

VODUN

The Definitive Guide to VOODOO & Its Practices



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Introduction

Mention the word Vodou, and for most people what comes to mind are Vodou dolls and Zombies. Some people even think that Vodou is associated with Satanism. While Zombies and Vodou dolls both play a role in the religion, it is not in the manner that most westerners think, and they are not nearly as important as media misconceptions would have us believe. Furthermore, the religion has nothing to do with Satanism. It has everything to do with a deep belief that all is one, with the veneration of ancestors, with a reverence for nature, and a deep concern for the day to day well-being of its adherents.

Vodou is one of the world's oldest religions, with millions of devout followers. Vodou, or Voudoun, is sometimes called "the world's oldest religion" and many believe it to be up to 10,000 years old. It originated in Africa where it was called Voudoun, but took the form of Vodou, which most people are familiar with, during the forced slave migration to Haiti. The African diaspora, or mass migration outside their home country, spread the religion to North and South America, the Philippines, and the Caribbean.

The religion of Vodou plays a huge role in community and family life in areas where it flourishes. It is a religion in which music and dance are very important parts of ceremony and ritual. Vodou also has a strong oral tradition, with stories of various aspects of faith being passed from one generation to the other. It has no prayer books, or central holy text. Because observers of Vodou are thought to communicate quite directly with various spirits, Vodou is quite a personal religion. Although adherents are expected to behave according to accepted standards of Vodou, there is no set list of observations and practices, and rituals can vary greatly from region to region. It is also interesting to note that, for all these reasons, books about Vodou often present their information in the form of stories. In this report, you'll learn all about the various aspects of Vodou today. We'll look at the practices and beliefs of the religion, who practices and where, and Vodou's long and fascinating history. We'll dissect some common myths and misconceptions of Vodou, and you'll learn the truth about Zombies and Vodou dolls. We'll talk about the true symbols and imagery that are important to adherents. Finally, you'll learn about where Vodou stands today, and most important of all, how you can benefit from living the simple truths of the Voudoun lifestyle.

Before we embark upon this fascinating journey, however, let's take a look at the common meaning of the word Vodou, its usage and its origin, as this can sometimes be confusing.

You'll find the word Vodou spelled in a variety of different ways, depending on which country you're reading about. Some of the other spellings you will see of the word are Vodun, Vudun, and Vodou, which is common in Haiti. The roots of these words come from various peoples of the West African region from western Nigeria to eastern Ghana. Vodun is a West African word for spirit. Vodou is most often used in Haiti, and Vudon, Vodun, or Vodoun are common in Brazil.

The word Vodou is most commonly used to describe the traditions of African and the Caribbean which combined into a rich stew in New Orleans. Vodou or Hoodoo is also sometimes used to describe the African-American tradition of folk spirituality common in the southeastern United States. Many scholars believe that Vodou is a transliteration, or a word changed from another language, of the French vous tous, pronounced voo too, which means you all. Vodou is an Americanized spelling of Vodou, which has really only become common over the last 100 years.

Confusing? Yes, indeed it is, but this brief look at the origins and usage of the word begins to hint at the vast complexity and mystery of the faith. Because of the possibility of confusion from switching back and forth between names, for the purposes of this report, we will be using, in general, the term Vodou. In New Orleans, Vodou is commonly spelled Voodoo, so we will continue with that tradition in this report. Bear in mind, though, that for many practitioners outside of New Orleans the term Voodoo signifies a religion dreamed up by the minds of Hollywood, and that religion has little to do with the deeply mystical and reverent faith they practice.

For your convenience and reference, please note that there is both an extensive resources page and a glossary at the back of this report. You may run into some unfamiliar words, and if you forget their meaning, you can simply turn to the end and refresh your memory. The resources will give you options for further reading and assistance in finding local groups of Vodou, should you feel so moved to practice the religion.

Now that this brief introduction has whetted your appetite to learn more about the profound and mystical religion of Vodou, let's get started. We'll begin with a look at the basic beliefs and practices of Vodou.

Vodou 101: Basic Beliefs and Practices

Vodou has its origins in a West African system of spirituality and as such, it is a mostly unwritten tradition, its rituals and ceremonies passed down orally or through music and dance. The religion is similar to religions the world over in that it attempts to explain what forces govern the world we live in, and how to influence those forces to make the lives of believers and practitioners better. Because of this, the religion also has a strong influence on human behavior. Vodou helps its adherents not only to better understand their own lives, but their own spiritual natures as well. It has been said that the main purpose of Vodou is to heal: to heal each individual's relationship with himself, and their relationship with God.

The Hierarchy of the Spirits

In the Vodou tradition, there is one main God. He is known by different names in different parts of the world; in Haiti he is called Bondye. This is taken from the French words *bon dieu*, which mean "good God." This God is so powerful that ordinary worshippers cannot get in touch with him. Instead, they must rely on other spirits to reach Bondye. Luckily, there are thousands of these spirits. They are called the Loa (lwa in Haiti). The Loa control the daily lives of mortals, influencing health, happiness, wealth, and nature. They act as intermediaries between Bondye and Vodou believers. To fully understand Vodou, you must grasp that the Loa exist in a complete hierarchy. There are some Loa which are very powerful and venerated, and have their own ceremonies and rituals. Some of their names are Damballah, Ezili, Ogu, Agwe, and Legba. Many spirits of lesser importance also exist. Families and communities also have their own spirits. The Loa tend to have personalities, with certain colors, food, plants and objects thought to be associated with specific spirits. These are then used as offerings to the Loa.

In order to better understand the veneration of the Loa, people with more traditional western religious and spiritual backgrounds may equate the worship of the Loa to the pantheon of Greek and Roman Gods. Just as the Greeks and Romans had many Gods which were the personification of elements of their lives, so, too, do believers in Vodou. The Loa become very personal and real spirits to them.

Veneration of Ancestors

Adherents of Vodou also venerate their ancestors, and ancestors are consulted for protection and guidance. Ancestors are those who have passed from this world into the world of the spirits. Ancestors represent the intermediary step between this world and the next, and they can serve as gateways.

In the Haitian Vodou tradition, ancestor worship is especially important. Adherents worship them in the form of a group of loa called Les Gede (sometimes Les Ghedes) and Les Barons. These energies of the dead manifest in ritual and their behavior are often outrageous. They may beg for money, dress in tattered clothing, or any other kind of wild behavior you can imagine. Adherents of Vodou believe that we all have the energy of the Gede embedded in our souls as ancestral knowledge. (And science backs this up, with gene theory.) These energies can often invade ceremonies and refuse to leave until some kind of price is paid—financial or perhaps sexual. While rousting about the ceremonies, the Gede make their presence overtly known through grabbing genitals, picking pockets (or noses!), spitting, or cursing.

Some adherents make a distinction between Les Barons as the named dead and Les Gede as the unnamed dead, but not all follow this. Whichever way they follow, all place great emphasis on revering and giving tribute to the dead.

Here is a brief rundown of some of the better known Gede. Baron Samedi is the ruler of all the dead. He is usually referred to as the first male buried in a cemetery. He is usually depicted in a white top hat, black tux, dark glasses, and cotton up his nostrils, which is how corpses are dressed for burial in Haiti. He has a white skull-like face and speaks with a nasal twang. One eye generally pokes out from behind the glasses, which symbolizes that he has an eye on both worlds.

Baron Samedi's name could be a corruption of zombie, or based on the French word for Saturday, as many French words were used in Haitian folklore. Baron can be seen as the epitome of stereotypical Vodou style, with his love of rum, cigars, hot peppers and flashy jewelry. He is also a very sexual spirit, with phallic symbols often associated with him. The former dictator of Haiti, Papa Doc Duvalier, claimed to be a manifestation of Baron. Baron Samedi stands at the crossroads, where the souls of dead humans pass.

Zora Neale Hurston reported that when making a request of Baron Samedi, it is very important to substitute a cow's leg in place of your hand. Baron Samedi takes with him whatever he is holding when he leaves, and in this way you don't lose your arm to him.

Baron's wife is Maman Brigitte. Like her husband, she is partial to hot peppers. Brigitte is represented by a black rooster. She is known as the first woman to be buried in a cemetery, and resides in the cemetery's trees and rock piles and is known to be very sensual. Sometimes her followers stuff their noses with cotton. She presides over a mother's justice and the divine arbiter of justice. In cases of legal arbitration, Brigitte would be petitioned.

In true syncretic style, there are clear links between Maman Brigitte and the Brigit of the British Isles. This Brigit was first worshipped as Brigid, who was the goddess of poetry, creativity, inspiration, and healing in the Celtic faith. When Christianity arrived in Ireland, the church fathers tried to eradicate the old beliefs with little luck, so they simply absorbed some of the pagan deities into their own lore. Brigid became Saint Brigit, and she was carried with Irish who immigrated to Haiti to escape famine. There she was immediately welcomed into the loa fold.

Maman Brigitte is known to heal those who suffer from incurable fatal diseases. As befits her "mother" role she presides over all her children—Vodou followers—and is vengeful towards those who would try to hurt them. Offerings to Brigitte include rum, cotton and willow branches. Other popular Gede spirits are Baron Criminal, who is a force of justice for criminals; the mischievous Ti Malice, or Uncle Malice, and Gede Nibo, the lusty gravedigger. Sometimes he is also called Ti Puce or Uncle Louse. Besides the Gede, Vodou adherents are also careful to venerate the family members that have already passed. This is considered crucial to well-being, and is one of the basic practices of Vodou. It is often done on an altar (about which we will discuss more later), with photos, objects such as jewelry that belonged to the ancestor, a glass of water and a candle. When honoring the members of your bloodline, it is also important to take into account individual personalities and tastes, and honor these differences. When asking ancestors for help, they will exhibit the same traits as spirits that they did in life. For instance, if a father was a workaholic, he will work night and day to solve your problem until it is dealt with. One thing that is import to remember when working with the ancestors or Les Gedes, is never to sprinkle salt on any food offering. Salt can make ancestors depart and void their powers.

Initiation

The essence of Vodou initiation is that the adherent becomes the “child” within a family of the living and the dead. The houngan (priest) and mambo (priestess) become your father and mother. However, the initiate actually becomes the child to the loa in the ceremony, and will have one special loa to which he or she is especially linked.

It is important to remember that there is no self-initiation in the Vodou tradition. People from different cultures may assume that they can learn Vodou from a book or website, but this is not true. While one can learn many aspects of the faith from reading, Vodou is an experiential religion with a strong oral tradition. In the Vodoun tradition, every event and situation from birth to death requires certain actions that must be exerted by trained priests. It is impossible to teach all of these to yourself. Read special reports and study like crazy if that is your way, but also be aware that to truly become a part of the Vodoun life, you will need to find a teacher.

Also, with initiation, you are pledging to become a part of a family, so it is not advisable to rush into anything. Ask questions about your family of others, if possible, to discern their reputation. Question the houngan and mambo. Attend ceremonies and pay attention to dreams and signs to confirm that you are on the correct path. Initiation is a very personal bond. It is also a very serious one, and should not be entered into lightly. Consider the bond to be as durable, binding, and important as a marriage. It may not be necessary for all followers of Vodou to go through initiation. The process is grueling and can be frightening, as it represents nothing less than a symbolic death and rebirth. Old ways of thinking are stripped away. Then, too, the origins of the initiation rites come from the warrior culture in African and it is designed to make you prove yourself on every level—physical, intellectual, emotional, and spiritual. Many, if not most, Vodouisants are not initiated, which is called bosal. You do not have to be initiated to serve the spirits.

However, for those who want to truly understand the path of Vodou, initiation is necessary because the tradition’s secrets are passed along only to initiates.

Follow your heart and listen to your loa to find the answer.

Interaction and Possession

The religion of Vodou has a huge impact on the day to day lives of its believers because of the interaction between the spirits and the followers. The Loa and their followers interact in several ways. During the famous Vodou ceremonies, the Loa are asked for advice, or protection, or assistance. In return, the followers must also do things for the Loa, most often in the form of rituals. These rituals sometimes take the form of animal sacrifices. Vodou believers also thank the Loa for their blessings and advice during rituals. In order to maintain these blessings and keep the Loa happy, followers must act according to the laws of Vodou. Thus does the practice of Vodou have a huge impact on the daily lives of its observers. You can see that it is a very practical religion, with a great deal of influence on its adherents.

One of the main hallmarks of Vodou belief is that the Loa communicate with believers by taking possession of their body. The person who is thus possessed is called the medium. While the medium is possessed by the Loa, it is thought that he or she cannot be harmed or feel pain. Through possession, the Loa offer advice, give instructions or predict the future. Sometimes the Loa lets his anger at the way people have been behaving known, and tells them they must adhere to the ways of Vodou. Possession varies according to region. In some areas, only the most powerful and select observers can become possessed. But in other areas, everyone has the opportunity. However, the idea of possession unites all branches of Vodou.

Ceremony and Ritual

Ceremonial dances, music and instruments—especially drums—are very important aspects of the religion and a major way in which communication with the loa is established. These dances usually include costumes and masks. Rituals are used to make contact with the loa to ask for help for more food, better standards of living, vibrant health, and so on. In this manner, rituals are somewhat similar to Christian prayer. Rituals are held to celebrate good fortune, to alleviate bad fortune, to celebrate specific holidays associated with the loa, and at the usual hallmarks of life—birth, weddings, and deaths.

Vodou is an egalitarian religion and priests can be male or female. Male priests are called houngan (sometimes spelled hungan). Female priests are mambo. The Vodou temple is named the hounfour. Inside the temple will be an altar, elaborately decorated with candles, fetishes, and symbolic items linked to the loa.

The components of a Vodou ceremony will vary, but many consist of a feast before the actual ceremony; the creation of a veve, or cornmeal pattern in the specific design favored by the loa, and chanting, drum-playing and dancing. The priests and the followers will often dance and dance, the ceremony building relentlessly in intensity, until one of them is possessed by a loa. This signifies that the person's spirit has left the body—and the Loa has entered. Now the possessed one is accorded all the respect that is usually reserved for the Loa.

The ceremony often ends with an animal sacrifice. The possessed follower may drink some of the animal's blood, and with this act the loa is considered to be satisfied. Then the animal is cooked and the food is consecrated for all. While animal sacrifices may seem distasteful and cruel to those of other traditions, it is important to understand that these sacrifices have a triple purpose: the loa are invoked and fed, followers are people of the community are fed (and in some poor areas where Vodou flourishes, this is a huge benefit), and finally once the loa have been fed and honored, they then give back through messages and communications for believers.

Other Beliefs

Vodou practitioners believe that we are all one. This goes back to the origins of the word discussed earlier. Remember how Vodou comes from the French vous tous, or you all? The you all attitude is inherent in Vodouism. There are no accidents and everything affects everything else. In this basic concept, Vodou is similar to Buddhism. It is also very close to what physicists are discovering is the true nature of the universe! A closely related concept of Vodou is the idea that every human being is filled with its own ashe, which is complex to define but basically refers to the divine life force within each of us. Vodou adherents believe strongly in this essence of the divine current that runs in each human being and unites us all.

There is a constant close connection between life and death, as is evidenced by the common practice of animal sacrifice, which is used to show respect to the Loa, or ask for favors. Also common in Vodou practice is the use of ritual or magical objects, such as dolls. These are thought to contain within them the spirit of the Loa, and they are used for protection. Ordinary objects such as bottles and pots, and even parts of sacrificed animals are used to create fetishes, which become sacred when used in rituals. Believers in Vodou have an affinity for the natural landscape with many rituals taking place near mountains or streams or other geographic

features. This may be because every element of nature is sacred to the Loa. The spirits also often manifest through nature, in thunder and lightning, and through trees, mountains, rivers and lakes.

Vodou followers also believe that each of us have a soul composed of two parts. These two parts are the “gros bon ange,” or big guardian angel, and the “ti bon ange,” or little guardian angel. The ti bon ange leaves the soul every night while we sleep and also during incidents of possession by the Loa. When the Ti bon ange is away from the body, it is thought that it can be captured by evil spirits.

It is ironic that many people associate Vodou with evil. We’ll look more deeply at this phenomenon and examine common misconceptions in a later section. In truth, Vodou is a deeply compassionate religion with a focus on respect and peace. Mambo and houngan become community leaders with deep concern for their followers and much of their work is focused on healing and improving lives. They provide guidance to their followers in many day to day matters and are frequently called upon to mediate disputes.

The Pantheon of the Loa

Perhaps one of the major differences between Vodou and other religions is that in most religions, believers talk to the divine. In Vodou, the divine talk to the believers. Perhaps because of this, to Vodouisants, their deities are as real as the people they interact with in the community every day. The loa have personalities and likes and dislikes, just like everyone we know. The loa have distinct preferences in dress and food, and it is important that those preferences be honored.

We met some of the ancestor loa in the section on veneration of the ancestors, and now it is time to take a look at some of the most important spirit loa. The pantheon of the loa is so extensive, it is impossible to go through all of them here. Also, the loa are ever changing, with new honored dead rightfully taking their place among the pantheon.

In general, the Haitian loa are arranged according to family lineages, also called nanchons. These are groups of loa that belonged to the same original tribal lineage. They are categorized according to different tribal groups. When slaves were brought to the Americas, they were most often separated from their tribal groups and held in varying locations. In these new groups comprised of people from many tribes and customs, the slaves held onto the familiar aspects of their religion. In this way, various nanchons were

created, each with their own traits and personalities. Many loa have slightly different aspects depending on their nanchon affiliation.

The Petro family is fiery, quick, and move with sharp motions. The Petro family of spirits is indigenous to Haiti. The Congo family is cool and watery and joyful and may be of Bantu origin. The Ibo came from the Hausa, Benin, and Yoruba tribes. The Rada spirits came from Dahomey in West Africa. They are gentle spirits.

Here is a rundown of the most common deities:

Papa Legba

He is the most popular spirit in that he is beseeched most frequently. Papa Legba is the patriarch, the wise father, the king of all. He presides at the crossroads, where he can distribute messages in both directions—from the visible world to the invisible and vice versa. Because of this a favorite prayer to him is: “Open the road, open the gate, open the door. We wish to come home to Papa.” Usually Papa Legba is depicted as an old man with a cane. The cane symbolized his member, and it is so old now that it has become his walking stick. Papa Legba speaks all human languages. His colors are either red and black or white and black. The symbolism of these colors stands for the connection that comes from having a foot in each world.

Papa Legba is summoned at the start of every ceremony because everything and everyone must go by him to have contact with the other loa. His permission is needed to open the door to the invisible worlds. If Legba is not happy, he can cause the ceremony to go awry. Images of him in the hounfour generally show Papa Legba with his cane. However, you might also see him depicted as the Catholic St. Peter, because of their similar roles, or as Moses. Papa Legba is offered rum, cigars, coffee, peanuts, corn fritters, smoked foods, and hard candy. When a Vodouisant wants to salute Papa Legba, she kisses the ground three times and requests that he open the door to the world of the invisible. When someone is possessed by Legba, they will usually walk slightly hunched over with a cane. Papa Legba is also the last loa to be summoned in each ceremony, in order that he may close the doorway to the invisible worlds again.

In New Orleans Vodou, Legba is represented as papa Lebat. This New Orleans loa got his name from an eighteenth century missionary named Father Jean Baptiste Lebat, who tried to stamp out the practice of Vodou in the area.

It is interesting to survey pop culture and see that there are often sly references to Papa Legba, generally in fantasy fiction, thrillers or television and films. For instance, the acclaimed science fiction writer William Gibson mentions Legba (and other loa) in his novels *Count Zero* and *Mona Lisa Overdrive*. Papa Legba and other loa also appear in *Darkfall*, by Dean Koontz. And fans of the old television series *Miami Vice* may remember that Legba was the name of a Vodou gangster on the show.

Erzulie

The Rada Erzulie's domain is water and she lives on the river banks. She embodies love. In the Rada aspect, Erzulie is the spirit of beauty, jewelry, dancing, luxury, and flowers. Her colors are light blue and pink. Sometimes her clothing will be shown in rose and white. She wears three wedding bands for her three husbands, Damballa, the serpent god, Agwe, the god of the fishermen, and Ogou, the god of iron. Erzulie is not promiscuous, simply an entity with a large heart.

Erzulie is the epitome of femininity and compassion. She possesses great beauty, grace, and sensuality, and demands cleanliness of her children. Her symbols are a heart, a mirror, and a fan. Erzulie is often weeping, and these can be tears of sadness, joy, or frustration. She may be depicted holding a child in one hand and a sword in the other. In her Petro nation aspect, she is Erzulie Dantor, a fierce protector of children and those who serve her. Some believe that this aspect of Erzulie stems from an association with images of the Black Madonna which were brought to Haiti by Polish soldiers fighting in the Haitian revolution in the early 1800s. This Erzulie is usually depicted as dark-skinned country woman and her daughter is named Anais. Her colors are red and blue and gold.

Erzulie is often associated with gay men and she is the patron of lesbians. Her days are Tuesday and Thursday. She has many flora and fauna sacred to her including the laurel tree, sweet-smelling flowers such as roses and jasmine, the white dove, and basil. Her favorite offerings include gourmet dishes, sweet confections, perfumes, fresh flowers, cosmetics, jewelry, honey, banana, liqueurs and champagne. Erzulie especially adores champagne and it is always kept ready for her appearance.

The Petro deity Erzulie Dantor grants material wealth and magical ability and will be invoked in ceremony to grant these things. She may also be asked for revenge for wrongs done to those who serve her. Women often invoke her domestic abuse and rape cases.

While known for her love and compassion, Erzulie is also a goddess of jealousy, vengeance and discord and she is often personified this way in her many different aspects.

Damballa

Damballa is the serpent creator in Haitian lore. He is a very ancient force and is often depicted in pure white. When Damballa manifests during possession, he writhes on the ground like a snake and makes hissing and gagging sounds. He is often thought of as the father of the loa and called Papa Damballa. He travels beneath water, where he creates stores of memory. He controls the divine waters of heaven. Adherents beseech him for matters of love, knowledge, healing, and wealth.

Sometimes he may be depicted as the Catholic Saint Patrick, with flowing white hair and beard, and, of course, the writhing serpents at his feet. He is also sometimes represented as Moses, which is also associated with snakes. His days are Wednesday or Thursday. The Petro Damballa is called Damballa La Flambeau and he is overtly sexual and has a tail of divine fire. Damballa La Flambeau is associated with the Kundalini serpent of Hinduism.

Damballa prefers simple offerings of white or light food and liquids, including rice, eggs, flour, milk, pineapple, white grapes, olive oil or sweet wine.

Damballa's wife is Aida Wedo, sometimes called Aida Ouido. She is a rainbow serpent of the sky and brings love and understanding to her adherents. When she appears during a ceremony, she slithers across the floor wearing a great jeweled headdress, alluring but impossible to catch—just like the pot of gold at the end of the rainbows. Aida Wedo likes eggs painted in rainbow colors. She coils around Damballa in a double helix which symbolizes erotic perfection. Damballa and Aida are the great parents of us all, taking us with them on the great journey of life.

Marassa

Twins are a very important symbol in Vodou. The divine twins are the representation of the sacred male and female forces of the universe. In Haitian Vodou, the divine twins are the Marassa. They represent the very embodiment of the elemental forces of the universe and are often compared to the principle of yin and yang in the eastern religions. Think of them in association with hot and cold, fire and ice, light and dark, sun and moon—all of the most basic dualistic elements of our world. The veve,

or symbolic representation of the Marassa, features three figures. This stands for the essential mystery of the duality—harmony, balance and unity.

The Marassa are not loa. Instead they are the forces which underlie and precede all of creation. They are often characterized as children, one male and one female, despite the fact that they are the most ancient of all the deities. The Marassa are offered toys and candy, often in special double-sided bowls, and they bring happiness, joy and balance to their petitioners.

Gran Bois

This loa of the forest is sometimes referred to as Ganga Bois. He lives in the land of the recently dead and his fingers and toes are comprised of roots. He sinks these roots into the earth to find nourishment—and wisdom. In New Orleans Vodou, he represents the forces of nature. Because of this, he knows all the secrets of botanicals and herbs and nature and he is the controller of all herbal medicines. Gran Bois speaks in rhymes.

Ayizan

The loa of initiation is Ayizan, and she is the loa who purifies the initiate as well. She is also the loa of public spaces and the marketplace. It is important to realize that the ancient African Yoruba tradition refers to earth as the “marketplace.” Offer her crab and palm fronds and peach nectar and perhaps she will help you with love and success, or divining the mysteries of the universe. She has been syncretized with the Catholic Saint Clare.

La Sirene

She is a loa, often seen as a mermaid, who represents the sea and is sometimes considered an aspect of Erzulie. She can also be considered an aspect of the loa **La Baleen**, the goddess of the whales. Similar to the sirens of Greek mythology, her beautiful songs lead followers to distraction—or marriage. She is known to grant gifts of extreme wealth. La Sirene is especially honored in New Orleans Vodou and when petitioned in that city, she is offered shrimp and seaweed and seawater. In return, she blesses her followers with gifts of music and song, as befits the temptress who tempts with her beautiful tunes.

Loko

Also known as Papa Loco, he is Ayizan's husband. He is the guardian of the hounfour. Because he is Ayizan's husband, he also signifies the support of the community. In the loa hierarchy, he is almost as important as Papa Legba. It is thought that his help is needed to make any ritual successful. His colors are red and white, which correspond to the male and female fluids of semen and menstrual blood. Together with Ayizan, he forms a divine union. As a pair, they guide the community. Loko is adept at diagnosing illnesses and prescribing herbal medicines.

Ogou

Ogou (also sometimes Ogoun) is an important loa in Haitian Vodou and also an Orisha in Santeria. In Haitian lore, he is believed to have been the patron spirit of Toussaint Louverture, a famous leader of the Haitian revolution. Because of this, Ogou is awarded a revered place in the Vodou loa.

Ogou presides over war, politics, hunting, fire and iron. He will not tolerate injustice of any kind. In Haitian Vodou, Ogou is a soldier integral to the country's independence, as befits his patronage of Louverture. He is becoming increasingly popular. In his aspect of Ogou La Flambeau he carries a flaming machete that makes quick work of bullets. Ogou is a very fierce loa who fights everyone. He is only summoned in times of extreme crisis.

Spirit Marriage

Vodou is unique in that it has a special provision for those adherents who wish to enhance their relationship with the divine—the spirit marriage. This is considered one of the most important practices in Vodou. The individual never chooses a spirit marriage for themselves. Instead, they are chosen for the marriage by the will of the loa. This is indicated through possession, dreams, or sometimes calamities such as illness or financial hardship.

It can also occur during a Vodou ceremony. As the loa give advice and blessings and instruction, they also ask for something in return—and sometimes this includes marriage. Erzulie is often known to propose to several men at once, and Ogou is also notorious for this. While it is an honor to be asked in this way, it is also sometimes a strain on the adherent. To understand spirit marriage, it is also necessary to understand the state of traditional marriage in Haiti today. Most Haitians are poor, and for them, a traditional marriage, whether civil or religious, is an unattainable

luxury. Most Haitians live in common-law marriages, called *Plasaj*, and any woman living in this arrangement is commonly referred to as a wife. These are stable, long-term arrangements with economic exchanges agreed upon in advance. In most cases, this takes the form of the man agreeing to work a plot of land and support the woman. In return, she takes care of the house.

Among the Haitian elite, traditional marriages are more the norm. They are considered to be more prestigious than the common-law marriages. Interestingly, they are not always the most long-lasting or successful unions. The Haitian man who can afford it is free to take on as many wives or women as he wants. Polygamy is accepted in Haiti, and it is a mark of economic status. Only the wealthiest of Haitians can afford the upkeep of more than one family.

The spirit marriage is an actual ceremony that resembles a Catholic wedding. The ceremony features all the usual trappings of wedding—a cake, a gown, rings, musicians, and a lavish wedding meal. Besides the usual celebratory items, a spirit wedding has other familiar rituals, also. Another adherent will act as a priest to conduct the ceremony and a marriage license if taken out—they are available all over Haiti for a small fee.

But because the wedding is elaborate and complex it is quite expensive, costing as much as a civil or religious ceremony and sometimes taking up several years savings. Because of this, the Vodouisant may ask the loa if he or she can present another offering in its place. Sometimes the loa are okay with this, but not always. If the Vodouisant resists the loa's proposal, they may find their luck turning bad. Or their earthly spouse may suddenly start suffering unexplained negative happenings. In this case, its time to proceed with the wedding.

As the wedding approaches, the spouse-to-be is instructed in all the knowledge he or she will need to know for this special union. The bride or groom must memorize all of the loa's favorite foods, herbs, songs, color, dances, and chants. A room is set up in the hounfour for preparations and the ritual itself. In this space, the loa are honored alongside of God, Jesus and the Virgin and various appropriate saints. The loa's favorite cake is set up, along with other offerings for the loa spouse. Offerings for other loa who may show up at the ceremony are also set out. Ceremonial objects are placed nearby, and the bride or groom dresses in his or her best clothing. The ceremony begins with the invoking of Papa Legba and other loa,

including the loa who are to be married. It is common for the marriage to involve two or three loa, which is thought to be beneficial to balancing the entities of the deities. The ceremony continues with much dancing and drumming and feasting. Throughout all this, the bride or groom lies in seclusion. If the intended loa is pleased with the offerings, he or she agrees to the ceremony by possessing the spouse or another person in the hounfour.

Then the wedding begins, with the priest reciting the Catholic wedding ceremony and the loa and the Vodouisant pledging fidelity to each other and exchanging rings. This is done for each loa to whom the Vodouisant is marrying.

After the marriage, there are certain rituals to which the spouse must adhere. On the day of the week associated with his or her loa, the Vodouisant will abstain from sexual relations with anyone. That time is reserved for visits from the loa. If possible, an entire room will be reserved for the loa. The loa spouses will wear the special colors of the loa, and sometimes wrap their heads in cloth of that color.

The spirit marriage is not only expensive, it is also considered a serious responsibility. It is seen as a sign of devotion and a guarantee of success. It is also considered extremely dangerous to violate the wedding vows, for instance, by having sex on a night reserved for a loa. This can anger the loa, and they may demand penance in return. As already noted, the spirit marriage is an important and integral Vodou rite. One measure of this is the fact that the Creole word for Vodou ritual assistants is hounsi, which literally means wife. The spirit marriage is a way that both Vodouisant and loa can strengthen their bond with the other world. Among the loa most commonly married are Erzulie, Damballa, and Ogou.

Santeria Deities: Orisha

Santeria, also called Regla de Ocha, which means “rule of the divine,” is a variation of Vodou practiced in Cuba and other Caribbean islands. It is also based on religious practices derived from the Yoruba of West Africa. In some ways it is very similar to Vodou. We’ll learn more about Santeria in the section on Vodou today, but for now let’s take a look at some of the Santeria deities. The Santeria call their spirits the Orisha, and there are over 400 of them. The Orisha rule nature and the fate of mankind, just as the loa do in Vodou. The attributes of the Orisha are related to their elemental nature. So, for instance, the Orisha of lightning also rules vengeance and inspiration. The Orisha of the ocean rules motherhood and

femininity, and so forth. The Orisha thus represent ancient archetypal forces.

Olorun

Olorun is the supreme god of the Orisha, although that does not truly describe him. Olorun is the source of all creation, he is the originator of all Ashe. He represents a concept similar to the Brahmin in Hinduism. Olorun is associated with the color white, and rules all that is that color, including clouds, the brain, and bones. He is a god of peace, purity and harmony. He is sometimes known as Olodumare or Olofin and he is represented by the dove. He does not manifest in ritual or possessions, and no sacrifices or offerings are made to him. Although for the sake of convenience we refer to Olorun as “he,” in truth he is gender-neutral.

Eleggua

Eleggua is also commonly known as Eshu. His counterpart in Vodou is Papa Legba, and as such, Eleggua rules the crossroads, his job being to open the communication channels between the visible and invisible worlds. He is known as a trickster god, who shakes things up with his mischievous ways. Even though Eleggua is charged with mediation between humans and all the other Orisha, he speaks in riddles and is difficult to understand. Those who take the time to listen, however, will glean much wisdom, particularly when it comes to learning about humility.

Eleggua’s colors are red and black. He is usually represented on altars with a concrete head. This head would be filled with cowrie-shell eyes filled with ritual herbs and magical items. Sometimes he is represented by a coconut. At times, he is also represented by imagery relating to the Catholic Saint Peter or Saint Anthony.

Ogun

Ogun is an ancient Orisha and, along with Eleggua and Ochosi, forms the trinity of the Warriors. The Warriors are usually referred to as brothers and often travel together, opening a path and guiding adherents down the correct road. Ogun is the ashe of iron and the patron saint of blacksmiths. He is the god of war, energy and metal and these attributes combine to make him the deity who keeps things in motion. Ogun wields his knife to clear a path for humans, and he represents the tools that shape man and bring out a person’s potential. He is the master of secrets, skills, crafts, professions and creations.

Ogun spends a lot of time alone in the forest, but he is not a hermit or a lonely god. Instead, he is simply devoted to focusing his attention to his craft. Other abodes of Ogun's, besides the forest, are the hospital, the railroad tracks, gun racks and the internet! Because of this he is also the patron saint of healers, the military, police officers, firefighters, engineers, auto mechanics, and computer scientists and technicians. His colors are green and black. There is a tradition of offering Ogun a kind of rum called chamba, which is infused with hot peppers and gunpowder. Clearly, this rum is not for the faint of heart—and it is often used as a true test of possession, because only a person possessed by Ogun could handle such a potent brew.

Ogun's colors are green and black, and his altar is always required to have at least two pieces of metal placed on it. An altar dedicated to Ogun will also usually have tools, knives, chains, or other weapons placed on it.

Ochosi

Ochosi is the third Orisha of the trinity of the Warriors, and he is the deity of the hunt, jails, and spiritual direction. He has a reputation as a hunter and provider who often saves communities from starvation because of his skills. Because of this, a favorite chant for Ochosi is, "Ochosi makes the hunger run." Even though Ochosi is often offered smoked fish, possum, venison and herbs, he is said to be a finicky eater. When Ochosi possesses an initiate during a ceremony, they mimic his hunting activities, stalking, aiming and shooting arrows.

Because Ochosi rules justice and the jails, his followers may create a jail cell for his shrine, along with a prayer asking that he come to live in their house so that they do not have to go live in his! His altars will be decorated with things that reflect his passions, such as animal skins and antlers. Those initiated to Ochosi may wear necklaces of blue and yellow beads and are said to be hospitable, quick and fond of change.

Yemaya

She is the mother of the ocean, the sea goddess. She is often depicted as a mermaid and besides the ocean, she is associated with the moon and feminine mysteries. Yemaya rules domestic affairs of women and children, and as such, she is evoked for matters childbirth, conception, love, and healing. Yemaya is usually depicted as a vibrant, beautiful goddess, radiant with love.

Yemaya's symbol is the cowrie shell. Offerings to her may include watermelon, cantaloupe, molasses candy, gin, or sugarcane syrup. She is also known to appreciate any items from the sea, such as seawater or seashells. Yemaya is associated with all kinds of sea imagery, such as fish, dolphins, shells, or sea glass. Her shrines feature lace or satin, and, because her number is seven, shells or coins presented in sevens.

Oshun

One of the most popular Orisha, she is the goddess of the waterfalls. She represents love, gold, fertility, and marriage, as she was one of the wives of the god Chango. Oshun emanates sexuality and beauty, and is a master of sensual dance.

Oshun is syncretized with the patron saint of Cuba, Our Lady of Charity, or La Virge de la Caridad del Cobre. Her color is yellow, and as such, she adores yellow flowers, amber, honey, oranges, pumpkin and sweet drinks. Her number is five, and so it is important to remember to give offerings in multiples of that number.

One story about Oshun tells how she had to become a prostitute to support her children. However, this angered the other Orisha terribly, and they removed the children from her care. Oshun grieved her missing children so

much that she nearly went insane, and she wore the same white dress every day, so that it eventually turned yellow. However, one day she decided to wash her dress by the river side and another Orisha, Aje-Shaluga, the lord of the river, fell in love with her. He gave her money and gems from the river bed. Most importantly, he married her and she was able to retrieve her children.

Oshun is summoned to ceremonies with a brass bell, and you can hear her coming because she always wears five bracelets. Because of her love of yellow and gold, adherents often sprinkle their altars to her with glitter—she loves the gold sparkles. Other offerings may include mirrors , fans, jewelry, perfume and make-up.

There are many other members of the Orisha and the loa. The pantheon in each religion is rich and complex, with each deity having specific attributes, aspects, personalities and stories told about them. The great thing about the Vodou and Santeria system of gods is that they become living, breathing creatures to adherents, as real as all the humans who populate their worlds. This make the religions very concrete and practical, and very

focused on creating good on a day to day basis.

As you can see from this brief introduction to Vodou and its gods, the faith is a deep and complex religion. We'll delve further into the beliefs and practices as they have developed in different regions, but first we'll take a look at Vodou history, in order to get a complete picture of how the religion began.

Vodou History

African Roots

Over 6,000 years ago, Vodou originated in the African kingdoms of Fon and Kongo, where the contemporary country of African country of Benin is now located. Many anthropologists call Benin the "cradle of Vodou." The Fon and Kong languages gave us many of the words used in Vodou today, such as mambo (for a female priest) which is a combination of the Fon word for "mother" and the Kongo word for "healer."

Vodou changed and grew from its West African roots as the slave trade developed. This first started in 1510, with slaves being taken from the West coasts of Africa. Many were taken from Africa and brought to the Caribbean islands to work on plantations and be Christianized by the Spanish and French. Part of the way in which the masters justified the slave trade was by deciding that these African tribespeople were sub-human, and incapable of complex thought about spirituality. The Spanish masters considered their slaves to be savages.

For the slaves, however, their Vodou religion was a lifeline to hope and solace and inner freedom. Through the ancient rituals and ceremonies, they maintained some small part of their identities as West African tribespeople.

Two of the main areas from which slaves were taken were Nigeria and Dahomey. In 1729, the Dahomey people conquered their neighbors the Ewes and then went on to sell many of the Ewes into slavery. At the same time, many Dahomey were subjugated and taken for slaves. Many of the new slaves included priests from the old African religions. After a short time in the new lands, these priests had established hounfours and large followings as they conducted their rituals and ceremonies. This was despite the fact that the French and Spanish captors strongly discouraged and opposed the practice of Vodou.

Syncretism in the Caribbean

The new world that Christopher Columbus discovered in 1492 was an island he named Hispaniola, meaning “Little Spain,” and it is the location of current-day Haiti and the Dominican Republic. The island was a rich source of indigo (for dyes), coffee, and sugar, and colonists soon followed in the path of Columbus and moved in, establishing large and profitable plantations. They needed man power to work these plantations, and soon the African slave trade was born.

Over the next two centuries, slaves were imported to the Caribbean island in large numbers. With them came their Vodou religion, though of course they were strictly forbidden from practicing this “pagan” belief system in the new world.

Some scholars have speculated that the African slaves took on the trappings of the Catholic religion in order to hide their own continuing practice of Vodou. This process of disguising their own worship of the Loa with the veneration of saints is called syncretism, or the process of reconciling contradictory beliefs. The religion that resulted in Haiti is a rich and complex stew of influences from Africa, Catholicism, Haitian history, and even the indigenous Taino Indians.

The African slaves realized the similarities between their Vodou religion and the Catholic religion their captors insisted they practice. The Catholics prayed to saints to intercede to a higher God on their behalf. This was very similar to the way the adherents of Vodou pray to the Loa to intercede with Bondye. The Africans also had a great affinity for the elaborate costumes and rites of the Catholic Church. We will learn more about how the process of syncretism affected Haitian Vodou in a future section.

Vodou also figures very strongly in the political history of Haiti. The country was a French colony named Saint-Dominique until 1791, when slaves rose up and revolted, the most successful slave revolution in the Western hemisphere. This revolution resulted in Haiti becoming a free country—the first free, black republic ever. Many people attribute the revolution to a Vodou service conducted in August 1791 by Dutty Boukman. He was a houngan who performed the ceremony at Bois Caiman prophesizing that certain Haitians would lead a revolt. When the revolt actually began, Boukman was beheaded by French authorities. His head was paraded through the streets in an attempt to discredit him and dispel a strong aura of invincibility that Boukman had emanated. However, this attempt failed, the revolution continued, and Boukman has passed into the

pantheon of the loa.

Recent political history has been harsh on the country and harsh, too, on its religious freedom and Vodou. Even with its history of revolt, the people of Haiti have suffered many constraints on their freedom. Laws were passed in 1835 which made Vodou ceremonies illegal. These laws stayed on the books for over 150 years. Then the U.S. occupied the country, from 1915 until 1934. When Papa Doc Duvalier came to power in 1957, a reign of terror began that would last for 30 years. The *President For Life*, as he called himself, and his son, Baby Doc, were responsible for thousands of deaths. Papa Doc suffered a severe heart attack in 1959 and was unconscious for nine hours. Many historians have speculated that the oxygen deprivation he experienced during this time may have affected his sanity, giving him neurological damage that made him paranoid and irrational.

Many feel that Duvalier won the 1957 election by appealing to the hearts and minds of the Haitian lower and middle classes, challenging the mulatto elite who had ruled the country. One of the ways that Duvalier did this was by reviving the traditions of Vodou and taking some of them for himself. After an election which many thought was rigged in his favor, Duvalier used the traditions of Vodou to consolidate his power. He claimed to be a houngan himself. He dressed as the venerated ancestor loa Baron Samedi, wearing sunglasses and talking in the nasal tones associated with the loa. His propaganda intimated that Papa Doc was one with the loas, Jesus, and God. One image from the time shows Jesus standing with his hand on Duvalier's shoulder, and the quotation, "I have chosen him."

Upon Duvalier's death, his son, Jean-Claude Duvalier, assumed power and ruled until there was a popular uprising against him in 1986. Duvalier was 19 at the age he gained power and wasn't much interested in it, preferring instead his life as a playboy, and he squandered much of the political goodwill his father had built with everyday Haitians. Despite the Duvalier's reputed bonds with the lower classes, they were responsible for the deaths of thousands of people. In the aftermath of their rule, some people blamed the Vodou community for the years of terror. Nearly one hundred hougans and mambos were tortured and killed, and hounfour were burned to the ground. Some houngan were made to renounce their Vodou beliefs and swear an oath to Christianity. Those who didn't were killed. The U.S. intervened in Haiti in the 1990s and again in 2004 after Jean-Bertrand Aristide's fall from power. A United Nations peacekeeping force currently remains in the country.

In the West Indies and other Spanish islands, the religion became known as Santeria. As the diaspora continued, the religion took root in New Orleans, where it was still called Vodou. In 1809, many of the Haitians who had migrated to Cuba were forced to leave and they moved to New Orleans. This caused a huge revitalization of Vodou in New Orleans.

New Orleans: Marie Laveau and the Vodou Queens

Vodou was practiced in secret in New Orleans from the time of the arrival of the first slaves in the area. Some theorize that it was introduced in New Orleans in the late 1700s. No matter when it arrived, most scholars agree that After slaves won their freedom in Haiti in 1804, Creole planters left the country with their slaves and settled in New Orleans, where the French-Spanish culture was more familiar to them. The slaves were adherents to Vodou, with a superficial layer of Catholicism, as we have seen, and they continued avidly practicing upon their immigration to New Orleans. Between 1805 and 1810, more than 10,000 refugees from the Caribbean arrived in the city.

History records the earliest reference to a Vodou priestess practicing in New Orleans as occurring in 1822. This was Sanite Dede, a mixed-race free woman who operated a Vodou temple, and a story about a ceremony there was published in the magazine called *Century*. The story was relayed by a teenage boy who went to Sanite Dede's temple with one of his household slaves and witnessed a Vodou ceremony of music and dancing.

One of the most famous historical figures of New Orleans Vodou was Marie Laveau. She has been called the Vodou Queen, in lore and in history, and anyone who grew up in or has lived in New Orleans is well aware of her legendary status. Although few real facts are known about her, she has become a nearly mythological figure due to her inclusion in several books of contemporary fiction. These include *American Gods* by Neil Gaiman, *Zorro* by Isabel Allende, and *Vodou Dreams: A Novel of Marie Laveau* by Jewel Parker Rhodes.

Laveau was born to a white planter mother and Creole mother in 1794, although this date is often contested. She married another Creole in 1819. Because of the long-standing oral traditions of Vodou, little is known for certain about Marie Laveau. However, she became a legend in New Orleans through her mixture of the occult, Roman Catholic religion, and the influence of Vodou. She had many wealthy patrons, and legend has it that she was asked to foretell the future for none other than Queen Victoria. Her snake, named Zombi, was highly venomous, favored watermelon and

was 20 feet long! It's no wonder that Laveau was reputed to have strong magical powers. She is said to have healed the sick, saved a condemned man from the gallows, walked on water, resurrected herself from a drowning—all while remaining youthful beyond her years. Laveau had a mind for business and promotion and she used it to promote Vodou and herself. She also tended to the sick and infirm. For quite some time she was considered the most powerful woman in the city.

Her death was announced by the New Orleans papers in 1881, and she was eulogized as a paragon of virtue, despite persistent rumors of her organizing orgies for white society men and mulatto women. However, even after her reputed death, Marie Laveau sightings continued, perhaps because one of her daughters took over her mother's role and was said to be nearly an exact replica of her—without the humanitarian streak.

Today, her legend continues, with the vaults in the New Orleans cemetery that bear her name (it is unclear if she is actually buried there) a favorite destination of tourists and residents alike. As a matter of fact, Marie Laveau's grave gets more visitors than any other grave in America, except for Elvis Presley. To this day, people continue to insist they see Marie around the city. And, the tradition of powerful Vodou Queens continues to this day in New Orleans, even as the city struggles to recover from the effects of Hurricane Katrina. Some of the most powerful contemporary Vodou Queens are Sallie Ann Glassman, one of the few white Vodou Queens, Queen Bianca, Ava Kay Jones, and Chief Sharon Caulder.

Vodou, Hoodoo and Slave Culture

In the southern United States, various forms of Vodou became associated with Christian mysticism among African American slaves. In some parts of the southeast, such as the Mississippi delta and the Georgia Sea Islands, Vodou took hold in a nearly intact manner. But in other parts, the folk mythology of Hoodoo took hold.

Hoodoo originated as an indigenous African folk magic based on botanical information, religion and folk knowledge. This magical tradition was imported to the United States with the enslavement and transport of Africans. The word hoodoo can also be used to describe a magic spell or the practitioner of the magic spell. A word which may be familiar to some is mojo, which means a hoodoo amulet. Practitioners may carry a mojo bag full of herbs and coins and roots and other magical items. Other terms which may be used to describe hoodoo are conjure or conjuration, rootwork, or tricking. In some parts of the country, notably the eastern

seaboard, African-American communities refer to Hoodoo as witchcraft. Hoodoo is a well-established magical and faith tradition in the American southeast, and, like Vodou, it is an oral practice. Knowledge is passed from person to person, priest to adherent. In Africa, Hoodoo knowledge was passed through family bloodlines, in a structured hierarchy with priests only belonging to certain families. Practitioners of Hoodoo are sometimes called rootworkers, root doctors, or two-headed men or women. The latter term comes because the Hoodoo practitioner is said to have a foot in each world—that of the visible and that of the invisible.

Hoodoo incorporates botanical folklore for a variety of cures, and practitioners of Hoodoo are also involved in divination. The most likely form of the Hoodoo practice of divination is Gypsy fortune telling, which utilizes a standard playing card deck in much the same way as a deck of Tarot cards. In rural areas, a very old form of Hoodoo divination called “casting the bones” is used, generally utilizing chicken or possum bones. In some urban areas, Hoodoo practitioners may also use the Tarot, astrology, or tea leaves for divination.

There are many similarities between Hoodoo and Vodou, which may account for some of the confusion that arises between the two. Those who practice Hoodoo seek control over their daily lives. Believers ask supernatural powers for assistance in their day to day concerns. Like Vodou, animal parts and botanicals may be used in rituals. Hoodoo practitioners also utilize blood, semen, and bodily fluids from women’s menstrual cycles. Contact with ancestors and the dead is also an important part of Hoodoo ritual.

However, there are also big differences in Hoodoo and Vodou. The latter is an established religious practice, but Hoodoo is not. As a matter of fact, the practices of Hoodoo can be adapted to fit into any religious practice. Today, most African-Americans practice a Christian faith, but some incorporate Hoodoo into their daily lives.

Who Practices Vodou and Where?

Overall, it is estimated that over 60 million people practice Vodou worldwide. It has many followers in Africa. Most adults in Haiti practice Vodou, and it is also very common in New Orleans, where one pre-Katrina estimate put the number of adherents at 15% of all adults. (This statistic was cited by Vodou high priestess and could not be verified elsewhere, so take it with a grain of salt.) It is also common in most large cities in North America, especially where Haitian refugees have settled. Let's take a look at the different areas where Vodou is prevalent, and discuss the ways the religion has changed in each culture.

African Vodou

It is estimated that over 30 million people practice Vodou in the countries of Togo, Ghana, and Benin. In Togo, Vodou has about two and a half million followers, with another million practicing the faith among the Ewe in Ghana. In Benin, in the region where Vodou got its start more than 6,000 years ago, more than 3 million people practice Vodou. This is about 60% of the population. Despite the years of repression, when a democratic government was installed in 1989, Vodou could be openly and freely practiced. It was declared the official religion of Benin in 1996. Also, about 15% of the occupants of Benin who call themselves Christian also practice Vodou. (As we learned in the section on history, Vodou is a syncretic religion.)

We have learned that Vodou began in Africa and morphed and changed as it moved to Haiti and the United States. Since Africa is the continent where Vodou began, it is useful to look at how Vodou is practiced there today, because from this we can study the commonalities of Vodou throughout the world. . Vodou shares several traits in common with other African religion, including the worship of multiple gods, ancestor veneration, and the centrality of music and dance to ceremony and ritual. These remain important to the practice of Vodou in African and other countries today. Other aspects of Vodou that remain much the same no matter where it is practiced include the use of amulets or magical objects in ritual, the use of fetishes which are meant to contain the spirit of the Loa within, animal sacrifices to the gods, divination through such means as casting the bones or other physical objects, and the way that certain foods, colors, and other likes and dislikes are attributed to specific Loa.

The casual observer watching a Vodou ceremony in Africa may well think that is simply a celebration of some sort. Vodou ritual and ceremony is centered around music, dancing and singing with great exuberance and intensity. Creativity is an unusually important part of African Vodou, with everyday objects such as bottles raised to sacred status and used in ritual by decoration with animal parts, coins, paint, and string.

A devout Vodou follower in Africa can enter a religious center much like the western world's monasteries and convents. There, the initiates learn the foods, colors, rituals, and objects associated with each Loa. Often, initiates enter a three-day period of seclusion in order to "die" and be returned to the world anew.

Haitian Vodou

One of the common sayings you'll run into about Haiti is that it is 80% Roman Catholic, 20% Protestant, and 100% Vodou. In other words, it is common for Vodou to be practiced alongside Christianity, and this is done by about four million people. Vodou in Haiti is a syncretic religion anyway, due to the changes it went through as African slaves landed on the island and melded some of their own beliefs with the Catholicism of their captors.

Because Africans imported to Haiti were forbidden to practice Vodou and forced to adopt Catholicism, contemporary Vodou in Haiti varies in some significant ways from the way Vodou is practiced today in Africa.

First of all, Haitian Vodou often utilized names of saints for the loa. In many cases, the role of the saint and the loa also correspond. For example, in Catholicism, Saint Peter is the familiar gatekeeper of heaven. In Haitian Vodou, Papa Legba is the gatekeeper to the spirit world and this loa corresponds directly to Saint Peter. Along the same lines, the holidays of the two religions have also been melded. The Vodou festival called Gedes celebrates the souls of dead ancestors and in Haiti this takes place on All Saints Day, November 1st. Even symbols have taken on similar meanings. The crossroads is an important symbol for Vodou adherents, as it signifies profound life choices and changes. It can also signify taking steps on the spiritual Vodou path. This equates to the Christian cross.

Still, despite these syncretic differences, Haitian Vodou still remains very similar to African Vodou. As in Africa, priests and priestesses are called houngan and mambo, and they may apprentice with Vodou leaders to hone their powers. They will celebrate their rituals at hounfours, or temples. The concept of possession is also very important in Haitian Vodou, as it is in African Vodou. Possession is not something to be feared or shy away from. Contrary to the images promoted in pop culture movies such as *The Exorcist*, possession is something that Vodou initiates desire. It is considered a sacred blessing, the way that the spirits communicate with their human counterparts. Possession is the way the loa speak to the world, and the loa's knowledge is vast and infinite.

To be possessed indicates you have been chosen by the loa, usually because you are about to face an important life challenge. The person being possessed is fully inhabited by the loa. Because of this the possessed is sometimes called a horse, and it is said that the horse is being ridden by the spirit. The possessed person may move in ways that are unusual or unnatural for him or her, or he may speak in unfamiliar languages. This phenomenon is similar to the "speaking in tongues" of evangelical Christians.

Vodou is an integral and important part of Haitian culture today, and the religion offers a deeply profound layer to the country's rich culture. Haiti is one of the poorest countries in the world, and the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere. It has the third highest rate of hunger in the world, behind only Somalia and Afghanistan. 76% of the population live below the poverty line, with an average per capita income of \$400 per person. The life expectancy in Haiti is 53 years old. Literacy is estimated at only 48 to 52%. In a country where medical problems such as malaria, AIDS, and limited access to drinkable water are daily challenges, not everyone has time to worry about learning to read.

Yet, despite these grim statistics, a rich and vibrant culture flourishes. Vodou contributes not only a grounding in sacred principles by which to live a life, but art and music and dancing and an engaging oral storytelling tradition to the country.

Santeria in the Caribbean

As mentioned earlier, in other parts of the Caribbean besides Haiti, Vodou is often referred to as Santeria. It is often called “The Way of the Saints” and, like Haitian Vodou, is an Afro-Caribbean syncretic religion that came originally from Nigeria. In Santeria, the spirits are called the Orisha, and they are worshipped through ceremony, dance, ritual and offerings in similar ways to Haitian Vodou. The Orisha are numerous, with some accounts holding the number as high as 401. Like the loa, they have their own colors, their own special days, and special foods and drinks as well. In Santeria, the divine legends of the Orisha are very important. They are called the Patakis and are myths which relate stories of the religion and man’s place in it. These are not to be taken literally, but symbolically. Many of these stories were passed down from slaves who were forbidden to write and thus used the Pataki to share the Santeria religion.

Santeria is one of the most formal of the Vodou strains, and tradition is of utmost importance. There is a huge emphasis on conducting Santeria practices in the proper way. Dance and drumming are an important part of the religion, with each Orisha having certain rhythms and movements associated with them. Drums are said to represent the memory and the soul.

There are several steps to initiation in Santeria, and the first one is much like a traditional baptism. To reach the highest levels of initiation in Santeria, some must study for years.

The final initiation in Santeria is called Asiento, and it can only be given if and when the Orisha say so. This Asiento initiation is a symbolic process of life and rebirth as the child of one of the Orisha, to which the initiate will be devoted for the rest of his life. After this final stage of the initiation process, the adherent is now considered a priest. Interestingly, the Asiento is an expensive process to go through, both in Cuba and in the United States, costing up to \$25,000, which covers materials for the ritual. This financial contribution takes the place of what formerly would have been a domestic residence at an ile, or house. The burden of taking on this financially is considered to be part of the sacrifice which needs to be given in exchange for the gift of power that becoming a priest brings.

While divination is important in all forms of Vodou, it plays a central role in Santeria, with readings being given for any decision of importance. One simple form of divination utilizes coconut shells, and is used for yes or no answers. Cowrie shells are used in groups of sixteen to foretell the future.

Sometimes this is called throwing the shells. The underlying theme of divination is that each person has a sacred path on which to walk, and deviating from this path is what causes upsets and trouble. If such is found to have been the case, a sacrifice of some sort may be in order to rectify the situation and get the person back on the correct path.

Santeria is widely practiced in Cuba, despite the country being officially an atheist state. After the Cuban revolution in 1959, adherents of Santeria were persecuted until about the mid 1980s. Tolerance for religion of all kinds seems to be becoming more common in Cuba recently.

Santeria has hit some rough patches in the United States, also, in one instance a controversy ending up in the Supreme Court. This involved a case of animal sacrifice in Hialeah, Florida. The city passed an ordinance preventing animal sacrifices by the Santeria believers living there. However, the Supreme Court eventually ruled that animal sacrifice in connection with Santeria was legal.

Vodou in Trinidad and the West Indies

Vodou on the island of Trinidad, and on other West Indies islands, has taken on a slightly different form. This is because the slaves that were brought here were from a variety of different countries and tribes, including Mandingo, Fulbe, Kwakwa, Igbo and others. The religion was officially banished here, too. However, it flourished today and is often called Shango, for the lord of drumming, thunder, and fire. The pantheon of spirits here is similar to those of Santeria, but there are also a few that are unique to Shango. Ancestor spirits are also very important here. Interestingly, Shango seems to be among the most syncretic of all the Vodou religions, with elements of Hinduism, Kabbalah, and other traditions mixed in.

In Jamaica, Belize, and the West Indies, there is an African-derived belief system called Obeah. In its reliance on botanicals and herbs, and the fact that much of Obeah is practiced by individuals, it is very similar to Hoodoo. Honoring ancestors, divination, and healing are all very much a part of this tradition. After the religion was officially outlawed in Jamaica in 1760, its practitioners turned increasingly to the darker side of sorcery and hexing. However, in recent years, this has changed, with Obeah practitioners making an effort to turn the religion in a more positive direction. One very important part of Obeah is Myal dance, which originally came from West Africa. Obeah rituals are called Myalism. In the West Indies, zombies are called duppies and they are frightening creatures

called from the dead to do the bidding of the conjurer. Bob Marley sang about the duppy, and in Jamaica, children are urged to eat their vegetables—or the duppy will come get them!

Vodou in Brazil

In Brazil, Vodou takes the form of Candomble, which has its roots in the Orisha tradition. Other important strains of the religion are Spiritism and Umbanda. The word Candomble has many connotations. It refers to the religion, a community, a space, and a dance. The religion was first noted in 1807 in Bahia, Brazil and it is strongly linked to Africa, with practitioners returning to that continent in the 1830s to gain more knowledge. Candomble uses words, dance and music.

Spiritism is hugely popular in Brazil, with over a million and a half adherents in Brazil, and it has had a big influence on many of the religions of the African Diaspora. Spiritism was revealed through a spirit named Allan Kardec. He in turn, was revealed through the French spiritualist Hippolyte Leon Denizard Rivail. This is a religion which believes in spirits and reincarnation. It respects all other religions and is complementary to the teachings of Jesus.

Umbanda is a religion which started in Brazil and incorporates many aspects of other religions, including Buddhist and Hindu ideas.

New Orleans Voodoo

New Orleans Voodoo continues to flourish today and it is far from being just a tourist attraction, as many believe. (Note: while the preferred spelling of the name of the religion is Vodou in other areas, in New Orleans it is still spelled Voodoo.) It has strong elements of Haitian Vodou and Hoodoo mixed in with it. In New Orleans, the dead are felt very strongly. The spirits of the ancestors can be sensed throughout the city and New Orleans is justly famous for its cemeteries. Voodoo practitioners visit them often, leaving offerings of food, flowers, and praise.

There is a strong strain of Hoodoo in New Orleans Voodoo, and both become merged and melded with an overlay of Christianity in the city. Just as in Haiti, prayers are said to Catholic saints. In New Orleans, the bible is used for divination, in a process called bibliomancy. The psalms are often used in rituals and as magical chants! Lilith Dorsey, in her book titled, *Vodou and Afro-Caribbean Paganism*, relates how stunned she was the first time a participant in a ritual became possessed by Jesus. Later, one of the houngan related that this not only happens often, but sometimes

it is hard to get Jesus to leave. Seems he likes to hang around and give sermons.

Divination is an important part of New Orleans Voodoo. Priests use tools such as tarot decks, astrology, palmistry and geomancy to foretell the future. It's not just a once in awhile event, either—readings are regularly scheduled to deal with every aspect of life. There are a couple of tarot decks that have sprung directly from the Vodou life in New Orleans, and they are used not only for telling the future, but also for meditation. One favorite is the *New Orleans Voodoo Tarot*, co-designed by Priest Louis Martinie of the Voodoo Spiritual Temple. The other author is Sallie Ann Glassman. And of course, New Orleans wouldn't be the city it is without its music. Blues, jazz, and zydeco all have associations with Voodoo, and blues songs in particular often mention hoodoo in their lyrics. Music aficionados are familiar with the story of the legendary musician Robert Johnson, who many consider to be the greatest blues guitarist ever. It was rumored that Johnson sold his soul to the devil at the crossroads at midnight in order to attain this status. He had been a mediocre musician at best when he took a break from playing the blues in the early 1930s. When he returned, however, the man could suddenly play. Rumors abounded that he had sold his soul to the devil. What is far more likely is that Johnson made an offering to one of the loa at the crossroads at midnight, perhaps Papa Legba. Johnson sang about Hoodoo foot-powder and mojo in his songs, and the crossroads are an important Hoodoo and Voodoo image.

Vodou in the United States

Besides Hoodoo in the southeast, which is still practiced in the old ways, and the rich stew of Voodoo and Hoodoo that thrives in New Orleans, there are many communities where Vodou is practiced in the United States. Haitian Vodou grew significantly in the United States during the 1960s and 1970s, as many Haitians fled the despotic Duvalier regime. It took root in many major American cities, particularly Miami, Chicago, New York City, and others.

Not only Vodou, but Santeria is flourishing in the United States, with the size of many iles increasing and the influence of the religion reaching the mainstream over the last few years.

Vodou Art

All the African-derived religions have a strong history of taking everyday objects and making them into offerings or vehicles of praise for their various deities and spirits. While believers take the utmost of care in preparing these items for ceremonial use, or for everyday worship at altars and shrines, most initiates would not consider themselves to be creating art. However, the art world has recently discovered the beauty and exuberance of much Vodou art, and a new generation of Vodouisants have begun to consciously create sacred art.

Let's begin by taking a look at some of the symbolism that underlies Vodou art.

Symbolism

Vodou is a religion based on ancient traditions and has many rich symbolic associations. Each loa has unique attributes and likes and dislikes, as we have seen, but besides these, there are a few symbolic themes that are important to all of the Vodou tradition. Vodou is a deep, complex tradition with much rich symbolism and imagery. It would be impossible to detail all of it in one report. Besides, much Vodou lore and belief remains secret to the uninitiated.

Twins

Twins are considered sacred in Vodou. They are thought to have two halves of the same soul. If one twin dies, it is common for the remaining twin to carry a twin doll as a receptacle for the missing half of the soul. Some strains of Vodou consider twins to be so powerful that special ceremonies are held to the loa Dossou so that the twins will only use their power for good.

The Divine twins, the Marassa, are popular and important loa which symbolize the balance of male and female forces in the universe (see more about the Marassa in the section on the pantheon of the loa).

Crossroads

The crossroad, or Carrefour, are very important symbols in Vodou and are seen repeatedly. Papa Legba stands at the crossroad. They are considered to be the path between the realms, a gateway between the visible and invisible worlds. Since much of Vodou ritual is about uniting the visible and invisible worlds, you can see why the symbolism of the crossroads is so important. They also represent life-changing choices and steps on the spiritual Vodou path.

Catholic Symbols

Because Vodou is a syncretic religion, as we have seen manifest in a number of different ways, common symbols in the faith are derived from the Catholic Church. Many loa are often represented in the familiar imagery of the Catholic saints, and some of the saints preferred symbols have also been translated to Vodou. Symbols from the Masons, including the ubiquitous eye, are also common.

Art

Now that we've looked at some common Vodou symbols, let's move onto Vodou art as a whole. Sacred Vodou art has become highly sought-after in the art world, and it is easy to see why. While Haitians are not wealthy, they have always been a people concerned with aesthetics, and even every day objects are made beautiful with their hands. People use whatever they have on hand to create amazing creations. Just as Vodou and Santeria has syncretized various religious traditions, so too has their art.

Drapo

Drapo are ritual flags which are used in Vodou ceremonies. They are used to summon the energies of specific loa and parading about the ceremony area at the start of the ritual. Often made of satin or velvet, they are sometimes adorned with beads and appliqué and are nearly always adorned with sequins. Because of this, they are sometimes called sequin flags. The drapo are intricate, colorful and beautiful and they have become sought-after items in the art world.

Each drapo is dedicated to a specific loa, and utilizes that loa's colors and symbols. The drapo are rich visual examples of the synthesis of various cultures and religious traditions, with their contrasting symbolism and artistic techniques. Juxtaposing all manner of ideas and images, the result is a startlingly original art ritual art form.

The drapo are sometimes called the "poor man's stained glass." They usually measure around three feet square and on this surface there can be up to 20,000 sequins. Sometimes they will have fringe around the edges. Each one is sewn by hand by Vodou initiates, and with every stitch on the drapo, a prayer to the loa is said. Creating a drapo takes skill and patience and discipline, and their creation is another example of the partnership between the individual and the loa.

Veve

A veve is a special design that is associated with each loa. These designs are

“calls,” or spiritual channels, to the loa they belong to, and they serve as a gateway between the worlds to all who come into contact with them. There is also a connotation of astral travel about the veve; the astral path travels between the world of the human and the world of the divine.

Although veves are commonly reproduced on drapo and other magical objects, for ceremonies, the design is usually created on the ground with some sort of powder substance, such as cornmeal, flour, rice powder, coffee, or red brick dust. Even gun powder or bark can be used. For the student of comparative religion, it is interesting to note that the veve bears quite a resemblance to the Hindu practice of drawing kolams, which are symbols of Hindu deities drawn in rice flour.

The veve is drawn simultaneously with two hands. This is symbolic of reaching equally into the two worlds of the visible and invisible. It is considered an essential skill to be learned by the Vodou initiate, and the more detailed and correct the veve is, the more power it will have to draw the loa. The veves are quite beautiful and they have been called both “primal and divine.”

During a Vodou ceremony, participants dance in their bare feet over the veves. As they do so, they are absorbing the ashe of the veve into their feet. It then passes through their body and into their souls. After the ceremony is over, the veve is cleaned and deposited

Fetishes and Magical Items

One very important aspect of Haitian Vodou is the use of clothing, objects and medicine bags. Magical items, fetishes, and charms are used to attract the loa, who are pleased by these tributes. These objects are decorated with bright colors and shiny beads or sequins to pay respect to the loa. Medicine bags are sometimes called Paket Congo, or Congo packets and are filled with herbs or other botanicals which will be used in healing, for calling in love, wealth, or for many other purposes. These are often decorated with sequins and feathers. Drums, bells, and rattles may be used to call forth the loa in ritual. Creativity is at the core of Vodou, and many of these devotional objects are now being made by Haitian artists, as we have seen already. They may depict specific loa in their art or create elaborate objects for use in rituals.

Some of the common magical items used in ceremony include calabashes, which may be painted with the loa's symbol and are used for food offerings; sequin-decorated bottles to honor the low; libation bottles, and dolls. Rattles are often used in ceremonies and rituals, including the sacred asson, which is a gourd rattle covered with beads and bones. The asson is used throughout the ceremony in various ways, and is one of the magical items which can only be used by the houngan or mambo. Each loa also has special magical items associated with him or her such as Legba's cane or Ogou's machete.

Sacred Practices

Altars and Shrines

Altars and shrines are an integral part of the Vodou tradition. They can be private or public altars. Public altars will be used in ceremony and ritual. Private altars are sacred spaces through which the individual can pray, or find a gateway to the invisible worlds that exist within. The difference between an altar and a shrine can be seen thusly: a shrine is a permanent tribute to a loa, while an altar is temporary and created for a specific magical result.

In Haiti, altars can take the form of the kay myste, which is from a French term meaning "house of mysteries." The kay myste are separate buildings, like small, special houses, which are created as a place to house the spirits sacred to the altar's builder. Like much Haitian art, the kay myste are created with an eye to aesthetics and are generally quite beautiful.

Altars, both public and private, are decorated with many kinds of objects. Most often these are images of the loa and Orisha and offerings to them. The overall effect the various elements on the altars create has been called "dense opulence." Fabrics such as lace or velvet, flowers, food, bottles or pots decorated with sequins and paint, streamers, flags and ribbons are only some of the items which may be used to create an altar. This rich mixture of objects and symbolism, so representative to the religion itself, becomes a place where the deities interact with Vodouisants, a point of contact between the spirit and human worlds.

It is also interesting to note that the Vodouisant makes liberal use of manufactured items and things others might consider less than sacred. But Vodou is not only a syncretic religion, it is a practical one, with the loa tending toward considerably earthly tastes. To the Vodou adherent, a rose may hold the same meaning as a bottle of perfume, and just because one is natural and one is man-made that doesn't make it better. Sometimes objects as mundane as a soda bottle or other pieces of "trash" will be used.

Other popular choices are rocks, feathers, and other items found in nature. There may also be portraits of Catholic saints done in that religion's traditional style. Along these same lines, an altar can be as simple as one or two objects set out in a specific place, or as elaborate as one of the key mystes, or rooms.

Altars and shrines are incredibly important when you consider that a great deal of time is spent praying, doing rituals, and giving offerings. There are usually daily prayers and offerings as well as weekly tributes and also periodic obligations to the hounfour. The shrines must be cleaned and maintained regularly, and altars created according to the needs of the individual at any given time. The non-initiate may be interested to learn that a Vodouisant can have a large number of shrines and altars set up all the time.

It is important to treat all shrines, altars, and every object on them with the utmost in respect. Remember, the items on the altars belong to the loa and are never to be handled except for ceremonial purposes or cleaning. Vodouisants never place their own food or drink nearby and expect visitors to follow the same guidelines.

Shrines of Haitian Vodou tend to be more functional and less decorative than those of Santeria. They are practical and utilitarian.

Santeria Shrines

The shrines of the Santeria are some of the most elaborate, exuberant, and beautiful in the world. As if to prove this, sometimes they are called the thrones of the Orisha. They may incorporate fountains, or use lots of expensive fabric, or contain towering statues. In most private homes, the shrine will be set up in a corner, with yards of opulent fabric draped above, around, and over the shrine. Color is an integral element of all shrines, and the correct one for the Orisha being honored must be used. A shrine may have multiple levels, with the floor level holding food and candles, then a table covered with fabric, and finally, there may be incense burners, more fabric and even balloons hanging from the ceiling.

New Orleans Voodoo Shrines

New Orleans Voodoo is steeped in rituals having to do with honoring the dead, and because of this, many of the shrines in the city concern the veneration of the ancestors. Grave markers are a unique art form in New Orleans. Techniques of collage and mosaic may be used—and within these techniques, any imaginable material may be incorporated. Here, altars and

shrines may be specially dedicated to Marie Laveau. Statues of her may be found on shrines, along with pictures of her tomb, and veves created in tribute to the Voodoo Queen. Another popular item for New Orleans shrines are serpents—tanks of snakes are common on altars all across the city.

Vodou Drumming and Dance

Mesmerizing drumming and dance is an absolutely integral part of any Vodou ceremony. The drumming is used to focus the energy of the people present. It also raises their power. This kind of drumming is not easy to learn, and it takes a great deal of study. There can be as many as 50 different rhythms that need to be learned before a drummer is deemed worthy enough to drum for the loa. Some of the things a drummer needs to consider are the rhythms themselves, interfacing with the mambo or houngan, and working with the hounsis, or assistants and dancers. In the Vodou ceremonies, there is always a strong connection between the drummers and the dancers. Some have said it is almost like there is an astral cord running between the hands of the drummers and the feet of the dancers. During Vodou ceremonies, the drumming and the dancing become sacred.

There are three drums that are played for the rituals. These are the Maman, the Segunda (also called the Seconde), and the Petit, (or Boulah).

The Maman represents Venus and the Moon, the Segunda represents the Sun and Mars, and the Petit represents Mercury. The Maman is the main drum, with the Segunda being the second, and the Petit being the smallest. In Vodou, there are precise and specific rhythms to call each specific loa. Often rhythms will utilize the number three, whether in drum beats or dance steps. This is to call forth the Holy Trinity of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, which was syncretized from Catholicism in the Afro-Caribbean religions. However, there is another meaning, also, and that is Bondye (God), the loa (sons) and the ancestors (holy spirits). Dance is used as a means to get outside the body. Small repetitive movements are used, which can bring about a heightened state or consciousness. As the dancers listen to the drummers calling forth the specific loa, they lose themselves in the rhythms in order that the loa may overtake their bodies.

When the various loa manifest, they do so in ways that are indicative of their personalities and preferences. Erzulie, the goddess of Love, is shy and coquettish and may move in a stylized, uncertain style. Sometimes, too, she manifests as the flirtatious one who only wants to dance with as many men as possible. Or she may come out as a concerned mother, chaperoning her children. Gran Bois, the spirit of nature, dances the way a tree might, with definite, forceful, steps. Ogou, the warrior, also manifests in different ways. He can be the wild young hunter and warrior, dancing and leaping about the hounfour, or he can be as calm and centered as the dignified diplomat.

And then there is Baron, the father of all the dead, the guardian of the cemeteries, the place where the living and dead meet. His role in ceremony is to remind us of the role of sexuality and the physical in our lives. Baron does a randy dance full of pelvic thrusts and explicit movements. There's no question what's on Baron's mind when he dances! This dance is called the Banda, and it is also used at funerals.

Another popular ritual dance is the Yanvalou, which is danced to honor the serpent Damballa. As you might imagine, this dance is performed with undulations and grinds, in a very serpentine manner. Interestingly, there is a movement performed at a certain point in the dance that is said to have been used by slaves as a signal for revolt. This movement appears to be a swift beheading. The Yanvalou is associated with Maman Brigitte, is practiced in three-quarter time and is popular in New Orleans.

Besides calling forth various loa, there are also dances associated with each nanchon, or family lineage. Dance and drumming serve the purpose, in Vodou ceremony, of allowing the participants to move out of their constantly chattering minds and into a connection with the Infinite. In Vodou, this Infinite is seen as the God energy of Bondye, the ultimate God, and at the same time to connect with their innate natural Ashe. The followers of Vodou believe that this is possible because drumming and dancing carries the spirit of healing within.

Magic, Spell Casting and Rituals

The essence of magic and spell casting is that spiritual power is raised over time through offerings, rituals and initiations. This may be done individually (as is usually the case in the hoodoo tradition) or in a group setting, which is what happens in Vodou and Santeria. But, because of the power and intensity of the work, it is not recommended for beginners and most magic is reserved for initiates. There are only a few types of rituals

and spells that will be suitable for the non-initiate, and most Vodouisants would strongly urge those with a genuine interest to seek further instruction with a houngan or mambo.

We'll take a look at some of the rituals that can be done by a beginning solitary practitioner.

Cleansing Baths

Vodou and Santeria have a strong emphasis on cleanliness and calm. They take the old saying, "cleanliness is next to godliness" to heart. The loa Erzulie is especially concerned with these matters. In the Afro-Caribbean religious traditions, the ritual of a cleansing bath is often used, particularly in Santeria, when magical baths are taken for many purposes. Another way to evoke the calming effects of water is to sit quietly for an hour with a glass of water and a lit white candle. Often various herbs or salts or oils will be added to baths, to invoke specific states of mind or effect changes in life. For instance, a bath to create opportunity will utilize coconut water, basil oil, and vanilla extract. For psychic power, combine parsley and sandalwood oil and sage. This is best done at the new moon.

For the greatest effectiveness, baths should be administered by a houngan or a mambo. The way this works is that the priest will identify what the initiate needs or desires in his or her life. The houngan will then allow himself to become possessed by the loa and administer the bath. A bath might be given to heal illness, to eradicate negativity, or to increase luck or opportunity, among many possibilities. Each houngan or mambo will have their own special styles of administering the magical baths. If herbs are involved, it is usually considered best if the person giving the bath gathers them. If the herbs are not available locally, they may be purchased at a Botanica, which is a store that supplies Santeria and Vodou practitioners.

Veve magic

Veve magic is used in conjunction with spells also. In both the Haitian Vodou and the New Orleans Voodoo traditions, spells are always performed by a houngan or mambo, and almost always they are done in response to a specific difficulty or certain situation. Perhaps a loa needs to be honored to redress a wrong, and so forth. A spell might be used to strengthen a connection to a loa, and in this case, a veve will be drawn to facilitate this. The veve can be drawn on paper and carried as a talisman. Someone looking for love may carry the veve for Erzulie with them, for instance. Please bear in mind that the serious seeker should contact a houngan or mambo for specific help.

Candle spells

Many of the spells used in Vodou and Santeria utilize candles to boost their effectiveness. An all-purpose candle is a white seven-day candle, which can be used for many different spells. Usually oils or herbs or other things will be added to the candle in order to personalize the spell to a specific purpose. The candles and other supplies are available at an online or local Botanica.

An example of a simple candle spell used for opening opportunities to success follows: Add a pinch of pipe tobacco, coffee, and a drop of coconut oil to a red seven-day candle. As you light the candle every morning, think about achieving your goals and walking along the road of opportunity. When you extinguish the candle, do so with your fingers, in order to preserve the candle's power. Continue this daily until you feel you have been successful.

Please heed this important reminder when working with candles: do not leave candles unattended. And it is also important to remember that working with candle spells under the guidance of a houngan or mambo is far and away the most effective choice. It also needs to be pointed out that the internet is filled with sites offering magical candle kits, in much the same way as Voodoo dolls (see below) are hawked. These are likely to have little effect, as they are created for mass consumption and Vodou is a very personal religion. Magical and candle spells are far more effective when they are designed with the person's specific problem in mind. Further, through consultation with a houngan or mambo, it might well be found that the problem is slightly different than originally thought, and thus a different spell will be needed.

Gris-gris

Gris-gris bags are herbal bundles creating for magic. Many scholars believe the word has its roots in the West Africa word juju, which means fetish or sacred object. They are worn around the neck or some other part of the body, and are especially popular in the Hoodoo traditions and New Orleans Voodoo. It is said that at one time, every police officer in the city carried a gris-gris bag for protection. Other popular uses of the bags in New Orleans include attracting money and love (the universal desires, it seems!), protection, good health or stopping gossip.

The gris-gris bag is made of flannel or silk, and assembled at an altar which contains the four elements: salt for earth, incense for air, a candle flame for fire and water. Ingredients are never an even number and never more than thirteen. Vodouisants may also place stones which correspond with astrological signs into the gris-gris bag. The bags are meant to be worn for as long as necessary to accomplish the desired result. When this has happened, the bag is disposed of by burying it under a large tree.

Some of the herbs that might be used for specific purposes in the gris-gris would be cinnamon, red rose petals, patchouli, rose quartz and a seashell for love; basic black salt, sesame seed, sandalwood oil, and a cowrie shell for protection, and comfrey, thyme, and basil for traveling.

The famous Voodoo Queen Marie Laveau is rumored to have carried a gris-gris bag containing bone, colored stones, graveyard dust, and salt and pepper. Another legendary Marie Laveau gris-gris contained a dried one-eyed toad, the finger of a black person who had committed suicide, a dried lizard, a cat's eye, bat's wings, an owl's liver and a rooster's heart. All this was wrapped in the shroud of someone who had been dead for nine days.

Gamblers used to carry gris-gris bags holding a lodestone or a magnet, which attracted good luck. When white masters mistreated their slaves, they might be apt to find a gris-gris filled with black pepper, saffron, salt, gunpowder, and pulverized dog manure.

An old expression, "putting a gris-gris on," referred to using one of the bags to bring misfortune to another person. One way to get rid of a person was to fill a gris-gris with gunpowder or ground bone and throw it at their door. If someone was left a gris-gris filled with gunpowder, it meant that he was not in favor with the hounsans or the loas.

You can see by reading these descriptions what amazing combinations have been put together in the gris-gris, and it only takes a small leap to imagine how powerful they might be.

New Orleans Public Voodoo Rituals

Voodoo rituals are an accepted and common part of life in New Orleans, and there are some interesting varieties. One of the most powerful is the Hurricane Protection Ritual, which is held each July. Mambo Sallie Anne Glassman performs this to honor the loa Erzulie Dantor, and ask for her protection from these storms. Offerings include fried pork, corn and egg omelets, and candies such as Red Hots and Hot Tamales, rum, whiskey, and cigars.

Mambo Sallie and her group have been performing this ritual for eight years, keeping the city protected. Some point to the massive destruction of Hurricane Katrina as proof that the ritual didn't work, however this is not true, because at the last minute Katrina took a turn and struck east of the city. Because it was not a direct hit, the hurricane damage that resulted was not as severe as it would have been. The destruction that did occur happened because of flooding—and the ineptitude of man.

Another popular ceremony conducted by Mambo Sallie Ann Glassman is the Marie Laveau headwashing ritual. This takes place on June 23, St. John's Eve. Marie Laveau performed a public ritual on this date, and Mambo Sallie commemorates this and celebrates summer with her ritual. Everyone in attendance is invited to share in the powerful ashe that results. Offerings for Marie Laveau include tools to honor her trade of hair styling, white candles, white scented flowers, coconut cakes, cigars and rum. Today's New Orleans Voodoo Queen is Queen Bianca, who rules in direct lineage from Marie Laveau. Queen Bianca offers a ritual twice yearly to bless and charge the Monkey and Cock statue that were created in Marie's honor. Queen Bianca also presents regular drumming rituals in secret locations around the city. During Hurricane Katrina, Bianca and her followers kept up a drum ritual through the height of the storm. The hurricane turned at the last minute and the city was spared the brunt of the storm.

Other popular rituals include blessing of Mardi Gras, Voodoo weddings, for which people come to the city from all over, Day of the Dead rituals, and crime protection rites.

Common Misconceptions and Myths

There are many popular misconceptions about the sacred religion of Vodou and the folk practice of hoodoo. Hollywood and the media have picked up obscure or trivial aspects of the religion and used these for their own purposes. This is fine, but unfortunately, it is these images that stick in people's minds. Probably the most misunderstood aspects of Vodou are Vodou dolls, zombies, and animal sacrifices.

Voodoo Dolls

Voodoo dolls are so associated with Vodou that they have taken on the name of the religion. In fact, the tradition of using "Voodoo dolls" in ritual and as a focus of intention is common the world over, in many cultures. When it comes to Vodou, though, the Voodoo doll is actually a very minor part of the religion. It figures more strongly in New Orleans Voodoo, with its strong hoodoo influence, and some have speculated that the practice of sticking pins in a doll's body to do harm was practiced by slaves in retaliation against their owners.

The exact origins of this are unclear. Such a practice has a background in European folk magic. The practice of using a doll or similar object to send spirit energy is also common throughout the world. The Ojibwa Indians of North America have a tradition of sticking arrows in the wooden image of a person to whom they wish harm. If they want that person to die, they bury the image in the ground. Peruvians fashion human images in fat and grain and burn it. This is believed to destroy an enemy's soul. In Malaysia, wax models are made. Nail and hair clippings from the intended victim are added to the wax. Every night for seven nights, the "doll" is scorched in flames, until on the seventh night the entire model is burned while the sorcerer chants. This is when the enemy dies.

It is very common for revenge and retaliation to be directed in this way in cultures all around the world. Sorcerers in India, Babylon, Egypt, Greece and Rome dealt with enemies this way thousands of years ago. Such practices have continued into more modern times in Australia, Scotland, and Africa.

It is curious, then, that with the practice so common in other cultures, yet not so much in Vodou, that the Voodoo doll has come to be so seriously associated with Vodoun life in the minds of so many. In both Haiti and New Orleans, the use of a doll is considered to be weak magic. It is thought that the bokor should have enough ashe to cast spells without resorting to a doll. A couple of theories may help explain this.

In Haitian Vodou, power objects are called pwen, and would be distinct from the class of magical surrogates that Voodoo dolls represent. There is also the tradition of the poppet—a doll or doll-like object which is nailed to a tree or post in order to act as a messenger to the underworld. Sometimes, too, plastic baby dolls are included on altars in rituals.

When dolls or similar representations are used, it will be done for the purpose of focusing attention and intention. Think of how you feel when you see an image of a loved one—your attention is placed on it. In simplest terms, the image brings the loved one to mind. This is also the case when a bokor uses a doll in a ritual. First he will focus attention on the intended recipient of the ritual through the use of the doll. Next, he will concentrate on the intention he has for that person. This is not usually done for harm. Healing can be accomplished in this manner with the healing intent placed upon the sick person's effigy. This ritual is considerably stronger when the effigy is enhanced with personal items, such as jewelry or clothing, or better yet, bodily parts such as nail clippings or hair. The effigy can also be manipulated for the sake of healing. If the intended recipient has broken a leg, for instance, the effigy's leg will be bound to signify attaining wholeness.

One important aspect of Vodou is to always consider the source of the disease. Thus if the client has suffered illness because of a magical attack, the houngan will ask the loa or check his divination system to learn who is responsible. The most common response is to send the black magic back at the person who initiated the attack.

In his book, *Vodou Shaman*, Ross Heaven tells the story of a friend who had been attacked by a bokor acting on behalf of an ex-girlfriend. The friend ended up with boils all over his left side and his face. He consulted a bokor, who was able to divine the name of the attacker thusly: the priest had the friend write down the names of everyone who might wish him harm and place them on tiny strips of paper in a bottle. The bokor then held a whole egg over the neck of the bottle. After a minute, the priest had the victim crack the egg—and there in the middle of the shell was the name of the attacker. Once the healer learned the name of the attacker, he was able to send the bad energy back. The next time Heaven's friend saw the ex-girlfriend, she had boils all over the left side of her face!

It is not necessary, or even common, for such attacks and rituals to be done solely with dolls. Photographs can be used, something that the person has given you, or something a person has written—such as a letter. All of these things contain your ashe, and so it is important not to leave items behind when you break off a relationship.

Today Voodoo dolls are commonly peddled as good luck tokens and ways to get others to do your bidding. Do a simple search on the internet and you'll come up with dozens of sites purporting to sell powerful Voodoo dolls. You'll find Voodoo dolls for love, luck, money, good health, or even all purpose dolls! Many of these dolls are supposedly blessed by New Orleans Voodoo practitioners. You can even find virtual Voodoo doll sites where you can "torture" a virtual image.

And, it seems that everything old is new again, as recent news reports tell of how Voodoo dolls have become the rage in China. The country has a long history of belief in curses and black magic.. The government became concerned with the political implications of the dolls and had them banned in April. But despite—or because—of that ban, the dolls are now incredibly popular with teens and others.

The good news for adherents of Vodou is that some of the sites which hawk Voodoo dolls also feature articles about various aspects of Vodou, including the fact that Voodoo dolls are not generally used in Vodou practice. Hopefully this will help in the continual quest to educate the public about the true nature of Vodou.

Zombies

Here's the section many of you have been waiting for. Zombies have become incredibly popular in the culture, with the movies of George Romero (*Night of the Living Dead* and many others) attaining cult status. Other, more recent films, such as *28 Days Later* and *28 Weeks Later* also touch on the zombie phenomenon. An entire mystique (in many cases tongue in cheek) has grown up around zombies, with websites devoted to "reanimation prevention and control," and the like. Zombies do have their roots in Vodou, but the tradition of Haitian zombies bears little resemblance to the current popular image. The truth about zombies is far more complex and fascinating.

For many people, zombies and Vodou are intricately connected, and when you say the word Vodou the first thing that comes to mind are zombies. But what, exactly, is a zombie? The technical definition is that it is an animated body devoid of a soul. Zombies are most often reanimated from the dead. They are the undead, existing in a dark state somewhere between life and death.

Nobody is certain of the exact origin of the word zombie, but several possibilities include “jumbie,” the West Indian term for ghost, and “nzambi” which is the Congo word for “spirit of the dead.” In Vodou, a zombie is reanimated by the bokor, or sorcerer of black magic. Zombies will have no will of their own and hence will remain under control of the sorcerer or conjurer. Apparently, zombies are harmless unless they are fed salt, which restores their senses. And then—watch out!

Zombies are a common theme in Haitian folklore and culture, and this has been well documented. Zora Neale Hurston, the famous African-American writer, was also a folklorist who did a lot of research into indigenous culture and customs. She visited Haiti in the 1930s to research Vodou and wrote a book called, *Tell My Horse: Vodou and Life in Haiti and Jamaica*. In the book she tells the tale of Felicia Felix-Mentor, who had died and been buried in 1907 at the age of 29. However, after her death and burial she was seen repeatedly wandering the streets. Hurston maintained that if science ever got to the bottom of the secrets of Vodou, many important medical secrets would be revealed. Hurston herself tried to uncover the secrets of the zombies, including chasing rumors that they had been fed powerful drugs, but was unable to find any credible information.

Countless researchers and anthropologists have run into the same problem. Chasing story and rumor of zombies, they found little evidence to document the phenomenon. In many cases, the so-called zombies had received no documented medical care before their deaths. This meant that investigators could not fully rule out cases of mistaken identity or fakery. That began to change in 1980, with the fascinating case of Clairvius Narcisse. He appeared in a Haitian village, claiming to have died at the Albert Schweitzer hospital in Deschapelle, Haiti, on May 2, 1962. The man described his death, and how he had been conscious but paralyzed, even remembering the sheet being placed over his head. He claimed that subsequently a bokor brought him back to life.

Medical records bore Narcisse's claims out, and so did anecdotal evidence. He answered questions about his childhood, his life and his family that nobody else could have known. Scientists considered Narcisse the first potential evidence of a real zombie, and eventually family and friends concluded he had been raised from the dead.

This incident was the impetus for The Zombie Project, a scientific investigation into zombies that took place in Haiti between 1982 and 1984. During this time, the anthropologist and ethnobotanist, Dr. Wade Davis, visited Haiti. He, too, was eager to discover scientific proof of zombies. Davis was operating on the theory that a drug induced the zombie state, just as Zora Neale Hurston had suspected back in the 30s. And, as Hurston believed, Davis also felt that if such a drug could be found, it might have promising medical uses. Davis studied the Haitians assertions that a bokor conjured zombies by capturing the ti bon ange. However, Davis also found that the bokors used concoctions in the form of ground plant and animal parts in their rituals. Davis collected samples of this "zombie powder" in various areas throughout Haiti and found that while the ingredients varied, there were some commonalities.

The four common ingredients were the marine toad, the hyla tree frog, human remains, and the puffer fish, which is a source of tetrodotoxin. This is the exact same lethal poison which is found in the Japanese delicacy called fugu, which comes from the puffer fish. In the hands of a chef who knows what he is doing fugu is considered a luxurious delicacy. But if the puffer fish is not handled carefully, too high a dose of tetrodotoxin can be released and the results can be fatal.

At very high doses, the powder from puffer fish can put a person into a near-death state for days. While in this state, the afflicted person still appears to be conscious. The other crucial ingredient for creating zombies, Davis felt, came from the datura plant, and caused the person to appear to have no will or his or her own. Davis theorized that Haitians might be influenced by their culture and belief system to feel they had been made into a zombie by the bokor, when in reality they had simply been poisoned. Davis popularized his theories in two books, *The Serpent and the Rainbow*, and *The Passage of Darkness*. However, much of his work has been discredited for several reasons. His ethics have been questioned, due to several lapses, and his experiments have been found to lack controls and proper science. While some people agree with Davis's conclusions, many dismiss it as unscientific or fraudulent.

Recent anecdotal evidence from initiates supports the theory that drugs can be given to people to put them in a zombie-like state. Ross Heaven, a British Vodou adherent and one of the first white European males to be initiated into the priesthood, writes the following in his book, *Vodou Shaman: The Haitian Way of Healing and Power*:

“The toxins used in zombification are effective and simple to deliver in food or drink, or even through the skin. You get sick, weak, and then vital signs pretty much stop. You are alive through-out this but you are unable to show it, trapped in a living death from which there is no escape without the intervention of the sorcerer himself, the one person who knows you are still alive. Sometimes, in this paralyzed state, you are buried alive so that the sorcerer can dig you up a few days later, in a spectacular display of his own Power. Bringing the dead back to life. You survive the burial because your nervous system is suppressed and your body doesn’t need so much oxygen, but your mind, your will, and your soul are gone, lost somewhere in a dark place of shock and fear. Is it any wonder that a country born of slavery is so adept at creating slaves?”

So, as you can see, the history of zombies in Haiti and Vodou is complex and fascinating. It is also useful to track how zombies have been presented in popular culture, because Hollywood is greatly responsible for much of our misconceptions of the sacred religion of Vodou into a horror side show. Zombies appeared in movies as early as 1919, but George Romero is most often credited with starting the pop culture zombie craze with the release of *Night of the Living Dead* in 1968, and several other films since then. In the first *Dead* movie, zombies took on their now-familiar personas as slow-moving, flesh-eating corpses. To explain how they became reanimated, the movie created a story line about radiation on a satellite returning from Venus raising the corpses from the dead—very un-Vodou like. In this first film, the zombies had no intelligence and had minimal capability of using tools. In later movies, this changed somewhat, with the zombies acquiring a limited self-awareness and some capability of thought. The only way a zombie could be killed was through destruction of their brains or the separation of their heads from their bodies.

Romero’s films have established zombie tropes which nearly all other movies either mimic or pay homage to. In Hollywood mythology, zombies are reanimated due to radiation, viruses, chemicals, acts of God, or sorcery. Zombies are strong and slow; impervious to pain and injury (except for the all-important injury to the brain or decapitation); relentless in their compulsion to kill and eat, and afraid of fire and bright lights.

It is worth noting that in 1988 the director Wes Craven made the film *The Serpent and the Rainbow*, based on Wade Davis's book of the same name. This was a film which proposed both scientific and supernatural theories about zombies and was the first and only Vodou-themed zombie movie. It was relatively well reviewed.

Now it is time to turn our attention to the other aspect of Vodou that is seriously misunderstood and misinterpreted—animal sacrifice.

Animal Sacrifice

Once again, the concept of sacrifice has little, if anything to do with the common representations we are accustomed to seeing in films and the media. In Vodou, sacrifices of various kinds are referred to as “feeding the spirits” or manje-loa. Not only are sacrifices love offerings to the loa, they are also a nod to the partnership that exists between you and the spirits—a partnership of energetic exchange. Basically, a sacrifice is an offering—an offering you give freely, with the expectation of receiving something in return.

Animal sacrifice *is* a part of Vodou culture. However, it is a relatively small part of the overall picture of sacrifices. In general, many of the sacrificial offerings the loa prefer are not of the animal variety. Many of the loa like rice or bananas or chicken or herring. Some of them would even prefer rum or cigars! When animal sacrifice is involved, be aware that it is always treated very seriously. Never is a sacrifice taken lightly. As Lilith Dorsey says in her book, *Vodou and Afro-Caribbean Paganism*, “I usually ask people that if their child or parent were diagnosed with a fatal illness and the only way to cure them was with medicine made from an animal source, would they refuse the treatment?”

Animal sacrifice is done to deal with serious problems in the community. When an animal is sacrificed, the priest actually ends up doing battle with its spirit. Lilith Dorsey notes that it is not unusual for priests and priestesses to die in the middle of rituals under mysterious circumstances. It is also important to note that after the sacrifice, the meat is cooked and shared with the community—and this is areas where food is often scarce. Many people routinely eat meat without a second thought, yet recoil at the idea of animal sacrifice, when there really is not a big difference between the two practices. Also bear in mind that animal sacrifice is an ancient practice which has appeared at one time or another in nearly all cultures.

The Dark Side of Vodou

Much of what would be considered the “dark side” of Vodou can be attributed to western bias. As we have seen, Hollywood and the media have sensationalized some aspects of Vodou, such as zombies and Voodoo dolls, which really have little to do with the religion. Some people call the rituals mumbo-jumbo, mocking them as little more than pageantry.

People have associated the faith with evil, and thought that Vodouisants are Satan-worshippers. It is common if people don't understand something for them to mock it. And, the fact that the indentured status of the slaves who brought the religion to the new worlds meant much of it was practiced in secret—and secrecy often breeds fear. And, it must be said, that some aspects of Voodoo that are unfamiliar to traditional Western religions make people uncomfortable. Add to the fact that some of the most important aspects of Vodou are considered taboo in other cultures and religions, and it is easy to see how the misconceptions have grown up.

Animal sacrifice is deeply disturbing to some people—even people who eat meat that has been slaughtered with no qualms. Even though animal sacrifice has been a part of many major religions, it is no longer common today. Vodou is often associated with snakes, with one of the most powerful loa, Damballa, especially closely associated with serpents. These creatures are deeply disturbing to many people. The idea of possession is also misunderstood and feared.

Also distasteful to some is the use of bodily fluids such as blood and semen in ritual. The use of blood can be a health hazard if not carefully controlled. Also, many Vodou leaders in rural areas, as well as hoodoo practitioners, often offer folk cures that modern medicine may not agree with. All of these points can and are refuted by modern-day adherents and practitioners. Throughout this report we have seen the truth of Vodou as a deeply profound yet practical religion whose followers benefit from it on a day to day basis. It must be said, though, that there is a dark side to some Vodou practices.

While the Houngan and Mambos perform “white magic” for the benefit of their people, there are also those who perform black magic. These sorcerers are sometimes called Caplatas or Botoño or Bokors.

Rituals designed to do harm fall into the category of Bo. Most anthropologists believe that Bo is a separate system from Vodou. However, it is also thought that many houngan and mambo learn Bo in order to understand how to combat it when necessary. Some, but only a very few, of the houngan alternate between white and black magic.

The Voudoun Life

How You Can Use its Simple Universal Truths

By some accounts, there are over two hundred million practitioners of various forms of Vodou in the world today. Estimates say the religion is growing by two hundred new practitioners a day, making it one of the fastest growing religions in the world.

Perhaps this is because the practice of Vodou offers a different way of looking at the world. In the Vodoun life, power is not something that comes from the government or an institution. Instead, power is a mark of how well an individual can work with the loa. If they are efficient at harnessing these unseen gods and their powers, it translates to having personal power in the form of good health and success.

The houngan and mambo have the power to access other worlds—the world of the invisible—and other states of consciousness. They make these other worlds directly available to initiates so that they, too, can learn from these other worlds. Seeing direct evidence of these other worlds gives the Vodou practitioner comfort and insight as he or she goes about his daily business. Vodou thus offers a glimpse of something bigger, a taste of the divine that lifts adherents beyond the mundane.

Using the knowledge you’ve gained in this report, you can now go forth and practice the wonderful religion of Vodou. As a solitary practitioner, there are a few simple things you can do to begin. You can create an altar, take cleansing baths, make a gris-gris bag, and practice simple candle spells. You can read books and peruse websites.

However, if you take a serious interest in Vodou, you will want to find a Vodou houngan or mambo to study with. Because Vodou is a syncretic religion, it is perhaps not surprising that many houngan and mambo have embraced the internet, with extensive websites full of information about the religion and initiation. Check the sites listed at the end of this report, and also check for directories in the back of books on Vodou. You’ll find some titles to get you started in the Resources section, also.

Also, ask around. You might be able to find a Vodou community in your hometown, or at least nearby. You might be surprised to learn that some of your neighbors or friends have been practicing Vodou all along!

Vodou Glossary

Aida Wedo, Aida Ouido Powerful and popular rainbow serpent loa, the wife of the all-powerful Damballa

Aristide, Jean-Claude Former dictator of Haiti

Asson Magical gourd rattle

Ayizan The loa of initiation

Ashe (Pronounced Ah-shay or Ah-say) The divine life force within, the very essence and being of a person or thing

Banda Dance with sexual energy and explicit movements, often used in association with Baron

Bibliomancy Using the bible for divination

Bo Hexes, curses, and spells designed to do harm; the system of black magic

Bondye, Also Bondieu The Haitian name for the one main Voodoo God, taken from the French words bon dieu, which mean, “good God.”

Bokor Black magic sorcerer

Bosol An uninitiated Vodouisant

Botanica Store (online or brick and mortar) which sells supplies for Santeria and Vodou practitioners

Botono Voodoo sorcerers

Candomble Afro-based religion in Brazil. The word refers to the religion, a community, a space and a dance.

Caplata Priest who performs black magic exclusively

Casting the Bones Very old Hoodoo system of divination generally utilizing possum or chicken bones

Chamba Potent rum infused with hot peppers and gunpowder used as an offering to Ogun.

Conjure, conjuration Other terms for Hoodoo

Damballa One of the most powerful of the loa, the white serpent who rules the waters of heaven

Diaspora A group which has been dispersed outside its homeland; any group flight from a country or region.

Drapo Ritual flags used in Vodou ceremonies

Duppie A dead soul called forth to do someone’s bidding, usually for nefarious purposes

Erzulie Powerful loa who embodies femininity and fierceness; the protector of mothers and children

Eleggua, Eshu The Orisha of the crossroads, the Santeria counterpart to Papa Legba

Fetishes Objects meant to contain the essence of a Loa or spirit

Gede Ancestors

Gran Bois Loa of the forest and woods

Gros Bon Ange Big guardian angel

Hoodoo Indigenous African folk magic transported to the United States with slaves

Hounfour A Voodoo temple

Houngan A male priest; also sometimes spelled hungan

Hounsi Vodou ritual assistant; wife

Ile House, usually adherents who share a lineage or worship under a common houngan or mambo

Iwa The name the Haitians use for the intermediary spirits

Kay myste Small sacred houses that serve as altars

La Baleen The goddess of the whales

La Sirene The goddess of the sea

Left-handed Voodoo Black magic

Les Barons The named dead in some Haitian traditions

Les Gede The unnamed dead

Loa Intermediary spirits

Loko Guardian of the hounfour

Mambo A female priest

Maman Main drum used in Vodou ceremonies; it represents Venus and the Moon

Manje-loa Feeding the spirits; offering the loa sacrifices

Marassa The divine twins, representing the dualistic nature of the universe

Mojo Magical amulet used in Hoodoo

Myal Dance A dance originating in West Africa

Myalism The name for the Obeah rituals which include dancing and drumming

Nanchon Family lineage of the loa

Ogou, Ogoun Revered loa of war, politics, and hunting. Also an important Orisha in Santeria, where he is known as **Ogun**

Olorun Supreme god of the Orisha

Orisha The spirit hierarchy in Santeria; corresponds to the Voodoo loa

Ochosi The Orisha of the hunt; one of the trinity of Warriors

Oshun A popular Orisha, she is the goddess of the waterfalls.

Paket Congo Congo packets, magical bundles used for a variety of purposes in ceremonies

Papa Doc Duvalier Haitian dictator from 1957 until his death in 1971

Papa Legba Loa who stands at the crossroads between the invisible and visible worlds, or, heaven and earth

Petit Smallest drum used in Vodou ceremonies, it represents Mercury

Plasaj Common-law marriage in Haiti

Possession A way in which the Loa communicate, through taking control of a believer's body

Pwen Haitian Vodou power object

Rootwork Another term for Hoodoo

Segunda Second drum used in Vodou ceremonies, it represents the Sun and Mars

Shango What Voodoo is called in Trinidad; also the Orisha lord of fire

Spiritism Brazilian religion

Syncretism The process of reconciling contradictory beliefs; Haitian Voodoo is sometimes called a syncretic religion because of its varying influences

Ti Bon Ange Little guardian angel

Transliteration The practice of changing words to corresponding characters of another language

Tricking Hoodoo

Umbanda Brazilian variant of Voodoo

Veve Cornmeal or flour pattern made in the favorite design of a specific Loa during a ritual

Vudon Variant of Voodoo, not as common

Voodoo Most often used to describe the African-Caribbean branch of the ancient African religion; also describes the folk spirituality common among African-Americans in the southeastern United States

Vodou The common spelling for Voodoo in Haiti

Vodoun Variant of Voodoo, not as common

Vodun West African word for spirit; a common variant of the word Voodoo, especially in Brazil and West Africa

Vudun Variant of Voodoo

Yanvalou Serpentine ritual dance said to be used to honor Damballa

Yemaya Orisha goddess of the sea

Zombie A reanimated body devoid of a soul; most often called up from the dead