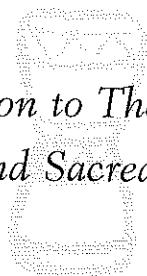


Afro-Caribbean Religions

*An Introduction to Their Historical,
Cultural, and Sacred Traditions*



Nathaniel Samuel Murrell



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Serving the Lwa

KEY TOPICS

*Hierarchy of the Lwa • Rada and Petwo Lwa •
Female Lwa • Lwa of the Peasantry • Macho Male Lwa •
Veves of the Mysteries • Lougawou, Zombies, and "Monsters" •
Leadership, Rites, and Rituals*

Vodou mirrors the classic African concept of a structured cosmos in which exists a hierarchy of spiritual beings (the supreme high god Bondye or Grand Mèt, a host of spiritual powers, the spirits of ancestors, and evil forces), human, animals, and the inanimate world.¹ Bondye governs and orders the universe so that it has cosmic balance and order. He is rarely approached directly, is far removed from the vagaries and day-to-day affairs of human life, and manifests himself through spiritual powers or mysteries. Called saints (*sint*), mysteries (*les misté*) invisibles (*envizib*), and more popularly *loa* or *lwa*, the spiritual entities are not regarded as individual gods but as active agents whom Bondye has placed in charge of the workings of specific aspects of the world. There are primary agents and secondary ones, good *lwa* and malevolent ones. Although there could be hundreds of *lwa* (according to legend there are either 401 or 1,701 *lwa*), only a few receive widespread recognition and ritual attention; many of those have currency mainly within the confines of the families and communities that serve them. Individual devotees worship specific mysteries based on ancestral tradition, personal temperament, spiritual need, and their situation in life;² the ancestors join these powers as recipients of significant ritual attention from the individual as well as from the family and community.

In colonial times, Vodou adepts grouped the *lwa* into seventeen families representing nations (*nanchons*); each of which historically had its own ethnic and religious connections to Africa. These *nanchons* were organized and identified as Wangol, Mondon, Rada, Petro, Ginen, Dhomey, Kongo, Djouba, Ibo, Gede, Nago, and other names derived from the various West African ethnicities that made up the black population in Haiti.³ Originally, every ethnic group

among the slaves worshiped its own deity, but they often stood for the same principles throughout West Africa. As scholars note, practically every group had a spirit representing the feminine principle, power, herbs, rivers and lakes, war and weaponry, and so forth. In time, groups amalgamated in a loose confederation to fight the common enemy, slavery, and employed a range of rituals to this end. After centuries of ethnic religious interchange, the *nanchons* lost their ethnic significance. The cultic activities and traditions of the *nanchons* were brought together "as a single constellation of rites maintained by individual congregations"⁴ and directed to their *lwa*, under a priest (*oungan*) or priestess (*mam'bo/manbo*). As Milo Rigaud states: "The gods of Voodoo . . . reach the place where the houn'gan or mam'bo summons them by leaving the atmospheric abode assigned them by the occult spirit referred to as the 'source higher than ourselves.'"⁵ The fusing of some rites, practices, and divine powers also probably occurred during colonial plantation slavery.

The Gods of Haiti

The pantheon of *lwa*, focused on human problems and natural phenomena, are the objects of their devotees' affection. Scholars group these *lwa*, especially in urban centers, into one of two categories of spirits: *Rada* and *Petwo*. Some scholars see Kongo as a third category of *lwa*, but others consider Kongo *lwa* a part of the *Petwo* tradition. Kongo *lwa*, identified in names like Kongo Zando, Kongo-Savann, and Rwa Wangol, are of Bantu origin and known collectively as *lwa-gad*. They originated from the region encompassing the Congo Basin and Angola, are reputed to provide devotees protection from harm, and various charms like *paket*, *wangas*, and *gardes* are associated with them. Many of the *lwa*, ritual implements, and much of Vodou's cosmology have their origin in the Dahomey-Fon religious system. Most *Rada* *lwa*, or "cool spirits," are Fon-Dahomey, whereas those of the *Petwo*, "hot" or "fiery," variety are from Kongo and Angola. *Rada* *lwa*, often referred to as a *lwa-Ginen*, reference things that have their origin in Africa; the term *Rada* comes from the city of Allada (Dahomey) and was creolized in Haiti to *Arada*, then shortened to *Rada*.⁶

Rada *lwa* are known by their special duties: Legba, guardian of entrances and crossroads; Marasa, the twin spirits representative of childhood; Loko, the patron of *oungan* and *manbo* and the spirit of healing; Ayizan, guardian of the marketplace; Dambala, source of energy and life; Ayida, the female aspect of Dambala; Agwe, master of the sea; Lasiren, mistress of the sea and music; Ezili Freda Daome, spirit of love and femininity; and Agaou, deity of thunder.⁷ Unlike the *Rada* *lwa*, the *Petwo* are hot because they are aggressive and vengeful and appear violent in nature; they reflect the black rage of the slaves against brutality and oppression. Joan Dayan states that some *Petwo* gods "bear the names of revolt, the traces of torture and revenge, like Brise' Pimba, Baron Ravage, Ti-Jean-Dantor or Mater Salvatoris, Ezili-je-wouj (. . . with red eyes), and Jean Zombie."⁸ *Petwo* rituals and ceremonies can therefore take on violent

characteristics and the possessing Petwo spirits can display an array of aggressive behaviors. Made into a lwa, Dessalines is said to reflect the most angry Petwo spirit, who manifests himself during warlike liturgical song and dance.

Karen McCarthy Brown notes that the two categories of lwa express contrasting views of the world and relations, and likens them to insiders and outsiders. Rada spirits reflect the disposition of family and other insiders, but the Petwo spirits articulate the ethos of foreigners and outsiders. The insiders are benevolent, intimate, sociable, trustworthy spirits that protect devotees on a daily basis, whereas Petwo spirits are said to be malevolent. The symbols and powers of Petwo lwa are associated with the left side of things (left foot and left hand) and with upward direction. Their devotees however, are required to be adroit, keep promises made to Petwo lwa, and render services with care. Rules must not be broken or bent in one's dealing with Petwo lwa, or consequences may be grave. The Petwo possess great herbal knowledge and healing powers. Rada lwa are gentle, good-natured, and concerned mainly with promoting the well-being of their servitors. Most Vodou initiates receive a Rada lwa and become its wife (*ounsi*) or husband (*ounsis*).⁹

One is cautioned not to hold the distinction between Rada and Petwo too rigidly. A number of Petwo lwa might in fact be aspects, emanations, and counterparts of Rada lwa. In their Petwo guise, they take on aggressive qualities. Ezili Freda, the sweet Rada lwa of romance and sensuality, becomes Ezili or je-wouj, an ill-tempered and dangerous lwa, in Petwo tradition. Good Danto spirits of Ezili exist, as well as evil ones; she is kind and gentle, but aggressive and fierce. On the other hand, although they are associated with benevolence, Rada lwa may cause affliction on persons who anger or neglect them, whereas Petwo lwa are extremely protective of their servitors. According to Leslie Desmangles, "Gede in his Rada persona does not usually inflict illness upon a devotee, but in his Petro persona as Gede-Zarennyen who, as the name indicates, crawls and stings like a spider, he does."¹⁰ Dayan notes further that "Even the best of gods, those of the *Rada* (*Arada*) rite from Alladah or Dahomey, can sometimes do evil, while a tough deity like Marinette-Bois-Cheche (Marinette-Dry-Bones) of the Petwo rite, known for her bloody behavior and preference for pimento, gunpowder, and gasoline, can be calmed if served properly."¹¹ These lwa show a multiplicity of personalities that can reflect Rada, Petwo, or Kongo traits.

The origin of the Petwo lwa is debated. Some scholars trace this group of spirits back to Africa and others to Don Pedro, a creole-Spanish slave priest. Others believe Petwo originated among the Maroons and Tainos of Saint-Domingue and are therefore indigenous to Haiti. Ezili Danto and Jean Pedro are among their most well-known deities; so is the Gede lwa, the spirit of death. Bosu Trois, Simbi d'leau, Mait Gran Bois, and Mait Calfour are also among the Petwo spirits. If the Petwo lwa are Haitian creole, their music and rites are African; they emerged from the crucibles of the Haitian experience and thus are considered the most creole of the lwa. These lwa might be larger than life but they are not other than life. Their virtues are not an inherent characteristic trait but an

ascribed dynamic mythological state of existence; they operate in responsive relationships that require constant attention and care. This care is demonstrated in the gifts they receive in the form of food, money, respect, worship, and other intangibles in return for protection and guidance.¹² Lwa have their likes and dislikes—special gourmet tastes that require pandering on various occasions, specially designated worship days and times, distinct colors that their devotees wear, dances and movements, songs and prayers, and special symbols to be displayed in rites and rituals. The most well-known lwa, male and female, are Ezili, Azaka, Legba, Gede, Dambala, and Ogou.

Female Lwa

The female spirits that belong to the Ezili family are many in number and personality, including Danto, Freda, Daome, je-wouj, and Marinette, among others. Ezili Danto, lwa of womanhood and eroticism, is Creole and has no precedent in Dahomey. She has many personae said to embody the collective historical memory of women in the Haitian past. Devotees believe that this protective mother fought bravely for her Haitian children during the revolution. Ti-Jean Danto, another persona of Ezili Danto and associated with the trickery of a female prankster, has many heterosexual lovers, including Ogou, who sired one of her children. Ezili Freda is a flirtatious female who clothes herself in the romance of her lovers; she loves jewelry and fine clothes and seems to get her identity from the men in her life. This Black Venus of Haiti typifies a lovingly passionate side of African human sensuality.¹³

Ezili je-Rouge is the opposite of Freda; she exemplifies female anger or rage. Grann Ezili takes on the personae of an elderly woman and Ezili Lasyrenn, the mermaid-like creature, connects Afro-Caribbean women's sense of power to the spirit of rivers, lakes, seas, and the African homeland. Brown argues that "Lasyrenn, Ezili Danto, and Ezili Freda are each conflated with manifestations of the Virgin Mary: Nuestra Senora de la Caridad del Cobre, Maer Salvatoris, and Maria Dolorosa."¹⁴ Ezili is one of the most powerful but arbitrary of lwa. She reflects the existential angst of Haitian life in her extremely contradictory personality. Dayan says Ezili is "a spirit of love who forbids love, a woman who is the most beloved yet feels herself the most betrayed. She can be generous and loving, or implacable and cruel. . . . As spirit of vengeance, she is fiercely jealous and sometimes punishes wayward devotees with death, impotence, or frigidity if they dare drink or have sex on those days devoted to her."¹⁵ As a friend of priestesses, Ezili is also caretaker of the ounfo, the place of worship.

Lwa of Peasants

In the more than two hundred years since the revolution, harsh economic realities have forced Haitians to focus their energy on domestic problems and the

struggle for survival. As a result, Vodou's mythology shows the strong social emphasis acquired during colonialism, one that has a close tie to subsistence on the land. As scholars observe, in rural Haiti human and natural disasters such as drought, political turmoil, and poverty have forced large numbers of people into urban centers, away from the land and the extended families that sustained a simple lifestyle and gave them a sense of identity. Mythic spirit characters are made to deal with these tragedies. Azaka, affectionately called cousin Zaka and papa Zaka, lwa of the peasants, reminds urban Haitians of their lost societal bond and simpler lifestyle in the midst of "urban tendencies toward elaboration of ritual and the creation of religious hierarchies."¹⁶ Zaka adorns himself in the characteristic peasant outfit: blue pants and shirt, straw hat, red handkerchief around the neck, and a small straw bag hanging from the shoulders. Azaka is an uneducated peasant associated with John the Baptist because of his humility.

Legba, the androgynous patron of the cosmos, is the umbilical chord that links Bondye with human beings. He is the guard of all crossroads, directs the destiny of everyone, protects the home, and aids in making tough decisions. As the spirit that opens and guards opportunity, gates, and doors, Legba makes a way for the poor and clears paths between the human and spirit worlds, so he is usually the first spirit invoked in a Vodou ceremony. Legba is the lwa of most rural practitioners, wears farming attire, smokes a pipe, and walks with a cane and a peasant tow bag. Legba appears as many creole characters—Papa Legba, Atibon Legba, Legba-zinchan, Legba-signangon, Legba-katarula, and Mèt Kalfou—and competes with Dambala for the title of chief lwa.¹⁷ Legba is also a prankster whom outsiders mistakenly call Satan, although he doubles as the personae of Saint Peter and Saint Anthony. Occasionally, because of his strength and in spite of his lofty status, even the mighty spirit Dambala is seen as a friend of the peasants who inhabit and work the hostile and arid land.

Gede, lwa known affectionately among the peasants as Papa Gede, is master of Ginen and Petwo's *Baron Samndy*, or power. Gede represents a family of spirits from the constellation of lwa families. He lives in the cemetery and is naturally associated with disease and the dead, but he fills multiple roles and has many manifestations and personae: Bawon Samdi, Bawon Simityè, and Bawon Lakwa.¹⁸ To some initiates, he is the link between life and death and is acknowledged at the end of every ceremony. To beggars and panhandlers he represents charity, but to women he is an enabler of sexual prowess and fertility. As a prankster, Gede could be a source of laughter and joviality as well as humor in bad taste. He eats with his bare fingers and throws food around like a helpless infant. Gede breaks social conventions; he can be impolite and ill-mannered, and delights in saying the corniest things. Unexpectedly, he can be chauvinistic and predatory, appearing to an outsider to sexually harass women¹⁹ with his "generous greeting." In plain view, using a ritual gesture, Gede also fills his pocket with goods pilfered from people's market booths while venders are expected to look the other way. Like the African griot and Trinidadian

calypso singer, Gede can criticize the rich and powerful in society with caustic satire without being punished by politicians or sued for character assassination. He claims healing as his main activity, can be compassionate and caring, and has an interest in family; therefore, Saint Gerard is one of his creole doubles.

Macho Male Lwa

Dambala (danballah, danbala), python spirit of supreme mysteries, sign and court-of-arms for Vodou enthusiasts doubling as St. Patrick, is one of the oldest and most complex of the lwa. He assisted Bondye in the creation of the world and, as the persistent life force and source of energy, helps to sustain it. The aged noble father Dambala Wedo, source of all motion in life, giver of rainbows and floods, is the most powerful spirit of the Vodou pantheon. Newell Booth writes, "So strong is his influence in Haiti, the sign of the serpent can even be seen in the architecture of the land. . . . Haiti could easily be called the land of Dambala."²⁰ Because of his Dahomean ancestry and association with Vodou in preindependent Haiti, he acts as a uniting force of past, present, and future Haitian reality. He writhes on the ground in simulation of a serpent's movement. His coiling, snakelike actions are symbolic of his encircling power around Haitian communities; via the rainbow, he allegedly encircles and unites land and ocean and brings life-giving water to the barren hills of Haiti. He is accommodated symbolically in a temple pool, a pond, or in a river basin, where his devotees worship him in ritual glee while jumping from the river banks, dancing, singing, and beating drums until he makes his dramatic appearance through possession. Dambala is also said to be pure and clean, and often avoids the sick. Although he lives with his wife, Ayida Wedo, Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception, he loves Erzili. Dambala's presence is recognized in the hissing snakelike sound made by his servitors, with whom he communicates. The machete Ogou carries is symbolic of Dambala's power,²¹ as well as the fighting power of the Haitian spirit.

Ogou, the aggressive Petro lwa of war and weapons of iron and steel, is not short in creole personae: Agaou, Ogou Balanjo, Ogou Batala, Ogou Yansan, Ogou-badagri, and Ogou-ferraille, among others. In Haiti's historical mythology, Ogou symbolizes the military might of the nation; his images often appear on flags and lithographs, and brave soldiers are said to have the spirit of Ogou, who teaches them how to fight. The Sword of La Place and Ogou's dagger and machete are not only symbols of the deity's fierceness and dread, but carry mystical power. They symbolically kill the sacrificial victim, cut through great mysteries, and reveal spiritual secrets. As a negotiator par excellence, Ogou mediates in crises among peoples and between opposing forces, as represented in the lwa. He is capable of complex emotions; he shows feelings of rage and empathy and is known for his generosity. Because of his great herbal knowledge and healing powers, his advice is sought in most pharmacopeial rituals.²²

Ogou's creole personae find several doubles in Haitian Catholicism. As Ogou Ferraille, he is St. James the Great, who rides a white horse and fights the heathen; he is honored on July 25, the feast day of James the Elder. As Ogou Balanjo, he is Saint Joseph²³ and also St. Jacques, who appeared to halt the Muslims' advance in Europe and was adopted into the family of Ogoué, the lwa of war, justice, and technology. This integrative impulse of Vodou mythology has led to a fusion of personalities of lwa with counterparts in Catholic hagiography, thus creating creole doubles for the lwa in a system of parallels between these spirits and Catholic saints.

Veves of the Mysteries

The lwa are recognized not only by their special idiosyncrasies, but each has a visual representative drawing called a *veve* (veve), a powerful cosmic symbol, one that brings to perfection all other images and representations of the spirits to focus the energy of lwa mysteries. The intricate drawing is made on the floor around the *poto-mitan* (*poteau-mitan*) at the beginning of a Vodou service to court the presence and honor of a specific lwa. The *poto-mitan*, the center post of the *ounfo* located in the *peristil* around which the ceremony revolves, symbolizes the middle doorway to the spirit world. The *peristil* is a partly enclosed and often roofed courtyard where priests and priestesses perform their rituals and treat ailments. The *poto-mitan* is the symbolic nexus of sky, earth, and the spirit world and connects Haiti to Africa; it has its roots in Ginen, home of the lwa, and therefore acts symbolically as the conduit through which the lwa enter the *peristil* from Africa to take possession of devotees. While *poto-mitan* is the unique representative link between Haiti and²⁴ Africa, the *veve* reveals the presence of the deity in a visual form, has an emblematic as well as a magical character, and is used only by a spiritually authorized person, the 'oungan or mam'bo.

By tracing the *veve*, the 'oungan forces a lwa to respond and appear at the ceremony. The priest consecrates the *veve* to the lwa by placing on it small heaps of grilled maize and other dried foods that are sprinkled with rum, kola, and a drink made of maize starch or flour.²⁵ The orderly placement of each *veve* around the *poto-mitan* indicates also how the liturgy is to proceed. The priest makes a liquid libation around the *veve* and places on it the consecrated animal slaughtered as food for the lwa. Each libation is made three times while the 'oungan shakes the *ason* (a rattle) over the drawing, humming or mumbling ritual words. The *veve* becomes "the first point of reception for these gifts, the pictorial face through which the lwa may eat. Once fed through the *veve* gateway in the earth, the lwa are energized to come up and mount their horse."²⁶ These food sacrifices therefore access spiritual power.

Veves of the spirits have become international representations of Vodou "works." As Anthony Pinn shows, Legba is depicted symbolically in a very intricate *veve*, containing a rectangle with two horizontal lines that five vertical

lines dissect. The outside of this rectangle depicts a machete on the left side and a sickle on the right. Another sickle is placed on top and an arch is placed over a box below the rectangle covered with different symbols. Legba's *veve* shows two worlds, represented in crossed horizontal lines, on one side of which is drawn a staff. Dambala's *veve* comprises two pythons on either side of his favorite goblet, a Masonic emblem over which are drawn two eggs. Three circles on a special horizontal line connect Marassa's *veve*. Ogou has several symbols, but his characteristic marks, the menacing machete and gun of the hunter, are prominent in his *veve*. The *veve* of Erzili, an enlarged heart, depicts her sensuality and capacity for lovemaking.²⁷ In contrast to Erzili's love for men, Zaka's *veve* shows his love for women. In addition to the *ason* and the *veves* representing the ethos of the lwa, Vodou uses many other symbols. There are the amulets and talismans that, like fetishes and charms, are supposed to ward off evil spirits and influences. The tree of good and evil is represented in a specially notched pole called the *joukouwou*. Just as symbolically powerful as the weapons of the lwa are the visually colorful ritual flags usually carried by two women devotees or priests. They show the magical importance of the spirits' acceptance of the ceremonial offerings dedicated to them.²⁸ These symbols and signs are windows to Vodou's mythology.

Lougawou and Zombie

LOUGAWOU

The mythological world of Vodou is inhabited by a variety of unsavory spiritual entities like werewolves, vampires, and zombies, most of which are manipulable by sorcery or gray magic. *Bakas*, malevolent spirits whom sorcerers deploy to harm or protect someone, can be dangerous to one's health, according to myth; they are said to make grave demands, such as the life of a family member. The existence of human sacrifice in Vodou, however, is folkloric speculation that has not been documented. The werewolf, or *lougawou*, are shape-shifting creatures that allegedly attack people, especially babies and young children, so that their physical condition deteriorates rapidly. Folklore distinguishes between vampires (as *lougawou*) and werewolves and claims that the former can change themselves into animals and inanimate objects, shed their skin, suck blood, and terrify those who walk late at night.²⁹ This *lougawou* legend is common in Caribbean mythology and is not a distinctly Haitian phenomenon. As the myth goes, *lougawou* are humans of questionable character accused of becoming vampires at night, entering locked doors and assaulting victims while they sleep unless the family obtains a ritual potion to protect their home. The folklore reveals other myths and tales of persons, often bearded whites, and evil beings who sneaked up on folks, kidnapped their children, and sold the souls of their victims to the devil for the purpose of launching ships. These tales are a remnant of the dangerous memories of the slave colonial past of Africans on the continent and in the diaspora. In perceptions of Haiti, the

myth is inverted. The "evil voodooist" becomes the lougawou, a stereotype of the Haitian religion specially favored among Vodou critics, the media, and Hollywood.

ZOMBIE

The zombie is another example of mythic manipulation in the Vodou spirit world, involving the rising and enslaving of the living dead. This Haitian folkloric myth is portrayed in popular culture as a malevolent, flesh-eating vampire, a scary skeletal Frankenstein-like monster. This disembodied ghostlike phantom who darts out from behind trees and dark alleys and strikes terror in the hearts of unsuspecting victims is a controversy of mythic proportion. People who regard zombies as a reality vouchsafe their existence. Alfred Metraux contends that in the 1950s "all Haitians, whatever their social status, have trembled in their youth at stories of *zombi* and werewolves and learnt to dread the power of sorcerers and evil spirits. Most of them . . . react against such fancies but some give in to them and consult a Voodoo priest in secret."³⁰ Haitians and American missionaries tell fables of witnessing incidences in Haitian villages where people were "slain," buried, resurrected, enslaved, drugged, reburied and finally returned to life when a *bokor*, or wicked priest, dies. From his interesting study of this myth, published in *The Serpent and the Rainbow*, Wade Davis suggests that the zombie phenomenon in Vodou is brought about by administering the potent hallucinogenic datura plant and puffer fish substances to individuals, which cause psychotic behavior that leaves them in a stupefied or catatonic state, to be revived later. Belief in this phenomenon has been widespread within and outside of Haiti.

The zombification of Vodou in Hollywood is responsible for propagating much of the zombie myth. In the first zombie film, *White Zombie* (1932), and later in *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* (1986), Vodou is portrayed with demonic rage and stupor. After the Americans left Haiti in 1934, the demonizing of Vodou accelerated in grotesque zombie movies: *The King and the Zombie* (1941), *I Walked with a Zombie* (1943), *Zombies of Mora Tau* (1957), *Voodoo Woman* (1957), *Orgy of the Dead* (1965), *The Plagues of the Zombie* (1966), and *Revenge of the Zombie* (1981). The zombie myth contains misogynist notions; most zombies are either female or associated with women.³¹ A different view of this phenomenon is that the belief in zombies, like belief in the lougawou, is an echo of a Taino belief in ghosts. There is also the view that the zombie myth evolved from the sight of the emaciated bodies of starving Haitians who roamed the countryside almost as ghosts; this zombie is supposedly a human void of affect, will, or sensitivity. One tradition holds that the dead person's body is revived by a *bokor* and used for malevolent purposes. This is done by magically seizing the victim's *ti bòn-anj*, collective faculty, and personality, "leaving behind an empty vessel subject to the commands of the *bokor*"³² and his fancies.

Exactly where the zombie myth originated is not clear but, like the lougawou, it has a long historical connection to Africa, slavery, and Vodou. Melville

Herskovits notes that in Dahomean folktales, zombies are beings "whose death was not real but resulted from the machinations of sorcerers who made them appear as dead, and then, when buried, removed them from their grave and sold them into servitude in some far-away land."³³ In Haiti, the zombie myth is creolized with grotesque characteristics; the zombie is a lwa or an ancestor most mean-spirited and demonic, or a child of the revolution. In 1804, Jean (last name unknown), a bloodthirsty mulatto from Port-au-Prince, was Dessalines' chief butcher in the merciless slaughtering of whites and earned many ugly descriptors for his heartless acts—one of which is *Zombie*. As a result, *Zombie* became not only Jean's familial name but a most interesting prototype of Vodou folklore. Once the name *Zombie* was attached to Jean the butcher, it revealed the effects of a different dispensation in Haitian mythology. As Dayan crafts it, the names, gods, and heroes that were originally "from an oppressive colonial past remained in order to infuse ordinary citizens and devotees with a stubborn sense of independence and survival. The un-dead zombie, recalled in the name of Jean *Zombie*, thus became a terrible composite power: slave turned rebel, ancestor turned lwa, an incongruous, demonic spirit."³⁴ What is a real zombie? Dayan thinks it may be the sublimated reign of terror orchestrated by the Haitian leaders, a past that is too gruesome to relive so it is projected onto a defamed, maligned, and phantom-like apparition. The real zombie is not in the malevolent image but in the threat it poses to historical memory.³⁵ It is so grotesque that it strikes terror in the heart of anyone who dares to believe in "zombified" Vodou.

Accessing Ginen-Potomitan

Ginen, or Guinea, was one of the many nations under which African religions in Haiti first operated. After the nation idea became less significant in Vodou, Ginen became a spirit and a mythological place in Africa and the netherworld. Finally, Ginen represented the original home of the Rada lwa and their current abode in the underside of the world. It conjures an entirely mythic Africa in the present, "the sacred world of Haiti's past that is present in the dances oriented to the *poto-mitan*" in the Vodou *ounfo*.³⁶ Vodouisants believe that during the final stage of spirit possession, when the lwa mounts its horse, the medium has no recollection of the experience because the person's "good big spirit" migrates across the sea back to Ginen, the original homeland of Haiti and her Dahomey children. The spirit, people, and country are tied in a mythological web to Ginen, which lies over the great waters and is revisited as a memory of crossing waters in Vodou liturgy. The priest petitions Agwe, the lwa of the ocean, to carry the lwa to the ceremony in his sailboat. Then the great tree Loko, which has its roots in the waters underneath the earth, pulls the lwa up from the netherworld via the *poto-mitan* strategically placed in the center of the *peristil*. Africa is made a central source of harmony, moral action, and authority through faithfulness to the traditions

of Ginen that exist in the Vodou ceremony. Ginen lends authenticity to the practice of Vodou at various levels: as Murphy holds, "The community orients itself toward Africa through the architecture of the *peristil*, centering on the great tree of the *poto-mitan* which links the visible trunk and branches of Haiti with the roots in the invisible earth of Ginen,"³⁷ the life of the other world or African heaven.

Leadership and Cultus

Vodou has developed its own creole *Gemeinschaft* and character. No religious hierarchy or centralized leadership overseeing all vodouisants exists. The fraternities maintain a network of communication among themselves, especially through the personal relations of the leaders, but it is all spontaneous, casual, and decentralized. Each *ounfo* is its own authority, and its ritual specialist communicates directly with its deities. Yet, Vodou fraternities are not disorganized, chaotic, or void of leadership. The *ounfo* has a simple two-tier organizational structure—the religious leaders and the other members of the community—but within each cultus exists a spiritual gradation of relationships based on the degree of one's participation, initiation, experience, and importance in ritual function. Each Vodou community is organized around an autonomous atypical temple, the *ounfo* or *lakou*, which is Kongo for "sacred place." The *lakou* comprises a small number of residences and people that form the communal social unit or extended Vodou family, especially in rural Haiti. As in Africa, it often has its own cemetery for burying its deceased members on land that is owned jointly and that should not be sold. Modern labor migration and urbanization have scattered Haitian families so that the *sosiete* forms the more common Vodou unit in the city.³⁸ In most urban centers, the *ounfo* comprises a family of initiates instead of blood kin, who serve the same family of *lwa*. The physical facility of the *ounfo*, which Rigaud says closely resembles Moses' design of the Hebrew Ark of the Covenant and the Tabernacle in the wilderness, could have a single room or several chambers in larger ones. In larger *ounfos*, each chamber has its own *pe* ("altar") and is reserved for adoring a single *lwa*. In small temples, the spirits are worshiped in a single holy place that has many altars consecrated to specific deities.³⁹

'Oungan and Mambo

A Vodou *ounfo* is operated and often owned by the priest or priestess who, because of their knowledge and experience, have the most direct contact with the spirits. The 'oungan (male) or mam'bo (female) is the sole authority figure in each *ounfo*. They combine the offices of religious and administrative leader of the small charitable fraternity, ritual expert, diviner or magician, herbal therapist, and confidential counselor. These leaders do not attend institutions of religion, but are trained in the practical knowledge of Vodou "works" under a senior

priest-practitioner. They acquire intimate knowledge of diverse characteristics and idiosyncrasies of various *lwa*; the intricacies of signs and symbols in the ceremonies and rituals; and appropriate songs, prayers, incantations, dances, and drumbeats through which *lwa* are approached and worshiped.⁴⁰ Priests must learn the names, attributes, and special idiosyncrasies of the gods and are able to perform rites appropriate to the ceremonies honoring each spirit. After a long and tedious training, they are given the *ason* ("rattle") "as healer, adviser, and teacher,"⁴¹ characteristics of their profession. As J. Lorand Matory says, "Candomble priests command the technology to purify bodies, houses, and other vessels of unwanted influences and to insert, or secure the presence of, the divinities in the bodies and altars of their devotees."⁴² This is true of all African-Caribbean priesthood.

To become an 'oungan or mam'bo, initiates undergo the rite of *haussement*, called the "lifting" because those being initiated are lifted three times in an armchair as they take the oath to respect the *lwa*. The candidates first undergo ritual cleansing and seclusion in the *ounfo* for nine days. After the initial period of confinement, they take an oath of allegiance to the *lwa* and pledge to uphold the integrity of Vodou. This signals a deepening of one's relationship with his or her primary *lwa* and the initiate's growing knowledge of the mysteries of Vodou. The *haussement* concludes with the vesting of the *ason* (the symbol of priestly authority and the sacred emblem for directing and controlling the energy of a *lwa*), thus marking the final level of initiation. A senior 'oungan or mam'bo confers the investiture of the *ason*, the symbol of the priesthood that legitimizes the priest and priestess to perform initiations and divinations, provide healing and other therapeutic services, invoke the *lwa*, and preside over ceremonies.⁴³

The *ason*, covered in a bearded mesh, is made from a small, empty, pear-shaped gourd, on the outside of which is drawn the vertebrae of Damballa, the Rada spirit it represents. Carrying the *ason* on ritual occasion gives visual evidence that the priestess occupies a high position of authority in a Vodou community and that the *ason* is indispensable for working the spirit. The *ason* plays such an important role in the cultus that the elaborate rituals that accompany initiation to the priesthood are "commonly referred to as 'taking the *ason*.'" Ascent to an even higher level of the priesthood comes through an initiation rite called the *asogwe* or *prise des yeux*, "taking or controlling of the eyes."⁴⁴ The secrecy of this order is closely guarded by the limited number of priests who have knowledge of it. Persons who undergo the experience are recognized for their knowledge of the traditions and mysteries of Vodou, their insights into the invisible world, and their ability to harness the powers of the *lwa* on behalf of the community.

Avenues to Spiritual Energy

If the *lwes* are the life-giving force of Vodou, rites, ceremonies, and rituals are its heart and lungs. Through these performances, the Vodou mythological

spirit breathes and is preserved, reenacted, and perpetuated. Bonds are cemented and spiritual energy is brought to bear on the problems and affairs of the worshipping community. The purpose of a Vodou ritual is to align participants with the lwa whose power and energy are responsible for the events and activities of the world. This alignment takes place first through initiation, in which candidates prepare for and receive the presence of the lwa in spirit possession. Several rites may be subsumed under the category of initiation, varying from one *ounfo* or *lakou* to the other. Devotees and enthusiasts have various levels of involvement in the rites and rituals of the *ounfo*. At the outer limits of participation in a Vodou fraternity are the uninitiated: visitors, well-wishers, newcomers, and curious observers interested in Vodou works. Some may consult the priests as one would consult a doctor or a psychiatrist. Consultations are prompted not only by health concerns but also by issues of relationships: love, money, and other human needs. Most followers who attend ceremonies make use of the priests' service and may perform some minimal task for the community. However, they have not undergone a ritual initiation and are therefore called *bosal*, wild or not tamed, indicating that they have not become subjected to the controlling influence of a lwa. When a person decides to become a devotee, he or she is declared an *ounsi bosal* or wild one in training to be a servant of the lwa. The *ounsi* must be brought along a path of knowledge in the ways of the spirit by completing an initiatory rite called the *kouche* rite or *lav tèt* that signals the beginning of a relationship with the lwa. An *ounsi* who completes the *kouche* and undergoes the *kanzo* can perform rituals in the *ounfo*.⁴⁵

KOUCHE

The cycle of initiation starts with the *kouche* and ends with the *kanzo*, the undertaking of which may be influenced by one or more factors. The candidate may desire to fulfill family obligations to the lwa, may be expected to become a spouse of the family lwa, or may receive a dream or a vision in which the lwa of departed family members instructs one to take on the obligation of serving the lwa. Others interpret their experience of sickness or misfortune as a result of their neglecting to serve their lwa. In many cases, recovery from illnesses is attributed to intervention of a lwa and can serve as a catalyst for entrance into a relationship and grateful service to the spirit. Still others are called to undergo the initiation while under possession. This is one of the strongest bits of evidence that the spirit desires a "marriage" with the individual.⁴⁶ Once the person is clear about the call to serve the lwa, plans are made with the *'oungan* or *mam'bo* for the *kouche* to be performed. Preparation involves a significant outlay of money by the initiate. In addition to initiation fees paid to the officiating priest, initiates pay for the ritual paraphernalia necessary for the ceremony—something most Haitians find unaffordable. The prohibitive cost often forces indigent clients to combine their resources and have a joint initiation ceremony.⁴⁷

When all of the preparations are made and the appointed day arrives, an initiate undergoes multiple cleansing rituals. The *kouche* requires a head-washing ritual designed to placate and make restive any unsettled spirits in the head of the initiate so that he or she can be receptive to the lwa. To strengthen the head to receive the lwa, an application of a poultice made of special ingredients is placed on the head of each inductee, where it remains for a week. The *kouche* is called the "lying down" or "sleeping" rite because it involves a lengthy period of isolation in which the initiate is said to go to sleep ritually and mentally. The primary significance of this period of isolation is a psychological and spiritual rebirth in which one is said to "die" in order to become attuned to the workings of a lwa, in whose image he or she is reborn. Here, the initiate receives instructions on the rules and etiquette of the *ounfo* and on how to greet elders and the lwa and how to care for and serve them. After the period of isolation, the lwa manifests itself in the head of the initiate. The investiture of *pot tèt*, or ceremonial jars, follows and represents the new relationship between the individual and the lwa. Symbolically, the *pot tèt* act as repositories of the individual's soul and of one's guiding lwa—a gesture that "seats" a lwa in the head of the newly initiated. A procession follows with the newly initiated *ounsi* marching with the priests and senior members of the *ounfo* with their *pot tèt* balanced on their heads. The sacred receptacles are finally placed on altars to become the property of the *ounsi*, who will eventually place them on their own altars.⁴⁸ The initiate is now ready for the next stage of initiation, the *Kanzo*.

KANZO

The *kanzo* is a culmination of the elementary education of *ounsi lav tèt*, those who have undergone the cleansing of the head, and the reception of the *pot tèt*, a fiery ordeal designed to convert suffering and hardship into spiritual energy. Often the *kouche* and the *kanzo* rites combine the ritual cleaning of the head, performed during a confinement in the initiation chamber of the *ounfo* for seven to fourteen days and followed by a fire dance in public. Those being initiated dance over boiling pots and handle items taken from the caldron without being burned. As Brown notes, for example, "hot dumplings are snatched from the boiling pots and placed into the palm of the initiate's left hand and the sole of the foot."⁴⁹ Surviving this ordeal demonstrates one's self-mastery and possession of *konesans*, the ability to acquire knowledge of the workings of the spirit world. Progressive acquisition of *konesans* signals a person's growth in the mysteries of Vodou and gives him or her the ability to understand and deploy spiritual forces for personal and communal benefits. *Kanzo* initiation qualifies the *ounsi* for an advanced leadership position in the *ounfo*, excluding that of *'oungan* or *manbo*.⁵⁰ The reception of the lwa in the head marks the adoption of a new personality and indicates that the spirit has now become the controlling force in the devotee's life. This initiation creates a mystical bond between devotee and the lwa and makes the spirit into a guide for the individual. Metraux argues that "later, other spirits may possess the initiate, but the

one who first made him his 'horse' remains his particular patron and protector."⁵¹ The successful initiate who wishes to be a priest must undergo the final initiation, called the "giving of the ason," which qualifies one to perform all of Vodou's works.

The feast of yams, the wake for the dead, and mourning rites are among the many rituals not reviewed here. Healing rites address the issue of human well-being and include diagnostic readings by 'oungan or mam'bo. These include playing the tarot cards, giving ritual baths and offerings for the lwa, the preparation and application of various herbal concoctions, and the deploying of charms and protective potions or *wangas* and *gardes*—some of which are not regarded favorably by practitioners. Death and burial rites, called *dessounen*, relate specifically to the soul or spirit. Vodou accords each person a multiplicity of realities; in addition to the physical body, which decomposes after death, the individual has as many as four souls; two of these may be called the "big soul" and the "small soul." In Vodou psychology, the head contains two faculties: *petit bon anj* or *ti bòn-anj*, "little good angel," and *gwo bòn-anj*, "big good angel." *Ti bòn-anj* equals the individual personality and the faculty of self-reflection and thought. As Desmangles explains, "It is the personality, conscience, the moral side of one's character which reveals itself through one's general deportment."⁵² This is the source of dreams, affect, and consciousness. The *gwo bòn-anj*, called a "shadow-corps, is the double of the material body . . . but is understood as the shadow cast by the body on the mind. The *gwo bòn anj* can easily be detached from the body"⁵³ and is responsible for such faculties as memory and intelligence as well as different bodily functions. In the ritual cleansing of the head at initiation, the *gwo bòn-anj* is prepared to receive the guidance of the lwa, who becomes the *mèt tèt* or master of the head of the devotee. The seating of the *mèt tèt* in the initiate's head occasions a mystical merger of the *gwo bòn-anj* and the *mèt tèt*.⁵⁴ The departure of the *gwo bòn anj* as animating force of the body signals a person's death, which must be ritualized through the death rite *desounen*.

DESOUNEN RITES

Various rituals like *dessounen*, *manjé-lèmò*, and *boule-zen* are performed in connection with death and burial to ensure that the spiritual forces are disengaged from the body, retire to their resting place, and do not remain on earth to disturb the living. The rite that separates the individual's *mèt tèt*, or seated lwa, from the physical head also retires the *gwo bòn-anj* to its final resting place. It ushers body and spirit to their final destination and commences the ancestral rites for persons who are made ancestors. On the day of an individual's passing, the 'oungan or mam'bo is called to the house to perform the *desounen*. This rite ensures that the constituents of the individual's personality are dispatched to their rightful destinations: the *ti bòn-anj* to *Grand Mèt* or heaven; the *gwo bòn-anj* and *mèt tèt* to *Ginen*, the watery abode beneath the earth; and the body to the earth. The priest performs various ablutions, shakes the ason, and speaks into the ear of the deceased, all while commanding the *gwo bòn-anj* and the

mèt tèt to leave. As a sign that the elements have been successfully exorcized from the body, the officiating priest becomes possessed by the lwa that is the deceased's *mèt tèt*.⁵⁵

Following the *desounen*, the body of the deceased is washed in preparation for burial. The "bather" speaks to the deceased and conveys messages that family members would like the dead to take to the ancestors. A *prèt savann* accompanies the body to the cemetery, where he performs final Catholic rites. After the burial, the family goes to the *ounfo* for the ritual breaking and burial of the *pot tèt* or *case kanari*, a vessel that symbolically contains the *gwo bòn-anj* and *mèt tèt* of the deceased. A year and a day after death, family members are expected to sponsor a ceremony called *ouete mò nan ba dlo* and invite the spirit of the dead back into the community of the living as an active ancestor. This is done so that the deceased's knowledge, power, and access to the world of the lwas can be deployed to empower the living in negotiating the exigencies of life. Since this ancestral rite requires considerable expense, it is often delayed while family members tap various resources. However, failure to carry out this obligation is a bad omen and may result in affliction of family members and even of the community.⁵⁶ In addition, this failure could deprive the family of the protection and good fortune that the ancestor is able to provide.

SERVICES

Vodouisants hold a number of other ceremonies that are collectively known as "the services." The purpose of these is to honor and feed the lwa and draw on their power to enable members to deal with life situations. These services, convened on annual holidays in the Catholic liturgical calendar and on special saints' days (St. Patrick's Day, Our Lady of Fatima's Day), are observed with feasts given to the corresponding lwa. Along with the holiday observances, a lwa may demand that a feast be held in its honor. A family may sponsor a service to honor and feed its lwa and ancestors. As an expression of gratitude for healing or some other good fortune received, an individual may sponsor a service to honor the lwa.⁵⁷

These Vodou *seremoni* in honor of the lwa generally proceed in several stages. They begin with the perfunctory Catholic prayers and a litany of the saints performed by the *prèt savann*. This is followed by the rites of entry, during which the sacred space is made hallow in preparation for the lwa's visitation. The consecration begins with the officiating priest performing a rite of orientation by saluting the four cardinal points of the earth with ablutions. The 'oungan or mam'bo then makes the important ritual drawings of the *veves* on the ground. To the accompaniment of drumming and singing, a ritual assistant or *la place* leads a parade of the flags of the *ounfò* and the lwa that are honored and served there. After the parade, the various sacred objects of the *ounfò* are greeted; special attention is given to the sacred drums, the rhythms of which invite the lwas to manifest themselves. The rites of entry conclude with the 'oungan or mam'bo invoking the lwa and the ancestors in a series of incantations.

At this stage, the sacrificial animal is offered to the lwa as a *manjè-lwa*, an offering to the lwa. During the playing of the rhythms, the lwa arrives and mounts one of the "horses" in whose head it has been seated during the initiation. Once the lwa leaves, the "horse" has no memory of what took place during the possession trance.

Rhythms of the Spirit

Vodou worship is inspired by what one writer calls a ritual orchestra. The most important of the musical instruments in this orchestra are the *ogan* ("triangle"), the *ason*, and the drum. The *ogan*, or iron, is a crude percussion instrument struck rhythmically with a piercing sound as it introduces the other instruments. Musicologist Lois Wilken notes that the *ogan* "is the most steady and unchanging of all the rhythmic patterns, and a mistake on the *ogan* is more painfully noticeable than a mistake on a drum. . . . Even though the *ogan* is not always physically present in the Vodou drum ensemble, musicians and dancers feel its rhythmic pattern."⁵⁸ Some magic is associated with this instrument, the triangular shape of which symbolically opens the path of the air to the spirit world and puts practitioners in touch with the divine. The *ason* also sets the musical and liturgical tempo in the ceremony by giving drummers a signal to begin and end. Wherever there is Vodou, there are drums. In Vodou's rhythm and dance, the drum is king of all musical instruments, the center of gravity of all ceremonies, and a unique means of communication. The drums remain both a ritual conduit of the spirit and a main attraction for outsiders. There are Rada drums and Petwo drums, all made from a log carved into shape with a machete, hollowed out either by burning or digging out the inside, and covered at the ends with cowhide or goat skin soaked in locally brewed rum. According to Wilken, around Port-au-Prince, three Rada drums—*maman*, *segon*, and *boula*—play for all the divinities of the Rada family, and the Petwo drums serve the Petwo spirits, which include the Djouba, Ibo, Kongo, and Gede nations. The drums are mystical and are said to make occasional trips to Africa "in order to renew their magical force."⁵⁹ Without the drums, a Vodou ceremony loses its compass, its rhythm, its pulse, its magical force, and its power.

Conclusion

Vodou as a religious philosophy and as a system of communication is an expression of authentic spirituality to many Haitians. As a religion operating sui generis ("in its own right"), it has successfully weathered centuries of stormy attempts at obliteration by Christianity, the Catholic Church, or both; Haitian leaders; and even foreign governments. After more than two centuries as the most dominant and resilient symbol of religion for independent Haiti, Vodou has now become a numerically dwindling minority religion. Where Catholics tried to convert Haitians through coercion for three centuries and failed, mod-

ern versions of American Protestant Christianity are now succeeding. The African-derived religion survived a turbulent colonial history in Saint Domingue/Haiti by adapting to Catholic cosmology and new world culture. Now, the future of Vodou no longer lies only in its ability to survive persecution but also in adapting once more to a new Christian competitor and in its relevance in the twenty-first century. Do I mean to suggest that Vodou has outlived its usefulness in Haiti, or agree with those who say Vodou serves no useful purpose in Haitian society? Patrick Bellegarde-Smith rephrases the question with disapproving sarcasm: "Might we conclude that populations of primary African descent were hopelessly confused and that, indeed, their beliefs are *un Catholisme indigeste*, an undigested Catholicism?" Or that "by borrowing from the Catholic pantheon instead of from [ARTs or] Hinduism, Vodou might have acquired some respectability!"⁶⁰ Vodou's role in sustaining the struggle for freedom and dignity and its contribution to cultural and artistic expression in Haiti is beyond question.

My study of this intriguing religious philosophy was not informed by those who continue to regard it as a cabal of evil fit for the sinister entertainment in Hollywood. As Bellegarde-Smith says: "The slave owners feared their slaves' traditions not because they believed in them . . . but because of the revolutionary potential of elements that unified persons of a same ethnic group or from diverse groups."⁶¹ Since the days under plantation slavery, Vodou has played a vital role in the political, cultural, and religious experiences of the Haitian people; it is a wellspring of Haitian artistic and literary expressions. Metraux writes, "The useful and productive role of Voodoo in the domain of arts is there for all to see. In music and dancing it has allowed the Haitian peasantry to maintain and develop its African heritage—and develop it to a very high level of excellence. A well-conducted Voodoo ceremony is something worth seeing: drummers and dancers are often virtuosos of their craft."⁶²

Vodou is appreciated when it is viewed in its historical cultural context and in light of its significance in the lives of its practitioners, seen as paralleling that of its main competitor, Christianity. On the issue of Vodou's contribution to Haiti, the thirteen Haitians who, in 1997, signed the "Declaration" of the Congress of Santa Barbara called KOSANBA should have the final word: "The presence, role, and importance of Vodou in Haitian history, society, and culture are unarguably a part of the national ethos. The impact of the religion qua spiritual and intellectual discipline on particular national institutions, human and gender relations, the family, the plastic arts, philosophy and ethics, oral and written literature, language, popular and music, science and technology, and the healing arts is undisputable."⁶³

Long live the religion of Vodou.