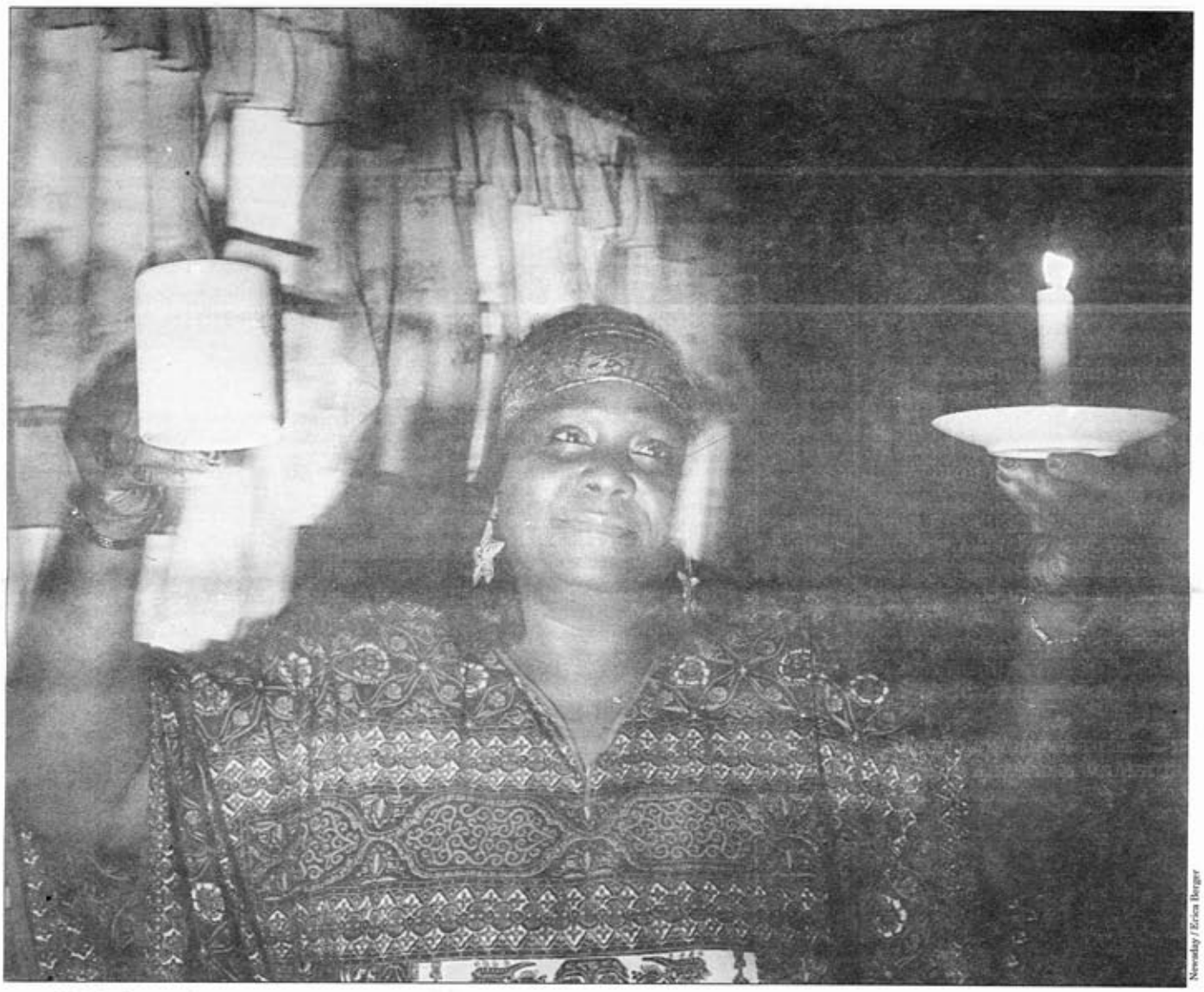
Part 2



Newsday / Erica Berger

Serving The Spirits

A PORTRAIT OF A VODOU PRIESTESS

Pages 44-45

Portrait of

By Karen Kramer

THE ceremonial objects have been laid out on a white cloth on a table near the altar. There are bottles of perfume for the goddess Erzulie and a bottle of rum for the spirit Ogoun. A white egg nestled in white flour and held by a ceramic snake sits to one side. Many other bottles, food offerings and sacred objects have been lovingly assembled; flowers and candles are everywhere. On the floor is a delicate geometric design painstakingly drawn with yellow cornmeal.

It's vodou — not voodoo — and it has nothing to do with sticking pins in dolls. In her home in East Flatbush, So Ann Augustin practices an old religion in the new world.

Off to one side of the room are three sweaty drummers who have been working hard all night playing nonstop polyrhythmic music. In between the drummers and the ceremonial table are about 50 people, dressed mostly in white and with white or red kerchiefs tied around their heads, who have been singing, dancing, praying and calling to the spirits for several hours. One woman in particular, Annette (So Ann) Augustin, is singing and praying louder than most. A whirlwind of vitality and energy, she is the one giving the ceremony, the one to whom falls the responsibility of pleasing the spirits. The scene could be taking place in Africa or the Caribbean, but it is occurring — as it does every year — in the basement of a small house in Brooklyn.

"I'm a Vodou-ist," says So Ann, a 46-year-old practitioner living in East Flatbush. "I've got the Vodou spirits in me. Every single year I give a party for the spirits, because they're helping me. They're helping people. Ever since I was born I saw my family do this. They used to do the same thing I do now."

So Ann was only 7 years old and living in Haiti, she says, when she first became possessed by one of the spirits. "When my mother saw this she was shocked," says this sturdily built woman who speaks in a deep, husky voice. "In Haiti when people first get the spirits, they are older than me. Twenty, twenty one. And my mother couldn't believe it, because the spirit who was talking through me was the same way *her* father's spirit used to talk about things twenty years before. Since that day, I started helping people."

It is not known how many of the approximately 300,000 Haitians living in New York practice Vodou. In addition to the Haitians, there are large numbers of Dominicans, Puerto Ricans, Brazilians, Trinidadians and other immigrants from the Caribbean who practice similar African-based religions.

Vodou — or "voodoo" as it has usually been spelled — has often been maligned, portrayed as sticking pins in dolls or putting curses on people. In reality, however, it is a complex religion based upon a pantheon of deities, ancestor worship and elaborate ceremonies and rites. The term "voodoo" is derived from the word *"vu-Du"* (from the language of the Fon people of Dahomey, now Benin, in West Africa). It means simply "spirit" or "family of spirits." People are said to serve the spirits or to practice Vodou.

Just as in the pantheon of the early Greeks and Romans, there are several major deities in Vodou. Each of these deities or spirits has its own personality, its own likes and dislikes, its special function.

For example, Ogoun is a warrior who likes fire and the color red. Damballah represents wisdom and fertility and is symbolized by a serpent. His colors are white and green, and his season — as would be expected — is springtime. Erzulie is a female spirit who represents

Newsday Photos / Erica Berger

Annette (So Ann) Augustin of East Flatbush throws water on her floor and lights a candle every day to talk to God and to her spirits.

a Priestess

A corner of a Manhattan home provides a niche for an altar. Vodou is based upon a pantheon of deities, ancestor worship and elaborate ceremonies and has a Supreme Being for which the individual spirits act as intermediaries.

love and beauty but also a strong power.

In the theology of Vodou there is a Supreme Being or Great Master, called *Gran' Mait,'* for which the individual spirits act as intermediaries. While Vodou practitioners serve all the spirits, they may have a particular spirit that watches over them more than the rest.

"You must serve all the spirits or they get jealous," says So Ann, who changed her name from Annette to sound more African. "I love all the spirits, but I got a special thing for Erzulie Dantor. She's my good friend. She's powerful."

Whether it's in New York or Haiti, serving the spirits can be as simple as lighting a daily candle or as elaborate as giving a major ceremony, and it's an obligation that *serviteurs* do not take lightly.

"Every day I talk to my spirits," So Ann says in slightly broken English. "I call God, and I call the spirits. I light my candle and throw some water. Like you brush your teeth every day, you can light a candle every day. You throw a little water on the floor every day. That's the way you're talking to your God."

Besides the daily candle lighting and libations, each spirit requires special individual rites throughout the week, and throughout the year. Wednesday is Ogoun's day, so every Wednesday So Ann will say a special prayer for him and wear something red in his honor. Mid-March, the time of the spring solstice and St. Patrick's Day, belongs to Damballah, and So Ann will put out a white egg nestled in white flour for Damballah to symbolically "eat."

Many Vodou-ists give or attend several ceremonies throughout the year — a specific ceremony for a specific spirit — but So Ann prefers to give one large one each July to which all the spirits are invited. It's an obligation that requires an enormous amount of time, work and money.

"You buy a lot of things," she says. "You're giving a party for all of the spirits. If you want to make Ogoun happy, you buy Barbancourt rum and you kill a chicken and you make a good rice and beans and you deposit it in bowls on the floor. For Damballah you buy a big fish and some white rice. For Azacca it's a dish called *chaka* made from beans and corn. You also buy avocado.

"And then you must buy all their favorite drinks. For Guede you must put a hot pepper in a bottle of gin. It's important for all Haitians to do something here in New York, or to have someone in Haiti do it for them."

ALTHOUGH So Ann has not been formally initiated as a *mambo*, the highest level of Vodou priestess, she says she is able to act as a diviner or card reader because of special gifts she has received from the spirits. Friday is the day she usually sets aside for seeing clients, but there is a steady stream of people arriving at her two-family home throughout the week.

"Because many of the friends I had in Haiti came to New York too, I help them," she says. "If they come to me with a problem, I tell them to go buy a candle and take a cup of water and throw that water three times and talk to the spirits. Then by the dream that he or she has I will know exactly what kind of thing to tell them to do afterward."

By laying out ordinary playing cards on a kitchen table So Ann, like many other Haitian women who provide the same services, says she can tell many things about a person's life; problems with a spouse, health worries, job opportunities. But, she says, "If I can't do something, I have to say to the person to go to someone else. We charge people [usually around $20 for a reading], because we have to buy things to do the work. When you have a good spirit in you, you can't think about money. If a person has a sickness and they don't have money, I have to try to cure them anyway, because that's the way."

No one knows for certain how the false image of sticking pins in dolls became associated with Vodou, but many scholars believe that Hollywood helped propagate this myth. What is true, however, is that vodou-ists have been persecuted through history — originally by the early slave masters and more recently through negative and sensationalistic images in the media. For those reasons, many practitioners have preferred to remain underground.

Still, for many Haitians living in New York, serving the spirits helps greatly in their lives. Jean C., a cab driver from upper Manhattan, wouldn't even think of working in his taxi without the spirits' protection. "Living in New York you have all kinds of negative things around you," he says. "So when I get into the car I say a prayer to the spirits and ask them for guidance and for help with the day. And I know that they're protecting me at all times in my cab."

Marie L., a 35-year-old woman living in Queens says, "Once when I went on a job interview I asked my spirits to come with me and do the talking. And of course, I got the job."

Most practitioners in New York are Catholic or Protestant as well, since earlier in their countries' history their ancestors were forced to take on the dominant religion of the slave holders controlling them.

"Vodou doesn't force itself as the only religion to be practiced," says Dr. Leslie Desmangles, professor of religion at Trinity College in Hartford. "Monotheism tends to be less tolerant, but a pluralistic religion can be more open and accepting of other beliefs." Therefore many Vodou practitioners see no discrepancy in adhering to a Western religion but also serving the spirits of their ancestors. So Ann is philosophical about the need to know the difference.

"The European people made you go to church," she says, "to help you forget what they did to you. They put the Bible in your hand and the European thing in your mind. I can't tell people to go to church or to serve the spirits; you have to choose for yourself. The same thing that the priest does at the church is the same thing that the *houngan* [high-level male priest] or *mambo* does at home."

So Ann's five boys (ages 12 to 28) grew up knowing about both religions, and her youngest is attending a Catholic school in Haiti. But before he goes to school each morning he is sure to light a candle for the spirits. At Vodou ceremonies and through dreams, she says, "the spirits come, they call the boys and talk to them and let them know how to behave. And the boys believe that too. It helps them."

As important to So Ann as her religion is the ever-changing world of Haitian politics. Along with many other Haitians living in the diaspora, So Ann attends countless meetings and demonstrations working toward a democratic Haiti. Their immediate goal is to see exiled President Jean-Bertrand Aristide restored as Haiti's first democratically elected president.

"Aristide is a powerful man. He doesn't serve the spirits, but people are always praying for him, and he prays too. When he was the president I predicted that a coup might happen. I saw that. I said he'd stay out of the country for one or two years and then go back. But if the Americans wanted to, they could put Aristide back in power one, two, three," she says, snapping her fingers.

Vodou and politics have often been inter-related, crossing and connecting many times throughout history. Many historians say it was at a Vodou ceremony in 1791 that a Vodou priest encouraged the slaves to revolt for freedom, thus igniting the Haitian revolution.

Like many others, So Ann feels it is important to continue to serve the spirits of her ancestors whether she's in Haiti or New York.

"Vodou is a powerful thing," she says. "It's a Haitian thing. When you're traveling and you live in another country, you forget about what you've got. You don't have to give it up. With this thing we can have a lot of power. When you forget about your real thing you forget about the person you are." ■

Karen Kramer is a free-lance writer who has produced several independent film documentaries about Vodou.

A shop in Brooklyn, where Vodou practitioners can buy religious objects