THE WILLIAM OSLER MEDAL ESSAY

PRIMITIVE MEDICINE IN HAITI *

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Primitive medicine is a glowing desert which lies between the fields of anthropology and medicine. A few medical historians, for example Sigerist and Ackerknecht, have studied this area, but interest at present is limited. To the anthropologist, the medical system of a people is only one small facet of their culture. Psychiatric interest in the field stems from Freud but is now centered in a separate field, transcultural psychiatry.

Workers in this area are increasingly recognizing the fact that the techniques employed by primitive healers have much in common with those used by psychotherapists. Studies of primitive medicine are shedding valuable light on the active elements in the therapeutic relationship between healer and patient.¹

In many parts of the world, the patient has his choice between the physician and the medicine man. Such a situation exists in Haiti. There, modern psychiatric help has been available to more than a few people only since the opening of the "Centre de Psychiatrie" in Port-au-Prince in 1959. Up to that time, the only recourse was to a Voodoo priest, who is called an hangan.

In the summer of 1962, the author visited Haiti and interviewed psychiatrists at the center, hangans, patients, and persons familiar with Voodoo practices. Voodoo ceremonies and treatment procedures were also observed.

The object of the study was to describe the native methods of diagnosis and treatment, relate them to the indigenous concepts of disease, and to

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evaluate their basis in terms of modern psychiatry. It was also hoped that it might be possible to trace the practices of the hungans historically to their African ancestors.

Such a prospect was fascinating as an historical acculturation study. What happens to a native African system of medicine when transplanted to the New World and exposed to the impact of European medicine? However, it was soon discovered that such a study was too great in scope and probably impossible to find adequate data for. Nevertheless, when information on origins is available, it will be indicated.

**Framework of Voodoo**

Santo Domingo was at first a Spanish colony, having been discovered by Columbus on his maiden voyage. However, the island began to be infiltrated by pirates, mainly French, who annexed the Western third of the island in 1663, thus dividing it between France and Spain. The Spanish annihilated, by one means or another, the native Carib Indian population so rapidly that the dearth of labor forced them to begin importing Negro slaves as early as 1510. This trade continued in ever-increasing quantity into the French era, until the occasion of the French Revolution afforded the slaves the opportunity to revolt. Led by Tousaint l'Ouverture and Dessalines, Haiti won independence from France for good at the beginning of the nineteenth century, becoming the first Negro republic.

Between 1510 and 1885, millions of African slaves were dispatched to the New World from West Africa, and even sections of East Africa. Today, their descendants are found, not only in Haiti, but in Brazil, Suriname, British Guiana, Trinidad, Dutch Guiana, Martinique, Jamaica, Curaçao, Cuba, and the United States. Among all these peoples, the most enduring of Africanisms have been found in their religious lives. Thus, Voodoo is just one of the many forms African religion has taken in the Western Hemisphere.

In response to the slave trade, powerful tribal groupings arose in West Africa. One of the greatest of these was the Kingdom of Dahomey, which maintained an independent existence until 1898. It was the customs of this area which proved dominant in Haiti. The names of the gods,

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and social and economic institutions, point to this geographical center of the slaving area as their source.\textsuperscript{5}

An example of the merging of various African religions in Voodoo is the existence of two major groups of gods and services, Rada and Petro, and, within each, separate "nations." There is ample evidence that the cults of these nations were once separate. The Rada grouping is in the majority and seems to stem from Dahomey and Nigeria, while the Petro grouping includes everything outside this area. The Petro grouping is regarded as Haitian, rather than African, but its rites and gods originated in large measure in other African services.\textsuperscript{6}

In opposition to the African gods was the Christian God. Roman Catholicism was introduced to the island by the Spanish and maintained by the French. However, during the slave revolt, the Catholic clergy were forced to flee from Haiti. There ensued Dessaline’s constitution of 1805, which produced an open schism with Rome until the Concordat of 1860 provided for the introduction of French clergy. During this interval, Catholicism persisted but became mingled with African belief. Despite later attempts at suppression, Voodoo had become too firmly entrenched to be eradicated. As a result, there exists today in Voodoo an element of Catholicism which is most manifest in the crucifixes and lithographs of Catholic saints on Voodoo altars and in the identification of saints with certain African gods.\textsuperscript{7} However, according to Bascom,\textsuperscript{8} while Catholicism is outwardly accepted, it is inwardly rejected.

The influence of Catholicism on Voodoo is shown by the fact that "le bon Dieu" is recognized as standing at the apex of the pantheon of gods. His power as the ultimate source of all things is accepted, but he does not stand alone in the supernatural world. Man’s lot can be bettered or worsened by dealings with other forces. Common ills, which we would call natural, are known in Haiti as "diseases of the Lord." \textsuperscript{9}

In Haiti, the Dahomean word for "god," Vodou, came to be applied in a general sense to all the activities of cult life, while the Congo word loa was used to designate the deities.\textsuperscript{10} Some of the deities were imported

directly from Africa, while others are indigenous to Haiti and are the result of the deification of powerful ancestors. The loa are said to come from "Guinea," which is a vague, almost mythological area. The loa differ from men only in the breadth of their supernatural powers. They are anthropomorphic, sharing the tastes, habits, and emotions of their worshippers. Their function is to watch over and protect their worshippers.\textsuperscript{11}

Whereas the loa are served individually, the Dead, who rank next to the loa, are served collectively. Ancestors enter the ranks of the Dead when, in the course of their lifetime, their names are forgotten by their descendants. Ancestors may also be incorporated into a loa with similar characteristics; or one with distinctive characteristics may, as mentioned above, become a new loa.\textsuperscript{12} Those who do not achieve this distinction must be treated respectfully, however, since they maintain an interest in this world, and they, like the loa, can help or hinder its inhabitants.\textsuperscript{13}

As in Dahomey, twins hold a privileged place in Haiti. They are supposed to be endowed with supernatural powers. Any family which includes twins in its ancestry must serve them. Dead twins are deified, and their spirits are formidable.\textsuperscript{14} Songs and rites for the Dead and dead twins are included in Voodoo rites. Since they may either protect or persecute members of their families, pompous funerals, Catholic Masses, and Voodoo rites for them are essential and constitute a serious economic burden.\textsuperscript{15}

In general, the main classes of practitioners in traditional African religious ceremonies are priests, diviners, and rainmakers. Priests act as intermediaries between specific gods and people serving the god by watching out for their needs. Diviners serve both as doctors and as ascertainers of the unknown. Divination is a skilled art learned through rigorous training. Techniques include throwing a number of bones or seeds and reading a pattern in the way they fall. Diviners may also have extensive knowledge of herbal remedies. Women diviners occasionally serve as midwives. The rainmaker may be one of these functionaries, the

\textsuperscript{11} Metraux, \textit{op. cit.}, ftn. 9 above, p. 61.
\textsuperscript{13} G. E. Simpson; "The belief system of Haitian vodun," \textit{Am. Anthropologist}, 1945, 47(1) : 35-59.
\textsuperscript{15} Simpson, \textit{op. cit.} ftn. 13 above, p. 52.
chief of the tribe, or someone else. His task is to insure sufficient rainfall and to halt floods.\(^{19}\)

The Dahomean cult house is headed by a chief priest, the \textit{voduno}, followed by a number of assistants drawn from the older and more trusted cult members, who are taught the intricacies of the secret rituals. Next come the ordinary members, the \textit{vodunsi}, "wives of the vodu." Then come the novitiates of varying degrees of induction, and last there are those undergoing initiation, who are secluded in the cult house for a period. In Dahomey, the diviner is a separate functionary from the \textit{voduno}. There is usually a member of this important profession in each extended family.\(^{17}\)

The Haitian functionaries are somewhat different. Apparently, in Haiti various African functionaries were compressed into one personage, the \textit{hungan}. This can be seen in the variety of names by which the \textit{hungan} is called. \textit{Hungan} is a Fon word signifying "spirit chief." He is sometimes called \textit{gangan}, a Bantu word meaning "conjuror" or "doctor." He is also known by the title \textit{bocor}, which seems to be derived from \textit{bocono}, the diviner or priest of the Fa cult of Dahomey.\(^{18}\) Two of the functions of the \textit{hungan}, those of priest and diviner, were taken directly from Dahomey; the third, that of doctor, which is missing in Dahomey, is taken from other tribes. Separate functionaries are the rainmaker, retained from Africa, and the herb doctor, who has command of a few simple remedies. In some cases, the \textit{hungan} may be a woman, who is then called a \textit{mambo}. The \textit{hungan} achieves his professional status through a long period of apprenticeship, during which he works his way up through the hierarchy of a cult group. Unless his father is a \textit{hungan}, he has to pay a considerable fee for the final stages of instruction. He must then demonstrate powers sufficiently formidable to be accepted by the community. He enjoys a status higher than that of the other peasants in accordance with his success. He has certain symbols of office, such as the \textit{asson}, the priestly rattle used in ceremonies. Until he is quite well-established, however, he must hold another job during the day in order to support himself. Thus, his status is not as high as that of the African medicine man, who remains less accessible.\(^{19}\) It is also recognized by the peasants that his principal object is to make money.


\(^{18}\) Courlander, \textit{op. cit.} fn. 6 above, p. 10.

\(^{19}\) J. Bordeleau, personal communication.
The Haitian cult house is called an *humfo*. The cult group is called a *Société*, and each has its own name. The group has a kind of corporate direction, with a president, secretary, treasurer, etc. The president is not the *hungan*, but his chief assistant, who has attained at least the rank of *hunsi-canzo*. The rank of *hunsi* has two grades, *hunsi-canzo* and *hunsi-bossale*. To have attained the former, one must have gone through a ritual fire ordeal. Thus there is in Voodoo a hierarchical organization and a series of initiation ceremonies.

Assisting at the ceremonies are the *Laplace*, who brandishes a machete and acts as the master of ceremonies, and the *houngenikon*, who leads the *hunsi* in their singing and dancing. Also essential are the drummers, usually three in number, who set the pace of the ceremony. They are often professional musicians; yet the drums are considered sacred instruments, vehicles for calling down the *loa*. Dancing is intimately linked with worship, and much of the ritual is incorporated in song.

The ceremonies are held in small, roofed pavilions, where dancing revolves around the center pole, the *poteau-mitan*, which is considered sacred. The Voodoo altar is in an adjoining ante-chamber where objects used in the ceremonies are stored.

One does not see statues or pictures of the African *loa*. However, during ceremonies symbolic drawings called *vèvè* are made in powder or flour on the floor or earthen ground. These designs are the signs of the different gods. They are supposed to help summon the *loa*. The particular *loa* being called can be recognized by constant symbols, such as a heart for Erzulie, the goddess of love, and a sword for the god of war, Ogun. Although these drawings originated in Dahomey, the patterns recall the European wrought iron fashionable in Haiti in the eighteenth century.

All genuine Voodoo ceremonies are held for a purpose. They may be held to initiate the *hunsi*, to honor the family ancestors, to reverence particular *loa*, or to consecrate drums. There are also water rites, funeral rites, and harvest ceremonies. There is even a mystic marriage ceremony in which one marries a *loa*. Several of these rites involve the sacrifice of animals. In the most important of these, the *manger loa*, chickens, goats, and even bulls are immolated as food for the gods.

Although there is a great diversity of purpose, the ceremonies follow a

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20 Courlander, *op. cit.* ft. 6 above, p. 11.
22 Métraux, *op. cit.* ft. 9 above, p. 80.
general pattern. They begin with ritual salutations in which the hunsi show their respect for the gods, the hungan, and for sacred objects, by pirouettes and prostrations. This is followed by a flag parade, in which the flags of the Société are brought out. At this point the symbolic drawings are made, and the name of the god being called is ritually invoked.⁴⁴ The tension of the ceremony mounts, and the pace of the drumming and dancing increases. Suddenly the hungan or one of the hunsi will begin to tremble. His features convulse, and he has to be supported by those around him. After a minute or two, the expression clears, and a new personality is manifest—that of the loa who has been called.

This is the phenomenon of possession, in which the loa is said to mount his cheval, or horse. The person mounted loses his identity. He is addressed as the loa. Since each loa has a distinct personality, his identity is easily recognized. Then his accessories, such as clothing, hat, cane, dark glasses, or cigars are brought out. Impromptu performances of various kinds follow. The loa may have a message for someone, or people may come up, and, after the proper greeting, speak to the god, who gives them advice or admonishes them. The loa may even flirt or play schoolboy pranks. There is certainly an element of entertainment in these actions.

After ten or twenty minutes, the god leaves in the same manner in which he came. The possessed begins to stagger and is helped to a chair. When he is himself once again, he claims to remember nothing of what has happened, and those present fill him in on what has taken place. He expresses amazement. The responsibility for his actions while possessed is not his, but the loa’s.

More possessions usually follow. Sometimes several people are possessed at once, in which case there is a definite element of the theatre. If there is to be a sacrifice, there is much ritual connected with the preparation of the victim. The hunsi may dance around the animal, ride on its back, etc. The animal is slaughtered in a prescribed manner. Often the blood is caught and drunk by those present.⁴⁵ The ceremony lasts all night, and toward dawn the people begin to leave a few at a time. The less experienced drummers take over, and the dancing gradually draws to a halt. If it is Sunday morning, the people may go to early Mass before retiring.

⁴⁴ Ibid., pp. 157-167.
⁴⁵ Ibid., pp. 168-176.
Etiology

It is the unusual which especially invites the speculations of mankind. In the consideration of disease, for example, the common cold, which occurs so frequently, is seen as a natural occurrence, but madness is seen as exceptional and often as supernatural in origin. In Africa, it is thought more reasonable for serious illness to be caused by the wrath of the gods or ancestors than by some invisible organism which the white man claims resides in the air, water, or in mosquitoes or flies.

In Haiti, soul-loss is frequently given as the reason for disease. There are thought to be two souls, the gros bon ange and the ’ti bon ange, literally, the “large” and “small” good angels. The former animates the body and corresponds roughly to the Christian concept of soul. The latter is a sort of guardian angel. It protects the person from all dangers, day and night.

It is on the gros bon ange that witches are thought to operate. They conjure it into a bucket of water and stab the reflection. The victim dies as a result. The infamous zombies, the “living dead,” are people whose gros bon ange has been captured by an evil houngan. Only the ’ti bon ange is left hovering over him, and he has no will of his own. Henceforth, he is the houngan’s slave, who works for him by night but returns to his tomb by day.

As in Africa, an illness in Haiti is classified as either natural or supernatural. Even mental illness can be natural in some instances. In cases of natural folie, the patient is calmly disposed but may refuse to talk or eat. This is of unusually long duration. In cases of supernatural folie, the patient is more apt to be excited, and the disease is usually of short duration.

Natural folie may take many forms, one of which is called tête chargé, “full head.” This is caused by thinking of one thing too often, or studying too much, and is perhaps akin to the Nigerian “brain fag syndrome.” It can also be caused by worry.

27 Ottenberg, op. cit. ftn. 16 above, p. 60.
Another form of mental illness is known as "empty head." This is thought to be the loss of part of the brain as a result of injury, such as a blow on the head. Another concept is that of insanity as a result of weak blood; vitamin treatment is considered effective in these cases. Finally, there is the idea of insanity caused by the intrusion of a foreign object, such as a bug, through the nose or ears. Many of these ideas seem to have originated from modern medical concepts, changed and simplified so as to be understandable to the Haitian peasant. The *hungan's* concepts of disease seem to depend in large measure on the amount of education he has received. While natural illness is admitted to be the province of the medical doctor when one is available, supernatural illness, especially madness, is thought to be the province of the *hungan*. It is caused either by one of the *loa* as warning or as a punishment, or by black magic worked by one's enemies.\(^3\)

In Dahomey, specific diseases are attributed to specific gods. Agbodoboji, for example, rules boats and drowns those guilty of wrongdoing. When a man drowns, his stomach becomes distended, and following this idea of punishment by swelling, this god is also thought to cause filariasis (elephantiasis). Twins are said to cause constipation, the *loa* dysentery, and the Dead, headaches.\(^3\) These facts suggest the highly developed function of the gods in social control, which is operative in Haiti to a lesser degree.

Supernatural illness is thought by the Haitian to be caused either by the *loa* or by the Dead. As in Dahomey, he must placate his ancestors by offering them a feast called a *manger morts* at certain intervals. If he does not, misfortune and illness are likely to befall him. However, one hears more commonly of feasts called *manger loa*. These are on a much larger scale, are held only once in several years, and are postponed as long as possible, since they require extensive preparation and may last five days. Huge food offerings based on traditional Haitian recipes are made to the *loa*, and the manner of serving is governed by rules which it would be very dangerous to break. The relationship with the *loa* is looked upon as a contractual one; if one is diligent about offerings and ceremonies, one will surely win the favor of the *loa*.\(^5\)

The great danger, of course, is in offending the *loa*. In Haiti, gods, like men, are very touchy, and the slightest offense to them may prove

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\(^5\)Herskovits, *op. cit.* fn. 17 above, pp. 18, 189.


\(^5\)Simpson, *op. cit.* fn. 13 above, pp. 48, 49.
fatal. Even offering them a type of food they dislike may arouse their ire. More serious is the failure to hold for them the feasts to which they are entitled. The loa may bring on madness by causing the loss of one of the two souls, or may even inhabit the person’s head, taking the place of the lost soul. Obviously, the treatment for such an illness is to atone for the wrong and to hold the proper ceremonies.

Belief in magic is an important part of many African cultures. It takes two forms: sorcery (black magic) and medicine (white magic). Herbs are used in both black and white magic. The practice of magic is closely linked to the cult of the dead ancestors.

In Haiti, most hagnans know how to work black magic as well as white. The most common method of dealing with an enemy is to send an expédition des morts against him. One goes to a hagn who knows the proper ritual. The hagn then goes to the cemetery at midnight and invokes Baron Samedi, the god of cemeteries, three times. The Baron has power over the Guedes, or Dead, who are his assistants. The efficacy of evil spells depends upon him. The hagn offers the Baron some food. He then asks permission to send some of the Guedes against the victim. If the Baron agrees, the hagn takes a handful of dirt, either from the cemetery or from a crossroads, for each of the Dead he wishes to send and spreads it along a path frequently taken by the victim. Should the victim pass near it, he will inevitably die, unless he can counteract the curse.37 The Dead imbibe themselves in the head of the victim and are very difficult to dislodge.

In rural areas, more than half the children die before reaching the age of four. This heavy child mortality rate is blamed on vampires, who are women who change form at night and suck the blood of babies. If the vampire is able to suck enough blood, the child inevitably dies.38

As far as etiology is concerned, the hagn admits no difference between mental and physical illness. However, he does differentiate illnesses according to their symptoms. He undoubtedly takes this into account in his divining when he tells whether an illness is natural or supernatural. Of course, he will no more admit this than he will admit that possession is sometimes simulated for tourists.

Thus people who are “crazy from birth” are thought to be afflicted by natural illness. Mental deficiency is usually seen in this way. Epilepsy of long standing is viewed as natural; but when the disease occurs

37 Metraux, op. cit. fn. 9 above, pp. 67, 68.
38 Metraux, op. cit. fn. 14 above, p. 275.
suddenly, it is suspected of being supernatural. In the same manner, the onset of tuberculosis is considered supernatural and so capable of being cured by the *hungan*. Cerebral vascular disease may be considered supernatural if it has a dramatic onset. A brain tumor or abscess would not be recognized as such and would be treated according to what symptoms were present. On the other hand, acute brain trauma is recognized as natural and involving the destruction of tissue. Senile psychoses, although rare because of the high death rate, are recognized as a natural part of the process of aging.

Because of the cultural trend toward paranoid thinking, schizophrenia, which usually takes a paranoid form, is not apt to be recognized until it becomes fairly severe. Involutional psychoses also take a paranoid form. Mania is more apt to be recognized at an early stage because of its disturbing effect on the patient's associates. All of these conditions, when severe, are apt to be considered supernatural. Depression, neuroses, and psychosomatic complaints are either considered natural disorders or not recognized at all. There is very little alcoholism or drug-addiction in Haiti.

**Diagnosis**

When a man falls ill in Haiti, he first tries to treat himself. Failing this, he may consult an herb doctor, or someone in the family with a knowledge of herbal remedies. Should the illness become more serious, he is forced to consult either a *hungan* or a medical doctor. The choice of practitioner will depend on such criteria as the nature of the illness, proximity to a competent practitioner, and the economic circumstances of the patient.\(^9\)

There are only several hundred physicians in Haiti and one small medical school, in an overpopulated land of four million people. Nearly all of the doctors are located in Port-au-Prince and the larger towns. The fees charged by the doctor are not a very great deterrent. The *hungan* may charge as much, or even more, for a course of treatment. When the patient pays the *hungan*, however, he feels that he buys a "control," a right to demand his money's worth, which he cannot do with the doctor, since he is so far removed from him by social and economic standards as well as educational ones. Social class is also important in determining the choice of practitioner. An upper class patient could not openly consult a *hungan*. Fees for treating the sick are usually the *hungan*'s main source of income.

\(^9\) Kiev, *op. cit.* ftn. 30 above.
Thus the *hungan* is usually the one consulted. The *hungan* may go to the home of the patient, or the patient may come to the *humfo*. In some cases, the patient will send another person to the *hungan* in his stead. Personal contact is not considered essential for successful treatment. The *hungan* claims he needs only to know the name of the patient.

The next step is that of diagnosis, which is usually done by divination. In Dahomey, the method of divination consists of dropping one or two palm kernels into the hand sixteen times. Which of the many possible sequences is produced is what determines the diagnosis.\(^{40}\)

If the *hungan* recognizes the illness as one of the common maladies, he relies on divination to give a supernatural sanction to his diagnosis. One method used is throwing shells or bones in a manner analogous to that of Dahomey. Another is calling down a *loa* into a *govi*, or small pitcher of water, and speaking to him directly through the art of ventriloquism.\(^{41}\) Water gazing and automatic handwriting are also used.

By far the most common method in use today is that of card reading. A deck of thirty-two cards is used, from seven through king to ace. Each card means something to the *hungan*. The deck is divided into three parts and the top cards turned up. From the results, the *hungan* can tell what is wrong with the patient, what caused it, and what treatment to use. If it is a case of black magic, the cards give clues to the originator of the affliction. The patient's enemies are usually well-known. The treatment chosen does not depend on the diagnosis, but solely on the choice of the cards. Thus two people with the same disease may be treated by entirely different methods. After reading the cards in private, the *hungan* may reassure the patient that he knows the disease and its cure. He then proceeds with the treatment. If it is a lengthy process, the patient may stay in the *humfo* for several days.

**TREATMENT**

In West Africa, talismans have an important place in dealing with disease. They are used both for protection and for treatment and may also be used to work black magic. For example, a charm to cure or ward off smallpox may also give the disease.\(^{42}\) In Dahomey, these charms are called *gbo*. Many of these *gbo* were brought to Haiti, where

\(^{40}\) Herskovits, *op. cit.* ft. 17 above, p. 52.


they were given new names. Although they are not the only measures relied on, they are still very important.

One category of these is the *paquettes*. These are wallets shaped like Chianti bottles, stuffed with cotton, and containing herbs, spices, and medicines. They are equipped with handles, which give them an anthropomorphic appearance and are seen on every Voodoo altar. They are made during a full moon, with invocations to Baron Samedi. When used to treat illness, they may be applied to the body or simply passed in front of the patient.\(^{43}\)

Haitians also frequently wear amulets. A pregnant woman will wear one around the neck or the waist to protect both herself and the child against black magic.

Haitians seem to accept the idea that they may easily fall ill and are constantly concerned with a variety of precautions. For example, a certain amount of immunity to witchcraft may be obtained by asking a *hungan* to extract the *gros bon ange* from the body and enclose it in a bottle, which is given to the *hungan* for safe-keeping. Such bottles are seen on all Voodoo altars.\(^{44}\)

Sometimes the *'ti bon ange* is said to have lost its strength, causing the patient to suffer dizzy spells. The treatment for this involves a *laver tête*, offerings, and prayers, and tying a poultice round the head.\(^{45}\)

The treatment for a desperately ill person is a *changé tête*. In this case, the *hungan* will usually say that there is very little hope, but that he will try to substitute another life for the patient's. He will then perform a *changé tête*, during which he kills someone else by black magic and transfers his soul to the patient.\(^{46}\)

In treating natural illnesses, the *hungan* uses such methods as baths, powders, and mixtures of herbs. Most *hungans* have an extensive knowledge of the native herbs and use them both externally and internally. (Whether or not any of these herbs is pharmaceutically active is unknown, but native remedies in other cultures do have real curative powers. It was found that the witch doctors of Nigeria had been using a raw form of reserpine for hundreds of years).\(^{47}\) Rubbing and massage are also used. Massage is always directed toward the extremities.

\(^{43}\) Maximilien, *op. cit.*, p. 185.


\(^{45}\) Metraux, *op. cit.* ftn. 28 above.


There are also treatments which seem to be derived from European medical knowledge of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Bloodletting, leeching, and other archaic practices are still popular. These treatments are often used in ailments attributed to wind which collects in the body, to the corruption of the blood, and to eating foods which are hotter or colder than body temperature.\footnote{Metrax, \textit{op. cit.} ftn. 28 above.}

Certain religious holidays are also connected with healing. On December 24, the people fill a large tank or drum with water and add herbal concoctions to it. Bathing in this water is supposed to cure minor illnesses. People dance around the bathers and become possessed. Bathing and possession are also a feature of the festival at Saut d’Eau on July 15, when people bathe at the foot of a waterfall. This might be considered the Lourdes of Haiti.

The most common cause of madness is thought to be the sending of \textit{expéditions des morts}. Many procedures have been devised by the \textit{hungans} to oust the intruding spirits. The crudest remedy for this is a form of “shock treatment” to frighten them out of the body. The \textit{hungan} may spray the cheek of the patient with a foul-smelling mixture of secret medicines; he may cut the patient’s arm, and as it freely hemorrages, rub the rest of the body with an indigo-ash mixture.\footnote{Kiev, \textit{op. cit.} ftn. 30 above.} He may even rub the patient with burning alcohol or igniting gunpowder.\footnote{Metrax, \textit{op. cit.} ftn. 38 above.}

A more common remedy is flagellation. The patient is taken to the cemetery at midnight and struck with hand or whip, often quite brutally. The purpose of this is to drive the spirits of the Dead out of the patient and back into their resting place. Patients often come to the Centre de Psychiatrie covered with the scars from these beatings.

The more subtle \textit{hungan} often resorts to the use of scapegoats. A section of hair is removed from the top of the patient’s head. The \textit{hungan} then cuts an identical piece from the head of a male pig and mixes it into a concoction with wine and the white of an egg. This is applied to the man’s head for a few days, during which time the patient stays at the \textit{humfo}. At the end of this time, the patient is taken to the ocean at eight o’clock at night and water put on his head. The concoction is combed out of his hair three times and thrown into the sea.

In another treatment, hair is taken from each of a dog’s ears. Part of it is placed on the patient’s chest and part on the small of his back and left there for seven days, during which time dog and patient stay in the
humfo. At the end of this time, the hair is removed and thrown away and the dog released. He is then supposed to run away and die.

A third treatment requires the patient to sleep in a casket for three days. In the middle of the third night, the patient is awakened suddenly and removed from the casket. The lid is slammed swiftly, before the expéditions have a chance to gather their wits. The casket is then thrown into the sea.

A simpler treatment involves putting a meal of eggs, flour, and syrup on a white plate. The meal is fed to the patient, although actually eaten by the spirits. This is an attempt to appease the spirits, and when they have had their fill and are, supposedly, in a good humor, they are politely asked to leave.

As a rule, only the hungan and the patient are involved in the treatment procedures. In one treatment, however, the members of the hungan's société are involved. In this case, a hole is dug in the ground and the patient made to lie down in it. A white sheet is spread over him, and the patient is fed a meal as the hunsis dance around the ditch and the drums pound out the rhythm of the dance. At the proper time, a doll is put into the hole and the patient taken out. The doll is covered with a sheet and buried and the patient is washed and put to rest.

**Discussion**

Haitian belief recognizes two main forms of possession: ceremonial and demoniacal. Ceremonial possession is a transient autohypnotic state which was transported to New World Negro cultures from Africa. It provides a socially sanctioned outlet for repressed feelings. Demonic possession has been in the past the explanation for all forms of madness in the Western World and remains the most widespread explanation in Haiti. Both forms of possession have been extremely widespread in time and place.

There is, however, a problem of overlap between these two forms of possession. For example, Hurston describes a Lesbian who was mounted by Guede. The loa reproached her for making love to women, told her she had done this for the last time, and forced her to climb a great mango tree and dive off, breaking her neck. There have also been cases of people who could not come out of possession for prolonged

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periods, and even of one who was possessed for five years. In these cases, the possession is certainly abnormal and is recognized as such by the Haitian. Such instances of ceremonial possession are, however, culturally accepted.

The explanation given by Voodoo believers for all these forms of possession is the same. The loa or the Dead drive the gros bon ange out of the head of the victim and take its place. As a result, his normal personality is not present. When this occurs in a culturally sanctioned setting and is of short duration, it is looked upon as the normal, or culturally sanctioned form of possession. When it occurs in a context not culturally sanctioned and is of long duration, it is considered an abnormal form of possession.

Socially institutionalized release of repressed feelings is an outstanding feature of the Negro cultures of West Africa and the New World. Ceremonial possession is the chief form it takes in Haiti. Possession raises the prestige of the individual in the community. Children look forward to the day when they will "catch a loa." Thus it is a learned form of behaviour. During possession, the individual becomes a figure of power who commands respect. He is allowed to say and do things normally forbidden. His exhibitionistic needs are satisfied. Certain of his sexual needs may also be gratified. Thus, possession serves the unconscious emotional needs of the id. It may even serve the needs of the superego in a few individuals.

Similarities have been seen between ceremonial possession and hysteria. It also has certain characteristics in common with epilepsy. For example, it is frequently preceded by an aura, convulsive movements accompany the entrance into possession, and it is followed by a retrograde amnesia. However, ceremonial possession most resembles a dissociative state. The rhythmic drumming and emotional atmosphere of the Voodoo ceremony, combined with autosuggestion, allow a stereotyped secondary personality to appear which acts independently of the primary personality. According to Wittkower, "the possessed person has introjected the loa and has become identified with the deity."

In dealing with what he considers abnormal possession states, the hungan has many factors in his favor. He takes advantage of the fact

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53 H. Ashton, personal communication.
55 E. D. Wittkower, personal communication.
56 Ibid.
that the superego of Haitians is very poorly developed. Instead of experiencing guilt, they feel that they are afflicted by some external force, either their enemies or gods whom they have neglected. The diagnosis offered by the hungan supports them in this belief. If they are being afflicted by their enemies, the source of their troubles can be directed into a scapegoat, or perhaps even redirected at their enemies. If they have offended the gods, they may obtain the expiatory effects of penance by making sacrificial offerings. The fact that both they and the healer have confidence in these methods is in itself therapeutically potent.

Thus, if the hungan finds the cause of the illness to be a supernatural one, there exists the possibility of resolution by some promising action. This promise is enhanced by various cues and attitudes on the part of the hungan. The paraphernalia of his office is symbolic of healing to the Haitians. These favorable expectations probably have some therapeutic effect in themselves. There is good evidence that the state of faith itself can have far-reaching effects on the mind and body. The main evidence for this lies in the realm of religious conversion and miracle cures. The use of placebos has also been found to be effective. They can even cure serious tissue damage, if it is directly related to the patient's emotional state. Much of the success of the hungan's herbal cures may be based on this placebo effect.

The hungan also requires the patient to assume an active role in the treatment process. He has to gather funds and may be required to purchase materials used in the treatment. Often there is a great deal of preparation involved. Furthermore, he receives sympathy and assurance from his family and friends. Since his illness creates a serious economic burden, there may be considerable pressure on him to return to his regular duties. On the whole, the treatment procedures used by the hungan have many psychotherapeutic elements. These elements are probably responsible for any success he achieves.

The degree of therapeutic success the hungan obtains in treating particular disorders has never been studied. Forster reports the native

\footnote{Ibid.}
\footnote{Frank, op. cit. ftm. 54 above.}
\footnote{Ibid.}
\footnote{A. Kiev: "Psychotherapy and Haitian Voodoo," \textit{Am. J. Psychotherapy}, 1962, 16: 469-476.}
\footnote{E. B. Forster: "The theory and practice of psychiatry in Ghana," \textit{Am. J. Psychotherapy}, 1962, 16: 7-51.}
practitioner in Ghana enjoys his greatest success with patients suffering from neurotic or psychosomatic disorders, and that he has least success with the functional psychoses. A similar impression has been obtained in Haiti. It seems likely that the hun gan has little success with serious organic disorders.

The hun gan admits that his particular sphere of illness is supernatural illness. Natural illness is seen to be the province of the physician. African medicine sees only supernatural causes of disease. The recognition of natural causation of disease is a result of European contact.\textsuperscript{83} Such contact has been present in Haiti for more than four hundred years. As a result, many Western folk concepts of disease have filtered down to the peasants.

It is very difficult to change native concepts of disease. Even dreams are used to support the culturally established world view.\textsuperscript{84} Explaining new methods of treatment under the native belief system usually meets with more success.\textsuperscript{85} However, as in Haiti, where some natural causes of disease are already accepted, it would not seem as difficult to bring about a popular recognition of such a basis for a greater number of diseases. It might also be possible to take advantage of the hun gan's desire to preserve his prestige by avoiding cases in which he is likely to be unsuccessful.

The problem in Haiti is that the hun gan is very likely to diagnose a serious somatic complaint as lying within this sphere of supernatural illness. Although a reputable hun gan will admit that he cannot treat so-called natural or somatic disorders and send the patient to a physician, most hun gans are not so scrupulous. Furthermore, in rural areas there is usually no physician to whom the patient may be sent.

The solution to the Haitian problem lies in education. The peasants must learn to recognize somatic illness for what it is. Many more physicians must be trained to meet the medical needs of the country, and they must be induced to go into the rural areas to practice. From present indications, this solution lies a long way in the future.

**SUMMARY**

In the course of the slave trade of the colonial period, an African religious system, that of Dahomey, was brought to Haiti, modified by

\textsuperscript{83} Ibid.


influences from Europe and other areas of Africa, and survived as a new religion, Voodoo, which has as its outstanding feature the phenomenon of spirit possession. Haitian peasants believe that only the Voodoo priest has the power to cure supernatural illness, which is said to be caused either by sorcerers or by offenses to the gods, either of which results in an evil spirit possessing the patient. The Voodoo priest makes his diagnosis by various techniques of divination, chiefly card reading. Treatment procedures are usually carried out apart from ceremonies. If the illness is caused by offenses to the gods, these may be propitiated by means of sacrificial offerings. If it is caused by black magic, it can be cured by the use of white magic, which frequently involves the use of scapegoats. The method of treatment employed contains many psychotherapeutic elements which are probably responsible for any therapeutic success obtained. These techniques seem to be less successful in those illnesses which have an organic basis. Such cases should be seen by a physician, but increased medical facilities are required.