

# Journal for the Academic Study of Magic



ISSN 1479-0750

ISBN 978-1869928-391

Published by Mandrake of Oxford, PO Box 250, Oxford, OX1 1AP,  
UK. <http://www.mandrake.uk.net>

In association with the Society for the Academic Study of Magic,  
c/o Dep't of Historical Studies, University of Bristol,  
13 Woodland Road, Bristol, BS8 1TB, UK  
<http://www.sasm.co.uk/index.html>

Bibliographic conventions: please cite as: Green, D (Ed.), *The Journal for the Academic Study of Magic*, 4, (Mandrake, Oxford, 2007)

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# **The Practitioner, The Priest, and The Professor: Perspectives on Self-Initiation in the American Neopagan Community**

**Marty Laubach, Louis Martinie' and Roselinda Clemons**

Initiation is a religious practice that is generally understood as involving socialization and acceptance into a religious community, but American Neopaganism, with its emphasis on individualism and autonomy, has evolved a meaning that challenges that simple understanding. American Neopagan communities are marketplaces of ideas that are comprised of groups and solo practitioners, all in interaction in which they might conduct main holidays together, but not necessarily work together in what they would consider more “serious” practices in which they receive the spirit communications with which they develop the ideas. Among groups, these practices include initiations through which candidates are trained and authorized by their group to bring claims of spirit communication to the marketplace. However, one of peculiarities of American Neopagans is that solo practitioners also claim authority to

bring communications from the spirit world to the marketplace based on claims that they received initiation from the spirits themselves. This practice of self-initiation effectively redefines a community into which the practitioner is initiated to directly incorporate the spirit world as the highest authority. While it offers community members tremendous flexibility and autonomy, it also confronts the broader community with the task of accepting or rejecting that claim. This study examines the phenomenon of self-initiation from the perspective of the solo practitioner and the community.

We propose an unusual methodology in this study. In response to the postmodern critique of an academic style in which a trained outsider presents the meaning world of a community using extracts of their words as data, this study offers a collaborative effort in which a practitioner, a trained leader in the religious community, and an academic engage in dialog over the issue at hand. We note that while we are directly engaging the social scientific debate over analytical perspective – insider vs. outsider, etic vs. emic, and most recently, postmodern vs. modernity – our real purpose is to explore spiritual phenomena that underlie religious meaning worlds from the unique perspectives of the authors. This format simply allows us to highlight the interplay between these perspectives in developing a fuller understanding of spiritually based religions.

We assert from the outset no precedence for any of these perspectives. We have discussed the issues in general and read each others' contribution but offered little more than requests for clarification and minor grammatical and stylistic comments. While we recognize that readers will likely feel drawn to one over the others, we hope that you will honor each for what it brings. Who better to offer the raw datum of

experiences and consequences than the practitioner? Who better to contextualize these within a meaning world than the priest? Who better to contextualize all of these within a rational/empirical framework than the professor?

Furthermore, while each of us is well embedded in our respective networks, none of us claims to be representative of them. In fact, the collaborative relationship represented by this project offers us insights and opportunities to reflect on these issues in ways that are likely unavailable to other members of our networks. Hence our commitment to this project.

Our practitioner, Roselinda Clemons, has had psychic experiences since preschool age. She is currently employed at a nursing home where she works with hospice residents as a spiritual calling dictated by the Guede. This Loa is the “master of her head” within the New Orleans Voodoo path, and is just one of the spiritual guides she is in contact with. Ms. Clemons has taught spiritual movement on and off for twenty-five years, and reads tarot cards for various people in her community.

Our priest, Louis Martinie’, has offered 15 years of service to the New Orleans Voodoo Spiritual Temple on Rampart Street as priest, lead drummer, and elder, but has offered personal service to the loa for many more. He co-authored the *New Orleans Voodoo Tarot*, founded the Black Moon Archives, and published books and journals on Voodoo and the Western ceremonial traditions through Black Moon Publications.

Our professor, Marty Laubach, teaches sociology at Marshall University. He has engaged with the American Neopagan community since 1979,

and lived a career in information processing before returning to academe in 1994. He earned a Ph.D. in sociology from Indiana University for research into the ethnophenomenology, epistemology, and social effects of psychism.

## **The Practitioner**

Visions have always been a part of my life. I sort of take them for granted. Not in an ungrateful way, but in a kind of way having any frequent experience for your entire life. You just know the visions are going to happen no matter what.

I remember as a child my mother giving me very strange looks when I would talk to her about my experiences. She had no understanding of my sensitivity. I had no support network. I had nonphysical guides, but my sensitivity levels were very acute and I needed guidance and support in both worlds. I just drifted along pulled wherever and incurring many bumps and bruises along the way. Some of which were quite dangerous.

As a parent of two daughters I realize how important it is to provide stability on the physical realm for sensitive children. I consider how lucky I am to have survived my childhood and into my adult years without being institutionalized. I still have a fear of not being able to cope and ending up in a mental hospital.

I believe I chose my ability to access other worlds and need to figure ways of using my sensitivity to help others and to evolve my spirit as well. There seems to always be sacrifices with the gifts we are given. Bouncing between worlds can be a difficult balancing act. Never feeling really connected in social settings or with people in general, spending



lots of time alone, and spirit attacks from other realms are just some of the problems one might encounter.

If my parents or other knowledgeable adults had helped me understand what was happening, my early life would not have been so painful and confused. I really had to create my own survival techniques. I believe along with choosing my sensitivity I chose a resilient, strong willed nature to help me survive. I have a warrior's spirit. I've learned how to fight in other realms in the appropriate spiritual way.

Someone asked me "Why do you believe in the Loa?" My answer was and still is that I connect with whatever positive spirits come through to communicate with me. It has been said that you don't choose the Loa. They choose you." I've never chosen a particular path or spirit to connect with, except as a child I was always searching for places to ground my sensitivity and feel accepted. The Pentecostal church was a place where I could trance and be accepted, but the unhealthy emphasis on sin eventually seemed obsessive and I moved on. I now wait until whatever spirit shows up and then we establish a relationship and go from there. I must add that I always feel special and honored when these visions occur. I'm excited and humbled at the same time and continue to wonder why they're talking to me, why not someone more important. Hopefully I can help others gain more understanding of the spirits and the spirit realms.

The Guedeh are a Loa or spirit within the Voodoo path. They are the spirit of death itself. They are not to be confused with the morbid grim reaper image. The Guedeh are not out to scare anyone but to shake and wake you up to the realization that everyone will face death. The Guedeh

are not an easy Loa to hang with. They are very dramatic by nature, and are high maintenance by way of how you choose to work them on the physical. Being initiated by the Guedeh certainly doesn't mean I'm always comfortable with them. My Roselinda ego has at times been embarrassed and generally discombobulated with their antics. They're usually demanding, coming and going as they please. By nature, they make one uncomfortable. That's what they do for specific spiritual reasons. Regardless, they're family and you deal with whatever because they're blood.

Just like any other relationship, it takes time to understand, build, and sustain that connection. I am honored and excited to work with my Guedeh family. They are my spiritual guides or what they call in the New Orleans Voodoo tradition, "Master of my Head."

My personal initiation by the Guedeh was totally on the spiritual realm. If a Priest or Priestess on the physical realm initiated me I would be honored and it would be meaningful, but until I hear directly from the source I have to question my initiation. This is my own personal feeling about my initiation process. I can't speak for others. Everyone has to assess their own initiation journey. No one else can do it for you. It doesn't matter anyway, the Loa have their ways of letting the community know who is or isn't connected. You can't fake the connection. One must have the passion, commitment, and faith to dive into the dark waters instead of paddling around on the surface with your head above water.

I do feel that if one is passionate and committed to whatever Loa they want to connect with then eventually they will get a confirmation in

some way, shape or form. Have passion and commitment and then listen. Always listen. Be aware of signs from everywhere. I work very directly with the Loa by way of visions, but I'm always open to less dramatic signs of communication as well. Most spirits I connect with know that to get my attention they have to hit me in the head! I've even challenged certain spirits to bring me more proof of their existence. I'm a sensitive but a hard case to deal with as well. Maybe that's one of the reasons they chose me, because I feel it necessary and am willing and committed to sort through my personal issues that would cloud the connection.

When asked about what initiation means to me, I feel my entire lifetime so far has been a part of an initiation process. Many years of my life were spent in pain and confusion. Initiation is not a short journey that can be bought and paid for with the way mapped out and without any obstacles along the path. I feel the Guedeh spirits chose me because of what I have experienced so far on my life's journey as well as my sensitivity to other worlds. To be initiated by any Loa one has a very special and personal connection to that Spirit and must also follow a path on the physical that includes work specific to them. Initiation is a commitment to focus intently on spiritual growth. Initiation also means responsibility, whether you like it or not. One must be responsible for working the energy of the Loa and imparting information to the community.

It's fascinating and wonderful in retrospect how many Guedeh visions I've had and didn't understand during those periods of my life. I remember thinking "how strange, oh well, never mind." Years later, when I finally gained an understanding of the Loa, my odd visions made sense to me. It makes me wonder why the Guedeh would contact me

when I had no knowledge of them. Among my first recollection of the Guedeh was the following sleep space vision:

I was in a graveyard, it was night time, but similar to a full moon on a cloudless night with bright moon shadows everywhere. Skeletons surface from shallow graves, dancing happily. They invite me to join in. (*Roselinda Clemons, personal notes*)

I awoke feeling great until that voice from my childhood Christian background says “this isn’t right.” I had been taught that graveyards and skeletons were morbid and sad, and that dancing with skeletons was definitely devil-related. I have since learned to quiet that negative voice and continue to dance with the Guedeh in this realm and others. I even wrote a poem about this experience before I understood the word Guedeh or anything about Voodoo:

*I dance with tall bony figures  
    carrying veils of darkness.  
Our movements are sharp and  
    lurking,  
    forever holding the mysteries  
    of the underworld.  
Come, we invite you into our dark  
    dance of mercilessly  
    passionate gestures.  
Embrace this enticing darkness.*

*You will be filled with an exhilarating  
fear that will give way to  
illustrious power.*

*Take heed, use it wisely.*

*As we dance, we move out of the darkness into the light  
where my companions become  
clothed in beautiful radiant  
flesh*

*The warm heat of the light is equally  
as exhilarating as the dark.*

*We breathe in the light leaping and  
swirling around one another  
until the darkness calls once  
more,*

*and we return home where familiar  
shallow indentations in the  
earth await us for a rest,*

*before we again do our journey dance  
into the light.*

I first heard the name Guedeh in a sleep space vision of a ritual officiated by Louis Martinie' The participants formed a serpent line with Lu at the head and me next in line. Lu whispered the word "Guedeh" in my ear and I turned and whispered it to the next person who passed it down the line. I awoke thinking about the word, and knew it was special, but forgot it for a few months because I was rushed that morning and forgot to write it down.

I feel the following vision was an initiation into the Voodoo spiritual current. I was someplace tropical. I remember seeing old cars from the thirties or forties, black and white in color. I knew something was going to happen. I was led to a swampy pool of dark water. A black priest walked me into the pool and recited words I couldn't understand, but it didn't matter. I seemed to know what was going on. Other black people in African tribal costume and holding spears surrounded the pool. They poked their spears in our direction while chanting. Everything was intensely focused. The priest then went with me under the dark water. Instead of coming up out of the water, I was ejected very quickly out of an African totem pole like I was being birthed.

After becoming more familiar with the Guedeh spirits I had the following vision:

I was in a cemetery and there was a Guedeh on an elevated platform. He was standing over a coffin filled with another Guedeh. The Guedeh in the coffin was modeling a tuxedo coat with tails and the other Guedeh was very much like a used car salesman trying to sell me the coat that was being modeled. He would lift the Guedeh by the arm so I could get a better look at the coat and the model Guedeh would smile exceedingly big. When I didn't seem interested in the coat the salesman Guedeh would drop the model Guedeh back into the coffin. Other Guedehs would then bring another coffin filled with another model Guedeh for me to view and hopefully choose a coat. The whole scene was very much like a vaudeville comedy skit. The salesman Guedeh all at once stopped his humorous routine and

became very serious, standing at attention. Approaching me from behind Baron LaCroix came around my left side and whispered in my ear, "We liked that you changed your name." Behind him a woman in a blue dress walked past me so close that she brushed my hair and face. She looked into my eyes with great intensity. She beckoned me to follow her down some steps that led underground under the cemetery. There were two beautiful stained glass windows on both sides of the stairway going down underground. I don't recall what happened while underground, but remember walking up the stairway still following the woman in the blue dress. As I was climbing the stairs the woman in the blue dress split into two identical women, twins. They turned their torsos inward, facing each other and then around to gaze at me. They turned back around and continued walking up the stairs. I came to the surface feeling connected, supported, like I had found a new family. (*Roselinda Clemons, personal notes*)

After this Guedeh vision I was in awe of the sacredness of the experience. I felt renewed, excited and most of all I had a spiritual knowing that I had been chosen or initiated somehow. How did I know? I just knew. Even if the Voodoo Pope refuted my experience, it wouldn't matter. If I don't experience that unwavering spiritual knowing then I usually discount the experience as an authentic vision. I'm very critical of my own process and am very careful of what I feel is or isn't a vision.

I integrate the Guedeh into my life through my job and the manner in which I work my spirituality. I work with spirit possession, letting the Guedeh spirits come through my body. They show me their specific

dances and also give me personal warning visions that help me in my everyday life.

I also work the Guedeh into my daily life by working in hospice care within a nursing home setting. I have since had many rewarding experiences helping people pass on. It seems that after the Guedeh felt we were sufficiently acquainted that I needed to work in the trenches to fully understand their meaning. It's a difficult and necessary task, but also a beautiful and exciting transition. I still have a healthy fear of death, but at the same time I'm totally comfortable working so closely with the dying process. Sometimes I feel I reek of death, my flesh falling from my bones. I jokingly refer to my physical body as "My Bag of Bones." What would make most people uncomfortable; I'm quite at home with. I've literally witnessed people physically rot before they pass away and the Guedeh always remind me that we are all just of bag of bones. As I have heard it said in the Voodoo community, "Status makes no difference, no one of the flesh is immune."

## **The Priest**

Blessings to you...Ah! The impudent humor of the Guedehs is apparent. They are such a pleasure. We are all in for surprises when they attend and they certainly do not disappoint in your vision. I can see the musty cloud of dust rise as the Guedeh model is rudely dropped back into the coffin.

When death laughs at us, the brave laugh back. Those who are both brave and wise laugh and willingly offer their hand. This day comes to us all and the humor of the Guedehs makes our common task a bit easier. If we can laugh with death, we can smile at most stuff the world



throws at us. The Guedehs are certainly clowns but they are our holy clowns; sometimes they can teach in situations where the more serious Loa fail.

Your vision looks to be a calling or an invitation to serve the Guedehs and Barons. They offered you a tuxedo coat with tails, which is a fine Guedeuh uniform. When someone is taken by the Loa at the Temple, they are offered clothing and other accouterments proper to the Loa that has nested in them. This is a common sign of honor and respect. If a beloved relative from far away were to pay you a visit, it would be a simple courtesy to offer him or her clothing, food, and shelter according to their taste. It's the same with the Loa.

You did not take the coat. This is very important. The Guedehs are tricky spirits. It would be an insult to accept their first offer. They love to haggle and respect those who can hold their own in affairs of the market (or cemetery, as the case may be). If you had bought the coat, the rank offered to you would have been diminished. You held your own and one of the big boys showed up. A Guedeuh standing at attention is a rare sight. The Guedeuh must have lost a bit of his composure when the Baron and his entourage entered your vision, if not I think he would have offered the Baron a mildly satirical salute.

Baron literally means "owner of the land." This is crucial to an understanding of the place occupied by the dead and the ancestors in our Voodoo. Soil is literally composed of the bodies of the dead. The mysterie here is not so much metaphysical as physical. We could not walk upon this earth; there would be no earth to walk upon without the animal and plant dead. We are supported every day by those who have

gone before us. The Guedeh in your vision defers before an owner of the land.

The Barons are generally the named dead; the Guedehs are the dead whose names have been lost “in the seas of time,” as we say. Here a big Baron shows up and compliments you on changing your name. This is an important moment in your confirmation into the realm of the Guedehs and Barons. You have been invited to change your name and an acceptance of this change has been voiced by the Baron even before you took a new name. My guess is that you hadn’t even considered changing your name as of yet so there is a dry humor here. When they choose, The Barons can be a bit more sophisticated than the Guedehs. Perhaps the evils and the joys of our social positions even survive death.

At this point a woman appears. She wears blue; the color of the sky. A proper color for someone who would accompany the owner of the land. Her touch which brushed your hair and face appears to be both a purification and a blessing. In purification something is taken and in a blessing something is given. Her looking so intensely into your eyes is to confirm this exchange. Manman Bridgette is known to walk with the Barons. Bridgette is a great judge of the dead. It appears that she judged you and found you worthy of passage.

She is satisfied and takes you into a holy place beneath the cemetery. It is very impressive that you do not remember what happened in this holy, underground place. With initiation not only comes a new name but also new words. These new words are needed to describe the experiences of your new state not only to others but to yourself. Without these new words, it’s harder to even recall the new experiences. You did

not have the new words so what happened underground was hard to recall. Forgetting or lack of words to describe a spiritual experience is something that attests to the truth of the experience.

You describe two stained glass windows gracing the stairway. I believe that these windows foretell the woman splitting into twins. The twins are called Marassa and walk before even the Loa. Perhaps your underground experience was needed for you to see the double nature of the woman who led you. She may have always had this twin appearance up her sleeve and now you could see it.

You have indeed found a new family. That is a meaning of initiation. Confirmation is the act of acknowledging an initiation. It is much more common to confirm than to initiate in New Orleans Voodoo. The Loa and spirits do the initiating, a Priestess or Priest confirms the experience. As a Priest, I Louis Martinie' confirm your initiation.

That said, I think it is important that you understand the nature of this confirmation. New Orleans Voodoo is more similar to Protestantism than to Roman Catholicism in the matter of initiations / confirmations. Protestants emphasize a personal relationship their God and His spirits. You read the Bible and God speaks to you. He may tell you that you are saved, a Priest, or chosen in some other respect. People may agree with (confirm) what He told you, disagree, or have no opinion. What people say does not change the fact that God either did or did not speak to you. You know this in your heart in a deep way. Roman Catholics have beautiful rites to give people each of these chosen states. I believe that there is grace in the Catholic rites but it is no longer an individual matter between the practitioner and his or her God. New Orleans Voodoo

believes in the primacy of an individual relationship with the Loa. As the old folks say, “Nobody needs to know (or do) your business.”

A few years ago a Haitian Mombo came to New Orleans and wanted to meet with people from the various spiritual houses in the city. A shop in the Quarter sponsored this meeting. It’s good to understand that there are all types of Voodoo in New Orleans. We have some houses that practice Haitian Voodoo, some that practice African Voodoo, and some, such as the House I am with, that practice New Orleans Voodoo. I went to the meeting so the New Orleans Voodoo Spiritual Temple could be present in welcoming the Mombo.

I sat with Creole Carol, another practitioner of New Orleans Voodoo. The Mombo was a nice person but she opened the meeting with exactly the wrong question. She said, “I want to get to know everyone. Let’s start by saying who initiated you and their lineage.” The practitioners of Haitian and African Voodoo were comfortable with the question and gave their well considered answers.

Ah! But there was such a silence from the practitioners of New Orleans Voodoo. I waited. I have the reputation as a bit of a trouble maker in our little community and didn’t want to be the first to speak. Finally Queen Mother Margaret, her title is used to honor many years of service, said, “The spirits gave me my initiation.” Perfect, she spoke with the humility a true queen offers an honored guest.

We believe that one is called by the Loa and is initiated directly by the Loa. Your vision is a good example of such an initiation and I am happy to confirm it as such but, and this is a big but, what I or others say is not

all that important. You have heard the voice of the Loa. No human can give or take that voice from you. Your success or failure as a practitioner of New Orleans Voodoo is your most important proof to others. Papers can burn and the words of confirmation can be denied or revoked; your meeting with the Guedehs and Baron lives and confers grace from a place within you that is so strong it needs no protection.

## **The Professor**

From a social scientific perspective, self-initiation is not supposed to happen. Religion is a social phenomenon involving communities, and a person cannot initiate him or herself into a community. However, Roselinda and Lu are discussing a religious community that skirts the edges of many social scientific theories – perhaps that is why they are so much fun to teach about in classes on the sociology of religion?

Scholars of religion who focus on New Age and American Neopagan religions note an emphasis on individualism and autonomy, which culminates in this peculiar acceptance of self-initiation (Bloch 1998; Berger et al 2003). My research (Laubach 2004) notes that the spiritual practices involving psychism, which are disproportionately practiced by Neopagans (Berger et al 2003), actually promotes autonomy and private practices. Bloch's (1998) work is especially interesting in that he demonstrates how inherently private magical practices actually serve as a basis for solidarity within spiritual communities that exist in tension with the dominant religions and rationalism of American society. My co-authors exemplify this with Roselinda's claim of private communication with spiritual entities and Lu's confirmation – i.e. that of a community leader.

Acceptance of self-initiation does not mean that American Neopagans do not crave long initiation lineages just like other religions – Lu’s incident with the Haitian Mombo aptly demonstrates that fact – it is just that in a religion that is still under construction, with no Bible or founder to dictate canon, the ultimate authority reverts to a perceived direct experience of spirit.

This self-initiation phenomenon illustrates the importance of psychism as a tool for the construction of the American Neopagan religious community, and the problems and strategies of bringing such an individual experience into the sphere of community.

Self-initiation presumes the importance of psychism as a basis for belief construction the Neopagan community. The Theosophical Society defined psychism as “every kind of mental phenomena, such as mediumship and the higher sensitiveness, hypnotic receptivity, inspired prophecy, simple clairvoyance or seeing in the Astral Light, and truly divine seership; in short, the word conveys every phase and manifestation of the powers and potencies of the human and the divine Souls” (Judge 1943, p 246). From a social psychological point of view, I defined psychism as “perceptions of psychic intrusions into the stream of consciousness that are interpreted by the actor as not originating within the self’s normal information channels” (Laubach 2004, p 242), and noted that its characteristics make the phenomenon uniquely “real” and allow it to serve as “evidence” (at least for initiates) of the reality of the spirit world.

My ethnographic research suggests that the importance of psychism is not limited to self-initiation. American Neopagans, who put such a

premium on these kinds of experiences, increasingly see what religious scholars think of as “rituals” – repeatedly presenting religious symbols to reinforce community beliefs and practices – as empty acts. Neopagans are generally reluctant to invest in an initiation process that does not offer something that the student can interpret as direct experience of the spirit world. While they are not above taking shortcuts when possible, most recognize that attaining that experience of spirit is not easy, or cheap. They also know that the bill is paid not in cash - but in effort. They acknowledge a need to offer an exchange for the effort teachers give to them, but also understand that the kind of initiation experience they crave - the direct experience of spirit - is something that a student attains, not something that the teacher can give.

This is not to say that there is not a tremendous expectation pressure on initiation processes. Candidates are trained on symbol systems and on meditation, rhythms, dance, or other techniques that produce psychism. Initiation rituals then present symbols in a sequence, tempo, and drama designed to evoke additional psychic objects in the candidate’s stream of consciousness that build on the ritual’s symbols but are perceived as originating from the spirit realm. In this way, the experience ultimately recognized as initiation occurs as an encounter within the stream of consciousness of the candidate, not with the ritual actions of the priest. The best the officiator can do is to set up the initiation ritual properly, execute it skillfully, look for signs of success from its effect on the candidate, and attest to or confirm its success as Lu did with Roselinda’s vision.

Self-initiation processes differ in the preliminaries that lead to the perceived encounter with the spirit realm. The most prevalent form has

the candidate learning the system and conducting (maybe even designing) the ritual on her or his own. The rarer form, exemplified by Roselinda's account of her sleep-space experience, has the candidate encountering the psychic objects spontaneously. Note that Roselinda distinguishes these experiences from "dreams," a claim that is reflected in descriptions of visions by other esoteric communities (e.g., Tumminia 2002).

The community gets brought back into the picture through the confirmation process as described by Lu. Confirmation confers legitimacy on the initiate, validating the experience and authorizing the initiate to speak of it to the community, to make claims on the basis of the experience, sometimes to offer to help others reach their own initiation. Of course, this begs the question: how do community leaders confirm that the candidate has actually had the experience he or she has claimed?

While a full discussion is beyond the scope of this article, some elements can be seen even in my co-authors' writings. Some elements are pragmatic, others are esoteric. The first and most obvious pragmatic element is knowledge of the candidate. Lu and Roselinda have been friends for many years and have developed a sense of trust that comes from experience with each other. Accompanying this is a trust in the purpose to which the confirmation will be used. Lu's knowledge of Roselinda's history gives him confidence that she will not use his confirmation to make extravagant claims for money or power in the New Orleans Voodoo community.

On a more esoteric level, Lu notes that Roselinda is using the symbols correctly – even though she had not learned them at the time of the visions. She describes the correct form, contexts, and actions of the



Loa, and her actions and attitudes both in the visions and in her writing demonstrate that she has integrated the appropriate values expressed by the Loa. Furthermore, her writings indicate that these experiences are consistent with her prior history of encounters with the spirit realm, and are sequenced to culminate in an initiatory relationship. Along this line, Lu can note that she is demonstrating her dedication to a path consistent with the teachings or meanings of the Loa who initiated her by working with the hospice unit of the nursing home.

The final confirming element is consistent with what I encountered in my ethnographic research into spirit possession. While I emphasized that I was not interested in “judging” the validity of possession accounts I was recording, I was still asked how I knew whether someone was consciously lying to me. The consistent element I found in “believable” accounts, which can be seen in Roselinda’s account, is a healthy respect or even fear of the experience. Experiences of psychism tend to challenge the essential foundations of what people come to believe is possible within their experience of reality, even if the type of experience is accepted within their cultural definitions of reality. Roselinda admits as much when she describes her continuing fear of ending up in a mental hospital.

The net effect of Lu’s, or any community leader’s, confirmation depends on the relative standing and interests of the people involved. It seems unlikely that the Haitian Mombo Lu describes would recognize Roselinda’s initiation, but likely that Queen Mother Margaret would. Regardless, and this seems the strongest point made by Roselinda and Lu, neither response will change her understanding or responses of her experience.

## Conclusion

The American Neopagan movement emerged from the 1960s countercultural mixture of spiritual seeking, feminism, eastern religions (see Melton 1993), indigenous American spiritual traditions, and British import spiritualities like Wicca, theosophy, and thelema. As is typical of American culture, these are blended with more regard for expediency than tradition, but always with an overriding concern for autonomy and individuality. These last factors have generated an emphasis on personal experience as a basis for beliefs, and psychism – spiritual experiences – has been a major tool in constructing the meaning worlds. With all of these influences, self-initiation claims, such as those described by Roselinda, can be seen as an obvious development from American Neopaganism.

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