Vodou: A Religion that words cannot describe?
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Vodou is a non-prescriptive religion without a written moral code or strict definition. There is no complete written history of Vodou practitioners. Several reasons serve to explain the scarcity of religious texts in Vodou. This quality has not always benefited the reputation of Vodou but writing about Vodou in a way that accurately depicts the culture and history is no easy task.

The histories of Haiti and Vodou are inextricably linked and as such, both contain periods of silence (Dubois 2001:95). When slaves were brought to Haiti from Africa they were forbidden from writing or documenting and so their history was not recorded in the way Western thinking believes it should have been. This reflects a substantial difference between the oppressor and the oppressed: white Euro-American culture is concerned with the accuracy of the record Vodouists are more concerned with the vitality and retention of their history (Brown 2001: 19). Over time, the elders have passed on the practice of Vodou to their children (Hebblethwaite 2012: 1). The histories have been passed down orally through stories, memorized songs and revelation through the lwa. Dayan (1995:35) describes possessions as “rituals of history.” Another way to retain memories is through association with a landmark like a found altar that will remain and serve as a reminder of the past (Dayan 1994:13). Through serving the spirits, a history and morality has been created that cannot be found in books (Dayan 1994: 12). However, it is specifically because of this unique history that the silence about Vodou and Haiti should be broken (Dubois 2001: 95).

Because there wasn’t a codified text associated with the religion until Max Beauvoir’s book in 2008, it has been easier for writers and directors to embellish, exaggerate and even fabricate customs of Vodou. For example, one of the contributions to the negative stigma attached to Vodou is Wade Davis’s book-turned-horror movie directed by Wes Craven: “The Serpent and the Rainbow” which shows practitioners engaging in black magic to turn people into zombies (Dubois 2001: 93). Things like voodoo dolls and black magic give the false impression of knowledge (Cosentino 1996: 8). Scholars since the 1990’s have attempted to dismiss the reputation that has haunted Vodou. Such is the case with the term “Vodou” itself. New scholarship spurred the change from the negatively associated term “voodoo” to “Vodou” which is more similar to the Creole pronunciation (Dubois 2001: 93).

This is not to say that complete disclosure of Vodou customs would settle any disapproval people have with the culture. Certain customs, rituals, or practices of Vodou could certainly make some people cringe. Donald Cosentino (1996) writes of his experience with opening up “Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou” in UCLA’s Fowler museum. The painting Mardigras at Fort Dimanche by Edouard Duval-Carrie depicts the Duvailer family and their attendants in the torture chamber dressed in black with black sunglasses: the markers of the tonton makout. Baby Doc dons a frilly dress and bears a pistol in his left hand. But most shocking are three bleeding hands nailed to the wall and a fourth hand clearly sticking out of Mama Simone’s (Papa Doc’s widow) basket (Cosentino 1996: 8). This painting sparked debate because it might contribute to the stereotype of human sacrifice. Mama Lola, a well-known and highly respected Vodou healer and expert said the painting must be included because it showed it “just the way it was” (Cosentino 1996: 8, 10).
One way of trying to represent Vodou is through the lyrics of the songs of the religion. The volume and diversity of the songs of Vodou offer a great look into the past and present of Vodou because the songs change as the people and circumstances change and they tell the story in the voices of the practitioners themselves (Hebblethwaite 2012:3). Even though some of these songs have been written down and translated, the songs are constantly being composed, altered and forgotten as the community in which they are sung evolves. (Hebblethwaite 2012:2) But even once these songs are put into writing they do not convey the powerful drums or the intensity of a possession (Hebblethwaite 2012:5). Perhaps it is because the spirits of Vodou cannot be understood in and confined to literary form (Dayan 1994:18). Possession must be experienced for full understanding and cannot be adequately captured by merely observing and recording.

In *Mama Lola: A Priestess in Brooklyn* Karen Mcarthy Brown tells the stories of five generations of Mama Lola’s family of healers. In this book Brown allows herself to become personally involved in Vodou to gain the full “depth of understanding” despite conventional ideas about remaining objective as an anthropologist. However even this understanding can only speak to her own experiences and interactions with Vodou (Brown 2001: 11). She goes on further to say that being able to blend and interact with a culture is different from being able to write about that culture (Brown 2001: 13). Even after 35 years of friendship with Alourdes Brown still knows that the stories Alourdes has told her cannot be replicated in written text (Brown 2001: 17).

Even though scholars have made great strides in the documentation of the history of Vodou, the record will never be fixed entirely because as a revelatory religion things change at a quick pace (Dayan 1994: 16). Any Vodou writings can only be understood in their context. The religion is not codified so the religion adapts to the people and circumstances that surround and interact with it to maintain harmony. Vodou is constantly changing as the people who serve the spirits and the spirits themselves continue to develop. Vodou is a way of life and is lived differently by each and every practitioner and only through personal involvement in the Vodou culture through possession, ritual, and song can scholars hope to shed light on the mysteries of Vodou.


