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## Haitian Protestant Views of Vodou and the Importance of Karacte within a Transnational Social Field

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## **HAITIAN PROTESTANT VIEWS OF VODOU AND THE IMPORTANCE OF KARACTÈ WITHIN A TRANSNATIONAL SOCIAL FIELD**

**KEY TERMS:** Protestant, Haitian, Diaspora, Vodou, Character, Transnational Social Field

### **ABSTRACT**

The ways that some Haitian Protestants view of Vodou and the importance of *karactè* (character) have emerged as two interrelated and fundamental aspects of Haitian Protestant worldview within a transnational social field. First, many Haitian Protestants believe the practice of Vodou since the *Bwa Kayiman* ceremony is the main reason why Haiti is mired in a socioeconomic crisis. Second, the development of a Haitian individual's *karactè* through Haitian Protestantism is seen by a growing number of Haitian Protestants in the Bahamas, Haiti and the United States as a remedy that can transform the poorest nation in the Western Hemisphere into a viable nation-state. In this essay, I offer ethnographic examples of these two features of Haitian Protestant worldview to demonstrate the centrality of these beliefs in the formation and maintenance of a religious identity that is growing in Haiti and in Haitian diasporas in the region.

As scholars of religion in Latin America and the Caribbean note (Austin-Broos 1997, Brusco 1995, Chestnut 2003, Martin 1990 and Stoll 1990, for example), Catholic Latin America is becoming Protestant. The success of Evangelical Protestantism in the region has been attributed to different reasons. For example, in his religious economical analysis of the popularity of pneumacentric (spirit-centered) faiths in Latin America like Pentecostalism, Chestnut notes that the way each faith produces and markets its pneumacentric and faith-healing products as a key factor to understanding their popularity among Latin Americans (Chestnut 2003: 14). Austin-Broos' study (1997) of Jamaican Pentecostals demonstrates that conversion and religious practice by working-class black Jamaicans allowed them to circumvent aspects of the British order while legitimizing enthusiasm and spirit possession (aspects of Jamaican religious practice long

denigrated because of their primary association with African religious practice). This contributed to Pentecostalism's overall growth and success in Jamaica.

The growth and success of Protestantism in Latin America also extends to Haitians. In 1930, for example, only 1.5% of the population of Haiti was Protestant. The population of Protestants then tripled between 1930 and 1940, and then doubled between 1940 and 1950. By 1977, 20% of the country converted to Protestantism (Romain 1986: 81). It is currently estimated that about a third of Haiti is Protestant (Louis 2007: 194). Hurbon notes that Pentecostal success in Haiti, for example, demonstrates a break from the established religions of Haiti and its success can be interpreted as an expression and a critique of the transnationalism process (Hurbon 2001).

Protestantism among Haitians in its diaspora scattered in the Caribbean (Brodwin 2003) and the United States (Richman 2005) is rising and now we are beginning to see Haitian Protestants outnumber Catholic Haitians in some locales. For instance, it appears that the religious affiliation of Haitians in the Bahamas has changed<sup>1</sup>. When responding to survey questions concerning the religion they currently practiced, 27.7 percent of Haitians interviewed responded "Catholic" whereas 29.1 percent replied "Anglican", "Baptist", or Pentecostal (College of the Bahamas 2005: 100). This indicates that the majority of Haitians in the Bahamas, who were traditionally Catholics and Vodou practitioners, are most likely Protestants now.

In my research about Haitian Protestants, I have found that Haitians convert to Protestantism for numerous reasons. One reason is that conversion provides them protection from the harm and misfortune they associate with Vodou. Some convert as the result of a long standing illness while others convert as a way to improve their economic

standing because of the opportunities Protestant churches provide. But what I am finding is that many Haitian Protestants believe that the maintenance of their religious identity should contribute to the transformation of Haiti from the poorest country in the Western hemisphere to a viable nation-state. How and why do these Protestants link their religious transformation to Haiti's socioeconomic transformation? I try to arrive at some answers to this question.

Ethnographic research was conducted among Haitian Protestants in the Bahamas, Haiti and the United States from 2002 to 2005. Within this transnational social field, two interrelated aspects of a growing Haitian Protestant worldview are shared. First, some Haitian Protestants in Nassau, Port-au-Prince and Missouri believe that Vodou is at the root of Haiti's ongoing socioeconomic crisis. Second, the people I interviewed noted that when Haitians convert to Protestant forms of Christianity it can remedy what they see as the harmful societal effects of Vodou in Haiti. In this respect *karaktè* (character), an integral part of a Haitian Protestant's religious identity that develops through maturation in one's faith, represents an improved Haitian citizen who works for the betterment of Haitian society because of their Protestant Christian comportment. In this essay, I offer ethnographic examples of Haitian Protestant attitudes towards Vodou and the importance which some Haitian Protestants associate with *karaktè* to demonstrate the centrality of these beliefs in the formation and maintenance of a religious identity across borders.

## OPINIONS OF VODOU AMONG HAITIAN PROTESTANTS

According to a recent United Nations report, Haiti was noted to be the western hemisphere's poorest country<sup>2</sup>. But how did Haiti become the "poorest country in the Western Hemisphere?" Scholars of Haitian culture, history and politics have differing responses that focus on economic reasons and external forces as important factors which have contributed to Haiti's current status. Alex Dupuy (1989) contends that Haiti's misfortune stems from its poor insertion in the world economy. Paul Farmer (1994) argues that the combination of incessant American military intervention in Haitian affairs and the repayment of an indemnity of 200 million francs to France since the 19<sup>th</sup> century partly contributed to current Haitian poverty and underdevelopment. Nina Glick Schiller and Georges Fouron (2001) use the term "apparent state" to explain the Haitian state as having almost no independent authority to make meaningful changes within its territorial borders. In their opinion, this contributes to Haiti's current socioeconomic crisis.

But if you ask a Haitian Protestant in the Bahamas, Haiti, or the United States why so many Haitians are poor and why the Haitian economy is in shambles, they may focus on an internal spiritual factor they consider to be at the heart of Haiti's troubles: Vodou. Considered a *malediksyon* (curse) by many Haitian Protestants, the enduring practice of Vodou in Haiti and its diaspora is viewed as the main reason why Haiti is in crisis. In fact, some Haitian Protestants can pinpoint the historical moment where Haiti's misfortune began. They refer to the *Bwa Kayiman* Vodou Congress, which occurred in Saint Domingue (colonial Haiti) in 1791, as the moment when Haitians procured their freedom from colonial powers through consecration with *dyab* (the devil, Satan).

## **VODOU AND *BWA KAYIMAN***

Africans who survived the rigors of the passage from Africa to Saint-Domingue were sold as chattel. Once they reached a plantation, Africans were assigned slave tutors who showed them how to perform different tasks necessary for production of coffee, indigo and sugar: commodities that would eventually be consumed throughout the world. On these plantations, Africans became slaves through different labor processes, force and domination. Le Code Noir prescribed baptism and instruction in the Catholic religion for all enslaved Africans and deemed assemblies of enslaved Africans for purposes other than Catholic worship illegal (Simpson 1945). However, secret assemblages occurred amongst the slaves where elements of African religions and rites were kept alive through the creation of the religion called Vodou.

Vodou was formed between 1750 and 1790 on the plantations of colonial Haiti and it is the Fongbe (Benin) term for “spirit.” In Haitian Creole, the word refers to a genre of ritual music and dance performed in honor of a category of spirit. Spirits are called *lwa* and can be thought of as super human beings who are inherited through family lines among land-holding descent groups. Said to be from Ginen (Africa) and to dwell there still, *lwa* crystallize a deep historical memory of the violence and displacement of the African ancestors’ past. Reflective of their creolized history, some *lwa* are based on Catholic saints and many have African names (Richman 2005).

Vodou was important in the struggle for liberation among enslaved Africans against colonial powers. Part of the Haitian national narrative well known among Haitians is the *Bwa Kayiman* Vodou Congress led by Boukman. Boukman was a maroon who escaped from a plantation near Morne Rouge and led a Vodou ceremony that was

pivotal to the beginning of the Haitian Revolution (1791-1803). C.L.R. James (1963) notes the importance of this historical moment in a stirring account of the ceremony that occurred on August 14<sup>th</sup>, 1791:

A tropical storm raged, with lightning and gusts of wind and heavy showers of rain... There Boukman gave the last instructions and, after Vodou incantations and the sucking of the blood of a stuck pig, he stimulated his followers by a prayer spoken in creole, which, like so much spoken on such occasions, has remained. "The god who created the sun which gives us light, who rouses the waves and rules the storm, though hidden in the clouds, he watches us. He sees all that the white man does. The god of the white man inspires us with crime, but our god calls upon us to do good works. Our god who is good to us orders us to revenge out wrongs. He will direct our arms and aid us. Throw away the symbol of the god of the whites who has caused us to weep, and listen to the voices of liberty, which speaks in the hearts of us all (James 1963: 87)."

Six days later, slaves of the Turpin plantation led by Boukman indiscriminately massacred every white man, woman child they could find (Simpson 1945). This began a general insurrection that would lead to the Haitian Revolution, the first successful slave revolt in the Western Hemisphere that extended the "rights of Man" beyond Europeans and articulated common humanity and equality for all Haitian citizens.

### ***BWA KAYIMAN: REPLACING THE BLOOD OF THE PIG WITH THE BLOOD OF JESUS***

Many Haitian Protestants find the *Bwa Kayiman* ceremony offensive. Regardless of their location within a transnational social field, some Haitian Protestants have developed an oppositional view of *Bwa Kayiman* that is a key to their religious identity. The majority of Haitian Protestants I have interviewed in the Bahamas, Haiti and the United States, do not view *Bwa Kayiman* as a liberatory moment but as a tragic moment when the fledgling nation of Haiti was "consecrated to the Devil." This act, in turn,

ensured a legacy of misery in Haiti that is evidenced by the underdevelopment which grips it today.

This counter-hegemonic reading of *Bwa Kayiman* is clearly articulated by Chavannes Jeune, a pastor and evangelist from Les Cayes, Haiti and a former candidate for the Haitian presidency in 2005. He is also the catalyst for “Haiti for the Third Century,” an interdenominational evangelical organization whose main purpose is to “take Haiti back from the devil and dedicate her to Jesus Christ.” Pastor Chavannes believes that the nation of Haiti is enmeshed in spiritual bondage because “the country was dedicated by a Vodou priest (Boukman) at its liberation” and “[Haiti] has been in bondage to the devil for four generations.<sup>3</sup>”

Haitian Protestants whom I interviewed acknowledged that Vodou is part of Haitian culture and that it is a part of their *razin* (roots). But Protestantism, as Romain (1986) explains, is a religion of rupture. This rupture occurs with *lemonn* (the secular world) and the rejection of Vodou is essential to becoming *Kretyen* (Christian). Therefore, Haitian Protestants like Pastor Chavannes view Vodou as a satanic religion which is responsible for Haiti’s underdevelopment, continuing governmental corruption, and the country’s endemic poverty.

McAlister notes (2006) that the evangelical re-writing of *Bwa Kayiman* also has violent implications in the fight for Haiti’s future between Haitian Protestants and the rest of Haiti. A group of Haitian Protestants called “Vision: Haiti” marched on August 14th, 1998 to *Bwa Kayiman* with the intent to exorcise Vodou spirits to “win Bois Caiman for Jesus” by performing a Jericho march. In the Jericho march, a group circles a space seven times in the name of Jesus, “commanding its walls to fall down (McAlister 2006).”



The ritual was performed at *Bwa Kayiman* and can be seen as a direct challenge to the politics of national heritage in Haiti and a confrontation with the Haitian state. The Haitian government considered the Evangelical ceremony an insult to national pride. By undoing that contract and claiming the birthplace of the Haitian nation for Jesus, however, the pastors had symbolically "won Haiti for Jesus" and "converted" the entire nation to evangelicalism (McAlister 2006: 18).

Based on the report of Bishop Joel Jeune about the Jericho march at *Bwa Kayiman*, we not only see a Protestant confrontation with the Haitian state but we also see Haitian Protestantism as a transnational political movement. According to Jeune, on the day of the confrontation (August 14<sup>th</sup>, 1998):

The Lord spoke clearly to me as well as many other Haitian leaders such as Paul and Gerald Clerie of Vision: Haiti, and others for mobilisation to take back the land [of *Bwa Kayiman*] for God. Haitian Christian leaders all over Haiti as well as in Florida, New York, Canada, France, and in all big Haitian communities around the world, and Christians of other nationalities, were mobilised to get together wherever they were on August 14, 1997 to fast and intensely pray to claim Haiti back for God while the holy invasion took place on the devil's territory in Bois-Caiman. So in all the cities, villages, mountains of Haiti, and in the Haitian diaspora a day of fasting, prayer, victory marches in the streets, and a big crusade went on all day from 6:00 a.m to 10:00 p.m. while the holy invasion was taking place on that devil-ground in Haiti<sup>4</sup>.

As evidenced by this report, the view of the Vodou ceremony at *Bwa Kayiman* as the moment when Haiti was consecrated to the Devil is a view that is shared many Protestants in Haiti and Haiti's Protestant diaspora scattered across Canada, France and the United States. The fact that these different Haitian Protestant communities were fasting, praying, holding crusades and victory marches in the streets and participating in Protestant rituals to rid Haiti of *move espri* (evil spirits) can be interpreted as transnational Haitian Protestant political action. The goal of this transnational religious

action was to rid the country of spirits which have mired Haiti in a socioeconomic crisis that began with the *Bwa Kayiman* Vodou ceremony. This counter hegemonic reading of *Bwa Kayiman*, as well as a general view of Vodou as a religion of evil and retribution, is also shared by Haitian Protestants living in the Bahamas.

## **HAITIAN PROTESTANTS IN THE BAHAMAS AND VODOU**

Due to Haiti's economic crisis, Haitians migrate to other countries within the Caribbean region as a way to counter debilitating poverty and unemployment. One of the countries they migrate to is the Bahamas. The Bahamas is an archipelagic nation-state consisting of over 700 islands and cays covering some 225,000 square miles of one of the most strategic positions in the Atlantic Ocean, stretching from the Florida coast to the north shore of Haiti, bordered on the west by Cuba, straddling the Tropic of Cancer (Bethel 2000: 21). As scholars of Bahamian culture and history confirm, when Haitians migrate to the Bahamas, they do not necessarily do so with the intention of settling there (see Craton 1995, Craton and Saunders 1998, Marshall 1979 and St. Jacques 2001). Most Haitians make their way to the capital, Nassau, located on the island of New Providence where two-thirds of the population of the Bahamas lives. Nassau is also where most of the country's employment opportunities are to be found. Many Haitians live in the Bahamas with the intention of working there temporarily and view life there as a way to support family in Haiti or as a temporary destination before they migrate to the United States.

Many Haitians who migrate to the Bahamas are Protestants and their political views cannot be separated from their religious views (Louis 2008). In interviews I

conducted with Haitian Protestants in Nassau, Bahamas in 2005, subjects were asked two questions concerning Haiti and contemporary Haitian society. The first question was “What is your opinion of Haiti’s social situation?” The second question was “What does Haiti need to change its current social situation?” In response to the first question, the majority of respondents from Haiti described the country’s current situation in overwhelmingly negative terms viewing no hope for Haiti. When the second question was answered, the majority of respondents referred to God as the only way for Haiti’s endemic poverty and political and social instability to stabilize<sup>5</sup>. In their responses, they blamed the practice of Vodou for the crisis in Haiti. Furthermore, Protestants viewed Vodou as a way of life that has deleterious effects on social life in Haiti. What follows is an excerpt from an interview that demonstrates this growing Haitian Protestant view of Vodou among Haitian Protestants in the Bahamas and within a transnational social field.

### **SISTER MAUDE AND VODOU**

I interviewed Sister Maude<sup>6</sup> on September 6<sup>th</sup>, 2005 in Nassau, Bahamas. At the time of our interview, she was 31 years old. She converted to Protestantism in Haiti when she was 13 years old and was baptized at age 17. Unlike the majority of Haitians in the Bahamas who migrate from the Northwest state of Haiti (*depatman Nordwes*), she was from Port-au-Prince. Before her migration to the Bahamas, she attended L’Église Baptiste Patriarche de Caseau, a Charismatic Baptist church in Port-au-Prince. She explained to me how her family was “deep into Vodou” and listed different family members that served *lwa* (spirits). In the following interview excerpt, Sister Maude links poverty, underdevelopment and violence in Haiti directly with the continued practice of

Vodou in Haiti. When I asked her to describe Haiti's current socioeconomic situation, she replied "I don't see anything for Haiti. For Haiti to change its current situation, the people have to stop committing crimes, stop the blood from running in the streets, and turn their faces towards God. Turn their faces towards God because the people, the Haitian people, have consecrated the country with the Devil (Maude 2005)."

Since Sister Maude brought up the topic of Vodou, I asked her a follow-up question which got to the heart of her religious beliefs with regard to Vodou. Specifically, I asked her opinion of Vodou and what effects the continued practice of Vodou has on Haitian society. She responded:

Haitians give Vodou top place in Haitian society. They give it top place. And, I think it's because they give Vodou top place in Haiti that the country is in the state that it is in. Haiti is in this critical state because they (those who practice Vodou and support it) give Vodou the top place in Haitian society. It's the reason why the country is in the state it's in, you understand what I'm saying?

Imagine a person, a little peasant who can't eat but has a goat, and is feeding it, fattening it up to give to *lwa*, to give *lwa* food every year. While he's/she's fattening the goat he/she has children, he/she has who knows how many children he/she can't send to school. And then he/she has to save what he/she has to give *lwa* food. What is he/she giving his/her food to? Some talking (incantations), something he/she does (rituals associated with Vodou), and then throws the stuff on the floor?<sup>7</sup>

Imagine a person who goes to a sacred tree every year and then rolls around in the mud, a place that's dirty, a place that smells like a place where a pig would roll around in. How can you make me understand for the Devil...that this is not misery that the Devil's creating in the country?

Do you understand what I'm saying? Because if you're not a pig there's no reason for you to be rolling around in the mud. How does someone bathe in dirty water, in mud? The person is not a pig. This is normal for a pig. I think that all of our ignorance, the Haitian people, causes the country to be in the state that it's in. For there to be true change in Haiti there needs to be no less than everyone saying "Ok, I renounce all of the worthless *lwa*, all of the worthless saints, all of the worthless statues...and well, turn their faces towards God and that's when God will say something on their behalf. But as long as they continue to give *lwa* food, worship sacred trees, make a bunch of faces, the country will never change.

Instead of changing it will get worse...That means that a president will never be able to change it (the country)...Only God can change it (the situation) (Maude 2005).”

As we can see, Sister Maude feels that Haiti has been consecrated to the Devil, a term directly used by Pastor Chavannes and other Haitian Protestants I interviewed while I was in the Bahamas in 2005. Sister Maude interprets Haiti’s current crisis as a spiritual crisis that can only be transformed through the catalytic action of the Holy Spirit. She contrasts her religious beliefs with her strong belief in the assumed deleterious effects of Vodou on Haitian citizens. In her examples of people who practice Vodou, Sister Maude believes that the practice of Vodou encourages wasting one’s money and promotes ignorance among Haitian citizens. Sister Maude feels that the only true transformation of Haiti into a safer, stable nation-state is through the conversion of Vodou practicing Haitian citizens into Protestants.

The strict practice of Protestantism, then, becomes the only logical religious choice for any Haitian concerning not only their personal salvation but ensuring a positive future for Haiti. Many Haitian Protestants believe that conversion to Protestant forms of Christianity teaches fellow Haitians to love each other evidenced in passages from the Holy Bible which Protestants memorize in Bible study and Sunday school<sup>8</sup>. Vodou, by contrast, teaches you to hate your neighbor by wishing their downfall by using *maji* (sorcery) against them. Vodou is, in the imagination of many Haitian Protestants, a religious “Culture of Poverty”; an adaptation to a set of objective conditions that is transmitted from generation to generation that keeps Haiti from developing into modern, civilized and liberated nation.

## **KARACTÈ IN TRANSNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE**

Haitians, who are raised as Protestants and Haitians who convert and remain Protestant, form a collective voice that critiques the problems of Haiti and Haitians as spiritual and cultural. The practice of Vodou and its spiritual grip on Haiti since *Bwa Kayiman* are reasons why, then, Haiti is in the state that it is in. So in the minds of Haitian Protestants, conversion is the solution to Haiti's problems addressing the individual, collective and spiritual needs of Haiti. Specifically, Protestantism helps the individual work on their *karactè*, the moral and ethical strength that conversion to Protestant Christianity provides an individual. Within a transnational social field, Haitian Protestants use churches and organizations to shape the identities of present and future generations of Haitians according to Protestantism. In ethnographic research with Haitian Protestants in the United States, Haiti, and the Bahamas, *karactè* came up repeatedly as an issue of focus essential to the ultimate goal of the transformation of Haiti into a Protestant Christian nation and, by extension of the catalytic effect of Protestant Christianity on Haitian society, a viable nation-state.

## **CENELC AND KARACTÈ**

As part of exploratory research about Haitian Protestantism in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, I interviewed Jonas Doré, an official with CENELC (the National Center of Evangelization and Christian Leadership) in August 2002. In this organization's mission statement, CENELC was supposed to evangelize all of Haiti by January 2004 (Haiti's bicentennial) and to use Haiti as a strategic base to convert the Francophone Caribbean to Protestant Christianity. Jonas was in charge of Operation Néhémie (Operation

Nehemiah), an Evangelical movement formed to create Protestant discipleship among Haiti's youth. It was during our interview that the issue of character came up when Jonas was posed a question concerning the social activities of the organization:

The philosophy of the organization is to invest spiritually in individuals. By doing this it opens a lot of doors to people. Our organization creates disciples for Christ and the individuals that are exposed to our organization develop a **Christian character (emphasis mine)**. This leads to individual development and success in life (Doré 2002).

At the foundation of Jonas' comments is the issue of character and how it is developed through Protestantism. What was clear in my interview with Jonas was that Protestantism seemed to him to be a proper way to develop a character not only beneficial to all classes in Haitian society but Haiti in general. This Haitian Protestant focus on character can be further elucidated when we look at the comments of a Haitian pastor in the United States who is trying to transform Haiti into a Protestant nation.

### **PASTOR LESLY, TRUTH AND GRACE, AND *KARACTÈ***

Two years after the interview with Jonas in Port-au-Prince, I interviewed Jean L. Paillan, head pastor of Truth and Grace Haitian Christian Church in Saint Charles, Missouri, about his life and the development of his church. At the time of our interview, he felt that it was the church's job to "form and educate people to function in society<sup>9</sup>." Pastor Lesly left Haiti with his wife and young child amidst growing economic and social turmoil in 1986, a year or two after Jean-Claude Duvalier fled Haiti. When Pastor Lesly migrated to the United States, he was unable to find work in his profession (radio) in Florida or Massachusetts so he worked service jobs until he landed a higher paying job with Procter and Gamble in Massachusetts. When his company gave him the

opportunity to relocate to Saint Louis, he moved his family to Saint Charles, Missouri in 1994. Already a Baptist since his teenage years, he found a Haitian church, First French Speaking Baptist Church of Saint Louis, on the south side of Saint Louis and was ordained as a music minister by the head pastor at the time, Dr. Christian Sanon. Each Sunday, Pastor Lesly would play the piano as the church sang hymns from Chants D'Espérance (Songs of Hope), a Haitian Baptist hymnal used by Protestant churches in Haiti and in the Haitian diaspora.

Pastor Lesly noted that he had always been an acute observer of culture and society and in the months leading up to the new millennium he stayed informed about how other countries around the world were preparing themselves. As he watched a program that dealt with this topic, he wondered aloud:

Wait a minute, who is thinking for Haiti? Who is thinking for all the little countries around the world? Do these people realize that there's a new thing going on in the world? Or are they so busy fighting poverty, surviving, they don't even realize or they can't even think at the same level than the rest of the world is thinking? I said, "Why can't the church take leadership [in this area]? Why can't we begin right here?" These are the questions I asked myself. And that shaped my ministries, it shaped my sermons, it shaped the way I approached Christianity altogether. I sincerely believed that, yes, God wants you to change your **character** (emphasis mine) so that you can become a functional human being in your environment.<sup>10</sup>

Pastor Lesly's views were not received well at the First French Speaking Baptist Church of Saint Louis. For the sake of remaining brothers and sisters in Christ, he sought out other people with a vision similar to his and in 2000, he started Truth and Grace Haitian Christian Church in Saint Charles, Missouri.

Since its inception, Truth and Grace Haitian Christian Church assists churches in Haiti, church projects and people through monetary donations and frequent trips to Haiti with vital supplies. Although financial capital and educational materials are vital to the



lives of Haitians which Truth and Grace touches, Pastor Lesly stresses that transforming the character of individual Haitians through Protestant Christianity is the most important part of Truth and Grace's mission. In his interview, Pastor Lesly brought up the importance of character repeatedly as a solution to Haiti's current crisis:

The challenge [as a Christian] is to have one being living his faith in every aspect in life: whether you are in business, politics, whether you are a minister, whether you are a teacher, wherever you go. You are a Christian and you carry with you principles that you will apply in every setting. Those principles are very clear, my friend. **It comes down to your character: honesty, integrity, and transparency as a person.** These are the things that Christ taught and **these are the things that are missing not only in Haitian society but the world over** (emphasis mine) (Pastor Lesly 2004).

Honesty, integrity and transparency as a person are the elements of character that are part of a Haitian Protestant ethos that can make Haiti a better country. Pastor Lesly strongly believes that these qualities are missing among all classes in Haitian society. What his statement also implies is that current Haitian power structures and institutions and any other forces responsible in shaping the character of Haitian citizens have failed. Protestant Christianity, then, becomes the only force that can rectify the imbalance wrought by political corruption and Vodou through the development of the character of each individual Haitian.

This issue of character is important to Pastor Lesly with regard to Haitian children. It is the responsibility of future generations to determine whether Haiti will become a functioning nation-state or a nation-state eternally mired in poverty, environmental degradation and insecurity. This issue of *karaktè* among children of Haitian descent born in diasporic contexts was also important to Brother Jean-Baptiste whom I interviewed in Nassau, Bahamas in 2005.

## **JEAN-BAPTISTE, THE HAITIAN CHILDREN OF NASSAU, AND KARACTÈ**

As part of a larger project concerning the Haitian Protestant population in the Bahamas, I interviewed Jean-Baptiste. Raised on the island of La Tortue, Jean-Baptiste, a 34-year-old Haitian male, was raised as a Protestant in Haiti. Although his parents were Catholics, he was part of a generation of Haitian children who went to Protestant schools for most of their education. Unlike other Haitian Protestants, who accept Jesus Christ as their personal savior personally or have someone pray with them as an actual conversion act, Jean-Baptiste never made a conscious decision to accept Christ but was baptized at his church in 1995 or 1996 at his home church, L'Église Baptiste Bethanie de Safoleur.

When he recounted his childhood, Jean-Baptiste reminisced with laughter and joy. His childhood was relatively carefree unlike his adulthood which is occupied with responsibilities which he thinks about frequently. A member of International Tabernacle of Praise Ministries since its inception, Jean-Baptiste had been living in Nassau for four years. At the time of our first interview, he had aspirations of becoming a pastor when he was a child and was working towards this goal in Nassau. But when we stopped that interview and resumed it at a later date, his objectives had changed. Instead of becoming a pastor, he was now interested in a different occupation which relates to the shaping of the character of the Haitian children in Nassau.

When Jean-Baptiste was young, his parents enrolled him in the Haitian Scout program which helped him grow into the person he is today; a Scout leader of the Haitian children in Nassau, Bahamas. Started in Britain in 1908, the Boy Scout organization was founded by Robert Baden-Powell, a former soldier who created activities to improve the

character and training of British boys in response to a perceived moral and physical degeneration of Britain. Scouts participate in marching, drill, games, camps, picnics and the teaching masculine virtues (Proctor 2002). In Haiti, the Scouts d’Haïti are engaged in the development of the country through environmental protection, fighting illiteracy and services to the community.

In Nassau, Jean-Baptiste’s Scout work takes place with boys and girls. The children take part in camping trips and learn Christian songs in English and Haitian Creole. While comparing the differences between children born and raised in Haiti and Haitian children born and raised in Nassau, Jean-Baptiste noted the importance of cultural institutions like the Scout association in the formation of the character of children. Growing up in Haiti, Jean-Baptiste felt he was a better person because he went to church, schools run by Baptists and the scout program. He felt there was a huge difference between children born and raised in Haiti and the Haitian children born and raised in the Bahamas and looked to Haitian parents and Bahamian cultural institutions as the reason for the differences:

...there’s a big difference between a Haitian child who’s in Haiti with a child who’s in the Bahamas. Why? The first reason is because the child who comes, the parents had the children in the Bahamas, it’s the parent who quits. The word *demisyone*, how can I explain it? It’s because that parent is a parent of the community who came in search of something...in search of work to live, to take care of their family...He comes in search of “a life.” Now while he comes in search of a life he can make \$100, \$200 and then this \$200 is for **good (emphasis his)** things. It’s for children in school in Haiti. It’s for his mother. It’s for his father. It’s for taking care of people in Haiti and also for putting his children in school. It’s for...he can’t do it! It renders...the parent becomes discouraged. The parent *demisyone* (The parent gives up; quits)! He feels that he has stress, he has problems. He’s stressed!

And [this is] how that parent learns the conjugal life according to the way the Bible explains it; a bunch of parents who are practically common-law husband and wife. They are in *plasaj* (common-law marriage). According to the Scout movement, it says that “The good example is above and a parent is the exemplary example” for a

child...The child is about 12 or 13 years old. The child suspects you have a boyfriend at the house. And then the child suspects you have someone, you're talking "chouchou (sweetheart, darling)" all the time on the telephone...the child is intelligence, the child understands. Watch! The child is following (the example you've put in front of them). The child is observing you. Now tell me all you want when this child acts out and you can't watch what and when they're doing it! Because (the child) didn't have a good example! You're not a (good) example to the child! The child takes people outside as his or her example because the comportment of the parent is not good!

...For those Haitians (born in the Bahamas)...there aren't too many good examples. At all! Because the Haitian born and raised in the Bahamas is stuck on imitating others! Imitating Americans! Imitating other countries! Pants sagging. A bunch of big boots. A bunch of earrings in their ears. They put chains on their feet, they put rings on their feet, braided hair. It's like you feel that the Bahamian school system doesn't respond the way it should (Jean-Baptiste 2005).

In his critique, Jean-Baptiste continued his assail on the *karactè* of Haitian children in Nassau, which, in his opinion, is poor and he considers a problem of imitation. Jean-Baptiste feels that these children imitate the bad examples of their Haitian parents, Bahamian schools and what they see on the streets. In his opinion, these institutions are not properly shaping the character of Haitian children especially in comparison to children raised in the families and cultural institutions of Haiti. He argues that school in the Bahamas, an important institution that not only educates future generations but also helps to shape the character of the youth so that they can become productive future citizens, does not install the proper *karactè* in the Haitian children of the Bahamas. Schools, particularly the Protestant schools he attended in Haiti, are supposed to do a proper job of raising the type of Haitian who then becomes a good citizen; humble and respectful of authority. But in Jean-Baptiste's opinion, schools in Nassau are not doing a good job of shaping the character of Haitian children.

Why should Jean-Baptiste care about the behavior of Haitian children in Nassau? Why is the *karactè* of Haitian children born and raised in Nassau so important to him?

One explanation is that many Haitians in a transnational social field consider their children to be Haitian and believe that they represent Haiti wherever they are. As Georges Fouron, an American of Haitian descent, explains in his collaborative work with Nina Glick Schiller on long-distance nationalism among Haitians in the United States:

I represent the whole nation [of Haiti], not just my family. So whatever I achieve, good or bad, will mark the nation. If I succeed, the nation will be proud of me; if I fail, I will bring disgrace to the nation. Your obligation to the nation begins with the obligation to improve yourself and your family. As you improve yourself and your family, you are contributing to Haiti. If you abandon your family and it is known, then you bring shame to your nation (Glick Schiller and Fouron 2001: 61).

Although Jean-Baptiste is not taking care of his family in Haiti when he is shaping the character of the Haitian children of Nassau, he is acutely aware of their importance as they relate to the present and future of Haiti. They are Haitian and they should have proper comportment, as it is created in Haitian Protestant churches, so that they can become adults that continue the transnational relationship established when their parents migrated to the Bahamas: taking care of family in Haiti and being successful so they are tangible and symbolic assets to Haiti. Although he has a wife and two sons in Haiti who are growing up without him, Jean-Baptiste feels that it is his duty to stay and help build the character of Haitian in Nassau.

## **CONCLUSION**

How and why do Haitian Protestants within a transnational social field link their conversion and maturation as Protestant Christians as a solution to Haiti's current crisis? Haitians convert to Protestant religions for many reasons but as the result of their conversion, their development into Protestants, and their activities in the religious communities they live in within a transnational social field, they contribute to a larger

critique of what they feel is necessary for a positive transformation of Haiti into a viable nation-state. As part of their critique of Haitian society, Haitian Protestants within a transnational social field reinterpret *Bwa Kayiman* not as a liberatory moment in Haitian history but recast it as the exact moment that formed the foundation of Haiti's current misery. Furthermore, many Haitian Protestants in a transnational social field view the continued practice of Vodou as a religion that has deleterious effects on Haitian society.

*Karactè* is of utmost importance to Haitian Protestants in Haiti, the United States and the Bahamas as a foundation for the reshaping of Haiti as a viable nation-state.

*Karactè* is developed and maintained primarily through the practice of Protestant Christianity in churches, programs and missions. Character is of utmost importance to Haitian Protestants because it is supposed to help Haitians become assets to their communities and, in the opinion of a growing number of Haitian Protestants within a transnational social field, represent the nation of Haiti positively unlike those Haitians who continue to practice Vodou.

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<sup>1</sup> The Haitian population of the Bahamas is estimated to be between 30,000 to 60,000 people. The overall population of the Bahamas is approximately 309,000 (<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/bf.html>).



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<sup>2</sup> <http://undp-usa.blogspot.com/2006/07/haiti-after-elections.html>.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.libertypressnews.com/modules/news/print.php?storyid=1>

<sup>4</sup> <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Carrefour/message/222>

<sup>5</sup> At first glance, the comment that “only God can change Haiti” made by Haitian Protestants interviewed in Nassau, Bahamas appears to relieve Haitian Protestants from any individual responsibility from transforming Haiti. I argue that by invoking God and linking God to the amelioration of life in Haiti, the Protestant God that Haitian Protestants follow becomes the only way for Haiti’s endemic poverty to be eradicated and for Haiti to stabilize economically and politically so that some can eventually return to their homeland or others could live outside of Haiti without the burden of remittances and other transnational obligations.

<sup>6</sup> Since many Haitians live in the Bahamas as undocumented migrants, I have changed the names of the Haitian Protestant participants I interviewed in the Bahamas in order to protect their identities.

<sup>7</sup> “Feedings of the *lwa*” begin with substantial Catholic prayer, led by a lay priest. In order to serve one’s *lwa* attendance at mass and giving alms to beggars gathered at cathedrals are necessary. Ritual action entails enthusiastic, spectacular, multimedia performance involving Catholic prayer (in French), drumming, singing (in Creole), dancing, visual art, parading, spirit possession-performance, and offerings of food, drink, toiletries, and animal sacrifice (Richman 2005: 173).

<sup>8</sup> An example of this belief can be found in I John Chapter 3, verses 18 and 19 “Dear children, let us stop just saying we love each other; let us really show it by our actions. It is by our actions that we know we are living in truth, so we will be confident when we stand before the Lord.” Holy Bible, New Living Translation.

<sup>9</sup> Life History. Pastor Lesly, May 2004.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.