

VOODOO 1: MAGIC

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GUMSHO
ZOOM!



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GUMSHOE ZOOM: INTRODUCTION

Not everything can support a game of its own, or even a big sourcebook. For those things, we present the GUMSHOE Zoom, a sort of supplement focused on a key game mechanic and its possible applications. In general, Zooms are interesting potential hacks, or intriguing adaptations of the main rules. Some apply to one specific topic or sub-sub-genre. Others cross all manner of GUMSHOE turf; you can slot them in and adapt them to tales of Cthulhuoid investigation, mean superpowered streets, or alien colonies alike.

Zooms are experimental. That does mean that they haven't been playtested, necessarily. (If something in here is really really broken – and it's not, as this ain't our first rodeo – we'll fix it in post.) But that also means we encourage you to experiment with them. Changing the cost, or prerequisites, or point effect, or other mechanical parameters of a given Zoom changes how often it shows up and how much drama it drives. The dials are in your hands.

Zooms will change the focus of your play if you use them. Putting a mechanic on the table puts it into your game. Adding a Zoom means more actions, possibly even more scenes, using those rules. Since the Zoom mechanics are intended to encourage specific actions or flavors, to force a card in your storytelling hand, they aren't "balanced" against "normal" actions or rules. In general, if you don't want to see more of it, don't Zoom in on it.

Zooms are optional rules. You can and should ignore them if you don't want them, or change them at will. After all, if a given Zoom turns out to be crucial to an upcoming GUMSHOE game, we'll change it to fit that specific genre or form of storytelling.

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INTRODUCTION

"IT WAS VOODOO, APPARENTLY, BUT VOODOO OF A MORE TERRIBLE SORT THAN THEY HAD EVER KNOWN; AND SOME OF THEIR WOMEN AND CHILDREN HAD DISAPPEARED SINCE THE MALEVOLENT TOM-TOM HAD BEGUN ITS INCESSANT BEATING FAR WITHIN THE BLACK HAUNTED WOODS WHERE NO DWELLER VENTURED."

— H.P. LOVECRAFT, "THE CALL OF CTHULHU"

This GUMSHOE Zoom models *voodoo*, not Vodou. "Voodoo" is a handy (if problematic) term for a magical system, in broad aspects common to a wide variety of Afro-Caribbean cultures from Brazil to New Orleans. Vodou (which has also been spelled Vudu, Vodou, Vodun, Vodoun, Voudun, Vaudou, and Vaudoux) is a Haitian religion, one of a wide variety of Afro-Caribbean religions practiced from Brazil to New Orleans. You begin to see the problem.

Vodou also provides a framework for other beliefs, habits, practices, legends, and superstitions. Any living religion nurtures a mythos made up of these "external" ideas. In addition to the Christian doctrines of the Trinity and salvation, for example, there are numerous Christian stories of miraculous statues, visions, guardian angels, lucky charms (like crossing your fingers), life-saving prayers, and faith-driven magic. It should be obvious that such a "folk mythos" is not restricted somehow to "primitive" people. The whole complex

of Afro-Caribbean religion covers five centuries and three continents. Like Christianity, it has "good guys" and "bad guys," magicians and heroines, legends of persecution and a tradition of secret societies.

However, just as someone who only knew about Merlin, *The Exorcist*, *The Da Vinci Code*, and the Book of Revelation might get a seriously distorted image of even folk-Christianity, most people outside the Caribbean have a seriously warped view of voodoo. And an even more warped view of Vodou.

VODOU

Vodou is built on the foundation of the Yoruba religion, which had

made itself the primary faith in West Africa during the 15th century much as the Greek pagan religion had in the Mediterranean 2000 years earlier. The word comes from *vodun*, roughly meaning "spiritual energy" in the language of the Fon people of Benin. The warring African kingdoms of Arada, Oyo, and Dahomey sold their captives, rebels, and criminals (including, of course, sorcerers and witches) to Europeans as slave labor for Caribbean plantations.

When Africans arrived in the islands, they had to reconstruct their religions without clergy, written scriptures, continuity of tradition, or support. Instead, their masters forced the African religions into hiding and

DISCLAIMER

As you may have noticed, the topic of voodoo -- and Afro-Caribbean magic and religion in general -- is hugely complex. Even in two issues, there isn't space to provide a full-fledged anthropological examination of every concept in this Zoom, or even to provide the equivalent terms, spelling variants, and exceptions across a dozen religions and fifty countries for the concepts we do examine. (Brazil alone features literally scores of magico-religious traditions tied to various native tribes, enslaved nations, and Portuguese superstitions.) Each individual Afro-Caribbean religion is just as diverse and factionalized as every other earthly religion, to boot. The few samples provided, the Sources section, and Google will have to do the rest.

Hoodoo, or American conjure magic, is its own topic entirely, with no connection to voodoo besides its common African roots. For lots of great hoodoo material, see Cat Yronwode's website luckymojo.com. Some -- not all -- of the magic here will translate.

Finally, of course, no offense is meant to any practitioner of any religion mentioned in this Zoom. Vodou and its kindred religions are triumphant examples of spirit and humanity defeating the most horrific and harrowing circumstances imaginable. Please treat them with respect while borrowing their way cool magic system for your game.

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instructed the slaves in Christianity, specifically Roman Catholicism. The Catholic panoply of saints meshed well with (and camouflaged) the Yoruban tradition of the orisha, divine and semi-divine spirits who carried out the Creator's work in the world. Escaped slaves, or maroons, living in the interior of the larger islands and Brazil further blended these faiths with those of the native Amerind remnants.

Over the centuries of slavery and persecution, new religions grew from this mixture. Early Vodou cults likely formed by the early 17th century: African *cabildos* or national congregations are attested in Cuba by 1598, and *candomblés* in Brazil by about that time. A new source of slaves, the Kongo kingdom beset by civil war in the late 16th century, provided still more cults such as the Palo and Makaya in Cuba. By 1700, recognizable forms or precursors of **Vodou** (in Haiti), **Santería** and **Regla de Palo** (in Cuba), **Candomblé** (in Brazil), **Winti** (in Suriname), and **Shango** (in Trinidad, Barbados, and Grenada) almost certainly existed.

In 1724, Dahomey conquered Arada, then fell to Oyo 25 years later. European sugar planters imported hundreds of thousands of slaves (this time primarily rebels and warriors) from both kingdoms, reinforcing the fundamental structure of Vodou and its confreres while badly undermining their own power. Rebel Vodou and other believers began actively using voodoo magic (and a wide range of local poisons) against Europeans in Jamaica, Cuba, Haiti, and Brazil. In Haiti, Vodou congregations used voodoo magic in open rebellion against France – and won their independence in 1793, triggering a flood of Haitian whites (and their remaining slaves

– and voodoo) to Santo Domingo, the surrounding islands, and New Orleans.

New religions grew up around these new populations: **Quimbois** (in Martinique and Guadeloupe), **Regla de Arará** (in Cuba), **21 Divisiones** and **Gagá** (in Santo Domingo, now the Dominican Republic), all practiced by the early 19th century. Older cults formalized as independence and abolition removed some of the pressure on local faiths. Evangelical Protestantism (initially from American slaves freed by the British in 1781-1815) entered the mix, along with table-rapping Spiritualism. The first sparked **Kumina** in eastern Jamaica in the 1830s and “Shouter” Baptism in Trinidad; the second greatly influenced Candomblé, Santería, and **Myal** (in Jamaica). As **Espiritismo** it became its own religion in Puerto Rico, while in Brazil Kardecist Spiritualism converted numerous socially striving Candombléros to the new religion of **Umbanda**, founded at a séance in 1908. The **Sanse** faith in Puerto Rico began in the 1920s or 1930s as a similar spiritualist cult spread from Haiti via the Dominican Republic.

Even then, however, the local elites loudly proclaimed their devout Christianity and conducted “anti-superstition campaigns.” The anti-government and anti-colonial attitudes of Vodou and other faiths’ priests didn’t help: occupying U.S. Marines were officially tasked (among other things) with suppressing Vodou (and voodoo) in Haiti from 1915-1934. Colonial-era laws prohibiting Vodou and other non-Christian religions remained on the books. Umbanda, in Brazil, was the major exception, and was still considered very much *déclassé* by urban elites.

Only with the rise of elite anti-colonial consciousness in the 1960s and 1970s have these religions slowly become accepted faiths in their own lands. Over the same period, Santería, Vodou, and other congregations in North America and Europe have emerged from the shadows of the immigrant communities where they have practiced for generations. Now, of course, most of these religions also have “puritan” or “reformist” factions or denominations like Quimbanda (which began in Brazil around 1910) variously dedicated to removing European, Christian, or non-African influences from their inextricably syncretic faiths.

THE VODOU VIEW

The Afro-Caribbean religions share a number of beliefs in common, first and foremost the belief in a Supreme Being, the Creator, usually identified with the Christian God. God, however, is remote and busy. His emanations or servants, a pantheon of demigods, semi-deities, and similar great spirits, do His will and watch over humanity. Each religion names them differently: the *Lwa* or *Loa* (Vodou), *Orishas* (Santería), *Orixás* (Candomblé), *Kimpungulu* (Palo), *Inquices* (Kumina), *Winti* (Winti), *Misterios* (21 Divisiones), and so forth. This Zoom borrows the Haitian generic term *Invisibles* to refer to these entities.

The end result is something resembling polytheism, under a unified monotheistic field. The *Invisibles* fulfill all the important duties that gods do; they are worshipped, invoked, placated, sworn by, and mythologized. Despite all this, the *Invisibles* are not gods. Worthy dead humans, such as the

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ancestors of important families, can eventually become Invisibles, given enough worshippers and time. Even the mighty orisha Shango was once merely a Yoruba king. This connection to the human gives the Invisibles a healthy (or unhealthy) interest in human affairs. They are gossiping aunts and uncles, not forbidding, remote figures on a mountaintop.

Most importantly, the Invisibles possess their worshippers during religious ceremonies. The Invisible enters the congregant's head and provides advice and aid material and spiritual, along with religious epiphany and somatic excitement. When not "riding" their "horse" (*chwal* in Vodou, *caballo* in Santería) the Invisibles dwell among us, usually "grounded" in sticks (the eponymous *palo* of Palo), stones (the "sweating stones" or *pierre-loa* of Vodou), pots such as the Vodou *govi* or the Palo *nganga*, or stones (*otanes*) in pots (*sopera*) as in Santería. In Vodou, the Loa travel to earth along the *poteau-mitan*, the pillar in the center of every *hounfor*, or temple; in Santería, the Orisha sit on a throne and watch the ceremonies closely. This traffic between the spiritual and the material infuses every aspect of Afro-Caribbean belief, including the magic of voodoo.

If a snake bites a man and he dies, it does not merely mean that he was unlucky or foolish. He was cursed by a *bokor* (a practitioner of malign voodoo magic), or offended the snake loa Damballah-Wedo, or was made unlucky or foolish by a spirit attack or some other supernatural means. The snake itself might be a *baka* or *dupiah* (Haitian and Jamaican terms, respectively, for a being with both a physical and a magical essence), or have been a purely supernatural manifestation.

To find out which, or to keep it from happening, the prudent believer consults his local priest, variously called a *houngan* (Vodou), *santero* or *oloricha* (Santería), *scientist* (Myl), *kenbwazé* (Quimbois), *bonuman* (Winti), *chefe* (Umbanda), et al. Or priestess: many African religions had female leaders, and Afro-Caribbean religions do likewise. Vodou has *mambos*, Santería *mamalawos*, Shango its queens, and Candomblé its *mae-de-santos* or *ialorixá*, for instance. That priest or priestess will pray, consult, and provide practical advice. And then, usually, he or she will work some voodoo.

VOODOO

In most cases, this Zoom treats Haitian Vodou and the Haitian version of voodoo as the "default." It's the best known in the West, and the one most likely to be invoked (if occasionally in ungainly or downright racist form) in GUMSHOE games' source fiction and film. Spelling likewise attempts to take the most common or familiar form, such as the use of "loa" instead of the correct Kreyol spelling "lwa" and "bokor" instead of "boko" or "bocor." This Zoom also simplifies and codifies voodoo in the name of fun and evocative gaming. If anthropology (or more usually, one or two anthropologists) disputes the result, that's why.

THE MAGIC ABILITY

Magic is a General ability. It refreshes at the end of the adventure. It can also be refreshed once per session, after four hours spent safely inside a hounfor or other shrine to one's patron Invisible, or after a (non-threatening) Vodou or other religious ceremony.

To avoid (further) confusion with the religion, in this Zoom we'll use the Magic ability to represent skill and power in voodoo magical practice. If your game has more than one kind of magic, it's up to you to decide whether they all draw from the same "mana pool" and skill set, or whether they are at least as different as Chemistry and Biology or Intimidation and Interrogation.

NAMES OF MAGIC

If you want a different word than "voodoo" for the ability, you can use *Maji* or *Senp*, which are Haitian Creole for "magic," or *Konesans* (or *Connaissance*), which actually does mean "magical knowledge" to a Haitian houngan or bokor. If your game is set in Brazil, *Macumba* is the general term for magical practice, while *Brujería* is "witchcraft" in Cuba but your ability name runs the risk of being mistaken for the Mexican folk-magic art.

The only other generic term for Caribbean magic is *Obeah*, which comes from the Akan *obayie*, meaning "witchcraft." The word commonly appears in former British colonies, which imported slaves from Britain's colony in the Akan coast. In many of those countries – which were primarily Protestant, and thus had no handy saints to attach – obeah magic has almost no connection to higher Invisibles. In St. Lucia, for example, Kele is a rite involving possession by ancestral spirits; its "thunder stone" axes are called Chango, and the rite involves banishing Akeshew (Eshu), but no other Invisibles appear in St. Lucian obeah. Jamaican obeah has little or no possession-ritual, but does work through ghosts, sperrids, duppies, and so forth.

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BORN UNDER A MOJO SIGN

Not all campaigns will feature characters slowly uncovering the truths of voodoo. In some games, some characters will begin as hounsans or ialorixá, or have attained knowledge of the loa and wanga in a previous occult adventure.

The GUMSHOE default for special abilities such as Magic is as follows: you buy such abilities out of your pool of General ability build points. Buying the *first rating point* in a special ability costs a **premium**: usually 4 or 5 build points for the first rating point. After that, build points for that ability become rating points as normal.

*Jacques wants to get **Connaissance**, which is what his GM calls voodoo Magic in her game. He spends 7 build points, and gets **Connaissance** with a rating of 3. The first rating point costs a **premium** of 5 build points; the next two each cost 1 build point.*

For voodoo Magic, you cannot buy your starting ability rating higher than 5. You must either increase your abilities during the game with Potential points or convince the GM to give you free points because your character conception is so amazingly great and will help the game so very much. This latter will be excellent practice for bargaining with the Invisibles.

The GM may always refuse to allow players to buy Magic abilities at the start. NPCs may, of course, begin with whatever Magic rating the GM feels necessary.

SUPER-VOODOO

GMs running **Mutant City Blues** with a voodoo component will likely want to model voodoo with superpowers. Cure Disease, Detect Influence, Enter Dreams, Fire Immunity, Induce Fear, Induce Mental Disorder, Observe Dreams, Possession, Suppress Influence, and the various Communication and Command powers seem most genre-harmonious. If voodoo is supernatural instead of the “flavor” or self-delusion of a mutant, though, feel free to add this system to the game as you would any other.

VOODOO POTENTIAL

Voodoo Magic uses potential points, a rules system initially introduced in **Rough Magicks**.

Some abilities are more abstruse, difficult, or complex than others, enough so that they can't simply be bought “from scratch” during character improvement. They require a prerequisite: teaching by a master,

learning from an ancient text, or some other specific in-game experience. That prerequisite experience conveys “potential points” in the ability; when the character spends build points from experience on that ability, she can only do so up to her “potential.”

After being ridden by Legba in an underground ceremony in Tampa (1 Magic potential point), Jay finds himself obsessed with the new world

of the spirit he encountered. He doses himself with mint, angelica, and five-finger grass and sleeps overnight in a cemetery at the crossroads (1 Magic potential point), and obsessively studies the bokor's confiscated diary (1 Magic potential point) for a total Magic potential of 3. Jay gets 2 build points per adventure; after two adventures, he can raise his Magic ability rating to 3. He can't spend that last build point on voodoo until he figures out another way to increase his Magic potential – it might be time to find out if the local hounsan is willing to take on an apprentice.

In the voodoo tradition, Magic potential points can come from a number of experiences:

Being ridden by an Invisible: If this is the character's first time being ridden, she may take 1 Magic potential point. After the first time, it's up to the GM whether the occupying loa is “leaking” any knowledge. By and large, voodoo tradition holds that nobody can work magic without being ridden, implying that this must be the first Magic potential point acquired.

Correlating existing knowledge: A character who buys her Occult, Outdoor Survival, Botany, or Pharmacy (or equivalent abilities) to 3 or higher may also spend another experience point to take 1 Magic potential point *once*.

Research: Although by and large voodoo places less emphasis on written spells than other magical traditions, grimoires can sometimes be power-items. (Usually regardless of their actual content – the fact of being a “magic book” gives them their power.) Bokors or hounsans

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VOODOO AND CTHULHU MYTHOS MAGIC

Voodoo spells, by and large, cost more and are harder to cast than the roughly equivalent Mythos spells in *Trail of Cthulhu*. This is for two reasons: the hyperscientific arts of the Mythos are better at manipulating unseen forces than corrupt human magics are; also, voodoo spells feature a lot of modifiers that, with some planning and suitable color, bring the numbers down to parity – the Invisibles (the “weak gods of Earth”? The Iloigor?) helping human spell-casters over the rim of reality. Helping.

Voodoo spells cannot banish, control, command, or otherwise affect Mythos entities unless the Keeper explicitly decides they can: for instance, if voodoo is Mythos magic after all. Possible exceptions might include dimensional shamblers, star vampires, ghouls, rat-things, masqut, or Hounds of Tindalos.

On a similar note, a Purist game uses one Magic ability for both voodoo and Mythos magic because voodoo, like all human occult arts, is misunderstood Mythos science. If voodoo is Mythos magic, voodoo spellcasting automatically causes a 5-point Stability test (one per caster per spellcasting scene) *in addition to* the Magic test to cast the spell.

A Pulp campaign can reserve Magic for Mythos spellcasting and keep Voodoo as its own ability.

VAMPIRIC VOODOO

As a default, vampires in *Night’s Black Agents* may either use Aberrance or Magic to fuel voodoo spells, which cost them only 1 to 3 points. They do not have to make a Difficulty test aside from any resistance roll by the PCs.



The Caribbean hosts a number of local vampire legends, which blend African and European lore. Jumbies (in Jamaica and other obeah islands) resemble murony (*Night’s Black Agents*, p. 152), borrowing the voices of children and the skins of animals or old women. The soucyoyant is the Trinidadian version of this creature.

As spirits, these vampires can be compelled with voodoo; they resist using Aberrance.



A bokor who bargains with Ghede or Baron Cimetiere for eternal life in exchange for eternal blood makes a fine voodoo vampire. The loogaroo (only the name is connected with the French *loup-garou*, or werewolf) of Haiti and Grenada is a living witch (usually an old woman) who bargained with a dark spirit for the ability to shed her skin and turns into a glowing jumbie.



In Niven and Barnes’ novel *California Voodoo Game*, the Orisha are actually extraterrestrial intelligences trapped in Earth’s energy field. Such beings have to replenish their life-force somehow ...



In *The Serpent and the Rainbow*, ethnobotanist Wade Davis controversially ties zombie magic to specific powdered blends of plants and venoms native to Haiti. Could such voodoo herbalism – carried out by French alchemists or offshore CIA experimenters -- have created the vampires?

might keep spell-diaries like Western witches, and lots of lore lies buried in anthropological archives. The GM might allow a diary or other spell book to convey 1 Magic potential point, or a heavy spend (2-3 points and several weeks of game-time) of Research, Anthropology, or Library Use might provide 1 point per major archive.

Fieldwork: Similarly, if the characters spend a few weeks in the islands and 2 Oral History points, they can gather reports of magic

lore (and 1-2 Magic potential points) from elderly or gossipy practitioners. Like most magicians, voodooists love talking shop in between warnings about how secret their arts are.

Pilgrimage: Like all religions, Vodou has its sacred sites where the loa indwell most powerfully. Visiting such a site might yield anything from 1 potential point (for a *bayé* or spirit-crossroads) to 3 points for the crater of Mont Pelée or some other powerful spot. These points only accrue on the *first* visit.

Defeat or bargain with a spirit:

Powerful spirits have magical knowledge; some are willing to teach it for horrible service. Others must give it up when defeated or bottled. Invisibles may demand services (some of them potentially horrible), and cannot be defeated. Either way, anything from 1 to 3 Magic potential points might be at stake.

Initiation as a priest: This almost always requires more commitment and time than most PCs are willing to spend, although in cinematic

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games it can occur rapidly. Slow and realistic or fast and dramatic, initiation as a houngan grants 2 Magic potential points. It also obligates the character (now called a *hounsi kanzo*) to obey the houngan and heed the loa. If the character doesn't have one yet, she must select a "patron" Invisible: a *mat tet* (Vodou) or *ori* (Santería). Characters native to the islands may also select a "family" Invisible, in Haiti the *loa rasin*. This may be an ancestral spirit rather than one of the main Invisibles.

Initiation into a secret society: Depending on how loose the GM is playing things, this might be easier than becoming a full-fledged hounsi kanzo. In Haitian legend, wandering troops of *zobops* (cannibalistic sorcerers) try to recruit the weak to join them. *Connected Cover (Night's Black Agents*, p. 28) provides another possibility, as does *Forgery* (with an Occult spend) of a "sect rouge" *passport* or magical membership card. Initiation grants at least 1 Magic potential point, and staying in is the easiest and fastest way to get more. Secret societies range from the relatively innocent Abakua

leopard society in Cuba, Shango societies in Trinidad, and the Great Goddess cult of Ogboni in Brazil to the feared *bizango* of Haiti: Sanpwel (who might be werewolves), Couchon Rouge, Calinda, Vlinbindingue, Galipote, Makandal (gifted poisoners), and Mazanxa.

VOODOO MECHANICS

"PERHAPS IT WILL COST YOU MORE THAN YOU ARE WILLING TO PAY, PERHAPS THINGS WILL BE REQUIRED OF YOU THAT YOU CANNOT STAND."

— HAITIAN DOCTOR TO ZORA NEALE HURSTON, QUOTED IN *TELL MY HORSE*

Casting a *bilongo* (Santería), *masango* (Palo), *fix* (Obeah), *pwen* or *travail* (Vodou) – a spell, in other words – has four stages:

- involve an Invisible by meeting its **preconditions**
- make a Magic ability test against the spell's **Difficulty**
- spend Magic pool points (at least equaling the spell's Cost) to build up the spell's **Power**
- if necessary and possible, the target **resists**

PRECONDITIONS

All voodoo magic works by manipulating spiritual energy. Houngans and bokors must attract the attention of a spirit to use its energy: usually, either an Invisible or a lesser spirit such as a *loa acheté* ("bought loa"), *loa travail* ("working loa"), *point-chaud* ("hot point"), or *punto* (Sanse). Some voodooists – far from all of them – use ghosts (*egun* in Vodou, Santería, and Candomble; *nfuri* in Palo), either free-range or bound.



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Magicians attract spirits with three things:

- The spirit's **image**. This may be an idol, a saints' card, or its sigil. That sigil (a *veve* in Vodou) might be drawn on the wall like a pentacle, sprinkled onto the ground using meal, or embroidered onto a *drapeau* ("flag"). Images might take any form; Darth Vader action figures represent Ghede on many a contemporary Vodou altar.
- **Sounds**, especially chants, songs, and drumming, the louder the better. Specialized instruments such as the metal *otan* (struck with a stick) and especially the snake-bone rattle of Vodou, the *asson*, call loudest of all.
- **Food**, usually rum and fruit or candy, but some spirits like grain or meat. Some spirits like perfumes, cigar or gunpowder smoke, or other scents. The worst spirits like blood.

If any of these three elements are missing, the spell is at +2 Difficulty for each one absent. If any of these three elements are substandard – a quickly sketched *veve*, a subvocalized invocation or recorded song, poor quality or insufficient food – the spell is at +1 Difficulty for each inferior element.

Most casters keep their lesser spirits bound into rocks, bottles, or fetishes; getting the attention of a bound spirit is much easier. Dripping a bit of rum into the bottle, shaking it to rattle, and softly calling its name suffices to avoid penalties.

Enchanted items (see p. 11) are pre-preconditioned during their enchantment; when activated they never suffer penalties for lack of preconditions.

DIFFICULTY

A spell's Difficulty increases based on the severity of the interaction requested between the spirit and the material world. See the *Voodoo Spell Table* on p. 10.

For spell effects not on the table, interpolate Difficulty and Cost based on the values given.

If you fail the Magic roll, it's because one of the Invisibles prevented your magic from working. The GM is free to add that complication to the story.

POWER

Each spell has a minimum Power, called its Cost. This must be paid for the spell to work at all. Over that Cost, the spell's effectiveness depends on the total Power put into it: for each 1 spell Power, healing spells restore 1 Health point, dangerous reveries degrade 1 Stability point, strength spells add 1 Athletics point, and so forth. See the specific spell notes on p. 10 for details.

GMs who prefer more flavor can call this trait Aché or Ashé, the term in Vodou or Santería respectively for spiritual force or energy. Translating it as "mana" isn't ridiculously wrong.

RESISTANCE

Often, the spell's target can resist its influence – almost always, when the target is a PC, as it turns out. Resistance contests should almost always be quick, one-roll contests; save full contests for climactic scenes and major foes with lots of points to burn.

The standard PC resistance to a spell is a Stability test against a Difficulty equal to the spell's Power. This may vary: disease spells test Health, scrying spells test Surveillance or Stealth, etc.

LESSER SPIRITS

Lesser spirits have either a Magic (if they know and can cast spells) or an Aché ability rating. In either case, they can do anything a ghost can traditionally do by spending 1 or 2 points depending on the scale of their action; the GM is free to define further special spirit powers along the lines of *Mutant City Blues* or *Night's Black Agents* powers.

All spirits can possess anything mundane – a tree, an animal, a rock, a glass of Coke – by spending 1 point. They can possess a willing human for free. To possess an unwilling human has a Cost of 4, but spirits can spend more points to boost the possession Power; humans resist (see p. 9) at a Difficulty equal to the total Power spent.

They give the possessed a bonus to Scuffling and Health equal to half their Magic or Aché rating.

Monsters and spirits resist using Aberrance, Magic, Aché, or other relevant abilities.

Important NPCs resist a spell's Power using their Health, Athletics, or other applicable abilities.

Other NPCs fall victim to the sorcery if its Power equals or exceeds 4, or if it sets up a lurid scene or advances the plot.

If the spell only activates if the target does something specific – meet a gaze, cross a path, step in dust, go to a location where a wanga is hidden, etc. – the spell's Difficulty goes down (usually by -2) but the resistance roll

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changes. PCs get an additional roll against Sense Trouble to spot the danger; for NPCs, if the spell's Power equals or exceeds 4 plus the target's Alertness Bonus, it takes effect.

Anyone with Magic can spend it on the resistance test or tests, regardless of the ability being tested.

SPELL NOTES

Some spells cost 1 or more *rating points* of Magic, over and above their regular Cost. Such spells indicate the rating cost in parentheses.

The abilities in brackets refer to one possible accelerant for voodoo provided under *Dialing it Up* (p. 15).

Affect Human Emotions: Outside combat, such spells usually last until actively dispelled. In combat, they last a number of rounds equal to the margin by which the resistance roll failed. Willing targets do not resist. [suitable Interpersonal ability]

Affect Self: The base Cost of any spell affecting the self must be paid per

VOODOO SPELL TABLE

Spell	Difficulty	Cost
communicate with Invisible find mundane object affect self (e.g., berserk rage, extra Athletics, briefly fireproof) spy on others	3	2
divination find specific object affect human emotions (e.g., love spell, summoning, berserk rage, intervene in legal matters, silence on a topic, brief mesmerism) enter dreams or reveries luck protection remove curse enchant item cure disease curse with bad luck banish monster	5	3
find treasure release prisoner send into trance curse with nightmares dangerous reveries heal wounds bottle spirit	7	4
create zombie; bottle soul; mind exchange; curse with accident or disease; shape shift	9	5
death curse	11	5
raise the dead with their soul intact (dead person returns at Health 4)	13	dead person's full Stability or Health rating (whichever is higher)

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round or (if not a combat spell) paid at triple Cost to last out the scene. This spell is never resisted.

Banish Monster: The spell's Power must exceed the higher of the monster's Aberrance, Athletics, or current Health pool. Once the monster is defeated in combat, the Difficulty of a banishment spell drops by -2. [Intimidation]

Bottle Soul (2): This steals and bottles the "small soul" (*eleda* in Santería; *ti bon ange* in Vodou) of a human victim. (The "big soul" operates the body and becomes a ghost after death instead of going to heaven or Guinée.) Power must exceed the target human's Health or Stability *pool* plus their Magic *rating* if any. If the caster can arrange somehow to catch the victim's breath or shadow (Filch or Sneak test), spell Difficulty drops by -2. Sometimes, people worried about magical attacks bottle their own soul and hide it from enemies; all Difficulty and Power requirements are halved in such a case.

Bottle Spirit (1): Power must exceed the spirit's Magic or Aché pool (see box, p. 9). The spirit is imprisoned in a bottle or other breakable item. If broken, it is freed.

Communicate with Invisible: Cost is free in *hounfor* or at Invisible's shrine. Invisibles do not resist communication; communicants cannot resist Invisible possession. [Theology]

Create Zombie (2): Power must exceed the target human's Stability *rating* plus their Magic *rating* if any. Target must be at Health -10 or lower, or dead. Zombies fall to dust if they taste salt; bokors usually bind their jaws shut against such an eventuality. [Pharmacy]

Cure, Heal: Restore 1 Health per 1 point of Power. Cure disease spells that do not heal more than half the lost Health only last a number of days equal to the spell's Power. Then the underlying condition returns. [Medicine, Diagnosis]

Curse: This might be the *maljok* (evil eye) or just a standard curse (*epe*, in Santería). A curse of bad luck can change any die roll made by the target a number of times equal to the margin by which the resistance roll failed. Other curses damage Health or Stability as appropriate; they begin the first night after casting. A curse on a building "attacks" the first person to sleep in it after being cast, but is resisted at -2 Difficulty. [Intimidation]

Death Curse (1): If the Power of this *envoi mort* exceeds the higher of the target's Health or Stability rating, plus his Magic rating if any, the target drops to Health -10. The Difficulty of this *expedition* drops by -2 if the death curse instead drains 1 rating point of Health per night, down to -10. [Pharmacy]

Divination: One of the most common magical practices in all Afro-Caribbean religion. Traditionally uses cowrie shells or the *gembo* pendulum, but cards, sticks, etc. have become more common. At a minimum, each point of Power spent allows one yes-no question. It's up to the GM how much of the future to reveal or how specific to make the reading aside from that. [Interrogation]

Dreams, Nightmares, and Reveries: Much of the life of the Invisibles happens in the spirit world, which humans see while asleep, drunk, or in a reverie. Houngans enter dreams to communicate with (or terrify) sleepers; the Invisibles do the same

thing to favored humans. Dangerous reveries introduce monsters, twist memories toward horror, or otherwise create a waking nightmare. Both dangerous reveries and nightmares cost the target Stability; any excess Power points reduce her Health. Any of these spells makes an excellent full contest set-piece, as caster and target duel within and reshape the dream or vision. Add +2 to the Difficulty of resistance rolls if the target is already sleeping, drunk, drugged, or idly dozing.

Enchant Item (1+): Primarily cast on magical items such as the *kisange* (a human tibia used in Palo Mayombe necromancy), this spell lowers the Difficulty of any spell cast with the enchanted item by 1 per Magic *rating point* spent on the enchantment. The total Cost of an enchanted item sets an upper limit on the spell Power it can be used to cast: a *kisange* enchanted with 5 Magic pool points and 2 Magic rating points can lower Difficulty by -2 for spells with Power 7 or lower. [relevant Art or Craft]

Luck: This spell can only be cast for 3 Power. For the rest of the session, the caster can change any die roll (up or down) in a scene she is present in. She may change it by 1 three times, by 3 once, or by 2 once and 1 once. [Gambling 8+]

Protection: Provides protection against one specific danger: fire, bullets, snakebite, knives, magic, etc. A Power 4 protection spell against bullets, for example, prevents 4 points of Health damage from gunplay. Once its Power is spent, the spell ends. This spell requires a *wanga* (see p. 14), which must be carried or worn by the target. This spell can protect a house, at triple Cost; the *wanga* must be buried under the threshold.

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Raise Dead (1+): Caster must spend 1 Magic rating point for each 1 rating point of Stability brought back. The target's Stability is permanently capped at that level. Random NPCs cost 4 Magic rating points to resurrect at "full soul capacity"; Sources of Stability or other key NPCs cost 6-8. Characters resurrected at only 1 Stability can never spend Interpersonal ability points.

Release Prisoner: Releases the target from the local jail or equivalent. Tougher prisons require more Power; this spell doesn't work on, say, the Couchon Gris' torture basement. [Cop Talk]

Remove Curse: Power must equal original curse's Power. Divination, or a 2-point spend of Magic while examining the curse's wanga, can determine the correct amount. Baths and washes are the normal method of curse removal.

Send to Trance: Allows use of Hypnosis or similar abilities. In combat, cast at +4 Difficulty, lasts for half its Power in rounds. Entranced targets resist dreams, reveries, and soul theft at +2 Difficulty. [Hypnosis 8+]

Shape Shift: Changes the caster's shape to that of a local animal or bird. The caster keeps all his abilities the same, but cannot cast spells. This spell lasts a number of hours equal to its Power, or ends at cock-crow, whichever comes first. [Disguise 8+]

VOODOO DIFFICULTY MODIFIERS

Consult the table and interpolate anything else that seems appropriate. Once players learn they can construct their own magic rituals, they tend to come up with all manner of evocative, creepy, and flavorful ideas.

VOODOO SPELL DIFFICULTY MODIFIER TABLE

Circumstance or Element	Difficulty Modifier
Cast in battle or other distracting setting	+4
Missing precondition for spirit (image, sound, food)	+2
Substandard precondition for spirit	+1
Cast in a graveyard, crossroads, or similarly magical space	-1
Cast in a hounfor, terreiro, or similar temple or magical laboratory	-2
Each day spent casting the spell (max 3)	-1
Image of target (photograph, scrying image in water)	-1
Sympathetic connection to target (hair, clothing)	-1
Strongly sympathetic connection to target (blood, semen, body parts)	-2
Human connection to target (child, spouse)	-2
Target must trigger spell by specific action (see p. 14)	-2
Target currently possessed by the spirit caster is invoking for the spell	-4
Enchanted item	(see p. 11)

SYMPATHETIC MAGIC

The best-known example of voodoo magic is the so-called "voodoo doll," an image or doll representing a target. With the target's hair or clothing sewn to it, the doll transmits the pain of a

needle stabbed into it to the person it represents. This specific magical technique likely came to Haiti with the French colonizers: it appears almost identically (as wax image magic) in Agrippa's 16th century treatise *De Occulta Philosophia*.

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However, the sympathetic theory behind the voodoo doll is very much part of voodoo, as it is of much folk magic. Items, especially hair or blood, connected with the target of a spell help connect the magic to the intended victim. This “law of contagion” is a shortcut, lowering the spell’s Difficulty.

The target cannot provide her own sympathetic connection: you don’t get a lowered Difficulty for the target’s body being present at an attempted curse!

Where two similar modifiers apply (e.g., both hair and blood of the target) use the largest.

Sympathetic magic also covers the “law of similarity.” Items similar to or symbolic of the spell’s action amplify it: to keep a wound bleeding, leave the knife that made it under running water. This increases the spell’s Power.

VOODOO POWER MODIFIERS

As with the Difficulty modifiers, consult the table and interpolate other factors that seem appropriate. As always, the GM speaks for the Invisibles to decide what is actually magically efficacious (or just way cool as a story element) and what is just crocked.

SACRIFICES

Called *ebbó* in Santería, the most common method of boosting the power of a voodoo spell is to sacrifice an animal. This must be done ritually: shooting a cow and claiming it as a “sacrifice” accomplishes nothing except angering the rancher *and* Baron Cemetière. In some traditions,

VOODOO SPELL POWER MODIFIER TABLE

Circumstance or Element	Difficulty Modifier
Truly superior precondition (beautiful image, superb drumming, lavish feast)	+1; +2 with spend of relevant Art ability
Cast during religious drum-and-dance ceremony (max +6 additional Power from ceremony)	+1 per hour
+1 per 12 congregants	+1
Sacrifice	+2 per 5 Health
Human sacrifice (initiated bokor necromancers only)	+6 per 5 Health
Element favored by the Invisible invoked to cast the spell	+1 to +3
Efficacious ingredient: graveyard dirt, thunderstone, omeira elixir, etc. (max 5)	+1
Symbolic representation of the spell (red cord, dead rat)	+1
Strongly symbolic representation of spell (obsidian knife left under running water, dirty hypodermic)	+3
Per 40 yrs of use of the casting space or main magical implements used in casting	+1
Per additional initiated caster assisting and spending Cost of spell	+2

the celebrants can eat the meat after it has been sacrificed, but circumstances seem to vary from town to town and decade to decade. At the very least, dining on the *ebbó* can open up the eater to whatever magical backlash the spell produces – you wouldn’t want to eat a goat sacrificed to infect someone with yellow fever!

Ebbó provide +2 to the Power of a spell for every 5 Health points sacrificed. In the Caribbean, especially in the 1930s, people live in grinding poverty and near starvation. So-called heroes who slaughter whole villages’ worth of milk or eggs for selfish magics will earn resentment and possibly a visit from the Makandal poisoners in return.

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Bokors initiated into specific necromantic traditions gain triple the normal Power from killing *cabrit sans cor*, “the goat without horns.” In other words, human sacrifice. No decent houngan would ever countenance such atrocities. Characters who commit human sacrifice make an immediate 10-point Stability test.

BORROWING MAGIC

If you’ve fallen a little short of the Power you need, fear not. You can always borrow some from the spirits!

If the caster has a bottle-spirit, he can borrow all but 1 of its Magic or Aché

pool points. The Invisibles and other *loa-bosal* (“wild loa”) have to be coaxed into lending with specific promises, bribes, and possibly with Interpersonal spends. There is no real ceiling on the amount of Magic an Invisible could grant, but in practice, they don’t grant more than twice the caster’s current Magic rating.

Borrowed Magic points add to the spell’s Power.

Once in debt to a spirit, the caster has to do whatever the spirit wants in exchange. Canny hougans get the price up front; sloppy or desperate casters must perform one task per

borrowed point of Magic. Bottle spirits, baka, and other cruel ones want blood, or self-destructive acts. Invisibles want “favors to be named later” or perhaps a team of human trouble-shooters to help their servitors in the next town over fight off monsters, zobops, or local government officials.

Debtors who refuse the spirit’s instructions are automatically cursed in whatever way the spirit wishes. Lingering and painful illnesses, runs of bad luck, and murderous bouts of possession are most common. The Power of such a curse is limited to the amount of Magic borrowed by the target. No one can resist any spell cast by a spirit he owes Magic to.

WANGA

A wanga is the general Haitian voodoo term for a charmed item. The word often has negative connotations, but in this Zoom it just means anything containing a specific spell. Also called a *pacquet* (Vodou), *macuto* (Santería), *nkisi* (Kumina or Palo), *kenbwa* (Quimbois), *gris-gris* (Haiti and New Orleans), fetish, hand, or *juju* (Obeah), a wanga is most often assembled from a wide variety of items such as bones, rocks, flowers, a sketched veve, and so forth. In Palo and Quimbois, sticks are always part of the wanga. Usually tied with magically significant knots or wrapped in a colored cloth or bag, the wanga holds a cast spell in check.

A spell in a wanga activates when the wearer or holder wants it to, when the caster wants it to, or on a predetermined condition. A *garde corps* (*resguardo* in Santería) wanga of protection against bullets activates, for instance, if the wearer is shot.

Assembling a wanga requires not only the normal rolls to cast the

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spell it contains, but also a spend of Art, Craft, or Occult. This spend does not add to the spell's Power, it powers the "seal" that keeps the wanga intact.

Disassembling or studying a wanga without triggering it requires a Magic test at a Difficulty equal to the wanga's Power. At the GM's discretion, characters can spend Filch, Sense Trouble, or Explosives or Demolitions on this test of magical manipulation and dexterity!

MULTIPLE CASTERS

Each additional initiated caster adds +2 to the spell's Power.

She must succeed at the Difficulty of casting the spell and spend the Cost of the spell in Magic pool points.

For truly enormous voodoo rituals like the 1791 Bois-Caïman gathering that triggered the Haitian Revolution, the GM is free to add any amount desired.

DISPELLING SPELLS

The caster of the spell can always dispel it for free, unless the Invisible or other spirit used to cast it prefers to keep it going.

To dispel another voodooist's spell, the houngan must find any wanga "anchoring" it. This can be done with divination, Evidence Collection spends, straight-up investigation, or a test of Conceal, depending on the specific circumstances. Destroying the wanga may be as simple as tossing it in the fire, or it may require a full purification ritual testing the houngan's Magic against the spell's Power. In direct circumstances, it may require the intervention of the Invisibles. A 1-point Occult or Magic spend usually tells the houngan which it is this time.

Spells without wanga can be dispelled with a Difficulty 4 test of Magic, but only after the exact nature of the spell is uncovered investigatively or by divination. Such spells cannot be dispelled during combat or during other spell casting.

CUSTOMIZING VOODOO

The Zoom mechanics above are designed to fit conceptually into the "standard game space" of GUMSHOE: capable characters, with action modeled on common storytelling conventions. But an individual GM may want to blow up or (comparatively) de-emphasize the role of voodoo in her game. This section helps her customize the rules to fit exactly the kind of story she wants to tell.

DIALS

These options change the Zoom mechanics. The GM may want to tinker with these dials until the flavor fits the table as a whole, as well as her notions of genre and drama. Use as many or as few of these dials as you wish for your preferred, specific flavor.

DIALING IT UP

The following changes make voodoo **more powerful**, prevalent, or prominent in the game. A full-fledged Caribbean occult warfare game might wind up using all of them! In some games, the GM might restrict these dials to houngans with ratings of 8+ in Magic. Each additional 6 (or 4) points in the ability activates one more dial.

- Once a character has 1 Magic potential point, Occult (or the equivalent ability) at 3+

automatically grants 1 more free Magic potential point.

- A caster can spend Occult on the initial Difficulty test for any spell as if it were Magic.
- Casters can borrow up to 3 Magic points from the spirits to add to the Difficulty roll.
- Voodoo does not demarcate the spiritual and physical worlds as strictly as other arts do: some Investigative abilities [in brackets] aid in magic. If you have that ability for the given spell, the Difficulty is 1 lower; if you spend 1 point of that ability (max 2), that counts for +1 to the spell's Power.
- Spells using wanga have +1 Power for each 1 point in the caster's Occult rating.
- Enchanted items both lower the Difficulty *and* increase the Power of spells cast with their aid. Power increases by +1 per Magic rating point spent to enchant the item.
- Casters can add up to +5 Power from an Invisible's favored elements.
- Maximum Power gained from drum-and-dance ceremonies increases to +9, or higher.
- Once laid, a curse can be renewed without a roll every Saturday; points spent to "recharge" a curse count double for its new Power.
- The Power of a death curse must only exceed the higher of the target's Health or Stability *pool*, plus her Magic rating if any, to take effect.
- It only costs 1 Magic rating point to create a zombie.
- Spells can only be dispelled on Sunday, with or without wanga.

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- Magic points spent on the ability test add to the spell's Power. This is a huge bonus for voodoo casters, and will lessen the flavor of assembling magical tools and bargaining with the loa, so the GM should be absolutely sure she wants to pull this trigger beforehand.

DIALING IT DOWN

These changes, by contrast, make voodoo **less powerful**, or less useful for players. They don't make it worthless – if you don't want voodoo in the game, don't use this Zoom at all! – but they do raise the cost of dealing with the loa.

Once you've chosen which dials to use, the GM might remove one of them for a houngan with a rating of 8+ in Magic. Each additional 6 (or 4) points in the ability removes one more dial.

- Casting a protection spell costs 1 Magic rating point.
- The basic Cost of a spell doesn't add to its Power: for example, to get a Power 9 curse with accident, the bokor must spend 14 Magic pool points.
- No spell can be cast in combat – or, worse, in under an hour – without a wanga.
- Sympathetic magic only provides bonuses if the houngan spends a point of Occult during the casting.
- Possession by an Invisible can be resisted with a Difficulty 9 Stability test. (This might also be considered “dialing it up,” depending on your exact game flavor.)
- A caster must spend Magic points for the spell's Power before rolling for success. If she fails, the spell

rebounds on her at full Power. She can resist like any other spell target, but she's already spent so much Magic already ...

SOURCES

These sources skim the surface of what's available on this topic. Nevertheless, I found them inspiring in some fashion.

FICTION

Early fiction about voodoo misrepresents it as horrible, savage magic. Although they're all great yarns, “Hills of the Dead,” “The Dead Remember,” “Black God's Hunger,” and “Black Canaan” by Robert E. Howard can make discomfiting reading today. Likewise *Strange Conflict*, by Dennis Wheatley, in which vile Haitian bokors team up with Hitler and Satan to attack British convoys during WWII. Even well into the postwar era, pulp novels like *Dark Ways to Death* by Peter Saxon continued to revel in lurid borderline racism.

Robert E. Howard's contemporary, the pulp writer Hugh B. Cave, by contrast, spent many years in Haiti and wrote scary voodoo novels that don't caricature the people or their religion. The easiest to find are later titles like *Legion of the Dead*, *The Lower Deep*, *The Evil*, and *The Restless Dead*. Cave's short stories from the pulp era are rousing tales but predate his time in Haiti.

In the last 30 years or so, the model has sometimes only shifted as far as exoticism, but the research has definitely improved. The best among the modern voodoo novels are Tim Powers' *On Stranger Tides* (adding voodoo to the career of Blackbeard), *Count Zero* by William Gibson

(presenting the loa as AIs or vice versa), the science fictional zombie novel *Green Eyes* by Lucius Shepard, and the rollicking dimension-sailing tale *Chase the Morning* by Michael Scott Rohan.

More respectful still to Caribbean culture are the urban fantasy *Brown Girl in the Ring* by Nalo Hopkinson, the haunted house tale *The Good House* by Tananarive Due, and the weird magical realist novel *Mockingbird* by Sean Stewart.

NONFICTION

The first batch of academics to investigate voodoo still walked behind the dedicated anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston, who recounted her own experiences in 1930s Haiti and Jamaica in *Tell My Horse*. The Haitian scholar Milo Rigaud wrote a sketchy but useful study in 1951 called *Secrets of Voodoo*; Alfred Mettraux' more comprehensive *Voodoo in Haiti* and Maya Deren's *Divine Horsemen* (both published in 1953) are still two of the best, most accessible works on Vodou.

Roger Bastide's *African Religions of Brazil* and Harold Courlander's ethnomusical study of Vodou, *The Drum and the Hoe*, followed soon thereafter, but both can be harder going. More recently, Migene Gonzalez-Whippler has written a number of popular books on Santería; I mostly used her *Santería: the Religion* as the most comprehensive. *Voodoo: Search for the Spirit* by Laënnec Hurbon is compact and pretty for those looking for a brief primer; *Creole Religions of the Caribbean*, edited by Margarite Fernandez Olmos and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert, is staunchly academic but still very useful with a wide scope.