



LW7 Do You Do Voodoo? Zombies, Ritual Crime, and Forensic Investigations

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The goal of this presentation is to illustrate the complex challenge of ritual crime investigation in modern multicultural Western society.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by proposing an effective approach for the investigation of suspected ritual crime.

In the last few decades, the mass movements of people from different parts of the world have transformed several countries into multicultural societies. Different populations, beliefs, and traditional religious systems have left their places of origin to merge with other cultures.

Despite the fact that Western society is inclusive, some ritual aspects of ethnic religions are perceived as particularly mysterious and looked at with suspicion and fear. Among them, voodoo is frequently associated with horror plots and dark crimes in movies.

The scientific community has been attracted by some of the darkest ritual phenomena, including zombification, and has attempted to explain them. Resuscitating a dead body has been viewed with fascination since Mary Shelly's *Frankenstein*; similarly, the possibility of transforming someone into the living dead by a voodoo ritual has attracted public interest. A dispute has begun about the alleged chemical origin of zombification, initially attributed to the use of tetrodotoxin. More recently, the possibility of a zombie invasion has been considered from an epidemiological and legal point of view, transfiguring the walking dead into a biological phenomenon, separate from the religious world.

However, even if scientists have put moderate effort into the investigation of these mysterious figures, the majority of ethnic cultures and their symbolisms are still poorly explored. The combination of mystery, fear, and lack of in-depth knowledge raises misunderstandings and misinterpretations. If crime scene elements seem to be out of the ordinary, it is not uncommon to lend them a ritual significance. The victim's bruises could appear to be arranged in a geometric symbol or some objects are scattered around as alleged indicators of an obscure ceremony. Media in particular, more than investigators, have emphasized and inflated these aspects since the Jack the Ripper murders, perhaps the first case of a modern serial killer being accorded media coverage.

In addition to the risk of "recognizing" symbols even when they are not, the ritual phenomenology is simplified into abstract categories because of a poor knowledge of ethnic beliefs. When the ritual shows pagan symbols of a possible ancient Western origin, it is classified as Satanic, while if the evidence exhibits a more exotic nature, it is considered voodoo related. Clearly this simplistic approach can lead to misinterpretation, driving the investigation and public opinion in the wrong direction, sometimes with terrible consequences (e.g., racist witch hunts).

During forensic investigations, it is central to identify the actual presence of symbols at the scene. Only then it is possible to recognize their origin and ascription to a particular cultural group. The same symbol may have very different and sometimes opposite meanings, depending on the culture using it. Symbols and rituals are languages of a specific group that must be identified in order to interpret their significance. Thus, it is important that the investigative agencies are able to identify whether there are discordant elements in a crime scene and whether



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these elements have a potentially symbolic meaning. After the first screening, the alleged symbolic elements must be carefully interpreted and classified according to the group to which they belong, without making simple generalizations. When the symbol is recognized and classified, the investigation needs to clarify the forensic relevance and whether a correlation between the ritual and the crime exists. Moreover, the symbolic elements may provide a cultural/ethnic profile of the persons involved at the scene.

Modern Western society is a multi-ethnic organism that includes a variety of beliefs and religious systems, representing a new challenge for investigators who require effective support (e.g., training and specialized units) in order to recognize and interpret symbolic elements present at a crime scene.

Ritual Crimes, Voodoo, Satanism