



Paranormal 101

Voodoo 102

General background:

Vodun (a.k.a. Vodoun, Voudou, Voodoo, Sevi Lwa) is commonly called Voodoo by the public. The name is traceable to an African word for "spirit". Vodun's can be directly traced to the West African Yoruba people who lived in 18th and 19th century Dahomey. Its roots may go back 6,000 years in Africa. That country occupied parts of today's Togo, Benin and Nigeria. Slaves brought their religion with them when they were forcibly shipped to Haiti and other islands in the West Indies.

Vodun was actively suppressed during colonial times. "Many Priests were either killed or imprisoned, and their shrines destroyed, because of the threat they posed to Euro-Christian/Muslim dominion. This forced some of the Dahomeans to form Vodou Orders and to create underground societies, in order to continue the veneration of their ancestors, and the worship of their powerful gods." 1 Vodun was again suppressed during the Marxist regime. However, it has been freely practiced in Benin since a democratic government was installed there in 1989. Vodun was formally recognized as Benin's official religion in 1996-FEB. It is also followed by most of the adults in Haiti. It can be found in many of the large cities in North America, particularly in the American South.

Today over 60 million people practice Vodun worldwide. Religions similar to Vodun can be found in South America where they are called Umbanda, Quimbanda or Candomble.

Today, there are two virtually unrelated forms of the religion:

An actual religion, Vodun practiced in Benin, Dominican Republic, Ghana, Haiti, Togo and various centers in the US - largely where Haitian refugees have settled. An evil, imaginary religion, which we will call Voodoo. It has been created for Hollywood movies, complete with violence, bizarre rituals, etc. It does not exist in reality.

History of Vodun in the west:

Slaves were baptized into the Roman Catholic Church upon their arrival in Haiti and other West Indian islands. However, there was little Christian infrastructure present during the early 19th century to maintain the faith. The result was that the slaves largely followed their original native faith. This they practiced in secret, even while attending Mass regularly.

An inaccurate and sensational book (S. St. John, "Haiti or the Black Republic") was written in 1884. It described Vodun as a profoundly evil religion, and included lurid descriptions of human sacrifice, cannibalism, etc., some of which had been extracted from Vodun priests by torture. This book caught the imagination of people outside the West Indies, and was responsible for much of the misunderstanding and fear that is present today. Hollywood found this a rich source for Voodoo screen plays. Horror movies began in the 1930's and continue today to misrepresent Vodun. It is only since the late 1950's that accurate studies by anthropologists have been published.

Other religions (Macumba, Candomble, Umbanda and Santeria) bear many similarities to Vodun.

Vodun beliefs:

Vodun, like Christianity, is a religion of many traditions. Each group follows a different spiritual path and worships a slightly different pantheon of spirits, called Loa. The word means "mystery" in the Yoruba language.

Yoruba traditional belief included a chief God Olorun, who is remote and unknowable. He authorized a lesser God Obatala to create the earth and all life forms. A battle between the two Gods led to Obatala's temporary banishment.

There are hundreds of minor spirits. Those which originated from Dahomey are called Rada; those who were added later are often deceased leaders in the new world and are called Petro. Some of these are

Agwe: spirit of the sea
Aida Wedo: rainbow spirit
Ayza: protector
Baka: an evil spirit who takes the form of an animal
Baron Samedi: guardian of the grave
Dambala (or Damballah-wedo): serpent spirit
Erinle: spirit of the forests
Ezili (or Erzulie): female spirit of love
Mawu Lisa: spirit of creation
Ogou Balanjo: spirit of healing
Ogun (or Ogu Bodagris): spirit of war
Osun: spirit of healing streams
Sango (or Shango): spirit of storms
Yemanja: female spirit of waters
Zaka (or Oko): spirit of agriculture

There are a number of 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 single responsibility or special attribute. Both believe in an afterlife. Both have, as the centerpiece of some of their ceremonies, a ritual sacrifice and consumption of flesh and blood. Both believe in the existence of invisible evil spirits or demons. Followers of Vodun believe that each person has a met tet (master of the head) which corresponds to a Christian's patron saint.

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 or "little guardian angel". The latter leaves the body during sleep and when the person is possessed by a Loa during a ritual. There is a concern that the ti bon ange can be damaged or captured by evil sorcery while it is free of the body.

Vodun rituals:

The purpose of rituals is to make contact with a spirit, to gain their favor by offering them animal sacrifices and gifts, to obtain help in the form of more abundant food, higher standard of living, and improved health. Human and Loa depend upon each other; humans provide food and other materials; the Loa provide health, protection from evil spirits and good fortune. Rituals are held to celebrate lucky events, to attempt to escape a run of bad fortune, to celebrate a seasonal day of celebration associated with a Loa, for healing, at birth, marriage and death.

Vodun priests can be male (houngan or hungan), or female (mambo). A Vodun temple is called a hounfour (or humfort). At its center is a poteau-mitan a pole where the God and spirits communicate with the people. An altar will be elaborately decorated with candles, pictures of Christian saints, symbolic items related to the Loa, etc. Rituals consist of some of the following components:

a feast before the main ceremony creation of a veve, a pattern of flour or cornmeal on the floor which is unique to the Loa for whom the ritual is to be conducted shaking a rattle and beating drums which have been cleansed and purified chanting dancing by the houngan and/or mambo and the hounsis (students studying Vodun). The dancing will typically build in intensity until one of the dancers (usually a hounsis) 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 others present.

animal sacrifice; this may be a goat, sheep, chicken, or dog. They are usually humanely killed by slitting their throat; blood is collected in a vessel. The possessed dancer may drink some of the blood. The hunger of the Loa is then believed to be satisfied. The animal is usually cooked and eaten. Animal sacrifice is a method of consecrating food for consumption by followers of Vodun, their gods and ancestors.

Evil sorcery:

The houngan and mambos confine their activities to "white" magic which is used to bring good fortune and healing. However caplatas (also known as bokors) perform acts of evil sorcery or black magic, sometimes called "left-handed Vodun". Rarely, a houngan will engage in such sorcery; a few alternate between white and dark magic.

One belief unique to Vodun is that a dead person can be revived after having been buried. After resurrection, the zombie has no will of their own, but remains under the control of others. In reality, a zombie is a living person who has never died, but is under the influence of powerful drugs administered by an evil sorcerer. Although most Haitians believe in zombies, few have ever seen one. There are a few recorded instances of persons who have claimed to be zombies.

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