



FORTEAN TRAVELLER

96. Lomé's Voodoo Market, Togo

TOM COOTE hunts for a bargain at one of the world's strangest markets and finds a love rat hotel manager struggling with a Vodosi's curse...

Marco turned up for breakfast in what appeared to be his pyjamas. I couldn't decide whether the large black and white stripes running across his baggy suit made him look more like Andy Pandy or an escaped convict. He was tall, with a flat top haircut and a moustache, spoke good English and seemed friendly. At first he seemed a little reluctant to take a seat at our table in the forecourt of Hotel le Galion but he soon relaxed into a spiel about the pleasures that lay ahead. I found it difficult to believe that he would go to the trouble of escorting us to the voodoo market without expecting some

kind of financial reward but there did seem to be a possibility that Dave might hire him as a guide if he were to travel up to the hill forests around Kpalimé.

I was about to more explicitly raise the awkward subject of money, when the hotel's young manager walked up behind Marco and brusquely tapped him on the shoulder before wriggling his finger at him in a 'come over here immediately' sort of way. A few minutes later, Marco returned to our table and told us we should get going. When I asked him what that was all about, he told me that the manager thought that he might be stealing business from him. He asked us to meet him outside.

BELOW AND OPPOSITE: Interesting items for sale at the Fetish Market.

As the Fetish Market was several miles across town, Marco waved down a taxi, and negotiated what was, apparently, a fair price.

After a short but hot and bumpy taxi ride across Lomé, Togo's capital city, we pulled up outside the wooden gates to the voodoo market and somewhat reluctantly coughed up the overinflated entrance fee for tourists. I had expected a typically crowded, bustling African marketplace, but it was just a dusty car park with a line of wooden stalls up against the far side. Stacked amongst the lines of what looked to be crudely made tourist trinkets and other assorted junk were shrivelled monkey's heads, animal skins, squashed lizards and tangles of slightly mouldy looking snakes. Some of these magical ingredients would be incorporated by marabouts into malevolent juju rituals while other fetishes would be purchased in the hope of gaining luck, love or money. Many poor West Africans – rather than investing in education, health or housing – would rather spend what little money they have on fetishes that they believe will bring them good luck in exams or fast, easy wealth. If these magically imbued trinkets fail to deliver upon their promises, then it is because they failed to invest enough; if they do get lucky, then this only serves to reinforce superstitious belief, and such illusions of power can quickly become addictive.

It's not only the poor and the powerless that fall under the spell of voodoo and witchcraft: many of West Africa's leaders and wealthy elites are



drenched in the bloody and sacrificial culture of juju-marabou. When a shiny new BMW pulled in through the gates, the stallholders abandoned their grisly collections to us, and rushed over in a rising storm of dust. Apparently they were rich Nigerians who journeyed regularly to the Fetish Market and were known to spend up to \$10,000 in a single visit. Such huge amounts of money, being offered for particularly rare or powerful magical ingredients, act as a great temptation to the impoverished: in Liberia and Sierra Leone, bodies have been found, emptied of their organs, and the trend in East Africa for murdering albinos for their hearts and livers has recently spread to Ghana.

A number of influential West African leaders – such as Gnassingbé Eyadéma (Togo), Foday Sankoh (Sierra Leone) and Charles Taylor (Liberia) – appear to have deliberately cultivated a magical mystique in order to inspire both fear and awe. Eyadéma regularly consulted diviners, had a live-in savant, and was widely believed to be able to kill through the use of mystical powers. When he survived a plane crash in 1974, he insisted that he had been saved by the spirit Gu (Ogun), to which he sacrificed all-white animals, while at the same time also claiming to be blessed by the Christian God. Sankoh believed that massive human sacrifices and ritual murders had made him so powerful that no bullet could ever penetrate him. He also claimed to have the power to simply vanish into thin air. Between 1991 and 2002, a powerful mix of juju-marabou and drugs led to around 500,000 Sierra Leoneans being murdered, raped or mutilated. Many of these atrocities were carried out by child soldiers: the rebel leaders would open up scars across the children's faces and heads, before rubbing cocaine directly into their blood stream through the open wounds, and then unleashing the frenzied juveniles upon their 'enemies'. Liberia's Charles Taylor was also notorious for his involvement in human sacrifice and ritual murder: when his rebel army – who wore magical amulets to protect them from bullets – finally took control of the capital, Monrovia, they were shocked to see these rural invaders ripping out and eating their victims' hearts.

Once the wealthy Nigerians had left, with whatever they had come for, the Vodusi led us into a poorly lit back room and sat us down. They handed each of us a wooden bowl and proceeded to hold up a series of fetishes that they had blessed, giving a brief explanation of each object's special powers, before dropping one of each into our bowls. One of the fetishes was an ugly little figure with a sprouting of dried grass hair, which was supposed to protect your house. Another one was a special necklace made up of 51 herbs – they seemed a bit vague about what it was supposed to do. I really wasn't sure what I was doing in there but it all became clear when they asked us how much we would like



He believed that no bullet could ever penetrate him

to pay for the contents of our bowls. I told them that I wasn't interested, as politely as I could, and handed back the wooden bowl. The 'priest' looked a bit disappointed in me and placed a small pendant in my hand as a 'gift', which he assured me would guarantee good fortune when travelling. He then asked me how much I would like to donate and made a polite suggestion of an appropriate amount that was clearly absurd. I handed the pendant back as well. I didn't need it – the Gods of Travel were already with me. They then asked me to leave the room so that they could talk to Dave in private. A few minutes later, he emerged clutching a small plastic bag containing two small, crudely constructed fetishes. He had somehow managed to bargain them down from 60,000 to 32,000 CFA (about \$45). Apparently he had always wanted to own a 'genuine' voodoo fetish.

Later in the day, I asked the young manager of Hotel Le Galion why he had spoken to Marco so sternly. He sighed, in a way that seemed to indicate that it was a long and unfortunate story, but nevertheless agreed to sit down with me and tell me all about it. As I suspected, Marco was well known for his attachments to both tourists and prostitutes. He had also been accused of ripping off tourists who had been foolish enough to hand over to him their documents or cash.

This wasn't, however, why the young manager had taken such a dislike to him. It was, he claimed, because Marco had tried to have him killed.

At the time of the incident, the manager had been having big problems with his "hot" Togolese wife. While they were living apart, he had become involved with a European girl who was a guest at the hotel. Fearing that he would inevitably be drawn back to his exceptionally beautiful wife, the girl had paid Marco to take a lock of the manager's hair to the Vodusi, who then used it to place a love spell upon him. At this point in the story it all seemed to get a bit muddled. Somewhere along the line, the love spell seemed to have been upgraded to a curse. "It's not that I believe in it," claimed the manager, "but they really do, and he intended to do me harm." For true believers, a curse really can lead to death: when those, conditioned from birth to believe in such phenomena, are told by all around them that they are going to die, then this can result in a self-fulfilling prophecy of anxiety and despair in which the victims just seem to give in to the diseases that are all around them. The manager assured me that he had seen this happen. He was now back with his wife, and happy and healthy, but still seemed disturbed by the malevolence of such magic. "He could have killed me," stated the manager... seeming to surrender his claim to be a disbeliever. **FT**



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