

Sofia Santoro

Jonathan Moore

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Voodoo, Santeria, and Syncretism in Colonial Caribbean

During the 16th century slave trade and colonization of the Caribbean islands, thousands of African slaves were brought over by the Spanish and French. This was the beginning of the blending of language, culture, and more specifically religion. The European's used Catholicism as a fear tactic against the African slaves and the Indigenous peoples of the islands they concord. Although this made Catholicism the main religion in the Caribbean, it didn't wipe out what was once there. As a result of colonization and syncretism, new religion and spiritual beliefs bloomed in the shadows. Deities from African and Indigenous practices were hidden and disguised in forms that appeased the colonizer. This allowed blends of people to hold on to culture, and let it evolve. Today, many people either don't know about these religions or have strong misconceptions of them based off of stereotypes put out into the media that essentially evolved from the colonizer's view of them. Modern day culture tends to look over the true origins and developments of these religious practices, further oppressing them. Writing through a lens of decolonization, this essay will discover the ways in which historians view and discuss voodoo and santeria in a historic and modern standpoint.

Yorùbá Influences on Haitian Vodou and New Orleans Voodoo.

In her article "Yorùbá Influences on Haitian Vodou and New Orleans Voodoo.", Ina J. Fandrich explores the significance of Yorùbá in the start and evolution of several religions popular in Black Caribbean culture. Fandrich grew up in Europe but has extensive knowledge on Marie Laueau and the history of New Orleans. She has even taught at several universities around the country and is now a tour guide in New Orleans. Going back to its African roots, Fandrich discusses how voodoo, candomble, and santeria are all tied back to Yorùbá due to the colonization of African people and the slave trade. She goes on to discuss how voodoo makes its way to the city of New Orleans, becoming a significant part of the city's culture. But through this she manages to stay true to the roots of the religion's practices and beliefs, calling out the whitewashing and commercialization that voodoo has undergone to call out the appropriation. She does a brilliant job at writing off any misconceptions the audience once had about voodoo. In addition, she keeps the reader intrigued to learn more and maintains a strong structure throughout the article.

Selling Voodoo in Migration Metropolises.

Melissa L. Cooper discusses similar themes of the representation of voodoo in her article "Selling Voodoo in Migration Metropolises." Cooper is a professor of history at Rutgers University in Newark, New Jersey. She specializes in African cultural and intellectual history,

and history of the African Diaspora. In this article she discusses the commercialization of black voodoo in major cities across the United States but more specifically in New York City. In the 1930s, a short film *Harlem's Black Magic* framed both black people and voodoo as a dark, barbaric, cult that essentially appealed to a white audience as a form of entertainment. It was a racist film that was very successful in theaters but sparked much controversy and protest from the black community. Cooper delves further past the film into news articles and critic's reviews of both the film and voodoo. The depiction of voodoo in newspapers even made it seem like it was the cause of negative phenomena in the black community such as murder or high mortality rates. She maintains her lens of decolonization throughout the piece to get down to the racist depictions and interpretations of voodoo that still strongly affects how society views the religion today.

Santeria

Lázara Menéndez is a professor at the University of Havana who specializes in art history. In her article "Santeria" she gives a detailed overview of the Afro-Cuban religion and discusses its roots, beliefs, and practices. She discusses how the beginnings of santeria came about and even goes into detail about the Sunday Catholic Mass where Tainos, Africans, and Catholics attended services. When these religious beliefs and practices first began to blend it was considered bruja, witchcraft. Interestingly enough, she explains how Catholics weren't fully invested in evangelizing the indigenous population and African slaves. They were more open to

syncretism and the melting and molding of these different beliefs. Historically, it only seems to really change in 1959 during the revolution when the government steps in with religious ideology. Later in the piece, she includes a chart going into detail about different deities and the attributes they have including their colors, plants, animals, food, fruits, and drinks. It's a thorough article that is perfect for anyone who wants to know more about Santeria in detail. It's well structured, organized, and explained.

Caribbean Santeria

Nathaniel Samuel Murrell is a professor of philosophy and religion at the University of North Carolina Wilmington. He's an expert in Caribbean Religions, African Religions, Biblical Literature, and World Religions. In this article he discusses the roots of Santeria and the racist attitudes present during the formation of it. He even mentions that the term *Santeria* is a derogatory term that was pushed onto the religion by white Catholic colonizers in order to "other" it. The term itself was popularized in the 1940s and as a result, scholars argue about the correct term to call the religion. Santeria was an escape for the indigenous peoples and African slaves to worship and connect back to their roots and culture. The article continues on to talk about the rituals, evolution, and deities of the religion. Although the article gives great information, it's dense and requires the reader to be on and aware. It's a lot to follow along to considering the rituals become complex and there are many deities that are responsible for different intentions. He mentions how in 1919 there was a white girl who died in mysterious circumstances in Cuba and the media blamed it on Santeros (devotees of Santeria). This caused a

domino effect in the US after a rumor was spread that Santeros kidnapped white children and took their blood for “satanic” rituals. This sparked mass lynching of black Cubans carried out by angry white Americans. Afterwards, whites were praised for their actions for trying to “civilize” black people. This draws a parallel to the portrayal and blame of crime done by black communities who practice voodoo. Murrell does a great job at keeping the reader informed about the roots in addition to the history and treatment of Santeros.

The Materiality of Magic

Natalie Armitage is a PhD student at Manchester University with research interests in the historical and cultural representations of figurative image magic. Also a PhD student at Manchester University, Ceri Houlbrook has research interests in the archaeology of British folklore and ritual. In this article they break down the commercialization of voodoo dolls and their existence. Voodoo dolls are usually presented as an effigy to stick pins into to hurt or heal part(s) of a real person. Although this practice is what is most commonly thought of as an essential part of voodoo, it is not. In the 19th century the writings of white travelers misinterpreted the symbol of the doll, and as a result it was forged into the popular culture stereotypes of the religion. Armitage and Houlbrook do a thorough and detailed job at debunking the voodoo doll to discuss the true origins of this doll ritual in Europe and parts of Northern Africa. It's chock full of history going into examples of image magic, which refers to any ritual that involves an image, sculpture, painting, photograph. It also describes the fetitisation of

particular West African deities and figures by Europeans when they misinterpreted the effigies while they “discovered” them.

Perceptions of New Orleans Voodoo: Sin, Fraud, Entertainment, and Religion

In this article, author and retired Smithsonian Museum employee Carolyn Morrow Long discusses the evolution of the societal view of voodoo. She mainly focuses on voodoo in New Orleans and the ways it's been rejected and accepted and why. She opens with explaining how voodoo was originally seen as sinful and threatening, and how it was even repressed by authorities throughout the nineteenth century. She explains that the French and Spanish colonizers were pretty tolerant of voodoo practices but didn't encourage it. There are no records of anti-voodoo campaigns pushed onto African beliefs of communities by the Catholic Church. She then goes on to discuss the history of voodoo in New Orleans, citing newspaper articles from mid-nineteenth century. At one point she discusses the racism that occurs after the abolition of slavery and uses the word “Negrophobia” which is not a relatively common term used in modern day 2019 however this was written in 1996 by a white woman in the south. She goes on to discuss how the turn from voodoo being a sin falls into being fraud. She uses the term “hoodoo” which refers to the practice of using the illusion of voodoo to control events or people by selling items that would pretend to influence luck, love, money, employment etc. It was then sensationalized by journalists, fictional writers, and magazines. This added an entertainment

factor and hooked people in to what we now think of today as voodoo. She wraps it up by reminding the reader that voodoo is a religion, and there are indeed people who really practice it. That it's not just what is commonly seen in the French Quarter. The article overall does a good job at walking the reader through the history of voodoo in New Orleans and voodoo evolved throughout the past several hundred years.