Wesleyan University

From the SelectedWorks of Elizabeth McAlister

Winter 1992

Serving the Spirits Across Two Seas: Vodou Culture in New York and Haiti

Elizabeth McAlister

Available at: https://works.bepress.com/elizabeth_mcalister/46/
Elizabeth McAlister,
Altar for Guede,
Leogane, Haiti, 1991
America’s fascination with Voodoo has more to do with our collective anxieties than with reality. Most people think they know something about Voodoo from watching horror films. Isn’t it basically a form of black magic, where primitive people stick pins in dolls to harm their enemies? The myths we hold about Voodoo are entirely skewed and distorted, part of a long history of misunderstanding between Black and White cultures.

Vodou (pronounced vau-DOO) is properly described as a religious system. It is known in Haiti simply as “serving the spirits.” After Bon Dieu, God, a large pantheon of spirits, called loa, tend to the affairs of humans. The loa dwell in rocks, streams and forests, and in a place “under the water” that separates the dead from the living. This place is also called “Guinea,” a mythical realm that stands for all of the African homeland. They leave this watery abode to possess the people who call on them, whose families have been calling on them for generations.

I remember my own ambivalence as I dressed to visit a Vodou ceremony for the first time. I had befriended some Haitian musicians when they arrived in my New York neighborhood. They came among large numbers of other Haitian immigrants running from the United States-backed Duvalier government and its vicious poverty. The moment I walked into the Brooklyn ceremony, I saw that Vodou was foreign, but not dangerous, and certainly not evil. The plastic-covered red velvet sofas had been pushed back against bright blue walls to make room for an enormous family and their guests to dance and sing.

Wedges between a little girl and an old man and sunk in a low armchair, I was handed pink cake and soda. Drummers caressed, rolled, slapped, and pounded their drums, making them talk and then shout back and forth to one another. One of the spirits possessed a young mambò, a priestess of Vodou. The spirit sent her into an elegant dance of rolling shoulders and delicate footwork. After years of study, of learning Haitian Creole, of patience, I can now see that the drumming and dance was Petro, the dancer was the goddess Ezili Dantor, and the pink cake was a gift in her honor.

Vodou developed during slavery when African people from numerous cultures were brought to Haiti to work the sugar plantations. They spoke hundreds of languages—Yoruba, Ibo, Wolof, Fon, Hausa, KiKongo, Portugese. Thrown together in Haiti, they had to rework their spirituality under the new repressive order. Those who converted to Catholicism incorporated the saints into their African cosmology. Each saint was roughly identified with one of the spirits and embraced for whatever creative and sustaining power it held. This maddened the church, which periodically mounted vicious “anti-superstition” campaigns against the peasantry.

Like the gods of ancient Greece and Rome, the spirits have powerful personalities that represent the quirks of humans and the force of nature. Serving these spirits is one Haitian method of coping with life’s problems. They can appear in dreams or possessions and help heal physical and mental illness. They can protect against bad luck. Inherited through the generations, they are an important source of family identity. The spirits mediate relationships, allocate resources, and even redistribute land.

Parents name children after the spirits. Vodou feast days are incorporated into the calendar of festivals and holidays, even printed in tourist brochures, when there were tourists in Haiti. Vodou is also embedded in the Creole proverbs that politicians use to “send a point” to one another. “Après bal-la, tanbou lou,” says the American ambassador, warning everyone in Haiti that “after the ball (or ceremony), the drum is heavy” and it might be more work than they think to rebuild the country under President Aristide. “Men antil, chay pa lou,” responds Titid eloquently. “Many hands make a light burden.”

Aristide, though a Salesian priest, does not ignore the rootedness
of Vodou culture in Haitian history. He once told me that sewn inside his robes were two reye—traditional designs for the spirits. On one panel he had Danbala, an ancient spirit of life-force; on the other side, Papa Loko, the patron of Vodou priesthood. This is not to say that Aristide is a Vodou priest, but rather that he was using traditional symbols to signal his respect for the responsibilities of ministry, and to show his belief in the ultimate unity of all peoples and their religious faiths.

For the majority of Haitians, who live in the countryside, serving the spirits is a simple matter of pouring daily libations to the many deities of their African forebears. Some families, though, concentrate on serving the spirits they have inherited from particular regions of Africa where their ancestors were taken as slaves. At a family compound at Souvenance, near Gonaïves, the people say they are descended from the royal family of Dahomey. I was introduced to a striking young woman there, named Elizabeth like me. She wore a simple dress, with her hair in a few box-braids, as
do most women in the Haitian countryside. But she also wore an unusual plastic necklace and bracelet hung with big purple, red, green and yellow shapes. She was tall and the necklace sat on her collarbone regally. I was told that she is considered a Dahomean princess.

This kind of cultural history is complex and not easy to trace. Clearly European history has failed Haiti; it is unable to retrieve the bloodlines of people kidnapped and sold. But the spirits return, dreaming and possessing those who inherit them. Haitian stories are ethno-historical lessons. “My family was from the area that is now Senegal,” says a young man in a matter-of-fact way. He knows this, not from any archive, but from a long talk over a rum with a Guede spirit, a loa who presides over the cemetery, death, sex, and rebirth.

Photographs can capture only a small dimension of the sights, smells, sounds, and emotion of a dance for the spirits. A Vodou ceremony is like a live, improvisational opera. Each ceremony follows a basic master plot, where the dancing and the singing are work, artistry and prayer all at once. Rituallly saluting one another, the family begins to perform the small but important actions that are coded languages for the spirits. All swoop down to tap the
ground with their fingers, because the spirits come from the earth. A man pours libations of rum at the doorsill. Two women dance with flashing sequined flags so the house can be properly honored. Shredding herbs into baskets, the family prepares medicine.

Healing and medicine are the focus of much of Vodou practice in private sessions between a client and a priest or priestess. Herbalists are called dokte fey, “leaf doctor,” and midwives are fanm saj, “wise women.” In a country with no hospitals or doctors for the majority of the population, the traditional doctor is an important source of healing. They treat everything from broken limbs to diseases like malaria to mental illness and spiritual malaise. Most likely the physical and the spiritual are found to be linked. Several mambos I have talked to, for example, became sick when they ignored messages that they were being called to the priesthood. One woman became paralyzed on her left side; as soon as she promised to become a mambo, she was healed.

A ceremony is always called for a particular reason. During a feast, a family’s spirits are fed in thanksgiving. Chickens, goats, and bulls can be killed in sacrifice in order to present the spirits with their blood, the force of life itself. The meat, almost always, is carried away to be cooked to feed the dancers and drummers at the end of the day. For an initiation, one or more people spend a week inside a Vodou house, from whence they emerge in the end, reborn. Wearing white clothes, a straw hat with rafia hanging over their faces and necklaces of colored beads, they are brought out and presented to the group.

A dance is not successful until the spirits come to possess someone and receive the gifts of music and motion and human intensity. These moments can be almost painfully intimate. I watched one woman listen while a spirit told her she would die if she did not stop drinking alcohol. He touched his machete to her neck, illustrating his point.

A sorcerer’s manipulations can also cause physical and spiritual damage. Sorcery is the manipulation of the spirits for self-gain. A boko agrees to serve the spirits with his “sinister” left hand. He must be willing to call on spirits who are “hot” and dangerous to accomplish his work. People distinguish this sort of spirit from the benevolent loa Guinca. Often the boko purchases his spirits, and often they demand a great price in return. But they work quickly where family spirits would take their time, and so enable him to turn a profit. Bokos are frowned upon, gossiped about, feared. But to protect oneself, to block adultery, to catch a thief—who knows what a desperate person would not do?

Despite the drama and exhilaration of a ceremony, serving the spirits is often a quiet matter, in naming a child or in selecting colors to wear, or in following the message of a dream. Because there is no official Vodou spokesperson, no orthodoxy, each person worships according to family tradition and personal innovation.

Serving the spirits can also be a public event. A two-month

---

Top, Daniel Morel, Untitled, Haiti
Bottom, Chantal Regnauld, Mambo Jocelyne Louis,
a voodoo gathering Brooklyn, New York, 1984
Les Stone,
The day after massacre in November, Haiti, 1987

Opposite,
Walter Rosenblum,
Azaka, Vodou God of Agriculture in a Catholic Church, Saut d'Eau, 1958
festival cycle every summer brings spiritual seekers and the ill thronging to sacred spots in the Haitian countryside. They stand under the life-giving Sodo waterfall in Ville Bonheur, where the serpent Danbala Wedo and his partner, Aida Wedo live. Pilgrims move on to bathe in the thick mud baths at Pleine du Nord, a site dedicated to Ogou. The mud, like the waterfall, can bring on possessions and is considered auspicious. Like some moments in a private ceremony, these possessions can also be extremely intimate, ironically played out amid chaotic throngs of pilgrims and ubiquitous photographers.

Haiti is a land rich in culture but deep in poverty. The poorest country in the Western Hemisphere, the nation still stands in crisis. Haiti faces land erosion, deforestation, drought, poverty, disease, pollution, toxic dumping, and drug traffic. To this add a history of United States-financed military dictatorships and widespread corruption. The country has no labor laws with which to defend its people against foreign exploitation. It has no public health care system, and no public education. Vodou, and especially sorcery, must be seen against this backdrop of lamizé, or misery, which is daily life for most Haitian people.

It is lamizé that has forced hundreds of thousands of people to leave Haiti, to find work in Miami, Boston, and New York. They often pay exorbitant prices to leave the island, and sometimes lack the paperwork to receive the benefits of U.S. citizenship. Because many are undocumented it is difficult to know the number of Haitian people in New York; officials quote ninety thousand, but others estimate half a million. This must be closer to the truth, because Haitian Creole is now the second foreign language after Spanish in the New York public schools.

Life in New York means great hardship for most Haitian people. They are not welcomed as are Cuban immigrants, their island neighbors. Haitians experience life as a Black minority and linguistic outsiders for the first time. They come to a city without trees, and in winter, a city under a freezing sun. The shock leads some Haitian people to a renewed sense of ethnic identity. “The United States has made us turn inside ourselves, to find our culture,” says a young man about himself and his friends.

An undocumented Haitian person may be distrustful of social workers or uninformed about the medical and legal systems. Unemployment, a racist boss, or a fight with a unionized worker makes life seem impossible. One logical source of support is the spirits and the social network of a Vodou house. It is impossible to know how many people in New York serve the spirits, but there are Vodou houses in all the boroughs.

Holding ceremonies in New York poses problems for a mambó or oungan. Everything is expensive—foodstuffs, alcohol, and flowers. Paying the drummers can be so costly that most people go without drums and use handclapping and singing alone. Cramped apartments and prejudiced neighbors dampen the joy of dances, which are often held in basements that offer a modicum of sound proofing. Once seven police burst into a ceremony I was attending in Brooklyn. Their guns were already drawn; they thought the sounds of the sislal whip during the Petro rituals was gunfire.

Space and time becomes economized in New York Vodou. New York initiations must be done in three days to minimize lost work time. Any ritual that should be done outdoors—under trees, next to water, or in a cemetery with the ancestors—must be changed. Because everyone works so hard, there are no free hands to help make the ceremony; the burden falls on a small few. For people who can afford to wait, it has become easier to do the truly important work back in Haiti. Since the uprooting of Duvalier in 1986, many people who could not go back for political reasons are now able to return.

Try booking a flight to Haiti during the November Guede season or around Easter and Rara. So many people go back and forth that Port-au-Prince and New York have become a continuous social sphere, with businesses and family relationships that span the two cities. It has become hard to find the person in Port-au-Prince who doesn’t have someone in New York. Because of this transnational culture, the Aristide government created the “tenth department,” a new “county” for ex-patriots. This gives political voice and responsibility to Haitians in the U.S. who have worked so hard for change at home.

New York and Haiti are spiritually linked as well. Just because someone lives “up north” does not mean that they can forget their responsibilities to the spirits. Sometimes the spirits insist that a person return for a dance, or for one of the pilgrimages. It is thought that to ignore the call is to court misfortune. Maybe the spirits, like teachers, are trying to pass on their history. They are saying that ignorance, like disease, will make you sick.

Language reflects the preoccupations of a people. Haitians say that the spirits and the ancestors are lot boa, “on the other side.” They are across the water dividing the dead and the living. Now, speaking of “the other side” in Haiti can also mean somebody has gone to New York. Like the dead and the spirits, they are not here, but they may, sometimes, be back.