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Cindy L. Lys
“90% Catholic 100% Vodou”:
Haitian Immigrant Religious
and Spiritual Identity

ABSTRACT

This cross-sectional exploratory qualitative study highlights the religious/spiritual identity of twelve adult Haitian American immigrants from the Chicago area and New York City using non-probability snowball sampling and a semi-structured interview with open-ended questions. The primary research question was: How have the religious/spiritual identities of Haitians evolved since their immigration to the United States? Subsumed under the primary question was the following: How did adult Haitian immigrants in the United States identify religiously and/or spiritually? How had their religious/spiritual identity changed since their immigration to the United States? How did their religious/spiritual identity affect how they cope with times of increased stress? What were their thoughts on the notion of religious/spiritual syncretism of Christianity and Vodou? Did they feel or anticipate stigma from mental health professionals regarding their religious/spiritual identity? The major findings were: widespread recognition of religious syncretism in the Haitian American immigrant community; the splitting of Vodou because of religious stigma; defensive or reactive legitimization of Vodou; and cognitive dissonance. Vodou and Christianity were concurrent, constant and comprised the baseline of the Haitian American immigrant religious/spiritual world. Clinicians were encouraged to face religious/spiritual biases and provide a safe environment for similarly situated clients to explore their religion/spirituality and how it informs their sense of self.

**“90% CATHOLIC 100% VODOU”:
HAITIAN IMMIGRANT RELIGIOUS & SPIRITUAL IDENTITY**

A project based upon an independent investigation,
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Social Work.

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2013

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|---|-----|
| ACKNOWLEDGMENTS..... | ii |
| TABLE OF CONTENTS..... | iii |
| CHAPTER | |
| I INTRODUCTION..... | 01 |
| II LITERATURE REVIEW..... | 04 |
| III METHODOLOGY..... | 13 |
| IV FINDINGS..... | 19 |
| V DISCUSSION | 33 |
| REFERENCES..... | 42 |
| APPENDICES | |
| Appendix A: Screening Questions..... | 45 |
| Appendix B: Informed Consent Form..... | 46 |
| Appendix C: List Of Referrals..... | 48 |
| Appendix D: Volunteer Or Professional Transcriber’s Assurance Of Research Confidentiality..... | 50 |
| Appendix E: Human Subjects Review Approval Letter..... | 51 |
| Appendix F.1: Recruitment – Flyer | 52 |
| Appendix F.2: Recruitment – Email | 53 |
| Appendix F.3: Recruitment – Talking Points..... | 54 |
| Appendix G: Interview Guide..... | 55 |

CHAPTER I

Introduction

As a first-generation Haitian American female clinician interested in working with the immigrant populations that nurtured me, I have explored the complexities of religious syncretism within the Haitian American immigrant population and its implications for social workers serving this population. Thus the primary research question is: How have the religious/spiritual identities of Haitians evolved since their immigration to the United States? Subsumed under this primary research question is how stigma, stress, and the challenges of negotiating dynamics of syncretic religiosity have shaped its evolution.

Employing the informal narrative style of Haitian communication, I offer an anecdote to illustrate some of what is here understood by “religious syncretism”:

When I was a teenager, my uncle came home with a paramour he was sure he would marry (which of course meant they wouldn't make it to six-months). After a brief and rocky relationship, she ended their romance by having him thrown in jail for a weekend on a trumped-up charge; pawned everything valuable in their apartment, confiscated my uncle's green card, passport and birth certificate and fled to New York City. My mother, who was raised Roman Catholic in Haiti by my devout Seventh Day Adventist grandmother, phoned the woman with a calm ultimatum: “Return my brother's documents at once! Or, I will put a curse on you using the dirty underwear you left behind in the apartment.” Startled and no doubt frightened, the woman shouted, “I thought you were a Christian woman!” and hung up. Several months later, the woman

called my mother with a litany of complaints; weeping uncontrollably, that she could not get a job, that everything was terrible, her life was in disarray, and so on. Within a few days, she returned all of my uncle's documents. Intrigued by what had happened, and amazed by my mother's "power," I asked my mother how she carried out the curse. With a calm voice my mother avowed: "It doesn't matter what I did. What matters is what she thought I did." I was utterly fascinated.

Over the years, I have acquired a nuanced understanding of the socio-historical context, stereotypes, assumptions, clandestine observances, distortions, and implicit beliefs, which enabled my mother's ultimatum to work. While my mother's threat was empty (she did not in fact do anything), I became increasingly aware of the intricate intersection of Christian beliefs and beliefs about Vodou in my life and in the life of members of my community. My mother went to Catholic Mass regularly, prayed often, burned incense, lit candles and frequently used Haitian "herbal remedies". Many Haitians I encountered harbored similar complex religious/spiritual heterodoxy, moving frequently between a "Vodou space" and "Christian space" in their daily lives.

It is commonly said among Haitians that we are 90% Catholic and 100% Vodou (Brown, 1991; Dash, 2001; Michel, 1996) and, despite the frequency of this saying, any elaboration on the topic is spoken of in hushed tones, perhaps due to fears associated with the historical and media-based stigma of Vodou. Little scholarly research is available on the subject of religious syncretism among Haitian American immigrants in the field of social work. Charles (1986) and Desrosiers and St. Fleurose (2002) are among the few who have explored the dynamics of Vodou and mental health in the Haitian American population. The paucity of current clinical research on Haitian religiosity necessitates an interdisciplinary approach to contextualize this study. I have

therefore presented a qualitative exploratory study in which adult Haitian American immigrants identify as believing or practicing some form of Christianity and/or Vodou. As research in the subjects of religiosity and social work become increasingly available, and as research on Haitians in clinical settings become increasingly dated and rare, this qualitative study of Haitians and Vodou will enable clinicians to approach expressions of religious duality with a stance of informed curiosity.

The findings of this study will be of value to clinical social workers because it provides a way to mitigate the long-standing bias against the religious/spiritual identity of Haitian American immigrants in light of NASW Code of Ethics sections 1.05(b) and 1.05(c) (2008):

Social workers should have a knowledge base of their clients' cultures and be able to demonstrate competence in the provision of services that are sensitive to clients' cultures and to differences among people and cultural groups. ... Social workers should obtain education about and seek to understand the nature of social diversity and oppression with respect to race, ethnicity, national origin, color, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, age, marital status, political belief, religion, immigration status, and mental or physical disability" (p. 9).

CHAPTER II

Literature Review

Clinical research on the syncretic religious practice of Vodou and Christianity within the Haitian American immigrant population is exceedingly rare. Charles (1986) and Desrosiers and St. Fleurose (2002) are among the few who have explored the dynamics of Vodou and mental health in the Haitian American population. The remaining interdisciplinary content of the literature review is sourced from various academic disciplines: anthropology, ethnographies, interviews, theology and literature/media written by a combination of Haitian scholars, practitioners of Vodou and Christianity, Caribbeanists including North American and European scholars. Most utilize a theoretical perspective of the subject, including personal memoirs or interviews, and in several instances, address it tangentially. To date, no study has been found that singularly addresses the dynamic religiosity of Haitian American immigrants.

The following will address several contextual aspects of the complex religious arena of Haitian American immigrants in the United States. The history of the relationship between Christianity and Vodou, spiritually and politically, sheds light on the complexities of religious syncretism in Haiti and among Haitians in the United States. A brief explanation of stereotypes of Vodou, its rituals and its therapeutic utility precedes a brief discussion of the clinical presentation of Haitian American immigrants and pervasive religious syncretism in this population.

Historical Context of Vodou in Haiti

Roman Catholicism was the official religion of St. Domingue (the colonial name of the island which is occupied by Haiti and the Dominican Republic) in 1697, under French colonial rule, and was indigenized after independence in 1804 (Richman, 2008). As a religion borne out of the influences of West African religions, Vodou has had a significant role in the history of Haiti (Dash, 2001; Désir, 2007; Desrosiers & St. Fleurose, 2002; Germain, 2011; Métraux, 1972; Michel, 1996). Major historical events leading up to the liberation of Haiti, the first Black nation to overthrow colonial slavery were famously facilitated by Vodou ceremonies and the Oath of Bwa Kayiman (1791), during which enslaved Africans vowed to reclaim their freedom from the French (Dash, 2001; Désir, 2007; Desrosiers & St. Fleurose, 2002; Dubois, 2001; Germain, 2011; Hurbon, 1995; Métraux, 1972).

The Schism (1804-1860) occurred when Haiti was emerging as an independent nation while forcibly isolated from the rest of the trading world and the Vatican (Dash, 2001; Dubois, 2001; Sansaricq, 1994). During this time, Haitians were routinely baptized without any formal religious instruction, circumstances which may have facilitated the syncretism of Vodou and Christianity in Haiti (Sansaricq, 1994). In 1860, a concordant was signed between the Haitian government and the Vatican in order to move away from “superficial allegiances” to the Catholic Church and begin the “true evangelization” of Haiti (Sansaricq, 1994). In Haiti, a historical dichotomy exists in which Catholic and Protestant traditions are often termed a true *religion* and Vodou traditions are described as *superstition* (Bartowski, 1998; Hurbon, 1992; Métraux, 1972; Michel, 1996).

The religiously informed tensions between Catholics, Protestants and Vodouists have also played out in the political arena of Haiti (Dash, 2001; Désir, 2007; Richman, 2008). Prior to

Haiti's independence, Christian "anti-superstition" campaigns outlawed Vodou ceremonies, collecting and burning religious relics, and making numerous efforts to force Haitians to abandon Vodou in order to practice an "undiluted" Christianity (Désir, 2007; Métraux, 1972; Michel, 1996). The people of Haiti literally hid the spirits they knew inside their veneration of Catholic saints in order to avoid persecution (Ferère, 1978; Michel, 1996; Rey, 2002; Tippet & Bellegarde-Smith, 2007). The Catholic church of Haiti scapegoated the heterodox syncretism of popular Haitian Catholicism as responsible for the country's strife (Désir, 2007), such as the small pox epidemic of 1881-1882 (Rey, 2002). Most recently, the anti-superstition campaign of 1942, launched by the French Catholic Church in concert with President Elie Lescot (1941-1946) on an anniversary of the Catholic "victory" over the 19th century small pox epidemic, tried in vain to rid the Haitian countryside of what was considered the "pernicious influence of Vodou" (Dash, 2001; Ferère, 1978; Rey, 2002). Protestants were occasional targets of these campaigns as well (Richman, 2008). President Lescot intended the campaigns to contribute to the nation's collective spiritual purification or rather repentance for having preserved the religious traditions of Africa (Rey, 2002). Throughout Haitian history attempts to suppress Vodou have never been generated purely by a Christian zeal but by a concern with Vodou's capacity to inspire the masses (Désir, 2007; Rey, 2002). Several prominent historical figures of Haitian history are widely reputed to have practiced Vodou and have facilitated its public acceptance in Haiti (Hurbon, 1995; Métraux, 1972). President François Duvalier (1957-1971), also known as Papa Doc, the self-proclaimed President for Life, supported Protestantism and Vodou (Richman, 2008). Papa Doc may have even encouraged the myths about his practice of Vodou in his ruthless politics, bolstering negative stereotypes of Vodou (Richman, 2008).

In 1985, Haiti recognized Protestantism and added a third official religion, Vodou, in 2003, 199 years after Haiti took its independence from France (Richman, 2008). Although Vodou is a formally recognized religion in Haiti, its long history of persecution and denigration pushed Haitians to observe Vodou traditions in secret (Hurbon, 1992; Michel, 1996).

Defining Vodou...

A bad reputation. To define the religion of Vodou is challenging because it is widely misunderstood and negatively portrayed (Bartowski, 1998; Désir, 2007; Dubois, 2001; Germain, 2011). To contextualize this phenomenon, the Martiniquan born psychiatrist Franz Fanon (1925-1961) described similar circumstances between the colonizers and colonized (France and Algeria) whereby the colonized are portrayed as agents of malevolent powers and as unconscious and incurable instruments of blind forces (1963). Various sources have described Vodou differently and have based their definitions on other pseudoscientific vilifications (Désir, 2007; Bartowski, 1998).

Despite the significant influence of Vodou on the culture of Haiti, negative perceptions and stereotyping of Vodou as “black magic” and “demonic” have contributed to its suppression and vilification in the United States (Bartowski, 1998; Désir, 2007) and in Haiti (Dash, 2001; Hurbon, 1995; Métraux, 1972). During the American occupation from 1915 through 1934, sensationalized images of Haitian Vodou as a domain of demonic possession, zombies and absurd superstitions proliferated the United States (Bartowski, 1998; Butler, 2008; DuBois, 2001). During the 1980’s when Haitian “boat people”, along with homosexuals, were blamed for the AIDS epidemic in the United States, negative portrayals of Vodou dominated the discussion of the religion, particularly in the mass media and popular Hollywood films (Bartowski, 1998; Dubois, 2001). These stereotypes of Vodou shaped how scholars and researchers wrote about

and interpreted the subject, often producing a mixture of research that used a Christian framework to map an enormously diverse set of spiritual practices and/or attempted to break the imprint of “demonic worship” and the “antithesis of civilization” (Butler, 2008; Dubois, 2001). As a way of life, Vodou bred fear becoming the target of ridicule and debasement because it was an element of cohesion and unity among the people of Haiti (Désir, 2007).

Anthropologically speaking. Vodou is the native religion of Haiti, based on the indigenous religions of Western Africa and some of the rituals of Catholicism (Dash, 2001; Charles, 1986; Ferère, 1978; Hurbon, 1995; Métraux, 1972). There is no liturgy, mythology or doctrine of Vodou to which *mambos* and *hougans* (priestesses and priests) are obliged to conform (Dash, 2001; Ferère, 1978; Métraux, 1972). The Vodou pantheon is composed of many *lwa* (deities or spirits) who represent symbolic roles or domains of a community such as: the ocean, rivers, conflict, agriculture, sickness, death, the crossroads, protection of children, storms, femininity, and so forth (Deren, 1985; Ferère, 1978; Hurbon, 1995; Métraux, 1972). The *lwa* are not models of a well-lived life, rather they mirror the full range of possibilities inherent in their domains (Brown, 1991). *The lwa* are honored during ceremonies in the *peristil* or temple using the *poto-mitan*, or sacred post in the center of the *peristil*, and the drawings of the *vèvè*, symbols attributed to specific *lwa*, as well as offerings of food and drink (Deren, 1985; Désir, 2007; Ferère, 1978; Hurbon, 1995; Métraux, 1972). Vodou also possesses syncretic properties as it incorporates details of other cultures and maintains its form (Désir, 2007; Dubois, 2001; Hurbon, 1992; Michel, 1996). For instance, many objects associated with Vodou incorporate the symbolism and imagery of Catholic saints and rituals, at times using a picture of a saint to represent a *lwa* (Dubois, 2001; Ferère, 1978; Hurbon, 1995; Métraux, 1972). Catholic prayers are also used in Vodou ceremony as part of the initial salutations to the *lwa* (Hurbon, 1995; Métraux,

1972; Michel, 1996). However some researchers feel that there is no actual syncretism of Vodou and Catholicism (Sansaricq, 1994) and the overlap was purely a result of religious persecution of Vodou or belief that the use of Catholic rituals would bolster the power/efficacy of Vodou rituals (Desmangles, 1990).

Vodou therapy. Vodou also functions as a therapeutic system (Brown, 1991; Charles, 1986) warding off physical and emotional illness (Richman, 2008) usually believed to be caused by imbalances of the mind, body or spirit (Brown, 1991; Michel, 1996; Tippett & Bellegarde-Smith, 2007). Like healers in related traditions found throughout the Caribbean and South America, the *hougans* and *mambos* combine the skills of a medical doctor, a psychotherapist, a social worker, and a priest (Brown, 1991; Michel, 1996). Most Haitians use supernatural exploratory models and resort to supernatural interventions as a way to bring about luck or resolve stress (Charles, 1986; Desrosiers & St. Fleurose, 2002). Some scholars and practitioners believe that the Vodou ceremony also serves as ritualized reenactment of Haiti's traumatic colonial past (Dubois, 2001). Trance and possession, a state in which the *lwa* mounts the host body, is a psychodrama used to maintain mental health (Charles, 1986; Fanon, 1963). The stress of psychological problems tenses the physical body, which is released in dance, shaking and convulsions (Charles, 1986). Possession indicates that the *lwa* has heard the problem and is willing to provide their divine assistance (Charles, 1986). When mounted, the person believes that the *lwa* speaks and acts through the host body communicating what should be done as a direct intrapsychic intervention (Charles, 1986). Like a treatment plan, the *lwa* can prescribe new behavior patterns to regain equilibrium and remove problems (Charles, 1986).

A Clinical Perspective of Haitian American Immigrants

More than 1 million Haitians reside in the United States of America in several major cities including New York City, Boston, Philadelphia, Miami and Chicago (Charles, 1986; Desrosiers & St. Fleurose, 2002; Prou, 2005). Among many Haitian Americans with traumatic immigration experiences, one frequently sees behaviors such as denial, frustration, rejection, passive aggression, jealousy, depression, paranoia, feelings of loss of mastery, self-deprivation and fantasies of return to a former life (Charles, 1986). The combination of a non-welcoming environment and intense financial need generates strong feelings of failure (Charles, 1986). Low self-esteem is associated with an awareness of low Haitian prestige in the world, which can manifest internally as a loss of self and a growing rejection of Haitian identity (Charles, 1986). The rejection or denial of national identity can result in externalized aggression in the form of intolerance and physical violence (Charles, 1986). Those with greater ego strength become preoccupied with achieving and maintaining material possessions (Charles, 1986). Most Haitians learned to respond to severe adversity with denial and projection, attributing personal deficiencies to the system or to other uncontrollable forces (Charles, 1986). It can also be said that Haitians are more religious than people from many other former colonies (Brown, 1991). Most Haitians attribute mental illness to Vodou, particularly those of lower socioeconomic status (Desrosiers & St. Fleurose, 2002). Upper and middle class Haitians may vacillate between Western explanations and treatment of mental illness and that of Vodou (Desrosiers & St. Fleurose, 2002). Haitian clients may be more likely to cooperate with the mental health professional when that professional is perceived as culturally sensitive and as having problem-solving potential (Charles, 1986).

Religious Symbiosis/Syncretism

Haitian immigrants' relationship to their religion(s), be it some combination of Catholicism, Vodou and Protestantism, are not only personal or communal, but also a theater between the Haitian "church" and the Haitian "state" (Richman, 2008). Haitian Americans can be deeply religious individuals who struggle with their religion/spirituality, become confused and even contradict themselves (Brown, 1991). Contemporary missionaries, both Haitian and not, have persisted in trying to "save" Haiti from its "black magic," through conversion and often resorted to degrading the religion in racist and ethnocentric ways that devalued the history of Haiti as well as its African ancestry in order to prevent religious "backsliding" (Bartowski, 1998; Butler, 2008; Hurbon, 1995; Richman, 2008). Instances of religious conversion or transformation can sometimes be an adaptive result of periods of extreme stress and subsequent difficulties in making spiritual meaning from them (Park, 2005). Additionally, times of increased stress will prompt most Haitians to speculate about the role of Vodou in the problem (Desrosiers & St. Fleurose, 2002). Educated Haitians tend to appreciate Vodou as a genuine expression of their folklore (Ferère, 1978) and those who have left the country deepen their interests in Vodou as a part of their Haitian identity (Tippett & Bellegarde-Smith, 2007).

Measuring the relative strength of self-identified Catholics and Protestants within this Haitian American demographic is difficult because of the flexibility of religious practice (Richman, 2008). The vast majority of Haitians practice Vodou, often alongside Catholicism (Butler, 2008; Charles, 1986; Dash, 2001; Desrosiers & St. Fleurose, 2002; Dubois, 2001; Ferère, 1978; Hurbon, 1992; Michel, 1996; Tippett & Bellegarde-Smith, 2007) however Protestants are less likely to do so because they typically require a complete abandonment of Vodou upon conversion (Dash, 2001; Michel, 1996) and consider "double dipping" to be

inauthentic and antithetical to religious practice (Butler, 2008). By contrast, to believe or practice Vodou does not require relinquishing other worldviews and to hold a multiplicity of faiths is common among Haitian Americans (Brown, 1991; Dash, 2001; Tippett & Bellegarde-Smith, 2007).

Summary

In consideration of the role of Vodou in Haitian social history and Christianity's contentious relationship with Vodou throughout, it becomes important to explore the clinical complexities of heterodox Haitian Americans. The paucity of research in this area necessitates an exploratory study that focuses not only on the theoretical aspects but also in the lived experiences of those who occupy that abstract space of religious syncretism in their daily lives.

CHAPTER III

Methodology

As research on religiosity and social work become ever more available, the findings from this descriptive exploratory study of Haitians and Vodou may assist clinicians in the field to be more culturally skilled and sensitive to the complex religious landscape of Haitian immigrants in the United States. There is no clinical research, to date, that explores concurrent religiosity within this population. Thus, the overarching research question was: How had the religious/spiritual identities of Haitians evolved since their immigration to the United States? Subsumed under the overarching question is the following: How did adult Haitian immigrants in the United States identify religiously and/or spiritually? How had their religious/spiritual identity changed since their immigration to the United States? How did their religious/spiritual identity affect how they cope with times of increased stress? What were their thoughts on the notion of religious/spiritual cohabitation of Christianity and Vodou? Did they feel or anticipate stigma from mental health professionals regarding their religious/spiritual identity? Little is available on the subject empirically and theoretically, particularly in the field of social work. Only Claude Charles (1986) and Desrosiers and St. Fleurose (2002) explored the dynamics of Vodou and mental health in the Haitian American immigrant population.

To explore the phenomenon of the evolving religious values of Haitian immigrants and its implications, I carried out a cross-sectional exploratory study using a semi-structured interview with open-ended questions. I conducted twelve 45-minute in-person interviews of adult Haitians who immigrated to the United States. A qualitative design for this study was chosen to

generate concepts and theories to deepen the understanding of religious syncretism among Haitian American immigrants. As a variable, religious identity among Haitian American immigrants has no current operational definition and cannot be determined by observable indicators alone (Rubin & Babbie, 2013). Thus, the methodological freedom and flexibility of a qualitative study allowed me to discover the most salient dynamics of religious syncretism and its deeper meaning in the Haitian American immigrant community (Rubin & Babbie, 2013).

Sample

For the purpose of this study, I interviewed 12 self-identified Haitian American adults between 22 and 65 years of age who were born in Haiti and are now living in the United States. Current legal status with respect to citizenship was irrelevant to the scope of this study. Participants spent their childhood in Haiti at least until the age of ten, as was the minimum age of immigration in order to ensure the absorption of Haitian culture. Those interviewed had been living in the United States between 8 and 49 years. Participants were recruited from the New York City area and the Chicago area. Participants had to be sufficiently proficient in English to participate in the interviews [in English] in-person or over the phone. Seven participants were female and five were male. All participants self-identified as practicing or having belief in Christianity, Vodou, or both. A set of screening questions (Appendix A) was used with each participant to ensure compliance with inclusion criteria.

Those who were interested in participating in the study were offered an in-person meeting set up in a private room in a local public library. If the interview could not be done in-person, it was conducted over the phone and audio-recorded at a date and time convenient for the participant. Before the phone interview dates, the informed consent form was mailed to the participant with an addressed stamped envelope so they could sign and return the form by mail.

At the interview, the eligibility of participants was once again established using the screening questions. Then they were given time to read the Informed Consent Form (Appendix B) and ask any clarifying questions they may have had regarding the research topic and their participation. A list of local and affordable referral sources (Appendix C) were distributed to all participants at the time that the Informed Consent Form was read with the exception of participants who were social workers or other mental health professionals. Participants were given a copy of the Informed Consent for their records. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed, ranging in length from 8-minutes to 45- minutes.

Protection of Confidentiality

The signed Informed Consent Forms have been stored separately from the recordings and transcriptions of the interviews. The professional transcriber who was used to transcribe the audio-recorded interviews signed the Volunteer or Professional Transcriber's Assurance of Research Confidentiality (Appendix D). The transcriptions of the interviews had all actual names removed and substituted with pseudonyms and a participant identification number. The list of substitutions has also been stored separately from the recordings and transcriptions of the interviews. The data was accessible to others only after all the identifying information had been removed. All participant data used has been kept confidential. Any illustrative vignettes and quoted comments used have been carefully disguised. Participant demographic information has been described in the aggregate. All electronically stored data has been password protected. All research materials including recordings, transcriptions, analyses and consent documents have been stored in a locked file cabinet in a locked storage room at my residence and will remain so for three years according to Federal regulations. In the event that materials are needed beyond this time, they will be kept secured until no longer needed, and then destroyed.

Ethics and Safeguards

Participation in this study was voluntary. Participants had the option to refuse to answer any question asked of them and to withdraw from the study at any point during the recruitment, informed consent and interview process. Participants who had already completed the interview had a deadline by which to formally withdraw from the study. If anyone had decided to withdraw, all of the data gathered from that participant would have been removed from the study and destroyed. No participants decided to withdraw from the study.

Risks and Benefits

Participants had an opportunity to share personal information on their religious and spiritual identity that was meaningful to them in a formal and confidential setting. There were no tangible benefits for participating in this study. Potential risks to the participants included emotional distress that may have involved shame, fear and defensiveness because of the sensitive religious and spiritual nature of the research questions. There was also the possibility that participants may have feared a supernatural consequence to their participation. In order to minimize these risks, the research questions were piloted with members of both faiths to ensure that the content of the questions as well as my interactions with participants were respectful. It was made clear to all participants that all identifying information would be held in confidence. However, because of the non-probability snowball sampling method used to recruit participants, those in the Chicago area may have disclosed to each other that they are participating in the study due to the smaller size of the Haitian community in this region.

Data Collection

Data collection began upon receipt of the Smith College School of Social Work Human Subjects Review approval letter (Appendix E) for this study. I utilized non-probability snowball

sampling in order to recruit the sample, primarily using my personal network to secure participants either through direct in-person communication, personal email correspondence or over the phone. In addition, recruitment flyers were distributed at local Haitian community centers and restaurants in New York City and in the Chicago area. The specific flyers, emails and talking points used for recruitment are outlined in Appendix F.1, F.2 and F.3, respectively.

Because there is very limited clinical research in this topic, I devised a cross-sectional qualitative exploratory study using a semi-structured interview. The overarching research question is: How have the religious values of Haitians evolved since their immigration to the United States? Some specific questions from the Interview Guide (Appendix G) include the following: How has your religious/spiritual identity changed since your immigration to the United States? What are your thoughts or feelings about the saying “Haitians are 90% Catholic and 100% Vodou”? What kind of reaction did you get when or what kind of reaction do you anticipate receiving if you were to share your religious/spiritual beliefs with a therapist?

The interview guide was pilot tested with individuals who met the screening criteria but were not included in the study sample. Their feedback was mostly positive due to their own curiosity on the topic. Also, given the rampant stereotyping and bias, which occurs when Haiti and Haitians are written about in popular media, the fact that I am a Haitian American researcher put them more at ease with the research question and scope of the study. One piece of constructive criticism they offered was that Haitians who are practitioners of Vodou are not likely to identify themselves as such outright. It is a rare occurrence for one to declare, “I am a *vodouisian / mambo / hougan*,” in the Haitian community mostly due to the stigma associated with Vodou. Even in Haitian Kreyol, those who observe Vodou in a formal way are said to *servi lwa* or “serve the spirits”. To counteract the stigma associated with those declarative statements,

I emphasized and clarified the confidentiality of the study with any potential participants. In addition, I worded the questions so that it was up to the participants to create their own labels and descriptions of their religious/spiritual identity.

Data Analysis

The data obtained from the interviews were subjected to a content/theme analysis. Responses were coded for themes, positions and dynamics of religious syncretism. Comparing the responses to each question of the interview guide allowed the salient themes, patterns and complexities of the narrative responses to emerge.

A professional transcriber transcribed the audio files. Once transcribed, I grouped the responses for each question in order to determine the frequency of similar positions and salient themes in the narratives. I began the coding process by writing initial comments on the transcribed materials, noting emerging themes particular to the narratives. The coding process also included reading each interview numerous times, analyzing the content for relevant and repeating themes, phrases and sentiments, as well as logging material that did not fit into thematic areas. Any quotes from the participants that best illustrated high frequency responses or the emergent themes were noted for inclusion in the following findings chapter.

CHAPTER IV

Findings

Introduction

This chapter presents findings from interviews conducted with 12 Haitian American immigrants from the greater Chicago area and New York City in April 2013. The interview questions were designed to carry out an initial exploration of Haitian American religious/spiritual identity and syncretism. All participants answered all interview questions. Nine interviews were done in person and three over the phone due to geographic logistics.

During the study, most participants endorsed the notion of religious syncretism within the Haitian American immigrant community. Throughout the interviews, the participants often vacillated between speaking about their personal experiences and the collective experiences of “our people”, switching from first-person singular to first-person plural. The data from the interviews are presented in the following sequence: demographic data, religious/spiritual self-identification, change since immigration, coping with stress, 90% Catholic 100% Vodou, public disclosures of religious/spiritual identity, and interactions with mental health professionals.

Demographic Data

This study involved 12 Haitian American immigrants whose ages ranged from 22 to 65. Most participants (n=7) were over the age of 50. The sample was balanced among male-identified (n=5) and female-identified (n=7) participants, females having a slight majority. Participants reported being in the United States from 8-49 years among which most (n=8) have

lived in the United States a minimum of 28 years. All participants met the initial screening criteria (Appendix A) for participation in this study.

Religious/Spiritual Identification and Legitimacy

This section details the ways that the participants in the sample identified themselves religiously/spiritually. The participants engaged in the discourse of Vodou's legitimacy as a religion.

Religious/spiritual self-identification. A majority of participants (n=7) described believing/practicing only one religion. Some (n=5) endorsed having multiple and/or flexible religious/spiritual beliefs. "I go to church because I like it culturally, but I go to Baptist, Pentecostal, Methodist, Catholic (when I have to take my mother-in-law) or any one of them that may be of interest from time to time." Three participants stated that they do not believe in one religion or do not adhere to a particular doctrine. One individual jokingly labeled herself/himself a "Cafeteria-style Catholic: they say that you don't follow the scripture... you pick out things that you like and you do them and certain things you don't because you don't like them." The religious/spiritual identities reported in the sample were Catholicism (n=4), Spiritual/Pan-Religious (n=4), Vodou (n=3), Seventh Day Adventist (n=2), Baptist (n=1) and Protestant (n=1). Three participants reported having a religion/spiritual identity that was different from their family of origin.

Legitimacy. Some participants (n=4) spoke of Vodou directly, regardless of whether or not they endorsed it as part of their own belief system. Those who mentioned Vodou spoke about it in very specific ways that all had the aim of legitimizing it. Three participants stated, "Vodou is a religion." No participants said the same of Catholicism, Seventh Day Adventism, Baptist or Protestant faiths. Several inserted historically significant information about Vodou. "I believe in

all the religions of our country including Vodou, which became a religion in 2003 officially in Haiti – April 4, 2003, by decree by Aristide.” Two participants described Vodou as a natural consequence of Haitian identity regardless of whether or not they believed it was a “good” or “bad” religion, “I’m still Catholic, but being Haitian, you know, you always hail by the Vodou and the practice of Vodou.” One person stated, “There’s this duality in the Haitian culture about Vodou and Christianity.” Two participants discussed the stigma associated with Vodou and its racist implications. One said:

The information I’ve been given has been skewed from beginning; that it’s devilish... my church was complicit in the dogma that really plagued that Vodou religion and it goes back to slavery. It goes back to the fact that the Africans came in with certain religious beliefs. It goes back to the fact that, you know, forever and ever ad nauseam, you see the pictures of African tradition or practices as Eww, they’re weird. It’s all this negative connotation. It’s a racial thing.

Change since Immigration

Participants were asked about how their religious/spiritual identity may have changed since immigrating to the United States. Some participants reported changes (n=5) and no changes (n=5) in their religious/spiritual identity since their immigration from Haiti. The two remaining participants did not endorse a change or lack thereof. Half of the sample (n=6) described heightened contemplation of their religious identity and values since their immigration. Some (n=2) thought about the sociopolitical implications of their religious identity. One respondent stated:

I believe in applying certain tenets but I don’t believe in the religious kind of framework within which they put us, it perpetuates exploitation. It perpetuates the acceptance of

some folks having much more than they need and it has been used as a historical kind of justification for enslavement of African people.

Some discussed their religious values (n=4) and deepened faith (n=2). “When I was in Haiti I was a Catholic, but when I came here I change my religion and I feel like I’m closer to God. I studied the Word, the Bible, and I’ve become more knowledgeable about it.” Participants (n=6) also remarked on the diversity of religions and religious practice in the United States as compared to that of Haiti. “Haiti is pretty homogenous because you are either Catholic or you are Protestant, so it is very common for people to – you just assume you are one or the other.” One participant described the exposure and access to different religious/spiritual beliefs and practices as a benefit since immigrating to the United States.

It’s okay to go to other churches, to experience other churches, with a lot of fear because we grew up – when you grow up Catholic in Haiti, you’re not supposed to go to anything else. It’s like you’re violating some rules, laws, spiritual something if you go to another church.

Some (n=3) elaborated on the cultural differences between religious observance in Haiti and the United States. “You know, like in Haiti, based on our culture, going to church is a very formal thing and compared to here, you can just go to church with a pair of jeans and a T-shirt or something.”

Coping with Stress

When asked about how religion/spirituality affects coping during times of increased stress, the majority of respondents (n=11) stated that their religion/spirituality was helpful while two reported that it was not helpful. One respondent stated that their religion was both helpful and not helpful during stressful situations. The stressful events that participants spoke of ranged

in type and severity which included the following: taking a test for school, death of a loved one, physical/mental illness as well as the 2010 earthquake in Port-au-Prince, Haiti.

Eight individuals talked about their use of prayer as a coping skill. “I believe prayers universally work. Prayers, to me, is a time to meditate, to cleanse, to really release all the negativity and try to clear the path for good thoughts to come in.” In addition to prayer, several individuals (n=5) either made religious interpretations of stressful events as interventions carried out by God or the spirit or requested such interventions by prayer. “When I am really stressed and I can’t sleep I do the rosary, do my prayers, and a lot of times I forget the prayers, I will just do my own prayers, ask for God to intervene.” A few respondents (n=2) reported increased attendance at religious services as a way of coping. This particular respondent referenced their experiences following the earthquake of 2010 in Port-au-Prince, Haiti.

I really tried to revive my Catholic faith during that time. For about maybe six or eight months I would regularly go to the church mostly when it was empty and just sit there and meditate and try and pray and try and see if time would change things.

Some respondents (n=2) reported major shifts in their religious practice in reaction to stressful events. One stopped attending services: “I sort of had another extreme where I altogether stopped going to church. I didn’t think it was helping me at all.” While another experienced a crisis of faith and challenged God after a personal loss:

I challenge God for a few days, but I have good faith that everything happen for a reason and I kept praying. We got prayer group, we got the pastor and the people coming to the house, we pray and that really help me cope with the situation.

Three participants reported that their religious community members were a source of comfort and support during times of stress. In addition, religious/spiritual values proved to be a source of

comfort (n=3), specifically the idea that there is something greater than oneself that is in control. “My spirituality helps me a lot when it comes to stress and knowing there is a God and, you know, a spirit stronger than me and that give me the strength to deal with all my stress.”

One participant reported that a family member had suffered a spiritual attack possibly as a result of being targeted by someone who used Vodou against him or her.

Some people say that (person) had a spiritual attack, but because of my religion I didn't go any other way but to trust the Lord... probably someone who was jealous did something to (person), talking about Vodou thing, ... I know I am serving a God who is above everything.

This individual was distrustful of the formal psychiatric diagnosis and prescribed medications, opting instead to treat the spiritual attack, successfully, with natural Haitian remedies and herbs.

90% Catholic – 100% Vodou

This section addresses the reactions of the participants when they were asked to share their thoughts on the saying the Haitians are 90% Catholic and 100% Vodou. All but one participant felt that the statement was true. One participant adjusted the percentage from 100% to 75% Vodou but agreed with the widespread duality of Christian and Vodou beliefs among Haitian immigrants. “People tend to be religious – they go to church but they still, you know, practice Vodou on the other side.” Another elaborated on the issue saying that, “Even though the people are practicing a Christian faith, but they still have that belief that Vodou exists and Vodou is being done whenever something bad was happening to them.” The following section illustrates, with a more liberal use of vignettes, the complex and intricate dynamics of religious syncretism, stigma and legitimization.

In their agreements with the validity of the statement, distinctions were made between Vodou as a practice, a belief and as a way of life some insisting that Haitians were 100% Vodou “culture-wise”.

I think the study is totally true, because not all Haitians practice Vodou, but they all believe in Vodou. Haitians are 100% believers when it comes to Vodou. It’s in our DNA in a sense. You know, not that we practice it, but you know, when the Vodou drums beat or when we hear of Dambala or Ezili Danto, whatever it is, we relate to it. That doesn’t mean we’re practitioners, because it’s been taken from our culture in terms of our daily lives.

Several participants (n=3) again made legitimizing statements about Vodou in their responses to this question as a way to counteract its stigma. Some defined it by stating what it was not: “Vodou is not actually an act, it’s a religion also. People think Vodou is magic. Vodou is not magic. Vodou is Vodou, just like you Catholic, you Catholic.” Some added that Vodou was also more than a religion.

It’s hard to just label it [Vodou] as a religion because it is a way of life for so many people. And it is such a strong part of our history, our culture. It’s a strong part of everything that we are, so denying it or taking it out of any conversation we have, I don’t think it’s a good idea at all. Especially after the earthquake with missionaries from the U.S. coming and vilifying this, it’s not a good idea, because you repress what is a big part of our identity.

Several participants (n=5) discussed the stigma of Vodou portraying it singularly as a religion that hurts people.

I remember when I was growing up we always have people that know how to treat any illness from Haiti with herbs. To me, I don't call these people Vodou. I think they have power from above to have the ability to heal. I don't call that Vodou because they are not doing anything wrong. They usually say that the Vodou people do wrong things, do others wrong.

Another participant described the secretive way in which traditional healers were accessed in Haiti.

When something was wrong, discretely they send somebody to find out what's going on, see if they see something. And they weren't practicing Vodou, wouldn't even associate with it. You hear these things and years later it's a great reference to go back to see how the society was maneuvering in and out.

One participant remarked on the chronically superficial conversations about Vodou among Haitians.

I mean I can't say I've seen anything that is Vodou, so to speak, but I've been told about a lot of things, so having been told so many times, I can't believe that everybody is lying or no one knows what they are talking about, you know what I mean? So that's not possible.

During the interviews I often found that participants would express several of the preceding themes in the same statement, mostly in ways that would seem contradicting theoretically.

Public Disclosures of Religious/Spiritual Identity

This section addresses whether the participants are comfortable sharing their religious spiritual identity and what factors go into their decision to disclose. Most participants (n=11) reported that they are open about their religious beliefs publically. Several participants (n=5) also

reported that their public disclosures were dependent upon the open-mindedness of others. “I don’t like to discuss religions in depth with anyone unless I know this person is as open and curious as I am.” Three participants stated that others found it strange that they don’t practice one religion. “They think it’s strange that I’m not sticking to one religion, but again, it’s not like they shun me for that.” The peculiarity of religious syncretism came forward throughout the responses.

Dynamics of silence and religious stigma within the Haitian American immigrant community quickly emerged. Four participants spoke of Vodou directly.

I’m comfortable discussing how I feel about the freedom to practice that religion [Vodou], but with Haitians, ... a lot of them are not very tolerant of the extensive discussion and possibly the acceptance of some of the things that I think is okay. So, it makes it a little difficult and a lot of us don’t want to be labeled as, *Okay, you are Vodou, you are practicing Vodou*. It’s a big stigma.

Some (n=2) spoke of the silences regarding Vodou religion and practice while discussing the stigma of being associated with Vodou.

It’s still somewhat taboo and when the word Vodou is in a conversation, it usually connotes something evil or something bad is going on. That’s never a good thing. We’ve never really sat down and had a conversation about Vodou. I can’t remember one.

Out of the silences and stigma, there was an unfulfilled curiosity about Vodou among those who mentioned it (n=3).

I don’t believe in one religion per se for now, but I believe in my beliefs and I believe God exists and I believe in God and I also believe Vodou is part of our culture and religion that we need to get to know better.

An unexpected finding (n=2) was the expression of stigma regarding Protestant religious identity. One person stated that in their work environment, “They prefer the Catholic religion.” Another reported having received some negative responses to their disclosure. “I’m very open about that. I’m a Seventh Day Adventist. Well it depends, some people think I’m crazy.”

Interactions with Mental Health Professionals

Participants were asked “What kind of reaction did you get when or what kind of reaction do you anticipate receiving if you were to share your religious/spiritual beliefs with a therapist?” It is probable that the wording of the question confused participants, as they often asked to either repeat this question or clarify it mid-way through their response. However, upon further clarification most participants were able to answer the question appropriately. This section reports any previous experiences with mental health professionals, the anticipated responses of mental health professionals as well as this sample’s expectations of the mental health professional.

Previous experiences. Only one participant had any previous experience in therapy and spoke of the cultural and religious dynamics of working with a therapist who did not share her cultural/ethnic background.

Just talking to the person really does help, but ultimately, the sort of advice I sought, I don’t think I would be able to get it from a health professional here. I never had the occasion of being with a Haitian health professional, but I have a feeling that they would probably be more understanding of my perspective of where I’m coming from. In Haiti there might be a better way of reacting to it, but here the reaction would probably be more – I wouldn’t say fascination, but something completely new.

The following is another experience of someone who had an indirect interaction with mental health professionals when trying to assess a dependent family member who had rapidly decompensated with no prior history of mental illness.

She wasn't herself. She was like a zombie. Yes, she was like a zombie. She didn't recognize anything that was going on with her. It was so sad, but God is more than that. We went to doctors, psychologists; you name it. They diagnosed her as severe depression. But deep down, we know she wasn't depressed. She was in shock. We took her home. We gave her herbal medicine, like something natural.

Two participants expressed hesitation and feelings of stigma regarding the hypothetical question of seeing a therapist. "I would love to do that. Yeah, I mean not go to the therapist – I wouldn't mind to talk to them about my religious beliefs." As a caution, most participants suggested that their comfort in speaking with a therapist about their religious/spiritual beliefs would depend on that therapist's open-mindedness as well as their previous knowledge about Haitian culture and Vodou.

Depending on who it is, if you say Vodou they might think maybe you have some sort of mental illness, because certain things are not explicable. I think that if you were to explain that to a therapist, depending on their level of knowledge, they may understand or they may not. They may think maybe there's something you might need, psychotropic meds or something. Or they may understand that based on your culture, that is something that is real to you.

Some (n=3) felt that the reaction of a therapist would also "depend on that person's beliefs." One remarked, "Folks who are zealous about religious framework, that think we all fit in them, they probably would think that I am different, non-conformist."

Anticipated reactions. Some of the anticipated reactions from therapists include ignorance and marginalization of Vodou, as well as dismissing Vodou beliefs and Vodou explanations of illness. Because monotheistic frameworks do not fit well the religious and spiritual dynamics of Haitian American immigrants, one participant expressed concern that the therapist might question the validity of their religious identity.

Maybe the way I see religion, my spirituality, may raise some questions like, how come you're not part of a religion? How come you don't practice just one religion? They may think if I don't belong to one religion, maybe I don't really believe in God, but I think that's the reaction I may get, but no matter what, I know that God exists and I'm very spiritual.

Expectations of therapists. Several participants (n=4) also shared their expectations of a mental health professional. One respondent wanted to feel supported in her attempt to learn more about Vodou.

I think a professional would tell me to practice what I believe, to explore what I want to explore. I mean an unbiased therapist, which they should be. They would encourage me to seek out what I want to learn, what I want to practice. There's a discomfort in trying to learn something and already been prejudiced about it by saying it's a negative religion such as the Vodou religion, without knowing that aspect that says it's beautiful, it's a community.

Two respondents expected the therapist to reciprocate their self-disclosure when discussing religion. "I would listen to them talking and teach me but I think I have things to teach them too." One respondent expected the therapist to be respectful of their religious/spiritual identity. "They don't have to agree with me. I'm open about my religious identity. They don't have to like

what I do, they don't have to understand what I believe in, but all I'm asking for is their respect.” One participant stressed the salient stigma associated with Vodou and made a direct plea during the interview warning against both extremes of stereotyping and bias:

Please, don't ever see the Haitian coming in with a mental illness and right away you say, oh, this is Vodou, this is bad spirit, this is zombie. No this is a human being. It could be any other thing too. Please try not to stereotype people; that's no good. That's not professional to begin with. That's bias. We know, also, that someone can be real sick and it's not natural. It's not natural, we know that. And people can call it whatever they want but it's the facts. So in that aspect I would say to anyone in that particular field, you have to do more research.

Summary

This chapter presented the findings from eight questions posed to twelve Haitian American adult immigrants. In most areas, there were a variety of responses that were in agreement with each other, however the arguments made to support their responses differed, reflecting the complex dynamics of religious syncretism in the Haitian American immigrant population. This may be due to various experiences of stigma associated with Vodou and/or differences in personal religiosity/spirituality. Participants almost all agreed that Haitians exist in a world comprised of Christianity and Vodou at all times, no matter what one's knowledge or experience of Vodou is, be it based on stereotypes, individual research or what has been passed on from previous generations. Religious/spiritual practice is flexible; about half of participants experienced changes in their religion/spirituality since their immigration to the United States. Most reported that they were open to discussing their religious/spiritual beliefs publically but that their disclosure would depend on the open-mindedness of others and their previous

knowledge of Vodou. Most felt that their religious/spiritual beliefs helped them cope in times of increased stress through prayer, increased attendance at religious gatherings and divine interventions. Most respondents had no prior experience with mental health professionals but expressed caution about disclosing their religious/spiritual beliefs to one due to threats of stigma, stereotyping, bias and inaccurate pathologizing. Participants shared that they would want a therapist to be respectful of their religious/spiritual beliefs, do some research to counteract the negative stereotyping of Vodou and to be open about their own religion/spirituality.

CHAPTER V

Discussion

Introduction

This qualitative, cross-sectional study explored the dynamics of Haitian-American immigrant religious and spiritual identity. It provided a platform for subjects to share if and how their religious/spiritual identity evolved over time, thoughts on Haitian religious/spiritual syncretism, their previous interactions with and expectations of mental health professionals regarding religion/spirituality. This chapter opens with an exploration of the salient findings inducted from the subject narratives in the context of the literature reviewed. These findings include the following: widespread acknowledgement and acceptance of religious syncretism in the Haitian American immigrant community; the Vodou split within Haitian communities in the United States; the reactive legitimization of Vodou; and cognitive dissonance. This will be followed by implications for clinical practice and areas of further research. A summary concludes this chapter.

Salient Themes in Relation to the Literature

The findings verified the complex dynamics of religious/spiritual identity in the Haitian American immigrant population. The interconnectedness of Christianity and Vodou was evident throughout the literature and the participant responses. Participants, however, each had slightly different interpretations of that link based on their personal understandings of Vodou.

Religious/spiritual syncretism. The findings indicate that almost all (n=11) participants endorsed the notion of religious/spiritual syncretism in the Haitian American immigrant

population in accordance with the literature. The idea that Haitian Americans are “90% Catholic and 100% Vodou” (Brown, 1991; Dash, 2001; Michel, 1996) is widely accepted as a metaphorical truth as opposed to its literal implication. The “practice” of Vodou per se was not common in this sample. However, the pervasiveness of Vodou and its importance as a staple of Haitian culture and ethnic identity was clear even among those who had mixed or negative perspectives of Vodou in their interviews. Some of the literature suggests that Haitian Americans can be deeply religious individuals who struggle with it and even contradict themselves (Brown, 1991). However, the data would suggest that “contradiction” is not an apt term. Vodou and Christianity are simultaneous, constant and comprise the baseline of the Haitian religious/spiritual world. While religious syncretism is understood as a natural consequence of Haitian-ness, the flexibility of religion/spirituality in the Haitian American immigrant community suggests that this heterodoxy shifts over time (Richman, 2008) which was reflected in the data. Despite the changes in religious/spiritual practice, belief, devotion, etc. over time the interconnectedness of Christianity and Vodou is unyielding but not always harmonious. The following three subsections highlight salient aspects of that interconnectedness.

Vodou split. There is a plethora of literature and media that either discuss the stigmatization of Vodou or perpetuate it, a phenomenon also present in the narrative data. Participants communicated internalized and externalized Vodou stigma within the context of a Vodou split. For example, some portrayed Vodou singularly as a religion that hurts people. Another participant described the secretive way in which those who did not wish to have a public association with Vodou accessed traditional healers in Haiti. Only three individuals in the sample identified Vodou outright as part of their religious identity. The sample shared that Vodou is thought of as a “bad word” or as an accusation when used to describe a person. Even as I piloted

the interview questions, I was warned about using the word Vodou because of the stigma associated with it.

Intentionally, none of the interview questions directly addressed religious stigma. Yet, religious/spiritual stigma hovered over each interview. Religious stigma was the unasked question to which participants responded via their collusion or resistance to it. Claude Charles (1986) stated that an awareness of low Haitian prestige in the world could manifest internally as a loss of self and a growing rejection of Haitian identity which could then result in externalized aggression in the form of intolerance. This notion is relevant to the sample of this study yet there was also a reversed reaction whereby low Haitian prestige and Vodou stigma also manifested as a growing acceptance and promulgation of Haitian identity and Vodou. The following section explores the way in which the individuals in the sample had a reversed reaction to their internalization of Vodou stigma.

Reactionary Legitimization. The other reaction to Vodou stigma was a type of reactionary legitimization of Vodou, or rather, an appropriately defensive reaction to a hostile and rejecting sociohistorical context with direct opposition. In the context of this study, legitimizing statements about Vodou were made throughout the interviews as a way to counteract its stigma. As reported in the findings, the phrase “It [Vodou] is a religion” was a way to validate what has been historically and socially invalidated. None of the participants stated that any denomination of Christianity was a religion. Furthermore, some respondents revealed that hostilities towards Vodou often came from other Haitian American immigrants so their defense of Vodou was directed not only at the larger sociohistorical context but also towards other members of their ethnic community.

In addition to legitimizing Vodou as a religion, participants also elaborated on the historical and cultural significance of Vodou. As stated in the literature, a Haitian immigrants' relationship to their religion(s), are not only personal or communal, but also a theater between the Haitian "church" and the Haitian "state" (Richman, 2008). The data also demonstrated that Vodou was appreciated as an expression of Haitian folklore (Ferère, 1978). In turn, I followed my own instinct to similarly defend and validate Vodou. Thus as a Haitian American clinician and researcher, this study is a manifestation of my own reactionary legitimization.

Cognitive dissonance - This, that and the other. During the interviews I often found that participants would express several of the preceding themes in the same statement in ways that would seem contradictory theoretically. The conflicting cognitions of religious/spiritual stigma and legitimization were often conveyed in the same thought. This communal and individual cognitive dissonance created an unfulfilled curiosity about Vodou. A few participants expressed knowing enough about Vodou to respect its saliency in the Haitian American immigrant community but also felt that they did not know as much as they wanted to about the religion vis-à-vis the details of religious observance, significance of sanctified objects, etc. Access to formal and/or "accurate" information about Vodou is limited. A majority of the literature reviewed for this study is not widely available unless one is currently enrolled in an academic institution with access to the relevant databases. If acquired on one's own, one would incur significant financial expenses. The popular media available to the general population is laden with the familiar and routine stigma and stereotypes of Vodou. Intergenerational information reported by the sample was sparse and vague. In addition, the stigma of Vodou presents a personal obstacle to the pursuit of knowledge. Some expressed ambivalence when they discussed pursuing more knowledge about Vodou because of their own internal struggles

between feeling its deep cultural resonance while simultaneously harboring the Vodou stigma perpetuated by Christian colonizers and missionaries (who have been both White and Haitian), as well as by American mass media.

Limitations in Study Data and Design

The study was conducted with a small sample size (n=12), which accurately reflected the criteria for the target population. Although the findings confirm what little was found in the literature, the small sample size does not allow the findings to be highly generalizable. I used non-probability snowball sampling to recruit the subjects for this study. I found that after interviewing one or two people from a similar social circle, I witnessed public disclosures of participation in a targeted effort to pressure others to participate, albeit in a friendly, enthusiastic way. I was present for two such interactions, during which I verbally emphasized that any potential participant could contact me directly at a later time when they had privacy if they wished to participate. I also assured them that any participation in the study was voluntary and confidential. I can't be sure that this information was conveyed in all instances of recruitment. However, I did secure at least five of my interviews in this manner despite the potential threats to the confidentiality of participation.

Furthermore, I created an interview guide for the study that I piloted with individuals who met the screening criteria and were not included in the study. Because the study was exploratory, the questions were intentionally vague so that the participants could identify their own meanings and associations with the research questions. Thus the words *Vodou* and *Christianity* were only used with participants three times during the recruitment and interview process: once in the title of the study, again in the screening criteria and finally in one interview question. Each time Christianity and Vodou were named outright it was done so at once instead

of discussing them independently. However because the variables were so flexible and broad, there was no steadfast definition of words like *religion*, *spirituality*, *Vodou* and *Christianity* to use as a point of reference. Although there is authoritative literature in various fields of study that attempt to concretely define such terms, asking subjects to define the relevant terminology may have distracted from the formal research question. When I recruited for the study, many people reacted to the topic by saying, “But I am not an expert on this. I don’t really know much about it.” When I explained that I did not need experts on Christianity or Vodou for the study, just personal experiences with religion/spirituality, the individuals were immediately put at ease. Subsequently, they felt comfortable enough with the interview questions to make distinctions between Vodou as a practice, a belief and as a way of life. Some opted to define the relevant terminology for themselves by stating what the terms did not indicate. Despite the vague questions, I was still able to assess the attitudes and understandings of Vodou and Christianity with the interview questions given.

Implications for Practice

Two questions in the interview addressed the willingness of the subjects to disclose their religious/spiritual beliefs publically and/or with a mental health professional. Cautiously, most participants suggested that their comfort in speaking with a therapist about their religious/spiritual beliefs would depend on the perceived open-mindedness of the clinician as well as their previous knowledge about Haitian culture and Vodou. While a majority of the sample had no prior experience with clinicians, they anticipated stereotyping, bias, exoticification, doubt as to the sincerity of their religious/spiritual beliefs, as well as pathologizing Vodou beliefs and Vodou explanations of illness.

Significance of the findings. This study contributes to the sparse clinical research on Haitian American immigrant religious/spiritual identity by highlighting some of the complex dynamics of religious syncretism, stigma, reactionary legitimization as well as the unfulfilled curiosity resulting from cognitive dissonance. According to the literature, Haitian clients may be more likely to cooperate with the mental health professional when that professional is perceived as culturally sensitive and as having problem-solving potential (Charles 1986). The data expands this idea in that the participants were vocal and specific about what they want and expect from a mental health professional regarding the subject of religion/spirituality. All requests spoke to the wish for a safe environment in which to explore complexities of religious and spiritual identity. No two participants had the exact same expectations of mental health professionals so the following subsection reveals an amalgamation of the major points.

Creating a safe space. The sample expressed, in various ways, that some prior knowledge about Haiti and Vodou would help them feel more comfortable with the therapist. Maintaining an open mind was crucial as well as being respectful of however they identified themselves religiously/spiritually. Participants wanted support and encouragement to explore their curiosity about Vodou and to make meaning of their religious beliefs and values in an unbiased atmosphere. This requires the clinician to tolerate sitting with the ambiguities, splitting and ambivalence inherent in such an exploration. The apparent contradictions of religious syncretism are what comprise the baseline of Haitian American immigrant religious/spiritual identity so it is not a novelty to the client. However what may prove to be a novel experience for the subject is the opportunity to discuss it openly.

Lastly, the stigma associated with Haitian Vodou is pervasive and will permeate any discussion on Haitian American immigrant religious/spiritual identity whether the client or the

therapist introduce it. The subjects expressed an interest in the therapist self-disclosing their own religious/spiritual identity and to acknowledge any bias that they may already have toward Vodou.

Areas of Further Clinical Research

Due to the limited research on the dynamics of religious/spiritual identity within the Haitian American immigrant population, there remain several viable options for continued clinical research in this area. While the sample accurately reflected the screening criteria for this study, only one participant had a direct experience with a mental health professional in therapy. One person reported an indirect experience with a mental health professional. A future study could refine the sample criteria by interviewing Haitian American immigrants who have sought services from a mental health professional in order to gain further insight into how the complex dynamics of Haitian American religion/spirituality manifest in therapy. Additionally, the sample could be broadened to include other immigrant ethnic groups from other African, Latin American and Caribbean nations who have a similar dialectic between a native religion and that of their former/current colonizers. The comparison of historical contexts may illustrate how different religious/spiritual faiths have been integrated in more agreeable and less stigmatizing ways. Finally, another area of research would involve exploring Vodou/traditional explanations of mental illness and symptomatology within the Haitian American immigrant population. A comprehensive understanding of how illness, assessments and treatments are carried out among Haitian American immigrants could be integrated with and inform the work of clinicians practicing with this population.

Summary

The findings of this study show how religious/spiritual syncretism and flexibility is widely acknowledged and accepted in the Haitian American immigrant community. Haitian American religious/spiritual identity is an amalgam of various denominations of Christianity and Vodou reflecting complex dynamics of religious syncretism, stigma, reactive legitimization and the unfulfilled curiosity resulting from cognitive dissonance. As clinicians, we must consider the client in their external and internal environment. In this instance, it is an environment burdened with secrecy, stigma, shame, curiosity, and fear of that which is indigenous and vilified, or rather, essential and simultaneously marginal to Haitian ethnic identity. We must confront our own biases as clinicians in order to provide a safe environment for the deep exploration of religiosity/spirituality and how it informs a sense of self, faith and community.

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APPENDIX A

Screening Questions to Determine Participant Eligibility

Please find a list of inclusion criteria for participation in this study:

1. You are 18-65 years of age
2. You identify as Haitian or Haitian American
3. You were born in Haiti
4. You were 10 years old or older at the time you immigrated to the USA
5. You practice and/or believe in Vodou and/or Christianity
6. You are able to participate in the 45-minute interview for this study in English in-person or over the phone

Do you meet all of the above criteria:

_____ YES

_____ NO

APPENDIX B

Informed Consent Form

Dear Participant,

My name is Cindy Lys and I am a Haitian American graduate student at the Smith College School for Social Work. I am doing research that will explore Vodou and Christian spirituality among Haitian Americans who immigrated to the United States of America. The purpose of this study is to explore the religious/spiritual identity of Haitian immigrants in the United States, a topic that has not yet been explored in Social Work research. The data collected from this study will be used to complete my Master's in Social Work (MSW) Thesis. The results of the study may also be used in publications and presentations.

As part of the study, you would be required to do a 45-minute interview that will be audio recorded. Demographic information will be collected. You must identify yourself as a Haitian or Haitian American between 18-65 years of age who immigrated to the United States of America after the age of 10. You must be able to identify their primary religious belief(s) as Christian (any denomination) and/or Vodou. You must also be fluent in English. A volunteer or professional transcriber and I will transcribe the interview into a word processing document. Volunteer or professional transcribers will sign a confidentiality pledge.

Participation in this study may cause emotional distress and/or emotional discomfort. You will be provided with a list of local affordable referral sources should they you wish to seek counseling. By participating in the study, you will have an opportunity to share your religious/spiritual identity, how your religious/spiritual values may have changed over time, and how they help in you deal with times of stress in a formal and confidential setting. No compensation will be provided for participation in this study.

Everything shared during the interview will be kept confidential. In publications or presentations, the data will be presented as a whole and when brief illustrative quotes or vignettes are used they will be carefully disguised.

All data materials, including audio recordings, transcriptions, notes, analysis and consent documents, will be stored in a locked file cabinet in a locked storage room for three years as required by Federal guidelines. All electronically stored data will be password protected during the storage period. Should I need the data materials beyond the three year period, they will continue to be kept in a secure location and will be destroyed when no longer needed.

Participation in this study is voluntary and you can choose to opt-out of the study at any time during the data collection process (the interview) and you may also refuse to answer any question. Should you decide to withdraw from the study after the interview has been completed, you may call me at (████) █████ or email me (████) at any point until April 1, 2013 and state that you no longer wish to participate in the study. If you decide to withdraw, I will remove and destroy all of your information. If you should have any concerns or questions

about your rights or about any part of the study, you are encouraged to contact me or the Chair of the Smith College School for Social Work Human Subjects Review Committee at (413) 585-7974.

YOUR SIGNATURE INDICATES THAT YOU HAVE READ AND UNDERSTAND THE ABOVE INFORMATION AND THAT YOU HAVE HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO ASK QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY, YOUR PARTICIPATION, AND YOUR RIGHTS AND THAT YOU AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY. PLEASE KEEP A COPY OF THIS CONSENT FOR YOUR PERSONAL FILES.

Participant Signature: _____ Date: _____

Participant Print Name: _____

Researcher Signature: _____ Date: _____

Researcher Print Name: Cindy L. Lys, M.S.W. Email: _____
Candidate

APPENDIX C

List of Referrals

24-hour Crisis Hotlines

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline
1(800) 273-TALK (8255)

Project Hope Crisis Counseling
1(800) LIFENET (543-3638)

Illinois Outpatient Services

Northtown Rogers Park MHC
1607 W Howard St
Chicago, IL 60626
Phone: (312) 744-7617

Trilogy
1400 W Greenleaf Ave
Chicago, IL 60626
Phone: (773) 508-6100

Greater Grand MHC
4314 S Cottage Grove Ave
Chicago, IL 60653
Phone: (312) 747-0036

Woodlawn MHC
6337 S Woodlawn Ave
Chicago, IL 60637
Phone: (312) 747-0059

New York Outpatient Services

Baltic Street
250 Baltic Street
Brooklyn, New York 11201
Phone: (718) 855-3131

Bensonhurst
8620 18th Avenue
Brooklyn, New York 11214
Phone: (718) 256-8818

Coney Island
532 Neptune Avenue
Brooklyn, New York 11224
Phone: (718) 946-2600

Fort Hamilton
8710 5th Avenue
Brooklyn, New York 11209
Phone: (718) 680-0006

Heights Hill
25 Flatbush Avenue
Brooklyn, New York 11217
Phone: (718) 875-1420

Mapleton
1083 McDonald Avenue
Brooklyn, New York 11219
Phone: (718) 421-7444

APPENDIX D

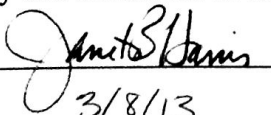

VOLUNTEER OR PROFESSIONAL TRANSCRIBER'S ASSURANCE OF RESEARCH CONFIDENTIALITY

This thesis project is firmly committed to the principle that research confidentiality must be protected and to all of the ethics, values, and practical requirements for participant protection laid down by federal guidelines and by the Smith College School for Social Work Human Subjects Review Committee. In the service of this commitment:

- All volunteer and professional transcribers for this project shall sign this assurance of confidentiality.
- A volunteer or professional transcriber should be aware that the identity of participants in research studies is confidential information, as are identifying information about participants and individual responses to questions. The organizations participating in the study, the geographical location of the study, and the method of participant recruitment, the subject matter of the study, and the hypotheses being tested are also confidential information. Specific research findings and conclusions are also usually confidential until they have been published or presented in public.
- The researcher for this project, Cindy L. Lys, shall be responsible for ensuring that all volunteer or professional transcribers handling data are instructed on procedures for keeping the data secure and maintaining all of the information in and about the study in confidence, and that they have signed this pledge. At the end of the project, all materials shall be returned to the investigator for secure storage in accordance with federal guidelines.

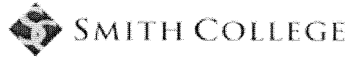
PLEDGE

I hereby certify that I will maintain the confidentiality of all of the information from all studies with which I have involvement. I will not discuss, disclose, disseminate, or provide access to such information, except directly to the researcher, Cindy L. Lys, for this project. I understand that violation of this pledge is sufficient grounds for disciplinary action, including termination of professional or volunteer services with the project, and may make me subject to criminal or civil penalties. I give my personal pledge that I shall abide by this assurance of confidentiality.

| | |
|--|--------------|
|  | Signature |
| 3/8/13 | Date |
|  | Cindy L. Lys |
| 03/8/2013 | Date |

APPENDIX E

Human Subjects Review Approval Letter



School for Social Work
Smith College
Northampton, Massachusetts 01063
T (413) 585-7950 F (413) 585-7994

February 22, 2013

Cindy Lys

Dear Cindy,

Thank you for making all the requested changes to your Human Subjects Review application. Your project is now approved by the Human Subjects Review Committee.

Please note the following requirements:

Consent Forms: All subjects should be given a copy of the consent form.

Maintaining Data: You must retain all data and other documents for at least three (3) years past completion of the research activity.

In addition, these requirements may also be applicable:

Amendments: If you wish to change any aspect of the study (such as design, procedures, consent forms or subject population), please submit these changes to the Committee.

Renewal: You are required to apply for renewal of approval every year for as long as the study is active.

Completion: You are required to notify the Chair of the Human Subjects Review Committee when your study is completed (data collection finished). This requirement is met by completion of the thesis project during the Third Summer.

Good luck with your project.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads 'Marsha Kline Pruett PhD'.

Marsha Kline Pruett, M.S., Ph.D., M.S.L.
Acting Chair, Human Subjects Review Committee

CC: Jean LaTerz, Research Advisor

APPENDIX F.1

Recruitment Flyer

IN NEED OF INTERVIEWS FOR RESEARCH STUDY!



My name is Cindy Lys and I am a Haitian American graduate student at the Smith College School for Social Work. I am doing a study titled **90% Catholic 100% Vodou: Haitian Immigrant Religious and Spiritual Identity** to explore the religious/spiritual identity of Haitian immigrants which is a subject that has yet to be explored in clinical social work research. I am doing research that will explore Vodou and Christian religion/spirituality among Haitian American adults who immigrated to the United States of America. Participation in this study is confidential. **You are receiving this letter**

because you or someone you know may be eligible to participate in this study.

As part of the study, you would be asked to participate in a 45-minute interview in-person or over the phone that will be audio recorded. In order to be part of the study you must:

- ✓ identify as Haitian or Haitian American and have been born in Haiti.
- ✓ have immigrated to the United States of America at or after the age of 10.
- ✓ practice/believe in Christianity (any denomination) and/or Vodou.
- ✓ be able to do the interview in English.

Your participation in this study will be kept confidential. There is no monetary compensation for participation in this study. The data collected from this study will be used to complete my Master's in Social Work (MSW) Thesis. The results of the study may also be used in publications and presentations.

If you are interested in participating in this study you may contact me directly by email at [REDACTED] or by phone at ([REDACTED]) [REDACTED]. If someone you know would be interested in being interviewed for this study, please forward this message to them. **Thank you for your time and consideration and I look forward to hearing from you.**

Sincerely,
Cindy L. Lys
MSW Candidate '13
Smith College School of Social Work

APPENDIX F.2

Recruitment Email

Greetings!

My name is Cindy Lys and I am a Haitian American graduate student at the Smith College School for Social Work. I am doing a study titled **90% Catholic 100% Vodou: Haitian Immigrant Religious and Spiritual Identity** to explore the religious/spiritual identity of Haitian immigrants which is a subject that has yet to be explored in clinical social work research. I am doing research that will explore Vodou and Christian religion/spirituality among Haitian American adults who immigrated to the United States of America. Participation in this study is confidential. **You are receiving this letter because you or someone you know may be eligible to participate in this study.**

As part of the study, you would be asked to participate in a 45-minute interview in-person or over the phone that will be audio recorded. In order to be part of the study you must:

- identify as Haitian or Haitian American and have been born in Haiti.
- have immigrated to the United States of America at or after the age of 10.
- practice/believe in Christianity (any denomination) and/or Vodou.
- be able to do the interview in English.

Your participation in this study will be kept confidential. There is no monetary compensation for participation in this study. The data collected from this study will be used to complete my Master's in Social Work (MSW) Thesis. The results of the study may also be used in publications and presentations.

If you are interested in participating in this study you may contact me directly by email at [REDACTED] or by phone at [REDACTED]. If someone you know would be interested in being interviewed for this study, please forward this message to them.

Thank you for your time and consideration and I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Cindy L. Lys
MSW Candidate '13
Smith College School of Social Work

APPENDIX F.3

Recruitment – Talking Points

Talking points for recruitment in-person and over the phone.

- Hi, My name is Cindy Lys and I am a Haitian American graduate student at the Smith College School for Social Work.
- I am doing a study titled **90% Catholic 100% Vodou: Haitian Immigrant Religious and Spiritual Identity** to explore the religious/spiritual identity of Haitian immigrants.
- I am doing research that will explore how Vodou and Christian religion / spirituality among Haitian Americans has evolved since their immigration to the United States of America.
- Participation in this study is confidential.
- There is no monetary compensation for participation in this study.
- As part of the study, you would be asked to participate in a 45-minute interview in-person or over the phone that will be audio recorded.
- In order to be part of the study you must:
 - identify as Haitian or Haitian American and have been born in Haiti.
 - have immigrated to the United States of America at or after the age of 10.
 - practice/believe in Christianity (any denomination) and/or Vodou.
 - be able to do the interview in English.
- The data collected from this study will be used to complete my Master's in Social Work (MSW) Thesis. The results of the study may also be used in publications and presentations.
- If you are interested in participating in this study you may contact me directly by email at [REDACTED] or by phone at ([REDACTED]) [REDACTED]. [If in person, offer a copy of the flyer.]
- Thank you for your interest in participating. May I have your contact information and the best time to reach you to discuss the participation requirements for the study and set up the interview? [If in person, offer a copy of the flyer.]
- Thank you for your time. If someone you know would be interested in being interviewed for this study, would you mind passing along my information? [If in person, offer a copy of the flyer.]

APPENDIX G

Interview Guide

1. Please state your age and gender.
2. How many years have you been in the United States?
3. How do/would you describe your religious/spiritual beliefs?
4. Are you open about your religious/spiritual beliefs publically e.g. among family, friends, co-workers, etc.?
 - 4.1 If yes: How so and how have others reacted to your disclosure?
 - 4.2 If no: Why is that?
5. How has your religious/spiritual identity changed since your immigration to the United States?
6. How does your religion/spirituality affect how you deal with times of increased stress?
7. What are your thoughts or feelings about the saying “Haitians are 90% Catholic and 100% Vodou”?
8. What kind of reaction did you get when or what kind of reaction do you anticipate receiving if you were to share your religious/spiritual beliefs with a therapist?