

# VOODOO CONTRA

Robert Gover

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## Preface

The power of the word Voodoo is such that once, when I mentioned it to a university professor, he jumped like he 'd been stuck with a hat pin. I merely asked if his university offered a course that would introduce young students to the history, beliefs and traditions of Voodoo. But at the sound of those two syllables, he was immediately on his guard, as though even *hearing* that word threatened him with the spooks and haunts and black magic that most people erroneously associate with this ancient religion.

I encountered many such reactions during the years I spent studying this subject, for there are millions of North Americans and Europeans who back away in horror when they hear the word Voodoo. The word itself carries so much power that I almost decided to drop it from this work.

But what other word can one use? For there are many other millions in the New World who practice what goes by the generic term Voodoo. The point is, their religion is a far cry from what most North Americans and Europeans suppose Voodoo is.

That is why I find myself in a catch-22 when people ask if I *practice* Voodoo, and if I have *faith* in it. The concept of Voodoo that has been conditioned into their minds has nothing at all to do with the Voodoo that I spent so many years in search of—the search that this book is about.

The ancient, literal, enduring meaning of the word Voodoo is “Creator of the Universe.” Are they asking me, then, if I have faith in the Creator of the Universe? That’s like asking if some sub-atomic particle involved in the composition of my left little toe has faith in *me*,

the *being* that it is a part of. I doubt that the sub-atomic particle has any real concept of who or what I am. And I, likewise, doubt that we humans—being comparably situated in regard to the *Being* that is the Universe—have any clear idea of Who or What He or She or It is.

It is certain that the Voodooist's concept of the Creator is not the same as the Judeo-Christian concept. Biblical characters spoke to their God, prayed to Him and even heard directly from Him. Voodooists consider the Great Creator far too remote for such intimacy. Rather, they relate to the “firstborn” of God—the gods and goddesses who fashion our tiny solar system, our planet, and us.

No, I do not “practice” Voodoo in social ceremonies. My experience has taken the shape of “conversations” with the gods and goddesses—much the way one might talk to one's inner self.

As for “faith,” I trust in the transcultural, transdenominational theology of Voodoo. It is universal enough to include the deities of all mankind's religions, and it invites its practitioners to creative and eclectic improvisation. Voodoo is often practiced by individuals alone in meditative trance—what present-day psychologists call creative visualization. Voodoo is but one path toward awareness of the inner self.

But the Voodoo path involves one large, other dimension: gods and goddesses and spirits. Whether mankind invented gods or gods created us is a question I, for one, do not expect to answer in this lifetime. One thing I have observed repeatedly, though, is that the Voodoo way of creative visualization can be reliable, effective, even amazingly powerful. It is this and other Voodoo “secrets” I wish to share with the reader.

Robert Gover  
Santa Barbara, CA 1985

# 1 A Voodoo Primer

How did a West African word meaning God get translated as meaning evil black magic? That's the question we must begin with, for the original, literal meaning of the word Voodoo is Creator of the Universe.

Why, then, are people in Europe and North America taught to equate this powerful word's midnight consonants and rolling thunder vowels with evil and depravity? Why does it suggest satanic powers rising from steamy tropical mists, killer zombies, human sacrifices, unnamed terrors, and any number of other mythical and mysterious horrors?

Strictly speaking, the word Voodoo applies only to African-derived religious rites practiced in Haiti and parts of the United States. But the word has been confused and misused for so long a time to characterize the pantheistic beliefs of all black and brown people that its present, common meaning is vastly enlarged. It is this larger, contemporary meaning I intend to explore: the pantheistic beliefs, and thus the culture, that came from Africa and now unites a loose confederation of millions in the Americas.

Even as its original meaning expanded over the centuries to imply a whole complex of cultural influences derived from Africa and amalgamated in the New World, its contradictory, derogatory meaning likewise spread. Modern American politicians have used it to

accuse each other of “voodoo economics” and “voodoo arms control.” It’s been used to discredit scientific hypotheses and to denigrate the religions of Native Americans, Hawaiians, and Orientals, as well as to scoff at the experiments of parapsychologists.

It is not my intention to win converts for Voodoo. What motivates me is Western ignorance. My desire is to undermine that ignorance by revealing how people from Voodoo cultures view the world. They know how Westerners view the world, but most Europeans and Americans are either in the dark or utterly misled concerning the mind-set of millions of people with whom we share this planet.

From the Voodoo perspective, the Creator of the Universe is the source of all, good and evil, yet not directly involved in what humans find good or evil. Yes, black magic is Voodoo, and so is white magic. Everything in the cosmos is Voodoo (God), but it is Voodoo’s firstborn, the gods and goddesses, who are directly involved in earthly affairs. It is this belief in gods and spirits as the eldest children of the Great Creator that Voodooists in the Americas share with all other pantheistic occultists and religionists.

The names of the cults are many, and they descend from two primary historic streams. From the Yoruba Kingdom come Santeria, Lucumi, Candomble, Macumba, and others. From the old Kingdom of Dahomey come Dahome, Rada, Nago, Petra, Obeah, and Dogan. And it is the word *Voodoo*, used in its broadest sense as an all-inclusive generic term, that describes this mix of Afro-oriented cults. And it is this same word that is so misunderstood by Europeans and Americans, white and black.



My interest in this subject began at a tender age. I had a grandmother who used herbs and what she called her helpful spirits to heal people. Her detractors called her “the Voodoo lady.” One preacher accused her of “trafficking with the devil,” but when he became sick and was not helped by licensed physicians, he turned to her and was healed.

As the years went by, it gradually dawned on me that the word *Voodoo* implies far more than its westernized meaning suggests. Eventually I discovered that it implies a way of perceiving reality that is virtually contradictory to the Western way. Thus, the title of this book, *Voodoo Contra*: the contradictory Voodoo vision of the world.



For more than twenty years I have made it my business to investigate this other meaning of Voodoo, to come to grips with it as a belief system, a cultural mind-set derived from Africa but transformed when transplanted in the Western Hemisphere. This book attempts to make those beliefs understandable to Western people, and to provide a sense of what I have come to think of as the Voodoo reality.

The aim of this introductory chapter, then, is to clarify the basic beliefs of the Voodoo culture, to trace their African origins and their transformations in the Americas and West Indies.

Following this introduction to Voodoo, the book shifts to a narrative of three parts: preparations for a Voodoo ceremony by fasting, a haunted stopover before the ceremony, and the ceremony itself. The aim of this narrative is to provide the reader with a vicarious experience of the Voodoo culture. Because this book addresses westernized people, the ceremony I have chosen is for possession of the Christ spirit, known in most Voodoo cults as Obatala or Oshala.



The word itself has been spelled in a number of variations: Vodou, Vudo, Vaudoux, Voudoun, Voudou, Voh-dong, and so forth. Most students of the subject agree it comes from Dahomey in West Africa. A London report from 1789 tells us that ten to twelve thousand slaves were exported yearly from Dahomey to the French Antilles, primarily to Dominique, as Haiti was then called.<sup>1</sup>

As for the original meaning of the word, we have the writings of Moreau de Saint-Mery, scholar, lawyer, politician, and relative of the Empress Josephine. He tells us Voodoo, according to the Negroes from Dahomey, is the god who knows the past, present, and future.<sup>2</sup> In Yoruba this god is called Orunmila, Ifa. In English this supreme being is called, simply, God. Why did this one particular Dohomean word grow in common usage and expand into contradictory meanings in the New World? No one knows for sure, but speculation is rife.

Alfred Mettraux, the French anthropologist, in his book *Voodoo in Haiti* says this: "Some people, in their anxiety to whitewash the Voodoo cults, saw it [the word] as a corruption of 'Vaudois' (the name of a sect founded in the twelfth century by Father Valdesius),

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<sup>1</sup>Janheinz Jahn, *Muntu*, trans. Marjorie Grene (London: Faber & Faber, 1961), 29.

<sup>2</sup>Jahn, *Muntu*, 30.

but which had finally become a term applied vaguely to heretics and sorcerers.”<sup>3</sup>

Early colonialists, fresh from that bloodbath known as the Inquisition, may have shuddered with revulsion when they heard those dark, rumbling vowels they associated with evil black magic and witchcraft.

Yet I’ve also been told by one knowledgeable source that the African word was confused with an old French word, *Voudous*, which appears in the *Talmud* and refers to the “descent of the holy spirit.” All Voodoo cults practice mediumship and spirit possession, so perhaps the modern word *Voodoo* descended from a combination of African and French and thus spread through Europe and the Americas.

In any case, the Inquisition and its aftereffects certainly colored how Europeans came to regard Voodoo. Early colonialists saw clearly that the Africans worshipped gods, goddesses, and ancestral spirits, and the Inquisition had cursed such pantheistic beliefs as heathen and heretical. Holders of such beliefs had been banished, tortured, or put to death by fire. The colonialists were survivors of that epidemic of missionary zeal, and in the spirit of the Crusades they were militant about spreading the notion that all religions except Christianity were heathen and heretical. Africans and Native Americans who refused to call the Creator of the Universe dog spelled backward were to be dealt with as the Inquisition had dealt with their pantheistic counterparts in Europe.

This martian (ogoonian) sort of missionary decree was not obeyed uniformly, however. Spanish and Portuguese slave traders, in accordance with Roman Catholic slave laws, dutifully baptized their human cargoes on shipboard. Yet in their Catholic colonies, it was illegal to break up families; whereas in Protestant colonies, families were systematically parted as a precaution against rebellion. Spanish Louisiana was the only place in North America where African families remained together on their arrival, according to some sources, but Maryland also contained many Catholic colonialists, who may have kept their slave families together as well.

In any case, the cultural impact must have been mind-shattering. An alien religion that demanded your obedience or your life, a strange new language to learn, a new culture that placed you on a social level with domestic animals, and back-breaking labor from dawn till dusk.

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<sup>3</sup>Alfred Metraux, *Voodoo in Haiti* (New York: Schocken Books, 1972), 27.

For a hint of how this “civilizing” process began, let’s turn to *Agotime: Her Legend* by Judith Gleason.<sup>4</sup> *Agotime* tells us:

...on the fifth day out, the ship’s priest, Father Martinho, decided to break the monotony by baptizing all of us. ...Whereupon [he] arose from the companionway in a cloud of black cloth.

The priest was a curious combination of the ecstatic and the ridiculous. ...Now for all the world like a masquerader, he sprang into our midst, climbed the ladder to the poop and thence up to the captain’s place behind the binnacle. Raising the captain’s speaking trumpet he bellowed forth his intentions in a language that I alone of all the slaves could understand. He would baptize us, he roared, in order that “those whose lusty bodies had been lately clothed in baft might not sink to damnation with shamelessly naked souls.” Then he prayed aloud in what I took at once to be the secret language of his cult.

Father Martinho gave each slave a Christian name and had each repeat the name back to him. Then:

He proceeded to mark us with a quick crisscross upon forehead and breast. Then followed something even more suspicious. With his own fingers he pried open our lips and placed a pinch of salt on every tongue. Did this salt contain a few grains of medicine that was strong enough to give the whiteman perpetual power over one? I know better now but then I was so terrified that I broke out into a sweat, tried not to swallow and fought against that unknown force with every resource I commanded. I could tell from their eyes, when their turn came around, that everyone felt as I did. But none of us dared cry out, dared refuse or reject the salt, until Father Martinho came to the strongest of the men in the bow, the slave we all called Gbaguideguide.

<sup>4</sup>Judith Gleason, *Agotime: Her Legend* (New York: Viking Compass Books, 1970).

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Agotime tells us she had guessed this man was “a thunder worshipper,” an initiate of Shango:

But I did not know for sure until they branded him on the beach. Unlike the rest of us, he felt no pain, no shame. He did not clench his fists or bite his lip till the blood came. I watched him closely then, for I thought if anyone would choose that moment to revolt, to strike out at his oppressors, it would be he. But no, as the hot brand touched his flesh, Gbaguideguide’s face lit up with a fierce joy. His bloodshot eyes gleamed with the incandescence of a supernatural manliness. At that moment he could have walked through the bonfire, heaped coals upon his head, run a steel knife through his swollen tongue. I turned my eyes away, and when I looked again he had come back to himself.

This man, when his turn came at the baptism, spat the salt into the priest’s face. He was quickly grabbed by sailors and bound to the capstan, and the priest continued the baptism “as if nothing had happened.”

After portioning out Christian names and salt communion, Father Martinho jumped up on the bowsprit and through the captain’s speaking trumpet performed “the final exorcism.”

“I conjure you,” he said, “every unclean spirit, in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Ghost, depart from these creatures all and most especially from this violent savage whom our lord has called to his holy ark. Begone, I say, depart.” Upon which he stepped down, picked up a waterbucket the cook had set out upon the bow for him, and wove back the way he had come, ladling out a scant amount onto the head of each new Christian.

Following that ceremony, the priest brought onto deck a large statue of St. Anthony and placed it in the center of the ship. Agotime says:

Anthony was the first Portuguese *vodu* they [the slaves] had seen and naturally they began to clap. The tension broken thus, they then began to dance, drumming upon the deck with their feet. “Silence,” cried Father Martinho. . . . “You see before you a powerful provocator of winds, patron saint of this and all Christian ships that venture forth upon the fickle

surface of the sea. Stay, Anthony, and provide us release from our chains, whip us up a breeze sufficient to the amplitude of our undertaking. Now, my little brothers, you may continue your dance.” With this the priest retired to his cabin—all wrung out from the look of him.<sup>5</sup>

This “civilizing” process was more successful among the Protestants of North America, whose beliefs did not encompass anything as close to African customs as the worship of saints. In South America and the West Indies, where the landscape was not so different from Africa’s, slaves escaped by the thousands, or committed suicide, or were allowed to perpetuate African ways by overseers interested only in agricultural production. Today in Surinam and Brazil there are upriver villages founded by runaway slaves, each with its own oral tradition.

Thus did the mind-set that is uniquely African find its way to the European-dominated New World. Given the nature of that domination, it’s a wonder any of the African ways survived. Yet as Harold Courlander says in *A Treasury of Afro-American Folklore*:

Looking at the Western Hemisphere as a whole, it is abundantly evident that many tangible elements of African ways, customs, attitudes, values and views of life survived the Atlantic crossing. In differing degrees, according to the complex of social forces at work, numerous Negro communities in the Americas continue to draw from the African wellspring. In the upper river jungle country of Surinam, for example, descendants of African slaves live in a style reminiscent of the West African bush village. Haiti, though overlaid with a heavy veneer of French custom, manifests many characteristics of African life. Black communities in Cuba, the English-speaking West Indies, Brazil, Venezuela, Guiana, the French Caribbean and the United States—all preserve something of the African past, and sufficiently so that it is possible to perceive the shared African inheritance.”<sup>6</sup>

It is this “outer edge of the African cultural complex,” as Courlander calls it, that is what I here call the Voodoo culture. Just as

<sup>5</sup>Judith Gleason, *Agotime: Her Legend* (New York: Viking Compass Books, 1970), 5.

<sup>6</sup>Harold Courlander, *Treasury of Afro-American Folklore* (New York: Crown, 1976), 2.

the descendants of early European immigrants developed their own distinct brand of Western civilization on these shores (I'm tempted to call it the cowboy culture), so the descendants of African slaves developed a view of life distinctly different from the European. As Courlander says:

A devotee of the Macumba cult in Brazil may be, and probably is, a Catholic; if he speaks some ritual words in Yoruba, his native language is Brazilian Portuguese; if he holds a number of superstitions a good many of them probably came from Europe; if he responds to African-style music he also responds to music more in the Caboclo and Iberian traditions. Although he is a devotee of Macumba, so are countless whites. And as has been pointed out by various studies of this cult, Macumba today is compounded of African, European, Catholic, Indian, spiritist and even more diverse and exotic elements.<sup>7</sup>



How did a West African word meaning God become in Western culture a handy tool to denigrate, insult, or vilify? Or to imply primitive black magic, witchcraft, ignorant superstition?

Early Europeans who recorded their observations of Africans were often shocked and baffled by the customs they encountered on the "dark continent." They were especially nonplussed by what they regarded at first as "snake worship," which was closely associated with a word they first spelled as *Voh-dong*.

Among the more sympathetic accounts is one written in 1608 by a Catholic priest, Pere Labat, who describes what his friend, Pere Braguez, witnessed in Whydah, West Africa:

The people on their knees and in silence are withdrawn some distance apart; the King alone with the priest of the country entered the enclosure, where after prolonged prostrations, prayers and ceremonies, the priest drew near a hole where supposedly he had a serpent. He spoke to him on behalf of the King and questioned him as regards the number of vessels that would arrive the following year, war, harvest and other

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<sup>7</sup>Harold Courlander, *Treasury of Afro-American Folklore* (New York: Crown, 1976), 5.

topics. According as the serpent replied to a question, the priest carried the answer to the King who was kneeling a short distance away in an attitude of supplication. This by-play having been repeated a number of times, it was finally announced that the following year would be prosperous, that it would have much trade, and that they would take many slaves. The multitude expressed their joy by loud shouts, dancing and feasting.<sup>8</sup>

Pere Braguez then tells Pere Labat that he interviewed the officiating priest and was told:

That the cult rendered to the serpent was only a cult in its relation to the Supreme Being, of whom they were all creatures. That the choice was not left to themselves, but that they had adopted it through obedience to the common Master's orders, which were always founded on sound principles. The Creator knew perfectly the dispositions of the creatures who had come from His hands, and appreciated only too well man's pride and vanity, not to take every means suitable to humble him; for which purpose nothing seemed more effective than to oblige him to bow down before a serpent, which is the most despicable and vilest of all animals.<sup>9</sup>

What seems to have been lost in translation is that only one kind of snake, the python, was the object of such ceremony. Modern science tells us the python has two sense organs on either side of its head, and that these organs are "heat sensitive." Science calls them "labial pits" but doesn't know what information the python picks up through these organs.

Those worshippers of the creator god, Voh-dong, who communed with the python, crossed the Atlantic among the thousands of slaves from Africa. Their European owners then outlawed their traditional religions and, to one degree or another, made an attempt to Christianize them. Combined with the European

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<sup>8</sup>Quoted in Joseph J. Williams, *Voodooes and Obeahs: Phases of West Indian Witchcraft* (New York: Dial Press, 1932), 22.

<sup>9</sup>Williams, *Voodooes and Obeahs: Phases of West Indian Witchcraft*, 22.

response to those two awesome syllables, *Voh-dong*, this attempt succeeded in hopelessly confusing traditional African religion with witchcraft. The distinction between priest and magician blurred, and the word Voodoo took on added dimension.

From an anonymous Frenchman we have this: "The slaves are strictly forbidden to practice the dance which in Surinam is called 'Water Mama' and in our colonies 'Mae d'Agua.' They therefore make a great secret of it, and all we know is that it highly inflames their imaginations. They make immense efforts to do evil things. The leader of the plot falls into such transports that he loses consciousness."<sup>10</sup>

The pre-Christianized European pantheists, the ancestors of those early colonialists, would have seen such scenes differently, no doubt, for pantheism/polytheism/paganism is the same, essentially, for all humanity. But the rise of the Roman Church and the Inquisition probably eradicated from the European mind any awareness of their own ancestral water deities. And it outlawed such frolicsome methods of worship as dance.

African pantheism was most ruthlessly suppressed in the North American colonies that became the United States. It was just as misunderstood elsewhere, however. In his book, *Voodooos and Obeahs*, Joseph J. Williams describes how attempts to outlaw the African religion resulted in a confusion of priests and wizards:

It is probable that many of the African priests became simple Obeah men after coming to Jamaica, for the simple reason that they could not openly practice their legitimate profession. But when known as Obeah men, however much they might be treated with respect, they still were hated and feared. Every evil was attributed to them. The very name of them spread dread.<sup>11</sup>

In Ashanti, where the majority of Jamaican slaves came from, the Okomfo (priest) was in constant and open combat with the Obayifo (wizard or evil magician). But in the New World, where the white master saw no distinction between priest and wizard, the former

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<sup>10</sup>Quoted in Joseph J. Williams, *Voodooos and Obeahs: Phases of West Indian Witchcraft* (New York: Dial Press, 1932), 145.

<sup>11</sup>Quoted in Joseph J. Williams, *Voodooos and Obeahs: Phases of West Indian Witchcraft* (New York: Dial Press, 1932), 145. Williams is quoting from *Twentieth Century Jamaica*, by Herbert G. de Lisser, published in 1913 in Kingston, Jamaica.



were forced into the sort of hiding and secrecy which had characterized the latter. Thus the distinction between them became blurred, even to their countrymen.

Like Voodoo in Haiti, Obeah in Jamaica was also used by rebellious slaves against their masters, focusing European attention on African magic and subtle methods of herbal poisoning. And the word Voodoo was steadily growing as the most commonly used one to designate such activities. Voodoo priests were beaten, jailed, or killed in the United States. The idea that Voodoo also pertained to religion became unthinkable—especially to Europeans, who found nothing sacred about such Voodoo scenes as the following, reported in the *New Orleans Times*, June 26, 1872:

...the sudden entrance of a hoydenish flaxen-haired white girl, who whirled around the room in the arms of a Negro blacker than the ace of spades. . . . There could be no mistake about it. Set adrift on the rapids of depravity in real earnest, she had reached the center of the vortex. The pallid wanton face actually beamed with exuberant levity, and La Dame aux Camelias, in her wildest hours, could not have displayed an abandon more complete. Even the negresses gazed at her with a look of wonder. While the maddening whirl continued our reporter watched the wretched creature, as one after another the ebony suiters sought her hand; he saw her shrink out into the darkness, and more wanton than ever rush back to the revel, and mute with amazement he also turned away.<sup>12</sup>

To the above account one can add countless others describing human sacrifices, massive orgies, boiling pots filled with blood, snakes, toads, owl's heads, rabbit's feet, etc. Where the fancies of such observers diverge from the facts we shall probably never know.

It must be remembered, however, that in the forced migration from Africa, priests and sorcerers, royalty and criminals were all thrown together, and to the eyes of Europeans all were savages. From that perspective came the mangled notion of Voodoo that has found its way into novels and movies. It became a notion so pervasive in Christendom that it created its own wall of racial bigotry and religious intolerance.

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<sup>12</sup>Robert Tallant, *Voodoo in New Orleans* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1946), 36, 37.

A small hole was made in that wall in 1929 when *The Magic Island* by W.B. Seabrook appeared. Seabrook undermined the notion of Voodoo as savage superstition and hailed it as religion:

I believe in such ceremonies. I hope that they will never die out or be abolished. I believe that in some form or another they answer a deep need of the universal human soul. I, who in a sense believe in no religion, believe yet in them all, asking only that they be alive—as religions. Codes of rational ethics and human brotherly love are useful, but they do not touch this thing underneath. Let religion have its bloody sacrifices, yes, even human sacrifices, if thus our souls may be kept alive. Better a black *papaloi* (Voodoo priest) in Haiti with blood-stained hands who believes in his living gods than a frock-coated minister on Fifth Avenue reducing Christ to a solar myth and rationalizing the Immaculate Conception.<sup>13</sup>

In 1947, Maya Deren went to Haiti to make a film in which Haitian dance was to be portrayed as “purely a dance of form.” Four years and three trips later she published *Divine Horsemen: The Voodoo Gods of Haiti*. It was written, she tells us in her preface, “not because I had so intended but in spite of my intentions. . . . I end by recording, as humbly and accurately as I can, the logics of a reality which had forced me to recognize its integrity.”<sup>14</sup>

Maya Deren’s *Divine Horsemen* is eloquent and profoundly philosophical, and it takes one deep into Haitian Voodoo. Other descriptions of Afro-American cults have since appeared, but to my mind none with the powerful insight of Deren’s.

For instance, the American novelist A.J. Langguth makes a valiant effort to come to grips with Brazilian Voodoo in his chronicle titled *Macumba*.<sup>15</sup> He spent three months in the rural village of Camaru, in the state of Bahia, nicknamed “the Voodoo Vatican.” The result is a swift read and a compact encyclopedia of gods and goddesses, symbols and paraphernalia.

Unlike Deren in Haiti, however, Langguth’s vigorous attempt to comprehend the subject falls short. He decides it’s crucial he get out of Bahia or else “I’d start to rant and flail.” He concludes:

<sup>13</sup>W.B. Seabrook, *Magic Island* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1929), 61-62.

<sup>14</sup>Maya Deren, *Divine Horsemen: The Voodoo Gods of Haiti* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1953), 5-6.

<sup>15</sup>A.J. Langguth, *Macumba* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975).

I'm not sorry I spent these three months searching after spirits. Where I went wrong was in not recognizing that the mystery lay closer to hand than a forest in Bahia. Writing fiction is my communion with spirits; it is all one mystery. And since I have known better than to analyze my own impulse too closely, I should simply accept and enjoy the Brazilian effort to recast and gladden an unsatisfactory world, at least until science overtakes us all.<sup>16</sup>

So for all his careful gathering of data, Langguth only adds weight to the notion of Voodoo as superstition and/or a "lost mystery," which is definitely not for North Americans or even urbanized *brazileiros*.

But if that were really the case, why is it that so much of the Western Hemisphere is so firmly grounded in the complex of shared beliefs that constitute the Voodoo culture?



Even in North America, where African traditions were most ruthlessly suppressed, there are obvious differences between white and black folkways and outlooks on life. And the farther south toward Brazil one goes, the stronger and more influential transplanted African culture becomes. In the United States blacks speak of soul brothers, soul food, soulful gospel. In Brazil, Yoruba and Bantu words are often combined with Brazilian Portuguese to say what cannot quite be said in the European languages.

Throughout the Americas, African rhythms and dance movements are evident influences. What is not so obvious are the values and beliefs supporting such influences. What constitutes the Voodoo culture, then, are these commonly held values and beliefs, whether held consciously or otherwise.

For centuries Europeans considered the African way of thinking "primitive," or as Levy Bruhl called it, "pre-logical."<sup>17</sup> Not many attempts were made to make this outlook understandable in Western terms until after World War II. By then it had become

<sup>16</sup>A.J. Langguth, *Macumba* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), 264.

<sup>17</sup>See Janheinz Jahn, *Muntu*, trans. Marjorie Grene (London: Faber & Faber, 1961), 97, for more on French anthropologist Levy Bruhl.

obvious that African culture can absorb what it pleases from Western culture without losing its essential integrity.

One of the best studies of African thinking is Janheinz Jahn's *Muntu*, a Bantu word meaning "human being." Jahn quotes Alexis Kagame, a Bantu who wrote in French, explaining that his native language is structured around four categories: *Muntu* (human being), *Kintu* (thing), *Hantu* (place and time), and *Kuntu* (modality). Everything belongs in one of these four categories—not only as substance but primarily as force.<sup>18</sup>

"Man is a force, all things are forces, place and time are forces, and the 'modalities' are forces." Beauty and laughter are modalities, and as forces they are related to each other. And all forces are related to *ntu*, the stem of the Bantu word for the four categories.<sup>19</sup>

"NTU is the universal force as such, which, however, never occurs apart from its manifestations: Muntu, Kintu, Hantu and Kuntu. NTU is that force in which Being and beings coalesce."<sup>20</sup>

As the Yoruba writer Abebayo Adesanya puts it, "This is not simply a coherence of fact and faith, nor of reason and traditional beliefs, nor of reason and contingent facts, but a coherence and compatibility among all disciplines."<sup>21</sup>

To the African mind, there is no such thing in reality as contradiction, no mutually exclusive propositions, as there are in European thinking. Says Adesanya: "God might be banished from Greek thought without any harm being done to the logical architecture of it, but this is impossible in the case of Yoruba thought, since faith and reason are mutually dependent. . . . In modern times, God has no place in scientific thinking."<sup>22</sup> But this is impossible in African thinking, for the source of everything permeates everything.

When sacrifices are made in Voodoo ceremonies, it is not to an idol or an image of a god or ancestor that the food or animal is offered but to the *force*, the *spirit* of the god or ancestor. And that force is not something separate or distant; it is part of the universal force and related to all forces everywhere.

<sup>18</sup>Janheinz Jahn, *Muntu*, trans. Marjorie Grene (London: Faber & Faber, 1961), 100.

<sup>19</sup>Jahn, *Muntu*, 100.

<sup>20</sup>Jahn, *Muntu*, 101.

<sup>21</sup>Jahn, *Muntu*, 96.

<sup>22</sup>Jahn, *Muntu*, 97.

Jahn quotes the Yoruba novelist Amos Tutuola to explain the African concept of modality:

We knew “Laugh” personally on that night, because as every one of them stopped laughing at us, “Laugh” did not stop for two hours. As “Laugh” was laughing at us that night, my wife and myself forgot our pains and laughed with him, because he was laughing with curious voices that we never heard before in our life. We did not know the time that we fell into this laugh, but when we were only laughing at “Laugh’s” laugh and nobody who heard him when laughing would not laugh, so if somebody continue to laugh with “Laugh” himself, he or she would die or faint at once for long laughing, because laugh was his profession and he was feeding on it.<sup>23</sup>

In African thinking, the physical individual and his personal soul are one during life, and when parted at death, the soul needs the living it has left behind as descendants. As a spiritual force, the soul remains in communication with its descendants, and only when it cannot do this is it considered “entirely dead.” In Afro-American Voodoo cults, the attention of the living to the souls of ancestors keeps those souls alive. If such prayerful attentions are done properly and regularly, the souls of ancestors are strengthened.

*Things*, plants, animals, and minerals, are forces without intelligence. It is the human being who imbues things with intelligence and meaning. Man does this with words. Words *are* the forces of life. Naming creates magic. In the Voodoo culture, it is the spiritual forces of plant medicines that effect healings, not chemical compounds.

When someone falls ill in a Voodoo community, his priest divines to name the source of his illness—its spiritual force. Usually another priest then conjures a counter word, a stronger spiritual force, which will bring about the healing.

Note the difference between this African belief in the power of words and the Christian “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1:1).<sup>24</sup> In the Christian mind, the word remains with God. In the African view, the word was with the Great Creator in the beginning and is still with Him,

<sup>23</sup>Janheinz Jahn, *Muntu*, trans. Marjorie Grene (London: Faber & Faber, 1961), 103. Jahn is quoting from *Palm Wine Drinkard*, by Amos Tutuola.

<sup>24</sup>All Bible references from the King James Version.

but it is also with man and continues to be with man. Man's word continues to create and procreate. Words give force to gods and goddesses and strengthen the souls of ancestors. Words bring intelligence to plants, animals, and minerals, giving the spiritual forces of such things meaning and usefulness.

All human reality is based on words, sounds made meaningful. And all words are part of the Great Creator's original Word, just as rivers and oceans, lakes, and springs are all of water.

It is this belief in spirits and words that crossed the Atlantic and now forms the foundation of the Voodoo culture. All Voodoo cults, no matter how wildly different they may seem to Western observers, hold this belief in words as spiritual forces. Conversely, in Western culture it is *things* that have power. The things of disease are treated with the things of medicinal remedies. Often one chemical remedy will come onto the market in the guise of a dozen or more names, put out by various companies and in various compounds with other, inactive chemicals. But it's not these many names that are thought to have power; it's the one chemical remedy.

The Western belief in things has been undermined lately by what is called the "placebo effect," a name for the fact that patients often respond as well when they *think* they've been given the proper pill as they do when they actually have been given the proper pill. It is said that the cure rate is especially high in experiments in which the doctor thinks he is dispensing the prescribed chemical but is actually giving his patients a placebo. Such experiments support the African contention that it's the word, not the thing, that has power.

In Western culture, the words *mind* and *brain* are often used synonymously, as if they mean the same thing. In the African tradition from which Voodoo arises, those two words have distinctly different meanings. The brain is the *organ* of the mind. The mind, on the other hand, is a nonphysical entity composed of thoughts, which when worded acquire forces.

In the Voodoo culture close attention is paid to the effects of thoughts (spiritual forces) on the physical human being. Whereas Western medicine considers the autonomic nervous system to function independently of conscious thought, Voodooists consider the autonomic nervous system quite vulnerable to the spiritual forces of worded thought.

Western doctors see the proverbial "witch doctor" as employing hypnotic suggestion to affect their patients or victims. But

Voodoo practitioners have a far more sophisticated concept of mind, both conscious and unconscious. For example, an American scientist arrives in a Voodoo community to do an anthropological study. He attributes the local priest's powers to the community's shared beliefs. If you believe he can heal or hex you, he can; if you don't believe it, he can't. The scientist crosses the priest, who puts a hex on him. The scientist falls ill and is taken to the nearest hospital. Doctors there diagnose his illness in their terms and treat him accordingly. Whether he recovers or dies, neither he nor his doctors will see any connection between his illness and the Voodoo priest's anger. Thus, both Western scientists and Voodoo practitioners find verifying evidence for their different beliefs.

Whereas Western culture has produced astounding ways to manipulate the physical environment, the genius of Voodoo culture is to manipulate the spiritual environment—which Westerners do not believe exists. But if you theorize the existence of Voodoo's spiritual world and its means of manipulation, there is ample evidence to support the theory.

If the writings of Sigmund Freud had been correctly translated, Americans might not find it so difficult to grasp the Voodoo concept of "the invisibles." Freud used the word *psyche* to mean what it has always meant since its Greek origins: soul. I suppose "soul-analysis" was not considered "scientific" in America, thus the mistranslation, and American culture took another giant step away from occult awareness. Now many Americans find it difficult even to imagine the realms of souls and spiritual forces that compose the ordinary reality of Voodooists.

Another reason Westerners have difficulty confronting the evidence of Voodoo reality is this: in Christendom there is said to be but one God, and yet there are almost as many notions of who or what that one God is as there are believers. I've heard Christians say it's not God who brings such natural catastrophes as earthquakes and hurricanes but rather God who helps people survive such tragedies. On the other hand, the Christian god is said to be everywhere, in everything, and eternal.

One does not encounter such mutually excluding beliefs among Voodooists, who regard the uproars of nature to be the doing of those children of God—the gods and spiritual forces. From the Voodoo perspective, the Creator of the Universe has far larger concerns and does not bother with the joys and sorrows of one species on one tiny planet in His vast cosmos. Whereas Christendom

has many concepts of its one God, Voodoo has many gods and goddesses, souls and spiritual forces.

To help bring the Voodoo belief system into clearer focus, we will next talk with a Voodoo priest. I have interviewed more than a hundred priests of various cults that fit the expanded meaning of the word *Voodoo*. The one I have chosen to present here is a very articulate American dedicated to preserving the Yoruba Voodoo tradition.



I brought notebook and tape recorder to interview the king of Oyotunji Village near the tiny town of Sheldon, South Carolina. This king was born in Detroit in 1928 and christened, aptly enough, Walter Serge King. He studied commercial art in high school, then joined the Katherine Dunham African dance troupe and toured Europe. He was initiated as a Voodoo priest first in Cuba and later in Nigeria. Now his name is Osejeman Adejunmi. In Yoruba, those names mean “savior of the people” and “the crown has been given to him.”

His priestly name is Efuntola. *Efun* is a white powder symbolizing the creativity and purity of the sun god, Obatala, the Voodoo Christ. Efuntola means a person who is a medium for the power of Obatala.

Efuntola obviously has considerable white blood in his mixed lineage, for he’s light-skinned and fine-featured enough to be mistakenly classified as white. The last time I spoke with him he had five wives and presided over a village of close to one hundred people. They are all classified as blacks in this country. Most are from big cities, and many are well educated. They live without piped-in water, gas, or electricity. They dress as their pre-slave African ancestors did, speak the Yoruba language among themselves, and are devout worshippers of the Voodoo gods and ancestral spirits.

Their king, according to African tradition, has absolute power over his people and village, and he retains that power as long as all goes well. In the case of calamity or extended misfortune, the king must sacrifice his life.

To reach Oyotunji Village, you leave the paved road near Sheldon, park your car near a farmhouse, and walk back along a dirt road. Soon you pass a sign saying you are now leaving the United



States and entering a Yoruba kingdom where the Voodoo gods of African ancestry are worshipped. When you arrive in the center of the village, the feeling is that you have definitely left Western culture and are now in precolonial Africa. About the only thing you find here that speaks of modern America is plywood, used in the construction of houses that are essentially African in style.

Many people travel great distances to seek Efuntola's healings or advice, so you must wait your turn before being ushered into the king's compound. For our interview, Efuntola sat on a platform in an overstuffed chair of vivid purple, wearing a white robe and smoking Norwegian tobacco in a briar pipe.



*Gover:* Obatala, I take it, is Oshala, the Sun god.

*Efuntola:* In Brazil they call this god Oshala, but that's a corruption of *Orisha-nla*. *Orisha* is the Yoruba term for a god, and *nla* means great. So this god is the great god, and he's the patron of this village. And of all creative people, as a matter of fact—artists, musicians, writers, scientists, philosophers. He is the father of all the gods, and according to the Yoruba tradition, he created the solid earth and the first human beings.

*Gover:* And how does Obatala relate, in your pantheon, to Eshu?

*Efuntola:* Eshu is the messenger of all the gods. He's the youngest, and Obatala is much older.

*Gover:* Does your Eshu correspond to Lucifer, the bringer of light? [Such a correspondence is made in Brazil.]

*Efuntola:* Well, not necessarily. Light was already brought by Obatala. For us, Eshu simply becomes the messenger. Whatever the gods have to communicate to man, Eshu is expected to communicate. However, Eshu is very unpredictable because of his youthfulness. For that reason, a god may be sending a person luck, but the person is liable to be having bad luck. So everyone worships Eshu, hoping to avoid his mischievousness in changing the directions of the god who ordered him. Eshu, then, is the unpredictable element in life.

*Gover:* I've been impressed by the idea that the theory of relativity is an expression of one god, Damballah—or the one you call

Orunmila—and that the quantum theory is an expression of Eshu. Do you see it that way?

*Efuntola:* Not necessarily. All the gods together is what relativity represents, the relationship of all forces to one another.

*Gover:* And quantum?

*Efuntola:* Eshu works very closely with Orunmila; they work like a hand in a glove—predestiny and the unpredictable. Orunmila is the fact that all is order and all is organized. Eshu often confuses this. But if the individual worships Eshu, he can then receive the ordered gifts and advantages of the universe. You see, Eshu is at the opposite end of the spectrum from Orunmila—or, as we sometimes call him, Ifa. Ifa is everything that has already happened or is going to happen or is happening now. He is the fact that every life being lived now has already been lived many times before. Through our system of divination, one can correspond with the god who knows what has gone on before and who will tell you what to do in order to solve every single problem. On the other hand, this orderly, predictable element is constantly being interrupted and confused by Eshu.

*Gover:* Is it possible to deduce that the theory of relativity is an expression of Obatala, since he brings enlightenment?

*Efuntola:* Well, you see, Ifa—Orunmila—is an even higher concept than Obatala. Obatala corresponds to the planets Sun and Jupiter, but for Orunmila—Ira—there is no planet. He is the knowledge of all the planets, all the gods and all their destinies. And of all rules and laws. He is known elsewhere as Ilam Aballah, or the whole zodiac.

*Gover:* All right, so relativity comes from Orunmila, Ifa.

*Efuntola:* Yes, I would say so.

*Gover:* How do your other gods express through the planets of our solar system? Which, for instance, is your Venus?

*Efuntola:* In our pantheon, Venus is Oshun. The Moon is Yemanja. Mercury corresponds to Eshu, Mars to Ogun, and Earth to Obaluaye. But this seems confusing because Saturn is also Obaluaye, the Great Teacher. In our system Earth is considered more like man, in the sense that in the trinity concept the Sun is father, the Moon is mother, and the Earth is everyman, or Jesus Christ who suffers in material form. This is the basic concept behind the original trinity. Well then, Shango corresponds to Uranus, Neptune to Olokun. *Okun* means oceans, so Olokun is ruler of the oceans. And this is the god, incidentally, who rules over the African race. So whenever the planet Neptune moves into another constellation, we know that this is

going to be the expression of blacks for the next fourteen years, since it takes about that long for Neptune to transit each constellation.

*Gover:* It's in Sagittarius now. [Now being Summer, 1976].

*Efuntola:* Yes, and when it was in Libra, the emphasis on "black is beautiful" came out, and the cry for justice. The cultural movement began then, and we produced the dashiki. Blacks became conscious of their own attractiveness and began to wear their hair in the "natural." And when Neptune went into Scorpio, you had the rise of the Black Panthers, Malcolm X, and so forth, a more aggressive influence. This more intense, more dynamic force took over the blacks. Then, as soon as Neptune went into Sagittarius—which is the sign of organization, institutionalization—the Panthers completely changed, and we of the cultural movement went south and began to establish and institutionalize our work here. The blacks who were into integration decided to organize by going into black caucuses and into government, formulating new methods to solidify control. Blacks in the middle of the road, between integration and nationalism, decided to organize schools of thought, so a number of black schools were set up around the country.

*Gover:* And what will be the effect on blacks when Neptune goes into Capricorn?

*Efuntola:* The industrial era will be undermined and come to a conclusion. People will have to return to the earth, to the soil. The luxury in which many have lived during the industrial era will completely constrict and contract. There's going to be land reform in the world generally, particularly in America and other industrialized nations. Blacks, for the most part, are going to have very hard times in the cities. That's one of the reasons we moved south—to prepare an alternative way of life for blacks when they are compelled to leave the cities.

*Gover:* Well, that analysis seems to make sense. Now we have one more planet, Pluto.

*Efuntola:* Pluto, the ruler of Scorpio, is the goddess we call Oya. She is one of the wives of Shango. She is a warrior queen, very intense and, if she is negatively aspected, subversive. On the other hand, she's the crusader who changes whole eras. She gets out the crusading type of people who begin to reorganize, to reorder the social system.

*Gover:* Then Pluto transiting through Libra, where she is now, brings the force of Oya to love and the arts, to legality and justice, dredging up government corruption. Is that so?

*Efuntola:* Yes, and when negatively aspected, it brings up all kinds of sexual perversions and aberrations, degeneracy, a love of ease and luxury.

*Gover:* In recent times, East and West seem to be having that meeting that “never the twain” would have, according to an earlier assumption. Yet it seems to me that one of the world’s three primary races, the African, is still grossly misunderstood by both East and West. Do you agree?

*Efuntola:* Well, not entirely. The East and the African worlds are quite similar. They have a basic understanding. Actually, the East and West will never understand each other. They’ll meet only superficially.

*Gover:* What I’m suggesting is that Voodoo—using that word as a generic term for the African-oriented cultural perspective—is the link for a true understanding between East and West.

*Efuntola:* Well, it would seem so, but because of the very nature, the very genius of the West, that genius is not able to live and express itself harmoniously with either the Eastern or African geniuses.

*Gover:* You see Ogun, then, as the genius of the West? Mars, god of war?

*Efuntola:* Exactly. We say of the Caucasian people that they are Arien, or Martian. Africans are a Piscean race—Olokun, Neptune. Obviously, then, there’s going to be a terrific cultural difference. The East is ruled by Eshu, Mercury. The West is Ogun, and as it has been developed here in the United States, it’s also Shango, Uranus.

*Gover:* Shango and Ogun combine to dominate the internal combustion engine and the assembly line, things of that nature.

*Efuntola:* Exactly. And both are terrifically powerful *auxiliary* energies. But they are not necessarily intellectually profound energies.

*Gover:* Would you say *dense* is the word?

*Efuntola:* Yes, that fits them very well, because Ogun is the consciousness of minerals, which are of a dense molecular structure. But when properly directed, Ogun is the force of the seed battling out of its pod to grow toward the finer energies, like the sun. But when left to his own devices, he’s like the nuclear bomb. Both Ogun and Shango need strong direction by the older, wiser gods. Otherwise, they can become the most destructive forces imaginable.

*Gover:* Yes, well. . . I’d like to move on now to the relationship of the gods to individuals. What I’m trying to do is find a way to explain, in Western terms, the old gods as composing the life force of

each individual. Or in other words, as the archetypes of the energy science tells us is all at various rates of vibration.

*Efuntola*: All right, I think our Voodoo doctrine of multiple souls will be helpful here. We believe the human individual is not motivated by one soul but by nine souls. The ancient Egyptians had this concept too. Each soul is a force in some aspect of life on this planet. And each also has an area of worship, relationships, and factors that give it expression, which the individual, in one way or another, at one time or another, ritualizes.

Now the first of these is the *universal* soul. This unites man with the universe and everything in it. Being a part of the universe, whatever happens in the universe affects man, sooner or later. If there's an earthquake on Krakatoa, people in America will in time be affected somehow. A sunspot, whether we even know of its existence or not, in one way or another will affect energies on this planet. This universal soul, then, can be taken for granted. Man doesn't have to worship it formally. This is the universal God, which we call Olodumare or Olorun, the supreme universal force permeating everything.

Now after that, man has a *human* soul. This narrows man down from being just an amorphous element in the universe and gives him a particular form. This gives him his relationships with other forms and other human beings. Whatever he does, he thinks of in human terms. Wherever he goes, this human soul enables him to relate to other human beings on a basic level. There may be other ways in which humans are unable to relate, but one human can correspond with other humans on this basic level, whereas he may or may not be able to relate to a turtle or a tree. So this human soul is another factor that guides, controls, and limits the behavior of the individual. And this soul corresponds to Obatala, the begetter of earthly forms.

Now after that, men are born into different races, and each has a *racial* soul. Each racial soul has its own genius, its own character. This is expressed by each particular race in the same way individuals or groups have certain talents and behaviors and geniuses. Each race also has this. The individual's acts and reactions to stimuli are going to basically be those of an Oriental, an African, or a European. We say Europeans are ruled by Ogun, Orientals by Eshu, and Africans by Olokun, and we consider the American Indian primarily Eshu.

Then after that is the *sexual* soul. Each race is divided into males and females. In every civilization there's a masculine ideal and a feminine ideal. The behavior of all human beings is motivated and

controlled and limited by this spiritual force that was created in their ancient past, long before they were born. Its laws, rules, and expressiveness were created long ago in each culture. Men in Arabia often walk around holding hands. That's not done in the Western world. The American ideal of masculinity is based on the cowboy, for the most part, which goes back to Valhalla and the ideal of fighting and dying and living in Valhalla and still fighting, still competing.

After the sexual soul, then, each person has an *astral* soul. Each male and female has some particular talent, or *odu*, as we call it. His *orisha* gives him a particular talent, and he's able to be a plumber or a writer, a killer or a decorator, a mystic or whatever, based on this astral force, this spiritual force we call a soul. And this one too limits, controls, and motivates the individual. This is the individual's archetypal god. And as we know, each god has his own rituals and symbols and elements and how a man should relate to it.

Now then, after the astral soul comes the *national* soul. People are born into various nations, and each nation has its own character, its own spirit. The American spirit is one thing, the Japanese spirit another. The Yoruba spirit is one thing, the Bushman spirit another. Whatever nation a person is born into, he carries this spiritual quality called the character of that nation. He acts like a Frenchman, or a Russian, or a Chinaman. He's mystical like a Hindu, and so forth. People develop popular notions about how each nationality is supposed to act. An Indian is supposed to be stern and silent. Orientals are supposed to be insidious and unpredictable. The Yoruba is supposed to be vigorously happy, strong, and sensual. So this national soul is a very real and influential thing, if you're willing to admit it and trace it out behind popular prejudices. And a person has to worship it if he is to integrate totally his complete identity, composed of all these souls, each expressing the characteristics of one god or another.

After this national soul, the person has an *ancestral* soul. This is his own personal family within the nation. And each family's pattern of behavior—if they're criminals, warriors, businessmen, factory workers, farmers, or whatever—has come down through the family to affect the individual. In the African system, of course, human beings are considered to reincarnate within the same family, so this particular soul is worshipped very intensely. There's a very elaborate system of worship attached to it.

After the ancestral soul, each person has a *historic* soul—what Shakespeare called the age and body of the time—the *spirit* of the

time one is born into. Those born in the time of slavery are going to have quite a different historical soul, speaking of blacks. And there are revolutionary times, innovative generations. This is a generation that is highly spiritual, much as we had two thousand years ago when religions in the Middle East were developing. People are born into wartime with a warrior historical soul, and into times of plenty, times of deprivation, artistic and scientific advancements, and so forth.

Then, finally, each individual has his own *personal* soul—in other words, his ego. This is his personal destiny, what he personally is going to do, or what he's expected to do, would like to do, or has the ability to do during one lifetime, which may last eighty years, more or less. In the Yoruba Voodoo culture, we each have a little vessel we worship, which represents our own personal destiny. It's called your *odu*, the reading you came from heaven with. And this soul also controls your life, motivates it, and limits it by prescribing what you are capable of doing, the type of people you are best to associate with and the type you can't even get along with. Also the type of things you should eat and what you should avoid eating—your *odu* writes out completely your individual life. [End of interview]



Unlike the Western theological tradition, within the Voodoo culture one is never asked to accept any belief on faith. As the Yoruba writer Adesanya points out, the ideal that God has no place in scientific thinking is an impossible proposition in African thinking. *Olodumare*, the source of all, permeates all, including scientific thinking. From the Voodoo perspective, every thought—scientific or otherwise—is from the realm of one god or another. Every undertaking—personal, family, social, political, or international—shows the old gods participating in human affairs, for those able to read the evidence.

In order to read the evidence, one must first consider the possibility that the African world of spiritual forces is valid. But within the modern, rational, scientific community, it is practically taboo even to suppose there are gods and spirits, and that words conjure forces that can be directed and used. The energy science proposes is all at various rates of vibration—that energy is not alive and conscious, nor can it be divided into those archetypal realms called gods and goddesses.

From the Voodoo perspective, that scientific taboo, or faith, is itself from the realm of Ogun, for that deity's most notorious faults are narrow-minded self-righteousness. When Ogun gets such a self-limiting, dead-end notion in his head, there is no point in trying to argue with him. So there is no point in my attempting to prove the logical integrity of Voodoo in a way that would be acceptable to the scientific community.

But for Westerners who are willing to discard the scientific taboo and consider the basic beliefs of Voodoo as possibilities, there is more than enough validating evidence. What so often confuses this process for Westerners, however, is the lack of any standard pantheon of deities throughout the Voodoo culture. Voodooists are polytheists, and each priest is a pope in his own cult. In some cults, the American Indian theology is the strongest; in others, Dahomean, Bantu or Congolese names and customs prevail.

To avoid that impasse, that confusion of different names and customs, I will stick with Efuntola's Yoruba pantheon. For one thing, the Yoruba people have been elucidating their theology for thousands of years and have become quite adept at making it clear and comprehensible. Transplanted to the New World, it has been this clearly defined Yoruba version of African pantheism that has become dominant. And Efuntola is among those who seek to preserve the Yoruba tradition as purely as possible.

The interview I presented above was edited from five hours of taped sessions. I also spent time with Efuntola informally and had the opportunity of watching him work, using the spiritual forces of various animals and things to heal some people and end the misfortunes of others, and to divine—to commune with Ifa, the knowledge of past, present, and future.

In one instance, a good friend, who was then a feature writer for a major newspaper, asked Efuntola to divine the destiny of that newspaper. Efuntola threw the traditional Yoruba *opele* and the reading came that if the paper were a person it could be said to be suffering a blood disease, like leukemia, a subtle kind of bleeding. Since money is the lifeblood of such an entity as a newspaper, its financial system would have to be thoroughly cleansed or else it would go belly-up financially. It did, within the year.

I asked Efuntola to divine the destiny of this book, which I was then working on. His reading said the book would take much longer



than I had anticipated (it has) but that when I finally brought it under control, it would be welcomed on three continents—which remains to be seen.

One reason the book has taken so long to complete is that for about five years I grappled with the confusing external differences found in the various Voodoo cults. It wasn't until I decided to shed as much exotic detail as possible and seek the common denominators uniting all of these seemingly different cults that the task became manageable.

Then too, it became clear over the years that Voodoo cannot be grasped as theory only, the way one can learn math from a textbook. To validate the theories of the Voodoo belief system, it is necessary to enter the Voodoo culture and experience it. I have made various attempts over the years to burrow deeply enough into the Voodoo reality to capture its essentials as personal experiences, to understand it from the inside out.

But such attempts did not succeed until I realized that like so many others conditioned by Western culture I had some very powerful built-in psychological blocks. As long as these blocks remained unidentified, unnamed, they acted as a stone wall.

For example, I never consciously held the belief that the souls of my ancestors were parked in heaven, hell, or purgatory, far from the living. Nor had I bought the belief of the rational—that death is oblivion and that there is no such entity as a soul or spirit. I could entertain the notion of reincarnation but neither believed nor disbelieved it. I had been conditioned by my culture to suspend belief, which was good. What was not good was that I blocked on looking for evidence, pro or con.

I didn't identify that block until evidence of reincarnation found me. A Santa Barbara hypnotist, Karl Larsson, guided me into a deep trance and got me to come up with my name and date of birth for a series of past lives, and we recorded the session. One of the persons I described myself as having been was a Captain John Worthington, whose main occupation during the mid-1600s had been transporting slaves from Africa to the Americas. Captain John had four wives—in London, Brazil, New Orleans, and Annapolis. About a week after that session, I chanced on an American genealogy book and looked up my surname. I found, to my utter amazement, that it recorded my first European ancestor to these shores as one Robert Gover, whose son,

Andrew, married Pricilla Worthington, daughter of Captain John and Hannah Worthington of Pendemy on the Severn, Annapolis! Since it's virually impossible that I could have tucked that bit of information away in my subconscious, I had to admit it as evidence of reincarnation. It is also evidence of the Voodoo belief that souls reincarnate within family lines—that an interwoven mix of bloodline and soul exists and evolves through time.

I realize that such evidence cannot be put forward as strictly scientific, since it did not emerge from a controlled experiment. But I can't deny it or dismiss it as coincidence on strictly scientific grounds, for I know how it came to me and how it revealed a psychological block: an inability to accept the information-gathering capabilities of my own mind. I had been conditioned to look "out there" rather than "in here."

Another block I eventually discovered was that I unconsciously bought into that old American saw, "If he's so smart, why ain't he rich?" I found I was paying more respectful attention to wealthy, educated, urbanized Voodoo priests than to their dirt-poor rural counterparts. I became aware of this hangup when I encountered a Voodoo priest who was watching an American news telecast in the jungles of French Guiana. After that, I didn't hesitate to find a translator and go sloshing into muddy villages of banana-leaf huts to seek out the ancient wisdom.

Without mentioning all the cultural baggage I had to toss overboard, I should include the one block I think of as my final breakthrough. That block I call the idea that mental telepathy is sporadic at best and usually unreliable. Since I was so often dealing through translators with Voodoo priests, I took the advice of one and paid close attention to the thoughts that came to me in his presence and later in dreams, imaginings, and visions. I found that not only did the priest's message jump the language barrier into my mind telepathically but that this brought home in no uncertain way the power of thought/spirit. After that, my interviews became translingual and transcultural, and Voodoo pantheism became stunningly real. Indeed it is a transtheological belief system, harmoniously integrated and logically verifiable.

Having found my own personal verifications, I was still left with the problem of how to convey the subject to my fellow countrymen. I made more attempts than I care to remember before going back to square one: theory precedes discovery of evidence; you won't find

what you're not looking for nor what you don't suppose can possibly exist.

A jungle tribesman may look up and see a jet fly by and consider it a supernatural phenomenon, having no knowledge of the theories on which the jet is built and flies. So an urban Westerner with no knowledge of the theories (gods and spirits) of Voodoo will consider ceremonial possession either a supernatural event or a fraud.

Thus, this first chapter is intended as a quick primer, an outline of Voodoo beliefs posed as theoretical possibilities. In contradiction to the Western belief that Voodoo is ancient and barbaric superstition, my aim is to show it as quite modern, highly developed, and the natural perspective from which millions of people view life.

No longer are these people remote and far away from us. We are now all part of the same "global village" and increasingly interdependent. Thousands are acquiring Western educations and finding they are able to integrate their native beliefs with Western beliefs. They know the Western perspective on life, but Westerners generally don't know theirs. That ignorance hinders the evolution of humanity. And Voodoo, with its contradictory meanings, is the cornerstone of that hindering ignorance.

This primer about the Voodoo belief system, then, is followed by a condensed narrative of my own search for evidence of the theories. It's as though I shot ten hours of film and edited it to one hour in an effort to capture the essence of the subject. My focus is on the internal effects of the Voodoo culture, for it is in mind, thought, spirit, and inner dialogue that the stuff of any culture resides. Even such spectacular manifestations of Western culture as the nuclear bomb derive from beliefs, theories that have found evidence of themselves.

I thought of the journey I will describe as a modern update of the Native American vision quest. To guide the first steps of this vision quest, I called on my old friend, Lennox, who had grown up in a Shango Voodoo culture in Trinidad. He had experienced Brazilian and Haitian Voodoo as well, and had the best collection of books on the subject I've ever run across.

My friend was living with his wife in a rented house that perched on a steep incline along Fort George Road, near Port of Spain. I stayed in their guest room downstairs in the back, overlooking the village in the valley below. All day I heard the chorus of voices and the clamor of work; each evening brought the sound of steel drum

bands practicing and each night the noisy travels of dog packs roaming the neighborhood. In the predawn stillness it was not unusual to see the tiny distant lights of Voodoo candles dotting the landscape.

Lennox proved to be an excellent guide into the Voodoo culture. But I soon found that trying to deal with my experience in straightforward prose was like trying to wrestle an octopus. My culture demanded I intellectualize, whereas what was needed to obtain the Voodoo perspective was a leap of intuition.

Too often I found myself involved in inner conflicts between those two *Is*, intellect and intuition. Until, that is, I realized my intellect is an expression of my personal soul and my intuition an expression of my astral soul. Eventually, I settled for these two personas of my *odu*—*Gover*, my personal soul and intellect, and *O. Govi*, the name I gave my astral soul and intuition. I turned these two entities loose in the dialogue that follows.

## 2 *Entering the Voodoo Reality*

*O. Govi:* He sleeps under mosquito netting in his friend's guest room. I, as his dreaming self, venture forth and spy ferocious guardians at the gates of Voodoo. If I conveyed such images to his sleeping mind, he'd pop awake from a nightmare. I withhold them. Perhaps later I'll share them. Yet I shiver and quake at the treacherous tangle of contradictions he has set out to explore—White Voodoo as black magic and Black Voodoo as white magic.



*Gover:* Today I begin fasting. Fasting is common in the Voodoo culture as a means of purification. I've been preparing for the past two weeks by eating nothing but raw fruits and vegetables. From now on, until I feel thoroughly cleansed, I will take in nothing but orange juice and the sun-purified milk of green coconuts.

I'm up at five a.m. to go with Lennox to a Shango Voodoo shrine in the countryside. He's described it as centering around a beautiful waterfall way back in the hills. Lennox has been up since four A.M., he tells me, doing Hatha Yoga and jogging up the very steep Fort George Road. This is his fifteenth day of fasting.

An hour of driving brings us to the foot of another very steep hill, deep in a rain forest full of magnificent fruit trees. I'm amazed by

the heavy-hanging abundance growing on both sides of the road. Has it been left to grow in untamed wildness?

No, for further up the road we pass a government work crew pruning trees. I want to stop so I can pick one of these luxuriant gifts of Mother Nature. I promise only to sniff and fondle it, but Lennox won't stop because he says the first day of a fast is the most difficult and there's no point making it more difficult than it has to be. He stashed a sack of green coconuts and a machete in the back seat. "Today we drink the sun-kissed milk of the coconut, nothing more," he says in the clipped English of his West Indian dialect.

The road climbs toward a cloud-covered peak. Near the end of the road the grade becomes so steep the car falters. We park it and continue up a hiking trail. "From here it's about a mile," says Lennox, then sets out at a fast pace up a single-lane dirt and stone thoroughfare. The angle of ascent soon becomes something for mountain goats. I'm panting and sweating; my legs give out, and I have to call for a rest.



*O. Govi:* His pursuit of the old gods might have taken us to a more fashionable place, like Findhorn in Scotland. But that would not have satisfied his fascination with the word *Voodoo*. Well, I'm not sure that dragging me, his much-abused autonomic nervous system, through such tortures as this will bring him any satisfaction either. His boozing and smoking have taken a heavy toll. That's why Lennox has advised that he fast—to get rid of the gunk of "civilized" living and clean up this wreck, this body, this "temple of his soul," and make it habitable for decent spirits.



*Gover:* I was educated to suppose that fasting is debilitating. And no doubt if you stop eating and drinking entirely, you will wither away and die. But witnessing Lennox's dynamo vigor after fifteen days of nothing but orange juice and coconut milk reminds me that energy—force—is not the stuff you chew and swallow and digest. What I need now is that type of energy named *Ogun* (Mars).

I struggle on, watching Lennox's "dreadlocks" swing to and fro. Occasionally the dreadlocks whirl as he turns to see if I'm still on my

feet. I've known him for fifteen years and never before have I seen him so strong, so glowingly healthy and sure of himself. His new wife, Cuiqui, is due to deliver their first offspring in a week.

At the crest of our climb he stands grinning down at me as I come groaning up the last of the ascent. Before us is a brief valley surrounded on three sides by cliffs. At the far end is a waterfall that feeds a rushing stream along the valley's floor. White water spumes over the top of the cliff then cascades down, becoming every color of the rainbow as it falls. Here it tumbles down in solid streams, elsewhere in slender trickles, and everywhere it sends out mists that hover in the sparkling sunlight or go flying in the wind.

We descend into the valley and approach the waterfall. Its rocky face is thick with moss that glows: deep purples, blues, greens, yellows, and glints of silver. All around are rocks and boulders, some eight or ten feet high. On top of the boulders and around their bases are plates of food, half-emptied bottles of rum, Coca-Cola, homemade breads stuffed with herbs, and candles—lots and lots of candles. I'm amazed by the number of offerings—not moldy old leftovers but fresh foods, neatly arranged among candles set in appropriate designs.

The path into this captivating valley and the floor of the valley itself are obviously well cared for. The tropical growth is kept trimmed back from the path, the old offerings to the gods picked up. "Who keeps this place so clean?" I ask.

"Whoever the spirits move to do so."

We wander about awhile, then each fall into our separate meditations. I open my notebook and pick up my pen, but the atmosphere of the place, the steady sound of the waterfall and rushing stream compel a wordless trance.



O. Govi: He would like to write something appealing to the rational Western mind—a syncretism of Voodoo and science. Or if he cannot find words for that, something about the overwhelmingly awesome atmosphere of this place. But he is struck dumb by the presence of towering intelligences far too vast to be contained by rational English.

And that is as it should be, for if the old gods were so easily conveyed in rational language, there would be no need for him to be here having this nonverbal experience.

Gover: I lost track of time and don't know how long we stayed there, entranced. Walking back down the hill, Lennox pauses to point out offerings at the base of a silk-cotton tree. We pause again to gather some fallen nutmeg to bring home. And now I notice here and there along the narrow thoroughfare—wide enough for two or three people but not for a car—people have constructed little rock bridges over natural gullies. That touch, plus the trimmed-back growth of the rain forest, are the only evidence of human tampering.

I'm reminded of what the Oxford-educated Bantu witch doctor Credo Mutwa said in his book, *My People*:<sup>25</sup> it's a great insult to divine creation for people to invent mechanical or technological ways to revise nature. Obviously, the Shango Voodoo worshippers at this natural shrine know this. I get the feeling that this place is so well guarded by such powerful invisibles that it would withstand the most severe geophysical catastrophe.

Where the stream widens and deepens we stop for a swim. It's like bathing in holy water. Then we lie out on rocks to dry off in the sunshine.

As we get back into the car I vow to myself to never mention the name and location of this place to anyone. If it ever became a tourist attraction, it would quickly fall into ruin.



O. Govi: He smiles to himself then, for he thinks he has taken a step into the Voodoo reality and now understands why such shrines are kept secret: the Christianized would scoff at feeding the pagan gods, and the rationalized would want to turn such a charming site into a public park.

Well yes, he has taken one step into the Voodoo reality, and he's about to take the next step.



Gover: At the first crossroads, an elderly man carrying a satchel flags us down with insistent arm-waving. He's between sixty and seventy but as spry and quick-witted as a man of twenty, as I soon

<sup>25</sup>Credo Mutwa, *My People*. I ran across this book while I was in Trinidad. I have not been able to find this book in the United States. It was originally published in London.



discover. He wears a black cloth band around his right wrist and a red one around his left. In Shango Voodoo these are called “shield rings.” He’s going to Port of Spain, he tells us, on an urgent mission.

As we fly over the blacktop, Lennox engages him in that clipped, British-flavored Trinidadian lingo that is a language of its own. I catch enough of it to realize I have just encountered my first Shango Voodoo priest.

“Oh, but I have nothing to do with *evil* spirits,” he says for my benefit. Centuries of experience has taught Voodooists to be cautious around white people.

Seeing that he carries flowers and herbs in his satchel, I ask about the mission he’s on.

“I go on a mission of healing. You see, mon, some people think they can call down an evil power and put it on somebody else and that’s the end of it. But no, no sir, that’s *not* the end of it. Because the power one person call down and put on another always go back to the first person, and then that person is in trouble. You know what I mean, mon?”

He explains that he’s going to give a bush bath—an herbal spiritual cleansing—to a girl who is suffering what Westerners would call a psychotic episode. He’ll use the spirits of his flowers and herbs to end the diabolic squabbling in his distraught patient. “She call down evil on somebody and now that evil make her suffer too.” He shows us the flowers and herbs he’s picked, holding up each with reverence. “First I get ready the bush bath, then I read Psalm Ninety-one and Psalm Twenty-three, and when I’m done with the body, I read the Fifth of Saint James.”

Such an amalgamation of Christianity and Voodoo is not unusual in this part of the world, especially among the English-speaking. But the healing of mental illness by exorcism is neither Christian nor psychiatric. So he is a kind of Christianized Voodoo psychiatrist. With this in mind, I idly ask, “And does the bush bath always work?”

An instant later I want to eat my words. Both he and Lennox gape at me with irritation and contempt. My question has undermined the purity of intention, the intense conjuring needed for a successful healing. Well no, it hasn’t really undermined anything in their minds, but it’s made them feel they should not have discussed any of this with me, a white man.

“I never know it to fail,” the old man says emphatically, then falls silent.

A while later, Lennox mentions my interest in Shango Voodoo and tells him we have just come from visiting the outdoor shrine. That lightens the mood, and the priest tells me there is really no difference between Christianity and the ancient African religion. "Oh yes, they seem different," he says, "but no no, at the heart of it all they are both quite the same."

I agree enthusiastically, glad to have gotten beyond my thoughtless question, and I mention the Seven African Powers candle, which depicts the Voodoo gods as Catholic saints and is widely used throughout the Americas. He is pleased to learn I consider saints Catholic symbols of the old gods.

Our rapport is so good now that as we near his destination I am tempted to ask if I can go with him and watch him work. But he deals with my question before I ask it. He makes it clear that what he's about to do is a strictly private affair between his patient, the spirits involved, and himself. Absolutely no visitors allowed, especially not an American who, even though he understands a thing or two about the Old Religion, as he calls it, has blurted out a question that shows he doesn't understand the concentration of purpose needed to succeed.

When we let him out, he graciously thanks us both for the ride, wishes me well in my quest to comprehend the Old Religion, then turns and takes off running. He runs through a busy intersection with long, loping strides, dodging cars like a lanky football player dodging tacklers.

We drive on, and Lennox gently reminds me that the British colonialists tried everything they could think of to destroy Voodoo and Christianize the "savages." Forced to bow to the Christian pantheon, the Africans made obvious (to them) correspondences between the old gods and these new characters called saints. So although it appeared to the Christian clergy that their obedient "darkies" had been converted, the blacks were really worshipping the Voodoo gods as the informing spirits of the Christian pantheon.

Well, I already knew that from reading books. "But the essential difference," I say, "is that Christians worship Jesus as a dead hero, who has promised to return, while the Voodooists worship Obatala as the Christ spirit present always and everywhere, who takes temporary possession of those able to invoke him."

We agree that there is this very important difference: whereas Christians worship the Christ spirit, they are unaware of it acting out in people, plants, and everything else, and Voodooists are aware of it!

O. Govi: One step forward, one step backward. My esteemed collaborator tends to overlook the fact that knowledge *about* is not experience *of*.



Gover: Even though I can legitimately claim to be the author of this, O. Govi has a way of coming up with thoughts that are strictly his, not mine. Sometimes I agree and sometimes, even as I jot them down, I wonder.



O. Govi: Words are the costumes of thoughts. Styles change. The same thoughts enjoy dressing up in different costumes.



Gover: I decided to create O. Govi after several Voodoo priests advised that I develop a way to listen to my inner voice, my subconscious, my dreams. Well, writing poetry and fiction is a process of harkening to one's inner voice, or *voices*. I've been doing that since earliest recollection.

But fictitious characters come as inner voices *via* the writer's subconscious. Creating a dialogue *with* the subconscious is something else. And this is not fiction; it's a condensed version of actual experience. I give O. Govi existence, definition, even form of a kind, and yet . . .



O. Govi: And what form does he suppose I take? A bee in his bonnet? How easy it is to lose track of the *spirit* of things, to think in literal terms about abstractions. Although it's true the old gods manifest through physical matter, to the eye of the *informed* observer, such spirits are as abstract as scientific theories.

It is recorded that the ancient Pythagoreans were attempting to square the circle. Well, I am a sphere contained within a cube that is Robert Gover. Anyone's so-called subconscious is a universe, the whole sphere of his mental grasp, the parameters of his awareness, his personal flying saucer through inner space. I am the vehicle he must ride to the Voodoo experience.

*Gover:* Second day of fasting. It's Saturday night, and Lennox and I have decided to go to the Savannah, Port of Spain's sprawling central park, for a big revival meeting to be conducted by a Pentecostal preacher from the United States.

A large crowd is already there by the time we arrive. We park, then work our way through this throng toward the brightly lit platform, where an organist is playing bouncy gospel tunes. Presently, the preacher steps forward and prepares to do his thing, with the aid of microphone and loudspeakers.

A long line of people await his blessing. In countries such as Trinidad, anyone advertised as spiritual draws a crowd. We manage to station ourselves by the platform's off-ramp, just as the line begins to move, the blessings happen, and the whole show gets under way.

It reminds me of an assembly line. Like bottles in a cola factory, each human vessel is filled with a Christian blessing. The preacher claps a palm smartly over each forehead and yells, "Heal, heal, heal! Heal in the name of Jesus!" Occasionally he cups a cheek gently, or holds a shoulder, or lays a hand on an ailing limb. Then each of the blessed in turn bounces, plods, or runs down the off-ramp, past our close inspection. Those who are especially touched by the blessing stagger down the ramp into the waiting arms of a couple of Pentecostal assistants.

Some are bored, and others go through this process just for a Saturday night kick. There are children of all ages, beautifully healthy young adults, the old and lame, maimed, blind and deaf, and all this blessing is happening to a musical accompaniment—a young lady behind the preacher enthusiastically bangs out waltzy hymns on her electric organ. When she's into an especially lively number, the crowd keeps time with hand clapping.

The preacher wears a raincoat for the first fifteen minutes or so, then he takes it off and is in a blue suit, white shirt, and subdued necktie. He is plump and jowly, and he's working away at this blessing business at a frenzied pace. It's a cool, damp night, but he's soon sweating. A thoughtful assistant hands him a cup of coffee, which he sips quickly between blessings. "Heal, heal, heal"—sip, sip—"heal in the name of Jesus!" Sip, sip.

The rhythmic efficiency of the preacher and the figures floating past me down the ramp are spellbinding. A multiracial mix of Afro, Hindu, Amerindian, Chinese, and brown-Spanish, -French, -Dutch, -English. Such a great ethnic variety, and yet after awhile they all seem to blend before my spellbound eyes into one.

Momentarily I snap out of the trance and wonder why so many are here tonight. Very few, if any, are Pentecostal. They are Anglican, Catholic, Protestants of one kind or another, Moslems, Hindus, Baptists, Baptist Shouters, Shangoists, and, no doubt, a few who secretly maintain the ancient Yoruba tradition. In the United States, this preacher could not possibly draw such a large crowd from so many other faiths. So why, I wonder, have these people come?

The answer to that is in their behavior. It's well understood here that the gods are the same by whatever name. That is a primary difference between these two cultures I call Western and Voodoo. Christianized Westerners believe their particular faith is the only true one. But these people know that everyone has discovered and/or invented essentially the same gods and goddesses.

And many of these people are experts at acquiring possession of their deities, to one degree or another. Or to put it another way, they have been trained to be spirit mediums. And occasionally I see someone who appears on the verge of becoming possessed in the preacher's hands. Hanging in the air is the strong hint that sooner or later this Pentecostal ceremony is going to be spiced by some Voodoo.

Sure enough, suddenly the preacher has his hands on a young woman who trembles at his touch, screams, flings up her arms, falls backward, then pops up and grabs him in a vibrating bear hug. He lifts his face heavenward and yells, "Jesus, Jesus, save this soul." But the spirit that has this woman has the preacher in its embrace and won't let go. The woman's body is trembling like she's about to have an orgasm. A hush comes over the crowd. The organist changes her tune. The preacher keeps yelling heavenward, and finally the woman regains her ordinary senses and lets go, reels backward and almost falls off the stage. The two assistants escort her gently down the off-ramp. The preacher pulls out a handkerchief and mops his brow. There is a huge sigh from the crowd—a kind of subdued mirth and the feeling of being spent.

The preacher accepts a second cup of coffee in a Styrofoam container and after a couple of sips gets back to work. All goes smoothly for a few minutes, then it happens again. Looks like the same prankster from the realm of Eshu, this time invading the body of a short, squarely built, middle-aged woman. Her arms lock around the preacher's midsection and her body vibrates orgasmically. Again the preacher shouts skyward to his version of the Great Creator's human son, but again this female Eshu prankster won't let go till she's good

and ready. And since she's riding a stronger woman this time, the preacher is being bounced up and down. For awhile it looks like the pair of them are going to go bouncing down the ramp together. The crowd loves it.

Finally the woman regains her selfhood, and/or the prankster spirit departs, and she goes reeling down the ramp into the arms of the assistants. Again the crowd sighs, the preacher takes a brief coffee break, and it's back to work . . . but not for long. That rakish female Eshu spirit has another in her grasp, a slender young thing about eighteen years old. This time, though, the preacher is able to peel her encircling arms off his body and hold her at arm's length a moment, before she whirls away and seemingly flies down the ramp into the clutches of the assistants, then falls on the ground, while her body throbs, undulates, and pulsates. I'm in the front row of the crowd that quickly swarms around her, and it's clear that no human being could move like that in her ordinary state.

Then down the ramp comes the preacher in a rush to the rescue, followed by another woman apparently possessed by the same mischievous entity—for she is running around with her arms extended like “Daisy Mae” chasing “Li'l Abner.” The circle of people opens to admit the preacher and his pursuer, then closes for a closer look at the action. The preacher drops to his knees, claps a hand on the prone and pulsating lady, lifts his face to the night and yells for Jesus to remove this “demon.” The second lady dances around the pair of them with such furiously fast footwork she resembles a hummingbird. “Jesus, Jesus, Jesus,” yells the preacher, “take this devil out!” Then he bends down—or else the lady rises up—and they lock into an extremely sexual embrace.

I find myself standing next to one of the assistants. We exchange a glance and he says, “This happens sometimes. Evil spirit. He'll get rid of it, don't worry.”

I'm amazed by his cool, controlled tone of voice. “Where will he send it?” I ask.

The assistant shrugs his shoulder, and we both return our attention to the action—the troublesome spirit has departed now and the preacher and lady are getting to their feet, both of them panting. The “hummingbird” dancing has ceased too, and the three participants in this seance are staring at each other with stunned expressions, as though wondering how they got here and what the hell is happening.

Then the preacher wraps one arm around both ladies and raises the other like a victorious boxer, lifts his face, and shouts loud

thanks to Jesus. A triumphant cheer goes up from the encircling crowd and spreads throughout the park.

Pulling both ladies behind him, the preacher strides briskly up the ramp onto the stage and grabs the microphone. Then, with an intensity that is startling, he launches into a raging, snarling diatribe.

This is such an unexpected turn of events that I can't understand what he's shouting at first. I think maybe he's "speaking in tongues," as the saying has it, but no. Gradually his roaring separates into words I can understand. I turn to Lennox, who is grinning broadly. He winks. I scan the faces around me. Everyone is amused, some near the point of having falling-down laughing fits. And I realize we have arrived at the highlight of this evening's religious extravaganza.

The preacher is possessed. In the name of his notion of deity he is cursing the gods of Africa and India. He is baring his teeth with rage, snarling, shaking his fist, and bellowing like the Christian Lord of Absolute Evil. His hoarse voice cracks with the effort.

"Cast out those evil Shango idols! Cast them *out*, I say. Turn your backs on those Hindu spooks and haunts, those so-called gods and goddesses! Destroy all profane objects! Burn ouija boards! Cast out *all* the instruments of the devil. There is but *one* god. Jesus is his oh-nly begotten son! Don't let anyone ever tell you *otherwise*! If they try, say, 'Devil, be gone!' Say, 'Devil, be gone' and call upon your *savior*! Jesus is your savior! Shango idolatry is the devil's device of deception. Be *not* deceived! *Remove* the blindfold of superstition and come, come, come to *Jesus!*"

After an initial torrential outburst of such invectives, he pauses, mops sweat from his brow, and continues in a less rageful tone. "These poor girls were possessed," he says, tugging them toward the front of the stage. "For years they've been possessed. For years the devil has had them in his evil grasp. They've tried Shango witch doctors and Hindu idols, but that didn't help them. Perhaps they even tried doctors and psychiatrists, but they didn't help. The devil stayed right there and rose up to make their lives miserable. They tried every which way to get the devil out . . . but there is but *one* way. Jesus is the way, the light, the life everlasting. Jesus came down tonight—you saw it, it happened right over there—Jesus came down and took the devil out. Took the devil right out of this girl, and this one."

The two young ladies, who never dreamed they'd been devil-possessed for all those years, who may or may not be Shangoists or worshippers of Hindu gods and goddesses, who look like they probably attend Anglican services each Sunday, are clearly uncom-

fortable and anxious to escape. They glance at each other, then out at the crowd, turn and look behind themselves, and give every indication of wanting to get out of this preacher's show.

"Now they're saved, glory be to Jesus. Isn't that a blessing?"

The preacher pauses for reaction but the crowd remains stone silent. "You bet it is. So what about all those gods and goddesses? All that eye-doll-itry? All that oh-cult nonsense? Get rid of that sinfulness, I tell you. Cast it all out, I say. Turn your backs on superstitious savagery and come, come, come to Jesus."

The spirit that's been riding the preacher is clearly from the realm of Ogun, whose main fault is narrow-minded self-righteousness. As the old myths point out, Ogun needs the guidance of higher, older, more intelligent gods, for otherwise his thick-headed, stubborn self-righteousness can result in such behavior as this. But the possessing spirit has departed now, and the preacher has released the two young ladies, who have disappeared into the crowd. The line of people awaiting the preacher's blessing has shortened considerably, and when the preacher returns to his assembly line work, I hear the sound of car engines starting in the distance and see people leaving in droves. The show they came to see is over. Lennox nudges me and says, "Let's buy some coconuts."

We stroll away from the bright lights of the stage toward the street and join a group gathered around the pickup truck of a coconut vendor. He stands amid his coconuts and, holding out one at a time with his left hand, whacks it open with his machete, then hands it to a customer, pockets some coins, and gets busy whacking open the next coconut. His customers drink the milk of the green coconuts without straws and without spilling a drop—a trick I have not yet mastered. Lennox and I have two apiece, and by the time I'm ready for my second, my shirtfront is soaked.

From the distant loudspeakers we are still haunted by the preacher's "Heal, heal, heal," shouted out like orders issued by a Marine drill instructor. The gathering of coconut milk drinkers I'm now part of is in a jovial mood and is soon speculating about the preacher's connections to his government. Since I'm the only American present, a few call for my opinion as an expert witness. But others hoot before I can come up with an opinion. "How could an American know?" someone says. "Ask a Latino, not an American." The coconut vendor, a sparkling happy and healthy old man, settles the debate: "Ask," he says tapping his forehead with a forefinger, "dee inner mon."



O. Govi: That's me. And my answer is, yes and no. The preacher has no formal government connection, but there is no real separation between church and state. The preacher and his government are both products of the same culture.

Having brought this to his mind, I remind my esteemed collaborator of the very different roles Christianity and Voodoo have played in the histories of their very different cultures.



Gover: I think tonight's performance by the Pentecostal shows that Voodoo has not been Christianized through contact with Western culture; on the contrary, it is Christianity that has been Voodooized.

In *Muntu*, Janheinz Jahn offers the following explanation:

The polytheists are gladly prepared to add an additional and obviously powerful divinity to their pantheon. They participate in the ceremonies required of them, allow themselves to be baptized and willingly learn the prayers and usages with which the new divinity is to be served. And from now on, they serve all their divinities, old and new, each according to custom and propriety. The monotheists cannot understand this and are horrified by it, and the polytheists cannot understand why the monotheists are so distressed. For the latter the very foundation of their monotheistic world is at stake, so much the more so as their God now no longer opposes the others but—recognized alongside others—threatens to be transformed from the one and only God to just one more divinity among many others. Thus the polytheists seem to them apostates, heretics, who sin against the most sacred of all commandments, “I am the Lord thy God, and thou shalt have no other Gods but me.” Everything the polytheists do appears in the light of the most terrible crime, and the more deeply their life is permeated by religion, the more does it appear false, idolatrous, abominable. The whole wrath of Jahweh and Moses against the apostates who danced before the golden calf comes to life in the disap-

pointed missionaries; curses of banishment come to their lips and in their distress they become the images of their god and say: "I am the Lord...and thou shalt!"<sup>26</sup>

That preacher tonight realized he was dealing with a crowd who are basically polytheistic, for in Trinidad many gods and goddesses are tolerated, worshipped, discussed, and compared. And because religion is the backbone of culture, he was up against that hard wall of prejudice that separates Christian and Voodoo cultures. So he banged his head on the wall and screamed, and in the minds of most of his audience he made a damned fool of himself. One could even say he found his own evil mirrored in his own wall of prejudice.

Monotheists construct monolithic social orders and cannot tolerate the diversities of polytheistic social orders. As Efuntole pointed out, Voodooists understand that Western culture is dominated by Ogun (Mars) and understand too that the Great Warrior can be confused by the Great Trickster, Eshu. From the Voodoo perspective, Eshu was sent tonight to confuse the preacher's Ogun. But there was no malice intended, for the Eshu spirit was lighthearted and erotically playful. If a heavier Eshu spirit had arrived, the preacher would have found himself in deep trouble. As it turned out, he and his Jesus were welcomed, even while the old gods revealed themselves, just to keep the whole event from becoming a bore.



O. Govi: He sleeps, and as his dreaming self, I am free to roam the dream dimension. Here I encounter many other dreaming selves wandering this dimension. And after considerable travel and investigation I decide to report my findings to his sleeping consciousness. He dreams he is trapped in a cave with a lot of primitive brown people who regard him with suspicion, for they are trapped in this cave by primitive white people brandishing weapons. Those in the cave have no defense against those weapons, and they talk of throwing him out in the hope that their enemies will be satisfied to kill him and go away. He pleads that he is not one of their enemies, but the skin-color distinction prevails, and he pops awake with a fright just as he is being rudely forced out of the cave.

<sup>26</sup>Janheinz Jahn, *Muntu*, trans. Marjorie Grene (London: Faber & Faber, 1961), 59.

*Gover:* Third day of fasting. Lennox tells me that after the third day I won't be so tempted to break the fast, and the body will then get rid of the accumulated poisons of junk food, booze, and cigarettes.

I want to believe him, but it isn't a temptation to end the fast that tortures me today; it's an awful feeling of depression punctuated by angry thoughts. Alternately I wallow in a self-pitying sense of futility—the feeling that my life has gone awry and there's no point in continuing—and visits of rage that boil up inside me. Memories of being wronged ignite my emotions and make me lust for revenge. Then I realize the lust for revenge only exacerbates the pain of the wrongs, and I fall back into depression.

When I confide this to Lennox, he smiles and says it's just part of the process of fasting. To counteract it he advises a hike up Fort George Hill. The day is hot, the hill is steep, and I'm lethargic, but I force myself to do it.

I'm soon drenched with sweat and winded, gulping in the hot, moist air and continuing the forced march only because of the flaringly angry thoughts that keep haunting me. On certain holidays hundreds of Trinidadians hike up this hill and then, around sundown, go calypso-singing and dancing their way down to the city again. Lennox's house is near the foot of the hill, so I've seen such parties pass. Near the top I realize it's exorcism as well as exercise, for my focus of attention changes to the gnat-sized cars on the roads below, the ant-sized tankers riding at anchor in the bay.

At the top a sign informs me that this fort of heavy stone was established in 1804 and in its time was "considered well nigh impregnable." "In times of rumors of war, the merchants of Port of Spain would store their records, cash and valuables here." But the fort was never involved in a battle. That's nice.

There's another building up here which was used as a signal station for ships. It was designed by one "Prince Kofi Nli, son of King Kofi Calachi of Ashantee, West Africa." Beside the squat stone structure of the fort it appears tall, wooden, and vulnerable. Yet the two buildings seem to have weathered the decades equally well.

Standing on the fort's wall overlooking a panoramic scene of land and sea, I feel as if I could spread my arms and soar through the air like a seagull. The rageful thoughts and depression seem to have gushed out of my pores with the sweat, and I'm surprised to realize that the fast has not made me hungry for food; it's made me hungry for the pure joy of life I felt as a child.

If, as the Voodoo belief has it, each element has its spiritual component, the residues of poisons I've ingested in civilized Western life are the physical components of the evil spirits I must rid myself of during this fast. Then I will be able to host good spirits, even the high ones who bring enlightenment.

That's a Voodoo idea I wasn't sure whether to believe or disbelieve a couple of weeks ago. But gradually it has grown valid in my mind, and now, up here on Fort George Hill, I suddenly see it as an absolute certainty. I try to imagine the countless millions of human beings who have fasted for the same reason down through the countless centuries. It comforts me to feel part of that seemingly endless river of souls.

Around sundown I walk back down the hill, the rage and depression gone, replaced by what I think of as the angels of healing.



O. Govi: It would tighten his intercourse with reality to realize he's the boss of his healing angels. The sooner he starts snapping orders, the sooner he'll be cleansed and ready for more arduous ordeals.

One of the old habits he's got to break is thinking of gods and spirits as "out there" rather than "in here." I, being also his storehouse of memories, bring to his mind the words of a Voodoo priest he met several years ago in Miami. "To understand Voodoo, you must see the gods and spirits within yourself."

With that in mind, he realizes it's Obaluaye, or Babalu, Saturn, the Great Teacher he's dealing with during this fast. In the Yoruba tradition, Obaluaye is said to "arrive" with a retinue of "twenty-one members of the dead," a mythological way of conveying Babalu's realm of activity. Gover has more than twenty-one residues of civilized living to rid himself of, however, and more than twenty-one angels of Babalu's realm to acquaint himself with.

So tonight as he sleeps I bring him this dream vision: He finds himself in a large old gothic house, which he soon discovers is haunted by a wild assortment of weird and horrible visages. They wander halls, appear in doorways, and float through the air. At first he thinks he's having another nightmare, but these dream creatures show no signs of threatening him, so he clings to sleep and dreams on. The last thing he remembers before awakening is meeting his wife. What are you doing here? he asks. She smiles and shrugs and asks him the same.

**Gover:** Fourth day of fasting. Lennox drives me far out into the countryside to visit a “preacher lady” from a neighborhood he lived in as a child. I’ll call her Mary, for there is a kind of black madonna quality about her. She lives next door to her Baptist Shouter Church and “mourning ground” and is flying Shango flags, which are triangular and of the seven primary colors. Flown in certain combinations, they attract certain combinations of spirits. They are mounted on long bamboo poles that bend in the wind.

The combination of four she flies today is for the person who is in her mourning ground. The mourning ground is a bare one-room building behind the church. One goes into the mourning ground for various reasons but primarily to make closer contact with the gods and/or have a personal religious experience. You decide before going in how long you’ll stay and what you’ll eat or drink. You might decide to stay for ten days, say, and drink one mason jar of orange juice a day.

The mourning ground has one door and no windows. The orange juice or whatever is slipped to you once every twenty-four hours. You’re aware of night and day, for it’s not tightly insulated, but otherwise you are completely alone with yourself.

At the end of your appointed stay, the congregation gathers outside and begins to sing, chant, drum. This is the signal that your mourning ground experience is complete. The door is opened and you emerge into the bright daylight. You’ve been busy with your own consciousness, and if you’re a Shango Voodooist, with the gods who compose all consciousness. The flags are flown to protect you from evil spirits while you undergo this ordeal and to attract the deities you seek.

When you emerge, you are, in the Western sense, out of your normal mind. From the Voodoo perspective you have experienced a kind of death, transformation, and renewal, and you are going to come out brimming over with a desire to share your experience with the congregation. You are, to one degree or another, possessed. Perhaps you have acquired possession of the Christos, the Light, the Christ, so it is Jesus who speaks through you when you first emerge.

In any case the mourning ground is a carefully planned and executed ordeal, and its purpose is to achieve a new level of self-knowledge, enlightenment. As part of the process you might break down into utter psychosis, but your friends and neighbors outside will be helping you through that travail with their prayers—not only out of

love and generosity but because they too want the benefits of whatever you return with.

The preacher lady jokes about me spending time in her mourning ground, and I give the idea consideration. But I'm an outsider here, a stranger among these people, so it wouldn't be the same. Besides, the idea scares me. Suppose I panicked and demanded to be let out. Or suppose the spirits of these people were on hostile terms with my spirits. Or suppose I went through ten days in the mourning ground and then came out possessed—I'd be speaking American English to West Indians who speak what they call Beewee, British West Indian.

Driving back to the city, I feel a twinge of shame for chickening out of the preacher lady's invitation. For even though it was proffered lightly, it was real enough. Then I excuse myself on the grounds that the fast I'm on and the immersion into this culture—so different from my California surroundings—is mourning ground enough at this point in my life. My purpose is to prepare myself to experience more of the Voodoo reality and bring it back alive, to make it comprehensible to my fellow countrymen. I don't want to dive too deep before I'm ready.



*O. Govi:* Good idea. Gover's national soul is ruled by Ogun, and it is well known that Ogun can quickly become lost in the mysterious depths of Olokun (Neptune), who rules the national soul of Trinidad. And although he's not in the mourning ground per se, he feels stranded on a small island surrounded by a vast ocean. The nature of his national soul requires some means of transportation through this Neptunian consciousness so alien to his native culture. It is Lennox who helps him build his ship.



*Gover:* Fifth day of fasting. Lennox takes me through the narrow streets around the Old Market to meet a renowned Shango priest. The Old Market is a huge one-story building that sits empty and idle now, replaced by the newer Central Market. But along the street outside the empty Old Market vendors sell their wares—fruits, vegetables, homemade preparations, remedies, bottled essences, and all manner of clothing.

One of these vendors is the Shango priest Allen. At first glance there is nothing special about him—medium height, round face,

husky, ordinary clothes, no beads or bangles, skulls, or rooster feathers—nothing to distinguish him from the many other vendors on the streets of Port of Spain. Judging by the lines in his face, he's in his sixties.

Lennox introduces me, then the two of them have a lively exchange in that Trinidadian Beewee I still can't quite understand. As they talk, I notice that Allen has a certain air of attentive preoccupation, as though he is thinking of two or more things simultaneously. And even though he is obviously a poor man, he has the dignity of an aristocrat. He is at once clearly at peace with himself—even here in this crowd, where people continually rub each other wrong or right—and proud. I get the impression that he is also utterly fearless, a man of daring who relishes each nuance of experience.

Lennox tells him of my interest in the Old Religion, avoiding the words Shango and Voodoo. Allen nods approval and asks, "You want to see a Shango feast, eh?"

I try to tell him I'd like to do more than just see it, I'd like to become as much a part of it as possible. That information strikes him as odd, coming from a white man, and I sense a twinge of suspicion growing in him.

"It's a feast for Saint Anthony," he says, looking me over closely. "You know Saint Anthony?"

"Ogun."

"Yes yes, the same. There will be lots of food, dancing, African drumming. . ." He pauses a beat, and I intuit that he wonders what motivates my interest in Shango Voodoo. "Strange things can happen," he adds.

"I'm interested in the Old Religion because it's essentially the same as that of my Native American and pre-Christianized European ancestors," I tell him.

He raises his eyebrows and regards me anew. He knows now that I've at least done some homework on the subject, but centuries of harassment have made him extremely cautious about sharing the inner reality of Voodoo with whites.

"I'd like to write about it," I say in answer to his unasked question.

He nods knowingly, and now his expression contains the hint of disdain. "People won't believe what you write, if you tell the truth. And to learn the truth would take much time. Years." He says that as though he's been approached by journalists, folklorists, anthropologists, and other nonbelievers many times before and has had more than enough of their gross misrepresentations.

“I’m not interested in facts and figures. I want to know the inner reality.”

“You yourself are of the Old Religion, then?”

“Well, not formally, but I want to learn all I can about the old gods.”

He nods approval. “Okay. Come to the feast for Saint Anthony then. Perhaps he will single you out and touch you.”

Then he and Lennox get the time and place of the feast clear, speaking that rapid Beewee I can’t keep up with, and we move on.



*O. Govi:* At home in Lennox’s guest room again, my collaborator is inspired to write ten pages about his slave-owning ancestors, recalling tales his great-grandfather passed along to him about what those times were really like, compared to the official written history of them. After that burst of scribble, he pauses to reflect, wondering if his brief encounter with Allen had anything to do with this sudden bout of ancestor worship.

Of course it did. Allen, being a Shango priest, is deeply concerned with ancestors, both African and European. And perhaps like other priests of the old gods, Allen has found that the ancestral souls of white people withdraw from being “touched” by Saint Anthony/Ogun or any other deity. And also that guiding white aspirants toward the inner reality of Voodoo can be dangerous for the white aspirant, whose ancestral soul—haunted by the Inquisition—shudders with dread as the approach is made, and that can cause massive upheavals among his other eight souls.

Perhaps he doesn’t think of it in those terms, but that’s the gist of it.

Gover picked up Allen’s curiosity telepathically, and that’s what sent his attention to his ancestors. And what he was writing is what he would like to tell Allen, the sum of which is that neither of them is racially pure; both are of mixed ancestral souls.



*Gover:* Sixth day of fasting. Last night I dreamed I stood at a fork in a road, wondering which way to go. One road led to a very urbane scene, a party of the rich and famous, a lot of glib people exchanging clever quips while standing on a penthouse balcony



overlooking a modern city. Take this road, said the dream, and you'll find yourself here.

The other road led to a beautiful stretch of unspoiled beach: invitingly soft, white sand, the sea glistening like diamond-studded jade, and behind the beach a virtual garden of Eden—coconut palms, papayas, mangoes, bananas. Take this road, said the dream, and you will glory in this attunement with nature. I saw myself living in a palm-leaf-covered hut, amid lovely women and happy children, fishing, gathering fruit, swimming, and lazing about in delicious sensuality.

But I seemed unable to make a clear choice in that dream. "Going native" was extremely tempting, yet it would estrange me from my native culture, those clever people and the commanding vista of the important events of our time. Do I have an unconscious desire to withdraw from the urbanized Western world and lose myself somewhere down here near the Equator on some secluded stretch of beach? Would I soon be bored with such an "ideal" life? Or is my search for the inner meanings of Voodoo really a search for the end of that second dream road?



O. Govi: I slapped his consciousness with that dream so smartly it lingers with him all morning. But the dream has more meaning than he at first supposes. It's not just a choice of romanticized life-styles. What I'm trying to tell him is that if he cooperates with me, his astral soul, he'll soon have an amazingly large range of new possibilities.



Gover: Seventh day of fasting. Seems I was cooperating so well with my astral soul last night I participated in the birthing of Lennox's new baby boy without even being there. I dreamed I watched his wife giving birth, clearly saw her struggle with her contractions, saw the other people in the bedroom with her, watched as Lennox gently accepted his new son in his hands and bathed him in lukewarm water. I even woke up with a vivid memory of the baby's face.

Then, when I went into the kitchen for my morning orange juice, Lennox told me I had missed the birth, that he and two friends had tried to wake me but I was so soundly asleep I refused to budge. I said, "That's strange, because I dreamed I was there." I even told him

who else was there: a doctor, a photographer, two friends, his mother, and his brother. And they were!

One of the impressions I recall from the dream is that I was helping. Not in any physical way but by adding spiritual force to the whole event. And I felt that I, as the visitor, was somehow responsible for making sure it went smoothly and that the baby was beautifully healthy, because if anything went wrong, I'd feel as though I'd brought bad luck.

The baby's a beauty.

After orange juice Lennox and I go out shopping for a scale to weigh the baby but find there is not one such scale for sale in all of Port of Spain. It's just as well. He weighs in heavy as a blessing and light as a worry, this reincarnating soul of an ancient elder.



O. Goui: Now he's starting to get the hang of it, this new relationship with me. In the beginning is the word, the intention formed into meaningful sound.

The words of some entities are far more powerful than those of others, however.



Gover: Eighth day of fasting, and it feels as if the word of Obaluaye is resounding within me with such force it threatens the end of my world. Well, I've accumulated a lot of evil eating companions over the years, and it's time to chase them out. And it feels as if Babalu is down there in my gut somewhere, cracking the whip over those evils—and they don't want to leave. He's lashing them without mercy, and they're screaming and pleading to stay—and all that ruckus is raising hell with my disposition. Some of them are good ol' boys, friends of mine for years—cigarettes, alcohol, coffee with sugar, red meat with all of its chemical additives. Lord Babalu sure doesn't like those chemicals, and he's letting both them and me know it in no uncertain way. Me, I'm inclined to pity the poor devils, hear them out, even consider forgiving them and letting them stay. They've been with me so long, I'm really the only home they ever had. But that mean, lowdown, nasty, cruel, and unforgiving Babalu is far more powerful than I am.

So there's not much I can do except give Babalu some help. I go to the kitchen, squeeze the juice out of a dozen oranges, filling a pitcher. I strain that into another pitcher, then slice a hot pepper in half, drop it into the juice, and stir it around. And when I say hot pepper, I mean hot. I've eaten jalapeños raw, but I wouldn't touch one of these things with so much as the tip of my tongue. I keep the half a pepper in the juice for about sixty seconds, then take it out. What a great cocktail! The orange juice soothes my jangled nerves and the taste of pepper is a big hit with Babalu. He's soon got a bunch of unwanted guests trapped in my lower bowel.

I feel a lot better after moving them out. I feel good enough to do something I've been wanting to do for days: go downtown to the Ministry of Culture and find out who *they* think is the greatest Shango priest in Trinidad.

There I meet a good-looking black lady with a coy twinkle in her eye, and in my sensitized, fasting state I fall immediately in love. And who does she think is the greatest Shango priest?

She sidesteps the question with a toss of her head and tells me she wants to go to the United States and study parapsychology. Soon I'm talking Shango Voodoo and she's talking parapsychology, and neither of us is listening.

I leave with the impression that what interests her most about parapsychology is getting funded. With funding, she'd be delighted to do a parapsychological study of Shango priests. She'd be even more delighted if her tests scientifically proved they were all just a bunch of half-crazed actors, that there are no such things (or nonthings) as gods and spirits, and that the Old Religion is a lot of bunkum.



O. Govi: I take him far away and show him something. He writes this dream down as follows:

I'm in a strange, foreign country with a lot of people, blacks and Latinos. They're all very friendly but I can't understand a word they're saying. Yet I know what they're saying. Either I'm reading their minds or just know ahead of time what they're communicating to me: "Hey, isn't it wonderful that we're all here together; let's go for a bus ride." We leave the large hut we were in and find ourselves on a high bluff overlooking the sea—sun glistening on the water, colors

supervivid, breathtakingly beautiful. Then we're in a bus, bouncing over a dirt road toward a main highway. We seem to be going somewhere important, but I don't know where or why. When we reach the highway, the bus suddenly goes backward and everybody is laughing. I'm disoriented by this backing up, by the landscape going by in reverse. I ask the guy beside me why we're going backward but he only laughs harder. I turn and look out the back window and see the bus hit a basket and knock it rolling into a field. I ask someone else where are we going and he says, "Who cares! We're moving, aren't we?" But I care, and soon we're back where we started—the bluff overlooking the sea, the beautiful vista. The bus stops with its rear end suspended over the cliff, an incredible drop straight down to broiling surf and deadly rocks. One more inch backward and over we'd go, but everyone is laughing and I'm not feeling any fright, because I realize we're all souls, and if we were to go over the cliff, smash on the rocks, and die, we'd go right on laughing—wouldn't we? With that in mind I turn to my companion and we exchange smiles, as if saying, "But of course, we always go back to start, don't we?"



*Gover:* Ninth day of fasting. It's market day, and Lennox is waiting when I awaken. I hurry out into the predawn semidarkness, feeling light on my feet and swift, even slightly psychedelized—a good sign that Babalu doesn't have many more evil eating companions to evict.

We drive to the Central Market and are soon cruising through the crowd amid displays of fruits and vegetables being sold out of trucks, vans, the trunks of old klunkers, pushcarts—anything that's mobile. A great variety of people are shopping here this morning—rich and poor, grocery store owners, street vendors, family providers, and just plain hungry folk with a taste for something earthy fresh this fine day.

Lennox is a very serious shopper. While he's busy comparing qualities and prices, I seek evidence of the old gods in action. The orange vendor Lennox finally chooses to buy from, for instance, is clearly ridden by Shango. He's dandily dressed, fiery-eyed, a magnet to the ladies, and exceedingly headstrong. He's convinced he's got the best oranges today, and nobody can reasonably dispute that fact.

We carry two large sacks of oranges to the car and put them in, then go inside one of the market's two buildings, under its sprawling

top of corrugated tin, and we approach a youngish hustler type, who's a horse for Ogun. He sells tomatoes, cucumbers, hot peppers, beans, and onions, and he works at it like there's no tomorrow. He reminds me of Sousa marching music as he moves about behind his stand. He's muscular, singleminded, willful, and he glowers as he handles his produce like a soldier in the heat of battle. Simultaneously, he counts out change to one customer, fills a bag for another, and chatters away at Lennox. "Today my tomatoes are the best, yes sir, you'll find none better." Lennox looks skeptical. "Look, look! Two sizes. All quite ripe." Lennox moves on, unconvinced, or maybe he just wants to get this vendor's goat. I glance back and see the guy watching us like a cop about to make an arrest.

One of my favorites is a lady who specializes in hot peppers. She's so full of Oshun she looks flirtatious just sitting there all alone staring off into space. If you were going to paint a picture of Venus manifesting as a dark-skinned lady in her middle thirties, you'd want her as your model. I don't think she smokes marijuana, but she looks very high and happy, moving with measured, easy grace and speaking in a velvety tone while batting her eyelashes so demurely. I catch her infectious feeling and smile broadly while Lennox selects some peppers and buys.

Then I go off by myself on a mission to buy onions, and Lennox, who seems to zip about like he's possessed by Eshu, returns to the Ogun-dominated tomato man. I come to an old guy who is definitely Eshu-headed and has a big stack of onions before him. With a crafty glint in his eye, he's wheeling and dealing with a bunch of customers, selling garlic, potatoes, and so forth so swiftly, with such deft fingers, it reminds me of a stage magician doing card tricks. I'm instantly suspicious that he's liable to shortchange me, but when my turn comes to buy and I ask for two pounds of onions, Eshu becomes Shango; he looks down at me like a bolt of lightning and fires out, "Is that *all* you gonna buy from me?"

I'm taken aback by this sudden shift. "Yeah, just two pounds of onions," I say. I bought two pounds of onions from him last week—so what's the problem?

"No no," he snaps, "you cannot come here for onions only. Why? Because of the shortage!

"Shortage?" People are staring at me like I'm a thief.

"Yes yes, the shortage. Don't come to me for onions only, mon. That will never do, no no."

I don't know if this is the Great Trickster Shangoing me as a joke, or what. A shortage of onions in Trinidad? I can't believe it. But while I stand there stunned, wondering what else I can reasonably buy from him, he moves on to other customers. And when he sells one a few garlics only, I move away.

I come to another pile of onions, these in front of a lady who looks very Yemanja. Her round face and eyes remind me instantly of a full moon, and it's clear she is sensitive, intuitive, emotional. Her stall is away from the heavy traffic near the doors, so there's no crowd around her, and she's watching my approach with a look of strong pleading in her big round eyes. When I ask for two pounds of onions, she regards me even more plaintively and asks, "Which kind, sir?" And I notice she has two kinds of onions. I point to the larger of the two kinds, and she carefully drops some in a bag, weighs it, adjusts for weight, and hands me the bag in a manner that suggests she's sorry to part with them. I start to leave, then turn and ask, "Is there an onion shortage in Trinidad?"

"Oh, I don't believe so, sir."

I'm tempted to tell her about that Eshu-ridden vendor who said there was, but she's radiating such emotional power it fairly overwhelms me, so I just stand there a moment, basking in this radiance.

Suddenly Lennox is beside me, looking like he's possessed by a god they call Oshagun in Brazil—the Militant Christ, a mix of Oshala the Sun god and Ogun the Warrior. "Here, I have a Shango lady for you to meet," he says and leads me outside to a gray-haired old gal who is sitting on a folding chair beside a heap of papayas. Lennox introduces us and is gone, and I didn't catch her name in that rapid Beewee, which sounds to me like a bunch of words strung together in one sound.

Her disposition is such that I think she must be harboring Babalu: grouchy, taciturn, unresponsive. She stares out at the parking lot as I nudge a few questions at her, which she doesn't answer. Makes me feel stupid, like I'm talking to the wall. But just when I've given up trying to converse with her and am about to walk away, she begins to speak, still with her gaze focused on the parking lot. She says something about never making animal sacrifices, no sir, never, none.

"Is that not done anymore?" I cautiously ask.

Her eyes go back and forth, looking right, left, right, left, as though expecting calamitous trouble to descend mysteriously at any moment. And the realization hits me: she's been traumatized because of her Shango Voodoo beliefs. She's frightened to talk about Shango

with a white man. The Old Religion was ruthlessly persecuted by missionaries like that Pentecostal preacher, and she's old enough to have caught a lot of such hell. I want to say something that will put her at ease but can't think of anything.

Suddenly she winds up and delivers, coming out of her chair with arms waving. Shango isn't what it was in the old days; the purity's gone out of it; it's just a show for carnival people now, a lot of silly dancing on broken glass. In the old days it was pure but no more. It was destroyed by the stinking British, by those hypocritical Protestant bastards and their intolerant henchmen. Shrines were smashed, people put in jail and beaten. Why? Isn't all religion the same? Why did they destroy Shango?

I shake my head. She glowers at me awhile, as if it's all my fault. Then she relaxes a bit, finds her chair and sits down again, heaves a sigh, and says, "But it's the same with the Catholic and Anglican faiths. They are in no better shape than Shango. The young people, they don't *believe*. All they want is money—no Shango, no religion at all, just money."

I lean against the building's wall awhile, wondering what god's realm that outburst came from. I decide it must be from Shango himself. Then, cautiously, I say, "I once heard a story about Shango. He was the most glorious man in the village, the richest, and with the most wives and children. But he was so splendid that some people envied him, even hated him, and this hurt him deeply. One day his youngest wife came running into the village from the forest, crying, 'Shango is dead, he hung himself.' The villagers all rushed out into the forest after her to find Shango. But when they came to the spot where his wife said he'd hung himself, all they could find was a rope with a hangman's noose, no body. And it wasn't long after that another man in the village became possessed by Shango's spirit, and then he became the most splendid man."

After delivering that toward the parking lot, I turn to find her eyes pinned on me, her expression somewhere between anger and astonishment. I step around to her stack of papayas, with her eyes still boring into me, and select a couple. We don't need them, but it gives me a graceful exit.



O. Goui: This evening he wonders if he's come to the right place at the wrong time. Oil workers and sugar cane workers have gone out on strike, and Trinidad is shut down. Gas stations have

closed, and no one knows when more fuel will be delivered. Allen's Shango feast is called off because there's no way to get to the site, which is far out of town.

But what bothers him most is the wall of suspicion his curiosity meets, the old lady in the market being just one instance. I remind him that Voodoo arose in secret, nurtured by slaves who often risked their lives to celebrate their old gods. Some were physically mutilated by Jesus-spouting, narrow-minded, self-righteous Christians. And their offspring are still persecuted, even by the Western meaning of the word Voodoo. Is it any wonder that the other side of the wall of prejudice is made of suspicion?

I plant a seed. The radio is playing, and he hears a tune he recognizes but has forgotten the name of. It's a Brazilian-sounding tune. Where, he wonders, has he heard it? Oh yes, it's from a movie, and the name of it is "Bahia."



*Gover:* Tenth and final day of fasting. This afternoon I go for a long walk and find myself down at the docks watching a pleasure ship unload several hundred tourists from West Germany. They file down the gangplank in standard sports clothes, and as they step ashore, each is handed a flyer. I walk over to the Trinidadian who is handing out these slips of paper and get one. It's an advertisement for the Miramar Nightclub:

Miramar presents such breathtaking, blood-curdling African dances as the Voodoo, the Shango, the P.K. and the Watusi. These give real pleasure and excitement to the tourist, especially when the dancers are overpowered by the supernatural spirit. It's so real—you have to laugh to hide your fear and superstition. You wonder—because native visitors, members of the cult who come for entertainment, very often are overcome by the spirit—to the amazement and amusement of the tourist. . . .

*Fabulous Battle Dance:* the midnight dance of the followers of the sacred Shango Cult had its first public preview at the Miramar. The dancers catch the real Shango spirit to the eerie music of African drums. They jump, dance, prance and roll on broken bottles without being cut. Tourists are allowed to supply the bottles for the dance.



I've seen that show. And in Haiti I've seen even more spectacular Voodoo feats. Now here come all these West Germans out of their Protestant Christian background, although most probably are nonreligious now. The ones who read English are translating for the others, and it's clear by their enthusiasm that the Miramar will be packing them in tonight.

Walking back to the house, I find myself humming that tune, "Bahia." It's from a movie I saw when I was five or six called *Road to Rio*. Lennox has mentioned several times that the best place to experience the Voodoo culture in its purest form is Bahia, nicknamed "The Voodoo Vatican."

But I'm not sure what Bahia is, so when I get back to the house I call the Brazilian consulate, tell them I'm thinking of going to Brazil, and ask about Bahia. The Portuguese-accented voice informs me that Bahia is a wonderful vacation spot famous for its fine beaches and its folklore—Condomble, Macumba, Shango, Umbanda, Quimbanda, and other Voodoo cults. He says the principal city of Bahia is Sao Salvador and that Sao Salvador is to Brazil what New Orleans is to the United States—the historic port of entry for slaves arriving from Africa. I ask if the African culture is still strong in Bahia. Definitely, he says. It's stronger there than it is across the Atlantic in Africa. I tell him I'd like to look up some Voodoo priests and talk with them about the Old Religion, and ask if he thinks they'd be open to that.

"Definitely," he says. The Old Religion was not so harshly persecuted in Brazil as it was elsewhere in the Americas, so the Macumbeiros are quite open and willingly discuss all aspects of their practices.

As I pack, Lennox talks about what a great country Brazil is—he lived in Rio for a year or so—and how much he'd like to be going with me. He gives me the name of a Brazilian novelist to contact. I'm worried about the language barrier, but he says not to worry, since many Brazilians speak English.

And it's a good thing I've been fasting, he says, for now I am cleansed and ready to host the higher spirits. And there will be plenty of opportunities for that in Bahia, "a very spiritual place." Then he gives me instructions on how to come off the fast: *gradually*. First some soft fruits and vegetables—avocados, papayas, mangoes, all very cheap and abundant in the street markets.

My intention is to stick to that "soft" diet in Bahia, for it feeds Obatala, and I feel a great need to keep my mind clear as I dive deeper into the depths of Voodoo.

O. Govi: The lack of gasoline and the old gods as nightclub entertainment conspire to send him on this next leg of his journey. He couldn't have timed it better if he had consciously tried. And although he doesn't realize this yet, the farther he travels "out there" in miles, the deeper he'll go "in here" where what he seeks awaits.

# 3 Conversations with Invisibles

*Gover:* On the plane I listen to people all around me smacking their lips over cocktails, while I twiddle my thumbs and yearn for green coconut milk. Just before leaving Trinidad I acquired the knack of cutting a coconut open with a machete, and now I wish I'd bottled some coconut milk so I could have my cocktail too.

Presently the hostess serves the standard airline dinner, and I'm in culture shock. It looks and smells so familiar and good I want to wolf it down and ask for seconds. Ah, but that is not the way to come off a fast, so I click into my Voodoo perspective and see if differently. It's been fried, frozen, and fried again. Pressed ham, minced chicken, canned tuna, soggy string beans, wilted lettuce, and a dandy-looking cake of factory products, mostly refined cane sugar. Imitation milk and overprocessed coffee. If the spirit components of this food are still here, they must feel hellishly tortured.

But damn it, I'm hungry. My sentimental attachment to these aromas threatens to overpower my Voodoo perception. The butter, for instance. The wrapper it comes in says it's real. I open the wrapper and sniff, just for old time's sake. Then I spy an interesting-looking piece of French bread and I'm gone.

Two bites of the buttered bread, though, and I click back into Voodoo. I inspect this stuff called bread and butter very closely, and to my fast-sensitized sense of smell it stinks. It reminds me of decaying

animal flesh and dances into my mind visions of chemically induced assembly line slaughter in the Chicago yards.

Quickly I grab a plastic cup and peel the foil from its top and drink. Water. I down it in two big swallows. Strange how fasting rearranges your relations with food. I'm hungry but I can't eat this stuff. . . yet.



O. Goui: Thus, he pays a tax of willful resistance to the principle of will, his own personal government, Ogun. Some taxes are more easily paid and benefit the whole being. If he is to dine for the spirits of Obatala, as he intends, he'd best remove his attention from airline cuisine.



Gover: I sit in the front seat beside the taxi driver as we head for the town of Cayenne, French Guiana. Another American, a tourist in his sixties, is in the back seat. I strike up a conversation with the driver, who speaks about as much English as I do French—very little. He jolts me with the news that the plane I was expecting to catch tomorrow for Belém, Brazil, no longer flies. The schedule has been changed, and I will be in Cayenne for three days instead of less than twenty-four hours.

This strikes me as a rotten trick for the fates to play and simultaneously causes me to worry about my mental health. I have physically returned to Western culture, it seems, for here I am rolling along in a taxi in what is still a province of France, feeling wronged by invisible forces because I'll be stuck here for three days. It's the airline bureaucracy I should blame, not the invisibles. But just what the hell are bureaucracies? They're procedures, not people. The schedule change was probably dictated by the airline's computer-directed money sensitizer. Yes, the bureaucracy is an organism composed of people but run by a computer. Well, maybe the computer will cough up my hotel bill, since it's the computer's fault I'll be here three nights instead of one.

Back to business: I ask the driver about the local Voodoo scene. At the sound of those two rumbling syllables he rolls his eyes, acting out a skit of comic fright. He's Afro-French, but he doesn't want to talk about Voodoo, so I use words like *African religion*, *spiritualists*,

*shaman*. Oh, he says, there are plenty of those. Also, he finally admits with a coy smile, there are some Voodoos, and he will be happy to see what he can arrange for me.

Then the man in the back joins in to tell us he has just returned from a six-day journey through the jungles of Surinam, and has a tape recording of a Voodoo ceremony held by people in a remote village. Plus a conversation he had through an interpreter with the witch doctor, which he'll be happy to play for me the first chance we get.

We're entering the town of Cayenne now, and it's like watching the negative of a film of Paris, shot in black and white. Under a neon sign reading "Vietnam Restaurant" stand a group of black people in Parisian clothes and postures, the men in that typically French-type macho pose and the ladies demurely foxy. African spirits wearing French personalities.

The one European-style hotel in town is full, we learn when we get there. The parking lot is full of Mustangs and English Fords, MGs, Jaguars, Mercedes, and such, all outfitted for road racing. They've just raced down from Paramaribo in Surinam and filled the hotel to capacity.

So we load our luggage back into the taxi and go in search of a non-European hotel. The other American tells me he's a sixty-five-year-old retired marine engineer with a battery-powered heart. He's on a seventeen-day excursion to this part of the world. He's visited eighty-five countries so far and wants to see as many others as he can before he dies. While here in French Guiana, he plans to tour Devil's Island, the famous penal colony, no longer in use but still standing as a tourist attraction.

We wind up in a small pension that has an Arab-style toilet just outside the room they put me in. The lower hinge of the john's door has broken loose, and all night long, when anyone goes there, it bangs loudly, waking me up. Around midnight I give up trying to sleep, turn on the light and read. By three A.M. I am playing host to the spirits of self-pity and depression.

They rush through my mind like Hun raiding parties, hacking at everything I think I should be, taunting, accusing, torturing me with self-regret. While part of me wonders how the hell I allowed myself to be swept away by such a howling rampage, another part of me submits. I think of the people I have wronged in this life, and tears trickle down my cheeks. The trip I've embarked on suddenly seems absurd. Whatever possessed me, a white man, to dive into this stange

culture? Who do I think I am that I should want to explore Voodoo and bring back something of it?

I decide my whole life has been a self-delusion. I've wasted it, and it's now beyond redemption. I shed a few tears for my wife and sons. Poor souls, they deserve better than me. To hell with Voodoo, to hell with this trip—tomorrow I will catch the first plane out of here and go home to California.

Then, from a dark corner of the room, a face appears. I blink, shake my head, and tell myself to stop hallucinating. But the face is still there. It's an ugly, brutal face, and I know immediately it belongs to a French convict. But is it really there, or am I imagining it? Why doesn't it blink off and go away? Why is it watching me so intently, or why am I hallucinating that it is?

I turn off the light, hoping that will switch off the vision. But instead it slowly expands until a whole man appears. I feel as though I've just been sent to Devil's Island, and this guy is my cellmate; and I don't belong here, there's been a terrible mistake—but he's laughing now. He is laughing at my anguish, not out loud but with such a sinister grin it sends chills up my spine. I turn the light on again, but he's still here.

What the hell, if I'm this far into insanity, I might as well keep going. So I commune with him, as in a dream, telepathically. He says he's laughing at my self-pity, and that he's been here for most of his life. For what crime? A very minor crime; it doesn't matter. It amuses him that I should feel sorry for myself while he's feeling fine, and I have enjoyed years of freedom while he's been imprisoned most of his life. But, I think at him, you're dead, you're a ghost. He agrees.

No, that can't be possible, I tell myself. Even if there are such things as ghosts, they don't really *appear*. He says, very seriously now, that he's made it his business to appear to me. Why? Because the living and the dead must help each other—isn't that basic to the Voodoo belief? Yes, but. . . Where do you come from, and why do you appear to me? He's been here for many years, he says, and he appears to me because we need each other, as I shall soon learn.

Oh no, I say, this isn't really happening. I get out of bed, put on my clothes and step outside into the dim light of dawn. The vision comes with me like a memory I can't shake. And when I finally find a little restaurant that's open this early Sunday morning, my hands are trembling so much it alarms the lady who serves me coffee. My hands are shaking because the ghost is sitting across the table from me.

O. Govi: On the trail of the Voodoo experience, my man's personal mind has opened a door into Mind. What he sees "out there" is not of his personal mind but of his personal relationship with Mind. You don't reach faraway places of consciousness by airplane or rocketship. At the proper time a bite of bread and butter triggers a switch, and presto, you're there.

Within the Voodoo reality, consciousness is the Son, the offspring of Father Spirit and Mother Earth. All creatures encountered in consciousness—whether "out there" or "in here"—are real enough. This one comes from that realm of Mind ruled by Obaluaye, of whom it is said, "he comes with twenty-one members of the dead." Babalu is the Great Teacher, and his entourage serves his cause. So our dead French convict is a good omen and will prove valuable if Gover quits his "fear of ghosts" and cooperates.



Gover: After one cup of coffee, I feel like I'm high.—I grab my bags and taxi to the big hotel on the hill, the Montabo. The crowd of auto racers are departing for the return drive north to Paramaribo, and soon there are very few people around. One is a pretty young girl, who gives me the eye, suggesting she's selling sexual favors. I respond awkwardly, not sure whether to take her up on it or not. I sense the dead convict grinning and imagine I can hear his laughter. In an attempt to recapture my normal senses I go exploring in and around the hotel.



O. Govi: I show him a worm. He is pacing, feeling trapped, around and around the hotel, when his attention is arrested by a worm. He stops and looks down at this long tropical specimen whose path crosses his own. He bends over and watches it closely, this fellow-creature, and then his mind opens enough for me to remind him that this worm is even more vulnerable to "invisibles" than he is. The worm is at once immune from the perversities of pride and fear and less open to contact with the ancient inhabitants of Mind.

This worm is heading south toward Brazil, he notices. He wishes this little creature a safe journey and decides to persist on his own way, this venture into Voodoo.

*Gover:* After that encounter the coffee high relents, and I feel suddenly tired, so I go to my room and sleep. No sooner do I close my eyes, it seems, than I'm engulfed in a nightmare. It's like a third-rate horror movie that could be called *Voodoo Kidnapping*. I'm being held captive by a bunch of Devil's Island convicts. It's night and there's a bonfire, and one of these dream convicts is telling me they are going to roast and eat me. I struggle but can't break free. Then I snap awake, look at my watch, and find that I've slept two hours.

While pondering that dream, I feel the presence of my ghost again, and this time he seems less a vision "out there" and more a reality "in here." I can hear his voice, or so I imagine. I don't know if I have conjured this being, or it has conjured itself, or what, but it's taken on a reality of its own.

Yes, it's true, he tells me, that meals in solitary confinement were bread and water. (I hadn't asked, hadn't even thought about it, not consciously. But I do feel stuck in a kind of solitary confinement here in Cayenne, waiting for my "conviction" to Brazil.)

But the bread wasn't as tasty as your airline bread, and there wasn't any butter to fuss over the animal smell of. And when you spend weeks or months or years in this remote part of the world, you learn to free your mind and converse with spirits. You do so to save your sanity, and so you become spiritual. You'd be surprised how psychic some convicts became in this environment. Some could cause amazing effects. Some became as adept as Hindu gurus.

It is, he tells me, because he himself developed such powers that he is able to appear to me with such forceful "reality."

Soon I'm up pacing the floor, trying to shake this vision again. But it sticks in my mind like a TV jingle, so I put on my swim trunks and head for the hotel pool, hoping to mingle with other people and become normal again.

But there's nobody in or around the pool. I dive in and swim lengths. It's a twenty-five meter pool, I judge, and I figure if I swim ten laps, I'll regain my rightful senses. I soon lose track of my count, however, and just keep swimming until the tension eases.



*O. Govi:* I wish he'd quit resisting and make himself comfortable in the presence of his newfound friend. There's not much else to do here. Time, as the saying has it, stands still. An hour here is like a



month in California. Here meditation isn't a discipline, it's an inevitability. In this ambience he slows to tree-talking speed.

Lying in the sun to dry off, he watches the thoughts that come parading through his mind. Good. The convict spirit isn't the last visitor I shall introduce, nor the most informative. Now that he's able both to *have* thoughts and to mark their arrivals and departures, he's ready for bigger and better.



Gover: I'm about to go back to my room when into the pool area comes an Afro-French lady. She's large, about six feet tall and big-bottomed. She's got a cheerful face and is wearing a print dress, and I'm instantly at ease with her. "You are interested in African culture?" she asks in French-flavored English.

"Yes."

"I have a taxi. You want to go touring?"

"Okay, just give me time to get dressed."

"No hurry. I wait in the lobby."

"Are there any Voodoo priests in Cayenne?"

That word again. Her eyes narrow and she looks into me, through me, beyond me. Finally she says, "Yes. Come, I take you to the best."

I hurry back to my room, eat an avocado, dress, and go down to the lobby to find her ample bottom filling a large easy chair to overflowing. She leads me out to her Renault and she is soon overflowing the driver's seat. A light rain begins as we head out of town, going south along the coast. As we approach the ruins of a stone building, she notices my curiosity and stops. "This was one of the prisons," she says. We take a brief tour of its remains, then resume driving.

I get out my ever-present notebook and scrawl a few thoughts, and the next time I look up, we're on a four-lane freeway. I ask her why the French built such a highway out here in the middle of the jungle, and she says they were expecting big business but nothing has come of it.

Soon we're sloshing back on a muddy road, one lane that cuts into the jungle, and then we're skidding to a squishy halt in a village of leaf-roofed huts. If I didn't know I was in French Guiana, I'd sure think I was in Africa. We're met by a host of dark-skinned people, clearly of African descent but also showing some European and Asian traits.

They're dressed in what look like secondhand Western-style clothes. She leads me deeper into the village, and the crowd follows, sidestepping and hopping mud puddles. The rain has stopped, but the air feels thick with moisture.

She stops at one hut and has a brief exchange with someone inside; then we enter, and she is warmly greeted by an elderly man wearing an African dashiki and blue jeans. While they converse in French, I am startled to hear a familiar voice speaking American English. Looking around for the source of this voice, I spy a TV set on a box in front of the chair the elderly man has been sitting on. An American news show is on. The familiar face and voice are that of TV newsman David Brinkley. This Voodoo "witch doctor" has been sitting here watching the news!

My driver/translator explains that the French built a large disk antenna tracking station near Cayenne, and thus they are able to pick up telecasts from satellites. But where's the source of electricity? She indicates a cord running from the back of the TV set out of the hut and shrugs, as though to say, "One doesn't ask that question."

Then she draws my attention to the old man, saying, "He's the best. If you want to know where someone is, you bring him a picture or a piece of that person's clothing, and he will tell you exactly where that person is and what that person is doing."

Right now he's concentrating on the televised face of the American president. The old man doesn't speak English, yet he watches the president's talking face as though he understands precisely what is being said. His concentration is awesome. What else, I wonder, is he able to do with a person's picture? Can he have an effect on a person from a distance? I ask my translator. "Oh yes, and sometimes he can cause criminals to confess."

We watch with him until the program ends; then he switches off the set, stands, and strides out of this hut toward another. We follow. Outside the other hut is a cluster of people waiting to see him. Some have obvious physical ailments and others appear worried. Judging by the variety of clothing styles, they are from widely different social classes. I notice that now, besides the taxi, several other cars have arrived.

"Now we must wait our turn," says my driver. "Come. I take you for a tour of the village."

The most popular spot turns out to be a soft-drink bar in a hut that doubles as a home. Here a crowd of black people lounge about drinking sodas. All around them on the ground are fallen green

coconuts. Someone asks if I'd like a soda, and I indicate I'd rather have some coconut water. The crowd finds that highly amusing, but someone hands me a machete, and I demonstrate the skill I picked up in Trinidad by hacking the top off a choice young nut and slurping the milk without a straw—which brings convulsive laughter to the assembled.

Conversing through my driver, I explain that I'm here because of my interest in Voodoo. Immediately more people show up, expressing interest in him who is interested in Voodoo. To show off and, I hope, gain their confidence, I begin naming the African gods. I pick up a stone and say, "Ogun." They giggle and avert their eyes. I heft a coconut and say, "Eshu." They hoot and hiss and wave. I point to the distant sea and say, "Yemanja." They chuckle and sigh.

Someone brings a drum and begins pounding out a rhythm. Some others begin stepping about, dancing. I point to the sun and say, "Obatala." An old woman comes dancing up to me, smiling toothlessly, her eyes gleaming. Her earth-brown face is wrinkled, her body emaciated with age. She dances barefoot in a tattered one-piece dress and waves her arms merrily, executing some extra-fancy footwork for my benefit. She's being a goddess they call Erzulie in Haiti, the saucy sexpot flirting with a stranger. The others laugh and hoot and urge her on. When her solo ends, a teenage girl steps out, catches Erzulie's force, and channels it through her dancing.

While the drumming and dancing continue, I fall into a daydream: I come to this village to live. I stay here a year, two, three; and when I return to the United States, I have a true comprehension of Voodoo from A to Z.

This daydream ends abruptly when my driver touches my arm. Our turn has come to visit the priest, so we leave the dancing and drumming.

We find the old man sitting at a table of the French Colonial period, wildly out of place in this banana-leaf hut with earthen floor. On the table is a lamp with a fancy white shade. Then I see other lamps and a web of wires feeding them electricity. They are set up to illuminate a shrine, a mix of African and Catholic idols.

My guide and the priest exchange a few words, then he gestures for us to sit by the French Colonial table. He produces a small cloth bag, and from this he carefully takes out his cowry shells and whispers his question to them. He will divine to find out where I'm from and why I have come to see him, I think, for that is fairly customary in the Voodoo culture.

After a few throws, his face lights up, and he speaks. "He says he is happy for you because you suffer no sickness or misfortune." A few more throws and: "He says the gods tell him you are from the western part of the United States, and that you are married and have two sons. He says you travel to Brazil to dress the old gods up in the latest Paris fashions and parade them through the halls of science." His eyes twinkle. "The gods are pleased, and you are on good terms with Eshu, the messenger and traveler. But for the success of your work you should make sacrifice to Obatala."

Then the priest dips his fingers into a bowl of water and flicks at me, spraying my face with wet coolness. He chuckles as I wipe my glasses. I've heard it said that some Voodoo priests steal holy water from the Catholic priests because they find the Catholics very good at blessing water.

"Ogun the pioneer is with you," continues my translator. "Do you know that Ogun is the patron saint of the United States?" I nod and keep writing in my notebook. "He says there are many on this continent and in Africa who are sending Eshu to confuse the war-making Ogun of America. Russia is also Ogun, and Eshu is being sent there too."

I ask, "Does that mean he and the others are practicing Voodoo on the politicians of America and Russia?"

The question gets a belly laugh out of him. "He says he merely asks the spirits to do what they will do in any case."

"Does he work with televised pictures?"

"Sometimes. Many faces enter this village by television."

I had a bunch of questions in mind for a priest such as this one, but I can't seem to think of them at the moment. So I ask, "What place do the old gods have in the lives of industrialized people?"

"He says the gods and spirits are everywhere, among industrialized people as well as here, among these people. But Ogun is not the king, and he should take his orders from the king, Obatala. When Ogun will not listen to the higher wisdom, he must be confused by Eshu. When Ogun is completely confused, then he will listen."



O. Govi: This interview with a doctor of witches has gotten out of hand, he thinks. Instead of exploring the gods as a map of consciousness, he is listening to a Voodoo lecture on politics. He wonders if he's expected to apologize for his government's activities.

He's missing the point. The priest is not assigning fault; he is saying that if one understands the American nation as dominated by Ogun, the god who rules the atomic programming of the mineral kingdom, you gain insight you would otherwise lack. You understand your national soul. Ogun is sometimes depicted as the sports hero who is either being loudly cheered for winning or loudly booed for losing. At this point in time much of humanity is booing the American Ogun. And this old man is talking gods and politics because politics has become the biggest game in the world. He talks American politics now because he is speaking to an American and because American politics are widely televised and occupy a large space in the collective human mind. This large space is Ogun-dominated, and as a prayer maker this priest must appeal to Ogun. So he wishes America would exhibit the best of Ogun the Pioneer, because then he'd have a better Ogun to work with here in his own village. In other words, he does not separate the consciousness of this village from the consciousness of the world, as Gover does.

Or did. He leaves this interview with the mind-boggling impression that there must be hundreds, maybe thousands of Voodoo priests watching American news shows on TV.

He leaves the priest a hefty sum but scraps his daydream of moving to the village. He is anxious to move on to Brazil and find out if Voodoo priests there watch the talking faces of American politicians on their TVs. But he has two more nights in Cayenne, and I'm not yet finished preparing him.



*Gover:* When I get back to the hotel late that afternoon, the pool is crowded. There are only three guests staying in the hotel, so these people are from Cayenne. Lots of girls, all ages, all races, and some spectacular Afro-Asian mixtures. They're definitely not unfriendly, and I'm wondering what it would take to bed one this evening, for I'm suddenly feeling a tremendous rush of sex energy.

One Asian lady in her middle twenties stations herself near me. She looks wealthy, worldly, ready, and is using some very bold body language. Another, a teenage Afro-Asian, is playing with her girlfriends in front of me and keeps turning to see if I'm watching. I am. We exchange quick smiles. Then the older one puts a cigarette between her lips and asks if I have a match. I have a great erection under my towel, but no match! I tender my regrets and the goddess of

love salutes herself through our eyes. Then the lady suddenly remembers she has a cigarette lighter and digs it out of her handbag.



O. Govi: I hate to be a killjoy, but my man's present purpose is the intercourse of Afro-American and Euro-American beliefs, and this purpose would not be served by addressing the cute angel buns of the love goddess incarnate in Cayenne.

In Greek, the word Voodoo means Logos. Yes, the Greek word *logos* means *word*, as in the Biblical phrase, "in the beginning was the word," an auditory vibration imbued with meaning. To remain open to Logos (Voodoo) he must forgo the pleasures of Eros (Erzulie). Or to dress the same thought up in other words, his quest for the Voodoo perspective requires he have intercourse with the interface of spirit and matter. So I withdraw the spirit force of eroticism from him and focus his attention elsewhere.



Gover: There's a handyman working around the pool. He's white, French, and gray-haired but in fine physical condition. I ask the young Asian lady who he is. Through a mix of French, English, and Spanish she tells me he's an ex-convict who fell in love with a local girl, and when his prison term ended, he stayed on in Cayenne.

He's one of the most serene individuals I've ever seen. He moves through this crowd of the local well-to-do, his gray hair lifting in the breeze, with a dignity that is neither revolutionary-threatening nor lower-class-subservient. Although no one speaks to him, all are keenly aware of his presence as he flows like a quiet proclamation of freedom from want through this kingdom of earthly desires. He's the "worker king," the servant of benevolent Obatala, and in some uncanny way beyond legality he owns this swimming pool he cleans and maintains.



O. Govi: Why have I jumped his attention from sex to death, from the chains of lust to an ex-convict's freedom? Because he has unfinished business with the Silent Majority, that's why.

Gover: Sunday evening alone in my room. Well, not alone, for my ghostly convict is present. And I am overcome by a strange sensation of being in close contact with my own personal death.

Like a mugger out of the shadows it sneaks up on me. It comes from the Kingdom of Oya, goddess of death, transformation, and conception. She also rules the demise of “truths” unable to survive the centuries. The truth of one’s personal, physical life usually doesn’t survive a century, so one’s personal death is a minor figure in Oya’s kingdom, but not an unexciting one.

In the Voodoo manner I think of my own personal death as a spirit force, a persona with an existence of its own. And I wonder if, with the help of my friendly convict ghost, I can open communications with Oya. I concentrate on her, listening, waiting for her to speak.

But she doesn’t say anything. Or, if she does, I don’t hear or understand. Just when I think I have a “live one” I can pump for rare information on this most mysterious of subjects—death—she goes mute and just hangs around like a coy expert, waiting to hear what I have to say on the subject.

Well, I’ve considered a wide variety of beliefs and myths about death, but I don’t know what to believe. My father was killed in an auto crash when I was a baby, so I never knew him personally, but he was such a legend to so many that he came alive in my imagination. He was conjured up by all the stories I heard about him and came to exist as spirit or myth or imaginary being. While I was growing up, I used to have make-believe conversations with him. I’d ask his advice about this or that, and when I got into trouble I’d ask for his help. And I could muster up plenty of evidence to support the belief that he came to my aid.

Now I realize that at a very young age, and quite unconsciously, I was practicing one of the basics of Voodoo: communications with the dead. The Voodoo belief is that you must bring your dead ancestors with you when you move or else suffer loss of individuality. I have been doing that, unconsciously, most of my life, although I never mentioned it before.

It’s a very un-Western idea. In Christendom, ancestors reside in heaven or hell, with a large number of Catholic souls in purgatory. There they remain for eternity, remote, out of contact with the living. In America even the elderly are made remote by sending them to nursing homes, where they are depersonalized and prepared for a heavenly oblivion.

I much prefer the Voodoo concept of nine souls and a continuum of living and dead. And there's evidence of national souls, sexual souls, family souls, historical souls. But when we get down to astral souls and personal souls, I've tended to block on what evidence there is. Either there isn't any or I've ignored it—till now.



O. Govi: I remind Gover that his favorite graffito has for some years been: "Death is the greatest thrill of all, that's why they save it till last." This graffito he has laughed at, but the Voodoo continuum of living and dead spirits of nine different categories deserves serious attention.

Since life is a one-way ticket to death, you'd think he and everyone else would want to know more about it. I insist he forthrightly examine the presence of his own personal death. That's why it's here. He would rather evade it like a draft dodger running from conscription—but we're dealing here with the government of the universe, and there's no possibility of evading that draft.

So I shall persist. I shall see to it that this business gives him some thoughts. It's not a matter of indifference to me, for I am making the trip with him. I have definite ideas on the subject and considerable resources at my disposal. All very reliable, too. It's true that what they say is often misinterpreted or misunderstood or ignored, but whose fault is that? "Thou shalt not kill" is incorrect. "Thou *cannot* kill" is the truth of spirit in matter. The energy (spirit/consciousness) of the universe can be neither increased nor decreased but only transformed.

But, he wonders, is it possible for the living ever to really know?

I recommend he ponder another question: Which aspects of the "energy that is all" look through his eyes, hear with his ears, think with his mind? How much of the energy that is all is it possible for him to become?



Gover: Okay, I accept O. Govi's recommendation. I'm still pondering the question by sundown. I'm prone on the bed, staring out at a tree. The green leafy body of the tree seems friendly, even protective. In Voodoo, trees are special because they connect earthly matter with heavenly spirit.



As I contemplate this tree outside my window, I become filled with the conviction that it and I are of the same aliveness, the same components of spirit and matter. And I try to establish telepathic communications with this tree. I concentrate, and a powerful sensation grows within me. It's as if the tree swallows me up and transports me to a different dimension. I and my physical surroundings dissolve, and I am overcome with the sensation of flying. It feels as if the atoms of my whole being are flying out of their usual orbits.

When I snap out of that, I'm aware of a huge and compelling presence, far more awesome than the presence of the dead convict. I am not in a state of total possession, for I am still here enough to witness what is happening. But practically everything else has fallen away, and this presence and I have become everything. And what it says, as best I can render it, is roughly as follows:

I am the Kingdom of Sound. Call me Aum, if you like. I am the primary vibration of sound made meaningful. You deal with my kingdom of forces in music and language and word/thought. I am that primary state of energy you deal with when writing. To experience the Voodoo reality—the gods as states of consciousness—and translate this experience into Western terms it is the forces of my kingdom you must use. But even as you do this, you must appreciate why the ancient pagan gods-worshippers have passed down no written scriptures. The meanings of words change over the centuries; new words are continually needed to rediscover the old gods as basic truths.

When you invent a fictitious character, it comes alive in your mind and speaks through you, and some characters linger like friends or visit now and then. I am very much like that, yet I am much more than a fictitious character. Think of me as an essence of nature, for out of my being flows what is called reality, both physical and mental. When a person speaks or writes at his best, he is being visited by my forces, even though he may not think of it that way. Your purpose is to experience Voodoo and write about it, and that is why we are in contact now. Each relationship with a primary state of consciousness is unique, because each individual is unique. You are learning to develop your own unique method of achieving such contact as this.

Do not waste time wondering if this experience is real or imaginary. You understand that energy is consciousness and that everything is of this energy, this consciousness. Now what you must grasp is that imaginings are as real as anything else that impresses

your awareness. Since I am able to fill your entire awareness, realize that I am a basic component of your reality. What's important for you to know is how this experience comes about. It begins with your naming it and proceeds with your decision to reach for it. It is furthered by intellectually refining what it is you are reaching for and grows into feeling, emotion, the movement in consciousness of imagined sensation. This feeling then acts as anticipation, which triggers the experience and brings it into your awareness as an event.

In the many languages of the world I have many names. You may think of me as the *Amakua* of Polynesian Huna, the *aum* sound in the Biblical amen, the *aum* of the ancient Sanskrit and Hindu mantra, the sound of the Tao, the *ah* sound that begins your alphabet; or you may simply consider me the origin of sound. Like the color white I am one end of a spectrum, yet like the color black I am also its opposite. You may also think of me as the opposite of light, if you prefer to consider sound and light opposites. All these ways of conceptualizing me are symbolic, however, and I am above all an immediate experience that is at once within you and beyond you. You exist in the human dimension, whereas I exist in countless dimensions simultaneously.

Now the task you have set for yourself often seems impossible to complete, and you fear your trip to Bahia may prove worthless because you don't speak Portuguese. Do not fear; you will succeed, but not in any way you now think of as succeeding.

You understand, in theory at least, that success or wealth is really well-being and that well-being can be represented by money but not purchased with money. Well-being is obtained with intelligent judgment and will. The ten-day fast has left you with increased well-being. Now it's important not to trade that well-being, for it's the brain of your subconscious mind and most necessary for the success of your efforts. Without a finely tuned well-being, you won't be able to capture and convey the Voodoo experience.

The Voodoo belief is that the dead are here among the living, and that is quite true. You serve the dead, whether or not you realize it, and they serve you; for both living and dead partake of the same energy/consciousness. But it is up to you as a living person to choose carefully which of the dead to develop relations with and which you must not entertain. Otherwise, you are not in control of your life and may even be in danger of being pushed or pulled by spirit/thoughts that might destroy your will and harass you into helplessness.

You and the spirit of the dead convict sought each other out. He's a much better guide to the Voodoo of Cayenne than any living person, for he's been here longer. There's no reason to fear him. He needs this relationship with you, and you need yours with him. Your two lives are strangely parallel, for he might have lived a life very much like yours, and you were almost sent to prison at a young age yourself, remember. This and other similarities make it possible for a strong contact to exist between the two of you now. In a dimension beyond your usual time-space-motion reality, the two of you are closely linked. You have read and heard about how Voodoo practitioners feed and care for such spirits—now you are being offered the opportunity to experience exactly what this entails. Feed him vegetables, especially potatoes. Keep him alive in your mind and bring him to Bahia. He'll prove very helpful.

When you get to Bahia, interview as many Macumba Voodooists as you please, but understand that this activity is only the exterior of the work you will be doing, which is your own personal exploration of consciousness and which will be helped by contact with Voodoo priests. Bahia will be an important station on your journey, and it's important to know that the most valuable possessions you bring with you are invisible but nonetheless alive.

Also become clear about what you want to bring back from your journey into the Voodoo reality. Why is it that you and millions of others find industrial civilization unsatisfactory? Become clear about this, because the essence of your trip is to reach back in time for beliefs that have endured and will continue to live as basic truths into the postindustrial future. Indeed, pagan gods are such truths, for they are older than any religious scriptures and more basic than any scientific principles. What modern civilization robs people of is self-knowledge. Knowledge of self means knowledge of consciousness, which is the home of both pagan gods and scientific concepts. It is knowledge of self that motivates your search of Voodoo beliefs and culture, and it is knowledge of self you must acquire in order to understand Voodoo. With that understanding will come freedom from certain conceptual restraints imposed by Western culture and language.



O. Goui: This experience brings Gover face to face with Ifa—or as he is called in Haiti, Damballah—symbolized by the snake with its

tail in its mouth, and with the eternal question: which comes first, creation or the creator? Are the old gods human creations or the creators of humans?

And of course it is I who mediate his mediumship. He proposes, true, but it is I who expand his awareness so that the invisible force he proposes to contact comes into existence. Or to dress the same thought up in different words, I am his personal envoy, his go-between, his connection between personal subjective reality and the subjective reality of all and everything.

He is feeling at the moment like an antique collector pawing around at a garage sale of knickknacks from the Heavenly Mansion. He doesn't quite realize what a good bargain he just scored.

I remind him that theory precedes discovery of evidence, that you can't find something you cannot conceive of or name. The name Aum thus becomes an important theoretical addition to his accumulation of self-knowledge.



Gover: That evening I meet the American with the electronic heart stimulator who has a tape recording of a Voodoo ceremony held in the jungles of Surinam. We go to his room and try to listen to it, but his recorder, mysteriously enough, isn't working. So we chat. I'm still feeling light-headed from my visit with Aum when this retired engineer says, "My lifelong hobby is sound."

Sound? Yes, he has a passion for sounds of all sorts, he says, and a large collection of recorded sounds. For instance, he has the original version of the Orson Welles "War of the Worlds" radio drama that caused such an uproar back in 1938.

I like this guy, and except for one other person, a forestry consultant, we are the only guests in the hotel. So when he asks about the trip I'm on, I'm so relaxed I make a terrible mistake. I use the word Voodoo. I tell him frankly that I'm attempting to make Voodoo understandable in Western terms. After that he's sure I'm crazy.

"God and gods and all that are just bull droppings," he says. Oh, he believed such nonsense when he was a child, but when he became a man he put away childish things. Now, even though he's a nonbeliever, he serves on the board of two churches in Florida—only because he's "civic-minded," he says.

I ask what then does he have faith in? He taps the battery that powers his heart and spreads his lips to reveal a fine set of dentures. “Engineering,” he says.

“We don’t need to learn anything about Voodoo,” he says; “it’s they who must learn our technology.”

He continues this rap as we dine together, the only two people in a very large dining room. His chatter makes me suspect he’s loaded on some interesting pharmaceutical. There’s no use my trying to debate the subject with him, for his is the prevailing Western belief, and it’s hard as a rock. I marvel anew at the power the word *Voodoo* has—for it set off an avalanche of verbiage.

Well, I also feel irked and frustrated and am tempted to practice a little Voodoo by sending Eshu the Mischievous into the electronics of his heart stimulator. But I’m afraid I might succeed, so instead I focus on his bright white artificial teeth as they bite off chunks of meat.

This reminds me of the toothless old lady I met in the village earlier. I guess they’re about the same age, and I wish I could pose the pair of them side by side and take a color photo and insert it right here, to show what absolute opposites they are. His thing-oriented culture has provided him with a battery-powered postponement of death. Her spirit-oriented culture has provided her with a secure place in the land of the dead, from which she may be summoned and consulted by the living.



*O. Govi:* I remind him that Voodoo occurs in the interface between spirit and matter and that one must assume responsibility for the well-being of the gods who compose all things, including one’s fellow diner. To prevent the bull droppings of Western ignorance from mucking up his meal, I suggest he remember that he eats for more than just himself.



*Gover:* Oh, the French convict—potatoes. My fellow diner’s diatribe against Voodoo distracted me. Now I hail the waitress, and between her little English and my petite French I obtain a potato salad.

So here I sit, bombarded by this lecture on the glories of Western technology, feeding a ghost potatoes.



*O. Govi:* Our visitor from the Silent Majority is pleased. He agrees to go with us to Bahia, provided we drop him off here on our return trip. Good. It's always nice to have a helpful ghost around.



*Gover:* I go to bed that night feeling a forlorn uncertainty. I'm tossed and turned by nagging questions. What good is Voodoo in this modern, urbanized, standardized, industrialized age? What reality can the old gods have to nine-to-five office and factory lives? To people dependent on mass production for food, shelter, and clothing? To a society that will soon be largely run by computer? Why do I subject myself to Western prejudice and Voodoo suspicion? Have I gone over the edge into utter madness?

For help in this storm I stare into the leafy body of the tree outside my window and feel myself again gradually absorbed by it. Soon a great calm comes over me, and I'm again in contact with Aum, who proffers the following:

Industrialism has people living in an unnatural rhythm. The clocklike precision of the machinery of mass production is out of sync with nature's rhythms. It has people dancing the same daily jig—summer, fall, winter, and spring. The human being is not designed to function to merely a mechanical beat, and doing so causes tremendous stress. Much of the world's human population now lives according to the industrial rhythm—up at seven, on the job by eight, coffee break at ten, and so forth, through prime-time TV, with “the long weekend” and “blue Monday.”

If people did not live for the demands of the industrial machine, they would pace themselves according to the rhythms of the seasons. Even each day has its unique rhythm, which has been upset by the demands of mass production. In fact the whole planet now vibrates with this banging monotony. And what is the source of this mechanized monster that now controls so many lives? The one-right-way standard one-God concept.

People are the brain cells of the planet Earth. If you had such a painfully monotonous pounding in your head, wouldn't you try to get

rid of it? Well, despite the present scientific belief that the Earth is an unfeeling *thing*, it is very much alive, aware of and sensitive to its brain cells—humanity. Will Mother Earth find a way to cure her headache?

As for the value of Voodoo to modern, urban people, that will grow as people discover it to be a refuge from the postindustrial chaos. Its origins are remote, but they have been refined by the first victims of American mass production. Its polytheistic system and values are built into the genealogical makeup of all people. It is currently a threat to the established order because it provides the means for each individual's unique discovery of ancient gods and spirits. Industrialism requires standardized minds to design, produce, and consume its products—even diseases became standardized concepts during the rise of industrialism. In the old pagan reality, each person's dis-ease is unique, since each relationship with all manifestations of aliveness is unique.

When people find unnatural standardization intolerable, then the ancient gods will be rediscovered through whatever people and cults have kept them alive. Only then can the current Western meaning of Voodoo really change. Its beliefs will assume a new importance, for it is the beliefs of Voodoo that have maintained mankind's proper place in the ecology of consciousness. The one-god-for-all concept is a historic aberration and cannot last. Pantheism, the Old Religion, will arise from the ashes of monotheism.

By developing this rapport with me, an area of consciousness beyond your usual, you are practicing the Old Religion. Once you become familiar with the process, you can conjure and relate to other gods and spirits, other shapers of energy/consciousness. This is how you expand your mind to contact the gods—of Voodoo, of your pre-Christianized European ancestors, or of your Native American ancestors.

Do not fool yourself, however. Keep a record and be as consistent as a dog trainer in your dealings with the invisibles. They can, and routinely do, produce spectacular results on both personal and collective levels. Science calls its gods theories and has developed a disciplined priesthood to record physical evidence. Become just as scientific in your personal dealings with the unseen entities, and they—we—will serve you.

When visited by such doubts as those you entertained tonight, remember they are not inseparable from your mind. In the one-god concept of consciousness they are considered inseparable, but in the polytheistic reality such demons are dealt with as separate entities. It's

not quite possible for individuals to deal successfully with the one-god notion of absolute evil, the Devil. But it is possible, and rather easy, to deal with a whole bunch of little devils, for they are relatively less harmful, less powerful, and far more responsive to your worded intentions.



O. Govi: Two days later, as he flies over the Amazon River's vast network of outlets to the sea, Gover wonders if he should write about his conversations with Aum or keep them to himself. If he is to make the Voodoo perspective comprehensible to the Western mind, how can he present a voice he heard in his mind as an expert on the subject?

Well, as he will soon learn, there are many such invisibles at large in Bahia. Their advice is considered expert in the best sense of the word. They are solidly in the ancient pantheistic tradition, and no Voodoo priest would be without his own contingent of them. They are regularly summoned up by whole cults, and over the centuries they have proved to be the most reliable of all experts. Besides, it is mainly through such communications that the Old Religion can be acquired, the old gods rediscovered.

Gover will find he is unable to understand the language, dance, ritual, and paraphernalia of Brazilian Voodoo and that his best expert on the whole subject is Aum. He will also find that his best protector from the suspicions of some Voodooists is his French convict friend.



# 4 Receiving the Spirit

I'm in Maria's home in Sao Salvador da Bahia de Todos os Santos—the City of the Savior on the Bay of All Saints. It's a balmy Friday evening, and a ceremony for the Voodoo Christ is about to begin.

Maria's home is also her *terreio* where she holds her *candombles*. She's a *macumbeira*, although to call her that tonight would be like calling the president of the United States a politician during wartime. The word *macumba* is as loaded with contradictory meanings as the word *Voodoo*, and both mean the same for all intents and purposes. Maria is addressed as *Mai de Santo*, mother of the saint, and the Catholic saints are understood here as Christian depictions of the ancient African gods, the *orishas* (pronounced *oh-ree-shahs*, spelled *orixas* in Brazilian Portuguese).

Maria is a round, radiant woman of medium height with milk-and-coffee-colored skin. She appears to be in her middle thirties, but I'm told she is certainly older. She could easily support herself as a *macumbeira*. I've seen her waiting room full of clients, and she's packing them in now for her *candomble*. But this morning I encountered her in the Afro-style market near here, behind her charcoal brazier, selling tasty treats.

This evening she is very much the Voodoo priestess, assisted by a host of helpers as she prepares to guide this ceremony.

I've been to more than a dozen *candombles* since arriving in Bahia a few weeks ago, but this one is especially interesting because it's for Oshala, the Voodoo Christ, the spirit that visited Jesus of Nazareth for three whole years.

Oshala is spelled *Oxala* in Brazil, and like *orixas* is from the Yoruba language, from what is now Nigeria. Some Brazilians believe—as does Efuntole in South Carolina—that *Oxala* is a corruption of the Yoruba word *Orixanlá*, the Great God. There's a lot of disagreement about such details within the Voodoo culture, and your mind could get badly twisted trying to make sense of it all. But like the guests arriving here this evening, I am concerned only with the basic beliefs of Voodoo, so I'll stick with phonetic spellings and the fact that Oshala is equated with Christ and is expected to bring great blessings when he arrives tonight.



O. Goui: My collaborator is trying not to indicate the trepidations he is experiencing. Although he is not a church-going Christian, he has been molded by a culture that considers Jesus of Nazareth the one son of their one and only god. His culture also takes a dim view of what is here called receiving the spirit. A good Christian can worship Christ, be born again, and have Jesus come into his life, and so on, but to have his entire being utterly taken over by the Christ spirit, even temporarily, is unthinkable. And to have this happen at a Voodoo ceremony in Brazil is worse than unthinkable, it's heretical.

Moreover, many of the faithful in Brazil do not believe it's possible for anyone to receive Oshala's spirit. "Oshala does not descend," they say. But others dispute this, and assure Gover that Oshala does descend but only at the purest and most carefully prepared and conducted *candombles*.

So he is wondering what will happen here tonight. Will this *candomble* turn out to be an occult fraud? Or will someone here receive Oshala, the Christ?

He has seen some Brazilians who are seemingly able to acquire temporary possession of their spirits practically anywhere, at any time, under any circumstances. Sometimes such performances are awesomely authentic; sometimes they're embarrassingly bad acting jobs.

Assuming there are some authentic mediums of Oshala here tonight, he wonders how it will be possible to recognize the Christ

spirit as a Brazilian Voodoo god. The French Caribbean Legba, known here as Leba, or Eshu, is regarded by many Brazilians as a more devilish spirit than he is in Haiti. Complicating it all is that there are so many different Eshus, or different “lines” of spirits from Eshu’s realm. Some of these Eshu spirits are difficult to equate with the French West Indian Legba. So how will he recognize the black Brazilian Christ? What evidence will there be? And if such an event occurs, how can he explain it to his Christianized and rationalized countrymen?

These are worthy questions for our scribe. After all, many Christians believe in Christ, worship Christ, pray to Christ, and weep for the Christ crucified, but who among them would have the audacity to become Christ? Such a psychic triumph could easily be rewarded with electric shock and other medical attentions. This being the case in Christendom, how dare these “heathens” court possession of the Christians’ only son of God?

But African and Native American people have been courting and gaining possession of this god for centuries. These “heathens” can locate and call forth this god from their own consciousness and from the aliveness of plants, animals, minerals, planets, solar systems, and so on, to the endlessness of pure energy. Besides being inspired by stories about this god, they are able to invoke it, make it manifest as a presence through the beings of one or more of them, and thus confront it personally.

Modern travel technology has brought Gover so quickly and easily to the physical reality of these “heathens” he’s wondering if it’s possible to go this final leg of his journey just as easily. And the answer to that is no, not so easily.



Gover: I have, by now, met well over a hundred Voodoo priests of various cults but none more warmly hospitable and helpful than Maria. She immediately intuited why I had come (as did many others) and she suggested that I just hang around and watch her work. I watched her heal mental illnesses, treat physical maladies, make charms, remove hexes, and transform expressions of worry into smiles. And it seemed at times that I could almost “see” the spirits she used as clearly as I “see” my friendly French convict.

Regarding spirits, Brazilians are 180 degrees distant from most Americans and Europeans. I’m told the all-time best-seller here is *The*

*Book of Mediums*, originally written in French by one Hippolyte Leon Denizard Ravail under the pen name Allan Kardec.<sup>27</sup> It's not very well known in Europe or America, but here it is treated as something of a Bible. When I read the English translation, I realized why, for it describes the invisible world of Voodoo in European terms. In this part of the world, Kardec's spiritism is white collar Voodoo, so to speak, practiced and supported by westernized, educated Brazilians, many of whom are too genteel for the more roughhouse version, *Macumba*.

In Brazil that word seems to mean any ceremony that courts spirits. Rita, my translator, says it's probably from the Bantu language, but whether you call it *Macumba* or Voodoo it's all the same. No one seems to know the origins of the word *candomble*, which Rita translates as "a dance party." Rita's a great help, even when her English renderings startle.

The other day I told her about the book *Chariots of the Gods*<sup>28</sup> and how in it the gods are defined as prehistoric astronauts from outer space. That news gave her a belly laugh, and since then when we attend *candombles*, she jokes, "Here comes another astronaut," as someone is about to receive a spirit. This evening she and Maria exchanged smirks about Oshala as an astronaut from outer space, and I think Maria got the idea that this is how I think of gods, which bothers me. But it seems to have tightened Maria's determination to deliver the living experience of the old gods to me in a very personal way.

But I'm still wondering, as we wait for the lead drummer to arrive, how to recognize the Christian Jesus as a Voodoo god if it arrives tonight.



O. Govi: Has he forgotten that the Jesus of the Oral Roberts singers is not the same as that of the Catholic priests, which is not the same as the Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian, Anglican, and other Christian versions of the Christ? I remind him that this is just another example of how different gods can wear the same name, or that different names can signify the same god. Christian cults consult the same scripture, but each has its own interpretation of this same "objective evidence."

<sup>27</sup>Allan Kardec, *The Book of Mediums* (York Beach, ME: Samuel Weiser, 1970).

<sup>28</sup>Erich Von Daniken, *Chariots of the Gods* (New York: Putnam, 1974).

O. Govi: It's just as well. There's no shortage in America of pictures about Voodoo. What's lacking is insight into the Voodoo reality of gods and spirits. And they, being invisible, cannot be documented.



Gover: Half of the *candomble* room is now full of people, but where's the lead drummer? From what I've learned about Brazilians, he's probably making love and will prolong the pleasure as long as possible. Well, that's worth delaying a *candomble* for, because it's important that the lead drummer is relaxed and feeling fine.

The name of this impoverished neighborhood is Alto da Ubarana. It is built on terraces that step down steep slopes into a ravine and half way up the other side. The paved road ends at the edge of this neighborhood, and its earthen streets are lined with ruts so deep you're in over your head if you miss a step.

From what I can gather, the city surrounds this neighborhood, and yet here you are out in the country, where people raise pigs and chickens, grow most of their food, pick wild fruits, and catch fish. Not much money moves in or out of this village within the city. And I get the impression that these people would not want their streets to be paved. They believe the Lord of the Earth, dirt, is Obaluaye (Babalu, Saturn), and Babalu would much rather feel the tickle of human feet than the hot chemicals of road surfacing.

There are many such villages in and around Salvador, and there is much traffic across the Atlantic between Bahia and Nigeria. As the desire grows in Africans to rediscover the beliefs of their precolonial ancestors, more and more West Africans find their way to Bahia, where the African tradition has been preserved more purely than in West Africa. Or so it is claimed by some.

Although the old gods and ancestral spirits are triumphant here, there is little agreement about which *candomble* maintains the tradition in its purest form. Certainly not Maria's. But that's not her intention. Her intention is to work effectively, and from what I've seen, she succeeds. The details of purely Yoruba theology she leaves to others.

One of the others—an anthropology student I met at a party—remarked that in the Old World the Dahomean and Yoruba peoples had been bitter enemies, so the word Voodoo should never be used in connection with the *orishas*. Someone else told me Macumba is black

magic and I should leave it alone, attend Umbanda ceremonies only, and become an initiate in order to protect myself. And someone else told me that because I'm white and educated, I should travel south and consult only with spiritists steeped in the teachings of Allan Kardec, who are also predominantly white and educated.

But I have been heeding the advice of Aum and of my French convict spirit. They assure me it's not part of my task to become involved in theological squabbles, which are the works of Eshu, the one who makes life seem so full of contradictions. My job is to sort through it all and get to the basic elements, for everything is the work of the one Great God acting through His agents, the gods.

Anyway, I feel comfortable here at Maria's *candomble*, in this country village surrounded by the city of Salvador. And I'm at ease with this particular type of black paganism. These people live at the interface of urban and rural life-styles. They know both the westernized world of mass production and standardized ideals and the world of sacrificial goats and spiritual forces. I like to think they have rejected the standardized in favor of maintaining their own uniqueness, but I'm not sure of that. In any case, despite their deep poverty, they appear clean and well fed and ready to welcome Oshala.

Now the lead drummer arrives, working his way through the crowd with a sheepish grin, one tooth missing from his front uppers. Rita draws my attention to the room just off the *candomble*, where various sacred objects have been put in readiness. She wants to acquaint me with each thing—garment, necklace, weapon, tool—and its meaning, and the meanings of each color and consecrated day, each amulet and talisman, plant and animal. I stand patiently by while she points, names, and explains, but not much registers. I have long since given up trying to sort through each cult's exotica and remember its details.



O. Govi: I applaud my man's determination to keep his focus on the basic beliefs common to all Voodoo cults instead of the exotica peculiar to each. When we first arrived in Bahia, he filled a notebook with Brazilian, African, and Indian names for the old gods and descriptions of each. But the result of all that was a sea of confusion. To make matters worse, a prominent Brazilian anthropologist, whose first name is Vivaldo and whose last name he didn't catch, shook a

forefinger at him and scolded that he would “learn practically nothing” until he had mastered Portuguese, Yoruba, and Bantu.

Fortunately, his many interviews with *macumbeiros* convinced him otherwise: that the learning he seeks is an inward process, and that process is stimulated by contact with people like Maria. As the first *macumbeiro* he visited told him, the information he seeks will come from dreams, visions, flashes of insight. And it will come in American English so he can understand it.

His purpose here is not to accumulate information *about* the gods but to become informed *by* the gods. And the gods are not found in the babble of strange words but on the most subtle levels of being. It’s all very well for him to tape-record and scribble notes from Rita’s translations of Portuguese to English. What’s needed most, however, is a translation from Voodoo culture to Western culture, and from ancient to modern.

For this task we have helpers at the ready on the intuitive level of mind. Each is demanding an audience, and all have something worthwhile to say. I do my best to keep them waiting, but they haven’t got all week. Being mercurial types, they’re restless by nature. I strongly urge my collaborator to pay attention, so these visitors can make their messages manifest and be on their ways.



*Gover:* Speaking of visitors, I’m not the only outsider here tonight. Besides my translator, Rita, and my lively taxi driver, Viarney, there are six Israeli students and a Brazilian poet.

The poet lived in San Francisco for a few years and speaks fluent English. We’ve had some very spirited conversations about the Old Religion during the past week. But I think the fact that I’m an American is a slight embarrassment to him. They say that Brazil is mixed racially, whereas America is a racist society. Yet the upper stratum of Brazilian society is white and westernized, whereas the poorest among them fall into the classification of black, and their culture is Afro-Brazilian.

Well, Rita and Viarney don’t treat me like an American tourist, and they tell me to ignore anyone who does. And America’s reputation here is no obstacle in dealing with *macumbeiros*. They welcome my interest in Voodoo, and my desire to make it understandable to Americans delights them. When my tape recorder broke down,

Viarney took me to a friend who is a disc jockey, who lent me the radio station's recorder. We tested it out by recording from Viarney's Volkswagen radio a Christian-sounding hymn to Oshala, played here every day at high noon.

I've been averaging three interviews a day and about four hours of sleep a night because of going to so many *candombles*. My day usually begins with breakfast at seven in the Grande Hotel da Barra's outdoor restaurant. I read over yesterday's notes, then meet Viarney at nine. We drive a couple of blocks and pick up Rita in front of her apartment building, then head out for our next *macumbeiro*. Sometimes we hit the freeway connecting Salvador with Brasília to visit villages in rural Bahia. And sometimes we are up past midnight attending *candombles*.

I think of Rita and Viarney as gifts from the gods. Rita I met an hour after landing at Bahia Airport. I went to Bahiatursa, the state tourism agency, in search of a translator, feeling that with Eshu's blessings I would find an American student interested in Brazilian Voodoo. But the official I was supposed to meet there never showed, and Rita was waiting to see him too. She introduced herself as a freelance journalist from Rio, in Bahia to conjure a TV documentary about Macumba. Since our missions dovetailed, she voluntarily assumed the job of translator.

Rita's English is heavily accented. When she first told me her name, I wrote it out phoentially as *Hayeeeeeta*. Ethnically, she tells me she's half Egyptian and half Italian. She's a lively woman and quite attractive. Frankly, I'm not sure I believe she's a freelance journalist working on a TV documentary about Macumba, but what the hell, she's pleasant company and does her best to help me sort through the profusion of Bahian cults and make sense of Macumba.

Our biggest problem was transportation. Rita doesn't have a car, so we were catching taxis—or missing taxis and having to walk long distances. That problem was solved the third day when we hailed Viarney's taxi on our way to the next interview. Viarney was delighted by the idea of visiting *macumbeiros* and *candombles*, so he took the taxi sign off his VW and we struck a deal.

Neither of them belongs to any particular cult. Both are intrigued by my effort to comprehend Voodoo/Macumba and write about it. They have endless tales about the old gods, about *macumbeiros* with miraculous powers, and about people who receive spirits.



I estimate there's an average here of one *macumbeiro* per city block, more or less. Almost everyone is happy to deal with any questions I ask through Rita, who is sometimes so overwhelmed by the answers that she forgets to translate. We don't call ahead for appointments, since few people have telephones. We simply show up, and if there are other visitors ahead of us, we wait our turn to be ushered into the consultation room. Each *macumbeiro* usually divines with cowry shells, Tarot cards, beads, or whatever to find out who we each are and why we've come.

Their divining methods vary, but most are contacting the Yoruba Ifa, god of all that is, was, and will be. And although they often speak mythologically, I'm amazed at how many are so accurate. Some call Ifa Damballah, and one discussed my relations with my wife and the pattern our arguments often take and why. Since it is Shango who "sits on her head" and Damballah who sits on mine, I'm inclined to feel *burned* by her at times and she to feel *bitten* by my sarcasm. My purpose for being here is expressed in various ways: "He says you come to take the African *orishas* out of blackface," or "she says you come to put the *orishas* in a scientific book," or "he says your *odu* [personal destiny] is to rediscover the old gods of your own ancestors.

During this preliminary exchange, with Rita translating, Viarney and I get the tape recorder plugged in and working. If there's no plug-in, it runs on batteries. Rita then reads my opening statement, which says that I'm interested in Voodoo as a very ancient and time-tested map of consciousness and/or the anatomy of pure energy. But that fetches such a variety of responses, from laughter to frowns, that I've stopped using it and just let Rita improvise. Viarney leans forward and listens closely, and I lean back, put myself into a light trance, and examine the effect of our subject's presence on my thoughts and feelings.



O. Govi: Later, back at the hotel, when he sits down with Rita and she translates each *macumbeiro's* recorded response, Gover finds his inner-viewing has often provided him with essentials of the information imparted. Yesterday, while listening to Rita and Maria talk, he wrote in his notebook: "Modern science is the old gods rediscovering themselves in new symbols. Voodoo and science are both forms of magic. Both are based on theories that find evidence of

themselves.” Later Rita translated Maria: “She says science no different than Macumba. Science has its *orishas* and Macumba has its *orishas*, and all, all are *orishas*. Science *orishas* talk through books; Macumba *orishas* talk through people. But . . . same *orishas* always talking, everywhere.”

Thus, Gover finds he can often learn his Voodoo lesson before the lecture has been translated.



Gover: Which, after interviewing Maria, was a good thing, because on the drive back we tried to play the tape, which we had so carefully set up and tested, and found that after Rita’s opening statement we got only one word from Maria: “*Bon.*” After that, there was a hissing, snaky sound that made Viarney stop the car and get out. Rita got out of the back seat, and the two of them walked in opposite directions awhile, then returned and said they weren’t sure we should continue this business. They got back in the car, and while I tried to figure out what had gone wrong with the recorder this time, Viarney ate some coconut meat and flipped the shell out his right front window. It immediately jumped off the ground, flew back into the car, and landed on my foot—which set off another round of hooting.

That wasn’t the first time the recorder had failed or that strange things had happened. The first night I was here Rita and I were strolling down a street when an old lady came waving and shouting to us, telling us her *macumbeiro* was waiting to see me, expecting me, knew why I had come, and said I should leave my tape recorder behind because it wouldn’t work in his presence. He said he would set up his own machine and give me a tape. So we got his address from the lady and went to see him the next morning. And sure enough my recorder didn’t work, and his big reel-to-reel job was ready. He hyperventilated to receive Damballah or Ifa and cut short the questioning by delivering more answers than we had questions for.

A few days later when we went to the oldest mission in Salvador to meet a priest, Frei Eliseu, who is reputed to be notorious in the Vatican for lauding Macumba in written broadsides and moonlighting as a *macumbeiro*, there was a more dramatic confrontation between old gods and new electronics. Frei Eliseu, a robust cleric in his seventies, first advised it would be best to use his own personal tape recorder, then had to perform an exorcism to free its devils and make it work. First he stood over the thing, reading from the

instruction book, while Viarney and I, Rita, and a half dozen others fingered it according to this litany. When we could find no mechanical or electrical oversight, the priest did a spirit exorcism on the thing, and then it worked. Rita said there was a temporary malfunction because the recorder was a Catholic, but Frei Eliseu assured us it was not that, and even if the thing were a Moslem it would still have trouble with the local spirit population. We then taped the interview, stopping now and then to replay and make sure the thing was still working, and it was—only to find, when we played the tape on my recorder, that what we had sounded like a speeded-up squabble of Mickey Mice.

As for the troubles with camera and film, the doorman at the hotel explained it this way: Because Macumba services were harassed by the police in the old days, many of the ancestors had become over-protective. And the less enlightened among them, not realizing my intentions were benevolent, were not going to allow me to bring any photos home.

One warm, muggy afternoon we parked the VW at the end of the paved road and walked into a mud-floored village, completed our discussion with a lovely old white-haired *macumbeiro*, and were returning to the car when we discovered we were lost. But how could that be? It wasn't a large or complex village, and we had found our way in easily enough. Why couldn't we find our way out? As we rounded a bend and came upon a kind of suburb of the village, we heard the first drumming and chanting of what turned out to be an impromptu afternoon *candomble*. We laughed, switched on the recorder, and spent a couple of hours watching people receive Shango. After that, we found our way back to the car with no further disorientation.

By the night of this *candomble*, which I will describe presently, strange coincidences and mysterious happenings have become commonplace. And in Bahia spirits are blamed or thanked in all such cases, and that's that—there is no other explanation. Hardly a day has passed without something "impossible" happening, but since none of these events has caused injury of any kind, we have learned to take them in stride. I've even stopped grouching over the loss of photos and the misbehavior of tapes. If the local spirits don't want me to come away with such audiovisual records, so be it.



O. Goui: This loss of records that rankles him is a blessing in disguise. The ancient ones have sent Eshu to free him from such

distractions. Instead of fumbling with mechanical buttons, he is now free to play with the buttons of mind and spirit.

Besides, the audiovisuals he sought would convince no one who is not already open to the possibility that the Voodoo belief in gods and spirits is logical, valid, and verifiable. It's high time he stops banging his head on the Western wall of prejudice and come on over to the Voodoo reality, where the audiovisuals will be more than enough.



*Gover:* It's 8:30, and this *candomble* is still delayed. The drummers and ogan (iron clangor) player are warming up, but the dancers and chanters are having a powwow or something in the kitchen. People are still arriving. The room's full, though, so they are gathering outside and peering in through the door and windows.

I wonder if this delay is because of the six Israelis and myself. Maybe these people don't like tourists watching their religious rites.

I strike up a conversation with an Israeli girl in her early twenties. "Are they ever going to do anything?" she asks. She's bored and weary and anxious to return to her hotel and sleep. "I've seen all this in movies. It's a lot of superstitious nonsense." She's bought a tourist booklet printed in English and reads aloud to pass the time:

"The name Candomble is applied to the place where the Brazilian Negroes perform their characteristic religious feasts. Elements from various African religions and remnants of the Brazilian Indians' cults are sometimes combined in the Candomble cult. The Candomble's temple walls are always made of clay, and its floor of brick or cement; the initiated must dance barefoot...."

The poet interrupts to let me know, in no uncertain terms, that he has grown suddenly restive too. I thought I had become accustomed to his sudden whims, but this one really surprises me. After coming here with Rita, Viarney, and me, and after waiting around for the ceremony to begin, he has decided the whole thing is "most impure."

"A celebration for Oshala after dark on Friday," he scoffs. "Such a fiesta is for the dead. I want no parts of it. I'm leaving."

The Israeli girl wants to catch a ride with him, but he tells her he's not going in her direction.

As if the poet's departure is the signal for the ceremony to begin, Maria appears carrying an incense urn and gets to work on the first order of business: prohibiting any interference from Eshu.

"It's all so counterproductive," says the Israeli girl, as we watch Maria fill the room with smoke.

"Counterproductive of what?" I ask.

"Look at them, how poor they are. Have you ever seen worse poverty? What good is all this superstition? Did you see the ruts in the road outside?"

I almost fell into one arriving this evening—had to sit down in the mud to stop the slide that would have landed me in a rut I'd have had to walk the length of to get out.

"Their roads need to be paved," says the Israeli, "and they need electricity, running water, flush toilets. They're probably all protein starved too. But instead of doing something to improve their wretched condition, they hold this silly *candomble*. It's awful. I hate it here."

She pleads with the others of her group to go, but now that the ceremony has begun, they want to watch some of it. She stands there tapping her foot impatiently, frowning, as onto the *candomble* floor come ten women ranging in age from teens to seventies, all dressed in the traditional white satin and lace skirts. While Maria continues to shoo away Eshu, the drums and clanging resound, and the ladies begin their dance of invocation.

It's a very serious undertaking but not approached in the somber, solemn mood common to religious services among Moslems, Jews, and Christians. Spectators are free to chat and joke, smoke and drink *batida*, come and go as the spirit moves them. Children squeeze in and out of the crowded doorway and scamper about as though at a picnic. And all this sideline commotion is guaranteed to buttress the Western notion that such Voodoo ceremonies are heathen and heretical. The way the Israelis are gawking at it all, I'm sure it's the first such spectacle they've ever seen—and they will come away more convinced than ever that it's just a lot of primitive superstition.

Maybe that's why the poet suddenly fled. From what he's told me, the *candomble* he belongs to would never tolerate the gawking of nonbelievers.

The group of dancers seem one round and whirling blur of white as they circle the yellow star and green cross painted in the middle of this concrete floor. Maria is chanting and walking about

with a jug of *batida*, a liquor made from sugarcane and fruit juice, and a plate of meal. She's still stalking Eshu, I think, to make sure he won't disrupt in any way. Maybe the spirit she's addressing is trapped in the girl who is feeling trapped in this room, with darkness and deep ruts outside and all this "superstition" inside.

Maria puts the jug and plate down on the cross and star, raises her arms and sings her chants heavenward. The dancers circle her, shuffling a kind of slow two-step, wooing Oshala. Maria leaves the circle and walks about the room, still chanting. She stops in front of me to say, through Rita, that she is sending Eshu the Confuser away and that this is very important, especially at feasts for Oshala the Elder.

Then she apparently senses Eshu's presence has entered to enjoy the food and drink she's laid out for him, and she runs to the center of the room, picks up the jug and plate, and carries them out the door. With a loud "Ayeeee!" she throws the liquor and meal to the night, wipes the plate clean, and returns. Now Eshu is surely outside, so the ceremony can proceed without worry that old Oshala will suffer any hanky-panky from the celestial rascal.

Great clouds of yellow smoke engulf the room as Maria walks about with another urn of incense. She "feeds" this smoke to everyone and everything in the room—people, plants, walls, drums, designs, and invisibles. After blessing all, she sits in a queenly chair, and one by one the dancers approach her, and each, according to which *orisha* rules her, salutes her.

I glance at the Israeli girl, who says, "It's just a lot of hypnotism."

Indeed, the drums, the rhythmic clanging of the ogan, the dance, and the incense—it is hypnotic. It seems to reverberate in my flesh and bones, echo about inside my skull. The drums are as rhythmic and complex as the atoms of the body's cells, and the dancers whirl like planets around an invisible sun. When next I glance at the girl, her lower jaw is hanging and she looks slightly entranced. Her fellow students are also slightly agape, although they keep snapping each other out of it with quips, jokes, chuckles.

But here comes the head drummer again, pushing his way in through the door and walking across the floor. I guess he left briefly to relieve his bladder. A boy has taken his place, and now the boy slides off the stool as the head drummer slides on, and picks up the beat without missing a single thump in this very complex polyrhythmic invocation. With the head drummer back, the sound takes on a more

compelling quality, adding a new dimension to the dancing and chanting. Maria smiles at him as she leaves her chair to join the dancing for awhile. She leads them into a slightly new pattern, more a snaking around the center than a circling. The youngest dancer looks like she's ready to receive, for she's glassy-eyed and a mite wobbly. An occasional child scoots across the floor, ducking between the dancers' legs. Now and then a little one steps out and imitates the dancers' movements.

I begin to feel that electrical tingle I get when a Voodoo ceremony is creating itself. From the hitherto chaotic patterns of people's comings and goings, a cohesive whole begins to form. This phase of it reminds me of hunting, for a Voodoo ceremony is a kind of hunt through subtle regions. The gods and spirits are both remote and immediate. And each is sought along an invisible path that has been tried and tested down through centuries. It is this dazing polyrhythmic sound that cuts the path, and it seems to me that everyone present is involved in this hunt, although the Israelis are unaware of their involvement. And I find myself wondering if Oshala will arrive before these tourists depart.

The Voodoo hunt for contact with a deity is not unlike the scientific hunt for knowledge. Theory precedes discovery of evidence; you can't find what you're not looking for. Watching the pattern made by the flowing white dresses of the dancers reminds me of peering into a microscope at the activity of a cell. In both cases the parts adhere to some central principle.

And while I'm seeing it that way, another correlation comes to mind: Not only do these dancing women duplicate the planets circling the sun and the body's cells clinging to their central principle, but they also behave like a corporate board of directors at a conference table, whose words dance out and orbit a central subject, circle and crisscross, conjunct, and occasionally bump each other in passing.



*O. Govi:* The Voodoo ceremony, I wish to interject here, is also an abstract construction made from a carefully planned design. What this construction will house is the presence of a god. Everyone who stays to welcome Oshala will, like laborers building a house in the physical world, each contribute according to his skills, and all will have reason to stand back and admire their handiwork.

The few who sacrifice their beings for the deity to manifest will be supported by everyone present, and all will be affected by the presence of the god. The complex rhythm, endlessly repeated by drums and ogan, chants and dancing, costumes, lighting, ikons—it's a total assault on the senses that works like acupuncture on the subtle levels of body/mind. One does not participate in this event by listening and watching, but rather by absorbing sound and sight with the bone and fiber of body and the genealogical memory of unconscious mind. These carefully designed pulsations reach to remote depths of the mind like long, invisible arms. And those sound-fingers send a message to every cell and get each molecule spinning to the beat. Then, from the very atomic programming of the being, one of the programmers leaps forth into the human dimension and communicates through words and actions.

Gover has told his Brazilian friends he would like to experience receiving a spirit but doesn't think it's possible for him to do so at a *candomble*, mainly because the language and ritual are foreign to him. The truth is much simpler. He has seen the look of fright that springs from the human face when a god "mounts his horse," and he has rightly speculated that the experience must be terrifying. He's afraid.

But he's also feeling quite at home here at Maria's *candomble* and rightly speculates he'd be safe in her hands if, per chance, a deity should choose to knock him over and inhabit his being. And when Rita asks, "Would you like to receive the spirit tonight?" he replies, "Yeah, I would, but I don't think that will happen."

"Why not?" she says coyly.

"I don't speak the language."

"You don't have to, the spirit speaks through you."

"Well, why don't you receive the spirit here tonight?"

"Maybe I will, who knows?"



*Gover:* I flash on science and religion as both rhythmically performed rituals devoted to a common cause. In the lab, the common cause is called truth. At this *candomble*, it's called a god. But these are two different words for the same thing, it seems to me, because both gods and truths are basic beliefs that have endured. We seek to verify these basic beliefs through scientific and religious ritual. Both gods and truths are creations of human mind, I suppose, yet able to be demonstrated. This ceremony is attempting to demonstrate a



god, a truth, a basic belief that has persisted over many centuries. Now, to bring the god through requires a lot of persistence.



O. Govi: And cautious discrimination, for there are some confusing untruths lurking about, and they're much easier to summon than the eternal truths. Even modern science gets possessed by some half-truths that barely survive a century. Some don't even make it through a decade. Many scientific cults unwittingly court possession of untruths, and even Voodoo ceremonies have been known to fall prey to such entities.

Great discrimination is needed to work with both the deeply messaging drumbeats of Voodoo and the clickety-clack of laboratory electronics. The truths who wish to discover themselves in the human dimension at this *candomble* are merely different aspects of the gods who seek discovery through scientific endeavors. But the ancient truth, the god, is often surrounded by a lot of tricky detractors. To guide the drumming to its target, one must be able to recognize the difference in a visceral way. That is Maria's specialty.



Gover: A week or so ago, at another *candomble* (for Oshun, Mother of Waters), I got into a discussion with an educated Brazilian about whether the theory of relativity is from Oshala or Olodumare. I thought it must be from Oshala. Wasn't the word *Oshala* a contraction of Orisha-nla? "Oh no," he said, "Oshala was originally Obatala in Africa, or Obatala's female counterpart, Odudua. Relativity must be from Olodumare." But after thinking that over a minute, he said, "No, relativity must be from Ifa (Orunmila), the knowledge of past, present, and future."

We both agreed the quantum theory is from Eshu, but we never came untangled concerning relativity. Recalling my interview in South Carolina with Efuntola and how he ascribed relativity to Orunmila (Ifa), I decide to stick with that deity as the father of relativity.

The problem is, the names for the gods went through changes down through the centuries in Yorubaland, and then in crossing the Atlantic to the New World. And in *candomble* they were strongly flavored with the names of the same gods from other African

traditions. Now it's difficult to figure out which one corresponds to the Christian God, the original creator. Olorun and Olodumare are two names associated with the original creation, yet Ifa (Orunmila), and in the French West Indies Damballah, are also thus associated.

In Bahia, when you first walk into a *terreiro* to meet a new *macumbeiro*, you don't know which name he applies to the Great Creator, God. And I've had some tell me the Great Creator is too remote to be named and is therefore nameless.

I have yet to learn how Maria correlates her gods with the Christian pantheon, and from what she has said, I suspect she makes no such correlation except for Oshala and Christ. But she describes Oshala as the grandfather, whose wives, sons, and daughters are the gods and goddesses. Eshu, being the youngest, is sent by the others on errands, but as often as not he gets his messages confused or plays pranks on his elders. His unreliability is the reason he is associated with the devil in Brazil, but this is only because to the Christian eye he appeared devilish.

One is often uncertain about the truth or untruth of Eshu's gifts, yet some of his best works come into our reality seeming illogical, cryptic, or nonsensical, and it is only later that we learn the hidden meanings that make divine sense.

Ah, but when Oshala comes through, his presence shines the bright light of clear understanding, dispelling ignorance and mystery.

No one here has received the spirit yet, and I'm beginning to wonder if it will happen. Then in fairly quick succession the Israelis troop out into the night and are gone, the drums change their rhythm slightly, and the dancing and chanting picks up the new tempo, and the whirl of white dresses and brown skin intensifies. Then a slim young lady in her early twenties, with long, loose black hair cascading down her copper-tan back, closes her eyes as she dances. With her eyes shut tight, she steps and bobs, turns and weaves, in and around the others. Maria spots her and is at her side in a flash, guiding her off the floor.

They are gone briefly, then they return and Maria leads her to a place near the other dancers but out of their way. The young woman stands with her arms extended, making a cross. She appears to be in a kind of catatonic trance, totally immobile. Her body has become like a statue of Christ crucified. I watch her eyelids closely and they don't blink or flutter. I can't even detect any breathing.

O. Govi: This has Gover slightly disappointed. He'd been expecting a more communicative spirit. In other Voodoo services, the gods and goddesses who came through were quite eloquent at times, in both words and deeds. The other night an old lady received Eshu and through Rita's translation has a lot to tell him. He has also been addressed by Ogun and Oshun and has seen Shango perform amazing dance feats. But never before has he seen a possession such as this seeming catatonia.

I beg his patience. There's more to come.



Gover: The mother of the saints stops by to ask if I'd like to join her for a taste of her own *batida*—raw rum with herbal or fruit additives. I'm already feeling lightheaded, but with Rita and Viarney I follow Maria into the small room just off the *candomble*. I really don't want any *batida* (any more than I wanted the Brazilian-style chitlins that made me throw up at another *candomble*), but her invitation indicates I'm welcome here, even though I'm an outsider.

I feel as though I'm walking and standing on a carpet of sound, and I realize I must appear tranced out. Maria pours the *batida* into three plastic glasses, then we toast; and while Viarney proclaims something in Portuguese, Maria looks very deeply into my eyes, filling me with something between a chilling foreboding and awesome wonderment.

She has poured water for herself. Now she downs it in one swallow and is gone back to the *candomble*. Viarney is pumped up with enthusiasm and is trying to tell me something, but Rita is not translating. She's looking at me with a smirk, as if to say, boy, are you in for a surprise!

There's no point asking what Viarney's enthusiasm and Rita's smirking are all about. The boom-booming of the drums is too loud for such an exchange of words, and Rita looks too flushed with excitement to speak. But why is she looking at me that way?



O. Govi: Because she thinks it is time Gover received a spirit, and she is suggesting he will tonight at this *candomble*. But he can't imagine such a thing happening to him.

I remind him that Oshala and all the other gods are always his possessions, for they are what compose the aliveness of pure energy. To become a medium for the Oshala spirit, all he has to do is cooperate with the mood the drums and chants create, for they are designed to separate this one god, Oshala, from the congress of his aliveness.

But, he protests, he has no desire to go into catatonic trance and stand like a statue of the crucified Christ. It looks like a psychotic episode rather than the reception of a Voodoo spirit. Indeed, it is what psychiatrists call psychotic but mystics call divine. Such divine psychosis, he thinks, is not for him.

Yet he has to admit he's never felt so close to the edge. So he buckles his mental safety belt as he downs the last of his *batida* and returns to the *candomble*.



*Gover:* A second woman has received Oshala and is standing next to the first. The second one is just as catatonic as the first, but her arms dangle from the elbows and her head hangs slightly to one side.

Momentarily, I wish the Israeli students had stayed to see this. I'd like to hear what that girl would say, for it would help me keep my distance from it. But it wasn't until the Israelis left that the spirit descended. It's the custom here that no one is barred from attending a *candomble*, which doesn't mean the spirits will arrive while nonbelieving tourists are present.

I glance at Viarney, who gives me the thumbs-up sign and departs for another *batida*. I glance at Rita and am surprised to see her eyes at half-mast, staring off into spaces other than normal. When I look back at the dancers, a third woman has received Oshala and has been positioned with the other two. This third lady appears to be in her fifties; she stands with her arms extended slightly upward, as though her body is sagging on the cross.

Abruptly the drums stop. For a moment there's a deafening silence, then people turn to each other and talk, children scamper about letting off steam, and the dancers wipe perspiration from their faces. The drummers stand and stretch, then walk into the adjoining room for *batida*. The three entranced women remain immobile, catatonic.

Rita is chattering into my ear, but I'm not hearing what she's saying. I can't seem to separate her sounds into English words. And I feel a need to relieve my bladder, so I extract myself from her as politely as I can and head for the door.

It's pitch-black dark outside. The air is cool and moist.



O. Govi: As he walks over the soft, damp earth in search of a little privacy, I remind him of the dream he had last night. I do this by the brown faces that watch him as he walks out the door into the darkness. "Aztecs," he mutters.

In the dream he is living with an Aztec tribe and has been selected to become the annual human sacrifice. This means his heart will be cut out and offered to the proper god, but he hasn't been told when this will happen or which god is involved. He supposes it's the sun god, but he doesn't know the Aztec name for this one and feels remiss in his research.

Then the dream skips to much partying and fondling of pretty girls, and he learns he's become the collective tribal ego and is expected to act out everyone's collective lusts in preparation for the sacrifice. This news makes the partying seem interminable, but he sticks to it doggedly to fulfill his duty.

Then the dream skips to when he's prone on a flat rock on top of a pyramid under a clear sky and a blinding sun, with the priest's arm raised over him, holding a long knife. The priest chants and the crowd below waits, and Gover feels ready to die, which surprises him. Why does he feel ready to die? Oh yes, because he knows his spirit will be welcomed as a gift to the sun god. At last the knife goes into his chest. He feels neither pain nor pleasure. "Maybe I've been drugged," he thinks.

Gradually he feels himself becoming pure spirit and rising up, spreading out, then showering down like a fine mist of sunlight on the waiting crowd. He feels he's gone light years away and returned instantly, all in a time-motion dimension that is divine. Now he comes down as this shower of pure light, into the cells of these people, where he immediately becomes part of the tribal whole. He sees himself looking out at himself through everyone's eyes. As they look at each other, each pair of eyes has something of him in them. He is also present in their voices, and he is able to leap instantaneously from the

senses of one person to another. And all this feels quite pleasurable except for one thing: Why, he wonders, has he, a white man, become part of this tribe of Aztecs?

Now, as he urinates, I remind him there are other questions he might ask of that dream. For instance, when he woke up to write that dream down, all he wrote was, "I dreamed I was dead and seeing through the eyes of others, who were Indians." Then he fell asleep again. So the question I now suggest is, When people receive the spirit at a Voodoo service like this *candomble*, whose eyes do they see through? Their own or others? Or do they go blind for the duration of the possession?

And of course there's only one way to find out for sure.



*Gover*: Back inside the *candomble*, it suddenly occurs to me that I walked in that utter darkness over some ruts that are deeper than I am tall. And very slippery, for this is the rainy season, and the ground is rarely dry. Even coming down here in daylight I had trouble keeping my footing. How did I walk diagonally across those ruts, totally forgetful of them, without so much as the least little slip?



*O. Govi*: The Christian Jesus, in full possession of Oshala, is said to have walked on water. Is it any wonder that a light entrancement by the same spirit conveyed *Gover* over ruts?



*Gover*: I have read and heard it said that two or more people cannot receive the same spirit at the same time. And there are those who believe that no one ever gains possession of Oshala, Obatala. But that is certainly what has happened here tonight, isn't it?

I move in close to inspect these three Oshalas. None of the three ladies has moved a muscle, even with adults, kids, and one stray dog moving around them. I suppose they are breathing, but I can't detect any sign that they are. Are they suspended somewhere between life and death?

The phenomenon baffles me. There's no way they can be faking. It's impossible for a person in his right mind to stand perfectly motionless for such a long time.

I saunter over to Rita, hoping for an explanation. “This is the Christ crucified,” she says, “but soon Oshala will arise from the dead and serve us food.”

“But those women aren’t even breathing. Are they dead?”

“Of course they’re dead. But when the time comes they will live again.”

“But how long can they remain like this?”

“Don’t worry, Maria has everything under control.”

Now the drummers return to their stools on the raised platform in one corner. A cigarette dangles from the lips of the lead drummer as they resume, the booming and clanging echoing off the walls and external to me now. It will take awhile for their pattern of rhythm to find its way into my flesh and bones again.

The dog is removed, and the dancers begin stepping around again. But this time each seems to be into her own movements. And there’s one, about as wide as she is tall, whose movements are exceptionally vigorous, even downright rough. I hadn’t noticed her before and wonder now how she can possibly acquire Oshala with such movements as these.

I’m about to ask Rita when suddenly this squarely built woman’s left foot plants and she shoots forward, reels, nearly falls, then lets out a supernaturally loud and masculine shout: “Ayeeee! Hey-eeee-ayeeee!”

What’s this? An unscheduled visit from Ogun or Shango? Someone hurries out of the back room and hands the woman a wooden sword, and then she does something truly incredible: leaping like a ballet dancer and brandishing this sword, she hurls her approximately three hundred pounds about twelve feet through the air. From takeoff to landing she covers what I estimate to be twelve feet. She leaps again, and again, all about this very crowded room without knocking anyone down. She leaps around and between the other dancers, lands, squats, hisses, yells, turns like a warrior ready for battle and leaps again—all in time to the drums and ogan.

“Oshagun,” says Rita. Oh, the Militant Christ, the one who throws the money changers out of the temple. But is Oshagun’s arrival on Maria’s agenda tonight? She’s hard at work trying to subdue it, or harness it, or something. She follows Oshagun about the room, her arms outstretched, fingers reaching, until she makes an invisible contact with the back of Oshagun’s neck. Then, as if lassoed, Oshagun is drawn backward by Maria, who carefully guides the spirit and his “horse” out of the *candomble* room. From elsewhere in the

house, we soon here “Ayeeee!” and other sounds that indicate this spirit is still very much here. But the sounds are decreasing, losing their angry intensity, and a few minutes later Maria returns with Oshagun, who now wears a helmet and carries a shield as well as the sword. He strides onto the floor and does a stiff, heavy-footed, bellicose dance, more like an Indian war dance than a military ballet.

Except for the other dancers, all attention is now fixed on Oshagun. He strides to the drummers and, still moving with dancelike steps, lays down his sword and shield in front of the musicians. Then, beginning at that end of the room, he steps his way around, giving each and every one a big bear hug, executed in a quick, stiff way and accompanied by a shout, “Ayeeee!” Even the three Oshalas receive this quick bear hug and shout, which does nothing to disturb their trances. When my turn approaches, I get an urge to flee into the other room. The woman’s eyes seem to be focused on some distant star, and it is definitely an Ogun-type character that shapes her face. I stand my ground, receive the hug, and feel a jolt of electrical bliss, a shock of pleasure that leaves me sucking in deep breaths of air. Then gradually I feel loosened, soothed, slightly intoxicated.

The round of hugs completed, Oshagun departs, and the lady is left sprawled on the floor. She is helped to her feet and looks about, as though wondering how she got here. Gently she is guided by two women in long white dresses out of the *candomble* room to the cot in the adjoining room, where she will lie down and rest until she’s recovered.



O. Govi: What my esteemed partner fails to mention is that Oshagun’s hug leaves him with the fearful sensation that it is possible for him to be inhabited by this force. Some Voodoo ceremonies he’s attended have risen to such frenzied heights of spirit possession, such wild and impossible shouts and behavior, such a tangle of spent “horses” dazed and recovering, he knew (or thought he did) he could never participate. He felt alien, separate, detached from it all. Then there were ceremonies in which either the possession was so light, or the acting so poor, it was obviously a fraud.

But Maria’s *candomble* is neither frenzy nor fraud, and even though he doesn’t know the language, nor understand the meaning of all the various symbols, he feels at one with the spirit of the proceedings, and that scares him. He is not unfamiliar with the King



James New Testament version of the Oshala myth, but these people have a quite different version of that myth. So how, he wonders, is it possible he can feel at one with the spirit here tonight when it has never been possible for him to receive the Biblical Jesus?

I respectfully request he flip back in his notebook and read the latest dictation he received from Aum.



Gover: “To appreciate the basic beliefs of Voodoo, you must step beyond the beliefs your culture conditioned you with; one of which is that the unscriptured religions of illiterate people are inferior to the scriptured religions of literate people; and another of which is that primitive, illiterate people are fast becoming extinct.

“Recall what the Navajo medicine man you once visited said: that species that seem to have become extinct are merely migrating. When the cause of their discomfort departs their natural habitat, they return to physical manifestation again, as spring flowers blossom after winter thaws. So it only seems that ‘civilization’ is causing the extinction of ‘primitive’ people.

“Literacy does not confer superior intelligence. And scriptured religions are no improvement over unscriptured. Enlightening as scriptures can be, the negative possibility is to constrict the intuition with literal meanings. It is the expression of mind through intuition that distinguishes humanity from other earthly forms.

“The ‘distance’ between a human being and the source of his aliveness is not bridged by literacy and scripture. If it were, the scriptured religions would provide their faithful with possession, god-realization, yogic oneness. Instead it is the faithful of the unscriptured religions who have access to this experience and are skilled at sharing it. And oneness with one’s god is exactly what Voodoo is all about.

“Oneness with one’s god may not be possible for those who believe in scriptured ‘facts,’ however. Rendered into words on paper, the religious experience no longer exists, for it can only exist as a firsthand experience. Solidly lodged in the mind of the literate, scripture blocks experience. Any scripture’s god is an energy force, but such a force cannot take up residency in a human being filled with the heavy furniture of the written ecstasies of long-gone ancestors.

“Scripture causes the old gods to migrate and seemingly become extinct. The literal meanings scripture produces poison the psychic ecology, making it uninhabitable for those primary spirit forces

known as gods. Only when one casts out the literal meanings of scripture and deals with the mythological meanings does the ecology begin to clean up.

“To gain possession, you must not only contact your god, you must also make yourself available as a medium. This act of surrender may seem frightening at first, for one isn’t dealing with a mundane therapist, one is dealing with a far more rapacious force. Surrender to such a force takes courage. Some gods leave their ‘horses’ feeling like losers in a barroom brawl.

“And possession is not to be undertaken for selfish reasons. The self is absent during possession and does not necessarily benefit from it later. It is the collective self of the group that is served when one of its individual selves offers a god access to the human dimension.”



O. Govi: Maria, who has been monitoring activities on the inner plane, has a plan. And I, the guardian of Gover’s interface between spirit and matter, am at the crux of that plan.

It takes one to know one, as the saying goes, and Maria is one who knows a likeness in Gover. She has reached the turning point in the *candomble*, for she now has six crucified Christs lined up against her south wall and must begin resurrection ceremonies soon. But she still has time to invite another spirit, and she plans to use Gover to do just that.

She has noticed him reading his notebook out of the corner of her eye. Now she approaches. He is sitting in one of the few chairs here and has closed his notebook. He looks up to find her standing over him, smiling. She takes his hand and guides him onto the floor. But he’s wearing shoes, a violation of *candomble* protocol. Through Rita, she asks him to remove his shoes. He does. He removes his socks voluntarily.

In the manner of a courtly eighteenth-century gentleman, Maria leads him into the dance. If he didn’t have such complete trust in her, he would flee. But she stares him in the eye, and what he reads from her intense concentration disarms his fears. She’s as subtle as an unknown virus invading his body and as harmless as pure water.

By her actions she lets him know she expects no fancy footwork. The dance she gets him doing is a simple two-step shuffle.

And to take his conscious mind away from the fact that he's a stranger here and the only male who has danced tonight, she keeps him facing the six Oshalas. They line the south wall, as immobile as death.

Dancing with his attention fixed on them, Gover screws up his courage to receive a spirit. But as he is about to learn, one cannot be one's courageous self and an invading spirit at the same time. He feels as if he's being pushed over a cliff, and he turns to Maria for a moment, for consultation. Maria smiles and says, "Sim," yes, and directs his attention back to the six Oshalas. He feels caught between the vices of vanity (feeling foolish) and pride (the determination to see this experience through to its natural limits).

He struggles to hang on and prevent the fall into this bottomless space, but he is helplessly swept away by an oceanic momentum. These people haven't seen a gringo taken by a spirit since they can't remember when.

Now he's falling away in a terror. It reminds him of what astronomers have called "the black hole." He blanks out, is without personal awareness. He feels forced out of life, into some other dimension.

As his astral soul, his dreamer, I register bits and pieces of the experience. As though seen under a strobe light, I catch glimpses of his physical being leaping about the *candomble* floor, the "horse" of Oshagun. I can tell it's Oshagun because he has a sword in his hand, a shield, and a helmet—the same set that adorned the three-hundred-pound lady. But he isn't doing exactly what she did—those twelve-foot leaps in ballet style. I'm not sure what his body is doing or how to describe it to his conscious mind. His movements are no less acrobatic than the other "horse" of Oshagun, and they are seen as a holy spectacle by the crowd. As a parked ego with blanked perception, he is gone and knows nothing of this.

He will later recall the impression that life as a parked ego wasn't half as terrifying as he'd expected. And the impression that, "seen" from this other dimension, life is a wriggling, squirming, exciting dance of interlocking organisms. Another impression he will recall is of his vocal cords resonating. Was Oshagun screaming? No, for the sound comes from his solar plexus and is rough, gruff, and rowdy, like the hoarse-voiced bellow of a wounded warrior.

Well, it's a blessing that he is unconscious and knows nothing of how his body is being manipulated. It is moving to the rhythm of the

drums, but as everyone here knows, these jumps and strides, squats and leaps, would be quite painful if he weren't parked in this other dimension, feeling nothing.

As the spirit withdraws and he gradually regains consciousness, he realizes he's received a spirit at a Brazilian *candomble*, and he wishes he knew more about what has happened. He tries to cling to this intermediate state and with the dawning of fleeting awareness to gather impressions of himself possessed. He wants to bring back something from this horrendous experience, something he can scripture in words on paper. Is it like a scary rollercoaster ride? No, because it's devoid of physical sensation. It's more as if his head had been chopped off and caught only a few strobe-lit glimpses of his body hurtling about, "seen" in suspended slow motion. One huge solar cell wriggling in slow motion.

Later he will remember making some dream connection between the faces of the six Oshalas and TV commercials—advertisements betraying the Christ who revolts violently against the practice of usury, excessive interest for loaned money. Is that what Oshagun's message was? That true values cannot be loaned at interest? Perhaps. But what about the six Oshalas? What they speak of tonight cannot be reduced to words, to sounds made meaningful, he thinks as he gropes his way back to consciousness. What they say can only be understood in a moment such as this, when the sound—the drums and clanging—resound through hundreds of centuries into a moment in modern time.

Done as a TV commercial, this moment—if he could capture it in words—would destroy Western civilization, would cut off its stalk and reduce it to its roots—this experience of the Christ consciousness captured and *shared*, as compared to captured and restrained, subdued, transformed into docile obedience to *The Church*. No church is this, this barbarism, this decapitation of sanity in the hunt for ancient mysteries. . . . banished long ago from consideration by the offspring of Inquisition-haunted Christians.

And he, suspended here between life and death, can only wonder at the absurdity of all religious beliefs and faiths, and marvel at how this experience makes faiths and beliefs irrelevant.

Now the bare electric bulb hanging from the ceiling over the cot he rests on looks dim compared to the radiance he recalls. What happened? Hypnotism? Or de-hypnotism? He decides quickly. Hypnotism is normal. De-hypnotism is when your normal self is

replaced by something far more powerful. Removed from your normal awareness, “you” do not exist. Well, nonexistence, like New York City, is a great place to visit but you wouldn’t want to live there.



*Gover:* After resting for half an hour or so, I struggle to my feet. Once, a few years ago when I was living too fast, I fainted dead away. I feel now much as I did then when I recovered from that faint. I shuffle sheepishly back into the *candomble* room, just in time for a round of divine refreshments.

While I was recovering, Maria led her six Oshalas off the floor, down six steps, and into her outdoor kitchen. Now, Rita tells me, they are preparing food to be shared by all.

In the meantime, kids are leaping about, imitating Oshagun, while the drummers share a joint and sip *batida*. People stroll about, stretch, chat, step outside for a breath of fresh air. Several approach me and remark on my reception of the spirit. Others give me the thumbs-up salute.

Well, I’m happy to have had the experience, but I’m still so dazed I don’t know what to make of it. A stranger here, I feel like a wanderer who has come back and found the familiar strangely changed.

Presently a female chorus is heard from inside the house, and people hurry back to their places in the *candomble*. Someone turns out the electric lights, and now the scene is bathed in the softer hues of candlelight. Up the steps and into the room come the six Oshalas, singing and carrying large trays and bowls on their heads.

At first I think they must have lost their possession and are now doing a theatrical. But when they pass me and I get a close look at the glazed, gone look in their eyes and hear the hymn breathing itself forth from mouths that hardly move, I know Oshala inhabits this whole line of bodies. Their serpentine togetherness, their long dresses swaying in precise rhythm, could not be achieved by the most talented acting. What they are doing is delivering a gift from the Christ.

They walk majestically to the middle of the *candomble* floor, form a circle and kneel, lift their trays and bowls from their heads, and place them gracefully on the floor in a particular arrangement around the star and cross. Then one by one their heads bob forward and snap

back, and this whiplash action of the neck seems to alter their trance and prepare them for the next round of activity.

Two Oshalas dish out a thick white liquid from the cut glass bowls into individual glasses. Two others serve these to the assembled. There aren't enough glasses to go around, so the other two take emptied glasses to the kitchen, wash them and return them to be filled again. This is coordinated with such precision that the Oshalas dishing out the liquid never miss a beat.

It's a tasty drink that reminds me of tapioca. Aware that the spirit of Oshala has been involved in its making, drinking it fills me with a sensation of light and love. It also brings up a distant memory: When I was three or four, my grandfather took me to a church—Methodist, I believe it was—and I had this same feeling then. I remember standing on the church's front steps, entranced, lightly possessed by this same god.



O. Govi: The gods are both the same by different names and different by the same names. But by whatever name, when summoned from their natural habitat, a god summoned is a lot rougher to handle than the same god worshipped from afar.

Gover can't help feeling that possession of such heavy-handed spirits as the Militant Christ, Ogun, Shango, Eshu, and some others should be for karate black belts only. And even they might feel afterward as though they'd just stepped off a torture rack.

Well, it's been a long day, and he feels a sudden letdown. Exhaustion sets in. His feet are cold, and that chills the rest of his body. He's anxious to return to his hotel and sleep, then bid farewell to Bahia and fly home.

The bowls and glasses have been cleared, and the Oshalas have walked as one body to their previous stations, but their stances are not so rigid now. Their eyes are closed and they are motionless, but their arms dangle at their sides. Christ has been taken down from the cross, and Maria's chant now calls for Oshala to speak.

But they will speak an African language, so he and his two friends prepare to leave. Just before they do, Maria takes his hand and walks him briskly past the Oshalas, then gives him a quick hug that seems to communicate everything the risen Christ will say.

# Glossary of Voodoo Gods

Rather than attempt a comprehensive listing of all the gods and goddesses extant in all the various Voodoo cults in the Western Hemisphere, this glossary is limited to those I have found to be most widely known. I have included their astrological correspondences so that anyone familiar with the ancient Hebrew Kabala and its astrological correspondences can place this pantheon on the Tree of Life design. Those who are familiar with the Hindu pantheon can compare the Voodoo gods with those deities. The same holds true for Druid, Celtic, Hawaiian, American Indian, or any other pantheon: the key to comparing deities is their astrological correspondences. This is so because the planets were named for the ancient gods of Western civilization.

The pronunciation of the name of each Voodoo god is included, although such indications can be only rough approximations, because the same names are pronounced differently from place to place. I have also tried to render the gods' names spelled as they are pronounced in American English.

*Babalu: see Obaluaye.*

*Chango: see Shango.*

*Damballah: see Orunmila.*

*Erzulie: see Oshun.*

*Eshu*, or *Legba*: (*Aye-shoo*, *Leg-bah*). Mercury, messenger of the gods, go-between for gods and mankind, ruler of communications and the marketplace, source of fortune and misfortune. Youngest of the gods, sometimes called the Great Trickster.

*Ifa*: see *Orunmila*.

*Legba*: see *Eshu*.

*Obaluaye*, or *Babalu*: (*Oh-bah-loo-why-eh*, *Bah-bah-loo*). Saturn and Earth, the Great Teacher, bringer of lessons to be learned in this life, and finally bringer of one's final lesson: death. Sometimes referred to as the fact that spirit suffers in material form. The only god one never asks any favors of.

*Obatala*, or *Oshala*: (*Oh-bah-tah-lah*, *Oh-shah-lah*). Sun and Jupiter, the Christ spirit, source of light, warmth, creativity, and enlightenment and begetter of earthly forms.

*Ogun*: (*Oh-gon*, *Oh-goon*, *Oh-gum*). Mars, ruler of the mineral kingdom, of martial force, war, and pioneering effort.

*Olodumare*, or *Olorun*: (*Oh-lo-du-mah-ray*, *Oh-lo-roon*). The god-head, source of all and everything; in some cults called *Orisha-nla*.

*Olokun*: (*Oh-low-kun*). Neptune, ruler of oceans and mysterious depths of consciousness, the subconscious, and distant places in consciousness.

*Olorun*: see *Olodumare*.

*Orisha-nla*: see *Olodumare*.

*Orunmila*, or *Ifa*: (*Oh-roon-mi-lah*, *Ee-fah*). The firstborn of *Olodumare*; the Zodiac; the knowledge of past, present and future. Priests who commune with this deity specialize in divination. Some correlate *Orunmila* with the Haitian *Damballah*.

*Oshala*: see *Obatala*.

*Oshagun* (*Oh-sha-goon*, *Oh-sha-goom*). Sun conjoined (conjunct) with Mars. *Oshala* and *Ogun* combined. The Sun god's Martian ray. *Ogun* acting at the behest of *Oshala*, or *Obatala*.

*Oshun*, or *Erzulie*: (*Oh-shoon*, *Er-zoo-lee*). Venus, source of love, beauty and the arts, of justice and celestial legality.



*Oya*: (Oh-yah). Pluto, goddess of the netherworld, of death, transformation, and conception; sometimes call Shango's warrior wife.

*Shango, or Chango*: (Shahn-go, Chang-go). Jupiter, until the discovery of Uranus. Ruler of fire and electricity, source of genius, sometimes called "the heir apparent to Obatala's throne."

*Yemanja*: (Yeh-mahn-jah). Moon, Mother of Waters, source of emotions both subtle and violent.

I bring him a telepathic communique from Maria: all these different interpretations fall into seven primary categories, corresponding to the seven visible planets of our solar system. There is the Martian “warrior” Christ, the Venusian “loving” Christ, the Mercurial “messenger” Christ, the Jupiterian “king” Christ, the Saturnian “teacher” Christ, the lunar “inspirational” Christ, the solar “enlightened” Christ, plus the earthly dead hero Jesus, as pure spirit who suffers in material form.

Maria’s Christ concept, Oshala, is far more encompassing than any one or all of the Christian cults. Instead of being a particular individual who came and is rumored to be coming again, Oshala never left and lives in every person and every thing. Oshala is also the son of Olodumare and the father of all other gods and goddesses, people, plants, animals, and minerals.

As Maria told Gover through Rita earlier this evening, “No one can ever see God, Olodumare, but Oshala is God’s first reflection.” So he put it down in his notebook that Oshala is the light of God, as the sun is the light of our solar system.



Gover: Maria’s house is a labyrinth of indoor and outdoor rooms. Concrete steps bring you up to her front door but when you step inside you’re on dirt floors until you reach the far end, the concrete floor of the *candomble* room. Between one end and the other, there are three shrines, with statues, pictures, African-type wood carvings, and other items containing the forces of the gods. And there are two consultation rooms. Her house also doubles as this impoverished neighborhood’s psychiatric clinic. Or more likely, she accepts mental patients from all over the city. When I first met her, she had four or five in various states of derangement, and a week later they were all gone and she had four or five others. One of the things she invited me to watch was how she and her *iaos* (female initiates) heal mental illness. The crazed spirit possessing the sick person is transferred to one of Maria’s assistants and then spoken to through Maria by a healer spirit; and eventually the crazed spirit is taken away to be cured. The human patient is dazed but quickly recovers his rightful senses.

A year ago I would have blocked on the possibility of such a happening as this. Now it seems as natural as rain. And here in Bahia just about everyone believes in spirits, good and evil. Even the waiter

at the Grand Barra Hotel understands that I have the spirit of a French convict along and that he likes potato salad.

It's a good thing I have him too, because not every *macumbeiro* is friendly and harmless. I met one from Nigeria who specializes in offing people. You pay him half the money down and the other half when your enemy has been eliminated. And if something doesn't happen to the victim within a month or six weeks, you get your down payment back. This *macumbeiro* drives a Mercedes and dines in the finest restaurants, but I doubt that he has many friends, for taking care of his psychotic killer spirits is a full-time job.

Our visit with him was brief and angry. He said nothing, letting his wife do all the talking while he stared out the window as if he were hiding from the police. I had eye contact with him for about one moment, and it was like a glimpse of hell. I immediately conjured up my French convict and put him on the job. As soon as I did that, this *macumbeiro's* wife and Rita got into a loud argument. Seems the man wanted five thousand dollars just to talk about what he does.

We left, and I could "see" my convict beating off the attacks of his maniacs. Rita was in a terrible state of upset and anger until we met our next interviewee, a *mai de santo*, who immediately ran her hands up and down both our bodies, blessing us with holy water from a rusty tin can and ridding us of the evil ones who, for lack of anyone else to bedevil, were trying to have at us. She said she could see I had a protector but that we shouldn't visit any more *macumbeiros* who specialize in evil. We didn't. Rita makes it a point to check out the health and well-being of people in a village or neighborhood to determine the benevolent powers of the local priest. If what she sees does not gladden her heart, we move on.

Maria's village, for all its poverty, is full of happy, lively people, who seem anxious to do anything they can for Maria and for this stranger who has come to learn what he can from her. The only prohibition, it seems, is photography. I tried to document Maria's mental healing on film, but that attempt went quickly awry when I had to reload and the film leaped out of my hands and unraveled on the *terreio* floor. It was the third roll of film that had been ruined by uncanny means. Rita advised that I give up trying, because the secrets of Voodoo do not wish to reveal themselves to strangers.

What I was trying to capture on film were the physical effects, not the spiritual causes, but I gave up anyway. Besides, cameras are not allowed at *candombles*, and even tape recorders are prone to malfunction.