

Frantz Fanon's Ambivalence towards Religion

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Abstract

Frantz Fanon has for more than fifty years been a celebrated theorist, intellectual and activist of the black struggle for recognition, to the degree that he has assumed the status of a “sacred cow” in African nationalist discourse. Without seeking to raise the significance of religion in Fanon's thinking, I use a critical, postcolonial literary reading of Fanon's texts to critique his conception of religion. Although he regarded Catholicism and Islam as orthodox religions that deprived the colonized of their dignity, he referred to them as the “great revealed religions.” Interestingly, Fanon's writing reflects a particular ambivalence towards indigenous religions, in the Caribbean and Africa, which he regarded as primitive, terrifying and pre-modern — always depriving the colonized of the gains of modernity. His reflections on indigenous religion are less considered and more visceral. He describes these traditions as irrational and more terrifying than the colonial settler. Ultimately his ambivalence towards religions leaves Fanon unable to expel colonial representations of the black as superstitious, primitive and child-like from his theories of transformation.

Introduction

Frantz Fanon, the French-Martinican psychiatrist, has been a much celebrated advocate of the black struggle for self-determination since the 1950s. Recent developments in postcolonial studies have seen a series of critical revision

of Fanon, including decisive contributions by subaltern, gender and queer scholars (Verges 1996; Sharpley-Whiting 1997). These critical revisions of anti-colonial voices have marked an exciting turn in postcolonial studies, which promises to produce more realistic and comprehensive historiographies.

The body of material on Frantz Fanon is immense but little has been written on religion in the context of his life and his work, with most scholars focusing on his Marxian humanism (Onwuanibe 1983; Gordon 1995; Gibson 1999; Pithouse 2010). Not unlike other scholars of a similar materialist orientation, Fanon regarded religion as essentially pre-modern and as such, he assumed that the onset of modernity marked the decline of religion. In his *The Wretched of the Earth* (1968) he asserts that religion is more terrifying than the settler. He argues that religion, whether through established faith communities or indigenous traditions would undermine the struggle against oppression.

Against this background I set out to interrogate why, despite his secular humanism, religion persisted in Fanon's works. Understandably, some scholars may challenge such an enterprise as being an attempt to "sacralize" Fanon's humanism. His popularity and the passionate following that his writing enjoyed are partly reflected in the claim by some African-American civil rights activists in the 1960s and 1970s that "every brother on a rooftop has a copy" of his famous text, *The Wretched of the Earth* (Macey 2000; Marshall and Johnston 2005).

Given the popularity of his writing among black nationalists and civil rights groups, I recognize it would be relatively easy to engage in such sacralizing of Fanon's aesthetic of transformation. However, sacralizing his esthetic of transformation and the "new man" is not the intention of this article. Likewise, this article does not attempt to raise the value of religion in the field of Fanonism. Fanon's contact with Catholicism in Martinique and Islam in Algeria, which he regarded as the great revealed religions, have led some scholars such as Michael Lackey (2002) and Marie-Aimee Helie-Lucas (1999) to suggest that there are more than mere hints of these religious traditions in Fanon's work. I argue that for Fanon, religion played a meaningful role in his esthetic of transformation and the emergence of the postcolonial subject (Perinbam 1982; Onwuanibe 1983; Abu Lughod 1998; Slisli 2008).

While this article considers the range of engagements that Fanon had with religious traditions in the Caribbean, France and Africa, it is not the aim of this article to prove the persistence of religion, nor is it to undermine Fanon's humanism by demonstrating the salience of religion in his anti-colonialism. Rather I will demonstrate the extent to which his ambivalent engagement with religion threatened to undermine and dislodge his esthetic of transformation and his idea of the new man.

Finally, this article interrogates the ways in which Fanon resolved and mediated the question of religion in his reflections on the black psyche and oppressed collectives. In his dismissal of world religions, and indigenous religions in particular, Fanon failed to recognize the significance of the sacred in cohering social collectivities and in the recovery of the black self. This narrow and ambivalent conception of religion continues to inhabit the postcolonial context thus undermining the state's ability to resolve the tensions between citizenship and subjectivity.

Engaging with Religion

Frantz Fanon, born and schooled in French colonial Martinique, is widely celebrated for his reflection on the lived experience of the black person during the 1900s. Despite his iconic status as an advocate of black self-assertion, his childhood, his later relocation to France for further education and his posting as a psychiatrist to Blida in Algeria were not uncharacteristic for the period (Macey 2000). It was quite common under French colonial policy for educated Martinicans to be posted for administrative and professional service in other French colonies such as was depicted in Rene Maran's *Batoula* (1921).

There was not much outstanding in the course of Fanon's life and education, though what set him apart was his revision of Hegel's master-slave dialectic for the colonial context where the black seeks recognition and the white colonizer seeks only black labour. However, this would only come after his move to Europe where he encountered widespread racism. From the time of his departure from Martinique in 1939 to the publication of *Black Skin, White Masks* in 1952, there are only a few hints of the passionate and militant activist we encounter in his later books. During a short stay in Martinique, after he returned from post war Europe, he was active in Aimé Césaire's communist party political campaign. Perhaps with the exception of this engagement in his mentor and former teacher's political campaign, the image that we get of Fanon during his earlier years is that of a dedicated young Catholic mulatto who wanted to serve France and defend its liberal ideals. In *Black Skin, White Masks* he recalls the carefree days of young men leisurely strolling about the plaza in Fort de France, displaying deportment, decorum and linguistic confirmation of their Frenchness — a social performance where the social and linguistic norms of French culture were re-enacted and reinforced (Fanon 1967).

Of course his idealistic notion of citizenship and equality was then deeply altered by his encounter of racism in Europe. It was at this point that he began to reflect on the social conditions of the colonized and critically thought about the mechanisms of alienation, and the practices of exclusion

that limited the responses of the colonized to their social conditions. He would soon become disillusioned with the traditional social institutions such as church and the limits of equality for a person of colour.

This is reflected in his conclusion to *The Wretched of the Earth*, “All the saints who turned the other cheek, who forgave those who trespassed against them, who, without flinching, were spat upon and insulted, are championed and shown as an example” (Fanon 1968: 67). Clearly Fanon regarded the church as an institution that essentially served to sanction the actions of the colonialists and to encourage compliance from the colonized. What is not clear is whether this analysis emerged from a critique of the role of religion in Martinique, or as a result of the prevailing appetite for secularization that characterized European scholarly work at the time.

Fanon also harboured a dis-ease about religions which he first encountered in Martinique and later in Africa. In *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967) he explicitly referred to indigenous religious practices as savagery, witchcraft and as cults. Where he had previously confidently rejected the church as collaborating with the colonialists, Fanon seems to have had a particular concern about what he regarded as primitive religion, while maintaining a cautious respect for the Islam and Judaism he encountered in Algeria. William Hart (2000: 107) suggested that these anxieties about native traditions did not spring so much from the tendency to consciously resist nativism, but were a reflection of how Fanon, like his peers, was customarily and habitually disposed towards it.

The issue of religion is largely absent in Fanon studies as well as in the field of postcolonial studies in general. Where the two fields intersect scholars are primarily concerned with Fanon’s theories of alienation, violence as therapeutic, transformation and black self-recovery (Perinbam 1982; Gordon 1995; Bhabha 1986 and 2004; Cherki 2006). In this article I assume a critical literary reading of Fanon’s texts as a way to excavate his engagements with religion to develop an archeology of religion. Without privileging religion as more, or particularly significant in the development of his theories, I will illustrate Fanon’s ambivalent orientation towards religion, and how this undermined the possibility of harnessing the transformative or cohering potential of religion among the colonized.

He appeared to have largely regarded ethnic or tribal traditions as a form of religious and political organization that possessed a vitality that cannot be easily dismissed, but that needs to be contained. Thus Fanon not only harboured a fear that religion would domesticate the revolutionaries, but he also revealed a deep anxiety about the disruptive potential of religion — thus his anxiety obscured his vision of religion’s potential to disrupt the colonialist establishment. As such he discusses ambivalent and at times conflicting notions of religions as sectarian, romantic, illusory and, at other as delusional and

primitive. This article explores the ways in which these varying conceptions of religion are deployed in Fanon's engagements with Christianity, Islam and indigenous religion in both the Caribbean and Africa.

Although influenced by the appeal of Aimé Césaire's and Leopold Senghor's brands of negritude, Fanon was deeply suspicious of, and ultimately, opposed to calls for the recovery of indigenous culture and traditions. He regarded such acts of recovery and celebration of a glorious African past, as no less stifling than the colonial approaches to local traditions (Fairchild 1994: 191-199). Although Fanon regarded cultural resources as an integral part of the struggle for liberation, because the activist throws "himself body and soul into the national struggle" he feared that a naïve recovery of all things indigenous would be disastrous. Fanon wrote that in "recalling the sacred unity of the struggle for liberation ... the people fall back into the past and become drunk on the remembrance" (1968: 168).

Christopher Miller in his *Theories of Africans: Francophone Literature and Anthropology in Africa* (1990) argued that "Fanon's weakness is seen to consist not in an underestimation of the *persistence* of the 'traditional' political practices and forms in the colonial era, but in contempt for tradition" (1990: 64). Similarly, in his critique of Fanon's humanism, Richard Onwuanibe (1983) suggested that in the development of his "revolutionary humanism" and the emergence of the "new man," Fanon was positively dismissive of indigenous religion and traditions (1983: 116).

In the past century the nature of religion and its place in society has indeed changed, but not always in the direction that scholars like Fanon would have expected. A variety of new developments in the social sciences make this an opportune moment to re-think the relationship between religion and modernity. Fanon's work serves as a critical lens through which we may read the changing fortunes of religion and its place in the postcolonial context.

There is No Room for You in God's House

While Fanon was critical of the church's collusion with colonial racism, his discussion of the matter reflects a somewhat taken-for-granted familiarity with the Catholic Church. This familiarity was evident from the number of anecdotes throughout *Black Skin White Masks* (1967), as well as *The Wretched of the Earth* (1968), which suggest more than just a passing knowledge of the Catholic Church.

Of course the racialized, anti-Christian rhetoric of the African and other anti-colonial nationalist movements had a significant influence in shaping how church was spoken of in the anti-colonial struggle. Fanon was no different in his description of the church as a white, European institution that

sanctioned oppressive practices. Fanon, in *The Wretched of the Earth*, spoke of the Christian religious institutions as “the church in the colonies... the white people’s church, the foreigner’s church. She does not call the native to God’s ways but to the ways of the white man, of the master, of the oppressor. And as we know, in this matter many are called but few chosen” (1968: 42).

By differentiating between indigenous religions as primitive and Catholicism and Islam as the great revealed religions, or “world religions,” Fanon appears to suggest that although we may distinguish between the primitive and modern cultures, religion is present in all cultures. Perhaps for Fanon religion was an unwarranted survival from the pre-modern that should have disappeared. For Fanon religion served the interests of the bourgeois and the colonizers and thus his materialist sensibilities did not permit him to think critically about why religion continued to prevail in the imagination of the colonized in resistance and after independence.

In *Black Skin, White Masks* Fanon’s references to religion reflected a taken-for-granted attitude towards Catholicism while references to Islam were articulated as encountering the unknown. Despite his privileging of Islam and Catholicism as the two great revealed religions, he was also opposed to colonial representations of the colonized as less than human which were drawn from the idea that they are without religion. Although it was not always clear what his views were about indigenous traditions, he did, at the outset of *Black Skin, White Masks*, critique the colonial tendency to couple blackness with spiritual backwardness. Fanon wrote that in France “I discovered my blackness, my ethnic characteristics; I was battered down by tom-toms, cannibalism, spiritual backwardness, fetishism, race defects, slave ships and above all *Y’a bon Banania*” (1968: 112).

Fanon regarded Catholicism as the State religion of France which at the time was intimately intertwined with the French assimilationist policies in the colonial context, unlike Islam, in the form of Sufism, which he felt was innately anti-colonial in character. Fanon argued that not only did religion produce a false consciousness of self, but that it also undermined the struggle for independence. He wrote that “it is the native Christians who are considered as conscious, objective enemies of national independence” (1968: 159).

Fanon suggested that if Negroes were impervious to the Christian teaching, it was not because they were not able to assimilate the teaching, but that what was required was that the Negro and the Arab should assume a new form. Fanon argued that by this logic the non-Europeans would first have had to understand and embrace the enlightenment values of rationality and modernity before they could meaningfully engage with what Fanon termed “the teaching of Christ” (Fanon 1967: 95).

In *Black Skin, White Masks* Fanon made references to the various ways in which the Catholic Church served the interests of the colonizer. One such story recalls the experience of a friend who, “being a Catholic,” joined a pilgrimage only to be told by a priest that he had no business there. Elsewhere he argued that “a belief in fatality removes all blame from the oppressor; the cause of all misfortunes and poverty is attributed to God” (1967: 42). Fanon was frustrated that the colonized believed that their psychic and social disintegration was ordained by God.

In chapter two of *Black Skins, White Masks* Fanon critiqued Mayotte Capécia’s autobiographical *I am a Martinican Woman* (1948) to articulate his view that the depiction of God and the angels as black was still quite uncommon in the Antilles. Of course Fanon’s primary objection is to Capécia’s politics of race, but he seems to accept the authority of the church in the popular imagination. Later in his life, particularly during his time in Algeria, he seemed to find Catholicism in the public arena particularly objectionable. What appeared to be a more tolerant view of religion during his early years, gave way to a more dogmatic and critical perspective of religion in the public domain as being sectarian, especially in relation to the anti-colonial revolution.

In *The Wretched of the Earth* his essay “Pitfalls of National Consciousness” Fanon reflected his anxiety about organized religion in his discussion of the local religious movements in Algeria when he remarked that they will “show a new vitality and will once more take up their rounds of excommunications” (Fanon 1968: 159). He viewed the revival of indigenous institutions as likely to distract the people from the struggle for national identity. In another essay, “On National Culture,” he labors the point of European complicity in continuing representations of the native as primitive and savage, yet in his discussion of indigenous religious traditions he himself refers to such traditions as superstition, and fanaticism in frenzied ritual, reflecting his view of indigenous religions as primitive and non-rational. He argued that European representations of the black person were developed out of a conception of humanness that equated being human with being rational, modern and secular, of which the black “other” was irrational, primitive and superstitious. Thus while he appeared critical of European conceptions of the native as savage, he was seduced by Europe’s rational modernism. I am not suggesting that these positions are necessarily mutually exclusive, simply that the convergence of the two concerns produced, in Fanon’s mind, an ambivalence towards religion. Although he sought to argue that religion was redundant, he also opposed the argument that presumed that the native, lacking religion, was more base and animal-like.

Fanon saw no significance for religion in the anti-colonial struggle, except perhaps through utilitarian use of certain symbols and rituals to deceive the

colonists, for example when Muslim women would use the *burqa* to hide and smuggle weapons. Since religion had no intrinsic value to the process of black self-recognition, Fanon could not imagine any place for religion in the postcolony.

Although Fanon considered Islam and Catholicism to be the “great revealed” or world religions, he would as easily condemn the Catholic Church for collaboration with French colonists as he would assert that it took an Algerian Jew to help him overcome his distrust of Muslims. Fanon employed an uncharacteristically explicit and narrow conception of religion that included Islam and Catholicism, but excluded the indigenous religion of the Caribbean and maraboutic cults associated with familial settlements among the rural poor in North Africa. So while he coupled Islam and Catholicism as two great world religions, he asserted that “inside a single nation, religion splits up the people into different spiritual communities” (Fanon 1968: 160). Fanon wrote that:

Totally unexpected events break out here and there. In regions where Catholicism or Protestantism predominates, we see the Moslem minorities flinging themselves with unaccustomed ardour into their devotions. The Islamic feast days are revived, and the Moslem religion defends itself inch by inch against the violent absolutism of the Catholic faiths. (1968: 160)

Cults of Chiefs and Holy Men

Fanon’s ambivalence about religion and especially his anxiety with the more visceral and mystical expressions of religion becomes especially evident when he encounters Islam during his deployment in Algeria. In his engagement with Muslim communities during this time, Fanon sought to draw a distinction between the formalism of Islam in urban centres and the more organic and mystical Islam that was more prevalent in rural areas. In *The Wretched of the Earth* (1968) Fanon referred specifically to the mystical worship of holy men or saints among rural Algerians as maraboutic cults.

His ambivalence regarding religion was evidently not limited to Catholicism or Christianity in general. He expressed similar anxieties and reservations about Islam, both in his encounters with Muslims in the French metropole and later in Algeria. Of his encounters with Muslim students during his student days in France, Fanon wrote that:

Up to that time I had never had such a conversation even with my best Moslem friends ... In this student committee,

relations between Moslems and ourselves were initially rather ambivalent. They wanted to give a political dimension to the committee's activities, while we felt that it should remain at a humanitarian level ... My Moslem comrades did not agree on this point, and we had a long discussion on the subject. They entirely approved of a profession of faith — patriotic, lyrical and passionate ... I was greatly shaken by his profession of faith. It was undoubtedly what I needed to be moved to think about my relationship to the Algerian nation. I still had too much anti-Arab feeling in me to be convinced by a Moslem Arab. It took the speech by an Algerian Jew to shake me. (1965a: 164-165)

Fanon was skeptical that these professions of faith were part of his Muslim and Jewish colleagues' public and political life, and like Richard Wright he was incredulous of the prevalence of religious belief among African delegates at the 1956 Congress of Black Writers and Artists. Fanon, however, did express to Ali Shari'ati, a fellow revolutionary who would become the main intellectual force behind the Islamic Revolution in Iran, his concerns that religious and sectarian spirits would become an obstacle to Third World unification. But he would later encourage Shari'ati to exploit the immense social and intellectual resources of Islam for the emancipation of the masses and the creation of a new and egalitarian society. "Breathe this spirit," he told Shari'ati in a letter from EI-Moujahid's office in Tunis, "into the body of the Muslim Orient" (Shari'ati 2004).

During his early days as a leading psychiatrist at Blida, he would reveal his limited knowledge of Algerian society. This included language barriers, since Fanon knew no Arabic or Berber, as well as a lack of familiarity with the rules of gender in North African society. For example, Algerian men at Blida, many from rural origins, responded poorly to the basket-weaving project which he ran at the psychiatric ward because it was regarded as an activity reserved in village life for women. These initial therapeutic interventions, including the fact that the workshop was convened in a converted mosque, exposed Fanon's lack of sensitivity to Islam. This would have been quite embarrassing for the young psychiatrist, but ultimately it was this disregard for religion that may have contributed to the failure of his initial attempts at psychiatric treatment at Blida (Brower 2008).

Fanon understood that the colonized were faced with a double negative. In the same manner that he found himself caught between the colonizers claim that the negro's lack of religion meant that he lacked humanity and his view that religion prevented the colonized from confronting their lived reality, Fanon recognized the predicament of the Algerian Muslim. He

understood that while he saw religion as inhibiting the recovery of the black or Arab self, in the context of Algeria, religion served as a site of resistance and agency against colonialists.

He understood that Algerian Muslims sought to stick to their traditions, but in the face of colonial claims of Islam as “sadistic and vampirish,” Algerian Muslims found themselves confronted with unveiling women and social mixing not ordinarily tolerated. Thus any move to dispel European representations of Islam put Algerians at risk of disrupting, and possibly corrupting, tradition. Although Verges (1996: 59) suggested that Fanon believed in the reconstitution of “social and cultural organization of Muslim society,” it is clear from Fanon’s essay, “On National Culture,” that he only saw religious constituencies as useful once they have been reformed. In *The Wretched of the Earth* Fanon wrote that:

The colonial system encourages chieftaincies and keeps alive the old Marabout confraternities. Violence is in action all inclusive and national. It follows that it is closely involved in the liquidation of regionalism and of tribalism. Thus the national parties show no pity at all toward the caids and the customary chiefs ... Their destruction is the preliminary to the unification of the people. (1968: 94)

Fanon saw the struggle for independence as always fought on two fronts: against colonialism, poverty and under-development; and also against “sterile” tradition. Fanon constantly referred to the fact that the indigenous poor were “ringed around by marabouts, witchdoctors and customary chieftans” (1968: 109) whose control over these groups was made all the more possible because of traditional hierarchies and as a result of the spiritual and religious aura associated with these roles and positions. Fanon (1965b: 34) described these institutions as archaic and inert, as “functioning under the oppressor’s supervision and patterned like a caricature of formerly sterile institutions.” He argued that the lack of self-determination and political integrity would ultimately produce a spiritual wasteland at the heart of the postcolonial nation (Fanon 1968: 148). In *A Dying Colonialism* (1965b) Fanon asserted that “old superstitions began to crumble. Witchcraft, maraboutism..., the belief in the djinn, and all these things seemed to be part of the very being of the Algerian, were swept away by the action and practice initiated by the revolution” (1965b: 143).

The statement revealed something of Fanon’s intolerance for indigenous and superstitious beliefs. Maraboutism was the practice of certain Islamic communities and in fact Ernest Gellner in *Muslim Society* (1981) argued that

the insistence on the pervasiveness of maraboutism does indeed contain a grave error: the cult of saints is not in the very least a sign of weakness of Islamic identification. The saint worship, on the contrary, is a means of achieving that very Muslim identification, on the part of the rustic population who cannot easily approach the faith through, the Book, and prefer that the Word should be flesh. (Gellner 1981: 158)

More Terrifying than the Settler

Fanon is anxious that traditional religion, often articulated as tribalism, should be viewed as a pre-modern belief system. In *The Wretched of the Earth* (1968) Fanon made a clear distinction between institutional religion — Catholicism and Islam — and the more visceral indigenous traditions. He viewed indigenous or native beliefs as premised on terrifying myths about malevolent supernatural spirits “which intervene every time a step is taken in the wrong direction, leopard-men, serpent-men, six-legged dogs, zombies ... which create around the native a world of prohibitions” so as to create magical superstructures that informed the social order (1968: 54-55).

His engagement with religion started in his Martinican childhood which was marked by the expulsion of indigenous tradition and the embracing of French Catholicism. Historically Martinique, like much of the Caribbean, had been characterised by the convergence of languages, cultural and religious practices from all around the Atlantic that gave birth to such traditions as Vodou, Condomble, Rastafi and Santeria. It is not surprising that for much of the 1900s we have witnessed the fetishization of Caribbean religions and cultural practices in media and literature (Breton 2008). Descriptions of the region as a fertile ground for the exotic resulted in the under-valuing of religion in the history and development of the Caribbean. The enduring impact of such persistent representations is evident from Hollywood's continuing depiction of followers of these traditions as either mindless zombies or malevolent practitioners of dark magic. In *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967: 126) Fanon conceived of, and depicted religious traditions in the Antilles in terms of magic and animism. However, despite the evident convergence of religion, language and cultural practices, Caribbean identities were shaped not only through adaptation of local practices to French Catholicism, but also significantly by the exclusion and denial of locally practiced diasporic religious traditions. Both Fanon and his mentor Aimé Césaire asserted that despite the history of slavery from Africa to the Caribbean, the late colonial period had been significantly defined by the expulsion and erasure of African heritage (Wilder 2004).

Fanon was seduced by the modernist and materialist tone of the European critiques of indigenous religions but he struggled to reconcile the colonial practice of denial and erasure of non-Western cultures and traditions with his vision of the “new man” and the “new national culture.” Fanon, like his African-American contemporary Richard Wright, was determined in his commitment to end colonial racism, but unlike Wright he never developed a tolerance for the esoteric and thus tended to view indigenous people’s religions as essentially anti-modern. Fanon, when writing of native religions in the Caribbean, defines religion as black magic, witches Sabbaths, heathen ceremonies and animism (1967: 126).

Thus we find that in Fanon’s Martinique the denial and exclusion of Creole or diasporic religion produced new sites of knowledge production around which racial identities were fashioned and contested. Macey (2000: 62) suggested that the denial of creole represented an erasure of the Martinican people’s Negro origins and as such Creole seemed to be the ignominious stigma of those origins. Fanon’s Antillean experience of native Caribbean religions coupled with his reading of French sociology and anthropology had an enduring effect on his conception of religion in the postcolony.

In *Black Skin, White Masks* Fanon reminisced about being home with his mother while she sang French love songs for him. Fanon followed it up immediately with a recollection of the strict policing of the social and meaning-making boundaries. He recalled that when he disobeyed his parents he was told not to act like a “nigger” and by extension, a “primitive savage” (1967: 191). In such a racially charged Martinique, this kind of labeling represented a casting out from the clan, and consequently the family. Thus at an early age every Martinican child learned that they should master the French language or risk being told by their mothers that they were *tibandes* or no better than the children who worked in the cane fields (Macey 2005). Finally, Hussein Bulhan (1985: 24) argued that through praise or punishment the young Martinican learned through song, language and folklore that not only was French culture preferable but it was reinforced at school and at home that creole culture was terrifying, more terrifying than the settler. It is clear from Fanon’s later texts that not only had he assumed a clear ideological distance from religion, but also that his anxieties about the place of religion in the black psyche remained unresolved.

In adulthood Fanon was particularly conflicted about indigenous traditions. His modernism did not permit him to imagine a legitimate place for autochthonous or mystical traditions in the postcolony. He wrote that “colonialism does not simply state the existence of tribes; it also reinforces it and separates them” (Fanon 1968: 94). He was at once opposed to negritude’s search for a mystical African past as well as to the colonialist promotion

of indigenous traditions. The “accounts of learned black men (doctors of theology who traveled to Mecca to discuss the Koran)” restored his faith in his African heritage (Fanon 1967: 99). He did, however, assert that the recovery of such histories made little difference to the material conditions of the colonized and the colonizer. For example in his reflections and critique of negritude, Fanon (1967: 148) wrote: “I concede that whatever proof there is of a once mighty Songhai civilization does not change the fact that the Songhais are today undernourished, illiterate and abandoned to the skies and water, with blank minds and glazed eyes.”

In France he found his blackness oppressive, “dense and undeniable” because despite assertions that “we no longer live in an age where people marveled at a black priest” or a physician or a teacher, blacks were still regarded as savages, morons and illiterates (1967: 169). Likewise, Fanon was acutely aware of how in the colonial frontier these representations also prevailed — although they exhibited differently, whether animist, primitive or savage.

In *Black Skin, White Masks* he cited Césaire who initially advanced a conception of Caribbean practices as partly a survival of African religions when he wrote: “But they abandon themselves, possessed, to the essence of all things, knowing nothing of the externals but possessed by the movement of things” (Césaire 1956: 77-8). Fanon observed that indigenous religion as essentially a bodily experience and his remarks on the subject were similar to the observations of Joseph Murphy, the author of *Santeria: African Spirits in America* (1998). Murphy wrote that at a *bembe* for Shango, the God of thunder:

The music seems to be coming from inside the people as if by their movement they are liberating the sound from within themselves. One woman in particular is carried by this energy, and others begin to channel theirs toward her. The dancing circle clears for her alone, and the drums focus directly on her. Her eyes are closed, and she is whirling and whirling. She bumps up against the human ring that encloses her and gently rebounds back to the circle's center ... she falls to the ground ... Oshun has arrived. (Murphy 1998: 96)

In *Black Skin, White Masks* Fanon went on to declare his anxiety and wrote of being “doubly alert,” in which he suggested that having come face to face with these practices he was appalled by the “obscenity of dances and of words” (1967: 126). While he understood the meaning of the clan ritual to bring invisible forces into action, whether to provide direction or to avert disaster, Fanon nonetheless described these manifestations and initiations

as “black magic! Orgies, Witches Sabbaths, heathen ceremonies” (1967: 126). Elsewhere he wrote:

One step further and you are completely possessed. In fact, these are actually-organized séance of possession and exorcism; they include vampirism, possession by djinns, by zombies, and by Legba, the famous god of the voodoo. This disintegration of the personality, this splitting and dissolution, all this fulfills a primordial function in the organism of the colonial world. (Fanon 1968: 45)

While it is hard to ascertain whether these ritual practices most offended Fanon’s Catholic sensibilities or his anti-racism, what is clear is that he viewed indigenous religions as irrational and pre-modern. Fanon was dismissive of indigenous religions as depriving blacks of the gains of modernity, and he asserted that the recovery of originality that was torn out of the black was only possible through the rational expulsion of the primitive mentality (Fanon 1967: 126), which leads him to assert, in *The Wretched of the Earth*, “the zombies are more terrifying than the settler” (Fanon 1968: 43).

An Unholy Ambivalence

Fanon asserted that the destruction or liquidation of these indigenous and religious institutions and practices are a prerequisite for the unification of the people because he believed that colonialism produced a simultaneous material and spiritual exploitation. Thus the process of national liberation and the accompanying black self-assertion reversed these conditions that would then make possible the transformation of the nation and the emergence of the “new man” (Fanon 1965a: 179).

However, Christopher Miller (1990: 35) viewed Fanon’s imposition of the “new national culture” on Algerian and African cultural traditions as an act of epistemic violence. Fanon regarded human life as isolated, and as having dignity and value without reference to the transcendent or the supernatural as advocated by indigenous religious communities. Thus he insisted on applying strictly humanist values to the struggle for recognition.

Jock McCulloch (1983: 158, 204) on the other hand advanced an argument that Fanon romanticized the peasant class so much that he had in fact produced a “peasant messianism” wherein the rural underclass became a kind of noble savage in the struggle against colonialism. Sekyi-Otu (1996: 40-44) concluded that in the final analysis Fanon was not ethnicist enough for Miller and not ethical enough for McCulloch. Nonetheless we can conclude

that Fanon was deeply aware that the representation of the black “other” constantly reconstructed black identity “out of a thousand details, anecdotes [and] stories” (Fanon 1967: 84).

Throughout *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967) he sought to systematically disprove and dispel the notion that black people are essentially primitive and prone to superstition, and in his essay “On National Culture” in *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon distanced himself from the essentialist notions of black universality and argued that “every culture is first and foremost national,” before going on to insist that without modernity the indigenous communities would once again “fall back into barbarism, degradation and bestiality” (1968: 174).

Fanon sought to differentiate between “the great revealed religions” of orthodox Catholicism and Islam on the one hand, and indigenous or mystical traditions on the other. And while he sought to generally reduce the impact and significance of religion in the public (intellectual and political) sphere, I have sought to illustrate that Fanon harboured a particular prejudice against indigenous and maraboutic religious traditions. What was striking about Fanon was that while throughout much of *The Wretched of the Earth* he cautioned against nationalist disregard for the indigenous, by suggesting that the exclusion and containment of indigenous religious practices would lead to religious and ethnic fragmentation within the nation, he also suggests that the practice of religion undermined the formation of national culture (Fanon 1968: 67).

I have argued that Fanon grew up, was educated, and as a young professional worked in societies defined not only by their pursuit of modernity and equality but also significantly by the expulsion of beliefs and practices that were regarded as primitive and threatening. In Martinique, Fanon was taught to privilege French language and custom, and to expel the creole language, religion and cultural practice. It is evident from *Black Skin, White Masks* that Fanon adopted the French colonial ideas of the native traditions as primitive, and by equating indigenous religion as the practices of witches’ black Sabbath, he appears to suggest that such beliefs and practices to be pre-modern, if not altogether anti-modern.

Often Fanon’s interaction with the idea of Africa or with Africans has been framed solely in terms of race. While he believed in the collective consciousness of the enslaved or alienated black, he found their religious practices curious and terrifying. In this article I have sought to separate these issues so as to expose the fact that Fanon’s ambivalence towards religion emerged not only out of a considered humanism, but that it was the result of a protracted domestic and social education dedicated to the expulsion of the creole or any hint of an African heritage.

Finally, his determination to dispel European representation of the black person as less than human – to justify their intervention in the region – is undermined when, in his desire to exorcise religion from the struggle for black self-recovery, he deploys the very same representation of the native as superstitious and primitive that he sought to expel from the public imagination.

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