the hands of his personal Palace Guard, loyal only to his person, and of his carefully selected VSN (Corps des Volontaires de Sécurité Nationale), the tonton makoutes. Many of the makoutes were drawn from the ranks of loyal Vodou priests and their networks (Bastien 1966; Diederich and Burt 1969; Ferguson 1987; Laguerre 1989; 1993; McAlister 2002: 202; Trouillot 1990: 191). If many makoutes also came from the military or wore two hats—working both for the military and for the makoutes (Laguerre 1993: 121)—still this secret police force granted Duvalier a substantial buffer against potential coups.

Second, he expelled church leaders, Catholic and Protestant alike, who had had any role in the anti-superstition campaign or its voice, the Catholic paper La Phalange, or who sympathized with so-called leftist student or workers’ groups. Third, he cultivated the approval and patronage of the U.S. by posturing himself as a bulwark of law and order against Communism, easily accomplished in the early Cold War’s absence of détente, and more easily still following the Cuban Revolution of 1959. “Better Duvalier than another Castro” was the official position of the U.S., wrote C. L. R. (James 1963: 409), a position Duvalier exploited to beef up his navy with U.S. help from 1959 to 63, and then declared himself president-for-life on 22 May 1964 with little protest from the giant of the north.

Yet to focus only on the mechanics of power and its control is to step too quickly over the thornier question posed by a Gramscian notion of hegemony: Namely, how did Duvalier forge and communicate the terms of what was initially a popular consent to his governance—even if such “consent” would later be based in fear? From what moves did Duvalier seek to build populist legitimacy; and, even later, a popular consensus of fear that accompanied the exercise of violence?
SECRETIST RELIGION

The apparatuses of state functioned on two levels, an official, public one and a secret one. The secret level was also publicized, however, in codes easily recognizable to Haitians though often obscure to outsiders. Secrets were deliberately circulated by Duvalier. The Kreyol term, *zin*, captures this aptly, implying a distinct form of spreading gossip that lacks any specific original source (Laguerre 1993: 139–143). For example, in the early 1960s Duvalier circulated the rumor that he was seriously ill, to identify potential backstage schemers who might wish him harm. *Zin* could be used to provide real information or misinformation or to solicit new information from contacts. And in a sense, even Duvalier’s actual violence, usually perpetrated by the VSN, was spectacular and staged, designed to generate stories. Even killing was *zin*, designed not merely to eliminate opponents but to foment the circulation of stories about the gruesome fates that awaited dissidents.

In this section, I identify three kinds of circulated secrets as coded information that translated easily among Haitians but remained “under the radar” to foreign observers (among the dictator’s main concerns, because they, and above all the U.S., provided most of Haiti’s revenue in the form of foreign aid that could easily be shut off, as it was by Kennedy in 1962). I examine in this section Duvalier’s relation to the Roman Catholic Church, his use of the codes of history, and the esthetic codes of the *Gede* spirits that communicated his power.

The Church on a String

Though his campaign had been careful not to antagonize the Church (Nicholls 1979: 209–210), Duvalier carried a bitterness toward it at least since the 1941 anti-superstition campaigns. He also regarded it with suspicion as a potential threat to his power and with good reason. For example, early in his reign he included a Roman Catholic priest, Jean-Baptiste Georges, in his cabinet as Secretary of State for Education. The same priest, a sympathizer with students and the left, subsequently plotted an invasion against Duvalier from the Dominican Republic, before being expelled (Nicholls 1979: 221, 224). Yet initially the president bided his time and kept appearances. Since 1806 Catholicism had been the official religion of Haiti and so it remained.

In 1959 Papa Doc began expelling selected foreign priests. Among the first to go were Father Etienne Grienenberger, superior of the Holy Ghost Fathers, and Father Joseph Marrec, a long-time parish priest. Grienenberger had reported many of Duvalier’s violent excesses to Pope Pius XII—especially a gruesome 1957 massacre in the Bel-Air neighborhood of
Port-au-Prince, in which scores of political enemies were buried alive. As to Father Marrec, after the body of Clement Jumelle, one of Duvalier’s rivals in the 1957 election, was stolen by tonton makoutes, he had preached against Duvalier.\(^9\) Catholics who gathered to pray in protest of the expulsions were violently assaulted by the makoutes, and sixty of them were arrested (Abbott 1988, 101; Diederich and Burt 1969: 138–139, 146; Nicholls 1979: 222).

In 1960 Duvalier expelled another Catholic leader, Archbishop Poirier, for his ostensible support of student dissenters, after which the Pope responded by excommunicating all those responsible for Poirier’s humiliating ouster (Desmangles 1992: 53–54). Bishop Robert of the city of Gonaïves was next, in 1962, a reprisal for Robert’s anti-Vodou campaigns against Zacharie Delva, a local makoute leader and Vodou priest (Nicholls 1979: 224). In 1964 the Jesuits were expelled in toto. From this point until a rapprochement was reached in 1966, Papa Doc remained officially outside the Church.

If Duvalier offended some in these purges, he may have only gained in stature among peasants: “He is not afraid of the white man. He is strong, he has power, magical power, the loas are on his side!” (Bastien 1966: 59). At the same time, he sought to save face. He continued to call Haiti a Catholic nation, claiming that he had merely removed political subversives. In 1964 he held a \textit{Te Deum} to mark the occasion of his “election” as president-for-life, and in the same year he assembled all Catholic clergy to receive from them an oath of their support (Nicholls 1979: 225).\(^10\) After a five-year split, a rapprochement finally was tendered when Pope Paul VI invited Haiti to discuss their differences. The Church’s own mission had shifted to appointing indigenous clergy whenever possible, matching to some degree Duvalier’s own plan for a thoroughly Haitian (and loyalist) version of Catholicism.\(^11\) Duvalier was granted the right to appoint a series of Haitian bishops in exchange for the restoration of the

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\(^9\) The mysterious theft of bodies (public but secret) was one of Duvalier’s means of circulating the repute of his priestly power. The most notorious example was the theft of his former rival Clément Jumelle’s body, in April of 1959. Police stopped the black hearse, pulled the casket into their own vehicle and drove away from stunned mourners (Diederich and Burt 1969: 139; Greene 1966). Officially, the body’s removal was to stifle the public rally that might have gathered on the occasion of Jumelle’s burial; but the gossip network spread the word that Jumelle’s heart would be used as a \textit{wanga} (magic charm) to fortify and armor Duvalier’s office.

\(^10\) In 1964 Duvalier was voted president-for-life, garnering a stunning 2,800,000 favorable votes out a voting population of less than 2 million.

\(^11\) Vatican II changed the Church. The indigenization of the Haitian hierarchy in 1966 preceded but was already part of the movement leading to the regional conferences of Medellin in 1968 and Puebla, Mexico, in 1979. In Haiti this led to the use of creole in the Mass, for example, and increased official interest in the plight of the poor (Greene 1993: 132–133).

In all, Duvalier got his wish for a thoroughly nationalized Catholic Church (un clergé indigene) (Desmangles 1992, 54; Nicholls 1979: 227). And by standing up to Rome, he bolstered the fearsome respect he commanded over the masses.

Making History: The Return of Dessalines

In 1959 Duvalier had posters plastered across Port-au-Prince, declaring “Dieu, the great worker of the universe; Dessalines, the supreme artisan of liberty; Duvalier, architect of the new Haiti” (Diederich and Burt 1969: 140). The president was reputed to sleep one night a year on the tomb of Dessalines, and he sometimes referred to himself as carrying the spirit of Dessalines. As Katherine Dunham, who knew Duvalier personally, described him,

. . . Dessalines is the mold that cast him. Identification is more obscure, emulation the driving force, to say nothing of deeper, more esoteric covenants rumored to have been pledged and executed through the incarnation of the essence of Dessalines . . . These rumors soon die down in Haiti, but it is by order of Duvalier that the date of the death of Dessalines has become a national holiday and a ceremony is performed at Pont Rouge. A flame burns day and night before the tomb of Dessalines, the contents of which were once removed and placed elsewhere. That is, the contents were supposed to have found a new resting place, but rumors go even further and say that they have since been disinterred and put to ceremonial black magic use. This sort of story runs rampant in Haiti at all seasons . . . (Dunham 1969: 162)

Duvalier’s initial campaign had portrayed him as the legitimate successor to Estimé, but once in office he built his reputation in relation to a different noiriste hero, the revolutionary leader and first Emperor of Haiti, Jean-Jacques Dessalines. Who was Dessalines, that he presented such a promising model? Dessalines was one of a triumvirate of Haitian revolutionary leaders under whom the independent nation was born, alongside Toussaint Louverture and Henri Christophe. But it was Dessalines who renamed St. Domingue as Haiti and who presided over the writing of her first Constitution and the raising of her flag. Moreover, he is distinguished in popular memory for his warrior’s fury and for his crusade against colonial injustice.

“Burn houses, cut off heads!” was Dessalines’ cry against the French leader Rochambeaut’s war of terror in the northern port of Cap-Français at the end of the wars of independence, in 1802. Dessalines matched
aggression with aggression, chasing Rochambeau into the sea and the enemy arms of the British fleet. He later boasted in his declaration of April 1804, “We have rendered to these true cannibals, war for war, crime for crime, outrage for outrage; yes, I have saved my country; I have avenged America” (Dayan 1995: 4). He renamed the former colony of St. Domingue with the indigenous Taino name of “Haiti” on 1 January 1804, after having earlier ripped the white from the tricolor flag to leave only the bands of blue (for blacks) and red (for mulattos) (Dubois 2004: 293). Duvalier adopted Dessalines’ version of the Haitian flag after 1964, with the blue now definitively black and the bands made vertical. He explained that the bands had to be vertical so that black could uniquely occupy the primary position by the staff, as the “base,” whereas the red (representing mulattos) would flutter in the wind and remain derivative.

Though assassinated in 1806 over land reforms that would have removed wealthy mulattos and blacks from plantation ownership (Dayan 1995: 17, 26), Dessalines’ apotheosis followed, as after his death he superseded both Toussaint and Henri Christophe. By mid-century he was recalled as the Haitian Robespierre, the savage “angel of death,” and the “Principle incarnate of Independence” (Madiou in Dayan 1995: 9). If other leaders like Toussaint and Christophe were accused of having a “white heart with a black skin,” Dessalines was remembered as authentically black. Illiterate, speaking only Kreyol and no French, he avoided cities to not succumb to their flattering luxuries (Dayan 1995: 20). He referred to himself on occasion as “Duclos,” the name of his former slave master, and showed off the whip scars on his back. Though he overtly persecuted Vodou like other Revolution leaders—as Toussaint had before, and Henri Christophe would after him—he was later reputed to have been himself a devotee. “Papa” Dessalines came to be remembered as the paramount indigène, the one who had fused race to land, who had first named “Haitians,” regardless of actual skin tone, as “black” by nation. Though monumentalized by elites only on the centenary of Haiti’s independence in 1904, he had already been elevated in Vodou networks as Papa Ogou Feray. Dessalines, now linked to the Yoruba/Vodou god of war, Ogou, was a spirit.

Lorimer Denis, in an article co-authored with Duvalier, recorded his surprise upon first encountering the loa Dessalines in his ethnographic research:

That evening of December 24, during a service in honor of the all-powerful Petro [spirits], I leapt in amazement when the emotional dynamism came to its paroxysm; the personality of the houngan fell into hypnosis, rising from the depths of the his conscience: Dessalines the
Emperor. It was really Him, the fierce expression, the fanatical look, the whole body sculpted in the motion of the avenger. Then he mounted two men as though to better arch into his pose as the Knight without fear or reproach, under the watch of Immortal Africa.\footnote{\textit{Je tressaillis de stupéfaction quand, ce soir du 24 Décembre au cours d’un service en l’honneur du Tout-Puissant Pétro, le dynamisme émotionnel parvenu à son paroxysme, la personnalité du Hougan chavira dans l’hypnose que surgit des profondeurs de sa conscience: Dessalines l’empereur. C’était vraiment, Lui, le visage farouche, la physionomie fanatique, et tout le corps sculpté en un geste de vengeur. Puis il enfourcha deux hommes comme pour mieux cambrer dans sa pose le Chevalier sans peur et sans reproche et que contemple l’Afrique Immortelle” (Duvalier 1966: 182).}}

For Duvalier the Haitian nation itself, like the return of ferocious Emperor Dessalines, was born of the religion: “1804 est issu du Vodou” (ibid.: 184) (“1804 [independence] was born of Vodou”). It is unsurprising, then, that Duvalier chose Dessalines—first Emperor, black indigénist par excellence, Kreyol nationalist warrior, returning warrior spirit—as the ancestor to possess him. When Duvalier compelled all Vodou centers to hang his portrait from the center pole (\textit{poteau mitan}), the conduit along which the spirits descend to mount the bodies of the living during possession rituals, he must have hoped that another loa would be in the making. And it was. Dessalines’ apotheosis as a manifestation of the god Ogou presaged that of Papa Doc Duvalier’s eventual rebirth as a spirit, as \textit{Loa 22 Os} (“Loa 22 Bones”; Laguerre 1989: 123).

Certainly Duvalier did his best to further his own apotheosis. Carnival parades of the 1960s included mandatory giant images and triumphal songs in homage of Papa Doc, as (Dunham 1969: 223–225) described in 1962. In 1963, following an attempt on the lives of his children, Duvalier delivered a public speech as a display of his invulnerability: “I ask you, Haitian people, to raise your souls to the height of the spirit of your ancestors, and to prove that you are men . . . and allow the blood of Dessalines to flow in your veins . . . As President of Haiti today I am here to continue the tradition of Dessalines and of Toussaint Louverture . . . \textit{I am already an immaterial being} . . .” (Diederich and Burt 1969: 217). In 1964, after upgrading his status to president-for-life, he issued the Catechism of a Revolution: “Who are Dessalines, Toussaint, Christopher, Pétion and Estimé? Dessalines, Toussaint, Christophe, Pétion and Estimé are five founders of the nation who are found within François Duvalier . . . Is Dessalines for life? Yes, Dessalines is for life in François Duvalier.” The Catechism closed with Duvalier’s Prayer:

\begin{quote}
Our Doc, who are in the National Palace, hallowed be Thy name in the present and future generations. Thy will be done at Port-au-Prince and
\end{quote}
in the provinces. Give us this day our new Haiti and never forgive the trespases of the anti-patriots who spit every day on our country. Let them succumb to temptation, and under the weight of their venom, deliver them not from any evil. (Ferguson 1987: 49)

Staging Secrets: Esthetics of Baron Samedi

In 1958 the American ethnomusicologist Harold Courlander returned to Haiti after a prolonged absence. Having known Duvalier earlier during his days at the Bureau of Ethnology, Courlander visited the palace to pay his respects to the new president. Courlander recounted his visit:

The guard opened the door for him and Courlander blinked in surprise, for the room he entered was pitch dark, draped with black curtains and lit only by black candles. As soon as his eyes adjusted, he moved forward and saw Duvalier staring at him. “How are you, Mr. President?,” Courlander inquired, moving forward to shake the proffered hand, then sat in a plain wooden chair placed near Duvalier.

It was a macabre scene. Duvalier, in a black woolen suit, sat surrounded by Makoutes, their dark glasses even more sinister in the pitch-black room. On a long trestle table in front of Duvalier dozens of black candles burned (Abbott 1988: 91–92).

Duvalier was dressed as Baron Samedi, the loa of senators and diplomats (Dayan 1995: 126; Laguerre 1989: 123). One of the Gede spirits, Baron Samedi is a keeper of the dead and of cemeteries. Alongside Papa Legba, loa of the crossroads, the Baron guards the places where spirits move between worlds; he controls the border between life and death. The Baron is a stylish but accessible patron, perhaps the most appealed to of the spirits for the problems of everyday life (Hurbon 1995: 95; McCarthy Brown 1991). He usually appears in top hat, black coat tails, and sunglasses, and speaks in a nasal tone.

This was Duvalier’s public, frontstage persona, even including the nasal voice. The meaning of the garb was never explicated, and it did not have to be. Wrote Dunham, “[O]ne wonders at times if Duvalier goes out of his way to be Baron Samedi, not just possessed by him or by Dessalines, or is he just that good a comedian?” (1969: 164). Duvalier was one with, was possessed by, was Baron Samedi, incorporating the master of life and death into his own person: As Maya Deren put it, “The loa . . . partakes of the nature of the head that bears it. The principle is modified by the person” (Deren 1953: 90). Duvalier not only bore the loa, he infused loa Baron Samedi with his own persona.
Haitians also learned to remain wary on the 22nd of any month. The number twenty-two became known as the president’s mystical number, a number he called “equal to himself” (Diederich and Burt 1969: 392). His election occurred on 22 September 1957, a date he had personally chosen (Bastien 1966: 55). Noted Bastien, “The date was a sinister warning. On September 22, 1882, President Lysius Salomon, a Black general well versed in economics and wearied by the provocations of the mulattoes, had loosed the mob of Port-au-Prince against them. The looting, burning, and killing lasted three days.” Duvalier took his oath of office a month later, on another 22nd, that of October. In 1958, when Duvalier was first to meet in person the feared Dominican strongman Trujillo, he set the meeting for 22 December (Diederich and Burt 1969: 130). In 1964 he declared himself president-for-life on 22 May. Indeed he used the date routinely to schedule important meetings. In 1968, after yet another coup attempt against Duvalier, the captured rebels were flown to Port-au-Prince to be interrogated by the president himself on the special day requested, 22 May (ibid.: 392).

After Papa Doc died on 21 April 1971, his son Jean-Claude was installed as president-for-life on the favored day, the 22nd. As the elder lay in state on the 23rd, wearing his familiar black suit and glasses, twenty-two soldiers and twenty-two tonton makoutes formed his honor guard. Even after his death, Duvalier achieved his apotheosis like Dessalines, just as he had hoped. His apotheosis arrived following the same numeric code, as the spirit called Loa 22 Os.

CONCLUSION

“After God, it’s the state,” says a Creole adage (Apré Bondye, se leta) (Richman 2005: 91). But in a sense the Haitian spirits themselves make up a state. The pantheon of Vodou operates as what Michel (Laguerrre 1989: 122–123; cf. Hurbon 1995: 69–75) calls the government of God, “a complex politico-military structure that operates on a spiritual as well as a human level.” The head priest of some Vodou temples is called the president, receives head-of-state honors from visiting Vodouisants, and commands an army of both spirits and humans to protect his territory. Within this military spirit-phalanx, the loa Baron Samedi is a senator and a diplomat, Azaka (the spirit of the peasant farmer) is Minister of Agriculture, Loko (chief Vodou priest) is Minister of Public Health, Danbala (the serpent/rainbow) is Minister of Finance, Agwe (spirit of the sea) is Navy Commander, Ogou (spirit of war and iron) is a Brigadier General, Legba (spirit of the crossroads) is Minister of the Interior, Dessalines is Emperor, and Loa 22 Os, the spirit of Papa Doc Duvalier, is president-for-life.
The militarization of Vodou’s roles and symbols comes as little surprise given Haiti’s colonial history under French domination (McAlister 2002: 140). That history is controlled and critically interpellated through its re-presentations in the social dramas of possession performances. This essay, however, has tried to show a slightly different process: What we saw was not only the process of militarized state structures infiltrating religion but also the process of religious structures’ infiltration of the State. Authoritarian power was created and perpetuated in part through the staging and circulation of the reputation of having special access to secrets. Here was a particular case of a relation between a religion, its entrance into the political sphere through the important noiriste/anti-colonial/indigenist movement but with a paradoxical creation out of this fusion of an utterly occulted and rigidly totalitarian regime. Duvalier not only used the national “authenticity” of Vodou to political advantage but also appropriated its sets, costumes, and even its cellular hierarchic structure. Vodou’s modeling of the government of God, in which religious power is acquired in part through the mimesis of political offices, roles, and relations, was here inverted. Politics imitated the religious model: Baron Samedi was president, the bogeyman Uncle Satchel (tonton makoute) was the law, ritualized display was state procedure, the secretist gossip of zin were the communications wing, and Lord Duvalier’s prayer was the pledge of allegiance. If this was the state against the nation (Trouillot 1990), it was also the state emerging out of a piece of the nation hypertrophied, as the rumor of special access to the secrets of the gods helped construct and enforce the repressive authority of the State.

In the wake of Baby Doc’s departure in 1986, hundreds of Vodou leaders were killed. The sorcerer’s magic had worn thin, and the perceived links between Vodou and the makoutes grown too thick. Political leaders took pains to distance themselves from any relation to the religion.

Three years ago, however, Jean-Bertrand Aristide issued a presidential decree on 4 April 2003 that echoed earlier calls from Jean Price-Mars and François Duvalier himself. It again recognized Vodou as an ancestral religion that is “an essential element of Haiti’s national identity” and asserted the duty of the State to protect this cultural heritage of the nation. Under the new law, all Vodou leaders and temple officials were granted the right to file a request for recognition by the Ministry of Culture and Religious Affairs. Vodou priests were suddenly able to take an oath before a judge of a civil tribunal empowering them to officiate at baptisms, marriages, and funerals with the full authority of the State. “This is good news for practitioners of Vodou who for centuries have been marginalized,” priestess Madame Auguste declared, comparing
Aristide to Toussaint Louverture the revolutionary hero, as the “new black Spartacus.”

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.

Initiatic religions based on graded access to power do not always or essentially feed authoritarian political forms. But when they take the secretist form of the spectacular staging of special access to secret knowledge, we should pay close attention.

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13 Haitiweb.com Magazine, 17 June 2003, accessed on 10 July 2003. “Black Spartacus” gestures (whether or not consciously is impossible to tell) to Wordsworth’s poem, “To Toussaint L’Ouverture” (1802–03). It is common to measure current leaders against the founding triumvirate of revolutionary heroes. (Dunham 1969: 162) had earlier read Dumarsais Estimé against the template of Toussaint (and Paul Magloire against that of Henri Christopher, and Duvalier in relation to Dessalines).

It has been rumored that Aristide lost power because he failed to maintain his cultivation of the loas: Mr. Jean-Louis, one of Port-au-Prince’s houngans, insisted that the former president dabbled in Vodou, and that his downfall was caused by offending the spirit world. “In a country where many people believe François (Papa Doc) Duvalier, the feared dictator who died in 1971, lives on as a spirit named Loa 22 Os, this is not a good thing. ‘Aristide had mystical protection and physical protection. He had the spirits walking with him,’ Mr. Jean-Louis said in an interview in his open-air shack in the capital’s Bel Air shantytown. ‘But then Aristide offended the voodoo priests’ ” (Maria Jimenez 2004: F3).
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