



Retrieved from: <http://www.cifas.us/smith/reviews.html>

---

Title: Review. *The Drum and the Hoe*, by Harold Courlander.

Author(s): M.G. Smith

Source: *Social and Economic Studies* 10 (2): 232-233.

*The Drum and the Hoe: Life and Lore of the Haitian People.* By Harold Courlander. University of California Press, 1960. \$10.00.

Courlander's book is an account of the folk culture of the Haitian peasants, and especially of their magico-religious practices, music, games and arts. It summarizes materials gathered over twenty years, some of which have been published before.

The book is a beautiful example of high quality production, with 90 photographs, and the music and words of 186 Haitian songs. Appendices are devoted to the Vodun pantheons, Haitian peasants games, proverbs, orthography, and translations of the songs. There is a glossary of Creole terms, a bibliography and list of recorded Haitian music. It is quite an achievement on the part of the author that his text sustains this elaborate treatment. The book is a delight to handle. It can be read for pleasure and information by general readers as well as specialists.

What Dr. Courlander set out to do was to give a non-technical description of the aesthetic and religious background of Haitian peasant life. He has done so admirably. By an oblique method of accumulating data, he shows the richness and essential dignity of this exotic peasant culture. The circumstances of Haitian history and economy have set limits to the peasant's world. By retaining and developing their traditions which stem from Africa, the peasants have produced a satisfying culture in which aesthetic richness counterbalances material poverty. There are signs that this balance is now beginning to change: but Dr. Courlander is not concerned with the wider problems of Haitian society; his attention is focused on the peasant religion and arts.

As such this book does not claim more than to present an account of the aesthetic and magico-religious aspects of Haitian peasant life. The materials are well organized, the exposition is lucid and illuminating and Dr. Courlander has an excellent prose style. While the presentation is explicitly non-controversial, his data clearly support Professor Herskovits' analysis of Afro-American cultures and of Haitian peasant culture in particular.

After an introductory chapter sketching the outline of Haitian history, Courlander gives a systematic outline of Vodun beliefs and ritual. This is perhaps the most important ethnographic section of the book. Although there have been many previous studies of Haitian Vodun, I know of none quite as clear and economical. Obviously, Courlander's problem was to distil and control his wide experience of this ritual. The acuteness of his observations may be illustrated by his distinction between possession and obsession of Vodun dancers. An Appendix classifies the host of Haitian spirits in their major pantheons, and substantiates Courlander's point that the identities of various spirits may fuse or overlap. It is quite clear that, to the Haitian peasant who follows one pantheon, this is only meaningful in terms of the total assemblage of spirits.

Another distinction of this study is that it points up the numerous linkages between the secular and religious ceremonies, songs and festivals of the Haitian peasant. From one point of view, Vodun is simply the explicitly religious segment of an aesthetic range which also has important secular elements and functions. Of these secular elements, those best documented here are the songs of complaint and ridicule, adulation, and the dance; a large section of the book is devoted to these. Carving, metal work, drum-making and other peasant crafts are also described and illustrated.

This is an excellent introductory account of Haitian peasant culture, especially in its religious and aesthetic elements.

M. G. Smith.