

HAITIAN VODOU: “PWEN” (MAGICAL CHARGE) IN RITUAL CONTEXT

by

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by

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The central focus of this dissertation “Haitian Vodou: Pwen (Magical Charge) in Ritual Practice” is to elucidate a central component of Haitian Vodou ritual, known as pwen, which literally means “point” or magical charge. This query begins with a theoretical discussion of what pwen is and is not. Common characteristics are outlined and serve as a means by which pwen is defined. All discussion about pwen returns to the strongest and most elaborate pwen in Haitian Vodou, which is the initiation ritual, called kanzo. Uniquely, my position is that of participant-observer, as I am an initiated practitioner of Haitian Vodou. The second chapter establishes historical context as pwen (objects, spirits, and ceremonies) are traced from their West and Central African origins through space and time to modern Haitian Vodou practice. Focus was placed on pwen that transferred from Africa to Haiti, relatively unchanged and is easily identified in ritual.

The third chapter examines pwen through a Roman Catholic lens, where Catholic veneration and devotions for the Virgin Mary are compared and contrasted to similar practices for the Haitian Vodou Dahomian Queen, Erzulie Freda. Catholic traditions of saying the Rosary and the celebration that accompanies the feast day for Mary’s May Crowning are contrasted to the

Haitian Vodou practices of “tying a pwen” (ritual binding activity), altar-building, and marriage to a specific spiritual entity. The fourth chapter transitions the reader to literature, which presents pwen and pwen-like manifestations in a brilliantly descriptive excerpt taken from the Haitian magical realism work, *Les Arbres Musiciens*, by Jacques Stephen Alexis. This study examines the people, spaces, and important pwen in Alexis’s fictional Vodou ceremony and compares them to real-life Vodou pwen. Chapter 5 is a detailed description of a wanga or magical work done by a medsen fey (“leaf doctor”) in Jacmel, Haiti during my fieldwork in December 2008. This chapter presents the important function of the medsen fey in vodouisant communities and relates details about training and professional practice. The magical work was done for my husband and I served as a surrogate. It was an elaborate and spectacular ceremony.

Methods to realize this project were: learning Haitian Creole, learning Haitian Vodou, going through a kanzo (Vodou initiation), traveling to Haiti on two different occasions for field work, interviewing and recording dozens of international and Haitian practitioners, attending Haitian dance workshops, attending Haitian drum workshops, and attending public ceremonies when possible. Upon completion of this research, it is the author’s opinion that Haitian Vodou: (a) reflects the dynamic evolution of Haitian history, while retaining an African core, (b) offers significant stability to the majority population of Haiti, as the country has been and continues to be plagued by lack of infrastructure, economic and political instability, and natural disaster, (c) is grossly misunderstood and merits accurate and unbiased explanation to those unfamiliar with it, and (d) should be universally recognized as a legitimate religion.

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PREFACE

This dissertation is the culmination of a 15-year study of the complex and dynamic religion known as Haitian Vodou. After four years of doctoral classes and seminars, I wanted to expand my (at the time) purely academic knowledge of Vodou. I decided I needed to go to Haiti and experience Vodou directly. A referral by a friend-of-a-friend led me to an American mambo (Vodou priestess) living on the East Coast who had a fully functioning Vodou house (temple or peristyle) in Haiti. I contacted her and she was willing to let me visit, observe, and document a Haitian Vodou initiation at her house in Jacmel, known as the Roots Without End Society. When I spoke to her again, she said that if I went to Haiti, she would require that I go through the kanzo, or Vodou initiation. She explained that she had done a reading (as is typical) for me after our initial telephone conversation and that the lwa, or the spirits of Vodou, strongly wanted me to go to Haiti, and insisted that I initiate. At first, I was not sure if I wanted to participate in a Vodou initiation, but finally I agreed. I reasoned that this was a perfect opportunity to experience Haiti and learn about Vodou. I was a little unsure about traveling to an unfamiliar third world country to meet strangers, who would then take me and another international woman (Margaret, a psychiatrist from St. Lucia) on motorbike to a Vodou peristyle in Jacmel, which was the location for the initiation. As uncertain as this seemed, I trusted Mambo Racine, so I committed to going to Haiti for the initiation. Over the next few weeks, I applied for and promptly received, 100% funding for the project. I interpreted this and the speed with which it happened, as an encouraging and prophetic sign from God and the lwa that I was on the right path. I busied myself with preparations for the trip. One thing I had not anticipated was that I was expected to buy all initiatory materials beforehand in the U.S. and transport them to Haiti. This included

specific types, colors, and quantities of beads, string (for the *kolye* and *asson*¹), satin fabric, zippers, buttons (for the seamstress to make my ceremonial regalia), fancy fabric in lwa-associated colors, embellishments such as sequins, feathers, lace (for *paket magik*²) and two bottles of (cheap) champagne. One bottle is for an offering for Lasirèn, the lwa or spirit of the sea, and the other to be poured on our heads when we are “baptized” into the Vodou religion. While Mambo Racine agreed that it was a hassle to travel with so much baggage, she maintained it was not reliable to wait and buy materials in Haiti due to uncertainties concerning availability, cost, and quality. Packed with a ridiculously bulging suitcase and a super-sized backpack, I departed for Haiti on the day after Christmas in 2008. This day marked the beginning of an incredible and life-altering journey into Haitian Vodou.

As for the academic project, my dissertation proposal began as a traditional comparative manuscript on Haitian Vodou “*pwen*” examining its non-ritual manifestations in Haitian marvelous realism (magical realism) in literature and Vodou spirit-art. My intention was to observe ceremonies and rituals to gain knowledge about *pwen* and apply this understanding to literature and art. One major consequence of going through the experience of *kanzo*, or initiation (which is the biggest *pwen* in all of Vodou), was that my professional trajectory dramatically changed, although this was not entirely clear for some time. For one thing, *pwen* proved to be a very difficult subject to understand, especially in a literal sense. *Pwen* was not “one” thing, but multiple and changing, richly layered within the power systems of Vodou and affected by context, situation, and skills of the practitioner. Additionally, my experiences with Vodou were

¹ Vodou necklace and beaded rattle. Both are initiatory objects, the *asson* being conferred to clergy only.

² “*Paket Magik*” are special herbs wrapped in fancy fabrics and embellishments. They are initiatory objects done in color schemes associated with the lwa or spirits.

surprisingly profound. The connections I felt to the ritual practices, the people who initiated, taught, and ultimately accepted me were strong. As I got closer to understanding the concept of “pwen,” and delved deeper into the world of Vodou, my personal worldview, especially where I believed I fit into the universe, shifted dramatically for the better. I attribute this change to be a result of going through the kanzo, and for this gain of great *konesans* or knowledge I am eternally grateful to my Mama and Papa Kanzo! *One ak Respe Mama Kathy ak Papa Wolmer!*³

Field research surrounded entirely by Haitian members of the Roots Without End Society taught me some invaluable things, including: Kreyol language, Vodou dancing, singing Vodou songs, step-by-step preparation for how to make ritual objects (*kolye*, *asson*, and *paket magik*), and following proper order and process of ceremonies, or *reglemann* (rules). I also learned how to identify Vodou rhythms by ear, how to play basic versions of them on drums, and how to properly perform the ritual gestures of mambos and houngans. As a result, my first field research excursion in Haiti was very productive. I did encounter a few difficulties. The first challenge was that as an initiate, on the “inside,” I was limited and unable to collect as much “data,” such as video, photographs, sketches, and observational notes as I would have liked. This is because I was in private seclusion and had taken vows of secrecy not to reveal these ceremonies. Also, on my return flight to Miami, the airport authorities required (last minute) that I pack some of my carry-on luggage in my checked bag. While the checked bag was in transit, irreplaceable recording equipment was stolen. Specifically, I lost unique recordings of Vodou songs sung by unknown (to me) members of the community.

³ Literally means “Honor and respect to my initiatory mother, Kathy, and initiatory father, Wolmer. It is traditional to honor their name when speaking of one’s initiation.

When I returned to the United States, I was able to continue my field research, but in a very different way. At home, research consisted of traveling to other cities for conferences, such as Milwaukee, Wisconsin where I presented preliminary data about pwen.⁴ I also participated in dance and drum workshops, traveling to Oakland, California, where I learned stylized Haitian dance moves from Djenane St. Juste of the Afoutayi Dance Company. That same weekend in Oakland, I participated in a drumming lesson/drum circle led by late master Haitian drummer, Frisner Augustin.⁵ I also enrolled in online Kreyol lessons, attended Vodou ceremonies, such as a *lav tet* (head-washing) at my initiatory mother's house in Amherst, MA in August 2010, and also started doing annual *fet gede* ancestral celebrations (on November 1 and 2) at my home and work (as a cultural study topic in my French language classes) in Dallas, TX.

All of this was necessary “background” learning for the study of Haitian Vodou and pwen. The most insightful part of my continued field research after visiting Haiti were the interviews I did with my initiatory mother, siblings, and other practitioners or knowledgeable people in the African diaspora.⁶ The interview process extended over the course of two years. I considered the individuals' expertise and then created interview questions about pwen. I recorded their responses over the telephone or in person and later transcribed them.

In 2011, two years after my kanzo, my initiatory mother asked me if I would be willing to

⁴ International Conference on Caribbean Studies. Greenough-Hodges, Kimberly. Unpublished paper titled “Pwen Talk: Concepts in Ritual Practice” Marquette University in Milwaukee, WI. October 8, 2010.

⁵ Three days of Haitian Dance Camp with Djenane St-Juste of the Afoutayi Dance Company and one-on-one Vodou drum session with Haitian master drummer, Frisner Augustin (the only Haitian citizen to win the National Heritage Fellowship from the NEA for his Vodou drumming skills). Oakland, CA. September 2009.

⁶ Mambo Pat Scheu of The Soysete du Marche in PA via telephone, the deceased Houngan Aboudja (Ronald Derenoncourt) in Austin TX in person, Mambo Margaret, Kineta, Mambo, Ke Kontan and several Africans—former French language students. One was from Senegal, another from Congo, and the third was from Benin.

return to Jacmel as an escort and “manager” of a kanzo for another individual. I accepted without hesitation. This time, the initiating person was an American physician and my job was to meet her in Miami and then travel with her to Jacmel. I was to be a liaison between Mambo Racine in the United States, and the Haitians “running” the kanzo.⁷ Mambo Racine honored me with a very important job and the opportunity to see a different “public” perspective of the kanzo. For this second excursion to Haiti, I was much better prepared to collect data and document ceremonies, spaces, and people. Additional funding from the UTD Graduate Research Office and a financial gift from my father funded the purchase of new audio and video recording equipment, which dramatically improved my archive of footage and ultimately influenced the content that appears in the final dissertation.

One obstacle remained in my path and considerably delayed the completion of this project: I am an introvert and struggled with the idea of framing myself as the central point of reference in my own research. However, after years of writing semi-productive drafts, trying to remain “objective” about experiences that were, in fact, very personal, I came to realize (with the help of my committee chair, Tom Riccio) that I was actually doing a very different kind of dissertation than originally planned. It was at this point that the research project shifted into its current interdisciplinary form, “Haitian Vodou: Pwen (Magical Charge) in Ritual Context,” positing me in the center of the dissertation.

As a participant-observer dissertation with an emphasis on primary research and experiential methods, the inclusion of all significant scholarly contributions to the field of Vodou

⁷ Mambo Racine lived and managed her Vodou house in Haiti for 10 years. She also worked as a former Human Rights Violation Investigator for the UN while in Haiti during the 1980s-1990s. When President Aristide was ousted in 2004, her previous political affiliations became an increasing liability for her, preventing her return.

is beyond the scope of this project. Nonetheless, I would like to mention some of the authors and works that have informed and influenced my opinions. Instrumental in understanding Yoruban and Kongo religion and philosophy and their evolution into their New World expression, are the cultural works of Robert Farris Thompson.^{8, 9} Look to Suzanne Blier for the study of Ancient Vodun.¹⁰ Indispensable for the study of the Taino and their religious beliefs, ritual objects, and herbal healing, I recommend any of the many works by Barbara Nesin.¹¹ For a comprehensive history about Haiti, consider the work by Michael J. Dash, *A Haiti Anthology: Libete* (1999),¹² co-written with Charles Arthur. Concerning Haitian revolutionary history, I recommend C. L. R. James', *The Black Jacobins* 2001)¹³ and Laurent DuBois', *Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution* (2004).¹⁴ Insight into Haitian social history, from colonial to modern times can be found in the essay by anthropologists Sidney Mintz and Michel-Rolph Trouillot, called "The Social History of Haitian Vodou" that appeared in *The Sacred Arts of Vodou*.¹⁵ I strongly recommend Leslie Desmangles's, *Faces of the Gods*,¹⁶ as it a solid study of Vodou belief/philosophy sensitively compared to Roman Catholicism. Donald Cosentino addresses the origins of the Gede and associations with freemasonry in "Envoi: The Gedes and Bawon

⁸ Thompson, Robert Farris. "From the Isle Beneath the Sea: Haiti's Africanizing Vodou Art." *Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou*. Ed, Donald Cosentino. Los Angeles: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History. 1995.

⁹ Thompson, Robert Farris. *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy*. Random House. 1984.

¹⁰ Blier, Suzanne Preston. *Vodun: West African Roots of Vodou*. *Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou*. Ed, Donald Cosentino. Los Angeles: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History. 1995. pp. 61-88.

¹¹ Nesin, Barba. "The Influence of Native American and African Encounters on Haitian Art," *Journal of Haitian Studies*, Vol. 11, No. 1. 2005, pp. 73-85.

¹² Arthur, Charles. Dash, J. Michael. *Libete*. Markus Wiener Publishers, 1999.

¹³ James. C L R. *The Black Jacobins*. Penguin Books. 2001.

¹⁴ DuBois. Laurence. *Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution*. Belknap Press, 2004.

¹⁵ Cosentino, Donald, ed. *Sacred Arts of Vodou*." UCLA. 1995.

¹⁶ Desmangles, Leslie G. *The Faces of the Gods: Vodou and Roman Catholicism in Haiti*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press. 1992.

Samdi.”¹⁷ Important as well is Elizabeth McAlister’s, *A Sorcerer’s Bottle: The Visual Art of Magic in Haiti*,¹⁸ which provides a rich context through which to visually interpret ritual pwen. A clear and comprehensive study of the role of American Hollywood in perpetuating negative perceptions about Haitian Vodou is Lannec Hurbon’s *American Fantasy and Haitian Vodou*.¹⁹ In the category of post-colonial and French Caribbean literature, theory, and history, I particularly recommend (in addition to the novels and other works listed in my bibliography) various titles by the Martinican Aimé Césaire, the most striking is *Cahier d’un Retour au Pays Natale*, which directly addresses and stylistically reflects issues of “de-colonization” and identity.²⁰ There is also the Martinican Patrick Chamoiseau who wrote “Eloge de la Créolité”²¹ that speaks to the multiplicity of voices and influences that contribute to the “Creole” identity. Significant to my understanding of Haitian Vodou-infused literature is the genre of “magical realism,”²² as defined by the Cuban author Alejo Carpentier’s in his prologue to his Haitian book, “The Kingdom of this World.”²³ For insight into Haitian magical (“marvelous”) realism, in addition to the titles in my bibliography, fiction writers such as Jacques Stephen Alexis’s *Les Arbres Musiciens* (1957)²⁴ and René Hadriana *dans mes rêves* (1988)²⁵ are excellent examples of this genre. Additionally,

¹⁷ Cosentino, Donald. J. “Envoi: The Gedes and Bawon Samdi,” pp. 399-409.

¹⁸ Elizabeth McAlister. “A Sorcerer’s Bottle: The Visual Art of Magic in Haiti,” pp. 305-321. *Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou*. 1995.

¹⁹ Hurbon, Lannec. “American Fantasy and Haitian Vodou.” pp. 181-197 Cosentino, Donald. *The Sacred Arts of Vodou*. 1995.

²⁰ Césaire, Aimé. *Cahier d’un Retour au Pays Natale*. Présence Africaine. 2000.

²¹ Chamoiseau, Patrick and Raphael Confiant. *Éloge de la créolité*, 1989.

²² The genre of magical realism. Zamora, Lois Parkinson and Wendy B. Faris. *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*. 1995.

²³ Carpentier, Alejo. *The Kingdom of this World*.

²⁴ Alexis, Jacques Stephen. *Les Arbres Musiciens*. Editions Gallimard. Paris, 1957.

²⁵ Depestre, René. *Hadriana dans tous mes rêves*.

Alexis's full 1956 manifesto, "Du Réalisme Merveilleux des Haïtiens"²⁶ would be of tremendous use to the Caribbean literary scholar, as he quite clearly states what is "unique" to Haitian literature. In the cross-discipline categories of ethnographical, anthropological, and ethnomusicological works, I recommend those by Elizabeth McAlister, Karen McCarthy Brown, and Lois Wilken. McAlister and Wilken offer a wealth of information concerning Haitian Rara music,^{27 28} and Karen McCarthy Brown documents a very personal story through her friendship with a Vodou mambo in the well-known book called, "Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn."²⁹ I also recommend Mambo Pat Scheu's accessible and thorough Vodou education courses (The Four Circles, available online through the Sosyete du Marche.com)³⁰ and any of her educational texts.³¹ One last work that I highly recommend is the recently deceased Rachel Beauvoir-Dominique's work titled "Underground Realms of Being: Vodoun Magic."³² This work had a tremendous impact on my understanding of pwen. Beauvoir-Dominique is knowledgeable and thorough, with a writing style that is both elegant and poetic. Years ago, I discovered her work, but I did not have the informed, initiate knowledge to completely understand the depth of her contribution at that time.

In closing, I maintain that this body of work is unique in that it examines and attempts to

²⁶ Alexis, Jacques Stephen. "Du Réalisme Merveilleux des Haïtiens" *Présence Africaine*, No. 8-9-10, juin-novembre 1956, pp. 245-271.

²⁷ McAlister, Elizabeth. *Rara! Vodou. Power, and Performance in Haiti and its Diaspora*, University of California Press. 2002.

²⁸ Post, Jennifer C. *Ethnomusicology: A Contemporary Reader*. Routledge. New York. 2006. (Specifically writings by Lois Wilken on Vodou).

²⁹ Brown, Karen McCarthy Brown. *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn*. University of California Press. 2001.

³⁰ http://sosyetedumarche.com/html/four_circles.html. Accessed April 10, 2020.

³¹ Scheu, B. Patricia. (Mambo Vye Zo Komande la Menfo). *Serving the Spirits: The Religion of Haitian Vodou*. Self-published. 2011.

³² Beauvoir-Dominique, Rachel "Underground Realms of Being: Vodoun Magic." *The Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou*. 1995, pp. 155-178.

define the concept of pwen in Haitian Vodou in ritual context from the perspective of a participant-observer. The strength of this work is its documentation of Vodou and the contextual, comparative, and interdisciplinary means through which pwen is examined. My hope is that the work will educate and correct misconceptions and negative stereotypes about Haitian Vodou, but also provide new insights, thus, expanding and deepening existing scholarship in this field of study.

INTRODUCTION

Haitian Vodou reflects a complex history of people brought to the Caribbean from Africa as slaves. Vodou has evolved in a profoundly appropriative fashion, which can be seen in its complex layers and textures, flavored by the many experiences the African slaves encountered on their journey across the Atlantic to the shores of Hispaniola. Its dynamic formation was largely in reaction to and resulting from, colonization, revolution, and independence. The modern religion of Haitian Vodou as it is practiced today is a uniquely New World Creole phenomenon, which retains a distinctly African core. One fundamental concept of Haitian Vodou is known as “pwen.” Pwen is a Haitian Creole word that means “point” and is a key concept in Vodou theology and the central focus of this dissertation. The meaning of pwen reflects a dual worldview, or reality that both is and is not, at the same time. In Vodou ritual practice, pwen can be a specific physical “point” (e.g., a drawing, an image, a song) in time and space, but significantly, it is also an intense focus of energy without definition or boundary. Pwen can be categorized by the following basic and unifying characteristics:

- Pwen is considered a living force or entity that exists outside of time and space. Since pwen is believed to be “living,” it must be cared for respectfully and consistently. An example of this phenomenon can be seen in the treatment of the ritual objects of initiation, or tools of Vodou, that practitioners receive during initiation. The asson, or “sacred rattle” of the houngan (priest) or mambo (priestess) must be kept clean, in a sacred space, and ceremonially “fed” and “watered” on an altar at least once a year.
- Pwen exhibits a multi-directional movement that is also reciprocal and balanced. The Vodou act of “tying” a pwen reflects this type of movement. When one ties a pwen

- (makes a good luck charm for someone), the practitioner first winds thread or fabric on a designated object in a specific direction and controlled speed. The practitioner then repeats the exact movement on the same object but in the opposite direction. This alternating action is continued until the practitioner feels the pwen is complete.
- Pwen has unique attributes. The best known of these is its associations with specific objects, colors, food preferences, and unique rhythms. Pwen, especially the lwa (spirits) of Vodou, are brilliantly celebrated in the elaborate art of the Vodou altars.³³ Usually, the altars are designed to venerate specific lwa and decorated with a central image (usually a Catholic holy card), associated colors, textures, and objects believed to attract and honor the designated entity.³⁴ Altars can be simple or elaborate, but all are characteristically inventive and textural, as they are made of available items, consisting of an artistic mix of new, old, and often found or natural objects.
 - A traditional public Vodou ceremony is a pwen made manifest through a group of practitioners and the use of specific spaces, objects, regalia, actions, songs, dances, or gestures that “call” spiritual entities to “do work.” There are also other types of “pwen” that are accessed outside of a full public Vodou ceremony. For this type of pwen, a practitioner could abstract specific actions, songs, dances, and gestures and perform them privately with the hopes of facilitating a personal goal or need. This method and procedure would be informed by the context and ability of the practitioner.
 - Importantly too, pwen in Haitian Vodou adapts in response to the needs of its

³³ The topic of Vodou altars appears in detail in Chapter 3 of the dissertation.

³⁴ There is more on the different spirits of Vodou and their associations in Chapters 2, 3, 4, and 5 in the dissertation.

practitioners. Whereas Haitian Vodou retains its overall structure and rules, the practitioners and the methods of practice have changed in response to social, economic, and political currents. This topic is one of several themes that run throughout the dissertation.

Haiti has experienced profound political and economic instabilities, including foreign occupation, military coups, dictatorships, and corruption. Some of these conditions have improved, whereas others continue to ravage the Caribbean island. This situation has been the case well into modern times, resulting in a divided economic and racial class system, where the extremely poor majority population has only known life without available and attainable food, housing, clothing, vocation, education, and medical care. This existence for many Haitians has become an unfortunate legacy and it has made self-preservation dependent on one's ability to be "self-regulating" and "self-reliant." Importantly, Haitian Vodou has evolved alongside with this majority class and Haitians continue to choose Vodou, as it offers powerful and very positive incentives for safety, good health, prosperity, and a strong community. It has adapted over the years to fulfill fundamental human needs of survival and has profoundly affected the sustainability of the religion. In the Vodou house, organization and self-maintenance fall under a strict hierarchical order.³⁵ These factors create stability that historically the government cannot provide, which is a strong imperative for adherence to the religion of Vodou in Haiti. Membership in a Haitian Vodou house offers sustenance, comfort, acceptance, security, and structure, where congregants have liberal attitudes toward those called to serve the lwa or spirits. Vodouisants are accepting of other religious affiliations, and do not discriminate against gender,

³⁵ A Vodou house is a temple and communal place of worship.

race, or sexual orientation. While there is a strict hierarchy observed between individuals within the same Vodou house, there is a democratic outward behavior exhibited between head hougans (priests) and mambos (priestesses) of different Vodou houses. I have attended meetings between hougans and mambos involving issues for the overall well-being of the Vodou community. It is important to note that vodouisants who are not economically challenged are compatible. In communities where there is hardship, houses tend to be more competitive. I have witnessed both types of interactions in Jacmel, Haiti in 2011 while doing field research.³⁶

Vodou requires a strict adherence to African “reglemann” or “rules of service,” which refers to how things are done. This knowledge is taught, generally during one’s initiation by an elder. Although interactions between head hougans of different houses are egalitarian, there is a clear and unvarying division of power inside the individual Vodou house. This understanding of Vodou power and hierarchy among house members provides a healthy structure for Haitians who, through no fault of their own, would be forced to otherwise live without. Social hierarchy within the Vodou community is as follows:

- *Mambo or hougans* (priestess or priest) are the Vodou clergy with a two-tier initiated status. *Su pwen* is an apprentice status whereas *asogwe* is top-ranking clergy. One *asogwe* (male or female) heads his or her Vodou house.
- *Hounsi* are initiated dancers, singers, helpers, and general workers for the overall function of the house and answer to other mambos and hougans, all under the head of the house.
- *Hougenikon* is the song leader, often a mambo or hougans su pwen, but answers to the

³⁶ Greenough-Hodges, Kimberly. Field Work. Jacmel, Haiti. 2009, 2011.

head of the house. The hougenikon leads singing in ceremony and guides and works in tandem with the head drummer during ceremonies.

- *Mama Onyo* is a hounsi who has been chosen by the head mambo or houngan to be the house mother who cooks, cleans, and generally cares for the peristyle.
- Drummers usually are initiated members and can belong to outside houses from where they perform. There is a head drummer who leads his ensemble. All drummers follow the orders of the head of the house. Drummers follow the lead rhythms of the head drummer, who gets his musical cues from the Hougenikon during ceremonies. Drummers are always paid well to perform and are always in demand in Haiti.
- *Medsen fey* is an herbal doctor who learns the skill from another older practitioner. The medsen fey may or may not be an initiated vodouisant and may work for anyone. The medsen fey (regardless of initiatory rank and house status) answers to the head of the house where he or she practices and is always paid for work.
- *Laplas* are the ceremonial (and real) sword bearers and defenders of the Vodou house. They are usually hounsi but can also be mambos and houngans. They are appointed to this position by the head of the house and usually serve for life.
- *Bossals* are uninitiated people who are people who live in the community and are allowed to come to the dances and public ceremonies.
- *Lakou* is the Vodou community or neighborhood. It is often familial.

Within the lakou, there is a continued focus on its welfare, creating strong and bonded Vodou communities. These groups operate under the initiatory ideals of “*ono ak respe*” (honor and respect) for God, the lwa, and each other.

With its turbulent historical record, Haiti has often presented a negative international image, with its recurrent episodes of insurrection, political, and economic instability, dictatorships, foreign occupation, and domestic corruption. In the early days of independence, the Haitian founding fathers took extreme measures to counter social, political, and economic problems. They were hoping to create a successful and unified Haiti. The need for survival and adaption under duress was a significant motivation for the evolution of Vodou. Improvements were initially put into place and episodes of “peaceful” reprieve have been known in Haiti. However, the fact remains that there is a strong undercurrent of “lingering aftershock” in Haiti, which is a response to the traumatic experience of colonization and slavery.³⁷ The result has been cultural, economic, and racially-based negativity that is more or less institutionalized. This domestic division based on an entrenched class system has proven to be extremely challenging to eradicate and certain historical events have augmented this disparity. Circumstances in Haiti have been made better only intermittently and, in the long term, the division has grown more extreme.

Modern Vodou theology, the ritual practice of today as well as the birth of “negative outsider perspectives” about the small island nation and its majority religion, developed consequentially in response to the influences of historical events and people. In 1791, Haiti successfully revolted against the French and later declared their independence as the first black republic of Haiti in 1804. Shocked by the success as well as the violent and extraordinarily bloody events of the Haitian revolution, colonial powers exerted “isolationism” toward Haiti, refusing to recognize it as an independent nation, despite their undeniable defeat of the French.

³⁷ Herskovits, Melville J. *Life in a Haitian Valley*, 1935. pp. 256-295.

Lack of recognition, specifically by the French, caused Haiti to live in fear of French invasion and re-enslavement. These events and others were crippling to Haiti and its future success and sustainability as an independent country.³⁸ The treatment by the international community was partly due to prevalent racism of the time but was also largely an economically-driven choice, as fears concerning the stability of home slave economies were believed to be threatened if Haiti was recognized as an independent and equal country. These attitudes and actions of the international community set into motion decades of unequal treatment, generating a general malaise and insecurity among the people, further cultivating an indefinable negative pathos.

One consequence of international isolationism was the focused and accelerated “creolization” (blending of culture) among all ethnic groups living in Haiti during this time. This effect was particularly felt in the majority African-based religions, as numerous diverse traditional practices blended and ultimately shaped modern Haitian Vodou. It was during this time that Haitian Vodou and Roman Catholicism became uniquely and permanently intertwined. The relationship between Vodou and Christianity has been difficult. From 1935 until 1987, Haitian Vodou was officially banned in Haiti. Vodou went underground, as practitioners and temples were persecuted by the Roman Catholic anti-superstition campaigns. In later years, large numbers of aggressive American Protestant missionary groups infiltrated Haiti, preying on the desperation of the majority class. Although many Haitians agreed to “convert” to these religions in exchange for medicine, food, or a place to stay, they continued to serve the spirits of Vodou. In 1987, President Aristide, a former Catholic priest, empowered the vodouisant majority class

³⁸ This refers to the 1824 agreement with France that Haiti would pay enormous “reparations” Haitians to the French slaveholders it had overthrown.

when he legalized the practice of Vodou. Then again, in 2003, he augmented the legal authority of Vodou when he passed an ordinance that allowed houngans and mambos to perform civil services, such as marriages, baptisms, and funerals.³⁹ Despite the protests of conservative Roman Catholic Haitians, the Vatican, officially conceded to accept Haitian Vodou as Haiti's "national" religion and Roman Catholicism would remain Haiti's "official" religion. The validity and legality of Haitian Vodou continue to be criticized well into recent times.

Numerous arguments presenting the "evils" of Vodou exist, but orthodox Haitian Vodou (this means Vodou practiced by initiated individuals in strict accordance with "reglemman" or rules of an oral tradition) is not a religion that contradicts Christianity.⁴⁰ There are Vodou-related practices that deal with dark or negative magic. However, these are usually carried out by individuals who are outside of the orthodox practice of Vodou and are only related to Vodou through like-worldview and understanding of spirit.

One person who requested complete anonymity for this dissertation was a Roman Catholic priest initiated into orthodox Haitian Vodou as the highest-ranking asowge.⁴¹ We talked at length about Church teachings and Vodou in Jacmel. In the course of our discussion, I told him I was going through a Vodou initiation. His response was to confide to me that he was also an initiate and added that he abstains from holding ceremonies and magical work and instead

³⁹ Article 287th Article of the 1987 Haitian Constitution removed the 1935 ordinance as well as "all laws criminalizing Vodou were no longer effective. Additionally, in 2003, President Aristide added to the same ordinance under clause two, where all supreme leaders and those responsible for temples and holy sites, leaders of systems and organizations were able to be recognized by the Ministry of Worship. According to the 5th clause, supreme leaders and those responsible for temples and holy sites, who have taken an official oath in civil courts are allowed to perform baptisms, weddings, and funeral. In the beginning paragraph of 2003 Ordinance, it states that Vodou is the religion of Haiti's ancestors and is one fundamental element of Haiti's identity." apic.or.jp/English/projects/haiti008-eng.html. Accessed January 19, 2020.

⁴⁰ Greenough-Hodges, Kimberly. 2009. Fieldwork in Jacmel, Haiti.

⁴¹ Greenough-Hodges, Kimberly. 2009 Fieldwork in Jacmel, Haiti.

practices regular Vodou prayer service. In this way, he was confident that he was not contradicting his Catholic faith.

According to some Vodou practitioners, the fact that Haitians continue to be at odds with themselves is seen as a “magical” problem that stems from the Bois Caiman Vodou ceremony in 1791, one of two Vodou ceremonies believed to have “jump-started” the Haitian Revolution.⁴² This ceremony is believed to have created an unusually large and formidable “revolutionary” pwen or spell. Due to the unique conditions and impossibility of recreating the magical knowledge of the 21 participating African nations,⁴³ it is believed by some practitioners that a cycle of revolution was put into motion, but now cannot be stopped.⁴⁴ There is a more in-depth examination of the details surrounding this revolutionary pwen in the historical overview chapter.

Haitian Vodou is also one of the most misunderstood religions in the world. This fact creates a biased antagonism toward the religion. Negative perceptions are likely due to its preponderance of pwen or magical characteristics, as seen in spells (wanga), divination, and “possession,”⁴⁵ all things that are characteristic of the Vodou ceremony. It is precisely these types of “magical” activities that are what critics consider objectionable. In addition to the aforementioned conservative Catholics, there are also many protestant Christians who equate consorting with spirits (pwen) as diabolical and contrary to Christian doctrine. Vodouisants do

⁴² Mambos and hougans in Haiti believe there were three ceremonies, rather than the one that appears in history books. Interviews. Haiti field experience. 2009.

⁴³ Interview with Bon Houngan Yabofe. Spring 2009.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ A culminating point in a Vodou ceremony where a spirit is believed to descend from the spirit and temporarily resides in the human. The spiritual entity then interacts with the humans and the “possessed” person has no recollection of the experience.

serve intercessory spirits (the pwen of Vodou), but it is important to note that all ceremonies are understood by believers as service to God.

The origin of the negative stereotypes of Vodou in the United States stems from the U.S. occupation of Haiti from 1915-1934 under Woodrow Wilson.⁴⁶ U.S. Marines stationed in Haiti observed Vodou ceremonies and the “magical” components of ritual practice were grossly misunderstood. Many of these Marines later wrote “memoirs” about their experiences in Haiti. The representations of Vodou were exaggerated and sensationalized and turned into fictional and highly racist accounts describing “Voodoo orgies, cannibalism, child sacrifice, and zombification.”⁴⁷ The texts were published in the United States and due to their immense sensational appeal, became the foundation for a new lucrative genre of “Voodoo-themed” American Hollywood film. As a result, negative perceptions about “Voodoo” or Vodou (preferred spelling by practitioners) have had far-reaching impact in the American imagination.

It is within this historical and cultural framework that I place the primary focus of this dissertation, which is an examination of the elusive concept in Haitian Vodou ritual context known as pwen—“Elusive,” partly because the precise nature of what in the Vodou ritual is referred to as “magical” is challenging to isolate and describe. “Elusive” and complex best describes how the history of Haiti and Haitian Vodou has made research difficult, as practitioners have been persecuted for generations by other religious groups, ongoing discrimination is waged against practitioners, and there remains a preponderance of misconceptions about Vodou in popular culture. The historical to present-day persecution of

⁴⁶ U.S. Occupation of Haiti began in 1915 and ended in 1934. Like the interventionist policies of the 20th century, President Woodrow Wilson sent the U.S. Marines to Haiti to maintain peace, economic, and political stability after the assassination of the Haitian president.

⁴⁷ Wirkus, Faustin. *The White King of La Gonaves*. 1931.

practitioners by other religions and the multitude of misconceptions in popular culture about the religion have made the faithful largely distrustful and guarded toward outsiders. Once befriended, many vodouisants remain reluctant and secretive about their beliefs and practices. Before, during and after interviews, I encountered many vodouisants who requested anonymity. This is especially true for non-Haitian initiates of Vodou. The most secretive of these people are international professionals—doctors, lawyers, and teachers—who traveled to Haiti to initiate. Although they actively use their “konesans” or knowledge in their work, they fear discrimination in their home countries, thus, keeping their Vodou beliefs secret, including their mambo and houngan identities.

Another challenge to clarity in the research process and productivity is the pervasive variations of spelling of Creole (Kreyol) Vodou words due to a very variable and flexible system of accepted spelling of Kreyol Vodou words. Sometimes, they are spelled from a French phonetics system, sometimes Kreyol. I have attempted to duplicate what I perceive as authentic uses and have attempted to minimize variations in spelling. Some inconsistencies do occur, however. Keep in mind, these inconsistencies are purposeful and are linked to specific informants and sources, not my own.

The focus of the dissertation is to define “pwen” or “magic,” as it is known in Haitian Vodou, through an examination of pwen-like manifestations inside and outside the ritual context. The goal is to ultimately gain a deeper and fuller understanding of the religious practice of Haitian Vodou through the study of pwen. To accomplish this goal, I draw largely from my observations and experiences encountered during my field work in Haiti and in the United States as both initiate and practitioner of Haitian Vodou. Equally important, is my Catholic faith. The

course of this research led me to the decision to convert to Catholicism in 2009. In effect, this dissertation is a coalescence of my real-time and scholarly research, which at the time of this writing, has taken over 15 years, placed within a cultural, historical, and literary framework—all from the unique perspective of participant-observer.

The discovery process of pwen in this dissertation is revealed through its chapters. In each chapter, a new “aspect” on pwen is discussed. The illustrative centerpiece of the dissertation, which is referenced throughout all chapters, is the Haitian Vodou initiation ceremony (kanzo), which is the largest and strongest pwen in Vodou. The organization of the dissertation is as follows: Chapter 1 includes three parts: “Introduction to Pwen,” “Interview with a Mambo” and “Misconceptions, Animal Sacrifice and Aggressive Pwen in Haitian Vodou.” The overall goal of the first part of the chapter, “Introduction to Pwen,” is to introduce the idea of pwen to the reader. It also defines and establishes parameters for what pwen is and what it is not. Generally speaking, this chapter is both theoretical and anecdotal in its approach. “Interview with a Mambo” includes a unique series of transcribed interviews between myself and a mambo asogwe, who is also my initiatory mother, Mambo Racine. She brings a wealth of understanding to this research, as she has over 10 years of house leadership experience in Haiti. These interviews present both questions and responses about diverse topics relating to pwen and offer valuable insight. The third part of Chapter 1, “Misconceptions, Animal Sacrifice and Aggressive Pwen in Haitian Vodou,” presents and explains some of the negative stereotypes and misguided perceptions about Vodou, clarifies common practices concerning animal sacrifice, as well as discusses a few dangerous and aggressive types of pwen.

Chapter 2, “Historical Overview of Haitian Vodou,” gives historical context to pwen and

Haitian Vodou. The first part examines West and Central African origins, noting several important beliefs and motifs that relate directly to pwen and transferred (unchanged) to the New World and can be observed in the modern Haitian Vodou ceremony today. Broad, but significant links between Vodou and African theology are discussed, followed by visual motifs that are perpetuated in Vodou and reflect their African heritage. This preservation of African roots is shown to be particularly evident in initiatory ritual objects, illustrated with descriptions and explanations of my initiatory pwen. Another component in this chapter concerns the spiritual entities that originated in Africa and transferred intact to Vodou. It is also in this chapter that the spiritual entities and their rites or relations to each other are discussed. The rites of the Haitian Vodou ceremony presented in this part of the dissertation are Rada and Gede. They are the oldest spiritual entities in Vodou and have precise and traceable African origins.⁴⁸ Linguistic origins are also examined as the language and liturgy of Vodou reflect a powerful African heritage, again traceable to specific ethnic groups.

The second part of the historical overview chapter deals with the influences that shaped Haitian Vodou once Africans encountered Europeans and arrived on the shores of Hispaniola. These influences are presented in a chronological sequence believed to match the order that the slaves encountered them. The strongest influence on Haitian Vodou from this time, readily visible in today's Vodou, is Roman Catholicism. The Catholic influence stems from Louis XIV's French Code Noir of 1685⁴⁹ that required all slaves to be baptized Catholic. Church precepts

⁴⁸ The three traditional rites of Vodou are Rada, Petwo and Gede. Rada and Gede are of African origin, Petwo is New World origin.

⁴⁹ *Le Code Noire le recueil des règlements rendus jusqu'à présent*. Paris: Perrault, 1767. Reproduced by the Société d'Histoire de la Guadeloupe, 1980. Translated version by John Garrigus, <http://www.s3.wp.wsu.edu/uploads/sites/1205/2016/02/code-noir.pdf>. Accessed April 10, 2020.

were not taught to slaves, as they did not speak French. The slaves found comfort and meaning in the rich iconography of the Catholic Church, as some Catholic spiritual entities shared imagery and characteristics with the deities of Africa. This resulted in a “creolization” of religious imagery, where Catholic iconography is freely shared with African and Creole lwa. The Creole lwa also have their rites, known as “Petwo.” Many of these lwa are famous people (ancestors) that were involved with Haiti’s revolution and fight for independence.

One striking (often overlooked) influence on the development of Haitian Vodou is the role of Amerindian religious traditions practiced by the native Taino, Caribe, and Arawak people of precolonial Hispaniola. Many Taino connections persist in Vodou today. The most striking vestige can be seen in the shared belief in objects and drawings that are “living.” In Vodou, these living objects and images are generically all referred to as “pwen,” but the drawings or sacred cosmograms of Vodou, conceived and drawn by mambos and houngans to honor spiritual entities, have a more precise name of “veve.” Native Amerindian tradition also had enlivened objects and drawings. Both were known as “zemi.” This chapter shows how the zemi’s earth motifs of design and material are mirrored in the pwen of Vodou. Additionally, this chapter illustrates how Amerindian traditions and Vodou hold similar theological beliefs concerning death.

The next development presented in Chapter 2, which significantly impacted Haitian Vodou, was the popularity of 18th-century European occultism and freemasonry during the colonial era. Both practices were widespread “pastimes” for the leisurely French plantation owners. As house slaves were ever-present, they learned and adapted these new European ideas into their evolving practice of Haitian Vodou. Attention is given to explain how these influences

are manifest in the modern-day practice of Vodou. This component of Vodou is quite popular among international practitioners of witchcraft and controversial among critics of Vodou. The final and remarkable event examined in Chapter 2 is the famous ceremony at Bois Caiman in 1791 that some scholars⁵⁰ assert jump-started the Haitian Revolution. The ceremony, the participants, the role of “pwen” or magic in the ceremony and the consequences of this event are discussed here.

Chapter 3 elucidates understanding of pwen from a western and Christian perspective as comparisons and contrasts are made between Roman Catholic mysticism and Haitian Vodou pwen. Specifically, this chapter focuses on devotions and prayer service for the Roman Catholic Virgin Mary, the mother of Jesus and the Haitian Vodou lwa, Erzuli Freda, who is a powerful and popular female water spirit of Vodou associated with love, beauty, and prosperity. The chapter presents how these two spiritual entities share common iconography (in this case, images of the Catholic Mater Dolorosa) and are venerated. The Vodou examples presented highlight the significance of altars, the role and function of songs and offerings made to Erzuli Freda, as well as profound individual veneration, such as marriage between a human and a lwa or spiritual entity. The Virgin Mother, the image of purity and quintessential motherhood, is beloved for her gentleness and continuous quiet acceptance and trusting despite the suffering and loss of her son, Jesus. Examples of veneration for Mary presented are devotions such as praying the rosary and the celebratory event in May known as the May Crowning.

Chapter 4 deals with manifestations of pwen and pwen-inspired representations in

⁵⁰ This refers to the claim that the Bois Caiman ceremony never happened. This is discussed in detail later, in Chapter 2.

Haitian magical realism literature. The work used in this discussion is “Les arbres musiciens” by Jacques Stephen Alexis. The Vodou concept of pwen is prevalent in this work, as this topic is a frequently appearing and unique cultural component of Haitian magical realism. Of particular importance is the way that the author renders the idea or feeling of pwen in his work, which occurs primarily in his literal descriptions of people, places, things, and events. Pwen is never overtly named, but it is inferred. The depictions of the people, spaces, and objects of Vodou—in the deka tradition, which is one of several variations of Vodou practiced in Haiti today—are highly detailed and accurate. Purposefully, Alexis visually leads the reader through a series of spaces. He fluidly switches between literal and figurative language in a way that augments key personalities, objects, or words, relevant to pwen and the ritual at hand. His representations not only illustrate pwen in action but reveal a great deal about the practice, beliefs, and systems at work in the Vodou ceremony. The centerpiece of the discussion in this chapter is the dramatic portrayal of the people, objects, places, and actions that take place during a fictional (deka) Vodou ceremony.

Chapter 5 closes the dissertation with an impressive example of real-time Vodou magic via a *wanga* or “spell” commissioned by me, done by Loulou,⁵¹ the resident medsen fey (literally translates as “leaf doctor”) of the Roots Without End Society in Jacmel, Haiti in December 2008. This wanga was a result of my desire to observe and document different types of Vodou ceremonies while in Haiti conducting field research. Prior to departure, I discussed my objective with Mambo Racine, the head mambo of this Vodou house. She suggested I commission some of the Roots Without End house members to do private magical work, as many were very

⁵¹ Jean Louis is his real name, alias Loulou Prince.

competent. I came to find out that “money-making wangas” were one of several magical specializations of Loulou Prince,⁵² the resident medsen fey. As a full-time graduate student, raising two young children in the midst of an economic recession, I decided to commission Loulou to do a money-making wanga to help my husband increase his earning potential. All details, including the cost, were negotiated prior to my departure via several three-way telephone conversations between me, Loulou, and Mambo Racine. When I arrived in Haiti, one month later, Loulou told me he had been visited by a specific lwa (spirit) in a dream, who showed him the necessary procedure and materials for the wanga. I relate my experience as participant-observer, through a detailed account of this dynamic, unexpected, and perhaps even a bit frightening example of pwen in action. Additionally, important details about how a medsen fey is made, their function in Vodou society, and how their prominence reflects a strikingly Vodou-centric worldview are presented.

⁵² Loulou Prince is a “stage name” used on the Internet for virtual spell work. His real name is Jean Louis. There is much more about him in Chapter 5.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION TO PWEN IN ACTION

Honor and respect to my initiatory Mama and Papa, Mambo Racine and Houngan Wolmer of the Racine Sans Bout peristyle in Jacmel, Haiti!⁵³

My Vodou initiation occurred in December-January 2009. It was during this time that I came to understand the concept of pwen in ritual practice. These experiences were preceded by five years of academic research of Vodou and related subjects. I have documented my experiences and interviews with international as well as initiated Haitian hounsi, mambos, hougans both asogwe and su pwen. A number of the vodouisants I interviewed are members of the Roots Without End Society of Jacmel, Haiti. Most of the Haitian membership of Roots Without End Society speak Creole and only a few can read and write. All understand spoken French, but very little English. The interviews of Haitians were conducted by me in French or Creole. Responses were generally in Creole. I also interviewed Kathy S. Grey, also known as Mambo Racine, of the Roots Without End Society (Racine Sans Bout Sosyete) and several initiatory siblings, all of whom have chosen to remain anonymous. Mambo Kathy, or “Mama” as I call her, is my initiatory mother and a seasoned mambo who lived in Haiti, practicing Vodou for 10 years. My interviews with her and other international members were conducted in English. Songs or explanations were given in Creole, French, or English, depending on the linguistic preference of the interviewee. English translations of Vodou songs are Kathy’s and reproduced here with her permission.

⁵³ In Vodou, it is proper etiquette to honor your initiatory mama and papa whenever you reference them.

The most elucidating information about pwen stems from the series of telephone interviews with Kathy during spring-summer 2010, my two excursions of field research, the first in December-January 2009 and later in December-January 2011. The concept of pwen, which is important in Haitian Vodou, is presented here as it is interpreted or understood by me as a result of the many interviews, observations, field experiences with Vodou, and personal experience as a practitioner. The goal of this chapter is to develop a functional understanding of pwen inside ritual context. A definition of pwen developed here in the following ways: by demonstrating general characteristics of pwen, showing how it can be seen, and for what situations pwen is created or activated; through explaining how it is believed to work; giving examples of pwen that is made; discussing what pwen can do, as well as why someone would want to make or use one. The first portion of this discussion intends to analyze and interpret pwen. The second part of this chapter presents “Interview with a Mambo,” which is a series of transcribed questions and responses asked of Mambo Racine about pwen by me. The final section presents information about misconceptions of Vodou and darker aspects of pwen. The hope is to help define a subject that by nature is difficult to define. Understanding Haitian Vodou, albeit through an analysis of pwen or any other means, can inform and enlighten those interested in Haiti.

One recurrent challenge to the research of pwen is that there is a highly negative association of pwen in the minds of some Vodou practitioners. This group is dominantly non-Haitian and American and many regard pwen as “evil” and view it only in terms of the

“wargas,”⁵⁴ done by Francois Duvalier⁵⁵ with the intent of tormenting dissidents and controlling the masses. This view is certainly valid, as Duvalier’s crimes (psychological, physical, and spiritual) against humanity are well documented. While it is true that powerful, frightening types of pwen do exist and Duvalier clearly exploited Vodou belief, this perspective held by international initiates is reactive and limiting. Magic in Vodou is not “immoral” and Haitian practitioners do not perceive pwen as inherently evil. Magical practice in Vodou must be just as aggressive as it is protective. In other words, to be considered competent, one must be skilled in both good and dark practices.

One observation that specifically pertains to foreign or outsider-practitioners is that the “blan” (commonly used word for outsiders, literally means “whitey”) vodouisants often need to *learn* how to open their minds and bodies to access pwen. In contrast, Haitians growing up around Vodou naturally accept and harmonize their physical, emotional, and spiritual states in a way that they can access pwen readily and with ease. Possession in Vodou, or “being ridden by the lwa,” is the quintessential example of pwen. During possession, the person’s body becomes a pwen for the lwa to enter and communicate with the people at the ceremony. The person has no memory of the possession and the state is marked by wild dancing and “stylized” behaviors or speaking that indicate a specific and recognizable lwa. The congregants recognize the lwa and welcome him or her with regalia, food, and drink. The lwa will converse with people at the ceremony and then leave. The person who has been “ridden” is left feeling disoriented,

⁵⁴ Spell or magical ceremony.

⁵⁵ Francois Duvalier, (Papa Doc) dictator for life in Haiti, 1957-1971, president in 1957 winning on a populist and Black Nationalist platform. Duvalier is known for his totalitarian and despotic regime and for militarizing the police, the Tonton Macoutes, Duvalier silenced his opponents by horrific acts of violence and/or “death. Duvalier used Haitian Vodou to manipulate the public.

exhausted and without memory of the entire event. It was explained to me by my Mama and Papa Kanzo that the manipulation of pwen is not necessarily *learned*, but kinetically “felt” from others who can do it well. If you come from outside Haiti, it is recommended to return as frequently as you can to absorb the “feeling” of allowing possession or “the movement” of pwen as it enters the body. This ability is desirable among practitioners.

In the simplest terms, pwen can be defined as focusing energy, which then converges and sets other desired actions into motion. It is believed that individuals can cultivate, hold, or capture pwen in a variety of ways. One common object that holds pwen (when “assembled”) is a *zin*, or a three-legged cauldron. Figure 1 is a picture of a zin, courtesy of Kathy S. Grey, of the Roots Without End Society.



Figure 1. Zin courtesy of Kathy S. Grey⁵⁶

The Zin is a ritual object used during Vodou ceremonies, most notably the *brule zin* ceremony of kanzo (Vodou initiation). Brule zin is a fire-purification ritual where the *neophyte's* (“unborn” person’s) hands and feet are placed in boiling millet and flames by the houngan or mambo directing the kanzo. Figures 2 and 3 are pictures of brule zin from kanzos that occurred

⁵⁶ Grey, Kathy. Roots Without End Society. Brule zin ceremony. 2004.

at the Roots Without End peristyle.⁵⁷



Figure 2. Hounsi tending the fire under the zin⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Greenough-Hodges, K. Field Work. 2009, 2010.

⁵⁸ Greenough-Hodges, K. My 2009 kanzo. Jacmel, Haiti.



Figure 3. Author's foot being purified in brule zin⁵⁹

The zin has a floating wick, made of raw cotton placed on two crossed pieces of sugar cane, sticks, or bamboo. It is filled with “lwil maskrati,” or castor oil and other things, such as herbal infusions or goat brains. One can use whatever one would like, but it must be water soluble. This is because the “ingredients” must stay at the bottom, while the oil floats to the top. The lamp is required to burn for a prescribed⁶⁰ period. Often, the person attending the lamp will refill the oil one to two times a day. The brule zin holds pwen as long as it is lit. During this public ceremony, pwen is believed to transfer into the initiates' bodies via their hands and feet and spiritually cleanses them with fire. This pwen is one of many that occur during kanzo in the “making” of initiates.

Another common object in Vodou that holds pwen is the hand-crafted spirit bottle or

⁵⁹ Greenough-Hodges, K. My 2009 Kanzo. Jacmel, Haiti. (Taken by a house member).

⁶⁰ Secret ritual information for initiates only.

“boutey lwa.” They are used to invoke specific deities for a particular personal need or desire or occasion and can be made by oneself or in a group. Pwen making is a meditational activity, where vodouisants sing songs for lwa, simultaneously wrapping empty bottles in fabric, decorating them with embellishments in various materials, colors, and textures that are associated with a specific spiritual entity. Color and fabric choices are individual preference, but must correspond to uniform associations with the spirit. These associations originated in Africa and are learned over time. Completed boutey lwa are placed on one’s home altar or “pe” and used as pwen to venerate or attract specific lwa for work.

Figures 4-7 are images of some *boutey lwa* made by my initiatory sister, Mambo Ke Kontan. Figure 4 is for Danbala, the sacred serpent. The prominent feature of this design for Danbala is the monochromatic color scheme, which infers purity and the spring flowers (also white with a touch of green) suggest birth or creation.



Figure 4. Danbala boutey lwa by Mambo Ke Kontan⁶¹

Figure 5 is for Ste-Jacques, known in Vodou as Ogou, the lwa of the Haitian Revolution. It is embellished in blue, red (colors of the Haitian flag), and gold (denotes power and bounty) with the corresponding Roman Catholic image of Saint George (shared Vodou and Catholic iconography). Mambo Ke Kontan made the Danbala and Ogou boutey to cultivate peace.

⁶¹ Boutey made and documented by Mambo Ke Kontan. Massachusetts. 2011.



Figure 5. Ste-Jacques boutey lwa made by and photo by Mambo Ke Kontan⁶²

The third image (Figure 6) shows a boutey lwa for Lasirèn. Mambo Ke Kontan made this boutey lwa with the hopes of improving her personal clairvoyance and dream interpretation. The dominant blue color represents the blue of the ocean. The flowers are suggestive of creation. The blue, white, and red flowers evoke associations with other spirits connected to Lasirèn. The blue flowers are her husband, Agwe, master of the sea. The white flowers are Danbala, a kindred water spirit, and the red flowers are Ogou, who has a romantic connection to Lasirèn. Binding of the fabric is particularly visible on the boutey Danbala and Lasirèn. Binding is done as a meditational activity in the making of the pwen, and it is typical of ritual objects in Vodou.

⁶² Boutey is made and photo was taken by Mambo Ke Kontan. Massachusetts. 2011.



Figure 6. Boutey lwa for Lasirèn made by Mambo Ke Kontan⁶³

This last image of a boutey lwa is for Simbi Makaya, a very mystical spirit who leads the dead. Mambo Ke Kontan made it to honor an unborn child I lost in 2011. The striking feature in this boutey is the red, yellow, and white color scheme, which originates in Africa. Also, the delicate, transparent, and flowing quality of the fabric parallels the character of Simbi, known to be a mystical and highly secretive spirit inhabiting freshwater.

⁶³ Boutey made and photo taken by Mambo Ke Kontan. Massachusetts. 2011.



Figure 7. Boutey lwa made for Simbi Makaya by Mambo Ke Kontan⁶⁴

Pwen is considered fully in force when the form, shape, or other properties of an object or subject change as a result of a ceremony that created the pwen. An example of this can be seen during a love or calabash (a Haitian gourd) wanga (spell), where the materials begin in one form, such as raw fruit, plants, herbs, new candles, oil, and rum. By the end of the wanga, or after all ritual activity and the pwen is said to be “tied” (finished), the ingredients change to a different form. They are either cooked, or through ritual, they magically transform into a new form. Sometimes, offerings no longer exist at all, as they are consumed. It should be noted that consumption is usually, but not always, energetic. An example of this is a common ancestral feast, where food and drink are placed on an altar. People do not consume the altar food; it is for the ancestral dead (les morts). Altar candles are allowed to burn out naturally, indicating when

⁶⁴ Mambo Ke Kontan. Made and photographed Boutey Simbi Makaya in Massachusetts, 2011.

the meal is finished. Although the food physically appears untouched, it is considered energetically consumed or “empty.” The food is then removed, ritually disposed of, and dishes are cleaned. The belief is that “living” food spiritually energizes the ancestors and promotes goodwill between the living and dead.

Interview with a Mambo

The following are excerpts from a large collection of song recordings and telephone interviews conducted by me with Mambo Kathy (my initiatory mother). These occurred between the years of 2009-2010. After my kanzo, I wanted to learn more about Vodou, but was separated by geography from my house members to learn through day-to-day practice. As a result, Kathy and I agreed to have recorded telephone conversations about Vodou twice a week for one year. I created a master list of questions specifically about pwen and I worked my way through them all. I asked her the questions in English and Mama answered me in English or Creole. All of Mambo Racine’s responses appear here transcribed by me in her original spoken language. These “interviews” were not traditional in the American sense, as Mama did not always directly answer the question. Sometimes, she would burst into singing a Vodou song (in Creole) or tell me an anecdotal story (in English, peppered with Creole) as a response to a question. What I came to understand (years later) was that this process was and continues to be her way of educating me. I am her “petit fey” (little leaf, meaning child by initiation) and she is teaching me to find purpose and meaning in the complex, layered, and nuanced world of Vodou as Haitians do, via song, parable, or anecdote. Kathy was gracious to give me translations from Creole/Kreyol to English as needed.

Kathy S. Grey, *Bon Mambo Racine Sa Te La Da Gine*,⁶⁵ interviewed by Kimberly Greenough-Hodges, *Bon Mambo Sonde le Miwa Sa Te La Da Gine*.

What is pwen?

(Kathy Grey) Pwen implies a spiritual or magical focus. It could be a ceremony, a lwa (spiritual entities that are believed to populate the world of Vodou), a magical object, a magical spell, a song, a dance, a particular pattern of veneration-serving the ancestors (all that are dead—family members, sometimes actual ancestors, more commonly, not) every Monday three weeks in a row. It is essentially something that focuses energy. Kanzo, or initiation, is the biggest pwen in Vodou. It goes on for almost two weeks; people pray, sing, cook, dance, nurture, cultivate and prepare herbs, fabricate objects, play instruments—all to cultivate energy for the new initiates. A non-ritual use of the term pwen exists in Haitian culture too. Specifically, personal power of non-initiates can be a type of pwen. If a Haitian had a car wreck and the person walks away untouched—one could say “*Se pwen cap travay*,” which means that a person’s pwen or luck kept them from harm.

What can Pwen Do?

(KG) Pwen does what you want it to. Again, think about a magnifying glass—you can either view small objects or burn hole in paper. The power or efficacy of the pwen is relevant to the spiritual strength of the houngan or mambo who is directing it. Some pwen is created, such as a magical spell or magical object. A lwa,⁶⁶ however, is not created. Lwa existed before people came along—specifically those lwa of principals, such as ⁶⁷Marassa. One could create pwen by

⁶⁵ Interviews with Kathy S Grey. Spring-summer 2010-2011.

⁶⁶ Lwa—spiritual entity that populates the spirit world in Vodou.

⁶⁷ Marassa—lwa entity that embodies opposite forces that balance; often symbolized by twins.

putting together the following: a machete, rum, sacrifice, image, altar, light candles. One would say, “Ou ap se pwen” (You are making a pwen.)

What are Examples of Objects that Hold Pwen?

(KG) Any sort of object can hold pwen, such as a bottle, three-legged cauldron (zin) all wrapped up, machete with spiritual energy invested in it, jewelry . . . like a ring.

How Long Does “Created” Pwen Stay?

(KG) It depends on how good the practitioner is and the nature of the pwen made. For example, the altar can be taken down, but the Iwa, Ogou, still exists. You can disassemble the pwen and the effects of the service still function. Another example is Haitian love magic where the magic wears off. In Creole, one illustrates this by saying, “Pwen ou vente.” However, a kanzo lasts forever, unless you spoil it, such as by having sex within the 41 days after you kanzo. In Haitian Kreyol, one would say, “Ou gate pwen ou.” In addition to kanzo, magic packets (ritual objects that are made during kanzo by members for new initiates to later take home for their own altar [pe]) are types of pwen that last forever.

In Haitian Culture, is Pwen Conceived of as Positive or Negative?

(KG) In Haitian culture, pwen is a neutral concept. Pwen can be viewed in terms of power that can be applied in some way. In a society where basic needs are largely unmet, “others” are seen as competitors rather than cooperators. So, a pwen can be seen as something to “get” or potentially dangerous to the person who does not own it. This brings to mind George Foster’s image of limited good.

Kathy’s reference comes from the April 1965 edition of *American Anthropology*: 293-315. In this source, he says:

that broad areas of peasant behavior are patterned in such a fashion as to suggest that peasants view their social, economic and natural universes (?)—their total environment— as one which all of the desired things in life such as land, wealth, health, friendship and love, manliness and honor, respect and status, power and influence, security and safety, exist in finite quantity and are always in short supply (emphasis original), as far as the peasant is concerned. Not only do these and all other “good things” exist in finite and limited quantities, but in addition there is no way directly within peasant power to improve the available quantities . . .” Good” like land is seen as inherent in nature, there to be divided and re-divided, if necessary, but not to be augmented. (296)

Basically, if you have more wealth, then I have less. Pwen is looked at in similar terms as this.

Can a Spirit be Harnessed into a Pwen?

(KG) Lwa, djab, ⁶⁸ beneficial lwa, animals and deceased persons can all be claimed.

“Demonic” ⁶⁹ entities can be claimed as well. It is believed that aggressive, powerful magic brings wealth. (If you know the secret, you can control it; if not, watch out.) There are lots of claims of “strong pwen.” Houngans and mambos are very competitive about it. There is a Kreyol song in which the lyrics read: (This year, they send the dead after me; every year I send it back)

⁷⁰This song suggests that the mambos and houngans are “throwing” pwen back and forth.

This is especially true in communities where there is desperation. The competition is strong. In Port-au-Prince, everyone is desperate and every street corner has a houngan or mambo. Death is attributed to supernatural evil cause. There is a lot of blaming among houngans and mambos for things that are not magically caused. The world is seen as a dangerous place. It is a good idea to have an evil spirit to do dangerous work for you. In Jacmel, where things are less

⁶⁸ Djab—another spiritual entity that inhabits the Vodou spirit world. Djabs are not “recognized” or “stylized” lwa. They are “wild cards,” meaning they can be any deceased person or energy. They are spontaneous and wild in possession of humans and are sometimes called “devils,” as this Kreyol word comes from the French word “diable.” They are not believed to be “demons” in a Christian sense of the word.

⁶⁹ “Demonic” entity—this Christian concept does exist in Vodou, but understood to be frighteningly powerful rather than evil.

⁷⁰ Mambos and houngans “throw points” at each other as a witty way to criticize each other in clever song lyrics.

desperate, the hougans and mambos are more cooperative. There is, in fact, an organized group of hougans and mambos that sponsor the biggest Fet Gede. They discuss issues, polemics. They have meetings.⁷¹ Occasionally, there is a fight, but it is considered that a powerful houngan or mambo will not be in conflict. Power plus no conflict = harmonious and well-regulated houngan or mambo.⁷²

Tell me about Pwen in the Haitian Revolution

(KG) The story that hougans and mambos tell is a little different than the story presented by standard historians. For one, there were two ceremonies that immediately preceded the Haitian Revolution at Bois Caiman. The ceremonies were two weeks apart. One was political and the other was spiritual. Black people in Haiti at that time were largely born in Africa, not in Haiti. They were trained African soldiers, and many were holy men and women of their respective nations.

How Does Pwen fit In?

(KG) They had magical beliefs that protected them from gunfire. They had cow tails (pwen) that they waved, and thus, rendered the French weapons useless. The type of weaponry, terrain, skill of French soldiers were all variables. Nonetheless: They believed in their pwen and the legend grew.

The story surrounding Bois Caiman is, in part, well known. The story goes that there was a ceremony led by a Haitian mambo. There was a sacrifice of a black pig, they partook in blood,

⁷¹ Fet Gede—Large feast day of Vodou, celebrated on November 2, similar to Day of the Dead. Celebration of the Gede, a family of spirits, guardians of the dead. The best-known are Papa Gede and his wife Maman Brigitte. The Gede are symbolized as skeletons, smoking cigars, wearing top hats, Masonic regalia and are known for having an incredibly bawdy sense of humor. Their colors are purple and black.

⁷² Interview via telephone with Mambo Racine, Spring 2010.

marked foreheads . . . all of which is a huge pwen. A story that was related to me by another houngan asogwe is that there were 21 nations of Africans represented in these ceremonies. It is believed that together they unified their magical abilities and created a huge pwen that set the revolution in motion. The result of the pwen was the Haitian Revolution, but the revolutionary spirit that spread forth into the rest of the New World. Remember that Simon de Bolivar in his revolutionary days came to Haiti for financial and military reinforcements. Also, it should be noted that many Haitians went to fight in the U.S. Revolutionary War. Houngans and mambos will cite these examples and explain that one very big problem in Haiti is that the pwen (the big one, made by the 21 nations of Africans) is still in effect; thus, the continual political strife. It is believed to be an irreconcilable problem, as the magical abilities of those African mystics present will likely never be known.

Can you Think of Direct Reference to Pwen in Songs and How to Explain the Meaning to Non-initiates?

(KG) One well-known petro song for Legba (lwa of the crossroads) is:

*Salywe Legba e,
Legba nan Petwo, salywe Legba e!
Salywe Legba e,
Legba nan Petwo, salywe Legba e!
Si nou te konnen,
Nou tut tap fe pou ko nou.*

Salut to you Legba oh
Legba in Petwo, salut to you Legba oh!
Salut to you Legba oh,
Legba in Petwo, salut to you Legba oh!
If you all knew how,
You would do it for yourselves.

What this song refers to is the mechanics or tradition of learning how to make pwen inside a Vodou house. It says you must ask someone who knows how to make pwen to do it for

you, because invoking and directing pwen is sacred knowledge.

Here is a song for the magical Erzulie Mapiangue, the lwa of newborn and unborn babies. This song reflects her selective accessibility, meaning she is accessible to all people to a certain degree. Although she is completely accessible to initiates as a pwen:

*Erzulie O, m pral rele pwen an,
Erzulie Mapian O, m pral rele pwen an,
Mwen gin yon lwa ki dancer nan
Tet moin si ti neg konnen nom li
Map fe yo gado pwen an!*

Erzulie O, I'm calling on the "pwen,"
Erzulie Mapian O, I'm calling on the "pwen,"
I have a lwa that dances in my head,
If they know the name I'll let them have the "pwen!"

Here is another for Simbi Andezo, an elusive, mystical, water spirit. This song indicates strong healing magic, and a close relation between the living and the dead, things associated with this lwa:

*Simbi Andezo!
Sa ki fe yo pa vle we mwen,
Yo poko konnen mwen.
Simbi Andezo!
Sa ki fe yo pa vle we mwen,
Yo poko konnen mwen.
Yo bay mwen pwen a,
se pou m mache la nwit, O!
Yo bay mwen pwen a,
se pou m mache la nwit, O!
Simbi Andezo!
Sa ki fe yo pa vle we mwen,
Yo poko konnen mwen.*

Simbi Andezo!
The reason why they don't want to see me,
Is because they don't yet know me.
Simbi Andezo!

The reason why they don't want to see me,
Is because they don't yet know me.
They gave me the magic spell (pwen),
it's so that I can walk at night, oh!
They gave me the magic spell (pwen),
it's so that I can walk at night, oh!
Simbi Andezo!
The reason why they don't want to see me,
Is because they don't yet know me.

Can Pwen Exist in Found Objects? Or What Folkloric Beliefs Are There in Haiti About Pwen?

(KG) Of the found objects that can hold pwen, stones or rocks often have significance. To explain this type of pwen, I will tell you the story of Solen's pwen. In my house, my initiatory brother, hounsi Solen had a dark, round rock the size of an egg with a long, white, wiggly occlusion. To him it was Danbala,⁷³ the lwa or creation, typified as the beneficent serpent and Solen believed Danbala lived in the rock. Solen's brother became jealous of Solen's Danbala pwen, and this conflict came to blows. It was a brutal fight and Solen's brother won. He then took the pwen to the Dominican Republic while Solen remained in Haiti. Later, Solen's brother was killed in a freak accident in the DR by an electric shock from a cord or wire (think angry Danbala). It was believed that Solen's pwen was responsible. This story has persisted for years in the Jacmel Vodou community.

Another sort of "charged" object found in nature is wood that is struck lightening. It is considered a blessing to have this happen in proximity to a peristyle, as it promotes and heightens the spiritual activity within the space and for the people inside it.

In Haitian Vodou, there are also unusual stories about meteor and meteorites that have

⁷³ Danbala—Iwa symbolized as serpent, egg, white and rainbow colors. The wife of Danbala is Ayida Wedo, symbolized by a mirror image snake, or rainbow. Also connected to St Patrick iconography. Danbala was explained to me by a Roots Without member as the "Holy Spirit."

struck Haiti. Pieces of the meteors or the meteorites are believed to have inherent pwen. Part of this is because of the heat that they generate (fact), but in Vodou, heat or “fe choffe” is a way to summon the lwa and heat, especially from unexplained “hot” natural phenomena, indicates lwa activity. Although there are few actual proven documented incidents of rocks from space falling and striking the earth, Caribbean people throughout the region as well as Haiti speak about this phenomenon. In fact, in the Iron Market in Port-au-Prince people will try to peddle arrowheads as “meteorites.”

Bones, especially human bones, have an inherent pwen, even when the person dies. The family often owns the graveyard, usually found at the backdoor. One year and one day, you do a ceremony to reclaim the spirit or pwen from “anba dlo” (under the water) and put the pwen (deceased person spirit) in a govi, which is a terra cotta pot with a lid, made specifically for the purpose in Haiti. Then, the govi is placed on the “pe” (altar) and the pwen will be fed and cared for as well as invoked to do work. Snake bones are particularly important (Danbala). There are not many snakes on Haiti nowadays—people have killed them. In the market, peddlers will try to sell you fish bones as though they are snake bones.

Dirt and soil have very strong pwen. There are numerous magical recipes with three pinches of dirt, seven pinches of dirt, . . . etc. The numbers three and seven are spiritually /magically significant, as they have associations with Christianity, European (18th-century French Grimoire “spell books”) and Breton Celtic maritime lore. There is an abundance of information about the where and when and how the dirt is collected as well as “how” to use it. The particularly “hot” dirt is from the grave at the foot of ⁷⁴Bawon Samedi’s cross. This type of

⁷⁴ Bawon Samedi is a lwa from the Gede family.

pwen from Bawon is very aggressive magic and very effective.

Can Clothes have Pwen?

(KG) Haitians love to do magic on clothes, but you have to know whose shoes or shirt it is. Often, a hair comb, article of clothing that has not been washed, is used. Sometimes, Haitians will steal the shoes of someone who is (for example) applying for the same job. Thus, you have the pwen (the shoes) and they don't get the job; you do.

What Other Unusual Folkloric Beliefs Involving Pwen Have you Heard?

(KG) In Jacmel, there is a belief among Haitians that jars of treasure or buried gold is buried in various places. It is difficult to find, however, because it is believed that the spirits move them—so they can't be found. People will occasionally exhibit old coins, not Spanish coins, but unusual. They claim these coins are from the “treasure.” The belief is that if you know the formula or spell, you can get them to raise up to the surface and “present” themselves. If you do the formula or spell wrong, the spirits will become vexed and bad things will befall you. A whole series of “dos” and “don'ts” are followed. The gold is seen to be African gold, or the unpaid wages of the forebearers of the individual who finds the gold.

Who Knows the Formula?

(KG) If you have your own “personal” pwen, you can ask the pwen to help you dream to recover it. There are some well-established people in Haiti who are believed to have made their fortune off this found gold.

What are the Darker Aspects of Pwen?

(KG) Some interesting mythology involving the El Rancho hotel and resort in Pétionville, a wealthier suburb outside Port-Au-Prince, and pwen. It is believed that men were

buried in the walls of the building to serve as spiritual watchmen. In the 1980s, UN human rights investigations were made into these stories.⁷⁵ What was told by the locals is that Duvalier publicly killed people, and then publicly bury the bodies in the foundation of building. In this way, they became spirit workers. Many allegations were made that Duvalier did this repeatedly. One example where he cast into concrete an entire country village, whom were then thrust into a foundation in Bellaire. . . . This is common knowledge. . . . Priests next door refused to celebrate mass until the place was consecrated and made into a grave.

This sort of pwen is called “live burial magic.” Duvalier engaged in this type of activity as a political attempt to prevent the return of Aristide. In 1994, right-wing houngans went out and killed some homeless people to make a sacrifice to also prevent the return of Aristide. This was investigated in the Artibonite.

The idea behind live burial magic is to create spirit workers. These can be people or animals, which you raise up from the dead, with a particular ceremony and ask them to work for you. This type of spirit worker is meant to be angry and ferocious. The more frightened and angrier the people/animals are before they die; the more ferocious the spirit worker. An example of this is the “baka,” which is either a calf or colt that is buried alive. The purpose is to “create” a monster. Sometimes, a family needs a totem piece or supernatural protector. They do not kill it; it needs to suffer. In death, the animal will change from a normal calf or colt to a fire-breathing, rip-snorting one.

Why Would Someone Want to Create Such a Ferocious Spirit Worker?

(KG) It was explained to me to imagine that the last three children have died. There have

⁷⁵ Mambo Racine worked for the United Nations as a Human Rights Violator Investigator in Haiti in the 1980s.

been armed robbers who stole everything. You go to the store with your last three miserable cents and can buy no food. Houngans can help. The world is seen as a scary place for most Haitians. They don't have guns, so they create a baka to protect the family compound.

Are There any Other Natural Objects with Pwen?

(KG) Seashells, univalves, called “lambi,” not bivalves, are believed to have pwen. At the start of Vodou ceremonies the Lambi is blown (like a horn). It calls the lwa, specifically Lasirèn, (the mermaid) as well as political and social action. It is also a battle trumpet and was commonly used as such during the Haitian Revolution.

Can Pwen Exist in Living Things?

Although this is not common, there was an incident where Kathy observed Loulou (resident medsen fey, herbalist, of the Racine Sans Bout Societé) do magic with a patch of vervain. She described it to me via interview in the following way:

First, he isolated the pwen from the other vervain, careful not to harm it. He drew a circle in ashes around a particular clump of vervain. He sweetly addressed it, sang to it, spoke sweetly what he wanted from it. He did all of this under the moonlight. He felt that there was a spirit in the vervain.

Can Pwen Exist in Animals?

(KG) In Haitian Vodou, animals do not become possessed and in and of themselves, they are not pwen—just animals. They can be used to make pwen, though. In Jacmel, there is a huge Sanpwel Bizango congregation whose leader became quite wealthy. He built a huge peristyle with wood carvings and when he served Lasirèn (mermaid), a big fish would swim up from the ocean into a stream and it would come up and jump. There are stories of “enchanted” fish, roosters, goat, and “strange” beings at night that take the form of an animal.

One such animal is called the lougarou. In French, it means werewolf, but in Kreyol, it

describes a “shape-shifter” that changes between human form and a large turkey. It is believed that the loulou are people who have been cursed in some way or other and have turned over to dark magic. The loulou can be male or female, although it is usually old and childless women. They are initially changed into a loulou via magical intervention and done against her will and without her consent. At night, when the person decides to undergo a transformation, they take off their skin and change into a large turkey-vulture . . . with red glowing eyes. They fly to the treetops and magically suck the life out of your kids. Sometimes, the skin can be found and you can fill it with salt. You shake the salt into it and the person coming back can’t put the skin on. They will fly back up into a tree and die when the sunlight hits them. Female loulou are believed to lay eggs to reproduce.

A head of a Vodou household is a pwen. The houngan says, “Se mwen pwen a ici” (I’m the pwen here). The role is the pwen, not the person. (You have good pwen) “Ou jan bon pwen.” A person who claims to be a good pwen is either a lunatic or houngan, as this is unusual usage of the concept. Lwa, paket, liturgy, wanga are all pwen. You can tie a pwen for somebody. You do not capture it, but invite it, and wrap it up nice.

Loulou tied a wanga for my husband to get more work several years back. I was a surrogate for my husband in this elaborate ceremony. Loulou, the medsen fey, wrapped up everything “nice” to keep it safe. What was on the outside was scary. This is similar to the kanzo in that the initiates are wrapped up and taken into the djévé.⁷⁶

⁷⁶ Details on this wanga appear in Chapter 5.

Misconceptions, Animal Sacrifice, and Aggressive Pwen in Haitian Vodou

It has been previously mentioned that Haitian Vodou is one of the most misunderstood religions in the world. According to Leslie Desmangles, in *The Faces of the Gods: Vodou and Roman Catholicism in Haiti*, most objections stem from the preponderance of magical practices in Vodou, such as spells, divination, and possession. Additionally, sometimes, the “sevis”⁷⁷ of the lwa requires that humans do things considered by some (Western internationals) as taboo. One example is animal sacrifice, which in Haiti, is a celebratory event where attendees are fed afterward. If money and livestock are available, sacrifice will be done regularly. Haitian Vodou asserts that the blood of the sacrificial animal “fe choffe” (heats up) the lwa. The life force contained in the fresh blood of an animal energetically nourishes or enlivens the lwa and is carefully contained in a calabash bowl and offered to the lwa on the *pe*, or altar. As a return, the lwa to whom the sacrifice is made repay the serviteurs with favors and requests made before the sacrifice. When preparing for a Vodou ceremony requiring a sacrifice, the animal is carefully selected according to its color, body type, and gender, as specified by the lwa being venerated. These associations are African in origin. An example of this is Bawon Samedi, a Gede lwa of the dead. Baron’s colors are black and purple and he prefers black male animals for sacrifice. Especially pleasing to Bawon is a black bull, which he claims by riding it (see Figure 8).

⁷⁷ Service.



Figure 8. Bawon rides his bull⁷⁸

Examples of lwa preference for animal sacrifice are as follows: Atibon Legba (Rada⁷⁹) likes speckled or white and red chickens. Erzulie Freda (Rada) prefers speckled or white chickens. Her sister Erzulie Danto (Petwo) prefers black chickens or a black female pig.⁸⁰ Simbi Makaya (Petwo), an important lwa for the Roots Without End Society, also prefers a black pig. Simbi Makaya is significant to the Roots Without End Society because *Makaya* is a parallel magical tradition to Vodou and many of the house members are practitioners. Here is one song that reflects the mystical and secretive character of this lwa:

*Papa Simbi, Simbi, Simbi Makaya
Houngan Pa Bondye, ou pa we
Milimine pou moun yo
M'achte balen nan, se pou'm pale a djab mwen
M'achte balen nan, se pou'm pale ak pwen mwe*

⁷⁸ Greenough-Hodges, K. Field work. 2010.

⁷⁹ Rites or nations of lwa indicate origin and relation.

⁸⁰ This is the lwa venerated at Bois Caiman.

Papa Simbi, Simbi, Simbi Makaya
Houngan By God, you do not see
I illuminate for people,
I bought my candle for me to talk to my djab,
I bought my candle to talk to my pwen,
Papa Simbi, Simbi, Simbi Makaya
Houngan By God, you do not see
I illuminate for people.

Figures 9 and 10 are images of a Simbi Makaya ceremony with animal sacrifice. Figure 9 shows a veve or sacred cosmogram indicating that the ceremony is for Simbi Makaya. Part of my mambo-in-training education requires I learn to draw accurate veve. This design was partly reproduced from a Haitian-drawn veve, but some elements and overall style was spontaneously inspired. The officiating houngan slightly adjusted my version before the ceremony began. He added extra pwen, shown as the asterisk or six-pointed stars.



Figure 9. Simbi Makaya veve⁸¹

⁸¹ Greenough-Hodges, K. Field Work. 2009.

Figure 10 shows Simbi's black pig, which was offered for sacrifice and killed on the veve. Recall that animal sacrifice is believed necessary for the lwa, as the blood is considered an energetic life force for them. In the course of a ceremony, the lwa will show "approval" of the animal to be sacrificed. This is seen when they either nip at the animal or suddenly kill it. Some lwa do not kill their own animals. In this case (seen in Figure 10 with Bawon), after the lwa accepts the animal, the congregants quickly kill it for him. Only the blood is saved for the lwa. The rest of the animal is cooked and eaten by the congregants. Chickens are commonly killed by having their necks wrung, whereas pigs, goats, and cattle are first pierced in the heart with a thin sharp knife, then the throats are slit. The blood is carefully drained from the body, collected in a calabash bowl, and placed on the altar.



Figure 10. Simbi Makaya black pig, tethered off to right during gestures indicating opening ceremonies⁸²

⁸² Houngans making sacred gestures opening a Vodou ceremony. Simbi Makaya pig is tethered behind.

When there is a sacrifice, the drums announce it to all of the people within earshot of the lakou or community. It is a joyful celebration, as food is given to all who come.⁸³ Treatment of sacrificial animals is as follows: The animal is purchased in the market, brought to the peristyle, fed and watered, and usually tethered nearby until it is the time in the ceremony to be presented to the lwa at the center pole. Before the ceremony, a great deal of attention is given to the animal, ritualistically preparing it for death. It is bathed, dried, sacred cosmograms (veves) are drawn on the animal's body, and either one individual (if the ceremony is one for hire) or the members of the congregation, each bless and caress the animal as a way to thank it for its death. Additionally, congregants whisper requests for God and the lwa in the animal's ear. These requests are varied and usually are thematically connected to the specific lwa being honored. An example would be asking a black bull for Ogou (lwa of masculinity and conquest) for success and improved vitality in one's life. These requests are believed to be fulfilled. They are considered a special grace allowed by God, given in exchange for the correctly done ceremony, genuine intent of the practitioners, and the necessary blood produced from the animal sacrifice that is believed to energize the lwa. Figure 11 shows a black bull in preparation for sacrifice.⁸⁴

⁸³ This is the practice at the Roots Without End Society.

⁸⁴ Greenough-Hodges, K. Field work. 2009.



Figure 11. Black bull for Bawon⁸⁵

During the course of the ceremony, the lwa will come in possession, claiming the animal to be sacrificed. Sometimes, “claiming” can be exhibited like Bawon Samedi, who “rides” his bull.⁸⁶ Other times, an individual in the congregation who serves a particular lwa being venerated, will stand up before the house, singing and dancing with the sacrificial animal(s) in hand or tethered to the *poto mitan* or center pole nearby. The lwa will often possess the singing congregant, who will then snatch up the animal and kill it. It should be noted the lwa are considered ancient beings. Thus, primitive behavior, such as biting off the head of a chicken or eating with fingers, is expected.

As previously mentioned, animals are (almost⁸⁷) always eaten after sacrifice. Rare

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Symbolic because he is sexual regeneration and he usually grinds/humps the bull.

⁸⁷ Animals sacrificed are usually eaten. A few examples of when this does not happen follow.

circumstances forbid the animals from human consumption. I have seen this in a wanga ceremony for Kalfou (Petwo), where the black chicken was consumed by fire, as the lwa required this type of energy to correct imbalances at work in the individual who commissioned the ceremony. Figure 12 shows an image of the “fire” chicken with Loulou the resident medsen fey of the Roots Without End Society putting castor oil on its back.



Figure 12. Chicken for Kalfou⁸⁸

Another example of an animal that was not consumed by humans was preceding my 2009 kanzo, where a djab⁸⁹ claimed Ogou’s intended goat and was, thus, not consumed. Figure 13 and 14 show pictures documenting this occurrence. Figure 13 presents Solen, possessed by Ogou. He is depicted with his machete, scarves, and a goat. Animals are bought fresh at the market or at a

⁸⁸ Greenough-Hodges, K. Field work. 2009.

⁸⁹ From the French word “diable” is a word for a random spirit from outside Haiti or Vodou that is not recognized. They are believed to be wild and unpredictable.

more competitive price from community breeders. In this case, a goat and two chickens were purchased as a substitute offering for Ogou, due to a money shortage. The regular sacrificial animal for Ogou would be a much more expensive big red rooster or a large black bull. Figure 14 shows Solen, with an image of Ogou, and a goat tethered to the center pole. As Ogou, he presents with red kerchiefs tied to his body, drinking rum and smoking a cigar.



Figure 13. Hounsi Solen as Ogou with image, mouchoirs and goat

Figure 14 depicts Ogou showing himself as spirit (crossed arms) to the congregants. In this photo, the image of two Ogou's, his machete is clearly visible here.



Figure 14. Ogou presenting with crossed arms⁹⁰

Figure 15 shows Ogou playing with fire while dancing with a machete. Ogou is a powerful Nago warrior lwa. He is the lwa of masculinity, the Haitian Revolution, and he is associated with fire and iron. Ogou has aspects within different rites, all of which are warriors, originating in Africa.

⁹⁰ Crossed arms indicates spirit. All lwa do this.



Figure 15. Ogotou dancing with machet

In Figure 16, Ogotou predatorily bites⁹¹ the ear of the goat. This is a demonstration to the congregation that he accepts the animal for sacrifice.

⁹¹ Here, the lwa bites, but they can also break a neck, rip off a head, etc. The way the lwa selects its animal for sacrifice is as varied as the lwa.



Figure 16. Ogou bites the ear of the goat

It is at this point when Solen then began acting erratically. His movements and speech were unrecognizable as any lwa. It was at this moment that the vodouisants believed a djab (a wild, unrecognized, and unnamed spirit) had unexpectedly come into Solen's head and killed the goat and chickens (see Figure 17).



Figure 17. Djab killed animals

When animals are killed by djab, they are left for the lwa, usually where they died, until the next day. The remains are then bundled separately and disposed of in an undisclosed carrefour or crossroad.

Another example of an animal sacrifice not consumed by humans is a service to the frightening and menacing lwa Marinette, a Petwo lwa of the Haitian Revolution. When she comes in possession, she requires a goat to be burned alive in an elaborately built wooden structure. This method of veneration is a reenactment of the death of the human Mambo Marinette. According to vodouisants, Marinette is believed to be the mambo⁹² who was leading the famous ceremony for Erzulie Danto at Bois Caiman, which sparked the Haitian Revolution.

⁹² Historians generally concur that the presiding mambo was Cecile Fatima, if they agree the ceremony happened at all. There are many different opinions on this. Leon-Francois Hoffman, a French historian, stated in the 1990s that the ceremony never happened in “Un mythe national: la ceremonie du Bois Caiman,” in *La Republique haitienne: etat des lieux et perspectives*, ed. Gerard Barthelemy and Christian A. Girault (Paris: Karthala, 1993), pp. 434-448.

We learn from Vodou songs that she led the Bois Caiman ceremony, she fought in the Haitian Revolution, and when she was finally caught, she was bound in a chair and burned alive. To the French, this treatment was understood as appropriate punishment for a “revolutionary slave-witch.” In Vodou, being burned alive is indeed terrible, but is also purifying.⁹³ The release of life through fire is believed to have far-reaching implications in the spirit realm. Sacrificial deaths such as Marinette’s were believed to generate a massive surge of spiritual energy that boosted the skills and abilities of the vodouisant soldiers, which they believed helped them ultimately win the fight for independence from France. Only experienced houngans and mambos venerate Marinette, and this type of ceremony would only be applicable in extreme situations where nothing can be lost.

Houngans interpret the songs for Marinette as proof that she existed.⁹⁴ It must be recalled that Vodou is largely an oral tradition where songs are history that is passed down. When Marinette comes in possession, she is recognized by her gnarled hands.⁹⁵ It is also believed that she kills children. Thus, for their protection, children are not allowed at ceremonies where Marionette might present herself.⁹⁶ Here are two songs that illustrate her frightening and violent associations.

Marinette O!
Ou se maman mwen, Marinette O!

⁹³ In the kanzo, initiates’ feet and hands are put into fire to purify. The idea is that initiates will not “burn” or at least feel the same pain as non-initiates would.

⁹⁴ There is a great deal of scholarly debate (outside vodouisant circles) not only about the existence of the Bois Caiman, but when it happened, who saw it, who led the ceremony, and about Marinette herself. Common “textbook” history cites that there was one ceremony led by a slave by the name of Cecile Fatima. For further reading, see Antoine Dalmas’s “Histoire de la revolution de Saint-Domingue,” Mama frères, Paris, 1814, or John D. Garrigus and Laurent Dubois’ *Slave Revolution in the Caribbean, 1789-1804: A Brief History with Documents*, New York: Bedford’s St Martin Press, 2006. p. 90.

⁹⁵ The gnarled hands suggest skeleton hands that were damaged through burning while clutching the arms of the chair.

⁹⁶ Greenough-Hodges, K. field work. Interview with Roots Without End Society Mambo Andreli. 2011.

*Ou se papa mwen,
Si ou manje petit mwen,
Kiles kap okipe mwebn?*

Marinette O!
You are my mother, Marinette O!
You are my father,
If you eat my children,
Who will take care of me?

*Mambo Marinette,
Koukou nan pyebwa a,
Mambo Marinette kita! Kita! Kita! Kita!
Marinette w chita nan forè a,
Ou kouche nan dife a,
Ou manje ak moun ki mouri yo.*

Mambo Marinette,
Owl in the tree,
Mambo Marinette kita! Kita! Kita! Kita!
Marinette you sit in the forest,
You lay down (to sleep) in the fire,
You eat the dead people.

Vodou does not require vodouisants to serve any particular lwa if they do not want to. Proper liturgy is taught, and then it is up to the individual to practice according to specific needs and desires. However, to make good pwen, one must also know what “makes” bad pwen—if for no other reason than to counter it.

CHAPTER 2

HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL OVERVIEW OF HAITIAN VODOU

Numerous influences have contributed to the evolution of modern Haitian Vodou. This historical chapter traces the origins of Haitian Vodou through space and time from Africa, across the Atlantic, to the island of Hispaniola—ending with the Haitian Revolution in 1804. The objective is to examine historical and cultural influences and how they relate to pwen, giving the reader a broad context to understand the religion and its complex evolution. The chapter proceeds in chronological order, beginning with Africa and ending with the Haitian Revolution in 1804. The first part of the chapter begins with identifying connections between West and Central African Vodun, Celtic, and Basque religion and seafarer folklore and how these influences were adapted and evolved into modern Haitian Vodou. Specifically important are the precise elements of pwen and how they have remained largely unchanged in modern practice of Vodou.

The second part of the chapter discusses continuing and increasing influences on the evolution of Vodou beginning on the shores of Hispaniola through the Haitian Revolution in 1804. Spanish, indigenous (Taino) and French historical, cultural, spiritual, and religious factors had a profound effect on the development of Haitian Vodou. The way that these influences were adapted or transferred into the pwen of Haitian Vodou are quite striking, especially in how they reflect their origins.

Many recognizable elements of African Vodun are found in modern Haitian Vodou. A few of the more prominent shared features are: animistic belief, connection to place, language, cosmology, and spiritual entities. Animism from the African standpoint suggests that places,

objects, animals, plants, and forces of nature have a generalized “living” essence.^{97,98} In Haiti, this African idea of animism evolved and ultimately distilled into what modern Vodou practitioners understand to be *pwen*, which is a specific “living vibration” of a named *lwa*, or spirit that lives inside of other things.⁹⁹ This “vibration” can be heard, sensed, or otherwise felt in specific objects, spaces, animals (rarely), plants, and/or words. Many types of “enlivened” ritual objects exist in Vodou. Two well-known ones are the *kolye* (sacred necklace) and *asson* (sacred rattle). These two “animated” or living ritual objects are made and given to new initiates by their elders during Vodou initiation or *kanzo*. These objects are visually and conceptually similar to items in West African Vodun. For example, the ritual rattle of the Vodun and Vodou *houngan* or *mambo* (priest or priestess) is made from a gourd derived from native shrubs and then decorated. In Africa, embellishments for the *kolye* and *asson* are hand-made or found material, such as bone, wood, glass, and rock. This is partly out of necessity, but also supports the belief that naturally occurring objects and certain fabricated ones have “strong” *pwen* and would, therefore, enhance the ritual object’s potential power. It is important to note that in both African and Vodou traditions all ritual objects must be ceremonially “animated” or *santaye* (blessed). Usually, this is done with the initiate who will one day wear and use the ritual objects. Henceforth, the objects are considered to have *lwa*, which is “fully” enlivened¹⁰⁰ and bonded with its initiate. The initiate

⁹⁷ Thompson, Robert Farris, *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy*. Vintage: 1st Vintage Books ed edition, 1984, p. 3, p. 117.

⁹⁸ Blier, Suzanne Preston. “Vodun: West African Roots of Vodou.” *Sacred Arts of Vodou*. Ed. Donald Cosentino. UCLA Fowler Museum, 1995. p. 73.

⁹⁹ Mambo Racine. Phone interview, 2012.

¹⁰⁰ Humans are believed to be reborn through *Kanzo*. Objects might have had *pwen* before ceremony (e.g., bone, rock), but the ceremony bonds the human and object and makes the objects magically accessible to the initiate.

must clean, feed (usually during the annual ancestor feast, or *Fet Gede*,¹⁰¹ held on November 2), store properly, and forever treat these initiatory items with respect. Although the kolye and asson are “pwen,” they are more commonly considered *conduits* of pwen, which are activated in ceremony and then harnessed by their human practitioner. Figure 18 is a picture of the house membership stringing kolye during my kanzo 2009. The elders (by years of service as an initiate, not necessarily by age) teach the initiates how to string their own ritual items.



Figure 18. Stringing kolye, Jacmel, Haiti 2008

Stringing kolye and asson of initiates-to-be is an important component of the many layers of ritual that culminate in the “making” of new vodouisants during a kanzo. During the stringing ritual, the house membership comes together and sings Vodou songs as a meditation. This ritual

¹⁰¹ Fet Gede in an ancestral feast that occurs on November 2. There is more on this subject elsewhere in the dissertation.

is a pwen-building one, as all the lwa (Minocan¹⁰²) are evoked. The stringing kolye process involves stringing the beads in a particularly numbered and colored sequence. This order is important and corresponds to an African liturgical order of spirit veneration that has been carried over into Vodou. See Figures 19 and 20 for this sequencing in the close-ups of my asson and kolye made during my kanzo in 2009.



Figure 19. My asson

¹⁰² Means “tous” or “all” of the spirits in the pantheon of Vodou.



Figure 20. My kolye

The image in Figure 21 shows the newly made ritual objects (kolye and asson in the foreground) on a freshly prepared altar. This photo depicts “living” pwen, as the photo was taken after the kanzo. My items are on the right and my initiatory sister’s items are to the left. Mambo Margaret initiated as asogwe (highest rank). As a result, she received different and more embellished ritual objects than I did as mambo su pwen (mambo in training).



Figure 21. Ritual objects kanzo, Jacmel, Haiti, 2009¹⁰³

Significantly, in Vodun and Vodou, places can also be “alive.” One striking example of this is that in Vodou theology there is a place called “Gine,” or Guinea. It is a reference to a “cosmic” Africa that is believed to be the location where the human soul resides—before birth as well in the afterlife. Importantly, Vodou’s “Gine” derives its name from “Guinea,” the West African empire and adjacent region (historic and modern) that the French military penetrated and assured their domination until military defeat in 1898. “Guinea” has profound significance for the New World slaves, as it is where large numbers of Africans were sold into slavery, boarded onto ships, delivered to Hispaniola, Santo Domingo (under Spanish dominion), and later Saint-Domingue (under French rule). Thus, the idea of Guinea as both a cosmic and historical place had an enduring effect on the collective consciousness of New World slaves, as it underscored

¹⁰³ Greenough-Hodges, K. Field work, Kanzo 2009.

the memory and final traumatic point of contact with their African homeland.

The majority of Africans brought specifically to Saint-Domingue as slaves were primarily from the port known as Bight of Benin, consisting of 67% West African and 33% Central African origin. These regions included people from Dahomey (Benin), Yoruba, Nago, Ibo, and Kongo among others. As a result, West and Central African heritage is the origin of a significant part of modern Haitian Vodou. This is evident in Haitian Creole Vodou language, as much of this ethnic African language was adapted into Vodou, with minimal changes in pronunciation and spelling.

The most frequently occurring African language in Vodou is the Fon language of Benin.¹⁰⁴ Haitian Vodou has numerous Fon words because the Fon were the earliest majority slave population to become well-established in colonial Saint-Domingue (French colony). Another large number of Creole Vodou words come from (KiKongo) Kongo language. Table 1 compares Haitian Vodou Creole Vodou terms to their West Central African origin.¹⁰⁵

Table 1. Comparison of Haitian Vodou Creole terms to their West Central African origins

Haitian Creole Vodou Term	Bight of Benin/West Central African Origin
<i>Oungan</i>	Fon, <i>hungán</i> , ‘priest’ (Rouget 2001:97)
<i>Gangan</i>	KiKongo, <i>Nganga</i> , ‘prêtre idolâtre’ (Laman 1936)
<i>Ounsi</i>	Fon, <i>hunsi</i> , ‘initiate’ (Rouget 2001:97)
<i>Andjennikonn/Oungenikon</i>	Fon, <i>hunjenukɔn</i> , ‘choir leader’ (Rouget 2001:98)
<i>Sanba</i>	Kikongo, <i>sám̄ba</i> ‘to shout with insistence like a <i>nganga</i> in ecstasy or under the influence of a charm’ (Laman 1936:870)
<i>Ason</i>	Fon, <i>asò</i> , ‘gourd shaker’ (Segurola & Rassinoux 2000:66)
<i>Vodou</i>	Fon, <i>vodún</i> , ‘deity, spirit,’ (Rouget 2001:102)
<i>Ountògi</i>	Fon, <i>hùntó</i> , ‘drummer,’ (Rouget 2001:98)
<i>Wanga</i>	KiKongo, <i>wanga</i> ‘spell,’ (Laman 1936)

¹⁰⁴ There are other African ethnic groups reflected in Haitian Vodou, but Fon and Kongo are dominant and relevant to the main rites discussed in this dissertation.

¹⁰⁵ <http://ufdc.ufl.edu/AA00026896/00001>. Hebblewithe, Benjamin. Accessed online August 16, 2017.

Practitioners believe that this purposeful and “well-preserved” connection to African language in Vodou serves to create a strong pwen.

Pwen of African words can also be observed in the fact that many “international” initiates and practitioners of Vodou who live in countries other than Haiti and may not speak Creole, can learn songs and prayers by ear. These practitioners learn enough Creole Vodou words to hold strong, accurate, and purposeful *sevis lwa* or ceremonies. I have witnessed a few of these types of ceremonies in the United States and interviewed seasoned practitioners about this phenomenon. The consensus is that the words themselves have pwen. Thus, if a non-Creole speaking practitioner follows *regleman* or liturgy, using Haitian Creole words and African “langaj” as need be, the spirits will come regardless of the linguistic abilities of the houngan or mambo leading the ceremony. I have seen cases too where an English-speaking person will become possessed by a French-speaking or “langaj”—speaking lwa. To the Western mind, this occurrence is a true curiosity. Practitioners consider it a demonstration of strong pwen.

Europeans inadvertently accelerated the spread and creolization of African ethnic language in colonial Hispaniola. Colonial powers had outpost stations on the African coast where they bought slaves from African leaders. The people to be sold as slaves were often adult Africans captured in war by opposing ethnic groups. Thus, a large percentage of the slave trade into French Saint-Domingue were adult-aged, military-trained Africans with aspirations toward freedom, who carried with them their solid African religious traditional beliefs and practices. The French slave traders separated these enslaved Africans by ethnic groups and by languages and then sold them. The idea, according to the will of the French Empire, was to separate like

groups as much as possible to lessen the likelihood of disturbance and revolt.¹⁰⁶ However, plantation owners of colonial Saint-Domingue allowed slave gatherings and celebrations of various sorts, which fostered the early “creolization,” or blending of language, culture, and religious ideologies from the many African ethnic groups. It is also significant to note that these gatherings allowed military-trained African warriors contact with other like-minded individuals, who brainstormed and strategized for escape and revolt. These exchanges were the grounds not only for future insurrection, but also for an incredibly strong Revolutionary power in the making—one that came from many diverse African groups.

See the image in Figure 22 from Emory University.¹⁰⁷ It illustrates the numbers and geographic origins of the African captives for all years of the slave trade.

¹⁰⁶ In Vodou, there is an idea referred to as the “21 nations.” This means the “21” nations or ethnic groups from Africa that are believed to have been responsible for the initial “meshing” of language/religion and also participated at the famous Vodou ceremony of Bois Caiman the evening of August 14, 1791. This ceremony is believed to have jump-started the Haitian Revolution.

¹⁰⁷ <http://ufdc.ufl.edu/AA00026896/00001>. Hebblewaithe, Benjamin. Accessed online August 16, 2017.

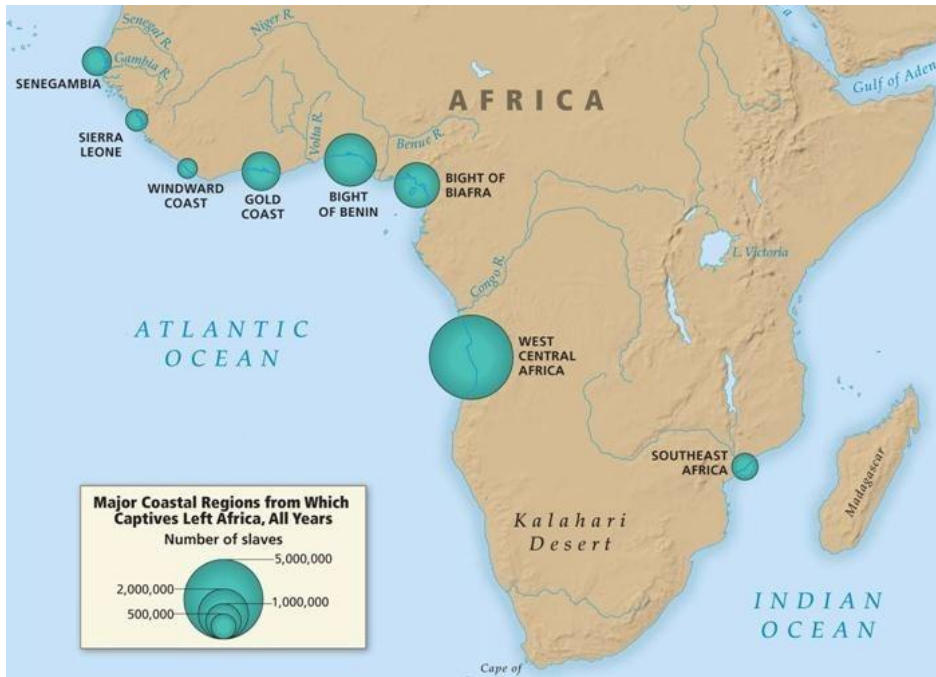


Figure 22. Numbers and regions from which captives left Africa, all years

Another significant feature of Haitian Vodou that transferred directly from Africa are the rites of Haitian Vodou. The “rites” are families of spirits that are “related” through origin and venerated in a special order within that rite. Although there are many rites in Haitian Vodou, there are three traditional ones to be discussed in this dissertation: Rada, Petwo and Gede. Rada and Gede rites are African in origin, whereas Petwo’s origins are in the New World. It is important to understand that rites are quite powerful pwen. As each spirit is venerated, the spiritual entities are believed to fuse or coalesce, working as one giant complimentary spiritual layer within the ceremony. In this way, pwen augments.

Below is a list that names some of the rites of Vodou. Rites are named in Creole on the left and the ethnic and geographic origins are on the right. This sample is striking, because it illustrates the widespread influences of African ethnic groups in Vodou.

- *Rit Anmin (Anminan)* is from the Mina people in Dahomey.

- *Rit Bizango* is from *Bissango* island near Senegal.
- *Rit Bosou (Achade)* is from the name of the Dahomian king *Tegbosou* (1740-1774).
- *Rit Boumba* is from the Boumba river in southern Cameroon.
- *Rit Danwonmen* is the adjective “Dahomian” in Creole.
- *Rit Gede* is from the Gedevi people.
- *Rit Ibo* is from the Igbo people and language of southern Nigeria.
- *Rit Makaya* is from the Kikongo *makaya* “medicinal leaves.”
- *Rit Nago* is from the Fon term *Nágó* from the Yoruba.
- *Rit Rada* is from the town of Allada in Dahomey.
- *Rit Seneka* is from Senegal.
- *Rit Wangòl* is from Angola.¹⁰⁸

Haitian Vodou is monotheistic and practitioners recognize one sovereign creator-God, known as *Bondye* (Good God) or *Gran Met* (Grand Master). It is believed that God is distant from his people and requires vodouisants turn to intercessory spirits (*lwa*) when seeking help in their daily life. In general, it should be noted that spirits in Vodou are *pwen*, as they are catalysts that “do” something to help achieve a desired goal, need, or wish. Ancient African spiritual entities are believed to be very slow moving. Some were never people, but animals, such as Danbala, the Great White Sacred Serpent. Others are natural phenomena, such as Sobo the *lwa* of thunder.

As mentioned earlier, Haitian Vodou ceremonies are structured around rites that are

¹⁰⁸ <http://ufdc.ufl.edu/AA00026896/00001>. Hebblewaithe, Benjamin. Accessed online August 16, 2017.

categorized by family. The rites indicate geographic location. The Rada¹⁰⁹ rites (oldest group of lwa) begin Haitian Vodou ceremonies. The liturgical order of the rites was taught to me by my initiatory mother like this:

Legba, Marassa, Loco, Ayizan, Danbala and Aida Wedo, Sobo, Badessy, Agassou, Silibo, Agwe and Lasirèn, Erzulie, Bossu, Agarpou, Azaka, the Ogou group (Ogou St. Jacques, Ossange, Ogou Badagris, Ogou Feray, Ogou Fer, Ogou Shango, Ogou Balindjo, Ogou Balizage, Ogou Yemsen).¹¹⁰

This order reflects Dahomean religious hierarchy. The color preferred by Rada lwa is (in general) white. However, individual lwa have their own color preferences. These lwa are believed to be cerebral, cool, stately, and beneficent. Since they are ancient, they are slow to act. One Rada lwa, Ayizan, is the mother of initiates. She is an integral lwa in *kanzo*, or Vodou initiation. Figure 23 shows an image taken from a *kanzo* ceremony, venerating Ayizan. In this photo, the typical Rada regalia is shown—white satin clothing and kerchiefs. It is believed that Ayizan is also the palm frond (in the hands of the house members), something that is unique to her.

¹⁰⁹ Rada is the Creole word that comes from “Arada,” which is what the Europeans called both the Ewe and the Fon.

¹¹⁰ The Roots Without End Society Vodou Page. Accessed June 2011.



Figure 23. Evening ceremony, participants in ceremonial whites. This is the Chire Ayizan ceremony, where Ayizan, the mother of all initiates and the first mambo is being fed and participants hide her from view.¹¹¹

During the rites, there is singing for each lwa, subsequent rhythms of the drums and songs, dances, food offerings, are all layers of “service,” which is specific to both to the lwa and rite. This part of the ceremony is conducted in Creole, but the manner in which the lwa are celebrated is African. This is the method for all lwa, even if not of African origin.

A well-known and prominent spiritual entity from Africa is Mami Wata, supreme goddess of the sea. Mami Wata is one of many pwen, or spiritual entities that transferred from Africa to the New World with few, if any, changes. In Haitian Vodou, she is known as Lasirèn or the mermaid. Depictions of her as African Mami Wata are prolific and the image in Figure 24 shows an early 19th-century rendition of her. In this image, she is framed with two snakes. In

¹¹¹ Ayizan, the mother of initiates, is being fed. Rada rites. The women are hiding her. Greenough-Hodges. Kanzo, 2009.

Vodou, these snakes are Danbala and his cohort, Ayida Wedo. The snakes are considered sacred in Africa as well as Vodou tradition as Danbala (male snake) is believed to have sparked the Creation of life with his wife/cohort (the rainbow). In the composition in Figure 24, Mami Wata is placed in the center of Creation, as a powerful ocean spirit or embodiment of *female* creative power. The image suggests that she transported the sacred snakes to the New World.



Figure 24. Ewe/Benin Mami Wata¹¹²

Early European Influences

When captive Africans first encountered the ships that transported them across the ocean to the New World, likely they saw mermaid figureheads on the slave ships, common during this period. See the image in Figure 25 of a carved mermaid bust from a French slave ship, circa 1800s.

¹¹² http://4.bp.blogspot.com/_tcXtLSwv88s/TP5CFLz76HI/AAAAAAAAADmQ/0QKtQJi1sSU/s1600/mami_wata.jpg Accessed October 5, 2017.



Figure 25. 17th-century Breton mermaid figurehead¹¹³

It is believed that the mermaid imagery reinforced the significance of the African water goddess—mermaid in the minds of the newly captured Africans.¹¹⁴

Another significant development as a result of the interactions between the European slave traders and the Africans on the ships is their exposure to seafarer folklore as well as Roman Catholicism. The European slave traders, particularly the Bretons and Basques, held fast to their folkloric beliefs in male and female sea creatures, who were half-human and half-fish. Although these beliefs exist in all cultures, they were particularly popular among Breton sailors.¹¹⁵ The female sea creatures of Breton were the ones who “bewitched” sailors with their eerie singing

¹¹³ <http://www.piecesofship.com/images/2015%20Java%20shipment/figurehead%20mermaid%20wall%20mount%20detail.jpg>. Accessed on October 6, 2017.

¹¹⁴ Desmangles, Leslie. *The Faces of The Gods: Vodou and Roman Catholicism in Haiti*, Chapel Hill, NC, 1992, p. 143.

¹¹⁵ Benson, LeGrace. “Qismat of the Names of Allah in Haitian Vodou.” *Journal of Haitian Studies*. Vol. 8, No. 2 (Fall 2002), pp. 160-164.

and extreme beauty. Legends include sightings of mermaids sitting on cliffs or rocks combing their long hair. These sightings had dual significance: Either they were harbingers of severe sea conditions and were feared, or they were welcome help, leading distressed crews away from danger. There are many ancient Breton ballads that mention the *Morgans* (Breton or Celtic word for mermaids).¹¹⁶

In addition, these Bretons and Basques practiced special veneration for the Catholic patron saint of seafarers, *Our Lady, Star of the Sea* or *Stella Maris* (Latin), *Notre Dame de la mer* (French), *La Diosa del Mar* (Spanish), a title or ancient name for the Roman Catholic Blessed Virgin. The Catholic tradition of “Stella Maris” evokes an allegory of Mary as a guiding star that leads the way to Christ. Stella Maris is believed to intercede as a protective guide of seafarers. The devotion to Stella Maris is evident in many Catholic coastal and fishing communities with numerous churches, schools, and colleges dedicated to her. Africans were exposed to this Catholic Queen of Saints through prayer or song on the slave ships as Marian Hymns were sung or recited by sailors in coastal areas.¹¹⁷ One from the slave trade era is:

Hail, Holy Queen of Heaven, the Ocean Star,
Guide of the wanderer here below,
Thrown on life’s surge we claim thy care,
Save us from peril and woe,
Mother of Christ, Star of the sea,
Pray for the wanderer,
Pray for me.

Once in the New World, Mami Wata-mermaid-Stella Maris creolized into the lwa known

¹¹⁶ Delaney, Claire. *Legends of Love in Celtic Mythology*, Kindle. 2018, vol. 1.

¹¹⁷ Rey, Terry. “The Politics of Patron Sainthood in Haiti 500 Year’s of Iconic Struggle. *The Catholic Historical Review*, Vol. 88, No. 3 (July 2002), pp. 519-545.

as Lasirèn of Haitian Vodou. The Vodou story of Lasirèn is that she is an ancient African water spirit, light-skinned because her realm is the deep sea. She is wife¹¹⁸ to *Agwe*, the master of the sea and sister to the whale (*la Balenn*). Her children are the creatures of the sea. She is a beautiful and powerful queen. In Vodou, anecdotal stories¹¹⁹ state that Lasirèn, or other water spirits, have been known to periodically “take” people to live in the water, “*enba dlo*.” These people live with the *lwa* and are believed to be returned years later, unharmed, and very knowledgeable about the family of water spirit *lwa*. Figure 26 is an image of Lasirèn, commonly used in ceremonies in Haiti. It is an image of a Catholic prayer card widely available in the Haitian market.



Figure 26. La Diosa Spanish Catholic image. Greenough-Hodges, K. personal collection. Purchased in Jacmel maret in January 2009.

¹¹⁸ Lasiren has “other” love intrigue/husbands too.

¹¹⁹ Greenough-Hodges, K. Field research. Jacmel, Haiti, 2010.

One song for the Haitian Vodou Lasirèn that expresses her power is below:

Siren rele La Balen O!
La Balen, O k ap mannen m ale
La Balen, O k ap mannen m ale
Na paye gelefrefe ougan marche sou do
Ne paye gelefrefe ougan marche sou do la!
Siren rele La Balen O!
La Balen, O k ap mannen m ale

Siren, call the Whale O!
The Whale O is leading me away
Siren call the Whale O!
The Whale O is leading me away
In Gelefrefe a Houngan walks on his back
In Gelefrefe a Houngan walks on his back
Siren, call the Whale O!
The Whale O is leading me away)

Figure 27 is a Haitian Vodou flag depicting Lasirèn, bought in Port-au-Prince in 2009.

Notice the pink and gold arched graphic on the left. Like the Mami Wata image from Africa, this flag for Lasirèn shows the sacred serpents as a graphic rainbow: Danbala (gold) and Ayida Wedo (pink).



Figure 27. Lasirèn spirit flag, Greenough-Hodges, K. personal collection. Purchased in Port-au-Prince in January 2009.

The second phase of this overview highlights influences on Haitian Vodou as African slaves adapted and evolved their religious practices in direct response to the experiences in the New World. The native Amerindian population of Hispaniola, notably the Taino, made significant contributions to the practice of modern Haitian Vodou and pwen. Specifically, these groups share similar and compatible views toward “animism,” general cosmology and herbal healing.¹²⁰ Other significant influences on the development of Haitian Vodou and pwen include French Roman Catholicism and slave exposure to French secret societies and European occult practices. The last event that profoundly affected Haiti, Vodou, and pwen during the colonial era is the Haitian Revolution.

¹²⁰ Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature. “Taino” Ed. Bron Taylor. London and NY: Continuum, 2005. p. 268.

Colonial Spanish Influences and the Taino

As for early colonial history, the island of Hispaniola was originally under Spanish control, colonized by Christopher Columbus in 1492. The Spanish quickly decimated much of the indigenous Taino population, as native people were exposed to European diseases for which they had no immunity, and the physical demands required to function as plantation slaves proved too extreme for most. In 1511, Spanish Dominican priest Bartolome de las Casas, fearing a complete population collapse of the Taino, suggested importing Africans for labor, as he believed they were more constitutionally fit than the Amerindians. As a result, De las Casas became indirectly responsible for the growth of African slavery in the New World.¹²¹

Although often overlooked, Taino traditional religious practices had a strong influence in the development of modern Haitian Vodou. Many of these traditions can be seen in rituals today. When Africans and Taino were first brought together as slaves, similarities in religious practice and belief were observed and shared. For example, both Africans and Taino used the common symbol of the cruciform to illustrate the position of the human in time. The vertical bar is the human in present time, the midpoint of the vertical bar is the living body. Up (north) indicates spirit and down (south) indicates the dead. The horizontal bar demonstrates space or the human divided in time. In other words, the midpoint, or intersection, indicates man in present time. The past is to the west and the future is to the east.¹²²

Vodou ritual demonstrates this connection through the opening ceremonies, called

¹²¹ Stopsky, Fred. Bartolome de las Casa: Champion of Indian rights. 1992.

¹²² Nesin, Barbara, "The Influence of Native American and African Encounters on Haitian Art," *Journal of Haitian Studies*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (Spring 2005), pp. 74-79.

“salutes.” The salutes are when practitioners present offerings and libations to the four cardinal directions¹²³ and define and prepare the ritual space for the lwa, or pwen. Offerings are made to the cardinal directions, always going counterclockwise (spirit direction), beginning with east, west, north and south. These gestures reflect both the African and Taino worldview of human and spirit intersection of time and space. In Vodou, once the salutes are done (Figure 28), the leading houngan or mambo will start the rites, beginning with Rada Legba.



Figure 28. House membership doing Rada salutes to the drum (hountor) It is identifiable as Rada because of the white candle, rum, and cool water.¹²⁴

Another Taino characteristic that is similar to African animism, but closer to the modern Haitian Vodou concept of pwen, is the Taino belief in “zemis.” Zemis are spirits, ancestors, or physical representations of spiritual entities that are believed to literally reside in a rock, bone, or

¹²³ There are other times in Haitian Vodou that the four cardinal directions are celebrated.

¹²⁴ Greenough-Hodges, Kimberly. Field work. 2008.

root. They can be made present through a drawing or pictogram. Like Vodou pwen, they are believed to be “living spirits” and are venerated and treated with respect.

There is another practice in Haitian Vodou that is derived from shared African and Taino religious traditions concerning the afterlife. Both groups used a particular kind of hand-thrown clay pot to temporarily house deceased people’s “spirits.” The spirit or consciousness of the person is later “set free” by breaking it during a ritual. In Vodou, the vessel is called a “govi,” and it is sanctified with the initiate during his or her kanzo. It is kept on the home altar and, while not a pwen on its own, it does function as a conduit for pwen for the initiate during his or her life. Upon death of the initiate, it is believed his or her spirit rests temporarily in the govi before it goes “anba dlo” (under the water). Once under the water, it is believed to take one year and one day¹²⁵ for people to fully separate the mind, body, and spirit. The govi (Figure 29) becomes a pwen in and of itself, beginning when the person dies and until the deceased is ritually reclaimed, as the deceased’s soul is housed inside. When the deceased person is reclaimed from the “water” through ceremony, the pot is symbolically crushed and the consciousness of the person is released to “Gine,” or Ancient Africa.¹²⁶

¹²⁵ This is the time it is believed it takes to fully separate body/mind/spirit after the actual death.

¹²⁶ Nesin, Barbara, “The Influence of Native American and African Encounters on Haitian Art,” *Journal of Haitian Studies*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (Spring 2005), pp. 74-79.



Figure 29. My govi pot, received during my 2008 kanzo¹²⁷

Another link between African and Taino traditions seen in Haitian Vodou is the expansive understanding of the use of native herbs. Scholarship suggests that exchanges of information about native plants and animals were freely shared between slaves.¹²⁸ The Taino had a vast knowledge of practical and medicinal native plants and animals. One native Haitian plant with precise medicinal and ritual use is *spondias mombin* (Latin), or in Creole *fran* or *monben*, a native woody plant to both the Caribbean and West Africa.¹²⁹ Medicinal characteristics include strong antiviral, antimicrobial, and anti-fungal properties. From the ritual perspective, it is believed to have very strong inherent “*pwen*,” so much so that its sacred leaves are the

¹²⁷ Ritual object received during Kanzo. 2009.

¹²⁸ Nesin, Barbara “The Influence of Native American and African Encounters on Haitian Art,” *Journal of Haitian Studies*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (Spring 2005), pp. 74-79.

¹²⁹ https://www.researchgate.net/publication/222409592_On_the_origin_of_the_tree_Spondias_mombin_in_Africa. Accessed October 31, 2017.

foundation for Haitian Vodou initiation rituals. It is likely that the species might not have been readily found in the new terrain by recently imported Africans. Thus, it is believed that the Taino, with geographic and botanical expertise of their native land, passed this knowledge on.¹³⁰

French Influences

The island never flourished under Spanish control, and in 1697, the western part of the island was given to France through the Treaty of Ryswick, and became known as the French colony of Saint-Domingue. Despite their linguistic and religious differences, and prohibition of African religious practice by the colonists, slaves in Saint-Domingue managed to covertly unify their religious beliefs under the guise of Catholicism. Louis XIV's Code Noir required that all slaves be baptized Catholic and taught rudimentary catechism. This action was counter to plantation landowner desires, since they feared that African slaves would not tolerate slavery if they understood church teachings. As a result, most slaves remained largely ignorant of Catholic doctrine, which indirectly encouraged sharing iconography of Catholic and African deities. This shared iconography grew more intense after the revolution in 1804 when the French fled and Catholic churches were abandoned. As a result, Catholicism and Vodou remain dramatically intertwined. In Haiti, a Christian saint could be an image for the saint, or it could be a Vodou lwa. Meaning is determined by context or by the beliefs of the individual. One visual example of this can be seen in Rada lwa, Gran Erzulie who is associated with Saint Anne, the Virgin Mary's mother. Both entities represent grandmotherly kindness, modesty, and love and are the essence

¹³⁰ Nesin, Barbara, "The Influence of Native American and African Encounters on Haitian Art," *Journal of Haitian Studies*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (Spring 2005), pp. 74-79.

of wisdom gained by maturity and experience. Figure 30 is a Vodou¹³¹ prayer card, from New Orleans. It shows Catholic iconography, labeled with the Voodoo/Vodou name. Note the spelling of “Erzulie” is printed as “Ezili.”¹³² Figure 31 is a Caribbean-influenced Catholic prayer card for Saint Anne, purchased in the market in Port-au-Prince. Note the “blended” name on this image. It evokes both the lwa “Gran” but labels the image as “St Anne.”



Figure 30. Saint Anne/Gran Erzili¹³³

¹³¹ Voodoo is a derivation of Haitian Vodou. It is a *practice* based on sorcery and black magic, not a *religion*, such as orthodox Haitian Vodou.

¹³² There is wide variety in spellings of Creole words. Generally, all are accepted. There is interest in current times to codify the different “patois” or Creole, but it is an ongoing task.

¹³³ <http://www.vodoustore.com/store/images/products/Gran%20Ezili.jpg>. Accessed October 5, 2017.

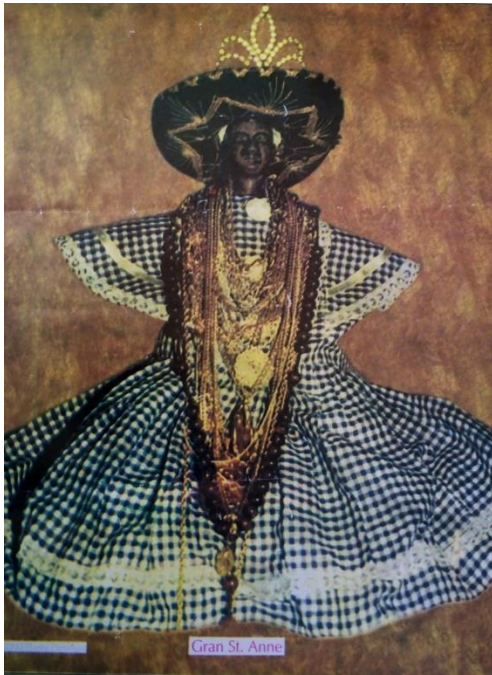


Figure 31. Gran St. Anne image that I bought in the Haitian market for Gran Erzuli.¹³⁴ This depiction evokes Latin American “apparition” imagery and the eclectic blending of clothing and adornment shows a highly creolized version of St Anne, mother of Mary.

During the 18th century, Saint-Domingue became the most lucrative colony in the world, functioning under a brutal plantation system, exporting sugar, indigo, cotton, and coffee. Due to its economic “value,” Saint-Domingue was seen as a powerful colony and was coveted by all imperialist countries. Profits from Saint-Domingue funded two-thirds of the Napoleonic Wars. Additionally, Saint-Domingue had the single largest population of imported African slaves in the region, with a ratio of 1:10 whites to blacks immediately preceding the revolution. Slaves on the island of Saint-Domingue were among the most mistreated in the colonies.¹³⁵ Despite laws in France prohibiting certain abuses of slaves and guaranteeing certain limited rights, the independently governed (and largely corrupt and cruel) plantation owners’ treatment of slaves

¹³⁴ Greenough-Hodges, Kimberly. Jacmel, Haiti. Field work. 2009.

¹³⁵ Cosentino/Sacred Arts of Vodou, pp. 399-410.

was left to their personal discretion. There were also a significant number of “mulattos” also known as “mixed bloods.” This group had many social and economic privileges. Many were free (affranchi) and they owned property. These people lived in a separate and distinct racial class between the blacks and the whites.¹³⁶

It was also during this period when Freemasonry was first brought by the French to colonial Saint-Domingue. The “Lodge de la Vérité,” the first Masonic temple in the New World, was built in Cap Haitian in 1748.¹³⁷ By 1770, every city had a lodge, so that each community could lead the way toward the “grand master” (i.e., “secrets of the universe”). The idea of mystical fraternities was familiar to slaves, as their ancestors had secret societies in Africa. After independence, black and mulatto Haitians joined Masonic lodges in large numbers and transferred the fraternal imagery in other sacred contexts. The most common of this imagery is the all-seeing eye, pyramid, square and compass, skull and crossbones, pick, shovel, top hat, and other funerary symbols.^{138,139,140} Masonic influences on the Haitian Vodou rites of the *Gede*¹⁴¹ lwa are particularly striking, as the Gede have extensively assimilated Masonic iconography. Recall that since lwa are pwen, assimilated mystical traditions added to a pwen would (if done properly) add more layers to its service, thus, deepening and augmenting the forces compelling the pwen to work.

¹³⁶ Foner, Laura. The Free People of Color in Louisiana and St Domingue: A Comparative Portrait of Two Three-Caste Slave Societies. *Journal of Social History*. Vol. 3, No. 4 (Summer, 1970), pp. 406-408.

¹³⁷ Beauvoir-Domingue, Rachel. *Vodun Magic*. p. 162. Ed. Cosentino., Donald. UCLA, 1995.

¹³⁸ Beauvoir-Domingue. *Haitian Journal*.

¹³⁹ Cosentino. Donald. *Envoi: The Gedes and Bawon Samdi. The Sacred Arts of Vodou.*, Ed Cosentino, Donald. UCLA. 1995

¹⁴⁰ Desmangles, Leslie G. *The Faces of the Gods: Vodou and Roman Catholicism in Haiti*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1992.

¹⁴¹ Family of lwa (“nanchon”) that rules the dead.

To explain the masonic connection between Vodou and the Gede, it is important to note that the 18th-century European interest in the occult and ancient systems of knowledge was at an unprecedented height at the time of the slave trade. As a result, The Grand Lodge of France, or “Les Frères Unis,” transferred to the French colonies during this period and the “craft” of Freemasonry had a marked impact on slaves who encountered it. Of additional note, Saint-Domingue had a booming trade of coffee, sugar, and cocoa and a resulting increased movement of colonial officers, merchants, and slaves. This trend dramatically increased exposure to the ideas and practice of Freemasonry, and helped it become firmly rooted in the colony. By the time of the Haitian Revolution and independence, 1791-1804, Freemasonry was so ingrained into local culture, that the all-black revolutionary government simply inherited the “craft” as part of independence.¹⁴² As it was previously mentioned, Africans also had secret societies in their home countries. As a result, the concepts were likely different, but not altogether unfamiliar to the slaves. Unique connections between the Gede and their links to the Freemasons are that large numbers of the Gedeви ethnic group slaves were put to work in particular jobs in the areas of Haiti where Freemasonry was the most active.¹⁴³ Furthermore, since many, if not all, high-ranking officials in colonial Saint-Domingue society were Freemasons, it likely seemed that, for slaves, “power” in colonial society was associated with being a lodge member. Thus, “Papa Gede” in his crucial decision-making of who gains entry by death into spirit, denotes a powerful role among lwa. Figure 32 is an image of a sequined Haitian Vodou flag that I bought in Port-au-

¹⁴² Richter, Darmon. “Freemasons of the Caribbean.” August 19, 2014.

<http://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/freemasons-of-the-caribbean>. Accessed June 2, 2017. It should be further noted that all Haitian revolutionary leaders and founding fathers of Haiti were freemasons.

¹⁴³ Richter, Darmon. “Freemasons of the Caribbean.” August 19, 2014.

<http://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/freemasons-of-the-caribbean>. Accessed June 2, 2017. It should be further noted that all Haitian revolutionary leaders and founding fathers of Haiti were freemasons.

Prince in 2009. It is Bawon, the Father of the Gede, as indicated by the purple and black colors and cross imagery. The symmetry of the overall design, including the demarcations for pwen (the nine-point asterisks) and white spirit candles are Kongo in origin.



Figure 32. Bawon Samdi Flag. Personal collection of Greenough-Hodges, K. Purchased in Port-au-Prince in January 2009

“*Les morts*” (the dead) is another name for this family of spirits, who safeguards the dead. The Gede family has its own African influenced rites but lacks liturgical order. The rulers of the Gede are Bawon Samdi (Papa) and his wife Gran Brigitte (Mama Brigitte). The Gede are sought because they are intensely mystical and offer advice and prophesy.¹⁴⁴ Although the precise origin of the Gede is unclear, one version states that the first Gede, or “Papa Gede” (Father Gede) is believed to have been born among the Gedevis-Dahomean people, and after his

¹⁴⁴ <http://www.rootswithoutend.org/racine125/vleson3.html> (lesson 3). Accessed 2010.

death was later elevated to the status of the lwa of the dead. Another version states that the Gede/Dahomean people were captured and sold into slavery¹⁴⁵ and that the Gede lwa descended from these people. Many versions exist on the origins of the Gede.

These lwa have unique characteristics. Their colors are black and purple and members wear clothing resembling masonic garb with graveyard imagery or funeral wear (as if dressed for a funeral). Bawon wears dark sunglasses that protect his “dead” eyes from light and he is known as a bawdy trickster, a wise counselor, and a healer with a special love for children. When people are costuming as Gede for Fet Gede or for the Mardi Gras parade, people paint or dust their faces with white powder and emphasize dark circles around the eyes, evoking a corpse or skull. Some people paint their faces in black and white, where the right half is painted black, reflecting Kongo symbolism for the body and the left side is white, representative of spirit. Some participants may plug the nostrils with cotton, suggesting funerary treatment. When lwa present themselves through possession,¹⁴⁶ they are identified through gesture, attitude, and other behavior. Figure 33 is an image showing Papa Gede “riding” Houngan Wolmer during a ceremony at the Roots Without End Society in 2010.

¹⁴⁵ Hebblewaithe, B. Footnote in PPT.

¹⁴⁶ Possession is when a lwa temporarily “mounts” a human in the course of a service. The spirit comes in to the person through the top of the head. The human has no recollection of the event and will often do extraordinary things for a human being. While in the human body, the lwa will exhibit recognizable gestures, movements, or other behavior so the congregation will know who it is.



Figure 33. Papa Gede “riding” Houngan Wolmer sees my camera¹⁴⁷

There are special feast days for the dead that occur during the month of November, during the Roman Catholic celebration of All Saints Day (November 1) and All Souls Day (November 2). Haitian vodouisants who are also Catholic observe both Roman Catholic ceremonies at church, and then stop at the Vodou cemetery for ancestor veneration ceremonies called, “Fet Gede,” usually celebrated on November 2. Fet Gede celebrations are public (in the cemetery) or private (in the home) and altars are prepared in purple and black, with food, pictures, and candles in honor of the ancestors and newly deceased people. It is a time to venerate the dead and rejuvenate the lwa through spiritual nourishment. The multiple layers of “service” involved in creating a proper Vodou altar stimulate the movement of pwen. The way to make a Vodou ancestor feast table for Fet Gede is as follows: The altar must be set with white, black, or purple fabric and candles. These are to call to and then heat the lwa once they come.

¹⁴⁷ Greenough-Hodges, K. Field Work. Lwa do not like technology. Papa saw my camera and the expression I captured is his reaction to it. Jacmel. Haiti. December 2008.

There must be four rocks from the property in each corner of the altar, signifying the cardinal directions and grounding the lwa to a precise location. There must be a central white candle, lit and placed firmly in cemetery soil. This is the central beacon for the lwa. On top of the black and purple fabric drapes, there must be a white linen washed with the first urine of the day. This is to create a connection between the dead and the specific person making the altar. If initiated, all initiatory ritual objects should be worn and others arranged on the table. In ceremony they are conduits of pwen, bonded to their initiate and will help bring the lwa to the ceremony. On the table, there must be water, rum, images of lwa and deceased people, significant objects to be used as “offerings” and food. Usually, the living serve themselves, then wait while a special plate is prepared for the lwa. Food is arranged on a lwa plate and a white candle is placed in the center of the food on the plate and lit. Once in front of the altar, the plate is presented to the four directions and then placed on the altar. (If the person placing the food is an initiate, there are additional gestures done in front of the altar.) After the altar is set, people eat, and when they are done, there could be song, drums, and dance, depending on the scale of the event. At some point, attendees pause for reflection on the lwa and about the deceased. Ancestor feasts spiritually rejuvenate the lwa and foster good rapport between the living and the dead. The altar remains intact until the central candle is burned out. Figure 34 shows my family’s in-home Fet Gede ancestor table from 2015.



Figure 34. Fet Gede ancestor table

In the Roots Without End peristyle, Papa Gede is one of the house lwa, and the lead houngan, Wolmer, serves him. For this reason, Papa Gede and his wife Maman Brigitte have a permanent home (*kay*) there. In Figure 35, the Gede are being presented to me before their service.



Figure 35. These skulls are Gede Iwa, Bawon Samedi (left with black kerchief) and Maman Brigitte (right purple kerchief) at the Roots Without End Society in Jacmel, Haiti. They live in their own “house” (*kay*), which is a structure near the peristyle.¹⁴⁸

Figures 36 and 37 show the Gede “house” or *kay*.

¹⁴⁸ Greenough-Hodges, Kimberly. Field work, December 2008.



Figure 36. This is the exterior of the Gede kay (house) near the peristyle. It is located on the southern side of the peristyle. The center image is a veve, or cosmogram for the Gede. The dancing skeletons and coffin show funerary iconography of this spirit family.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁹ Greenough-Hodges, K. field work. Jacmel, Haiti. December 2008.



Figure 37. Interior of kay Gede, Bawon is on left in black and Maman is on right in purple

Another powerful influence on Haitian Vodou was the 18th- and 19th-century European “mania” for the occult, mystical organizations such as the Rosicrucians (“Rosy cross”),¹⁵⁰ and mass-produced Grimoires, or French sorcery spell books of this period that came to the island by French elite women, who then organized regular “salons” in Saint-Domingue where the Creole society practiced the “mystical arts.”¹⁵¹ The Grimoires: *Le Dragon Noir* and *Le Dragon Rouge*¹⁵² are still in use in Haiti.¹⁵³ Modern magicians in Haiti and elsewhere in the world consider these

¹⁵⁰ This was a European cultural movement of the early 17th century, which developed alongside Freemasonry and is symbolized by the Rose Cross. Anonymous Rosicrucian Manifestos were published first in Germany and spreading throughout Europe that claimed the existence of a previously unknown and esoteric order to the world. Ideas and origins are claimed to originate with the Kabbalah, Hermeticism and mystical Christianity. The text tells the story of a German Doctor and a mystic philosopher who studied in the Middle East. The Manifestos are not literal, but figurative and allegorical and tie to other mystical “sciences” of the time, such as astrology and alchemy.

¹⁵¹ Beauvoir Domingue, Rachel. “Vodoun Magic.” *The Sacred Arts of Vodou*. 1992. pp. 155-175.

¹⁵² Among others.

¹⁵³ <http://www.hermetics.org/pdf/grimoire/theblackpullett.pdf>. Accessed on October 31, 2017.

two spell books to be foundational sources on the black arts. Topics in these texts include directions for: spell casting, raising the dead, demonic evocation, and creating talismans (pwen). Both works are believed to date back to the mid-16th century, although there is no documented proof of this. The writing style found in both books is narrative and features “how-to” spell recipes, including drawings and incantations. See the pictogram in Figure 38 from the original text of the “Master Grimoire,” which illustrates obligatory images and verbatim directions for spell casting.¹⁵⁴

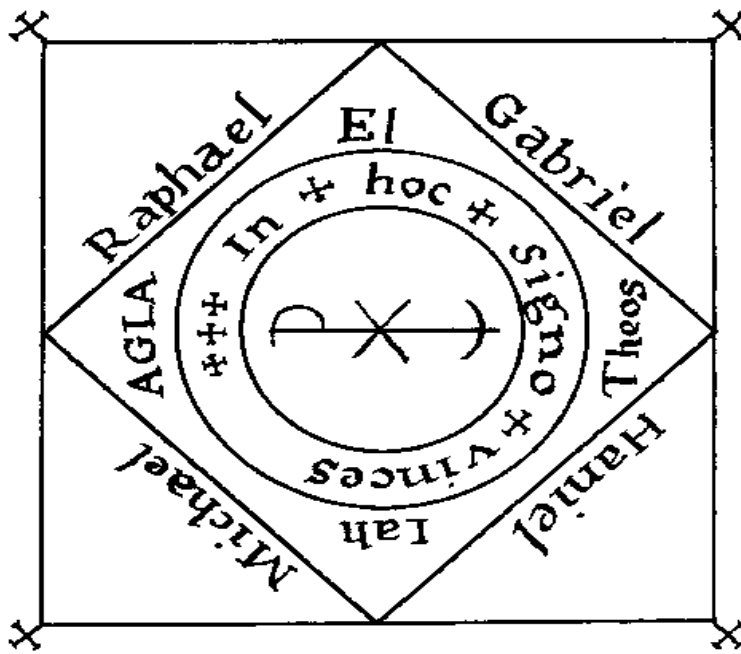


Figure 38. This image has the following caption “*Je fais un cercle pour tenir en bride et restreindre l’esprit malin,*” Or I make a circle to hold and restrict the “clever spirits.” Note the inset geometries, circles of theological references Roman Catholic archangels, Words for God in Hebrew (*EL*), Greek (*Theos*), Gaelic (*Iah*) and *AGLA* is an acronym for the Hebrew, “*Atah Gibor Le-olam Adonai*” (You, O Lord, are mighty forever), the second blessing of the Amidah, or central Jewish prayer. This image uses geometric proportion and manipulation in concentric layers, moving inwards to the central (unknown) pictogram.

¹⁵⁴ <http://www.esotericarchives.com/solomon/grimhono.htm>. Accessed on November 4, 2017.

The wide circulation of these books in Haiti since colonial times has fostered a development of sorcery and black magic. This is particularly true concerning the esoteric secret societies found in the Artibonite region,¹⁵⁵ like the Sanpwel and the Bizango (also have rites of the same names).¹⁵⁶ Card reading, crystal gazing, and other European occult and divinatory practices were introduced into Haiti during the colonial period and continue to flourish, as they are quite compatible with Vodou.¹⁵⁷

In 1791, there was a general (and extraordinarily violent) slave uprising, which marked the beginning of the Haitian Revolution. Legend has it that the Revolution began with a Vodou ceremony in a forest called Bois Caiman on the border of the Plaine du Nord, Saint-Domingue's richest sugar producing region. This was a planned general insurrection of slaves, which, within days, reduced the Plaine du Nord plantations to ashes. Many variations exist on the story and about the details of this ceremony. To understand the Haitian Revolution from a Vodou-informed perspective, the lwa of the Petwo Rite (which are pwen) must be named, as they played significant roles in the events surrounding the Haitian Revolution. Unlike the Rada and Gede Rites, which are entirely African, Petwo Rites have lwa with both African and New World origins. The African-derived lwa of Petwo come from Kongo and Ibo. The Creole or New World lwa of this rite were people who lived and died during the colonial and revolutionary times. These New World people were frequently and vigorously venerated after death with less emphasis on the mortal human, and more focus on their unique and memorable character,

¹⁵⁵ The region of Haiti, referred to as the Artibonite is highly Kongo influenced, thus is the heart of the most intense mystical/magical practices in Vodou.

¹⁵⁶ Secret societies have a strong rural tradition in the Artibonite region of Haiti and are feared because of their intense mysticism. They are societies that are sworn to secrecy.

¹⁵⁷ Cosentino, Donald. "Envoi: The Gedes and Bawon." *Sacred Arts of Vodou*. pp. 399-419.

attributes, and/or actions. While the process of a newly deceased human being ritually transformed into a lwa is usually a lengthy one, the extreme and rapid succession of events of this historical period accelerated, resulting in a spiritual compression of time and space.¹⁵⁸ Thus, “les morts” or “dead people” who had been known in life, with families and varied personalities, changed rapidly into “lwa,” where they were no longer remembered as the mortal people they had been, but rather as exaggerated distillations of a worthy revolutionary character, quality, or action associated with the actual deceased person.¹⁵⁹ The surviving vodouisants needed the courage, resilience, and ingenuity of their deceased brother and sister-warriors. Service to the deceased as “new lwa” dramatically bolstered their military efforts. The Petwo liturgical order, as it was taught to me by my initiatory mother is as follows, “Legba Petro, Marassa Petro, Wawangol, Ibo, Senegal, Kongo, Kaplou, Kanga, Takya, Zoklimo, Simbi Dlo, Gran Simbi, Carrefour, Cimitiere, Gran Bwa, Kongo Savanne, Erzulie Dantor, Marinette, Don Petro, Ti-Jean Petro, Gros Point, Simbi Andezo and Simbi Makaya.”

As mentioned above, what is unique in this rite is the addition of Creole lwa to the African pantheon. Creole lwa begin with Erzulie Dantor (from the French *à tort*, meaning “wronged”), who will be introduced within the context of the Haitian Revolution. As for Petwo lwa in general, ceremonial regalia are red and these lwa are hot, fierce, protective, and aggressive toward adversaries. Petwo lwa like fire (purification), kleren (single-distilled cane liquor¹⁶⁰) and black pigs¹⁶¹ or dark chickens for sacrifice. The image in Figure 39 shows the Roots Without

¹⁵⁸ Greenough-Hodges, K. Field work. Jacmel, Haiti. 2011.

¹⁵⁹ Mambo Racine. Notes about Petro and Sanpwel, January 2011.

¹⁶⁰ Creole drink.

¹⁶¹ Ideally, meaning the black Creole pig, which was native to the island until the 1930s when they were almost made extinct by an American sponsored eradication program.

End Society *laplas* or sword bearers in Petwo red regalia, dancing and clinking their swords to Petwo rhythms during the *Bat Guerre*, which is a three-night series of ceremonies that occur during the cycle of initiation (kanzo). The Bat Guerre machete-dance is considered a “sacred dance” with the lwa and is believed to encourage the spirits to walk with the new initiates.



Figure 39. Petro Bat Guerre¹⁶²

Another lwa from the Petwo rite that has strong connections to the Haitian Revolution is Erzulie Dantor. She is a patron lwa of the Roots Without End Society and frequently venerated.

Figure 40 is a picture of a hounsi twirling with a chicken for Dantor.

¹⁶² Laplas Marcelien and Levois, sword dancing at Petro Bat Guerre (making war) is a ceremony that lasts two nights during Kanzo. This was my Kanzo 2009.



Figure 40. Hounsi Jeanni with a chicken twirling for Petwo Erzulie Danto. Danto is a special lwa of this house, so there are regular services for her. This was during a kanzo, and the person to be initiated was meeting as many lwa as possible. Jeanni, is also my initiatory sister. She specifically serves Danto. She is twirling with the sacrifice, while Babou (the houngan) and Hilaire (master drummer) attempt to invoke Danto to mount Jeanni. Jacmel, Haiti 2011.¹⁶³

Erzulie Dantor or Danto,¹⁶⁴ also known Erzulie Zye-Wouj, is a wild and feisty lwa of motherhood, single motherhood in particular. She is a defender of all wronged in love and is a feminist and warrior woman. As Dantor, she is evoked in the image of the Catholic icon, the black Madonna and child of Czestochowa. However, the scratches on her cheek are believed to be a result of fighting with her sister, Erzulie Freda, over a man. The child in her arms is not the Christ-child, but believed to be either her daughter, Anais, or Ti-Jean, her co-hort. Figure 41 Shows a Catholic statuette of Dantor.

¹⁶³ Houngan or Hougenikon Babou of the Roots Without End Society directs Hounsi Jeanie to sacrifice a chicken for Erzulie Danto, Petro. Seconds before possession by Erzulie Danto, the drum, Hountor “growls” (drummer on large Maman drum). Jeanni is my initiatory sister.

¹⁶⁴ Spelling of her name, like many words in Creole are inconsistent.



Figure 41. Black Madonna of Czestochowa Figure statuette¹⁶⁵

Sometimes, depictions of Dantor show her with red eyes filled with rage and blood spewing out of her mouth. Of particular interest is that this image recalls her participation in the Haitian Revolution. The story told to me by a fellow initiate was that she voluntarily allowed her tongue to be cut out by her own people, so that if she was captured, she could not reveal military plans. Figure 42 shows a depiction of Dantor illustrating this Vodou story.

¹⁶⁵ https://images.search.yahoo.com/search/images?p=erzili+danto+statuette&fr=tightropetb&imgurl=http%3A%2F%2Ffananda-oasis.fr%2F2345-thickbox_default%2Fstatue-resine-erzulie-dantor-exili-dantor-peinte-a-la-main.jpg#id=3&iurl=http%3A%2F%2Ffananda-oasis.fr%2F2345-thickbox_default%2Fstatue-resine-erzulie-dantor-exili-dantor-peinte-a-la-main.jpg. Accessed October 2, 2017.

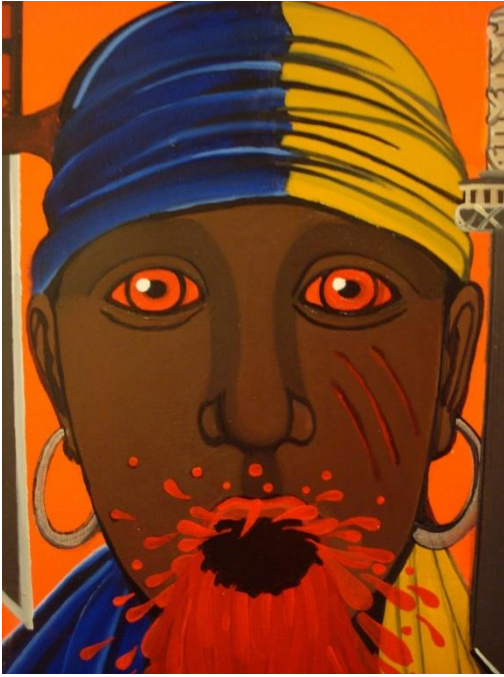


Figure 42. Eruzili Dantor, detail from a larger painting depicting many of the Erzili variations in Petwo¹⁶⁶

The last significant influence on the development of pwen in Vodou and perhaps the beginning of negative perceptions by outsiders toward the small Caribbean nation and its national religion are the incidents immediately preceding the Bois Caiman ceremony as well as the Bois Caiman Vodou ceremony itself. Before the Bois Caiman ceremony, there were previous insurrections, including a notable one led by Francois Mackandal, who in 1757 successfully poisoned some plantation owners through their water supply before he was caught and burned alive.¹⁶⁷ As for the generally accepted version of the Bois Caiman ceremony,¹⁶⁸ seen by many as the centerpiece of the start of the Haitian Revolution, is believed to have happened on the night

¹⁶⁶ Ziyatdinova, Elise. (Detail) of Dantor Ge Rouge. Canvas 9x12in. 2010. <https://erzulieredeyes.wordpress.com/page/7/>. Accessed October 6, 2017.

¹⁶⁷ Evocations of this event appear in popular culture. Most famously Alejo Carpentier's novel, *The Kingdom of this World* (1949) depicts this scene.

¹⁶⁸ There are many versions of this event, including some scholars who say it did not exist at all.

of August 14, 1791 at a Vodou ceremony where a revolt was planned against the ruling white planters in the Plain du Nord. After the ceremony, participants of the Bois Caiman ceremony went on a killing spree, simultaneously setting the plantations in the Northern Plain on fire. The ceremony itself was said to have 200 Africans present,¹⁶⁹ with 21 diverse African nations represented. The ceremony was long; the entire pantheon of Vodou spirits was summoned, known as *Minocan* (all lwa). A vast array of religious knowledge from the 21 African nations was put into practice that night; there was a native Haitian black pig sacrificed for lwa Erzulie Danto; Blood offerings to the lwa were made, and the leading houngan of the ceremony, Dutty Boukman¹⁷⁰ predicted great resistance and ultimate liberation of the slaves. Additionally, the leading mambo, Cécile Fatiman,¹⁷¹ was mounted by Dantor.^{172,173} Thus, the spiritual energy of 21 African nations put into movement what is believed to be the strongest pwen of all time. The ceremony was consummated by the blood of a pig and participants made a blood pact, indicated by ritual marks on the foreheads of all present and a loyalty oath was made to the cause of creating a Haitian Fatherland.¹⁷⁴ Some sources say “an African blood pact” involves the consumption of human blood, which is a point that continues to be disputed by scholars.¹⁷⁵

¹⁶⁹ Geggus, David Patrick. *Haitian Revolutionary Studies*. Indiana University Press, 2002. p. 72.

¹⁷⁰ Boukman was an inspirational figure. He was believed to be a Jamaican Muslim slave, and later killed by French troops November 7, 1791. His head was displayed by the French to dispel the aura of invincibility he projected.

¹⁷¹ Fatiman is the mambo scholars generally agree on who did this ceremony, but I have been told there were actually two ceremonies. The first ceremony, further north, was led by a mambo called Marinette. Her ceremony was the first one and she was subsequently caught and burned by the French. We, vodouisants, know this story because the songs about her tell us the story. There is more about her elsewhere in the dissertation.

¹⁷²

¹⁷³ One Houngan told me Dantor rode Cecile until the next day, which was a direct and revolutionary reclamation of the day from the French, as the 15th of August was the mandated Catholic holiday of the Feast of the Assumption. This was explained to me that it was more about inverting the systems holding them back, rather than disrespecting the Virgin Mary. Greenough-Hodges, Kimberly. *Field work*. 2008.

¹⁷⁴ Grey, Kathy S. Telephone interview. 2010.

¹⁷⁵ Molefi Kete Asante and Ama Mazama. *Encyclopedia of African Religion, Volume 1* SAGE, p. 131.

Another controversy involves the exact words and meaning of the mambo, who becomes “mounted by Dantor” during the ceremony and then declares war against the French, encouraging them to “[c]ast aside the image of the God of the oppressors.”¹⁷⁶ Although the resulting massacre of the whites profoundly shocked the European world, it is important to remember that, to the resisting Haitians, it was seen as war, thus, a necessary means to an end. Additionally, the message from the lwa.



Figure 43. Depiction of Bois Caiman ceremony¹⁷⁷

Dantor was to cast aside “the image of the God of the oppressors” *not to cast aside God himself*. Recall that in Vodou things “are” rather than “represent.” Therefore, “the image of the God of the oppressors” would have seemed false, because it was an *image* of the French God,

¹⁷⁶Charles Arthur and Michael Dash (eds), *Libète: A Haiti Anthology* (Princeton, NJ: Markus Wiener Publishers, 1999), p. 36.

¹⁷⁷ Castera Bazile, *Petwo Ceremony* 1950. Oil on Masonite. 58.5 x 49 cm. Milwaukee Art Museum. Image found in Cosentino, J. Donald. *Sacred Arts of Vodou*.1993, p. 139.

not simply *God*.

After 13 years of revolution, unified black and Creole Haitians defeated Napoleonic forces in 1804. They declared themselves independent of France under General Jean-Jacques Dessalines. Thus, the Republic of Haiti became the first black Republic in the western hemisphere with Saint-Domingue named as the second colony to win its independence (after the United States).

CHAPTER 3

ROMAN CATHOLIC MYSTICISM AND HAITIAN VODOU PWEN

In Haiti, many people practice Roman Catholicism and Haitian Vodou side by side. It is common for people to attend mass and then stop by the peristyle, or other lwa-specific sites for ceremonies on certain feast days.¹⁷⁸ For Caribbean people, largely as a byproduct of a complicated colonial histories, this practice is accepted as natural. In recognition of this fact, Roman Catholicism and Vodou became the two national religions of Haiti in 2003. Vodou shares many recognizable characteristics with Roman Catholicism. A few of these shared features are ritualized gestures, prayers, devotions, veneration of spiritual entities and saints, including colors, rhythms and/or songs associated with the specific spirits. The intention is to give the reader context to better understand Haitian Vodou by comparing and contrasting its traditions to similar devotions and practices of Roman Catholicism. I argue that there is specific ritualistic behavior, in both Catholic and Vodou religious practice, such as prayers, gestures, devotions, songs, veneration of God, saints, and lwa that serve to focus “energy” toward the realization of a desired result. This “focusing of energy” and its inherent power is a foundation of what is understood in Catholicism as “mysticism” and in Haitian Vodou as “pwen.”

For the Catholic, the means to the desired end is an individual, meditative, and introspective process. To the Haitian vodouisant, this process is communal, dynamic, and extroversive. Additionally, Catholic methods tend to be predictable and controlled. Meditations, devotions, and prayer service are usually taught by clergy and other trained ministers to children as well as adult converts. In the course of a lengthy process of Catholic catechism,¹⁷⁹ there is a

¹⁷⁸ The graveyard is a Gede lwa-specific site, as the beach is a Siren/Agwe lwa specific site.

¹⁷⁹ Roman Catholic conversion or catechism time frames vary, but are generally taken over a year or more.

strong emphasis placed on solemn, individual prayer or communication with God, Jesus, and intercessory saints, sometimes requiring the assistance of a priest. The apex of Catholicism is achieved through the celebration of the Eucharist, which is a group or communal experience. It is a largely sedentary “meditation” with controlled song, music (usually an organ), prayer, minimal gestures and restrained, “reverent” and proscribed body movements,¹⁸⁰ led by a priest. This context is typical for catholic “mystical” experiences. Whereas in the Haitian Vodou ceremony, *pwen* is cultivated initially through solitary and isolated Catholic methods, but the *vodouisant* should (at some point) become “lively” with interactive songs, improvisational movements, and dances. In Vodou, movement is crucial to spirit activity. These animated Vodou exchanges are often spontaneous and responsive to both participants and *lwa* (spiritual entities). Prayer, song, and drums in a Vodou ceremony are polyphonic, meaning they have many (interacting) voices, but also lead by a priest or priestess (*houngan* or *mambo*). It should be noted that Vodou service can be done alone. Like Christian prayer service, Vodou ceremonies are substantially more powerful and effective if done with others. In Vodou and Catholicism, it is believed that help from the spirit world is far more likely if the needs and desires are requested through a unified community service, as multiple harmonizing voices and intentions are believed to be stronger than individual ones. Thus, Catholicism and Vodou share the same goal of communication or otherwise engaging in deep and profound mystic communion with spiritual entities. In this way, the two religions demonstrate that there are more similarities in basic belief and practice than differences.

¹⁸⁰ Minimal gesturing is defined here as signing of the cross, bowing one’s head, clasping hands together or genuflection, or lightly “striking” the fist to the chest during penitential rites, genuflection and raising one’s hands in call and response.

It is striking how Roman Catholicism is deeply embedded within Haitian Vodou tradition. This fact can be casually observed in the opening prayers of Haitian Vodou ceremonies. “The Our Father,” “Hail Mary,” and “The Apostle’s Creed” are always said in the same order and spoken in French. There are also universal Catholic gestures used in the Vodou ceremony, such as making the sign of the cross accompanied with the utterance, saying (in French) “Au nom du père du fils et du saint esprit. Ainsi soi-t-il.” (In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Amen). The purpose and meanings of these prayers are the same in a Haitian Vodou ceremony as well as a Catholic mass.

The Guinea Prayer, or “Prie Gine,” is a very long prayer that loosely follows the framework of the Catholic devotion known as the litany of saints. The Creole character of the prayer can be seen in the way it transitions between languages and spiritual entities. The Prie begins in French, transitions into Creole, and dramatically culminates in “langaj,” or African words that have no known translation.¹⁸¹ Langaj is believed to be the ancient language of the lwa, a powerful attractant to the spirits of Vodou with strong incantatory force. Its correct usage in ceremony helps to “fe choffe” (heat up the spirits). It is believed that through the evolution of the Creole language, the exact meaning of the African words became lost. The early French part of the *Prie Gine* evokes the rhythms of Catholic prayers and chants said during mass. This part of a Vodou ceremony is solemn. There are no drums or dancing and congregants may be seated, usually facing the song leader (hougenikon) or mambo or houngan (priestess or priest) officiating the ceremony. In particularly formal settings, such as in the final rituals of kanzo (initiation) known as the baptem (baptism), congregants do not sit, but as a gesture of honor and

¹⁸¹ Stems from the slave trade.

respect, they stand behind the newly “emerged” initiates awaiting baptem. In Christian and Vodou traditions, baptism is a washing clean, starting new and for children and infants—bringing the person into faith. Specifically, in Vodou, it is more about looking at faith (Vodou) through new eyes, imbuing power, and aligning the person spiritually (see Figure 44).



Figure 44. Kanzo 2009¹⁸²

Phrases of the Vodou Prie Gine are recited or sung in a “call and response” method. This is similar to the Catholic responsorial, or “responses” by the congregation to the word of God. In the Prie, both Roman Catholic saints and Haitian Vodou lwa (all nations and origins) are “introduced” in song.¹⁸³ After the spiritual entity is “named,” the congregants applaud in welcome. It is important to note that the “calling” of the different spiritual entities and the

¹⁸² Opening ceremony for my baptem (baptism). 2009.

¹⁸³ Each entity introduced has a different rhythm of prayer, chant, or song.

singing and dancing to their corresponding rhythms are understood as creating pwen.¹⁸⁴

However, in the context of a formal ceremony, these independent pwen function as layers of spiritual energy that augment as the rhythms circle around, creating a progressively larger and stronger pwen. A completed Prie Gine boasts a collective energy of the entire pantheon of Vodou lwa, beginning with entities from Europe, then Africa, and ending with those from the New World.

The liturgical order of the Prie is largely African in origin and reflects a progressively cool to hot “temperature” of the Vodou ceremony. The temperature is expressed through the type and sequence of prayers, colors, rhythms, as well as in the character and personality of the spirits. Cool lwa are the most ancient ones. They are also believed to be beneficent, regal, and slower to act. Warm or hot lwa are more modern, spontaneous, and quicker to act. The “cool” spiritual entities also include Catholic European ones and they are named and venerated in this order: God, Jesus, Mary, and Catholic Saints. The Catholic spirits are first, likely a result of colonial history.¹⁸⁵ After the Catholic saints, African and Creole “lwa” follow, categorized in the traditional rites of Vodou: Rada lwa (Ancient West and Central African spirits), Gede lwa (Central African spirits), and Petwo lwa (Kongo and New World or Creole spirits). Like the Catholic saints, Rada lwa are also considered “cool.” The Gede and Petwo rites have lwa that range from “warm” to “hot.” Bright colors, peppery rhythms, and spontaneous wild possessions characterize these lwa. Most of these temperature categorizations originate in Africa, although “hot” Petwo New World lwa have origins stemming from revolutionary times. There is more

¹⁸⁴ Meaning of pwen implies a focusing spiritual energy here.

¹⁸⁵ Greenough-Hodges, K. Field work. Conversations with practitioners. Jacmel, Haiti. 2009.

detail about these spiritual entities of Vodou, their rites and specific origins, found earlier in the chapter on historical context.

Similar to Catholic saints, with their unique characteristics, religious, personal histories, and attributes, Haitian Vodou lwa, also have versatile and colorful temperaments with distinctive associations to places and situations. Sometimes, the stories of the lwa pertain directly to a Christian/Catholic notion of God, but not always. Even if the lwa is frightening and menacing, there is always an important “moral”¹⁸⁶ life lesson in the story of the lwa.

Although Catholics and Vodouisants both venerate spirit in similar ways, there are also some profound differences. To start with, the vocabulary practitioners use to describe their religions underscores differences that address markedly different worldviews. Catholics (and many other Christian faiths that use similar liturgy) state that they “believe” in God, the saints, etc. They do this formally in mass, with prayers such as the Nicene Creed, Apostle’s Creed and the Our Father, but also informally when Catholics or Christians are asked about God and religion. Although Vodouisants use the same formal “I believe” words of the Catholic prayers in Vodou ceremonies, it is important to note that these prayers only appear in the introductory, structured “French and Creole Catholic” part. As the ceremony progresses, cerebral professing of faith is superseded by song lyrics, where bodily movement and rhythm honor God and the spirits. This aspect of Vodou reveals its deeply African origins. Additionally, if vodouisants are asked if they believes in God, they will respond that they “serve” the lwa.¹⁸⁷ One significant similarity is that concerning both Catholic mysticism and Vodou pwen is the belief that

¹⁸⁶ Morality in Haitian Vodou is not specifically (always and for all practitioners at all times) grounded in Christian morality.

¹⁸⁷ This is known as sevis lwa (service lwa or “doing” a complete service or ceremony for the lwa).

community participation increases spiritual power. Singular Catholic prayer or the individual Vodou song can be a strong religious devotion, but a fully participatory Catholic mass or multi-layered *sevi lwa* is believed to generate incrementally more intense spiritual power. For the Catholic, mysticism culminates in the transubstantiation of the communion wafers and wine, which they believe to transform into the actual “Holy Body” and “Holy Blood” of Christ. Additionally, it is believed that the priest alone has the ability to invite Jesus down from heaven and into the wafers and wine, which are then consumed by congregants. Transubstantiation is believed to be possible, as a result of the sacrifice made by Jesus’ death on the cross. It is further relevant to understand that frequent participation in the Eucharist brings one closer to Jesus, thus, underscoring the profound morality embedded in Christian religion that does not exist in Vodou. In the Vodou context, a complete and multi-layered ceremony, such as a kanzo,¹⁸⁸ or initiation ceremony, the initiates and their future ritual objects are transformed through a series of intense public and private rituals, from one state into another.¹⁸⁹ For example, the kanzo cycle of initiation is allegorical to gestation and birth. First, the initiates-to-be are collected (or “arrested” by the house sword bearers or *laplas*), where they are ritually “washed”¹⁹⁰ until “clean.” Then, the unborn, or “neophytes” (as they are called) are taken into seclusion where they “grow” and “develop,” deepening their understanding of the Vodou worldview. The initiated vodouisant undergoes a profound psychological, emotional, and spiritual transformation.¹⁹¹ Initiates are

¹⁸⁸ Haitian Vodou initiation ceremony.

¹⁸⁹ This is a deep and extensive topic that falls outside the scope of this research.

¹⁹⁰ “Washing” means the pouring of water infused with sacred herbs over the head, seven times (maximum number of *lwa* that can “walk” with an individual. It is important to wash underarms and private areas with provided soap and a penny (offering for Legba, the crossroads of Rada). It is a cold experience. These “soiled” garments are destroyed and initiates-to-be become “neophyte” once they are taken into seclusion.

¹⁹¹ Most of what happens to an initiate during kanzo is private, secret information and can only be discussed among other initiates, preferably of the same house.

revitalized, realigned, and intensely connected through ritual to spirituality and the people of their house. Vodou maintains a worldview that is different from western Christian religion, but also is not in conflict with it. The focus for initiated vodouisants is on healing, balance, and doing “good.” The desire to do “good” is more a motivation to be productive and help oneself, thereby helping one’s family and the larger community. It is not a Christian sense of morality, overshadowed by guilt and sacrifice. As many practicing vodouisants are also practicing Catholics,¹⁹² the reality of day-to-day life is a blend of both worldviews.

After 14 days of private and public ceremonies, the initiates “emerge.” They are considered to be (re)born, and spiritually “voyant”¹⁹³ with enlivened and bonded ritual objects that will serve them for life. Importantly, with its 14 days of intense ceremonies, herbal preparations, animal sacrifice, prayers, singing and dancing, the kanzo is the ultimate pwen in Vodou. For this reason, the kanzo will be referenced throughout the dissertation as a centerpiece that illustrates pwen and how it works.

There are distinct differences between the types of spiritual entities of Roman Catholicism and Haitian Vodou, but the central theological similarity is that both Catholics and vodouisants agree there is only one supreme God. One major difference does exist as seen in the types of spiritual entities. In Vodou, not all lwa used to be people. Some of the lwa are spirits that exist inside natural elements, opposing forces or ancient plants or other creatures from Ancient Africa. Examples of ancient lwa that are generally understood to predate Christianity are: the secretive Loko (lwa of medicinal plants and leaves who is associated with healing), the

¹⁹² Greenough-Hodges. Field work. Jacmel, Haiti, 2009.

¹⁹³ “Seeing” from French means enlightened in Vodou context.

Iwa Sobo (Iwa of the power of thunder and lightning), and Danbala or the beneficent and sacred white snake. It is important to note that these nonhuman Haitian Vodou Iwa are not animistic in the African or Native American sense. Instead, these Iwa are *specific* spiritual entities that reside within or are associated with a *precise* natural thing. Not every clap of thunder or white snake is automatically a Vodou spirit. The pwen or spirit residing inside a specific thing is situational and contextual. One example of this is the Iwa Loko, who is a Iwa that resides inside a specific medicinal plant. He is not a generalized “essence” of just any plant, as Vodou does not recognize a generalized spirituality in nonhuman things.¹⁹⁴

There is an interesting system of hierarchy among spiritual entities in both Catholicism and Haitian Vodou. In Roman Catholicism, the order is morality based, divided between good and evil, and the order is loosely as follows: the highest and benevolent authority is God the Father, then his Son, Jesus (who is divine in nature with human body and character), and the Holy Spirit, or love shared between the Father and Son. These three persons (i.e., Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) are also one entity, the Holy Trinity. Then, there is Mary, the mother of Jesus, believed by Catholics to be free of original sin, followed by the saints and the martyrs, then angels (of which there are many different types with different ranks and jobs). On the “evil” side, there are demons or devils (also with many different ranks and jobs) and the supreme fallen angel, Lucifer, or Satan. In Catholicism, the afterlife is composed of three places: heaven, purgatory, and hell. One’s afterlife entry and placement are believed to be determined by God on Judgment Day. Things considered for one’s afterlife placement include a variety of factors such as, adhering to rules as set out in the Bible, sins (forgiven and unforgiven), repentance, intent,

¹⁹⁴ There are some exceptions to this as seen in Chapter 1, “Interview with a Mambo.”

and good works. It is believed that the deceased await judgment in purgatory. (Although some souls, due to innocence or good works go immediately to heaven.) Most people, after a period of cleansing and repentance in purgatory, will go on to heaven. Those who have chosen in life not to repent, and/or die with serious sins¹⁹⁵ go to hell.

Alternatively, death in Vodou is a universal transitional space that begins with an initial resting period “to settle the soul and body.” After one year and one day,¹⁹⁶ there is a ceremony, “Anba dlo nan Gine” (under the water in Guinea), where the body and soul¹⁹⁷ of the deceased are ritually separated and set free into the cosmos. This ceremony can occur any time after the waiting period and is usually the last *pwen*,¹⁹⁸ done on behalf of a deceased person. It is performed by a *houngan* or *mambo* with family and friends as support. To a *vodouisant*, this “African heaven” is a primordial cosmic space where all potentiality is born and ultimately returns. All *vodouisants* are welcomed on their return to Gine. In Vodou, once a person is deceased, or in spirit, their morality (or lack of) during their time on earth is not relevant.¹⁹⁹ There is no belief in “hell” or the idea of Satan or Lucifer in Haitian Vodou. One semantic

¹⁹⁵ Sins in Catholicism are divided between mortal and venial sins. Mortal sins are grave offenses that separate the individual from God’s saving grace. Examples are killing another person or oneself. Mortal sins can be sincerely repented through the sacrament of Reconciliation, or Confession with a Catholic priest. Mortal sins which are not confessed, can potentially block entrance to heaven and send one to hell. Venial sins weaken a person’s relationship with God. Examples are lying or infidelity. Venial sins can also be forgiven through the Sacrament of Reconciliation with a Catholic priest. One must spend extra time in Purgatory repenting if one dies with venial sins.

¹⁹⁶ Other old cultures have this same time wait, but the origins and reason for it are unclear, but likely come from Africa.

¹⁹⁷ More on the components of the soul in magical realism literary chapter.

¹⁹⁸ Meant here as prayers or intention for the return to Gine.

¹⁹⁹ As mentioned before, the idea of morality in Haitian Vodou is not the same as western religious tradition of morality. It is taught through Vodou songs, in oral tradition and although songs address issues of spirituality and appropriate behavior, I posit that “Morality” in Vodou is largely a social morality, as it does not affect one’s afterlife and/or ultimate return to Gine, but does affect one’s community and personal relationships.

connection to the idea of a “devil” is a “djab,”²⁰⁰ which (contrary to popular belief) is actually a *neutral* and unnamed spiritual entity that sometimes comes into a person’s head during a Vodou ceremony. One djab of historical significance “mounted” the Mambo Marinette, who was leading the (first²⁰¹) famous ceremony at Bois Caiman that jump-started the Haitian Revolution. Later, this “djab” was recognized as the lwa Erzulie Dantor²⁰² at a subsequent ceremony. In the chapter on historical and cultural context, this ceremony is discussed in detail. The ceremony was very intense and long, involving the “magical knowledge” of the 21 nations of ethnic groups or *Milokan*, the sacrifice of a black pig (Dantor’s preference), including blood markings on the foreheads of participants. There has been a great deal said about this ceremony and specifically how “evil” is was. However, it is important to keep in mind that these spirits are not evil “devils.” The idea of “a satanic-devil-lwa” is not African, but a Western construct that does not exist in Vodou theology. Furthermore, some djab, such as Dantor, were “new” Creole lwa just coming into being. Others come from different religious traditions and are not recognized by a name because they are outside the pantheon of venerated Vodou lwa. The word I heard Haitians use to describe these entities was “enkoni,” which literally means “unknown” in English. Subjectively, it means unrecognizable by behavior or character.

In both traditions, God is always recognized as the supreme, reigning spiritual entity, followed by Jesus, the son of God and Mary, the mother of Jesus. However, in Vodou, Jesus is

²⁰⁰ From the French word “diable.” It does not inherently connote evil or good. It is simply a spirit outside the recognized pantheon. Often, it is a Native American spirit and is recognized by erratic unpredictable behavior.

²⁰¹ Historical texts cite one Bois Caiman ceremony. My field research 2009-2010 in Jacmel revealed stories about the other two ceremonies. Greenough-Hodges, Kimberly. Jacmel, Haiti, 2010.

²⁰² Dantor was an African female revolutionary fighter who lost her life. There is more about her life, death and spirit that appears here, in the Historical Overview chapter, and in the chapter on the Haitian Revolution and pwen.

unusual, as he is at times considered part of God (Bondye), where he is all-powerful. Other times, he is thought of as just “another” lwa. Even still, there are times when he is thought of as both at once, depending on the religious orientation of the individual and the ritual context.²⁰³ As said before, in Vodou, all lwa are pwen and these lwa are spiritually equal to each other as well as to the Catholic saints. As for the lwa themselves, it is understood that they are sound and color vibrations, identified by rhythms, by name, and image. In Vodou theology, lwa are considered lesser vibrational beings than God, but higher than man. The personalities of the lwa, like the different Catholic saints, are quite unique and varied in their strengths. Practicing vodouisants who are also Catholic, consider the lwa to be lateral extensions to the pantheon of Roman Catholic saints.²⁰⁴ Vodou practitioners often venerate the saints in Catholic style, typically through prayers and other devotional practices.²⁰⁵ In contrast, lwa are honored in Vodou-style, through ceremonies that include prayer, song, libations, dance, drums, offerings, sacrifice and possession.²⁰⁶ Although images of Catholic saints, specifically “prayer cards” or chromolithographs of the saints, are used in Vodou ceremonies; Catholic and Vodou aspects of the entities are different and people do not confuse the two.²⁰⁷ Vodou interpretation of the Catholic images is literal not mythological. Thus, the Catholic card portrays a mythology about

²⁰³ Greenough-Hodges. Field work, 2010.

²⁰⁴ Field work in Haiti.

²⁰⁵ Examples outside of these exist in folk Catholicism. Folk Catholicism is an ethnic expression of Catholicism that typically occurs in developing countries, usually with a colonial history. Practices appear to be “Catholic,” as they might coincide with a Catholic Holy Day, but practices are outside Church Doctrine. An example of Folk Catholicism are the “flagellants” that flog themselves while walking down the road as an enactment of the Lord’s Passion during Holy Week. Folk Catholicism is not criticized by the Church but ignored unless the practice is perceived as heresy.

²⁰⁶ Not all of these things need to happen in order to illustrate “veneration.”

²⁰⁷ Scholarly writing on Vodou refers to “syncretism” between Catholic saints and lwa. Although the images of the catholic saints can depict both saint and lwa—there is a clear distinction between the two in the practice of Vodou. Western perspective on Vodou implies the distinction is ambiguous.

St. Patrick, but in Vodou, it is an image of “snakes.” Also, the Catholic prayer cards are imbued with a long-standing spiritual tradition, which was recognized as “power” by the African slaves.

Popular Catholic images used in Vodou that illustrates this duality are those of Mary, Mother of God. Mary has many images and methods of veneration by Catholic followers. Catholic devotions to her are in some ways similar to the veneration of the popular female lwa of Haitian Vodou, Erzulie Freda. The Roman Catholic chromolithographic image of Mary, specifically the one of the Mater Dolorosa,²⁰⁸ is used by Catholics to depict the Blessed Mother. To vodouisants, this image has a parallel meaning. It represents Mary but it also “is”²⁰⁹ the Haitian Vodou mambo, Erzulie Freda, Dahomean Queen.²¹⁰ This chromolithograph depicts a light-skinned woman dressed in luxurious robes with a fantastic crown.



Figure 45. Mater Dolorosa/Erzuli Freda detail from Vodou dwapo by Kim Greenough-Hodges

²⁰⁸ The tearful Catholic Mary with swords piercing her heart Vodou interpretation is literal, Catholic interpretation is mythological.

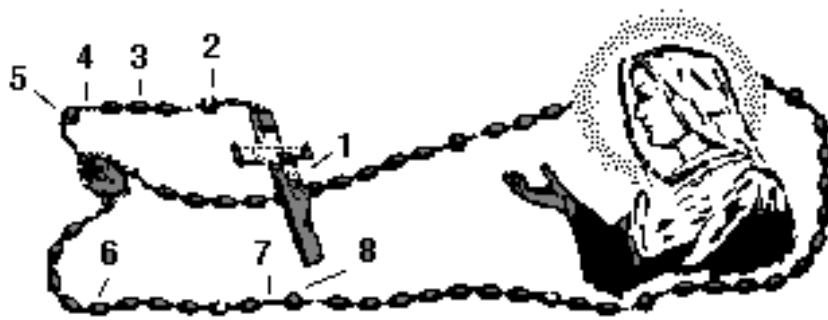
²⁰⁹ “Is” is used here because images are not representations of spirit, but are the actual spirit.

²¹⁰ Beninois.

For Catholics, Mary's power resides in her gentle power as the quintessential Mother, pure and completely without sin. For centuries, Catholics have venerated her so fervently and in so many ways that church factions through time have been and continue to be categorized as "Marionists" depending on the specific view of the parish toward the mother of Jesus. Special churches, sculptures, and altars are dedicated to Mary; special prayers are said when her intercession is desired and many famous stories and visions have developed around her. The image in Figure 45 of *Erzulie/Our Lady* shows a woman with sword and ample heart imagery is believed to exemplify Mary's sorrow at losing her son. The sword imagery stems from a biblical prophecy of Simeon where he says, "Jesus would be like a sword through Mary's soul."²¹¹ Personal and public veneration of Mary in Catholic tradition can be done in a variety of ways. A few common meditative activities in honor of Mary include individual or group prayer, where recitations of the *Hail Mary*, *Hail Holy Queen*, and the *Holy Rosary*²¹² take place. A great deal of Catholic mysticism surrounds Mary and her devotions.

²¹¹ Luke 2:35.

²¹² The Rosary is a meditative/prayer practice dedicated to Mary, Mother of Jesus. The individual recites the following prayers: Apostle's Creed, Our Father, Hail Mary, Glory Be, Hail Holy queen in repeating "decades" or groups that correspond to the number of beads on a rosary necklace. Each decade the individual prays the following: Our Father, Ten Hail Marys, Glory be to the Father . . . while meditating on the different mysteries of Mary/ Jesus' life: The First Joyful Mystery (The Annunciation of Our Lord), The Second Joyful Mystery (the Visitation), The Third Joyful Mystery (The Nativity), The Fourth Joyful Mystery (The Presentation in the Temple), The Fifth Joyful Mystery (The Finding in the Temple), The First Luminous Mystery (The Baptism of Jesus), The Second Luminous Mystery (Jesus' First Miracle at the Wedding Feast of Cana), The Third Luminous Mystery (Proclamation of the Kingdom of God), The Fourth Luminous Mystery (The Transfiguration), The Fifth Luminous Mystery (The Institution of the Eucharist), The First Sorrowful Mystery (The Agony in the Garden), The Second Sorrowful Mystery (The Scourging at the Pillar), The Third Sorrowful Mystery (Crowning with Thorns), The Fourth Sorrowful Mystery (The Carrying of the Cross), The Fifth Sorrowful Mystery (The Crucifixion and Death of Jesus), The First Glorious Mystery (The Resurrection of our Lord), The Second Glorious Mystery, (The Ascension into Heaven), The Third Glorious Mystery (The Descent of the Holy Spirit), The Fourth Glorious Mystery (The Assumption of Mary), The Fifth Glorious Mystery (The Coronation of Mary). Monday and Thursday are dedicated to the "joyful mysteries," Tuesday and Friday to the "sorrowful mysteries," and Wednesday, Saturday and Sunday to the "glorious mysteries," Thursday for the "mysteries of light."



1. Make the Sign of the Cross and say the “*Apostles’ Creed.*”
2. Say the “*Our Father.*”
3. Say three “*Hail Marys.*”
4. Say the “*Glory be to the Father.*”
5. Announce the First Mystery; then say the “*Our Father.*”
6. Say ten “*Hail Marys,*” while meditating on the Mystery.
7. Say the “*Glory be to the Father.*”
8. Announce the Second Mystery; then say the “*Our Father.*” Repeat 6 and 7 and continue with Third, Fourth and Fifth Mysteries in the same manner.²¹³

Figure 46. Diagram showing how to pray the Rosary

It is believed that the rosary, Mary’s favorite prayer, came into being as a result of her appearing in various locations in the world and asking for its recitation. It is both a vocal and reflective prayer, involving the basic recitation of a repeating series of the *Our Father* and *Hail Mary* prayers, followed by a reading and a reflection on an image of 1 of 20 important events, or “Mysteries” in the life of Mary, the Mother of God and her Divine Son. These events are divided into five evenly between the Joyful, Luminous, Sorrowful and Glorious Mysteries. The beads on the rosary necklace denote the number and type of prayer said (see footnote). The entire rosary takes about 45 minutes to do and is referenced in terms of “decades,” as there are 10 beads between the Mysteries. This is a popular devotional activity that is done by Catholics. There is

²¹³ <http://www.rosary-center.org/howto.htm#loaded> The mysteries are as follows: Joyful (the baptism of the Lord) 1, Luminous (The wedding at Cana), Sorrowful (The proclamation of the Kingdom) 1, and Glorious (the Transfiguration/the Eucharist).

no parallel activity in Vodou, as saying the rosary is only done for the veneration of the Virgin Mother with the goal of achieving an enhanced spiritual state. One use of a rosary (as a ritual object) in Vodou is wearing a rosary to honor an individual's met tet (Master Iwa believed to be in a person's head). For example, a practitioner might wear a rosary with Catholic St Anthony on it if the person's met tet is the Vodou Legba, as these two entities share iconography. One devotional activity in Vodou that evokes the rhythmic and repetitious movements accompanied with song of the rosary is called "tying a pwen." This practice involves a person singing songs venerating a particular spiritual entity (alone or in groups) while ritually binding an object with string or thread. While the person sings, the thread is wrapped around embellishments, fabric, bottles, or other items a specific number of times.²¹⁴ Then, to create equilibrium, the practitioner does the same action in the opposite direction. Tying a pwen is believed to balance energy. It also is believed to contain "goodness" in an attractively wrapped package. The finished Vodou object (pwen) can be for personal use or can be given as a gift. While there is no long-standing mythological meaning behind the tying of a pwen as there is with the rosary, Vodou devotional activities remain popular among practitioners. Vodouisants appreciate the literal meanings and immediate functions that come with "tying" a pwen.

Another popular Roman Catholic Mary devotional that presents an aligned *visual* aesthetic of the Vodou altar can be seen in the May Crowning ceremony. This ceremony is known as Catholic Mother's Day, which occurs in the month of May, honoring the supreme Mother of Jesus. In the May Crowning, congregants gather at a permanent Mary statuary or altar, dressed in their finest clothing. Flowers are placed at the feet of Mary, prayers such as Holy

²¹⁴ The materials and number of bindings are specific to the Iwa.

Queen, Hail Mary, and the Rosary are said or sung and she is crowned “queen” with a gold crown and adornments, such as a special rosary just for this occasion is placed on the statue. This is a powerful and very mystical (and imaginative) Catholic ceremony, particularly for children (see Figures 47-48).



Figure 47. May Crowning Mary with jewelry



Figure 48. May Crowning. Mary with jewelry and flowers²¹⁵

Again, this devotional practice is Roman Catholic, but the “altar” building with flowers and “dressing” the statues with finery is very similar to the treatment given to the altars of Vodou, especially those that share the Virgin Mother’s iconography. For a vodouisant who is also Catholic, one altar such as the May Crowning would serve in parallel the two spiritual entities that share iconography: the Virgin Mother and the Vodou lwa Erzulie Freda, discussed below.

In Haitian Vodou, Erzulie Freda is a French-speaking Creole woman, a lover of beauty, finery, cleanliness, elegance, and all things feminine. She shares iconography with the Virgin Mary, as seen on page 16, in her aspect of the Mater Dolorosa. Erzulie loves men and has three

²¹⁵ Greenough-Hodges, K. Photo taken at May Crowning Mount St Michael Catholic School, Dallas, TX, 2017. This is a permanent outdoor altar site for the veneration of Mary.

husbands, Danbala (Sacred Serpent), Ogou Feray (lwa of Haitian Revolution), and Agwe/Tawoyo (Master of the Sea). She has three gold rings on her hand. One is for each husband.²¹⁶ An altar for Erzulie Freda that visually evokes the Roman Catholic altar traditions for the Virgin Mother can be seen in Figure 49.



Figure 49. Erzulie Altar, USA, 2018²¹⁷

Note the visual reference to the Catholic Mater Dolorosa as seen in the statuette, who is the venerated lwa Erzulie Freda at this table. Erzulie's flower, color, texture, and food preferences are shared with preferences for altars for the Holy Mother. Common items used at altars in both traditions are roses and other luxurious, decorative embellishments. Unique décor items for the Vodou Erzulie Freda are pink flowers (roses), crystal stemware, and white and pink

²¹⁶ During a Vodou ceremony for a lwa with double signification, the Vodou lwa, the lwa would first be recognized in Vodou context, then (if applicable to ceremony or individual) the Catholic saint.

²¹⁷ Ezilkomen. Courtesy of Papa Hector. Sanctuary of Misterios 21 Divisiones. www.Greatestspells.net. Accessed on February 5, 2020.

satin fabric with gold accents. Some things found on the Erzulie altar are entirely Vodou. The most common is the veve or sacred cosmogram of Erzulie Freda. Characteristic of her association with love, it is depicted in Figure 50.

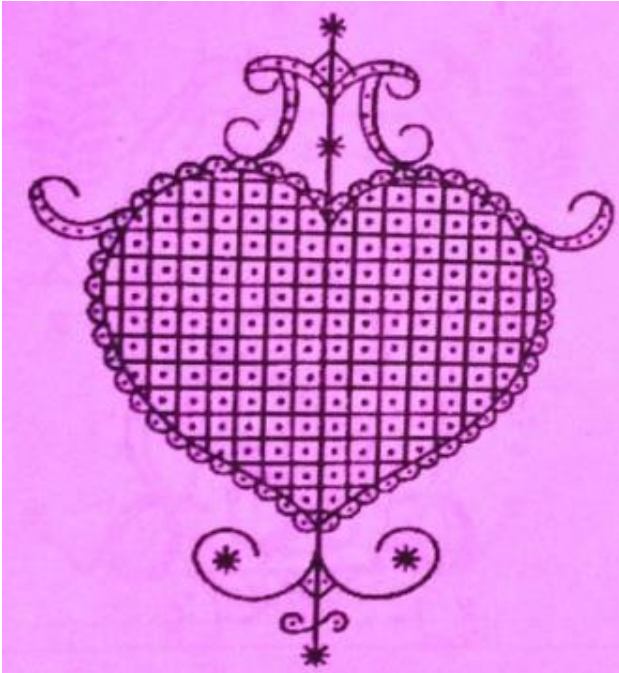


Figure 50. Erzili Freda²¹⁸

In addition to her veve, it is common to find Erzulie's three husbands' veves on her altars as well. Presentation of the veves of Erzulie's cohorts at an Erzulie ceremony are believed to be powerful attractants to all four lwa. Figure 51 shows the veve of Danbala, the sacred serpent, her first husband.

²¹⁸ Leconte, Frantz-Antoine. Erzili Freda veve. Haiti: Le Vodou au troisieme millenaire, p. 67.

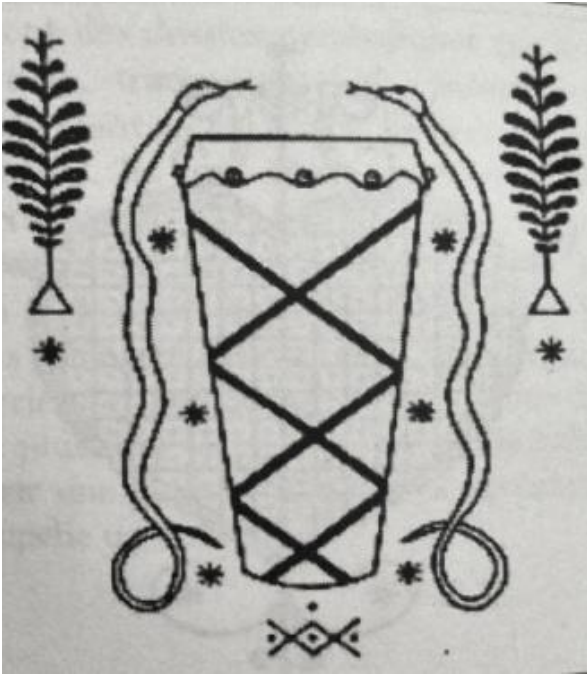


Figure 51. Dambalah veve²¹⁹

The next veve (Figure 52) is another husband of Erzulie, Ogou Feray, and the lwa of the Haitian Revolution, recognized by the machete. He was Erzulie's second husband.

²¹⁹ Leconte, Frantz-Antoine., p68. (Recall Danbala is the Sacred White snake of Vodou creation. He comes from Dahomey.)

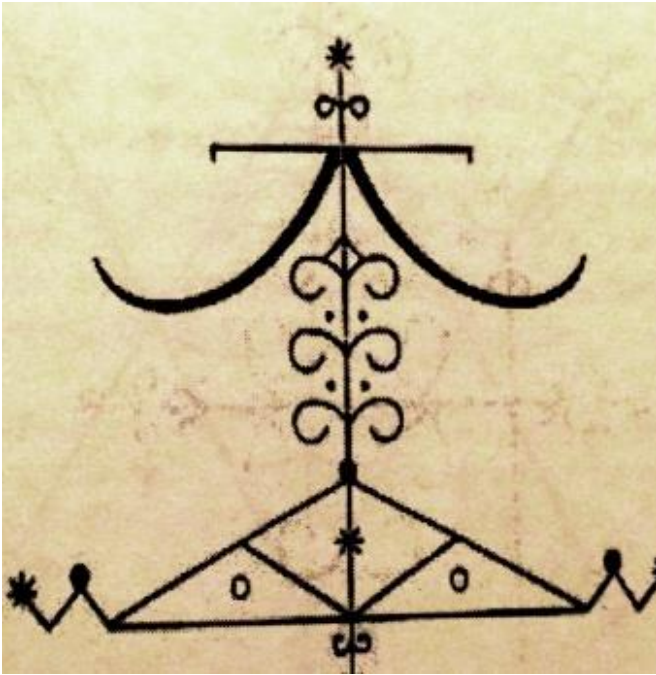


Figure 52. Ogou Feray²²⁰

The last of Erzulie's husbands is Agwe, master of the sea, indicated by the boat (Figure 53). He is her current husband. These three lwa are foundational lwa in Haitian Vodou. Thus, a ceremony for Erzulie that also honors her husbands is believed likely to attract a "lwa party," or ceremony with multiple lwa presenting. This type of ceremony is seen as a colorful, lively, and desirable event.

²²⁰ Leconte, Frantz-Antoine. Sacred Arts of Vodou. p. 67. The imagery has secret meanings, but the machete is indicative of this lwa.

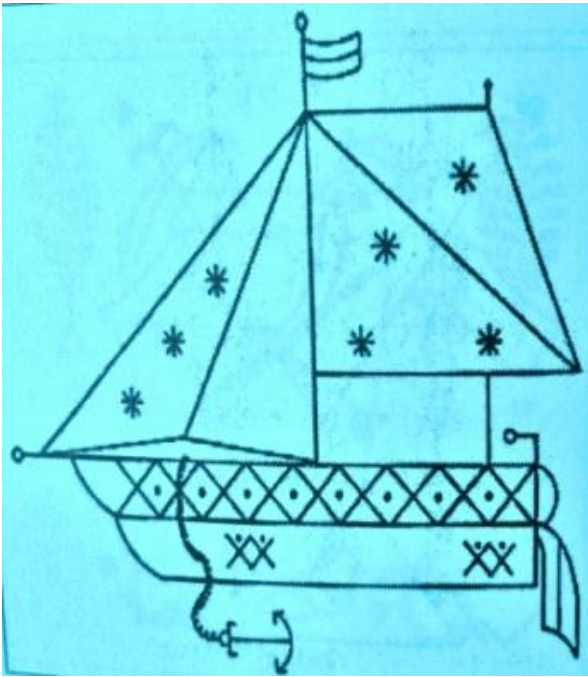


Figure 53. Agwe/Tawoyo veve²²¹

Erzulie Freda yearns for perfection in love and beauty. When she comes in possession, she flirts with the men and because she demands perfection in love and beauty, inevitably breaks into desperate tears. Although Erzulie Freda is draped in wealth and magnificence, she is wounded by the imperfections of the world.²²² Like other lwa, Erzulie Freda is a pwen that can be summoned or honored in song. The following are two common songs for her; they allude to her sense of refinement, beauty, power, fierceness, and beneficence:

Ezili O Kay la mande oze (3x)
Si nan pwen dlo oze lavek loksyon.

Ezili O, the house needs sprinkling (3x)
 there is no water, sprinkle lotion (perfume).

Ezili Fre, li fre, li Freda (x2)

²²¹ Leconte, Frantz-Antoine. Sacred Arts of Vodou. p. 67. Agwe is the Master of the Sea, thus the boat imagery. It is evocative of the Middle Passage.

²²² The Vodou page. <http://www.rootswithoutend.org/emporium/fredaserv>.

*Ezili O ! Li pa manje moun anko
Inosan Bondye va gade ou
Ezili Fre, li fre, li yon bel fanm
Erzili Fre, li fre, li yon fanm blanch*

Ezili she is fresh, she is cool, she is Freda
Ezili O, she doesn't eat people anymore
God beholds her as innocent
Erzili she is fresh, she is cool, she is a beautiful woman
She is fresh, she is cool, she is a white woman.²²³

Vodou songs are pwen in and of themselves, but they are also instructive. They tell stories about the lwa, culture, politics, and lessons on life. Vodou songs are also devotional and meditative. There are hidden meanings in the songs; often revealed over time, they can be different depending on circumstances. Sometimes, meanings are intuitive, sometimes literal. The only way to truly know the lwa is by learning their songs and singing them for oneself.

Just as many Catholic homes and Catholic communities have permanent altars for Mary, kept with flowers, pictures, offerings of money and candles and small knickknacks; Vodouisants and vodouisant communities will also have permanent altars for specific lwa. Practitioners with “Freda” in their head, also known as a “met tet,”²²⁴ will often keep a permanent altar for her in their home. The permanent altar is a very strong pwen that brings health, wealth, love, and happiness. A permanent altar also requires specific rules of set-up, offerings, upkeep, and take-

²²³ Greenough-Hodges. Field work. 2009.

²²⁴ From the French word meaning master of the head. Vodou beliefs include the idea that people can have anywhere from 1-7 lwa who “walk with” a person. One’s met tet should be known and it can be discerned, through dreams, traditional tarot “reading” of a hougan or mambo or, in certain cases, a Hougan or Mambo will induce possession during a ceremony. It is good to know one’s met tet, as it is believed ongoing veneration promotes health, wealth, and happiness.

down to be successful.²²⁵ Erzulie Freda is served with Florida water,²²⁶ basil, perfumes, sweet pink drinks, white icing cake, champagne, and anything expensive. Erzulie is a lwa of wealth; thus, items on her altar should (ideally) have material value. As for the food, flowers, and beverages, they are typically kept fresh on her altar. A serious Erzulie Freda altar will have, in addition to the above, three gold rings—one for each husband—and a gold chain, as it is a luxury item. The attention to details significant to the lwa (such as the gold rings) is believed to be correct “service” and fosters the relationship between lwa and vodouisant. Figure 54 is another image of an altar for Erzulie.

²²⁵ Vodou altar requirements and basic rules: a table, a clean white sheet or cloth, washed with vinegar or mornings first urine, four small rocks from the property, placed at the four corners of the table. A small bit of soil from a graveyard is put in a small glass cup or glass and a white candle is lit. All ritual objects (for initiates) relevant to the lwa should be on table. There should also be lwa appropriate food, libation, and other significant objects. A crystal glass for water is placed in the center of the table and no metal dishes for food. Altar must be kept clean, dust-free. People do not eat out of the plate of food for the lwa. The lit candle is placed directly in the food. The ceremony is conducted, preferably with at least one other person present. This makes the call/response songs easier, but also in the event a lwa comes into the person’s head- the other individual can later relate any messages. The day after food offering has been made, candle must burn out on its own and food must be disposed of separately from other trash (or if in Haiti, deposited in a crossroad). All dishes must be washed with salt and stored for future use.

²²⁶ Florida water is sweetly perfumed water common in New World folk religions and available for purchase in Botanica stores. It is associated with Erzulie Freda because it is water and it smells sweet.



Figure 54. Erzuli altar with food²²⁷

In Figure 54, Erzulie as a lwa of wealth and luxury and abundance is made clear. Additionally, the fact that she speaks French, rather than Kreyol, underscores her association with wealth and refined sophistication. She is a powerful lwa that can break wanga²²⁸ and bring luck, wealth, inspire romantic love and spoil poison. Sometimes, practitioners will make *boutey lwa* in her honor to go on an altar or to function as a pwen. A *boutey lwa* is a manifestation of a “tied pwen” (previously mentioned), but the *boutey lwa* has specific requirements for fabrication. First, it is always a bottle decorated in certain colors with certain materials believed to be pleasing to a specific spirit. The process is meditative and often communal, where vodouisants gather and sing while decorating the bottles. There is more discussion about *boutey lwa* in the previous chapter about pwen in objects.

Figure 55 is a photo of a *boutey lwa* for Erzulie, indicated by the heart veve and pink

²²⁷ <http://voodooboutique.typepad.com/a/6a00e54edc5c68883301b7c7cec313970b-pi>. Accessed June 23, 2017.

²²⁸ Spells.

satin, feathers, gold trim and luxurious gold backdrop. Again, the expensive materials and embellishments are a reflection of the idea of royalty. As the Virgin Mary is believed to be the Heavenly Queen, lwa Erzulie Freda is believed to be an Ancient African Dahomean Queen.



Figure 55. Erzuli Boutey lwa²²⁹

Practitioners will also honor her by wearing pink clothing misted with Florida water on her special days of the week.²³⁰

If a practitioner feels particularly drawn to a specific lwa, the relationship can be

²²⁹ <https://s-media-cache-ak0.pinning.com/564x/a2/fb/65/a2fb65ddaf87c721ae7fd347cb288d6.jpg>. accessed June 23, 2017. Accessed on June 6, 2017. A “boutey lwa” is a bottle decorated with a specific lwa in mind, using colors, textures, images that would be pleasing to the lwa. The bottle is kept on the altar and fed and watered. Sometimes practitioners will capture “spirit/pwen” put it in a bottle and made “to work.” The pwen is cared for in a similar way. There is more discussion on pwen in bottles elsewhere in this dissertation. Boutey lwa can be made and used by non-initiates.

²³⁰ Met tet means master (lwa) of the head. It is believed that everybody can have varying numbers of masters in their head. Average is three, but some people can have seven. A lwa can also have special days (like Catholic Holy Days of Obligation) and/or special days of the week. Erzulie has Tuesday and Thursday as special days of the week.

deepened by marrying a lwa (mariaj lwa). In this situation, the practitioner must, in addition to the above-mentioned practices for honoring a met tet, abstain from sexual relations and sleep alone on that lwa's days of the week. The lwa are considered very chaste. Thus, abstinence is a way to honor them.²³¹ During this time, the lwa will come and visit his/her spouse in dreams. A mariaj lwa is a lifetime commitment, as there is no divorce. A practitioner might desire a mariaj lwa, as it promotes health, protection, luck, blessings, support, and balance. The wedding ritual is performed by a hougan or mambo who is familiar with the reglemann or liturgy, involves an exchange of vows, a ring, usually the lwa being honored appears to "speak" with his/her spouse. The conversation between the newlyweds is usually guided by a hougan or mambo. The ritual itself can be likened to a Roman Catholic wedding and is followed with a huge reception-party. Marriage to a lwa is not bound in anyway by gender; thus, men and women can marry lwa of any "gender affiliation." This type of commitment is a serious and lifelong honoring on the part of an individual for a particular lwa. It creates a powerful and lifelong pwen that continues to evolve and become stronger over time.

²³¹ Additionally, if one has a permanent altar in one's house, one must not be naked in front of an altar or to have sex in the room with them.

CHAPTER 4

HAITIAN MAGICAL REALISM AND PWEN IN LITERATURE

My initial fascination with Haitian Vodou and the core concept called pwen was a result of viewing Haitian ritual art objects depicting the lwa, such as the “dwapo” (Haitian Vodou flags) and seeing Haitian lwa-inspired paintings. The artisanship, imagination and deeply layered symbolism of these items were such that I, as an artist, had never before seen and could have never otherwise realized. These Haitian ritual objects and spiritual art, I came to find out, were magically and culturally endowed, and thus, epitomized for me what I had previously only known through literature via the literary device known as magical realism. When the famous Cuban writer Alejo Carpentier²³² visited Haiti for the first time in 1943, he was inspired by the people, culture, history, and natural geography. Carpentier said that Haiti was the inspiration for his novel, *The Kingdom of this World*.²³³ His definition of magical realism appears in the prologue of this book. He says it is “an unexpected alteration of reality . . . an unaccustomed insight that is singularly favored by the unexpected richness of reality or an amplification of the scale and categories of reality.”²³⁴ Informed by the particulars of French Caribbean-style magical realism that I encountered in graduate school studying French literature, I began to discern and extrapolate the hidden meanings of these ritual objects that spoke of the systems at work in Vodou. In Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris’ book, *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, they tell us that magical realism achieves its effects by making “marvelous” a

²³² Famous Cuban writer born (1904-1980). He is credited with the term “magical realism.”

²³³ Carpentier, Alejo, *The Kingdom of this World*. Trans. Harriet de Onis. New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1956.

²³⁴ Zamora, Lois Parkinson and Wendy B. Faris. Ed. *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*. Durham: Duke UP, 1995.

setting or certain character's perception. The characteristics of magical realism can be useful in developing a dialogue for discussing, analyzing, and understanding the magical aspects of Vodou, known as pwen. Zamora and Faris list the following primary traits for magic realism in literature:

- An “irreducible” magic that cannot be explained by typical notions of natural law.
- A realist description is presented stressing normal, common, day-to-day phenomena. The same scenario is then revisited, described in extreme or amplified states of mind or setting.
- The effects of magical realism cause the reader to be suspended between two views of reality.
- The two visions of reality intersect and/or merge.
- Time and space are distorted. Time is both historical and timeless. Space is both defined and challenged. Identity is challenged.

Additionally, Zamora and Faris present these secondary characteristics:

- Work is often self-referential.
- The text may employ a “verbal magic” where metaphors are treated as reality.
- Repetitions as well as mirror reversals are employed.
- Metamorphosis takes place.
- Ancient systems of belief and local lore often underlie the text.
- Collective symbols and myths are presented, rather than individual ones.
- The fiction in form and language “embraces” the carnivalesque.²³⁵

²³⁵ This term refers to the Russian critic Mikhail Bakhtin's notion that refers to a literary mode that temporarily subverts authority and liberates the individual.

Aside from some universal technical devices, the specifics of content and style of magical realism vary throughout the world. Different worldviews influence and inform the specific “flavors” of magical realism, determined by the country or culture at hand. Haiti’s literature is no exception and cannot truly be considered separately from its majority religion, Haitian Vodou. Thus, in addition to literary classification by style and technique, I argue these devices—in the context of Haitian literature—function as a sort of literary *pwen*, an expansion of a ritual concept of Haitian Vodou. Specifically, *pwen* in ritual is the process of the distillation of the power of the Vodou ceremony, which then serves as a catalyst to “do” something else. *Pwen* refines a physically defined magical “space” through an extensive and multi-layered and sequenced series of actions in rhythm, embodied in prayer, song, and dance. As *pwen* reduces the physical ritual space via concentric circles, the energetic power of the *pwen* increases. Ultimately, the *pwen* manifests in possession²³⁶ and (depending on the intention of the practitioner), is directed out into the universe to fulfill a desired result. It is my argument that this ritualistic concept of *pwen* informs and underscores Haitian magical realism—literally, figuratively, and technically through hyperbole that incarnates the power and importance of the *lwa*. Haitian magical realism, like *pwen*, presents a multi-valent and complex narrative.

When Alejo Carpentier visited Haiti in 1943, he delivered a speech about magical realism. In the audience was a young Haitian writer by the name of Jacques Stephen Alexis (1925-1961) who embraced Carpentier’s literary aesthetic. Alexis developed this literary aesthetic into a specifically Haitian-style magical realism. He presented “*Du réalisme*

²³⁶ When spirits “mount” or come into the head of a human as a means to communicate.

merveilleux des haïtiens”²³⁷ at the International Congress of Black Writers and Artists at the Sorbonne in 1956. In this speech, Alexis celebrates the fantastic, extreme and hybrid character of Caribbean magical realism as previously defined by Carpentier. However, Alexis, a Marxist and a fervent social activist, diverts from Carpentier’s theory and adds new tenets, which claim that politicized social realism and historicity are essential for Haitian truth and beauty. Specifically, Alexis says Haitian magical realism “wants”:

1. to sing the beauties of the Haitian Fatherland, its glories and its miseries, while grieving a sense of the grandiose perspectives awarded it by the struggles of its people and its solidarity with all men; to thus reach that which is human, universal and profoundly true in life.
2. to reject art without real and social content
3. to search for those expressive words which are specific to its people and correspond to its psyche, while also having recourse to renewed forms of the universal molds, in agreement, of course, with the personality of each artist;
4. to have a clear awareness of the precise, concrete problems for real dramas that confront the masses of today, in order to reach the people, to make it more deeply cultured and to lead it in its struggles. (p. 268)²³⁸

Like *pwen*, Haitian magical realism is unique in that it can be two disparate things at the same time. The work I have chosen to best illustrate this Alexian-style magical realism is *Les arbres musiciens*.²³⁹

Les arbres musiciens is historical fiction that dramatizes the unfair class division in Haiti that disenfranchises the peasant class and gives power and wealth to the upper class. The central

²³⁷ Alexis, Jacques Stephen, “prolégomènes a un manifeste du Réalisme merveilleux des Haïtiens”, No spécial 1 er Congrès International des Ecrivains et Artistes Noirs, Paris, *Présence Africaine*, No. 8-10, 1956, pp. 245-271.

²³⁸ Alexis, Jacques Stephen, “Prolégomènes a un manifeste du Réalisme merveilleux des Haïtiens”, No spécial 1 er Congrès International des Ecrivains et Artistes Noirs, Paris, *Présence Africaine*, No. 8-10, 1956, pp. 245-271. (Translation here by Schel, Charles. “Magical Realism versus ‘Realisme merveilleux’ in Canadian literary criticism: a linguistic or theoretical divide?” Presentation Universitat des Saarlandes, North American Literature and Culture Alexis, Jacques Stephen, “Prolegomenes a un manifeste du Réalisme merveilleux des Haïtiens,” No special 1 er Congrès International des Ecrivains et Artistes Noirs, Paris, *Présence Africaine*, No. 8-10, 1956, pp. 245-271. Culture for Canadian and Anglo-American Cultures. “Perspectives on Canada,” January 20, 2003, p. 3.

²³⁹ *Les Arbres Musiciens*. Paris: Editions Gallimard 1957.

character is Leònine Osim, a vodouisant. She has three sons who all work for the church or state and are “positioned” against the lower class. The action takes place in early 1942 while Elie Lescot was president. Two events happen simultaneously in this novel: (a) There is collaboration between the Haitian and U.S. governments by expropriating peasant land so American companies could cultivate a vine to make rubber (this plan was a failure²⁴⁰) and (b) the Catholic Church is preparing for a new anti-superstition campaign²⁴¹ as an attempt to eradicate Vodou. The story is set in Port-au-Prince. The excerpt presented here is in Chapter 7. The passage illustrates a meeting of “papalwa” from all over who meet in Nan Rembrans.²⁴² The head houngan, Bwadòm, leads a spectacular ceremony that ends with a possession by Ayizan, and she (in the houngan’s head) incites the other priests and priestesses to make a human wall to protect the sanctuaries.

In this passage, Vodou has two metaphoric functions. The first one is that, for Alexis, Vodou is an authentic connection to the human body, to the spirit, to the earth, to the past and to the universe. Vodou pwen, with its hyperbolic rhythms that jump from one “hotspot” of pwen to another, accumulating strength through layers, textures, and polyphonic melodies, are seen here as Haitian hope because they connect the majority population to its “truth.” The second purpose of Vodou in this passage is that it evokes a strong “remembrance” of the Vodou ceremony at Bois Caiman that jump-started the Haitian Revolution. In this way, it posits as a powerful

²⁴⁰ <http://www.thenation.com/article/lost-years-haiti/>. Accessed on April 12, 2020. (Bell, Madison Smart. “The Lost Years: On Haiti. The mutating tensions and alliances of postoccupation Haiti,” *The Nation*. July 15, 2009.

²⁴¹ Nerestant, Micial M. *Religions et politique en Haiti (1804-1990)*. Montreal: Editions du CIDIHCA, 1994.

²⁴² Remembrance, or “the active and purposeful remembering of diverse lived experiences that practitioners evoke, express, and promote through visual and performing arts. Remembrance includes the historical, socioeconomic, political, and sacred realities that Vodou.” Brice, Leslie Ann. “Nou La, We here: Remebrance and Power in the Arts of Haitian Vodou,” Dissertation publication, 2007. <http://www.drum.lib.umg.edu/bitstream/handle/1903/7746/umi-umd-5027.pdf>. Accessed April 12, 2020.

revolutionary subtext for social activism.

People of Vodou

Les arbres musiciens presents numerous examples of literal and figurative pwen in literature, but the description of the Vodou ceremony is the most relevant to this discussion. The opening of this sequence demonstrates literal and figurative pwen in the description of the trees that demarcate the Vodou ceremonial space. This passage demonstrates how metaphor is also reality. Alexis writes:

The night was marked by an exceptional aura—a night that was coal black, sidereal, looming, and sprinkled with stars. Caressing the earth soothingly and without the slightest sound, the nocturnal breeze was almost ethereal. Framing the entrance to the Nan-Remanbrans sanctuary, the bare, swelling boles of two flamboyants formed enormous, athletically muscled thighs. The powerful branches intertwined like pairs of human limbs with massive biceps, knotted knees, twisted calves, herculean bulges—trees that were virtually human, monstrous titans brandishing thirty arms and twenty legs. (621)²⁴³

The anthropomorphic trees at the entrance to the Vodou ceremonial space are a literal reference to Vodou pwen. The pwen is a spirit or lwa, known as Papa Loko Attisou, who is the “primary or first” houngan, father or protector of all Vodou initiates, and guardian of the deepest secrets in Vodou.²⁴⁴ He shares iconography with the Catholic St. Joseph (as the “father” figure), and both have the feast day of March 19th. Recall that Vodou associations to Catholic saints are literal. Thus, the Catholic image in Figure 56 highlights the paternal, protective attributes that Joseph and Loko share.

²⁴³ *Les Arbres Musiciens*. Paris: Editions Gallimard 1957. An excerpt from Jacques Stephen Alexis’s *The Musical Trees* translated by Carrol F. Coates. “Vodou . . . The Soul of the People” *Callaloo* 27.3 (2004) 621-628.

²⁴⁴ Capitalization is because I am referencing a specific lwa that can be named by those words.



Figure 56. St Joseph and Jesus²⁴⁵

Another way to understand a lwa is through the Vodou veve or sacred cosmogram that venerates and evokes a specific spiritual entity in the Vodou context. The drawing of veves is a sacred art that is taught through initiation. The designs are African in origin, but have evolved into the modern form seen in Haitian Vodou. Figure 57 is a veve of Papa Loko, painted on the exterior wall of the djévo (sacred interior space) of the Roots Without End peristyle in Jacmel, Haiti. Its presence here denotes a spiritual “hotspot” of protective Loko power, or pwen.

²⁴⁵ One-sided Catholic color reproduction. Greenough-Hodges K personal collection, Purchased in Jacmel market, January 2009.



Figure 57. Loko veve or sacred cosmogram is Nago in origin²⁴⁶. This veve is permanent and indicates power for Loko. It is painted on the wall of the Roots Without End Society djévo (sacred interior space)²⁴⁷

Papa Loco in Vodou and St. Joseph in Roman Catholicism are enormously popular to their believers. As a result, feast day celebrations are shared in communities with large numbers of vodouisants and Catholics. See the image in Figure 58 of a huge altar for St. Joseph in New Orleans in 2008.

²⁴⁶ Greenough-Hodges, Kimberly. Field work. Interview with locals. Jacmel, Haiti, 2011.

²⁴⁷ Greenough-Hodges, Kimberly. Field work. Kanzo. Courtesy of Mambo Ke Konton. 2010.



Figure 58. St Joseph/Loko altar in New Orleans²⁴⁸

²⁴⁸ www.Voodooboutique.typepad.com/mambosam/2008/03/st-joseph-and-p.html. Accessed June 27, 2017.



Figure 59. Detail St. Joseph/Papa Loko altar in New Orleans²⁴⁹

Papa Loko was once a human who became a lwa over time. Also, he confers the asson,²⁵⁰ of Haitian Vodou initiation or kanzo and is only served by houngans and mambos.²⁵¹ He is “all-knowing” and he is believed to be so powerful that he only rarely appears in possession. If he does choose to show himself, he appears as a butterfly.²⁵²

Figure 60 is a photo taken of the new initiates, immediately upon coming out of the private, secret ceremonies that occur inside the Vodou djévé. This part of the initiatory cycle is called “lev couche” as the initiates are “awakening” from their “sleep” as new vodouisants. They are slowly reintroduced to the world under the protection of Loko. The initiates are placed in

²⁴⁹ Ibid.

²⁵⁰ Beaded rattle of the priesthood of Vodou.

²⁵¹ Initiated clergy of Vodou.

²⁵² This was told to me by Maman Ounyo (House “Mother) immediately preceding my initiation. A butterfly lit on my shoulder during dance practice at Vodou School. It stayed there for almost an hour. She said Loko was showing his pleasure in my choice to Kanzo.

front of the veve to show that Loko is literally behind them.



Figure 60. Lev couche under the protection of Ancient African Loko, indicated by veve²⁵³

One African originating idea that connects Loko to the Alexis passage is that Loko is believed to inhabit the large trees (pwen) found growing by the entrance to the Vodou peristyle. Vodou songs teach us that Loko and the asson (gourd decorated with beads) that he confers to future mambos and houngans, are great pwen. Here is a Vodou song that reveals his pwen as “pisans” (power), “mystè”²⁵⁴ (mystery) and warns against using sacred knowledge adversely.

*Papa Loko o se ou ki Banm Asson
Le ou te ban mwen'l ou dim kenbe'l nan kè mwen
Ala'm tonbe mwen leve li nan kè mwen
Pechè latè ki fè'l sèvi ponya yon jou l'ap ponyade yo.*

Papa Loko it is You who gave me the Asson

²⁵³ Lev Couche is when the new initiates “emerge” from the djevo (sacred space). Like newborns, they are acclimated slowly to the world, under the protection of Loko. Initiates are taught to interpret and draw veve. My Kanzo 2009.

²⁵⁴ Power and mystery from the French words “puissance” and “mystère.”

When you gave it to me, you told me to keep it in my heart
I have fallen, I have gotten up, it is still in my heart
I have fallen, I have gotten up, it is still in my heart
Sinners of this earth who use it as a dagger, one day will be stabbed by it.

Mambo Asogwe Pat of the American Vodou house, Soysete du Marche Inc., describes Papa Loko in the following way:

in Haiti, Loko is the preeminent Lwa of healing. It is often stressed that the kanzo initiation is the biggest healing Loko does each year. Those who undergo its rigors—and survive it—are a testament to the faith people place in this marvelous lwa (and saint).²⁵⁵

The larger-than-life description in the Alexis's text parallels Loko's power and importance to vodouisants. It also comments on social history, as this "gigantic titan warrior imagery" underscores the scale and energy put toward the widespread and violent Vodou protests against the "new" anti-superstition campaign of the Catholic Church, launched in 1942.²⁵⁶ As for illustrating pwen, Alexis is descriptive and figurative in his treatment of both the ritual objects and ceremonial space in this passage. He describes physical trees that simply frame the entrance to the peristyle. Alternatively, these trees are a human-god of mythic strength and proportion. Specifically, a lwa, is both threshold as well as protector/healer to more sacred interior spaces (and events). The trees, marking the entrance to the peristyle and "badji" or semi-private interior ritual space of a peristyle, are examples of pwen and ceremonial spaces, "alive" with spiritual energy. In exchange for protection, celebration and feeding by the vodouisants of

²⁵⁵ www.sosyetedumarche.com/html/loko.html. Accessed on June 27, 2001.

²⁵⁶ In *Les arbres musiciens*, Alexis dramatizes the split between the large majority of working and peasant classes and that of the upper classes holding power and wealth. This drama is embodied in the fictional situation of Leonie Osmin, who is herself a follower of Vodou, and her three sons, each assuming an important role in the machinations of church and state against the lower-class majority. The main action occurs in early 1942 under President Lescot with two significant historical events: 1. the US expropriating peasant lands where American companies were allowed to cultivate "kon kabrit" (a nuisance vine) from which it was projected to obtain latex. This venture was a failure. 2. The "new" anti-superstition Campaign was an attempt to stamp out Vodou as the majority religion was perceived by Christians as sorcery and satanic worship. Callaloo, p. 627.

the local house, these enlivened things and spaces channel spirit energy and facilitate communication (usually through possession²⁵⁷) between the spirit world and the living. In Haitian Vodou practice, these pwen are believed to hold varying degrees of magical potential and denote sequentially increasing power relationships. In this passage, Alexis illustrates a scene that—like pwen—is both clear and ambiguous.

The second powerful depiction of pwen in *Les arbres musiciens* occurs in the Vodou ceremony led by “orthodox” Vodou priest, Bwadòm. Here, the depictions of pwen are multi-layered and sequential, culminating in the grand scene where Bwadòm, through “possession,”²⁵⁸ becomes the pwen for the great lwa Ayizan.²⁵⁹ Many of Zamoro and Faris’s primary and secondary characteristics or traits of magical realism appear in this passage. Specifically, there is an “intersection of reality and magic,” a “distortion of time and space,” and a “metamorphosis.” These magical realism techniques serve to amplify and underscore, in an extreme fashion, the literal and figurative depictions of pwen. Alexis writes:

General Miracin, the *badjika*²⁶⁰ of the sanctuary at Nan-Remanbrans, had fulfilled his mission. The *papalwa*, the priests, were hurrying over the roads, paths, and mountain passes leading to Fonds Parisien.²⁶¹ Almost all the sanctuaries in the Departments of the West, North, Northwest, and South had found it important to participate in the conclave called by old Bwadòm Letiro, the head of one of the purest Arada Vodou sects. Some representatives from the other side of the border had even arrived. (621)

A great white towel, sparkling immaculately, was displayed in the very middle of the gate. Dressed in a white robe with a blue sash tied around her wrist, the “Empress” was welcoming those arriving. This was Madame Ange Desameaux herself, the buxom

²⁵⁷ During a Vodou ceremony, when a lwa “mounts” a practitioner and the practitioner embodies the lwa. There is usually communication between the spirit and the congregants.

²⁵⁸ When the lwa enter the head of a human. The human consciousness is not present and the individual embodies the lwa, usually to communicate to the congregation or an individual.

²⁵⁹ Ayizan is the Mother of Kanzo, as Loko is Father of Kanzo.

²⁶⁰ Guardian of the temple.

²⁶¹ The high plateau just south of the Etang Saumâtre. (Haiti’s largest saltwater lake shared with the Dominican Republic) east of Port-au-Prince.

wife of the tax collector, an *ounsi*, a servant of Manbò-Nanan, the spirit of wisdom and of azure, the mother of all Grenadier²⁶² spirits, Standing in the dust with her bare feet, she was silently welcoming the with a double handshake and leading them across the courtyard to the sanctuary. Ayizan²⁶³ —the wife of Atibon Legba²⁶⁴ and the spirit of sweet water, markets, gateways, and highways, the chief goddess of the orthodox Arada Polypus-was lighting a fire in the great hearth a few steps from the temple. Close by Bwadòm, Dada, his aging wife, was taking care of other business. Their granddaughter Harmonise was blowing on the fire beneath a great humming cauldron of boiling water for coffee. (621)²⁶⁵

To understand this passage fully, one must first understand important references that establish the scene. When Alexis clearly states this is an “Arada” house (Rada), his word choices, “purity,” “beneficent,”²⁶⁶ “regal” and “ancient” underscore the positive character of the lwa of this house. The colors, blue, white, and gold further reinforce the “propitious” Rada aspects. Alexis directly names two congregants of the house of Bwadòm as “Ayizan” and “Legba.”²⁶⁷ It is clear that these are “people” but they are being called by the lwa that they serve. This naming of people by lwa’s names intersects “reality” with the “unreal,” as these people are meant to be both *living* and *spirit*. Additionally, in Haitian Vodou, assuming a lwa’s name indicates a strong connection between the human and that particular lwa.²⁶⁸ Ayizan and Legba,

²⁶² Originally from French, referring to soldiers who threw grenades, but were selected according to their strength and size. In Vodou it refers to lwa known for warrior ability and heroic battle heroes.

²⁶³ The Mother of all Vodou initiates.

²⁶⁴ Legba is the “crossroad” lwa. He must be addressed first in Vodou liturgy and permission must be asked (and thanked in advance) for him to allow interaction with the lwa.

²⁶⁵ *Les Arbres Musiciens*. Gallimard, Paris. 1957. An excerpt from Jacques Stephen Alexis’s *The Musical Trees* translated by Carrol F. Coates. “Vodou . . . The Soul of the People” *Callaloo* 27.3 (2004), pp. 621-628.

²⁶⁶ Although the hot and cool description does apply to lwa; any sort of implied morality concerning a lwa is Alexis’s suggestion, not mine. Lwa are considered neither “good” nor “bad” in Vodou.

²⁶⁷ A person is believed to have between 1-7 lwa that can inhabit a person’s head. One lwa is the master, or “met tet.” It is suggested that these two people are devout serviteurs, possibly with these lwa as their “met tet” but also even married to the lwa.

²⁶⁸ Being named after a lwa denotes a serious bond between the human and spirit, sometimes made by parents for a child (such as a Catholic child named after a Catholic saint) or as an adult who chooses the name of a lwa as an act of devotion or veneration or marriage to a specific lwa. If the parents name a child after a lwa, they usually dedicate that child’s religious upbringing to its specific service. If it is an adult in a marriage lwa, very specific lifelong commitments to devotion and veneration are made. This is discussed elsewhere in this dissertation.

like Loko, are fundamental lwa of Haitian Vodou. The first, Ayizan Velekete, or the Mother of all initiates, is an old walking market woman in a white dress with an apron that has deep pockets where she keeps candy and treats for children. She shares iconography with the Catholic image of Jesus being baptized by St. John the Baptist and St. Clare. Both underscore her expansive and holy aspects, although she can also be punishing to those who disobey. Background knowledge about Ayizan marks her appearance in the text as a figurative depiction of pwen. Recall that Catholic saints have a long-standing mythology that corresponds to their holy card depictions and when these images are used by practitioners for the lwa of Vodou, the association is literal. Also, the Vodou ceremony that Alexis describes is the Rada (Arada²⁶⁹) rite, which is a family of very ancient African “cool” white, noble, slow-moving spirits (because they are so old). The shared iconography, as seen in the Catholic images in Figures 61-62, presents the following literal associations to the Vodou lwa. With Jean the Baptist, the image depicts baptism, a pastoral landscape, a white color scheme, and fresh (pure) flowing water. For St. Clare of Assisi, her image illustrates purity, “light” in darkness, holiness, and strong maternal love. These ideas are all literal associations to the lwa Ayizan.

²⁶⁹ One of the three traditional rites of Vodou. These are ancient African spiritual entities. They follow the Catholic Saints in liturgical order. They are “cool” and considered beneficent, but slow to act.



Figure 61. St. John the Baptist baptizing Jesus²⁷⁰

²⁷⁰ One-sided color reproduction of Catholic image, Greenough-Hodges, K personal collection. Purchased in Jacmel market in January 2009.

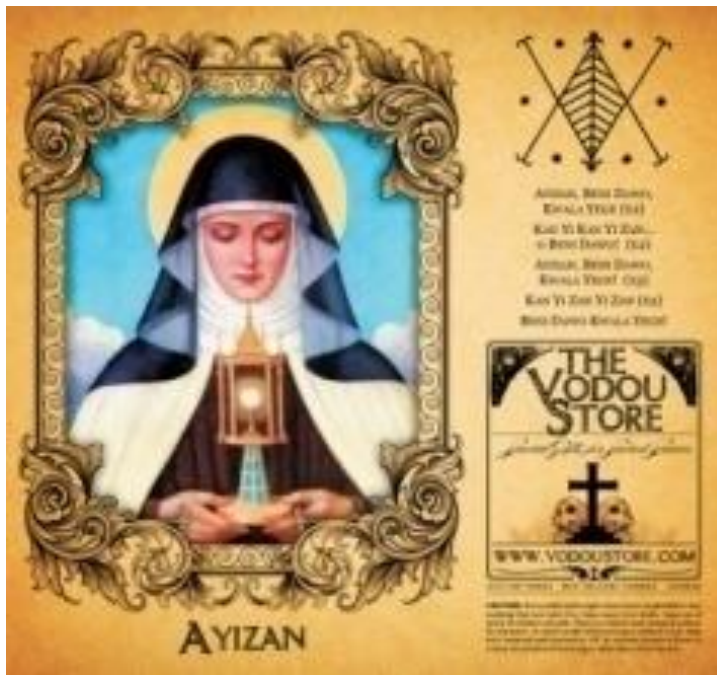


Figure 62. St. Clare/Ayizan²⁷¹

Ayizan (like Loko) is an ancestor who was once a human and then became a lwa. In Vodou, Ayizan is importantly the First Mambo. Thus, she births the spiritual energy that purifies her “children” (petit fey²⁷²) when they are born into new life through kanzo.²⁷³ The palm frond is her sacred repository.²⁷⁴ During kanzo, there is a powerful and thrilling ceremony called the Chire Ayizan,²⁷⁵ where palm leaves are shredded until they are full and soft. Then, the houngan or mambo leading the kanzo, dramatically and forcefully twirls around the peristyle, repeatedly sweeping the fronds through the air, “heating up” sacred Ayizan pwen. This pwen then rushes into djévo,²⁷⁶ purifying the initiates, depicted in the photo in Figure 63 from a 2010 kanzo

²⁷¹ <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/306667055850220764/>. Accessed July 5, 2017.

²⁷² “Little leaves” in Creole.

²⁷³ Vodou initiation,

²⁷⁴ Offering.

²⁷⁵ Shredding/tearing Ayizan.

²⁷⁶ Sacred interior space of the djevo.

ceremony at the Roots Without End Society peristyle.



Figure 63. Twirling Houngan Wolmer during Chire Ayizan²⁷⁷

Below is an Ayizan Vodou song that demonstrates how, through kanzo, initiates are eternally bound:

*Ayizan eh Ayizan eh
Ayizan eh, Ayizan eh
Ayizan m'prale nan Ginen pou'm we si m'a lage
Ayizan nou tout mare*

Ayizan eh Ayizan eh
Ayizan eh, Ayizan eh
Ayizan I'm going to Guinea to see if I can free myself
Ayizan we are all (en) tangled.²⁷⁸

The second person in this Alexis passage with a lwa's name is "Atibon Legba," also

²⁷⁷ Ginny's kanzo. 2010.

²⁷⁸ Greenough-Hodges, K. Field work, Jacmel, Haiti, January 2009. (Creole version of spelling came from <http://www.hougansydney.com/voodoo-spirits/ayizan>. Accessed July 5, 2017). English translations are my own.

known as Papa Legba,²⁷⁹ Vye Legba,²⁸⁰ Grand Chemin²⁸¹ (the road to Guinea) and the potomitan.²⁸² Legba is the gatekeeper between the living and the dead. In possession, he presents himself as a humble, sociable, good-natured old man with a fondness for dogs, needing crutches to walk, smoking a pipe, and drinking rum. Legba is the most important spirit in the hierarchy of Vodou. He is always invoked first in liturgy and no ceremony or communication with the lwa can occur without his permission. Legba is associated with the following Catholic saints: St. Peter (keys), St. Lazarus (old man with dogs), and St. Anthony (lost items). The literal connections can be explained in this way: Legba grants spirit communication in the Vodou ceremony, so he is key. Physically, Legba is believed to be like Lazarus, the old man walking with a stick who has a fondness for dogs. Legba also helps people find things that have gone missing, similar to Catholic St Anthony (see the three Catholic images in Figures 64-66).

²⁷⁹ Father Legba, also “Papa” is a friendly Creole greeting for a man in charge or clearly older man

²⁸⁰ Old Legba (Catholic image of Lazarus).

²⁸¹ From French.

²⁸² Center pole of peristyle where spirits descend.



Figure 64. St. Peter²⁸³

²⁸³ One-sided color reproduction. Greenough-Hodges, K personal collection. Purchased in Jacmel market in January 2009.



Figure 65. St. Lazarus²⁸⁴

²⁸⁴ Josephson, Nancy, *Spirits in Sequins: Vodou flags of Haiti*. Saint Lazarus chromolithograph, “Depicts Legba in the Vodou pantheon.” p. 20.



Figure 66. St. Anthony (partial) Catholic prayer card²⁸⁵

Another way to interpret the Iwa is through their individual veve or hand-drawn sacred cosmogram. Unique to Legba's veve is the depiction of his staff or walking stick, shown on the horizontal bar to the right of the drawing (see Figure 67).

²⁸⁵ One-sided color reproduction. Greenough-Hodges, K. Personal collection. Unknown publisher, Circa 1980s Holy Card. Given to me by Haitian stranger in January 2009.

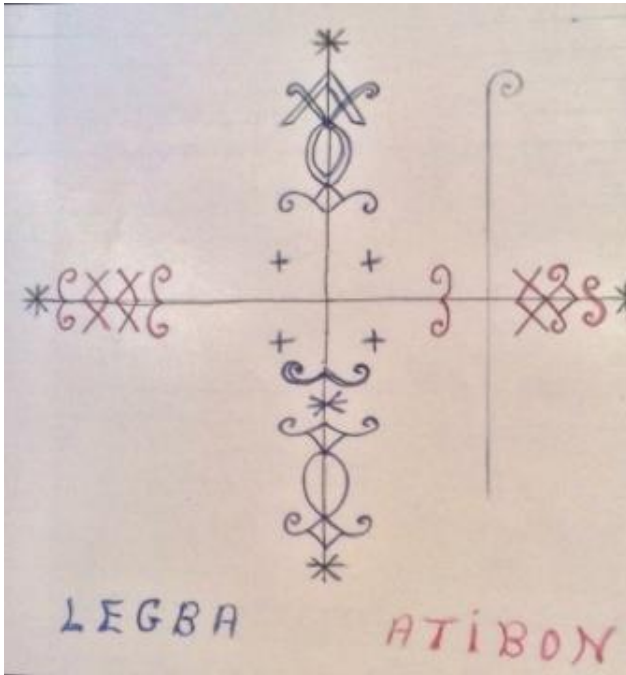


Figure 67. Veve Atibon Legba Veve²⁸⁶

Another essential component of any Vodou ceremony is human singing.²⁸⁷ Vodou songs help the practitioners understand the character of the lwa and the act of singing for a lwa denotes a significant level of veneration. For this reason, the following Rada Vodou song for Legba, which can be sung at the opening of a ceremony, announces him as gatekeeper and celebrates his power as messenger is presented here. The reader will see that Legba is a most pivotal pwen and significant reference for Alexis.

*Legba nan barye a
 Legba nan barye a
 Legba nan barye a se ou ki pote drapo
 Se ou ki pra'l pare soley pou lwa yo*

Legba is at the gate

²⁸⁶ Josephson, Nancy. *Spirits in Sequins: Vodou Flags of Haiti*. p. 22.

²⁸⁷ Alexis does not include literal human singing in this passage. Instead he culminates the passage with the singing of birds. This is Alexis's creative expression that presents an allusion to this required component of an authentic Vodou ceremony.

Legba is at the gate
Legba is at the gate, it is you who carry the flag
It is you who will protect the lwa from the sun.

When Alexis specifically names Legba, he symbolically grants the reader “permission” to proceed forward to the Vodou ceremony. Thus, Legba functions as a figurative *poto mitan*²⁸⁸ or *pwen* for the reader, as it is a point that marks where the narrative goes deeper into the ceremonial space. Alexis subsequently begins listing a series of people by the names of the lwa they serve, beginning with the well-known ancient Danbalah Wedo or the two entwined sacred serpents from Dahomey. Alexis writes:

Beneath the peristyle leading to the House of the Spirits, Aristil Dessin, the “emperor” guardian and decorator of the temple, was standing watch. Dressed in his best trousers and a discolored old tunic, Aristil, the *chwal*²⁸⁹ of Atchasson Zagondon—also known as Danbala Wedo²⁹⁰ - Alada’s servant—was standing erect and calm. With their drums in hand, the priests headed toward him and Aristil showed them into the inner sanctuary, the *badji*. (621-622)²⁹¹

Alexis names Danbalah Wedo because he is one of the oldest and most sacred lwa. He is married to Erzulie Freda and paired with Ayida Wedo. His color is spotless white and he is served with an egg, symbolizing the world. His image is a snake coiled into a circle, surrounding the universe. Usually, he is depicted with his companion, Ayida Wedo, shown as a rainbow. He bestows fecundity, peace, strength, sanctity, and wisdom. Danbala shares iconography with St. Patrick (the snakes) or Moses (rules). The reference to Moses in Vodou usually is Danbala, but

²⁸⁸ Center pole, through which spirits travel.

²⁸⁹ From French, meaning “horse.” Here it refers to a person that is frequently “ridden” i.e. possessed by a particular lwa.

²⁹⁰ The intertwined Sacred Serpent. Male and female aspect of creation, paired with Ayida Wedo and married to Erzulie Freda. He is fire and water, also creation/regeneration and knowledge. Symbols are white, pure water and a white egg.

²⁹¹ *Les Arbres Musiciens*. Gallimard, Paris. 1957. An excerpt from Jacques Stephen Alexis’s *The Musical Trees* translated by Carrol F. Coates. “Vodou . . . The Soul of the People” *Callaloo* 27.3 (2004), pp. 621-628.

some say that Moses is actually the Father of Danbala.²⁹² This association is because he embodies foundational precepts (creation and theology) of Vodou and strict reglemann or liturgy. Rules of ceremony, clothing, movement, or an overall finesse are important to Danbala. The images in Figures 68-69 show Catholic St. Patrick, then Moses. Recall that Catholic associations to Vodou lwa are literal interpretations.



Figure 68. Catholic holy card showing St. Patrick²⁹³

²⁹² Moses is cited by some as being either the Father of Danbalah. (<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1525/aa.1937.39.4.02a00080/pdf>. Accessed July7, 2017.) Or simply as Danbalah because of his connection to rules, i.e. The Ten Commandments.

²⁹³ Josephson, Nancy. *Spirits in Sequins: Vodou Flags of Haiti*. p. 24.



Figure 69. Catholic chromolithograph Moses and the 10 Commandments²⁹⁴

The Vodou veve in Figure 70 further enhances the understanding of Danbala (Wedo). The veve shows two entwined snakes, Danbala and his cohort (Ayida Wedo, also known as the Rainbow). They are associated with Vodou Creation, as evoked by the egg. Their imagery is common in Haitian pop culture and is indicated by a “serpent (Danbala) and rainbow (Ayida Wedo)” design.

²⁹⁴ Ibid, p. 23.

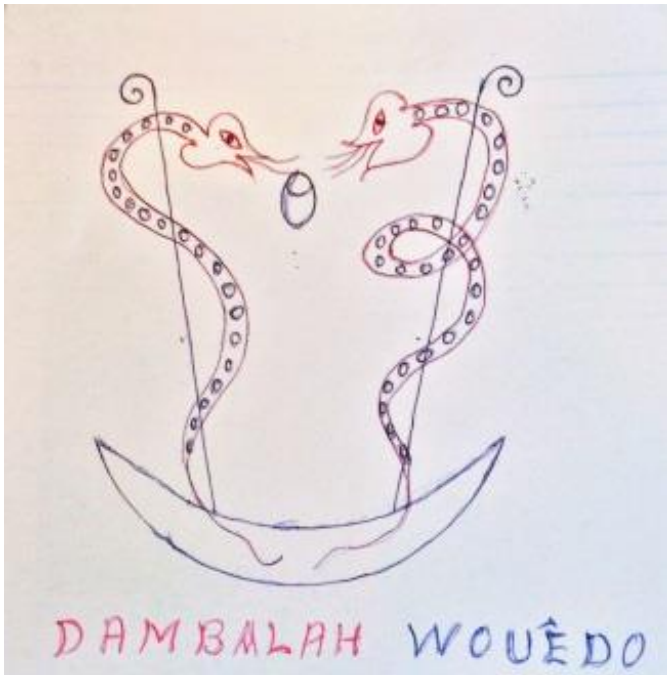


Figure 70. Danbala Wedo veve²⁹⁵

Another visual example to help understand Danbala and his color associations is shown in Figure 71. It is a “paket magik” or magic packet for Danbala, a pwen made for me during my kanzo (initiation) cycle in 2009. The white overall color is Danbala; the sacred serpent and the multicolored rainbow embellishments indicate his female counterpart or rainbow, known as Ayida Wedo.

²⁹⁵ Josephson, Nancy. *Spirits in Sequins: Vodou Flags of Haiti*. p. 23.



Figure 71. Danbala initiatory object, magic packet²⁹⁶

As any authentic Vodou lwa veneration involves song, here is a Vodou song for Danbala Wedo that demonstrates his far-reaching and ancient supremacy:

*Mape mande sa ka resvwa mwen,
 Mape mande sa ka resvwa mwen la,
 Mwen soti nan peyi nan Ginen,
 Tout sele avek lwa nan tet mwen la,
 Mape mandesa ka resevewa mwen la,
 M pa moun isit O!
 Pouswiv yape pouswiv mwen la,
 A la yape pousiv O! (Repeat)
 Se mwen menm Dambala Wedo,
 E se mwen menm Ayida Wedo,
 Yo poko we kote m tounen koulev O!*

I am asking who will receive me,
 I am asking who will receive me there,
 I have come from Guinea,
 All saddled with the lwa in my head,
 I am asking who will receive me,

²⁹⁶ Greenough-Hodges, K. Field work. 2009.

I am not a person from here, oh!
Follow, they are following me there,
There they are following me, oh! (Repeat)
It is I Ayida Wedo,
They have not seen where I turn into a snake.

Alexis's text mirrors real-time Vodou reglemann²⁹⁷ with the invocation of many lwa. He

writes:

Bwadòm was seated on the ground, just in front of the altar. On the left was the temple guardian, General Miracin, the servant of Sobo Naki Dawome, the spirit of the jade Indian hatchet and, on his right, was the emaciated bony old Clèmèstine Dieubalfeuille, an *ounsi temeré*²⁹⁸ and the servant of Ayizan of Guinea. Set against the walls around the large hall were the tables of the Spirits: a table covered with a blue cloth was dedicated to Manbò Nannan, other tables honored Papa Lissa, Zanmandòn, Papa Kieviesou Danle, Loko Azagou, Atchassou (Zangondon, Damwazo Blan, Kadya Dossou, and Bel Venis).²⁹⁹ On the trampled ground, the priests sat forming a circle. There were about eighty of them and others kept arriving. On all their old calloused, and shaven or bearded faces, tinted all shades of brown and black, a painful uneasiness could be noted along with their unusual gravity and ineluctable professional pride. . . . There were certainly some men whose ministry had not been marred by compromises, who were not occasionally guilty of trading on their religious office or who had not at times soiled their hands with forbidden practices-evil done to other people-but there were also numerous children of the earth, some of tradition and duty, naïve and having done the bit of good that a man can accomplish in an anti-humanistic society, priests with unsullied vestments, zealous and faithful servants of the Spirits from whom they had inherited their knowledge. Some of them bowed their heads in meditation, wondering whether what was happening might be vengeance meted out by a heaven in anger or sacrilege, the mixing of orthodox faith and magical practices or the pollution of pure water and innocent corn with blood from infernal pacts.

One after the other, the priests stood up and spoke.
Calm and imperturbable, Bwadòm remained silent. General Miracin was uneasily scrutinizing the old man's face in order to sense his decision, but no muscle twitched on that thought-ridden face. (622)³⁰⁰

In this excerpt, Alexis escorts the reader through the peristyle, introducing house

²⁹⁷ Rules (of ceremony). In this context, it references the order of lwa, and subsequent procession through space, which is being made smaller, more focused, and more sacred.

²⁹⁸ The highest grade of initiation as *ounsi* below that of *mambo* or *houngan*.

²⁹⁹ Lwa.

³⁰⁰ *Les Arbres Musiciens*. Gallimard, Paris. 1957. An excerpt from Jacques Stephen Alexis's *The Musical Trees* translated by Carrol F. Coates. "Vodou . . . The Soul of the People" *Callaloo* 27.3 (2004), pp. 621-628.

members along the way. They are described as doing jobs delegated by initiatory rank and obligation to the house and lwa. Alexis accurately describes these vodouisants dressed in clothing and colors that are associated with specific lwa. They also literally reflect the iconography of associated Catholic saints as well. This is a common practice vodouisants use to venerate particular lwa.

The next two figures show the men (Figure 72) and women (Figure 73) of the Roots Without End Society in real time, wearing different colored kerchiefs³⁰¹ representing the lwa they serve.³⁰² In Alexis's depiction, most of the vodouisants were dressed in white and honoring Rada spirits. The real-time Vodou house depicted in these two figures shows a more diverse presentation of Vodou lwa from other rites being served. The red kerchiefs (generally) indicate Petro, Green is Gran Bwa, Purple is Gede and Blue is Lasirèn.³⁰³

³⁰¹ Silk or other fabric head scarf.

³⁰² Men and women dance in two lines, facing each other. It is always separated by gender, so as to reduce likelihood of sexualized dancing, which would be very inappropriate.

³⁰³ These different lwa are discussed in more detail elsewhere in the dissertation.



Figure 72. Men of the Roots Without End Society in different colored kerchiefs Vodou school 2010³⁰⁴

³⁰⁴ The kerchiefs indicate lwa they are serving. This was “Vodou School,” day-time ceremonies intended to prep and or teach the soon-to-be initiates before the secret ceremonies of initiation begin. Jacmel, Haiti.



Figure 73. Roots Without End Society women in colorful kerchiefs Vodou school 2010³⁰⁵

Spaces of Vodou

In addition to the vodouisants, Alexis also gives very literal and detailed descriptions of the spaces of the Vodou house. The reader encounters many different types of altars and spaces in this passage. Alexis presents interior chambers (badjis, or semi-private spaces of a peristyle) as well as exterior “public” spaces. In the passage, Alexis also mentions peripheral altars that lead to the central altar, the focal point for Vodou ceremonies. While Alexis’s descriptions can be amply appreciated at face value, there are also multiple layers of “initiate” knowledge, which—if the reader is made aware—deepens the impact of the passage and reveals the complexities of the sacred spaces of Vodou and how they relate to the function of pwen. For this reason, I will explain these important “subtexts” to fill in gaps important for full comprehension

³⁰⁵ Ibid.

of the passage.

In the description of the private interior space, or the badji, reglemann³⁰⁶ requires that only initiated persons may enter. Alexis depicts a very large badji where more than eighty hougans, mambos, and ounsi gather. There are peripheral altars against the walls with tables “for the spirits.” In Vodou, in addition to the transient altars, there is always a central altar, which is the focal point for the ceremonies. Alexis’ description of the ceremonial space accurately parallels authentic Vodou altars, as one can see in the two pictures in Figures 74-75. Figure 74 shows a complete altar set up for a Lave Tet ceremony³⁰⁷ outdoors. This altar was set up for a special ceremony in a practitioner’s backyard. The altar is transient (can be packed up easily and set up again), but is considered “complete” as the seven colored kerchiefs honor all Vodou lwa (across the rites). The gold and red scarves tied on the chair venerate the met tet or “master of the head” of the officiating mambo. In this case, those scarves honor Simbi Makaya. More is said about this lwa in the chapter on Pwen and Misconceptions about Vodou.

³⁰⁶ Here, it means Vodou rules.

³⁰⁷ Lave Tet ceremony is a Vodou ceremony involving the washing of one’s head. This may be done as a preliminary act by persons considering kanzo.



Figure 74. Lave Tet altar³⁰⁸

Figure 75 is used to illustrate the hard-constructed spaces of a Vodou peristyle. The background of the image shows a plaster or concrete façade behind which lie the interior spaces of the Roots Without End Society peristyle. The photo shows a post-Baptism ritual where the new initiate (me) showcases new knowledge to the community. This was the last of many “tests” that I underwent during initiation and gained much Vodou credibility by the local Vodou community. I am responding to ritual gestures, cued by Houngan Babou. After this ceremony, the community welcomed the new initiates and I became known affectionately by the local vodouists as “petit blan mambo.”³⁰⁹

³⁰⁸ Courtesy of Kathy S. Grey, 2011.

³⁰⁹ Means “little white/foreign mambo.” Greenough-Hodges, Kimberly. Jacmel, Haiti. 2009.



Figure 75. Roots Without End peristyle showing badjis and djévo in background³¹⁰

The background in Figure 75 shows two single doors (one on the far right, the other on the far left) and one set of double doors in the middle. The two single doors on opposite sides are the badjis. Recall the badji are semi-private spaces that initiates from other houses may enter. The Alexis passage is depicting a very large single badji, with initiates from many houses.

In the Roots Without End Society image, the badji to the right is for Rada Lasirèn, and one of her husbands, Danbala, the sacred serpent. The badji on the left is designated for Petwo

³¹⁰ Greenough-Hodges, Kimberly. Field work. 2009.

Erzulie Dantor.³¹¹ The third doorway (double doors in the center) is the most sacred space of the peristyle, known as the djévé. Appropriately, this is where the protective veve or sacred cosmogram of Rada Loko is found.³¹² No one except initiated members of that house may enter the djévé. It is the interior space where initiates are secluded during initiation and is considered to be intensely magical.

Lasirèn or the Mermaid, is the met tet³¹³ of the leading mambo of this house. Therefore, she is depicted on the badji to the right. Since she is always honored in this house, a permanent altar to her is kept inside the badji. The image in Figure 76 showing the Lasirèn altar was taken inside this badji. Blue, aquatic themes with objects and textures pleasing to Lasirèn are on her altar: water, crystal, silky, shiny fabric, a comb, mirrors or reflective glass, shells, shiny sea glass, champagne (evokes an image of sea foam), boutey lwa (Danbala). Notice, there is also an image of Stella Maris (shared iconography) on the wall.

³¹¹ Erzulie Dantor is a lwa depicted as a dark skinned, hardworking woman of the country. She is fiercely independent and loyal, and a particular protector of children and women who are abused, betrayed, or otherwise mistreated by men. She is believed to have been a fierce warrior during the Haitian Revolution, who fought with her own people. It is believed that her own people also cut her tongue out in case she was captured, she could not tell their secrets. Thus, when she comes in possession, she is a mute, and makes a “ke-ke-ke-ke” sound, gesturing at her throat between fits of sobbing. Her daughter, in the image, Ti Koukoun serves as her interpreter. Her colors are black and red. The scratches on her face are believed to be from her jealous sister, Erzulie Freda. She is associated with the Catholic Mater Salvatoris or Our Lady of Czestochwa.

³¹² Greenough-Hodges field work, 2009.

³¹³ Master of the head.



Figure 76. Lasirèn permanent altar Roots Without End badji

The background of the photo in Figure 77 shows how the Lasirèn badji door is encircled by Danbala and his cohort, Ayida Wedo. A Vodou song reveals that Lasirèn brought the two sacred serpents across the ocean from Africa. There is more about these spiritual entities in the section on Lasirèn in the historical context chapter.



Figure 77. Lasirèn depiction on badji in background of a Carrefour ceremony (indicated by the veve). Jacmel, 2011

The other badji (on the opposite side from Lasirèn) is for Petwo Erzulie Dantor, indicated by the red/black colors and the Dantor veve or sacred drawing on the wall. The photo in Figure 78 shows Mambo Racine, the lead mambo of the Roots Without End Society, guarded by her laplas (Marcel and Levois), or sword bearers. They are all dressed in Petwo Rite regalia. This was a picture taken in 2000, courtesy of the Roots Without End Society, in front of the Petwo badji during a kanzo. Petwo lwa and rites are discussed in detail in the historical overview chapter. Erzili Danto is well-known for her role in the Haitian Revolution and she is discussed in detail at the end of the Historical Overview chapter.



Figure 78. Petro Erzulie Danto veve and badji³¹⁴

A permanent Haitian Vodou peristyle is carefully planned and designed by a mambo or houngan asogwe.³¹⁵ Ceremonies are initially conducted to clean and prepare the space for serving the lwa. Orientation to the sun is considered and trees are planted at the entrance. Of primary consideration is the erection of the *poto mitan* (center pole) in the center of the peristyle, with a space for a fire below.³¹⁶ The *poto mitan* is the center structure of the ceremony and the major conduit for lwa to “enter” the ritual space. Spirit energy is believed to come down through the *poto mitan* and circle outward in concentric circles within the ritual space. It is also a central offering space; thus, it is always “greeted” in opening “salutes” of ceremony. The fire³¹⁷ serves

³¹⁴ Petro ceremonial regalia with laplas, Marcel and Levois. Photo courtesy of The Roots Without End Society. 2000.

³¹⁵ Highest ranking Vodou clergy initiation.

³¹⁶ Greenough-Hodges, Kimberly. Gede ceremony. Jacmel, Haiti, 2009.

³¹⁷ Fire in Vodou is purifying.

to heat spirit energy from below and is necessary for many rituals. Figure 79 shows an image of the poto mitan at The Roots Without End Society during a Gede Rite ceremony. Note the opening at the base of the poto mitan is where the fire burns. (The ceremony depicted here is an unknown daytime ceremony that took place during Mambo Ke Kontan’s Vodou school.)³¹⁸



Figure 79. Roots Without End Society poto mitan. Jacmel, Haiti. 2010

There are important interior spaces in the Vodou peristyle that must be built, such as the above-referenced spaces designated for house membership and lwa, called “badji.” Recall, they are *semi-sacred*, meaning initiates may enter, including non-house members. Usually, there are two badjis, placed as barriers of protection (on both sides) of a “center,” more sacred space

³¹⁸ Photograph is courtesy of Mambo Ke Kontan. The veve can’t be determined, thus ceremony can’t be determined. Vodou School was held during the day to get initiates up to speed with songs, dances and general reglemmen (rules) of service to the lwa. Jacmel, Haiti. 2010.

called a djévo. The center space is where initiates are “couche,”³¹⁹ or go into seclusion and have secret initiation ceremonies done.

A permanent peristyle also needs access to nearby supplies—market for animals and sundries and wild areas for harvesting native herbs³²⁰ for magical and medicinal purposes. The peristyle must also be cared for and this job belongs to a special house member called the “Maman Onyo,”³²¹ or house mother. Usually, the Maman Onyo is a woman beyond childbearing years, who cooks for the house members (and lwa) and cleans the physical spaces of the peristyle. Initiates and prospective initiates are required to greet her as “Mama” followed by a bisou or “kiss” on the cheek. The picture in Figure 80 is of the Maman Onyo of the Roots Without End Society. She is wearing a blue kerchief in honor of Lasirèn.

³¹⁹ From the French word, *coucher*, or to lie-as in lie down to sleep.

³²⁰ Specific herbs are not revealed and “formulas” are made by Vodou clergy or the medsen fey with herbal and botanical knowledge. It is considered a “propriety blend.”

³²¹ This means “Mama of the Ounfo.” Ounfo is the peristyle.



Figure 80. Mama Onyo of the Roots Without End Society

Proper “santaye³²²” ceremonial spaces, including ritual objects, are considered permanently magically charged and facilitate communication between the participants and spirits during the Vodou ceremony. In other words, the spaces and ritual objects serve pwen. They either “hold” or attract a specific lwa to an object or space via ritual as desired by a knowledgeable practitioner.

Defining Ritual Space

There is a striking parallel between the movement of the Alexis sequence through space and the movements involved with defining sacred space during an actual Vodou ceremony. Alexis leads the reader via narrative through space with movement that is progressive, moving

³²² “Sanctified,” ceremonies conducted to enliven and then baptized for purity. “Deka” also refers to Vodou traditional religious lineage, such as the asson lineage, which is hereditary and tcha-tchaor Deka lineage which is not.

from public and secular space to increasingly private and sacred space. Visual examples of how this compares to the way sacred space is defined and is sequentially reduced into select “hot spots” of pwen during a Vodou ceremony can be seen in Figure 81. First, the whole congregation sanctifies the public peristyle space with song, libation, drums, and gestures. This procedure is referred to as the *salutes* or opening ceremonies and they begin at the entrance, by the tree Loko and move in the four cardinal directions, beginning in the east and moving counterclockwise. Counterclockwise indicates spirit, whereas clockwise is human. Recall from the Historical Chapter that this observation of direction is believed to be Kongo in origin.



Figure 81. Roots Without End congregation defining sacred space (full peristyle)

As the *salutes* continue, the leading hogan or mambo will often break away from the full congregation and define smaller sacred spaces. In Figure 82, the smaller area was prepared for an animal sacrifice in front of the *poto mitan*, or center pole. Again, song, drums, libations, and gestures were required.



Figure 82. Mambo Andreli and Houngan Babou defining ceremonial space directly surrounding the *poto mitan*³²³

The concentric reduction of sacred space eventually compresses into a *pwen*, such as in the *veve* or sacred drawing. In the photo from Figure 83, it is the *veve* of *Ayizan*. The *veve* is drawn as an extra layer of service, which can direct the *lwa* to a precise location.

³²³ Petro ceremony. Jacmel, 2009.



Figure 83. Houngans drawing Ayizan veve³²⁴

Pwen: The Deka³²⁵

In the Alexis text, the focus of the pwen is fluid and gains momentum. He writes:

Suddenly, the noise increased. Bwadòm stood up. Silence fell abruptly. All eyes were focused in the direction of the old man. His long military coat glared, white in the midst of the multicolored assembly and the wild rays of light from the *tetkwòt* lanterns³²⁶ hanging from the walls. A striking impression of majesty emanated from this slight figure with his wavering head wrapped in a scarf of white silk. Gold earrings were suspended from his ears. All eyes were riveted on the sparkling *deka* raised in his right hand. The *papalwa*³²⁷ stared at the sacred object, which had traveled from the sanctuaries of Alada-La-Sainte, carried across the seas and through the tempests of the Slave Trade to the sandy shores of Haiti. Transmitted from hand to hand, this century-old object was the symbol of faith through the ages. The *Lwa*³²⁸ are Immortal! The other priests had only

³²⁴ RWE Society Chire Ayizan. Elaborate Kanzo ceremony involving palm leaves. Ginny's Kanzo, 2010.

³²⁵ Mystical object, described as a glowing crystal ball. The priest uses it to both to entrance people and to summon the lwa.

³²⁶ Metal lanterns that resemble a "kinky (kwòt) head (tet).

³²⁷ Vodou priest. "Papa" in a title of respect like the military ranks-captain, general.

³²⁸ In Vodou, "spirit/spirits." Capitalization is by Alexis. Alexis uses the word "dieux" (gods) translator uses spirit/spirits to show Vodou conception of living spirits rather than "god" or "gods" in the common Western sense.

cheap necklaces and poor *asson*³²⁹, the ritual rattles newly made from common gourds. The *deka* shone like the rising sun in the hand of the grand priest (624).³³⁰

This passage begins with Bwadòm, a houngan with “uncompromising orthodox”³³¹ Vodou faith. He is described as regal, with a “slight majesty” emanating from him. Then, the pwen is introduced. It is a “sparkling” *deka*,³³² a sacred object that Bwadòm holds up in his right hand. When he calls forth (silently with a look) his granddaughter, Harmonise, we understand she is pure, not only because she is a child, but also by lineage.³³³

Pwen: The Houngan

Alexis continues:

Bwadòm deliberately returned to his place in front of the altar. The crowd parted once more in respect. When he reached his place, he remained standing and gave a sign to Clèmèstine Dieubalfeuille. The old woman quickly went out, slipping through the crowd. The *papalwa* were squatting on the ground, their entranced eyes fixed on the priest. A moment later, Clèmèstine returned with Harmonise (624).

Quiet but uneasy, the little girl glanced across the crowd toward the grand priest. He drew her toward him and had her stand in the middle of the sanctuary. Then he set the *deka* on the head of the child. His two cupped hands were barely touching the sacred object, which kept turning, ever turning more quickly, Little drops were falling over the face and eyes of the motionless Harmonise. Bwadòm had his eyes closed. He was speaking, quietly at first, then more and more audibly. (624)³³⁴

Bwadòm stands Harmonise in front of the altar and places the *deka* above her head, with his hands barely touching it. At this point, the houngan, the girl, and the object are “cumulative” pwen. All the while, the *deka* continues to float, glow, and rotate, showering Harmonise with

³²⁹ This ritual object is a rattle used by a priest in Vodou ceremonies.

³³⁰ Les Arbres Musiciens. Gallimard, Paris. 1957. An excerpt from Jacques Stephen Alexis’s *The Musical Trees* translated by Carrol F. Coates. “Vodou... The Soul of the People” *Callaloo* 27.3 (2004), pp. 621-628.

³³¹ *Ibid.*

³³² An ancient ritual object that indicates familial lineage within the Deka tradition.

³³³ A familial lineage of practitioners on the eastern side of Haiti, closer to the Dominican Republic., different from the Kanzo tradition on Vodou that I initiated into.

³³⁴ Les Arbres Musiciens. Gallimard, Paris. 1957. An excerpt from Jacques Stephen Alexis’s *The Musical Trees* translated by Carrol F. Coates. “Vodou . . . The Soul of the People” *Callaloo* 27.3 (2004), pp. 621-628.

“pure water.” The houngan falls into a trance (he becomes a pwen) and slowly, he narrates what he sees. He relates a vision from Ayizan:

Ayizan, great walker, she whom you have neglected has eyes filled with water. I see her in the middle of a great green field. I see men spattered with blood and filth, leopards spotted with blood among those to whom the *Lwa* have entrusted their shrines! The greatest miracles spring from pure water and innocent corn! I see the *Lwa* chained in their *ounfò*,³³⁵ the furious Spirits who are cursing the silver for which you sold them. They are foaming with rage and a hundred voices are calling out to them with the rhythms of the rattles. The Spirits are children armed with mysterious *kachapikas*.³³⁶ They are coming, grumbling, because dedicated hands know the secrets by which they are bound. Woe be unto those who challenge the *Gran Neg*, the only *Gran Neg*, *Papa Bondye*, the source of the multiple emanations that are spirits. Ayizan says that the *Lwa* are neither good nor bad- they are like the hearts of men! I see misfortune as a great bull wandering through the country. But Ayizan keeps walking, walking, walking, breaking the dew. Sanctuaries will not be abandoned; trees are sacred dwelling places- they will not be abandoned; the people of the plains, the mountains, and the valleys will not remain alone in the face of the anger that evil men have unleashed. Ayizan the great walker is watching. Woe to those who have enclosed the *Lwa* in vulgar bottles to transform God’s creatures into zombies. Vengeance, says ancient Ayizan! (625)³³⁷

Bwadòm continues channeling Ayizan, but the vision and the momentum of the pwen builds.

The passage continues:

It is fitting to dwell where the *Lwa* have built their sanctuaries, among the people of the gardens, Ayizan has said to me! Ayizan asks me about the fate of the children suffering with fever, the children trembling with cold, the children twisted in pain, the unfortunate children of the entire land. Ayizan says that the *Lwa* will live as long as hunger may last, as long as misery may last, as long as illness may last, as long as blood will be shed! (625)

Pwen: The Possession by Ayizan

Bwadòm suddenly stops speaking in his own voice as houngan. He has become Ayizan, demonstrated through a narrative switch from third to first person. Ayizan, the lwa speaks in

³³⁵ Vodou sanctuary.

³³⁶ Dagger or sword. (Alexis describes it as a long sword).

³³⁷ *Les Arbres Musiciens*. Gallimard, Paris. 1957. An excerpt from Jacques Stephen Alexis’s *The Musical Trees* translated by Carrol F. Coates. “Vodou . . . The Soul of the People” *Callaloo* 27.3 (2004), pp. 621-628.

exclamations and “ancient,” cryptic and prophetic terms:

“Enough crime! Enough blood! *Agoye*³³⁸!”

“Save the holy stones! *Agoye*!”

“Await those who will come to burn the *ounfo*! *Agoye*!”

“The *ounfo* are as indestructible as the grass that is burned in the fields in order to have a greater harvest. The *ounfo* will blossom once more in the springtime of like! Scorn the swift, dazzling weapons! *Agoye*!”

“The arms of the *Lwa* are deliberate, invincible, immanent! *Agoye*!”

“I see them coming! I see why they are coming! I see everything in a strange light! I see another army marching in the wake of their army! I see the garden people cut down like the grass, cast beside the roads like weeds! What is seen by Ayizan’s eyes will be repeated by none!”

In this passage, Bwadòm is under possession by Ayizan and he “speaks in noble Arada

discourse”³³⁹ (625). This African-originating dialect or language is understood to be so old and

infrequently used that other priests had mostly forgotten it.³⁴⁰

Pwen: The Magic

The powerful and inspiring message of the ancient *lwa* Ayizan is followed by a strikingly symbolic and evocative depiction of *pwen*. The momentum of the *pwen* continues to build, and its direction shifts. This aspect is evident when Alexis writes:

Appearing larger than life, Bwadòm’s face was radiant, and this language of tolling sonority flowed from his lips like rivulets in the forests. Above Monise’s head. The *deka* gleamed like the setting sun over a shattered sea. The trembling hands of the old man were magnets, strange animal’s magnets that gave life to the sacred object with an instant vibration and the child sparkled with the clear undulating light flowing from the *deka*. Bwadòm took hold of the *deka* and opened it. He gathered the golden rain in one hand. The water flowed over the head of the motionless child, who seemed to be a stone idol whose drenched garment reproduced the network of undulating folds, like the sloping bark of the land of *Ayitiana*,³⁴¹ land of the ancients of Haiti. With his two cupped hands stretched out, Bwadòn offered the priests the twinned corn that he had gathered in the

³³⁸ Kreyol “I am here!” an expression for invoking spirits.

³³⁹ West African nation or family of Vodou spirits. Also called “Rada.”

³⁴⁰ This is similar to “langaj” in Vodou, where African words are used, but so removed from time and place that they are not understood as individual decipherable words, but as memorized phrases or songs.

³⁴¹ Another word for Haiti, “also “Ayiti.”

fields of the spirits. They filed before him, each taking one of the marvelous white kernels that heaven had let ripen in the earth as a presage for ³⁴²those who were going to know doubt, despair, and the sight of hearts ravaged by apostasy. (626)³⁴³

This scene brilliantly depicts the building momentum of pwen and the unexpected results that can occur. First, Bwadòm becomes “possessed” by the lwa, Ayizan, and he relays her message. All the while, the *deka* continually rotates above Harmonise’s head, gently “watering” her head and face. The ceremony, the houngan, Ayizan, Harmonise, and (importantly) the rotating, watering *deka* are alternating points of focus, which end in the birthing of twinned “pure and white” corn kernels. This magical shifting of inexplicable “energy” between people, objects, and action distorts time/space/reality in the same way pwen does in ritual practice.

In the Vodou ceremony passage, when Alexis first describes Bwadòm holding a ritual object in hand, the depiction seems to be in real time and positioned in actual space. When the *deka* animates, levitates, and produces water above Harmonise’s head, resulting in Bwadòm’s possession, none of the people, spirits, or objects involved in the pwen remain grounded in real time and space. Additionally, Alexis uses exaggerated words and the reader of the text is struck by the metaphors and symbolism of this powerful scene. We are told that Bwadòm’s face is “larger than life” and “radiant.” The words of Ayizan are “sonorous” and flow “from his lips like rivulets.” The sequence amplifies as his “old man hands” become enlivened, “like animal magnets.” This scene peaks in the fantastic pwen of “golden rain” or twinned corn “harvested in the fields of the spirits.” This scene is extraordinary, as the description of pwen in ceremony animates and moves from the space (the badji) to the houngan (Bwadòm, channeling Ayizan), to

³⁴²

³⁴³ Les Arbres Musiciens. Gallimard, Paris. 1957. An excerpt from Jacques Stephen Alexis’s *The Musical Trees* translated by Carrol F. Coates. “Vodou . . . The Soul of the People” *Callaloo* 27.3 (2004), pp. 621-628.

the glowing, “watering” ritual object—the *deka*, and through the virginal girl—Harmonise, until the magically produced twinned corn is consumed by the congregants. The power of this “moving” *pwen* culminates. The consumption of the corn has an overt religious reference to the ceremony of the Eucharist or Holy Communion³⁴⁴ of a Roman Catholic mass. In the mass, communion wafers and wine are blessed by the priest and transubstantiated into the Holy Body and Holy Blood of Christ, which is then received by the congregants. The belief is that one gains spiritual nourishment directly from Jesus through the Eucharist. The consumption of the magically twinned corn by the participants serves to embody the sacred words of Ayizan and infiltrate their bodies, hearts, and minds, preparing them to be “spiritual warriors” of Vodou. Vodou ceremonies are meant to “heat up” or “*fe choffe*”³⁴⁵ the *lwa*, congregation, and *pwen*. The *pwen* in this ceremony stirs the survival instincts of the practitioners to fight to preserve Vodou in the face of violent protest from the Catholic Church.

Another interesting reference in this passage is the corn. In and of itself, corn is a significant staple of the Haitian diet and it has ritual use in Haitian Vodou. Corn kernels that are properly prepared can be woven into initiate’s *kolyes* (see Figure 84).³⁴⁶

³⁴⁴ Eucharist, Holy Communion or the Lord’s Supper is a Christian rite considered a “sacrament” by some groups. It is believed to have been instituted by Jesus Christ during the Passover meal, where he gave bread and wine, commanding his disciples to “do this in memory of me.” He referred to the bread as “my body” and the wine as “my blood.” There is much difference of opinion as to whether this was a metaphor or actually the blood and body of Christ (known as transubstantiation) among Christian groups. Although the reference works equally well as metaphor, Alexis’s audience at the time the text was written would have originally been largely Haitian (Vodou influenced if not practicing) and French-speaking. Therefore the communion scene is best understood in terms of Roman Catholic doctrine.

³⁴⁵ *Fe choffe*, in French “*fait chaud*” or heat up something. Expression with literal and ritual meaning- as one stimulates spirit energy by “heating up” the space with song, dance, rhythms, etc.

³⁴⁶ Mimerose Beaubrum in *Nan Dòm: An initiate’s Journey into Haitian Vodou* refers to her own initiatory *kolye* that had kernels of corn strung into it.



Figure 84. Corn with beads for stringing kolye³⁴⁷

³⁴⁷ Kolye is the beaded necklace that Mambo and Houngans wear. They are made by the membership during Kanzo and initiates are taught how to string their own kolye. This picture is the communal bead bowl. Notice kernels of corn and, in this case, popped corn is in the bowl. We did not weave them into our kolye, but some traditions do. Courtesy of Mambo Ko Kontan. 2010.



Figure 85. Stringing kolye³⁴⁸

The fact that the corn is “twinned” also invokes another powerful lwa, the Marassa, the lwa of twins, multiples, those born under usual birth conditions. Also known by the name, Marassa Dosu Dosa, in Vodou this lwa represents the concept of two opposing things coming together to make a “third potentiality.”³⁴⁹ The Marassa evoke a strong sense of religious positivism pertaining to the future of Vodou. The images in Figure 85 are the Marassa. The first is a veve.

³⁴⁸ Greenough-Hodges, Kimberly. Field work. 2009.

³⁴⁹ In Vodou, the idea reflecting the nature of the sacred twins is “One plus one makes three.”

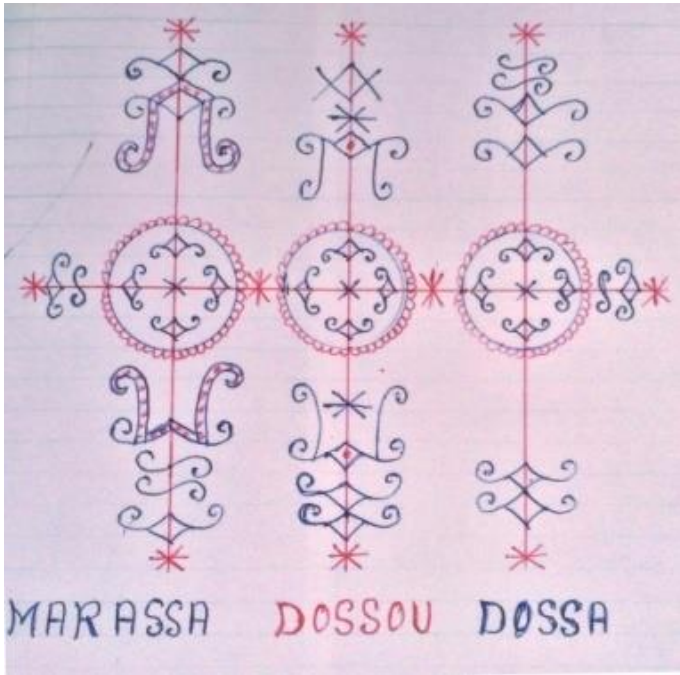


Figure 86. Marassa Veve³⁵⁰

The Marassa share iconography with the Catholic Saints, Cosmos, and Damian in Rada rites and with the Three Virtues: Faith, Hope and Charity in Petwo. Figures 87-88 are images of the Catholic spiritual entities.

³⁵⁰ Josephson, Nancy. *Spirits in Sequins*. p. 27.



Figure 87. St. Cosmos and Damian³⁵¹

³⁵¹ Josephson, Nancy, *Spirits in Sequins: Vodou Flags of Haiti*, Catholic Chromolithograph Cosmos and Damian, p. 27.



Figure 88. The Three Virtues: Faith, Hope and Charity³⁵²

Recall that shared iconography has a literal meaning in Vodou. In Vodou, the Marassa are identical, yet sexless; they are light and dark, as well as positive and negative. Serving the Marassa is “double” the work and is a powerful reminder to those who serve them of the rewards of “double fruition.” With this in mind, Alexis’s twinned corn brings to mind the idea of “manna from heaven” or “ultimate bounty,” where $1 + 1 = 3$,³⁵³ the third “potentiality”³⁵⁴ in Haitian Vodou. In this excerpt, the Marassa indicates a powerful, fecund, and enlightening pwen. Here is a Vodou song that illustrates this aspect:

Marassa noun an nwa e (repeat)
Marassa Ginen nou nan nwa devan bondye
Dossou Marassa poye chandel pou klere nou

Marassa we are in the dark (repeat)

³⁵² Josephson, Nancy. *Spirits in Sequins: Vodou Flags of Haiti, Three Graces*. Catholic chromolithograph. p. 30.

³⁵³ In Vodou, twins represent two opposite concepts of something. Together, they do not make a unified whole or even two different parts. Instead twins are thought to create a third, unique “potential.”

³⁵⁴ Mambo Pat of the Sosyete du Marche. Website. Accessed June 5, 2017.

Marassa from Guinea we are in the dark in front of God
Dossou Marassa bring the lamp to shine upon us

Alexis returns to nature to close the passage in a symbolic and poetic fashion. He writes:

Through the calm night, a *zwazo mizisyen*³⁵⁵ was singing in the shadows at the tip of a neighboring tree. Its voice suddenly broke the silence, then trilled, and slowly swelled. The melody was roseate, flowery, gem-like, embodying light. The arpeggios flowed, swelled. Merged, sparkled: three silvery peals falling in perfect cadence, followed by a plagal trill with its dominant fifth conveying an infinite gentleness. The precious bass notes flowed across a tender and melancholy sub-dominant to the clear, sparkling, enchanted tonic. Existence is beautiful and gentle for the strong! Robust hope sails through dark nights, through tempests towards life's new mornings (626).³⁵⁶

This evocative description of the birds singing in the trees creates a pastoral bookend to the passage. Whereas the physicality of the mystical tree of Iwa Papa Loko introduces the sequence, the mystical songs of the birds, or the Iwa indicate a return to the earth after quite an intense Vodou ceremony. The pwen of the ceremony has transformed into vibrations of energy, moving through the universe as a catalyst, which us not considered finished until its goal is fulfilled.³⁵⁷ A hopeful and healing breath of Loko is the bird's song. It is now up to the congregants to utilize their magical gift from Ayizan.

³⁵⁵ A type of bird in Haiti called the "Musician Bird" or Hispaniola Solitary. Significant for Alexis as the title underscores the name— "Les Arbres Musiciens," which a tree species is originating from Madagascar. (*Casuarina equisetifolia*).

³⁵⁶ Les Arbres Musiciens. Gallimard, Paris. 1957. An excerpt from Jacques Stephen Alexis's *The Musical Trees* translated by Carrol F. Coates. "Vodou . . . The Soul of the People" *Callaloo* 27.3 (2004), pp. 621-628.

³⁵⁷ As historical fiction, we, the reader, know (as we know the historical course of things) that the pwen will complete. As Vodou was not extinguished and continues to transform to fit the needs of its practitioners.

CHAPTER 5

VODOU MAGIC: THE WANGA

To fully understand this wanga, or “spell,” we must first present the context surrounding the practitioner who executed it, the medsen fey. The medsen fey is an herbal doctor (literally translates as leaf doctor”) within a Vodou community. He or she is a healer who knows how to talk to the lwa and has an encyclopedic knowledge of native herbs, plants, minerals, and animals and the medicinal uses of each. Additionally, the medsen fey may be a Vodou initiate, or may belong to another related tradition, such as the extremely magical and secretive Makaya.³⁵⁸ Loulou, the practitioner who I personally know and commissioned to do a magical work, is an initiated vodouisant, but not a member of the Roots Without End Society. He works throughout the Vodou communities of Jacmel and, as of 2008, had an international following as well. Loulou practices Makaya magic as do many of the members of the Roots Without End Society vodouisants.

The particular religious affiliation³⁵⁹ of a medsen fey determines the approach he or she takes with patients. It is important to note that whatever the religious affiliation or initiation status of the medsen fey, all have a close spiritual relation to the lwa. It is the Vodou lwa who reveal to them the methods and materials for healing people, most commonly through dreams. The role of the medsen fey in the Vodou community is important, as they are the main practitioners people seek for “health” and “well-being.” One difference from the Western

³⁵⁸ There is more about Makaya and Vodou- related religious traditions in the Introduction to Pwen chapter.

³⁵⁹ Vodou initiates may be more focused on balancing energies of people and places. Makaya is more magical work oriented, where people commission love, money, fertility, and health wanga.

healthcare perspective is that among vodouisants, physical well-being is not considered separate from spiritual well-being. Thus, medsen fey often work in collaboration with mambos or hougans to help out with patient/client health issues. They know how, when, and where to collect the special plants necessary for magical work if that is determined to be the cause of ill-being.

A significant and unique job of the medsen fey is harvesting plants and preparation of them for Vodou ceremonies, especially the Vodou initiation or kanzo. This job takes a lot of time and energy and the medsen fey charges a substantial fee (\$200 per kanzo and retainer for the duration of the ceremony) for their service, which is about 10% of the total cost to run a kanzo. Figures 89-91 show three pictures. The first one is of the medsen fey, Loulou Prince (Jean Louis), who became a trusted contact and friend to me during my two visits to Jacmel.



Figure 89. Loulou resident Medsen Fey of Roots Without End Society. Jacmel, Haiti. Circa early 2000s. Courtesy of Kathy S. Grey.

Figure 90 shows Loulou as the medsen fey, leading the house membership in a ritualized search for plant-pwen to use during Mambo Ke Kontan's kanzo in 2010. Members are venerating different lwa seen by the color of clothing or kerchiefs (silk scarves) they are wearing. Loulou is wearing dark green shorts (under khaki pants) to honor Gran Bwa (the forest) as Gran Bwa is his met tet (master of his head) and often walks with the medsen fey. Loulou also wears a light-blue scarf honoring the lwa Lasirèn (the met tet, or master of the head mambo running the kanzo). The membership is wearing red scarves because lwa Gran Bwa (the forest) is a lwa of Petwo rite, whose lwa colors are dominantly red. The lwa Loko (father figure/master healer) is with Loulou too, as seen by the Haitian-made straw bag or djakout, that "holds" Loko's offerings, which in this case, are special plants and herbs. Houngan Wolmer, pictured to Loulou's left, has a purple scarf around his waist to designate his met tet, which is Bawon Samdi (Guardian of the Dead) of the Gede Rite. Of special note is the rope around Loulou's ankle. This photo shows the rope tied to Marcel, one of the house laplas or sword bearers (protectors). During the course of the outing, all the membership will take turns being tied to Loulou. This action connects and unifies the individual person to the group, the plant-pwen being collected, Loulou, and all venerated lwa. Recall from earlier discussions, there is a strict hierarchy among the people in the Vodou house, but individual lwa to human interactions are always equal. This use of the rope reinforces that idea.



Figure 90. Loulou leading membership looking for medicinal plants to harvest. Jacmel, Haiti 2010. Courtesy of Virginia Merritt

Collection of plants by the medsen fey requires special skill for maximum efficacy, involving secret knowledge and secret words,³⁶⁰ as select plants are believed to have living pwen inside them. It is understood as good practice to collect plants at night when they are overwhelmed by sleep and under certain stages of the moon and/or during certain types of weather. Certain environmental conditions are believed to enhance the pwen of the plants. Examples of this would be harvesting plants under a full moon or in the height of a violent electrical storm.³⁶¹ There is more on this topic in Chapter 2, “Interview with a Mambo.” Mambo Racine told me that she had seen Loulou collecting a plant one night under the moonlight. She described him softly singing to it, then gently and sweetly coaxing it to “wake up” so it could

³⁶⁰ Merritt, Virginia MD. Unpublished. Presentation on medsen fey. Kosanba. 2015.

³⁶¹ Greenough-Hodges, K. Field Research, Jacmel, Haiti.

come “work” for him. He told her later it had a very strong pwen and he simply could not leave it there. See the image in Figure 91 of propriety-plant material collected by Loulou for a kanzo in 2010.



Figure 91. Plant material for kanzo. Jacmel, Haiti 2010. Courtesy of Mambo Ke Kontan

A medsen fey can be male or female. If female, it is expected that she take on the additional duty as midwife or “fanm-chaj.” Both sexes of medsen fey earn a competitive living in Haiti and they have high social standing in Haitian culture. The lineage of the medsen fey is passed down within one family to only one child. The child shows himself or herself worthy of the position by demonstrating a strong interest in plant medicine from a very early age. The choice to become a medsen fey is a personal one, and those who choose this path are very dedicated.

Most Haitians prefer using the medsen fey as a first choice for physical, emotional, and spiritual problems. In part, this is because of the inaccessibility of conventional doctors and

medicine in Haiti, but also—as was seen in the aftermath of the 2010 Earthquake—Western and Haitian views about medicine remain in conflict. The Western approach to health and illness is anthropocentric, where the patient is at the center. The Haitian worldview on health in humans is largely cosmocentric, where the patient belongs to a vast world of spirits, ancestors, and the natural world. Thus, to Haitians, good health requires being in harmony with a complex and interrelated system that involves the mind, spirit, body, society, and universe.³⁶² It should be noted that if the methods of the houngan, mambo, or medsen fey fail, Haitians will then turn to conventional Western approaches to healing.³⁶³

When I began finalizing my field work plans to go to Haiti, I wanted to maximize my experience of Vodou and observe and document as many types of ceremonies and practitioners of Haitian Vodou as I could. As a result, I commissioned Loulou to do a wanga, or magical work, to stabilize and increase my husband's earning potential.³⁶⁴ Loulou first consulted with me on the telephone, with Mambo Racine as translator, as my Creole was not yet good. Mambo explained the situation to Loulou; he asked me some general questions about my husband's life, family, and type of work he did. Mambo Racine told me Loulou would think about it and direct himself to dream an interaction with the lwa, through which he would receive details for a process and sequence for a wanga to improve my husband's earning potential. He later told me that he did not know which lwa would initially come and reveal to him what to do. In the case of this wanga for my husband, the directives came from Kafou, the Petwo lwa of the crossroads. I

³⁶² The 2010 Haiti Earthquake Response, *Psychiatric Clinics of North America* 36 2013 431-450. Reference/citation appeared in Dr Virginia Merritt's unpublished paper on medsen fey.

³⁶³ Merritt, Virginia MD. Unpublished paper on medsen fey. Kusanba paper presentation. 2015.

³⁶⁴ My husband was working free-lance and we were financially struggling on one income after the recession of 2006.

agreed to pay \$350 for Loulou to do the work.

Once I was in Haiti, the ceremony took place in the small (12 by 10) space, which is the Erzulie Dantor badji of the Roots Without End Society peristyle. The Danto badji is indicated by a painted version of this chromolithograph of the Black Madonna with child to the left of its door (see Figure 92).³⁶⁵



Figure 92. Erzulie Danto with Ti-Jean, her Petwo cohort³⁶⁶

The physical space of the Danto badji is shown in Figures 93-94. The first image shows an overall view of the peristyle. The Danto badji is on the left.

³⁶⁵ There is a Gede veve on the wall facing the field (indicated by a cross). This is because the Head Houngan of the house (Wolmer) has Bawon Gede as his met tet. There used to be a small “House” for the Gede near the Danto badji, but it was destroyed by the hurricanes and earthquakes that happened between 2010-2012.

³⁶⁶ One-sided Catholic image of Black Madonna, Greenough-Hodges personal collection. Purchased in market. Jacmel, Haiti. 2010.



Figure 93. Roots Without End Society peristyle. Jacmel, Haiti. Courtesy of Virginia Verrmitt. 2015

Figure 94 shows the Danto badji from a different angle. The open door is partially covering the painted image. The three black pigs of Danto crossing the peristyle in front of Danto's sacred space prompted Mambo Ke Kontan to take the photo. It was Danto who famously sacrificed a black pig during the Bois Caiman Vodou ceremony, which was believed to jumpstart the Haitian Revolution (see Figure 94).



Figure 94. Roots Without End Society peristyle. Three black pigs for Danto. Jacmel, Haiti. 2015. Courtesy of Virginia Merritt.

For the wanga, there were about 10 people crowded in the badji, including me. Loulou brought an array of items, such as sticks, roots, stems, leaves, fruit, dried herbs, rope, fabric, candles, and other ritual items—many I did not recognize. Loulou led the ceremony and a few house members were there to sing and help out. My soon-to-be initiatory sister and St. Lucian native, Margaret (bilingual Creole/English), was present to help translate for me, as my Creole was still developing. Mambo Racine had explained to me pre-departure that in Haiti I would be a surrogate for my husband's wanga. Thus, I was required to transport an unwashed shirt of his from Texas to Haiti and deliver it to Loulou. The shirt was a very important piece of the ceremony, as it connected the ceremony specifically to him through me. Figure 95 shows the shirt, mid-ceremony.



Figure 95. Loulou's wanga. Will's shirt. Jacmel, Haiti. 2008

The Wanga turned out to be a very long ceremony, taking almost six hours. There were three major Petwo lwa involved: Kalfou, Gran Bwa, and Erzulie Danto. They will be introduced as they are venerated or otherwise encountered in the ceremony. The first is Kalfou, from the Petwo Rite, as this is the lwa who came into Loulou's dreams and revealed to him what must be done. Kafou did not come in possession during the ceremony, but it was his message that was being fulfilled in the wanga. Thus, to understand the character of Kafou, we begin with his veve, or sacred cosmogram, which is pictured in Figure 96.

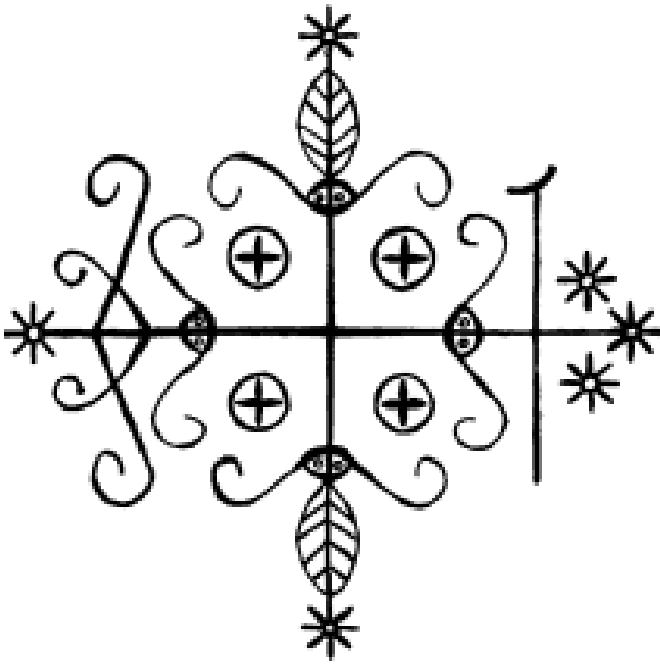


Figure 96. Kalfou Veve, a required component of a Vodou ceremony³⁶⁷

Recall that the images in the veve have literal interpretations, which means that shared design motifs would indicate “associations” between the lwa. Specifically, the Kafou veve has a dominant African-origin “crossroad” design radiating out from the center of the design. This feature is also found in the Rada Legba veve (previously discussed lwa in Chapter 4). Like Legba, it also shows a walking stick to the right on the horizontal bar. These shared design details are “cross-rite” affiliations and indicate similar characteristics between Rada Legba and Petwo Kafou. Similar to Legba, who is the first Rada lwa called in Vodou ceremonies, Kalfou is the first lwa called in Petwo. These lwa grant permission to humans to communicate with the lwa. In Vodou, opposing lwa of different rites can be considered “counterpoints.” The idea of counterpoint lwa was explained to me by Houngan Wolmer (my initiatory papa) in this way:

³⁶⁷ <http://www.arcadia93.org/pics/VeveLegba.png>. Accessed July 11, 2017.

“Rada Legba is the sun and Petwo Kafou is the moon,” Legba is also friendly and kind (albeit circumlocutive) in his communication, whereas Kafou is frank in expression and known for his sharp words and powerful outbursts.³⁶⁸

To understand the role of Kafou in this spell and gain a more specific understanding of his sacred and parental role, here is a song Loulou sang for him at the opening of the Wanga:

Kafou O!
Se ou ki mama mwen, Se ou ki papa mwen
Kafou O!
Se ou ki mama mwen, Se ou ki papa mwen,
Se ou ki ba mwen tete,
Se ou ki ba mwen lave³⁶⁹,
Pa kite mwen yo wont ta O,
Devan sobadji lwa yo

Kalfou O!
You are my father, you are my mother
Kalfou O!
You are my mother, you are my father
You take care of my head,
You wash me
Don't let them put shame on me
under the sacred room of the spirits

The next lwa in this wanga is Petwo Rite Gran Bwa. According to reglamen or ceremonial rules, Loulou dressed in his formal green regalia, in honor of Gran Bwa, who also is his met tet. Since this was a Petwo ceremony, Loulou led the songs with a tcha-tcha.³⁷⁰ Gran Bwa did not come in possession, but was present throughout the ceremony, as his veve was drawn in the dirt floor of the badji and Loulou sat in a chair right next to it. See the pictures in

³⁶⁸ Greenough-Hodges, Kimberly. Field Work. Jacmel, Haiti. 2009.

³⁶⁹ In Vodou, one's head and washing of it can only be done by trusted Houngan and Mambo. It is the entry and exit point of all that is spirit, thus it must be protected.

³⁷⁰ Wooden type maracas for Petwo rhythms. In the Roots Without End Society, a tcha-tcha is one of several initiatory objects one receives at the end of initiation.

Figures 97-98. Figure 97 shows the pre-ceremony set up with the Gran Bwa veve, a small chair, Loulou’s ceremonial clothes, red and white scarves, a vessel for water, and an image of Erzulie Danto (more on her shortly).



Figure 97. Gran Bwa veve under chair holding Loulou’s Gran Bwa ceremonial clothing, an Erzulie Dantor image and assorted ritual items³⁷¹

Figure 98 is a detail of Loulou’s Gran Bwa veve, which was drawn by him to go under the chair.

³⁷¹ Loulou works frequently with Dantor, as she “walks with him.” This expression in Creole means that the lwa is always around the person.



Figure 98. Gran Bwa Veve drawn by Loulou, medsen fey for wanga. Jacmel, Haiti 2008³⁷²

The veve of Gran Bwa is both “man and tree” and is always drawn with associated (literal) objects, such as a machete and bag. The machete is to harvest the plants and chop them to make medicine; the bag is a vessel to hold the contents or pwen. Figure 99 is of Loulou early in the ceremony. He is leading songs with the “tcha-tcha.”

³⁷² Gran Bwa is an elusive part man, part tree lwa of the forest. He knows medicinal secrets that he shares with those he trusts. He is also an overseer of initiations.



Figure 99. Loulou leading Wanga with tcha-tcha. Jacmel, Haiti. 2008³⁷³

A tcha-tcha is a type of ritual “rattle” given as a ritual object during initiation to Vodou initiates. I have a tcha-tcha (like the one in Loulou’s hand), but in my house we use the tcha-tcha only for Petwo Rites³⁷⁴ and the main “rattle” (for houngans and mambos only) is the asson, a beaded gourd with a bell. There is a picture of mine in Chapter 2 on pwen and ritual objects. It is used for Rada and at the discretion of the practitioner during other rites. Because Loulou is an initiated ounsi,³⁷⁵ vodouisant and a Makaya (a Vodou-related religious tradition discussed in the discussion of Dark Magic in Introduction to Pwen) magician, he uses the red and yellow tcha-

³⁷³ Greenough-Hodges, K. Field research. Jacmel. Haiti. 2008.

³⁷⁴ Rhythms are 4/4 time with a tcha-tcha. Petwo songs and dancing are faster than Rada rites, which are 3/4 time with an asson.

³⁷⁵ Loulou was initiated as ounsi as his mother went through her Kanzo while pregnant. Normally children are shielded from the lwa until about 13 years of age. It is considered unethical to expose children to the lwa too early. It is believed they are too impressionable and exposure at this age could create imbalance in their spiritual development. In Loulou’s case, his in utero exposure to the lwa made his connection to the lwa stronger than others and very powerful as a magical worker.

tcha. It should be noted that Petwo and Makaya colors are mainly red and yellow.

The type of “rattle” one possesses indicates initiatory rank, lineage, and geographic origins within Haiti. Tcha-tchas are either acquired as initiatory ritual objects or they can be passed down through one’s familial lineage. Tcha-tchas are used exclusively in the Artibonite region to the north, which is a tradition very different from the kanzo one. For one thing, there is no “couche” or seclusion part of an initiation. Additionally, the asson (beaded rattle) that hougans and mambos receive through the “kanzo” means “initiated” through fire or “Zo,”³⁷⁶ as initiates undergo a public ceremony where they are “purified” through fire. For this ceremony, initiates are bound in a sheet, like a cocoon, carried on a house member’s back, and the initiate’s hands and feet are plunged into boiling millet and fire. This ceremony is believed to “clean” the person through fire. Those who kanzo are given tcha-tchas as part of their initiation. All kanzo initiates may use the tcha-tcha, including the lowest ranking initiates, the ounsi. For them, the tcha-tcha is the only type of rattle they may use, as the use of the asson is reserved for mambos and hougans. There is a strong kanzo presence in the southern area around Jacmel, where my initiatory house is located. Figure 100 is a photo of a different type of tcha-tcha that Loulou, the medsen fey used at a healing for a terminally ill friend of Mambo Ke Kontan.

³⁷⁶ Zo is capitalized because it is also a lwa or pwen.



Figure 100. Loulou's tcha-tcha. Wanga for Mambo Ke Kontan's terminally ill friend

As previously mentioned, Gran Bwa is Loulou's met tet, or master of his head. Thus, Gran Bwa, with his healing presence, is always at Loulou's side. Gran Bwa lives in the forest, the deep woods, and he owns the leaves. Loulou told me that it is typical for a medsen fey to have either Gran Bwa or Loko (another healing lwa, discussed in depth in Chapter 4) as a met tet.³⁷⁷

In the wanga for my husband, Loulou sang three songs for Met Gran Bwa,³⁷⁸ as is customary. These two songs were sung and included here because they indicate the elusive, magical, medicinal, and regenerative properties of this lwa:

*M al nan Gran Bwa, al chache fey
Le mwen rive mwen jwen twa zom O!
Al nan Gran Bwa, al chache fey
Le mwen rive mwen jwen twa zom O!*

³⁷⁷ Greenough-Hodges, K. Field Work. Jacmel, Haiti. 2009.

³⁷⁸ Means "master," a common title for Gran Bwa.

*Premye a, yon boutey nwa,
Dezyem nan, yon tet san ko,
Twazyem nan, yon asson nan men!
Se li ke wa, se li kap komande.*

I go to Big Woods, go looking for leaves.
When I get there, I find three men, O!
I go to Big Woods, go looking for leaves.
When I get there, I find three men, O!
The first, a black bottle,
The second, a head without a body,
The third, an asson in hand!
It is king, it commands.

Then this one:

*Se nan bwa, fey nan bwa ye,
Se nan bwa, fey nan bwa ye,
Se mwen menm Gran Bwa,
M pap montre moun kay mwen,
Si m pral montre moun kay mwen,
Yap di se nan bwa m rete.*

It's in the woods, the leaves are,
It's in the woods, the leaves are,
It is I Gran Bwa,
I won't show people my house,
If I go and show people my house,
They will say I live in the woods.

Loulou remained composed as he sang for other Petwo lwa in the expected liturgical order. However, when Loulou got to the second song for Erzulie Dantor, she violently “mounted”³⁷⁹ him and knocked him to the floor. “Spirit possession” in Vodou has unique terminology. For one thing, it refers to the human as a “horse” who is “being ridden or mounted” by the lwa. This is a belief that originates in Africa, but is likely an integrated idea resulting from exposure to Europeans and the experience of colonialism. During possession, the belief is that

³⁷⁹ Another reference for spirit possession, when the spirit comes down into the human body.

the human is overcome by a spirit and temporarily loses human faculties. While the human is “absent,” the lwa “possess” (use) their body to speak, dance, and act in a way that the vodouisants recognize and welcome. In this case, it was Erzulie Danto. When Loulou was mounted by Danto, the membership rushed to assist and greet her, hoping to receive important messages from the spirit realm. Immediately, Loulou (as Danto) began weeping and speaking random, disjointed utterances in a high-pitched screechy voice, all in Creole. It was difficult for me to understand, but Margaret confirmed that *she* (Danto through Loulou) was talking about “misdeeds” of my husband’s familial ancestors³⁸⁰ . . . generations ago. Danto said (between tears) these things must be put back into “balance.” This was the song he was singing when Danto arrived:

*Erzulie Danto prete poule pou nou an la
pou m fe maji a mache
Erzulie Danto prete poule pou nou an la
pou m fe maji a mache
Se ou k mache, se ou ki we,
Se ou k mache, se ou ki we*

Erzulie Danto borrows the chicken for us
To make the magic walk for me
It’s you who walks, it’s you who sees

Figure 101 is a photo showing Loulou being “ridden” by Danto:

³⁸⁰ I had not expected such an outpouring of information by a lwa and was taken aback by what she said.



Figure 101. Loulou possessed by Erzulie Dantor³⁸¹

I was to find out later that tears, accompanied with the screechy voice and incomprehensible utterances, are typical presentation for Danto. There is more about this lwa and the meaning of her presentation in the historical overview chapter.

At this point in the ceremony, Loulou recovered from the possession and the wanga sped up. Loulou started putting elaborate things together in the recipe for the spell. Loulou would not disclose exactly what the items were or why he had selected them.³⁸² He only repeated that Kalfou showed him in a dream what needed to be done (see Figures 102-104).

³⁸¹ Greenough-Hodges, K. Wanga. Jacmel, Haiti, 2008.

³⁸² This information he considered propriety.



Figure 102. Wanga ceremony ingredients³⁸³

The blue “human” dolls are Will (my husband) and I. The red “human” doll is the “offending” family member. I offered a few U.S. dollars to the lwa, as it is believed to show sincerity of intention and accelerate the pwen. In Vodou, an action such as offering money to a lwa is believed to be reciprocal. If one pays the lwa, then the lwa will repay you.³⁸⁴

³⁸³ Greenough-Hodges, K. Wanga. Jacmel, Haiti, 2008.

³⁸⁴ I was told that because the lwa are very old, the amount of money is insignificant. One might pay one penny or one might pay \$200.



Figure 103. Wanga ingredients with money, which is believed to accelerate the pwen



Figure 104. Tied-up wanga, the blue dolls are my husband and I. The red doll is the “offending” male ancestor on Will’s side of the family³⁸⁵

³⁸⁵ Greenough-Hodges, Kimberly. Field work. 2008.

The ritual ingredients and objects were at last bound and taken “away” to a secret crossroad (Kalfou) under the light of the moon. At this point, I (as surrogate) was instructed to hold a black chicken, knowing it would be killed as a sacrifice. I was told to make a cross on its back. I was told this action is how I send my identifying fingerprint to the lwa and God. I was also supposed to whisper a message³⁸⁶ to the bird to deliver to God. “Messages” to God are varied and usually are requests for things such as grace, courage, or expedition of pwen in its completion of its objective. Alarmed for the impending death of the bird, I asked God to let it die quickly and painlessly and asked for financial help for my husband (see Figure 105).



Figure 105. Chicken for Kalfou³⁸⁷

Then, Loulou set the tail of the bird on fire and I was instructed to let it go. It ran a circle to the other side of the peristyle, which was about 100 yards, and exploded into a 3-4 ft. ball of

³⁸⁶

³⁸⁷ Greenough-Hodges, K. Wanga. Field work. 2008.

fire.



Figure 106. Kafou fire-chicken. Wanga. Jamel, Haiti. December 2008³⁸⁸

This manner of killing an animal was unexpected and profoundly disturbing to me, as I am a lifelong lover, protector, and helper of animals. I asked Loulou, Wolmer, and Mambo Racine why this had to be. They said that Kalfou, the powerful dark crossroad lwa, the opposite “twin” of Legba, required the cleansing of the bird’s life energy by fire and the force of the explosion was relative to the amount of work the spirits must do to balance my husband’s familial energy. This is a clear example of the movement and building force of pwen in this wanga. First, the pwen was created in the space in the badji with the congregation. Then, it circled in around Loulou, via Gran Bwa, until his possession by Danto. Then, the pwen focused on the wanga—ritual things—ingredients, healing herbs, and the literal “tying up” of all the good

³⁸⁸ Greenough-Hodges, K. Wanga. Field work. 2008.

things to keep it safe from the “bad.” The final display of pwen was the explosion of the bird through fire—as it seemed to us (me and Margaret) that the feeling of time and space collapsed. I would like to add that extremely strong pwen “in action” is difficult, if not impossible to photograph. Figure 106 was the only image captured. Other electronic devices (both mine and hers) were not working for almost 10 minutes after the explosion. When Margaret and I discovered the nonfunctioning cameras, the Haitians laughed and said “Se toujou kom sa” (It’s always like that). They meant that strong pwen “in action,” like the chicken bursting into flames, is pure energy, like a giant surge of electricity and can (and did) interfere with technology.

Conclusion

Upon reflection of this 15-year project, I am still interested in the study of Haitian Vodou and pwen and believe there is much more to discover about this topic. The reader should know that the body of work represented in this manuscript reflects only a small portion of the considerable archive of primary research in my possession and personal knowledge on the subject. I have hopes of developing this unused material into future presentations and publications on Vodou. I am still enthusiastic about Haiti and am currently considering different academic and creative ways to expand this study of pwen in the future.

Immediate project plans are for the development of the individual chapters in the dissertation to be presented at conferences and for publication. Also, I have several “extra” writings on the topic of pwen that did not make it into this dissertation because they did not fit thematically or structurally into the overall organization of the manuscript.

Essentially, this dissertation is an ethnographic study and it provides a great deal of documentation of Haitian Vodou. The work is rich in detail and is based on extensive field

research, which comes from my participant-observer perspective. The fact that I am an initiated mambo affords me a privileged perspective on Haitian Vodou. I have taken great care to provide information that is as accurate as possible given the verbal and fluid nature of this belief system. One very important goal in the realization of this project is to educate people about Vodou, hopefully correcting negative stereotypes and misconceptions. This dissertation takes a tremendous amount of information and knowledge and presents an organized, focused study of pwen in the ritual context of Haitian Vodou, compressed into a digestible form.

In the creation of this dissertation, the organization was an important consideration as well as how to connect the varied disciplines. I began intuitively piecing the work together—history, Vodou practitioners' views, Roman Catholicism devotions, Haitian magical realism, and Haitian Vodou magic, drawing from 15 years of experience and research—all connected by the common concept of pwen in ritual practice. In the end, I realize that by creating this work, I have been the one tying the pwen, for Haiti, for vodouisants, and for all who take the time to read what I consider to be a significant body of work and a unique and important contribution to the field of ritual study.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Kimberly Greenough-Hodges lives in a 100-year-old (self-restored) home in the oldest part of Dallas, Texas. She lives with a full complement of husband, children, cats, dogs, goats, and rabbits. She plans to continue teaching, writing, and publishing. She is currently considering new projects, involving field research in the Caribbean.

CURRICULUM VITAE

EDUCATION:

University of Texas at Dallas, Richardson, TX

Doctoral candidate in Aesthetic Studies, (anticipated date of graduation) May 2020.

Dissertation title: *Haitian Vodou: "Pwen" (magical charge) in ritual context*

- Dissertation chair, Thomas Riccio
- Examination fields: Latin American History, Afro-Caribbean Art, Ritual Studies/Haitian Vodou

University of Texas at Arlington, Arlington, TX

Master's in French Literature, April 2003

University of Washington, Seattle, WA

Master's candidate in Comparative Literature (French/Italian),

September 1994-March 1997

Texas A&M University, College Station, TX

Bachelor of Environmental Design, December 1989

Bachelor of Arts in the French Language, December 1989

FOREIGN LANGUAGE EXPERIENCE:

Haitian Creole/French Expert Interpreter, Jacmel, Haiti

Field work, December 2010-January 2011,

December 2008-January 2009

L'Università di Firenze, Florence, Italy

Italian Language Certification, May-July 1997

S. Chiara Study Center, C. Fiorentino, Italy

Fellowship, work study and language immersion, January-May 1997

La Sorbonne (Paris III) Paris, France

Centre for Critical Studies (theory and film), August 1996-January 1997

La Poggerina/ITALART, Ponte Agli Stoli, Italy

Architecture/Language Program, January-June 1988

L'Université de Montpellier, Montpellier, France

Intensive Language Immersion Program, June-August 1986

TEACHING EXPERIENCE:

R L Turner High School, Carrollton, TX

French Instructor, August 2015-present.

Taught French levels I, II, III and AP, grades 9-12.

Sponsored in-country French language immersion for students; June 2019.

Irving High School, Irving, TX

French Instructor, August 2010-June 2013.

Taught French II, III and AP, grades 9-12.

T. J. Lee Elementary School, Irving, TX

First contact French instructor for 15 traumatized immigrant children

from Congo, preparing them for transition to American culture and English language.

Upon return visit, children were adapted and fluent in English.

University of Texas at Dallas, Richardson, TX

Teaching Assistant, August 2007-2010

Taught Survey of American history (Pre-Columbian-1865); Intro to History of Film;

Introduction to Humanities; performed Photoshop and archival research in Art History slide library.

Bishop Dunne Catholic School, Dallas, TX

French Instructor June 2002-June 2004.

Taught French 1-AP and World Literature, grades 9-12.

Skyline High School, DISD, Dallas, TX

French Instructor August 2001-May 2002.

Taught first year French. Emphasis on communicative language learning, grades 9-12.

University of Texas at Arlington, Arlington, TX

Teaching Assistant/Graduate Teaching Assistant, September 2000-August 2001.

Assisted in first- and second-year university French. Taught vocabulary, reading comprehension, grammar, and pronunciation. Developed own lesson plans, exams, quizzes, and dictées. Privately tutored French and English as a Second

Language. Assisted on site with undergraduate UTA study abroad program in Paris, June 2001.

OTHER WORK EXPERIENCE:

Escorted private individual from the USA to Haiti as an initiate-to-be. Served as liaison between initiate and Haitians. Interviewed and photographed international and local practitioners; recorded previously undocumented Vodou rituals and songs in partial sponsorship with Roots

Without End Society Kanzo (Vodou initiation), Jacmel, Haiti; December 2010-January 2011.

Freelance architectural, landscape, interior, theatrical and film set design, scenic painter and fossil restoration in Seattle, WA and Dallas, TX 1990-2000.

GRANTS:

1. Field work; Jacmel, Haiti; December 2010; UT Dallas Arts and Humanities Research Grant (\$1000.00).
2. Haitian Dance and Drum Workshop; Oakland, CA; September 2009. Dr. Rick Brettell, UT Dallas. (\$500.00).
3. Haitian Vodou Lave Tet Workshop; Amherst, MA; August 2009. Dr. Rick Brettell, UT Dallas. (\$500.00).
4. Field work; Jacmel, Haiti; December 2008. UT Dallas Arts and Humanities Research Grant. (\$500.00).
5. Study abroad France and Italy, University of Washington Graduate Scholarship; 1996-1997 (\$10,000.00).

PRESENTATIONS:

Presenter - "Representing Haiti: Haitian Vodou *Pwen* - Concepts in Ritual Practice"; 2nd International Conference on Caribbean Studies: Looking to the Caribbean: Film and Literature; Marquette University, Milwaukee, WI. 2011.

Repeat Guest Lecturer for Dr. Thomas Riccio's graduate Shamanism seminar: "Overview of Haitian Vodou," University of Texas at Dallas, Fall 2009-Spring 2010.

PUBLICATIONS:

Encyclopedia of Latin American History and Culture: The Search for National Identity, 1820s-

1900; all Haitian entries (6000 words) for a 19th century Latin American History Encyclopedia textbook; Volume III; Monica Rankin (volume ed.); Tom Leonard (series ed.); New York: Facts on File Library of World History, 2008.

COMMITTEES:

Faculty Search Committee for Film Studies, Graduate Student; UT Dallas, Richardson, TX; Spring 2007.