

A Pantheon of Spirits

Haiti's 'voodoo' mixes faith and magic

Voodoo: the word itself reeks of black magic. It evokes frenzied dances and spiritual possession, pincushion effigies and dull-eyed zombis under the sway of sinister witch doctors. With the Feb. 7 fall of the Duvalier dynasty in Haiti, a new round of lurid tales seems inevitable. But image and reality part company. Voodoo dolls have no place in the Haitian religion known to anthropologists as "vodoun"; they are found mostly in the United States. And while new research suggests that Haitian sorcerers do create zombis—people poisoned into a paralytic state that mimics death—the practice is only tangential to one of the world's most vivid and elaborate folk religions.

Vodoun, the belief system of the great majority of Haitians both at home and abroad in New York and Miami, grafts elements of Roman Catholicism onto the primitive West African religions exported to the New World as part of the 17th- and 18th-century slave trade. It is a well-articulated system, monotheistic in its confession of one relatively distant God called the "grand master," and with a pantheon of spirits and a rich inventory of rituals. The spirits, called *loa*, appear to possess the bodies of vodoun practitioners during ceremonies. During possessions they perform such superhuman feats as holding hot coals in their mouths, advising onlookers how to gain health, wealth, love and power, in return for ritual obligations. The obligations are straightforward: the congregants meet at the *houngan*, or temple, where the priest (the *houngan*) or priestess (the *mambo*) leads ceremonies that include prayer, song, dance and ritual animal sacrifice.

Spirit of love: The purpose of the ceremonies is to summon *loa*, which then possess one or more of the congregants. *Loa* may be either gentle or violent in their treatment of the possessed body, and which kind appears depends largely on which of two rituals is used: *rada* rites, which invoke benevolent spirits, or *petro* rites, which can be bloody and which serve the "harder" spirits, as Haitians call them. The maleficent ones, like Baron Samedi, the lord of cemeteries and zombis, can be kind and malicious while pos-

sessing someone. Or the same *loa* may appear in different guises, depending on the rite; *Erzulie*, the spirit of love, is a flirtatious and beautiful woman when summoned by a *rada* rite but an angry and contorted one when called by a *petro* ceremony. Catholic saints, too, belong: lithographs of St. Patrick banishing snakes are popular in Haiti because they are associated with *Damballah*, a spirit who takes the form of a snake.

Of all the elements of Haitian culture, none is more shrouded in darkness than the *zombi*. It is not zombis themselves that Haitians fear, however, but the threat of being turned into one, as a quasicapital punishment exacted by the secret societies for transgressions against their social and territorial codes. The society contracts with a



JASPARD—SIPA-SPECIAL FEATURES

Scenes of possession: Mud baths and animal sacrifice serve the spirit realm

ADRIEN GALLO—BLACK STAR



bokor, an evil counterpart to the *houngan* and often a member of the dreaded paramilitary Tontons Macoutes, to administer a topically active poison by sprinkling it down the victim's shirt or across his or her doorstep. The poison causes a profound paralysis, suppressing the metabolic rate to the point where the victim may live for hours or even days on the amount of oxygen trapped in a coffin. The victim is then declared dead, buried and exhumed by the *bokor* at night—to become his slave, according to Haitian legend. Harvard ethnobotany student Wade Davis, whose recent book "The Serpent and the Rainbow" is a swash-buckling scientific adventure story attempting to place zombis in their social context, actually obtained a sample of a potion used to induce the *zombi* state. The active ingredient is a poison known as tetrodotoxin found in puffer fish.

Slave revolt: Does vodoun serve a political purpose? Some Haitian intellectuals denounce it as an opiate of the desperately poor Haitian masses. Others point to its historical role as a revolutionary force. On an August night in 1791, a slave named Boukman led a vodoun ceremony that sparked the only ultimately successful slave uprising in the New World, leading to Haiti's independence from France in 1804. "Vodoun is a quintessentially democratic religion, because the believer has direct rapport with the spirit realm," says Davis. In the '60s, Haitian exiles in the United States produced a daily radio program featuring a vodoun priest who preached against the Duvalier regime. "We developed the myth that we had more vodoun power than Papa Doc," recalls Raymond Joseph, publisher of the Brooklyn newspaper *Haiti Observateur*. And while the coup in Haiti was precipitated more by the action of Catholic priests inspired by liberation theology, it was vodoun that put the symbolic seal on the regime's coffin.

Last month 10 *houngans* were called to the National Palace to advise President Jean-Claude Duvalier on how to control the political unrest. "We told him we had removed our support," said Max Beauvoir, a *houngan* who practices outside Port-au-Prince. In the final days of the dictatorship, in an echo of a secret-society ritual, Haitians danced through the streets with an empty casket bearing Jean-Claude's name and the legend, "Your place is here." To Berkeley anthropologist Michel Laguerre, that was a telltale sign: "A good number of the secret societies had turned their backs on the government." A few days later, Duvalier fled.

SUSAN KATZ

JUSTICE

The Eastern Connection

Coke was a frequent flyer

The simplicity of the plot gave it elegance. The typical high-rolling drug smuggler has to invest in fast boats, cars with hidden panels or aircraft with extra fuel tanks. All this scheme required was ordinary suitcases and a lot of American dollars. Eastern Airlines employees allegedly did the rest. Last week word leaked out that federal authorities will seek indictments against 25 to 35 Eastern baggage handlers and ramp supervisors. The charge: helping smuggle large amounts of cocaine from Colombia into Miami.

The feds have been on the airline's tail since 1984, when U.S. customs agents seized an Eastern L-1011 after finding drugs on 22 earlier Eastern flights. Last summer customs agents discovered 1,722 pounds of cocaine in suitcases hidden behind air-conditioning panels in the baggage compartments of two Eastern jets. Customs fined the airline \$1.3 million, and Drug Enforcement Administration agents and Eastern security guards began an investigation, developing informants among ground-crew members. The informants said the ring had been operating since 1981 and had brought about 20 shipments—some as large as 900 pounds—into the country by mid-1985.

'Premature disclosure': The alleged M.O. was to wait until all regular baggage from a given flight cleared customs. The coke-filled suitcases were then hauled from hiding places in the baggage compartment, mixed with luggage in the domestic arrival area and picked up by accomplices. All told, the authorities believe, the Eastern connection may have brought in between 5,400 and 16,200 pounds of cocaine with a street value of \$250,000 a pound. So far no arrests have been made in the case, and no Eastern officials have been implicated. In fact, airline and Justice Department officials alike expressed consternation at last week's disclosure, triggered by a remark DEA chief John Lawn made in a speech in



JAN ZLOTKIN—AP

A scam worth billions: Security agents with the L-1011 seized in 1984

San Jose. "Until this unfortunate premature disclosure, the matter had been handled with discipline and confidentiality," said Eastern president Frank Borman. Some feared that now the suspects might have time to escape.

But the Eastern connection had more ominous implications. "If a crook can put 100 pounds of cocaine on a plane without anyone knowing it, he can put 100 pounds of explosives on just as well," said U.S. Customs Commissioner William von Raab. Beginning next month customs will re-

quire all personnel with access to the international cargo areas of U.S. airports to undergo security checks. The new regulations, which require airlines to hire private investigators, will cost the airlines money at a time when most are trying to cut costs. But U.S. authorities insist the checks are necessary not only to stem drug smuggling but also to reduce the possibility that terrorists could bribe ground workers to plant bombs, knowingly or unknowingly, on passenger planes.

ELAINE SHANNON in Washington

Hitting the Books to Get Out of the Slammer

Some stereotypes are true: Prisons are schools for crime, and their graduates are all too likely to return for more courses. Last week Gov. Gerald L. Baliles of Virginia said he thought he knew why. He looked at his state's 10,800 inmates and found that 35 percent are functionally illiterate. Unable to function in the straight world, he said, "they return to what they know only too well: crime." So he announced an increased emphasis on education behind bars—a traditional reformer's plank—and linked it to a far more controversial idea. Eligibility for early parole would be tied to literacy. "I want to motivate the prison-

ers," said the governor, "and I think we can do that by tying privileges to education."

Although many details have to be worked out, Baliles has pledged \$863,221 to fund the plan. The state's prisons chief, Edward W. Murray, expects to start the effort in four months, after his staff finishes the ticklish task of weeding out inmates with learning disabilities. For the rest the rule will be: no read, no early release. "If you don't put demands on people, it looks like you don't care about them," said Murray.

But as critics pointed out, caring isn't the issue. Gerald Zirkin, a Richmond defense lawyer, argued that the system will discriminate against

inmates who attended poor schools and those who would become eligible for parole too soon to complete a literacy program. And Alvin Bronstein, legal director of the ACLU's National Prison Project, threatened a court challenge if literacy became a requirement for release. Legality aside, the program may have unintended and unwanted consequences: any measure that postpones parole will increase the problem of jail overcrowding. Baliles vows to work out such problems because he believes the scheme can reduce recidivism. If he's right, the next step should follow: to teach youngsters to read before they start on a life of crime.