

Abstract

Poverty and Sorcery in Urban Haiti

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This ethnographic study explores conceptualizations of sorcery in contemporary urban Haiti. Sorcery is seen to operate as a dynamic local idiom for coping with uncertainty and misfortune. The study endeavors to demonstrate that sorcery is meaningful in this regard since, as an idiom, it is itself flexible, evasive and fraught with uncertainties. The study also aims to examine these “elusive” aspects of sorcery and to thereby contribute to the understanding of sorcery in a poverty-stricken, rapidly changing, urban context.

The Republic of Haiti is the poorest country of the western hemisphere. Ideas of sorcery and other dangers in the social environment are locally associated with poverty and competition. Sorcery, like other imagined hostile acts, personalizes and articulates causes of misfortune in social terms. This study relates ideas of sorcery to processes of social change and the way in which these are experienced locally. The local view of sorcery as a means for coping with pragmatic issues is brought into relief; sorcery and magic may be identified both as causes of, and ways of handling, misfortune.

Case descriptions, which may include several contradictory explanations of a single case of misfortune, show the adaptability of sorcery's social dynamics. Sorcery discourse is often characterized by a “subjunctive mood” colored by probability rather than certainty. The study found that sorcery explanations often take the form of gossip and allegation. The fact that sorcery deals with, but does not necessarily resolve uncertainty is recognized locally and this influences practice. Sorcery practices and beliefs are found to be multiplex and rich in interpretative alternatives.

The adaptability of the idiom of sorcery makes it especially meaningful in a context of poverty and uncertainty. This study therefore enhances the understanding of the relationship between sorcery and the pressures of contemporary life.

Keywords: Anthropology, Haiti, poverty, urban, magic, sorcery, uncertainty, misfortune.