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Review, The Spirits and The Law: Vodou and Power in Haiti

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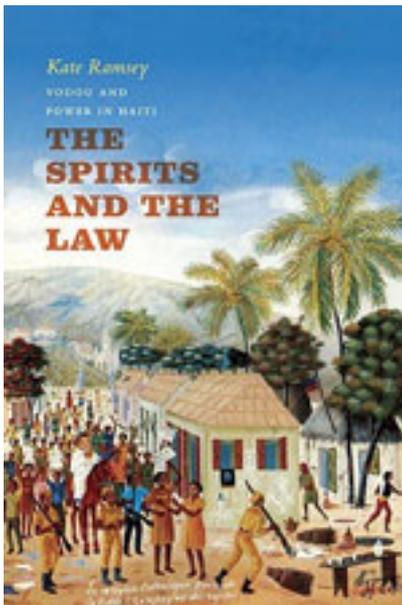
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***The Spirits and the Law: Vodou and Power in Haiti*, by Kate Ramsey**

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Ramsey, Kate. *The Spirits and the Law: Vodou and Power in Haiti*. Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2011. 448 p.



The Spirits and The Law: Vodou and Power in Haiti is a brilliant, nuanced re-mapping of how Vodoun became Voodoo and Vodou. In the process of her meticulous delineation, Ramsey offers in the world of geopolitics critical insights into the inevitable plight of the “avant-garde,” to use Haitian anthropologist Antenor Firmin’s casting of the first black republic in relation to Africa and its diaspora (95).

Ramsey charts her course early, stating: “Arguably no religion has been subject to more maligning and misinterpretation from outsiders over the past century”. (1) Indeed, “voodoo,” she writes, especially to foreigners, is synonymous with Haitian “sorcery” and “black magic”. (9) In fact, as she reveals, the etymology of this word denotes not only that the one with the four vowels is a misnomer but also that the more correct term Vodou (spelled vaudoux during colonial times) traditionally refers to a mode of dance.

Vodou, she convincingly argues, has had multiple significations. Her goal is to excavate the foundations of each of these meanings, especially in relation to the supposed Haitian curse or pact with the devil, as Evangelists would have us believe. In the wake of the devastating 2010 earthquake, Ramsey writes, several commentators revived this idea blaming “voodoo” as a

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“progress-impeding force” that continually obstructs the country’s development (21). She embarks on an exploration of the various ways the religion has been (mis)used to restrict the “barbaric” black nation, which eventually defied its colonizers and won its freedom. Her undertaking not only exposes the imperialist “roots” and “routes” of the stigma but also Haitians’ complicity in damning this cultural heritage, an issue that remains pertinent today. ¹

To this end, Ramsey dexterously digs into key moments in Haitian history to unmask intersecting patterns of dissonance that are inherent in the complex social life of laws, the intimate ambivalences of Othering, class clashes and the commodification of culture in the pursuit of civilization.

The four chapters are based on extensive archival research of primary and secondary materials, oral interviews of scholars, practitioners and artists. It should be noted that Ramsey engages a wide range of multi-disciplinary work and is unmatched in her thorough engagement with Haitian scholarship.

In the first chapter, she examines the historical development of legislations that criminalized magico-religious practices from slavery to post-independence. As “collective spiritual practices were subject to sweeping penalizations,” (31) they enticed ingenious subversion. These laws against *les sortilèges* were repudiated by the newly formed Haitian state desperate to eschew accusations of barbarity. This pursuit of equality, in the name of civilization, is further explored in the next chapter. While these penal laws were slippery at best, Ramsey contends that motivation of their application warrants inquiry, particularly as these relate to “state concern with intensifying peasant labor... rural dances were believed to diminish agricultural productivity” (67). Since “serving the spirits” is deeply tied to land, the burgeoning *lakou* (conjugally related family-based compound) system that emerged during that period and the hierarchy among practitioners in rural Haiti actually threatened state authority as a potential “parallel system of power.”

The anti-superstition campaigns against “*le Vaudoux*” that persisted as Haiti formed relations with the Vatican were further reinforced with military force during the American occupation. During the 32 years of U.S. presence on Haitian soil, the marines established a neo-slave labor system that exploited the masses. Haitian cultural heritage was undermined in spurious ways, including legal trials that attempted to deliver “the Republic of Haiti from a curse which has been on it from the time of its foundation,” (146) as well as the confiscation and destruction of ritual objects. These worked in tandem with other cultural productions that promoted “voodoo” in film and theatre as well books. It was in this context, Ramsey writes that “the figure of the marine as an authority on ‘voodoo’” (164) emerged representing the ultimate symbol of white power over black barbarians.

In chapter 4, Ramsey revisits Haiti’s attempt to join the international stage as a sovereign state in its post-occupation era during the mid 1930s-40s. The cultural nationalist policy touted by

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government heavily marketed performances of “folk traditions” for foreign consumption while restricting bona fide practices at home. Folkloric representations were rampant to meet the demands of American travelers fascinated with the mystical “who wished to see ‘voodoo ceremonies’” (218). Ramsey’s account takes a particularly expository turn as it was also during this period of open exchange that anthropology made Haiti its primary social laboratory in the Caribbean. Herskovits, Métraux, Dunham, Hurston and others conducted their fieldwork under the prohibition and as a result, they relied on the “staging of ritual practices” for research.

Throughout this work, Ramsey asserts, Vodou is something of a lifeline for many among the Haitian majority. It is a tradition, simultaneously revered as a vestige of its African past by some while reviled by others within and outside the nation-state who deployed it as an object of disgust, an alluring New World commodity as well as a source of oppressive power at given historical moments. With such a perverse and misconstrued history, no wonder the religion remains an enigma.

A note on praxis. After the book’s publication, Ramsey took her work one step further. Spearheading a collaboration with an international group of scholars and practitioners in conjunction with KOSANBA-the scholarly association for the study of Vodou, she organized a series of petitions to the Library of Congress, the Associated Press and several national newspapers whose media stylebook continuously confound Vodou with voodoo. While the mainstream media lags behind with this pejorative speech act, in October 2012, the PSD [Policy and Standards Division] of the Library of Congress issued a statement declaring they have changed their subject heading from “Voodooism” to Vodou. Additionally all other uses of the word voodoo in references and scope notes have also been revised.

The Spirits and The Law is by far the most comprehensive historical study on the subject of Vodou to date. Future scholarship on the topic simply cannot ignore this esteemed volume, which received The Berkshire Conference Book Prize for the best first book published in any field of history in 2011.

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Notes

¹ In June 2012, the Haitian Government amended the Constitution to repeal Article 297 established in 1987, which, in effect, declared the cessation of all laws and government decrees thus, arbitrarily restricting citizens’ fundamental rights and liberties, including the decree law of Sept. 5, 1935 on superstitious practices. The religion is under siege again in at home.

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