To the stranger, Haiti presents a curious mixture of the beautiful and the squalid, the exotic and the desperately poor. The people themselves are utterly French, cultured and polite, on the one hand, and miserable, poor and illiterate on the other. In every respect, all extremes seem to be represented, although the middle ground may often be lacking. Thus, after having read quite a bit of what has been written on the subject of this country, and finding that the author's themselves are not always in agreement, one might wonder whether the mystery is at all penetrable. After almost six months of observation, interrogation, testing and to some extent, participation, some of the questions seem even more perplexing than at the beginning, although some of the results might be summarized in the following, without however entering into details of ceremonialism, belief systems, ways of making a living, etc.

Although the mass of the population are descendants, to a greater or lesser degree, of those brought to this island in slavery times from Africa, Haiti is, in certain respects, quite distinct from other New World areas, where African retentions are to be found today. In the surface, it is striking that here French and its creolized offspring, are spoken, the only place in the New World where that is the case, with the exception of the small French possessions. This in and of itself served to isolate this country in the New World and led to its prolonged cultural dependence on France, at least as far as the upper classes were concerned. Only with the days of the Second World War has the younger generation of the Haitian elite been forced to turn itself increasingly towards the United States. On the whole, however, this matter of the French language and French culture is of hardly more than surface importance, however dear his reminiscences of his "student days"
in Paris might be to many a member of the elite, and however "Latin" he might consider himself. The difference between Haiti and other Afro-American areas lies rather in the fact of the uniquely successful revolt with its resulting expulsion of foreign domination. Accra. For here it was the slaves who revolted against the white masters, rather than the white colonists who broke with the mother country, as was the case in all the other parts of the New World. As a result, from the time of the revolution until the American occupation more than one hundred years later, this country did not have a white ruling class but a mulatto one. The mulattoes, although as well hated as the whites had been, had themselves African roots, many of them had allegiances to vodou and other African remainders; even today, among themselves, they speak predominantly creole, as do the masses whom they despise so very much. In contrast to the foreign rulers, the mulattoes remained "Haitian", with a peculiar feeling of patriotism, ambivalent though it may have been. Thus, by taking over the position of the previous masters, they were in a sense identifying themselves with them, as Frenchmen, Latins, Catholics and rulers, while hating and fighting them, at the same time also being dependent on the masses from which they had sprung, but hating and surpressing these in their turn in their new role as masters. Their very social position determined their ambivalence.

From the moment of the ascension to power of the mulattoes, the most minute differentiations of skin color became of even greater importance than they had been under the French. There was, needless to say, never the slightest degree of freedom; even after the successful revolution slavery, or its equivalent, continued to exist, and probably in a harsher form than it had been known to the slaves in Africa, where many of them had been themselves among the masters.
Christianization, in the time of the colony, had never been more than skin deep, nor had the example of the white masters been inspiring. When, as a result of the revolution, the Vatican broke off relations with Haiti for about sixty years, the only priests that ever came there were defrocked ones or those who, for one reason or another, had to leave other countries. Nevertheless, for the greater part of that period, Catholicism remained the official state religion of the country, and several presidents carried out anti-voodoo campaigns. Among the most ruthless in his physical suppression of the cult and of its adherents, was Dessalines; according to popular belief however, he himself was a faithful adherent of the cult, and his cult houses may still be visited. Furthermore, he has become deified and is known to possess individuals in the course of ceremonies. Lorrimer Denis has published an account of Dessalines magical protection in battle and the ceremonials surrounding this "divinity". Once more the ever present current of contradiction and ambivalence is evident.

In spite of the suppressions, voodoo continued full force throughout the entire period, even if at times undercover, while the Catholic missionary efforts that we know in other Latin American countries, were absent. At the same time, the elements reinforcing the African side of the picture were absent as well. Elsewhere the slave-trade continued until the end of the 19th century. Today in Cuba one may meet individuals born in Africa or whose parents were born there; tribal affiliations and African languages have remained living realities. Similarly in other New World countries, Haiti, quite to the contrary, has lost all contact with Africa since the end of the 18th century. It was only within the last few months, (1947), that the first diplomatic exchange visits between Haiti and Liberia took place.
As a result of these circumstances, both African and European items of Haitian life and religion might be expected to be more modified here than elsewhere, and perhaps also better integrated. The duration of the contact, too, has been longer; in 1505 Haiti was the first country of the New World to introduce Negro slaves, according to St. Mary, 150 years prior to the other French colonies. These historical conditions together with the great regionalism of the country—one might even say regional isolation—as well as the individual manner of handing down traditions, and personal embroideries on these, make for the tremendously variegated range of phenomena observable. It is perhaps, hardly possible to speak of phenomena as Haitian without specifying regional and individual peculiarities. For this reason the following emphasizes my knowledge of the region of Leogane with which I am best acquainted.

In considering the Haitian peasant and lower class individual for it is mainly he who has inherited the rich Afro-American tradition, we must remember that in several ways he differs from the traditional subjects of classical ethnology: Instead of representing a cultural entity, he represents a class in a larger cultural complex, on which he is dependent. This dependency is not only functional, as for example in the sense of economic needs, but also frequently non-functional; thus, e.g., with reference to time and space orientation, the Haitian peasant utilizes the terms acquired from the dominant culture, without actually being able to handle these concepts.

Furthermore, although he has remarkable lacks of information on all kinds of subjects, as well as remarkable misinformations about the outside world, the Haitian peasant is not as cut off from the outside world as the classical "primitive."
Even from the distant mountain regions, women carry burdens into the city, and in my own region, many people not only visit the city frequently, but have lived there as well as in other parts of the country, while several of the men have worked in Cuba or the Dominican republic. Parenthetically, it is often amazing to see how these foreign contacts the mechanism of reinterpretation is operative, and items of observed are retranslated into the familiar mold. Thus one woman has worked for a time in an American household in Port-au-Prince, and knows that at Christmas time Americans invite friends to a large dinner. This, she interpreted as being their way of serving the loa—the African gods,—according to their own peculiar ordinance, for Christmas, to her, is essentially an African holiday. This conception is further indicated by her remark that Protestants do not pray at Christmas time, for they do not mix themselves in matters of the loa. To many of these people vodu is not, as in Cuba, the African religion, but rather as integral a part of Catholicism as midnight mass, baptism, the cross, the credo, etc., all of which figure in their ceremonialism. Incidentally, it is precisely for this reason that inspite of its anti-vodu campaigns the Catholic Church has never succeeded in stamping out vodu in Haiti. Protestantism, on the other hand, treating the loa as evil spirits and shaming them away as such has succeeded in a considerable number of cases.

We see then, that a pattern of thinking has developed, tightly intermingling African and European elements, into which new experiences are constantly fitted. It is true that not only the European elements have changed in the course of time but the
African ones as well. Most prominent in this change is that which was undergone by the character of some of the gods; most obviously, perhaps, that of the god Legba, who in the Dahomean pantheon is the youngest of the family, a trickster, a phallic god. In Haiti, on the contrary, he has become very old, and the wooden phallus of the African rites has become a crutch. The suggestive dances, including the wooden phallus, have moved into the domain of the Gede, and the secular dances of the carnival. The African derivation of the Gede is not entirely clear, but here in Haiti they are the spirits of death, of fertility; they are considered most amusing and are laughed at—so that one might wonder at this mocking attitude toward death. They are considered to be drunkards, beggars, vagabonds, and thus by extension have become the symbolic representatives of the masses against the elite. The one thing in Haitian religion, however, which holds for all of Haiti, as well as all Afro-American areas, including the countries of origin in Africa, is the phenomenon of possession; that is, all of these areas the divinities may manifest themselves by appearing in the body of the faithful. According to belief, the individual loses consciousness and another personality, that of the divinity inhabits his (or her) body for the duration of the possession. The divinity may speak and perform extraordinary feats, such as healing, dancing in the fire, for example. The divinity may punish individuals, and even the body he inhabits. He may eat and drink, smoke and dance, and otherwise behave in the manner considered typically of the specific divinity. Medically, possession might be defined as temporary loss of consciousness, followed by amnesia, sometimes accompanied by violent convulsive movements, and sometimes by complete alternations of the personality, lasting
from a few moments to—reputedly—a week or even ten days. However, the cultural definition of the Haitian believer, it seems, does not always overlap with the above medical definition, and since, in the literature on Haiti, they have been employed simultaneously, the problem is thus complicated. It is of course difficult, and sometimes even impossible, to tell apart those cases of culturally defined possessions which do not fit the medical conditions. One simple example, however may be cited: to the Haitian, a person speaking in his sleep is possessed by a divinity and it is this divinity which speaks. Another example would seem to be furnished by the Gede possessions: About the time of All Saints Day and All Souls Day and starting about one month prior to it, and this especially in Port-au-Prince, Gede—possessions occur. Individuals, usually women, dress up with dark glasses—rimmed in white, black hat and sometimes jacket, white paint (or powder) on their faces. They walk about the streets especially the markets, in something of the "Tricks or Treats" spirit of American Halloween. They hop up and down, chattering incessantly, dancing, begging stealing, making more or less suggestive approaches. These are culturally defined as possessions, although it is admitted that some people fake such possessions and that members of the culture themselves often cannot tell apart the fake from the genuine. It is hoped that the gods will take it upon themselves to punish the impostors. Similarly, on All Saints Day and All Souls Day; dances are held for the Gede and again it may be doubted that all those supposed to be possessed are so in a medical sense. This is not to say that such imitations are necessarily
conscious in essences, but may simply be a very convinced acting out of a rôle, but lacking the complete break in awareness. This is borne out by the fact that the Cede may be able to discuss all kinds of events in the life of the person he is supposed to be possessing, indicating that amnesia of one's previous life has not set in. In general it must be recognized that good dancers are able to dance in the same twisted and rigid fashion which characterizes certain types of possession—even where no attempt at pretended possession takes place, so that the untrained observer may believe himself to be witnessing a case of possession without the being so at all. In other instances, genuine possession may be identified as such by only a few minutes or even seconds of contortion and convulsion at the beginning and the end. When actual possession does take place, it is not always clear who the possessing divinity is; this is especially true in cases of first possession, before initiation, when the gods do not know how to talk or "stand on their feet." In that case a hungan—a priest—may be consulted who identifies the deity, sometimes by convoking his own dominant divinity into a jar (a canari), asking him the desired information. But even if possession in a medical sense takes place, and if the divinity behaves in a well differentiated and recognizable manner, his identity is still not certain. For it may be an evil spirit, sent by someone to harm, and in such cases the individual possessed by this spirit may disrupt a ceremony, destroy its efficacy, and even kill herself.

While, then, there are possessions culturally so defined but not medically, there may be others, existing in the medical sense, but not so recognized culturally. Thus half possessions, apparent states of semi-consciousness, were observed at one dance,
where, however, the individual in question pulled herself together and did not actually get possessed.

How much control the individual herself has in permitting herself to get possessed is still a moot point. Again we must differentiate the medical and the cultural definitions and the people themselves are not quite agreed on this point. The consensus of opinion, however, seems to be that, in the last instance, it is up to the deity himself. At a dance given by a family it is expected, as a matter of common propriety on the part of the deities, that these in the heads of non-family members will not come, although frequently enough they do. If you try to stop a god from coming by "tying" your head, he may come with such force as to kill you.

The above, however, must not be taken to mean that all Haitians do get possessed. Many believers, including humans, never get possessed in the course of their lives. Others rarely, while still others get possessed frequently and violently. Which of these groups might represent a majority in the population might be hard to establish. Most frequently, possession seems to take place among women, although they do occur among men. It is said that as individuals get older, their own deities may look for younger and more vigorous bodies to possess. Their is one reason to believe that possessions prior to puberty are rather rare.

As to the dynamics of possession, there may be considerable variations between cases, as the symbolism of individual possessions sometimes indicates rather clearly. Let us cite one example of such symbolism: one man who is most timid, shy and seemingly unintelligent has a most powerful divinity. When
possessed by this divinity, to whom much respect is due, this man, remaining sensitively aware to his environment, becomes most dignified, almost regal, and greatly enjoys the reverent treatment given him by his friends and relatives who on other occasions treat him rather disdainfully.

On the whole, it may be said that the phenomenon of possession has profound roots both culturally and psychologically. It is certainly true that children from the tenderest age on know the dances the songs and the habits of the gods, and are able to imitate their typical gestures and tone of voice. It is said that first possessions frequently occur during the games of children (or adolescents) while playing "Loa", i.e., while imitating the actions of possessed persons. However, it is only in the course of initiation that the possessions become more and more stereotyped. First possessions are said to be violent, pseudo-epileptic fits, and only when the divinity is identified by the human and the appropriate rites are started does the god learn to dance and to speak. Thus the pattern is prepared and learned both before and after initiation.

On the other hand, there can be little doubt that the true medical phenomenon of possession has psycho-sexual roots. Certainly the French word "possession" has such connotations as has the creole "monter" or "mount." The possessed person is called the "cheval" or "horse" of the divinity and is ridden by it. Gods address women as "my daughter" or "my wife." The initiates are called "Huni"—the wives of the god. More concretely, at least in my region, the initiation ceremony is considered the marriage with a god who asks for it. The woman to be initiated lies on her mat for her god for nine days.
She is to wear special clothing, to have special toilet paraphernalia. She is to have a special necklace which is identified as the equivalent of the wedding ring. During the ceremony the novice is to have boiling maize put into her hand and mouth, and to have her hand and foot passed over the flames. One might even go so far as to consider the symbolism of pain and fear as well as of the fire in the course of the initiation.

On the other hand, men may also be initiated in the same fashion, although they are said to lie on their mat only for five days. They too are referred to as horses and are mounted. Depending on the individual, there might here be a question of identification with the god, as well as the possibility of a latent homosexual symbolism. This possibility is rather striking, since male homosexuals are rather frequently encountered in Port-au-Prince voudou centers. (As further evidence it might be mentioned how strikingly many men dressed up and acted as women during the Port-au-Prince carnival.)

Two further considerations:

1. Men may be married to female gods at a regular marriage ceremony performed by a bush priest, during which the goddess in question is in the head of the man. It is the goddess who requests such a marriage and often she will also demand that the man marry not only her but also the woman she is possessing.

   The man then prepares a separate room for his goddess wife in which he is to sleep alone "for her" twice a week. The goddess is said to come to him in his sleep.

2. In both the number of initiates and of possessed persons, women seem to outweigh men greatly. Hauck Burnham discusses in detail the possibility that in population numbers also women seem to outweigh men, even in the birth figures. (Bascom has mentioned
a similar observation for Yoruba!). Unfortunately, it is not possible to arrive at exact conclusions on this subject for no census has ever been conducted. However, the apparent disproportions in the population seem to lead also to greater sexual frustration in women, especially with the existence of polygamy, and would in part explain the orgiastic violence of some of the female possessions observed. In addition, in terms of remarks overheard and attitudes observed, there seems to be, at least latently, quite a bit of female homosexuality in the countryside. This permits, at least in some cases, an additional hypothesis on the nature of possession: namely, the identification of a woman with a male divinity. This hypothesis fits especially well one case. This woman is not known to have orgiastically violent possessions, but rather masculine, domineering ones. Under possession, she (i.e. the divinities,) has been known to proposition a woman. Her Rorschach and other psychological materials would indicate such masculine tendencies.

One third point must be noted with reference to possession and Haitian life in general: Haitians are wonderful actors. They act by completely identifying themselves with the character portrayed: in telling a story, in inventing a situation, in living their daily lives. This acting is closely allied to dressing up. From October to November 2nd, people dress up as Gede and act out the character of these gods. From January 2nd to Ash Wednesday, people dress up for the carnival and practice the dances and actions. From Ash Wednesday to Easter, it is the Rara. The loa themselves are to some extent even more complete identifications than these, and they too dress up. Thus, in a way the personality of the Haitian who participates in all these events is not a stable and more or less permanent thing; he is,
rather, constantly changing identity. This changing of one's identity goes very far, to the very roles one plays in one's daily life, and in part explains, perhaps, the almost compulsive lying found in many persons and many situations. It goes hand in hand with what might be called a profound lack of a sense of reality. This is turn leads to an intensive living in the present with no ability to prepare for the future, with no thought of living in terms of a goal in the future. It is for this reason, among others, that Haitian workers have been called lazy by people orienting themselves in terms of other systems of values.

The caste system is conducive to what has been called a sado-masochist orientation to life, and anyone who has observed Haitians of any class, knows that here too it exists. The constant bowing to those above, which is compensated for by cruelty to those below. This hierarchical arrangement is true socially in the society at large, but also in terms of the pyramidding of generations, and behind the living ancestors are those dead and deified, the African dead, the loa and at the top, bon Dieu. The lowliest peasant or peasant woman has still the children or a dog they can beat, sometimes someone else's children even; children are subject to all adults of the family. And the peasant himself admits that he often beats a child disproportionately to its guilt, and is then unable to stop until his pent up emotion is discharged. The sado-masochist element also clearly comes out in aggressive and auto-aggressive behavior during possession. And here we may note, with reference to the sexual symbolism of possession, that the creole word "to beat"—"callier" also signifies sexual intercourse.

Dancing for the gods, and through possession, giving
them an opportunity to come and dance, is, however, only one aspect of vodou. Theologically more important is the feeding and serving of the gods. It must be understood that the gods—the loa, or saints—are considered as entities having an existence of their own. At the same time, they—or their manifestations—become tutelary spirits of a family or of an individual, and it is these tutelary spirits that have to be fed and served according to certain rules. These rules on the one hand are general—in the country or region as a whole—generally recognized as appertaining to the giving divinity, and on the other hand are modified by the commands of the tutelary spirit to his servant. The more such a divinity is fed, the more powerful he becomes, and apparently also the more dependent on his servant. Thus he can be caused increasingly to do things for his servant, to the point where he may be turned toward evil. In that case, a god may "eat" one's enemies, or, in exchange for certain services, may demand a "human sacrifice." This is done not by literally killing a person, but by killing an animal that symbolically represents that person. It is believed that as a result of that animal sacrifice the person will sicken and die and thus be "eaten" by the god. Should however the servant refuse to fulfill his obligation—once undertaken, to do this, he himself might die, and thus be "eaten" by the god. It may be noted that this idea seems to be one of the contributing factors to the continuing widespread belief, even outside of Haiti, in the existence of cannibalism here, although other types of explanation may not easily be ignored. However, whether or not actual cases of cannibalism have taken place is relatively unimportant in comparison with the profound psychological importance of the deep-seated belief of large masses of the population
that cannibalism on the part of demons and werewolves is a reality. And by the fact of this belief, cannibalism becomes a reality in terms of the behavioral world. It can easily be seen that this oral orientation—toward feeding in a sense being the protection against being eaten—is of basic importance in Haitian psychology.

This leads us to the reasons for the continuous survival of vodou as a vital force in the life of the Haitian peasant, inspite of surpressions and persecutions. The service of the loa is a mighty protection, on the one hand, against the wrath of the loa themselves, were they not served, and on the other hand against all the various dangers of life. And life, indeed, is very dangerous business. To the Haitian peasant, all things are, potentially, animate: there are animals, but then there are animals which are really gods in disguise and there is no effective way of telling which is which. This is especially frightening if these are animals that are considered to be dangerous. And the peasants are especially afraid of snakes—the favorite vehicle of many gods. (There are no poisonous snakes on the island.) If you kill a snake, and it is a god, he will kill you. If you do not kill it, and it is not a god, it will kill you. Aside from dangerous animals, there are dangerous people. For you know your neighbors and even the members of your family in the daytime but you do not know into what they will turn at night. You can have confidence in no one. There are secret societies of demons who march at night and eat human flesh, there are those who turn their gods to evil purposes, there are still others, especially women, who turn into werewolves at night and eat people. There are those who make zombies and may turn your children into animals, who kill people.
or make them sick. How deep seated these beliefs are may be seen from the nightmares of the children—and adults—as well as from the material they produce in projective tests. Fear of the night is a widespread phenomenon among Haitians of all ages and classes, and sometimes it is translated into a fear of thieves and robbers. Against all these evils there is only one protection—après bon dieu—the service of the loa. They protect and defend you, and either directly, i.e., in the head of a person, or through the intermediacy of a human, they may cure and give advice. In the region of Leogane, at least, disease and infant mortality are at a peak, there is a complete lack of sanitation, water is taken from the irrigation canals, which serve for all purposes. There is no medical help, no priest or church agency, there is insufficient food and shelter. The faithful service of the loa remains the only hope for protection of any kind. As a result, economically people bleed themselves white to live up to their religious obligations. This may indeed be very expensive, into the hundreds of dollars even, for people whose income measures in cents. But if it is not possible for a person to fulfill his obligations, the gods will be understanding and permit of almost indefinite postponement, as long as one shows one's good will by making a small beginning. They will then cease tormenting the person in his sleep, which is the sure sign that they want sacrifices or initiations.

Thus, fear seems to be a basic motive for the service of the loa, and in some cases one may suspect that it is fear of one's own, inward turned aggressions. In the mentality of the people, the dancing and the posessions, though often spectacular, are of entirely secondary importance to the feeding and ritual serving of the gods. And although the gods are one's only protection,
nonetheless the ambivalence that pervades all aspects of Haitian life, persists, and during the carnival the very members of vodu societies satirized vodu dances. With the exception of the cock fights, however, the dancing remains the only social event. A dance attracts people from miles away—frequently of a radius of one hour's walking distance or more—and frequently only to watch rather than to dance and/or get possessed oneself. Spectacular events, such as the great Christmas gatherings, where the gods dance in the fire and whose group emotions reach an immense pitch, remain the subjects of conversation for months afterwards. As a matter of fact, gods and diseases comprise the great majority of all subjects of conversation.