How did ancestral altars in southern Benin come to make space, in a very commonplace and ordinary way, for the major Christian symbol of the cross, and how did social actors using these altars come to request its inscription on them as relevant symbols for recalling their ancestors (ill. 045.)? This question is the starting point and framework of this short text on the religious modernity of vodun cults in present-day southern Benin.

For several centuries, the vodun religious system has been marked by a rationale of power accumulation, and vodun worshippers have been appropriating the religious forces of neighbouring peoples, which is a well known and widespread process in this part of Africa. Thus, for example, during its many military campaigns to supply the Atlantic and local slave trades, the Kingdom of Dahomey, the dominant political entity in southern Benin from the mid-18th century to the late 19th century, appropriated several cults of deities worshipped by their neighbours. Héviosso, a god of the sky and of lightning, Sakpata, a god of the earth and of eruptive diseases, Mawu and Lissa, a pair of gods linked to the world’s creation, are just a few examples of major deities of the Dahomian religious system whose foreign origin is recognized locally. Such cases are common on the Abomey plateau, home to the kingdom’s capital, where historically, as in other regions of Africa, the appeal and power of gods has been partly based on their foreign origin. Throughout its domination of southern Benin, the Dahomian monarchy saw its politico-religious salvation in the juxtaposition of cults, the accumulation of spiritual powers, and the assimilation of the religious forces of its neighbours. Such logic has largely prevailed in the ensemble of culturally and linguistically similar societies in Benin and southern Togo that are historically engaged in vodun cults.

Therefore, to return to the case of the Kingdom of Dahomey, it’s not surprising that the religion of the whites, with whom the Dahomian court and officials dealt directly since the mid-18th century via the Atlantic slave and other trades, was approached in the same spirit by the kingdom’s political elite. Since the second half of the 19th century, crucifixes were incorporated into the finery of several Abomey court dignitaries. These objects were, however, largely reinterpreted: only the king, who had the right to organize human sacrifices, wore a crucifix bearing the image of Christ; other dignitaries...


wore crosses bearing images of animals they had the right to sacrifice. Despite the Dahomey elite’s thorough reinterpretations of Christian symbols, their integration of them in their dress illustrates the openness of the vodun religious system to innovation, and even its penchant for novelty. And this dynamic didn’t end with the colonial period, which witnessed the emergence of still other cults and gods. In the second half of the 20th century, an explosion of H/omega-inspired imagery in the Mami Wata cult, itself borrowed in preceding decades from societies of the present-day Ghanian coast by the peoples of southern Benin, again clearly shows the receptiveness of the region’s cults to foreign religious possibilities.

Nevertheless, in southern Benin as elsewhere, the complexity of missionary and colonial encounters cannot be understood as a simple process of reinterpretation and assimilation that in the end left the local cultural matrix unchanged, having only appropriated new symbols while remaining profoundly faithful to the logic of an ‘authentic’ vodun religious system. Indisputably, intense religious diversification marked the last century in southern Benin, so much so that today we see the simultaneous expansion – to varying degrees, depending on the area – of Islam and reinforcement of Catholicism, and the development of charismatic, sometimes intensely proselytizing Christian movements of prophetic or Pentecostal inspiration. In different forms, Christianity today has become a major local cultural force, and the religious socialization of many Beninese now makes room for Christian ideas. That said, if part of the southern Benin population is now converted to one or another form of Christianity or Islam – which does not prevent a significant fraction of these people to also sometimes resort to vodun forces –, another part has remained essentially faithful to vodun cults (ill. 048.).

World religions have had a fundamental impact on the world views of contemporary practitioners of vodun, namely, the integration of a ‘patriarchal’ God of creation, whose existence almost no one in southern Benin today would think of denying. Yet the visual evocation of this God, including by those who remain faithful to vodun cults, occurs mainly through the representation of a cross, reflecting Christianity’s progressive gains in local legitimacy during the 20th century. Thus the F/o.smallcap/n.smallcap ancestral altars of the Abomey region, which at least since the 19th century were shaped like small metallic parasols known as asen, bear routinely representations of the cross. Such representations refer to a proverb expressing that ‘With God’s will, the name of [the deceased] will not be lost’, but also constitute a tacit sign of recognition that the deceased was a ‘child of God’, who has gone to be with God as well as with his/her ancestors. Thus Christianity has definitely contributed to reshaping the religious imagination of Christians and of those who remain essentially faithful to vodun cults. Indeed, in southern Benin today, many people consider that the deceased is leaving to be with God, while public evocations of hell are much more rare and concern only those, such as devout and militant Christians or Muslims, who demonstrate a less generous and less democratic conception of salvation. But beyond the mere appropriation of Christian symbols on F/o.smallcap/n.smallcap ancestral altars, the vodun religious imagination as a whole bears the mark of continuous interaction with Christianity over at least a century and a half. Today, southern
Benin vodun religious elites routinely become eminent actors in the transformation of contemporary vodun symbolism, deliberately establishing connections between their practices and the Biblical narrative, for example. Working with the vodun religious imagination in this way of course reveals itself in the material culture of cults, as the mural paintings in most temples attest. For in the same way that some cults now make ample space for Htsen-inspired imagery, illustrating in a surprising way the undeniably decentralized character of religious globalization (see above), other cults refer more directly to the meeting of the vodun world with the two ‘world religions’ of Islam and Christianity and to the local long-standing proximity that these religious traditions maintain. But permit me to provide a short ethnographic vignette to illustrate my point, by evoking the temple of Dah Gbèdiga, a pre-eminent face of contemporary Beninese vodun and a first-rate religious entrepreneur involved in representing traditional cults at the national level while maintaining close relations with high-ranking political actors.

Having resided in Cotonou for a few decades, Dah Gbèdiga, like many other vodun priests, has decorated his temple with telling motifs of the religious imagination of the god T’von Kpete Dela Alajfa, around which revolves the essence of his activities as a cult leader. In the room where the god’s altar is located, a fresco representing Adam and Eve shares space with a representation of Abraham’s sacrifice, while a figurative portrait of T’von near the room’s doorway represents the god as having almost Christ-like features and wearing clothes of clearly Muslim inspiration (ill. 045). Some years ago, Dah Gbèdiga told me that his T’von was ‘a Muslim’, and that the practices inspired by Islam in the worship of this vodun, such as the Friday rest observed by the deity, occupied a significant place in the cult’s economy. And in 2009, during our last conversation on this subject, Dah Gbèdiga explained that it was absolutely normal that his temple’s frescoes evoked other religious traditions in Benin. T’von Kpete Dela Alajfa, a vodun that arrived in Benin from Ghana in the early 20th century, is indeed, in Dah’s own words, a ‘universal’ deity - thus the representation of Adam and Eve to show that T’von is in the same league as the characters of the Christian narrative. As for Abraham’s sacrifice, in which an angel brought a lamb for Abraham to sacrifice in place of his son, Dah Gbèdiga drew an explicit parallel with the vodun ceremony through which one can neutralize a death threat by sacrificing a lamb (ill. 046).1-3

The making of such connections - or as Levi-Strauss called them, this ‘bricolage’ (‘do-it-yourself’ construction) - inescapably relies on partial similarities and limited resemblances, but it illustrates the workings of the religious imagination of vodun practitioners in contemporary Benin. In fact, as Dah Gbèdiga’s temple frescoes (and those ordered by many other cult leaders) show, vodun religious elites are engaged in a continuous effort to connect their deities to the evolution of the Beninese religious landscape. Yet it’s at least a century now since Islam and Christianity started to take an important place in the religious life of many in southern Benin. During that time, almost inevitably, vodun deities have found themselves drawn into interlaced meanings based essentially on connections and contrasts among religious figures in the region’s different religious traditions. The missionary demonization of African ‘traditional’ cults is well known across the continent, and vodun tradition was certainly not excluded from it: when translating the Biblical message into vernacular languages, missionaries used Lájigbe, a well-known deity of the vodun pantheon, to communicate their notion of ‘devil’. However, as temples such as Dah Gbèdiga’s show, the missionary effort to stigmatize did not go unanswered and, in certain respects, claims of T’von’s universality can be seen as a form of subverting that effort: by calling for a positive association with figures in the Bible, cult leaders such as Dah Gbèdiga offer ways of thinking about relations between religious traditions that are clear alternatives to the Christian and Muslim demonization of vodun cults by elite leaders of the ‘world religions’ and their growing local audiences. In fact, it is certainly not as a victim of such demonization that Dah Gbèdiga presents himself on southern Benin’s religious scene, but rather as a dignitary of a cult asserting legitimacy comparable to that of Islam and Christianity.

Capable of pursuing their religious endeavours by adroitly riding the waves of the globalization of spiritual exchanges, prominent Beninese dignitaries, especially the most well-educated, are also distinguished actors in forging changes in meaning in contemporary vodun tradition. In fact, parallel to the ‘hegemonisation’ of cults, which requilishes them as essentially cultural phenomena and as African heritage to be preserved, another way of reworking meaning in today’s Beninese vodun world revolves, a contrario, we could say, around specifying the religious character of vodun cults. For instance, a well-known vodun priest (and a good friend of mine) in Abomey told me recently how he was planning to publish a kind of missal of prayers with, notably, a full vodun Crédit beginning Un di nu vodun dit (“I really believe in vodun”), and a series of typical prayers to the main gods.4-5 Actually, projects reflecting the influence of the ‘Religions of the Book’ are multifarious, and generally suggest reinterpretations of vodun cults, whether as a peaceful religion, an ecological religion in harmony with nature, or a ‘universal’ religion. In an undertaking that aims in a way to ‘build a world religion’ and show that vodun is as socially and culturally dignified and respectable as other religions in Benin, some vodun elites have henceforth appropriated the agenda of universality, or even of monothemitism. For some cult leaders vodun cults are thus ‘universal’, while others even talk of the vodun religious system as a monotheism, where vodun deities are reinterpreted as intermediary powers interceding with a supreme god on behalf of men, like Catholic saints.

Certainly, this text does not provide an inventory of the complex dynamics that contribute to the social production of the contemporary vodun world. Nevertheless, I hope by the end of this brief article to have sketched the degree to which understanding today’s vodun tradition is inseparable from understanding the broader historical dynamics that inform African modernity, and how much the authenticity and traditionality of these cults reside, paradoxically, in their malleability and creativity - and not in an alleged fixed or timeless character, as some avidly held, nostalgic views of authenticity so stubbornly claim.