



PORTFOLIO

Vodou Lives

LES STONE



The most important Vodou sanctuary is in Souvenance. Here, celebrations include dancing, singing, drumming, collective baths, and sacrificing bulls and goats. In this catastrophic period following the earthquake, these practices have only intensified.

SOUVENANCE, Haiti—This tiny village sits nestled in a valley, almost 100 miles north of Port-au-Prince. As one of Vodou’s central sites, it holds an annual festival at Easter, which attracts thousands to the spirit, culture, and profound mysticism of Vodou. When I arrived in Haiti two months after the 7.0-magnitude earthquake, little of the landscape had been reclaimed, but participants seemed more intense than ever.

Vodou arrived in Haiti with the slaves. With its roots among the West African people from what is now Benin and Congo, the practice quickly grew among the oppressed on the island of Hispaniola. For more than five centuries it has thrived, giving cultural and spiritual comfort to generations as they survived wars, revolutions, and natural disasters. Vodou (commonly disparaged as “voodoo” outside of Haiti) has guided its followers through slavery and the transition to life as free men and women. The culture survives through dances, chants, and rituals. Vodou and Christianity have been combined in Haiti in a unique fashion.

But Vodou transcends religion—it is a deeply embedded part of the Haitian psyche, a survival mechanism, and a catalyst of revolutionary politics. It was the motive force behind the first and only successful slave revolt in history, which began in 1791 and culminated in 1804 with freedom for Haiti’s 500,000 slaves. A Vodou high priest, Boukman, sounded the first drums of rebellion.

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Les Stone, an award-winning photojournalist, has chronicled conflict and disaster around the world, including in Haiti, Afghanistan, Iraq, Panama, Cambodia, and Liberia.





Vodou followers take a collective bath in Souvenance during a ceremony honoring African royal ancestral figures.



The same courage that overthrew their French oppressors continues to strengthen the island nation's Vodou-practicing population. Not surprisingly, as a complex amalgam of the temporal and spiritual realm, it experienced a strong revival after the cataclysmic earthquake in January 2010. Its epicenter, near the town of Léogâne, 16 miles west of Haiti's capital, turned much of the core territory of Vodou into rubble.

An estimated 316,000 people lost their lives in the quake and the immediate aftermath, and another million were rendered instantly homeless. Vodou, a system believed to transcend mortality, offered answers to a devastated population. As Haitians

struggled to grapple with the countless, sudden deaths of so many friends and family, many found solace in the Vodou notion that those who died today will return in some form tomorrow.

For the survivors who embrace Vodou, the quake's psychic damage would have been far more destructive without something powerful to hold on to, without the unity woven deeply into the fabric of Vodou. Despite its reputation in American pop culture, Vodou practices such as animal sacrifice are hardly evil. Even the most casual observer can recognize that Vodou carefully integrates sacrifice, ritual dance, and song into a complex cultural and spiritual hybrid.

Following the earthquake, many

Haitians found themselves rediscovering the Vodou they had abandoned in their youth. At the same time, Haiti's Vodou priests stood up for the spiritual rights of the victims. Four days after the quake, when relief workers had already deposited 50,000 bodies into anonymous mass graves, the main Vodou leader told President René Préval, "It is not in our culture to bury people in such a fashion. The conditions in which bodies are being buried is not respecting the dignity of these people."

And it is, after all, dignity that is at the heart of Vodou and those who embrace it. ●

LEFT: Two and a half hours from Souvenance under the best of conditions, this waterfall is a destination for Vodou practitioners to pray for healing.

BELOW: In St. Michel, a woman brandishes a machete amid a Vodou ceremony.





Transfixed during a ceremony, Vodou offers a moment of escape from the horrors of post-earthquake Haiti.



A Vodou priest is being “mounted” by a Loa, or spirit. He is being held so that he will not fall or hurt himself.



At Bord de Mer on Haiti's northwestern coast—scene of a cholera epidemic after the earthquake—a Vodou practitioner takes to the ocean for a purifying bath.

