

**Book Review: Vodun: Secrecy and the Search for Divine Power by
Timothy R. Landry**

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By Nuwan Herath¹

In this fascinating account of the West African religion Vodún, Timothy R Landry unravels the intricacies and role of secrecy in its growth as a globalized religion. His work traverses the terrains of spiritual tourism, initiation rituals, and expanding markets to showcase how the interaction of such elements contests the existing power structures. He examines the transnationalism of Vodún along with the belief and efficacy that contributed to its changing 'beliefscape' in the context of global capitalism. He provides a thorough analysis of how rural secrecy got commoditized in an enigmatic way to expand this West African religion in Benin. The paradoxical nature of secrecy is such that it became the propelling factor that took Vodún to the global stage rather than restricting its global outreach. Through his ethnographic account, Landry sheds light on this fascinating process as he navigates how cultural appropriation takes place with the mediating role of local agents in the transnationalization of Vodún. On the other hand, the transformative process that the foreign spiritual seekers undergo makes Vodún's secrets emerge as a global commodity, which enriches its international outreach. In exploring and explaining these intricacies, the author delves into previous scholarly work on West African religions and how Vodún has been resilient against the racial and postcolonial politics of West Africa.

Chapter one of Landry's work discusses the negotiated access to Vodún with some relevant political and economic aspects of spiritual tourism. Access to Vodún is an interaction that involves negotiation between the diviners and the spiritual seekers. In this respect, the author highlights the tension between the foreign spiritual seekers' intention of getting initiated and the locals' fears of misusing their cultural secrets. Both tourists and locals experience a sense of exploitation that stems from the histories of colonialism, racism, and the process of 'othering.' On the one hand, the tourists have a sense of getting financially exploited because of their common misconception that Africa is usually cheap.

In contrast, locals feel that the tourists seek access to their sacred knowledge to profit from it for minimal compensation. Landry believes this reflects the potential of spiritual tourism evolving into a form of neocolonialism. However, amidst these challenges, exchanges take place with compromises to share some secrecy while retaining some. Also, Vodún is becoming popular among Western spiritual tourists despite certain unintentional prejudices they may have about Vodún as a primitive African religion. Nevertheless, the author argues that this process contributes to the evolution of Vodún as a transnational belief system. Moreover, Landry argues that the successful spiritual seekers become part of the ritual community, becoming a type of diaspora linked with locals, not physically but ritually in a multinational marketplace where religious initiations, artifacts, and spirituality are exchanged.

Chapter two provides a detailed and interesting tapestry of Landry's experience with the spiritual landscape of Benin. His account of 'occult ontology' argues that becoming part of the spiritual community is not just an acquisition of knowledge but undergoing ontological changes

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by becoming agents of the global expansion of Vodún. The author takes the readers on an immersive journey of rituals through his personal experience in the symbolic space of the forest, sacrificial ceremonies, and ritual baths, marking the symbolic rebirth within the Vodún community as a diviner by describing how rituals generate moods, motivations, and a view of the world through symbols (Geertz 1973).

Further, the narrative takes us through a challenging experience that the author encountered as an outsider transgressing the sacred space of an Egúngún cult. This encounter, followed by punishment for him and his fellow violators, adds another layer of reflexivity and introspection to the chapter by showcasing how his peripheral presence as a foreigner, local politics, and the complexity of rituals have affected his ability to fully integrate into the community, despite his initiation to a similar cult. This echoes Mary Douglas's thesis that 'unclear is unclean' (Douglas 1966). Notably, the author becomes a testimony to his claim that foreigners lack 'habitus or embodied memory' in these ritual practices as he failed to prove that he was an initiate during the transgression.

The promotion of secrecy is a vital aspect of the commoditization of Vodún. In the third chapter, Landry shows how this is still the same in the transnational marketplace where ritual objects such as Egúngún masks get sold. These sacred items are no longer confined to the local space but are sold globally using technology such as money-transfer services and social media like Facebook. So, what is unique about this selling of Vodún paraphernalia with the use of e-commerce platforms? Firstly, it is the presence of Vodún practitioners online for spiritual services and artifacts. Secondly, the secrecy behind Vodún has become a marker of authenticity by adding an element of mystique to the spirituality-based businesses. It would be interesting to think more about how local practitioners handle the challenge of sharing their traditions with outsiders while preserving the esoteric nature of their spiritual traditions.

The fourth Chapter discusses the fluidity and negotiation of belief systems in the religious landscape of Benin, emphasizing understanding their contingent nature concerning their social context. Navigating through several cases such as individuals concealing religious identity to maintain the modern image and imitation into Vodún due to occult economy and spiritual tourism, the author argues that beliefs are contingent and shift through a socially negotiated process. Despite the concerns about the generalizability of this claim, the author's description of Vodún as an ever-expanding religion with diverse spirits like Tron and Gũ and room for individual expressions stand in agreement with the idea that African religions are not primitive, irrational but exceptionally ambiguous and cannot be discerned with conventional and Western categories of religion (Pritchard 1956). Moreover, the final Chapter reiterates that foreign participation in spiritual tourism exposes power disparities. In contrast, Beninese leverage and commoditization of the ritual secrecy of Vodún enhance its spiritual supremacy over its spiritual seekers.

As a part of globalization, spiritual tourism enhances the transnational spiritual economy where people interact in local settings and online to learn Vodún secrets. Urban centers in Benin and elsewhere are vital places for spiritual tourism that promote Vodún as a commodity with secrecy as its value addition. However, spiritual seekers may realize that secrecy lies in the process rather than as a commodity. What is discernible in this entire account is that there is always a gap between the spiritual seekers and spiritual holders. In the name of secrecy, this gap is being used to reverse the unequal power relationship between the foreign, western spiritual tourists and local Vodún diviners. As one could closely observe when reading this account, the very orientalist mythology of a mysterious East (Said 1978) has been used here in the course of accumulation in a global marketplace by the Beninese with their commoditization of Vodún secrecy. However, as argued by the author, this process helps the

globalization of Vodún with an increased demand for its items or paraphernalia for non-African initiates outside of Benin. The use of online marketplaces comes with such requirements. On the other hand, the modification to conventional Vodún rituals, such as bloodless rituals without sacrifices, shows how attempts were made to include the foreigners who disagree with such rituals.

Overall, Timothy R Landry's work offers a thought-provoking journey into the heart of Vodún, uncovering how the secrecy of Vodún gets connected to the global landscape through spiritual seekers. His insightful analysis makes this work an invaluable contribution to understanding the intricacies of Vodún and its dynamic presence in a globalized world.

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