



# VODOUN CULTURE

## LOCATION

Vodoun is first and foremost a lifestyle and religious belief system that developed on the island of Hispaniola, that now consists of the countries Haiti and the Dominican Republic. The original name of Hispaniola was Quisqueya (given by the native population), and this is the island that Christopher Columbus first encountered on his voyage to discover a new world in 1492. Today, almost seven million people live on Haiti, where about 80% of the population believe in Vodoun. Haiti is located in the Caribbean Sea, just south of Cuba. Larger Vodoun communities can also be found in the Dominican Republic, Cuba and in the United States (especially New Orleans). Religions that closely relate to Vodoun can be found in Benin (in Africa) and in South America.

Vodoun is spelled in many ways, including Vaudou, Vodun, Voodoo (the most commonly known name) and Vodou.

## HISTORY

The history of Vodoun starts perhaps with the history of Christopher Columbus. After the first trip by Columbus and his men to "discover" the new world, more and more Spanish settlers followed. The native Arawak inhabitants slowly disappeared due to European diseases, murder, suicide and slavery. The growing importance of sugar brought African slaves, especially from West Africa, to Haiti at the beginning of the 16th century.

Due to its perfect location, climate and soil, Haiti became a place that the Spanish, French and British fought over for years. Eventually, the island became a French colony in the middle of the 17th century. The vast resources of the island soon found their way to Europe. It was during this time that Vodoun started to develop. By 1780 Haiti was one of the wealthiest places on earth, though few Haitians shared in this wealth.

Inspired by the French revolution, the African slaves on Hispaniola revolted in 1791. They killed the French landowners and proclaimed the first black republic in 1804. In 1844 Hispaniola split into two countries, Haiti and the Dominican Republic.

Throughout the 19th century Haiti experienced a series of internal bloody wars. A ruling class of Haitians with mixed heritage regarded their French language and culture and their Catholic religion, to be superior to the black Creole language and the Yoruba religious beliefs that many slaves had brought with them. There was a large gap between the rich and poor at this time. This led to much conflict and there was a great deal of chaos and anarchy.

In 1915 US marines landed to intervene in a country that was in crisis. Roads, houses, hospitals, etc. were built, but once again the result was the same: rich white people who ruled over a majority of blacks. Many peasants were driven from their lands and had to make way for very large US fruit companies. The US left in 1934 but the crisis continued. In 1957 Francis Duvalier, also called "Papa Doc", started a reign of terror on Haiti. His son "Baby Doc" followed him but was also corrupt and violent. Instability continues until today and Haiti is now the poorest nation in the Americas.

Vodoun has had to survive a lengthy organized attack by one of the major religions of the world: Catholicism. For centuries the Catholic Church has tried to completely wipe out Vodoun. At first, Vodoun priests were killed or imprisoned. But after the successful slave revolt of 1804 it was the Catholic priests who were kicked off of the island (of Hispaniola) or killed. Since then the Catholic Church organized many campaigns against the Vodoun. But these have been unsuccessful. In the 1950's the Catholic Church decided to give up its fight to destroy Vodoun and since then the two exist together peacefully. Since the 1970's, however, it has been the Protestant Church (a newer presence in Haiti) that has declared war against Vodoun.

## RELIGION

After black slaves were brought from Africa by the British to work in the fields, they were forbidden to worship their native Yoruba gods. Missionaries tried to force the slaves to accept Catholicism. This was only partially successful. Eventually, a blend of Yoruba and Catholicism occurred (a blend that led to strong disapproval from the Catholic Church).

There is only one god in Vodoun, called Bondye or Damballa. Members of the Vodoun faith, however, worship many spiritual beings, called Loa, that have contact with people on earth. The main aspect of Vodoun is healing people from illness. Those who practice Vodoun give sacrifices to the Loa and ask these spirits to help them in their lives to solve many problems. Vodoun priests can be both men (called houngan) and women (called mambo).

Vodoun priests can tell the future and read dreams, as well as cast spells that harm and protect. They also create potions for various purposes. It is such activities as these and misunderstandings about them that have given Vodoun a bad name in the western world. Popular movies and books focus on these aspects of Vodoun, as well as the belief in zombies (the walking dead), black magic, the "possession" of people by Loa during ceremonies and the sacrificing of animals. Many horror movies use stories about Vodoun. In reality, the practice of black magic does happen but is very rare. Vodoun ceremonies are usually held outside. Drumming, song, chanting and dance are a very important part of any ceremony, as was traditionally the case among the Yoruba in Africa. At the center of the Vodoun temple one will find a pole where people communicate with the spirits. One will also find an altar that will have all kinds of items that relate to the Loa. During these ceremonies animals like goats or chickens are sacrificed to feed and please the spirits.

The sense of free will is almost completely absent in Vodoun religion. The Loa are seen as responsible for everything that happens in life. Whatever happens to us is decided by the Loa and one must always ask the Loa to change something in one's life or in society.

### **CULTURE, SOCIETY, ECONOMY AND POLITICS**

Haitian society is heavily influenced by the African origins of the population and the influence of the French. This shows clearly in the language, religion and customs of the country.

The middle class and elite Haitians still tend to speak French, while the majority speak Creole, which is a mixture of African languages, heavily influenced by French.

Haitian art, music and handicrafts are very popular and rich in design. One can find much of this art on, and in, Vodoun temples and on ceremonial drums. Favorite themes in art relate to the spirit world, as well as of weddings, market scenes, cock-fights and imaginary jungle scenes. Paintings are very bright and colorful. Haiti is also famous for its wood carvings.

Haitian society has been influenced by long periods of violence and dictatorships. In the last few years, however, Haiti has been trying to set up a democracy. Nevertheless, Haiti is an extremely poor country. There continues to be a huge gap between the rich and poor. At the moment 1% of the population owns about 60% of the land. Many of today's writers from Haiti are very critical about the problems in Haiti, and most of these problems have not gone away.

Many Haitians cannot read or write, and are peasants who work in the fields. Despite the relevant increase in stability, many peasants are becoming even poorer than before. Because they have had a hard time competing with farmers abroad, the rural farmers of Haiti see little choice but to leave their land and seek employment in the country's capital, Port Au Prince. In the 1950's there were 150,000 people in Port Au Prince. Today there are more than 2,000,000. However, almost 70% percent of the workforce still works in agriculture. The main crops are coffee, mangoes, sugarcane, wood, rice, and corn.

Population growth is a major problem in Haiti, not only in the Capital. In this century alone the population of the country has increased by 400%. Men have much more power in Haitian society than women. Many women's organisations, such as Kay Fanm, have recently been created to protest the way that women are treated by men in their country. Women's complaints are still rarely taken seriously by the police and the government.

The United States has a much stronger influence on Haiti today than France. American marines have landed on Haitian shores several times since its independence and more than 80% of all trade is now with the United States.

