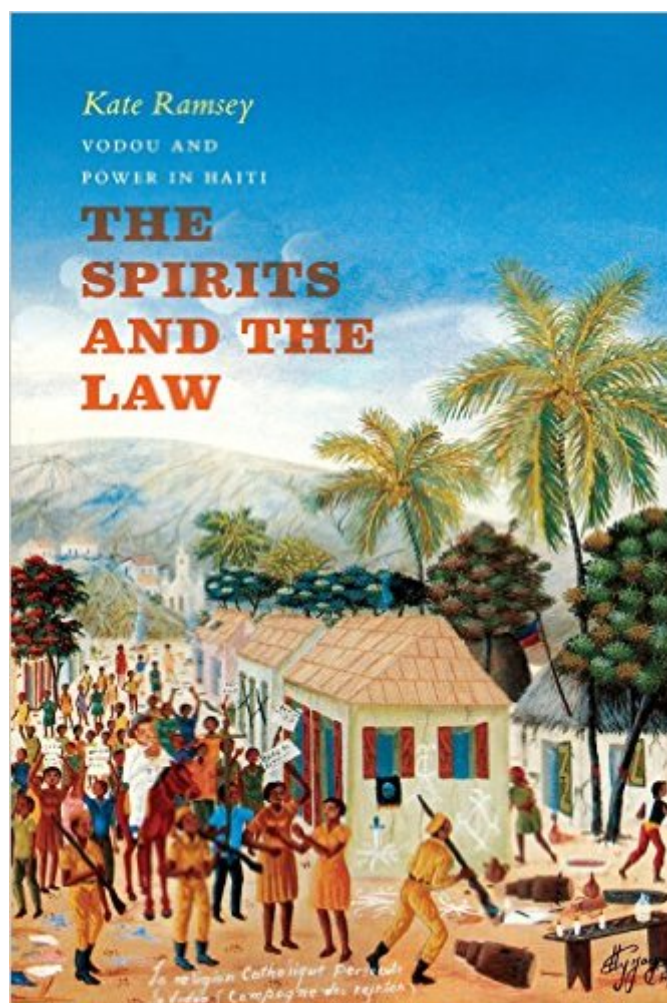


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# The Spirits And The Law: Vodou And Power In Haiti



## Synopsis

Vodou has often served as a scapegoat for Haiti's problems, from political upheavals to natural disasters. This tradition of scapegoating stretches back to the nation's founding and forms part of a contest over the legitimacy of the religion, both beyond and within Haiti's borders. *The Spirits and the Law* examines that vexed history, asking why, from 1835 to 1987, Haiti banned many popular ritual practices. To find out, Kate Ramsey begins with the Haitian Revolution and its aftermath. Fearful of an independent black nation inspiring similar revolts, the United States, France, and the rest of Europe ostracized Haiti. Successive Haitian governments, seeking to counter the image of Haiti as primitive as well as contain popular organization and leadership, outlawed "witchcraft" and, later, "superstitious practices." While not often strictly enforced, these laws were at times the basis for attacks on Vodou by the Haitian state, the Catholic Church, and occupying U.S. forces. Beyond such offensives, Ramsey argues that in prohibiting practices considered essential for maintaining relations with the spirits, anti-Vodou laws reinforced the political marginalization, social stigmatization, and economic exploitation of the Haitian majority. At the same time, she examines the ways communities across Haiti evaded, subverted, redirected, and shaped enforcement of the laws. Analyzing the long genealogy of anti-Vodou rhetoric, Ramsey thoroughly dissects claims that the religion has impeded Haiti's development.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

This is one of those rare books that is destined to be a crossover hit -- an academic study at once profoundly rigorous and so very well-written, with a passion and lyricism that's hard to find in

popular OR academic non-fiction these days, that will draw you into a fascinating culture from page one, and entangle you in the lives of the characters who people this book with the same intensity one imagines its author must have lent to this stunning feat of research. The writing and reporting are good enough that -- like a book on the oyster or the potato that becomes a best-seller, only more so due to the intrinsic importance of its topic -- it doesn't matter whether you thought you cared about Haiti enough to buy this book. Get a few pages in and you will. Ramsey's gifts as a writer make a sometimes painful journey at the same time a literary delight. Can't remember the last time I've felt this way about a book.

Ramsey's research for this book is wide-ranging and meticulous. As a scholar who is looking at Haitian life and institutions from outside, but who who does so with serious respect, she has illuminated relationships between deeply rooted religious beliefs and social orders and arrangements. This book is a must-read not only for scholars but for any journalist expecting to report on Haiti and for anyone traveling there -tourist, entrepreneur or aid provider, perhaps especially the latter.

Most studies of Vodou focus on either its ritual content, the way it has been denigrated by individuals within and outside of Haiti, or its folklorization. This book shows how all of these elements have interacted throughout the course of Haitian history to shape Haitian politics, the lives of religious practitioners, and the views of Haiti by outsiders. It also serves as a great legal history. If you read only one book about Haiti(an Vodou), I would recommend this instant classic.

I learned very much from this study of the interface between the legal and judicial apparatus of the state in Haiti, and Haitian religion and culture, at various points in its history. Kate Ramsey is the best kind of academic writer - thorough, lively, not too pedantic. Her sourcing is impeccable. She approaches the material with a critical (but not cynical) hand. She writes with passion on a subject (for me, Africana Religions) that many approach with a just little too much passion. I can't say enough about this book - an awesome interdisciplinary model!

Can't recommend a better book if you are interested in the dynamic between religion and the law.

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