

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-

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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Medicine needs to follow the anti-vaccination lobby's lead and tell heart-wrenching stories.



BOOKS | C6

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.



