

A real Vodou lounge – a service for the spirits in rural Haiti

Photo by Leah Gordon

Reappraising Vodou

VODOU, the religion of Haiti, is a major feature of Haitian history, society, culture and identity. Vodou inspired the slave revolution that created the modern state of Haiti, has been and continues to be the religion of the majority of Haitians, and serves as the inspiration for huge numbers of Haitian artists and musicians. Yet in the UK popular conceptions of Vodou are still dominated by the negative stereotypes of black magic, blood-soaked orgies, and zombification. This anti-Vodou prejudice grew out of Europe's hostility to Haiti's successful slave revolution, has been perpetuated by Christian missionaries, and survives today thanks to sensationalist portrayals in Hollywood movies. Starting below with some responses to the traditional Eurocentric view, this issue focuses on Vodou.

■ "In the eyes of Westerners in the 19th century, any element of African culture smacked of barbarism. In Haiti, the agitators who emerged from the rebellion of 1791 and the revolution were used as proof of a connection between voodoo and savagery. The same apprehension was invoked in the 20th century to justify the American occupation of Haiti in 1915, turning the island into something seen as a land of the living dead." – **Laennec Hurbon, anthropologist.**

■ "I must not accuse Haitians who practice Vodou of sin, without first having analyzed Vodou from the viewpoint of my real experi-

ence as a Haitian. There is good and bad in Vodou. But in the Catholic religion, do we not also have to take some things and leave others?...we have to pursue a thoroughgoing analysis, striving to liberate the passion and energies of the Haitian people. And this passion and vigour cannot exist without Vodou." – **Father Jean-Bertrand Aristide, later President of Haiti**

■ "I am fed up with the stereotype ideas of who we are. I'm fed up with living in a closet, of not showing our flag in terms of who we are culturally." – **Dorothy Desir-Davis, Vodou priestess, New York.**

■ "It's more than simply a religion - it's a way of life. Vodou is rooted in the countryside and the mountains and has been around for hundreds of years. So it is part of our national identity and our cultural pride." – **Lolo Beaubrun, Boukman Eksperyans.**

■ "If it (Vodou) has had more meaning to most Haitians than Christian doctrine, it is because Christianity has served only to offer only doctrine and guidelines to behaviour whereas Vodou offers doctrine, social controls, a pattern of family relations, direct communication with original forces, emotional release, dance, music, theatre, legend and folklore, motivation, alternatives to threatening dangers, individual initiatives through placation and invocation, treatment of ailments by means of herb lotions and rituals, protection of fields, fertility, and a continuing familiar relationship with the ancestors."

A ROUGH GUIDE TO VODOU

A short history of Vodou

When millions of black slaves from west Africa were taken to the Americas, their beliefs and practices were reborn under various forms and names: Candomblé in Brazil, Santería in Cuba, Obeah in Jamaica, the Shango cult in Trinidad, and Vodou in Haiti.

In Haiti, as in the other colonies, the plantation owners tried to eradicate the slaves' memory of their family, lineage, and origins. The various ethnic groups were systematically split up and dispatched to different plantations. The slaves were given new names, and they were forcibly baptised as Catholics. In spite of this, the slaves held on to their cultural and religious traditions. They invoked and celebrated their ancestral spirits in secret, using worship of the Catholic saints, and the Church sacraments and holidays, as a screen. Slowly a new religion evolved, giving the slaves a sense of identity and hope.

What happened at Bois Caiman?



Vodou drummers play rhythms that have been passed down the generations for over two hundred years. Photo by Leah Gordon

The French colonists correctly saw the new religion as a focus of resistance to and a rejection of Christian, white supremacy, and tried, without success, to stamp it out. In August 1791, a group of slaves met to plan an uprising. They held a Vodou ceremony in the forest at Bois Caiman where they sealed a sacred pact, swearing to die rather than live under the misery of the slave system. The participants at the Bois Caiman ceremony returned to their plantations, and, a week later, a slave rebellion began, quickly spreading across the whole colony. The rebellion became a revolution, and, over the course of twelve years, the half a million black slaves fought and defeated the armies of France, Spain, and Britain. Slavery was abolished, and, in 1804, Haiti became the world's first black republic.

What happened to Vodou after the revolution?

A small group of merchants and the top officers from the revolutionary army emerged as a ruling elite based in the country's coastal towns. This elite looked to France and to Catholicism for its cultural and religious identity, but the majority of the population, living as peasant farmers in the interior, developed a way of life and a system of beliefs drawing on African traditions. Although most Haitians believed in Vodou, Catholicism was made the official religion of Haiti in 1860. Since then, the Church and the government have carried out repeated 'anti-superstition' campaigns, destroying temples, burning religious objects, and imprisoning Vodou priests.

How has Vodou survived?

Because of the repression, Vodou has had to exist as a semi-underground religion. Ceremonies usually take place at night, and, in towns, the temples are hidden away between the corridors and densely-packed shacks of the slum areas. The practice and beliefs of Vodou are shrouded with a veil of mystery and secrecy as a necessary means of self-defence. It also survives thanks to its ability to coexist with Catholicism - it is perfectly possible to be a Vodouist and a Catholic at the same time. In fact, some Haitians say that you can't serve the spirits unless you are a Catholic.

What's the connection between Vodou and 'Papa Doc' Duvalier?

The black nationalist dictator who ruled Haiti between 1957 and 1971 used his knowledge of Vodou and peasant culture to sustain his regime. He had his paramilitary force, the Tonton Macoutes, dress in the blue denim and red necktie that Haitians know as the uniform of the Vodou spirit of agriculture, and he himself dressed in a black top hat and coat - the outfit of the powerful spirit, Baron Samedi. Papa Doc also recruited many Vodou priests into his network of spies and informers.

Vodou today

Since the 1980s, the Catholic Church has grown more accommodating, and has abandoned its former line of outright

opposition. Many progressive Catholic priests see Vodou as an important cultural element in Haitian society. The new Constitution, adopted in 1987, guaranteed the freedom to practice any religion, and in 1991 President Aristide met with a delegation of Vodou priests in the National Palace. However, there is a growing threat from the evangelical Protestant missionary churches, many from the US, who campaign aggressively to get Haitians to reject Vodou.

Vodou as religion

Vodou is a religion with priests, a society of the faithful, temples, altars, ceremonies, and finally a whole oral tradition by means of which the essential elements of worship have been transmitted. Yet it has never been codified in writing, never possessed a national institutional structure, a national church, an orthodoxy, a seminary, a hymnal, a hierarchy, or a charter. For this reason it is hard for non-believers to pin down exactly what Vodou is.

'The spirits' (Iwa)

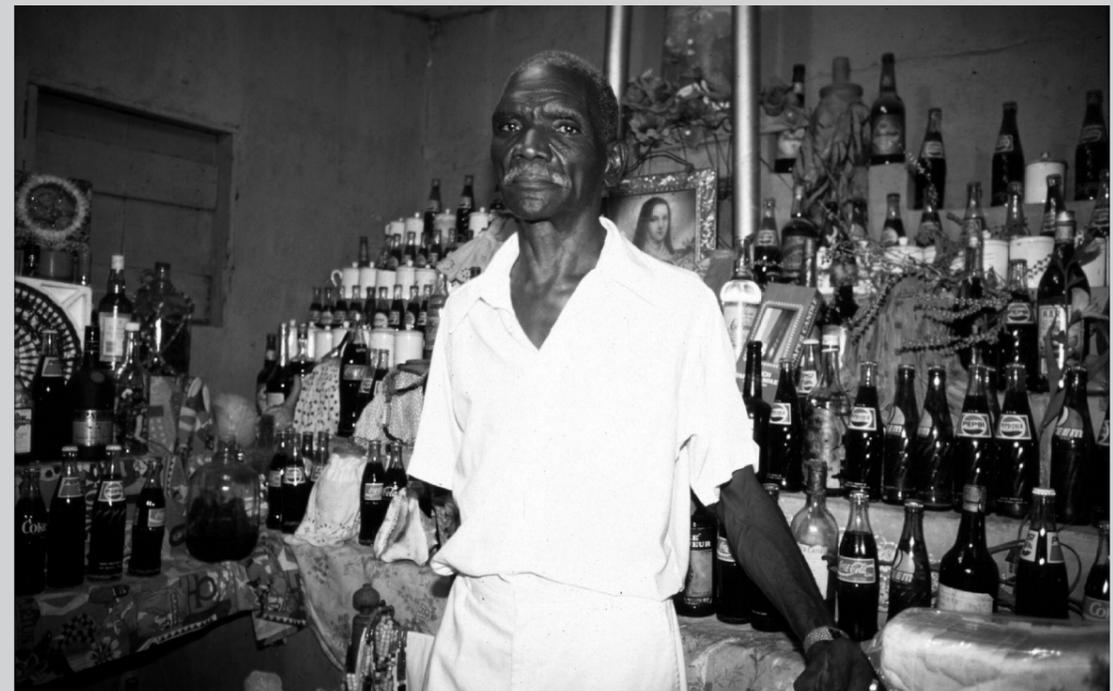
The all powerful God is both distant and close, but too great to concern him/herself with humans, instead delegating the mediating task to the spirits (the *Iwa*). There are hundreds of *Iwa*, who may be the protective spirits of clans or tribes from Africa, or deified ancestors. Some are conceptualised in human form such as Papa Legba, the old man who guards gates and crossroads and is invoked at the beginning of every service. Others are less tangible like Gran Bwa, who is the spirit of the forest and trees. The *Iwa* are grouped into families, called nations, which are divided by different rituals. Each ritual has distinctive ceremonies, dances, rhythms, and type of offering.

The priest/priestess (oungan/mambo)

Priests interpret the language of the *Iwa*, and officiate at ceremonies in their temples. They also act as counsellors, giving advice, and interpreting dreams and misfortunes. Many priests are also leaf-doctors with a specialised knowledge of medicinal herbs and plants.

The service or ceremony

These take place to mark religious holidays, to satisfy a particular spirit, or at the request of an individual or family who pay for the expenses. No ceremony completely resembles another one of its kind, for each priest/priestess has his or her favourite rites and special features. Some of the congregation are initiates (*ounsi*), who dress in white, and are charged with singing and dancing. The priest/priestess directs the unfolding ceremony, beginning with a litany of saints, prayers and hymns from the Catholic religion, the marking of the four cardinal points, and the drawing on the ground of the symbolic *Iwa*. Then the spirits are invoked, the drums roll, and the *ounsi* dance. If a spirit arrives, it will often 'possess' a believer, briefly using their body as an instrument of self-expression. Each spirit will manifest itself in a certain way, consistent with their individual attributes.



Priest Edgar Jean-Louis in front of an altar in a temple in Port-au-Prince.

Photo by Leah Gordon

Once 'awakened', the possessed person remembers nothing of the event.

The drummers

Drums play a central role in the ceremony, and the drummers play ancient rhythms that bring the congregation and the spirits together. The spirits will only come to dance or 'ride' the bodies of the faithful in response to the 'call' of the drums.

Magic and curses

The practice of magic and sorcery is generally disapproved of by followers of Vodou, however there is an awareness that supernatural forces do exist and can be enlisted to bring protection and luck, or create illness or bad luck for an enemy. A minority of priests claim to be able to harness these powers. It may well be that a knowledge of natural poisons has been passed down the generations. In the opinion of all learned authorities on Vodou, the prevalence of magic and poisoning in Haiti has been exaggerated out all proportion to the reality by foreign sensation-seekers.

Vodou as culture

As well as serving Haitians' spiritual needs, Vodou fulfils other important social functions. The priest is often a source of knowledge and authority in the community, and the temple and the ceremonies that take place there provide the space and the events around which communal bonds are constructed. Vodou also contributes massively to Haitians' sense of identity - since the time of slavery,

during and after the revolution, it has been a religion of resistance. Despite all the efforts to suppress it, Vodou has survived and has served as the inspiration for Haiti's rich and varied culture. Vodou inspires the painting, sequin flags, metal sculpture, roots music, dance, folklore and crafts for which Haiti is world famous.

Further reading:

Voodoo: Truth and Fantasy - Laennec Hurbon (Thames and Hudson)

Voodoo - Alfred Metraux (Schocken Books)

Divine Horsemen - Maya Deren (Thames and Hudson)

Spirits of the Night - Selden Rodman and Carole Leaver (Spring Publications)

● AN EXHIBITION OF THE WORK of Haitian artists inspired and informed by Vodou religion and culture runs from 20 - 26 May 1998 at Penn Street Studios, 23-28 Penn Street, Hoxton, London N1. Hours: 12 - 6pm. Vodou Art of Haiti displays brilliantly colourful sequin flags and monochrome beaten metal sculptures. Admission free.

● SATISFY YOUR CURIOSITY and have your preconceptions blown away. A five hour Vodou ceremony will take place at Vodou Nation, two evenings of Haitian culture that also include performances by the roots music group, Boukman Eksperyans, and DJs playing rara, and rhythms from the Caribbean diaspora. 15 May 1998, 9pm-3am at Bagley's, Kings Cross, London N1 - tickets £12 (£10 concessions) call 0171 344 4444, and 22 May 1998, 9pm-2am at Cream, Liverpool L1 - tickets £9 (£7.50 concessions) call 0151 708 9979.

Read it first in *Haiti Briefing*

A Pig's Tale

Award-winning documentary

At the annual British Environmental Media Awards ceremony in February, *A Pig's Tale*, was named the best documentary film of 1997. The film looks at the repercussions of the US-funded eradication of the entire local pig population in the early 1980s.

In our February issue we focused on the growth in cocaine trafficking through Haiti. On February 16, the *Washington Post* newspaper ran a long piece entitled "Cartels 'buying' Haiti", and three days later, a similar story appeared in Florida's *St. Petersburg Times* with the headline, "Drug runners aim pipeline through Haiti".

In the *Post* article a US investigator was quoted, "Nowhere does a narco-dollar go further today than in Haiti. As a transshipment venue and a 'stash house' for traffickers, Haiti is bigger than ever, it has never been worse, in large part thanks to narco-corruption." A Haitian law enforcement official explained that up to a dozen suspected Colombian traffickers are living in Haiti, "Basically, the drug

cartels are buying this country from the bottom up and from the top down. They are corrupting everyone from poor townspeople to police officers and judges with cash, and sometimes product, to make sure they consolidate their positions on the island."

Boukman Eksperyans

TOUR DATES

For over a decade, the roots music group, Boukman Eksperyans, has been one of the most popular bands in Haiti. This May they are touring Britain and Ireland.

Dates:

May 15 - Bagley's, Kings Cross, London
May 20 - University of Wales, Aberystwyth
May 21 - The Buttermarket, Shrewsbury
May 22 - Cream, Liverpool
May 24 - Highland Festival, Aviemore
May 25 - Fishquay Festival, North Shields
May 30 - Belfast
May 31 - Sligo Festival, Sligo
June 2 - Arts Festival, Salisbury

Boukman Eksperyans' song, *Pawol Tafya* - Drunkard's words, (right) was the hit of this year's Carnival in Haiti. The lyrics contrast the revolutionary urge of the Haitian people, who fought for 12 years to overthrow slavery and gain independence in 1804, and overthrew the Duvalier dictatorship in 1986, with the corrupt and self-serving political leaders that continue to plague Haiti to this day. Although the group deny it, fans in Haiti assume that the drunkard in the song title and chorus refers to the easy-going manner and liquid-fuelled lifestyle of the current president, René Préal.

Pawol Tafya

Since Bwa Kayiman

We were looking for freedom

Which brought us to 1804.

Since then, how is it?

It's the big shots eating the little ones.

How is that? They killed Dessalines.

They gave us a second-hand State.

Which has taught us to hate

To hate everything about our roots

I ask you, what do you see?

It's everybody looking out for themselves

How is that?

How is that my friends?

How is that Balendjo?

February 1986 -

Hope made everybody live

We understood we were free.

Then under the colonialist witch doctors

We fell under the influence of their false ideas

A carnival mixing good and bad masks

How is that?

The year 2004 is coming

We can't waste time.

Listen to the people talk

They are discouraged by fatalistic speeches.

For our second independence

The army of Guinea stands up for freedom.

All the little bosses want to be president,

They are power-hungry,

Their pockets are already exploding,

They are not ready to help,

They are not ready to plan.

Look at how mean they are,

Look at how cynical they are.

They don't care if there is no electricity,

They don't care if there is no school,

They don't care if Haiti is wrecked.

What do I care?

Give me my drink.

Drunkard's words,

Drunkard's words.

Obituary

Gérard Laforest

It is with great sadness that we report the tragic death of Gérard Laforest, one of six people killed when a Carnival float careered out of control into the crowd during the early hours of Shrove Tuesday (February 24). Gérard was a doctor and a veteran anti-Duvalier activist. In January 1990, he was imprisoned and tortured by the military dictatorship of General Prosper Avril. He survived appalling injuries, and once recovered, worked as a member of the election campaign team in support of the candidacy of Jean-Bertrand Aristide.

In September 1994, Gérard visited London as a guest of the Haiti Support Group, and at a public meeting he spoke of his hopes for Haiti's future under a democratic government. We will remember Gérard's energy and *joie de vivre*, epitomised by the memory of him, later that evening, heading off up the Seven Sisters Road in north London in search of an all-night party.