

Dark arts

How Vodou fuels Haiti's gang culture

AMY WILENTZ

For a politician known for his ability to shock, Donald Trump managed to outdo himself with his baseless claim during last year's presidential debate that Haitian immigrants in Springfield, Ohio, were stealing, butchering and eating household pets. Regardless of this racist lie – new Haitian immigrants to Ohio do not eat people's pets and are in the main perfectly respectable – Haiti itself is a mess and a good place to flee. The country's extreme problems can't be denied, although the US is doing a good job of ignoring them.

Since the devastating earthquake of 2010, criminal gangs have grown larger and more powerful. Last month, Micanor Altes (known also as King Micanor), a gang leader in Cité Soleil, the biggest of Port-au-Prince's many shantytowns, ordered his acolytes to gun down all old or grey-haired residents, mostly people over 60, because he decided they might have been involved in casting spells that, he thought, killed his young son. More than 200 people were massacred.

This was not the first atrocity Micanor allegedly masterminded, though it was his largest. He is a key figure in a Vodou congregation in the shantytown, where he is said to lead ceremonies on the weekend that have frequently devolved into violence.

Vodou has a complicated history in Haiti. It's deeply entwined with the whole national concept. Folklorically, and probably with a basis in fact, the Haitian revolution of 1791 was ignited at a large Vodou gathering of the enslaved. There is a monument to this uprising in the caves and fields in the mountains behind the old plantations of the north where the revolution exploded, killing masters, overseers and entire plantation-owning families as it proceeded.

Among Haitian writers, artists and intellectuals, Vodou is considered a revolutionary religion. Though the masters used to force their enslaved people to be baptised as Christians, the old religion from Africa always persisted for them as a reminder of their origins. African folk tales and proverbs are common in Haiti, and are imbued with Vodou lore and wisdom. But the religion has its dark side in the form of 'black magic'. Vodou can be used for good or evil depending on who's running the show. It is a very powerful belief system, resembling the Greek pantheon, with numerous gods in charge of many fields: love, war, agricul-

ture, the sea, the dead, the forests, etc. Vodou always involves possession of the congregation. Neighbours and friends will come together and suddenly one neighbour takes on the mantle of Ogoun, god of war. They will become his character, a well-known personality who is always the same at every ceremony, with the same tone of voice, the same painfully strong hand clasp, the same wielding of the flat side of a machete. I say 'takes on the mantle', but for the crowd present, that person has actually become the god.

The religion is nothing if not causal. Very little happens out of the blue. An accident is rarely seen as such, and even a fatal illness can have been brought on by a human force. A great-grandmother may be sick for three months but when she finally dies, often there is someone who will assert that an enemy of hers paid a Vodou priest to put a spell on her.

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So when a gangster like Micanor wields his religious credentials and asserts that black magic has been used against him and must be avenged, he will be very powerful, especially if he controls everything else in his followers' lives, as Micanor seems to. And especially if, as most observers believe, Micanor is giving his teenaged male followers drugs to spur them on. The dark truth is that he may even believe that what he is telling them is true.

There could be other reasons for the massacre. There could have been, among the elders who were killed, one or two who were advising their followers to abandon Micanor or to overthrow his rule in the neighbourhood

or who were even plotting to assassinate him. Dictators assume guilt by association: if one old person is plotting against you, and you can't find her (many Vodou spiritual leaders are women), they may all be killed.

One crazed example of this was the black dog massacre of 1963. François Duvalier, Haiti's much-feared ruler, learned that at an unstable moment in his regime, his once close adviser, Clément Barbot, was plotting his demise. Duvalier executed many whom he thought might have been involved in the plot. He also had Barbot's house torched and a black dog emerged howling from the embers, so the story goes. Some people believed that Barbot had shapeshifted into a black dog. So Duvalier had his henchmen shoot every black dog in town.

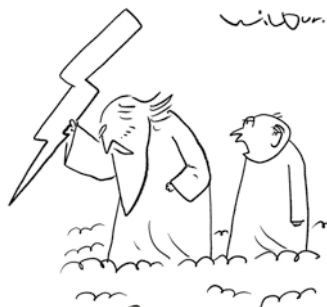
Duvalier, who was an extremely canny leader, probably didn't believe that one of these dogs was Barbot in dog form (in the end, Barbot and his co-conspirators were hunted down and killed), but he did want to send a message to other plotters like Barbot. Even today it's rare to see a black dog among all the tan skeletal street animals.

In another spurt of violence last month, a gang looted and burned down the Bernard Mevs, an 87-bed neurological trauma hospital and the only one of its kind in Haiti. 'It's just too sad,' said Dr Barth Green, a neurosurgeon whose Miami-based group, Project Medishare, helped support the hospital. 'This was a lifeline for all the people of Haiti. It was the only critical care and trauma hospital with newborn and adult ICUs and the only hospital in Haiti that could support neurosurgery. And now it's gone.' Credible reports say the gangsters demanded a ransom to spare the hospital, and when the money was not forthcoming, they burned it down.

'These so-called gang members are just teenagers who have no place to live, no food, no shelter, no income, no jobs, no school, no future,' says Dr Green. 'They're just wandering around and the gangs recruit them and give them drugs and AK-47s.'

While belief in black magic played its part, the most significant factor behind the massacre of the aged was not Vodou, but a situation of extreme instability and the shortage of everything material that underlies a culture and a society.

Amy Wilentz is the author of Farewell, Fred Voodoo: A Letter from Haiti.



'You know you can do this online now?'