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**SPIRITS OF THE NIGHT**

**THE VAUDUN GODS OF HAITI**

**SELDEN RODMAN**

**and**

**CAROLE CLEAVER**

**Foreword by Jay Livernois**



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## CHAPTER SIX

### VAUDUN'S DARKER SIDE: *BOCORS* AND BLACK MAGIC

A French con man with one ear had made his base in Jacmel for some years. When he decided he had squeezed the territory dry, he cut to Paris. But word of his plans to escape leaked out; and among those with debts to collect was a *bocor* (dealer in black magic) who promptly nailed the leg of a plastic doll pierced by a long, bloody needle to the con man's door. The Frenchman laughed good-naturedly, kept the evil *ouanga* (charm) as decor and flew home to Paris. Months later, while painting the ceiling of a restaurant he was redecorating, he fell from the ladder and received multiple fractures of the leg the *bocor* had cited for attention. Before he emerged from the hospital months later, limping with a cane, the news had traveled back to Jacmel by the Haitian *télediol* ("the grapevine"). People smiled, nodded their heads wisely and went about their business.

On the lighter side, the following story was related by Colonel Robert Debs Heinl, who headed the United States Marine military mission to Haiti in the early 1960's until he had had more of Papa Doc than he (or the Kennedy Administration) could take. Late in the 1960's, Heinl and his wife,

who were living in Pacot, a suburb of Port-au-Prince, started writing the most completely documented history of Haiti in any language.<sup>1</sup> When he had finished a very critical chapter on the Duvaliers, Heint had the typescript sealed in an envelope ready to mail to his publisher, Houghton Mifflin in Boston. But just as he was about to step into his car, a strange dog came out of nowhere and bit him in the leg. He dropped his manuscript to deal with the dog. The dog seized the package in its teeth and disappeared, never to be seen again. People said the dog was a *baka* (a demon in an animal's body) and Papa Doc, who was famous for dealing in black magic, had sent it to get rid of the offensive material.

Colonel Heint had a carbon of the stolen manuscript, of course, and he was more careful next time, taking it home with him on the plane to Washington. Months later when it was being proof-read in the publisher's New York City office, the chapter on the Duvaliers again disappeared.

For two instances of effective black magic like these, there are no doubt hundreds of cases that had no consequences. But the failures are not reported. Who cares?

Alfred Métraux devotes an inordinate number of pages<sup>2</sup> to stories about people who profess to have been swindled by unscrupulous *bocors*. None of them are dramatic, and if they prove anything, they prove only that the raconteurs (*élites* for the most part) were eager to convince the "serious" French sociologist that they were above believing in such silly "peasant" superstitions. Tales of *zobops*, monsters conjured up by sorcerers and banded together in "red sects," *loup-garous* (werewolves) used to frighten recalcitrant children or naive journalists like William Seabrook in search of hot copy, owe as much, Métraux admits, to European treatises on black magic as to native imaginations.

<sup>1</sup>Written in *Blood: The Story of the Haitian People 1492-1971*. Robert Debs Heint and Nancy Heint, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co.), 1978.

<sup>2</sup>Forty-three in a book of moderate length.

Magic abounded in seventeenth and eighteenth century France. One of Louis XIV's mistresses, the Marquise de Montespan, is said to have consulted an infamous sorceress, La Voisin, to keep the Sun King's affections. This lady was later arrested for arranging black masses at which live children were sacrificed and naked court ladies served as altars.

Some of Métraux's stories involve *bocors* who play on the widely-held Haitian belief in treasure hoards of gold coin buried on their properties by French planters escaping the 1791 slave insurrection. The longest story is based on a transcript of the trial of a swindling magician which appeared in the newspaper *Le Nouvelliste* November 20, 1944. The victim, a Madame Tulia Durand, had paid thousands of dollars and numberless gems set in gold to a magician who convinced her that a treasure lay buried under her home. The wily *bocor* even showed Mme. Durand a genuine French coin or two. When the credulous lady finally lost patience and went to the police, the swindler was jailed for fraud—but too late for the lady to recover much of the loot.<sup>3</sup>

Our son, Van, during his teenage years chose to wear a silver *ankh*, the ancient Egyptian symbol of life, around his neck on a chain. A neighborhood friend in the southern town of Jacmel, where we then lived, assured him that the local *bocor* could cause this *ankh* to reproduce itself so that instead of one silver *ankh*, Van could have several.

One day Van showed the *ankh* to the *bocor*, who agreed to conduct the appropriate ceremony. Van was to select and buy three eggs in the local market and bring them together with a bottle of rum to our courtyard that evening. The *bocor* arrived as scheduled with several assistants, drew a *vever* on the stone floor, and set upon it several lighted candles and the three eggs. He began to chant and to drink rum and was soon possessed by *Baron Samedi*. The *loa* instructed Van to crush each

<sup>3</sup>Métraux, *op. cit.*, pp. 314-16.

egg between his hands. The first egg broke easily and contained nothing. The second egg refused to break although Van pressed with all his might. "This egg contains your strength," the *bocor* asserted, "you must eat all of it." Inside the third egg was a small *ankh*.

The *bocor* now demanded that the *loa* be rewarded for producing the new *ankh*. He instructed Van to give one of his assistants ten dollars which would be "thrown away" where the *loa* could find it. Van and the assistant went into the courtyard outhouse, and the assistant threw the ten dollar bill into the john. Peering down, Van saw that it had been propelled in such a way that it did not fall into the water but had stuck to the side where it could be easily retrieved.

The next morning Van ate the required egg. He then went to the outhouse to look for the money. It was gone. Encountering the *bocor* in the town square, Van proclaimed loudly that he had taken his ten dollars. Outraged, the *bocor* screamed that the *loa* would surely take vengeance on him.

That night the new *ankh* now on the chain about Van's neck burned an evil-looking spot on his chest. He was overcome by a fever so high he became delirious and nearly threw himself off our third floor balcony. "I deserve to die," he kept exclaiming, "I turned the world upside down." Tests taken at the hospital the next day indicated that Van did not have malaria or any other common disease found in tropical Haiti. Since there was no scientific explanation, they wracked their brains and decided it must be the much rarer *dengué fever*.<sup>4</sup>

In Chapter Two it was mentioned that all priests and priestesses of *vaudun* are familiar with black magic (*magie noire*)—they have to be to counter effectively the spells of unscrupulous *bocors*, themselves sometimes *houngans* who "serve with both hands." But the honest and worthy *houngan* will have nothing to do with practices designed to defraud the

<sup>4</sup>*Dengué fever* is a tropical disease, transmitted by an insect bite, characterized by swelling of the brain and a high fever.

innocent or put evil spells on a client's enemy. Of course if such a reputable *houngan* traps a sorcerer who turns out to be a thief or murderer, by turning his magic against him, the good *houngan's* flock (and the law) will applaud. The difference is in the priest's morality; and of that the *serviteur* must judge.

The *bocor* may work on his own, or in a *houmfor* devoted to the rites of *Péto* where standards are lax. The grand master of sorcery is *Legba*—generally invoked in *Péto* as *Maît-Carrefour*. Other disreputable *loas* invoked are *Criminelle*, a sinister aspect of *Ghédé*; *Erzulie Ze rouge*; *Ti-Jean*; and *Kita-démembre*.

Unlike the *houngans*, whose rites of *vaudun* are public and open to anyone, the *bocor* operates secretly, at the foot of black crosses in cemeteries or at lonely crossroads. Yet his "congregation," so to speak, is nation-wide. In a poor country like Haiti where literacy is confined to the upper and middle-classes, almost everyone has a basic knowledge of how to cast spells—and prepare poisons. Not that many would do any of these things, but to guard against them one must be prepared. And the best way to be prepared may be to know a magician.

Métraux tells the story of a friend of his, an anthropologist, who in her babyhood almost fell victim to a *bocor*. One day the victim's mother heard the child give a sharp cry followed by prolonged screams. The child's nurse could not account for it. Finally, since the screams continued, the mother took the child to her doctor who discovered a pin so deeply imbedded in the child's chest that he had to operate to take it out. The nurse was questioned a second time and now admitted that a *houngan* had told her that he must have an "angel before Christmas." The mother was too relieved to prosecute the nurse, but needless to say fired her.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup>Métraux, *op. cit.*, p. 271.

Maya Deren on the other hand—more personally involved in the cult since she lived with a *houngan* and describes her own possession—believed that the secrecy cloaking *magie noire* attests to its fundamental pessimism. As Haitians become less and less certain that the cosmos is essentially benevolent, they tend to turn away from the *Rada* rites and invoke the *bocor* who scorns the collective well-being in favor of his individualistic promises to "get things done." And since one of the functions of the *houngan* is to protect his people against the malevolent *ouanga* of the magician with protective *gardes* (talismans), he too must perform magic. "This has contributed," she writes, "to the great confusion between *Voudoun*, as a religious practice, and the magical practices, which are actually completely separate and outside the religious system. A man may be strong and powerful because the *loas* have made him so; but it is the man who makes the magic, not *loas*."<sup>6</sup>

There are no "rites" in black magic. "A magician's apprenticeship consists of exchanging his services for secreted, concealed information, whereas the religious neophyte, by virtue of experience and ordeals, matures spiritually to an understanding of things which have been frankly evident in public ritual all along. Magic refers to power, which is amoral in nature; the primary emphasis of religion is moral discipline and development."<sup>7</sup> The *bocor*, Deren concludes, "is involved in a complex and formal series of cabbala-like manipulations, involving 'contacts,' publicity incantations, and even what might be accurately termed the cocktail libation...all pursued in the interests of his own personal aggrandizement and entirely irrespective, in a profound sense, of the public welfare."<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup>Deren, *op. cit.*, p. 77fn.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 200.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 201.

If the credentials of Deren and Métraux be questioned because of their affiliations with the avant-garde in New York and Paris, no such case could ever have been made against the scholarly objectivity of Jean Price-Mars and Melville Herskovits. Price-Mars (1876-1969) was the father of Haitian ethnology and author of the 1928 classic *Ainsi Parla L'Oncle* which established once and for all the African provenance of *vaudun* as a religion and the dominant yet heretofore neglected component of Haitian culture. He was also the first of his countrymen to ridicule (albeit gently) the timorousness of the *élite* viz-a-viz all things African.

Price-Mars was the first to understand black magic, pointing out that magic from Moses<sup>9</sup> on down has been a component of all religions in their early stages. Melville Herskovits, for his part, disposed of the wholly undocumented canards of nineteenth and twentieth century sensationalists once accepted abroad at face value, that Haitians practice human sacrifice, cannibalism, and the wholesale creation of slaves by resuscitating the buried dead (*zombis*).

It was Salomon Reinach almost a century ago who pointed out that humanity, to justify such crimes as slavery and war, always "found an auxiliary in a false science which is the mother of all true science, Magic." And from there, Price-Mars goes on to point out that whereas *vaudun* concerns itself primarily with collective well-being through public rites, black magic reveals "a particularly individualistic character." Though "there are religious communities," he adds, "there are no magical communities."<sup>10</sup> In Dahomey, from which *vaudun* was introduced into St. Domingue by the preponderance of slaves the French colonists imported from that relatively enlightened kingdom in West Africa, sorcerers were hanged, stoned to death and left unburied.

<sup>9</sup>"I have given you blood," Jehovah tells him, "as a means of expiation for your souls at my altar." *Numbers*, XXVIII.

<sup>10</sup>Price-Mars, *op. cit.*, p. 42.

Rémy Bastien, an intelligent Haitian sociologist who has lived in Mexico for the last fifty years, reveres Price-Mars but believes that he tends to see peasant life as more idyllic than it is, ignoring the peasant's dependence on magic as a panacea in the struggle for survival.

Melville Herskovits, before addressing the relation of black magic to *voudun* as no one else has, disposes of the various myths and misconceptions that have given Haiti a "bad press" for more than a century:

More than any other single term, the word "voodoo" is called to mind wherever mention is made of Haiti...Not only has emphasis been placed on its frenzied rites and the cannibalism supposed on occasion to accompany them, but its dark mysteries of magic and "zombies" have been so stressed that it has become customary to think of the Haitians as living in an atmosphere of psychological terror...The system of belief included under the term *vodun* (and the rewards that accrue from practicing its rites in good faith) are good health, good harvests, and the goodwill of fellow-men; the punishment for neglect is corresponding ill fortune.<sup>11</sup>

So where does that leave black magic? And what is its relation to *voudun*? And is the *houngan*, who seems to know so much about exorcising the *bocor's* spells—and even casting a spell or two himself if the occasion calls for it—a hypocrite?

No, answers Herskovits, but the distinctions are perforce subtle. Since the system of magic is empowered and validated by many of the *loas*, as well as being closely affiliated with the cult of the dead, "distinctions in practice are neither sharp nor consistent. Contradictions arise from the fact that the realistic African world view has by no means given way to that separation of the categories of good and evil that governs much of European thinking. A *loa* that helps a man when friendly to him may, if slighted or vexed, set about to do him harm. For the *loa*, like human beings, are creatures of mood

and may take umbrage at some act which had created no displeasure before."<sup>12</sup> Moreover the *houngan* and the *bocor*, Herskovits points out, often employ essentially the same techniques and operate with the same forces, the differences between them being one of degree rather than of kind. "*Houngan*, c'est magasin. Gagne enpil marchandise.—The *houngan* is like a shop. He has a lot of merchandise."<sup>13</sup>

Then what are the differences? "The gods of the *houngan*," Herskovits concludes, "are family gods who come to him through the natural course of inheritance, endowing him with the *connaissance* that gives him his control over the supernatural world, while the *bocor* buys his gods...a purchase dearly bought, bringing its own eventual punishment."<sup>14</sup>

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Overleaf:  
*La Grande Brigitte-La-Croix*  
by André Pierre.  
Private Collection

<sup>11</sup>Herskovits, *op. cit.*, pp. 139, 154.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 222-23.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 225.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*

The following story was recounted to us by Tamara Baussan, a white Russian lady from Baku, who having fallen in love with a Haitian architectural student at the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris, married him, and moved to Haiti where she co-managed the Hotel Ibo Lélé for more than fifty years.

There was a large and beautiful tree in a Port-au-Prince cemetery, where, a *bocor* said, resided *Brigitte-la-Croix*, the wife of *Baron Samedi*. When the wind ruffled the branches, the faithful heard her voice and saw her floating among the foliage. Masses of people began to appear to leave gifts for her. Why? Because *La Grande Brigitte* was known to dispense money, and money is the primary need of every impoverished Haitian. Things began to get out of hand. The people trampled on neighboring graves and jostled each other, picking fights, while the offerings attracted various ravenous animals. Clearly something had to be done. The authorities built a high cement wall about the entire cemetery and attached to it strong metal gates, reinforced with a chain. The people were undaunted. They climbed the wall, slid under the gate, broke the chain. There was only one solution. In the dead of the night, the authorities sneaked into the cemetery and cut down the tree.



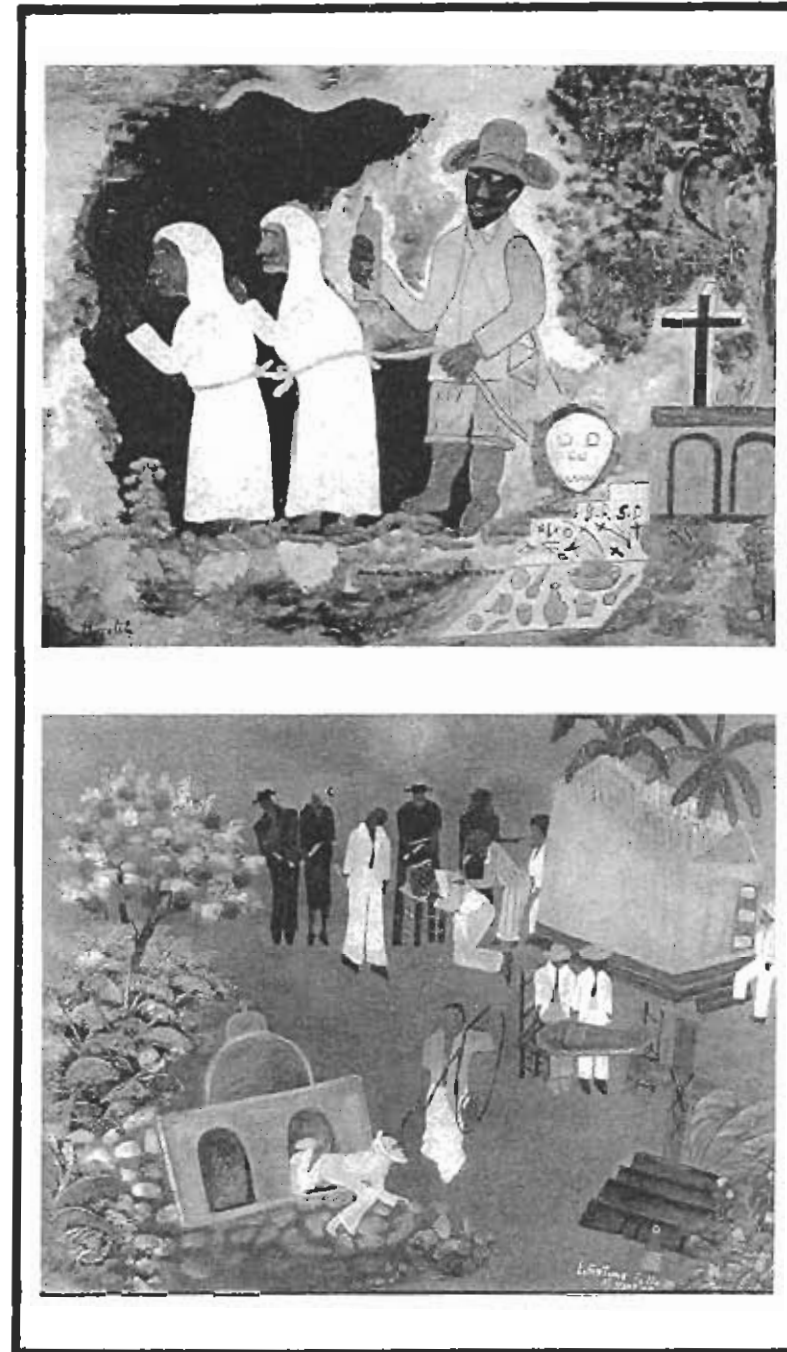
Facing page:

***An Avan, An Avan! (Forward, Forward!)***

by Hector Hyppolite, c. 1947.

*Zombis* being returned to the grave by a *bocor* (sorcerer).

Collection, Musée d'Art Haïtien, Port-au-Prince, Haiti



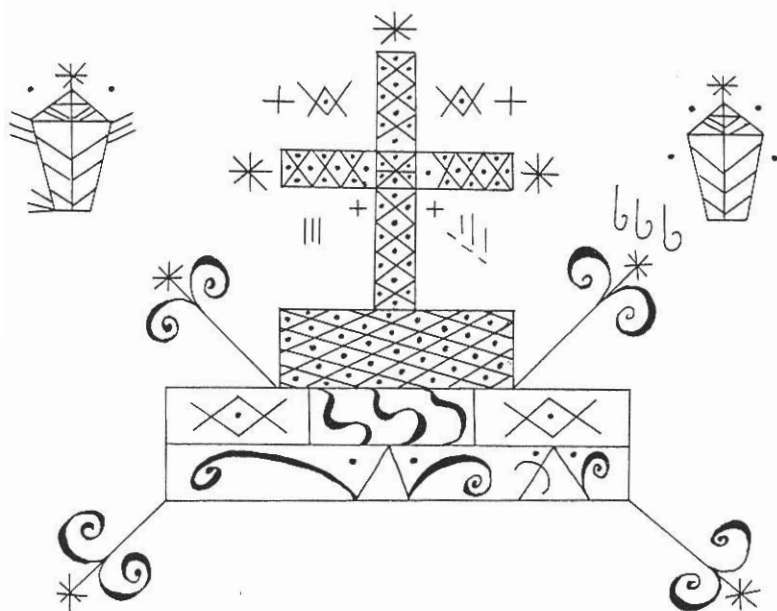
***Creation of a Zombie***

by Lafortune Félix, 1984.

Collection, Charles Boer, Pomfret, Connecticut



## Baron Samedi, God of Death



*Baron Samedi*, is the chief of the *Guédés*, the spirits who inhabit the cemetery and the underworld. He wears a top hat, sunglasses, and smokes a cigar. His color is black, and he prefers as a sacrifice, a black goat. His symbol is the cross. Those possessed by him make obscene gestures and demand food, rum and tobacco. A glutton and a trickster, he is also worshipped as *Baron-La-Croix* and *Baron Cimitière*. His wife, *Brigitte-La-Croix*, or *Grande Brigitte*, is the evil goddess of black magic and ill-gotten gold. Always dressed in purple, she lives in the trees of cemeteries and prefers the sacrifice of black chickens.