ANTH 162: Non-Western Worlds: Caribbean “Others”  
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Film Notes: To Serve the Gods (A film by Karen Kramer) (Filmed in Southern Haiti)

Words in italics and bold are *Kreyol* words. Words in bold are **key concepts**.

The *vodun* services presented in this film are part of a week long *cycle of ceremonies* sponsored by a family once in a generation (every 20-30 years). The participants are members of the *extended family* of the Guins, along with their friends and neighbors.

What is important to realize is that any one ceremony in the cycle honoring a particular *loa* would be comparable to the ceremony for *Papa Legba* in the novel, and therefore representative of a typical vodun worship service.

Note the following as you watch the video:

- The land, the ancestors, the living, and the gods (*loa* and other deities) are united.
- The *loa* reside at specific places on the family land. They are inherited through the generations, just as is the land. It is the obligation and birthright of the family members to keep the *loa* content through appropriate service and offerings. The *loa* must be honored with food, drink, music and dance.
- This also points to the importance of the ancestors and their role in everyday life.
- The ceremonies are led by the hounkan.
- The cycle begins on Tuesday with an invocation (a *yanvalou* or slow dance) to encourage the family *loa* to come and guide them through the service. Water is poured to cool the anger of the gods. Food is placed in a hole in the ground, and coffee, the drink of hospitality is offered. As the supplicants pray, a low whistle is heard, signaling the arrival of the *loa* through the possession (mounting) of one of the family members. The god is asked to bring good fortune to the services to follow.
- Wednesday is the ceremony of *Papa Legba* (The Keeper of the Gates and the Master of the Crossroads). Legba must be serviced first so that he will open the gates for the other *loa* to enter. Note that one of Legba's icons is a cross; his *vévé* also contains a crutch, because he is an old man. A red chicken (Legba's favorite color) is prepared for to be offered to him. Legba eventually mounts a woman and speaks to the group. The ceremony for Legba ends. One can tell which god is present by the characteristics of the possession. The possessions are not theatrical performances, but real altered states of consciousness.
- On succeeding days other *loa* are served. A goat is sacrificed for *Mundong*, a pig for *Amin*, a turkey for *Gran Bois*, and sweet, sugary foods for *Erzulie*. Each *loa* has its distinct likes and dislikes, and it is important for the family to satisfy their wants.
- On another evening, the *Petro* spirits are served with strong drink, fire and erotic dance. The *Petro* are the younger, newer gods who have arisen in Haiti. They are contrasted with the *Rada* (*Arada*), who came with the slaves from Africa. The *Rada* are more sedate and easier to control.
- The observance of these rites is an important social event for the family and the community. Family members come from near and far to participate in the ceremonies, as they are vital to the future of the family and the health and well-being of its members.
- This can be seen in the social dancing and the fact that all of the food must be prepared and consumed before the next part of the cycle can begin.
- The ceremony concludes with the Ceremony of the Bull which takes three days to complete. The bull (a very expensive undertaking for the family) is offered for all of the *loa* and the dead ancestors.

- Note the role of the *Pere Savanne* (*Prêt Savanne*) in these services. He is the lay priest, representing the *Catholic* elements of *vodun*, since an ordained priest would not
take part in these activities. He is a tall man who wears glasses and read prayers in Latin and French from the Catholic liturgy. The dual participation of the houngan and the Pere Savanne makes apparent the dual origins of the vodun belief system. Note also the references to Saints, Angels, The Holy Father, and the houngan’s appeal to the assembled to repeat the Hail Mary and Our Holy Father.

- As the ceremony nears its climax, a man becomes possessed and mounts the bull. Note also the reverence which the people exhibit toward the bull – now a sacred object.
- The houngan dispatches the bull with a thrust of a stiletto and the people begin to sing a call and response hymn (European influence).
- Monday, ceremonies over the head of the bull are performed. Again, the Pere Savanne offers prayers in French and Latin (compare this with the role of Aristomène at the funeral for Manuel in the novel).
- The final event of the cycle is a feast, at which the food prepared for the Ceremony of the Bull is consumed.

As a final reminder, remember that this lengthy and costly cycle of ceremonies is sponsored only once in a generation by a family. Of course, other families in the area might also hold similar ceremonies in other years. Also, remember that the service for any one of the loa would be comparable to a regular vodun worship service.