Forthcoming J. of Am. Folklore


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Coming on the heels of the author's sensational book on Haitian zombies, The Serpent and the Rainbow, a lurid film based on it and a heated attack by a number of pharmacological researchers (see Science April 15, 1988), this book aims at setting some of the record straight. It is sober to the point of dullness, with all the faults of dissertations, including half a dozen "literature review" sections, containing much that is marginal to the author's thesis. There are other stylistic defects, including the author's very idiosyncratic and arbitrary spelling of Creole, for which no key or explanation is offered.

The book comes at a time when Haiti has again been much in the news, but though Davis attempts to shed some light on the political situation in that unhappy country, that light is at best oblique and the insights offered are debatable. As is by now widely known, Davis, a student of the ethnobotanist R. E. Schultes, went to Haiti to find the poison used to make zombies, after a Canadian-trained Haitian psychiatrist, L. Douyon, identified a well-documented case of a zombie.
Review: Wade Davis

This man had been declared dead by an American physician at the Albert Schweitzer Hospital, and buried. He reappeared 18 years later. His return prompted systematic investigations by Douyon, including an analysis of fingerprints by Scotland Yard. Conclusion: this case was indeed authentic -- the buried man and the returnee were the same. No other cases have come to light in which the supposed zombie was able to tell so convincing and coherent a tale, nor have others been as thoroughly investigated. In cloak and dagger adventures, Davis located sorcerers and had poisons prepared to be analyzed in European and American laboratories. It is Davis' announcement of preliminary, unpublished findings and his ignoring of negative findings that has researchers cry "foul." Davis has now reduced his claims from the earlier, more sensational ones, which appeared in the public record first on ABC-TV and BBC magazine programs. He now says that the poisons are of varying composition and strength, with many inert ingredients in them, including human bone, but that puffer fish and certain species of toads are used, and if prepared and administered correctly their poisons (Tetrodotoxin) can produce temporary paralysis and lowering of vital signs to such a degree that the victim may be declared dead. This fits well the pattern of curare, the famous Amazonian arrow poison. If quantities are insufficient, nothing happens, and if excessive the victim dies outright. Only in rare cases where the scenario works and the victim is removed from the grave in time and administered a second poison, a hallucinogenic, is the making of the zombie complete. The "antidote" keeps the victim stupefied and unable to resist physical and ritual manipulation, he or she remains
Review: Wade Davis

the sorcerer's prisoner, made to work cruelly, for the remainder of the sorcerer's life. The problem is that there is no good evidence of such slavery and that slavery is indeed economically irrational in a country such as Haiti. Davis is aware of the problem but cannot resolve it.

Where the curare-like action of the first poison is conceivable, the second phase of the process raises more questions that are not dealt with. The arguments over the pharmacology of the zombie poisons -- both need to be dealt with, not just the first one -- must be worked out by specialists. For the folklorist and the cultural anthropologist there are other issues. One, as already noted, is the use sorcerers are supposed to be making of zombies. Although the ethnobotanical and ethnobiological nature of the poison, if there was one, was the task set for Davis, he seeks to place zombification in a cultural, social and historical context. It might be noted that there was an anthropologist on Davis' doctoral committee: Irven DeVore is a physical anthropologist who had worked among the !Kung in Southern Africa, not a Caribbeanist or West Africanist. It is here, then, that Davis was on his own and where he is vulnerable. He argues interestingly that for the Haitian sorcerer, from his emic perspective (a term not defined), zombification is only partly a matter of substances administered but more importantly a matter of magical and ritual manipulation of essences. Secondly, the sorcerer is not an independent agent, but a member of a secret society, which acts not arbitrarily, but, in the absence of any effective government, to enforce social rules and values on behalf of the community.
Review: Wade Davis

The secret societies are compared to possible West African antecedents. It is further claimed that Duvalier made use of the secret societies to gain and maintain political power and that they formed the core of the Tontons Macoute. Now called "thugs" in the American press, Davis refers to them by their official name, "Volunteers for the National Security," a militia trained by a U. S. mission. Davis also suggests that the ultimate downfall of Duvalier, Jr. ("Baby Doc") was linked to a withdrawal of support by the Tontons Macoute and/or the secret societies. The picture is coherent and therefore (somewhat) attractive. The evidence, including that for the existence of the secret societies and their links to both sorcerers enforcing morality and to the Tontons Macoute, is fragmentary. The presentation seems to be heavily influenced by the views of certain of Davis' informants who have a perspective beyond the rural level. In the process, Davis overlooks the abuses of the Tontons Macoute, the Duvaliers and the Duvalieristes, and what amounts to a tyranny over the country people by the secret societies.

Clearly, there are lessons to be learned here. What is the kernel of empirical reality in the fantastic tales informants tell as part of their emic view of the world? People, including fieldworkers, construct realities. Do not seek coherence at all costs -- to do so may do violence both to the emic and the etic reality. Most importantly, there are the ethical questions. Davis has been criticized for paying for poisons for which graves were opened. The political implications of the study raise more serious questions for me, for ultimately Davis seems to be arguing for social control,
Review: Wade Davis

keeping people in line through the secret society/Tontons Macoute connection, keeping them in line through terror, by making or threatening to make zombies.