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The Truth About

Voodoo

WHEN darkness rapidly settles over Haiti and supplants the orange and purple of the sunset, the throbbing of drums in the country back of Port-au-Prince signifies only one thing to the newly arrived visitor—"Voodoo!" This is a natural supposition, since drums are an important and integral part of every real voodoo ceremony. And if the visitor has a lively imagination—particularly if he has read some of the recent studies about Haiti and "voodoo" by imaginative writers—there are no bounds to his fancy.

If the visitor happens to be driven past a small village or group of native huts (*caillies*) on a Satur-

The "ceremonies" that visitors to Haiti read about in sensational stories and are taken to see are very different from the serious rites to which the average traveler is never admitted

By FRANK H. LOUGHRAN*
Chief, Bureau of the author and, seven months

day or Sunday night or on the eve of a holiday, or if his hotel is near a village, he may also hear a plaintive chorus of high-pitched female voices. This is all so novel and

Two and a half years of work in Haiti as a medical doctor directing a program to rid the island of yaws have given Dr. Loughran entrée to remote sections not usually visited by outsiders.

He wishes to express his gratitude to

...entirely-unreal that he begins to picture the origin of these sounds in the chimera of a weird, fire-flamed ceremony, with "frenzied and savage dancing and singing as

Dr. François Duvalier and M. Lorrimer Dels for their notes on the *lèden* ceremonies and for some of the historical background. Their help was generously given in connection with the native terminology, the ceremonial objects, and the

violent as the flames that light up the participants in the rite.

He feels he is lucky when he is invited to one of these "voodoo ceremonies" by an obliging taxi

...temple. It was through their assistance that it was possible to take the unprecedented series of unposed photographs of a Rada ceremony published for the first time here in NATURAL HISTORY Magazine.

Ed.

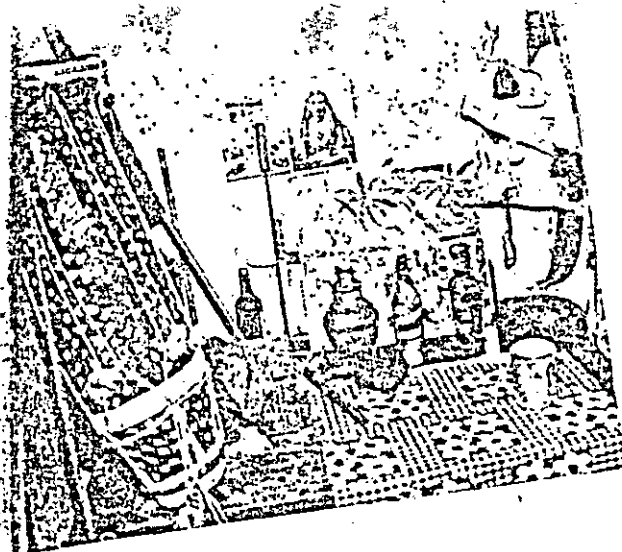
driver. During the ride, his chauffeur will brief him about the occult rites and sacrifices he is shortly to witness.

When he arrives at the "ceremony," he is usually told that he came too late to see the sacrifice of the animals, which he may be told included a bull, goat, or pig. If only he would remain in Haiti for a while longer, he might witness such a ceremony.

Swallowing his initial disappointment, he enters a large hut or enclosure provided with a thatched roof and a dirt floor. He is impressed by the reverberations of the drums, the clanging of iron, the mooing of the bamboo *vache*, the clatter of the *chacha* rattles, and the chanting of Creole songs, interrupted periodically by the master of ceremonies blowing a policeman's whistle and ringing a small bell. He finds himself in a milling group of strangers who apparently accept him and is fascinated by the movements of some of the younger participants, especially the women. They are shuffling about the enclosure in a seemingly aimless manner with vacuous stares on their perspiring faces. "This," he says to himself, "is it!"

If he is not completely convinced and asks the taxi driver whether this is really voodoo, his escort usually prefers to move away to consult with some of the bystanders. Presently he returns with the whispered and almost secret information that this is voodoo. Sometimes a group of visitors, bent upon seeing a voodoo ceremony, are permitted to witness the entire "ritual," including the tracing of the cabalistic symbols on the ground. Of course, this is the result of a prearrangement between the taxi driver and the "priestess," commonly referred to in stories as the "mamaloi."

After watching the dances and listening to the singing for an hour or so and becoming wearied by their apparent similarity, the visitor may become quite sophisticated about the entire subject and



▲ THE ALTAR of Erzalieu, showing the intermixture of pagan and Christian beliefs. The symbols on the wall are lithographs of the Virgin Mary. Two bottles wrapped with ribbon contain holy water. The small bottle in front contains perfume for a voodoo deity. Note the vigil light in the center of the altar and the ceremonial drums



▲ ALTAR of the God of War, Agouan Badagri. The sacred articles include flags of the deity, a machete, and other articles. The earthenware basin is to collect the blood of sacrificed animals

dismiss it as something inane. On the other hand, his imagination may have been stimulated by stories about "voodoo" in Haiti or by the taxi driver's briefing, which may have included a guarded remark about recently reported sacrifices of children. He may then believe that he has been witnessing the real Haitian voodoo. When he returns from Haiti and tells of his experience, he may try to surpass even the most imaginative story writers.

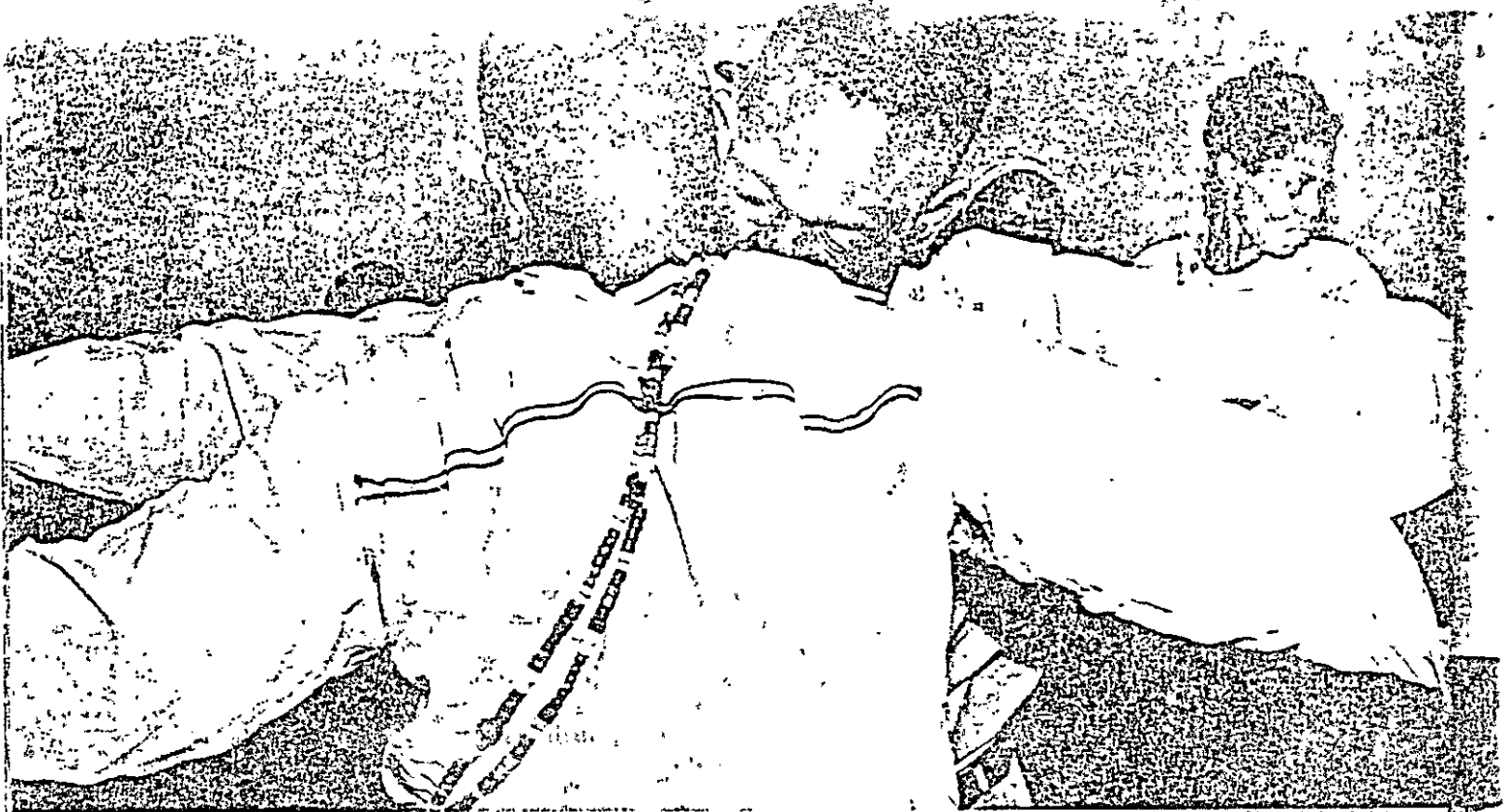
As a matter of fact, the "booming drums" and the dancing and singing in these villages are nothing more than the Saturday or Sunday night folk dances, known as *bamboches*. They may be compared with our square dances and certain European folk dances. The *bamboche* is the usual week-end relaxation of the Haitian peasant and provides him with the opportunity to get together with his neighbors and relatives at what is merely a social gathering. The taxi driver who has taken the visitors to the "voodoo ceremony," as well as the "mamaloi" who conducted it, usually profit from the naiveté of the visitors.

It can be definitely stated that visitors in Haiti do not witness voodoo ceremonies either by chance

▲ ALTAR of the Protector of the Cemetery, Baron La Croix. The offerings include rum, soft drinks, bread, and coins

▼ THE HIGH PRIEST tracing the mystical signs in cornmeal with the help of a male assistant. The design shows to which deity the service is dedicated, in this case to the voodoo equivalent of St. Patrick, whose snakes it depicts. Partly out of sight in foreground is the ship of the God of the Sea





▲ HERE THE PRIEST (back to camera) and his assistant are beginning the dance of the Rada rite to summon the spirits to the ceremony.

▼ THE PRIEST is holding in his right hand the beaded rattle and the bell, and his assistant is about to become possessed by the deity.

or intention and that the *lambouches* and the supposed "voodoo" ceremonies are never held in or near the real voodoo temple, or *houmfort*.

The term "voodoo," or more correctly, *vodou*, is of African origin and was used by the natives of Dahomey to indicate any deity. Some of the more imaginative writers have attempted to derive the word *vodou* from *veau d'or*, or "golden calf." They trace its origin to the golden calf fashioned by Moses' brother Aaron in the likeness of the Egyptian Apis and worshipped by sacrifices, wild dancing, and shouting. It is extremely doubtful, however, that the Dahomeans were aware of the *veau d'or*.

Vodou is not concerned with the practice of black magic, sorcery, or witchcraft, or with any of the devil worshiping rites frequently ascribed to it. The *zombis*, the living dead or soulless automatons, are definite figments of superstitious peasants and story writers. There are no human sacrifices in the rites of the



vodou ceremonies, and it is unfortunate that these sensational features have been made notorious by the writers of fiction.

What, therefore, is *vodou*? *Vodou* is a religion that is practiced

and believed in by the majority of Haitian peasants and is reflected in the many intimate aspects of their daily life. *Vodou* can be traced to the tribal cults of Africa, through the eighteenth century slaves who

contributed to today's Haitian peasant population. According to the concepts of the Haitian peasant, *vodou* does not supplant his Christian religion, which is usually Roman Catholic. Rather, it supplements it, since it possesses the original common factor in Haitian peasant tradition. *Vodou* is the familiar daily religion of many of these people, whereas the Christian religion is the one to be practiced specially on Sundays, at baptisms, marriages, and deaths, when there is a church and a priest.

The *vodou* religion provides an invisible bond between individuals. It serves as well as a linkage be-

tween the Haitian peasant of today and his African forebears. The ceremonies were at first essentially religious and were practiced according to tribal regulations by the slaves, imported from Africa, with considerable influence from the rites of the Dahomeans. The cult was able to supply the stimulus for coalition of a heterogeneous people from many African nations, including the Dahomeans, Aradas, Nagos, Congos, Senegalese, Ibos, Mandingues, Canas, Fans, and Caplaous, and it gave strength to their effort to throw off the oppression of slavery. It was first used in Haiti as a manifestation of this bond on

August 14, 1791, when in a *vodou* ceremony at Bois Caiman, the high priest Boukman organized the revolt of the slaves against their French masters. Subsequently, because of the initial success of this revolt, *vodou* became synonymous with the desire of all Haitians to become and remain free.

Vodou has continued essentially as a primitive African cult, worshipping inanimate as well as animate things, along with certain deities and the spirits of deceased persons and of powerful ancestors, to whom are allotted positions in the pantheon according to their accepted supernatural powers. *Vodou*



▲ HERE THE PRIEST dances with the priestess and transfers the beaded rattle to her



▲ THE *vodou* PRIESTESS, with the beaded rattle in her hand, twirls a female worshiper to bring about possession by a spirit. The cornmeal on her lips is from kissing the mystical design on the floor. On the wall, are seen pictures of the *vodou* counterparts of St. Anthony and St. James the Greater

◀ THE SACRED ORCHESTRA. At left is the *hountou* drum, in the center the *boulou* drum, and at right the *assotou* drum. The man holding the rattle is the master of ceremonies



▲ HERE THE FEMALE assistant is bearing the flag of the deity and paying homage to the *vodou* priest, who is possessed by the *vodou* equivalent of St. Patrick. Other participants and worshipers chant songs



SCENES in the *Salute to the Flag*, with the ritual of the *sabre*. Female assistants are bearing flags, and the worshipers are chanting songs of the deity



has also assimilated many features of the Roman Catholic religion, which was prescribed for the slaves by their French masters and is today the national religion. There is the recognition of God as the Supreme Being, the Creator of man and of the world. In the opening ceremonies, the prayers are Catholic and are frequently accompanied by the sign of the cross. Although there are *vodou* deities, or *loas*, that have originated from Africa (Guinea) or have been created in Haiti, many of these have their Christian counterparts. Some are: Legba and St. Anthony; Erzulie and the Virgin Mary; Damballa and St. Patrick or St. Peter; and Ogoun Feraille or Ogoun (Hogoun) Badagri, the god of war, and St. James the Greater.

There are two main types of rites, Rada and Petro, which are never mixed in a single service. The manner in which they may have evolved separately is suggested by the distribution of the deities. The Rada rites usually honor the African deities, which are honored also in certain localities in the Congo. The Petro rites usually honor the deities of Haitian or local creation. When Rada or African deities are included in the Petro pantheon, as they admittedly are, they may change remarkably in character. For example, Erzulie is portrayed in the Rada pantheon as a gentle, timid, and at times a sorrowful woman, as shown in color lithographs of the *Mater Dolorosa*. When she is in the Petro pantheon and is known as Erzulie Gé-rougé (Red Eye), she becomes boisterous, rough, and at times unmanageable. The Petro rite is believed to have been originated in Petit-Goâve, Haiti, by a famous and powerful *houngan*, Don Pedro.

The *vodou* worship of the deities, or *loas*, calls for temples containing altars, on which are placed the

◀ THE HIGH PRIEST NOW salutes the arrival of the deity with the beaded rattle and the bell

symbols and offerings to the *loas*. Unfortunately, there is no written record of the ceremonies. Because of this lack of orthodoxy, the rites have changed through the generations and differ considerably in the various sections of Haiti. There are broad similarities, however, that will make it possible to describe the worship in a general way and to illustrate the rituals of what is called the Rada rite in the accompanying photographs, made during an Easter service.

After reading some of the lurid and fanciful stories of Haitian voodoo, with their demon-worshipping rites and mad orgies, I went to my first ceremony with no small measure of apprehension. I was, at the same time, excited by the anticipation of seeing the weird rites of this supposedly savage cult. My fears were quelled when I saw the people who were present, in the *vodou* temple and who were shortly to participate in the ceremony. I recognized several whom I had previously seen engaged in their everyday work, and they appeared to be no different at this time. As an invited guest, I was graciously received by my hosts, who guided me about the temple and eagerly exhibited the altars, the offerings, and the implements for the ceremonies. I was disillusioned when the wild orgiastic rites so vividly pictured in tales of voodoo did not take place and when I discovered that the services were essentially religious and were not, as some writers have misrepresented them, the occasion for diabolism or for mass eroticism.

Although bewildered by what I had previously read about voodoo rites, the interpretation of the songs, dances, and rituals given to me by my Haitian mentors became the key to an understanding of the ceremonies. The service was conducted ostensibly with solemnity and in planned sequence. The worshipers, whose faces were sober and reverential, were well versed in their roles and executed them carefully. I was deeply impressed

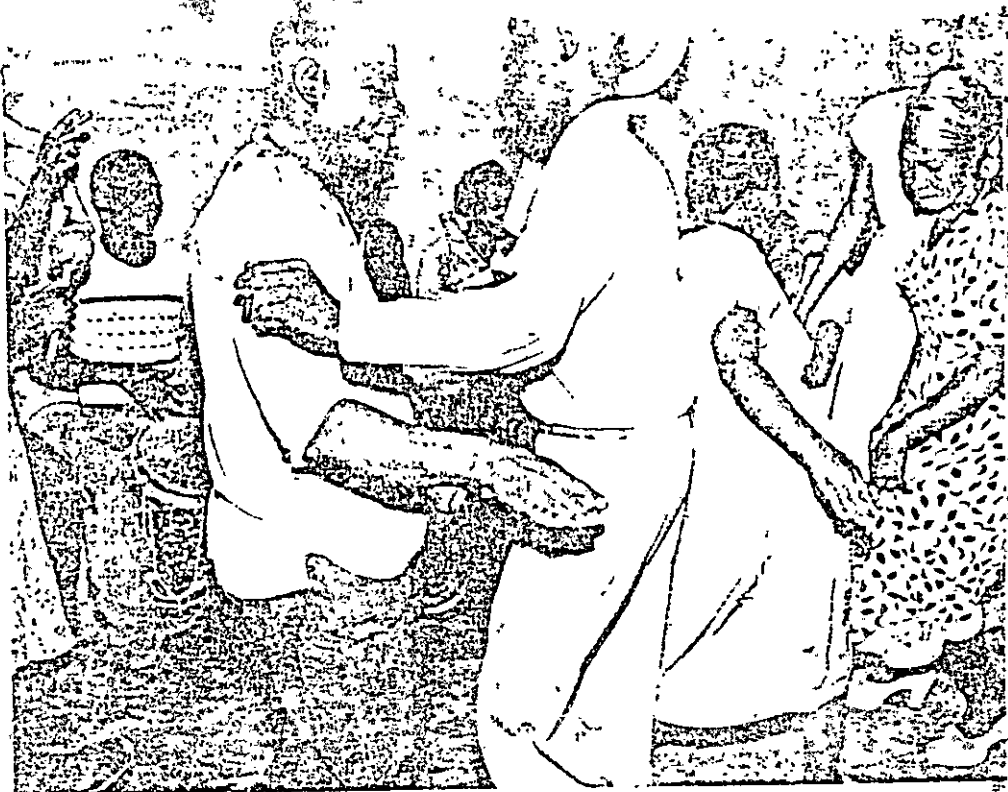
➤ THE PRIEST (left), possessed by the counterpart of St. Patrick, dances with an assistant holding a bottle of holy water

by the evident sincerity of those who were participating in the rites and by the patently bona-fide emotional and physical responses manifested by those who became possessed by the *loas*. The observer at a *vodou* ceremony would have to be entirely unresponsive and unimpressible not to be a little affected by the dynamic rhythms of the sacred drums, by the African and Haitian songs chanted by the sacred chorus, by the symbolic dances performed by the worshippers, and by the rituals themselves.

The *vodou* temple, a sand and cement hut with a thatched or corrugated iron roof, is known as the *hounfort*. This temple consists of an antechamber, or peristyle, at the center of which is a wood pole (*poteau legba*) and the *hounfort* proper, in which are found cement altars (*pes*), dedicated to the *loas*. The altars are usually separated by cloth curtains. On the walls of the *hounfort* or on the altar itself are seen the flags of the *loas*, as well as the national colors. Various sacred articles are placed on the altar, while the sacrificial animals are put in front of it.

The sacred articles on the altar include the ceremonial drums, the machete or saber, the flags of the *loas*, a cross or crucifix, a vigil light, the beaded rattle (*açon*), the bell (*clochette*), an earthenware jug (*govi*), an egg, candles, and a bottle of *loa* perfume. Most of these are used in the rituals of the ceremony.

Representations and emblems of the *loas* are usually painted on the walls of the *hounfort*, or above the altar, and symbolic objects are placed on the altar. Legba is pictured as an old man with tattered clothing. Ogoun Feraille or Badagri is a general in military uniform, occasionally on horseback. Erzulie is identified as the Virgin Mary in



▼ HERE THE PRIEST dances over the symbol of the deity. The Master of Ceremonies (right) is possessed by a deity and is unable to direct the ceremonies at this point. His rattle is held by a worshiper at right





▲ THE PRIEST sprinkling perfume in the direction of the four cardinal points. The falling drops can be seen in mid-air. The female assistant, serving as *Reine Drapeaux* (Flag Queen), holds the flag over his head.



▲ THE PRIESTESS and priest, followed by the Flag Queen, saluting the sacred orchestra. Note the positions of the priest's hands

one of her many representations as depicted in colored lithographs. Damballa (Oueddo) is represented by a drawing of a serpent. Aida Oueddo, his wife, is a rainbow. Agoue Arroyo, the god of the sea, is symbolized by a ship. Baron LaCroix (or Baron Samedi) who is the protector of the cemetery, takes the form of a cross protruding from a "grave" and inscribed with skull and crossbones and his name. The several *Guédés*, including *Guédé Nibo*, are represented by a cross on which is lying a black hat, or by a peasant's straw hat and the mountain peasant's shoulder bag (*macoute*). The *Maitresses d'Eau* are thought of as beautiful mulatto women with long hair who bathe nude at stream sources, and speak French.

The sacrificial animals are usually cocks, although a male pig or goat, and at times a bull, may be

used in certain rites. The meat of the sacrificed animals is cooked and eaten by the worshipers after a small portion is offered to and "accepted" by the *loas*. The offerings are also placed on the *pe* and include the things that the *loa* likes, such as bottles of rum, soft drinks, bread, and cooked plantains and yams.

Each of the *loas* has a special color, and these colors are used in the rituals of the ceremony, depending upon the *loa* being honored. In various sections of Haiti, the *loas* have different colors, and the rituals may also vary. Red is preferred by Ogoun (Feraille or Badagri) for his flags and sacrificial animals. Damballa's color is either green or white for the flags and white for the animals. The *Guédés* preference is for black; and Erzulie, Agoue Arroyo, and the *Maitresses* fancy white for their ceremonies.



When robes are worn by the officiator, particularly the *mambo*, they are of the color prescribed by the *loa*.

The *houngan* is the high priest in the sacerdotal hierarchy of a district or community, except in some sections where this position is occupied by a priestess known as the *mambo*. If the *houngan* officiates at Rada as well as Petro rites, he is said to serve with both hands. If he acts as a family adviser as well

as a *vodou* priest, he is sometimes referred to as *Papa Lpa*. He is usually aided in the ceremonies by a male assistant (*hounguenicon*) and female assistants (*hounsis*). The *hounguenicon* leads the chorus in songs to the arriving *loas* and may serve as a drummer (*hountor*). Finally, there is the *LaPlace*, who acts as master of ceremonies.

The *vodou* ceremony usually consists of two parts. (1) The service is private and can only be attended by the family, the high priest, the priestess, the assistants, and a few specially invited guests. (2) The dance is not private and is attended by friends and neighbors. Since the service is completely religious, it is conducted by the high priest or priestess as a series of rituals, called *Service Loas*. Some of these are intended to honor the deities or *loas* to whom the family is grateful, others to propitiate *loas* who, they believe, are harassing them. Still another purpose is to renounce the worship to certain *loas*, good or bad, and to request, after a suitable sacrifice, that they depart.

Following the death of a person or on the anniversary of his death, a memorial dinner is held—a so-called *Manger les Morts* or *Mañger les Ames*. There are animal sacrifices in connection with this, and rituals which include last prayers (*dernieres prières*), removal of the soul from under the water (*ouété mort en bas d'eau*), and the release of the imprisoned soul (*casse canari* or *loa nan canari*). An extremely restricted service is seen in the rituals for the transfer of the *loa* from a recently deceased head of the family to another member of the family designated by the *loa*. This transfer carries with it the authority and the *connaissance*, or know-how, for invoking the *loa*.

The *Manger Marassa*, dinner in honor of the twins, is in most sections of the country a less important ceremony than any of the above-mentioned. These services are intended to honor twin deities, usually represented by male and female figurines.

Although families may request a service for any of the aforesaid purposes, other ceremonies regularly correspond to the holidays of the Catholic Church (particularly Christmas, Easter, and All Saints ceremonies) and to the harvests. Any of these ceremonies may be dedicated to either Rada or Petro deities. When a *loa* of the other rite appears in the possession of a worshiper, the *loa* is asked to leave. If this request is not heeded, the possessed is led away from the service to emerge from his unwelcome possession or is sent home.

Before starting the actual service, there is a preliminary recitation of prayers, usually Catholic, and the chanting of hymns, accompanied by waving of flags. This initial ritual is called the *action de grâce*, and is followed by an invocation to the most revered of the deities, Legba: "*Papa Legba, ouvri bariè pou' nou*." The high priest then traces the cabalistic *vèvè*, indicat-

a o u t w a s



THE WORSHIPER passing a series of mental, emotional and physical disturbances occasioned by Erzuli, who is associated with the Virgin Mary



➤ THE PRIEST, having received the earthenware jug of water from the Flag Queen, drinks from it in the way that the deity is believed to do





▲ THE PRIEST dancing with a male worshiper to bring about possession by the spirit. In this photograph, the female assistant has apparently emerged from possession.



ing by symbols to which deities the service is being dedicated. The *Salute to the Flag* follows, and it is one of the most important rituals. It actually is a welcome to the arriving *loa* and is conducted with the machete and flags of the *loa*. On occasion, it may be used to greet an extremely powerful priest or priestess.

During the service, the sacred orchestra sets up the rhythm for the songs of the *loas*. It is usually made up of three drums, the largest of which is called the *manman*, or *assotor*; the second, the *houmtor*; and the smallest, the *boula*. In addition, there is the iron *ogan*, an



▲ AS THE SACRED DRUMS beat out their ceaseless cadence, the dance grows more intense

◀ THE SCARF that was on the priest's arm in the previous photograph has now been transferred to that of the male worshiper, and he is possessed of the spirit

iron implement struck by another piece to mark the rhythm, and the *tia-tia* or *maraca* nonbeaded rattle. The chanting of the songs, which are usually either Rada or Petro, is accompanied by dances to the *loas*. The drums used in the service are either Rada or Petro depending on the rite. The arrival of each *loa* is indicated by the behavior of the worshipers, who appear to become possessed. Then the song of the particular *loa* is chanted three times.

Possession by the *loa* is the culmination of the ceremony, and it is to this objective that the rituals are directed. When certain worshipers seem to be possessed or "ridden," it is proof that the deities or *loas* have deigned to come to the ceremony by possessing or "riding" certain worshipers. Although many theories have been offered to explain the nature of these possessions, most of them are too complicated or vague to repeat here. From my own personal observations, it would seem that the worshiper must be in a condition of mental and emotional receptiveness or susceptibility to the occurrence of possession, and that as a consequence of mental, emotional, and physical transformations he gives the appearance of having allowed the spirit of the *loa* to supplant his own and to have substituted submission for self-restraint. Denis and Duvalier depict in Creole words the pattern of this possession: *Loa monté li* (The *loa* rides him); *loa dansé lan tête-li* (the *loa* is dancing in his head); *maitre tête-li monté li* (the master of his head is riding him).

The *vodou* service is an exceptionally serious ceremony, whereas the dance that follows the service becomes more festive with the arrival of friends and neighbors. Although spirituous liquor may be offered to guests as well as to the more important members of the family, neither the service nor the dance is the drunken and frenzied way that some authors of fiction about Haiti and "voodoo" would have their readers believe.



▲ PEASANTS doing their laundry and bathing in the river at Pilate, in Haiti



▲ WARES BEING DISPLAYED outside the market at Saint-Michel-du-Sud