

To the average American listener, the word “voodoo” recalls images of charms, curses, effigies, and superstition. One could easily replace the word with “witchcraft” or “black magic” for all the difference there is in the mind of the American conscious, and yet true Voodoo exists and has existed before and beyond such associations. Indeed, Voodoo (or Vodou, as modern scholarship knows it) is not superstition or magic—it is a religion born of and shaped by the Haitian slave revolt and is still widely practiced in Haiti today. When the slave revolt ended, immigration from Haiti to New Orleans brought Vodou to the U.S., where it morphed into Louisiana Vodou (a similar but separate set of traditions from Haitian Vodou). Even this is not the same as the colloquial voodoo described above, as this “voodoo” is more akin to hoodoo (African folk magic), if it has any basis in reality. Dispelling of these erroneous and even harmful understandings of Afro-Haitian religion can best be motivated through education—and in the process, create an appreciation for the creative traditions surrounding Vodou.

Haitian Vodou was created when Haiti was still the French colony of St. Domingue, when slaves of different African ethnic groups were brought to the colony and Christianized by Roman Catholic missionaries in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. As a result, Haitian Vodou incorporates many traditions from these different ethnic groups, as well as elements from Christianity; Vodou can thus be described as a creolized religion, just as the Haitian vernacular is described as a creole language. The key practices of Vodou involve the worship and service of the *lwa*, spirits of the unseen world who act as intermediates between humanity and the Supreme Creator Bondye. Named for the French term “bon dieu” (“good God”), Bondye is a creolized form of the Christian God who created the universe and the *lwa*. However, Bondye does not interfere with human affairs and can only be reached through the *lwa*. The *lwa* are

spirits (not deities—Vodou is monotheistic). They can be personally related to a practitioner, as spirits of departed family, or be known as part of a collective pantheon, as is the case with *lwa* of particular esteem (for example, Agwe, *lwa* of the oceans, and his wife Erzulie, *lwa* of fertility and love). Each *lwa* has a personality with distinct likes and dislikes, which means that practitioners must cater to the specific *lwa* they wish to communicate with during rituals. When *lwas* are summoned in a ritual, they often temporarily take a human host (usually the priest or priestess leading the service), whose body they will use to give advice, perform healing, accept offerings, and otherwise interact with practitioners. There are seventeen pantheons of *lwa*, although there are two that are larger and more prominent in Vodou: the Rada and the Petwo. These two pantheons are distinguished primarily by the temperament and origin of the *lwas* within them—the Rada *lwa* are friendlier and more peaceful than the Petwo, who are protective and aggressive. The influence of Christianity on Vodou can be seen not only in the existence of Bondye, but also in the *lwa*: certain *lwa*, particularly the more well-known ones, are syncretized with Catholic saints. The feast days for those *lwa* occur on the same day as the saint's day

Unlike many religions, the relationship between art and worship in Haitian Vodou is not just that of depiction and depicted. Art is infused in nearly every aspect of Vodou: ceremonies require song and dance (usually performed using intricately decorated instruments themselves) in order to summon *lwa* to the land of the living, and Vodou altars heavily feature figurines, quilts, and artifacts from previous interactions with spirits. The prevalence of art in Vodou tradition provides a degree of personalization that extends as far as the individual's concept of art is willing to go—as one scholar puts it, even a Mattel doll brought for a child from the U.S.

could end up on an altar as a representation of Erzulie. If art is representative of the artist's worldview, then the colorful art of Vodou should make it obvious that the worldview of Vodouists is not one of just ignorance and poverty, as the rest of the world is so inclined to portray, but one as vivid, passionate, and intricate as that of any practitioner of any religion.



*Left: a sequined figurine depicting Zazi Maza Wangol, a Vodou forest spirit who uses plants to create remedies and potions. Right: a Vodou priestess (mambo) at an altar. Note the patterned blankets and small figurines.*

Historically, Vodou has played an important role in Haiti's political timeline. Prior to Haiti's independence, the practice of Vodou was illegal. However, it was a Vodou ceremony organized for slaves by the priest (houngan) Boukman Dutty that is often described as the instigating event of the Haitian Revolution. This ceremony was known as the Bois Caiman (named for the wooded area in which it took place), occurred on August 14, 1791, and made

Vodou into a rallying force for the revolution: the most prevailing images of the ceremony involve a great storm, a pact to overthrow the whites, and a lwa-possessed priestess named Cecile Fatiman sacrificing a pig in the name of revolution and offering cups of its blood to the participants. It is unclear what parts of the Bois Caiman actually occurred and what did not; some even argue that it did not occur at all. Yet even the rumor of its existence has taken on a legendary status in Haitian history. Following the success of the revolt in 1804, however, Vodou became a dividing line between the rural and elite populations; the former continued to see it as a symbol of revolution and freedom, while the latter felt as though the “backwards” religion undercut Haiti’s legitimacy in the global forum. Vodou was outlawed and legalized many times even after the slave revolt, and though Haiti now offers religious freedom, the rise of evangelical Protestantism among Haitians continues to threaten Vodou’s autonomy. Many Vodou practitioners are also Roman Catholics, but Protestant Christianity is often viewed as incompatible with Vodou. Haitian Protestants in Haiti and elsewhere tend to view Vodou as “devil worship” and blame Haiti’s high poverty rates (and the 2010 earthquake) on such worship.

Even for a brief overview, it would be a complete oversight to not discuss Vodou’s American derivative, simply known as Louisiana Vodou. Louisiana Vodou is a more secular tradition than Haitian Vodou, likely as a result of being transplanted into a country where its practitioners were minorities, and reputable information about its practices is not as easily found as that on Haitian Vodou. Louisiana Vodouists make livings through selling charms, curses, and blessings; the most historically notable of them is certainly Marie Laveau, a free woman of color who was born to a Haitian mother and French father in 1783 New Orleans.

After taking interest in her mother's Vodou faith, she became known as the "Queen of Vodou" for her notable capabilities in healing and in supernatural knowledge. Laveau's Catholicism existed side-by-side with her Vodou beliefs, which made her services more palatable to the primarily Christian upper-crust of New Orleans society—unfortunately, this did not increase the legitimacy of Vodou in the eyes of the white elite. It can be inferred that many of this elite came to perceive Vodou as a fun, occult pastime or souvenir compared to the "real" religion of Christianity, if the current connotation of "voodoo" in the American vernacular is any indication. Laveau also had two daughters that took up both her name and her mantle of Vodou Queen, leading to quite a bit of confusion over which Marie Laveau did what.



*Left: Example of a gris-gris, a small bag full of charms with various effects that originated in West African religion and is often sold by Louisiana Vodouists. Artwork in Louisiana Vodou generally takes the form of amulets such as these.*

Despite its reputation, the mythos of Haitian and Louisiana Vodou is no more occult or strange than anything that exists in the Bible or any other holy text. It is at once simple and incredibly complex to rationalize why Vodou has received such negative attention from not only outsiders but even Haitians who may have grown up in the Vodou tradition. The answer is tied up in the Haitian Revolution, pervasive attitudes of white supremacy among non-whites, Christianity, and slavery. It has taken decades of research and thousands of essays to even scrape the surface of this answer, and it will take many more; and yet, before we can even

begin to contribute to the discussion of art, religion, and power, we must first educate ourselves.

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