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The American Crusades: Exploring the Impact of Marine Persecution of Vodou in U.S. Occupied Haiti

Bridget Woody

In *Tell My Horse*, a 1938 personal account of and guide to her experiences in Haiti, Zora Neale Hurston reveals to the readers, “I know that there are zombies in Haiti. People have been called back from the dead.”¹ Hurston’s tantalizing language affirms one of the most sensationalized and fascinating aspects of Haitian vodou: the *zonbi*. Even preceding Hurston’s proclamation of vodou’s grim power, zombies had been a cultural phenomenon born of the American fascination with Haitian witchcraft, appearing first in the U.S. film *White Zombie* in 1932. The U.S. public was fascinated, and disgusted, with the idea of Haitian sorcery, no matter the realities of the religion itself. Significantly, Hurston’s book and the horror film both released at the tail end of a decade of United States military occupation of Haiti, out of which an unprecedented level of Haiti-centered news in America begun.

The 1915-1934 regime in Haiti began shortly after the passage of the Roosevelt Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine, and while its goals were to secure “the attainment of the peace of justice” and to ensure every nation “scrupulously recognizes and performs its duty toward others” the campaign was actually quite unpeaceful.² Military officials and individuals in Haiti did not demonstrate commitment to these lofty goals nor did they achieve some of the more specific, concrete, and covert aims of the occupation. The religion of vodou had inspired many fears amongst the Marines, and as such, the forces waged a war against vodou rather than improving the island. With their cultural crusade against Haitian vodou, U.S. Marines sought to “civilize” the nation

¹ Zora Neale Hurston, *Tell My Horse*, 3rd ed (Berkeley, CA: Turtle Island, 1981).

² Theodore Roosevelt, “1904 Annual Message to Congress,” Washington, DC, December 4, 1904. Our Documents.

<https://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=false&doc=56&page=transcript>.

by stamping out the rituals and behaviors they found threatening. However, by occupying Haiti from 1915 to 1938, the United States government and forces in many ways achieved the opposite of what they sought in Haiti, transforming Haitian vodou from a personal practice into a broader, more subversive form of worship.

In order to properly describe the impact of the U.S. occupation on vodou, I must first clarify the various terms writers use to refer to vodou and its related forms of worship. Period and modern authors' uses of voodoo, vodou, *vaudaux*, *vodun*, and other words interchangeably or synonymously warrants explanation. While one might describe the modern singularization of such terms to simply "voodoo" as an effort to replace linguistic variations of one word with a single term, the practice generally results in misuse. The anglicized voodoo, for instance, did emerge from the French-Creole word vodou; however, the selective use of only one of these terms is erroneous. Today, voodoo commonly refers to a general and ambiguous collection of American spiritual and magical practices with influence from West African religions such as Yorùbá.

In contrast, vodou, sometimes named *vaudaux*, is the most academically studied yet most misinterpreted religion of the group. Vodou is the Afro-Creole religion of Haiti, and it has been historically targeted as a subversive and uncivilized practice on the island. Its core pillars, however, rely upon interconnectedness and personal worship.³ Vodouizan, those who practice Haitian vodou, believe in a distant creator and thousands of *lwa*, or spirits, who are loyal to the central deity. Most of the actual practice of vodou centers around honoring and connecting with these *lwa*, which influence daily life.⁴ Group worship often takes place in private homes or outdoors rather than in churches or temples. Vodouizan

³ Ina J. Fandrich, "Yorùbá Influences on Haitian Vodou and New Orleans Voodoo," *Journal of Black Studies* 37, no. 5 (2007): 775-91.

⁴ Jeffrey E. Anderson, "Vodou in the Haitian Experience: A Black Atlantic Perspective," *Nova Religio* 21, no. 4: 120-121. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCOhost (accessed June 14, 2018).

believe this ensures better communication with spirits. Priests and priestesses, known as *Papaloi* and *Mamaloi* respectively, lead these sessions with song and dance, and sometimes conjuration or possession.⁵ For the most part, however, vodou consists of individuals following rituals and taboos in accordance with the central values of generosity and honor.

To clarify the other terms often confused with vodou, Louisiana voodoo is the Afro-Creole form of the generalized voodoo with practice centered in New Orleans. *Vodun* refers to traditional religions such as Yorùbá, practiced in regions in and around Benin.⁶ The appropriate definitions of these various religions and belief systems are important because of their differences. Louisiana voodoo, for instance, has a stronger Christian influence and history of symbolism than vodou.⁷ Referring to any of the religions plainly as voodoo and proceeding to describe its features would be analogous to calling all “religions of the book” (Islam, Christianity, and Judaism) Catholicism and then describing the latter. Therefore, I shall refer to Haitian vodou as such. When a source misnames vodou, I will not correct its usage but allow the error to reflect the writer’s time or misunderstanding.

A brief background on the history of Haitian vodou will help clarify why the U.S. Marine corps targeted the religion during their occupation. The foundations of vodou lie in the syncretic interactions of the diverse religions practiced by peoples captured during the 17th century slave trade. Along with the traditionalist African religions carried to the Americas, vodou draws symbolic and ritualistic elements from the Roman Catholic faith, imposed upon enslaved persons by the French *Code Noir* in 1685.⁸ Catholic

⁵ Anderson, “Vodou in the Haitian Experience: A Black Atlantic Perspective.”

⁶ Fandrich, “Yorùbá Influences on Haitian Vodou and New Orleans Voodoo.”

⁷ Ibid., 778.

⁸ Leslie Gérald Desmangles, *The Faces of the Gods: Vodou and Roman Catholicism in Haiti* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), *eBook Collection (EBSCOhost)*, EBSCOhost (accessed June 2, 2018).

symbolism was often used as a “vener” overlain upon Afro-Creole practices to subvert French oppression, but the church did influence the rituals of vodou as well. Serpentine symbols, for instance, did not appear in vodou nor its religious predecessors until Biblical stories including snakes were well known amongst Vodouizan.⁹ It should be noted, also, that many Haitians identify as both Catholic and Vodouizan despite the potential incompatibilities. Notably, vodou emerged in its own right as a creole practice, not of the native people of Saint Domingue (who were practically wiped out by disease in early days of the colony) but of the enslaved people who claimed agency through its practice. As mentioned, King Louis XIV outlawed the practice of any religion other than Catholicism in the *Code Noir* and labeled non-complying individuals as “rebels disobedient of... orders” and subject to punishment.¹⁰ Thus began a long-standing tradition of governments on the island to politicizing and outlawing the practice of vodou. Despite the role vodou played in the insurrections leading to the nation’s independence, authoritarian Haitian governments have outlawed vodou from the passage of the *Code Noir* to the independence of the nation in 1804 and in varying degrees from 1835 to 1987. Through the centuries and regimes, the prevalence of vodou has ebbed and flowed, but it has always had a presence on the island.

Examining the American rhetoric regarding vodou preceding the U.S. invasion of Haiti reveals why Vodou received so much backlash and oppression during the occupation. Haitian vodou was, in the U.S. media, a black sorcery which demanded deliverance. Generally, vodou was portrayed not as a deeply spiritual and unifying religion but as a sensationalized and violent cult. The American public received, with increasing frequency, reports of

⁹ Leslie G. Desmangles, “The Maroon Republics and Religious Diversity in Colonial Haiti,” *Anthropos* 85, no. 4/6 (1990): 475-82.

<http://www.jstor.org.libproxy.scu.edu/stable/40463572>.

¹⁰ “The Code Noir (The Black Code),” *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity*, accessed December 29, 2018, <http://chnm.gmu.edu/revolution/d/335>.

vodou ritual that were at best, exaggerated and misinformed, and at worst, falsified. *The New York Press* published an article in 1901 entitled “Haiti: Land of the Voodoo” in which the author proclaims the nation is “ruled by the voodoo drum” and describes (in ambiguous terms) a violent and unfamiliar ritual involving an animal sacrifice carried out in secrecy.¹¹ This was a common authorial position of the time, simultaneously invalidating Haitian self-governance and alarming readers.

Countless newspapers printed similar messages. Even when extricated from the black nation of Haiti, messages that regarded vodou and its theological cousins were distinctly negative, with authors in the American South who lamented that they were in land deeply influenced by “dark voodoo.”¹² The connections between the court of public opinion at the turn of the century and the military’s actions several year later become even more clear when expressed by the American marshals who too believed in the corrupting power of vodouism. One U.S. official, Admiral Colby Chester, stationed in Haiti in 1908 published in *National Geographic* an article decrying the ability of Haitians to exercise self-rule. Chester claimed the island was growing “blacker and blacker” and morally bankrupt.¹³ While the body of his argument addresses political instability as a sign of black failure, he also references vodou as another indication of a need for Christian intervention. Portraying vodou as a sign of how the people of Haiti were not developed enough to exercise self-rule set the stage for the crusade against vodou long before the invasion actually began. Since vodou was foreign, frightening, and historically linked to

¹¹ Haiti, “Land of the Voodoo, 1901,” *Current Literature (1888-1912)*, 12.

<https://login.libproxy.scu.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.libproxy.scu.edu/docview/124798340?accountid=13679>, (accessed May 13, 2018).

¹² “More Mediaeval Mummery,” *Health (1900-1913)*, 1906, 04, 204.

<https://login.libproxy.scu.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.libproxy.scu.edu/docview/90862919?accountid=13679>.

¹³ Colby Mitchell Chester, “Haiti: A Degenerating Island,” *National Geographic* 1908, 19, 200-217. *Readers' Guide Retrospective: 1890-1982 (H.W. Wilson)*, EBSCOhost (accessed June 4, 2018).

Haitian resistance, the U.S. military could justify intervening in its practice.

The Marines' campaign against vodou was multifaceted but ultimately centered around erasing any threat that vodou offered—primarily to the Marines themselves. An interesting aspect of many raids upon vodou temples or gatherings was the special attention paid to drums used in the vodou rituals. Recall that even preceding the invasion, *The New York Press* described Haiti as ruled by the “voodoo drum” rather than by vodou itself. Drums are quite noisy, which could obviously factor into the number of Marines whose accounts noted the drums in particular.¹⁴ However, Commanders and individuals corpsmen often would report the destruction of drums with “exceptional pride,” which seems to suggest a greater significance to the drums.¹⁵ I believe the attention paid to vodou drums, and the enthused accounts of their destruction, relates to Euro-American notions of militarism. In United States warfare, drummers and the various rhythms which they beat communicated commands to large forces as late as the American Civil War. Drums were implicitly connected to military orders in the collective consciousness of the U.S. Marines. Therefore, the drums (used for religious rituals) in Haiti were construed as a demonstrable and defeatable military threat by the forces of the occupation. As described in Congressional Hearings about Marine misconduct in Haiti, “wherever a voodoo drum was heard, [Marines] immediately got on the trail and captured it.”¹⁶ Drums

¹⁴ Pressley-Sanon Toni, “Haitian (Pre)Occupations: Ideological and Discursive Repetitions: 1915-1934 And 2004 to Present,” *Caribbean Studies* no. 2: 2014, 115. *JSTOR Journals*, EBSCOhost (accessed June 4, 2018).

¹⁵ United States Congress, Senate, Select Committee on Haiti and Santo Domingo, *Inquiry Into Occupation And Administration of Haiti And Santo Domingo: Hearing[s] Before a Select Committee On Haiti And Santo Domingo, United States Senate, Sixty-seventh Congress, First And Second Sessions, Pursuant to S. Res. 112 Authorizing a Special Committee to Inquire Into the Occupation And Administration of the Territories of the Republic of Haiti And the Dominican Republic* (Washington: Govt. Print. Off., 1922), 488.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 630-631.

represented the military's priority to eliminate that which threatened its regime.

Another demonstration of the military motivation behind oppressing the practice of vodou is the harshness of the punishments exacted against those discovered to be vodou leaders. Vodou priests and priestesses became a symbol, whether actualized or not, of depravity and manipulation in the Marines' eyes. The penalties for practicing vodou were extreme even on paper. Laws penalizing *sortilèges*, a generalized term referring to religious sorceries, included the repossession of all belongings and imprisonment for up to six months.¹⁷ On more than one occasion, individuals who U.S. Marines believed to be *Papaloi* awaiting trial were murdered in prison.¹⁸ The injustices of such treatment were ultimately a factor in the aforementioned Congressional hearings. In the same hearing interview, regarding mistreatment of Haitians by the U.S. Marines, witness Ernest Angell reports to Senator Medill McCormick and General Waller that the Senator of the Navy had been "strongly impressed with the number of Haitians killed" in the first Caco War, even adding that the vodou leaders amongst the Cacos must have been taught a lesson.¹⁹ Even during the investigation, the Marines actions were not actually condemned because vodou had been determined morally reprehensible. The Catholic Church even labeled vodou as a false religion.²⁰ Therefore, this religious oppression was a strategic and unethical decision receiving backing from American military officials.

The final and most ironic disparity between the proclaimed goals of the U.S. military and the results of the occupation lies in the idea that Marines would save Haitians from moral treachery. In efforts to dissuade Haitians from committing "immoral acts," the

¹⁷ Ibid., 588.

¹⁸ Kate Ramsey, *The Spirits and the Law: Vodou and Power in Haiti* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 118-76.

¹⁹ United States Congress, Senate, Select Committee on Haiti and Santo Domingo, *Inquiry into Occupation*, 632.

²⁰ Desmangles, *The Faces of the Gods*.

U.S. Marines acted with far more depravity than the Haitians ever had. In one Haitian man's open letter to the American public, he outlines in what ways the Marine occupation has violated principles of the American people. He declares the Haitian populace "conquered and helpless" under Marine control which has not exhibited "the slightest bit of evidence" of their stated pure intentions of stability and betterment.²¹ In fact, Hudicourt, who wrote the letter, describes the Marine occupation as cruel in the face of a public that, in general, is quite cowed. While acknowledging the rebellions against the Marine presence, he maintains that the majority of Haitians are a peaceful and religious people, robbed of their rights by American tyranny.²² Hudicourt's allusion to Marine forces treating average citizens with cruelty and discrimination are confirmed in accounts of the *corvée* system of forced labor. Another witness interviewed in the U.S. Congressional hearings, Mr. Evans, admits that Haitians were sensitive to the regular cruelty of the *gendarme* in building projects. He testifies that Marines and *gendarme*, the policing military instated for the duration of the American occupation, regularly beat and even tortured laborers for no reason other than increasing productivity or discouraging unfamiliar worship.²³ While I will not go into details of the hundreds of accounts of Marines abusing their power over the Haitian populace, it is important to recognize that torture, murder, and sexual violence were regularly overlooked aspects and instruments of the regime's order. In contrast to this American brutality, General Waller later confirms to the Senate that no American citizens or other foreigners had been killed in Haiti preceding the American

²¹ Pierre Hudicourt, "Haiti's Appeal to Americans," *Advocate of Peace through Justice* 84, no. 3 (1922): 95-97. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20659948>.

²² *Ibid.*, 97.

²³ United States Congress, Senate, Select Committee on Haiti and Santo Domingo, *Inquiry into Occupation*, 246.

invasion in 1915.²⁴ In light of this, it seems occupying Haiti was hardly an endeavor in stability and improvement.

Using such extreme measures to enforce obedience under the guise of a civilizing mission is even more ludicrous when considering some of the very actions cited as examples of barbarism in Haiti have no confirmed records. Misunderstandings of Haitian mythos and thinly veiled racism created an image of Haiti that was largely fictional. Cannibalism, for instance, was a commonly mentioned indication of black inhumanity. However, the common tradition of so-called cannibalism in Haiti is not the consumption of human flesh but rather the sacrifice of a goat or other animal symbolizing a human spirit.²⁵ In a piece published in 1907, Haitian author Jacques Nicolas Léger explains part of the issue with presumptions of cannibalism in vodou rituals. He discusses how if a practice so “shocking and horrible” were indeed occurring, there would surely be verifiable witness records of it—and there are no such confirmed accounts.²⁶ Additionally, he refutes claims that several practices that do occur are evidences of cannibalism; for instance, he explains that graves are desecrated not to consume the bodies, but to steal fine clothes and jewelry from corpses (as is common in many other impoverished societies). Since many of the foundational justifications for invading Haiti were sensationalist or outright untrue, the occupation itself was baseless.

While the American presence in Haiti undoubtedly enforced anti-vodou laws with an unprecedented ferocity, inconsistency and favoritism still undermined the success of the the Marines’ and the *gendarmes*’ crusade. Between regional and personal differences in the persecution of vodou, a consistent set of expectations for

²⁴ Ibid., 632.

²⁵ Erika Bourguignon, “The Persistence of Folk Belief: Some Notes on Cannibalism and Zombis in Haiti,” *The Journal of American Folklore* 72, no. 283 (1959): 36-46. doi:10.2307/538386.

²⁶ J. Nicolas Léger, *Haiti, Her History and Her Detractors* (New York: The Neale Pub. Co. 1907), 101-184.

Vodouizan was never fully realized. In the book *The White King of La Gonâve*, Marine Lieutenant Faustin Wirkus recalls his time stationed in Haiti, including his fascination with vodou and his coronation by the Vodouizan living on the island under his jurisdiction. Wirkus and his strange experiences capture the attitude some of the less prejudiced Marines had. Throughout his account, Wirkus struggles to reconcile his duty to enforce the anti-vodou laws and his fascination with the lived experiences of the religion, ultimately writing that he “very seriously believe[s] that it is unwise of the government to regulate the religious practices of its people unless they intend to create disorder.”²⁷ In accordance with this belief, Wirkus infiltrated many vodou ceremonies to observe and study the rituals rather than stop them or confiscate their religious artifacts as ordered. Admittedly, few experiences resembled that which Wirkus had in *La Gonâve* because for the most part, Americans did not work so closely with the Haitian populace in their region (and no other U.S. personnel managed to become a king of any form). However, many Marines made judgements calls disparate with the official laws prohibiting all practice of vodou and all possession of its traditional objects. Kate Ramsey recounts several such instances in *Spirits and the Law*. For example, one young private warned several Vodouizan of his commands to shoot all persons found with vodou “evidence,” seemingly to protect them from such a fate.²⁸ Even more common was the use of vodou as a reward system. If Haitians in a region behaved well and generally obeyed the American forces in the area, the troops would often allow Vodouizan to host dances and gatherings as a reward for their good behavior.²⁹ Incentivizing vodou in this manner made it into a sort of trophy, exchanging one American goal— obedient Haitians— at the cost of another— the

²⁷ Faustin Wirkus, *The White King of La Gonâve* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, Doran & Company, Inc., 1931), 167.

²⁸ Ramsey, *The Spirits and the Law*, 161.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 159.

civilizing mission. Similarly, Vodou became a more coveted, attainable practice rather than a disallowed belief system.

Haitians were not merely a passive people taking advantage of the loopholes and inconsistencies of American rule. Though the accounts of such occurrences are rare, Haitian leaders used the few instances of power they could grasp during the occupation to keep the traditions of their people alive. One interesting dynamic of Haitian power during the latter half of the occupation is the “indigenization” of the *gendarme*, or American led Haitian constable regimen. While Haitians only ever made up twenty-five percent of the *gendarme*, and within that a miniscule portion of police officers, evidence suggests some Haitian members of the *gendarme* were themselves Vodouists.³⁰ Haitian *gendarme*, for instance, were much more likely to grant permission to hold vodou gathering than their white, American counterparts.

The campaign against vodou found its only real motivation in the previously discussed attempts to eradicate the threats it made to the U.S. Marines regime, but the occupation ultimately failed to sever ties between the Haitian rebels and vodou. Considering the ties vodou had to resisting white occupation long before any U.S. intervention, troops were skeptical of the religion which seemed to foreign to them. As Dr. Benjamin Hebblethwaite describes, the “U.S. authorities understood that vodouists opposed the occupation and drew inspiration to resist from the religion,” particularly referring to the *cacos*.³¹ In this manner, the perceived threat of vodou was real: persons who practiced vodou tended to oppose the American invasion and sustained regime. However, the Marines’ misunderstanding of vodou and its followers caused their campaign against vodou to be largely unsuccessful. One such indication of the Marine’s failure was their focus on destroying vodou drums. As previously discussed, whenever troops would

³⁰ Ibid., 154.

³¹ Benjamin Hebblethwaite, “The Scapegoating of Haitian Vodou Religion: David Brooks’s (2010) Claim That ‘Voodoo’ Is a ‘Progress-Resistant’ Cultural Influence,” *Journal of Black Studies* 10 no. 71, 2015, 1-20.

confiscate or destroy vodou drums due to their obvious nature and militaristic connotations. By imposing their own cultural expectations and personal biases upon the vodou drums, Marines ended up overestimating their importance to vodou as a whole. A vodou drum is an instrument (in every sense of the word) of worship; its use parallels the singing of hymns and spirituals in the Christian tradition. Drums, contemporarily and during the years of the U.S. occupation, have been most commonly used in vodou celebrations of life and in Haitian dance, both of which are peaceful and completely non-threatening.³² By confiscating and destroying vodou drums, Marines did not suppress the practice of vodou, but they did complicate their enforcement of its prohibition. Some Vodouizan began using a percussive tube called a *ganbo* to perform the same purpose as drums, but in a smaller, more easily concealed form.³³ *Ganbo*, interestingly, were almost never confiscated. Even more Haitians began carrying out their vodou rituals and gatherings without loud ceremonies and celebrations, making it much more difficult for Marines to track and stop the non-compliance. More significantly, there is even some record of boisterous, conspicuous celebrations using vodou drums occurring on the same nights as *caco* attacks against Marines. In *A Marine Tells it to You*, Colonel Wise recounts one day in which his forces successfully captured an enormous drum at a peaceful gathering, only to be “ambushed immediately” upon their return to base by insurgent Haitians, indicating the drumming had been used as a distraction for a *caco* assault.³⁴ Thus, their campaign against vodou achieved the exact opposite of what the Marines had intended. Rather than pacify and weaken vodou practices, the occupation

³² J. Ridgeway, and J. Jean-Pierre, “Heartbeats of Vodou: For Many Haitian Immigrants, the Sound of the Drum Recalls the Religion and Culture of their Native Land,” *Natural History*, 30, 1998. *British Library Document Supply Centre Inside Serials & Conference Proceedings*, EBSCOhost (accessed June 8, 2018).

³³ Ramsey, *The Spirits and the Law*, 150.

³⁴ Frederic May Wise, “Haiti,” in *A Marine Tells It to You*, 2nd ed. ed. Meigs O. Frost, (New York: J.H. Sears, 1929), 130-38. Accessed June 8, 2018. The Internet Archive.

transformed vodou into a more potent and subversive force than it had ever been before.

Another American misinterpretation of vodou that resulted in the strengthening of Vodouizan' agency was the gross imagining of the *zonbi*. The conception of a zombie that lived in most Marines' minds during the occupation is largely the same as the generalized pop culture zombie that lives on today— a deceased person called back from death as an unaware monster— as reflected in many publications and the media of the time. However, the *zonbi* in which most Haitians of the era believed to some extent joins with the ideas related to cannibalism previously discussed. In vodou and in folk sorcery belief systems, the term *zonbis* most often refers to “people... transformed into animals” but can also refer to a reanimated corpse in a more familiar sense of a “zombie.” Even the undead *zonbi* has been misinterpreted by ill-informed U.S. citizens because while the *zonbi* resembles a monster in many ways, the Haitian fear of *zonbi*-ism is rooted in fear of becoming one after death rather than meeting one in life.³⁵ Using *zonbi*-ism like so many other aspects of Haitian culture, American forces touted the image of a zombie as evidence of Haitian savagery and the belief in *zonbis* as an indication of Haitian ignorance. To most American forces, zombies were a scary monster story that justified “saving” the backwards, black nation.³⁶

Yet again, the use of *zonbi*-ism against the Haitian people did not necessarily produce the desired effect on the island. In the U.S., I must admit that zombie centered rhetoric did its job in characterizing how Americans thought of Haitians. The American understanding of *zonbis* did not, however, work nearly as well in Haiti itself. American rhetoric and authoritarianism could not create a new idea of a *zonbi* in the minds of the Haitian people. Instead, the twisted understanding of “zombies” became a symbol of resistance and Haitian pride to many *caco* fighters and

³⁵ Bourguignon, “The Persistence of Folk Belief,” 39.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 40.

Vodouizan alike. As scholar Margaret Heady describes, “the sensationalist depictions of ‘voodoo’ and zombies in American writing were adopted by Haitians as one of the few sources of power and intimidation available to them.”³⁷ Faced with the much more powerful American military, Haitian opposition could use the undying zombie as a symbol for what the U.S. forces could never eradicate: a Haitian spirit. The Haitian Penal Code itself even notes the survival of *zonbi*-ism, noting the belief’s survival despite its illegality. Yet even as the law and rhetoric of the occupation sought to delegitimize Haitian religion and power, some Marines remarked that their commands gave weight to what they labeled superstition and sorcery.³⁸ By acknowledging and attempting to combat belief in *zonbis* and other elements of Haitian *sortileges*, the American military acknowledged the power of Haitian belief. Haitian reclamation of the *zonbi* was so strong, in fact, that its symbolism persisted after the end of the occupation. To Haitians, mythos regarding *zonbi*-ism fits comfortably into their intersectional identities as Vodouizan and Catholic (or Protestant), in conjunction with the Christian story of Lazarus. While in the Christian tradition, the story of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead with his godly power was never intended to be related to vodou, it confirmed the validity *zonbi*-ism to its practitioners. Despite the years of the American forces’ and the Catholic church’s attempts to alienate vodou from its plurality and practice, the *zonbi* remains an element of Haitian faith and pride to this day.

The most surprising impact the American regime left on Haitian vodou has little to do with the religion’s subversive power. U.S. Marines, through their violent and sustained presence, unknowingly became incorporated into the masses of *lwa*, or spirits, central to the faith of vodou. Rather than weaken the

³⁷ Margaret Heady, “Vaudou and the Marine: Jacques-Stéphen Alexis and Zora Neale Hurston on the American Occupation of Haiti,” *Atlantic Studies* 13, no. 2 (March 08, 2016): 282-300. Accessed June 8, 2018. doi:<https://doi-org.libproxy.scu.edu/10.1080/14788810.2015.1138026>.

³⁸ Ramsey, *The Spirits and the Law*, 156.

religion so influential to many Haitians, the American forces became a part of its mythos. One specific account of a naval officer's rebirth as a vodou spirit transforms the American imposition on Haitian nationalism into its own form. A vodou priest discovered the spirit and expressed that "Captain Deba... needed to be fed," potentially representing the way the Haitian people needed to accommodate for the cruel American regime.³⁹ However, the priest and his daughter also claimed the spirit was now too busy to ever again visit Haiti, casting out the the officer as a symbol of American power from the island. "Captain Deba" is only one example of an American imperial power becoming incorporated into the Haitian religion which, in life, they were obligated to persecute. Lieutenant Wirkus too alludes to an American influence within the vodou tradition. He describes a vodou gathering in which a "modern, white" spirit is referenced, which by definition could only be an American *lwa*.⁴⁰ These instances are not isolated and have left a persistent legacy on vodou and its practice in Haiti. Lauren Derby describes her observation of a recent vodou ceremony:

In 2008, at a ceremony for the gede spirits, which are propitiated on the Day of the Dead, I witnessed our hostess become possessed by Ogou Feray. She appeared in the khaki uniform of a US Marine, complete with epaulets and the flat-brimmed hat. Her procession was accompanied by a brass band, led by a bugle, that played US Marine tunes.⁴¹

Even considering the other failures of the U.S. enforced crusades against vodou in Haiti, the incorporation of American figures into the religion which they opposed is a firm mark of Vodouizan

³⁹ Lauren Derby, "Imperial Idols: French and United States Revenants in Haitian Vodou," *History of Religions* 54, no.4 (May 2015): 394-422. *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed June 10, 2018).

⁴⁰ Wirkus, *The White King of La Gonâve*, 287-292.

⁴¹ Derby, "Imperial Idols," 420.

reclaiming the negative impacts of the occupation for their own culture. Becoming a part of the vodou mythos was in no way a goal of the American Marines, but the Haitian people sustained their own interpretation of *lwa* in face of oppression.

The legacies of the 1915-1934 occupation that live on in vodou represent the resilience of the Haitian people rather than the violence of oppression. In that regard, the U.S. failed to suppress vodou. Irregularity in the United States' declared goals compared to the realities in Haiti capture just the beginning of some of the disconnect within the American regime. The persecution of vodou was uneven: in some cases, the Marines were violent and oppressive, but in other cases, punishments were lenient or non-existent on a personal level. While the U.S. forces mostly viewed vodou as uncivilized and twisted, they were unable to exact the destabilization of the religion they sought. In many ways, vodou only evolved under the occupation. It became more furtive and more difficult for the Americans to persecute through adaptation to the circumstances of the U.S. rule. Vodou also served as a valuable rallying point and symbol of Haitian-ness to the downtrodden people. By adaptation and evolution, the Haitian Vodouizan refused to allow a foreign power to dominate their system of worship, reclaiming every aspect of appropriation that they could. Like a *zonbi* or an echo of a drum, the Haitian people have marched forward in their practice of vodou.