



The *vodou* priest, singer, actor and choreographer Erol Josué is on a mission to dispel the myths and misconceptions about Haiti's musical religion. **Jane Cornwell** reports

Erol Josué knows how to call down and speak to the *lwa* (spirits) that visit the ceremonies he conducts in Haiti and with Haitians around the world. A *houngan* (vodou priest) since his teens, he speaks *langaj*, a liturgical vocabulary of words once spoken in Benin and Congo and by Haiti's Indigenous Taíno. The *lwa*, flattered by *langaj*, are channelled through trance: Erzulie, the goddess of love and beauty; Chango, the blacksmith with the purifying fire; and the psychopomp Papa Gede, the dancing spirit of life and death, the *lwa* with the galaxy in his hips. "Langaj is the secret language of vodou," says Josué, a 21st-century renaissance man who is a singer, songwriter, dancer, actor, lecturer and director general of the National Bureau of Ethnology in Port-au-Prince, Haiti's capital. "It cannot be translated except through rituals and dreams. But as practitioners, we feel it. We use *langaj* in songs, dances [and] incantations to calm or to change a mood."

An African diasporic religion with roots in Benin (formerly Dahomey), vodou (also spelled voodoo) is part of the fabric of Haiti, that spectacular, beleaguered nation sharing the island of Hispaniola with the Dominican Republic. *Langaj* was formerly spoken by maroons, the escaped slaves who fled into remote mountains and formed communities that – during and after the Haitian Revolution of 1791-1804 – were crucial in the fight to abolish slavery, overturn colonialism and establish the world's first Black republic.

"I learned *langaj* as a child from my parents and grandparents, all of them *houngans* and *manbos* [vodou priestesses]," continues Josué, Zooming from a hotel room in Port-au-Prince. He's had to temporarily leave his home due to the recent violent anti-government protests in September, which spilled over into attacks on property and citizens

including, notably, vodou practitioners – who are frequently blamed for the crises that beset Haiti. Josué sprinkles *langaj* across the 18 tracks that make up his second album, *Pelerinaj*: "I'm presenting a way of life using sacred and secular language," he says. "Even though these songs were composed for musicians to play, not for use in rituals, they present spiritual knowledge." A homage to vodou's abiding principles of community, tolerance and sharing, to its affinity with ecology, life cycles and ancestral wisdom, *Pelerinaj* ('Pilgrimage' in Haitian Creole) comes some 15 years after its predecessor, *Regleman* (Mi5 Recordings), a debut album that mirrored the vodou ceremonies that Josué was then conducting inside New York's Haitian community.

Pelerinaj blends sacred chants and traditional rhythms (*dogo*, *noki*, *fla vouden*) with elements of funk, jazz, rock and electronic music. He sings mostly in Haitian Creole as well as French. The album is an ambitious, even epic, work with a reach that spans a lifetime, from Josué's childhood home in Kafou, a sprawling outer suburb of Port-au-Prince, through his journey out of Haiti and two decades spent living between Paris, New York and Miami to his eventual return, to his Caribbean birthplace, first as a traveller undertaking a series of timeworn vodou pilgrimages, then as a proud repatriate.

"The songs on this album were recorded over several years with a range of musicians and producers. But the tracks build on each other so that it feels like one large work," says Josué, whose dramatic golden tenor conjures centuries of history on album opener, 'Badji', a song featuring the vast choir of the National Theatre of Haiti alongside archive samples from the court of the king of Ouidah in Benin (where *vodoun* is an official state religion). The lyrics tell of the secret transmission of knowledge from the Indigenous Taíno to Africans transported to Haiti. "The Taíno used the word *badji* to mean 'high mountains.' I use it to refer to the high spirituality of this country. It is our duty to protect the transmission of the legacy, the *badji* of Haiti."

The Bureau National d'Ethnologie, which Josué has helmed since 2012, strives to do just that. Founded in 1941 by Haitian writer Jacques Roumain and located on Champ de Mars, a noisy crossroads in Port-au-Prince, its remit is to preserve and champion Haitian culture (housing, for example, a huge cache of stolen Taíno artefacts recently returned from the US by the FBI). The culture of vodou is a priority. For despite a peaceable aesthetic that include the notion of *lakou* – broadly, a family-oriented compound with a communal worship area and a *peristil* (shrine) around a sacred *mapou* tree – the religion is couched in negative misconceptions.

Superstition and Hollywood sensationalism carry much of the blame. As does the dictatorial Duvalier dynasty, which exploited vodou practitioners to bolster their rule (1957-1986). As does evangelical Christianity. "Most people who practice vodou in Haiti live in the countryside," explains Josué. "The Catholic church is always trying to convert them. Children are beaten at school if they do not speak French well. I was able to maintain my vodou spiritual life at home ▶



Photos by Verdy Verma

Josué is a vodou priest as well as a musical polymath