



Paranormal 101

Voodoo 101

Voodoo (Vodou, Vodoun, Vudu, or Vudun in Benin, Togo, southeastern Ghana, Burkina Faso, and Senegal; also Vodou in Haiti) is a name attributed to a traditionally unwritten West African spiritual system of faith and ritual practices. Like most faith systems, the core functions of Voodoo are to explain the forces of the universe, influence those forces, and influence human behavior. Voodoo's oral tradition of faith stories carries genealogy, history and fables to succeeding generations. Adherents honor deities and venerate ancient and recent ancestors. This faith system is widespread across groups in West Africa. Diaspora spread Voodoo to North and South America and the Caribbean.

Hoodoo refers to African traditional folk magic. A rich magical tradition which was (for thousands of years), indigenous to ancient African botanical, magio-religious practices and folk cultures, its practice was imported when mainly West Africans were enslaved and brought to the United States.

Hoodoo is used as a noun and is derived from the Ewe word Hudu which still exists today. Hoodoo is often used in African-American vernacular to describe a magic "spell" or potion, or as a descriptor for a practitioner (hoodoo doctor, hoodoo man or hoodoo woman), or as an adjective or verb depending upon context. The word can be dated at least as early as 1891. Some prefer the term hoodooism, but this has mostly fallen out of use. Some "New Age" non-Diaspora practitioners who have taken up Hoodoo as a hobby employ synonyms, including conjuration, conjure, witchcraft, or rootwork. The latter demonstrates the importance of various roots in the making of charms and casting spells. It is important to note that in traditional African religious culture, the concept of "spells" is not used. Here again, this Afro-botanical practice has been heavily used by the New Age, and Wiccan communities who have little understanding of "Hoodoo's" spiritual significance as it is traditionally used in Africa. An amulet characteristic of hoodoo is the mojo, often called a mojo bag, mojo hand, conjure bag, trick bag, or toby; this is a small sack filled with herbs, roots, coins, sometimes a lodestone, and various other objects of magical power.

PAPA LEGBA

Papa Legba is the intermediary between the lwa and humanity. He stands at a spiritual crossroads and gives (or denies) permission to speak with the spirits of Gine; he translates between the human and "angelic" and all other languages of the spheres.

The term Vodou (Vodu or Vudu in Benin; and Togo; also Vodon, Vodoun, Voudou, or other phonetically equivalent spellings. In Haiti; Vudu (an Ewe word, also used in the Dominican Republic) is by some individuals applied to the branches of a West African ancestral religious tradition. It is important to note that the word "Voodoo" is the most common and known usage in American and popular culture, and is viewed as offensive by the Afro-Diaspora practicing communities. However, the different spellings of this term can be explained as follows:

The word "Voodoo" is used to describe the Creole tradition of New Orleans, Vodou is used to describe the Haitian Vodou Tradition, while Vudon and Vodun and Vodoun are used to describe the deities honoured in the Brazilian Jeje (Ewe) nation of Candomble as well as West African Vodoun, and in the African- American Diaspora. When the word "Vodou/Vodoun" is capitalized, it denotes the Religion proper. When the word is used in small caps, it denotes the actual deities honored in each respective tradition.

Its roots are believed to be varied and include the Fon, Mina, Kabye, Ewe, and Yoruba peoples of West Africa, from western Nigeria to eastern Ghana. In Benin, Vodun is the national religion, followed by around 80% of the population, or some 4½ million people. The word Vodún "Vodoun" "Vudu" is the Fon-Ewe word for spirit. Voodoo in Haiti is highly influenced by Central African traditions. The Kongo rites, also known in the north of Haiti as Lemba (originally practiced among the Bakongo) and is as widespread as the West African elements. The Vodoun religion was suppressed during slavery and Reconstruction in the United States, but maintained most of its West African elements.

Haitian Vodouisants believe, in accordance with widespread African tradition, that there is one God who is the creator of all, referred to as "Bondyé" (from the French "Bon Dieu" or "Good God"). Bondyé is distinguished from the God of "the whites" in a dramatic speech by the houngan Boukman at Bwa Kayiman, but is often considered the same God of other religions, such as Christianity and Islam. Bondyé is distant from His/Her/Its creation though, and so it is the spirits or the "mysteries", "saints", or "angels" that the Vodouisant turns to for help, as well as to the ancestors. The Vodouisant worships God, and serves the spirits, who are treated with honor and respect as elder members of a household might be. There are said to be twenty-one nations or "nanchons" of spirits, also sometimes called "lwa-yo". Some of the more important nations of lwa are the Rada (corresponding to the Gbe-speaking ethnic groups in the modern-day Republic of Benin, Nigeria, and Togo); the Nago (synonymous with the Yoruba-speaking ethnicities in Nigeria, the Republic of Benin, and Togo); and the numerous West- Central African ethnicities united under the ethnonym Kongo. The spirits also come in "families" that all share a surname, like Ogou, or Ezili, or Azaka or Ghede. For instance, "Ezili" is a family, Ezili Dantor and Ezili Freda are two individual spirits in that family. The Ogou family are soldiers, the Ezili govern the feminine spheres of life, the Azaka govern agriculture, the Ghede govern the sphere of death and fertility. In Dominican Vodou, there is also an Agua Dulce or "Sweet Waters" family, which encompasses all Amerindian spirits. There are literally hundreds of lwa. Well known individual lwa include Danbala Wedo, Papa Legba Atibon, and Agwe Tawoyo.

In Haitian Vodou, spirits are divided according to their nature in roughly two categories, whether they are hot or cool. Cool spirits fall under the Rada category, and hot spirits fall under the Petwo category. Rada spirits are familial and congenial, while Petwo spirits are more combative and restless. Both can be dangerous if angry or upset, and despite claims to the contrary, neither is "good" or "evil" in relation to the other.

Everyone is said to have spirits, and each person is considered to have a special relationship with one particular spirit who is said to "own their head", however each person may have many lwa,

and the one that owns their head, or the "met tet", may or may not be the most active spirit in a person's life in Haitian belief.

In serving the spirits, the Vodouisant seeks to achieve harmony with their own individual nature and the world around them, manifested as personal power and resourcefulness in dealing with life. Part of this harmony is membership in and maintaining relationships within the context of family and community. A Vodou house or society is organized on the metaphor of an extended family, and initiates are the "children" of their initiators, with the sense of hierarchy and mutual obligation that implies.

Most Vodouisants are not initiated, referred to as being "bosal"; it is not a requirement to be an initiate in order to serve one's spirits. There are clergy in Haitian Vodou whose responsibility it is to preserve the rituals and songs and maintain the relationship between the spirits and the community as a whole (though some of this is the responsibility of the whole community as well). They are entrusted with leading the service of all of the spirits of their lineage. Priests are referred to as "Houngans" and priestesses as "Mambos". Below the houngans and mambos are the hounsis, who are initiates who act as assistants during ceremonies and who are dedicated to their own personal mysteries. One does not serve just any lwa but only the ones they "have" according to one's destiny or nature. Which spirits a person "has" may be revealed at a ceremony, in a reading, or in dreams. However all Vodouisants also serve the spirits of their own blood ancestors, and this important aspect of Vodou practice is often glossed over or minimized in importance by commentators who do not understand the significance of it. The ancestor cult is in fact the basis of Vodou religion, and many lwa like Agasou (formerly a king of Dahomey) for example are in fact ancestors who are said to have been raised up to divinity.

A common saying is that Haiti is 80% Roman Catholic, 20% Protestant and 100% Vodou. Thus the Catholic contribution to Haitian Voodoo is quite noticeable. However, in the United States the story is different, despite claims to the contrary.

Confusion about Voodoo in the USA arises because there exists throughout the United States a widespread system of African American folk magic belief and practice known as Hudu or more popularly as hoodoo. The similarity of the words hoodoo and Voodoo notwithstanding, hoodoo is not an organized religion like Voodoo, but is an integral part of the Vodoun religion in West Africa and arguably throughout all of Africa. Some aspects of hoodoo is considered derived primarily from Congo and Angolan magical practices of Central Africa and retains elements of the traditions and practices that arose among Bantu language speakers. However, any serious practitioner who has travelled and studied Hudu in West Africa, will readily conclude that this ancient, magio-botanical practice is indigenous and essential to all indigenous, West African religious systems, having only minute variations.

Today, due to the suppression of the Vodoun religion in America, most hoodooists are now members of African American Protestant churches, such as the various Baptist, African Methodist Episcopal (AME), Pentecostal, and Holiness denominations, but when hoodoo is compared to some of the African religions in the diaspora, the closest parallel is Cuban and Dominican Palo, a survival of Congo religious beliefs melded with some Catholic forms of worship.

Survivals of Haitian and West African-influenced Vodou religion in the southern US are claimed by some to be found within the African-American Spiritual Churches of New Orleans, a city with a large Catholic population. This is a fallacious assumption.

The Spiritual Churches of New Orleans are a Christian sect founded by Wisconsin-born Mother Leafy Anderson in the early 20th century. These churches incorporate Catholic iconography, ecstatic worship derived from African American Protestant Pentecostal sources, and a large dose of Spiritualism, but a closer examination shows that the hallmark of the New Orleans Spiritual Churches is the honoring of the Native American spirit named Black Hawk, who lived in Illinois and Wisconsin (Anderson's home state), not in Africa, or Haiti. Furthermore, the names of some individual churches in the denomination -- such as Divine Israel -- bring to mind typical Black Baptist church names more than Catholic ones.

In sum, Haitian Voodoo is derived from West African religious traditions and was retained in modified form by enslaved Africans living in the Caribbean who were held captive by Catholics. However, in the USA the Vodoun religion is derived from largely the Ewe and other West and central African groups.

Voodoo is a derivative of the world's oldest known religions which have been around in Africa since the beginning of human civilization

Public relations-wise, Vodou has come to be associated in the popular mind with such phenomena as "zombies" and "voodoo dolls". While there is ethnobotanical evidence relating to "zombie" creation, it is a minor phenomenon within rural Haitian culture and not a part of the Vodou religion as such. Such things fall under the auspices of the bokor or sorcerer rather than the priest of the Lwa Gine.

The practice of sticking pins in "voodoo dolls" has history in healing teachings as identifying pressure points. How it became known as a method of cursing an individual by some followers of what has come to be called "New Orleans Voodoo", which is a local variant of hoodoo is a mystery. Some speculate that it was one of many ways of self defense by instilling fear in slave owners. This practice is not unique to New Orleans "voodoo" however and has as much basis in European-based magical devices such as the "poppet" and the nkisi or bocio of West and Central Africa (see also Paket kongo). In fact it has more basis in European traditions, as the nkisi or bocio figures used in Africa are in fact power objects, what in Haiti would be referred to as pwen, rather than magical surrogates for an intended target of sorcery whether for boon or for bane. Such "voodoo" dolls are not a feature of Haitian religion, although dolls intended for tourists may be found in the Iron Market in Port au Prince. The practice became closely associated with the Vodou religions in the public mind through the vehicle of horror movies. In fact, voodoo always gets a bad rap in movies with possibly the only exception being the film London Voodoo where voodoo is shown as a force for good.

There is a practice in Haiti of nailing crude poppets with a discarded shoe on trees near the cemetery to act as messengers to the otherworld, which is very different in function from how poppets are portrayed as being used by "voodoo worshippers" in popular media and imagination, ie. for purposes of sympathetic magic towards another person. Another use of dolls in authentic Vodou practice is the incorporation of plastic doll babies in altars and objects used to represent or honor the spirits, or in pwen, which recalls the aforementioned use of bocio and nkisi figures in Africa. One Haitian artist particularly known for his unusual sacred constructions using doll parts is Pierrot Barra of Port au Prince.

Kumina is both the religion and the music practiced by the people who inhabit the region of eastern Jamaica. These people have retained the drumming and dancing of the Bantu-speaking peoples of the Congo. Like the Kongo practitioners from Cuba, they have kept a large amount of

the Kongo language alive. In the Americas there are many Kongo-derived religions still being practiced today.

There are two main aspects of Kongo religion that are quite distinctive. One is the practice of bringing down spirits of the dead to briefly inhabit the bodies of the faithful. The purpose of this is so that the ancestors may share their wisdom, providing spiritual assistance and advice to those here on Earth. Without exception, all such faiths in the Americas retain this central feature of Kongo faith. The other feature is the extensive work with Inquices (Enkises, Nkisi). The Inquices are very like the Orishas of Yoruba tradition, but also different. In Cuba and Brazil, where Yoruba influence was strongest in the Americas, they are often synchronized with the Orishas. They may best be described as being both the most ancient of ancestors as well as being associated with specific powers in nature. The Inquices do not tend to possess as detailed a mythology as the Yoruba gods. kumina is found in ST.Thomas

Obeah (sometimes spelled "Obi") is a term used in the West Indies to refer to folk magic, sorcery, and religious practices derived from Central African and West African origins. As such, Obeah is similar to Palo, Voodoo, Santeria, rootwork, and hoodoo. Obeah is practiced in Suriname, Jamaica, the Virgin Islands, Trinidad, Tobago, Guyana, Belize, the Bahamas, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, Barbados and many other Caribbean countries.

Obeah is associated with both black and white magic, charms, luck, and withmysticism in general. In some Caribbean nations Obeah refers to African diasporic folk religions with admixtures such as Hindu puja; in other areas, Christians may include elements of Obeah in their religion—Obeah is associated with the Spiritual Baptist church—and the word Obeah, although not the practice of Obeah, appears in a text associated with the religion of Thelema.

In Jamaica, slaves from different areas of Africa were brought into contact, creating some conflicts between those who practiced varying African religions. Those of West African Ashanti descent, who called their priests "Myal men" (also spelled Mial men), used the Ashanti term "Obi" or "Obeah" -- meaning "sorcery" -- to describe the practices of slaves of Central African descent. Thus those who worked in a Congo form of folk religion were called "Obeah men" or "sorcerers." Obeah also came to mean any physical object, such as a talisman or charm, that was used for evil magical purposes. However, despite its fearsome reputation, Obeah, like any other form of folk religion and folk magic, contains many traditions for healing, helping, and bringing about luck in love and money.

During the mid 19th century the appearance of a comet in the sky became the focal point of an outbreak of religious fanaticism and Christian millenarianism among the Myal men of Jamaica. Spiritualism was at that time sweeping the English-speaking nations as well, and it readily appealed to those in the Afro- Caribbean diaspora, as spirit contact, especially with the dead, is an essential part of many African religions.

During the conflict between Myal and Obeah, the Myal men positioned themselves as the "good" opponents to "evil" Obeah. They claimed that Obeah men stole people's shadows, and they set themselves up as the helpers of those who wished to have their shadows restored. Myal men contacted spirits in order to expose the evil works they ascribed to the Obeah men, and led public parades which resulted in crowd-hysteria that engendered violent antagonism against Obeah men. The public "discovery" of buried Obeah charms, presumed to be ofevil intent, led on more than one occasion to violence against the rival Obeah men.

Laws were passed that limited both Obeah and Myal traditions, but due to the outrages perpetrated by the mobs of Myalists, the British government of Jamaica sent many Myal men to prison, and this, along with the failure of their millennialist Christian prophecies, resulted in a lessening influence for Myalism, while Obeah remained a vital form of folk magic in Jamaica. By the early 20th century, Myalism was considered a thing of the past, and Obeah dominated.

One aspect of Obeah with which many visitors to the Virgin Islands are familiar (although they may not fully comprehend it) is the Mocko-Jumbie, or stilt dancer.

In the Virgin Islands Obeah tradition, a Jumbie is an evil or lost spirit, related to the Kongo word Nzumbi, which led to the sensationalistic Zombies of Hollywood. Jumbie however, retains more of the word's original meaning. It is sometimes associated with a child who has died before being baptized. Such a child is said to be forced to forever walk the earth at night, and is easily identified by its backward-facing feet. The connection between the Jumbie and death is extended into botany: *Abrus precatorius*, a species of tropical legume bears deadly toxic red and black seeds called Jumbies in English-speaking regions of the Caribbean. By contrast, the Mocko-Jumbie of the Virgin Islands is brightly colored, dances in the daylight, and is very much alive. The Mocko-Jumbie also represents the flip-side of spiritual darkness, as stilt-dancing is most popular around holy days and Carnival.