

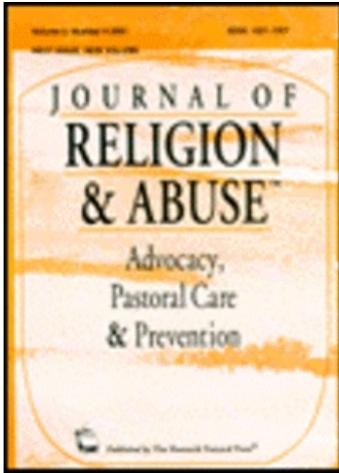
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# A Grassroots Religious Response to Domestic Violence in Haiti

Shelley Wiley

**ABSTRACT.** The Caribbean island nation of Haiti has a history of victory over slavery, and a history of violence, including violence against women and children. Haiti's traditional religion, Vodou, is a resource for change. The theology at the heart of Haitian Vodou stands in direct contrast to domestic violence. Centered on a theology of hospitality and equality, Vodou offers great potential as a voice of resistance against violence. Grassroots responses in various forms have begun to emerge from within Vodou, but to date there is no cohesive organization to pull these voices together. Work in organizing the religious responses denouncing domestic violence would provide the opportunity for a systemic change. *[Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2003 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]*

**KEYWORDS.** Haiti, vodou, grassroots, domestic violence, hospitality

Haiti is a country and a land much misunderstood in the United States. Most images people have, if any, are from television news reports of political violence and the need for the intervention of United Nations troops, or from the sensationalized and demonized portrayal of Vodou issued from Hollywood. What remains unknown is that Haiti is a country with a rich history, the first country in the world in which a group of slaves fought for and won their independence and formed a nation. That beginning, rooted in slavery and in the brutal racism that

came from it, as well as the resistance to it, is the centerpiece of Haitian history and culture. The religious tradition of Vodou developed during the slavery period, and brings together the spiritualities of many African traditions alongside of Native American and Christian traditions to form a voice of resistance to slavery. Unfortunately, the larger system of a dominance/submission worldview survived the revolutionary war to shape Haitian culture. That system continues in many forms, particularly in political and economic violence, and in domestic violence against women and children. The struggle to end domestic violence will be a long one. It will need support from all areas of Haitian life, governmental, social, and religious. In this paper I will discuss briefly the problem of domestic violence in Haiti, drawing from the work of Anne Fuller, Terry Rey, and Karen McCarthy Brown. I then turn to what I see as the beginnings of a grassroots response to violence against women and children, a response that is growing in women's groups and from Haiti's religious communities and the deep spirituality that shapes Haitian culture. It is these grassroots attitudes and events, still unorganized, in which the hope for a systemic response to domestic violence rests.

In the Spring/Summer 1999 journal of the Association of Concerned African Scholars, Anne Fuller published an article entitled "Challenging Violence: Haitian Women Unite Women's Rights and Human Rights." This article traces the ongoing struggle in Haiti to bring issues of violence against woman and children into public awareness so that a governmental response can be crafted. The process has been slow, and to date, attempts to make violent acts against women and children punishable by law have not garnered much success. In particular Fuller cites a Haitian women's group's analysis of discrimination in the law:

Adultery is classified as a second-level crime, and women who are caught are punished with three months to two years imprisonment while men pay only a fine . . . Rape is never actually defined in the law but is classified among crimes against morals. The courts have attributed less importance to the rape of a woman who is not a virgin on the pretext that her honor is not at issue . . . Domestic abuse has traditionally been seen as an internal family matter and not penalized.<sup>1</sup>

Fuller continues to discuss how the formation of some women's rights groups has helped to raise awareness of the issues, and even slightly modify the law, but that there is still much work to do to change public views on domestic violence. In Haiti today, the need for awareness of domestic violence

is obscured by the upheaval in political and economic life. The political situation is unstable, with a lack of confidence in the government to affect any issues. Corrupt police and a nearly non-functioning judicial system are a serious threat to human rights. The current estimated per capita income in Haiti is \$250 U.S. per year, due in part to rampant unemployment. Very few people can read and write. There are serious deficiencies nation-wide in health care, clean water, and access to human services. When struggling against these very real societal issues, concerns for the rights of women and children are often overlooked.

In the last decade, however, women's rights groups and feminist scholars have begun to focus on the problem of domestic violence, as exemplified by Fuller's analysis. Her work draws on the 1997 document that grew from a UNICEF-supported investigation entitled "An International Tribunal Against Violence Toward Women in Haiti." While that investigation has been criticized as methodologically weak, it was published, thus making some information about domestic violence available. The tribunal was organized by those who were outraged at the systemic violence against women and girls that was a part of the military reign in Haiti.

From September 1991 until September 1994, Haiti was in the control of the military. This period began when the military regime ousted president Jean-Bertrand Aristide from power. Many sources document the reign of terror that ensued, with military and police using torture and murder as means for crushing any resistance to the regime. Terry Rey has documented the brutal way in which the systematic rape of women was used as a form of political intimidation and terrorization. He writes, "In 1995 I conducted a survey of females who had been victims of abuse during the Cedras regime. Of ninety-eight respondents, forty-five reported having been raped. Two rape victims stated that they had been raped on two separate occasions, and two others on three and four occasions respectively, for a total of fifty-two incidents of rape."<sup>2</sup> He then sets this data in the context of reports to human rights organizations, and finds that his survey correlates with the organization's information.

This report on the use of rape by the military does not suggest that rape was uncommon in Haiti before 1991. Rey reports that "according to a 1990 study of the scope of sexual violence in Haiti, the first sexual experience of nearly one in three Haitian women transpires against her will."<sup>3</sup> Evidence gathered by women's groups and other human rights organizations documents the reality that Haitian women are treated as property. Haitian Vodou both condemns and legitimates this view of women.

Karen McCarthy Brown has done extensive anthropological work in Haitian Vodou, especially in relation to women. In *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn*, she states: "Haitian culture is a misogynist culture. The ideology of male supremacy is fierce. Haitian humor is rife with anti-woman jokes, and domestic violence is a frequent occurrence. Vodou has not escaped the influence of this attitude. Certain *oungan* [Vodou priests], for example, are notorious for mistreating, in various ways, the women who become *ounsi* (ritual assistants) in their temples."<sup>4</sup> Women's groups have studied the issue of domestic violence, and their data supports the prevalence of misogyny and violence in Haitian culture.

An ongoing problem of violence against children is the system of child servants, or what many call child slavery. Poor, rural families send their children to the city to live with families. The promise made is that in return for their work as a servant in a household the children will receive an education and a better standard of living. These children are known as "resteveks." In reality, the lives of these children are filled with many forms of violence. Many are forced to live in squalor in a family home, spend long hours working for the family with little chance for education. Repeatedly, data indicates that these children are used as the sexual toys of all older males in the family. This system of child abuse has received wide attention during the past few years, with important publications in such texts as *Libete*.<sup>5</sup>

Beyond these published sources, there is my own research and conversation with Haitian women. One Mambo said to me, "Men in Haiti seem to think it is written into the definition of the word "man" that they must control and physically abuse women. I don't see much enlightenment spreading around." Another woman in Haiti reported to me a new approach muggers take. If they are attacking a woman, they will yell at her as though she is a lover or wife, knowing that if others witness the attack they will assume it is "simply" a domestic matter and leave the man alone.

My work over the past three years has been focused on attempts to represent the theology of Vodou. Shrouded in mystery, Vodou remains greatly misunderstood and misrepresented in the United States, in spite of some good scholarship, journalism and fiction completed in the past two decades. Haitians say they "serve the lwa (spirits)." Theologically, Vodouisants acknowledge one creator God who becomes known to people through the spirits, each of whom manifest a different attribute of God or of the world. At its very core, Vodou is relationship-based. The lwa are part of the community through ceremonies in which they possess their devotees. The way this deeply theological relationship gets worked out is through the interaction between people and the lwa

they serve, and through the larger community, including the priests (Houngan) and priestesses (Mambo). Houngan and Mambo serve their communities by providing guidance and often health care by traditional healing means. They are central to inviting the spirits into the community life, and they serve as interpreters of spiritual meaning. The presence of the spiritual world is very real in Vodou theology, and through all of the beliefs and rituals is the recognition that the Creator God creates all people equal.

What began to get my attention was the contradiction between the basic teachings and worldview of Haitian Vodou and domestic violence. Because Haitian Vodou is a religious tradition that grew in part as a resistance to slavery, it developed within it a central understanding of the worth and dignity of every person. Women and children alongside of men are recipients of the lwa and play important roles in religious expression. Women also serve as spiritual leaders, and in contemporary settings, may be equal to men in their authority. A central aspect of the theology, then, is that of theological hospitality. The spirits welcome people, and work with them. People welcome the spirits into their lives. People practice hospitality toward each other.

In reflecting on the misogynist culture in Haiti, Karen McCarthy Brown goes on to set the context for the discrepancy between the culture and the worldview envisioned in the Vodou system. She writes, “in spite of this [misogyny], Vodou empowers women to a larger extent than the great majority of the world’s religious traditions. As Haitians struggled to survive and adapt both during and after slavery, women gained social and economic power, gains that are mirrored in the influence of women within Vodou.”<sup>6</sup> Brown has documented this contemporary role women’s leadership especially within urban communities, where the influence of contemporary culture and women’s rights has had a greater impact.

The central representations in Vodou are in conflict with domestic violence, because that very violence denies the relationship each individual person has with the spirits, and their value within the community. Because Vodou shares Haitian culture with a deeply held patriarchal worldview, however, there is tension. The popular voice today is beginning to flout that tension to urge an end to violence against women and children, but it has a long tradition of misogyny it must engage and overturn. Some examples will demonstrate the societal and religious struggle against domestic violence.

One particular incident, presented here as a case study, demonstrates the beginnings of a response in religious communities to domestic vio-

lence. In May 1999 I was in Port-au-Prince, the capital of Haiti, staying at a well-known guesthouse. There was a nurse practitioner named Mike from Texas also staying at the guesthouse. He was spending his days in Cite Soliel, the desperate slum on the water's edge, a place where 250,000 people live in a little less than one square mile. One day he noticed a very small boy lying on the side of the road, unprotected from the hot Caribbean sun. He went over to check on him, and what he found was a boy on the brink of death. Mike worked on him and got him breathing again. He then took him to the clinic, where he got an I.V. into him and began the process of reviving him and then he took him to the hospital. Then Mike went about finding out who this boy was. He went back to where he found him, and was able to find out that the little boy's family lived close by. He went to talk to them, and found a mother living in fear. The little boy's story began to emerge. He had epilepsy. He would have seizures that racked his entire body. The boy's father believed he was possessed by an evil spirit, and would beat him. This had just happened the night before, and the father had had enough. He had beaten the child and then expelled him from the house for good. The mother seemed to love her son, but was clearly afraid of disobeying her husband, and so had left her young son out on the street to die. Mike was able, along with the hospital staff, to revive the boy. He looked about 4 years old, though in reality he was more like 7. He was severely malnourished, and they began giving him nutritional supplements. When Mike brought him from the hospital to the guesthouse, the young boy slowly began to come back to life. Mike found a home for orphaned boys that was willing to accept this child as a resident. All he needed legally was a signed document from the parents turning the boy over to the home.

The small hut that was the family's home was just across from an Houngan's home. Mike had talked with the mother, and she was more than willing to sign the papers for her son's sake, but she was afraid because of what her husband might do. Mike arranged to talk with the husband. They met in the open space out between the family hut and the Houngan's area. Mike explained the plan to the father, and the father demanded that Mike pay him \$200 for the boy. Suddenly, the Houngan came running out into the midst of them. He got in front of the father and told him that his abuse had gone on long enough, that the boy was not "possessed" but had a physical illness, that he would NOT ask for money for his son but would instead sign the papers, and furthermore that he would stop beating his wife. The Houngan had had enough. As Mike told me later that day about the encounter with the Houngan, he described him as a strong, powerful man with a great deal of presence.

The father quickly signed the papers releasing his son, as the Houngan told him to do.

I reported this story to a Mambo. Her response was “Yes! Very often Houngans, Mambos, or the abused individual’s “relatives” within a Vodou congregation will intervene with the abuser. It’s very much on a case-by-case basis, though, no class action.” Her response reflects the tension. It is significant that this event happened in Cite Soliel. The people living there have almost no access to education. Simply staying alive in that community is threatened by all the poor quality health issues, as well as various forms of violence. That this religious leader chose to take a stand demonstrates, if only in one instance, that the discontinuity between domestic violence and Vodou beliefs can be recognized. The problem becomes one of getting that message out to all parts of Haitian society.

Because over half of the population of Haiti cannot read or write, many varied forms of communication have developed. Analysis of these forms demonstrates the conflict between a cultural acceptance of violence against women and children and the basic worldview of Vodou. For example, two popular Haitian bands that incorporate the rhythms and lyrics of Vodou songs in their popular music have produced songs that specifically mention the need to stop violence against women and children. In the rural areas radio is the key form of communication, and this voice against violence is being heard. In religious art, poetry, liturgy, and teaching, at the popular level, violence is condemned. In February of 1999, I was walking down a street in a Port au Prince neighborhood, and there was a large mural painted on the side of a building, picturing a man, a woman, and a small child, with the man in a tender and protective posture. Painted across the mural was the message “It’s time to stop violence against women and children.” In other neighborhoods there have been reports that local men have begun to go out and find any officials who committed crimes against women and deal with them directly. In November 2000 I was in Atlanta for a conference on Haitian women that was part of the Haitian Cultural Awareness Week celebrations. Dr. William Leslie Balan-Gaubert, a Haitian History scholar-in-residence at the University of Chicago spoke on the topic “God Our Mother.” In speaking about his native Haiti he said, “Women have been silenced, but the feminine principle has not.” Because he sees the feminine principle as alive and well within the Vodou tradition, he sees great hope that respect will return to women as men learn to say no to the lies of patriarchal dominance. That is one step in the right direction.

Karen McCarthy Brown demonstrates how the Vodou tradition pushes the tension even further. She writes, "Few other places in the world rival Haiti in recognizing women's religious leadership. In part, this is an inheritance of the African homeland where women could be cult leaders, even though the religious institutions with social status were led by men, as were the public ceremonies. But the more significant source of women's religious power in Haiti is, I believe, the recent shift in family structure brought on by the movement of large numbers of people from the countryside to the cities [and the influence of contemporary urban themes mentioned earlier]. When women's religious leadership is unfettered by male control, that religion begins to take account of the circumstances of women's lives. Women become visible. In Vodou, the female spirits have begun to tell the stories of women's lives from their point of view, in striking contrast to religious systems in which goddess figures function largely as the carriers of male projections about women."<sup>7</sup>

Brown's analysis can be expanded by considering the influence of the large number of Haitians who have left Haiti and formed strong communities in Canada, the United States and Europe, especially Great Britain. In the article cited earlier, Anne Fuller discusses the role women's rights groups have played in condemning domestic violence. As women and men alike have had access to education and a more stable economic life, the critique of domestic violence has grown within the Diaspora communities and now travels back to Haiti. Starting in 1986, women's groups began to form in Haiti. In her article "Challenging Violence," Fuller briefly discusses this emergence and the connection these groups have to Haitian women abroad. These women's groups began the process of critical analysis of domestic violence in Haiti, but through the intervening years their voices have waxed and waned depending on the larger political climate. Many of these groups survive, however, including SOFA and *Kay Fanm*, and they continue to try to draw attention to the needs of Haitian women and children.<sup>8</sup>

I have focused on the Vodou tradition in Haiti. There are also many different Christian communities, and they share the same mix of misogyny and condemnation of domestic violence as do Christian communities in the United States and as do various Vodou communities. Even within these traditions, the grassroots voice is growing as people make the connection between general violence in society and domestic violence in particular.

At this point in history, the attempt to analyze the success of these grassroots movements encounters great problems. These problems in-

volve all the basic concerns: cultural, governmental/political, economic, and religious structures. There is a deeply patriarchal cultural belief that women should only concern themselves with domestic work and childcare. With little representation of women in the governing bodies, changing the judicial structure so that domestic violence is prosecuted will be a long struggle. The struggle for control of the country at the political level, and the violence often associated with it, also impedes movements for the end of violence against women and children. In the face of drastic poverty, malnourishment, unemployment and inadequate health care, the problems of domestic violence are not being systemically addressed in official bodies that would lead to changed lifestyles.

The resources for denouncing violence are strong within both Vodou and Christianity. The problems at the religious level are also complicated. Vodou has no governing structure. There is no national body, no tradition-wide education of practitioners. While individual leaders have begun to reject domestic violence, their voices tend to be very localized. As Brown discussed, the voices of the female spirits have begun to address issues of violence, but this phenomenon is also localized. Much of the Christianity practiced in Haiti represents the traditions long influenced by idea that women should be submissive. While there are no official religious groups that advocate violence against women and children, the problem still tends to be seen as a matter to be resolved within families. Religious groups condemn violence, and at this point it is largely political violence that takes center stage.

It is difficult to quantify the grassroots movements that challenge domestic violence. There are parallel movements, such as women's groups and the poor peoples' movements, that have pushed for change in Haitian government. A brief examination of one example will serve as a paradigm for the promise of the Vodou spirituality in changing attitudes toward domestic violence.

On January 10, 2002, seventeen women's organizations in Haiti came together to issue a condemnation of the political violence and urged the people of Haiti to work together and to end their political battles. That document states in part,

“We, the women of Haiti state our full support of the programs continually being implemented by Lavalas in the fields of literacy, cooperative development, road construction, schools, radio (educational) and television (educational) for the children, improving local hospitals, scholarship for students, creation of universities and other initiatives that we did not mention.”<sup>9</sup>

The struggle will be to move the religious leaders themselves to condemn domestic violence in their communities.

The “no” to domestic violence is growing louder, and it is precisely within religious communities, Vodou and Christian, that we can find the resources to organize a sustained response. At this point there is no organized movement, but as in other movements in Haiti’s history, these first voices have the power to gain strength and numbers. Through gradual conversion of Vodou leaders to condemn violence, through the voices of women, through the influence of family members who live in urban areas and who have had access to education and economic stability, and through a reclaiming of the core value of hospitality within the Vodou tradition, I see the beginnings of a grassroots response voicing that “no.” Perhaps one of the best places to hear it is in these words by Theodore “Lolo” Beaubrun, one of the lead singers in the popular Racine/Vodou group Boukman Eksperyans. The words of this popular band are being heard around the country, and with their deep spiritual connection to the Vodou tradition, they hold an authority in local communities. Here is hope. I quote from his message printed inside the English version of the compact disk jacket for *Libete*:

“To our friends, old and new, who are listening to this album: What is the freedom we must take? What kind of freedom is this that even money can’t buy? What is this freedom without ego, false pride, selfishness, inner division?

This freedom is beckoning us to respect, to understand, to be compassionate, to love and to be generous. This freedom tells us to learn to know ourselves so we can get rid of ignorance, of material dependence and of the slavery of the social class system. This freedom liberates us from the Domination System surrounding us which is based on passive and active violence . . . The Bible called this System Babylon, and Babylon has turned us into white, black, yellow, and red zombies, aimless little human robots!

We have been trapped in violence ever since we were kids: Domestic violence, violence in the schools, violence in the media, violence against nature, violence against women and children, too many forms of violence! Too much violence!

It isn’t easy to get out of this trap because Babylon is acting as if it was God . . . But there is no greater power than God! Capitalism,

Communism, Fascism, Bullshittism are products of the System which tries to prevent us from practicing Love, Truth, and Justice.”<sup>10</sup>

#### NOTES

1. *Challenging Violence: Haitian Women Unite Women's Rights and Human Rights*. Anne Fuller. Special Bulletin on Women and War, Association of Concerned Africa Scholars. 1999.
2. Terry Rey, “Junta, Rape, and Religion in Haiti, 1993-1994,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, 15, no 2 (Fall 1999), p. 75.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 79.
4. *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn*. Karen McCarthy Brown. University of California Press. 1991. P. 220.
5. Charles Arthur and Michael Dash, *Libete: A Haiti Anthology*. This text covers a wide variety of issues related to Haiti and its history, and includes excerpts from primary sources.
6. Brown, 220.
7. *Ibid.*, 255.
8. *Solidarite Fanm Ayisyen* (SOFA, Haitian Women's Solidarity); *Kay Fanm* (Women's House).
9. From a press release on January 10, received from rdol@caramail.com.

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