



March 2007 Newsletter

Misterios: The Making of a Documentary as a Way of Exploring One's Own Faith

By Giovanni Savino

Misterios is a journey in the complex and mysterious world of Vudu worshipping and spiritual possessions. Guided by the very voice of the “Servidores de Misterio,” we open a door into their faith, their ancient rituals and their supernatural experiences. The “Servidores de Misterios,” “Los Caballos” (the horses) are the priests, the intermediaries between the spirits of the Loas and ordinary people. The spirits descend into their bodies sometimes after being invoked, especially during the intense drumming of a Fiesta de Palos. They are the “Horses” who temporarily carry the spirit in their own body while in a state of trance. They are the people I followed and asked questions to, who permitted me to film the ceremonies and places of worship portrayed in this video.

I was raised by grandparents who didn't have a television (in the early 1960s, in Italy, not everybody had a television) and grew up listening to stories and recollection of their youth in the wild swamps of Maremma (the southernmost part of Tuscany) where malaria was rampant and Polenta (maize meal) was the staple. As a matter of fact, one of the things that has always fascinated me is oral tradition.

In my opinion, oral tradition is a privilege. You either are lucky enough to know the people who know, and they tell you while they are still alive, or you'll never know. One of my greatest desires, since I was a child was to preserve and pass on oral tradition.

Life has brought me, for its own reasons, to work for television, and as the years went by I must say that I grew less and less proud of my career.

I started very young to work for a major American network based in London, England covering major world events like the fall of the Berlin wall, the endless urban conflict in Northern Ireland, the war in Bosnia, the first war in the Persian Gulf. Along the way I became more and more cynical and disillusioned about what I was doing.

The world of Network Television appeared to me, as I progressed in my career, increasingly meaningless, empty and contrived.

I'll try to explain what I mean.

For example, there I was, “covering” unique and historically important events, employing the most sophisticated technology, sparing no expense, risking my own life to “feed” the raw, often powerful footage back to the New York headquarters and when I’d get to see the finished product, to put it in the words of my dearest colleague (a senior cameraman), it “would be fit for an audience of very well educated 12 years olds”

In other words, television as we know it (indeed, increasingly in the last few years), has the financial means to be present whenever and wherever history is in the making and yet is not able or willing (for a number of reasons I won’t examine here) to fulfill its enormous cultural and educational potential, but only spurts out whatever a small-minded corporate (and obviously somewhat politically biased) management considers “fit for broadcast.”

However, working for television over the past 25 years has given me a considerable technical and editorial knowledge, has enabled me to pay my bills, own a small apartment, and most importantly, finance my own short films. And I am very grateful for that.

Most of my films are documentaries about oral tradition. The way I try to shoot and edit I would characterize in one word: unobtrusively. I don’t like to use lights, a big crew, intimidating equipment, not even a “commentary” track explaining what we see but rather let the very people on the screen tell what is going on in their own words.

I don’t get financial help from anybody. Not because I don’t want it, but because I often operate as if in a “mystical rapture.” I immediately start filming and following the subject matter instinctively and impulsively without allocating much time to pre-production and budgeting and even less time to schmoozing and connecting with the “money people”.

Also, unfortunately, being a self-taught [thought] kind of guy, yet an anthropologist and ethno-musicologist at heart, I am not well connected to the academic world either.

Often, in order to explore and film my subjects more intensely, deeply and unobtrusively, I commit to them at a great level, plunging myself, fearlessly, into the most intimate recesses of the subject matter, living for extended periods of time with the protagonists of my film, sharing the same food, smelling the same smells, sometimes befriending them, albeit always trying to maintain my personal objectivity and common sense that usually guides me to when and where to press the camera trigger and how to frame a shot.

I could say I am a primitive filmmaker. I care more about the story than the “pretty picture.” I use my quarter of a century of technical and editorial experience in all my films, both in the field and in the edit room. But I try not to be dominated by it, sometimes enjoying the greater latitude that financial independence gives you to escape the “rules” and embark on totally unorthodox visual and structural experiments.

Misterios has been the most difficult film of my entire career. First of all I started researching and filming with neither an audience nor a commercial end in mind. I started documenting ceremonies and spiritual possessions mainly to learn, to enter a world of faith and

worship that I felt was calling me. Making the film, at first, was merely an instrument, an excuse to gain access, to get to know the people and their spiritual beliefs. Then it became an effort to try and condense on magnetic tapes the intense emotions that this religion was evoking in me and them.

The greatest difficulty however, was to translate, to make accessible to an audience, via the film medium (very often reliant on technical artifice and content dramatization) something so mysterious, so completely based on intangible energies, on ancient traditions, on strong spiritual beliefs and yet, as I witnessed it, so *real*.

I don't think I have achieved that. I think now that perhaps it just cannot be done or even, I dare say, should not be done. When it comes to faith, each and every person has got to find and walk his or her own path according to a [their] calling. It is certainly impossible to assemble a "pre-packaged" product on this topic, polished and ready for audience consumption.

On the other hand, making this film has been an opportunity for me to travel into my own spirituality through exploring the often "down-to-earth" yet totally unexplainable world of Vudu. I have read of other filmmakers, such as Maya Deren, who were also attracted to the spirituality and power of Vudu religion *even before* thinking of the importance and relevance of the film they were actually shooting. The same happened to me. Hence, not once in the over 60 hours of footage and nearly two years of production, did it occur to me that I was making this documentary without a commercial end in mind.

For me, all along, making this film firstly meant doing an act of devotion to the deity that inexplicably, powerfully, irresistibly attracted me, Santa Marta la Dominadora. As well, it was a way for me to become an apprentice in this Afro-Caribbean "branch" of the Catholic faith that I felt was calling me louder and louder every day.

The hardest and most unexpected moment, my true "reality check," came when I set about putting English subtitles to the documentary. Then and there I realized, aside from the difficulty of interpreting and translating the true sense of certain expressions, the truly gargantuan task of giving meaning to all that was happening and being said on the screen while keeping in mind an Anglo-Saxon audience.

I decided the English language was not up to the task. Even with the help of illustrious academic translators who offered their expertise, I felt we could only barely approximate the meaning of many concepts in order to give an English-speaking audience a very relative and unclear portal "to get in".

There are many words in Spanish (and in Italian) to translate the not-so-easy-to-define concept that in English is univocally called Love.

Perhaps that can serve as an example of how hard the subtitling task was, without getting into too many details.

As all things must come to an end, I have now a “finished” product, the documentary *Misterios*, 55 minutes long, that is only partially fulfilling my expectations.

I also edited an additional 84-minute program that includes all the musical footage that was only partially included (for editorial-timing and formatting reasons) in *Misterios*. I call this program *The Culture of Palo* and, although most of the footage is grainy, gritty and unedited, I consider it priceless for it preserves that tradition -- so ephemeral, so quickly disappearing and mutating -- that I initially set out to document.

The documentary *Misterios*, while far from a thorough and clinical dissection of Vudu religion, has already fulfilled its purpose. I now have a huge database and network of people in the world of Dominican Vudu, some of whom I call friends. More importantly, I have personally entered that very world and have become part of it through the teachings of others and mainly through faith and devotion deep down in my own soul. I have now an open road in front of me to better my knowledge of the inexplicable. I have become a student in the University of the Supernatural.

I have finally found hope to be able to reach the day of my death with an increased sense of what life, compassion and faith are to me, accepting my human limitations and the mysterious ways destiny and God work.

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This documentary is my personal voyage into the world of Dominican Vudu, also known as *Los Misterios*. It is a journey in the unknown world of the LOAS, or Spirits, guided by the Servidores de Misterios, who introduced me and my camera to their beliefs, their ceremonies, and their work.

I filmed in New York City, The Dominican Republic and Haiti.

A *misterio* is something inexplicable, a mystery, something that requires faith and belief to approach and observe, something that inevitably defies a scientific and rational explanation.

A *misterio* is something that cannot and should not be revealed to a voyeuristic audience in search of a thrilling magic spectacle, it's a serious spiritual happening that cannot be easily recorded by a video camera and a microphone, something one cannot and probably shouldn't try to dissect and analyze with a western rationale and a cynically charged urge to understand.

Hence, I had many concerns on how to go about this video investigation and maintain a respectful attitude toward these cultural and religious phenomena so ancient, mysterious, extremely private yet socially widespread and avoid the common western presumption to explain, judge and criticize what I was being allowed to witness.

I decided to start filming without any financial help from anybody, completely free from obligations to anyone but myself, mainly to fulfill my own need to know more about something

that, almost inexplicably, deeply attracted me and that I felt belonged to me not as a member of a specific cultural group but really, at an ancestral level, as a member of the human race.

I had little money but not a deadline or concerns about neither commercial breaks nor TV ratings.

I started befriending various Botanica owners in NYC, who in turn introduced me to Paleros (ceremonial drummers), worshippers and Servidores de Misterio.

We could say this is a video notebook, primarily for my own use. To this day I don't know if I'll ever let it reach a large audience and if it does I don't know yet in what format or circumstances.

Certainly this is not a family TV/ soft entertainment kind of film, it's a story about the places and the people where the divine, the inexplicable, the supernatural is a daily staple. What I am filming is to me more important than the film itself and I feel honored to have been able to access such intimate sites of popular faith and tradition

Often the video quality is rather poor due to lack of lighting and unusual shooting conditions which I often endured in order to be as unobtrusive as possible.

Always, while I was filming, my eye to the viewfinder, I felt that what could be seen on the screen was merely a fraction, a faint, symbolic, very limited representation of the actual significance of the events themselves.

In other words, I felt I was dealing with ancestral rituals and spiritual events that are almost impossible to be captured and analyzed through a video camera. In fact, the very use of this medium often could dangerously enhance the already feeble borderline between inexplicable but genuine events and some kind of supernatural choreography, possibly fabricated just for the benefit of the viewers.

The "Servidores de Misterios", "Los Caballos" (the horses) are the priests, the intermediaries between the spirits of the Loas and ordinary people. The spirits descend into their bodies sometimes after being invoked, sometimes, especially during the intense drumming of a Fiesta de Palos, spontaneously.

They are the "Horses" who temporarily carry the spirit in their own body while in a state of trance. They are the people I followed and asked questions to, who permitted me to film the ceremonies and places of worship portrayed in this video.

Their powers are sometimes a gift of God and nature, sometimes an inheritance from a family member, who passed them on at the time of his/her death.

Twins and triplets appear to have a particularly undeniable disposition towards becoming "Servidores" or "Caballos" de Misterios and further examples of this belief can be found in ancient African legends and symbolism.

Also, I have sometimes come across homosexuals who were regarded as more “naturally prone” to incarnate both male and female spirits and carried no social stigma whatsoever.

A “caballo de Misterios” might have a normal life and job on the side of his/her spiritual role, or vice versa, dedicate him/herself full-time to “serving the Misterios”.

Serving the Misterios is not a joke and is not fun; it is a mission that God and nature put a person, with the right personality and psychic power in charge of. If you are a chosen one, you must perform your spiritual duty.

It is a very serious matter with many ceremonial rules to be carried out and if performed incorrectly one can incur in punishment from the Loas.

Serving the Misterios is often a very difficult and debilitating activity and once the descending spirit leaves the body of his or her caballo, the person does not remember what happened and can be very tired and debilitated, physically hurt or I have been told, even dead, depending on the particular spirit that occupied his/her body and the specific circumstances of the trance.

The person “que se monta”, the “caballo” (the horse) who receives and carries the Loas (spirits), can also be called “Servidore de Misterios,” “Brujo,” “Santero,” “Espiritista” and “Curandero.” I have met Servidores de Misterios as young as 17 and as old as 90.

When the Spirit descends, the body, behavior and voice of the “caballo” changes considerably, according to the spirit descended; multiple possessions are common.

The question of how genuine a possession is cannot be answered simply. When observing this kind of phenomena, whether one “believes” or not, there is always a very human natured interrogative present: if and how much of what we are witnessing is “real,” genuine, authentic, and how much of it is “theatre,” some sort of a choreographed interpretation of ancient myths and legends, of a remote oral tradition, staged specifically for the observer or the petitioner with the sole scope of extorting money and/or gaining prestige in the realm of magical manipulation.

Even if I was personally approaching all this with a great deal of respect and belief, I was not immune to asking myself the above question and to this day I am struggling to find a proper answer.

In magic matters as well as in western medicine and even in other fields such as psychoanalysis and even dentistry I have always been fully aware of the “placebo effect.” In other words sometimes there is a very feeble line between what does us good and what *we believe* is doing us good.

Sometimes an aching tooth stops bothering us as we approach the dreaded dentist’s chair, sometimes a simple sugar pill, as long as we have faith and trust in the doctor administering it to us, can improve our illness.

When we are dealing with supernatural forces this is even more true.

There is worldwide great yet inexplicable evidence of the power of faith and prayer, widely substantiated by innumerable temples and sites of pilgrimage linked to every cult and religion.

Obviously there is no use in consulting a “brujo” or a “curandero” if we are skeptic and negatively opinionated about their methods and line of work.

Whether we decide to follow a conventional western (or eastern, natural, macrobiotic etc.) therapy or to work with supernatural forces we need to believe in what we are doing in order to obtain a result.

And I would leave it to that.

In this documentary I could systematically deconstruct and present as “fake” each and every event I filmed if I decided to do so.

I don't do it because I believe in God and the supernatural, as a man, a human being and a filmmaker. In the course of my life I have had many experiences that I could not nor would bother to dissect and explain but that, nevertheless, ***I know***, must have happened to me for a reason greater than my own capacity of understanding.

When covering a war, while working for TV News, I could have been killed many times and yet I was not, when traveling extensively (as I have been doing for the past 25 years) I have had accidents and mishaps but survived, I have lost properties and “miraculously” recovered them, I have met people from all walks of life and often I rode a very fine line between being their friend and being their enemy.

To me, the inexplicable exists, it happens to all of us, everyday, whether agnostics or religious. We cannot explain all philosophies of life mathematically; we cannot dissect poetry, painting, music, love, hope, pain, faith using a ruler and a calculator.

Here I present the viewer with the events I witnessed, you won't see blood flowing nor water turn into wine, but in this film you'll be able to see the life, the work and hear the thoughts, the opinions of people who work with supernatural forces in their day to day life.

Believe it or don't, true or false, genuine or staged? Do miracles happen? Does God exist? Are the Loas true spiritual forces? You are entitled to your own opinion as long as I don't impose on you my own.

Loas, Saints, Divisions And Possessions

The Pantheon of Loas pertinent to Dominican Vudu, "Las 21 Divisiones" (the 21 Divisions) is vast but there are 3 main divisions I am focusing on: The White Division, the Black Division and the Indio Division.

While the majority of the Loas (spirits) are graphically represented by Canonized Catholic Saints such as St. Miguel, St Carlos Borromeo, St. Elia, St. Antonio, St. Lazaro, etc., there are exceptions.

For example, there is an entity who is very important to me on a personal level, and perhaps because of this very entity, to whom I became inexplicably attracted about 8 years ago, as I casually walked into a Botanica shop in NYC, I found the determination to embark in the difficult and painstakingly slow research that was to lead to this film.

She is a Loa of the Black Division, a beautiful black woman fiercely holding a dangerous snake with her hands and giving shelter to a newborn baby in her lap. She is Santa Marta La Dominadora and a vast part of my investigation focuses on Her, Her powers, Her followers, Her "Caballos."

People have said to me many times that Santa Marta la Dominadora is a dangerous Loa, that she is best left alone if one is not absolutely sure how to deal with her.

Santa Marta is a Loa more openly of African descent than others, a Saint that in the popular iconography can be found (to the contrary of the majority of the other Saints, depicted with colorful images) only in a black and white print, almost to underline the dark tones of her work and of her personality.

The added mystery of her lack of conformity to the Vatican-approved syncretistic imagery employed as a graphic vehicle for the rest of the Loas, her blackness, her snakes (a diabolic related animal) make her different and even more mysterious.

In the Botanicas of NY and Santo Domingo, while I was able to find booklets and papers describing the majority of the other Loas, their rituals, their preferred offerings, their "related" Catholic counterpart, I could not find anything related to Santa Marta but a tiny prayer book.

And yet, I am told there are a great number of people working and pleading to Santa Marta, there are snake skins, perfumes, oils and essences being sold in Botanicas to be used in her worshipping.

In other words Santa Marta appears to be very popular and at the same time have a "bad reputation" and her rituals and offerings are divulged entirely by word of mouth, as an oral tradition, a secret within a secret, a mystery within a mystery.

I was also told several times that she is the protector of prostitutes who often keep her image in the room where they receive the clients so that Santa Marta's snakes can dominate the men and avoid trouble.

The common interpretation about this Loa I encountered while visiting many altars on the Dominican border with Haiti (where S. Marta is also venerated and "used" in various rituals) was that S. Marta is not a Saint, she is an emissary of the forces of darkness, she is a Loa of the Black Division, that she can be very dangerous, and that she is mainly used to strongly dominate a person or an event and even employed in rituals leading to someone's death. That would also explain why the syncretism with Catholic Saints common with many other Loas does not apply here.

In the Dominican Republic there isn't such a radically negative vision on S. Marta but it is still perceivable a certain level of fear and uneasiness when mentioning this Loa of the "Black Division" who "works" as a team with S. Elia (Baron del Cementerio), another very powerful and dark tinted entity worshipped every Monday at the crypt of the first dead in many Dominican cemeteries.

Santa Marta is very popular in esoteric works to dominate a lover, a stray husband, an unfaithful wife and there are many "servicios" (services) and "lamparas" (votive oil lamps) that can be prepared with different ingredients and then offered to S. Marta in order to solve a particular problem. Santa Marta likes offerings of dark malt, honey, eggs, gin, beer, champagne, perfume and cigarettes.

In the Altar she has in the Cemetery Maximo Gomez in S. Domingo, pilgrims pour such offerings all around her statue after ritualistically genuflecting and slapping their hand three times above the tabernacle. Many smoke cigars in front of this altar and "read" the ash that develops, being very careful not to flick it off.

The possession with Santa Marta, to my understanding can be of two kinds, the first one, as a "Metresa," more gentle and flirtatious and the second one as "Petro" with darker tones and more intimidating.

When Santa Marta descends in her "horse" as Metresa, she laughs, asks for beer and cigarettes, wants perfume and speaks sitting upright with sibilant sounding voice. She wears a purple scarf around the head and sometimes, in saluting her worshippers she is flirtatious and sensual, showing her tongue as she speaks as a snake would do.

When the possession is of type "Petro" Santa Marta descends with convulsions that throw her caballo to the floor where he or she starts tearing the clothes off and contorting in the dirt as a serpent. During this type of possession eggs and ground coffee are offered to her which she consumes raw.

There is also a third type of possession: when Santa Marta does not descend, she might send her snakes to do the work, "el Punto Culebra" and in this case, the possessed also convulses on the ground and contorts like a reptile, but usually does not speak.

The majority of “Servicios” (offerings) and “Lamparas” (votive oil lamps) for Santa Marta I have come across are used to ask for her intervention to solve a problem or to “take care” of a person or a situation. As I said earlier, she is mainly used to manage love matters, but she can also be invoked to help with money problems, law problems and even immigration papers.

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You can learn more about these films by Giovanni Savino, at www.artemagnetica.com and www.earthcds.com. You can also contact the author by email at gsavino@attglobal.net.

Selected Illustrations



Servidore De Misterio possessed with Santa Marta La Dominadora, giving a healing bath to a colleague. San Juan de la Maguana, Dominican Republic.



Ogun Balendjo (San Santiago) possession. San Cristobal, Dominican Republic.



Client in waiting room of a Vudu practitioner.
Elias Piña, Dominican Republic.



Old "Servidore de Misterios" next to his altar. Elias Piña, Dominican Republic.



Papa Candelo and San Miguel in a possession dance, New York City, USA.



Genuflecting In front of a "Santo Calvario." Nigua, Dominican Republic.



Vudu Practitioner smoking to the Indio spirits. San Cristobal, Dominican Republic.



"Petro" Altar. Haina, Dominican Republic.

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