

THE HISTORY OF ZOMBIES

Zombies are everywhere these days – on television, in movies and in books. The current image of the terrifying flesh-eating zombie comes from George Romero's 1968 classic film *Night of the Living Dead*. Nowadays many people like to frighten themselves with the idea of the 'Zombie Apocalypse', and enjoy learning how to destroy zombies by decapitation or shooting them in the head.

However zombies are not new. The term, from the Kongo word *nzambi* which means 'spirit of a dead person', has been long associated with the Vodou religion of Haiti (popularly known as Voodoo). As with West African Vodun, from which it is descended, Vodou has strong ties to the supernatural and magic practised by witch doctors called *bokors*.

In Haitian culture zombies are not evil creatures but victims. They are said to be people who have been killed by poisoning, then reanimated and controlled by *bokors* with magic potions for some specific purpose, usually to work as slave labour. The *bokors* were widely feared and respected. It is said that they used to be in the service of the secret police and those who defied the authorities were threatened with being turned into the living dead.

For a long time most people assumed that zombies were nothing more than mythical figures, like werewolves and vampires. However this changed in the 1980s when a man called Clairvius Narcisse claimed that he had been turned into a zombie by means of drugs and forced to work on a sugar plantation for two years before escaping. Wade Davis, a Harvard scientist, investigated the claim and obtained something called 'zombie powder' from Haitian *bokors*. The main active ingredient was a neurotoxin found in puffer fish which could be used to simulate death. The *bokors* also explained to Davis that a second poison, made from the *datura* plant, known as the zombie cucumber, was given to victims after they were revived from their death-like state. This kept the 'zombies' in a submissive state so that it was easy to force them to work. Davis wrote several books on the topic, including *The Serpent and the Rainbow*, later made into a horror film by director Wes Craven.

Although the book was very popular with the public, some scientists were sceptical of Davis's claims. They said the amounts of toxin in the powder samples he found were inconsistent and not high enough to produce zombifying effects. Although many people in Haiti still believe in zombies, there have been no publicised cases in the last few decades and Davis's theory remains controversial. The Zombie Apocalypse seems unlikely to take place soon.

