

HIST/ANTH 442

The Power of Voodoo

Voodoo's Effect on the Haitian African Diaspora

(Name Removed)

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The Power of Voodoo: Voodoo's Effect on the Haitian African Diaspora

Voodoo has been a powerful force in the lives of innumerable people of African descent, both positively and negatively. One of its largest groups of adherents resides in Haiti, where Voodoo is practiced by close to 5 million people, which accounts for nearly half of the population. Voodoo is a true syncretism; a mix of the worship of the gods their West African ancestors observed from ancient times and the worship of the Catholic saints that the slaves were taught in the New World. Its strongest influence came from the West African kingdom of Dahomey, and the word "voodoo" itself means a "god, spirit, or sacred object" in the Dahomean language (Wilmeth, 28).

Voodoo brings a community together, remembering and honoring those that came before, but it also tends to create fear in outsiders who don't understand it. Its demise has been predicted many times due to the "anti-superstitious persecution it aroused," but it holds together against all the pressure against it and is practiced around the world to this day (Dominique, 104).



40. Voodoo ceremony in Montréal (Canada).

The positive effects of Voodoo on the diaspora are more obvious than the negative. When the anthropologist Katherine Dunham visited Haiti to observe the Haitian peoples' lives and practices, Voodoo provided her with "a sense of ethnic 'belonging' that she never possessed before (Gelder, 92)." Levi-Strauss thinks of Voodoo as a social force, and believes it has the ability to hold a society together. It is such a cohesive force, in fact, that it unified the slave population in Saint-Domingue and helped give them the courage and strength in numbers to begin the Haitian Revolution.

After the revolution, though, the newly freed Haitians had to live on an island that was desolate due to the destruction caused by the war. Because of this, the now all-black

population of Haiti had to retreat to the mountains for a time, and it was there they rediscovered who they were as a people, and that identity was strongly influenced by Voodoo (Dominique, 103).

At the heart of Voodoo is the *lakou*, a sort of family group that mixes natural and social forces and honors ancestors and lineages. In their worship, the *lakou* use a type of rattle called an *asson*, which is viewed as representing apprenticeship and the idea of creating unity while still respecting people for their differences (Dominique, 103). The overarching focus of Voodoo is a focus on the community as family and on honoring the ancestors and the Voodoo gods, or Vodou, who are often the spirits of deceased slaves themselves (Rosenthal, 774). These *lakous* were often the glue that held a society together. This was demonstrated in the early 20th century, when unethical Haitian leaders had broken down many *lakous* and other important social structures. Dominique believes that the lack of the *lakous'* unifying presence made foreign occupations such as the U.S. occupation of Haiti from 1915 through 1934 all the easier to accomplish (Dominique, 103).



41. Asson, Voodoo ritual object.

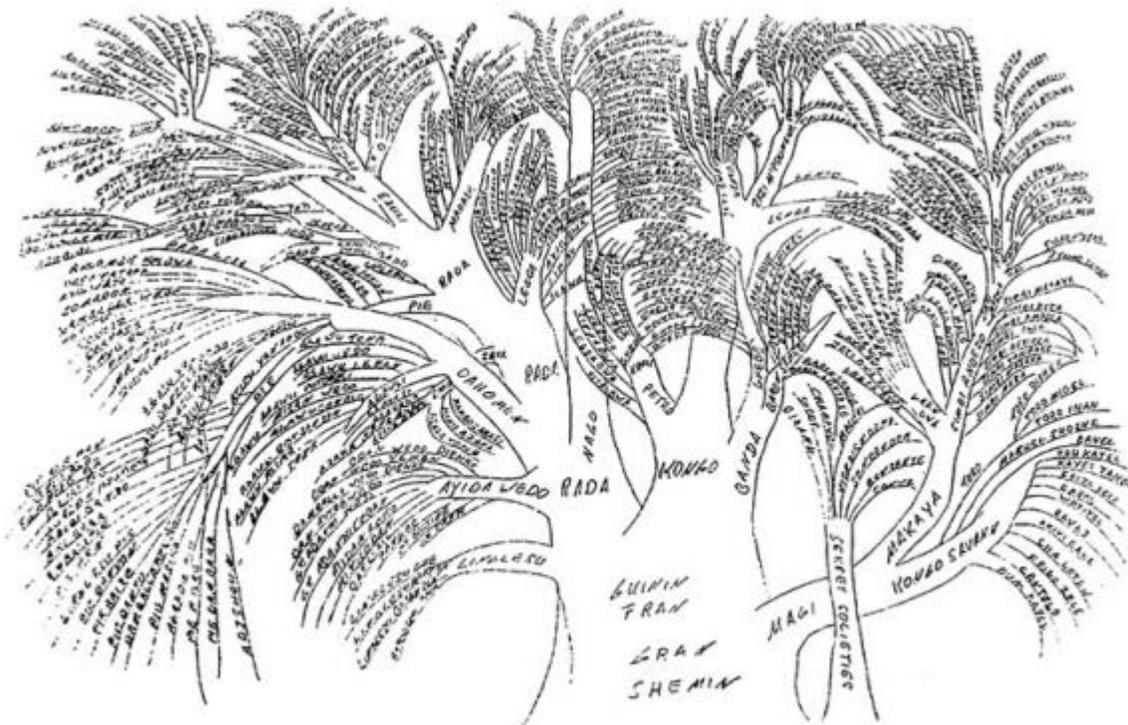
Voodoo is also beneficial in that it puts women in leadership roles, and has done so hundreds of years before there was ever such a concept as “women’s rights”. Marie Laveau, one of the most famous Voodoo practitioners ever to have lived, held a great deal of power in her community and is still celebrated every year at Mardi Gras in New Orleans. In a time when women, and especially women of color, had no power, Marie was nevertheless able to “transform” herself into a “theatrical and flamboyant ... seer, spell weaver, and voodoo priestess (Rhodes).” While Laveau may not have been Haitian, she does demonstrate the kind of power and social influence that female leaders hold in the practice of Voodoo worldwide.

While Voodoo is a powerful positive force in the lives of millions of Haitians, its negative effects on the people of Haiti are serious and far reaching. Voodoo ceremonies tend to be theatrical, larger-than-life experiences, which enchants outsiders but also has a tendency to frighten.

An aspect of the Voodoo ceremony that never failed to leave an impression on outsiders was the possession by various gods and ancestors. Only full members of the *lakou* were allowed to participate in possession ceremonies, regardless of whether or not they were actually able to reach a trance-like state. Traditionally, those who pretended to be possessed and put on a good show were just as respected as those who actually reached the state of a “true trance.” If someone outside of the *lakou* were to go into a state of possession it would not only be bad manners, but they would be removed from the ceremony due to their show of “spiritual weakness (Wilmeth, 29).” These ceremonies were overwhelming and dramatic, and any

observer or participant could become completely immersed in the drama played out by the *lakou*.

The theatricality of these ceremonies was undeniable. Each god had its own costume and demeanor. To channel the water god Agwe, for example, it was required that the human vessel be wearing a naval uniform, and once they were possessed the *lakou* must salute him with gunpowder. Some gods spoke one language better than another or had strange accents, and “Papa” Legba, a kindly spirit that bridges the gap between gods and men, would always be portrayed as an old man with a pipe and haversack (Wilmeth, 30).



42. Tree representation of the Voodoo deities (“lwa”) and their relationships.

Even seasoned anthropologists have been wrapped up the mystery and theatricality of Voodoo to the point that they forget that they were present merely to be observers. Because of this, and because of Voodoo’s sense of “otherness,” it tends to be sensationalized in popular

literature and media, and occasionally in scholarly writings by those anthropologists who become too immersed in their subject of study.

One such author, William Seabrook, wrote a novel called *Magic Island*, in which he spins a tale portraying Voodoo as a mysterious and sinister force that holds Haiti in its grip. The first zombie film ever made, *White Zombie*, focuses on a white woman who was turned into a zombie through the influence of Voodoo. While these tales made great literature and film, they also stoked white fear and distrust of Haiti and its people. To argue this point, Gelder references Joan Dayan, who is referred to as “one of the best known postcolonial critics who have written about Haitian literary culture,” and who feels that some readers in the U.S. may have used *Magic Island* and other similarly sensationalist literature to justify the U.S.’s occupation of Haiti because of the fear they had developed (Gelder, 94-96). Because of these infectious stories they stopped seeing Haitians as people in their own right and instead saw them as thralls to an evil cult-like religion. *White Zombie* had planted the idea that Voodoo could affect whites in all sorts of negative ways, and perhaps in their minds, controlling Haiti would control the spread of the Voodoo they so feared and hated.

Another problem with all the sensationalist literature surrounding Haitian Voodoo is that it takes away focus on Haiti’s true history and obscures it with the “tall stories” constructed by both observers and adherents of Voodoo. For example, rather than seeing Voodoo leaders as real people and being able to study where they came from and how they lived their lives, all historians would be able to learn were the aggrandized tales of their accomplishments in Voodoo, which by nature blend fact with fiction. Gelder believes that it is important to remove

the mystery and hype surrounding Voodoo if the reality of Haiti is ever to be observed and recorded thoroughly.

One piece of literature, and its subsequent movie, is an example of how Gelder believes Voodoo should be represented in fiction. This book, surprisingly, is the James Bond novel *Live and Let Die*. Gelder feels that this novel had a positive effect on the views of Haitian culture because it features a main character who throughout the novel is attempting to do the same thing Gelder is striving to do: demystifying Voodoo and making it seem “ordinary and banal.” By making people realize that Voodoo is just a belief system like any other, *Live and Let Die* breaks some of the sensationalism surrounding Haiti and helps the reader step back and reevaluate their real life view of the country and its people. As Sydney W. Mintz says, “Voodoo only seems extraordinary because we don’t understand it (Gelder, 95).”

One other negative that has been discussed is somewhat dubious, but many experts believe that it may be legitimate: Voodoo death, more modernly equated with psychogenic death. No modern scientist believes that Voodoo, as magic, is able to kill someone. Instead, the current theory is that the Voodoo curse, or hex, causes such psychological distress to both the believing person who has been “hexed” and their family that, as Meerloo says, that cursed person “decides to die and may act in such a way as to facilitate death (Lester, 2).”

Lester gives us a Western example of psychogenic death to give the reader an idea of what the effect of a “voodoo hex” would be to a true believer:

“Meador (1992) described the case of a man who had esophageal cancer and uncontrollable diabetes who decided that it was time to die. The physician managed

to motivate the man to live through Christmas, which he did, but he died soon after New Year's Day. The autopsy revealed that the diagnosis of cancer was a false positive. He did have a small nodule in his liver and a mild case of pneumonia. Meador argued that he died with cancer and pneumonia, but not of either of them. He suggested that the case met the criteria for a hex death because the man and his family believed the earlier physician's pronouncement that he was going to die, and all acted as if he was going to die (Lester, 4)."

Because the man and his family believed entirely in this doctor's diagnosis, he may have unwittingly committed what Meerloo refers to as a "passive suicide". The result is similar with the victims of a Voodoo hex. In "primitive societies" in places like Central and South America, Africa, Australia, and Caribbean, similar behavior happens when a person and their family believes completely that they are under a Voodoo curse. Anthropologists have observed the "cursed" person simply lie down on his or her bed and wait for death, while their family begins funeral preparations around their still-living relative. Because the person and everyone around them believes that they will die, they do; more often than not because they stop eating and drinking out of hopelessness and despair (Lester, 1-2).

To look at the other side of the coin, Lester cites Barber, who does not believe that psychogenic death actually exists. Barber notes that most of the documented cases of Voodoo death occurred in underdeveloped countries where the victims' corpses were not subjected to toxicology tests after their deaths. Barber feels that in many, if not all cases, the victims may have in fact been poisoned by the individual putting a "curse" on them, so that they died not of any psychological trauma or persuasion but by good old-fashioned poisoning. As Voodoo

practitioners have been known to work with poisons such as the form the common blowfish produces, the poisoning theory could be another likely explanation for the phenomenon of Voodoo death.

Still, Lester proceeds to note that the few cases of Voodoo death that have happened in first world countries did have full autopsies after their deaths and no trace of poison was found in any of these cases. Lester clearly feels that Meerloo is correct in his diagnosis of psychogenic death, but is careful to show both sides by addressing Barber's views as well.

Regardless of whether Voodoo death is a true scientific occurrence, the fact that modern scientists and doctors in peer reviewed medical journals are seriously discussing the possibility that something called "Voodoo death" actually exists shows the negative power the belief in Voodoo can exert on its adherents, and brings one back to Gelder's point that the "tall stories" can obscure our ability to see what's truly real.

Voodoo as a religion and worldview is dramatic, larger than life, and can be all encompassing. It has both enthralled and frightened outsiders, and is a culture of total immersion and belief for its adherents. Its benefits are many; it unites communities, gives power to the powerless, and, as Brenda Osbey says, it is a "highly complex, deceptively simple set of principles, beliefs and what-have-you, [and] is much that could heal you of whatever it is in your life that needs healing." In Voodoo, women are respected and looked up to as authority figures and Mothers. But Voodoo brings with it a stigma that has often negatively impacted its many Haitian followers. The fear it incites in outsiders has given foreign nations excuses to invade, and some believe that the fear it incites in its adherents can lead, in extreme levels, to death. The smokescreen of "tall stories" that surround Haitian Voodoo can hamper serious

efforts to uncover Haiti's true past, but ultimately it is an integral part of Haitian life and history and the story of the African Diaspora would not be complete without it.

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Reflection Essay

When writing this essay I had the difficulty of deciding on how narrow or how wide a topic I wanted to cover. People have written entire novels on Voodoo, so I had to decide what I had the time, energy, and space to talk about. My original focus was actually even wider than the scope of this paper – I was going to cover Haiti, New Orleans, and touch on African nations that practice Voodoo. Eventually I discovered the majority of the work focused on Haiti and any other papers tended to just be side notes in comparison.

I also found the article about how sensationalism negatively impacted Haiti to be really interesting as I had never really thought about it like that before. It reminded me about how the stories we build up about a person or place can sometimes become more real to us than the actual person or place itself.

The one thing that really connected with me in this essay was the discussion about how theatrical Voodoo is. I've always been very involved in the theatre and it never occurred to me how similar a Voodoo ceremony is to a play. They dress in costumes, inhabit characters, and basically put on a show for the community to watch and participate in. That part didn't really fit in with my essay very well so I didn't go into it much, but I did really connect with that aspect.