

VOODOO

(VODUN, VODOU)

By Robert and Marilyn Stewart

Founded: There is no starting date for Voodoo. It developed over several hundred years as a blending of African animism with principles found in other religion such as Catholicism

Followers: 30 million

Unique terms: Bondye, loa, Rada, Ghede, Petro, Agwe, Zaka, Legba, Erzulie, Damballah, Marassa

HISTORY

Zombies, black magic and the mysterious Voodoo queen, Marie Laveau, are intriguing images of a popular Hollywood depiction of voodoo. But those who practice voodoo perceive it to be an ancient religion, founded on the spiritual traditions of West Africa, and embracing universal concepts found in other religions.¹

During the period of European colonization of the 16th-18th centuries, thousands of slaves were taken from the coast of West Africa to the island of Hispaniola that is today divided between the Dominican Republic and Haiti. Numerous tribes were represented on the island, including the Dahomey, Yoruba, Ewe, Congo, Nago, and Fon tribes. Taking its name from the Fon word for “spirit,” voodoo arose from this melting pot of African ethnic groups as a religion of animistic characteristics that pays homage to spirits and ancestors.²

Spain encouraged missionary work among the slaves during its rule of Haiti, which lasted until the late 1600’s. But the colonists’ focus on economic gain overshadowed the zeal for missionary work among the slave population, declining further during French control of the island. By 1685, in hopes that Christian indoctrination would stave off an impending slave insurrection, the French instituted the *Code Noir* forbidding all African religious practices and requiring each slave to receive a Christian baptism. The prohibition of African religions did not eradicate its practice nor did the heavy-handed punishment meted out to participants diminish its use. Instead, clandestine meetings of the slaves forged a solidarity that tolerated the merger of different tribal beliefs and rituals. Many historians credit voodoo with providing the driving sense of unity that culminated in the slave rebellion of 1804 and secured Haiti’s independence from France.³

The severity of slave life presented a theological dilemma. Appeals to the African spirits to end their dismal plight seemed unfruitful, but the slaves’ minimal Christian education did little to persuade them that the Christian God could do any better. In their quest to find a spiritual resolution, the slaves developed a fetish for Catholic ritualistic articles and any magical power they might possess, while clinging still to their native religion. The indigenous Indian culture and the culture of the French colony helped mold the new belief system that was taking form. Voodoo emerged, then, as a blend of African, Catholic and indigenous religious practices.⁴

Voodoo remains an integral part of the religious and cultural fabric of Haiti. Francois Duvalier, “Papa Doc,” used the public’s intimacy with voodoo as a tool of intimidation by assuming the black top hat and coat attributed to Baron Samedi, the formidable Ghede loa of the dead believed capable of creating zombies. Propaganda posters during Duvalier’s oppressive presidency (1957-1971) unabashedly identified the dictator with the loa and with Jesus Christ.⁵

Voodoo was introduced to the United States and other countries with the movement of slave populations. Estimates put the number of worldwide practitioners today to be approximately 30 million.⁶ In Haiti, the constitution of 1987 granted freedom for the practice of voodoo, granting it full status as a religion by 2003.⁷

THEOLOGY

Voodoo practitioners feel no restraints from participating in other religions, and a commitment to Catholicism, in particular, is popular.⁸ French and Catholic leaders attempted to suppress voodoo for much of Haiti’s history, resulting in voodoo slipping under a veneer of Catholicism in order to

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avoid persecution. Catholicism and Voodoo in Haiti became intertwined so tightly that it has been said “one cannot be a worshiper of Voodoo without being a good Catholic.”⁹ Rosaries, pictures of saints and the crucifix are frequently incorporated into Haitian as well as American voodoo rituals. In Haiti, the blend has been such that many Haitians see a greater incompatibility between Protestantism and Catholicism than they do between voodoo and Catholicism.¹⁰

There is no central authority figure or written work in voodoo by which doctrine is formulated and beliefs are judged to be orthodox. Practices and rituals can vary significantly by region, by city or even by individual houngan (priest) or mambo (priestess) and often reflect their influence.¹¹

The West African tribal beliefs that gave rise to Voodoo held that a supreme being named Bondye created the earth and maintained cosmic balance, but whose highly elevated stature made him unconcerned with human needs.¹² Voodoo describes the creator-supreme being (Bon Dieu or Gran Tet) as all-powerful, all-knowing and even omnipresent, but distant and aloof. The term “goddess” may be applied equally well to this being who relinquished communications with human beings, turning that over to a host of lesser spirit beings called loa.¹³ God is not believed to deal directly with humans but meets only with the loa and considers their requests on behalf of mankind. In Haiti, God’s name is used freely, but often denotes an idea more akin to “fate.” God is viewed as a vague and impersonal force, and requires little from human beings.¹⁴

Although voodooists profess a belief in one God and creator of the universe, the rituals of voodoo are devoted to the worship and appeasement of other spirit beings. Service is offered to what is sometimes called the trinity of voodoo theology: “*les morts, les mysteres, et les marassa*” (the Dead, including ancestors, the loa and the Divine Twins).¹⁵ Their importance is reflected in a statement posted on the website of Voodoo Authentica following the flooding of New Orleans due to hurricane Katrina in August 2005: “We thank God, the Lwa, the Orisha [Santerian loa] and all of our Ancestors for protecting our shop and our families and friends.”¹⁶

Service to ancestors is an important tenet of voodoo, based on the belief that the living and the dead communicate and that ancestors have a natural affection for their descendants. Newcomers to voodoo are often advised to begin with the simple ritual of an ancestral feast. In return for homage to ancestors, a devotee will expect guidance, healing and protection.¹⁷ Though an ancestor will not necessarily be considered divine, or equal to a loa, he or she is considered an important conduit to spiritual and physical blessings.¹⁸

Ancestral lineage is central to voodoo’s claim as an ancient religion. Though any race may participate in its ritual, voodoo is described as carried “in the blood” of those from an African lineage and is offered as the explanation for voodoo’s tenacity despite a long history of oppression.¹⁹ Practitioners of voodoo recognize this distinctive birthright, for without it, voodoo may be seen as “little more than another Western, superficial, New Age commercial ‘spiritual’ fad.”²⁰

Voodoo ceremonies involve recognition of the loa, the manifestations of the creator.²¹ These lesser spiritual beings, also called *les mysteres* or *les invisibles*, are described as “the archetypal representatives of some natural or moral principle” and in some instances are associated with a specific element of the physical earth.²² The New Orleans Voodoo Spiritual Temple describes the loa as “intermediaries (like the saints in Catholicism) between the creator and the human world.”²³

Hundreds of loa are said to exist, with each individual loa identified with specific mannerisms and preferences in dress, foods, drink, trees, colors, drum rhythms and dances.²⁴ Voodoo says the loa choose their *serviteurs* (worshippers), rather than the converse, and will expect devotion and attention from them. Misfortune is attributed to improper attending to the loa that “belongs” to a family or to the loa’s altar.²⁵ A devotee may wed a loa in a marriage ceremony performed by a houngan or mambo in order to secure the loa’s special patronage.²⁶

Haitian voodoo says that in order “to learn about the loa you must watch the possessed.”²⁷ Trance possession is the primary method by which the loa communicate to humans.²⁸ When possessed, a person will imitate the general appearance, personality, walk and talk of a specific loa. Possession often occurs during, but is not limited to, a voodoo ritual involving dance and music. “Comparable to the New Age phenomenon of ‘channeling,’...through possession (the loa) sing, dance, tell jokes, heal the sick, and give advice.”²⁹

The loa are categorized by three primary identities: the Rada, Ghede and Petro loa. The Rada loa have clear African origins and are generally benevolent. Ceremonies to Rada are stately and disciplined and employ white as a ceremonial color. Petro loa originate from the harsh days of Haitian servitude and are fierce, magical and aggressive toward adversaries. Displaying red ceremonial colors, Petro rituals are fast-paced and spirited. The Ghede loa are the lords of death

and resurrection, and are identified by violet and black ceremonial colors. Those possessed by the defiant Ghede may tell jokes, or act bawdy and lewd.³⁰

Assigning the loa to a particular group does not define the spirit's position within a hierarchy of beings. Rather, voodoo believes that the many loa are manifestations of the same cosmic energy, each serving a different purpose. The Rada and Petro loas are "the same energy bent in another direction and meeting divergent needs."³¹ Collectively, the loa make up a central cosmic principle. Individually, the manifestation of a loa with certain "personality" traits serves to emphasize some part of the cosmic principle.³²

Imagery is important in voodoo. Pictures of Catholic saints are used to visualize the essence and personality of the loa. This identification is more a matter of putting a face to the spirit's personality than actually equating the loa with the saint.³³ Other associations link the loa to an element in nature such as Agwe, the loa of the seas and Cousin Zaka, the loa of agriculture. Three loa that serve as an example of this type of association with a Catholic Saint are Legba, Erzulie and Damballah.³⁴

Legba, or Papa Legba, is central to every voodoo ceremony. Often associated with Christ or Peter the apostle, Legba is the guardian of the gate between the invisible world and the world of humans. As keeper of this important crossroads Legba is responsible for relaying messages between the loa and mankind. Every voodoo ceremony will begin with an acknowledgment of Legba's position, for without his assistance the invisible world of loa would be inaccessible, thereby denying help and resources to the *serviteur*.³⁵

The jealous female loa, Erzulie, represents love, beauty and sensuality and demands that a devotee dedicate an area or room of his home in her honor. Erzulie is often associated with the Virgin Mary, and in the realm of nature, woods or water.³⁶

Damballah is considered as old as humanity and may be referred to as the Father, as in the first member of the Trinity. The serpent is the image used to represent Damballah, and unlike other loa who communicate verbally through possession, his only sound is that of hissing. Damballah is associated with the rainbow, but also with Saint Patrick, a Catholic saint often pictured with the snakes of Ireland.³⁷

Distinct from the loa are the Marassa, or Divine Twins, the spirit beings said to be the first of "God's children" and the first dead. "The worship of the Marassa... is a celebration of man's twinned nature: half matter, half metaphysical; half mortal, half immortal; half human, half divine."³⁸ Some have related the Marassa to voodoo's view of the nature of Christ, that of being half human and half divine.³⁹

Humans are believed to possess two "souls" or "angels," both housed within the head of a person. The "ti-bon-ange" or "little good soul" is essentially the personality or conscience of a person, and is useful for moral and ethical judgments. The "big good angel" or "gros-bon-ange," is the seat of intelligence, memory and is often called the soul.⁴⁰

Good and evil in voodoo are considered intimately connected. Pain and suffering are not the result of human failure or sin, and evil does not deserve long-term punishment. Both good and evil are seen as components of life, joined as one in a wider cosmological notion of "God." Suffering can be made right through the balance achieved by maintaining a proper relationship with the cosmic forces. All experiences of life are regarded as opportunities for growth and renewal.⁴¹

Voodoo is an experiential system and does not look to the intervention of a supreme being for mankind's needs, but rather focuses on the actions of human beings through honoring the ancestors and fulfilling commitments to the loa. The *serviteur* can seek answers, relief from suffering, or reward for service from his loa. One may offer traditional service to the loa, but creative, personalized means of service is quite acceptable.⁴² Voodoo Authentica represents the success of voodoo dolls as being "actually you the practitioner, who 'works' the doll or any other magickal tool. Through focused creative visualization, you can truly achieve just about any positive purpose."⁴³

CHRISTIAN RESPONSE

Despite the protestations of its devotees, voodoo cannot be harmonized with biblical Christianity.

God: The supreme god of voodoo is pictured as impersonal, aloof, and requiring little from humans. The God of the Bible is personal and loving. His personal presence is seen by his confronting individuals and carrying on conversations with them (Gen. 3:8; Exod. 19:20; Matt. 3:17;

John 12:28). The emphasis in Christianity is upon one's personal relationship to God. In voodoo the emphasis is upon one's service to the loa through rituals, sacrifices, dance, and ceremonies. His love for humans is seen in his actions, supremely so in giving his Son on the cross (John 3:16; Jer. 31:3; 1 John 4:8). The Christian concept of grace is lacking in voodoo, with its cause-effect understanding of divine action.

Polytheism: The supreme god of voodoo is willing to share his glory with lesser gods (loa) and even tolerate their being worshipped. The God of the Bible insists that there be "no other gods before me" (Exod. 20:3; Deut. 5:7; Judg. 6:10; Hosea 13:4). These passages do not refer to no other gods *above* him, but rather no other gods *but* him, not even lesser gods. His wrath is poured out against those who suppress his revealed truth and instead worship gods they have made for themselves (Rom. 1:18-25). Voodoo loa are understood to stand between humanity and the supreme god, but Scripture declares that "there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus" (1 Tim. 2:5). Worship of the loa is in fact idolatry. Whatever men sacrifice to idols is in fact being sacrificed to demons (Deut. 32:17; Ps. 96:5; 106:36-37).

Spirit Possession: Individuals are encouraged to give themselves over to spirit possession in voodoo, but the Bible condemns such behavior and warns believers to test the spirits to see whether they are from God (1 John 4:1; 1 Tim. 4:1). Demon possession is something to be delivered from (Matt. 9:32-33; 12:22; 17:18; Mark 5:1-20; 7:26-30; Luke 4:33-36; Acts 16:16-18), not something to desire and seek.

Sorcery and Spiritism: Scripture condemns sorcery, attempts to manipulate spirits through magick rituals and spiritism, communication with the dead and other disembodied spirits (Deut. 18:10-13; 1 Sam. 28:3-25; Mic. 5:12-13).

Ancestor Worship: Voodooists expect to receive guidance, protection, and healing. Sadly they have turned to dead humans rather than to the living God for what God alone offers his children (Prov. 3:5-6; 16:3-9; Ps. 37:5).

Notes

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- 3 Anthony B. Pinn, *Varieties of African American Religious Experience* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), 15-16.
- 4 Pinn, 16-18.
- 5 "Francois 'Papa Doc' Duvalier," <http://www.giles.34sp.com/biographies/papadoc.htm> (accessed 6 December 2005).
- 6 Interview with African-American Voodoo and Mami Wata Priestess: Mamaissii "Zogbe" Vivian Hunter-Hindrew, <http://www.mamiwata.com/interview2.html> (accessed 6 December 2005).
- 7 "The Afrocentric Experience: Origins of Voodoo," <http://www.swagga.com/voodoo.htm> (accessed 8 November 2005).
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- 9 Henry Gilfond, *Voodoo: Its Origins and Practices* (New York: Franklin Watts, 1976), 93.
- 10 Deren, 57.
- 11 "Voodoo FAQ," New Orleans Voodoo Spiritual Temple, <http://www.access.avernus.com/~rogue/temple/FAQ.html> (accessed 8 November 2005).
- 12 Deren, 55.
- 13 "The Afrocentric Experience: Origins of Voodoo," <http://www.swagga.com/voodoo.htm> (accessed 8 November 2005); "Voodoo FAQ," New Orleans Voodoo Spiritual Temple, <http://www.access.avernus.com/~rogue/temple/FAQ.html> (accessed 8 November 2005).
- 14 Alfred Metraux, *Voodoo in Haiti* (New York: Schocken, 1959), 83-84; Pinn, 20.
- 15 Deren, 21.
- 16 "Voodoo Authentica," <http://www.voodooishop.com/> (accessed 6 December 2005).
- 17 "Vodou Lesson 4, part 2: Making an Ancestral feast," <http://members.aol.com/racine125/vleson4.html> (accessed 6 December 2005).
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- 19 "Interview with Mamaissii 'Zogbe' Vivian Hunter-Hindrew," <http://www.mamiwata.com/interview2.html> (accessed 6 December 2005).
- 20 Ibid.
- 21 Pinn, 20.
- 22 Ibid.; Deren, 16, 56.
- 23 "Voodoo: A Belief Misunderstood," New Orleans Voodoo Spiritual Temple, <http://www.access.avernus.com/~rogue/temple/about.html> (accessed 8 November 2005).
- 24 Metraux, 86, 92-93.
- 25 "Vodou Lesson 3, Part 1: General characteristics of Vodou lwa," <http://members.aol.com/racine125/vleson3.html> (accessed 6 December 2005).
- 26 "Initiation in Haitian Vodou," <http://members.aol.com/mambo125/kanzo01.html> (accessed 24 February 2005).
- 27 Metraux., 93.
- 28 Deren, 16-17.
- 29 "Vodou Lesson 3, Part 1: General characteristics of Vodou lwa," <http://members.aol.com/racine125/vleson3.html> (accessed 6 December 2005).
- 30 "Vodou Lesson 3, Part 2: What groups of lwa are recognized?" <http://members.aol.com/racine125/vleson3.html> (accessed 6 December 2005).
- 31 Pinn, 24.
- 32 Deren, 94-95; "The Afrocentric Experience: Origins of Voodoo," <http://www.swagga.com/voodoo.htm> (accessed 8 November 2005).
- 33 "Vodou Lesson 3, Part 1: General Characteristics of Vodou lwa," <http://members.aol.com/racine125/vleson3.html> (accessed 6 December 2005).
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- 36 Ibid., 21.
- 37 Ibid., 21-22.
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- 39 Pinn, 23-24.
- 40 Ibid., 28.
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- 42 "Voodoo FAQ," New Orleans Voodoo Spiritual Temple, <http://www.access.avernus.com/~rogue/temple/FAQ.html> (accessed 8 November 2005).
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