

A Christian Pogrom Against Voodoo

anon.

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The burning of witches and healers, the destruction of sacred places, forced conversion to the christian cross: this is not a description of the christian conquest of Europe and the original invasion of the Americas, but rather of the recent christian pogrom in Haiti being carried out against practitioners of voodoo, the syncretic christian-animist spiritual tradition of more than three quarters of Haiti's people. Describing it as a "devil's religion" practiced by "sons of Satan" and a "national curse" to be "uprooted," Radio Lumiere, run by the Baptist Group of Southern Haiti (which is in turn funded by an evangelical group in Florida) has declared war on voodoo, fomenting a wave of violence against voodoo communities.

In the three months following the fall of dictator "Baby Doc" Duvalier earlier this year perhaps 100 voodoo priests were burned or hacked to death, the houses of voodoo followers were burned, people were forced to convert to christianity, voodoo temples and ritual objects were smashed and burned. People identified as werewolves by christian mobs were macheted and burned to death. In some towns dozens of people were murdered and sacred voodoo sites were desecrated. A Haitian writer told the *New York Times*, "There has been a fanatic crusade...like the Inquisition, with people dragged off to church or lynched."

At first some observers attributed the attacks to revenge against Duvalier supporters, but as one Haitian ethnologist argued, "Equating voodoo with Duvalier's reign is a pretext for the massacres. It's an excuse used by those Catholics and Protestants who want to reduce voodoo to a less significant role in Haitian culture."

Voodoo worshipers have vowed to resist. One 78-year-old man recalled that his father and grandfather had both been killed with burning oil in the last anti-voodoo outburst in 1942. "At that time we had to practice secretly in the woods," he said, "but voodoo went on and it will."

While we do not know many particulars about voodoo, we were struck by the New York Times reporter's description of the conflict between "the two Haitis": "One is African, with a rich mythology, a pantheon of spirits and distinct moral and social codes that were brought on slave ships from West Africa. The other is Western, first molded as a Catholic French colony, then shifting its model and source of aid to the United States." (Voodoo is one manifestation of a family of syncretic spiritual traditions created by African slaves who were forced to go underground in their nature-based spirituality to avoid punishment from Christian slavemasters. In Cuba and Trinidad, this tradition is called shango, in Brazil, condomble, xango and macumba, much of it brought from Yoruba, Ibo and Dahomey cultures. The word voodoo derives from vodu, or spirit, in the Dahomean language.)

There is another way to characterize the conflict: on one side, christianity, with its hierarchy, organization, and rigid gospels. On the other, a diffused, decentralized spiritual tradition, described in the encyclopedia we found: "Each group of worshipers is an independent unit, and there is no central organization, hierarchy, or dogma. There is much variation between groups..."

And there is also the contrast in attitudes toward nature: in voodoo and related religions, possession is central to the experience, and through the cult, the practitioner participates in nature, is possessed by nature, and passes beyond the boundary between civilization (or even human society) and wilderness. In an essay on shango, Edward James writes that it "is based on an understanding that there is no distinction between the natural world of trees,

rivers, mountains, and the human world of feelings and ideas”—a kind of poetic participation in nature, one could say, made by all.

For Christians, one does not participate in poetic-natural processes, one does not become nature’s horse (as in voodoo rites) but has dominion over the wild, conquers it and brings it under spiritual and technical cultivation. The boundaries are pushed back and the corporate state is brought in to develop the countryside. Rather than being possessed directly by the spirits in the drumbeats, one joins a bureaucratic organization in which hierarchs mediate all possibility of ecstasy. And, where free spirits choose to experience ecstasy in other ways, inquisition and massacre follow.

There are few places left in the world where werewolves can freely travel across the frontier to wilderness and the wisdom of otherness; in Haiti, the territory seems to be contested at present, and werewolves are threatened—with so many other species, and species of ecstasy—with extinction.

Perhaps voodoo was an element in why Haiti gave this hemisphere its most far-reaching and most brilliant slave revolt. Now, christianity, a religion of slaves and submission to slavery in league with the corporate state, wants to extirpate the “satanic strongholds” where a kind of anarchic spirituality and ecstatic participation goes on. But the spirits are ever-present; freedom, pleasure, wilderness can never be entirely subjugated.

Somewhere, deep in the mountains, deep in sleep, an anonymous Toussaint is preparing a new dance. “Shango,” goes the Yoruba poem, “is the death who kills money with a big stick...”

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