

Reviews

MARK OF VOODOO: *Awakening to My African Spiritual Heritage*

By SHARON CAULDER

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Reviewed by Richard A. Blasband

Mark of Voodoo will especially appeal to anyone interested in shamanism and/or African Voodoo society but will also be of great value to anyone interested in consciousness and the many varieties in which it can manifest. The author, Sharon Caulder, holds a doctorate in Mythology and Depth Psychology and has professional credentials in physical therapy, neuroscience, education, and transpersonal psychology. She is thoroughly Western in birthplace, education, cultural upbringing, and scientific point of view. She is also an experienced shaman, with many paranormal qualities—clairvoyance, telepathy, healing abilities—who maintains a spiritual healing practice in California, specializing in the treatment of cases of possession. This combination of qualities and education gives Dr. Caulder a deep understanding of herself to the depth where she knows and can contact her eternal spirit. This, and her innate courage permit her to actively enter a field of inquiry, Voodoo, that is not for the faint of heart, to objectively report on it in this manuscript, and to tell us of its profound impact on herself.

As a child in New Jersey, Caulder was subjected to voodoo ritual practiced by her Great Aunt and other members of her family: in a special ceremony she was forced to undergo the release of kundalini energy, in another she received her birthright, a Voodoo spirit, from her maternal grandmother. Much of her early life experience was closed off to her conscious awareness until the age of 43, when Sharon began to have flashbacks of these frightening ritual experiences. At this point she knew that she would have to go to Africa to fully recover her African spiritual heritage. This book

documents her remarkable adventures there.

Little was known in the United States of Voodoo or its origins, except that it is most often portrayed as an African or Haitian cult of zombie-makers, who practiced a form of witchcraft. On the advice of her spirit Caulder flew to the Republic of Benin, previously known as Dahomey, and its coastal village of Ouidah, where the Supreme Voodoo Chief, Daagbo Hounon Houna lived and held court. Initially suspect because of the lightness of her Negro color, Caulder was soon recognized as having the “Mark of Voodoo” in her spirit, and was given entrée into the most private of the Voodoo rituals.

When I saw the bag, I knew that Daagbo had come to give me my traditional scars. I asked him to explain the scarring, and he said that commonly there is a ceremony during which the deity possesses the initiate. When the initiate is totally possessed and in a frenzy, the elders cut the initiate's body with ceremonial blades. Each cut is a symbol for something, such as the identity of your people, your status in society, and protection. I realized that each cut, etched deeply and permanently into one's physical body as a scar, deeply marks their soul as well. And as with any symbol, each scar contains a program that can be opened only to those select few who possess a key to it. Therefore most people, including the common Vodusi, cannot decipher the ritual marks on the initiated. The symbols are inscribed with a blade on the physical body and with laser energy on the soul. They are the transcribed voice of the Voodoo divinity.

Caulder and Chief Hounon Houna recognized in each other their past lives as lovers and soul-mates. She became Houna's queen and left a profound mark on the community

bringing to it material benefits and some of the advantages of Western life, especially with regard to hygiene. This she managed with the utmost tact and respect for her hosts and their way of life.

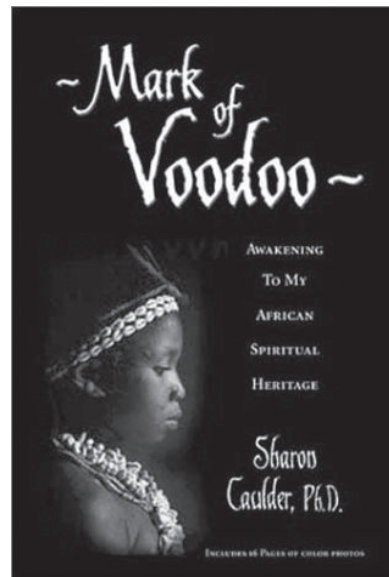
During her three-month initial stay in Africa, Caulder witnessed and participated in a variety of Voodoo ceremonies, some of them dangerous to her spiritual survival:

The front courtyard was filled with people laughing and talking. Martine, [Sharon's Ouidah friend and interpreter] asked around and then reported to me, “The Zangbeto are coming over to consult with Daagbo.” Before I could ask, she said, “You

know, the deities that are across the road in that temple.” But before I could say another word, the drumming commenced, and in danced a procession of “haystacks” that were obviously alive and could sing, dance, and talk. The whirling haystacks were accompanied by men with long sticks who guided them around. “There are not supposed to be men under there,” said

Martine, “only spirits. They are the spirits of the night.” By this time they had assembled around Daagbo, and the leader was talking to Daagbo. Martine started to answer (a question that Sharon had put to her) when one of the Zangbeto came twirling toward me, alternately spewing and then sucking energy like a dark, menacing whirlwind . . .

The spirit inside was said to be discarnate, and when it was earthbound it possessed the large haystack form and used it as its body. Just as I was about to turn to Martine to ask what it wanted, someone shoved me forward and the Zangbeto began whirling around me. It was then that I got it, as I felt my spirit being sucked right out of my body. The war was on. I started to fight to keep my spirit inside my body and his spirit out of me. I



wasn't going to let the Zangbeto possess me and use my body and steal my energy potential. But I could feel myself begin to lose consciousness as I had seen so many devotees do during my time among the vodouis. Martine stood helplessly by. Finally I anchored my spirit deep in my body and cringed as the foreign spirit of the Zangbeto entered my body along with my own. Even if I was to be possessed, I was not going to let my spirit be evicted from its own temple.

. . . Just as I thought that my fight was a loss, the Zangbeto suddenly stood deathly still. The crowd became silent, and everyone focused on us.

Daagbo stepped forward and appeared to scold the Zangbeto. I remembered that as supreme chief, Daagbo was chief of all of the deities, including the Zangbeto. The possessing spirit moved out of my body and back into the haystack form. I immediately began feeling stronger as my own spirit began expanding throughout my body.

Although the ceremonies involve animal sacrifice, mostly chickens and goats, which are later eaten, and the temporary possession of humans by spirit entities, Caulder learned that Voodoo is fundamentally a "religion" that provides its practitioners with blessings and protection. As plentiful and frightening as the spirit entities are they are also the potential source of personal spiritual growth as seen from the Vodistu point of view. Dr. Caulder's account of life in the few African villages she visited, of Voodoo ritual, and of other practices makes for fascinating reading: She writes well and so involves us in the detail of her experience that one feels that one is there.

Caulder's was and is a true adventure of the spirit. Though few of us are spiritually equipped to follow a similar path, we can all learn and be inspired by the accounts of those like Sharon Caulder who are willing and able to share their lives with us.

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