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**ABOUT**

The tragedy of the earthquake in Haiti continues to unfold with reports of over 100,000 deaths, some one million homeless and now countless orphans being stolen or abused. We continue to ask everyone in the Afropop community to contribute as generously as possible to relief organizations on the ground now.

Singer-songwriter and vodou priest Erol Josue **offers us a song** from his “Requiem for Haiti” 21 song cycle. In “Manyan Voude” Erol says “We have to accept the decision of the Almighty. Even though the loss is big we have to rebuild.” It’s powerful. Also on our blog is international superstar **Wyclef Jean, performing a song featuring rara carnival music** at the recent Hope-For-Haiti-Now telethon. Please



The below interview was done for the Afropop Worldwide Hip Deep program,  
(Just click the hi or lo stream link below the image on the page.)

In 2007, Afropop’s **Sean Barlow** visited **Elizabeth McAlister**—Liza to her friends-- at her home in Middletown Connecticut where she is a Professor in the Religion Department at Wesleyan University. Liza has focused her research and writing work on Haiti. She authored the acclaimed book, “*Rara!: Vodou, Power and Performance in Haiti and its Diaspora*” and has compiled two beautiful albums based on her field recordings—“*Angels in the Mirror—Vodou Music of Haiti*” (Ellipsis Arts) and “*Rhythms of Rapture: The Sacred Musics of Haitian Vodou*” (Smithsonian Folkways). She is currently researching a book on the relationship of Vodou to evangelical Christianity in Haiti. There is more information on Rara festivals on her learning website, <http://rara.wesleyan.edu/> and on her work, on her faculty web page

Liza co-produced the special Hip Deep edition of Afropop Worldwide, “The Music and Story of Haiti.” She had help from community scholar, Holly Nicolas. You can hear a podcast of the program on Afropop.org and as of late November, the entire one hour program on-demand streaming via Afropop.org.



Each market woman has her call for what she’s selling, and there are also walking market people selling stuff. So, you have to develop your own call to advertise what you’re selling at the moment. You hear the guy walking past your house, “zoranj si, zoranj si, zoranj si,” which means ‘sour oranges’. If you want your sour oranges, you go outside, make a deal with him, and bring them back into your house. Then you might hear sounds of bottles being tapped, and each bottle has a little bit of a different sound. And that’s the guy selling soda, and he’s tapping out a little “Dee-dee-di-doo, dee-dee-di-doo,” as he walks by. If you want to run outside and buy a Coca-cola or a 7-up, you hear his sound and you know that’s him. There’s one who walks by calling, “Chicklet, Allumette, Cigarette,” which means ‘gum, matches, and cigarettes.’ And each person has his or her own distinctive cry in each neighborhood. That tells people that they’re en route, and they’re open for business.

**SB: Liza, give us a sense of the big picture of Haitian history, and how music fits in.**

**LM: Haitians face a whole host of issues. You can see it in the history and you can see it coming out of the music. Haitians are facing the legacy of slavery and the fact that they fought a successful revolutionary war ending in 1804. They abolished slavery and emancipated the slaves. This wasn’t perfect, but you know, this is an important legacy for Haitians. So then they have issues of being in a post-colonial condition and of being a**



pariah in the hemisphere because there is almost a 60 year period when the US, France, and the Vatican refuse to recognize Haiti at all. They also have constant interference from the North. The U.S. is constantly interfering economically and then politically with various invasions. And race and racism become very salient here for Haitians. Because the U.S. is a majority white and Christian Anglo nation. It has operated with this kind of superiority imposing this superiority in a racist and imperialist way on Haiti, a majority African, Franco-oriented, and Black, former-French colony. All of this is addressed in music.



Haitians have also been really thoroughly militarized from the Independence War of their own, all throughout the U.S. military occupation from 1915-1934, and up to the present day where U.N. peacekeepers are still in Haiti. So we can see these themes of “What is the role of Vodou?” “What is the role of Africa?” “What is the role of the military?” And Haitians are also troubled by deep class divisions. This plays out through color, through language, through education and religion, and often through the music too.



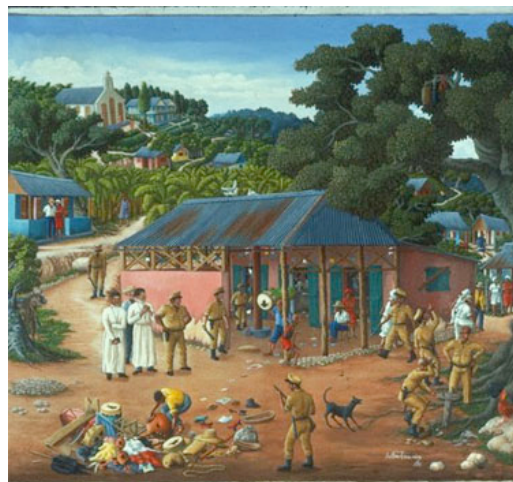
**S:** You talked about the tensions between Afro-Centric and Euro-centric class leagues and the issues of literacy and non-literacy. So, I guess the question is what music reflects here and now? How has music reflected all of these tensions and divides?

**L:** One thing you find running through Haitian music throughout its history is a focus on Haitian identity. Haitians are really keenly aware that they are a small nation, a particular people, with a very singular identity. So you have early songs about Haitians presidents rising and falling. You have songs recently about Creole identity. You have songs that are really talking about what it means to be Haitian, from the Hip-Hop point of view, about what it means to be Haitian-American in Miami, let's say, done in a Hip-Hop style. So, Haitians are always aware that they're in a transnational, global order; in a hemisphere full of other nations. And what does it mean that they had a revolution? What does it mean that they became independent only second to the U.S? What does it mean that they're still struggling for

a whole series of sovereignty issues? What does it mean that they hold an Afro-Creole religious worldview, that of Vodou? And what does it mean that they are in this particular position of long-standing independence, post-colonial, Black-majority nation?

**SB:** Correct me if I'm wrong, but in Haiti you have Vodou, Evangelical Protestant, and Catholic religions competing, or coexisting in peoples' hearts, souls and ears. How does music and culture reflect this competition?

**LM:** Vodou is the tradition of the vast majority of people and it grows up in Haiti under an overarching scheme of Roman-Catholic domination. There is a very interesting symbiotic relationship, which some describe as a syncretic relationship or a Creole-relationship. I like to think of this as a continuum. Vodou, and its thought, philosophy, world-view, personnel and temples are on one side of the continuum. The Roman-Catholic church with its priests, hierarchies, rites, and its thought are on the other side. They're two ends of the scale, but the fact of the matter is that most Haitian people spend their lives somewhere in the middle. They participate in both sets of overlapping thought and practice, sometimes going back and forth on the continuum throughout their lives. So they might go to Mass every Sunday, they might be baptized and confirmed and take first communion and marry in the church. They might also participate in their obligations to family spirits. Very typically, they might go to the Vodou priests or priestesses when they are sick, or when there is a big crisis in the family. So, scholars debate whether Vodou is a form of Catholicism, whether it's a form of Christianity, whether they're the same religion, whether they are entirely two different religions. I like to think of it, as I say, as this sort of overlapping continuum. Protestantism sets itself apart from this continuum. It critiques Roman Catholicism for being tied with Vodou, for its relationship with Vodou over the centuries. Protestantism says that “Vodou is unacceptable, it isn't Christian (nor is Roman Catholicism, for that matter) and that the real way is through Christ alone.” They really have, probably to a greater extent than Catholicism, set themselves apart from Vodou and, to a large extent, demonized Vodou as an outright source of evil that should be fought, resisted, and renounced. But Catholicism is not immune to this demonization; it has gone through its repression of Vodou, its periods of repression and periods of suppression.







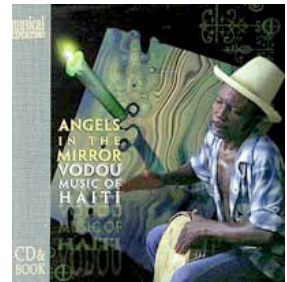
**SB:** *How are the musical manifestations of the Evangelicals and Vodou, different in when they celebrate and when they have their services?*

**LM:** Musically, the three religions have interesting features. Catholics, of course, have their own musical traditions that they practice in the Catholic Church. Occasionally they've experimented with bringing in elements of traditional African religions, such as bringing in the drums, especially in the 60's and 70's. The "Acculturated Mass" idea was that you incorporate indigenous culture music into the liturgy, but there were debates about that, such as, "What happens if you play music that people associate with the Vodou spirits? Will they be possessed in the Catholic church? Wouldn't this be bad?" These questions were always up for debate in Haiti. The Protestants have tended to eschew Vodou drums, and certainly Vodou melodies. They really have

tended to hold Vodou at arm's length, musically and they've tended to use European melodic songs and European instrumentation in church. Protestant bands are much more likely to have a bass and a guitar and a trap set. Although, that said, there is a Protestant sect in Haiti called L'Arme Selest, "The Celestial Army." Their music does borrow from Afro-Creole religious music and they're synchronizing with Vodou in interesting ways.

**SB:** *Tell us about the basic setup of drums and how they're used.*

**LM:** Port-au-Prince Vodou music is one of my favorite styles of music in the world. It's very complicated, very sophisticated. I find it very beautiful. It consists, essentially, of three drums. A maman drum, a segón drum (a second drum), and a boula, or baby drum, which can also be called kata. There are at least two sets of these drums because there are various branches or rites that own their own sets of drums. The maman drum is generally talking to the second drum; they have a conversation back and forth, throughout the rhythms. The baby drum is holding down the back-bone of the beat, while the segón and the maman are talking back and forth in this beautiful conversation, which will ultimately serve to communicate to the spirit world.



**SB:** *What is another song you especially like?*

**LM:** "Ogou O, Wa de Zanj." This is the name of a song, which literally means, "Ogou, king of the angels." Ogou is the spirit of warrior discipline. He's the iron-worker; the metal-worker; the blacksmith. Ogou is one of the Nago spirits. "Ogou O, Wa de Zanj," is a song that came into the head of a woman one day while she was possessed by Ogou so, really, Ogou wrote the song. It's sung here by her granddaughter, Mimerose Beaubrun, one of the lead singers in the group Boukman Eksperyans (a leading force in the racine roots music movent in the late '80's and 90's). The grandmother was possessed by Ogou in the market. The story goes that Mimerose's grandmother was a market woman who had other rivals in the market. She was in a little bit of a turf war with some other women over who would sell what in what location. Ogou came into her head and started singing this song which says "Ogou O, wa de zanj. . ." The song is sung in two voices. One voice says "Ogou, the spirit says it will eat me. Is this true?" And then the voice of Ogou comes in to respond and Ogou says, "This is not true. This is a lie. I'm the king, I will protect you. You're my child. No one can do you any harm." So, in this song, Ogou is assuring his child that, since he's there, the problem can be resolved. She shouldn't worry. This song was passed down in Mimerose Beaubrun's family and stands in their prayer services as a praise song for Ogou and as a reminder that he's protecting their

extended family.

**SB:** *Is there any kind of attempt to record Vodou and pass it on? Any kind of recorded forum, either informally or commercially?*

**LM:** Definitely. Vodou services that are done in someone's house or in someone's compound are recorded, typically by folks in the family. They might record it on cassette and send it to someone in Miami who is their extended family member. They might say "Look at the service that we held where the spirit came and gave



us a message,” and people in Miami might listen to them around the house as a way to be connected to back home. Additionally, people might record them and just listen to them as you would listen to an event that you think is important.

People also might record ceremonies to sell, hand-to-hand, in the market to Vodouists that are interested in Vodou music. Also, priests and priestesses with particularly strong voices have gone into the studio to record Vodou songs with studio quality and those are very popular in Haitian communities, in Haiti and in the diaspora as a form of music that is nice to listen to around the house. There's a Manbo Henriette who's very popular. There's Wawa and Azor; they're very popular. Before that there was Ti Roro. Frizner Augustin has recorded music that has been put on LP, cassette and CD. Studio Vodou recording is a subgenre of Haitian music that does get produced in the studio and enjoyed and consumed by Haitians all over Haitian social space.



**SB:** Can you give us an example of the various ones?

**LM:** Some of the most popular, or important spirits, these days, for example, would be Legba, who stands between the human and spirit world. Another would be Marasa, who are the sacred twins. Another is Ogou, who is the spirit of metal working and military discipline. Then you have Ezili Dantò, who's a spirit of hardworking, serious, feminine strength. You also have Ezili Freda, who's the coquette, the flirtatious, she is sexualized. She's thought to be wealthy, and interested in sort of bourgeois pursuits-- powdering her face and perfuming herself. You have a spirit called Kouzen, who's a farmer. And you have Agwe, who lives at the bottom of the sea, who's something like Neptune in the Greek system.

**S:** That's fascinating. Okay, you wrote a book about Rara. First, what is Rara, and give us a picture of a typical Rara at carnival time in Haiti.

**LM:** Rara is a parading, musical festival that is both political and religious. It typically happens right after Carnival ends continuing for all the six weeks of Lent, and climaxing on Easter week, and especially on Easter Sunday and Easter Monday.



There's some evidence in the historical record that in slavery times, a kind of predecessor of Rara was practiced. This may have been practiced by enslaved Africans during Easter week which they were supposedly given off under the Code Noir; under the rule of French king Louis XIV. It also may have been practiced on Sundays, which they were also given off. So, it could be a very, very old form that's evolved through time and is now very prevalent in Haiti. I really do think it's probably the largest and most popular form of grassroots music in Haiti because it's done all over the country and it's done by musical communities of extended families in small villages, by Vodou societies. It's something that everybody can participate in, from small children to older folks. During Rara, often a Vodou society will form a kind of subgroup within it sending out musicians, drummers, and a chorus of women called queens. It will have a very distinctive instrument, which you can almost not find anywhere else. This consists of bamboo that is cut to particular lengths in order to achieve particular tones. A short bamboo produces a very high tone and a long bamboo produces a very low tone. Each instrument player plays one note. So, if I'm playing "higher note" and you're playing "lower note," we get in a circle with a bunch of other musicians and we figure out a particular rhythm to a melody. Then we start walking through the countryside, collecting money from people that we entertain, and it's wonderful fun. Now, I say that it's political. This is because it's also possible to compose songs and the Rara will typically have a song-maker called a samba. He or she (usually it's a he), will compose songs, which could be praise songs for the spirits or they could be "singing the point"-- singing a political message to a local person, or to a national figure, or even an international figure. For a local example, if one year, over the course of the year, a neighbor stole my chicken, that year in the Rara, I could write a song that says, "When chickens are stolen, people get upset." Now, I haven't named you, and I haven't said "You stole my chicken," but if I walk by your house and I sing that song, you're going to know that I know that you stole my chicken. So Rara can be a very pointed way to get a political message across without directly naming what the situation is. This allows people to side-step out-and-out conflict.



For example, in 1992, one Rara band downtown in Port-au-Prince developed a song called "Pa Vle Zinglindo." Zinglindo, at that time, were kind of like left-over macoutes, members of Duvalier's secret service who were then called "Atache," or "Zinglindo," which means "piece of broken glass," or "shard of broken glass." The Zinglindo were





mercenaries, thugs, working for political leaders. They would terrorize neighborhoods and rob people. So the band was saying, “We don’t want Zinglindo coming into our neighborhoods to terrorize us and rob us,” and the song, which was very explicit, said “We don’t want Zinglindo.” When Aristide was overthrown, and the military leaders were using

the Zinglindo as sort of foot soldiers of their regime, the Rara went out, but it didn’t sing the song. It just played the melody. They couldn’t be accused of singing against anybody because they weren’t saying anything. But if you were a resident of that neighborhood, you knew exactly what that song was saying. It sent a point without even using lyrics, just using melody to deliver a political message.

**SB:** Any other Rara songs come to mind?

**LM:** One band, Sanba Yo, a pioneer in the Racine (roots pop music) movement made a very interesting recording of Rara in the studio. It’s called “Vaksine!” It was actually part of a public service announcement to vaccinate children. It says, “Mothers stand up, fathers stand up, vaccinate your children so they don’t get sick. Lawyers stand up, farmers stand up.” It called out all members of society. It was sort of interesting because it mixed high-status jobs with low-status jobs. You know, “Nurses stand up, Vodou priests stand up. Everyone, no matter who you are, you should vaccinate your kids.” It used the Rara bamboo sound as a sort of sonic tag. It became extremely popular, played on all the radio stations and all the little kids of Port-au-Prince could sing you that song that year.

Boukman Experyans is one of the bands that is going into the countryside and reemerging, bringing their experience into the roots movement. They produce a number of albums. The first one, “Vodou Adjae” has a great track on it called “Se Kreyòl Nou Ye.” This means, “We are Creole.” Now, this shouldn’t strike us now as being particularly controversial but their message was controversial. They were saying, “Look, we are a mixture of African, European, and Native American, and we are therefore Creole, and we should all embrace the Creole.” Along with that, they said, “We should all be speaking Kreyòl.” There’s also a whole verse in the song that says, “Why do Haitians prefer to speak Spanish? Why do Haitians prefer to speak French or English? We’re Creole, we should speak Kreyòl.” And it was doing a particular political maneuver about embracing multiple identities. Sort of a multiculturalism, if you will.



**SB:** What’s the state of the Racine music movement today in Haiti?

**LM:** You know, it’s interesting, because nowadays, Racine has been somewhat eclipsed by the international Hip Hop movement, which has arrived in Haiti. Now there are Haitians who go back and forth in a kind of transnational existence, with one foot in Haiti and one foot in the US. They are converting to Hip Hop and they’re bringing it home to Haiti. Shabba Ranks from Jamaica is huge in Haiti. So you have really interesting mixes now of Dancehall, Reggae, and Ragga (Raggamuffin) from Jamaica with Kreyòl

lyrics. You’ve got Hip Hop with Kreyòl lyrics. In general, people are mixing all the genres together. These songs are usually expressing urban young people and their concerns.

**SB:** Can you give us some examples of these?

**LM:** One of the earliest examples of Raga Hip Hop is King Posse. They’re a band of young guys in the early 90’s. They come out with a song called “Lokal.” It says “We all need a home base. King Posse should be your home base,” which means “King Posse is where you go for pleasure.” It’s got a very Jamaican influence music with some rap, and it’s got a nice tag, a nice refrain. Black Alex is the lead singer of King Posse. He’s now working a lot with Wyclef Jean. He’s got a very distinctive, interesting voice. He’s an interesting artist someone to watch out for.

It’s interesting to watch Wyclef because he keeps one foot in Haiti. Back in the day, he used to release tracks in Kreyòl into the Haitian radio market, and not release them in the U.S. He always maintained a Haiti connection while he was working on his success in the United



States. After he got to a certain level, with his album "Wyclef Presents the Carnival," he started releasing tracks in the U.S. in the Kreyòl language. Now Americans are used to hearing him speak Kreyòl. But he was always connected to Haiti and he's recorded a lot of Konpa songs too. He's recorded with Sweet Micky and a bunch of other Konpa musicians. He crosses over a whole lot of styles, musically. Politically, Wyclef is interesting because he's developed a foundation called the Yele Foundation that aims to work on a lot of initiatives in Haiti for education, for feeding children, orphanages, and social progress. He works on a number of levels. He's now an official U.N. Goodwill Ambassador; with diplomatic status. The other night he was with Bill Clinton at the Apollo, urging the youth to become more politically active. Wyclef Jean is the first Hip Hop artist to perform at Carnegie Hall, I think, and he's really proud of that. So he's an interesting figure.



**SB:** Could you just name one or two of Wyclef songs that really got Haitians?

**LM:** A lot of Wyclef's songs are about the Hip Hop life of living large and embodying a sort of masculinist prowess, but he also does wax political. He has a bittersweet and heartbreaking song about the town of Gonaïves, which was flooded, and huge mudslides ensued. Hundreds of people lost their lives and thousands of people were displaced. Wyclef recorded a Konpa song saying, "I am heartbroken over Gonaïves. What can we do to help our brothers and sisters there?"



**SB:** Give us a picture of a Konpa band.

**LM:** Okay. In Konpa, the smaller Konpa bands are usually sort of medium to fast tempo beats. There's an emphasis on electric guitars. There's usually a solo alto sax, a horn section and, unlike Dominican Merengue (which is in Spanish) the lyrics are all in Haitian Kreyòl.

**SB:** Why don't you introduce these guys?

**LM:** Part of what propels this style to national attention in Haiti was the fact that Nemours Jean-Baptiste's first recording is immediately answered by Weber Sicot, who developed an alternate style, Kadans Konpa. This develops into an intense rivalry, in which they shoot songs, critiquing one another. One comes out with one song and the other comes out with another. The song "Rit Comercial," or "Commercial Rhythm," is a classic Nemours Jean-Baptiste song. It talks about a mango tree bearing a lot of fruit and how people want to throw stones at the fruit and knock it down all the time. This is Nemours Jean-Baptiste saying to Weber Sicot, "Hey! You're always trying to throw stones at me, but you're never going to really knock me down. Plus I have plenty of fruit." It's an example of rivalry politics. It's found in a lot of other Black Atlantic forums, from Calypso to Hip Hop. It's a masculinist style of men making reputations for themselves by knocking down the other guy.

**SB:** Papa Doc Duvalier, who is he? How did he affect music?

**LM:** Duvalier is a nice country doctor and an ethnologist, or a culture student. He comes into elected office as President of Haiti in 1959 and everybody thinks he's great. He's got an agenda, he's a Noiriste. He believes that the Black majority and Black culture should be valorized. That's fine, until the mid-60's, when he becomes a ruthless dictator. He consolidates a secret police, separate from the army, called the Tonton Macoutes, which famously means, "boogeymen." They are his secret death squad; not-so-secret death squad, really. They dress in blue denim with a red kerchief around their throat and a particular kind of cap. They're given power as sort of regional sheriffs all over the country. So by the mid-60's to late-60's, the game in Haiti is to establish some sort of credible claim to association with Duvalier. That is where power flows from and that's what protects you. What happens musically during this time is that Duvalier develops a preference for Konpa. He likes Konpa. He even has a favorite group.



What also happens musically during this time is that Haitians leave Haiti, going to Montreal, New York, Boston. There, musicians write critical songs about Duvalier; naturally, from outside the country. From inside the country, it's trickier business. A lot of musicians just sort of go in for the pleasure of women and rum and music. So Konpa rides along a lot on benign lyrics, lyrics that are not "angaje," or politically engaged. But you do have interesting tracks, like the famous song by Tropicana, a famous band from the north. This tells the song of a guy who wants to go to a ball, or a dance, but he loses his wallet, so he has no money for the entry fee. He climbs over the wall and crashes the party (a party-crasher is called a "dasomann"). Some Macoutes are inside the party. They see him scaling the fence, they grab him, and they beat him up. So the song is the story of this guy's plight. All he wanted was to dance with a nice girl, have fun, and drink a little rum, and what he got was his body completely torn in half by the Tonton Macoutes. I look at that song, and I

say, "Well, on one hand, that's a critique of the Macoutes and the Macoute system. For entering illegally into a nightclub you're going to get beaten up?" But, on the other hand, that's what really happened. So it wasn't a controversial song. It was a song that, in some ways, spoke to the power of the Macoutes. The Macoutes probably kind of liked it! So this is the kind of song that can happen during the Duvalier era.



One thing you can find throughout Haitian music, in all of its history, are these tensions about power. One of the earliest recordings we have is a praise song for Nord Alexis, who's a president in 1905. It basically says, "Alexis is the big man. He'll leave power when he feels like it." Then, just recently, when Aristide was president, they recycled a song from Duvalier.

**SB:** He promoted Kreyòl culture and the use of the language and music even, didn't he?

**LM:** Aristide delivered many of his speeches in Kreyòl, rather than French. He was very aware that the vast majority of disenfranchised Haitians spoke Kreyòl, were affiliated with Vodou, and were disenfranchised politically. So he spoke to them in their language, which is one of the reasons why he was so enormously popular among the majority and so feared and despised by the business classes and the enfranchised political classes. But, he's tricky. People are still fighting over what he meant.

About our contributor

**Elizabeth McAlister** holds a BA in Anthropology from Vassar College; an MA in African American Studies and an MA in History from Yale University; and a PhD in American Studies from Yale. She is Associate Professor of Religion and Associate Prof in African American Studies and American Studies at Wesleyan University. Her area of expertise is Afro-Caribbean religious traditions, particularly Haitian Vodou. She is also interested in issues of transnationalism, religion and the social construction of race and ethnicity, as well as religion and gender and sexuality. At Wesleyan she teaches on these themes, as well as a course on "the millennium and end of times thought." She has also produced three albums of Afro-Caribbean sacred music. She loves music--playing it, hearing it, producing it and dancing to it.



### Featured Artists

Erol Josue

Read Banning Eyre's CD review of Régléman

Wyclef Jean

Boukman Experyans

Sweet Micky

Black Alex

### Other Links

Rara: Vodou, Power and Performance

<http://rara.wesleyan.edu/>



## ***Photo credits***

*Three lengths of bamboo walking. (Elizabeth McAlister)*

*Rara Djakout plays in Prospect Park, Brooklyn (Elizabeth McAlister)*

*Rara Painting (Elizabeth McAlister)*

*"This painting depicts the collaboration between the government, via the military, and the Catholic Church, in targeting Afro-Haitian traditional religion for suppression. These efforts were called the Anti-Superstition Campaigns.*

*Rara Kings and Queen (Elizabeth McAlister)*

*Two young Rara kings and a Queen behind them.*

*Wyclef Jean*

*Sweet Micky*

*Haiti Map*

*Haiti flag*



***Elizabeth McAlister***

*Interview by Sean Barlow*

*Middletown, CT, 2007*







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