Without One Ritual Note: Folklore Performance and the Haitian State, 1935–1946

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During a roundtable discussion focused on the early history of Haitian staged folklore performance that took place in Port-au-Prince in April 1997, one panelist noted that the so-called mouvement folklorique had “really begun” under the post–U.S. occupation presidency of Elie Lescot (1941–46). Another then observed that “paradoxically, you also had under Lescot the kanpay rejete;” the Roman Catholic Church’s violent crusade against “superstition,” which the state backed in 1941–42 with military force. This article focuses on the logic of that historical conjunction, examining official cultural nationalist policy in Haiti during the late 1930s and early 1940s in relation to the postoccupation legal regime against les pratiques superstitieuses (superstitious practices).

The latter was a new penal category, instituted by Lescot’s predecessor, Sténio Vincent, a year after the end of the nineteen-year U.S. military occupation of Haiti in the summer of 1934. Repealing the longstanding legal prohibition against les sortilèges (spells), Vincent’s government tightened the official interdiction of particular forms of popular ritual, but also, for the first time, affirmed the right of peasants to organize “popular dances.” The article will consider the implications of this legal formulation in light of the Haitian state’s support for the church’s “antisuperstition” campaign and its simultaneous construction and promotion of ritual dance as an
official national sign. I would like to suggest that there was more complementarity than contradiction to these policies, and that, in fact, the postoccupation state’s assertion of modern national identity even seemed, at times, to depend on their simultaneity. Through their conversion to “national folklore,” popular cultures long figured in the West as evidence of Haiti’s primitivism could be constructed as official indices of national identity, but only, it seemed, on the condition that they were figured as “revivals” of a transcended cultural past.

Throughout the article, I will also consider how practitioners of the religious complex known as Vodou negotiated their own participation in the codification and performance of folklore at a moment when popular religious practices were subject to violent repression on the part of both state authorities and the Catholic Church in Haiti. My research on what became collectively known as the mouvement folklorique in the early 1940s suggests that a number of sèvitè (“servants” of the spirits) were instrumentally involved in the construction of the folk, whether working as informants to ethnologists and theater directors, drumming for official presentations of music and dance folklore, or performing in independent folklore events in Port-au-Prince. How certain sèvitè used their involvement in the production of folklore to protest persecution by the church and state during these years will be a key focus of the pages that follow.

“Better Than the Laws Which Can Only Be Borrowed Finery”

Imperial myths of peasant ritualism had never been so highly charged as on the eve of the U.S. military departure from Haiti in August 1934. However, neither had Haitian popular cultures ever been so forcefully figured as the matrix for Haitian national identity. During the occupation, an intense nationalist concern for the ethnological study and literary representation of the folk developed in Haiti among young urban intellectuals and writers. Carl Brouard, a poet and one of the cofounders of the short-lived landmark literary journal, La revue indigène, introduced the iconoclastic “new school” as a reaction against the “too servile imitation” of European models that, he and others charged, had stunted the development of Haitian arts and letters up until that time. The proponents of what became known as indigénisme defined their break with the past by figuring popular cultures as the proper source and subject for the building of a national literature. Michel Buteau notes that while there had been earlier efforts to establish a national literary school based on popular themes, most significantly that advanced by Pierre Nau in the 1830s, none of these initiatives exerted the political force that indigénisme would, particularly on state policy. “Above all,” Buteau writes, “indigénisme changed the terms of the debate.”

No one was more influential in the project of reevaluating Haitian popular cultures toward national ends than Jean Price-Mars, medical doctor, teacher, state-
man, and founder of what became the Haitian school of ethnology. Born in 1876 at
Grande Rivière du Nord, Price-Mars was a generation older than most of the self-
identified *indigénistes* and not himself a poet. But he galvanized the movement
through his persistent public critique of the Haitian elite’s failure to unite the coun-
try. In 1928, a number of his lectures were published as *Ainsi parla l’oncle* [So spoke
the uncle], Price-Mars’s classic study of Haitian folklore and popular traditions. In
this enormously influential work, which a group of his students later called “the basic
book of our folklore,” Price-Mars attacked the elite’s cultural identification with
France and the West more generally at the expense of “all that is authentically
indigenous—language, customs, sentiments, beliefs.” He charged that the persist-
tence of this “bovarysme collectif” precluded the possibility of national unity, and
had weakened the state to such a degree that Haiti was left vulnerable to U.S.
takeover in July 1915. “Our only chance to be ourselves,” he wrote, “is to not repu-
diate part of our ancestral heritage. And . . . as for this heritage, eight-tenths of it is
a gift from Africa” (290).

Thus Price-Mars called for the reevaluation of Haitian culture through the
intensive study of folklore, a concept that he defined, after the French folklorist Paul
Sébillot, as the “oral traditions of a people,” encompassing the inventory of “legends,
tales, songs, riddles, customs, observances, ceremonies, and beliefs which are its
own, or which it has assimilated in a way that gives them a personal imprint” (51). Above all, it was “the religious sentiment of the rural masses,” objectified, not un-
problematically in Price-Mars’s view, as “Vaudou” (according to one orthography) that,
he argued, should be recognized as the wellspring of Haitian folklore and pri-
mary source of the nation’s cultural particularity. Marshaling French sociological
theory (and particularly Emile Durkheim’s *Les formes élémentaires de la vie
religieuse* [Elementary forms of religious life]), Price-Mars set out to refute the colo-
nial construction of peasant belief and ritual as “sorcery” and to methodically argue
for their status as a religion, albeit a “very primitive” one, “formed in part by beliefs
in the almighty Power of spiritual beings—gods, demons, disembodied souls—in
part by beliefs in sorcery and magic” (88–89).

The implications of this reclassification were not simply academic in his view,
given that such practices were then subject to demonization by Catholic and Protes-
tant clergies in Haiti, criminalization in Haitian penal law, and repression at the
hands of the marines and U.S.-trained gendarmes. While Price-Mars justified his
focus on popular religious belief and practice in *Ainsi parla l’oncle* with reference
to the primacy of the spirits in peasant life and culture, he also points throughout his
book to the way in which “Vaudou” functioned as a sign, encapsulating, as he put it,
“the undesirable legacy of a shameful past” (232). Price-Mars’s recognition of the
ways in which the longstanding prohibition of *les sortilèges* in the Haitian *Code pénal*
served as a pretext for the peasantry’s continued subjugation shaped the political
stakes of *Ainsi parla l’oncle* and much of his subsequent work.
At one point in *Ainsi parla l’oncle*, Price-Mars makes explicit his call for a shift away from earlier elite-centered, Western-identified nationalist models and toward the construction of popular tradition as a commonly held, uniquely Haitian cultural endowment:

Better than the stories of great battles, better than the relation of the great events of official history . . . better than the theatrical poses of statesmen in attitudes of command, better than the laws which can only be borrowed finery ill fitted to our social state, in which short-lived holders of power condense their hatred, their prejudices, their dreams or their hopes, better than all these things which are most often . . . adopted by only one part of the nation—tales, songs, legends, proverbs, beliefs are works or products spontaneously sprung up, at a given moment, from an inspired mind, adopted by all. (253–54)

It is not incidental that Price-Mars singles out law in this inventory for particular critique. As he suggests, Haiti’s legal codes served the state as both a sign of modernity and a space for the repudiation of the primitive, most particularly through the penal prohibition of “spells.”

*Ainsi parla l’oncle* is an extended rebuke of the Haitian elite for having disavowed and repressed precisely what they ought to have claimed and constructed as the repository of Haitian national identity, or as Price-Mars, after Herder, terms it, the “national soul.”

For Price-Mars, the reevaluation of popular cultures as folklore held the promise of national unification. The political force of this argument stemmed from its basis in an anti-imperial assertion of difference. However, the premises of this project were also shaped by nineteenth-century European Romantic nationalism, and the increasingly ubiquitous way in which folklore was being promoted internationally as the cultural basis for state nationalist claims. This was the legacy of *indigénisme* for official cultural politics in Haiti during the late 1930s and early 1940s. With the restoration of Haitian sovereignty in 1934, the postoccupation state constructed popular practices, and particularly ritual dance, as indices of official Haitian identity and modernity, but framed such performances internationally as revivals of a transcended cultural past.

**Popular Dances versus Superstitious Practices**

Coming so soon on the heels of the restoration of Haitian sovereignty, the law that president Sténio Vincent signed in September 1935 against *les pratiques superstitieuses* was welcomed as a kind of signature legislation in certain quarters. While only a few months earlier, the conservative Port-au-Prince daily *Le Matin* had been antagonistic to Vincent’s government and its increasingly absolutist tendencies, the newspaper hailed this new law as representing “a turning point in national life,” and one that would heighten the nation’s prestige, given that, “the most frequent subject of denigration of our country is . . . our superstitious practices.”
It seems circumstantially notable in this regard that the law against “superstitious practices” was promulgated only a few days after notices of the latest imperial travelogue had appeared in Port-au-Prince newspapers. This was a book entitled *Voodoo Fire in Haiti*, written and illustrated with lurid woodcuts by an Austrian artist named Richard Loederer, which circulated widely in translation across Europe and North America in 1935.\(^{14}\) Purportedly an account of the author’s travels in Haiti, *Voodoo Fire in Haiti* was so replete with hallucinatory scenes of, in Loederer’s words, “wild dances” and “frenzied ceremonies,” that one reviewer, H. P. Davis, an American living in Haiti at the time, characterized it as being “not simply another sensational book on Haiti,” but rather, “we sincerely hope, the extreme limit of this genre.”\(^{15}\) Loederer wrote on the heels of the rash of voyeuristic firsthand accounts of “voodoo” ritual that had proliferated over the course of the U.S. occupation, and he was clearly himself an aficionado of this genre. *Voodoo Fire in Haiti* reads like a compendium of tropes taken from previously published texts. It features a particularly frequent return to primitivized and sexualized images of native dance, which inspire his most derivative prose.\(^{16}\) In *Ainsi parla l’oncle*, Jean Price-Mars describes such passages as constituting a kind of imperial “plagiarism,” whereby “accounts . . . [can be] made of the cultic ceremonies of ‘Vodou’ by writers who have not even had the opportunity to observe them.”\(^{17}\)

I do not mean to suggest that the publication of Loederer’s book, in itself, prompted the Vincent government to pass new legislation against *les pratiques superstieuses* in September 1935. Rather, I want to argue that *Voodoo Fire in Haiti* was emblematic of an occupation-era literature that, in constructing “voodoo” or “vaudoux” (or any number of cognates) as the sign of either a felicitous primitivism or abiding barbarism on the part of Haitians, played a compelling role in the perpetuation and tightening of this penal regime after the restoration of Haitian sovereignty. In fact, the pressure that such representations exerted on the early postoccupation state was written into the prologue of Vincent’s 1935 legislation as its primary justification. Specifically in the name of preventing “the accomplishment of all acts, practices, etc., liable to foster superstitious beliefs harmful to the good name of the country,” the new law doubled the minimum prison sentence for such offenses, which it now defined, principally, as “ceremonies, rites, dances, and meetings during the course of which sacrifices of livestock or fowl are performed in offering to so-called divinities.”\(^{18}\) This was the first time in the history of Haitian penal discourses against popular ritual that such offerings were made a legal litmus test of prohibition.\(^{19}\)

Yet if this legislation was compelled, in part, by the force of imperial sensationalism around “voodoo” just after the occupation, it also reflected, I want to argue, the influence of cultural nationalist discourse and politics in Haiti at this time. After asserting the responsibility of the state to eradicate practices potentially damaging to the reputation of Haiti, the prologue to the 1935 law conceded that, in the
past, there had been an “exaggerated application” of the former penal code articles against les sortilèges. In an apparent softening of the penal regime toward peasant communities, this prologue then affirmed “the right of citizens, particularly country dwellers, to enjoy themselves and organize dances according to local customs,” making such dances, for the first time in Haitian juridical history, explicit exceptions to the category of “superstitious practice.”

One might assume that the acknowledgment of prior excesses in the application of the law against les sortilèges referred to the rigor with which these articles of the Code pénal had been enforced by marines and the Haitian gendarmes under their command during the U.S. occupation. However, there is also evidence to suggest that such an “exaggerated application” of these laws had continued under Vincent’s governance. In April 1935, three months prior to the abrogation of the laws against “spells,” Northwestern University anthropologist Melville J. Herskovits, who had conducted fieldwork in central Haiti during the prior summer, wrote to a contact at the U.S. legation in Port-au-Prince on behalf of Katherine Dunham, then a young student of anthropology at the University of Chicago, who was preparing, under his tutelage, to undertake research on dance in the Caribbean. “Knowing the charm with which the Haitians care for visitors,” Herskovits wrote, “I had no hesitancy two or three months ago when the plans were laid out, in indicating Haiti as the logical place for her to work. Recent reports of the political situation, however, especially as these bear on the prohibition of dancing—this I get from my friends at Mirebalais with whom I am in correspondence—lead me to wonder how much work she will be able to do in Haiti.” A representative of the legation wrote back that Dunham “would probably have little difficulty in finding opportunities to study native dances, since they occur almost nightly throughout the island, and attendance at any one of them could probably be arranged. The much discussed religious ceremonies, or voodoo dances, are banned by law, however, as you probably know.”

Whether the law’s reference was to the occupation or a more recent episode of enforcement, the concession that there had been past “exaggerated applications” of the law against sortilèges does not transparently explain the unprecedented legal affirmation of popular dances that followed. How do we account for the anomalous exemption of popular dances from the tightening of this penal regime? Given the centrality of dance to rituals of serving the lwa (spirits), sociologist Laënnec Hurbon has interpreted the preamble to the 1935 law as a kind of juridical wink, signifying the tacit forbearance of the government toward the ritual practices the law apparently forbids: “As if surreptitiously they must tolerate Vodou, but without saying so, or rather while stating its prohibition.” Hurbon’s analysis is particularly persuasive in light of reports of the way peasants in certain parts of Haiti were already negotiating the local regulation of their spiritual traditions. Indeed, there is some evidence to suggest that the law might have been, in the sense that Hurbon suggests,
a kind of official endorsement of a customary or informal legal status quo then in
practice in some parts of the country. George Eaton Simpson, an American anthropologist who spent 1937 in northern Haiti on a Social Science Research Council (SSRC) postdoctoral fellowship, wrote that, according to his informants, the so-called “dance without sacrifices” had been popularly “invented” in the late occupation period “to circumvent the law.” Of the several ethnographers who visited Haiti from the United States during the 1930s, Simpson was one of the few to acknowledge in his published work that these practices were officially prohibited, and was, to my knowledge, the only to consider seriously how local regulation shaped the ways in which different communities served the spirits.  The fallacy of earlier anthropological displacement of such questions is that the legal status of these practices has been, at different historical moments, constitutive of how they were performed. Describing the regulatory regime in Plaisance and elsewhere following the promulgation of the 1935 law, Simpson wrote: “Sometimes members of a family held their ceremony in the privacy of a bedroom while a dance was in progress in the courtyard.”

Hurbon’s interpretation of the 1935 law, against its apparent grain, as signaling the state’s surreptitious tolerance for that which it seemed to prohibit, suggests that perhaps the new law was meant to keep a kind of public secret. He writes, “If the foreigner, in reading this text, does not discern all its implications, no one is fooled in the very interior of the country.” In his Defacement: Public Secrecy and the Labor of the Negative, Michael Taussig writes of the “margin of fiction separating the laws of the state from their actual observance, in which not only the law but also the system of community values is largely honored in the breach.” Similarly, Joseph Roach, in his Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance, discusses how in seeking to regulate New Orleans Mardi Gras, Louisiana law “has deliberately created in its interstices a space for easily overlooked transgression.” Such readings of the 1935 law against les pratiques superstitieuses are persuasive in light of the paradoxical political situation whereby, as Hurbon writes, “the tolerance of Vodou [was] necessary to the general functioning of society. But its penalization, no less so.”

I want to suggest another way to think about the state’s sudden defense of rural pastimes, and, in particular, the unprecedented insistence on the distinction between popular dances and superstitious practices, notably set apart here by the performance of sacrifice. It seems to me that the penal revisions of September 1935 mark the moment when it became politically desirable, given the force of postoccupation cultural nationalism in Haiti, and epistemologically possible, given the turn toward national folklore, for the state to distinguish popular dances from prohibited ritual. The latter then became more subject to penalization under the law as superstitious practice, while this excised construct—popular dance—was figured in ensuing years as national culture.
In interpreting the 1935 law’s validation of the right of peasants to hold popular dances as a concession to *indigénisme*, I also want to propose that the social scientific logic of folklore, separating a unified national culture into an inventory of discrete cultural traits and forms—tales, songs, dances, superstitious beliefs, proverbs, and so on—_influenced_ the formulation of this law as well. As appropriated by the Haitian state under Vincent and his successor, Elie Lescot, the concept of national folklore seemed both to politically _compel_ and logically _enable_ the constitutive separation on which the 1935 legislation was premised. In a sense, by legalizing what had never before been expressly prohibited, the law annexed the figure of popular dance to the state and laid a juridical groundwork for the subsequent promotion of this construct as an official national sign. My interest here, then, is studying the connection between how the Haitian state constructed and, in conjunction with the Catholic Church, policed so-called superstitious practices during the early postoccupation years, and how it constructed—and also policed—representations of Haitian national identity and culture through the performance of folklore during those years.

**Staging Folklore and Bon Voisinage**

While the occupation-era *indigénisme* movement had been primarily literary in scope, what came to be collectively nominated in the 1940s as the *mouvement folklorique* in Port-au-Prince encompassed an array of overlapping disciplinary projects. Jean Price-Mars later wrote of the “variety and originality of productions of all orders” that were sparked by his *Ainsi parla l’oncle*, and the _indigéniste_ movement more generally: “Novels, poems, linguistic, archaeological, and psychiatric studies. . . . And pictorial art, sculpture, music, dance, for the first time . . . found application for their techniques in Haitian material.” From the beginning, the *mouvement folklorique* was as heterogeneous ideologically as it was generically. There was Jacques Roumain, *indigéniste* poet, novelist, and founder of the Haitian Communist Party who based his critique of elite hegemony and peasant subjugation in a historical materialist analysis. Roumain regarded Haitian color politics as an idiom of the class struggle and took a dim view of those who, in his view, cynically privileged the problem of color in public discourse to obscure the economic basis of inequality in Haiti. If overtly directed at elite politicians, Roumain’s critique also implicated members of the so-called Groupe des Griots, named after the traditional storyteller musicians of West Africa, whose most prominent members were the collaborators Lorimer Denis and François Duvalier. In 1938, the group founded the journal *Les Griots* which became the principal mouthpiece of the postoccupation political movement of *noirisme*, positioning Denis and Duvalier as its foremost ideologues. Ethnology, they maintained in articles throughout the late 1930s and 1940s, scientifically corroborated the central *noiriste* political doctrine that Haiti’s social structure and political institutions should reflect the African biological and psychological
“nature” of its masses. State power, consolidated throughout Haitian history in the hands of the mulâtre (mulatto) elite, ought instead be held by representatives of the petite bourgeoisie noire, or authentiques, who, Duvalier and Denis argued, shared the interests of the peasants and were uniquely capable of acting on their behalf.

As ideologically divergent as Roumain’s politics were from those of the Griots, their mutual investment in the study of ethnology was linked to an expressed solidarity with the peasantry and an advocacy for the redistribution of economic and political power in Haiti. There was another prominent sector of the self-identified mouvement folklorique in the late 1930s and early 1940s that expressed little of this populism, nor a particular interest in social transformation. They were primarily elite folk song collectors, arrangers, and composers such as Valério Canez, a violinist, and Anton Werner Jaegerhuber, a music professor and pianist of German-Haitian descent, who, in the tradition of Brahms and Liszt, sought to locate the Haitian “national character” through the distillation of popular musical themes. Their collective efforts were encouraged by the international success and popularity during these years of so-called American Negro spirituals, harmonized and arranged for piano or orchestra. Canez felt particularly strongly, as he explained in an article in Haïti-Journal, that in order for its national character to be realized, Haitian musical folklore, “with its beautiful melodies and its unique rhythms must be known, executed in all parts of the world.” To this end, Canez advocated that Haitian popular songs, including those which were ritually dedicated to the spirits, be “harmonized, purified, and presented in a universal musical form, a classical musical form, rendering them accessible to all, and extricating from them all primitive form, while preserving their national character.” In response to those who argued that it was necessary to use drums “to give the really typical, local character to our folklore,” Canez
replied that conical Haitian drums were, categorically, “not musical instruments,” and that their rhythms could be adequately replicated on the piano, or, in orchestral performances, by the kettledrum.\textsuperscript{34}

I quote Canez’s article at some length here not only to highlight the divergent political projects encompassed by the early 1940s under the heading of the \textit{mouvement folklorique}, but also to point to the particular contestation that surrounded the representation of performed genres of folklore as these were being codified for the first time. There are two reasons why I think the emergence of “staged folklore” is crucial for understanding the complex field of cultural politics around the folk in early postoccupation Haiti. First, from the late 1930s on, the performance of folklore was a highly prominent, even privileged aspect of the \textit{mouvement folklorique}.\textsuperscript{35}

Independent music and dance troupes were beginning to form, such as that organized in 1939 among a group of secondary school students from predominantly elite families by Lina Fussman-Mathon, a Port-au-Prince pianist and music teacher, who many credit with first codifying and theatrically presenting a Haitian folklore dance idiom.\textsuperscript{36} In 1940, Clément Benoit, a teacher and writer, assembled his own small troupe and created a weekly radio program called \textit{L'Heure de l'Art Haïtien} \textit{[The Haitian art hour]} which, judging both from press reports at the time and the memories of Benoit’s younger contemporaries who listened to the program, became an important catalyst in popularizing musical folklore among middle-class and, to a lesser extent, elite audiences in Port-au-Prince during the early and mid-1940s.\textsuperscript{37}

With the founding of the Haitian Bureau d’Ethnologie as a state agency for ethnological study and archaeological preservation, and the Institut d’Ethnologie as an independent higher education faculty for ethnological training in 1941, the staging of folklore came to have a formalized place in Haitian ethnographic research and pedagogy.\textsuperscript{38} At a time when North American anthropologists often avoided studying dance on the grounds that it resisted objectivist methodologies, the integration of such performances into the Institut d’Ethnologie’s curriculum is notable.\textsuperscript{39} Jean-Léon Destiné, who later became one of Haiti’s premier folklore performers, was a student at the institute in the early 1940s and recalls that classes sometimes featured demonstrations of ritual dances and rhythms performed by practitioners: “That is how we learned. . . . As they danced in front of us, we would . . . analyze the steps, trying to see what they meant, trying to see the background, and the interpenetration of the songs and rhythms. Naturally we also learned from books, but we got to associate what we read with what we saw.”\textsuperscript{40}

Such was the priority that the Bureau d’Ethnologie accorded to performance in its early years that nearly all of its public lectures were illustrated with demonstrations of popular music, dance, and ritual. These were performed by the bureau’s own troupe, called Mater Dolorosa, whose members were drawn from its pool of informants and directed by Saint Erlonge Abraham, an \textit{oungan} (male priest), who worked closely with ethnologists.\textsuperscript{41} Billed as Haiti’s first “popular folklore choir,” sig-
naling that its performers came from the peasantry rather than, more typically, the urban middle class or bourgeoisie, the members of Mater Dolorosa, as both performers and informants, played a key role in the ethnological interpretation and codification of ritual performance as folklore in the early and mid-1940s.42

The second reason, I would suggest, that the performance of folklore is particularly critical to an analysis of postoccupation cultural politics in Haiti is that, from the early 1940s on, the Haitian state was highly invested in constructing new images of Haitian national culture and identity through dance and music folklore. This should be understood in the context of Washington’s policies of pan-Americanism and Good Neighborliness during World War II, when U.S. efforts to foster a sense of collective hemispheric identity through cultural means converged with the efforts of some Latin American and Caribbean states to construct traditional cultures as the repository of national particularity. Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s goodwill visit to the northern city of Cap Haitien in July 1934 to announce that the last marines would depart from Haiti by August 15 was symbolically weighted to mark the end of an age of repeated U.S. military aggressions in the Caribbean and Latin America, and the beginning of an era of *bon voisinage* (good neighborliness).43 Of course, the with-
drawal of American troops did not alter the fundamentally imperial nature of U.S. involvement in Haitian affairs. However, in keeping with the mandate of pan-Americanism, the U.S. legation in Port-au-Prince focused a spotlight on Haitian and American cultural relations, which it sought to promote among the elite and middle classes through a wide array of programs, sponsorships, collaborations, and exchanges.

One of the earliest high-profile occasions for such an exchange of inter-American folk performance was the eighth annual National Folk Festival, which took place in Washington, DC, in early May 1941, sponsored by the Washington Post Folk Festival Association. Up to that point, this annual festival had been national in scope, with each featured group representing a particular state or territory. That year, however, as director Sarah Gertrude Knott explained in a January 1941 letter to Melville Herskovits, the organizers had decided to explore the possibility of “inviting guest groups from Canada, Mexico, one South American country and some of the Islands.” She went on, “We feel that there has never been a time when the need was so obvious for better understanding, more tolerance and a stronger National Unity. We believe the use and interchange of folk traditions will help to bring this about.” Knott was writing to solicit Herskovits’s advice about inviting folklore groups from Peru and Haiti to perform at the festival in May. She was clearly also hoping that he would authoritatively intervene in a dispute she was having with the Haitian minister to the United States over what sort of group should be presented. This minister was Elie Lescot, who would succeed Sténio Vincent as president of Haiti four months later, and become known, thereafter, for his efforts to further consolidate the hegemony of the country’s light-skinned elite. Knott explained the nature of their disagreement:

The Minister from Haiti is interested in sending a small group demonstrating the Voodoo. It seems to me that this is the thing that we would have to handle especially careful [sic], isn’t it? He too, had an idea of bringing a group of the natives who had been sort of polished off. I feel that it would be much better to have the genuine thing or nothing. What do you think? . . . We shall appreciate any information which might help us to secure the most genuine representation.

Herskovits obliged with a strongly worded reply against the kind of group that Lescot had proposed. Stating that he would consider it “very unfortunate if anything but a group of peasants were brought to do this,” he recommended that “singers and drummers be obtained from the southern peninsula of the island, particularly Miragoane or Leogane.” He further specified: “This group should be headed by a hungan, or native priest, and the group should be brought with the idea of performing a vodun bamboche, which means that they would drum the vodun rhythm and sing the accepted songs without spirit possession ensuing, since this might be a little embarrassing. If it did happen, the hungan could take care of it.”
Two weeks before the festival was to begin, Knott again wrote to Herskovits, hoping that he would agree to vet the program notes prepared for the Haitian dances, and, announcing, rather apologetically, that these would be performed by the type of group that Lescot had originally recommended. She explained: “A number of people, including the Minister, told me that if we brought the type of group we were thinking of at first we could not depend on what would happen. In the first place, they might decide not to dance or if they got under the power we might not be able to stop them.” The group that had been invited in the end was the student troupe of Lina Fussman-Mathon. “Of course,” she wrote, “the type of group in which we both were interested at first would be of more interest to Anthropologists, but in our Festival we are showing things as they are done today and I am absolutely convinced that this is a true group of its kind.”

If Elie Lescot was already invested, as his initiative suggests here, in fashioning new images of Haitian national culture and identity through folklore performance, he seems to have recognized that such a project was not without risks. On the one hand, constructions of dance and music folklore had become a ubiquitous vehicle for representing modern nationhood. On the other hand, the Haitian popular forms on which these might be based had long been sensationalized by constructions in the West as evidence of Haiti’s primitivism. Lescot convinced Knott that it would be folly to invite a group of sèvité to perform at the festival who, as believers, might lose control of themselves and, in their performances, exceed the domain of representation. The control actually at stake here, of course, was that which the state sought to exercise over the construction of ritual dance as an exemplary sign of Haitian national culture. A group of peasants, who themselves served the spirits, could not perform the nation’s modernity. This is the implication of the argument that Knott recounted to Herskovits in defense of the festival’s decision to invite Fussman-Mathon’s “polished off” troupe. While the performance of a group of sèvité might be of academic interest to an anthropologist, Fussman-Mathon’s company was modern, up-to-date, and would, as Knott put it, “be able to show things as they are done today.” One hears in her words the echo of evolutionary anthropology’s denial of coevality to the cultures it studied, ironically rehearsed back to Herskovits, an advocate of anthropological relativism. Significantly as well, the anachronism of ritual practice is contrasted with the modernity of folkloric constructions based on that practice.

In fact, the invitation to perform at the National Folk Festival required Lina Fussman-Mathon to make certain overnight changes to her young troupe’s repertory. While up to that point, they had been performing popular songs she had collected and harmonized with her collaborator Anton Werner Jaegerhuber, Lescot specifically wanted to send a dance troupe. Jean-Léon Destiné, then a young member of the company, emphasized this point during a 1997 panel in Port-au-Prince: “We did not
begin with the dance, we were singers. There was no dance. It was when we were going to Washington to do the show that we began to study seriously, with a young woman or a young man who came to the home of Mme. Fussman-Mathon to teach us a few steps. But Mme. Mathon danced herself too. She taught us the petwo, the juba—a society woman dancing Vodou!”

For the most part, the troupe was coached in ritual dances such as the kongo, yanvalou, and banda in Fussman-Mathon’s home by sèvité she had met through her own research. Destiné relates, however, that one Saturday, with the intent to “expose us to the very source of folklore,” Mme. Fussman-Mathon took several members of the troupe, all young men, to attend a sèvis on the outskirts of the capital. Destiné recalls this experience vividly, for the excitement and distress that it produced in him and his friends at the time. “What adventure! What anxiety!” he wrote in a 1994 tribute to his former teacher. “The mambo, highly respected in her community, graciously received us. Her assistant showed us the ritual forms to observe, which we would perform to the letter, but not without a certain fear.”

This was a fear, Destiné specifies, cultivated by clerical diabolism of these practices, which had recently intensified with the campagne anti-superstitieuse (anti-superstitious campaign) that the Catholic Church had been waging against “le mélange”—the “mixture” of Catholicism with popular belief and ritual—since 1939. This had become a crusade on the part of some French priests, who conducted raids on ounfò (temples) and other suspected sites of “superstition,” confiscating donkey-loads of drums and other sacred objects that were burned in bonfires behind local presbyteries. Those who voluntarily gave up ritual objects in their possession were called rejetés (rejectors) and were issued a ticket that made them eligible to take an antisuperstitious oath. Any parishioner over the age of fourteen who failed or refused to comply with the campaign was forbidden from receiving communion, marriage and burial rites, or any other sacrament. Oungan, manbo (female priests), and those found guilty of participating in a Vodou ceremony were subject not only to ecclesiastical punishments, but also, at the direction of the church, to penalization under the recently tightened proscription in the Haitian criminal code.

These were the circumstances under which, perhaps somewhat surprisingly, Fussman-Mathon led her students on their visit to the ounfò. Destiné continues: “Drums, dances, songs, all of this mounted in my head and, timidly, in movements hardly sketched, I imitated the participants. Conscious of the terror that the ‘forbidden fruit’ inspired in me, I already saw myself at the confessional of the ‘bon père’ [Catholic priest], admitting my sin of having attended a Vaudou meeting.” It may have been such a bon père who, hearing drums that day, dispatched the gendarme who broke up the sévis Fussman-Mathon and her troupe members were attending, and, as Destiné writes, “arrested us all and conducted us to the nearest police station.” There, as Fussman-Mathon secured their release, her students were lectured
by a sergeant who admonished them “that such ‘diabolical ceremonies’ were legally interdicted, and to no longer participate in them.”

The other major change in the group’s repertory, which followed the invitation to perform in Washington, was that, from then on, their performances would be accompanied by drums. In part, this was a function of the shift to performing dances, in addition to harmonized arrangements of traditional songs. However, it also seems likely that the Folk Festival, invested in the presentation of indigenous forms of instrumentation, exerted some pressure on this decision. In soliciting Herskovitz’s intervention in another case (the proposal on the part of a diplomat from Peru that Peruvian songs be performed by “some white people . . . using the piano”), for example, Knott specified, “we have never used the piano accompaniment.” At the same moment, then, that sèvité in the countryside were forced to conceal drums to preserve them from antisuperstitious raids, two peasant drummers were added to the twelve-member student troupe who were to represent Haiti in Washington.

These “ambassadeurs de l’art populaire haïtien,” as one article called them, left Port-au-Prince aboard the America on April 18, 1941, accompanied by Fussman-Mathon and Antoine Bervin, Haitian commissioner of tourism, who served as the group’s spokesperson and, as Destiné remembers, master of ceremonies. The official national status of the company had been magnified three days earlier with Elie Lescot’s election to the presidency by the Assemblée Nationale. This identification intensified once they arrived in Washington, where Lescot was still stationed. While Destiné recalls that Fussman-Mathon had given the troupe the name Haïti Chante et Danse, the Washington Post referred to them simply as “the troupe of Elie Lescot, President-elect of Haiti.”

As part of the Folk Festival, the group gave six performances over a three-day engagement at Constitution Hall, breaking the color bar where two years earlier the Daughters of the American Revolution had refused to allow Marian Anderson to sing. They also gave performances at Howard University, Washington’s International House, and at venues in Wilmington, Delaware, and Boston. The Port-au-Prince dailies followed their travels closely, reporting the warm reception that the group received from audiences in Washington, as well as in the pages of the festival’s sponsor, the Washington Post. Le Nouvelliste printed excerpts from a review that appeared in the April 29 edition of that newspaper praising the troupe’s performance at a lavish banquet organized by Lescot at the Hotel Carlton prior to the opening of the festival. Attended by Washington’s political elite, including U.S. undersecretary of state Benjamin Sumner Welles, the Mexican ambassador to the United States, and “numerous representatives” of the diplomatic corps from Latin America, the event reflected Lescot’s deft ability, even at this earliest moment of his presidency, to exploit the nationalist opportunities of pan-Americanism. The Washington Post article reported that at some point during this reception, which featured the young com-
pany performing choreography based on the ritual dance of *yanvalou*, including stylized representations of spirit embodiment, “it was explained that the Haitians didn’t believe in Voodooism. It’s just an old dance they like to break out occasionally.”

One hears in these remarks an official sense that if choreographic constructions of ritual dances were to become internationally legible signs of Haiti’s postoccupation modernity, they had to be framed as folkloric revivals of a vanishing or already extinguished cultural past. Lescot’s presentation of Fussman-Mathon’s student troupe at this reception marked the first time that folklore dance, based on ritual performance, was constructed as officially representative of Haitian cultural identity. This disclaimer makes clear, however, that such dances, or such scenes of spirit embodiment, could only be indexed as national if they were simultaneously figured as transcended. It seems that through these folkloric constructions Lescot sought to negate the contemporary reality of the popular practices that served as their referents, while also thereby negating imperialist representations of an enduring, atavistic voodoo that held all of Haiti, including the state, in its thrall. The primitivizing optic of the *Washington Post* article itself, in which the young male performers are described as “wild-eyed” and the girls “writhe” as they dance, suggests both the high stakes and risks of this project.

Such representations point to the imperative for controlling performed representations of folklore, at the same time as they cast doubt on how effective such efforts could be. There was, on the one hand, the mimetic relation of these folkloric choreographies to contemporary ritual practices. There was, on the other hand, the possibility, or even likelihood, that foreign audiences would mistake such representations for precisely what they were meant to disavow. One witnesses, for example, an unmistakable slippage in the *Washington Post*’s review of the students’ performance at the reception, which first describes their entrance as performers, “in native costume,” but then goes on to depict one of the dancers as “falling on the floor palpably voodooed” and having to be revived on stage. In parts of the review that were notably not excerpted in *Le Nouvelliste*, the author observed that the performers “weren’t professionals but boys and girls from the bush,” and that on mounting the stage, “they didn’t look at the audience nor seem to care whether they had one. Somehow back among the dishes and soup spoons they must have worked themselves into incipient jungle fever because they had it when they arrived on the party floor.”

Along with the clearly justified concern that these constructions would themselves be willfully mistaken for actual ritual by such audiences, came the shadow of a doubt that such performances might not always be purely representational. There was, in a sense, a suspicion that the signified (the choreographed ritual dance) could overwhelm and seep into the signifier (the dancer), almost, as Rosalind Morris has discussed, like spirit embodiment itself.

Jean-Léon Destiné recalls that it was once
Lina Fussman-Mathon’s young troupe began learning and performing choreography based on ritual, as opposed to simply singing harmonized folksongs, that they began to be stigmatized by some of their peers from bourgeois families. During a panel in Port-au-Prince in 1997, he remembered:

I didn’t want to tell my friends that I was studying folklore. . . . Everyone knew that young men and women were dancing [folklore with Mme. Fussman-Mathon] and they began to speak badly about us. Once, there was a little dance, and when I arrived no one wanted to dance with me. The young women of my generation said, oh-oh, he’s a Vaudou man—that was enough to discourage anyone to quit. What happened was, I had gone to . . . a ritual gathering where people were dancing, and it seemed that while the dance was going on someone was possessed. They always associate Vaudou with orgies or black magic. When they heard that I went out to a Vaudou ceremony they believed that I could contaminate them.60

If there was a sense that performers could be “contaminated”—and then contaminate others—by their bodily mimesis of ritual forms, there also seemed to be some official uneasiness around the participation of popular religious practitioners in folklore representations, at first primarily as drummers, but increasingly in independent productions, as dancers and singers. Destiné remembers that in the course of another reception Lescot held for the troupe in Washington, following their performances at Constitution Hall, lead drummer André Janvier was moved to ask Fussman-Mathon’s permission to address the gathering. Lescot had just finished praising the company’s performances at the Folk Festival, and for these accolades the drummer thanked the president-elect. Then, according to Destiné, Janvier asked Lescot for a memento or souvenir to prove on his return to Haiti that drummers who were “so unappreciated in our country, were recognized as great artists abroad.” With this intervention, it seems to me, as Destiné recounts it, Janvier effectively insisted that the new president acknowledge the contemporaneity of ritual practices in Haiti, and their immediate relation to the representations the troupe had staged as national folklore. What’s more, in asking for a memento, Janvier made the president-elect confront the discrepancy between his acclaim for the troupe’s theatrical staging of ritual performance and the persecution to which ritual ways of serving the spirits were then increasingly subject in Haiti. It might seem a particularly significant reversal that Janvier requested a physical token of state legitimation from Lescot at a moment when the church was systematically confiscating and performatively destroying ritual objects in the Haitian countryside. That night, as Destiné recalls, “in the face of such aplomb,” the president-elect offered Janvier “a medallion, under the sustained applause of the guests.”61

A month later, in one of his earliest presidential acts, Lescot officially
endorsed the Catholic Church’s ongoing campaign in the Haitian countryside by issuing a presidential letter directing the Haitian civil and military authorities “to give their most complete assistance,” to the church’s “mission . . . to combat fetishism and superstition.” Thereafter, priests were joined on their antisuperstitious raids not only by groups of *rejetés*, who aided in the destruction of sacred objects and sites. They were also accompanied by members of the U.S.-trained Haitian *garde* (guard) and/or local *chefs de section* (section chiefs), who, no doubt often in spite of their own beliefs and customary protocols, enforced the church’s campaign by applying the 1935 *décret-loi* against superstitious practices. If the church relied on that law as a legitimating sanction for its campaign, it was Lescot’s authorization of civil and military support for the antisuperstitious offensive in June 1941 that ensured its systematic enforcement across rural Haiti over the next eight months.

In September 1942, the American cultural attaché to Haiti, J. C. White, sent a memorandum to U.S. secretary of state Cordell Hull concerning what he perceived to be a changing attitude toward “voodoo” on the part of the elite, suggesting that the “reported success” of Fussman-Mathon’s group in Washington, “may be partially responsible for the awakening of Haitian interest in their folklore.” However, he noted that there appeared “to be two conflicting attitudes toward voodoo among the intellectuals of Haiti”:

One group believes that the songs and dances of the voodoo ceremonies should be developed systematically as Haiti’s folklore, and exhibited at home and abroad largely in order to interest and attract tourists; whereas the other group believes that they should be ignored or denied, if not actually stamped out, as an unfortunate and debasing heritage from the dark days of slavery in the French colony, declaring that it is not a part of the life of the independent nation of Haiti.

What is signaled, however, by the disclaimer made at the reception in Washington, no less than by Lescot’s presidential letter a month later backing the church’s crusade against “superstition” with civil and military force, is that for the elite state there was no conflict between exploiting folklore “to interest and attract tourists,” and ignoring, denying, or even “stamping out” the practices on which such folkloric forms were based. Indeed, there is a sense in which the government’s support of the church’s campaign at this time might be understood as not simply consonant with the construction of ritual dance as a national sign, but even as a kind of condition of possibility for that conversion. This would be consistent with the logic of the 1935 legislation against *les pratiques superstieuses*, in which the figure of popular dance, once divorced from the category of superstition, lent itself to a tightening regime of popular control at home, as much as to a renovated image of national culture abroad.

I want to suggest, however, that the early 1940s are a particularly interesting
and complex moment in the history of the staged representation of popular performance in Haïti, if only because, in the beginning, the state had no monopoly on such productions. While there were prominent artists and arrangers whose vision closely corresponded to government aspirations for the international circulation of Haïtian music and dance folklore in nationally representative forms, there were also numerous practitioners in the early 1940s who seemed to regard the staging of popular performance, and especially ritual, in terms of a very different set of possibilities. Thus my concern in the pages that follow is not simply with how the Lescot government constructed popular performance, including codified versions of ritual dances, as national culture. It is also with how the state policed unofficial and even antiofficial representations of folklore, and ultimately banned the theatrical depiction of prohibited ritual practices on stage, with reference to the terms of the 1935 law against les pratiques superstitieuses.

“Without the Inclusion of One Ritual Note”

During the early 1940s, the independent staging of folklore seems to have been far more subject to state surveillance and censorship than other forms of folkloric representation. As folklore performance became an increasingly primary space for the official elaboration of national particularity, the stakes rose for controlling the ways in which ritual dance could be theatrically represented. It may seem like a deceptively simple point, but while there were numerous ethnographic accounts of sèvis in publications of the Bureau d’Ethnologie, frequent literary representations of ritual in the so-called peasant novel genre, and even radio broadcasts of simulated ceremonies, there was far greater imperative on the part of Lescot’s state to police representations of ritual practice by independent dance and theater artists.

Interestingly, it was the radio producer Clément Benoit, creator of the popular weekly program L’Heure de l’Art Haïtien, who first brought this issue to a head, when, in September 1942, his ensemble mounted its first theatrical performance on the stage of the Rex Theatre. By this point Benoit was a well-known producer whose broadcasts of ritual drumming and songs, storytelling, and comedies of local manners were widely acclaimed, and even endorsed by president Lescot, under whose high patronage the program’s first anniversary was celebrated in May 1941.65 Well-publicized in advance by the Port-au-Prince dailies, “Gabélus,” as Benoit entitled his group’s first theatrical venture, was advertised as being “a gala folklorique without precedent.”66 On the evening of the performance, before the curtain rose, Benoit addressed the capacity audience with a short manifeste (manifesto) that was published, several days later, in the newspaper Haïti-Journal.67 He began by expressing his satisfaction at the flight of interest in folklore since the founding of L’Heure de l’Art Haïtien, and what he sensed was a new openness in public discourse around the subjects of “Vaudou, loas [spirits], houngans, etc.” He attributed this candor to a growing recog-
nition of “the value that the people have always had in the life of a nation, and there-
fore the value of their practices in the domain of Art.” He continued: “If we present
today religious ceremonies of the peasant cult, it is without doubt because we are cer-
tain that Haitian art cannot be found elsewhere—and that in large measure, the art
of the people in Haiti can only be the most integral expression of a life truly Haitian
and national.” “Thus,” he concluded, “we present for you, without great pretensions,
some scenes of peasant life which deal with their religious customs.”

The performance began with the company staging a piece that Benoit intro-
duced in his remarks as dramatizing “the antagonism between peasants rooted to
their land, to their customs and traditions,” and those forced by circumstances to
leave for the cities. Such migrations had been going on for years, and intensified dur-
during the occupation, as U.S. agricultural and industrial companies won concessions to
take over government lands formerly under peasant cultivation. Most recently,
beginning in 1941, large tracts of farmland had been seized for U.S. wartime rubber
production in a debacle known by the acronym SHADA (La Société Haïtiano-
Américaine de Développement Agricole). Benoit may have had these displace-
ments in mind in so thematizing the piece, but its focus was not primarily on the
protest of such policies. Rather, in structuring the scenes around the staging of a rit-
tual invocation known as *manje lezanj* (literally, feeding of the angels, or spirits),
Benoit and his collaborators aimed, according to his precurtain statement, to affirm
the legitimacy of such rituals as both religion and source for artistic representation.

The well-known singer Marthe Augustin, who performed as a soloist on the
*L’Heure de l’Art Haïtien*’s radio broadcasts, and, on occasion, with the Bureau d’Eth-
nologie’s troupe Mater Dolorosa, played the figure of the *manbo*, supported by a cast
of *ounsi* (initiates), played by a group identified in newspaper reviews of the pro-
duction only as “peasants.” Jean-Léon Destiné remembers that Benoit worked with
*sòviti* in this production, not as the usual behind-the-scenes choreographic consul-
tsants, but as performers themselves, who were also meant, in some sense, it seems,
to perform themselves. In the course of this dramatization of the *manje lezanj* rit-
tual, the figure of the *manbo*, Marthe Augustin, sacrificed a rooster on the stage of the
theater as an offering to the spirits. The reviewer in *Le Nouvelliste* recounted the
scene thus:

It would be necessary to be an initiate, or a “specialist,” in order to explain . . .
the sense and meaning of these attitudes and movements, these abrupt and
jerky gestures, these steps of the Mambo . . . the sincerity of a rite older than a
thousand years. . . . The sacrifice of the victim: a rooster. The public, breathless,
stifled, followed the brief, quick and expert movements of the mambo, twisting,
tearing off the neck of the victim and drinking its blood.
This offering was followed by a cycle of ritual dances—the *taudou, kongo,* and *makaya*—and the production closed with a popular love song, the eponymous “Gabélus,” around which, as *Le Nouvelliste* described, Benoit had “embroidered a little scenario” of peasant life and customs.

The two major Port-au-Prince dailies highly praised Marthe Augustin’s performance of “Gabélus,” the final sketch. They were sternly critical, even scathing, however, about Benoit’s inclusion of the *manje lezanj* sequence on the program. Discounting his precurtain claim that this enactment of ritual held the status of art, both reviews argued that Benoit had betrayed what he intended to honor through the production. *Le Nouvelliste* contended that the performance had transformed what was “a pious and clearly religious ceremony” into a ridiculous spectacle, and that such a reconstruction, “with all the realism of its rites, but without the atmosphere which is indispensable to it, is very exactly the opposite of an artistic performance.”

Two days following the performance, *Haïti-Journal,* for which Benoit sometimes wrote, published a thinly veiled rebuke, without naming their colleague, of artists who, whether “intentionally or unconsciously, render popular art ridiculous,” describing this as “a crime against . . . the masses,” and a betrayal of the cause of revolutionary art.

The public debate incited by the performance in late September 1942 was such that it motivated the American cultural attaché J. C. White to send his memorandum to the U.S. secretary of state a few days later, describing Benoit’s production as “probably the most important of its kind yet given in Haiti.”

Benoit’s contemporaries, folklore performers and ethnologists of his generation, still discuss the September 1942 performance as representing a decisive marker in the history of Haitian folklore performance. Some remain critical, maintaining that Benoit had an artistic responsibility to further translate the *manje lezanj* rite for the stage. Pierre Desrameaux, a former folklore performer from the urban working class, now a well-known folklore dance instructor in Port-au-Prince, emphasized, in discussing the protocols of staging ritual more generally, that in representing sacred acts and performances onstage, whether sacrificial offerings or spirit embodiments, “you must mime them [fok ou ‘mime’ yo],” otherwise “you are not in the theater anymore.” He continued: “Under the *peristil,* they can dance freely, no matter which way. One bumps into another, things like that.” He described the codification of such dances for the stage as a process of “cleaning them up,” so that they are performed to counts, in arranged patterns, to set drum rhythms. “We desacralize the dances,” he said, as the condition of their representation.

In discussing “Gabélus” in a 1997 interview, ethnologist Michel Lamartinière Honorat likewise noted, as others had, that Benoit was not a “person of the theater.” However, he set aside the question of whether or not the staged reenactment of this ritual was art in order to emphasize the opprobrium that the performance generated.
among the bourgeois public. There are many questions that one might want to ask about the manje lezanj section of Benoit’s production, including, but not limited to, what the ethics of such a performance were when, as the newspapers insisted, the risks of exploitation and sensationalism seemed so high. Yet, whatever questions one might want to ask, or claims one might want to make about the group’s staging of the offering, what I would like to focus on here, taking Honorat’s cue, is how socially and politically confrontational the performance was at that moment. It presented as folklore precisely the act by which pratiques superstitieuses were principally defined and prohibited in the 1935 law; and it did so as the state claimed folklore performance as an official national sign.

It seems to me that the production was, in fact, a good deal more challenging to the 1935 legal redefinition and prohibition of les pratiques superstitieuses as, specifically, any dance, ceremony, or meeting involving animal sacrifice, than the rare ethnological calls for the decriminalization of popular religious practice at this time. These were surprisingly few and far between, given that the tightening of the legal regime occurred at the same moment that ethnological studies were being inaugurated in Haiti. There were a few notable exceptions to this general silence. Jean Price-Mars, in asserting the status of Vodou as a religion in Ainsi parla l’oncle, had implicitly challenged the construction and interdiction of these practices as sorcilièges in legal discourses. A decade later, Kléber Georges-Jacob, a lawyer and associate of the Griots group, critiqued the regime of penalization against Vodou as part of his more general noiriste argument against the liberal republican political institutions that Haiti had “borrowed” from Europe after independence, “with which,” he wrote in his 1941 anthology L’ethnie haïtienne, “we have nothing in common.”

Outside of Price-Mars and Georges-Jacob’s work, amidst the proliferation of close ethnographic studies of popular ritualism in the 1940s, most notably those published by Lorimer Denis and François Duvalier, few ethnological writings contested, or even acknowledged, this legal regime. By contrast, Benoit’s performance directly violated the 1935 law against les pratiques superstitieuses, defined by the act of sacrifice. Certainly, he and his company members did not suffer what were, at that time, the official penalties for such a transgression—six months imprisonment and fines equivalent to $80. Yet Benoit’s contemporaries emphasize that his representation of a prohibited ritual had its own repercussions. Lamartinière Honorat associates the departure of Benoit’s star performer, Marthe Augustin, from the group shortly thereafter with the negative publicity surrounding the production, and he remembers that other members left at that point as well. While L’Heure de l’Art Haïtien’s radio broadcasts continued through the mid-1940s, Benoit seems not to have returned to the stage until the late 1940s, when he founded another folklore troupe called Pierre Damballah.

What is interesting is that, in spite of, or perhaps more likely because of the scandal it generated, Benoit’s gala folklorique in September 1942 seemed to catalyze
a new trend in folklore performance and popular theater in Port-au-Prince. For nearly ten months thereafter, performances of prohibited ritual took place regularly on the stages of the city's concert halls, including that of the Rex Theatre. Whether motivated by political protest in solidarity with the peasantry, theatrical provocation in a surreal vein, and/or the strong box office receipts that burlesque comedies of popular manners yielded, such performances proliferated in Port-au-Prince in early 1943. They became particularly frequent scenes in the comédies de moeurs (comedies of manners) that were popularized in the early 1940s by such artists as Théodore Beaubrun, creator of the beloved character Languichatte Débordus; Martial Day, a former member of Fusman-Mathon's troupe; and Antoine Lubin, a writer and director who specialized in adapting medieval tales to local circumstances.  

The establishment press hailed some of these early productions as prototypes for the development of a national theater. In a December 1941 article, for example, Haïti-Journal described one of Martial Day's first comedic sketches, “Le trésor de Bouqui,” as “one hundred percent Haitian,” and its success as evidence of “the particular interest that the public brings to the national theater inspired by . . . the thousand little facts of Haitian life.”

By early 1943, however, articles in Haïti-Journal were denouncing, as Pierre Mayard, a writer and popular theater actor himself, put it in one article, “the great vogue, these last months, of theatrical performances: I dare not say of Haitian theater!! The theater is something honest and clean.”  

In favorably reviewing a lecture by ethnologist Lorimer Denis a few months later, another critic wrote of the importance of distinguishing “between the serious work of a scholar [like Denis] and the grotesque exhibitions to which imbecilic parvenus have attempted, as of late, to accustom a public too weak to boo and stone them as it should.” A few days later an editorial warned the authors, directors, and players of local comédies de moeurs that “the public . . . is beginning to complain of these grotesque comedies in which, in the guise of theater, they are offered buffooneries of a clearly bad taste, augmented by licentious subjects which are no longer even amusing.”

Such protests did not deter the director René Rosemond from staging his three-act comédie folklorique entitled “Mambo-Chérie” at the Rex Theatre on June 2, 1943. Taking the stage before the curtain rose, as Clément Benoit had done the prior September, Rosemond announced that with this performance what had formerly been a mouvement folklorique, would henceforth become a “révolution folklorique.” In the newspapers the next day, there appeared categorical denunciations of Rosemond’s production. Le Nouvelliste was particularly critical, rebuking Rosemond for his failure to recognize “the necessity of showing the beauty of our folklore” and for not bringing “a more refined sense, a more delicate taste to the national theater.” Beyond such pronouncements, however, there was little in the way of description to give a sense of what kind of folkloric revolution “Mambo-Chérie” had augured.
This might be better gauged by the official response to the show—and one senses its genre—which came two days later. On June 5, 1943, a new ordinance was issued by the office of the wartime governmental censor, the Bureau d’Information à la Presse, (BIP), forbidding the staged representation of prohibited rituals. As printed in both Haïti-Journal and Le Nouvelliste (in the latter case, under the headline, “An Excellent Decision”), it began: “For some time now, authors have been presenting to the public, under the pretext of folkloric exhibitions, scenes that are rather only imitations of prohibited ritual ceremonies. This practice, which has no artistic character whatsoever, can only throw Haitian customs into disrepute. Consequently, these sorts of performance are henceforth formally interdicted.”

Up until that time, the BIP was charged, in general terms, with censoring “theater plays and other publications judged to be contrary to the foreign policy of the Government of the Republic, and harmful to national defense and domestic peace.” Two months earlier, in the midst of this wave of objectionable folklore productions, the government had issued a warning to theaters advising that because the BIP “only practices political censorship,” it was “up to them [the theaters themselves] to interdict the performance of plays liable to ridicule Haitian intellectualism.” The new BIP ordinance, however, was specifically addressed to folklore performance. In banning the staging of prohibited rituals, it further specified that, from then on, “folkloric performances must be limited to the presentation of popular dances and songs without, under any circumstances, the inclusion of one ritual note.” An editorial in Le Nouvelliste commended the government for putting a stop to the “trend of transporting prohibited practices to the stage,” adding, “We have been vindicated in our call for the end of this genre of folklore.”

The BIP ordinance was, in one sense, typical of what historians have characterized as president Lescot’s inclination, whenever possible, to exploit the situation of wartime as an alibi to further curtail civil liberties in Haiti. Yet what seems most striking about this law is its reiteration of the constitutive split between prohibited ritual and popular dance that, I have argued, structured both the 1935 legislation against les pratiques superstitieuses as well as official cultural nationalist policy in early postoccupation Haiti. Whatever their diverse motives in staging interdicted rituals on the stage of the Rex Theatre, Clément Benoit and the popular theater artists who followed his lead could scarcely have chosen a more politically provocative object of folkloric representation in the early 1940s. The 1935 law made animal sacrifice the definitive mark of “superstitious practice,” and, thus, the legal litmus test distinguishing prohibited ritual from the newly protected category of popular dance. I have examined how these two categories were mutually constitutive and particularly how the legal negation of prohibited ritual served as a kind of juridical basis for the state’s annexation of popular dance as national folklore in the early 1940s.
As reflected in the disavowal made at Lescot’s reception in Washington in April 1941, there was an official sense that if choreographic constructions of ritual dances were to become international signs of Haiti’s postoccupation modernity, they had to be framed as folkloric “revivals.” The official stakes for this reinscription were particularly high in the early postoccupation moment, given the frequency with which such practices continued to be construed by foreigners as evidence of Haiti’s primitivism, whether this was deemed a cause for celebration or censure. The fact that the need to protect the reputation of Haitian customs from negative associations with superstition was written into both the 1935 legislation and the 1943 ordinance as their justificatory rationale, draws attention to the way in which representation was principally at stake in both laws. Because it was to such a great extent concern over the depiction of Haitian popular cultures that propelled the passage of the antisuperstition statute in 1935, folklore performers and popular theater artists who transgressed that prohibition through the staging of banned rituals in the early 1940s became subject to the same interdiction, if not, certainly, the same potential penalties.

However, to point to the representational stakes of the 1935 law against les pratiques superstitieuses, promulgated by the Haitian state at a moment when Western literary and cinematic sensationalism around “voodoo” was reaching new heights, is not to propose that this law had no material consequence for communities of sèvitè. Jacques Derrida’s caveat in his essay on legal authority that there is “no such thing as a law . . . that doesn’t imply in itself . . . the possibility of being ‘enforced,’” had been borne out repeatedly in Haiti’s juridical history, regardless of the “customary” ways in which officially interdicted practices were locally regulated much of the time. Most notably, U.S. military officials made the literal application of Haitian laws against les sortilèges both a hallmark of official policy and, in the early years of the occupation, a frequent point of self-congratulation. After the departure of the marines from Haiti, the latent force of Sténio Vincent’s new law against superstitious practices was soon realized in the Catholic Church’s campagne anti-superstitieuse, backed by the Haitian military and police during its penultimate and final years. Even outside of such episodes of strict enforcement, in criminalizing the ritual feeding of the spirits through sacrificial offerings, the 1935 legislation played a key role, as its antecedents had, in perpetuating the political marginalization, social stigmatization, and everyday economic exploitation of the subaltern majority in Haiti. It joined the battery of laws regulating peasant life through which, as Laënnec Hurbon has written, the elite state sought to maintain “a peasant society closed in on itself, based on its own traditions, and effectively constituting another country . . . in the interior of Haiti.”

Yet, in some sense, both the 1935 law and the 1943 ordinance exposed their own impossibility in attempting to legislate an absolute distinction between pro-
hibited ritual and popular dance. This is why Hurbon interprets the 1935 law’s validation of rural dancing as a kind of juridical wink, tacitly acknowledging the impossibility of establishing a strict separation between popular dance and ritual practice, even while seeming to attempt to legally enforce one. The 1943 ordinance against the staging of prohibited rituals aspired to another impossible detachment in restricting folklore performance to the presentation of popular dance and songs, “without, under any circumstances, the inclusion of one ritual note.” Much like the law against superstitious practices, the ritual dances that Lescot presented as national folklore in 1941 were intended to perform a labor of negation. Yet also like the law, they were subject to misreading, as when the author of the *Washington Post* review willfully refused to see the dances performed by Fussman-Mathon’s students as choreographic representations and instead depicted them as effective rituals that overwhelmed several of the performers.

The stakes for officially policing independent folklore performances were high, then, not merely because staged folklore was a primary space in which the post-occupation Haitian state articulated national identity during the 1940s. The “embodiment” of these representations affiliated them with the ritual practices that the official figure of popular dance, constructed in legal discourse as well as in national culture formations, was meant to repudiate and supplant. As the government’s censorship of the folkloric *comédiens* in 1942–43 drove home, these staged representations of ritual were at least as threatening to state authorities as the “real” ones they indexed, if not more so for being publicly performed in the capital. Yet, it seems to me that even state-sponsored folklore bore witness to the spiritual practices performed on the other side of official sanction. Was this not the drummer Janvier’s point when, after listening to Lescot’s accolades in Washington, DC, he requested that the president-elect provide him with a tangible memento to mark the Haitian state’s appreciation abroad for practices then subject to violent repression in Haiti?

I have been concerned here to examine the interconnections between state nationalist performances, which constructed popular practices as revivals of a transcended past, and the penal regimes or programs of reform that seemed designed to relegate such practices to the past. Over the course of the article, I have argued that the legal proscription on types of popular performance became the occasion, or even the condition of possibility, for their theatrical restaging as national culture. Yet Janvier’s confrontation of Lescot, and, perhaps as well, the performances of those credited only as peasants in Benoit’s transgressive theater piece, suggest that the “folklorization” of ritual practice became itself, at times, the occasion for popular political challenges to the law’s repressive regime.
Notes

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1. Remarks made by Maritou Moscoso and Déita (Mercédes Foucard Guignard) during the panel “Les Débuts des Danses Folkloriques Haïtiennes sur Scène Théâtrale,” at the conference La Danse Haïtienne: Histoire et Traditions, April 3, 1997, Port-au-Prince, Haiti. Videotapes of this conference are available at the Performing Arts Library, Lincoln Center, New York Public Library, New York. My spelling of Haitian Kreyòl words in this text will generally follow the orthography standardized by the Haitian government since 1979. However, in quoting other writers, I will preserve their choice of spelling. All translations of French and Kreyòl are mine, unless otherwise noted.

2. In Haiti, Vodou has traditionally referred to a particular rite within the Rada religious repertory, and, more recently, has been used to gloss all of the rituals serving this principal nanchon (nation) of spirits, believed to derive from Ginen, or Africa. It has generally not been figured as an inclusive term for the entire range of spiritual practices pursued individually and through relationships with male and female “priests,” called, respectively, oungan and manbo.

3. If catalyzed by the shock of imperial domination, the poetics of what became known as indigénisme in Haiti emerged in dialogue with a confluence of other post–World War I literary and political currents. A number of the self-identified indigénistes, most of whom were from elite families, had recently returned from study in Europe. Surrealism, primitivism, communism, the poetry of Harlem’s “New Negro” movement, Spengler’s theory of Western decadence, René Maran’s 1921 Prix Goncourt–winning novel Batouala—these are some of the broad strokes of indigénisme’s international context in the late 1920s.


5. Pierre Buteau, “Une problématique de l’identité,” Conjonction 198 (1993): 25. See literary scholar J. Michael Dash’s discussion of how nineteenth-century Haitian nationalist discourses privileged “official” revolutionary histories (the leadership of Toussaint Louverture, for example, over that of the maroon rebel Boukman), and embraced republican institutions and enlightenment values in positing the elite as “the avant-garde that would rehabilitate the black race.” J. Michael Dash, The Other America: Caribbean Literature in a New World Context (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1998), 45.
Laënnec Hurbon makes a similar argument: “[The elite] soon would take itself for the entire black race which it would defend and exemplify to the West.” Laënnec Hurbon, Le barbare imaginaire (Port-au-Prince, Haiti: Editions Henri Deschamps, 1987), 53.


8. “A singularly dangerous course if this society, weighted with impedimenta, stumbles in the ruts of dull and slavish imitations, because then it does not appear to bring any tribute to the complex play of human progress and will serve sooner or later as the surest pretext for nations impatient for territorial expansion, ambitious for hegemony, to erase the society from the map of the world.” Price-Mars, Ainsi parla l’onde, 44.


10. Price-Mars, Ainsi parla l’onde, 170. Price-Mars problematizes the word Vaudou and its variants in discussing its etymology: “To our mind the term Vaudou carries an ambiguity that should be dissipated forthwith. Nowhere have we found it to signify a body of beliefs with codified formulas and dogmas” (90–91).

11. In a 1917 lecture, “La domination économique et politique de l’élite,” which was later compiled in his 1919 La vocation de l’élite, Price-Mars critiques the Haitian Code rural (rural code) for establishing “a category of individuals whose social and economic role merited being defined by special laws in order to demonstrate more accurately that they do not resemble us and that we are able to dispose of their goods, of their liberty and even of their life at will!” He argued that these laws were proof of “the arbitrary nature and the abomination of the legal regime to which we subject our peasants,” and noted that it was on the basis of this code that U.S. marines justified the forced conscription of Haitian peasants into corvées (work crews) to build roads during the occupation. Qtd. in (and translated by) Magdaline Shannon, Jean Price-Mars, the Haitian Elite and the American Occupation, 1915–35 (New York: St. Martin’s, 1996), 42.

12. When this law was passed just a little over a year after the U.S. occupation of Haiti had ended, the popular practices formerly legally classified as sortilèges had been officially prohibited by the Haitian Code pénal for precisely a century. Article 405 of the original 1835 Code pénal prohibited the making of “ouanges, caprelatas, vaudous, donpèdre, macandals and other spells.” In 1864, under president Fabre Nicolas Geffrard, the law was revised, its penalties reinforced, and its scope expanded so that, “all dances and any other practices of the nature to keep alive in the populations the spirit of fetishism and superstition will be considered spells and punished by the same sentences.” The 1864 Code pénal was in effect during the American occupation, and article 405, in particular, was enforced by U.S. military officials with extreme severity during the early years of the nineteen-year intervention, when it both served as a pretext for the repression of peasant rebels and enabled U.S. officials to justify that counterinsurgency before the 1921–22 U.S. senate committee investigating the occupations of Haiti and the Dominican Republic as a “civilizing” mission.
13. The article went on to affirm that this “Presidential Act will have considerable repercussions for the prestige of the nation,” because Vincent “included in his reform of the state this reform of our customs, this reform of our mentality, banishing from our habits these shameful vestiges of Africa which have always made us considered a strange people, backward, withdrawn from the great lights of civilization and presenting the paradoxical characteristic of appropriating the most refined elements of civilization while preserving in secret beliefs and practices of barbarous peoples.” “La réforme de l’état, les décrets-loi,” Le Matin, October 11, 1935. On the former hostility of Le Matin to Vincent’s policies, see Shannon, Jean Price-Mars, 143, 151; emphasis in original.


15. Once head of the American Chamber of Commerce in Haiti and author of the historical account Black Democracy: The Story of Haiti (1928), Davis continued, “After a first quick read, I turned, completely bewildered, to page 99 and, after having re-read these sentences: ‘The fetid air clogged my lungs. My breath came in thick, short gasps. A fit of vomiting seized me . . . ’ I was grateful to the author of the book for having found an adequate expression for translating the effect that this work will produce on readers who really know Haiti and Haitians.” H. P. Davis, “La fumée s’élève des feux du vaudou,” Haïti-Journal, November 6, 1935.

16. Transparently threatened by the education, wealth, and cosmopolitanism of elite Haitians, white American and European writers during the occupation and thereafter frequently sought to identify such universal “racial traits” that would, as Loederer put it in one case, force the “primitive African [to] break through the shell of civilized convention.” Loederer, Voodoo Fire in Haiti, 4.

17. Price-Mars, Ainsi parla l’oncle, 173.


19. Interestingly, in his 1910 portrait of Haiti, La République d’Haïti: Telle qu’elle est, Vincent anticipates his legislation of this specific prohibition in quoting from his “eminent compatriot” Dr. Léon Audain’s book Le mal d’Haïti on the subject of “la danse du Vaudou”: “It is necessary to purify the dance of Vaudou of all that which can take the spirit back to the barbarity of past times, to suppress the ceremony which precedes the sacrifice, to interdict the public effusion of the blood of animals, to check the tafiaic [tafia is a locally produced rum] furor of initiates, to reduce, in a word, Vaudou to a simple popular dance, joyful and decent.” Qtd. in Sténio Vincent, La République d’Haïti: Telle qu’elle est (Bruxelles: Société Anonyme Belge d’Imprimerie, 1910), 284.

20. Alphonse Jean, an elderly oungan (male priest) in an area of Tabarre, on the outskirts of Port-au-Prince, known as Kajo (a name by which Jean is also known) emphasized in a 1997 conversation that during the occupation, “we could not do anything.” He said that many oungan, manbo, and ounsi from this area were arrested and taken first to the Cassernes Dessalines, which was the primary base for American operations, and then to Fort Dimanche, which served as the regional prison. Alphonse Jean, interview by the author, Tabarre, Haiti, June 15, 1997. My thanks to Yanick Guiteau Dandin and Etienne Germain for introducing me to Jean.
Melville J. Herskovits to Norman Armour, American Legation, Port-au-Prince, Haiti, April 12, 1935, Haiti Field Trip file, box 8, folder 22, Melville J. Herskovits Papers, Northwestern University Library, Evanston, IL.

Hurbon, Le barbare imaginaire, 124.

George Eaton Simpson, “The Belief System of Haitian Vodun,” in Religious Cults of the Caribbean: Trinidad, Jamaica, and Haiti (Rio Piedras, Puerto Rico: Institute of Caribbean Studies, 1970), 255. The end of the occupation in August 1934 ushered in a moment of intense ethnographic interest in Haiti on the part of American anthropologists and folklorists. Elsie Clews Parsons had visited in 1926. Harold Courlander made his first trip in 1932 and would spend much of the next decade in residence in Port-au-Prince. Melville Herskovits arrived with his wife and collaborator, Frances, for a three-month stay in the summer of 1934 as U.S. military forces were preparing to leave. In 1935–36, under Herskovits’s direction, Katherine Dunham spent nine months in Haiti researching social and ritual dances. Remarkably, in the early months of 1937, Harold Courlander, Alan Lomax, Zora Neale Hurston, Lydia Parrish, and George Eaton Simpson were all simultaneously conducting research in Haiti.

Simpson, Religious Cults of the Caribbean, 255.

Hurbon, Le barbare imaginaire, 124–25.


Hurbon, Le barbare imaginaire, 92.

In discussing Vincent’s décret-loi, Léon-François Hoffmann makes a similar point. He also sees “the influence of Jean Price-Mars and his disciples, who pleaded for the conservation and study of national folklore,” but detects this in the new law’s provision for the confiscation of objets cabalistiques, rather than also their destruction, as article 407 of the 1864 Code pénal had prescribed. Léon-François Hoffmann, Haïti: Couleurs, croyances, créole (Port-au-Prince, Haiti: Editions Henri Deschamps et Les Editions du CIDIHCA, 1990), 138.

References to the mouvement folklorique as such appear in the Port-au-Prince daily Haiti-Journal as early as April 1941.


As David Nicholls argues, the romantic populism of the Griots school was “to some extent shared by Roumain.” See David Nicholls, From Dessalines to Duvalier: Race, Colour and National Independence in Haiti, rev. ed. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1996), 176.

See Jean Coulanges, untitled essays, Conjonction 198 (1993): 85. Coulanges discusses the work of Jaegerhuber, Justin Elie, Ludovic Lamothe, Lina Mathon, and Frantz Casséus, among others: “Certain Haitian artists and foreign artists (living in Haiti), following the example of a Béla Bartok, for Hungary, of a Hector Villa Lobos for Brazil, of a Manuel de Falla for Spain, utilized their technique and talent to make classical, concert, recital, salon, chamber work, from Haitian popular themes” (85).

35. One indication of this prioritization of performance comes in a 1947 article by ethnologist Michel Aubourg in Haïti-Journal, which summarizes the course and scope of the mouvement folklorique up to that point. Interestingly, almost all of the figures and groups he mentions were performers. Michel Aubourg, “Le mouvement folklorique d’aujourd’hui,” Haïti-Journal, August 8, 1947.

36. Jean-Léon Destiné, one of Fussman-Mathon’s original company members, who went on to have an international career as a teacher, choreographer, and performer of Haitian dance, remembers that they would rehearse in Fussman-Mathon’s home. To begin with, according to Destiné, they concentrated on learning popular songs that Fussman-Mathon had arranged, occasionally offering performances at elite social clubs, or illustrating lectures given by Jean Price-Mars. Remarks made during the roundtable, “Les Débuts des Danses Folkloriques Haittiennes sur Scène Théâtrale.”

37. Ethnologist Michel Lamartinière Honorat remembers as a young person having to listen to L’Heure de l’Art Haïtien surreptitiously, as his father did not approve of it. He recalls that the program remained on the air until approximately 1946. Interview by the author, Pétion-Ville, Haiti, June 4, 1997.

38. The Bureau d’Ethnologie de la République d’Haïti was founded by Jacques Roumain on October 31, 1941. The Lescot government issued a lengthy décret-loi instituting the bureau as a state agency and identifying as its mission the collection, classification, and conservation of “archaeological and ethnological pieces found in Haitian territory.” Qtd. in “Création d’un bureau d’ethnologie: Un important décret-loi instituant ce bureau vient d’être promulgué,” Haïti-Journal, November 11, 1941. A week after the bureau’s institutionalization, the Port-au-Prince daily newspapers announced that a group of scholars, headed by Jean Price-Mars, had created the Institut d’Ethnologie. See “Un institut d’ethnologie: Il vient d’être créé à Port-au-Prince par un groupe d’intellectuels. Le premier cours sera fait le 17 novembre,” Haïti-Journal, November 8, 1941.

39. See, for example, Melville J. Herskovits’s regret in The Myth of the Negro Past (1941; reprint, Boston: Beacon Hill, 1958), that “no method has as yet been evolved to permit objective study of the dance” (269).


41. Louines Louinis, interview by the author, Brooklyn, NY, July 19, 1998. Michel Lamartinière Honorat recalls that Lorimer Denis was instrumental in forming Mater Dolorosa and gave the troupe its name.

42. Marie Noël, a particularly respected informant and member of the troupe, was memorialized on her death in a 1947 issue of the Bulletin du Bureau d’Ethnologie: “The Afro-Haitian Ethnography Section to which Marie-Noël was attached . . . owes to her the greatest part of its documentation on popular culture.” The tribute goes on: “At the head of the choir ‘Mater Dolorosa,’ supervised by M. Saint Erlonge Abraham, she interpreted sacred hymns and popular songs. . . . Marie Noël participated, in a way, in the very life of the Bureau: illustrating its lectures on the subject of the culture of the Haitian masses, collaborating with it in the collection of proverbs, tales and legends.” See Regnor C. Bernard, “Hommage à Marie-Noël,” Bulletin du Bureau d’Ethnologie (1947): 27.
43. The Roosevelt administration considered the ongoing occupation of Haiti, scheduled to continue according to the terms of the 1915 Haitian-American Treaty until May 1936, to be a serious political liability to efforts to recruit the allegiance of neighboring states through the rhetoric of pan-Americanism. Reporting on talks held between Vincent and Roosevelt in Washington in April 1934 to work out the terms of an early departure of U.S. troops from Haiti, H. P. Davis commented that “the complete restoration of Haitian sovereignty . . . coincident with the withdrawal of the armed forces of the United States, unquestionably would be accepted throughout Latin America as a proof of the sincerity of Mr. Roosevelt’s new ‘good neighbor’ policy.” H. P. Davis, “Haiti and the ‘Good Neighbor’ Policy,” *Literary Digest* 117.17 (1934): 8.

44. Haiti remained under American financial control for thirteen years thereafter, with a U.S. fiscal representative rigidly enforcing the country’s debt repayments to American bondholders on a 1922 loan, amounting by 1934 to approximately $11 million.

45. Sarah Gertrude Knott to Melville Herskovits, January 28, 1941. National Folk Festival file, box 14, folder 11, Melville J. Herskovits Papers, Northwestern University Library, Evanston, IL. Interestingly, a March 1938 letter from Charles S. Johnson of Fisk University to Katherine Dunham suggests that the festival's interest in presenting Haitian material was more long-standing. As part of his response to her query about venues that might be interested in her dance company, Johnson wrote: “You know, I suppose, of Miss Gertrude Knott’s Folk Festival. This is the third year, I believe. I have just had an inquiry from her about Zora Hurston, who wants to present a Haitian voodoo ritual.” Hurston had returned from her Guggenheim-funded research in Jamaica and Haiti several months earlier and was then in the process of completing her ethnography *Tell My Horse*. Charles S. Johnson to Katherine Dunham, March 1, 1938, correspondence folder 20–7–F1, 1/6, Katherine Mary Dunham Papers, Special Collections/Morris Library, Southern Illinois University, Carbondale.

46. Herskovits also asked Knott to “transmit to the Minister from Haiti my considered opinion that the music and dances of these people, as they perform these in their vodun rites, is artistically the equivalent of any folk music and many music art forms. The drumming is magnificent; I know of no Negro society where drumming has been perfected to a higher degree, and I would not exclude West Africa itself in this.” Melville Herskovits to Sarah Gertrude Knott, January 31, 1941. National Folk Festival file, box 14, folder 11, Melville J. Herskovits Papers, Northwestern University Library, Evanston, IL.

47. Sarah Gertrude Knott to Melville Herskovits, April 17, 1941. National Folk Festival file, box 14, folder 11, Melville J. Herskovits Papers, Northwestern University Library, Evanston, IL.

48. Remarks made by Jean-Léon Destiné during the panel “Les Débuts des Danses Folkloriques Haïtiennes sur Scène Théâtrale.” According to another member of this panel, Mariot Moscoso, Fussman-Mathon “often frequented the peristil [Vodou temple],” and, in Port-au-Prince consulted with the well-known manbo Lorgina and her assistant Ciceron St. Aude, who was widely recognized as an extraordinary dancer. Lorgina also had close ties to members of the Troupe Folklorique Nationale, founded in 1949. When I asked if he had known Lorgina, Louines Louinis laughed and replied, “You could not be part of the national troupe and not know Lorgina.” Louines Louinis, interview by the author.

50. In studying the literature produced by the church for its so-called campagne anti-superstitieuse, it becomes evident that the missions institutionalized between 1939–42 need to be understood, perhaps even primarily, as an effort to check the growing postoccupation influence and prestige of Protestantism in Haiti. A church declaration from early in the campaign, for instance, cites, as a cause for alarm and action, a persistent rumor that “one must become a Protestant in order to extricate oneself from the obligations of superstition.” One of the antisuperstitious oaths, in fact, required Catholics to swear both that they were “completely finished with superstitions,” and that they would never become Protestants. Campagne anti-superstitieuse: Documentation (n.p.: n.p., 1941), 7, 91. Collected at the Bibliothèque Haïtienne des Pères du Saint Esprit, Port-au-Prince, Haiti.

51. Destiné, “Hommage à Lina Mathon-Blanchet.”


53. The young members of this troupe, according to Jean-Léon Destiné, were: Max, Denise, and Marie-Thérèse Roy; Carline Duré, Léon Walker, Carmen Dalencourt, Martial Day, Jacqueline Déjean, Gladys Hyppolite, Chaton Duplessis, and Léon Destiné. An article in Le Nouvelliste on the eve of their departure reported that the group also included Lucienne Duré and Félix Duplessis. This article lists the drummers as André Janvier and Léandre Lunique; Destiné remembers the drummers as Janvier and Jonas. See Destiné’s remarks during the panel “Les Débuts des Danses Folkloriques Haïtiennes sur Scène Théâtrale.” Also see, “Départ du groupe folklorique de Madame Fussman Mathon,” Le Nouvelliste, April 17, 1941.


56. Lina Mathon-Blanchet, interview by the author, Port-au-Prince, Haiti, June 25, 1991. Jean-Léon Destiné writes that the members of her group were “the first blacks to be admitted there.” Destiné, “Hommage à Lina Mathon-Blanchet.”

57. “Haitians Sing to Voodoo Gods As Jungle Drums Beat at Party” in “Le groupe folklorique haïtien aux Etats-Unis,” Le Nouvelliste, May 8, 1941. Interestingly, the paragraph in Le Nouvelliste that introduces the excerpts from the Washington Post article makes a point of describing the “yanvalou” (yanvalou), which Destiné and Gladys Hyppolite were performing in the photograph that accompanied the article, as a “vaudouesque dance that is currently practiced in our countrysides” (emphasis added).

58. “Haitians Sing to Voodoo Gods As Jungle Drums Beat at Party.”


60. Remarks made by Destiné during the 1997 panel “Les Débuts des Danses Folkloriques Haïtiennes sur Scène Théâtrale.”

61. Ibid.


63. While lauded by the elite and backed by the force of civil and military authorities when battling le mélange in the countryside, the church lost this support in February 1942, when
it attempted to install the antisuperstitious missions in Port-au-Prince and administer them across the capital's social classes. The establishment press and government then accused the church of providing fodder, through its campaign, for those in the West who desired to represent or view Haiti as "the most superstitious country in the world." "La campagne anti-superstitieuse dégénère en manifestation de haine et de discordes," *Haïti-Journal*, February 23, 1942. Ultimately the persecution of sèvitè by church and state authorities seemed only to intensify such associations. Elie Lescot, who, in his 1974 memoir, accused the Roman Catholic hierarchy of attempting to destabilize his government through the *campagne anti-superstitieuse*, regretted, too, that "all this din in our poor country in 1941 and 1942, under the fallacious pretext of converting our rural masses, constituted, abroad, the most deplorable publicity for Haiti." Given his initial backing for the campaign when it was focused in the countryside, such a statement might seem rather revisionary. Elie Lescot, *Avant l'oubli: Christianisme et paganism en Haïti et autres lieux* (Port-au-Prince, Haiti: H. Deschamps, 1974), 360.

64. J. C. White to the Secretary of State, "Change in Attitude towards Voodoo on the Part of the Intellectual Classes in Haiti As Evidenced by Development of Expressions of Interest in Folklore," September 24, 1942, U.S. Department of State decimal file 838.404/85, U.S. National Archives, College Park, MD.

65. *Haïti-Journal* announced this event several weeks earlier: "This will be the occasion of a great artistic and society event under the high patronage of the new chief of state, S. E. M. Elie Lescot." *Haïti-Journal*, April 21, 1941.


68. In cooperating on SHADA, Haiti and the United States took over massive tracts of land to cultivate a latex-producing plant called cryptostegia, resulting in serious food shortages in the affected regions the following year. When the U.S. government abandoned the project in 1944, it provided no financial or other assistance for the resettlement of peasants on the confiscated land.


70. Ibid.


72. J. C. White to the Secretary of State, "Change in Attitude towards Voodoo."


75. Later on, in his 1951 lecture, "Folklore et Patriotisme," probably his strongest published statement against the legal prohibition of *les pratiques superstitieuses*, Price-Mars built on this earlier redefinition in arguing against the injustice of the law's failure "to disassociate archaic and old-fashioned religious practices from crimes of sorcery and magic." Addressing his auditors (and subsequent readers) in the confrontational tone that was his frequent rhetorical mode, Price-Mars analyzes the stakes of the governing elite's reliance on this prohibition: "Ah! You don't want to hear Vodou spoken of... you feel only shame and scorn for this form of barbarity and it is the *Code pénal* for which you call to help to put an end to this scandal which contrasts so strongly with the degree of civilization that you boast of having attained." Price-Mars, *Folklore et patriotisme*, 17–18.
76. Kléber Georges-Jacob, *L’ethnie haïtienne* (Port-au-Prince, Haiti: Imprimerie de l’Etat, 1941), 65. In this work, Georges-Jacob made Price-Mars’s reclassification the basis of a legal argument against Vodou’s interdiction, with reference to the Haitian constitution’s protection of religious freedom. He reasoned that if these were practices of a religious nature, as Price-Mars had scientifically demonstrated, and if, constitutionally, each citizen has the right to profess his religion as long as it does not disturb the public order, then the prohibition should be lifted, as such family-based rites “constitute neither an immediate nor indirect danger for society” (74).

77. It seems that Augustin may have formed her own company of performers soon thereafter. In May 1943, an advertisement in *Haïti-Journal* read: “This evening, at the Rex, the Great National Star Marthe Augustin and her troupe in a Great Folkloric Gala.” *Haïti-Journal*, May 12, 1943. By the late 1940s, when folklore performance, as Oriol et al. write, had “reached its apogee” under the officializing cultural policies of president Dumarsais Estimé and the boom in tourism to Haiti, Marthe Augustin seems to have stopped performing. Oriol, Viaud, and Aubourg, *Le mouvement folklorique en Haïti*, 75. She was only vaguely remembered by the participants in the panel “Les Débuts des Danses Folkloriques sur Scène Théâtrale,” at the 1997 conference in Port-au-Prince. Michel Lamartinière Honorat recalled that some of Benoit’s other former performers became founding members of the folklore company La Troupe Macaya, directed by André Narcisse. Interview by the author.

78. Louines Louinis, who worked in the late 1940s with Met [Antoine] Lubin and Pierre Blain (“Papa Pierre”), another well-known director of popular theater productions, characterized this theatrical genre as focusing on “country life, middle-class life. When you saw it you would say, ‘That actually happens,’ or ‘My God, I saw that last week in Gonaïves!’” Louines Louinis, interview by the author.

83. Qtd. in “‘Mambo-Chérie’ est ‘Malade,’” *Le Nouvelliste*, June 3–4, 1943.
84. “‘Mambo-Chérie’ est ‘Malade.’”
87. Authors and directors of this genre of folklore who had already had their works approved by the BIP were required to present them again to the undersecretary of state for information and the general police to be reexamined in light of this new ordinance. To be mounted onstage, productions would require an official “visa” issued once a government representative had attended, and approved, a dress rehearsal. “Une excellente décision.” Georges Corvington, author of a multivolume history of the city of Port-au-Prince, is certain that this ordinance was applied to theatrical folklore productions during the remaining three years of Lescot’s presidency. Interview by the author, Port-au-Prince, Haiti, June 8, 1997. See his *Port-au-Prince au cours des ans: La ville contemporaine, 1934–1950* (Port-au-Prince, Haiti: Henri Deschamps, 1991), 233, for another case of BIP censorship “in the interest of morality and good customs.”

88. “L’incident est clos; Clos est le folklore . . . ,” *Le Nouvelliste*, June 7, 1943.
89. Derrida writes: “The word ‘enforceability’ reminds us that there is no such thing as law (droit) that doesn’t imply in itself, a priori, in the analytic structure of its concept, the possibility of being ‘enforced,’ applied by force. There are, to be sure, laws that are not enforced, but there is no law without enforceability, and no applicability or enforceability of the law without force, whether this force be direct or indirect, physical or symbolic, exterior or interior, brutal or subtly discursive and hermeneutic, coercive or regulative, and so forth.” Jacques Derrida, “Force of Law: The ‘Mystical Foundation of Authority,’” trans. Mary Quaintance, Cardozo Law Review 11.5–6 (1990): 925–27.

90. Hurbon continues: “The specific task of the State—and . . . the service expected from the penalization of Vodou—consists first of all in producing the marginalization of the peasantry.” Hurbon, Le barbare imaginaire, 143.