

BOOK REVIEW

Timothy R. Landry. *Vodún: Secrecy and the Search for Divine Power*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019. 197 pp. Note on Orthography and Style. Notes. Works Cited. Index. \$49.95. Cloth. ISBN: 978-0812250749.

Timothy R. Landry's *Vodún: Secrecy and Search for Divine Power* is a powerful book that highlights the peaks and valleys of doing ethnography in a post-modern and neoliberal world, while his methodology of personal apprenticeship showcases a refreshing empathy and care for Vodún beliefs and believers. Perhaps most impressive is Landry's holistic lens for unpacking the complex relationships between locals/foreigners, tradition/globalization, blacks/whites, consumption/production, and public/private as they pertain to both racialization and the exchange of ritual knowledge. This is a book that could only have been written by deep and fully-engaged ethnographic participation with Vodún followers and the spirits themselves. Landry is quite adept at prodding the intimate connections between race and class, innovation and tradition, and especially the "paradox of secrecy," while examining "the globalization of African religions from the perspective of Africans and through an analysis of events and ritual encounters." (7). This insider's view permits a successful quest for divine power and ritual secrecy—one that is both timely and beautifully crafted.


In Benin, and in Vodún writ large, there is a consummate conundrum between individual and collective secrecy on the one hand, and the ancestral desire to grow the religion on the other. Landry manages this dialectical relationship with enormous skill and ease, moving from description to explanation, while educating the reader on the connection between embodiment, occult ontologies, and religious secrecy. He is the first anthropologist to truly recognize the centrality of the forest, blood, and leaves as the key symbols for understanding collective power structures and the individual agencies at play between African practitioners, African spirits, and foreign bodies longing to consume African sacred knowledge. The first three chapters, "Touring the Forbidden," "Receiving the Forest," and "Secrecy, Objects, and Expanding Markets," were particularly informative and cohesive, illuminating the concept of secrecy as it relates to ritual practice and material culture. His approach is on the one hand highly contextual, and on the other

hand tied to notions of authenticity and how power transfer between initiates and interlocutors is negotiated.

Most studies within the anthropology of religion matrix tend to focus on the exponential growth of Islam and Christianity in Africa and the African Diaspora, and many ignore the growth of African religions such as Orisha and Vodú. This is not the case with Landry; he convincingly shows how Vodún is expanding while offering reasons for its contemporary renaissance. I would like to have seen Landry go further here, to follow what Jacob Olupona and Terry Rey did regarding Orisha in *Orisa Devotion as World Religion* (University of Wisconsin Press [Madison, 2008]), and argue for its positioning as a true world religion. I think digging deeper into the life histories and diversity of motives of the “religious tourists” and religious practitioners themselves would have helped enhance this argument. For example, Landry speaks of how many foreign initiates feel cheated out of their money after their various rites of passage into the Vodún belief system, and explains this as a cultural misunderstanding, but I believe it is more than that; secrecy itself is paramount here. For example, I know from my own research in Ghana, Togo, and Benin that the knowledge of the plants, in both incarnating the gods and healing the sick, has been co-opted and appropriated by foreign visitors, pharmaceutical companies, and the like for financial gain. These pervasive unethical acts have forced many Africans to turn inward and protect their secrets. I think more attention to the practical usage of plants and divination to both empower and heal would have been important additions to this text.

Landry has done perhaps the best job building on Paul Johnson’s profoundly useful analysis of secrecy as it applies to ritual knowledge. However, there are some other important works on secrecy and African rituals which would have been beneficial for him to consider. Landry hints at what Abner Cohen has dubbed “the politics of ritual secrecy,” which describes the richly textured connection between ritual, politics, and power in many African cultures. Mary Nooter’s work on secrecy in African art offers a useful integration for Landry’s wonderful articulation on the *Egungun* masquerades, which he frames eloquently throughout his book. Nooter also explored secrecy in West African rituals as a trans-medial “master trope” which privileges abstraction over direct depictions, a “weapon of the weak” of sorts for empowering marginalized African actors. Even Charles Piot’s work on Kabre culture in Northern Togo has much to add to Landry’s analysis, regarding how ambiguity is worked out in African ritual systems.

Nonetheless, this book is a seminal tour de force on the growing literature dedicated to Vodún, and in the anthropology of religion. *Vodún: Secrecy and the Search for Divine Power* will not only be cited and read for years to come, but it also makes a fine companion reader for courses in globalization, comparative religion, anthropology of religion, ethnography, and any course in African and African Diaspora Studies more generally. I heartily recommend this book to all, for it is a much-needed and trailblazing model for how to conduct ethnographic research in twenty-first century Africa.

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For additional reading on this subject, the ASR recommends:

- Lang, Alison, Philippe LeMay-Boucher, and Charlemagne Codjo Tomavo. 2019. "Expenditures on Malevolent Magico-Religious Powers: Empirical Evidence from Benin." *African Studies Review* 62 (4): 154–80. doi:10.1017/asr.2018.136.
- Turner, Victor. 1964. "(40) On Religion and Ritual." *African Studies Review* 7 (4): 29–30. doi:10.1017/S0002020600041020.