

# Haitian Vodou as a Means of Resiliency

Renee Morgan Goodridge

## Abstract

Haitian Vodou is a commonly misinterpreted religion, fraught with negative stereotypes and connotation perpetuated by western media. In spite of misplaced judgements, Vodou maintains its historical role as a means of resistance and resiliency for the Haitian people. Vodou has been shaped by historical events and has also influenced much of Haiti's history. This paper looks at three different contexts in which this has proven to be true. The idea of resiliency through African-based religions is not one to be regulated to history. Through the study of Vodou's role in the lives of Haitians in the past, it is possible to break down the preconceived notions western society continues to carry about "voodoo" and understand and appreciate its true value.

## Keywords

Haitian history — Religion — Vodou

Haitian Vodou, or what is more commonly known as "voodoo" has found a permanent place in North American popular culture, ranging from depictions of zombies to witch doctors, all focusing on the use of dark magic. This arises from a basic misunderstanding of religious practices in the Caribbean, especially African-based "syncretic" religions practiced by the enslaved peoples that have been passed down to modern society. These depictions are not representative of the Vodou religion, yet this characterization has cast a stereotype on the many people who practice African derived religions. Vodou has been shaped by historical events and has also influenced much of Haiti's history. This paper looks at three different contexts in which this has proven to be true. First is the colonial period; the Haitian Revolution is one of the first examples of Vodou calling Haitians to action. Second is the modern context in which Vodou is used to voice political struggles. Third is the context of the Haitian diaspora where Vodou continues to have a profound effect on its followers. Examining how Haitians have used Vodou in their interactions with the world throughout history reveals that Vodou is more than a religion but also a means of resistance and resiliency.

The representation of Haitian Vodou has been fraught with misinterpretations and frankly prejudiced stereotypes. From the first descriptions of the religion it was seen as witchcraft, black magic, or a cult; in many ways it was seen as the "antithesis of civilization" (Dubois, 2001, 92). Colonial powers regarded Vodou, and anything African in origin for that matter, as primitive or barbarian. Religion was a cornerstone of the colonizing mission starting in 1510 when Pope Nicholas V called the Christian European nations to bring the Christian faith to the "uncivilized" world (Pierre, 1977). This began the long history of misinterpreting and devaluing Vodou that continues to this day. It was not until the 1930s that the link between West African religions and Vodou was made by anthropologist Herskovits (Dubois, 2001). Yet academe

continued to view Vodou as mere superstitions. Scholars even have attempted to explain away spiritual possession as neurosis (Metraux, 1972). Throughout the century this idea of Vodou as cult was challenged, with Vodou coming to be understood as a complex religion. While the twentieth century saw a change in academia's perception of Vodou and a new understanding of the religion, western media held on to the inaccurate stereotypes reported by early observers of Vodou. These stereotypes were misinterpretations based on fear of the religion, such as zombism, cannibalism, and demonic possession (Bartkowski, 1998). A prime example of this is Wade Davis' *The Serpent and the Rainbow*, an anthropological study of zombis in Haiti, which was then inaccurately adapted as a horror film by the same name in the 1980s (Dubois, 2001). The following decade signalled a change in the conversation surrounding Vodou. Anthropologist Karen McCarthy Brown's work with Mama Lola, a Vodou priestess from Brooklyn, was fundamental to this change. With information about Vodou in America being brought forth by academics, the religion was further accepted by academics. The study of Vodou has stretched across many disciplines including the fields of history, anthropology, psychology, dance, and music; in doing so, the outside perception of Vodou has come closer to how practitioners of Vodou view their own religion.

When writing about Vodou's impact on resiliency of the Haitian people, it is important to understand its path from Africa to Haiti and finally to the diaspora and to clearly define what is meant by the term Vodou today. The Vodou religion originates in Africa. The Fon and Ewe people of Dahomey had religious practices collectively called Vodun, which was brought with the enslaved peoples to the Caribbean and took many different forms (Fandrich, 2007). By 1510, there were enslaved Africans on the island called Hispaniola. In 1697, the French took over half of the island, naming their colony St. Domingue (Mintz & Trouillot, 1995). Over the following

century, approximately 864,000 Africans were imported to St. Domingue, resulting in two thirds of the slave population being born in Africa (Mintz & Trouillot, 1995). At this point, the enslaved people, being from a variety of ethnic groups, practiced many different religious systems. The religions were strengthened by continual importation of enslaved people from Africa. The absence of a clerical hierarchy, creed, or religious text allowed for great regional variation of Vodou (Mintz & Trouillot, 1995).

The Haitian Revolution from 1791 to 1804 resulted in independence for the colony and discontinuation of the slave trade. Therefore, there was no longer an influx of Africans into the country, so as Vodou continued to evolve with the people, it grew further away from the religions it was based on. In the simplest terms, the mixing of people from different African ethnic groups, as well as the influence of Catholic colonial powers, led to a new creolized religion. From this point on until the early twentieth century, Vodou functioned as a “familial system of ancestral belief” with continued variation across the religion (Mintz & Trouillot, 1995, 127). In the 1940s, the state made an effort to support Haitian culture, Vodou in particular, through the creation of the Troupe Folklorique Nationale, a dance troupe. So-called “authentic” performances of Vodou were put on the stage to display Vodou to locals but also foreign visitors seeking an authentic, exotic experience. The commercial elements of the tourism industry threatened the preservation of the true form of Vodou (Ramsey, 1997). The Duvalier dictatorship brought Vodou into the public as Francois Duvalier used it to validate his dictatorship. Following the Duvalier period in 1986 was a reactionary period of oppression of Vodou when many practitioners and oungans (priests) were attacked and killed (Ramsey 2013). The oppression was not successful and had rather the opposite effect. Many advocacy organizations for the rights of Vodou practitioners, such as ZANTRAY, were created following this period. The resulting religion, known as Vodou today, is more unified than its regional beginnings and recognized as a valid religion rather than superstitions. The term “voodoo” is commonly used to refer to any African-based religion but has been associated with the negative representation of Vodou in the media (Fandrich, 2007). Therefore, the term has fallen out of use in favour of Vodou, as it is a more accurate transcription of the Creole term and it distances the true religion from western stereotypes<sup>1</sup>.

The history of Vodou as a means of resistance and resiliency is traced back to the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. Through religion, enslaved Africans were able to find the strength to survive their condition. The religion of the African enslaved people had to be reconstituted in the conditions of slavery where total dissolution of religion and culture were

preferred by European colonial powers. The conditions Africans were subjected to, including forced geographical resettlement, depopulation, and loss of civil rights, necessitated this evolution (Mintz & Trouillot, 1995). Where slaves were expected to conform, religion allowed them to rebel. Rather than adopting the Christian religion of their masters, certain aspects were adapted to fit into the African religious framework they refused to forget<sup>2</sup>. This in effect was a marronage of the mind; those who could not escape the plantations to live in maroon communities were able to escape their situation temporarily or influence their situation through interacting with the lwa, or spirits. Not only did Vodou give the enslaved people mental strength and courage to resist their oppressors; it also gave them an organization through which they could revolt. The stories of Makandal and Bois Caman exemplify this. Though the verity of all the details of these stories is unreliable, they reveal a theme connecting Vodou and resistance. Makandal is known as the “harbinger of revolution,” though his story takes place thirty years before the Revolution (Mintz & Trouillot, 1995, 136). He was an enslaved African who had escaped enslavement and possibly led a maroon band. A known Vodou practitioner and expert with poisons, his plan was to poison all the colonial powers in the colony by contaminating their water. There were many victims, and Makandal was arrested and burned at the stake in 1758 (Mintz & Trouillot, 1995). Vodou continued to be a common theme in the Haitian Revolution starting in 1791. It is said that the Revolution was planned at the ceremony at Bois Caiman in August of 1791. Boukman Dutty, a slave and possible Vodou oungan, called fellow slaves to action against their colonial masters. The details of the ceremony are unclear but what is clear is that a pig was sacrificed and an oath taken, and only days later the Revolution began (Mintz & Trouillot, 1995). In this event, oungans took leadership roles in resistance. Vodou provided the enslaved peoples with leaders they had trust in to lead them in their resistance, and ultimately the Revolution.

Vodou continues to play a significant role in Haitians’ resiliency. Being a ritual based religion, there are no sacred texts, so people find comfort and are able to voice their struggles through any of the many ritual practices of Vodou (Pierre, 1977). One of these is Rara, a festival celebrated throughout the whole period of Lent. Rara functions as a time to remember the Haitians’ ancestral history in Africa. They do this by visiting grave sites of their ancestors but also by performing certain rituals for the spirits of the ancestors and other lwa of the Vodou tradition. While a major part of Rara practices is recognizing their past, this cannot be separated from the sacred as the very way in which they remember their past is religious. McAlister (2003) points out yet another way in which Rara functions for the Haitian people: “Rara is not only about historical memory. More immediate is what Rara has to say about the present realities of Haiti’s disenfranchised poor majority” (p.4). Rara bands are politically engaged and

<sup>1</sup>It is important to note that Voodoo is the accepted term used to refer to Voodoo in New Orleans which was also brought by enslaved Africans to Louisiana and has similarities to Vodou but is different. Refer to Fandrich (2007), for more information on the distinction.

<sup>2</sup>For further information on “syncretism” and Catholic influences on Vodou, see Pierre (1977).

use their songs to criticize the government and the effect government policies have on the people. The songs used in Rara often have double meanings, seemingly unrelated to politics but understood by the Haitian people to be a critique of a common problem. One example is during the coup in Haiti in 1991 which put a military government in place until 1995, songs for Ogou (the warrior lwa) were understood as critiques of the military (McAlister, 2003). In the spring of 1993, the army formally banned Ogou songs in Rara, understanding the strength Vodou has in resistance and resiliency.

Vodou's importance during slavery was not lost after emancipation, but rather it continued to aid in resiliency of Haitian people even as they emigrated from Haiti to live in the diaspora. Karen Brown identifies similarities between the arrival of Haitian "boat people" in the United States and the arrival of enslaved Africans in Haiti. The trauma many children experienced when they fled Haiti and the Duvalier regime in the 1980s and found themselves in refugee facilities led them to turn to the lwa for help (Hagerdorn, 2001). Where oungans, elders, institutions, musical instruments, and altars were common in the home land of both Haitian children and enslaved Africans, they were absent in the new lands they found themselves in. In the absence of these, people only had themselves and the lwa, and had to turn inwards for help. Possessions were one way in which their religion could still be practiced without the traditional institutions they were used to. In both cases, possession performances became more common. Some of the Haitian boat children were possessed by their lwa and were counselled by Mama Lola, a local Vodou priestess (Hagerdorn, 2001). The similarities in coping mechanisms of Haitian boat people and enslaved Africans found by Karen McCarthy Brown illustrate how Vodou continues to be used by Haitians for resiliency and resistance.

It is clear that there are many ways in which Vodou contributes to the resiliency and resistance of the Haitian people, even to this day. From the Middle Passage to slavery on Hispaniola, enslaved Africans brought with them not only a religion but a survival mechanism. It has continued to be used for years, from enabling the Haitian Revolution, to voicing political commentary on contemporary issues, to handling struggles in the diaspora even on a personal level. The value of Vodou cannot be underestimated. This paper is necessary to look at Vodou in a way that is not often done as it continues to be stigmatized and associated with damaging stereotypes.

The idea of resiliency through African-based religions is not one to be regulated to history. Through the study of Vodou's role in the lives of Haitians in the past, it is possible to break down the preconceived notions western society continues to carry about 'voodoo' and understand and appreciate its true value.

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