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Abstract

Ever since the night of August 14, 1791 at Bwa Kayman, where Boukman Dutty declared war on the French during a Vodou ritual, Vodou has shown its dominance in the Haitian culture (Dominique 103). Along with being a religion practiced across the class boundaries of over six million Haitians, Vodou is a philosophy as well; a way of life for the majority of Haiti. Vodou “brings coherence where there might otherwise be chaos” (Michel 282-283). Used as a common ground for the intermixed Africans in the New World, Vodou has played a key role in the daily life of the Haitian population since its origination. Held anywhere from Haiti to Brooklyn, Vodou’s popularity still remains today. Evident in its history, characteristics, emphasis on service, worship of the lwas, communal expectations, and oral performance: Vodou is a vital aspect of Haitian life, past and present; Vodou is simply not just a religion. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Vodou, religion, Haiti, philosophy, ritual

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Comments

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Vodou Value in Haitian Life

Ever since the night of August 14, 1791 at Bwa Kayman, where Boukman Dutty declared war on the French during a Vodou ritual, Vodou has shown its dominance in the Haitian culture (Dominique 103). Along with being a religion practiced across the class boundaries of over six million Haitians, Vodou is a philosophy as well; a way of life for the majority of Haiti. Vodou “brings coherence where there might otherwise be chaos” (Michel 282-283). Used as a common ground for the intermixed Africans in the New World, Vodou has played a key role in the daily life of the Haitian population since its origination. Held anywhere from Haiti to Brooklyn, Vodou’s popularity still remains today. Evident in its history, characteristics, emphasis on service, worship of the lwas, communal expectations, and oral performance: Vodou is a vital aspect of Haitian life, past and present; Vodou is simply not just a religion.

Originally developed and practiced by slaves and freed blacks in Haiti, Vodou has been recognized as the country’s national religion since 1987 (Fleurant and Michel 345). After being forcibly removed from their land, culture, and families, Africans in the New World, having come from different ethnic and linguistic groups, could not recreate their life back home (Michel 281). This recreation was impossible especially due to the actions of the colonial powers. Through systematically intermixing the Africans, the colonial powers made it so that any recollection of language, lineage, and ties to the African’s motherland would be permanently lost (Fleurant and

Michel 326). In order to restitch their past, the Africans in the New World developed a new definition of family; a definition no longer based on blood or tribal appurtenance, but on a new religion—Vodou (Michel 281).

In an attempt to stop the practice of this new religion, colonial powers forbid slave gatherings and persistently imposed European values and Roman Catholicism upon the slave population. The imposition of European values, including Catholicism, and the restrictions against slave gatherings, forced the Africans to hide allegiance to their ancestral religions and stimulated them to develop innovative forms of worshipping African deities. Despite the Haitian's resistance of European values through hidden allegiance and innovative thinking, sociopolitical realities impelled the devotees to integrate Catholic elements, such as hymns, prayers, and the Gregorian calendar into Vodou cosmology. All in all, Catholic practices became an integral part of Vodou worship and exemplified the syncretic fusion of heterogeneous cultural and religious elements (Michel 281). In order to keep their religion of Vodou, Haitians had to adapt. Nowadays Vodou can be seen as a Haitian religion that blends West African spiritual traditions with Roman Catholic characteristics. This blending is highly apparent as Vodou synthesizes the belief in Haitian spirits, called lwa, with the Catholic saints—creating multiple identities for popular religious figures (Manuel 146). Vodou had become a syncretic religion. Through all of this blending, Vodou has come to be the religion of the greater part of the peasants and the urban proletariat of the Republic of Haiti. Sooner or later, these groups were joined by members of the Haitian elite and some foreign nationals (Michel and Bellegarde-Smith 29).

Worshipping of Haitian spirits, called lwa, is one of the most important aspects of Vodou. Vodouists refer to their religious beliefs and practices by the phrase “sévi lwa yo” Meaning

“serving the spirits,” this phrase signifies the importance of the lwa to the practice of Vodou. Lwa are brought into all affairs as devotees consistently seek their influence about virtually any aspect of their life (Michel and Bellegarde-Smith 30). Helpful in the everyday lives of their followers, any one lwa can have multiple emanations. These emanations depend on the composition of the sacred area for Vodou priests called a hounfour, on a particular ritual, on locale, or on their association with particular individuals or family groups (Dayan 2). Because lwa do not correlate with objects in the natural world nor with specific human activities, their identities are formed by their relation with each other and by their interaction with those they claim as their devotees (4). The importance of the lwa cannot be emphasized enough for they are the ones “who understand, experience, and manifest the poverty of a land whose history they bear-quite literally in their bones” (5).

Another important aspect of Vodou is possession. Along with music and dance, Vodou utilizes spirit possession in religious rituals (Manuel 146). When a Vodouist becomes possessed, they become the temporary vessel for the gods—and in this case, the lwa (Dayan 3). Although it is among the least understood aspects of the religion, “possession is the most vital manifestation of the reciprocity that marks the relationship between Vodou devotees and the spirits that guide them” (Olmos 119). Possession is a form of communication in the Vodou religion that cannot be overlooked.

Throughout its history, Vodou’s importance has been made evident. As noted above, slaves from over a hundred different ethnic groups came to Haiti and unfortunately, lacked a common language. This was not drastically horrible however, because despite their differences in cultures, they were able to unite through a recreated African religion; and that religion was Vodou. This regrouping around a common past and ideal has consistently played a role in

Haitian political life and has fueled a number of mass movements (Fleurant and Michel 326). See, not only did Vodou become the means for revitalization through ancestral traditions, but it also became the channel par excellence to organization and resistance (Michel 281). A prime example of Vodou's role in this resistance and organization is an event that took place on the 14th of April in 1791. That night, a Vodou ceremony was held in Bwa Cayman. Due to the events that took place at this ceremony—which included Boukman Dutty declaring war on the French plantation owners—Vodou took part in a fundamental step in the unification of the slave population of Saint Domingue. A week after this fundamental step was taken, the plantations (which were mainly sugarcane) were on fire, and the revolution against the French had started. This revolution would last for thirteen years, until 1804 when the Haitians gained independence (Dominique 103). Intricately connected to the twelve-year war of independence known as the Haitian Revolution (Olmos 103), Vodou can be clearly perceived as more than just rituals of a cult, temple, and family (Michel 282).

In order to discuss how Vodou is a way of life for Haitians and its other devotees, one must consider the negative connotations that come along with it; the connotations that the practices of such a religion defy. In 1958, the Swiss anthropologist Alfred Metraux predicted the demise of Vodou after conversing with a Haitian author by the name of Jacques Roumain, in the 1940s. Alfred Metraux's prediction was stated so: "I am not trying to justify it, and I know that it will disappear sooner or later." This reasoning was a result of the anti-superstitious persecution it aroused (Dominique 104). See, there is a widely shared perception that Vodou means sorcery and witchcraft. However, that perception could not be further from the truth (Michel 281). Vodou is not witchcraft or sorcery. Vodou is

a comprehensive system of knowledge that has nothing to do with simplistic and erroneous images such as sticking pins into dolls, putting a hex on an adversary, or turning innocents into zombies. It is an organized form of communal support that provides meaning to the human experience in relation to the natural and supernatural forces of the universe. (Fleurant and Michel 326)

Vodouists believe in creating harmony, in keeping a balance, in cultivating virtues and positive values (Fleurant and Michel 326). It is based on a conception of reality that includes life's goals, the forces that determine the fate of living things, balanced interpersonal relations, proper social organization, and practices that promote the welfare of the community of believers (Michel and Bellegarde-Smith 28). Vodou permeates all aspects of its devotees' existence from the highest forms of interactions with the divine to the most mundane and profane matters (30). These matters greatly concern the notion of service, communal expectations and mindset, oral performance, and lwa dependence.

The most fundamental premise of Vodou is the notion of service (Olmos 125). For a majority of Haitians, this service is for the Vodou spirits—the lwa (Olupona 164). For the practitioner and the devotee, serving the spirits permeates all areas of daily life (13). As previously noted, the followers of Vodou refer to their religious beliefs and practices by the phrase “sévi lwa yo,” which can be best translated as “serving the spirits.” By saying “I serve the spirits,” the devotees are revealing the nature of the religion; a nature in which there is prime importance in withdrawing the self and serving others. Vodou puts a high level of importance on this sense of community over the individual. It also reveals the spiritual connections that exist between living human beings, their ancestors, and their Gods (Michel and Bellegarde-Smith 30). These connections can be seen in Vodou ceremonies. Vodou ceremonies are places in which the

human and the divine meet to create interpretations and meanings. Connecting to the divine however is not restricted to these ceremonies as it is important to note that no human experience is beyond the influence of the lwa (Michel 282). On a daily basis, the religious life of those who serve the spirits revolves around a form of collective self-consciousness guided by their Lwa and several African-derived principles: the holistic conception of life, honor and respect for others, centrality of the community, human-centered orientation, beneficence, forgiveness, forbearance, and sense of justice (Michel and Bellegarde-Smith 30).

This concept of serving the spirits is not one-sided. 95% of Haitians believe in spirits, and although all may not be participants in Vodou, they are likely to turn to the lwas during periods of need and crisis (Michel 283). Vodou devotees ask of it what people have always asked of other religions: a basis for daily living, help in times of hardship, satisfaction of needs, remedy for ills, and hope (Michel and Bellegarde-Smith 28). People turn to the spirits to secure a better life for themselves and their community, to get advice on matters of importance for the members of their community, and to seek assistance in basically all practical matters of life in their current lifetime (28-34). Common blessings towards the human devotees extend from good health and well-being to marriage and love, to rain and plentiful harvest, to work and finances, and to children who grow up to be respectful to people and traditions (31). In return for these blessings of luck and protection for the family and the land, devotees offer small tangible gifts of food or other sacrifices to the lwa in support and appreciation—thus serving the spirits. Furthermore, such offerings strengthen the relationship between the living and the dead and allow the spirits to “exert their cosmic power partaking of the very realm of human existence” (34).

Along with the expectation of service, communal expectations are also prominent in the religion of Vodou. Vodou is a coherent and comprehensive system and worldview in which every person and everything is sacred and must be treated accordingly (Michel and Bellegarde-Smith 29). A person is meant to derive energy from interactions with others—all encounters with nature, with fellow humans, and with the spirits. These interactions create opportunities for understanding, growth, and healing (34). In Vodou, one must understand that everything in the world—whether a plant, animal, or mineral, shares essentially similar chemical, physical, and/or genetic properties (29). This communal sense, which starts with the extended family, is considered so highly valued because it prepares the individual for integration into the larger community. If one were to ignore family responsibilities, jeopardize communal interests, and/or neglect the lwa—all of which are serious moral offenses—they could be subject to disapproval from the community and may endanger the care and protection of the spirits. Moreover, morality in the absolute sense can never be placed above the well-being of the collectivity (31). To regulate this, customs and implicit rules are put in place. Such customs require virtues; virtues which include allegiance, love, faithfulness, respect, prayers, and material support. All of these virtues are determined by seniority, status, and final means. Virtues such as the ones previously listed are valued for their potential to help develop knowledge and wisdom among devotees of the Haitian religion and to support one another (31-32).

Predominantly determined by seniority, the virtues of extreme respect and honor are particularly accorded to the elders; “the bearers of knowledge and wisdom, the repository of experience.” Respecting, honoring, and serving the elders is inherent in the very essence of the religion. Failure to be virtuous—to provide for the elderly, to give them care, food, clothing, money; to show them love, appreciation, respect, and deference—may attract imbalance in the

life of the person who has departed from such traditional values of society. Failure can also lead to “bad luck” for the departed person and his or her family and can be morally destructive for the entire community (Michel and Bellegarde-Smith 31). All in all, these communal expectations strive to portray the characteristic of Vodou in which “everything has a soul, from the smallest grain of sand to the Cosmic being.” If one is to consider this statement, the dynamic force in teaching and the learning of all task ideas, materials and spiritual, can become a learning experience in itself (34).

Permeating the day-to-day life of its devotees, Vodou is also evident in oral performance. In Western societies, people write and read books to learn about past experiences and remember their ancestors. For those who serve the spirits, historical, social, and religious experiences are apprehended in a holistic manner, which then takes form in a lively and meaningful fashion, via oral performance through family memories, metaphoric images, proverbs, songs, tales, prayers, and various other spiritual and artistic expressions that represent an extremely rich repertory of practical wisdom. In this case, liveliness, relevance, and functionality takes precedence over truthfulness, clarity, and objectivity as dominant virtues (Michel and Bellegarde-Smith 32). Indigenous tales, stories, proverbs, songs, saying, and prayers all acquire this livelihood because they have a purpose and a meaning. See, what counts is not the songs, tales, or words themselves, but it is their significance and relevancy to people’s lives and immediate well-being (32-33). This significance and in turn, message behind the words, is thus portrayed through the use of images, metaphors, contradictions, irony, humor, and tone. With respect to Vodou, a rich tradition of teaching and learning has developed in Haiti, “encompassing uses of symbols, rituals, ceremonies, proverbs, wise sayings, memorizing, apprenticeship, storytelling, observation, practicing, singing, dramatizing, and sometimes writing” (33). Observing that 80%

of Haiti's population cannot read, oral performance remains a strong and ultimately necessary conveyor of the religion of Vodou (32). Without the continuance of such a tradition, Vodou would not be as dominant in Haitian society as it is today.

Vodouists, like members of other religions, participate in lives and rituals in which the overall belief is in creating harmony, in keeping balance, in cultivating virtues such as justice, beneficence, patience, forgiveness, benevolence, cooperation, in respecting others—especially elders, and in instilling desirable values in children. Similarities between other religions and Vodou however, are not as consistent. Unlike many of the monotheistic religions—Christianity, Islam, and Judaism—which are prescriptive and accompanied by a book of law, such as the Bible, Vodou is more complex. Only offering trends and thematic modalities of lived ethical life, Vodou offers few absolutes and generalities (Michel and Bellegarde-Smith 28). Vodou also does not have a concept of Eden or Heaven—which in turn, engages Vodouists throughout their only lifetime to strive for the primary goal of survival and healing for immediate well-being (29). Lastly, Vodou is not a system imposed from above. Instead, it is a democratic and functional religion; a religion embedded in the variations of its followers' daily existence, and in their struggle for survival (28). Despite an absence of a formal church and clergy, of written dogma, and other such publication or instructional material, the Vodou religion is omnipresent, pervasive, strong, and performs key functions in all aspects of Haiti's social and political life. It represents a key element of Haitian consciousness and provides moral coherence through common cosmological understandings (28).

Since its origination, Vodou continues to increase in popularity (Fleurant and Michel 326). This popularity can be seen in many groups and organizations in which it inspired. Boukman Eksperyans, Boukan Ginen, RAM, and the Fugees are musical groups that evolved

from the inspiration of Vodou. Vodou-inspired organizations include groups such as Zantray, Bode Nasyon, and the New Rada Community (326). Moreover, it is through these organizations, groups, and more, that allow Vodou communities to be seen throughout the world. In New York, Vodou communities consist of family-like networks connecting Haitians with one another (Olupona 164). This diaspora of Vodou, including anywhere from a temple in rural Haiti to the basement of an apartment building in Flatbush, Brooklyn, accurately conveys Vodou as a religion in which the paramount goal is to improve the living conditions on earth—and not just in one specific area (Manuel 147; Michel and Bellegarde-Smith 31).

Even outside of the organizations and groups listed above, Vodou's popularity can be further notably seen in the United States. As of today, the New Orleans grave of Marie Laveau, the “Vodou queen” who died in 1881, is currently one of the most visited gravesites in the United States. This fact shows that although Vodou may be complex and was not originally accepted by people other than the lower-class Haitians, its religious diaspora is still increasing in size as people throughout the world, such as those in the United States, are embracing it (Fleurant and Michel 328).

In order to understand history, politics, literature, art, institutions, social systems, and racial and cultural conflicts, one must grasp how religion has shaped the course of the human story over time in almost every culture and country (Michel 293). For Vodou, every dance, every song, every action is but a particle of the whole...Vodou not only embodies a set of spiritual concepts, it prescribes a way of life, a philosophy, and a code of ethics that regulate social behavior (Michel and Bellegarde-Smith 30). Every act and every word becomes a lesson; one can learn everywhere and at all times with Vodou (34). With Haitians, Vodou is life (30). It

is central to the Haitian experiences and as such cannot simply be abstracted from the day-to-day life of its followers (28).

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I affirm that I have upheld the highest principles of honesty and integrity in my academic work and have not witnessed a violation of the Honor Code.

