

FINE ARTS

Museum display unmask Vodou myths

BY LINDA ANNY CHOMIN
STAFF WRITER

In many people's minds, the word Vodou conjures up a shadowy world of evil spirits and priestesses who stick pins in dolls to cast spells of illness or death. Nothing could be further from the truth.

The exhibit "Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou" was created by the UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History to de-mythify Vodou by showing more than 500 objects and art used during rituals and in the practice of the religion. The exhibition, which continues through Sunday, Dec. 28, at the Museum of African American History, features sequined flags bearing images of saints, sacred bottles and painted calabashes to hold offerings, drums, spirit repositories, a Vodou temple, and votive altars reassembled after altars in Port au Prince.

"Vodou is more misunderstood in this country than in any other country in the world," said Rita Organ, curator of exhibitions at the Museum of African American History. "We fear what we don't understand. Hollywood has presented it in a negative way — such as curses used to get back at people. The use of curses to wish evil or death on someone is all myth."

Never before presented in the context of religion, exhibit objects refer to the worship of a supreme God and powerful spirits (lwa) who serve as intermediaries.

Vodou is rooted in African spiritual tradition, and was preserved by slaves on their passage to the Caribbean.

Vodou borrows from Roman Catholicism and Free Masonry. Spirits, often made in the images of saints such as Isidore and Patrick, link humans with the divine. Vodou practitioners summon spirits when they're in need of rain, wisdom, fertility, a good crop, or to protect ships.

There are hundreds of lwa — from the Rada (benign spirits from West Africa) to Petwo (fiery spirits from Central African and Kreyol traditions) to Gede who personify ancestral dead.

Devotion to Gede is carried out during the month of November, but especially the Days of the Dead (Nov. 1) and All Souls Day (Nov. 2).

"It's actually controversial," said Organ. "A day doesn't go by that I don't get a call that it's blasphemous, superstition. Because it's been confined to Haiti for so long, the exhibit is an opportunity for us to educate. Just seeing the beauty of the objects, Catholicism and elements of Free Masonry and they made their own religion out of it."

Ninety percent of the calls that Organ receives are from people who have not viewed the exhibit. "Many people don't want to respect it as (they would) any religion of the world," said Organ. "We had to do a lot of education around this exhibit even with our own staff. The museum invited in clergy from different congregations to preview the exhibit. The museum's taking a positive approach."

Rooted in Africa

The first comprehensive exhibit ever to explore the arts produced for the African-Caribbean religion of Vodou, "Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou" is divided into sections.

The first section traces the history of persecution of Vodou followers.

Columbus discovered the island of Hispaniola in 1492

when it was inhabited by the Taino Indians. Within a generation, the Taino were nearly exterminated by Spanish colonizers who began importing slaves from West and Central Africa. Nearly 200 years later, the French acquired the western one-third of the island, and for the next century African slave labor made it the most prosperous colony in the world. Under the French, slaves were baptized into the Catholic Church in accordance with the colonial slave code.

According to oral tradition, Vodou began with the great slave insurrection of 1791 when the white was ripped out of the French tricolor flag. The first act of the revolution according to Haitian tradition was a Vodou ceremony held by runaway slaves in that year. By 1804, Haiti became the first nation after the United States to gain independence in the Americas. It was the only slave revolt in the world ever to create a nation.

In the 20th century, Vodou survived and prospered despite U.S. Marine occupation, persecution by clergy from 1915 to 1934, and the despotic rule of Francois (Papa Doc) and Jean Claude (Baby Doc) Duvalier from 1957 to 1986.

Items in the first few sections are representative of those likely to be placed on altars or sold as popular art. Still others are used during ceremonies. Many of the objects, collected during campaigns against Vodou from the 1940s to 1980s, were borrowed from museums, private collections and key Vodou temples in Haiti.

"Once they understand the history of Haiti and Vodou, there is no problem accepting Vodou as a religion," said Organ. "Many

people find Vodou interesting because it's extended beyond the bounds of Haiti. There is a Haitian society or 'Bapote' in Detroit and Vodou is practiced in New York, Miami and New Orleans."

Guerin Montilus, a Wayne State University anthropology professor and native of Haiti, estimates there are 5,000 Haitians living in the metropolitan Detroit area. Montilus gave a lecture at the museum in mid-October about the transformation of Haitian and West African Vodou over the last five centuries. He has conducted extensive research in Benin and neighboring West African countries since 1969 and studied Vodou in Africa and Cuba. Montilus is currently writing a book on the religion.

"Vodou is wrongly understood in American society (where) it refers to sorcery, magic, witchcraft, human sacrifice, all kinds of negative connotations," said Montilus. "It is based on hearsay, gossip. As a religion, it's as valuable as any other religion. There is an aesthetic especially in Vodou and other African religions of beauty and harmony."

Summoning Spirits

Objects used daily such as calabashes painted with the image or sacred sign of lwa (spirit) hold daily offerings. Ceremonial drums and rattles summon spirits through prayer. Dolls are used as healing tools. So, where did the notion of sticking Vodou dolls with pins to cast spells come from?

"I don't know where they find this," said Montilus. "It's not what I've observed. In Haiti, Vodou is a way of life. It touches

Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou

What: Exhibit features more than 500 objects including sequined flags, votive altars, bound medicine packets, dolls, and contemporary paintings. Museum cautions some images may not be suitable for children age 13 and younger, or individuals sensitive to graphic images.

When: Through Dec. 28. Hours are 9:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday to Sunday.
Where: Museum of African American History, 315 East Warren at Brush, Detroit. (313) 494-5800.

Admission: \$3 adults, \$2 children.

Related activities:
Lecture series to learn about the life, religion, politics, and culture of Haiti 3 p.m. Saturdays through Dec. 6. The cost is \$5 per lecture.

■ Nov. 22 (Vodou and Politics, Patrick Bellegard-Smith, University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee)
■ Nov. 29 (Sacred Space, Lulash Tellez, priestess)

■ Dec. 6 (Maroons and Vodou, Karen F. Davis, humanities chair, Maygrove College).
Family Workshops Saturdays Nov. 22 and Dec. 6, Dec. 13, and Dec. 20. Topics include, "The Drums of Haiti," "Dances of Haiti," "Shadow Box," "Spirit Bottles," and the "Game of Kal." Times and costs vary. Call museum for information.

the life of people. Everything is in everything. In Vodou, you find politics, education; it's a microcosm."

After the initial sections explain the rituals and belief of Vodou, the visitor walks into a recreated temple and altar chambers devoted to the three major rites of the religion.

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