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In a recent paper (American Anthropologist 66:344 - 354) Seth Leacock described and analyzed ceremonial drinking patterns in the Batuque cult of Belem, in northern Brazil. In reading his discussion, I was much impressed with the similarities as well as the differences between these patterns and those which I encountered in the study of various vodun cult houses in urban and rural Haiti. As in the Batuque, it is the spirits, rather than the cult members, who drink. That is to say, persons in dissociated states of various depths ("trance"), presumed to be possessed by spirits (loa), drink during ceremonies. Drinking rarely, if ever, occurs prior to the onset of dissociation, and dissociation cannot be said to be a result of drinking. The spirits have particular preferences for rum, tafia (raw rum corresponding to the Brazilian cachaca), occasionally even whiskey, depending on their personalities and presumed attributes as to social class, ethnic status, etc. Quantities as well as tastes vary among the individual spirits. For example, the spirit Ogun is said to be able to drink great quantities of rum without becoming drunk, and indeed this is the key refrain of one of his most popular songs. Again, the same spirit may behave somewhat differently, depending on the person "in whose head" he or she appears. Some persons, particularly women, claim that they never drink, indeed cannot stand alcohol, yet are possessed by male spirits who drink heavily, without ill effects to the subject while dissociated.

While members of vodun cults may be possessed by many spirits in succession, the distinction Leacock makes between "serious" and "light-hearted"
spirits in the Batuque does not hold for vodun. This distinction may well re­late to the non-African background of the Batuque.

To return to the matter of drinking, however, it is noteworthy that while Haitian vodun priests engage in curing, this activity does not involve either drinking nor incidentally, spirit possession, when the curing is sepa­rate from the general ritual of dancing and sacrificing for the spirits. Indeed, cult leaders frequently do not get possessed at all during any cere­monies, and this may be explained as due to the fact that they are old—if that is the case—and the spirits do not wish to tire them. Also, that they have much esoteric knowledge and therefore can control the spirits. Conse­quently, they are not likely to engage in much drinking, in contrast to the cult leaders of the Batuque.

In addition, I might mention the case of one man, a habitual drunkard, of whom it was said that his affliction was punishment by the spirits. I did not observe the ambivalence about drinking that Leacock speaks of, and indeed it was my impression that there was more outright drunkenness in a mountain area near Port-au-Prince, where an effective anti-vodun campaign had been conducted by the Catholic Church, than in areas where the cults flourished.