

## Topic Page: [Voodoo](#)

Definition: **voodoo** from *Philip's Encyclopedia*

Religious belief of African origin. It is prevalent in parts of Africa, but is better known as the national religion of Haiti. Adherents believe in the incarnate qualities of **Loa**, which include deified ancestors, local gods and Roman Catholic saints. Loa possesses the believers during dreams or ceremonies, which include dancing and hypnotic trances.



Image from: [lfa divination uses a tray in which... in Religious Holidays & Calendars](#)

Summary Article: **Voodoo**

From *The Brill Dictionary of Religion*

### Concept

1. Like the Afro-Brazilian religions Candomblé and Umbanda, or Cuban Santería, the Afro-Caribbean Voodoo religion is one of the African systems of religion that emerged in colonialism. These systems were brought to the 'New World' by enslaved members of African tribes, and there underwent an independent development. The word 'Voodoo' (variant, 'Hoodoo') is from the Haitian Creole French language (Fr., *voudou*; Creole, *voudoux*), where it originated in the language of the Ewe Fon, of West African Benin and Togo. In Haiti, it is used mostly as a denomination of foreigners across the board, and thus is applied to a large number of Haitian indigenous cults. In colonial, and Western Anglo-American, linguistic usage it is a (pejorative) synonym for 'black magic.' Ultimately the denomination is from *vodún*, the word for 'god' or 'worship' in the language of the Ewe Fon. Beginning in the seventeenth century, 'Voodoo' was used in the missionary literature that dealt with the Ewe Fon, who call an initiate in their religion a *vodúnsi* or *hunsi*, a 'bride of the deity,' a concept adopted by the Haitian Voodoo religion. In the Caribbean, in the South of the United States (Florida, Louisiana), and in parts of South America, 'Voodoo' can denote various phenomena. On the one hand, the concept refers to an *Afro-Catholic religion* that is widespread on the island of Hispaniola, especially in Haiti. The designation can also be applied synonymously with those of persons: for 'spell-worker' (*hoodoo doctor*) in the Southern states of the United States, for 'witch' (*bruja*) in Latin America. In the broad sense, 'Voodoo' can denote the religions and cults originating in regions of West Africa.

### Political Influence and Social Background

2. Haitian Voodoo is the religion of the former African slaves carried off from West Africa in the eighteenth century by the French colonialists, and put to work in the sugarcane fields. It has at times had an important political role: it was able to mobilize forces against the rulers, as at the close of the eighteenth century in the struggle for the abolition of slavery and the country's independence from France (1804). It gathered opposition to various Haitian regimes devoted to policies of their own interest. The last instance of the latter was under dictator 'Papa Doc' François Duvalier (ruled 1957–1971). Socially, there is a distinction between rural and urban forms of Voodoo. In rural areas, worship and belief are oriented to small farmers, and have their pillars of support in the traditional family alliances. Involvement with ancestors and farming stands at the center of religious practice. Voodoo believers in the cities have adapted their practice to relationships there. They simplify this practice, to an extent, and find a 'secondary family' in the temple communities.

## Divinities

3. Like Candomblé and Umbanda in Brazil (→ Afro-American Religions), Haitian Voodoo still manifests authentic African characteristics. Voodoo is a typical example of a → possession cult centered on divinities or groups of divinities (*loas*, from the *lwa* of the Yoruba linguistic groups, ‘divinity,’ or ‘mystery’), and originating in the West African ethnic groups Yoruba and Fon. Voodoo's gods, or groups of gods, are called ‘mysteries,’ or ‘saints.’ According to Fon myth, there are three regions of the world, in which various gods reign: the sky, the earth, and in between, the clouds. The creator god (Yoruba, *Olorun*; Creole, *Bon Dieu Bon*) lives in the remote sky, and is not revered.

Loas, the Gods or 'Mysteries' of Voodoo										
Name	Rite / 'Nation'	Region of Action, Attributes	Signs of Possession	Symbols	Dwelling places	Region of the World	Sacrificial Gifts	Liturgical Color	Weekday	Christian Correspondence
<i>Legba</i>	Rada	Guardian of the home; intermediary between God and the human being; sentry at the gate, at intersections, and at streets; rival of Dambala	Brutality, strength, violence	Frail old man in shabby clothing	Gates, intersections, medicinal trees	Earth	Cassava, rice, smoked green bananas, piebald hen	Red	Friday, Saturday	St. Peter St. Anthony (lost articles)
<i>Zaka</i>	Rada	Loa of farming and fields, rural, mistrustful, cunning, greedy, hates cities	Looks like a farmer; large straw hat, blue shirt, blue pants, red necktie, straw purse or handbag	mabouya (small reptile)	Fields	Earth	Maize, bread, raw cane-sugar, liquor	Blue, Red, Green	Friday, Saturday	St. Isidore
<i>Gédé</i>	Rada, Petro	Protection from or attraction of harm; Loa of death	Obscene words and gestures, corpse-like exterior	Dead, black cross, farm tools	Cemeteries and subterranean places	Earth	Black ram, black cock	Black, Violet, White	Monday, Friday	St. Expeditus
<i>Baron Samedi</i>	Rada, Petro	Leader of Gédé (Loa of death)	Macabre, obscene	Tall, black clothing	Cross at the entrance to the cemetery	Earth	Salted Herring, black she-goat, black hen	Black, Violet	Saturday	—
<i>Dambala</i>	Rada	Principle of the good 107 wealth, happiness, prosperity	Serpentine movements	Rainbow snake	Springs and streams	Water	Anything white: chicken, rice, milk, eggs	White	Thursday	St. Patrick, in the expulsion of the snakes from Ireland
<i>Aïda Wèdo</i>	Rada	Wealth, happiness, prosperity; wife of Dambala	Serpentine movements	Rainbow snake	Springs and streams	Water	Anything white: chicken, rice, milk, eggs	Blue, White	Monday, Tuesday	Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception
<i>Ezili</i>	Rada	Love, beauty, graces, luxury, pleasure, promiscuity; coquette, sensual mulatto	Seductive exterior, provoking behavior, seeks perfume	Heart, mirror	Riverbanks	Water	Toilet articles, choice and elegant food, rice, chicken	Blue, Pink	Tuesday, Thursday	Virgin Mary
<i>Ogou Féray</i>	Rada	Battler of misfortune, warrior, soldier	Authoritarian, coarse language, barrack-room tone of voice	Sword plunged into the earth	Calabash tree, bamboo stalks	Fire	Red cock, bull	Red	Friday, Sunday, Monday	St. James the Great (Santiago)
<i>Agwe</i>	Rada	Protection of seafaring, of oceanic trade, of fishing; mulatto, with blond hair, and sea-green eyes, naval officer	Seeks water for diving and swimming	ship, oar	Sea	Water	White sheep, chicken, champagne	White, Green, Pink	Thursday	St. Ulrich
<i>Simbi</i>	Petro	Gift of clairvoyance, guardian of springs and ponds	Leaps into a pool or river	Water basin	Springs, caves, mountains	Water	Black or gray animals, swine, ram, guinea fowl, turkey cock, chicken	Black, Gray	Tuesday, Thursday, Friday	The Three Wise Men

Following Laënnec Hurbon, *Les mystères du Vodou*, Paris 1993, pp. 140-143.

Through the influence of Catholicism, Voodoo believers also know the Christian God. But besides God and the Voodoo divinities, they also venerate two other kinds of spiritual beings: human souls that have become spirits of the dead, and spirits that have never been directly tied to matter. Voodoo gods live in the sea, waterfalls (including the famous Saut d'Eau, with the pilgrimage to Ezili Dantò, i.e. Our Lady of Mount Carmel), springs, forests, at intersections, cemeteries, piles of stones, and in saints' rooms that stand alongside the places of worship. Many gods of Voodoo possess a correspondence among the Catholic saints, on whose feast days they, too, are celebrated (see chart).

## The 'Nations'

Gods and rites are divided into groups (Creole, *nanchon*), according to the regions of their origin. Thus, there are the Wangol (from Angola), the Ibo, and the Kogo. More important, however, are the *Rada* and the *Petro*, who are honored especially in urban areas. The word *Rada* derives from the name of the capital of the old Kingdom of Arada, near Abomey, in Benin, while the *Petro* cult, more orientated to the indigenous Creoles, refers to the name of a priest, Don Pedro, who, in the eighteenth century, introduced a variant of the Voodoo trance dance. Petro divinities and spirits are invoked especially for magical actions. Obviously, Voodoo priests may support both groups, and a believer is either Rada or Petro, but may likewise take part in ceremonies of the other type.

## Worship

4. As with Candomblé in Brazil, and Santería in Cuba, so with the Voodoo cults is it a matter of a typical phenomenon of the fusion of African religions with Catholicism, spiritism, and the religious traditions of

the American Indians. The religion of Voodoo, then, refers not to sacred scriptures, but to ritual practice (it can thus be described as a 'cult religion' in that sense). The latter concentrates on the animal rituals of a bloody sacrifice, as well as on → trance dances. Both are regarded as generating a bond with the gods. The rites are practiced by initiated members (*hunsî*), in cultic groups presided over by priests and priestesses (*hugan* or *mambo*). Initiands are introduced into the group by way of a complicated and rather spectacular ritual sequence. The centers of worship are sacred cabins, or city temples, that have an altar and a central post, which latter will enable the *loas* to descend to believers, and mount them in trance as their 'riding horses.' There exists, besides, a cult of the dead, with meticulous burial rites, and with the mythic figure of the Baron Sam[e]di as 'Lord of the Dead.' Thus the cemeteries become important places of assembly and worship.

## Magical Practices

5. The magical practices of Voodoo are renowned and maligned. It is the preferred cult of the lowest social class in Haiti—the small farmers and the urban (sub-) proletariat—although, today, persons of the upper class are also found here. Participants in the ceremonies seek deliverance from all of the difficulties of normal life. Diseases are seen as the effect of demonic spells. In the state of trance, body and soul find relief: Voodoo gods can break the influence of evil demons. Probably the magical practice best known in the West is the one performed with a small doll, through which certain magical actions are seen as being able to effect the injury of someone's health, or even their 'Voodoo death.'

## Reception

6. Little magical dolls, bloodcurdling rites, Voodoo death, the invocation of serpents, → zombies, and dismal nocturnal scenarios are the ingredients that have made the Voodoo religion a favorite staging of Western exoticism. Ever since R. Spencer St. John, with his 1884 adventure account *Hayita or the Black Republic*, new adventure sensations have continually sprung up in the underground of Western fantasy. Like the witches' Sabbath of yore, Haiti's Voodoo, its 'poor aesthetics' and mysterious aura have assumed for outsiders the shape of a hotch-potch of all of the practices tabooed or disparaged by Christianity: bloody sacrifices, trance dances, invocation of the dead (necromancy), dangerous 'black magic.' For thus the Voodoo religion, precisely via its cinematic exploitation, entered the aesthetic trivia of Western pictures: as a cheap staging of popular horror mythology (*James Bond—Live and Let Die*, 1973; *Angel Heart*, dir. Alan Parker, 1987).

A different social reality appears behind these fantasy images, however. Poverty (with seventy percent unemployment at the moment, the country currently ranks as the poorest in the Western hemisphere) and political instability have occasioned the emigration of many Haitians to North America. They have taken their native Voodoo religion along with them to the urban centers of this diaspora: to New York and Montreal, but especially to Miami and to New Orleans, where today there is a Historical Voodoo Museum. Voodoo today has also gained a foothold as a magical practice in the European scene, as well: Hamburg, for example, has its own Voodoo store. Whether all of this will exorcize the phantasm of the sinister, blood-curdling cult, however, remains an open question.

→ *Afro-American Religions, Colonialism, North America (Traditional Religions), Possession, South America, Trance, Zombie*

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Claudio Mattes

**APA**

Chicago

Harvard

MLA

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