

Anth 404

Mystic Lands Dance of the Spirits

African music and singing playing.

[Narrator Edward James Olmos] Sacred drums and a chorus of devout voices summon the gods of a distant homeland. They ask a blessing and seek strength for a difficult life. In the Caribbean nation of Haiti all things are spiritual and the gods of Voodoo are everywhere. These powerful deities possess the faithful. They dispense power and wisdom. They join the people in the dance of the spirit.

[On screen} DANCE OF THE SPIRIT

CREATION

Mystic Lands

[Mr. Olmos] The soul of a nation is crying. Here in the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere, more than half the people are without jobs. Poverty is a way of life for nearly everyone and human suffering has been common place for many centuries. When Christopher Columbus landed here on his voyage of 1492, he called the island Hispaniola. Roughly 65 miles east of Cuba, the western third of the island was later colonized by the French and by the mid-1700s, exports through the capitol city of Port au Prince made Haiti more prosperous than all 13 of the British colonies of North America combined but the cost of prosperity was extremely high. The human toll, difficult to fathom. The fields of rice and sugar cane were farmed by West African slaves brought here against their will. Forced to work under brutal conditions including unrelenting heat, meager food and debilitating disease, the average life expectancy was fewer than 10 years from the time of their arrival.

In 1804, Haiti became the only nation in history ever created by slave revolt. The 12 year guerilla war shocked the European powers. The world turned its back on Haiti and the economy never recovered. Dictatorship and oppression marred the 20th century and today, Haiti remains a land of significant hardship but the drum beat of hope and faith echoes from the mountains and rolls across the treeless valleys. From Benin, Nigeria, the Congo, it is the call of the spirit, Voodoo.

It's dawn in rural Haiti. An entire village has been dancing and singing through the night, calling the Loa the gods of Voodoo. The roots of Voodoo go back hundreds of years to West and Central Africa. During the 17th and 18th centuries, European settlers forced thousands of slaves across the Atlantic to work the plantations of Haiti. Slaves were treated harshly, even in matters of faith. Colonial law mandated that slaves be baptized Roman Catholic with little regard for the traditions of African tribal religion.

Even after the departure of the French, the Catholic church and the government of Haiti, spent much of the 19th and 20th centuries trying to stamp out Voodoo. Sacred objects were destroyed. Voodoo temples burned to the ground. Yet Voodoo survived.

[Translator for Mimerose Beaubrun] Christians always despise us because they say we don't love Jesus but it's not true.

[Mr. Olmos] Mimerose Beaubrun is a musician and Voodoo practitioner who holds a degree in ethnology from the National University of Haiti.

[Translator] The first spirit was Jesus. He told us how to live with each other, how to deal with sickness, war, with everything that prevents us from transcending the material world.

[Mr. Olmos] Even Evangelical Protestantism which has been growing in Haiti since the 1970s considers Voodoo and its rituals "devil worship". But the Christian church isn't alone. For years, Hollywood movies have portrayed Voodoo as sinister and bizarre.

[Translator for Mimerose Beaubrun] Many people in the world think that Voodoo is black magic. They think of zombies, they think of dolls with pins and they think of a lot of blood everywhere and these are really stereotypes that are completely misunderstood and blown out of proportion. I think one of these...

[Mr. Olmos] Dr. Elizabeth McAllister is a Haitian scholar at America's Yale University.

[Dr. McAllister] Really what dolls and pins and Voodoo are all about is about creating a physical embodiment of a kind of change that a person wants to happen. So sometimes, people will construct a small effigy and they will ask the spirit to help them cure that person, love that person, have that person love them more, repair a relationship with that person, and they will use physical things to have that work come about., It may be tying and wrapping. It may be pinning together.

[Mr. Olmos] Rich as the traditions of Voodoo are in African tribal religion, it's complexities are also rooted in Catholicism. It has been said that Haiti is 80% Catholic but 100% Voodoo. To be Catholic and practice Voodoo isn't a contradiction to most Haitians. In Voodoo, there's one supreme god, **Bon Jur (sp)** The slaves brought here long ago saw their African gods, loa, in the images of Catholic saints. In Saint **Jacque (sp)**, a hero of the Crusades, they saw **Papa Ogoun Phurae (sp)**, god of military discipline, strength, and iron. In the Virgin Mary, they saw Erzulie, goddess of feminine power.

In the sanctuaries and altars of Voodoo, icons of the saints and loa are one. Altars often reflect the poverty of Haiti's people in the simple adornments. A tattered doll may symbolize the Virgin Mary. Most altars include the Christian cross and many pay respect to the crucified image of Jesus Christ.

Voodoo tradition surrounding death are remarkably similar to those of the Catholic faith. Voodoo priests even speak Latin when conducting rituals for the dead.

The cross is symbolic of Christianity and is also the sign of the convergence of earthly and spiritual worlds. Every Voodoo cemetery contains a sacred grave marked by a cross. The first person buried becomes a spirit called **Barom Sumitsia (sp)**, lord of the cemetery. At the Barom's cross, the faithful believe they can find the source of life, the soul of the universe. They pray for healing energy. Beyond the cemetery, the spirit of Voodoo calls from the maze of the city. The wounds of poverty and oppression are healed with dance, music and calls to the spirits.

In Haiti, the spirit of Voodoo is everywhere. There are hundreds of loa, individual gods for emotions, natural phenomena, and daily events. The loa bring good fortune or bad, illness or health, bountiful crops or deadly drought.

[**Abu Dja (sp)**] Voodoo is not just a religion. Voodoo is Haitian way of life.

[Mr. Olmos] **Abu Dja (sp)** is a high ranking Voodoo priest.

[**Abu Dja (sp)**] It includes religion, economy, ecology, medicine, you know, everything is within Voodoo.

[Translator for Mimerose Beaubrun] Whether it's washing clothes or brushing a child's hair, or going to the garden or market, whatever you do, Voodoo doesn't have a past or future. It's now, in the present. It's the spirit.

[Mr. Olmos] Because Voodoo is all of life, any person can touch the loa. Believers find the loa in sacred trees where they contact the spirit world and tap its power.

[Translator for Lolo Beaubrun] Voodoo puts you in contact with spirits, into magical contact. This magic is inside all Haitians/.

[Mr. Olmos] Lolo Beaubrun is a Voodoo practitioner and a performer in the acclaimed Haitian band, Bookman Espiriats (sp)

[Translator for Lolo Beaubrun] In Voodoo, if you make spiritual changes, spirits will walk with you and won't abandon you.

[Mr. Olmos] The faithful also make pilgrimages to sacred waterfalls and other natural sites seeking energy or help from the spirits.

[Translator for Mimerose Beaubrun] Four elements are important to us: water, fire, earth, and air. Each gives us part of our balance. When we find the secrets of the four elements that hold us together, that form who we are, when we can understand those secrets, we will be able to go to other dimensions. We will be free.

[Mr. Olmos] In Voodoo, music and dance carry prayers to the loa. Elaborate rituals help believers harness the energy of the gods.

[Translator for Mimerose Beaubrun] Through the drums, we can make the sounds that let us communicate with the spirits. Drums are made of wood, wood that is sacred. Inside that wood is life, breath of life, the spirit of the tree.

[Translator for Lolo] The drummer does his own work to beat the drum, to give the sound for the spirit and the angels to come down. Each goes with the other to make the ceremony work. To make the spirit manifest itself.

[Mr. Olmos] Preparations for ritual are done with the help of the *Houngan*, the priest or the *Mambo*, the priestess. The ceremony usually takes place in a home floor. The room is simple – little more than four walls and a dirt or cement floor. Even electricity is a luxury. An elaborate drawing of the loa sign called a *veva (sp)* is traced on the floor with cornmeal. The loa favorite food and drinks, such as rum or cane liquor are placed on the altar as offerings. The faithful circle a central post, a symbolic link to the spirit world. If the loa is pleased, it will travel up from its home in the earth, emerge from the post, and enter the body of a believer. No one knows for sure what will happen or when.

[Dr. McAllister] But I like to think of them as sort of like a live, improvisational opera where the plot line is already established but we don't know exactly how the dancing is going to go and which spirits will come and possess people and exactly what will happen in this wider plot. We never know exactly how the ritual is going to happen.

[Mr. Olmos] Possession – it's the heart of each Voodoo ceremony. The arrival of the spirit in the body of the believer. Possession is the physical manifestation of the loa. The behavior of the possessed shows other dancers which loa has arrived.

Tonight, in Port au Prince, an agent of snake-like African god appears, *Dumbahla (sp)*. Because the Catholic Saint Patrick was often depicted casting snakes out of Ireland, Haitian slaves believed him to be *Dumbahla (sp)*. In Voodoo, *Dumbahla (sp)* is the good force that brings light.

[Dr. McAllister] *Dumbahla (sp)* is thought to be so sacred and so old that he must be covered by a white sheet and it's shaken to give that person air and life and the person's face shouldn't be seen by the other people at the ceremony.

[Mr. Olmos] The possessed woman won't remember what happened, Possession is like a dreamless sleep and she was simply a physical body receiving the presence of the loa. The loa has blessed the community bringing knowledge and power from the spirit world.

A hundred miles to the north, in the tiny village of *Sucre (sp)*, drums, singing, and dancing call the gods of Africa to help celebrate a Catholic holiday, the Epiphany. It's the Epiphany. The Holy day that marks the arrival of three wise men to worship Jesus, the newborn Christian messiah. Thousands of Haitians celebrate the Epiphany by calling for the spirits of Voodoo. The ceremony begins with a Catholic prayer. *Lagbau (sp)*, the powerful loa known as guardian of the crossroads is summoned. Animals are prepared for sacrifice to the gods. As the sun sets, participants parade through the compound with flags symbolizing their religious community, the loaqu (sp). Villagers join the procession, salute the loa, and proceed toward a sacred well.

The chicken that was sacrificed earlier is blessed in the well then distributed to the faithful. Eating together creates a bond between the religious community and the spirit world of the loa. The ceremony will last through the night. Despite the hardships of this difficult life, the spirit of Voodoo is one of celebration.

Haiti is a land of contrast. Poverty and oppression are facts of life. Politics are uncertain. Crops are meager and hunger is common place. Yet, through faith, people have found the will to survive. Some rejoice in the soulful passion of Protestant Christianity. Others in the prayerful visions of Catholicism. But more than anything else, Haiti is alive with the powerful mysteries of Voodoo, the dance of the spirit.