

Sent by the Gods: François Duvalier's Appropriation and Performance of Divine Authority

Abstract

Throughout history, several ancient and modern states have been ruled by monarchs to whom have been accorded degrees of deified recognition and authority. While the tradition is rooted in sacred belief systems and narratives, the latter have also been subject to conflicting interpretation and reinterpretation. Essentially, the manner in which a leader is bequeathed with divine authority also lends itself to manipulation. In time, this practice has evolved from a mandate that ensured the submission of leaders to ethical societal laws to its utilization as a weapon with which to achieve absolute dictatorial control. Haiti's "Papa Doc" Duvalier is exceptional in this regard as he successfully cast himself as a deity of a religious practice rooted in his African ancestry, Vodou, and was thus able to garner unconditional loyalty from the people. He is an extreme embodiment of the grim and ruthless options available to the ruler who seizes or is conferred with the status of a supernatural being.¹

Keywords: Sacred leaders, François Duvalier, Vodou, Efik Obong, Egyptian Pharaoh, Yoruba Oba

¹ Authoritarian rule assumes unique dimensions when leaders inherit, adopt, or are bestowed with a supernatural persona that provides the template for consolidating a Cult of Personality syndrome by which they demand absolute allegiance. This article is informed by this politico-religious trend and underscores its impact on systems of global governance and stability. It has not been presented at any conference.

Introduction

Throughout global political history, authoritarian rule has frequently drawn legitimacy from claims of divine sanction. In the Western tradition, monarchic power was deeply entwined with the notion of divine right, presenting the sovereign as God's appointed ruler on earth. From the "Rex Dei Gratia" ("King by the Grace of God") inscriptions of medieval Europe to the sacral coronation rites of French and English monarchs, divine legitimation offered more than a metaphysical rationale for authority. It established a sacred order in which obedience transcended human law. This convergence of the sacred and the political underpinned absolutist regimes, where defiance could be cast as blasphemy and allegiance to the crown became a religious duty.

Across many African societies, both on the continent and throughout the diaspora, similar spiritual and political authority are deeply entangled, though rooted in ontologies and epistemologies that are distinct from Western secular frameworks. Within these cosmological and political systems, rulership transcends mere secular governance and is imbued with sacrality. The sovereign is frequently construed as a liminal figure—either a reincarnated deity or a living intermediary between the human realm and the spiritual order, including ancestors and divine entities. In Yoruba cosmology, for instance, the *Oba* functions as both a king and a custodian of spiritual balance. This understanding of rulership as a sacred duty finds expression in the investiture rituals of the Congo, Asante, and Dahomey kingdoms, where the invocation of divine and ancestral powers serves both to legitimize the sovereign and to bind their authority to spiritual accountability. Significantly, this idea of sacred kingship has persisted and evolved within diasporic traditions—appearing in Haitian Vodou, Cuban Santería, and African American liberation theology—where sacred kingship serves as both a form of political resistance and a means of spiritual affirmation amid systemic oppression.

To fully understand how divine legitimation undergirds authoritarian forms of rule in African and African diasporic contexts, one must look beyond surface-level anthropological descriptions and engage with the deeper cultural, cosmological, and philosophical foundations of these traditions. This demands an intellectual history that situates sacred kingship within broader epistemological systems—systems that integrate ritual, governance, and the metaphysics of power. Such an approach opens critical space for examining how spiritual ontologies, rather than serving merely as instruments of domination, can both authorize and contest authoritarianism, depending on how the relationship between the sacred and political authority is imagined and enacted.

In contemporary society, autocrats are often characterized by their reliance on tactics of intimidation and terror, chief among them the use of cold-blooded violence ranging from covert assassinations and mass killings to torture and genocide. These leaders frequently employ coercion, abductions, politically motivated arrests and trials, and prolonged incarcerations. Often, entire families, communities, or political groups are targeted to create an atmosphere of collective fear. To further entrench their grip on power, autocrats suppress dissent by stifling press freedom, silencing public expression, and banning organizations such as trade unions that might mobilize resistance. History shows that such methods are not isolated to one region or era; notorious figures such as Idi Amin of Uganda, Joseph Stalin of the Soviet Union, Mobutu Sese Seko of Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of the Congo), Benito Mussolini of Italy, and Francisco Franco of Spain all employed similar strategies. Others, including North Korea's Kim dynasty, François "Papa Doc" Duvalier of Haiti, Augusto Pinochet of Chile, Mao Zedong of China, and Adolf Hitler of Germany, likewise ruled through fear, repression, and systemic violence.

However, authoritarian rule assumes unique dimensions when leaders inherit, adopt, or are bestowed with a supernatural persona that provides the template for consolidating a Cult of Personality syndrome by which they demand absolute allegiance. With a godlike status, the individual is delineated as flawless and in possession of powers more mysteriously devastating than conventional weapons. Sometimes, this is achieved through submission to a longstanding history of ruler fetishization or the elevation of individuals to superhuman prominence, earning them unconditional loyalty swayed by religious fervor as opposed to intimidation by physical terror and sheer brutality.

History is replete with instances where leaders are venerated and endowed with omnipotent—even immortal—statuses. In African metaphysical thought, such veneration is not merely symbolic or political; it is deeply rooted in the cosmological belief that reality is a continuum between the physical and the spiritual. Within this framework, certain individuals, especially rulers, priests, and founders of dynasties, are believed to embody or channel sacred forces, ancestral spirits, or divine mandates.

These leaders are often seen as *living ancestors* or chosen vessels through whom spiritual power flows. This belief is reinforced through sacred narratives, whether transmitted orally or written down, that portray them as divinely chosen, born under exceptional circumstances, or

capable of communing with the spirit world. In such contexts, leadership is not merely a function of political power, but a metaphysical state that binds the community to the cosmos.

The conferment of divine or semi-divine status on leaders thus becomes a central mechanism for securing absolute allegiance. It is not simply a matter of indoctrination, but part of a broader ontological reality in which spiritual legitimacy and political authority are inseparable. Followers, therefore, do not just obey a ruler; they revere and submit to what that ruler represents: a link to the ancestors, the gods, and the organizing principles of the universe.

This metaphysical view explains why resistance to such leaders, even when they become tyrannical, is often fraught with spiritual anxiety or fear of cosmic disorder. It also sheds light on why rituals of succession, burial, and remembrance of African rulers are often highly elaborate—ensuring continuity not only of leadership but of cosmic harmony. In many African societies, the death of a ruler is not simply a political event; it is a metaphysical rupture that must be carefully managed to restore balance between the living and the spiritual realms.

While this metaphysical belief system was embraced by various ancient African societies, the transatlantic slave trade led to its transformation and readaptation within New World contexts, giving rise to African-influenced religions across the Americas and redefining its cultural, political, and spiritual significance. However, unlike the ancestral communities from which these creolized religions have evolved, their leaders and adherents in the countries where they exist—Cuba, Brazil, Jamaica, Haiti, among others—have not typically evoked their religious standings and commitments as a basis for openly demanding political power and authority. This article contends that this trend changed remarkably with former President François Duvalier of Haiti, a country noted for its largescale devotion to Vodou (also spelled *Vodun*, *Vodoun*, *Voudoun*, *Voudou*, *Vaudoux*), which syncretizes West African religious traditions with Catholicism. Duvalier would not only declare his devotion to Vodou; he would also declare his ascension to the status of Vodou deity as part of his resolve to gain absolute power over the country. To fully appreciate Duvalier's strategy, it is important to explain the *monarch-as-god* phenomenon within the context of its prehistoric practice in three African cultures.

The Egyptian, the Yoruba, the Efik

For centuries, diverse societies across Africa and beyond have articulated and institutionalized the concept of the leader as a superhuman entity, embodying both spiritual and

temporal authority. This construction of leadership transcends mere political governance, drawing deeply from exclusive religious frameworks, elaborate rituals, codified attire, gendered roles, and clearly demarcated power hierarchies. The cultures of ancient Egypt, the Yoruba of southwestern Nigeria, and the Efik of southeastern Nigeria exemplify this phenomenon, each offering a distinct yet interconnected paradigm through which leadership is both sacralized and exercised. Despite significant external influences—most notably the introduction and spread of Christian and Islamic doctrines—these societies have maintained and adapted their indigenous conceptions of leadership. These adaptations often involve a syncretic blending of traditional cosmologies with imported religious tenets, ensuring the continuity of leadership ideologies that confer upon rulers an almost transcendent status. The sustained transmission of these beliefs and practices across generations underscores the resilience and dynamism of cultural identities in negotiating historical transformations and external pressures.

Egyptian pharaohs, predominantly male but occasionally female, occupied a unique and exalted position that transcended mortal existence. Upon their death, they were not merely buried but deified—transformed into divine beings who became one with Osiris, the god of death, resurrection, and fertility. This sacred transformation was no abrupt leap but the natural culmination of their earthly role as indispensable mediators between the human world and the mystical, divine realms. The pharaoh's life was a continuous enactment of this divine connection, marked by symbols of power and spiritual authority. Chief among these was the serpent, usually a rearing cobra known as the uraeus, worn prominently on the pharaoh's crown.² This living emblem was not just ornamental; it symbolized the ruler's divine protection, infinite wisdom, and unparalleled power—a visible sign that the pharaoh stood at the axis of heaven and earth, chosen by the gods themselves.

Before their death, pharaohs were closely linked to the god Horus, the falcon-headed deity who embodied kingship and victory over chaos. Horus was famed for restoring order to a world threatened by destructive forces, and in this divine association, the pharaoh became the living guarantor of Egypt's stability and cosmic balance. This connection underscored the pharaoh's role as a charismatic leader who was both earthly monarch and spiritual guardian, a figure whose very presence was believed to repel chaos and secure prosperity for the land and its people.

² From *Smendes: King of Egypt*, by Encyclopaedia Britannica Inc., 1998 (<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Pharaoh-Smemdes>).

Yet the pharaoh's power extended beyond mere symbolism. As a semi-divine spirit-being, the ruler was charged with officiating complex religious ceremonies that reaffirmed the cosmic order and maintained harmony between gods and humans. Their responsibilities included selecting sacred sites to erect monumental temples and awe-inspiring monuments that simultaneously celebrated their own achievements and paid reverent homage to the divine pantheon.³ Bojana Mojsov vividly captures this performative dimension of Egyptian kingship, describing how "pageant and fanfare promoted the institution of divine kingship.... These were grand, theatrical spectacles involving large casts and plentiful extras, all meticulously orchestrated around the central figure—the pharaoh himself. These dramas were enacted in principal shrines throughout Egypt, designed to propitiate and overcome the dark, chaotic forces that threatened the pharaoh's absolute power."⁴

Perhaps the most enduring testament to the pharaoh's quest for immortality and divine legitimacy was the construction of pyramids—majestic tombs intended to serve as eternal homes for the exalted kings in the afterlife. This tradition began with the visionary King Djoser of the Third Dynasty, who commissioned the revolutionary Step Pyramid, setting a new architectural standard that would inspire generations. Old Kingdom rulers elevated this legacy, culminating in the monumental Great Pyramid of Giza, constructed under King Khufu. This unparalleled feat of engineering not only immortalized Khufu's name but also crystallized the idea that the pharaoh was an invincible, god-like figure whose power transcended time. As Mojsov eloquently summarizes, "The leadership of the divine ruler came to personify the stability of society. Throughout Egyptian history the word for 'state' had not been invented. The idea was implicit in the person of the king and the institution of monarchy."⁵

In essence, the pharaoh was not merely a ruler in the political sense but the living embodiment of Egypt's order, divinity, and eternal continuity—a cosmic fulcrum on which the fate of the land balanced. Their reign was a seamless fusion of earthly governance and celestial mandate, their legacy enshrined not only in stone but in the spiritual fabric of a civilization that saw no division between the human and the divine.

The Yoruba Oba

³ From *Pharaoh*, by J.J. Mark, 2009, September 2 (<https://www.ancient.eu/pharaoh>).

⁴ From Enter the divine king in *Osiris: death and afterlife of a god* (pp. 10–14, 12) by B. Mojsov, 2005, Wiley-Blackwell.

⁵ See Footnote 4 (p. 14).

Highlighting the symbolic importance of the Oba's crown, art historian Marsha Bol underscores that Yoruba royal regalia is far more than ornamental; it is a sacred ensemble that communicates divine authority, ancestral lineage, and spiritual mediation. At the center of this regalia is the Oba's elaborate, beaded crown, or *ade*, a richly adorned headpiece that serves as a visual and metaphysical anchor of kingship. The crown's distinctive conical shape reflects a cosmological axis—the link between heaven and earth—while the birds affixed to its apex symbolize the Oba's connection to the spiritual realm, particularly to the *òrìṣà* (deities) and the ancestral forces that guide the community. According to Bol, these avian figures often reference Ogun, the deity of iron and transformation, or represent the collective power of elder women, known as the *àjé*, whose spiritual authority and protective presence are essential to the well-being of the kingdom.

The crown's most enigmatic feature, however, is the veil of beaded strands that cascades down to conceal the Oba's face. This veil is not a mere flourish of aesthetic design; it embodies a profound theological and cultural concept. To see the Oba's face unveiled is to come dangerously close to divine radiance, a spiritual force believed to be too powerful and overwhelming for ordinary human eyes. By shielding his visage, the Oba both protects his subjects and amplifies his own mystique, becoming less a man and more a living symbol of ancestral and cosmic order. The veil thus serves to depersonalize the king, transforming him into a vessel of sacred kingship—a tradition that echoes the belief that rulers are chosen not merely by lineage but by divine ordination.

Through these richly symbolic elements, the Yoruba crown encapsulates a convergence of history, mythology, and metaphysics. It affirms the Oba not only as a temporal leader but as a sacred intermediary who stands at the threshold of the natural and supernatural worlds. As Bol explains, every aspect of the crown, from its structure to its iconography, reinforces the idea that kingship is a spiritual institution, deeply embedded in Yoruba cosmology and sustained by ritual performance, ancestral reverence, and divine endorsement. Underscoring its deep symbolic importance, she explains:

When the oba wears the crown, he embodies divinity. The conical-shaped beaded crown (*adenla*, translated as “big crown heavy with power”) with its veil of beaded strands is the prime symbol of Yoruba divine kingship. The oba only rarely wears this crown, limiting its use to state occasions, such as his own coronation, ceremonial festivals, and conferment of titles and judgements. So powerful is the crown, imbued

with the royal ancestral spirit, that it can serve as a material substitute for the king by being placed on the throne, where his subjects must observe the same protocols as if the king were present.⁶

The Efik Obong

Among the Efik people of Calabar in southeastern Nigeria, the institution of kingship is deeply intertwined with spirituality, cosmology, and ancestral authority. The Obong, the sovereign and traditional ruler, is not merely a political figure but a sacred embodiment of divine presence and ancestral continuity. His authority transcends temporal governance and is perceived as divinely ordained even before the formal rites of installation take place.

The process leading to the coronation of an Obong begins with a period of ritual seclusion and meditation within a sacred kingship shrine known as *Efe Asabo*, or the Cobra Shrine. This shrine is consecrated to *Ndem*, the powerful water deity revered by the Efik as a guardian of spiritual equilibrium, fertility, and ancestral connection. The Obong-elect's retreat into this shrine serves both as a rite of purification and a liminal transition, during which he symbolically sheds his former identity and is spiritually reconstituted as *Edidem*—a term denoting majesty, divine sanction, and supreme authority.

This spiritual retreat is not a passive withdrawal, but an active engagement with metaphysical forces. Through prescribed meditative practices, ritual observances, and symbolic communion with the deities, the Obong-elect is initiated into a sacred kinship with *Ndem* and, by extension, the entire pantheon of Efik gods. This transformative phase affirms his ontological shift from an ordinary mortal to a divine intermediary—a living conduit between the spiritual and material worlds.

The culmination of this metaphysical journey is the coronation ceremony, an elaborate and highly theatrical rite conducted by the chief priest or priestess of *Ndem*. Central to the ceremony is the invocation of ancestral spirits and deities through chants and incantations. These utterances are not mere formalities; they function as performative acts that summon sacred forces to bear witness to, and legitimize, the king's investiture. The placement of the crown on the Obong's head marks his full assumption of divine kingship and the formal recognition of his status as the living embodiment of *Ndem*.

⁶From *The art & tradition of beadwork* (p. 145) by M. Bol, 2018, Gibbs Smith.

Following this, the priestess of *Ndem* performs the sacred anointing, applying water, white clay, and oil to the king's body. Each element bears profound symbolic significance: water, representing purification and rebirth; white clay, a signifier of spiritual potency and ancestral presence; and oil, emblematic of consecration, abundance, and divine favor. This ritual consecration seals the Obong's transformation and publicly affirms his role as both political leader and spiritual custodian.

Even in death, the Obong does not lose his sacred status. He is revered as an ancestral presence whose influence continues to guide the living. His legacy, encoded in oral tradition and ritual memory, ensures that his spiritual authority endures beyond the grave, reaffirming the cyclical and eternal nature of kingship in Efik cosmology.

In this way, the Obong of Calabar embodies a unique synthesis of political leadership and religious mysticism, standing not only as a guardian of communal values but also as a vital link between the human and the divine.⁷

The above examples establish societal variations to the existence, significance, and acceptance of leaders bequeathed with supernatural roles and identities that rank on a par with their political positions. The Efik Obong, Egyptian Pharaoh, and Yoruba Oba are prime examples of collectively accepted leaders whose dedication to the welfare of the people and the preservation of long-held belief systems are rooted in standards of behavior as stipulated by accepted religious codes. However, this spiritual-political synthesis does not eliminate internal disputes. Differences in the interpretation of sacred duties, for instance, contributed to conflicts among Yoruba chiefs in the Oyo Empire during the precolonial period.

Continuities in the African Diaspora

Despite the profound disruptions caused by the international slave trade to African belief systems, institutions, and traditions, descendants of Africans have preserved numerous ancestral practices, albeit often transformed to varying degrees. These cultural retentions are evident throughout the diaspora, particularly in African-influenced religions such as Santería, Obeah, Vodou, and Candomblé, among others. However, unlike Islamic or Christian monarchies, these

⁷ From *Religion in Calabar: the religious life and history of a Nigerian town* (pp. 181-182) by R.I.J. Hackett, 1989, Mouton de Gruyter.

enduring traditions have rarely been invoked as a basis for asserting or legitimizing absolute political dominance. In the Ottoman Empire (1299–1922), for instance, the Sultan held both political and religious authority as the Caliph, the spiritual leader of Sunni Islam, thereby combining political and religious power in a single figure. Similarly, in the Kingdom of France (1643–1715), King Louis XIV exercised absolute authority. Known as the “Sun King,” he centralized all political power under his control, famously declaring, “L’État, c’est moi” (“I am the state”). It was therefore intriguing when, from 1957 to 1971, late President François Duvalier of Haiti delineated himself as a leader endorsed by consecrated hierarchical structures within Vodou. Notwithstanding the widespread followership he garnered from practitioners of the faith, which continued after his death, his controversial self-enthronement as divine leader was an unprecedented, self-seeking adoption of the *leader-as-godlike* phenomenon that has historically shaped the scope and parameters of monarchical authority in several African societies. Unlike the standard application of this custom in precolonial African societies, however, Duvalier successfully assumed a holy persona that was as manipulative as it was destructive. It became a curious instance where a leadership ideal originally designed to ensure communal stability and administrative efficacy was revived and reapplied in a new setting where political victory and dominance were determined by individualistic and materialistic gain.

Cult of “Papa Doc” Duvalier

Few dictators have matched François Duvalier’s extreme efforts to adopt a supernatural persona, which he reinforced through the establishment of an unassailable system of macabre control. As such, Duvalier represents a distinctive case in the study of authoritarian regimes employing supernatural symbolism. In this regard, Paul Christopher Johnson’s recap of François Duvalier’s ability to wield absolute power by exploiting the intricacies of a secretist religion underscores the fact that his reputation as a celestial being, whether believed or disbelieved, is permanently etched in history. Johnson writes, “The case is that of Haiti and the religion of Vodou, as it was merged with political objectives by François Duvalier during his tenure as ‘president-for-life’ from 1957 to 1971. Duvalier represented himself in his discourse as being possessed of the historical spirit of the revolutionary hero Jean-Jacques Dessalines, and in his style impersonated

the Vodou Gede spirit, Baron Samedi.”⁸ There are adherents to Vodou who still believe that, upon death, Duvalier underwent deification and has taken his rightful place among the pantheon of Vodou deities known as the *loa*.

Pan-Africanist Influences

Although Haiti officially proclaimed religious freedom during Duvalier’s rule, he effectively leveraged the widespread adherence to various forms of Vodou among the population to advance his unusual political ambition of becoming “president-for-life.” This occurred despite his public endorsement of Catholicism as the nation’s primary religion. As his political aspirations intensified, Duvalier positioned himself as a Pan-Africanist figure, promoting Vodou as an indigenous religion of the majority Black population and portraying it as a potential instrument of resistance against the Haitian elite, the Catholic Church, and the French and German interests dominating the island’s trade and utilities. By 1914, during World War I, several foreign powers—including France, Germany, Great Britain, and the United States—competed for financial control over impoverished Haiti, culminating in the occupation of the island by American Marines. (1915-34).⁹ Viewing these countries as foreign bullies, Duvalier intensified his pro-Black doctrine, which appealed to the underprivileged Black majority. To them, Duvalier not only championed their cause but also sanctioned Vodou as a key part of their ancestral heritage and African identity. Duvalier increasingly gave them a sense of cultural pride and championed resistance against the politically privileged, the occupying United States, and a *mulatto* class that had historically been favored over darker-skinned Haitians. Cognizant of the people’s detestation of colonialism, neocolonialism, and foreign invasion, Duvalier exploited the widely held belief by Vodou devotees that the religion could be wielded as a supernatural weapon against one’s enemies, a means to overcome injustice, and a symbol of the empowerment of marginalized Blacks. His superficial espousal of Vodou thus became a key factor in his rise to political power. As Paul Johnson explains, “In the hands of Duvalier, Vodou came to represent not a religious subnation under siege by an antagonistic state, and state-religion (Roman Catholicism), as it in fact was for more than half of the twentieth century

⁸ From Secretism and the apotheosis of Duvalier, by P.C. Johnson, 2006, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 74 (2), pp. 420-445 (<https://doi.org/10.1093/jaarel/lfi088>).

⁹ From *Papa Doc & the Tontons Macoutes* (p. 38) by B. Diederich, et al., 1970, Markus Wiener Publishers. Also see Footnote 9 (p. 424).

but rather the State under siege by an antagonistic world.... Through Vodou Duvalier built what had perhaps not existed since the Revolution: a nation-state of ‘the people.’”¹⁰

Throughout history, African diasporic religions, including but not limited to Candomblé, Rastafarianism, Santeria and, of course, Vodou, have been used to defy slavery, colonialism, neocolonialism, and, in general, alleged Western domineering religions and political systems. Despite Vodou’s symbiotic relationship with Haitian society, the practice has periodically faced denunciation as was the case during the US occupation and the era of the Catholic Church’s “anti-superstition” campaign of 1941. (The Catholic Church embarked on a similar campaign after Duvalier’s son (Jean-Claude Duvalier) lost power in 1986, though a freedom of religion and legitimization of Vodou was reinstated in 1987.) Notwithstanding these shifts in recognition of Vodou, Duvalier was able to attain a cultural icon and hero status through his calculative endorsement of the religion.¹¹

The Making of a Rebel

To understand Duvalier’s eventual reliance on Vodou as a potent political tool, it is essential to trace its roots in his early life. Born in 1907, Duvalier was just eight when U.S. Marines occupied Haiti in 1915—a formative experience that would shape his worldview. As a high school student, he came to view the American presence as emblematic of Western degeneracy and oppression, and as a threat to Haiti’s authentic African heritage. This heritage was embodied in Vodou practices and the French-based Creole language, both of which were central to *noirisme*, a black solidarity movement that Duvalier embraced in the early 1930s. *Noirisme* called for the affirmation of Haiti’s indigenous culture and sought to dismantle a political order dominated by the lighter-skinned mulatto minority, advocating instead for empowerment of the Black majority. As Elizabeth Abbott has observed, “Dr. François Duvalier immersed himself in the traditional beliefs, analyzing, praising them almost to the point of proselytization. ‘Voudou,’ he wrote, ‘elaborated on the soil of Africa whose anguished mystery it reflects, also expresses overwhelmingly the conscience of a race as it confronts the enigmas of this world.... [It] proclaims the survival of the soul in sanctifying the spirit of Ancestors.’”¹²

¹⁰ See Footnote 9 (p. 424).

¹¹ See Footnote 9 (p. 426).

¹² From *Haiti: the Duvaliers and their legacy* (p.54) by E. Abbott, 1991, Simon and Schuster.

Just as Duvalier's engagement with Vodou is crucial to understanding his ideological and political transformation, a reassessment of his involvement with Negritude is equally important in tracing the development of his pro-African values. Duvalier became associated with the Negritude movement in the 1930s—a movement that, while less radical than *noirisme*, sought to reclaim African cultural identity and affirm Black pride.¹³ Duvalier's pro-Black ideology found early nourishment in the teachings of his high school mentor, Jean Price-Mars, a pioneering Haitian intellectual and writer known for his advocacy of cultural authenticity. Price-Mars was among the first to argue that Vodou, far from being a primitive or barbaric superstition as colonial narratives had long portrayed it, was a legitimate and deeply rooted expression of African heritage and Haitian identity. Through Price-Mars's writings and classroom influence, Duvalier encountered a radical reimagining of Blackness, one that embraced African spiritual traditions as sources of strength, dignity, and national pride. This formative exposure laid the ideological foundation for Duvalier's later political vision, in which he weaponized cultural nationalism to consolidate power and align himself with the Black majority. Duvalier's political engagement deepened during his medical school years in his twenties, particularly through his friendship with the mystic Lorimer Denis, which encouraged his ethnographic study of Vodou. During this period, he also contributed to the nationalist poetry movement, which aimed to displace the French literary canon in favor of works rooted in Black identity and African-centered imagery.¹⁴

Alongside the formative influences of Vodou and the Négritude movement on his spiritual worldview and political ambitions, François Duvalier was also deeply shaped by the Catholic Church's antagonistic 1941 "anti-superstition" campaign. Initiated under the mulatto President Élie Lescot, the campaign was marked by violent repression—Vodou temples were razed, altars desecrated, ceremonial drums destroyed, and sacred objects confiscated. This assault on Vodou enraged Duvalier and other Black nationalists, who viewed it as an extension of anti-Black, colonialist ideology. In direct response, Haitian novelist Jacques Roumain founded the Bureau of Ethnology, where Duvalier's former mentor Jean Price-Mars and close associate Lorimer Denis held supervisory roles. Duvalier himself became actively involved in the Bureau, forging deep ties with Vodou priests (*houngans*) and priestesses (*mambos*). Through this network, Duvalier increasingly framed Haitian society in stark oppositional terms: on one side, the oppressed Black

¹³ See Footnote 10 (p. 44).

¹⁴ See Footnote 9 (pp. 427-428).

peasantry; on the other, the entrenched forces of colonial domination—represented by the mulatto elite of Port-au-Prince, the Catholic Church, and the occupying U.S. Marines.¹⁵

From “Papa Doc” to Messiah

Although Duvalier’s pro-Vodou and Pan-Africanist stance endeared him to the Haitian Black population, it was his role as a physician that earned him the status of a folk hero. In 1944, as part of a US-led medical campaign against the degenerative disease, yaws, the medically trained Duvalier was one of twenty Haitian doctors selected by the Inter-American Affairs Commission to study at the Graduate School of Public Health, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. Like leprosy, yaws was rampant among Haitian peasants, causing excruciating skin decomposition. On completing his studies at Ann Arbor, Duvalier returned to Haiti and embarked on rigorous tours of the most remote villages of Haiti to vaccinate the people against the disease.¹⁶ As his reputation grew among the peasants, he earned the esteemed nickname, *Papa Doc*, and, more importantly, many concluded that his ability to cure yaws was not only the result of his medical training but also proof that he possessed mystical powers and could communicate with spirits. This became the advantage that Duvalier had over his political opponents – the fact that he was equipped with Western scholarship in addition to allegedly *possessing* the supernatural healing powers that Vodou devotees ascribed to some politicians.¹⁷ Capitalizing on this image, Duvalier subsequently claimed unlimited religio-political powers and unleashed absolute control over the people.

Duvalier enjoyed other political advantages. Urban intellectuals found him credible as a Vodou ethnographer while his public health training in the US earned him the support of US officials. Most importantly, Duvalier was overwhelmingly embraced by the marginalized Black majority who welcomed his endorsement of Black nationalism. He became Haiti’s new president after winning the 22 September 1957 elections, despite losing in Port-au-Prince. As president, Duvalier understood the importance of continuing to appeal to various segments of society, posturing as a devout Catholic while being perceived as a Vodou devotee and Catholic hater by the Black rural population. Those who believed in his commitment to Vodou were encouraged by his expulsion of foreign Protestant and Catholic priests beginning in 1959, though he replaced them with local priests. But even more intriguing were reports about his otherworldly ventures, which

¹⁵ See Footnote 9 (p. 428).

¹⁶ See Footnote 13 (p. 55).

¹⁷ See Footnote 13 (428-429).

increasingly defined him as one with the pantheon of Vodou deities. A precedent had already been set with Jean-Jacques Dessalines, the first Black Emperor of Haiti, who, upon death, was deified as a companion of the Yoruba god of iron and war, *Ogun* (*Ogu* in Vodou), and therefore a Vodou spirit and member of the *loa*. Duvalier understood the advantages of establishing a religio-political link to Dessalines on whose tomb he was rumored to sleep one night each year.¹⁸ Dancer and anthropologist Katherine Dunham has expounded on this affiliation, even if delusional, explaining that “it is by order of Duvalier that the date of the death of Dessalines has become a national holiday and a ceremony is performed at Pont Rouge. A flame burns day and night before the tomb of Dessalines, the contents of which were once removed and placed elsewhere...but rumors go even further and say that they have since been disinterred and put to ceremonial black magic use....”¹⁹

Even as he promoted the emergence of an unprecedented Black ruling class, Duvalier continued to systematically appeal to Port-au-Prince’s *mulatto* elites and the West in general. His strategy was to portray himself as a devout Catholic and, notably, as a president chosen and endorsed by God Almighty. By 1964 when Duvalier upgraded his status to “president-for-life,” he began to exploit the power of self-elevating theatrical representation. A government newspaper, for instance, flaunted a picture of Jesus Christ laying his hand on the dictator’s shoulder with the caption, “I have chosen him.”²⁰ This was just one instance of Duvalier’s public demagoguery, which featured a range of accolades, among which were, “I am the Haitian Flag, One and Indivisible,” “Duvalier, President for Life,” “Supreme Chief of the Haitian nation,” “Uncontestable Leader of the Revolution,” “Apostle of National Unity,” “Renovator of the Fatherland,” and “Chief of the National Community.”²¹ Most indicative of Duvalier’s growing self-deification, however, was his administration’s release, also in 1964, of a pamphlet to be taught in Haitian schools. Titled, *The Catechism of the Revolution*, it delivered an audacious parody of the Lord’s Prayer: “Our Doc, who are in the National Palace, hallowed be Thy name in the present and future generations. Thy will be done at Port-au-Prince and in the provinces. Give us this day our new Haiti and never

¹⁸ See Footnote 9 (p. 435).

¹⁹ From *Island possessed* (p. 162) by K. Dunham, 1969, University of Chicago Press.

²⁰ From *How human rights can build Haiti: activists, lawyers, and the grassroots campaign* (p. 29) by F. Quigley, 2014, Vanderbilt University Press.

²¹ From *The Haiti files: decoding the crisis* (p. 19) by J. Ridgeway, 1994, Latin America Bureau. Also see Duvalierism (p.328) by J. M. Dash, 2010, *The Oxford Encyclopedia of African Thought: 2-volume set*, B. Jeyifou & F. A. Irele (Eds.), Oxford University Press.

forgive the trespasses of the anti-patriots who spit every day on our country. Let them succumb to temptation, and under the weight of their venom, deliver them not from any evil.”²²

A Morbid Personification of Baron Samedi

François Duvalier’s decision to consolidate power beyond the traditional reliance on the military and law enforcement was both deliberate and strategic. Haiti, after all, had long been plagued by chronic coups and ephemeral governments. Between 1843 and 1915 alone, the country saw twenty-two heads of state, only one of whom completed a full term. Even Jean-Jacques Dessalines, the revered hero of the Haitian Revolution, met a violent end—assassinated and dismembered in the streets in October 1806, a mere two years after taking power.

Fully aware of this legacy of political instability and institutional fragility, Duvalier ruled with calculated ruthlessness, determined to maintain his grip on power.²³ He knew that appealing to the elites and the Catholic Church would not suffice, nor could he rely solely on the personal militia he had created—the Tonton Macoute—especially after a failed military coup against him in July 1958 shook his trust in the armed forces.²⁴ To tighten his hold further, Duvalier cast himself as a Vodou deity—a move as psychologically potent as it was politically shrewd in a society where legitimacy was deeply intertwined with myth, religion, and tradition. This self-deification amplified the aura of fear and reverence surrounding Duvalier, compelling total submission from a population already conditioned by uncertainty and repression.

Duvalier’s ultimate transformation is alleged to have happened after he suffered a diabetes-related heart attack on 24 May 1959, which left him in a coma for nine hours until he was revived by a glucose injection administered by one of his principal assistants, Clement Barbot. If the coma had affected him mentally, his followers saw things differently, believing that he had undergone a rite of passage that transformed him into the incarnation of the Vodou *loa* Baron Samedi (though his physician concluded that he suffered a neurological damage that affected his mental health). Believed to be one of the most terrifying of all Vodou deities, Baron Samedi is both the god of death and fertility and a stalker of graveyards at night. On assuming this identity, Duvalier began to dress publicly in a black suit, dark glasses, and bowler hat, which is how Samedi is traditionally

²² Quoted in *Haiti: The tumultuous history – from pearl of the Caribbean to broken nation* (p. 103) by P.R. Girard, 2010, Palgrave Macmillan.

²³ From *Evolution of evil E01: Papa Doc Duvalier*, YouTube, 2018b, May 20 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ds7hmyvbckl>).

²⁴ See Footnote 13 (p. 82).

portrayed. His speeches were increasingly made in a deep nasal voice, which is also how Samedi is believed to sound.²⁵ From political heavyweight, Catholic emissary, and Vodou adherent, Duvalier now assumed the status of a Vodou deity and therefore head of the religious practice throughout Haiti. He made the point clear during his visit to Croix-des-Bouquets, a Vodou stronghold, after he recovered from his heart attack. Elizabeth Abbott recalls the encounter between Duvalier and the people of Croix-des-Bouquets, to whom he spoke in both Creole and French to demonstrate his perceived identity as intellectual and traditionalist. “He finished with a statement that was both simple and chilling. ‘Never forget that I am the supreme authority of the State,’ he warned them. ‘Hence forth, I, I alone, I am your only master.’ The *houngans* and *mambos* understood exactly what he meant. He was one of them, and for the good of every single Haitian they would have to pray for [to?] him, and never forget to make the proper sacrifices to the spirits who alone could protect them.”²⁶

Besides arrogating the identity of Baron Samedi through costume and voice, Duvalier secured his image by generating an aura of mysticism and a culture of macabre brutality that Vodou adherents associated with the *loa*. He steadily built a cult around the number twenty-two, being that he was first elected on 22 September 1957 and was inaugurated as president on 22 October of the same year. Openly repulsed by Duvalier, US President John Kennedy had cut aid to Haiti and was determined to remove the Haitian dictator from power. After Kennedy was assassinated in 1963, Duvalier cited the date that the incident occurred, 22 November, as being supernaturally symbolic. Claiming that he had put a curse on Kennedy, Duvalier took credit for orchestrating his murder, further instilling fear in his followers and the people of Haiti.²⁷ Paul Christopher Johnson has reexamined the mystical link that Duvalier established between his authority, identity, and the number twenty-two. In his words, “In 1958, when Duvalier was first to meet in person the feared Dominican strongman Trujillo, he set the meeting for 22 December. In 1964 he declared himself president-for-life on 22 May. Indeed he used the date routinely to schedule important meetings. In 1968, after yet another coup attempt against Duvalier, the captured rebels were flown to Port-au-Prince to be interrogated by the president himself on the special day requested, 22 May.”²⁸

²⁵ See Footnote 24.

²⁶ See Footnote 13 (pp. 102-103).

²⁷ See Footnote 24.

²⁸ See Footnote 9 (p. 439).

Frustrated by Kennedy's death and the apparent absence of any resistance against Duvalier, thirteen Haitians who called themselves "Jeun Haiti" ("Young Haiti") sailed from New York to Haiti in the summer of 1964 to carry out a guerrilla-type revolution to overthrow the Haitian leader. But they were eventually routed and killed by Haitian forces. After the first, Yvon Laroque, was killed, his rotting and stinking corpse was placed on an armchair outside the arrival hall of the Port Au Prince International Airport and was the first thing that travelers and tourists saw after they exited the airport. This didn't only confirm Duvalier's ruthlessness but also served as a warning to anyone who dared to defy his authority. The last two of the "Jeun Haiti" to be captured, Louis Drouin and Marcel Numa, were publicly executed against the wall of the national cemetery in the equivalent of a grisly circus show that was televised. Following Duvalier's declaration of the day as a public holiday, schools were temporarily closed, and teachers were ordered to attend the execution along with their schoolchildren. Besides sending a clear message to potential insurgents, Duvalier's brutal treatment of the young men also reinforced his status as the *loa* of death and guardian of the cemetery. Their execution was one of several executions ordered by Duvalier and mostly carried out by his Tonton Macoute, some of which involved the massacre of thousands of unarmed men, women, and children charged with being involved in uprisings against his administration.

With time, Duvalier's rampant murder of political opponents and civilians became more and more morbid and ritualistic. This was the case when he murdered several men, women, and children in the district of Bel-Air, whose inhabitants were said to be doggedly opposed to Duvalier. First, their holy grounds, which periodically attracted thousands of worshippers, were ravaged and thus desecrated. Next, the people (including some of their piglets and chickens) were abducted in large numbers, gagged, tied, and buried alive in a huge pit that was eventually covered with cement. A message had been delivered and it was soon widely understood that "no man, woman, or child was safe, and through magic and sacrifice, the President had harnessed great forces of evil to assist him in his quest for absolute power."²⁹ It is estimated that as many as 30,000 to 60,000 Haitians were exterminated during Duvalier's rule. The numbers are unclear about political prisoners who were tortured to death, starved to death, or executed in public and private prisons.³⁰

²⁹ See Footnote 13 (pp. 80-81).

³⁰ See Footnote 24.

Duvalier's administration transformed into a grotesque display of kleptocracy and megalomania, marked by the systematic cultivation of a cult of personality that cast him as an infallible figure. Surrounded by sycophants and protected by a brutal security apparatus, he ruled through fear and manipulation, ensuring that dissent was not just discouraged but often met with swift and brutal punishment. In such an atmosphere of intimidation and repression, only a handful dared to question his authority, and even fewer survived the consequences.

After securing absolute power, Duvalier wanted more. He didn't just want to be linked to a god; he wanted to be the god. While violence guaranteed his place as president-for-life, it was Vodou that kept him there and he began to circulate myths about his otherworldly powers. In a speech after the constitutional referendum that affirmed him as "president-for-life" in 1964, Duvalier identified himself as an indestructible and immaterial being with superhuman powers; he was the dreaded Baron Samedi in human flesh. One of the more eerie rumors alleged that in March 1958 he travelled with a loyal *houngan* to Trou Forban, a sacred Vodou cave located in the hills, from where, after a ritual was performed, he procured and returned to the national palace with evil spirits known as Baka whom he offered a new home in his "mystic room." In addition to providing Duvalier with the extra protection he craved, their alleged presence became another means through which he instilled fear in the people.³¹

To match his iconic celestial persona, Duvalier's atrocities became disturbingly sinister to the extent that on 12 April 1959, he ordered his Macoute to hijack the funeral of his former friend and political rival, Clément Jumelle, and return to him Jumelle's coffin and corpse. Stories began to emanate from the presidential palace of how Duvalier placed the corpse in a room where he periodically sequestered himself and either communicated with it or used it in Vodou rituals. Jumelle's crime was that he not only dared to run against Duvalier in the presidential elections of September 1957, but, even worse, criticized the process and result as being heavily rigged.³²

Whatever Duvalier did with Jumelle's body, he practiced what were most likely erroneously perceived as Vodou rituals, a key part of which entailed demanding the body parts of his murdered enemies. Though it is not clear what he did with them, commonplace accounts insist that he consulted with bodiless heads from which he received advice on a range of issues. These known

³¹ See Footnote 13 (pp. 81-82).

³² From *The Haitians: class and color politics* (191-193) by L. Paquin, 1983, Multi-Type. Also see Footnote 13 (pp. 94-95).

and speculated rituals increasingly cast him as a mysterious being to be feared, especially among many unschooled and superstitious Haitians.

In the end, as Elizabeth Abbott argues, “the great Machiavellian François Duvalier would study voodoo with as much devotion as an *houngan*, and then twist and use it to keep an entire population at his pitiless mercy.”³³ In a society where the spiritual and physical worlds have coexisted intimately, he successfully became a master of both to the point of convincing the people of his immortality and of his ability to commune with the spirits of his murdered victims.

To be sure, Duvalier was neither a pro-Black nor religious leader. Vodou is more of a community religion than one that installs individuals as invincible political or military leaders. The close link that it creates between natural and supernatural realms, part of which entails spirit possession and the deification of the dead, was strategically exploited by Duvalier to reinvent himself as one of the most feared Vodou deities, a facade that he used to secure supreme power, reinforce his military and political authority, and bring the Haitian people to their knees. It is important to note, in this regard, that while Vodou does not endorse political leadership, Haitian society exhibits a powerful tradition comparable to societies that accord divine status to leaders or that deify political leaders. In other words, Haiti was (and perhaps still is) vulnerable to the type of religious-driven manipulation that Duvalier used to influence and subdue the majority Black citizens of the country.

Duvalier did not only exploit his people’s devotion to Vodou; he also became one of the most dynamic tyrannical performers to manufacture a transcendent character on grand, public spaces, complete with his dark suits, bowler hats, and deep near-inaudible voice. His stage was not always physical or visible since it was also the mysterious world of Vodou that permeates the cultural and social psyche of Haitian society.

François “Papa Doc” Duvalier died of heart disease and diabetes on 21 April 1971. It would have been remarkably creepy if he died a day later (22 April), which would have coincided with his preferred magical number, twenty-two.

Conclusion

³³ See Footnote 13 (p. 28).

Various societies have historically venerated their kings, chiefs, and emperors as godlike or gods; from the Chinese, Romans, and Greeks to the Japanese, Egyptians, Tibetans, Yoruba, and Efik. Extensive theatrical attributes typically run through the enforcement of this belief system, whether they are prescribed by age-old divine philosophies or informed by recently invented precepts and fantasies. To recap, some of these attributes are grandiose ceremonies; the creation and use of ritualized and performative spaces (like public arenas and buildings, television stations, religious houses, and forests); exclusive costumes and paraphernalia; use of animated language or language steeped in rich metaphor (by the holy leader or compliant disciples); and the tactical use of artistic forms like music and dance.

When Barry Rubin assesses despots who believe their unlimited wisdom transcends the gains of democracy, he is essentially stating that they exploit age-old beliefs that demand veneration for political leaders. In Rubin's words, "This relationship between leader and ruled is the new version of the medieval divine right of kings based on the relationship between the monarch and God."³⁴ The success of modern, self-serving, omnipotent autocrats is therefore rooted, at least in part, in the redefinition, misrepresentation, and misappropriation of such longstanding traditions of idolizing designated rulers. The emergence of this new breed of *divine* psychopaths also underscores the timeless truth that religion, depending on context and purpose, is eternally susceptible to self-serving misuse, not just by religious personalities but by political extremists with dreams of exercising unquestionable dominance.

Fabricating Immortality

Even among authoritarian leaders who do not flaunt a blatant religious identity, their make-believe supremacy drives them to seek a fundamental divine quality—*immortality*. Whereas the deification of pharaohs and Roman emperors strived for immortality, recent despots like the Kims of North Korea continue to stay "alive" through the children to whom they hand over power upon death, just as President Gnassingbé Eyadéma, former Togolese dictator, lives *vicariously* through his son, Faure Eyadéma, who became president after his father's death in 2005. The former President of Gabon, Ali Bongo Ondimba, assumed power immediately after his father, Omar

³⁴ From *Modern dictators: third world coup makers, strongmen, and populist tyrants* (p. 8) by B. Rubin, 1987, McGraw-Hill.

Bongo, died in 2009. Duvalier prepared his son, Jean-Claude Duvalier (“Baby Doc”) to succeed him after his death. Jean-Claude became President of Haiti a day after his father’s death but lacking his father’s calculated sadism (or superhuman powers?) was overthrown in 1986 and fled the country. His mother, Simone Duvalier, had taken extreme measures to secure the devil’s protection, which should have guaranteed her son’s invincibility as indisputable ruler over Haiti. The process entailed an incestuous spiritual marriage between mother and son, achieved through exclusive Vodou rituals, but failed in its goal as Jean-Claude faced charges of corruption and human rights abuse after returning from exile to Haiti in 2011. He died of a heart attack in 2014 before his trial was concluded.³⁵ Even so, François Duvalier must be consoled by the widespread belief that he is occupying a position among the council of esteemed Vodou gods as the embodiment of Baron Samedi. Nothing could be more “immortal” than this, a fact underscored by Paul Johnson in his comment: “After Papa Doc died on 21 April 1971, his son Jean-Claude was installed as president-for-life on the favored day, the 22nd. As the elder lay in state on the 23rd, wearing his familiar black suit and glasses, twenty-two soldiers and twenty-two tonton makoutes formed his honor guard. Even after his death, Duvalier achieved his apotheosis like Dessalines, just as he had hoped. His apotheosis arrived following the same numeric code, as the spirit called Loa 22 Os.”³⁶

An Enduring Tradition

The use of terror by pseudo-religious despots is often obscured by the illusion they craft—that their grip on power stems not from brute force but from a populace willingly bowing to a sacred figure. Yet overt aggression is not the only path through which religion is harnessed for political ends. It thrives just as effectively in polished, diplomatic settings: during swearing-in ceremonies that invoke holy texts, or in staged photo-ops where a president holds aloft a Bible before a church. These acts of pious theater, however hollow or hypocritical, matter only insofar as they continue to enchant followers who conflate religiosity with legitimacy.

³⁵ From *Jean-Claude Duvalier*, by Encyclopædia Britannica Inc., 2020 <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Jean-Claude-Duvalier>).

³⁶ See Footnote 9 (p. 439).

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