

Haitian Vodou: Serving the Spirits

by Michael Rock

Email: hakomi@yahoo.com

Haitian Vodou, called Sevis Gineh or "African Service", is the primary culture and religion of the approximately 7 million people of Haiti and the Haitian diaspora. It has its primary roots among the Fon-Ewe peoples of West Africa, in the country now known as Benin, formerly the Kingdom of Dahomey. It also has strong elements from the Ibo and Kongo peoples of Central Africa and the Yoruba of Nigeria, though many different peoples or "nations" of Africa have representation in the liturgy of the Sevis Gineh, as do the Taino Indians, the original peoples of the island we now know as Hispaniola. Haitian Vodou exists in Haiti, the Dominican Republic, parts of Cuba, the United States, France, Montreal, and other places that Haitian immigrants have dispersed to over the years.



Other New World traditions it is closely related to or bears resemblance to include Jeje Vodun in Brazil, La Regla Arara in Cuba, and the Black Spiritualist Christian churches of New Orleans. Haitian Vodou also bears superficial resemblances in many ways with the Nigerian Yoruba-derived traditions of Orisha service, represented by La Regla de Ocha or Lukumi, aka "Santeria", in Cuba, the United States, and Puerto Rico as well as Candomble in Brazil. While popularly thought of as related to Haitian Vodou, what is commonly referred to as "voodoo" in New Orleans and the southern US is a variant of the word "hoodoo", also called "rootwork" or "root doctoring". This is a folk magical tradition from Central Africa in the Congo region in which roots, leaves, minerals, and the spirits of the dead are employed to improve the lot of the living, often including the reciting of Psalms and other Biblical prayers. Rootwork also incorporates Native American herb lore and European and Jewish magical traditions. As a folk magic tradition, New Orleans "voodoo" and southern "hoodoo" rootwork are distinct from the RELIGION of Haitian Vodou and its siblings and cousins.



History

Vodou as we know it in Haiti and the Haitian diaspora today is the result of the pressures of many different cultures and ethnicities of people being uprooted from Africa and imported to Hispaniola during the transatlantic African slave trade. (1) Under slavery, African culture and religion was suppressed, lineages were fragmented, and people pooled their religious knowledge and out of this fragmentation became culturally unified. In addition to combining the spirits of many different African and Indian nations, pieces of Roman Catholic liturgy are incorporated to replace lost prayers or elements; in

addition images of Catholic saints are used to represent various spirits or "misteh" ["mysteries"], and many saints themselves are honored in Haitian Vodou in their own right. This syncretism allows Haitian Vodou to encompass the African, the Indian, and the European ancestors in a whole and complete way. It is truly a "Kreyol" or Creole religion.

The most historically important Vodou ceremony in Haitian history was the Bwa Kayiman (Bois Caiman) ceremony of August 1791 near the city of Cap Haitien that began the Haitian Revolution, led by the Vodou priest named Boukman. During this ceremony the spirit Ezili Dantor came and received a black pig as an offering, and all those present pledged themselves to the fight for freedom. This ceremony ultimately resulted in the liberation of the Haitian people from their French masters in 1804, and the establishment of the first and only black people's republic in the Western Hemisphere, the first such republic in the history of the world. (2)

Haitian Vodou came to the US to a significant degree beginning in the late 1960s and early 1970s with the waves of Haitian immigrants under the oppressive Duvalier regime, taking root in Miami, New York City, Chicago, and other cities mainly on the two coasts.

Core Beliefs

Vodouisants believe, in accordance with widespread African tradition, that there is one God who is the creator of all, referred to as "Bondje", from the French words "Bon Dieu" or "Good God". Bondje 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 (from Allada in Dahomey), the Nago (from Yorubaland), and the Kongo. The spirits also come in "families" that all share a surname, like Ogou, or Ezili, or Azaka or Gede. For instance, "Ezili" is a family, Ezili Danto and Ezili Freda are two individual spirits in that family.



In 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 mostly come from Africa, Petwo spirits are mostly native to Haiti and are more demanding and require more attention to detail than the Rada, but both can be dangerous if angry or upset. Neither is "good" or "evil" in relation to the other.

Everyone has spirits, and each person has 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.

The lwa are all said to live in a city beneath the sea called Ile Ife or Vilokan. Except for Agwe and his escort, who live in a different city below the waters.

Pantheon

All of the lwa of Haiti are initiated manbos and houngans. Many are also Masons. Some of the more important spirits are as follows.

RADA

Papa Legba Atibon - He is imaged as an old man, St. Lazarus is used to represent him in the hounfo or temple. He opens the gate to the spirits, and translates between human languages and the languages of the spirits.

Marasa Dosu Dosa - They are twin children, either in twos or threes. Imaged with Sts. Cosmas and Damien, or the Three Virtues.

Papa Loko Atisou and Manbo Ayizan Velekete - The prototypical priest and priestess of the tradition. They confer the office of priesthood in initiation.

Danbala Wedo and Ayida Wedo - The white snake and the rainbow, together they are the oldest living beings. Danbala brings people into the Vodou. St. Patrick and Moses are used for Danbala.

Ogou Feray - He is a fierce general who works hard for his children but can be moody and sullen at times as well.

Ogou Badagri - He is a diplomat, and is Ogou Feray's chief rival.

Ezili Freda - She is a mature light-skinned woman who enjoys the finest things, jewelry, expensive perfume, champagne etc. She is said to own all men (or she thinks she does) and can be very jealous. She gives romance and luxury. She is so pure she must never touch the bare ground. Her main rival is her sister Ezili Dantor

Agwe Tawoyo - He rules the sea and those who have crossed the ocean, and is symbolized by his boat named "Imammou". St. Ulrich is his saint counterpart.

PETWO

Gran Bwa Ile - His name means "Great Wood". He is a spirit of wilderness. He is fierce and unpredictable, and a section of the grounds of a Vodou temple is always left wild for him. St. Sebastian is used to represent Gran Bwa.

Ezili Dantor - a Petwo lwa, she is a strong black single mother. She does not speak, but makes a "kay kay kay" sound in possession. She is nurturing and protective but is dangerous when aroused, even to her own children. Her image is the Mater Salvatoris of Czestokowa. She often uses a dagger or bayonet, and her colors are often red and dark blue. A little known fact is that she is actually a hermaphrodite, and takes both men and women in marriage.

Ti Jan Petwo - the son and lover of Ezili Dantor.

Simbi - the Simbi lwa live in fresh water rivers and are knowledgeable in the areas of magic and sorcery.

The Bawons - they rule the cemetery and the grave. There are three - La Kwa, Samdi, and Simitye.

The Gedeh - The Gedeh spirits are all dead spirits who rule death and humor and fertility. They drink rum steeped with 21 habanero peppers and bathe their faces and genitals with this mixture also, to prove that they are who they say they are. They are sung for last at a party for the spirits. Chief of the Gedeh is Gedeh Nibo, with his wife Maman Brijit. St. Gerard represents the Gedeh.

Role of Clergy



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 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 "manbos". Below the houngans and manbos are the hounsis, who are initiates who act as assistants during ceremonies and who are dedicated to their own personal mysteries. One doesn't serve just any lwa but only the ones they "have", which is a matter of one's individual nature and destiny, and sometimes a matter of which spirits one has met and who take a liking to oneself. Since the spirits are individuals, they respond best to those whom they know or have been personally introduced to. Which spirits a person has may be revealed at a ceremony, in a reading, or in dreams. However anyone may and should serve their own blood ancestors.

That said, there are a few spirits or groups of spirits that have a particular relationship with humankind such that, it is not unreasonable to say, anyone might approach them with some confidence if a few basic forms and preferences are known, among these being Papa Legba Atibon, the gatekeeper of the spirits, Danbala Wedo, who is said to own all heads and is the oldest ancestor of all life, and Papa Gedeh, who gives voice to the spirits of the dead, and everyone has Dead. I leave it to the reader to investigate the identities of these spirits further from other sources such as the Vodouspirit Yahoo! forum. Also the Catholic saints are all very approachable to anyone who asks for their help, such as St. Anthony or St. Michael.

Standards of Conduct

The cultural values that Vodou embraces center around ideas of honor and respect - to God, to the spirits, to the family and sosityete, and to oneself. There is a plural idea of proper and improper, in the sense that what is appropriate to someone with a Danbala as their head may be different from someone with an Ogou as their head, for example -- one spirit is very cool and the other one is very hot. I would say that coolness overall is valued, and so is the ability and inclination to protect oneself and one's own if necessary. Love and support within the family of the Vodou sosityete seems to be the most important consideration. Generosity in giving to the community and to the poor is also an important value. Our blessings come to us through our community and we should be willing to give back to it in turn. Since Vodou has such a community orientation, there are no "solitaries" in Vodou, only people separated geographically from their elders and house. It is not a "do it yourself" religion - a person without a relationship of some kind with elders will not be practicing Vodou. You can't pick the fruit if you don't start with a root.



The Haitian Vodou religion is an ecstatic rather than a fertility-based tradition, and does not discriminate against gay people or other queer people in any way. Unlike in some Wiccan traditions, sexual orientation or gender identity and expression of a practitioner is of no concern in a ritual setting, it is just the way God made a person. The spirits help each person to simply be the person that they are.

Ways of Worship

After a day or two of preparation setting up altars, ritually preparing and cooking fowl and other foods, etc., a Haitian Vodou service begins with a series of Catholic prayers and songs in French, then a litany in Kreyol and African "langaj" that goes through all the European and African saints and lwa honored by the house, and then a series of verses for all the main spirits of the house. This is called the "Priye Gineh" or the African Prayer. After more introductory songs then the songs for all the individual spirits are sung. As the songs are sung spirits will come to visit those present by taking possession of individuals and speaking and acting through them. Each spirit is saluted and greeted by the initiates present and will give readings, advice and cures to those who approach them for help. Many hours later in the wee hours of the morning, the last song is sung, guests leave, and all the exhausted hounsis and hounsans and manbos can go to sleep.

On the individual's household level, a Vodouisant or "sevite"/"serviteur" may have one or more tables set out for their ancestors and the spirit or spirits that they serve with pictures or statues of the spirits, perfumes, foods, and other things favored by their spirits. The most basic set up is just a white candle and a clear glass of water and perhaps flowers. On a particular spirit's day, one lights a candle and says an Our Father and Hail Mary, salutes Papa Legba and asks him to open the gate, and then one salutes and speaks to the particular spirit like an elder family member. Ancestors are approached directly, without the mediating of Papa Legba, since they are in one's blood.

If a person feels like they are being "called" or approached by the spirits of Haiti, the first thing a person should begin to do is to serve their ancestors, perhaps beginning with an ancestor novena (see the links below). Monday is the day of the ancestors in our house, but ideally one speaks to their ancestors daily. If you do not honor your ancestors first, they may get upset and stand between you and other spirits. The second thing is to seek out a competent and trustworthy manbo or hounsan for a reading or consultation. It may take some time of prayer, patience and effort to find a suitable person. Travel may even be necessary. They can help determine what spirit(s) if any may be involved and what if anything might need be done. Expect to pay some sort of fee for their time - unlike many Neo-Pagan traditions, in Haitian Vodou "manbo e hounsan travay pa pou youn gwan mesi" ("The manbo and the hounsan don't work for a big thank you") (3). This is true of other African-based traditions as well.

Role of Initiation

Initiation in Haitian Vodou is a serious matter, and it is advised to not run off to Haiti with the first person you encounter, on the internet or elsewhere, sight unseen or otherwise, who says they will initiate you. Take the time to get to know your prospective Maman or Papa in the Vodou, and the members of their society. Attend ceremonies in person, ask questions, learn, check references. Serve your ancestors, cultivate patience, and wait. Pay attention to dreams or other messages from the spirits. For most people initiation is totally unnecessary. It may be advised to research (as you would anyone else!) and weigh carefully, but perhaps not necessarily discount out of hand, anyone

actively promoting initiation into the Haitian Vodou priesthood with marketing slogans and New Age buzzwords. Haitian Vodou does not proselytize and it is not for sale although even valid initiations do cost some money, due to the time, people, materials and travel involved. If you think of the time and care it takes to make the best choice when you invest in a car or a home, or to hire a babysitter for the kids, how much more important are one's concerns of the Spirit? At the end of the day, reputations and rumors are less important than an honest answer to one question however: "Will I be happy and satisfied having this person/these people in my life? Is this a community where I can learn and grow in a positive way?" Only the seeker can answer that question for themselves, with God's help. And the help of the Advanced Bonewits Cult Danger Evaluation Frame (see the links below).

Also there are other options besides initiation in Haitian Vodou to become closer to the spirits. While the concept of initiation gets a lot of airplay among outsiders, far more common among the Haitian community is the "maryaj mistik", or the mystical marriage, in which the Vodouisant literally marries one or more lwa, in a ceremony complete with bridal dresses, rings, cakes, and a priest. In return they gain special protection and favor from the spiritual spouse. This is generally in exchange for one day of sexual abstinence per week in which the human spouse receives the spirit in their dreams, and any other terms spelled out in the marriage contract.

Initiation for its part creates a reciprocal bond between initiator and the new initiate with obligations every bit as serious as marriage, deeper even since it cannot be undone. Initiator and initiate become family with all the joys and burdens that may entail. It also entails certain promises, responsibilities and commitments with regard to the spirits. With persistence and patience, the spirits will lead a person to the house and elders that are right for them. Vodou is not a race, so every seeker can well afford to take their time. Personal relationships are the very foundation of Vodou and there is no substitute for the time it takes to cultivate them. I knew my houngan for three years prior to my own sevis lave tet ("washing of the head"). We were friends long before I had any interest in or notion of any connection to Haitian Vodou that I might have. Some of my god-brothers waited longer than that. This is how it should be. In Haiti these would all be people you grew up with and you would just know who is who or would know someone who knew someone. In the United States, those of us who are non-Haitian have a few more obstacles to overcome, but by the grace of God and the spirits they are not insurmountable.

Regleman Gineh

Initiate or not, once you belong to a house and have chosen an elder, it is important to follow the guidance they provide as to the way things are done in their house, called the "Regleman Gineh". There is a diversity of practice in Vodou across the country of Haiti and the diaspora, for instance in the north of Haiti the sevis tet or kanzwe may be the only initiation (according to my elders from Haiti in three different houses) as it frequently is in Cuba and the Dominican Republic, whereas in Port Au Prince and the south they practice the kanzo rites with three grades of initiation -- senp, si pwen, and asogwe -- and the latter is the most familiar mode of practice outside of Haiti. Some lineages combine

both, as Manbo Katherine Dunham reports from her personal experience in her book "Island Possessed." Kay Aboudja, my own house, is one of these lineages. Although the general structure of ritual and practice are the same across Haiti, small details of service and the spirits served will vary from house to house, and information in books or on the internet may be contradictory. When in doubt, etiquette dictates that one consult their own Maman or Papa in the Vodou, and practice as they direct according to the regleman of their lineage, since "every manbo and houngan is the head of their own house", as a common saying in Haiti taught to me by Houngan Aboudja states.

While the overall tendency in Haitian Vodou is very conservative in accord with its African roots, there is no singular, definitive, One And Only True Right And Only Haitian Vodou (tm), only what is right in a particular house or lineage. In other words, if you read something on a web page or a book, and it contradicts what your manbo or houngan says to do, go with what they say. This may seem restrictive on the surface from a solitary Neo-Pagan perspective, but since you have done your homework and taken the time to build a positive relationship of trust with your elder(s) ahead of time, this will not be the case in practice. A good parallel is the way everyone practices the same way in a Wiccan coven context. Ultimately everything comes from the spirits and the ancestors however. It is not a matter of personal preferences as it often may be in popular Witchcraft or other pagan traditions, and this reality becomes clearer with experience in the Sevis Gineh.

This is the most basic overview of the Haitian Vodou religion imaginable; keeping in mind that I am by no means an expert compared to my elders after only a couple of years in the religion as an hounsi, I hope it gives some general idea and understanding of what Haitian Vodou is about, since it summarizes what I have learned from my own elders in a very condensed form. The most important thing I have learned from my elders however is this: Black, red, yellow or white, a person can find beauty and fulfillment serving the spirits in the Haitian religion - the Vodou is not a religion limited by race or ethnicity since ultimately, as science has proven, we are ALL the Children of Africa, and the waters of Gineh join us all.

Ayibobo!