



AYITI-MORE THAN MEETS THE EYE- PART 1



To kick off this Destination Spotlight series, I start with the land of my birth – my beloved Ayiti.

Located in the Caribbean’s Greater Antilles, Haiti is home to a population whose culture has been shaped by the convergence of European colonists, enslaved Africans and the - now greatly diminished - indigenous Taino people. While this happens to be the general outline of Caribbean history, the resultant culture on each island is unique and distinct. Haiti is among *the* most distinct and unique.

One of the major reason for this distinction is our religious/spiritual expression - it is strong, vibrant...and surreal.

I’m Catholic, which- according to statistics - makes me a member of the most populous Christian denomination on the island. However, many who claim this religious identity are also practitioners of Vodou, an African based system of spiritual technology. No reasonable understanding of my home and its spiritual potency can be had without taking the phenomenon of Vodou into account.

Growing up, I knew very little about it. My parents were not involved in the tradition nor did they even talk about it. They were seemingly indifferent. My first exposure to it came when I was a teenager. At that time my family employed a domestic assistant by the name of St Luke. Like his biblical namesake he was regarded by those around him as a *medicin feuille* or healer. He had many clientele who would come seeking his herbal remedies and potions. I bore witness to his busy practice through those years and started to have an inkling about the important place in creole Haitian society accorded to the knowledgeable ‘bush’ doctor - especially in the absence of access to contemporary health care.



From this initial contact with traditional medicine, it has since dawned on me that Vodou is an impressive spiritual technology with many areas of specialization. Besides herbalists there are ritual specialists and diviners, for example.

Through the creation of dedicated devotional spaces (such as consecrated natural areas, or personal altars with associated devotional objects), presentation of offerings, as well as participation in elaborate ceremonies of music, dance, and spirit possession, one can be healed and transformed.

The key is devotion.

If you are in Haiti from Easter onwards through the summer months you will see Religious/spiritual devotion on full display in the form of several pilgrimage events:

- **Souvenance** -the main event on the Vodou calendar begins its annual week-long celebrations on good Friday near the city of Gonaives. The devout converge on this sacred site accompanied by rambunctious [Rara music](#). By Sunday, deep ritual takes over with devotees dressed in white and crowned with Crimson stains (from animals sacrificed to the holy spirits.), chanting, singing and reaffirming their loyalty to the old gods. This goes on for several days.

This is Haiti where a very Catholic religious calendar serves as the framework for honoring the Pre-Christian forces which have always been active in the lives of the Africans. Souvenance, perhaps more than any other event, reflects this reality.



The village or extended-family compound (known as Lakou Souvenance) which oversees this event were founded by freed slaves from Dahomey (present day Benin). In fact, another name for the festival is *the fet Daome*. It is this direct ancestral connection to the African home of Vodun which qualifies this region as a sacred space. Interestingly, it is in Gonaives that Haitian independence from France was declared. It is in Gonaives that the uprising against the Duvalier dictatorship began.



Other feast days in Ayiti have a more Catholic profile in accordance with the tradition of syncretism where the names of the saints function as synonyms for the African deities with whom they are paired.

- **Our Lady of Mount Carmel/Ezili Dantò)**

From the 14th to the 16th July, pilgrims flock to the central Haitian village, ville-Bonheur to pay homage to the Virgin Mary, our Lady of Mount Carmel or Ezilii Danto (in the Vodun spiritual perspective). There are Catholic as well as Vodun rites which take place during the three days.



However, the big attraction is the sacred waterfalls, the Saut D’Eau (or Sodo, in Haitian *Creole*) which is considered a natural shrine/residence of Ezili. Pilgrims enthusiastically bathe in her waters and petition her for healing and mercy.

Legend has it that, in 1849, the Virgin Mary made an appearance on a palm tree, near the waterfall, and started to heal people. It is also interesting to note that the 100ft waterfall is reported to have been started spontaneously from a massive earthquake which shook Haiti’s central plateau in 1842. From its inception Sodo has been considered a natural shrine of the ‘other-worldly’ and a place of miracles, a testament to the extraordinary spiritual

potency of certain places on our planet.

- There are several other festivals for saints/vodun spirits. See partial list below. Haiti’s spiritual culture is characterized by intense spiritual devotion. There is something which is real and palpable which people continue to tap into which is bringing benefit to their lives.
 - **Our Lady of Perpetual Help/Ezili Freda and Ezili Dantò** - June 27th, Port-au-Prince
 - **Saint James the Greater/Ogou Feray** – July 25th, Plaine-du-Nord
 - **Our Lady of the Assumption/Ezili Kawoulo**, - August 15th, Cape Haitian, Les Cayes and Port-au-Prince
 - **(Saint Philomena/Lasyrenn)**, September 5th, Bord-de-Mer-de-Limonade

To my fellow pilgrims, spiritual vacationers, I hope this has inspired you to be more curious about Haiti’s pilgrimage culture. She really is a bastion of the purest spiritual devotion. To visit my island is to come to



Blacksmith's forge where resilient beautiful souls are crafted in the heat of adversity only to be cooled by a tried and true connection to non-ordinary reality. On my next post I shall reflect more on Haitian art, culture, and life in aftermath of the massive earthquake of 2012.

Peace and Blessings,

Maryse.