



# JUMBIES

*a field guide*

HOW TO RECOGNIZE,  
TRICK, AND  
OUTMANEUVER THEM

by TRACEY BAPTISTE

Hi, there!

If you are reading this, it's probably because you have ...

1. heard the word *jumbie* but don't know what it is.
2. seen something you absolutely cannot explain in the dark of night.
3. been lured in by a jumbie, in which case this book will not help you. It's too late.

If you are in situation 1 or 2, congratulations! You are well on your way to understanding what a jumbie is, how to recognize one if you meet it, and most importantly, how to get away.

The word *jumbie* is pronounced "JUM bee." It can be spelled several ways: *jumbie*, *jumbee*, *jumbi*, or *jumby*. Other words for jumbie are *mendo* (MEN doh) and *duppy* (DUH pee). Some believe that they are the spirits of the dead. A really bad person who has died will become a jumbie three days after death. Others believe that jumbies are demons. There are many different kinds of jumbies, and most Caribbean islands have different variations. All jumbies, no matter where they are from, only come out at night.

The most important thing to know about jumbies is that they are often very tricky. They thrive on being able to fool their victims, so most of them look like regular people—at first glance. So to tell whether someone is a regular person or a jumbie, you have to look very closely.

This guide will help you recognize and get away from the most common Caribbean jumbies, but be warned: follow its advice at your own peril. Some methods are risky. (When you read about the Lagahoo, you'll see what I mean!)

Still, I hope it keeps you safe.



Tracey Baptiste

Author of *The Jumbies*

# CHILD JUMBIES

## DOUEN

SOUNDS LIKE: dwen

OTHER SPELLINGS: duen, duenne



Douens by Nikolai Dinsey Ragunath

A douen is the spirit of a baby that has died before being baptized or christened. It is neither boy nor girl. A douen may be naked or covered with some leaves. It wears a round, peaked hat made of dried grass that covers most of its face. You can recognize a douen by its feet, which face backward. Some think it is only the feet that face backward, some say the feet and knees face backward. No one knows for sure.

A douen may cry and whimper like a little child to trick adults. It can be very clingy. If one gets inside your house, it will be almost impossible to get rid of. A douen's call is mesmerizing to children. The douen uses this sound to lure the child farther and farther into the woods or swamp, until the child is never seen again. A douen may also make convincing animal sounds to throw hunters off the track. This helps another jumbie, Papa Bois, who protects the forest and its creatures.

**BEST DEFENSE:** To avoid a douen, do not call the name of a child outside at night. A douen can convincingly copy the voice of a parent to get children into the woods. If you are a child, do not answer a call at night unless you are certain it is someone you know. Instead of answering, go to the adult you think you heard and ask, "Did you call me?"

The backoo is another type of douen. It may be based on a Nigerian entity called an Abiku. This jumbie is found in Guyana. Like the douen, the backoo is the spirit of a baby. A backoo looks like a short man but with large eyes and very long arms and legs. It does not have kneecaps. The backoo enjoys throwing stones at houses, and if it gets inside, it will move things around. A backoo lives on bananas and milk. It is also very hard to get rid of.

**BEST DEFENSE:** Keep a bottle with a cork handy. Trick the backoo into getting inside the bottle, then cork it. You can then throw the bottle into the sea. This is why you must never open a bottle you find in the water. If you choose to keep your backoo, it may grant you wishes if you feed it well and keep it happy.

## BACKOO

SOUNDS LIKE: BAH-koo

OTHER SPELLINGS/  
NAMES

baccoo, backoobackoo



# FEMALE JUMBIES

A **churile** is the spirit of a woman who has died in **childbirth while the baby lives**. The churile goes around looking for the baby at night, crying out terribly. The words *chudail* and *churile* come from Urdu and Hindi. They mean “witch.”

**BEST DEFENSE:** Leave it alone.

## CHURILE

SOUNDS LIKE: CHOO reel

OTHER SPELLINGS/  
NAMES

choorile, chudail

## GANG GANG SARA

OTHER NAME  
Sarie

Gang Gang Sara is an African witch who was **flying one day and got blown off course**, landing in Tobago in the village of Les Coteaux. Rather than returning immediately to Africa, she decided to stay and look for her family, who had been taken from Africa years before. She became a housekeeper on a plantation and later married a man named Tom, whom she is said to have known in her youth in Africa. She is remembered for her wisdom and kindness. After Tom died, she climbed a cotton tree to try to fly back to Africa, but could not because she had eaten salt, and that stripped her of the ability to fly. Gang Gang Sara lived to be very old and was buried next to her husband's grave. Their graves lay side by side still.

**BEST DEFENSE:** None needed.

## LA DIABLESS

SOUNDS LIKE: LAH jah bless  
OTHER VERSION: Bush Dai-Dai

A **La Diabless** is a beautiful woman often seen at **the side of lonely country roads**. This jumbie typically wears a long, white traditional dress, a big white hat that covers her face, and white gloves. A La Diabless will lure men from the main road, who are never heard from again. The La Diabless has one human foot and one cow hoof. In the Guyanese version, she is called a Bush Dai-Dai, and turns into a wild animal before eating the men alive.

**BEST DEFENSE:** Prevention. Check the feet of any woman you meet at night.



La Diabless by Sayada Ramdial

## MAMA D'LO

**SOUNDS LIKE:** Mama Juhlo

**OTHER SPELLINGS:** Mama D'Leau, Mama Glo

**OTHER VERSION:** Mami Wata (mami WAH tah)

**Mama D'Lo is the head of the mermaids.**

Her name is derived from the French phrase *de l'eau*, meaning “of the water.” Like a mermaid, she is human from waist up, but from the waist down she may have a fish tail, or a serpent’s tail. She is said to be a beautiful woman with long hair. She protects and heals river animals. When angered, her hair turns into snakes and her upper body is covered with scales. Mama D'Lo is sometimes said to be the love interest of another jumbie, Papa Bois. The Nigerian version, Mami Wata, sometimes appears on land with a serpent wrapped around her body. Sometimes she appears as a man.

**BEST DEFENSE:** Take off your left shoe, place it upside down on the ground, and walk backward all the way to your house.



Poster of a snake priestess,  
an early version of Mami Wata.

## SOUCOUYANT

**SOUNDS LIKE:** SOO koo yah

**OTHER VERSIONS:** Ole Higue (ohl HIG), Fire Rass, Angeli

**The soucouyant is an old woman who lives alone at the edge of a village.** At night, she takes off her wrinkled skin and puts it into a mortar for safekeeping (in the version of the Ole Higue, she keeps her skin in a calabash—a dried-out gourd). Then she becomes a fireball and flies off looking for victims, sometimes entering homes through a keyhole or a crack in a wall. The soucouyant sucks blood from the arms or legs of her victims. If she takes too much blood, her victim can die. She prefers the blood of young children or babies.

**BEST DEFENSE:** Leave a large pile of rice outside your door. The soucouyant will obsessively count every grain. Make sure there are no containers around so the soucouyant must put the counted grains into her left hand, which will eventually spill, making her have to start all over again. A soucouyant can be destroyed if you find her skin and put sea salt into it (or red peppers in the Ole Higue version). The soucouyant will not be able to put her skin back on, and she cannot live in sunlight without her skin.

# MALE JUMBIES



Lagahoo by Nikolai Dinsey Ragunath

## LAGAHOO

**SOUNDS LIKE:** LAH gah hoo

**OTHER SPELLINGS:** Ligahoo, Loup Garou, Loogahoo

**OTHER VERSION:** Rolling Calf

A lagahoo is a shapeshifter. It can look like a half-human, half-wolf, or like a man carrying his own coffin. In the second version, the lagahoo is often covered in chains, which people can hear from a long way off. The lagahoo can lay curses and give protection, charms, and bush medicines.

**BEST DEFENSE:** Remain unseen. To see a lagahoo but not be seen by it, put dog yampee (yellow eye gunk) in your eye, and look out of a keyhole at midnight. (Assuming you don't think this is gross and your dog lets you.)

## MASSACOORAMAAN

**SOUNDS LIKE:** mah sah KOO rah man

**OTHER NAME:** Sea Master

This creature is huge and hairy, and looks like an untamed beast. It will capsize small boats and eat anyone inside.

**BEST DEFENSE:** None.

## MOKO JUMBIE

**SOUNDS LIKE:** Moko Jumbie

These are street performers who wear colorful clothes and dance on stilts at parades. Original early moko jumbies wore women's dresses, bloomers, and masks. They evolved to wear colorful clothing, makeup, and sometimes wigs and masks. In Africa, the moko jumbie had a spiritual role. However, when slaves were brought to the Caribbean, they were not allowed to practice their religion, so the jumbies became parade characters.

**Best defense:** None needed.



# PAPA BOIS

SOUNDS LIKE: Papa BWAH

OTHER NAMES: Maitre Bois (MAY truh bwah), Master of the Woods, Daddy Bouchon (BOO shon)

Papa Bois may appear as a deer, a man in tattered clothing, or a half-man/half-goat. He guards animals and ancient trees and carries a cow horn to warn animals of danger. He may change into a deer to lure hunters into the forest. Then he resumes his regular shape and issues a warning. Hunters may have to pay a fine, such as marrying Mama D'Lo. However, in some variations, Papa Bois is said to be the love interest of Mama D'Lo.

**BEST DEFENSE:** Always greet Papa Bois politely, but do not look at his feet.

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Chromolithograph of a Samoan snake charmer by unknown artist (1880s). Public domain image.

**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** This poster is credited with promoting the common image of Mami Wata, a water goddess of the African diaspora. Some sources attribute the image to German artist Schleisinger. While there is a German artist Felix Shlesinger (1833–1910), there is a significant difference in the art attributed to Shlesinger and the style of this poster. Note the spelling difference in the artists' names.

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