

# Religious Racism & Resistance in the Vodou Community:

A Report of the Community Project to Prevent Discrimination  
and Violence Against Black and African Religions

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## I. INTRODUCTION & BACKGROUND

In June 2022, I began participation in the 2022-2023 [Community Project](#) to Prevent Discrimination and Violence Against Black and African Religions, funded by the Henry Luce Foundation. From September through November 2022, I conducted an online survey entitled “Religious Racism & Resistance in the Vodou Community.” I used purposeful sampling to identify potential respondents through word of mouth and shared networks, and once identified, I directly contacted them via email or social media. In addition, supportive community members and I shared the fliers on social media and in email contacts. Fifteen respondents completed the survey, and from among these, I met with four participants for in-depth interviews via Zoom video conference. In December 2022, I conducted an additional Zoom interview with a Vodouyizan member who did not complete the survey, for a total of five interviews and 16 participants overall. Ethical considerations involving the research required a balance of: (a) protecting the confidentiality of participants, (b) compensating them equitably for their time, (c) ensuring that recruitment materials were accessible in various modalities and relevant languages, and (d) maintaining some level of autonomy for a “community project” that was not entirely beholden to academia.

For survey participants, no identifiable information was required, but participants could provide their names and other contact information if they wanted to receive a copy of this final report when it was completed. Participants could also indicate if they wanted to participate in a focus group, for which they would be paid \$50. At the end of the survey collection, in order to garner more candid responses, I gave the option of

completing 1:1 interviews instead, with an additional option to participate in a longer oral histories project. To support a multilingual community, the survey was composed in English with visual cues to support emergent bilingual speakers. In addition, Dr. Marie Lily Cerat, Director of the Haitian Studies Institute at Brooklyn College, provided a Kreyòl translation of the flier. I adhered to the principles of informed consent and received Stanford University IRB approval for all interview protocols used, as those participants opted to participate in a larger project on African traditional religions for which I already had obtained approval. However, the survey was composed and administered outside of the auspices of an institutional review board, which allowed me to have more autonomy over its content and compensation schemes.

### **Participant Survey Demographics**

Collectively, the 16 participants who participated in the study represent a range of ethnicities, genders, ages, and geographic locations within the United States. The following charts and graphs refer to the 15 participants who completed the survey. The vast majority (86.7%) were initiates of a Vodou tradition from Ayiti or Kiskeya, representing the range of traditions on the island shared by Haiti and the Dominican Republic. Non-initiates could include those from Vodou lineages that do not have formal processes of initiation, or active practitioners who are apprenticing and have not yet undergone rights of initiation. In this study, all respondents were treated the same as *sèvitès*, or practitioners of Vodou, whether or not they underwent initiation.

The survey included an open-ended question about where participants were born, and responses ranged from countries of origin to specific cities. Two-thirds of

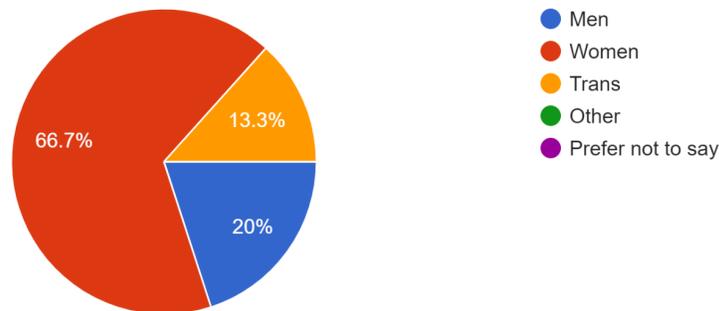
survey respondents (66.6%) were born in the United States, and from among these, four respondents (26.6%) specifically stated that they were born in Miami, Florida. Another 26.6% of respondents were born in Haiti, and one respondent was born in Japan. Participant birth years ranged from 1947 to 1991, with the mode being 1981, representing 26.7%. Accordingly, the eldest respondent was 74-75 yrs old, the youngest respondent was 30-31 yrs old, and the median age was 41 yrs old. The mean, or average, age of respondents was 45.6 yrs with a standard deviation of 11.49.

66.6% of participants (10/15) lived in the Northeast United States, including Massachusetts, New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania. Three respondents lived in the southern states of Georgia and Florida, and two respondents lived in the Midwest and West coast. While zip codes were obtained, in order to protect the confidentiality of participants, they will not be shared in reporting.

Racial and ethnic diversity of respondents varied. Thirteen percent identified as Hispanic or Latina/o/x, and another 13.3% preferred not to answer. When asked how they identified racially, participants entered open-ended responses. Eight respondents (53.3%) identified as Black or a combination of African American and Haitian American. One respondent identified as Ayitian/Afrikan, and one responded as Creole, which could refer to being of Haitian and African descent. If these responses are included, then 10/15, or 66.6% of respondents could be considered 'Black.' Other responses included Dominican and Puerto Rican, mixed, human, and white—the latter of which including the following caveat: “According to the dominant power structure, I am white i.e. mostly of recent European descent. But I know race is a social construct and that the vast majority of my Ancestors - like everyone else on Earth - are Afrikan.”

Descriptions of gender identity (Figure 1) were varied, as well, with the majority of respondents identifying as female or a woman, according to open-ended responses. 73.3% (11/15) entered a variation of cis female, female, female/androgynous, or woman for their gender. Two respondents identified as male, and one identified as a *masisi*, a name in Kreyòl for a same-gender loving man. One participant identified as gender non-conforming. A second question about gender asked participants to self-select the gender categories that they preferred to be associated with for this study, and 66.7% (10/15) identified as women, 13.3% (2/11) identified as trans, and 20% (3/11) identified as men. The female/androgynous and gender non-conforming respondents appear to have identified as trans for this question.

For the purpose of this study, what gender groups would you like us to include you in?  
15 responses

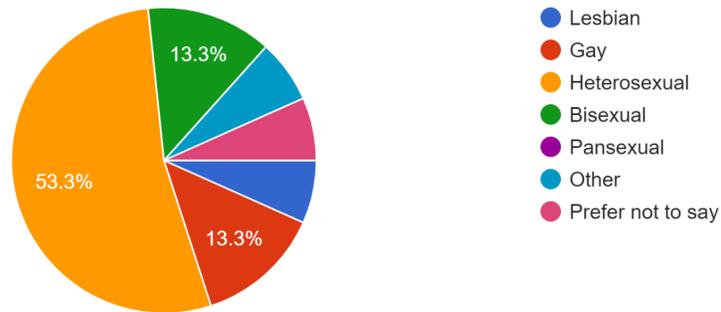


**Figure 1.** Gender Identity of Respondents.

When asked about sexual orientation (Figure 2), about half of participants (53.3%) identified as heterosexual, and about half were members of the LGBTQIA community. Two respondents identified as bisexual, and two respondents identified as gay. One participant each identified as lesbian and other, and one preferred not to say.

What is your sexual orientation?

15 responses



**Figure 2.** Sexual Orientation of Respondents.

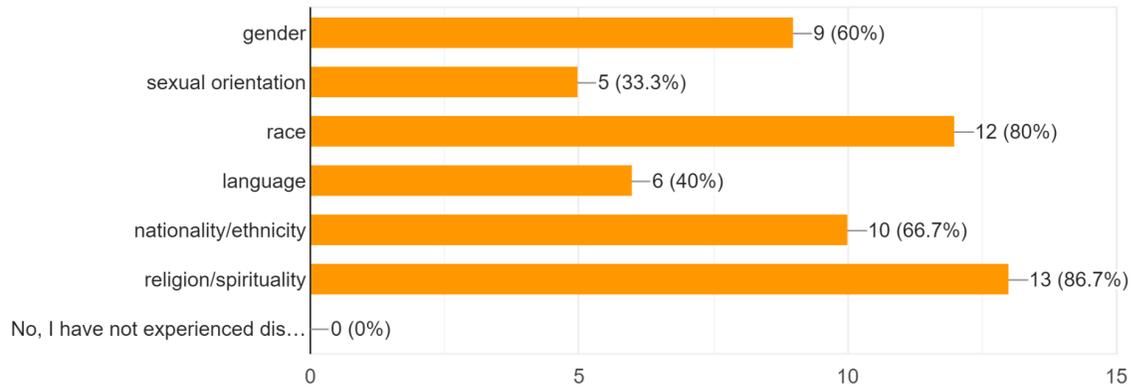
## II. DISCRIMINATION

All participants had experienced discrimination of some sort (Figure 3), with the majority experiencing discrimination because of religion or spirituality (86.7%) and race (80%). Two-thirds of respondents (66.7%) experienced discrimination because of their nationality or ethnicity. Forty percent of participants experienced linguistic discrimination. Three-fifths of participants experienced gender discrimination, and one-third cited

discrimination based on their sexual orientation.

Have you experienced discrimination because of any of the following? Check all that apply.

15 responses



**Figure 3.** Types of Discrimination Experienced by Respondents.

Figure 4 shows that nearly all respondents (93.3%) experienced racial discrimination at work, and two-thirds (66.7%) experienced racial discrimination in a college or university setting. Slightly more than half (53.3%) experienced racial discrimination in a K-12 school setting. Based on qualitative interviews, I learned that some respondents also teach in college or university settings, so the percentage experiencing racism at work includes school settings, as well. In short, the second and third most racially discriminatory places in the lives of Vodouyizan are school settings. As revealed in how participants identified racially on the survey, race is interpreted in a myriad of ways, including what some may refer to as ethnicity and nationality. As a result, racial discrimination has also referred to ethnicity, specifically Haitian ethnicity and Vodou as a specific spiritual expression from Haiti.

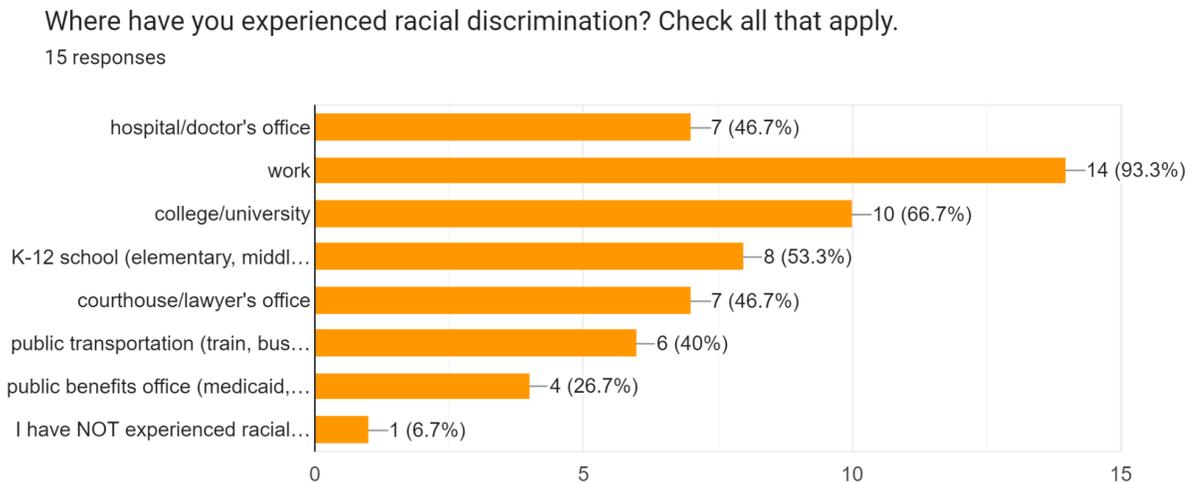
A few participants shared that they experienced discrimination as Vodouyizan by other Black people and by other practitioners of African diasporic religious communities. For example, one participant, who chose to complete the survey orally with me, noted the following:

There was a court case in 1994 about religious sacrifice. [*Interviewer: In Hialeah, Florida? The Church of Lucumi?*] Yes, that one. Well, these reporters were doing interviews with middle aged Cuban women in Little Havana who said, 'We have religion; we don't do Vodou.' You know, separating themselves from the Black Haitians.

The respondent referenced the historic 1993 court case *Church of the Lukumi Babalu Aye, Inc. v. Hialeah*, 508 U.S. 520, in which the Supreme Court of the United States held that laws against animal sacrifice targeting specific religions violated the Free Exercise clause of the Constitution. In this case, ethno-racial discrimination surfaced in discourses about religious freedom for African diasporic traditions. Another participant, who lives in an Episcopalian-affiliated retirement home, also cited ethno-racial discrimination from African Americans:

The worst grief I get is from the Black women here, African American ladies. I thought they would be a little more forthcoming, but they are all about Jesus, a white one. The Black staff are scared when they come to my apartment to clean because I have several African masks and Haitian paintings on the wall. One woman told me that she was scared to walk down the hall because all the paintings were Satanic, and she was visibly shaking.

Respondent experiences highlight the complexity of racial categorization, particularly across languages and cultures, and they also illustrate the importance of applying an intersectional lens to analyze the multiple marginalizations of race and religion in their lives.

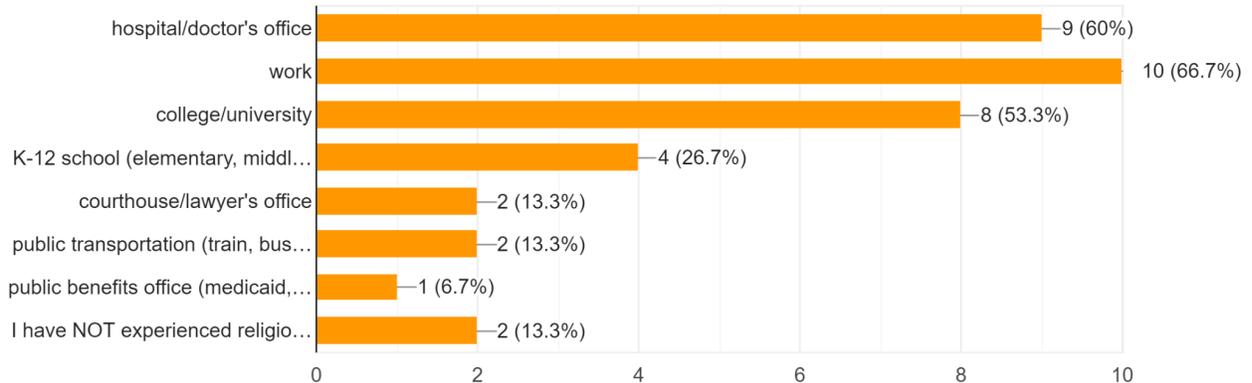


**Figure 4.** Locations Where Respondents Experienced Racial Discrimination.

With perceptions of religious discrimination (Figure 5), work remained in first place with 66.7 percent; however, the hospital or doctor's office emerges in second place with 60% of respondents experiencing religious discrimination there. In an interview, one participant offered insights, stating, "I was at a Catholic hospital. Everytime they ask your religion, I say, 'Vodou,' and they refuse to put it. They say there is no room to do it, and when I insist that they put it, they keep changing it, everytime." Slightly more than half of respondents (53.3%) experienced religious discrimination in a college or university setting. One participant, who is a university professor, shared, "An lyalosha once invited me to speak at a Roman Catholic university, and she told me that

I couldn't mention Vodou. The nuns would be more accepting to listen to a lecture about homosexuality, but not Vodou.”

Where have you experienced religious discrimination as a Vodouyizan? Check all that apply.  
15 responses



**Figure 5.** Locations Where Respondents Experienced Religious Discrimination.

Both explicitly and implicitly, participants cited racism as a root cause for their experiences of religious discrimination. They also referenced the economic structure of capitalism in identifying wealth being needed to access power. Among participants who did not have support in fighting religious discrimination, examples of unsupportive organizations and actions include silencing, ridicule, and ostracization. One respondent shared the following:

If you talk about Vodou, you are not going to get any help from any of the Black organizations. A Black leader told me in the 80s to not mention the word Vodou because you will lose all credibility. In giving a talk about African spirituality, I was told that the word Vodou should not pass my lips... There was an Orisha community here, and they were ridiculed for wearing African clothing, and most

of them have left. There are about 20 Haitians in my city, who meet once a month, but they have never invited me. They know I exist, but the Vodou thing and gay thing are out of bounds for them. They will not approach me.

### **III. ANALYSIS & SOLUTIONS**

The survey also included the following two short answer questions:

1. What do you do to fight against religious discrimination as a Vodouyizan?
2. What people or organizations have helped you to fight religious discrimination? What did they do that was helpful?

For both questions, there was a range of responses, and I coded them for common themes.

#### **Methods of Fighting Religious Discrimination**

Survey participants had seven responses to fighting against religious discrimination: educate, disengage, practice openly, build relationships, model good character, acquire wealth, and protest. Seventy-three percent of respondents (11/15) cited education as a means to fight against religious discrimination. The forms of education included one on one conversations, community education programs, college courses, and religious apprenticeship of those within the Vodouyizan community. Education was often coupled with practicing openly, which one third of respondents (5/15) cited as means of addressing religious discrimination:

**Strategy: Educate & Practice Openly**

“Practice openly and educate others”

“I work to educate people in my line of work to dispel myths. As an academic, I use my platform to give presentations and produce writing. I also integrate information on ADRs in the courses that I teach. I live my faith wherever I go and do not hide it. The lwa have blessed me because of it.”

“I live my life uncensored- I educate by sharing stories of my ancestors.”

Twenty percent of respondents (3/15) cited building relationships, along with education or practicing openly, as a means of addressing religious discrimination.

**Strategy: Building Relationships**

“I’m an educator and believe that trying to dispel religious racism can begin in the classroom and also beyond the classroom with meaningful friendships/relationships with people of different faith traditions.”

“As a person of mostly recent European descent who has been adopted by the lwa, in addition to being an antiracist educator of other ‘white’ people, I also try to highlight the rich heritage of Vodou - particularly the unique & outstanding role (relative to \*all\* other religions) Vodou has played in ending chattel slavery and colonization. When

relevant, I share with white friends experiencing depression/anxiety/etc how practicing Vodou has helped me heal from those problems and is helping me heal & deepend my relationship to my Ancestors.”

“I [would] try to engage person in conversation if 1:1. Otherwise, I seek to find allies in those instances.”

Not everyone chose to educate or otherwise engage with the public to dispel myths about Vodou. Another 20% of respondents (3/15) expressed that they disengaged from addressing religious discrimination, with one stating, “I don’t. It is far too risky to utilize my identity and my family as a public means to address religious discrimination.” Fear of public admonishment or rejection was also mentioned by another respondent who shared, “I am [sic] don’t because I know they will think I will put spells on them.” A third respondent shared that they simply “ignore it.”

The other responses to religious discrimination, modeling good character, acquiring wealth, and protesting, were each mentioned once. One respondent noted, “I do my best to show good character and show that Vodou produces empowerment, respect and honor for oneself and others.” Modeling good character and acquiring wealth seem to be aligned with an overall theme of personal empowerment or advancement to counter religious discrimination, as one respondent expressed that they, “continue to grow in my profession, teach people who are chosen and try to make more money bc money is power in this world.” While all responses to religious discrimination consisted of disrupting dominant narratives in some way, the final method of protesting seemed to have the primary goal of personal defense rather than changing

opinions. A respondent explained, “I protest that they should know better...People see me as White and Jewish always. I wear my T-shirts that have become my billboard: Black Lives Matter; Part White, But I can’t Prove It.”

### **Helpful People and Organizations to Fight Against Religious Discrimination**

Respondents found support in fighting against religious discrimination from academic organizations (KOSANBA, African and Diasporic Religious Studies Association [ADRSA], Daughters of the African Atlantic, and the Haitian Studies Institute); mentors/elders; family; friends/community groups; and other African diasporic religion devotees. The forms of support provided include personal encouragement, research support, opportunities for collaboration, modeling of research on African diasporic religions, and a public platform to disseminate research. Four respondents stated that no one or no organizations have supported them.

<b>Support: Academic Organizations</b>
“Kosanba, ADRSA, Mentors, Elders, Ancestors”
“Daughters of the African Atlantic, KOSANBA, ADRSA are three organizations that have supported my research and provided a space for other scholar-practitioners to gather and collaborate. Because of their visibility, they encourage other junior scholars to pursue work in this area. The Haitian Studies Institute has been helpful in providing a platform to discuss my work.”

### **Support: Mentors & Elders**

“None [sic] Haitians, especially white people and Jews. They took the time to teach me about my spirituality and encouraged me to go back to Haiti and learn my roots, tradition. They helped me fight discrimination by getting my spiritual centre registered in Haiti and they support my activities. Be unapologetic about their practice”

### **Support: Family & Friends**

“My family and friends helped by being supportive.”

“As individuals, my spiritual parents, natural parents, friends, and family have been supportive of my faith and advocacy--even when they did not fully understand it. They saw my character and dedication over time, and this has allowed them to learn more.”

### **Support: African Diasporic Religion Devotees**

“Fellow devotees of Africana religions traditions always offer support and tactics for how to deal with religious discrimination.”

“Sosyete Nago - giving Vodou more exposure on social media...Also adding here because I don't know where else to fit it: being a Vodouyizan has also helped me form quick & beneficial connections with 'strangers' who are also Vodouyizan in various settings.”

In summary, participants experienced the most religious discrimination in schools and hospitals. Additionally, most respondents cited education and building relationships as a primary means of successfully fighting religious discrimination. Accordingly, they also found academic organizations and mentors to be most helpful in modeling how to practice their faith openly and in publicizing research and programming about Vodou. Respondents stating that they did not have community support also provided the most detailed accounts of harassment and ostracization, highlighting that both professional collaboration and informal community are effective in buffering against religious racism. Findings suggest that future research investigate religious discrimination in educational institutions and hospitals. Next, providing more funding to the specific academic organizations cited by respondents can help to expand their impact and disseminate accurate information and positive images about Vodou.

## Appendix A: English Version of Flyer



# Religious Racism & Resistance in the Vodou Community

Two ways to get involved!  
Have your voices heard!

## About The Project

You are invited by Manbo Dr. Kahdeidra Monét Martin to participate in a community project to investigate religious racism experienced by the Vodou community in the United States. This work is part of a larger Community Project To Prevent Discrimination And Violence Against Black And African Religions.

**Complete the survey here:**  
<https://forms.gle/NfkgxMqPmBEKFoX48>

**Deadline: Sept 1, 2022**

**For More Info**  
[kamartin@stanford.edu](mailto:kamartin@stanford.edu)  
[www.kahdeidramartin/research-projects](http://www.kahdeidramartin/research-projects)

### 1. Complete a Brief Survey

- Only 10 min or less!
- 4 multiple choice + 2 short answers • • •
- 100% anonymous • • •

### 2. Complete a Group Interview

- 45 min - 1 hr total
- Groups of 6 (You + 5 friends )
- Held online via Zoom
- Receive \$50 each

## Appendix B: Kreyòl Version of Flyer



# Rayisman kont relijyon moun nwa & Rezistans nan Kominote Vodou

De fason pou nou patisipe! !

Fè tande vwa nou!

## 1. Pou plis enfòmasyon

- 10 minit senpman ou mwens!
- 4 kesyon ak repons yo + 2 kesyon ki mande repons
- Garanti 100% pyès moun pa p konnen kiyès ou ye

## 2. Fè yon entèvyou an gwoup

- 45 minit - 1 èdtan antou
- Gwoup 6 moun (ou menm + 5 zanmi )
- Entèvyou yo ap fèt nan Zoom
- N ap bay chak moun \$50

### Pwojè a

Manbo Dr. Kahdeidra Monét Martin envite nou vin patisipe nan yon pwojè rechèch kominotè sou rayisman kont relijyon moun nwa ki se sèvitè vodou nan kominote a ap sibi nan peyi Etazini. Travay sa a fè pati on pi gwo travay kominotè k ap fèt pou kwape diskriminasyon ak vyolans kont Relijyon moun nwa ak relijyon afriken.

**Klike sou lyen sa a pou ou reponn kesyon ki nan sondaj la:**

<https://forms.gle/NfkgxMqPmBEKFoX48>

**Dat limit: Oct 1, 2022**

**Pou plis enfòmasyon**  
kamartin@stanford.edu  
[www.kahdeidramartin/research-projects](http://www.kahdeidramartin/research-projects)

## Appendix C: Survey Items

**DESCRIPTION:** You are invited by Manbo Dr. Kahdeidra Monét Martin to participate in a community project to investigate religious racism experienced by the Vodou community in the United States. This work is part of a larger [Community Project To Prevent Discrimination And Violence Against Black And African Religions](#). You can learn more about Dr. Martin's research, writing, and community activism at [www.kahdeidramartin.com](http://www.kahdeidramartin.com).

You will be asked to complete a brief, confidential survey about your experience. The survey has multiple-choice and open ended/write-in questions. If you want to receive an email with the survey results, you can leave your email address. In addition, if you want to participate in a paid group interview, you can leave your name, phone number, and email address for follow-up.

**TIME INVOLVEMENT:** This survey will take approximately 10 minutes to complete.

**The first set of questions are about your experiences as a Vodouyizan.**

1. Are you initiated into a Vodou tradition from Ayiti or Kiskeya?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
  
2. Have you experienced discrimination because of any of the following? Check all that apply.
  - a. gender
  - b. sexual orientation
  - c. race
  - d. nationality/ethnicity
  - e. language
  - f. religion/spirituality
  - g. No, I have not experienced discrimination
  
3. Where have you experienced **racial** discrimination? Check all that apply.
  - a. hospital/doctor's office
  - b. work
  - c. college/university
  - d. K-12 school
  - e. court/lawyer's office
  - f. public transportation
  - g. public benefits office (medicaid, food stamps, SNAP, etc.)
  - h. I have not experienced **racial** discrimination
  
4. Where have you experienced **religious** discrimination? Check all that apply.
  - a. hospital/doctor's office
  - b. work
  - c. college/university
  - d. K-12 school

- e. court/lawyer's office
- f. public transportation
- g. public benefits office (medicaid, food stamps, SNAP, etc.)
- h. I have not experienced **religious** discrimination

5. What do you do to fight against religious discrimination as a Vodouyizan?

6. What people or organizations have helped you to fight religious discrimination? What did they do that was helpful?

**The next set of questions will help us to learn more about your individual background. To help protect your identity, any information shared here will only be reported as a group.**

7. What is your 5 digit zip code (ex: 11225)?

- a. Short Answer

8. Where were you born?

- a. Short Answer

9. What year were you born?

- a. Short Answer

10. Are you Hispanic or Latino/a/x?

- a. Yes
- b. No
- c. Prefer not to say

11. How do you identify racially?

- a. Write in response:

12. How do you describe your gender identity?

- a. Write in response:

13. For the purpose of this study, what gender groups would you like us to include you in?

- a. Men
- b. Women
- c. Trans
- d. Other
- e. Prefer not to say

14. What is your sexual orientation?

- a. Lesbian
- b. Gay
- c. Heterosexual
- d. Bisexual
- e. Pansexual
- f. Other
- g. Prefer not to say

15. Would you like to participate in a group interview about religious racism and the Vodouyan community? If so, please leave your name, email address, and phone number below. All participants will receive a \$25 gift certificate to Amazon.

- a. Paragraph

16. Would you like to receive a copy of the final report from the survey and group interviews? If so, please leave your email address below:

- a. Short Answer