

QAR: THE ZOMBIE LEGEND

In 1980, a man walked into a village in central Haiti, approached a woman named Angelina Narcisse, and identified himself as her brother Clairvius. If he had not introduced himself using a boyhood nickname and mentioned facts only close family members knew, she would not have believed him. Eighteen years earlier, Angelina stood in a cemetery and watched as her brother was buried. The man told Angelina he remembered that night well. He knew when he was lowered into his grave, because he was fully conscious, although he could not speak or move. As the earth was thrown over his coffin, he felt as if he were floating over the grave. The scar on his right cheek, he said, was caused by a nail driven through his casket. The night he was buried, he told Angelina, a voodoo priest raised him from the grave. He was beaten and brought to a sugar plantation in northern Haiti where he was forced into slavery. Only with the death of the zombie master was he able to escape and return home.

In Haiti, legend says zombies are the living dead, raised from their graves by voodoo sorcerers. Clairvius' story is not unique. Near the time he reappeared, two women turned up in other villages saying they were zombies. That same year peasants in northern Haiti claimed to have found zombies wandering in the fields. Clairvius' case was different in one important way; it was recorded by doctors. On April 30, 1962, hospital records show, he walked into the emergency room spitting up blood. He was feverish and achy. Doctors could not diagnose his illness, and his symptoms grew worse. He died three days later, and physicians signed his death certificate. His body was placed in cold storage for twenty hours, then he was buried. He said he remembered hearing doctors pronounce him dead while his sister wept at his bedside.

Although most outsiders dismissed the zombie legend as untrue, some early investigators tried to find a scientific explanation. Researchers discovered that many Haitian peasants practice voodoo, a sophisticated religion with African roots. The most famous of these researchers, ethnobotanist and anthropologist Dr. Wade Davis, stated, "It was immediately obvious that the stereotypes of voodoo weren't true." Vodoun society is a system of education, law, and medicine; it is a code of ethics that regulates social behavior. In rural Haiti, secret vodoun societies are as much or more in control of everyday life as the government.

The origin of the idea of zombies comes from Haitian voodoo culture. The word zombie--in Haitian it is "zombi"--means "spirit of the dead." Zombies are common in Haitian stories and folklore. Researchers studying Haitian culture have related many tales of bodies brought back to life by *bokor*, or sorcerers. These zombies are mindless slaves who are not particularly dangerous. These stories are widespread and similar to urban legends -- they prey on the listener's deepest fears and seem believable in spite of their improbability.

Narcisse's story led to the Zombie Project -- a study into the origins of zombies conducted in Haiti between 1982 and 1984. During that time, Dr. Wade Davis traveled through Haiti in the hopes of discovering what causes Haitian zombies. Davis collected eight different samples of poisonous powders used by voodoo sorcerers to create the zombie effect. Their ingredients were not identical, but seven of the eight samples had four ingredients in common:

- One or more species of **puffer fish**, which often contain a deadly toxin called **tetrodotoxin**
- A **marine toad**, which produces numerous toxic substances
- A **hyla tree frog**, which produces an irritating (but not deadly) substance

- **Human remains** (mainly bones)

In addition, the powders contained other plant and animal ingredients, like lizards and spiders, which would be likely to irritate the skin. The poison looks like dry black dirt and is rubbed into the victim's skin. Within hours he begins to feel nauseated and has difficulty breathing. A pins-and-needles sensation afflicts his arms and legs, then progresses to the whole body. The subject becomes paralyzed; his lips turn blue for lack of oxygen. Quickly—sometimes within six hours—his metabolism is lowered to the point that he appears dead.

Davis's investigations uncovered the importance of secret societies. Open to both men and women, the societies control specific territories of the country. Davis believes the secret societies are responsible for policing their communities, and the threat of zombification is one way they maintain order. To outsiders, the practice may seem like a random criminal activity, but in rural vodoun society, it is exactly the opposite—it is a punishment imposed by authorities. For rural Haitians, zombification is an even more severe punishment than death, because it deprives the subject of his most valued possessions: his free will and independence. As a punishment in Haiti, the fear is not of zombies, it's of becoming one.

QUESTIONS

For each of the questions listed below, identify the **type of question** and explain **why**. After you have identified the QAR type, answer the question in a **complete sentence**.

1. Does Clairvius Narcisse's story seem believable to you?

Type of QAR: _____ because _____

Answer: _____

2. How does popular culture (movies, television, books, comics) usually portray zombies?

Type of QAR: _____ because _____

Answer: _____

3. Describe two of the ingredients in the poisonous powder used by voodoo sorcerers.

Type of QAR: _____ because _____

Answer: _____

4. In what year did Narcisse escape from his zombie master and return to his village?

Type of QAR: _____ because _____

Answer: _____
