

A Glimpse into Vodou Paul Touloute

Since creation, human beings have always desired to investigate the invisible world. This led to many philosophies and religious tendencies that account for many religions in the world. Vodou, one of those, is practiced throughout the world under various names. Slaves from various African tribes were able to preserve it in Haiti. The attempt of this article shall be to investigate Vodou beliefs for a better understanding of them as well as an honest and respectful communication with people holding them.

1. A DESCRIPTION OF VODOU

1.1. Alternative Designations

Vodou permeates the whole Caribbean basin and also extends to some American states. Vodou is the traditional and popular religion of Haiti. This pantheistic religion, that has affinity with many other religions and mythologies, is known in Cuba and throughout South America under names such as hoodoo, santeria, chango, naniguismo, candomble, and macumba. Even in Haiti it is designated as Vodoun, Vaudou, Vodou, Vodou, and Voodoo. First, it was named differently among the various African lines; second, Haitian Creole varies much both in orthography and phonetics because it is developed from many languages and dialects¹; and third, it builds heavily on French, the other official language of Haiti. The term “Vodou” that the Haitian majority use to describe this belief system comes from *vo*: introspection and *du*: into the unknown. Thus, Vodou means “introspection into the unknown.”

For the sake of uniformity, and because it is closer to the most common and standardized spelling of the common language of Haiti, the author of this article will depart from the spelling of some of his sources and adopt “V-o-d-o-u” to mean any of the above spellings. His reader will hopefully bear with him because to the Creole speaker, “Creole is spoken, Creole is understood.” “Those who indulge in this introspection into the *mystere* (mystery) will comprehend not only the Voodoo [Vodou] gods, but also the souls of those who are the adepts and servants of these gods.”² Yet, some Vodou devotees prefer to simply say, “I serve the gods.”³

1.2. Motifs of Thoughts

Each religion has its own set of polarized attitudes toward acceptance or rejection of the surrounding culture. Each reflects the great complexity and diversity of human experience, even within one tradition.⁴ But many people throughout the world were drawn into Vodou just because its forms, rhythms, and mysteries are universal and fundamental to the human experience, regardless of one’s origin or skin color. “Vodou is tolerant....”⁵

¹Joan Dayan, *Haiti, History, and the Gods* (University of California Press, 1995), xxiii.

²Milo Rigaud, *Secrets of Voodoo* (City Lights Books, 1969), 8-9

³Dayan, 288, note 7.

⁴Robert S. Ellwood, *Many Peoples, Many Faiths*, 5th. ed. (Prentice Hall, 1996), 23.

⁵Sallie A. Glassman, *Vodou Visions: An Encounter with Divine Mystery* (Villard Books, 2000), 3.

Enslaved Negroes brought Vodou from Africa to Haiti and from it they sought to obtain comfort and hope, power to destroy one's enemies, protection from harm, and cures for illness or disease.⁶ Based on ancestor worship, it is a religion of survival and hope that teaches a unique combination of empowerment and humility in communal service to the faith. Its followers believe in helpful and healing gods who provide spiritual focus and direction.

Vodou can be practiced either individually or in community. Yet, it is so sophisticated and entrancing that it remains profoundly mysterious to man no matter how deep, intelligent, diligent, or creative he is.⁷ Haitians take it very seriously and sincerely believe that it empowers its practitioners to manipulate the creative power in the universe through the cosmic forces. Vodou, they hold, also enables them to attune themselves with the environmental natural rhythm of life forces to live well without harming others.⁸

1.3. History

Vodou, a spiritual tradition, evolved in Haiti during the period of French colonial slavery. Africans from many ethnic lineages and traditional religions, transported by force to Haiti as agricultural slaves, derived this folk religion as a by-product of their contact with Roman Catholicism. Yet, Vodou sinks its roots in remote civilizations of the world and encompasses an exceedingly complex religion and magic with complicated rituals and symbols that have developed for thousands of years. Its believers center their hopes and fears on it as strongly as do the followers of any other world religion.⁹

“It is vain that subtle processes have been employed to envelope in darkness the brilliant phases of the mental evolution of the Negro....All the theocratic legislation of Moses, the Bible social and religious codes, bear the imprint of the sacred formulas of the Negro's faith...”¹⁰ Vodou adherents have transformed their African ethnic traditions according to their environmental, sociocultural, and economic situations. The liturgical calendars of Vodou and Catholicism correspond with each other and many Vodou adepts simultaneously practice Catholicism.¹¹

The Haitian revolutionists successfully used Vodou, ever present on the battlefield, to found the first black republic and second nation in the Western Hemisphere.¹² It is believed that slave revolt leaders were under Ogou's inspiration. At the “Bwa Caiman Ceremony,” which began the Haitian revolution in 1794, Mambo Marinette sacrificed a wild hog to Ezili Dantor to don immunity to the French enslavers' bullets. “Even the death of the majority of General Leclerc's expeditionary force” is attributed to the work of the *djabs* (Vodou forces).¹³

⁶Anna Riva, *Voodoo Handbook of Cult Secrets* (CA: International Imports, 1974), 6.

⁷Glassman, 5.

⁸Charles L. Manske and Daniel N. Harmelink. *World Religions Today: Comparative Outlines of Contemporary Faiths Around the World*. (Institute for World Religions, 1996), 91.

⁹Rigaud, 7.

¹⁰Her-Ra-Ma-El, Quoted in Rigaud, 10.

¹¹Leslie G. Desmangles, *The Faces of the Gods: Vodou and Roman Catholicism in Haiti* (Book News, 1992), 172-174.

¹²Michel S. Laguerre, *Voodoo and Politics in Haiti* (Martin's Press, 1989), 70.

¹³Mambo Racin San Bout, “Vodou Lesson” <http://www.voodoo>, 1996.

The masters ferociously reacted to Vodou and punished its practitioners with most cruel treatments such as castrations and hangings. In spite of such cruelty, the struggle of the blacks continued until the proclamation of Haiti's independence in 1804.¹⁴ From then on, many groups vainly attempted to do away with Vodou, only to later admit: "If you can't defeat them, co-opt with them."¹⁵ "Vodou is like the maize of Haiti...it will never be eradicated from the Haitian society... because it is interwoven so completely within the fabric of Haitian life."¹⁶

1.4. Divisions

The Vodou priesthood performs such functions as healing, pacifying the spirits, initiations, foretelling, dream reading, spell casting, and creating potions for various purposes like protection, love and death.

In the Vodou list of gods, *Legba*, symbolized by the sun and an erect penis, is the *lwa* of communication between the earthly world and that of the Invisibles. He is the origin of life, the source of regeneration. *Kalfou* (crossroads) is the spirit of darkness and *Papa Ghede*, the "*loa* [*lwa*] of death and resurrection." *Dumballah* is the source of peace and tranquility while *Agwe* is the sea sovereign. *Ogoun*, the violent warrior, is the force of politics whereas *Erzulie* [*Ezili*] is the goddess of love, the muse of beauty.¹⁷ *Baron Samedi*, the most feared of all the *lwa*, is the keeper of the cemetery. The *Petro lwa* are considered fierce, protective, magical, and aggressive toward adversaries. Among the various Vodou denominations are the Orthodox, the *Makaya*, and the *Kongo*.

Certain *lwa* are served by only one individual (*Bòkò*) who invokes them on behalf of clients for compensation, usually in the form of animal sacrifice. Such *lwa* are commonly referred to as *djab*, (wild spirit), whose function is magical. The *djab* also protect from possible acts of random aggression through a *gad* (magical shield) placed in the individual's skin. Certain particularly amoral *djab* can be invoked to effect a person's demise.

1.5. Beliefs

The Vodouist believes that there is one god supreme over all of them. He is the great architect and creator of the universe, where he manifests His power through the *lwas* that are his children and representatives.¹⁸ The Vodouist also believes in three important categories of other spiritual beings – the *loa* [*lwa*] (spirits), the twins, and the dead.¹⁹ The Vodouist believes in the Last Judgment and the victory of God's beneficence over Satan's maleficence, but he only has a vague concept of heaven and hell and the end of the world. He pictures God as omnipresent, omniscient, and omnipotent, holding a cross in his right hand – which represents the four cardinal points – and a scale in his left hand, which represents man's destiny as planned by Legba.²⁰

¹⁴Rigaud, 13.

¹⁵Bob Corbett, "Introduction to Voodoo in Haiti" <http://www.voodoo>, March, 1995.

¹⁶Desmangles, 174-181.

¹⁷Corbett, March, 1995.

¹⁸Desmangles, 159.

¹⁹Corbett, March, 1995.

²⁰Desmangles, 164-167.

The twins are “a curious and rather mysterious set of forces of contradictories” that will tend to help people who honor them to have the better side of life. “Healing people from illness . . . with herbs, faith healing (with the help of *lwa* and other spirits) and, today, even with western medicine,” is central to Vodou and constitutes about 60% of all its activity.²¹

The dead are “mainly the souls of one’s family members who have died but are not yet ‘reclaimed’ by the family.” They are helpful or dangerous depending on whether the family members honor and care for them or ignore them.

The *lwa* are lesser entities, more readily accessible, that serve those who serve them, requiring a mutual relationship.. They have well-defined characteristics, including sacred numbers, colors, days, ceremonial foods, speech mannerisms, and ritual objects through which they can be served.

Vodou directs its ceremonies only to the gods differently from any animistic principle of life energy pertaining nature. The *poteaumitan* [*potomitan*] (center post) that supports the roof of the peristyle of the “*oum’phor*” (Vodou temple) and serves as a representation of the chief Vodou god Legba “is the axis of the rite.” This center post “represents the structural material of the Temple of Jerusalem – the wood of Lebanon.”²²

1.6. Worship

All rites use prayer, song, drumming, costume and dancing during ceremonies, but God is considered somewhat distant and detached from human affairs. God himself created the spirits as intermediaries between him and man.²³ He is yet ever-present in the daily speech of Haitians, who always say, “if God wants.”²⁴

In Haiti, “Voodoo [Vodou] rituals borrow heavily from Roman Catholic services, including an altar covered with candles and surrounded by pictures of saints and the use of holy water, which is sprinkled over worshipers by means of a leafy branch.” Candles, prevalent since ancient times are burnt to gain love or wealth, to cast spells and exorcise evil, to heal, and to symbolize faith.²⁵ Animal sacrifice takes place in almost every service to “get movement going both ways between the imagined and the real . . . to be part of healing ceremonies . . . or to “release the vital life force to the *lwa* in order [for them] to manifest”²⁶ in the visible world.

1.7. Ethics and Practices

As men and women grow in knowledge and standing in the Vodou community, they attain to higher levels of initiation in orthodox Vodou. They receive counsel and medical treatment from a *Houngan* or *Manbo* [priest], and take part in related activities. They will also take a dragon blood bath to obtain faith, constancy, the spirit of success, and to attract attention.

²¹Corbett, March, 1995.

²²Rigaud, 8-9.

²³Jean Louis, 17.

²⁴Mambo Racine Sans Bout, “Vodou Lesson” <http://www.voodoo>, 1996.

²⁵Riva, 6, 13-15.

²⁶Glassman, 20.

Before and after casting a spell, vodouists wash their hands in a brew made with hyssop leaves. They also use “life-everlasting leaves” to fight illness and to lengthen life.²⁷ Their spells are said to bind, break, make, mend, harm an enemy, make rain, banish ghosts, or raise the spirits of the dead.

Lave-tet (head washing) is a ritual water baptism that facilitates the entrance of the *lwa* in the new initiate’s head and “consecrates the novice to the service of the *lwes* in the *ounfo*.”²⁸ At times the priest washes the initiate’s head and covers it with a paste made up of rice, bread, syrup, and blood to place him/her under the protection of a particular *lwa*.²⁹ “All dancing revolves around the *Poto mitan* . . . the center pole in a Vodou peristyle. It represents the center of the universe. . . . Virtually all Vodou acts, even healing, begin with the acknowledgment of the crossroads . . . the place where the two worlds meet.”³⁰

Vodou does not discriminate on the basis of gender, race, age, sexual orientation, national origin requirements, or pre-existing religious affiliation. A Vodou ceremony is public, and anyone may enter the peristyle (temple) to observe its activities. Singing and dancing are encouraged, and a free-will offering to help defray the cost of the ceremony is welcome. However, neither the uninitiated nor a lower grade initiate may participate in a ceremony conferring a higher grade of initiation, because they are not competent to access the secret knowledge imparted on such an occasion..

1.8. Polity

A Houngan/Manbo *asogwe*, like bishops, can consecrate other priests, *kanzo senp*, or *asogwe*. At a ceremony, they are the final authority on procedure, unless a *lwa* is present and manifests its presence through the mechanism of bodily possession of a worshiper. Deference by lower to higher rank is mandatory.

2. A CHRISTIAN RESPONSE TO VODOU

On the one hand, Vodou and Christianity share certain characteristics that could lead an outsider to the conclusion that differences between the two are not so great, or that Vodou and Christianity could team up to address the different needs of the people of the land they share. On the other hand, the two faiths seem so distant that one would say no dialogue is even possible between them. The following lines will attempt to address the most common features of Vodou and Christianity, as well as the most important difference between them.

2.1. Similarities

Both Vodou and Christianity acknowledge a supreme God who created the universe and exercises full control over it. Both acknowledge the world of the spirits and the spiritual warfare that is going on in the world. They both assert they can give protection from the supernatural. Both religions practice water baptism to initiate their members. Both use symbols such as the

²⁷Riva, 20.

²⁸Desmangles, 87.

²⁹Riva, 43.

³⁰Corbett, 1995.

cross to portray their beliefs. Both believe in life after death. Both have strong conviction that, in the end, the forces of good will triumph over the forces of evil.

2.2. Difference

In Vodou, God is distant. He deals with humans through intermediaries, namely spirits, that human beings can manipulate as they wish. But Christianity knows a very personal, gracious, involved God. He is a Father Who loves sinners so much that He entered into their world through His only Son to die in the place of sinners so that they may receive eternal life (John. 3:16). Vodou sees the spirits as God's children who "draw their sustenance" from God and who represent "the many aspects of his personality." Some are inferior and some are superior³¹, but through them God gives "all good things."³² Christianity trusts in God the Holy Spirit. He is the Lord and the giver of a new spiritual life (2 Cor. 3:6). Christians see the present world, and humans particularly, as the battleground of the evil spirits who seeks to keep humans from receiving God's gift of eternal life in Jesus Christ (Ephesians 6:10ff.). Therefore Christians test the spirits to see whether or not they are from God (1 John 4:1).

The Vodouist lives in constant fear of being harmed because "*Si fe pat koupe fe, machoket pa ta bat*" ("There would be no blacksmith if iron could not cut iron"). But Christians have the comfort of the Biblical witness that reveals to them that not only is Satan's kingdom divided but also the concatenation of all the satanic forces is nothingness before the loving, all-powerful God. He protects His people from eternal damnation. Wherever His message of salvation in Jesus Christ is focused upon and believed, evil power is bound (Luke 10:18-19; John 16:23; Revelation 17:14). It appeared to be sheer defeat when Jesus died on the cross. However, His resurrection proved He conquered sin, Satan, and death and therefore changed the course of history to such extent that even the lives and reigns of those who put Him to death are to be reckoned in reference to Him.³³

The God revealed through the Bible is the God whose gifts to sinners often go beyond human expectations. The lame man at the Jerusalem temple did not seem to have so high expectations as to be healed (Acts 3:1-10), nor did the paralyzed man in Capernaum expect to be treated in both body and soul (Mark 2:1-12). Simon the magician was so amazed at the power of the Spirit working through the disciples that he attempted to purchase some of it (Acts 8). True power to conquer all that would hinder human entrance into a blessed life eternal resides in Jesus' hands and is given to those who follow Him.

Even if the Christian knows someone would try to cast a spell on him, he lives in perfect peace in Christ who bore sin's worst spell upon a Jerusalem cross in the sinner's place. The Christian has full protection and victory over the enemy through the Triune God who created him, redeemed him, and sanctified him.³⁴ When the Christian stops breathing in his mortal body, he knows that he is taken to the presence of His Lord, as it was in the case of Stephen (Acts 7:54-60).

³¹Riva, 40.

³²Desmangles, 159-160.

³³Matthew 26-28; Mark 15-16; Luke 23-24; 1 Co. 15.

³⁴Ps. 118:6; Rom. 8:31-34; Ps. 34:6-8.

The washing of the head, the Vodou concept of baptism, is a process that achieves entrance into the Vodou rite since water is the pathway of the *loas* [*lwa*].³⁵ It prepares a candidate to be mounted by the *lwa* and sanctifies that person as a temple for the *lwa* and an ally with the forces they embody.³⁶ The Christian concept of Baptism is that in that action, God the Holy Spirit is at work to connect the baptized to the Triune God and the life that knows no end (Titus 3:5). Through Christian Baptism, one becomes the temple of the Holy Spirit, empowered and protected by the Triune God to live in joy and holiness. (Rom. 6:4-6; 1 Peter 3:21-22).

2.3 Main difference

The primary difference between Vodou and Christianity resides in the cross and their respective centerposts. To Vodou the cross is as a representation of “the four cardinal points of the universe,”³⁷ the home of Papa Legba and Gede, the god of death and sexuality.³⁸ Christianity sees the cross as the center of the God’s triumph over humanity’s sin, death, and the devil on a Jerusalem cross, through the sacrifice and merits of the God-man and sinners’ substitute, Jesus Christ (Col 2:9-15). His blood has cleansed them from all sin (1 John 1:7). The Vodou centerpost is Legba while the centerpost of Christianity is Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world.

The Vodou idea of sacrifice is to heal or to sustain the spirits, something man does for his gods. But the Bible stresses human beings cannot bargain with or purchase God’s favor (Ps. 49:7). Sinners can do nothing to open the way into God’s kingdom nor do they have any claim on God. No person can justify himself (Rom. 3:20). The supreme God created men and women in His own likeness to enjoy a perfect relationship with Him, but they severed themselves from His fellowship when they sought to live independent of Him; to fear, love, and trust only himself. (Genesis 3). But He sought them out; He desired to restore fellowship with them.

The Good News, the Christian Gospel, proclaims that God has supplied the blood of humanity’s Savior. “The life is in the blood **and I have given it to you**” (Lev. 17:11). The Christian idea of sacrifice focuses upon the amazing heart of God Who gave His Son as a ransom on the Calvary cross so that sinful humans may have spiritual freedom as well as life everlasting (John 3:16-17). Through the perfect blood of His Son Jesus Christ, He rescued them and adopted them again as His own children (John 1:12; Rom. 8:16). Still today, Jesus Christ is the only Way or connection to the living Father (John 14:6). There is no other Name under heaven given to men by which one can be saved (Acts 4:12). In Jesus Christ, creation is redeemed and will be eventually restored to perfection when the Lord returns (Rom. 8:21).

God is saddened when those He has redeemed and whom He invites to come to Him directly and personally (Matthew 6; Mark 11:24) go to the spirits as intermediaries. Although the practice of Vodou goes very far back in time, God has never approved of it. He punished nations that had practiced it and still promises to punish those who practice it today.³⁹ The Scriptures advise human beings to test the spirits because many false prophets have gone out into the world (1 John 4:1).

³⁵Rigaud, 166.

³⁶Glassman, 33.

³⁷Desmangles, 167.

³⁸Glassman, 13.

³⁹Dt. 18:10-12; Ez. 13:20; Gal. 5:19-21.

CONCLUSION

God does not desire animal or human sacrifices. He graciously summons all people to come to Him in repentance and to receive from Him forgiveness of sins, along with all His other blessings (Is. 1:11-20, Ps. 51:17). He gives His Holy Spirit so they look to Jesus Christ and His Word.⁴⁰ Through His Word, the Bible, God the Holy Spirit is present to guide them (Gal. 5:16), to inform them (1 Cor. 2:10), and to connect them to His power through faith in Jesus Christ. Only Jesus is Lord. He is alive and governing the Universe on behalf of His followers, and He is always present to strengthen them in their trials and weakness (Rom. 8:26).

God's desire is that all be saved from the demonic forces that seek their destruction. God through Jesus revealed that He wills all to be saved and to come to the knowledge of truth resident in Christ. He is the only one Mediator between the holy God and sinful humankind (1 Tim. 2:3-6). He is the source of the one Spirit, the Holy Spirit, who defeats all evil spirits. Unless those human beings who call upon spirits repent, abandon their practices, and receive the gifts of God through His Word, they will have no part in the kingdom of Christ when He comes in His glory (Rev. 22:12-16).

⁴⁰Acts 4:31; 1 John 3:24.

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WEB SITES

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