

# Cultural Competency and Haitian Immigrants

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## Spirituality

There are two religions that Haitians practice and they can be practiced simultaneously.

- Christianity
  - Catholicism was the first Christian religion to be introduced to the Haitians and now is the religion of 80% of the population in Haiti.<sup>14</sup>
  - Protestantism was introduced more recently with 16% of Haitians being protestant.<sup>14</sup>
  - Haitians in the U.S. are very active in their churches and for most Haitians, religion helps to maintain their cultural identity.<sup>4</sup>
  - Many devout Christian Haitians will denounce Voodoo.<sup>4, 59</sup>
- Voodoo (also spelled Vodou, Vodoun, or Vodon)
  - The word Voodoo comes from an African word meaning spirit. The Voodoo religion was thought to have been brought with the slaves to Haiti, and over time, it developed into a religion specific to Haiti.<sup>4, 21, 32</sup>
  - Voodoo is often considered the national religion of Haiti as most Haitians practice it to some degree or are affected by it in some way.<sup>21</sup>
  - Voodoo does not have an organized hierarchy or a specific theology.<sup>21</sup>
- In Voodoo, there is a belief in one central God called *Bondye or Bon Dieu*. This God is similar to the God of Judaism, Christianity, or Islam.<sup>4, 21, 25, 26, 60</sup>
- Under this god there are three categories of spirits: the *loa*, the twins and the dead.
- The *loa* or *lwa* are spirits of family members and the spirits of all major forces.<sup>21, 25, 26, 32, 60</sup>
  - These forces include reproduction, health, good and evil.<sup>32, 60</sup>
  - Any person or being who has an image of power could ultimately become a *loa*.<sup>26</sup>
  - It is the *loa* that interact with people. People ask the *loa* for protection or luck. It is they who can cause good and bad things to happen.<sup>4, 21, 32, 60</sup>
  - During religious ceremonies *loas* may possess people and send messages through them.<sup>4, 60</sup>
  - The *loas* are paid by gifts during religious ceremonies. The gifts can include food, drink, or other gifts.<sup>21</sup> Each *loa* has its own function and ability to control the forces of nature.<sup>4</sup>
  - Each family has a *loa* who serves as the family's spiritual protector. This *loa* is viewed as responsible for protecting the family against the evil of other spirits. In return the family has a ceremonial feast every year to honor their *loa*. The *loa* are thought to need the respect of the living to elevate their status in the spirit world. Illness may occur as a result of not respecting your *loa* appropriately.<sup>31, 32</sup>
  - Catholic Haitians often associate *loas* with Saints. For example *Dumballah* the snake *loa* is represented by St. Patrick and *Erzulie* the earth mother is represented by the Virgin Mary.<sup>4, 25, 26, 60</sup>
- The twins
  - The twins are believed to be descendents of the one God.<sup>60</sup>
  - They represent the dichotomy of good vs. evil male vs. female, etc.<sup>26, 60</sup>
  - Haitians believe that if the twins are occasionally remembered in religious ceremonies, they will help improve your life.<sup>60</sup>
- The dead
  - These are mostly the souls of family members.<sup>26, 60</sup>
  - They are still considered part of the family and are helpful.<sup>26, 60</sup>

- Ignored dead are thought to be dangerous.<sup>60</sup>
- The most important and central tenet of Voodoo is healing people from sickness.<sup>60</sup>
- The ministers of Voodoo include the *houngan* (priest) and the *mambo* (priestess).<sup>4, 25, 26,</sup>  
<sup>60</sup> These practitioners are paid for their services, not unlike Christian religious ministers.  
 The major duties of these practitioners are:<sup>60</sup>
  - Healing
  - Presiding over rituals to contact or calm the *loa*.
  - Initiation of new priests and priestesses.
  - Foretelling the future and dream reading.
  - Spell casting and creating protections.
  - Making potions for a variety of purposes.
  - Voodoo ceremonies
    - Gatherings are outside under a pavilion type dwelling.
    - They are presided over by a *houngan* or *mambo*.
    - All people participate in the ritual.
    - Drums and dancing play an integral part.
    - The *loa* also participate by overtaking the body of some of the humans involved in the ceremony.
    - In order to pacify the *loa*, animal sacrifice is frequently offered..<sup>4, 25, 60</sup>
- Zombification. This is perhaps the most sensationalist facet of Voodoo, and is thought to be well exaggerated in the media. Part of Voodoo black magic, which is not usually discussed among Haitians (see below), zombification has been documented to be the result of poisoning to a near death level, resulting in burial and later excavation of the living corpse. These "zombies" are theorized to have been brain damaged in the poisoning process and thus walk around "like a zombie".<sup>4</sup>
- Voodoo is divided by practitioners into 2 types:
  1. Rada: peaceful worship of the happy *loa*; white magic.
    - Petro: black magic. This is the Voodoo that we usually read about, the voodoo of the angry *loa*. This is the type of voodoo that results in zombification, death curses and orgies. Petro is reported to represent only 5% of all Voodoo practiced.<sup>25, 60</sup> Black magic is related to Voodoo like Satanism is related to Christianity.<sup>4</sup>
  - Voodoo is a fatalistic religion. Those that practice believe that fate is predetermined by the *loa*. Your destiny is controlled by these spirits and only by contacting them can you control your destiny.<sup>26, 60</sup>

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