

STUDY OF THE PERCEPTIONS OF PRACTITIONERS OF HAITIAN VODOU  
REGARDING THEIR TREATMENT IN THE UNITED STATES

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## **ABSTRACT**

Over the past thirty years in the United States, the corpus of knowledge pertaining to Haitian Vodou has increased as scholars have developed a collective understanding. Questions nevertheless remain: As migration continues, how do practitioners of Vodou perceive their treatment in the United States and how does this affect their religious practice and cultural assimilation? A popular lack of understanding about this population and continuing stereotypes condemning Haitian Vodou have unknown impacts on Vodouizan culture. The purpose of this study is to explore how practitioners of Vodou in the United States perceive their treatment by the government, the media, Haitian non-practitioners, and the society of the United States as a whole. This study employs both quantitative and qualitative research methods that support nuanced understanding of some of the components forming Vodouizan perceptions. Data were collected using web-hosted surveys. Vodouizan all over the United States were enabled to participate in the study. Of the fourteen Vodouizan who participated in the survey, none self identified as Haitian or Haitian American. Findings were analyzed to identify the degree of agreement about a range of responses. As a result, an initial understanding has emerged of how non-Haitian Vodouizan perceive the acceptance of their religious practice in the United States.

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## INTRODUCTION

During a research trip to Little Haiti in Miami, Florida in the spring of 2012, members of the University of Florida Vodou Archive team set up their cameras at a Haitian Vodou ceremony. As they tested their microphones and focused their lenses, a group of boys, perhaps 10 or 12 years old, approached the team. They wanted to make sure that the videos that were being collected that day were for a private collection and would not be available online. They were worried that someone they knew may find out that they participate in Vodou ceremonies.

Richard Freeman, a visual anthropologist and librarian at the University of Florida, and a fellow member of the Vodou Archive team, relayed this story to me. He was struck by the concern that these boys exhibited. This paper emerged from an effort to better understand whether this concern for secrecy is widespread in the Vodou community and why it exists.

Initially this project focused on Haitians and Haitian-Americans, along with the ways they perceive their treatment in the United States. Once the survey began, the focus shifted to how non-Haitian practitioners perceive their treatment. Of the 14 survey respondents, none reported identifying themselves as Haitian or Haitian American. They are European American, African American, Native American, and Hispanic. With all of the work that has been done to document and learn about the history and practice of Haitian Vodou in both Haiti and the United States, there is almost no information regarding non-Haitian adoptees of Haitian Vodou practices. The respondents represent a subset of the Vodou practitioners population who are not well documented.

In the past 50 years, the academic documentation of Haitian Vodou practices and beliefs has flourished. Scholars, anthropologists, musicologists, and videographers have argued for the equality of Haitian Vodou in the global religious arena. Milo Marcelin and Alfred Metraux

introduced academia to the practice of “serving the spirits” (1949, 1959). Maya Deren’s classic *Divine Horsemen* allowed general readers an inside look at the practice of Haitian Vodou in both writing and film (1953, 1985). Karen McCarthy Brown humanized Vodou with her immersion into the life of *Mama Lola* (1991). Claudine Michel and Patrick Bellegarde-Smith have led the discussion about Vodou’s involvement in Haiti with their various written works and formation of the Congress of Santa Barbara (KOSANBA), a “scholarly association for the study of Haitian Vodou” (Michel 2006: xiii). Ati Max Beauvoir’s 2008 additions to the collection were the first pure Vodou content in Haitian Creole from a well-known *oungan*. Benjamin Hebblethwaite et al. contributed written songs collected from a myriad of sources to the growing collection of Vodou knowledge (2012). Terry Rey and Alex Stepick recently added a look at the interactions between Haitian Vodou, Catholicism, and Protestantism in the Haitian diaspora in Miami (2013). All of these additions have framed Haitian Vodou as a sacred practice integral to the Haitian culture. While they have done a tremendous job of exploring what it means to be a Haitian serving the spirits, the subset of non-Haitian Vodouists has expanded significantly without a matching increase in study.

Haitian Vodou is a spiritual practice that emerged out of the Haitian Revolution. Why is it then that non-Haitians become practitioners? Although this project did not initially seek to answer this question, responses from participants have shaped the project significantly and raise new questions about the relationship between non-Haitians and Vodou in the United States.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

If there is anything to be learned from researching Haitian Vodou, it is that there are no absolutes. Each interaction with the lwa assures those who serve the spirits that life is not a predetermined affair. That being said, there are scholars and practitioners who have been instrumental to the introduction of Haitian Vodou to academia. These contributors have focused on what Haitian Vodou is and how it came to be, how Vodou is practiced, and how Vodou has emigrated to the metaphorical eleventh department (the US diaspora). The literature review for this research will therefore include these topics. Being versed in the history of Haitian Vodou is necessary for speculating why non-Haitians are drawn to a spiritual tradition integral to the Haitian culture. Learning how Vodou is practiced allows insight into the similarities shared between religions and cultures. Studying how Vodou has immigrated to the United States opens the door for exploration into how and why people who did not grow up in Haiti or as Vodouists were introduced and found their way to the spirits.

### What Vodou is

Vodou is more than a religion; it is a cultural practice, a way of life, for those who “serve the spirits” (Hebblethwaite 2012: 1). According to Hebblethwaite’s *Vodou*, it originated in the Dahomey and Kongo regions of Africa, which were both represented equally demographically in Haiti via the slave trade at the time of the Haitian Revolution (2012: 1). Hebblethwaite’s description of Vodou in Haiti provides a context for interpretation of the songs found within the text.

Alfred Métraux’s *Voodoo in Haiti* (1972) was a product of his attempt at gaining a holistic understanding of Haiti and Haitians. He provides a detailed history of Vodou both in

Africa and in Haiti. His book is a focus on the practice of Vodou and all of its components. It details the people who practice and the ways that they practice. Métraux's purpose for learning about Vodou, to better understand Haiti, is evident. He repeatedly shows the links between Vodou and Haitian culture as a whole. He shows how inextricable Vodou is from the Haitian identity.

An edited volume by Claudine Michel and Patrick Bellegarde-Smith, *Invisible Powers: Vodou in Haitian Life and Culture* (2006) is a compilation of essays regarding the ways that Vodou is integral to Haitian culture. It is similar to Métraux's work in its focus on tying Vodou to Haitian culture. The essays range geographically from Haiti to New Orleans, Louisiana and feature topics from popular culture to sickness and Judaism. The authors featured in this collection all write about personalized topics while contributing to the greater focus of showing the importance of Vodou in the lives of Haitians, both those who serve and who don't serve the spirits.

Also edited by Patrick Bellegarde-Smith is *Fragments of Bone: Neo-African Religions in a New World* (2005) . This collection discusses more religious practices than *Invisible Powers* and does so in a way that allows readers to see the ways in which African religions in the New World have become cultures of transition. From the introduction it is evident that the author houses contention towards the "freedom" of religion perpetuated by the United States and uses this work to show the ways that these freedoms are awarded only to religious practices fitting an approved mold. It is through its resilience that Vodou will remain in tact in the United States.

*Vodou: Visions and Voices of Haiti* (2005) by Phyllis Galembo combines the history and practice of Vodou in Haiti with the author's photographs of Vodou temples, ritual items, ceremonies, and portraits. The book gives straightforward definitions of the people, items, and

places involved in the practice of Vodou in a respectful manner. Galembo's photos and researched descriptions take great care to present the roots of Vodou. The portraits presented in this book show people practicing a religion just as valid as any other. While this book does not provide any new insights into Vodou, it does make it real for those unfamiliar with the culture and religious practices.

George Eaton Simpson's *Black Religions in the New World* (1978) does not deal specifically with Haitian Vodou in the United States. It is a collective history of the African diaspora in the Western hemisphere. Although the focus is not on Vodou, Simpson discusses the decline of the practice of African based religions in the New World. The quote that he uses posits a hypothetical answer to why non-Haitians in the study are being called by the lwa:

Voodoo gods, in spite of their African names and lore are under the influence of their environment... the lwa have the tastes of modern man, his morality, and his ambitions. They are no longer the gods of an African tribe, exotic and remote, but deities who act and think in the industrialized world of today (1978: 302).

### **How Vodou is practiced**

In *Vodou Songs*, Hebblethwaite also explores the domains of Vodou: public and domestic (2012: 6). Public Vodou requires a dedicated *ounfò* (temple) to host ceremonies. *Manbo*, *oungan*, and *bòkò* (priestess, priests, and intuitive priests) serve as spiritual guides at the *ounfò*. They lead ceremonies, heal people, and give advice to the members of their community. Domestic Vodou is focused on family *lwa* (spirits) and *dantan* (ancestors) and takes place in the family's *lakou* (yard). Hebblethwaite notes: "Vodou religion is rooted in the Haitian family, community, culture, history, and identity" (2012: 7). With such strong ties to the Haitian identity, it is curious how non-Haitians have adopted the practice.

Milo Rigaud's contribution of *Secrets of Vodou* (1985 [1953]) reads as a manual of how to practice Vodou. He details the inner meanings of the crucial components of Vodou, such as

explaining that Vodou was designed to reflect the sun's influence on the atmosphere (Rigaud 1985: 8). Rigaud's book was an attempt to explain Haitian Vodou to a layperson whose only introduction to the practice had been from "the misleading use of it in Hollywood horror movies and in paperback thrillers" (1985: 7). It details the crucial elements of Vodou: the *potomitan* (center pole), *vèvè* (symbols), the lwa, the *ounfò*, the *ason* (rattle), the *drapo* (flags), the rites, the songs, the music, and the practitioners and priests.

*Creole Religions of the Caribbean: An Introduction from Vodou and Santería to Obeah and Espiritismo* (2003) provides much of the general background information and key terms found in all of the other introductory books. Its strength lies in the focus it places on showing the similarities between the religions of the Caribbean. The authors, Margarite Fernández Olmos and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert, like many others, agree with the significance of Vodou in the Haitian Revolution (2003: 16).

### **Vodou in the United States**

One of the most respected ethnographies of Vodou in the United States is Karen McCarthy Brown's *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn* (1991). Brown spent years getting to know Mama Lola, her family and friends, and the lwa. *Mama Lola* is more than a collection of the key terms of Vodou and their uses; it is an emotional tale that ties readers to two women who find solace through Vodou. The book is infused with the elements and history of Vodou and Lola's family. It explains how Vodou is passed from generation to generation and shows the real world implications of being a Vodouizan in America.

Brown briefly discusses her experiences as a white woman trying to enter the Haitian Vodou realm. She tells of how some of the practitioners who attended Lola's ceremonies were betting on whether the "white woman" would participate in a ritual that involved laying on the

ground (1991: 7-8). Her discussion of practicing as a white woman opens the door for further exploration into the experiences of this growing population.

Alex Stepick and Terry Rey's *Crossing the Water and Keeping the Faith* (2013) is one of the more recent additions to the diaspora research. It delves into the Haitian religious life found in Miami, Florida and looks at the ways that Catholicism, Protestantism, and Vodou exist and interact. They mention one aspect in particular that has relevance to the study; in Haiti, generally whether or not someone practices Vodou, they accept it as a legitimate practice (2013: 197). In the United States, Vodou practitioners will encounter people who neither practice nor believe in it. This situation sets the stage for governmental and societal abuses. As mentioned by Bellegarde-Smith in *Fragments of Bone*, while Americans like to think of themselves as proponents of religious freedoms, the freedoms are designed for those who meet their definition of religion, an inherently limiting definition (2005: 11).

*Introducing African American Religion* (2013) by Anthony Pinn does not deal specifically with the migration of Haitians and Haitian Vodou to the United States but he does discuss religions of African origin in depth in ways that address the history, purposes, and issues and concerns of contemporary African American religion. Interestingly the author points out that Vodou in some form or another has been present in the United States since the colonial period and that Haitian Vodou has been present in the United States for almost as long (2013: 24-25).

Pinn's previous work, *The African American Religious Experience in America* (2006) has a greater focus on Haiti and its influence on the Vodou that exists in America than his more recent work. In his discussion of the emergence of Voodoo as a religion in North America, Pinn does note that practitioners in the United States were both black and white (2006: 223). Pinn also

acknowledges the effects of stigma against Vodou in the United States for practitioners (2006: 225).

*This Land is our Land: Immigrants and Power in Miami* (2003) by Alex Stepick is an exploration into the effects on Miami from decades of immigration and the effects on the immigrants by Miami's melting pot culture. Although the author does not deal specifically with religion in general or with Haitian Vodou specifically, it does discuss the Haitian diaspora in Miami, which is arguably the source of Haitian Vodou in the United States. The assimilation into African American culture by the Haitian diaspora, side by side with and at times at odds with, the maintenance of Haitian culture, is not a universal reality for all Haitian immigrants but it does present a possibility for the restructuring of Haitian Vodou as those who brought it to the United States hide parts of their culture (Stepick 2003: 135)..

Rose-Marie Cassagnol Chierici's extended dissertation, *Demele: "Making It": Migration and Adaptation Among Haitian Boat People in the United States* (1991) does not exclusively deal with the migrants who practice Haitian Vodou, but there is mention of the permanence of Vodou in Haitian culture collectively and of the negative effects of Haitian perceptions of how Americans view Vodou (1991: 265, 268).

*Migration and Vodou* (2005) by Karen Richman delves into the world of Haitian migration. She discusses this in terms of *pwen*, a Haitian term with no exact English translation. She uses Walter Benjamin's wording to define *pwen* as a way "to get hold of an object at very close range by way of its likeness, its reproduction" (2005: 16). *Pwen* are omnipresent and are discernable to those who know where to look. This book tells of a personal relationship with a Haitian migrant who opened up to the author about Vodou. It is a vehicle for their story rather than an attempt at proving a point.

## METHODS

This study was conducted using an online survey with 14 respondents who responded to a call for participants posted through the Facebook groups: “VODOU, VOODOU, VODOUN, VODUN,” “Voodoo place,” “401 Loa of Vodou/Vodou,” “Creole Voodoo of New Orleans,” as well as members of the staff of the New Orleans’ shop, Voodoo Authentica. An online survey was selected as the best choice for a survey of this nature because it allowed for participation over a wide geographical range and awarded anonymity to people who may not be comfortable with providing this information otherwise. It is worth noting that despite the benefits of this technique, there is an implicit sub-sectioning resulting from the online nature of the survey. Vodouists who do not have technological access or who are uncomfortable with sharing information over the Internet are unable to participate.

The survey consisted of: demographic questions concerning age, race, ethnicity, length of practice, and family history; questions were formulated using Likert scale as a model and asking respondents to gauge their agreement with statements such as “The media in the United States misrepresents Vodou,” “My coworkers know that I practice Vodou,” “I feel safe to practice Vodou in the United States,” “I feel that I am treated differently than my peers because I practice Vodou,” “Non-Vodouizan Haitians mistreat Haitian Vodouizan;” and short answer questions allowing respondents to elaborate on their answers.

Surveys were held exclusively online using the “Google Docs” feature offered by Google Inc. Respondents accessed and completed the surveys between February 20<sup>th</sup> and March 12<sup>th</sup> of 2014.

Although most of the research and written material regarding Haitian Vodou discusses Haitian practitioners, none of the respondents to this survey identify as being Haitian or Haitian

American. Although this study sample does not reflect the Haitian Vodou community in its entirety, it does help identify a sub-group of individuals willing to talk about their experience who have not been researched in great depth and a way to communicate with them.

In order to better understand the population represented by the survey respondents the researcher worked to identify other predominately non-Haitian practitioners. One such group was located and analyzed using the standards deemed acceptable by the Association of Internet Researchers (AOIR). The webmaster of the group's homepage did not need to sign informed consent documents or deal with confidentiality or intellectual property issues since no qualitative or quantitative data was taken from the site. Use of the site was simply to verify the existence of this community.

## FINDINGS

This survey was designed to develop an understanding of the various ways that Haitians practicing Vodou in the United States perceive their treatment by the government, the media, and society in general. Due to the unexpected variability in the ethnicity and race of the respondents, the survey raises many questions but leaves them unanswered. With that in mind, the findings can be separated into three main categories: perceptions of the government and safety, perceptions of the media, and perceptions of coworkers, peers, and society in general.

In order to accurately portray the responses provided by participants in the studies, each section will highlight the statements that respondents were asked to gauge their agreement with and a summary of their degrees of agreement or disagreement. The short answer questions will be quoted as necessary in the discussion with their full text found in Appendix D.

### **Perceptions of the Government and Safety**

Until 2008 Vodou was not recognized as an official religion in Haiti. In the United States, in theory, acknowledgement should not be an issue since there is no standard for defining a religion. “The very concept of ordered liberty precludes allowing every person to make his own standards on matters of conduct in which society as a whole has important interests” (Casino). With that in mind, these responses show how well the United States government acknowledges these rights according to the people receiving the treatment.

*The United States government hinders me from practicing Vodou.* The majority of respondents felt that the government does not hinder their ability to practice Vodou. Twenty one percent of respondents “strongly disagreed” with this statement. Forty three percent “disagreed” with this statement. Twenty nine percent “neither agreed nor disagreed” with this statement. Only one individual “agreed” with the statement as written.

*I feel free to practice Vodou in the United States.* In this case, most respondents fell in the disagree/neutral range. Seven percent “strongly disagreed” with this statement. Thirty six percent “disagreed” and “neither agreed nor disagreed” with this statement and twenty one percent “agreed” with this statement.

*I feel safe to practice Vodou in the United States.* Again, most respondents fell in the disagree/neutral range. Fourteen percent of respondents “strongly disagreed” with this statement. Thirty six percent “disagreed” and “neither agreed nor disagreed” with this statement. Seven percent “agreed” and seven percent “strongly agreed” with this statement.

*How do you feel you, as a Vodouizan, are perceived by the government in the United States?* Not a single response to this question was positive. Twelve of the 14 respondents answered this question. Of the twelve, 5 reported neutral perceptions and seven reported negative perceptions.

### **Perceptions of the Media**

The United States media is notorious among Vodou scholars for its vivid misrepresentations of Vodou as a barbaric and evil witchcraft. Hollywood’s portrayal of “Voodoo” and “zombies” such as in *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) or *The Serpent and the Rainbow* (1988) makes it evident why most Americans do not take Vodou seriously. These questions are specific to various types of media to gather a more accurate understanding of the perceptions held about specific components of the media machine.

*The media in the United States misrepresents Vodou.* An overwhelming 79 percent of respondents reported that they “strongly agreed” with this statement. Seven percent felt that they “neither agreed nor disagreed” and fourteen percent “agreed” with this statement.

*American comics misrepresent Haitian Vodou.* This statement had over half of the respondents in agreement. Fifty seven percent of respondents “strongly agreed” that American comics misrepresent American Vodou. Seven percent “agreed,” twenty nine percent “neither agreed nor disagreed,” and seven percent “strongly disagreed” with this statement.

*American books misrepresent Haitian Vodou.* Twenty one percent of respondents “neither agreed nor disagreed”, twenty nine percent “agreed”, and fifty percent of respondents “Strongly agreed” that American books misrepresent Haitian Vodou.

*American movies misrepresent Haitian Vodou.* The most agreement was found in response to this question with 86 percent of respondents stating that they “strongly agreed.” Seven percent “agreed” and “neither agreed nor disagreed”.

*American television shows misrepresent Haitian Vodou.* Seventy one percent of respondents “strongly agreed” with this statement. Twenty one percent “agreed” and seven percent “neither agreed nor disagreed”.

*American newspapers and magazines misrepresent Haitian Vodou.* This was the only media based question to receive any disagrees. Fourteen percent of respondents “disagreed”, seven percent “neither agreed nor disagreed”, fourteen percent “agreed”, and sixty four percent “strongly agreed”.

*How do you feel you, as a Vodouizan, are perceived by the media in the United States?* Again, only 12 of the 14 respondents answered this question. Of those 12, there was one neutral response and 11 negative responses.

### **Perceptions of Peers**

For adherents of Vodou in the United States, one of the most pressing fears is of those surrounding them. Although Americans like to think of themselves as being open and accepting,

interactions with the “others” have always been difficult. These experiences with peers are perhaps more influential than those with the government or with the media since peers have an impact on the lives of those they surround every day.

*I feel uncomfortable letting my peers know that I practice Vodou.* Twenty nine percent of respondents “disagreed” and “neither agreed nor disagreed” with this statement while twenty one percent “agreed” and “strongly agreed” with this statement.

*My coworkers know that I practice Vodou.* Twenty one percent of respondents “strongly disagreed” with this statement. Forty three percent “disagreed” with this statement. Fourteen percent “neither agreed nor disagreed” and twenty one percent “strongly agreed” with this statement.

*Haitian Protestants mistreat Haitian Vodouizan.* Fourteen percent of respondents “disagreed” and twenty nine percent of respondents “neither agreed nor disagreed”. Thirty six percent of respondents “agreed” and twenty one percent of respondents “strongly agreed” with this statement.

*Haitian Catholics mistreat Haitian Vodouizan.* Fourteen percent of respondents “disagreed”, fifty percent of respondents “neither agreed nor disagreed”, twenty nine percent of respondents “agreed” and seven percent of respondents “strongly agreed” with this statement.

*Non-Vodouizan Haitians mistreat Haitian Vodouizan.* Seven percent of respondents both “strongly disagreed” and “disagreed: with this statement. Forty-three percent of respondents “neither agreed nor disagreed” with this statement. Twenty nine percent of respondents “agreed” with this statement and fourteen percent of respondents “strongly agreed.”

*My treatment by my peers as a Vodouizan has improved since I finished school.* Fourteen percent of respondents “strongly disagreed” and “disagreed” with this statement. Thirty six

percent of respondents “neither agreed nor disagreed” and twenty nine percent of respondents “agreed”.

*I remember negative opinions expressed about Vodou by my peers in high school.* Seven percent of respondents “strongly disagreed”, twenty nine percent of respondents “neither agreed nor disagreed”, thirty six percent of respondents “agreed”, and twenty one percent of respondents “strongly agreed”.

*I remember negative opinions expressed about Vodou by my peers in middle school.* Seven percent of respondents “strongly disagreed” with this statement. Forty three percent of respondents “neither agreed nor disagreed” with this statement. Seven percent of respondents “agreed” and thirty six percent of respondents “strongly agreed”.

*I remember negative opinions expressed about Vodou by my peers.* Seven percent of respondents “strongly disagreed” with this statement. Thirty six percent “neither agreed nor disagreed”, fourteen percent “agreed”, and thirty six percent “strongly agreed” with this statement.

*How do you feel you, as a Vodouizan, are perceived by your peers in the United States?* Twelve of the 14 respondents answered this question. Of the 12 responses, two people reported primarily positive perceptions, three people reported relatively neutral perceptions, and seven people reported negative perceptions.

### *Demographics*

Many of the responses are given further depth when considered in their complete context. This is explored in more depth in the discussion section. To preface that section, a summary of the respondents’ demographic information is as follows.

All respondents were between 18 and 45 years old with participants in the age range of 26-35 having the most members. The majority of respondents were female. There were three males and two people who identified as “other”. Four people work in the school system or attend school. Two people are in health, two people work in the funeral business, three people work in retail, and one person works in technology. One person is a priest and one person is a homemaker. Three people are first generation Americans or immigrants. Two people are second generation Americans. Eight people are third generation or longer. One person did not answer.

There was a wide range of ethnicities provided. Please see Appendix E for more specific information. All respondents reported practicing at least one form of African or African derived religion. Four people also identified as Catholic, one person as a Protestant, and one person identified as a Baptist and an atheist. Six people identified as “White American”, one person as Asian-European, two people as Hispanic, two people as Native American or part Native American, two people as African American or Black, and one person as Polynesian. Three people responded with multiracial identities.

The range on this question was huge and varied from one year to “all my life”. No useful groupings were discerned. Eight people are the first in their family to practice and six people reported members of their mother’s family who practiced. Most people were introduced to Vodou by family or friends. Two people found it through research into religion and four people were called by the lwa.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **Challenges of Conducting the Study**

This study originally was designed to elicit qualitative statements more about the ways that Haitian immigrants who practice Vodou in the United States perceive their treatment. That proved difficult when no Haitians participated in the survey. The questions used in this survey were designed with the originally targeted respondents in mind. Had the demographics of the actual respondents been known ahead of time, the survey would have focused more on the ways in which the respondents came to practice Vodou, their identity as a Vodouizan, and their relationships with their Haitian peers. It is important to note that respondents were asked to provide their “perceptions” in this study. All of the opinions and data gathered are specific to the people who participated and may not represent those of all people who practice Vodou in the United States.

### **Major Findings and Possible Explanations**

*1. Quantitative findings.* Generally speaking, the respondents stated that the government respects their right to practice Vodou in the United States. Despite this, approximately half of the respondents do not feel free or safe to practice Vodou in the United States. While the government may, in theory, respect the right of religious freedom, a right to practice does not necessarily mean a right to acceptance as seen by the responses here. Although respondents feel that they have the right to practice their religion, the actual practice is limited by fears of the perceptions of peers.

An overwhelming majority of respondents indicated that the media misrepresents Vodou. When broken down into more specific components, movies and television shows were viewed as the worst offenders of misrepresenting Vodou. Comics were the next most recognized offenders

and newspapers and magazine articles were viewed as the least offensive of the options. The media is one of the greatest perpetuators of misconceptions about Haitian Vodou and this perception aligns with that. Movies and television shows are generally created to capture profit through entertainment value. According to one respondent, although the image they perpetuate of Haiti and Vodou is false, it sells, and that is the goal of the purveyors.

Over 40 percent of respondents agreed that they are uncomfortable letting their peers know that they practice Vodou. Over 60 percent of respondents hide their religious practice from their co-workers. More than 50 percent of respondents perceive that Haitian Protestants mistreat Vodouizan as opposed to 36 percent perceiving the same of Haitian Catholics. Forty three percent of respondents perceive that non-Vodouizan Haitians mistreat Haitian Vodouizan. Most of the respondents remember negative perceptions regarding Vodou from their peers both in middle and high school and in general. Perhaps it can best be summed up with Bellegarde-Smith's argument that Americans are open to freedoms for any religion, as long as it is one that they approve of (2005: 11). Stepick's (2003: 135) point that Haitians in the United States "hide" parts of their culture and religious practices to better fit in are also evident in these responses.

2. *Qualitative findings.* Respondents' perceptions regarding their treatment from the government ranged from "afraid" to ignorant. One respondent was dismissive of all of the questions about Vodou, stating: "The government dislikes me for so many other reasons that vodou [sic] is not the top of the list as to why they would dislike me." At the end of the survey, this individual reveals that s/he is an out queer transgendered individual and faces more discrimination for his/her sexual identity than for his/her religious beliefs. It is fitting that someone who faces so much adversity found Vodou since traditionally Vodou emerged as a survival technique.

Other individuals seem to feel that the government is ignorant of what Vodou actually is and note that it is “recognized but not taken seriously.” One person felt “afraid” for their safety and another individual talked about “staying below the radar” as introduced by Alex Stepick in *This Land is Our Land* (2003). For the most part it seems that the respondents feel that Vodou is not understood and is not respected by the United States government.

With the exception of the respondent who finds religious persecution secondary to the persecution of their sexual identity, all of the respondents feel that the media perceives Haitian Vodou as negatively. They offered responses including: “as evil or satanic,” “as a joke,” as “doing harm to someone.” Not a single participant in this study indicates that they believe the media in the United States understands what Haitian Vodou is or what it means to be a Vodouist. Many of the respondents offered the common stereotypes of Vodou as examples: images of animal sacrifices and blood lust, casting curses, sacrificing babies, and Satanic rituals. One individual feels that the media misrepresents all religions that are not Christian “solely for the sale of whatever they are selling.”

Most of the respondents reported negative perceptions regarding treatment by their peers. One person mentioned being disowned by a member of their family because of their religious beliefs. Another person noted that they feel others perceive them as “a spooky Satanist weirdo” or “as a white person who’s trying too hard to be exotic.” Another individual echoes the sentiment of “trying to be different” and elaborates that they are just “someone following a dedicated and spiritual religious path.” One person mentions that she feels Haitian Vodouists view her “suspiciously” because she is African American practicing Haitian Vodou. She also perceives that her Christian peers are “enraged” by her practice.

On the other hand, one individual identified himself as a priest (although he did not specify in which religion), reported that he feels “respected” by his peers. Another individual, who identifies as a practitioner of “hoo doo,” feels respected for the “advice and direction in regard to the religion and practice of hoo doo” that they give.

The positive perceptions reveal that there is hope for greater understanding. That being said, the negative perceptions were more common and follow many of the stereotypes previously noted. Ignorance was brought up as a root cause for these negative perceptions on multiple occasions in the responses.

### **Implications of the Present Study and Consideration for Future Studies**

This study explored a group of Vodou practitioners who are willing to share their experiences. That this group exists is reason enough to hear their stories. The fact that they are open to creating a dialogue for learning about their culture calls for attention. This glimpse into the lives and perceptions of these Vodouizans has prompted more questions than it has answered regarding the origins of Vodou practice in the United States, the interactions between Haitian and non-Haitian Vodouizans, and the ways (if any) that their practices vary from those of Haitian Vodouizans. Is there a clear delineation between Haitian and non-Haitian Vodouizans? Does race even matter for access or is Vodou private and limited to those who live the Haitian culture? Like any good question, this survey gathered information and set the stage for further exploration. Vodou is not any one thing. It is living and breathing and changing just like the people who serve the spirits.

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**APPENDIX A: INTERNAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL DOCUMENTATION**

**UF** Institutional Review Board  
UNIVERSITY of FLORIDA

PO Box 112250  
Gainesville, FL 32611-2250  
352-392-0433 (Phone)  
352-392-9234 (Fax)  
irb2@ufl.edu

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DATE: February 17, 2014

TO: Benjamin Hebblethwaite, PhD; Megan Raitano  
PO Box 115565  
Campus

FROM: Ira S. Fischler, PhD, Chair *ISF*  
University of Florida  
Institutional Review Board 02

SUBJECT: **Approval of Protocol #2014-U-0160**  
*Survey Regarding the Perceptions of Haitian Vodouists (Vodouizan) with their treatment in the United States by the Government, the Media, and Society as a Whole*

SPONSOR: None

I am pleased to advise you that the University of Florida Institutional Review Board has recommended approval of this protocol. Based on its review, the UFIRB determined that this research presents no more than minimal risk to participants, and based on 45 CFR 46.117(c), An IRB may waive the requirement for the investigator to obtain a signed consent form for some or all subjects if it finds either: (1) *That the only record linking the subject and the research would be the consent document and the principal risk would be potential harm resulting from a breach of confidentiality. Each subject will be asked whether the subject wants documentation linking the subject with the research, and the subject's wishes will govern;* or (2) *That the research presents no more than minimal risk of harm to subjects and involves no procedures for which written consent is normally required outside of the research context.*

The IRB authorizes you to administer the informed consent process as specified in the protocol. If you wish to make any changes to this protocol, ***including the need to increase the number of participants authorized***, you must disclose your plans before you implement them so that the Board can assess their impact on your protocol. In addition, you must report to the Board any unexpected complications that affect your participants.

This approval is valid through **February 10, 2015**. If you have not completed the study prior to this date, please telephone our office (392-0433), and we will discuss the renewal process with you. Additionally, should you complete the study on or before the expiration date, please submit the study closure report to our office. The form can be located at [http://ib.ufl.edu/irb02/Continuing\\_Review.html](http://ib.ufl.edu/irb02/Continuing_Review.html). It is important that you keep your Department Chair informed about the status of this research protocol.

ISF:dl

## **APPENDIX B: INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENTATION**

### **Informed Consent Protocol Title:**

**Please read this consent document carefully before you decide to participate in this study.**

#### **Purpose of the research study:**

The purpose of this study is to determine the perceptions held by Haitian Vodouists regarding their treatment in the United States.

#### **What you will be asked to do in the study:**

You will be asked to fill out an anonymous online survey regarding your perceptions and thoughts about your treatment as a Vodouist in the United States from the government, the media, and society as a whole.

#### **Time required:**

20 minutes

#### **Risks and benefits:**

There are no known immediate benefits to the participant.

There is a minimal risk that security of any online data may be breached, but since Google uses SSL encryption and your data will be removed from the server soon after you complete the survey, it is unlikely that a security breach of the online data will result in any adverse consequence for you. <http://www.google.com/intl/en/policies/privacy/>

#### **Compensation:**

There is no compensation for participation in the project.

#### **Confidentiality:**

Your identity will be kept confidential to the extent provided by law.

#### **Voluntary participation:**

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. There is no penalty for not participating.

#### **Right to withdraw from the study:**

You have the right to withdraw from the study at anytime without consequence.

**Whom to contact if you questions about the study:**

Megan Raitano, Undergraduate Student, Department of Anthropology, 407.493.4957

Benjamin Hebblethwaite, Associate Professor, Department of Language, Literature, and Culture,  
301 Pugh Hall PO Box 115565, 352.273.3762

**Whom to contact about your rights as a research participant in the study:**

IRB02 Office, Box 112250, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL 32611-2250; phone 392-0433.

**Agreement:**

## APPENDIX C: SURVEY QUESTIONS

Are you over the age of 18?  
Do you consider yourself a Vodouizan?  
Are you currently residing in the United States?

Age  
Gender  
Occupation  
What generation American are you?  
What ethnicity do you identify as?  
What race do you identify with?  
What belief system or systems do you identify with?  
How long have you considered yourself a Vodouizan?  
How many generations of your family practice Vodou?  
How did you come to practice Vodou?

The United States government hinders me from practicing Vodou.  
I feel free to practice Vodou in the United States.  
I feel safe to practice Vodou in the United States.  
I feel that I am treated differently than my peers because I practice Vodou.

The media in the United States misrepresents Vodou.  
American comics misrepresent Haitian Vodou.  
American books misrepresent Haitian Vodou.  
American movies misrepresent Haitian Vodou.  
American television shows misrepresent Haitian Vodou.  
American newspapers and magazines misrepresent Haitian Vodou.

I feel uncomfortable letting my peers know that I practice Vodou.  
My coworkers know that I practice Vodou.  
Haitian Protestants mistreat Haitian Vodouizan.  
Haitian Catholics mistreat Haitian Vodouizan.  
Non-Vodouizan Haitians mistreat Haitian Vodouizan.  
My treatment by my peers as a Vodouizan has improved since I finished school.  
I remember negative opinions expressed about Vodou by my peers in high school.  
I remember negative opinions expressed about Vodou by my peers in middle school.  
I remember negative opinions expressed about Vodou by my peers.

How do you feel you, as a Vodouizan, are perceived by your peers in the United States?  
How do you feel you, as a Vodouizan, are perceived by the government in the United States?  
How do you feel you, as a Vodouizan, are perceived by the media in the United States?  
What other information do you think is necessary for us to understand how you perceive your treatment in the United States?  
Additional comments or information that you think we should know:

## APPENDIX D: SHORT ANSWER RESPONSES

<b>How do you feel you, as a Vodouizan, are perceived by your peers in the United States?</b>
It's a non-issue. No one cares.
I feel some what oppressed, my family and some of my friends consider me a devil worshiper, I have been disowned by an aunty and still continue to recieve bad treatment.
My peers ask me for advice and direction in regard to the religion and the practice of hoo doo. I'd say they respect my religion and perceptions of the cosmos.
Either as a spooky Satanist weirdo who probably kills small animals, or as a white person who's trying too hard to be exotic. The positive receptions are rarer, but they're generally from people who are either attracted to the exotic aspect or who just perceive me as doing something that hasn't been well represented or researched.
My peers are diverse. Some are Vodouizan who perceive me favorably because of my sincerity and strong faith in my ancestral religion. On the otherhand, some Haitian Vodouizan view me suspiciously and with prejudice because I am African American. Ethnic prejudices--along with racial, class, gender and sexual--will come out in social gatherings because people bring their whole selves to religion, and these are the issues of division that need yo be worked through. My peers who are not Vodouizan may be intrigued, at best, or enraged, at worst, especially if they are Christian.
I feel that my peers see Voodoo as a "dark" thing, that I am a "dark" or "scary" person because of it, or that I'm just someone trying to be different, rather than someone following a dedicated and spiritual religious path, just like any other religion.
Respected
Many do not understand, so ignorant comments are made ...simply because they are ignorant...meaning they are not knoweledgable about Vodou or how many Americans, especially African Americans, became christian in the first place through missionaries and forced upon them by slavery.
As a superstitious person, who is a bit too influenced by the occult
Evil, crazy, to be avoided.
I try to keep it fairly private because most perceive it as being evil or satanic
Of course it depends on the person. Some have the perception that it is a great thing, others think it is a thing of ignorance.

<b>How do you feel you, as a Vodouizan, are perceived by the government in the United States?</b>
The government dislikes me for so many other reasons that vodou is not the top of the list as to why they would dislike me.
I feel OK being a vodowizan but being that most of america is christian I sometimes feel afraid for my safety.
I don't think the U.S. government has full knowledge, understanding or concern with Vodouizans. Our population is still so very limited that we don't seem to pose any threat.
Primitive, stupid and probably crazy.
I have no idea. The government is comprised of people, so a person in any given position can hold a myriad of perspectives.

I feel that the government feels Voodoo is more of a marketing tool than something that is an actual religion, and does not treat the practitioners as though they are practicing a real religion.

Recognized but not taken seriously.

I don't feel that the US really perceives me as an individual participant strangely, but as a collective or people who practice...yes we are perceived as "lost".

As a person not to be taken too seriously

Evil, crazy, stupid

I don't feel it is wise to let the government know about any religious practices that they deem suitable....anything that goes against the government is never good if your goal is to stay below the radar and keep the peace

I doubt that the government has any perception at all about Vodou or its practitioners, if anything they, we, and it will be lumped with any other marginalised or misunderstood belief.

**How do you feel you, as a Vodouizan, are perceived by the media in the United States?**

Non-issue.

Horribly wrong and awful, its like saying the holocaust was used to promote jewish activity in comparison.

As with most "alternative religions" I think we are usually considered to be superstitious fantasists , who create patterns and imbue natural events with supernatural causation. The religion is often sensationalized within the media.

Primitive, probably crazy and possibly dangerous.

I do not believe that the media is conscious of true Vodouizan. The same, age-old, stock images are recapitulated without much variation. All ATRs are grouped together, and there is an image of killing an animal and splattering the blood. Finally, practitioners of ATRs are always doing harm to someone.

The media perceives Voodoo practitioners as dark, scary people who cast curses and sacrifice babies.

As a joke. We are constantly misrepresented and used for entertainment purposes.

media often misrepresents anything that is not of Christianity ..solely for the sale of whatever they are selling ...(movies...programs...etc)....It's not profitable for them to sell "truth".

As a cult member

evil, controlling, manipulative, the enemy

as evil or satanic. The media misrepresents vodou at every chance, making it look evil or bad. This is especially so more recently, with shows such as american horror story coven and other increasingly popular shows with occult themes.

Very poorly understood. Few serious practitioners speak out so the spokesperson become experts, anthropologists or "knowledgable outsiders" and fewer media representatives penetrate local, home based worship or ritual ceremonies.

**What other information do you think is necessary for us to understand how you perceive your treatment in the United States?**

I am an out queer transgender person. My religious choices are the last thing that gets me persecuted.

I think we are very much viewed as a minority in the country, a minority hated by others because our beliefs are different.

I am a white woman. I grew up privileged in a wealthy area of the country. My experience is very different from what I'd imagine a Black or a Haitian Vodouizan's would be like -- and I can only imagine, because the only perspective I have authority on is my own.

I am very much free to practice what I believe in, and to do what my heart tells me to do, but it's important to keep in mind that I represent someone coming into this culture and this religion as the minority. Many Haitian-American and African-American people see me as an intruder, possibly someone with ulterior motives.

The idea of Vodou in the American imagination represents the failure of white supremacy, slavery and colonization. It engenders a cardinal fear of "the natives," of nature, and of their powerlessness against indigenous religions.

I do not feel comfortable even letting people into my home, because I don't want them questioning my altars. Where I live can be somewhat progressive, so it's not as bad as it could be, but it seems like just because my altars are different from Christian ones, they're a bad thing - which they're not.

I think it's necessary for documentaries to be made of a day in the life of a practitioner...so they can see the looks we get...the remarks that are made and the possible harassment we encounter..especially when it comes to animals.

We are not taken seriously by the government - they placate us by recognizing us according to the letter of the law and not according to the spirit of the law

Just keep up with the media that is misrepresenting vodou. All of the people who choose to misrepresent the fact, would be very surprised to actually find out that vodou is very similar to most popular religions. A great deal of familial superstitions and practices that others that practice catholicism or christianity use, are the same that vodouisants use.

While perception may not be great by media or the US, that does not necessarily mean it is a bothersome thing. I think that socioeconomic status, race, language and other more obvious identifiers of difference may lead to negative perceptions that have an adverse effect.

**Additional comments or information that you think we should know:**

Vodou is NOT a third world tradition; it is a vibrant, living, dynamic tradition that has more to offer, at least to me, than any other tradition.

After being raised in a strict christian household, I struggled with religion and the feeling of being lost. When I found vodou, I knew I was home. There is something warming and loving about it all. The people are so much more accepting than any other religion. The mix of god and ancestors and the lwa, it just feels right.

Many mambo from Canada are speaking out to the media and maintaining web presences, I wonder if in this study or a future one you will consider the sizeable Vodouizan community of Canada and their own government/media perception. Good luck.

## APPENDIX E: DEMOGRAPHIC RESPONSES

Age
26-35
Prefer not to say
36-45
18-25
36-45
26-35
18-25
36-45
36-45
36-45
26-35
26-35
26-35
26-35

Gender
Other
Other
Female
Male
Female
Male
Female
Female
Female
Male

Occupation
Substance abuse counselor.
school
Sales Advisor: Cemetery and Funeral
Customer Service Specialist
Shop Owner
Middlr school teacher, special education

Funeral Director/Embalmer
Priest
nursing
Technology
Home Maker
receptionist
student
student

<b>What generation American are you?</b>
Third Generation
First Generation
So far back, we don't remember
Third Generation
Third Generation
more than 3rd generation
Second Generation
First Generation
Third Generation
Depends on which race you consider me to be "of"
Native
Second Generation
4th generation
Immigrant

<b>What ethnicity do you identify as?</b>
Portugese and irish.
Samoan
White
White
Mutt
African American
Caucasian
none
african american (creole)
Mixed Race
German, Native American, Irish
latina
Irish, german
Mixed race Asian-European

What belief system or systems do you identify with?
African-Haitian religion, African-Hispanic religion, polytheism
west african vodu
American Vodou
African-Haitian religion, Catholic
African-Haitian religion, Catholic, Christian
African-Haitian religion, African-American religion, Protestant, Kabbalah, Hinduism, Native Amwrican, all ATRs
African-Haitian religion
African-Hispanic religion, Catholic
African-Haitian religion, Palo and Orisha
African-Haitian religion, African-Hispanic religion
Baptist, Athiest, Appalachian Hoodoo, Native American Spirituality, New Orleans voodoo
African-Hispanic religion
African-Haitian religion, African-American religion, African-Hispanic religion, Catholic, Christian
African-Haitian religion, Lukumi

What race do you identify with?
White American
Polynesian
White American
White American
White American
Black
White American
Hispanic American, African American, Native American
African American
Cherokee, Black, Dutch, French
Multiracial
Hispanic American
White American
Asian-European

How long have you considered yourself a Vodouzian?
2+ years
7
7 years
Two years
25 years
9 yrs

3 years
25 years
20+ years
All my life
8 years
5 yrs
1 yr
17 years

How many generations of your family practice Vodou?
I am the first
I am the first
I am the first
I am the first
Godmother
Mother's family-other, Father's family-other, I am the first, cant be certain because they were secretive
I am the first
Mother, Grandmother on Mother's Side
Mother
Mother, Grandmother on Mother's Side, Mother's family-other
Grandmother on Mother's Side
I am the first
Grandmother on Mother's Side
I am the first

How did you come to practice Vodou?
the Lwa came to me, so I sought out the religion.
Introduced
Drawn to New Orleans many years ago. Learned of Vodou religion upon investigation of the region. "Odd" dreams, visions, and clear awareness that Tourism Voodoo wasn't genuine practice from a very early age.
I was called by the Lwa and just happened to meet the right people at the right time.
Godmother
I was frustrated with Christianity and called out to my ancestors. They responded and have been guiding me ever since. Ase!
Discovery on my spiritual path while searching for the right religion
introduced as a child
we always practiced on and off
My grandmother practiced, she introduced me
Daily. in everything
friend
study
Through a friend

