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## Young Haitian-Americans turn to voodoo for cultural and spiritual connection

In southern Florida, scholars and priests say more people in their 20s and 30s are finding the religion

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Ricardo Petit-Homme left Haiti when he was four, and was raised a staunch Catholic.

"From christening to penance and then confirmation, I did it all," the 30-year-old interior decorator said.

But not that long ago, he felt spiritually disconnected. He had dreams that needed to be interpreted, questions about his purpose and a burning desire to connect more deeply with his roots. He turned to voodoo.

"I like that, with voodoo, the spirituality comes from within," Petit-Homme said, as he joined in a voodoo ceremony in North Miami Beach, Florida. "I feel like I'm piecing together a puzzle."

Voodoo, also spelled vodou, is witnessing a resurgence among younger Haitian-Americans. In southern Florida, where the Haitian community is estimated to be close

to 300,000, scholars and voodoo priests say more people in their 20s and 30s are finding the religion.

Voodoo blends African religions with Catholic saints. Followers believe there is one God and deities who manifest to serve different purposes, such as healing and protecting. The religion shares west African roots with Santeria practiced in Cuba, Obeah in Jamaica and Macumba of Brazil. Experts estimate that about 60 million people worldwide practice some form of voodoo.

It is hard to quantify the religion's growth since voodoo is often practiced in one's home, explained Elizabeth McAlister, a professor of religion at Wesleyan University, who has written extensively about voodoo.

But research shows the religion is becoming more prevalent among well-heeled first and second generation Haitians, as well as people of various backgrounds, she said.

Ruby LaCroix, 39, of West Palm Beach, became intrigued by voodoo when she began to study Haiti's history in college. She left Haiti when she was eight years old and had questions about some of the traditions she grew up watching her grandmother practice. "I was looking to find out more about myself, about being Haitian and what that means," she said.

Gone, for most, is the shame that used to be associated with the stigmatised religion. Unlike some of their parents who practiced voodoo in secrecy, the newcomers to the religion invite friends to voodoo ceremonies, have altars in their homes and work to shatter the stereotypes.

Followers say Hollywood gave the religion a bad rap with representations of zombies, spells and dolls. They say those calling on spirits to do harm are practicing sorcery, not voodoo.

"A lot of people think voodoo is devilish. They think it's a doll with spirits but it's not that," said voodoo priest Erol Josue. "Voodoo is a way of life. voodoo is dignity, it's a celebration."

Referred to as a houngan, Josue, 38, does not fit the stereotypical image of a voodoo priest.

He's a musician raised in voodoo, with a MySpace page and a CD called Regleman,

featuring voodoo music to a global beat. His CD was featured on The World's music segment on Public Radio International.

"We're not asking people to convert," he said. "But young people need to know where they came from."

On a recent Saturday, Josue hosted a voodoo cleansing ceremony at his house on a quiet street in North Miami, not far from the Aventura shopping mall. The ceremony, held at the beginning of every year, attracted people from West Palm Beach to Homestead, and lasted eight hours. Participants danced, sang and fell into trances.

Everyone began by dipping their hands in a white enamel basin filled with fragrant leaves, oils and water for good luck and protection.

The gathering of about 25 men and women ranged from teenagers to seniors, and included teachers, college students and artists.

Sherline Fontus, a 31-year-old mother who lives in Fort Lauderdale, said rediscovering the religion has filled her with a sense of freedom. "You feel like you're home."

The ceremony lasted through the night into the early morning, with the participants singing in call and response style, as Josue and others led them through richly textured songs in Creole.

"Ouve barye pou nou," they chanted - "open the gates for us."

Amid the singing and chanting, men drink beer as women hand out small cups of a Haitian soup with spinach, dumplings and meat.

The mood is relaxed, with bouts of intensity as people start to act out the characteristics of an invoked spirit. One woman, feeling moved by the spirit of the seas, sways like the tides of an ocean.

A table against the wall in the living room is filled with offerings for the spirits: eggs for Damballah, the fertile snake god of the waters; roses for Erzulie, the female spirit of love; a machete with a red handkerchief, for the warrior spirit Ogou - and bottles upon bottles of rum.

"Once upon a time everything connected to Africa was shameful, including skin colour and hair texture," said Dr Patrick Bellegarde-Smith, a professor of Africology at the

University of Wisconsin. "But now you have a number of American scholars who are into voodoo."

Jacqueline Manigat, a 28-year-old kindergarten teacher from Miami, was always curious about voodoo. When she was young, her mom had a "secret room" where she communicated with voodoo spirits. At the beginning of the school year, her mom would pray over a white pot of water - calling for the ancestors to guide her children and make their year a success.

Six years ago, Manigat became a voodoo priestess. Now she consults the same spirits for guidance she watched her mother call upon.

"I like that there is tolerance," she said. "No matter who you are in voodoo, you are welcome."

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