VOODOU, 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 issues 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 experience as a Haitian. There is good and bad in Vodou. But in the Catholic religion, do we 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, Boukm an 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

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 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 himself 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 destined ancestors. Some are conceptualised in human form such as Papa Legba, the old man who guards gates and crossroads and is invoked to begin or end service. Others are less tangible like Gran Buwa, 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. 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 services. The ceremony then proceeds in its own way, for each priest/priestess has his or her favourite rites and special features. Some of the ceremonies are initiated (oumis), who dress in white and are charged with singing and dancing. The priest/priestess controls 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 Iwa 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 certainly a way, consistent with their individual attributes.

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 side’ 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 harnessed to bring protection and luck, or create illness or bad luck for an enemy. A majority 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 there place 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, film-making and crafts for which Haiti is world famous.

Further reading:

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Divine Horsemen - Maya Deren (Thames and Hudson)

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

A short history of Vodou

When millions of black slaves from west Africa were taken to the Americas, their beliefs and practices were born out. The French colonists did not bring 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 spirit of this, the slaves held on to their cultural and religious traditions. They invoked and celebrated their ancestral spirits in secret, using worship and 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 Caïman?

The French colonists correctly saw the new religion as a focus of resistance and to 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. The participants at the Bois Caïman 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 Catholicism for its cultural and religious identity, but the Haitian Republic. In August 1791, a group of slaves met to plan an uprising. 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 harnessed to bring protection and luck, or create illness or bad luck for an enemy. A majority 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.

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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 traffickers, Haiti is bigger than ever, it has never been worse, in large part thanks to traffickers.” 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.”


Oblitiary

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.

Boukman Eksperyans

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, Patol 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 overthrow 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 drunken in the song title and chorus refers to the easy-going manner and liquid-fuelled lifestyle of the current president, Réné Préval.

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 pig population in the early 1980s.