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## West Africa: The Truth about Voodoo

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Led by Hollywood, Voodoo has become one of the world's most mysterious and maligned religions. Is it all about human sacrifices and evil intervention? Bob Burch explored Voodoo's West African roots to reveal the truth behind the myth. All pictures by Bob Burch.

Voodoo is one of those words that sends shivers up the spine - zombies staggering through a graveyard, victims writhing in pain as a sorcerer sticks pins into a doll. How unfortunate that Hollywood - always eager to find a new box office draw - should choose a religion to demean.

Ever since the 1940s, when the thriller "I Married a Zombie" hit the silver screen, Voodoo has become synonymous with something sinister, something evil. Voodoo has found its way into our language too, as a description of any act that is suspect, e.g. "Voodoo Economics".

In reality, Voodoo is a centuries-old religion that has withstood the test of time. In Africa, it has always been the "spiritual glue" that has held different societies together in a common union. During the past 400 years, Voodoo has spread beyond Africa's shores and taken on new forms - a natural consequence of the mass exportation of slaves to the New World. Today, Voodoo practitioners of one type or another number over 60 million. But for the most part, it is the evolution of Voodoo in the western world that has spawned the myths so popular with the movie industry.

Today, Voodoo in Africa survives in its original form and has many elements in common with other African animist beliefs. "Juju" is another practice found throughout West Africa, but it should not be confused with Voodoo since the conduct of juju varies widely from region to region. Unlike Voodoo, juju can involve lust for power, curses and threats.

Like all animist religions, Voodoo embodies ancestor worship and a belief that spirits dwell within inanimate objects such as trees, forests, lakes, mountains, stones, the sea, even termite mounds. Most often, Voodoo gods inhabit shrines and religious objects known as fetishes. Fetishes can take the form of carved dolls and statuettes, or organic materials such as animal skulls, cowrie shells, and any number of things with feathers, bones and claws.

The pantheon of Voodoo gods is extensive, but the principal deities number a few dozen and are common throughout the heartland of Voodoo worship. That heartland extends from eastern Ghana, across Togo and Benin and into western Nigeria, encompassing mostly the Ewe, Fon and Yoruba ethnic groups.

The main gods are the same, but may take on different names from one locale to the next, reflecting dialectic differences. And each locale may also have its own homegrown gods - sometimes numbering in the hundreds. The very word "voodoo" means "spirit". Thus each god is itself a voodoo. In essence though, there is but one god - Mawu - who can appear in many manifestations. These numerous forms constitute the Voodoo pantheon.

The font of Voodoo worship is at Ouidah in Benin, where Voodoo is both a way of life and a cottage industry catering to tourists. It is here in Ouidah where the "Hounon" (the supreme priest of Voodoo) resides. Hounon Daagbo Dodu is the current hounon; he embodies a continuous succession of Voodoo "Popes" dating back to 1452. He welcomes visitors into his home and patiently explains Voodoo to his audience, correcting the many distorted perceptions that non-initiates harbour.

At age 79, he favours a floppy hat and African robes, presiding over reverent followers from as far away as Haiti and Brazil. High priests and priestesses from these distant lands are frequent visitors to Ouidah, paying homage and seeking guidance. The hounon is a veteran traveller too - with visits to New Orleans, Havana, Port-au-Prince and Bahia. During one of his African tours in 1992, even Pope John Paul visited Ouidah to pay his respects.

The hounon's extended family also resides in the compound, but one long-time resident is unique. Occasionally a 400-pound tortoise can be seen lumbering across the courtyard or meandering down a hallway. This 300-year-old tortoise has been the "pet" of numerous past "popes", and is thought to contain their souls. Through him, the present hounon maintains a living link with his past.

The hounon officiates at ceremonies on Voodoo's holiest days, performing the blood sacrifices and personally invoking the gods to bestow favours. Blood from a slaughtered goat or chicken is allowed to drip upon the fetish, providing sustenance to the god. These sacrifices are always in animal form and may be accompanied by gifts of food and alcoholic spirits. There have been reports of cannibalism among practitioners of Voodoo but there is no evidence of this. It may be that these stories emanate from a rare ceremony of purification that takes place when someone has been struck dead by lightning.

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"Shango" - the manifestation of lightning and thunder - is held in awe, and is one of the most revered gods. To die by a lightning strike is surely a sign of Shango's displeasure. In a very secret ceremony, high priests and priestesses roast the corpse over a bed of coals. One tiny morsel of flesh is consumed by each, following which the body is cremated. This in itself is highly unusual since cremation is virtually nonexistent in African cultures.

In the not so distant past, there was once a minor diplomatic crisis in Nigeria, "sparked" by the unfortunate demise of a European who was killed by lightning. A flap occurred when local priests insisted on "purifying" the body, but the government intervened and a suitable substitute solution was contrived.

We often forget that Africans are just like us - a man wants a better job, a woman wishes she could conceive a child, the farmer hopes the rains will come on time, the fisherman prays for an abundant sea. Voodoo is centred on improving one's lot in life - by asking favours of the gods and then returning those favours by leading a moral life and helping one's neighbour.

Like all religions, Voodoo provides occasions for celebration - a gathering of people for a common purpose. This is Voodoo in its purest form. Yes, there are gods who may be invoked for sinister purposes - to curse an enemy perhaps - but in Benin, one must journey far to visit his shrine. Thus only the desperate and those truly bent on revenge will make the long trip to a place such as Dankoly, a shrine devoted solely to cursing an enemy.

So where do all these negative ideas about Voodoo come from? Many stem from Hollywood's exploitation of Voodoo as it is practised in the Americas. But while western Voodoo has its roots in Africa, it has undergone many changes and often bears little resemblance to its origins. Slaves brought their beliefs with them to the New World - to Haiti, Brazil, Trinidad, Cuba and even parts of the United States. These changes were a natural process of adapting to new conditions - most notably the influence of the Catholic Church. Voodoo beliefs allowed slaves a way to communicate with one another and share an ancient oral tradition. Fearing revolts, the Catholic Church outlawed the practice of Voodoo upon penalty of imprisonment, flogging and even death. It was even forbidden to play drums, since they too could be used to convey secret messages. Refusing to forsake their gods, the slaves simply adopted the various Catholic saints and ascribed their own gods' properties to them.

Overjoyed at the prospect of slaves converting to Christianity, Catholic priests ignored the possibility that their charges were actually engaged in the worship of voodoos. Over time, the two religions did merge, giving birth to completely new cults - cults that are far removed from the Voodoo that still thrives in Africa. In New Orleans, it is the stuff of legends, spawning such icons as the mysterious 19th century Voodoo Queen, Marie Leveau. Her tomb is visited daily and offerings are placed by devotees and tourists alike seeking her favour. In Brazil, Voodoo was to become "Macumba", "Candomble" and "Umbanda". In Cuba it gave rise to "Santeria". And in Haiti, it remained Voodoo in name only. New ceremonies were introduced, with little or no relationship to the Voodoo of old.

Zombification (reanimation of the dead) in Haiti is based on an ancient rite still practised in Africa, whereby initiate priests and priestesses must symbolically die and then be reborn. In Haiti, the process has an altogether different purpose. It is meant to torment the soul and force one to exist on the mortal plain in a "living death". There are rumours that potent drugs are used to slow the metabolism, feigning the appearance of death. These same drugs may do irreparable brain damage, affecting speech and the ability to walk properly.

Exactly how much of this is fact or fiction is a matter of speculation. But it is easy to understand how a movie audience - thirsty for horror and the bizarre - would embrace such an idea. Pins in dolls, potions and spells, all are facets of malevolence ripe for Hollywood's imagination.

In closing, a few words must be said about possession. Here too, Hollywood has had its way, portraying priests and priestesses in trance as some kind of evil force at work. Voodoo adepts act as channels to the spirit world. By joining the priesthood, they become servants of both worshippers and gods. The priest interprets signs, consults oracles and conveys the gods' advice.

Dance often forms an integral part of Voodoo worship. The dancers become vessels for the gods to visit the mortal plane. In essence they take over the body of the priest using his or her vocal chords to speak aloud, and controlling the legs to act out elaborate movements. During these possessions it is not unusual to see a dancer fall to the ground and go into convulsions.

No doubt the fervent drumming, copious amounts of alcohol and the colourful costumes and masks all lend credence to the act. It is taken very seriously by believers, and one cannot help but be impressed by both the physical skills involved and the ardent unshakable faith of members of the Voodoo community.

All too often we fear that which we can't explain, rather than just accept it for what it is and try to respect it. On the other hand, who doesn't like to sit in a movie thend have the living daylights scared out of them?

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