

THE HEX, VODOO WORSHIP, AND THE MACUMBA

By T. G. MACKENZIE

IN the rural and backwoods sectors of Canada and the United States it is still possible to hear of some aggrieved person who had "put the hex" on someone with whom he was annoyed, or angered, or whom he believed to have unfairly wronged him. While the practice varies widely from one region to another, it has everywhere one thing in common. It is always a direct or indirect invocation to the gods or supernatural spirits to visit ill luck, or calamity, or even death, on the offending party.

The curse, for that is what it was, may often be somewhat less devastating than the fictional one — the Black Curse of Shielygh — which Kipling relates was invoked in India by tipsy Mother Sheeny against private Terence Mulvaney and his sweetheart Dinah Shadd; or the factual one which Kenneth Odhar, the Brahan Seer in the Highlands of Scotland, pronounced against the then powerful titular chief of the Clan Mackenzie in the time of Charles the Second of England, a dire prophecy which came true in every particular nearly one hundred and fifty years ago. But a curse it nevertheless was, intended to bring bodily harm or sorrow to the group or person against whom it was invoked.

The practice was naturally more widespread, and also more effective, among the more primitive races of the world, those prone always to link ordinary every-day events with supernatural causes and origins. Sickness, crop failure, flood, fire or other calamity, were invariably attributed by them to angry gods who must in some manner be propitiated. And for sure success in battle or in love their potent aid must also be invoked.

The practice had, and still has, a wide application among the dark tribes of Western and Central Africa who were preyed upon in the past by the Arab traders, and sold by them to the waiting slave ships. These peoples had an abiding faith in rituals, grigris and fetishes; that faith constituted in fact their religion, and they brought that religion with them to the New World. It was their only real link with their African homeland. Even today many of their descendents find in it aid and comfort. The same dusky people — the children of Ham — still practice on all suitable occasions and in many localities in Latin America the primitive religious rites of their African ancestors.

The practice of voodoo worship in Haiti, for example, has been widely misunderstood. So great an authority as the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, after correctly remarking that the word is a corruption of the Creole French word 'vaudou', meaning Negro sorcerer, then dismisses the subject with the curt comment that it is "the name given to certain magical practices, superstitions and secret rites prevalent among the Negroes of the West Indies, notably in the Republic of Haiti. Serpent-worship and obscene rites involving the use of human blood, preferably that of a white child, were considered features of this religion."

That is hardly an accurate description of a primitive but serious African religion; a religion with precise ritual performances, with ancient chants and symbolic pageantry, and with frequent invocations to the African deities venerated by their remote ancestors. We are dealing with the survival in the New World of African paganism, brought over in the slave ships, handed down by word of mouth and ritual repetition from one generation to another, and subsequently overlaid by a thin veneer of Roman Catholicism. It accepts without question the major teachings of the Christian padres; but in all matters intimately affecting their daily lives its devotees revert to the old African gods of earth, water, fire and war, for the protection of their crops, for continued health, for disaster to their enemies, and for good success in affairs of the heart. A voodoo ritual is nothing more or less than a seance, an attempted approach to their pagan gods to invoke their blessing on projected undertakings, or damnation to those who opposed them. This invocation was usually believed to be more acceptable to the supernatural spirits if accompanied by the shedding of blood.

It might be said that the dusky inhabitants of Haiti are nominal Christians by day, but only by day. When the daily tasks are over and night falls, the drums begin their monotonous "tom tom" in the chosen recesses of the near-by jungle, the faithful respond to the call, and African paganism takes over. At daybreak, if the mystical rites have lasted until then, as they often do, the worshippers will slip silently away to their humble homes, and change their simple attire in time to attend early Mass in the little church in their native village.

It is true that the shedding of blood was an integral feature of any important ritual; and it used to be believed that the greater the sacrifice the more rewarding would be the response of the spirits appealed to. In pre-Columbian America, for instance, the sacrifice of human beings to propitiate the angry gods was a usual practice with both the warlike Aztecs and the earlier and

more cultured Mayas. The slaughter of captured enemies was with them a mere routine procedure. When they really wanted tangible results, such as rain for the parched crops they selected and sacrificed the very flower of their own young manhood and womanhood.

However, human sacrifice is now practically non-existent, except occasionally among the aboriginal tribes of Africa itself. The victim at a voodoo ceremony of today is possibly a goat, or more commonly a chicken or a cockerel. It should be remembered that the voodoo worshippers, in this belief in the essential virtue of shedding blood, but follow the ancient customs of their own African homeland, those of the Semitic Israelites of Biblical times, and those of the present-day devotees of Kali Mai, the dread dark goddess of Hindu mythology.

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It should not be thought that the practice of voodoo is confined only to Haiti. But since Spanish or Portuguese replaces the French language throughout Latin America outside of the former French colonies, the corresponding rituals are characterized by different names in other localities. Among the Negroes of the Bahamas, for example, the custom is known as Obéah. Here is the story of a judicial trial which took place there within the past twelvemonth.

A member of the native negro community was the accused, and he was to come up for trial by jury in the court of Chief Justice Henderson. He happened to be a popular member of his community and had their sympathy and support. It was noised abroad that Obéah, an appeal to the spirits, would be resorted to if the trial proceeded. That of course was sheer nonsense, and so the case was duly called and a jury selected.

Then the Chief Justice, the presiding judge, lost his voice and had to adjourn court. Then the President of the Legislative Council died, and during the further delay due to his funeral the judge recovered his vocal faculties. When court was again resumed, the judge again lost his voice and had the utmost difficulty in summing up. The jury however had taken due note of what they believed to be supernatural intervention, and they lost no time in acquitting the accused.

In Guatemala, again within the current year, one Olga Monson was charged with practicing witchcraft against Castillo Armas, the President of the Republic. She had procured a rag doll to represent the president she hated, repeated over it certain deadly incantations, stuck its head full of pins, placed

it in a jar with a noxious liquid, garlic, onions, and some buck-shot, and then sent her maid to bury it in the nearest 'campo santo'. This procedure, as a result of the invoking incantations, was intended to bring sudden death to the person represented by the doll. However, because both Olga and her maid were arrested before they could secretly inter the jar in the graveyard, it is not possible to judge of the efficacy of the method employed. A somewhat similar procedure is incidentally quite common among the negro population of the vast Portuguese-speaking Republic of Brazil.

Brazil, a country to which most of the Portuguese slave ships brought their human cargo, — where in the former capital, the old city of Bahia, one may still see the slave market where many slaves afterward brought to the Southern States of America were purchased, — has today a population of African origin many times greater than that of Haiti. Those slaves so purchased by Southern planters brought with them to North America a firm belief in witchcraft and supernatural spirits, as well as a few Portuguese words, such as 'pickinny', which is nothing but the Anglicized spelling of 'pequenina', meaning a very small female child. The former Portuguese slaves, the last of whom were legally liberated in Brazil only in 1888, have preserved and kept alive African traditions almost identical with those of the West Indian island of Haiti with its French background. Such things as tribal and ancestral religion go far deeper than mere differences of language and casual environment.

In Brazil the Portuguese word 'Macumba' is broadly used to describe both the nocturnal gatherings of the negro worshippers and the incantations and crude mystical devices through which sorrow or suffering is brought to the hated enemy or rival, or joy and happiness to the invoking party.

The profound reverence for fetishes, weird rites and incantations as avenues to the unseen spirits which the African slaves brought with them to the New World, was nourished and kept alive in the slave quarters or 'senzalas' of the great Brazilian 'fazendas'. In the course of time the Roman Catholic church resolved to bring these simple doubly-black sheep into her fold. They on their part readily absorbed such dramatic aspects of Catholicism as appealed to their primitive minds, without however giving up one jot or tittle of the respect or veneration due to their old African gods.

Among the negresses of Brazil, it is an almost universal custom to wear a grigri or charm, known in Portuguese as a 'figa', in the form of a clenched fist with the thumb protruding

between the index and second fingers of the hand. This charm may be fastened in wood, in ivory, in silver, in semi-precious stone or in gold, according to the wealth or option of the wearer. It is worn on a necklace or chain about the neck. Its purpose is to ward off 'The Evil Eye' from the wearer; it is often worn pendant from the back of the neck, instead of on the bosom, as that is the direction from which unseen danger is more likely to approach.

In Brazil I learned that the invisible attendant spirits were divided into two main groups; the Éixus or evil spirits and the Óguns or friendly spirits. Evil practices and appeals to the Éixus — in other words Black Magic — were governed by the "Law of Guimbanda, while beneficent practices and invocations to the Oguns — or White Magic — were governed by the "Law of Umbanda." It would seem that the witch doctors, the high priests of Macumba, had built up a pagan theology of their own which perforce necessitated their purchased intervention.

I was most happy to learn that the chief of the Oguns was Sao Jorge, or Saint George, my own patron saint, a bright figure undoubtedly adopted and absorbed into their theogony soon after their first contact with the Christian religion. This saint garbed in full medieval armor, mounted on a magnificent white charger, and bravely battling the fearful fire-breathing dragon, must have made an irresistible appeal to their primitive minds.

Successive Brazilian governments have endeavoured to restrict or abolish the practice of Macumba. In the neighbourhood of Rio they succeeded only in driving it underground. In some of the northern states, where the negro population is large, it still has a firm foothold.

In Brazil, if you happen to have a dusky skin, and have also a business enemy, an employer who has unfairly treated you, or a rival for the hand of your 'namorada' or 'querida', you will go to a good "terreiro da macumba," — we would probably call him a witch doctor — tell him of your trouble, and pay him a suitable fee for his services. He will in due course furnish you with a "canjeré" or "despácho," which will probably include; a rag doll representing your enemy or rival, with pins stuck into it. If you are able to secure a few strands of the enemy's hair to attach to the doll's head, the charm becomes much more efficacious; a dead black hen or chicken; manioc flour cooked in palm oil; cigars, copper coins, a bottle of cacháca or native rum, and some lighted candles, the latter presumably to represent a wake. This despácho or deadly charm you deposit at the nearest crossroad or on the steps of your enemy's residence,

on any Friday at the stroke of midnight. At the same time you will chant repeatedly some deadly invocation taught you by the witch-doctor. After which your sleep should be sound and peaceful, and your enemy's plans successfully thwarted and of no avail.

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My wife and I were both anxious to attend a real Macumba, not one of those faked affairs put on for the special benefit of passing tourists. Through my capable office secretary, Marta Soáres de Sá, we got in touch with a member of a Macumba organization or club in the Baixada Fluminense, the low-lying swampy tract that lies between the capital city of Rio de Janeiro and the Serra do Mar, the coastal range in which are located the lovely hill towns of Petropolis and Teresopolis, named respectively after the former Emperor Dom Pedro and his wife Teresa. We were opportunely advised, after Marta's assurances that we were seriously interested in Negro customs and were not connected in any way with the police force of the government, as to the date of the next Macumba session. This happened in 1938, when the little Gaucho dictator Getulio Vargas held the country in the hollow of his hand. He had come from the extreme south of Brazil, where the Macumba was unknown, and he thought its practice lowering and undignified, so its observance was officially banned in many parts of the country.

We set out late one sunny afternoon in my Buick car. The party consisted of João Botelho, my Portuguese chauffeur, my able secretary Marta, our colored guide, my wife and myself. We looked forward eagerly to the experience, because as a general rule only persons of color are permitted to attend Macumba celebrations; but Marta had been persuasive and insistent.

For some miles we followed the fine paved highway which leads to Petropolis, then turned off on a narrow dirt road used only by ox-carts, near the small Rio Douro. Soon a thick jungle closed in on each side. We reached a spot where the road passed through a pool representing overflow from the river. A native woman was washing clothes at its margin. Botelho hesitated because if the pool proved to be deep and the bottom muddy, we would be stuck beyond the reach of help, and darkness was rapidly coming on. But the Cabóclo woman called out encouragement, and sent her small boy into the water to indicate its depth at the ford. The bottom proved to be sandy and the pool only knee-deep, so we tipped the happy youngster and proceeded on our way.

Shortly we came to a fork in the little-travelled road; but our guide got down, examined the tree-trunks, and found markings in the bark intended correctly to orient us. It was quite dark when we arrived at the humble adobe dwelling where the Macumba seance was to be held, but nevertheless we had arrived early, so we sat on a log and smoked cigarettes while the guide instructed us as to how we should behave. It was a serious occasion for them, he said, and any indication of amusement or unbelief would be likely to get us into trouble. Above all, we should never cross either our arms or our legs during the course of the seance, as such behaviour was highly displeasing to the invisible spirits.

At about eight o'clock, we were called on to enter. We were welcomed by a number of colored persons, including José the owner of the building, and an extremely fat negress named Maria who turned out to be the priestess or mistress of ceremonies.

The house consisted of two rooms only; the larger one had been cleared and decorated for the occasion and was perhaps 30 feet long by 15 feet wide. The other room contained the kitchen. The walls were of sun-dried brick, and the roof was of the same material, supported on wooden poles for rafters, with a lacing of small sticks between the poles. The floor was of hard tamped earth, and had just been covered with a layer of green banana leaves, to keep down the dust. A single kerosene lamp high on one wall supplied all the lighting. In the angle of one corner was a small altar decked with paper roses. On the altar itself were small images of Sao Sebastiao, Santo Antonio, Sao Benedicto, the patron of the black race, Sao Cósme and Sao Damião, the protectors of children; and in the place of honor and dominating all others was the image of Sao Jorge with his spear, seated on his traditional white charger.

Then candles were lighted in front of the altar, and there entered the male and female actors who were to take part. In turn they dropped to their knees before the altar and touched the floor three times with their foreheads. Then the door and the wooden shutters which served as windows were tightly closed, and those present were addressed by one of the older negroes, as we all listened in respectful silence.

He counselled the most absolute respect and silence during the proceedings. He said "We must respect the manifestations of the spirits in the same manner that we revere the memory of our own ancestors, in spite of the fact that we have not known them." And he explained that the "manifestados" were those

who would have the honor to receive the spirits within their bodies.

Thereafter one negro marked a Cross on the open palms of each present with a piece of chalk, while another carried around a flat tin containing the hot embers of some dry herb, which gave off an agreeable smell as he waved his tin up and down before each of us. Thus we were purified, and were now ready for the reception of the spirits. The first act was to be dedicated to Jose de Cabinda, an African slave who died in 1838 at the reputed age of 120. This number was put first because the owner of the house in which we were holding the seance was also named José, and in addition the day was the Day of Sao José. We and the other spectators, all of them descendents of slaves, had retired to the far end of the room. One rude bench, the only furniture left in the room, was made available to our party. All the others stood throughout the performance.

The "manifestados" then formed a close group in front of the altar and started a slow shuffle, moving in a narrow circle and chanting continuously at the same time in a subdued tone of voice, a tune of incomprehensible words, undoubtedly African in origin. They chanted and shuffled for some minutes, but nothing happened. The priestess then came to us with a worried expression on her broad face and said something must be wrong on the outside. So we opened the door and windows and we all went out to investigate.

This is what we found. My chauffeur Botélho had declined to accompany us inside, and had stayed in the car. Feeling lonesome, and perhaps afraid of the spirits, he had turned on the head-lights of the car. And that, if you please, is what had kept the spirits away.

I told him of the trouble he had caused, but he still emphatically declined to come in and join us. So jokingly I asked "Why, Botélho, surely you don't believe in the power of The Evil Eye?" and I got a truly Hibernian answer. "Of course not," he stoutly asserted, "and just for that they might want to put it on me."

Returning inside, we again closed the door and windows, and were again purified as before. Then the slow shuffle and monotonous chant recommenced, and this time it wasn't long before they got tangible results.

One by one the spirits of the ancient Africans which were being invoked entered into and possessed the bodies of the performers. One by one they passed into a trance, the entrance of the spirit being manifested by a convulsive shuddering of the

body. Their respiration became laboured. They shuffled about like very old people. Some threw themselves to the floor in convulsive movements and then rose to speak to each other in a lingo which none of the spectators understood. The fat priestess acquired a strange intonation which was rather alarming. Some of the dusky spectators who surrounded us fell on their knees before the incarnations of their ancient African ancestors and solemnly rendered them homage.

During this period the tottering and feeble old manifestados were served with a stiff bracer of the strong native rum. Then after an interval the spirits were asked to return to Ogun by means of a weird different chant, and their departure from the bodies was marked by the same convulsive movements.

After an interval, the spirits of the Cabóculos or primitive primitive Indians were next invoked. One by one the spirits arrived with the same bodily manifestations, and we saw a primitive dance in the manner of the Indians, but without the usual accompaniment of the tambor or cuica, as it was feared the sounds of primitive barbaric music might be heard and reported to the police. The stout priestess had lighted a pipe and puffed strongly on it. Some of the negro spectators attempted to speak with the performers, but completely failed to understand their strange dialect.

Next we had the Eixus, a violent number, with five female and three male actors. When the evil spirits entered their bodies, the performers began to spin like whirling Soudanese dervishes, and some of the huskier on-lookers formed a protective screen to prevent them from bumping into us. Their respiration became short and rapid, the pupils of their eyes dilated, the lower jaws projected crazily, they groaned hoarsely and whirled violently, they dropped to their knees and crawled toward the altar. Then they chanted in unison an air which ended with a constant wailing repetition:

Éixu Tirirí, Toquínho de Guiné

Éixu Tirirí, Toquínho de Guiné.

During the eerie dance, the performers continually called out "Oi! Oi!". Then all at once the Éixus approached us with a hostile bearing, which we quite failed to understand until a young negress near Marta whispered to her "Quickly! Uncross your hands!" Marta had become so excited at the performance that she had neglected the explicit injunction and had unwittingly crossed her arms.

Then a quite unscheduled thing happened. Maria, the fat priestess, suddenly let out a horrible shriek, her eyes bulged in

the direction of the door and she fell heavily to the floor. Our colored guide later explained as we drove home that the door had accidentally swung open, and Maria had seen the spirit of one of the Éixus as it slipped out the open door. He said it was a tremendous shock to her because "with all due respect, it is not good to have seen an Éixu."

That was the end of that fantastic number. Some of the actors were lying exhausted on the floor. One young negress, in a bright red blouse, was indeed so rigid that she was carried out like a log by two spectators at her head and feet, her body so stiff between them that she might well have been a solid block of wood.

But the door was now open, and we welcomed the opportunity to repair to the Buick for a cigarette and a comfortable seat. The moon had risen in the meantime, and a light breeze was gently stirring the leaves of the palms and the banana plants. But for the solid presence of the Buick we might easily have imagined ourselves marooned in the heart of Darkest Africa.

Returning after the intermission to the resumed seance, and being again purified, the spirit of Ogun was next invoked with the following chant:

Ogun de la-la-la
 Ogun de le-le-le
 Vem salvar seus fio, Ogun
 Das onda do mar e-ma-le.

Ogun, as I have stated, is the good spirit of the negroes, but as a consequence of the Christian overlay to the primitive African religion, the chief of the Oguns is also said to be Sao Jorge, or St. George.

The Oguns arrived more quietly than their predecessors, the Éixus, and I had an opportunity to tell the roly-poly priestess, not performing in this number, that St. George was my own patron saint. Ogun was therefore called on to bless the Macumba session in homage to the visitors. Ogun apparently agreed and, in a lingo which only his devotees could understand, said that he was very pleased with the white guests because of the deep respect which they had shown during the seance.

In the following act only Maria took part, to invoke the spirit of Vovozinha, an old black female slave. The invoking chant went:

Oh, pilao da Mozambique
 Oh, pilao da Mozambique
 Que é de Mozambique
 Que é
 Que a
 O sol ja vae
 A lua ahi vem clareà

When the spirit entered her stout body and transformed Maria, she began to speak in the lingo peculiar to the black slaves brought from Mozambique in earlier days. She called the other negros "moleques," and myself and my wife she addressed as Yoyo and Yaya.

In the final act, "As Crianças," — or the children, — the protectors of childhood Sao Cosme and Sao Damiao were the spirits invoked. The manifestados, on being possessed, crept about the floor on all fours and spoke in the high shrill voices of very young children. One negress, with a piece of hard candy in her grimy paw, crawled over to where we sat on our rough bench, hoisted herself up as a youngster would by grasping my knee, and then pushed the piece of candy in the direction of my mouth. I smiled at her and politely declined. She insisted in the manner of a perverse child, and to placate her I accepted the gift. Then by insistent motions toward her own mouth she indicated that I must eat it. So finally I had to pop it in to my mouth, and she smiled happily at having got her way.

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The Macumba seance in the adobe hut of José, the humble farmer in the jungle of the Baixada Fluminense, was now over. We gratefully thanked our hosts of the evening, and after first consulting our guide I was able to leave a modest donation with the robust Maria, who was now smoking a huge cigar. We departed in a hail-storm of blessings and good wishes.

I must add that during the whole performance a large pure-white cockerel remained tethered under our rude bench. I imagine that if the occasion had called for the invoking of a curse, the bird would have been a black one. I assume also that the shedding of its blood was to be the last act in what had been for us an intensely interesting and eye-opening seance. But that of course could take place only after the white visitors had departed from their midst.

It was already four o'clock in the morning, and the eastern horizon was beginning to change from black to gray, as we said our farewells to our simple African hosts, and Botelho piloted us safely over the rough cart-road through the Brazilian jungle, back to the broad paved highway and on to the beautiful modern city of Rio, just as the first ray of the rising sun began to gild the top storeys of the taller buildings. We were back in another and totally different world — a world of reality.

THE TENDER ART

By ALDEN A. NOWLAN

The spark she struck with tender art
To flame inside her lover's heart,
Soon spread its fire in scarlet lanes
And burnt along his pulsing veins.

The holocaust engulfed his years,
Unsmothered by her desperate tears,
And she, like one who bears the lash,
Saw love and lover turn to ash.