

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF AFRICAN MASKING IN
AFRICAN SPIRITUAL BELIEF SYSTEMS:
AYITIAN VODOU

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ABSTRACT

The significance of the removal of the “White Mask” in Ayitian Vodou is to provide an Afrocentric analysis regarding the detriment of Catholicism/Protestantism has inflicted on African agency in Ayiti. The Practice of Ayitian Vodou derives from a variety of West African Spiritual Belief Systems like the Yoruba, Kongo, and Dahomean. During the imperialist era in Ayiti, Ayitians utilized biblical figures to hide their African gods in order to partake in Ayitian Vodou overtly. Due to classism, colorism, racism, and white domination, the camouflage aspect of Ayitian Vodou became a permanent component within Ayitian Vodou. This study proposes that scholars should rely on the method of Masking rather than the popular notion of Double Consciousness in examining African phenomena. W.E.B. Dubois coined Double Consciousness, which does not accurately explain or articulate how African people endured the institution of mental and physical enslavement. Double Consciousness derives from a Eurocentric ideology that operates from depriving African people of their history, culture, perspective, and personal development.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin White Masks*, examines the psychological impact of European colonialism and enslavement on the descendants of enslaved Africans. Colonization denied, neglected, and destroyed African agency which instilled seeds of white validation in the minds of colonized Africans. Fanon believes the cultural alienation of Africans has led to "the black man [wanting] to be white" (Fanon 3). The primary aim of *Black Skin, White Masks* is to propose a way of liberating the "man of color from himself," (2). In his assessment Fanon fails to ground his approach from an African cultural perspective which would have produced a concrete Afrocentric analysis. The issue discussed in Fanon's book is prevalent within African communities throughout the world. This study will discuss the implementation of the "White Mask" during the institution of enslavement. Thus, it created a comprehensive disempowerment of African descendants. I investigated African people's engagement with White Masking and the divisive use of Universalism.

This study proposes that scholars rely on the method of Masking rather than the popular notion of Double Consciousness in examining African phenomena. W.E.B. Dubois coined Double Consciousness, which does not accurately explain or articulate how African people endured the institution of mental and physical enslavement. Double Consciousness derives from a Eurocentric ideology that operates from depriving African people of their history, culture, perspective, and personal development.

The mask is one of the many representations of the ancestral continent and the culture the ancestors created (“Mask & Masking” 2). The mask is more than a relic of African history because it exemplifies the African aesthetic. The ancestors created artwork that represented themselves because they understood the importance of knowing their history and seeing themselves within it. The mask is a great artifact for African descendants to use when investigating how the ancestors viewed themselves on a spiritual, psychological, and cultural level.

In an effort to survive the oppressive inferiority regarding the myth of white supremacy, enslaved Africans had to adopt a new identity. The effects of attempting to survive European imperialism, caused a major portion of Africans that suffered from Agency Reduction Formation (ARF) (Tillotson 60), White Validation Syndrome (WVS) (Cognitive Hiatus 32), and Cognitive Hiatus (CH) (Ibid 29). Michael Tillotson defines Agency Reduction formation as “any system of thought that distracts, neutralizes, or reduces the need and desire for [an] assertive collective agency by [Africans],” (Tillotson 60). The first step to indoctrinate another group their humanity must be removed, thus results in the “civilizing” process of the oppressed. The oppressed group is reduced to a “primitive” stature which allows oppressors to establish their supremacy. The reduction of African agency is vital in the process of indoctrination and, in turn, with the White Mask. The White Mask is a manifestation of Eurocentrism that operates in Ayiti through many of its social constructs. African maskers, who wear the White Mask experienced White Validation Syndrome and Cognitive Hiatus. Ama Mazama defines White Validation Syndrome as “...this construction of whiteness as the epitome of authority, there is the notion of [African] deficiency, with African in need of whiteness to be fully human,” (Cognitive Hiatus 31). The White Mask distorts the African masker’s agency in

order to instill need to be European. European imperialism validates this functional aspect of the White Mask before and after the African Revolution in Ayiti in 1804. As a result, the new leaders maintained the same infrastructure that they fought against.

Jan Verschueren (1948) provides insight into the first three African presidents of Ayiti who attempted to suppress Ayitian Vodou in the forty years following independence (1804-44), (qtd. Desmangles 38). Why would these early leaders suppress their people into docility after achieving liberation from European imperialism? African maskers who wear the White Mask for a long period of time suffered from Cognitive Hiatus. Mazama defines Cognitive Hiatus as “a break in the continuity of logical reasoning, a missing logical step in one’s thinking,” (Cognitive Hiatus 29). In order to understand the Afrocentric perspective scholars must understand Afrocentricity. Molefi Kete Asante who coined the term Afrocentricity defines it as, “a self-conscious obliteration of the subject/object division between two things that are represented at being oppressed and entirely different and the enthronement of an African vision,” (*African Pyramids of Knowledge* 5). When examining African phenomena, it is imperative that scholars apply the Afrocentric method to avoid objectifying Africans within their historical-cultural context. Furthermore, Asante who created the Afrocentric method argues:

European world view: Cannot truly grasp the significance of a revolutionary idea that would challenge the Eurocentric projection of its method as universal. The time has come for a total re-evaluation of both intellectual privilege and the assertion of European dominance in knowledge. (“African Pyramids of Knowledge” viii)

The Afrocentric Perspective is vital in placing all African agency mentioned throughout this study in its historical-cultural context. The Afrocentric Perspective liberates African people from the mental shackles of White Supremacy. Eurocentric

methodological approaches are structured to objectify African people aids in validating white dominance. The Afrocentric analysis in this study places the African as the primary subject within African history versus being objectified in their historical context.

European indoctrination affected the development of African personhood in Ayiti (Haiti). Ayiti was the first African nation to liberate itself from European imperialism, and yet, the Africans living in Ayiti still suffer from the remnants of mental enslavement. This study will attempt to answer these preliminary questions: Why African people continue to perform with the “White Mask” when the European colonizers vacated Ayiti after 1804? Why are the African divinities in Ayiti still disguised as Biblical characters to this present day? Who has become the new oppressor that instills this fear of practicing Ayitian Vodou?

This study will not examine the functional aspects of white powder that some Africans utilize within the practice of African Masking. African Masks can materialize in many forms varying from natural resources like wood, metal, powder, leaves, feathers, and copper. In the African cultural context, the color white is in reverence to the ancestors (“Catching Color”). The White Mask in this study is the imposition of Eurocentrism projected its ideology, aesthetics, and perspective on African people. Another form of functional aspect of the White Mask is “Code Switching²³.” Code Switching is a linguistic method that African people resorted in order to endure the suppressive nature of systemic oppression throughout the African diaspora.

Ayitian Vodou will be referred to as an African Spiritual Belief System because the term religion negates its purpose in the African historical-cultural context. The Practice of Ayitian Vodou derives from a variety of West African Spiritual Belief Systems from the Yoruba, Kongo, and Dahomean people (Asante & Mazama 696).

During the imperialist era in Ayiti, Africans made use of Catholic biblical figures to hide their African Divinities in order to partake in Ayitian Vodou covertly. Due to classism, colorism, racism, and other forms of white domination, the camouflage aspect of Ayitian Vodou has been ingrained within the African Spiritual Belief System (ASBS) which continues today. When generations are severed from their African Spiritual Belief System without comprehending the historical-cultural context of Africans practicing Catholicism, they fall victim to White Validation Syndrome, Agency Reduction Formation, and Cognitive Hiatus. As a result of Cognitive Hiatus Africans throughout the diaspora who practice Catholicism find their way back into practicing Ayitian Vodou without acknowledging the contradiction between the two systems.

A person who suffers from Cognitive Hiatus can act or speak in a variety of contradicting expressions (Cognitive Hiatus 30). For example, the early leaders of Ayiti exuded Cognitive Hiatus. Desmangles asserts, “During the forty years following independence (1804-44), the first three black presidents set themselves against Vodou and attempted vigorously to suppress it,” (Desmangles 45). Ayitian Vodou was a notable threat to the stability of this new system created by European colonialists. In order to control a group of people, the oppressor creates a system that brainwash the oppressed into forgetting who they are then assigns a new identity to assign the oppressed in order to maintain dominance.

Through the indoctrination Africans have been trained to believe that Europeans are superior. The construction of whiteness fulfills many positions of authority that creates the illusion of white superiority. This notion portrays that in order to be considered human one must be of European descent in comparison to those who are not. A constant search for approval exemplifies a form of self-rejection since Africans in this

space have not created room for their validation (Cognitive Hiatus 31-33). The colonizers' hyper-evaluation manifested in this space, that negated self-preservation, self-determination, and self-development for the African person. An example of this is through the Christian religion, with its white male supreme God. In ancient African history, before the interruption of European and Arabic invaders, Africans sought their communities and ancestors for approval before seeking validation from people outside of their historical-cultural context.

Celucien L. Joseph makes the assertion that the Catholic church was aware of their role within the process of indoctrination. He states records and journals within the churches confirmed that European missionaries were occupying Ayiti to enslave Africans:

Church records and historical journals show that the Church did not oppose [enslavement] in [Ayiti]. Some in the church even justified it on the basis that it gave [enslaved Africans] the opportunity to become Christian...The best indication of Church acceptance of [enslavement] is that priests owned [enslaved Africans]. (Joseph 5)

The missionaries and Priest understood their religious practice condemned the atrocities towards Africans in Ayiti. Europeans this inhumane process of Agency Reduction Formation against African people. The African person who undergoes this process while enslaved starts to develop White Validation Syndrome and Cognitive Hiatus. The White Mask in this situation functions through Catholicism. Africans that utilize this oppressive exploitative religion without understanding its historical context display Cognitive Hiatus. The combination of Catholicism and Ayitian Vodou diminishes the empowering aspects of the African Spiritual Belief System.

White Validation Syndrome shaped the worldview of many Africans in Ayiti from being centered in African epistemology to subconsciously accepting Eurocentrism.

It is imperative that Africans engage in the Afrocentric Paradigm through its three fundamental aspects which are orientation, grounding, and perspective (Mazama 63). Africans who are successful within all aspects of the Afrocentric Paradigm experience Victorious Consciousness. Danjuma Sinue Modupe defines Victorious Consciousness as knowing and understanding how the African person came to achieve African psychic and cultural development (qtd. in Mazama 58). Thus, it is crucial that African people achieve Victorious Consciousness, which cannot be done if we remained shackled through the mental entrapments of Eurocentrism.

CHAPTER 2

CONCEPT OF MASKS & MASKING IN AFRICAN SOCIETIES

Origins of the African Mask

The origins of the Mask are still unknown, but one of its earliest examples was discovered on a rock painting that dated back to 4000 B.C., or earlier in the Tassili-n'Ajjer Algerian Sahara (Celenko 68). Masks were used in performances to connect the living world with the spiritual world. These performances were used to allow the spirit of the ancestors to mount the devotee. While this occurred, the individual underwent a transformation to become the ancestor, spirit, or divinity that they were summoning. Kimani Nehusi defines Masking as “the deliberate act or practice of transformation of the body by the addition of adornments to disguise or conceal one’s normal identity, the better to achieve anonymity or to take on another identity,” (“Masks and Masking” 1). This definition will be used to describe the phenomenon of the White Mask in Ayitian Vodou.

The mask was a great representation for African descendants because it illustrated how the ancestors viewed themselves on a spiritual, psychological, and cultural level. It also expounded on how the ancestors created their worldview and identity. In an effort to survive the oppressive inferiority of the myth of white supremacy, Africans had to develop a foreign personhood. The White Mask, in this case, operated from Eurocentrism which caused Africans to suffer from Agency Reduction Formation, White Validation Syndrome, and Cognitive Hiatus. Throughout this study, there will be a specific focus on this process which is still unfolding within Ayitian Vodou.

Scholars who engage in investigating African discourse on Masks should focus on the primacy of Kemet, one of the most ancient African civilizations. Kemet is one of the first African civilizations that scholars currently have been able to study in-depth in comparison to Nubia, Axum, Kush, etc., which are some of its predecessors (*African American People* 5-7). For example, in July of 1899, Gaston Maspero, then director of Egyptian Museums, observed animal heads that had been placed on human bodies at the temple of Deir el Bahiri (Celenko 71). These individuals were priests and priestesses who had paid homage to their respective African Divinities. The women rarely wore animal masks during certain ceremonies or rituals, with the exception of Bast and Sekhmet (Ibid 73). Most women wore emblems on their headdresses while men wore helmet masks (Ibid 73). These are early indications of Masking in Ancient Kemet, that connected the living and ancestral worlds through the use of a mask in order to ensure that the spirit transitions into the spiritual world. As a result, these rituals maintained cosmic balance between the living and the ancestral worlds.

The correlation between nature, human beings, and the spiritual worlds are all interconnected to represent the circle of life. There is a particular structure in which The Kemetic System (TKS) follows this African concept which started with the King as the high priest, who wore the Horus falcon mask in reverence to the succession of the King (Celenko 73). Priests who performed the process of properly burying the deceased wore Anubis jackal masks (Ibid 73). In the case of the ceremonial masks in Ancient Kemet, this principle can be found throughout the African diaspora today among a variety of African Spiritual Belief Systems. Evidently, Africans throughout the diaspora performed rituals and ceremonies that maintained a sense of purpose and sustained cosmic balance

throughout the universe. Therefore, the functional aspects of the African Mask in an African Spiritual Belief System centers practitioners in their African epistemology.

Placement of the White Mask onto African Agency

During the expansion of European colonialism throughout the world, Europeans created masks to disguise themselves in masquerade balls while they engaged in self-indulgence during bacchanalia (“Masks & Masking” 4). In some European traditions, they utilize the mask strictly for recreation in contrast to other cultures who use their mask for a variety of functions. This tradition traveled with Europeans throughout their exploitative “exploration,” of indigenous people and land. The concept of masks and masking transmitted from the African continent throughout the African diaspora while under the conditions of physical enslavement. In contrast, Europeans imposed the White mask onto African people through the perpetuation of white supremacy during Jim Crow and after, which generated legislation on an international level against African culture.

The first action of implementing white supremacy occurred when European colonizers named the land they claimed to “discover.” Through their rediscovery of preoccupied land, they took the possessions of indigenous people and their land. For instance in the Caribbean Asante & Mazama provide the original names of the islands to what they are now known as today, “ Karukera which derived from the Karibs meaning ‘the island with beautiful waters’ to Guadeloupe and Ayiti came from the Arawaks meaning ‘mountainous island’ was changed to Hispaniola,” (“Caribbean” 178). This process translates to the period of enslavement when European colonialists would assign European names to enslaved Africans. This name change was the action of appropriation

and claiming ownership of people categorized as property (Cognitive Hiatus 33-34). This can be seen tremendously through dislocated Africans naming their children after biblical figures.

French colonists imposed Eurocentric thoughts while prohibiting African spiritual practices, “French Catholic missionaries went to Saint Domingue to convert enslaved Africans [into] Christianity in an effort to eradicate African [spiritual] practices from the colony,” (Asante and Mazama 697). The French missionaries wanted to destroy Ayitian Vodou because it went against their “seasoning” process. The seasoning process consisted of removing Africans from Africa and dislocating them from their homeland into new territory while attempting to remove any aspects of transnational memories of Africa. Regarding the African concept of naming which defines the person ontologically, this is compromised to suit the needs of an involuntary position to encourage docility towards European colonialists and their cruelties. Neither our history nor our lineage derives from European ancestry, so we must denounce these names that were forced upon Africans and recollect the names of our African ancestors.

The incorporation of White Masking occurred in Ayiti during French occupation from 1625-1804. While the French were occupying Ayiti, their goal was to ensure that the Africans and indigenous people did not practice anything outside of Catholicism. If anyone was caught practicing Ayitian Vodou, they faced mutilation, emasculation, and destitution. King Louis of France signed the Edict of 1685 which is known as *Le Code Noir* which punished enslaved Africans for running away:

A[n] [Enslaved African] who is absent for a month shall have his ears cut off and shall have a fleur de lys branded on his left shoulder. If he runs away, his knees shall be lacerated and his other shoulder shall be branded. Finally, if he runs away for a third time, he shall be sentenced to death. (qtd. in Price 38)

The Code Noir along with other laws and campaigns subjected Africans in Ayiti to maintain the institution of enslavement. Through the travesties of enslavement, Africans were violently coerced into practicing Ayitian Vodou covertly while masking their African divinities with Catholic saints. The ideology of universalism through the practice of Catholicism, a “civilizing” religion, was designed to condition African people to accept the inhumane atrocities against their humanity during indoctrination. This caused some of the Africans in Ayiti to denounce their Africanness to adopt Eurocentric social constructs as their own. Hence, the first initiative of the French was to force Africans to wear the “White Mask.” Paul Bairoch (1971) and Pierre Bigo (1974) expounds on the different institutions of underdevelopment for African people within colonized societies:

the empirical evidence of this tension by showing concrete examples of developmental failures such as demographic imbalance, extraordinarily high birth rates, progressive disintegration of the classic family structure, illiteracy, severe social and economic disparities, dictatorial regimes functioning under the cathartic name of democracy, the breakdown of religious traditions, the constitutions of syncretic churches, etc. (Mudimbe 5)

Europeans have applied this methodology to impose their culture onto oppressed societies. As a result, this disenfranchised African people on a multitude of levels who fell victim to this corrupt system.

The purpose of colonization was to profit from the adversity that the colonized endured while the colonizers benefited from this system (Memmi xii). The Africans in Ayiti underwent acts against their humanity, being subjected to poverty, and being branded as property. In the Eighteenth-century, French thinkers such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Voltaire, and Victor de Riqueti developed the idea of civilization in the imposition of the concept of “barbarism” (Huntington 40). The early development of the

dichotomy on what was considered “civilized” to “barbaric” manifested as a byproduct of indoctrination. For instance, the members of the bourgeoisie class within a colonized land understood the elements of colonization. The elements of colonization are nationalistic pride, cultural expansion, codifications that protects their personhood, and representation in employed within the judicial system (Memmi 7). These individuals were completely protected, because of the system of imperialism was stratified by complexion in Ayiti (Desmangles 40). In short, the beneficiaries of colonized societies in no way shape or form rejected the notion of enslaving African people in Ayiti, because they enjoyed the benefits that came with their stature. Thus, the creation of European social constructs in order to validate this system which also sustains its ongoing practice against African people throughout the diaspora.

After the African Revolution in Ayiti in 1804 the new elite class that replaced the French imperialist was the Mulatto class. Prominently in Eurocentrism, it sustains European ideologies and judges other societies with their specific criteria. I. Sachs presents a similar ideology that can easily be identified as Eurocentrism, but in this case, it takes the form of Europecentrism:

Dominates our thought and given its projection on the world scale by the expansion of capitalism and the colonial phenomenon, it marks contemporary culture imposing itself as a strongly conditioning model for some and forced deculturation for others. (Mudimbe 4)

In the case for the White Mask in Ayitian Vodou this serves as another manifestation that shapes the consciousness of the African masker while learning how to adapt to systemic racial oppression.

European social institutions created situations in order to pressure enslaved Africans to forcefully comply with the process in assimilating within the colonized

society (Memmi 5). One of the major institutions that aided in the endeavor, is the institution of religion. Religion, with the help of the concept of Universalism, projected the falsification of its direct purpose for enslaved Africans. Memmi illustrates the relationship that the French colonialists enforced unto the enslaved Africans in Ayiti, “it is rather the impossibility of enjoying a complete social life which maintains vigor in the family and pulls the individual back to that more restricted cell, which saves and smothers [them] (100). In order to be “civilized,” African societies had to undergo a process in which negates all of their indigenous culture, history, and heritage. Specifically, African people within these societies who wholeheartedly accept these ideologies have experienced Agency Reduction Formation. Memmi alludes to the correlation between the colonized citizenship in comparison to the colonizer that this separation kept the colonized apart from the true conditions of contemporary citizenship (96). African people have subconsciously rejected whom they were for citizenship in their land, thus validating a system that disempowered their people.

In order to make the distinction of what establishes a civilization, scholars need to examine Kemet, which developed the concept of civilization. Huntington is in the company along with a plethora of European scholars who refuse to accept the geographical location of Egypt, which was formerly known as Kemet (Hegel 109; Huntington 47; Mazama 20-21; Lewis and Wigen 6). Through examining the characteristics of a culture, which consists of organization, consistency, and a system that determines the reality or worldview of that given society. Thus, it gives people a sense of identity through a shared historical experience, which creates a collective cultural identity.

Shared experiences shaped the values, formed the concepts, and philosophies from the “voice” of the perspective authority. Europeans produced these selected aspects of culture in a strategically aggressive manner in order to enforce their worldview unto other groups of people. A given group of members considered as “intellectuals,” “scholars,” and “theorists,” spread this perception. These individuals represent this perspective as tenets of a universal system that applies its logic, rationality, and truth in their reality. The primacy of Kemet will not be argued within this paper because it will take it beyond its scope. Thus, this entire section exemplifies the implementation of the White Mask that was imposed onto the Africans in Ayiti.

Reclamation of African personhood within the Functionalities of the African Mask

“All magic is word magic, and that the generation and transformation of sounds contribute to a speaker’s power”

--- Molefi Kete Asante *Afrocentric Idea*

The Mask is one of the many representations of the ancestral continent and the culture they created. The mask is more than a relic of African history, because it shows the African aesthetic without any outside influences that would distort its image. The Mask, in this sense, is a mechanism to disguise a particular ideology under the eyes of the colonizer. Africans first enacted this method, as they were cognizant of why they were practicing this ritual. Not surprisingly, as time progressed and future generations came, after the occupation of European colonialists, the practice of masking continues to this day. The effects of the mask as Nehusi describes are:

the adoption of a different or particular voice, whether [the] difference is [a]ffected [by] mimicking the sound of the target’s voice, or addressing issues from

the target's distinctive point of view, the [aforementioned] bodily contortions, or dance, song, poetry, prose, or any combination of these. ("Masks and Masking" 1)

Throughout African Spiritual Belief Systems, there has been a connection between the mask as a way to engage in communication with African deities and spirits with the living world. The trained practitioner has to undergo a ritual in order to have the deity or spirit mount their body as this is a facet of African Masking. To reiterate Masking plays a significant role in portraying the different stages of life. For instance, there is a mask for bringing new life into the world and for transitioning an individual into the ancestral world. This cycle does not end with becoming an ancestor as people can be deified for living a contributive life. Their impact in the world of the living becomes mystified into a story of inspiration for future generations to follow.

The Mask in the African traditional contextual sense is designed to keep Africans throughout the diaspora centered in African ontology through their life experiences. The perception of this process presents itself in a variety of ways as mentioned earlier with the description of the Mask. These concepts of the African Mask and Masking are strictly African. The exception is when an oppressive group of people who contort the collective memories of Africa against Africans. Consequently, Africans suffer from the distortion of their worldview, exploitation for their resources, and reduction of their agency. In other words, the oppressive group performs White Masking in its totality.

CHAPTER 3

AYITIAN VODOU

African Spiritual Belief System: Ayiti

Vodu originated in Benin, Africa where it is still practiced today and has spread throughout the African diaspora. The practice of Vodu has expanded into the African diaspora during the European enslavement trade of Africans (Asante & Mazama 469). Ayitian Vodou was created by a variety of enslaved Africans who were kidnapped and shipped to Ayiti. Alfred Metraux examines the creation of Ayitian Vodou as he states, “The history of Voodoo begins with the arrival of the first batches of [enslaved Africans] at Saint-Domingue in the second half of the seventeenth century,” (Metraux 25). In addition, Leslie Desmangles gives a brief description of a variation of Africans who contributed to the formulation of Ayitian Vodou:

It was brought largely by [enslaved Africans] from the Kongo and Dahomean regions (as well as many other parts) of West Africa to Santo Domingo or Saint- Domingue---as [Ayiti] was called during its colonial period (1492-1804)---and the term Voodoo is a deterioration of the Dahomean term vodu or vodun, meaning “deity” or “spirit.” (Desmangles 2)

There is a limitation in regard to the actual date in which this African Spiritual Belief System was created. African history never starts with European indoctrination, because African history does not start with European colonialism. Scholars should refer back to ancient civilizations like Kemet and Nubia in order to properly investigate African history, because they are pioneering civilizations.

Desmangles does not explain the definition of Vodou in regard to its spelling which represents its place of origin and most scholars can observe the variation of Vodou

in multiple literary works. This paper will utilize *The Encyclopedia of African Religion*, edited by Molefi Kete Asante and Ama Mazama since it provides more contextual background to the term “Vodou.” Another group of enslaved Africans who contributed to the creation of Ayitian Vodou that Desmangles did not mention in his analysis, are the Yoruba people. Robert Farris Thompson discusses the Yoruba influence in the origins of Ayitian Vodou:

Vodun which was first elaborated in Ayiti is one of the [significant] achievements of people of African descent in the western hemisphere: a vibrant sophisticated synthesis of the traditional religions of Dahomey, Yorubaland, and Kongo with an infusion of Roman Catholicism. (Thompson 164)

The creation of Ayitian Vodou derives from a collective memory of African Spiritual Belief System has translated into Ayitian Vodou. Thompson identifies this African Spiritual Belief System as a product of multiple African “religions.” John Mbiti argues that the word “religion” is not found in any African language (2). In the African context if there is no word within any African language for a particular phenomenon then that would render it as a concept outside of Africa. European scholars have a tendency of viewing Ayitian Vodou as a religion which reduces its African historical context.

The word Vodou is used in Benin and Ayiti designates a community of divine and ancestral spirits who are identified with the natural forces of the universe and who participate actively in the lives of their devotees (Asante & Mazama 696). Vodou was created to shape an African cosmology that allowed devotees to understand the world around them through an African lens. Mitchell Armand expounds on this thought of engaging in an African Spiritual Belief System that allows its practitioners to engage in Ayitian communal cognitive will, “in the [Ayitian] Vodou gathering of *Souvenance* the rituals that take place around the sacred *Mapou* tree are a reversal of the process of

forgetting, and healing return to the collective memory of the ancestors,” (Armand 78).

The ancestors have the knowledge to pave the way for those in the living world to understand their responsibility and purpose as an African descendant. An example of this communal cognitive will is exemplified in the Bwa Kayiman ceremony in 1791, which led to the liberation of African people in Ayiti in 1804.

The definition Desmangles presented did not provide any historical-cultural background on how Africans perceived the world around them in Ayiti. Desmangles asserted that their history started with enslavement, versus the beginning of humanity in Africa when their African ancestors contributed to all aspects of human civilization. Furthermore, Mazama and Asante state, “Vodou is a system of beliefs that instills in its devotees a need for solace and self- reflection; it is an expression of a people’s longing for meaning and purpose,” (696). Evidently, this would go against the contemporary misconceptions that Vodou is a pagan, satanic, and an uncivilized African spiritual practice. Ayitian Vodou was created by different groups of Africans who did not speak the same indigenous language but managed to produce Ayitian Vodou under the insidious institution of enslavement. Africans understood the importance of their acquired knowledge by pursuing their collective memories of Africa in recalling their African identities with an Afrocentric consciousness.

Africans were able to acquire their memories of Africa from the process initiation into their respective African Spiritual Belief System. The initiation into the priesthood was to develop students who would develop social responsibility, character, and spiritual power (Mazama 275). Both Ani and Armand add to this discussion in great details on the requirements/significance of becoming a Houngan and Mambo. Armand comments, “Mambo females and Houngan males are Vodou initiates of the high-level learning”

(Armand 10). In addition to the influence of Ayitian Vodou Marimba Ani states, “The backbone of African religious organization is the process of initiation, training, and ritual through novices

gain knowledge of these spirits and of [African Spiritual] practice,” (*Circle be unbroken*, 16). Ayitian Vodou is similar to the purpose of Kemetic education which was to develop a deeper understanding of human relations to nature and our place within nature. This process aids in creating African divinities who have made significant contributions to the world through The Kemetic System. Africans who are located in African epistemology understand these two aspects share a common goal with connecting the living, ancestors, divinities, those who will live, and nature.

Ayitian Vodou is influenced by different parts of West Africa. Gomez gives a brief summation, “the deities of the Fon-Ewe (Loas in Haiti, vodun Dahomey) and the Yoruba (orishas) are numerous in their qualities that they are distinctive within the context of West African belief systems,” (Gomez, 56). Ayitian Vodou derives from multiple cultures from West Africa due to the Obeah. It is immaculate that these different groups of Africans were able to take their collective memories of Africa and combine like-minded ideologies to create new cultural forms in the African diaspora. In Ayitian Vodou it has two distinct parts:

Rada after the Obeah designation for persons abducted from Arada, on the coast of Dahomey, itself derived from the name of the holy city of the Dahomeans, Allada. Ptro-Lemba or Petro, after a messianic figure, Don Pedro, from the south Peninsula of Haiti, and the northern Kongo trading and healing society, Lemba. (Thompson, 164)

The symbolic significance of the ancestors as the Ayitians would state, “Mwen se vre Ginen,” which means I am grounded in the knowledge of my ancestors (Armand 52). Ayitians were able to make the connection from previous interactions with the Guinea

people and influence from West Africa to make this reverence towards the ancestors. The terminology of the different aspects of Ayitian Vodou pays noteworthy homage to Africa.

Circular Lens of African Cosmology

The circle is the geometric shape of excellence in African society because of the unbroken cycle of life. Each phase within the circle is necessary for an individual to become an ancestor through rebirth, puberty, marriage, and death. Kimani Nehusi explains the importance of knowledge that is passed down from the ancestral world to the living, “these attributes, indispensable for any successful society, originate from divinity and are passed down to ancestors, to elders, and thence to the younger generations” (*Libations* 100). In contrast, this differs from the linear system projected by Eurocentrism where an individual life ends after they transition out of the living world. The African circle of life has specific rituals where keynote life experiences grant individuals the opportunity to become an ancestor, or in rare cases, an African deity. The achievement of completing all of these phases, procreation, and living a contributive life while living righteously aids in the process to become an ancestor. Everything derives from the same spiritual essence of a Supreme divinity that establishes and sustains cosmic order. The relevance of this concept in African lives/spirituality is that in every life experience from rebirth, puberty, marriage, and death there are rites of passages. In order for individuals to transition through these different phases of life, they have to undergo a rite of passage. In fact, this helps the individual find their destined path in life. Therefore, the concept of force aids in African Agency revitalization in grounding them in African orientation and perspective.

The concept of ontological unity states that everything has force which sustains the cosmic balance in the universe (Mbiti 15). This force derives from a Supreme divinity that is both male and female. The complementary aspect of the Supreme divinity exemplifies the importance of life between male and female components. Everything that comes from the Supreme divinity in itself is sacred, which means that each person has a spiritual DNA. Specifically, this makes every individual unique. The opportunity to be reincarnated relies on the life that the individual decides to live.

CHAPTER 4

THE WHITE MASK

The Inception of Western Colonial Imposition

Christianity was a concept to be shared as enlightenment for those who were not a part of it. Furthermore, Marimba Ani gives more historical context to European colonization situation that affected colonized African societies:

Christianity, then, became the ideal formulation for the unlimited expansion of a culture with a supremacist ideology, and at the same time it provided the ideological tool for the control of the resultant empire through its rhetorical “universalistic” component (Ani 124).

This belief offers salvation to those who accept Jesus as the “Son of God,” by doing so grants the believer eternal life. In all actuality, this was a tactic to lure African people into becoming citizens of an oppressive colonizing nation. For example, the Romans offered citizenship to all, providing, as Aristides says, they possessed “talent,” “courage,” and “leadership” potential, (Ibid 130). These notions are directives to convert and recruit Africans outside their cultural group and how Europeans colonists would identify Africans in comparison. Self-image sets the foundation of universalism as “the proper model for all,” who identifies as European. In turn, after centuries European aesthetic and perspective both manifest itself into a universal paradigm for all of humanity.

One of the pinnacle points in history pushed a Eurocentric paradigmatic shift further occurred in 312 A.D. Constantine was able to use Christianity to gain control over the West, by believing in a God that would ensure his military endeavors (Ani 131). He was concerned that those who followed this belief shared the same ideology and

narrative. Thus, Constantine wanted to provide a “spiritual bond⁶,” along with what colonizers define as a “moral basis⁷.” In order to achieve powerful political positions, it was up to the elect of God. For those who did not support his worship of a “Supreme God,” Constantine said:

I will destroy and disperse [them]...What can be done by more consonant with my fixed resolve and with the duty of an emperor than, having dissipated errors and cut off all unfounded opinions, to cause all men to present the omnipotent God, true religion, unfeigned concord, and the worship which is his due. (Ibid 131)

It is evident that Christianity served Constantine’s agenda to “unify” Rome under a calculated mechanism and use it to build his empire (Ibid 135). All of this is traced and interwoven in the fabric of Western European Imperialism disguising itself within the White Mask. Another objective of the White Mask is the imposition of citizenship which facilitates the process of indoctrination. Moreover, the concept of citizenship would have the illusion of colonized societies aspiring to become the “elite” of other cultures.

Europeans accept monotheism as it represents a socio-technological advancement along the evolutionary spectrum (Ibid 120). In this context, monotheism creates this space for universalism which is the key element of European cultural imperialism. For instance, “religious” wars are centered on notions of cultural nationalistic ideologies. Fundamentally, the hegemonic elements of obtaining control occur when two or more groups of people who have a dispute because of their different perspectives on how a particular nation should function. Monotheism places the colonizing group as superior while deeming the indigenous people as inferior. Therefore, providing the premise of the White Savior complex. The insidious nature of Eurocentrism is concealed as a means of aiding in the development of non-European societies.

Monotheism is embedded with the proposition that all religions that do not share the concept of one-god were evolutionary inferior. The premise of superiority based upon a supremacist belief allows this perception to become a monolithic reality. Early stages of Judaic culture, the cultural statement of [good/bad], we/they, becomes Jew/Gentile (Ibid 122). The Jews were culturally superior, because of their religion. The Gentiles were considered heathens, irreligious, ignorant, and culturally inferior in an evolutionary sense. Marimba Ani defines this dichotomy as European chauvinism, meaning the ‘evolution’ of which we can trace historically and ideologically (121). This dichotomy manifested throughout the African Diaspora as civilized/primitive that continues today.

Development of European Social Constructs Through the Institution of Enslavement

Portugal was the first European country that initiated the European enslavement trade of Africans in 1441 (E. Williams 3). The European transatlantic trade was in high demand for sugar, tobacco, cotton, and enslaved Africans. Specifically, in the Caribbean, the method of obtaining massive production was through small farming which eventually turned into plantations. This economic foundation created the predecessor for capitalism, mass production of natural resources, utilization of intensified enslavement in the North American South and Caribbean islands (Ibid xii). Historically, this system validated the adverse treatment of marginalized classes, racially biased codifications, and human genocide funding while validating capitalism.

Eric Williams argued that the enslavement of African people was strictly economic and not racial. However, Williams did not understand the methodology of using enslaved Africans instead of indentured servants. He makes the correlation of the process of enslavement but does not successfully assess the nature of Eurocentrism as,

“the labor supply of low social status, docile and cheap, can be maintained in subjection only by systematic degradation and by deliberate efforts to suppress its intelligence,” (Ibid 7). Enslaved people are marginalized into destitution, subjected into an “inferiority” complex, and exploited for the benefit and sustainability of European imperialism.

Before the African Revolution in Ayiti, there were three distinct social classes: Grands Blancs, Petits Blancs, and enslaved Africans. White and African enslavers did not consider the humanity of enslaved Africans. It is important to note, the fourth group of Africans, who were the Maroons refused the institution of enslavement. The Grand Blancs were the wealthy upper-class Europeans who were plantation overseers and supervised the Petits Blancs. The Petits Blancs were poor European under-class small merchants, artisans, and laborers. The Petits Blancs and freed Africans, both enslavers, had to ensure their practices did not motivate the enslaved Africans to revolt against them. Ayiti was conditioned to imitate the French model in 1789; the political institutions followed a hegemonic social system that was related to ancestry and prestige which only applied to a select few (Knight 110). The French model translated into the social hierarchy on the plantations in Ayiti that were based on race and occupational relationship. The Petit Blancs and Gens de Couleur wanted citizenship, equality, and land ownership as the Grands Blancs. The system that kept neglecting all these different groups would spark the motivation for the African Revolution in Ayiti.

Ayiti became liberated on January 1, 1804, after the African Revolution eliminated French colonialists, rulers, and their allies (Chomsky 197). Ayitian revolutionary leaders decided to preserve the name of the indigenous people of Ayiti. Toward the end of the eighteenth century, the African Revolution in Ayiti was an influential revolution that motivated other enslaved Africans to form their insurrections

against European imperialism. The African revolution aided in replenishing African agency from the entrapments of enslavement. Europeans feared that their notion of superiority and nationalistic pride within their political system would deteriorate when Ayiti became physically free of European control.

Franklin Knight speculates that the Africans in Ayiti started to call themselves “Ayitians,” (Knight 105). One of Napoleon's’ commanders wrote to him to impose French rule in Ayiti, stating the entire African population inevitably needed to be exterminated (Chomsky 199, Knight 113). France and other European nations feared Ayiti’s victory and attempted in a variety of ways to extinguish any form of revolutions from the enslaved diasporic Africans. The United States occupation in Ayiti between 1849 and 1913 was to reestablish the Oppressive Eurocentric nature of class and racial oppression. Assistant Secretary of State Williams Phillips wrote that Ayitians were “an inferior people” who were unable “to maintain the degree of civilization left by the French or develop any capacity of self-government entitling them to international respect and confidence,” (Chomsky 200-201). Phillips statement was an oxymoron because he failed to recognize the significant accomplishment of a country liberating itself from a corrupt, oppressive system, and the fact that they were African instead of European negated his response.

Chomsky gives a brief analysis of this U.S. continuation of European imposition saying, “The U.S. sought only to ensure that ‘the people were cured of the habit of insurrection and taught how to work and live,” (205). The occupation of the U.S. was similar to all of the European nations predicated on preventing Africans from challenging their new infectious politicized power structure. There is an overt assumption that Africans were only meant to live to work in order to sustain European industrialization.

Europeans cannot survive without undermining other groups of people to feed into their insecurities. Therefore, the theme of claiming African people as inferior exemplifies the weaponization of Eurocentrism within its institutions.

War Propaganda: The Virgin Mary & Other Biblical Figures

The incorporation of biblical characters in Ayitian Vodou comes from the period of French colonial disruption in Ayiti from 1625-1804. This incorporation grew out of conditions that were set by French colonists who wanted to sustain white domination through multifaceted operations. Biblical lithographs, especially in the affairs of the Christian religion, served as instruments of mental and physical subordination. During the 17th and 18th centuries, the use of the Virgin Mary as a visual propaganda symbol by the French colonialists influenced some enslaved Africans to become Catholic. Catholicism was one of the many methods of indoctrinating enslaved Africans from revolting against French colonialists.

Syncretism is speculated to allow the process of transfiguring two different systems that operate separately to function together as a new system. Leslie Desmangles suspects, in the early stages of Catholicism, enslaved Africans were able to relate to the Virgin Mary through making correlations between their African divinities and many other Catholic saints (qtd. in Rey 130). The Africans in Ayiti would make these correlations through certain symbols they would see in lithographs that they connected to their African divinities in Vodou. The Eurocentric perspective would contest that their religion came first, however as aforementioned African Spiritual Belief Systems predates this European construct. In short, Terry Rey summarizes this cognitive recognition as syncretism. However, both scholars did not sufficiently provide the historical contextual

perspective of African people in this instance. They also failed to elaborate on Africans adapting and transitioning to a foreign identity in order to survive the terrors of enslavement. Thus, the operation of the White Mask functions to distort the African masker's personhood.

The Catholic Church, along with the French colonialists understood that language was a crucial barrier that became an obstacle with their plan of imposing their religion onto the enslaved Africans. In this case, Rey provides an example to some of the tactics the colonialists enforced onto the enslaved Africans:

For the missionaries to offer religious symbols and trinkets to the 'pagan' targets of their evangelization, while lacking the capacity to communicate clearly their meaning and function, represented a most fortuitous environment for syncretism to flourish. (Ibid 130)

Rey did not explain the nature of the modifications, the inhumane environment, and the constant fear that led some of these enslaved Africans to adopt Catholicism. His typography implies that the missionaries only wanted to "civilize" the enslaved Africans by allowing them access to the Catholic faith. As previously mentioned, the Jew/Gentile dichotomy has not changed from that situation to European imperialism on African people.

This was further from the lived reality, and Desmangles goes into the tactic of weaponizing the Virgin Mary to recruit enslaved Africans saying, "[Missionaries] related stories of the Virgin's life and made instructional use of the Catholic symbols connected with her, but that the [enslaved Africans] responded by transfiguring these symbols in African terms," (Rey 130). The enslaved Africans were able to make these connections of survival in which later generations, suffered from the post-traumas of enslavement. The new generation of African people in Ayiti, started to forget the rationale behind their

ancestors' actions. The African divinity, Ezili Dantor is recognized as the beautiful Dahomean water spirit, but was appropriated to The Virgin Mary (Asante & Mazama 697). Thus, The Virgin Mary functions as war propaganda against African agency in Ayiti.

Ezili in Ayitian Vodou cosmology is the mother of the lwas who gave birth to the first human beings after Bondye created the world (Desmangles 132). Oshun in Nigeria and Ezili in Whydah, Benin which transnationally formed Ezili in Ayitian Vodou (Ibid 143). In the African context, the ongoing principle of sustaining life would never depict an African divinity as promiscuous like Terry Rey has labeled Ezili Danto in his book *Our Lady of Class Struggle - The Struggle of the Virgin Mary*. When Vodou practitioners have inquiries or concerns in reference to childbearing they call upon Ezili Danto. Ezili just like all the other African divinities in Ayitian Vodou has many manifestations. She can be depicted as a wealthy upper-class mulatto woman of luxury who has an exquisite taste (Ezili Freda lwa of love, luxury, & beauty), African woman in a similar fashion to the Virgin Mary with two parallel scars on her right cheek (Petro Ezili Danto Mother of lwas), and a dejected woman with arthritis who uses a cane to support herself and trembles as she walks (Rada Metres Ezili) (Ibid 131-134, 141).

Ayitian Vodou practitioners stopped designating geographical locations to lwas which caused discrepancies within the categorization of lwas (Desmangles 95, 97; Metraux 110). Predominantly all of the *nanchons* (nations) of famnis (families) are associated with different parts of Africa. The discrepancy that these two scholars are presenting is an effect of indoctrination that led to this modification. In Ayitian Vodou there are lwas that are not associated with Africa and I presume that this derives from the Africans being severed from their African center. The influence of whitewashing aids in

this adaptation of the Dahomean divinity into an upper-class mulatto woman that represents love, luxury, and beauty. In turn, whitewashing also manifests itself into creolization. I question how Africans viewed themselves while implementing this change, in comparison to the maroon societies that also practiced Ayitian Vodou? The Maroons never had to endure the effects of White Masking, due to their resistance of colonialism in Ayiti. The solution to the situation in Ayiti is quite simple, it starts with the removal of the White Mask from Ayitian Vodou and reclaiming the Africanity that was lost in translation.

Creolization existed during the occupation of French colonists from 1625-1804 and increased after the African Revolution in Ayiti in 1804, to present day. The vital process of naming in the African context is now replaced with the resurgence of 'creolization' in Ayiti. Jean Bernabe et al., praises the benefits that Mulattoes gained from colonization but are robbed of their African history, "...the eyes of Europe should, in the final analysis, serve as a means for the rising of the buried continent of Africa..." (888). This example presumes the position that there was never any African history before European imperialism. Albert Memmi adds to this discussion with defining this relationship, but for the sake of this argument the European is easily interchanged with the mulattoe as, "a colonial is a European living in a colony but having no privileges, whose living conditions are not higher than those of a colonized person of equivalent economic and social status," (10). The ambivalent nature of creolization gives mulattoes the autonomy to reject their Africanity. As a collective, the Africans in Ayiti must return to designating the geographical location of its African divinities to avoid European negation in order to replenish their agency.

CHAPTER 5

PLAYING MAS

“Africans used to perform in order to assimilate in a given environment, ‘the act, acts or process of acting out or characterization of the idea or story...of the person...is intended to portray...’”

--- Kimani Nehusi “Masks and Masking”

Hidden African Divinities Disguised as Biblical Figures The Appropriation of Papa Legba

The idea of Playing Mas as an African Masker is to adapt to the environment. Enslaved Africans had to utilize this strategy when invoking African divinities. This section will focus on the origins, purpose, and appropriation of Papa Legba in Ayitian Vodou. The Supreme Being of Bondye first created the sun and without its existence, the lwas, human beings, and everything else would not exist (Desmangles 108). The Fon cosmology views this light as the fire of life which is correlated to Yoruba Legba, and Fa to the Fon, which in Ayitian Vodou is Papa Legba (Ibid 108, 110). The continuity between African cosmology was translated into Ayitian Vodou as seen through the connection between Fon tradition and Ayitian Vodou.

Fon traditional beliefs are within Vodou, Papa Legba is the link between Bondye and the universe, the umbilical cord that connects the universe to its origin (Ibid 108). The importance of Papa Legba in Ayitian Vodou is also depicted within his symbol of the cross which represents his responsibility as the gatekeeper of the sacred world, living world, the center of the universe, and between humanity and the lwas (Ibid 109). His

responsibility represents the four crossroads and how they all interconnect with the living and ancestral worlds which develops the foundation for the next generation to follow. At the beginning of every Vodou sevis (service) practitioners must call upon Papa Legba as he is in control of the order in which the lwas appear. Papa Legba holds the keys to the secrets of life and assists Bondye in sealing the destiny of the world (Ibid 110).

The correlation between Papa Legba, keeper of the keys, was appropriated to Saint Peter (Ibid 113). This translation occurred because of the hidden relation of the keys within the lithograph of Saint Peter, that Vodou practitioners were able to make this connection to Papa Legba (Ibid 113). The lithograph of Saint Peter portrays his position within the biblical sense as, “the keeper of the keys to the kingdom of heaven,” (Matthew 16:10-20). In addition, within this same lithograph, there is a rooster that derives from the New Testament’s account of Peter’s denial of Jesus (Demangles 113). In contrary, Melville Herskovits asserts that the rooster is associated with the Fon African Spiritual Belief System with Legba which debunks the notion of the Christian influence in this African phenomenon (Ibid 113). In Ayitian Vodou the rooster is sacrificed for Papa Legba in certain rituals and ceremonies.

Misuse of Eurocentric Tools Investigating African Discourse

Universalism is a European intellectual construct that causes Africans to denounce who they are and adopt the oppressive nature of Europeans as standard. This belief offers salvation to those who accept Jesus as the “Son of God,” and by doing so grants the believer eternal life. In all actuality, this was a tactic to lure African descendents into becoming citizens of an oppressive colonizing nation. For example, the Romans offered citizenship to all, providing as Aristides states, they possessed “talent,”

“courage,” and “leadership” potential, (Ani 130). These notions are directives to convert and recruit those outside their cultural group. As a result, this would aid in the process on how the colonizer would classify the colonized. This self-image sets the foundation of universalism as “the proper model for all,” that identifies as Eurocentric. After centuries this aesthetic and perspective both manifest itself into a universal paradigm for all of humanity. The spread of Universalism through syncretic ideologic notions creates a yearning in dislocated Africans to become European. A system that praises European aesthetic, contributions, and privilege leaves those who do not recall their Africinity to adopt the White Mask as their own.

The notion of ‘syncretism’ derives from anthropologist Gregory Bateson’s (1958) concept called the schismogenetic process (Palme 73). Bateson (1936) describes this process as “...differentiation in the norms of individual behavior resulting from cumulative interaction between individuals,” (Bateson 175). In other words, every society has its behaviors, attitudes, and values that are collectively agreed upon in moving towards ‘progressive’ change. For example, the cases throughout the African Diaspora regarding Africans being able to practice their African Spiritual Belief System is disrupted by European imperialism. The imperialist system forces the indigenous people to accept the perspective of their colonizers. In order to maintain this system of oppression, the colonizers created codifications, propaganda to instill their aesthetic, and white supremacist ideology. In addition, the concept of ‘syncretism’ implements the operational aspects of the schismogenetic process within the European religious institution. The principle of syncretism predicates itself on ‘progressively’ distorting indigenous spiritual practices towards a more Eurocentric religion to maintain the myth of White Supremacy.

The issue of utilizing Anthropology to examine African phenomena is that its methodology is rooted in the Eurocentric perspective that objectifies its subjects and categorizes them based on Eurocentric standards. Stephen Palmie concludes that syncretism brings more ‘cultural awareness’ to African Spiritual Belief Systems. Does this cultural awareness apply to Europeans attempting to undermine African personhood, self-preservation, and self-determination? Palmie’s statement promotes that this system is destined to dismantle African orientation, distort the African perspective, and destroy African grounding. This Eurocentric methodology should not be used to critically examine African discourse.

Asante elaborates on the European worldview, “that cannot truly grasp the significance of a revolutionary idea that would challenge the Eurocentric projection of its method as universal,” (Asante vii). Thus, this reminds scholars of the imperative nature of Afrocentricity for African people. Asante defines Afrocentricity as, “a self-conscious obliteration of the subject/object division between two things that are represented [as] being oppressed and entirely different and the enthronement of an African vision,” (Asante 5). Afrocentricity liberates African people from European indoctrination while developing a holistic understanding of their orientation, grounding, and perspective. Therefore, African people have a responsibility of protecting and defending their historical-cultural contexts from outside forces.

The underlying issue with syncretism in investigating African Spiritual Belief Systems is the language, attitude, and direction of the authors that functionalize its use. Syncretism served as a byproduct within Western religion that can be defined as two systems operating separately in the production of a new system (Palmie 73). Scholars who have misused this concept when examining African Spiritual Belief Systems identify

them as ‘religion versus spirituality’. African Spiritual Belief Systems have existed long before the creation of religion. Thus, Syncretism serves as another manifestation of a Eurocentric social construct that validates white domination and sustains its oppressive systemic methods on African people.

The European nationalistic religious worldview was constructed to deteriorate the collective memories of Africa from enslaved Africans. It is also important to note that this tactic is used to dislocate Africans from their grounding, perspective, and orientation. Instead, it would relocate the African in Europe where they would turn to for their history, culture, and tradition. Enslaved Africans were being slaughtered for practicing their African Spiritual Belief System and in order to continue their practices they had to disguise their African divinities with biblical figures. Roger Bastide gives a synopsis on why the enslaved Africans were successful in camouflaging their African divinities:

Although their [enslavers] may have found their behavior bizarre, it probably did not occur to them that the [enslaved Africans] were honoring the African [divinities], and that their behavior was a mask over black faces (Bastide 1978), a veil behind which they could practice their African religions. (qtd. in Desmangles 11)

Enslaved Africans were performing another African concept called Masking within their rituals invoking the ancestors, African divinities, and spirits.

Masked performances were practiced connecting the living world with the spiritual one. These performances were used to have the spirit of the ancestors mount the devotee. While this was occurring, the individual transforms into becoming the ancestor, spirit, or divinity they were invoking. Masks are symbolic in African culture because they help Africans honor their ancestors. The reason being is that they remind the practitioner of whom they are calling upon. As previously mentioned with all the African divinities,

spirits, and ancestors are responsible for our recollection to who we are and where we come from as African people.

Syncretism and other alike ideologies fail to focus on African consciousness of African people throughout the African diaspora. This ideology seems to only correlate with the experience of the Creole bourgeoisie as they struggled for their equal opportunity, recognition, and contribution with Europeans by reciprocating their ideas and ideals as their consciousness. The actions of the Creole exemplify their imperative need to denounce their Africanity to adopt Eurocentrism. Their benefits came from the exploitation of enslaved African people since they located themselves in Europe. In this case, syncretism is being used to describe the duality of a society with two separate paradigms coexisting in one space. The issue with the two paradigms is that one paradigm sustains itself on the oppression of Africans while the other empowers African agency, development, and grounding. Thus, the two systems cannot coexist because its ambivalence causes Cognitive Hiatus, White Validation Syndrome, and for African people.

CHAPTER 6

MASK OFF

As shown throughout this study, the Africans in Ayiti, who have and still perform White Masking are suffering from Agency Reduction Formation, White Validation Syndrome, & Cognitive Hiatus. The White Mask is and has always been against African agency. As people of African descent internalize the White Mask, they start to believe in the claim of African inferiority in comparison to their white counterparts. Frantz Fanon discussed the idea on how African people could feel inferior in an environment, which is not African, “In practice, therefore, an inferiority complex connected with [color] [sic] of the skin is found only among those who form a minority within a group of another color,” (qtd. in Tillotson 92). In the instance, everything that surrounds African people are whites in powerful positions which, in turn, controls their way of life and “supports” the claim of white superiority. In all actuality, if a given group of people exhaust all resources to prove to the entire world their significance, they have exuded their insecurities. One way to conceal these insecurities is through propaganda about their group being the one to bring all aspects of human civilization, even though history and scholarship shows that all of this derives from Africa.

In order to manipulate a group of people into forgetting their rich history, the European imperialists must indoctrinate them into the universal belief that all civilizations stem from Europe, which in their perspective, retains their fragile nationalistic self-esteem. Marimba Ani analyzes this behavior and coins the term *Yurugu*, meaning, “a conceptual/existential construct which allows Europeans to act out their extreme aggression and destructiveness, while simultaneously limiting their collective [self-destruction] on a conscious level,” (qtd. in Tillotson

glossary, 1). This kind of behavior transmits to the scholarship that Western scholars impose on African people who produce scholarship that is not only relevant but also disempowers African people. Many scholars from Molefi Kete Asante, Ama Mazama, Marimba Ani, Kimani Nehusi, Jacob Carruthers to Maulana Karenga have diligently advanced the study of African people throughout the African Diaspora. Asante expanded this practice into a theory, known as Afrocentricity, and narrows in on one of the three pillars of Afrocentricity:

If we have lost anything, it is our cultural centeredness; that is, we have been moved off our own platforms. This means that we cannot truly be ourselves or know our potential since we exist in a borrowed space. But space is a matter of point of view or interpretation. Our existential relationship to the culture we have borrowed defines what and who we are at any given moment... (qtd. in Tillotson 8)

European colonialism has dislocated Africans throughout, the African Diaspora which has placed them into borrowed spaces through European impositions and codifications attempts to modify the identity of the African person to a foreign identity. The adoption of these new identities and African nuances were created in translation to its connection to Africa is disrupted by European influence.

When African descendants are taught everyone's history but their own, they will tend to follow the oppressive dominant authoritative tone of said society. Unaware of the brainwashing that they undergo and how it affects the way they view the world it is vital that African people be able to comprehend the primacy of the African experience. By examining our own experience, it allows African descendants to look towards Africa for answers versus other racial groups.

Mazama adds to the discussion on African epistemology in order for, "[Africans] to consider turning towards Africa first for knowledge of themselves and then considering other

viewpoints” (Mazama 11). The epistemological method allows Africans to explore who they are and understand the different variations as to why other groups of people perceive their history or experience differently than their ancestors. Furthermore, this method helps Africans understand why certain phenomena only occur towards or for people of African descent. One can only achieve this through Afrocentricity.

Without Afrocentricity, people of African descent function under the term “Mentacide.” Wright (1984) states, “[Mentacide is] the silent rape of people’s collective mind by the penetration and preparation of alien culture, values, beliefs systems, or ideas for the purpose of group destruction or political use of the victim group” (qtd. in Tillotson 12). The silence of this process is equivalent to being compliant to what is happening to people of African descent. Mentacide slowly instills self-hatred towards anything African since the process of European imperialism is to eradicate African agency. Agency Reduction Formation is a byproduct from which Africans who suffer from the effects of Mentacide. The systematic oppression that Europeans created to distract Africans from understanding who they are, by neutralizing Africans to accept the conditions of their oppressor as normalcy, and by reducing Africans to sub-human status because of Eurocentric saturation and negation on African people throughout the African diaspora. This system ensures itself that it is foolproof to the revolutions from people of African descent and has proven on multiple accounts throughout its enslavement period of African people to be invalid. As we examined the case of Ayiti when the Africans decided to reclaim who they were and those before them guided them to a successful revolution against all of its European colonial invaders.

The condition of mental enslavement creates a critical sense of urgency that Africans throughout the African diaspora continue to defend in their fight against European negation. This section will focus on the battle of White Validation Syndrome, Cognitive Hiatus, and Agency Reduction Formation. The African agency in Ayiti is referenced in the aforementioned cases. In order to understand the context of the phenomenon that happens today, we must investigate the past in order to create a victorious future. Thus far there are movements in Ayiti that are designed to decolonize Ayitian Vodou.

The new generation of Africans in Ayiti have created movements to remove the White Mask on a variety of levels. As the African proverb states, “When there is no enemy from within the enemy outside can do us no harm,”. More specifically, this statement means that one cannot claim liberation if they are still bonded by the mental chains of oppression from their oppressor. The retention of these chains of enslavement establishes a dislocated orientation that causes the affected African to assume an identity that was constructed by European colonialists. Furthermore, this speaks to their nationalistic worldview on groups outside of their culture and how they juxtaposed themselves to the entire world. Insecurities should never lead a group into organizing, operating, and orienting themselves into an ideology that they have to express in order to mask their intentions. This serves as the many injustices that European colonialism affected in the lives of those who encountered their brutality as they went on with their white masking.

Correspondingly, the need for a push for an Afrocentric paradigmatic shift in Ayitian Vodou is needed when the African Spiritual Belief System was forced to incorporate biblical figures. This caused the Africans in Ayiti to perform and hide their identities in the face of the

oppressor, but as they left, it was determined that there was no need for these kinds of performances. Reiterating the definition, “Masking” is the body transforming with adornment in order to camouflage one’s identity to carry out another identity. This was exemplified on both sides of the investigated groups, the colonists and Africans. The Mask takes on a different form to match its suitor in order to ensure the transition is complete. In the context of Ayitian Vodou, masking is the mounting of a spirit onto a devotee. The devotee then embodies the identity, voice, and personality of the African divinity or spirit. It also allows the messages of the ancestors to come through the oral tradition of their descendants in order to sustain Ma’at throughout the entire cosmic universe.

On the other hand, White Masking takes on its form in order to feed into its falsification of supremacy which benefits from the exploitation of African people. When in all actuality, White Masking only serves to exude insecurity. No possible ramifications would allow these acts against humanity to happen throughout European imperialism if it had not contorted the axiology, ontology, and epistemology of African people. In the minds of those wanting to exploit another group of people to a life of bondage, they would have to dehumanize the oppressed in order to maintain this system. In a later study, I will explore how Africans in Ayiti are decolonizing their minds from Eurocentrism while shifting towards an Afrocentric Paradigm through the use of Ayitian Vodou.

In order for Africans in Ayiti to reach a victorious consciousness, there are a few steps they will have to take. The first step involves rewiring our brains for our own collective best interests, otherwise known as Cognitive Saturation. Mazama elaborates on the importance of African representation saying, “we must saturate ourselves with Africa so that the latter [occupy]

our mental space as much as possible” (Mazama 35). Doing this eliminates the chances of European programming, which results in one being uncertain of who they are. To further this African nuance, there has to be an ongoing education on African culture and history. As a result, Africans will develop a projected historical worldview that will explicitly assert actions of resistance against white domination. One can only do this by practicing African culture. In other words, one must look back to their African cultural values in order to make any significant effort for themselves and for African people who are deeply affected by Eurocentrism. African ontology is a guiding force in centering the individual because it involves African Ancestral Reconnection, which is moving away from alien religions and more towards African spiritual (Mazama 36). Both systems cannot co-exist within a spiritual belief system because it causes severe confusion within oneself. Even though the answer should be obvious, Cognitive Hiatus still plays to the whims of Agency Reduction Formation.

In conclusion, the removal of the White Mask in Ayitian Vodou is crucial for African agency in Ayiti. The paradigmatic shift between Eurocentric and Afrocentric models in regard to the incorporation of biblical figures to mask African deities undermines the purpose of Ayitian Vodou. The Eurocentric paradigm within Ayitian Vodou instills White Validation Syndrome, Cognitive Hiatus, and Agency Reduction Formation which cause Africans in Ayiti to develop a dislocated orientation. Agency Reduction Formation in Ayiti is responsible for that Ayitian Vodou strictly originated in Ayiti and had no correlation to Africa due to the side effects of indoctrination. The only solution to solving this issue altogether is to remove the White Mask in its entirety.

This will allow African living in Ayiti to be located within African Epistemology, understand their African heritage from the perspective of their people, and create a spiritual framework that empowers their Africanity.

Notes

¹Sense of looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity (Du Bois 8).

²To speak two or more different languages and to use one language rather than another in a particular social situation.

³Process of shifting from one linguistic code to another, depending on the social context or conversational setting.

⁴Someone who is pretending to be of African descent on social media by using makeup, hair products, and in some cases surgery.

⁵Worn to cover the performer's entire body, was once complete with raffia cuffs around the hands and feet that swayed with their frenzied movements.

⁶Worn atop the head with its long peak pointed forward and is speculated to have encouraged reverence for the Pende's maternal ancestors.

⁷A connection between individuals who share a common belief system (Ani 132-133).

⁸Rationale to believe a set of rules and regulations which is determined by the society's code of ethics (Ani Ibid)

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