

# From Africa to America: The Transposition and Survival of the Vodoun Practices, Through Slavery and the Present

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**Abstract:** *The slave trade and the whole slavery process have made America to get in touch with many African traditions, cultures and religious practices. Many of these practices could not survive on the American land not only because of the lack of effectiveness in their transmission from fathers to sons, but also due the white master's fear of their perpetuation. Yet, Vodoun, one of the strongest connections between the slaves and their African ancestry, then their hope for salvation, has survived and has continued to exist in modern America. Although modernity tends to bury the origins and most customs and cultures of black Americans, Vodoun has remained a mark of identity in the life of many African Americans today. More than a culture or a custom to the Blacks, Vodoun is a religion and its worship has about 50 million practitioners around the world. Although its true origins are still in debate, it has commonly been admitted that the Dahomey kingdom (today the Republic of Benin) has been its head-quarter, with the south of the country hosting the experts and champions. With the deported slaves not being necessary experts in the Vodoun practice, together with its difficult and exclusive oral transmission and the ages, one can rightly wonder if there has ever been any true vodoun in America. And if "Yes", what connection and relationship could exist today between the vodoun practiced in America and the one prevailing in the mother country, that is Africa in general, and Benin in particular.*

**Keywords:** Vodoun – slavery – religion – relationship - comparison

## 1. Theoretical framework of the study

### 1.1. Contextualizing the study

Although the exact origins of Voodoo are unknown, it is generally agreed that this religion has its roots in West Africa. Modern day Benin is regarded as the birth place of this religion, and the name 'Voodoo', or 'Vodun' or even 'Vodoun' itself means 'spirit' in the local Benin language *Fon*. It has been suggested that Vodoun in West Africa evolved from the ancient traditions of ancestor worship and animism. The forms of Vodoun practiced in America today, however, are the results of one of the most inhuman episodes in modern history, that is the slave trade and slavery, that took place between the 16th and 19th centuries. It should be noted that some ancestral practices of Mesopotamia, ancient Greece and ancient Rome, is similar to the vodoun practiced in Benin and neighboring countries. These well-known practices of antiquity had not received the name "Vodoun". The Vodoun badly pronounced and misspelled by the Colon, comes from the word "Voodoo", which means in Fon language: "True Power" or "Mystery". That is a kind of power coming from both *Mawu* (God) and *Lissa* (Spirit). The legend teaches that *Mawu* and *Lissagave* birth to fourteen children with supernatural powers; these children include *Chango* or *Xévio*, the God of thunder, *Nana Bouloukou*, the Goddess of the earth, the night and its mysteries, and *Sakpata*, the God of justice and the spread of smallpox and many other associated deities.

In the cosmogony of the peoples of the Adja-Tado cultural area that constitute the base of the populations in the southern States of the Gulf of Benin (an area that includes Benin, Togo, Ghana, and southern Nigeria), the divine transcendence is named *Mahou*, in the Beninese *Fon*

language, which can be translated as: "*the inaccessible*" or in Yoruba language, "*Olorun*: the Master of the heaven. He is the sole source of life and absolute master of the visible and the invisible. He is uncreated and creator of the universe and all that is the people. Being inaccessible, he does not intervene in the lives of men. However, his breath, felt through these works, is embodied by spirits who are called "Voodoo" in the language "Fon" of Benin which is a diminutive of world "*Yehwe-voodoo*" or *Orisha* in the Yoruba language. Vodouns are therefore deified spirits, earth gods, considered as intermediaries between men and *Mahou* (the Unique God). Their mission is to be permanent intercessors between men and the God. The vodoun would therefore be mediators between the supreme God and men. Then, there no one vodoun, and a vodoun is not God, but a god. For the latter, they obtain favors, but are also the executors of divine vengeance. *Mahou* being of spiritual essence has no form. He is never represented, either in painting or associated with objects, contrarily to the vodoun gods. This explains why there is nowhere in the vodoun area worship for *Mahou*. On the other hand, vodouns or Orishas are objects of worship. More generally, the voodoo is not a religion, but a religious practice which consists in worshipping the only God, *Mahu*, through some God's representatives and divinized spirits on earth, called vodouns, and who serve as intercessors to man to reach the Almighty God. However, in the concert of vodoun, some have forged very close relations with one another. The most manifest is the relation of *Fâ*, the vodoun of destiny and *Lègba*, the messenger and vodoun of the crossroads.

For sure, there exists then many theories about the exact origin and the real significance of vodoun but the most commonly admitted origin of it remain Benin, and vodoun practitioners are monotheists; they believe that vodoun is a way to the Unique God, the way Christianity are ways to

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address that same God. Now, with the transportation of vodoun to America through slave-taken from the West African coasts, most white American masters have quickly considered it as a witchcraft practice, rather than a positive religious practice, which made it impossible for the slave to overtly go through. In view of this difficult existence, it is accurate to wonder the kind of similarities and dissemblance that might exist today between the vodoun practices in Africa and the ones in America. However, it is important to point out from the start that, although the study is meant to focus on Africa and America, the data collected from Africa are solely concerned with Benin. Indeed, when talking about vodoun in Africa, the southern Benin is generally referred to as the reference. As such, the sample field of the study as for Africa has been Benin.

## 1.2. Literature Review

The Oxford American dictionary defines Vodou as “a form of religion based on belief in witchcraft and magical rites, practiced by some people in the West Indies and America”<sup>1</sup>. Such a definition puts it clear that vodoun is a religion, rather than a religious practice. Basing on this assertion, vodoun practitioners cannot pretend to be monotheists, since there are many forms of vodoun, and each would then be a different religion, which is far from the real meaning of vodoun. It is true, in the factual conception of vodoun, from its origin to contemporary time, some people have used vodoun negatively; but is it accurate to consider only the negative aspect of it, so as to conclude that it is a religion based on witchcraft? Definitely, the answer is negative. Fortunately, this has not been the only meaning given to vodoun.

According to the English Oxford dictionary, “Voodoo is a black religious cult practiced in the Caribbean and the southern US, combining elements of Roman Catholic ritual with traditional African magical and religious rites, and characterized by sorcery and spirit possession”<sup>2</sup>. Here, although the terms ‘magic’ and ‘sorcery’ appear in its meaning, vodoun is not considered as a religion, but just a cult, a practice, which goes along with what it is supposed to be. Also here, vodoun is said to be a combination of the Roman Catholic and the African traditional rites, which would be sufficient to make it more acceptable as a religious practice. These two conceptions of vodoun would then explain that the British were probably more tolerant with the slaves than the American colonists, in the practice of Vodoun.

Many authors and writers have written about the practice of vodoun both in America and in Benin but there has hardly existed any document or literary work focusing on comparison of the vodoun practiced in America and the one practice on the mother land, Africa.

Zora Neale Hurston’s *Tell my horse*, is an account of the weird mysteries and horrors of voodoo, “*Tell My Horse*” is an invaluable resource and fascinating guide. Based on Zora Neale Hurston’s personal experiences in Haiti and Jamaica,

where she participated as an initiate rather than just an observer of the vodoun practices during her visits in the 1930s; in this novel, Hurston has painted a vividly authentic picture of ceremonies and customs and superstitions of great cultural interest.

Denise Alvarado has also been concerned with the vodoun, through her *The Voodoo Hoodoo Spellbook*. Cultural psychologist and root worker, Denise Alvarado, who grew up in New Orleans, draws from a lifetime of recipes and spells learned from family, friends, and local practitioners. She traces the history of the African-based folk magic brought by slaves to New Orleans, and shows how it evolved over time to include influences from Native American spirituality, Catholicism, and Pentecostalism. She shares her research into folklore collections and 19th- and 20th- century formularies along with her own magical arts. *The Voodoo Hoodoo Spellbook* includes more than 100 spells for Banishing, Binding, Fertility, Luck, Protection, Money, and more. Alvarado introduces readers to the Pantheon of Vodou Spirits, the Seven African Powers, and other important Loas, Prayers, Novenas, and Psalms, and much more, including: Oils and Potions, Hoodoo Powders and Gris-Gris, Talismans and Candle Magic, Curses and Hexes.

Many other black American writers have focused on the practice of vodoun in America, which has either been depicted or valued.

## 1.3. Objectives, methods and theories

Mutilated dolls, stuffed animals, and hexes are just a few haunting images that pop into mind upon hearing the word vodoun. But this is rather a kind of popular misconceptions that label it not only as a separate religion, but also as an informal or ghostly practice. The present paper has a two-fold purpose. First, it aims at showing that, far from the widespread conception about the vodoun practiced by Africans and the Blacks in America either in time of slavery and in contemporary time, the vodoun is a rather positive religious practice. Then, it tends to unveil, if any, the different transformations and deviations of the vodoun conceptions and rites, through the journey to America and necessity of adaptations based on free practice restrictions and life conditions in America. The resulting objective then is to conclude on how African Americans could better integrate the American society through an accurate practice of Vodoun.

Investigating in the frame of the writing of the present paper has taken me to read some African American authors who have been concerned with the issue of vodoun; they include Zora Neale Hurston and Denise Alvarado. I have also read many other African American documents in extracts or from the internet. But mainly, I have been lucky enough to have interview sessions with some vodoun priests from different regions of my country Benin, and more specifically living in the cities of Parakou, Dassa-Zoumè, Abomey and Ouidah. This has not been always easy to have those practitioners let go with information since; their reluctance is generally due to the fact that, despite my explanation and assurance, they couldn’t always have confidence, nor anticipate on why

<sup>1</sup> American Oxford Dictionary, ( 1982), Oxford University press

<sup>2</sup> British Oxford Dictionary, ( 1979), Cambridge University press

those pieces of information were needed. The interviews have been recorded, and as for my readings, information and data have been synthesized, classified and hierarchized basing on my objectives. Then, development based on critical analysis and interpretation of the data has followed. The methodology used is then many folds. First it has considered the context: that is the circumstances or events that form the environment within which both the vodoun and slavery have taken place; then it has referred to assumption, meaning stressing on the starting point of vodoun in Benin, without having a clear proof of that; and lastly critical thinking, which is a disciplined intellectual criticism that combines research knowledge of historical context, and balanced judgement, that is: evaluating, examining, analyzing, formulating and hypothesizing. The literary theory used for this paper writing has been historiography; this is concerned with the principles of historical research or writing, the writing of history based on scholarly disciplines such as the analysis and evaluation of source materials, the existing findings and interpretations relating to a particular historical topic, like the practice of vodoun, or a body of historical literature.

## 2. The Vodoun: An Effective religious practice in America and Africa

### 2.1 The transportation and integration of vodoun in America

“Vodoun was first practiced in America and the Caribbean by slaves of African descent, whose culture was both feared and ridiculed by the white masters”<sup>3</sup>. Since slaves were not considered fully humans their religion not either; it was dismissed as superstition, their priests denigrated as witchdoctors, their Gods and Spirits denounced as evil and witchcraft. When African slaves were brought to the Americas to work on plantations, they carried with them some of their traditional, cultural and religious practices; this is how Vodoun was transported from Africa to America. The white masters, however, had other plans regarding the religious practice of their slaves. “A 1685 law, for instance, prohibited the practice of African religions, and required all masters to Christianize their slaves within eight days of their arrival in Haiti”<sup>4</sup>. Such legal dispositions were based on two assumptions: first, the white masters, knowing very little about those practices, feared that their slaves might use them for witchcraft and killing them and their families. Then, those African traditional and religious practices, if allowed, might hinder the masters’ efforts of controlling their slaves. Although the slaves accepted Roman Catholicism, they did not give up their traditional beliefs and instead, the vodoun and the Catholicism were syncretized, producing some unique results. The slave would then identify some Catholic with traditional Vodoun spirits. For instance, in Haiti vodoun practitioner identified St. Peter from the Holy Bible as Father Legba, the gatekeeper of the spirits world. In

Benin, of all the deities of the voodoo pantheon, obviously, Lègba is the most familiar, but also the most singular figure of Vodoun. Traditionally, Lègba is represented by a landlock with almost a human form, often with an excessive phallus. The representations of Lègba are everywhere. It is seen at the thresholds of houses, public places and all the corners of streets in the old cities and villages. This transgression of the cult of Legba for instance, is due to the fact that the slaves were not really in full possession of their means for the worship of Lègba.

### 2.2. Vodoun: a cultural patrimony in America and Africa

Despite the various repressions, vodoun has remained a religion in its own right both in Africa and America. Centuries after the slave trade, several places and monuments present on the American continent, testify to the importance of voodoo in the patrimony of black Americans. In Africa, and Benin in particular, there are several vodoun congregations as well as temples that worship various deities. For over 25 years, in Benin, the government has devoted every January 10th to vodoun. This national commemoration decreed by President Nicéphore Soglo in 1994 consists of a few spectacular celebrations and demonstrations throughout the country. The voodoo festival attracts thousands of fans and tourists curious to learn more about this religion, and the American diaspora would never miss this exceptional occasion. As such, many Black Americans would come to the celebration, which proves that the vodoun has never died, even to those people whose ancestors were deported to America centuries ago.

In America, the city known for a permanent practice of Vodoun is New Orleans. The “New Orleans Historic Vodoun Museum, has opened in 1972”<sup>5</sup>, and it teaches visitors, especially those who have never had a physical or eye contact with vodoun, what this is and looks like: One can discover vodoun dolls and stuffed animals. When African slaves brought their Vodoun practices across the Atlantic, they had to pour their beliefs into the Catholic practices to form the Creole version of Vodoun, which is referred to today as the Louisiana Vodoun. “The Marie Laveau gravesite in the oldest cemetery in New Orleans is a major tourist attraction, where believers and visitors offer gifts and pray to her spirit”<sup>6</sup>. Across the street from the cemetery where Laveau is buried, offerings of pound cake are left to the statue of Saint Expedite; these offerings are believed to expedite the favors asked of the Vodoun queen. Saint Expedite represents the spirit standing between life and death. The chapel where the statue stands was once used only for holding funerals. Marie Laveau continues to be a central figure of Louisiana Vodoun and of New Orleans culture. Gamblers shout her name when throwing dice, and multiple tales of sightings of the Vodoun.

<sup>3</sup>Holloway, Joseph E. (1990) *The Case of Voodoo in New Orleans, In Africanisms in American Culture, 123-129. 1st ed. Vol. 2.* Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press. P. 19

<sup>4</sup>Holloway, Joseph E. (1990) *The Case of Voodoo in New Orleans, In Africanisms in American Culture, 123-129. 1st ed. Vol. 2.* Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press. P. 23

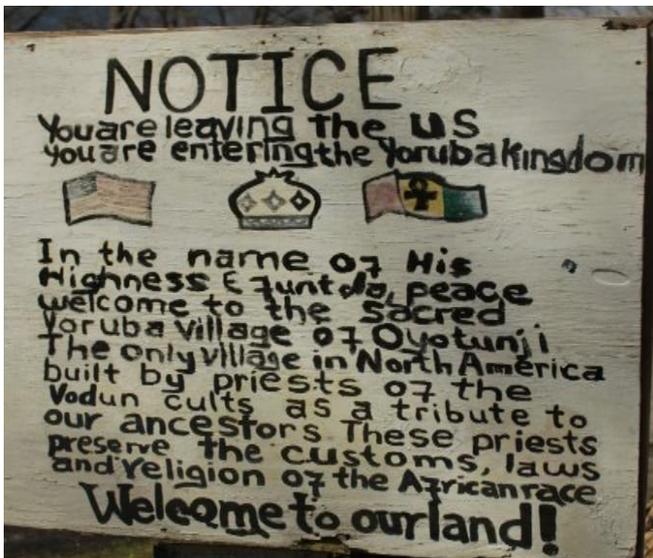
<sup>5</sup>Holloway, Joseph E. (1990) *The Case of Voodoo in New Orleans, In Africanisms in American Culture, 123-129. 1st ed. Vol. 2.* Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press. P. 44

<sup>6</sup>Hall, Gwendolyn Midlo (1995). *Africans in Colonial Louisiana: The Development of Afro-Creole Culture in the Eighteenth Century.* Louisiana State University Press. p. 58.



*Photo : Marie Laveau's Tomb (by Britt Reints. CC BY)*

Another symbolic place of vodoun in the United States is the village of Oyotunji down in Sheldon. Oyotunji is a traditional West African village founded in the 1970s by Vodoun priests. The village houses a group of families who maintain their connection to the Yoruba people of Africa. Vodoun practice in the Village is still widespread, as the descendants of the village are African Americans from the Nigerian and Benin regions.



*Photo: Oyotunji Village in Sheldon (Capture America Daily Journal)*

Reading the above picture, people could say that Oyotunji Villagers consider themselves apart from Americans. But in fact, the notice seeks to tell people that coming to the Oyotunji Village means entering a new world, with new cultures and religious practices totally unknown to the larger Americans, since the latter have, in the past and even in the present, denied not only the existence of vodoun, but also the right for Blacks to practice it.

### 3. Vodoun varieties and their practices in Africa and in America

#### 3.1 The types of Vodoun

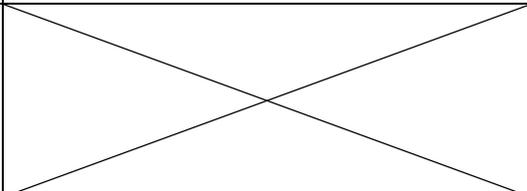
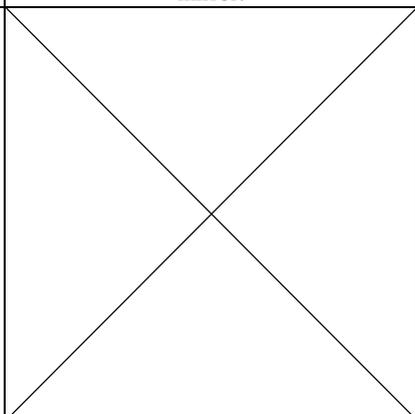
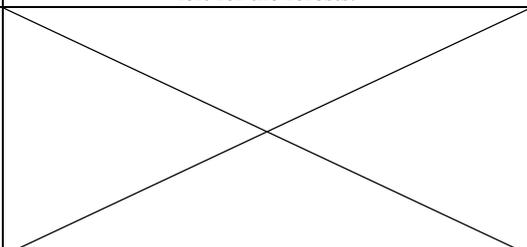
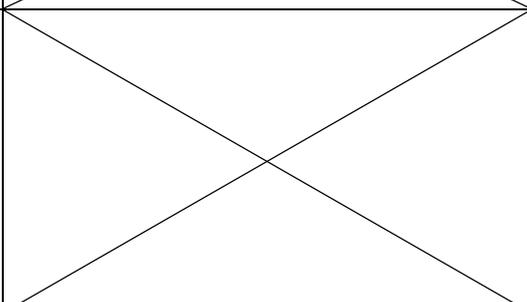
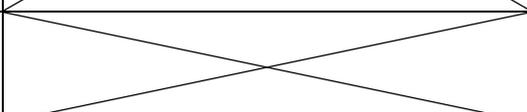
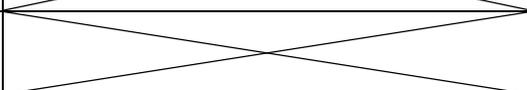
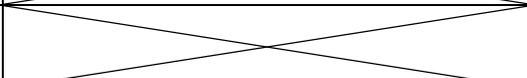
In Africa and for the people of South Benin in particular, Mawu (God) acts and addresses humans not directly, but only through some intermediaries. It is then believed that God, the omnipotent, has delegated His power

to the Vodoun(s). Hence the Vodoun(s), recognized as Mawu's creatures, according to the *Fon* expression "Mawuwê do Vodunlê" (the vodouns are the offsprings of the supreme God); and in response to the spiritual desires of mankind, God has chosen to be closer to them, by sending the vodouns as intermediaries. In this sense, Vodoun designates all that is sacred, all power coming from the invisible world to influence the world of the living, everything that is mysterious. Vodoun then is not Mawu (God), it is explicitly distinct from Mawu. In the areas where vodoun prevails, people then hardly address God straightly, except in some particular circumstances. As has said Jesus Christ in the Holy Bible, "I am the way, the truth and life; nobody can reach the Father unless through Me"<sup>7</sup>, the same holds for the vodoun spirits: they are the way to God, and that is why the vodoun practitioners should not address God, unless through the vodoun. The Vodoun(s) receive the worship because of their position and proximity to humans in the one hand, and God in the other hand.

However the revered vodoun deities in Africa in general and southern Benin in particular, are not the same as those in America. The oral and difficult transmission of the vodoun rituals through slave generations has definitely diverted the original practices brought from Africa. Also, since slaves could not overtly practice their mother tongues, this has made it almost impossible to practice vodoun rituals accordingly, because vodoun also has a specific language. Slaves then could keep only a tiny part of their cultural heritage. Both Africans and Americans recognize Mawu (God) and Lissa (Goddess). The vodouns or intermediary gods do not always bear the same names, and they have different meanings from Africa to America. Below are a few examples where resemblances are to be found on the same horizontal lines.

<sup>7</sup>The Holy Bible, John Chp 14, V. 6

In Africa		In America	
Vodoun Spirits	Meaning	Vodoun Spirits	Meaning
<b>Achina</b>	it is called <i>Ta vodounin</i> Benin, which means the vodoun always carried on the head	<b>No matching with the American vodoun</b>	
<b>Lègba</b>	it is materialized by a clump of earth at the entrance of the villages, houses or in the heart of the markets. Traditionally, Lègba is represented by a landlock with almost a human form, often with an excessive phallus. It is supposed to bring protection, peace and prosperity, it can also punish. It is then known to be both generous and wicked.	<b>Legba or Elegba, Eshu, Ellegua. [Papa Legba]:</b> ↔	Known in America as the God of crossroads, singer, fighter, fool, guardian of the door into the spiritual sphere - he appears as either a child or a hunched old man (with a crutch). In some myths Legba is a thief as he has stolen the secrets of gods and gave them to people. Every ritual starts with invoking him and ends by saying goodbye to him. This is because he is the guardian of the door; therefore the contact with him enables better communication with other gods. During the ritual he acts as a messenger of gods as he is translating the words of gods (ghosts) into human language. Those who died can return back to the world of living people if they obtain Legba's blessing.
<b>Xévioosso</b>	vodoun of thunder, lightning; its devotee carry a double blade ax. It is a righteous deity which punishes thieves, liars and malefactors.	<b>Shango or Xango, Chango (Nago Shango)</b> ↔	god of fire, fighter, judge, lord of the lightning and thunder - brave, healthy looking man, he can be likened to the Beninese Xévioosso. Initially Xango was worshipped by Yoruba tribe in Nigeria. He was born as one of the gods of earth and lived as a king of Oyo land on the earth with people. Today he is worshipped as a god of justice. On the home altar Shango is symbolized by double axes or ram's horn. Invocation of Shango can help with legal proceeding or it can give more power and courage.
<b>No matching with the African vodoun</b>		<b>Obatala or Oxala, Batala, Blanc Dani</b>	Goddess of heavens, personification of creative energy - old with white hair, kind and extremely powerful. Obatala is goddess of creation of Yoruba tribe. Her/his name is the word for god as such. Obatala is man and woman at the same time. He/She is direct descendant of the highest and omnipresent god Oludumar. He/She personifies highest ethical principles such as justice, wisdom, abilities and generosity. He/She brings wealth and well-being to people, heals the most serious or even deadly diseases. Obatala is constantly trying to create therefore always fights for protection of sources and nature.
<b>Ninssouhoue</b>	Representatives of the ancestors, to whom people owe reverence.	<b>No matching with the American vodoun</b>	
<b>Tohossou</b>	It is a god that is incarnated in innocent children are called in French dwarves. They are gifted, respected and they provide material wealth to their families. At their death, they are thrown into the sea, after ritual ceremonies, where they are thought to return to their living space.	<b>No matching with the American vodoun</b>	
<b>Mami Watta</b>	It is the goddess of the sea. She loves luxury and her followers are best dressed, the most beautiful and the most fragrant. They only wear white. They are formed in special convents they are called <i>Mamissi</i> (the wives of the gods).	<b>Oshun or Oxum, Ezili, Erzulie (Erzulie Freda)</b> ↔	Goddess of love and power of creation, abundance and passion - beautiful, seductive young woman. Oshun is African Venus of Afrodite. She is the beauty, sensuality and love. Erzulie is a lady of visual arts and her attribute are jewels. She spreads the joy of life and passion. She heals diseases with cold water upon which she rules. Her generosity feeds the hungry. She spreads universal abundance so that everybody can enjoy the beauty of creation. Careful, though, she is also a mother of witches and she colors herself with the blood of her

			enemies, she is the ruler of a vulture. Although there are many differences, she can be likened to the goddess "MamiWatta".
<b>Similar to MamiWatta</b>		<b>Yemaya or Imanje, La Balianne (Yemalla)</b> 	Goddess of the sea - motherly, she gives nutrition, loving and desirable. Yemaya is a ruler of the sea and personification of female power. She is watching all the powers that give nutrition and food and she takes care of female affairs. Yemaya protects child in the womb and also protects home. She has the powers to nurture and to destroy. Her task is constant renewal. In many countries people celebrate her on the days of full moon. She can also be likened to Mami water
<b>Abikou</b>	Godofabnormalchildren. It defends automatically all children born after several miscarriages of deaths of their elders. It binds them to life by keeping the deceased elder brothers and sisters in their world, on the other side of the mirror.	<b>No matching with the American vodoun</b>	
<b>No matching with the African vodoun</b>		<b>OgunorOgum, Ogu [Ogoun]</b>	Wild man of woods, god of iron and smithery, protector of wealth and work, peaceful and dangerous man, he is also known as "Gou" by the fon people of Benin. Ogun transforms wild forests into new land for gods. He uses machete and axes for making way through the woodland, thus he is called a god of pioneers and "The one who prepares the way". Ogun teaches people how to use knife for self-defence in the jungle. He teaches the smith craft, he helps people to build houses for shelter. He is the father of civilization and technology. According to the legend he was initially crowned as a king, but once people learned everything from him, he returned the crown and left for the forests.
<b>Kocou</b>	It is a very violent and bellicose vodoun. It likes to perform, but it always ends badly. Many families disapprove of its devotee, who once in a trance cut themselves with knives, shards of bottle or any other sharp object. Women in trance are able to slit a sheep with their teeth or eat chicken with blood and feathers.	<b>No matching with the American vodoun</b>	
<b>Oro</b>	voodoosower of terror is an intransigent punisher. It does not want to admit initiated on his way. It goes out in Nago's community mainly. It removes all curious women who dare to hide to look at him. No one has the right to talk about Oro except insiders in the circle of initiates. The universe of Oro is at first nocturnal. At the general role it is forbidden to leave the house during Oro's ceremony	<b>No matching with the American vodoun</b>	
<b>Sakpata</b>	Also called the earth, he is much feared and people do not dare to pronounce his name. It is the divinity that spreads smallpox.	<b>No matching with the American vodoun</b>	
<b>Agê</b>	his fifth son of Mawu is the deity of agriculture and the forests. He reigns over animals and birds.	<b>No matching with the American vodoun</b>	
<b>Jo</b>	This deity is characterized by invisibility. He is the Vodun of the air.	<b>No matching with the American vodoun</b>	
<b>Dan</b>	it's the snake. It manifests itself through the rainbow. It can also be in the form of a man and fill with wealth those who welcome him well.	<b>Oya or Yansa, Aida-Lenso, Olla</b> 	Goddess of wind, fire, water and rainbow; ruler of the nature, fighter - courageous, beautiful, passionate and unpredictable. Oya is a goddess of sudden change. Her energy is shown also in the destructive power of wind storms, floods and

			earthquakes. The Power of Oya stems in her speed and her ability to change things immediately. She can be likened to "Dan"
Similar to Dan		Damballahor Aida-Wedo ←	Primordial god, god of snakes, he has a form of snake, he is universal power, protector of trees and waters- vivacious, strict and brave.Damballah is a primordial and constantly renewing creature. He is the protector of universal knowledge; he is the original creative power (energy). He also can be likened to "Dan"
	Gou: It's the deity of blacksmiths, hunters or anyone who handles iron or iron weapons. It is a god represented by a pile of scrap. He protects but he can punish also by bloody accidents.	No matching with the African vodoun	
No matching with the African vodoun		Loco	Another primordial god is Loco. He is the spirit of vegetation and male form of plants. According to the legend he was the first priest, who transformed from a human being into a loa. Therefore he is the intermediary between people and gods. If Loco appears at a ceremony, he could be recognized by a gnarled stick that he always carries with him or by his companion who always smokes a pipe and always accompanies Loco.
Similar to MamiWatta		Simbi ←	He is the loa of white magic. Simbi is depicted as a green snake and he is very wise. A person obsessed by Simba is turning like a snake and is attracted by the water, because he is more than Damballah depending on the element of water. Simbi is also providing certain connection between people and ghosts, because among voodoo people the mythical other side is deep in the sea
No matching with the African vodoun		Baron Samedieand Guede	Barons are gods of death and cemeteries. The most powerful is baron Samedie. He appears as a thin black man wearing a hat and holding a walking stick in his hand. Baron La Croix appears as a skeleton, he answers all the questions with sarcasm and he scares by his chilling look. Baron CemetiéreBoumba has sinister look and his frightening behaviour evokes fear. The colours of barons are black and purple. All the rituals have to be done at night-time at a cemetery. The most suitable sacrifice offers are coal, black candles, purple flowers or stones, but also rum and black chickens.

**Note:** the above table was designed basing on interview with four vodoun priests in Benin, and on Michelle Gordon's *Midnight Scenes and Orgies: Public Narratives of Voodoo in New Orleans and Nineteenth-Century Discourses of White Supremacy*, published in 1954

The divinities here quoted are just a few, but the most famous ones in both Africa and America.As it can be learnt from the above table, not all the African vodounhas found a way through America; as a counterpart, new vodouns have emerged in America. The possible explanation of these variations is that the American slaves have contended with the deities needed for daily life and conditions, which could not be the same with Africans. This also explains the appearance of new deities to the slaves, since new challenges were being faced by them, which were not concerned with the practitioners from the mother country.

### 3.2. The Limitations of voodoo practices

The vodoun practitioners have always claimed that the spirits under those deities are only positive. Indeed, in the past the vodoun spirits were invoked for guidance and assistance to humans. In times of draughts, epidemics or

crucial situations, the vodouns priest would gather to invoke the mediation with the Supreme God. Infertile women would have refuge in the vodoun premises. The vodoun was also a rewarder for good deeds and a punisher for thieves and criminals. But todaypeople in Africa have used the vodoun for committing crime on innocent people, and in search of easy money.Prior initiation which was an obligation before being a vodoun priest has hardly been observed, and many young people with no preparation now handle the vodoun instruments for only financial benefits. In Benin for instance, young people and children have disappeared and been found slaughtered with missing organs, just because human blood and organs are needed more and more for vodoun to turn people into rich men and women. The vodoun has fallen into bad hands, and is then is being diverted from its former good mission.

In America, the slaves have often resorted to violent vodoun practices, especially while trying to escape from bondage. These practices have left in white people's memory a mistaken representation of vodoun, which has then long been considered a satanic religion. Today, even with a less negative apprehension on vodoun practices, with reference to the love potions, healing potions, luck baths that the vodoun can provide them with, both and white Americans still have a reserve attitude towards the vodoun practices in America, seen as magic, and witchcraft.

#### 4. Conclusion

Through the sixteenth-century slave-trade system, millions of Africans were captured from the West African coasts to the West Indies to be worked as slaves. Those Blacks brought their cultures and religion with them, and this is how the vodoun religious practices, previously existing only in some sub-Saharan African countries, were transferred onto America. In spite of its oral tradition, the core beliefs and practices of Vodoun have been preserved over time and space, despite some transformations. The vodoun in Africa and the vodoun in America are then the same with minor variations influenced by syncretism, creativity, and diverse experiences. Today it is common for Roman Catholic mass celebrations to refer to vodoun lyrics for praising God, which proves that the vodoun practices have some positive aspect. Through this comparative study of the practices of vodoun in Benin and in America, it reveals that the vodoun deities and practices are misunderstood by many people both in Benin and in America.

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