

WEEKEND REVIEW

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WEEKEND EXTRA



TALLULAH/SPECIAL TO THE VANCOUVER SUN

Day of the Dead voodoo celebrations take place in a cemetery in Port au Prince, Haiti. A participant wears the ritual colour purple, carrying a staff and hot chili peppers, with his face whitened with chalk.

DANCING WITH THE UNDEAD

The West's whimsical homage to the netherworld, Halloween, pales next to Haiti's annual voodoo holiday, Jour des Morts, or Day of the Dead, with its deep religious roots and nation of devotees

BY ROBERTA STALEY

It is nearing midnight, and we are driving down narrow streets as potholed and bumpy as the back roads of rural Canada after winter. "This must be it," our driver and Creole interpreter, Sebastian Petion, murmurs as he peers out the window of the four-by-four.

We are deep in the heart of Carrefour, a slum in Port-au-Prince, the capital city of Haiti. Today is Jour des Morts, or Day of the Dead, and we are here to attend a vodoun, or voodoo, possession ceremony.

Jour des Morts is when Ghede, the family of spirits that rule over death and fertility, make a pilgrimage to the corporeal world, lured by voodoo priests and priestesses, music and fetishes.

Our driver pushes the gearshift into park and we disembark in total blackness; electricity is a rare commodity in Haiti. In the distance, a sickly green light, created by a chugging generator, emanates from a low-slung concrete structure

that is normally used for cock-fighting.

Inside, about 150 people cram on one side of a makeshift stage: heavy twine wound around thin, crooked posts that are driven into the uneven dirt floor. The ceiling is festooned with flashy bunting, which hangs alongside crudely drawn cutouts of phaluses.

Thirteen mambos, or priestesses, pace about the tiny corral. They are clad in long purple dresses or skirts, their heads covered in tight black scarves, the favoured colours of Ghede. One mambo carries a five-gallon glass jug of dark rum with pale habanero peppers floating at the bottom. A bulky, round-faced priest, called a houngan, dressed in a black T-shirt decorated with a stylized white skull, intermixes with the women. Some of the mambos light cigarettes, another way to lure Ghede, says Haitian journalist Chenald Augustin, the local *Le Matin* newspaper's voodoo reporter who explained the proceedings in his native Creole as the ceremony progressed.

Jour des Morts is a two-day



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national holiday that begins Nov. 2 in the small Caribbean nation. It is a rum-fuelled homage to the ethereal world, with possession rituals that take

place at midnight at cemeteries all over the country.

Fallaciously portrayed by Hollywood as an evil zombie cult, voodoo became an official reli-

A possession ceremony is underway with female priestesses, or mambos (left), during a Day of the Dead voodoo possession ceremony in Port au Prince, Haiti.

gion in 2003 in Haiti. Catholicism, the official religion in Haiti since colonialism, and voodoo have borrowed from each other, and the crucifixion of Christ is a common image during Jour des Morts.

In the makeshift stage area with the mambos are a handful of musicians, with tarnished trumpets or worn, wooden congas, the animal-skin drumheads lashed down tightly with twine. The music must be highly evocative for Ghede to deign to appear. The drumming begins, pounding and intense. It increases in tempo and volume,

yet never loses its melodic overtone. The drum beats are absorbed by the body, and hair sparkles with beads of sweat, which run down the back and saturate clothes in the stifling heat. The mambos sing, a meditative, rhythmic chanting. When I glance at my watch, I am startled to see that 45 minutes have slipped away.

But the mambos are becoming impatient, and they chastise the drummers, blaming them for Ghede's failure to appear. The mambos splash rum in front of the drums and chant louder while the musicians increase the pounding. Suddenly, one mambo jerks and flies forward like she has been pushed. She flies backwards, then falls forward once more, like a puppet controlled by a sadistic puppeteer. Her face has gone blank, and the invisible assailant throws her into the other mambos. They encircle her and throw her back and forth like a ball, their faces full of glee.

Ghede has arrived at last.

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Banging the Haida Drum

Ian Gill's new book traces the history of the coastal first nation, but the central figure, Guujaaw, says it doesn't accurately reflect history.



COVER



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These Haitian men are said to be in a trance during Day of the Dead voodoo celebrations in Port au Prince cemetery in Haiti.

Voodoo blurs line between life, death

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The mambo spins, nearly falls and is caught by another woman whose expression, too, suddenly glazes over. Ghede has passed into her and she spins and crashes into the others. The madcap dance, called banda, intensifies as Ghede takes over more and more mambos, until all are falling into one another in an ecstasy of possession. The spectators scream with laughter, clap and sing salacious songs that my interpreter primly refuses to translate into English.

The ultimate gesture to Ghede occurs when the mambos, as they feel the spirit leave their bodies, hoist the jug of rum and pour it over their heads. They catch several of the habanero peppers as they fall out of the jug, and shove them up their skirts. It is this heat, explains Augustin, which Ghede craves, and it is the mambos' final gift of surrender in this stylized enactment of sexual ecstasy.

I inquire, incredulous, why the mambos aren't in agony from the habaneros. These chili peppers contain capsaicin, the main ingredient in pepper spray. The possession, Augustin says, leaves the mambos impervious to pain. Indeed, none of the mambos show signs of discomfort, just sated expressions on their sweat-streaked faces.

A polytheistic religion, voodoo was brought to Haiti in the 18th century by West African slaves who enriched France's economy by toiling in the sugar cane, tobacco and coffee fields. Jour des Morts is not only an opportunity for Haitians to laugh, sing and dance, but allows them to engage directly with Ghede speaking through a hounsis, the Creole word for someone possessed.

Ghede is believed to have the power to tell your future and lift voodoo curses. However, the predictions of these capricious tricksters cannot be trusted. The most prominent Ghede is Baron Samedi, a salacious rogue, smoker and rum drinker. Baron Samedi, who has the special role of escorting souls from the grave to the underworld, has influence over life and death, sickness and health. The presence of Ghede reminds Haitians how tentative life is, yet reaffirms the life force.

Haiti's maternal, infant and child mortality rates are the highest in the Western Hemisphere, according to UNICEF, and the country is gripped by poverty and violence. As I peer at the fetishes — the rum, the cigarettes, the purple and black garb and the hanging phalluses — it becomes clear that this celebration of death helps control the fear of death; it is a way to create order out of disorder.



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Revellers celebrate Jour des Morts, or Day of the Dead, in Port au Prince, Haiti. Below, a brown mottled skull, minus its lower jaw, stares blankly out at the revelry from its lofty lookout atop a cemetery mausoleum.

Possessions are not just midnight affairs. At the four-hectare National Cemetery in Port-au-Prince's Petionville district, Jour des Morts starts shortly after sunrise and continues through the day. Women and men stream into the cemetery, which is laid out like a small, overpopulated city, with narrow paved walkways dividing family mausoleums that maintain a genteel dignity despite advanced states of disrepair and disintegration.

It becomes obvious that most people are here simply to enjoy the carnival atmosphere. For the men, it is an excuse to drink too much rum and make lewd comments to women. To honour Ghede, people have whitened their faces with chalk, imitating the pale mask of death. Many are in purple, while others have stuffed their nostrils with cotton, as is the custom when preparing a corpse for burial. A brown mottled skull, minus its lower jaw,

stares blankly out onto the revelry from its lofty look out on top of a mausoleum, and I can't help thinking that it, too, is enjoying the celebrations.

Daylight doesn't diminish the physical drama of being possessed by Ghede. Two young men are in the throes of possession, heads jerking back and forth like fighting cocks, circling, then crashing into one another, impervious to injury. We push through the crowd and another possessed man, limbs jerking, eyes blank in his face, comes flying towards me. I can't get out of his way, and steel myself for a crash. To my relief, he ducks at the last second, avoiding impact. The spectators seated high on surrounding mausoleums shake with laughter at the mixed look of horror and relief on my face.

The line between life and death is smudged within voodoo, and it is here at the National Cemetery that I can question people about zombies, a Haitian



phenomenon that renowned anthropologist Wade Davis wrote about in his seminal book on voodoo, *The Serpent And The Rainbow*. Voodoo is not only a religion but a way of life. Voodoo priests and priestesses have a vast pharmacological store of knowledge passed down from their West

Jour des Morts, despite its grim subject — death — is a time to celebrate, with joy and laughter, the act of being alive, as well as being a ceremony that helps make sense of these deep, enduring questions.

African ancestors on the healing and poisonous properties of plants and herbs. Davis concluded that zombies — people in a trance-like state that inspired the term "living dead" — could be explained by tetrodotoxin poisoning, a deadly nerve toxin derived from the puffer fish.

But, to some Haitians, zombies are a reality that cannot be explained away by scientific reasoning. Elmond Chery is a security guard at the National Cemetery, and I speak to him in the cemetery's main office. Chery is convinced that he has seen zombies during his past two years as a guard, one or two every few weeks, he says. They "terrify" him, he admits through my interpreter. It is important, Chery says, that they don't see you, because "they were people who had very bad hearts, so the family has turned them into zombies." However, he is unable to say what might happen to someone who encounters a zombie.

Any religion, be it monotheistic like Christianity or polytheistic like voodoo, has inexplicable elements of magic and superstition that, by the "gift of faith," become real to followers. What is common among these religions is that they exist to confront humankind's eternal questions: "What happens after death, where did we come from, and why are we here?"

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