

The Voodoo Cult of Detroit: Race, Human Sacrifice, and the Nation of Islam from the 1930s to the 1970s

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In the 1930s, two African American Muslims committed shocking crimes that led newspapers across the country to declare that the Allah Temple of Islam (the precursor to the Nation of Islam) was a “voodoo cult” and its members were practicing human sacrifice. These allegations resurfaced multiple times in the media and scholarly literature over the next forty years, damaging the Nation’s reputation during the height of their popularity. This article is the first attempt to analyze these sensationalized depictions of the origins of the Nation of Islam within the context of contemporaneous understandings of “voodooism” and the racialized rhetoric of human sacrifice.

Keywords: voodoo, voodooism, Allah Temple of Islam, Nation of Islam, Wallace Fard, Haiti

Introduction

In 1932, in Detroit, Michigan, an African American Muslim named Robert Harris killed his tenant on an altar in his home, as a purported human sacrifice to Allah. In the weeks that followed, as Harris was prosecuted for murder and ultimately sent to an insane asylum, newspapers across the country declared that Detroit was home to a “voodoo cult,” and that black Muslims in the city offered human sacrifices to their “gods.” According to the media, Detroit police asked the Nation of Islam’s founder, Wallace Fard, to leave the city due to suspicions that he encouraged Harris’s actions. Elijah Muhammad, who assumed leadership after Fard’s mysterious departure, changed the name of their organization and moved their headquarters to Chicago, partially to escape these accusations.

Although Fard had already left the city, the Nation of Islam was also blamed for a subsequent attempted sacrifice in 1937, when another African American Muslim, Vernon McQueen, was arrested for preparing to boil his wife and daughter alive. While neither supposed sacrifice could be clearly linked to the teachings of the Nation of Islam nor even to prominent members, these allegations would have a long-lasting and far-reaching impact on public perceptions of this black Islamic organization. Over the next forty years, the media, the police, and even scholars would recount these alleged sinister origins of the Nation of Islam, when their mysterious leader, Wallace Fard, purportedly encouraged the practice of human sacrifice and served as the high priest of a “voodoo cult.”

This article will contextualize these depictions of the Nation of Islam within early twentieth-century narratives about race, religion, and “civilization,” with an emphasis on the significance of the subtle connections the media drew between Haitians and black American Muslims by glossing the latter’s faith as “voodoo.” By this time, European travelers and emissaries had enthralled the American public with their allegations that cannibalism, human sacrifice, and snake worship characterized religious practices in the independent black nation of Haiti. These depictions of Haitian “voodooism” spurred reflections on the intellectual and social capabilities of other persons of African descent because Haiti had become a yardstick for the potential of

independent black societies. The Harris murder occurred during the final years of the U.S. Occupation of Haiti (1915–1934), during the height of North American fascination with “voodooism.” Therefore, this public labeling of black Muslims in the United States as members of a “voodoo cult” must be understood within the context of dialogues about race and political participation, U.S. imperialism in the Caribbean, and the purported prevalence of ritualized human sacrifice among practitioners of African diaspora religions.

This article contributes to the growing literature reflecting on the centrality of negative imagery about “voodooism,” superstition, and human sacrifice in opposition to the political independence and empowerment of persons of African descent in the Americas. For example, Kate Ramsey’s book *The Spirits and the Law: Vodou and Power in Haiti* (2011) examines a series of campaigns to suppress spiritual practices in the independent black nation of Haiti.¹ Most significantly for this article, Ramsey explores how the U.S. military forces manipulated rarely-enforced Haitian laws against “sorcery” to solidify and morally defend their occupation of the country.² Similarly, Reinaldo Roman has argued that in early twentieth-century Cuba, anthropologists, criminologists, journalists, police officers, and other members of the legal system collectively invented a hysteria about “brujeria,” a fictional notion that persons of African descent were prone to kidnapping and murdering white children to use their body parts to practice “witchcraft,” to create an “atmosphere that made the repression of Afro-Cubans appear both sensible and necessary.”³ He places this hysteria, which began two years after the end of the U.S. occupation (1898–1902), in the context of struggles over race and political participation on this newly independent Caribbean island.

Based on these well-founded observations of the significance of claims about African-derived human sacrifice in a racially diverse Cuba and predominantly black Haiti, I argue that these narratives of “voodooism” and ritual murder in the Nation of Islam would have redirected the public’s concerns about such practices toward African American populations within the United States. While the U.S. media and authorities had often accused African Americans of retaining “superstitious” beliefs and practices related to the use of charms and medico-religious healing, Robert Harris’s sacrificial murder in 1932 would be the first time that blacks in the United States were suspected of belonging to a religious organization centered on human sacrifice. As stamping out “voodooism” and ritual sacrifice had been one of the justifications for U.S. imperialism in the Caribbean, Detroit police would have been under tremendous pressure to swiftly disband their own “voodoo cult” or risk undermining the notion that the United States was capable of exerting a “civilizing” influence through its occupation of more racially diverse countries.

A Brief History of the Term “Voodoo”

By the time the Detroit police and the media began referring to black Muslims as members of a “voodoo cult,” the phrase had been a part of the vocabulary of the United States for approximately one hundred years. At least as early as the eighteenth century, the French

¹ Kate Ramsey, *The Spirits and the Law: Vodou and Power in Haiti* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 2.

² *Ibid.*, 118–176.

³ Reinaldo L. Román, *Governing Spirits: Religion, Miracles, and Spectacles in Cuba and Puerto Rico, 1898–1956* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 82–106.

began utilizing the word “voodoo” to refer to African spiritual practices in their Caribbean colonies.⁴ By the 1840s, English-language presses in the United States sporadically published stories regarding Haitian “voodoo,” employing the French spelling. These mid-nineteenth-century articles referenced Haitian Presidents Jean Louis Pierrot and Faustin Soulouque, who were described as chiefs of the “voodoo,” which reporters explained was a “superstition” from Africa that involved the worship of “fetishes.”⁵

The Anglicized version of this term, “voodoo,” began to emerge shortly thereafter in English-language presses in Louisiana. In 1850, a New Orleans newspaper, the *Times Picayune*, published a series of articles describing the arrest of “voodoo” practitioners on various charges including holding unlawful ceremonies and disorderly conduct.⁶ Articles about New Orleans “voodoo” became particularly common after the Union forces captured New Orleans and as the United States moved toward the abolition of slavery. Reporters argued that “voodoo” practices in New Orleans were evidence of the “superstitions” and “barbarism” that blacks would resort to once they had been “freed from all constraint.”⁷ During Reconstruction, newspapers across the country began to refer to African Americans’ unorthodox medical treatments, beliefs about spirits and conjuring, and related practices as “voodoo,” lamenting that this “race of pagans” was now exercising the right to vote and hold public office.⁸ As reporters applied this term to beliefs and practices outside New Orleans, they increasingly employed the spelling “voodoo” rather than “voodoo.”⁹

From the 1840s to the 1860s, reports of “voodoo” in Haiti and “voodoo” or “voodoo” in the United States largely appear to have been distinguished in the media. Newspapers not only used different spellings but accounts of practices in one region did not reference those in the other. However, starting in the late 1870s, references to “voodoo” in Haiti abandoned the spelling “voodoo,” and reporters permanently adopted the Anglicized “voodoo.”¹⁰ Around this time, partially influenced by Sir Spenser St. John’s infamous book, *Hayti; or the Black Republic* (1884), journalists also increasingly began to argue that cannibalism, human sacrifice, and devil worship characterized Haitian “voodoo” and would likewise permeate African American communities in the United States if white Americans did not step in to provide a “civilizing”

⁴ Mederic-Louis-Elie Moreau de Saint Méry, *A Civilization that Perished: The Last Years of White Colonial Rule in Haiti*, trans. Ivor D. Spencer (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1985), 15. First published in 1797 by the author.

⁵ “From Cape Hayten. Correspondence of the Philadelphia Exchange,” *Southern Patriot* (Charleston, South Carolina), April 27, 1846; “Things in Hayti- The Emperor Soulouque- The Negro Religion- Voodoo and its Peculiarities- The Burlesque Empire, & c.,” *New York Herald*, April 3, 1858; “The Empire of Haiti,” *New York Times*, Feb. 14, 1859; “Paganism,” *Albany Evening Journal* (Albany, New York), March 19, 1859 “Paganism,” *Columbian Register* (New Haven, Connecticut), April 2, 1859.

⁶ “City Intelligence,” *Times-Picayune*, July 6, 1850; “City Intelligence,” *Times-Picayune*, July 7, 1850; “More Of The Voodoo,” *Times-Picayune*, July 30, 1850.

⁷ “Dark Deeds: A Graveyard Violated,” *Times-Picayune*, May 1, 1864.

⁸ “The Black Cloud In The South,” *Crisis* (Columbus, Ohio), July 31, 1867; “The Failure of Southern Colonization,” *Daily Picayune* (New Orleans), Feb. 13, 1868.

⁹ For example, see “A Few Nuts for Democrats to Crack,” *Logansport Journal*, Oct. 6, 1880; John Fisher, “Georgia,” *Coshocton Democrat*, March 8, 1870.

¹⁰ “The St. Domingo Annexation,” *Crisis* (Columbus, Ohio), Jan. 19, 1870; “Political,” *Columbian Register* (New Haven, Connecticut), Feb. 5, 1870; “The St. Domingo Commission,” *New York Herald*, March 31, 1871.

influence.¹¹ These narratives intensified in the early twentieth century, leading up to and during the U.S. occupation of Haiti from 1915 to 1934.

Similarly, during the first U.S. occupation of Cuba (1898–1902), the media began to report that “voodooism” and “fetishism” had yet to be eliminated among blacks on the island.¹² These articles became particularly common after eleven Cubans of African descent were charged with the (presumed sacrificial) murder of a child named Zoila in 1904. For example, a special Sunday supplement to *The News Magazine* published in Galveston, Texas, was entitled “Voodooism in the West Indies: Negroes in Cuba and Haiti Condemned to Death for Sacrificing Infants in their Horrid Devil Worship.”¹³ The author asserted that the case of Zoila had brought to light that cannibalism was still practiced in remote areas of the island. Over the next twenty years, the U.S. media made similar claims about the pervasiveness of “voodooism” and human sacrifice in Cuba as it did in Haiti. The authors of most of these articles stressed the purported necessity of American intervention to eradicate these practices.¹⁴

As reporters increasingly linked human sacrifice and “voodoo” in Haiti and Cuba, their descriptions of “voodoo” practices within the U.S. took on a somewhat similar character. By the 1920s and 1930s, in addition to being a descriptor for various kinds of “superstitions” held in black communities, journalists also began to employ the term “voodoo” to report any particularly brutal murder committed by an African American. Newspapers used titles like “Nurse Slain by Voodoo Doctor,” and “Voodoo Doctor Admits Slaying; No Victim Found,” to sensationalize accounts of crime in black communities and subtly link them to reports of the alleged savagery in Haiti and Cuba.¹⁵

At times, there was a vague connection between the alleged murder and some form of spiritual rituals. For example, in 1923, Alonzo Savage was convicted of killing Elsie Barthel in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania after Barthel asked Savage to create a love charm for her but then refused to pay him. Likely because of the purported request for a love charm, the media referred to Savage as a “negro voodoo doctor.”¹⁶ In many cases; however, the link to longstanding stereotypes of “voodooism” was more tenuous. For example, in 1928, police discovered a headless body in Cleveland, Ohio.¹⁷ As the police struggled to determine the identity of the victim and whether the African American who confessed to the crime was actually the murderer,

¹¹ “Nagualism, Voodooism, and Other Forms of Cryptopaganism in the United States,” *The Catholic World: A Monthly Magazine of General Literature and Science* 25 (1877); “Negro Rule in Haiti,” *Aiken Journal*, July 15, 1885; “A Southern View of It,” *Newark Daily Advocate*, April 23, 1892.

¹² For example, see “Fetish Worship in Cuba,” *Daily Advocate*, Nov. 10, 1899.

¹³ “Voodooism in the West Indies: Negroes in Cuba and Haiti Condemned to Death for Sacrificing Infants in their Horrid Devil Worship,” *News Magazine* (Galveston, Texas), May 7, 1905.

¹⁴ For example, see “Cuban Child Butchered By Voodooists,” *Galveston Daily News* (Galveston, Texas), December 28, 1913; “Trying to Stop the ‘Voodoo’ Human Sacrifices in Cuba,” *Lima Daily News* (Lima, Ohio), Jan. 18, 1914.

¹⁵ “Nurse Slain by Voodoo Doctor,” *Wisconsin Rapids Daily Tribune*, Oct. 8, 1923; “Voodoo Doctor Admits Slaying; No Victim Found,” *Billings Gazette*, Dec. 22, 1928.

¹⁶ “Voodoo Man Killed Girl,” *Lincoln State Journal* (Lincoln, Nebraska), Oct. 8, 1923; “Nurse Slain by Voodoo Doctor,” *Wisconsin Rapids Daily Tribune*, Oct. 8, 1923; “Hauley Held in Nurse Murder Case,” *Kingston Daily Freeman* (Kingston, New York), Oct. 9, 1923; Arthur Brisbane, “Today,” *Hamilton Evening Journal* (Hamilton, Ohio), Oct 15, 1923.

¹⁷ “Headless Body Found in Ohio; ‘Doctor’ Held,” *Sheboygan Press* (Sheboygan, Wisconsin), Dec 21, 1928; “Voodoo Doctor Admits Slaying; No Victim Found,” *Billings Gazette*, Dec. 22, 1928.

they quickly jumped to conclusions, stating that they “would assign no other reason for the decapitation other than some Voodoo rite.”¹⁸

While these media accounts of gruesome murders committed by “negro voodoo doctors” portrayed a very racialized and sensationalized image of crime in black communities within the United States, white travelers and marines serving as occupying forces in Haiti published accounts of their experiences abroad that helped maintain the public understandings of “voodooism” as an African-derived religious cult. In 1929, William Seabrook published a book entitled *The Magic Island*, in which he claimed to be the first white man to have undergone initiation into Haitian voodoo.¹⁹ Book reviewers and reporters lauded Seabrook as an expert on “voodoo” and the first white man “to have penetrated the heart of darkness.”²⁰ Seabrook’s tale emphasized the centrality of blood offerings to “voodoo” deities and he claimed to have participated in several ceremonies where the practitioners had sacrificed a large animal as a substitute for a human being.²¹

During the same time period, Faustin Wirkus, a marine who co-authored a book detailing his experience on a Haitian island, La Gonâve, was also reported to be the only white man initiated “into the black arts.”²² When the media advertised Wirkus’s manuscript, they focused not only on the alleged rise of this white American farm boy to the status of emperor of a predominantly black island, they also reminded their readers about the purported human sacrifice occurring in Haiti. For instance, in an article entitled “In the Land of Voodooism,” the author included a series of photos from Wirkus’s experience in Gonâve, one of which was captioned “[a]bove, before this altar, goats, bulls, and sometimes human beings are sacrificed in worship of the old African serpent god.”²³

Between the reports of “negro voodoo doctors” committing brutal murders and white Americans becoming initiated into a “voodoo cult” in Haiti, the U.S. public had competing narratives about the nature of “voodooism” at this time. The domestic murders were typically gruesome—involving decapitation, bludgeoning, etc.—but they were neither ritualized nor a component of a larger religious sect. In fact, since the early Civil War era, there were few, if any, widespread reports of “voodoo cults” existing in the United States. While “superstitions” characterized as “voodoo” were reportedly pervasive among African Americans, the public imagined Haiti as a more extreme example of where “voodooism” had been allowed to run rampant. Therefore, when African American Muslims were accused of forming a “voodoo cult,” this was perhaps the first instance in which a large group of blacks in the United States had ever been linked to ritual murder based on the teachings of a religious organization. In a time period when the imagined practice of human sacrifice as a “voodoo” ritual in Haiti and Cuba played a central role in justifying the need for Americans to provide a “civilizing influence” through occupation, reports of similar domestic practices would have suggested to the public that African Americans had been granted too many liberties and rights since emancipation, and were experiencing regression similar to that which was supposedly occurring in the Caribbean.

¹⁸ “Voodoo Rite Blamed for Beheading,” *Davenport Democrat* (Davenport, Iowa), Dec. 21, 1928.

¹⁹ William Seabrook, *The Magic Island* (New York: The Literary Guild of America, 1929).

²⁰ Stanley E. Babb, “In the Heart of Darkness,” *Galveston Daily News*, Jan. 20, 1929.

²¹ Seabrook, *The Magic Island*, 38, 63–69.

²² O. O. McIntyre, “Well, You Might Get Tired of Some of These,” *The San Antonio Light*, Apr. 19, 1931.

²³ “In the Land of Voodooism,” *Syracuse Herald*, Jan. 6, 1929.

The Voodoo Cult of Detroit

The Nation of Islam's reputation as a "voodoo cult" began in November of 1932 when an African American Muslim named Robert Harris murdered his black tenant, James Smith, as a purported human sacrifice to Allah. According to Harris's confession, Smith voluntarily climbed onto a makeshift altar in a back room of Harris's home, after Harris promised him that his sacrifice would make him the "savior of the world."²⁴ Harris then stabbed Smith in the heart and struck him over the head with an automobile axil.²⁵

Harris was a member of the Allah Temple of Islam, an organization of African American Muslims that had been founded by an immigrant trader named Wallace Fard (also known as W.D. Fard, Wallace Farad, and Fard Muhammad) in Detroit in 1930.²⁶ Like the Moorish Science Temple before it, the Allah Temple of Islam (later renamed the Nation of Islam) taught their followers that Allah would bring about the cataclysmic destruction of white "devils" and empowered African Americans through lessons about the great historical achievements of black people.²⁷ Both Islamic temples had swiftly gained a following in northern U.S. cities like Chicago and Detroit, where numerous African Americans had moved during World War I, to fill labor shortages as well as to escape lynching and other pervasive forms of racial discrimination in the South.²⁸ The murder of James Smith, and the arrest and trial of Robert Harris, was one of the earliest stories that gained widespread media attention for the Allah Temple of Islam, which numbered approximately 8,000 members in the early 1930s, as reports of this "human sacrifice" reached newspapers in every corner of the nation.²⁹

Although Fard was unquestionably the leader of the Allah Temple of Islam in 1932, the media described Robert Harris as the "high priest" of this "voodoo cult" and asserted that hundreds of members gathered in support of Harris throughout the proceedings.³⁰ Other Temple members, including Harris's own family, adamantly denied these claims. Robert Harris's wife asserted that he had a history of mental illness and violent outbursts, and had threatened several times to decapitate her and their children.³¹ Under the misleading title "Leader of Cult Called Insane," *The Detroit News* reported that Harris's brother Edward, who was also a Muslim, explained that Harris had no standing in the Temple and the members were well aware of his mental health issues.³² Edward attributed his brother's erratic behavior to financial concerns, not to their religious beliefs.³³ The homicide investigator assigned to Harris's case seemed to support

²⁴ "Called by Allah to Kill, Negro Slays Neighbor," *Nevada State Journal*, Nov. 22, 1932.

²⁵ "Cult Leader Says Victim Gave Consent," *Daily Mail* (Hagerstown, Maryland), Nov. 22, 1932; "Head of Cult Admits Killing," *Detroit News*, Nov. 21, 1932.

²⁶ Clifton E. Marsh, *From Black Muslims to Muslims: The Resurrection, Transformation, and Change of the Lost-Found Nation of Islam in America, 1930-1995* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 1996), 37.

²⁷ Vibert L. White Jr., *Inside the Nation of Islam: A Historical and Personal Testimony by a Black Muslim* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2001), 7-9.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 15-16.

²⁹ Marsh, *From Black Muslims to Muslims*, 37.

³⁰ "Cult Crime in Detroit," *Lowell Sun* (Lowell, Massachusetts), Nov. 21, 1932; "Negro Cult Leader Admits Killing Man in Voodoo Worship," *Komoko Tribune* (Komoko, Indiana), Nov. 25, 1932.

³¹ "Leader of Cult Called Insane," *Detroit News*, Nov. 22, 1932.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ "Leader of Cult to Be Quizzed," *Detroit News*, Nov. 23, 1932.

the significance of these economic problems in Harris’s mental breakdown, as he reported that Harris had also intended to harm Gladys Smith, the social worker who had recently terminated welfare benefits to Harris’s family.³⁴

Despite the growing evidence that Robert Harris committed murder because of mental illness and financial stress, the police continued to harass Temple members, seeking to establish a connection to their religious teachings. Homicide detectives questioned Wallace Fard; Ugan Ali, the Temple secretary; and Edward Harris about the tenets of their faith, searching for a relationship to “human sacrifice.”³⁵ Edward reaffirmed that his brother was suffering from a mental breakdown, and that “[n]obody paid much attention to him.”³⁶ Ali expressed a similar opinion, stating that Harris had “no standing” in the Temple and “[m]any people avoided him because of the wild things he sometimes said.”³⁷ Fard responded that he did not know Robert Harris and that nothing in their teachings encouraged human sacrifice.³⁸

The police continued to detain Fard, Ali, and several other Temple members despite their unequivocal denunciations of Harris’s actions. Hundreds of black Muslims marched on the police station in protest of these seemingly unwarranted confinements. Unfortunately, misleading newspaper accounts about these demonstrations fueled speculation that the Temple encouraged Harris’s “human sacrifice.” The *Morning Herald*, a newspaper in Hagerstown, Maryland, published one such distorted report, claiming “five hundred members of the negro Voodoo-Moslem cult recently revealed in Detroit marched to the Central police station today to demand the release of their leaders, held for questioning as a result of the investigation growing out of the ‘sacrificial’ slaying of James H. Smith last Sunday.”³⁹ They failed to mention that Harris was suffering from mental illness and that the Temple leaders had condemned his actions.

While some reporters omitted key facts in the Harris case to suggest the culpability of the entire Temple, others instead persisted in attributing the murder to their religious teachings even while recounting events that contradicted the Temple’s involvement. For example, under the title “Cult Slayer Pleads Guilty,” the *Detroit Press* described Harris’s extremely erratic behavior at his arraignment but still suggested that his crime might be linked to Islamic teachings.⁴⁰ The author claimed that Judge John Scallen ordered Harris to remove his hat in the courtroom, but Harris refused, replying “I’m king here.” This resulted in a dispute between Scallen and Harris about who was “king,” and a court officer was forced to remove the hat from Harris’s head. Amidst this exchange, the judge asked Harris whether he admitted to killing James Smith. Harris replied in the affirmative then, after struggling with the court officer to attempt to replace the hat on his head, explained that Smith had to die because “It was crucifixion time.”⁴¹ Immediately after his confession, Harris informed the judge, “Well, I’ve got to go now,” and attempted to leave the courtroom but officers restrained him and returned him to his cell. While the *Detroit Press*

³⁴ Karl Evanzz, *The Messenger: The Rise and Fall of Elijah Muhammad* (New York: Vintage Books, 1999), 85. Gladys Smith was no relation to the victim, James Smith, and she had no connection to the black Islamic community.

³⁵ “Leader of Cult to Be Quizzed,” *Detroit News*, Nov. 23, 1932.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ “Harris, Cult Slayer, Faces Court Friday,” *Detroit News*, Nov. 24, 1932.

³⁹ “Cult Members Move to Free Their Leaders,” *Morning Herald* (Hagerstown, Maryland) Nov. 25, 1932.

⁴⁰ “Cult Slayer Pleads Guilty,” *Detroit News*, Nov. 25, 1932.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

reported that due to this bizarre behavior it was likely that the judge would appoint a sanity commission to evaluate Harris, it continued to refer to him as the “cult leader,” and claimed that as a result of this murder, the deputy chief of detectives had ordered a special investigation into the “activities of the Order of Islam [referring to the Temple].”⁴²

Similar contradictory articles emerged over the following days, as Harris was transferred to the mental health ward of the local hospital after he became agitated and began destroying things in his cell. Judge Scallen appointed a three-member sanity commission to evaluate Harris and they adjudged him insane and sent him to the state asylum in Ionia, Michigan.⁴³ Even as the media described Harris’s bizarre behavior and the sanity commission’s findings, they continued to characterize him as the leader of a “voodoo cult” and his actions as representative of all black Muslims, employing misleading titles such as “Negro Cult Leader Admits Killing Man in Voodoo Worship,” and “Cult Chief Admits He Killed Victim” to report these events.⁴⁴

The attribution of the actions of one mentally unstable person to the members of the Allah Temple of Islam and its leaders is consistent with the sensationalized depictions of “voodooism” in Cuba and Haiti in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Travelers and reporters conflated isolated allegations of ritual murder on these islands with the beliefs and desires of the entire black population, and emphasized that the rulers of these countries supported “voodooism” and ritual murder or were too afraid to suppress it. St. John asserted that voodooism, human sacrifice, and cannibalism permeated all classes of Haitian society, and claimed “[a] black Government dares not greatly interfere, as its power is founded on the goodwill of the masses, ignorant and deeply tainted with fetish-worship.”⁴⁵ In the 1910s and 1920s, journalists made analogous claims that white government officials and other “persons of influence” were collaborators or “co-worshippers” of voodoo and refused to punish their black counterparts even for heinous crimes like human sacrifice.⁴⁶

As historian Richard Brent Turner has pointed out, following Marcus Garvey’s conviction for mail fraud and deportation to Jamaica in 1927 and the death of Noble Drew Ali, leader of the Moorish Science Temple, in 1929, the Allah Temple of Islam (and its later incarnation as the Nation of Islam) “may have been the most important Pan-Africanist organization in America in the 1930s.”⁴⁷ The Allah Temple of Islam was a significant source of African American empowerment, particularly because of Fard’s teachings about the racial superiority of blacks over whites as well as his encouragement of black self-sufficiency and self-segregation. Linking this organization and its leader to human sacrifice would have been a particularly effective manner of discrediting them in the 1930s.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ “Negro Cult Leader Admits Killing Man in Voodoo Worship,” *Komoko Tribune* (Komoko, Indiana), Nov. 25, 1932; Correlation Summary: Wallace D. Fard, Jan. 15, 1958, FBI Files: Wallace D. Fard, Part 2, p. 63.

⁴⁴ “Negro Cult Leader Admits Killing Man in Voodoo Worship,” *Komoko Tribune* (Komoko, Indiana), Nov. 25, 1932; “Cult Chief Admits He Killed Victim,” *Ironwood Daily Globe* (Ironwood, Michigan), Nov. 25, 1932.

⁴⁵ Spenser St. John, *Haiti; or the Black Republic* (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1889), xii. First published in 1884.

⁴⁶ For example, see “Cuban Child Butchered By Voodooists,” *Galveston Daily News* (Galveston, Texas), Dec. 28, 1913; “Fear Little Ones May Be Offered In Cannibal Rites,” *Ogden Examiner* (Ogden, Utah), Aug. 11, 1919; “Cuba Has Another Voodoo Mystery,” *Nevada State Journal*, Dec. 3, 1922.

⁴⁷ Richard Brent Turner, *Islam in the African-American Experience* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 159.

Because of the widespread public understandings of “voodoo” and human sacrifice as components of uncivilized black societies and the close link between reports of these practices and U.S. imperialism, these repeated claims that the Temple was involved in Harris’s crime had a substantial impact on the organization. First, Wallace Fard was detained by police until May of 1933; he was instructed to leave Detroit immediately upon release.⁴⁸ Although the official reasons for Fard’s detention and banishment from the city are unknown, the media claimed that he was suspected of encouraging Harris’s purported human sacrifice.⁴⁹ After leaving Detroit, Fard spent a short time at the organization’s second temple in Chicago, which had been established by his Chief Minister, Elijah Muhammad, in 1932. However, Fard disappeared in 1934, leaving Muhammad to take over Temple operations.⁵⁰ Muhammad changed the Temple’s name to the Nation of Islam, purportedly to escape their negative reputation from Harris’s so-called human sacrifice. The Chicago temple also became the Nation’s main headquarters. Therefore, these characterizations of black Muslims as a “voodoo cult,” directly or indirectly, led to the first major changes in the organization’s name, location, and leadership.

Despite Fard’s departure and the restructuring and renaming of the Temple, narratives of Muslim “voodoo practices” in Detroit resurfaced in 1937 when a man named Vernon McQueen was charged with preparing to boil his wife and daughter alive at a “gathering of worshippers of Allah.”⁵¹ McQueen’s arrest made front-page headlines across the country, as reporters alleged that the police were forced to hide McQueen’s wife and child out of fear of reprisals from the other members of the “cult.”⁵² The media linked McQueen to Harris’s murder of Smith in 1932 and the arrest of Wallace Fard shortly thereafter.⁵³ They characterized these events as evidence of “a new uprising of Detroit’s Negro voodoo cult,” which police thought had been eradicated when Fard had been ordered to leave the city.⁵⁴ Reporters further alleged that McQueen’s arrest provoked detectives to investigate the rest of the “Voodoo cult,” which had spread to Chicago, New York, and Canada.⁵⁵

The following year, in 1938, Erdmann Beynon published the first scholarly article ever written about the Nation of Islam in the *American Journal of Sociology*. Beynon titled this work “The Voodoo Cult Among the Negro Migrants of Detroit,”⁵⁶ which he explained reflected the name that the police used to describe the Nation of Islam. He clarified that he did not intend “to trace relationship between this cult and Voodooism in Haiti or other West Indian islands;” rather, the

⁴⁸ Marsh, *From Black Muslims to Muslims*, 39.

⁴⁹ “Police Guard Woman, Girl: Negress Says Husband Threatened to ‘Sacrifice Her to Allah,’” *Daily Hawk-Eye Gazette* (Burlington, Iowa), Jan. 19, 1937.

⁵⁰ Marsh, *From Black Muslims to Muslims*, 39.

⁵¹ “Voodoo Leader Scares Couple into Collapse,” *Daily Courier* (Connellsville, Pennsylvania), Jan. 20, 1937.

⁵² “Save Mother and Daughter from Sacrifice,” *Morning Herald* (Uniontown, Pennsylvania), Jan. 20, 1937.

⁵³ “Voodoo Leader Scares Couple into Collapse,” *Daily Courier* (Connellsville, Pennsylvania), Jan. 20, 1937.

⁵⁴ “Police Guard Woman, Girl: Negress Says Husband Threatened to ‘Sacrifice Her to Allah,’” *Daily Hawk-eye Gazette* (Burlington, Iowa), Jan. 19, 1937; “Voodoo Cult’s Sacrifice to Allah Failed,” *Lima News* (Lima, Ohio), Jan. 20, 1937.

⁵⁵ “Voodoo Leader Scares Couple into Collapse,” *Daily Courier* (Connellsville, Pennsylvania), Jan. 20, 1937. However, aside from this initial flurry of articles in the days immediately following McQueen’s arrest, little is known about these events. It is unclear if McQueen was actually a member of the Nation of Islam or if he had ever met Robert Harris, Wallace Fard, or Elijah Muhammad. It is also unknown whether or not McQueen was ultimately charged for the threats he made to his wife and if so, the disposition of McQueen’s case.

⁵⁶ Erdmann Doane Beynon, “The Voodoo Cult Among Negro Migrants in Detroit,” *American Journal of Sociology* 43, no. 6 (May, 1938): 894–907.

name was “solely because of cases of human sacrifice.”⁵⁷ This article would become central to the Nation of Islam’s reputation because virtually every scholar writing about Wallace Fard, Elijah Muhammad, and Malcolm X since the 1930s has relied on Beynon for their work.⁵⁸

Without citing a single source, Beynon recounted the details of the Harris and McQueen cases and the alleged response of other black Muslims. He contended that Robert Harris was “a prominent member” of the Nation of Islam and McQueen was the brother of one of the assistant ministers.⁵⁹ Beynon claimed that these sacrifices caused substantial internal dissension in the organization, leading one group known as “Rebels against the Will of Allah” to break off from the others “to avoid human sacrifice, the necessity of which as an expiation of sin forms one of the most hotly debated subjects among cult members.”⁶⁰ While Beynon conceded that Wallace Fard’s official position on human sacrifice was not known, he suggested that the practice was a natural extension of Fard’s teaching that his followers could gain access to Mecca if they killed four “white devils,” and that members of the Nation were expected to give themselves over to Allah and the movement unto the point of death, if necessary.⁶¹

The Legacy of Human Sacrifice

Over the next forty years, newspaper reports and scholarly publications on the Nation of Islam, Elijah Mohammed, and Malcolm X periodically repeated these allegations that Fard was connected to “voodooism” and human sacrifice, particularly during the height of the organization’s prominence in the early 1960s. For example, C. Eric Lincoln’s book *The Black Muslims in America*, which appears to have been the first monograph published about the Nation of Islam, unquestioningly adopted sensationalized depictions of the Harris murder from the 1930s. Lincoln argued that amidst the Great Depression and the increasing difficulties African Americans faced attempting to secure housing and employment in the North, welfare workers and police officers “became the symbolic targets of a virulent hatred of the white man growing in the breasts of Fard’s Black Nation.”⁶² Citing a lengthy quote from Beynon’s 1938 article, Lincoln contended that Harris’s threats to kill welfare workers “for human sacrifice as infidels” was “one extreme example” of this hatred and targeting.⁶³

While Lincoln depicted Harris’s crime as representative of broader sentiments of a disgruntled and disillusioned African American community, most reporters and scholars writing in the 1960s and 1970s characterized Fard as a criminal and a charlatan who was solely responsible for the formation of this “voodoo cult.” For instance, in February of 1961, dozens of

⁵⁷ Ibid., 894.

⁵⁸ Edward Curtis, a scholar writing on the Nation of Islam in 2002, noted that almost every work on the history of black Islam relies on “a seminal article by sociologist Erdmann Beynon.” Edward E. Curtis IV, *Islam in Black America: Identity, Liberation, and Difference in African-American Islamic Thought* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), 69.

⁵⁹ Beynon, “The Voodoo Cult Among Negro Migrants in Detroit,” 903–904.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid., 904.

⁶² C. Eric Lincoln, *The Black Muslims in America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), 13.

⁶³ Ibid. Later Lincoln merely says, “The Detroit Muslims of the 1930s had a number of bizarre excesses charged against them, including, as we have seen, human sacrifice.” After quoting a newspaper account of the Harris trial, Lincoln continues, “Other reports of sacrifices or attempted sacrifices were current in Detroit as late as 1937.” Ibid., 204.

newspapers circulated a virtually identical story written by George Sokolsky about the Nation of Islam. Sokolsky drafted this article in response to a protest that the Nation, under the leadership of Malcolm X, led in front of the United Nations Security Council meetings in New York City following the death of Patrice Lumumba. Sokolsky emphasized the swift growth of the Nation of Islam, which had at least thirty temples in the United States at this time and claimed 250,000 members. Sokolsky described the Nation as a “Negro Cult” and asserted that their founder was a criminal who taught his followers to hate whites and commit acts of violence:

The organizer, W.D. Fard, who has disappeared and who the votaries of this sect believe is Allah, that is God, was a peddler in Detroit after serving a three year period in San Quentin penitentiary for violating the narcotics law. He went by many names and preached violence.

At first Fard preached the Bible but very soon abandoned and ridiculed the testament and preached racial hatred instead. On Nov. 21, 1932, Detroit was shocked by a frightful story of human sacrifice. Robert Harris induced his roomer, John J. Smith, to present himself as a human sacrifice so that he might become “the savior of the world.” At the appointed time and place, Harris plunged a knife into Smith’s heart. Harris was arrested and adjudged insane. Fard disappeared in May 1933.⁶⁴

Ed Montgomery made similar claims about Fard in his now-infamous article, entitled “Black Muslim Founder Exposed as a White,” published in the *Herald Examiner* in 1963.⁶⁵ Montgomery declared that Fard, who Nation of Islam members believe was from Mecca, was actually named Wallace Dodd, and was born to a British father and a Polynesian mother. He depicted Fard as “an enterprising, racketeering fake” who posed as an Arab and intentionally targeted African Americans to steal their money. Within this multi-page article, Montgomery included a large section entitled “Detroit Ousted Him For Human Sacrifice.” Montgomery claimed that this “human sacrifice” demonstrated “the potential dangerousness and the primitive instincts of some of his followers.”⁶⁶ He asserted that Fard was arrested in connection with the sacrificial murder and then ordered to leave Detroit, but not before he admitted that his teachings were a racket.⁶⁷

Throughout the 1960s and in the early 1970s, both the media and scholars continued to resurrect these allegations that the founders of the Nation of Islam practiced human sacrifice. For example, in 1965, Lee Brown, a member of the San Jose Police Department, published an article entitled “Black Muslims and the Police” in the *Journal of Criminal Law*.⁶⁸ The primary purpose of the article was to describe a series of violent conflicts between African American Muslims and the

⁶⁴ George Sokolsky, “U.S. Negro Cult Preaches Hate, Claims ¼ Million Membership,” *Ogden Standard Examiner* (Ogden, Utah), Feb. 28, 1961; George Sokolsky, “Islam Cult in UN Riot,” *Sunday Light* (San Antonio, Texas), Feb. 26, 1961.

⁶⁵ “Black Muslim Founder Exposed as a White,” *Herald Examiner* (Los Angeles, California), July 28, 1963.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ Elijah Muhammad famously responded by declaring the entire article to be a fabrication and offering to pay \$100,000 if someone could prove these claims.

⁶⁸ Lee P. Brown, “Black Muslims and the Police,” *Journal of Criminal Law, Criminology, and Police Science* 56, no. 1 (March 1965): 119–126.

police in California; however, Brown inserted a sensationalized version of Robert Harris's murder into his narrative as background information. He recounted these events without mentioning that Harris was declared insane and that Temple leaders denied ordering or supporting his actions. Brown also contended that there were additional unconfirmed reports of human sacrifice associated with the Nation of Islam.⁶⁹ However, despite his negative depictions of the organization's origins, Brown ultimately concluded that the Nation posed no threat to police or society, and had made substantial strides in reducing drug and alcohol abuse as well as criminal recidivism rates among African Americans.⁷⁰

Merv Block was less equivocal in his depictions of the Nation of Islam in a newspaper article he wrote in March of 1972 that was circulated in several papers.⁷¹ In addition to focusing on the departure of several prominent members (such as the late Malcolm X) and on claims that the millions of dollars raised for the poor were being siphoned off for Muhammad's personal use, Block emphasized the criminal history of many of the Nation's leaders, including their controversial founder, Wallace Fard. Block accepted as true the recent contentions that Fard was a white man of New Zealand ancestry who had served time in San Quentin prison. Of Fard's early activities with the Nation of Islam in the 1930s, Block asserted, "The cult came to notice in 1932 after one member sacrificed another. In 1933, Detroit police arrested Fard as chief of the 'Voodoo Cult,' and authorities told him to leave. He soon dropped from sight."

Recent Scholarly Interpretations

Searches of major newspaper databases have produced no recent references to the Nation of Islam as a "voodoo cult;" however, claims that their founder encouraged human sacrifice still haunt this legendary organization in scholarly literature. In the 1990s and 2000s, researchers frequently asserted that the murder of James Smith was an extension of Fard's alleged instructions that his followers should murder four white "devils" to gain access to heaven.⁷² One of the most sensationalized interpretations of Fard's influence on Robert Harris appears in Karl Evanzz's biography of Elijah Muhammad published in 1999:

According to Fard, not only white devils were to be targets for ritual slayings, but also African Americans who placed their loyalty to the American government before their loyalty to the temple and God. Fard referred to these blacks as

⁶⁹ Ibid., 120.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 125–126.

⁷¹ Merv Block, "Muslims Gain Strength Under Paradoxical Leader," *Daily Review* (Hayward, California), March 26, 1972; Merv Block, "The Black Muslims Messengers of Allah," *Stars and Stripes*, March 29, 1972; Merv Block, "The Black Muslims: Leaders Teach Austerity but Live Stylishly, Prosperously," *Register* (Danville, Virginia), March 30, 1972.

⁷² Claude Andrew Clegg III, *An Original Man: The Life and Times of Elijah Muhammad* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), 31–32. Clegg argued that "Robert Harris, in his own distorted way, was trying to carry out the literal essence of this [Fard's] teaching." However, Elijah Muhammad's son argued in 1975 that Fard's teachings about the "white devils" were not meant to be taken literally. Turner, *Islam in the African American Experience*, 225. Other researchers repeated Clegg's angle in various recounts of the 1930s events. One scholar, Martha Lee, completely omitted Smith's race and Harris's insanity in her analysis of this crime. Lee stated that although Fard's support of human sacrifice "appears to have been temporary, at least one sacrifice was offered," again treating Smith's murder as an act fulfilling the purported teachings of Fard that followers of Islam must sacrifice four "white devils." Martha F. Lee, *The Nation of Islam: An American Millenarian Movement* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1996), 24.

“imps,” meaning they were “impersonating” white people in their thinking and behavior. Most of Fard’s followers preferred to forgo the rewards he promised for carrying out ritualistic murder, but there was a handful for whom the salvation he assured them meant everything. Robert Harris, whom Fard had renamed Robert Karriem, was one of them. His desire to please Fard led him into an unspeakable act that had the city of Detroit in shock during Thanksgiving week of 1932.⁷³

Without weighing in on the longstanding debate about whether Fard encouraged his followers to kill “white devils,” the purported link between such an instruction and the murder of James Smith or the attempted murder of Vernon McQueen’s wife and children is extremely problematic. Smith and the McQueen family were all African Americans who, at least according to media reports, were Temple members. As neither whites nor African American non-believers, it is unclear how their deaths would further Fard’s purported teachings about murdering “white devils” or “imps.” This is particularly true in the case of James Smith who, according to Robert Harris’s confession, was so devout that he offered himself as a sacrifice to Allah.

Furthermore, there is a substantial distinction between murdering “white devils” or “imps” and engaging in human sacrifice. The above-cited scholars suggest that Fard urged the murder of “white devils” as a type of holy war against the oppressors and their collaborators, and that he claimed that such killings would earn the slayer access to Mecca. Human sacrifice, on the other hand, suggests the believer must utilize a ritualized method of killing in order to make a propitiatory offering to appease a god or gods. This would have been particularly true of public perceptions of voodoo-related human sacrifices in the 1930s. However, despite the contemporaneous descriptions of the Nation of Islam as a “voodoo cult” and the bizarre ritualized crimes of Harris (sacrificing Smith on an altar) and McQueen (attempting to boil his family alive), no reporter or scholar appears to have uncovered any evidence that Fard gave specific instructions about a ceremonial method of killing nor that he ever suggested that the blood or life force of the victim would serve any spiritual purpose beyond proving the follower’s loyalty. One must therefore question whether even recent scholarship continues to deploy racialized stereotypes about “voodooism” and human sacrifice that were common in the 1930s.

Conclusion

This article has attempted to unravel the loaded meaning of the characterization of the Nation of Islam as a “voodoo cult,” a moniker that has been largely unquestioned since the publication of the first scholarly work on this organization in 1938. Emerging at the end of the U.S. occupation of Haiti, which had whet the American public’s appetite for tales of “voodooism” and human sacrifice, these allegations would have had a substantial impact on public perceptions of black Muslims in the 1930s. This trial led to the detention of several leading members of the Allah Temple of Islam, the departure of Wallace Fard from Detroit, and the transition of leadership from Fard to Elijah Muhammad. It also appears to have influenced Muhammad’s decision to transition the primary operations from Detroit to Chicago and encouraged him to change their organization’s name to the Nation of Islam, to escape the reputation that the Temple had incurred as the “voodoo cult of Detroit.” However, the Nation

⁷³ Evanzz, *The Messenger*, 83–84. Evanzz relies exclusively on newspaper archives to establish the purported connection between Fard and Harris. *Ibid.*, 355–356.

was unable to shake off this legacy, and these allegations of human sacrifice re-emerged in the 1960s and 1970s to discredit the organization and its founders as they rapidly gained wealth, influence, and followers.

Rather than accepting these rumors as gospel, scholars should understand “voodooism” and human sacrifice as a stereotype that the media and U.S. officials employed to demean many black religions in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. From post-emancipation New Orleans to the independent nations of Haiti and Cuba, they utilized the rhetoric of “voodooism” to prove that persons of African descent were incapable of voting, holding public office, and governing themselves. The Nation of Islam, therefore, did not become known as a “voodoo cult” because its leaders encouraged human sacrifice. It earned this designation because it threatened white supremacy by promoting the education and empowerment of black people.

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