Montgomery, Eric, and Christian Vannier


Eric Montgomery and Christian Vannier’s (2017) book is a careful, ethnographically rich, and historically grounded contribution to African Studies and especially to the understanding of Vodu, one of the world’s most well-known West African religious complexes.

In part i (‘Of Spirit, Slave, and Sea’) the authors provide a nuanced and critically important historical examination of the spread of *gorovodu*, a relative newcomer to the religion’s vast and ever-changing spirit pantheon. *Gorovodu* (literally spirit, god, or divinity of the kola nut) is ‘a spirit possession and medicinal order found among many cultural groups along the Bight of Benin and in the Volta region of Contemporary Ghana and Togo’ (10). From my experience, gorovodu has become increasingly popular due to its tremendous ability to fight off witchcraft, disease, and help individuals overcome the ill effects of poverty. Montgomery and Vannier offer readers a rare glimpse into the transnational movement of a spirit cult that has grown in popularity and social power over several decades.

While never explicitly argued, the care with which the authors take readers on this journey can help those scholars seeking to unpack the social complexities and entanglements that simultaneously support and hinder the expansion of spirit cults from region to region. While I wish Montgomery and Vannier had broadened their observations in this way, by carefully documenting gorovodu’s historical trajectory they have laid the groundwork for future Africanists—and especially historians—to examine similar themes in West Africa and beyond.

As significant as the first half of the book is, I believe that the book’s real value comes in parts ii (‘Ethnography of a Shrine’) and iii (‘Performance in Gorovodu Ceremony’), in which the authors deliver vivid evidence and analysis while contributing broadly to scholarship on religion in West Africa. At a time in anthropology where the arts of ethnographic writing and storytelling seem to be waning, the authors make use of both to present gorovodu as a spirit cult flourishing across West Africa and increasing in importance. In the ten years I have been working in Bénin, for example, I have watched as shrines for this cult have risen in number and prestige. In part this is because gorovodu has positioned itself to fight against witchcraft, heal the sick, and offer guidance to individuals struggling with problems that range from the small to the seemingly insurmountable.
In part ii Montgomery and Vannier detail and explain the multifaceted uses of a typical gorovodu shrine. In so doing, they chronicle the spirits’ ever-expanding reach and salience in the community. The authors begin the book by arguing that ‘throughout our ethnography ... we seek to elucidate four critical institutions of Gorovodu culture—possession, prayer, divination, and sacrifice’ (12). It is in the second half of the book that they truly deliver on this promise by examining the ‘Shrine as Church’ (157), ‘Shrine as Hospital’ (194), and ‘Shrine as Court’ (205). While I worry that these distinctions create and reinforce categories that are somewhat artificial, I concede that their choice has strong heuristic value, especially for those unfamiliar with African religions.

I had hoped that the authors would have been more linguistically careful by opting to use local words instead of overly Christian or colonial terms such as ‘church’, ‘congregation’, ‘prayer’, ‘worship’, and ‘fetish’. Even so, they do a wonderful job of problematizing some of these terms and in contextualizing the sorts of rituals that one may expect to encounter when visiting Vodu shrines. From divination and sacrifice to possession, gorovodu offers its devotees respite from life’s trials and tribulations. The authors demonstrate that shrines serve not only ostensibly religious purposes but a dizzying number of others as well, illustrating how difficult it is to determine what is specifically ‘religious’ about gorovodu given Vodu’s vast reach across social spheres. My work with practitioners of Vodún in Bénin corroborates Montgomery and Vannier’s understanding of Vodu in Togo. These religions are multisensorial, multivocal, and dynamic. Indeed, some have argued that these characteristics are the very reasons why religions such as Vodu and Vodún are so successful on the global stage (see Landry 2018, Rush 2013).

As effective as the authors are in presenting a powerful and evocative representation of Vodu, the book is not without its challenges. When I first picked it up I was excited to read a work focusing on a Vodu shrine (as the title suggests). I also assumed the authors would be engaging with new trends in anthropology by focusing especially on ontology and material religion. Perhaps these biases left me frustrated since the authors only tangentially engaged with such issues. As a result, the manuscript may have been more aptly titled ‘An Ethnography in a Vodu Shrine’. Despite this disappointment, the book left me pleased and inspired to revisit some of my own work that has focused on shrines in Bénin (Landry 2016).

If encouraging readers to think in different ways is a measure of success, then I give Montgomery and Vannier’s book five stars. This is a study of tremendous value to scholars of religions in the African Atlantic World that will resonate with historians and anthropologists alike. It is sophisticated enough