

THE BLOOD OF THE LAND: HAITIAN VODOU



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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

*Tanbou bat nan raje, men se lakay li vin danse –
The drum is beaten in the grass, but it is at home that it comes to dance.
-Haitian proverb¹*



As the congregants gathered for the evening prayer meeting at Faith Church in Cap-Haitien, a slow, staccato drumbeat began to punctuate the air from the adjacent premises. As the evening progressed, the prayers of the faithful church members increased with fervor and strength. Simultaneously, the neighboring drumming amplified with intensity and velocity. The adherents of the Christian and Vodou faiths once again contended against one another and vied for the ear of God. Though I was unfamiliar but curious about this phenomenon, similar occurrences happen daily across the Haitian landscape.

Mention Haiti and everyone is curious about Vodou. No part of Haitian culture is more scandalous or misunderstood. Popular culture has sensationalized it with fantastical Hollywood depictions and fictional literary fantasies. Superstition and Vodou seem to be synonymous. The secretive nature invokes images of cannibalism, animal sacrifices, chanted spells, divination dolls, torture, and malevolent magical workings.

Many Christians have incorrectly labeled Vodou as “devil worship.” Though elements of dark spiritual forces are deeply imbedded in its theology and practices, adherents are not worshipping a “devil.” When televangelist Pat Robertson rashly attributed Haiti’s devastating 2010 earthquake to a “pact to the devil,” he was referring to the August 14, 1791, Bois Caïman Vodou ceremony that ignited the slave rebellion.² Many Haitians concur and believe their country is cursed because of this event.

Vodou has performed a pivotal role in determining Haiti’s culture and history. It is the dominant religion. Evidence of its influence is visible everywhere throughout the land. “To read the history of Haiti while ignoring Voodoo would be comparable to studying the Middle East with no prior knowledge of Judaism, Christianity, or Islam.”³

¹ Meaning- Acts that are done outside the home end up having repercussions in the family.

² An account of the Bois Caïman ceremony is on pages 9-10.

³ Robert Debs Heinl, Nancy Gordon Heinl, and Michael Heinl, *Written in Blood: The Story of the Haitian People 1492-1995* (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, Inc., 1996, revised and expanded edition) 766.

In my documents, I have made the personal choice to use the “**Vodou**” spelling. There are numerous spellings, including Voodoo, Vodun, Voudou, Vodoun, Vaudou, and Vaudoux, and no standard has ever been established. In Haitian Creole, inconsistent spellings are common throughout the language, and Vodou terms are no exception. My choice is to distance it from sensational interpretations and to distinguish Haitian Vodou from variations in other lands. I have also chosen to capitalize the word when I write, rendering it as other religions are transcribed. In conformance with the Haitian pronunciation, the word is pronounced /'vu:du:/.

Vodou is the spiritual blood of Haiti.

Vodou came to the New World from Africa. When the slaves arrived, they had nothing but the chains they bore and what they carried in their hearts—their ancient beliefs and practices. In Hispaniola, it evolved into the people’s religion and sank its roots deep into the culture. The oppressive environment of Saint-Domingue’s colonial period and the impoverished post-Revolution conditions of the peasant’s daily life shaped the religion into its own—**Haitian Vodou**. To the peasant, it provides structure and meaning to the mysteries of life and helps them to make sense of their harsh realities—health, wealth, food, shelter, and sex. It provides a primitive release that transports their pleasures rather than inhibits them.

The peasant is born into a world under the shadow of death, and it never seems to leave him. If a baby survives tetanus, prevalent because the umbilical cord is often cut with unsanitary instruments such as a machete or a broken piece of glass, he later faces the weakening effects of malnutrition and parasites. These undermine his stamina and make him prey to diseases like malaria and tuberculosis.⁴

To find relief in this life, to change his fortune, to obtain healing from a sickness that disables him, or to seek release from an evil spirit that torments him, Haiti’s peasants turn to Vodou to engage the mystifying spirit world and ascertain the cause and a cure.

Vodou is more than a belief. It is Haiti’s way of life; it is power; it is in its blood.

My motivation to write this paper is love. Given the nature of this topic, that might seem incongruent. But for the past two decades, it has been my honor to serve in Haiti, more specifically, the people of Haiti. I love them, and they have loved me back in immeasurable ways. I believe that when one wants to genuinely love someone, it is

² Bernard Diederich and Al Burt, *Papa Doc and the Tonton Macoutes* (Princeton, NJ: Marcus Wiener Publishers, 2005) 32.

imperative to make an effort to know them. I especially hope that this study will benefit those who desire to serve the Haitian people.

Chapter 2

HISTORY

Twou manti pa fon –The hole of lies isn't deep -Haitian proverb⁵

Transformed by Cruelty



Haitian Vodou is the result of one of the cruelest episodes in human history—the slave trade of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Vodou arrived in the West Indies aboard the slave ships from the West Africa Kingdom of Dahomey (present-day nation of Benin). Haitian Vodou transformed under brutal conditions and differs in various aspects from Dahomean spiritualism while maintaining its core.

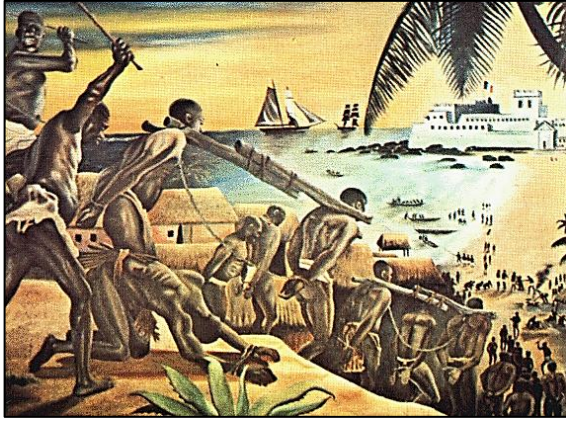
The 1685 **Code Noir** by King Louis XIV elaborated in precise and harsh details the conditions of slavery in France's colonial empire. It forbade the practice of any religion other than Roman Catholicism and ordered all new slaves to be baptized within eight days of their arrival. Many were sprinkled as they emerged in irons from the bowels of the ships.

The sugar and coffee plantations of Saint-Domingue were large scale manufacturing operations that required massive amounts of human labor. They differed from their counterparts in the United States in a key aspect—Saint-Domingue's business model was to systematically work the slaves to death and to replace them with newly purchased arrivals. Half of the slaves died within a few years of arrival.

The logic of this policy was simple and based entirely on mathematical calculations. After four to seven years, the statistics proved, a planter could amortize his initial investment in his slave workforce. At the same time, the plantation would also provide a respectable eight to twelve percent return. It was not economically sound to keep them alive for more than four to seven years. . . . In one hundred years, Haitian slavery killed nearly one million Africans, often after the briefest sojourn there.⁶

⁵ Meaning- You don't have to look far for the truth to be revealed.

⁶ Elizabeth Abbott, *Haiti: The Duvaliers and Their Legacy* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1988), 11.



“There is no indication that the supply of blacks ever equaled the demand for them.”⁷ The extraordinary cruelty killed ten percent of the colony’s half-million-strong population every year. Laurent Dubois notes that fully two-thirds of the slaves in Haiti on the eve of the revolt of 1791 had been born in Africa.⁸

Plantation owners did not attempt to Christianize their new labor force and allowed them to retain their African languages, religions, cultural values, and establish independent social systems. Thousands of slaves ran away and disappeared in Hispaniola’s dense, mountainous forests where capture was nearly impossible. Known as the “**marrons**” (a French word that means “wild, untamed,” like a domesticated animal that turns feral), they founded tiny villages and camps and existed by subsistence farming. Their estimated numbers were in the tens of thousands. In these isolated, primitive environments, the marrons kept their African culture and religion alive. At night, the drumming and chanting reverberated down from the hills.

Some plantation slaves were forcibly forbidden to practice their African faith, and under threat, they accepted Roman Catholicism, nominally, but they did not abandon their traditional spiritual beliefs. Instead, they syncretized the Roman Catholic saints and images with their Vodou spirits and worshipped them by both names.

Vodou was the energy that sustained the slaves and gave them strength through their hardships and suffering. As they endured the burdens of slavery, it became a potent reminder of their former dignities and a driving intensity for freedom. Their religion united plantation slaves and marrons into cooperative communities of faith and rebellion.

One early slave revolt was organized in 1751 by a marron and



⁷ James G. Leyburn, *The Haitian People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1941), 14-15.

⁸ Mike Dash, “Haiti: The Trial That Gave Vodou a Bad Name,” *The Smithsonian Magazine*, May 29, 2013, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/the-trial-that-gave-vodou-a-bad-name-83801276/>.

houngan (priest) named Mackandal. He claimed to possess the magical powers of Jesus, Allah, and African gods, and he was knowledgeable in poisons. He united maroon bands with plantation slaves into secret organizations that poisoned the water supplies and animals. His great terror campaign killed six thousand. He was captured in 1758 and burned at the stake. Before his death, Mackandal said that he would be reincarnated as a deadly mosquito. As his body writhed in convulsions in the flames, the stake snapped and the blacks watching let out a great shout celebrating his free soul. In decades to come, mosquitos would decimate the ranks of the French and British armies with yellow fever.

Bois Caïman



Eighteenth-century Saint-Domingue was a powder keg ready to explode. A combustible mixture of racial hatreds, a burgeoning number of runaway slaves, and a growing independence movement in both France and the West Indies needed only a spark to ignite a revolution. On August 14, 1791, Vodou lit the spark.

Under the cover of night during a raging storm, hundreds of slaves stole away from their plantations to the remote wooded ground known as Bois Caïman (the Alligator Wood). Dutty Boukman, a marron and Vodou houngan, convened the slave rebellion leaders for a Petro Vodou ceremony. With his giant, powerful build and a grotesque, terrible face that looked like an exaggerated African carving, Boukman exercised an undisputed influence and command over his followers. His fierceness made him a fearsome and inspiring leader.

“A woman at the service was possessed by Ogun, the Vodou warrior spirit . . . speaking the voice of the spirit, named those who were to lead the slaves and marrons to revolt and seek a stark justice from their white oppressors.”⁹ The ceremony was marked by flashes of lightning, incantations, and participants formally swearing death to all whites. As drums beat a hypnotic rhythm and worshippers supplicated, a Vodou **mambo** (priestess) led them in chanting as she sacrificed a black pig, and everyone drank its warm blood. Then, Boukman, with his voice roaring above the storm, called upon the assembled slaves to rise up against their masters, saying:

*The god who created the sun which gives us light, who rouses the waves and rules the storm, though hidden in the clouds, he watches us. He sees all that the white man does. The god of the white man inspires him with crime, but our god calls upon us to do good works. Our god who is good to us orders us to revenge our wrongs. He will direct our arms and aid us. Throw away the symbol of the god of the whites who has so often caused us to weep, and listen to the voice of liberty, which speaks in the hearts of us all.*¹⁰

Word spread rapidly of this historic and prophetic religious service and the maroons and slaves readied themselves for a major assault on the whites. This uprising which would not ever be turned back began on the evening of August 21. The whole northern plain surrounding Cape François [present-day Cap-Haïtien] was in flames. Plantation owners were murdered, their women raped and killed, children slaughtered, and their bodies mounted on poles to lead the slaves. It was an incredibly savage outburst.¹¹

⁹ Robert Corbett, “The Haitian Revolution of 1791-1803: An Historical Essay in Four Parts,” Webster University. <http://www.websteruniv.edu/~corbetre/haiti/history/revolution/revolution1.htm>. 8-9.

¹⁰ The L’Ouverture Project. (2009). <http://thelouvertureproject.org/index.php?title=Boukman>.

¹¹ Corbett, Part 1, 8-9.

Soon after the Revolution began, Boukman was captured; his body was burned, and his head was publicly displayed on a pike, in an attempt to shrink his invincibility. However, his influence remained strong, and Haitians later honored him by admitting him into the pantheon of *loa* (Vodou spirits). Dutty Boukman and the Bois Caïman ceremony have had an enduring influence as it has become a dominant motif forming Haiti's national identity. Conversely, some Christian sources have characterized the event as a "pact with the devil," and even many Haitians believe the country is "cursed" because of it.



Independent Isolation

After thirteen years of barbaric war, the united armies of the **noirs** (blacks) and **mulattoes** (mixed-race) defeated the army of Napoleon Bonaparte. Independent Haiti was born in 1804. They had driven the armies of France, Spain, and Great Britain from their portion of the island to become only the second independent nation in the Americas and the first state to be governed by people of African descent, the first Black Republic. The new nation adopted the original Indian name, Haiti, and abolished slavery. The conditions inside this new nation were ripe for Vodou to thrive.

Immediately, independent Haiti became an international pariah. Founding father Jean-Jacques Dessalines could not constrain his malice against the whites. In his first act as the new nation's head of state, he launched a reign of terror to racially cleanse Haiti by exterminating the whites in a sea of blood. All whites—men, women, and children—were brutally butchered in cold blood by the most atrocious means possible.

Approximately 20,000 French were slaughtered. Dessalines exclaimed, “If I die at this moment I will go to my grave happy. We have avenged our brothers. Haiti has become a blood-red spot on the face of the globe!”¹²



When the accounts of the brutality reached foreign governments, they were shocked. Instantly, Haiti was completely ostracized and isolated from the rest of the world. It gave her critics the evidence needed to build a case of a savage nation incapable of being part of the world community. Diplomatic recognition for the world’s first experiment in black self-government would be denied. The United States would not officially recognize Haitian independence until 1862. Frightened Southern plantation owners feared their slave-driven economy would be threatened by their own slaves’ desire for liberty.

The massacre produced another disastrous result. Dessalines, who was illiterate, eliminated most of the educated class essential for the reconstruction and administration of Haiti’s economy and society. A new, hierarchical society emerged with deep disparities in wealth and education. The minority elite, mixed-race mulattos—French-speaking and French-educated— would commandeer the economic and governing power while the newly emancipated black majority would linger and labor in abject poverty and darkness.

¹² Heintl, Heintl, and Heintl, 123.

The isolation from foreign influences and the hierarchical social structure would deepen the power of Haitian Vodou among the uneducated black masses. It flourished in the secluded backcountry and small villages that were once marron refuges.

Some surviving colonists fled Haiti to New Orleans and other West Indies islands, accompanied by their Vodou practicing slaves. Although practiced in these regions, it was not as strong a force as in Haiti because it was brutally suppressed each time it emerged.

The Roman Catholic Church shares considerable responsibility for Vodou evolving and taking root as Haiti's dominant religion. During the colonial period, the Church was a loyal collaborator with the oppressors, further driving the slaves away from Christianity and to the security of their ancestral faiths. Bible teachings posed awkward questions in a slaveholding society.

The low moral state of the Haitian Catholic Church was another significant contributing factor. Many of the priests who found their way to the island were questionable characters—dubious adventurers or fugitive convicts—and lacked theological training. Heresies propagated by untrained priests contributed to further distancing from the Christian faith towards spiritualism. According to Philippe Girard, when France acquired Saint-Domingue, the kingdom was emerging from a massive scandal in which prominent members of the royal court were convicted of celebrating black masses in which infants were executed. The passion for occultism and various enchantments were practiced by plantation owners in the presence of the house slaves who incorporated these spells into their Vodou ceremonies.¹³

In 1828, James Franklin wrote, “The Catholic Church in Haiti appears to be in a very disorganized state. Some of the priests are some of the most abject and miserable wretches that I think I ever saw.”¹⁴ US Representative John Candler visited in 1840 and recorded, “The chief object of the ecclesiastics in Haiti is to secure gold and silver as quickly as they can. They encourage superstition in the people. Not content with baptizing children for gain, they baptize houses, boats, and doorposts . . . widespread rites of heathenism, such as are practiced to this day in Africa . . . heathen ceremonies are commonly resorted to, libations are poured out, and a table is spread for the dead, of common eatables.”¹⁵

¹³ Philippe R. Girard, *Haiti: The Tumultuous History- From Pearl of the Caribbean to Broken Nation*, (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005) 30.

¹⁴ Heintl, Heintl, and Heintl, 184.

¹⁵ Heintl, Heintl, and Heintl, 185.

After the Revolution, the Church was poorly organized and administered. There were only three churches standing and six priests in the entire country. From 1804-1860, a schism separated Rome and Haiti. The Vatican would not ordain or name a single Haitian bishop or priest, even though President Boyer implored them. Instead, it mandated an incompatible arrangement by extending hated Santo Domingo's (present-day Dominican Republic) Spanish jurisdiction over Haiti.

Priests neglected the villages where the people resided and conversions in the interior ceased. To foreign visitors and the indifferent mulatto elite, Vodou was simply regarded as primitive superstition or a folk religion to be reluctantly tolerated and ignored. Under these conditions, Vodou thrived.

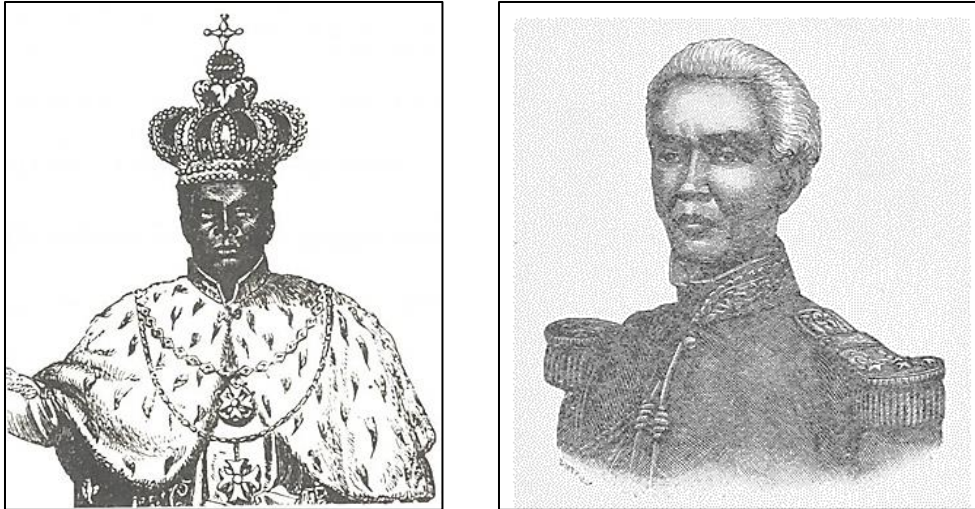
Noted British adventure traveler Hesketh-Pritchard, who walked across the Haitian interior in 1899, wrote that it was nothing but “‘West African superstition serpent worship,’ and that believers indulged in ‘their rites and their orgies with practical impunity.’”¹⁶ For Westerners, this was proof that the “black republic” could not claim to be civilized.

Forty-three years after the Revolution, in 1847, a former slave, Faustin Soulouque, was appointed president. Soulouque was a fervent believer in Vodou, and on the day of his inauguration, he refused to kneel upon the presidential *prie-dieu* (prayer desk) because a mambo had told him it had been cursed with a spell by a **bocor** (sorcerer). An **ouanga** (talisman) would limit the kneeler to no more than thirteen months in office, the length of time that the four previous presidents had governed.

For the first time, Vodou was openly practiced in the Presidential Palace and given official religious status. Soulouque maintained a staff of spiritual advisors, bocors and mambos, in his residence and exploited Vodou as a component of his ruthless regime. Yet, he and his wife practiced Catholicism and saw nothing incompatible with both.

Soulouque's reign lasted longer than thirteen months—ten-years. Opinions vary about the man and his reign, from nonsensical to cruel, but he was also one of Haiti's most influential rulers. Like his predecessors, Soulouque scamped to exile in Jamaica after a revolt led by General Fabre Geffrard. One hundred years later, a future dictator would follow his template of terror and spirituality, “Papa Doc Duvalier.”

¹⁶ Mike Dash, “Haiti: The Trial That Gave Vodou A Bad Name,” *The Smithsonian Magazine*, May 29, 2013, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/the-trial-that-gave-vodou-a-bad-name-83801276/>.



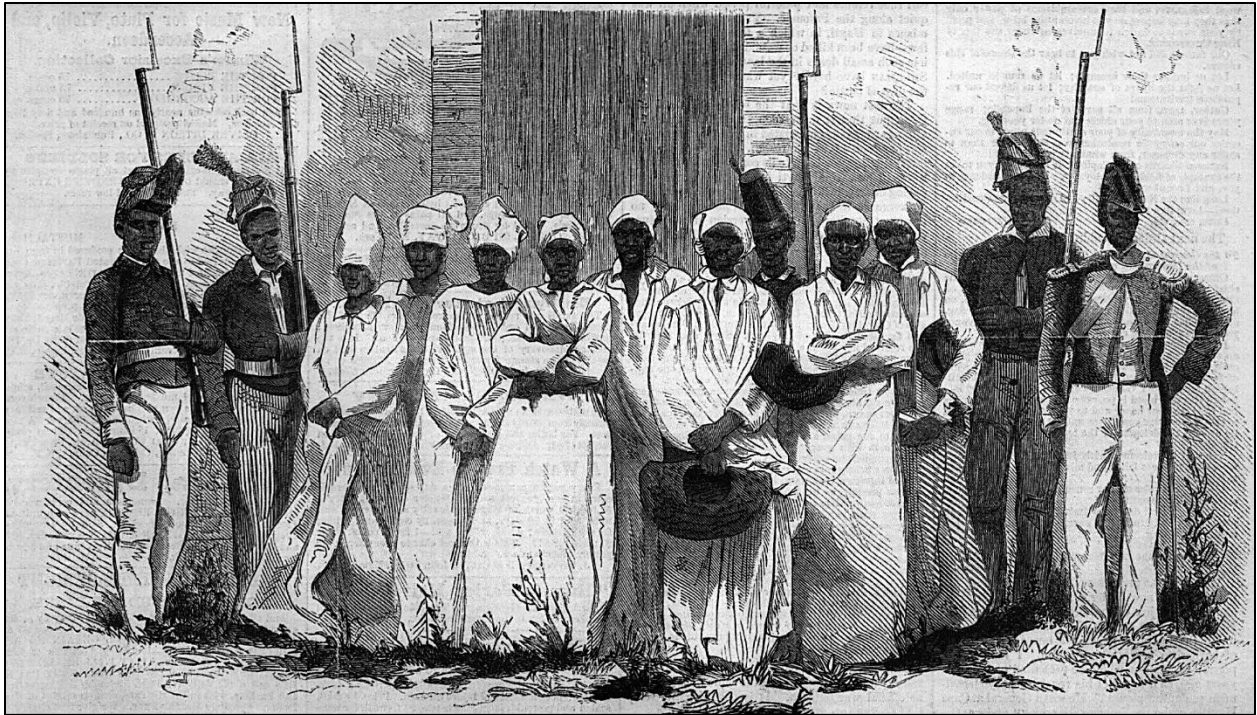
Faustin Soulouque, Emperor Faustin I, and Fabre Nicolas Geffrard

Fabre Nicolas Geffrard was Soulouque’s foil—mulatto, elite, educated, and hostile to Vodou. As the newly appointed president, he desperately wanted diplomatic recognition and international acceptance for his country. The privileged class felt that Vodou was suppressing Haiti’s progress and impeding the respect. The Vatican Schism of 1804 had segregated Rome from Haiti. In 1841, Pope Gregory XVI sent an emissary to restore relations, conveying the Pope’s aspirations, “I won’t die easy if the Lord doesn’t give me the consolation of seeing this poor abandoned country become Christian again.”¹⁷ On the other hand, the Vatican was more concerned about the arrival of Protestant missionaries as much as the power of Vodouism. The mission failed miserably. Papal envoys utterly underestimated the depth of the difficulties and opposition. Widespread resistance from French Jacobins, Freemasons, and Templars would only accept the Church as an arm of the state and would not submit to its absolute authority. The reprobate clergy who had fled Europe’s orders wanted their continued security and life beyond Papal discipline. The Pope did not die easy.

Geffrard understood that nothing positive could be accomplished in Port-au-Prince, so he took the initiative and dispatched ambassadors to Rome to negotiate a concordat. At last, in 1860, the schism was mended. The new pact committed Haiti to making Catholicism its state religion. The Vatican assigned a French military archbishop, forty priests, and a corps of nuns. Their first order of business was to purge the degenerate priests.

¹⁷ Heintl, Heintl, and Heintl, 209.

“A Goat Without Horns”



1864 *Harper's Weekly* engraving of the eight Bizoton Haitian Vodou devotees

Geffrard was a reformist and eager to demonstrate that Haiti was a Christian nation and governed by the rule of law. He redrafted the Penal Code to impose heavy fines and penalties for casting spells and sorcery, performing dances and practices that displayed a spirit of fetishism, and any customs likely to upset the pope, such as public nudity and bigamy. Don Mariano Alvarez, the Spanish charge d'affaires at the time reported, “President Geffrard, who is not afraid of the Vaundoux [Vodou] . . . with an energy that does him honor, has caused the authorities to throw down the altars, collect the drums, timbres, and other ridiculous instruments which *papalois* [priests] use in their diabolical ceremonies.”¹⁸

His commitment to these reforms would be put to the test in 1864. Vodou and Haiti were put on trial, and the dark, mysterious religion would come out of the shadows and onto the world stage for all to collectively gasp.

Four men and four women were arrested and tried for a gruesome crime—abducting, murdering, and cannibalizing a 12-year-old girl. The killing had taken place in the

¹⁸ Heintl, Heintl, and Heintl, 209.

village of Bizoton, near Port-au-Prince. A man named Congo Pelé sacrificed his own niece in the hope of winning favor from the Vodou gods.

The world was alerted to the horror of the crime in a detailed account from Sir Spenser St. John, the British charge d'affaires in Port-au-Prince. The international press flocked to the Caribbean to put the heinousness of Vodou on center stage in the global public eye. St. John's salacious account defined Haiti as a place where ritual murder and cannibalism were commonplace, and usually went unpunished.

He described Pelé as "a laborer, a gentleman's servant, an idler" who had grown resentful of his poverty and was "anxious to improve his position without exertion on his part." Since he was the brother of a noted Vodou mambo, the solution was obvious, the gods and spirits could provide for him. In December 1863, Jeanne Pelé agreed to help her brother. "It was settled between them . . . that about the new year some sacrifice should be offered to propitiate the serpent." The only difficulty was the scale of Congo's ambition. While "a more modest man would have been satisfied with a white cock or a white goat . . . it was thought better to offer a more important sacrifice." Two Vodou houngans were consulted, and they recommended that Pelé offer up a "goat without horns"—a human sacrifice.¹⁹

Jeanne Pelé chose her sister's child, a 12-year-old girl named Claircine. On December 27, 1863, Jeanne invited her sister to visit Port-au-Prince with her, and, in their absence, Congo Pelé and the two priests seized Claircine. They bound and gagged her and hid her beneath the altar of a nearby temple. The girl stayed there for four full days and nights. Finally, after dark on New Year's Eve, an elaborate Vodou ceremony was held. At its climax—St. John says—Claircine was strangled, flayed, decapitated, and dismembered. Her body was cooked, and her blood caught and kept in a jar.²⁰

In 1846, a sect called the **Guyons** were widely rumored to perform human sacrifices. One member was brought to trial in a chillingly identical child cannibalism ceremony. The court never rendered a judgment, and the government suppressed the proceedings. For this reason, President Geffrard wished to make an example because it represented everything he hoped to renounce and abandon as he molded Haiti into a modern



¹⁹ Dash, "Haiti: The Trial That Gave Vodou A Bad Name."

²⁰ Dash.

nation. As the whole of the country assembled and the world's telegraph wires shivered, it was hard to conceive of a case more likely to bring Vodou and Haiti into greater disrepute than the murder and cannibalism of a child.

The most damning testimony came from a participant named Roséide Sumera. At trial, she confessed to eating the palms of the victim's hands, her favorite morsel, and detailed every aspect of the whole ritual. Two eyewitnesses, a young woman and a child who claimed to watch from holes in the wall in an adjoining room, corroborated the gruesomeness. The child testified that she had been intended as a second victim. She was tied up under the same altar that had concealed Claircine, so that they could sacrifice her on Twelfth Night (January 5), the most sacred date in the Vodou calendar. She divulged all the terrifying details and then her nerves broke down so completely that she had to be taken out of the courtroom and was unable to respond to jury queries.

To deepen the horrors, the most damning evidence produced at trial was the child's freshly boiled skull, her cooked flesh, and a pile of bones concealed in the bushes outside of the temple.

The trial ended with the convictions of four men and four women. Their executions by firing squad were performed by untrained soldiers who had to practice close range firing for half an hour, but they still managed to botch their role. St. John was a witness at the executions and recorded that the prisoners were tied in pairs, placed in a line, and faced by five soldiers per pair. They fired with such inaccuracy that only six fell wounded on the first discharge. It took these inexperienced soldiers half an hour to complete the capital sentence. The unnecessary suffering of the convicted produced unexpected pity for them as they summoned the soldiers to draw closer. Roseide Sumera held the muzzle of a musket to her chest and called on the man to fire.

The executions were to demonstrate Haiti's Christian orthodoxy just weeks before the new priests arrived from Rome for their first mission. But it backfired. The opposite effect was produced. By taking a straightforward course of exposure and prosecuting in open court, Haiti sealed its international identity as a savage, uncivilized land.

During the remainder of the nineteenth century, sadistic and scandalous perceptions were propagated by authors with little or no personal experience or evidence to support their tales. In 1884, Sir Spenser St. John published his memoir entitled *Hayti: The Black Republic* (the double connotation was intentional), which caused public outrage with its sensational stories of cannibalism. Though he was accurate with some facts, he also circulated numerous suspect exaggerations. Chief among them was that Haitian Vodou's most dominant and central rite was human sacrifice and cannibalism, and that people

were killed, and their flesh was sold in the public market. Victorian writers who had never visited the island or seen a Vodou ritual nevertheless described in vivid detail practitioners throwing themselves on the victims, tearing them apart with their teeth and madly sucking out the blood. Myths propagandized that each day forty Haitians were eaten and nearly every citizen had tasted human flesh.

The British minister to Haiti in 1910, Alexander Murray, promulgated the legends about cannibalism and child sacrifices by reporting a rumor from a Haitian colleague who justified it by saying:

You condemn our human sacrifices, but Abraham was about to sacrifice his son when he saw the ram caught by his horns in a thicket; we also sacrifice a goat instead of a child on ordinary occasions. We have our solemn feasts at which we eat human flesh; your priests tell you to believe that it is the body of Christ that you partake of at Communion.²¹

Haitian writers and officials were ultrasensitive to any mention of “goats without horns” and vehemently denied any forms of human sacrifice existed, dismissing the “Affaire de Bizoton” as an isolated incident.

Occupied Vodou

Universal perceptions of the nation and its dominant religion lingered for the next half-century. These impressions were a major factor in initiating the next humiliating chapter in Haiti’s history—the nineteen-year United States military occupation.

For its part, Haiti did nothing but contribute to the lamentable perceptions. Following the bizarre “Affaire de Bizoton,” it sank deeper into economic and political turbulence. The volatile instability inflicted greater suffering on the people. In a seventy-two-year period, there were 102 bloody civil wars, revolutions, insurrections, and coup d’états that utterly ruined any chance for stable leadership and progress. The presidential palace was occupied by twenty-two heads of state—only one completed his full term of office; thirteen were ousted before the expiration of their terms; four died in office; one was blown up inside his palace; another was most likely poisoned, and one despot was dismembered by a savage mob.

With the dawning of the twentieth century, officials in the United States became increasingly apprehensive about Haiti’s vast unpaid loans and Germany’s growing economic influence and aggressive military presence in the Caribbean. As the prospect of war escalated in Europe, the Woodrow Wilson administration began making

²¹ Heintl, Heintl, and Heintl, 777.

contingency plans for the occupation of Haiti. “Hayti is a public nuisance at our doors,” stated U.S. Assistant Secretary of State, Alvey A. Adee, and the nuisance could no longer be tolerated.²²

The instability provided the US with a pretext for occupation. On July 27, 1915, armed rebels attacked and fired upon the provisional Presidential Palace in another violent coup attempt to overthrow the government of Guillaume Sam. The President was wounded in the buttock. He ordered his chief of police to execute all political prisoners, all of whom were from Haiti’s elite families. Nearly 200 terror-stricken hostages were systematically murdered inside the prison. British foreign minister Kohan reported, “They were found shot, hacked, mutilated, and disemboweled—the walls and floors of the prison were spattered with their blood, their brains, and their entrails.”²³

As the news of the massacre spread, a mob of Haiti’s elite citizens swarmed into the streets of Port-au-Prince in one enormous outburst of violent rage. An infuriated horde snatched Guillaume Sam, who had sought sanctuary in the bathroom of the French embassy, and literally ripped his body to pieces.

There was a terrific howl of fury . . . I could see that something or somebody was on the ground in the center of the crowd, just before the gates, and when a man disentangled himself from the crowd and rushed howling by me, with a severed hand from which the blood was dripping, the thumb of which he had stuck in his mouth, I knew that the assassination of the President was accomplished. Behind him came other men with the feet, the other hand, the head, and other parts of the body displayed on poles, each one followed by a mob of screaming men and women. The portion of the body that remained was dragged through the streets by the crowd.²⁴

Elizabeth Abbott relates an event that occurred years before. On an evening in October of 1887, Guillaume Sam attended a Vodou ceremony led by a powerful houngan with his brother Tiresias Antoine Simon Sam, who would also become a future president of Haiti. As the drummers pounded out their staccato rhythms, the worshippers chanted and moaned, and several possessed dancers swayed and wildly flailed their arms, one of the **hounsis** (white-garmented assistants to the houngan) reached out to the houngan and bid him to halt and to listen to the words of the goddess Erzulie speaking through her.

²² Heintl, Heintl, and Heintl, 385.

²³ Heintl, Heintl, and Heintl, 378.

²⁴ Heintl, Heintl, and Heintl, 381.

Taking Tiresias' hand and staring with glazed eyes into his, she intoned the goddess' message to him, "You are going to become very powerful. President, that's what it is. You are going to be President."

Then releasing his hand, she turns toward Guillaume. Squeezing his hand, she spoke again. "You too will be President. But don't be in too much of a hurry, for it won't last very long, and it won't be good."²⁵

The spectacle of a jubilant mob parading through the streets with the dismembered corpse of their former president shocked the United States into swift action. The British, French, and American legations urgently requested that a strong force be immediately landed, as anarchy ruled the streets. Secretary of State, Elihu Root, who had been monitoring Haiti for years and had exclaimed, "In the name of humanity, morality, and civilization . . ." he was hoping that a "psychological moment" would arise so the United States could establish "the right sort of relations."²⁶



²⁵ Abbott, 30-31.

²⁶ Abbott, 34-35.

This was his “psychological moment” and the “right sort of relations” were immediately established. The American warship *Washington* sped to the Port-au-Prince Harbor, and on July 28, 1915, 330 US sailors and marines went ashore on the authority of President Woodrow Wilson.

The American Occupation was an era of profound shame for Haitians on many levels. Cultures clashed immediately. The American military treated the Haitians with paternal colonial attitudes reminiscent of the plantation period.

The thousands of American marines who were deployed were all white, many from the South, where Jim Crow laws were still the law of the land. The reams of letters and reports sent back home described the Haitians as “coons,” “niggers,” and “apes” with “semi-brains.” In Haiti, the shade of one’s complexion distinguished one’s social standing. The wealthy, light-skinned mulatto elites had received privileged deference from the dark-skinned noirs for generations. But to the marines, they were “blue gum niggers,” imposters who aped as white men, and even under all of their veneer and polish would revert their natural state of savageness. For the first time in their lives, mulattos felt the sting of indignities and prejudice that they had inflicted upon their black countrymen for centuries.

For the American command, “the right sort of relations” gave them latitude to impose themselves upon all segments of Haitian society. Their insensitive and oppressive measures would anger and unite every class against the “white invader,” something that had not occurred since the revolution ousted the French.

Former US Naval Mission Chief to Haiti during the Duvalier years, Colonel Robert Heinl, wrote, “One of the occupation’s most serious mistakes—a mistake of ignorance—was . . . in ill-advised attempts to stamp out Voodoo. . . . It is a measure of the occupation’s lost opportunities, during nearly two decades in Haiti, that no evidence can be found that senior American officials ever seriously comprehended Voodoo in its impressive totality as Haiti’s national religion.”²⁷

The sounds of the pounding Vodou drums and blasting conch shells at night irritated the expeditionary force. Like the rest of the outside world, they considered it to be “witchcraft” and “black magic.” They believed the tales of human sacrifice, ritual murders, and blood drunk from human skulls. They could not distinguish between lighting a candle in a cathedral and lighting one at the foot of a mango tree. They could not distinguish between preparing cornmeal for dinner or consecration to the gods. Most of all, they feared Vodou’s subversive nature would incite the peasants to violence and fight to the death, as in past generations. Therefore, Vodou needed to be eradicated.

²⁷ Heinl, Heinl, and Heinl, 457.

Provisional President Louis Borno, a mulatto and tenaciously anti-Vodou, urged the Marine officers to enforce a seldom imposed statute in the 1863 Haitian Penal Code forbidding the practice of Vodou. This gave license to unleash a vast campaign of sending American officers with the Haitian **gendarmerie** (military police) into villages to desecrate temples, sacred drums, and other artifacts. Ceremonies were disbanded and hounsans, mambos, and bocors were arrested. As in the past, Vodou went underground. Ceremonies continued with clandestine meetings, posted sentries, and secret passes.



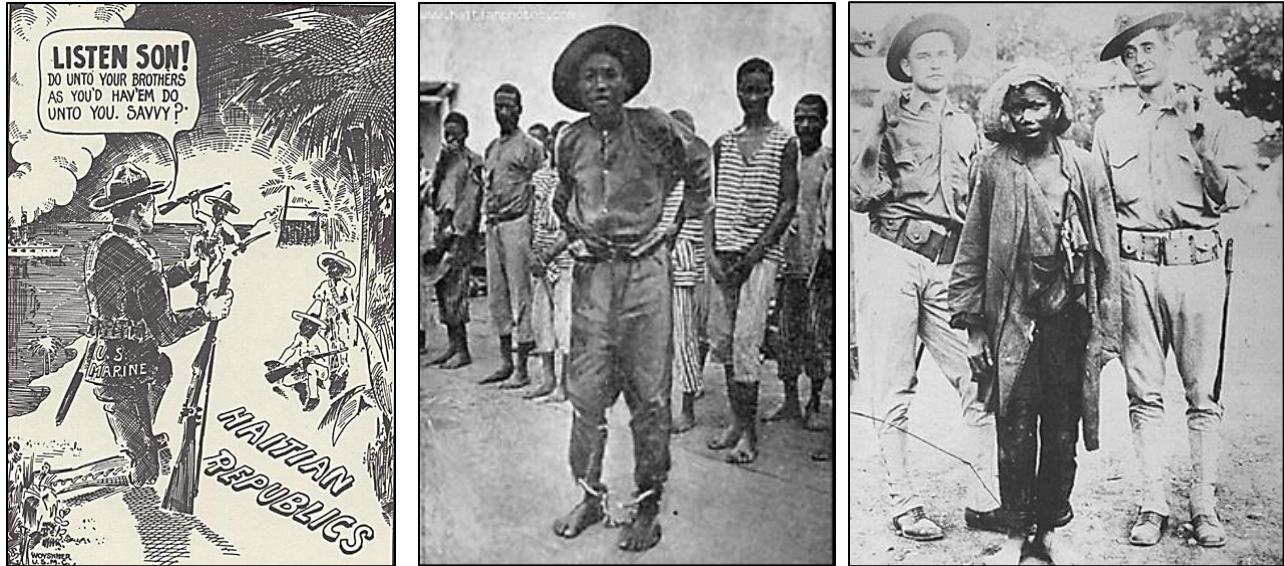
Sorcerer's passport offering safe passage

What did not go underground was the anger and bitterness. Violence erupted. Thousands of Haitians lost their lives in a bloody guerrilla rebellion known as the **Cacos**²⁸ Wars.

Vodou adherents believed that the war god Ogun was shielded with iron and immune to fire and bullets, and if he was properly appeased, he would protect his petitioners from bullets and weapon wounds. Many Caco soldiers fearlessly and foolishly propelled their bodies into the pitch of battle believing that Ogun's armor would shield them from bullets. They were no match for Marine machine guns.

One documented act of Vodou vengeance, savagery, and lunacy, occurred on the morning of April 4, 1920, a small Marine patrol was ambushed by troops led by Caco general Benoit Batrville, who was also a bocor. They captured wounded Marine Lieutenant Lawrence Muth. Benoit propped up his prisoner, made a speech, and then with a machete ceremonially cut off his head and private parts, took out his heart, liver, and intestines, and removed two large strips of flesh. He gave the heart and liver to his fighters believing that the organs would impart wisdom and courage to those eating them. Muth's brain was smeared on the cartridges and sights of their guns to improve their accuracy (the Cacos were infamously poor marksmen).

²⁸ *Cacos*- mercenary soldiers from northern Haiti contracted by regional chiefs to overthrow governments for the highest price. They dominated Haiti's political chaos in the early twentieth century.



“The Missionary” (US propaganda); Caco after killing a Marine; arrested rebel

Embittered by the oppression and racism, Haitians looked deep into their past as a source of pride and in the process rehabilitated the image and respect for Vodou. Unable to resist the military might of their foreign invader, Haitians resisted with a new nationalism. A contemporary ethnological movement was conceived that embraced their African heritage with a refreshed pride and patriotism. The movement was called **noirisme**, after the French word for black. By adopting their African roots, Haitians found dignity in African customs, their Creole language, Haitian traditions, the color of their skin, and Vodou.

Noiristes concluded that their dual identity, European and African, were incompatible and the source of their cultural and political discord. By adopting the traditions and systems of their former colonial master as the model for the nation—the French language, education, and customs, and Catholicism—they were living in denial of their origins and embracing a culture completely foreign to their true nature.

Haitian intellectuals devotedly studied this new philosophy and fought against the widespread prejudice of their skin color while incorporating Creole folk tales into their literature. Catholicism and Christianity were now the scorned religions, and Vodou achieved new acceptance and followers. Noirisme deeply touched the soul of suffering Haiti.

Noirisme’s philosophy was later adopted by Stokely Carmichael during the American Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s as “Black Power,” and by future Haitian President François Duvalier.

The United States Occupation of Haiti lasted nineteen long years, from 1915-1934, and through four presidential administrations (Wilson, Harding, Coolidge, and Franklin Roosevelt). On August 14, 1934, the final contingent of US Marines departed after a formal transfer of authority, though the US maintained control over Haiti's external finances until 1947. "The right sort of relations" was never established.

The US Forbes Commission investigated the occupation to determine its abuses and malfunctions. It determined that the failures of the occupation could be attributed to not fully comprehending Haiti's social climate, a brusque attempt to plant democracy in a nation without a record in diplomatic self-governance, and an unwise determination to establish a middle-class. It further concluded that Haiti was little better fitted for self-government than they were in 1915, and that little real change had in truth been wrought.

On President Stenio Vincent declared August 21, 1934, the day of Haiti's second independence. Haitians have long regarded this as one of the most humiliating periods in their history. Immediately, the country returned to its previous forms of political instability and intrigue. Public leaders maneuvered to consolidate their power with the support of the military or succumbed to their conspiracies and interventions.

"The Principle Slave of Satan"

In 1942, mulatto President Élie Lescot and the Roman Catholic Church launched an "anti-superstition campaign," against the practice of Vodou. Fanatical Gonaives Bishop, Monsignor Paul Robert, preached vicious anti-inflammatory sermons equating it with Satanism. His devotees and the military dispersed throughout the countryside destroying numerous Vodou temples, ceremonial artifacts, such as drums and gourds, and sacred trees. Practitioners, priests, and priestesses were arrested and imprisoned. They forced the people to renounce Vodou through a catechism:

Who is the principle slave of Satan? —The principle slave of Satan is the houngan. What is the name the hougans give to Satan? — The names the hougans gives to Satan are loas [spirits], angels, saints, the dead, the sacred twins. . . . They take these names to deceive us more easily. Have we the right to mix with the slaves of Satan? No, because they are evil doers, they are liars like Satan.²⁹

²⁹ Abbott, 53.

French anthropologist Alfred Métraux became alarmed at the possibility that this folk culture could disappear. He founded the Bureau of Ethnology with writer Jacques Roumain and Dr. Price Mars. They saved many valuable Vodou pieces from the fires and commenced research into various aspects of the cultic religion.

In the end, the Church and State failed miserably to extinguish the peoples' religion. It went underground for a period, but the masses' devotion deepened, and their resentment intensified.



Summoning the Spirits



In the two tumultuous decades following the United States Occupation, governments fell, and presidents fled in rapid succession. In 1957, a new leader emerged to assume the reigns of rule, François “Papa Doc” Duvalier. He would use the power of Vodou as an instrument of terror to subdue the populace and to reach deep inside the nation’s soul.

As an astute observer of Haitian life, after having lived and worked in the countryside, Duvalier knew the central role Vodou played in the lives of the common people and that their allegiance could be captured through its dark powers. He was skilled in its beliefs and practices and most likely a houngan or a bocor. Using Vodou’s manipulative influences for devious political purposes and to elevate his aura as the savior of Haiti, he incorporated hougans and bocors into his intelligence network and the ranks of the **Tonton Macoutes**, his private Gestapo-like force.

Duvalier was also deeply knowledgeable in other spiritualisms, especially **onomanie**, a magical Haitian numerology from whose divinations he became convinced that the number 22 would confer on him high and sinister powers. Therefore, it was not surprising to those who knew him that he was elected to the presidency on September 22, selected October 22 as his inauguration day, and set other important events on dates bearing that number.

Papa Doc cultivated a cult persona as the earthly manifestation of **Baron Samedi**, the most feared loa who kept the gates to the grave. To the superstitious and uneducated peasantry, his appearance was instantly recognizable and feared. He would speak in a deep nasal tone and wear dark glasses—like Baron Samedi who had to protect his eyes from the light since he spent most of his time in the invisible realm.

The extraordinary events that occurred during Duvalier’s reign are bizarre, shocking, and numerous.

Elizabeth Abbott, in *Haiti: The Duvaliers and Their Legacy*, tells of an episode where Papa Doc “summoned the most the powerful spirits” to his side at the outset of his presidency in order to gain complete mastery over his people. In the Artibonite Valley, near the top of ancient mountain, is a vast cave called **Trou Foban**. In Haiti, spirits prefer natural dwellings just as they did in Africa, especially under waterfalls and in trees and under rocks. Trou Foban is greatly feared for the supernatural might of its spirits. Since the days of slavery, it has been known as the home where the evil spirits who roamed throughout country gathered. Only the most powerful houngans and bocors dare to conduct ceremonies there because these spirits are not to be toyed with.



François Duvalier made the long trek to this sacred cave with a houngan and a host of acolytes. After elaborate and secret preparations, the mystics called upon the spirits to leave the cave and to follow Papa Doc to Port-au-Prince to a new home in the Presidential Palace. Haitians believe that the incantations were successful, and that the spirits followed him and set up residence in his mystic room in the Palace. They also believe that because they lived with him, no human being could overthrow him.³⁰

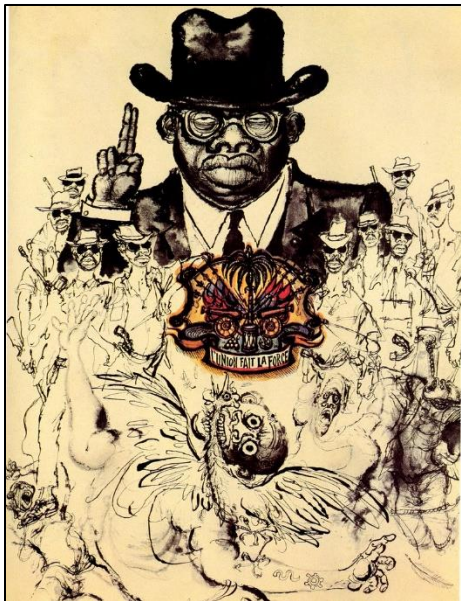
On one evening in 1959, as dusk was settling over the Cul-de-Sac and charcoal fires and kerosene lamps flickered in a thousand huts, truckloads of soldiers were deployed stealthily around Croix-des-Missions and Croix-des-Bouquets, [Vodou’s] heartland. During the hours ahead, pouncing without warning, detachments picked up every houngan and mambo in the region, packed them into trucks at gunpoint, and drove them off into the night. The convoys converged in the inner courtyard of the Palais National. At midnight, herded up the darkened spiral backstairs of the palace into Salle des Bustes, houngans and mambos faced François Duvalier, standing alone and menacing in the blood-red robe of the

³⁰ Abbott, 81-82.

Secte Rouge. ‘Never forget,’ he told them, ‘that I am the supreme authority of the State. Henceforth, I, I alone. I am your only master’ Then, wordlessly, he dismissed.³¹

Duvalier elevated the antiestablishment Vodou to normalized heights never before permitted in Haiti’s underground toleration of the religion. His eccentric, bizarre behaviors were lived out within the walls of the Presidential Palace as if it were his divine temple. Allies claimed that he studied goat entrails for guidance, sought counsel from the gods when sitting in the bathtub wearing his top hat, and spiritually communicated with Dessalines by sleeping on his tomb one night a year.³² Gruesome stories emerged about his fascination with enemy corpses.

On the express orders of the president, Philogènes’ [former military captain] head of one unfortunate foe was chopped off with a machete, packed in a fast-melting bucket of ice, and flown back to the National Palace. Here, with spiritual counsel from houngan Dodo Nasar, Duvalier interrogated the spirit of Philogènes and conversed at length with the head.³³



Duvalier’s former presidential rival Clément Jumelle’s was a fugitive from the Papa Doc’s henchmen. He became deathly ill and died while in refuge inside the Cuban ambassador’s residence. Papa Doc demanded the corpse for Vodou rituals. As the body was being delivered to the Sacred Heart Cathedral for final rites, the Tonton Macoutes intercepted the hearse and abducted the casket into their van. As his widow shrieked, the body snatchers sped away. Jumelle’s cousin and others followed the van to the palace gates and whispered in disbelief, “Duvalier’s going to capture his loa . . . Duvalier’s going to use the body for magic.”³⁴

Word leaked out that Duvalier mounted the portly, swollen corpse and called upon its spirit, as a host of Macoutes stared in awe. To his great disappointment, the spirit had already departed.

³¹ Heint, Heint, and Heint, 576.

³² Diederich and Burt, 346.

³³ Heint, Heint, Heint, 604.

³⁴ Abbott, 93.

The Macoutes returned the coffin to the family and ordered them to bury it immediately without inspection. At a later date, the family dug up the coffin and discovered a strange thin body inside.

Duvalier had longstanding scores to settle with the Catholic Church. Like many Haitians, he perceived it to be an extension of French colonialism and racist because of its strong alignment with the elite. As voices from prominent clergy started to rise against the regime, Duvalier launched a full-scale attack. First, foreign-born archbishops, priests, and professors were expelled or imprisoned. Then the seminaries and universities were closed. The entire Canadian Jesuit Order was completely banished, never to return during his reign.

One evening, as a thousand worshippers knelt in prayer during mass for the departing clergy in Port-au-Prince's cathedral, the Tonton Macoutes suddenly descended upon them. The Macoutes started cracking heads with their nightsticks, staining the basilica's aisles with blood, and demolishing sacred objects. Outside, they arrested sixty wounded supplicants. The official justification for the sacrilege was delivered by the Minister of Cults, psychiatrist Louis Mars: "Christ himself took a scourge to expel the evildoers from the Temple."³⁵

Papa Doc restocked parish positions with pistol-packing Macoute priests who would celebrate the mass, hear confessions, and report those that were perceived to be politically suspect. Protestant missionaries and their proliferating churches were not exempt from expulsions and infiltrations either.

The Vatican retaliated by excommunicating Duvalier, the second Latin American head of state to be anathematized since Juan Peron. After a few years, Pope Paul VI sought to mend fences and invited Haiti to enter into formal discussions. The eagerly inclined Papa Doc stipulated that a new concordat must be hammered out to replace the one signed in 1860 by President Fabre Nicolas Geffrard. He demanded a native Haitian Church hierarchy, the right to make all appointments, subject to papal approval, and the annulment of his excommunication. Duvalier proved to be a formidable negotiator. Eventually, Pope Paul VI acceded to Papa Doc's demands while the dictator conceded very little. Vodou also received official religious status. "Enemies of Duvalier would say the Church had been 'macoutisée' or, worse, 'zombifiée.'"³⁶

³⁵ Heintz, Heintz, and Heintz, 583.

³⁶ Heintz, Heintz, and Heintz, 611.

The enhancement of Vodou to official religious status deified Duvalier's position of power. His megalomania was without boundaries. The national state newspaper published an image with Christ's hand on Papa Doc's shoulder with the caption, "He is My chosen one." Official palace degrees replaced personal pronouns with "Sovereign." To safeguard his veneration by the nation, Duvalier's name replaced the Holy Trinity in standard Roman Catholic rituals of litanies, hymns, prayers, and doctrine.

Le Catéchisme de la Révolution

"Question: Who are Dessalines, Toussaint, Christophe, Pétion, and Estimé?
Answer: Dessalines, Toussaint, Christophe, Pétion, and Estimé are five distinct Chiefs of State who are substantiated in and form only one and the same President in the person of François Duvalier."³⁷

In place of the Lord's Prayer, children were instructed to recite in school:

"Our Doc, who art in the National Palace for life, hallowed by Thy name by present and future generations. They will be done in Port-au-Prince as it is in the provinces. Give us this day our new Haiti and forgive not the trespasses of those anti-patriots who daily spit upon our country; lead them into temptation, and poisoned by their own venom, deliver them from no evil . . ."³⁸

"The year Duvalier came to power his men stenciled on the walls of the old Finance Ministry: 'Man talks without acting. God acts without talking. Duvalier is God.'³⁹

Papa Doc detested John F. Kennedy because he would not let him spend US aid money without restraint; he vowed to 'bring Kennedy to his knees.' Dressing in his houngan vestments, Papa Doc conducted a Vodou death ceremony in the National Palace placing a curse on his adversary. When the news of Kennedy's assassination reached Duvalier, he rejoiced and served champagne, and claimed credit for his death since it occurred on November 22—the magical Haitian numerology number



³⁷ Robert Corbett, "The Lord's Prayer According to Francois (Papa Doc) Duvalier," Bob Corbett's Haitian History Page, Webster University, <http://faculty.webster.edu/corbette/haiti/history/duvaliers/lordsprayer.htm>.

³⁸ Corbett.

³⁹ Diederich and Burt, 349.

divined to confer him with sinister powers. A few months later, Duvalier dispatched an envoy to Arlington National Cemetery to bring back particles of dirt from each corner of Kennedy's grave, shredded fragments of funeral flowers, and a vial of gravesite air. In a new ritual, Duvalier hoped to capture JFK's soul and render it subject to his will, thereby controlling US-Haiti relations.

François Duvalier claimed to be a god, but he could not escape death. On April 14, 1971, with family members at his bedside, Papa Doc breathed his last. A houngan was called to administer the last Vodou rites.

In the **houmforts** [temples] of the Cul-de-Sac it was whispered that to Edner Day fell the task of performing the last rite called **Déssounin**. First tracing on the floor a large cross in maize flour the length and breadth of the body, then climbing past the silent doctors and nurses, under the dead president's sheet and astride the frail and wasted little corpse, the houngan now implored Duvalier's loa, the **Maite Tete** [principal loa in a person's head] who had so often driven away the **Gros Bon Ange** [personal soul], to retire and leave the dead in peace. Only then could the soul be shriven and the Maite Tete transferred to the head of Jean-Claude [his son], standing mute and awed by the light of the candle at the foot of his father's bed. When the body seemed to shudder ever so slightly, some thought it tried to rise and shake its head: they knew the Maite Tete had departed. Papa Doc had gone to Guinée.⁴⁰

As if François had ordained the day, Jean-Claude was sworn into office on the 22nd day of April 1971.

His casket was paraded past the Champs de Mars and the towering statues of Haiti's past heroes—Toussaint Louverture, Jean-Jacques Dessalines, Alexander Pétion, and Henri Christophe. Outside the palace along the procession route, François Duvalier performed his grand finale. Suddenly out of nowhere, an immense, dusty whirlwind kicked up from the ground a howling cloud that obscured the sun. The multitude shrieked in horror and hysteria erupted. Musicians dropped their instruments, Tonton Macoutes haphazardly fired their weapons, and mourners trampled over one another to escape the phenomenon. After two hours, at the cemetery gate, the



⁴⁰ Heinel, Heinel, and Heinel, 624-625.

sentry post of Baron Samedi, the wind twisted out to sea. The masses cried out, “Duvalier has burst the grave and is loosed upon the earth. There is no hiding place.”

The interpretation of the paranormal was evident to every Haitian, François’ escaping spirit now resided in Jean-Claude. After Duvalier, Duvalier!

Chapter 3

THEOLOGY

Bondye fe san di. – God acts and doesn't talk. -Haitian proverb



Vodou is as old as Africa. It was the ancient religion practiced in the Dahomey region of West Africa (the modern-day nation of Benin). **Vodou** is the word in the “fon” language meaning “spirit.” Vodou has no formal theology, no seminaries, no bible, and no ecclesiastical hierarchy. It is a changing, flexible faith transmitted by word of mouth from generation to generation, in which services and beliefs differ from houngan to houngan and village to village. Two temples within the same city might teach distinctive mythologies and appeal to the “loas” in different ways.

Haitian Vodou is a polytheistic religion.

Vodou believes in one supreme deity and a host of lesser spirits or gods. The supreme god is “**Bondye**,” the Creole word for God Almighty. It is derived from the French Catholic God, “Bon Dieu” (the good god). Common Haitian Creole expressions are “*Bondye bon*” (*God is good*) and “*si Dié vlé*” (*God willing*). Bondye is a remote figure who does not interact in the affairs of mortal beings; he is too busy running the universe, and he is unknowable to humankind.

Several respected scholars and practitioners will take issue with my definition of labeling Vodou “polytheistic” and will propose that it is “monotheistic.” My counterargument is that the “loas” function as active divinities with their own names, duties, and corresponding sacrifices and rituals.

The Loas

The intercessors between Bondye and humanity are conducted by the “loa” or “lwa,” who function as spiritual mediators of Bondye’s will. Loas are lesser divine beings and are intimately involved in the believer’s daily life. They are sometimes referred to as “les mysteries” (the sacred knowledge) and “les invisibles” (all spirits). Loa translates into “les laws” and are worshipped and served with gifts. They are regarded as forces of nature that have personalities and personal mythologies.

Haitian Vodou loas are divided into three major families: **Ghede**, **Rada**, and **Petro**.

Ghede or Guédés

The Ghede are among the most famous and most beloved spirits in Haitian Vodou. Spirits of death—their family embodies death, resurrection, and fertility. As the keepers of the cemetery, they control the eternal crossroads where everyone must cross over to gain access to everything in the afterlife. Ancestral spirits of the forgotten dead exist, who are no longer remembered by others. They must be reclaimed in the dance. Ghede operate under the direction of Baron Samedi. The other spirits fear him and avoid him.



The Ghede are the lords of eroticism and have eclectic personalities such as being sensual, fearless, boisterous, and comedic. When they are gathered with other family members, they can be loud and ill-mannered. Ghede are enamored with women and constantly use obscene words and songs and perform indecent dances. Since they believe eroticism is inevitable and beyond good and evil, they often single out people who appear to be detached from it in order to ridicule, embarrass, and expose them in compromising manners. They are especially hard on whites because they often have puritanical sexual attitudes of western culture.

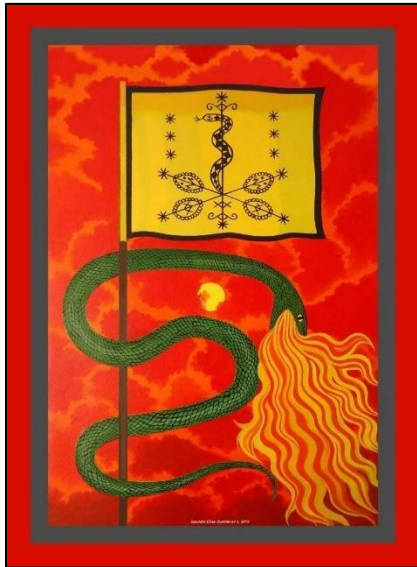
All are known for the drum rhythm and dance called the "**banda**". When summoned, Ghede appear through outrageous acts such as eating glass and raw chilis and anointing their private parts with chili rum. Possessed worshippers will often drink or rub themselves with a mixture of clairin (raw rum) or goat peppers. When someone is mounted by Ghede, they put on a black undertaker's coat, a black top hat, and stuff cotton in their ears and noses to symbolize a dead person. After they are dressed up, they must then perform an erotic dance to the rhythm of drums which imitates the movements of copulation. Sometimes they are symbolized by a giant wooden phallus. Some of the Ghede have crass names like "Little Fart," "Good Dust from the Cross," "Little Flea in the Water," and "Bull with Three Balls."

Rada

The Rada loa are a family spirit that represents emotional stability. The Radas are the first nation called during any Vodou service. They stand for light and the normal affairs of humanity, and they tend to be peaceful, happy, benevolent, and creative. As

older guardian spirits, the Rada uphold morals and principles. These were the spirits honored by the slaves who were brought to the New World and became the major loa within the new religion as it evolved in Haiti. They were derived from the Dahomean deity and were highly religious in nature. Rada rites are celebrated with onbeat drumming and dancing. White is their associated color.

Petro or Petwo



Petro is indigenous to Haiti. The Petro loa are the spirits of the Haitian soil and emerged during Haiti's colonial period. They were the spirit invoked at the 1791 Bois Caïman ceremony which sparked the revolution that cast off the shackles of slavery. Some of their origins came from the Taino Indians, the indigenous people of the island. This is the black magic of Vodou, and their loa are considered demonic, angry, mean, aggressive, and vicious. These spirits are served in red and blue of the Haitian flag.

Petro is rage, violence, and delirium. Dangerous things can occur in Petro ceremonies including death curses, transformation into zombies, and wild sexual orgies. Common rituals include igniting gunpowder, blowing whistles, cracking whips, beating drums in sharp offbeat rhythms, and dancing. Petro rites are used to initiate hounsans and mambos. **Bizango** is an extreme form of the Petro that occurs by night, in the darkness that is the province of the “**djab**,” the devil.



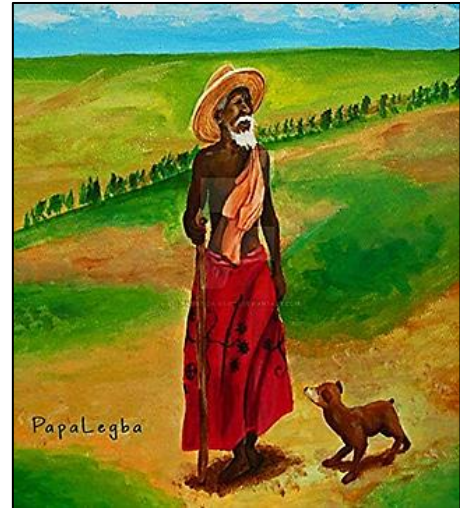
There are countless loa in the Haitian Vodou pantheon. Haitian scholar Milo Rigaud was one of Vodou's most noted authorities. He asserted that a hundred-page volume would not suffice to catalog every loa because they vary from region to region and temple to temple, and new loa often appear without notice, derived from powerful, dead hounsans or mambos.

Dutty Boukman and the Bois Caïman ceremony

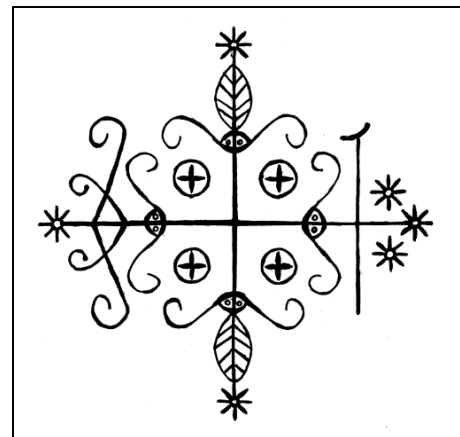
The following are some of the most important loas.

Papa Legba

Papa Legba is the gatekeeper between humanity and the spirit world because he is the loa at the crossroads. He opens the way to the spirit world and the other loas; therefore, he is always the first god to be invoked in Haitian Vodou ceremonies. Legba gives or denies permission to speak with the spirit world. The crossroads is a central theme in Vodou because it is the place where the two worlds (earth and spirit) meet. Haitian Vodou followers avoid crossroads when they prepare for long journeys because Legba has described them as highly dangerous places for people because of the presence of sorcerers and evil spirits.



Legba has evolved in numerous ways from Africa to Haiti. He can be the origin of life symbolized by the sun, or he can be the source of regeneration, symbolized by a large erect phallus. Legba is portrayed as an old man in a straw hat and tattered clothing walking with a cane or crutch and accompanied by a dog. His colors are typically red and black. His symbols include several keys, locks, gates, and passageways. In some variations, he is the trickster or a protector of children. He can teach humans how to use and interpret oracles.

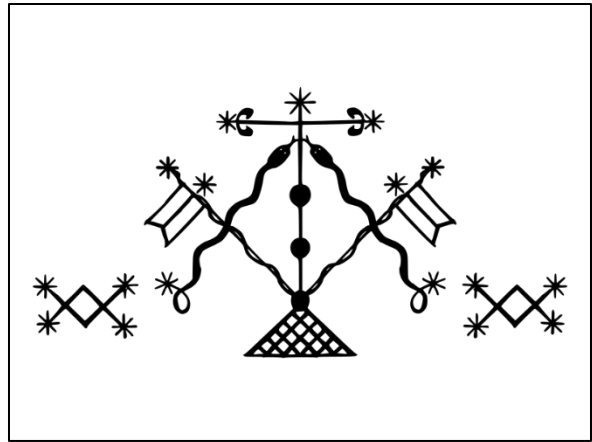


Another primary Ghede is **Papa Ghede**, the corpse of the first man who ever died. He wears a high hat, likes to smoke cheap cigars, eat apples, and has a very crass sense of humor. Papa Ghede is a psychopomp, one who waits at the crossroads to conduct souls into the afterlife. He has a divine ability to read minds and an ability to know everything that happens in the worlds of the living and the dead. He is considered the good counterpart to Baron Samedi. If a child is dying, adherents pray to Papa Ghede because they believe he will protect the little ones. It is believed that he will not take a life before its time. Black goats and chickens are the animal sacrifices made to him during the rituals.

Dambala or Damballah the Serpent

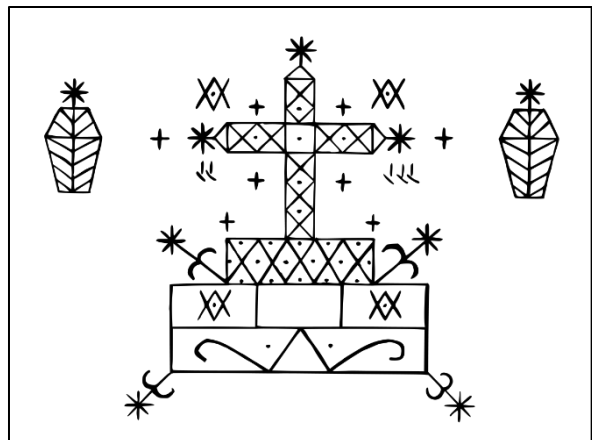
Dambala is one of the most important loas because he is celebrated as the creator of life, “the Sky Father,” who helped Bondye design the universe. As the oldest loa, Dambala is a giant serpent who used his 7,000 coils to shape the heavens, the stars and the planets, and the earth, the hills and the valleys. When he shed his skin, he produced the bodies of water. He used lightning bolts to forge metals and to form the sacred rocks. His wife, Ayida-Weddo, forms the rainbow, and his concubine, Erzulie Freda, attends to him. These male-female combinations bring tension and balance to the universe.

Dambala is the keeper of knowledge, wisdom, and healing magic. He rules over one’s intellect and the planetary balance and is much loved and sought after because he is the source of peace and tranquility. Dambala is seen as innocent and benevolent with a quiet presence. He can be found living in trees near the waters. His holy color is white. White chickens and eggs are sacrificed to him when he comes to mount a person.



Baron Samedi and Maman Brigitte

Baron Samedi is the most feared loa and the leader of the Ghede family. He is the dreadful counterpart to the good Papa Ghede. Baron Samedi is the god of the resurrection, the gatekeeper of cemeteries, and the only one who can accept one into the realm of the dead and lead them into the underworld. He is also called upon for work with the ancestors of those who are long deceased. He is known for powerful acts of magic and can cure any mortal wound if the



recipient is willing to pay his price. Therefore, he both respected and feared. Baron Samedi is often called upon to heal those who are approaching death. On Christian All Souls Day, November 2, the believers visit cemeteries and light candles in his honor. His symbols are the cross of Christ, skull and crossbones, and a gravedigger's tools.

The loa often appears as a white skeletal face, wearing a top hat, a formal black tailcoat, and dark glasses to protect his eyes from the light since he spent most of his time in the invisible realm. He plugs his nostrils with cotton to resemble a corpse dressed for burial. But he is the life of the party, enjoying debauchery, swearing, and outrageous lewd behavior. He is rarely seen without a cigar in his mouth or a glass of rum in his bony fingers. There is a legend that a woman who dies a virgin must be despoiled before burial or she risks rape by the Baron.

François, Papa Doc, Duvalier cultivated a cult persona as the earthly incarnation of Baron Samedi. To the superstitious and uneducated peasantry, his appearance was instantly recognizable and feared as he would often speak in a deep nasal tone and wear dark glasses.

Baron Samedi's wife, Maman Brigitte, is a loa of fertility and motherhood. She originated in Ireland and is the only white Haitian Vodou spirit with red hair. She is connected with Brigid, the Celtic goddess of the sun, the dawn, fire, spring, fertility, healing, knowledge, wisdom, poetry, medicine, smithcraft, warfare, arts and crafts, cattle and other livestock, sacred wells, and serpents. Like her Celtic counterpart, she is a powerful healer, and if she cannot heal or cure, she will help her followers travel towards the afterlife. Maman Brigitte is a protectress over women who ask for her assistance, particularly in cases of domestic violence, unfaithful lovers, fertility, childbirth healing, or sexually transmitted diseases. She is very feminine and sensual, often depicted in bright, overtly sexual costumes, yet she can be extremely dangerous.

Even though they are married and deeply in love, Baron Samedi is regularly promiscuous with other women.



Baron Samedi and Maman Brigitte

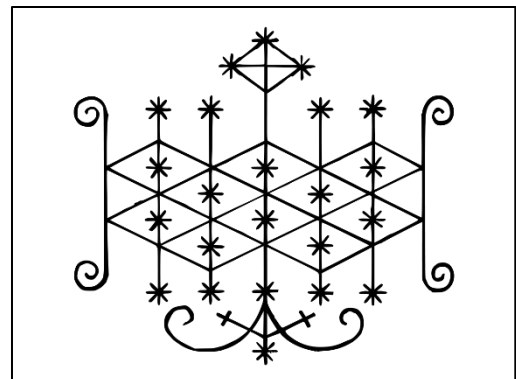
Ogun or Ogoun



Ogun is the god of war. He was the traditional warrior figure in the Dahomean religion. This highly respected loa is the god of iron—mighty, powerful, and triumphal, and he embodies the spirits of warriors, metalworking, and rum making. Any piece of scrap iron may be considered an incarnation of him. He loves the noise of battle and is the master of lightning and the storm. His dominant mode is power and militancy. He can be violent, and today, he is the force of politics. Ogun guards the sacred altar of the temple and male animal sacrifices are made to his honor. His symbol is a saber or machete plunged in the earth in front of the altar. Legend says he is the one who planted the idea of the 1804 Revolution in the slaves and empowered them.

Ogun is shielded with iron and immune to fire and bullets, and if he is properly influenced, he will protect his petitioners from bullets and weapon wounds. During the early stages of the Haitian Revolution, many warriors fearlessly thrust their bodies into the pitch of battle believing that Ogun's armor would shield them from bullets.

His possessions can be violent. He mounts people in an array of manifestations, such as the wounded warrior in a Christ-figure pose, giving strength by slapping them on the thighs or back, or lifting a person and carrying them to indicate his special patronage. Those have been mounted by him wash their hands in flaming rum without suffering. He gives strength through prophecy and magic and interprets Dambala's messages.



Ogun dresses in a red mantle and French military kepi and waves a saber or machete. He chews cigars and demands rum because he claims his testicles are cold. His family is great drinkers, but alcohol does not affect them. His greatest passions are for fire and women. Those possessed by him imitate his appearance by wearing red kerchiefs, kepis, shirts, and wield a sword or machete, chomp on cigars, and demand rum. The former Caco mercenaries distinguished themselves with red caps.

Male animals are the primary sacrifices made to Ogun. He prefers red animals like red or russet pigs and roosters, but goats, snakes, and dogs are acceptable. Adherents serve him white rum to make him more comfortable. They salute him by pouring rum on the ground and lighting it into flames. In ceremonies, devotees wear a red shirt, pants, and scarf.

Erzulie Freda or Maîtresse Erzulie



Erzulie holds a revered place in the pantheon of loas. She has tremendous power and is greatly loved and respected because she is the personification of femininity and womanhood—the female energy of Legba. Erzulie is the earth mother, the goddess of beauty and love. She represents idealism and can conceptualize, dream, and create. She is uniquely human and the differentiating force between humanity and the creation. According to Haitian professor Leslie Desmangles, at Hartford's Trinity College, Erzulie “represents the cosmic womb in which divinity and humanity are conceived. She is the symbol of fecundity, the mother of the world who participates with the masculine forces in the creation and maintenance of the universe.”⁴¹

Erzulie functions in a variety of roles, as the goddess of the word, love, help, goodwill, health, beauty, and fortune. But she can also be the goddess of jealousy, vengeance, and discord. As the loa of ideal dreams, hopes, and aspirations, she is the most loved loa of all. Believers summon her for issues of motherhood and strong feminine sexuality, and to read the future in dreams.

Erzulie is the most beautiful and sensuous woman in the pantheon of loas. She is very wealthy and adorns herself in fine clothing and expensive jewelry. Her appearance

⁴¹ “The 8 Most Important Voodoo Gods,” *Learn Religions*, <https://www.learnreligions.com/voodoo-gods-4771674>.

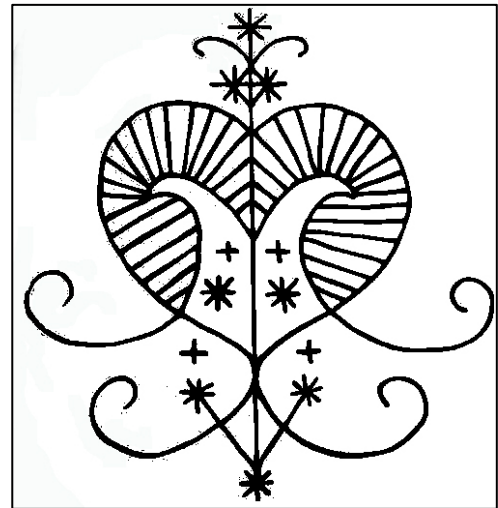
is of a light-skinned, mixed-race, upper-class woman. The lightness of her complexion is because Haiti's wealthy elite are mulatto.

Erzulie wears three wedding bands since she has been married to Dambala, Ogun, and Agwe. She is seductive and flirtatious. She walks seductively swaying to her hips and loves to dance, kiss, and caress men in embarrassing ways. Erzulie is always in charge and may take any lover as she wishes. She may simply visit with them or just decide to eat or drink some delicacy. A lover of pleasure, she likes to receive presents. Erzulie is fond of men but mistrusts women as rivals. Erzulie is a very jealous lover and requires her partners to dedicate a special room for their ritual lovemaking. Erzulie has been compared to Aphrodite.

Despite Erzulie's flirtations, she is a virgin—not in the physical sense, but in the sense that her love transcends the earth; hers is a higher love.

Erzulie is never fully satisfied and often weeps and grieves because she longs for unattainable love. Hence, she is strongly identified with the Virgin Mary, the Lady of Sorrows. People try to comfort her with more gifts and exquisite food and drinks, but her tears continue to flow. Women are drawn to Erzulie because of her tearfulness and approach her confidentially with their sorrows. Her symbol is the heart with a broken arrow as the recognized in the Roman Catholic portrait of Mary.

The hougans and mambos reserve their finest items for her. In every sanctuary, there is a room or space dedicated to her presence. Erzulie's sacred days are Tuesday and Thursday. When she mounts someone, it is for cleansing, dressing, and eating delicious foods. The possessed believer is washed and dressed in fine attire.



Haitian Vodou is a syncretic religion.

A “syncretic religion” is the fusion of diverse religious beliefs and practices. In some cases, an underlying unity existed which allowed for more inclusive assimilation. In other forms, opposing principles, practices, cultures, and traditions merge. Such is the syncretism between Roman Catholicism and Vodou.

Scholar James G. Leyburn in *The Haitian People* provides insightful analysis into Haiti’s social institutions as they developed out of the backgrounds of slavery and French colonial life into present institutions. He tells the story of a rural Catholic parish in 1937, and how a feast was syncretized.

A Catholic chapel had been erected in recent years upon a hilltop long respected as a favorite haunt of the loa Damballa. Apparently, this was no slight, for Vodun gods are not monopolistic. On the hill, however, once stood a tree in which a snake made his home, symbol of Damballa. Many years earlier a forthright Catholic priest had ordered his parishioners to fell the tree, an insult direct to the loa which none of the faithful dare give. The determined cleric therefore performed the task himself but left a sizable stump on which has now been placed a small statue of the popular Catholic Saint Anthony.

The feast day was well attended, and while the Mass and sermon were proceeding in the crowded chapel dozens of men and women who could not get into the building, or who preferred not to try, remained outside. Many were simply standing about in groups, chatting; others were more significantly engaged. Some knelt before the tree stump at whose foot many candles were burning; there, as at a shrine, they prayed. Were their prayers Catholic petitions to Saint Anthony or Vodun prayers to Damballa? At another corner of the church under the shade of a tree sat a venerable woman dispensing a liquid concoction, which seemed particularly popular with the women and children. Holding out their hands they received a palmful each of the syrupy substance, which they then smeared upon their bodies, on the eyes or face, on their legs, or on more private parts. The Catholic priest later explained the liquid as a “Voodoo brew,” and again as a charm; more accurately, it was a garde to turn away illness from the parts of the body rubbed with it.

The officiating priest knew perfectly well that not all the candles burning at the tree stump were for Saint Anthony; he was also aware of the woman dispensing her liquid yet took no steps to stop her. He assumed with the small statue of Saint Anthony on the stump, there were already children growing up unaware of Damballa’s connection with the place. He hoped to find money for a larger, more

imposing statue so that as generations passed the memory of the loa, as related to worship on this hill, would be supplanted. As for the woman, why bother to drive her away? It would merely cause antagonism and would certainly not stop the practice. Her being there might draw a few more peasants to the feast, where they would have an opportunity to learn the true Word.

As soon as the Mass in the chapel was finished, the people poured out and began to form a line of march. Headed by the priest the whole congregation, including many who had not penetrated to the chapel, wended their way down the hill and across to a clearing among trees. On the way many of the women stopped beside the path to pluck a handful of long grass or reached up to break twigs from smaller trees. At the clearing, primitively decorated with colored cloth, the priest made a short discourse; then he intoned three times, “Notre Dame d’Alta Gracia,” and the worshippers, raising their wisps of greenery above their heads, rustled the twigs until the air was filled with a sound like the hissing of many serpents. “*Priez pour nous!*” they responded each time to the rustling accompaniment. The Virgin of Alta Gracia is the miraculous saint of Higüey, as much renowned among Haitians as among the Spanish-speaking Dominicans farther east. The supplication to the Virgin is proper enough to a Catholic feast, but the hissing, reminiscent of Damballa, is an imitation that the Vodun loa is not forgotten on his holy hill.⁴²

Haitian Vodou is the alchemy of western African spirituality with the rituals and images of Roman Catholicism. When the slaves of Hispaniola were forbidden from practicing their religion, they circumvented these restrictions by uniting their loas with Catholic saints. They also comingled their liturgy and rituals by using the items and imagery of the Catholic Mass.

In the minds of most Vodou practitioners, there is no contradiction between the powers who rule the universe, whether African or Christian; they are complementary. The slaves were taught about the God of the **blancs** (whites) whom they addressed as “Bon Dieu.” They translated this to “Bondye,” who is one and the same. If one God reigns supreme, why not use all possible approaches to him? There is too much mystery in the world—sorrow, beauty, misfortune, joy—that it would be absurd to refuse God or the gods’ support. There is plenty of need for all of them.

Most practitioners consider themselves to be Roman Catholics who serve the spirits who are the same as the saints. Adherents of Vodou do not consider themselves to be

⁴² Leyburn, 170-172.

part of a separate religion. One can attend a Saturday night Vodou sacrifice and dance and then participate in the Mass on Sunday morning without the slightest bit of internal discord.

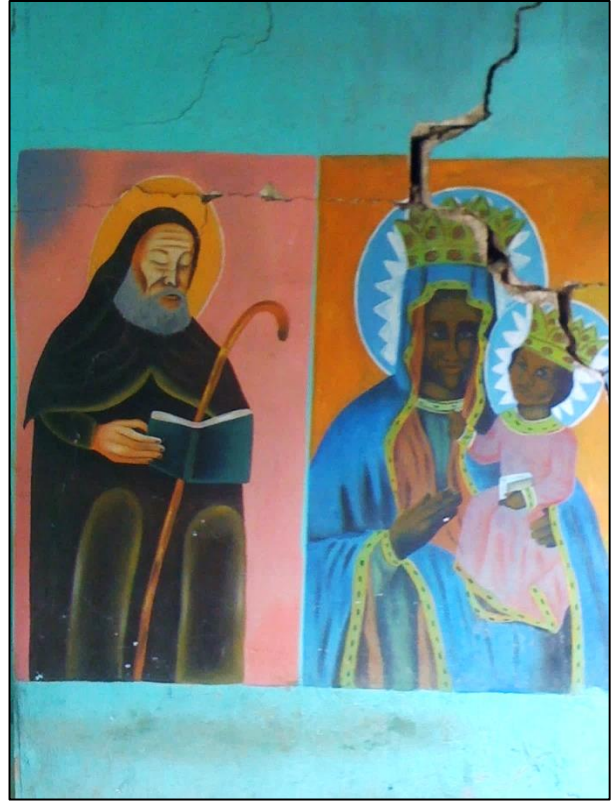
Leyburn observed, “The Haitian peasant is not interested in making formal distinctions. If he is critical, it is only of results, rarely of the means used to obtain those results. If he cannot gain his ends in one way, he is not too proud to try another, and still a third.”⁴³

Each major Haitian Vodou loa corresponds to a Roman Catholic saint:

- Maîtresse Erzulie is the Virgin Mary, celebrated as the Mother of Heaven or the Queen of Sorrows. Their portrait and symbol are the same.
- Papa Legba is St. Peter, the one who guards the gates of heaven, but he is also associated with St. Anthony and St. Lazarus.
- Dambala, who is the serpent god, is recognized as Moses, but he has connections to St. Patrick, who is legendary for driving the snakes out of Ireland. There are times that Dambala is Jesus Christ.
- Ogun is syncretized with St. James the Greater, the warrior general, and St. George on his charger.
- One saint associated with Ghede is St. Gerard Majella. The classic imagery is a pale young man holding a cross with a skull in the lower left-hand corner. Ghede visit Catholic churches at night, and their symbol is the cross upon a tomb.
- In some syncretic belief systems, Maman Brigitte is connected with various saints, including Mary Magdalene and St. Brigid of Kildare.



⁴³ Leyburn, 167.



Portraits of Dambala, the serpent loa, and Ghede as St. Gerard Majella.
The walls of a Vodou temple destroyed by the earthquake in the Tabarre neighborhood of Port-au-Prince.



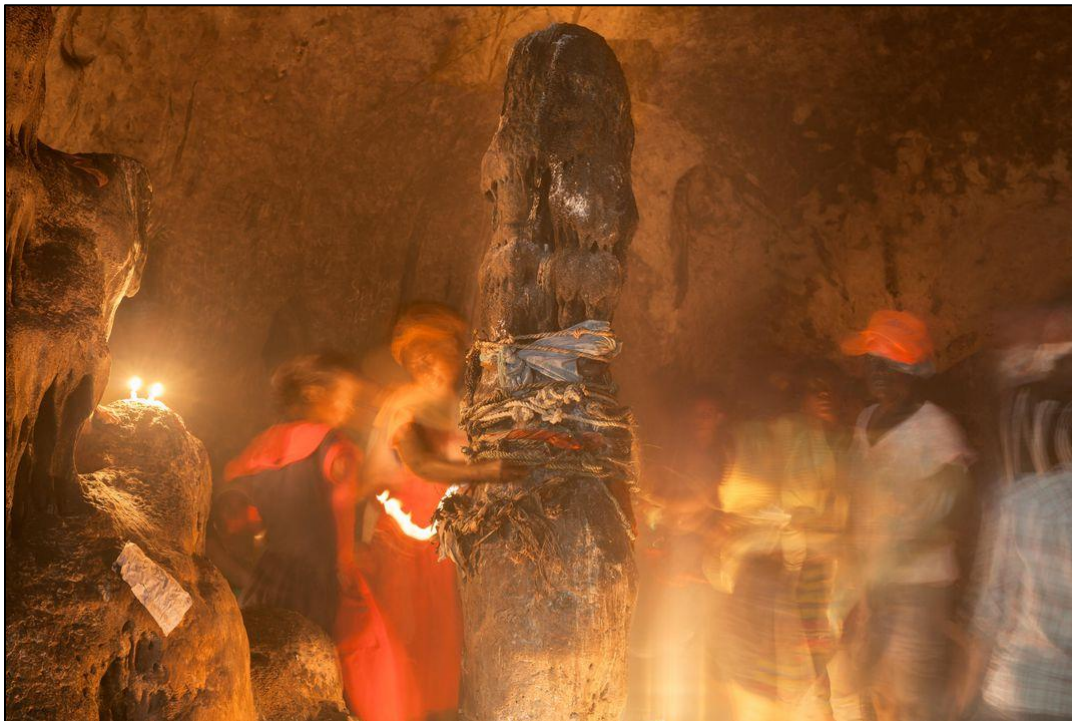
Metalwork representations of loas, Croix-des-Bouquets

Vodou is an animistic religion.

“Animism” is derived from the Latin word “anima,” which means breath, spirit, and life. It perceives all things—animals, plants, rocks, rivers, weather, and human handiwork—as animated and alive. Animism encompasses the beliefs that all material phenomena possess souls and that there is no distinction between the physical world and the world of the spiritual.

Animistic faiths believe in countless spiritual beings that are concerned with human affairs and capable of helping or harming human interests. Sometimes these spirits are often thought to be the souls of deceased relatives. In animistic religions, ritual is essential to gain the favor of the spirits, to restrain malevolent spirits, and to provide the basic necessities such as food, shelter, and fertility. Mediators, such as medicine men and women, intervene between the physical world and the world of spirits. In all animistic religions, the elements must be personally propitiated.

Vodou is an animistic religion. The relationship between humans and loa is reciprocal by nature. Believers attempt to appease the loa and to appeal for their assistance in exchange for food, drink, and other items. The loa are frequently invited to “mount” or possess a believer during ritual ceremonies and give messages so that the community can directly interact with them. They can cause good or bad things to happen to people.



The animistic aspect of Vodou is reflected in the use of stalagmite as a fertility altar; female worshippers tie their scarves around it or embrace it to tap the stone’s powers for childbirth.

Haitian Vodou is magic.

“Magic” in popular culture is making things disappear, creating illusions, and other entertaining tricks. Certainly, that is not the definition and context used to label Haitian Vodou as “magic.” As previously established, Vodou is being examined as a religion, the primary religion practiced by the Haitian people. But when comparing the terms “**religion**” and “**magic**,” there are some distinct differences; important differences that apply to the nature and practices of Vodou.

First, there are similarities. Both have an underlying belief in the supernatural. Both perform certain rituals and seek divine assistance and advice. Magic and religion rely on established bodies of knowledge that are maintained and used to assist believers. Both adhere to longstanding traditions though occasional innovations may be introduced.

On the other hand, anthropologists have delineated distinguishing characteristics between both terms. First, magic is a means for achieving ends that its practitioners believe cannot be obtained through ordinary prayers and rituals. Secondly, magic is generally performed privately and often in secret. Since magic is employed for a specific purpose, it is only necessary when the need arises. Thirdly, more recent scholars have argued that the various forms of magic should be viewed as a subset of religious practices—practices that are outside standard rituals.⁴⁴

When comparing orthodox Christianity to the magical nature of Haitian Vodou, the surest way to distinguish the differences is to consider the “why”—examining the attitude and objectives of the individual believer in their practices. In doing so, a very sharp difference emerges in the believers’ responses to their respective deities.

In the Christian religion, God is omnipotent, and therefore, beyond human control and domination. Therefore, the Christian life is characterized by humble and obedient submission to God. Believers are required to conform their lives and behavior to the nature and will of God through conversion and volition. Another vital aspect of the Christian faith is that believers can have a personal relationship with God.

Conversely, in magic, the supernatural beings and forces are not omnipotent; they can be manipulated by technique, no matter how powerful they might be. Magic’s intent is to dominate and tame the supernatural in order to alter life events and to control others. It does not concern itself whether these beings or forces are good or evil, or if the person is good or evil. Therefore, conversion or change in one’s life and behavior are not required.

⁴⁴ “Magic and Religion, Georgetown University, June 28, 2020, https://faculty.georgetown.edu/jod/apuleius/renberg/MAGIC_RELIGION.HTML.

This is the magical essence of Haitian Vodou. This view of the gods and life is the preeminent mindset that has shaped Haitian culture into an uncommon society.⁴⁵ The magic of Vodou is practiced through the very process of living, and the mysteries of life and death are explained through the labyrinthine structure of its rituals and the incantations.

Morality

The assumptions of sin and moral law are alien to Haitian Vodou. The loas are not role models for a well-lived life. Virtue for the loas and those who serve them is not an inherent character trait; it is a dynamic state that demands unending attention and care. Since the gods are perceived as humanlike and absent of a good or evil character, life is not seen as a struggle between good and evil. Neither are people considered to be wholly good or wholly evil, but a mixture in proportions that vary from person to person and from spirit to spirit. “Vodou operates as a moral system not because it takes up what is good in life and human behavior and accentuates that, but rather because it takes up all of life and intensifies it and clarifies it.”⁴⁶

There is no absolute morality. It is dynamic, flexible, and circumstantial. Since the gods are flexible and changeable, human beings can generally persuade them into any mood with the right techniques.

Is there such a thing as a moral person or an immoral person? What is considered right and wrong? To better understand the moral implications of the Vodou faith, and its divergence from Christian ethics, a mambo, who converted from Protestantism, provides a personal perspective:

The Vodou tradition also posits a spectrum of existential states, with the highest or most desirable being that of the powerful person, and the lowest or least desirable being that of the powerless person. Power is defined as the ability to do what one wishes, obtain wealth, make others perform desired actions even against their will, or harm others without being punished or harmed in return. The proof of power is the individual's material wealth, or social and political

⁴⁵ “uncommon”- I use this term because Haiti is a singular society when compared to the rest of the world. Though situated in the Caribbean and the Americas, it is not Latin-influenced or Spanish-speaking. It is nothing like other North American societies, nor is it European though some social elements from France remain, including a French-speaking minority. It is not African, though its ancestry and ethnicity originate from there. Its dominant language, Haitian Creole, and dominant religion, Haitian Vodou, exist only on the western portion of this small island.

⁴⁶ Claudine Michel, “Tapping the Wisdom of Our Ancestors: An Attempt to Recast Vodou and Morality through the Voice of Mama Lola and Karen McCarthy Brown,” *Trotter Review*, Vol. 17: Iss. 1, Article 5. September 21, 2007, 56-57. http://scholarworks.umb.edu/trotter_review/vol17/iss1/5. (Quoting Karen McCarthy Brown, “Alourdes: A Case Study of Moral Leadership in Haitian Vodou,” 166.)

status. In the Haitian Creole language, the words “*moun de byen*,” literally “*person of good*,” means both a good person and a rich person, a person with goods, as in worldly goods. . . .

A person must serve the lwa [loa] in order to enjoy that particular lwa's protection. A person serves a lwa by singing songs about the lwa at a Vodou ceremony, dressing in the lwa's colors, making food offerings, and observing sexual continence on certain days of the week. Another individual who serves the lwa better, that is to say with more effort or material gifts, can enjoy a preferential standing. The lwa do not prescribe moral behavior. They confer protection and power.

In the Vodou tradition, a victim is by definition in the wrong. The lwa have shown their preference for the victimizer by giving that person more power than the victim. A victimized individual is an object of derision, feels shame, and supplicates the lwa in order to obtain power to wreak vengeance on the aggressor. Misfortune of any kind is always the fault, at least in part, of the person upon whom it falls, because that person failed to adequately protect himself. . . .

A Vodouisant, by contrast, perceives the lying man as a “winner” who has won a victory against the woman, the “loser,” who deserves to be mocked and blamed for her credulity, the weakness which enabled the man to victimize her. She, not he, is in need of correction. She is exhorted by her neighbor women not to trust others, and it is considered perfectly permissible and even admirable if she is able to recoup her losses by lying to the man or to another completely unrelated individual.⁴⁷

Sociologist James Leyburn wrote an insightful examination of Haiti's social institutions in the early twentieth century. He attributes the disregard for morality to the peasant's view of pleasures.

The peasant loves life. His pleasures are simple enough, partly because he lacks the money for expensive ones. Puritanical self-searching is alien to the normal Haitian. The touchstone is infallible: so long as life moves along smoothly one need not worry; if misfortune comes, one of the spirits is angry or out of sorts and his worshippers must propitiate him. What spirit could mind a man's dancing, drinking clairin, watching a cockfight, or otherwise indulging himself? By conceiving his spirits as in manner and desires resembling himself, the Haitian

⁴⁷ Mambo Racine Sans Bout (Kathy S. Grey), “Morality, Power, and the Vodou Tradition in Haiti,” Webster University. December 3, 2000, <http://faculty.webster.edu/corbetre/haiti/voodoo/morality.htm>.

can understand his little universe without subjecting himself to the bewilderment which faces a simple Christian trying to reconcile an all-loving Father with obvious evil He allows on earth.⁴⁸

Latter twentieth century journalists, Diederich and Burt, concur: “Vodou channels pleasures rather than curbs them. In it, there is a primitive release and a purgative for heavy hearts rather than the accumulation of sin-inspired guilt. It has survived and grown as a working belief that acknowledges and deals liberally with the practicalities of a harsh life—food, shelter, sex, disease.”⁴⁹

Death

Death is the paramount moment in the life of a Haitian peasant. In no area is magic more dominant than in the realm of death. Strict rules govern the behavior and dress of mourners. The slightest lapse in observation could harm the dead. Enormous personal sacrifices are required to successfully remove one’s spirit from the body and to transport it from one life to another. The most lavish funeral that one can buy, even by begging and borrowing, is required. Haitians believe supernatural beings are prowling about seeking to harm the dead if they are not properly protected.

Vodou believes in an afterlife. When a person dies, the spirit must go through a series of stages and be subjected to a succession of ceremonies before reaching its final resting place. At death, the soul of the deceased remains close to the body for nearly a week. This is a precarious period because if the proper rites and rituals are not precisely administered, the soul will roam the earth and never reach its haven. Harmful emanations could emerge and inflict vengeance on the family. Evil practitioners or someone with malice could steal the soul and thwart its ultimate journey, during this perilous stage.

Funerals are intensely consequential in Vodou. The rites and sacrifices conducted over the body will determine the destiny of the spirit. Houngans or mambos make elaborate preparations, exercise extreme care, perform the mandatory ceremonial rituals, and offer the appropriate sacrifices to release the spirit from the body, transport it to the afterlife, and prevent the corpse from transforming into a zombie. The family will summon houngan and mambo to perform a ceremony called “**dessounin**” that will release the spirit from the body and forward it to a deferred location for the next year and one day. A white powder of an arsenic herb is placed

⁴⁸ Leyburn, 144-145.

⁴⁹ Diederich and Burt, 350.

between the lips to ensure that the corpse will remain at peace and to impede it from becoming a “zombie” slave if his enemy attempts to call him from the grave.

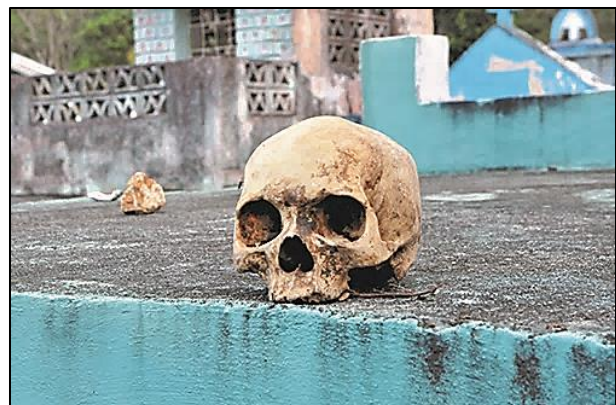
During this temporary sojourn, the spirit is trapped in dark waters. After 366 days, a ceremony called a “*weté mo nan d’leau*” commemorates the deceased being discharged to live in the world again. The family summons the released soul to a clay jar, called a “*govi*,” where the spirit of the family member will be consulted for guidance and life lessons. The dead can become a beloved ancestor to be prayed to for ongoing protection and wisdom or even a loa.

Persons who died violently and who do not receive a proper burial or lonely souls who have been forgotten by their families and friends are condemned to wander eternity alone. They may become a zombie slave of an enemy loa.

Most Haitians die at home surrounded by their loved ones. The eldest member of the family makes the arrangements for the handling of the body and the funeral rites. Another family member gives a final bath as a sign of affection and respect. The final selection of a resting place can be problematic. Haitians prefer above-ground mausoleums, but the cost is often prohibitive, usually more than the average annual family wage. Most families rent space in a public mausoleum during the crucial first year. If a family cannot afford to properly bury a loved one, making it impossible to correctly honor that person, they may abandon the body in a secluded place and pray that no harm comes to their loved one’s spirit. Sometimes, the poorest families will leave their deceased loved ones in the hands of others, so that they will not be forced to pay for a burial they cannot afford. Cremation is not preferred because many Haitians believe the body must stay intact for the spirit to cross over to the afterlife.



Cemetery next to Hôpital Sacré Coeur in Milot



Since death is the paramount moment in a peasant's life, it is also a scheming business. A Catholic missionary relates her experience visiting a cemetery near their mission site.

When I visited the cemetery next to Hôpital Sacré Coeur in 2012, I was shocked to see human bones and other remains all over the grounds. The cemetery keeper even prompted us to take his photograph holding a human skull (and then asked for money after the photograph was taken). The seeming disrespect and lack of care for the deceased that was prominent in the cemetery was a stark contrast to the religious views. . . .

A fire crackled in the back corner of the cemetery. We were told that the bodies of the people whose family members could not afford the price of the grave site rental, were being disposed of in that fire. If a family did have the money for a grave site rental, cemetery workers would dig up the bodies of the deceased and burn them to make room for more bodies and generate more income.

Freelance undertakers wait outside cemeteries to make deals with families who cannot afford proper burial. And even after the grave of a loved one had been fully paid for and secured; the deceased can still fall victim to grave robbery. Some morgue workers were even accused of hiring hit men to ensure steady income for their business.⁵⁰

Honoring and celebrating the legacy of one's ancestors is incredibly important in Haiti. They believe their future depends on the ways they honor their ancestors. Regardless of one's economic condition, Haitians strive to preserve their legacy with dignity.⁵¹



A ceremony honoring Haitian Vodou loa Baron Samedi on the Day of the Dead in November.

⁵⁰ Amanda, MacFarland, "Death in Haiti," The Cruden Foundation, <http://crudem.org/death-haiti/>.

⁵¹ Personal observation- Through my years in Haiti, I have recognized that funerals and cemeteries hold significant importance to all Haitians, regardless of religious affiliations. I noticed that an enormous amount of money is spent by families for funerals, not just for the deceased, but also for family member's clothing and ceremonial supports. When a Haitian pastor visited the United States for the first time, his first and persistent request was to see was a cemetery.

Sickness and Healing

Haitian Vodou serves as a form of health care by providing religious healing. By every statistical measure, Haiti is at the bottom of the world index in poverty and health care. Standard medical services have never been readily available to the masses; therefore, out of sheer necessity, people are forced to seek alternative treatments to alleviate their pain and suffering.

African medicine men and women brought their knowledge of herbs and home remedies with them and continued to serve the slave population during the colonial period. Revolutionary leaders such as Mackandal, Boukman, and Louverture were known for their knowledge of these medicines. Treatments such as garlic for infections, spiderwebs to stop bleeding, and salt to cure shock have been commonplace since the days of slavery. These remedies continue to be used today. The treatment for some skin irritations is sitting on cold stones, while leeches for bloodletting are prescribed for conjunctivitis. Tropical diseases are often treated with coffee buds and special flowers.

Today, people still turn to Vodou's magic for healing and relief. They believe the spirits will help them with their struggles for comfort and survival if they are appropriately appeased. The reliance on Vodou also prevents many from seeking basic medical care for common illnesses even when it is available or when practical cures are known.

Vodou adherents believe that the origins of their physical problems and illnesses are caused by a sacrilegious act or the failure to perform some ceremony that has offended the loas. One could anger the spirits simply by inadvertently stepping on a magic powder or touching an ouanga. Since the roots of their misfortunes are spiritual, they trust that hougans command spiritual powers through the loas and can apply the proper propitiatory rituals to remove the punishment.

Infant mortality is a prevalent tragedy in Haiti, and many believe that it is caused by "**loup-garous**," werewolves that suck the blood from unprotected babies at night. Fearful mothers seek out hougans who use their divination powers to determine the supernatural causes and the long and costly magical treatments. Vodou believes that the most feared diseases, such as tuberculosis or elephantiasis, are caused by bocors' curses. Common cures are hougans placing chickens next to the body, and then burying it alive or massaging the victim with burning alcohol. To scare away the evil spirits, gunpowder is thrown into a fire. This is frequently recommended for childhood diseases, such as the evil eye. For protection, mothers will hang a "**garde**" (an amulet) around

their baby's neck.⁵² The often-dramatic demonstrations provide psychological comfort, as well.

Vodou convert Karen McCarthy Brown asserts, "There is no Vodou ritual, small or large, individual or communal, which is not a healing rite."⁵³



A man channels Agwe, the spirit of the sea, and sits on a wooden chair representing a boat

⁵² Diederich and Burt, 355.

⁵³ Michel, 62. (Quoting Karen McCarthy Brown in *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn*, (Berkeley, CA: The University of California Press, 1991) 11.

Chapter 4

PRACTICE

*Bel fanm pa di bon menaj – A beautiful funeral doesn't guarantee heaven.
-Haitian proverb*



Vodou is the spiritual blood of Haiti. Its power continuously flows through her veins by the very process of living. Its wide spectrum of intricate rituals—from passive to active, simple to complex, harmless to malevolent—facilitate the navigation through life's obstacles and to interpret the enigmatic lessons from birth to death. Those who guide the masses are the heartbeat of Vodou, continuously pumping new blood into the souls of their passionate devotees.

The Priesthood

Houngans and Mambos

Vodou continues to be a potent and sweeping force throughout Haiti because of the priests who maintain the traditions and rituals. Their close association with the masses, especially throughout the rural countryside, places them in positions of accessibility and empathy. Most priests are simple peasants like their parishioners, working alongside them in common labors while experiencing the same



struggles. They have earned the confidence of their communities by their prevailing influence and trusted reputation. This has been acquired solely by their abilities to cure illnesses, to create protections that advert misfortunes, to prophesize the future and interpret dreams, to cast spells, and to create potions for love or death. The greater their knowledge and power, the greater their following. Since they are the intermediators between this world and the spirit world, they are powerful.

The priests and priestesses are called **houngans** and **mambos**, respectively. These interpreters and servants of the loas are ordained into their positions through an apprenticeship of assisting officiating priests, discovering their abilities to handle the spirits, and their desire to actively lead the ceremonies. They keep the oral traditions alive, from generation to generation, by passing along the lore received from the older priests. After a period of detailed instruction and submission, the new houngan or mambo ascends through ceremonies of purification and initiation.

There is no official hierarchy for accountability to oversee practices of the houngans and mambos; they are completely autonomous to do as they determine as the head of their own temple and following. For their ceremonies, they are at liberty to add their personal touches with a flair for the dramatic. Their holy robes or vestments might represent special colors in recognition of a certain loa. When they are called upon to perform a ritual, an offering is collected at the beginning to compensate them for their expertise and services, sometimes these are offerings of food and drink.

The houngan and mambo's following is called the "**société.**" A devoted cadre of servants assist with the ceremonies, including the "**hounsi,**" women attendants dressed in white who prepare the services and perform the ceremonial chores. The head hounsi serves as the choir mistress; she is responsible for recognizing the arrival of the loas and selecting the appropriate song to honor their presence. The master of ceremonies, called the "**laplace,**" wields a sword or machete during the processions.

Bocors



The realm of black magic in Haitian Vodou belongs to the **bocor**, the witch doctors or sorcerers. They are skilled in the use of sinister charms and can send death curses, wreak havoc with the dead, and contrive with the "zombies" and "bakas." Certain loas are readily available to assist the bocors in their dark missions of evil.

François Duvalier appointed many houngans to leadership roles in the Tonton Macoutes, ensuring a nationwide network of loyal bosses. Duvalier was more than likely a bocor. His use of sinister black magic rituals with the dead and perverse torture methods was infamous. When he appointed the notorious bocor Zacharie Delva as his personal envoy and chief of his federal militia, Duvalier was notifying the nation that he was the commander in chief of the Vodou masses. During the period of the Ouanaminthe insurgency, the mere mention of Delva's

name would send a trembling silence over entire families, and rumors of his pending arrival would shutter entire villages. He held ceremonies to combat Duvalier's enemies. "In some areas of northern Haiti, peasants claim human babies were sacrificed. Indeed, some can tell you how many, where, and when, who attended and what the loas told Delva."⁵⁴

Ceremonies and Rituals

The Houmfort



The Vodou temple is called a “**houmfort**.” This is the place where everything happens. In most rural villages, it is the center of the community. The construction and furnishings will vary according to the houngan's influence and affluence. Typically, it is a primitive, peristyle structure—an open space encircled by a colonnade, with benches on three sides, an earthen floor, and a thatched or corrugated sheet metal roof.

As in all religions, symbolism is highly significant. Prominently placed in the center of the houmfort is a large supporting pillar, called the “**poteau-mitan**.” It is usually brightly painted with serpentine spirals symbolizing a snake. This is the entrance and exit point for the loas. When the gods are summoned, the responding loa slides down the poteau-mitan and possesses a worshipper. One area of the peristyle always remains unoccupied. This is a sanctuary, the sacred dwelling place of the loas, and no one may enter unless they receive a special invitation from the houngan or mambo.

Surrounding the poteau-mitan on the floor are sacred, intricate Vodou drawings called “**vévés**,” usually made from cornmeal. Their purpose is to repel evil spirits and to satisfy the requirements of a particular loa. Each loa has its own distinctive design.

A temple may have one or more adjoining rooms and an inner chamber with paintings of Catholic saints and an altar called a “**pé**.” On top of the pé sets an eclectic assemblage of sacred objects, including a Christian cross, the “**govis**” (the earthenware jars holding the spirits), holy water, and covered jars holding the hair and nails of

⁵⁴ Diederich and Burt, p. 348.

initiates. A plethora of other objects are also stored in the chamber—the ritual drums, magical rocks and bones that contain ancestral spirits, the flags of the community, candles, flowers, fruit, wine, the dolls, and other accouterments that a houngan prefers for his ceremony. Since the loas crave alcohol and each spirit has a preferred drink, wines and liqueurs are also kept on hand. For example, bottles of champagne are reserved for Maîtresse Erzulie, while white clairin with hot peppers is the drink of choice for the Ghede, and Ogun wants Haitian Barbancourt rum.

In rural houmforts, sacred trees surround the peristyle. They are recognizable by a circle of stones at their base and strips of brightly colored cloths tied to their branches. For certain ceremonies, sacred offerings are placed at the base of these trees.

Though the houmfort is revered as a sacred space, it also functions as a center for community activity. Women will congregate on the premises to wash clothes and their babies, to prepare the cornmeal and other foods, and children find the open space useful as a play area.



Previous page, magical rocks and a cross in a sacred chamber; above, Vodou worship drums in a damaged houmfort from the 2010 earthquake in the Tabarre neighborhood of Port-au-Prince

Haitian Vodou is a dynamic, participatory religion. Every believer is actively engaged in the ceremonial rituals by responding to the houngan's liturgy and passionately seeking contact with the spirits. Vodou's bizarre and macabre reputation stems from the rituals practiced during these ceremonies. As the ceremony opens, the gods are summoned by prayers and incantations. Papa Legba is saluted first, and if he is not pleased, he might become angry and terminate the entire ceremony. The primary end of Vodou worship is to establish direct communication with the gods.

Mounting



This union between human and the divine is known as “possession.” As in other religions, the phenomenon refers to a spirit occupying the body. When a person becomes possessed by the supernatural, they lose control so that they are utterly unaware of what is happening. Vodou uses a highly descriptive term to describe this event—“**mounting.**”

The possessed person is “mounted,” and god rides him like a horse. When one becomes god's horse, the mount is under the invisible whip of the spirit rider. The loa has complete control so that he does nothing of his own accord. The mount may be seized with violent convulsions, enter a trance-like state, speak in an unknown tongue, simulate orgasms, lose consciousness, become drenched with sweat, groan, jerk, collapse, or any number of extremely bizarre behaviors.

Changes in personality and behavior are naturally and normally expected and accepted because the horse will say and do anything, even the unnatural or impossible. Mounts will act out inhibited desires without fear of personal embarrassment. They believe that when repressed needs are given spiritual expression, guilt is purged, and problems are reduced. If a male loa mounts a female and commands her to do freakish behaviors, even distasteful ones, such as taking a male name, eating and drinking what the loa prefers, dressing as a man, or sexually provocative dances, she will do it.

The only explanation for some possessed behaviors is paranormal. Each loa expresses its supernatural identity through unique and strange behaviors. Those possessed by Agwe, “the sovereign of the sea,” might mimic rowing a boat vigorously. Ogun's servants can be especially licentious. They will spew obscenities, demand hot rum

complaining of cold testicles, smoke cigars, or proposition any attractive women that catch their lustful eye. They might stick gourds up women's dresses to simulate pregnancy. When Dambala, "the serpent god," mounts his horse, the possessed will act out snake behaviors. They will hiss their messages instead of speaking so that the houngan must interpret. They could writhe and slide on the ground. Heintz notes that two authors near Arcahaie witnessed a Dambala possession where a mount slithered up a seventy-five-foot tree and lay coiled in the vines at the top.⁵⁵

During mounting, the spirits deliver their divine messages for the entire following through the possessed person. Generally, believers do not feel ashamed because they have been used as a mouthpiece of a god. Sometimes bad things will happen when an evil spirit mounts a person.

Mountings may last for hours or only a few minutes. After the spirit departs, the person is often left in a state of exhaustion, bewilderment, or amnesia.

Mounting is confidently expected at every significant ceremony, but not every worshipper will be possessed. A person may have to wait many years. The first loa to mount him becomes his primary deity, taking precedence over any other spirits who might desire him. The initial possession is like a conversion or confirmation in other religions. The possessed person is carefully observed so that no mistakes will be made in deducting the actions and speech of the loa. The loa is baptized by sprinkling water onto the head of the possessed person. This recognizes the subservience of the mount to his god and that any future possessions by other spirits will have to conform to an initial agreement. The loa becomes one's guardian angel throughout his life. At death, the loa is taken from his head so that the soul may go to God.

Dancing to the Drumbeats



Haitian Vodou is a danced religion. The syncopation of the hallowed drums and the swaying of dancers comprise an essential spiritual element in every ceremony. Once the identity of the arriving loa has been determined, the head hounsi directs the drummers and singers in the appropriate songs. Every loa has a personal cadence and dance that emphasizes different body parts,

⁵⁵ Heintz, Heintz, and Heintz, 779-780.

traditional steps, and precise footprints. Vodou dances are always circular in recognition of the eternal circle of life. Transported by the tempo, worshippers chant and pulsate in trances and convulsions with total abandon.



Sacrifices

Sacrifices are required at every Vodou ceremony. As this sacred time approaches, the tempo of the drums will surge and the possessions multiply. Sacrifices are enormously significant because the gods are demanding and must be propitiated. The loa are exhausted from their responsibilities of governing the universe, and the gifts of food, drink, and animals rejuvenate and pleasure them.

Animal sacrifices are commonplace for nearly every Vodou service, these may include chickens, goats, pigs, or bulls, whatever the gods require. By killing an animal, life is released. The sacrificial animals are carefully selected, washed, dried, perfumed, powdered, and clothed in silk or velvet in the colors of the loa to whom it is being offered.

The worshippers will petition the spirits whether their sacrifices are acceptable. A consecrated food is set before the sacrificial animal, and if it eats, then the spirits are

satisfied. If the god's desires are not gratified, its anger will be released by any measure of retribution. Speaking through the mounted participants, the gods reveal their demands from the modest to the extravagant.

Worshippers have close physical contact with the animal—rubbing, touching, petting, riding. Then after hours of rhythmic dancing, chanting, and singing, the moment arrives. The animal's throat is slashed, and a hot stream of blood spurts forth. The blood is mixed in a bowl with spices and fed to each member, so they can receive the spirit of this sacrificed life. The flesh of the animal is then cooked and eaten by the participants. Ceremonies are often called “*mangé-loa*” because they provide food for the loa and participants (“*mange*” is the Creole word for eat).



Previous page- sacrifice being prepared by the hounsi, adorned in white for the loa Maitresse Erzulie; above- sacrificial animal being presented to the loas with food and drink, dressed in red for Ogun.

Black Magic



Haitian Vodou's notorious reputation is due to the rituals of "Petro." This is the black magic realm where alarming, hazardous, and demonic phenomena occur. The loas of Petro are angry, fierce, and dangerous. Though it is not nearly as prevalent as the more routine Rada rituals, it is very real. Believers acknowledge and fear Petro's evil presence as part of their daily reality and rely on their local hounsans and

mambos to counteract the evil curses inflicted upon them and to return the spell against the adversary who conjured it.

Curses and supernatural creatures are the most common forms of this phenomenon. Spectacular tales emerge from this dimension, including death curses, zombies and bakas, and wild sexual orgies.

An "ouanga" is a talisman used to cast a spell or curse. Its purpose is to deliver a vengeful, wicked affliction upon one's enemy, such as suffering, illness, or even death. Ouangas are greatly dreaded. Many Haitians fear that an inadvertent step on an unseen ouanga will doom one's life. The most sensationalized ouanga is a Vodou doll made with cloth and the hair or nails of the intended victim. The widespread perception is one of casting a curse by mutilating the effigy with a pin stuck into the heart or other body parts. However, this is more of a West African tradition and not normally Haitian. The most feared spell is the "ouanga-a-mort," the death curse. The prevalent belief among Haitian Vodouists is that any sudden death or grave illness is the result of a death curse.

To protect oneself from personal harm or illness, the most common practice is to wear an amulet, a small protecting charm. A "garde," is a common charm to ward off evil or to bring good fortune. A "drogue" is a type of garde which is believed to shield the wearer against wounds, such as bullets and knives. As previously noted, fighters during the Haitian Revolution and the Caco uprising wore types of "drougues" and would recklessly hurl their bodies against adversaries.

The fear of predatory supernatural creatures is very real for Vodou believers, especially zombies, bakas, and ghosts.

The **zombie** is believed to be a person who is buried and raised from the dead by some mystical formula which makes him a total slave to the sorcerer. Because hounsans are so skilled in the use of native herbs and drugs, it is said that some

zombie cases are a result of drug-induced catalepsy. In such a state, a person is pronounced dead, buried, and then dug up. The theory is that regular doses of narcotics keep the enslaved person in a state of mental apathy. The Haitian criminal code states that anyone practicing this shall be guilty of murder even if the victim does not die. Since most burials take place shortly after death, it is possible for a bocor to drug his victim, bury him, dig him up again before he smothers. In the black-magic realm of the zombies are the oungas, or symbols which cause harm to a person. Peasants believe that a bocor can cause sickness or even death with the oungas.⁵⁶

Another feared creature is the “baka.” Occasionally, evil loas will transform themselves into ferocious, red-eyed creatures that are capable of assuming whatever form they desire. Noted anthropologist Harold Courlander tells about a baka who transformed into a bicycle and was seen traveling at nights on the road from Port-au-Prince to Léogane. A rumor in the 1960s was that the Liberian ambassador metamorphosed each night into a black cat that prowled around the town. A startled housewife who went to shoo a black cat away with a broom was admonished by her husband, “No, no my dear, we must treat Monsieur l’Ambassadeur with more respect.”⁵⁷

⁵⁶ Diederich and Burt, 357.

⁵⁷ Heintz, Heintz, and Heintz, 772.

Chapter 5

REVERBERATIONS

Sa ou fè se li ou wè – What you do is what you see. -Haitian proverb⁵⁸



Vodou has been woven so deeply into the fabric of Haitian life and culture that to ignore this fact is to disregard a dominant motif. Some have dismissed it as a bizarre superstition and tried to deny its existence, most notably Haiti's elite. Others have over-sensationalized it, especially in early and contemporary Western societies and in some evangelical Christian circles.

To the vast majority of Haitians, Vodou is the governing principle of their lives; therefore, I have endeavored to treat their faith respectfully and objectively. At the same time, I have also attempted not to understate certain aspects that are well-documented.

Through the centuries, religions have always been a primary force in shaping civilizations. In this final chapter, I will address two significant repercussions regarding Vodou's influence. First, has Vodou's influence hindered Haiti's economic and social development? Secondly, what are the implications for Christian mission in Haiti?

Fatalism

Philippe Girard, in *Haiti: The Tumultuous History- From Pearl of the Caribbean to Broken Nation*, proposes the theory that Vodou's influence has impeded Haiti's economic and social development.

One cannot help but think that Voodoo's popularity has hindered, rather than facilitated, Haiti's development. The distant gods of monotheistic religions offer the promise of everlasting bliss in exchange for the following rules and rituals, but they generally do not intercede on a daily basis, thus leaving more room for self-reliance and individual action. Because of its focus on the omnipresence of supernatural forces and on a loa's ability to solve one's daily problems, Voodoo serves as a substitute for a rational assessment of the difficulties a parishioner

⁵⁸ Meaning- What we see in our life is the result of our actions.

should face alone. Vodou hinders Haitians' entrepreneurial spirit by portraying godly intercession, not human activism, as the most efficient method of human betterment.⁵⁹

New York Times columnist David Brooks has accused Haiti of having “progress-resistant cultural influences [including] the voodoo religion.”⁶⁰

I agree with Girard's thesis that Haitian Vodou has inhibited, rather than facilitated, Haiti's economic and social development, but it is a partial inhibitor and not a total one.

Historically, Vodou was always seen as a detrimental factor in the nation establishing relations with the outside world. Its founding fathers, Louverture, Dessalines, Christophe, Pétion, and Boyer, feared Vodou's negative reputation, and therefore, they forbade its practice. Additionally, the contributions of several European authors furthered the isolation by startling the world's perceptions with sensational and scandalous publications of Vodou's evil and savage dark side.

However, Vodou cannot be blamed for all of Haiti's woes. The obstacles to economic and social development have deep historical roots. The brutality of the colonial period, the establishment of dueling racial classes, the fiscal and public policies of the early governments, the failure to establish a functioning democracy, and the brutality of dictatorships have been greater contributing factors.

Nevertheless, **Vodou's worldview is fatalistic**, and as a result, it has had a pervasive negative impact on shaping the nation's culture and development. In fatalism, human beings feel powerless and impotent to influence their outcomes through their own actions. In Vodou, the individual is not the primary agent to change and control one's world. This is the realm of the loa. Free will and personal responsibility are generally lacking because it would be counter-productive to attempt to change one's life when the gods decide these fates. Personal misfortunes and illnesses are not viewed as the result of natural forces or one's individual choices. Therefore, since germs, inadequate nutrition, and poor health conditions do not make one sick, they can be disregarded in favor of appeasing an angry loa or counteracting the spell of an ouanga.

Robert Corbett asserts that fatalism has contributed significantly to the peasants' unwillingness to struggle for liberation because the loa have already decided things, and since they are not very changeable, things will always remain the same.⁶¹ François Duvalier's brutal reign validated this perspective. During his fourteen-year dictatorship,

⁵⁹ Philippe R. Girard, *Haiti: The Tumultuous History- From Pearl of the Caribbean to Broken Nation* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005) 33.

⁶⁰ Laurent Dubois, *Haiti: The Aftershocks of History* (New York: Picador, 2012) 3.

⁶¹ Robert Corbett, “Introduction to Voodoo in Haiti.” (Webster University, March 1988) <http://faculty.webster.edu/corbetre/haiti/voodoo.htm>.

the opposition was almost entirely from the elite who were rarely adherents to Vodou. On the other hand, the masses tended to acquiesce to the oppression. Duvalier was an astute observer of Haitian life. During his medical tenure in the countryside, he familiarized himself with the everyday concerns of the people, their predisposition toward paternalistic authority, and the ease with which their allegiance could be secured and easily manipulated through the use of Vodou.

Over the years, I have observed fatalism manifesting itself in various forms, including a general lack of initiative or an entrepreneurial spirit, a widespread passivity to a present state of circumstances, and a resignation to dependency on others for one's well-being.⁶² As our mission organization has become more cognizant of this disposition, we have responded by adopting new criteria and strategies to embolden initiative, to promote genuine collaborations, and to discourage debilitating dependence.

Christian Mission

To conclude, I am submitting two personal points of view regarding faithful, effective service in Haiti to those who are engaged in Christian mission work.

Discernment

During one of my first mission trips, we took a much-needed break in a Port-au-Prince café. As was his habit, our team director initiated an impromptu conversation with a young Haitian man in his early twenties. The conversation was amicable, and eventually, they started to discuss each other's personal faith, which is quite common in Haiti. The young man expressed that he was a Christian, which delighted our director and encouraged him to take the conversation to a more engaging and good-natured level.

After some time, our Haitian pastor arrived and sat down at our table. Wishing to include him in the conversation, our director introduced the young man and shared what they were talking about. The pastor looked firmly at the young man and probed, "So, what's that around your wrist?"

Abruptly, the whole mood of the conversation changed. The young man retorted in Creole in an angry, elevated tone. After the two exchanged many more unknown words, the young man abruptly stormed off.

⁶² I know that I am painting with a wide brush, and that there are exceptions—which I have gratefully experienced—but these exceptions stand out as anomalies.

Unbeknownst to us, he was wearing a “garde,” a small protective charm to shield him from evil or to bring good fortune.

This event illustrates two important points. **First, spiritual beliefs are “syncretic” in Haiti.** Most Haitians exercise a variety of spiritual practices. This young man, sincere as he was, saw nothing incompatible between the Christian and Vodou beliefs and practices, nor do most Haitians. Vodou gives them permission to believe in deities with countless approaches for support. All avenues are open; none are excluded because results are what counts.

I have often heard it expressed something like this, “Jesus is good for this; Catholicism is good for that, and Vodou is good for these things.”

Discovering the true religious beliefs of many Haitians is not always initially discernable because most are quite adept at using religious language as the young man demonstrated. He was skilled with the right words within a specific context, but they hid the complete nature of his faith. I do not believe he was being intentionally deceptive; he was just unaware of the contradiction.

Secondly, he vanished when his beliefs and practices were confronted. **Vodou thrived in insolation, and when it was persecuted, it went underground where it further flourished.** Consequently, Christian servants should be discernible, sensitive, courteous, and patient. We would be wise not to accept every opening religious declaration at face value as a true reflection of one’s whole belief system. If you care about someone and their faith or are exploring a relationship for a cooperative mission, it is imperative to explore the deeper and complete nature of their beliefs. Assessing what ultimately transpired, I have also wondered if our Haitian pastor had taken a more sensitive and less confrontational tone would the outcome have been different. Would we have had the opportunity to have conversed longer, to have discussed his motives and beliefs, and to have presented ours?

Foremost and finally, it is imperative that **Christian servants understand the true nature of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and competently communicate the specific and constructive elements of Christ’s sufficiency.** Since the founding of Israel, the proclamation has been: “**The Lord our God, the Lord is one**” (Deuteronomy 6:4; Mark 12:29) “**There is no one like you, Lord, and there is no God but you**” (1 Chronicles 17:20; 1 Samuel 2:2; 2 Samuel 7:22; 2 Chronicles 14:11). Furthermore, Jesus Christ is God’s one and only Son, both human and divine, and His work on the cross is the only means for salvation. Jesus said it himself, “**I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me**” (John 14:6). Paul declared,

“For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all people” (1Timothy 2:5-6).

Moreover, consider how **Jesus is sufficient to meet one’s needs.**

Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin. Let us then approach God’s throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need (Hebrews 4:14-16).

Likewise,

Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. . . . I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do all this through him who gives me strength. . . . And my God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus (Philippians 4:6- 7, 12-13, 19).

By comparison, imagine the daily, fearful struggles of a Vodou believer who is continually striving to discern if he is pleasing the correct loa, who is insecure if he is offering the appropriate appeasements to earn favor from the loas, who is fearful of hidden spirits and curses laid in his path, and who has no assurance of the final resting place of his soul.

For centuries, Euro-American missionaries have reported that one of the greatest reliefs which Christianity brings to polytheist and pantheist hearts and minds is the certainty that there is only one God. By believing that the world is crowded with hordes of gods, that every river and stream, tree and valley, hill and wood, and every natural force has its god, and that these gods are angry, jealous, and hostile, and must be placated, one can never be certain if he has omitted or offended a god.

As servants of Jesus Christ, we can confidently proclaim to every Haitian that there is one God who is love, and He is absolutely sufficient for salvation and life.

Spiritual Warfare

Many North American Christians have had limited or nominal encounters with the spiritual realm beyond the natural order in this world or contended with unseen forces of evil. Many would prefer to relegate these alien concepts to the extremists and those on the fringes, such as the television faith healers. But in Haiti, most people have directly encountered supernatural forces and witnessed bizarre, atypical activities and behaviors. Trustworthy people have told me bizarre and unimaginable stories about their encounters. Some of these experiences have been devastating.

Long-term missionaries in Haiti recognize this reality and prepare themselves to contend against it. They understand that the true nature of Vodou is not neutral or a harmless superstition of the uneducated masses. They know that failure to acknowledge its reality will lead to, at best, ineffectiveness, or at worst, failure and disaster.

The Apostle Paul has described Vodou's true nature and how to regard:

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms (Ephesians 6:10-12).

The Apostle Peter reinforces this, "Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that the family of believers throughout the world is undergoing the same kind of sufferings (1 Peter 5:8-9).

Our battle is spiritual; though invisible, it is real. Ministry in Haiti is war. For some, merging the terms "ministry" and "war" appears to be a contradiction. But these forces are fierce and at war with God; therefore, they are at war with Christ's followers.

I am continually wrestling with these questions. Why is Haiti the way it is? Why does nothing ever seem to get better, especially with all the money being poured into it, and with all the mission and humanitarian agencies working there? Undoubtedly, historical and human elements are a factor, but there is a spiritual war that has been raging before Haiti existed, and it is a powerful, destructive force.

Every Christian who intends to serve Christ faithfully in Haiti will encounter this raging war. It will reveal itself in many forms, some will be minor while others will be extreme. Personally, I have experienced it in several ways. The most painful and injurious experience in my life occurred as I was preparing for a mission role in Haiti nearly two decades ago. Even as I write today, it still affects aspects of my life, and it is an area where I am constantly seeking God's intervention and healing. Other

encounters have seemed almost accidental. But they woke me up and reminded me of my need to wholly depend upon God's grace and protection. Some occurred before my trips, some after I returned, and a few during my time in Haiti.

But not every encounter with the forces from this spiritual realm has been negative or evil. To a much greater degree, I have felt the glorious force of the Holy Spirit powerfully at work while doing mission. I have experienced Christ's presence in my life, empowering me to minister effectively beyond my own capabilities and overcoming insurmountable obstacles. This has given me profound joy.

A Christian servant does not need to be fearful or withdrawn. Instead, one can be confident in Christ's grace and protection. Paul not only warns us; he tells us how to prepare for spiritual warfare by using spiritual weapons.

Therefore, put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord's people. Pray also for me, that whenever I speak, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it fearlessly, as I should. (Ephesians 6:13-20).

One afternoon, a local city mayor took me to a neighboring village. He dejectedly uttered, "I don't know what to do here. It seems hopeless."

Our trek traversed over rugged, desolate, parched fields overgrown with wild cactus, sisal, and sugar cane. The few scrub trees that dotted the landscape provided no shade from the scorching sun. As I glanced across the horizon, I could not see any signs of life.

Upon arrival in this hidden, remote village, I saw the remains of crumbling tenant laborer houses constructed from sticks and mud and laid out in neat rows. The town was once a dynamic, productive community that employed hundreds in the world's largest sisal plantation. But President Jean-Claude Duvalier, Baby Doc, ceded 47,000 acres to his sister, Marie-Denise, for a tourist development, forcing the employer to abandon the plantation and the people. The tourist development never happened, and the once-thriving town sunk into wretched poverty. Everyone and everything that my

eyes gazed upon revealed a long lingering misery, desperation, and hopelessness. Now, I was brought there to do something.

The village elders ushered us into a central meeting hall and seated us before a large group. I couldn't help but notice the flapping Vodou flags from the adjacent houmfort that occupied the most prominent position in the town center.

Immediately, I sensed a considerable amount of tension. Their body language was intensely adversarial. I had no idea what I had walked into. The mayor attempted to address the crowd, but loud, combative voices burst out from every corner of the room. Though he was an exceptionally large man, I could tell that he was getting exasperated as his nerves evaporated before them. Since the words were in Creole, I couldn't comprehend what the commotion was about.

What could I ever say to this crowd? As I sat there, I prayed. Soon, I sensed that this was more than a personal conflict; a real spiritual battle was transpiring in front of me. I realized that my words would be inconsequential and possibly detrimental. So, I resolved that the only words that I would deliver when called upon would be from the word of God.

Abruptly, all talking ceased and a strange silence permeated the air. Then everyone stared forcefully at me. One man broke the silence and asked, "Why are you here?" "What's your mission?"

Looking straight at them, I began, Jesus said, "'The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I came that they may have life and have it abundantly' (John 10:10 RSV). Everywhere I go in Haiti, I see the work of the thief—stealing, death, and destruction. But Jesus brings life. I am here to bring His life." I continued, "'God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us'" (Romans 5:8). I halted. A couple of seconds skipped a beat. Then, they broke into applause. Suddenly, the entire atmosphere was transformed. Nothing else needed to be said. We concluded by embracing one another and making arrangements for future get-togethers.

The sword of the Spirit, the word of God, enabled me to stand my ground and to extinguish the flaming arrows of the evil one.

Vodou has been called the "blood of the land." It is more than a belief. It is Haiti's way of life; it is power; it is in its blood.

To Haiti, we offer the "blood of the lamb."

For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your ancestors, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect. He was chosen before the creation of the world but was revealed in these last times for your sake. Through him you believe in God, who raised him from the dead and glorified him, and so your faith and hope are in God (1 Peter 1:18-21).

Personal Note

I hope every person who loves the Haitian people and wants to help will find what I have written to be informative and useful for service. If I can be helpful in any way, please don't hesitate to contact me (michael@internationalstrategicaliances.org).

GLOSSARY

abres reposoirs- sacred trees where the loas live.

Action de Grace- Catholic ritual prayers which precede Vodou services.

Affaire de Bizoton- 1863 human sacrifice and cannibalism of a 12-year-old girl; eight Vodou devotees who were tried; convicted and executed by firing squad; incident that made Vodou internationally infamous.

ason- the magic rattle of the houngan or mambo; taking of the ason is the final initiation into becoming a houngan or mambo.

baka- evil loas transformed into ferocious, red-eyed creatures that are capable of assuming whatever form they desire.

banda- African dance.

Baron Samedi- the most feared loa and the leader of the Ghede family; dreadful counterpart to the good Papa Ghede; both respected and feared; the loa of the resurrection, the gatekeeper of cemeteries, and the only one who can accept one into the realm of the dead and lead them into the underworld; called upon to heal those who are approaching death; known for powerful acts of magic and can cure any mortal wound.

Baron Samedi- the most feared loa who keeps the gates to the grave; François Duvalier presented himself as the incarnation of this loa.

Bizango- extreme form of the Petro that occurs by night, in the darkness that is the province of the “djab,” the devil.

bocor- sorcerer, witch doctor; skilled in the use of sinister charms and can send death curses and wreak havoc with the dead.

Bois Caïman- the 1791 Vodou ceremony that ignited the slave rebellion; an enduring influence as a dominant motif in Haiti’s national identity; an iron statue of a marron summoning the slaves to revolution stands in Port-au-Prince to commemorate the “Boukman Contract;” some Christian sources have characterized the event as a “pact with the devil,” and even many Haitians believe the country is “cursed” because of it.

Bondye- the supreme god (God Almighty); derived from the French Catholic God, “Bon Dieu” (the good god); a remote figure who does not interact in the affairs of mortal beings; unknowable to humankind.

Boukman, Dutty- marron and houngan who convened the slave rebellion leaders in 1791 for the Bois Caïman Petro Vodou ceremony that ignited the slave rebellion and revolution; captured, burned, and his head was publicly displayed on a pike; his influence remains to this day and Haitians have honored him by admitting him into the pantheon of loa.

caille mystère- inner sanctum of the houmfort.

cérémonie- a Vodou ritual.

choual- a mounted or possessed person.

clairin- cheap raw rum; often used to appease certain loas.

cocomacac- nightstick with magical powers.

Congo loa- special group of loas.

connaissance- special knowledge of the supernatural given to houngans and mambos.

crossroads- where the two worlds (earth and spirit) meet; nearly all Vodou acts begin by acknowledging it.

Dambala or Damballah the Serpent- one of the most important loas; the creator of life who helped Bondye design the universe; the oldest of the gods; a giant serpent who used his 7,000 coils to shape the heavens, the stars and the planets, and the earth, the hills and the valleys; the keeper of knowledge, wisdom, and healing magic; rules over one's intellect and the planetary balance; much loved and sought after because he is the source of peace and tranquility; found living in trees near the waters.

démon- evil spirit.

dessounin- ceremony to release the spirit from the body and forward it to a deferred location for the next year and one day.

Djab- the devil.

drogue- type of garde believed to shield the wearer against wounds, such as bullets and knives.

Erzulie Freda or Maîtresse Erzulie- the most beautiful and sensuous woman in the pantheon of loas; the personification of femininity and womanhood—the female energy of Legba; the earth mother, the goddess of beauty and love, help, goodwill, health, and fortune; she can also be the goddess of jealousy, vengeance, and discord; as the loa of ideal dreams, hopes, and aspirations, she is the most loved loa of all; believers summon her for issues of motherhood, strong feminine sexuality, and to read the future in dreams.

Erzulie-gé-rouge- Erzulie with red eyes; an evil loa.

garde- amulet or charm for protection from evil forces or to bring good fortune.

Ghede or Guédés- spirits of death, resurrection, and fertility; keepers of the cemetery and the eternal crossroads where everyone must cross over to gain access to everything in the afterlife; ancestral spirits of the forgotten dead; lords of eroticism and have eclectic personalities such as being sensual, fearless, boisterous, and comedic; operate under the direction of Baron Samedi.

goat without horns- human sacrifice.

govi- earthenware jar that holds the spirits; the spirit of the family member will reside there and be consulted for guidance and life lessons.

Griot- African sect who foretell the future.

gros bon ange- one of two souls that inhabit all bodies; big good angel; similar to the soul, personal soul; immortality.

Guyons- sect widely rumored to perform human sacrifices.

houmfort- Vodou place of worship, temple.

houngan- Vodou priest; interpreters of the loas.

houngeniçon- head hounsi serves as the choir mistress; responsible for recognizing the arrival of the loas and selecting the appropriate song to honor their presence.

hounsi- white-garmented assistants to the houngans and mambos.

kanzo- initiation ceremony into a very serious level of Vodou practice.

konesans- sacred knowledge.

laplace- master of ceremonies; brandishes a sword or machete during the processions.

lavé-tete- ceremonial washing of the head for Vodou initiation.

les invisibles- all spirits.

les mystères- loas, spirits, gods.

loa or lwa- lesser divine beings who involved in the believer's daily life; intercessors between Bondye and humanity; function as spiritual mediators; forces of nature that have personalities and personal mythologies; worshipped and served with gifts.

loup-garous- werewolves that suck the blood from unprotected babies at night.

Mackandal- houngan who united maroon bands with plantation slaves into secret organizations and launched a slave terror campaign in 1751 poisoning water supplies and

animals; claimed to possess the magical powers of Jesus, Allah, and African gods; captured and burned at the stake.

Maïte-Tete- principal loa in a person's head.

mal d'ioc- evil eye.

Maman Brigitte- Baron Samedi's wife; loa of fertility and motherhood; a powerful healer; protectress over women; very feminine and sensual, yet extremely dangerous.

mambo- Vodou priestess; interpreters of the loas.

mangé-loa- ceremonies when the animal sacrifices provide food for the loa and participants.

mangé-sec- Vodou food offering which does not include animal sacrifices.

mapou- large tree with magic and guardian powers.

marrons- runaway slaves; from a French word that means "wild, untamed," like a domesticated animal that turns feral.

mount- possession of a believer by a loa during ritual ceremonies; the mounted person is referred to as being ridden by a god like a horse; the loa has complete control so that the mount does nothing of his own accord; may be seized with violent convulsions, enter a trance-like state, speak in an unknown tongue, simulate orgasms, lose consciousness, become drenched with sweat, groan, jerk, collapse, or any number of extremely bizarre behaviors; messages are given so the community can directly interact with them.

Négritude- black pride.

Noirisme- philosophical and ethnological movement that embraced Haiti's African heritage; named after the French word for black; adopted the African roots, customs, traditions, skin color, the Creole language, and Vodou; considered Haiti's European and African identities to be incompatible and the source of cultural and political discord.

Ogun- the god of war, traditional warrior figure in the Dahomean religion; highly respected—mighty, powerful, triumphal; embodies the spirits of warriors, metalworking, and rum making; the force of politics; his possessions can be violent.

onomancie- magical Haitian numerology for conferring sinister powers through divinations; François Duvalier believed this about the number 22 and set important events on those dates.

ouanga- talisman used to cast a spell or curse to deliver a vengeful, wicked affliction upon one's enemy, such as suffering, illness, or even death.

ouanga-a-mort- the death curse.

Papa Legba- the gatekeeper between humanity and the spirit world; opens the way to the spirit world and the other loas; always the first god to be invoked in Haitian Vodou ceremonies; the loa at the crossroads, a central theme in Vodou because it is the place where the two worlds (earth and spirit) meet.

pé- Vodou altar for sacred objects.

peristyle- part of the hounfort where the ceremonies are held.

Petro- the black magic of Haitian Vodou; demonic, angry, mean, aggressive, and vicious; dangerous things occur in these ceremonies including death curses, transformation into zombies, and wild sexual orgies; indigenous to Haiti, the spirits of the Haitian soil.

Pots-tetes- jars containing the hair, fingernails, etc. of Vodou initiates.

poteau-mitan- large supporting pillar in the center of the hounfort; usually brightly painted with serpentine spirals symbolizing a snake; entrance and exit point for the loas.

Rada- a family spirit; called first during any Vodou service; represents emotional stability, light, and normal affairs; tend to be peaceful, happy, benevolent, and creative; upholds morals and principles; African origins, brought to the New World by the slaves; their rituals are celebrated with onbeat drumming and dancing.

Sectes Rouges- secret societies whose primary concern is evil.

servi- to serve or worship.

société- houngan and mambo's following.

the twins- mysterious set of contradicting forces; good and evil, happy and sad, etc.; will tend to help with a better side of life, if honored in religious services.

ti-bon-ange- one of two souls that inhabit all bodies; little good angel; universal soul; similar to conscience.

Tonton Macoutes- François Duvalier's private Gestapo-like force; many hougans and bocors were incorporated into this intelligence network; use Vodou's manipulative influences to elevate Duvalier's aura as the savior of Haiti.

Trou Foban- sacred cave in the Artibonite Valley near the top of ancient mountain; greatly feared for the supernatural might of the spirits who have dwelled there since the days of slavery; home where the evil spirits who roam throughout country gather; only the most powerful hougans and bocors dare to conduct ceremonies there.

vévés- sacred, intricate Vodou drawings called usually made from cornmeal surrounding the poteau-mitan on the floor; repels evil spirits and satisfies the requirements of a particular loa; each loa has its own distinctive design.

Vodou- word in the “fon” language for “spirit.”

weté mo nan d’leau- a ceremony called to commemorate the spirit of the deceased being discharged to live in the world again after being temporary trapped in dark waters for 366 days.

zombie- living dead; person who is buried and raised from the dead by some mystical formula which makes him a total slave to the sorcerer.

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AUTHOR

“The life I touch for good or ill will touch another life, and that in turn another, until who knows where the trembling stops or in what far place my touch will be felt.”

-Frederick Buechner

Michael VanHook is the founder and Executive Director International Strategic Alliances (ISA), a mission outreach to Haiti, and the MSV Educational Network, an English language and cultural institute in Brazil. ISA exists to make a significant and enduring difference in the lives of the Haitian people by helping them to rise above their present circumstances, reach the highest potential of their intended design, and become catalysts for change in their spheres of influence. ISA accomplishes this by strategically and collaboratively aligning themselves with leaders and groups to mutually design and implement sustainable humanitarian, educational, and leadership initiatives.

Michael has worn many hats throughout his life—educator, businessman, pastor, and advocate. His personal journey has been a passionate pursuit to discover how his life, transformed by God’s grace, can make a difference in the lives of others. Any success that he has achieved, he attributes to the faithful support of family and friends. Michael holds degrees from Northern Kentucky University, Asbury Seminary, and Morehead State University.

His improbable journey with Hispaniola has transformed his life as much as theirs—“I can’t explain why or how, but their love has profoundly changed me.” The spark was lit when he made a trip to Haiti as an 18-year-old high school senior. His deep, abiding love for the Haitian people motivated him to found the International Strategic Alliances as a response to their stated dreams and needs. He considers the greatest compliment that he has ever received, was when a Haitian man told him, “I consider you a Haitian because you treat us as equals.”

Michael and his wife Luciana live in the Greater Cincinnati area. He has three adult daughters and two granddaughters.

