

Voodoo? That Old-Time Religion

How is Ghede
Creeping into our
World?

Voodoo: Cruelty to
Animals

GIMME THAT OLD TIME RELIGION by Iceman Bakunin

PORT AU PRINCE, HAITI

Bellielle is either a Caribbean slum or the last remnant of the ancient world, depending on your attitude. It's a hilly, twisted part of Port au Prince, full of tiny alleys and wobbly huts that look more like abstract art than habitations. When the sun goes down your only illumination comes from the small candles burning by the streetside vendors, an occasional kerosene lamp, and the tropical moon. Haiti has electricity, but it is about as reliable as Sly Stone.

I was standing outside the peristyle - temple is a rough translation, and shack is a better description - for a Voudou ceremony. It was twilight and we were hanging around on the street, sipping beers. Hundreds of people are milling around - a normal streetscene in Haiti resembles a football game letting out anywhere else - and they have the shimmering quality of shadows. The place smells like the original planet; a mixture of mud and burning charcoal and roasting meat. Even plants have a chance to contribute. I felt as though I was in a biblical village just before the Flood. At one point I flicked a cigarette butt onto the ground and it was instantly sucked up. That part of the sidewalk was some sort of Caribbean quicksand.

THE ROAD TO HEAVEN?

My Interest in Voudou was mostly musical. The drummers are reported to be among Haiti's best. They are also some of the few musicians of any kind in the country that get paid for playing. The houngon, (Pronounced "oo-gone") - priest - hires them for about 400 Gourdes (\$23.00) a night's work. The singers cost more, pulling in 700 G a night. Like divas everywhere, they won't deign to perform for less. The musicians are one of the many expenses that the Houngon has to bear.

If he doesn't, the gods will kill him.



Guillame, the houngon here, is almost middle aged, a condition that not everyone in Haiti can aspire to. He's been a houngon for 12 years. He runs a factory that makes Voudou flags, marvelous sequined cloths done with colorful depictions of the Voudou

legends, much like stained glass windows. He sometimes has as many as 15 people working for him, but at the moment he's down to three. He's a capitalist, but he's not excessive, as so many religious leaders can be. 'Ti Cousin of Dufour, a well-known houngon from days past, trafficked in black magic, operated distilleries and fleet of camions, and tooled around the impoverished island in a new Cadillac.

The gods spoke to Guilliamme in a dream. They said, and he quoted, "Follow me. If you don't, I'll kill you." Voudou gods seem to recruit like bad-ass pimps.

He told his parents, both of whom were doctrinaire Protestants, that he was going to renounce Jesus and follow the gods of Voudou. They were not happy. Indeed, how many doctrinaire Protestants can you think of that would be? His mother wept, his father smacked him with the Bible, and Guilliamme was genuinely torn. But, with the clear, Cartesian logic of Francophones everywhere, he figured it out. The Protestant gods threatened vague tales of some abstract paradise and eternal fire. Their ministers were mild-mannered white guys, more like golf pros than fiery demons. The Voudou gods, on the other hand, came right to his house and snarled orders at him, and told him straight out that if he didn't obey, they'd whack him right where he stood.

Nolo contondre.

THE CARE & FEEDING OF THIRD WORLD DIETIES

When thinking of Voudou, it's important to remember that the spooky, devilish images were created by hostile white missionaries, who came up with a scare campaign quite similar to the one used in American drug war. And just as crack cocaine is nothing more than regular coke mixed with water and baking soda, Voudou is nothing more than a mixture



of some African animist beliefs and borrowed images and ideas from the West. It's polytheistic, and our easiest parallel with the ancient Greeks and their pantheon of jealous, bickering gods. They have different gods for differing reasons and they have distinct personalities. Some are tough, some are drunkards, some are plain silly. All of them are hungry. When they leave the Abysmal Regions - their official address - they come around looking for a free meal. Other gods demand the sacrifice of a sheep. Voudou gods want it roasted and marinated.

Voudou is a temporal religion. Most of the other big ones tell you that this life of misery and servitude is just wretched phase for you to prepare you for entry into paradise. Voudou is less pretentious. Grand, sweeping claims like that are outside its range. Voudou is

more concerned with small, peasant aspirations, what you can get now. The rewards and punishments are almost all earthly, and the most typical benefit is a good income. I remember going through the entire Voudou fetish market in Togo without seeing a single charm that would get me to heaven. Instead, they sold amulets that would get me through customs, help me pass a school exam, and become invisible when the police were after me. (I bought a few, chuckling over the quaintness of it all. A month later, passing into Senegal, I made it through a nasty group of customs agents with an ounce of hashish in my pocket, the only place they didn't look.)

Voudou's Reverend Ike approach to the gods has filtered up to America, at least in our ghettos. In Harlem shops they sell Landlord Break A Leg, Hit a Number, Lover Stay Hard candles. These kinds of magic charms are perfectly suited to people on the low end of the economic pile. And nobody's lower than the average Haitian.

HAITI

When Haiti became independent, in 1802, the egalitarian Jeffersonian ideas of the French and American revolutions hadn't reached her shores in quite the same form. Toussaint L'Overture, the slave turned liberator and founder of free Haiti, believed that part of a ruler's mandate is control of the private and spiritual lives of his subjects. One of his first acts was to proscribe Voudou and its practice, granting monopoly rights to the Catholics. This diktat was taken seriously, even to the point of burning down the "sacred" Ma Pou trees that provide wood for the drums.

Toussaint didn't last long, however. In 1803 he was kidnapped by Napoleon and froze to death in a Swiss jail, leaving the country to his ferocious military commander Dessalines.

Dessalines became, before the famous Calypso singer, the Original Black Stalin. Fierce, unbending, he had a job to do, and when humans got in his way he swept them away like a rockslide. Like Uncle Joe, he wrenched his country into the new world, building a new society at the expense of an appalling number of its members. His blood-soaked career - he was known for slaughtering entire garrisons he had promised safe passage to - was a throwback to the Frankish Crusaders and a foretaste of Idi Amin. He also crowned himself emperor. Some say he was the model for Eugene O'Neil's THE EMPEROR JONES.

He was, however, extremely competent, and he could do other things besides roast his enemies over slow fires. He built up the island's defenses, both with forts and his own well-publicized reputation for savagery. By the time of his own murder - almost a given fate among Haitian presidents - the days of Haitian slavery and European colonialism were over. Haiti became, finally and perhaps forever, an independent black republic.

Black Stalin kept the anti-Voudou laws, but at the same time he secularized the constitution, which infuriated the reigning Catholics. In what amounted to an ecclesiastical tantrum, the churchmen broke off relations, recalled their priests and stalked off in a snit.¹ (If only the other banana republics had known how easy it was) The newly independent Haitians were left without a state religion, and Voudou stepped into the gap. During the 60 years respite from monopoly Catholicism, Voudou, unpruned by Christian bayonets, grew into the strongest and purest form it would take anywhere in the New World.

The Catholics may have been gone, but a lot of their images remained. The stories and fables and heroes of Catholicism were incorporated into Voudou, to the point where, even today, they still say a mass for St. Patrick. It's tempting to say they take images more for the sake of the visuals and convenience - a lot like junk sculpture - rather than from any feelings of religious fervor. One temple has the goddess of fertility and orgasm, Grande Erquie, represented by a picture of Shirley Temple.

Voudou is said to have been brought to West Africa by the Dahomey invaders, who established an empire in 1730's. They sold their own co-religionists into slavery and Voudou was one of the few things the slaves could bring along on their voyage to the Americas. It was not appreciated by the ruling European Catholics, of course, but they found it impossible to suppress. They feared it for many reasons, not least because they thought it would give the slaves a chance to plot a rebellion. That did, in fact, happen in Haiti. The successful 1802 plot to overthrow the French and their hated slavery was hatched at a Voudou ceremony. This, if nothing else, puts Voudou in a religious class all by itself. How many other religions, normally content to wax fat off the ruling classes, have successfully fomented a people's revolution?

HAITI TODAY

Voudou may claim to help people on a material basis in the real world, but you'd never know it by the Haitian standard of living. Their industries; sugar, sisal, bananas, textiles, have collapsed under just a few too many incompetent managers. What money there is comes from foreign aid, remittances and cocaine smuggling. Tourism is so weak that even I, stumbling in, stoned, carrying bongos, was welcomed by the customs people with a smile. In a tableau straight out of *The Comedians*, I was surrounded outside the main post office by desperate souvenir hustlers, selling handmade artifacts, shrieking and begging to get my pennies first. Crime was up, and everybody warned me not to go to Cite Soliel after dark. Haiti has the lowest per capita income in the Western Hemisphere and absolutely no social programs to alleviate it.

This poverty, however, has its helpful side, since Safeways and

strip malls won't bother with the place. This allows very small businesses - the equivalent of pushcarts - to exist. One might think that religious organizations might do the same, seeking better pickings. One, of course, would be showing a charming ignorance of how religious organizations work. They enter into a new territory with a marvelous disdain for financial realities, being more concerned with potential converts than the money to pay for them. Like the spokesmen for the Vietnam War, they ignore the cost and focus on body counts. What's depressing is that they succeed. A population one nickel away from starvation is apparently just dying to give that last nickel away in order to feel better about it.

GHEDE: THE CLOWN OF DEATH

I went to a mass for Ghede, an extremely important loa who wears a lot of different hats. He is described in the same tones of voice reserved for third world dictators: The dark figure controlling life and death, who is wise beyond all others, who is the beginning of the end. His is the corpse of the first man. He is the god of fertility, guardian of the history of the race. Women bump up against him to ensure healthy children. Also, he tends the cemetery.

He dances the dance of copulation - here we get into the parts of Voodoo not borrowed from Christianity - and he poses as an itinerant traveler. He is amused by the constant human eroticism and man's constant pretense that it's something else. He is a clown and a trickster, like Pan or Loki. When I saw him, he was more like Larry, Moe and Curly.

Before the ceremony could begin, it was his turn to be fed. They like to eat, these gods, and the first thing Haitian believers do is put out a plate of meat & rice for them. Along with that we'll have bottles of clairin (the local moonshine) and bottles of Diet Pepsi, demonstrating again Voodoo's adaptability. The gods will "mount" a nearby living being and ingest the food through his or her body. The food is considered payback. If you make enough money for food, the reasoning goes, it is because the gods helped you. So you have to give some of it back.

If you don't, the gods will kill you.

So, in direct opposition to the Salvation Army soup kitchen, the meal comes before the sermon. People were sitting around, not doing much of anything. They were remarkably patient, smoking cigarettes and sipping beers, waiting for the start. This night they waited 3 hours.

Well, got anything better to do? One of the great evils of a stagnant economy is boredom. People hang around and stare straight ahead for hours at a time. This is why an occasional necklacing can brighten up an otherwise dull week. It's certainly

more meaningful to sit inside a temple waiting for something than to sit outside waiting for nothing.

As people walked in, there was an usher of sorts, but it was otherwise quite informal. Voudou, in fact, has about the most relaxed services I've ever seen. Even shouting out wisecracks about the houngon's competence is quite acceptable. It's a lot like a town meeting, or even daytime TV. The ushers make sure that everybody sits in their proper places. Kids are not allowed in the back benches with the drummers, for instance. They were directed, with liberal cuffs to the head, to their own section, which was practically out of the room. Kids are not particularly revered in Haiti, it's a lot like it was here around the turn of the century.

We were waiting for the drummers to show up. Voudou uses three drummers, who play the maman, a big drum played with one hand and a stick; the baquette, which holds down predetermined patterns in the middle range; and the small bula, which is played with thin sticks. Sometimes an ogantier hits patterns on a piece of iron, exactly the way salsa utilizes the sides of the timbales.

The night before, they had been paid what they felt was too little, and they were showing their disgust by showing up when they damn well felt like it. In Haiti, where most people sit all day in the murderous sun hawking pieces of chewing gum, a gig like this makes them something like rock stars. And the parallel wasn't lost on them either. When they finally did come in, grumbling and sighing, they were muttering like John Belushi not finding enough smack in the dressing room.

THE DISMAL SCIENCE IN VOUDOU

The fact that most Voudou adherents are one inch from starvation does not mean that their holy men let them off lightly. Money is collected with all the serious resolve of any other religion, and the punishments for holding out are quick and terrible. If you aren't struck dead you'll lose the chance to improve your socio-economic standing. This is a lot like playing the numbers.

Voudou paraphernalia is for sale. There are fetishes, dolls,² and flags. Guillaume's main moneymakers are the wonderful handmade flags of Voudou, that grace homes and businesses wherever Haitians can be found. Tight sequins sewn together in beautiful patterns and colors, they represent scenes and stars of Voudou, a bit like stained glass church windows do. They are gorgeous



examples of naive art and every home should have one. (Believers have a strange, tense relationship with art. When they aren't

repressing & burning art they are inspiring it. The cynical among us might call this simply establishing a monopoly. But maybe the marketplace would do that anyway. Given a choice of what to put in my living room, I'll take a Voudou flag over "Piss Christ" any time.)

When the drummers started I lost interest in the ritual. They were playing the strongest music I'd heard in the Caribbean and quite possibly my whole life. (This includes 5 trips to Africa and 12 years as a professional drummer) Whatever happened outside the rhythm didn't register for at least an hour. After that, though, I noticed a few things: A couple of lovely young ladies went forward with candles and poured moonshine over the altar. Several participants were mounted by Ghede. One guy played the fool to irritating perfection, jumping around with flour in his face, grinning and hissing one inch from my face, demanding money, and shrieking and rolling around on the floor. I'm sure behavioral scientists have an acronym for this when it happens with hyperkinetic children. Later, he poured some moonshine on his head and screamed, "I've been rolling around on the floor all day and Guede sent me a blanc (White tourist. Guess who?) and he gives me no money!" Every job, I replied, has its down side. You think I like booking agents?

People in the back jumped up and cracked wise in Creole, so fast that even my interpreter couldn't catch it. The drummers locked into a groove perfect enough to lift the house. Some people danced, carefully, beautifully. Others, especially the mounted ones, flailed their arms and legs around and fell against the others like partying skinheads. Other people just remained seated, looking almost bored.

I had paid for permission to take pictures but I felt churlish doing it. They didn't mind either way. They knew it had been cleared with the houngon, which brought up an interesting point. That meant that if they objected to the white tourist snapping at them with flashbulbs during their most intimate communication with their sacred spirits, the gods would kill them.

When I got back to my hotel - Olofson's,³ of course - I must confess to a certain elation, the kind I usually only feel after playing 4 hours of music for a high-tipping audience. The only explanation I can offer is that I found the religious service exciting. And how often can we say that?

THE LINGERING QUESTION

So, why does this, the seemingly healthiest religion, fail so miserably in helping its devotees do the very modest things it promises? A religion that can't even deliver a minimum wage job wouldn't seem to have much staying power. Worse to contemplate, why are the people who practice the nasty, divisive religions

prospering like Horatio Alger, tooling around in His & Hers Gulfstream trailers?

I don't like to speculate on things like that. If I do, the gods will kill me.

FOOTNOTES

- 1) It cannot be said that they were much missed. They were as arrogant and corrupt as priests anywhere, and they grafted & wrenched with all the subtlety of Renaissance Popes. When they came back, in 1860, they fell right back into character, blessing even outdoor toilets if the price was right. REF HAITI: THE BLACK REPUBLIC, Selden Rodman (1953) [[back](#)]
- 2) The room next to mine at the Olofson Hotel was the one where Papa Doc Duvalier and Chicago crime boss Sam "Mooney" Giancana stuck pins in a Voodoo doll of John F. Kennedy. A few months later, Kennedy was dead. [[back](#)]
- 3) Anyone who doesn't know what I mean by that is invited to read Graham Greene's THE COMEDIANS. [[back](#)]

OTHER REFERENCES

THE BEST NIGHTMARE ON EARTH Herb Gold
THE DIVINE HORSEMEN, Maya Deren, 1953
THE COMEDIANS, Graham Greene, 1959

"Iceman Bakunin," aka Kevin Lambert, has also written SCANDALS IN EDEN, Selected Tales Of Religious Misbehavior, part 1: [Billy James Hargis](#), part 2: [The Reverend Harold Davidson](#), and part 3: [A Quick Romp through Gospelgate](#).

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