

Getting Curious with Jonathan Van Ness & Dr. Eziaku Nwokocho

JVN [00:00:04] Welcome to Getting Curious. This is Jonathan Van Ness. It is Pride. We love Pride. It's one of our favorite things. And this Pride, we are celebrating queer culture because queer culture is so much more than the people that legislate against us. Queer culture is joy. It's spirituality, it's movement, it's art. It's literally everything that culture is. And honey, we are staying in the joy. For our latest installment, we're exploring gender, sex, and sexuality through the world of Haitian Vodou. Yes, queen! [Dr.] Eziaku Nwokocho is an assistant professor at the University of Miami. She is a leading scholar of Africana religions with expertise in the ethnographic study of Vodou in Haiti and the Haitian diaspora. Her new book *Vodou in Vogue: Fashioning Black Divinities in Haiti and the United States* is published by the University of North Carolina Press. Can I just say, Eziaku, that literally gave me the chills. Like that gave me the chills. How are you today?

EZIAKU NWOKOCHA [00:01:05] I'm doing fabulous. I'm doing fabulous. And you know, once you, like, go down my educational background being at Santa Barbara, Harvard, Penn, and Princeton, I was, like, just—I did that shit. And so I feel, you know, those moments where everything is colliding together and you feel like you're, you are where you need to be. I'm really, really excited and I'm like, I've been about that life, and now I'm like, it's about the time that we get to see, like, everything come to fruition. So, I'm really happy.

JVN [00:01:34] Now, I hate to go off script this early in the podcast, but we're, we have, I feel that we have this relationship already.

EZIAKU NWOKOCHA [00:01:42] It's, it's done.

JVN [00:01:44] And obviously this is audio, but we can see each other on video right now. And you came to play with these hoops this morning. You are giving us brightly colored hoops, y'all, if we could ever get a selfie of you in this moment that we can post on our, like, Insta stories or like our Instagram so that people can see. I need people to see these—and in fact, it's gotta be on the feed. I don't know what I'm talking about stories! Someone punch me in the face. But you, these hoops, so they're, cause they're giving me, like, red orange, like, neon yellow. Like, is there a story to these hoops? Like, what are these hoops?

EZIAKU NWOKOCHA [00:02:14] Well, these are, like, African print hoops and you know what I need to start doing now, figuring out who the people are and then, like, start name dropping them, because as a scholar of fashion studies, I actually now need to be, like—

JVN [00:01:23] Yes! I, I have a new appreciation for jewelry in the last, like, year. And your hoops are just, like, beautiful. So that's all we really have to go off script for at that moment. But—

EZIAKU NWOKOCHA [00:02:32] I like that.

JVN [00:02:33] So we set the stage a little at the beginning and I think exploring queer culture through the lens of Haitian Vodou, I'm obsessed. Zooming out a little bit for us to kind of understand what Haitian Vodou is in the first place so that we can explore anything through it. You write that, "comparing Haitian Vodou to non-African diasporic religions would quote, ultimately trap discussion inside old and irrelevant binaries." Slay! To start, can you share, so to start, can you share with us some basics on Haitian Vodou on its own terms?

EZIAKU NWOKOCHA [00:03:10] Yeah. Thank you so much for opening up the, the conversation. 'Cause I think that you're right, that we need to think about how we're naming this, this African diasporic religion that has made such a wonderful impact on not only the African diaspora, but then also the United States. We need to make sure we just name it that if it wasn't for the Haitian Revolution, part of the Louisiana Purchase and the land mass that the United States was able to grab, the United States benefited from the war. So these places have an intimate relationship, you know, through violence, through racism and colonialization that has a connection. So again, I'm, this is what I am really excited to talk about. But Haitian Vodou, and again, I'm saying Vodou, V-O-D-O-U, because it is a way that a number of scholars and practitioners have identified how to say the name of the religion that is closely related to Benin. And the fact that we, there's a separation between Vodou, V-O-D-O-U, versus Voodoo, V-O-O-D-O-O. And I wanna make sure I'm clear about this, that voodoo is still being practiced in New Orleans and there are some Haitian people that still say "voodoo" instead of "Vodou."

JVN [00:04:22] So basically, is it true that, like, voodoo and Vodou, are they, like, of the same, like, lineage, but, like, voodoo is just like a, it's, like, almost like a different, is it giving, like, Episcopal to, like, apost, like, Episcopal to—wait, no! We're not comparing! Can't compare, ah!

EZIAKU NWOKOCHA [00:04:37] You caught it, but, like, let's just think, let's just think about, like, either an umbrella or an octopus.

JVN [00:04:43] Yes, I love an octopus.

EZIAKU NWOKOCHA [00:04:44] There's a head. I love an octopus, too! So it's, like, and then it has many branches. And also during, back in the history for the island of Hispaniola when the Dominican Republic and Haiti were one. And then it got split and France took over Haiti and then Spain took over the DR. France and what we know as Louisiana, there was a lot of movement of enslaved Haitians from Haiti to New Orleans and Louisiana proper. So the actual religious tradition of Vodou and voodoo moved together. And then, you know, because it's New Orleans, and it's in the United States and it has its own new world, then it's changing in adapting to the, the land of the people from the Catholicism as well as the Indigenous people, like, of the Arawak and the Taino Indians and many American Indigenous people that are there.

JVN [00:05:32] How fucking fascinating, like, oftentimes on the pod, I really realize how fucking Midwestern I am and, like, how much I need to know more about, like, other people's histories, but just, like, how inside ourselves we kind of—like, 'cause I imagine, I didn't go to college, like, other than like one semester. So it's like these are things that I feel like I should know. Like when you said Hispaniola, I was like, "Yes, vaguely." But I really wanted to know, like, even just, like, the origin story and just, like, on a basic sixth grade level, which you, like—thank you! I didn't even have to ask. So it's, like, it was Hispaniola and then, like, Spain took over the Dominican. Yeah. Like. Dominican and then France took over Haiti. And then a lot of people are going between Louisiana and Haiti, which makes sense, 'cause, like, mm-hmm. Aren't they kind of relatively like above each other esq-que-like? So that's that. And so what does this history have to do with colonialism and diaspora? Like, laying in that way?

EZIAKU NWOKOCHA [00:06:31] Yeah. It has everything to do with colonialism and diaspora in terms of, we need to think about, and especially when we think about Haiti. And I'm just gonna do some basic African and Black history. We know that French, Britain, Germany, Spain, the Dutch, like, these are, these are major figures in white colonial powers taking over and separating Africa at large, the continent of Africa, and moving—forcefully moving and removing—Black people to the Caribbean and the United States. So when we think about the type of role that colonialism has played in terms of money, labor, wealth that's been accumulated, and the types of people that have been lost, the violence that's happened, the rape and genocide that's been happening with Black people as well as again, Indigenous Americans that also got impacted by colonialism as well. There's been a number of violence.

So when we think about Haiti proper, Haiti is comprised of a number of people coming from West and Central Africa. So what does that mean? That these people are coming from what we know today as Nigeria, the Congo, Angola, Benin, and that even within ethnicities of Nigeria, the Ibo people. That's where I'm from. I'm Ibo, and the Yoruba people. And so you have to think about these people from, coming from West to central Africa. Again, forcefully moved to Haiti, and they're having to work for, for nothing. And the average lifespan of, of an enslaved African is up to 33 years. So think about it, I'm over 33 and you are, like, you're, you're gone. So when we talk about the violence of, of colonialism, the amount of deaths that that was happening and the forceful movements, and, and again, when we think about France, have you, you've been to France before? You've been to France.

JVN [00:08:17] Mhmm. Yea, trois.

EZIAKU NWOKOCHA [00:08:17] Yeah, yeah, that's right. So I, every time I think about going to, yeah, going to France and London, I always think to myself about, like, the wealth that, that was amassed came from enslaved Africans. And I think about the United States, the wealth that was amassed, um, the amount of labor, these, even these institutions that I just named, from Harvard, Penn, and Princeton, these institutions have benefited from the marks of slavery. And so when we think about colonialism, The ways that Black people had to think to each

other and, and say to each other that, "We need to, like, come together. We need to think about how we practice our own African indigenous religions. And we need to find ways to say that we are more than just what you're, what you're providing for us. And we are humans and we should not be treated like this." And so the biggest thing that, that happened in Haiti, one of the biggest things that happened historically in Haiti was the Haitian Revolution. And that was from 1791 to 1804.

And that's what I was saying to you, like, this revolution really changed the, the ways, really pushed Western European powers to want to recognize that you cannot enslave Africans and African people, but it also, it caused the rupture of any other type of enslavement that was happening in the United States and other European and African colonies at the time. And so, I don't know if you know this, that Haiti's victory over France caused such a rift that when Haiti was, you know, moving towards its independence, a lot of the European powers around them did not recognize Haiti until they paid off their debts of the loss of land to France. And so what do we mean by that? We need to think about that. Like, there was another war that was happening that just recently happened, and that was the American Revolution. And the American Revolution, we need to think about the fact that the United States never had to pay any debts to the loss of land, the loss of tea to, to Britain. And so the fact that Haiti, as a new burgeoning country, has to pay some debts. It's, it's equivalent to almost a billion dollars.

JVN [00:10:17] Not to mention that everyone in Haiti was, like, a formerly enslaved person.

EZIAKU NWOKOCHA [00:10:23] Yeah, formerly enslaved or recently free or, like, there were maroons. So there was, like, different types of—

JVN [00:10:29] Marooned?

EZIAKU NWOKOCHA [00:10:23] A maroons? Yeah.

JVN [00:10:31] What's that mean? They got, like, stranded?

EZIAKU NWOKOCHA [00:10:33] So those are people that—no! So those are the people that, like, never were enslaved. They were, they were high in the mountains. They had their own world. And that was not a part of, like—

JVN [00:10:42] Oooh! But they were just, like, always in the mountains in Haiti?

EZIAKU NWOKOCHA [00:10:45] No, these are still Black and Indigenous people, but mostly Black people that, like, found ways to like not be a part of—

JVN [00:10:55] Oh, fierce.

EZIAKU NWOKOCHA [00:10:55] The, the enslavement that was happening. But yeah, they were, like, migrating and moving.

JVN [00:10:55] Were they, like, native Haitians?

EZIAKU NWOKOCHA [00:11:01] When we talk about in Native, those are the Arawaks. The Arawaks.

JVN [00:11:05] Interest!

EZIAKU NWOKOCHA [00:11:06] A-R-A-W-A-K-S. Yeah. Arawak Indians and the Taino Indians. Those are the main, main groups that were there. And because of colonialization, a number of them got wiped out or, you know, they were intermixing with enslaved Africans. And so imagine that the population is going down, like, by a third of its size because of war colonialization and violence and genocide, basically.

JVN [00:11:29] So basically it's, like, the US Revolution, like, happens, they don't really have to pay anything back to England. And then right after that, the Haitian Revolution happens from 1791 to 1804, which, I also, like, cornfield girl, didn't fucking know. So basically—like, so what was that revolution about? Like, that was, like, all the people, like, the people in Haiti were, like, “You're not gonna fucking enslave us anymore. The, the gig is up.”

EZIAKU NWOKOCHA [00:11:57] Yeah, “You're not gonna fucking enslave us anymore.” Yeah. “The gig is up. Like, this is not, this is not happening. And we are humans, we're people, and we have our own rights and our own freedoms. And, like, fuck this shit. Y'all gonna die.” And again, when I say this, I mean that very, like, war is bad. War is bloody. And freedom was never given to, to Black people. They had to literally fight and take, and take it.

JVN [00:12:19] So they kick France out.

EZIAKU NWOKOCHA [00:12:21] They push a lot of French people out, but there's still some that remained. But, like, a lot of them were, like, kicked out.

JVN [00:12:28] And that was in 1804?

EZIAKU NWOKOCHA [00:12:30] Yeah. But again, while they were still developing. Imagine, like, Haiti, Haiti is now, like, this small country—small *Black* country that just won a war. You fucked up these mighty European powers, like, France is huge. France is huge. And imagine, like, other European nations wouldn't even recognize Haiti as a nation. But think about it, would you recognize a nation if the work that you're doing, the way that you're amassing a mount of wealth is on the backs of other enslaved Africans? So, like, a number of, of people in the south and even the north were, like, really afraid about their revolution. Even in Latin America. Like it, it caused a major rupture. So it basically blockaded Haiti until Haiti started

paying. Debts to France, and this amount of debt that was paid didn't, like, end until, like, the eighties.

And so I wanna make sure that we're clear about that—like, when we think about when some people have said, “Oh, Haiti is, like, one of the poorest countries in the, in the Western hemisphere.” We need to think about how, what type of start that Haiti had to have, what type of wealth that they're able to amass as they're trying to build a new nation versus the United States. So again, when we think about Haiti and the United States, the relationship about how New Nations are formed really does dictate the ways that people are not paying attention to who's able to have a start, who's able to, like, fight for their rights and, and see themselves. And again, these are things that are racialized and that we're thinking about how people are seeing someone as a person as well.

JVN [00:14:08] So 1804 to the 1880s or the 1980s, Haiti is making payments to France?

EZIAKU NWOKOCHA [00:14:14] 1980s, yeah, it just—

JVN [00:14:15] Holy fuck. So for 180 years—Haiti is making payments to France. Which is much like how in Britain when they, like, outlawed the transatlantic slave trade in, like, 1808. It was the families who were holding enslaved people who got paid off by British taxpayers for quote, like, “freeing their people” or whatever. And that, that payment didn't end by British taxpayers until, like, 2015. And then obviously we know that in America, like, formerly enslaved people in America were never given reparations, like, so in no, in no culture, like, were formerly enslaved people ever given a chance. And Haiti was almost, like, or not almost, but, like, as a country, dealt with that collective injustice of the way that, like, the transatlantic slave trade happened, was cultivated wealth was amassed, and then it was just like, “Okay, sorry, we're Even Steven.” It's not even Steven.

EZIAKU NWOKOCHA [00:15:17] And I wanna make sure I say this, like, that the, the amount of wealth is up to, like, 30 billion of today's money. So I kept saying billions of dollars, but I'm like, I feel like I need to make sure I say the exact amount of money of today's dollars because again, we need to think about, like, who, like, how many recent new billionaires are. And then think about, like, if you're trying to develop a country and billions of your dollars are going to another country, not for your own development, not for your own new technology, new land, new ways of, like, you being industrious, you're just giving it away. Because you lost. Again, France are the biggest bullies. And again, the fact that the United States, Germany, and other, and other countries decided to block Haiti, you know, Haiti, until they started paying it off, like, we have to think about, like, basically Haiti was messing up their money.

And I wanna make sure I'm, I'm clear about, like, when they talk about payments, just real quick, because I think it's important to know that when I say, “Oh, they didn't finish paying it off, or they're still paying till the 1980s,” some people can argue, “Oh, you know, typically, maybe it was 1947 or 1950.” But one of my biggest arguments, and a number of Haitian

scholars have said this, and Haitian people have said this today, Haiti is still paying off and still having to be the feeder of, of European and now Chinese power. Banks are now in Haiti. Investments are now in Haiti. In the way that Haiti has been stripped, stripped of its minerals and gold, in the way that aid is coming in and looking, like, it, this is, this is like, this is not ended.

JVN [00:16:43] Well, especially when you think about, like, generational wealth and how, like—

EZIAKU NWOKOCHA [00:16:46] Go ahead! There it is!

JVN [00:16:47] You know, the Rockefellers, the Astors, like, all these people in the Gilded Age back in, like, the 1700s, 1800s, like, all those families are still pretty wealthy. And so if you would've had what is equivalent to today, \$30 billion and if even a quarter of that or a half of that had been invested and put in like the National Bank of Haiti and, you know, like, everything would've been very different. Like, it just—not having that nest egg and having that nest egg robbed for 180 years. And then, and then you think about, like, the natural disasters and, like, the earthquakes and, like, the other things that Haiti's been through. Like, they just, there wasn't even, like, a rainy day fund, like, 'cause it was literally robbed from them in a way that just other countries like, well so many other Western countries specifically, like, don't understand. Because they just did not have that experience on any sort of type of level. And then isn't a diaspora, like, a group of people with shared, like, culture that live in, like, kind of spread out? Like, they don't have to be in the same place but they have, like, they share—

EZIAKU NWOKOCHA [00:17:43] Yeah, exactly.

JVN [00:17:43] So basically, like, the Haitian diaspora, like, there's immigration and, like, movement all over. So, like, the Haitian diaspora is probably, like—

EZIAKU NWOKOCHA [00:17:50] It's huge. Let's go back to “the diaspora.” So yes, the, the diaspora, it's a Greek word. It means, like, the spreading of seeds. It's the, the dispersal of, of people. And so when we think about Haiti and the Haitian diaspora, especially when you think about, like, what's happening with a nation that has been robbed of, of its resources and, and wealth. There's been a number of people that have been moving and then also just moving in general. So I wanna make sure that I talk about some of the horrors, and then also people wanting to have new lives and new, new spaces. They know somebody, they, they fall in love. There's a number of Haitians in Cuba, Jamaica, Latin America. Like you said, the United States, Montreal, basically, wherever France has touched—France, of course—Haitian people are there. And then again, this is, this is about colonialization in general, about, like, where people are moving and colonial powers.

So, for me, as a scholar in this book that I bring up, I, I, you know, I focus on Manbo Marie Maude Evans, although that she's a center figure and I'm looking at her home in Jacmel, Haiti and Boston, Massachusetts, or Mattapan, which is the suburbs of, of Boston. I always say that

I'm a, I'm a scholar of *Haitian* studies. I'm a, I'm a scholar of African diasporic religions, and especially for Haiti. I've traveled to so many places that Haiti has touched. I went to Cuba, I've been to Montreal. I've seen ceremonies in New York, both Queens and Brooklyn. Of course, Miami and then even Northern California. I can't wait to see something that happens in Southern California. Of course, New Orleans. So I've seen the ways that the religion has expanded and has moved and morphed into different regions. And they all, like, the people are practicing in unique ways, but they're still a meta language of Vodou that is, that is still universal about, like, the deities, the ways that things are happening during rituals.

And so for, for my work, I've been to over 300 ceremonies and I'm so proud to say that, that I was able to see a lot of uniqueness and beauty of Haitian religion and Haitian culture. And so when we talk about the dispersal, we're talking about, like, how the religion has moved from one space to another, and then how sometimes there's, there's been change over time. And then, and most importantly for my, for my book is to think about the, the ways that individual practitioners—and when I say practitioners, I mean people who practice the religion—have found their uniqueness and innovation in, in religion. So again, that's where my work is, is, is really trying to highlight, is to think about modern and contemporary Vodou communities and to celebrate, but also tease out some of the, the uniqueness and nuances of the Vodou tradition.

JVN [00:20:25] Thank you for catching us up on getting us into, like, yeah, not even 101. It's, like, eighth grade level, like, cuz we're new to it. Outside of Haiti, like, where do people practice Haitian Vodou and even just kind of setting the stage for us on, like—

EZIAKU NWOKOCHA [00:20:39] Yeah, yeah. Like I said, I've been to so many ceremonies. I've been to a number of spaces. I've met so many beautiful people that have practiced Haitian Vodou. And I wanna make sure I say this, that it's not only Haitian people that are practicing Haitian Vodou, but I'm also thinking about the ways that the Black diaspora or the African diaspora, when I say this, I mean Black Americans, these are people that are formerly enslaved and from the United States. I'm thinking about people from the Caribbean—from Jamaica, the Bahamas. People coming from Europe. These are all, like, the central figures that are coming in. And then again, for my own self, I, I consider myself a participant observer. And that's my way of, like, moving into the space as an ethnographer. And now, like, I'm Nigerian and first generation Nigerian American. And so there's a way that I was even moving into the space that I found very unique about my own positionality.

JVN [00:21:30] So, like, a temple is where someone practices Hait—or, like, well you could maybe probably do it anywhere, but like, that's, like, where you, like, congregate to celebrate and, like, do, like, your thing.

EZIAKU NWOKOCHA [00:21:39] Yes. So this is where the uniqueness lies about Vodou temples. In Haiti, there's people that have like, like they actually make temples, like, actual temple, physical temple. Where they dress and, and have different rituals, and this is where

people get initiated. And so they have different rooms for people to get initiated in, to officiate that they are Vodou practitioners. And then there's also people that have, like, just a land—and where they have this major pole and then this opening, you put ritual objects around it, and that's where the spirits are supposed to come out into the world. Or they say, come from the ground, from, from the, the sky. Like, it's all coming from all these different spaces. Although I'm always focusing on, like, the spirits and the people and the audience. Also nature is involved. The elements of dirt, land, air, water, sea, like, all that, all that is in part of the Vodou tradition as well.

Sometimes the rooms are very, very small where it's someone's bedroom. So again, I've also been in ceremonies where it's just a few people because again, we're thinking about the ways that people are able to practice, who's able to join, who gets invited to these spaces, who feels safe practicing the religious tradition. So you'll, you'll see that there's, like, pictures and images of the divinities in different spaces. You'll see that there are, it's called drapo, like, flags that are posted around. It's very beautiful, it's very colorful. And you'll see different, like, ritual items that are there. I forgot to bring—I was gonna bring this, like, asson, so you could see, like, the sacred rattle. It's very beautiful and colorful and has a lot of beads.

So in the United States, Vodou temples can be in the basement. The reason why it's in the basement is that there's, there's a number of people that had to hide their, the religious traditions. And so people had to practice lower. So again, when you think about the drumming in the music, it's, like, the sound gets confined. And so that's the reason why they're not doing this in their backyard. And also when we think about the, the ways, in terms of structures, you need a pole, that's called the potomitan, that's, like, the center pillar. I've also been to places where they've rented out community centers or, like, bigger venues. Or now, like, we're seeing because of the ways that, you know, we're, we're now seeing this beautiful shift of religious openings and acceptance—

Again, there's still a lot of work to do, so I'm not, I'm not trying to have people go, “Oh my God, we're not, it's done. It's over!” No! There's different homes that still get people calling the cops on practitioners for drumming. And even in the United States, especially in New York where gentrification is happening, where rich white folks are moving to Black neighborhoods. And that's what's been happening in New York and even Miami and even in Boston as well. There's ways that people were playing music out loud and doing stuff that it's, it's now been seen as, like, a hindrance. Like, “Please stop turning on the music.” So you're, you're dealing with that as well.

JVN [00:24:25] No one yells at you guys for your stupid bells at noon! Your fucking church bells! Disturbs our shit!

EZIAKU NWOKOCHA [00:24:31] Right. No one says anything about that. No one says anything about that. But you hear a little drumming and then all of a sudden, like, “Yeah. Excuse me. 9-1-1, this is, like, so much noise.” [CROSSTALK] So, that's my voice.

JVN [00:24:43] No, but you're—I'm obsessed with your, I'm obsessed with that. You're, it's, it's so good.

EZIAKU NWOKOCHA [00:24:47] But I feel like that's my voice in regular, so I feel like I didn't even make a transition Cause I'm from California, so...

JVN [00:25:05] In, in the research that we've gotten to do on your work. You, you just can't even talk about your research without talking about, who I think you just mentioned, which is Man, Manbo Maude. Is that how I say?

EZIAKU NWOKOCHA [00:25:16] Yeah, Maude. Yeah. Yeah. Maude, and people say Maude. Yeah. Yeah.

JVN [00:25:18] Maude. Okay. Love. I wanna say how, yeah, we say it correct—forever!

EZIAKU NWOKOCHA [00:25:22] But people have said Maude before. So again, like, it's also French enunciation, pronunciation.

JVN [00:25:26] Ah, it's giving, like, Maude.

EZIAKU NWOKOCHA [00:25:28] Yeah. Oh, you got it. You got it.

JVN [00:25:30] Ah! But can you introduce us to her, like, what's her story? What is, like, unique about, like, her temples as compared to, like, other ones?

EZIAKU NWOKOCHA [00:25:37] I also wanna say that now I am the second person that's ever written on a Vodou practitioner. So again, when we talk about scholarship, this is, this is very, very new. Mama Lola was written by Karen McCarthy Brown. This is written I believe in 1991. This was one of the first books on a Vodou practitioner. And also putting on the map to think about the seriousness of, of Vodou religion and also African diasporic religions. I think that what makes my work unique is that I'm able to talk about another population in which Haitian people are at—Boston is the third largest population—and how they're living and how they're thriving in the United States. And then in case for Manbo Maude, she is moving in not only having a Vodou temple in Boston, but also in Jacmel, Haiti. And Jacmel is about two hours from the, from Port Au Prince, which is the capital. So I wanna make sure that we know the geographic spaces in which we're, which we're aligning in. So again, not only are we thinking about, like, what's happening in the United States and the temples in the United States, but also temples in, in Haiti as well.

But what is unique about Manbo Maude is that she's exploring the use of fashion. I said this before that my bigger argument is that people are coming in with their uniqueness into the religious tradition. Another practitioner who just, who recently passed away, his name was Max

Beauvoir. And he also was a biochemist. so he was, like, really cool with plants. Like, in his Vodou temple, he had over 2000 species of different plants and he knew all the species and which plant is gonna go for which divinity. So think about that, like, you're using your scientific understanding and the way that you're thinking about, like, plants and the chemistry behind it and the biology behind it, to think about how this is also related to the divine. So that's his uniqueness. So I could have done a project on, on that if I was very interested in that. But what's different about Manbo Maude is out of all the 300, like, over 300 ceremonies I've been to, there's a way that Manbo Maude has centered the role of fashion and, and, and clothing as a way to connect the divine with herself and the rest of the community.

So what do I mean by that? In an average Vodou ceremony, there is a way that the drumming, the singing, and the dancing can dictate the starts and stops of the ceremony. But you would just wear, like, the colors that are associated for the spirits. So we just finished having St. Patrick's Day. I'm gonna give an example. That's March 17th. We know that St. Patrick, you know, the lore is that he's a driver of, of snakes and, you know, there's also a meta lore about, like, "Was he the driver of snakes or the driver of Druid people." Okay. Okay, fine, but—during, I definitely, I was, like, "Did you know that?"

JVN [00:28:20] Well, I was just proud of myself because I was, like, I knew that there was something about snakes. Like, when you first started talking about St. Patrick's, I was, like, "snakes"! [CROSSTALK] Yay, so, like, keep going! Enough about those fucking Christians. We wanna know everything about fucking non-Eurocentric fucking traditions.

EZIAKU NWOKOCHA [00:28:36] Well, what's interesting about Haitian Vodou is that depending on who you talk to, Catholicism still has played a, a big role in Haitian Vodou. So there's two ways of thinking about the scholarship or the understanding of Vodou. Where Catholicism has—was relevant and present from the Congo people. And then they came with Catholicism and again, Christianity and, and religion has been in Africa for a long, long time.

JVN [00:28:59] That's interesting, though. Wait, standby. Not to go on a tangent, but, like, when did Christianity get to the Congo? Was that, like, like, it was more giving, like, like, those, like, Christian wars or something, like, in, like, the five hundreds or something? It wasn't, like—

EZIAKU NWOKOCHA [00:29:12] Yeah, yeah, exactly, exactly. If you think about, like, the way that religion has moved and people move, and this is the role of, like, Islam as well. Like, not only has it been from, like, the Middle East or, like, we think about, like, Christianity from, like, Northern, Northern Africa, like, Christianity and, and religion has been always moving. So, again, there's different arguments about, like, whether like it's been from Portuguese influence or whether that, like, you know, by people are, that have trade in that Christian, Christianity has been a part of the religious tradition. So forgive me for not, not knowing the exact dates but—

JVN [00:29:43] No, don't, don't worry. That was, I, I come up with such random fucking questions. Like, someone, like I, like, I—

EZIAKU NWOKOCHA [00:29:47] No, cause I think that what's, what you're asking, which is a good question, is like, there has been a saying that, you know, Christianity was, like, forced upon enslaved Africans, which it has. Which it has. Because again, a number of them, African indigenous, religious, have been wiped out and there's been a forceful—

JVN [00:30:02] Assimilation?

EZIAKU NWOKOCHA [00:30:04] Implication of, of—and assimilation, excellent. Of assimilation of the religious tradition to enslaved Africans, cuz again, people are practicing Islam, people are practicing African Indigenous religions.

JVN [00:30:15] And also the good word of mouth, like, that word of Jesus, honey. Like, there was like, 'cause everyone loves a good rumor cuz like it, but it got all the way down there, honey. Like, it kind of did it on its own. Some people were, like, feeling it in Africa, like, it wasn't foist upon them. Like, some were, like, "We're down with him and we love Mary."

EZIAKU NWOKOCHA [00:30:30] So, but, so there is that stream, but then there's also, they still got forced. [CROSSTALK] What we're learning, too, is that there is different narratives that have shaped and have impacted the religious experiences of Black folks. And so what I love about what you're asking is, like, just the timeline of that and, like, how, like, when people were coming or forcefully coming to, to the United States, they were still carrying their religious beliefs of also African indigenous religions, of Christianity, as well as Islam. But again, because of the French, the Catholicism was still a driving factor, people were forced to hide their indigenous religious practices into Catholicism. So when I was bringing up St. Patrick, there was another spirit, this African indigenous religionist that's coming from Benin. His name is Danbala.

And that's, like, the serpent god and serpent spirit, and also the spirit of wisdom. So, like, there's been, like, not the same in terms of, like, what has happened, but, like, similar maybe images, iconic images or, like, maybe what the saint has done that has had a connotation with it. So then you'll go to church and you know, and if you go to a Catholic church, you might see some Haitian people there. You might see people that are, like, "Oh, you know," you think they're going to church during say Patrick's Day for Catholicism? And they're, like, "No, I'm also thinking about Danbala. So the, the African indigenous religions as well as Catholicism is always playing hand in hand.

JVN [00:31:54] That makes so much sense.

EZIAKU NWOKOCHA [00:31:57] Right, right, right? So the reason why I'm bringing that background up is 'cause again, I wanted to think about the ways that in this time, in this

modern time, that these religious practices are still, are still happening. And again, for my work, I also talk about the ways that, like, the different types of cloth is also very important. So Danbala is seen as this old, regal spirit. And for his case, they're giving him lace. Beautiful satin. And so again, these colors of white and green, that is used to attract Danbala. And, like, in comparison, there's another spirit—I'm just giving this for context—there's another spirit named Azaka that is a spirit of, like, this farmer spirit and he's a spirit of agriculture, of wealth and abundance through, like, food. And you will not give Azaka lace. He's a farmer. So what are you gonna give him? Thinking about, like, what, what would you give a farmer?

JVN [00:32:51] Like, giving burlap or something? Like, a strong sack?

EZIAKU NWOKOCHA [00:32:54] Yeah, has a satchel, a makut, yeah. So again, clothing and the types of clothing and cloth is also very important. You're giving him cotton. You're giving him, like, plaid. There's also another meta-language with the, with the, with the clothing. And again, if I went to another ceremony in Brooklyn or Miami, people would come in with just wearing green and white already to honor the spirits, and the ceremony would've began and continued with just, just, like, you have the clothing, you have outfits, and then that's it. And again, like I said, the drumming, singing and dancing would dictate the starts and stops of the, of the ceremony. But for Manbo Maude, because she's not only a Vodou practitioner and, and a Vodou priestess. And again, part of her job is to think about healing and rituals to help aid healing for, like, people that are, that call on her for the community members and clients that ask her for aid, for, like, wealth or for healing. She's also a mental health clinician, so she got, she's got her degree from Leslie University and she's also a trained fashion designer. And she also has a degree in economics.

Sometimes there's a bigger, there's another argument about Haitian Vodou only being for poor, poor people. And again, remember, I, we started off talking about, like, the reasons why there's, there's a number of wealth disparities with, with Haiti. But again, what I was trying to showcase is that many people coming from different economic backgrounds and even educational backgrounds are prac—not only practicing, practicing Vodou, but they're thriving in Vodou. And when I say thriving, I'm, I'm meaning that there's been people that have, that are working class and upper middle class, they're politicians, nurses, doctors, lawyers, other professors. They're janitors, they're teachers. So again, there's, we're thinking about different types of class and world economics that the people are participating in. So for Manbo Maude, she's highly educated, and as a trained fashion designer, the spirits spoke to her in a way that she can use her fashion.

So remember, for Max Beauvoir, Max Beauvoir was using his, his trained biochemistry to think about planted species to honor the spirits. But for Manbo Maude, she's not gonna do biochemistry 'cause she's not a biochemist, you know? So she's using fashion. So she's had dreams where the spirits have told her to dress better. "And you're gonna, like, you're gonna look the part because you are Gwo Manbo," and that's, that's Haitian Creole for a "Big Manbo." "And you need to look good, don't you embarrass us." And so, so for Manbo

Maude, she a bad bitch. She'll, she'll come in and she'll start off with one outfit. She'll wear, like, just white. And then after that, there will be a change in the ceremony where there's, like, a pause, and then she'll come back and wear another dress.

And that dress is even more elaborate with greens, whites, yellows that, like, showcase, like, this even more glamorous. So for her, she's really centering the stage of thinking about the way that fashion can really illuminate beauty, glamor, and connection with the spirits, but also, There are other people that are wearing the same, same dresses that she's wearing. And then we're seeing a community change of clothing that has now, like, other people in the community, other practitioners wearing the same dress that adds even more glamor and beauty. So imagine, like, this is where, and I was seeing this 'cause Manbo Maude also has, like, YouTubes, on Facebook. I've watched how people, like, within also the audience have gotten so excited.

Because now she's been doing this for over 20 years now—30 years? 25 years? Yeah, almost up to 30 years now. And people have gotten so excited. They're like, I wonder what she's gonna do next. She doesn't tell people, like, she tells that the, the, the community members, like, she gets their sizes for their outfits, but she has her own seamstress. She has, like, a whole team, not only from the seamstress, but also people picking the fabric for her. That it's like a whole production. And what is important to know about Manbo Maude is that when we think about Louis Vuitton, when we think about, like, Nike, there's like these symbols that, you know, that these are, these are for Nike or McDonald's, like the Big M, the arch, you know. Manbo Maude has her own Vodou fashion that now has become the “Manbo Maude” line.

You know that when, even when I've traveled to Port Au Prince, other spaces, other voodoo ceremonies in Boston and in New York, I can actually see the Manbo Maude impact. I call it the “Manbo Maude effect.” So I, again, for my bigger argument, I'm really trying to see and showcase the, the *how*—Vodou is always changing, it's dynamic. It's never been, it's never been static. And what we can learn from African diasporic religions is how we're thinking about the ideas about. What is happening with gender, like, the fact that she's wearing dresses and then sometimes she wears, like, pants and suits. So that's very different from the standard, traditional way of doing, practicing Vodou. And then also what types of people—and racialized and sexualized people—are a part of the Vodou ceremonies. So this is what my work is doing, is trying to illuminate and is trying to capture the, the uniqueness of the religion, but then also thinking about these bigger arguments about how people are practicing and being inspired by the spirits.

JVN [00:38:13] You really, like, tore my lid off of interest and, like, I knew I was, like, interested, but now I'm, like... You've been listening to Getting Curious with me, Jonathan Van Ness. You can learn more about this week's guests and their area of expertise in the episode description of whatever you're listening to the show on. Our theme music is “Freak” by Quiñ - thanks to her for letting us use it. If you enjoyed our show, introduce a friend - show them how to subscribe. If you enjoyed our show, introduce a friend and show them how to subscribe.

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