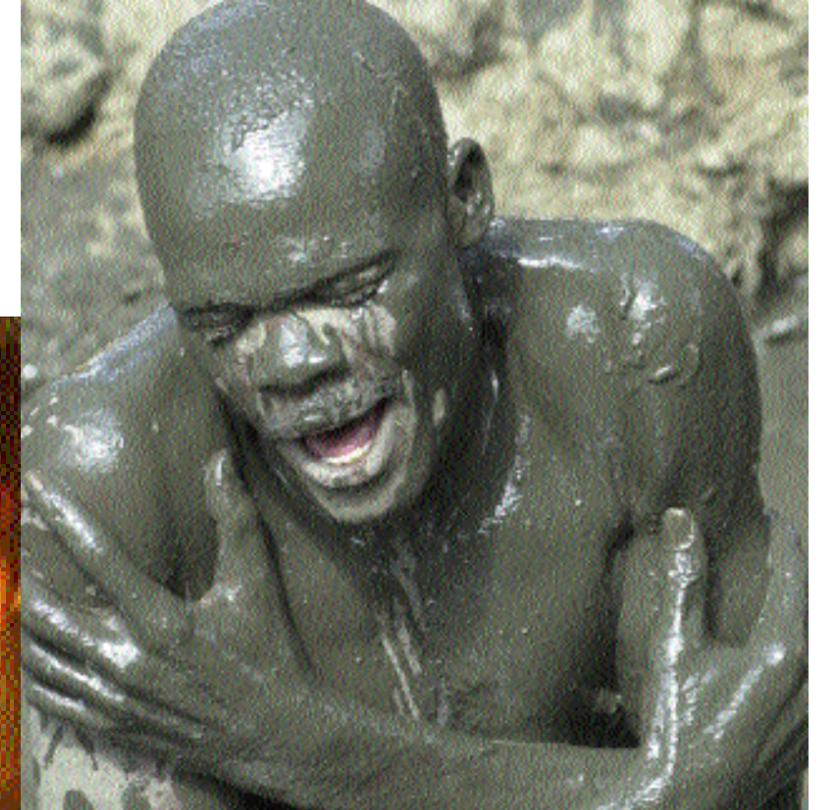


Recently declared an official religion, Vodou embodies Haiti's unique cultural and political milieu, while borrowing substantially from Catholicism



SERVING THE Spirits AND Saints

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The pounding rhythm of the water, tumbling from high above the tree-ringed ravine, mingles with shouts and shrieks of joy, fragments of prayers and songs. Sunlight dancing off the drops of sweet-scented mist thrown into the air by the falls' force nearly but not quite obliterate the tiny flames of candles clutched by pilgrims praying on the cliffs overhead.

The air is thick with sanctity.

"When a holiday comes around, if you're a real Haitian, if you aren't an evangelical, you show up," affirms Estime Augustin. He is standing in whorls of water, just one man surrounded by thousands of praying, swooning, singing pilgrims.

by Jane Regan
Photographs by Daniel Morel

“The Haitian culture has something very different from other cultures. We serve the spirits. We serve Vodou. And if you serve Vodou, you have an extra force with you”



Any July 15 and 16 he can make it, Augustin comes from Miami to the sacred Saut d'Eau waterfalls and the nearby Ville Bonheur for the first of three major Vodou-Catholic pilgrimages that every July draw tens of thousands from around the country and around the world to pray or to beg, to dance or to keep a promise.

All of Haiti's towns fete their saint days, but some

Jane Regan is a (biobox). Daniel Morel is a (biobox) Jane Regan is a (biobox). Daniel Morel is a (biobox) Jane Regan is a (biobox). Daniel Morel is a (biobox) Jane Regan is a (biobox). Daniel Morel is a (biobox) Jane Regan is a (biobox). Daniel Morel is a (biobox) Jane Regan is a (biobox). Daniel Morel is a (biobox) Jane Regan is a (biobox).

have massive celebrations because their patrons—who to many Haitians are Vodou spirits, or Iwa—are thought to have power to heal, to enrich, or to bring good luck. In a country where the average income is less than US\$250 a year, where unemployment and illiteracy are growing, and the local currency, life expectancy, and agricultural production are falling, that power means a lot.

And so, for the last two weeks of July, the trucks hauling produce carry extra loads: parties of worshipers clothed in the colors of the spirits they are honoring, singing and chanting as they balance bags of yams and bunches of bananas.

In 1883, Catholics say Our Lady of Mount Carmel appeared on a palm frond near the Saut d'Eau falls, while Vodouists will tell you it was the dark-skinned Erzuli Dantor. Whoever it was, the local French priest said the appearance and claims of miracles were blasphemous and chopped down the tree. But still pilgrims came.

Finally the hierarchy bowed to pressure and built a church, hoping to co-opt a budding cult at its roots. But the parallel worship of Mary and Erzuli Dantor only grew as it mingled with the worship of deities at the falls, probably dating back to the island's indigenous people and their veneration of underwater spirits.

While a friend carefully held his calabash bowl full of herbs and soap, Augustin takes off his shirt. To his right, perched on a rock in the middle of the torrent, a mambo, or priestess, administers an herbal bath. To his left, an old man tries to keep his balance as he holds candles and a rosary aloft in outstretched hands, his face turned towards the heavens.

“The Haitian culture has something very different from other cultures,” Augustin explains. “We serve the spirits. We serve Vodou. And if you serve Vodou, you have an extra force with you.”

He takes the calabash and slowly breaks up the leaves of lemon grass, basil, mint, and other herbs.

“These all have names. This is called ‘Capable.’ Do you know what Capable means? It means you are king. You have strength,” he says. “Everything you want to do, you can do it, because you have a spirit with you. In the U.S. the money says ‘In God We Trust.’ Well, here we believe that too, but we know that behind God, you’ll find the Vodou spirits.”

And with that, Augustin climbs over slippery rocks, through the wafts of warm, moist air scented with toilet water and herbs and joins the hundreds of nearly naked men, women, and children crowded under the rushing, pounding water.

“Oh Our Lady! What can you do for me? I have nowhere to live! I owe everybody!” a woman practically falls on top of Augustin as he goes by. (Whose quote?)

After the purifying “good luck bath,” bathers hurl

furtive request.

The man clutching a tattered paperback Bible and singing the Clong of Solomon at the entrance to the ravine doesn't even look up. He and his followers are busy blessing a beautiful doe-eyed bull, washing him with perfume and talcum powder.

“Today is about one thing and one thing only,” said Lesly Egalite, who for thirty years has been a houngan, or priest, in the capital's sprawling Cite Soleil slum. “The Virgin is the representation of Erzuli Dantor. She is her other half.”

Erzuli appreciates perfume and the blue and red cloth draped over the bull who will be sacrificed once the blessing is complete, he explains. “When you make a demand of someone, you have to offer something in return.”



their old underpants into the ravine and put on new ones so they can start the year afresh.

From time to time a man or woman is possessed. The Christian God, whom Vodouists also believe in and call “Great Master,” is worshiped from afar, but Vodou spirits—intermediaries between man and God—are close by and often inhabit or “mount” their devotees in order to give advice, express displeasure, or extract promises.

Writhing, eyes flashing, a woman is consumed by the serpent spirit Dambala, said to inhabit the falls. She tumbles into the rushing water, oblivious to the jagged rocks, slithering over boulders. Hoping to catch a moment with the spirit, bathers crowd around, whispering into her ear as she slides by. Maybe they were meant to see her, to bathe near her, so they could make a

A group of freshly bathed men and women on the edge of the falls didn't take much notice of the bull or of Dambala. They are putting on red and blue clothing and their own perfume. They soon climb the path past corn and sorghum fields, carefully walking around a man frozen rigid on the ground, his legs locked—he had been “arrested” by an angry spirit—and join the thousands crowded into the Our Lady of Mount Carmel church to worship Mary and Erzuli Dantor.

The pilgrims' progress from serpent spirit to Immaculate Virgin is part of the simplicity and complexity of Haiti's summer schedule of sacred pilgrimages and of the relationship between Vodou and Catholicism. The seemingly simple identification of spirits with saints veils a relationship much more com-

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plex than syncretism.

Like the skulls, the chromolithographs of saints, the plastic baby dolls and the African-looking “packets” containing spells that adorn a Vodou altar, the religion evolved out of a series of beliefs and practices African slaves pieced together after being ripped from their lands and families and confronted with the horrors that faced them in the “New World.”

Haitian Vodou (the word means “spirit” in the language of the Fon, one of the Dahomey peoples) is rooted in several African practices as well as in the Catholicism and Free Masonry of the masters, and the beliefs culled from the island’s indigenous Arawak and Taino before they were exterminated by the Spanish invaders.

The “civilizing” masters outlawed the religion, but it survived among runaway slaves, providing the fuel for Haiti’s victorious revolution. The bloody thirteen-year struggle was launched with a Vodou ceremony in the northern woods on August 22, 1791.

Because the Vatican refused to recognize the world’s first black republic, for six decades, especially in the countryside, “Pè Savann” or “country priests” said mass and performed rites, probably cementing Vodou’s

stronghold on Haiti’s consciousness, even if Catholicism plays equally important roles in Vodouists lives.

For despite the return of the clergy in 1860 and repeated “anti-superstition campaigns,” and the waves of Protestant evangelicals following the U.S. occupation (1915-34), Christianity has not supplanted Vodou, and almost everything the church tried has backfired. Christian baptism fits right in with Vodou baptisms of people, objects, and places, and the millions of saints’ chromolithographs handed out by priests and now hawked at every church only reinforce the saint-spirit relationship.

While the numbers in the famous saying “Haiti is 70 percent Catholic, 30 percent Protestant, and 100 percent Vodouist” can’t be exactly verified, Vodou is still the dominant religion and—more importantly—the dominant worldview for Haiti’s overwhelmingly poor and still mostly rural population.

Port-au-Prince hougan Mans Peter is one of scores of “Vodou militants” struggling to bring the religion out of the closet. He believes most Vodou followers still say they are Catholic because they fear persecution.

“When they go into a church and pray to a saint,



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they know they are really praying to a lwa,” he says. “But people are programmed to say they are Christian. In Haitian Creole [the only language all Haitians speak], ‘human’ is translated ‘kreyen vivan’ [living Christian]. Don’t forget, slaves were considered beasts until they were baptized.”

Peter, who is also a university professor and a soap opera movie actor, says the summer round of pilgrimages in the north should actually not be called pilgrimages.

“Pilgrimage is a Catholic word. Vodou is sedentary. The ceremonies are more like sacraments or homages,” he says. “The spirits inhabit sacred places, especially where there is water, and you come to ask, if you can. You come to serve your particular spirits or to pay your debt. You come to keep your promise.”

A week or so after the Saut d’Eau-Ville Bonheur celebrations, thousands converge on Plaine du Nord not far from where rebel slaves held their 1791 ceremony to celebrate Ogou, the spirit of war and iron, and the hamlet’s saint, the warrior St. James of Compostela.

For the few days leading up to the saint’s day (July 25), the village is transformed into a vast profane and religious street fair. The narrow road leading into

town is lined with stalls hawking St. James cards, posters, lockets and statues, white candles or the black or yellow beeswax homemade Vodou ones, scarves and chords in the colors of all the Vodou spirits, perfume, herbs, and rum.

At every corner a Vodou band plays, pounding out rhythms associated with Ogou or other spirits, chanting prayer songs. Pilgrims and fun-seekers dance the waltz or French contra-dance. Sometimes one breaks away, suddenly mounted, whirling wildly about, conveying a message in an ancient tongue.

Teenagers and city people hang round the food stands or loudspeakers blaring rap or Haitian top-40s, drinking beer or whiskey, and getting ready for a night at discos and dances rigged up behind makeshift walls. Charlatans hawk games of chance, trying to play off the get-rich-quick dreams of tourists. Haiti’s patron saint days are not only for the religious. They are also the main summertime attraction in a country where beaches are mostly reserved for the rich or the minority who knows how to swim.

A truckload of Protestants dressed in white, clutching black Bibles, rolls by. Their hymns denouncing the devil, sounding tinny and unconvincing through their cheap megaphones, are no match for the crowds of revelers.

Dodging a group of social workers handing out con-



“It costs a lot, but we get a lot in return, too. If you have a good year, where nothing bad happens to you, you have to give something back.”



doms, the Protestants' truck comes head on with a giant banner decorated with Baron Samdi, the head spirit of the dead who loves sexual innuendo. The banner is also graced by a giant painting of a penis and the slogan “Mine is sweeter.” Behind the banner a street band of horns, bamboos, and drums propels a laughing and singing group of satin-draped believers and their two bulls and white goat past the swelling crowd.

Hundreds of beggars hover around the church, hoping to benefit from alms distributed by richer, repentant pilgrims. Hand-outs are an important way for believers to make amends, to humble themselves in the eyes of the spirits. A large well-equipped pick-up, full of large, well-fed Haitians, pulls into the yard with vast cauldrons of steaming rice and stew. Immediately a frenzied fight breaks out.

Next door, the cemetery guard has given up. He's letting anyone in for a few coins. The graveyard is alive with activity. In the midst of crumbling tombs, a houn-gan is curing a woman with herbs he rubs on her stomach in the shadow of a Baron Samdi. Three pilgrims shuffle by, backwards, following sacred instructions.

Inside the church, more pilgrims plead, murmuring furtively, lifting Haitian passports or photos of their children high, begging for a visa or good health, leaving a food offering where the priest won't see it, hurling their candles toward an empty niche from whence the warrior's statue once surveyed the nave.

St. James was removed long ago after things got too out of hand, the sexton explains as he tried to keep order.

“When I was little, there were ceremonies in here. Sacrifices. Chickens, everything,” says Antoine Pierre who has worked at the church for twenty-five years (and who asked that his real name not be used.) “The church had practically turned into a temple.”

“Because Vodou gave the country its independence, I can't totally reject it,” he admits, shaking his head as pilgrims poured into the church. “But I don't think people should serve two masters. I think it happens because people are so poor, they don't know what to believe in, so they try both.”

Beyond the church, hardcore believers gravitate towards the mud-filled “St. James Pond.”

Pushing their way past Vodou bands, a bull being sacrificed at its lip(?), the traditional healers and country priests, they glide into the thick grey soup, singing or nodding or humming. The spirit is talking now. Pilgrims and tourists crowded around the edge strain to listen.

Before the sun comes up on July 25, thousands are piling into pick-ups, headed for Limonade and “Limonade by the sea,” the nearby impoverished fishing village.

While most will eventually end up Limonade's St. Anne church to celebrate her patron saint day (July 26), just as important—and perhaps more sacred—are the ceremonies in the same shallow bay where Christopher Columbus and the Santa Maria ran aground on Christmas Eve, 1492.

But it's not his crash nor the cross he planted in the sands that brings believers.

“There's a story about King Henri Christophe,” houn-gan Peter remembers.

Christophe, a revolutionary hero, ruled Haiti's north with an iron fist and a homegrown monarchy from 1806 to 1820, building the massive Citadelle fort atop one of Haiti's peaks as a stronghold in case the French returned.

“While he was on his way down to mass at St. Anne's one day, Christophe came across a young girl on a mule. He told her to move aside, but one of his aides said, ‘That's Our Lady.’ ‘If that's Our Lady, tell her to follow me,’ he supposedly said. When he got to the church, there were three priests he had murdered saying mass. He collapsed with a stroke,” Peter says.

The girl was never seen again, but her mule was found by the sea, people say. Soon she was identified with the early teenage martyr St. Philomena and a new Vodou spirit, Filomez Pierre. Once again a church went up and the pilgrims came.

On July 25, half-buried in a century of sand, the tiny chapel is more like a Vodou temple, full of chanting, sobbing, swooning believers clutching yellow and black candles. The priest, perhaps embarrassed, chases away curious journalists.

The real action is down by the sea anyway. Once again people are stripping down to underpants and walking into the water, hands outstretched, eyes skywards.

“Oh Mistress! Please hear me! I have done everything you asked for!” one woman says as she wades out across the shallow bay, clutching her bunch of

herbs. Last year's shorts and underpants lap the shore, floating on the warm Caribbean waves.

On the beach, mambo Camila, who came with 160 followers, is adjusting a crisply ironed white dress. An old peasant dressed in red and blue—on a normal day he would be hoeing beans or picking corn at this hour—tucks different colored handkerchiefs into her belt and sprays her with perfume.

“We came for St. Philomena and St. Anne,” she says. “It costs a lot, but we get a lot in return, too. If you have a good year, where nothing bad happens to



you, you have to give something back.”

Nearby, Marie-Carmel Menelus is getting dressed.

“I just came to take a swim,” Menelus says shyly. “I saw a woman holding a child in a dream and I knew I should make all the pilgrimages this year. I'm praying for a visa to get out of here. Every year I get a little closer. God hears me. I'm sure of it.”

Out in the bay, her aunt, seventy-year-old Jeanne Louis, is just finishing her devotions. Menelus, who sings in a church choir, says she is Catholic but that her aunt is Vodouist. Once a Florida resident, her aunt came back “because the spirits called her,” Menelus says, although Louis denies it.

“I don't serve. I'm pure Catholic,” the old woman says as she puts on her handkerchief.

Menelus shakes her head, smiling. “Now we're going to Limonade. I'm going to pray in the church and she'll do what she has to do. But if I don't get what I am asking, I'll never come back.”

Will she also lose faith in Catholicism?

“The spirits want to take me, but I'm not ready yet,” she admits quietly.

When Columbus ran aground that Christmas Eve, he wrote of the islanders to his patrons, Catholic mon-



archs Isabella and Ferdinand: “Your Highnesses should feel great joy, because presently they will be Christians and instructed in the good manners of your realms.”

But Christianity has not taken hold the way the conquerors planned. This year Haitian president Jean-Bertrand Aristide even issued a decree making Vodou an official religion, on equal standing with Christianity. Maybe the millions of massacred Africans and indigenous peoples have their revenge. (?)

“Vodou is the bedrock of the country,” Peter says. “It's not surprising the government wants to recuperate (?) it. It's really a political move.”

“The biggest betrayal the founding fathers could commit two hundred years ago was handing the country back to the oppressors, the cultural and social system we fought against,” according to (says?) Peter.

When the clergy came back in 1860, the government asked the church to educate the population, and since then it has played a dominant role in social and

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political life. "We never got full independence. If we are poor, if we are illiterate, if the country is in ruins, it is because Christianity has failed. Vodou hasn't failed yet because Vodou hasn't had a chance."