
VODOO, voo'doo, the folk religion of Haiti, consisting of African, Roman Catholic, and local elements. The term is derived from the Dahomean (West African) yodun, meaning "spirit". The Creole French word voodoo stems from vodu, of the African Ewe language. Many of the Africans brought to Haiti during the period of slavery came from Dahomey, but others such as the Yoruba (Gago) and Xoo also have contributed to the cult. Syncretic religions of this type exist also in other areas to which many Africans were brought — for example, santeria in Cuba, Shango in Trinidad, Congofole, Kongo, and candombe in Brazil. In the United States, the term "voodoo" (or hook-doo) often is used to mean any type of magic. More specifically, it refers to the magical and curative activities of "voodoo doctors", particularly among Negroes in the South. However, there is no evidence at present of a cult of the type found in Haiti, although such a cult does appear to have existed in New Orleans during the 19th century.

The Haitian voodoo cult involves belief in a Supreme Deity (Bon Dloa), as well as in loa, or gods, and the twins. The loa are a large group of lesser deities known variously by the names of Catholic saints or those of African gods. Loa worship centers in family groups and cult groups, headed by a priest (a perist or a priestess (mambo), and there are various grades of initiates. They perform ceremonies on an annual cycle (such as Christmas, harvest) and for special occasions (initiations, memorial services). Families of believers have obligations for the worship of their loa and their ancestors, and the twins among them, and cult groups are called in to provide the expert help with the necessary ceremonies, which consist principally of dancing and drumming and chanting and dancing, and the preparation of feasts.

The loa are invited to participate in these rites and they do so through ecstatic possession, that is, certain participants take on the characteristics of individual loa. This means not only donning of clothing (such as a red kerchief for...
"Ogun-St. James"), but also the behavior, gestures, facial expression, and so on, of the loa. Such trance states are introduced by specific drum rhythms associated with each loa. The deity may sing, dance, great people, give advice, perform cures, eat, drink, and so on. "Possession" may last from a few minutes to several hours, and the individual is supposed not to have any memory of the event. A possessed person is referred to as the loa's "horse" (chevel). Possession is central to the life of the cult since it presents tangible evidence of the gods and brings their reassuring presence to the believers.

Each group of worshippers is an independent unit, and there is no central organization, hierarchy, or dogma. There is much variation between groups in the specific loa worshipped - the choice of which depends on family tradition - and there is variation also in specific ceremonies and details of belief. However, there is contact between groups and there exists some general consensus.

Haitian peasants fear black magic, and the cults provide protection against it and other evils. There is much poverty, disease, and a high rate of infant mortality, with little empirical defense against these ills. Efforts by the church to destroy the cults often have led to an increased fear of magic. Under these conditions, the cults fulfill an important function.

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Reprint: The Encyclopedia Americana