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## The Power of Voodoo to Impoverish and Enslave a Nation

By Chris Ampadu

Professor Bob Corbett of Webster University wrote: „Haiti, once called The Jewel of the Antilles, was the richest French colony in the New World. Economists estimate that in the 1750s Haiti provided as much as 50% of the Gross National Product of France. The French imported sugar, coffee, cocoa, tobacco, cotton, the dye indigo and other exotic products. In France they were refined, packaged and sold all over Europe. Incredible fortunes were made from this tiny colony on the island of Hispaniola.<sup>1</sup> Some 260 years later, it is Haiti’s dubious distinction to be the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere.

How could the source of such wealth for a European landlord become, after independence, so impoverished? How did The Jewel of the Antilles become what some call the hell-hole of the Caribbean?

Billions of dollars have been poured into Haiti. All the „experts` have brought their thoughts to bear on Haiti’s development, yet corruption, hunger and poverty still dominate this island nation. Such a history of massive aid with so few results proves that huge amounts of assistance aren’t the answer. At their roots, Haiti’s problems stem from something she shares with Africa: a system of beliefs.

Nations are built on the foundation of belief systems. Beliefs form the roots of a peoples’ values and behaviors. Disease, poverty, hunger, wars, greed and corruption are consequences of wrong beliefs.

Haiti is known for voodoo, a religion she received from Africa. Voodoo is entwined with African Traditional Religion. Both have had massive foreign assistance and investments, yet both remain impoverished. In both places, many people live on less than a dollar a day. As Darrow Miller has said, ideas have consequences.

For many Africans, African Traditional Religion (ATR) is a way of life. It forms the religious background of most Christians, Muslims and followers of other religious

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.webster.edu/~corbetre/haiti/misctopic/leftover/whypoor.htm>

traditions. So it is with Voodoo in Haiti. It is said that Haiti is 80 percent Catholic, 20 percent Protestant and 100 percent Voodoo. Many Haitians will tell you that Voodoo is life: one cannot separate it from other religious (including Catholic and Protestant) practice.

### **The Main Elements of Voodoo**

Although for many the word evokes devilish and animist connotations, Voodoo is first and foremost an actual religion. It is the predominant religion of Haiti, practiced by hundreds of millions throughout the Caribbean as well as in the U.S. and in Africa. To outsiders, many of the practices and descriptions of Voodoo appear as superstition. The main attributes of Voodoo (as elucidated by Leah Gordon with contributions from Bob Corbett) are as follows:

1. One God, **Bondye**. This God is very similar to the God of Islam, Judaism and Christianity.
2. Other spiritual beings fall into three important categories:
  - A. **Iwa**: spirits of family members and of major forces of the universe: good, evil, reproduction, health. Virtually all aspects of daily life are represented by Iwa spirits. Iwa interact with people. During religious ceremonies they ,mount` (possess) people, give messages, and cause various good and bad things to happen.
  - B. **The Twins**: a mysterious set of contradictory forces such as good and evil, or happy and sad. If honored in religious services they tend to help you have the better side of life.
  - C. **The Dead**: mainly the souls of one's family members who have died but have not yet been ,reclaimed` by the family. Ignored family dead are dangerous. Honored and cared for family dead are helpful.
3. Humans have a body and two spirits.
  - A. **Ti-bon-ange** (little good angel), similar to the conscience in the Western understanding.
  - B. **Gros-bon-ange** (big good angel). This is similar to the soul in Western theories of person, except that the gros-bon-ange is much more separate from the person than is a western soul. For example, when the person goes before God for judgment it is the gros-bon-ange which presents ,the person` to God and makes the person's case.
4. The central aspect of Voodoo is healing people from illness. Such healing activities probably constitute 60 percent of all Voodoo activity. Healers cure with herbs, faith healing (with the help of Iwa and other spirits) and, today, even western medicine!

5. The priesthood of Voodoo includes men (houngan) and women (mambo). Their functions are:
  - A. Healing
  - B. Performing religious ceremonies to call or pacify the spirits
  - C. Holding initiations for new priests (tesses) (kanzo service and taking the ason)
  - D. Telling the future and reading dreams
  - E. Casting spells and creating protections
  - F. Creating potions for various purposes (from love spells to death spells)
  
6. Another central feature of Voodoo is the ,service,` the religious rites.
  - A. These are usually held outside, under a rough roof and around the ,poto mitan,` the center pole. A houngan or mambo almost always directs these.
  - B. Drums are used extensively to provide music and dancing is essential to the whole service.
  - C. Services are fully participatory. Not only the houngan and mambo, but nearly everyone present participates.
    - i. A master of ceremonies (La Place) is often present.
    - ii. A hounganikon directs the music and motion.
    - iii. Hounsi (women only) are the serving women, usually dressed in white.
    - iv. Those in attendance are nearly all participants and most can be ,mounted` by Iwa. In most services the Iwa ,mount` people. That is, they take over a person's body for a time. When the Iwa come the person is gone. (It's not clear where the person goes.) The body is the body of the person, but it is really the Iwa. If a male Iwa mounts a female person, he is referred to as ,he,` not she, during the mounting.
  - D. Nearly every Voodoo service has animal sacrifice. Killing the animal releases life. The Iwa are exhausted by the taxing task of running the universe. Thus they can receive this life sacrificed to them and are rejuvenated. They are usually quite happy about this.
  
7. There are two primary sorts of Voodoo.
  - A. Rada. This is a family-spirit Voodoo associated with relatively peaceful and happy Iwa. Virtually all scholars agree that Rada accounts for 95 percent or more of Voodoo practices.
  - B. Petro (in some areas called Congo). This is a black magic Voodoo associated with angry, mean and nasty Iwa. Dangerous things happen in Petro including death curses, the making of zombi and wild sexual orgies. Again,

black magic, while very real, is extremely limited. Petro is not the typical Voodoo, but it does exist.

### **Consequences of the Voodoo Beliefs**

Haiti's people suffer some of the most debilitating and depressing misery of any people in the world. Has Voodoo caused Haiti's problems?

Some, of course, attribute Haiti's problems to economic and political causes. Poverty is a result of greed and power. Key factors include the international community, Haiti's rulers, the near slavery of the labor systems early in the republic's history, protection of wealth by the elite, and corruption and human rights violations. Such factors led to ignorance and illiteracy, unemployment and underemployment, underdevelopment and, in general, the loss of a healthy Haitian self-concept.

All this is true to some extent, but the roots go much deeper, down to the lies embedded in the culture. The cultural values of a group are determined by the belief systems. For Haiti, the roots are in voodoo worship, and the consequences are enormous.

One of the most serious consequences of voodoo worship is fatalism. It is widely believed that Iwa determines lives. As a result, the idea of personal responsibility is completely lost. What Iwa determines in one's life becomes final and nobody can do anything about his/her situation. Iwa determines one's destiny: a drunkard or a thief cannot be blamed since Iwa caused it and determines everything. Things are the way they are in one's personal life, family, community or national life because Iwa decided it. Peasants, for example, are unwilling to work hard to liberate themselves from poverty and hunger because Iwa has already determined that for them.

Corruption represents another consequence. Cheating and corruption seem to be endemic. The source of corruption comes from the countless spirits that must be constantly appeased. Many consider corruption normal since everybody seems to be involved in it. Foreign governments and humanitarian and religious organizations have often attempted to aid the suffering people of Haiti. Time and again, the so-called Haitian elite and government officials have sidetracked much of this wealth for their own purposes.

Ignorance and illiteracy comprise another consequence. The illiteracy rate is close to 90 percent in the cities and higher in rural areas. It is impossible to calculate the suffering arising from illiteracy, or the ignorance of alternatives from the lack of education. Ignorance allows the continuation of traditional practices in agriculture, education, health care, hygiene, et al. Some of these practices are killing Haitians unnecessarily; others are destroying the agricultural base. This harmful ignorance is the direct result of the illiteracy which, in turn, flows from the worldview of Voodoo.

Another consequence is the defeatist self-image, all too typical of Haitians. People know they are poor in a rich world. They have heard that they are ignorant and illiterate. They are told that their Creole is not a real language. They experience powerlessness and are told it is their own fault. Such a self-image creates its own cycle of misery. The masses of Haitian people blame themselves for their own suffering.

Another fruit of voodoo is the largely untapped state of human resources. Few are highly skilled, and those with skills are often unwilling to work hard. Managers consider themselves above hard work, the domain of laborers.

A related consequence is the conspicuous absence of a capable entrepreneurial class to train and mobilize human and capital resources. Efficient production is rare and local investment minimal. Fetish priests instill fear, so that in most rural communities, economic growth and prosperity is very low. Many people reject any notion of development and growth, choosing to remain at their current economic level rather than risk being killed through magic as punishment for trying to improve their lot.

Authority is strongly hierarchical: a weak ethical framework tolerates little dissent or criticism. The notion of justice is undermined by a weak sense of obligation to those outside the family.

How can Haiti be freed from the mental stronghold of voodoo and reach her God-given potential?

The foundation we lay for communities and nations determines their prosperity, success and development. If the foundations are ignorance and lies, the consequences are destruction. However, knowledge and truth are the sure foundation for development and prosperity. Natural resources are important, and financial assistance has its place. More money, however, is not the key. We must attack the lies embedded in the culture. Lies impoverish and enslave people. They disintegrate, destroy and dismantle societies and nations. Biblical truth empowers and strengthens, breeds confidence and hope. Truth sets people free and brings success, progress, development and transformation. ,If you continue in my word, you are my disciples, and then you will know the truth and the truth will set you free.` (John 8:31-32)

Satan deceives nations with counterfeit values. The more the culture listens to his lies, the greater the poverty, hunger, deprivation, wars, corruption and enslavement. But when a nation builds its culture on God's truth, it has a solid foundation for progress and development. Consequently, the more truth, the greater the blessings of justice, freedom, peace, integrity, honesty and compassion.

Someone has said that 'it is no measure of health to be well adjusted to a profoundly sick society.' People in Haiti are profoundly sick. We must not pretend that all is well when

people are dying from hunger and poverty. Martin Luther King Jr. once said, 'He who passively accept evil or lies is as much involved in it as he who helps to perpetuate it.' Indeed, it is the profound duty of the church to lead in the transformation of Haiti. The church can have an impact, not by spiritualizing life, but by bringing biblical truth to replace the lie of fatality, the lies of arrogance and pride of the elites in Haiti. People must recognize that all men were created in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:26-27). All Haitians—every color, tribe or language—deserve respect and dignity. All languages are important; no one should be looked down upon because of his or her language.

St Augustine said 'citizens of God's kingdom are best equipped to be citizens of the Kingdom of man.' Christians are best suited to bring about godly transformation, progress and development in Haiti. Conscious and intentional efforts should be made in this effort since the Bible says that '... you shall know the truth and the truth will set you free.' (John 8: 32)

Money does not set people free. God *can* bring deliverance through simple prayer and fasting, but He has established that freedom comes from knowing and living the truth. He calls us to speak biblical truth to every facet of society. Truth-telling must not be confined to church buildings and cathedrals, but be brought to the market place, to politics, to business and government. Christians are best equipped for this, which is why the church must take her place in the development of all of society, not confined to the spiritual only.

Excellence is not a matter of chance, but of choice. For the people of Africa and Haiti, our only option is excellence. God's concern, and ours, is the total transformation of the nations.

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