

“Playing Vodou”: A Visual Essay of Imitation and Meaning in Political and Popular Cultural Depictions of Baron Samedi

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Abstract

This visual essay collects and examines select images of persons and groups who have imitated and symbolically simulated the folkloric appearance of Baron Samedi in contemporary political and popular culture. Our purpose with this essay is twofold. First, by offering a chronological presentation of “Samedi-esque” imagery, we present a record of appearance that preserves said imagery for comparison, analysis, and critique. In particular, we are interested in identifying mass media images of Samedi that have helped shape popular understandings and misunderstandings of the intersection between ethnicity and the Vodou religion. Second, we explore the various ways these images have been used to invoke fear, promote cultural stereotypes, and generate hope in the performance of “playing Samedi.”



Figure 1: Geoffrey Holder as Baron Samedi in James Bond’s *Live and Let Die* (1973).
Image courtesy of jamesbondwiki.com

Introduction

This visual essay collects and examines select images of persons and groups who have imitated and symbolically simulated the folkloric appearance of Baron Samedi in contemporary political and popular culture. Our purpose with this essay is twofold. First, by offering a chronological presentation of “Samedi-esque” imagery, we present a record of appearance that preserves said imagery for comparison, analysis, and critique. In particular, we are interested in identifying mass media images of Samedi that have helped shape popular understandings and misunderstandings of the intersection between ethnicity and the Vodou religion. Second, we explore the various ways these images have been used to invoke fear, promote cultural stereotypes, and generate hope in the performance of “playing Samedi.”

What is Vodou?

While this paper is not an in-depth socio-cultural exploration of Vodou, it is necessary to offer some background of the religion itself in order to provide context for the essay. Vodou is a syncretic religion that originates in Haiti as a complex belief system that merges the cultural traditions of the indigenous Arawak with faith systems from the African Diaspora and Roman Catholic Christianity.

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As Germain (2011:248) writes, “As a contact-cultural religion, Vodou is a grassroots system that survived the Atlantic-slave trade and is both an expression of African-centered beliefs with ‘new world’ [meaning indigenous and Catholic] negotiations.” Louisiana Vodou, on the other hand, is a tradition syncretized from the Catholic and Francophone culture of southern Louisiana and emerges as a result of the slave trade. Louisiana Vodou is often confused with, but because of their common roots and the influence of the Roman Catholic Church is not completely separable from, Haitian Vodou (for an in depth analysis please see Fandrich 2007). The word Vodou has several historical and interpretable meanings, but the most common is that of “spirit” and/or “serving the spirit(s)” (Ramsey 2011). However, the symbolic constructs and politics behind the spelling choices that name the spiritual practice are vaster. The reader will note that the authors have chosen to use the spelling “Vodou” rather than the more Anglicized “voodoo.” The reason for this is several. As Pettinger (2004: 422-423) writes, “Vodou is of demonstrably African origin...and its use is an attempt to overcome deep and long standing misconceptions of Haitian religious beliefs and practices.” In greater detail:

The Anglicization or Americanization that produces voodoo gives us a word that is exotic...Voodoo cannot be mistaken for an English word; it cannot be broken down into familiar morphemes, and indeed its oo sound and internal rhyme aligns it (for imperial ears at least) with the language of children and savages... Even the earlier French derivation, Vaudoux was designed and transformed to be a common noun meaning witch or sorcerer (420)

Indeed, “voodoo” has become a generic and often derogatory term for any form of spiritual belief and practice remotely associated with Afro-Caribbean, and non-exclusively Christian, Black spiritual practices (Fandrich, 2007). Further, “voodoo” has also come to name, among the ignorant and uninformed, practices and structures that are deemed inferior and dangerous (see for example the rhetorical history of the phrase “voodoo economics” and related aphorisms in Bartkowski, 1998). In particular, Haitian Vodou (and by extension Louisiana Voodoo) has possibly become one of the most maligned and misunderstood religions in the world As Fandrich writes:

The vilification process began with the Haitian War of Independence (1791-1804) when intense Vodou ceremonies empowered the enslaved African population to overthrow their French slave masters and beat the mighty army of Napoleon Bonaparte, then the most powerful military force in the world... Concomitantly, Vodou, the religion that had empowered the rebellious former slaves to kill and expel their masters, became a despicable evil in the literature throughout the Western Hemisphere, and from the point of view of the slaveholders it was indeed a major threat to their economical basis. Hollywood’s film industry continued this vilification process by producing big-screen pictures promoting gross stereotypes. Consequently, most Americans to this day surmise Voodoo to be a particularly vicious form of witchcraft. Few people know that Vodou is the mystical bona fide popular religion of Haiti and developed under the yoke of slavery as an assertion of resistance. Even fewer people understand that Haitian Vodou and Voodoo in Louisiana are not the same but different, though related, traditions (2007: 779-780).

Unfortunately the vilification of Vodou and its practitioners continues into the present day. For example, when a magnitude 7.0 Earthquake severely damaged Haiti in 2010, Pat Robertson, the well-known Christian televangelist and former Republican Presidential candidate, declared that the quake was God’s punishment because the Haitians made a pact with the devil to be freed from their French colonizers in the 18th century. He stated:

...Something happened a long time ago in Haiti, and people might not want to talk about it. They were under the heel of the French. You know, Napoleon III and whatever. And they got together and swore a pact to the devil. They said, ‘We will serve you if you will get us free from the French.’ True story. And so, the devil said, ‘OK, it’s a deal.’ And they kicked the French out. You know, the Haitians revolted and got themselves free. But ever since, they have been cursed by one thing after the other... That island of Hispaniola is one island. It’s cut down the middle. On the one side is Haiti; on the other side is the Dominican Republic. [The] Dominican Republic is prosperous, healthy, full of resorts, et cetera. Haiti is in desperate poverty. Same island. They need to have and we need to pray for them a great turning to God (James, 2010).

Further, since the earthquake, Christian missionaries from various U.S.-based Protestant and Pentecostal churches have been swarming to Haiti to condemn the Haitian belief system, labeling it a satanic cult and blaming it for the plight of the people (Germain, 2011).

Similarly, journalist David Brooks has said that the Haitian people “suffer from a complex web of progress-resistant cultural influences [such as] the influence of voodoo religion, which spreads the message that life is capricious and planning is futile” and which further implies adherence to the “wrong” religion or, at the very least, one that is harmful to society (Brooks, 2010).

These are serious and uniformed falsehoods about Vodou and as numerous scholars have pointed out, (Brown, 2001; Hagerty 2010; Germain 2011; Ramsey, 2011) the belief system of Vodou is actually quite progressive particularly in how it defies patriarchy by legitimizing forms of gender relations that contradict Western social norms and codes. As (Germain 2011:248) writes:

Indeed, the Mambos (Vodou priestesses) hold a significant amount of power within the community of Vodou practitioners, and for that reason when they address issues of gender inequality during private consultations and communal ceremonies the audience listens and the women seeking help are introduced to different solutions for solving their problems...Moreover, the Vodou pantheons include many male and female deities who also provide men and women with empowering tools to deal with family responsibilities, relationships, work, and personal challenges.

So in spite of these broad cultural misconceptions, what in brief is the theological core of Vodou? As Elizabeth McAlister, a religion expert at Wesleyan University writes:

There is no unified Vodou religion. There's no ‘Vodou Pope’ or central authority, no Voodoo scripture or even a core doctrine... It's a religion that really operates through revelation. So people can receive dreams or visions, and even be possessed by spirits, and that spirit can tell them something, and that's the revelation. And yet, Haitian Voodoo blends many of its rituals and beliefs — which came with the slaves from Africa — with Western Catholicism. For example, Vodou believers worship Le Grand Maitre, or Grand Master, who is the equivalent of the Christian God. They pray to lwa, or spirits, who then intercede with God on their behalf — just as Catholics pray to saints... who guide them through their daily difficulties (Hagerty, 2010).

However those who practice Vodou also operate in ways markedly different from those of mainstream Catholicism. As Brown (2001:6) writes, “God does not get involved in the personal, day-to-day affairs of human beings... Instead it is the spirits and the ancestors... who mediate between the living and God.” And the lwa are not saintly types in the traditional Christian tradition. Brown continues, “They are not models of the well lived life; rather they mirror the full range of possibilities inherent in the particular slice of life over which they preside... Vodou spirits are larger than life but not other than life.” (2001:6)

But again, this study is not an in-depth examination of the historical, symbolic, and theological underpinnings of Vodou. This work rather is a critical examination of the visual play of those who have imitated and symbolically simulated the folkloric appearance of Baron Samedi in contemporary political and popular culture.

Baron Samedi, Lwa of the Dead

Baron Samedi is one of the aforementioned lwa (spirit intermediaries) of Haitian Vodou and Louisiana Voodoo. Born out of the fusion of cultures, he is understood to be one of the supreme characters of Gede¹ (Death). He is the keeper of the dead as well as one of the guardians of the past, of history, and heritage (Jackson, 2010). As such, he is often understood to be the gentler manifestation of death and is often invoked by individuals to intercede on their behalf especially with pleas for longer life.

In paradoxical juxtaposition (and representing the full cycle of life and death), Baron Samedi is also depicted as having a particular fondness for life, and is also considered to be “the lord of gluttony, sexual intercourse, insult, death, and resurrection” (Cosentino, 1987:270). But as Mama Lola (a prominent, contemporary Vodou Priestess) reminds us: In the end, Samedi is believed to be just, refusing to dig a grave if it is not a person's time to die. She states:

He a cemetery man...but that not mean he's bad. He a very good man. He love children a lot. He love women a lot. He's a very sexy man. Sometime he say a bad word, but... he love everybody. He love to help people. When people sick—all kind 'a sickness—that's his job to help (cited in Brown, 2011:330).

In appearance, Baron Samedi is generally considered stylish, often appearing in a top hat, black coat tails, with dark sunglasses, and speaking in nasal tones (Johnson, 2006). This "look" mirrors his trickster personality: "a randy, playful childish and childlike personality... that raises life energy...and redefines even death itself as one worth a good laugh (Brown, 2001:330).

Having such life-giving and life-taking powers makes Samedi a powerful lwa and perhaps the most appealed to of the spirits for the problems of everyday life (Hurbon 1995). Among Vodou practitioners he is recognized most as a healer, which makes the media's historic inaccurate presentation of the lwa confusing and harmful to a broader understanding of the religion – and this is the subject to which we will turn after the following section on theoretical and methodological guides.

Prelude to the Visual Essay: Visual Spectacles and the Creation of Meaning

In this work, we are interested in the aesthetics of meaning regarding the portrayal and performance of Baron Samadi in popular culture. Specifically, we identify mass media images of Samedi that have helped shape popular understandings and misunderstandings of the intersection between ethnicity and the Vodou religion. In the conclusion, we present and make commentary on various ways these images have been used to invoke fear, promote cultural stereotypes, and generate hope in the performance of "playing Samedi." Scholars have long recognized the power of images to craft social relations and societal expectations. Guy Debord's (1983) *Society of the Spectacle*, for example, is an essential starting point to the study of images and social structure. In this seminal work, Debord notes the ways that images can become "spectacles," or "world-visions that are objectified through the mass dissemination of images" (1983:5). Stated differently, the spectacle is a social force through which imagery serves as a tool of socialization and as a vehicle through which meaning and identity is crafted.

While Debord's work was primarily a theoretical and philosophical treatise numerous contemporary works have expanded his initial observations to explore a range of cultural understandings and social actions. For example, Douglas Kellner (2005) and Steuter and Wills (2008) have produced a series of works that examine the spectacle (that is, the production and dissemination) of Orientalist images and their impact on warmongering. In a similar vein, Covington (2010) explored film and media presentations of African Americans and suggested that criminal and violent racial constructions negate realistic understandings of Black identities and social-historical processes. Finally, Marlovitz (2011) combined the thematic intent of each of the aforementioned scholars and produced a work that examined a number of political and racial spectacles that have shaped popular understandings of our social world. He writes:

Spectacles matter materially because they work to shape popular understandings of the social world that can affect how people lead their daily lives... Since they are ever changing and always open to challenge, spectacles present opportunities to contest common sense understandings of powerful institutions and social structures, and they frequently allow for the emergence of critical voices into popular discourse. They are consequently, important sites of struggle for social change (2011:3).

This essay is written with the words of Marlovitz in mind, in that we work to contest popular understandings of Vodou and challenge media spectacles and stereotypes of the religion. Finally, before we address the visual essay, allow us a brief note on methodology: As we are concerned with images of Baron Samedi in political and popular culture, we have surveyed the field of visual mediums (including television, film, and sport) for his representation and likeness. We were limited by what access we could gain to representative visual markers and databases of insight. We began first with the Internet Movie Database (IMDb) searching for the character "Baron Samedi." Following this, we did a systematic image search for Baron Samedi using popular search engines (Google, Yahoo, Bing), news sources (NPR, The New York Times), and academic databases (J-STOR, ARTstor, Sage Premier). We feel confident that we have produced a representative sample of images from which to compare and contrast the spectacle of Samedi. However, the possibility exists that images have escaped our purview and we apologize for any omissions. Please note that all of the images presented here were "copied" from open source Internet sites and "pasted" as data in our paper. Open source sites generally refer to data portals that promote access to the origins of its products (see: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Open_source). While images on open source sites may be bound by copyright, all of the images copied and pasted here are available for public distribution, and to the best of our knowledge, are free of copyright restrictions (see endnotes for further clarification and argument of fair use).²

The Visual Essay

I. Political Samedi: “Papa Doc” Duvalier



Figure 2: Haitian President Francois 'Papa Doc' Duvalier stands at attention during an unidentified ceremony, Haiti. Photo courtesy of biography.com

The Haitian dictator François Duvalier (also known as “Papa Doc”), who ruled from his election in 1957 to his death in 1971, often exploited the image of Baron Samedi to create fear, symbolic legitimacy, and political power. As Cirelli (2011, no page number) writes:

Dressing and acting like Baron Samedi, the Vodou god of the dead. Duvalier used fashion to make implicit what he did not say explicitly: that he was a god, the god, of Haiti – and as such, was entitled not only to unmitigated power, but to absolution, loyalty and even affection.

In appearance, Duvalier became Samedi, deliberately appropriating the symbolism of the Baron – a top hat and long, black coat, with thick glasses and cane. Additionally, he spread rumors of his powerful and personalized Vodou practice, namely his ability to commune with the dead, predict the future, and practice magic (Laguerre 1989). In action, Duvalier also created a powerful secret police, the Tonton Macoutes (a Creole term for Bogeyman or Zombies) to imprison, torture, and kill tens of thousands of his political opponents, both real and perceived. Johnson (2006:438) writes:

This was Duvalier’s public, front-stage persona, even including the nasal voice...Duvalier was one with, was possessed by, Baron Samedi. He incorporated the master of life and death into his own person...Duvalier not only bore the Iwa, he infused Iwa Baron Samedi with his own persona,

As a first hand account of this fully developed persona, please consider the tale of ethnomusicologist Courlander, who recounts meeting the newly “constructed” Duvalier. Having known Duvalier earlier during his days at the Bureau of Ethnology in Haiti, Courlander visited the palace to pay his respects to the new president:

The guard opened the door for him and Courlander blinked in surprise, for the room he entered was pitch dark, draped with black curtains and lit only by black candles. As soon as his eyes adjusted, he moved forward and saw Duvalier staring at him. “How are you, Mr. President?” Courlander inquired, moving forward to shake the proffered hand, then sat in a plain wooden chair placed near Duvalier. It was a macabre scene. Duvalier, in a black woolen suit, sat surrounded by the Macoutes, their dark glasses even more sinister in the pitch-black room. On a long trestle table in front of Duvalier dozens of black candles burned (cited in Abbott 1988: 91–92).

Born in 1907, François Duvalier was eight years old when U.S. Marines arrived to occupy Haiti on July 28 1915. Duvalier’s intellectual formation (and eventual use of Vodou as a political system) was developed, in part, as a reaction to this U.S. occupation. An occupation “that used Vodou—as symbol of Haiti’s backwardness—as justification for its occupation” (Johnson, 2006:427). Indeed, multiple narratives of “voodoo” savagery emerged during this time, generating popular (yet imperialist and stereotypical) media images that entrenched Haitians as savages (see Bishop, 2010 for a detailed analysis of novels and movies produced in this era). Though late to blossom into political activism, Duvalier grew to combat such colonizing and dismissive attitudes toward Haiti and Vodou through the use of similar artistic spectacles: poetry, literature, and ethnographic studies of Vodou itself (Johnson, 1988).

In time Duvalier established a working friendship with many Vodou priests (houngans) and priestesses (mambos) and developed a strong emotional connection to the Haitian peasantry who used Vodou as a form of hope and spiritual empowerment (Johnson, 1988). While this work is not a detailed analysis of his rise to power (see: Abbott, 1998), it is important to summarize that he gained popularity by calling on the masses of the politically disenfranchised and appealed to them through the empowering fashions of Vodou.

Duvalier marshaled and encompassed for himself Vodou’s cachet as a national and indigenous religion expressing resistance within an elitist and neocolonial State, a resistance value strongly developed in the early twentieth century as the “other” to Haitian elites, the Roman Catholic Church, and occupying U.S. Marines. To accomplish this, he created a new, national meaning of Vodou that reinforced and built upon a few selected aspects of Vodou itself. For example, the idea of Vodou as resistance to foreign encroachment could become persuasive not only because of the message’s repeated iteration, or to the objective fact of Haiti’s colonial and neocolonial exploitation, but also because of the worldview of Vodou itself, which invokes a “constant state of alert” to potential spiritual attack or molestation by rivals ... But Duvalier revamped this religious “state of alert” in political terms. He transferred Vodou’s prestige and ethos of the need for defense against foreign intrusions to the State by linking political claims to religious sentiments of vulnerability to destruction by massive unjust forces. In the hands of Duvalier, Vodou came to represent not a religious sub-nation under siege by an antagonistic state, and state-religion (Roman Catholicism), as it in fact was for more than half of the twentieth century but rather the State under siege by an antagonistic world (Johnson 2006: 424).

The irony of this is that while Duvalier initially found and used Vodou as a system of resistance and hope against oppression, he ultimately corrupted it, using its social power to become the oppressor. As Cirelli (2011: no page number) finishes:

Duvalier used the clothing and accoutrements of vodou iconography to mitigate the social backlash against his grab for power, and to align himself – however hypocritically – with the Haitian people. In effecting the persona of Samedi, Duvalier replaced himself as the axis between the two planes of existence – living, and spirit – becoming, in the minds of his constituents, a living god.

The corruption of the religion also extended into taking away the aspect of justness and humanity from the Iwa. For while the Iwa Baron Samedi would not dig a grave for those whose time had not come, Duvalier’s Baron Samedi was capricious in digging his graves for those disobedient to Duvalier. In the end, he took away the benevolence of a caring, life affirming, albeit somewhat flawed, Iwa that empowered the people and replaced it with a repressive god who randomly doled out life and death and exported this vision to the rest of the world through media depictions.

II. Samedi at the Movies: Live and Let Die ... and other Cinematic Depictions



Figure 3: Mr. Big, the main villain from *Live and Let Die*, played by Yaphet Kotto (center).
Figure 4 & 5: Geoffrey Holder as Baron Samedi in the James Bond Film, *Live and Let Die* (left and right). Images courtesy of jamesbondwiki.com

Live and Let Die is a 1973 film set in the fictional James Bond universe and is loosely based on the plot of the 1954 novel penned by Ian Fleming. The story centers on Bond's pursuit of an international criminal, Mr. Big, who has links to various American criminal networks, the world of Haitian Vodou and the Russian secret service, all of which are considered a threat to Western political and capitalist interests. Bond becomes involved through Mr. Big's smuggling of 17th century gold coins from British territories in the Caribbean. As Marshment (1978:335) summarizes:

Mr. Big is the major villain of *Live and Let Die*. He is a black man –a Haitian, with a 'good dose of French blood', and the head of a large criminal organization operating from Harlem, whose villainous exploit is the recovery of pirate treasure (from British colonial waters) to finance operations of the Russian secret service. Although his position as a criminal chief would seem sufficient explanation of his power, it is claimed that this, in fact, derives from his use of Voodoo, according to which he has encouraged the belief that he is the zombie of Baron Samedi, thereby instilling fear and obedience into the whole black population of the US and the Caribbean, since, we are told, 'the fear of Voodoo and the supernatural' is 'still deeply, primevally ingrained in the negro subconscious.'

As a secondary villain in the film, Baron Samedi is perhaps the most enigmatic villain/henchman the cinematic Bond has ever faced. He is the only henchman that is given an occult persona -- and this is emphasized through his use of hoodoo (folk magic) to kill his enemies. His character is an ambiguous one, and the audience cannot tell if he is the Vodou lwa Baron Samedi himself or simply a human who has assumed Samedi's identity. Contributing to the mystery is the fact that Samedi seems to operate as an aide to Mr. Big but is not entirely under his control.

In the film, Samedi is depicted as a fortuneteller, a master of magic, and as a "man who cannot die." In fact, Bond is shown to have killed Samedi (or facsimiles of him) on multiple occasions, only to have him return to confront and menace Bond again and again. In one of the final scenes, Samedi rises from the grave and engages Bond in a machete fight. Bond "kills" him again by pushing him into a coffin full of snakes. But just before the end credits roll, Samedi is seen riding and laughing on outside of Bond's train, suggesting that he either survived falling into the coffin of snakes or that he was not mortal to begin with - that he really is "the man who cannot die."

Indeed, while the cinematic Samedi of *Live and Let Die* is memorable, it is also inaccurate to the general theological and folk interpretations of Vodou and the lwa Samedi. Worse yet, it falls within the Hollywood formulation of Blaxploitation – a symbolic and often inaccurate crafting of what it means to be Black, which has the (intended or unintended) outcome of being exploitative (that is: producing a derogatory image of the Black populace; See, Covington 2010). Marshment (1978:335) writes more critically of the exploitative message of *Live and Let Die*:

By characterizing Voodoo as evil, black people generally are so characterized. Also, not only is Bond's [core] enemy a black man, but one who is assisted (willingly or not) by every black character in the book, and thus poses a potential threat to the hero, so that the moral universe of the fiction is defined clearly in terms of black and white, not just metaphorically, but also concretely through black and white characters.

Coming in the immediate aftermath of black civil rights protests and urban rioting, Blaxploitation films represented Hollywood's first attempt to entertain and attract black audiences politicized by the protests of the 60's. As Sheridan (2006:180-181) writes:

As the decade of the '60s came to a close, with the clamorous sounds of "Black power" replacing those of "we shall overcome," a new, tougher Black figure emerged [Be him hero or villain]. He was a no-nonsense guy who had no intention of trying to ingratiate himself to "Whitey" ... Most White critics, as well as some Black, hated these films for their glorification of violence and the unsavory aspects of inner-city life.

However, rather than accurately depicting the political reawakening that was going on in inner-city ghettos or showing the ongoing problems with racial discrimination that were one source of this new black activism, film makers chose instead to depict black characters as apolitical criminals or vigilantes. One such example is the 1974 film, *Sugar Hill*.



Figure 6: Don Pedro Colley as Baron Samedi in *Sugar Hill* (1974). Image courtesy of unratedmag.com

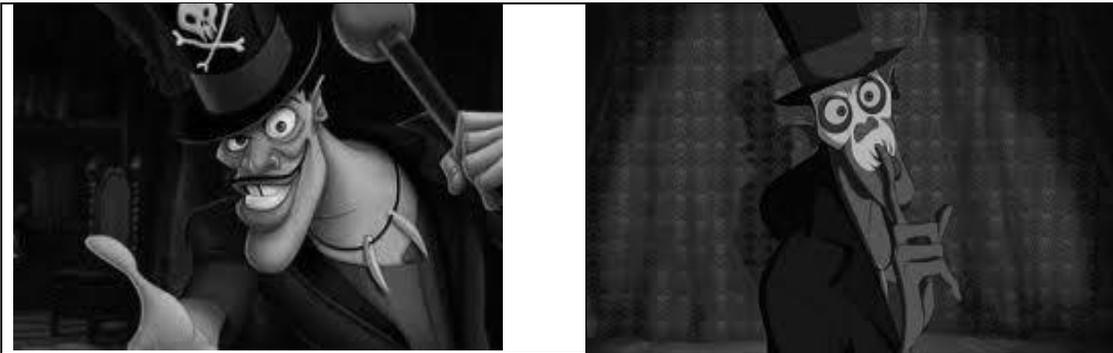
As the official movie summary of *Sugar Hill* from the Internet Movie Data Base (IMDb) states:

When her boyfriend is brutally murdered, after refusing to be shaken down by the local gangsters running their protection racket, Sugar Hill (the lead female character) decides not to get mad, but BAD! Calling upon the help of aged voodoo queen Mama Maitresse, Sugar entreats her to call upon Baron Samedi, the Lord of the Dead, for help in gaining a gruesome revenge. In exchange for her soul, the Dark Master raises up a zombie army to do her bidding. The bad guys who thought they were getting away clean are about to find out that they're DEAD wrong.

Further, as the movie critic Sorensen (2011: no page number) writes:

OK, so most "Blaxploitation" films are revenge plots. In *Sugar Hill* you've got your black neighborhood being encroached upon by corrupt white people who try to control and subjugate the masses with violence and drugs. It seems like the perfect metaphor to have the means to the hero's revenge being the mummified corpses of former slaves.

Essentially the film is a revenge fantasy wherein a black woman via the supernatural and vengeful nature of Baron Samedi “ultimately meets violence with violence and triumph[s] over the corrupt and inept white establishment” (in this case the police) by taking matters into her own hands (Sheridan 2006:181). So, again, Baron Samedi and the Vodou religion are taken out of context, not only exploit a stereotypical image of its followers, but also to characterize it as a religion of malevolence where empowerment comes only through the destruction of white society. While those that meet their end possess few, if any redeeming qualities, it still sends a negative, unrealistic message about Vodou culture to the general population as a religion based on helping people get revenge.



Figures 7 & 8: Dr. Facilier in the *Princess and the Frog* (2009). Images courtesy of animationsource.org

Finally, while not a Blaxploitation film, Disney’s 2009 *The Princess and the Frog* has been critiqued for perpetuating ethnic caricatures and stereotypes (Charania and Simonds 2010). And while there are voices of criticism, the film has also been praised for the depiction of the first Black heroine in a Disney film (as well as multi-ethnic characters) and for starting a conversation about the fluidity of race (Brooks, 2009) Here however we focus less on the controversy of race and more on the film’s depiction of Vodou.

First a summary: Set in New Orleans at the beginning of the 20th century, *The Princess and the Frog* concerns a poor African-American girl named Tiana who dreams of opening her own restaurant. Her best friend, Charlotte, is a privileged white girl whose wealthy father employs Tiana's mother as a dressmaker. When Charlotte’s family hosts a party for Prince Naveen of Maldonia, Dr. Facilier, an expert in black magic (presented as voodoo) turns the visiting royal into a frog and puts a doppelganger in his place hoping the double will marry Charlotte and facilitate access to her wealth. The now amphibious Naveen convinces Tiana that a kiss will reverse the spell, and if she obliges him he'll provide the money she needs to open her dream eatery. However, her kiss not only fails to turn him back into a human, but transforms Tiana into a frog as well. The duo then sets out to find a Vodou priestess who can make them human again.

The movie plays larger with the idea of good magic and bad magic and ultimately defines Vodou as a choice between the evil Facilier and the kindly Vodou priestess. In the film Dr. Facilier appears fashioned after Baron Samedi with his top hat, long tailed coat, and general charismatic appearance (though the connection to Iwa Samedi is never explicitly stated in the movie). However when the Iwas are presented in the film they are depicted as beings of wrath and avarice. As religious commentator, Michelle Maldonado (2009: no page number) writes:

The film perpetuates offensive stereotypes about Voodoo. The Iwas are represented as evil spirits full of greed and anger. The masks [that represent their presence] are vengeful, and end up killing Dr. Facilier when, in inevitable Disney fashion, his evil plan fails. This climax occurs, of course, in a graveyard, reaffirming the film’s association of Voodoo with death... In the end one is presented with an evil religion that will ultimately fail. I did not expect critical race analysis or a sophisticated presentation of Voodoo when I walked into the theater...I did not expect such a blatant, racist, and misinformed presentation of Voodoo, however. The reduction of religion to magic is also reaffirmed in the curious absence of Catholicism in the film... it just doesn’t have anything to do with the authentic African Diaspora religion.

In the end, the cinematic depictions of Samedi and “Samedi-esque” characters are highly inaccurate and disappointing given the traditional, cultural, and theological interpretations of the Iwa. And provided what Sheridan (2006:189) writes, this will probably be the greater reality for some time, as:

Part of the problem could lie in the Hollywood system itself. Hollywood has never been crazy about making message movies—thus, the famous adage from Samuel Goldwyn, “If you want to send a message, use Western Union” ... indeed such characters were made more for the purpose of thrilling than enlightening.

While it is not our expectation that movie studios will ever fully or accurately portray the nuances of Vodou it does appear nonetheless that they insist on portraying the same negative stereotypes over and over. Additionally, even though there has been criticism over the portrayal of Vodou in film, it has not been of the magnitude that accompanies the outrage over perceived slights to other belief systems (i.e., Judaism, Christianity) depicted in film (Reinhartz, 1998; Pawlikowski, 2004; James, 2008). This lack of large scale protest thereby allows producers to turn a blind eye to said criticisms, especially considering the potential profit that such exaggerated and embellished character depictions bring (e.g. *The Princess and the Frog* made \$25 million dollars in its opening weekend (Sperling, 2009) while *Live and Let Die* earned \$847 million in 2012 dollars worldwide, AFP. 2012).

Furthermore as we will show in our next section, this commercialized and profitmaking aspect of the exaggerated misrepresentation of Vodou and Baron Samedi extends beyond Hollywood.

II. Samedi in Sports: Professional Wrestling and Professional Football



Figures 9 & 10: Chris Wright as Papa Shango of the World Wrestling Federation.
Images courtesy of WWE.com

Sport-sociologist D. Stanley Eitzen (2009:42) reminds us that, “symbols of sport are both fair and foul... they bind together the individual members of a group, and they separate one group from another.” Indeed, all sport franchises use symbols to craft a sense of community and create solidarity among its fan base. But there is also a potential dark side to their use. As Eitzen continues, sports symbols “may dismiss, differentiate, demean, and trivialize marginalized groups” in their attempts to create a highly visible and unique visual iconography (2009:42).

In this sense, sport logos (and sometimes sport actors themselves) often reflect commodified identities and perpetuate stereotypical, decontextualized, and ahistorical thinking about race, ethnicity, religion and gender (see: Eitzen and Baca Zinn 1993; King and Springwood 2000; Strong 2004). The result of such symbol making is the creation of a visual culture that leaves the populace “wantonly undereducated and uninformed” about the group being represented (Staurowsky 2004:12). As a case in point, consider Papa Shango, formerly of the World Wrestling Federation (WWF). Papa Shango, “played” by Chris Wright, made his first appearance in the WWF in 1992 as a “voodoo practitioner.”

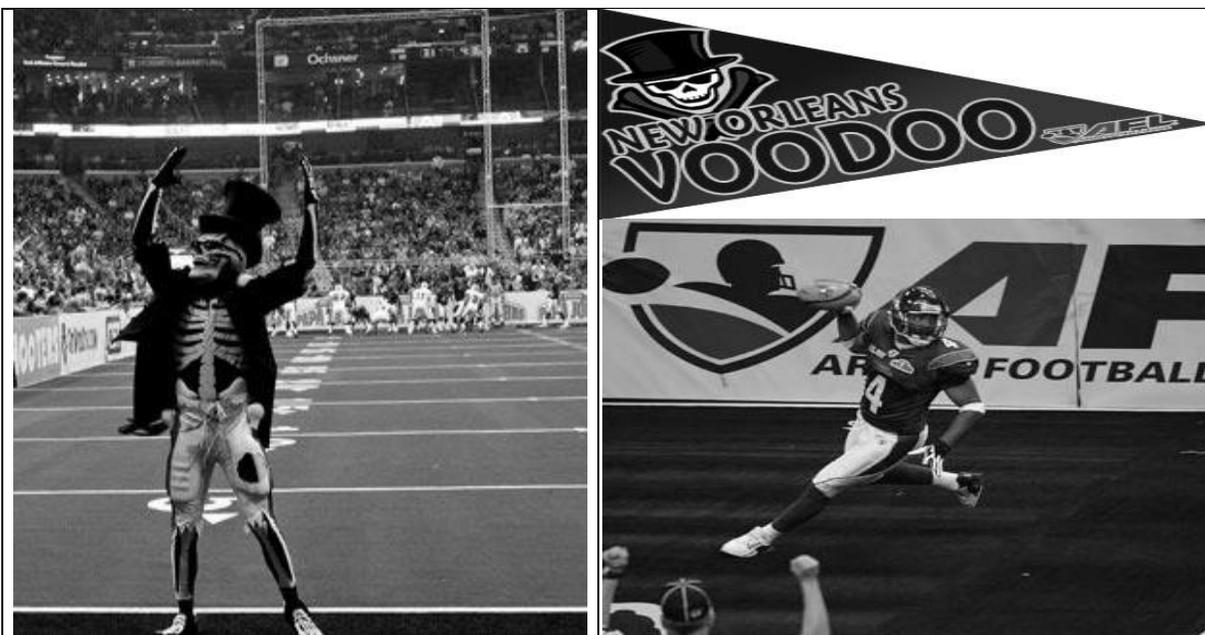
In traditional Yoruba religion in Nigeria—as well as in the syncretized forms of Yoruba religion in the New World such as Santería in Cuba, Espiritismo in Puerto Rico, Candomblé in Brazil, and Vodou in Haiti —Shango is venerated as an Orisha (a spirit or deity) that reflects one of the manifestations of god. His appearance is often eroticized and warlike and he is considered an avenging force of redress as well as a granter of wealth (Lefever 2000).

With an appearance that amalgamates and appropriates the symbolic imagery of the Iwa Baron Samedi and the Orisha Shango, Chris Wight (and the WWF) created a hybrid stereotype. For example, Papa Shango often carried a skull to the ring and could control the arena lights. Later in his career, Papa would begin casting spells on his opponents, causing them pain and even forcing opponents to vomit with more advanced “spells” (Schaefer, 2011). The Papa Shango character lasted in WWF for a little over a year, after which Wright refashioned himself (or was forced to refashion himself at the behest of WWF management) as Kama (a Black militant and Nationalist) and later as The Godfather (a ghetto pimp-like character).

Needless to say, professional wrestling has never been one to promote a progressive or informed conversation about racial, ethnic, and national identities. In fact, it has been argued that Black characters in professional wrestling were often eroticized and caricatured as a way to appeal to white working class fans angry over affirmative action and other race-based policies (Maguire and Wozniak 1987). As one fan stated to a student researcher exploring the topic:

‘The first thing you have to write,’ he told me, ‘is that it’s fake, pure fake.’ He went on to explain that wrestlers must have 2 years of acting lessons; that wrestlers change names, roles, and even nationalities; and that the matches always involve good versus evil and that good usually wins. He also said that there are few Blacks in the WWF and that the few that are involved are not superstars nor will they be in the future. ‘The few Black wrestlers they have,’ he added, ‘are forced to look stupid by kissing feet, not speaking, or by their names, such as Reverend Slick.’ ‘If the WWF wants to maximize profits as you suggest,’ I asked, “why wouldn’t they want to include Blacks and other groups?’ ‘Racism, pure racism. (Communication Studies 298, 2000:539).

When viewed through this racial and ethnic frame, it seems apparent that the character of Papa Shango served principally to reinforce uninformed and derogatory ideas about Vodou and its practitioners. Though the character is now “retired”, he was nonetheless part of a mass media spectacle, where the misappropriation and falsification of Vodou educated millions (Bernthal and Medway 2005) and was crafted primarily for profit and entertainment.



Figures 11, 12 & 13: Bones, the Mascot of the New Orleans VooDoo (Left). Banner and Gameplay (right). Images courtesy of Aflvoodoo.com

The visual symbols of the New Orleans VooDoo, a professional arena football team, are also open to the aforementioned critique, as their mascots and logos, upon initial inspection, promote a superficial understanding of a spiritual practice. Take for example wording from the official New Orleans Tourism Website:

The team was given the name in recognition of the city's reputation as a center for the West African and West Indian practice of Voodoo, introduced here in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Appropriately, the VooDoo's official mascots are known as Bones and Mojo. Their cheerleaders are called the VooDoo Dolls (New Orleans Tourism Bureau, 2012: no page number).

Here, the city's description celebrates the historical roots of Vodou while simultaneously trivializing it with fetishized constructs (for example, the spelling of the team name, association with voodoo dolls, etc.). However, despite this deserved critique, the symbolism of the team (especially Bones, the Samedi-like top hat wearing skeleton) has proven to be a powerful metaphor and rallying point for fans and residents of New Orleans alike. Like Samedi, the team (and city) has crossed the boundary between life and death several times. The New Orleans VooDoo, originally an Arena Football League (AFL) expansion team, played its inaugural game on February 8, 2004. In the first two years of operation, the team proved to be popular with the fans and had attendance and television ratings success. But it was not to last, as the team's first "death" came on August 28, 2005, when it was announced that due to the extensive damage suffered by Hurricane Katrina to the New Orleans Arena, the Voodoo would suspend operations for the 2006 season.

In 2007 the team returned and games served as a temporary respite from the aftermath of Katrina. As *Sports Illustrated* journalist Michael Brick (2011) writes:

The city was lost...the population had stalled, according to the most optimistic count, at 70 percent of what it was before the storm. The murder rate led the country, unless the population figures were wrong. Vacant houses stood waiting for teardown; people were sleeping under the CCC Bridge... But the VooDoo were ascendant. No, better: Transcendent. They were the boys of football-country summer, offseason royalty in a place not unwilling to be charmed...Friday nights at the New Orleans Arena, 16,000 customers would pay \$8 apiece to watch them come crashing through their pyrotechnically armed inflatable mausoleum with their cheerleaders flinging beads at the slightest provocation...[a] football-as-Mardi Gras spectacle...

The VooDoo played to a revived fan base and offered a pleasurable diversion from the post-Katrina landscape. However this phase of the team's existence only lasted only two seasons as the original ownership terminated franchise operations in 2008. According to sport commentators and observers, the community at large felt the loss of the team emotionally as the city continued to struggle with economic and natural disasters (Brick, 2011). Indeed, there is social-scientific evidence to suggest that sport does provide a significant kind of escape from bleak contemporary forms (Giulianott 2005, Eitzen 2009). Invariably the call for this sporting venue was such that in 2011, the team returned once again to New Orleans with a much hyped "resurrection campaign" (Cox 2011). In this campaign, "Samedi-esque" imagery, complete with dancing top-hatted skeletons and open casket imagery, became central to reestablishing a symbolic structure for fans to rally around (aflvoodoo 2011).

Like Baron Samedi, the VooDoo have crossed the boundary between life and death on multiple occasions, and also like Samedi, the VooDoo have served as a symbol of hope and escape in trying times. Thus the paradox and the ambiguity: while the imagery of team is short sighted regarding the presentation of ethnic and religious identity – it is also emancipatory and positive to those who see it as a symbol of recovery and rebirth. As King and Springwood (2000:284) writes:

The struggle over mascots is a struggle over the contours of racial and ethnic identity but what we witness in such struggles is the invention, refashioning, and and even fracturing of identities... The struggle of various social groups to shape identity, culture and history is never monolithic and is always contradictory.

So, while the fate of Baron Samedi in sports mostly revolves around his ability to bring in fans and money for the corporate heads, it also provides someone to cheer for that either looks like you or represents your culture and identity in some way. Granted, there is still an element of violence and purposeful extensions of stereotypes associated with it, but in some ways it could be argued that, particularly in the case of the New Orleans VooDoo, the spirit of Samedi is at least retains more of his original attributes than other media forms have allowed.

Summary and Conclusion

This essay examined select images of persons and groups who have imitated and symbolically simulated the folkloric appearance of the Vodou lwa Baron Samedi. Our purpose with this essay was twofold. First, by offering a chronological presentation of “Samedi-esque” imagery, we presented a record of appearance that preserved said imagery for comparison, analysis, and critique. In particular, we were interested in identifying mass media images of Samedi that have helped shape popular understandings of the intersection between ethnicity and the Vodou religion. Second, we explored the various ways these images have been used to invoke fear, promote cultural stereotypes, and generate hope in the performance of “playing Samedi.”

To this end, three categories of presentation were identified: The playing of Samedi in politics, the depiction of Baron Samedi in film, and those who have imitated him in sport. Regarding politics, we focused exclusively on the former Haitian dictator, François Duvalier, noting how he initially used Vodou as a system of hope and an emancipatory force against colonization and the subjugation of self-rule. Yet we also described how, once gaining power, he reconstructed Vodou into a repressive political tool to legitimize his rule and threaten his enemies both real and perceived. In this fashion, Duvalier became a living stereotype of the perceived evils often associated with Vodou. Moving next to film, we identified a number of movies that portrayed the lwa Samedi (or at least impressions of him) as a wrathful and/or scheming agent. In further critical commentary, the movie depictions craft an unrealistic depiction of Vodou and a biased portrayal of Black ethnicity, akin to what scholars have labeled Blaxploitation in film.

Finally, in the arena of sport, we provide two examples of imitation: one described by us (and others) as racist, and the other as contradictory – both shallow and uplifting. Of the racist image we name the character Papa Shango from professional wrestling. Such was an image of the “savage” appearing crafted by Eurocentric and antagonistic thinking. Certainly this figure did little to dispel racial or religious stereotypes about Vodou and Black identity. Finally of the image that is both superficial yet heartening, we named the logo structure of the New Orleans VooDoo arena football team. The logos and thematic message take inspiration from Baron Samedi and his ability to control the liminal space between life and death. Indeed many residents of New Orleans feel as though they have died and been reborn many times in the advent of Hurricane Katrina, the gulf oil spill, and the broader economic collapse. For fans the “Samedi-esque” imagery provides a totem of resilience that they too can “comeback” from the trials and tribulations of life. Yet such images are also short sighted as they give a superficial and naïve understanding of Voodoo.

Ultimately, this paper was written to contest some of the uninformed understandings of Vodou and challenge media spectacles and stereotypes of the religion. In the end, we find that most presentations of Baron Samedi (and by extension Vodou) are negative and derogatory in nature – even though some local contingents are able to reconstruct these symbols into messages of hope and comfort. It is likely, however, that until the general American media, cultural, and economic structures of representation are challenged, depictions of Vodou and Baron Samedi, will continue to be used as a way to debase those who practice and whom are culturally linked to the spiritual tradition of Vodou.

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End Notes

¹ Ghede (Death) is a complex and multifaceted figure. In some communal and spiritual circles, Baron Samedi is considered to be the full, complete manifestation of death. In other interpretations, he is merely one of many figures that construct or represent the "family of death." Please see Cosentino, 1987 and Brown, 2001 for greater insight into these multiple and varied interpretations.

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