

Traditional music of Haiti

Following the declaration of independence from France in 1804, the first “Black Republic” in the world was the site of a rich encounter between African and European cultures. Today the population is still largely rural and there is a deep divide between city and countryside. There are differences of language, (French / Creole), religion (Christian / Voodoo), literacy and culture. Traditional music separates into Voodoo, Music of festivals, recreation and daily life, and popular music.

Voodoo: Slaves were brought to Haiti from various areas in West and Central Africa. According to their ethnic origins they often conceived themselves as belonging to various *nachon* (nations), including Kongo (Congo), Ibo (Igbo), Daome-Ginen (Dahomey) etc. Their African religions mixed with Catholicism on the plantations. The religion that emerged is often called *Vodou*. Despite a nominal adherence to Catholicism Voodoo is still practiced by the majority of Haitians.

Drumming and songs serve as offerings (along with food, drink, candles, dance and animal sacrifices) and as calls to the *Iwa* (angels) to enter ceremonies. Songs are always performed in call-and-response fashion. Voodoo songs use a mystical *langaje* (language), accessible only to those who have attained *konesans* (understanding).

Major Voodoo rituals include offerings of food for the *Iwa* (*manje Iwa*) or for the dead (*manje mò*), initiation ceremonies such as baptisms etc. or dance ceremonies. They often start with a litany of Catholic prayers, followed by African prayers. Voodoo is practised within the family, within congregations in a temple, or contractually with specialists who prepare protective magic, or within a rural extended family. There are single-nation ceremonies, however the dominant pattern is to gather most Voodoo deities and rituals within one of two major rites, *Rada* or *Petwo*.

Rada unites most of the *Iwa* and ceremonies of most *nachon*, and is older and more African than the fiery and militaristic *Petwo*. The latter rites come primarily from Kongo peoples and were formed in the independence struggle.

Rada rites feature the three drums as described below. Additionally, in some areas a frame drum (*bas*) is played. The majority of *Rada* rhythms are in something like a 12/8 metre. Songs are addressed to deities. Common rhythms include the *yanvalou* (track 3), *mayi* (track 4), *zepòl* and *nago*.

Petwo-Kongo rites honour the *Iwa* of the Kongo and *Petwo* families as well as the *Djouba*, *Gède* and *Ibo* deities. Additional instruments used are a conch-shell trumpet (*lanbi*) and a whistle (*siflèt*).

Gède and *Banda* spirits rule the cemetery, govern transitions between life and death and play an important role in fertility and rebirth. The ceremonies tend to be comically obscene, with exaggerated rolling of the hips (*gouyad*), which may take place at funerals during *Gède* ceremonies around All Souls' Day.

Festival and recreational music

Rara appears to have developed from the French colonial practice of holding a second carnival at the end of Lent. *Rara* is considered a sacred obligation to the *Iwa* and most of its rituals have roots in Voodoo. *Rara* instrumental ensembles feature single note bamboo trumpets and *konè* (tin trumpets). The atmosphere is one of exuberant playfulness.

Kanaval (Creole for carnival) is held three days before Lent. Hundreds of bands (similar to Rara bands) march through the streets playing percussion, singing and dancing. Participants often wear traditional masks, including zombie masks and perform stickfights.

Drums:

The drums are usually made from hollowed-out and carved logs. The drum heads are of heavy cow hide, tightened with strong pegs or a system of cords and pegs. The mouth of the drum (bottom end) is comparatively small, to produce strong percussion.

All instruments in Voodoo ceremonies are treated as spirits: they are baptised, 'put to sleep' (*kouche tanbou*), when not in use, and given offerings as though they were *Iwa*.

Manman ("mother" drum) or **ountò**: This largest and leading drum is usually about 80-90 cm (32-36 in) high, with a diameter of 25-31 cm (10-12 in). It is played with one hand and a heavy stick-like mallet (*agida*). It cues and signals the ensemble and the dancers and plays elaborated variations.

Segon or **papa** drum: This mid-sized drum is about 55 cm (22 in) high and about 20 cm (8 in) in diameter. It is played with two hands, or with one hand and a bent stick, called *agida*. It converses with the *manman*.

Bula or **bebe** ("baby", also called **piti** – "small"): This is the smallest drum, highest in pitch. It is about 45 cm (18 in) high and about 20 cm (8 in) in diameter. It is played with two thin straight sticks. It plays a repeated pattern.

1. Kongo

The *Kongo* is more like a contre-dance than most of the dances of Haiti of African origin. This dance expresses the temperament and the character of the tribe after which it is named – the Kongo tribe of Africa.

The dance is symbolic of beauty and love and is considered to be one of the most beautiful and gracious dances in all of Haitian folklore.

2. Djouba

The Djouba can be interpreted as an entertainment after a *konbit** or a hard day's work. The boys are expected to buy refreshments for the girls after dancing for a while, and usually hold out a paper note to tease them into dancing harder to earn their soft drinks.

* *Konbit*: Cooperative work association – a system of mutual self-help that has counterparts in West African agricultural practices.

3. Yanvalou

The *Yanvalou* is a ritual dance in honour of *Maitre Ague*, god of the sea and also the dance of *Damballa*, whose symbol is the snake. The dance expresses the waves as they rise and fall. The dancers also imitate the movements of the snake in honour of *Damballa*.

4. **Mayi**

The *Mayi* is one of the dances which form a Rada ceremony. Dances typically proceed in anticlockwise circles. Changes in the choreography are introduced by breaks in the rhythm, which often have the effect of precipitating possessions.

5. **Banda**

This erotic dance is part of the *Gède* voodoo rituals. It is a symbolization of man's rebirth as he rises from the dead. Such beliefs recall the Osirian rites in which life and death are fused together. It is a symbol of Prosperina's descent to Hades – a symbol of the dead buried in the earth and their germination into new plant life with the rhythm of the seasons. All this is acted out in the dance.

6. **Petwo**

Petwo rites are the liveliest and most rapid of all Haitian dances. They honour the *Iwa* of the Kongo and Petwo families. The *Iwa* of Petwo are typically hotter in temperament, more demonstrative and theatrical. The name may have derived from one Don Pedro, a former slave in the Leogane hills. The dance seems to be symbolic of the ancient magic practices of the old Ancestors, done in honour of the terrible divinities "*Loa boulette*" and "*La Poudre*". Red is the customary colour of dress for the rites and black pigs are used for sacrifices.

7. **Ibo**

This dance belongs to the *Petwo-Kongo* family of ceremonies, along with *kita*, *boumba*, *djouba* and *banda* rhythms. It honours the deities of *Ibo* and *Gède* deities. With the exception of *djouba* they are almost all in duple metre.

8. **Rara**

Rara is a very old springtime festivity which takes place during Lent. The word itself may come from the Yoruba adverb "rara" – loudly; it was used only to modify the verb "ke", meaning to make a sound or noise.

This festival dance was known early in the history of the colony. It is said that on *mi-careme* day the Slaves of the plantations dressed in masquerade and celebrated with drums and dance.

During this dance colourful ribbons attached to a maypole-like pole are braided. The leader or *king* of the band blows a whistle to signal the couples when to begin and when to end the braiding of the ribbons around the pole.

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