

Voodoo – Reality and Imagination

Who hasn't heard about Voodoo? All the time we see the pinned dolls in movies or TV spots. We ask ourselves what are their purposes...they were only created to scare...and nothing more.

The book which caught the imagination of people outside the West Indies, and which was responsible for much of the misunderstanding and fear that is present today is "Haiti or the Black Republic", written by S. St. John. It is an inaccurate and sensational book, written in 1884 and which describes Vodun as a profoundly evil religion, and included lurid descriptions of human sacrifice, cannibalism etc, some of which have been extracted from Vodun priests by torture. Hollywood found this a rich source for Voodoo screen plays. Horror movies began in 1930s and continue today to misrepresent Vodoo. It is only since the late '50s that the accurate studies by anthropologists have been published.

It all started 6 000 years ago in Africa, but can be directly traced to the West African Yoruba people who lived in the 18th and 19th century Dahomey, which occupied parts of today's Togo, Benin and Nigeria. It was brought to Haiti and the other islands in West Indies when the slaves were brought there by force. When the slaves arrived, it was prohibited to them to practice those rituals and were baptised into the Roman Catholic Church, but although they attended Mass regularly, they kept practicing their rituals in secret. It was also actively suppressed during colonial times when the priests were either killed or imprisoned. The Dahomeans were forced to create Voodoo Orders or underground societies and so to continue to worship their ancestors and their powerful gods. It was again suppressed during Marxist regime. In Benin, for example, the Vodun religion is freely practiced since 1989 and since 1996 it is formally recognized as Benin's official religion. It is also followed by most adults in Haiti. It can be found in many large cities in North America, particularly in American South. It is also related to other religions such as: santería in Cuba, Shango in Trinidad, candomblé, xango, macumba and batuque in Brazil, obeah in Jamaica.

All the Vodun practitioners worship three groups of spirits: the saints (also known as *loa*), the ancestors and the twins (*marassa*). The *loa* are often associated with Catholic saints and African tribal deities and many combine characteristics of both, as the identification of St. Patrick with a native deity. Individuals inherit the obligation to worship a particular *loa*, as well as the family dead and the spirits of the twins among the ancestors. There is no hierarchy of priests and no centralised control, and the cult groups are aided to do rituals by priests (also called *hungan*) or priestesses (*mambo*) but not necessarily.

As well as the Catholics, the Vodun belief includes a chief God Olorun, who is remote and unknowable. He authorised a lesser God Obatala to create the earth and the life forms. A battle between the two gods led to Obatala's temporary banishment. The spirits which originated from Dahomey are called *rada*; those who were added later are often deceased headers in the new world and are called *Petro*.

Followers of Vodun believe that each person has a soul which is composed of two parts: a *gros bon ange* or "big guardian angel" and a *ti bon ange*, meaning "little guardian angel".

Although the African and Haitian Vodun have the same source, along the time little differences appeared. I would say African Vodun is more aggressive but of course is just my opinion.

The African followers rely on unseen forces to govern their world and their lives. Most of West Africa's 2.5 million Ewe are devout believers. The coastal people learn from childhood to

honor their divinities. Parents use voodoo to teach their children how to behave and what the community expects of them. Each morning worshipers make an offering to the local god, asking for guidance.

There are voodoo healing hospitals where all kind of cures can be found, from cures for leprosy to ones for paralysis. In these hospitals there are shrines of the loa and the “doctors” invoke their spirits. One declared “The gods protect us. They direct our actions and tell us which medicines to take so no harm can come to us.” But the shrines are a little bit funny: they smoke, drink gin and smell good.

Every three years, in May, a seven-day celebration is held and the meeting place hundreds of worshipers from area villages come and pay homage Flimani koku, the healing god. During the celebration weird things happen “with the help of our gods” as they say “a man brings a heated knife to his tongue but after several repetitions, his tongue doesn’t even redden”. Only for the strangers these things seem weird but for the participants it seems normal.

During the ritual a feast has to be prepared and a chicken has to be killed on the forehead of a boy and cooked in a cabalash. Before this the Kokuzun participants follow the deities command: “ Do not have sex or eat goat meat for two weeks before the celebration, and come with a clean heart.

Haitian Voodoo rituals involve a feast before the main ceremony and a dance. The dancing will typically build in intensity until one of the dancers (usually a hounsis- students studying Vodun) becomes possessed by a loa and falls. His or her ti bon ange has left their body and the spirit has taken control. The possessed dancer will behave as the loa and is treated with respect and ceremony by the present. While they are possessed they may walk, dance, eat and even give advice to and prescribe cures for ill. A possessed individual is known as the deity’s “horse” and the deity is said “to mount” his “horse”. At the end of the possession the “horse” is expected to have no memory of the experience. The dance and the whole ritual is accompanied by a lot of drumming and singing. The drummings and the songs must be appropriate for the particular group of spirits to be invoked, because each loa has his or her own particular drum rhythms and songs. They are thus invited to participate in the dance.

The Haitian form of spirit possession is clearly derived from similar, somewhat more highly formalized phenomena in elements of voodoo are derived.

A Vodun ritual contains a number of elements taken over from catholicism as the Hail Mary, the Lord’s Prayer, the Litanies of Saints, the sign of cross, baptism, the use of bells, candles, crosses and pictures of saints.

There are more similar points of similarity between Roman Catholicism and Vodun: both believe in a supreme being, the Loa resemble Christian Saints, in that they were once people who led exceptional lives, and are usually given a special responsibility or special attributes, both believe in an after life, followers of vodun believe in each persona has a met tet (master of the head) which corresponds to a Christian’s patron saint.

Sticking pins in ‘voodoo dolls’ was once used as a method of curing an individual by some followers of Vodun in New Orleans; this practice continues occasionally in South America. The practice became associated with Voodoo in the public mind through the vehicle of horror movies.

Vodun is not what we all thought about it, but a religion like others and the hot details about, were just inventions we see all the time at TV and we take for granted.