

**Bryant C. Freeman, Ph.D.**

**Third-World Folk Beliefs  
and Practices:  
Haitian Medical  
Anthropology**



**Institute of Haitian Studies  
University of Kansas**

**La Presse Evangélique**

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Haitian Medical Anthropology**



Dedicated to the memory of Haiti's great physician-missionary-archaeologist, Dr. William Hodges, and to its great physician-humanitarian, Dr. W. Larimer Mellon, Jr.

- Bryant C. Freeman, *Haitian-English Medical Phraseology for Doctors, Dentists, Nurses, and Paramedics — with seven accompanying tapes*. Pp. 166.
- Bryant C. Freeman, *Haitian-English English-Haitian Medical Dictionary, with Glossary of Food and Drink*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Pp. 200.
- Joseph F. Bentivegna, M.D., *The Neglected and Abused: A Physician's Year in Haiti*. Pp. viii+176.
- Bryant C. Freeman, *Survival Creole*. 5<sup>th</sup> ed. Pp. 32.
- Bryant C. Freeman, *Chita Pa Bay: Elementary Readings in Haitian Creole, with Illustrated Dictionary*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Pp. 126.
- Bryant C. Freeman, *Ti Koze Kreyòl: A Haitian-Creole Conversation Manual*. Pp. 139.
- Bryant C. Freeman, ed. *Fòklò natifnatal peyi Dayiti, Liv 1: Yon Sèvyèt, yon Bourik, epi yon Baton - ak 57 lòt kont ayisyen*. Pp. xiii+117.
- Bryant C. Freeman, ed. *Fòklò natifnatal peyi Dayiti, Liv 2: Twa Chèlbè - ak 88 lòt kont ayisyen*. Pp. xiii+123.
- James G. Leyburn, *The Haitian People*. Ed. Bryant C. Freeman. Pp. xxiv+342.
- Bryant C. Freeman, *Haitian-English Dictionary*. 5<sup>th</sup> ed. Pp. xlix+1,020.
- Bryant C. Freeman, *English-Haitian Dictionary*. In preparation. C. pp. 1,000.

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**Haitian Medical Anthropology**

*Medicine in Haiti III*

**Institute of Haitian Studies**  
**University of Kansas**  
**Lawrence**

**La Presse Evangélique**  
**Port-au-Prince**  
**2007**

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Cover: “Study of a Black” (possibly in preparation for an Adoration of the Magi), by Paolo Veronese (1528-1588).

*“The greater want goes beyond medicine.”*  
(Dr. W. Larimer Mellon, Jr.)

## FOREWORD

The present work was created principally for that group of human beings - the most admirable we have ever known - who devote a large, or small, portion of their lives to helping the Haitian people by practicing medicine in extremely isolated, difficult outposts of rural Haiti. Our principal aim is to acquaint those new to the rural Haitian scene with what many (but certainly not all) patients may believe, and to present a sampling of the cultural barriers to be confronted. We hope to be of use as well to those interested in the mindset of rural Haiti in particular, and in the Third World in general.

“Working within the system.” The experience of many physicians has indicated that the best way to begin to achieve results in a peasant community is by working with rather than against many of the commonly-held folk health beliefs - as long as these are not definitely contraindicated. The age-old therapeutic beliefs and practices of the Haitian countryside continue to influence greatly today’s patients. A combination of modern medical practice, with a bit of folk theory, may be at first the best way to achieve compliance on the part of the patient, and to ensure that there will be follow-up visits. Customs such as the five-day postpartum lying-in period, or the wearing of the infant umbilical band, will be continued whatever the Western-type doctor preaches - and strong, overt opposition to such practices will usually only undermine confidence in the physician.

Much of this material has been gleaned during the numerous consultations we were privileged to attend while working in ten

medical missions scattered throughout rural Haiti, as well as through general observations gained over a 30-year period. A great deal of this information, however, is thanks to the late Dr. William Hodges, of the Hôpital Le Bon Samaritain at Limbé. The privilege of sitting at his table, often until late into the night, was one of the most illuminating experiences we have had.

The Appendix here contains one hundred Haitian proverbs related to health and sickness, in addition to those contained within the text. In Haiti, proverbs punctuate everyday conversation, and constitute a valuable insight into Haitian psychology.

Of use to the foreign health-care provider in Haiti could be our *Haitian Creole-English English-Haitian Creole Medical Dictionary, with Glossary of Food and Drink* (Port-au-Prince: La Presse Evangélique, pp. 200 - available in the United States from the University of Kansas Oread Bookstore). In addition to the dictionary, it also contains a pronunciation guide, and detailed charts - labeled in both Haitian and English - of the face, the front and rear of the body, arm and hand, leg and foot, baby teeth and adult teeth, and the eye. Also of use could be our *Haitian-English Medical Phraseology: For Doctors, Dentists, Nurses, and Paramedics, with seven accompanying tapes* (Port-au-Prince: La Presse Evangélique, pp. 166). Finally, we would like especially to recommend the very personal account of a young American M.D. who spent a year as a generalist working in a Port-au-Prince hospice for the sick and dying as well as in a foundling home: Joseph F. Bentivegna, M.D., *The Neglected and Abused: A Physician's Year in Haiti* (2275 Silas Deane Highway, Rocky Hill, Conn. 06067: Michelle Pub. Co., pp. viii+176). This is one of only two required texts in our basic course on Haiti at the University of Kansas - "he tells it like it is."

We wish also to express our special debt to Professor Michel Laguerre of the University of California at Berkeley, to Professors Gerald F. Murray and Maria D. Alvarez of USAID/

Haiti, to the late Alfred Métraux, to Dr. Ary Bordes and Andrea Couture of the Haitian Public Health Program, and to Colonel Jean-Claude Delbeau. For welcoming us into their medical world, sharing both wisdom and hospitality, we wish to thank the late Dr. W. Larimer Mellon Jr., Mrs. Gwen Mellon, Mr. William Dunn, Dr. Michel Jean-Baptiste, and the late Dr. Roger Larose, as well as the other members of the Hôpital Albert Schweitzer staff in Deschapelles; Dr. Brinson McGowan, Carol McGowan, and Dr. Louis Philippe of the Centre Médical Emmanuel in Cayes-Jacmel; the late Dr. Abel Gousse of Jacmel; Gail M. Boaz of La Vallée-Jacmel; Dr. Reynold Monsanto of the Hôpital pour les Yeux in Cayes; Reverend Wallace Turnbull and Eleanor Turnbull of the Hôpital de Fermathe; Dr. Salvatore Molica of the Centre Médical de Plaisance; Dr. Paul Kincaid of Lawrence, Kansas; as well as the staffs of the Centre Médical Cité Lumière in Cayes, the Hôpital de Bonne Fin, and the Hôpital Sainte-Croix in Léogane. For help in the preparation of the text, we are grateful to Jennifer Burtner, Pam LeRow, Lynn Porter, Gwen Claassen, and Stephanie Freeman. Finally, let us express our special gratitude to Dr. Catherine C. McGowan, who collaborated with us at every stage of this work.

Lawrence, Kansas  
May 1997

Bryant C. Freeman

**N.B. Folk beliefs not otherwise stated are indicated by \*...\***



## ENTRIES

Foreword	Bonesetters	Dead (The)
Abandonment	Breast-Feeding	Death
Abortion	Breasts	Deforestation
Abscesses	Bruises	Demonstrations
Accidents	Burns	Dentistry
Achievements	Buttocks	Dependency
Addresses	Cannibalism	Development
Adoption	Cemeteries	Diabetes
Adultery	Change	Diarrhea
Age	Chayote	Diaspora
AIDS	Squash	Dignity
<i>Akamil</i>	Child Abuse	Dilatation and
Albinism	Childbirth	Curettage
Alcohol	Child Growth	Dispensaries
Amulets	Child Mortality	Dissociation
Anger	Circumcision	Distance
Animals	Cleft Palate	Divination/ Diagnosis
Animal Sacrifice	Colors	Dreams
Aphrodisiacs	Common-Law Unions	Dress
Attitudes	Conception	“Drop in the Bucket”
Autopsies	Condoms	Earlobes
Bananas	Confidence	(Pierced)
Baptism	Conjunctivitis	Eclampsia
<i>Bawon Samdi</i>	Conservatism	Economics
Beggars	Consultations	Edema
Beliefs	Contagion	Eggs
Big Three	Contraception	Elephantiasis
Birthmarks	Cooperation	Emotivity
<i>Biskèt Tonbe</i>	Cost	<i>Endispozisyon</i>
Blood	Cupping-Glasses	Environment
Blood Donations	Cures	Envy
Body Language	Cures vs. Relief	Epilepsy
<i>Bòkò</i>	Dates	

<i>Espedisyon</i>	Garlic	Informality
Evil Eye	Gas	Injectionists
Expectations (Health Care Providers')	Geophagy	Injections
Expectations (Patients')	Germes	Insanity
Experience	Girls	Intercourse
Eye Charts	Godparents	IUD
Faith-and-Herb Healers	Gonorrhea	Jaundice
Falling	Government	Jealousy
Falling Star	Gratitude	Kidney Stones
Family Planning	Greetings	<i>Kriz de nè</i>
Family Support	Guardian Angels	Kwashiorkor
Fat	Hair	Land Titles
Fatalism	Haiti	Language
Fetus	Handouts	Leeches
<i>Fibwòm</i>	Handshakes	Left-Handedness
Fingernail	Health	<i>Lemò</i>
Fish	Health Education	Lethargy
Flexibility	Hemorrhaging	Limes
Flogging	Hemorrhoids	Lip Lacerations
Folk Healers	Herbs	<i>Lougawou</i>
Folk Medicine	History-Taking	Magic
Fontanel	Homosexuality	<i>Maladi Bondye</i>
Food	Hospital	Malnutrition
Foreign Aid	Hot/Cold Imbalance	Mangoes
<i>Fredi</i>	Houses	Marriage
French	Human Sacrifice	Meals (Rural)
Frogs	Hydrocele	Meat
Fruit	Hypochondria	Meconium
Funeral Processions	Hysteria	Medical Education
Funerals	Illness	(Western- Style)
	Impotence	Medical Theory
	Incest	Medication
	Infanticide	
	Infant Mortality	

Medicinal	Paranoia	Prostitution
Plants	Paternity	Protein
Menarche	Payment	Psychology of
Menopause	Peasants	the Haitian
Menstrual	<i>Pèdisyon</i>	Puberty Rites
Cramps	Penis	Public Hospitals
Menstruation	Permissiveness	Radio
Metamorphoses	Pharmacies	Rain
Midnight	Photographs	Rashes
Midwives	Physical Violence	Religion
Milk	Pictorial	Reproductive
“Milk Sack”	Illiteracy	Capacity
Milk (Spoiled)	Pilgrimages	Role Model
Miscarriage	Pill (The)	Salt
Moon	Pineapple	Sanitation
Motion Sickness	Placebos	<i>Sanpwèl</i>
Mourning	Placenta	Sapodilla
Mud	Pleurisy	Scarification
Mumps	Pluralism	Sensitivity
Mutton	Point!	Sex Education
Names	Poisoning	Sex of Child
Neonates	Politeness	Sexual Fantasies
Night	Political	Sexuality
Noon	Problems	<i>Sezisman</i>
November	Population	Sin
Objects	Posters	Skin
Okra	Postpartum	Slapping
Oranges	Beliefs and	Sneezing
Orchiectomy	Practices	Sore Throat
Ostentation	Poverty	Specialists
Outreach	Prayer Paper	Spell-Casting
Overpopulation	Pregnancy	Sperm
Pain	Prescriptions	Spinach
Paralysis	Priapism	Spitting
Paramedics	Prognosis	Status

Sterility	Tuberculosis	Medicine
Sterilization of Equipment	Twins	Voodoo
Stethoscope	Ulcers	Consultations
Still-Born	Umbilicus	Voodoo Cures
Stoicism	Umbilicus (Swollen)	Voodoo Death
Stoicism	Underdevelopment	Voodoo
Sugar	Unmarried Woman	Possession
Suicide	Urine	Wakes
Surgery	Vaccination	Water
Teeth	Vasectomy	Weaning
Teething	Virginity	Western Medicine
Tetanus	Vision	Wheelchair
Time	Vitality	Whooping Cough
<i>Timoun</i>	Vomiting	<i>Wi</i>
Tobacco	Voodoo	Womb
Tombs	Voodoo and Conversion to	Worms
Towel	Protestantism	Wounds
Traditional Medicine	Voodoo and	Yawning
Triage	Western-Type	Yaws
Truth		Zombis

### **Appendix - 100 Haitian Proverbs on Health and Sickness**

Aging	Health	Quackery
Birthing	Precautions	Recuperation
Death	Hunger	Self-Treatment
Diet	Illness	Sexuality
Eyes	Medication	Survival
Forbearance	Pain	Teeth
Health	Pediatrics	

**ABANDONMENT** A common problem at many clinics, especially in the case of a small, undernourished or neglected child, with the family deliberately disappearing, believing death to be inevitable. Also overwhelming poverty, or deaths in the family, can be a cause. However this is quite contrary to Haitian thinking, as there is usually a grandmother, aunt or godmother, to take care of the child. Nevertheless babies are found “left over” in clinic waiting rooms at the end of a busy day. Since there are no regular agencies in Haiti for abandoned children, the task falls to churches and charitable hospitals. Thus there is the problem of becoming inadvertently an adoption agency - and for a Haitian family it is often easier to take in a poor child as an unpaid domestic servant, rather than a sickly foundling or abandoned child. (See **ADOPTION** and *TIMOUN*.)

**ABORTION** (*jete pitit, avòtman*) Severely condemned by both sexes: crime against God and State, whether mother single or not. “Done only by women from other places.” Reasoning: if single, there will always be a female relative to raise the child. Apparently an attitude inspired by more than just Roman Catholic teachings.

Most commonly used methods: special herbal teas; self-induced *fredi* (*q.v.*); operation by a Western-type physician.

**ABSCESSSES** \*Caused by blood clots formed as the result of a fall.\*

**ACCIDENTS** Often suspected to be due to human malice, jealously or greed, using the paid services of a *bòkò* (Voodoo sorcerer). Thus the victim’s job or possessions can be taken by another. The failure of Western medicine to effect a cure often causes the accident to be seen as having definitely been caused by a Voodoo-inspired curse.

**ACHIEVEMENTS** Notable medical advances in recent times in Haiti: eradication of yaws, yellow fever, and smallpox. Haiti has also become, unfortunately for its own well-being, a major exporter of physicians as well as some nurses. (See **MEDICAL EDUCATION - WESTERN STYLE**.)

**ADDRESSES** Many, especially among the urban poor, really do not know their exact address, making follow-up home visits in pediatric and family planning programs difficult or impossible. Adjacent landmarks are often the only useful guide. Also, especially in the city, there is much transience, due to the inability to pay the rent. Added to this is the element of shame concerning the dwelling, or the sexual liaison.

**ADOPTION** Difficult. In the case of an abandoned child of unknown origin, there is often a lingering thought that the child might not be human, or of the real parents suddenly appearing to make demands. Or the child could introduce low-class, peasant manners into an elite home.

**ADULTERY** Severely chastized in a woman, accepted as more or less a normal fact of life for a man.

**AGE** Often quite difficult to estimate. Long-term malnutrition or undernourishment can bring about pitiful results in the development of the human frame. An 18-year-old can look 12, or the hardships of life can make a 40-year-old appear 60.

Often a patient will have only a very approximate idea of his/her age. In former times, a child's mother would date the birth by the president in office at the time. However with the Duvaliers in office from 1957-86, this method has broken down, to be replaced by the more disastrous of the tropical storms.

See **APPENDIX: Aging**.

AIDS (*SIDA*) When first appeared, typically diagnosed as one more blood disorder, tuberculosis, or an evil spell created by human malice or jealousy.

In 1978 occurred the first known AIDS-related death in Haiti. In 1988 it was found that 10.5% of seemingly healthy Port-au-Prince adults were HIV positive, and 42% of the prostitutes. In 1990 Haiti was declared one of the world's twenty most affected nations. In January 1991 it was reported that in Haiti the number of female AIDS victims was approximately the same as for males. More recently, over half of the children under 18 months of age in the capital's orphanages tested HIV positive. (See also *TIMOUN*.)

It has continued spreading inexorably along Haiti's major roads, and working its way into the interior. A June 1996 report of the Albert Schweitzer Hospital at Deschapelles lays forth the scope of the problem as concerns one relatively isolated, representative district:

- In 1992, 20% of its out-patients required to have blood drawn for any reason were HIV positive;
- Since 1994 it has identified 1,000 new HIV cases;
- One-quarter to one-third of its tuberculosis patients are HIV positive.

The so-called medical evidence placing Haitians among the four high-risk H's (heroin addicts, homosexuals, hemophiliacs, and Haitians), creating untold suffering for Haitians abroad, was finally declared false by the Center for Disease Control in Atlanta on April 8, 1985. Haitians were the only group to have been singled out "because of who they were rather than what they did" (Robert Lawless). The damage by the press was done, however, and its effects still remain.

The Red Cross ban on blood donations from Haitians or from foreigners having been to Haiti was finally lifted in December 1990. Ironically, now that proper screening is possible with donor blood, it appears that with Haiti's high incidence of disease and infant mortality, the blood of surviving Haitians is uncommonly rich in protective anti-bodies.

One of the most convincing arguments presented to support the view that AIDS was introduced into Haiti by foreign homosexuals is that its first Haitian victims were centered in the areas most frequented by tourists. Haiti's poverty forced many heterosexual males into homosexual prostitution. (See HOMOSEXUALITY.)

\*AIDS was a conspiracy invented by the CIA as a means to reduce the population of Haiti, thereby lessening the chances of a violent revolution. More efficient than using guns, and far more acceptable on the international scene.\*

\*There is no danger of AIDS if sexual intercourse is carried out while in the ocean.\*

A certain attitude has occasionally been noted: "I am HIV positive, so I want others to be also" - thus condoms with holes.

The perceived threat of AIDS infection has devastated the already weak tourist industry but, as has often been stated, it is what one does that counts, not where one goes.

*AKAMIL* Haiti's great weaning food: two parts cereal to one part bean, finely ground and cooked in water with seasonings. But often beyond the means of many peasant families because they cannot afford the beans.

ALBINISM \*The result of adultery.\*

ALCOHOL When there is no rubbing alcohol available as a disinfectant, *kleren* (raw rum) is usually used instead.

AMULETS Ubiquitous - and of all sizes and shapes. Can include anything from a *kolye maldjòk* (protective necklace against evil eye) to a *lepitem* (comb-like object worn in hair against headaches) to a *chemizèt twa paman* (undershirt usually made of red, black and white cloth) - all to ward off evil and/or sickness. (Cf. our rabbit's feet and various medallions!) Often slipped into the beds of patients even in a very Western-type hospital.

ANGER \*Especially if unexpressed, can seriously disturb body organs and fluids, causing sickness. Mother's milk above all is quite vulnerable.\* (See MILK.)

ANIMALS One of the most difficult aspects of the Haitian scene for the foreigner to accept is an apparent lack of sensitivity concerning the suffering of animals. Has so much human suffering stifled feeling for animal suffering?

ANIMAL SACRIFICE A frequent part of Voodoo ceremonies, consisting usually of a chicken or (black Haitian) pig, occasionally a goat, and on extremely rare occasions, an ox - depending on the magnitude of the favor requested of the Voodoo spirits. (Cf. the Old Testament in the Christian Bible.) The euphemism for human sacrifice is the "goat without horns."

APHRODISIACS \*Roasted peanuts and a bouillon made of starch will do wonders. *Bwa kochon* ("A gnarled root shaped like an exhausted phallus" - Herbert Gold) soaked in raw rum (*kleren*) is also effective.\*

ATTITUDES The peasant's attitude is refreshing: all one needs for happiness is health, a little land, a small house, a woman or two, with enough food, drink and clothing - whereas he

perceives the White man, with his endless possessions, as making life endlessly complicated, resulting in endless problems.

“White people have acquired cleverness and riches at the expense of sensuality and *joie de vivre*.” (Peter Michelmores)

**AUTOPSIES** Permission usually easily obtained from family: many believe that any residual life force will thereby be destroyed, ensuring that the dead person cannot be made into a zombi (*q.v.*).

**BANANAS** \*Together with oranges, are too “cold” (see **HOT/COLD IMBALANCE**) for small children, and will activate any worms they might have, causing the abdomen to swell.\*

**BAPTISM** \*If a pregnant woman serves as godmother at a baptism, then either the baptized child or her child will die.\*

**BATHS** The baths referred to in Haitian folk remedies are normally ablutions with water in which leaves, ground roots or barks, as well as other substances such as raw rum, have been left to macerate.

During the Christmas season there are special Voodoo “baths” to ensure health for the coming year.

The most famous sulphur springs in Haiti are probably Sources Puantes (Stinking Springs), not far north of Port-au-Prince on the main highway to Gonaïves and Cape Haitian; considered useful against arthritis, skin problems, etc.

\*River baths are quite dangerous if one has a fever or has recently given birth.\* Certain ones are deemed useful for conceiving boy babies, others for girl babies - or even for restoring lost virginity.

*BAWON SAMDI* (Baron Saturday) \*Death due to supernatural causes can occur only if he and his helpers (*Gede*) consent to it.\* He is commonly represented as wearing a formal black suit and top hat, with white gloves and black cane - not unlike the frequent attire of Dr. François Duvalier.

**BEGGARS** A perennial problem for the foreigner: what to do? Seasoned “Haiti hands” have usually arrived at the solution of giving only to those who have performed some service for them, however slight. Otherwise, there is the distinct possibility of being mobbed.

Several rolls of quarters (best obtained from a bank before leaving the U.S.) will be useful. Small change always appears to be a rare commodity in Haiti. When they run out, a few gourdes will do quite well.

Above all, do not make beggars of the Haitian people. Even small change given to children who have performed no task only makes them expect the same from all foreigners, making it so unpleasant that even fewer tourists come to Haiti.

**BELIEFS** “If you believe in ‘these things’ and still violate them, you will be harmed; if you don’t believe in them, then they can’t hurt you.” (Wise old Haitian peasant)

“Our myths are ignorance, theirs are literature.” (Derek Walcott, Caribbean poet)

**BIG THREE (THE)** *Dyare* (diarrhea), *lafyè* (fever), *vonmisman* (vomiting). Others cite “The Big Two”: *doulè* (pain) and *feblès* (weakness; anemia).

**BIRTHMARKS** \*Result of a sudden, unsatisfied desire by the pregnant mother. The shape or color of the birthmark corresponds to the object desired: fruit, wine, a pig, a crab, etc.\*

*BISKÈT TONBE* One of the imprecise complaints which the Western practitioner encounters so frequently. Literally, “fallen breastbone or sternum,” translated variously as “to have a sore chest; to be incapacitated (above waist); or, to suffer epigastric discomfort.” Many Haitians interpret the problem as being caused by a section of cartilage at the end of the sternum displaced as the result of a blow, fall, or strain. It is most often treated by a faith-and-herb healer who massages the back and abdomen, occasionally tugging on the thumbs, while the patient remains seated with the legs extended. Herbal teas, together with appropriate prayers, are prescribed as well. (Cf. the complaints of *mis tonbe*, literally “fallen coccyx,” generally translated as “to have lower-back pain”; *lanmè tonbe*, literally “fallen womb or uterus,” translated “to have a prolapsed uterus”; and *lalwèt tonbe*, literally “fallen uvula,” translated as “acute respiratory distress, or tonsillitis.”)

**BLOOD** (*san*) Considered the most crucial single element in natural illnesses. \*Condition determined by quality, quantity, temperature, color, and place of concentration of the blood. Problems are caused especially by strong emotions such as anger, fear, and shock.\* More than a dozen specific pathological conditions are defined:

- move san* (bad blood) - result of anger, fright or shock; causes skin eruptions; major cause of spoiled breast milk (*lèt gate*).
- san boulvèse* (agitated) - causes profuse or irregular blood menses.
- san cho* (hot blood) - causes high fever, nervousness.
- san epè* (thick blood) - result of anger, fright, shock, or hypertension.
- san fèb* (weak blood) - causes physical or mental weakness.

- san frèt* (cold blood) - result of malaria.
- san gate* (spoiled blood) - result of venereal disease; also result of anger, fright or shock.
- san jòn* (yellow blood) - result of bile mixed in the blood.
- san klè* (thin blood) - causes pallor.
- san koupe* (cut off blood) - causes girl never to reach menarche, to become anemic and die.
- san nwa* (black blood) - indicates one is about to die of an incurable disease.
- san pati* (departed blood) - causes woman to miss a menstrual period.
- san pike* (spicy blood) - causes itching.
- san sal* (dirty blood) - result of venereal disease.

\*Blood can mix with other substances and cause illness; or it can turn into water - particularly from drinking too much alcohol, causing pleurisy or tuberculosis. Other problems can result from insufficient volume and from irregularities of circulation. And the physical characteristics of whichever parent who has more *san fò* (strong blood) at the time of conception will be dominant in the child.\* (Cf. Michel S. Laguerre, in *Ethnicity and Medical Care*, ed. Alan Harwood. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1981.)

\*Women are more subject to emotional crises than men because their blood is “weaker” than men’s.\*

Too many blood tests can make some patients suspect that they may become weak, or that the blood is being sold or used for Voodoo purposes. Explain why the test is necessary.

**BLOOD DONATIONS** Many remember only too well the shameful period, especially in the early 1970’s, when Haitian blood became a lucrative and major export item for a few profiteers.

‘Blood is blood.’ It has happened that when family members have been found to be too anemic to donate blood, they have instead brought a horse as donor.

**BODY LANGUAGE** Essential to understanding, especially in a setting where the physician may well not be comprehending all that is said, or may be missing certain unstated cultural references. The patient’s non-verbal message can well be more meaningful than the verbal: slapping the back of one hand against the opposite palm, (signifying resignation), shrugs, folded arms, raised shoulders, widening of the eyes, glances. “Pacing” has also been suggested, where the physician adjusts his/her body movements, such as leaning forward or crossing the arms, to make the patient feel unconsciously less ill-at-ease.

A marked scratching of the head or face of a patient often reveals an attempt at dissimulation. And the patient’s body language upon leaving can be eloquent testimony of his/her satisfaction.

**BÒKÒ** A Voodoo priest (never a priestess) who “works with the left hand,” as well as with the right, i.e., who deals in evil magic as well as in good magic, who deals in sorcery as well as in medicine.

Sometimes accused of being paid to create a sickness, and then being paid by the victim to alleviate the very same sickness for which he himself was responsible - not unlike the drugstore operator who sells both cigarettes, and medicines to combat lung cancer.

It is in his self-interest to emphasize animosities rather than to allay fears or avoid conflicts.

**BONESETTERS** (*Doktè Zo*) Realign bones using wooden braces, and flour-based plaster casts which are replaced every

week or so to prevent infection. Also treat luxations and sprains, and manipulate damaged blood vessels. Generally enjoy an excellent reputation, and even members of the upper class turn to them. Only when their care has been rather disastrously unsuccessful is the Western practitioner called in to repair the damage.

A part-time profession. Their art is considered a spiritual gift, and they usually do not charge their patients.

**BREAST-FEEDING** Traditionally, all babies were breast-fed in Haiti for at least the first six months. Weaning occurred at varying times between a minimum of six months and a maximum of two years. Recent findings (see Philip L. Graitcer et al., "Current Breast-Feeding and Weaning Practices in Haiti," *Journal of Tropical Pediatrics*, vol. 30, Feb. 1984, pp. 10-16) have revealed a pattern defined essentially by rural vs. urban location, and by socio-economic status. At present, it appears that the median age at which children in the rural areas are weaned is 18 months, whereas in Port-au-Prince the median age is 12 months. Secondly, the higher the socio-economic status, the shorter the period of breast-feeding and the greater the amount of bottle-feeding. Similarly, bottle-feeding is more common in urban areas than in rural ones. Women over 25 tend to breast-feed longer and bottle-feed less than younger women, while the more children a woman has, the longer she tends to breast-feed. Unlike the situation in certain other countries, male infants are breast-fed no longer than are female ones.

"In Haiti, the leading cause of death for children under the age of five is diarrhea. Babies that are exclusively breast-fed for the first six months of life do not often suffer from diarrhea. When contaminated food or water sources are introduced into the infant's system, the problem of diarrhea occurs. Exclusively breast-fed babies suffer fewer illnesses and gain more weight. . . . However, babies are typically

given rice, rice water, and bean sauce. The nursing staff is reeducating mothers to the benefits of exclusive breast-feeding.” (Albert Schweitzer Hospital, April 1997)

\*During pregnancy, mother’s milk builds up, distributed throughout the entire body, in the same way as is her blood. The nipples later serve as focalizing conduits. Care must be taken to prevent the milk from mixing with any *move san* (bad blood) which would be harmful to the child, or from making its way up into the woman’s head, which could cause permanent mental illness.\*

\**Lèt gate* or *move lèt* (spoiled mother’s milk) can be caused by an emotional trauma, or even by just one violent argument. The milk then becomes a poisonous substance, and the baby must be weaned immediately.\* (A societal invention to protect the mother?)\* Also can be caused by an interruption of 24 hours or more in breast-feeding.\*

\*Mother’s milk can cause worms in a child. When breast feeding ends, the worms go away.\* (See WORMS.)

Breast-feeding is resisted by many mothers because: 1) they are too malnourished to maintain their own bodies adequately, much less to produce milk; 2) artificial milk preparations are a status symbol which the international corporations are only too happy to give away at first - and then charge for later. (See WATER.) However there is the proverb: “*Lèt tete pi bon pase tout lòt lèt.*” (Milk from the breast is better than any other milk.)

Supplements to mother’s milk commonly begin at about the second or third month after birth.

Today there are increasingly shortened periods of breast-feeding due to ever greater economic pressure. Often the mother must return to the traveling-and-trading pattern of the

typical market woman. And this further increases the birth-rate, since breast-feeding reduces (but does not eliminate) the chances of conception.

**BREASTS** \*Size can be increased by rubbing on a special mixture prepared with crushed butterflies.\*

\*The left breast is more sensitive and gives more milk than the right.\*

**BRUISES** \*Can be healed by cutting in order to draw out the bad blood.\*

**BURNS** Often explained away as the result of having fallen into a fire, and it is, of course, true that children and epileptics do indeed sometimes fall into fires used for cooking. Another good possibility, however, is that the burns are the result of Voodoo “cures” (*q.v.*) or possession trances. Exorcism, or catharsis, is supposedly achieved by passing the patient’s body over a fire, and is accompanied by much ritual chanting and by offerings of animals and food.

Passing a baby through flames is considered an additional protection against *lougawou* (*q.v.*).

Circular burns may well have been caused by the rims of heated glasses used by a folk healer to extract evil spirits. (See also SCARIFICATION.)

Burns are commonly treated by rubbing on gel of aloe. \*The burn victim should avoid eating spices and pimentos, but onions and leeks are recommended.\*

**BUTTOCKS** Traditionally considered by Haitian males as a woman’s greatest sexual asset, even more so than face or breasts.

CANNIBALISM \*Some *lougawou* (*q.v.*) disinter the bodies of their victims and eat their flesh.\*

CEMETERIES \*Are essentially polluted: no plants which grow in their immediate vicinity may be used for medicinal purposes.\*

\*Any lesion on the leg will heal very slowly, or not at all, if one visits a cemetery.\*

\*One should never visit a sick person just after visiting a cemetery, or the sick person will become even sicker.\*

CHANGE Very difficult to bring about in the highly conservative peasant community. For example, most mothers still insist on administering a potentially harmful strong laxative to neonates to expel the meconium; others still cannot be induced to use the highly nutritious and easily prepared *akamil* (*q.v.*); while others have yet to master *sewòm oral* (ORT). (Same resistance applies especially to agriculture - see CONSERVATISM.)

CHAYOTE SQUASH (*militon*) \*Must not be eaten by a man, or he will become partially impotent.\*

CHILD ABUSE Malnutrition and neglect are more frequent than outright abuse.

CHILDBIRTH Traditionally handled by midwives. However more and more first deliveries are performed in a hospital if possible, with subsequent deliveries at home. The feeling is that better medical treatment is provided at the hospital, but closer personal attention and more proper traditional care for both mother and child are obtained at home. Thus Caesarean sections are especially avoided because of the strong possibility of unattended future deliveries.

However births do of course occur unexpectedly, in the field, along the path to a water source, on the way to or at the local outdoor market, etc. - and thus often unassisted. Normally done in a half-sitting or squatting position, with a round wooden support (*choukèt*) placed under the hips to aid in delivery. It usually takes place in the front room of the two-room dirt-floored, thatched-roof peasant hut, with windows and doors closed. Screaming by the mother-to-be is considered quite helpful to the birthing process. Some women drink herbal teas during delivery. Certain Westerners believe that one special tea given during labor to enhance contractions could be a significant cause of severe postpartum bleeding, leading to death.

\*A wooden spoon placed in the mother's mouth during the birthing process will ensure proper air for the baby.\*

If the neonate does not show immediate signs of life, there is loud drumming on plates to awaken him/her, in addition to the traditional spanking practiced in Western-type medicine.

In rural Haiti, if the first baby is a breech presentation, it nearly always dies or is stillborn.

Kits containing razor blade, powder etc. given (or better: sold for a very small amount - see HANDOUTS) directly to pregnant women have proven very useful in reducing neonatal deaths. Also ensures more will come for prenatal check-ups. However, \*supplies must be carefully protected against evil magic.\*

\*The placenta must be disposed of in such a way that it cannot be found and sold to an evil sorcerer. If this should happen, a woman either is unable to bear additional children, or any fetus she might conceive will be at the mercy of whoever possesses her placenta.\* (See also PLACENTA.)

\*A baby born in the seventh month can survive, but never one born in the eighth month.\* Conclusion: a baby born in the eighth month who survives was doubtlessly fathered by another man a month before the mother told the supposed father she was pregnant. Result: trouble! (See also UMBILICUS.)

CHILD GROWTH When a baby cries, it is assumed (s)he wants to nurse. But crying is also seen as a beneficial activity since \*it serves to open up the body and help the baby grow.\*

\*Playing naked in the mud is also a growth-inducing factor.\*

\*Little boys grow on Mondays and Saturdays, and little girls only on Fridays\* - thus the discrepancy in size.

CHILD MORTALITY Principally from tetanus, diarrhea, malnutrition and respiratory diseases. In peasant parlance, a child is spoken of as having “escaped” (*chape*) past the high-risk period if (s)he has survived to the age of five years.

CIRCUMCISION Not normally performed on males. Clitoral circumcision is unheard of for females.

CLEFT PALATE \*Caused by goat crossing the pregnant mother’s path while at the market.\*

COLORS Strong perception of red, black, and white. (Interestingly, many African languages recognize only three colors, corresponding to red, black, and white.) Perception of other colors is sometimes imprecise, with notable confusion between blue and green. Few distinguish between *wouj* (red) and *woz* (pink), and *pipi wouj* (red urine) is often not red at all but simply yellow. “It’s all in the eye of the beholder.”

COMMON-LAW UNIONS (*plasaj*) Usually agreed upon with the formal consent of both sets of parents, and are both recognized and respected among the peasant population.

Polygamy is by no means uncommon, and can add considerably to male prestige. But more importantly, it can be of quite practical value in the frequent case of ownership of rather widely separated landholdings: a woman on each plot can serve as a resident caretaker.

Basic reasons: 1) economic practicality; 2) male vanity; 3) male pleasure, given the tendency among many peasant women (because of their hard life) to age prematurely and lose their physical desirability; 4) availability of a woman when one or more others are menstruating or nursing.

Polygamy is encountered among Voodoo priests as well, who need several reliable female assistants to be always available. Organized polyandry, on the other hand, is unknown.

CONCEPTION The will of God - though not possible without intercourse.

\*The waters at Saut d'Eau, Limonade, and Acul Samedi have a fecundating effect on a woman who has been unable to conceive.\*

CONDOMS Decidedly unpopular - and neither being sold very cheaply nor given away free seems to have increased their use - although certainly more valued if not given away free.

Apparently their main use in Haiti: as balloons or inflatable balls for children; as part of a slingshot by boys; with one end cut off, as bracelets by girls.

Men: "Real men don't use condoms!" Women: "What if it should come off and get lost inside me?"

The men say the women don't like them; the women say the men don't like them.

In at least one very rural setting was heard: "Oh, I understand about condoms. Every time I have sex with my wife, I am to swallow one." Careful explanation may be necessary.

**CONFIDENCE** Do not for a moment harbor the illusion that just because a patient consults a Western-type physician that (s)he is totally convinced of the efficacy of Western-type medicine or medical theory. The folk theories and remedies have been deeply ingrained in the peasant population for centuries, when there was nothing else, and they are not easily forgotten.

**CONJUNCTIVITIS** \*Can be caught from someone thus afflicted talking to you or looking you straight in the eye.\*

\*Can be caused by blood rushing to the head and "cooking" the eyes. Alleviated by cupping-glasses applied to the neck, incisions in the skin, and washing the eyes with raw rum (*kleren*).\*

**CONSERVATISM** An important factor impeding advances in Haitian medical - and other - practices. Diversely termed superstition, or inherited wisdom, depending upon one's point of view.

Adoption of new ideas and habits is always a slow process, and is even more pronounced in agriculture than in medicine. A treatment can always be abandoned, but should a new method of agriculture fail - however unproductive in reality the time-tested way of one's forefathers - there is normally no one to whom to turn. The result could be starvation for oneself and one's family. An understandable, yet self-defeating attitude that so directly affects the nutritional output of Haiti. (See also CHANGE.)

CONSULTATIONS Medical visits can be overpowering for many a peasant from very humble rural surroundings. Don't underestimate the psychological trauma which can be brought on by this new experience. Strange White faces, a strangely quiet and structured atmosphere, potentially make for an emotionally charged encounter, constituting both a physical and psychological exposure to a degree unmatched by their other experiences. Expect mumbling, almost whispering, and staring at the floor.

Inarticulateness can be a problem - just not knowing how to express what's wrong. But if the physician starts helping a person to state the problem, the doctor will always be right. And the answers will fall into the *Wi, dòk* pattern. (See *WI*.)

Distance from the medical center, embarrassment concerning physical appearance or clothes - all can cause medical attention to be postponed. What is often difficult for the Western patient is all the more so for the rural Haitian. Great sensitivity is required to put the patient at ease (see SENSITIVITY). A touch, a look, a few words of Creole, can be of great use. (See also DISTANCE.)

Patients may well be more accustomed to the diagnostic techniques of the faith-and-herb healers, where history-taking plays only a limited role. (See FAITH-AND-HERB HEALERS.) Thus it might well be more effective at least to appear to emphasize the physical exam rather than history-taking. (See also VOODOO CONSULTATIONS.)

Some patients come convinced that they already know what is wrong, and simply seek a cure. Thus they tend to exaggerate the supposed symptoms of their alleged malady.

Localization of pain often tends to be very imprecise for many Haitians. When one is ill, the entire body is perceived as being ill, and the specific pain experienced is usually seen

as the result of the disease either moving from one part to another, or expanding. It appears of no particular importance where a pain began, or where it is at the present moment. The problem is seen as more general.

Many a Haitian peasant has learned that any open, honest discussion concerning what (s)he perceives as the true cause of a health problem will most likely elicit open disbelief or disguised scorn from the Western-type physician. Hence there is an instinctive tendency to express what the physician supposedly wants to hear or at least will accept, rather than any intimately held belief. Thus open communication in this cultural setting is rare.

Some women - and especially their mates - do not like having a physical examination conducted by a male. They wonder what he is looking for!

See also HISTORY-TAKING.

CONTAGION “Magic, not contagion.” The fact that patients often do not believe in such a thing as contagion makes it difficult to explain the danger presented to others concerning, for example, AIDS or syphilis. Try a comparison with tuberculosis, where victims are commonly isolated from others.

CONTRACEPTION Among the many beliefs one hears on this subject: \*Before intercourse, a woman should drink salted coconut milk; a man should place a grain of rock salt on his tongue during intercourse.\*

\*After intercourse, a woman should lie face down on a coin. A man should knot seven different kinds of herbs on a red string and attach it to a fruit tree on the night of a new moon.\*

\*The woman should sneeze when her partner ejaculates.\*

\*Licorice tea taken in the morning will calm the amorous desires of a young woman.\*

COOPERATION (*tèt ansanm*) The inability to work together effectively is another curse frequently met in Haiti - though hardly limited to Haiti. Even when not divided by rival factions, people seem unable or unwilling to agree on and carry out a concerted course of action. And this appears to hold true even in the relatively rare circumstances when sufficient financial means are available. Talk, not action. Bickering, or lethargy, are often the greatest enemies. Some observers even speak of an innate, ingrained hostility toward progress. On the other hand, there are indeed cooperative work teams which do function quite well together (e.g., *konbit*). Often lack of effective leadership is the underlying problem. Due in large part to the massive "brain drain," especially during the regime of "Papa Doc" (1957-71), to the U.S., Canada, and other countries?

COST An all-important factor of medical treatment in one of the world's neediest countries. Often proper medical care is delayed, abandoned, or never begun, for want of even the modest sum required. And why consult a physician if one cannot afford the medication prescribed? "Consult now, pay later" has often been an effective solution.

Self-respect is extremely important for Haitian peasants: they must be made to feel they are bearing the "cost" of their treatment.

On the other hand, Western-type medical treatment (a most useful type of foreign aid) is sometimes preferred for purely practical, pragmatic reasons: ritual Voodoo healing is often far more expensive. (See PAYMENT.)

There is the true story of the little boy who, upon being asked why he had come to the Western-style hospital, blurted out

that it was “because his mother didn’t have enough money to take him to a Voodoo priest!”

Generic products are a must (unless donated!).

**CUPPING-GLASSES** (*vantouz*) Often consist of small, perforated calabashes stopped up with wax.

Used for ‘spoiled blood’ (*san gate*), for pain from a fall or bite, or to reduce swelling. To be even more effective, occasionally the skin is cut at the spot where the cupping glass was applied in order to make a scar.

\*More effective if applied when the moon is on the wane.\*

**CURES** Four paths open, quite often followed in this order, with frequent overlapping: 1) home remedy; 2) faith-and-herb healer; 3) Voodoo priest(ess); 4) Western-type physician. Though some (mainly Protestants) would “rather die” than consult a Voodoo priest(ess). (See **VOODOO CURES**.)

**CURES vs. RELIEF** It is difficult to explain that a sickness cannot be cured and that medication affords symptomatic relief only, for conditions such as arthritis, seizures, and heart disease.

**DATES** Avoid numbers: “the last Friday of February” (*dènye vandredi fevrye*) is better than “February 27,” for example.

**DEAD (THE)** (*lemò*) Often obligations to the dead outweigh those to the living. Often more money will be put aside for funeral expenses than for medical expenses. Often more will be spent on the tomb than on the home. (See **TOMBS**.)

**DEATH** High birth rate, high death rate. “The three principal causes of child mortality: diarrhea, pneumonia, immunizable diseases (measles, tetanus, polio). The two leading causes

of adult morbidity and mortality: malaria and tuberculosis. Additional major problem for adult women: too frequent childbirth.” (Haitian Department of Public Health and Population, 1983.) Obviously AIDS could be a subsequent addition to this list. (See also CHILD MORTALITY, MALNUTRITION, PARANOIA, and VODOO DEATH.)

The immediate reaction to expect from the relatives is loud screaming from the women, sullenness or belligerence from the men.

So common an occurrence that it is sometimes accepted as an inevitable result of sickness, without any real effort at attempting a cure. A Haitian physician, Dr. Ari Bordes, reports accidentally coming upon a sick person at whose bedside funeral plans were already being made, when, thanks to his fortuitous intervention, the patient was easily saved. How often is death seen simply as a natural consequence?

The body is washed, and the mouth of the deceased is closed (*mare*) with a strip of cloth (*bann machwè*) tied around the face. Care must be taken to liberate (*desounen*) the soul. To prevent a virgin from being violated by the spirits of death (*gede*), the hymen must be broken before burial.

The dead are greatly feared, and precautions are taken at both home and funeral to ensure that the deceased will not return and take vengeance. (See WAKES.)

Three drops of saliva (*twadegout*) from a dead person’s mouth are considered the most deadly of poisons.

A fetus, stillborn, or unbaptized infant, is held “unknown to God,” and is buried in an unmarked grave in the bushes wrapped only in a cloth. Same is true for cases of execution or suicide.

See APPENDIX: Death.

DEFORESTATION Deforestation' Drought' Famine' Disease.  
D' D' F' D: an implacable formula. But if trees take up too much land, where will the crops grow? And trees require much water, which is usually in short supply. The solution?

DEMONSTRATIONS One demonstration (for example of ORT - Oral Rehydration Therapy) is worth a thousand words - even Creole words!

DENTISTRY In a country where sheer survival is of such basic concern, routine dental care receives low priority. The basic assumption one finds in the rural areas is that a dentist (if available) is to be consulted only when one is in great pain. Thus dentistry usually means essentially extraction. Faced with great numbers and rudimentary conditions, most dentists are obliged to line up approximately seven patients at a time, inject one after the other, and then, with the Novacain taking effect, begin the extractions at the start of the line.

Various methods used to try to dull the pain of a toothache are: applying creosote (which may result in burnt parts of the mouth); raw rum breathed up the nose while stopping up the ear with the little finger on the side opposite the ache; clove oil (eugenol); pulverized thyme; dry celery; crushed parsley and salt wrapped in cotton and inserted in the ear; crushed garlic applied to the arm opposite the aching tooth. And naturally, alcohol drunk in appreciable quantity.

Patients tend not to tense up before an injection - and even ask for additional work on other parts of the mouth.

Often a patient will drape a towel over his/her head when in pain.

The pulp of the tooth is taken for a worm, which is believed to be the main cause of toothache. Some see these worms - and thus the pain - as spreading from one tooth to another. The other main cause of toothache is seen as being a hex brought about by: 1) someone using negative Voodoo magic, or 2) the enmity of a Voodoo spirit.

Attitudes toward brushing vary greatly, and only a small minority seem to be even faintly aware that it is connected to the reduction of dental decay. Instead of commercially-made toothbrushes and Colgate toothpaste [the generic term in Haitian Creole for toothpaste is *kòlgat*], some use a brushstick (*bwadan*) made usually from a twig from the lamandier bush, which softens and produces a soapy foam thought to be effective in cleaning the teeth. Leaves are used for cleaning children's teeth. (See especially Paul Rundberg and Wesley O. Young, "Dental Health Knowledge and Attitudes in Haiti," *Journal of Public Health Dentistry*, vol. 32, N° 3 (1972), pp. 149-157.)

Lack of running water obviously affects proper oral hygiene, and combined with malnutrition and high sugar consumption, results in a high rate of periodontal disease and dental caries.

Many are convinced that if the father of an unborn baby has a tooth extracted, the mother will abort - which of course is quite possible if she believes this firmly enough. Thus a father-to-be, no matter how painful the toothache, may violently resist any attempt at extraction, insisting only on a bandage.

Similarly, some believe that during pregnancy and nursing, a mother cannot have a tooth extracted, or her milk will go to her head and drown her.

After an extraction, many wish to have cotton in the ear, in order to prevent an evil spirit - or wind (see GAS) - from entering through the empty tooth socket.

Some men insist on taking an extracted tooth with them in order to pulverize it - supposedly as an aphrodisiac, or to prevent its being used in evil magic against them.

\*Cold temperatures should be avoided at all cost after a tooth extraction.\* (See also TEETH, and TEETHING.)

DEPENDENCY Many observers feel that certain places in Haiti have been reduced to a state of dependency by sporadic, ill-conceived foreign aid, accustoming the people to relying on handouts rather than developing any spirit of self-reliance or local initiative. Too often the so-called “Fish Principle” has been forgotten (“If you truly love a man, you do not give him a fish - you teach him how to fish”).

In the short run, it is easier to do than to teach to do, but in the long run, it is the nationals of any country who must take the responsibility for the development of their own nation. Foreigners come and, eventually, go. The nationals stay. Find the nationals who can and will learn, and teach them to do: the lasting solution, not the short-term one.

Remember the proverb: “*Se Ayisyen ki pou fè Ayiti.*” (It is Haitians who must make Haiti.)

DEVELOPMENT The ideal of course is integrated development: better health makes possible better education, which makes possible better agriculture, which in turn makes possible even better health, etc., etc.

A very slow process.

DIABETES Folk medicine tests by: 1) tasting the urine, or 2) seeing if the urine attracts ants. (Cf. the expression *gen founmi nan potchanm* - to have ants in one’s chamber pot, i.e., to be diabetic.)

DIARRHEA \*Breast-feeding should be discontinued if a child develops diarrhea\* - one of Haiti's most life-threatening beliefs.

Many Haitian mothers are firmly convinced that teething causes an excess of saliva, resulting in a natural, non-threatening form of diarrhea. Thus, only when the problem becomes acute is medical advice sought.

\*A red-hot nail placed in boiling milk will prevent diarrhea.\*

\*To stop diarrhea, tie a string around your big toe.\*

DIASPORA Haitians moving back to Haiti from abroad (especially from New York City) are often considered to exhibit a high degree of criminality (e.g., violence, drugs, smuggling) - as well as a certain superiority complex.

DIGNITY However poor, however downtrodden the humble Haitian peasant may appear to be, he nonetheless has a deep-rooted sense of his own dignity, of having beaten Europe's best, of being a member of the first nation in the world to free itself of foreign slavery. And to help him medically or otherwise, one must never for an instant forget this dignity, or all efforts are not only useless but insulting.

If the Haitian has to choose between his dignity and his welfare, he will almost invariably choose his dignity.

DILATATION AND CURETTAGE (*kitaj*) \*Will make a woman permanently sterile.\*

DISPENSARIES A great scandal of the Haitian medical scene is the number of all too often closed government dispensaries spread throughout the country. "Staffed" by an absentee doctor and a medical auxiliary, they are usually devoid of even the most basic medical supplies. Worse perhaps are the

dispensaries built by well-meaning foreign-aid groups who arrive in a burst of enthusiasm, set about the construction of what could be a fine dispensary, and then blithely fly away with the firm expectation that the Haitian government “will take care of equipping and staffing,” i.e., the hard part. The result is a countryside of conspicuously labeled but useless *Dispensaires*. (Similar remarks could be made concerning many a rural school.)

**DISSOCIATION** Described as a relatively frequent phenomenon among Haitians, occurring in situations as diverse as Voodoo ceremonies and during significant stress such as an accident, surgery, or threat of death. The Voodoo possession trance (*q.v.*) is termed *posesyon*, hysteria (*q.v.*) is called *kriz*, a fainting spell is referred to as *endispozisyon (q.v.)*, and a mild fainting spell is designated as *dekonpozisyon*.

**DISTANCE** Keep in mind that many patients have traveled from even before dawn along narrow, steep, rocky, treacherous paths from their mountainous homes. Those too ill to walk are carried on makeshift stretchers (a door, a blanket) to the bumpy, uncomfortable trucks which serve as buses.

A much higher proportion of patients comes from towns on “main” roads simply because of the greater accessibility. There is also the cost of lodging for out-patients from far away who must present themselves regularly, e.g., in tuberculosis treatment.

However, the physical journey to a strange new environment is often still less stressful than the psychological one. (See **CONSULTATIONS**.)

**DIVINATION / DIAGNOSIS** The two most common methods used by Voodoo practitioners involve the use of ordinary playing cards, or of supposedly ancient occult texts. The cards are laid out seemingly at random, and the seer

interprets according to methods known only to him/her. Similarly, a book of magic spells is opened at random, and its text interpreted. (Thus, when a Western-type practitioner consults his/her medical reference book, many a peasant recognizes a familiar diagnostic technique!)

A Voodoo divination can recommend a Voodoo-inspired treatment, a faith-and-herb healer, or even a Western-type practitioner.

**DREAMS** Often taken quite seriously as a means of transmitting important messages from dead relatives, or from Voodoo spirits, in order to communicate with the living. Dreams are sometimes seen as an extension of everyday reality, as something that actually took place. (See PEASANTS.)

**DRESS** One's "Sunday best" is almost always worn when coming to consult at a clinic. Coming often from great distances and on foot, patients strive nonetheless to arrive well before opening time - and as clean as possible.

One hears of cases where a peasant in dire need of medical attention nevertheless refuses to appear at a medical center due to shame about clothing.

Many wear sandals only when in church or in town, thus increasing the risk of intestinal parasites.

**"DROP IN THE BUCKET"** This may well seem to be all you can contribute toward alleviating some of the suffering of Haiti - but for those individuals whom you do succeed in helping, it is no mere "drop in the bucket."

**EARLOBES (PIERCED)** And even earrings, on a boy. His mother will often do this if she has lost several sons already, in hopes that the evil spirits will mistake him for a girl and thus spare him.

Girls usually have their earlobes pierced soon after birth, with small pieces of wood or straw inserted, or sometimes just thread or string. This piercing does not, however, appear to be a significant cause of tetanus infection.

**ECLAMPSIA** \*Caused by a fit of anger, resulting in a surge of blood to the head.\* Associated with the commonly-known symptoms of *kriz* (hysteria, convulsions), *endispozisyon* (delirium, fainting), and *kriz de nè* (emotional crisis).

**ECONOMICS** An integral part of medicine which takes on an entirely new dimension when viewed within the context of one of the world's neediest nations.

The greatest stumbling block to effective medical care in Haiti. More often than simply not *knowing* about proper nutrition and hygiene is the problem of not being able to *afford* what the medical community recommends. (See also **COST** and **PAYMENT**.)

As for Haiti in general, one thing is certain: it is not going to sink into the sea. A country - unlike a company - does not go into bankruptcy and disappear.

**EDEMA** \*Normally a sign of supernatural illness.\*

**EGGS** \*Cause children's teeth to rot, up to age ten or twelve. Also cause convulsions.\*

**ELEPHANTIASIS** (*gwo pye*) \*Caused by a particularly virulent magic powder placed in one's path.\*

\*Caused by knocking over with one's foot, either inadvertently or on purpose, a receptacle placed at a crossroads in honor of the Voodoo spirit Papa Legba.\*

\*Caused by eating too much salt.\*

**EMOTIVITY** Inordinately high, as reported by a leading Haitian physician (Dr. Ary Bordes, *Un Médecin Raconte*). For example, in cases such as extreme infant dehydration, expect an uncontrolled panic on the part of parents and relatives. Super-activity is expected from the attending physician.

**ENDISPOZISYON** Various translated as “fainting spell,” “delirium,” or “shock.” A frequently discussed Haitian phenomenon, a dissociative state believed to fall between psychic and somatic ailments, caused both by too rich blood surging into the head, and by magic; lasting from fifteen minutes to an hour. Occurs chiefly during moments of extreme emotional tension, such as great unexpressed anger, frustration, grief, or shock. It is considered neither a form of hysteria nor of epilepsy, though somewhat resembling both. The person falls, but there is only limited agitation of any part of the body. Described by patients as a sensation of emptiness in the thoracic region, dizziness, and extreme weakness. It affects females much more often than males, and only teenagers, young adults, and the elderly - but neither children nor the middle-aged. Puberty, menses, sexual frustration, and menopause are given as frequent causes. Considered incurable by the remedies of Western medicine. Not to be confused with *dekonpozisyon* (mild fainting spell; seizure) where one experiences an extreme bodily weakness but neither falls nor really faints, nor with hysteria *q.v.* (*kriz*).

**ENVIRONMENT** A patient can be nourished properly, cured of infections, parasites, etc., but then must be returned to the same environment which produced this malnutrition and these sicknesses in the first place. A problem largely beyond the powers of the medical profession.

**ENVY** To be avoided at all cost by a peasant. Above all, one should never brag. If one should appear too prosperous, a jealous relative or neighbor could well be tempted to cause harm through evil magic. Or a person with political

power and influence could seize one's land if it appears too productive. (See LAND TITLES.) Thus, even an appearance of material well-being can be risky. A self-defeating attitude on both personal and national levels, tending essentially to perpetuate a static, non-progressive society. Lack of apparent progress often equates with lack of real progress.

**EPILEPSY** Considered especially shameful, resulting in much hesitation before consulting a physician.

**ESPEDISYON** A frequently-heard term, defined in the Freeman-Laguerre Haitian-English Dictionary as the "sending of evil spirits or evil magical substances against an enemy (Voodoo); evil substances or spell (Voodoo)." Seen as a leading cause of supernatural illness (see ILLNESS).

**EVIL EYE** (*move je, maldjòk*) \*Inflicts sickness (e.g., whooping cough) mainly upon a child, usually quite unintentionally. Can be caused by a parent, relative, friend or neighbor, totally unaware of his/her evil power, who overly admires or compliments a child. Any evil effect can be averted, however, by spitting immediately after the compliment in order to avoid swallowing one's saliva, or by touching wood. Certain amulets worn by a child can serve as protection, as can special clothing and baths. The worst effects from the evil eye, however, are caused by persons who are in reality *lougawou* (q.v.) seeking to mask the effects of their murderous nocturnal blood-sucking.\*

**EXPECTATIONS (HEALTH CARE PROVIDERS')** Beware of having overly high expectations - they can lead to early burn-out. Haiti has been here for a long time. Deeply-rooted attitudes do not change overnight, nor in just one year or two.

"Do expect to encounter hunger and malnutrition, ignorance and superstition, fear of malevolent spirits, disease, pain, suffering and extreme poverty; overpopulation,

unemployment, soil erosion, lack of sanitation, few schools, few hospitals. Do expect to see elephantiasis, scrofula, severe sickle-cell crises, typhoid fever, malaria, advanced tuberculosis of every organ system, and other conditions which you may have thought to exist only in textbooks. In children expect to see marasmus and kwashiorkor. And the most common causes of death on the Haitian scene are tuberculosis, malaria, typhoid fever, filariasis, intestinal parasites, meningitis, venereal disease, AIDS, diarrhea, along with death in childbirth.” (Dr. William Hodges)

No matter how much good you may be doing for Haiti, maybe Haiti is doing even more good for you. A feeling of being exceptionally useful. Self-fulfillment. How can this be measured? (But see also PERCEPTION.)

EXPECTATIONS (PATIENTS’) 1) A stethoscope is to be used (otherwise patients feel they have not had a proper examination, or that the physician is downright incompetent); 2) a prescription - and unfortunately many believe that an expensive one will be more effective than an inexpensive one.

EXPERIENCE It has often been noted that a physician learns far more in one month in Haiti than in two years in the United States, or that cases only read about in textbooks at home are seen almost daily here.

EYE CHARTS In a largely illiterate country, must consist of “forks” or “bushes” heading left or right, up or down.

See APPENDIX: Eyes

FAITH-AND-HERB HEALERS (*doktè fèy*) Numerically the most important class of folk healers. May be either male or female; women (who often double as midwives) are at least as numerous as men. Deal primarily with “natural” illnesses.

(See ILLNESS.) Normally only a part-time profession. Training is usually received from a family member, with shared knowledge from colleagues, plus personal experience.

While the Voodoo priest(ess) operates chiefly on the supernatural level, the *doktè fèy* functions on both the spiritual and pragmatic levels. Prayers and revelations from dreams are combined with an often encyclopedic knowledge of local plant, herb, bark and root remedies, used both internally and externally. Magic and/or religion are essential, however: no cure is possible without divine or supernatural assistance. Even while gathering the plant items to be used as remedies, many offer special prayers either to God or to Voodoo spirits. As an offering of thanks, seeds are placed in the ground from which the plant is taken. Invocations to certain saints are considered especially effective for curing certain illnesses.

Traditionally use three diagnostic techniques, with very limited history-taking: 1) visible signs (condition of skin; minute indications contained within the fingernails or behind the ears; condition of blood as evidenced by yellow or red in whites of eyes); 2) palpation (*manyen*); 3) diet.

Illnesses which are their special domain are worms (*vè*), chills (*fredi*), evil eye (*maldjòk*), and spoiled (mother's) milk (*lèt gate*). Also *biskèt tonbe* (*q.v.*), as well as *lalwèt tonbe* (acute respiratory distress; or tonsillitis) - attributed to the obstruction of the trachea by the uvula.

Empirical methods of treatment consist of: 1) dietary recommendations (herbal teas or infusions [*tizann*], or correcting hot/cold imbalance [*q.v.*]); 2) massage (*ràle* - usually with burnt alcohol or hot oil) for a displaced bone or an internal organ that must be returned to its proper place; 3) compresses, poultices and baths (*beny*) for sores and inflammation; 4) laxatives (*lòk*) and enemas (*lavman*),

especially for “dirty blood.” Medication consists of herbal mixtures and powders of leaves, bark and roots from Haiti’s amazing flora.

Often there is an exorbitant charge for the supposedly rare plants etc. necessary, in addition to their fee.

Collaboration with others of the healing profession is not rare. For example, cases of *pèdisyon* (*q.v.*), gas, and impotence are sometimes treated jointly with a Voodoo priest(ess). Other cases such as typhoid fever, tuberculosis, anemia, and abscesses, are referred to Western-type physicians.

However, contrary to the productive collaboration established in China and elsewhere, in Haiti there does not appear, as yet, to have been any concerted effort to upgrade the skills of these folk healers. One notable exception was carried out experimentally c. 1979 at Petit-Goâve under the general direction of Dr. Ari Bordes, whereby 30 faith-and-herb healers received Western-type medical instruction over a four-month period. The results reportedly were excellent: improvement of techniques, and more patients referred to modern medical facilities. And of course these local practitioners appreciated the greater prestige. The subsequent problem appears to have been hostility on the part of some of the Haitian medical establishment. It would appear that while the majority of Haitian physicians have no desire to practice medicine in rural areas, some object to improving the skills of the ‘semi-professionals’ who do. (Cf. Ari Bordes, *Un Médecin Raconte*, pp. 233-234.) (A similar three-hour workshop on AIDS prevention was held in 1996 by the Albert Schweitzer Hospital. Why are cooperative efforts of this sort so rare?)

Their prestige, however, has always been lower than that of the Voodoo priest(ess), though of course some combine both professions.

“We must remember that they have borne the burden of medical care since French colonial days. Sure, they mistreat patients, but so do all doctors sometimes. They do know how to treat malaria and average cuts and pains. And they understand the psychiatric problems here better than do we. I’ve seen a broken leg perfectly set by one. They recommend bed rest for tubercular patients, and this is okay.” (Dr. W. Larimer Mellon, Jr.)

FALLING Often given as a good neutral explanation for a variety of ills secretly believed to have been caused in reality by evil magic.

FALLING STAR \*Someone in the immediate vicinity will soon die.\*

FAMILY PLANNING “All of Haiti’s potentials appear submarginal, save the child-bearing capacity of its women.” (John Augelli) A woman’s role is seen as producing children, and her social status is judged accordingly. To be barren is one of the worst curses that can befall a woman.

The concept of family is radically different from that prevalent in Western society, and family planning is met with deep-seated resistance.

“The average woman in Haiti produces six children, leading to growth of the population twice the world rate. Only an estimated 7% of the women in child-bearing years use birth control techniques.” (Haiti’s Hôpital Albert Schweitzer, 1986)

The 1988 World Population Data Sheet reports that Haiti has the highest crude birthrate, the highest population increase rate, the highest infant mortality rate, and the shortest population “doubling time” (25 years) of any nation in the Caribbean. The population of Haiti is believed to increase

2.2% annually, compared to a 0.7% increase in the United States. This figure is relatively low for a Third-World country, however, because of two factors: 1) high death rate; 2) high emigration rate.

Poverty and urbanization appear to play an enormous role in Haiti as elsewhere. There seems to be an unwritten law that the richer the country, the lower the birthrate; the poorer the country, the higher the birthrate. And urban promiscuity, combined with poverty, further exacerbates this trend. Haiti is desperately poor, and its second largest community today is Cité Soleil, a vast shantytown adjoining Port-au-Prince.

Overly frequent pregnancies by undernourished or malnourished mothers lead to an increasingly weakened female population, and to babies ill-adapted to surviving, flourishing, and eventually contributing to a prosperous nation. Completing this picture are endemic diseases often affecting the mother, as well as often disastrous birthing practices.

With unemployment rife and amusements rare, boredom is a powerful factor leading to very frequent intercourse. "What else is there to do?" (Cf. the sudden rise of the birthrate in New York City nine months after a power failure - and the ensuing television truce.) "The poor man's only delight."

In former times a high birthrate was offset by a high deathrate. Infant mortality was the chief means of population control. Modern medicine has altered the deathrate, with disastrous results for present-day Haiti, causing it to outstrip its resources, especially in food and fuel. Human needs overwhelm the life-support systems.

Many feel, therefore, that the only responsible corollary to improved medical care is family planning.

Infant and child mortality remains high, nevertheless, and family planning information continues to go unheeded. Goal: decrease the births, decrease the deaths, and increase the quality of life.

Yet nothing is more revealing of the attitudes deeply ingrained in the peasant community than the proverbial sayings one so frequently hears. A sampling:

*Pitit se richès pòv malere.* - Children are the poor man's riches.

*Timoun se kado Bondye fè pòv malere.* - Children are God's gift to the poor.

*Se Bondye ki bay pitit.* - It's God who gives children.

*Pitit se baton vyeyès granmoun.* - Children are the old person's walking cane.

*Lakou san timoun, se yon lakou san lajwa.* - A home without children is a home without joy.

*Manman poul ki gen yon sèl pitit pa gen pitit.* - The mother hen with only one chick has no chick.

*Lè ou pa gen pitit, ou se chen.* - When you don't have children, you're nothing but a dog.

*Bourik fè pitit pou do l ka poze.* - The donkey has little ones in order to rest his back.

*Viv san gen rapò ak fanm, se nwizans pou gason.* - Lack of sexual contact with a woman is harmful to a man's health.

*Gason gen yon bous pou yo devide chak lè.* - Man has a purse which must be emptied constantly. (See also SPERM.)

*Se pou m fè sa m kapab fè.* - I must produce what I'm able to produce [woman's saying].

WHY HAVE SO MANY CHILDREN? Answers one hears:

- 1) High infant and child mortality rates.
- 2) Family needs - help in the home and in the field - and beginning at a very young age.
- 3) Deep-rooted insecurity - trust no one but your immediate family.
- 4) Woman's security - a man does not take a union seriously until offspring have been produced by and for him.
- 5) Machismo - male prestige in being able to beget many children.
- 6) Status symbol - for lack of impressive profession, house or car.
- 7) Investment - land (seldom with a clear title) can be seized; house, crops and livestock can be destroyed by storms, with no hope of compensation; but maybe some will make it to the U.S. or elsewhere and send money home.
- 8) Assistance in times of adversity - to make up for the fact that many of the adult children (especially male) will move far away.
- 9) Old-age insurance - the peasant has no other social security.
- 10) Burial insurance - to assure a big funeral, a major symbol of a successful life.

Finally: It's God's will which determines the number of children, and since only God can make a child, is not family "planning" encroaching upon His will? And: when there's enough for two or three, there's enough for four or five or more.

Then there is the family planning example of the Voodoo priest from Gonaïves who had 56 children - he *planned* to have 56 children! His reasoning: he could support them, and they added to his prestige.

WHY IS FAMILY PLANNING BAD? Answers one hears:

- 1) Unsafe to health of the woman (principal answer heard).
- 2) Causes pain.
- 3) Prevents woman from ever having children again.
- 4) Aims at preventing people from having *any* children.
- 5) Relative newness of the idea.
- 6) Whites are fearful of one of Blacks' greatest assets: fertility.
- 7) Male fear that a mate's tubal ligation will cause him to be impotent (sic).
- 8) Against teachings of Roman Catholic church (not a major factor in peasant reasoning).

Never underestimate the importance of male authority in Haiti: many claim it is much more the men than the women who have to be convinced. Another factor is male insecurity: the fear that contraceptive methods would give the woman too much sexual freedom, without risk. (See also CONDOMS; IUD; PILL.)

IN FAVOR OF FAMILY PLANNING The "two-child concept" falls on deaf ears, but informal surveys seem to indicate that most women really would like to "rest" or "stop" after three or four children. The women most receptive to the idea are mostly aged 25-35. Thus, the principal role for the family planner would appear not to convince, but rather to allay fear that the method chosen will cause sickness or even death to the woman. Safety even more than desirability should be the principal message.

IMPORTANT POINTS TO BE STRESSED:

- 1) Safety of methods.
- 2) Improved quality of life: proper care and education for one's existing children.

- 3) Today's high cost of living in Haiti: food, clothing, medical care, education. The family cooking-pot is only so big.
- 4) "Stop for a while" or "rest" concept, child *spacing* rather than child *limiting*.
- 5) Each birth prevents mother from engaging in commerce until weaning.
- 6) Inheritance: even less land for each heir.

(Peasant saying: *Rat anpil, twou pa fon.* - Many rats, and the hole is not deep. There is only so much room in the nest.)

If God or the Voodoo spirits will a pregnancy, modern science is powerless to prevent it - but there is no harm in trying!

A "hard-sell" approach that has worked: "Food and medicine cost. Do you want to care for your children, or do you want to bury your children? Death is not a family-planning device."

Radio and community meetings have had only limited success, but home visits by field workers and talks given in the dispensary and maternity ward have proven more useful. The five to seven-minute chat seems to be the most effective; any more than that appears to be a waste of time. A 10% success rate is considered very good. The most effective medium by far however is word-of-mouth, woman-to-woman.

The 'Western' methods favored by Haitian women appear to be, in this order: the contraceptive pill, the rhythm method, tubal ligation, contraceptive foam, and the diaphragm. These last two are rarely if ever used, and the IUD has finally met with wide resistance. Often contraceptive measures must be taken by the woman without the man's knowledge (reportedly 90% of cases). Rarely does the mate appear. Yet for a tubal ligation in the case of a wife or common-law wife, the man's written permission must be obtained. The

traditional methods (coitus interruptus, douche, periodic abstinence) still seem to be the preferred ones by far. As for men, see CONDOMS and VASECTOMY.

A normal menstrual flow is considered an important health factor. Thus the IUD which sometimes increases the flow, or the pill which sometimes decreases the flow, can be seen as unhealthy. (See MENSTRUATION and PILL). A recent problem is a high dropout rate: more new users than repeaters.

A problem with White foreigners trying to encourage birth control is that it can be perceived as a subtle means employed by the White race to control the proliferation, and eventual take-over, of the Black race. Also there is the accusation that after the Whites have stripped a country of its economic resources, these same Whites then kindly point out that its population will have to decrease as well.

Many observers feel, however, that it is immoral to upset the age-old, delicate balance between high birthrates and high deathrates, if this is not countered by intelligent family planning. Haiti's birthrate has outstripped its ability to feed itself. More and more agricultural products have to be imported into this agricultural economy. There is too little arable land for too many people, offset neither by natural resources nor by a highly educated population. There is intolerable pressure on food, health, education, and jobs. Yet effective family planning in Haiti is even more difficult to achieve than is effective medical care. **But saving lives is not enough if the end result is greater national misery.**

**FAMILY SUPPORT** Families will usually "camp out" on or near the hospital grounds, and it is normally they who both feed and bathe the patient.

"Family support has revealed itself to be of immense

psychological and moral importance for the welfare and survival of the Haitian patient. Before the age of antibiotics it was noticed, for example, that the outcome in typhoid fever would be determined by whether the patient was adequately nursed and nurtured. It has often been observed that patients without family support are in grave danger of dying, even from quite curable diseases.” (Dr. William Hodges)

It was often noted that Dr. Albert Schweitzer’s hospital in Lambaréné, Gabon, where an almost native village atmosphere reigned with family support groups camping out, was packed, whereas a nearby French hospital with an overly sterile atmosphere, was little used.

FAT \*Symbol of both health and happiness.\* (Fact: it is normally only the wealthy few who have the means to become overweight.)

FATALISM Basic concept of self: passive recipient of all forces of the universe. Man is not master of his own fate. This acceptance of fate (*Bondye bon* - “Whatever God wills is good”) translates sometimes into an apparent lack of interest in vaccinations, sanitation, and preventive medicine in general.

“A safety valve for mental health, but a hindrance to development.” (Andrea Couture)

FETUS \*The fetus is nourished, by menstrual blood, through the cranium rather than through the umbilicus - thus the fontanel at birth.\*

\*The fetus develops principally while the mother is asleep\* - thus ample sleep is believed necessary during pregnancy. Conversely, \*if the mother sleeps too much, the child will be lazy.\*

\*If the pregnant mother is violently startled from sleep, that part of the fetus being “sewn” at the moment may be born deformed or missing.\*

\*Birth defects can also result from the wrath of another human who has enlisted the help of a Voodoo spirit (*lwa*).\*

Birth defects and fetal cravings: \*the fetus has an independent personality which interacts with the mother, affecting her personality and behavior - and vice versa. Cravings for special food by the mother are, in reality, the fetus demanding those special foods necessary for its development. If the fetus does not receive them, it will be permanently damaged.\*

\*Energetic kicking by the fetus is usually an expression of hunger.\*

A strong taboo exists against burying a deceased pregnant woman with the dead fetus still inside, for fear that her soul will harm any other pregnant woman or new-born of the family. Even among members of the elite, the fetus is usually extracted - normally by a Western-type physician. Among the peasant population the extraction is performed by special practitioners accompanied by a Voodoo rite.

*FIBWÒM* Both a folk concept and a specific medical term. For some, it is conceptualized as a hard mass of spoiled blood within the womb, caused by a fetus in *pèdisyon* (*q.v.*) which, instead of eventually growing to maturity, has assumed a pathological state threatening the life of the mother. The solution is surgical removal by a Western-type physician. For others, it simply means a fibroma or fibrous tumor.

**FINGERNAIL** An extremely long fingernail on either a man’s left or right hand, or both, is an ostentatious show of the fact that he does no manual labor.

(See also “Conceal or Reveal” under HISTORY-TAKING.)

**FISH** The accelerated rate of soil erosion has, especially in recent times, deposited so much silt in the immediate off-shore waters of Haiti that the algae etc., on which the fish feed, have been smothered. Consequently, fishermen must venture much further from the shore to ensure good catches - something which they are unprepared to do either materially (flimsy craft) or psychologically (fear of water, inability to swim).

But fish are probably the most neglected protein potential in Haiti. One answer: creation of small ponds stocked with sturdy, resistant fish. A most worthy project for continued Peace Corps efforts and for other aid groups, but there is one recurring problem with the newly-created pond: ownership title to the suddenly valuable property.

**FLEXIBILITY** Perhaps the most important single characteristic necessary. If the foreigner requires all the amenities and efficiency of a technologically developed country, best stay there.

Another absolute necessity in order to carry out successful work in Haiti is the ability to appreciate and adapt, to a certain degree, to a rather radically different culture.

**FLOGGING** Sometimes used in Voodoo cures to expel an evil spirit. (Cf. BURNS.)

**FOLK HEALERS** Five general categories: 1) Voodoo priests (*oungan*) and priestesses (*manbo*); 2) faith-and-herb healers (*doktè fèy*); 3) midwives (*fanmsay*) and government-trained midwives (*matwòn*); 4) bone-setters (*doktè zo*); and 5) injectionists (*pikiris*). To these categories must be added the sorcerers (*bòkò*), who are male Voodoo priests dealing in both positive and negative effects.

FOLK MEDICINE Syncretism is an important characteristic of the rural Haitian: just as there is often no firm delineation in his mind between Voodoo and Roman Catholicism, there is often no conceptual conflict between folk medicine and Western-type medicine. Few if any reject outright either the modern or the traditional approaches to medicine. The Haitian peasant will consult the folk healer, the Voodoo healer, and the Western healer - often simultaneously - until the illness is overcome. He is above all a pragmatist.

Occasionally heard is the attitude held by many, even if rarely expressed, that no one is going to let oneself or one's child die, whatever the local Protestant minister or Roman Catholic priest may proclaim against Voodoo. "*Se de dwèt ki manje kalalou*" ("It takes two fingers to eat okra"), i.e., both folk and Western medicine will be tried when the going gets tough.

If it were not for the practitioners of folk medicine, to whom would many, many rural Haitians turn? There simply are not enough government and foreign doctors available.

Quite conceivably there was a time, say during the colonial period, when folk medicine, being more empirical in its approach, was more effective than so-called Western-type medicine.

Furthermore, when there is no other medical advice available, folk medicine at least gives the patient the feeling of not passively awaiting his/her fate, but of actively trying to seek a cure - and in the case of psychosomatic complaints, may very well find one. One can feel in a state of grace with one's Voodoo divinity, a feeling of euphoria not to be underestimated.

"The village healers have been there for centuries, and present a far stronger brand of competition than do say chiropractors in the U.S. On the psychosomatic level they

are perhaps unsurpassed, and even on the physical level they often have an age-old knowledge of local plants for certain local maladies which Western science has yet fully to explore.” (Dr. William Hodges)

Although Haitian folk medicine is still very much centered in magic and superstition, there are indeed certain effective herbal cures which we have personally witnessed where the Western practitioner had been powerless. A Canadian woman of our acquaintance had developed a strange skin rash which the Western-type doctors of Port-au-Prince were unable to cure. One application, however, of an herbal compound by a village *doktè fèy* brought about an immediate cure. This was no doubt a local cure for a local malady, but it nevertheless serves as a reminder that Western medicine still needs to evaluate - and learn from - many a “folk cure.”

Not unlike Western medicine, folk medicine is constantly evolving, albeit more slowly. Its practitioners are open to new remedies based on their own observations and those of others with whom they have direct contact. In an illiterate society however, transmission of knowledge is obviously quite limited. Nevertheless, this openness to new ideas could prove a fertile field for the upgrading of some local skills by an adroit Western-type practitioner. Medical training disguised as collaboration?

Many feel that the worst harm done by the *oungan*, *manbo*, or *doktè fèy* is that proper medical treatment is thereby delayed until it is often too late.

FONTANEL Often protected by powdered nutmeg and oil in a piece of cotton, held in place by a sock or bonnet.

\*When noticeably indented (as in the case of dehydration), the solution is simply to hold the baby on its head.\* Only later (and often too late) is medical aid sought.

\*Rain falling on the fontanel will cause crooked teeth.\*

**FOOD** Three basic food groups are recognized by the peasant population: *vyann* (high-protein foods such as meat, chicken, fish, eggs, milk); *viv* (starches and carbohydrates such as cornmeal, millet, rice, plantain, sweet potato, yam, manioc); and *legim* (vegetables such as eggplant, tomato, okra, pumpkin, onion, chayote squash). A healthy diet must include each group.

However beliefs about certain foods can well deprive a person of important nutrients. See BANANAS, CHAYOTE SQUASH, EGGS, FRUIT, MEAT, MILK, MUTTON, OKRA, ORANGES, PINEAPPLE, SPINACH; and especially HOT/COLD IMBALANCE, MEALS, and POSTPARTUM BELIEFS AND PRACTICES.

Pregnant women are supposed to “eat for two,” especially red fruits and vegetables such as beets, to build up the baby’s blood. They are to avoid spices.

Haitians do not like to try new foods. A hospital setting is not the place to try to introduce the unfamiliar in nutrition.

Haiti has been described as a mecca of vegetarianism - not because Haitians are convinced of the virtues of eating only fruits, vegetables, and grains, but because most are too poor to do otherwise. The result however, thanks also to a harsh life-style involving much walking and climbing, is a relatively low rate of coronary sclerosis.

“There are three types of Haitians: the first eats three times a day; the second eats one meal a day; the third doesn’t know when he’ll eat next.”

**FOREIGN AID** The great majority of foreign donors prefer to channel their contributions through non-governmental

organizations. There is the well-known proverb: “*Chodyè monte sou non timoun, li desann sou non granmoun.*” (The cooking-pot set up in the name of the child is taken down in the name of the adult. - Aid given to help the people ends up in the pockets of the powerful.)

*FREDI* (chill) \*An external substance always harmful when it enters the human body; affects women more than men, especially in the head and stomach. A woman is most susceptible to *fredi* immediately after delivery, but it can also harm the fetus and even prevent further conception.\*

\*The basic cause of tetanus.\*

FRENCH A wondrous societal device for keeping the rich rich, and the poor poor.

\*Every Haitian speaks French.\* The greater the outside social pressure, the more this ridiculous statement is likely to be heard. In reality, only some 3% of Haitians are fully fluent in French, with another 12% who have varying commands of French. Thus approximately 85% of Haitians speak *only* Creole. All Haitians however (except a few raised abroad), speak Haitian Creole - and Article 5 of the latest Haitian Constitution (1987) proclaims Haitian Creole and French as the two official languages of the country.

FROGS \*Fearsome creatures to be avoided at all costs. They will urinate up into one's eyes, causing blindness.\*

FRUIT \*Acidic fruit can spoil the blood of adolescents of either sex, causing acne.\*

\*Eating fruits classified as “cold” (see HOT/COLD IMBALANCE) when the body is overheated from exertion, is a certain cause of diarrhea.\*

FUNERAL PROCESSIONS Normally take place at 4 p.m., are often slow, and always on foot. Another constant of the Haitian scene - even to the point that when driving in Port-au-Prince at this hour, one has to allow extra time because of the inevitable funeral processions encountered. "A land of high birthrates, and high deathrates."

There is even a well-known proverb concerning fate and inevitability: "*Wè pa wè, lan tèman pou katrè*" (Whether we see it or not, the funeral is for four o'clock.)

FUNERALS Services both in church and at grave site are often the scenes of extreme emotional outbursts (*kriz de nè, q.v.*) which sometimes render the continuation of the ceremony all but impossible.

GARLIC \*A garlic necklace prevents worms from working their way up to the lungs and throat, where they could cause suffocation.\* A new twist on the Dracula legend?

\*The aroma of garlic, when deeply inhaled, is effective in killing worms.\*

GAS (*gaz*) More a concept than a substance. Pockets of gas are perceived as the immediate cause of pain occurring *anywhere* in the body: in the head (entering through the ears), in the stomach (entering through the mouth), in the neck, shoulders, back, appendix, or legs (traveling from the stomach) - and especially in a muscle. As gas moves from one part of the body to another, it produces pain. For example in passing from the stomach to the legs, it is held responsible for producing arthritis or rheumatism. Hernias as well are explained by gas. Gas is also given as the cause of acute hunger pain, and the accumulation of this gas results in *anfleman* (swelling), i.e., kwashiorkor. In the head, it is referred to as "wind": *van nan tèt* (wind in head) or *van nan zòrèy* (wind in ears, buzzing in ears) - both causing headaches.

It is believed that women are especially susceptible to gas after childbirth, and should wear a tight belt or strip of cloth about the waist. But it is of little use to ask a Haitian woman if she has been passing gas; she will rarely, if ever, give an affirmative answer.

\*A cord tied tightly around any body area will prevent *gaz*, and therefore pain, from spreading. A headache can be localized by a tight string around the neck; a stomach-ache can be confined by tight cords around the chest and upper abdomen.\*

**GEOPHAGY** The habit of earth-eating, especially clay, indeed exists in Haiti, but is apparently not as widespread a problem today as in colonial times. Brought about supposedly by: 1) extreme hunger; 2) an unconscious need to remedy certain mineral deficiencies; 3) simply a fondness for the taste of certain earths. It sometimes occurs with pregnant women, and is interpreted as a need for increased iron. *Manjèdètè* (earth-eaters) are reportedly found most frequently in the country's most destitute region, the Department of the North-West.

**GERMS** A concept quite foreign to the average Haitian peasant. However, much illness is seen as being caused by elements originating outside the human body, such as inappropriate foods (see **HOT/COLD IMBALANCE**), *fredi* (*q.v.*), *gas* (*q.v.*), as well as, of course, Voodoo-induced ailments.

Blaming sickness and disease on such commonplace elements as bad water or lack of latrines strikes many a Voodooist as a White man's simple-minded explanation for a complex Voodoo curse.

Is not the wrath of one of the three m's (*mistè* - another name for the Voodoo spirits or *lwa*; *mò* - the dead, the ancestors; and *marasa* - twins) a far more reasonable explanation than

tiny, invisible particles floating around in the water, in the air, or in mosquitoes and flies?

GIRLS \*If a girl climbs a fruit tree, the fruit will become sour.\*

\*If a girl eats the testicles of a pig, she will become sexually aroused.\*

\*If a girl wears too many rings, she will have trouble finding a husband.\*

GODPARENTS One's godmother especially is considered in almost the same light as one's mother. And there exists a strong taboo against marrying someone with whom one shares the same godparent.

GONORRHEA (*grantchalè*) \*Caused by sitting on wet grass or on a wet stone when fatigued.\*

GOVERNMENT Did you really expect government red tape to be organized, orderly? Is it really that way anywhere? And if Haiti were really "the way it should be," you wouldn't be needed here. (See POLITICAL PROBLEMS.)

GRATITUDE Don't expect it. Some claim that it is there, though not often exteriorized. But did you really come to Haiti seeking blind adoration or undying thanks? Or rather because you thought this is where you were most needed, because this is where you thought you could help most, because this is where you wanted to be? Your reward has to come from within, not from without.

Many patients simply perceive that they are receiving services in return for fees paid (however small). Perhaps this is best for their self-respect.

“There is no reward for the work except the privilege of doing it.” (Dr. Albert Schweitzer)

**GREETINGS** The mobile person is expected to greet a stationary person first. Similarly, a newcomer in a community is expected to take the first steps in getting to know the already established members of that community.

**GUARDIAN ANGELS** Voodooists believe there is a *gwo bonnanj* (literally: “big good angel”) which animates our thought processes, memory, and feelings, and which leaves us during our sleep - and whose adventures during that time make up our dreams. If it does not come back to us in the morning, the result is a profound lethargy, or even death. This condition will continue indefinitely should it be captured and sold by an evil sorcerer. And for a Voodoo possession to occur, the *gwo bonnanj* must temporarily leave the body. It has been described as corresponding more or less to the Western concept of the soul.

There is also a *ti bonnanj* (literally: “little good angel”) which protects us from evil. It is conceptualized as an incarnation of one’s special protective Voodoo spirit (*lwa tèt*). The *ti bonnanj* corresponds essentially to the Western concept of the guardian angel. A supposed technique of evil magic is to entice another’s guardian angel into a tub of water and then stab it.

Both originate in God (*Granmèt*), and both must join forces in order for a fetus to become truly human. However, both are subject to the physical state of the expectant mother. The body is but the physical support for these two angels.

\*Since the *gwo bonnanj* of a child is not firmly attached to the body, it can wander off, and the child will die\* - thus another explanation for high infant and child mortality. Remedies for keeping it firmly attached are special fetishes (*wanga*)

nailed to the wall, as well as shirts of various colors bearing a cross which the child must wear until a certain age.

HAIR \*If washed by an unknown person, can take away a gifted child's intelligence.\*

HAITI \*Filled with malevolent creatures roaming about, posing as friendly neighbors, waiting for a chance to harm or destroy by magic.\* (See also PARANOIA.)

Noise: during the day, people; at night, dogs; at dawn, roosters. Not to mention donkeys braying, goats bleating, along with Voodoo drumming, and funeral wailing.

“Not a single straight line in all of Haiti.” An old ‘Haiti hand’: “Thank goodness!”

Haiti is a poor country. Thus the competition is fierce - but not the cooperation. Few and fortunate are the circumstances where this pattern can be changed. A basic reason why Haiti is a poor country.

Why Haiti? Simply because it is a foregone conclusion that of all the needy nations in the Western hemisphere, Haiti is undisputedly number one. Also, perhaps because it is the most fascinating.

HANDOUTS Prevailing wisdom has it that the peasant often does not really appreciate - or value - what (s)he has not paid for. Free medication, for example, will probably be considered inferior and not be used. Best to charge something - but not necessarily the full cost.

The various local ‘medics’ - Voodoo practitioners, faith-and-herb healers, midwives - are very definitely paid, and quite well too, by local standards. Outside medical-care programs are not intended to be self-perpetuating. People must become

accustomed to helping support their own health programs.  
(See COST, DEPENDENCY, and PAYMENT.)

**HANDSHAKES** A basic, widespread facet of Haitian etiquette.

**HEALTH** In Haiti, the exception rather than the rule.

Yet there is a saying that “*Mikwòb pou pete fyèl yon Ayisyen poko fèt*” (The germs that would do a Haitian in have not yet been created). Despite the unconscious irony of this statement, it is nevertheless evident that Haiti presents a striking example of the law concerning the survival of the fittest. Only the strongest survived the slave pens and the slave ships, the harsh treatment of the slave plantations, as well as the generally insalubrious living conditions that have characterized so much of the Haitian environment since the Revolution.

It has often been observed that even more important than more and better health facilities, and more medical personnel, are simply more and better food, more potable water, and more latrines.

**HEALTH EDUCATION** Health care without accompanying health education: a variation of the “Fish Principle.” (See DEPENDENCY.)

**HEMORRHAGING** \*Can be caused by red foods.\*

\*Best treated with herbs.\*

**HEMORRHOIDS** \*Can be caused by someone burning your excrement.\*

**HERBS** Plants are of the greatest importance for the peasant, forming not only his nourishment and the basis for his handmade crafts, but also his medicine and his magic.

Even rather young children have an amazing knowledge of herbs and the reputed medicinal qualities of each.

Herbs are used in good magic (medicine) as well as in evil magic (sorcery). \*Certain ones are useful only to counteract a supernatural illness.\*

Herbal teas are the basic feature of home remedies.

An intriguing peasant philosophy has it that each herb is good for some medicinal purpose, though we may not yet know that purpose. Conversely stated, for every sickness there is a curative herb. The problem is simply to match one with the other.

Proverb: “*Nanpwen maladi ki pa gen remèd.*” - There’s no sickness that doesn’t have a remedy.

HISTORY-TAKING [*All but the last paragraph in this section are either inspired by, or are a direct quote from, Dr. William Hodges, rich (in wisdom and experience!) from over thirty years’ practice in Haiti.*]

“Many peasants are used to going to a Voodoo priest(ess), who operates through divination alone. Thus they are not psychologically prepared for the question-and-answer cause-and-effect dialogue of Western medicine. And they may well see in any medical practitioner the same ‘magic aura’ and may be trying to test you. You are supposed already to ‘know’ what their problem is.”

“There is a most revealing proverb: ‘*Abitan pa janm konnen*’ (Peasants never know), i.e., peasants *pretend* never to know anything. Deeply instilled is the principle never to volunteer information, either personal or concerning those near to them. Any information divulged may give someone a degree of power over them. Another proverb goes ‘*Tou sa ou pa*

*konnen pi gran pase ou* (Everything you don't know is greater than you), i.e., 'Lack of knowledge can hurt you,' or conversely stated, 'Knowledge is power.' Thus withholding information is an effective way of protecting oneself and even of having power over others."

“CONCEAL OR REVEAL: the patient's option, and unfortunately, the Haitian peasant's cultural orientation inclines toward circumlocution and obfuscation. Sometimes this tendency even leads to using a different name on each visit. Answers tend to be vague, evasive, or even to reflect what the patient believes the physician wants to hear. The causes of this mindset have been ascribed to slavery, colonialism, oppression, poverty - even to Voodoo which tends to conceal. Whatever the reasons, here are some ploys which have evolved from thirty years' experience in Haiti:

Exaggeration: 'I'll bet this fellow has been sick since last Christmas!' - 'Oh no, doc, it hasn't been over 3-4 months!'

Praise: 'It's good you have taken care of him so long! How long has it been?'

Threat: Throw the dossier down on the table and refuse to continue unless the person tells you when and how the illness began.

Fingernails: Look at their length. Frequently the peasant will let his nails grow in disease. If they are a quarter of an inch or more, the illness is over a month.

Keep on asking: often first answers can be misleading. For example, you can be told 'I fell,' 'I have a sore stomach,' or 'My eyes hurt' - and the eventual diagnosis can be tuberculosis. But what often appears to be a lie is actually more a problem of differing concepts.

‘Why are you here?’ Maybe simply because they were told to return, but when asked the question, they sometimes tend almost to invent symptoms. Rely more on what you see than on what you hear. Body language and non-verbal communication are all the more essential when dealing with often inarticulate patients. Yes, you are sometimes reduced to practicing ‘veterinary medicine’!”

“As the desperation level rises, histories can become more and more contrived, and more and more misleading. And some exaggerations are in hopes of getting more and better medicines.”

“Very rarely will a patient admit to feeling completely well, even if cured. The viewpoint is: Don’t tempt fate!”

“Psychosomatic complaints are common, especially for those mourning a dead relative - possibly out of fear of retribution. Psychotic depression is very difficult to diagnose in a foreign culture.” (See INSANITY.)

“One learns not to interpret the history too literally, but according to the patient’s willingness to communicate. Histories are ‘basically discountable,’ unless volunteered.”

Confidentiality can be seen as a problem, especially for women patients, when in the presence of an interpreter - who could well spread gossip around the community.

See also CONSULTATIONS.

**HOMOSEXUALITY** No more or less prevalent in Haiti than elsewhere. However, a male is considered homosexual (*masisi*) by the local community only if his general demeanor is overtly effeminate.

Most Haitian males consider themselves neither homosexual

nor bisexual as long as they are the insertive partner during the sexual act, regardless of the sex of their partner - and thus in their minds at no risk in acquiring AIDS.

Others will in no way admit to homosexuality, since they engage in it only as a way to support themselves in a country where unemployment and poverty are rampant.

**HOSPITAL** The *peristil* (a covered area open at the sides) of the Voodoo temple complex (*ounfò*) where the ritual dancing and public ceremonies are centered, is often used also as an informal lying-in hospital where the priest(ess) can follow a patient's progress more closely. More generally, it has been described as: "sanctuary, clubhouse, dance-hall, hospital, theater, chemist's shop, music-hall, court, and council chamber in one." (J. Jahn)

Question: Why would a Voodoo priest come for treatment in a Christian hospital? Answer: To have a disease sent by God treated in a hospital of God!

See also PUBLIC HOSPITALS.

**HOT/COLD IMBALANCE** Foods, body conditions, illnesses, and medications, are defined as either "hot" (*cho*) or "cold" (*frèt*) - designating not the temperature, but rather their symbolic "essential quality" generating heat or cold within the body. Good health depends upon achieving a state of equilibrium between the two. For example, the postpartum period is considered to be the hottest state of the mother's body, and thus "hot" foods must be avoided - but foods too "cold" can induce hemorrhaging. Someone with a cold is considered "hot," and must take a "cold" medicine. Measles and migraines are "hot," and must be countered with "cold" medicines, herbs, or foods. Someone with cold blood (*san frèt*) must take medication to increase body warmth, and vice versa. Malaria is "cold," while other fevers are "hot," and

hot and cold temperatures experienced in rapid succession can bring on *chofrèt* - fever and chills.

According to some observers, dark grainy foodstuffs tend to be classified as “hot” since they more closely resemble the texture of the dark, nourishing earth with its life-giving forces. Conversely, lighter smoother foods are commonly classified as “cold.” The example is given that unrefined honey, being darker and heavier, is “hot,” while refined honey is “cold.” Similarly, dark meats are more life-giving and therefore “hot,” fish and poultry “cold.” However, upon examination many classifications appear to be quite arbitrary, and some foods change category depending upon the user: milk, being white, is usually considered “cold,” yet “hot” for a neonate, since it is essential for sustaining life. (Leslie Desmangles)

Examples of “hot” foods are cinnamon tea, coffee, corn, eggs, manioc, nutmeg, peanuts, rum, sesame seeds, shaddock juice, sweet potatoes, taro, and yams. Examples of “cold” foods are avocados, bananas, cashews, chayote squash, coconuts, granadilla, green beans, limes, mangoes, okra, oranges, pineapples, shaddock, soursop, star apples, tomatoes, and watermelons. There is a large third “neutral” category which includes beef, beets, bread, breadfruit, cabbage, carrots, cassava, conch, cornmeal, eggplant, goat, kidney beans, lima beans, plantains, pork, pumpkins, rice, and sugar cane. As for medication, cough medicines are “hot,” while laxatives are “cold.”

This theory appears to be somewhat less prevalent in Haiti than in the rest of Latin America - but Haiti does, after all, share the same island with an Hispanic culture.

Obviously, a Western physician could well coax a recalcitrant patient into taking indicated medicine or foods by referring to this well-entrenched belief.

HOUSES Used for sleeping, and for sex. Cooking is done in a detached lean-to. Living takes place outdoors.

Small, crowded, tightly closed up at night against the evil spirits that roam about - thus maximizing chances of contagion.

HUMAN SACRIFICE Unsubstantiated since the infamous Bizoton Affair of 1863, when Congo and Jeanne Pellé were tried and executed for ritual murder and cannibalism. Nevertheless, the fear is still present among some of the peasant population that they, or their children, could be used as Voodoo “goats without horns” - human beings taking the place of a sacrificial goat.

HYDROCELE (*maklouklou, madougoun*) \*Caused by river water having entered through a small lesion and bringing about enormous enlargement. Or by air pressure from, for example, playing the trumpet, or even from just breathing too hard, which punctures body tissue and leads to enormous swelling.\*

\*Caused by an excessive effort such as carrying heavy objects.\*

Considered shameful - consequently there is usually much delay before a physician is finally consulted.

HYPOCHONDRIA Even less rare in Haiti than elsewhere, due in part to rather widespread paranoia that “others” not only desire to do one harm, but - thanks to evil Voodoo spells - are quite able to do so. (See PARANOIA.) Obviously a situation to the financial advantage of certain folk healers.

HYSTERIA (*kriz*), or “PANIC ATTACK” “A constant of the Haitian scene. In most cases the victim is a girl between 15 and 25, who screams at the top of her lungs and throws

her arms, legs and head about in wild abandon. The pulse races, as the chest heaves in and out. Sometimes there is a lull, followed by a repetition. The eyes always seem to flutter, and some have even come to call it ‘the fluttering-eye disease.’ There is usually some consciousness, as shown by the old test for conscious states whereby the lifted arm will not fall back upon the face. The usual Haitian explanation is either a Voodoo possession, where a Voodoo spirit has temporarily taken possession of a believer, or a pressing need for sexual activity. Afterward, the victim returns to a normal state, though exhausted. The routine for many Western doctors is to check for serious disorders such as meningitis or cerebral malaria, and then prescribe a tranquilizer. For habitual seizures of this kind, Haitian folklore medicine simply prescribes marriage!” (Dr. William Hodges) (Cf. *ENDISPOZISYON*.)

Supposedly affects 50% of neurotic young girls of both poor and middle-class backgrounds at one time or another.

ILLNESS \*Exists only when there is intense pain, or when one can no longer function normally.\* Result: much delay in treatment.

Certain ones are considered especially shameful: tuberculosis, epilepsy, insanity, AIDS.

Divided into two categories: 1) of natural origin, and 2) of supernatural origin - although the distinctions between the two can be quite subjective. Illness is treated on its own terms in Western society, but for many in rural (and urban) Haiti, it is a combination of religion, magic, and empirical science - the sacred vs. the secular treatment of illness.

NATURAL ILLNESS (*maladi Bondye, maladi peyi, maladi doktè*) Well-known, common sicknesses, of short duration.

Not thought to be the result of a Voodoo-inspired poison or of negative magic.

Examples: headaches, colds, sore throat, cramps, mild fevers, blisters, conjunctivitis, sore chest, lower-back pain, and hot/cold imbalance (*q.v.*). Also cuts, burns, sprains, common poison. A few others, such as ulcers, abscesses, and spoiled blood (*san gate*), fall in an intermediate category, perhaps calling for the help of a Voodoo priest(ess) as well.

Six major causes: 1) blood problems (volume, condition, temperature, color, and circulation - see BLOOD); 2) gas, *q.v.*; 3) (mother's) milk (condition and location - see MILK, SPOILED); 4) hot/cold imbalance, *q.v.*; 5) broken or dislocated bone; 6) movement of disease from one part of the body to another.

Treatment: 1) home remedies; 2) faith-and-herb healer; 3) Western-type physician - usually in that order. Any so-called natural illness, however, which fails to respond to treatment, can be suspected of being of supernatural origin, and is then referred to a Voodoo practitioner. Recourse to the rare, understaffed and expensive government hospitals is usually seen as an act of final desperation.

**SUPERNATURAL ILLNESS** (*maladi lwa, maladi majik*), "the evil that comes from another." Unusual sicknesses. Clearest indication: appears suddenly, with no preliminary signs, and, if nothing is done, progresses slowly through the body.

Examples: sudden sickness in young children, sudden but persistent internal complaints, edema, seizures, strokes, coma, paralysis, insanity. Also, a child born with a physical deformity. However, any illness or injury, such as an accident on the road, falling from a tree, or being struck by lightning, can be seen as punishment by the Voodoo spirits,

or conversely, by God for having made some sort of Voodoo pact.

Two major causes: 1) ill-will of a Voodoo spirit (*lwa*) whom one has offended, usually through neglect; 2) ill-will of a human being who has employed negative magic (*voye mò, maladi majik, maladi moun, maladi satan*). Other causes are the evil eye (*move je, maldjòk*) and vampire-like witches (*lougawou*), both attacking mainly children; plus dead relatives (*lemò*) and various other evil spirits (*djab, move nanm, baka, sanpwèl*).

Treatment: supernatural means for a supernatural illness, namely positive countermagic by a Voodoo priest(ess). Some illnesses of supernatural origin will, however, require subsequent therapy by a faith-and-herb healer or Western-type physician to repair the damage remaining (or resulting), once the supernatural cause has been alleviated. Often complications occur because of the time-lag involved.

If Western-type medicine has been tried first and been found to be unsuccessful, \*this is a clear indication of supernatural illness, and the services of a Voodoo priest(ess) are definitely in order. Thus any possible reasons why a given person might have wanted to wreak vengeance on the afflicted person are to be carefully examined.\*

It is not difficult to understand why phenomena such as sudden infant death syndrome (“crib death”) would be attributed to supernatural causes, often seen as the result of the ill-will of a neighbor or the evil powers of a half-demented old woman (*lougawou*) - and the ensuing and enduring hatreds that would result.

And naturally, the cessation of many an illness which has run its course is attributed to the powers of the folk healer - or Western-type physician.

“In Haiti especially, one is tempted to examine the relation between the mental and the physical. To what extent do the terror and stress caused by belief in a Voodoo curse weaken the entire immune system? And do certain side effects of Western drugs used as treatment only augment the psychosis and thereby worsen the physical response? The proverb “*Tout maladi pa maladi doktè*” (Every sickness is not the kind to be treated by a doctor) can well be applied. But it could well be that here especially the old ‘bedside manner’ so often said to be lacking in modern medicine, is needed to soothe the mind of the patient, support any efforts of relatives, and bring about an objective mustering of all healing forces for the welfare of the patient.” (Dr. William Hodges)

See APPENDIX: Illness.

IMPOTENCE \*Caused by the mother having carelessly let several drops of her milk fall upon the baby’s genitals.\*

An abiding fear among many a groom is that negative magic is cast against him during the wedding ceremony which will cause him to become impotent, at least temporarily.

\*Can be overcome by participation in a group sex session following a Voodoo ceremony.\*

\*A woman can render her mate impotent for any other woman by collecting some of his sperm in a cloth which is then placed in a cold spot, preferably under a large water jar. When she wishes his favors for herself, all she has to do is to remove the cloth temporarily.\* Of course a “well-meaning friend” will have informed him of this action. (Such magic could doubtlessly bring international fame and fortune to any Voodoo practitioner who could guarantee results!)

INCEST Occurs, but meets with stern social disapproval.

INFANTICIDE Supposedly non-existent. However, in cases of handicapped infants, there is often disguised infanticide largely by withholding nourishment.

INFANT MORTALITY The three major causes: umbilical tetanus, diarrhea, and malnutrition.

Very high - exactly how high is unknowable, in spite of frequently published 'precise' statistics. For example, a widespread practice is the burying of deceased infants without registration or funerals. Haitian statistics are at best educated guesses. Some reasons: mountainous terrain with few roads, a highly dispersed population, and an attitude toward anything governmental which causes people to hide out when the census-taker passes.

INFORMALITY And relaxed friendliness, with much joking and chatting - the dominant tone of rural Haitian life. The more you can fit in with this approach, the more effective you can probably be.

INJECTIONISTS (*pikiris*) Usually a former employee at a dispensary who has acquired some experience in giving shots. Goes from village to village administering this form of medication most favored by Haitians. Main clientele consists of patients living far from health services and/or unable to travel.

Reportedly use the same hypodermic needles, their biggest expense, some twenty times or more. Their medicines, more often than not, consist of drugs well past their expiration dates, and dumped at low cost on the Third-World market. And obviously any injections requiring refrigeration are worse than useless.

Such is the blind faith in the hypodermic that some have been discovered going from house to house injecting - for

a healthy fee - substances such as condensed milk, with decidedly unhealthy results.

Could well be instrumental in the spread of AIDS. With a minimum of equipment, their needles are rarely sterilized, and a large percentage of their clients have tuberculosis - in Haiti often one of the first symptoms of AIDS.

**INJECTIONS** Often perceived as the great cure-all, whatever the malady.

\*If they don't hurt, and you don't get a highly noticeable reaction, then you're not getting your money's worth!\*

\*If administered at the time of a full moon, can result in a welt forming on the spot of the injection.\*

**INSANITY** Thought to be caused by an intruding evil spirit (demoniacal possession). The Voodoo priest(ess) attempts to drive out this spirit by a number of methods, including shock treatment ceremony, rubbing on a foul-smelling concoction while cutting the patient's arm, flagellation in a cemetery at midnight. (See also VOODOO CURES.)

\*Can also be caused by *san fèb* (weak blood), by mother's milk mixing with her blood and going to her head, or by a foreign object such as a bug having entered through the ears or nose.\*

“Voodoo provides a reasonable theory and treatment method for the psychiatrically ill. Examination reveals certain striking similarities between the therapeutic framework of Voodoo and that of Western psychiatry.” (Ari Kiev, M.D., Johns Hopkins Psychiatric Clinic, in “Folk Psychiatry in Haiti,” *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease*, March 1961, p. 264.)

Psychiatric evaluation should be subject to much caution. Because of a firm belief in Voodoo, what might easily be diagnosed as delusion and hallucination by a psychiatrist coming from another culture, can instead, in a Haitian context, well be simply an expression of a strongly entrenched traditional belief system, and not necessarily a form of psychotic behavior. There is not the same delineation between the real and the unreal. (Cf. DREAMS.) Thus commonly used indicators of paranoid schizophrenia will not necessarily apply. (See PARANOIA.)

INTERCOURSE \*Beneficial during pregnancy: keeps uterine canal open, and above all, gives strength (*manm*) to the unborn child.\*

Not supposed to occur until two to three months after delivery, or \*the new-born child will be puny - its nourishment being absorbed by any child conceived during this period.\* Such abstinence is rarely the case, however.

IUD (INTRAUTERINE DEVICE) \*1) Can travel up inside a woman, injuring the stomach, lungs, and heart; 2) harmful to the male during intercourse; 3) will “break a woman’s nature.”\*

Some foreign observers have long questioned whether it is proper to insert IUD’s when the recipients often have little access to proper medical care in case of complications.

JAUNDICE \*Can better be treated with herbal teas by a folk healer than by a Western-type physician.\*

\*A person with jaundice must not cross a river.\*

JEALOUSY In a country as poor as Haiti, jealousy concerning even small material advantages of others is unfortunately a fact of life - and can create business for any unscrupulous *bòkò* (*q.v.*).

**KIDNEY STONES** Without an indoor flush toilet, many patients have no way of knowing they are passing kidney stones.

**KRIZ DE NÈ** “Emotional crisis.” Expression used especially to describe violent convulsions of women at a funeral or grave site, or the male reaction of collapsing and lying tense and motionless on the ground. \*Caused by blood rushing to one’s head as the result of violent emotion.\*

**KWASHIORKOR** (*maladi kò anfle*) The swollen belly, matchstick arms, reddish-tinged hair, and huge, staring eyes, find “natural” explanations. The swollen stomach is explained as the result of intestinal parasites, an excess of salt, or by the mother continuing to breast-feed after having once again become pregnant. Slightly golden or reddish hair color is explained as the result of walking in the sun. In addition, there are, of course, the usual hypotheses based on supernatural causes, such as a curse, the evil eye, or a *loukawou* (*q.v.*) sucking out the blood and replacing it with water.

Traces of kwashiorkor will often be seen in children who have just recently been weaned because of the birth of another little brother or sister.

**LAND TITLES** Lack of proper deeds is the curse of a largely illiterate society. Should one’s land appear too desirable, a political bigwig may well suddenly materialize with a bogus or long-forgotten deed, evicting one from land inhabited and farmed by one’s family for generations. A fact of life disastrous not only for one’s mental well-being, but also for general rural prosperity.

**LANGUAGE** Haitian Creole is declared by the Constitution of 1987 (Article 5) as the first of Haiti’s two official languages (along with French). It is the only language spoken by 100% of Haitians, while some French is spoken by at most 15% of Haitians. (See FRENCH.)

There is often in Haitian both a learned (“French-fried”) as well as a more descriptive popular term for the same illness. Thus, malnutrition is *malnitrisyon* - or *malmanje* (literally: bad eating); kwashiorkor is *kwachyòkò* - or *maladi kò anfle* (swollen-body sickness); marasmus is *maras* - or *maladi kò chèch* (dried-up-body sickness); diabetes is *dyabèt* - or *maladi sik* (sugar sickness); anemia is *anemi* - or *feblès* (weakness) or *manke san* (to lack blood); goiter is *gwat* - or *gwo kou* (fat neck). If you wish to make yourself understood by all, avoid “French-fried” Creole like the plague.

Do not assume, however, that there are necessarily good, strictly Haitian equivalents for many technical or technological terms, such as “retina,” “laser beam,” or “contact lens.” Every language must at times make use of cognates. Also note a frequent impreciseness among many speakers, even when there exists a well-known specific Haitian term. For example, *tibèt* (bug) is often used instead of *ravèt* (cockroach), and *bagay* (thing) is used to refer to almost any tangible object. In medicine the general word *kriz* is used to designate problems as varied as epilepsy, eclampsia, and hysteria.

Haitians tend to express themselves in a symbolic or metaphoric mode sometimes difficult for a foreigner to understand. Also, proverbs play an extremely important role, serving to make a decisive point or draw a logical conclusion. (See APPENDIX.)

LEECHES (*sansi*) Together with blood-letting, seem to reflect European medical practices from the colonial period.

Raised by certain peasants, who for a small sum will “make house visits” to apply them to a patient.

\*More effective if applied when the moon is on the wane.\*

**LEFT-HANDEDNESS** \*All children are born with a tendency to be left-handed. This must be gently corrected from the first moment they begin reaching for objects.\* (Reminder: evil is associated with the left hand, good with the right.)

**LEMÒ** (The Dead) \*Failure to remember deceased relatives both by word and by deed (e.g., by maintaining their tomb; by spilling a few drops on the ground before drinking), can result in sickness sent as punishment.\*

**LETHARGY** Should be seen as largely the result of a number of factors: climate, improper diet during early formative years, general undernourishment, malnutrition, internal parasites, overall poor health. To these should be added the psychological factor of poor role models. A vicious cycle.

**LIMES** \*Will prevent normal menstruation if eaten in excess.\*

\*Lime juice pressed against the eyelids - or into the eyes - of a baby, will provide exceptionally good eyesight.\*

**LIP LACERATIONS** Inflicted by one woman on another are seen not infrequently - often the result of jealousy over a man. The intention is to make the other woman permanently unattractive.

**LOUGAWOU** Central concept in rural Haiti to explain infant morbidity and mortality. Translated as a “creature human by day and vampire by night, witch or (very rarely) warlock.” Supposedly enters dwellings at night through any available crack in the hut, and sucks the blood of infants little by little, slowly bringing about anemia and often death. It can also use a long tube for this purpose. It can attack even the fetus, causing it to abort. Most often identified as an old woman who may be only vaguely aware of her nocturnal metamorphoses.

\*Herbal brews for the expectant mother, followed by similar treatment for the neonate, are an excellent preventive. Best of all, however, is to make the blood of the infant “bitter,” using several drops of turtle blood, or through special leaf baths. Passing the baby over flames is an additional protection. Another is to place next to the sleeping baby a large doll which, it is hoped, will be attacked instead.\*

Some Haitian Protestants believe that the powers of the *lougawou* have diminished in recent years thanks to the increased number of those of their faith.

Not surprisingly, the bad reputations of many supposed *lougawou* seem to diminish considerably with the successes of a nearby clinic or dispensary.

With the average Haitian there seems to be an innate need to believe in magic and in its effectiveness. So different from the rest of mankind?

*The following is our translation of an article which appeared in the Haitian-language monthly Bon Nouvèl in January 1996 (N° 313, page 4):*

“In December 1995, a *lougawou* killed a two-year old child. Flovenid Cherestal had been suffering for a week with a fever and constant vomiting. One evening the child’s mother noticed an ugly cat meowing near the bed, while another answered in kind from outside the house. The mother dived after the cat which was near the bed, but it scampered away. When she went into the house where the cat had gone, she found two healthy young women as naked as the day they were born. Only three people lived in the house: Tanya, Marie, and Madame Emile. Meanwhile Flovenid had died. The mother brought the little one to them so they would bring her back to life, but the women pretended not to understand. Madame Emile

appeared to agree, but not Tanya, who said: 'If we bring her back to life, we'll die; if we don't bring her back to life, we'll die.' Outraged neighbors burned Tanya and Madame Emile to death, while relatives were able to save Marie. Tanya was 23, Madame Emile 69, and Marie 20. This occurred on rue de l'Enterrement, Saint-Anne block, Port-au-Prince, on Thursday, December 7, 1995."

Obviously the fact that a highly respectable and respected monthly would relate this incident indicates an attempt to put an end to such shameful practices, but unfortunately it is eloquent evidence that such beliefs, and such crimes against the innocent, do occur even in the capital. And what of the rural areas?

MAGIC For the Haitian traditionalist, the world is constituted by a physical continuum between the Visibles and the Invisibles, and where the Visibles are usually considered the less important. The Invisibles are magic, omnipresent beings who can help or harm. This is especially true concerning health. More often than not sickness is brought on by their ill-will or wrath.

Western doctors successful in their cures can be seen as possessed of a powerful magic. And if a dosage book is consulted, it is there that occult formulas are obtained. (An unreasonable belief?) Science is simply one more manifestation of the spiritual forces which the Voodooist believes surround us. Reality and the forces of the hidden spirits blend into one. Death is all too often attributed to magic. It is not surprising that a people with very limited physical resources, and largely isolated from the modern world, would have clung to beliefs which only recently this modern world used to share as well. Disease, understood as the result of natural causes, is a comparatively recent phenomenon. (See also PARANOIA and SPELL-CASTING.)

“Rational, scientific cause and effect is essentially a concept foreign to the Haitian peasant.” (Jowel Laguerre, Haitian scholar)

*MALADI BONDYE* Literally, “sickness of God.” This is the most commonly-used term to refer to natural illnesses (see *ILLNESS*), but does not necessarily imply that God is held responsible for the particular illness.

*MALNUTRITION* Pervasive. Per capita calorie consumption estimated at 86% of that required to maintain even moderate physical activity. Lowest in the Western hemisphere, among the lowest in the world. Mean national protein consumption: 68% of minimum daily requirement. (In many rural areas these rates are even lower.) Estimated that approximately one-fourth of Haitian children between the ages of 3 months and 5 years are stunted as a result. Brain damage and retardation are not so easily estimated.

Proverb: “*Lavi malere se mistè.*” (The life of the destitute is a mystery. - We will never be able to understand how the desperately poor survive.)

Causes most frequently cited:

- 1) Too many people on too little arable land.
- 2) Deforestation and resulting soil erosion.
- 3) Less rain due to deforestation.
- 4) Recent hurricanes taking away rich topsoil and leaving salt deposits.
- 5) Silt from soil erosion washing into the sea causing there to be less fish off Haitian shores.
- 6) Peasant conservatism results in an unwillingness to adopt more efficient farming techniques. (See *CONSERVATISM*.)
- 7) Overworking the soil.

- 8) Parasitic infestation.
- 9) Lower death rate due to modern medicine.
- 10) Exploitation by those in power.
- 11) Rapid inflation, deteriorating rural economy.
- 12) Ignorance concerning proper nutrition (this last reason put very much into doubt by findings of Murray and Alvarez: “poverty rather than ignorance”).

“If you want to know about the basic nutritional situation of any country, just look at the animals” - one of the most sobering observations to be made about Haiti.

Its symptoms have often led newly-arrived physicians mistakenly to seek far more esoteric diagnoses.

Recent studies have shown that a very high proportion of the food - especially meat - available in a Haitian household is often consumed by the man, in some cases as much as five-sevenths. The reasons given are: 1) as principal wage-earner he must conserve his strength in order to function properly; 2) in order simply to ‘hang on’ to him. The consequences for the woman and children are obvious.

**MANGOES** Haiti’s most abundant food. (The Freeman-Laguerre *Haitian-English Dictionary* lists 152 varieties of mango.) Main sustenance of large part of the country during the four to five-month season. Average peasant consumption estimated at 6-10 mangoes per day. Good for vitamins, but no protein.

Haitian military folklore has it that mango season was when the generals used to organize their revolts: at mealtime, just camp the army under some mango trees!

**MARRIAGE** The exception rather than the rule among the great mass of the peasant population, save for the smaller, more closely-knit Protestant groups. Discouraged during the

period of slavery, the pattern continued after Independence. For many, it is simply not that important a factor. In addition to a deeply rooted mistrust of legal, “outside” entanglements, there is the very considerable problem of cost. A marriage celebration calls for a major display, with the couple paying the bill for much rum and food. Failure to provide one’s guests with proper food and drink is a far greater social disgrace than any failure to marry in the first place. (See also COMMON-LAW UNIONS.)

A civil service not accompanied by a religious one is very much looked down upon.

There is also the mystic Voodoo marriage, whereby one is “married” to a particular Voodoo spirit for whom one must reserve one or two nights a week, foregoing intercourse with one’s earthly partner. An ingenious method for ensuring sexual respite, and/or perhaps an unconscious form of the most effective birth-control method yet devised: abstinence.

MEALS (RURAL) With certain individual and seasonal variations, typical meals include: breakfast which consists of coffee, bread and peanut butter, or a sweet potato, or a semi-liquid cornmeal preparation (*akasan*) - or nothing. There is normally only one cooked meal per day, consumed at midday if work in the fields so permits; it consists of either millet or rice, corn, with red-bean sauce - plus vegetables in season. Meat is consumed at most once a week. Cooking is done under a lean-to near the house, and eating normally takes place outside, using metal dishes and bowls, and large spoons. Children often share a plate with other children, or with an elderly relative.

Proverb: *Grangou se mizè, vant plen se traka.* (Hunger is misery, a full belly is trouble.)

MEAT \*Meat causes worms.\*

Some people will not touch red meat, for fear that it is really human flesh.

**MECONIUM** A strong purgative (*lòk* - composed of ingredients such as crude castor oil, pork fat, nutmeg, garlic, cinnamon, and various leaf brews) is given the neonate very soon after birth to expel the meconium. Some observers believe the *lòk* so harmful that it is a disguised elimination of weaker children. This is often followed by *labouyi lanmidon* (literally: starch porridge), made with laundry starch, sugar and cinnamon, mixed in water - believed to be a further purgative as well as nutritious.

**MEDICAL EDUCATION (WESTERN-STYLE)** On the whole, quite good, but: often textbooks from France and U.S. do not adequately cover certain sicknesses prevalent in Haiti; students are steeped in French medical terms and appear to have trouble communicating with their Creole-speaking clientele.

The School of Medicine of the State University of Haiti, in Port-au-Prince, used to graduate as many as 100 M.D.'s each year, but in recent times this number has been reduced by some 40%. Paradoxically, in a country which has one of the least enviable ratios of physicians to patients, there had been created an oversupply of doctors. The elite few who could afford proper medical care were already receiving it. Thus the Haitian government was supporting expensive training which in too many cases, instead of benefiting the country, only added to the brain drain. It is often claimed that there are more Haitian physicians in Montreal alone than in all of Haiti.

Reportedly, Port-au-Prince contains some 80% of the country's M.D.'s, 50% of the dentists, and 55% of the graduate nurses. The remaining 20% of physicians are located principally in the 10 main provincial towns.

In addition, the State University of Haiti in Port-au-Prince graduates each year some 10-20 dentists and 10-25 pharmacists. For nursing, there are schools in the capital and in Cape Haitian graduating from 30 to 60 each year.

There is supposedly an obligatory two-year period of service in rural Haiti after medical school graduation, but this is all too often served in theory only, with a high rate of absenteeism. And those who do attempt to fulfill this obligation are greatly hampered by a lack of necessary medical material. (See DISPENSARIES.)

To serve the rural masses, the Haitian physician does not find an infrastructure within which to work: adequately equipped hospitals and clinics, reliable electrical supply for refrigeration of medicine or for operating equipment, even running water or telephones - or most importantly, a clientele which can afford to support these expenses. In addition, there is the question of simply being able to support oneself and family adequately, as well as the lack of a pleasant social environment. On the other hand, the two main complaints from the rural population concerning Haitian physicians are: 1) unavailability, and 2) lack of understanding of the peasant milieu.

It appears that until the basic economy of Haiti improves greatly, medical care for the rural majority will be in the hands of foreign medical missionaries (religious and/or humanitarian), and the traditional folk healers. And many, many young Haitian physicians will continue to find their careers abroad. Thus one has a clearer conception of the importance, through default if nothing else, of the role of folk medicine in the rural areas.

**MEDICAL THEORY** An amazing mixture of age-old African beliefs, of 18th-century French-colonial practices, of herbal knowledge acquired in the Haitian milieu, and

of relatively modern Western medicine. For example, humors or the state of one's blood, leeches, cupping, and frequent enemas, can be seen as remnants of 18th-century European beliefs and practices. The whole makes for a far more confusing and certainly more heterogeneous medical climate than that to which the foreign medical practitioner is accustomed. Magic, tradition, and science all co-exist, and not always peacefully.

The average Haitian patient views the Western-type medical practitioner as dealing on an entirely physical level, and thus unable to cure the large category of supernatural illnesses.

As is necessarily the case with all human beings, the unknown is interpreted in terms of the known. Thus the rural Haitian views Western-type medicine in relation to age-old folk medicine. Could it be otherwise?

**MEDICATION** Most frequently used by far are home remedies (i.e., herb, leaf, bark, root): cheap, and available. Efforts should be made to identify and disseminate those that are truly effective.

Haitians often have definite prejudices concerning the different forms of medication. Judged most efficacious are, in this order: 1) injections; 2) solutions; 3) tablets; 4) capsules.

It is often not enough for a physician merely to ask questions about medication already prescribed by another Western-type physician. Folk or herbal medication is an important practice, and many of its remedies may well be contraindicated. However, if the question is not brought up, patients may well believe they can continue with them. A strategy found useful is to suggest that since the previous remedy has evidently not been successful, another one might now be tried.

Specificity is often not fully understood: a Western drug is frequently considered effective against any complaint. Penicillin is considered a cure-all, even for eye treatment - just rub it in. Immunization such as DPT shots are believed adequate protection, for example, against anthrax. Thus much oral medication is used not only by the patient, but is dispersed to a wide range of family and friends for an even wider range of disorders. Inquire if the patient has taken medication prescribed for another. Also, in the case of potentially dangerous medication, it is essential to warn the patient not to let others use it without medical approval.

Two useful proverbs are: “*Sa ki bon pou youn, pa bon pou lòt.*” (That which is good for one, is not good for another.) “*Mwen pa ka pran te pou lafyèv li.*” (I can’t take tea for someone else’s fever.)

\*If one pill is good, two or three must be better. And if you begin to feel well, don’t take any.\*

Many a peasant has absolutely no idea concerning the proper administration of medication. For example, it has been found that for a wound, pills - instead of being swallowed - were placed under a bandage, with water applied to the bandage to dissolve them. Having instructions repeated back is an excellent precaution.

A common problem is that patients will sell medication given to them rather than use it - a simple question of food vs. medicine. One physician’s solution: tell them either to take the medicine, or they can forget about sex. His success rate increased tremendously.

In a largely illiterate environment, a major problem is for the patient to be able to follow instructions. They must be clearly stated and reiterated. (Proverb: “*Koute se renmèd kò.*” - Listening is medicine for the body.) One solution is

to place XX on the medication to be used twice daily, XXX for three times daily etc.

Patients often feel cheated if they have to go away without being given medication.

At least two cultural anthropologists (Murray and Alvarez) have reported a certain attitude which scorns subsidized medicines in favor of more costly ones.

See APPENDIX: Medication.

**MEDICINAL PLANTS** An immense, still largely unexplored field. The basic reference work on the subject is Arsène V. Pierre-Noël, *Les Plantes et les Légumes d'Haïti qui Guérissent: Mille et une Recettes pratiques*. Tome I. Deuxième édition revue, corrigée et augmentée. Port-au-Prince: Le Natal, 1989. Pp. 479. Timoléon C. Brutus et Arsène V. Pierre-Noël, *Ibid.* Tome II. Port-au-Prince:

Imprimerie de l'Etat, 1960. Pp. 417. Timoléon C. Brutus et Arsène V. Pierre-Noël, *Ibid.* Tome III. Port-au-Prince: Presses Nationales d'Haïti, 1966. Pp. 389.

Also: Rulx Léon, *Phytothérapie haïtienne: Nos Simples*. Port-au-Prince: Imprimerie Henri Deschamps, 1980. Pp. 79.

**MENARCHE** Reached without surprise, shame, or secrecy, but rather with joy and relief.

\*If a girl nearing puberty eats anything sour, she will not reach menarche.\*

\*A girl who has still not reached menarche by the end of her fifteenth year is in dire danger of being suffocated by her own blood.\*

MENOPAUSE Sometimes mistaken for pregnancy. “Been pregnant for 3 years and baby still in there!” (See also *PÈDISYON*.)

MENSTRUAL CRAMPS \*May be caused by improper disposal of rags used during menstruation.\*

\*Can be caused by any sour foods, or by pineapple, during menstruation.\*

MENSTRUATION Considered both healthy and necessary: a process by which the “body,” “womb,” and/or “veins” are kept open; a sign that one is a woman, has sexual feelings and needs, and is able to reproduce.

\*Brought about by the moon.\* Woman is seen as a living calendar, and her menstrual blood as an object both of reverence.

\*Cleanses the body of impurities, or of an excess of bad blood. In the male, this process is achieved through perspiration. Otherwise these processes can be carried out only through skin eruptions.\*

An insufficient blood flow is interpreted variously as a sign of nervousness, depression, or increased blood pressure. The body is not ridding itself of the bad or unnecessary blood. Too much blood flow is seen as depleting the body’s supply of blood, and as a possible cause of loss of appetite, bad temper, and insomnia.

\*A young girl’s menstrual blood is too lively, and her presence when menstruating can harm certain foods difficult to prepare. She can make milk curdle, and cause bacon and pork to rot.\*

\*A menstruating woman should not wash clothes in the river, for fear that the cold water will harm her blood.\*

\*Sexual intercourse during this time can result in inflammation of the testicles.\*

**METAMORPHOSES** A persistent belief among much of the peasant population is that, thanks to Voodoo, certain humans can change at will into an animal such as a dog, cat, or donkey, or even become invisible - but no true animal can change into a human. \*A few clairvoyants have the ability to detect those animals which are in reality humans.\* A variation of this belief is that humans can be changed into animals against their will, with the result that there are occasionally loud public disturbances when it is thought that an animal being led off to slaughter is in reality a human being pleading for his/her life. (Cf. Brahmanism in India.)

**MIDNIGHT** \*The time when labor pains are most likely to occur, with the baby being born around 4 A.M. It is also the time when *lougawou* (*q.v.*) set forth to do their evil deeds.\*

**MIDWIVES** Government-trained midwives are usually called *matwòn* or *fanmsaj diplome*, while *fanmsaj* (or *fanm chay*) are the empirically trained midwives (who generally charge some 40% less).

Traditionally a woman in her 60's, considered absolutely essential to the birthing process. Fulfills several functions: presides at the actual delivery, treats the uterus, performs the necessary Voodoo rites, administers herbal remedies to the neonate, buries the placenta in a corner of the house or nearby, and rules over the traditional period of postpartum confinement. She gives the three customary medicinal baths to the mother, massages her, and escorts mother and child out of confinement. Illness prevention is also within her domain, through the use of protective charms. Only very occasionally gives prenatal care and attempts to correct improper fetal position. Proper massage technique is considered an important part of her art, as is knowledge

of herbs and teas. Even should delivery take place before her arrival, it is nevertheless she who normally cuts the umbilical cord and bathes the neonate. And even in the case of women who have delivered in a hospital, it is customary upon returning home to call in a midwife who will oversee the traditional herbal baths and advise dietary restrictions.

Deliver at least 85% of all births in Haiti, and a far higher percentage if one considers only the rural areas. The vast majority are women, but one does occasionally meet a man who exercises this profession. Almost always illiterate. Almost always a part-time profession, performing at most two deliveries per month. Seldom Protestant, since it is believed that Voodoo spirits (*lwa*) are essential to the work.

Have usually received initial training thanks to their mother or godmother. Sometimes have been called to the profession by a revelation during sleep.

There is traditionally little formal contact between the midwife and the expectant mother, and above all the midwife should not enter the yard where the mother cooks. Any malformed baby or difficult delivery could be blamed on her.

The midwife must be trusted implicitly not only concerning her skills, but also not to sell any part of the placenta - which could be used in evil magic against the mother and child.

Are quite often open to new and better techniques. Many postpartum and infant problems are averted by training of and close cooperation with the local midwives. For example, the training program for midwives in the area served by the Albert Schweitzer Hospital at Deschepelles has produced a remarkable and sustained reduction in the number of infant deaths, thanks to monthly meetings which constantly stress cleanliness and proper technique. The midwives receive

fresh sterile supplies, while discussing their recent cases with Western medical personnel. On the whole they are only too happy to participate, since their local prestige is thus enhanced.

Also, in general, these training programs for midwives have resulted in a much higher rate of visits by expectant mothers to regional health-care centers.

MILK \*In the case of a nursing mother, violent emotions (*sezisman*) - brought on by a domestic quarrel, for example - can cause her milk to mix with her blood (*lèt ak san*) and go to her head. The result can be temporary insanity. A frequent and dangerous occurrence, causing the mother's milk supply to cease (*lèt pase*).\* The folk treatment consists of various cold compresses applied to the head, plus herbal teas; some also recommend having the mother drink a little of her own milk.

Colostrum (*lèt jòn*) is regarded with great suspicion; to be expressed and disposed of. \*Only mother's milk which is white is good for a baby. To produce good white milk, the mother should eat white-colored foods.\*

\*If a mother becomes pregnant again while still nursing, her milk from then on must be reserved for the fetus. Should the child which was being nursed then try to "steal" any of her milk, this child will become sick.\*

\*Cows' milk is too rich for neonates.\*

\*Goats' milk is an excellent aphrodisiac, but certainly too rich for children of any age.\* Usually reserved for tuberculosis victims.

Lactose intolerance appears sometime after weaning and increases with age, affecting an estimated 70-80%

of the adult population. Milk produces for this group the classic symptoms of abdominal cramps, bloating, and diarrhea.

(The US milk industry appears to be blithely unaware of this fact, continuing to urge export to Third-World countries where it is used, if at all, as a laxative or as an inferior substitute for white-wash.)

“MILK SACK” (*sak lèt, pòch lèt*) It is believed that there is a sack or pocket in babies which receives the mother’s milk.

When the child is weaned, this sack is supposed to disappear and the child will normally not take milk again. If the child becomes ill after weaning (as is frequently the case), naturally there is much speculation concerning the milk sack. Sometimes it is thought necessary to give a purgative so that the child will expel the milk sack; the stools are then carefully watched for its presence.

*Vòlè tete* (stealing the breast) - if, for example, during the night a child should return to the breast after having been weaned, it is considered disastrous, since (s)he will no longer have a “milk sack” to receive it.

MILK (SPOILED) (*lèt gate*) \*Mother’s milk is dangerous to both mother and child if it is either too thick or too thin. The former can cause impetigo (*bouton*). The latter - caused especially by fright to the mother - can move to the head, occasioning anything from acute headache to postpartum depression in the mother and diarrhea in the baby.\* Closely associated with *move san* (bad blood).

\*Sexual intercourse should not take place during the nursing period, because sperm poisons the mother’s milk, and thus the baby.\* (Rarely, however, is this belief honored.)

MISCARRIAGE Believed to be the result of natural causes: *fredi* (q.v.); carrying a load on the head of more than 50-60 lbs.; stumbling while crossing a stream; emotional trauma. (Two proverbs: “*Ze toumante pa kale*” - The disturbed egg does not hatch; “*Poul ki bat kò l kraze ze l’*” - The chicken which thrashes about crushes its egg.) Or can be seen as the result of supernatural causes: God; ill-will of a Voodoo spirit; a *lougawou* (q.v.); evil magic caused by a jealous woman.

\*The intensive anti-malaria campaign was the cause of many miscarriages.\*

\*Can be avoided by wearing an underskirt of seven colors; by placing a small polished magic stone in the hem of one’s dress; by fumigating one’s body and house with asafetida each Friday to ward off evil spirits; by riding a donkey (believed to be immune to evil magic) rather than a horse or mule; and by special baths. Spicy foods and especially salt are to be avoided. Mourning clothes can be dangerous, as can attending funeral rites - especially those of a still-born child.\*

MOON \*Determines not only women’s menstrual cycles, but its various phases are important concerning the effectiveness of certain remedies.\*

\*Menstruation is far more likely to begin during a waxing moon than during a waning moon.\*

\*Hemorrhaging is far more likely to occur during a waxing moon than during a waning moon - thus surgery and even extraction of teeth should be avoided during this period. The worst possible time is under a full moon.\*

\*A full moon exerts a disturbing influence, especially upon mental patients.\*

\*Babies are much more likely to be born just after a full moon, and much less likely with a new moon. More babies are born during a waning moon than during a waxing moon.\*  
(See SEX OF CHILD.)

MOTION SICKNESS \*To prevent, women should roll their hair in a ball containing two match sticks and a penny.\*

MOURNING Many widows and widowers do not follow the funeral procession of their spouse, for fear that the soul of the deceased will prevent any future remarriage, or cause the untimely death of any future mate. Similarly, \*following the funeral procession of a young son can cause the death of any other young children in the family.\*

\*Wearing a piece of red clothing under the mourning garb, such as red underpants or panties, can ward off future deaths in the family.\*

MUD \*Highly useful for avoiding infection and healing a wound.\*

MUMPS Called *malmouton* (literally, “sheep sickness”), can be cured by bleating like a sheep over a large mortar turned upside down, with one’s jaws covered with palm-oil and bandaged with sheep’s wool.\*

MUTTON \*Not to be eaten: causes rashes and boils.\*

NAMES There is no continuity of family names among the majority of the peasant population. Children simply take the father’s first name as their own last name. Taking the paternal grandfather’s last name is seen simply as naming the child for the grandfather rather than (more logically) for the father. (However if the father is unknown, the mother’s last name is used instead.)

Often a nickname is so universally used that even the individual concerned in effect forgets the “official” name on the birth certificate (which [s]he may well be unable to read in any case).

A wife (common-law or formal) is usually addressed by the first name of her husband. Thus the wife of a *Jak Anri* would be known as *madan Jak*.

Voodooists have a special secret name, and many believe they can be harmed only if this secret name is known.

NEONATES Infant mortality is one of the highest in the world, with a deathrate supposedly of 130-150 per thousand live births. An especially high risk period is right after being weaned.

Proverb: “*Ti poul pa mande plim, li mande lavi.*” (The little chick doesn’t ask for fancy feathers, he just asks for life.)

In some places neonates are given a calabash-leaf bath, in addition to the usual strong purgative. (See MECONIUM.) A small sack containing a crushed cricket soaked in mother’s milk is placed nearby - considered helpful for proper urination.

They are dressed in a rather tight nightgown, with a special band to protect the navel. Narrow nostrils are considered important esthetically, and thus the nostrils are pinched several times daily soon after birth. The mother or midwife attempts to “round out” the skull, as well as to create dimples, considered not only a mark of beauty but a protection against sickness.

Neonates are believed to be particularly vulnerable not only to sickness and cold, but especially to negative magic such as the evil eye (*q.v.*), spells etc. Thus visits are a delicate matter, and only those closest and most trusted are normally admitted.

\*If a pregnant or menstruating woman enters the room of confinement during the postpartum period, the infant will act as though he has to defecate but cannot (called *pouse* - “pushes”), with grunting and partial prolapse of the rectum.\* The folk remedy is a string of three large beans and three grains of corn tied around the child’s waist.

\*Hair and fingernails should not be cut before one year of age - or children may become deaf and dumb, or lose their souls.\*

NIGHT Considered a time of terror. Mysterious, evil beings (evil spirits - *movèzespri*; witches - *lougawou*; the secret societies, organized bands of evil-doers - *sanpwèl*) are about. One does not go out, and every crack and crevice of one’s dwelling is tightly shut (making for stuffy, crowded sleeping areas where contagious diseases such as tuberculosis are easily spread). Only in the urban slums are people out at night - there is simply not enough room inside, and sleeping must be done in shifts.

Few places so black at night as Haiti? Due to comparative rarity of electricity? Does this make the Haitians’ proverbial fear of night a bit easier to understand?

\*Between two and three A.M. is the most dangerous time for those who are sick or dying.\*

NOON \*Best time for intercourse if one wishes to conceive.\*

NOVEMBER Beginning with All Saints’ Day (Nov. 1) and All Souls’ Day (Nov. 2), is a time of dread for many. Most will not marry during this month. Evil spirits appear in greater abundance, people are more hesitant than ever to venture forth after dark, and patients are especially loathe to undergo surgery.

However, November is the time during which there is traditionally the greatest number of births - some nine months after the free-wheeling activities of Mardi Gras.

NUTRITION See FOODS; MALNUTRITION; PERMISSIVENESS.

OBJECTS Even such a seemingly innocent object as a handkerchief (supposedly hexed - *monte* or *ranje*) whose sudden appearance or disappearance one cannot explain, can be viewed as negative magic potentially dangerous to one's well-being - and such can, of course, be the case if thus interpreted.

OKRA \*Can cause a young man to become impotent.\*

\*Essential however in the nourishment of a pregnant woman, because its slippery texture will aid in the actual birthing process.\*

ORANGES \*Harden children's gums too much and prevent teeth from forming properly.\*

\*Delay onset of puberty.\*

ORCHIECTOMY Rarely if ever permitted by a patient, even at age 90.

OSTENTATION Marriages and burials in Haiti both reveal a taste for ostentation. Both are occasions for spending quite disproportionate to the resources of those involved, and all too often simply constitute an additional poverty factor. The multi-million-dollar marriage of Jean-Claude Duvalier and Michèle Bennett (May 1980) was nothing more than the exaggeration of a well-established custom.

OUTREACH As Dr. Larry Mellon and so many others have discovered, in Haiti especially, to cure someone of, for instance, diarrhea or amoebas is not enough, unless basic causes such as contaminated water and lack of latrines are attacked as well.

OVERPOPULATION Has as its corollary malnutrition - two of Haiti's most basic problems. (See FAMILY PLANNING.)

PAIN \*A rope tied around an arm or leg can reduce pain in the limb.\*

See APPENDIX: Pain.

PARALYSIS Especially if sudden, seen as caused by a Voodoo spell, probably paid for by someone desiring the afflicted person's job and/or possessions, or by simple jealousy.

Hysterical paralysis is not uncommon among peasant population. Caused by Voodoo fears?

PARAMEDICS More paramedics would provide an enormous service to Haiti. At present, but in insufficient number, are the community health workers (in Haitian: *ajan lasante*; in French: *agents de santé*), recruited from their own villages and trained for three months. They establish contact with the people of their district, identify those needing medical attention, and attempt to induce them to come to the local dispensaries - especially pregnant women, and mothers with infants and young children. Auxiliary nurses (*oksilyè*) receive eight-month medical training in an urban hospital. David Werner's excellent *Where There is no Doctor* has been translated into Haitian: *Kote ki pa gen Doktè*, Port-au-Prince, 1991; pp. xxxii + 464. (Usually on sale at La Presse Evangélique, on Boulevard Harry Truman, in Port-au-Prince.)

PARANOIA The Voodoo mindset instructs that some element - either human or supernatural - is responsible for every mishap or misfortune that occurs. The results of this attitude are: 1) much animosity between humans, often resulting in business for the Voodoo clergy (see SPELL-CASTING); 2) appeasement directed at the Voodoo spirit deemed responsible, always resulting in business for the Voodoo clergy.

“When asked how his child became ill, a father will often solemnly shake his head, produce a sucking sound through his teeth, and whisper: ‘*Rayisman*’ (hatred, persecution). This means that his ‘friends’ or neighbors have caused the child’s illness through malice or jealousy. The effects of superstition upon personal peace of mind and upon interpersonal relationships are incalculable.” (Dr. William Hodges)

“The anecdote is told of a foreign health-aid specialist visiting a small town in Haiti. He inquired of the assembled town elders the leading causes of death. When informed that deaths from pulmonary disease, coughs or tuberculosis were indeed rare, as well as from diarrhea and vomiting, worms or other parasites, and fevers, he finally asked in exasperation: ‘Well, what *do* people die of around here?’ After some hesitation, the answer came forth: ‘Murder!’ It has been suggested that in a country which has one of the lowest rates of homicide in the world, the deep feeling was being expressed that most deaths are due to outside forces of evil. But it could well be that this deep fear of being destroyed by spirits or by enemies, this widespread distrust and suspicion, is actually the reason why Haiti, poor and crowded as it is, is so relatively free of violent crime. Fear itself might well be the social cement which holds the country together.” (Dr. William Hodges)

And because of this general cultural tendency toward paranoia, pathological problems of this kind are generally not detected until quite severe. (See INSANITY.)

**PATERNITY** When a mother-to-be wishes to influence the paternity of her child, in case of doubt, she stares for some time each day at a photograph of the desired father, repeating that she wishes the child to look like him.

Paternity tests are conducted by a village elder who assembles the mother, child, and supposed father. Certain Voodoo spirits are invoked, and the mother is summoned to swear on the head of her child. Then the elder informs her that the baby will taste blood from the finger of the supposed father. If he is indeed the father, there will be no effect on the baby; if he is not, the baby will die. The reaction of the mother is considered sufficient proof, or disproof, of paternity. A clever folk device for ensuring both paternal support and family cohesiveness?

**PAYMENT** The average rural dweller depends solely on a subsistence economy. Rarely can enough be grown to adequately feed a numerous family, yet in order to secure cash, some of the crop and/or domestic animals have to be sold. This is how patients make their payments.

An habitual problem is that externally-funded health-care programs are almost always intended eventually to become self-supporting in part or in whole. Meanwhile, the recipients of these programs become unrealistically accustomed to free or virtually free medical services. As the donors withdraw financial support, there is often intense resentment and even boycotting by the local community, which failed to understand the initial premise. Thus for a program to be effective in the long run, this withdrawal of support must be very gradual - and the concept of outside help for a limited time only must be made very clear to the people involved,

especially the local community leaders (the *notab*). Often the basic problem with foreign aid programs is that no one has taken the trouble to explain to the peasant population just what is really going on and why - and in a language they can understand, i.e., Haitian, and not elitist French.

Another point that should be made concerning foreign health-care programs is that health care by Voodoo practitioners is still considerably more expensive.

It is customary for Voodoo priest(esse)s to demand full and immediate payment, usually a considerable amount. Stories are intentionally spread of cured patients still in arrears who suddenly drop dead.

In the case of faith-and-herb healers, payments are normally made on an installment plan, beginning with the first day of treatment. In case of non-payment, the herbal potions are, if possible, confiscated by the healer with the threat either of placing them in a termite nest (thereby supposedly reducing the patient to his/her former sickness), or of burning them (thereby supposedly causing the patient to die). On the other hand, some healers ask for no payment at all until the patient is cured; if the patient dies, no payment is requested. (See COST.)

**PEASANTS** One of the most fundamental realizations that the foreigner must achieve in trying to comprehend the Haitian peasant mind is that there is no firm dividing line between reality and dream. Often the peasant's life is so poverty-stricken and monotonous that over the centuries an elaborate dream-world has been created which effectively shields him/her from a drab, harsh reality. Complex beliefs, superstitions, taboos - and Voodoo - constitute a psychological defense mechanism which in effect make life possible. Unreasonable perhaps, but not necessarily unwise. And this has perforce been the case since the earliest slave days, when a whole

population was suddenly and forever uprooted from all it had ever known. The Westerner does not perceive this inner dream-world, and constantly encroaches upon it unknowingly. And how different is this peasant mental universe from the drug-ridden fantasy world into which so many contemporary Westerners have withdrawn? Both are a retreat from reality, and the peasant's is perhaps indeed a far healthier one. (See DREAMS.)

An ever-present danger for some medical workers is the temptation eventually to see the Haitian peasantry simply as a poor, down-trodden, faceless, one-dimensional mass, instead of as individuals each with his/her own distinctive identity, problems, fears, hopes, and aspirations.

“[The peasants are] a funny lot. You think they're simple..., you think you know everything that's going on in their heads, and then you find out that you don't know a damned thing about them.” (Faustin Wirkus, as told to William Seabrook, in *The Magic Island*, p. 188.)

*PÈDISYON* Many definitions: menorrhagia; false pregnancy; (non-apparent) miscarriage; unusual menstrual periods and/or general pelvic discomfort.

Also a condition in which a fetus is believed to remain entrapped in the uterus for years, unable to develop properly since it is not receiving the blood which would enable it to grow. Considered the result of natural causes such as insufficient diet, a fall, a blow that has displaced certain internal organs, *fredi* (q.v.), strain or an emotional shock; or of supernatural causes such as a Voodoo spell cast upon the family or a *lougawou* (q.v.) sucking the blood of the fetus. The fetus is conceptualized as consisting of little more than a tiny speck, and after what can be many years, it sometimes grows to maturity - none the worse for its long-dormant stage. (See also *FIBWÒM*.) This concept has been suggested

as serving at least two purposes: 1) to reduce the stigma of sterility; 2) to secure the conjugal union in that the man has an obligation to the unborn child. On the other hand, a child can be considered the result of another union long since terminated.

PENIS \*Two ways to increase the length: 1) massage regularly with cocoa-butter; 2) mark the length when in erection on a banana or bamboo shoot, and the penis will grow along with the shoot - but if the shoot is not cut in time, the length will grow out of all proportion and become a cause of embarrassment rather than of pride.\* (See also UMBILICUS, “A small bit of the cord . . .”)

PERMISSIVENESS “Or Cultural Perceptions and Child Nutrition. The permissive attitude toward children is a major problem. What the Westerner considers proper care (correct diet, feeding schedule, toilet training) is often seen by the Haitian as heartlessness and cruelty. The old ‘Eat-your-spinach-because-it’s-good-for-you’ attitude appears to be virtually non-existent. A child’s lack of appetite is simply accepted as a fact of life. Thus a mother had literally to be forced to stop giving cola to her little boy who nearly died of kwashiorkor. When he cried, it was for the soft drink. When one discusses proper nutrition with a mother, a frequent response is: ‘He won’t eat those things.’ Thus no amount of protein-based food furnished the family will cure a child of kwashiorkor. And why should proteins be the cure if the real causes are *lougawou* (witches) and evil spells? And it may well be that the foods containing protein are more difficult to impose on the child - and thus, if permissiveness is an overwhelming cultural attitude, more kwashiorkor will result, even when protein sources are available. Cultural perceptions can indeed destroy children.” (Dr. William Hodges)

Proverb: “*Makak karese pitit li jouk li touye l.*” (The monkey caresses its little one until it kills it.)

**PHARMACIES** Often carry, along with standard Western-type drugs, Voodoo-inspired substances such as *kanpelwen* (a foul-smelling liquid used as a spell to keep away people or evil spirits), or *espedye* (a powder to turn a supernatural illness back on its originator).

**PHOTOGRAPHS** For medical study are acceptable to most peasant patients, but shocking to most upper-class patients.

**PHYSICAL VIOLENCE** Comparatively rare. Hostility is more likely to be expressed by having an evil spell cast upon one's enemy.

**PICTORIAL ILLITERACY** The inability to interpret line drawings seems to be widespread among the peasant population. Photographs rather than drawings have proven far more effective, though even they can be problems. A recent photograph depicting only the torso of a woman elicited a uniform reaction of sadness from its peasant viewers: they believed she had no legs.

Thus it is exceedingly difficult to conceptualize the response of the average illiterate person to pictures, and tests have shown that there is little difference between the illiterate and the semi-literate. To interpret line drawings or even color photographs accurately, i.e., two-dimensional representations of three-dimensional reality, is not necessarily self-evident to someone who has never been fully exposed to the concept that marks on paper can represent spoken words, and thus ideas. The fact that pictorial illiteracy is a frequent concomitant to general illiteracy is a fact that does not often occur to the world's literate minority. Thorough pre-testing is a necessity for choosing health pictures, and even then, do not expect an appreciable percentage of patients to comprehend. Songs, stories and small plays - in Haitian - accompanied by some explanation, have been suggested as effective alternatives. (See also POSTERS.)

**PILGRIMAGES** Many believe that miraculous cures can be achieved by going to Sodo (in French: Saut d'Eau, near Ville-Bonheur), especially on the 16th of July, and represent special hope for women unable to conceive. There is also an annual medicinal mud bath on July 25 in the small town of Plennindò (Plaine du Nord, near Cape Haitian), followed by another pilgrimage to Limonade the next day. (See also CONCEPTION.)

**PILL (THE)** Much self-discipline and consistency are necessary for effective use of the contraceptive pill - a major drawback to its use by much of the peasant population. (See FAMILY PLANNING.)

“I don't understand why I got pregnant! The very day you gave them to me, I swallowed half the supply and my husband the other half!”

**PINEAPPLE** \*Particularly dangerous for children between ages of 10 and 15: can stunt growth, and inhibit onset of menstruation.\*

\*Will make a woman sterile.\*

**PLACEBOS** A great majority of patients are far happier when given an injection or medication.

The herbal cures of both Voodoo priest(esse)s and folk healers have often been explained as quite effective placebos.

**PLACENTA** If slow in being expelled, traditionally: 1) the abdomen is swept over with a broom; 2) the midwife blows on the end of the umbilical cord; or 3) a dog is made to sit outside the door of the hut.

\*Burying the placenta face down will prevent future pregnancies.\* (See also MIDWIVES.)

PLEURISY \*Caused especially by eating cold food when one is overheated, or by simply being exposed to cold.\*

PLURALISM Medical pluralism is as much a fact of Haitian life as is often over-lapping religious pluralism (French-inspired Catholicism, African-inspired Voodoo, American-inspired Protestantism). (See RELIGION.) Rarely will patients have recourse to only one form of medical treatment, especially if seriously ill.

Proverb: “*Ti moso Bondye, ti moso sòlòkòtò.*” (A little bit of God, a little bit of a sorcerer.)

POINT! Don’t say “left” or “right” alone. Many either do not know the difference, or will not know if you mean your left or their left.

POISONING A very real (if almost always unfounded) fear in the rural scene. Hygiene is bad, doctors are few - and many deaths are attributed to neighbors’ hatred. (See PARANOIA.)

POLITENESS And a touch of humanity are extremely important when dealing with Haitian patients (as well as with those of other nationalities!). Try using *tanpri* and *souple* (both mean “please”). Commands such as *chita* (sit) and *kanpe* (stand) can be turned into requests by adding *wi* (yes) or *non* (no) at the end: “*Chita, wi*” - “*Kanpe, non.*” And a gentle *ti cheri* (literally, “little dear”) for women and children, and *(ti) frè* - “(little) brother,” can go far in putting the patient at ease. (See also SENSITIVITY.)

POLITICAL PROBLEMS Health care workers, Haitian or foreign, can be viewed by the peasant population as government spies serving to gather information that could be used in exerting control. Conversely, they can be viewed by the Haitian authorities as a threat because of their social status, their acute awareness of the underlying causes of

illness and disease, and their potential as agents for social/political unrest. Caution! A focus on mission, and a careful apolitical stance, have long proven invaluable both in times of peace and of trouble.

It has happened that valuable medical programs have been delayed indefinitely or even cancelled outright, because of petty jealousy or a quarrel between local politicians.

It is of course only natural for any government to expect to have a degree of control over foreign assistance programs on its own soil. What, for example, if some foreign medical group wanted to carry out dubious medical experimentation in Haiti which they would not or could not carry out in their own country? (A not infrequent suspicion among many in Haiti.)

**POPULATION** Haitian population figures are notoriously inaccurate. The total number is estimated variously from five million to eight million - with the latter figure probably by far the more realistic. As for population growth, the Albert Schweitzer Hospital at Deschapelles gives us a good indication: the 610 square mile district it serves had some 70,000 people when it opened in 1956, whereas forty years later in 1996, it had more than three times that number, with some 218,000.

**POSTERS** Do not underestimate the potential value of medical posters - not so much the text (how many can read?), as the pictures. Photographs of a healthy Black baby, contrasting with ones showing the characteristic signs of kwashiorkor and marasmus, can serve as an eloquent back-up to instructions concerning proper nutrition.

However, the only images most of the rural population ever see are the painted buses, an occasional magazine picture attached to a hut partition, and sometimes a political poster.

Thus there can very definitely be problems of interpretation. Simplicity is essential. (See PICTORIAL ILLITERACY.)

A large colored billboard recently displayed in various localities in Haiti shows a man and a woman with several children. The caption is totally irrelevant, since the great majority of viewers cannot read. The message it attempts to convey is that marital fidelity is the best defense against AIDS. One would be tempted to award a genius rating to any illiterate person who could interpret accurately the idea this picture aims to present. Another poster concerning nutrition depicts apples and imported breakfast cereals, instead of cheap, locally produced foods. Pre-testing with a cross-section of the target group is an absolute necessity.

Distribution is another problem. For example, we found several dozen copies of a striking poster - a photograph in color - on oral rehydration, carefully stored away for the ages to come, in the cupboard of a rural dispensary. Some have even said that posters contribute to a community's hygiene only through their usefulness at the latrine or field! Posters probably are of use mainly as a back-up to what a health worker is attempting to explain.

**POSTPARTUM BELIEFS AND PRACTICES** It is believed the mother's body is altered in four major ways: 1) body opens up, becomes slack; 2) hollow, empty stomach; 3) wandering womb (see WOMB); 4) bad blood. Remedied respectively by: 1) hot medicinal leaf baths; 2) massage; 3) abundant and solid food; 4) special herbal teas.

Traditionally, there is a strict five-day confinement period for the mother, usually in the back room of the typical two-room peasant hut. Since the mother's body is considered to be unusually empty and thus highly vulnerable to cold and drafts, all doors and windows must be kept tightly shut, with wadding inserted between any cracks - resulting in a dark

stuffiness in the confinement chamber. She must be warmly dressed, with her head covered, long socks on her feet, and even cotton in her ears. In addition, she should keep her legs together since the vagina is the most sensitive spot to be protected against cold and air. A large band is tied around the mother's stomach for two or three months to protect her against the cold and to flatten her stomach. Cold water, either for drinking or bathing, must be avoided. Many neonatal problems, including tetanus, are ascribed to the mother's perceived carelessness concerning her own body, and which are then transmitted to the infant through her milk. Thus hot baths are an important element for both mother and child, especially during the confinement period. Should she take a cold bath less than a month or so after delivery, she may be unable to have more children or might experience difficulty in conceiving. Since it is believed that menstruation continues during pregnancy, with the blood flowing directly into the womb for the development of the fetus, the resulting build-up of "bad blood" must be alleviated through special herbal teas after delivery. Thus postpartum vaginal bleeding is seen as a healthy process and is to be encouraged.

Sometimes the period of confinement for the mother is much longer, up to a month. Thus if the baby has to be brought to a hospital, it will be by a relative or close family friend.

Traditional dietary restrictions placed upon the lactating mother constitute an additional cause of malnutrition. (See H. Jean C. Wiese, "Maternal Nutrition and Traditional Food Behavior in Haiti," *Human Organization*, vol. 35, No 2 [Summer 1976], 193-200.)

**POVERTY** Some Christians attribute the extreme poverty of Haiti to the wrath of God brought on by a widespread belief in Voodoo; some Voodooists attribute the extreme poverty of Haiti to the wrath of God brought on by a widespread forsaking of the Voodoo spirits.

**PRAYER PAPER** Bits of paper supposedly from the Bible (but in reality usually discarded printer's waste) sold in the markets and which, when swallowed, will have a curative effect.

**PREGNANCY** In peasant community, usually precedes marriage (common-law or formal). The man wants to be certain the woman is fertile before spending money on house and furniture.

\*Can cause the father to be sick as well.\*

**PRESCRIPTIONS** Not required to buy medicine in Haiti.

**PRIAPISM** A male patient arriving at the hospital clothed in a dress instead of pants, will in most cases have this problem. Pants are simply too tight.

**PROGNOSIS** Sometimes it is almost as though the patient were too frightened to respond to treatment, a victim of the fear and horror of a Voodoo curse.

**PROSTITUTION** Most have no other possibility for support, either for themselves or for the children born as a result, since rarely is any form of contraception used.

The cards certifying that prostitutes are free from disease are obtained by paying a fee, not by undergoing a medical exam.

**PROTEIN** It has often been observed that Haiti is a great center of vegetarianism, not by choice but by necessity. But the fact that one can benefit more, for example, from growing and eating beans than corn does not seem to be generally known.

**PSYCHOLOGY OF THE HAITIAN: OBSERVATIONS BY FOREIGNERS LONG FAMILIAR WITH THE HAITIAN SCENE.** Probably partly true, partly false:

Intense interest in individuals as an all-consuming motivation (vs. greater degree of detachment and objectiveness of the Westerner).

Foremost concern about oneself, one's family and friends - less of a sense of social responsibility, making social cooperation difficult. Less abstract concept of the common good, and thus a greatly weakened ability to organize hospitals, dispensaries, schools, or an efficient civil service.

Innate opposition to institutionalization: distrust, apathy, fatalism - which perhaps helps explain in part why so many foreign aid programs do not work after the foreigners leave.

Vestiges of slave mentality (or coping in one of the world's neediest nations): survival by any means, thus an essentially gentle people can at times take on a necessarily ruthless outlook concerning its fellow man.

Secretiveness: *Pa kite moun konnen afè ou* (Don't let people know your business). An attitude so deeply ingrained that it can even carry over into the medical review. (See HISTORY-TAKING.)

Preference for subtlety and cleverness over honesty. (Cf. the cultural bent of the traditional Bouki and Ti Malis folktales, where shrewdness and trickery usually triumph.)

Intensely religious, perhaps therefore more basically spiritual and perhaps less materialistic than the Westerner; the Haitian is less reserved, less deterministic.

However, do not make the mistake of considering the Haitian peasant as primitive and child-like; as is the case with all complex adults who have experienced various facets of the human condition, (s)he has woven them together into a mysterious fabric called culture. (See also COOPERATION, and PEASANTS.)

PUBERTY RITES Non-existent. (See MENARCHE.)

PUBLIC HOSPITALS The following list of twenty (some overlapping) complaints, purportedly by then-President Jean-Claude Duvalier, was widely published in the Haitian press in December 1983, following an inspection tour of Port-au-Prince General Hospital. Many would argue that conditions there, as well as in many a provincial public hospital, have changed but little.

- 1) Chronic doctor and nurse absenteeism.
- 2) Generalized lack of respect for authority.
- 3) No effort whatsoever to keep in stock even such basic supplies as cotton, bandages, alcohol, and syringes.
- 4) For emergency cases, they have nothing and can do nothing.
- 5) There is no doctor on duty for emergency cases.
- 6) The various wards are ill-organized, with people sitting around in one doing nothing, while in another there is no one to give assistance.
- 7) There is no adherence to the many rules and regulations.
- 8) The doctors responsible for training the interns do nothing.
- 9) The hospital is supposedly available to all, but those able to pay receive special attention.
- 10) No medical charts are maintained, and when the doctor assigned to a case is not present, no one knows what to do.
- 11) Services are available only at certain hours, whereas patients needing help arrive day and night.
- 12) General lack of supervision, with workers untrained and unmotivated.
- 13) Enormous favoritism for those with money, position, or political pull.
- 14) Doctors make no effort to keep up with new advances in medicine.
- 15) No medical services on Sundays and holidays.

- 16) No one to receive and direct entering patients.
- 17) Employees who appear only to pick up their check.
- 18) No reporting of theft.
- 19)
  - No contingency plans to meet any sudden surge of patients.
- 20) Generalized low morale which affects even those who initially attempt to make improvements.

See also HOSPITAL.

**RADIO** In a country where some 85% of the population is illiterate, the only effective means of public communication to transmit health messages has proven to be the radio. Electricity is rare, but battery-operated transistors are not.

Often called the “transistor revolution,” probably the single most important innovation in public consciousness-raising in modern Haitian (and Third-World) history.

The broadcasts must, of course, be in Haitian - yet not infrequently one hears programs declared to be “for the good of the greater Haitian public” broadcast in the most technical, bookish French. The result, for all practical purposes, is that the vast majority will then listen only for the music.

**RAIN** Considered almost a certain cause of sickness when an adult is caught out in it, since any sudden change in body temperature, especially from warm to cool, is believed to automatically cause illness. The resulting chill is seen as breaking the body’s equilibrium between hot and cold, upon which health is based. (See HOT/COLD IMBALANCE.)

**RASHES** \*Can be caused by certain foods, especially eggplant and breadfruit - but these can be cured (homeopathically!) by eating, respectively, burned eggplant and breadfruit nuts.\*

RELIGION The three religions of Haiti - Roman Catholicism, Voodoo, and Protestantism - are often described as a continuum, whatever the declared profession of faith of the individual (see PLURALISM). The demarcation between these first two is often quite hazy, however, to the extent that there is even a specific designation - *katolik fran* or *katolik levanjil* - for a Roman Catholic who in no way practices Voodoo. The distinction between a Voodooist and a Protestant, however, is quite sharp, and a - or the - major tenet of Haitian Protestantism is a formal renunciation of Voodoo. Yet see VOODOO AND CONVERSION TO PROTESTANTISM.

REPRODUCTIVE CAPACITY \*Depends upon body warmth. A female is warmer than a male, a young person warmer than an old one.\*

ROLE MODEL Don't forget this is what you are - whether you like it or not!

SALT \*Added to any beverage can help purify blood tainted by strong emotion.\*

SANITATION Personal hygiene very important. Bathing and washing of clothes a constant of the Haitian scene; problem is cleanliness of streams.

On the other hand, it is often difficult to make the peasant understand the necessity of latrines, or to undertake the expense involved. Defecation takes place in nearby bushes, with the traditional Haitian hogs eagerly serving as scavengers. It is difficult to instill seemingly strange new habits in any people.

Often it is believed that if a latrine is 20 feet from a well, the distance is sufficient to make the well-water safe!

*SANPWÈL* (literally: “without body hair”) \*Beings who remove their skin at night, leaving it for safe-keeping under a large water jug, and who then fly through the air and suck primarily the blood of infants. Thus one of the main causes, along with *lougawou* (*q.v.*), of high infant mortality. If, however, the skin can be discovered in time and salt or spices thrown on it, the *sanpwèl* will die.\*

SAPODILLA \*Whoever plants this (quite useful) tree will soon die afterward.\* Thus those that do exist are almost always the result of chance.

SCARIFICATION Burning a small circle or line on the forehead, cheek, shoulder, or buttock is sometimes done so that the Voodoo spirits (*lwa*) will not be jealous of an overly handsome child, and also in order to avoid the attention of those with “evil eye” (*q.v.*). Often performed using a red-hot metal thimble. (See also BURNS and CUPPING-GLASSES.)

SENSITIVITY Extreme in many Haitians, as compared to many Westerners. For example, scolding (especially in public) for having delayed medical care etc. is interpreted as a cutting insult which can even cause some to forsake Western medicine altogether. (See SLAPPING.)

SEX EDUCATION By observation. Privacy is a rare if almost non-existent commodity given the overcrowded conditions under which most Haitian peasants live.

SEX OF CHILD \*If a man wishes to father a son, he should limit his ejaculations as much as possible. The less often he ejaculates, the thicker his sperm - and the thicker the sperm, the more likely to produce a boy.\*

\*If a woman wishes to give birth to a son, she should eat salty, spicy meat dishes, cabbage, at least three different fruits

each day, and drink alcohol. For a daughter, she should eat seafood and vegetables, drink plenty of milk, and, above all, avoid salt.\*

\*Determined by position of moon at time of conception. Waxing: boy; waning: girl.\* (See MOON.)

\*If a pregnant woman often stumbles with her right foot, the child will be a boy; with her left foot, a girl.\*

**SEXUAL FANTASIES** Some women claim regular weekly or bi-weekly intercourse leading to orgasm with one or more Voodoo spirits.

**SEXUALITY** Permissive. Any restrictions imposed on one's sexual conduct are essentially those of one's mate(s). Except for the one or two nights a week reserved for a Voodoo mate (see **SEXUAL FANTASIES**), the Voodoo religion places no other restrictions on one's sexual activities, whether often considered "natural" or "unnatural." There is no religious concept of sexual perversion..

Sex is considered by the Voodoo community as simply one of many normal human functions, and in no way an object of shame or embarrassment. Reducing intercourse to simply a necessity of procreation is seen as animalistic, since animals mate only when fertile. For many, however, seemingly a biological function more than an emotional one.

Nevertheless, many Haitian patients experience embarrassment in discussing matters related to sex with a foreign physician of the opposite gender, and occasionally males will object to any examination by a male physician of their mate's genital area or breasts.

**SEZISMAN** \*Shock, fright, any violent emotion or upset heats the blood, making it highly vulnerable to "cold," and can

bring on fever, diarrhea, or paralysis. Contact with very cold water, or eating “cold” foods such as avocados, bananas, limes, or mangoes, can even result in death.\* (See HOT/COLD IMBALANCE.)

**SICKNESS** See **ILLNESS**.

**SIN** Illness or misfortune is not seen as punishment for sin. A Voodooist may well believe (s)he has angered a Voodoo spirit in some way, but there is no abstract concept of sin or guilt as such in Voodoo.

But for some Haitian Christians the onset of illness, especially if sudden, can raise disturbing questions of personal innocence and guilt. Sickness is perceived as a concrete form of moral punishment.

**SKIN** “The aristocracy of the skin” - one of Haiti’s great curses. Traditionally, the lighter the skin, the higher the social standing. Deeply rooted in the Haitian mentality since the slave days when the Mulattoes - children produced by White slave-owning men and Black slave women (the other way around was supposedly unthinkable) - were quite often given not only freedom from slavery, but also enormous advantages of education, plus financial and social distinction. The opposition between Mulatto and Black has been described by some historians as the essential difficulty in unifying and governing the Haitian nation.

Thus, the tactic of some dark women to bear a child by a White, since the resulting Mulatto could well go far in society and be a financial support for her in later years. A form of living insurance.

**SLAPPING** Not to be recommended even for an hysterical patient. Slapping is a great affront in Haitian culture - as well as the spectacle of the White slapping the Black. Can

be especially upsetting to the families, who are often present.  
(See SENSITIVITY.)

SNEEZING \*Sign of health, or that one is recovering.\*

SORE THROAT \*Can be cured by pulling on one's hair.\*

SPECIALISTS \*A doctor is a doctor\* - a concept difficult to combat when trying to refer a Haitian patient. Often the unspoken conclusion is that something indeed mysterious must be wrong, calling instead for the ministrations of a Voodoo practitioner.

SPELL-CASTING The infamous stuffed dolls stuck with pins are decidedly not a part of normal, respectable Voodoo practice, but do indeed exist as part of the "left-hand" or malevolent side of Voodoo. The practice is rationalized by arguing that casting an evil spell upon another is simply a means of legitimate self-defense, or a form of just punishment for wrongs inflicted. And as the level of poverty worsens, so does the level of desperation - and of negative magic. The widespread notoriety of the dolls is based on the general philosophy that life's accidents and misfortunes are due to specific ill-will on the part of another human, or of a particular Voodoo spirit. Nevertheless, since many, many persons believe in their efficacy, and since mutual ill-will appears to be a constant of the human condition, the secret practice of supposed malevolent telepathy is by no means rare.

First, it is believed that the practitioner must be a Voodoo sorcerer (*bòkò*), or at least endowed with certain magical powers. Naturally, these services are not without remuneration. The specific instrument used is not necessarily a doll, but can also be a small figurine in wood, lead or wax. The advantage of the doll, however, is that hair, fingernail or toenail clippings, blood, or sperm of the intended victim,

can be more easily inserted or rubbed on the doll. An ideal strategy used with the figurines is to insert metal nails covered with blood of the victim and wrapped with his/her hair. Any object such as a piece of clothing belonging to the victim can supposedly increase the efficacy of the curse - thus the advisability of disposing carefully of one's hair, nail clippings, and used clothing. Alternate means are simply sticking pins or nails into a photograph of the victim (thus part of the fear by some of being photographed), into clothing worn by the victim, into the ground where his/her shadow has just been cast, or into his/her footprint. And then a "well-meaning" friend can be dispatched to inform the intended victim of what has occurred.

Similar ploys are to bury a live chicken or rooster, the recently severed head of a cat or dog, or a calf's heart, near the intended victim's house. Another is to stab to death a goat bearing some of the intended victim's clothing, while repeating the victim's name.

Other major weapons in the surreptitious Voodoo arsenal are the three infamous *koud*: the *koud poud* ("powder attack"), the *koud zè* ("air attack"), and the *koud lanp* ("lamp attack"). The *koud poud* is 'magic' powder consisting of ground-up snake or toad parts, acid from manioc, stinging nettles etc., placed at a door, or on a table, chair or bed. The intended effect is to cause first intensive itching and irritation, leading to complications which can even result in death. A variant of this is to apply the same powder directly to the face of a rival woman, thus making her unattractive. The *koud zè* or *souf poud* ("breath of powder") consists of similar substances which supposedly travel through the air directed at the intended victim, enter the skin through any available lesion causing general infection, or attack the lungs causing unconsciousness and death. The *koud lanp* can be used either for evil or for good: to harm someone, his/her name is repeated over a black bottle filled with oil and a burning wick,

and then buried near the intended victim's door. Variations of this consist of burning various noxious substances in a coconut shell or cooking-pot placed near a sacred tree. Conversely, as a love potion, one lights a flame in a coconut shell filled with syrup, honey, sugar, flower petals etc. and repeats the name of the person desired. Other lamps filled with specific substances are deemed useful for curing the sick, for finding a job, or are simply placed as an offering before a Roman Catholic or Voodoo altar.

Another form of spell-casting is *chanje tèt* (literally: changing heads or persons) whereby a desperately ill patient is supposedly saved by killing another person through evil magic and transferring that person's *gwo bonnanj* or soul to the patient. (See GUARDIAN ANGELS.)

Finally, another form of spell is the pact made with evil Voodoo forces whereby one can enjoy for a time great material success, but which must be paid for by sudden death. Thus the abrupt, unexpected demise of a person of importance is often interpreted as proof of an evil pact. (Cf. Faust legend.)

In general, the initial symptoms observed in the victim as the result of an evil spell are insomnia, loss of appetite, indigestion, headaches, and weight loss, along with ill-defined pains and a generally run-down condition. It is usually during the night that these symptoms are at their worst. Although death is a frequent outcome, a sick person who believes him/herself cursed can often see no reason to consult a Western physician.

The comparison can be drawn with a situation in Western society where, were one to believe that a price had been put on one's head and that a paid killer were lurking in every shadow, the psychological and thereby physical damage could be incalculable. The human mind is a most powerful instrument.

The antidote is of course a counter-spell that one pays another Voodoo practitioner to cast. It then can often become a contest to determine which one has the more effective magic - or control of the intended victim's mind.

Similar processes are used against political enemies, or to turn one political or military leader against another. Another situation which occurs is a bogus spell set up by a would-be Voodoo exorcist, who profits financially by 'saving' the supposed victim from his/her fate.

SPERM \*Stored in male's back, at level of the waist. Without periodic intercourse, large amounts accumulate, causing pain. In old age, this accumulation can cause the back to bend over, and one can even become a hunchback.\*

\*Poisons the mother's milk.\* (An unwitting birth-control practice?)

SPINACH \*Quite dangerous for babies.\*

SPITTING Very frequent among the sick. Also, frequent spitting is considered an early sign of pregnancy.

\*Important in order to avoid inflicting the evil eye (*q.v.*)\*

\*A girl or woman should spit on the ground after urination.\*

STATUS A great many Haitian peasants are very status conscious, and are easily scandalized or even offended by what they perceive as improper dress or conduct on the part of those of "high status." Some are shocked by doctors who make a habit of visiting patients in their homes, or who simply wear *sapat* - the Haitian informal sandal. Wearing glasses, on the other hand, is a sign of high status.

There seems to be a belief prevalent among some peasants that no really “good” Haitian physician would be practicing in their midst, far out in some rural area. The result of peasant low self-esteem, and/or the recognition of the lack of physical and social amenities? See MEDICAL EDUCATION (WESTERN-STYLE), “To serve the rural masses. . .”

The “big” doctors are thought to be found only in Port-au-Prince. Apparently, however, this attitude does not apply to foreign physicians.

**STERILITY** Always imputed to the woman. The greatest shame which can befall her, causing her to be considered unworthy of being deemed a real woman. She can be totally rejected by her family-in-law and mate, whatever her other qualities. Often seen as a curse placed against her by a rival woman.

\*Effective remedies: holy water, a pilgrimage to Saut-d’Eau (see PILGRIMAGES), special clothing, a magic doll placed between her and her mate each night,\* or the often very personal (and discreet) ministrations of a Voodoo priest - if not of another willing male.

**STERILIZATION OF EQUIPMENT** (Midwives, injectionists, etc.) Extremely difficult in rural Haiti, where fuel (almost always charcoal) is quite expensive by local standards. Set on the traditional three stones over an outdoor fire, maintaining a boiling cauldron for some 15-20 minutes is seldom achieved.

**STETHOSCOPE** \*Even for a relatively minor cut on the leg, proper treatment has not been administered if a stethoscope has not been applied to the chest.\* For many it is an integral part of the healing rite. (See EXPECTATIONS - PATIENTS’.)

**STILL-BORN** \*Caused by the failure of a *gwo bonnanj* (see GUARDIAN ANGELS) to occupy the infant’s body just

after birth. Its presence is indicated by the infant's first wail, its absence by stillness.\*

**STOICISM** In an overwhelmingly poor country, the tendency is to ignore illness and to delay treatment. Accustomed to great hardship, sickness is seen as just one additional factor. Cost rather than fear seems to be the decisive element.

Two proverbs: “*Bondye ban m yon maleng dèyè tèt, m asepte l.*” (God gave me an infected sore behind my head; I accept it. - I accept my lot.) “*Lavi a gen de tete: yon tete dous, yon tete anmè.*” (Life has two breasts: one sweet breast, one bitter breast.)

See APPENDIX: Forbearance.

**SUGAR** A national addiction, a dentist's nightmare. The Haitian is weaned on sugar water, and later dotes on *kola* (a bottled fruit drink with a seemingly 95% sugar content). From the ubiquitous chewing on sugar cane, to *rapadou* (brown-sugar candy sold on every street corner), to *tablèt* (peanut brittle-like candy), to coffee laced with so much sugar (4 to 6 teaspoonfuls per cup) that many refer to it as sugar moistened with coffee, an inordinate fondness for sugar and sweets is a striking characteristic of almost the entire population. Sugar is also used in large amounts in the preparation of popular dishes such as *akasan* (a semi-liquid cornmeal preparation) and *labouyi* (hot oatmeal). A provider of quick energy in an often insufficient daily diet.

There is a proverb which states: “*Machwè brannen, grangou tchoule*” (literally: “Jaw moves, hunger moves off”), i.e., chewing on something relieves hunger pangs - and sugar cane is a chief remedy.

**SUICIDE** Quite rare, as is overt homicide.

**SURGERY** Greatly feared: seen as life-threatening. Patient and relatives require considerable reassurance. (See NOVEMBER.)

Most Haitians are convinced that physical activity after any surgery will be harmful.

**TEETH** \*Are attacked by worms, just as are plants and vegetables. Worms are the cause for the holes or canals (i.e., cavities) found in teeth. So-called nerves and any other matter found in a tooth are in reality remnants of worms.\* Thus one way of saying “to perform root canal surgery” is *wete vè nan dan* (literally, “to extract worms from a tooth”) - certainly a more concrete image than the nebulous concept of a nerve. There is supposedly a special herbal concoction which can kill the worms.

\*A flow of black blood rising to one’s head can be a cause of violent toothaches.\*

Many believe that sugar cane is actually good for the teeth. While the fibers do help clean the teeth, they inevitably leave a sugar deposit as well, precipitating cavities. (See DENTISTRY.)

\*An old person’s tooth can be made to regrow by rubbing the gum with a mixture of crushed ants.\*

See APPENDIX: Teeth.

**TEETHING** (*dantisyon*) Parents sometimes interpret sickness in their children as simply due to teething, and thus delay seeking medical help.

\*Dentition is impeded by cutting the infant’s hair before weaning; also by rainwater falling into the infant’s mouth\* - although at least one Voodoo priestess believes

in sprinkling rainwater in an infant's mouth to prevent bad teeth.

**TETANUS** Neonatal tetanus was already reported in colonial Haiti, causing the death of one-third of babies delivered by Black midwives, but rarely by White midwives. Interpreted by the colonists as an expression of the Blacks' hatred of slavery.

Today believed due to cold (*fredi*) entering the mother during the postpartum period and thus transmitted by her milk, or through the umbilicus of the infant. One folk remedy consists of burning the clothes of the child, mixing the resulting ashes with raw rum (*kleren*), and then having the child drink some of the concoction and bathe in the remainder.

**TIME** The concept of time is often very vague. Many have no access to calendars, and seasons vary but little. Just because a patient tells you, for example, that a certain condition has been going on for two months, this is not necessarily so. It could well be six months - or far less than two months. (See also AGE, and HISTORY-TAKING.)

**TIMOUN**, or **RESTAVÈK** Literally meaning "child," is among the most decried of Haiti's informal social institutions. Typically, a poor peasant family with too many mouths to feed will entrust a child to a well-to-do urban family which will supposedly provide food, clothing, shelter, medical care and education, in return for domestic services. All too often, however, the domestic services are the only part of the bargain fulfilled as agreed. In many cases the custom is little better than a form of modern-day slavery, and physical, psychological, and sexual abuse is common. A 1984 UNICEF report estimated that 109,000, or five percent of all Haitian children between the ages of 5 and 18, fall into this category. Recently declared a high-risk group for AIDS.

**TOBACCO** Cigarettes are a status symbol, especially among males. “Comme Il Faut,” the Haitian brand, has been somewhat eclipsed lately by large quantities of American cigarettes smuggled in. With an ever decreasing U.S. market, cigarette companies are making all the more effort to market their poison in the Third World, which, for the most part, is still naively unaware of their disastrous effects.

\*Chewing tobacco lessens toothaches, and snuffing tobacco lessens headaches and head colds.\*

\*To be able to give up smoking: attach a clove of garlic to your navel.\*

**TOMBS** Often more costly than the house in which one has passed a lifetime. But proper care for the dead is a necessity: 1) to be sure they will not be angry and return to harm the living; 2) to prevent the deceased from being turned into zombis (*q.v.*), a fate considered far worse than death.

**TOWEL** Often wrapped around the head as a self-proclaimed indicator of great pain and/or despair.

**TRADITIONAL MEDICINE** It has been estimated that approximately two-thirds of rural Haitians go to both traditional healers and Western practitioners, and one-third to traditional healers alone. For Haitians in general, the higher the level of education and income, the more one tends to go to Western practitioners.

The enormous strength of the traditional medical system is that people really *believe* in it. Diagnosis is minimal; divination is the true basis. The healer *knows*, and the patient, the family, the community, believe implicitly. Thus any inner strength of the patient works at maximum efficiency. Thinking is not enough; believing is.

As with cultures world-wide, the Haitian belief in their own medical culture is often so strong that one observes Haitians returning from abroad, at great expense and personal inconvenience, in order to receive what they consider the only really effective medical treatment. Social anthropologists have even described this cultural mindset regarding health practices as “one of the basic social institutions of a society,” comparable in effect to a political or economic system.

When the divergence between two medical cultures is too great, there is the very real possibility of a high degree of dissatisfaction on the part of both the health provider and the care recipient. One will not accept the health views of the other, with the result that health care is neither sought nor accepted.

The more that folk beliefs and customs, i.e., the familiar, can be integrated into Western-style medical practice, i.e., the unfamiliar, the more successful that practice will be.

Any too blatant ridicule of existing folk medical practices has been found to be counter-productive. A mutual climate of trust and respect is necessary before Western medicine can begin to be fully accepted.

**TRIAGE** Traditionally, triage consists of battlefield medical decisions, where priority is given to the wounded with the best chance for survival. As for Haiti, Dr. William Hodges gives the following description: “Medical care for the hordes of needy will of necessity always be messy, and even painful. The total amount of human suffering will always exceed the best of our efforts to alleviate it. To sort out ‘the sickest of the sick, the poorest of the poor,’ is probably one of the world’s worst jobs. Easy to spot and admit immediately are the children with sunken eyes and reduced skin turgor dehydrated from diarrhea. Obviously unconscious persons

must be admitted - but watch out for those merely pretending. A hand on the forehead can reveal a fever, and the chronically ill with tuberculosis and severe weight loss are also easy to recognize. Much more difficult to judge are the recently ill with possibly typhoid or malaria, or those who have not yet lost much weight. Expect in almost all cases the little game of dramatically increased symptoms and suffering as the physician approaches. And then there is the ‘Doctor, if you don’t see my baby today, I’m going to leave him for you in the clinic.’ Some of the more aggressive will keep changing places to be seen again if the first try has failed. Occasionally, the truly sick will come again the next day to get an examination ticket for someone else, using that person’s name - making record-keeping a nightmare.”

“Expect speeches: ‘Would I sit here for four days if I weren’t really sick!’ ‘Would I have come all the way from . . . if I weren’t dying!’ ‘If my baby dies tonight, it will be your fault.’ Retain your composure. Keep everyone seated. The triage must always not only be but must also appear to be just - which can be especially difficult if, for example, the patient is a well-known imitator simulating a shaking spell or convulsion.” (Dr. William Hodges)

Unfortunately, it will often be found politically expedient to grant automatic admission to anyone armed with a special letter from a local political or religious authority. The Haitians accept this bit of injustice matter-of-factly.

But there are indeed medical centers in Haiti where facilities and number of patients make this sort of triage fortunately unnecessary.

TRUTH Terminal cancer? Baby will be still-born? Often the Haitian patient prefers not to know. It is better to inform an influential relative who can better judge when and if to do so. The same is true concerning major surgery.

TUBERCULOSIS The many terms for tuberculosis (our *Haitian-English English-Haitian Medical Dictionary* lists no less than fifteen) are usually used only to designate what Western medicine calls advanced active pulmonary tuberculosis.

Greatly feared, since both a frequent and obvious cause of death. Highly contagious especially because of crowded housing conditions (see NIGHT) and poor nutrition.

Its extreme contagiousness - as well as seriousness - is well known among the peasant population. Consequently, its victims often try to hide their condition if possible, thereby infecting others.

Carries with it a strong social stigma. Families often desert the patient, and the hospital will have to take charge of burial. Newspapers never give tuberculosis as cause of death.

Isolation from family and village is a common protective practice. Cf. *maladi ti kay* (little house sickness), and *maladi san fanmi* (sickness without family) - among the numerous terms for the disease.

It has been found that those living along a 'main' road tend to withdraw from treatment less than those who must make a more demanding trip. In addition, high market season, when the greatest amount of cash is available, is the period of fewest withdrawals from treatment. Cost (however low by Western standards) is a major factor for the patient. Often added to that is the cost of local lodging necessary during the first phases of treatment.

The problem of premature patient withdrawal has been called staggering. Once patients begin to feel better, three factors come into play: 1) a strong temptation to withdraw from treatment (until the disease again becomes disabling);

2) cost; 3) trip. A monetary refund for those who complete treatment has proven most effective. Another ploy found effective is free food given each week when they return to get their medicine.

\*Does not occur in children.\*

\*Cannot be transmitted to someone older than oneself' - thus only those younger than the affected individual feel the need to take precautions.\*

**TWINS** (*marasa*) Voodoo holds that twins are endowed with strange, magical powers, and are thus the object of special respect and even fear.

Are quite jealous of each other: each must be dressed similarly, and if one receives a gift, the other must receive exactly the same. If one is sickly and the other not, it is because \*the healthy one is sucking the blood of the other.\*

\*Twins are indicated by a dark streak or stripe extending from the expectant mother's pubis to her navel and sometimes slightly higher.\*

A child born following the birth of twins (boy: *dosou*; girl: *dosa*) is considered even more powerful than twins, combining their dual force into one person. On the other hand, the child born preceding twins (*dosou/dosa anvan*) is held to be of little importance, and thus loses status after their birth.

**ULCERS** Surprisingly high incidence of stomach ulcers - due to frequent anxiety of the Voodooist, as well as to undernourishment?

**UMBILICUS** According to Dr. Florence N. Marshall, "Cultural habits in rural Haiti dictate that something must be done to

the cut end of the cord. 'Because it has always been done so' is the most frequent reason given. In questioning more deeply, it appears that such practices arise from the belief that putting certain substances on the cord will assure its early drying and falling off - crude, mistaken efforts to prevent infection. In more recent years, there is evidence that some of the people are making a vague connection between treatment of the umbilical cord and the development of tetanus. Consequently, more vigorous applications of foreign substances are used . . ." She goes on to list these substances as pot black, powdered or crushed charcoal, "burned strands of the straw bed mat, nutmeg and candle grease, [concoctions of] leaves, grasses, cotton or feathers; also pork fat, baby powder, cosmetic powder, indigo, sand, fresh earth, sugar cane syrup, plantain, starch, wood shavings, dust and water, ginger, red pepper and crude castor oil. Then a patch of cloth or a belly band is applied." (*Advances in Pediatrics*, vol. 15, 1968, p. 69.) A Haitian physician adds "parts of a spider web" to this list. "Sometimes after the beginning of clinical symptoms of tetanus, still more concoctions are used as home remedies to combat the illness." (Marshall, *ibid.*, p. 74)

Implements often used to cut the umbilicus are an unsterilized razor blade (old or new), scissors, a knife, a piece of broken glass, sharp pieces of rock or metal, a machete, simply two rocks, or it is even just burnt with a piece of hot charcoal. The fresh wound is cauterized with a piece of heated iron. (See CHILDBIRTH, "Kits . . .")

A small bit of the cord is left attached. About four thumb-widths is considered ideal, and measurement is held crucial, since \*the eventual size of the penis or vagina is partly determined by the length of the remaining umbilical stump.\*

Another fixed belief is that this stump 'must' fall off when the baby is three days old. "Numerous manipulations and applications lead to this result on schedule. Then one or

another of the substances mentioned is put on the umbilicus, which is obviously still raw. Even when a baby is delivered and handled correctly at a hospital or by a ‘good’ midwife, the relatives, especially the grandmother, work on the navel, and at the earliest possible moment.” (Marshall, *ibid.*, p. 70)

The cord can be tied with thread, string, rags, or grass. \*Loud speech, or handling of a needle by the mother, delays the healing of the stump.\* Once detached, the bit of cord is boiled and the water given as medicine should the child become ill.

Traditionally the cord is buried as near as possible to where the birth actually took place, designating one’s symbolic home throughout life.

\*Dung rubbed on the navel of a neonate will ensure that (s) he will be fertile.\*

It is estimated that, until the recent, increasingly active programs, neonatal tetanus caused the death of approximately one-third of all live births in Haiti. By way of comparison, the number of neonatal deaths among the rural population of Haiti was approximately 300 times greater than among the rural non-White population of Florida.

UMBILICUS (SWOLLEN) \*Due to: 1) too much crying soon after birth; 2) gas; 3) whooping cough; 4) heredity.\*

UNDERDEVELOPMENT Poor health leads to poor work, which leads to poor output, which leads to poor nutrition, which leads to poor health . . . A vicious cycle.

“The waste of human resources.” (Andrea Couture)

UNMARRIED WOMAN Looked down upon in the community. It is considered far preferable to share a man rather than to be without one.

URINE \*Drinking one's own urine is good for a variety of ills.\*

VACCINATION Hardest part by far: the follow-up shots. Perhaps easier to tell the mother when to return (with immunization card) rather than to try to have her memorize the number of shots necessary.

Another great problem is proper refrigeration of the vaccine. And, what if it has remained unrefrigerated for weeks in customs?

VASECTOMY Commonly believed will result in impotence. Added to this is the fact that the usual term for "to perform a vasectomy" is *chatre* (to castrate). The only way yet found to popularize is through the direct testimonial of a local man who has had one (and who has subsequently found much favor among members of the fair sex).

VIRGINITY Prized for the woman, derided for the male. Traditionally, spots of blood on the sheet after the first night are considered necessary proof. Of course proper timing can make this night coincide with menstruation, or a small animal intestine filled with blood secreted in an appropriate spot can perform the same function.

If a woman has had intercourse only during a Voodoo possession, she will consider herself still a virgin.

\*Certain baths, seated in certain positions, can restore a woman's virginity.\*

VISION Color perception will often be found to be quite imprecise (cf. COLORS), whereas night vision is often quite acute.

VITALITY Contrast the essential joy and vitality of the Haitian people with (what at least appears to be) the essential sadness

of the other destitute peoples of the Americas. Is this the essential quality which will one day be the salvation of Haiti?

VOMITING \*Can be prevented by a large iron key tied around the neck.\*

VOODOO = religion / medicine / way of life.

The all-pervasive folk religion of Haiti. Much of rural Haitian attitudes are informed by Voodoo, a fact not to be taken lightly by the outsider. Because the Haitian peasant is so poor and always in danger of want or illness, he traditionally sees Voodoo as his only resource. And in the world of Voodoo, religion and medicine are inextricably linked. The high incidence of ill health forms a climate of anxiety in which Voodoo flourishes. A revealing fact: fees for treating the sick are usually the Voodoo priest(esse)'s main source of income.

The Voodooist's world is peopled with both the visible and the invisible, with magic both good and bad, with one great God (*Granmèt*), with all-powerful spirits (*lwa*), with the dead (*lemò*), with witches (*lougawou*) and other creatures - and priests (*oungan*) and priestesses (*manbo*) who serve as intermediaries. One must cajole or appease, cheat or conquer the three main potential causes of harm: 1) the Voodoo spirits, 2) the dead, and 3) the twins (*marasa*). All phenomena are spiritual, "animated" by the Voodoo spirits. These spirits and forces are all around us, and more often than not cause ill fortune and disease - when not simply playing tricks on us. They are capricious, without any particular moral or ethical orientation, and can be maneuvered by clever persons to their own aims. Thus negotiating exterior forces forms the framework of one's actions. Evil is exteriorized, not interiorized as in the Judeo-Christian tradition.

Although Voodoo is deeply ingrained in the peasant population, it is unlikely to be discussed with a Western-

type practitioner. It is nevertheless obviously of prime importance to know what is in the mind of the patient and what other medical beliefs and practices are being entertained simultaneously. Voodoo furnishes the underlying vantage point from which many a Haitian patient views illness, and the influence of Voodoo cannot be countered if it is not understood. In the mind of the Voodooist, certain health problems are interpreted as religious problems, to be solved by religious means.

Illnesses thought to be of supernatural origin are the specific domain of the Voodoo priest(ess). Treatment consists essentially of the spiritual (based upon Voodoo practices), but also of the physical (based upon herbs). The Voodoo priest(esse)'s paramount task is to ascertain which Voodoo spirit is causing a given illness, and then to appease that spirit through the rituals it desires - as well as which herbal remedies should be taken. Diagnosis consists of interrogating the Voodoo spirits using procedures such as entering into a trance, dream interpretations, or reading of cards. (See DIVINATION/DIAGNOSIS.) Failure to cure is attributed not to the ritualistic system as a whole, but rather to: 1) incorrect diagnosis, i.e., improper identification of the specific Voodoo spirit who is the cause; 2) unbending wrath of the Voodoo spirit involved; 3) lack of the patient's faith in the Voodoo priest(ess); 4) a stronger hex created by an evil sorcerer; 5) the patient's failure to follow instructions. (See ILLNESS.)

If the human mind can be of prime importance in bringing about cures, then it can obviously be of prime importance in bringing about sickness and even death. Thus the psychological power of a Voodoo hex or curse is not to be taken lightly. Haitian peasants are steeped in the traditions of Voodoo, and they constantly witness illnesses and deaths that are (for them) otherwise inexplicable. (See VOODOO DEATH.)

Innumerable are the personal enmities brought about by belief in Voodoo, perhaps symptomatic of an underlying belief in man's innately evil nature. For example a woman may believe that her vagina is being rotted out by a *wanga* (hex) placed upon her by a rival woman. (A supernatural explanation of an all too natural contagious venereal disease?) And yet some observers argue realistically that the pervasive anxiety generated by Voodoo constitutes the social cement which ensures the comparative peacefulness of a destitute and overpopulated country. (See PARANOIA.)

In the some thirty or forty Voodoo ceremonies which we have had the privilege of attending, only once upon arriving were we mistaken as to who was the priest, although the clothing of a Voodoo priest(ess) is in no way distinctive. The chief distinguishing characteristic can perhaps best be described as a certain charisma - an air of omniscience, of omnipotence, as though the eyes were looking directly into one's innermost self.

**VOODOO AND CONVERSION TO PROTESTANTISM** Often for protection through what is seen as a more powerful, and certainly more prosperous, religion. More pragmatism than spirituality, in the Christian sense. It may well be through fear of exterior evil forces, not sin or guilt - through desire for deliverance from the evil of this world, not repentance. It can represent a remedy against hardship (missionary-furnished food and medical care), or yet another treatment for "supernatural" illnesses.

In general, Haitian Christians seem to blame illness on the following: 1) God; 2) Satan; 3) magic and the Voodoo spirits; 4) natural causes. One of the principal reasons for becoming a Protestant is to escape the threats of Voodoo, which by no means necessarily implies a disbelief in Voodoo.

Even those who have purportedly given up Voodoo, as demanded by Protestant missions in Haiti, sometimes suddenly blurt out remarks such as, “But of course I can’t deny what I’ve actually seen myself.” Belief in a faith held for many, many generations does not die easily.

Conversion to Protestantism - and thus denouncing the Voodoo spirits - can at some time be deemed dangerous by the convert, should (s)he come to believe the spirits are angry and have decided on punishment through illness or misfortune. Often a convert’s death is attributed to the anger of the Voodoo spirits. Much of the conflict, of course, may well center upon a suppressed desire to return to Voodoo.

**VOODOO AND WESTERN-TYPE MEDICINE** “Integrated medicine.” Reportedly, the traditional enmity between Voodoo priest(esse)s and Western-type medicine is largely a thing of the past. More and more it appears that once the Voodoo practitioner has appeased the problem with the supernatural (and collected fees), the patient is then advised to consult a Western-type practitioner to repair the damage remaining from the Voodoo spirit’s former wrath. In effect, Voodoo is enlisted to combat the cause, and Western medicine to combat the symptoms. Thus often the problem essentially reduces itself to delay in receiving effective treatment.

Competition or cooperation? In practice, real collaboration has been limited to working with midwives, injectionists, and faith-and-herb healers, with in a few cases strictly Voodoo practitioners called in for certain psychotherapeutic counseling.

“Grapeshot therapy” - or the concurrent treatment pattern. Typically the rural Haitian will consult both the Western and the traditional medical practitioners concurrently. (See TRADITIONAL MEDICINE.)

Patients who believe that they have received a Voodoo curse or hex will rarely if ever admit this to a Western physician, for fear of ridicule. Therefore, if it appears that such may be the case, it is extremely important to ask patients if they think something has been done to them, and then to explain how (if true) Western medicine can definitely help. Symptoms often include weight loss, sleeplessness, depression, lack of appetite, and vague abdominal complaints. Often patients are quite relieved to be able to exteriorize their fears. In some obviously psychosomatic cases, physicians have knowingly accepted working in cooperation with a Voodoo healer.

Question: Then why not go to the Western-type doctor in the first place? Answer: Because if the Voodoo spirit's wrath has not been appeased, the same or a similar sickness will reappear.

Would it be advisable therefore for there to be overt collaboration between Voodoo and Western practitioner? The problem would be that public overtures to the Voodooist would give him/her too great an added prestige in the village. Communication might well be useful, but probably not overt collaboration. Nevertheless, one wonders if someday in Haiti the type of collaboration which has worked so well in Zimbabwe would be possible, namely faith-and-herb healers, midwives, and Western-type physicians all working together in a shared dispensary or clinic.

**VOODOO CONSULTATIONS** The typical consultation takes place in a very small Voodoo sanctuary called a *badji*, before an altar covered with a motley collection of seemingly (to the outsider) unrelated objects, and space enough for only three or four people. The priest(ess) chants, prays, and appears to enter into a trance while being possessed by a Voodoo spirit. This spirit then essentially takes over the consultation, questioning, palpating, and prescribing. The psychotherapeutic force at work here is abundantly evident.

Just how a Voodoo practitioner distinguishes between illness brought on by a Voodoo sorcerer (*bòkò*), and the wrath of a Voodoo spirit (*lwa*), is unclear. Paid informants, as well as gossip, can well be sources in the case of local enmity.

Collusion between Voodoo priest(esse)s can and sometimes does occur. A patient may come to one complaining of having been poisoned. The Voodoo practitioner may well believe (s)he knows which *bòkò* (Voodoo sorcerer) prepared the poison on behalf of a client, and who therefore, for a fee, could indicate not only its nature but also its antidote. If such is the case, the *bòkò*, by revealing the proper cure, thus ends up being paid by one client to cause illness, and indirectly by another to cure the same illness! And he can tell his original client that the person targeted for evil did indeed become ill, but that other magic prevailed.

**VOODOO CURES** A Voodoo cure for a Voodoo illness. A person who believes in the magic of Voodoo evils will most likely believe in the magic of Voodoo remedies. This culture firmly believes that illness can be brought on by spirits or spells, and it believes just as firmly that these illnesses can be cured by other spirits or spells. One can view this as a process of subconscious suggestibility, of psychosomatic suggestion, of self-hypnosis, or of self-fulfilling prophecy. Is it reasonable, or effective, to attempt to cure culture-specific mental problems by therapy devised by and for another, entirely different, culture?

\*The world is filled with potentially harmful forces. All misfortune is caused by the wrath either of humans or of Voodoo spirits, i.e., of the Visibles or of the Invisibles.\* Therefore, when ills occur, one must first determine whether the cause is human or otherwise, and then find the appropriate cure. Magic harm wrought by another human can be countered by stronger magic; wrath of the Voodoo spirits can be calmed by the proper offerings. (See PARANOIA.)

Ritual Voodoo cures can be quite intricate and prolonged, sometimes inflicting burns on the patient's body, or even lowering the patient into a grave which is then partially filled in with a thin layer of dirt. (See also INSANITY.) They can consist of rubbing the blood of freshly sacrificed chickens or foul-smelling leaf concoctions over the patient's body. Another cure is formed of a mixture of rum, leaves and spices sprayed from the priest(esse)'s mouth into the face of the patient. Leeches or incisions in the arm or chest are also considered effective.

For mental illness, beating and burning the patient may form an integral part of elaborate ceremonies. Total belief in the Voodoo practitioner's powers, as well as support and reassurance by the community, can well be determining factors. These psychotherapeutic aspects are all-important: the implicit faith of the patient in this healer who possesses a technique for all ills. The omniscient healer - is there a more comforting concept for the patient?

The role that Voodoo can play in certain psychiatric disorders is illustrated by the case of an elderly woman who firmly believed that an evil spell had been cast around her house and that she would die if she were to go out. A Voodoo priest was successfully called in by a Western physician to break the spell and furnish protection against any further similar occurrences. A Voodoo cure for a Voodoo illness, where a Western-type remedy would doubtlessly have been without effect.

Dr. Ari Kiev quotes one Voodoo priest as saying to him: "In order to cure someone successfully, it is necessary for him/her to believe in me, in Voodoo, or in God."

One can also speculate on the problem of the patient who has consciously rejected Voodoo for Protestantism, but who is still subconsciously a firm believer in Voodoo. (S)He thus

refuses to have recourse to a Voodoo priest(ess), but the mental problem is still there.

On December 24 is held a special ceremony to ensure health for the following year. A washtub is filled with rum and various herbal concoctions, as well as with the blood of a sacrificial animal, and then blessed through a series of incantations. The members of the congregation strip to their underpants and anoint themselves with the liquid while dancing around the tub.

\*Sometimes if one's protective Voodoo spirit (*lwa tèt*) does not come to help in times of sickness, it is simply that (s)he is busy at the bedside of other sick persons who have been more attentive to him/her.\*

Proverb: *Nèg fè, nèg defè* - Man does, man undoes. (*What is done by one Voodoo sorcerer can be remedied by another.*)

Often it is the Voodoo priest(ess) living further away who will be consulted, rather than a nearby one - "distance lends enchantment."

Christians tend to credit God with their cure, Voodooists a specific Voodoo spirit.

**VOODOO DEATH** "If faith can heal, fear can kill." Apparently a very real phenomenon, with occurrences reported not only in Haiti, but in regions as diverse as Africa, Australia, and islands of the Pacific - involving cases where competent Western-type medical authorities have ruled out the possibility of poison, physical injury, or disease. It is claimed that the victims die not because they have made up their minds to die, but because they believe they are bound to die as the result of a Voodoo curse or hex. Deeply rooted insecurity in a fear-ridden environment would create a very special vulnerability in some: "A fatal power of the

imagination working through unmitigated terror.” Death would supposedly occur from a prolonged state of shock induced by intense emotion. For a discussion of possible physiological causes and symptoms, see Walter B. Cannon (of Harvard Medical School), “‘Voodoo’ Death,” in *American Anthropologist*, Vol. 44, No. 2 (April-June 1942), 169-181.

VOODOO POSSESSION (*posesyon*) Seen by non-believers as a form of voluntary self-hypnosis or trance; by believers as the high point of the Voodoo religion, when a Voodoo spirit (*lwa*) temporarily takes possession of a mortal’s mind and body, speaking and acting through this mortal, and leaving him/her with no subsequent recollection of the event. The first time one is possessed (or “mounted”), the reaction can be especially violent, even throwing oneself into a fire or cutting oneself.

Has been interpreted (by non-believers) as a liberating device approved by Haitian culture, whereby unconscious emotional needs are fulfilled, speech and actions normally forbidden are permitted, and exhibitionist and even sexual needs can be gratified. It can be seen as a healthy expression of suppressed emotions which could cause neurosis and psychosis. An imaginary other self comes temporarily into existence, expressing hidden desires and freeing oneself of frustrations, yet without involving one’s responsibility.

A man can just as well be possessed by a female Voodoo spirit as by a male one, and the same is true for a woman. Thus there is an inherent bisexuality in Voodoo, and while under a Voodoo possession, a man can have intercourse with a woman or with another man, or a woman can have relations with a man or with another woman. This is not seen as homosexual activity by the Voodoo community, but rather as an act involving only the Voodoo spirit in question. The same is true even for what would normally be considered incest. Such occurrences are rare, but well illustrate the “other-worldly” nature of the Voodoo possession trance.

WAKES A time for loud mourning, as well as for general revelry - the dead person must depart in a merry mood or (s) he could return to do mischief. Drinking, card-playing, and story-telling go on well into the night - as well as wailing.

WATER Boiling water is quite often too expensive for the average person: too much charcoal is required, and charcoal does not come cheaply. Thus the bottle-feeding of infants, formula mixed with water, leads to diarrhea. The mothers often realize it is because of the water, so no more water is given. The result: death by dehydration.

Another problem is that those babies who have been given boiled water are then given unboiled water as they are introduced to weaning food, often resulting in a violent onset of diarrhea.

“The number of faucets in a country is a more accurate health indicator than the number of doctors.” (Joseph Bentivegna, M.D.)

Rural wells are not infrequently found to contain raw sewage, and the most prevalent rural water source - the local stream - is the site of bathing, washing of clothes, and watering of domestic stock.

\*A body's length away from an animal makes the water safe to drink.\*

\*After having been used by an undertaker (*benyè*), even a few drops of water are highly toxic and can be used as a most deadly poison.\*

WEANING The willing consumption of food from the family cooking-pot (*gwo manje*) is considered the essential factor in deciding when a child should be weaned. Teething, walking, and the ability to say one or two words are also important factors.

Often accomplished by applying to the mother's breasts the extremely bitter jelly-like substance found in the leaves of the local aloe (*lalwa*), thus quite effectively repelling the child from the breast.

Can occur abruptly if another pregnancy is recognized: \*the milk must be reserved for the fetus.\*

**WESTERN MEDICINE** Just as organized Christianity was absent from Haiti for over half a century after Independence, Western medicine was also absent.

Both Mulattoes and freed slaves had been forbidden to serve as Western-type physicians, and the White French physicians had been forced to flee. Thus traditional medicine, like Voodoo, came to play an even greater role than during colonial times - and, like Voodoo, became firmly rooted in Haitian mores.

Private Western-type doctors, as well as foreign-operated mission hospitals, are highly regarded. (But see STATUS.)

See also **MEDICAL EDUCATION (WESTERN-STYLE)**.

**WHEELCHAIR** For many, a public announcement that one is seriously ill. To be avoided if possible.

**WHOOPIING COUGH** \*Fears the color red\* - thus a U.S. penny is attached to a red cord and worn around the neck, and predominantly red clothes are worn. Beet juice and a roasted mouse are considered additional cures.

*WI* Beware of the "*Wi, dòk*" ("Yes, doc") syndrome which many overly humble patients instinctively adopt in the belief that this is necessary to receive proper medical care, and as an unconscious reaction to the strangeness of the Western medical setting. Suggestibility is a frequent characteristic.

A ploy to test the “*Wi, dòk*” syndrome is the use of ridiculous statements such as: “You’ve been dead for six months, haven’t you?”

*Wi* does not necessarily mean anything in Haitian. However it can mean: 1) I don’t know - and don’t want to admit it; 2) I don’t understand - and don’t want to admit it; 3) I hear you - but I will not necessarily do it; 4) You want me to say yes. Also one often hears the physician proceeding in such Frenchified “Creole” that the patient does not have the slightest idea as to what is being said, but (s)he will continue to answer obediently “*Wi, dòk.*”

WOMB The “wandering womb” belief: \*the uterus moves about the body after childbirth in search of the newly born infant. Symptoms are weakness and confusion, to be remedied by gentle massaging (normally by the midwife) of the uterus until it returns to its proper place.\*

WORMS So ubiquitous among the rural population as to be considered by many as simply a fact of life.

\*Everyone is born with a *manman vè* (mother worm, very large worm), and if this worm dies, you die. Some worms hurt you, but other worms nourish you.\*

\*Caused initially by mother’s milk, especially if the child is not weaned early enough. Some of the most harmful are due to spontaneous generation within the stomach, and then make their way to the heart.\*

\*Occur in children from eating too many sweets.\* (Cf. the similar belief in Western society that sweets cause worms in dogs.)

\*Their presence indicated by grinding of the teeth, by crying out or jerking in one’s sleep, or by sleep-walking.\*

\*Anti-worm remedies are far more effective if taken when the moon is on the wane.\*

WOUNDS \*To treat a wound filled with pus, pack with sugar - just as fruit is preserved with sugar.\*

YAWNING Interpreted as a sign of hunger, not of fatigue or boredom.

YAWS \*Transmitted by insect stings, and thus cured only by the “sting” of a hypodermic needle.\*

ZOMBIS Most believe in the existence of the “living dead,” human beings reduced to the state of automatons mindlessly toiling away at the will of their master, an unconscious caricature of the condition of a slave. A recent book by a Harvard ethnobotanist (Wade Davis, *The Serpent and the Rainbow*, 1985) explains how persons are reduced to a coma-like state by chemical means (tetrodotoxin), are believed dead, are buried, and then secretly dug up by those who administered the poison. In the process, their minds are impaired, turning them into robots.

Considered a fate far worse than death, sometimes a form of community punishment. One preventive sometimes used is simply to poison the cadaver. There is even a recorded case of a father decapitating his already dead son.

Explicit recognition of zombification is even made in the Haitian Penal Code, Article 246, which equates this practice with murder.

Someone eminently successful is said to have a zombi secretly working for him. A neighbor’s far more productive field may convince some either that a powerful spell has been created by a Voodoo priest(ess), or that a team of

zombis is brought out in the dead of night for special tilling and watering.

Supposedly the dreaded *tonton makout* wore dark glasses to give the impression that they were dead-eyed zombis, incapable of human emotions or pity, entirely at the will of a ruthless master - and thus all the more to be feared.

\*An effective anti-zombification ploy is to throw grains of rice into the casket. The deceased will then be so busy counting the grains that (s)he will not respond to the *bòkò*'s call to rise.\*

## APPENDIX: 100 HAITIAN PROVERBS ON HEALTH AND SICKNESS

Proverbs are one of the most revealing barometers of a given society, and all the more so in a largely illiterate one. Haiti's innumerable axioms constitute a basis for much of its discourse, as well as expressing its accepted wisdom. The following is a sampling of some which concern health and sickness, though many certainly have other meanings as well which go far beyond.

### AGING

**Fanm se kajou: plis li vye, plis li bon.** - Woman is like mahogany: the older the better.

**Yo fè pi bon wout ak yon vye baton.** - The going's better with an old walking cane.

**Bouch granmoun santi, men sa ki ladann se rezon.** - The oldster's mouth smells, but out of it comes reason.

**Cheve blan pa vle di vye.** - White hair doesn't mean old.

**Kò timoun rèd, san l pa di; kò granmoun di, san l pa rèd.** - The young person's body is tough, without being hard; the old person's body is hard, without being tough.

**Zo granmoun se lakre.** - The old person's bones are chalk.

**Pitit se baton vyeyès granmoun.** - The child is the old person's walking cane.

**Gwo espwa pa pou vye granmoun.** - Big hopes are not for old people.

### BIRTHING

**Pito dlo a tonbe, kalbas la rete.** - Better that the water falls and that the gourd remains. (*Better to lose the baby than the mother.*)

**Kolik pa tranche.** - Menstrual pains are not labor pains.

**Ze ki kale twò bonè, ti poul la p ap viv.** - If the egg hatches too soon, the little chick will not live.

**Nou pa mande pitit sanble papa l, nou mande erez kouch.** -  
We don't ask that the child look like its father, but just for  
a successful delivery.

## DEATH

**Chak lè blese, dènye a touye.** - Each hour wounds, the last  
one kills.

**Ou pa mare pye lanmò.** - You don't tie up the feet of death.

**Ou ka di konben ou genyen, men ou pa ka di konben ou rete.**  
- You can say how much you have, but you can't say how  
much you have left. (*You know how long you have lived,  
but you don't know how long you have to live.*)

**Ou wè jodi a, ou pa konn denmen.** - You see today, you don't  
know about tomorrow.

**Yon moun pa janm mouri anvan lè l.** - A person never dies  
before his time.

**Moun fèt pou mouri.** - Man is born to die.

**Lanmò manke ou, men li pa bliye ou.** - Death misses you, but  
it doesn't forget you.

**Simityè pa janm refize vyann.** - The cemetery never refuses  
flesh. (*Don't live too dangerously.*)

**Lavi se kòd sapat: ou pa ka konte sou li.** - Life is a sandal  
strap: you can't count on it.

**Lanmò granpapa yon moun, se kout tafya yon lòt.** - The death  
of one person's grandfather is a strong drink for someone  
else. (*One person's death is another's shot in the arm.*)

**Ou mouri, ou mouri pou je ou.** - When you die, you die alone.

**Vanyan pa mouri vanyan.** - The courageous do not die  
courageously.

**Se pa tout blesi ki geri.** - Not all wounds heal.

**Lè ou kontre yon zo sou chemen, konnen li te gen chè sou  
li.** - When you encounter a bone on the road, know that once  
it had flesh on it.

**Kriye pa leve lanmò.** - Crying doesn't raise the dead.

## DIET

**Sak vid pa kanpe.** - An empty bag doesn't stand up. (*No work gets done on an empty stomach.*)

**Sa ki pa touye ou, li angrese ou.** - Whatever doesn't kill you, fattens you.

**Manje ou plis renmen, se li menm ki va trangle ou.** - The food you like the most is the very one which will strangle you.

**Si ou manje bouji, fòk ou kaka mèch.** - If you eat candles, you have to excrete wicks. (*Whatever goes in comes out. Whatever goes around comes around.*)

## EYES

**Pito ou wè lwen, ou pa avèg.** - Better to be far-sighted than to be blind.

**Nan mitan avèg, bòy se wa.** - Among the blind, the one-eyed is king.

**Ti bwa ou pa wè, se li ki pete je ou.** - The little twig you don't see is the one that puts your eye out.

**Pi bon gad kò, se je.** - The best bodyguard is the eyes.

## FORBEARANCE

**Lavi pi fò pase lanmò.** - Life is stronger than death.

**Byen mal pa lanmò.** - Very sick is not dead.

**Maleng pa janm santi pou mèt li.** - Infected sores never smell to their owner.

**Tete pa janm twò lou pou mèt li.** - Breasts are never too heavy for their owner.

**Grenn kochon pa janm twò lou pou li.** - A pig's testicles are never too heavy for him.

**Nanpwen kavalye ki pa janm tonbe.** - There is no horseback rider who has never fallen. (*Accidents happen to us all.*)

**Gwo chen tonbe, ti chen tonbe.** - Big dogs fall, little dogs fall. (*Large or small, we all get sick.*)

**Sila ki gen tout manm li, bèl anpil.** - The one who has all his limbs is handsome indeed.

**Lè ou malere, tout bagay sanble ou.** - When you are unhappy, everything resembles you. (*When you are down, everything else seems to be down. Subjectivity.*)

**Lapenn pa dire santan.** - Pain doesn't last a hundred years.

## HEALTH

**Lasante se pi gwo richès.** - Health is the greatest wealth.

**Gwo bounda pa di lasante.** - A large rear end does not necessarily mean health. (*Healthy looks can be deceptive.*)

## HEALTH PRECAUTIONS

**Se mèt kò ki veye kò.** - It's the owner of the body who looks out for the body.

**Atansyon pa kapon.** - Caution is not cowardice.

**Marengwen danse, men li pa bliye janm li.** - The mosquito dances, but he doesn't forget about his legs.

**Lantèman brav pase devan kay kapon.** - The brave person's funeral procession passes by in front of the coward's house. (*The coward outlives the brave.*)

## HUNGER

**Grangou dimanch pi rèd.** - Hunger on Sundays is worse. (*Hunger is all the harder to bear when others are feasting.*)

**Depi yon moun grangou, li soud.** - As soon as a person is hungry, he is deaf. (*Hunger has no ears.*)

## ILLNESS

**Maladi vin sou chwal, li tounen sou bourik.** - Sickness arrives by horse, and goes away by donkey.

**Maladi pa konn bon.** - Sickness does not recognize the good.  
(*Sickness spares neither the good nor the bad.*)  
**Chik pa janm respekte pye gwo mouche.** - Chiggers never  
respect even big shots' feet. (*Sickness spares no one.*)  
**Malè pa gen klaksonn.** - Misfortune has no horn.  
**Ti kou ti kou fè mo.** - Many little hits make a hurt.  
**Maladi ranje doktè.** - Sickness makes business for doctors.

## MEDICATION

**Bondye pa janm bay pitit Li penn san sekou.** - God never  
gives His children pain without help.  
**Gwo maladi mande gwo renmèd.** - Serious sickness requires  
serious medicine.  
**Fòk ou pase maladi pou ou konn renmèd.** - You have to have  
thrown off sickness to know its remedy.  
**Plenn nan kè pa renmèd kò.** - Sorrowing in the heart is no  
remedy for the body.  
**Bonè se pi bon doktè nan lemonn.** - Contentment is the world's  
best doctor.  
**Bouche nen ou pou bwè dlo santi.** - Hold your nose to take  
stinking water.  
**Pa antre nan batay san baton.** - Don't go into battle without  
a stick. (*Inoculation; condoms.*)  
**Rete trankil se renmèd pou kò.** - Staying calm is medicine  
for the body.

## PAIN

**Wòch nan dlo pa konnen doulè wòch nan solèy.** - The rock  
in the water cannot know the pain of the rock in the sun.  
**Sa ki pa janm soufri, pa konn doulè lòt.** - He who has never  
suffered does not know the pain of another.  
**Bay kou bliye, pote mak sonje.** - He who gives the blow forgets,  
he who bears the scar remembers.

**Pito lakwa al kay zanmi, li pa al lakay ou.** - Better that the cross goes to the friend's house, and that it not go to your house. (*Better it happen to someone else than to you.*)

**De zòm mouye nan lapli, gen youn ki pi mal.** - Two men get wet in the rain - one gets it worse. (*Misfortune strikes each person differently.*)

**Lavwa pòv yo, se tankou yon klòch an bwa.** - The voice of the poor is like a wooden bell.

## PEDIATRICS

**Lè ou pa gen manman, ou tete grann.** - When you don't have a mother, you nurse from a grandmother. (*You make do with what there is.*)

**Timoun ki byen tete byen kenbe.** - Babies who nurse well do well.

**Pitit ki kriye, se li ki bezwen tete.** - The baby who cries is the one who needs to nurse. (*It's the squeaking wheel that gets the oil.*)

**Pi piti toujou pi rèd.** - The smallest is always the toughest.

**Yon pitit ka gen anpil papa, li ka gen yon sèl manman.** - A child can have many fathers, it can have only one mother.

**Odè manman sèlman, se yon medikaman.** - The mere scent of a mother is medicine.

**Pitit mouri nan men manman l, nanpwen repwòch.** - There is no blame when a child dies in its mother's arms.

## QUACKERY

**Kabrit kaka pilil, li di li se doktè.** - The goat excretes pills and says he's a doctor.

**Chat ap fè longan gri: li konprann li se doktè.** - The cat produces gray ointment and is convinced he's a doctor.

## RECUPERATION

**Kò se zèb: I a pouse ankò.** - The body is like the grasses: it will grow again.

**Avèk pasyans ou ap wè lonbrit founi.** - With patience you'll see the ant's navel. (*With patience, all is possible.*)

**Twò prese pa fè jou louvri.** - Being too much in a hurry doesn't hasten the dawn. (*Recovery takes time.*)

**Bondye di ou: "Fè pa ou, M a fè pa M."** - God says to you: "You do your part, I'll do Mine."

**Se pa tout medsen ki geri malad yo.** - It's not every doctor who cures his patients.

**Lespwa fè viv.** - Hope gives life.

## SELF-TREATMENT

**Doktè pa janm trete tèt li.** - A doctor never treats himself. (*One can never be self-sufficient.*)

**Oungan pa janm geri maleng li.** - A Voodoo priest never cures his own infected sore.

**Kouto pa ka grate manch li.** - A knife cannot scratch its handle.

## SEXUALITY

**Chak fanm fèt ak yon kawo tè nan mitan janm li.** - Each woman is born with rich farming land between her legs.

**Founi pa janm mouri anba sak sik.** - An ant never dies under a sack of sugar. (*Even the smallest woman can have intercourse with the largest man.*)

**Gason konn bouke, men pa fanm.** - Man eventually gets tired, but woman never. (*Woman's insatiability.*)

## SURVIVAL

**Depi tèt pa koupe, ou espere mete chapo.** - As long as the head is not cut off, you hope to put on a hat. (*When there's life there's hope.*)

**Nanpwè tonbe ki pa leve.** - There's no falling without getting up again.

**Pito ou lèd ou la.** - Better ugly, but alive.

**Lapriyè se renmèd pòv malerez.** - Prayer is the poor woman's remedy.

## TEETH

**Dan pouri gen fòs sou bannann mi.** - Rotten teeth have strength against ripe plantains. (*Even bad teeth are useful.*)

**Dan ou genyen, se ak li ou manje.** - The teeth you have are the ones you eat with.