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Assembling Spirited Things:
The Collection and Circulation of Haiti's Sacred Objects in the Early Nineteenth Century

By
Pascale D. Boucicaut

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in
Anthropology
in the
Graduate Division
of the
University of California, Berkeley

Committee in Charge:

Professor Rosemary Joyce, Co-Chair
Professor Laurie Wilkie, Co-Chair
Professor Elena Schneider

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Abstract

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by

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Doctor of Philosophy in Anthropology

University of California, Berkeley

Professor Rosemary Joyce, Co-Chair

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The suppression of Vodou was waged heavily during the U.S. occupation of Haiti, from 1915 to 1934. Amidst its prohibition, a substantial flow of Vodou drums and other sacred objects circulated within and out of the country, and ultimately into museums abroad. Bringing together anthropologies of collecting, theoretical investigations of the ways objects move, and interdisciplinary Vodou scholarship, I trace the itineraries of these materials out of Haiti, from museums and archives in the United States and in Europe, tracking how, where, and why they circulated along the way. Part I investigates the adjacent forces of U.S. military occupation and U.S-American anthropology, as well as the enduring presence of Vodou, during the early- and mid-century period of collecting. Part II brings together object biography and itinerary methods to trace the circulation of two sacred classes of objects within and out of Haiti. I argue that, following Paul Mocombe's concept of "the Vodou ethic," ritual objects embodied not only spiritual power but the social values of collectivism, justice, accountability, and freedom. These principles were central to *sevitè*, or those who 'serve the spirits,' and were wielded in spaces where sacred objects were used — including ritual ceremonies, *combité* agricultural collectives, and even on the battlefield. As ideological apparatuses, these objects were deliberately targeted by arbiters of U.S capitalism and law enforcement. This research contributes to broader theories of materiality, anthropologies of war and diplomacy, and considerations for museum- based research. It also offers new perspectives on the enduring impacts of U.S-American interventions in Haiti.

Dedication

For my father and for my son

Acknowledgements

During fieldwork in Haiti, the anthropologist, dancer, and Vodou initiate, Katherine Dunham, wrote of her experiences being possessed by the *lwa*, articulating that “it is the god and some indefinable combination of circumstances or need or propitiousness which brings about the ‘marriage’” (1994, 58), emphasizing the numerous and sometimes uncanny complexities that made her research possible. When I pause to consider those guiding presences within my own work, an equally complex network of people and presences illuminates. I will attempt to capture their light here.

This project simply would not have existed without Dr. Joshua Bell, who shared with me files related to a small set of Haitian drums at Smithsonian and asked if I would like to see them. That spark shifted the direction of my research, and I was so fortunate for the ongoing support, especially through years of unanticipated interruption including the Covid19 shutdowns, illness, and the birth of my son just before fieldwork began. Josh, your incredible generosity also supported my ability to build a strong community of peers and colleagues in Washington DC.

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I am also indebted to the assistance of many curators, collections managers, and other museum and archives professionals during research in the United States, the United Kingdom and Europe. Most especially, this includes Martin Berger at Universiteit Leiden, Laura Van Broekhoven at Pitt Rivers Museum, Korantema Anyimadu at the Horniman Museum and Gardens, and Philippe Mathez at the Musée d’ethnographie de Geneve. So many thank yous to the brilliant Mercedes Martinez Milantchi for connecting me with radical museum folk in London and elsewhere and for ongoing friendship and support.

It was alongside my community of peers and mentors at the University of California, Berkeley that I developed my thinking and writing. My cohort and collaborators in the

departments of anthropology, African American studies, and history of art were continuously inspiring and encouraging. Special thanks to Sara Eriksson, Delphine Sims, Annie Danis, and Natasha Fernandez Perez-Preston who were constant sources of inspiration and friendship.

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I must thank Professor Laurie Wilkie, who is the reason I made my way to Berkeley. What seemed like an extra stop through a Folklore master's program ended up influencing my approach to material culture studies in ways that are invaluable and much of it is due to the inspiration of her brilliant work and mentorship. She also consistently reminded me that academic environments can be kind and generous, for which I am continuously grateful.

Professor Rosemary Joyce is and has long been the glue that holds so much of this together. Not only has her work shaped me in profound ways, but her mentorship and championing of my research really helped me grow my personal and professional confidence. Professor Joyce was, during my years at Berkeley, the museum studies department, and working with her all these years has been a result of divine intervention, I have no doubt.

Chapter four is dedicated to the late and great Ronald Mevs, whose incredible brilliance, as well as kindness and generosity inspired my thinking about Haiti's drums. Ronald and I would meet by WhatsApp over coffee on Saturday mornings, to talk about politics and the weather and possibilities for art and for life in an increasingly unstable Haiti. Though we never met face-to-face, Ronald taught me how to look at the drums and how to listen to them.

I would be nowhere without my friends and family, who encouraged me through my years of coursework, research, and writing. Words permit me from fully expressing my gratitude to Julien. My son and moon, he is the reason for this work, and he gave it depth and meaning beyond my wildest dreams.

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Introduction

A well-known aphorism in the field of Haitian studies states that Haiti is “ninety percent Catholic, ten percent Protestant, and one hundred percent Vodou”. Consequently, investigations of Haitian art, culture and history have been called out for being theologically overdetermined. This dissertation, which explores Haitian heritage collections in U.S-American museums, builds from the proposal that Haitian Vodou is not only a set of spiritual practices and beliefs, but a religious ideology, comprising a set of ethics that impact the social and political lives of Haitians and their diasporas (Mocombe 2017). This intervention, as led through my research on curated collections, addresses traditional values of the collective, social justice, and personal accountability, which are often left out of examinations of Haitian visual and material cultures, in favor of more conventional spiritual and religious investigations.

The suppression of Vodou was waged heavily during the U.S. occupation of Haiti, from 1915 to 1934. Amidst its prohibition, a substantial flow of Vodou drums and other sacred objects circulated within and out of the country, and ultimately into museums abroad. Bringing together anthropologies of collecting, theoretical investigations of the ways objects move, and interdisciplinary Vodou scholarship, the following pages trace the itineraries of these materials out of Haiti, from museums and archives in the United States, the United Kingdom and Europe, tracking how, where, and why they circulated along the way.

Sacred objects and collections are the foundation of this research. The bulk of this took place at the Smithsonian Institution, where from September 2023 until September 2025, I worked with Haitian collections at the National Museum of Natural History (NMNH) and the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI). At the NMNH, which houses ninety percent of the Smithsonian’s collections overall, over half of the museum’s 23,000 specimens from Haiti were collected during the years of the occupation. These collections include ethnographic and archaeological specimens in the department of anthropology, as well as botanical, mineral, entomological and diverse zoological specimens. My focus at both these institutions were the sacred “cultural” objects – especially *tanbou* (drums), *drapo* (ritual flags), and *travay maji* (magic works; e.g., animate stones, bottles and altar objects). While the collections comprise accessions made from 1884 to 2013, my focus are on those that were collected during the long decades of U.S. occupation.

During this time based in Washington D.C., I also visited archival collections at the United States Marine Corps Archives, History Division at the United States Marine Corps University at Quantico, where I pored through personal correspondences, daily ledgers, and muster rolls, that illuminated the picture of U.S-American imperial administration in Haiti and revealed some clues about the movement of sacred things. I began by attempting to locate the names of any and all donors and collectors within the U.S. Marine Corps archive, but this proved to be like looking for a needle in a haystack. Much of what I’d hoped to identify I never did, so instead I relied on the textual records to “interrogate, deconstruct, or illuminate” questions that emerged from the collections (Wilkie 2003, xxi). This was further expanded at the National Anthropological Archives, the Smithsonian Institution Archive, and the Library of Congress, where important details surfaced about the surge of anthropological collecting that took place during this time. In addition to textual records, I was able to engage with ethnographic film and

photography and sound recordings from the Human Studies Film Archive and Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage.

The collections of Haitian Vodou objects in museums have been called out for being “aesthetically, historically, and theologically ‘overdetermined’” (Cosentino 1995, 30). Networked communities of religious practice and persecution, ethnographic encounters, and imperialist occupation in Haiti have provided a rich setting for exploring the histories of collecting on the island during the first half of the twentieth century and the gathering of materials collected there elsewhere in museums (Renda 2001; Ramsey 2011; Schuller 2016). Still, these intersections have yet to be investigated, and many of the forementioned collections remain unexamined in museum storage. Drawing them together, my project brings new insights into the ways in which bodies of knowledge are materialized through historically-situated networks of the animate objects and the individuals who empower them. While tackling these theoretical fields, my research also engaged broad methodological concerns about ways of conducting museum-based research that would center the mobility of things. Explorations of object “biographies” and “itineraries” have each yielded important discoveries about various types of curated materials. Yet historical collecting of “magic,” and the circulation of objects with spirited presences, required deeper intellectual engagement still.

Methodological Approaches

Haitian collections in museums reveal histories of opposing, yet connected, ontological views about the materials that assembled. Unlike Vodou, a Haitian and diasporic community, practice, and worldview, “*Voodoo*” reflects the intersecting social and ideological perceptions about Blackness, “magic,” and occultism by a mixed group of Haitian and non-Haitian interlocutors (Desmangles 2012; Ramsey 2012; and Pettinger 2005). Tacking between the two orientations guided my research to new ways of tracing the routes and means by which the objects that assembled in these encounters circulated – and continue to do so.

Biographies and Itineraries

Object biographies provide collections research with a relief from the narrative boundaries of provenance, and from anthropological traditions that regulate the activities of things through systems of human intervention (Kopytoff 1986; Hoskins 1998; Gosden and Marshall 1999). Instead, objects are re-conceptualized as social *beings*, animated through their relations with other objects, humans, and non-human things. Intrinsic to these material manifestations are generative questions about how to attribute causes and effects to the movements of things and to human-material engagements. Opening *Art and Agency* (1998), Alfred Gell wrote that art works are, like people “enculturated beings,” meaning they are incarnated by the same cultural norms that establish individuals and society. Subsequently, Gell determined that objects trigger effects, secondary to the motivated actions of humans (1998: 20). This inspired a plethora of literatures that attended to the “agency” of objects (e.g., Boivin 2008; Hoskins 2006; Knappett 2005), or their “capacity to act” (Ahern 2001, 110) within social contexts mediated by humans (Tilley 2001).

More recently, methods for tracing objects in space and time were reconceived as ‘itineraries,’ or “the routes by which things circulate in and out of the places where they come to rest or are active” (Joyce 2015, 29). Object itineraries subverted associations that come from

anthropomorphizing things, such as the assumption of bodily integrity and the events of life and death, that are intrinsic to biographic models (Joyce and Gillespie 2015). I situated my research firmly within this ‘New Materialist’ approach, which emphasizes the “flows” (Bergson 1944; Deleuze and Guattari 1987) and “stoppages” (Küchler 1988; Gosden 2006; Gell 2013) of things that were not made to be in museums. While the aim of this research was to interrogate those sacred objects in curated collections, I found myself drawn continuously back into dynamic environments and social networks through which these objects traveled.

Rasanblaj

Object ‘itineraries’ require investigations of the places where sacred objects came from and where they might be going, yet they also present methodological questions about the boundaries of narrative: Where does an itinerary begin and end? How do we attend to moments of pause? What about the objects’ material components? Here I turned to the academic logics of assemblage, and the Vodou logics of *Rasanblaj*.

Theories of assemblage typically stem from the technical languages of archaeology, ontological interventions of materialist philosophy, or methodological principles of “assemblage art.” Archaeological assemblages are primarily terminological – referring to the imposed organizational boundaries placed on aggregated materials that share either stylistic likeness or discrete contexts of variable scale (Hamilakis and Jones 2017, 77). New Materialist theories, on the other hand, build on earlier ontological formulations of assemblages as ‘*relationist*’ multiplicities that are “ceaselessly establishing connections” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 25) and expanded on the historical processes that brought them into being – what Manuel Delanda calls their “individuation” process (2016, 140). Such investigations allow for a return to the presences of humans as they appear within dynamic webs of relational engagement. These logics of assemblage enabled me to interpret each “node in the matrix of movement” (Ingold 2000: 219) as a “unique historical entity” (Delanda 2016: 6).

Alternative meanings of assemblage insinuated motivated human action into a mode of art production also known as collage, characterized by the fastening together of disparate and dissimilar things, which historians trace to twentieth-century works by Pablo Picasso, Kurt Schwitters, and George Braque (Seitz 1961). This brings me to the dual Kreyòl concepts of *asanblaj* – another rich aesthetic tradition mobilized by scholars of “*Vodunland*,” the vast conceptual domain that runs from coastal West Africa across the Atlantic into Haiti (Rush 1999) and “the purest link” between the religious cultures of Haiti and *Fon* arts from the kingdom of Dahomey (Cosentino 1995, 43) – and *rasanblaj*, which is defined as a “...regrouping of ideas, things, people, spirits” (Ulysse 2017, 69). As a practice, *asanblaj* refers to the process of joining “disparate stuff” (Cosentino *ibid.*, 27) with deities and other metaphysical matters in all the material categories of Vodou. *Rasanblaj* is a social gathering, and a means for inciting ceremony and/or rebellion by bringing together all that is material and immaterial to activate shared power.

Chapter Summaries

This dissertation is presented in two parts comprised of two chapters each. Unlike traditional histories of collecting, which privilege collectors and their discrete actions and motivations, I turn to the objects themselves as the foci of my research. Still, U.S. marines and anthropologists were

responsible for a tidal wave of Haiti's cultural materials leaving the island. The first two analytical chapters map the broad contours of twentieth century Haiti, including anthropological, military, and collecting projects there, as necessary context to my interpretive and materially-based investigations in Part II.

Chapter one, "Cataloging the Magic Island," traces the production of anthropologies of Haiti during this period, as well as what Gérarde Magloire and Kevin Yelvington have smartly referred to as "the Haiti of anthropology." I begin with the pseudo-ethnographic travel-writings produced during the U.S. occupation of Haiti, from 1915-1934 by writers like Faustin Wirkus, William Seabrook, John Houston Craige and Blair Niles. Next, I turn to Melville Herskovitz, whose 1934 fieldwork in the Mirebalais Valley set the stage for a new cohort of folklorists (including Zora Neale Hurston, Katherine Dunham, Alan Lomax, and others) working to "set the record straight" on Vodou. Lastly, I follow the Argentinian-Swiss anthropologist Alfred Métraux, whose goals for salvage ethnography, the promotion of Haitian scholarship, and public anthropology were mired in institutional commitments to the United States and the burgeoning United Nations. This chapter ends with François Duvalier's election to the presidency in 1957 and addresses why this period marks an end to the U.S. fixation with Haiti as a site of anthropology. Along the way, I refer to the Haitian ethnographers, anthropologists, and intellectuals who greatly influenced these U.S.-based scholars, such as Jean Price-Mars, Suzanne Comhaire-Sylvain, Jacques Romain, and Odette Rigaud.

Chapter two, "Altars and Art Markets," takes a closer look at collecting projects in Haiti, based on provenance research on the Haitian collections across Smithsonian. The chapter begins by situating the subject within broader studies of collecting that center source community agency. Next, I provide the context for collecting projects in Haiti through the period of United States occupation, diving into the economic exploitation, infrastructural projects, cultural suppression, and armed resistance movements that took place. Finally, I lay out different categories of collecting projects during the long decades of U.S. Occupation – including sponsored collecting expeditions, ethnographic salvage, tourism and the burgeoning craft market, and the role of cultural materials in warfare and diplomacy.

The second section provides an interpretive dive into two classes of sacred objects and the dynamic networks and environments they illuminate. It is also a meditation on the materiality of power. **Chapter three**, "'Indian Stones' and African Networks" focuses on a category of animate material that has been overlooked in the published literatures on Vodou – Taíno carved stones that proliferate in museums internationally, where they are typically cataloged as "neolithic stone tools." Close inspection of the accession records related to many of these stones, however, reveals a history tied to Haitian secret society, Vodou altarwork, and Afro-Indigenous worldmaking. In and around *arrondissements* such as *Jérémie*, *Croix-des-Bouquets*, and *Île de la Gonâve*, devotees of the lwa erected temples hidden in caves, to continue worshipping amidst ever-intensifying prohibitions. Raids on these sites by the *gendarmerie* (1915-1928), *garde d'haiti* (1928-) and other non-commissioned officers produced extensive collections of "axe heads" and "anthropomorphic stones," identified as "pre-Columbian" or "aboriginal," and elsewhere referred to as *zemis* – cultural materials that have been extensively studied in alternate Caribbean contexts such as Puerto Rico and Cuba. Using Lauren Derby's concept of the "Zemi Complex" – a form of assemblage thinking that recognizes the "strange mixtures of objectified person and spirit animated objects" – I embrace the significance of these materials within Vodou in general, and Vodou collections in museums especially, and consider the reasons for their lack of curatorial and anthropological attention as objects of Haitian provenance.

Finally, in **chapter four**, “Sacred Drums and Sonic Weapons,” I consider the agency of rebel communities that were stripped of their sacred and ceremonial objects. Marines stationed in Haiti during the United States Occupation often complained of confusion and disorientation because of the “incessant beating” of Vodou drums. In this final chapter I consider the complex role these instruments played and the reasons why U.S. marines were so preoccupied with confiscating them. Drawing from archival sources, multimedia records, and drum collections themselves, I trace the circulation of drums through ceremonial networks and wartime contexts, carceral spaces and museum sites, and consider their various functions as mechanisms for political resistance, illicit communication, and esoteric power.

Cataloging the Magic Island: U.S-American Anthropologies Of Haiti And The ‘Haiti Of Anthropology’

It has been argued that U.S-American anthropology owes a terrific debt to Haiti, one which has largely gone unacknowledged (Schuller 2016). Most histories of anthropology in the United States begin with Franz Boas, the so-called “father” of the discipline and proponent of African American culture.¹ Far less known is Boas’s contemporary, the Haitian anthropologist Anténor Firmin, whose *De l’égalité des races humaines* also advocated a four-field approach and used evolutionary theory to support a thesis of race equality.² Carolyn Fluehr-Lobban investigated the influence of Firmin’s *De l’égalité* on Boas, concluding his impact on the future of U.S-American anthropology writ large (2000; 2005).³

This paper is an assemblage of the disparate texts that comprise another claim to Haiti’s role in U.S-American anthropology: the period from 1915 – when the United States marines occupied the country, until 1957 – when François Duvalier was elected president and geo-political interest in Haiti waned (more on that later). It was during this time that a huge number of U.S.-based anthropologists traveled to the island, most of whom were the direct students of Franz Boas, or the students of his students. Tacking between America’s political ambitions and scholarly pursuits in Haiti over these long four decades, I trace the production of anthropologies of Haiti, as well as what Gérarde Magloire and Kevin Yelvington smartly refer to as “the Haiti of anthropology” (2005).

Haiti exists in several anthropological imaginations, but nearly always as the domain of Vodou, a set of religious orders that elude characterization despite the ongoing attempts to do so (Hurston 1938; Deren 1953; Dunham 1969; Consentino 1995).⁴ Anthropologists were preoccupied with Vodou and visited the island in the early twentieth century mostly to observe its practices. Meanwhile, the suppression of Vodou was waged heavily in the 1920’s, during the U.S. occupation, then officially codified in 1935 under Sténio Vincent’s presidency, and intensified again in 1941 by the Catholic Church. Still, Vodou’s researchers emphasized the significance of the religion on the island and its people, asserting that “Vaudou cannot be interpreted apart from its significance for the Haitian people, and for Haitian history. Correspondingly, Haiti cannot be understood if, on the other hand, one chooses to ignore vaudou” (A. Métraux 1972, 13). Others pointed out the need for scientific research on a subject that had previously inspired an “endless succession of regrettable books by journalists, novelists, and soldiers of fortune,” selling black magic and zombies to a frenzied U.S-American audience (Mintz 2012, x).

This chapter begins with the wartime travelogues that proliferated during the United States Occupation, which inspired the likes of folklorists and ethnologists to visit, mainly in search of Vodou. Next I follow Melville Herskovits, whose 1934 fieldwork in the Mirebalais Valley set the stage for a new cohort of ethnographers working to set the record straight on Vodou and to collect the folklore, dance, and ethnomusicology of the “Black Peasants” in the

mountains. Those folklorists – especially Zora Neale Hurston, Katherine Dunham, Alan Lomax, and George Simpson – who all arrived in 1936, comprise the next section. Lastly, I follow the Argentinian-Swiss anthropologist Alfred Métraux, whose goals for salvage ethnography, the promotion of Haitian scholarship, and public anthropology were mired in institutional commitments to the United States and the new United Nations. My paper ends with François Duvalier's election to the presidency in 1957 and addresses the various explanations for the end of this particular U.S. fixation with Haiti as a site of anthropology. Along the way, I refer to the Haitian ethnographers, anthropologists and intellectuals who greatly influenced these scholars, often arranging their accommodations and connections during research trips, and whose presence remains absent from the historiographies of U.S.-American anthropology despite their critical role in shaping it.

Wartime Travelogues

Returning from a trip to Haiti in 1931, Harlem Renaissance writer and activist Langston Hughes reported for the journal *New Masses* that what he'd witnessed there had been “all mountains and sea; a lot of marines, mulatto politicians, and a world of black people without shoes – who catch hell.” He'd decided to take a three-month trip to the island after encountering editorials by W. E. B. Du Bois and exposés by James Weldon Johnson, then Secretary of the NAACP, who'd each criticized the U.S. military's brutal treatment of Haitians living under occupation. Johnson, who visited the island in 1920, later claimed that his writings and speeches were “in some degree responsible for a new literary interest in Haiti... Among my friends and acquaintances, my trip started a sort of pilgrimage to the black republic” (Pettinger 1997, 141).

The image of a “black republic” propagated by Johnson, plus later reportage by amateur geographer Blair Niles (1926) and marine corps captain John Houston Craige (1933), certainly attracted a great deal of attention in the United States. Delegations of the NAACP traveled to Haiti to establish a solidarity with the people there, whom they saw as proud descendants of those who fought for an American nation without slavery (Renda 2001, 261-300). Their vision was complicated, however, by the realities of the mixed-race *boujwazi* in Port-au-Prince, whom Hughes saw as snobbish and oppressive, just like the “brute” Anglo-Americans invading their country.

White U.S.-American writers also commented on this presence of the *boujwazi*, yet they took an altogether different view. “One of the most difficult problems of the American occupation,” wrote William Seabrook in his 1929 best-seller *The Magic Island*, “has been to teach these people their proper place” (125). “These people” were the educated, urban upper class in Port-au-Prince, “who were proud of being Haitians, proud actually of being negroes” (*ibid.*). Seabrook repudiated the occupation, but still maintained a white supremacy learned in his upbringing in the U.S. South (McGehee and Taylor 2018).

As a writer, Seabrook dabbled in journalism but mostly made a name for himself as an intrepid explorer and travel writer, “willing to try anything and committed to reporting it objectively” (Zieger 2013, 739). Allegedly a Freudian, he adopted a “black-white man” persona in his books, detailing both his willing submission to Haitian and African “magic,” and yet narrating the experience through a cultivated Enlightenment rationality (*ibid.*). A most poignant example was in his introduction of the Zombie to audiences in the United States. In Haitian folklore, the *zonbi* is conceptualized as an animated corpse – dead and soulless but bewitched by a *bokor*⁵ to do dark magic work against their will. Literary theorist Susan Zieger argues that for a

people whose national identity was largely defined by their violent rejection of slavery, the horror of re-enslavement, even in death (as evoked by zombi status), was profound (740). She also proposes that the mythology took on a new potency during the occupation, when U.S.-American corporate development reinstituted *corvée* labor on the island (*ibid.*).

Seabrook paints this very picture vividly in his chapter "...Dead men working in the Cane-Fields," in which his guide Polynice tells him about zombies working for the Hasco sugar processing plant in the suburbs of Port-au-Prince. After recounting Polynice's tale, albeit with some skepticism, Seabrook then goes on to describe his own encounter with three zombies who were "plodding like brutes, like automatons," unnaturally and strange (Seabrook, 101). Seabrook's zombie accounts had a huge impact upon *The Magic Island's* release in the United States. In Hollywood, a new zombie hysteria hit Hollywood, in movies like *White Zombie*, *Voodoo*, *The Emperor Jones*, *Drums O' Vodou*, *Crime of Vodou*, and *Revolt of the Zombies* (see Szwed 2010, 93). *The Magic Island* also got into the hands of anthropologists and researchers – including Harold Courlander, Katherine Dunham, Maya Deren, and Melville Herskovits – all of whom we will attend to later.

Seabrook also dedicated several chapters to the exploits of Faustin Wirkus, a marine sergeant who he called "the White King," eluding to his alleged rulership on La Gonâve, the island he was stationed to command in 1925 and continued to live on until 1929. Two years after *The Magic Island* was published, Wirkus released his own book, *The White King of La Gonâve*. In this memoir he details enlisting with the marines, promotion through ranks, and subsequent accession as King Faustin II. To that end, Wirkus describes rescuing a Haitian woman from a U.S. controlled prison who turned out to be Queen Ti Memenne of La Gonâve and head of the secret Congo societies. Ti Memenne invited Wirkus to a ceremony on her island and introduced him to traditional customs "as old as Africa itself." There she crowned him king and invited him to rule jointly alongside her (Wirkus 159). Photos of Wirkus's coronation ceremony appear in the book, as well as vivid descriptions of the Congo Society rituals he observed.

Though *The White King* wasn't as widely read as *The Magic Island*, it inspired other marines, such as John Houston Craige, to write about their experiences of the occupation while in the *Gendarmerie d'Haiti* (see Craige 1933; 1934). The island of La Gonâve also became a popular travel destination for visiting researchers. When Wirkus began directing a pseudo-documentary called *Voodoo* in 1933, he was joined by Zora Neale Hurston, who rented a house on the island, Frank R. Crumbie, a major collector of Vodou arts, and others.

Melville Herskovits in the Mirebalais Valley

In the summer of 1934, as the last contingent of U.S. marines were leaving the island, Melville Herskovits arrived for a three-month research trip to Haiti, where he'd set out to identify connections between the island's "Black peasants" and the traditional cultures of West Africa. This was Herskovits's third fieldwork expedition alongside his wife and collaborator Frances. After a trip to observe "the Bush Negroes of Suriname," where they'd hoped to encounter surviving African cultural traits there on account of their relative geographic isolation (Merriam 1964, 85), the pair traveled to Nigeria, the Gold Coast, and Dahomey, believing that only when knowledge of African culture is gained could proper investigations of the Black cultures of the Americas be undertaken (Herskovits 1930; Blier 1989). Together these trips solidified what Walter Jackson (1988) calls Herskovits's growing "pluralist view," which emphasized the influence of African origins on both Black and non-Black American societies.

Having come up in Columbia's school of anthropology, Herskovits was primed in the conceptual study of culture areas and theory of cultural diffusion promulgated by his mentor Franz Boas. Early publications reveal a set of beliefs he would later reject – such as his view that American Blacks in the United States, like other ethnic minorities, had adopted white cultural norms (Herskovits 1925a, 1925b, 1927).⁶ Then, in 1928, Herskovits came across the name of Haitian anthropologist and writer, Jean Price-Mars, who'd just published *Ainsi parla l'oncle: Essais D'Ethnographie*, a work of romantic nationalism that advocated for the promotion of African heritage in Haiti and preservation of its folklore (Price-Mars 1928).⁷ Herskovits wrote a letter to Price-Mars, requesting copies of his publications and explaining that he was “exceedingly interested in cultural connections between the African and American Negroes” (quoted in Magloire and Yelvington 2005, 13).⁸ A transnational connection was made, and the two remained in regular correspondence, frequently reviewing each other's work.

Jean Price-Mars was an outspoken critic of the U.S. occupation, and one of the founders of the *Mouvement Indigéniste* – a literary and artistic movement that sought to both emphasize the African elements of Haitian culture as well as counter depictions of the country by U.S.-American travel writers (see Perry 2017; Célius 2005a-b; and Shannon 1996 for more on this cultural movement). He was also one of Haiti's first advocates for the application of a national anthropology and the preservation of traditional culture (Antoine 1981; Owens 2015). He was particularly interested in Vodou, which he saw as “a legitimate, authentic, and authentically Haitian religion” (Magloire and Yelvington 2005, 4; also, Joseph 2012 and 2018). In 1922 Price-Mars co-founded the *Société haïtienne d'histoire et de géographie*, and in 1941, the *Institut d'ethnologie*, relying on both historical and ethnographic methods to support state-building projects after the U.S. Occupation (for more on these national institutions see Ramsey 1997 and 2002).

Gérarde Magloire and Kevin A. Yelvington, in their treatise on the two scholars, make a strong case for the influence of *Ainsi parla l'oncle* on Herskovits's subsequent work (2008). They note the Haitian scholar's insistence that research in Africa could inform research on Afro-America, an argument that inspired Herskovits's expedition to the continent (see Joseph, Saint Paul and Mezilas 2018 for more on the role of Africa in Price-Mars's thought and legacy). They also describe Price-Mars's work advocating for a nationalization of folklore and ethnological research, on account of the African ‘*survivance*’ that he believed could be identified in Haiti.

Price-Mars wrote to Herskovits about his displeasure with Seabrook's accounts of Haiti, having already written a long critical review of *The Magic Island* in the Port-au-Prince newspaper, *Le Temps*. This inspired Herskovits to produce his own critical review of Seabrook for *The Nation* (Herskovits 1929). When Herskovits wrote back asking to meet him on a brief stopover in Port-au-Prince on the way to Suriname, he received an enthusiastic response from his colleague: “I would be even happier,” wrote Price-Mars, “if, next year you would take the Haitian people as the new field of your anthropological and biometric investigations.”⁹

He agreed, and the following year the Herskovitses set out for the Valley of Mirebalais, a rural setting selected by Price-Mars, located thirty-five miles northeast of Port-au-Prince on the main road connecting the capitals of Haiti and the Dominican Republic. Herskovits describes Mirebalais as one of Haiti's main agricultural regions, having first introduced indigo and then cotton, cocoa, corn and, since the nineteenth century, coffee. He also notes that the valley was widely regarded as the head of a stretch of mountains associated with the *Mawons*.¹⁰ And in the twentieth century it was the site of one of the country's great rebellions against the U.S.

occupation, known as the Caco Uprising of 1918-20, and amongst the first districts to withdraw U.S-Americans from their local *Gendarmerie*.¹¹

Herskovits first set out in search of African “survivals” in the Valley, one of his shared goals with Price-Mars (see Herskovits 1930). In the first place, he followed Price-Mars’s identification of Dahomey as the ancestral homeland of modern Haitians, by way of the enormous capture of enslaved people taken from there (Herskovits 1937b, 15-30). This claim was principally based upon eighteenth-century reports by the French Jesuit Priest, de Charlevoix, and the Martiniquais lawyer, slaver, and chronicler of Saint Domingue, Moreau de Saint-Méry. He then went on to evidence the Dahomean ancestry of Haiti using the cultural similarities from those two geographies (253-69).

Based upon his previous research, Herskovits attested to the cultural resonances in African and Haitian material culture, such as the design and construction of domestic structures (especially thatch-roofing), hair braiding and the styling of headscarves, and foodways (“stews, dishes fried in deep fat, generous use of pepper...”). In another nod to Price-Mars, he concluded that the African cultural trait which has “survived most tenaciously in all the New World” were the folktales, proverbs, and riddles that are “so characteristic of other Negro groups” (266-7). Yet Herskovits appeared most taken with what he called “the intangible aspects of culture” – performances of buying and selling at market, family structures, ancestor veneration and deference to elders, plus the vast rituals of agriculture.

Still, it was his observations of Vodou, which he termed *Vodun* after the Dahomean pronunciation, that “fundamentally altered” Herskovits, and shifted his intellectual pursuits and theoretical contributions to anthropology, and later – to the emergent African American, African, and Black Studies (Baron 2003). In a letter to his colleague Elsie Clews Parsons, he reflected on these shifts in his focus and thinking, writing that, “The African survivals were so numerous and so obvious, that they almost recorded themselves. But the thing that continued to fascinate us... was the manner in which African and French traditions have been integrated in a single system” (Baron, 102). Herskovits believed that while *Vodun* did derive from African theology, it was also a product of Catholicism’s influence on the island, calling it “one of the best acculturation finds that can be imagined” (Baron, 101) – a claim which Haitian and U.S-American scholars continue to investigate (i.e., McAlister 1988; Desmangles 1992; and Cosentino 1993).

The folklorist Robert Baron covers this transformation in Herskovits’s theory of culture, which he calls a “precursor to creolization,” and pinpoints this time in Haiti as the emergence of new interventions that would come to define Herskovits’s career (Baron, 101-7).¹² Most notable among these is the concept of *syncretism*, or in Herskovits’s words, “the mingling of African and European elements in Haitian belief,” and a symbol of an individual’s “psychological process” reckoning between Catholic saints and European deities (Herskovits 1937a, 282).¹³ Herskovits began incorporating illustrative words like ‘*mosaic*,’ ‘*merging*,’ ‘*interlarding*,’ ‘*kaleidoscope*,’ and ‘*amalgam*,’ articulating new theories of cultural contact between Europeans and Africans and the subsequent emergence of a new African-American culture.

He began summarizing these new ideas in what would become *Life in a Haitian Valley* (1937b). Baron notes that while working on this monograph, Herskovits was concurrently defining the study of acculturation as a member of the Committee on Acculturation of the Social Science Research Council, where he would formally disentangle Boasian theories of diffusion from his repertoire. Diffusion, Herskovits argued, negated the role of the individual and her own psychological reasoning from the process of cultural

transmission – a logic borrowed from Price-Mars and one that resonated with his own observations of religious practice in the Mirebalais Valley.

Though *Life in a Haitian Valley* was the only publication based upon Herskovits's research there, the theoretical transformations that took place during fieldwork in the Mirebalais Valley influenced much of his future work. In 1936 he published "Memorandum for the Study of Acculturation" alongside other members of the council (Herskovits, Redfield and Linton 1936; also, Herskovits 1937c) – followed by "The Significance of West Africa for Negro Research" (1936), integrating more of Price-Mars's influence into the U.S.-American anthropological domain. In 1941 Herskovits published *The Myth of the Negro Past*, honing many of the theories that he'd begun crafting in Haiti. The publication helped to cement the establishment of Black studies, African American, and African studies, and Herskovits encouraged young scholars to contribute to those emergent disciplines. He was particularly invested in those with training in the disparate fields of folklore, which he believed could contribute to further research of Haiti and its rich traditions of music, dance, storytelling, and especially religion.

Staging Folklore

Shortly after the Herskovits' departure from Haiti, President Sténio Vincent repealed a set of 19th century Penal Codes that prohibited all expressions of "*des sortilèges*" (spell-casting), on the grounds that they'd been exaggerated to the detriment of other folk customs. He replaced them with a new set of legal decrees that would "curb superstitious practices without hindering the legitimate right of peasants to enjoy themselves in an honest and decent manner" (Vincent 1935). Those who expressed their faith would be sentenced to imprisonment, and objects used in said offences would be confiscated and destroyed.

Historian Kate Ramsey has pointed out that while most early anthropological researchers in Haiti focused on Vodou, few of their publications acknowledged the extent of its suppression, including at times outright prohibition of rituals and practices they observed (Ramsey 2005). Ramsey's research looks closely at the enforcement against Vodou practice during the period of U.S. occupation, plus the ethnographic research on Vodou by Melville Herskovits and Alfred Métraux. Still, more work must be done that focuses on the surge of folklorists that all arrived in Haiti the year following Vincent's *décret-loi*, and who all conducted research on Vodou, often at the same venues and relying on the same intermediaries.

Katherine Dunham arrived in June of 1936 with a Rosenwald fellowship, at the urging of Melville Herskovits, to study the dances performed for the *lwa*¹⁴, which she later published in her MA thesis, *Dances of Haiti* (Dunham 1938). Dunham also participated in a series of religious initiations and produced an entire monograph on the process (see Dunham 1969).¹⁵ Soon after, Zora Neale Hurston arrived with a Guggenheim fellowship to collect folktales and religious rituals. Her trip was summarized in a book about her research in Jamaica and Haiti, in which she includes an entire section on "Voodoo" (Hurston 1938).¹⁶ Alan Lomax was warned by Hurston not to mention Vodou upon his arrival in Haiti and instead declared to local authorities his goal of recording "all kinds of Haitian music," which he did while traveling across the country with support from the U.S. Library of Congress. Lomax only published one short article (1938), but his vast and popular audio recordings are held at the American Folklife Center in Washington D.C. and include several taken during illegal ceremonies.¹⁷ George Simpson was Herskovits's post-graduate assistant at Northwestern University before arriving in Haiti to conduct

ethnographic research on folklore and religious belief with a Social Science Research Council Grant. Simpson published widely about Vodou, for a number of different social science journals (Simpson 1940a; 1940c; 1940d; 1942a; 1943; 1945; 1946; 1948; 1950).¹⁸

In front of these folklorists, dozens if not hundreds of Vodou ceremonies were performed. As Ramsey has suggested, proper authorization was likely required for them to be carried out. In fact, organizing ritual events typically demanded an official reframing of these religious ceremonies as ethnographic *performances*, signaling their scientific value for U.S.-American researchers. Exploring this process of “staging” Vodou, Ramsey argues that the Haitians involved in these ceremonies were “not only aware of this reframing, but also tactically involved in engineering it” (2005, note 11). Of course, this doesn’t detract from their credibility as sacred ritual events, but rather highlights the way that Haitian practitioners utilized the presence of foreign researchers for their own advantage, providing opportunities for religious practice and the production of folkloristic scholarship. Still, it’s notable that for each of the ethnographers mentioned above, who witnessed these ceremonies or even participated in them, the lengths taken to have them staged were hardly mentioned in writing.

When Katherine Dunham set out to observe dance in Haiti, she very quickly began seeking out Vodou ceremonies, sometimes in remote areas of the country that were difficult to get to and, due to their outlawed status, potentially dangerous to attend. In her first publication, *Dances of Haiti*, Dunham described her strategies for entering these secret societies, like the Vodou cult of Madame Henri, writing:

Very early I learned that one set of activities is reserved for the outsider, and another set of activities is reserved for those who ‘belong.’ For me the belonging began by moving into a native habitation... soliciting intimate friendships with members of the community, and entering into the minor hardships and pleasures of the people (1938, xxiii).

The subject of Dunham’s initiation was covered in rich detail in her personal writings about Haiti, *Island Possessed*, first published in 1969. In it she conveys the stark contrasts between the religious life amongst rural peasants and the urban upper-class of mostly light-skinned *boujwazi*, who tended to disregard Vodou and its influence on foreign visitors. Many of her earliest contacts in Haiti seemed to take issue with her activities – including President Dumarsais Estimé, with whom she alleged a brief courtship; Louis Borno, an unpopular former President of Haiti; and the Rouzier sisters, who ran the Hotel Excelsior in the wealthy enclave of Pétionville, where she stayed.

It was in Croix-des-Missions, just outside Port-au-Prince, where Dunham otherwise lived and eventually initiated, with *manbo*¹⁹ Madame Henri, and her cult. She describes the intimate practices that took place there, where she and her fellow initiates danced, ate from the same pot, and slept and woke alongside one another for the duration of the process. In her own words, Dunham elaborates on the blurring between her engagement as an observer and as a believer, writing that,

“...then the sensation would leave me, and instead of feeling the god in possession of me, the calculating scientist would take over, and I would be making mental notes on clothing, social organization, speech habits, associated traits, and so forth... And when people ask me, as they do now, what of those mystic or occult experiences I believe in, or why I spend so much time in their search and research,

I find myself answering as I did even as far back as those *houngfor* days, that I honestly do not know. I am there to believe or not believe, but willing to understand to believe in the sincerity of other people in their beliefs, willing to be shown, to participate, and where the participant begins and the scientist ends, I surely could not say” (1969, 105-6).

Zora Neale Hurston, who landed in Port-au-Prince a few short months after Dunham, also claims to have been initiated into a Vodou cult, though she refrains from describing the experience in either her ethnographic writing *Tell My Horse* (1938) or in her personal memoir *Dust Tracks on the Road* (1941), saying only that “I went *Canzo*²⁰ in Voodoo ceremonies in Haiti and the ceremonies were both beautiful and terrifying” (1941, 711). Unlike her Hoodoo initiation in New Orleans, which she describes at length (1935, 207–20), the sacred events with which she claims to have participated in Haiti are far more elusive.

Folkloristic engagements with Hurston’s Haitian fieldwork deal primarily with her 1938 monograph, *Tell my Horse*, which details her 1936 journey to Accompong, Jamaica and to Haiti. Unlike Dunham, who criticized the religious and material inequities between rural peasants and the “Mulatto” elite, Hurston embraced her standing with the upper classes and was even referred to by her contemporaries as “the toast of the Haitian army” (Szwed 2010, 96). Instead, she highlighted the ways that Vodou undermined the racial and gendered inequities between men and women (particularly dark-skinned women) thanks to the sacred high status of *mambos*, or high priestesses, and through the rituals of possession – when “women dressed like men and men like women” while being mounted and ridden like a horse by their deities (Stein 2013).

Beside collecting fieldnotes and folktales, Hurston was committed to capturing Vodou using photography and audio recording. *Tell My Horse* includes eighteen pictures taken in Haiti, mostly Vodou ceremonies and altars. She stated that her greatest thrill in Haiti was photographing a Zombie, which was an “act [that] had never happened before in the history of man” (1942, 711), and which granted her tremendous publicity. Hurston sold the photograph to Time Inc., who published it in a 1937 issue of Life Magazine, with the caption “This is the Only Zombie Ever Photographed” (Dunbar 2018, 245).

Still, Hurston doesn’t mention the suppression of Vodou in *Tell my Horse*, instead emphasizing its liberatory potential for poor people, Black people, and women. Yet we know she was aware of the dangers associated with practicing. In a letter to her friend Alan Lomax, which he received shortly before his arrival in Haiti, Hurston warned him not to utter “the general term folk-lore or magic practices” to authorities (Averill 2008, 11). Lomax followed suit and arrived with letters of introduction to prominent members of the U.S-American and Haitian militaries, stating his association with Hurston, who was already a well-known figure there.

According to his biographer John Szwed (2010), Alan Lomax viewed Haiti as an untapped treasure trove of unrecorded music, and “the product of a people who were culturally closer to Africa than any others in the New World” (94). Lomax was successful in raising the funds from the Library of Congress for his travels, as they had no Haitian music yet in their collections. Arriving in December 1936 alongside his fiancée Elizabeth Lyttleton Harold, Lomax quickly found the government and upper-classes wary of foreign intellectuals after so many publications misrepresenting (and over-emphasizing) Vodou. At first, Lomax admitted, he was “completely dependent on [Zora]” for contacts. He had to write to Melville Herskovits asking for help “on what to record” and for his notes on Vodou, and he also wrote to Katherine Dunham asking her to send him a Haitian bibliography. He struggled deeply with the language, ultimately

hiring a translator, Revolie Polinice, for a “scandalously high wage of \$10 a month” (Averill 2008, 13).²¹ Still, he found the fieldwork difficult, writing that,

My former experiences as a collector were mere child’s play; here I am up against something... I have to learn diplomacy, how to collect, how to handle a servant, how to beat the tambour, how to dance, how to bargain, how to lie, how to run the new recorder, how to take notes, how to budget and keep accounts, all on top of my personal problems, which have formerly kept me completely occupied (Szwed, 99).

Still, Lomax called Haiti “the richest folk-song field I know” and he eventually found his way outside of the capital and into the rural enclaves across the country, from the southern seaport Aux Cayes in the Sud province to the northern tip of Cap-Haïtien where “the real people of Haiti” live (Lomax 1938, 131). Lomax was struck by the extreme class division and sought to stay in the company of the peasant population, who he felt were “all informants, so far as the folklorist is concerned” (Lomax 1936, cited in Szwed, 99).

Lomax loathed the Haitian *boujwazi* and suffered encounters with their music. Instead, he sought out both religious and secular performances in a variety of settings. In Port-au-Prince he secretly attended a Vodou ceremonial dance, performed for Agasu,²² and allegedly collected the first ever recording in a *hounfort*.²³ He also attended *danses*, secular events that required permits and often featured Vodou songs, sometimes even secretly serving as religious ceremonies (Averill 2008, 13). Lomax wrote about these events, and the loose enforcement of permitting by police who were usually happy just to be paid off (ibid.).

Lomax also repeatedly encountered George Simpson, the post-graduate assistant of Melville Herskovits, who arrived in Haiti the same year to conduct a community study in Plaisance, and Harold Courlander, the independent folklorist and novelist who was busy collecting folksongs and documenting music in 1936 and again in 1937. Courlander was inspired to visit Haiti after reading Seabrook and traveled around the world recording folklore and music. He wasn’t academically affiliated, though his two Haitian monographs – *Haiti Singing* (1939) and *The Drum and the Hoe: Life and Lore of the Haitian People* (1960) were widely reviewed in social science publications.

Both Simpson and Courlander, as well as Dunham, Hurston and Lomax, relied on many of the same U.S-American intermediaries in their efforts to find, observe, and document Vodou. Overlapping in their publications and personal writings are two ex-army men who defected but remained in Haiti, initiated into Vodou, and took up with local women. R. H. Reiser was a pharmacist for the U.S. navy who was appointed supervisor of Haiti’s National Insane Asylum in Point Beudet, about 50 kilometers north of Port-au-Prince. Faustin Wirkus was a former marine sergeant who lived on the island of La Gonâve, where he was the self-proclaimed “White King” (Wirkus 1931) – a title that Reiser found ridiculous, but which seemed to attract a plethora of academics from around the world.

Hurston devoted an entire chapter of *Tell My Horse* to ‘Doctor Reser,’ who she calls “one of the showpieces of Haiti, like the Citadel” (1938, 246). Rumors appear again and again in text about his drinking habits, abilities as a psychic, and knowledge of Vodou secrets. He even allegedly had a snake tattooed on his arm which ate eggs and did dark magic for him. ‘Doc Reiser,’ as he was called by Dunham, organized ceremonies and dances for all these folklorists, as well as for journalists and any interested U.S-American visiting the island with the hope of witnessing Vodou. According to Hurston’s observations, “everyone who goes to Haiti to find out something makes a bee line for Dr. Reser and tries to pump out of him all that they can in a few

weeks and then they sail off and write as if they had seen something” (1938, 252). And while his abilities may have been questioned by each of these researchers, they all claim a great benefit in his association, particularly as he was “loved by everyone” and extremely well-connected (Dunham 1969, 20).

Unlike Reiser, who organized ceremonies and notified researchers of performances around the country, Faustin Wirkus was a producer of folkloristic documentation of Vodou, and the island of La Gonâve became his studio. Hurston traveled there alongside her friend Frank Crumbie (“Junior”), who collected a vast assemblage of objects which he later sold to the Smithsonian.

The two were interested in seeing this place that both Wirkus and Seabrook before him had so elaborately described. Hurston even set up a small house there, where scholars like George Simpson could stay when they visited. Wirkus, who directed *Voodoo* – “a fake part-documentary, part-fiction film” (Swed 2010, 95) - enlisted the help of these folklorists, who were more than happy to oblige.

Institutional Anthropology

Sometime after the 18th of August 1941 Dr. Julian Steward, of the Smithsonian’s Bureau of American Ethnology, received a telegram from the Swiss anthropologist, Alfred Métraux, regarding some “specimens of anthropological interest”.²⁴ Later that year, Métraux would join Steward as a member of the organization, but first he was busy conducting research in Port Au Prince, Haiti. Members of the island’s Catholic clergy had started “a systematic persecution of the Voodoo cult,” Métraux explained, and they were busy gathering thousands of objects in their presbyteries to be piled up and burned unless the National Museum in Washington would take interest in order that he might save some of them. F. M. Setzler, Head Curator of the Department of Anthropology confirmed that his department “would be very much pleased to receive the Voodoo specimens.” The Division of Ethnology had, at this time, only a very small set of “authentic” Vodou objects from Haiti – four drums donated by Captain George G. Sinclair and Lieutenant Peter Hartman on the 11th of September 1917.²⁵ Setzler and his Department were very anxious to obtain the Métraux collection.

Métraux had arrived in Haiti just one month earlier that year, encountering Vodou for the first time in and around the *faubourgs* of Port-au-Prince. Like the Lomaxes, Métraux was on a joint research and honeymoon trip with his new wife Rhoda, an anthropologist he’d met during a stint as her visiting professor at Yale (Mitchell 2005). Together they visited sanctuaries, met *sevité* and *houngans*,²⁶ and even attended ceremonies in the capital. Métraux became captivated by what he called “the dynamic aspects of Voodoo” – a *mélange* of not only Dahomean, Congolese, and Catholic beliefs and practices that Herskovits had attended to, but an endlessly emergent, modern religion that is “always evolving before our eyes” (A. Métraux 1958, 61). He felt that the adaptive nature of the religion was impressive for its lack of liturgy or doctrine. What made Vodou customs so thrilling were the improvisational relations between the *loa* and their priests and devotees, and the critical role of performance in ceremony. He worried that the efforts of the Catholic Church, which cut the people off from material access to the supernatural, might destroy the future of Vodou entirely.

It was the height of “*La Renonce*”, the country-wide campaign banning ‘*les pratiques superstitieuses*’ that waged against Vodou and its practitioners in both public and private domains. Led by the Catholic Church, a series of initiatives were imposed to eradicate paganism from

Haiti completely. First, the clergy insisted that all faithful Catholics take an anti-superstition oath. When this proved impossible the Church began coercing conversions, particularly amongst the darker-skinned populations in the *mornays*,²⁷ and imposing sanctions on any persons attending Vodou ceremonies, wearing amulets, or displaying public devotion to the *loa*. After the election of president Élie Lescot, a member of the mixed-race *élite* with strong ties to the U.S., the armed guard participated in the campaign's final mission – the collection and destruction of all Vodou objects.²⁸

The series of events encapsulated above proved to be the most significant catalyst for Métraux's continued research in Haiti. Years afterwards, he recalled a scene in Croix-des-Bouquets, just twelve miles north of Port-au-Prince: "I was in Haiti in 1941 and I remember seeing in the back-yards of presbyteries vast pyramids of drums, painted bowls, necklaces, talismans – all waiting for the day fixed for the joyous blaze which was to symbolize the victory of the Church over Satan," (1958, 343). The collection that would eventually be accessioned by the Smithsonian museum comprised twenty-three objects Métraux managed to save from this church, citing "scientific or aesthetic reasons."

"Whenever the State has tried to suppress paganism," Métraux insisted, "it has begun by forbidding the use of the drum," (1958, 177). Influenced by the former writings of Harold Courlander (1930; 1941), as well as Haitian writer, activist, and politician Jacques Roumain's research on the *Tambour Assoto* (Roumain 1943), Métraux understood Haiti's sacred drums to be tangible forms of the divine and took notice that worshippers conduct offerings to serve them. He witnessed the ceremonies of *bay manger tambour* (feeding the drums) and *coucher tambour*, in which a drum is put to bed so that its soul may depart for Africa to rejuvenate before returning to wake. It is perhaps with this deep understanding of the drums' socio-spiritual significance that Métraux determined to save those he could from the pyre, though one must wonder what life he believed these divine instruments might lead, so far from their devotees, in Washington DC.

"The scale of the offensive against Voodoo, and the brutality of the measures taken against its devotees, suggested that its days were numbered; and so I conceived the desire to study it before it was too late" (A. Métraux 1958, 17). Together with the Haitian writer, activist, and politician Jacques Roumain who was "equally convinced of the need to put on record the story of Voodoo which seemed so gravely threatened," Métraux departed for the Ile à Tortue, off the island's northern coast (*ibid*). Later, in an article he published about his friend and collaborator, Métraux described the trip to the island, and the lasting impression it would have on both of their careers:

"We were able to identify a considerable number of Indian sites and even caves that were used for secondary burials. Jacques was in despair at not being able to carry out proper excavations [...] The destruction of the sites and the scattering of archaeological finds distressed and exasperated him. On this subject, he was inexhaustible, and we shared in the same fury the story of specimens fallen into the hands of indifferent people. I spoke to him then about a law of protection for this part of the national heritage and the need to create a state institution to collect the vestiges of the distant past of the island (A. Métraux 1944, quoted in Lauriere 2005b).

The two devised a plan to form the *Biwo Nasyonal Etnoloji*, or National Bureau of Ethnology in Haiti. Métraux returned to the United States and Roumain successfully founded the *Biwo* before the end of the year.

Jacques Roumain was another founder of the “*Mouvement Indigene*.” Particularly interested in the literary arts, one of his main goals was to establish Haiti’s “native” language, Kreyol, in its literatures – rather than imitating French writing, French style, and the use of French language (Renn 1945). Roumain used his platform with the *Movement* to speak and write against the occupation – actions which landed him in jail for over a year and ultimately forced him into exile in France.²⁹ There he began studying anthropology and working at the *Musée de l’Homme* in Paris. His research focused on “the Voodoo cult of Dahomey,” and used materials from the museum’s curated collections. Finally returning to Haiti in 1941, Roumain met Métraux and founded the *Biwo Nasyonal Etnoloji* with the hope of comparing the religious practices of Haitian peasants with those who worshipped the deities in Dahomey.

The *Biwo* was, in Métraux’s words, “*un veritable centre de recherches*,” devoted to ethnographic and folkloric research, as well as the protection of archaeological sites (1945, 84). The ethnographic department was organized by Lorimer Denis, who would go on to publish a bounty of books and articles on Haitian culture, music, and politics, and co-authoring several publications with the future *Biwo* director and eventual president of Haiti, François Duvalier (Denis 1947, 1950, 1953; Denis and Duvalier 1944, 1948). The folklore research was led by Odette M. Rigaud, a French-born Haitian citizen who authored several articles on Vodou (Rigaud 1946, 1951, 1958). The *Biwo* was also formed as a museum comprising ethnographic and archaeological specimens.

The same year the *Biwo* was founded, Alfred Métraux became a full-time employee of the Smithsonian Institution’s own Bureau of Ethnology. At that point, he had spent the bulk of his career studying indigenous communities in South America. Then in 1943, the Métrauxs returned to Haiti. Sidney Mintz characterized this intellectual pivot using descriptive terms popular with anthropologists at the time, stating that “until he began his work in Haiti, Métraux had usually worked among peoples better described as ‘primitive’ than as ‘peasant’” (Mintz 1972, 3). The characterization was used to stress Métraux’s belief that while the traditional cultures of Indigenous Americans were “doomed,” important efforts could support the continuation of Haiti’s traditional arts and society (Mintz 1972, 4). With the help of the *Biwo* and its new director M. Lorimer Denis, Métraux began conducting research in and around the capital with several “friends and collaborators” who also served as Vodou priests. The head of the *Biwo*’s folklore department, Odette Rigaud, was an especially important connection for Métraux. She was married to the Haitian scholar and painter, Milo Rigaud, and had unprecedented access to religious communities in the capital³⁰.

Métraux would later write that while some African characteristics might have been better preserved in the rural *mornays* than in Port-au-Prince, he was only moderately interested in what he called “the purity of African heritage” (1972, 61). Unlike Herskovits, whose project was to connect Haiti with Black communities across the Americas, Métraux was interested in how the foundational elements of Vodou – including even the deities themselves – were unique to each practitioner. The sanctuaries of the city were both “numerous and prosperous” and the rituals he witnessed were “full of refinements and subtleties which are lacking in the rural cults” (*ibid*).

During this trip as a representative of both U.S-American and Haitian Bureaus of Ethnology, Métraux seemed to take a special interest in the materiality of Vodou. In a letter to Yvonne Oddon, he insisted “we have devoted ourselves entirely to voodoo. Rhoda and I got

attached to a *houmfo* and during our entire stay we did nothing but attend ceremonies. We worked in desperation, but with good results, since we brought back some 150 pages of notes” (Métreaux quoted in Lauriere 2005a). He observed the process of making *vévé*³¹, the attribution of each symbol to the *loa*, the drawings’ tangible magical powers, and their use in ceremony as a site of divine offering. He also carried out similar research on music (A. Métreaux 1950a), healing and medicine (A. Métreaux 1953c), and the manifestation of the soul (A. Métreaux 1946).

By the end of the Second World War, the Métrauxs were living in New York City. Rhoda returned to school to finish her PhD, enrolling in the Anthropology department at Columbia University under the advisement of Margaret Mead.³² Alfred began his appointment at the newly established United Nations. These were the first years of the United Nations’ Educational, Social, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), whose “fundamental education” priorities were aimed at reducing illiteracy and improving living conditions around the world. At the organization’s first General Conference, member states advocated for the introduction of a small number of pilot projects to be carried out by the national governments in cooperation with UNESCO. The next year, a representative of Haiti’s department of education proposed a rural region in the southern part of his country as a promising site for an educational UNESCO innovation that focused on education, public health, and economic development (Verna 2017, 123). By then, president Dumarsais Estimé was equally committed to increasing literacy and advancing the living conditions in Haiti’s most impoverished areas. Early the next year, a plan was drafted for Haiti’s Marbial valley.

Alfred Métreaux was selected to direct a six-month anthropological field survey prior to the first-stages of the pilot, to assess “the daily life of the Haitian peasants in the Marbial Valley” in areas including agriculture and the seasonal rhythm of work, family structures, market systems, popular arts and crafts, food and diet, religion, folklore, values, and aspects of the built environment (A. Métreaux 1949a). “The prospect of becoming an ‘applied anthropologist,’ that is to say a man of action appeals to me immensely,” articulated Métreaux in a personal correspondence in 1948, “I have a great need to work out for others and to get out of the magic circle in which I am captive” (Lauriere 2005a). Métreaux believed the Marbial Valley project would be an opportunity to use his ethnographic training for work that would better serve the needs of Haiti’s poorest citizens. He also felt that anthropologists had a duty to provide technical assistance for educational and development projects in areas where they conduct their research, and to support organizations like UNESCO in upending racial prejudice and doctrine around the world (A. Métreaux 1950b; 1951e; 1951f, 1953a). The Métrauxs returned to Haiti in 1948, with Alfred directing the UNESCO pilot project survey while Rhoda completed fieldwork for her dissertation and future publications (R. Métreaux 1952a, 1952b).

Métreaux strongly believed in the “institutional method” – that is, Malinowski’s assertion that ethnography must investigate all personal, social, material, functional and behavioral aspects of a given society to understand any one of its elements (A. Métreaux 1949a). He also followed Malinowski’s belief that the anthropologist must live amongst their research subjects, and he rented a small house in the remote village of Cochon Gras. As in the capital, Métreaux insisted on hiring Haitians to assist in his research, fighting for the survey to simultaneously function as a training program in anthropological methods for Haitian students (A. Métreaux 1951d, 295). He also hired esteemed Haitian colleagues including Arthur Bonhomme, Haiti’s director of Education, social worker Jeanne Sylvain, agronomist Edouard Berrouet, and Africanist ethnologist Suzanne Comhaire-Sylvain (Lauriere 2005a).

President Dumarsais Estimé supported the initiative, and invited John Marshall, humanities officer at the Rockefeller Foundation, to visit Haiti, in hopes that he might recommend financial assistance for the project.³³ He was successful, and Métraux was awarded \$9,000 by the Rockefeller's Viking Fund. Marshall had another agenda as well, which was to encourage doctoral research on literacy – in particular, whether literacy was best promoted through an individual's maternal or auxiliary language (Verna 2017). Historian Chantalle Verna argues that this connection between Estimé and the Rockefeller Foundation firmly cemented the United States' hold in the country, during a period in which the new president vowed to challenge the country's ties with its former occupier (Verna 2017, 124). French anthropological historian, Christina Lauriere, proposes that this may have been the real reason behind Métraux's diplomatic hiring of mostly Haitians, all dark-skinned, and from both the Bureau of Ethnology and its rival institution, the Institute of Ethnology (Lauriere 2005a). And yet Métraux's intellectual commitment to salvage ethnography, and his particular concern with the imminent disappearance of Haiti's peasant culture, suggest other personal agendas behind his choice of collaborators in the field.

Métraux remained impacted by *la renonce* and his earlier years researching Vodou in the capital. He hoped to continue this study in the Marbial Valley but soon discovered that the campaign was so successful there that any effort to investigate would be fruitless, admitting that “those who in their heart of hearts remained faithful to the ancestral spirits did not dare mention it aloud, still less celebrate public ceremonies” (1972, 19). The Marbial Valley seemed to have exacerbated Métraux's feeling that Vodou, along with other elements of Haitian peasant society, must be protected from the dangers of acculturation, which he felt were being ushered in by the country's desire to Westernize (Lauriere 2005a).

It's hard to know what Métraux believed about his time with UNESCO in the Marbial Valley, since he was contractually forbidden from mentioning the organization by name outside of research publications. In his monograph on the Black peasants of Marbial, he writes that “an international organization,” ostensibly forbid him from studying Vodou, instead insisting that he sharpen his focus on broader aspects of “rural life only” (1960, 7). He carried on with the subject anyway, believing that it was the most impactful way to protect what was authentically Haitian from being destroyed.

In a short article published by the *Instituto Indigenista Interamericano* in 1949, Métraux expanded on these beliefs, arguing that the anthropologist's fundamental responsibility will always be to identify cultural elements “worth maintaining and supporting,” while insulating peasant societies from quickly adopting “what is new” (Métraux 1949a, 187). Feeling somewhat discouraged by this tension, as well as the ongoing crisis in the Marbial Valley, Métraux left Haiti after the conclusion of his survey. He would carry on as a reluctant administrator, becoming a permanent member of UNESCO's Department of Social Science – ushering anthropologists, and an anthropological point-of-view, into other development projects around the world (Wagley 1964; A. Métraux 1953d).

François Duvalier and the new ‘ethnologie haïtienne’

In 1957, François Duvalier, former director of the *Bureau d'Ethnologie*, was elected president of Haiti. His dictatorship marked a new phase of ethnographic research in which works of the state, university and the discipline of ethnology were enmeshed. Duvalier, who had been a student of Price-Mars, consolidated these three areas into his *noirisme* ideology, taking control over the

production of knowledge in Haiti and limiting opportunities for foreign anthropologists hoping to do work there (Rémy 2013; Byron 2016).

There was certainly a decline in the number of researchers from abroad during the Duvalier years (1957-1986).³⁴ In the first place, ceremonies were heavily patrolled by the *tonton makout*, the president's paramilitary force that were authorized to suppress political opposition by any means, and who were comprised of several well-known *houngans* from throughout the country. As the director of the Bureau, Duvalier had conducted extensive research on Vodou which he relied on during his tenure as "president-for-life". He began dressing and speaking aloud as the *Baron Samedi*, the *loa* of the dead. He dressed the *tonton makout* as *Azaka*, the *loa* of the harvest, and spread rumors across the capital of his Vodou ceremonies in the presidential palace, ultimately invoking secretism to enforce his totalitarian rule (Johnson 2006).

Beyond the challenges imposed by Duvalier on citizens of Haiti and visitors from abroad, other social and political realities in the United States redirected research goals and trajectories. As the Duvaliers *noiriste* regime, especially under Jean-Claude's term, increasingly moved towards an anti-communist agenda, interventionist concerns were mitigated in the United States. Alessandra Benedicty-Kokken has also argued that the Civil Rights Movement inspired shifts in academic research on 'blackness' to studies of race relations. Subsequently, an intellectual focus on Haiti (the famed Black republic) was replaced with a new interest in Brazil a site of anthropology, where "different 'races' supposedly cohabitated within the same population" (Benedicty-Kokken 2016, 63).

Yet, as several have noted, "there is still a foreign preoccupation with Vodou" (Schuller 2016) or alternatively an "obsession" with Haiti (Dayan 1995). The experimental filmmaker Maya Deren who had been "obsessed" with both William Seabrook and Katherine Dunham, visited Haiti in 1954 to film *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti*, also publishing a monograph by the same name (Deren 1953). Following the ongoing migration of Haitians to the United States during Duvalier's dictatorship, new directions of anthropological research focused on Vodou practice in diaspora (i.e., McAlister 1988; McCarthy Brown 1991; Cosentino 1995).

Meanwhile in Haiti, the work that began with Métraux's UNESCO project in the Marbial Valley solidified Haiti as a "laboratory" for public anthropology. In the late 1980s, U.S.-American medical anthropologist and physician, Paul Farmer co-founded *Zanmi Lasante* (Partners In Health), a global health organization that began treating people with HIV and AIDS in rural Haiti. Farmer's clinical work and publications on poverty and public health inspired a breadth of development projects in the country, which precipitated a crop of new anthropological research on foreign aid interventions (Farmer 1999; James 2010; Schuller 2012).

Though Haiti has become somewhat of a marginalized geography within American anthropological discourse in the United States, the representation of Haiti as a Black Republic remains a potent signifier. In the aftermath of the 2010 earthquake, 2016 Hurricane Mathew, and more recent hostilities towards Haitian migrants at the U.S. border, the country and its diaspora are once again brought into focus. It is my hope that discussions about the enduring material impacts of United States imperialism will emerge at the heart of these investigations.

Notes

- ¹ However, aspects of Boas have been sharply critiqued, including his non-stance on anti-black racism (Bernasconi 2019), maintenance of white hegemony (Anderson 2019), and exploitative relationships with non-white scholars (Lewis 2001).
- ² Firmin also served as Minister of Finance, Commerce and Foreign Relations from 1888-1897, and during that tenure negotiated with U.S. Ambassador to Haiti, Frederick Douglass, over access of the Môle St. Nicholas for the U.S. Navy (Bernasconi 2003). Both men were forced to resign due to claims of “divided loyalties” and accusations that each was too accommodating to the other. Douglas was allegedly too suspicious of the U.S.’s imperial ambitions (Fluehr-Lobban 2000, 450).
- ³ It is also worth noting Schuller’s (2016, 22) claim that the Haitian intellectual Milo Rigaud was the “forefather” of Claude Lévi-Strauss’s structuralism.
- ⁴ Apart from direct quotes, I use the spelling Vodou (see Desmangles 2012; Ramsey 2012; and Pettinger 2004 for more on this etymology).
- ⁵ Also bocor, or sorcerer.
- ⁶ Alessandra Benedicty-Kokken (2016) proposes that this early career stance reflected Herskovits’s own ‘assimilative’ experience as a Jewish American, while Walter Jackson (1988) proposed that Harlem Renaissance writers, particularly Alain Locke, influenced Herskovits’s stance against ethnic particularism.
- ⁷ Magdaline Shannon’s translation – *So Spoke the Uncle: Essays on Ethnography* – was first published English in 1983.
- ⁸ Letter from Herskovits to Price-Mars from Melville J. Herskovits Papers, Northwestern University (NUHP). Additional writings, as well as research papers and other materials by Melville and Frances Herskovits, are available in the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture (SCHP), part of the New York City Public Library.
- ⁹ My translation. Letter from Herskovits to Price-Mars, May 11, 1929 (NUHP). Quoted in Magloire and Yelvington 2008, 15.
- ¹⁰ The Kreyol Word for *Marrons* (French), *Cimmarones* (Spanish), or *Maroons* (English), or fugitive ‘slaves’.
- ¹¹ Herskovits was the first but certainly not the last to write about the Mirebalais valley. For more on the agricultural history of the Valley see Tippenhauer 2020; Fouchard 1981 and Gonzalez 2019 write about the maroon history of Haiti; and detailed accounts of the Caco Uprising can be found in Chochotte 2018 and Gaillard 2020.
- ¹² Baron wrote his dissertation on Herskovits, entitled *Africa in the Americas: Melville J. Herskovits’ Folkloristic and Anthropological Scholarship, 1923-1941* (1994). Though he credits Herskovits’s 1934 Haitian fieldwork with transformations in his theoretical interventions (what he calls his ‘Aha!’ experience), Baron attributes this entirely to Herskovits’s ethnographic observations, while neglecting to recognize, or even mention, the influence of Jean Price-Mars or his writings.
- ¹³ Magloire and Yelvington outline Price-Mars’s earlier definitions of the “synthèse psychologique” of Vodou in *Ainsi parla l’oncle* (2008, 10-11), once again demonstrating the influence of this text on Herskovits.
- ¹⁴ There is no direct English translation for the lwa, but spirits and deities are most commonly used.
- ¹⁵ The Katherine Dunham collection, available at the Library of Congress, includes photographs,

correspondences, writings, moving images from her Caribbean research, and production materials and clippings that document her academic and creative work (<https://www.loc.gov/item/2011570505/>). Additional archival materials are available in the Katherine Dunham Papers (1906-2009) at Southern Illinois University (<http://www.celebratingresearch.org/libraries/southernillinois/dunham.html>) and the Katherine Dunham Collection at the Missouri Historical Society (<https://mohistory.org/collections/item/P0332>).

- ¹⁶ Relevant archives of materials relating to Zora Neale Hurston include Zora Neale Hurston Rare Books & Manuscripts, Special Collections at the George A. Smathers Libraries, University of Florida (<https://ufdc.ufl.edu/znhurs>); the Zora Neale Hurston Collection at Yale University's Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library (<https://archives.yale.edu/repositories/11/resources/990>); and the Zora Neale Hurston Recordings, manuscripts, Photographs, and Ephemera in the Archive of Folk Culture at the library of Congress (<https://www.loc.gov/folklife/guides/Hurston.html>).)
- ¹⁷ Alan Lomax's recordings and papers are available in the Alan Lomax Collection at the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress (<https://www.loc.gov/folklife/lomax/alanlomaxcollection.html>) and the Lomax digital archive (<https://archive.culturalequity.org/>)
- ¹⁸ George Simpson Haiti photographs available in the National Anthropological Archives, at the Smithsonian Institution (<https://sova.si.edu/record/NAA.PhotoLot.93-14#Scope%20and%20Contents%20note>) and his travel writings and correspondences available in the collection of George Simpson Papers, 1940-1985 at the Oberlin College Archives (<http://oberlinarchives.libraryhost.com/?p=collections/controlcard&id=67>)
- ¹⁹ priestess
- ²⁰ *Canzo* refers to the status of a female initiate, which is only one step below the *manbo*, or priestess, and involves a rigorous training. Hurston, whose publications and personal correspondences typically emphasize her access to secret, lesser-known, and insider activities at no point provided any written description of this process in Haiti.
- ²¹ Averill notes that Polinice wasn't just a translator, he also "carried equipment and baggage, negotiated with singers and musicians, cooked, cleaned, and assisted in the recording process" (2008, 13).
- ²² A *Iwa* considered the first deity to bring Africa's spiritual practice to Haiti, to ease the sufferings of slavery.
- ²³ temple
- ²⁴ Smithsonian Institution Archives, Record Unit 305, SIA000305_R612_Y1942_A0163278.
- ²⁵ See Accession Numbers 061539 and 061540 in the Smithsonian Department of Anthropology Collections: <https://collections.nmnh.si.edu/search/anth/>.
- ²⁶ devout worshipers and priests
- ²⁷ Valleys
- ²⁸ For historical interpretations of 20th century anti-Vodou campaigns see Ramsey 2005. And for histories of pre-20th century Vodou persecution on the island see Hurbon 2005.
- ²⁹ When news of Roumain's arrest reached the United States, Langston Hughes, an enthusiastic follower and translator of Roumain's work, published a letter in *New Republic* calling upon "all writers and artists of whatever race who believe in freedom" to protest the President of Haiti and nearest Haitian Consulate (Hughes 2002c).
- ³⁰ An archive of Odette Rigaud's work (1944-1969), including ethnographic research and writings, notes

and recorded songs, drawings, and more are entrusted to the *Bibliothèque Haïtienne des Pères du Saint-Esprit*, whose building was destroyed in the earthquake of January 12, 2010. They have been recovered but are now in several boxes being stored in a shed.

<https://en.unesco.org/memoryoftheworld/registry/227>.

³¹ symbols of the *l* that are drawn on the ground with materials like corn, maize, brick-dust, powdered bark, ashes or coffee-grounds

³² The papers of Rhoda Métraux, including fieldnotes, photos, lectures, her dissertation, correspondences and more were donated to the Library of Congress in 1980. Additional materials were given by Alfred Métraux and their son Daniel in 1998 and 2005 and transferred from the Margaret Mead papers in 1996.

³³ John Marshall's photographs, journals oral history and correspondences are available through the Rockefeller Archive Center.

³⁴ François Duvalier remained president from 1957 until 1971, when he was succeeded by his son Jean Claude until 1986.

CHAPTER 2

ALTARS AND ART MARKETS *A Study of Collecting in U.S.-Occupied Haiti*

In the previous chapter I explored U.S.-American anthropological interests in Haiti, as a backdrop to the accumulation of Haitian cultural materials. In this chapter, I take a deeper look at these collecting practices, while broadening my focus to include both academic and non-academic motivations for collecting. As readers may expect, a great deal of this accumulation occurred within the broader project of expanding U.S. imperial interests abroad and the strategic suppression of traditional cultural practices (Renda 2001; Ramsey 2011; Katz 2022). Yet there were other paradigms at work and, more importantly, there were also motivations that aligned with diverse Haitian interests. For example, as we saw in the previous chapter, salvage anthropology, which instructed the mass gathering of cultural specimens for the purposes of scientific preservation in the face of a modernizing world, appealed to a new intellectual class seeking to emphasize Haiti's cultural ties to Africa through archaeological, folkloristic, and ethnological research and collecting. The production of objects for collecting by foreigners created new market opportunities for craftspeople in urban centers of Port au Prince as well as remote regional outposts that lay along popular travel routes.

In organizing this chapter, it was important for me to attend to the intersecting Haitian and U.S.-American paradigms that, together, resulted in circulation of sacred objects around and off the island. They were not always aligned and were just as often at odds. Still, tensions that arose during these early twentieth century encounters, and the dual valuing of sacred objects, yielded complex dynamics of power those cultural materials, such as sacred drums and animate stones, facilitated. In the pages that follow, I will first explore anthropological studies of collecting that attend to source community agency. Then, I situate collecting projects in Haiti within a broader context of military, economic, and cultural conflict through the decades of U.S. Occupation. Lastly, I provide an assessment of the varieties of collecting projects that occurred in that period, drawing primarily from the Haiti collections at the Smithsonian. The chapter concludes with some synthesizing arguments and inclusions of collecting projects that occurred outside of the framework I have provided.

Locating Community Agency in Anthropological Studies of Collecting

Histories of collecting took off in the 1990s, after museums became more reflexive about their extractive colonial roots, and they remain a popular genre of academic writing (i.e., Pomian 1990; Boone 1993; Findlen 1994; Schildkrout and Keim 1998; Blom 2003; Delbourgo 2019; Hicks 2021). Their introduction occurred alongside a shift in anthropological recognition of objects as things that are *relationally charged*, no matter where they sit within circulations of exchange and possession (Weiner 1992). When the concept of “object biographies” was introduced, it freed studies of collecting from the linear and commodity-based “provenance

research,” that merely traced chains of ownership (Kopytoff 1986; Hoskins 1998; Gosden and Marshall 1999). This meant, at least in part, re-conceptualizing objects as social *beings*, animated through their traditional relations with other objects, humans, and non-human things.

Nicholas Thomas picked up on the approach, and in *Entangled Objects* (1991) demonstrated that not only do objects possess phases, periods, ages, and “careers,” their meaning and value is mutable but always historically and contextually determined. In the first place, Thomas argued that “objects are not what they were made to be but what they have become,” (pg. 4). His research on material culture and colonialism in the Pacific (Fiji and eastern Polynesia, as well as New Guinea, the Solomon islands, New Zealand and Micronesia) tracked ‘appropriations’ of Indigenous and European things by each respective group, within the exchange systems that permeate colonial encounters. In doing so, he situated Indigenous intentions, worldviews and knowledge systems directly within the biography of objects themselves.

Yet much of this reflexive turn within both academic and museal contexts, which highlighted the impacts and devastation of the colonial agenda, meant that Indigenous communities could become flattened in the anthropological literature, and that source communities were continuing to be stripped of agency in the museum. Histories of collecting returned to commoditizing collections, by focusing on collectors themselves and their discrete motivations. Provenance research may have shifted from auction registers to diverse historical archives, but they were still devoid of ethnographic methods that centered community knowledge.

When Michael O’Hanlon published his volume on ethnographic collecting (O’Hanlon and Welsch, eds. 2000), he provided methods for deep engagement with the colonial processes that influenced colonial collecting projects generally, and in his specific case, in Melanesia. O’Hanlon also incorporated source-community agency within his study, emphasizing not only the enduring cultural knowledge of Melanesian peoples, but the ways in which they influenced the building of collections. This was an attempt, by O’Hanlon, to write against the dominant historical narrative that situated communities merely as repositories of materials that were plundered against their will. There were, as O’Hanlon demonstrated, other dynamics at work.

Differentiating between ‘Primary’ collecting, a project “made by explicit, intellectual design” (12) versus secondary and concomitant, or incidental, collecting projects, O’Hanlon spelled out how diverse European actors animated a variety of collecting contexts by virtue of their ideological motivations, subjectivities, and positionalities while in Melanesia. He conceptualized his method as an “ethnography of field collecting,” emphasizing the context of collecting from both Indigenous and European points of view before, during, and after the scene of exchange. In doing so, he attempted to broaden the view of collecting as a diverse set of activities, and more than a practice of “dispossession alone,” writing “collections held in museums may incorporate aspects of local agency which are overlooked if the sole identity allowed to such collections is that of artefactual abductees” (2-3).

Josh Bell took this project further, writing a material history of New Guinea that relied on metaphors of “sorcery” and “sweetness” to demonstrate how U.S-American collecting practices and Indigenous communities’ knowledge and agency entwined during the United States Department of Agriculture sugarcane expedition in 1928 (Bell 2013). Of particular interest to Bell, an anthropologist at the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History, were the ways in which Indigenous pasts, presents, and futures are entangled with material collections in museal contexts.

A decade later, Rainer Buschmann took on the topic of German collecting in colonial Papua New Guinea (Buschmann 2023). Referring to this immense historical project as “hoarding,” Buschmann simultaneously addressed “the colonial hierarchies and injustices inherent in forceful looting”; forms of Indigenous agency that left Europeans dependent on Melanesian material culture; and also, the infrastructural needs of storing such an abundance of material in nineteenth and twentieth century Europe that helped to precipitate the birth of the ethnographic museum (Buschmann, 1-18). Where O’Hanlon and Bell’s ethnographic methods highlighted Indigenous knowledge systems within the pinnacle of European collecting, Buschmann tracked how Papuan social, political, and economic agency impacted the shaping of value for diverse forms of “ethnographica”.

As evidenced by the paragraphs above, much of this genre of anthropological writing has animated material histories of Oceania, a region mired in theorizations of exchange that go back to Malinowski’s canonical text 1922 monograph, *Argonauts of the Pacific*. Looking more broadly, and with an eye on attending to the masses of objects collected from around the world that sit in European and American museums, requires this same attunement to source communities, their knowledge systems and forms of agency. In particular, the ways diverse communities around the world resisted, took advantage of, and sometimes even participated in and benefitted from, imperial collecting projects.

The U.S-Caco Wars (1915-1919)

At the end of July 1915, United States President Woodrow Wilson ordered U.S. Marine troops to Haiti, beginning what would come to be nineteen years of military occupation. Admiral William Banks Caperton of the U.S. Navy, also known as “the Butcher of Samar,” landed in Haiti and declared martial law, took over Haitian customs, and disbanded the *Arme Indigene*, Haiti’s national army which had been raised during the Revolution over a century prior. The move was justified by the island’s ongoing political turbulence, including the recent and bloody assassination of Haiti’s President Vilbrun Guillaume Sam following his massacre of suspected political dissidents. It was supported by Theodore Roosevelt’s Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine issued in 1904, which articulated the United States’ growing commercial interests abroad and the need to protect them at all costs using military, economic, and diplomatic efforts. The next four years would be defined by ongoing armed conflicts between the Haitian military (then led by the United States) and the *Cacos* rebel forces, widespread exploitation of poor peasant labor, and the suppression of Haitian economic, cultural, and religious sovereignty.

Waller had been born into an old, proud Confederate family and on his approach to governance in Haiti, he declared “I know the n--er and how to handle him” (Katz 2022, 206). It was Marine Corps major Smedley Butler, whom Waller invited to command the First Battalion of the newly raised *Gendarmerie d’Haiti*, that succeeded in spreading United States Imperialism in the country through a more holistic range of tactics that have been described as the first tactical use of counterinsurgency (Katz, 210). Butler was a Quaker who also held paternalistic and deeply racist views. He led the restructuring and reorganization of the force, including the “remapping” of Haiti by military cartographers into four departments and local sub-districts that could be policed easier than the previous administration (Renda 2001, 139).

Butler was already a star of the marines, having served in the Spanish and Philippine-American wars, and winning a medal for bravery during combat in the Boxer Rebellion. It was his involvement, and leadership, in U.S interventions in the Caribbean and Latin America that

led to his celebration not only as a war hero but an administrator of economic projects and advancing United States interests. Butler directed the gendarmerie and built it up from a military force into a political and economic tool for United States' financial interests, most notably through its instalment and enforcement of the *corvée* labor system. *Corvée* labor had first been introduced in the northern Kingdom of Haiti in 1810, when Henri Cristophe enforced newly liberated citizens to build fortifications against French invasion, including the now UNESCO world heritage site of *Palais Sans-Souci*. Twentieth century *corvée* labor in Haiti was also focused on building and infrastructural projects – including the construction of roads and railways, bridges, hospitals, schools, and irrigation canals. These were seen as a signifier of the U. S's successful attempts to modernize Haiti but in fact they resulted in the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Haitian laborers.¹

Another deployment of conscripted civilian labor occurred in the growing agricultural sector. Sisal, sugarcane, cotton, and coffee were the fastest growing products in Haiti's export market. Land was seized from the Haitian peasant class, and plantations were managed directly by U.S-Americans and secured by the Haitian gendarmerie. Much of this occurred in the northern and central departments, where Cacos forces, who viewed *corvée* as a return to slavery, had been emplaced since the first institution of conscripted labor over a century prior, and where dissidents had strong networks of communication and knowledge of both highland and valley regions.

Cacos resisted the U.S invasion from its first moments and grew with the enforcement of *corvée* in the rural areas. Battles in the northern Cacos strongholds, Fort Diptié and Fort Rivière, in 1915 comprise what historians refer to as the First Caco War, which ended with the defeat of rebels and the flattening of Haitian towns by dynamite. Two years later, under the leadership of Charlemagne Peralte, the Cacos began intensifying their guerilla tactics against the U.S. marines in and around the capital city, Port au Prince. Peralte was eventually killed in battle in 1919, and photographs of his crucified body were distributed throughout the country as a tactic to stave off further insurgents. Yet it had the opposite effect, and Peralte remains to this day a symbol of resistance in Haiti.

Peralte's successor was Benoit Batrville, or Ti-Benwa. In addition to being a high ranking Caco lieutenant, Ti-Benwa was a known practicing *sevité*. Accounts reference his dressing to evoke Ogou Feray, the Petwo lwa of war and battle. After his murder in 1919, marines found on his body a book of spells and incantations, which now rests at the U.S. Marine Corps History Division at Quantico (see chapter 3). In chapter 4, I will discuss the intentional use of drumming as a military tactic by Cacos, and the confiscation of sacred drums by U.S. marines. Other sacred, ceremonial, and animate objects such as stones (chapter 3), and charms were used for protection, leading marines to speculate about the dark magical abilities of cacos and their leaders' alternate roles as *bokors*, or sorcerers. Ti-Benwa certainly exacerbated this fear, despite his death signifying the end of the Cacos Wars and an incredible crush of the organized resistance movement.

The Broader Occupation (1914-1934)

The Cacos wars were brutal and resulted, collectively, in the deaths of thousands of Haitians and U.S-Americans in battle. Still, the military control the gendarmerie held was but one of several arms of U.S-American imperialism that stretched throughout the country. With the Cacos defeated in 1919, the 1920s are sometimes described as relatively stable due to the reduction in

armed dissidence. Yet the decade was characterized by other forms of violence. Technically, in 1928, the gendarmerie was reorganized into the Haitian *Garde*. It too was tasked with defending the economic and cultural affairs of the country, more so than engaging in active combat. These activities were also met with resistance.

Economic Exploitation

In his biography of Smedley Butler, the historian Jonathan Katz describes with great color and detail the events that preceded the military invasion in 1915: when eight U.S. Marines, disguised in civilian clothes, broke into the Banque National de la Republique d’Haiti with revolvers and canes, and left with “seventeen heavy wooden boxes, prepacked with gold bars, valued at roughly \$30,000 each” (Katz, 202). The heist was designed by Roger Leslie Farnham, vice president of James Stillman’s National City Bank of New York (now City Bank), which for the past four years had held the U.S offices of Haiti’s National Bank and also held one third of the bank’s ownership shares. Farnham was also an advisor to William Jennings Bryan, then secretary of state under President Wilson. Katz makes a strong case for Farnham’s success in motivating an occupation in Haiti for purely financial interests, spelling out a number of reasons why the United States would benefit including the control of the Mole Saint-Nicholas – “the harbor facing Guantanamo across the Windward Passage, which was now a key sea lane for traveling to and from the recently opened Panama Canal” (Katz, 204).

In addition to taking over the Banque, the United States, also led by City Bank, restructured Haiti’s indemnity scheme to promote U.S profits and cut out its competitors in France and Germany. This historical arrangement between Haiti and France was imposed in 1825 as a method for repaying one hundred and fifty million francs for damages and lost property (including enslaved persons) following Haitian independence, in exchange for diplomatic recognition. The result of this scheme and subsequent restructuring by France and then the United States, meant intensifying financial distress for the Haitian government and increasing reliance on international loans, and loss of financial sovereignty.

These policies were most harmful to the poor and mostly dark-skinned classes from Haiti’s countryside. They suffered loss of land and with it the resources that enabled the necessities of life. Some from the elite class, particularly in Port au Prince, benefitted from a corrupt relationship with foreigners, and were equally invested in “modernizing” Haiti by way of *corvée* labor and the eradication of the Kreyol language and Vodou religions.

Cultural Suppression

One of the early policies enacted by the U.S. Marines in their first year of the occupation was the enforcement of the 1864 *Code Pénal*, translated into English by Captain R. S. Hooker and circulated by marines as *The Rural Code of Haiti* (Gendarmerie d’Haiti, 1916). As historian Kate Ramsey has noted, of the 413 articles that comprised Haitian penal law, it was only three sections that were translated and disseminated for the first seven years of the occupation – these were articles that prohibited vagrancy, poisoning, and practices of divination and spells (Ramsey 2002, 149-151). This final section included articles 405-407, which mandated that:

Art. 405. All persons practicing ‘ouangas’, ‘caprelatas’, ‘vaudoux’, ‘donpedre’, ‘macandals’, and other sorceries, will be punished with imprisonment of from three to six months, and a fine of from sixty to one hundred and fifty gourdes, adjudged by an ordinary police court; in case of a second offense [sic], imprisonment of from six months to two years and a fine of from three hundred to one thousand gourdes, adjudged by the Court of Correction, without prejudice to the most severe sentences they may have incurred, through offenses or crimes committed [sic] by them in preparing or accomplishing their sorceries.

All danse [sic] and other practices of any kind likely to foster in the people a spirit of fetishism and superstition, will be considered sorceries and will receive the same punishments.

Art. 406. People who have, as a trade fortune telling, divining, foretelling, explaining dreams, or telling fortunes with cards, will be punished by imprisonment of not less than two months or more than six months, and a fine of from one hundred to five hundred gourdes.

In addition, after the expiration of their sentences, they will be placed under the surveillance of the police, on account of their conviction, if for no other reason.

Art. 407. Instruments, utensils and costumes, serving or destined to serve at the rites covered in the two preceeding [sic] articles, will be seized and confiscated for burning or destruction.

It is worth noting the significance placed on the material components of Vodou, including cards, charms, and the vaguely listed “instruments, utensils and costumes.” The code also demonstrated the lack of understanding on the part of the writer and/or translator, given the conflation of vaudoux’, ‘donpedre’, ‘macandals’ – terms for spiritual communities and sects – with ‘ouangas’ and ‘caprelatas’- words for animate and protective charms. Still, the priority was made clear, and that was the eradication of all traditional religious, spiritual, and healing practices in Haiti.

The 1920s were a time of especially rampant attempts to curtail Vodou, particularly through trials of Vodou offenses held in the military tribunal. David Ulbridge (2019) analyzed the legal reports for prosecutions against Vodou-related offenses, mostly after 1927, when High Commissioner John H. Russel returned the judicial function to Haiti, while the marines continued to monitor Vodou-related offenses. He found that reports referenced two types of prosecutions: those penalizing Haitians for Vodou practices and rituals; and others that created “disorder, fear and crime” (Ulbrich, 33).

Despite these trials, efforts to eradicate Vodou were disorganized and difficult to enforce. In part, this was due to the pervasiveness of spirit in everyday life as well as the commitments *sévitè* made to maintaining ritual practices. Another factor was the marines’ own fascination with and fear Vodou, and the transpiring of these perspectives back home. The proliferation of “Voodoo” content emerging out of Haiti during the occupation years – in the form of sensational travelogues, zombie horror films and theater productions, and magazine and newspaper spreads – led to an increased interest in visiting Haiti. As I describe in the previous chapter, permits were issued to hold “dances” for foreign visitors. More irreverent travelers would seek out ceremonies in secret and expressed interest in bringing souvenirs home.

Varieties of Collecting in Occupied Haiti

Haitian collections in museums reveal histories of opposing, yet connected, ontological views about the materials that assembled. Unlike Vodou, a Haitian and diasporic community, practice, and worldview, “*Voodoo*” reflects the intersecting social and ideological perceptions about Blackness, “magic,” and occultism by a mixed group of Haitian and non-Haitian interlocuters (Desmangles 2012; Ramsey 2012; and Pettinger 2005). Tacking between these two orientations highlights the agency of communities whose belongings were taken during this period of U.S.-American exploitation, extraction, and theft. In the pages that follow, I explore varieties of collecting projects that occurred in twentieth century Haiti, and both Haitian and U.S.-American ideological paradigms that supported them.

Sponsored Collecting Expeditions

Museums at large, and the Smithsonian in particular, holds many objects that were collected during sponsored expeditions – in which “ethnographic,” “archaeological” or “natural science” specimens were sought after. Prominent examples from the Smithsonian include the 1927 and 1931 trips expeditions led by Alexander Wetmore, then Curator of Ethnology, in which he traveled to the island mostly to collect ornithological specimens for the U.S. National Museum. Photographic journals in the National Archives of Anthropology reveal small mini-expeditions within that trip and led by his colleagues – including archaeological excavations by Herbert Krieger and Matthew Stirling. Wetmore also supported the 1930 Parish-Smithsonian Expedition, financed by the Parish family and led by Watson Perrygo, taxidermist and field collector for the museum. These trips, which were organized to gather natural science specimens, also resulted in the collection of some ethnographic materials.

Researchers were given permits, protections, and petrol by the U.S. Marines, and there is evidence that the institution was in regular correspondence with General John H. Russell, the Marine Corps brigadier general and American High Commissioner who asserted his administration’s efforts to “stamp out” Vodou.² Despite Russell’s success at building infrastructure projects, the legacy of his tenure includes violent suppression of protest and other forms of resistance, and the confiscation and destruction of sacred objects. It was perhaps for this very reason that collectors whose primary focus was the gathering of material culture, or the documentation of intangible cultural heritage (music, dance, ritual, and storytelling) were instructed not to mention Haiti’s popular religion in their applications for research permits, or any term for “magical practices” (Averill 2008).

Haitian *sévitè* took advantage of these queries, often requesting permits to “perform” staged folklore presentations for these same researchers. Particularly for urban communities in Port au Prince and nearby Croix des Bouquets, these demonstrations became the means by which many practitioners could in fact conduct their sacred ceremonies. Many visiting researchers who arrived wanting to see a vodou ceremony. Often, they would work with the same fixers, visit the same sites, and collect objects made by the same makers.

While scientific or intellectual value was a primary motivation for collecting during this period, there were others involved in commercial collecting, and the gathering of archaeological and ethnographic materials for financial gain. Frank Resler Crumbie, whose collections comprise the largest assemblage at the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History, embodies this form of collecting. Crumbie was a bureaucrat from the United States who also served as customs inspector in Cap Haïtien and Jeremie, and as a finance advisor to the Haitian government. Yet he also moonlighted as a collector, and his archive at the George Smathers Libraries at the

University of Florida attests to his avid interest in Vodou.³ In her investigations of the “commodification of Haiti,” the historian Mary Renda refers to a series of articles in the Haitian newspaper *La Presse*, which alleged that after President Hoover sent a commission to Haiti to assess the state of the occupation in 1930, Crumbie began “maliciously maneuvering in order to dazzle and impress members of the commission” (Renda, 213). “Buying drums with drumheads on which the fur is preserved,” and distributing them to the commission as gifts, Crumbie was also, charged the paper, illustrating “the mentality of a people who they say are profoundly attached to voodoo” (*ibid.*)

This emphasis of Vodou in Haiti angered the Haitian elite, who felt the connection was used to malign the people of Haiti and to further justify the occupation. Yet it also attracted the attention of anthropologists, museum professionals, and collectors who wanted to gather pieces of this “primitive religion” for themselves. In 1938, four years after the end of the occupation, George Gustav Heye, the prolific collector of Native American artifacts whose estate would become the Museum of the American Indian, paid Crumbie to gather “Indian materials” in Haiti. He made a series of trips to the island of La Gonâve, hiring locals to help him locate neolithic stones and other artifacts for Heye (see chapter three). Unlike many donors, Crumbie named local collectors who worked for him and listed their remuneration in reports back to Heye.

Tourism

Unlike most archaeological and natural history specimens, which were gathered during sponsored expeditions, much of the Smithsonian’s holdings from Haiti were collected during touristic trips to the island. Personal correspondences addressed to U.S. marines reveal a fixation, particularly amongst women, with bringing home a Vodou drum.⁴ While these trips were not organized around collecting, there was an expectation of returning home with souvenirs. These touristic and collecting interests meant opportunities for Haitian makers and craftspeople, especially in the rural areas that were visited on longer tours.

Curated collections also provide material evidence of the expanding market in Haitian crafts and quasi-sacred objects. Certain classes of portable objects, such as *criche*/red clay vessels, *calabasse*/calabash bowls, and even *tanbo*/drums were produced to evoke sacred and ceremonial materials, but with distinguishing features that indicate that they were not intended to be used in ceremony. In some instances, stickers are affixed to the underside of objects indicating the name of a vendor or seller, such as the Fisher gallery sticker, belonging to prolific collector of Haitian arts, Kurt Fisher, which I have identified in museums in at least three countries, and which have appeared on all the classes of objects named above.

One important Haitian collection at the NMNH also came through an unexpected touristic engagement on the island. Anthropologists Alfred and Rhoda Métraux, who would come to do extensive fieldwork in Haiti, first traveled to the island for their honeymoon in 1941. The two visited all manner of sites, including sacred sites, and met with local historians and folklorists, spiritual practitioners and Vodou priests, later publishing accounts of these visits in the 1958 monograph *Le vaudou haïtien (Voodoo in Haiti)*. Alfred was particularly taken with Vodou and felt that the religion was critically endangered. His trip happened to correspond with the height of *La Renonce*, the Catholic Church’s campaign to eradicate Vodou completely, and which sought to destroy all sacred objects on the island. The Métrauxs thus embarked on a collecting project informed by a “salvage” paradigm of disappearing cultures, which involved convincing a local curate to hand over several specimens, by type, for the purposes of scientific

preservation and study. These objects were accessioned by the U.S. National Museum's Bureau of Ethnology in 1942.

Métraux, who was known to value ethnography more than theory, had undertaken extensive fieldwork across South America, and was, at the time of this trip to Haiti, deep in working on his contributions to *The Handbook of South American Indians*. Métraux was also influenced by his friend and colleague on the island, Jacques Romain, with whom he eventually co-founded Haiti's National Bureau of Ethnology in 1941. Métraux provided technical support to Romain, who was equally convinced of the need to document ritual practice and preserve sacred specimens on the island.

Conflict and Diplomacy

Here I put together two distinct prerogatives that informed the circulation of Haiti's cultural materials around and off the island, and into museums in the early twentieth century. These are by way of conflict, particularly the suppression of Vodou by the U.S. marines during the occupation from 1915-1934, as well as the diplomatic efforts that occurred before and after this period, and which saw exhibitions as a means of fostering good will between nations. They reveal very different means of collecting but both center the central aims of the U.S in Haiti. In doing so, I also put more contemporary collections directly in conversation with some of the Smithsonian's first accessions from Haiti.

Many sacred objects, and especially drums, were confiscated during the U.S. occupation. The Haitian Constabulary known as the *Gendarmerie d'Haiti* and which was established in 1915 and operated under instruction of the U.S. Marines, patrolled the country's urban and rural zones conducting raids on temples and altars and confiscating sacred objects. They were enforcing, under U.S. Marine guidance, articles of the 1864 *Code Pénal*, which included the prohibition of "*les sortilèges*" or witchcraft. As General Littleton Waller, who commanded U.S-American ground forces in Haiti, explained, the Penal Code was not enforced until the occupation began, after which "we broke up all their meetings, seized all of their drums... and wherever a voodoo drum was heard we immediately got on the trail and captured it, and broke it up, as far as we could" (United States Congress, 1922).

Drums were, by far, the priority of the *Gendarmerie*, given their association not only with Vodou but with the Cacos resistance troops (see chapter 4 of this dissertation). Small portable objects, such as animate stones and other charms that were used for protection, were also held alongside drums, often for extended periods of time, in prisons and jails. Some Smithsonian accession records include references to these periods of incarceration, while others simply point to them by virtue of their having been donated by members of the U.S. Marines. Either way, the frequency with which raids occurred and sacred objects were seized meant that the policy against witchcraft became almost the brand of the broader occupation and United States' presence in Haiti.

By contrast, the first and last accessions from Haiti reveal a different sort of transnational politic. The earliest Smithsonian accessions from Haiti were donated following their exhibitions at two International Expositions held in the United States: the American Exhibition of the Products, Arts and Manufactures of Foreign Nations in Boston (1883-1884); and the World's Industrial and Cotton Centennial Exposition, which took place in New Orleans (1884-1885). The latter exposition included purchases that had been made directly from the Government of Haiti, then led by President Lysius Salomon.

These accessions stand out because, unlike the rest of the Haitian collections, there was no clear relationship to sacred rituals or magical practices. There was no mention of “fetishes” or “charms” – language that was introduced in the collections just after the U.S. occupation began. This period of Salomon’s government, which was defined by efforts to modernize Haiti, also saw an intensification of anti-Vodouism that rested on the Haitian elite’s desire to break Haiti’s association with what they saw as a primitive religion. Unlike the U.S.’s efforts to suppress Vodou, which resulted in the transmission of sacred objects into curiosities to be displayed back home, the Haitian elite sought to destroy materials completely.

By contrast, late twentieth and twenty-first century collecting was very much centered on the gathering of sacred objects for exhibition purposes. Since the mid-1990s, major Vodou exhibitions took place in museums across the United States, the United Kingdom and Europe. At the Smithsonian, the Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage’s 2004 folklife festival featured an exhibition on Haitian arts and culture, called *Freedom and Creativity from the Mountains to the Sea* (Benoit et. al, 2004). The project focused on visual arts, Kreyol language, music, architecture, and Vodou. Of the materials commissioned for the event, the sacred arts collection – which consisted of *tanbo*/ceremonial drums, *drapo*/sequined flags, and *travay maji*/altar objects – was subsequently accessioned at the National Museum of Natural History, marking the last Haitian accession to date.

Conclusion

The United States Occupation of Haiti comprised two decades of military, political, economic, and cultural enforcement, enacted through the strength of Marine forces. Land was seized, and financial schemes were reorganized to favor U.S-American interests. Traditional culture including sacred, ritual and ceremonial practices were banned and all manner of associated objects were confiscated and destroyed. Despite this, Haitians continued to resist their overthrow and participate in movements for liberation. In fact, I am typically inclined to refer to the first stage of the occupation – from 1915 to 1919, as a war. Cacos deployed guerilla tactics on gendarmerie bases throughout the island and were often successful at stirring anxiety and fear amongst U.S. Marines. Their defeat meant an end to organized arm resistance but left room for other forms of dissent – namely, the Mouvement Indigeniste, which sought to oust not just U.S military but European and U.S-American cultural norms and mores.

The Haitian collections that currently rest at Smithsonian animate this push and pull of imperial violence and anti-imperial resistance. Objects were feared because of the power they held in the hands of Haitian people. While their confiscation tells a story of dispossession it also tells one of agency and power under imperial invasion. These collecting projects also demonstrate ways that Haitian individuals and communities took advantage of the lumbering foreign presence. Whether through remuneration for fixing services, selling souvenirs, or providing religious demonstrations, Haitians were participants in the exchange of material, and in the circulation of their culture abroad.

Notes

¹ It is also worth noting that both Congressional and State Department assessments of American public works projects at this time were largely of poor quality.

² John H. Russell, *Some Truths about Haiti*, John H. Russell Papers, box 3, folder, Archives Branch, Marine Corps History Division, Quantico, VA.

³ Frank R. Crumbie Papers, Special and Area Studies Collections, George A. Smathers Libraries, University of Florida.

⁴ Letter from Elizabeth Rastall Hibbs (April 11, 1933). U.S. Marine Corps Archives, COLL 1112/Clayton Vogel Collection. Box 8, Folder 5.

“Indian Stones” And African Networks: Reappraising the Smithsonian’s Haiti Collections

The principal aim of this chapter is to highlight the presence of ritual stones from Haiti at two Smithsonian museums and to discuss why, despite their abundance, their associations with Vodou, magic, and sorcery have been overlooked. Stones comprise forty percent of the curated collections from Haiti at both the National Museum of Natural History (NMNH) and National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI), amounting to over three hundred in total. Based on a culture-historical artifact classification system, they are mostly defined as ‘archaeological’ – axe heads, celts, and *zemís* attributed to the island’s broad Casimiroid and Ostionoid cultures, from 4000 BC – AD 1500 (Rouse 1992). While this framework is useful, it conveys a shrunken picture of the social worlds these stones inhabited. Instead, my research is guided by a shift promoted in different forms of social archaeology from static cultural categories to consideration of active social relations.

Nineteenth and twentieth-century collectors were often aware of the ongoing ritual significance of the stones they found within the island’s popular religion and disparate magical practices. Many were taken from Vodou temples, cave shrines, altars, and other sacred contexts, though they were prized, sold to museums, and attributed solely as “Indian materials”. Once accessioned, the stones were separated from the more recognizable *objè Vodou* and given Indigenous/archaeological attributions. Frank R. Crumbie, a former U.S-American customs inspector at Cap Haïtien, traveled to Haiti’s island of La Gonâve at least four times in the 1930s. During each of these trips, Crumbie collected stones, personally or on behalf of Gustav Heye, which now rest at the NMAI. He also collected during trips investigating Vodou in 1936. Despite gathering nearly one hundred carved and polished lithics, Crumbie asserted that “I do not think it easy to find good Indian material in Haiti.”¹ The discrepancy between Crumbie’s position and the cultural attribution of stones by curatorial staff is stark and opens important lines of investigation into how museums produce knowledge, often in ways that obscure objects’ complex identities and social networks.

Added to the materials in the NMAI, I also examine stone objects from Haiti in the NMNH Department of Anthropology. It is worth noting that vast and potentially relevant collections rest in the museum’s Mineral Sciences and Botany departments. The objects in the museum’s Department of Anthropology, which are most relevant to this volume, are cataloged and stored either as archaeological or ethnological materials. As we will see, the ritual stones from Haiti defy this distinction, and it is only when taken together as an assemblage that their webs of relations become visible.

This chapter begins with a survey of the Haitian collections at the NMNH and the NMAI, with a focus on the stone assemblages. Here I interpret the classification systems that obscure stones’ animate power and sacred provenance. Next, I provide an overview of Haiti’s ritual stone traditions and animate stone worlds, a field of study for which there is a dearth of published works. Critical to these relationships are Haiti’s social and political mobilizations of *indigénisme*,

a sense of belongingness to the land and to diverse ancestors that these magical stones help to cement. Finally, I reassess the Smithsonian collections, tracing their itineraries “from Amerindian to African hands” (Derby 2021, 33), through multiple social and ritual networks. I end by stressing that these collections continue to have social lives, linked to multiple heritage networks, and that the mixed African and Indigenous worlds they inhabited must be articulated in any scholarly and curatorial work that involves them.

Stone Assemblages

Writing about Taíno artifact interpretation in 1942, Cornelius Osgood defined a *class* as “an aggregate of objects which is conceived or perceived as a totality on the basis of the sharing of one or more attributes or features” (Osgood 1942, 23). Those features, which may be perceptual or conceptual, are either directly or indirectly sensed. That means there are multiple processes for interpreting data and that these are typically motivated by the interpreters’ goals. This variety becomes problematic when, as Osgood explains, classification systems aren’t made explicit. Scholars working with museum collections will be familiar with the outcomes. Digital catalogs reveal distinct curatorial priorities for identifying, interpreting, and labeling objects, and shape our research with available keywords and search terms. Below, I explore the classification systems used at Smithsonian, which influence the interpretation of Haiti’s ritual stones.

NMNH and the Field System

There are 499 objects from Haiti at the NMNH. These include collections acquired from international exhibitions in the 19th and 20th centuries and ethnographic collecting trips. Several smaller collections were accessioned from U.S. marine corps officers and other U.S.-American bureaucrats stationed in Haiti during the 1915-1934 Occupation. Large accessions were made during that same period from Smithsonian collecting expeditions staffed by USNM curators and, often, prospectors for various federal agencies.

The Department of Anthropology’s object collections are organized within two divisions, archaeology and ethnology, searchable as ‘Fields’ on the online database. According to the department website, the ethnology division represents “19th, 20th and 21st century cultures,” while the archaeology collections are, presumably, older. The latter set does not specify collection by means of excavation, though many were acquired during Smithsonian-sponsored digs, but rather the attribution of a cultural group that preceded the 19th century. I therefore refer to “The Field System” as a method of classification that attributes temporality as a first line of interpretation, and as a data management process that aggregates objects based on those distinctions.

The vast majority of NMNH’s Haitian collections are in the division of ethnology, almost entirely comprising sacred objects (Table 1). These include *tanbo* (drums), *drapo* (flags), *asson* (sacred rattles), and numerous other ritual objects. In contrast, of the museum’s 194 stones from Haiti, almost all rest in the archaeology division (Table 2). These include “petaloid celts,” “axes,” “zemis,” and other stones designated “prehistoric.” Visitors to the online catalog would be unable to perceive any association between the archaeological collections and ritual practice from the 19th century onwards. Few stones in the ethnology division are also labeled “celts,” though catalog cards attribute them to both Indigenous (read: ancient, “neolithic”) and Afro-Haitian (“Voodoo”) groups.

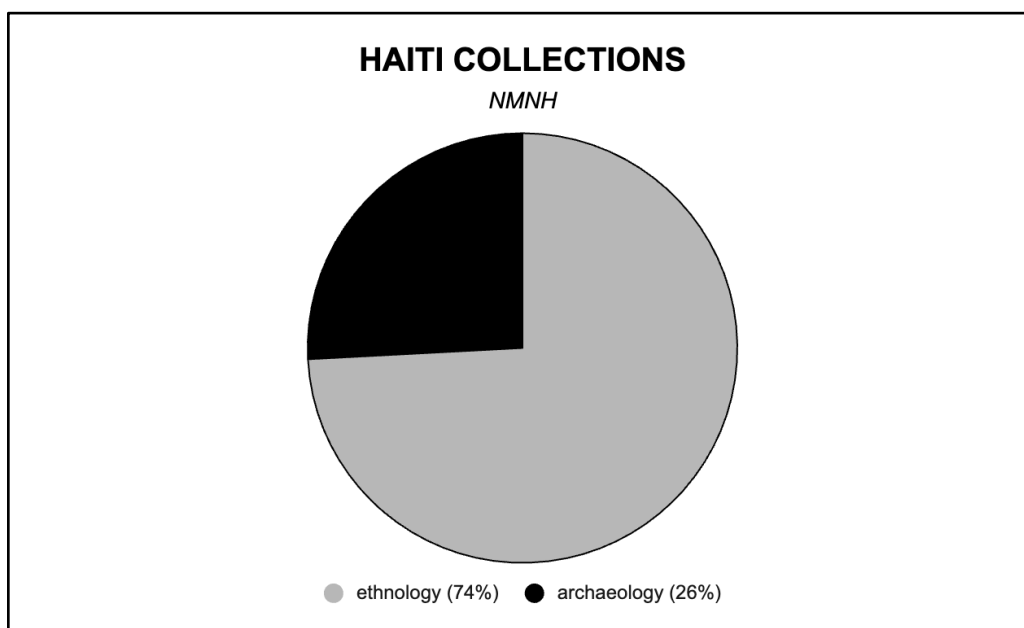


Table 1. Distribution of Collections from Haiti at the National Museum of Natural History by Ethnographic and Archaeological Classification. ©Pascale D. Boucicaut.

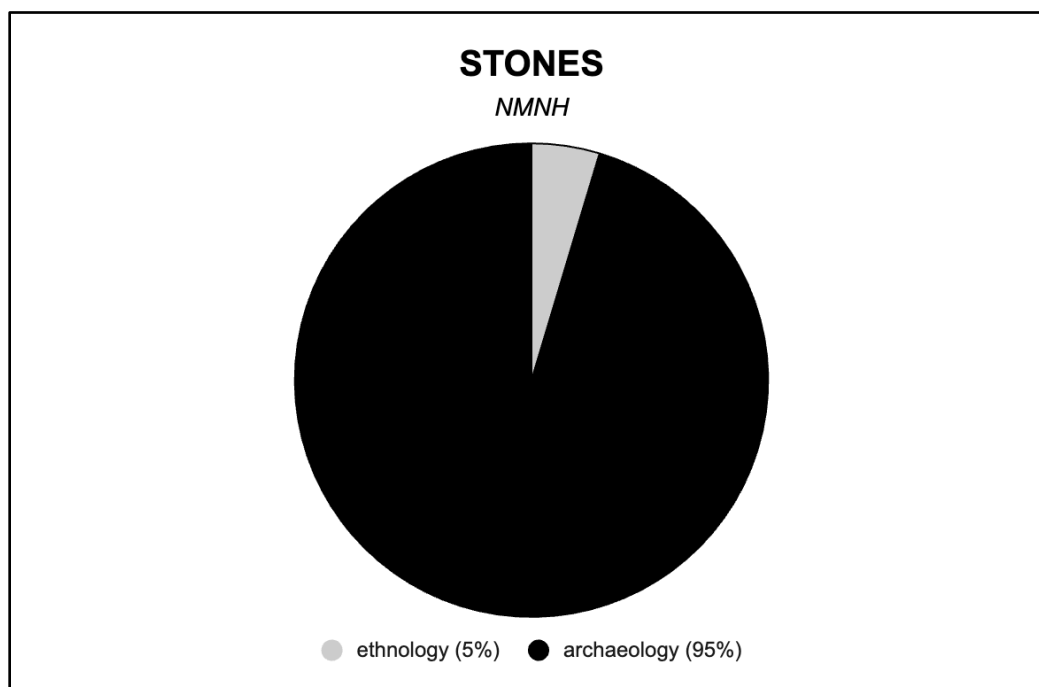


Table 2. Distribution of Haitian Stones at the National Museum of Natural History by Ethnographic and Archaeological Classification. ©Pascale D. Boucicaut

NMAI and the Attribution System

The scope of accessions is smaller at the NMAI, with most specimens entering the museum via two collectors from the United States – Godfrey J. Olsen, an independent archaeologist, and Frank R. Crumbie Jr., a customs inspector during the U.S. Occupation turned hired collector for George Gustav Heye. Heye can be considered the “godfather” of the NMAI, having founded its parent museum, the Museum of the American Indian (MAI), in 1922, and pursued a vigorous campaign of purchases and supporting research expeditions to build collections from across the Americas. This included funding archaeological expeditions and purchasing excavated materials. Yet the NMAI is not an anthropology museum. When collections transferred to the Smithsonian in 1989, the new museum was founded as an institutional custodian of Native American cultural heritage. The digital catalog reflects this. Researchers can easily enter place names (ex: Haiti) and cultural designations (ex: Taíno) into the search fields. While certain objects are designated archaeological, this is neither a searchable field nor a clearly indicated facet of their identification.

Here, the majority of the NMAI’s total collection of objects from Haiti are attributed to an archaeological “culture” (Table 3). This organization is founded on a classification system for Caribbean archaeology that aggregates artifacts using a cultural historical approach that ranges from the Casimiroids (4000-400 BC) to the Ostionoids (600 A.D – 1500), also known as the ancestors of the Taínos. This system effectively ends the Taíno culture shortly after the arrival of Columbus, following the same principles he used to identify earlier cultural historical shifts – an interruption in types of ceramic and stone production. The same structure is used at the NMAI, in the dating and identification of both ceramic and stone artifacts.

141 stones from Haiti rest at the NMAI, over half of the total collection of objects from this place. Only two stones in the collections are attributed to “Afro-Haitian” cultures, including one found on an altar (Table 4), and another on a body. All the remaining stones are attributed to “multiple archaeological cultures”, meaning their characteristics suggest production dating anywhere between 2500 BC and 1500 AD, and without any indication of any association to Haitian Vodou, witchcraft, or sorcery practices.

Of the more than thousand Haitian objects at Smithsonian, hundreds of stones rest at both the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) and the National Museum of Natural History (NMNH). Many were collected from sacred contexts, including temples, cave shrines, personal altars, and even the bodies of *sèvitè*, those who serve the spirits. When foreign collectors visited Haiti in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, they gathered them alongside other ritual objects. Once accessioned, most stones were separated from materials more obviously associated with Vodou and given Indigenous attributions. These curatorial decisions influenced the cultural identities attributed to stones and obscured the complex social worlds stones moved through.

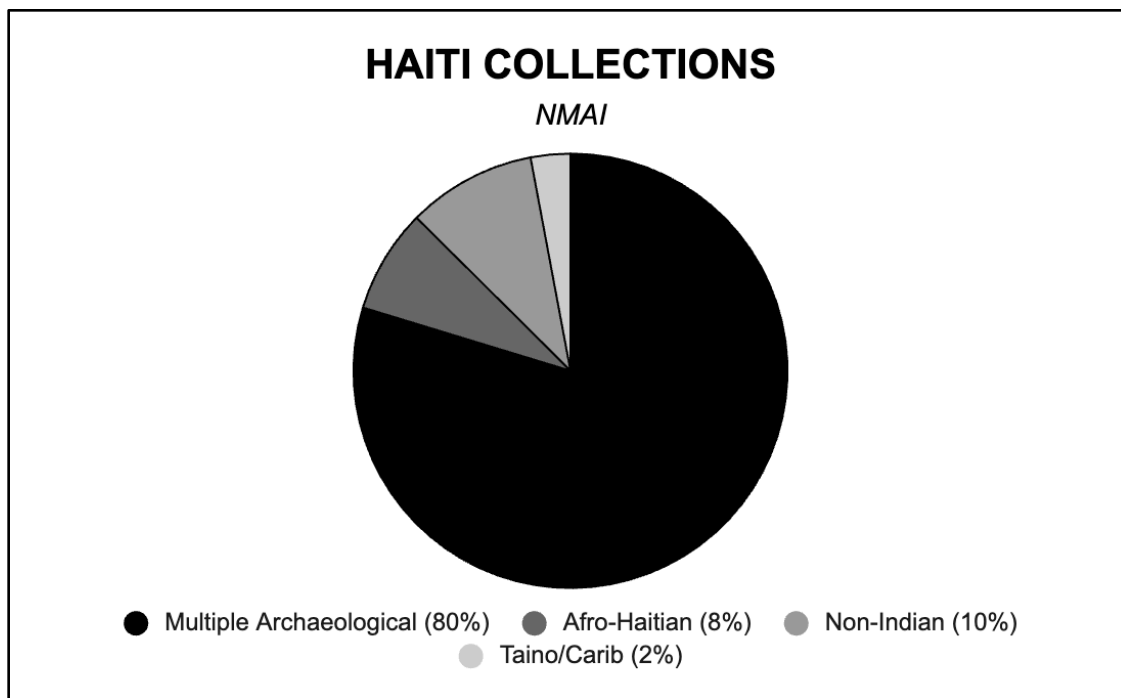


Table 3. Distribution of Cultural Affiliations for Collections from Haiti at the National Museum of the American Indian. ©Pascale D. Boucicaut

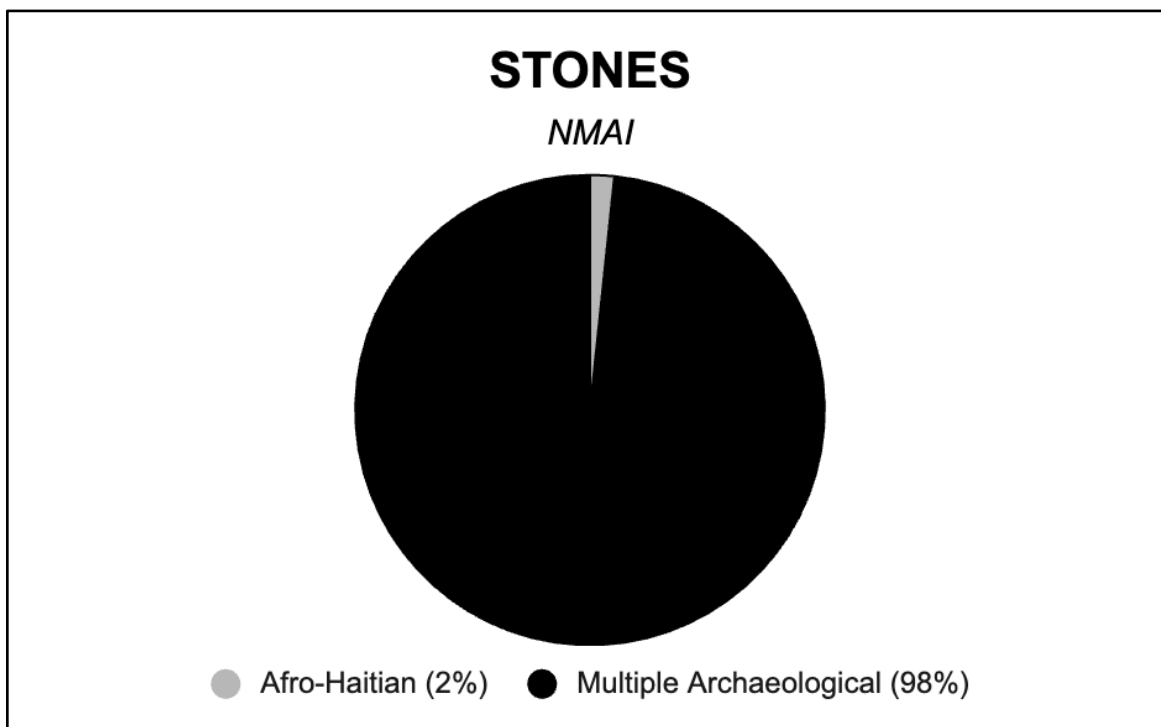


Table 4. Distribution of Cultural Affiliations for Stones from Haiti at the National Museum of the American Indian. ©Pascale D. Boucicaut.

Stone Worlds

The first documented arrival of Africans in the Americas occurred around 1500, on the island declared by their captors as Hispaniola and known by the Arawak speaking people as *Kiskeya*, meaning “mother of all lands”, as well as *Ayiti*, “the land of mountains” (Wheat and Eagle 2020). Most historians claim that the island’s native inhabitants vanished within decades of Spanish arrivals, either by the violence of colonialism or through “absorption” into other communities – two narratives that view the Caribbean as a space ultimately “reshaped by imperial endeavors” (Perry 2017, 49). Rarely have historians suggested possibilities for Indigenous survivance on the island or conveyed a more complicated picture of African and Indigenous co-worlding and transference of traditional knowledges (but see Derby 2021). Instead, a faint picture has been drawn depicting new Africans disembarking to discover an island full of *zemís*, hand-carved stones, and other “vestiges of its vanished inhabitants” (Dubois 2004, 15).

In fact, there is an entire folklore around finding Indigenous hand-carved stones in Haiti and recognizing them as sacred. In the days and months immediately following Haiti’s successful revolution in 1804, when rebel forces led by Jean Jacques Dessalines alongside a crop of new militant *lwa* (spirits) emerged from the battlefields victorious over their former enslavers, mythic tales about relationships between warrior men and spirits spread, including whispers that Dessalines himself was an *houngan* (Vodou priest). Objects that materialized both supernatural and political power also circulated during the making of this new Black republic – including the first red and blue flag, alleged by some to be the colors for *Ogou Feraille* and *Èzili Danto*, two *lwa* who were the driving force behind the revolution; and the Republic’s first minted coin, which depicted a treasury of arms on one side and the serpent God *Danbala* on the other, the first and only currency to portray an African deity in the New World (Gonzalez 2019, 5-6). But it was across the battle-torn countryside landscapes that newly liberated *houngans* looked for carved and polished stone celts, axes, and “*objets d’art*” for their altars, temples and peristyles. Kreyol linguist Michelson Hyppolite (1989, 103) famously referred to these collectors as “*les premiers archéologues de Ayiti*” because of the extensive field excavations they carried out for the purposes of finding these antiquities.

These traditions continued over the next century and were recorded by ethnographers. In 1937, Zora Neale Hurston studied “the sacred stones of voodoo” in La Gonâve, to identify the presence of *lwa* based on a stone’s shape, color and polish (Hurston 1938, 135-6). Others described “tests” that could be undertaken to determine stones’ animacy, like seeing if they could sweat, cry, whistle or talk (Métraux 1972, 166; Courlander 1960, 21). It wasn’t merely carved and polished rocks that were discovered, but the presences of spirit, which may have been deities or ancestors, and either kind or wicked.

Stones are part of a broader context of *travay maji*, “magic works,” and other spirit-containing objects in Haiti, used both by practitioners of magic and sorcery. Early ethnographers in Haiti like Harold Courlander and Alfred Métraux included several names for spirit-containing objects they encountered in their Glossary of Haitian Terms (Courlander 1960, 357-361; Métraux 1972, 373-378). They include *wangas*, powerfully charged objects enlivened through magic that are often associated with *minkisi*, “spirit-embedding medicine” charms from the Kongo culture (Thompson 1981, 37). Elizabeth McAlister (1995, 2017) writes about decorated glass bottles – artistic creations that are also alive and filled with fractured zombie spirits.

Stones are also incorporated into sacred assemblages, and they continue to be used in ritual ceremonies and curated in sacred places – such as altars, temples and cave shrines.

Often, they are placed on white plates, bathed in oil, perfume or Florida water, and set opposite mirrors to safeguard their power (McCarthy Brown 1995). During ethnographic research on cave Vodou in contemporary Haiti, Patrick Wilkinson (2019) observed two large black stone celts on an altar for *Legba*, guardian of the crossroads between human and spirit worlds and speaker of all sacred and profane languages. The stones were resting on a white enamelware plate alongside a rusted leg shackle. Wilkinson (2019, 131) was told that these offerings represented “the dual ancestry that all Haitians share, of Taíno and African Slave”.

In Taíno origin myths recorded by Fray Ramón Pané in 1498, animate stones (*zemís*) and the people who worshiped them emerged from a cave called *Cacibagiagua* (cited in Whitehead 2011, 82–13). These caves served as “access points to the underworld,” and they were used as sanctuaries and sites of ritual ceremony (Wilkinson 2019, 59). In addition to their cosmological significance, Haiti’s caves have long been associated with shared anti-colonial and anti-imperialist struggle, as protective sites that housed Indigenous, African, and later, Haitian militants.

Taíno and African Maroons commonly used caves as hideouts, and from at least the year 1503 there is evidence that sites in the Central Plateau and Batoruco cave systems helped to forge mixed self-sustaining communities on the island (Beauvoir-Dominique 2009; Schwaller 2018; Stone 2013). Enslaved Africans would have relied on Native Kiskeyans for tactical, botanical, and spiritual knowledge to survive. A distinct Colonware ceramic style found at the northern Puerto Real site, with its confluence of African and Indigenous pottery elements, affirms these social networks (Smith 1995). As we will see, the continuous presence of Indigenous antiquities within Vodou cave shrines provides additional material evidence worthy of investigation. At the very least, these shrines suggest that some of the stones collected in caves circulated through time while potentially staying in place. Others, like the stones found on altars and in temples, traveled significant distances in and around the island, before circulating through new networks of human relations in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Afro-Indigenous Networks

Most scholarly investigations of Vodou emphasize the cultural traditions originating from the former kingdoms of Dahomey, Kongo, and Yorubaland (Blier 1995; Farris Thompson 1983; Rush 1999). These African traditions are recognized as the cultural forebears of Haiti’s popular religion, traceable through various iterations of *langage* (the language of Vodou and distinct from *Kréyol Ayisyen*), expressive cultures, the pantheon of lwa, and sacred objects. This includes practices of stone worship, which were associated with African tradition, even if the geological materials and hand-carving practices were known to be Caribbean.

Early ethnographies of Vodou in Haiti refer to the presence of “thunder-stones,” a name likely derived from nineteenth and early twentieth century ethnological studies of axe heads and celts from West Africa and around the world that are regarded as objects made by thunder gods and not by mortal hands (Balfour 1903, 1929; Dwyer and Lugard, 1903). These studies informed twentieth century interests in Haiti, then recognized as the site of the strongest African survivals in the Americas and the direct cultural descendant of Dahomey. These ethnographers wrote that the island’s carved axe heads and celts were hurled to the earth by *Shango*, lwa of war, and *Sogbo*, lwa of thunder and lightning (Courlander 1960, 21; Hurston 1938, 136). First and foremost, they were recognized as instruments of war, and both defensive and aggressive power.

Once they reached the earthly realms, these and other hand-carved stones became material homes for other lwa, and a way for them to engage with human interlocutors.

When Katherine Dunham traveled to Haiti in 1937 for research on the sacred dances, she heard from informants that powerful stones had been carried over “from ‘*Nan Guinée*,’ a name that denotes both ancestral Africa and the sacred home of the lwa (Dunham 1969, 116). Kreyol scholar Benjamin Hebblewaite acknowledges the name’s wide range of meanings but specifies that Guinée, or the more commonly used Ginen, typically refers to West Africa’s Guinea region, as well as the spiritual work of preserving African culture and traditions, especially as expressed through the sacred *Rada* rites (Hebblewaite 2011). Dunham seemed to suggest that the transatlantic crossing of stones was not symbolic, but a literal dispersion from Africa to Haiti. There is little historical evidence for this. However, accounts of animate African stones traveling to the Americas are present in other Caribbean ethnographies, like William Bascom’s encounters with *piedras*, or sacred stones, during his research on Cuban Santería in 1948. Visiting a cult community in the town of Jovellanos, Bascom was told by informants that the island’s most powerful stones had come from Africa, and that they had been swallowed by enslaved Africans before they boarded ships, keeping them secret (Bascom 1950, 65).

Meanwhile, a very small but sustained debate on the Indigenous influences on Haiti’s magical and religious traditions has proliferated throughout the past century, though largely overshadowed by investigations of the religion’s African origins. Maya Deren made multiple claims, for example that the word *Simbi*, or water spirit, derived from the Arawak *zemí*, small idols made of stone or wood, and specifically from Taíno ritual practices of placing zemís in riverbanks (Deren 1975, appendix B). Haitian intellectual Louis Maximilien argued that zemí presences in Vodou temples are proof of Arawak influences on the formation of Vodou, while historian David Geggus argued that Vodou’s appropriation of axe-heads and other stone objects suggests “an awareness” among Haitians of aspects of Taíno cultural practices (Maximilien 1997; Geggus 1997). More recently, historian Robin Derby considered possibilities of a sustained Indigenous presence within healing and sorcery practices across the island – pointing to traditional ecological knowledge including botanical practices and ritual stone uses (Derby 2021). I would add that the collecting practices of Haiti’s “first archaeologists” echoed the social identifications with Indigeneity that mobilized after the revolution, and during subsequent struggles for independence.

When Jean-Jacques Dessalines wrote *Liberté ou La Mort*, Haiti’s Declaration of Independence, he asserted that the Arawak name *Ayiti* would replace French colonial *Saint Domingue*. He also consecrated the country’s new citizens and soldiers both as *Indigènes* (Dessalines 1805). These claims to native identity were not based on culture or ethnicity, but rather emphasized relationships between the land and all its formerly colonized people – including those who, at the birth of the new nation, may still have been born in Africa (Perry 2017, 46).

Haiti’s next major struggle for sovereignty against a foreign power, the 1915-1934 United States Occupation of Haiti, ignited the second *Mouvement Indigéniste*. Led primarily by writers and scholars, this cultural and political movement sought to replace the island’s cultural attachments to France, promoting the legitimacy of *Krèyol* language, literature (through the documentation of the island’s folklore), and Vodou. This period also saw the birth of Haiti’s Bureau of Ethnology, a national agency devoted to ethnographic and folkloric research and to the protection of archaeological sites – once again merging both African and Indigenous cultural heritage within a shared anti-imperial struggle.

Militant fighters also embraced *indigénisme* as a throughline that connected anti-slavery and anti-United States resistance. *Cacos*, armed bands of formerly enslaved and fugitive rebels, came together during battles against the French. During the United States Occupation from 1915-1934, Cacos rebels were greatly feared by United States marines. In addition to their reputation as a courageous and skillful paramilitary force, many were alleged to be *bòkò* (sometimes *bokor*), or sorcerers. Unlike *houngans* or *manbos*, sanctified high priests and priestesses in Vodou, a *bòkò* is recognized as a practitioner of magic, witchcraft, or sorcery.² While the *houngan* is embedded in a network of communal and familial relations, the *bòkò* is “a man out for himself” (McAlister 1995, 305). He conducts both healing and dark magic, by commission. Among the *bòkò*’s many occupations, including divination and necromancy (particularly the creation of *zonbi*), is the making of charms, talismans, and amulets to be sold to those in need of protection.

Many Cacos utilized objects that were believed to cause their opponents harm, and which were treated as weapons of war (Ramsey 2011). Fighters were known to wear talismans and amulets, including those made of stone, in their uniforms, to guard against inimical human forces like physical harm, robbery, or incarceration. When the Cacos’ commander Benoît Batrville, also known as *Ti Benwa*, was killed by United States Marines in 1920, a small book of spells and incantations was found on his body. Marine Captain Harry Peterson, who was given the book and later donated it to the USMC history division at Quantico, wrote that *Ti Benwa* had worn the booklet “in the inside pocket of his coat all the time, like all former Haitian generals did in the past when battling for independence”.³

The uses of objects like these in battle are part of the material folklore of resistance, that includes sacred objects like the *tanbos* (drums) that were played “incessantly” to disorient opponents, and the *lanbi* (conch shells), which were “scattered across the landscape of Haiti” so that fighters could blow them on command (Renda 2001, 44). U.S. Marine Corps Captain John Houston Craige alleged to have had several wangs planted on him (Craige 1933, 28-29). Ethnographers also encountered (and sometimes collected) these charms, distinguishing *gardes*, *arrêtes*, *caprelatas*, and *pwens* based on material form and magical ability. Sometimes they were described as “small bags of mysterious ingredients,” or as very old and very powerful “Indian stones” used to protect entire villages or valleys (Courlander 1960, 98-99).

Historian Robin Derby recalls similar practices documented throughout the long colonial period, suggesting that they derived from Taíno war traditions, where stone *zemí* were affixed to warriors’ foreheads during battles (Derby 2021). She cites 16th century Italian writer Peter Martyr d’Anghiera’s observations that *zemís* – “small images representing little demons” – were tied around the forehead with strings (cited in Whitehead 2011, 84). Fugitive Africans observed this Taíno battle practice and, by the eighteenth century, were recorded doing the same. Moreau de Saint-Méry called them “*garde-corps*,” or body-guards, which he described as “small carved figures, of wood or stone, representing men or animals” (Moreau de Saint-Méry 1789, my translation).

Zemi (also *cemí*) research is a vast cultural study, particularly concerning their significance as powerful beings within Indigenous Caribbean societies (Brecht et. al. 1997; Stevens-Arroyo 1988, 219-49; Whitehead 2011). José Oliver (2009, 6) even proposed replacing the term Taíno with “believers in Cemiism”. As animate beings that were entangled with their human interlocutors, objects that were “imbued with *cemí*” framed an essential part of Kiskeya’s social and political worlds – including their uses in negotiation, the fomenting of political power, and protection during battle (Oliver 2009). Derby (2021, 23) proposed that other ritual stones

used by Africans and, later, Haitians, such as axe heads and celts, might be thought of as material “descendants” of zemís, because their status as supernatural “assistants” was influenced by Taíno practices. She terms this phenomenon “the Zemi Complex,” a broad assemblage of animate Amerindian stone objects that “passed into African hands” (ibid.).

The accounts of zemí uses by Moreau de Saint-Méry and Anghiera contradict Hyppolite’s claim that African and Afro-descendant ritual uses of stones began after the Revolution in 1804. This may reflect the fact that Hyppolite was only referring to the collection and curation of *sacred* stones by houngans (Vodou priests), for uses in temples and shrines. Derby reports older references to stone, but also to a different class of objects – stones that are used in the context of sorcery, protective arts and dark magics, as opposed to divine rites. Ethnographers documented both practices, though they struggled to untangle differences. As we will see, the Smithsonian assemblages contain both classes of animate stones, those that possess magic potential and others that are inherently sacred.

Reappraising the Smithsonian Collections

Having explored the social dynamism of zemís and other ritual stones in Haiti, and the complexity of their cosmological worlds, mythological origins, and diverse ritual networks, we now return to the Smithsonian, to reappraisal the collections. The culture-historical artifact classification system imparted by Rouse (1992) provides a useful interpretation of lithic traditions, which suggest periods of history and places around the island where stones were carved. But their ongoing circulation through time and space, diverse uses and meanings, and entanglements within different social networks are neglected by this approach.

Rather than attempt a cultural or typological analysis, I drew on biographical methods help to reveal the complex social relations of stone objects with humans, as well as other non-human things (Thomas 1991; Hoskins 1998; Gosden and Marshall 1999). I also traced the itineraries of stones, tracking “the routes by which things circulate in and out of the places where they come to rest or are active” (Joyce 2015), including bodies, altars, caves, shrines, and forest floors, as well as inside custody of various law enforcement, private collectors and/or museums.

Ultimately, I constructed a classification system that accounted for the stones’ confirmed social/ritual networks, as opposed to assumed cultural affiliations (Table 5). Drawing from archival records (including collections catalog records, correspondence about acquisition, registration and conservation histories) and object study (stylistic and use-wear analysis), I confirm the significance of many stones at the Smithsonian to communities of *sèvite* and practitioners of magic in Haiti, through multiple historical periods. Rather than attribute specimens to singular cultural groups, interpretations rooted in social networks help to articulate the changing significances, meanings and uses of stones across time.

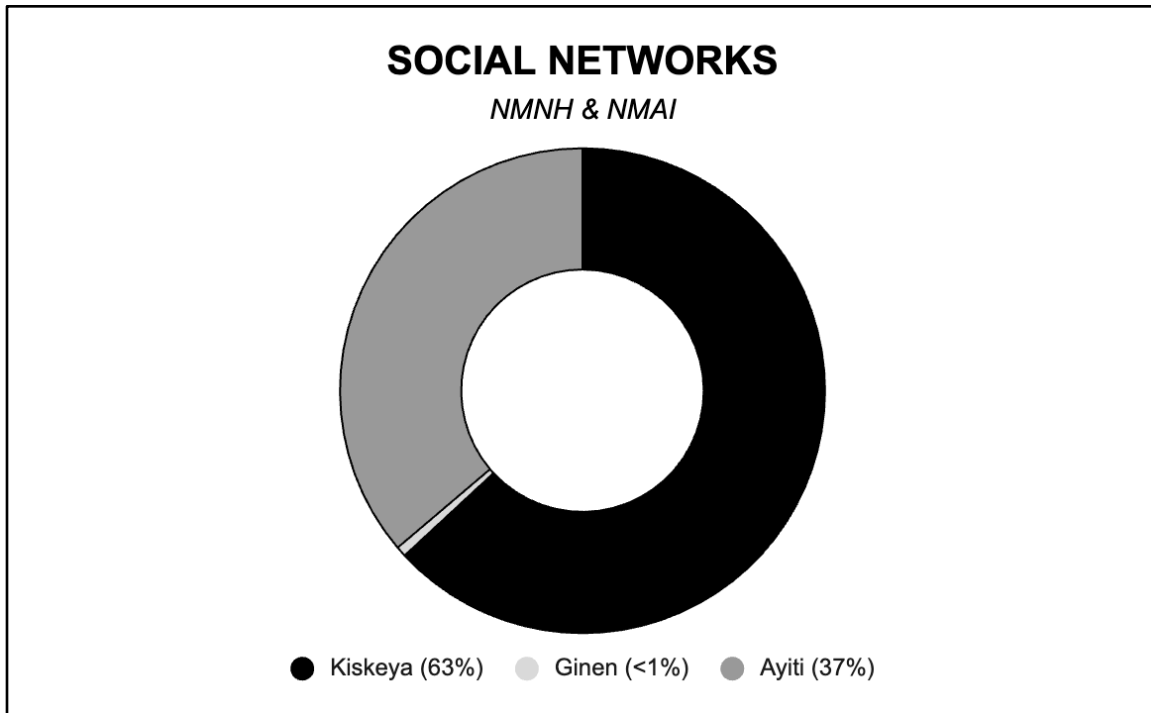


Table 5. Comparative Social Networks of Stones Held at the National Museum of Natural History and the National Museum of the American Indian. ©Pascale D. Boucicaut.

Kiskeya Networks

Nearly all stones in the Smithsonian collections were hand-carved and first used on the island known in the local Arawak languages as *Kiskeya*, prior to the arrival of Columbus in 1492. Lasting heritage legacies have focused on “Taíno” peoples as the primary pre-Columbian representation within the Greater Antilles, though the Smithsonian collections comprise materials likely carved over a period of thousands of years of settlement on the island. Irving Rouse (1941), who began his archaeological career in Fort-Liberté, Haiti, as well as Jacques Romain (1943), who cofounded Haiti’s Bureau National d’Ethnologie in 1941 contributed the classification systems that many museums have employed use artifacts to “define the local cultures of [a specific] age and to identify the peoples who possessed them” (Rouse 1992, 50).

In the case of Haitian collections, ceramic and lithic artifacts are used to identify and define the Casimiroid and Ostionoid cultures from 4000 BC – AD 1500. Yet even if we narrow our focus to the island’s early European colonial period, Indigenous Kiskeyans held diverse cultural backgrounds, spiritual beliefs, languages, and ancestry (Curet 2014). Arawak-speaking Kiskeyans may also have appropriated lithics carved from previous generations of the island’s inhabitants. Ultimately, stones traveled through complex networks and itineraries even prior to the arrival of Europeans and Africans.

Though nearly the entire collection of Haitian stones at the Smithsonian circulated within these complex Indigenous networks, my use of “Kiskeya Networks” refers to a subset of the collection – stones which have no evidence yet of having presenced African or Afro-descendant sacred or ritual sites. In other words, their social relations after 1500 AD are yet to be

determined. It is possible, that some of the specimens excavated by archaeologists were dated based on a culture history approach that assumed deposits were older than they really were, and which may in fact have been left by mixed Indigenous, African, or Afro-Indigenous groups. These specimens open additional lines of investigation, to be taken up in future publications.

Ginen Networks

The smallest assemblage of stones belongs to what I term “Ginen Networks,” or social webs that stretch from coastal West Africa across the Atlantic into Haiti. Ginen is both a geographic domain, referring to ancestral Guinée/Africa, as well as a metaphysical home of the lwa – those (like the *rada* lwa) that traveled across the Atlantic and others (like the *petwo* lwa) that emerged in Haiti. Two stones at the NMAI stand out because they were presumed to be made during or close to the first documented arrival of Africans, around the year 1500 AD. Their material composition, decorative marks, color, and polish are all distinct, as are the cultural attributions imparted by the museum. The first is an incised “pointed stone object,” the only specimen across the collections attributed to the “Meillacan”/ late Ostionoid archaeological culture, from approximately 600 – 1500 AD (see Figure 1). This stone was collected by Frank R. Crumbie in La Gonâve in 1938, during a collecting expedition sponsored by the Heye foundation. Curatorial staff may have assumed that post-contact encounters influenced the decoration, which are not typical of any Indigenous lithic carving traditions. Comparative typological research suggests that the stone, which more closely resembles the Benin “thunderbolt” celts photographed by Balfour in 1901 (Figure 2), may have been carved in West Africa or by West African hands in the Caribbean. In either case, additional scientific analysis will be required to determine its provenance.

The NMAI’s most abundant stone accessions were collected by Crumbie, a U.S.-American who’d served as a customs inspector during the occupation and often provided fixer services for foreign visitors. Aside from the Heye expedition, four other Crumbie accessions were made in 1938 and 1948 that are without documentation. Archival research reveals that stones collected during Crumbie’s earlier trips were spent investigating the island’s sacred and ritual traditions. In 1936 he traveled to La Gonâve at the invitation of Zora Neale Hurston, who’d requested his translation services. Together they observed the island’s distinct local rituals, including “the sacred stones of voodoo” and how to find them and to identify the lwa that inhabited them based on color, shape, and gloss (Hurston 1938, 158). Hurston eventually published a chapter about the stones in her book *Tell My Horse*, and Crumbie went on to collect or purchase specimens. She described the process of learning how to find them using vague generalized descriptions. Crumbie, who never published, kept detailed notes in his field journal.⁴

While the Heye field report describes an expedition in search of “Indian materials,” Crumbie’s personal field journal tells a remarkably different story. Here we learn about his growing interest in Vodou, and his study of ritual stones and other sacred objects on La Gonâve and elsewhere. He described trips into the island’s caves and the ongoing use of these caves by living practitioners. Crumbie also described and photographed his expeditions to La Gonâve, including the stone specimens he found and collected there and the ways they are meant to be used. Many of the stones in the NMAI collection with unknown provenance appear in these photographs, suggesting their likely association to ritual communities that Crumbie encountered on La Gonâve.



Figure 1. Incised Object. National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution (19/8826).
Photo By NMAI Photo Services.

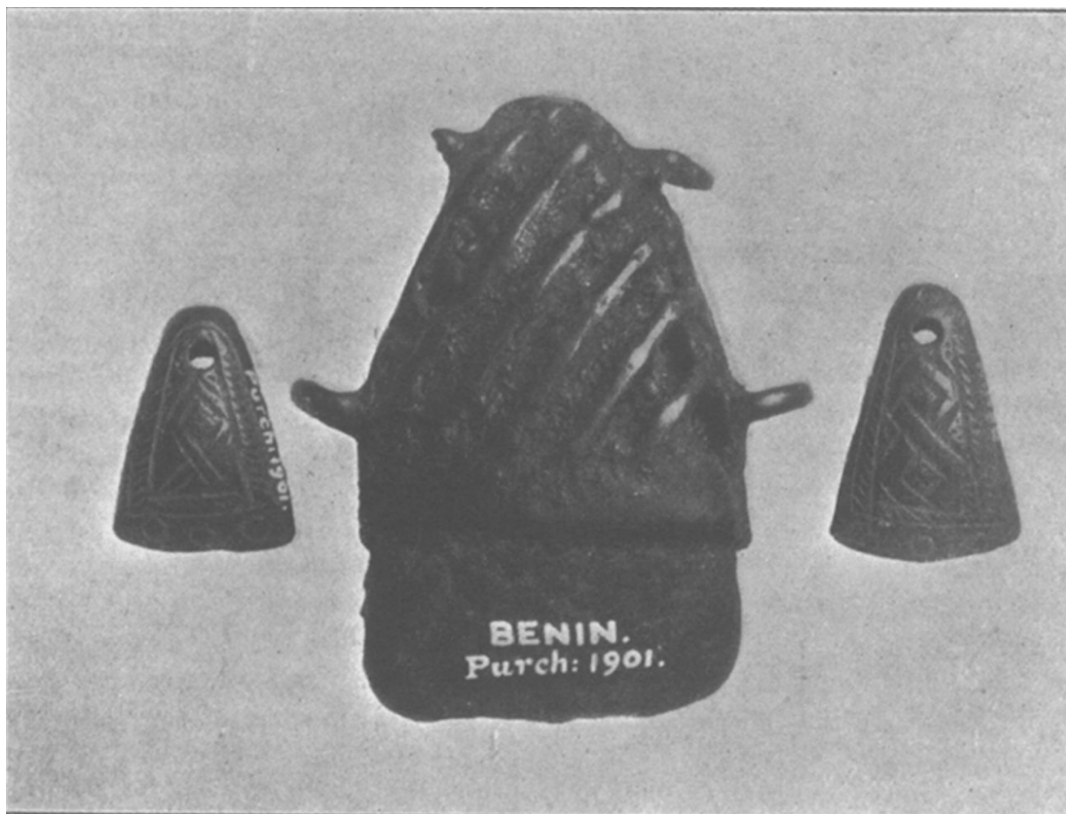


Figure 2. 'Thunderbolt' Celts from Benin. Photograph by Henry Balfour and published in *Man*, vol. 3 (1903): pg. 102.



Figure 3. Altar Accessory. National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution (19/7222).
Photo By NMAI Photo Services.



Figure 4. Polished Stone Knife. [A382145], Department of Anthropology, Smithsonian Institution.
©Pascale D. Boucicaut.

A second stone at the NMAI stands out because it is the only specimen in the wider Smithsonian collections with both “archaeological” and “Afro-Haitian” attributions. Curatorial staff approximated its date of creation to 1700-1800 AD. This stone was also collected by Frank R. Crumbie, during one of his personal collecting trips La Gonâve, either in 1932, 1936 or in 1938, the year it was accessioned by the museum. The catalog notes that this stone had been used on an altar, suggesting either that it was *found* by an houngan, manbo, bòkò, or sévité, or that it had traveled through multiple generations of a single family or spiritual network. The shape of the stone resembles a carved neolithic celt, but the markings are crude, and the surface is unpolished, perhaps contributing to the curatorial decision to attribute it solely to an Afro-Haitian, rather than Indigenous, maker.

Ayiti Networks

This final category consists of stones that circulated through what I call Ayiti Networks, or social webs that cross extensive periods of archaeological time, ritual space, and social practice. Ayiti Networks emphasize three points that help to articulate the complex social worlds that ritual stones in Haiti traveled through. First, these specimens affirm Robin Derby’s notion of the “Zemi complex,” or the historical passing of Amerindian stone objects “into African hands” (Derby 2021). By making use of the name Ayiti, a nineteenth-century sociopolitical entity that took its name from an Arawak word, I stress the continuous Indigenous influences on the island, as well as the appropriation of this presence within Haiti’s national and spiritual identities.

A third distinct stone, labeled a “charm” by the NMAI, was lent to the museum in 1928 and never picked up by its lender (fig. 11.12). It has no remarkable aesthetic attributes, like incised designs or markings. It is simply a grey stone, round and softly polished by centuries of sand abrasion and salt water. Labeled “waterworn” by the museum, the stone is not a part of any larger accession or collection, but it’s pairing together with local lore and a complex provenance warrants some attention. In the first place, the stone had allegedly belonged to a “Voodoo doctor,” a common Anglo-American translation for bòkò. This charm was so powerful that “an Indian named San Rafael” stole it and was then jailed for its theft. The stone was subsequently confiscated, likely by the local *gendarme*, and eventually transported to the United States by parties not yet identified.

San Rafael’s charm is the only stone whose records reference an enduring “Indian” presence on the island, one that is contemporaneous with Haiti’s Afro-descendant population. This makes its attribution as “Afro-Haitian” both fascinating and inaccurate, the presumption being that this cultural marker refers to the “Voodoo doctor”. Yet the doctor was not the stone’s only known associate; it had also temporarily belonged to San Rafael. As the stone is described as “water-worn” rather than carved or shaped by crafting, I argue that its cultural identity was determined by the doctor who was its assumed “maker” – not in the sense of hand-carving but as the one who made it animate.

Ayiti Networks also refer to stones that were collected in prominent cave sites, suggesting their possibility of having circulated through *mixed* Afro-Indigenous, as well as African and Indigenous networks. In the 1920s, several collecting expeditions were undertaken at the *Grotte San Francisco*, a cave site in the mountains near Saint Michel de l’Atalaye, in the northern Artibonite department. These expeditions were staffed by government surveyors together with curators from the United States National Museum, who encountered shrines erected before “carvings of unknown Indian artists”⁵ and witnessed “occasional Voodoo

ceremonies” in the cave’s large chambers (Miller 1926). Papers were published on their findings (see Miller 1922, 1926, 1929; Wetmore 1922), and vast collections were amassed of faunal, botanical, and both archaeological and ethnological specimens – including carved and polished axe heads, celts, zemís, and even a polished stone knife (figure 4).

Finally, as an assemblage, Ayiti Networks assert a ritual merging of two conceptual geographies – Ginen/Africa and Kiskeya/Indigenous Haiti – within materials that therefore belong to multiple heritage groups. Put another way, they cannot be defined by a singular cultural attribution. Over one quarter of the Haitian collections at Smithsonian have Indigenous provenance, and also have at least some associated evidence of having rested at a sacred Vodou site, or with a practitioner of magic, witchcraft or sorcery. On entering the museums, these stone had to be assigned to one culture or the other, the actual complexity of their itineraries and biographies set aside. Restoring that complexity makes clearer how things that might be viewed as purely “archaeological” evidence of a closed past continued to be animate participants in social life under the changing social and political conditions of Haiti.

Conclusion

Small and ubiquitous, Haiti’s ritual stones have long comprised an important function for *sèvitè* and sacred relationships between the lwa and the spirit world, and Ayiti and the natural world, yet they are curiously neglected by scholars of Haiti’s religious traditions. As curated objects, they are attributed solely to the Indigenous cultures that carved them, though their spiritual charge is recognized within Haiti’s religious and spiritual traditions. As animate objects, they materialize the spirit(s) of anti-colonial struggle in Haiti – from sixteenth-century anti-slavery battles to eighteenth-century revolutionary rebellion, and then through the twentieth-century resistance to U.S. occupation. Finally, as social beings, they affirm the presence of Indigenous ritual practices within Vodou and Haitian sorcery.

Temporarily inactive in museums, Haiti’s stones have been overlooked in favor of the sacred tanbou (drums), asson (rattles), drapo (flags) and other ritual objects that have inspired broader curatorial attention and scholarly investigation (e.g., Cosentino 1998; Polk 1997; Wilcken 1992). These objects, when charged by an houngan or manbo, are mounted by the lwa and used in ritual ceremony. In museums they inspire awe because of their sacred status. Yet ironically, it is both the natural and human-made objects that are used within disparate magic and sorcery practices – such as stones, bundles, decorative glass bottles, etc. – that may have the potential to hold our ancestors.⁶

All Haitian ritual objects continue to have social lives in the museums where they rest. What makes the stones significant is their social ties to *multiple* Afro-Indigenous heritage communities. These stones circulated within diverse social networks, all of which must be articulated in any scholarly, curatorial, and public work that involves them. Instead of relying on cultural and temporal attributions, which obscure the biographical histories and complex itineraries that stones traveled, a social archaeology approach emphasizes the distinct religious and magical practices, social identities, and group formations that occurred alongside stones’ various uses. What emerges are complex webs of African, Indigenous, and Afro-Indigenous ritual communities, with whom these stones came into contact.

Notes

¹ Letter to Selden Rodman (1954), Frank R. Crumbie Papers, Special and Area Studies Collections, George A. Smathers Libraries, University of Florida.

² Early ethnographers have a habit of conflating the two, and it is possible that some collectors misidentified practitioners.

³ Benoit Batrville papers, COLL 3433, Archives Branch, Marine Corps History Division, Quantico, VA.

⁴ Notebooks, Frank R. Crumbie Papers, Special and Area Studies Collections, George A. Smathers Libraries, University of Florida.

⁵ Haiti: Petroglyphs, Herbert William Krieger Photographs, Smithsonian National Anthropological Archives.

⁶ Elizabeth McAlister (2017, 68) refers to Luminisa Bunseki Fu-Kiau at a conference, who asserted “When you put our ‘charms’ and ‘fetishes’ in your museums, you are incarcerating our ancestors.”.

Sacred Drums And Sonic Warfare In U.S-Occupied Haiti

In the dark wet of a blue-black night in St. Michel de l'Atalaye, Lieutenant South turns over restlessly in bed, from his small private fortress in the central plateau. Below the rainfall, the croaking frogs and other sounds of deep night, is an ongoing, rhythmic drumming. It has been beating every night. One drum... then two... three... now up to dozens of drums call to each other from across the Dondon mountains, echoing from the St. Francis grottos, hidden in the cane fields, and gathered around burning fires. The complex percussive patterns are incantations. Their rhythms summon the lwa, but all this is unknown the Lieutenant South. To this lost American marine, the drums are a throbbing, incessant reminder that he is unwanted here. They dizzy him. They keep him from sleeping and fill him with dread. They make him sweat. Tomorrow he will order his troupes to raid the countryside and have the drumming stopped. He must rid himself of this madness.

When the United States invaded Haiti in July 1915, their stated purpose was threefold: (1) to bring about political stability, particularly following the recent assassination of President Jean Vilbrun Guillaume Sam; (2) to submerge Haiti deeper into the international capitalist economy; and (3) to advance U.S. strategic interests in the Caribbean. What followed were two decades of imperialist extraction, deployed through the reestablishment of an unpaid enforced *corvée* labor system, takeover of Haiti's *Banque Nationale de la République*, and the re-formation and control of the Haitian constabulary, known as the *Gendarmerie* (1915-1928).

While the passage I opened this paper with is fictionalized, it is based upon accounts of the *Gendarmerie*'s highest-ranking U.S-American officer, who was so worn down by the sound of drumming that he began to believe himself under siege. After days and nights of their non-stop beating, Lieutenant South barricaded himself in his room, armed, and nearly attacked his own subordinates in the process (Renda 2001, 131). Dozens of accounts like these are present in the archive of Haiti's nineteen years under U.S-American occupation. They appear in Marines' letters home, in their daily ledger books, and within the published travelogues of U.S-American soldiers.

The same level of accounting is not afforded to those who were *actually* under siege – the Haitian drummers, communities, and *sévitè* that were subjected to nineteen years of brutal occupation. As with any historical narrative, the story of the United States Occupation is wrested with its own “bundle of silences” (Trouillot 1995, 27). It is history not necessarily of victors but of those who produced and interpreted an archive. Yet there is a rich text that remains; it emerges from the material archive, within “ethnographic” collections in museums. Tacking between these

archival and material remains provides a more nuanced story about the methods and motivations of collecting sacred drums in Haiti, and the agency, power and resistance of the communities from whom they were taken (Wilkie 2006).

Divine Instruments

Alfred Métraux clarified that as the “tangible form of a divinity,” drums are not merely musical instruments, but sacred objects. I would add to this that, as sacred objects, they are apparatuses of a worldview, a justice system and a means of protection from harm. To understand the drum, you must first know the lwa. In particular, the two pantheons known as *Rada*, our oldest lwa, who crossed the ocean alongside their servitors during the transatlantic slave trade, and the *Petwo*, borne of slavery and rebellion in the Atlantic world. The Rada lwa are “cool-tempered” like Ezili Freda, adorned in white and light blue, a goddess of love and motherhood; she takes her offerings sweet and syrupy, like watermelon and honey. Like the other Rada lwa, Ezili protects and teaches us how to respect the natural world, how to care for one another, and especially children. Ezili Danto, her sister, is part of the pantheon of Petwo deities that run “hot-tempered,” quick to anger, and difficult to please. The Petwo lwa emerged during the Haitian revolution, and are not only fierce protectors of freedom, but they also govern and enact retribution on those who violate the freedom of others.

Rada drums are made with stretched cowhide heads that are tuned with pegs. They have a tiered and/or collared base. A Rada battalion, or *batri*, is composed of three drums and various names are used for them. The largest/first is usually *maman*, while subsequent drums are called the *moyen/segonde/grondé* and the *boula/petit/bebe*. Sizes vary, as do the number of pegs. The *boula* is played with two sticks while the first and second drums are usually both played with one hand and one stick. Petwo drums and other batri such as *Congo* and *Nago*, are made with goatskin heads and are tuned with braided cords that evoke the carceral nature and material conditions of slavery. Petwo objects are often bounded with sisal, chain, leather, and rope while whips and other implements of violent control are integrated into ceremony.¹

Rada drums comprise the majority of batri in curated collections. U.S. marines, who confiscated most of the Haitian drums in these collections, were largely ignorant of their ceremonial and spiritual significance. Meanwhile, scholars of Vodou will distinguish these drums in relation to their associated ancestral African forms: the rada descending from the former kingdom of Dahomey; and the Petwo, from the spirit pantheons and drum forms of the Congo (Métraux 1958; Courlander 1960; Farris Thompson 1995). Instead, I introduce these two pantheons of lwa to emphasize my view that sacred drums serve not only as cultural instruments but as political agents and as apparatuses of Haitian identity and national defense (Mocombe 2017).

For example, the *Rara* festival that travel throughout the country during Easter week are also described, by one scholar, as a “popular army” (McAlister 2010).² Many lwa in the *Nago* nation, which are associated with the spiritual traditions of Yorubaland (present day Nigeria), are warriors. The most powerful and best known is Ogou Feray, the lwa of iron, fire, and warfare. Dances for Ogou are still performed as a tribute to his support for Haitian warriors in the revolution and beyond (Averill and Yih 2000).

Acoustic Force

Sacred drumming and other ritual and ceremonial practices associated with “voodoo” were prohibited during the occupation. Historian Kate Ramsey has pointed out that while Haiti’s 1864 *Code Pénal* had been translated into English and distributed to U.S. officers in 1922, three of its articles were translated as early as 1916 for officers to enforce: laying out the prohibition of vagrancy, uses of poisons, and “*les sortilèges*,” or witchcraft (Ramsey 2015, 128). These articles instructed the imprisonment of practitioners and the seizing and burning of objects associated with sacred, ritual, or magic practices. Despite this official anti-vodou legislation, drums continued to beat through the night, capturing both the vivid imaginations and impacting the physical and emotional states of marines. The beats “were always throbbing,” wrote captain John Houston Craige, who credited the ongoing nightly drum beats at least in part with “producing nervous degeneration and collapse” (Craige 1933, 231). One account describes a young man who could no longer distinguish between actual drumming and its persistent resonance in his own mind (Steedman 1939, 166). Rhythms were described as “frenzied” (Steedman, 73) and “steady” (Seabrook 1929, 4), as well as “elusive” and “hypnotic” (Wirkus and Dudley 1931, 103). They were often described as echoing from deep within Haiti’s remote mountains, where ritual ceremonies were taking place.

In bringing together these U.S.-American encounters with drums in Haiti, I needed to experiment with what Julian Henriques (2011) describes as thinking *through* sound, as opposed to thinking *about* sound. Henriques applies this method to his multisensory study of sound’s ethereal and material features including physiological effects on the body – a phenomenon he calls “sonic dominance”. For Henrique, sonic dominance is an uplifting experience, wherein “there is no escape, not even thinking about it, just being there alive, in and as the excess of sound” (xv). For United States Marines in Haiti, this submersion into the auditory overwhelm of midnight drumbeats produced overwhelmingly destructive impacts – including nervousness, insomnia, dizziness and even, according to some accounts, death.

“It is said that Vodou drums can be used to kill a man at the other end of the island,” wrote Mabel Steedman (1939, 200), a British tourist who had spent months trying to acquire a drum and then suddenly, “as if some magic had been at work,” inherited four by means she never revealed, and brought them home to England.³ Steedman spends many pages of her travel memoir, *Unknown to the World – Haiti*, reflecting on the white imagination, as if seeking justification for her own interests. She also attempts to distance herself from the spiritual communities and ritual ceremonies she visited, drawing in the kinds of exoticized depictions that were popular with her contemporaries (73):

“Perhaps only those who have lived in close contact with the throbbing drums of Haiti realize the powerful effect they have on the nervous system. Hour after hour the savage, relentless rhythm pulsates through the eerie stillness of the night, with not one second’s intermission, mercilessly pounding until the sound seems to be inside your head, your nerves become affected and in spite of your own volition the savage in you becomes cognizable. Hidden depths of primitive emotion of which you were unaware, are roused; momentarily you become a savage with the psychology of a savage. After centuries of civilization, if you did not exercise powerful control, you would dance with the peasants, dance and dance, compelled by that remorseless, irresistible call of the drums...

Much of this writing interpreted the effects of drumming as a product of the merging of civilized society and savage phenomena. The published accounts and administrative records of Anglo-Americans in Haiti are mired in these racist tropes. They justified the high level of fear and need for retribution, by referring to physiological impacts on marines but also on Haitians, decrying their rhythms as methods for control and brainwashing that inspired “all sorts of excesses committed, murder and even cannibalism [sic]”.⁴ What resulted was a folklore of occupation that inspired lost U.S-Americans abroad to enact policies that would protect themselves simultaneously from hostile physical, spiritual, and psychic forces.

Yet where much of this historical record is situated within the violence of imperial ideology and so-called modernizing agenda, it speaks to possibilities not yet examined about the mobilizing of drums by Haiti’s resistance movement. There is precedent for this inquiry. Steve Goodman (2010) refers to “acoustic forces,” forms of sonic warfare that produce a whole host of emotional responses – such as anxiety, fear, or dread – and even, in certain contexts, physiological responses. Drawing from examples like the IDF’s 2005 deployment of sonic bombs on the Gaza strip to the U.S occupation of Panama in 1989, when United States military forces surrounded Manuel Noriega’s compound with speakers and blasted rock and roll continuously for three days until he finally surrendered, Goodman looks at the uses of sonic warfare by occupying forces. Building from this research, I am interested in how resistance groups deploy *traditional* sound as both a defensive and offensive battle tactic.

Considering Sonic Warfare

The Cacos were a guerilla unit that first came together during the early years of the Haitian Revolution, in the late 18th century. Consisting of fugitive Africans and their descendants in the Haitian mountains, they remained active through the Occupation, and were greatly feared by US Marines. In addition to being renowned for their skill in battle, many Cacos rebels were alleged to be *bókó*, sorcerers who deployed both healing and dark magic by commission. Unlike *houngans* or *manbos*, sanctified high priests and priestesses in Vodou who are embedded in networks of relations, *bókó* operate independently. Among their many occupations include divination and necromancy (particularly the creation of *zonbi*), animating objects as protective talismans, and the use of incantation to produce harm on one’s opponents.

Many *bókó* were conscripted into the Cacos units because of these powers, and because U.S. marines feared both their sorcery and the animate materials they wielded. Often referred to as “bandits,” U.S. marine troops would go on “hunting” trips to find Cacos hideouts. One unnamed marine described the acoustic forces in a Caco camp: “about 150 Cacos fell in behind us armed with rifles, machetes, and sharp pointed sticks, keeping up an incessant blowing of conch horns and beating of drums...” (Renda 2001,42). That drums and conch horns were deployed alongside conventional assault weapons suggests some intentionality behind the uses of this sonic instruments.

Other accounts reference drumming as a form of insurgent communication that was “as effective as Morse” (Steedman, 218). There are certain auditory characteristics – continuously changing beats (Wirkus and Dudley, 158), call and response from different points in the landscape (Seabrook, 267) – that marines identified as signals rather than the sound of a dance or even a ceremony. Faustin Wirkus described coming upon a Caco camp from deep in the banana groves and hearing “from the distance... the muffled strumming of drums,” which he believed to be a signal from one mountain to another, from one rebel group to another (99). In another vivid

passage, Colonel Frederic May Wise describes his first encounter with “the bamboo wireless of the Haitian jungle,” which he claimed could “spread news over the island almost as fast as the telegraph wire” (Wise 1929, 136). He explained that news of gunboats shipping into port would dispatch from his field office in Jérémie, up to local Haitians in Port au Prince, despite the fact that no commercial cable or telegraph line was installed there. He believed that the news was sent via drum signal by communities watching as the ships cruised up the coastline.

Underground networks of communication have long penetrated both folk and archival histories of African survival in the Americas. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, for example, enslaved and free Black communities passed news about the revolution in Saint Domingue throughout the Atlantic world – sharing news of past and even upcoming uprisings, the whereabouts of fugitives, and the transfer of weapons and other resources of rebellion (Scott 2018). Drums were frequently associated with these insurgent lines of communication, particularly as a means for organizing rebellion. For example, fugitive armies in Saint Domingue drew upon traditional African rhythms to disseminate battle commands – a practice that is still commemorated in ritual ceremonies (Munro 2010). We know that drumming was prohibited in many Atlantic World contexts, and there is evidence that *bàtá* drums were confiscated in Cuba (Villepastour 2009; Barcia 2012), *Batuque* drums in Brazil (Reis 2005), and other African style drums in North America (Johnson 2019).

That the sources of the beating were difficult to locate added to the drums’ dizzying power over foreign soldiers. It also meant that, tactically, the gendarmerie units sent to disband them remained constantly occupied with this activity. In 1921 the United States Senate held special hearings to investigate reports of human rights abuses committed by United States forces in Haiti and the Dominican Republic. General Littleton Waller, the commander of U.S. Marine ground forces in Haiti who was testifying about his work enforcing the *corvée* labor system, was asked about the role of Vodou in Haitian society, and the way his troops engaged with it. He responded that, “[Vodou] is against Haitian law... but they never enforced the law. We did, and we broke up all their meetings, seized all of their drums... and wherever a voodoo drum was heard we immediately got on the trail and captured it, and broke it up, as far as we could” (United States Congress 1922, 630).

Drums and other powerful objects were captured during raids of hounfours, altars, and other sacred sites. Sometimes they were confiscated in carceral spaces like prisons and gendarmerie headquarters, from houngan, manbo, boko, and sevite who were jailed for their continued practice. In the Smithsonian collections alone, there is evidence of stones, charms, and staffs that were taken off the bodies of inmates (see previous chapter). Drums were prioritized differently however, and marines seemed focused on capturing them. Captain John Houston Craige, who wrote two books about his years of service in the Haitian Gendarmerie, staged a photograph with a set of Rada drums and an Assoto, ceremonially dressed, that he would go on to donate to the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology.

Drums weren’t the only sonic weapons mobilized by Haitians resisting the U.S. Occupation. Accounts reference the sound of conch shells, or *lambi*, whose sound was also used consistently in battle. Lambi were so well-known as a battle instrument they became memorialized in Albert Mangonès’ statue, “Le Marron Inconnu,” just opposite the presidential palace in Port au Prince, depicting a maroon insurgent blowing a conch shell to spark the Haitian revolution.

U.S. marines recounted the sound of lambi on the battlefield, as well as other sonic weapons like boxes full of stones, and bamboo trumpets known as “*vaccines*”. But drums are the most prevalent extant form in the material archive.

Haitian Drums at the U.S. National Museum

There are twenty-eight sacred drums from Haiti that rest in the National Museum of Natural History (NMNH) collections, which were formerly the U.S. National Museum (USNM). They include Rada drums, Petwo drums, and examples from other battalions, and they were accessioned both as individuals and sets. Except for one drum that was donated in 2012 as part of the 2004 Smithsonian folklife accession (Benoit et. al, 2004) the entirety of the NMNH’s Haitian drum collection came in through two distinct but related periods in twentieth century Haitian history: the United States Occupation of Haiti, from 1915 until 1934; and the Catholic Church’s Anti-superstition campaign, which saw its height from 1939 through 1942.

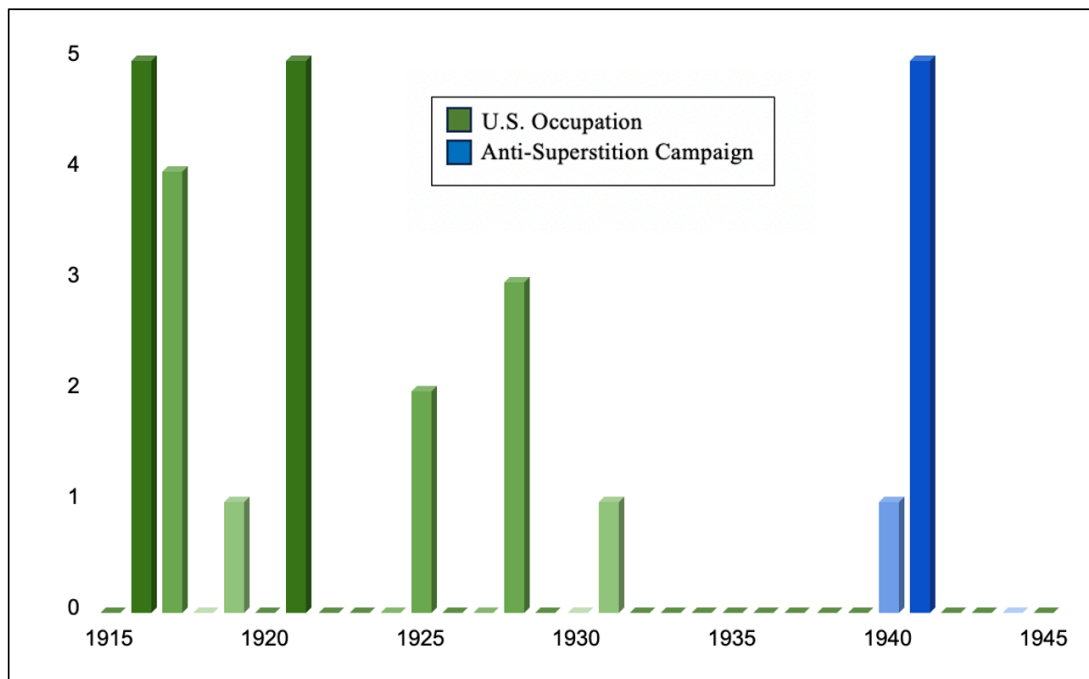


Table 6. Drums from Haiti Held at NMNH, by Collection Date ©Pascale D. Boucicaut

Unlike the broader Haitian collecting projects, which were undertaken with a variety of purposes and methods (see chapter 2), and which were accessioned on a broader timeline (introduction), drums were gathered within a much narrower remit of activity. In particular, as part of a disarmament campaign set by the U.S Marine Corps backed Gendarmerie (1915-1928) and later, Garde d’haiti (1928-). Material traditions were severely transformed during this period, and while there is no estimate for the number of drums that were destroyed during the occupation, the material record does reveal some facets of this violent disruption. Katherine Dunham claimed

that when she arrived in Haiti in 1938, four years after occupation ended, “there were still baptized drums hidden in hollow tree trunks and behind waterfalls” (Dunham, 3).

It took many months of looking at drums before I discovered catalog numbers E352324 and E352325 – a pair of hollowed out bamboo sticks that were collected by then curator of mammals, Gerrit Miller, in the San Francisco cave near St. Michel de L’atlaye (see previous chapter).⁵ The sticks, which are known *ganbo* or *ti kanmbo*, “work like an inverted drum,” with the bamboo joint struck on a hard surface while different tones emerge from the open end (Courlander 196). Miller had traveled to the cave in 1925, with the aim of collecting an enormous selection of birds, mammals, fish, mollusks, insects, plants, and reptiles. He also returned to Washington with this set of instruments. According to his notes, Miller had witnessed a young boy striking against the stalagmite, while one hand was used to clap over the open end, producing an array of different sounds. Hence why in his letter to the museum he referred to them as “primitive voodoo drums”.⁶ Courlander claims these instruments had “a singular burst of popularity” during the U.S. occupation, when widespread drum burning was taking place (Courlander, 196). He explains that while drums could not be easily hidden, ganbos tucked away easily within thatch roofs, during periods of intensified local raids.

Many Haitian drum scholars associate nineteenth century specimens with West African prototypes, which were elaborately carved and decorated (Courlander, 190). As the U.S. marines and Catholic church engaged in widespread burning, drum makers began shifting their craftsmanship for simpler models that were quicker to make. Courlander, who calls these new models “expendable,” explains that intricate craftsmanship became substituted with paint – which one can see in the evolution of drum collections in museums.

Ronald Mevs, an historian and maker of sacred drums, who I had the opportunity to meet and speak with, shared a slightly different take on the evolution of form. Mevs suggested that the drums without elaborate carving *or* paint were made during periods of intensified violence, when drums needed to be made quickly for battle purposes and made easier to hide. Like Courlander, Mevs relates shifts in drum making with a broader historical context. But where Courlander sees these changes as a reaction to drums’ increasing “expendability,” Mevs locates both urgency and agency in the decision to more quickly produce.

It is worth noting that Miller credited Brigadier General Ben. H. Fuller of the U.S. Marine Corps, Mr. G. Burlingame of the United West Indies Corporation, and Mr. E. J. Sieser of the local Atalaye plantation, with providing transportation and other support services during his visit. This admission demonstrates the entanglements between the USNM and scientific collecting generally, and America’s military and corporate interests (Miller 1926). It also suggests the awareness U.S. marines had about anthropological interests in collecting.

In general, it is safe to assume that most drums were acquired through raids on honfours, confiscations of sacred material following incarceration of seville, and other forms of legal seizure as outlined in the Penal Codes. The first drums accessioned at the USNM arrived in 1916, which is remarkably soon after the occupation began. They had been collected and donated by Captain Robert O. Underwood of the United States Marine Corps. By December 1915, the gendarmerie was formerly established, martial law was declared, and United States Marines were stationed within all districts of Haiti. Underwood managed to collect three drums from the Rada Battalion and get them off the island. The likeness of their color scheme and collar design suggests that they are a set produced by the same maker and played within a singular hounfor. They would have been collected sometime between the end of July 1915, when the marines disembarked in Haiti, and the early September 1916, when the drums arrived at the Museum.

There wouldn't have been much of a market associated with collecting at this point, which means Underwood's donation was almost certainly taken by military action. These may have been associated with battles, such as the skirmishes with Cacos rebels in the Port au Prince, where Underwood was stationed with the Artillery Battalion in 1915 and 1916.⁷ His position meant that he was involved in active combat, rather than conducting raids like the gendarmerie. How the drums made their way off the island is less certain. Underwood appears in a passenger list for the *Prince Der Nederlanden*, which departed Port Au Prince and arrived in Haiti on May 31st, 1916, but there are no associated luggage lists.

The following year, four more drums were accessioned at the museum, care of William Louis Abbot, a prolific ornithologist and field collector. Abbot arrived in Haiti in 1917 after five months exploring the Dominican Republic and he stayed for over a year. According to archival sources, he had intended to stay longer but left following "a near fatal attack of dysentery".⁸ Though he would return in 1919 to collect botanical specimens, in his correspondence with the U.S. National Museum he declared that "the only things [I got] for the museum were some Voodoo drums".⁹

Abbot donated three drums that had come into his possession care of Major Charles G. Sinclair, which he described as a "set," though details about their movements are less certain. For one thing, Abbot claimed that Sinclair was stationed in Port de Paix, but U.S. Marine Corps muster rolls reveal that, despite moving around frequently, he was never stationed there directly.¹⁰ In fact, Sinclair had been stationed in Les Cayes, Jacmel, and Cap Haitien, and was in Port au Prince at the time of Abbott's trip.¹¹ The drums may have been taken from any of these locations. Abbot also donated one drum he'd acquired from Sergeant Peter W. Hartmann, who had been stationed in the northern city of Port de Paix. Hartmann had arrived in Haiti in 1915 and was quickly dispatched there, where he'd served with the First Brigade, following a sacking of the city by Cacos rebels in that year.¹² Given Hartmann's role as a non-commissioned officer, it is likely that he was personally conducting raids, confiscating items, and handling petty crimes. In fact, in Abbot's correspondence with the U.S. National Museum he explained that "The Gendarmes seize the drums whenever they find them and they will soon be very scarce in Hayti [sic]," suggesting that he'd either witnessed such activities or heard about them from one of his contacts.

Accessions were made through U.S. Marine Corps and U.S. Navy donations for an entire century. The last of these came in 2013 – a donation of three drums that had been collected by Commander L.C. Frost, a dental surgeon with the U.S. Navy who was stationed in Haiti during the later years of the occupation. In 1939, a selection of types was donated by 1st Lieutenant Thomas Arthur Tighe, which he'd acquired in Hinche in 1921.¹³ They include two maman drums from the Rada battalion, a Petwo drum, and two others that may be part of the *Congo* and *Rara* battalions.

Analysis of the material components of the drum collection at the NMNH revealed at least three with puncture marks through their heads, including the drum that was seized by Hartmann. These may be a consequence of the hides drying out and cracking, or they may have been acts of vandalism. In 1917 a Haitian drum with a punctured head was registered at the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Anthropology and Archaeology that had been confiscated by Major Alexander Williams of the United States marines. According to the donor, Major Williams, who was second in command of the gendarmerie, had the drum's head

punctured “because the beating of a drum was the signal to assemble the Voodoo devotees and to incite them to a religious race war” (Merwin 1917, 123).

Conclusion

This chapter arose out of my desire to locate and emphasize the agency of Haitian drummers whose sacred instruments were violently taken and destroyed, or else confiscated and shipped overseas. This meant engaging with traces of sound that continue to exist as imprints in audio records, archival documents, and the material record. In the process, I discovered what was perhaps a deeper motivation to locate and name source community agency within anthropological studies of collecting. As a museum scholar and practitioner, I most often encounter assumptions that Indigenous and Diasporic communities were simply stripped of their belongings without challenge or recourse. Additionally, the twentieth century collecting enterprise is often flattened into a project informed by scientific racism, capitalist extraction, and imperialist dominance. Despite the truth in these assertions, what I encountered in the mountains of 1920s Haiti was a collecting project that was informed by fear, self-preservation, and defense tactics and as a response to an armed and organized resistance.



Figure 5. Drum with punctured head. Courtesy of the Penn Museum, object no. NA5596.

In situating this chapter within the push-and-pull of imperial violence and anti-imperial resistance, I am asserting the power and political agency of Haitians under occupation. I am picking up on Herman Bennett's claim that for Africans and their descendants in the Americas, "cultural resilience" is privileged over "a political social existence" (Bennet 2019, 95). Sacred drums in Haiti have, since their earliest colonial encounters, represented political and military power, and a refusal to submit to any force other than those that ascend from the spirit world. Following Bennet, I aimed to show that Haitian drums in museum collections around the world are more than "cultural" objects; they are political tools and military instruments. This recognition helps us to locate agency within their communities of origin, and to develop broader museal understandings of source community power – particularly in those collecting contexts that occurred within imperial projects.

Notes

- ¹ While there are certainly enduring practices of drum-making and drumming, I must point out that Vodou is a living religion and traditions have significantly changed over time and vary widely by town, sect and even family. The collections that I studied, and which we will explore in the following pages, are historical collections produced between the late nineteenth and very early twentieth centuries. Their production and formal design are nothing like the drums one finds in Haiti today.
- ² Elizabeth McAlister cites on source who claims that during the U.S. Occupation, the title of *kolonèl* became the highest rank in Rara festival troops.
- ³ Steedman mentions in passing that upon bringing three drums to her home in Yorkshire, the other members of her household, fearing the drums' sinister influence, insisted she lock them in the shed (209). The drums now rest at the Manchester Museum.
- ⁴ Smithsonian Institution Archives, Record Unit 305, SIA000305_R210_Y1918_A0061539
- ⁵ It is also worth noting that Miller credits Brigadier General Ben. H. Fuller of the U.S. Marine Corps, Mr. G. Burlingame of the United West Indies Corporation, and Mr. E. J. Sieser of the Atalaye plantation, with providing transportation and other support services during his visit, demonstrating the entanglements between the USNM and scientific collecting with America's combat and corporate interests (Miller 1926).
- ⁶ Smithsonian Institution Archives, Record Unit 305, SIA000305_R330_Y1925_A0087443
- ⁷ Muster dates August 15, March 1916. National Archives in Washington DC; Washington, DC, USA; NAI Title: *U.S. Marine Corps Muster Rolls, 1893-1958*; NAI Number: *Nara Microform Publication T977*; Record Group Number: *Record Group 127*; Record Group Title: *Records of the U.S. Marine Corps*.
- ⁸ https://siarchives.si.edu/collections/siris_arc_217275
- ⁹ Smithsonian Institution Archives, Record Unit 305, United States National Museum, "USNM Accession Records: 1918 Acc. No. 61539", SIA000305_R210_Y1918_A0061539
- ¹⁰ Muster dates April 1916, June 1916, November 1916, July 1917. National Archives in Washington DC; Washington, DC, USA; NAI Title: *U.S. Marine Corps Muster Rolls, 1893-1958*; NAI Number: *Nara Microform Publication T977*; Record Group Number: *Record Group 127*; Record Group Title: *Records of the U.S. Marine Corps*.
- ¹¹ Abbot got many details wrong, including the rank of Sinclair and Hartman. A posted memo in the accession file states, "When asked for the initials of Lieutenant Hartman and Captain Sinclair, he said he could not recall them – that it would not be necessary, he thought, to have them". Smithsonian Institution Archives, Record Unit 305, SIA000305_R210_Y1918_A0061539.
- ¹² Muster Date October 1915. National Archives in Washington DC; Washington, DC, USA; NAI Title: *U.S. Marine Corps Muster Rolls, 1893-1958*; NAI Number: *Nara Microform Publication T977*; Record Group Number: *Record Group 127*; Record Group Title: *Records of the U.S. Marine Corps*.
- ¹³ Smithsonian Institution Archives, Record Unit 305, United States National Museum, "USNM Accession Records: 1940 Acc. No. 153259", SIA000305_R571_Y1940_A0153259.

Epilogue

At the time of this writing, summer 2025, the current presidential administration has added Haitian citizens to its “no fly” list of nationals barred from entry to the United States. It’s a cap on a months-long campaign of dehumanization that targeted Haitian immigrants living across the country. This began officially in September 2024, after false claims about Haitians stealing and eating pets began to proliferate in Springfield, Ohio, a city with a large Haitian community. Then senator of Ohio, JD Vance, who is a self-proclaimed devout Catholic and now serves as vice president of the United States, repeated these claims, eventually admitting that “If I have to create stories so that the United States media actually pays attention to the suffering of the American people, then that’s what I’m going to do.”

While these inflammatory allegations shocked many around the country, they were, for Haitians and scholars of Haitian history, not in the least unfamiliar. Since the United States’ occupation of Haiti, from 1915-1934, marines and other U.S-American enforcement agents published incendiary accounts depicting Haitians as primitive cannibals (i.e., Craige 1934). Haitian travelogues became popular depictions of zombies and other horrors and even inspired a new silent film genre. Beyond their popularity abroad, these accounts of cannibalism, zombies, witchcraft, and sorcery were also used to justify the prohibition of Vodou, and subsequent incarceration of hounsans, manbos, and bokors, as well as the confiscation and destruction of sacred objects. While the official language used by America’s occupying forces were conveyed to promote “civilizing” and “Americanizing” the Haitian masses, it was well understood by U.S. marines that Haitians, particularly those that were actively involved in the resistance movement, relied upon rituals, practices and objects that they were seeking to destroy.

It was with all these thoughts and within this current political context that I began investigating sacred Vodou objects within the federally funded Smithsonian Institution, set right upon the national mall. Though this research, which relied on collections and archives, was historical, it posed serious questions about the future of these collections and the implications of their being held as property of the United States government. In these final pages I highlight where my own research left off, and what work must come next.

Provenance research is, as I described in my introduction, the work of tracing the movements of objects through space, time, and complex social networks. The conventions of provenance work are to build a linear narrative of an object’s life from its moment of creation to its context in the museum. Drawing in an itineraries-based approach, subsequent research would benefit from work that extends before and after these points. This includes research that investigates the material components of the collections.

Beginning late 2022, I had the pleasure of working with Ronald Mevs, an artist and public historian based in Jacmel, Haiti. I connected to Ronald through friends on the island, who spoke so highly about his atelier in the mountains. I was particularly interested in learning about Ronald’s drum workshops, and his efforts to recreate ‘historical’ versions of sacred drums – types that are no longer in production or even circulation. Over the course of our collaboration, I realized the Ronald was teaching me Haitian history as told through the drum. It was a story of the ongoing fight for liberation and the strategies that were enacted through craft, spiritual work, artistry, and performance.

One of our conversations focused on the changes in trees used to carve sacred drums. Broad ecological changes, such as widespread deforestation on the island, have deeply impacted on the traditions of drum and other craft making on the island (Dirksen 2019). These ruptures were compounded by political campaigns to eradicate Vodou, which intensified the need for drum making and shifted these speed and elaborateness of instruments produced (see chapter 4). For example, it has been alleged that prior to the occupation, drum makers could identify the provenance of a drum based on its collar at the base of the body. These collars were makers' signatures, and were marks of an individual, a community, and a region of Haiti. Subsequent research would benefit from bridging archival based provenance research together with a materials-based study specifically on drum collars. Such research would support revitalization of traditional ecological, craft, and community knowledge.



Figure 6. Drum collars photographed from NMNH collections. ©Pascale D. Boucicaut

In addition to projects that deepen the impact of this research, broadening the project to include collections in all departments at the Smithsonian National Museum of natural History would also support the endurance of traditional ecological knowledge, networks of craft production, and sustainable cultural and environmental futures. Over 23,000 objects and specimens from Haiti rest at the NMNH. Anthropology collections, which were the focus of this dissertation, make up just a small portion. The Botany, Vertebrate and Invertebrate Zoology collections comprise a much larger assemblage. It is also important to point out that many of these collections were gathered by field collectors that appeared in the pages above – including Gerrit Miller, William L. Abbott, and Herbert Krieger – and must also be interpreted within the context of U.S. Occupation.

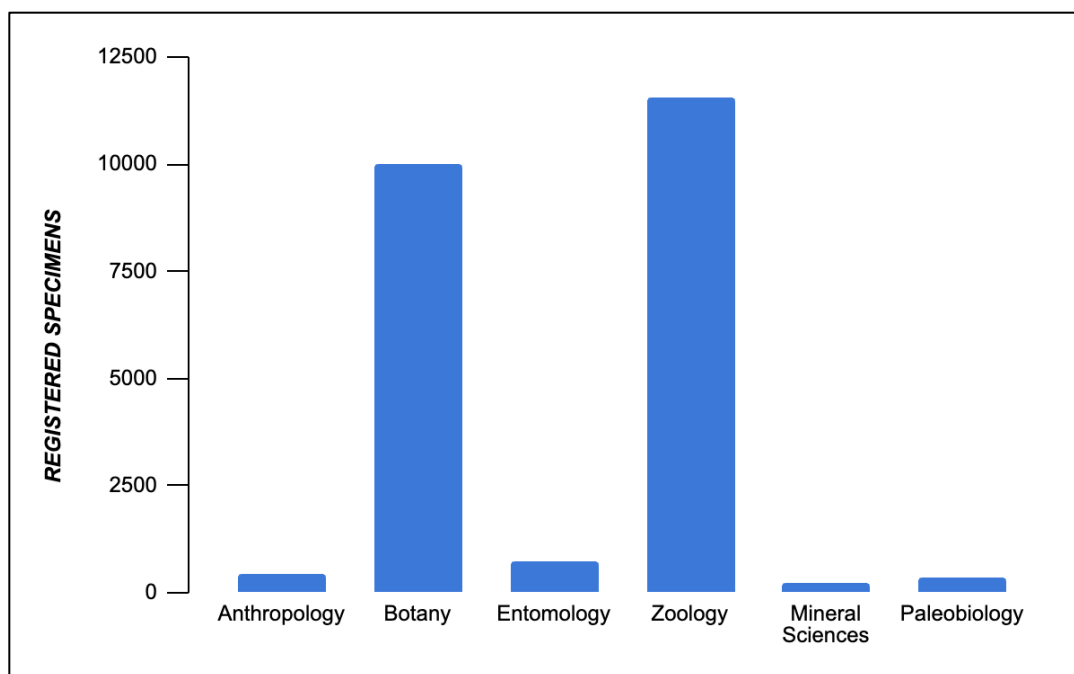


Table 7. Collections from Haiti at the NMNH, by Department. ©Pascale D. Boucicaut

Provenance research can direct us towards repair and restitution. Ronald and I had big ambitions for working together. We’d develop a workshop, one that suited both craft and curatorial communities, in Haiti and the United States. I was gently suggesting the Smithsonian, which had expressed both willingness and support for returning drums to Haiti, commission a new drum that would speak to the histories of occupation and theft and the endurance of traditional culture that emerge through their historical collections. This drum would tell a complex new story, not just about the destructive role of the United States in Haiti, but about the influential and ongoing role of Haiti in the United States. I was devastated to learn of Ronald’s death in early 2024. We lost a great artist and storyteller, and a great champion of Haiti. We also lost an incomprehensible holder of knowledge. It was through my conversations with Ronald that I began to understand more about the work of bridging ‘communities’ with collections. Future work with the collections from Haiti should begin with connecting objects to the contemporary practitioners and makers, who have gained, through their work with intangible and intangible traditions, knowledge about the collections that is deeper and broader than any academic could provide. This view echoes that of my highly theoretical training in New Materialism and archaeological methods that trace the itineraries of objects – before their point of creation and beyond their time as museum property. Ronald understood this project intuitively and helped me to develop much more complex ideas about the work.

What lingers is the question of return. Should these sacred things be in the United States anymore? I didn’t commit much space to considerations of futurity within these pages and that was intentional. First and foremost, it is not for me to determine where these sacred objects belong. We are also not yet at a place of knowing *to whom* these things belong. As described in the previous chapters, the Haitian government, albeit led by the United States Marine corps, was responsible for the confiscation and destruction of so many sacred things. How then does one return them through the Haitian government? Deeper work to locate the communities that made

and used these collections is required, which will rely on a multitude of different research methods and networks.

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