

# Voodoo in Haiti

—By Dr Gerald Murray

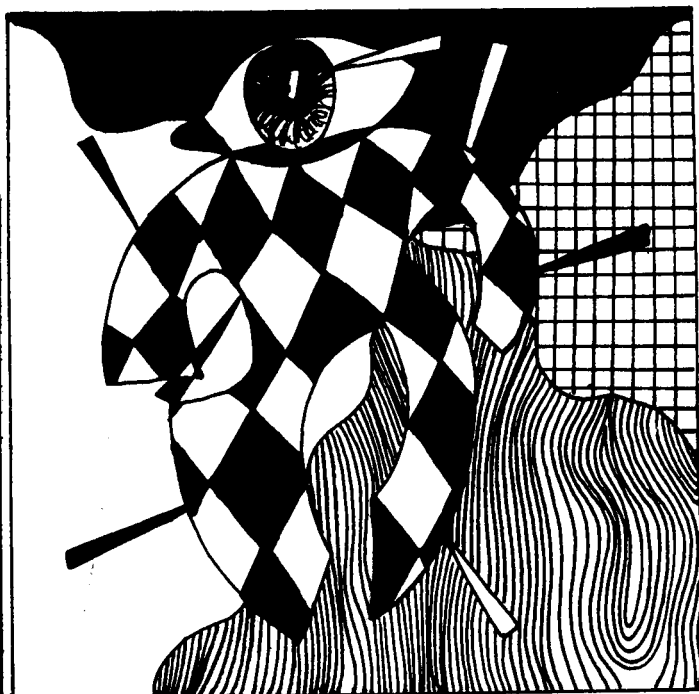
As an anthropologist I became interested in learning about life in Haitian villages. Despite a tightly controlled government ("Baby Doc" had succeeded his father "Papa Doc") I was able to secure permission to settle into a small village with my wife to carry out two years of research.

I was warned to stay away from Voodoo. Too many foreigners had spent too much time indulging their curiosity about this exotic cult I was told. I agreed. I preferred to learn about "the real Haiti" the economic and domestic organisation of village life.

But Voodoo refused to be avoided. After weeks of tension with our new neighbors, who had never had a white live in their village, and who had been reluctant to rent me a house, we were solemnly and publicly welcomed into the community by our neighbors' dead parents. They had been summoned from the abode of the dead by a houngan ("voodoo priest") and spoke to the assembly from behind a closed door. (The houngan was behind the door with the spirits.) The dead father greeted me warmly and castigated his children for their mistrust, stating that he was the one who had "drawn" me to this village rather than to another. He instructed us all to live in harmony, bade us farewell and returned to his resting place "beneath the waters".

A feeling of solidarity and brotherhood warmed us all after this ceremony, and I had not the slightest inclination to suggest that the voice of the dead Patriarch was produced by ventriloquism on the part of a clever voodoo priest. The ritual had been a powerful emotional experience. Its meaning was in terms of the transformation which it momentarily effected within and among the participants. Whether the source was a ghost or a tricky houngan, I was grateful for the welcome.

I soon realized that much of daily life in the village was permeated by belief in the praeter-natural action of local spirits. It was clear that I had to learn at least something about voodoo to understand village life. The villagers, proud of their religion, were willing to inform and assist when they sensed that I wished neither to caricature nor convert them. With their help, the "mystery" and "bizarreness" of Voodoo rapidly dissolved, replaced by growing awareness on my part of a rich, logical and internally coherent religion possessing its own pantheon, rituals and priesthood.



The most active members of the Voodoo Pantheon are legions of minor anthropomorphic spirits referred to as "loua". Many of these loua were once powerful deities in their African homeland but have been demoted to lesser niches in Haiti. Each family inherits its own loua, who will give help and guidance if properly served, but who will cause illness and even death if ignored. The loua want attention. Voodoo dances are occasions on which friendly family loua are called down by drumming, chanting, and dancing. The spirits temporarily possess their children, dance in their bodies, speak through their mouths. The loua enjoy ordinary food; thus animals are frequently killed, cooked and served to them. The food is consumed by participants - but since they are often under possession at the moment, it is the loua who are receiving the food.

In addition to the loua, special veneration is given to one's dead parents and grand-parents - including the summoning of them for consultations such as the one described above. But food must also be given to one's parents at least once after their death. On this occasion special food is cooked and spread out for them in the bedroom where they used to sleep. The dead parents come and silently eat the "soul" of the food, but leave the externals behind for the living children (and their guests) to consume later. (The "accidents" of this food look and taste identical to ordinary food, though its essence is believed to have been consumed by the dead.)

But by far the most important rituals in Voodoo are those in which illnesses are diagnosed and healed.

The only acceptable test of true spiritual power - the only path to Voodoo priesthood - is the ability to heal. For the outside world, Voodoo entails the causing of illness. But the major use to which Haitian peasants put their religion is to heal illness.

Rituals of sorcery - the stereotypical "sticking pins in dolls" - also occur. (Dolls are not necessary - a piece of hair, fingernail, or used clothing of the intended victim may also do.) But this sorcery is done in great secret and constitutes a secondary sideline in the religious life of the people. Its center-stage position in popular image is due to the tendency of outsiders to search for the bizarre, the exotic, the "savage" - and the willingness of religious commercializers to pander to these inclinations in ceremonies staged for tourists.


Stereotypes still abound about Haitian Voodoo. I have met people still convinced that Voodoo rituals entail human sacrifice and cannibalism. Toward the end of my fieldwork, I asked several friends of mine in the village if they had ever heard of people in Haiti sacrificing children and eating their flesh. They looked at each other with an embarrassed smile and admitted to me: "Gerald, we've heard rumours of people doing that, but we thought that only whites did such things. That's why your neighbors were afraid to rent you a house in the beginning."

Of all the patterns which emerged, however, none was as surprising as the intimate linkage between service to the local spirits and membership in the Catholic Church. Recall: the louna and the dead are minor spirits in the theology of the people. The Supreme Being of the Voodoo Pantheon is the same God ("Bon-Dye") worshipped in the local Catholic Church. Even the most committed follower of the folk religion insist on having their children baptized by a Catholic Priest, on sending their children to First Communion in the local church, and on having the bodies of the dead prayed over in the church before being laid to rest. That is, there is firm, almost militant, adherence by the members of this cult to the Pantheon, rituals and Priests of the Catholic Church, and - at least in the village where I lived - a sense that conversion to American style Protestantism constitutes an abandonment of one's forebears. In a paradoxical sense one has to be a Catholic to be a bona-fide participant in the folk religion of Voodoo.

The pertinacity of the peasant in serving his ancestral spirits in the shadow of the Church is a pattern with which neither priest nor anthropologist feel fully comfortable. The priest generally objects to the intrusion of African spirits into the Pantheon of his parishioners, and is much more inclined to label these spirits as demons rather than as angels. The anthropologist in contrast tends to favour the African side of the Pantheon, dwelling on animal

sacrifices and African-derived rituals, filtering out or explaining away the simultaneous commitment of the villagers to the spirits and rites of traditional Catholicism. But the peasant has integrated both worlds.

Haitian Peasant Voodoo, then, far from being a hodgepodge of silly superstitions, is the tip of an iceberg that raises issues and goes much deeper than one would have ever suspected. The Haitian peasant has forged a linkage between two ancient competing traditions. One need not serve the louna to stand nonetheless in respectful awe before the living synthesis that has thus been achieved.



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