

# Adventures in Voodoo Land



'I had a black, abysmal, oceanic feeling. I needed something to improve my luck, and I was going to do whatever it took.' Edward Fox goes to Haiti for some heavy magic. And pays a heavy price

I was standing on the corner of Kingsland High Street, Hackney, in a cloud of exhaust fumes, hesitating to cross the road. I fretfully eyed my destination, which lay on its distant shore, separated by a torrent of angry traffic: a shop called Dark & Light Cosmetics and Hair Products. Already I was wondering if what I was about to do was really such a good idea. I had been attracted by a small handwritten sign in the window a few days earlier, and now I was going back to make further enquiries.

The sign read: "Organizing a trip to Haiti for one week in the summer for people with spiritual problems. The cost is £1,200 which includes return flight to Haiti, bed and breakfast and travelling expenses on the island. People can have any problems solved on this trip. Anyone interested should contact Bernie for more details."

At last, I thought, a chance to do something about my spiritual problems. I was trapped in a downward spiral of competitive materialism. Life was a kaleidoscope of bewilderment. The screens were all blank, the lines all busy, the systems all down, and everyone in a meeting or at lunch. And I had a black, abysmal, oceanic feeling. I needed something to improve my luck, and I was going to do whatever it took.

It was clear that Dark & Light was a front for a voodoo temple. In the window, among the displays of Mary Kay Clarifying Mask Formula 2, Mary Kay Creamy Cleanser and Head and Shoulders for Dry Scalp, you could see a crowd of statuettes of the Virgin Mary, garlanded with rosaries, some with brown, some with pink complexions; John the Baptist baptizing Jesus; gory crucifixion

scenes; candles for various purposes; books with titles like *Voodoo and Hoodoo* and *The Magic of Herbs*; and a shrine to a Jesus-like figure with a sword, with offerings set before it: a burning oil lamp, a dagger, some corn in a dish, coins, apples. There were colour photographs of a voodoo ceremony in the window with the caption, in gothic letters, "I AM REAL".

I went in, and asked to see Bernie. He was due in later, I was told; a shop assistant gave me a business card: "Dark & Light: the foremost source of occult books and supplies." It showed telephone numbers in London, New York and Haiti.

Bernie was there when I went back later that morning. He wore white trousers, a white silk shirt with white stripes, gold rings and a crucifix on a gold chain around his neck. I asked him about the trip.

"Oh, that's on hold because of the political situation," he said. This was bad: the United States was trying to force out the military junta that had seized power in Haiti, at first through an economic embargo that was squeezing dry a country that was dry enough at the best of times, then, if that didn't work (it was feared), with an invasion. In the meantime, what the US called the "MRE" of Haiti – the "morally repugnant elite" – sat tight and tried to ride out the crisis, while normal life ground to a standstill. The situation was tense and dangerous. But Bernie was going to Haiti anyway the following week, on his own, to attend ceremonies, he said. Voodoo was the lifeblood of Haiti; no crisis could lay it low.

Under these circumstances, I needed to be sure that Bernie was



my man. "Are you a voodoo priest, an *hou-*?" I asked. I was testing him, to see if he would use the right word.

"*Houngan?* Yes." He *was* real.

"I'm coming with you," I said.

"All right."

I said I had spent time in Nigeria, researching the Yoruba religion. I rambled on about Ifa, the Yoruba oracle, and Eshu, the god of the crossroads.

"That's not real," he said.

"They think it's real," I said defensively. I was trying to show him how knowledgeable I was, and worthy to accompany him. It cut little ice.

"Can they make a person rise from the dead?" he said.

"No," I conceded. I could not refute his theology.

His employees were packing balls of dried ferns into cardboard boxes, and sealing them with tape, for dispatch to people with spiritual needs all over the world.

I went back to Dark & Light the next day. Walking back there along the Balls Pond Road, I felt like Orpheus descending into the underworld.

The notice advertising the trip to Haiti had been removed. In its place on the plate glass door there was a letter from a man in Connecticut, thanking Bernie for his help in influencing the outcome of divorce proceedings in a way favourable to him. This time, I saw that despite the encouraging signal I had received the day before, this wasn't going to be at all easy. It was as if the gains I had made yesterday had evaporated.

Again I asked to see Bernie.

"Do you have an appointment? Is he expecting you?" said a polite but unwelcoming young man, festooned with rings and necklaces.

Suddenly Bernie had turned into someone terribly important and hard to get to. It was like a mirage: something that seems very close, yet when you reach out and try to grab it, you realize that it is in fact very far away.

"Your name?"

I told him. The man went upstairs to consult the master.

He came back. "He is seeing someone. It will be half an hour."

So I waited. I looked at the stock in the shop. It was all so spooky I shivered. It was enough to make you see the virtues of Protestantism.

The young man reappeared. "He wants to know what you want to talk to him about," he said. I told him to tell Bernie that I was ready to come to Haiti with him, and wanted to talk further with him about it. As if he didn't know.

"He says come back Monday."

I rang him later that day, and put my case all over again.

"What's in it for me?" he said simply.

## I shivered. It was enough to make you see the virtues of Protestantism

"Something," I said. "Let me think about it."

After a few days I rang him again, and offered him \$50 a day to devote himself to solving my spiritual problems. "Out of the question," he said. "I get at least \$1,000 a day when I'm in Haiti."

I told him I'd think about it.

That night, the voodoo goddess Ezili Dantò (of whom there had been a statue in the window of Dark & Light Cosmetics and Hair Products), a dark-skinned manifestation of the Virgin Mary, with two diagonal scars on each cheek, West African-style,

came to me in my dream. Although she wore a crown to denote her divine status, she was heavily built and down-to-earth in manner. She said, "Forget about Bernie. He is too expensive. Believe me, you could get it done a lot cheaper by just going there and finding an *houngan* yourself. It's not as if they're hard to find in Haiti!" She laughed. "Hell," she puffed derisively, "if you can't find an *houngan* in Haiti, which is like finding an Anglican priest in England, then you're in worse shape than I thought. Besides, I'm not even sure this Bernie is Haitian. He speaks with a Jamaican accent! And his last name is Williams. Do me a favour!"

"You're absolutely right," I said. "He must think I'm crazy." She studied me as if there might be something in that.

"Exactly. Here," she said. She reached down from her cloud and handed me a business card with her plump hand. "Call me if you have any problems. The main number's usually busy but you can always reach me on my mobile. Bye-bye, sugar. Good luck!"

That settled it.

The night before I flew to Port-au-Prince, the country's "provisional president", Emile Jonassaint, a doddering marionette in his eighties whom the military had installed a few weeks earlier to give their goonish regime a (ludicrously unconvincing) gloss of legitimacy, appeared on television at 2am to deliver a bizarre speech in French and Creole in which he called on voodoo spirits to protect Haiti, and threatened the United States with a "Haitian secret weapon". "We do not have an atomic bomb, but we have something better," he said ominously. "Haiti has protectors that no one knows about. People will be surprised."

It is part of popular belief in Haiti that the late dictator François "Papa Doc" Duvalier "caused" the death of John F Kennedy by supernatural means when the Kennedy administration was ▶

► squeezing him, just as the Clinton administration was squeezing the military regime now. The regime was using all available rhetorical means to defy the United States, including wrapping itself in the flag of the national spirituality of the Haitian people.

This is one of the strange things about voodoo, but not the only one (heavens no!): it is the spiritual pillar of both the state, which in Haitian history has existed, in large part, for the purpose of exploiting and oppressing the population, and of the population, for whom voodoo is a way of finding meaning in life when life seems to favour the oppressor. The common element is that everyone believes in it: voodoo is the common language of desire and fear in Haiti.

Voodoo is a thread that is continuously woven through Haitian history, right back to its solitary moment of glory, in the last decade of the eighteenth century, when its slave population defeated the armies of Napoleonic France and created the second republic in the western hemisphere, after the United States, and the first modern black state: their resistance was inspired by a renewed, messianic belief in the power of the African gods left behind in Nigeria and Dahomey and Guinea.

An American aid worker told me that voodoo was on the rise again in Haiti, after a quiet period in the aftermath of the overthrow of Jean-Claude "Baby Doc" Duvalier in 1986: a lot of the *houngans* had been Duvalier supporters and informers. Both Papa Doc and his son Baby Doc depended on voodoo to frighten people into submission (Papa Doc even used to dress like an undertaker, in black and grey, to make him look like Baron Samedi, voodoo god of graveyards and the dead). When their patron was expelled, the *houngans'* influence declined.

I stayed at the Oloffson Hotel in Port-au-Prince – a beautiful old ornate wooden building on a leafy hill overlooking the smouldering decay of the Haitian capital. It was an oasis amid chaos. The Oloffson has to be one of the world's great hotels. It was the setting for Graham Greene's *The Comedians*, and it is still a rich mine of what one might call characters. It is now owned by a young American who sings in an ultra-cool voodoo-rock band that plays in the hotel on Thursday nights. Aubelin Jolicoeur, the model for Greene's Petit Pierre, still comes to the Oloffson most evenings at sunset for a rum punch, an old gentleman in a white suit who carries a silver-topped cane and charms whoever meets him with his old-fashioned manners. In Greene's day he was a journalist of remarkable cunning, who managed to publish glimmers of truth about Duvalier's rule and survive. He now writes a gossip column in a local newspaper, *Le Petit Samedi Soir*. Every writer who comes to Haiti stays at the Oloffson: you can meet anybody there.

Now, because of the crisis, there was no one in the hotel but other journalists and aid workers. The aid workers had their work cut out for them in an impoverished country where the US government claimed it was paying to feed a million people a day, one-sixth of the population. The journalists had installed themselves early so they would be in place when the invasion happened, or when whatever was going to happen to resolve the crisis happened. They were fierce and rational and carried sophisticated laptop computers with modems and extra battery packs. I gave them a wide berth. While they waited for the superpower's battleships to appear on the horizon, I made ready to enter a world of mumbo-jumbo, of capricious gods and expensive, dubious remedies.



The Oloffson was a magnet for Haitians offering their services as guides and translators. You only had to sit on the terrace of the Oloffson for ten minutes, looking conspicuously foreign, for one to appear. This is how I met Alex, a short, wiry man in his forties, whom I asked to take me to a voodoo priest. The morning after I arrived, we took a taxi out to Carrefour, about ten kilometres west of the centre of Port-au-Prince, to see a man named Nicolas, but whose spiritual name, Alex said, was Drivé. People came from all over the Caribbean to see him.

There had been a downpour the night before, and the road we took, rue Jean Jacques Dessalines, named after one of the heroes of the Revolution, was an axle-deep creek of muddy water and garbage, crowded with slow-moving traffic. On each side of the road, what was left of the economy plied its business: market women selling piles of mangoes, shacks ironically signposted "BANK" that sold

**Drivé wore a chain with an inch of pink fingertip hanging from it**

lottery tickets, young men hawking plastic gallon jugs of gasoline for a price that fluctuated according to the difficulty of obtaining embargo-busting supplies from across the border in the Dominican Republic, currently about US\$10 per US gallon.

We turned down some potholed roads, parked the car, then walked down a narrow lane past goats and chickens and cooking fires. We entered Drivé's *ounfo*, or temple. The walls inside were painted with big, colourful murals of the voodoo gods, the *lwa*: barely altered versions of Catholic saints, all with haloes around their

heads, the symbol of the exalted self.

We waited, as if in a doctor's waiting room. A woman lay tossing and turning on a cot. One of the things I was to learn about *houngans* in Haiti was that they always have a reputation for evil magic as well as good: pointing to some empty skins of halved oranges on a ledge, Alex said that they were filled with oil and burned as lamps, as part of spells to kill people. He also told me that Drivé was able to make zombies.

"Have you ever seen one?" I asked. Zombiism is caused by a poisonous concoction whose active ingredient is a toxin extracted from a kind of puffer fish found in Haitian waters. It puts the victim into a coma for three days, enough time to pronounce him dead, bury him and dig him up again in the dead of night, at which point the poison wears off and the victim is alive again. The victim then acts like a zombie – that is, like a silent drone – because that is what is socially expected after dying, being buried and dug up again in Haiti. It is extremely rare in practice, but is potent folklore, and everyone fears it happening to them.

He smiled and said he hadn't.

Some people emerged from behind one of two wooden doors at the far end of the room, their consultation concluded, and we were shown in, in our turn, to Drivé. He was sitting in a room dominated by a tiered altar crowded with statues of the kind I had seen in the window of Dark & Light Cosmetics and Hair Products. I sat close beside him. Drivé wore big rings on his fingers and around his neck a chain with an inch of pink fingertip hanging from it. It looked real, but it was plastic. He had a shaven head and a nose that was little more than two holes in the middle of his face.

I wanted to convey to him the precise nature of my spiritual predicament. There was a black, heavy feeling in my solar plexus that screamed, "I want something!" day and night. It was the voice of an angry spirit. Sometimes it whispered under closed doors, sometimes it left messages in chalk on the pavement. I had to do

something. But I wasn't going to do anything involving human body parts, and I wasn't going to leave a chicken carcass painted blue on the front seat of anyone's car. My glance shifted around the room, before settling on the rum-soaked eyes of Drivé. I didn't say any of this.

"I want you to help me get a job," I said.  
"What job?"

It came to me in a dark flash of inspiration. "Religion correspondent on the *Sunday Telegraph*," I replied.

The sorcerer's eyes blazed with dollar signs. He took us into the other room, which had a much spookier atmosphere, to talk real business. The first room had been a consulting room; this was the surgery. It was cluttered with weird and arcane voodoo paraphernalia. Here I sat even closer to him. The room smelled of rum, and was dominated by an elongated wooden head wrapped in chains. It was a spirit, Drivé said, called C'est La Vie. There were rusty chains hanging from the rafters, and clusters of glasses wrapped in cloth, which were used for exacting vengeance. I sat in front of a chunky wooden cross with a cow's skull tied to it with rope. There were rats scuttling all over everything, and cockroaches two inches long.

At first he said he wanted \$500 to perform the appropriate ritual. This was heavy magic. Alex bargained him down to \$350, then \$200.

I gave him \$30 as a deposit. He handed me a bottle of *clairin*, coarse rum, and directed me to offer libations to C'est La Vie, a stone, and a spot on the floor, which I did. I said I would come back the following day.

Alex told me Drivé's story on the way back. "His family was Protestant. When the spirit came to him in a dream and told him to be a voodoo man, he said no, he didn't want to, and that's why the spirits ate his face."

In the car on the way back to the hotel, Alex said, "Are you sure you want to do this?" I said I was. He counselled me quite precisely on what I should do between now and going back to Drivé. You had to know exactly what you wanted, he said, and concentrate on that. "You have to pray in your heart, then come back and pay the rest of the money, and he will give you what you need." He said the ritual would give me the spiritual strength to get what I wanted. But Drivé charged about as much as a Park Avenue shrink: part of the way voodoo works, it seemed, is that you have to pay so heavily it hurts. That way, you believe in it. "For heavy magic, you pay heavy money," Alex said.

**I went back, not the next day,** but the day after, and with a different guide, named Pierre. Back in Drivé's macabre inner sanctum, the hagglng started all over again, as he wanted to be paid in US dollars, not Haitian gourdes, which was all I had. He was on the verge of sending me about my business.

"He is very busy," Pierre said. But eventually the *houngan* relented. Two thousand seven hundred Haitian gourdes. Two hundred dollars. It made my guts hurt to hand over that much money, and he counted every note. I thought, this had better work. He gave some money to an assistant, with instructions to buy certain things in the market for my treatment. We went back into the main room to wait.

Drivé had two female assistants, one of whom, in a white dress,



Pierre pointed out to me. She was a devil, he said. He paused until she was out of earshot, then continued. "If you see her in the street late at night, you cannot pass by. She dress all in red, and she fly like a bat." She was ridden by a spirit called Ogoun Je Rouge, Ogoun with Red Eyes.

After we had been waiting for about an hour, Drivé came up to me and very politely asked, through Pierre, if I didn't mind if a woman went before me: she had to get a plane back to Miami. I said I didn't. I could wait.

The door of the surgery shut behind her. After a while a turkey was brought in. A terrible squawking emerged from behind the wooden door. The assistant came out and washed her feet. Pierre and I discussed the price of gasoline. The *houngan* started shouting. Pierre told me he was reprimanding the woman for being lazy, for not fasting, as prescribed. The woman paid him by the week, he said.

After the commotion, the lady from Miami walked out of the room. She was soaking wet, and shuddering.

Then it was my turn.

I was told to take my shoes off. Another assistant gave me three new white candles, which he instructed me to hold in my left hand as I descended the steps into the cellar, in bare feet. I dreaded stepping on a cockroach. The steps were moist. The assistant followed me down. If anyone asks why I'm here, I thought, I'll say I'm investigating the Haitian secret weapon.

The cellar contained three large, round rocks, arranged in a row. With the assistant's guidance, I poured libations of rum on each one in turn, and planted my three candles the same way. There was also a coffin on sawhorses, and a red, life-sized statue of a human figure with horns, which I could only barely see in the dark. (Pierre told me later that the coffin probably contained the corpse of a person who had been very successful in his life, and that it was there so some of this success would radiate onto whoever went into the cellar to pray.) Then I was told to turn around and pray for what I had come for, facing the blank wall, which was directly underneath the *houngan's* altar.

**He poured various sickly-smelling cosmetics over my head**

Alone, I addressed the unseen forces of the cosmos from the depths of this clammy pit. "Look," I pleaded. "I know this must all seem a bit strange, but please be reasonable. I'll explain it all later. Just let me get through this. Look, I've got to go. They're waiting for me upstairs."

Then Ezili Dantò appeared. "Who you talking to?" she said, a bit mystified.

"Never mind," I said.

She could tell I was worried. "Don't worry, child. You be all right. Hey, I don't want to miss this next part."

Upstairs, I had to take off my clothes, and pour handfuls of corn and handfuls of rice into an enamel bowl filled with water and mint leaves. I had to stir this and rub it all over myself while standing on a wooden board. Drivé, the assistant and Pierre looked on, exhorting me to cover myself completely with the mixture, which burned slightly. I thought, *I have paid \$200 for this*. Then he poured various sickly-smelling cosmetics over my head, which I had to rub into my hair, and with a festive pop opened a bottle of quite good Californian champagne, which he also poured over my head. It fizzed. I dried myself with a sheet of red synthetic silk. He commended me to the care of Ezili Dantò and Ogoun, the god of iron implements and war. That was it.

The *houngan* told me not to wash for the rest of the day, and to

refrain from sexual intercourse. The latter was easily followed, but I wasn't sure how long I would be able to stand smelling like cheap cosmetics. He shook both my hands and we left.

That night I dreamed I had come out in a red rash all over my body.

**To be on the safe side, I decided to seek a second opinion.** I hired a guide named Ti Loulou and asked him to find me another *houngan*. Loulou was big and young and flashily dressed and took me to probably the most expensive *houngan* in Haiti, in the wealthy district of Pétionville. The *houngan* lived in a brand new villa behind a high metal gate. He wanted \$500 to do the same ritual. I told him I had already spent \$200 on Monsieur Drivé.

"That was bullshit," he said. The only rigid principle of voodoo seemed to be that every *houngan* tried to tell you that every other *houngan* was a quack.

We weren't getting anywhere. "Let's go, Loulou," I said. We were both in a bad mood when we left. Ti Loulou was disgusted with me because he didn't think I was taking the matter seriously enough. He thought I was cheap.

"That is a big *houngan*. They make zombi in there," he said, back in the car. Oh no, I thought, not that again. Pierre had said the same thing, and Alex.

Loulou continued to harangue me. "But voodoo cost money!" he snorted. "Now let me explain you something. When you go to *houngan*, you have to work," meaning submit, get in deep, break your own back. "That's why rich people do voodoo, because they got money! They pay! I had some journalists from St Louis. They pay \$250 to talk to *houngan* for an hour." This was obvious rubbish.

"You don't know nothing, man! I tell you one ting: a white man can never know nothing about voodoo, even if he stay here for a thousand years. A Haitian know voodoo even if he don't never go to *houngan*." He jerked his head forwards in preemptory conclusion. Then he turned back to continue. "An I tell you something else. That French lady at the hotel say she smell you after you have that bath and she don't smell nothing!"

(This was probably because I could only stand it for an hour and washed it off, which was probably why the following day had gone so badly.)

After a long moment of surly silence, in which I contemplated the ultimate and expensive failure of the morning's work, Ti Loulou had an idea, and he ordered the driver to go to an address he knew. We parked the car, walked down a narrow alley, and entered a house.

It was the home of Mme Antonio, who was a mambo, a voodoo priestess. Her altar was in a separate room at the back. The focal point of the room was a long wooden-handled kitchen knife, still in its printed cardboard and plastic packaging, hung point-downwards from a nail high up on the wall, above the altar, where a crucifix would normally be.

She took her *ason*, a rattle made from a dried gourd filled with pebbles and the vertebrae of small animals, and shook it to invoke her personal spirit. The spirit came instantly; the mambo started talking in a strange, wheedling voice: the spirit was talking through her. The spirit's name was Wawé, she said. He was a soldier. She became a mambo in 1961, when Wawé came to her in a dream.

The diagnosis was done by a reading of the cards.



I cut the grubby deck, and she pulled out a five of hearts, a ten of diamonds, a seven of clubs and an eight of spades: nothing particularly auspicious. She sat with one leg over the arm of her chair to study them.

"You want something, don't you?" she said. I nodded eagerly.

For the treatment, further negotiations were conducted. As usual, she wanted \$500. But I had hired Ti Loulou on the express condition that he would get the price right down, a task at which he had signally failed with the de luxe *houngan* we had just left. I couldn't afford the whole shooting match all over again. I just wanted something extra to supplement what Drivé had done.

I gave her all the money I had, which was 450 gourdes, which was about \$33, which was a lot. She still wanted more. I managed to pluck a \$20 bill out of my money belt, which I had been saving for the return journey.

She said I had to send her \$60 later, with the threat of awful supernatural consequences if I didn't.

Voodoo practitioners don't send out invoices for overdue accounts, or threaten to place the matter in the hands of their solicitors if payment is not sent by return post, they send demons to hound you to the grave; or they visit you with the most appalling terminal illnesses. Now every time I catch a cold I'm going to think it was the mambo's doing.

The remedy she prescribed was a mixture of rum, perfumes of various sorts, some pink powder, and cigarette smoke, contained in a small bottle that had once held Listerine. I could envisage

it breaking open in my luggage on the flight home, making me live with its awful smell for the rest of my life. She put a lit candle into her mouth, held heavenward a cheap print of St Michael slaying a devil, and sang a few verses of a voodoo song. I felt much better: I preferred her to Drivé; her rite was less gruelling.

There was more hard sell: "She say she can make you a voodoo priest. You see things you never see before," Loulou said.

"I thought you told me a white man could never know about voodoo!"

"That's different!" he protested.

She could also find me my own *lwa*, but that too would cost extra.

She was surprisingly amenable to being photographed. Ti Loulou suggested photographing the two of us together. I sat beside her, and she put her arm around my shoulder. After a few clicks of the shutter, I turned my head and noticed that she was taking flamboyant slugs out of her rum bottle. I told her to put down the bottle immediately. "Please, madame: it is *de trop*."

After we left, Ti Loulou said, "I tink you was angry with me. Now I make you happy, right?"

Yeah, yeah, I thought. Give it a rest, Loulou.

"I tink you make me happy now, no?" Meaning he was seeing if he could get more than his agreed fee of \$50.

**The night before I left Haiti, I rang Bernie's Port-au-Prince** number from my hotel room. The number was on the business card I had been given at Dark & Light Cosmetics and Hair Products. A recorded voice said, "*La direction que vous avez demandée n'existe pas.*" The direction which you have requested does not exist. It was the clearest thing anyone had said to me in Haiti.

Now I am back in London. I have been here for a week. My black, abysmal, oceanic feeling has lifted, somewhat, but I am still waiting to hear from the *Sunday Telegraph*. ☺