

# LUTHERAN MISSION WORK AMONG HAITIAN VODOUISANTS

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[August 2011 - The following research article is divided into two parts. First, a brief synopsis of Vodou (Voodoo) as practiced in Haiti is provided. This is followed by an anthropological analysis of the religion and practical applications for Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS) mission workers in this Caribbean country. The research project itself was conducted with the encouragement of the WELS Latin American Committee and at the request of Dr. Terry Schultz, missionary to Haiti.]

## PART I VODOU: THE BASICS

### SYNOPSIS

Stripped to the bare essentials, Vodou is belief in numerous spirits or deities. Male or female priests conduct a variety of ceremonies, rites, and rituals which incorporate dancing, drumming, singing, and feasting. The purpose of many Vodou ceremonies is to invite spirit possession. A god or spirit enters into a ceremonial participant and can speak through the person and on behalf of the individual. For the devotee, Vodou is a means to very practical ends: healing, encouraging good luck, bringing about good or evil, wading off evil, divination, and the like. Finally, Vodou provides a series of social, psychological and political functions in society as well.

### NAMES

“Vodou” is the currently accepted spelling of the religion best known as *Voodoo*. Alternative spellings and pronunciations include: *Voudou, Vodun, Vodou, Vodoun, Vaudou* and similar variations. The word *Vodou* is of African Dahoman extraction and means “lesser deities, spirits, sacred objects.” Devotees are called *Vodouisants*.

Even as *Vodou* is spelled in various ways, so are other words associated with the religion. Examples are *zombie* and *zonbi, loa* and *lwa, mambo* and *manbo, houngan* and *oungan*. There is no one, universally accepted phonology.

### LOCATION AND LANGUAGES

In 1492 Christopher Columbus “discovered” the Caribbean island of Hispaniola with its indigenous populations. Within two centuries the French colonized the western third of the island which they called Saint-Dominque (now Haiti). The Spanish controlled the eastern portion of the island now called the Dominican Republic.

Because of French control of Haiti, French became the language of the educated elite. In order to communicate with one another, slaves, who spoke a variety of different languages, developed Creole French. (Creole language = “one that has developed from the blending of two or more languages and that has become a first language learned by children”—Stein and Stein 2005:253.) Meanwhile, Spain controlled the Dominican Republic where Spanish is spoken.

## ROOTS AND HISTORY

The roots of Haitian Vodou reach back to West Africa and the slave trade. Following struggles between various European powers, Saint-Dominique (Haiti) became a French colony in 1697 with the signing of the Treaty of Ryswick. In time this colony became the richest in the entire Caribbean. Conditions were right, especially in the fertile north, for crops including sugarcane, indigo, cacao, and cotton. Sugarcane was particularly profitable because the sugar could be processed into molasses and rum.

Sugarcane cultivation, including clearing the land, planting, tending, harvesting, and processing, was very labor intensive. Thus, a large number of slaves were brought from Africa. By some estimates, nearly a half million slaves from hundreds of West African tribes and kingdoms, speaking dozens of mutually unintelligible languages, crossed the Atlantic (Courlander 1985:4-5). The most heavily represented groups included the Yoruba, Fon, and Konga from what are now several African nations including Benin, Nigeria, Togo, Ghana, and the Republic of Congo.

Slaves were treated more brutally in Haiti than elsewhere in the Caribbean. They were treated like chattel, and many were tortured and abused. Consequently, the life expectancy of slaves was extremely low, and new slaves had to be imported continually from Africa. The most intense period of importation of slaves occurred between 1730 and 1790.

Slaves soon outnumbered the French colonists who lived in constant fear of slave rebellions. To prevent such possible occurrences, plantation owners divided their slaves into small work and housing units spread across the plantations. Slaves in these work gangs had come from different tribes and spoke different languages making communication difficult. Thus, according to the colonists' thinking, the slaves would find it difficult to communicate much less to plan a revolt. By combining various African tongues and French, however, the slaves developed Creole French and could communicate freely (Stein and Stein 2005:253).

While this was taking place, and during the height of slavery, Vodou was evolving as the unifying slave religion. French law demanded that slaves received some exposure to Catholicism. Through the amalgamation of various African religious traditions, native Amerindian (Arawak) beliefs and practices, and Catholicism, Vodou came into being. It was the "religion of the oppressed." "Its appeal lay in the fact that it was linked both to African polytheism and to the efforts then being made on the Black Continent to unify all the tribal religions" (Lanternari 1963:139). Vodou was particularly important for the "maroons," the fugitive slaves living out of harm's way in inaccessible mountain areas.

In 1790 tensions in Haiti reached a crescendo. Free blacks demanded French citizenship. Then, between 14 August 1791 and 1 January 1804 the feared slave revolts occurred. After this prolonged struggle, Haiti, in 1804, became independent from France. Thus, it became the first black republic in the New World and the only nation born of a slave revolt. Although scholars debate the matter, it seems that Vodou played a significant role in the struggles for freedom.

The establishment of a new Haitian republic was fraught with problems from the beginning. For a time neighboring nations refused to recognize a new republic formed by ex-slaves. In addition, the Vatican recalled its priest from Haiti in 1804. Thus Haiti went through a period of isolation during which time Vodou flourished.

In the centuries which followed, Haitians and Vodou spread beyond the confines of western Hispaniola as Vodouisants arrived in Santiago, Cuba, and in New Orleans in the United

States. More recently, economic and political struggles have led to the diffusion of Haitians and Vodou to New York City, Miami, Montreal, and Paris (Brown 2008:325) as part of what is called the Haitian diaspora.

## VODOU SYNCRETISM

Vodou can best be described as a syncretistic religion. (Syncretism = “the mixing or blending of religious beliefs and practices that result from contact between different religious traditions”—Crapo 2003:261.) In simplest terms, Vodou is an African-based, Catholic-influenced religion which incorporates additional elements derived from aboriginal Haitian religions, African Islam, and other sources.

When the West African slaves were brought to the New World, they brought with them their various religions and worldviews. French colonists and slaveowners in Haiti, meanwhile, were Catholic. In 1685, France, under King Louis XIV, passed the *Code Noir* (Black Code). In Haiti the *Code Noir* forbade the exercise of any religion other than Catholicism. It prescribed that slaves were to be baptized and instructed in the Catholic religion. It mandated that assemblies of slaves for purposes other than Catholic worship were illegal. Slavemasters who permitted such gatherings were to be punished. Night meetings of slaves, however, did take place during the 1700s. At these clandestine meetings, African culture was kept alive by the slaves through tales, discussions, and religious and magical rites (Simpson 1980:234). In time, Catholic rites and images, much more than theology, were combined with the West African religious beliefs into Vodou (Brown 2008:327). Vodou, thus, mainly represents an amalgam of various African religious traditions with an admixture of Roman Catholicism.

To those steeped in the basic tenets of Western Civilization, Vodou lacks consistency and care must be taken not to force Haitian beliefs into a preconceived structure (Simpson 1980:237). Indeed, Vodou has a “propensity for fluidity in marrying ostensibly opposite constructs” (Bellegarde-Smith and Michel 2006:xx). The confusions, contradictions, and un-clarities which abound in Vodou are of more concern to outsiders, however, than to Vodouisants. Vodou is in motion. It changes from place to place and group to group. Haitian Vodou has no one overarching, formal religious organization or control (Courlander 1985:10). Rather, each Vodou group is, for the most part, autonomous, and takes on the personality of its priest or priestess. Furthermore, rural Vodou groups tend to be more extended family oriented while urban Vodou groups are not. Rural Vodou is simpler and is practiced in response to crises. Urban Vodou tends to be more elaborate and follows a set calendar of ceremonies. In addition, considerable differences exist between Vodou in the north of Haiti as compared to ceremonies in other parts of the country.

## VODOU GODS AND SPIRITS, SAINTS AND ANGELS

At the heart of Vodou are supernatural entities. As noted, the very word ‘Vodou’ came from the West African Fon language meaning “gods” or “spirits.” Vodouisants today prefer to identify their religion in verb form, “serving the spirits” (Brown 2008:325).

Drawing on various African traditions, many Vodouisants recognize a high god. This god, Bondye (called *Mawu-Lisa* and androgynous *Nananbuluku* among the Fon, *Olorun* among the Yoruba, *Otiöse* among many Vodouisants), created the universe, the spirits (*lwa*), humans, and the animal, vegetable, and mineral worlds. After creating the world, Bondye went high up

into the sky. There he is considered very remote and plays little or no direct role in the daily lives of people (Fleurant 2006:47).

If humans do not have direct contact with Bondye, they do interact freely with the *lwa* (also spelled *loa* and pronounced low-ah). They are considered intermediary deities or spirits. They number in the hundreds, maybe thousands. Some are mentioned by most Vodou groups, others are regional. New *lwa* come into existence when they announce their presence through possession or in dreams while others simply disappear (Stein and Stein 2005:254).

Various authors have classified the *lwa* into different pantheons reflecting their African roots (Courlander 1985:317-331; Deren 2004:82-85; Metraux 1972:86-89; Herskovits 2007: 313-330). The two most important *nanchon* or nations of *lwa* are the Rada and Petwo. The Rada *lwa* consist of deities closely connected to Yoruba roots and are, therefore, very ancient. Many of the Petwo *lwa* (associated with the Konga in Africa) were more recently redefined through the lens of the slave experience in Haiti. Another series of *lwa* are those associated with death.

Each *lwa* has his/her own particular personality, rules over a particular domain, and has definite preferences for particular artistic motifs, dress codes, food types, color tones, musical selections, speaking patterns, dance moves, and days of the week. Generally speaking, the Rada *lwa* tend to be “sweet-tempered, wise, and usually patient” (Brown 2008:328). They prefer things that are “cool” such as candies and sweet drinks. The Petwo *lwa*, on the other hand are aggressive and assertive. They like “hot” things such as strong drinks like rum and prefer spicy foods. Ceremonies invoking a particular spirit or *nanchon* take into account the tastes of the *lwa*. For example, a ritual for one *lwa* may feature slow, rhythmic dancing with special foods and supplications. A ritual for a different *lwa* may more closely resemble the stereotypic fast-paced “Voodoo” ritual.

*Lwa* come and go from their various locales. The most important *lwa*, according to some, reside in “Ginen” (a word taken from “Guinea” on the West Africa coast and ancestral home of many slaves). Some Vodouisants believe Ginen is a watery subterranean home. Metraux (1972:91) notes, however, that the term usually lacks geographical meaning (perhaps like Valhalla). *Lwa* are present in sacred trees and each has its own favorite variety. They also “frequent mountains, rocks, caves, rivers and seas” (Metraux 1972:92). So, a Haitian is apt to say that the *lwa* live in Africa or on an island under the sea, or in a mythological city called Ville-aux-Camps or nearby (Courlander 1985:19).

The differences between Vodou gods, spirits, saints, and angels are hard to comprehend and distinguish. Different terms for the same supernatural beings are commonplace. A name may identify one spirit in one context and a different spirit in a different context. In essence, it would be a mistake to try to distinguish between gods and spirits. The supernatural entities are known by different names (*lwa*, *mystere*, *hounaie*, *vodoun*, etc.) but all of them are intermediary beings. For simplicity’s sake we may call them *lwa*.

Not uncommonly the *lwa* are seen as synonymous with various Roman Catholic saints and angels. Those outside Vodou find this somewhat problematic, for unlike the Roman Catholic saints, the Vodou *lwa* have “richly developed histories, personalities, needs, desires, character strengths, and flaws, and even taste in food and drink” (Brown 2008:329).

The superimposition of saints and *lwa* can, in part, be traced to the teaching method employed by early Roman Catholics. They made use of chromolithographs of Catholic Saints. Herskovitz (1937:637-638) shows how African gods and Catholic saints came to be seen as one and the same.

Legba, the god who in Dahomey guards crossroads and entrances to temples, compounds, and villages, is widely worshiped in Haiti where, as in Dahomey [Benin], he must “open the path” for all other supernatural powers and hence is given the first offering in any Haitian *vodun* ceremony. Legba is believed by most persons to be the same as St. Anthony, for the reason that St. Anthony is represented on the *images* as an old man, poorly dressed, carrying a wand which supports him as he walks. Some hold that Legba is St. Peter, on the basis of the eminently logical reason that St. Peter, like Legba, is the keeper of keys and opens the door. By most persons, however, St. Peter is usually believed to be a *loa*, or *vodun* deity, without any African designation, being called the *loa* St. Pierre, though this again is disputed . . . .

Other examples can be given as well.

One of the oldest and most venerated Rada *lwa* is the serpent Danbala. On the chromatographs, Saint Patrick was pictured with snakes at his feet. Thus he is seen as Danbala. Furthermore, Danbala is often seen with his wife Ayida Wedo, the rainbow serpent.

The Rada *lwa*, Agwe, is the spirit or god of the sea and ships and is depicted wearing a naval officer’s uniform. Offerings on altars to Agwe naturally include small boats, metal fish, and shells. Agwe is identified with Saint Ulrich who is pictured holding a fish. Agwe’s consort is Lasiren, a mermaid who brings good luck from the ocean. Lasiren produces music from deep in the ocean and is the patron saint of musicians. She is seen as Saint Martha with a dragon.

Meanwhile, the name Ezili encompasses a group of female deities that are associated with the Virgin Mary. Stein and Stein (2005:255) describe two manifestations.

Ezili Freda is a Rada *lwa* who enjoys the finer things in life—fine clothes, jewels, and perfumes—all associated with love and luxury. Her love is unrequited, her heart pierced with knives, and she is shown in art as the Mater Dolorosa weeping. On her altar she is offered sweet drinks and foods, and her images are sprayed with perfumes. Another manifestation of Ezili is the Petwo *lwa* Ezili Danto. She is seen dressed in bright, multicolored fabrics and appreciates rum and fried and spicy foods. She is depicted holding her daughter Anais and is a fiercely protective mother. She is associated with the black Madonnas, such as Mater Salvatoris, with the Christ child reinterpreted as her daughter.

Of course the god Bodye is often associated with the biblical God the Father (Levinson 1996:237) and spirit possession by the *lwa* with the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

Ordinarily *lwa* are not divided into “good” and “evil” as if they were angels and demons. Rather, Haitians believe that most of the *lwas* are both good and bad. They provide assistance to the devotees who follow the ceremonial obligations and punish or persecute those who do not. Exceptions to this can be found in the North where three *lwas* are considered to be unqualifiedly malicious.

Linglesou is a harsh god who, through his servants, kills readily and without mercy. Sousseou pannan is a very cruel *loa* who loves alcohol and blood.

Limba is an arbitrary persecutor, a glutton whose appetite is insatiable, a *loa* who is said to kill and eat his followers (Simpson 1980:247).

## PRACTITIONERS

Courlander (1985:9) notes that “Vodoun is democratic in concept. Any man or woman may have direct contact with the deities or dead ancestors without the intervention of the cult priest.” Vodou has also been called “egalitarian.” This does not mean, however, that there is no division of labor or religious specialists in Vodou.

There are different classifications of Vodou adepts. George Simpson (1980:245-246), who conducted field work in Northern Haiti, categorized cult members into four main, although not mutually exclusive, groups: the *hungans* (Vodou priests), *badjicans* (assistants to *hungans*), *serviteurs* (those who become possessed by the *lwas* during ceremonies), and *fideles* (believers who never become possessed at a ceremony). Other researchers who conducted their studies further to the south—like Courlander (1985:59-60), Deren (2004:154-158), Herskovits (2007:153-154), and Metraux (1972:69-73)—tended simply to distinguish between *hungans* and *hunsi*. The *hunsi* are devotees who have “passed through certain stages of initiation and are therefore qualified to assist in various ritual activities” (Deren 2004:47). *Hunsi* are further subdivided according to tasks performed such as *hungenikon* (song leader, choirmaster) and *la-place* (master of ceremonies, assistant).

Vodou worship often takes place in a sanctuary/temple or *humfo*. There the faithful come together and voluntarily place themselves under the authority of the principal religious practitioners—the *hungan* (priest) or *mambo* (priestess).

The responsibilities and tasks of a *hungan* or *mambo* are significant and varied, and one does not come by the position easily. There are various paths to the priesthood. In some cases the profession can be hereditary. A father hands his secrets down to his son and trains him to take his place. Most candidates for the office go through many weeks or months of apprenticeship in which they work their way up through each position until they reach the top (Metraux 1972:67-68). Finally, a person with considerable *connaissance* (supernatural insight) may experience a dream propelling him into the priesthood (Courlander 1985:11). In any event the candidate for the priesthood undergoes a torturous rite of passage lasting up to nine days (Metraux 1972:69).

In Vodou the priest/priestess plays many roles. Most obviously, they are religious specialists who plan and conduct rituals; they know the *lwa*, their names, attributes, symbols, and preferences; they are adept at interacting with the gods; and they guide the devotees through complex ritual performances. In addition they provide spiritual advice through mechanisms including palm reading, card reading, and dream interpretation, and they serve as recognized community leaders. As Metraux (1972:64) notes, “A good *hungan* is at one and the same time priest, healer, soothsayer, exorcizer, organizer of public entertainment, and choirmaster.”

In a religion which lacks formal organization, each group of Vodouisants gathered at a Vodou sanctuary takes on the personality of the priest. Particularly charismatic priests draw large followings and may gain a regional reputation. With the office of *hungan* or *mambo* comes access to three highly-valued commodities—power, prestige, and wealth. At the same time, however, the *hungan* is under scrutiny and can be suspected or accused of malfeasance.

Below the *hungans* is a cadre of hardworking adepts called the *hunsi* (literally the “spouse of the god”). These are the male and female (mostly female) initiates who regularly take

part in the ceremonies and who are committed to helping the priest in his functions. Out of piety to the *lwa* in the local sanctuary, they tirelessly perform many duties.

They must be prepared to spend whole nights dancing and singing beneath a peristyle and to be possessed by spirits. A *hunsi* is committed not only to offer sacrifices to the *loa* of the *humfo*, but also to devote herself to the humblest tasks, without hope of any reward beyond the friendship and protection of the *loa*, as well as living in dread of divine punishment should she prove negligent. The singing and dancing can be satisfaction in themselves but the same could scarcely be said of the down-to-earth chores such as cooking food for the *loa*, cleaning the peristyle, collecting and making ready the sacred objects—in short fulfilling the role of ‘spouse of the god’ (Metraux 1972:70).

The *hungan* assesses the devotion, effort, and expertise of the *hunsi* and delegates to some special responsibilities. The *hungenikon* is the chief chorister. She sets the standard when it comes to liturgical singing. She lifts up her arms and sings the opening notes of hymns with force. She also chastises *hunsi* who sing with less vigor. She shakes the rattle (*chacha*) to bring a hymn to conclusion. She identifies the *lwa* as it appears and chooses the song to be sung in honor of the *lwa*’s manifestation.

Other important *hunsi* positions are available to qualified devotees. The *hungenikon*-quartermaster is in charge of the offerings. The drummer drums. The *la-place* serves as master of ceremonies. With saber or machete in hand he marches in front of all processions and maintains order. The *le confiance* (confidant) is the *hungan*’s right hand man who takes care of administrative chores (Metraux 1972:71-72).

To use Metraux’s (1972:72) phrase, the servants of the *lwa* form a “hierarchy of dignitaries.” Men and women have access to the various positions depending on interest, skill, and commitment.

## **BODY AND SOUL, LIVING AND DEAD**

Whether *hungan* or *hunsi*, every human being is a complex merger of material body, energizing spirit, and souls. The mortal, flesh-and-blood body which dies and afterward decays is the *corps cadavre*. The spirit that energizes every cell of the body and allows each to function is called the *n’ame*. Upon death the *n’ame* passes slowly into the organisms of the soil causing the corpse to lose shape. Separate from the body and energizing spirit is the person’s *z’e’toile* or “star of destiny.” It resides in the sky or heavens and, pictured as a calabash, it carries one’s hopes and destiny.

Apart from these, humans have two souls: the *gros-bon-ange* (“big good angel”) and the *ti-bon-ange* (“little good angel”). Different functions and characteristics are applied to each. It should be noted that the same descriptions earlier authors gave of the *gros-bon-ange* are now applied to the *ti-bon-ange* and vice versa (Ackermann and Gauthier 1991:469). Here we will follow the more contemporary scholarship.

The *gros-bon-ange* (“big good angel”) is the undifferentiated life force characteristic of all sentient beings. It enters the person at conception and enlivens the body until death. The other half of a person’s soul is the *ti-bon-ange* (“little good angel”). This is not a generic energy but is directly identified with the person. “It is one’s aura, and the source of all personality,

character, and willpower” (Davis 1985:181). This individual aspect of a person’s soul figures large in Vodou. It can leave a living person temporarily. For example, it travels during sleep to experience dreams. When a person is startled he/she has a sudden sensation of emptiness and fright. This is because the *ti-bon-ange* has temporarily fled. It is the facility of the *ti-bon-ange* to leave the body that makes a person vulnerable to sorcery. Furthermore, during possession the *lwa* dislodges or displaces the “little angel” in order to enter the person.

When a person dies the *gros-bon-ange* returns to the high heaven or solar region from which it came. It then becomes part of the energy reservoir that supports all life. It joins the *lwa* and becomes a *lwa*. The *ti-bon-ange*, meanwhile, hovers around the body before going to the land of the dead.

Perhaps bits of Roman Catholic doctrine can be seen in the way Vodouisants in the North view the final disposition of the soul. From their perspective a natural death is one in which god recalls a person’s soul. The soul is judged and rewarded or punished. Good souls either remain in the sky with God or return to earth as “good” *lwes* or are inherited by newborn babies. Bad souls become bad *lwes* and either suffer in hell or do evil on earth (Simpson 1980:250).

The final disposition of a person’s souls is also determined by the survivors. Vodou death rituals are designed to return the “angels” to their proper proveniences. If the *gros-bon-ange* is not sent back, it can become trapped on earth and bring misfortune to the surviving family members. The *ti-bon-ange* is reluctant to leave and tends to linger in the house where that person died. In order to release the “little good angel” into the land of the dead, it must be placed in a large earthenware jar (*canari*). Ultimately the jar is broken as part of a death ritual. It is usually on the ninth day after death, during the “last prayer” that the soul is dismissed to the ultimate destinations (Metraux 1972:258).

Vodou recognizes a sad situation in which a material body exists without a soul or a soul exists without a body. The person with this condition is known as a *zombi*, the living dead. Haitians do not fear *zombis*; they fear becoming *zombis*. Most commonly, a *zombi* is a soulless body, animated for a life of slavery in the fields or urban workshops (Ackermann and Gauthier 1991:474). Vodou adepts believe that it is possible for a powerful priest to control the *ti-bon-ange*. Since the *ti-bon-ange* controls the person’s personality, individuality, and will, a body without this “little angel” can be consigned to servitude (Davis 1985). The *zombi*, bereft of will, consciousness, and memory has dull, glazed eyes and a vacant stare and speaks with a nasal voice (Ackermann and Gauthier 1991:474). According to Herskovits (2007:248) the *zombi* stays in this wretched state, eating only saltless food (not people) until it dies at the end of the person’s natural life span or is given salt.

The invisible world in Vodou is not confined to the various spirits and souls identified above. Simpson (1980:250-251) provides a deeper glimpse into the spirit world, at least in the northern part of the country. The word *zombi* can be used for all the dead and not just those whose bodies have been resuscitated or manipulated by bad *hungan*. *Zombi errants* are the spirits of people who die in accidents. By day they dwell in the woods and by night they walk the roads. Thus each lives out the earthly existence which god has assigned to it. *Diablasses* are evil spirits who are forced to live in the woods for several years before being allowed into heaven. “These devil-women are being punished for the crime of being virgins at the time of their deaths” (Simpson 1980:250). The ghosts of children who die before they are baptized are called *lutins*. *Zombis* who have been transformed into animals (usually dogs) and who steal for their masters are the *bakas*. “*Spectres* and *fantomes* are inhabitants of the other world who



appear before the living stripped of their bodies. Ordinarily they disappear quickly and the living get only a glimpse of them” (Simpson 1980:250). The *revenants* are the dead who return to persecute their relatives for they feel that they have been neglected. Finally, the *marassa-jumeaux* are dead twins. They are highly revered by the living and are included in most Vodou ceremonies.

## VODOU CEREMONIES

Vodou theology comes to life in Vodou services. Vodouisants look forward to the dramatic ceremonies with eager anticipation. Before describing a Vodou ceremony this caveat is in order. Vodou ceremonies differ from place to place, according to need or calendar, and according to the *lwa* invoked and the *hungan* officiating. For example, in the rural areas, ceremonies often are held as needs arise in extended families. In urban settings where extended families are less significant, a calendar of ritual events may be followed.

There is a plethora of reasons why Vodouisants may feel the necessity of having a ceremony. Some believers view their relationship with the gods as a binding contract. The human is obliged to provide the *lwa* with an annual ceremony in exchange for protection. Peasants sometimes attribute human characteristics to the *lwa*. At ceremonies believers provide the *lwa* with food and drink, music and dance, and gossip so the spirits can have a good time. A ceremony may be held to celebrate a *lwa*'s birthday, therefore. The main purpose of a ceremony may be to ask the gods to stop persecuting the family by destroying the crops, sending diseases on the children or livestock, or causing other sundry misfortunes. On the other hand ceremonies are held to thank the gods for favors received and ailments overcome (Simpson 1980:258). Ceremonies may be held when a god or a dead relative demands them, or a *hungan* may advise a parishioner that a ceremony is advisable. A ceremony is an appropriate way to show respect and loyalty to a particular *lwa*. Vodou ceremonies are given for various rites of passage including dedication, initiation, advancement, and death rituals as well as spirit marriages.

Vodou ceremonies take place in the *hounfo* (*humfo*, *ounfo*, *hounfor*). As Metraux (1972:77) notes, “There is hardly any difference between the ‘houses of the *mysteres*’ and ordinary houses.” The *hounfo* does not resemble a ‘temple’ or ‘church’ in the usual sense of the word. Rather, it takes the appearance of a household or extended family compound with a building, court and peristyle. The most noticeable feature of the *hounfo* is the peristyle or roof held up by posts where dances and ceremonies can take place out of the elements. In the middle of the space is a central post or *poteau-mitan*. It is a pivot point for dances and a kind of spiritual lightning rod or ladder where spirits can descend during the ceremony when invoked. It is most often highly decorated. Nearby the peristyle is a building of one or more rooms. This is the “inner sanctum” to use Courlander’s (1985:13) phrase. It contains the patron saints of the *hounfo* society and a variety of symbolic and patriotic emblems. The sanctuary itself (*caye-mysteres*, *bagi*, *badji*, *sobadji*) is backed by one or more stone altars dedicated to the *lwa* or the “spirits of twins and the family dead” (Herskovits 2007:157). Metraux (1972:80) describes the *bagi* as “a veritable junk shop” clogged by a vestry, color prints, a sword, lamps, and including:

Jars and jugs belonging to the spirits and the dead, platters sacred to twins, carrying-pots belonging to the *hunsi*, ‘thunder stones’ [aboriginal Indian axe heads felt to have been dropped from the sky during thunder storms] or stones

swimming in oil belonging to the *loa*, playing cards, rattles, holy emblems beside bottles of wine and liqueur—all for the gods.

While no two *hounfos* are exactly alike, they tend to share these common elements.

The overarching goal of Vodou is to bring about spirit possession. This occurs when a god or spirit enters the human body and takes over its functioning (Stein and Stein 2005:76). The drumming, singing, and dancing are a “heating up” process through which a person enters a trance and becomes a conduit for the spirit to communicate. Using the devotee’s body the spirit speaks, sings, eats, and dances and issues advice or chastisement. The spirit, meanwhile is placated to ensure continuing connection and protection.

In order to explain what takes place during possession, the Vodouisant uses the illustration of a horse. In possession the adept is the “horse” (*chwal*) and the *lwa* is the rider. Possession takes place when the *lwa* mounts and rides the horse.

Metraux (1972:120-141) describes possession in detail. During a ceremony the *lwa* moves into the head or neck of the adept having first driven out the *ti-bon-ange*. While the transfer is taking place the person trembles and convulses. Then the celebrant experiences total emptiness as if fainting. From this point on, not the adept’s, but the *lwa*’s will, personality, bearing and words are expressed. The *lwa* has “saddled” or “mounted” his horse which has been tamed. Possession can last for hours or even days. During this time attendants protect the “horse” from injury and immodesty. If the horse seems to be in distress, the *hungan* may tend to the person. Once the *lwa* has accomplished its purpose it departs, the *ti-bon-ange* returns, and the person emerges from the trance with amnesia of what has taken place. During a ceremony many *lwas* may mount their numerous horses.

Much of the Vodou ceremonial liturgy is Catholic. Not surprisingly, the Vodou and Catholic calendars reflect the overlapping of the two religious traditions. Vodou sanctuaries are closed during Lent and services are not held. During Holy Week cult paraphernalia is covered with sheets as are images in Catholic churches. While Catholics celebrate Christmas night, Vodou “takes wing in its full plumage” to use the words of Metraux (Lewis 1975:105).

Simpson (1980:258-272) provides a detailed description of a Vodou ritual. While all the elements of this particular ritual may not be exactly alike elsewhere, they are typical and illustrative.

A major ceremony takes months of preparation. Money must be set aside to pay the priest, animals have to be secured for the sacrifices, food and drink have to be purchased for the reception, and the sanctuary compound has to be cleaned and readied.

On the day of the ceremony, flags, chromolithographs of the Catholic saints, crucifixes, holy water, food, liquor, dishes, jars, flowers, perfumes, rosaries, candles, rocks and other items are carefully arranged on the altar. In late afternoon, about 4:00 p.m., the priest appears in the *hounfo* dressed in clothes resembling those which the chief *lwa* prefers (military garb for one *lwa*, hat of paper covered with silk for another, etc.). He carries a small handbell. Using cornmeal, syrup, or liquor, the *hungan* traces cabalistic designs on the ground. He then tends to the needs of the spirit twins by providing them with food and invites them to the ceremony with the hope that they will not go away disappointed and take out their grievances on the family.

About 7:00 p.m., the priest dips a sprig of orange leaves into holy water and symbolically consecrates the sacred places where *lwa* dwell including trees, brooks and crossroads. He then offers drink to the spirits, throws flour in the air, pours liquor on the ground, and throws fried corn in the air. This is accompanied by drumming. Then, turning his attention to the people, he

warns them not to take the ceremony too lightly. After this the *hungan* rings his handbell and blows a whistle. His assistants, meanwhile shake carachas, beat drums, strike triangles and wave flags as a salutation to the Vodou spirits. As the people kneel the *hungan* begins a series of songs and prayers. Many of the prayers come from Catholic liturgies (Paternoster, Credo, Ave Maria, Magnificat, etc.). Other prayers are derived from the Vodou cult itself and ask the angels, *lwas*, and others not to permit bad spirits to spoil the service.

With the preliminaries over, the priest summons Legba amidst chanting and dancing. The *lwa* Legba must arrive first at the ceremony because of his character and age. Since Papa Legba is old and limps, he cannot hurry, so it may take him quite some time to arrive. There is no question when Legba does arrive, however. A dancer suddenly whirls around, leaping and going through violent spasms and contortions. This energizes the dancing and drumming to a more frenzied height. Then the single dancer throws herself to the ground, looks disoriented and fatigued, rises and begins to act like an old man as she limps about. Legba has mounted his horse and is presented with offerings, songs, and dances. The priest gives Legba a black chicken and Legba goes wild with joy. "He thanks the master of the ceremony and assures him he has nothing to fear" (Simpson 1980:264). The chicken is carefully washed and perfumed and Legba caresses it. Then Legba on his horse dances spiritedly with the chicken and simultaneously wrings its neck and throws it to the ground. Water is sprinkled on the chicken and then Legba gives it to be cooked. This is the end of Legba's part.

After a lull in the action, the priest sings a song for another god. As "Mambo Ya-Djoni takes possession of one of her servants, an assistant to the priest tosses her the red and white handkerchief which she likes" (Simpson 1980:264). As this possession is winding down another *lwa*, Agwe, mounts his servant and dances and sings with the chicken which he received. In short, one spirit after another is summoned and takes possession. While only about 10 to 20 percent of the assembly become possessed, all reach a state of near hysteria amidst the drumming, dancing, singing, and drinking. Some horses can be mounted by more than one spirit.

After hours of singing, dancing, and possession the solemn time for the goat sacrifice is at hand. The animal victim is dressed in a ceremonial coat and is offered some green leaves to eat. The nibbling is a sign that the spirits are satisfied with the sacrifice. At the first nibble the *hungan* screams, drums beat, and the priest dances with the goat. Then he cuts off the goat's head being careful to catch all the blood in a basin. Three or four chickens are added to this primary sacrifice.

After a rest period the ceremony resumes. The *hungan* recites various Catholic morning prayers and Vodou supplications. Food is eaten and goat remains are distributed to honored participants. By about 7:30 the ceremony slowly draws to a conclusion.

In addition to *hounfo* ceremonies held throughout communities, there are special cemetery rituals. The crossroad between the living and the dead, the human and the spirit, is the cemetery. The initial male buried in any cemetery is called Bawon Samidi. Bawon's wife or sister is called Gran Brijit. She is the first woman buried there. A cross, either in the center of the cemetery or near the gate, acknowledges them and serves as a focal point for Vodou rituals. Food and offerings are placed at the base of the cross. Prayers are said while holding on to the cross. Healing, love, and good luck rituals conducted in cult houses distant from the cemetery are not considered complete until material objects from the ritual are placed at the foot of Lakwa Bawon ("Bawon's Cross").

Haitians clearly distinguish between the dead and the spirits. The cemetery houses the bodies of the deceased, but is also frequented by many different spirits. There are the *lwa*. A few of the ancestors, especially if they were prominent individuals when alive, evolve into *lwa*.

“Jean-Jacques Dessalines, Toussaint L’Ouverture, and John Kennedy have all been reported making cameo appearances through possession in Vodou ceremonies” (Brown 2008:329). Then there is a cadre of cemetery spirits called the Gede (Guede, Ghede) who are led by Bawon and represent the whole community of the dead. In a sense they form a family with Bawon and Gran Brijit as father and mother and the Gede as their family. Papa Gede is pictured as a short, dark man wearing a high hat, smoking a cigar, and holding an apple in his left hand. He waits at the crossroads, like a cemetery, to take souls to the afterlife. Similarly other Gede have their own dress styles and tasks. Unlike other *lwa*, however, the Gede are rowdy, raunchy, mischievous, humorous, outrageous, vulgar, and preoccupied with sex. Their behavior is justified on the basis that they are dead and are beyond censure or punishment and that it is permissible to ridicule death. The Gede feast day is November 2<sup>nd</sup> which corresponds to All Souls’ Day in the Catholic church. During this time parades are held in the streets with hundreds of people possessed by Gedes participating. The *lwa* Gede are thought to protect children (St. Gerard Majella is the Catholic counterpart) and boost human sexuality. Since the Gede are unbounded, they are variously represented. “Statues of the Buddha, Lao Tzu, King Kong, St. Gerard, and Elvis Presley have all been sighted on Vodou altars” (Brown 2008:329).

## VODOU AND POLITICS

Roman Catholic clergy historically have spoken disparagingly of Vodou. In Haiti, nation-wide “antisuperstition” campaigns have been publicly launched against the religion as was the case in the 1940s. More recently however, Vodou has received prominent and official recognition. Presidents Dumarsais Estime (1946-1950) and Francois Duvalier (1957-1971) were sympathetic to Vodou. Jean-Bertrand Aristide, first elected in 1990, openly supported the religion, and on April 5, 2003 he passed legislation granting Vodou full recognition according to the Haitian constitution and in Haitian laws.

Meanwhile, various *hungan* have established organizations to defend themselves from defamation primarily coming from evangelical Christian missionaries and congregations. For example, Wesner Morency established the Vodou Church of Haiti in 1998 which was registered by the Ministry of Justice in 2001. Another influential *hungan* is Max Beauvoir, who heads the National Confederation of Haitian Vodou. The non-hierarchical and decentralized nature of Vodou has hampered attempts to create one organization which speaks for all *hounfo* groups.

In January of 2010 a major earthquake and numerous aftershocks killed tens of thousands in Haiti. Vodou ceremonies were held to appease the *lwa* and seek assistance and blessings from the ancestors. In October a cholera epidemic broke out across devastated Haiti. Angry mobs lynched at least 45 *hungan*, blaming them for the spread of the disease (CNN 2010).

## CONCLUSION

Vodou remains a vibrant and vital religion in Haiti. It enjoys official recognition and public acceptance. Vodou, drawing on African traditions and Roman Catholic symbolism, acknowledges a distant high god and many intermediary spirits that interact freely with humans. The spirits meet many needs including assistance with health issues, advantages in love, luck and

strength, and protection for self, family, home, and land. In return the spirits are venerated and celebrated in rituals. Haitians believe that life works best when harmony exists in relationships: relationships between people, between people and the dead, and relationships between people and the spirits. When problems arise or special advantage is needed, the Vodou priest diagnoses the situation, prescribes the magical/ritual solution, and offers the cure. Brown (2008:330) concludes, “Generally speaking, Vodou cures come about through ritual adjustment of relational systems.”

## **PART II VODOU: ANTHROPOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE AND MISSION APPLICATIONS<sup>1</sup>**

### **VODOU AS MAGIC**

For over 100 years anthropologists have attempted to make a distinction between magic and religion. Early theorists saw magic as primitive and religion as civilized. Later thinkers tried to distinguish between the two ideological systems. Bronislaw Malinowski (1954) proposed that magic seeks an immediately useful purpose while religion is an end in itself. Emile Durkheim (1969) concluded that magic has no church and that practitioners of magic carry out their functions on an individual basis. Religion, on the other hand, has corporate groups and outlives the officiant and individual congregants. David Aberle (1966) suggested that magic deals with the natural environment including weather, crops, and health. Religion deals with the social environment including social rules and man’s inability to abide by them.

Regardless of what it does, modern anthropologists are in agreement regarding the definition of magic. Hoebel and Frost (1975:429), for example, define magic as “the control of supernatural forces by means of compulsive formulas.” Ember and Ember (1977:332) define it as “the performance of certain rituals which are believed to compel the supernatural powers to act in particular ways.” Viewed from this perspective, magic involves compulsive formulas or rituals which coerce the supernatural to act in an anticipated way. Religion employs supplication, inviting or begging the supernatural to intercede.

Magic is often broken down into two types: imitative magic and contagious magic. Imitative or homeopathic magic works on the principle of similarity in form. According to Frazer (1975:12) the Law of Similarity presupposes that “like produces like” or “effect resembles cause.” In other words, a fundamental and real connection exists between similar things or acts. When you do something to one object, it will have a similar effect on its likeness. Meanwhile, contagious magic focuses not on likeness but on contact. Building on Frazer’s definition, Richley Crapo (2003:195) defines contagious magic as “the magical principle that things once in contact with each other continue to act on each other at a distance after physical contact has been severed.”

Perhaps the best known example of imitative magic (like affects like) is the stereotypic “voodoo doll” (Bowen 2005:76). A doll is made to look like a person. When something is done to the doll it has the corresponding impact on the person. Thus a pin is stuck into the doll and is felt by the human victim. Interestingly, the proverbial “voodoo doll” is more a fabrication than a

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<sup>1</sup> [In this part of the essay] The anthropological perspective is presented in regular print and the mission application in *italics*.

reality in Vodou. The material culture of West African religions and Haitian Vodou did have dolls which were believed to have power (*nkisi*, *bocio* in Africa, *pwen* in Haiti), but these were more energy sources than magical surrogates. In “Louisiana Voodoo” the dolls represented *lwas* and pins were used to attach the name or picture of the person to be blessed or assisted by the spirit. Apparently the sinister use of the “voodoo doll” is connected with “New Orleans Voodoo” and “Hoodoo” as recast in Hollywood horror films.

This is not to say that magic plays no part in Vodou (Simpson 1940), but as Courlander (1985:9) says, “Magic lurks on the periphery of Vodoun.” Some Haitians wear magical charms made of monkey palm (*cocomacaque*) to protect them from the *baka* (*bakor*, *boko*). *Bakas* are evil creatures which look like small humans with red eyes and can change into animals. They are notorious sorcerers (Courlander 1985:95). Charms are employed to protect fields against evil magic and newborns against the effects of envy and a myriad of other possible calamities (Herskovits 2007:79, 94-95). The idea of a charm is that people use them to activate god, the church, and the *lwas* into action (Herskovits 2007:223). Magical fetishes or charms are most often used defensively to ward off evil. Thus *garde* are small bags of mysterious ingredients used to protect its owner from black magic. *Arrete* bundles protect a whole household or households from evil. *Pouin* is a defensive charm to ward off lightning, protect from falling trees, shipwreck or drowning, but it can also be used to bring success in fishing, farming, and fertility (Courlander 1985:99). The list of magical charms goes on and on.

*Strictly speaking Vodou is not magic in contradistinction to religion. Rather, Vodou is both. It is an end and a means to an end. It is concerned with both the here and the hereafter. It addresses both natural and social concerns. In Vodou ceremonies the lwas are not compelled to possess serviteurs, but are enjoined to do so. The lwas have a will of their own which allows them to do as they please apart from compulsion.*

*The missionary runs the risk of assuming that he can identify superstition and magic in a pagan religion and determine the meaning it has for the adherent. This is not always such an easy task, and hasty conclusions can jeopardize the missionary’s credibility.*

*Before confronting the Voudisant about superstition and magic, the missionary will want to first examine the use of magic in his own culture and in connection with familiar Christian churches. The forefathers of Western Civilization believed in magic and remnants still can be seen today. The ancients had a goddess of luck or fortune. She was called Tyche by the Greeks and Fortuna by the Romans. She was a fertility goddess and bearer of prosperity and good fortune. On certain people she bestowed fortune (good luck), on others the opposite (bad luck). Thus, adepts venerated her and engraved her image to bring good luck. Today in the United States magic is seen all around. A few examples of good luck paraphernalia and practices will suffice: lucky rabbit’s foot, four leaf clover, wishing star, carrying an acorn, breaking a wishbone, and lucky numbers. Examples of preventative magic in United States society can also be found: throwing salt over one’s shoulder, not walking under a ladder, not letting a black cat cross one’s path, a high rise building without a 13<sup>th</sup> floor, not stepping on a crack, knock on wood, and not breaking a mirror. America’s national game is replete with magic: not saying “shutout” in the locker room, not mentioning a “no hitter” late in a game, and touching the cap in a particular way. George Gmelch (1978) provides dozens more examples of baseball magic. Then there are religious rituals associated with Christian churches which closely resemble magic. Some baseball players make the sign of the cross when they get up to bat. Does this represent a prayer to the triune God or a form of magic? Then there are prayers to saints and*

*medallions of saints, the lighting of candles, repetition of prayers and Latin phrases, and the like.*

## **VODOU AS RELIGION**

Vodou is a religion. One of the most widely accepted definitions of religion was provided by renowned anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1966:4): “Religion is (1) a system of symbols which act to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.”

Obviously, Vodou is highly symbolic. The clothes, the altar images, body movements, etc. all help the adepts visualize the invisible. Vodou uses its symbols to create depths of feeling and direction for behavior. At the heart of Vodou is a very complex worldview which gives meaning and understanding to life. Anthropologist Roger Keesing (1976:571) defines worldview as, “a people’s basic assumption about what kind of world they live in, what forces or entities control it, and what the place of humans is.” Haitians require a meaning for suffering, pain, death, and injustice. The Vodou worldview gives them just that. It provides a sense of coherence and reasonableness for the seemingly capricious nature of life. It explains suffering so it becomes sufferable. It outlines a moral order in which evil can be overcome and virtue, goodness, and justice can prevail (Roberts 2004:11). The Vodou worldview does not have to make sense from an outside perspective, for it is designed to be viewed from the inside. Through the lense of its worldview, Vodou allows the believers to account for and “even celebrate” the “perceived ambiguities, puzzles and paradoxes of human experience” (Geertz 1966:23). When seen from the inside out, Vodou is both reasonable and believable. Thus, it is practiced.

Vodou has the key characteristics of all religions as outlined by sociologist Ronald Johnstone (2007:8-14). First, it is a group phenomenon. It is a corporate exercise and not a solitary pursuit. Second, it makes a distinction between the sacred and the profane. Vodou, like all religions, transports things out of the ordinary or mundane world and views them with fear, reverence, and awe. A chicken becomes a spirit-pleasing sacrifice, liquor satisfies a spirit’s palate. Third, all religions involve bodies of beliefs. Assumptions, religious facts, and basic beliefs are clearly understood and articulated in Vodou. Fourth, beliefs are expressed in rituals. More than anything, Vodou is ritual behavior. Finally religion involves moral perceptions. Vodou is an effective means of self-control and social control through clearly articulated prescriptions and proscriptions.

Vodou is a church not a cult. Sociologists and anthropologists carefully distinguish between church and cult. A cult by definition is “a new religion, with few followers, whose teachings and practices put it at odds with the dominant culture and religion” (Henslin 2011:364). Vodou does not reject traditional African religions or Roman Catholicism but embraces aspects of both. As opposed to a cult, Vodou has the characteristics of a church as outlined by sociologists (McGuire 2002:150-171). It is inclusive in that it welcomes people from a wide variety of backgrounds. Especially in urban areas members may have little in common with one another other than their religion. Next, as is typical of churches, in Vodou the failures of the members can be rectified and reversed through proper observances and ritual performances. Finally, Vodou exists in relative peace with society’s values.

*The missionary should regard Vodou as a sophisticated religion in and of itself. It is not an aberration or cult. Vodou has much in common with all religions, however differently they are expressed.*

*The missionary is encouraged to construct a column by column comparison of Vodou and Christianity. Points of comparison can be drawn from the definition of religion (symbolic behavior, moods and motivations, factuality, believability), from the characteristics of all religions (group involvement, sacred and profane, beliefs, rituals, moral perceptions), and from the attributes of a church (inclusiveness, mostly faith in common, response to members' failures, relationship to society). The missionary will find this comparison useful for it will help him view the big picture at a glance, assist him in making one-to-one comparisons, and help him avoid the trap of concentrating on minutia taken out of context. Furthermore, the missionary will find the comparison useful in guiding discussions with Vodouisants. It will allow him to determine whether or not he correctly understands the adepts' beliefs and practices and to articulate what Christianity has to offer instead.*

## **VODOU AND ANIMISM**

In 1871 anthropologist Edward B. Tylor constructed an evolutionary sequence of religion. He maintained that "primitive" man had a "belief in spiritual beings" which he called animism (Tylor 1871). Animism evolved into polytheism and polytheism into monotheism. While Tylor's evolutionary sequence is no longer held, nevertheless, the concept of animistic religions has proven to have utility. Hunter and Whitten (1976:649) define animism as "religious beliefs involving the attribution of life or divinity to such natural phenomena as trees, thunder, or celestial bodies." Similarly Haviland (2005:457) defines it as "a belief that nature is enlivened or energized by distinct personalized spirit beings separable from bodies."

According to animists, all things (people, trees, rocks, rivers, etc.) may have souls or spirits. Furthermore, these souls are linked on a spiritual level and affect one another (Angrosino 2004:31). Since people have an immaterial presence as well, when they die their ghosts (spirits, souls) persist. Good and bad spirits can affect living human beings. The best protection against angry and retaliatory spirits is to maintain a harmony with all of nature and its spirits. Disharmony creates an offense and often prompts negative sanctions. When a problem exists, the person most likely to make a diagnosis and prescribe a remedy is the shaman (spirit-medium, medicine man, medicine woman, etc.). Shamans most often turn to magical solutions (Bolle 1987, Tanney 1998).

*The missionary working in Haiti may sense that Vodou is essentially animistic. After all, Vodou focuses on spirits, souls, ghosts, and zombies. Vodou employs certain forms of magic. Finally the hungan and mambo may be equated with shamans. However, as Deren (2004:86-87) clearly shows, Vodou is not animism. While the lwas may dwell in trees, rocks, and streams, the natural phenomena are simply vessels. The lwas are not spirits of the trees, for example, they simply reside there.*

*The missionary working with Vodouisants may find the following comparison useful in better understanding himself and Vodou religious specialists. By definition a religious specialist is recognized as someone who is more skilled in the performance of certain religious tasks than other members of his/her society and community. A shaman is "a part-time, charismatic religious specialist who conducts rituals for individual clients" (Crapo 2003:212). A priest,*



meanwhile, is a “full-time religious specialist who is associated with formalized religious institutions” (Stein and Stein 2005:283). The following chart is an elaboration of these definitions and is derived from the work of various anthropologists including Basso (1970), Kessel (1976), Kluckhohn and Leighton (1980), Underhill (1972), and Waal Malefijt (1969).

#### COMPARISON OF RELIGIOUS SPECIALISTS:

<i>SHAMAN</i>	<i>PRIEST</i>
1. <i>Receives his/her power directly from a god or spirit and acquires status through personal communication with the supernatural</i>	<i>Receives his skills through training and is found competent in the performance of rituals.</i>
2. <i>Seeks power or power comes to him</i>	<i>Receives a “call” to the office but not spirit possession</i>
3. <i>Must be found competent in contacting rituals the supernatural</i>	<i>Must be competent in performing</i>
4. <i>Needs charisma to assure him/herself prestige and others that the work is efficacious</i>	<i>Holds an office which supplies and authority</i>
5. <i>Usually a part-time religious practitioner</i>	<i>Usually a full-time religious</i>
6. <i>Considered capable of doing good or evil good</i>	<i>Considered capable of doing mostly or exclusively good.</i>
7. <i>Performs work after a “crisis” (birth, death, illness, natural calamity, etc.)</i>	<i>Performs work on a regular basis</i>

*The missionary will readily see that the hungan and mambo is a combination of shaman and priest. The Lutheran mission worker will want to note the similarities and differences between himself and the Vodou priest/priestess in discussions with Vodouisants.*

#### FUNCTIONS OF VODOU

Anthropologists discuss the functions of religion apart from the issue of right or wrong, true or false. All religions tend to explain the inexplicable, validate the social order, mark status changes and integrate people into new groups, reinforce people psychologically, and store information.

The first function of religion is to provide meaning for inexplicable phenomena and answers to existential questions. How did the world come to be? In what ways, if at all, are

humans related to natural species and forces? Why do people suffer and die, and why do some suffer more than others or die at a young age? Are there explanations as to why that storm hit at that particular time and devastated those people as opposed to others? Why do the efforts of some succeed while the labors of others come to naught?

Vodou provides explanations and answers to these questions. Bondye created the universe and put the forces in motion. *Lwas* are intermediaries between people and Bondye. As long as proper relationships are maintained among people and between people and the natural world (both physical and spirit-filled) a harmony exists in the universe. When disharmony occurs misfortune is not far behind. There is good and evil. Good must be actively sought and earned and bad must be fought. One need not always be blamed for calamity, however, since an evil or bad person such as a sorcerer can cause it. On the other hand, persistent bad luck is attributed to some transgression which has incurred the wrath of a *lwa* (Metraux 1972: 98-99). In short, the Vodou worldview explains the inexplicable.

A second function of religion is to validate and legitimize the social order (Durkeim 1969). The gods, spirits, and ancestors reinforce rules and give meaning to human actions. A basic precept of Vodou is that actions have consequences. If people act positively and predictably then a strong likelihood exists that they will fare well. If, on the other hand, they behave in negative and antisocial ways, they can expect misfortune to befall them. The *lwa* punish people for a variety of offenses trying to make the punishment fit the offense. Thus, Simpson (1980:252) draws the conclusion that Vodou supports Haitian social mores by providing supernatural sanctions against such offenses as murder, incest, theft, and showing disrespect toward the aged (Simpson 1980:252). This makes the tenets of Vodou a serious and effective social control mechanism.

Vodou also supports the social order by promoting the value of effort-optimism. People can improve their lot through significant effort and proper direction. These principles mirror and motivate secular society as well.

Finally, Vodou helps maintain the Haitian social hierarchy. Rural peasants do not expect to get rich and move to the cities. They aspire to hold on to what they have and to prevent things from getting worse. Of course they would like to make modest gain. These aspirations are addressed and encouraged in Vodou and satisfy the masses, to use the logic of Karl Marx. Thus, Vodou ceremonies and magical acts “contribute to preserving the status quo” (Simpson 1980:253).

The third function of religion is to provide a smooth transition for people as they move from one status in life to another. As early as 1908 anthropologist Arnold van Gennep (1969) noted that most cultures have rituals or ceremonies associated with the events of birth, puberty, marriage, and death. Each of these “life crisis” events is important for identifying a person’s social status. Status is a person’s position in society relative to other people. A person is single (a status) and gets married (a new status). A person is alive (a status) and later is dead (a new status). Rites of Passage transition people from one status to another. This is usually done in three phases. First there is a Rite of Separation which distances a person from his/her former status. This is followed by a Period of Transition during which time the individual learns the information necessary to assume a new status. Finally there is a Rite of Incorporation by which the individual is given the new status.

This threefold Rite of Passage is found over and over again in Vodou. Ceremonies surrounding changes in status can be observed as a man or woman aspires to become a *hungan* or *mamba*. Clearly defined Rites of Passage and status changes are evident in a typical Vodou

ceremony in which an adept goes from common human to spirit-possessed and back again. When a person is initiated into Vodou he/she undergoes the threefold ceremonial change. Special rituals are involved in the status changes which occur because of death. Courlander (1985:71-74) and others note that in special instances a devotee may become involved in a mystical marriage to a *lwa*. And when a person is possessed for the first time, the *lwa* is considered untamed. It is tamed over the span of several days through rituals associated with “baptizing” the *lwa* (Herskovits 2007: 143-146).

A fourth function of religion is to provide people with a sense of security in a world that is unpredictable and harsh. It allows humans to cope with the fragility of human life—with death and illness, famine, and flood. The world seems unpredictable, capricious, and accidental. At such times, religion re-informs people psychologically and give them security during times of tragedy, anxiety, and crisis.

From this it follows that those most attracted to Vodou are those with the most to gain.

According to Metraux (1972:58-61), Haitians whose lives are more or less removed from significant difficulty and distress are not drawn by the spirits into Vodou. On the other hand, Haitians suffering from the vicissitudes of life may seek possession and initiation into a Vodou group. Thereafter the guardian spirit provides comfort, protection, security and encouragement, if not actual help itself. Lewis (1975:106) lucidly explains the social and psychological functions of membership in a Vodou group in these words:

They act also as welfare and betterment associations and play a highly significant role in defining the social identity of their members. Above all, while in the regular danced rituals the possessed devotees are enable to give free reign to their suppressed desires and ambitions—which the gods gleefully and freely express on their behalf—the cult also gives great psychic satisfaction to ‘poor souls ground down by life.’ Usually, as we would expect, downtrodden men and women are possessed by gods which, in fantasy, express their hopes and fears and bespeak upward social mobility.

A final function of religion is to store information. Ritual repeats the same message time and time again employing ever familiar words, actions, and symbols. In so doing it connects the past to the present and provides a sense that things will continue well into the future. It is true that neither Haitian way of life nor Vodou are stagnant. Like all cultures and religions they undergo modification and change. Yet, the names of gods uttered in West Africa hundreds of years ago are still household words in Haiti. Folk beliefs, organizational structures, archaic words, and many more aspects of culture persist. This gives people a sense of continuity and belonging connected to African heritage and, perhaps, racial pride.

Besides these five key functions of religion, Vodou provides individualized results for selected adherents. As much as anything, Vodou ceremonies are grand theater “in which problems and conflicts relating to the life situations of the participants are dramatically enacted with great symbolic force” (Lewis 1975:195). For example, in the rituals the mundane merges with the sacred. Lewis, for example (1975:195), recounts that in the midst of a Vodou service a *lwa* may accost a trader or merchant in the “congregation” for not hiring the host through whom the spirit is speaking. Meanwhile, the *lwa* vouches for the honesty and industry of the one possessed. Other forms of job hunting and banking take place between spirits and spirits and between spirits and people as well.

Vodou also provides tangible benefits for the leadership. The *hungan* or *mambo* is simultaneously priest, healer, diviner, fortune teller, and exorcist. In return for his/her efforts, the Vodou leader acquires material advantage as well as notoriety or social prestige but is in constant competition with other *priests*.

Finally, some individuals have formed groups which use Vodou as a means of furthering their own nefarious interests. Groups of the “left hand” have formed Mafia-like organizations.

*The Lutheran missionary or pastor working in Haiti must realize that any religion, including Vodou, satisfies a variety of human needs. Religion is spiritual but also social and psychological. It is integrated into the fabric of society and provides comfort, security, reinforcement, compliance and understanding.*

*The missionary’s goal is to convert the unbeliever through the Gospel. But it is not to separate the new believer from society. This is cult mentality.*

*Jesus addressed His Father (John 17:15-16), “My prayer is not that you take them [disciples, believers] out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of it.” Jesus said to the believers in Pergamum (Revelation 2:13), “I know where you live—where Satan has his throne. Yet you remain true to my name.” Christians are not called upon to remove themselves from society but rather to uphold the faith while in society. Likewise, becoming a Christian does not diminish the individual’s need for psychological reinforcement and cultural continuity.*

*In the past 40 years missiologists have defined, refined, and disagreed about the concept of “contextualization” (Davis:2008). Sherwood Lingenfelter (1992:15) writes, the “idea of contextualization is to frame the gospel message in language and communication forms appropriate and meaningful to the local culture, and to focus the message upon crucial issues in the lives of the people.” Charles Kraft defined contextualization as “the process of learning to express genuine Christianity in socioculturally appropriate ways” (1996:376). From these definitions and others we can conclude that contextualization is about communicating the Bible message in ways which are clearly understood by the indigenous population.*

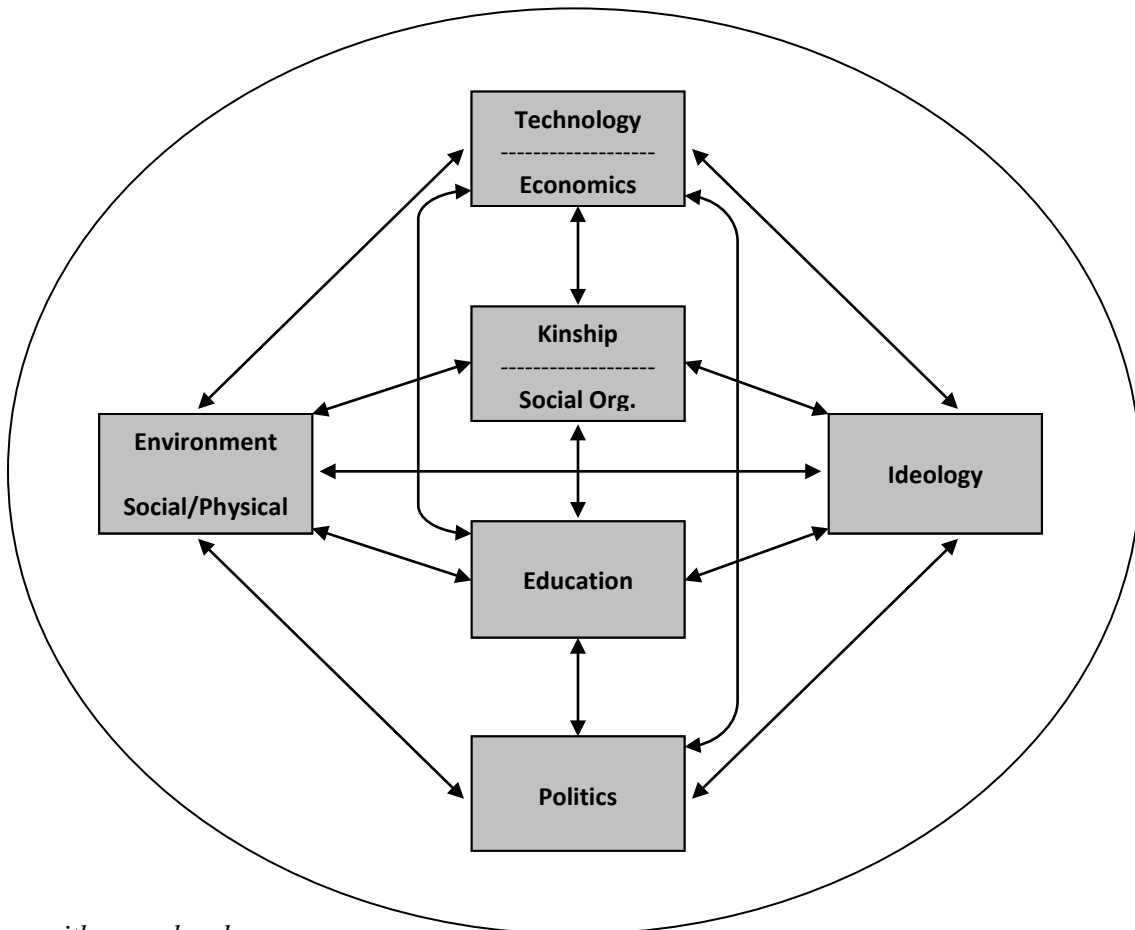
*David Bosch (1983:495) has argued that contextualization grew out of the concept of indigenization. I am proposing that what I call “functionality” of religion takes contextualization one step further. Even as the missionary is concerned with how the Christian message is communicated, he should have a clear understanding of how religion functions in the local setting. Vodou has spiritual, social, and psychological ramifications for the adherent. When the Vodouisant is converted to Christianity, how well will his/her new religion fulfill these associated needs?*

*The concept of functionality of religion draws heavily on the work of anthropologists such as A. R. Radcliffe Brown and Bronislaw Malinowski and their predecessor Emile Durkheim. Essentially functionalism in anthropology is based on that notion that society is made up of many parts or social institutions. All the parts are interrelated and function to maintain the whole. This is analogous to St. Paul’s words in 1 Corinthians 12:12-29 where he describes the body as a unit made up of many interrelated and interdependent parts.*

*The following model is of a social system. The boxes are social institutions which meet basic human needs. Religion is found in the Ideology sub-system along with ideas, beliefs, values and worldview. Religion is connected in one way or another to all other aspects of the social system. What happens in one segment of society may, through slow chain-reaction*

*fashion, be extended to other institutions as well (Kessel 1982). This will be illustrated in the next section.*

# **social System**



*Lines with arrowheads indicate feedback.*

## **VODOU AND FAMILY**

Enculturation, as it is called in anthropology (socialization in sociology), is “the process by which individuals acquire the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values that enable them to become functioning members of their societies” (Grunlan and Mayers 1988:72).

In Haiti, family and Vodou are closely connected. This is especially true in rural areas where extended families remain intact. A child develops his/her first notions about the *lwas* from relatives. “Indoctrination concerning sacred things is acquired in conversations with his elders, in story-telling sessions on the family estate, and in the *vodun* ceremonies which his family sponsors” (Simpson 1980:251). Since families often sponsor ceremonies, members of the extended family are expected to contribute and attend. In the child’s mind, Vodou and family are inseparable and the religion holds the family together. Moreover, the child learns to trust the

family and to be wary of neighbors, for while sickness, death, and crop failures may be caused by the *lwás* or the dead, they are just as likely to result from jealous neighbors. In church it is not unusual for a *lwa* speaking through a family member to lash out against a malicious neighbor during a regular Vodou service (Simpson 1980:252).

As the child grows, he/she often experiences family fun and religion simultaneously. Vodou ceremonies bring relatives together to enjoy one another's company.

*This section demonstrates the interconnections between religion and other aspects of the social system as previously discussed. In addition, it provides a point of comparison with Christianity. What WELS educator John Isch (1988:81) says of Christian families applies to Vodou ones: "The family is the child's first school. His parents are his first teachers who have the most lasting impression." Furthermore, [parents'] love of children and desire for progeny is both biblical and found in Vodou (Kessel 1991; Herskovits 2007:88-105).*

*The connection between enculturation and religion has implications for the missionary. In leaving Vodou the individual may be alienating himself/herself from the family. The Christian church worker will have to ask himself what and who will fill this void in the person's life.*

## **VODOU AND CULTURAL AND CLASS IDENTITY**

The following statement refers to the descendants of slaves in the United States: "No aspect of the life of African Americans can be understood without giving consideration to the issue of racism that they have experienced" (Breckenridge 1995:218). Clearly the same thing can be said of Haitians. Haiti is a nation of former slaves who experienced the most barbaric forms of racism at the hands of the French. To understand the modern Haitian is to understand the slave experience.

The beliefs and rituals of Vodou come mainly from the West African religious traditions. To practice Vodou is to relive the historical African past, to experience nostalgia for what once was and to recall the slave experience. In this way, to be Haitian is to embrace Vodou. Thus the expression is repeated over and over—Haiti is 85% Catholic, 15% Protestant, and 100% Vodou.

Haiti has four social classes. The upper class constitutes but two percent of the population with 44% of the wealth. These elite tend to be identified by light skin, straight hair, and French refinements. The middle class comprises about 8% of the population. They are non-manual laborers with moderate incomes, literacy, and a mastery of French. Peasants make up 75% of the Haitian population. They tend to be black, illiterate, and speak Creole. The urban lower class, about 15% of the population, is concentrated in Port-au-Prince. While they strive for education, many live in deplorable conditions (Wikipedia: 2011).

Previously we defined Vodou as the "religion of the oppressed." As such, it resonates most clearly with the lower classes—the peasants and urban poor. According to Karen McCarthy Brown (1991:98), Vodou is a "repository for wisdom accumulated by a people who have lived through slavery, hunger, disease, repression, corruption, and violence all in excess." Claudine Michel (2006:34) elaborates: "People turn to the spirits and their ancestors to assure the survival in this lifetime of the self and the group . . . . Therefore, survival in this lifetime and healing for the immediate well-being become an ongoing process that engages Vodou adepts throughout their life." Since Vodou expresses the concerns of the lower classes, Vodou becomes an important identity marker for the majority of Haitians.

The lower classes in Haitian society are composed primarily of blacks and race tends to be connected to Vodou as well. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century the urban elite comprised the Haitian ruling class. For the most part they were educated, were comparatively wealthy, and spoke French. Racially the urban elite were white or mulattos and were antagonistic against the blacks. According to Remy Bastien (1960), the mulattos at the top of the socioeconomic ladder have been identified by various labels—elite, an aristocracy, a caste, and a bourgeoisie. They held sway as heads of state until the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Simpson 1962).

People are social beings who manage their lives within the comfort of groups such as family, class, race, and religion. With group membership comes an understanding of statuses, roles and norms. Group members depend on one another to meet physical and emotional needs (Brinkerhoff et. al. 2011:103). Friendships and fellowships are found in groups. Vodou temples are found in great abundance scattered throughout the many neighborhoods. A congregation profile of any given temple would reveal members who have most characteristics in common and who share their lives with one another outside the confines of the *houfo*.

*The foregoing has major implications for mission work in Haiti and elsewhere. The expatriate Lutheran pastor or missionary may be categorized as one of the elite who does not understand the plight of the parishioner. It will take love, friendship, and years of regular contact for him to be fully accepted. Meanwhile the indigenous pastor may be looked upon as categorically different from his parishioners as well because of his education, wealth, etc.*

*But the information presented above has further implications. What happens when a person in a predominantly Vodou neighborhood converts to Christianity? Sociologists Brad Christerson and Michael Emerson (2003) have developed a model which helps explain why racial and ethnic diversity is so difficult to achieve in a congregation in the United States. Their model can be reconfigured to suggest why it may be difficult for a Haitian in a Vodou neighborhood to join and then remain in a Lutheran church. We can start with some basic assumptions. People choose if they want to be involved in a church. People choose which church they want to join. People look for a church which will satisfy their basic needs such as meaning and belonging. The Vodouisant in a typical Haitian neighborhood is joined in the houfo by his family, friends, and neighbors. They share most things in common, including their religion. When the convert to Christianity goes to a Lutheran church in the same neighborhood, he has one thing in common with his fellow worshippers—religion. His family, friends, associations, etc. from which he meets many of his emotional, psychological, and material needs may exist apart from the church. Thus he is pulled in different directions when it comes to finding satisfaction in life. Here we may wish to employ a cost/benefit analysis. Without knowing it, the convert will weigh his religious satisfaction against the support, consolation, celebration, and strength which comes from those outside the church. He will measure his gain against his losses. This is a dilemma faced by a new member in a small mission. Obviously the larger the congregation the greater chance he has of experiencing both a shared faith and a web of cross-cutting ties and relations.*

*We have been talking about conversion. The missionary, steeped in biblical understanding, knows how true conversion takes place. People cannot bring themselves to faith (1 Corinthians 2:14; Ephesians 2:1; Genesis 8:21; Romans 8:7). It is the job of the Holy Spirit to bring people to faith (1 Corinthians 12:3; Ephesians 2:9; 1 Corinthians 6:11). The Holy Spirit brings people to faith through the Means of Grace. There is the gospel in the Word (1*

*Corinthians 4:15; 1 Peter 1:23; Romans 10:17; John 17:20; Titus 3:3-7). There is the gospel in the Sacraments (1 Peter 3:21; Titus 3:5).*

*Yet, people are “converted” to Vodou and to other non-Christian religions as well. How does this come about? Anthropologist Michael Angrosino (2004:70-72) itemizes four ways in which a person becomes a believer. First, there is personal experience. People can have life-changing experiences which convinces them “of some truth higher, more powerful, more beautiful than the reality they began with” (Angrosino 2004:70). Transcendence can be found in any number of atypical events—a spectacular sunrise, the birth of a child, a beautiful song, etc.*

*Second, a person may come to believe through myths and rituals. Myths and stories explain how and why things came to be. Rituals reenact or commemorate events which are important to the religious community. As in enculturation, people come to believe slowly by participating in the rituals of a group. People want to fit in and to affirm the beliefs of the group.*

*Third, there is the sense of harmony. People do not easily exist in the midst of perceived chaos. They earnestly desire for things to fit together and make sense. Theology helps people see how pieces fit together and how harmony is achieved.*

*Finally, there is the effect of liberation. People are more likely to believe a message which offers liberation or has a liberating effect. For some it is as simple as the axiom, “The truth shall set you free.”*

*No doubt all these forces are at work in the conversion of the Vodouisant. The Haitian has grown up learning the myths and stories through informal means at home and by watching the Vodou ceremonies. The spirit-possession which is witnessed and experienced in a ceremony certainly gives a feeling of liberation and transcendence and implies that people and lwas live in cosmic harmony. (As an aside, the main sources on Vodou utilized in this paper all fail to address the issue of conversion in Vodou.)*

*The missionary will want to keep these four conversion mechanisms in mind when dealing with the Vodouisant. The convert to Christianity will need to be reassured that a conversion experience is not needed for new faith to exist; that amidst the broken family ties and social ostracism that may result from conversion, harmony is to be found in a right relationship with God; that true liberation is to be found in justification; and the like.*

## **VODOU AND OTHER RELIGIONS**

As noted previously, Vodou is a syncretistic religion which starts with West African traditions and folds in elements of Catholicism. Both acknowledge a creator god. Both have a concept of heaven. In Vodou the *lwas* are also called “saints” or “angels.” Meanwhile, the Virgin Mary and other saints are equated with *lwas*. When the *lwa* emerges in a new devotee, it usually is baptized, and while possessing the human host the *lwa* can take Holy Communion. Many Haitians equate possession by the *lwa* with the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. So closely wed are the two religions that a common Vodou axiom is that “to serve the *loa* you have to be a Catholic” (Lewis 1975:106). Thus, many Vodouisants feel no qualms about attending a Vodou ceremony in the morning and a Catholic mass in the afternoon. According to Michel (2006:36), “Traditionally, to be seen in church was protection against persecution and was perceived as a sign of being a ‘good’ Christian, someone who honors both God and saints, a practice that does not reduce respect within the Vodou community.”



Vodou is a religion of accommodation which freely absorbs beliefs and rituals from other traditions. This syncretistic religion, however, has prompted different responses from mainline Christian denominations. From the onset, the Catholic Church saw the slave as a human being in need of salvation. The differences which existed between the slave owners and slaves were only worldly and transient. According to Courlander (1985:6) the “Church did not insist on washing out of the African mind everything that was there. It regarded its mission as that of supplying the single quality that was lacking—salvation.” As Vodou developed and matured and erased the clear-cut lines between Catholic orthodoxy and African paganism, the Catholic Church wavered in its policies. It undertook a series of anti-superstition campaigns against the Vodouisants but with little lasting effect. For the most part, therefore, it has employed a “tolerance-by-necessity” approach. This has allowed syncretism to find its way into Haitian Catholicism.

“The Protestant churches in Haiti, on the contrary, have demanded that their converts become new people. They have forbidden their adherents to take any part in non-Christian rituals or other activities—including even the dance. They have presented them with a simple and painful choice” (Courlander 1985:6). The Haitian is either fully Protestant or fully pagan.

*Lutherans working in Haiti will have the opportunity of examining these two approaches somewhat dispassionately. Today Catholicism and Vodou are on relatively good terms. Most Haitians are nominally Catholic and, simultaneously, committed pagans. The line between truth and fiction has been clouded or erased. According to Haitian perception, the Virgin Mary is the mother of God as taught by the Catholics, but she is also one of the lwa. Saints Peter and Paul and St. Patrick are also lwa, as we have seen. On the other hand, the work righteousness of the Catholics does fit comfortably with the Vodou concept that duty and obedience to the lwa brings temporal and eternal rewards. Then there is the matter of “quality control” and consistency in the priesthood. Indigenous Haitian priests do not view the spiritual world in the same way as Catholic leaders elsewhere throughout the Caribbean and the world. Rome must grapple with issues of doctrinal unity and the “tolerance-by-necessity” practice.*

*The Protestants working in Haiti (Lutherans excluded) are committed to a different direction. Their battle cry seems to be that of Joshua (24:15): “But if serving the Lord seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your forefathers served beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.”*

*While the Evangelicals’ intolerance of paganism is biblical and, therefore, commendable, any implementation of the “Joshua approach” must be carefully considered. First, it can be misapplied. Joshua made his bold statement to an established community of believers. His purpose was that the Israelites maintain a God-pleasing commitment to the Lord while surrounded by pagans. Joshua was not setting forth an evangelism methodology. After all, Joshua and the Israelites were commissioned by God to destroy the pagans in Canaan. Second, what I am calling the “Joshua approach” can easily be used to support classical colonialism. In this, the expatriate administrators and missionaries, often unwittingly, seek the total transformation of the people, culture, and society, not just religion (Kessel 2011:2-4). The missionaries feel satisfied when the indigenous worshippers look, act, sound, and think like their counterparts in other countries.*

*The Lutheran missionary is well advised to consider the pitfalls of the Catholic and Evangelical approaches employed in Haiti. On the one hand he must not compromise the truth*

*of God's Word for the sake of convenience. On the other hand he must realize that Christianity is not culture-specific designed to snatch people out of their culture, society, and nation.*

*What approach, therefore, should the missionary take? The first place to start is a review of the basics. God wants all men to be saved. Salvation is God's work. Conversion is effected through the Gospel and not the Law. Religious forms and rites do not everywhere have to be the same. People can be Christians and live within their own culture. A synopsis of these and other principles can be found in a paper entitled "Share the Promise Culture to Culture" (Kessel 1996). Next the missionary is encouraged to see what decisions have been made by missionaries working under somewhat similar circumstances. For example, early missionaries among the Apache Indians of eastern Arizona had to decide whether to learn the language of the people or to use interpreters, how to respond to the shaman, how imperative it was to train local pastors, whether to target parents or children, how to balance humanitarian aid with Gospel ministry, and the like (Kessel 1995:26-36). Next, the long-term commitment of the missionary to the community must be considered. Claudine Michel notes that Vodou permeates every aspect of a person's existence. "Vodou is more than ritual of the cult, temple, and family. As a comprehensive religious system, it ties together the visible and invisible, material and spiritual, secular and sacred" (Michel 2006:33-34). The missionary who makes periodic sorties into a Vodou community will not have the impact on the people as will one who lives day in and day out in the town. The called church worker who sees his task as preaching and teaching during selected hours of the week is not going to have the impact as does the man who makes himself part of the community and brings his faith and family into all life tasks. To this end humanitarian aid can serve as an obvious testimony to the love the missionary has for the people and of Christian faith in action as well. Finally, expressions of superiority and paternalism have no place in mission relationships. Elsewhere I have proposed what I call the "Partnership Model" of missions (Kessel 2011). This carefully navigates around these dangers.*

## CONCLUSION

In this paper I set out to accomplish two goals: to provide a succinct summary of Vodou, and to supply an anthropological analysis leading to mission applications. In viewing an iceberg at sea, only the top is visible, but much remains out of sight. In similar fashion I have exposed only the surface of Vodou. Much remains to be learned and understood.

Significant questions need to be asked and answered. In order to stimulate more in-depth research into Vodou and the Christian's response to it, I conclude this paper with these appetizers.

Is Vodou Satanic? Certain Evangelical groups working in Haiti have concluded that Vodou is Satan worship. This is consistent with the Hollywood portrayal as well. In one sense this is true; in another sense it is naïve and false. Any religion that is not of God is of Satan. The end product of Vodou is damnation, and Satan rejoices. Yet, Vodou is not Satanism per se. Vodouisants do not worship Satan as Satan. They worship the *lwas* and, to some extent Bondye.

*The Missionary is advised to use caution in the labels he attaches to Vodou. Hindus worship false gods, yet they are not called Satanists. Vodouisants worship false gods, but neither should be called Satanists.*

How are women viewed in Vodou? Vodou is somewhat unique among world religions insofar as women hold positions of power and prestige. Many of the *lwas* are prominent women. Women *mambos* serve as priestesses, and women in the *houfo* have clearly defined service positions.

*What leadership positions and tasks does Lutheranism define for women in Haiti? Along these same lines, Vodou provides many positions of service within the church for men and women. How are the talents of congregants utilized in the local Lutheran congregation (or does the pastor essentially control most things)?*

What teachings of Scripture resonate most readily with Haitians? Obviously all Scripture is given by inspiration of God and is efficacious (2 Timothy 3:16), yet certain people find special meaning in certain passages. For example, a shepherd may be drawn to the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm. Favorite texts in African American Churches in the United States include those pertaining to deliverance from bondage. Moses, thus, becomes a “patron saint.”

*Has the missionary in Haiti found that certain Bible stories spark greater interest than others? When people can see their own lives and circumstances in parallel Bible teachings, they realize that God’s Word is not distant but is intended for them.*

Or then there is the whole matter of spirit possession. Courlander (1985:16) writes, “The possessing, or ‘mounting,’ of the possessed individual is manifest proof of the *loa*’s existence and his constant proximity. Vodoun is built upon the premise of the existence of the *loa*, and the possession is the instrument of direct contact and of constant proof of the *loa*’s imminence.” Spirit possession is the foundation of Vodou.

*Will the missionary show that Christ and His redemptive work is the foundation of faith, and that faith demonstrates the indwelling of the Holy Spirit?*

To God Alone Be the Glory

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