



INSIDE THE HOUNFO: COMMUNITY, MUSIC, AND POSSESSION

BY ZEHARA NACHASH

There is a lot of mystery surrounding Voodoo, and while there is a lot of secrecy surrounding the practice's initiation process, there is less secrecy in the ceremonies themselves. The Voodoo house, or hounfo, functions similarly to that of a Wiccan coven—they both hold regular ceremonies, honor the spirits, leave offerings, give libations, work with the public to educate people about the religion, and function as a support for the larger community.

the creator energies of Papa Damballah and Ayida-Weddo. The pillar is essentially where the spirits come down once they are called. This is also the central part of the ritual and is usually surrounded by offerings to the lwa being honored. Members who are accompanied by the beats of drummers will stand in a circle around the poteau-mitan and sing and dance to invite the spirits to the ceremony.

ALTARS

Many of the Voodoo houses have altars set up for the various lwa (spirits). As someone who practiced Wicca for a long time, I was initially overcome by the complexity and size of the altars in a Voodoo house. They are very large, sometimes nearly reaching the ceiling; there are also quite a few of them. Depending on the particular hounfo, there will be several large altars to various lwa, sometimes in different rooms altogether. Additionally, Voodoo altars seem chaotic and messy, but that is because they are filled with many offerings, including animal bones, money, candles, cigarettes and cigars, various types of alcohol, sunglasses, pictures, dolls, keys, and so much more.

CENTRAL PILLAR

In Voodoo, there is a central gathering point where energy occurs that is similar to that in Wicca. While Wiccans cast a circle to keep the energy in, the spirit energy in Voodoo comes from the poteau-mitan, or the “central pillar,” of the Voodoo house. The pillar serves as a symbol of connection between our world and the world of spirits. The pillar is usually painted with snakes descending from the heavens to represent

CEREMONIES

An amazing aspect about Voodoo ceremonies is their length. When I first found a house in Boston, I remember being told that the ceremony could last anywhere between two and 12 hours, and sometimes even longer! Unlike Wiccan ceremonies, in which there are specific rituals done to honor a specific sabbat, esbat, or a full moon, Voodoo rituals often only honor one or sometimes two lwa.

In certain houses, a ritual may be performed until a lwa appears or takes possession of the mambo (priestess), houngan (priest) or hounsi (initiate). During the ceremony anything can happen. Cigars may be smoked with the burning end in the mouth, several bottles of rum may be drunk, pieces of charcoal can be placed in the mouth—all this while the mambo is under the possession of the lwa. The lwa also offers advice and gives wisdom while he/she is there “riding the horse.” After the lwa leaves the body, albeit exhausted, the mambo/houngan will be unscathed—even after drinking several bottles of alcohol, they will not be intoxicated! This is much like the idea of Drawing Down the Moon, found in some Wiccan and ceremonial magic covens, in which the spirit of the god(dess) may descend into the body of the high priest or priestess. (If you are interested in

trance possession, I highly recommend *Lifting the Veil: A Witches' Guide to Trance-Prophesy, Drawing Down the Moon, and Ecstatic Ritual*, by Janet Farrar. It will give you a good idea of what happens during a possession and why you should never do it alone.)

COMMUNITY

One of the most beautiful things about the hounfo is that it is often the center of the community, particularly in more rural areas in Haiti, where the hounfo serves as a communication center, a place where people can come to ask advice, seek assistance, and, if necessary, be healed from an illness. The hounfo functions as a meeting point for day-to-day activities. Many hounfos in Haiti will have separate rooms dedicated to a specific lwa. If a person needs to speak to a lwa, they will knock on the door (no one likes company that just barges in!) and then enter. It is in this place that they will communicate to ask for what they need.

There is a beautiful ceremony in Haiti called the manje pov, or “the feeding of the poor,” that can sometimes incorporate animal sacrifice. Animals are sacred to the lwa, so no animal is ever sacrificed without the permission of the lwa it is going to serve. If the lwa say no, then the sacrifice does not happen. Looking at the socioeconomic aspect of Haiti, it is a very poor country; to purchase a goat or pig for sacrifice can be expensive. So, during ceremonies in which an animal is sacrificed, it is fed to the entire community, nothing wasted. It’s not just a simple kill to thrill; rather it’s a way to honor the spirits and feed the community. During the manje pov, several animals may be killed, and villagers from around the local area will be asked to come to eat, regardless of whether they are part of the hounfo. This generosity is one of the most beautiful aspects of Voodoo.

The Voodoo house is a magical place full of love, good energy, and a sense of community. And while some mysteries remain, the hounfo is a place where the community gathers to honor self and spirit. It is also a place to literally communicate with the spirits during a possession. If you are ever interested in attending a Voodoo ceremony, contact your local hounfo—most houses welcome outsiders to attend. Always ask which lwa they will be serving, what color headscarf to wear, and what types of offerings to bring. Allow yourself to be guided by spirit during the ceremony, and enjoy the song and dance that are Voodoo!

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