



# selling SORCERY

Travelling through West Africa, author **Tom Coote** visits Lomé's notorious voodoo market and is less than enchanted by the grisly sorcery trade.

**AFTER A SHORT BUT HOT AND dusty taxi ride across Togo's capital city Lomé, we pull up outside the wooden gates to the Marché des Féticheurs and, somewhat reluctantly, cough up the over-inflated entrance fee for tourists. I had expected a typically crowded, bustling African marketplace but it's just a barren car park with a line of wooden stalls up against the far side. Stacked in amongst crudely made tourist trinkets and other assorted junk are shrivelled monkey's heads, animal skins, squashed lizards and tangles of slightly mouldy-looking snakes. Some of these magical ingredients will be incorporated by marabouts (holy men with supernatural powers) into malevolent juju rituals, while other fetishes will be purchased in the hope of gaining luck, love or money.**

Many poor West Africans, rather than investing in education, health or housing, would rather spend what little money they have on fetishes that they believe will bring them good luck in exams or fast, easy wealth. If these magically imbued trinkets fail to deliver upon their promises, then it is because they failed to invest enough; if they do get lucky, then this only serves to reinforce superstitious belief, and such illusions of power can quickly become addictive.

It is not only the poor and the powerless that fall under the spell of voodoo and witchcraft: many of West Africa's leaders and wealthy elites are drenched in the bloody and sacrificial culture of *juju-marabout*. When a shiny new BMW pulls in through the gates, the stallholders quickly

abandon us to their grisly collections, and rush over into a rising storm of dust. Apparently the new arrivals are rich Nigerians who regularly journey to the Fetish Market. They are known to spend up to US\$10,000 in a single visit. Such huge amounts of money, being offered for particularly rare or powerful magical ingredients, acts as a great temptation to the poor and powerless: in Liberia and Sierra Leone, bodies have often been

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found, emptied of their organs. And the disturbing trend in East Africa of murdering albinos for their hearts and livers has recently spread to West Africa.

Once the wealthy Nigerians have left, with whatever they had come for, the *Vodusi* (voodoo priests) lead us into a poorly-lit back room and sit us down. They hand each of us a wooden bowl and proceed to hold up a series of fetishes that they have blessed, giving a brief explanation of each object's

special powers, before dropping one of each into our bowls. One of the fetishes is an ugly little figure, with a sprouting of dried grass hair, which is supposed to protect your house. Another is a special necklace made of 51 herbs – they seem a bit vague about what that is supposed to do. They are all poorly made. I'm really not sure what I'm doing here but it all becomes clear when they ask us how much we would like to pay for the contents of our bowls. I tell them I'm not interested, as politely as I can manage, and hand back their offerings. The 'priest' looks a bit disappointed in me and places a small pendant in my hand as a 'gift', which he assures me will guarantee good fortune when travelling. He then asks me how much I would like to donate and makes a polite suggestion of an appropriate amount that is clearly absurd. I hand that back as well. I don't need it – the Gods of Travel are already with me. They then ask me to leave the room so that they can talk to my travelling mate Dave in private. A few minutes later, he emerges clutching a small plastic bag containing two small, crudely knocked up figures. He had somehow managed to bargain them down from 60,000 CFA to 32,000 (about US\$45). Apparently he has always wanted to own a 'genuine' voodoo fetish. ☒

Tom Coote has recently completed his second travel book *Voodoo, Slaves and White Man's Graves: West Africa and the End of Days*. His first book, *Tearing up the Silk Road*, is currently available through Garnet Publishing.  
[www.tomcoote.net](http://www.tomcoote.net)