Voodoo in Detroit

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I

Voodoo is a colloquial corruption of Vodo, the name of an African godhead, the Holy Serpent.

The practice of Voodoo has been, until recent years, the most consistently revolutionary and anti-establishment force among poor blacks in the United States. For this reason, Voodoos have always been, and-still are, secretive, especially where white people are concerned. Yet, as "the Power" of Voodoo is slowly assimilated into many secular forms, including some of the recent black nationalist movements, candid information becomes more and more generally available, and it is finally clear how profoundly important Voodoo has been in so many quarters of American life.

It is now clear that Voodoo practice represented one of the first organized efforts in the United States to undermine and unseat slavery as an institution. It is also apparent that Voodoo was the first black nationalist movement in the United States, the first long-term effort to systematically retain and restore the dignity of the debased black slave in American society. Voodoo not only partially retained Africa for the American black man, it also gave him an African orientation to worshipping the godhead; a total African religion in America, a total African "power." Many feel that revolutionary black politics began in Voodoo separatism. Voodoo is surely part of that river of Africa that to this day flows through the veins of America's black communities.

II

"Raids on the African Slave Coast began about 1724, and thousands of Africans who worshipped the Vodo deity were captured and sold into the West Indies. Fiercely proud and religious, these "slaves" represented an immediate threat to the slave system of the Americas. As far back as the time of the French and Spanish ownership in the United States, "Vodo" slaves were rigorously prohibited from America. In 1782 Governor Galvez of Louisiana prohibited importation of black slaves from Martinique, and slaves already residing in America were punished if caught gathering for any reasons, as insurrectionary Vodo worship was always suspected as the reason for such gatherings.

With the arrival of American authorities, after the Louisiana Purchase of 1803, many restrictions were lifted, as American officials felt that by this time second and third generation slaves had now been sufficiently acculturated to remove the revolutionary threat of Vodo practice. At the same time, revolution was sweeping the West Indies, and many West Indian-European planters were coming to the United States with their Vodo slaves, and their money! This period, with its relaxed slave laws and its new influx of Vodo worshippers, marked the beginning of organized Vodo worship in the United States.

As time went on the slave owners quickly saw that acculturation had not occurred, and the fear of a racial uprising again became a threat. According to Robert Tallant in his brilliant book, Voodoo in New Orleans, "It was known

that the Voodoos were stirring up hatred against their white masters, and that some of these meetings were held for the purpose of working "black magic" against the whites, if not to plot an actual revolution. In 1817 the Municipal Council of New Orleans issued an ordinance forbidding slaves to gather for dancing or any other purpose except on Sundays, and only in places designated by the mayor. Congo Square was established as the recognized place for such dances and, under police supervision, it was here that the slaves met each Sunday afternoon for more than twenty years."

III

The worship of Vodo, the Zombi, the Holy Serpent, represented a mode of total religious expression whereby "the power" of the godhead was transmitted, individual by individual, to the worshippers. The original African ceremonies, according to Tallant, involved a priestess lifting a python from a box, allowing it to lick her cheek, and "from this touch she received vision and power and became an oracle." The power was passed on by a chain of handclasping, or by the shaking of numerous bells attached to the python-box, whereby came a tinkling that induced the hypnotic state desired by the worshippers. Everything seemed to be aimed at the acquisition of some form of power, at sharing in the powers of the godhead, a universal desire in religious practice.

Part of the process of obtaining and keeping "the power" was incorporated into many of the ritual objects of Vodo. Objects charged appropriately (via the appropriate ceremony) with "the power" were carried by the worshippers and were known as "gris-gris," ancestors of charms and the Tiki. They might include black-cat bones, snail shells, black stones, all manner of black (and powerful) objects. As Vodo was, perhaps inevitably, touched and corrupted by American traditions, Vodo ceremonials gradually incorporated certain Christian fundamentalist traditions, and in particular, certain Roman Catholic features, including a ritual reading of the Apostle's Creed, and prayers to the Virgin Mary.

The gris-gris represented the embodiment of "the power." It could be used to bring good luck, or bad luck. The legendary voodoo doll was a grisgris, charged with a death-curse.

It is significant that the Voodoo priestess was never herself a slave, but always a free woman of color who feared neither the curfew nor any of the laws applied to slaves. Surely, part of "the power" slaves sought, and hoped to find in the worship of the Vodo, was the power of their own freedom. This was part of its political threat.

IV

Like Jazz (the origins of which can actually be traced to New Orleans Vodo chants that were hummed and whined soto voce) Vodo and its worshippers slowly moved northward, to the black ghettoes of the great American cities.

Gradually corrupted by time, by the token alternatives of Western Civilization, and by countless black and white exploiters of the religion, the 'practice of worshipping Vodo, in cities like Detroit, became a mere shadow, virtually a relic. In former times, Vodo represented a proud metaphysical and secular wellspring of African and West Indian culture and character in America.

Today, though an important vestige is still widely (if unconsciously) practiced, little of the grandeur and character remains. It has become a ritual practice of "luck-acquisition," top-heavy with desperation. Today, its practice seems to represent a kind of hopeless hope, the last prayer-beyond-prayer for salvation among the many black residents of the most poverty-blighted depths of Detroit.

It is utterly too convenient for the Western colonialist mind to dismiss the worship of Vodo as a savage and barbaric exercise of a primitive mind. It is always convenient to degrade those ideas of people you have enslaved.

Vodo is a genuine religion, but not a Western religion, not a fragmentary and linear patronage to Faith. Vodo, more like the religions of the Orient, is a direct and integrated phenomenon involving the relationship of human individual and godhead. Truly, it is a religion of faith, not a religion about faith.

It is significant to this writer that its modern day practice survives largely as a spiritual "last resort," as an alternative utterly beyond the layers of Christianity. In other words, when one is deep in the troubles of life, and turns to the godhead of Vodo (even if unconsciously) it is not the white godhead of Christianity to which so many poor blacks turn, but rather to the vestiges of the African religion, the black deity, the practice of voodoo, or "Hoodoo," as it is often called in the North. When the poor black turns to Voodoo, for whatever reason, it is a faith in a black religion to which he is turning.

It is some kind of proof that the colonization of the black mind in America has not corrupted the deepest instincts, proof that underlying the veneer of the black ghetto's allegiance to a white fundamentalist Christianity, there is a bedrock of feeling unsympathetic to the slave-owner's god, unsympathetic to the slave-owner's effort to acculturate the black mind.

Where it exists, Vodo is the symbol of black victory over the colonialist's effort to wipe out black civilization in the Western world.

V

In Detroit, there is considerably more evidence of a flourishing practice of Vodo worship on the lower east side, probably because there is a more metaphysical, rather than secular, orientation to living in a Northern metropolis, as well as the fact that an elderly black population, with strong roots on the east side (the first stop-off, generally, for Southern black immigrants) retain the traditions (like Vodo) which are unpopular for a younger generation seeking other kinds of access to secular power.

In Vodo worshipping, individuals gain "the power." As with all direct worship with the godhead, it is subversive to the secular community in general, for it covertly pits man against man, brother against brother, in the scramble for survival and power, and god.

No one can tell how many store-front churches (using essentially Vodo orientations to religious worship) have been established to gain "the power," and have further divided the Ghetto with their endless ranklings over who really has "the power." No one can tell how many lives have been eaten up by this mad dog-eat-dog scrambling after "the power" sought after by so many poverty-blighted black worshippers, who seek personal and political power in their store-front religious worship.

One could say that there are essentially two kinds of "power" derived in the worship of the Vodo, two kinds of "magic." I have heard them called "white magic" and "black magic." White magic is the power to influence events beneficial to oneself or others, and black magic is the power to influence events harmful to other people. By and large, it is white magic that we are talking about when we speak of the practice of Vodo in a Northern metropolis. Though friends have informed me that Vodo dolls (the black magic death-curse charms) are still discovered from time to time in Detroit, it is largely in the acquisition of good luck for oneself that the practice survives in Detroit.

It is not surprising that the typical atmosphere of Vodo worship is one of acute poverty, and not surprising that the acquisition of money is perhaps the fundamental focus of the desire for "good luck" and power.

Perhaps the most typical form of Vodo expression in Detroit is the effort to find the right combination of oracle, candles, oils, powders, and incense, so as to derive the right three-number combination for the Numbers betting so common in disenfranchised black communities. One woman explained to me that for about $5.00 the buyer may purchase a kind of "kit" in one of the many Religious Candle Stores in the community. The kit contains a number of multi-colored candles, packages of incense, oils, powders, and prayers. It also contains a policy number which, if the ritual is followed correctly, with spiritual conviction, will be the number to bet to win. The ritual frequently takes eight to nine days to perform, burning candles each day at the right hour, rubbing oils into one's hands, sweeping certain "evils" out of the home with various floor powders, and burning incense, reciting Catholic prayers and other religious incantations. If all this is done correctly, the Vodo will lend her Power to the worshipper, the policy number will pay off, and the poverty-stricken desperation of the worshipper will be temporarily appeased.

Vestigial and largely unwitting Vodo practices are in evidence in many of the fundamentalist black churches, many of them having a weekly showcase in the late night hours of Saturday and Sunday on radio station WJLB. One woman explained to me that the congregational orientation of these churches is often toward secular power,

that is, toward the covert transmission and reception of the divinely-heard "numbers" for the gambling practices of the congregation.

VI

A simple referral to the Detroit *Yellow Pages* under the heading "candles" will reveal at least one or two columns of candle shops located in acutely-poor black neighborhoods in Detroit. Though some black youths claim these candles and incense are bought and burned to hide roach fumes, a slightly deeper scrutiny indicates a motive far more profound, namely, the remnants of a genuinely African religion in America.

In many east-side drug stores in Detroit, some around Gratiot and Mt. Elliot, next to the aspirin bottles and constipation remedies, one may discover an extensive collection of Vodo artifacts: vials of Love Powder (white and pink), Drawing Powder, War Powder, Peace Powder, Controlling Powder, Anger Powder, Courting Powder, Mad Water, Angel's Delight Powder, Black Devil's Powder, Easy Life Powder, Lucky Jazz, Get-Together Drops, Fast Luck Drops, Bad Luck Water, Mexican Lucky Water, Sacred Sand, Boss Fix Powder, and Follow Me Drops.

One druggist has said: "the most unbelievable thing is how many white people come in here to ask for Love Powder and stuff to fix other people. I should say, roughly, that about one-third of my customers are white."

Several dealers in Vodo supplies sell pictures of Saints. St. Michael is thought best able to aid in conquering enemies. St. Anthony de Padua is invoked for "luck." Mary Magdalene is popular with women who are in love. And many believe a picture of the Virgin Mary in their homes will prevent illness.

According to Robert Tallant, the most popular charm used today is a variation on the "Big Johnny." It is a twisted root with a prong-like formation at the end. For love and gambling the "power" of the Johnny is considered supreme. Thousands of destitute black men reportedly carry Big Johnny roots with them, wherever they go, a tradition originated in the once-secret practice of a black religion in a white racist society.

VII

It would not be far from the truth to say that insofar as Vodo practice exists (in whatever forms), it exists to serve destitute black people with a genuinely black religion in a white civilization. Hardly any fundamentalist black church in the American ghetto today has not been touched by the profound impact of this religious tradition that so utterly undermines Christianity.

Despite all the efforts to wipe out Vodo religion in America (by law, and by discrediting it by corruption) it has ruggedly persisted, and in recurring times of personal desperation, when the destitute black man feels he can turn nowhere else, he may still turn to an African godhead and his black heritage,- in his act of the ritual search for the power of identity, good fortune, and the good life.

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