

Book Review

Melville J. Herskovits. 1937.
Life in a Haitian Valley.
Garden City, NY: Anchor Books

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An attitude of prejudice and racism towards Americans of African descent remained prevalent throughout the United States during most of the first half of the twentieth century. It is against this backdrop that Melville J. Herskovits published his ethnography, *Life in a Haitian Valley*, in 1937. It provided revolutionary insight into the then highly debated subject of cultural (and racial) assimilation. He used Haiti as a case study to show that despite an extended period of European contact, the African slaves who were brought to Haiti two hundred years previously have retained many aspects of their African culture. He claimed that assimilation is not simply the replacing of a primitive culture with one that is more sophisticated. Rather, assimilation is the process of combining cultures: taking some from the new culture while retaining many dimensions of the traditional culture. Though he uses many aspects of the life of a Haitian peasant to demonstrate his point, the central topic of Herskovits' ethnography is the examination of religious practices of the inhabitants of the Mirebalais valley. This is not only done anthropologically, but also historically, as he attempts to show the reason behind certain Haitian practices, pointing to their origins in both African traditional religion and Roman Catholicism.

Although Herskovits does not provide the reader with an explicit statement of his anthropological perspective, it quickly becomes obvious that the author takes the perspective of a historical particularist. This is demonstrated by the conclusion of his work: Haitian culture is neither predominantly African nor European, but is rather a synthesis of the complex historical interrelations between Africans and Europeans, particularly during Haiti's early history as the French slave-trading colony of Saint Domingue (301). The recurring theme throughout the book is that though modified, the African elements of Haitian culture have not and will not be fully replaced by the exposure to the Western (European) way of life.

Prior to this work, Herskovits was a distinguished scholar of African (particularly West African) ethnology. In his analysis, the author often draws upon his knowledge of West Africa; however, the direct fieldwork for this volume was conducted immediately following the

withdrawal of American troops from Haiti in the summer of 1934. Herskovits and his wife spent three months in the township and surrounding rural valley of Mirebalais in Central Haiti.

This volume is divided into four sections. The first serves as a background for readers to understand how Haitian culture has become what it is today. The author states that before the culture of Haiti can be examined, one must first understand the cultures from which it was derived. Chapter 1 describes the history and cultures of the various tribes and regions of West Africa from which St. Domingue's slaves were taken. Herskovits states that despite the well-proven fact that there was a preponderance of slaves descended from the Congo region, a majority of the African traits in Haitian culture seem to be descended from the Dahomey culture of the Guniea region. Following this initial chapter is a look at the culture of the various classes of Frenchmen that the Africans encountered in Saint Domingue. The question is posed: "What impression must the Negroes have obtained from their opportunities to observe the life of their masters?" (43). He offers three principal aspects of Colonial European life that affected the life of the slaves: lack of cleanliness and sanitation, loose moral values and promiscuity, and an apathetic attitude towards Catholicism and the related misbehavior of the clergy.

The second and third sections of this work contain the primary ethnographic content. Section two contains an overview of the life of a Haitian peasant. Chapter 4 explains the economic aspect of life for the Haitian peasant. He describes in detail the importance of *konbit*-the communal workgroup, the functioning of the local markets and the division of labor. Chapters 5 and 6 contain a brief description of the various phases of life in Haitian culture: birth, childhood, adolescence and eventually marriage and family life. Chapter 7 examines kinship relations and inheritance in Mirebalais. Throughout this section Herskovits points out which aspects are primarily descended from European tradition and those primarily African in origin.

The third section comprises nearly half of the book and is an examination of the many facets of Haitian religious belief and practice. In Chapter 8 the reader is provided with an introduction to what is known to Americans as "Voodoo." Herskovits defines Vodun as "a

complex of African belief and ritual governing in large measure the religious life of the Haitian peasantry” (139). In this chapter he introduces the reader to the gods of Haitian folklore- the *loa*, which are divided into two companies: *Rada*, those coming from the African Arada culture and *Pétro*, the Gods who originate in Haiti. He also introduces the fundamental principles of sacrifice and possession and describes in detail the ritual of baptism of the *loa*, by which they are tamed. In this chapter, the author also provides the reader with an explanation of the various practitioners of Haitian religion: the *houngan* (priest), *mambo* (priestess), *hounsi* (assistant) and *bòkò* (sorcerer). He also introduces the basic structure of Haitian folk belief; that Haitian belief is not solely in the *loa*, but it is the Christian God who maintains the highest position of power, followed by the pantheon of *loa* and Catholic saints, after which comes the worship of twins and finally homage to the dead. A separate, but related concept of the religion is that of magic.

Chapter 9 is an in depth description of the Vodun service. This formal service is performed to pacify the *loa* who harass the family because they feel neglected. The *loa* seldom require it more frequently than once a decade or generation. Herskovits describes in great detail the proceedings of the two day event. It is preceded by an *aksyon de gras*, a ceremony that resembles what one might see in a Catholic Church, involving singing and reciting of prayers. Following this initial phase, the *houngan* initiates the vodun ceremony; singing and reciting of prayers to the *loa* are followed by several people being possessed. Sacrifice of the required animals ensues. A similar ceremony is conducted the next day and followed by the *Vodun* dance.

This ritualistic dance is the topic addressed in the following chapter. Herskovits states that this aspect of Haitian religion “has been more frequently observed and reported on than any other rites of the cult” (178). He claims that it is an integral part of both the worship of the *loa* and the social life of the Haitian peasantry. He gives a detailed account of the goings on at the event as well as descriptions of the location of the dance, an outdoor shelter called a *tonnelle*, as well as the instruments used: the drums, the rattle and the iron.

Chapters 11 and 12 highlight the aspects of Haitian cult that are not directly related to worship of the *loa*. Herskovits first addresses the worship of the twins and the dead. Despite the fact that the author claims twin worship is more developed in West Africa, he none the less states that it holds a special place in Haitian belief. He quotes an informant as having said: “Their power comes from God. Do we ourselves know how twins are made?” (203). Herskovits then touches on the cult of the dead, which he states “has been modified to a far greater extent than these others [cult of the *loa* and twins] by the influence of the Catholic Church” (206). He describes the rituals that accompany death in Haitian culture, which are largely based in Catholicism. However, there are some very clear West African principles which underlie these rituals, such as: the close relationship between the dead and magic and the meticulousness of washing, preparing and disposing of the body (to avoid sympathetic magic). He then describes the beliefs in magic present in Haiti, both good and the evil forms, along with the magical beings believed to exist. Though somewhat distinct from *loa* worship, it is recognized that some *loa* control the forces of magic, be they good or evil. The Pétro *loa* tend to be more responsible for dark magic.

Herskovits’ final section is more comparative than ethnographic; comparing many facets of Haitian culture and religion with those of Africa and Europe to determine which of these founding cultures is primarily dominant in the various aspects. His central point is stated repeatedly: that Haitian culture is clearly a syncretism of both the European and African components. Moreover, European culture certainly did not overshadow African beliefs and practices, as these traditional elements are still boldly manifest in various aspects of contemporary Haitian culture – especially that of religion. He concludes:

The process is seen to be one of selection, of working over, of revamping and recombining the elements of the contributing cultures, with the result that the ensuing combinations, though of recognizable derivation, differ from their aboriginal forms. (301)

Following the above sections are four appendices: one containing a description of the *loa* of the Vodun Pantheon, another with his comments on fieldwork methods, another with notes on the text and a glossary of creole terms used throughout the book. These appendices are helpful to the reader, particularly the first two, which provide insight on Herskovits' research techniques and an overview of the Haitian *loa*.

Though the text provides a great description of various Vodun rituals and practices, it lacks sufficient explanation of the symbolism and purpose of the practices. It may well be the case that Herskovits was unable to obtain sufficient explanation in the short time he was in Haiti, as in his appendix on field work he states that upon arrival he did not understand creole (325). Even the appendix entitled "The Gods of the Vodun Pantheon," regarding which he states was "of capital importance" to compile (313), is far from exhaustive. Since he was only in Haiti for 3 months, his ethnography lacks important explanation of the many significant calendrical rituals in Vodun, such as: the New Year, Easter, All Saints Day.

Despite these few criticisms, Herskovits' ethnography provides fascinating insight into the life and culture of the Haitian peasant, yet it proves even more valuable when considered in its historic context. At the time of publication, racial prejudice abounded in the United States. The belief that Americans of African descent should not retain markers of their African heritage, but rather should be fully assimilated into American culture was widely accepted in Herskovits' day. In response to this claim he states:

African traits of behavior retained by the Negroes cannot be claimed to make him a unique phenomenon; this merely marks him as a group no different from all the others that go to make up the citizenry of the United States. (309)

He thus uses Haiti as an example to refute the above stated ideology and to show that New World people of African descent—even those in Haiti, who had a very lengthy period of European contact—have retained many aspects of their aboriginal culture. Through this example he asserts that African-Americans should not be expected to abandon their culture, but rather that they have a right to retain aspects of their culture in the process of assimilation.