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From the Motherland: Voodoo and Shaping of African American Identity

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Abstract

The current research work intends not only to reveal the origin of Voodoo religion but also to highlight its contribution to African Americans' identity building. Also known as Vodun, Voodoo is one of the main spiritual and religious beliefs practiced by Africans. Originating from Africa, this spiritual and religious practice has been brought to Americas by African slaves during the transatlantic slave trade, a remarkable period during which black people were forcedly brought to Europe and to the Americas. Ever since, Voodoo practice is anchored in the history of African Americans' DNA and seems to be shaping their identity. During this research, qualitative method has been applied with a special reference to previous articles, books and publications dealing with Voodoo practices in the Americas. As cultural heritage, the results show that Voodoo practices influences African American's identity in various ways. Apart from the magnificent role played by Voodooists while fighting against slavery, it is worth mentioning that the embodiment of Voodoo rhythms, songs and dances by some African American artists reflects their attachment to their motherland spiritual powers, and hence, shaping their cultural identity. With a view of successfully complete this research work, two literary theories have been used: New Historicism and African American Criticism.

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Introduction

From approximately 1526 to 1867, more than twelve million of African slaves have been captured and sent to America to work in plantations (Mintz 1). Unwillingly embarked in this journey of no return, an uncountable number of African slaves died during the dreaded- middle passage and those who have luckily survived are disconnected from their culture, nature and spirits. During this period, the majority of African slaves coming from the west Africa were sent to the Caribbean in order to work in sugar plantations (Mintz 1). The most awful aspect of this slave trade is related to women sexual oppression manifested through sexual violence and the enslavement of children by slaves' masters. Though coming from different horizons, African slaves uses songs, dances and other spiritual powers to build a strong family (Ahougnon 2). This helps them to reconnect not only to their ancestors but also to their motherland and their deities.

The misconception of voodoo by slave owners who considered voodoo as demonic practice or witchcraft including the wondering socialization of slaves are certainly among the main reasons why slave owners have decided to forbid voodoo practice in the different plantations, leading to a rebellion organized by slaves in 1739 the South Carolina (Ahougnon 2). However, voodoo is also considered as a racist term because it has been used to "denigrate the spiritual practices of African American and to argue that black people are too superstitious for independence and self-governance" (Boaz 1). Voodoo practice among African American community is often misunderstood and misrepresented by many people. However, African Americans consider voodoo as a source of cultural pride and spiritual connection to their African roots. Voodoo is commonly accepted as spiritual and religious practice that shapes African American's identity because of its influence on the community and Collective identity. During voodoo rituals and ceremonies, participants come specially to honor their ancestors and to seek for guidance and healing.

Henceforth, voodoo has been used as a powerful weapon to fight against slavery, segregation, and other forms of systemic racism. By connecting with their ancestors and drawing on the strength and wisdom of their spiritual traditions, African Americans have been able to persevere their identity and thrive in the face of adversity.

Therefore, the current research entitled: from the motherland: voodoo and Shaping of African American identity is significant in the sense that it aims not only to reveal the origin of voodoo in the African American community but also to depict how it contributes to shaping their identity. Thanks to qualitative method that helps to collect data from relevant existing literatures basically books, articles, and previous research works, this research explores the place and the influence of voodoo practice in African American communities without putting aside the main factors that facilitate the exportation of African spiritual and religious practices in the Americas.

I. Background of the study

1.1 Problem statement

The practice of voodoo in African American communities instigates many scholars' reactions. When some tried to pinpoint its origins, some of them are willing to know its influence on the shaping of the African American's identity. Anyways, knowing how the practice of voodoo shapes the African American's identity is relevantly important and this research raises a matter of the impact of voodoo practices in African American communities, shedding light on the importance of the spiritual links between African Americans and their ancestors, if not, with their motherland. Out of that, this research instigates misconceptions of voodoo by the mainstream culture which considers voodoo practice as demonic, and part of Zombie culture. Far from witchery, voodoo practice is viewed by some scholars as a religion and a cultural heritage of African American. Even though extracts from some articles show that voodoo practice comes from Haiti, solid evidences give detailed information, clarifying its undeniable roots.

1.2 Objectives of the study

There are several reasons behind the choice of this angle of research. First and foremost, this research basically aims at exploring the origin of voodoo practiced by African Americans without ignoring the impact of the transatlantic slave trade that represents an irrevocable factor that facilitates the arrival of voodoo practices in the Americas many centuries ago. Secondly, this study intends to depict the main reasons why African American identity seems to be shaped by voodoo. In addition, talking of this matter without tackling the socio-cultural impact of voodoo practices on American communities

would be a little bit bizarre. This research states how voodoo practices influences African American identity socially and culturally, underlining its effects in the musical genres practiced by African American artists. It also reveals the relevant role of voodoo practices in peacemaking and community building. Finally, this research intends to reveal the African Americans' attachment to their motherland and to their ancestors.

1.3 Literary theory

With a view of grasping the underlying messages in the pieces of scholarship related to Voodoo practices used in this research work, two literary theories have been used. New Historicism is the American branch of cultural poetics. Appearing in the late 1970s and early 1990s. It challenges the old Historicism, founded in the nineteenth century thought, which declares that: "history serves as a background to literature, history, as written, in an accurate of what really occurred; and historians can articulate a unified and internally consistent worldview of any people, country, or era" (Bressler 319). As I cannot go in the past to collect data, this literary theory is a boon for my work.

African American Criticism is an approach that develops a black aesthetics to be applied when interpreting African-American writings. One of its leading advocates, Henry Louis Gates Jr.. Henry believes that: "Such an aesthetics provides work for developing and analyzing the ever-growing and popular African-American canon (Bressler 301)". When look closely, African American Criticism and African American traditional and cultural Criticism are two coins of the same side.

African American traditional and cultural criticism is defined as the analytical approach that helps to examine research works focusing on the socio-cultural context in which the work is produced. According to Shanafelt, this criticism studies how literary works shape cultural identities especially those of marginalized groups within the society (Shanafelt 1). From transatlantic slave trade period up to its end, anyone could agree that Africans have been marginalized. Even after the slave trade, racial discrimination has taken a new trend in America and this brings many American writers such as Toni Morison and Zora Neale Hurstson to depict the fate of black woman within the African American societies in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. While

putting the main character of *Beloved* in the position of a slave woman who has killed her own daughter in order to prevent her from being subject of sexual oppression and the horrific treatment of African slaves during slave trade, Toni Morrison would like to depict African slaves who have been disconnected from their culture and motherland. From their motherland to America, African American traditional and cultural criticism helps to examine the place of voodoo that is viewed as a cultural heritage in shaping African American identity. Using African American traditional and cultural criticism as the driving code to emphasize the place of voodoo in contemporary African American communities is crucially important in the sense that it helps to better understand its origin and to make a good interpretation of the collected data. This theory appears as an appropriate theory because voodoo is commonly known as one of the main religious beliefs originating from Africa even if it is also practiced by African Americans. Henceforth, voodoo is at the heart of African of American culture and civilizations. Consequently, it may be analyzed through the lens of African American traditional and cultural criticism.

II. Literature Review

2.1 Relevance of the selected works

This study is not the first research work dealing with voodoo practice among African American communities. That is, many scholars have already worked not only on the origin of Voodoo practice in the world but also on its influence on the African American's identity. As a matter of fact, Rasiah et al.'s publication on *reconstructing African American's Ethnic identity* is a relevant research work dealing with the influence of voodoo on African American's identity.

However, Emily Suzanne Clark considers voodoo as an American religion in her recent work entitled *Nineteenth-Century New Orleans Voodoo: An American Religion*. She tries to explain the influence of voodoo on African American identity. Reading her work with a special attention may help to understand how she perceives voodoo. She thinks voodoo shapes African American identity. In addition to Emily Suzanne Clark, Daphne Lamothe goes further, depicting the influence of voodoo in African American Communities with a specific reference to Zora Neale Hurstons' *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. In her study, she described voodoo as a traditional and cultural heritage of

African Americans.

As time goes on, voodoo practice has known an amazing evolution that leads to the New Orleans voodoo churches. Stephanie Bilinsky gives details explanation on this voodoo spiritual temple in his dissertation. Entitled *The voodoo spiritual temple: A case Study of New Orleans' Spiritual Churches*, this research is a crucial work that depicts the evolution of voodoo practices in the Americas. Bryant Long has also tackled New Orleans voodoo practice in his well-known research work, *An Ethnography of Voodoo Tourism and Heritage Sites in New Orleans, Louisiana*.

Meanwhile Servan Ahougnon's publication on *How Voodoo Has Influenced Music in the world* is a crucial work that clarifies not only how this religion has exported to America but how it has influenced African American musical genres. Boaz's research entitled *Ten Facts about the Racist History of "Voodoo"* depicts how voodoo practice is conceived by white Americans. Manigault-Bryant's *African and African Diaspora Traditions: Religious Syncretism, Erotic Encounter, and Sacred Transformation*, Denise Martin's *African Mythic Science or Vodou Methodology*, Claudia Rauchut's *A Transatlantic Restoration of Religion: On the Re-construction of Yoruba and Lùkùmì in Cuban Santeria*, James Tino's *The Afro-Caribbean Religious Experience* and Adam McGee's *Haitian Vodou and Voodoo: Imagined Religion and Popular Culture* are some extremely relevant work selected in the frame of this research work.

Eric Montgomery on his part, in his article entitled "Gothic "Voodoo" in Africa and Haiti, historicize and demystify "Voodoo" religion in Africa Haiti: It also draw comparisons and contrasts to concepts and themes related to the "gothic." Besides, in his paper, he confesses that: "A certain racialized Eurocentric hegemony devalues one of the world's least understood religions("Voodoo") by equating it with equally distorted concepts of "the gothic"" (Montgomery 1). As for Claudine Michel, In her piece of scholarship entitled "Voodoo in Haiti Way of life and Mode of Survival," she underscores the necessity of rediscovering and rehabilitating indigenous people religions and modes of spirituality which has suffered from a long history of subjugation, and whose beliefs have been dismissed continually as primitive if not downright evil (Claudine 27). Worse , the Western culture even went far to demonize and label Voodoo religion as: "Animism, fetishism, paganism, heathenism, and black magic"(27). The latter terms are some of the terms that

have been used improperly in the West to describe the Haitian religion, which is presented in the foreign press and the media as a religion of blood and sacrifice, as a religion of sexual orgies and malevolence, thus resulting in the widely shared perception that the practice of Vodou equals sorcery and witchcraft (27).

2.2 Critical appreciation of the selected works

According to many scholars, Africans are known for practicing voodoo because of the unwanted migration of slave to Americas. Even though slave trade has facilitated the extension of this practice in the whole world, some people think that this religion comes from Caribbean. Even if, there is logic in their analysis, some researchers like Emily Suzanne Clark are still not convinced. As Judith Weisenfeld, Emily Suzanne Clark thinks that the origin of voodoo is not easily traceable. That is certainly the reason behind her assertion: “voodoo’s origins are impossible to trace, but African religious influence and the contemporary context of enslaved life in Louisiana coming together in creative innovation seems clear” (Clark 133). From this extract, one could not clearly get their point of view unless one takes back books related to transatlantic slave trade because the use of the name Louisiana needs better explanation. According to Laura Ewen Blokker, Louisiana is one of the slave states where millions of African slaves from the west region of Africa were brought (Blokker 4). She adds that the majority of slaves are Fon, Bambara, Fanti, Gambians, Senegalese, Guineans, Yoruba, Igbo and Angolans (4). Even if the list has been incomplete, it is good to underline that Anderson has also mentioned that Louisiana slave town and Mississippi have been influenced by traditional faiths of Senegambians, Beninese, and west central African groups (Anderson 50). For him New Orleans tradition does not mean that voodoo practice is coming from Haiti, rather it serves a place where voodoo has fascinated to create new religion through the blending of Catholicism to African beliefs.

Once evidences show that African powerful men were brought to the Americas during the transatlantic slave trade, the only question that needs to be asked is to know how many people have been practicing voodoo in the Americas before the arrival of African slaves? Eric Montgomery has been clearer about the origins of voodoo practice in America. Unlikely to some scholars who think that voodoo is originated from Africa basically from Haiti,

Eric prefers using African instead of specializing. For him, Haiti is not the only African country from where slaves have been exported to the Americas (Montgomery 12).

Considering voodoo as a spiritual and religious practice that shapes African American identity may be right as many scholars claim it. Referring to Rasiah et al. definition of the term identity, one could relate voodoo to African American because of its influence in their history. Rasiah et al. has defined the term “*identity*” as a concept that provides a tangible answer to the question “*who am I*” (Rasiah et al. 113). In addition to this question, adding the question: where am I coming from would bring more details. In front of this question, the answer would be clear and simple to understand: I am coming from Africa, a land of voodoo. Consequently, one could easily make a link between African American and their motherland.

Therefore, Walter Rucker goes further, bringing more clarification to show the influence of voodoo and magical powers in African American communities. Walter states that voodoo magical powers have been used as mean of defense in the eighteenth century by African Americans including American-born slaves. In his recent publication, he underlines:

In North America, the power of conjure was revered by both African- and American-born slave rebels in similar fashion. They seemingly believed, without question, the ability of these spiritualists to determine the outcome of a variety of events, including resistance movements, through arcane and supernatural means. (Rucker 85)

To cap it all, Eric Montgomery and Claudine Michel’s pieces of scholarship enlighten us in no small measure. Their papers offer us interesting inputs to be used in this article. Though, their works are significant, there still has a gap to be filled. For instance, no part of their works clearly specifies to what extent Voodoo practices contribute to African- Americans’ identity building or formation, what is unfortunate.

III. Voodoo and shaping of the African Americans’ identity

3.1 Clarification of the key concepts

Voodoo also known as “vodun” or “voudou” is commonly viewed as a religion that belongs to Africans (Clark 134). Unlikely to Christianity and Islam that have been brought to Africa, voodoo is an endogenous practice

that has been exported to the Americas by African slaves during the transatlantic slave trade. Through animal sacrifices, voodoo serves as a compass to honor their ancestors. Drums, songs and dances, all together make people enjoy voodoo celebration and help to communicate with spirits. Unlikely to other religious beliefs, voodoo practitioners think that there are spirits behind everything. This is certainly why, they believe in the existence of many gods such as god of iron, god of thunder, god of water as described in T.S Ogundimu's *The Gods Are Not To Blame*.

As mentioned above, identity refers to one's individual personality. Identity is a set of characteristics by which a thing or an individual is recognized or known. Generally, names, skin color, motherland are the main characteristics that help to know a person's identity. Henceforth, one's motherland's culture may influence one's identity. This is the case of Africans who are commonly viewed as people coming from the land of voodoo. In the frame of this study, African American's identity is studied with a special attention to their motherland's culture.

3.2 Origin of voodoo

The transatlantic slave trade is an indelible part of Africans and African American history. Considered as a period of marginalizing, oppression and unwanted migration, thousand Africans have been subject to forced-migration from their motherland to the Americas where they have been submitted to harsh treatments and hard works. Almost treated as animals, the barbaric treatment faced by African Americans' ancestors seems to be anchored in the heart of every African, living in the Americas or not. But what matters here is the mean of self- defense used by African-Americans' ancestors to protest:

This was definitely the case in the 1712 New York City slave rebellion, which was the most serious slave disturbance up to that time in the British American colonies. It only involved about 28 insurgents; however, this relatively small band killed 10 Whites, wounded 12 others, and created a panic throughout the North American colonies (Aptheker, 1993, p. 173; Carroll, 1938, pp. 14-15). Among the key components in this rebellion was Peter the Doctor, a free African conjurer who rubbed a magical powder onto the clothing of the slaves to reportedly make them invulnerable. (Rucker 85)

The above extract is palpable evidence that reveals the origin of voodoo in African American communities. Voodoo was practiced by African slaves as mean of self- defense in eighteenth century. It is now obvious that voodoo is a cultural heritage left to African Americans who continue to preserve its roots and reckon on its power.

Apart from Walter Rucker, Emily Suzanne Clark underlines that among a group of voodooists arrested by police officers in America, Toledano has confirmed: “Voudouism was an African religion with its signs and symbols” and that she learned the secrets of Voudou from her African-born grandmother (Clark 139). According to many researchers such as Boaz, the term vodun comes from Fon language (Boaz 50). Servan Ahougnon emphasizes that the word may be subdivided into syllables. The first syllable “Vo” means to feel free, to relax or to avoid prejudice whilst the second syllable “dou” means to seek or to fetch in Fon language. So vodou literally means to go in harmony and to seek in invisible what people need to satisfy themselves in the visible world (Ahougnon 1). If the name is from Fon language, it means that voodoo practice is African religion origination from the West African especially from Benin or Togo. But the expansion of the term “Orisha” also calls for a specific analysis. It underlines that voodoo is also from Nigeria. In front of this diversity of name that surely refers to the same practice, people have to keep that voodoo practice is from Africa not from Haiti, recognizing that Haiti plays a great role in the modernization of voodoo practice.

3.3 Influence of voodoo in shaping the African American’s identity

With the evolution of voodoo practice in the Americas, many scholars think that voodoo is one the key characteristics that shape the African American’s identity. This viewpoint matches with the aim of this study. Although voodoo is known as African religion, many African Americans are also initiated to its practices. In the contemporary African American communities, voodoo images can be found, showing indirectly the place and the influence of voodoo in their culture. Far from being considered as demoniac religion, voodoo is viewed as a religion that allows them to honor their ancestors by offering sacrifices for their ancestral deities. This religion has known an amazing evolution thanks to New Orleans voodoo churches.

Before jumping in the core of the message, it is good to reveal the historical impact of voodoo on the African American culture. Indeed, it is obvious that voodoo practice is not invented by Americans. The history brings us back to the slave trade period when African slaves have been tortured, mistreated and marginalized. During this period, slaves have been denied of any culture, any name, any humanity and any religious beliefs. To emphasize African slaves' loss of identity, Toni Morrison declares that slaves have no right of paternity, worst, to get married. When a slave woman gives birth, the child belongs to the master (Morrison 13). From Morrison's *beloved*, one could easily understand that African slaves have lost their identity during the slave trade, on the contrary, the life jacket which helps African Americans to remain resilient and united is Voodoo practice. From Morrison's novel and many other publications, the main question that needs to be asked is: how many descendants of African slaves truly know their father's name?

In Africa as well as in many countries in the world, the identity of the child is determined thanks to the one of his fathers. How can someone who does not know his father's last name know his identity. That is certainly the main reason that brings Ahougnon to declare: "they are in the quest of identity" (Ahougnon 2). Therefore, it is irrefutable that Voodoo practice plays a great role in shaping African American identity. According to Blokker, voodoo practice is brought to the Americas by West African slaves who work on plantations but this practice contributes to the socialization of Caribbean's slaves (Blokker 4). From his article, it is easy to understand that Voodoo is not originating from Haiti like many people think, rather it is having been brought from Africa by African Slaves who work in Louisiana and New Orleans. Historically, the continuation voodoo practices in the Americas, despite the French King Louis XIV's *Code Noir of 1691* tore apart western historiographies which buttress that there is no survival of Africanism in the Americas. Thus, Voodoo practices cannot be suppressed, it is part a parcel of African Americans' DNA. Rather, in time of trouble, danger, they refer to find answers.

After the refusal of voodoo practice that caused a rebellion in New York states in 1712, the practice of voodoo has been embodied (Rucker 85-86). This leads to the integration of voodoo practices in order to reshape African American musical genres. According to Ahougnon, the mixing of African traditional songs to western musical styles gives birth to some musical

genres such as Blues and JAZZ. He does not hesitate to emphasize that this musical style is created by African slave decedents of American colonies (Ahougnon 2).

In addition, Ahougnon sheds light on the fact that Santeria is born thanks to the mix of voodoo to Catholicism by African slaves of Haiti, Cuba and Brazil (Ahougnon 2). This underlines the cultural impact of voodoo practices. With the nineteenth century New Orleans voodoo practices, voodoo is now viewed as American religion. The title of Emily Suzanne Clark research work *Nineteenth-Century New Orleans Voudon: An American Religion* is a good example that shows the influence of voodoo in African American identity. Voodoo practice is now anchored in the thick of African American communities.

People's religion often shapes their identity. Muslim is the identity of those who take Islam as religion while Christian is the religious identity of those who are Jesus Christ believers. It is undeniable that religious beliefs also shape one's identity. That is the case of African Americans whose identity is relevantly influenced by their motherland's culture and religious beliefs. Their identity is shaped by voodoo. They are known as descendants of voodoo practitioners. Voodoo plays a great role in African American communities. Far from being mere objects, African Americans reckon on the power of these of objects. They know the use and the worth of these spiritual temples.

Conclusion

African Americans are in majority the descendants of African slaves exported to the Americas during the transatlantic slave trade. From their motherland to the new land, they brought the practice of voodoo that is now anchored in the heart of the African American culture and traditional heritage. Although, voodoo practices originate from Africa, it has been shaped fascinated in the Caribbean through it mix with Catholicism. The practice of this religion contributes to African American well-being. Helping them during protestation, trouble, danger; voodoo practice has been used as powerful weapon to threaten whites. Clark underlines that voodoo helps Africans living in America to kill ten whites and wound many of them thanks to African conjurers.

Magical powers are the expression of voodoo's spiritual power.

Developed in this research, it is obvious that voodoo is originated from Africa and practiced in African American communities. Thereby, qualitative method had been applied with special reference to research papers dealing with the origins of voodoo and its impact on African American identity. The results show the influence of New Orleans voodoo in the history of African Americans. The integration of voodoo rhythms and dances in world music shows its cultural influence in African American society. As it is known as the religion brought to America by their ancestors, voodoo historically and culturally shapes African American identity; thus, the main objectives of this research work are reached. Nonetheless, Voodoo religion is a broad topic. Further Researchers could investigate how African Americans celebrate voodoo and define their identity in time of globalization and LGBTQ puzzle.

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