

Vodou in New York City

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Vodou is a significant part of Haitian folk and national culture and the Haitian diaspora. The study of any diaspora involves the study of the survival or adaptation of the diasporic culture in the geographic and cultural space of the adopted land. Vodou is already a religion of the African slave diaspora in Haiti. However, it underwent a second migration with the travel of Haitians to other countries. Hebblethwaite (2012: 9-10) defines Vodou as a religion that is non-apostolic and is not prescriptive. This means that Vodou will probably have a similar, although unique, form outside of Haiti. This paper will address the presence, form, and status of Vodou in the Haitian diaspora located in New York City.

The ethnographic book by Karen Brown (1991), Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn, discusses the larger Haitian community of Brooklyn, New York, the presence and nature of Vodou, and the response to it by members of both the Haitian and non-Haitian communities in the area. Mama Lola's status is important in maintaining the survival of Haitian Vodou. As a *manbo* (Vodou priestess), Mama Lola serves the *lwa* and is the leader of a group of Vodouists in the area. Her gatherings are small and intimate; there are around 30 people that attend her ceremonies and rituals and most of these people are family members or close friends (1991: 4). Her altar room and ritual space is in her basement, which is a contrast to the mostly outdoor space where Vodou is practiced in the Haitian countryside. Additionally, Mama Lola's work predominately deals with consulting with clients and serving them as a healer rather than as a priestess. To highlight the differences of Vodou practiced within the state of New York, Brown also discusses the different temples of other New York Vodou practitioners. Even though there are some who rent out large spaces to conduct ceremonies, most of the Vodou practitioners practice within their homes and have rather conservative ceremonies (1991: 4). Drums are a significant part of a Vodou ceremony, but in Brooklyn, drums are expensive and draw attention — which Mama Lola tries to avoid because of the negative images of Vodou held by many in the United States (1991: 4). This illustrates how the negative perceptions of Vodou complicate Haitians' ability to fully follow and practice their religion in the United States.

The image of Vodou in New York City is an important issue because it affects the way that Haitians can practice their religion. Bettina Schmidt (2003) addresses the presence of Vodou in New York and how it has adapted to the area. Haitian Vodou has a similar history of migration and creolization to that of the people who practice it. Schmidt (2003) writes that the regime of Francois Duvalier and his son caused many Haitians to flee Haiti for political asylum in the United States. However because of a complicated history with the United States, many Americans viewed Haitians in a suspicious and negative light (Schmidt 2003). Vodou seems to have survived the acculturation into American culture. Schmidt mentions that Haitians of “first, second, and third migrant generation practice Vodou in New York...” meaning that even those who are American-born still serve the *lwa*. As mentioned before, Vodou is not a prescriptive religion and as Schmidt also mentions, it is a religion that is fluid in adapting to its new surroundings. An example of this is Mama Lola. She practices out of her basement without the drums traditionally used in ceremonies. Within the Haitian community, Vodou seems to be a significant part of their lives in New York. Outside of the Haitian community, it is viewed as a curiosity, negative or positive. Sometimes it is a serious curiosity which attracts outsiders who are in need of help, such as African-Americans who have taken to *Ifa* healing practices for

mental health problems (Ashby 2011). *Ifa* is of Yoruba origin and is associated with divination and healing within Vodou, where it is known as *Fa* (Hebblethwaite, 2012: 235). Despite the positive aspects of Vodou, such as healing, Vodou is still seen as a malevolent religion in the American cultural mindset (Schmidt 2003).

Kate Ramsey gives us a possible origin of this negative view point that stems from the book *Voodoo Fire in Haiti* by Richard Loederer and was distributed in Europe and North America (2002: 11). Literature like this and other sources of media have constantly depicted Vodou as being a religion of “fetish dolls, zombies, and diabolic practices” as described by Schmidt (2003).

However, Schmidt believes that this image is slowly changing as evidenced by the “Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou” exhibition in the American Museum of Natural History in New York. The exhibition was a success. It educated the audience about what Vodou truly is; challenging the often “exotic” ideas that many speculators had (Schmidt 2003). However, Schmidt critiques the exhibition claiming that even though it did a lot of good, it still had its faults in its presentation. The presentation mostly ignored the fact that there are many Vodou practitioners in New York and chose to import a priest from Haiti rather than having one from Brooklyn. The marginalization of Haitians and Vodou within New York is highlighted. However, there may be other reasons for this oversight, such as communication issues between the museum and the Haitian community. Even though Vodou is still widely practiced within the Haitian diaspora in New York and there have been efforts to educate people about the true nature and form of Vodou, it is still viewed with xenophobia in America.

Works Cited

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