

Breaking the Power of Voodoo

After centuries of oppression, the nation of HAITI is still locked in a spiritual battle against occultism and poverty. The scene was like something out of an old horror movie.

The mourners at the young man's funeral watched silently as the coffin was inserted into the crypt. They shuffled aside as a man stepped forward to brick-and-cement the casket inside.

The deceased's brother etched a farewell message in the wet cement. Then, a metal gate was fastened in front of the seal and locked.

Why this strange, sinister burial ritual? Actually, it was a practical necessity.

In Haiti, Voodoo is a prevalent evil. Even the dead are not safe. Voodoo practitioners have been known to raid tombs to steal recently interred corpses and then use their body parts in gruesome ceremonies.

With justified fear, the grieving family dreaded their loved one being turned into a zombie—the legendary Voodoo image of the “walking dead.” Many in Haiti believe the zombie is more than a mere myth. They believe the spirits have the power to make the dead walk.

As one evangelical leader in Haiti told Charisma: “Voodoo is not a game. Satan has power. And the Voodoo power is very real.”

Voodoo's Grip

“Voodoo is ingrained in the Haitian culture,” explains Becky Noss, a former U.S. missionary to this troubled Caribbean island nation just two hours by plane from Miami. “It keeps many Haitians in bondage.”

Noss, who witnessed the funeral service described above, encountered the deep-rooted influence of Voodoo during her 18-month term in Haiti, the poorest nation in the Western Hemisphere. “Many Haitians are absolutely terrified of curses,” she says. “Voodoo has a grip on their lives.”

But Satan is not having things all his way.

There are many signs that God-not Satan-is in control, affirming Jesus’ words in Matthew 16:18: “‘I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it’” (NKJV).

As Haiti’s evangelical and charismatic churches experience tremendous numerical growth, church leaders report that many Haitians from Voodoo backgrounds are finding freedom in Christ.

Noss, who is fluent in Haitian Creole, relays the testimony of a former Voodoo priest, known as a houngan. For years, the priest sought to appease five spirits that controlled him and gave him healing powers. Then, one of the spirits told him to sacrifice a specific type of cat. The priest searched everywhere but could not find the animal.

The spirit reacted by throwing him to the ground, badly injuring him. The priest’s fear turned to anger as he realized

he had spent his life appeasing a spirit that treated him with contempt. He began a search that ultimately brought him to faith in Christ and led him to tear down his Voodoo temple. "Today," Noss says, "a church stands on the site ... praise God!"

The Real Voodoo

In the U.S., Hollywood portrays Voodoo as a theatrical form of witchcraft in which practitioners stick pins into dolls to cast spells and curses on their enemies.

"Many people in the U.S. think that Voodoo is a game, just a little play theater," says Dr. Hubert Morquette, a Haitian physician and former stage actor. "They do not know, they cannot imagine, the power that this thing, Voodoo, has."

Haiti is often seen as the "home" of Voodoo, but Voodoo actually traces its roots back centuries to the region of West Africa that today includes parts of Nigeria, Togo and Benin. African slaves brought Voodoo with them when they were forcibly shipped to Haiti and other islands in the West Indies. In 1791, the story goes, a group of these slaves dedicated Haiti to Satan. Haitian folklore teaches that the nation's independence in 1804 came as a result of that satanic ceremony.

Voodoo-sometimes called Vodun or Vodou-teaches that there is a chief god, Olorun, who is remote and unknowable. Olorun, Voodooists believe, authorized a lesser god, Obatala, to create the earth and all living things. A battle between the two gods led to Obatala's temporary banishment.

This mysterious religion revolves around a spirit world, the realm of demons. In a society riddled with fear of evil spirits and curses, many Haitians think spirit appeasement affords the best protection against personal calamity.

The purpose of Voodoo rituals, often staged in a temple known as a hounfour or humfort, is to make contact with a spirit and gain its favor and protection by offering animal sacrifices. At the center of the temple is a pole called a poteau-mitan, where the spirits communicate with the participants.

During a ceremony, followers of Voodoo believe that part of a person's soul leaves the body when he or she is possessed by a loa, or spirit. Their greatest fear is that the soul will be harmed or captured by evil forces while it is absent from the body.

Rituals are often complex, involving various steps including the sprinkling of cornmeal on the ground and the shaking of a rattle accompanied by the beating of drums. As the ritual intensifies, the priest or priestess chants and enters into a frenzied dance, at which point he or she is possessed by a loa.

Finally, a sacrifice is made-usually of a chicken, sheep, goat or dog-and the blood is collected in a vessel. The possessed dancer drinks the blood to "satisfy" the loa.

The ritual is a mockery of God's covenant with His Old Testament people, Morquette says. "Everything God asks His people to do, Satan asks his people to do the is why you see [animal] sacrifice in Voodoo ... because the spirits ask for blood."

Spiritual Warfare

Clive Calver, senior pastor of Walnut Hill Community Church in Bethel, Connecticut, described his experience at a Voodoo ceremony in Port-au-Prince.

Calver watched as the possessed priest writhed on the floor, rolling in fire only to emerge unscathed. "There was a definite sense of evil," he recalls. "As C.S. Lewis said, Satan's key strategies are to convince people that he is too powerful, or to convince them of his nonexistence."

The unnerving experience reaffirmed to him the vital role of spiritual warfare. "We have to recognize our enemy Satan, expose him for what he is doing, and oppose him in the power of the Holy Spirit," Calver says. "So many of us do not see the victory because we are too scared to go into battle."

Although some will speak out, there is tremendous pressure on evangelical and charismatic leaders in Haiti not to "interfere with" or condemn Voodoo. "There is a lot of manipulation," Morquette explains. "People say: 'Voodoo is our culture. We should not speak badly of Voodoo or our ancestors.' Let me tell you plainly: Voodoo is a satanic religion."

During a Voodoo ceremony, the loa considers the possessed person to be his horse. "The spirit rides his horse," Morquette explains. "After the ceremony, the possessed person does not know what has happened to him ... the spirit used his body. This is totally different from the God of the Bible who works through our will, not replacing our mind. The true God respects our personality and our will."

Despite its intimidating nature, the power of Voodoo fades in the presence of Spirit-filled believers. "The Voodoo spirits have power to heal, kill and do supernatural things," he says. "But they are completely ineffective in the midst of true Christian believers. This is well-known in Haiti. Voodoo spirits cannot show up in the environment of Christians praying. It is so obvious that there is complete incompatibility."

However, the pervasive influence of Voodoo on Haitian culture has, to some extent, penetrated the church. Lack of theological training and Bible teaching has left some converts vulnerable to false teachings and the acceptance of some Voodoo practices alongside Christianity, even in some evangelical churches, Morquette says.

Pastor Sylvain Exantus, a seminary professor with the Church of God in Port-au-Prince, confirmed that theological training is desperately needed in Haiti's growing evangelical and charismatic congregations-in part, to enable the church to confront effectively the Voodoo influence.

"Voodoo is just one element of our culture," Exantus told Charisma. "It is not the culture. Haitians are a spiritual people, searching for God, searching for purpose and the truth. Our pastors need to be equipped to shepherd their people ... to live out the gospel of mercy and compassion."

The arm of Voodoo, though, is far-reaching and extends into every sphere of Haitian life. Claude Jacquet, pastor of a 100-member Baptist church in Port-au-Prince, says Voodoo feeds Haiti's AIDS crisis because it promotes sexual immorality. "The Voodoo priest is a very important person," Jacquet explains. "He can choose to have sex with any member of his

temple.”

Priests regularly prescribe sexual acts as the remedy for curses or sicknesses. For those who truly seek to serve Jesus in Haiti, the cost of discipleship is likely to be high. In the past, high-ranking officials have included Voodoo sympathizers and practitioners.

“If you speak badly about Voodoo, you risk being threatened with going to court because some Voodoo practitioners are top officials,” says Rev. Varnel Jeune, director of Radio Lumiere, the nation’s influential evangelical radio station. “Voodoo is everywhere in Haiti.”

Because of its official status as a state-sanctioned religion, Voodoo ceremonial marriages are legally recognized and Voodoo practitioners have been known to conduct marriages to dead people, Jeune told Charisma.

“I would say to the church in America: Please pray for Haiti!” Jeune pleads. “I believe in the future of the church in Haiti because Jesus has promised to build His church. There is much darkness in our land ... but the light will come, of that I am sure.”

Freie Vachon’s testimony is proof that the Holy Spirit can turn the foulest darkness to light. “The Voodoo power is brutal,” says Vachon, a former Voodoo priest.

“When those demons possess a person, that person can do anything. You need to make a sacrifice ... demons want blood.”

For Vachon, the ultimate goal was to sacrifice a Christian girl. But, Vachon testifies, he was hit by the power of God,

came to faith in Jesus, and began proclaiming Christ.

No longer does Voodoo have a hold on him. Instead, the Holy Spirit is his source of strength. "I know that the real power is in Jesus," he says, "not in Voodoo." 3

Julian Lukins is a freelance writer based in California. He traveled to Haiti to compile this report.

Voodoo's Curse

In Haiti, poverty, AIDS and family breakdown all have their roots in the national occult religion.

Voodoo's destructive influence extends beyond the spiritual realm and into the physical lives of Haiti's vulnerable people.

Many Haitians actually fear prosperity because they are terrified their good fortune will attract the jealous attention of others-and make them a prime target for a curse, says Dr. Hubert Morquette, a Haitian humanitarian worker with World Relief.

Subdued by such oppression, many Haitians are reluctant to acknowledge if they are healthy or doing OK, he says. In response to the question *Kijan ou ye?*-"How are you?"-most prefer to use the Creole phrase *pa pi mal*, literally, "not worse." To admit otherwise could be to invite a curse.

Immersed in this culture of fatalism, Haitians suffer from very low self-esteem, fueled by the knowledge that their nation is the poorest and least developed outside Africa.

AIDS is a national crisis, rife among the most sexually active age group: 15- to 49-year-olds. However, Haiti's churches are taking the initiative. Mobilized and trained by Baltimore-based World Relief, young volunteers in Haiti's churches are spreading the dual message of abstinence and marital fidelity through a network of anti-AIDS clubs.

As a result, thousands of young Haitians have made public pledges of abstinence before their peers and churches. "It is a very spiritual ceremony in which we ask each young person to publicly take a stand in front of the assembly of the church," explains 23-year-old Marckenzy Deteriere, a World Relief staffer in Port-au-Prince. "A young person is responsible before God and himself. There is no control, no pressure from us.

"We remind them: 'When you make a vow, you have to keep your promise before God. Think about the vow you are making ... think before you take the vow and not afterwards.' We read Proverbs 20:25: 'It is a trap for a man to dedicate something rashly and only later to consider his vows'" (NIV).

Deteriere reflects: "Our society would make a young person feel ashamed for being abstinent. We encourage youth to stand up and say: 'Yes, I am going to be pure. I am going to be set apart for God, and I am not ashamed.'"

Sexual exploitation of children is another ugly reality being addressed by local churches with the support of World Relief, the humanitarian arm of the National Association of Evangelicals in the U.S.

Child sex workers are known as Degaje-a derogatory term that refers to being in survival mode. "Many girls in our cities, and even in our churches, practice prostitution," says World Relief's Philippe Nicolas. "Their parents are desperate for food, so they encourage their 15-year-old daughters to have sex to bring in money. It's a desperation trade."

In response, World Relief equips and mobilizes local churches to distribute food and provide tuition scholarships to at-risk children in Haiti's slums.

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