

Haitian Vodun

Roger S. Bolger Jr.

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Vodun, as it is practiced in Haiti and other areas in the Americas, is an eclectic religion that owes its origins to the tragedy of New World slavery. African slaves from various tribes found themselves in a strange land, began to unite together to carry the yoke of oppression and to gain any measure of control and freedom in their lives. One source of power was the strength of African religion, and especially the conjurers, or bokos, who could provide a means of justice and hope against the masters and overseers, while preserving African culture in their beliefs and rites.

One of the most important African beliefs in Vodun is the notion that the world is alive with spirits who rule over their specific domains. This allows the wind, trees, and inanimate objects to be manipulated by dealing with the governing spirit. The relationships between Man and these spirits define the relationship between Man, the world, and the Supreme Being.

Another important characteristic of African belief is the pragmatic view of reality, and especially religion. Religion permeates all aspects of life, and is involved in everything one does and experiences. Religion is not just something to be talked about or thought about, but is something to be used to

hold together a family or tribe, or overcome some obstacle in one's life.

The third major concept in African belief systems is the sense that everything has a cause. Nothing is attributed to luck, chance, or fate. Misfortunes occur because someone has been offended, felt envy, or just felt malicious and has fixed a spell on the victim. This belief doesn't function as a means of scapegoating, but instead allows a victim of disaster to find the source of the problem and control it.

This was often done with the help of a boko. During slave times, bokos were the ones who held power, and were sought out by other slaves when someone became ill, had trouble with the overseers, or wished to do harm to the master. Especially when it came to spells for use against the master or overseers, slaves would seek out the most powerful boko on the plantation, regardless of tribal origin. Bokos would borrow spells from each other if they thought they could increase their powers. In this way, the various tribal beliefs began to blend to some extent, although one usually predominated. In the case of Vodun, the predominant gods are the lesser gods of the Dahomey, although Nigerian and Congolese gods are represented, with some Catholic saints. The bokos of Vodun could call on any of the African gods to help in the struggle to survive slavery and achieve freedom.

The bokos were said to be "two-handed" because they could

fix a person - left-handed work - or undo a fix - right-handed work. To make the charm, the boko would use materials such as various herbs and roots, graveyard dirt, insects, bones, blood, scorpions, horse hair, and red flannel, to name a few. Each of these materials had energy, which combines in the charm to make the charm's spirit. The charm would then be placed in the victim's possession or near where the victim would pass. To make the "hand" more likely to fix the right person, a piece of hair, fingernail, or any other item kept close to the victim's body would be incorporated into the charm. Once the victim was fixed, he would have to get help from another boko quickly, for if the spell had begun to run its course, it could never be counteracted. If caught in time, the spell could be reversed and sent back upon the boko who had placed it. The possibility of retribution was one that a boko had to live with if he was to place a fix.

Vodun was still repressed in Haiti after the slaves were freed, because the Africans who had gained ruling power feared the power of the bokos' hand. Despite the repression, Vodun beliefs had spread amongst the people of Haiti quite thoroughly by 1850. Today, about ninety-seven percent of the Haitian population professes some belief in the power of Vodun.

All of the gods of Haitian Vodun are referred to as loas, or "powers". There are over three hundred of them, and they are

divided into two groups: Rada loas and Petro loas. The Rada loas are the benevolent ones, and include Legba, Damballa, Aizan, Agwe, Erzulie, Shango, and Ogun. The malevolent Petro loas consist of Bosu Trois Cornes (Bosu Three Horns), Simbi de l'eau (Simbi of the Water), Guede, Maitre Grand Bois (Master of the Great Forest), and Maitre Carrefour (Master of the Crossroads), among others. The Petro loas helped to inspire the Haitian revolution, and acquired their violent reputation. They are not to be considered evil in the same sense as the Christian Satan, but in the sense that they are warlike.

The most important loas in Vodun are Legba, Guede, and Damballa. Legba is the mediator between Man and the other loas, so he is the first to be called upon in any ceremony. He is also known as the guardian of doors, gates, crossroads, and barriers. Guede is the loa of both death and sexuality. as such, he is to be feared as well as enjoyed. Damballa is the loa most revered in Haiti. His symbol is the serpent, which is found on the coat of arms of Vodun itself. In Vodun services, the Yanvalo dance honors Damballa with its smooth and graceful serpent-like movements. Damballa is so important to Haitians, Haiti is often referred to as the land of Damballa.

The Vodun priest is the houngan, who is not to be confused with the bokos. The houngan is a priest, teacher, and adviser, and administrator of the Vodun religion, not a freelance dealer

in magic. As such, he is an object of fear and veneration, as is his equal female counterpart, the mambo. Both go through a long period of intense training to learn the names, powers, likes and dislikes of the loa, the rites appropriate to the Vodun ceremonies, and the rest of the traditions of the religion. Once the training has been completed, the houngan or mambo has earned the right to carry the symbol of priesthood, a rattle called the asson.

The houngan is aided during the Vodun service by a hunsi or assistant. Next in rank is the leader of songs, or hungenikon, who must have knowledge of the rites near to that of the houngan himself, for his role in the ceremony is crucial. There must also be at least three specially trained drummers present to have a Vodun service. The singing and drumming is vital to properly worship the loas because they are the instruments that create the emotional atmosphere that allows the loas to participate in the service. The members of the congregation are called vodunsis, and those that have been initiated into Vodun are the canzos. All these groups and individuals participate in the services held in the hounfort, the Vodun temple.

A typical Vodun ceremony might proceed in the following manner. Food and drinks are sold before the ceremony to any of the vodunsis that care for them. When the service is about to start, the vodunsis are called to attention when the drumbeats

start and the singers file into the room. As the hungenikon leads the singers in a call-and-response style, the ritual items are brought in and placed at the center of the room. The hunsi, or assistant, then consecrates the room as holy space by cracking a whip at the entrances and spraying liquor from his mouth to the four directions. Then Legba, the guardian of the barrier between the world and the loas, is invoked as the singers begin dancing.

The singing and drumming increases in tempo as another hunsi makes a veve, or symbol of invocation, for the loa to be honored in this ceremony. This is drawn on the floor with flour or dust in much the same way that southwestern Native Americans make sand paintings.

Now the houngan or mambo enters the room, further increasing the tension in the room. The houngan picks up his asson rattle and salutes the drummers, who respond by bringing the tempo to an even more rapid pace. The singers are also singing very rapidly, and possession begins to occur at this point. One or more of the vodunsis, when possessed, stiffens up momentarily and becomes limp. Others who are not possessed make sure no one falls and injures himself, and the dancing continues. Then the houngan and his assistants leave the room for a short time.

When the assistants return, they are in costumes that reflect the attributes of the loa being invoked. The deity's colors are worn, his flag is carried, and the costumes reflect

the god's nature. The drums erupt in polyrhythmic patterns that invoke the spirits to come down and nearly everyone becomes possessed. Though possession only lasts a few moments, when the vodunsis recover they seem ecstatic as they continue dancing.

The pace slows down as the vodunsis come forward to revere the flag of the loa by kneeling and kissing the emblem. This is thought to impart a special blessing on the worshipper directly from the loa. Then some liquor is poured on the ground and the vodunsis anoint their foreheads with it, using their left hands. Then the assistants retreat from the room once again.

An interlude of drumming allows the vodunsis to catch their breath. When the hunsis return, they return with the houngan, who is now possessed with the loa they had been honoring. He is announced as the god, and he is dressed in the full costume of the loa. Enactments of legends involving the loa and mock demonstrations of his powers ensue, with a great deal of intentional dialogue between the houngan and the vodunsis. Finally, there is a short but vigorous dance that ends the period of possession. Then the whole assembly joins in a feast. A ceremony of this type can last anywhere from five to eight hours.

The boko still has a place in Vodun, though in a different role than the one played during slave times. Today, a boko may run a shop or do business out of his home selling charms and herbal cures. The most popular charms are those that bring

money, bring love, or provide protection. These are made out of the same types of materials as in older days, especially roots and herbs, and are still endowed with spirit. Special arrangements must be made if one wants a boko to fix an enemy, and the price can be quite high. Many modern bokos refrain from left-hand work altogether, but there enough who still do black magic to preserve their fear and respect, and ensure brisk business in charms that prevent curses.

One part of the boko legend that has received a lot of attention from Hollywood is his power to create a zombi. The word "zombi" comes from the Congolese "nvumbi", which means "body deprived of its soul". It refers to a person who has died and has been brought back to life by a boko, usually to serve as his slave, or to be sold to a plantation owner as a slave.

There are two ways to make a zombi: medically and magically. In the magical method, the Boko goes to a graveyard and finds a grave with a freshly buried corpse. He then performs a ceremony next to the grave in honor of Guede. First he draws a vever on the ground. Then he draws a circle around the grave, lights a candle at the four cardinal points, and pours liquor on the ground at each of these points. The boko is usually assisted by a drummer who provides the rhythm for the spell. This also warns the neighbors to keep away from the cemetery. Next, the assistant unearths the coffin and opens the lid. At the climax

of the ceremony, the boko calls out the corpse's name, and the corpse sits up and answers him, and is from that moment his slave. Due to this belief, it is a Haitian custom to sew up the mouth of the deceased to prevent him from answering the boko's call.

The medical method is more likely the actual means employed, and the magical method is just a legend to inspire fear. The boko acquires a collection of herbs that induce a cataleptic state. These include belladonna, henbane, jimson weed, and myrobalan. These are somehow administered to the victim without his knowledge, often in a cigar or pipe tobacco. The victim enters an extremely lethargic state that is easily mistaken for death, and, as is the custom in Haiti, is buried unenbalmed within a matter of hours. By the next night, the herbs have worn off enough so that the boko can rouse the zombi and lead him away. The zombi is then kept in a state of partial catalepsy by feeding him reduced amounts of the herbs in his food, giving him the uncoordinated body movements and lack of emotional response characteristic of the zombi, and preventing him from making an escape.

The power of the boko to create a zombi in this manner is widely accepted. The Criminal Code of the Haitian Republic states that "murder shall be assumed to include any use made, against others, of substances which, without necessarily causing

death, induce a more-or-less prolonged lethargic sleep. And the act of burying the individual to whom such substances have been administered shall be held to be murder, no matter what the outcome of it." This acknowledges the boko's capabilities and attests to the frequency with which people are made into zombis.

Though Vodun is often looked upon as a set of superstitions or Hollywood fantasies, it is a very real religion, especially in its native land of Haiti. Though it combines aspects of many African belief systems and some Christianity, Vodun has a coherent philosophy and style that has developed since its birth during slave times. As such, it is an example of African practicality and the ability to survive under appalling circumstances and emerge with a significant piece of culture intact.

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