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The Place Where Vodun Was Born

At a West African crossroads, devotees of an ancient religion welcome each appearance of the gods

by Suzanne Preston Blier

Photographs by Henning Christoph Das Fotoarchiv

In Benin, West Africa, Vodun permeates life. People come into the world through the auspices of a deity and live out their lives in a world filled with deities who connect the natural and material worlds to the worlds of the living and the dead. They inhabit the trees, the earth, the stones. Ask and you'll be told that not everything has a god, but listen long enough and you'll realize that the gods are everywhere. You couldn't begin to count the Vodun gods. There may be 2,000, there may be 200,000. Gu, the god of iron, serves as the god of cars. But the Gu

A woman commemorates dead twins by carrying wooden figures tucked in her dress. In Vodun, twins are considered to be gods.





In a ceremony seeking protection from malevolence, participants cut themselves with knives to show the power of Vodun.

dwelling in your car would be different from the one dwelling in mine.

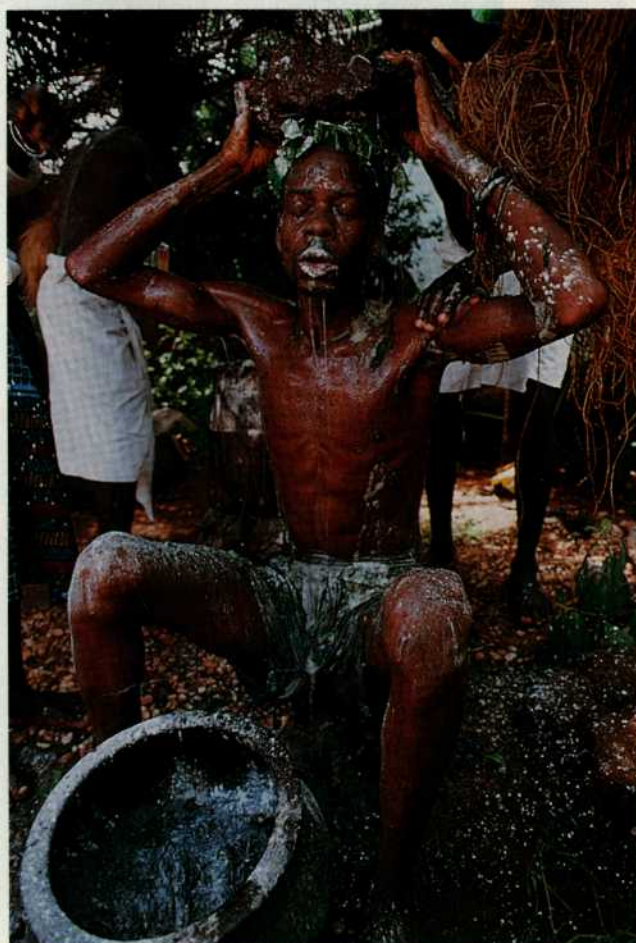
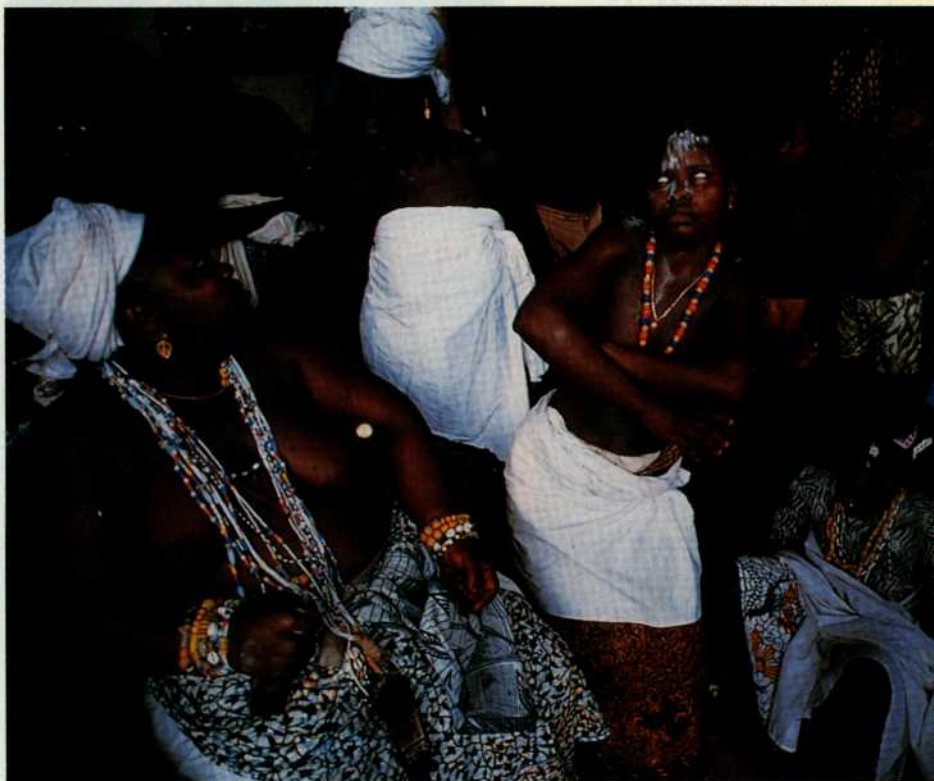
The gods are involved in everyday life: they settle arguments and take offerings to allay illness, relieve curses, or bring luck. Legba, the messenger god, is enshrined in front of every house. The various offerings to the gods must be mediated through this youngest of them. Take a look at a representation of Legba in a diviner's home; the god may be wearing sunglasses, an appropriate accessory because Legba is the trickster god, always inscrutable. He may deliver the message; he may not.

Vodun recognizes the complex layering of phenomena. A characteristic of every shrine—anything from a refined piece of

sculpture to a simple earthen mound—is that the material of its construction becomes a metaphor for the connectedness of things. Wet earth is mixed with plant leaves, with colored beads, with bits of metal, with patches of cloth, with the blood of animals; all the components are pulverized so that they are enmeshed within the whole to become a symbol of the deity's identity and character.

Rooted in ancient beliefs, Vodun (or Voodoo, as it is known in the Americas) was born in what is now southern Benin and nearby Togo, on the Gulf of Guinea. Lying on the coastal route between rain forest and savanna, the region has been a crossroads of the Fon, Ewe, and Gun cul-

The rites of Vodun are emotional experiences designed to provoke responses from the gods.



Observed by a priestess, above, a woman dances in a deep trance. She is a devotee of Mami-Wata, a "mother of the waters" who can summon health and well-being. A man suffering high fever and pain, left, is bathed with herbs to wash away a curse.

tures, among others. Beginning in the fifteenth century, the variegated nature of Vodun was further intensified as a result of the European slave trade, when captives from many West African cultures passed through the region on their way to the slave ships.

This part of West Africa was ruled by successive kingdoms, including Allada and, beginning in about 1700, Dahomey. The Dahomey king Guezo, who reigned from 1818 to 1858, demonstrated the inclusiveness of Dahomey culture when he ordered a shipment of Vodun sculptures from Europe. What he acquired were actually representations of Roman Catholic saints—Saint Roche, Saint Laurent, and

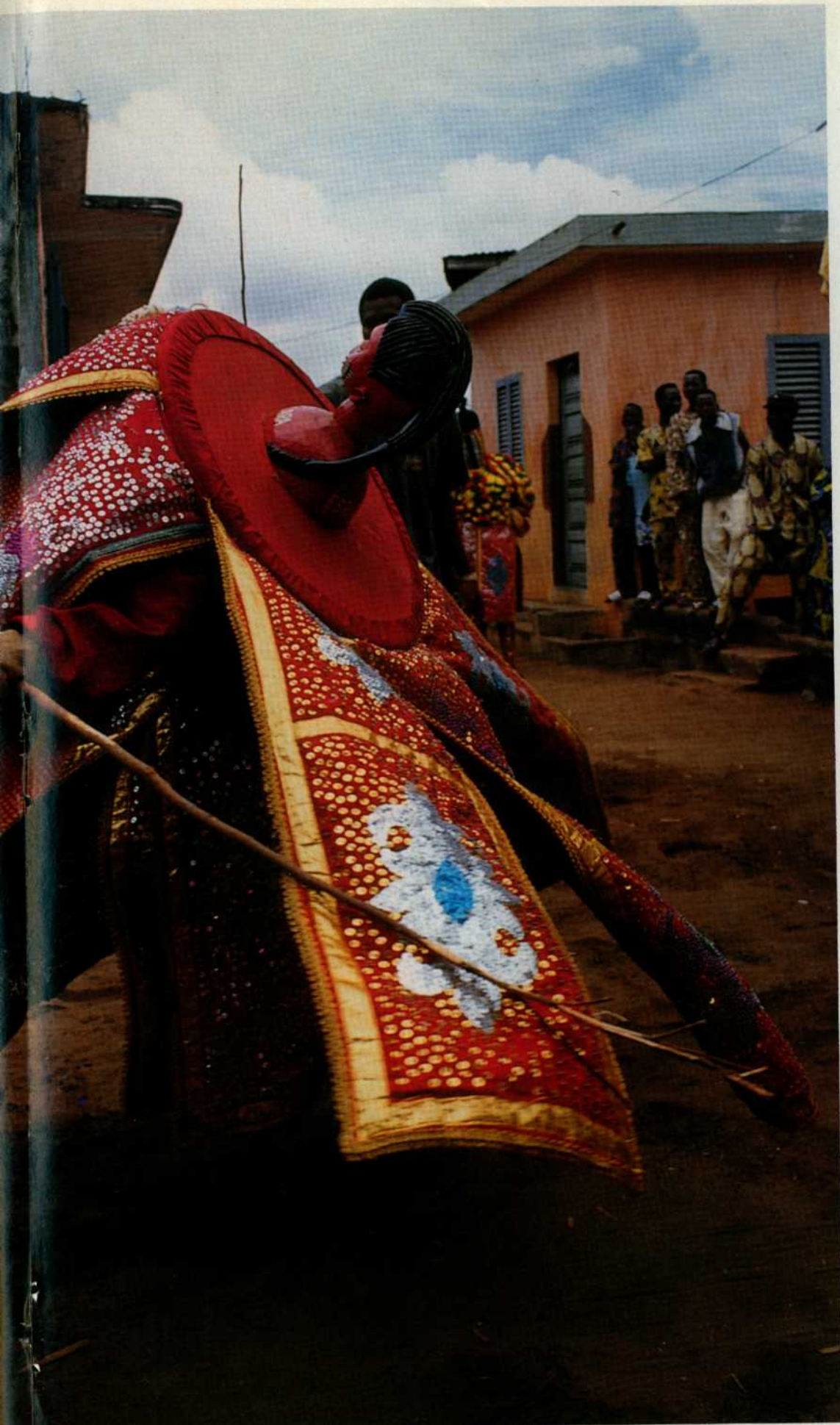
The natural world—herbs, wine, perfumes, decoctions of leaves or bark, pastes of blood and ashes—is brought to bear on the spiritual realm.



others. These ultimately served as models for some of the most visually powerful royal Vodun sculptures. Another example of Vodun's adaptable iconography is the cult of Mami-Wata, familiar to people all along the coast of West Africa. The cult had its origins in a poster portraying a touring circus performer from Hamburg who advertised herself as an Indian snake dancer. The poster appeared all over West Africa, and her image became a prominent and powerful symbol for women, representing a "mother of the waters," who could summon health and well-being.

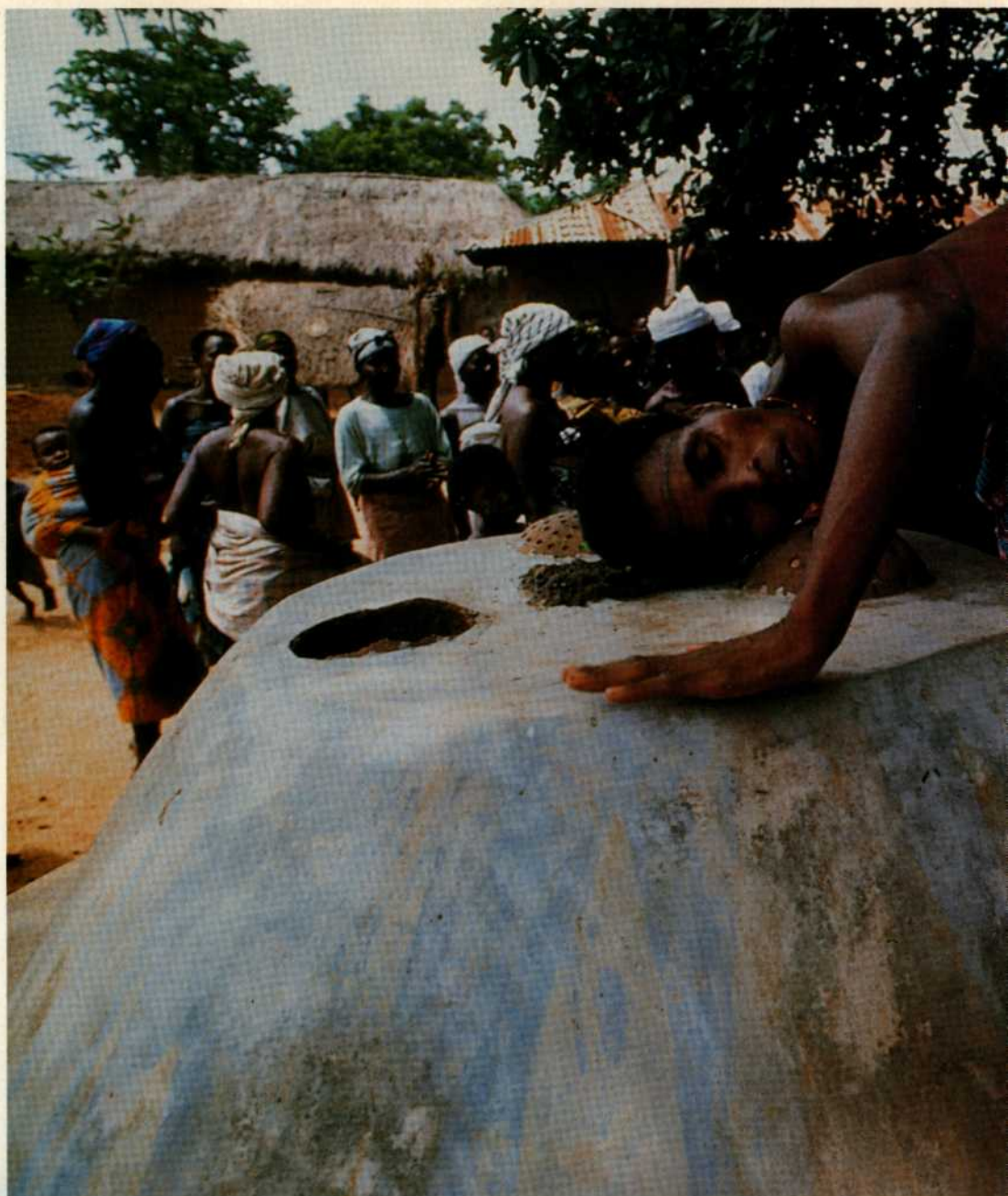
The term *vodun* first appeared in print in 1658 in the *Doctrina Christiana*, a work by the ambassador of the king of Allada to the court of Spain. In this work, *vodun* generally is translated as "god" or "sacred." Although the puzzle over the word's etymology remains unresolved, two diviners I met during my time in Benin both told me that *vo* means "to rest" and *dun*, "to draw water." They explained that "in



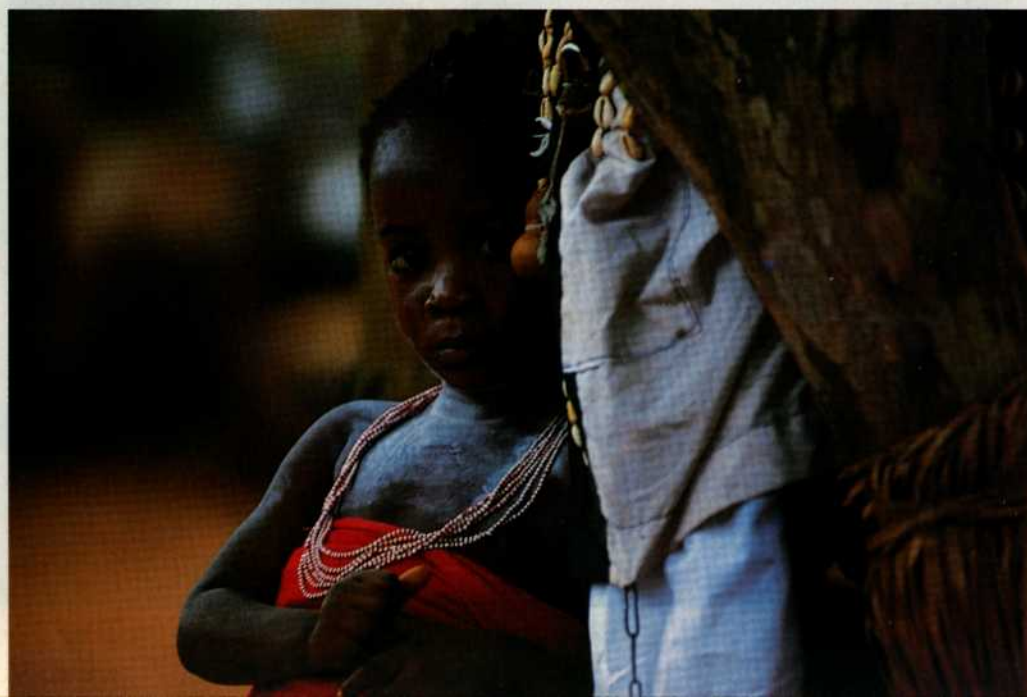


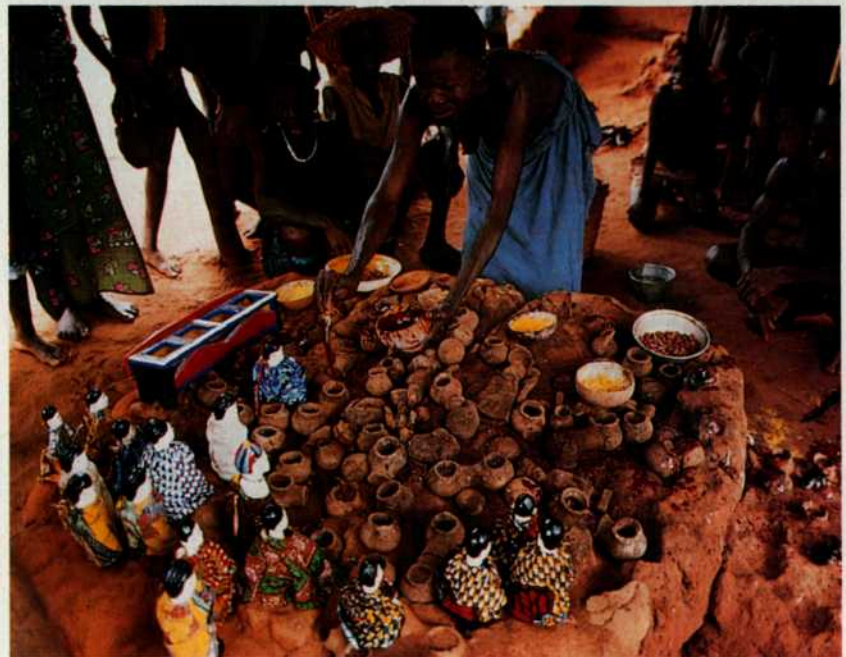
At an annual celebration honoring Yoruba ancestors, left, a dancer in southeastern Benin performs an Egungun dance. Above: Herbs and other ritual materials are set out on a platter. Far left, top: His Majesty Dedjalagni Agoli-Agbo, king of Dahomey, wears a silver sieve shaped like a leopard's nose as protection against breathing dust. Far left, bottom: Followers of Vodun perform a rite to counteract witchcraft.

In a trance, a Mami-Wata devotee, right, climbs on a village shrine to obtain its power. A child, below, watches a ritual from the sidelines. Far right, top: A Vodun priest in his temple pays respect to the gods. Far right, bottom: Chicken blood is offered to various deities at a shrine for Sagbata, god of the earth, whirlwinds, and disease.



The deities dwell everywhere, connecting the material world to the worlds of the living and the dead.





this life, there is a pool that is below, and one draws from it," but "one should rest before drawing." For devotees, the essence of Vodun resides in ideas of calmness and composure. When women go to the spring or river to draw the daily water, they rest for a moment on the bank before filling their containers.

Vodun teaches that one must take time to sit quietly rather than rush through life. One should accept the flow of events. Even at funerals, relatives are chastised if they cry: outward signs of emotion are taken to be evidence of frailty and loss of control. Only during religious possession and war is it considered appropriate to display emotion.

The rites of Vodun I observed were emotional experiences designed to provoke responses from the gods. Just as an amalgam of materials is used to represent the external world in a Vodun sculpture, so in religious practice the natural world of things—herbs, wine, perfumes, decoctions of leaves or bark, pastes of blood and ashes, each thing a dwelling place of gods—is brought to bear upon the spiritual realm. The resultant ritual can be as mundane as dropping a bit of food on the ground before one eats as an offering to the ancestors, or it can be as elaborate as coating the body with pastes designed to turn the worshiper into a living Vodun sculpture. It can be as heated and intense



A Vodun devotee in a trance, above, is washed with palm wine and herbs. Another devotee, right, is assisted in his trance.

**“In this life,
there is a pool
that is below,
and one draws
from it.”**

as dancing to the driving beat of a drum in order to induce a hypnotic trance.

In one ritual I observed outside a temple of Sagbata—the god of the earth, whirlwinds, and disease—a devotee in a trance spun around and around, his acrobatic wheeling as beautiful to watch as it was difficult to perform. Another exuberant dancer balanced two straight-backed chairs precariously on his arms while moving his body into a series of angled positions. More dancers followed, in round-robin fashion, each devotee displaying the special acrobatic talent that the god Sagbata had accorded him. The emotionless faces and fixed, seemingly unseeing eyes of the trance dancers contrasted with their taut-muscled backs and limbs, glistening with sweat.

The dances both honored the gods and were believed to be brought on by them. Because this was a sacred event, the audience of family members, together with other villagers and cult members, watched spellbound, in complete silence, neither clapping nor offering verbal encouragement or praise.

After an hour, when each dancer had appeared several times, the drum beats ceased and the devotees of Sagbata went back inside the temple. With the departure of the dancers, the other villagers returned to their daily activities, knowing that they had once more been blessed by an appearance of the gods. □



