

The function of haitian voodoo essay



In her book, *Tell My Horse*, Hurston (1990) suggests the existence of a variety of types of Haitian Voodoo. It would be impossible to discern a complete list of every loa, or Voodoo god, she writes, “ because every major section of Haiti has its own local variation” of the religion (p.

114). The practice of Voodoo in Haiti “ has gathered about itself more detail of gods and rites” than many other religions (p. 131). As a result, each community that practices Vooodoo has different moral standards, based on the characteristics of their own gods; spiritual and sacrilegious customs, based on their various rituals; and, ideas based upon the context of the community in which the religion is practiced. In summarizing Durkheim, Giddens (1971) writes that “ a religion is never simply a set of beliefs: it always involves prescribed ritual practices and a definite institutional form” (p.

107). Thus, the institution of Voodoo and its rituals serve the necessary function of defining and reinforcing the morals, culturally accepted norms, and even the reality of those who actively participate. Throughout her descriptions of Voodoo rituals, Hurston (1990) writes about Haitians who attempt to participate in certain rituals but are found to be “ faking” their actions (p. 221).

Many deities “ mount,” or posses, persons who, “ under the whip and guidance” of the spirit, say things they would otherwise not say (p. 221). Some people, though, who “ have something to say and lack the courage,” use the guise of being mounted by these deities to say these things (p. 221). In the case of the god Guedi?? , Haitians differentiate between persons who

are really “mounted” and those who are not by requiring them cleanse their face with his drink, which is “raw rum and hot pepper” (p.

221). The person who is possessed will follow through with the request, while the fraud will “always draw back” (p. 221). Many persons not familiar with the religion would have a hard time believing that it is possible to be possessed by a spirit.

In Voodoo, though, it is not a difference between belief and non-belief: possession is accepted as normal and is no more surprising than a Christian’s prayer. As Giddens (1971) writes, it is the fact that members of a society “adhere to common beliefs and sentiments” that a society is a ‘society’ at all (p. 111). Only through a collective conscience that believes in spirit possession, or any other Voodoo aspect, do the rituals become the “source and repository of human ideals” (p. 107). Hurston (1990) tells the story of a Lesbian woman who was “mounted” one afternoon (p.

222). The spirit announced through her that he “told this woman repeatedly to stop making love to women,” and that doing so “is a vile thing” to which the deity objects (p. 222). Thus, through the ritual of possession, we see the morals of the community actively defined. As another example, del Guercio (1997) recounts the story of Clairvius Narcisse, who had “abandoned his children and deprived his brother of land that was rightfully his” (p.

321). As a result, Narcisse was Zombified, becoming “an unthinking, unknowing beast” that was forced to work for a Bocor, a voodoo priest who deals in black magic (Hurston, 1990, p. 181). Clearly, it is difficult to believe

that humans could be raised from their graves in the form of a Zombie and be forced to work as a slave in a body without a soul (Hurston, 1990, p. 179).

Even Hurston (1990) writes that she “ was told by numerous... Haitians that [Zombification] was a myth,” and that the belief in them had very little basis (p. 182).

Del Guercio (1997) claims that ethnobotanist Wade Davis “ unlocked” the secret of Zombification by recognizing that “ the symptoms brought on by fish poisoning in Japan were identical to those experienced by victims of so-called zombification in Haiti” (p. 318). Voodoo belief in Zombies, however, does not revolve around the question of whether or not it is possible for them to exist scientifically. Empirical data for or against the existence of a drug that could cause a state of zombification has little to do with Voodoo belief in the existence of Zombies.

As Hurston (1990) points out, the belief in Zombies is “ real and deep,” and the fear of becoming one is “ outspoken” among Haitian peasants (p. 179). Hurston was able to discover clear evidence for or against the source of Zombies only within the beliefs of Voodoo. She discovered that the gods who caused the zombification were Petro gods, gods who had the power to do both good and evil (p. 164).

The reality of Zombies is further reinforced by the collective belief in legends and myths that account real stories of friends and family members becoming zombified. Especially amazing is the story of the young girl who sees her dead brother, now a Zombie, being taken by his own home. Even after she “ screamed and aroused the house..

. such is the terror inspired by [the Bocors] that no one” attempted to rescue the young man (Hurston, 1990, p. 193). Those living in the upper class also believe in the possibility of becoming a Zombie, which causes “ obvious fear” in “ educated, intelligent persons” who “ safeguard the bodies of the dead against this possibility” (p. 181). Many of these safeguarding rituals do not provide protection from zombification scientifically speaking.

Hurston (1990) writes that “ many peasants put a knife in the right hand of the corpse and flex the arm in such a way that it will deal a blow with the knife” were the body to be disturbed (p. 191). Clearly, among Haitians it is the belief in rituals that result in their religiosity, not whether or not scientific evidence exists to uphold these beliefs. In the story of the Virgin of Ville Bonheur, Hurston (1990) tells of the woman who “ lit in the fronds of a palm tree” and blessed the people (p. 231). People came to the palm tree to be cured and helped in other ways (p.

231). When the Catholic Church found out about the tree they attempted to chop it down, but when a priest tried to use a machete to cut it, “ the tree caused first blow of the machete to bounce back and strike the priest on the head” (p. 231). The Haitians began to worship the tree and the spot on which it stands is still revered today.

It is only through the ritualistic worship of the tree that ideals – in this example, anti-Catholicism ideals – are held as beliefs. Further, the cascade at Saut d’Eau draws people who “ undress and climb the misted rocks so that the sacred water may wet their bodies” (p. 31). Immediately, many of them become possessed (p.

231). As Giddens (1971) writes, the tree or water, like other sacred objects, “do not intrinsically evoke the powerful feelings of religiosity” which are attributed to them (p. 109, my italics). Only through rituals associated to these objects are ideals derived. As another example, note Hurston’s (1990) description of the Petro gods (p. 164).

Petro gods can help you to “find a job... lend you big support, or give you something to protect you,” but in return you must make a promise of service to them (p.

167). Your sacrifice to them can be in the form of livestock, other animals, or even dead bodies from the tomb, but the promise “must be kept or the spirits begin to take revenge” (p. 167). If you do not make good on your promise, “first the domestic animals begin to die.

.. then the children fall ill and die..

. and finally the head of the house” will die (p. 167). One can’t decide whether or not they will keep their promise. The ability of the Petros to do harm can’t simply be ignored. Through the collective belief in Petro gods, Haitians reinforce certain morals, in this case that debts must be repaid.

It is impossible for practicing members of Voodoo to “get outside,” or simply ignore principles of their religion and the reality that these principles creates. Durkheim (1965) notes this quality of religion when he writes, “the believer...

believes himself held to certain manners of acting which are imposed upon him by the nature of the sacred principle with which he feels he is in

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communion” (p. 236-238). An example in Voodoo can be seen in Hurston’s (1990) account of the goddess Erzulie Freida (p. 121-128). Erzulie is believed to be the perfect female, and she must be “loved and obeyed” (p. 21).

She is the dream woman for many Haitian men, and on the day that she calls a man, “no mortal woman may lay possessive hands” upon that man (p. 121). Men are called in different ways, and often the men willingly succumb to her call. However, “sometimes the man chosen is in love with a mortal woman,” and he valiantly fights against Erzulie’s call until “ill luck and ill health” finally breaks his will and he “bows to the inexorable goddess” (p. 123). The men called by Erzulie are “baptized” or initiated into her cult by preparing a special course of food for her (p.

124). This food is used at a ceremony where the applicant’s head is “washed,” a necessary function in “most [Voodoo] ceremonies” (p. 124). Other rituals are performed, including the “mounting” of the initiate by Erzulie, singing and dancing, and certain traditional actions – including the sprinkling of a couch with flour and a little syrup – taken by the houngan, or priest (p. 124-125).

This entire ceremony, and the objects used within it, holds little intrinsic religious value, but it is within this ritual that the belief in Erzulie – a belief that causes married men to divorce women whom they love – is upheld (p. 23). It should be noted that “being called” by Erzulie is not an excuse that is used to obtain a divorce. Instead the belief in her existence, a real and deep belief, means that a divorce is the necessary outcome when, by chance, she calls on a married man (p. 123). Durkheim writes that all members of a

society who adhere to “ a unified system of beliefs and practices” are united into a single moral community (p.

53). In the case of many Haitians this system is the religion of Voodoo, and in the community into which they are united, almost everything receives a certain quality of religiosity. Thus, as Durkheim writes, religion and society cannot exist separate from one another (p. 236). Religion plays a significant part in determining the agreed upon norms of a society, and even in that societies’ language. Clearly, “ the scope of religion extends much further than might initially appear” (p.

179). Through its existence and the manifestation of its various forms, Voodoo in Haiti continues to influence the communities that practice the religion by strengthening their peoples’ morals, giving meaning to their customs, and providing value to their faith.