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Author:  Erika Bourguignon
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Voodoo (voudou, from Dahomean vodun, "spirit"), the folk religion of Haiti, combining many Catholic elements with beliefs and practices derived from various African tribal religions, particularly from the West Coast.

Saints or loa. In Haitian voodoo, respect is paid to a rather distant high god, but great importance is also given to three groups of spirits: the saints (also referred to as loa, mysteres, and anges), the dead, and the twins (marassa). Of these the loa have attracted the greatest interest because many of them represent an identification of various Catholic saints with African tribal deities. St. Patrick, for example, is identified with the Dahomean snake deity Damballah; St. James the Elder with Ogun, the Yoruba deity of iron and warfars; and St. Anthony with the Dahomean Legba. However, some loa, as for example Baron Samedi (who is associated with death and graveyard crosses) have no connection with Catholic saints. Others, such as St. Michael, are identified solely with their Catholic namesakes. There are hundreds of loa. A dozen or so are known throughout Haiti, while a good many are known only by one family or one cult group.

RITUAL. Individuals inherit obligations to worship particular loa, as well as the family dead and the spirits of the twins among the ancestors. Families and cult groups carry out ceremonies collectively. They are often, but not always, aided by voodoo priests (mungan) or priestesses (membo) who have undergone various rites of initiation. Each cult group is independent, and there is no hierarchy of priests and no centralized control.

Voodoo ritual contains a number of elements taken over from Catholicism: such prayers as the Hail Mary, the Lord's Prayer, and the Litany of Saints; the practice of making the sign of the cross; baptism; and the use of bells, candles, crosses, and pictures of saints. African elements in voodoo ritual include the use of drums, dancing, and, most important, elements of ancestor worship and concern with twins. Still other elements undoubtedly are of local origin. Indeed, local variations in the ritual and also in the belief system of voodoo are continually being elaborated.

As a rule, services for the loa, the twins, or the dead involve a feast and a dance. There is not a shred of evidence for the much repeated assertion that voodoo involves human sacrifice. While an animal (chicken, goat, pig, or even bullock) may be killed ceremonially, it is usually cooked and most of it eaten. There is much drumming and singing. The drumming and the songs must be appropriate for the particular group of spirits to be invoked, for each loa has his or her own particular drum rhythms and songs. The loa are thus invited to participate in the dance. They do so supposedly by possessing individuals among the faithful. These possessed individuals take on the personal characteristics attributed to each of the deities. While they are possessed they may talk, dance, eat, and even give advice to and prescribe cures for the ill. A possessed individual is known as the deity's "horse" (cheval), and the deity is said to "mount" his "horse." At the end of the possession, the "horse" is expected to have no memory of the experience.

Much has been written on the subject of spirit possession—the phenomenon is by no means unique to Haiti. It involves a state of psychological transformation, together with a belief system which explains and expects these alterations. The Haitian form of spirit possession is clearly derived from similar, somewhat more highly formalized phenomena in West Africa among the people from whom many of the elements of voodoo are derived.
Related Folk Religions in the Americas. Throughout those areas of the Americas where descendants of Africans are concentrated, there are large numbers of cults that are strikingly similar to Haiti’s voodoo cults. These Afro-Catholic cults are known under different names in each region: Cuba (santeria); Trinidad (shango); Brazil (condomblé, xango, macumba, and batuque). Related cults have been reported from Dutch Guiana and, during the last century, from Louisiana. Some of these folk religions have retained a strikingly large number of African elements in their ritual. This is true, for example, of the condomble of Bahia, Brazil, where contact with West Africa was maintained until relatively recent times.

In the United States, the term voodoo (also hoodoo, voodooism) has been used to refer to a type of magic practiced by Negro “voodoo doctors” in the South. While little is known of the practices of voodoo doctors, these seem to include both curative and aggressive magic and, as in Haitian voodoo, a fusion of African, European, and local elements. There does not appear to be among these voodoo doctors an organized religious system as in the Caribbean and in Brazil, nor worship of any African deities. Many Southern U.S. voodoo doctors are Protestants and Christian influences on them are derived from Protestantism rather than from Catholicism.