Throughout human history, differences in cultures and appearances have been attributed to intrinsic spiritual evil and more recently to genetic inferiority. These prejudices often lead to the creation of scapegoats, people or groups of people that bear the blame for the plights of others and for society’s problems. Haitian Vodou and its practitioners are no exception to this pattern. Followers of Vodou have suffered frequent persecution since the Haitian Revolution in 1791. This paper will explore the disapprobation of Haitian Vodou through the lens of Scapegoat Theory.

**Scapegoat Theory**

The term scapegoat originated in the Old Testament; it refers to a goat that received a symbolic transfer of the sins of the Jewish people, and was then used as a sacrifice to gain atonement (Scapegoat, 2012). Scapegoat theory, also called the frustration-aggression theory of prejudice, encompasses a similar pattern of human behavior in which a minority group, falsely held responsible for some individual or societal problem, is mistreated and ostracized. Scapegoat theory posits that prejudiced individuals harbor aggression that is not, or cannot be, directed at the appropriate source, and instead redirect it toward a weaker minority group (Lindzey 1950: 296).

Scapegoat theory has some conceptual roots in Freudian defense mechanisms, which are cognitive methods utilized to defend an individual from anxiety caused by internal or external events that conflict with positive self-view (Cramer 1987: 597-598). For example, a person who views himself or herself as superior in intelligence may resolve the dissonance caused by failing an exam by judging the exam to be unfair. Displacement is a defense mechanism that occurs when an individual changes the target of an emotion or impulse because the original target is inappropriate or threatening to self-perception (Baumeister 1998: 1093). In the previous example, when the test-taker chooses to blame their failure on the quality of the exam, rather than their own study methods, they are displacing blame onto the test-writer and thus protecting their self-image. Scapegoat creation is a direct implication of this mechanism; the person or group shouldered with blame is weaker or less threatening than the actual cause.

Prejudice and scapegoat creation are found and studied in groups as large as countries and as small as families. A family, like any society, organizes itself around overarching expectations and defined roles for members. A child who deviates from the norm or reminds family members of their shortcomings may become a scapegoat (Wright 1988: 35). Vogel and Bell (1964), utilize the example of a set of parents with unresolved issues concerning their own level of intellectual ability who then spurn their least intellectual child. The parents neglect or reject this child because he or she is a reminder to the parents of their own intellectual uncertainty. The practice of scapegoating also occurs in much larger groups; some common conflicts being those between cultures or countries.

Hovland and Sears (1940) wrote a seminal paper on the relationship between economic troubles and the lynching of African-American males in the American South. They found a predictive relationship, indicating that the fall of cotton prices correlated with a rise in the number of lynchings between the years of 1882 and 1930. The results of this study display a clear example of scapegoating: when cotton prices fell, farmers experienced frustration and aggression that they channeled toward black males (Baumeister 1998: 1094). An example of a
scapegoat utilized by societies across time is the Jewish people; ironically, the creators of the term are one of the groups most frequently persecuted. From the evil collector of the European Middle Ages, to the genetic plight of Jewish people in World War II-era Germany, the history of the Jewish scapegoat is both varied and tragic.

Haitian Vodou shares some similar history with Judaism; they both have suffered harsh castigation and censorship by Christian powers. The subjugation of the Jewish in Spain under Ferdinand and Isabella, and the concealment of Jewish rituals during and after the Spanish Inquisition are very similar to the history of Vodou in Haiti. Upon their arrival in the French colony of Saint-Domingue, which would later become Haiti, African slaves underwent forced conversion to Catholicism. However, through subversion and camouflage behind the names and iconography of Catholic Saints, the slaves were able to continue the practice of their native religion under the guise of Catholic worship (Hebblethwaite 2012: 8). It is important to note, that Vodou is unique from most western religions in that it is malleable and rules are rarely set in stone. The rituals and practices of Vodou change with the needs of its followers, so the slaves were able to shift the religion to cope with their new environment and servitude (Brown 1991: 100). The religion survives and remains relevant across shifts in power and circumstance because each generation fits Vodou to their unique needs.

Scapegoat Theory and Haitian Vodou

Since the Haitian Revolution, beginning in 1791, Haiti has seen many occupations and misuses of governmental power. Frequently, Vodou has served as a scapegoat for the problems that have plagued Haitian society. Vodou practitioners have served as the “whipping boys” for everything from natural disasters to the spread of diseases. The Haitian government, Catholic Church, United States Marines, and more recently Protestant televangelists and missionary workers have enforced the status of Vodouists as pariahs.

The government of Haiti officially sanctioned the vilification of Vodou beginning in 1835 with the passage of a ban in the Code Pénal of any type of sortilège, or spell making (Ramsey 2005: 167). Article 405 of the Code Pénal states that spell or charm making was punishable by up to six months in jail and a fine of 16-25 gourds. Article 406 made the selling of fortune telling, reading cards, or interpreting dreams punishable by six days to one month in jail and a fine of 16-25 gourds. Article 407 legalized the confiscation of all tools and garments used in the acts forbidden in the preceding acts (Ramsey 2011: 58-59). The enforcement of these laws by Haitian governments fluctuated. However, during the U.S. occupation of Haiti from 1915-1934, the Marines strictly enforced the bans. Following the passage of these laws, self-appointed “saints” violently enforced the laws in the name of Catholicism and morality (Ramsey 2011: 74). The 1835 laws, made stronger and more restrictive by an 1864 revision, remained in the Code Pénal for over 150 years (Ramsey 2011: 1). Haiti recognized Vodou as an official religion in 2003; however, this has not put an end to prejudice against Vodouists. The influx of missionary groups into Haiti, particularly after the earthquake in 2010, has once again increased tensions.

Protestantism in Haiti

Protestant missionaries have been present in Haiti for the last 100 years (Germain 2011: 250). Missionary workers are the subjects of controversy within Haiti and in other struggling nations. The presence of Protestant missions brings many short-term benefits: monetary aid, food and supplies, and volunteers to build schools and hospitals. However, controversy stems from the
missionaries’ religious motivations and intentions of conversion. The systems of healthcare and 
education that missionaries build and manage often follow ethical principles that differ greatly 
from the society in which these structures exist (Germain 2011: 258-259).

While the importance of aid should not be underplayed, the consequences of Christian 
mission work warrants examination as well. An example of a dispute about the value of mission 
work is the curriculum in mission schools. Schools established by Protestant groups undoubtedly 
serve the vital purpose of increasing literacy in developing nations, however, substantial 
resources and hours are devoted to Bible study (Germain 2011: 253). Much debate takes place 
about whether it is appropriate to cause impoverished parents to choose between sending their 
children to school and respecting their ancestral beliefs.

Evangelical and Pentecostal Protestantism have enjoyed growing popularity in Haiti since 
the 1970’s (McAlister 2005: 252). In the past, Haitians did not consider the growth of 
Protestantism threatening because Vodou is a xenophilic religion, as demonstrated by the 
common saying that all Haitians are 85 percent Catholic, 15 percent Protestant, and 100 percent 
Vodou (Germain 2011: 251). This is changing. Now, the growth of evangelical movements 
accompanies increasing tensions between the two religious groups. Many Protestants believe that 
there is a “spiritual war” being fought in Haiti, pitting Christians against Vodou (Butler 2008: 
26). Protestant leaders characterize Vodou as a depraved and satanic religion. According to these 
leaders, the Devil uses the lwa, or “false gods”, to possess Vodouists in order to corrupt and 
control communities (McAlister 2005: 252).

As the size of the missionary presence in Haiti has grown, so too has the population of 
Haitians who identify solely as Christians and sever ties with Vodou. This may have long-
reaching cultural consequences, as Vodou is deeply rooted in Haitian life and identity. Vodou 
priests and priestesses provide small, rural societies as spiritual and community leaders. Haitian 
women also utilize Vodou to gain opportunities for fiscal independence and community 
leadership in male-dominated Haiti (Brown 1991: 156-157). Many women in Haiti make their 
living as readers of fortunes and dreams, healers, and manbo (priestesses). Thus, increased 
missionary presence, and the resultant move from Vodou to Christianity may disrupt the female 
paths to empowerment found in Vodou.

Protestant aid organizations view the troubles that Haiti has experienced both past and 
present as the result of Vodou’s connection with the Devil. They believe that rejection of the 
Devil and conversion to Christianity can set Haiti on a righteous path toward prosperity 
(McAlister 2005: 253-254). The recognition of Vodou as one of Haiti’s official religions in 2003 
has not reversed this perception of Vodou as dangerous or prevented its denigration. In recent 
years, Vodou become a scapegoat for many natural disasters in Haiti, especially for the 
earthquake in January 2010.

Haitian Vodou as Scapegoat for Natural Disasters

The strife caused by natural disasters often leads to increased religious activity and 
conversion, and such was the case in Haiti after many of the tragedies suffered during the first 
decade of the new century (Germain 2011: 255). During 2008 alone, Haiti endured Hurricanes 
Fay, Gustav, Hanna, and Ike, and then an earthquake on January 12, 2010. The earthquake 
destroyed many cities, including the capital, Port-au-Prince; over 200,000 people died and about 
1.3 million people were displaced. Patrick Bellegarde-Smith (2011) illuminates the true 
magnitude of these numbers by placing them in proportion with the United States population,
similar numbers in the U.S. would be over 600,000 deaths and 110 million people displaced. The emotional trauma caused by such rampant destruction led many to turn to religion for both aid and explanation.

In the aftermath of the earthquake, blame for the disaster fell upon Vodou and its followers. Televangelist Pat Robertson commented that Haiti brought the earthquake upon itself because of a pact made with the Devil (Bellegarde-Smith 2011: 267). Robertson referred to the famous Vodou ceremony, Bwa Kayiman, held on August 14, 1791, at which Boukmann Duty summoned the lwa to help fight the Haitian Revolution. (Hebblethwaite 2012: 47). Robertson claimed that those present made a pact with the devil to liberate the slaves from their French holders (Bellegarde-Smith 2011: 267). Robertson has gained some infamy for blaming disasters upon “sinners.” In 1998, he warned participants in a Gay Pride Festival in Orlando, Florida, that they might be in the path of hurricanes sent by God. Similarly, after Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans in 2005, Robertson blamed the storm upon legalized abortion (Friedman 2011). His remarks about Haiti’s pact with the devil were echoed on Protestant media outlets; even secular journalists’ wrote about Vodou in a sensationalized manner. (Bellegarde-Smith 2011: 267-268).

Scapegoat theory and defense mechanisms are directly applicable to situations such as these. Placing the blame for natural phenomenon on chance is more threatening to an individual’s perception of an orderly world than shifting fault to an unfamiliar religion or a minority group.

Protestant Haitians also engaged in the scapegoating of Vodou. After the earthquake, Vodou practitioners suffered physical and verbal abuse, the destruction of ritual items, and disruption of ceremonies. Many Vodouists converted to Christianity because of fears that religious organizations would deny practitioners of Vodou aid (Dodd 2010). On February 23, 2010, crowds threw stones at Vodouists who were holding a ceremony for those killed by the earthquake (Dodd 2010). The crowd also urinated on Vodou symbols, destroyed food offerings, and dismantled an altar.

The defense mechanism called displacement may partially explain the scapegoating of Vodou after the earthquake. An earthquake is not something that can be blamed in any way that would be cathartic for its victims. The pervasive use of scapegoats, like Judaism and Vodou, across time demonstrates a darker side of human nature. Although discriminatory and erroneous, punishing Vodouists and assigning them with fault for Haiti’s tribulations provides emotional relief and a feeling of control to the majority of a country struggling with unfathomable loss.
Works Cited


