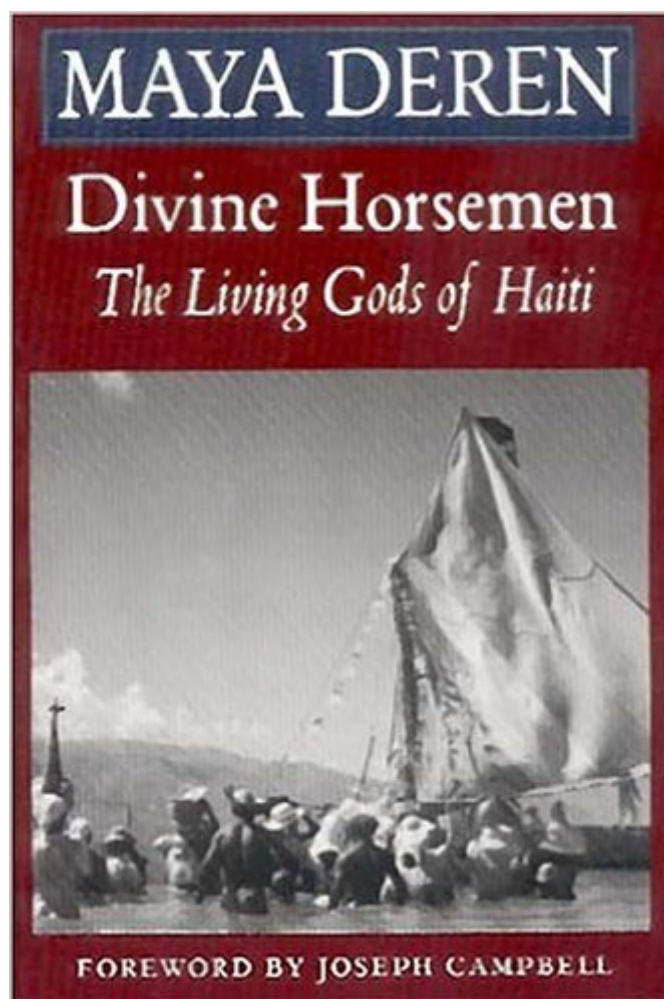


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Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods Of Haiti



Synopsis

Includes photographs and drawings. Foreword by Joseph Campbell This is the classic, intimate study, movingly written with the special insight of direct encounter, which was first published in 1953 by the fledgling Thames & Hudson firm in a series edited by Joseph Campbell. Maya Deren's Divine Horsemen is recognized throughout the world as a primary source book on the culture and spirituality of Haitian Voodoo. The work includes all the original photographs and illustrations, glossary, appendices and index. It includes the original Campbell foreword along with the foreword Campbell added to a later edition.

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Customer Reviews

Maya Deren's "Divine Horsemen" is a poetically rendered exploration of the philosophy and practices of Haitian Voodoo. Written in the early '50's (with the support of Joseph Campbell), this book is not a "how to" practical guide. Rather it a metaphysical, religious, philosophical & anthropological study of Voodoo. As an artist, Deren brings a uniquely lyrical voice to her narrative and paints a multi-textured, infinitely complex portrait of a spiritual tradition with roots stretching back to the very dawn of humanity. In reading this book I was awed by an awareness of the sophistication and perception of the so-called "primitive" people of West Africa (from which Voodoo derives). They were only "primitive" in terms of the development of technology, certainly not in the development of the spirit. Reading this has created a profound shift in my view of the history of civilization as taught to me in school. This book is essential reading not only for anyone interested in Voodoo, but also for any student of comparative religion, mythology or spirituality.

This is an excellent history of the African origins of Voudoun (creole 'spelling' used by Deren) and its transplantation to the New World. When the subject of spirit possession comes up, Deren questions why the most impressive phenomenon of Voudoun is not seen as a direct pragmatic expression of the principles of the religion . There is a chapter on this called 'The White Darkness' which Deren cautions should not be seen as a 'personal' experience but service to the 'loa' or Voudoun deity. Nevertheless this has been misinterpreted as Deren's 'deed', which has laid ground for several unfounded myths about the filmmaker. Her participatorial observations ran against the grain of traditional orthodox male anthropologists of the time and she realized that she would be attacked for encroaching on their turf. That is why DH should be seen as an important feminist ethnography. Deren described the relationship between magic, science and religion which was at the apex of modernism. This research interrupted her film career as she was hard at work with this before she made her first film in 1943. She later returned to this as recipient of a Guggenheim fellowship for creative work in motion pictures in 1947 . Over 20,000 feet of film were shot by Deren in Haiti and remained unedited as she later came to see that it was impossible to alter the forms of the rituals of Voudoun. For that reason it is claimed that she never made a film and that her involvement in Voudoun destroyed her work as an artist which are fallacies. This book is a must to understand the complexity of this outstanding artist and ethnographer

I agree with all but one of the statements made by carnero@juno.com: Deren was not an academic at all. Rather, she went to Haiti as a filmmaker, intending to study and film ritual dance. In her preface, she discusses at length her unique vantage point as an artist rather than an anthropologist. This is part of why her book is so wonderful: it is clearly infused with an artist's--and ultimately an adherent's sensibility.

For those looking to seriously research and learn about Haitian Vodou, Deren's book is a must-read. For those interested in an overview, this is not the book. The reality is that Deren seems to write largely for the sake of the art, with less concern for the communication of the subject matter. I judge the book at a higher standard partially because it is considered to be the standard for resources on Haitian Vodou, and partially because of the length of the book. For as much time as it takes to get through this book, I feel that my understanding should have increased more than it did. I did not find this to be easy reading, and often stumbled over the flowery, albeit awkward sentences. She writes with passion, but she writes in the style of a memoir. But this is not a memoir. it could have been,

but it's a book about the beliefs and traditions of Haitian Vodou. For that purpose, she could have cut the book in half and been more efficient to be more concise. The most useful sections were the appendices at the end, speaking about marriage between voudisant and loa, and about indigenous influences in the religion. If you're serious about Haiti or Vodou or religious studies, it's a good thing to read. But take your time. You'll need it.

Maya Deren was an experimental filmmaker in the 40's who traveled to Haiti in the hopes of making a film about Haitian dance. She was also a dancer. See "In the Mirror of Maya Deren," and definitely see "Maya Deren: Experimental Films." Occasionally I think about voodoo, and this is the best book about the real thing I've ever seen. I know, she was the white daughter of a prominent immigrant psychiatrist. It's a bit of a time capsule if you look at it in anthropological terms. The film she shot in Haiti was edited into "Divine Horsemen: the Living Gods of Haiti," after her death by a couple of her friends. It's beautiful. If you've never heard of Maya Deren, buy "Maya Deren Experimental Films."

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