

ABSTRACT

Title of Document: NOU LA, WE HERE: REMEMBRANCE AND POWER IN THE ARTS OF HAITIAN VODOU

Leslie Anne Brice, Doctor of Philosophy, 2007

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Haitian Vodou is vast, accumulative, and constantly in flux, drawing from many sources and traditions as it adapts to changes in the world, as well as to the needs and imaginations of its adherents. With its origins in west and central Africa, along with the strategies for transformation that are at the heart of many religions there, Vodou developed into its current form as a response to forced transatlantic migration, enslavement, encounters with Amerindian traditions, Catholicism, Freemasonry, the complications that emerged in the quest for liberty, the consequences of a successful slave revolt, and the establishment of an independent state. It is largely the last three points that contribute to Vodou's strong military ethos, and with that, Vodou's focus on liberation.

Based on field research between 2000 and 2004, in Washington, D.C. and in Haiti, this dissertation examines Vodou visual arts in relation to Haiti's revolutionary history, and how the arts articulate related themes of militarism, liberation, and resistance. Central to this study is 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 shape Vodou practice today and thereby provides a larger context for interpreting visual expressions. Equally important to this interpretation is the sacred world, which includes the spirits, the ancestors, and Vodou cosmological principles.

Along the lines of remembrance and the sacred world, this dissertation examines the sacred spaces, altars, and power objects that practitioners create with their own aesthetic sensibilities and cosmological interpretations. It considers how practitioners actively remember and engage the past to empower themselves and their communities in the present. By weaving together the historical, social, the political, and the cosmological, along with an emphasis on practitioner agency, this dissertation underscores the transatlantic scope of Vodou visual creations. In doing so, it brings into focus just how pragmatic this religion and its objects are, and suggests how visuality offers people a sense of self-determinism in their lives.

NOU LA, WE HERE: REMEMBRANCE AND POWER
IN THE ARTS OF HAITIAN VODOU

By

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Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the
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For Nova

Acknowledgements

I remember a particularly hot July afternoon in 2003 I decided to escape the dust, heat, and bustle of Port-au-Prince to seek refuge in the home of the Beauvoir family down the coast in Mariani. After I finished lamenting about the day's frustrations, my friend Elisabeth Beauvoir smiled sweetly and said reassuringly, "In Haiti, we say '*lese koule*,' let it flow, dear." Those words helped enormously throughout my remaining fieldwork and at home in Maryland, where I tried to piece it all together, grappling with the difficulties. Since my last trip to Haiti in January 2004, I had regrettably forgotten these words for long spans of time. But gratitude to remembrance, for when they reemerged I was able to loosen what had been so constricted. During the last several months of writing this dissertation I have tried to envision, understand, and articulate what for me has seemed opaque, ambiguous, and distant. It has been a most confounding and yet enriching experience, one that has forced me to expand, alter, or dismantle my long-held and stubborn conceptions of spirituality, history, expression, healing, community, and self.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

*Ouve baye-a pou mwen*¹

At the Bizango secret society ceremony I sit with the other onlookers along the interior wall of the *ounfò* (temple) with feet tapping in rhythm to the syncopated drum beats. We watch the orchestrated movements of ten women wearing denim dresses, their heads wrapped in red satin, and a small sheathed knife tucked in each of their belts. Ten men also dressed in denim mirror their steps as André Villaire,² the head of this society, pours Florida water over the heads and palms of the participants and observers, taking each of us in turn.³ The perfume feels cool and refreshing in the June evening heat.

Suddenly a *lanbi* (conch shell) sounds from outside, then five alarming thrashes of a whip against the ground. It is 10:20 p.m. As participants sing for the stronger spirits they light long yellow candles then salute the four cardinal points—first north, then south, west, and east. We walk slowly into the candle-lit altar chamber. A message is displayed on its door for all those who enter: “*Sages, tanperans, tolerans. Respe youn pou lòt. Pa pou you mou’n-men se pou tout moun.*” (Wisdom, temperance, tolerance. Respect for each other. [The spirit] is not for one person but for everyone).⁴ The chamber walls are dark red and a large altar stands on the right. In front of the altar rests a closed coffin covered by a vibrant red cloth. Suspended above the coffin is a knotted rope. We plant our candles firmly in the ground, next to a large metal cauldron and an

¹ This is from a song to Papa Legba, the guardian of the crossroads, asking him to open the barrier.

² This is a pseudonym, the reason for which I explain in the “Method” section of this chapter.

³ Florida water is an inexpensive and easily available perfume used in Vodou ceremonies and offered to various spirits.

⁴ I would like to thank Guy Laurent for help in capturing the nuance of this translation.

iron staff tied with red satin. Flowers and several bottles wrapped in different color satins cover the altar top. Emblazoned on the wall behind the altar is an image of a horned woman with long dark hair wearing gold rings around her neck and holding one in each hand. A sun appears to her right and directly below that a cement basin. I am taking too much time and so I turn to leave. Written above the door is the unequivocal “*mèt*”—master.

The drumming, dancing, and singing has grown more intense as the participants move counterclockwise around the *poto mitan* (center pole), on which appears the Masonic All-Seeing Eye painted over a red band.⁵ A man removes the *lanbi* from the *poto mitan*'s base and sounds it repeatedly into each preceding echo. Another man cracks the whip against the ground and the *poto mitan*. The movement intensifies as André circles the center pole with his Petwo drum, his voice heard above all others. At 11:07 p.m., with the atmosphere thick with the scent of rum and the *lanbi*'s resonance, a spirit comes into the body of one of the female participants. Others stand her steadily against the *poto mitan* while two participants salute the altar. At 11:08 p.m. the spirit seems to have left the woman as quickly as it came, and the *lanbi* sounds again. Moments later everything stops and André speaks. We break for soda and sandwiches.

At midnight everyone rises abruptly and leaves the *ounfò*. A woman whisks me away and leads me to André's red pickup truck that has three Haitian flags affixed to its hood. I try to climb in the back with everyone else but a woman grabs my arm and pushes me onto the front seat. As I protest I remember my backpack, notebook, and camera, all left behind. She tells me not to worry. “Where are we going?” I ask. “Legliz,” she responds, church.

With every car and truck full of people we form a procession and drive slowly into Gressier, a small town south of Port-au-Prince along the western coast (Fig. 1.1). We arrive in front of a large and open *peristil* (the public portion of an *ounfò*). Hundreds of people congregate outside and all are clearly enjoying themselves as they stand or sit at tables. A man instructs our group to form a line and walk into the *peristil*. Several women—perhaps twenty or so—move around the *poto mitan*, all wearing red dresses with black dots and shiny red head scarves. Many are younger, but some are in their fifties, sixties, and maybe into their seventies. Between the women and the *poto mitan* a smaller circle of men lead the singing. Then André assumes control of the song as he guides us closer to the center of the *peristil* with the women in our group directly behind him, followed by the men. I notice the door to the altar chamber is open. Inside and suspended from the ceiling is a small bound chair with a *govi* (ceramic vessel) lashed to its seat. The dancing and energy around us intensifies, the women's red skirts swirl one into the next and it feels as if we are in the calm eye of a hurricane.

At 1:00 a.m. we leave the *peristil* just as orderly as we arrived. On our way out a man hands us each a white candle and instructs us to exit backwards. Members of another secret society appear wearing vibrant reds, yellows, and greens. The three societies form separate and distinct lines while a large group of onlookers decides to create a fourth. Together, several hundred of us in four lines holding white candles take to the street and block the only road that links Port-au-Prince with the south of Haiti. With no electricity, the only illumination emanates from the hundreds of candles and the stars above. The stillness of the moment is broken when a man from André's society

⁵ Masonic images appear throughout Vodou sacred spaces—a point that I will develop in Chapter Three.

runs up and down our line yelling *mache! mache! mache!* He grabs me several times to straighten out my walk though I do not feel myself deviating from the line.

Soon a large truck carrying bags of wood charcoal approaches us from behind, but with all the people on the street I feel no immediate concern. All of sudden someone grabs my arm and yanks me off to the side just as I hear the truck's engine roar. Once safely off the street I see that the truck has charged the crowd and nearly hit several people, including myself. People shout in defiance as several men climb onto the truck and bang on the doors, windows, and hood while shouting at the driver. Somehow voices grow quiet and the situation becomes resolved. The truck pulls off to the side and we continue with our procession. Cars and trucks driving in both directions pull off the road, turn their engines and lights off, and wait for us to pass.

We continue walking for another twenty minutes until we turn off the main road and approach a modest cement church. People camp along the small road that leads to the church as well as in front of it. We form two lines according to which society we are with, and here too everything is carefully orchestrated and strictly regulated. The third society remains behind. A man instructs all of us to get on our knees and some people begin to pray as they look up to the doors with arms outstretched. Two women from the society wearing red hold a flag with red and blue bands, the national colors of Haiti. We begin to get up and walk slowly under the flag as we make our way toward the church door where people are praying fervently. When each person finishes his or her prayer they knock on the door several times then place their candle on the ground. After taking our turn we get back into line and march back to the *peristil*. Someone behind me holds my arms firmly along my side, trying to enforce a straight line as the pace quickens.

Back at the *peristil* in Gressier the atmosphere is lighter as the societies dance around the *poto mitan* and sing, while others enjoy beer and soda. Feeling dizzy from the heat and excitement, I decide to sit in a corner until two people from André's society tell me that it is time to leave. We all pile into the vehicles and arrive back at André's at 3:00 a.m. By 3:45 a.m. I am in bed, exhausted, mind racing, and wondering what it all meant.

The next day I learned that what I attended was the eve of the *sermoni boule bwa Sen Jan*, the first night of a major ceremony for Sen Jan, or Saint John the Baptist. But in Vodou, as my friend Claude Lubin later told me, Sen Jan is Legba Kalfou, the guardian of the crossroads, keeper of the gate. People knock on the church door to ask Sen Jan/Legba to let them through, to open the gate for them—*ouve baye-a pou mwen*. Saint John the Baptist as a gate opener is an ideal counterpart to Legba Kalfou in Vodou logic for John was born before Jesus and thus opened the road for him.⁶ Another friend informed me that the procession lines are called “columns,” and are intended to be like the military.⁷ These explanations only added to my other questions. Why did a Masonic image appear in the *ounfò*? Why was a coffin in front of the altar? What did the images in the chamber reveal? What did the cauldron and iron staff draped in red satin mean? Why did participants continuously sound the *lanbi* and thrash the whip against the ground and the *poto mitan*? Why was there a bound chair and vessel suspended from the ceiling? Why did we form such a strict procession? Why was there such a strong feeling of enforced militancy?

While Bizango is an offshoot of Vodou, a point to which I will return, this ceremony is also a gate opener to the kinds of questions this dissertation poses. In Vodou

⁶ Claude Lubin, personal communication with the author, June 26, 2003.

⁷ Nicole Augustin, personal communication with the author, June 27, 2003.

practice the spirit world, history, politics, and social memory converge. This dissertation examines this convergence against two overlapping backdrops. The first is Haitian history, not so much as it appears in the written archive, but as Vodou remembers the past—a “Vodou history” as Joan Dayan describes it,⁸ or remembrance, as I often refer to it. I use the word remembrance to refer to the active and purposeful remembering of diverse lived experiences that Vodou practitioners evoke, express, and promote through visual and performing arts.⁹ Accordingly, I view remembrance as a form of individual and collective agency—the resolve to create or transform one’s reality.¹⁰ As such, remembrance is a major creative force that Vodou practitioners evoke and express in what they paint on *ounfò* walls, attach to objects and altars, sing, or dance around the *poto mitan*. The second backdrop of this study is the sacred world, which includes the *lwa* (spirits), the ancestors, and Vodou cosmological principles. Along these lines I look specifically at the sacred spaces, altars, and magic objects that practitioners create with their own aesthetic sensibilities and cosmological interpretations and consider how, through this production, practitioners actively remember and engage the past to empower themselves and their communities in the present.

In considering how practitioners evoke remembrance and the spirit world to shape the production of Vodou spaces, altars, and objects, additional questions arise. What is

⁸ Joan Dayan, *Haiti, History, and the Gods* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995), 35.

⁹ This notion echoes what Mary Nooter Roberts and Allen Roberts have said about memory, which is “active, always in the present, and a construction, transaction, and negotiation, as opposed to a reproduction;” see “Audacities of Memory,” in *Memory: Luba Art and the Making of History*, ed. Mary Nooter Roberts and Allen F. Roberts (New York: The Museum for African Art; Prestel-Verlag: Munich, Germany, 1996), 29.

¹⁰ On this view of agency, see Henry Drewal, “Memory and Agency: Bantu and Yoruba Arts in Brazilian Culture,” in *Diaspora and Visual Culture: Representing Africans and Jews*, ed. Nicholas Mirzoeff (London: Routledge, 2000), 241.

the relationship between the practitioners and the arts they create? How do practitioners transform these creations into sites of empowerment? How do these sites function in the transmission of knowledge and how do they enable remembrance? How do these spaces and arts heal, promote social cohesion, and build community? How do they relate to historic narratives, Vodou philosophy and cosmology, lived experiences, and ideology?¹¹ And finally, what kind of implications and paradoxes emerge when practitioners use assemblages and objects to deploy power?

Method

This dissertation is based on fieldwork consisting of four trips to Haiti (July 2001, July 2002, May-August 2003, and January 2004), for a total of six months. I supplemented this fieldwork with library and archival research in Port-au-Prince and Washington, D.C. I also worked with a Vodou community in Washington, D.C. (2000-2002), until the leading *oungan* (priest) Alex Augustin and his *manbo* (priestess) wife Simone Augustin returned permanently to their home in Mariani, Haiti. Alex, a famous *oungan*, is my primary teacher and informant.

Although Alex is well known in Haiti, the United States, and France, I nevertheless use a pseudonym for him and all informants as required by the University of Maryland System policy on research. For information received in public forums such as

¹¹ I use the word “ideology” despite its many connotations and interpretations. Because the nature of this project underscores the roles of practitioner agency, a clarification of how I use the term is necessary. I do not consider ideology to exist solely as a coercive determinate in society wherein subjects possess little to no agency as Louis Althusser does; see “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation),” in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (1970; reprint, New York and London: Monthly Review Press, 1971), 127-186. In my project, ideology is a fluid system of beliefs that reflects the lived experiences of people. Viewed in this manner, ideology may serve as an empowering strategy for people as active agents in social and political relations.

seminars, however, I use real names. After the first mention of an informant I refer to her or him by first name in the main body of the text. Not only is this for the benefit of narrative flow, but such a reference reflects in many cases my personal relationship with them.

During the early years of my study I attended gatherings on the first and third Sunday of every month in the apartment of Alex and Simone in Washington, D.C. At my first meeting in April 2000, I explained my academic interest in Vodou arts, my role as a researcher, and that I had no personal connection with the religion or any future intention of initiation—my focus was strictly scholarly. One member of the community expressed his concerns about my presence but a senior *manbo* insisted it was the spirits who brought me there, and with that comment the discussion came to an end. That was the only conversation the community had with me on that specific subject, though over the next several years the women I was closest to would ask me when I planned to *kouche*, or undergo initiation. By 2001 my perspective was clearly changing. As I developed relationships with people in this community and in Haiti, as my knowledge of and admiration for Vodou deepened, and as I began to believe that the religion could ease my own pain, help mend my personal and familial relationships, and enhance my overall well-being, I considered more and more the possibility of becoming initiated. Alex expressed concern that such a move could compromise my credibility with the academic community, and accordingly, I decided to postpone initiation until after the completion of the dissertation.

The gatherings at Alex and Simone's would begin with a discussion, usually prompted by a problem or question that a member would pose to the group. Alex would deftly weave Vodou principles and philosophies throughout the exchange, broadening the

community's understanding and perspective of the topic at hand, which ranged from spiritual and social concerns to those that were personal. After an hour or so of sharing, we would then move into the *djevo*, or the altar room, where we would sing to the *lwa* and offer libations. Then we would return to the living and dining rooms where Simone had so lovingly laid out all the food and drinks we brought to share. This was social time full of enriching discussions. This community welcomed me from the beginning, and when Alex and Simone returned to Haiti, they opened their home there to me on several occasions.

For most of my fieldwork in Haiti I was based in the southern Port-au-Prince neighborhood of Fontamara, where I was adopted into a family that gave me immeasurable help and joyful company. For the first of these visits I stayed further down the coast in Mariani to attend a seminar on Vodou at Alex and Simone's Le Péristyle de Mariani, where I spent a week of my third visit participating in a second seminar. These sessions included a series of lectures and workshops given by Haitian scholars, Vodou practitioners, and musicians, in addition to numerous ceremonies and a pilgrimage to Sodo (Saut d'eau), not far from Mirebalais. Not only were these sessions scholarly, they were also spiritual. These seminars proved to be an extraordinary opportunity to study Vodou in an environment suited to contextual learning, and I constantly refer back to my notes for information not found in published texts.

I also spent time visiting *lakou* (extended family compounds) and *ounfò* throughout the country. Not far from Cap Haitien in the north, Alex and Simone's daughter, Nicole, introduced me to a *lakou* in Katye Morin where I was received most graciously for a three-day stay. She also introduced me to a *lakou* in nearby Limonade. Along the west coast, between Saint-Marc and Port-au-Prince, I visited an *ounfò* in the

fishing village of Luly. I also visited one in nearby Arcahaie as well as a historic site that had recently been refurbished and that stands across the street from a new mural commemorating the creation of the Haitian flag. In Port-au-Prince I befriended a young *oungan* who had a series of altar niches in place of an *ounfò*. I also visited the *ounfò* of a famous Vodou flag-maker living in the Bel Air neighborhood, as well as the *ounfò* belonging to an *oungan* living in Fort-Mercredi. Not far from Port-au-Prince's cemetery I made several trips to the *ounfò* of a Sanpwèl secret society leader, who deepened my understanding of Vodou and secret societies. My association with Alex and Simone opened many doors for me in the southwest region of Haiti; among the *ounfò* I visited they are widely known and respected, and in many cases I was welcomed with just the mention of their names. A friend took me to visit several *ounfò* in this region including Mariani, Léogâne, and Merger. In nearby Gressier, I attended several ceremonies at the *lakou* of a Bizango secret society leader who welcomed me into his community. Finally, in the southern coastal town of Jacmel, I visited the *ounfò* of a well-known senior *manbo*.

My fieldwork in Haiti (as well as in Washington, D.C.) most resembles the participant observation method—with a purposefully blurred boundary, as I will explain. This method consisted of conducting interviews with *oungan* and *manbo*, documenting sacred spaces, altars, and objects in most of the *ounfò* I visited, and videotaping as well as participating in several ceremonies in all the regions I described. My research began in Washington, D.C. with formal and taped interviews; but as the research progressed—both locally and in Haiti—persistent lines of inquiry increasingly gave way to fluid conversation. This is not to say that these conversations lacked structure or direction, but I tried to keep these chats open ended so that practitioners discussed what was most comfortable and interesting to them. By encouraging practitioners to speak on their own

terms and what was of value to them was crucial for my own understanding of how individuals balance their own sensibilities and experiences when creating sacred arts. This approach resembles Clifford Geertz's "experience-near" concept, which he defines as "one that someone—a patient, a subject, in our case an informant might himself naturally and effortlessly use to define what he or his fellows see, feel, think, imagine, and so on, and which he would readily understand when similarly applied by others." This is in contrast to the "experience-distant" concept, or "one that a specialist of one sort or another—analyst, an experimenter, and ethnographer, even a priest or an ideologist—employ to forward their scientific, philosophical, or practical aims."¹² Because my concern here is practitioner agency, such an approach brings their voices closer, revealing more from their point of view how they construct their practice and the objects and images used therein.

Another reason for the move away from formal interviews was my own growing immersion in the religion and the consequent deepening of my relationships with several practitioners. While I followed Alex's advice to postpone initiation, I had a harder time restricting myself to my role as researcher. For me, maintaining a critical distance did not work. Increasingly I broke down the boundaries that seemed to isolate myself from the people with whom I worked, their practices, and their visual creations. This shift did not compromise the academic integrity of my field research—on the contrary, I became significantly more reflexive about my role in the process of gathering and interpreting information, and simultaneously became more aware, as Barbara Myerhoff and Jay Ruby

¹² See Clifford Geertz, *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1983), 57. Here I draw from art historian David Brown's study of Santería altar making; see "Toward an Ethnoaesthetics of Santería Ritual Arts: The Practice of Altar-Making and Gift Exchange," in *Santería Aesthetics in Contemporary Latin American Art*, ed. Arturo Lindsay (Washington and London:

put it, of the “implications” of my “displays.”¹³ I began to keep separate field notebooks—one for observations and interviews and the other to describe my personal interactions with and reflections about Vodou. By giving myself the freedom to write through my personal experiences—the hardships and the joys—I was better able to understand them and my relationship to the religion. Blurring the boundary between myself as researcher and Vodou practitioners as informants was for me a decisive act that recognized the richness of integrating personal experience with intellectual endeavor. As Karen McCarthy Brown observes, “when the lines long drawn in anthropology between participant-observer and informant break down, then the only truth is the one in between; and anthropology becomes something closer to a social art form, open to both aesthetic and moral judgment. This situation is riskier, but it does bring intellectual labor and life into closer relation.”¹⁴

When documenting ceremonies I always asked permission before photographing and videotaping, and I respected requests by individuals to turn the camera away.¹⁵ Although I only had two such requests, one of them came during a ceremony for Ti Jan in Katye Morin, when the spirit himself demanded that I turn off the camera. At that

Smithsonian Institution Press, 1996): 131.

¹³ Here I adopt Myerhoff and Ruby’s definition of reflexiveness. They describe it as “the capacity of any system of signification to turn back upon itself, to make itself its own object by referring to itself: subject and object fuse.” They emphasize that rather than leading to a focus on self-centeredness, reflexiveness “pulls one toward the Other and away from isolated attentiveness to oneself. Reflexiveness requires subject and object, breaking the thrall of self-concern by its very drive toward self-knowledge that inevitably takes into account a surrounding world of events, people, and places.” See their “Introduction,” in *A Crack in the Mirror: Reflexive Perspectives in Anthropology*, ed. Jay Ruby (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982), 2-5.

¹⁴ Karen McCarthy Brown, *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 12.

¹⁵ On return trips I always gave a community’s head *manbo* or *oungan* a copy of all photographs I took in their *ounfò*. I also provided Alex and Simone copies of ceremonies recorded at their *peristil*.

moment the music and dancing stopped as all eyes fell on me. As soon as I put the camera down, the drumming resumed and I joined in on the dancing. After several minutes Ti Jan turned to me and with good humor, instructed me to pick up my camera and film.

I was consistently amazed and grateful to the kindness and openness that practitioners showed me when sharing their spiritual worlds. Even when practitioners would keep the doors of their *djevo* closed or would not answer my questions, they were extremely kind and patient, often explaining that because I was not an initiate, certain knowledge was off limits to me. There were also times when a practitioner told me secrets about the religion or the way that person practiced it. These disclosures were often accompanied by requests that I not write about them, and I have not nor will I. When writing about people and their practices my guiding principle was to imagine them sitting with me at the computer, reading what I wrote. What would they think? Would they approve? I have given my best effort to ensure that they may recognize their words throughout these pages.

Power, aesthetics, and agency

Before explaining how I frame my study of Vodou sacred spaces and arts, I would first like to provide a brief description of the religion, although more substantive observations will emerge throughout the chapters. Vodou is vast, accumulative, and constantly in flux, drawing from many sources and traditions as it adapts to changes in the world, as well as to the needs and imaginations of its adherents. In Vodou, the past,

present, and future fold into each other, and the seemingly disparate meet on equal footing. It is a world of hierarchy and order and yet one of inclusion and fluidity.¹⁶ It is ebb and flow, tension and release. With its origins in west and central Africa, along with the strategies for transformation that are at the heart of many religions there, Vodou developed into its current form as a response to forced transatlantic migration, enslavement, encounters with Amerindian traditions, Catholicism, Freemasonry, the complications that emerged in the quest for liberty, the consequences of a successful slave revolt, and the establishment of an independent state. It is largely the last three points that contribute to Vodou's strong military ethos, and with that, its focus on liberation.

Above all else, Vodou is a tradition that pays homage to the ancestors and passes on—through the ancestors, the *lwa*, and sacred principles—knowledge, or *konesans*, which is vital for living a strong and harmonious life. Accordingly, Vodou is very much a social religion of healing and community building. Although it is a monotheistic religion, with God being referred to as Bondye, it is the ancestors and the *lwa* who practitioners invoke, for they are the ones who provide guidance and intercede on behalf of the servitor. The *lwa* are very human in their behavior and in their desires, and collectively they represent, reflect, and articulate an extraordinary range of experiences and being-in-the-world with which humans can identify. Because adherents believe that

¹⁶ Catherine Bell points to the work of Robert Hetz, Terence Turner, and Pierre Bourdieu who proposed that a set of binary oppositions in ritual is linked to another set, which in turn establishes hierarchization and leads to integration. Bell states that the establishment of oppositions “generates hierarchical schemes to produce a loose sense of totality and systematicity. In this way, ritual dynamics afford an experience of ‘order’ as well as the ‘fit’ between this taxonomic order and the real world experience;” see *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 101-104. While ritual strategies of oppositions (e.g., hot/cool, fast/slow, loosening/binding) and hierarchy exist in Vodou, the ultimate focus is on balance, integration, and inclusion.

the *lwa* and ancestral spirits constitute their spiritual beings, possession by these spirits offers them an ultimate repossession of self.

Vodou has many different families or *nanchon* (nations) of *lwa*, many of which fall under the Rada or Petwo categories, although there is room for individual interpretation and designation here. In general, Rada *lwa* have their origin in west Africa, and display a calm and cool disposition. Accordingly, the drumming and dancing of Rada rites are slower and more fluid. Many Petwo *lwa* come from west central Africa and are fierce, demanding, exacting, and militant. Syncopated drumbeats, heat, gunpowder explosions, and the cracking of a whip often characterize their rites. The practitioners who most effectively work with the *lwa*, those who have reached the highest degree of initiation and have earned the *ason*, or the sacred rattle, are *manbo* (priestesses) and *oungan* (priests).

Because Vodou's visual expressions are so embedded with meaning, interpretation requires a deep and well-grounded contextualization. Central to this effort, as Sally Promey proposes for the case of Shaker material culture, is a strong "historical understanding," that is "an indispensable tool" for (re)contextualizing and interpreting images and objects.¹⁷ In creating the historical, visual, and social context that this study necessitates, I strengthen my historical understanding by drawing from the disciplines of history, art history, anthropology, and sociology. This has been a fruitful approach in helping me to articulate three defining features of Vodou visual arts: the generation and transformation of power; the importance of aesthetics, both as a reflection of individual sensibilities and cosmological principles; and practitioner agency.

¹⁷ Sally Promey, *Spiritual Spectacles: Vision and Image in Mid-Nineteenth-Century Shakerism* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995), xxi.

Power

I use the word power throughout this dissertation, taking my cue from anthropologists William Arens and Ivan Karp, who consider power as a generative and transformative energy inextricably linked with creativity, agency, actions, and effects. Power is no longer conceived exclusively as a determining and defining factor in social and political relationships. Rather, power becomes a resource from which people can draw to generate and transform “a series of ideas linked with actions, which have an effect on other ideas and actions.”¹⁸

Arens, Karp, and anthropologist Eugenia Herbert contend that cosmology, or ideas about the structure and nature of the universe, is instrumental to the operation of power.¹⁹ How this notion extends to Vodou sacred space and arts will become clearer throughout the subsequent chapters, but I would like to emphasize here that a deep understanding of cosmology (and secrecy in many instances), which emerges in ritual practice, assumes knowledge of how to generate, engage, and transform power that

¹⁸ William Arens and Ivan Karp, “Introduction,” in *Creativity of Power: Cosmology and Action in African Societies*, ed. W. Arens and Ivan Karp (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1989), xviii. Similarly, Michel Foucault underscores this generative quality when he asserts that power “produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth. The individual and the knowledge that may be gained of him belong to this production;” see *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan, 2nd ed. (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1975; New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 194. Although Foucault acknowledges the connection between power and production, elsewhere his conception of power compromises the agency of the individual, who becomes a target or an “effect of power;” see *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*, ed. Colin Gordon, trans. Colin Gordon, et. al. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 98. For a critique on Foucault’s conception of power, see P. Steven Sangren “‘Power’ against Ideology: A Critique of Foucaultian Usage,” *Cultural Anthropology* 10, 1 (1995): 3-40. While I do not deny that individuals and social collectives can be the object, effect, or target of power, it is more worthwhile, for the scope of this study, to consider how individuals and social collectives work with power, and moreover, how they assume the active role of subjects rather than the acted upon role of objects. This formulation of power follows Sangren, 5.

¹⁹ Arens and Karp, xvii-xxi; and Eugenia W. Herbert, *Iron, Gender, and Power: Rituals of Transformation in African Societies* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993), 2.

affects events and outcomes. Power in this ritual context, according to Herbert, “emphasizes the *means* by which selected individuals are thought to gain access to and control over people and resources through the mastery of transformative process,” which is achieved through “ritual actions and prescriptive behaviors.” Herbert incisively attributes to ritual the means of transforming and activating power; however, when she states that, “it is in ritual that beliefs about power are acted out,” she assumes that power pre-exists ritual, and consequently ritual is ancillary to power.²⁰ Such a position narrows the relationship between power and ritual. I would suggest, drawing from the work of David Holmberg, that rituals both activate pre-existing power and *generate* power. Once activated or generated, power may then be deployed in ritual.²¹ It is this aspect of power and its relationship to visuality that this study examines.

A Vodou aesthetic of power

With an understanding of power as an energy that individuals and communities may activate and transform in ritual, I now turn to how power works within a Vodou aesthetic. I frame this aesthetic by applying the concepts of organization, action, assemblage and condensation, and efficacy. Taking each concept in turn, I consider organization first because it is the most fundamental guiding principle in visual production. As Alex emphasized to me, organization is order, and order is beauty.²² In ritual, practitioners observe the order of the universe during salutary rites, and such a demonstration of order cleanses and charges sacred space thereby facilitating communion

²⁰ Ibid., 2-3.

²¹ See David Holmberg “Derision, Exorcism, and the Ritual Production of Power,” *American Ethnologist* 27, no. 4 (2000): 927-949.

with the spirits, which in turn activates and generates power. Not only are the initial rites instrumental to power, so too are the *regleman*, or the organizational principles that guide all aspects of practice and visual production. Although practitioners adhere to certain principles of order, there is room for agency and innovation.

Agency and innovation assume action. Action here refers to the vital and generative qualities of production undertaken by agents who instantiate cosmological principles and structural properties.²³ As it relates to aesthetics in Vodou, action assumes that *oungan*, *manbo*, *ounjenikon* (chorus leaders), musicians, or any other active participants, guided by aesthetic principles, innovate and generate new meanings rather than simply repeat a system of pre-existing principles. In visual production, individuals demonstrate a significant degree of agency based on their own aesthetic and spiritual sensibilities.

The third aesthetic component is the combined concept of assemblage and condensation, which I adopt from the work of art historians Arnold Rubin, Suzanne Blier, and anthropologist Karen McCarthy Brown. Assemblage involves the gathering together of disparate objects or other elements to achieve affect or causal power.²⁴ It is a diachronic process; assemblage may continue through time and space. A ritual agent unites and orders various objects then activates them by transferring and concentrating

²² Alex Augustin, personal communication with the author, June 23, 2000.

²³ This notion of action follows Kris Hardin, *The Aesthetics of Action: Continuity and Change in a West African Town* (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993), 2-3.

²⁴ Suzanne Blier applies this practice to Fon peoples of the Republic of Benin and suggests its influence on the arts of Haitian Vodou; see "Vodun: West African Roots of Vodou," in *Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou*, ed. Donald J. Cosentino (Los Angeles: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History, 1995), 61-87. Chapter Four of this dissertation addresses this connection.

energies, or what Arnold Rubin refers to as the process of “accumulation.”²⁵ Here I should point out that the mastery of energy is at the core of Vodou functioning.²⁶ Assemblage or accumulation organizes and channels energy to gain a particular end, in other words, assemblage enables the generation of power. Related to assemblage is the idea of condensation, which is “the taste for overloaded, terse, multi-referential images—for *pwen*.”²⁷ In Vodou practice a *pwen* refers to a distilled, condensed, and empowered energy that takes tangible or conceptual form. Together, *assemblage* and condensation reformulate, (re)appropriate, channel, and empower sacred arts through causal means.

Causality segues into the fourth aesthetic factor: efficacy, or the possession of causal powers. This formulation of efficacy derives from anthropologist Robert Plant Armstrong’s notion of “affecting presence.” Armstrong conceives of objects and happenings as “affecting things and events” that human actions produce by channeling into them “potency, emotions, values, and states of being or experience—all, in a clear sense, *powers*.”²⁸ People accomplish this through song, heat, offerings, or other ritual activities. Objects and happenings, then, through the actions of agents, may possess causal powers that distinguish the affective from the non-affective, the causal from the mundane. An “affective presence” is an empowering energy that imbues visuality with efficacy. This relates to the Yoruba concept of *ase*. In his analysis of Yoruba aesthetics,

²⁵ Arnold Rubin, *African Accumulative Sculpture: Power and Display* (New York: Pace Gallery, 1974), 10.

²⁶ Vodou recognizes the first law of thermodynamics: energy can neither be created nor destroyed. In Vodou energy is transformed.

²⁷ Karen McCarthy Brown, *Tracing the Spirit: Ethnographic Essays on Haitian Art* (Davenport, Iowa: Davenport Museum of Art, 1995), 35.

²⁸ Robert Plant Armstrong, *The Affecting Presence: An Essay in Humanistic Anthropology* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1971), 3-4.

art historian Rowland Abiodun links *ase* with power and authority, explaining it as “the vital force in all living and non-living things” that energizes spaces, objects, and even verbal utterances, endowing them with causal abilities.²⁹ Without the presence of *ase*, Abiodun states that, “many an attractive artifact would fail to make an appreciable religio-aesthetic impact.”³⁰ The degree of this impact is accessed aesthetically through an evaluative process that emphasizes efficacy; in other words, efficacy, or the power to makes things happen, is the cornerstone of Yoruba aesthetics. Efficacy, in addition to organization, action, assemblage and condensation, shapes the Vodou aesthetic, an aesthetic with power as its underlying principle and generator.

Agency

Connecting aesthetics with power necessitates a consideration of visual production in relation to agency and evaluation. When individuals act, as in the creation of an object, space, or performance, they anticipate judgment or evaluation based on aesthetic criteria. A scholar who provides an example of this is art historian David H. Brown. In his 1996 article on Santería ritual arts, Brown approaches altar-making as a diachronic process that foregrounds the generative and active roles assumed by individuals in artistic production.³¹ One of the scholars Brown cites, and one who also informs my thinking, is anthropologist Kris Hardin, who investigates the role of agency and the ways "individual actions are melded into social and cultural forms that structure

²⁹ Rowland Abiodun, “Understanding Yoruba Art and Aesthetics: The Concept of Ase,” *African Arts* 27, 3 (1994): 72.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 74.

³¹ David Brown, "Toward an Ethnoaesthetics of Santería Ritual Arts."

future action."³² Structure, for Hardin, is not fixed but changes with individual or collective acts, such that if an aberrant act is repeated, the structure eventually shifts to accommodate it.³³ For Hardin, aesthetics determine how individuals makes choices and how those choices will be evaluated; in short, aesthetics contribute to the reshaping and production of cultural "norms and traditions."

I am also interested in how agency extends to objects, and anthropologist Alfred Gell provides a model to consider objects in this way. Gell's *Agency and Art* advances a theory of the anthropology of art, which he defines as the "social relations in the vicinity of objects mediating social agency."³⁴ To accomplish this, he emphatically separates art from aesthetics and from any function of carrying meaning or communication. Instead, he emphasizes art as "agency, intention, causation, result, and transformation."³⁵ While I do not share his dismissal of aesthetics, meaning, and communication, I do find helpful his idea of objects as *doing*, and as mediators of agency in social relations. If an agent, however, is defined as one "who has the capacity to initiate causal events in his/her vicinity [ascribed to] intentions,"³⁶ then how does an object possess agency if it presumably cannot possess intent? To address this dilemma, Gell distinguishes between "primary" and "secondary" agents. The former are the "intentional beings" and the latter are those "things" that become extensions of the primary agents' intentions or causality,

³² Hardin, 3.

³³ On this point, Hardin follows the work of Anthony Giddens. See, for example, *Central Problems in Social Theory: Action, Structure and Contradiction in Social Analysis* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979); and *New Rules of the Sociological Method: A Positive Critique of Interpretive Sociologies* (New York: Basic Books, 1976).

³⁴ Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: an Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 7.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 6. His emphasis.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 16.

thus endowing effective agency in the “secondary agent.” Things, therefore, may be “objective embodiments of the *power or capacity to will their use*.”³⁷ This distributed agency and “affecting presence” outlined above suggest how social agency may extend to visual production.

Action and agency here encompass ritual practice, which I view as practitioners’ purposeful, repeated, and transformative activities and behaviors. As Catherine Bell explains it, ritual practice “has meant a basic shift from looking at activity as the expression of cultural patterns to looking at it as that which makes and harbors patterns.”³⁸ According to Bell, three assumptions shape this definition. In the first, ritual serves as a site of cultural mediation that brings “history and structure, past and present, meanings and needs” in direct relation to each other. A contradictory world (especially one that includes Haiti’s complicated history) may then be “addressed and manipulated,” providing people with the “power to define what is real” and to shape behavior.³⁹ Secondly, practice concentrates on what rituals do, not exclusively on what they mean or convey. The third point underscores individual agency, one that acknowledges the balance between acquiescence and resistance, reproduction and transformation. Central to this agency, as Bell states, “is a focus on the physical mind-body holism as the primary

³⁷ Ibid., 21.

³⁸ Catherine Bell, *Ritual Perspectives and Dimensions* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 82.

³⁹ Ibid., 83. On a related note, Mary Douglas observes that ritual “enlivens the memory and links the present with the relevant past . . . Ritual makes visible external signs of internal states;” see *Purity and Danger: an Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (1966, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, Inc., 1970), 80 and 86.

medium for deployment and embodiment of everyday schemes of physical action and cultural values.”⁴⁰

Echoing this last assumption in relation to what he terms “lived religion,” David Hall states that practice “always bears the marks of both regulation and what . . . we may term resistance. It is not wholly one or the other.”⁴¹ Similarly, Bell draws attention to the political dimensions of practice, “how positions of domination and subordination are variously constituted, manipulated, and resisted.”⁴² Regulation and agency coexist within Vodou. Practitioners interpret and innovate according to individual sensibilities so long as what they do is effective, “feels right,” and nurtures their relationships with the *lwa*. In Vodou, practitioner agency—or resistance—extends to larger social and political structures. In this instance practice relates to what practitioners do within the religion, in addition to how they position and empower themselves in relation to external power apparatuses. Anthropologists John Kelly and Mary Kaplan assert that ritual practice is a site wherein history is made, generating possibilities for political change. Ritual reproduces, contests, transforms, and can deconstruct authority.⁴³ Understanding ritual

⁴⁰ Bell, *Ritual Perspectives and Dimensions*, 83.

⁴¹ David D. Hall, “Introduction,” in *Lived Religion in America*, ed. David D. Hall (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), xi.

⁴² Bell, *Ritual Perspectives and Dimensions*, 76. Laurie F. Maffly-Kipp, Leigh E. Schmidt, and Mark Valeri pick up this point when they state, “the exploration of practice is, at bottom, an examination of the intricate exercises of power, the procedures of enforcement, the spaces of negotiation, as well as the subtle tactics of resistance; see “Introduction,” in *Practicing Protestants: Histories of Christian Life in America, 1630-1965*, ed. Laurie F. Maffly-Kipp et. al. (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 3.

⁴³ John Kelly and Mary Kaplan, “History, Structure, and Ritual,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 19 (1990): 139. Not all scholars share an empowering view of ritual. Maurice Bloch, for example, suggests that one may regard ritual as “a kind of tunnel into which one plunges, and where, since there is no possibility of turning either to right or left, the only thing to do is follow;” see *Ritual, History and Power: Selected Papers in Anthropology* (London: Athlone, 1989), 42, and also cited by Kelly and Kaplan, 125. Furthermore, Bloch regards ritual as highly formulized, repetitive, and constructed—with ample potential for institutional manipulation and establishing pretenses of legitimacy. He states: “The general image created by the ritual is, within the ritual, perfectly clear and unchallengeable. It is the creation of a transcendental order in which all will have a place, and it is the creation of the legitimacy of conquest of

as a site of action that links the present to the past to shape the future helps reveal how a spiritual system empowers its adherents in a complex web of relationships shaped by history, politics, and economics.

Previous studies

Haitian Vodou developed significantly during an era of slavery, war, and the early years of independence. The people who were best able to capture the history of this religion—those who practiced it—were systematically denied the means to write down and document their experiences and their histories. And so the history of Vodou, like the history of Haiti, is “layered in silences.”⁴⁴ Consequently, Vodou and its early forms of practice have been an open field for writers to project, as V. Y. Mudimbe would have it, their “ideas” onto the religion and those who practice it, which too often reflected colonial (and even post-colonial) animosity, disavowal, and a compulsion to “other” their subjects.⁴⁵ Colonial accounts, in addition to observations and scholarship of the

‘this world’ . . . so that the order in which one will have a place might be maintained;” see *From Blessing to Violence: History and Ideology in the Circumcision Ritual of the Merina of Madagascar* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 175.

⁴⁴ Laurent Dubois, “Vodou and History,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 43, no. 1 (Jan 2001): 95.

⁴⁵ I would argue that Mudimbe’s overall charge that historically, Western scholarship has constructed false ideas and knowledge of Africa and Africans—fantasies that coincided with colonialism—may also be applied to the histories of Haiti and Vodou; see *The Idea of Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994); and *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy and order of Knowledge* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988). These representations typify, through their trappings and dynamics, a colonial discourse wherein, according to Homi Bhabha, a “fixity” arises that places people in an “ideological construction of otherness.” Bhabha defines fixity as a “sign of cultural/historical/racial difference in the discourse of colonialism,” that takes on a “paradoxical mode of representation: it connotes rigidity and an unchanging order as well as disorder, degeneracy and daemonic repetition;” see “The Other Question: Stereotype, Discrimination and the Discourse of Colonialism,” in *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 66. In this situation, representation assumes a knowledge of and a knowledge over people and culture. Through a subjectifying discourse, knowledge produced in representation, perpetuates a stereotype. Knowledge, as Edward Said argues in the case of Orientalism, is a discourse constructed by the West that conceives of an Orient, or anyone perceived as different—an “Other.” Orientalizing, then, is a process that constructs knowledge, systematizes, generalizes, abstracts,

nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, have too often worked within these parameters; and even up to the last couple decades some writers have intentionally or unwittingly, exoticized, criticized, or politicized Vodou. Fortunately, over the past twenty years a new body of literature has emerged, built upon the work of those scholars who have made productive contributions, and with this development, a new and long overdue focus on the visual arts. The works that I highlight here are either those that have figured prominently in the scholarship or those with which I have been in a tacit dialogue.

One of the earliest and most notable works on Haiti and its cultural traditions appeared in 1928: Jean Price-Mars's *Ansi Parla l'Oncle* (So Spoke the Uncle).⁴⁶ A physician, diplomat, and intellectual, Price-Mars focused on Vodou's African roots and promoted its categorization as a religion. Writing in the mid-1920s, during the time of the U.S. Occupation and consequently a period of profound humiliation in Haiti, Price-Mars empowered Haitian culture by looking "home" to Africa, and away from France. Vodou provided something tangible for the cultural elite of Haiti to claim as their own. Although it created a foundation for the Negritude movement and empowered theoreticians, it came, however, at the expense of practitioners.⁴⁷ Of this appropriation of Vodou by the intelligentsia and the *mouvement folklorique*, Harold Courlander observed that, "Vodoun was intellectualized and emotionalized. And yet all this did little to

distances, romanticizes, and controls; it allows the West to speak of and for the East, which supposedly cannot speak for itself; see *Orientalism* (Pantheon Books, 1978; New York: Vintage, 1979).

⁴⁶ Jean Price-Mars, *So Spoke the Uncle*, trans. Magdaline W. Shannon (France: Imprimerie de Compiègne, 1928; Washington, D.C.: Three Continents Press, 1983).

⁴⁷ Magdaline Shannon notes that while leading "French-speaking black writers" championed Jean Price-Mars as the father of the Negritude movement, Price-Mars himself did not "consider this concept as differentiating the Negro from the rest of mankind;" see *ibid.*, ix.

change the institution of Vodoun or to better the status or condition of those for whom Vodou was a system of life."⁴⁸

Within a decade of Price-Mars's landmark publication, Melville Herskovits published *Life in a Haitian Valley*, one of the first anthropological studies on Haiti, and on Vodou in particular.⁴⁹ Herskovits's most considerable scholarly legacies are the notions of acculturation, syncretism, and retentions, which presuppose an *a priori* and fixed African baseline, and accordingly have received considerable criticisms in the last several decades. A major challenge to Herskovits's "encounter model" came from Sidney Mintz and Richard Price in their 1976 publication, *The Birth of African-American Culture: an Anthropological Perspective*.⁵⁰ They argued that enslaved Africans and their descendents were culturally heterogeneous, that they created institutions during the first few decades in the Americas with attention to process, and that they exercised significant agency under oppressive conditions. With a focus on agency, process, and heterogeneity, Diaspora studies could be released from previous models that focused on structuralism, functionalism, and syncretism.

Before Mintz's and Price's publication, folklorist and ethnomusicologist Harold Courlander and sociologist George Simpson also focused on African retentions in the Americas. Although Courlander published his first book on Haitian music in 1939, it

⁴⁸ Harold Courlander, "Vodoun in Haitian Culture," in *Religion and Politics in Haiti* (Washington D.C.: Institution for Cross-Cultural Research, 1966), 24.

⁴⁹ Melville Herskovits, *Life in a Haitian Valley* (Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1937; Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1971).

⁵⁰ See Sidney Mintz and Richard Price, *The Birth of African-American Culture: An Anthropological Perspective* (Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human Issues, 1976; Boston: Beacon Press, 1992). Most recently J. Lorland Matory effectively challenged Herskovits and emphasized the transnational and transformative realities of Afro-Atlantic religions, namely Brazilian Candomblé; see *Black Atlantic Religion: Tradition, Transnationalism, and Matriarchy in the Afro-Brazilian Candomblé* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2005), 10-16.

was his 1960 publication, *The Drum and the Hoe: Life and Lore of the Haitian People* that became most influential, which examined Vodou, folklore, music, carnival, and the visual arts.⁵¹ Simpson did his fieldwork in the northern town of Plaisance during the late 1930s, and in the following decade published a series of articles describing specific ceremonies, the *lwa*, and the integration of Catholicism. Simpson drew attention to regional differences, placed Vodou in a historical context, and ultimately argued for its role in promoting social cohesion.⁵²

A major departure in American scholarship on Vodou came with filmmaker and dancer Maya Deren. In 1947 Deren went to Haiti for an eight-month stay with the intention of filming Vodou dances, but soon shifted her focus to understanding the depth of Vodou mythology. Of this move she reflected that, “I had begun as an artist, as one who would manipulate the elements of a reality into a work of art in the image of my creative integrity; I end by recording, as humbly and accurately as I can, the logics of a reality which had forced me to recognize its integrity, and to abandon my manipulations.”⁵³ With her artistic perspective, Deren’s endeavor resulted in one of the most significant publications on Haitian Vodou that remains a classic to this day: *Divine Horsemen: the Living Gods of Haiti*. Although she lacked an ethnographer’s rigor, which may account for neglecting to make regional differentiations, corroborating her

⁵¹ See Harold Courlander, *Haiti Singing* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1939; New York: Cooper Square Publishers, Inc., 1973); and *The Drum and the Hoe: Life and Lore of the Haitian People* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1960).

⁵² Simpson's early publications on Haiti include "The Vodun Service in Northern Haiti," *American Anthropologist* 42, 2 (1940): 236-254; "Belief System of Haitian Vodoun," *American Anthropologist* 47 (January-March 1945): 35-59; "Four Vodoun Ceremonies," *Journal of American Folklore* 59, no. 232 (April-June 1946): 154-167; and "Two Vodun-Related Ceremonies," *Journal of American Folklore* 61, 239 (1948): 49-52.

⁵³ Maya Deren, *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti* (London and New York: Thames and Hudson, 1953; New York: Documentext, 1983), 6. Citations are to the Documentext edition.

interpretations with informants, and emphasizing mythic universalisms and archetypes (undoubtedly enhanced by the influence of her father-psychiatrist and Joseph Campbell), this work nevertheless offers illuminating analyses of cosmology, the role of the *ounfò*'s personnel, music, dance, and insightful descriptions of the *lwa* enriched by poignant anecdotes. Deren bolstered her study with the work of Herskovits, Courlander, and Simpson in addition to the work of Haitian writers Milo Rigaud and Louis Maximilien.⁵⁴ Dancer, anthropologist, and Herskovits protégé, Katherine Dunham, who conducted her initial fieldwork in Haiti in 1937, most likely influenced Deren's analysis of dance.⁵⁵ Deren also attempted to make a case for the Amerindian influences on Vodou, an argument that had never before been made so comprehensively, and one that has yet to receive thorough study.⁵⁶

Deren's was the first of several important works during the 1950s to cover a considerable range of Haitian religious, cultural, and social traditions. Another significant publication that broke with Herskovits is Alfred Métraux's *Voodoo in Haiti*.⁵⁷ Métraux, a French anthropologist, worked in the Maribial Valley during the late 1940s under the auspices of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural

⁵⁴ Rigaud emphasized the esoteric aspects of Vodou, particularly those based in Gnosticism and the Kabbalah; see *La Tradition voodoo et le voodoo haïtien (son temple, ses mystères, sa magie)* (Paris: Éditions Niclus, 1953). Maximilien is one of the first scholars to write on Vodou arts and architecture; see *Le Vodou Haïtien: Rites Radas—Canzo* (Port-au-Prince: Imprimerie H. Deschamps 1945; 1982).

⁵⁵ See Katherine Dunham, *Dances of Haiti* (Los Angeles: Center for Afro-American Studies, University of California, Los Angeles, 1983). It is worth noting that Deren served as Dunham's research assistant and later published "Social and Ritual Dances of Haiti," *Dance* 23, 6 (1949), based upon Dunham's research.

⁵⁶ While Deren's section on Amerindian influences addresses a neglected issue, it relies too heavily on one source: Hartley Burr Alexander's *The Mythology of All Races*, vol. xi, Latin-American (Boston: Marshall Jones Company, 1920). It also makes far-stretching assertions and overlooks the legacy of African practices.

⁵⁷ Alfred Métraux, *Voodoo in Haiti*, trans. Hugo Charteris (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959; New York: Schocken Books, 1972). Citations are to the Schocken edition.

Organization (UNESCO). Métraux's first contact with Haiti came in 1941, when the anti-superstition campaigns were in full destructive power—an experience that undoubtedly prompted him not only to address the intersection of Vodou and Christianity, but also to consider Vodou in the present, not simply as a link to the African past. Focusing on its historical context, its social framework, the *lwa*, ritual, and magic, Métraux recognized Vodou as a modern and dynamic religion whose "adepts continually enrich it with fresh contributions both to its mythology and to its liturgy."⁵⁸ Métraux also understood just how human the *lwa* are, emphasizing that they “have the tastes of modern man, his morality and his ambitions.”⁵⁹ Milo Marcelin, a Haitian folklorist, also understood the human nature of the *lwa*. In his two-volume publication, *Mythologie Vodou (Rite Arada)*, Marcelin offered profiles of the major *lwa* that include their mythological roles, songs, Catholic counterparts, and most interestingly, anecdotes conveying their human qualities.⁶⁰ Accompanying these descriptions are the corresponding *vèvè* (invocative designs) for the *lwa*, drawn by artist and *oungan* Hector Hippolyte.

Over time, increasing numbers of scholars began to study Vodou in the context of Haitian history, economics, and politics. In 1966, ethnographer Rémy Bastien published "Vodoun and Politics in Haiti," in which he argued that Vodou owes its survival to its ties with politics, nationalism, and class struggle, ties that have impeded progress in

⁵⁸ Ibid., 365.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Milo Marcelin, *Mythologie Vodou (Rite Arada)* 1 (Port-au-Prince: Les Éditions Haitiennes, 1950); and *Mythologie Vodou (Rite Arada)* 2 (Pétionville, Haiti: Éditions Canapé, 1950).

Haiti.⁶¹ Moreover, he stated that Vodou is no longer a religion of revolution but rather, a system manipulated by political leaders to create an image of nationalism and maintenance of power. Undoubtedly, Bastien had François Duvalier in mind. In the same book, Harold Courlander addressed Duvalier's connections to Vodou by suggesting that he controls it as he does other aspects of Haitian life.⁶² Under Duvalier's system, *oungan* who cooperate are safe from raids and destruction while those who fail to cooperate are in danger. Courlander also refuted the notion that Vodou is responsible for Haiti's slow development and its "backwardness."⁶³

Social anthropologist Michel Laguerre examined the relationship between Vodou, Haitian history, social structure, politics, and land. In an article published in 1973, Laguerre provided an outline of the historical development of Vodou in its social context.⁶⁴ Central to this development is the *lakou*, an agrarian family compound headed by the family patriarch, or the *pe*. With the rise of the *lakou*, Vodou moved from private and secret practice to a familial religion. The consequence of this shift was that ritual and land became intertwined. A few years later, Serge Larose expanded Laguerre's work, arguing for the connections among land, kinship, and ritual by focusing on the structural properties of the *lakou*, how it fits within a land inheritance framework, and its ties to ritual and the ancestors.⁶⁵ Also relating to issues of the land, Gerald Murray, in 1980,

⁶¹ Rémy Bastien, "Vodoun and Politics in Haiti," in *Religion and Politics in Haiti* (Washington, D.C.: Institute for Cross-Cultural Research, 1966), 39-68.

⁶² Harold Courlander, "Vodoun in Haitian Culture," in *ibid.*, 1-26.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁶⁴ Michel Laguerre, "The Place of Voodoo in the Social Structure of Haiti," *Caribbean Quarterly* 19, no. 3 (1973): 36-50.

⁶⁵ Serge Larose, "The Haitian Lakou, Land, Family, and Ritual," in *Family and Kinship in Middle America and the Caribbean: Proceedings of the 14th Seminar of at the Committee on Family Research of the*

addressed how land tenure and economics affect ritual.⁶⁶ He provided a quantitative analysis that suggests that land circulates through economic transactions, the major reason for which is to finance rituals. Therefore, Vodou is an integral part of land circulation and part of a system that evolved from the nineteenth century when both land and spirits were inherited bilaterally. The common thread woven throughout the work of these scholars is the integral relationship among land, family, and ritual.

Another focus in the scholarship is the relationship between Vodou and Catholicism, a significant area of study considering that most Haitians practice both religions to varying degrees, and often without personal conflict. In his book, *The Faces of the Gods: Vodou and Roman Catholicism in Haiti*, Haitian scholar of religion Leslie Desmangles, considered Vodou a "by-product of Catholicism and traditional religions from various regions of Africa."⁶⁷ Rather than upholding the Herskovits syncretic model, Desmangles drew from Roger Bastide's idea of "syncretism in mosaic" to argue for an understanding of Vodou as a symbiosis, a spatial and temporal "juxtaposition of diverse religious traditions from two continents which coexist without fusing with one another."⁶⁸ While it is helpful here to see in Desmangles's work examples of how Vodou's relationship to Catholicism and its images is largely superficial and based on visual similarities (a suggestion that is hardly novel, given that French writer and

International Sociological Association, Curaçao, September 1975, ed. Arnaud F. Marks and René A. Römer (Williamstad: Institute of Higher Studies, 1978), 482-512.

⁶⁶ Gerald Murray, "Population Pressure, Land Tenure, and Voodoo: The Economics of Haitian Peasant Rituals," in *Beyond the Myths of Culture: Essays in Cultural Materialism*, ed. Eric B. Ross (New York: Academic Press, 1980), 295-321.

⁶⁷ Leslie Desmangles, *Faces of the Gods: Vodou and Roman Catholicism in Haiti* (Chapel Hill & London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 7.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 8.

ethnographer Michel Leiris made it over thirty years beforehand),⁶⁹ the work's serious shortcoming is a significant lack of historical examination, despite its attempt to place Vodou in a historical context. Not only does Desmangles overlook the work of major historians of Haiti, he makes no mention of the impact of Christian Kongolese people in Haiti's history and the development of Vodou.⁷⁰

A significant amount of scholarship during the late 1980s and 1990s addressed the political and the social dimensions of Vodou and its place in the Haitian experience, a movement that continues into the current decade. A scholar who has made major contributions in this direction, and one whose words and ideas appear frequently throughout this dissertation, is anthropologist Karen McCarthy Brown. While I draw from several of her publications, two in particular stand out from the others. First among these is "Systematic Remembering, Systematic Forgetting: Ogou in Haiti," which appeared in a volume entitled *African's Ogun: Old World and New*, edited by Sandra T. Barnes.⁷¹ Brown examined the different faces of the Ogou complex within the Haitian social and historical context. In urban Haiti, Ogou is an embodiment of power—power that protects and heals, but also power that betrays and destroys. Brown argued that the

⁶⁹ See Michel Leiris, "On the Use of Catholic Religious Prints by the Practitioners of Voodoo in Haiti," *The Evergreen Review* 4, no. 13 (May-June 1960): 84-94.

⁷⁰ On this Kongolese impact, see John Thornton "The Development of the African Catholic Church in the Kingdom of Kongo, 1491-1750," *The Journal of African History* 24, no. 2 (1984): 147-167; *The Kongolese Saint Anthony: Dona Beatriz Kumpa Vita and the Antonian Movement, 1684-1706* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Terry Rey, "Kongolese Catholic Influences on Haitian Popular Catholicism," in *Central Africans and Cultural Transformations in the American Diaspora*, ed. Linda M. Heywood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 265-285; and Hein Vanhee, "Central African Popular Christianity and the Making of Haitian Vodou Religion," in *Central Africans and Cultural Transformations in the American Diaspora*, ed. Linda M. Heywood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 243-264.

⁷¹ Karen McCarthy Brown, "Systematic Remembering, Systematic Forgetting: Ogou in Haiti," in *Africa's Ogun: Old World and New*, ed. Sandra T. Barnes, 2nd and expanded ed. (1989; Reprint, Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1997), 65-89. Citations are to the second edition.

contradictions of Haitian military and political history not only reveal themselves, but also become comprehensible when filtered through the lens of Ogou.

Similarly, Brown also explained the *lwa* through the lives of people. In her most significant contribution to the field, *Mama Lola: a Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn*, Brown focused on the life of Alourdes Kowalski, a Haitian-born *manbo* living in Brooklyn, New York.⁷² Brown wove together the people (past and present) and major events of Alourdes Kowalski's life, stories of the *lwa*, and the social and economic realities of Haiti and its diasporic community in New York City. By focusing on the life of one Haitian woman and her family, Brown conveyed how Vodou is a religion of healing and community building, one that recognizes and nurtures the complex web of relationships between humans, the ancestors, and the *lwa*. This understanding of Vodou has influenced my thinking about it and my experiences with it. While problems may arise with any biography, the book nonetheless offers an insightful and poignant glimpse into a complex religious world.⁷³

While Brown explored the healing and relational qualities of Vodou, literary scholar Joan Dayan delved into Haiti's complicated colonial past in her seminal *Haiti, History, and the Gods*. To reinforce and expand the historical, she added to it ethnography and literary fieldwork, all the while exposing the colonial excesses,

⁷² Karen McCarthy Brown, *Mama Lola*.

⁷³ One of the criticisms of the books came from Alourdes Kowalski herself. Brown relates a discussion with Alourdes in which the *manbo* declared, "I hate that book, I hate it!" Several months later, according to Brown, Alourdes gave her reason: "I hate that book because it does not change . . . and I do." Tensions between the two women eventually eased and the book made its way back onto Alourdes's altar; see "Telling a Life through Haitian Vodou: An Essay Concerning Race, Gender, Memory, and Historical Consciousness," in *Religion and Cultural Studies*, ed. Susan L. Mizruchi (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001), 22.

violence, exploitations, and revolts that “rituals of history” reenact.⁷⁴ Dayan took an unflinching look at the horrors of the past, manifested in the rituals and narratives of the present. She dispensed with the “straightjacket pairs” of colonizer/colonized, slave/master, victimizer/victim, and focused on “what remains to a large extent an unreconstructible past—the response of slaves to the terrors of slavery, to colonists, to the New World,” and tried “to imagine what cannot be verified.”⁷⁵ Underlying this attempt is Vodou. Rather than giving way to escapism or frenzy, her emphasis, she stated, is on the

intensely intellectual puzzlement, the process of thought working itself through terror that accounts for what I have always recognized as the materiality of vodou practice, its concreteness, its obsession with details and fragments, with the very things that might seem to block or hinder belief. This sense of invention goaded by thought leads me to claim that vodou practices must be viewed as ritual reenactments of Haiti’s colonial past, even more than as retentions from Africa.⁷⁶

Whether or not Dayan succeeded in her reconstruction of Haitian history through Vodou is secondary to her posing the questions and her attempt to reveal what Vodou captures and what the written archive neglects: the responses of the enslaved to the excesses and abuses of the slave master’s power. With this focus, Dayan’s inquiry is crucial for any subsequent examination of Vodou, history, and remembrance.

Although Louis Maximilien published his study on Vodou sacred space, altars, and ritual in 1945,⁷⁷ a larger degree of scholarship since has focused on Vodou

⁷⁴ Dayan, *Haiti, History, and the Gods*, 36-37.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, xvii and xix.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ See Maximilien, *Le Vodou Haitien: Rite Radas—Canzo*.

performance and ritual than on its visual arts and aesthetics.⁷⁸ Fortunately, during the last two decades scholars have increasingly recognized the extraordinarily visual dimension of Vodou; it is, after all, a religion that encourages artistic expression among its practitioners. Robert Farris Thompson examined Vodou visual expressions in his 1983 publication, *Flash of the Spirit*.⁷⁹ In his chapter devoted to Vodou, Thompson placed sacred arts in their historical and transatlantic context. With his strong emphasis, however, on west and central African stylistic influences—namely Fon and Kongo—he fell short of acknowledging the specifically Haitian events that shaped Vodou practice and the objects used therein.

The most significant contribution to the study of Vodou art is the 1995 publication *Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou*, which also accompanied a traveling exhibition.⁸⁰ It brought together Haitian and American scholars of various disciplines including anthropology, religion, sociology, art history, and history to create a spectacular collection of essays on Haitian sacred art, and possibly the best overall work on Haitian visual culture to date. Following a colorful introduction by Donald Cosentino, the volume's editor, Suzanne Blier examined Vodou's west African roots among Fon peoples. Similarly, Robert Farris Thompson considered central African underpinnings in

⁷⁸ See, for example, Erika Bourguignon, *Possession* (San Francisco: Chandler and Sharp Publishers, Inc., 1976); Ira Lowenthal, "Ritual Performance and Religious Experience: A Service for the Gods in Southern Haiti," *Journal of Anthropological Research* 34, 3 (1978): 392-415; Michelle Anderson, "Authentic Voodoo is Synthetic," *The Drama Review* 26, no. 2 (1982): 89-106; Alan Goldberg, "Identity and Experience in Haitian Voodoo Shows," *Annals of Tourism Research* 10, no. 4 (1983): 479-495; Lynn Martin, "Six Haitian Vodou Dances," *Visual Anthropology* 8 (1996): 219-249; and Kate Ramsey, Vodou, Nationalism, and Performance: The Staging of Folklore in Mid-Twentieth-Century Haiti," in *Meaning in Motion: New Cultural Studies of Dance*, ed. Jane C. Desmond (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1997): 345-378.

⁷⁹ Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy* (1983; reprint, New York: Vintage Books, 1984), 163-189.

⁸⁰ *Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou*, ed. Donald Cosentino (Los Angeles: Regents of the University of California, 1995).

Vodou arts in addition to an analysis of Vodou drums. The remaining articles examined Vodou social history, American fantasy and Vodou, ritual service to the spirits, a “sorcerer’s bottle,” sacred banners, the iron art of Georges Liautaud, and an analysis of some of the most popular *lwa* including Ogou, the Marassa, and the Gedes. It challenged previous notions of Vodou and Haiti, updated the literature, and featured beautiful images of altars, sacred objects, paintings, and ritual performance throughout its pages.⁸¹

While each article was a significant contribution, two in particular were helpful for my own work with Vodou magic and secret societies. The first is Rachel Beauvoir-Dominique’s analysis of magic, which focused on magic as a vision of necessity and a movement of resistance. She traced the many traditions that contributed to the development of magic in Haiti—Amerindian and maroon resistance; Catholicism, particularly devotion to St. Jacque and Marianism; Freemasonry; Gnosticism; and the Kabbalah, among others. She delved into the abstract, the latent, and the potent in her discussion of the major *lwa* who synthesize a “cosmology of rebellion.”

In the second, Elizabeth McAlister’s examined her “sorcerer’s bottle” and addressed the topic of *zonbi*, or conscripted spirit labor, which has received little critical analysis, with the notable exception of Laënnec Hurbon’s *Le Barbare Imaginaire*.⁸² She took each component of the bottle in turn, linking them carefully to Kongo sources without making sweeping claims that focus on retentions. McAlister also articulated the connection between these Kongo sources, *zonbi*, and secret societies, a move that she developed in her 2002 publication *Rara! Vodou, Power, and Performance in Haiti and*

⁸¹ In 2003, the Abbaye Daoulas in France held an exhibition based on *Sacred Arts* and published a catalogue with many of the same articles translated into French, in addition to new ones and the republishing of passages of older texts; see *Vaudou* (Daoulas: Centre Culturel Abbaye de Daoulas, 2003).

Its Diaspora, the first book published on this Lenten festival.⁸³ In this work McAlister explained the power dynamics and politics played out on the street by Rara bands, and how magical work and conscripted spirit labor cross paths with complicated historic legacies.

I am indebted to the work of many of these scholars. What became apparent to me in much of their scholarship, though not always explicitly stated or expanded upon, is how much history and remembrance—of nation, of family, of the spirit world—have always had a significant role in shaping Vodou practice. Recognizing this underpinning, my task was to then examine how and the degree to which practitioners engage history and remembrance as they create sacred spaces, altars, and objects. Joan Dayan’s consideration of the “rituals of history” led me to question what Vodou visual arts capture that would have otherwise been lost, and to realize that what is remembered, practiced, and evoked in ritual often reflects the challenges of Haiti’s local and transatlantic histories. Rachel Beauvoir-Dominique’s and Elizabeth McAlister’s work have given me further context to frame my questions as well as expand their scope. My last chapter, which deals with magic and the legacy of slavery, could not have come to fruition without their valuable contributions. From the very beginning of my interest in Haitian Vodou, Karen McCarthy Brown’s work has shaped my perceptions of the religion and approach to it. Having read her work early on in my studies, I have consequently viewed and experienced Vodou as an extraordinarily rich and positive religion, one with healing and community building at its very core. This understanding has been my guide.

⁸² Laënnec Hurbon, *Le Barbare Imaginaire* (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1988).

Chapter content

Following this introduction, Chapter Two provides a political and historical backdrop for the dissertation by examining eighteenth-century magico-religious practices in the context of slavery, war, and the move toward liberation. I focus on the revolutionary period because it is the people, events, and practices of this era that appear to a significant degree in Vodou visuality today, and accordingly, my dissertation examines these connections. Identifying how magico-religious practices intersect with organized efforts of resistance not only points to the political and military foundation that underpins such practices, but also helps to explain the strong legacy of militarism and the idea of liberation that shape Vodou. This chapter also recognizes the difference between Vodou history and “official” history by calling attention to the gaps or silences that the latter inevitably produces, and also focuses on key historical figures that Vodou remembers today. It begins to tell a complicated story of war, resistance, liberation, spirituality, and remembrance that unfolds throughout the following chapters.

Many facets of this story converge in Chapter Three, which examines how Vodou’s foremost sacred space, the *ounfò*, serves and strengthens Vodou communities. I consider how the *ounfò* structure, spatial organization, and decoration focus and facilitate sacred activities that lead to purposeful remembrances and to the transmission of *konesans*. In keeping with the nature of Vodou itself, this chapter weaves the historical and the political with the sacred. As a point of departure I turn to Lavilokan, which assumes a special role in Vodou, not only as the religion’s first *ounfò*, but also for being remembered among practitioners today as an emblem of resistance during revolutionary

⁸³ Elizabeth McAlister, *Rara! Vodou, Power, and Performance in Haiti and Its Diaspora* (Berkeley and

times. The historical, political, and sacred threads continue with an examination of two major *lwa* whose images appear prominently in *ounfò*—the venerable creator Danbala and the ever militant Ogou. Their presence, in addition to images and invoked ideas of liberation, link the past to the present, reflect the far reaches of human experience, and promote a social cohesion that builds and empowers communities.

My examination of sacred space continues with Chapter Four, which focuses on altars, the very heart of the *ounfò*. Whereas the larger *ounfò* promotes social cohesion and serves the community, the altar is more personal. As the most concentrated and orchestrated site of spiritual energy in the *ounfò*, altars are the ideal place to conduct healing work, often done for the benefit of an individual within or outside the community. To enhance the altar's efficacy for such work, the practitioner adheres closely to Vodou aesthetic sensibilities that not only affect altar production, but also strengthen the maker's relationship with the specific *lwa* with whom they work most closely. What emerges is a highly interpretive and diachronic process that incorporates and expands Vodou iconology by assembling and recycling seemingly disparate elements drawn from personal and social experiences, remembrances, and histories. The resulting altar creation is an individual, dynamic, and evolving expression of a practitioner/altar maker's aesthetic and spiritual sensibilities.

Chapter Five offers an expanded context for understanding *pwen*, or focused points of energy. Although *pwen* appear in many forms, from the tangible to the spoken, I examine *pwen* as objects that practitioners deploy in the context of magic, or *maji*. In doing so, I consider the historical and socioeconomic context of their production and operation, and compare them to the *prenda* object of the Cuban Palo Mayombe religion

(cognate with *pwen* and *maji*) a move that underscores their translocalism and transatlantic scope, and well as places them in the larger Black Atlantic context.⁸⁴ This is the first study that considers *pwen* in this way and brings into focus just how pragmatic these religions and their objects are. As art historian David Brown asserts, “the religions of the African Diaspora are immediate, humanistic, and practical.”⁸⁵ This chapter ultimately addresses why practitioners employ strategies of binding to create these objects, how such strategies reflect historic and current realities of domination, labor, and consumption, and how, despite the morally ambiguous quality of these objects, they nevertheless offer people a sense of self-determinism in their lives.

This study contributes to the existing literature on Vodou visual production by proving an in-depth analysis of sacred spaces, altars, and *pwen* objects. In doing so, I chart a course that brings together diverse disciplines enabling me to expand the scope and context of this study. Because Vodou has a significant political dimension and a strong ideology of liberation, understanding the art that practitioners create in relation to Haitian history and social memory is of utmost importance. By weaving together the historical, the social, the political, and the cosmological, along with an emphasis on practitioner agency, this dissertation provides a new and expanded understanding of Vodou sacred spaces and arts.

⁸⁴ See Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993; rpt., Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999).

⁸⁵ See “Altared Spaces: Afro-Cuban Religions and the Urban Landscape in Cuba and the United States,” in *Gods of the City: Religion and the American Urban Landscape*, ed. Robert A. Orsi (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999), 158.

Chapter 2: Magico-Religious Practices and the Move toward Liberation

On a typical hot June afternoon in 2002, an American and an Italian friend and I were chatting with a young *oungan* named Jean-Pierre Fleurival in his *ounfò* while drinking our refreshing *kokas* (colas) under numerous rows of small Haitian flags suspended from the ceiling. Jean-Pierre had invited the three of us to stay for a small ceremony that was not due to begin for another couple of hours. As soon as we finished our drinks he stated eagerly, “Come with me—there is something I want to show you.”

We followed him out into the narrow streets of Fort Mercredi, a neighborhood in Port-au-Prince that inches its way up the mountain in a series of steep streets and passageways. Jean-Pierre climbed up onto the rooftop of a building and leapt three feet to the corner of the next rooftop, and the three of us followed him with some trepidation. Eventually he led us to an open space with an extraordinary view of the city and the bay. We followed him tentatively for about twenty feet over piles of refuse wondering what he possibly wanted to show us. When we got to the edge of a precipice Jean-Pierre pointed to a large hole about two feet in diameter that had been covered by a sheet of metal. “You see this?” he asked. “This is the opening of a long tunnel that goes all the way down the hill and to the sea. It was built during the war by our forefathers as a strategic means of defense against the French.” Jean-Pierre paused to let us reconsider what we were looking at. Emphatically, he added, “Toussaint’s people built this tunnel, and many others like it.” As Jean-Pierre talked at great length about military strategies in the Port-au-Prince region during the Haitian Revolution and war of independence we gazed at the tunnel entrance, each in our own minds trying to re-envision what this place meant to

those who lived it over two hundred years earlier, and what it means now, in the evolving present.

This kind of instruction in remembrance by an *oungan* was one of many I experienced while talking with Vodou practitioners, visiting their sacred spaces, and observing or participating in ceremonies. Many of these remembrances commemorate the people and events of and surrounding the Haitian Revolution and war of independence (1791-1803), particularly those people who, in Vodou history, engaged in magico-religious practices to establish a military and political foundation for the move toward liberation.¹ The degree to which these practices actually inspired the initial insurrections and affected the course of the thirteen-year war is difficult to determine, and beyond the scope of this chapter.² What is more pertinent here is that these are the people and events Vodou practice remembers today.

The official written record of this era—composed mainly of colonial decrees, reports, legal documents, correspondence, and chronicles—creates gaps of knowledge as it fills them.³ Not only is slave agency excluded from the historical archive of Saint-

¹ I apply the term “magico-religious” practices to this era because the term “Vaudoux” was applied broadly and imprecisely by colonialists, and the religion we know today as “Vodou” was still evolving.

² Many scholars based in a nationalist tradition have argued for the key role Vodou played to inspire the massive slave revolt of August 1791, connecting Vodou with events leading to Haitian independence in 1804, often not making clear their sources or being critical of them. David Geggus provides a brief description of this tradition. He has scrutinized these claims and concludes that because of scant or problematic evidence, one cannot state with certainty that Vodou was inherently political or as Laguerre asserts, possessed an “ideology of liberation;” see “Haitian Voodoo in the Eighteenth Century: Language, Culture, Resistance,” *Jahrbuch für Geschichte von Staat, Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* 28 (1991): 22. For the individual work Geggus cites as part of this nationalist tradition, see Jean Price-Mars, *So Spoke the Uncle*; Lorimer Denis and François Duvalier, “Évolution stadiale du Vodou,” *Bulletin du Bureau d’Ethnologie d’Haïti* 3 (1944): 9-32; Odette Mennesson-Rigaud, “Le rôle du Vaudou dans l’indépendance d’Haïti,” *Presence Africaine* 17-18 (1958): 43-67; Henock Trouillot, *Introduction à une Histoire du Vaudou* (1970; Port au Prince: Les Editions Fardin, 1983); and Michel Laguerre, “Voodoo and Religious and Revolutionary Ideology,” *Freeing the Spirit* 3, no. 1 (1974): 23-28 and *Voodoo and Politics in Haiti* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1989).

³ Recent scholarship has made tremendous progress in addressing this problem. Anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot’s *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon, 1995) draws

Domingue, as Laurent Dubois points out, but the fragments of this record are distorted and limited, revealing not the actual lived experiences of slaves, but rather the judgments, fears, and suspicions the colonialists leveled against them.⁴ As Michel-Rolph Trouillot asserts, “any historical narrative is a particular bundle of silences,” an inevitable outcome of the unequal production of historical facts.⁵ But Vodou, as Joan Dayan so provocatively puts forth, provides its own history, and for its practitioners these stories are real, powerful, and remembered.⁶ Where historical sources fall short, Vodou songs, sacred spaces, altars, objects, and the *lwa* themselves give voice to the silence.

Many people of this era constitute the collection of names I heard many times in songs and the images I saw on *ounfò* walls. I also saw haunting objects in Vodou spaces that keep this past powerfully alive in the present. Resistance, war, and liberation produced a legacy that Vodou practitioners today hold strongly, evoke purposefully, and recreate continually, allowing them to empower and assert themselves and their ancestors

out the many problems with the historical production of Haiti’s history. In addition, literary scholar Sibylle Fischer’s recent work, *Modernity Disavowed: Haiti and the Cultures of Slavery in the Age of Revolution* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004), looks beyond the official written record to link slave resistance with modernity. Historians have also made recent strides in contributing to the scholarship on the Haitian Revolution and war of independence. David Geggus’s works on various aspects of the war now appear in a collective volume, *Haitian Revolutionary Studies* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2002). Geggus also edited a volume of essays that addresses how the Haitian Revolution resonated throughout the Atlantic world; see *The Impact of the Haitian Revolution in the Atlantic World* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2001). Laurent Dubois’s recent publication, *Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), is also a significant contribution.

⁴ Laurent Dubois, “The Citizen’s Trance: The Haitian Revolution and the Motor of History,” in *Magic and Modernity: Interfaces of Revelation and Concealment*, ed. Birgit Meyer and Peter Pels (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 112. On this point also see Gabriel Debien, *Les Esclaves aux Antilles Françaises XVIIe-XVIIIe Siècles* (Basse-Terre: Société d’Histoire de la Guadeloupe, 1974), 8. Historian Jeremy Popkin points out that descriptions of the initial insurrections in the local press “followed a rigid ideological formula [that] emphasizes the cruelty and destructiveness of insurgents, whose actions were categorized as crimes against the paternal plantation owners;” see “Facing Racial Revolution: Captivity Narratives and Identity in the Saint-Domingue Insurrection,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 36, no. 4 (2003): 514.

⁵ Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 27 and 49.

⁶ See Dayan, *Haiti, History, and the Gods*.

within Haitian history. Drawing from portions of the available, yet problematic official record, this chapter examines eighteenth-century magico-religious practices as resistant actions in the context of slavery and war, and points to why Vodou practice today actively absorbs and remembers the complicated ideal of liberation.

“Vaudoux” in eighteenth-century Saint-Domingue

Once known from a profiteer’s point of view as the “Pearl of the Antilles,” eighteenth-century Saint-Domingue, about the size of the state of Maryland, was the richest colony in the world, leading all other European colonies in sugar and coffee production and thus providing France a key position in the world economy. By 1776, the prosperity of Saint-Domingue surpassed the wealth produced by the entire American Spanish empire.⁷ By the 1780s, with 8,000 plantations producing export crops, Saint-Domingue reached its economic peak.

This could only be accomplished by forced labor. As the Spanish decimated the native Amerindian population through toil and disease, they began to import enslaved Africans by 1503, a practice that continued with the French when the Spanish ceded the western third of Hispaniola with the 1697 Treaty of Ryswick. To meet the exploitive labor demands required by the plantation economy, and to offset the continuous depletion of the slave labor force, the colony increasingly imported people from the African continent. Importations increased significantly during the eighteenth century when sugar

⁷ James E. McClellan III, *Colonialism and Science: Saint Domingue in the Old Regime* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 2.

became the most profitable crop.⁸ According to Philip Curtin, the slave population of Saint-Domingue increased from 2,000 in 1681 to 480,000 in 1791, the year the Haitian Revolution began.⁹ The exceedingly laborious, exacting, and dangerous process of sugar production, in addition to the horrendous working and living conditions on those and other plantations, contributed to a high slave mortality rate, so much so that fifty percent of all newly arrived Africans died within their first three to eight years on the island.¹⁰ This continuous importation of Africans changed the dynamics of the population of Saint-Domingue. At the eve of the war, for example, the slave population totaled nearly 500,000 while there were only an estimated 40,000 whites, and 30,000 free people of color,¹¹ who by 1789 owned nearly one-quarter of Saint-Domingue's real estate and one-third of all its plantations.¹² Not only were the free people of color gaining more wealth and increasingly becoming a threat to the whites, the slave population, with 30,000 people imported each year between 1785 and 1790, was becoming more African.¹³

⁸ For more on the relationship between the production of sugar in Europe's Caribbean colonies, its rise in the world market, and its role in slavery, see Sidney W. Mintz, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* (New York: Penguin Books, 1986), particularly 19-73.

⁹ Philip D. Curtin, *The Atlantic Slave Trade: A Census* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1969), 75-78.

¹⁰ Debien, 343-347.

¹¹ Geggus, "Haitian Voodoo," 23.

¹² Carolyn Fick, *The Making of Haiti: The Saint Domingue Revolution from Below* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1990), 19. Fick also observes that the free people of color owned one-quarter of the slave population.

¹³ David Geggus, "The Haitian Revolution," in *The Modern Caribbean*, ed. Franklin W. Knight and Colin A. Palmer (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 23.

According to David Geggus, slave inventories for the period during the late 1780s and 1790s, indicate that sixty to seventy percent of the slaves were born in Africa.¹⁴

Although the slave population was increasingly African born, it was by no means homogeneous. In fact, in his 1797 *Description . . . de l'isle de Saint-Domingue*, Moreau de Saint-Méry, a Paris-educated Creole chronicler and lawyer from Martinique, cites several of the major regions from which many of the slaves originated and when they arrived.¹⁵ Moreau states that importation began in the early sixteenth century with slaves arriving from the upper west coast of Africa. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, slavers progressed down the coast of Africa to the Ivory, Gold (Ghana), and Slave coasts (Togo, Benin, and western Nigeria) where many of the enslaved included people of Yoruba, Fon, Arada, Hausa, and Ibo ancestry. Another significant group of Africans came from central Africa, particularly Congo and Angola, and even beyond 1773, slavers looked east to Mozambique.¹⁶ As heterogeneous as the slave population of

¹⁴ David Geggus, "Sugar and Coffee Cultivation in Saint Domingue and the Shaping of the Slave Labor Force," in *Cultivation and Culture: Work Process and the Shaping of Afro-American Culture in the Americas*, ed. Ira Berlin and Philip Morgan (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1993), 79-81.

¹⁵ M.L.-E. Moreau de Saint-Méry, *Description topographique, physique, civile, politique et historique de la partie française de l'île Saint-Domingue avec des observations générales sur la population sur la caractère et les mœurs de ses divers habitants, sur son climat sa culture, ses productions, son administration*, etc. (Paris, 1797, 1875), 1:28-46. Although published in 1797, Moreau wrote the text during the 1780s. David Geggus and Stephan Palmié suggest that Moreau based his work on second-hand accounts. See Geggus, "Haitian Voodoo in the Eighteenth Century," 23; and Stephan Palmié, "Conventionalization, Distortion, and Plagiarism in the Historiography of Afro-Caribbean Religion in New Orleans," in *Creoles and Cajuns: French Louisiana—La Louisiane Française* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang), 321. For more on this point, see note 72 in Chapter Five of this dissertation.

¹⁶ Fick, 26. For a list of works that focus on the French slave trade to the French Antilles, see Fick, 281, n. 59. For more on the complexities of determining the "ethnicity" of slave origin and the importance of focusing on the heterogeneity of African origins, see Philip Morgan, "The Cultural Implications of the Atlantic Slave Trade: African Regional Origins, American Destinations and New World Developments," *Slavery and Abolition, a Journal of Slave and Post-slave Studies* 18, (1997), 122-145. Serge Larose suggests that while the notion of "nation" may have encompassed ethnic traits, "nation" also reflected a colonial ideology that reformulated various ethnic labels depending on the degree of acculturation and ability to assimilate according to French values; see "The Meaning of Africa in Haitian Vodou," in *Symbols and Sentiments: Cross-Cultural Studies in Symbolism*, ed. Ioan M. Lewis (London: Academic Press, 1977), 102. In current Vodou practice, the term *nanchon* refers to a family of *lwa* and typically corresponds to their geographic place of origin. For questions concerning the construction of ethnicity, see J. Lorland

Saint-Domingue was, nations from the sub-Saharan and central African regions composed the majority of the slave population who contributed religious, political, and cultural characteristics that in part forged new institutions in a new world context.¹⁷

Among these institutions, a diverse system of spiritual practices provided the slave population a means to build social cohesion and to establish a small degree of autonomy from the whites. Although the Europeans and affluent Creoles wielded tremendous control over the degree to which the slaves developed and maintained their cultural patterns, ritual practices nevertheless persisted and expanded. A multiplicity of such practices existed, reflecting the various origins of slaves and where they lived. Increasingly during the revolutionary era, these practices, though still diverse, became known as Vaudoux.

With Moreau's *Description*, we have the first mention of Vaudoux. He identifies the practice with Arada peoples, "who are the true followers of Vaudoux in the colony, and who uphold the principles and rules."¹⁸ At the time, Arada was the term applied to Aja-Fon peoples from the western region of the Bight of Benin, namely Togo and Dahomey (now known as the Republic of Benin). For them, according to Moreau, "Vaudoux signifies an almighty and supernatural being upon which all events that happen in the world depend."¹⁹ Moreau states that Vaudoux had been present in the

Matory, "The English Professors of Brazil: On the Diasporic Roots of the Yorùbá Nation," *Comparative Study of Society and History* 41 (1999): 72-103; and Stephan Palmié, "Ethnogenetic Processes and Cultural Transfer in Afro-American Slave Populations," in *Slavery in the Americas*, ed. Wolfgang Bender (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1993), 337-363.

¹⁷ Fick, 26. Here I follow Sidney Mintz and Richard Price who define institution as "any regular or orderly social interaction that acquires a normative character, and can hence be employed to meet recurrent needs." This may include but is not limited to marriage and patterns for establishing relationships, and, I would argue, religion; see *The Birth of African-American Culture*, 23-24.

¹⁸ Moreau, 1:54. All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

¹⁹ Ibid.

colony for a long time, particularly in the western part of the island, and unlike the calenda and the chica, which were popular secular dances, “superstition and bizarre practices” accompanied Vaudoux.²⁰ For example, Moreau describes Vaudoux as a practice involving a nonvenomous snake kept in a box that possesses “the knowledge of the past, the knowledge of the present, and the foreknowledge of the future,” and communicates its power through a high priest chosen by the followers.²¹ Moreau’s description includes the “king” and “queen” who led the ceremony, the altar upon which they placed the snake, the gifts, the animal sacrifice provided, the oath of secrecy binding the adherents, and the possessions, usually begun by principal priests then followed by the other initiates. After the spirit received its offerings and conveyed its knowledge through the mediums, the Vaudoux dance began.

As Hein Vanhee observes, some historians have drawn from Moreau’s account to support their assertion that Vodou originated in the kingdom of Allada in west Africa, and have thus eclipsed distinct ethnic groups practicing under the term Vaudoux.²² The botanist Michel Etienne Descourtilz, writing between 1799 and 1803 as a captive of Jean-Jacques Dessalines’s army, is an exception.²³ In his account of the Mozambiques, Descourtilz describes their ceremony called the “Vaudoux Mozambique,” which like

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid. For Moreau’s full description, see pages 1:53-60.

²² Vanhee, 247.

²³ Descourtilz arrived in Saint-Domingue in 1799 in an unsuccessful attempt to salvage his wife’s plantation. Jeremy Popkin observes that Descourtilz “portrayed himself as an innocent victim of black treachery; he saw no connection between his own efforts to regain control over his wife’s plantation and the blacks distrust of white intentions.” Although Descourtilz’s experiences undoubtedly shaped his writing agenda, with reluctance he acknowledged Toussaint’s intelligence and the understanding of plant medicinal qualities demonstrated by his captors; see Popkin, “Facing Racial Revolution,” 525.

Moreau's account, is a nocturnal event that included dance and for some, possession.²⁴ This indicates that what may have been termed Vaudoux did not strictly apply to Arada peoples, and as David Geggus suggests, Moreau may have applied the term Vaudoux to what might have been Kongo ancient practices involving snakes.²⁵ Not only did colonists apply the general term Vaudoux broadly, slaves may have congregated for dances, whether sacred or secular, along the lines of common origin. In a secular context, for example, Descourtilz states that dances provided the opportunity for slaves to unite based on nationality and for each nation to "display its character and to uphold its glory while each of its members would solicit praises from the spectators."²⁶ In another example pointing to this solidarity, Descourtilz writes of an Ibo man who attempted to join an Arada gathering by offering modest gifts of *tafia* (rum), money, and chickens, but despite his persistence, Arada peoples turned him away.²⁷ An anonymous colonist writing around 1750 noticed this distinction when he stated how the slaves "do not worship the same god; they hate one another and spy one upon the other."²⁸ It is quite likely, then, that writers of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries applied the term

²⁴ Ibid. Vanhee reports that in Descourtilz's manuscript copy of notes, there is no mention of *Vaudoux*, a king, a queen, or snakes when he referred to Arada peoples. Interestingly, however, when Descourtilz defines *Vaudoux* in his 1809 publication, he refers to Moreau who attributes it to an Arada origin; see *Voyage d'un Naturaliste en Haiti: 1799-1803* (1809; Paris: Librairie Plon, 1935), 115. Writing in 1730, Father Charlevoix described the diversity of slave religious practices and attributed to Arada peoples, "the darkest darkness of idolatry and worship of the snake;" see Pierre François-Xavier de Charlevoix, *Histoire de l'Île Espangole ou de Saint Domingue. Ecrite Particulièrement sur des Mémoires Manuscrits du P. Jean Baptiste le Pers, Jésuite, Missionnaire à Saint Domingue, et Sur les Pièces Originales Qui Se Conservent au Dépôt de la Marine* (Paris: Hippolyte Louis Guérin, 1730), 1:366, as cited by Laguerre, *Voodoo and Politics in Haiti*, 30.

²⁵ Geggus, "Haitian Voodoo," 41.

²⁶ Descourtilz, 125-126.

²⁷ Ibid., 126.

²⁸ Lucien Peyraud, "Essai sur l'esclavage," *L'esclavage aux Antilles françaises* (Paris, 1897), 370-371, as cited by Geggus, "Haitian Voodoo," 42.

Vaudoux broadly to diverse magico-religious practices of various African origins that later became integrated,²⁹ and in the case of Moreau, may have been mistaken in their attribution of the term to one group.

Moreau distinguishes Vaudoux from the dance called Dom Père, introduced to the island by a Spanish-born slave also named Dom Père, from the southwestern coastal town Petit-Goâve.³⁰ More convulsive and violent than the Vaudoux, Dom Père participants intensified the dance by drinking a mixture of finely ground gunpowder and *tafia* (raw rum), which in some cases led to casualties, prompting the colonial administration to prohibit the dance. This attempt to suppress the dances and gatherings, however, were to no avail.

Descourtilz describes a man named Dompète (presumably the same Dom Père), referred to as a Vaudoux leader with significant powers of divination.³¹ Dompète may also have been a certain maroon who had been accused of poisoning citizens in the Nippes region near Petit-Goâve. According to testimony given in December 1781 by François Picau, a member of the local *maréchaussée* (a police force that monitored slaves), he and other residents of the region searched for this maroon known as “Sim dit Dompète.”³² Late one evening Picau and a free person of color named “Joseph dit

²⁹ David Geggus, “Marronage, Voodoo, and the Saint Domingue Slave Revolt of 1791,” in *Proceedings of the Fifteenth Meeting of the French Colonial Historical Society Martinique and Guadeloupe, May 1989*, ed. Patricia Galloway and Philip P. Boucher (Lanham, New York, and London: University Press of America, 1992), 30.

³⁰ Moreau, 1:60. Geggus states that “Pedro” is “the name of seven Kongo kings.” After reading hundreds of slave lists, he also points out that it “was probably the most common name borne by ‘Congo’ slaves in Saint Domingue, and this was precisely the period when they came to dominate slave imports;” see “Haitian Voodoo,” 38.

³¹ Descourtilz, 3:181, as cited by Métraux, 39.

³² John D. Garrigus, “A Struggle for Respect: The Free Coloreds of Pre-Revolutionary Saint Domingue, 1760-69” (PhD dissertation, The Johns Hopkins University, 1988), 383. The *maréchaussée* was established to support the colonial militia’s efforts in policing slaves. Although its members were

Aubert” encountered Dompête with a saber in his hand and a *macoute* (sack) suspended from his shoulder. In his own words, Picau instructed Aubert to shoot “this courageous *nègre* Sim, who prefers death to life.” Dompête became determined to open his *macoute*, but after three hours of battle he fell dead.

With this example we have an extraordinary document that details the contents of Dompête’s *macoute*.³³ The most significant objects are seven bound and plumed bundles or charm packets. What is significant here is a colonial-era description of these objects, which are created and used in Vodou practice today. The objects, appropriately referred to as *pakèt kongo*, have a discernable source among Kongo peoples, which I examine more closely in Chapter Five. Robert Farris Thompson points out that in some areas of Haiti, practitioners call them “*Dom Pèdre*,”³⁴ most likely after the same Dompête. Dom Pèdre, as Alfred Métraux states, appears in contemporary Vodou Petwo rites as a *lwa* who demands a salutation of gunpowder detonation.³⁵ His reputation of courage and power is why his image also appears on the walls of *ounfò* today.

In addition to the problem of subsuming the diversity of slave religious practices under the generic term Vaudoux, one may argue that while many facets of Vodou originate in African and Amerindian practices that predate the Haitian Revolution it is the years during and surrounding the war that contributed significantly to the current shape

primarily free people of color, some such as Picau were neither free nor enslaved. Service in the *maréchaussée* was one possible way to receive manumission papers free of charge.

³³ Garrigus includes this in an appendix in his dissertation, see page 431.

³⁴ Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit*, 179. For more on *pakèt kongo*, see Thompson, “From the Isle beneath the Sea: Haiti’s Africanizing Vodou Art, in *Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou*, ed. Donald J. Cosentino (Los Angeles: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History, 1995), 108-114.

³⁵ Métraux, *Voodoo in Haiti*, 39. In current practice, I have seen his name spelled “Don Petro,” “Dan Petwo,” and “Dan Petro.”

of Vodou practice, particularly its references to militarism and liberation.³⁶ Certainly, however, aspects of contemporary Vodou practice existed in the eighteenth century. Michel Laguerre, for example, drawing from the accounts of three colonial observers, concludes that although there was a diversity of religious practices among slaves, particularly according to region, there nevertheless existed six features of unity: belief in a supreme being; ceremonies that climaxed with spiritual possession; a center post through which the spirits appeared; intense dancing; symbolic drawings of the spirits called *vèvè*; and gifts of food to the spirits.³⁷

Because of the tolerance and receptivity to change that characterize the African “religious habitus” as described by Terry Rey, the slaves, many of whom were African born, incorporated Catholic elements into their traditions.³⁸ This practice may in part be a consequence of the *Code Noir* of 1658, which mandated the Christianization of all slaves, prompting some scholars to suggest that African practices merely “syncretized” with Catholicism.³⁹ While later scholars have rightfully criticized or modified this model,⁴⁰ what most have overlooked until recently is the fact that some Africans were

³⁶ Following Jean Price-Mars, George Simpson states that Vodou developed significantly between 1750 and 1790; see “The Belief System of Haitian Vodun,” *American Anthropologist*, 35.

³⁷ Laguerre, *Voodoo and Politics*, 32. The three writers from whom Laguerre draws his conclusion are Colonel Malenfant, Drouin de Bercy, and the botanist M.E. Descourtilz.

³⁸ Terry Rey, *Our Lady of Class Struggle: The Cult of the Virgin Mary in Haiti* (Trenton, NJ and Asmara, Eritrea: African World Press, Inc., 1999), 33. To explain the religious predisposition of the slaves of Saint Domingue, Rey employs Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of “habitus” which attempts to describe the structure of an individual’s dispositions, perceptions, and experiences and how these factors shape one’s behavior; see Bourdieu’s *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 78. One problem with this approach, however, is that it assumes a certain level of predeterminism, which challenges the idea of an individual’s or group’s agency.

³⁹ For example, see Melville Herskovits, “African Gods and the Catholic Saints in New World Negro Belief,” *American Anthropologist* 39 (1937): 635-43.

⁴⁰ See, for example, Roger Bastide, *The African Religions of Brazil: Toward a Sociology of the Interpretation of Civilizations*, trans. Helen Sebba (1960; reprint, Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1978); Mintz and Price, *The Birth of an African-American Culture*; Stephen D.

already Christians before their enslavement and subsequent forced passage to the Americas. John Thornton, for example, demonstrates that a significant number of Christian slaves taken from the Angolan coast contributed to the spread of Catholicism in the Americas.⁴¹ Moreover, many Kongoleses Christians also brought military experience with them.⁴² Elsewhere Thornton states that many slaves in Saint-Domingue had served in African armies before their enslavement, and that those from central Africa may have had the military expertise that contributed to the ultimate success of the war.⁴³

Pre-war resistance: Makandal and Bwa Kayiman

The case of Makandal(s)

One of the most famous people to emerge during the decades preceding the war was a man born in central Africa: François Makandal, a runaway slave from a northern plantation in the Limbé district.⁴⁴ Believed by his followers to have possessed messianic powers, he terrorized the northern plantations of Saint Domingue during the 1750s by

Glazier, "Syncretism and Separation: Ritual Change in an Afro-Caribbean Faith," *Journal of American Folklore* 98, no. 387 (1985): 49-62; Andrew Apter "Herskovits's Heritage: Rethinking Syncretism in the African Diaspora," *Diaspora* 1 (1991): 235-260; Leslie Desmangles, *The Faces of the Gods*; Stephan Palmié, "Against Syncretism: 'Africanizing' and 'Cubanizing' Discourses in North American Orisa Worship," in *Counterworks: Managing the Diversity of Knowledge*, ed. R. Fardon (New York: Routledge, 1995), 73-104; Hein Vanhee, "Central African Popular Christianity;" Terry Rey "Kongoleses Catholic Influences on Haitian Popular Catholicism."

⁴¹ See John Thornton, *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400-1680* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 235-271.

⁴² See John Thornton, "'I am the Subject of the King of Congo': African Political Ideology and the Haitian Revolution," *Journal of World History* 4, no. 2 (1993): 181-214.

⁴³ John Thornton, "African Soldiers in the Haitian Revolution," *The Journal of Caribbean History* 25, nos. 1 and 2 (1991): 59 and 63.

⁴⁴ Geggus suggests that rather than identifying Makandal as a Sudanic Moslem, as historians have done, he asserts that Makandal was more likely of Bantu origin. The basis for this are the amulets he made, which follow a Kongo tradition of charm packets; that Makandal's name is similar to the Kongo word for amulet, 'makunda/makwanda;' and his collaborator's name, Mayombe, is of west central African origin; see "Haitian Voodoo," 32-33.

organizing an extensive network of poison distribution to further his goal of overthrowing the whites. His organizational vehicle of marronage differed from other maroon bands because, as Fick states, Makandal drew from “existing African beliefs and practices . . . for building a resistance movement aimed at nothing less than the destruction of the white masters and of slavery,” and moreover, because of his ability to infiltrate “the plantation system for the recruitment of slave allies and adherents.”⁴⁵ His conspiracy to poison all the households in the region, and launch a massive attack against the whites never reached its final execution.⁴⁶ News of the conspiracy broke and the authorities eventually captured him and burned him at the stake in 1758.

Jean Fouchard suggests that through his network, Makandal may have killed the same number of blacks as whites,⁴⁷ while Hilliard d’Auberteuil, a French observer, goes a step further by suggesting that Makandal killed more slaves than colonists.⁴⁸ This ambiguity surrounding Makandal’s deeds has led some scholars to suggest that Makandal did little to further black resistance and revolutionary zeal. Pierre Pluchon, for example, dismisses stories of Makandal’s revolutionary and messianic qualities.⁴⁹ Even though large-scale poisonings swept through the plantations, killing as many, if not more slaves than whites, one should not so readily dismiss any political potential. For example, one

⁴⁵ Fick, 61. Fick suggests that this infiltration was to further Makandal’s overall goal: the creation of an independent black state, 292, n. 80.

⁴⁶ C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L’Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*, rev. ed. (1963; repr., New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 21.

⁴⁷ Jean Fouchard, *The Haitian Maroons: Liberty or Death* (1972; New York: Edward W. Blyden Press, 1981), 320-21.

⁴⁸ Hilliard d’Auberteuil, *Considérations sur l’état present de la colonie française de Saint-Domingue* (Paris 1776-1777), 1:137, as cited by Geggus, “Haitian Voodoo,” 46.

⁴⁹ Pierre Pluchon, *Vaudou, sorciers, empoisonneurs de Saint-Domingue à Haïti* (Paris: Éditions Karthala, 1987), 182.

magistrate presiding over a slave trial in 1780 offered a motive for slaves killing each other: “revenge for the abuse of slaves, especially of the women, by masters and overseers.”⁵⁰ In another instance, and one perhaps more telling of a growing stance of resistance, a house slave named Médor, and probable ally of Makandal’s, declared at the time of his arrest for suspicion of poisoning that, “If blacks commit poisoning, the end purpose is to gain freedom . . . Among those whose only thought is to destroy the colony there is also a secret which the whites know nothing about and of which the free blacks in the main are the cause, using any means to increase their number so as to be strong enough to oppose the whites when necessary.”⁵¹

Makandal’s name became identified with charms and powers, and even after his death, it continued to spread throughout northern Haiti. One means of this transmission was through the proliferation of small packets of magical and protective substances to which his name became affixed.⁵² The use of *makandals* spread throughout the north despite the decision to outlaw them by the Upper Council of Le Cap in March 1758, just two months after Makandal’s execution. Furthermore, Makandal’s name also became synonymous with spiritual powers and to African priests who practiced “sorcery.”⁵³ Over two hundred years later, the power of his name and legacy is still alive and evoked in Vodou practice.

⁵⁰ As quoted in Fouchard, 329.

⁵¹ *ibid.*, 317.

⁵² See Pluchon, 211.

⁵³ Vanhee, 251, n. 35. From Descourtiz’s manuscript, Vanhee reports that the term “Makandal” was a general term for African “sorcerers” in the eighteenth century.

During the 1770s at the northern parish of Marmelade, slaves working on coffee plantations there used charms similar to the *makandals* of the 1750s. Moreau reports that these slaves, in the trend of mesmerism, gathered for nocturnal ceremonies called *mayombe* or *bila* under the leadership of Jérôme Pôteau and his comrade, Télémaque.⁵⁴ In addition to leading the ceremonies, which Jérôme promised would provide protection against the whites, he sold charms of small chalky stones called *maman-bila*, placed in a bag called a *fonda*. He also sold red and black acacia seeds called *poto* to detect chicken thieves and poisoners. The most significant items Jérôme sold were large wooden sticks that enabled a person to fight better. He charged a considerably larger sum if the sticks were studded with nails and filled with powdered *maman-bila*, or soaked in rum “to anger,” or activate them.⁵⁵ Eventually Jérôme and Télémaque, along with several participants, were arrested and sentenced to the gallows in 1787. Nevertheless, before their arrest and subsequent execution, they established through their ceremonies and protective amulets, early structures of resistance.

Bwa Kayiman⁵⁶

By the early 1790s, mobilization for large-scale revolt among slaves, and even among some free people of color gained momentum. For example, according to letters written by the nuns of Communauté des Religieuses Filles de Notre Dame du Cap-Français, one of their former students, later called Princess Amethyst, joined “the cult of

⁵⁴ Moreau, 1, 326.

⁵⁵ Geggus notes a discrepancy in Moreau’s description. *Mayombo* was not the stick as he stated in his text but rather, according to his own source, it was the pouch of powder; see “Haitian Voodoo,” 33, n. 56. I address object activation in Chapters Four and Five.

⁵⁶ Here I follow the Kreyol spelling rather than the French “Bois Caïman.”

Ghioux, or Voodoo [Vaudoux].”⁵⁷ The nuns reported that one evening she and another young female left the institution, and as if donning a uniform, they wrapped red sashes around their bodies. The story continues:

During the nights we heard these words, incomprehensible to whites, chanted alternately by one or several voices. The king of the cult of Voodoo had just declared war on the colonists. His brow girded with a diadem and accompanied by the queen of the cult, wearing a red sash and shaking a box [rattle] garnished with bells and containing a snake, they marched to the assault on the cities of the colony . . . The sisters perceived from the windows of their Monastery, overlooking the countryside and the city, barebreasted Negresses belonging to the sect, dancing to the mournful sound of . . . tambourines and conch shells . . . In the midst of the rebels was Zamba Boukman.⁵⁸

This rebel is Boukman Dutty, a coachman from the Clément plantation in the north and an *oungan* who, in Vodou history, led the ceremony at Bwa Kayiman that legend credits for igniting the Haitian Revolution. This nocturnal gathering was likely held on August 21st, 1791, (not August 14th as many accounts state) at a place called Kayiman, at Morne Rouge in the north of Haiti, one week after a delegation of “slave elites” met on the Lenormand estate in Plaine-du-Nord and resolved to mount a large-scale rebellion.⁵⁹ Popular accounts of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries tell us that a violent storm broke out, and among thunderous roars of the sky and streaks of lightning, a *manbo* named Cécile Fatiman raised a knife then slashed the throat of the sacrificial black pig, allowing its blood to drain into a wooden bowl for all to share.

⁵⁷ This account is found in Appendix B of Fick, 265-266. Fick states that although the account was compiled after the events, it is based on original correspondence and information reported by contemporary observers.

⁵⁸ The song referred to in this account is none other than the famous Kongo “Eh! Eh! Mbumba,” magic formula chant that has been repeatedly misinterpreted as a vow to destroy the whites. I provide an analysis of this in Chapter Five.

⁵⁹ David Geggus’s examination of Bwa Kayiman attempts to sort out what has been written about this event. The dates and location provided here follow Geggus’s article, “The Bois Caiiman Ceremony,” *The Journal of Caribbean History* 25 (1991): 41-57.

While Cécile called upon the spirits, many participants became possessed by various *lwa*, most notably the warrior Ogou. Boukman Dutty made a fervent call to arms against the whites, and with god on their side, he ended his oration with the following command: “Throw away the image of the god of the whites who thirsts for our tears and listen to the voice of liberty which speaks in the hearts of all of us.”⁶⁰ This would be, as Fick points out, a repeating refrain of Boukman Dutty as he led insurgents during the early days of the insurrection.⁶¹ The ideal of liberty is expressed consistently in Vodou songs and visuality today.

Determining what really happened on Bwa Kayiman is a challenge complicated by subsequent modes of historical and mythical production, and further skewed by ideological agendas.⁶² The only contemporary description comes from Antoine Dalmas, a doctor who lived near the Lenormand estate. Dalmas collected his information from eyewitness accounts and later published them in his 1814 book on the revolution. His contempt for the insurgents—for Africans—is clear, referring to them as “ignorant,” “stupid” and to their “superstitious” practices as “absurd” and “bloody.”⁶³ Nevertheless, he reports that the event was a sacred ceremony, that “*fétiches*” encircled the sacrificial

⁶⁰ As cited in Fick, 93. Fick indicates that this speech first appears in the Haitian writer Hérard Dumesle’s *Voyage dans le Nord d’Haïti* (Les Cayes: Imp. du Gouvernement, 1824), 88. Laurent Dubois emphasizes Dumesle received some of his information from oral testimonies collected in the early nineteenth century, when people who had experienced the events of that era were still alive; see “The Citizen’s Trance,” 111.

⁶¹ Fick, 93.

⁶² See Fick, Appendix B, 260-266. More recently, Laurent Dubois challenges Léon François Hoffman’s controversial claim that the ceremony was nothing more than a myth propagated by the essentialist and nationalist “negritude” of François Duvalier. Dubois also refers to a 1988 conference wherein participants rebutted Hoffman’s presentation. Haitian novelist Jean Metellus, for example, asserted that the ceremony, as Dubois retells it, “was a foundational myth drawn from a historical event.” Moreover, Haitian sociologist Laënnec Hurbon stated that Hoffman did not demonstrate that the event never occurred, only that there is no proof that it did; see “The Citizen’s Trance, 109-113.

⁶³ M. Antoine Dalmas, *Histoire de la révolution de Saint-Domingue* (Paris: Chez Mame Frères, 1814), 1:118.

pig, and the participants removed its hair to create protective amulets; however, there is no reference to an oath, the *manbo* Cecile Fatiman, or even Boukman Dutty himself.⁶⁴ Moreover, the decision to revolt had already been made at the Lenormand meeting, and therefore the ceremony at Bwa Kayiman more likely served “to sacralize a political movement.”⁶⁵ While we may never know for certain whether or not Bwa Kayiman was the instigating force of the insurrections, the ceremony nevertheless demonstrates a union between political action and magico-religious practices, a union that may have strengthened an ideology of political resistance in Vodou that continues today. In fact, every August Vodou practitioners still make pilgrimages to Balan, a site near Morne Rouge where the Bwa Kayiman ceremony is said by current local residents to have occurred.⁶⁶ Recent investigations in the area also indicate that details of the ceremony have been transmitted through oral history.⁶⁷ Although the line between history and myth is not clearly cut in the example of Bwa Kayiman, it nevertheless forms in the present a connection to the revolutionary deeds of the past, deeds that are relived and recreated in Vodou ritual. As a *manbo* living in the southern town of Jacmel told me,

⁶⁴ Geggus, “The Bois Caiman Ceremony,” 48.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 51.

⁶⁶ Interestingly, as related to me on June 9, 2002 by Simon Cadet, a native of nearby Cap Haitian, the first name called at the ceremonies held during the pilgrimage is Allah, evidently because of the Muslim Mandingo slaves who once populated the area. It is worth pointing out the link between Muslims, rebellion, and magico-religious practices also appear in colonial Brazil. Rachel Harding states that the most significant revolt organized by slaves and free people of color in nineteenth-century Bahia was the “*Revolota dos Malês*,” coordinated by Yoruba and Hausa Muslims. She also observes that there were Muslims among the Mandingas from Senegambia (west Africa) who were known and respected for their strong magico-religious practices, so much so that the term *mandinga* became synonymous with “sorcery.” As was the case with Saint-Domingue, these practices created tension for the colonial regime; see *A Refuge in Thunder: Candomblé and Alternative Spaces of Blackness* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press), 5 and 24.

⁶⁷ In 1999, Rachel Beauvoir-Dominique headed an investigation in collaboration with Eddy Lubin, which included 50 interviews in the Morne Rouge area. The report, entitled “Investigations autour du site historique du Bois Caiman,” was submitted to the Haitian Ministry of Culture.

people of the revolution and war of independence are remembered in Vodou ceremonies and objects, but Boukman Dutty is remembered first. She emphasized, “We follow in his footsteps.”⁶⁸

Magico-religious acts and war

On August 22, 1791, the slaves of the north launched a massive series of insurrections that would lead to the demise of Europe’s wealthiest colony, the abolition of slavery on the island, and independence from France. Although coercion, impatience, and misunderstandings led to plans being set in motion prematurely or to the betrayal of some of the conspiracies, the rebellion nevertheless demonstrated a high degree of organization and mass mobilization. This mobilization was remarkably effective, for within the first two weeks of insurrections twenty-three of the northern province’s twenty-seven parishes experienced slave revolts and the destruction of over two hundred sugar and twelve hundred coffee plantations.⁶⁹ The slaves, joined by free people of color, managed at various times to outmaneuver Europe’s leading military powers—Spain, Britain, and eventually France. Beginning in 1801, Napoleon, eager to regain control of the colony from the insurgency and to reestablish slavery, sent a total of 80,000 “fighting men” to Saint-Domingue.⁷⁰ Due to the intelligent and determined leadership of Toussaint Louverture and subsequently that of Jean-Jacques Dessalines,⁷¹

⁶⁸ Yvette Ducal, personal communication with the author, August 5, 2003.

⁶⁹ Laurent Dubois and John D. Garrigus, in *Slave Revolution in the Caribbean, 1789-1804: A Brief History with Documents* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 24.

⁷⁰ Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 251.

⁷¹ By the time Toussaint retired from the military, he had lost popularity among the former slaves, many of whom demanded his arrest. Napoleon’s brother-in-law, General Leclerc, nevertheless viewed Toussaint as

the effective guerrilla tactics of their armies, the yellow fever that debilitated General Leclerc and his troops, and the overextension of Napoleon with his European campaigns, Saint-Domingue became the first independent black republic in the Americas. Dessalines declared independence from France on January 1, 1804, and reinstated the original Amerindian name of the island, Hayti, meaning “mountainous land.”

Undoubtedly the people and events of the Haitian Revolution and war of independence resonate today in Haitian culture, and more specifically in contemporary Vodou, but did its earlier forms perform a key role in the war? For the same reasons that make it hard to determine the degree to which magico-religious practices affected slave mobilization and organization in pre-war eighteenth-century Saint-Domingue, the precise role of these practices during the war cannot be ascertained. Still, the fact that images and references to warfare and militancy pervade Vodou sacred spaces, objects, and songs demands the consideration of these questions. Even David Geggus, who calls many of these legends into question, suggests “it is clear that during the Revolution magico-religious beliefs served to mobilize resistance and foster a revolutionary mentality.”⁷² A brief examination of magico-religious practices during the war, understood in the context of militaristic strategy and political ideology rather than as a perceived throwback to “African superstitions” as many chroniclers would have it, will suggest that these practices were a tool for mobilizing efforts of resistance.

During the early months of the Revolution four men formed the core leadership: Boukman Dutty, Jean-François, Georges Biassou, and Jeannot Bullet. Toussaint

a threat and therefore had him arrested and sent to France where he died in prison in 1803; see Dubois and Garrigus, 36-37.

⁷² Geggus, “Haitian Voodoo,” 48.

Louverture, a free person of color and who for over a decade was employed as a coachman at the Bréda plantation, joined the movement three months later under the leadership of Georges Biassou. The most famous of the original four leaders was Boukman Dutty.⁷³ Whether or not Boukman Dutty can be credited with mobilizing the rebellion together with Bwa Kayiman, the whites clearly perceived him as a threat with significant influence over the insurgents. In the following fall of 1791, the whites killed Boukman Dutty during combat, and in the middle of the Le Cap's public square, placed his decapitated head on a stake with the following inscription: "The head of Boukman, leader of the rebels."⁷⁴

One of the remaining major sources outlining the events of the revolution and war is the work of Haitian-born historian Thomas Madiou, who based his accounts on eyewitness accounts captured in letters written by veterans of the war.⁷⁵ These letters, moreover, indicate magico-religious practices among the insurgents during the war. Madiou mentions that Jean-François, a chief general of the insurgent army during the early months of the war, worked with "sorcerers."⁷⁶ Madiou also states that Jean-François's lieutenant, Georges Biassou had "sorcerers and magicians" among his advisors, and kept in his tent "symbols of African superstitions."⁷⁷ Albeit with exotic

⁷³ As pointed out by Geggus, "Marronage," 31-32.

⁷⁴ Fick, 113.

⁷⁵ Thomas Madiou (1814-1884) was a post-revolutionary Haitian historian who was educated in France and returned to Haiti at age twenty-one. According to Joan Dayan, Madiou, along with the other major Haitian historian of the time, Beaubrun Ardouin, "turned to France and the white world, but claimed blackness and repaired the image of Africa, by making Haiti—purified of superstition, sorcerers, and charms—the instrument of reclamation;" see *Haiti, History, and the Gods*, 9.

⁷⁶ Thomas Madiou, *Histoire d'Haiti* (Port-au-Prince: Henri Deschamps, 1985), 1:97.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 1:96. Among these objects were human bones, which as I point out in the following chapter, are still used in magical work.

and exaggerated flavoring, Madiou also describes Biassou's nocturnal practices that included lighting large fires in his camp with nude women dancing around the flames chanting words understood "only in the deserts of Africa." He continues:

At the height of the exhalation, Biassou, followed by his sorcerers, would present himself to the crowd and exclaim that the spirit of God inspired him. He told the Africans that if they died in battle, they would return to their people in Africa. Then would come the prolonged cries from far in the woods, the chants and drumming would begin again, and Biassou, at the moment of exaltation, would move his bands against the enemy, surprising them in the middle of the night.⁷⁸

This sort of nocturnal activity also appears in the account of Colonel Malenfant, a contemporary observer. In his description of an expedition against a rebel camp in the Plaine de Cul-de-Sac in 1792, Malenfant states:

As we drew near the camp we were amazed to see huge poles stuck at the side of the road each crowned with a different dead bird, arranged in a different position . . . In the roadway birds had been chopped up, thrown down at intervals and surrounded by stones artistically arranged; finally we came across seven or eight broken eggs circled by zig-lines.

Upon discovering the camp, Malenfant states:

Imagine my astonishment when we perceived all the blacks leaping about and more than two hundred Negresses dancing and singing without a care in the world. We rode full tilt at the camp and the dance as soon finished. The Negroes fled . . . I singled out a few Negresses for special questioning . . . they couldn't understand how we had managed to get past the obstacles which the expert Voodoo priestess had scattered across our path. It was faith in these—the devices of their priestess—which had given them confidence to dance.⁷⁹

In the western province we also find evidence of revolutionary movements in a magico-religious context, chiefly among Halaou, Hyacinthe, and Romaine-la-Prophétesse. What we know about the guerilla leader Halaou again derives from

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ As cited by Métraux, 44.

Madiou's work. Halaou, who always kept a talisman for protection, and like Biassou, surrounded himself by "sorcerers," marched against his enemies accompanied by drums, trumpets, the sound of the *lanbi*, and the shouts of his followers declaring the invincibility of their leader.⁸⁰ Chief of 12,000 insurgents, Halaou arrived at the capital, Port-Républicain, to meet with the French legation, "covered with fetishes, holding a white rooster at his side, and seated close to the representative of France [Léger Félicité Sonthonax], covered with tricolor ribbons."⁸¹ The "fetishes" suggest magical protection and the rooster is a sacrificial animal of Ogou, the Vodou *lwa* of war.

In the cases of Hyacinthe and Romaine-la-Prophétesse, we have two men who declared divine inspiration in their military efforts against the whites. The reputed *oungan*, Hyacinthe, only twenty-two years old, gained the trust of the slaves throughout the Cul-de-Sac plain, and led his troops in battle at La Croix-des-Bouquets. Thousands of them, armed only with knives, picks, iron-topped sticks, and hoes, charged against the cannons fearlessly. To protect his troops and to boost their courage and defiance, Hyacinthe brandished a horse-hair talisman as he rushed unscathed through a barrage of bullets, shouting to his troops: "Forward! Don't be afraid; it's only water coming out of the cannon."⁸² Some of the troops, according to Colonel Malenfant who witnessed the battle, placed their arms down into the cannons and called out to their comrades, "Come, come, I've got it," but were tragically killed.⁸³

⁸⁰ Madiou, 1:234. The *lanbi* is still used at the beginning of Vodou ceremonies today, particularly those that call the stronger spirits.

⁸¹ Ibid., 235.

⁸² Fick, 139.

⁸³ Malenfant, 18-19, as cited by Métraux, 47.

In the nearby region of Léogâne, Romaine-la-Prophétesse claimed he was the godchild of the Virgin Mary who he professed instructed him to arm his troops and organize a rebellion against the colonists. He portrayed himself as a prophet with supernatural abilities, and like Biassou and Hyacinthe, charged fearlessly into combat, dodging bullets and bayonets with a rooster at his side. Upon his altar rested an assortment of spiritual objects, with which he would meditate, and before battle, Romaine “reached mass before an inverted cross with a sabre in his hand.”⁸⁴

Another example demonstrates magico-religious practices in the context of battle and also points to the convergence of such practices with French modernity. A report written anonymously by a French Creole during the war recounts that upon the death of an insurgent slave, the writer and his fellow soldiers discovered in one of the man’s pockets:

pamphlets printed in France, filled with commonplaces about the Rights of Man and the Sacred Revolution; in his vest was a large packet of tinder and phosphate of lime. On his chest he had a little sack full of hair, herbs, bits of bone, which they call a fetish; with this, they expect to be sheltered from all danger; and it was, no doubt, because of this amulet, that our man had the intrepidity which the philosophers call Stoicism.⁸⁵

One thing that rings clear from these commentaries is an emphasis on and often hostility toward so-called African superstitions and savagery separate from and operating against notions of modernity. And yet in the case of this fallen insurgent, the political

⁸⁴ Fick, 127. Vodou practitioners today invert objects to activate their powers. Fick reasons that Romaine may have been a shaman, or a “self-styled prophet,” and had no involvement with anything that resembled Vodou or any other ritual practices of African origin; see *ibid.*, 128. Terry Rey, however, convincingly refutes this assertion. While Fick dismisses Romaine’s involvement with Vodou practices and suggests that he was little more than an opportunist, Rey counters that because Vodou traditions during the war had yet to be standardized, each sect followed its own traditions. Moreover, Rey points out that Romaine was an accomplished herbalist, an important skill in Vodou practice; see *Our Lady of Class Struggle*, 138-148.

⁸⁵ *My Odyssey: Experiences of a Young Refugee from Two Revolutions*, ed. and trans. by Althéa de Puech Parham (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1959), 34, and Fick, 111. On August 26, 1789

and ideological fields that formed the engine of revolution become difficult to ignore or dismiss. Laurent Dubois observes that during the last two centuries, “the French Revolution has become a symbol of the advent of modernity, the Haitian Revolution and Haiti itself have become symbols of political backwardness rooted in African superstition. Instead of being proof of the failure of colonial venture, Haiti has been recast as its justification.”⁸⁶ But Vodou, in its earlier forms as well as its current forms of practice, is still maligned and manipulated, too often stripped of its political underpinnings and cast in the role of “tradition” as something antithetical to “modern.” This example suggests two histories that operate synergistically rather than separately, working within a larger geohistorical frame—what Stephan Palmié calls “Atlantic modernity.”⁸⁷ Vodou, nevertheless, remembers these magico-religious practices and those people who engaged in them as political and ideological, indeed providing the foundation for liberation.

Contemporary Vodou ceremonies actively invoke remembrances of war, resistance, and liberation through possessions, art, songs, and speeches. Joan Dayan, for example, recounts a “four-day genealogy of the gods” sung by an *oungan* in Bel-Air, Haiti, in 1970.⁸⁸ So central to this genealogy were the spirits “who inspired the revolutionaries,” particularly Makandal. Many of these same revolutionaries were remembered at a Bizango Secret Society meeting in Haiti, documented by Wade Davis in

delegates of the French National Assembly approved the Declaration of the Rights of Man, which outlined various rights that would provide the foundation for the French constitution.

⁸⁶ Dubois, “The Citizen’s Trance,” 107-108.

⁸⁷ Stephan Palmié, *Wizards and Scientists: Explorations in Afro-Cuban Modernity and Tradition* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 15. Writing of this Haitian example, Palmié suggests that African tradition and Western modernity are part of the same Atlantic historical reality, 61-62.

⁸⁸ Dayan, *Haiti, History, and the Gods*, 31.

1984. The Bizango leader gave direct homage to the leaders who shaped the course of Haitian history, and who are consistently named in Vodou songs, spaces, and arts:

Bizango is the meaning of the great ceremony at Bois Caiman. They fall within the same empire of thoughts. Our history, such moments, the history of Makandal, of Romaine La Prophetesse, of Boukman, of Pedro. Those people bore many sacrifices in their breasts. They were alive and they believed! We may also speak of a certain Hyacinthe who as the cannon fired upon him showed no fear, proving to his people that the cannon were water. And what of Makandal! The one who was tied to the execution pole with the bullets ready to smash him but found a way to escape because of the sacrifice he did. And so I tell you again and again that there was a moment in 1804, a moment that bore fruits, that the year 1804 born the children of today.”⁸⁹

Resistance and liberation connect the memories of Makandal, Boukman, Don Petro, Bissaou, Hyacinthe, Romaine-la-Prophétesse, and all those who risked their lives to change the social, political, and economic order, and who continue to inspire strength and courage among Vodou practitioners today.⁹⁰ Late eighteenth-century magico-religious practices strengthened structures of resistance, provided protection, and enhanced a sense of empowerment, all of which affected the insurrections and war. This is not to suggest these practices were central, or on the other hand, peripheral to the organization and mass mobilization of insurgents during the war, one can only speculate as to the degree. What is evident, however, is that the experiences of slavery, resistance, war, and liberation produced in the practice of Vodou, a body of knowledge that fills in the gaps created by “official” colonial discourse. The remaining chapters attempt to

⁸⁹ Wade Davis, *Passage of Darkness: The Ethnobiology of the Haitian Zombie* (Chapel Hill and London, The University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 266-267. Legend has it that Makandal escaped the flames of his execution by magical means.

⁹⁰ Another revolutionary hero remembered in Vodou is none other than Jean-Jacques Dessalines, a point that I expand upon in the following chapter.

address how Vodou remembers these omissions as it works to build community, heal, and empower practitioners in their own lives.

Chapter 3: Sacred Spaces, Intentional Places

Vodou sacred spaces are empowering and intentional places. Foremost among these spaces is the *ounfò*, the Vodou temple, which practitioners create to sustain and nurture their relationships with the ancestors and the *lwa*, and with each other. Inside the *ounfò* spiritual and earthly worlds touch and exchange, temporal dimensions fold one into the other, and the community united within its walls grows stronger. From the exterior to the interior seemingly incongruent images and objects induce a sense of astonishment and awe: horizontal bands of miniature Haitian flags festoon the ceiling rafters, as well as intricately bound objects;¹ embellished drums stand in corners or hang from the ceiling; and emblazoned on the walls are nationalist images, large-scale Catholic saints recast with new meaning, Kabbalistic signs, and Masonic symbols that evoke the esoteric and the hidden (Fig. 3.1). In the *ounfò* displays of power coalesce in an imaginative, vast, and evocative idiom that serves ritual functions, remembers the past, and unites the community for empowerment and healing.

As an architectural construct, the *ounfò* is especially able to function as a repository of meaning that draws from the spirit world, mythic stories, ideas of nation, social memory, and lived experiences. Geographer Yi-Fu Tuan explains that architectural space, including temples, “heighten[s] awareness by creating a tangible world that articulates experiences, those deeply felt as well as those that can be verbalized, individual as well as collective.”² One may apply this view to the *ounfò*, which practitioners create to give form to the abstract, articulate experience, transmit

¹ These bound objects are the subject of Chapter Five, and will not be addressed here.

² See Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977), 100.

konesans, and orchestrate and deploy spiritual power. Practitioners participate in an active process of spatial transformation that incorporates the forms they choose to create and juxtapose, the behaviors they adopt, and the ritual activities in which they participate.³ In this manner practitioners make space meaningful and experiential, transforming “undifferentiated space” into value-filled “place,” as Tuan would have it.⁴ Such spatial production is purposeful. As philosopher Henri Lefebvre posits, space is social, produced, and reproduced, and is a product of human action, thought, and intention.⁵ In short, what people do and think shapes what they create, and the *ounfò* demonstrates this idea.

This chapter explores the epistemic, mythopoeic, and sociohistorical (including the political) dimensions of Vodou sacred spaces—particularly in the *ounfò*—and how practitioners unite these facets in spatial arrangements and in the grand narratives on *ounfò* walls. After writing about the significance of Vodou’s first temple, a description of *ounfò* in general and their typical structural patterns, I turn to the two spirits whose images and icons are the most present in the *ounfò*: Danbala and Ogou. These spirits also provide a means to understand Vodou remembrance, itself composed of narratives. Sociologist Margaret Somers suggests that “people construct identities (however multiple and changing) by locating themselves or being located within a repertoire of emplotted stories.” Accordingly, she continues, “people make sense of what had happened and is happening to them by attempting to assemble or in some way to integrate these

³ In the case of Afro-Cuban religions, David Brown explores how practitioners similarly shape their environment; see “Altared Spaces.”

⁴ Tuan, 6.

⁵ See Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford, UK and Cambridge, USA: Blackwell, 1991), particularly pages 11-12 and 33-39.

happenings within one or more narratives.”⁶ So much of Vodou visuality, particularly in the *ounfò*, takes on this narrative quality, a series of emplotted stories that incorporate the spirit world, history, memory, and myth, which in turn produces action.⁷ The final images I consider in this chapter are those of liberation, a fundamental concept in Vodou belief that in the *ounfò* emerges from knowledge and remembrance, both of which promote social cohesion and empower spiritual communities.

Ounfò meaning: putting one’s foot down

The etymology of the word “*ounfò*” reveals its spiritual meaning and significance. Since the early 1990s, the standard spelling in the scholarly literature dropped the “h” from the beginning of *ounfò*, a move that belies the word’s “houn” sound, which emerges deep from the diaphragm when spoken.⁸ This orthographical shift eclipses *hun*, the root of *ounfò*. The term *hun* derives from west Africa, namely from the Republic of Benin (former Dahomey) and Togo, and is also the root of other Vodou terms such as *oungan*, *ounsi* (initiate), and *oungenikon* (song leader). Among Fon peoples, who are part of the Ayizo language family, *hun* has sacred connections. Suzanne Blier observes that *hun* is often synonymous with the term *vodun*, or spirit forces, and refers to “a number of *vodun*-related concerns.”⁹ Blier lists the term’s sacred meanings, illustrating the

⁶ See Margaret Somers, “The Narrative Constitution of Identity: A Relational and Network Approach,” *Theory and Society* 23, no. 5 (October 1994): 606 and 614.

⁷ Somers argues that narrative guides action; see *ibid.*

⁸ One exception to this is the work of Milo Rigaud, who spelled the term as *oum’phor* in his publications, which date from the 1950s. See, for example, *La Tradition voodoo et le voodoo haïtien (son temple, ses mystères, sa magie)*; and *Secrets of Voodoo* (1969; repr., San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1985).

⁹ Suzanne Blier, *African Vodun: Art, Psychology, and Power* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 46.

connection to Vodou: *fon hun* (“to awaken the sacra or god”), a resuscitating ceremony after an initiate’s spiritual death; *hun gbe*, (“language of hun”), the sacred language spoken by initiates; *hun kpame* (“fence of *hun*”), a convent; *hun gan* (“chief of the hun”), a priest; and *hunsi* (“wife of hun”), a novitiate.¹⁰

Informed by the work of R. Père Segurola, Blier also states that *hun* refers to “God” as well as to “heart” and “blood.”¹¹ In Vodou these meanings interrelate. When *oungan* Alex Augustin explained the meaning of the term *ounfò* to me, he focused first on the root, *hun*, and stated that: “*Houn* is the most sacred word of the Fon language. For some people it means ‘blood.’ For other people it means ‘the great spirit of God.’ Of course, the implication is that God circulates through one’s blood.”¹² He could have also said “*beats* through one’s blood.” In fact, *hun* also signifies “drum” and “bellows” which not so coincidentally mirror the beating and pumping actions of the heart.¹³ *Hun* conveys the “great spirit of God” beating through one’s blood, thereby connecting the physical body to the spiritual realm.

The term *hun* also connects spirit to place. Blier points out that in divination accounts, *hun* is a toponym for the Dahomean capital of Abomey, as well as the larger region. In these texts the term is a “linguistic signifier” for “both a place and the gods that were worshiped there.” Used in this way, the term *hun* “has importance not only with respect to philosophy and religious identity, but also with regard to larger historical

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid. For Segurola’s work, see *Dictionnaire Fon-Française* (Cotonou, Republic du Benin: Procure de L’Archidiocèse, 1963), 233.

¹² Alex Augustin, personal communication with the author, June 23, 2000.

¹³ Blier, *African Vodun*, 46.

and sociopolitical concerns.”¹⁴ This connection between place, spirits, and history, held together by a single term among Fon peoples, parallels a similar linkage within the *ounfò*—not only through a shared etymology, but because it unites the spirits, a value-filled sense of place, and history. But before turning to this point, I will briefly describe the meaning of *fò*, the suffix of *ounfò*.

Haitian ethnographer Léonce Viaud acknowledged the African origin of *houm* (as he spelled it), but *for* (*fò*) had yet to be identified.¹⁵ I, too, have not seen this etymological explanation in the literature. But during my discussion with Alex he stated that *fò* means “the foot.” As he explained:

The implication here is that wherever you put your foot down without shoes . . . that means you are at home. So if the *ounfò*, is where the *houn*, or the great spirit of God put her foot down, the house of God is the house of spirits. The spirits are the *lwa* who are the different representations of God, God herself. So in fact that’s where they put their foot down and to describe it as a locality.¹⁶

By “putting her foot down” metaphorically in the *ounfò*, Bondye (the “great spirit of God”) imbues it with sacred meaning, transforming in Tuan’s sense, space into place, and for the servitor, a mundane structure into a sacred house of the spirits. Following Alex’s words, the act is also a declaration, as if to say, “we here, we are at home.” As servitors dance barefoot around the *poto mitan*, this declaration echoes with each driving step, directly and definitively onto the receptive earthen floor.

Lavilokan: intentional remembrance

The very real and poetic sense of home—for people, the spirits, and the ancestors—lies at the center of Vodou practices and beliefs in Haiti and throughout its

¹⁴ Ibid., 47.

¹⁵ Léonce Viaud, “Le Houmfor,” *Bulletin du Bureau National d’Ethnologie* 2 (1984): 29.

¹⁶ Alex Augustin, personal communication with the author, June 23, 2000. Alex included the letter “o” in the word, which follows the Haitian Kreyol spelling.

diaspora. The legacy of forced migration from the African continent centuries ago, as well as modern movement from Haiti to the United States, Canada, France, and other countries, has compelled practitioners to renew and develop innovative strategies that strengthen ties to their spiritual and ancestral homeland.¹⁷ In Vodou this homeland is Ginen—Africa; but it is also the otherworld that exists beyond our eyes—the mystical island deep below the earth and the cool waters. As homeland and spiritual abode, Ginen is at the core of Vodou. Vodou songs—which function as oral articulations of history, distillations of memory, and repositories of cosmological understandings—repeatedly refer to Ginen. Ritual activities also focus on connecting with Ginen to honor and nourish the *lwa* and ancestors, and for servitors to receive guidance and protection in return.

Practitioners associate Ginen with Lavilokan (also known by its French spelling, Ville-au-Camp), which holds sacred, historic, and mythic significance for practitioners. Lavilokan is a town in northwestern Haiti near Port-de-Paix that serves as a “sort of embassy for Ginen in the New World, a place for the *lwa* to stop on their long journeys back and forth from Africa.”¹⁸ Similarly, others describe it as “Ginen’s mythological city” where the *lwa* reside.¹⁹ Lavilokan is also the site of Vodou’s original *ounfò*, known

¹⁷ Karen McCarthy Brown details innovative ritual strategies practiced by Haitians in New York City; see “Staying Grounded in a High-Rise Building: Ecological Dissonance and Ritual Accommodation in Haitian Vodou,” in *Gods of the City: Religion and the American Landscape*, ed. Robert A. Orsi (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999), 79-102.

¹⁸ Brown, *Mama Lola*, 285.

¹⁹ Desmangles, 99. Courlander also refers to it as a “mythological city” below the waters; see *Drum and the Hoe*, 19. Laënnec Hurbon states that when people call the spirits from the subterranean waters, they reunite at Lavilokan, a meeting point on route to earth; see *Dieu dans le Vaudou Haïtien* (Port-au-Prince: Henri Deschamps, 1987), 98. Donald Cosentino draws an apt comparison between Lavilokan and the Yoruba concept of *orun*, the otherworldly domain inhabited by various spirits and ancestors; see “Lavilokan,” *African Arts* 24, no. 2 (Spring 1996): 25.

among practitioners as having boundless potential to effect momentous change for the individual and community, an idea expressed in the *Prye Djo*, the opening prayer sung at every ceremony in the Ginen tradition: “*Nan Lavil O’Kan é Kreyol mande chaniman*” (in Lavilokan Kreyols ask for change).²⁰

While all *ounfò* function as places where people can commune directly with the spirits and ancestors to ask for change in their lives, Lavilokan carries deeper historical importance. In Vodou understanding, Lavilokan stood as a bastion of resistance during revolutionary times, and continues as a symbol of resistance to social, economic, political, and cultural oppression.²¹ Indeed the *ounfò* has functioned this way for centuries, having been, as Patrick Bellegarde Smith argues, a “repository of resistance to cultural oppression.”²² Lavilokan, like all *ounfò*, is a source and symbol of self-determination, where people are active agents of change in their own lives.

Little is known about the temple at Lavilokan outside Vodou communities. In spite of Lavilokan’s sacred and historic significance—or perhaps because of it—a group of elders who maintain and guard it conceal the *ounfò* to such a high degree that many people in the region will deny it is there at all.²³ During her fieldwork in the 1970s,

²⁰ Karen McCarthy Brown examines the “*Prye Djo*” and provides another version of the same passage; see *Mama Lola*, 275-285. Sadly, I heard that the destructive floods that swept through Haiti in September 2004 destroyed the temple at Lavilokan. As of this writing I’m not sure what efforts are underway to restore it.

²¹ See Beauvoir-Dominique, “Underground Realms of Being,” 423, n. 59. Finding evidence for this claim that withstands critical scrutiny is not my intention here, as I am more interested in the Vodou understanding of history. But as I pointed out in Chapter Two, the first insurrections that launched the Haitian Revolution occurred throughout the north, where the spirit of resistance still remains strong. When I spent time there during the summer of 2003 I observed that people spoke more freely against the government. In Cap Haitian I was also struck by the widespread street graffiti, which was remarkably more critical of Aristide than in Port-au-Prince.

²² See Patrick Bellegarde-Smith, “The Spirit of the Thing: Religious Thought and Social/Historical Memory,” in *Fragments of Bone: Neo-African Religions in a New World*, ed. Patrick Bellegarde-Smith (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2005), 57.

²³ Didier Dominique, seminar lecture at Le Péristyle de Mariani, Mariani, Haiti, July 17, 2001.

however, one of Karen McCarthy Brown's informants assured her that Lavilokan is "quite real." As Brown points out, the secrecy that surrounds Lavilokan extends to a special office-holding *oungan*:

It is said that at Ville-au-Camp there is a very special *houngan* known as Déka. He is chosen, sometimes even as a child, to hold the office for the duration of his life. His office is surrounded by the same secrecy that marks the special part of the Vodou peristyle at Ville-au-Camp that is shielded by a curtain ('rideau') from the eyes of all men but him. The secrecy is unusual in Vodou and it indicates something of the importance of the Déka himself.²⁴

While in Haiti, I heard—though cannot verify—that a maroon named Deka was the first guardian of Lavilokan during the colonial era. According to an encyclopedic Vodou website created by a Haitian *manbo* living in France, Deka was a direct descendant of the first African to arrive in Haiti.²⁵ She also tells how around 1803, on the eve of independence, Deka returned to Africa in a cloud of smoke for all the slaves to see.²⁶ I include these mythic fragments of Deka's biography here because they point to the connection that practitioners make between place (Lavilokan/Africa) and self-determinism (marronage/transformation).

A Haitian architect and artist named Didier Dominique and his colleagues visited Lavilokan and stressed how difficult the *ounfò* was to find. This was unusual given how conspicuous they are in the countryside. They were led to the site in secret and after much persistence they were eventually invited inside. What they found was unexpected:

²⁴ See Karen McCarthy Brown, "The Vèvè of Haitian Vodou: A Structural Analysis of Visual Imagery" (PhD diss. Temple University, 1976), 122.

²⁵ See <http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Delphi/5319/langaj.htm>.

²⁶ This legend echoes that of the African-born Makandal, who, by using his own magic, escaped the flames of his public execution in 1758.

no furniture, no wall paintings, no sacred objects, not even a set of drums—just empty space.²⁷

A practical explanation for this empty space is that the caretakers removed the signs, the objects, and instruments for the sake of the *ounfò*'s protection, and with good reason given Haitian history. Since the end of the nineteenth century, the Catholic Church, Protestants, and politicians have launched violent “anti-superstition campaigns” against Vodou and its practitioners, targeting the real and symbolic centers of Vodou practice—the *ounfò*. During the second major anti-superstition campaign of the early 1940s, ordered by then President Elie Lescot and carried out by the Haitian army and the Catholic Church, Alfred Métraux describes how the local priest and secular officials harassed Vodou practitioners, cut down sacred trees, and destroyed many *ounfò*.²⁸ More recently, following the ouster of Jean-Claude Duvalier in February 1986, a violent movement called *déchoukaj* (uprooting) surged through the country, with mobs targeting alleged supporters of the Duvalier regime, often seriously hurting or killing people. Among the targeted were many *manbo* and *oungan* accused of being *tonton macoute* (the Duvalier militia formally known as the Volunteers for National Security). Ethnologist Max Paul, then head of the Bureau National d'Ethnologie, documented sixty-two murders of Vodou practitioners in the first three months following Duvalier's fall—a number excluding the southwestern city of Jeremie, where an estimated thirty practitioners were killed.²⁹ In rural areas, people also looted or completely destroyed

²⁷ Dominique, seminar lecture at Le Péristyle de Mariani, Mariani, Haiti, July 17, 2001.

²⁸ Métraux, *Voodoo in Haiti*, 344-351. For more on these campaigns, see Jacques Roumain, *A Propos de la Campagne Anti-superstitieuse* (Port-au-Prince: Impr. De l'État, 1942).

²⁹ Julie Preston, “Voodoo Adherents Attacked in Haiti; 100 Reportedly Killed Since Duvalier's Fall,” *The Washington Post*, May 17, 1986.

hundreds of *ounfò* and the sacred objects inside, prompting practitioners to remove signs and flags from their *ounfò* exteriors.³⁰ Vodou practitioners charged that the real force behind this violence was the Catholic Church and Protestants, who have long attempted to purge Vodou from the practices and minds of Haitians.³¹ In the end, this “uprooting” killed and brutalized hundreds of Vodou practitioners.³²

Vodou temples and their sacred objects are the first targets during times of oppression and violence—and the region around Lavilokan was no exception during *déchoukaj*. Given the special value with which practitioners endow Lavilokan, and given the risk that visibility creates, it is not surprising that Lavilokan’s guardians would protect it through secrecy and remove its exterior signs and interior contents.

Vodou sacred spaces have always captured, articulated, and responded to painful and triumphal events, just as they unite the spirit world with human presence for guidance, healing, and community building. A key way that Lavilokan accomplishes all this—as do all *ounfò*—is through active and evoked remembrance. In fact, the strongest

³⁰ Ibid.; Marlise Simons, “Voodoo Under Attack in Post-Duvalier Haiti,” *The New York Times*, May 15, 1986.

³¹ Anne Greene points out that neither the Catholic Church nor Protestants attempted to put an end to the violence; see *The Catholic Church in Haiti: Political and Social Change* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1993), 213. In fact, according to a report by Estelle Beauvoir and Comité Déshoukaj, a minister who spoke on the Protestant station Radio Lumière said, “We have to pursue it [Vodou] until it is *déhoukéd* for good;” see “Lynching of Mambos and Houngans in the North,” 16 April 1986, cited by Greene, 240, n. 77. Greene states that Vodou leaders quickly organized themselves by establishing the Bode Nasyional (The National Body), which cultivated 6,000 members within three months, 214.

³² Official reports documented in the newspapers cited above state that approximately one hundred Vodou priests were killed in the first three months. Patrick Bellegarde-Smith, himself an *oungan* and professor of Africology at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, reports that nearly 300 *oungan* were killed in 1986. He also states that the massacre received little coverage, a conclusion that I also reached from my research. See *Haiti: The Breached Citadel*, 150. In his 285-page report of the *déchoukaj* movement, *oungan* Max Beauvoir, director of the Groupe d’Etudes et de Recherches Traditionnelles, asserts that “over 1,500 Vodouizans were lynched for their religious conviction;” see *Histoire du Deshoukage, ou Histoire des Persecutions Religieuses Menees Contre les Croyances Traditionnelles du Peuple Haitien, Le Vodoun* (Port-au-Prince: privately printed, n. d.), 5.

point Didier made about Lavilokan, is that it is “a place of memory.”³³ Historian Pierre Nora’s work on the national memory of France is helpful here, particularly as Vodou spaces and arts intertwine ideas of nation, memory, history, and politics. For Nora, “memory takes root in the concrete, in spaces, gestures, images, and objects,” all in what he refers to as *lieux de mémoire*, or sites of memory.³⁴ *Lieux de mémoire* are immediate, functional, and symbolic. Nora emphasizes a defining criterion of *lieux de mémoire*: “there must be a will to remember . . . Without the intention to remember, *lieux de mémoire* would be indistinguishable from *lieux d’histoire*.”³⁵ I draw this point out because the will to remember shapes Vodou practice and imbues sacred spaces. Even though state and religious groups have marginalized and persecuted Vodou and its practitioners to varying degrees throughout the last two centuries, this will to remember persists. A significant example of this is the grand *fèt* of Lavilokan, held the last week of every September for people to gather in remembrance. Infused with a cosmological notion of homeland and of revolutionary resistance, Lavilokan’s “symbolic aura”³⁶ touches the imagination as it radiates throughout the consciousnesses of those who choose to remember.

By connecting memory and place, all Vodou *ounfò* are *lieux de mémoire* to varying degrees. As I will illustrate throughout this chapter, *ounfò* give form and structure to memory by providing a tangible framework to which people may attach

³³ Dominique, seminar lecture at Le Péristyle de Mariani, Mariani, Haiti, July 17, 2001.

³⁴ Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*,” *Representations* 26 (Spring 1989): 9.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 19.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

memories and around which they can organize and retrieve them.³⁷ As philosopher Edward Casey proposes, place contains, orientates, and sustains memory, thereby giving it meaning in a way that time, which has a narratizing propensity, does not.³⁸ For Casey, “places are potently receptive and preservative of memories, which they hold to keep. As much as body or brain, mind or language, place is a keeper of memories—one of the main ways by which the past comes to be secured in the present, held in things before us and around us.”³⁹ Place gives form to our experience, a sort of *mise en scène* for us to situate our memories so that we may locate and recollect them. Recollection in this sense is not a matter of creating an account or a chronology, but is, as B. Jewsiewicki and V. Y. Mudimbe suggest, “a meaningful configuration of selected, negotiated events around . . . *lieux de mémoire*.”⁴⁰ Places enable us to concentrate our memories, experiences, and intentions, and to configure them in a way that makes sense to us.⁴¹ The following sections will explore how practitioners invest the *ounfò* with this capability.

Ounfò structure and the cosmicization of space

Although the *ounfò* serves the needs of a vast spiritual community, it nevertheless exemplifies the balance that exists between an individual’s agency—the artistic and

³⁷ In her classic study on memory, Francis Yates explores how imagined architectural space functions as a grid to which memories are attached and organized; see *The Art of Memory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966).

³⁸ Edward Casey, *Remembering: A Phenomenological Study* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2000), 183-186, 214.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 213.

⁴⁰ B. Jewsiewicki and V. Y. Mudimbe, “Africans’ Memories and Contemporary History of Africa,” in “History Making in Africa,” ed. V. Y. Mudimbe and B. Jewsiewicki, special issue, *History and Theory: Studies in the Philosophy of History* 32 (1993): 10.

⁴¹ See E. Relph, *Place and Placelessness* (London: Pion Limited, 1976), 42.

practical means that one chooses to serve the *lwa*—and the individual’s adherence to the underpinnings of Vodou cosmology and principles. Variation and innovation emerge from this balance, as became apparent to me during my time in Haiti. I was able to compare *ounfò* in the northern region, not far from Cap Haitien, in Limonade and Katyè Morin; along the west coast in Luly, Archaie, Mariani, Merger, Gressier, and Léogâne; in the south in Jacmel; and in Port-au-Prince (Fig. 1.1). From this experience it was clear that *ounfò* vary in their size, appearance, and adornment, depending on their location (rural or urban), which *lwa* the presiding *manbo* or *oungan* serve, availability of space, and most practically, the financial means of that *manbo* or *oungan* and their *sosyete* (spiritual community) as a whole.

In rural areas the *ounfò* is typically part of a larger sacred complex situated on a *lakou*. Most the compounds that I visited were clearly visible from the distance with large blue and red flags billowing high above the ground, crosses emerging from elaborate bases, and vibrant images and designs painted on building exteriors (Fig. 3.2). Lining the *ounfò* of these compounds are sacred trees called *reposwa* that function as repositories for inherited spirits and as sites for spiritual work.⁴² Another focal point of the *lakou* is a cross honoring both the family’s dead and Bawon Samedi, guardian of the cemetery and head of the Gede spirits (Fig. 3.3). Finally, near the entrance of the temple one often finds an iron bar thrust into the earth with a fire burning at its base to honor and call upon Ogou, the mighty *lwa* of iron, war, and protector of the *ounfò* (Fig. 3.4).

Surrounding and inside the *ounfò*, the degree of sacredness progresses from the exterior to the innermost chambers that house the *lwa*’s altars. In her dissertation, Martha

⁴² Serge Larose, “The Haitian Lakou, Land, Family, and Ritual,” 492. On the symbolism of sacred trees in Vodou, see Hurbon, *Dieu dans le Vaudou Haitien*, 129-137.

Patricia Perez provides a diagram of this progression and indicates how the *ounfò* functions as a crossroads of the metaphysical (spiritual) and physical (earthly) planes (Fig. 3.5).⁴³ The horizontal axis represents the earthly plane, i.e. the exterior—the road leading to the courtyard and the courtyard itself. (This point, however, requires some qualification, for courtyards also contain highly sacred areas such as the *reposwa*, Bawon Samedi’s cross, and burial plots, if any.) The vertical axis represents the spiritual realm found within the *ounfò*, particularly in the form of the *poto mitan*, the cosmic highway that literally extends upward into space and figuratively downward toward Ginen. Perez also aligns an architectural progression with a progression of the self—as one moves deeper into sacred space one transforms the social self into the spiritual self. In this way the “*ounfò* reflects the tonalities of human experience ranging from social and public practices to our deepest and the most sacred truths of who we are as spiritual beings.”⁴⁴ The progression also aligns with the type of images that appear on the *ounfò* walls. As we will see, images on the *peristil* interior and exterior walls often include figures from Haitian history, or other figures of empowerment that have a role in promoting social cohesion. Images in the *djevo*, the most sacred space of the *ounfò*, contain images for and of the spirits, thereby strengthening the individual’s bond with his or her guiding *lwa* and strengthening one’s higher, spiritual self.⁴⁵

The first area one enters in every *ounfò* is the *peristil*, the gathering space where a Vodou community holds the public portion of their services for the *lwa* (Fig. 3.6). Like

⁴³ Martha Patricia Perez, “Reciprocity and a Sense of Place: A Phenomenological Map of Haitian Space” (PhD diss., The University of Texas at Austin, 2001), 111.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 110-111.

⁴⁵ This is a preliminary conclusion. As a non-initiate I was denied access to many *djevo*, so my suggestion is drawn from six examples throughout the western and southern provinces.

the *ounfò* exterior, the *peristil* walls are elaborately painted with various images, depending on the preferences of the *manbo* or *oungan* to whom the *ounfò* belongs. Typically the *manbo* or *oungan* hires a *dekorátè* (an art specialist or “decorator”) to paint the images,⁴⁶ which may include portrayals of saints, designs that correspond to specific *lwa*, Masonic symbols, Kabbalistic signs, and any other images or text that convey instructional, declarative, or authoritative meaning.

In the country or along the outskirts of towns, the *peristil* tends to be large and may appear relatively accessible to the outside, either by large open windows (Fig. 3.7), or simply by the absence of walls. In Port-au-Prince, on the other hand, the high density of buildings necessitates an economizing of space, and consequently *peristil* are smaller than their rural counterparts, if they exist at all.⁴⁷ While the *peristil* is highly sacred during ceremonies, the next morning it may return to a mundane state, functioning as a reception area, a storage place, or in any other way to accommodate practical activities.

Almost every *peristil* I visited had a beaten-earth floor.⁴⁸ This defining characteristic of the *peristil* facilitates its primary function: for the living to gather and to commune with the ancestors and the spirits. In Vodou, like many religions, the earth is sacred and powerful. For Vodou practitioners the earth contains the remains of the ancestors and the seeds of sustenance. As such, the earth provides a means for spiritual

⁴⁶ Aboudja, seminar lecture at Le Péristyle de Mariani, July 19, 2001.

⁴⁷ I visited a young *oungan* in Port-au-Prince who had no space for a *peristil*, but instead had small rooms or niches for altars where he performed his spiritual work. Given his young age and the high rents in that neighborhood, I am inclined to think his spatial economy was a result of insufficient means rather than personal preference.

⁴⁸ The exception to this belonged to a newly reconstructed *ounfò* in Arcahaie to commemorate the war of independence and the consecration of the Haitian flag by Jean-Jacques Dessalines. I will return to this example.

exchange between the living, the ancestors, and the *lwa*, as well as a source of nourishment for both the body and the soul.⁴⁹ Because of this charged nature, the earth is crucial to the construction of a new *ounfò*. Karen McCarthy Brown explains that prior to this construction, servitors hold a ceremony during which they bury sacred objects and offerings in the ground where they will erect the *poto mitan*.⁵⁰ The strategic point of burial channels the vital power from Ginen, the realm of the ancestors and *lwa*. Just as servitors receive power from the earth, they also provide nourishment by pouring libations directly onto its surface, which flow all the way to Ginen.

In the center of the *peristil* stands the *poto mitan*, the precise point of convergence of the spiritual and the earthly worlds, an axis mundi at the symbolic center of the universe that orients and organizes space.⁵¹ It is a cosmic avenue through which the spirits arrive from Ginen and accordingly, libations are poured at its base. The *poto mitan* typically takes the form of a wood, cement, or plaster pole emerging from a platform or tiered base with a compartment to hold spiritual offerings and ceremonial implements, which receive spiritual charging when the *lwa* arrive. Vibrant images are usually painted on the column, such as the “All-Seeing” Masonic eye in a secret society *ounfò* at Gressier (Fig. 3.8), or images of the *lwa* Danbala—both in his serpent form and

⁴⁹ On this point see Karen McCarthy Brown, “Staying Grounded in a High-Rise Building,” 84.

⁵⁰ Brown, “Tracing the Spirit,” 16.

⁵¹ While I draw this idea of a “fixed point” from Mircea Eliade, I do not share his conclusion that destruction of a “fixed point,” or “sacred center” would result in “chaos;” see *Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. Willard R. Trask (1957; repr., New York: Harper and Row, 1961), 20-65. For a critique of Eliade’s theories of sacred space, see Jonathan Z. Smith, *To Take Place: Toward Theory in Ritual*, (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1987). An exception to the *poto mitan*’s central placement is the Kongo *ounfò* at Soukri, where it is located in the *djevo*, the building’s most sacred area. Aboudja, seminar lecture at Le Péristyle de Mariani, July 19, 2001.

as Saint Patrick.⁵² Often at the beginning of ceremonies the *laplas* (chief assistant in the ceremony) strikes the *poto mitan* with a sword to spiritually cleanse the space. Various forms of illumination on its base help the *lwa* to find their way.

The *poto mitan* may assume any form, so long as it fulfills its function. In *ounfò* that serve the Rada spirits, the *poto mitan* tends to be more elaborate than those in Petwo or secret society temples. For example, three different *ounfò* that I visited incorporated Rada drums: in Mariani drums placed one top of the other formed the *poto mitan* (Fig. 3.9); in a Dahomean *ounfò* in Gressier, several drums stood alongside it (Fig. 3.1); and in a Carrefour *ounfò*, a single tall drum abutted the pole (Fig. 3.10). Harold Courlander states that most Vodou drums have Dahomean designs and names,⁵³ which would explain why they appear in *ounfò* where the spirits honored belong to the Rada pantheon, i.e., those with Dahomean origins. This innovative use of drums is a brilliant blending of form and spiritual function because drums call forth the *lwa* and ancestors from Ginen, enhancing the ability of the *poto mitan* to do the same. Drums are consecrated through elaborate baptism rites, giving them the ability to reach into the spirit world (Fig. 3.11). Subsequent libations and offerings made during ceremonies renew their energy and affecting presence. Not only are drums among Vodou's most sacred objects, they are practically a signifier for the religion itself. As Laënnec Hurbon reminds us, the expression "beat the drum" has a long-standing association with Vodou.⁵⁴

⁵² Masonic images, as I will examine in this chapter, abound in secret society spaces. I will also return to Danbala in this chapter.

⁵³ Courlander, *The Drum and the Hoe*, 194.

⁵⁴ Laënnec Hurbon, *Voodoo: Search for the Spirit*, trans. Lory Frankel (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc.; London: Thames and Hudson, Ltd., 1995), 48. I would like to point out that drums, like the *ounfò* that house them, have been targets of anti-superstition campaigns. Courlander notes that one reason why so few older drums exist is because the "church and misguided public officials" destroyed so many of them. During the U.S. occupation (1915-1934), military personnel had a significant hand in burning many drums;

In another innovative example, Alex placed a dead tree in the center of his *peristil* to serve as the *poto mitan* (Fig. 3.12). He told me that a match or a small tree branch could fulfill the same function by simply placing the wood in the ground, symbolically linking the center of the earth to the center of the universe. This symbolic connection, he stated, “is the meaning of the *poto mitan*.” The center of the earth, he continued, is “anywhere you plant it . . . it’s a symbolic representation. So it’s quite all right for me not to have a *poto mitan* right here, to have simple symbols that represent it.”⁵⁵ Indeed the servitor can make significant choices in her or his *ounfò*. Phyllis Galembo points to an *oungan* who chose the powerful symbol of a chain to represent the *poto mitan* (Fig. 3.13).⁵⁶ The *poto mitan* may also be invisible. In his 1953 publication, for example, Milo Rigaud recounts that the Dahomean *ounfò* at La Souvenance had a double colonnade to support the roof, but the *poto mitan*, was “purposely replaced by a raised decagonal figure nailed to the exact center of the ceiling, making a star-shaped ceiling!”⁵⁷ In another example, my friend Claude Lubin took me to the Bel-Air neighborhood of Port-au-Prince to see his uncle’s *ounfò* in which the *poto mitan* took the form of a cross, signifying the idea of *tout chemen*, or all roads (Fig. 3.14). As Claude explained, the form represents “left, right, up and down—all the forces together.”⁵⁸

see *The Drum and the Hoe*, 190. Just after the occupation dancer and anthropologist Katherine Dunham made her first trip to Haiti and observed that, “there were still baptized drums hidden in hollow tree trunks and behind waterfalls;” see *Island Possessed* (1969; repr., Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 3.

⁵⁵ Alex Augustin, personal communication with the author, June 23, 2000.

⁵⁶ See Phyllis Galembo, *Vodou Visions and Voices of Haiti* (1998; repr., Berkeley: Ten Speed Press, 2005), 59. In Chapter Five I explore the use of chains and other objects of bondage.

⁵⁷ Rigaud, *Secrets of Voodoo*, 17.

⁵⁸ Claude Lubin, personal communication with the author, June 26, 2003.

Complementing this idea of *tout chemen* is the *vèvè*, a ground drawing made of cornmeal, flour, or ash applied around the base of the *poto mitan* at the beginning of a ceremony to invoke the *lwa*. Like the term *ounfò*, the term *vèvè* also derives from the Fon language, referring to ritual ground drawings named after the vibrant “red color of palm oil.”⁵⁹ The fundamental framework of many *vèvè* is a two-dimensional intersection of vertical and horizontal axes, recalling the crossroads image, an idea that appears throughout the Afro-Atlantic sacred world (Fig. 3.15). Karen McCarthy Brown asserts that the *vèvè* is a two-dimensional reflection of the three-dimensional *ounfò* and accordingly, a candle placed at the *vèvè*’s center functions as a *poto mitan* thereby restoring it to its three-dimensional state.⁶⁰

The *vèvè* is ephemeral, for ceremony participants dance it away as they circle the *poto mitan*, garnering spiritual momentum as they call forth the *lwa* and prepare for their arrival. This circular movement reflects an aesthetic and ideological principle of Vodou: harmony. As Alex emphasized to me, “Vodou is circular . . . and circularity is harmony.” “In Vodou,” he explained, “there is no top, no bottom, no left, no right . . . The Vodou mind is aesthetically harmonious because of circularity. People go around and around the *poto mitan*. That’s the ideal of the thoughts in the minds of the people.”⁶¹ Alex’s own circular *peristil* exemplifies this principle (Fig. 3.16). We may take these variances

⁵⁹ Brown, “The Vèvè of Haitian Vodou,” ix; Blier, “Vodou: West African Roots of Vodou,” 63; and Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit*, 188. Thompson also writes about other west and central African precedents for ground drawings in Haiti, see *ibid.*, 189-191, and “Translating the World into Generousness: Remarks on Haitian Vèvè,” *Res* 32 (Autumn 1997): 19-34. In his dissertation on Kongo writing systems, Felix Bárbaro Martínez Ruiz describes coded drawings called *firmas*, which are of central African origin and used in the Cuban Palo Monte religion (also called Palo Mayombe); see “Kongo Machinery: Graphic Writing and other Narratives of the Sign” (PhD diss., Yale University, 2004), 142-184.

⁶⁰ See Brown, “Vèvè of Haitian Vodou,” 261-262.

⁶¹ Alex Augustin, personal communication with the author, June 26, 2003. This contradicts the conclusions that Karen McCarthy Brown reaches in her dissertation, which emphasize the geometric and directional significance of *vèvè*.

as examples of assertions of individual or group agency while adhering to the *poto mitan*'s fundamental function: a symbolic cosmic center through which the spirits arrive.

While the *peristil* forms the public portion of the *ounfò*, the *djevo* or *badji* is the private area, serving as the temple's sanctuary and vestry housing the altars and implements for the *lwa*.⁶² Much like the *igbodún*, a sacred room in the Cuban Lucumi tradition,⁶³ the *djevo* focuses the spiritual power of the ancestors and the *lwa* to strengthen the community, particularly for initiation and healing treatments. The term *djevo*, as Alex told me, contains the word “je,” which is known in Benin as “white.” The inference here is a white room because most people who enter the *djevo* wear white, especially for initiation or healing treatment.⁶⁴ The whiteness emphasizes the purity befitting this most sacred area of the *ounfò*. Because of the *djevo*'s charged sacred nature, I was often denied access to see it, and the altars within, or the sanctuaries were simply too dark to photograph or document by other means. Nevertheless, I would like to offer a few general observations, and explore more fully the altars in the following chapter.

When physical space and financial means allow, an *ounfò* may have more than one *djevo*, each designated for a specific spirit—usually the patron spirit—or a particular *nanchon* of spirits, which is more often the case. If there is more than one *djevo*, they may be adjacent, separated spatially by the *peristil*, or occupy opposite corners of one side of the *peristil*. In many of these cases, the spatial arrangement and configuration,

⁶² Some people also use the term *ounfò* to designate this area, but here I adopt *djevo*.

⁶³ See Brown, “Altared Spaces,” 165.

⁶⁴ Alex Augustin, personal communication with the author, June 23, 2000.

type of *nanchon*, and adornments mirror or complement each other, creating a sense of order and balance.

Take for example an *ounfò* that I visited outside of Gressier, along the western shore southwest of Port-au-Prince. The *oungan* André Villaire, who also owns the Makaya *ounfò*, the site for the Bizango ceremony described in Chapter One, referred to this second *ounfò* as Dahomean. The *ounfò* contained two *djevo* on each side of the large *peristil*: one for Ezili Freda and Ezili Danto on the left, and one for Twa Letan and Brize on the right (Fig. 3.17).

This configuration reflects an order and balance fundamental to Vodou aesthetics and principles. For example, Ezili Freda and Ezili Danto are two major *lwa* in the Vodou pantheon whose combined complementary characteristics offer servitors a wide range of guidance. Generally, practitioners consider Ezili Freda and Ezili Danto as belonging to the Rada and Petwo pantheons, respectively, though I have heard some practitioners insist that Ezili Danto is also a Rada *lwa*. But in the case of André's *ounfò*, their *djevo* exemplify their Rada and Petwo designations and mirror each other accordingly.⁶⁵

Facing the entrance in both rooms is an altar with a cement basin on the left-hand side. In Ezili Freda's *djevo*, the basin is for Danbala Wèdo, the serpent *lwa* whose *vèvè* appears directly above it. The basin in Ezili Dantò's *djevo* is for Simbi, guardian of lakes and rivers, who, like Danbala Wèdo, is often rendered as a snake.⁶⁶ As Maya Deren observes, Simbi shares attributes not only with Danbala, but also with *lwa* from

⁶⁵ Unfortunately I was unable to take any photographs of Ezili Dantò's *djevo* because it had no windows or electric lighting.

⁶⁶ It is worth pointing out that in Kongo, *bisimbi* (plural of *simbi*) are local spirits associated with water. Wyatt MacGaffey describes them as "spirits of localities, inhabiting rocks, gullies, streams, and pools, who are able to influence the fertility and well-being of those who live nearby;" see "Twins, Simbi Spirits, and Lwas in Kongo and Haiti," in *Central Africans and Cultural Transformations in the American Diaspora*, ed. Linda M. Heywood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 212.

both the Rada and Petwo pantheons, and may be called upon from either of these sides.⁶⁷ Simbi is also the patron *lwa* of *maji*, whether the work is for healing, providing protection, or committing antisocial acts for individual gain.⁶⁸ Simbi's strong association with *maji* is appropriately placed here, for *maji* is strong Petwo. In the case of Ezili Dantò's *djevo*, where the focus is on Petwo, André draws from the stronger side of Simbi, capturing the *lwa*'s Kongo origin, which, as I argue in Chapter Five, is at the root of Petwo.

In addition to the basins for Danbala Wèdo and Simbi, references to Ogou also demarcate the spaces. On the right-hand wall of the Ezili Danto *djevo* is a *vèvè* for Ogou Chango, a Petwo manifestation of the mighty *lwa*, one that is both a politician and a sorcerer, possessing assertive and potentially aggressive powers.⁶⁹ In Ezili Freda's *djevo* are references to the head of the Ogou family, Ogou Feray, the powerful warrior identified with Saint Jacques Major (Saint James the Greater) as depicted on a sequined flag above the altar (Fig. 3.18). Another reference to him appears as a *vèvè* painted on the wall to the right of the altar (clothing placed in front of it prevented me from photographing it). In addition, mounted in the ground directly in front of the altar is a sword for Sen Jak (André referred to him as such, rather than as Ogou), with his crimson scarf tied around the handle. The sword, symbolic of Ogou's power, Haiti's military history, and liberation, also appears frequently on *ounfò* walls. The image also has a

⁶⁷ Deren, 117. For a description of the Simbi family, see Courlander, *Drum and the Hoe*, 327.

⁶⁸ Deren, *ibid.*

⁶⁹ Brown, "Systematic Remembering, Systematic Forgetting," 71 and 79.

connection to Freemasonry,⁷⁰ which has had a significant presence in Haiti and in shaping Vodou iconology. Many *oungan* are also practicing Masons, particularly those that work with the stronger spirits of Vodou and who are leaders in secret societies. Its Masonic association dovetails with that of Ogou. According to Carl. H. Claudy, “The sword has always been a symbol of . . . the knight, the protector of the weak, the soldier of the king, the officer in the army.”⁷¹

On the other side of this *ounfò* are additional *djevo* for the spirits Brize and Twa Letan, the latter being André’s patron *lwa*. He explained that together these two *djevo* signify the good fathers and the good mothers, an idea expressed in other ways in the *ounfò*.⁷² Although he did not expand on this, the statement indicates a conceptual balancing of masculine and feminine principles to create a whole, reflected by the inseparable Danbala and his wife Ayida Wèdo. This Dahomean *ounfò* unites not only these principles, but also invites the Kongo presence into its realm. Brize and Twa Letan are spirits of the Makaya family, which is of Kongo origin, and govern André’s other *ounfò*. So here we have the “hot” in the “cool,” a decision of balance, cohesion, and unity.⁷³ Through their designation, content, and configuration, all of André’s *djevo* clearly complement each other both physically and conceptually, and express Vodou aesthetic principles of balance and harmony.

⁷⁰ H. Claudy, *Pocket Encyclopedia of Masonic Symbols* (Washington, D. C.: The Masonic Service Association of the U.S., 1953), 52-53.

⁷¹ Claudy, 53.

⁷² I describe one example related to coffins in the following chapter. A friend, who is Haitian and a thirty-second Mason, told me that the compass and square, which also appears frequently in *ounfò*, takes on additional meaning in Vodou: the feminine and masculine united; Edouard Laurent, personal communication with the author, December 7, 2006.

⁷³ I provide another example of this in the following chapter.

Danbala: distant past for the future

One of the most rendered *lwa* is also one of the most revered—the venerable Danbala, also known as Danbala Wèdo. Danbala appears as a serpent in *ounfò* images and accordingly, while in the body of a devotee, he moves like a snake and emits “kek-kek-kek” sounds.⁷⁴ To honor the integrity of his purity, participants hold a large white cloth over him as he writhes his way around the base of the *poto mitan* before plunging into his basin or twining up a tree. On *ounfò* walls, altars, and flags he often appears with his wife Ayida Wèdo, with whom he is inseparable—for to invoke one is to invoke both.⁷⁵

Servitors hold Danbala and Ayida Wèdo in the highest esteem. Not only are they among the major *lwa* in the Vodou pantheon, they are the *lwa* of creation, cosmic progenitors of all humans, and abundant sources of divine wisdom, fecundity, and security. For the Vodouizan, the *mèt tèt*, or one’s principal *lwa*, shapes much of an individual’s personality; however, also critical to one’s makeup are the spirits of heritage, spirits inherited from the lineages of one’s mother and father. It is the quintessence and blending of these spirits that people celebrate through Danbala and Ayida Wèdo who, along with the *mèt tèt*, constitute an individual’s spiritual being.⁷⁶ It is a celebration of creation, life, continuity, and renewal—all captured by the cosmic egg, Danbala’s symbol and offering, and fittingly rendered on *ounfò* walls (Fig. 3.19).

⁷⁴ For more on Danbala’s possession behavior, see Deren, *Divine Horseman*, 115; and Brown, *Mama Lola*, 274-275.

⁷⁵ Nancy Turnier Fèrère, *Vèvè: Ritual Art of Haitian Vodou* (RéMè Art Publishing, 2005), 49.

⁷⁶ Alex Augustin, personal communication with the author, June 23, 2000.

Danbala corresponds to Dã Ayido Hwedo, a major deity in Fon mythology associated with the rainbow and envisioned as a serpent. Although he is one being, Dã Ayido Hwedo contains distinct male and female qualities apparent in his rainbow form: the red portion reflects the male aspect while the blue reflects the female. In this form Dã Ayido Hwedo is also a serpent, the male and female aspects unite to spiral the world and support the sky.⁷⁷ This belief still holds strong in Haiti where devotees also view the rainbow as a multicolored serpent.⁷⁸

In another Fon myth, Dã Ayido Hwedo established an iron pillar at each of the four cardinal points to uphold the sky and coiled around them for reinforcement. In many *ounfò* an image of a serpent winds its way up the *poto mitan*, giving visual expression to this idea. Accordingly, some practitioners refer to the *poto mitan* as the *poto-Danbala*.⁷⁹ Depictions of the twined serpent vary from minor abstraction (Fig. 3.20) to highly stylized and embellished forms (Fig. 3.21).

Danbala also appears on the *poto mitan* as his Catholic counterpart, Saint Patrick, known for having driven the serpents out of Ireland (Fig. 3.22). This defining moment in the saint's hagiography, captured in the chromolithographs that continue to circulate widely in Haiti, helps to explain why practitioners identify Saint Patrick with Danbala and draw from this visual source for their own renderings of the spirit. In the chromolithograph, just as on the *poto mitan*, Saint Patrick appears in the regalia of a

⁷⁷ P. Mercier, "The Fon of Dahomey," in *African Worlds: Studies in the Cosmological Ideas and Social Values of African Peoples*, ed. Daryll Forde (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), 220-21.

⁷⁸ Desmangles, 126-127.

⁷⁹ Karen McCarthy Brown suggests that this term observes Danbala's "position as the collective representation of the ancestors in Africa;" see "The Vèvè of Haitian Vodou," 267. Michael Laguerre states that in the Bel-Air neighborhood of Port-au-Prince, a *poto mitan* must bear an image of a serpent to be of value; see *Voodoo Heritage* (Beverly Hills and London: Sage Publications, 1980), 81.

bishop, holds a crosier, and directs the serpents underfoot. Practitioners use chromolithographs or other images of Catholic saints for the visual associations with the *lwa* rather than to emphasize connections based on a saint's life. In the case of Danbala, this is particularly true. Although Saint Patrick's personal story shares similar experiences of enslavement and forced migration that the Haitian ancestors endured, he is not among the most popular and studied saints in the Haitian Catholic church.⁸⁰

The presence of Danbala, not Saint Patrick, is vital to the *ounfò*. The *ounfò* is a spiritual home, the central point that connects practitioners to the ancestors, the spirits, and to the cosmos. Across the Atlantic the ancient Dã Ayido Hwedo represents those ancestors who lived too far in the remote past for recollection, those who existed before the establishment of an association for ancestral veneration, which could have ensured their memory among the living.⁸¹ Dã Ayido Hwedo also personifies the unknown dead and the anonymous, including those people taken captive and their descendants, identities lost to families who remained.⁸² Similarly in Haiti, where slavery's cruel inflictions produced countless unknown dead, Danbala is there to reach back in time and help the living remember, connecting them to the people of a painful past for whom Danbala provides a legacy in the present.

⁸⁰ Father Délimon, a Haitian priest who recently lived in Washington D.C., told me that the most popular saints in the Haitian Church include all variations of Mary, Saint Jacques, Saint André, and Saint Anthony. Personal communication with the author, March 3, 2004. Joan Dayan argues, however, that the Haitians' choice of Saint Patrick to represent Danbala goes deeper than imagery alone. She states that the saint's own experience as a slave and his own journey overseas mirrors the experiences of enslaved Africans brought to the Americas. Moreover, that Saint Patrick escaped bondage and returned by sea to Ireland also recalls the Haitian ancestors' own return to their native Africa after death. While this is a fascinating connection, I heard practitioners talk about the importance of Danbala, never about the life of Saint Patrick; see "Querying the Spirit: The Rules of the Haitian *Lwa*," in *Colonial Saints Discovering the Holy in the Americas, 1500-1800*, ed. Allan Greer and Jodi Bilinkoff (New York and London: Routledge, 2003), 46-48.

⁸¹ Brown, *Mama Lola*, 273.

⁸² *ibid.*

Danbala also appears on the *poto mitan*, as well as on *ounfò* walls, because of his venerable cosmic position and the ideals of stability and continuity that he conveys. While the physical location of the *ounfò* may change, its meaning and functions are enduring, just like the ancient Danbala. Full of “cosmic grandeur” and venerability, Danbala’s stability and connection to an existence beyond the parameters of human events and suffering brings immense comfort to the servitors inside the *ounfò*.⁸³ As Maya Deren so aptly observes, Danbala “is himself unchanged by life, and so is at once the ancient past and the assurance of the future.”⁸⁴ And yet this stability is continuously flowing, full of movement and possibilities—the cycle of life—as reflected by the enduring motion of the rainbow serpent across the immense sky, from sunrise through sunset and to sunrise again.

Ogou: military and memory

Both Danbala and the mighty military *lwa* Ogou focus remembrances in the *ounfò*—Danbala invokes the ancestors and memories of the unknown dead, while Ogou, another major *lwa* who appears frequently on *ounfò* walls, is the great liberator and protector who embodies the contradictions, complexities, and triumphs of Haiti’s past. Originally a Yoruba deity and later absorbed into the Dahomean pantheon through military conquest and immigration, Ogou (also known as Gu in what is now the Republic of Benin and Togo) was, and still is, a major deity of hunting, iron, and war.⁸⁵ Once in Haiti, however, circumstances and needs changed dramatically and tragically, for new-

⁸³ Desmangles, 125.

⁸⁴ Deren, *Divine Horsemen*, 115.

⁸⁵ On Yoruba deities in the Fon pantheon, see Mercier, “The Fon of Dahomey.”

world horrors necessitated unprecedented leadership, protection, and resistance. Consequently, Ogou's association with hunting and smithing receded while his military role intensified.⁸⁶ In this process a dynamic complex of soldiers and politicians emerged, one that could focus all the power and absorb all the contradiction that a nation born out of a successful slave revolt would need.⁸⁷ Accordingly, Ogou's role as a soldier would become increasingly linked to militarism, nation, and the paradoxes of power. Because of Ogou's authority and strength, and the protection he provides, practitioners have long associated him with a militarism so inextricably linked with Haitian history, Vodou *regleman*, and sacred arts.

Militarism and the building of a nation

Before exploring this association, it is necessary to examine in some length the significant role of militarism in Haitian history to demonstrate why visual expressions within Vodou practice—particularly when it comes to Ogou—draw so intensely from this legacy.⁸⁸ As I mentioned in Chapter One, many enslaved Africans arrived to colonial Saint-Domingue with extensive military experience, which proved to be instrumental during the war. But even before the war, slaves and free people of color had been recruited voluntarily and involuntarily into military service, at least until the discovery of

⁸⁶ This development also happened in Brazil. Roger Bastide attributes Ogou's "persona as a brutal and aggressive warrior" to the exploitation and struggles that emerged in the slave system; see *The African Religions of Brazil*, 254. For more on this Ogou's warrior persona manifests itself in Brazilian ritual performances, see Margaret Thompson Drewal, "Dancing for Ógun in Yorubaland and Brazil," *Africa's Ogun: Old World and New*, ed. Sandra T. Barnes, 2nd and expanded ed. (1989; repr., Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1997), 225-227.

⁸⁷ Brown, "Systematic Remembering, Systematic Forgetting," 65.

⁸⁸ For the role of militarism in Haitian sacred music see Gage Averill and Yuen-Ming David Yih "Militarism in Haitian Music," in *The African Diaspora: A Musical Perspective*, ed. Ingrid Monson (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 2000), 267-293.

the Makandal Conspiracy in 1758, which prompted colonialists to conscript only free people of color.⁸⁹ Because of this new policy, in addition to white resistance to serve in the militias, a new military emerged in which free people of color were the majority. It did not take long for news of Saint-Domingue's military to travel outside the island. In 1779 French officer Charles d'Estaing came to Saint-Domingue in search of recruits for his campaign to assist the thirteen American colonies against the British—most of these recruits were people of African descent.⁹⁰ At the Battle of Savannah, despite unfair and unequal treatment, members of the free-colored unit distinguished themselves.

According to some historians, a number of these veterans—most notably Henry Christophe and André Rigaud—were instrumental during the war of independence.⁹¹ By serving in the military and in the police units, free people of color were able to advance themselves through social and economic opportunities, though defending the colony meant defending slavery, a reality that would disrupt the status quo.

During the eighteenth century, militarism had become embedded in colonial life, so much so that insurgent slaves, as Trouillot observes, “saw themselves first and foremost as a people united behind a military-type organization.”⁹² After independence the military continued as the major power apparatus of the state and continued to provide opportunities to otherwise marginalized peoples. Through the military, for example, a

⁸⁹ Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, *Social Control in Slave Plantation Societies: A Comparison of St. Domingue and Cuba* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1971), 116-117.

⁹⁰ Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 65.

⁹¹ Ibid., 66-76, who in turn cites John Garrigus, “Catalyst or Catastrophe? Saint-Domingue's Free Men of Color and the Battle of Savannah, 1779-1782,” *Revista Interamericana* 22 (Spring 1992): 109-124, 109.

⁹² Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Haiti: State Against Nation: The Origins and Legacy of Duvalierism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1990), 87.

non-elite person of color could have some voice in governance—both locally and nationally, as well as improve their economic and social status.⁹³ Until 1915—the year the U.S. began its nineteen-year occupation of Haiti—all but five heads of state ascended from the military, and three of those exceptions were honorary generals.⁹⁴ It was also during this period, from the end of Jean-Pierre Boyer’s presidency in 1843 to the U.S. occupation in 1915, that Haiti was “wracked by at least 102 civil wars, revolutions, insurrections, revolts, coups, and *attentats*.”⁹⁵

This era of militarism and violence must be understood in its postcolonial context. Decisions made by Haiti’s leaders during the first half of the nineteenth century had a significant impact in shaping the country’s political, economic, social, and cultural realities. But as Trouillot points out, “the replacement of a European-led apparatus with a ‘native’ bureaucracy creates as many problems as it solves. The ‘national’ state so created never inherited a blank slate because the preceding colonial entity, as well as conditions of its demise, limited both the new rulers’ possibilities and those of their successors.”⁹⁶ Indeed the major challenge for the young Republic was how to move from a plantation economy based on slave labor to a self-sufficient economy that could compete in the world market. Most of Europe and the United States, however, denied diplomatic recognition of the newly independent country, even as many U.S. American

⁹³ David Nicholls, *Haiti in Caribbean Context: Ethnicity, Economy, and Revolt* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire and London: Macmillan in association with St. Anthony’s College, Oxford, 1985), 27.

⁹⁴ Trouillot, *Haiti: State Against Nation*, 88. Trouillot points out that another one of these five presidents had “served as head of a peasant armed band.”

⁹⁵ Robert Debs Heinl and Nancy Gordon Heinl, *Written in Blood: The Story of the Haitian People, 1492-1995*. [3rd ed.] newly rev. and expanded by Michael Heinl (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2005), 370.

⁹⁶ Trouillot, *Haiti: State against Nation*, 23.

and British merchants monopolized Haiti's ports. The United States, for one, had its own slave-based economy to protect and many of its legislators—particularly from the slave-holding states—stood firmly against recognizing the Haitian state. France also refused to recognize Haiti until President Boyer agreed to pay a 150-million-franc indemnity to compensate French plantation owners (later reduced to 60 million), a move that forced Haiti into considerable debt and severely compromised its economic independence.⁹⁷

The peasant agricultural producers—the “economic backbone” of the Haitian state—were the people most adversely affected by national debt and an increased trade imbalance.⁹⁸ Even though the agricultural producers had no claim to the powers of the state, they nevertheless received an excessive export tax on their products, which further marginalized them economically while providing the state a significant source of revenue.⁹⁹ According to the nineteenth-century Haitian economist Edmond Paul, this disproportionate taxation, particularly for coffee farmers, was the major reason for the numerous insurrections.¹⁰⁰ During the nineteenth century, as Trouillot states, “Haitian politicians turned the state Treasury over to foreign merchants and condemned the peasants to refill, day and night, the bottomless barrel of the Danaïdes.”¹⁰¹ This constant refilling contributed to an increasing socioeconomic divide with the agricultural producers on one side and the politicians, wealthy urbanites, and merchants on the

⁹⁷ On this point see Nicholls, *Haiti in Caribbean Context*, 95-100.

⁹⁸ Trouillot, *Haiti: State against Nation*, 16.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 16 and 60.

¹⁰⁰ As cited by Nicholls, *Haiti in Caribbean Context*, 107.

¹⁰¹ Trouillot, *Haiti: State against Nation*, 69.

other.¹⁰² Given that Vodou has always been practiced strongly among people who work the land, these factors undoubtedly contributed to expressions of resistance in Vodou practice.

Militarism, from the eighteenth century through the war of independence and into the nineteenth century, along with diplomatic ostracism, trade imbalance, and a growing socioeconomic divide, were the significant factors that contributed to the emerging idea of “nation” in Haiti.¹⁰³ If the “nation is the culture and history of a class-divided civil society, as they relate to issues of state power,” as Trouillot suggests,¹⁰⁴ then we have a compelling context in which to understand the frequency of nationalist and militaristic images in Vodou sacred spaces and arts. The emergence of these images parallels the formation of nation. In Vodou visual expressions, images and references to national identity, militarism, or authoritative power are linked to the many faces of the Ogou complex and its corresponding iconography, and rendered most frequently in the *ounfò*.

Soldier saints

The most prominent member of the Ogou family is Ogou Feray, the valiant soldier whom practitioners regard as Haiti’s national hero. Adherents identify him most with the apostle Saint James the Greater (Saint Jacques) as his “Moor-slayer” persona, captured by the popular chromolithograph that is also widely circulated in Haiti (Fig.

¹⁰² Ibid., 80.

¹⁰³ Here I adopt Trouillot’s definition of nation, which “is a construct that operates *against the background of political power*,” but is “not necessarily a cultural construct *backed* by political power. Rather, it is a cultural construct that offers some claim to homogeneity *in relation to* political power.” Ibid., 25.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

3.23).¹⁰⁵ Accordingly, this association is the one that appears most frequently on *ounfò* walls (Fig. 3.24 and Fig. 3.25).¹⁰⁶ Nevertheless, signification is open for practitioners to assert their own interpretation. An *oungan* in Merger, for example, rendered Ogou Feray as the fully armored knight behind Saint James (Fig. 3.26), even though practitioners typically identify that figure with Ogou Badagri or Gede (*lwa* of the dead), because his lowered visor resembles, the chin-cloth of a corpse.¹⁰⁷ Still others give Saint James his own Vodou identity, referring to him as “Sen Jak,” the most senior of all Ogou, separate from Ogou Feray.¹⁰⁸

When people refer to Saint James, it is the many powers of Ogou they call: the conqueror, the soldier, the politician, and the protector (practitioners consider him the protector of the *ounfò* and of children). The legend of Saint James captures these many faces. Killed by Herod Agrippa I in Judea in 44 AD, Saint James rose to martyrdom in Christianity. According to his hagiography, the saint appeared on the battlefields alongside the Christian armies during the Reconquista. The most celebrated legend is his appearance at the Battle of Clavijo in 844 AD, where he slaughtered so many Moors that he earned the title “Matamoros,” or Moor-slayer, and became the military patron saint of Spain.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁵ An eighteenth-century sculpture by Jose Gambino of Saint James as the “Moor-slayer” stands in the cathedral of Santiago de Compostela in Spain, James’s reputed burial place and major pilgrimage site.

¹⁰⁶ In my experience, practitioners usually referred to Ogou Feray as Saint Jacques. Milo Marcelin, however, identifies Ogou Feray with Saint Philip and describes Saint Jacques as the chief of the Ogou; see *Mythologie Vodou (Rite Arada)*, 2:41-46. Donald Cosentino provides a colorful examination of this identification; see “It’s All for You Sen Jak!,” in *Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou*, ed. Donald J. Cosentino (Los Angeles: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History, 1995), 305-321.

¹⁰⁷ See Leiris, “On the Uses of Catholic Religious Prints,” 88.

¹⁰⁸ See Brown, “Systematic Remembering, Systematic Forgetting,” 71.

¹⁰⁹ James is certainly not the only saint linked with militarism. Alexander Webster states that from the third century on, several saints have been involved in military activities, usually to exact justice or to

The saint's popularity flourished throughout the Iberian Peninsula (where people call him Santiago) and images of him, along with the Virgin Mary, were among the first distributed throughout the Americas during the Spain's "conquering expeditions."¹¹⁰ But the cult and image of Saint James, as Terry Rey points out, also arrived to colonial Haiti from Christian Kongolese slaves.¹¹¹ The Portuguese brought the saint to the Kingdom of Kongo in the late fifteenth century as part of their overall trade and proselytizing efforts. Following the death of King João I in 1506, Dom Afonso, a Christian convert and João's chosen successor for the throne, was challenged by Mpanza a Nzinga, a "defender of the threatened traditions," who had a formidable army under his command.¹¹² Although Dom Afonso had few followers to resist his rival, he was victorious—with the help of Santiago. Seeing that the opposing forces were advancing with swords and lances, Afonso shouted "Santiago!" In a letter published in 1512, a contemporary chronicler described what happened next:

We called upon the blessed apostle Saint James, and as a result, miraculously, we saw all our enemies turn their backs and flee as fast as they could, without our knowing the cause of their route. We followed them, and during this pursuit a great number perished, but not a single one of our men.¹¹³

defend the Christian faith and its adherents. Some saints, as he points out, "such as Michael the Archangel, George, and Demetrius were either portrayed posthumously as warriors or invoked in military contexts;" see "Varieties of Christian Military Saints: From Martyrs Under Caesar to Warrior Princes," *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 24, no. 1 (1980): 3 and 23.

¹¹⁰ Jacques Lafaye, *Quetzacóatl and Guadalupe: The Formation of Mexican National Consciousness, 1531-1813*, trans. Benjamin Keen (1976; repr., Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press 1987), 226.

¹¹¹ Terry Rey, "Kongolese Catholic Influences on Haitian Popular Catholicism," 272-274.

¹¹² George Balandier, *Daily Life in the Kingdom of the Kongo: From the Sixteenth to the Eighteenth Century*, trans. Helen Weaver (New York: Pantheon Books, 1968), 48-49.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 49.

In an earlier letter to his people, Afonso wrote that he and his supporters interrogated those who fled. He stated that, “When we called upon the Apostle Santiago, they all saw a white cross in the sky and a great number of armored horsemen which so frightened them they could think nothing else but to flee.”¹¹⁴ Following Afonso’s triumph, the Kingdom of Kongo made the Saint’s Feast Day, July 25th (the same day in Haiti), its own national holiday, and in 1512 commemorated the legendary battle on its coat of arms.¹¹⁵ With the legend concretized on the kingdom’s coat of arms and other royal regalia, the image of the triumphant Saint James on horseback undoubtedly gained visibility throughout the kingdom.¹¹⁶ As Catholicism took hold in the Kongo, so too did widespread devotion to Saint James the Greater, which only added to his prominence in Haitian Catholicism during the colonial era, and his image in Vodou.¹¹⁷

Vodou’s Ogou complex absorbs the reality of countless wars and insurrections in Haiti’s history. Practitioners say, as Milo Marcelin retells, that “during times of war, the Ogou rarely appear in ceremonies because they are too occupied on the battlefield.”¹¹⁸ The legends of Saint Jacques’s appearances on the battlefield, captured and circulated widely through mechanical reproductions, have had enormous appeal to the descendants of revolutionaries who fought for their independence in a thirteen-year war followed by

¹¹⁴ Thornton, *The Kongolese Saint Anthony*, 33.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ The popularity of Saint James continued into the seventeenth century. In 1622 King Pedro II drafted a charter that made funding provisions for the royal chapel, the Chapel of Saint James; see John Thornton, “The Development of an African Catholic Church in the Kingdom of Kongo, 1491-1750,” *The Journal of African History* 25 no. 2 (1984): 161.

¹¹⁷ Rey, “Kongolese Catholic Influences on Haitian Popular Catholicism,” 273.

¹¹⁸ Marcelin, *Mythologie Vodou (Rite Arada)*, 2:33.

numerous rebellions and conflicts throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Understandably this appeal extends to Ogou Balendjo, known as an army general, a powerful healer, and escort of Agwe, the great *lwa* of the sea.¹¹⁹ On *ounfò* walls he appears as the chivalrous Saint George rendered in full armor, with a red cloak (Ogou's color) flowing dramatically behind him, and lance held firmly in his hands just before he slays the defeated dragon (Fig. 3.27, Fig. 3.28, and Fig. 3.29). In three out of four *ounfò* where I saw this image, practitioners reinforced the message of strength and prowess by painting him next to the Petwo power of Ezili Dantò, who possesses her own reputation as a fierce warrior, evinced by the battle scars she bears on her face (Fig. 3.30). The militancy continues with Ogou Badagri, also a soldier and general, only he appears in the *ounfò* as the Archangel Saint Michael, cloaked in red, holding a balance in one hand and with the other wielding a sword to threaten a fallen demon (Fig. 3.31).¹²⁰ This image carries a strong visual message, appealing to those who have suffered from the blow of injustice.

As Allen Roberts and Mary Nooter Roberts tell us, a saint's "hagiography retains origins as diffuse as memory, yet it can be as purposeful and politically driven as

¹¹⁹ While most accounts identify Ogou Balendjo as a warrior, Milo Marcelin specifies that he is an army general and healer; see *Mythologie Vodou (Rite Arada)*, 2:74. In July 2003, I attended a grand ceremony for Agwe off the coast of Gressier. When all the participants returned from the sea, a man on a white horse appeared on the beach. Everyone present said he was Ogou Balendjo, Agwe's escort. It was the only time I saw such a sight in Haiti.

¹²⁰ An *oungan* in Port-au-Prince identified his chromolithograph of Saint James with Ogou Badagri, which again, demonstrates the openness of interpretation. Similarly, he identified Saint George with Ogou Feray. Yvon Ducet, personal communication with the author, January 2004. In the Medieval West, according to Alexander Webster, St. Michael the Archangel was honored as the "protector of Christians, particularly soldiers," and appeared in a sixth-century Coptic encomium as "the ultimate military patron;" see "Varieties of Christian Military Saints," 12.

history.”¹²¹ These Ogou spirits, rendered as soldier saints with their enemies all underfoot, not only inspire and empower those who gather for protection, guidance, and community in the *ounfò*, but they also reveal the painful components of social memory and historic realities from which these images emerge.

Images of nation

With its coat of arms over a field of blue and red, the Haitian flag is ever present throughout the country’s public and private spaces, a constant reminder of a hard-won independence and current rallying point for political power, as evident in the 2004 bicentennial independence celebration in front of the National Palace (Fig. 3.32). It also appears in almost every *ounfò*, whether in rows suspended from the ceiling rafters, or painted directly on walls and drums (Fig. 3.1). Along with the *poto mitan*, its presence is one of the major defining characteristics of the *ounfò*. Not surprisingly Vodou practitioners associate the flag with the political figurehead Ogou, whose colors it displays. But various legions throughout Haitian colonial and post-colonial history have grafted meaning onto flags, displaying them as symbols of political or religious allegiance. Patrick Polk points to the significant visibility of flags during the war of independence and how they “were imbued with an aura of divine power which served as a means of sacralizing armed forces.”¹²² After independence flags continued to figure prominently both in the secular and Vodou spheres. For the former revolutionaries who practiced Vodou, flags—with influences from Kongo, Dahomean, and European

¹²¹ “A Saint in the City: Sufi Arts of Urban Senegal,” *African Arts* 35, no. 4 (Winter 2002): 62.

¹²² “Sacred Banners and the Divine Cavalry Charge,” in *The Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou*, ed. Donald J. Cosentino (Los Angeles: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History, 1995), 336.

(particularly French) military traditions—became indispensable objects in *ounfò*, sacred rites, and public celebrations.¹²³ Today they are central to Vodou visuality and rites, particularly at the beginning of ceremonies when the *laplas* emerges with a sword in hand, accompanied by two *kò-drapo* (flag bearers) holding elaborate sequined flags with the symbols of *lwa* embroidered on their surfaces (Fig. 3.33).¹²⁴ The ceremonial use of the flag in this segment incorporates the military power of Ogou into Vodou *regleman*.

The Haitian flag is a lasting symbol of the independent state and the organized military resistance under Jean-Jacques Dessalines that made independence possible. In March of 1803, an article circulated in Port-au-Prince indicating that the revolutionaries were fighting under the French tricolor, which had at the beginning of the war symbolized the unity of all people defending the Republic, regardless of color.¹²⁵ After the article came to Dessalines's attention, a congress convened in the town of Arcahaie where he reportedly ordered the white stripe removed from the tricolor and the blue and red portions sewn together vertically to symbolize unity among people of color against the French. Subsequently, following his Constitution of 1805, Dessalines changed the blue band to black to represent all people of color, but Alexandre Pétion, President of the southern Republic of Haiti, later reinstated the horizontal red and blue bands.¹²⁶

¹²³ See *ibid.* for these influences.

¹²⁴ For more on this subject, see Patrick Polk, *Haitian Vodou Flags* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1997). Dolores Yonker has also written on the subject, see *Sequined Surfaces: Vodoun Flags from Haiti* (Northridge, CA: Art Galleries of California State University, 1991); and “Invitations to the Spirits: The Vodun Flags of Haiti,” *A Report* (Spring 1985).

¹²⁵ Beaubrun Ardouin, *Etudes sur l'histoire d'Haïti suivies de la vie du général J.-M. Borgella* (Port-au-Prince, 1958; Paris 1853-60), 5:83-84, as cited by Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 293.

¹²⁶ See David Nicholls, *From Dessalines to Duvalier*, 234; and Trouillot, *Haiti: State against Nation*, 240, n. 5. After Dessalines's death, Haiti divided into two political regions; Pétion ruled the south and Henri Christophe declared himself king in the north.

Placed centrally over the red and blue stripes of the current flag is the Republic's coat of arms designed by Pétion, which still appears on *ounfò* walls and sacred objects today, symbolizing Ogou, Vodou's national hero (Fig. 3.34).¹²⁷ Crowning a centrally placed palm tree is the *bonnet phrygien* (cap of liberty), a long-standing symbol of liberation incorporated into French Revolutionary iconography and subsequently into Haiti's. The palm tree and *bonnet phrygien*, emblematic of "revolutionary Haiti,"¹²⁸ is found throughout Vodou sacred arts, as well as on the streets of Port-au-Prince (Fig. 3.35). On the coat of arms cannons, artillery, bayonets, axes—the weapons of resistance—accompany trumpets, drums, and six sweeping flags. Below appears a scroll bearing an unforgettable—albeit utopian—message: "L'Union Fait la Force" (in union there is strength).¹²⁹

By choosing—or appropriating—imagery of militarism and liberty, it is as if Pétion foresaw that the official discourse outside Haiti would downplay the Haitian Revolution and war of independence by using, as Michel-Rolph Trouillot describes them, two families of tropes: erasure and banalization, "formulas of silence" that expunge and trivialize.¹³⁰ In spite of systematic silencing, the images and colors associated with Haiti's independence resonated beyond its borders. In colonial Cuba, for example, where officials monitored the events of the war and consistently attempted to prevent a massive

¹²⁷ Desmangles, 148.

¹²⁸ Robert Farris Thompson, "From the Isle beneath the Sea," 95.

¹²⁹ In an article that challenges Haiti's founding myths and argues for their reformulation to meet new needs, Maximilien Laroche suggests that the national motto "l'union fait la force" promotes a utopian idea of racial solidarity. Alternatively, he calls for a deethnicization of the motto to convey unity "between all people with the right will;" see "The Founding Myths of the Haitian Nation," *Small Axe* 18 (September 2005): 4-7. Interestingly, this motto appeared in a Saint Marc meeting hall in 1790, conveying the will of a newly elected white assembly who had a great stake in the contraband trade; see Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 78.

¹³⁰ Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 96.

slave insurrection on its own soil, news and images from Haiti nevertheless reached free and enslaved people of color.¹³¹ In eastern Cuba, a *cabildo* (a mutual aid and religious society for Africans, creoles and other immigrant groups) adopted images and colors associated with Haiti for its own *bandera* (flag) and member attire.¹³²

For Vodou practitioners, the red and blue stripes of the flag and the coat of arms take on additional meaning, merging ideas of nation and the spirit world. While practitioners identify the flag and its colors with Ogou, Patrick Bellegarde-Smith includes Ezili Freda in this symbolism. He suggests that blue symbolizes “cosmic energy” with which she is associated, along with her protective and maternal qualities that promote social welfare.¹³³ Practitioners associate the central palm tree with the *poto mitan*. Accordingly, several examples of the coat of arms on Vodou flags include Danbala and Ayida Wedo, rendered as serpents twisting up the trunk, so often seen in the *ounfò*. In addition, the palm leaves refer to the *vèvè* of Ayizan, patron *lwa* of the *ounfò* and the marketplace (Fig. 3.36).¹³⁴ Ayizan also oversees the rites of initiation, her presence evident by the palm fronds that protect and purify new initiates as they emerge from the

¹³¹ Colonial officials responded to the insurrections in Haiti by isolating slaves who harbored “revolutionary sentiments,” by prohibiting slaves arriving from other colonies, and by deporting or jailing slaves who arrived from French and English colonies since 1790 and 1794, respectively; see Hall, *Social Control in Slave Plantation Societies*, 125. For more on how the news of the war linked communities of African descent throughout the Caribbean and beyond, see Julius S. Scott, “The Common Wind: Currents of Afro-American Communication in the Era of the Haitian Revolution” (PhD diss. Duke University, 1986).

¹³² Ibid., 126; and David H. Brown, *Santería Enthroned: Art, Ritual, and Innovation in an Afro-Cuban Religion* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), 39.

¹³³ Bellegarde-Smith, “The Spirit of the Thing,” 54. *Oungan* Max Beauvoir identifies both the red and blue with Ogou Feray, see http://www.vodou.org/colors_of_the_flags.htm.

¹³⁴ Bellegarde-Smith, “The Spirit of the Thing,” 64. I would like to point out that the axe is a major symbol of Shango, the Yoruba *orisha* of thunder known in Haiti as Ogou Chango.

djevo in a state of spiritual rebirth.¹³⁵ Similarly, on the coat of arms Ayizan oversees the emergence of a new nation. An *oungan* named Josué explained to historian Laurent Dubois the significance of Ayizan's connection to the Haitian flag:

And in the Haitian flag there is a little bonnet on top of the palm, and we call this the bonnet of Aizan. You see, once again it's the history of *Haiti* that comes back. Aizan is a lwa of virtue, but also of liberty, and when in a ceremony all the people tear the palms of Ayizan and distribute them, they are sharing liberty, tearing liberty and sharing it, giving liberty . . . Every day you see the flag, every day you see Aizan, every day there is a *chiré Aizan*, liberty is there (Fig. 3.37).¹³⁶

Conveyed by the Haitian flag, the idea of liberty has long been present on Vodou objects. We only have to turn to examples from the nineteenth century to see the long tradition of the flag and the coat of arms appearing on Vodou sacred objects housed in *ounfò*. For instance, standing today in the Musée du Pantheon National in Port-au-Prince is a nineteenth-century Dahomean-influenced *asotò* drum, the grandest and most sacred of all Vodou drums (Fig. 3.38).¹³⁷

The *asotò*, arguably the most sacred and powerful object in Vodou practice, may also communicate the political—and on this early nineteenth-century example, the emergence of nation. As the *asotò*'s accompanying wall text in the museum indicates, the drum was used to honor the spirits of Ginen, but most especially to honor the ancestors who sacrificed themselves to create a free homeland, a message made clear with the drum's images. On one side appears the coat of arms flanked by two grenadiers

¹³⁵ Deren, 147-148.

¹³⁶ Dubois, "The Citizen's Trance," 123.

¹³⁷ Jacques Roumain, founder of the Bureau d'Ethnologie in Port-au-Prince, suggests that the drum, found northwest of Port-au-Prince in Cabaret, dates to at least the middle of the nineteenth century; see *Le Sacrifice du Tambour-Assoto(r)* (Port-au-Prince: Imprimerie de L'Etat, 1943), 65. Harold Courlander dates it to the early days of the Republic; see *The Drum and the Hoe*, 125. In another nineteenth-century example, Robert Farris Thompson describes a set of Rada drums. The largest, the *manman*, displays the coat of arms; the smallest, the *pitit*, bears two flags resembling the *vèvè* of Sen Jak; see "From the Isle beneath the Sea, 94-95.

attired in the uniform of the First Empire.¹³⁸ On the other side of the drum and perched over a stylized rosette of palm fronds appears the guinea fowl, known for its strategic invisibility, vigilance, and being long emblematic of Jean-Jacques Dessalines.¹³⁹ Finally, just as they appear around the *poto mitan* and the tree of liberty, Danbala and Ayida Wedò twist around the cylindrical form and enclose the national motif as a reminder of the ancestors whose heroic acts made liberation possible. This *asotò*, Vodou's oldest, most famous, and most sacred extant object, exemplifies the merging of sacred function with symbols of nationhood, a convergence that continues to characterize a significant portion of Vodou arts.

Dessalines, Grann Guitonn, and public remembrance

The person most identified with images of national identity, particularly the Haitian flag, is the man who proclaimed Haiti's independence, who collapses temporal horizons and embodies paradox perhaps more than any other historical figure: Jean-Jacques Dessalines, who practitioners identify with Ogou. His legacy is multidimensional: up until the last two decades, writers outside Haiti have largely ignored or criticized him; Haitian politicians, elites, and intellectuals have, through their

¹³⁸ Roumain, *Sacrifice du Tambour-Assoto(r)*, 65.

¹³⁹ Harold Courlander identifies the bird as a guinea hen; see *Drum and the Hoe*, caption for figure 33. Interestingly, Francois Duvalier appropriated the guinea fowl as a symbol of his regime, which continued with his son, Jean-Claude, until his ouster in 1986. Just before Aristide's 1991 inauguration, murals appeared all over Port-au-Prince with his emblem, the rooster, along with textual messages. Paul Farmer points out that one of the most popular phrases was, "The Rooster Pecks at the Guinea Fowl," a declaration of triumph over the Duvalier regime and the *macoutes*; see *The Uses of Haiti*, rev. ed. (Monroe, Maine: Common Courage Press, 2003), 136. A photograph by Martha Cooper captures the same message: a rooster stands triumphantly with blood and feathers falling from his open beak, and at his feet lies a decapitated guinea fowl; see Karen McCarthy Brown, "Art and Resistance: Haiti's Political Murals, October 1994, *African Arts* 24 (Spring 1996): 56. Susan Tselos photographed another example; see figure 9.31 in Donald J. Cosentino, "It's All for You, Sen Jakl," 260.

shifting agendas, shunned, appropriated, romanticized and glorified him; and Vodou apotheosized the whole of him.¹⁴⁰ While untold violence and tyranny characterize his military career and presidency, his role as liberator rises above all else for Vodou practitioners.¹⁴¹ Karen McCarthy Brown suggests that it is through the prism of Ogou that practitioners are able to understand him and reconcile a history replete with torture and triumph.¹⁴² They understand the reality of liberation.

In 1937 George Simpson collected folktales about Haitian heroes from J. B. Cinéas, who in turn heard them from his great-grandmother, born just five years after Henri Christophe's death.¹⁴³ The stories about Dessalines focus primarily on war and they point to his popularity among the peasantry—more so than Toussaint or Christophe. One tale exemplifies his exuberant remembrance among the people:

One day after Dessalines had made an impassioned speech to the people, he is said to have drawn his formidable sword from its sheath while the people sang 'Gadé manchette à Dessalines! Li gros li longue, li pesé!' (Look out for the sword of Dessalines! It's large, long, and heavy!)¹⁴⁴

Although Madiou reports that Dessalines demonstrated contempt for magico-religious practitioners by carrying out orders to eradicate them,¹⁴⁵ stories in Vodou point

¹⁴⁰ Joan Dayan examines with refreshing insight the legacy of Dessalines and his role in the "rituals of history," see *Haiti, History, and the Gods*, 17-54.

¹⁴¹ The first articles of his 1805 Constitution include the abolishment of slavery, equality among citizens, and the "generic appellation of Black" for all Haitians; see Dubois and Garrigus, 191-193.

¹⁴² See Brown, "Systematic Remembering, Systematic Forgetting."

¹⁴³ George Simpson and J. B. Cinéas, "Folk Tales of Haitian Heroes," *The Journal of American Folklore* 54, no. 213/214 (July-Dec 1941): 176-185.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 185.

¹⁴⁵ According to Madiou, Dessalines, as a general, carried out orders to suppress the activities of secret societies and others who practiced "African superstitions" to maintain order. (Toussaint was said to have abhorred Vaudoux.) Madiou reports Dessalines and his battalion stormed a large ceremony in the Cul-de-Sac plain, and killed fifty participants with bayonets; see *Histoire d'Haïti* (Port-au-Prince, Impr. de J. Courtois, 1847-1848), 2:112.

to his use of magic and pre-battle consultation with major *lwa*, including none other than the warrior Ogou, who is said to have been Dessalines's *mèt tèt*. As a soldier, Dessalines has not only become the symbol of national independence in Haitian popular memory, but also the “personification of the archetype of Ogou.”¹⁴⁶ In public and on the battlefield Dessalines was a carnal embodiment of Ogou, with displays of bravado and appearances with the *lwa*'s major attributes: crimson scarf, sword, and bottle of rum.¹⁴⁷ Vodou understood this uncanny union of *lwa* and human enough to relax its elastic boundaries and absorb the experiential and the real, giving rise to a new Kreyol spirit: Ogou Dessalin.¹⁴⁸ How befitting that Dessalines joined forces with the Ogou soldiers and politicians, a complex that accommodates and reflects the endless dimensions of power turned against itself or directed toward the possibilities of transformation and liberation.

Today two new monuments in Merotte, Arcahaie, commemorate the memory of Dessalines: a mural enclosed by a white fence marks the creation of the Haitian flag (Fig. 3.39) and directly across the street stands a reconstructed *ounfò* belonging to Grann Guitonn, a famous *manbo* in Vodou history (Fig. 3.40). Her *ounfò* is the site where Dessalines supposedly received warning of the treacherous betrayal plotted against him. The mural in Merotte is new, completed just before my visit there in the summer of 2003 to commemorate the two-hundred-year anniversary of the assembly of Arcahaie and the creation of the Haitian flag. This is what the interpretive sign tells us; but curiously,

¹⁴⁶ Rachel Beauvoir-Dominique, *L'Ancienne Cathédrale de Port-au-Prince: Perspectives d'un Vestige de Carrefours* (Port-au-Prince: Editions Henri Deschamps, 1991), 59

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ Dayan, *Haiti, History, and the Gods*, 30.

while a flag rises above the mural, none appears in the mural itself. What else, then, does the mural commemorate?

The scene depicts a Haitian landscape with Dessalines on horseback in full military regalia, including the Napoleonic *bicorne*, though recast here with Haitian plumes of red and blue, and the scallop symbol of Saint Jacques painted on his sash (Fig. 3.41). The image captures how popular Haitian folklore remembers him as: “the conqueror, the avenger, the God of War, and the founder of Haitian Independence.”¹⁴⁹ On the far right side of the mural is Grann Guitonn, rendered in a ritualizing moment (Fig. 3.42). She shakes her *ason* and bell in one hand, while pouring libations next to a lashed cross, *vèvè*, and a lit candle. Without doubt, the *lwa* upon whom she is calling is Ogou, understood by the sword planted firmly in the earth and the red scarf lashed around her chair.

Across the street at Grann Guitonn’s newly refurbished *ounfò* a marble sign tells us that it was restored in her memory for her “important role along side Dessalines in the battle for Haitian independence.” What did she do exactly? Writing romantically about the role of Vodou in the revolution and war, Odette Menneson-Rigaud relates a story that provides some background for this mural and refurbished temple.¹⁵⁰ From her informant, whose grandfather had told him the story of the Haitian flag since he was a child, she learned that this oral history encompasses Dessalines’s purported service to the *lwa*. The place is Merotte, at the *ounfò* of none other than Grann Guitonn. In the center of her *ounfò* stood a gigantic fig tree, a *reposwa* for the Nago spirits (deriving from Nigeria), whom Dessalines served. Chief among these spirits was Ogou Shango. Every

¹⁴⁹ Simpson and Cinéas, 184.

¹⁵⁰ Menneson-Rigaud, 65-67.

year since the day of the flag's creation (May 18, 1803), Dessalines held grand services under that tree because for him, stated the informant, the tree was "good for war." Having decided to see it for herself, Mennesson-Rigaud searched for the *ounfò* and encountered an old woman at the site who served the spirits and told the same story, preserving it in Vodou history.

When my friend Colette Robert and I visited Merotte nearly half a century later, she told me of another connection between Dessalines and Grann Guitonn: the latter's vision of his death.¹⁵¹ Her warning came in 1806, when rumors of a massive conspiracy against him emerged and insurrections began in the south. Dessalines decided to leave his headquarters in the central region to crush the rebellion. Having foreseen his murder, Grann Guitonn tried to stop him but he disregarded the warning. On October 17 he headed south toward Port-au-Prince, but at Pont-Rouge soldiers ambushed and killed him, operating under the orders of high-ranking officials.¹⁵² Today a monument marks this site just north of Port-au-Prince (Fig. 3.43). In another version of the tale, which appears in a Vodou song, Dessalines consulted with the spirit of the pre-revolutionary insurgent Makandal, who warned him of the treachery that awaited him.¹⁵³ Every day, the song goes, Makandal would speak to Dessalines, but he would not listen; it was a willfulness that cost him his life.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵¹ Colette Robert, personal communication with the author, June 8, 2003.

¹⁵² Joan Dayan offers a detailed account of his death; see *Haiti, History, and the Gods*, 16-17.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 31.

¹⁵⁴ See Milo Rigaud, *La Tradition voodoo et le voodoo haïtien*, 62; and Rachel Beauvoir-Dominique, *L'Ancienne Cathédrale de Port-au-Prince*, 59.

While the mural and the *ounfò* may recall this fatal decision, they nevertheless proclaim what so much of critical discourse has denied, dismissed, or disparaged: the role of Vodou—or magico-religious practices—in Haiti’s revolution and war of independence. Vodou’s Grann Guitonn joins Ogou and Dessalines in these sites that evoke and celebrate liberation, a theme that runs so deeply and poignantly in Vodou thought and imagination. Vodou praises, petitions, and even questions Dessalines, but above all else it remembers him—through his life and death—as the pathway to liberty for country and self.

Dessalin mouri kite peyi-a se pou nou
Ou ap sonje byen depi lontan
Pou aprann de Desalin
Avèk zanm-yo a lamèn
Oriyo nanpwen lafwa
N’ap mache ewa a libète o
Se pèp-la ki resèvwà
Pou antre de Desalin
Ou ap saliye a libète

Dessalines died leaving Haiti for us
Remember well from long ago
To learn about Dessalines,
With our weapons in our hands,
Once there was no hope
Now we’re working for liberty
For the entrance of Dessalines
You’re saluting freedom.¹⁵⁵

Legacies of liberation

One afternoon in Jean-Pierre Fleurival’s Fort Mercredi *ounfò* I observed what is called a *seremomi promès*, performed on behalf of a young man who had committed a transgression (I was not told what) and who was consequently making amends and

¹⁵⁵ For the full song see Averill and Yih, 281.

seeking forgiveness. Toward the end of the ceremony, which was held in front of the *poto mitan*, the officiating *manbo* sang a series of prayers and after each verse chanted the following: “*A gras a delivrans, gras la mizerikòd.*” Jean-Pierre told me the chant meant, “thank you for liberation and thank you for the end of suffering.”¹⁵⁶ At the time this did not fully resonate with me, nor did I connect it immediately to the many other references of liberation that I encountered in songs, heard in conversation and in teachings, or saw clearly painted on temple walls or public murals. Sometimes these examples are forthright and other times they are more nuanced; so too they can touch the community or the interior life of the individual.

Vodou understands the depth of human suffering and so much of its beliefs and practices focus on practical means for people to find a way out of this suffering, to attain liberation of mind, body, and soul. With Haiti’s complicated history that extends to contemporary adversities such as forced labor,¹⁵⁷ staggering poverty, poor health care, and few educational opportunities—all of which lead to persistent civil unrest and violence—liberation assumes an extraordinary depth of meaning. More than anything, liberation is a means of transformation, an emergence from a state of suffering—whether it is of nation, community, or individual. This is one reason why Vodou, which focuses so much on healing and community building, incorporates images of liberation into its practice and visual displays. The *ounfò* provides space for this practice, walls to focus

¹⁵⁶ Jean-Pierre Fleurival, personal communication with the author, June 12, 2002.

¹⁵⁷ According to the National Council for Haitian Rights there exists an estimated 300,000 domestic child laborers who suffer from severe exploitation. See <http://www.nchr.org/hrp/restavek/overview.htm>. Called *restaveks*, these children are sent by their families to urban households to receive education and care in exchange for minor household work. The reality is that these children are typically denied proper care and education, and frequently suffer from physical and mental abuse.

these displays, and consequently the means for a strengthened community to transform suffering into empowered action.

Frequently, images on *ounfò* walls evoke historic events or people that in turn evoke memory and foster social cohesion. Memory is composed of culturally- and historically-based narrative constructions that function more for the purpose of formulating self and community identities than adhering to the impossible enterprise of reconstructing the past as it actually happened.¹⁵⁸ Again, the Bizango leader who, for the benefit of the community, evoked the memory of Haitian revolutionary heroes is a pointed example of this. With his final words, “And so I tell you again and again that there was a moment in 1804, a moment that bore fruits, that the year 1804 born the children of today,” he intertwines contemporary Haitian identity with revolution, liberation, and the birth of the nation.¹⁵⁹ He painted images in the minds of practitioners to transmit memory for the purpose of building and empowering community; images on *ounfò* walls can do the same.

For example, painted in the *peristil* of the *ounfò* at Luly is a triumphal image of Don Pedro, its relatively public placement provides access to its society’s members in addition to visitors (Fig. 3.44).¹⁶⁰ Occupying an ambiguous place in history, as I explain in Chapter Two, the figure of Don Pedro nevertheless represents the spirit of courage and liberation. On the *ounfò* wall he has just severed the chain of bondage, stepping

¹⁵⁸ On the social and cultural construction of memory, see Susanne Kuchler and Walter Melion, “Introduction: Memory, Cognition, and Image Production,” in *Images of Memory: On Remembering and Representation*, ed. Susanne Kuchler and Walter Melion (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 7.

¹⁵⁹ Davis, 266-267.

¹⁶⁰ As I mention in Chapter One, I have encountered various spellings of his name, I adopt “Don Pedro” for consistency.

triumphantly onto a rock while wielding his machete. Lionel Chauvet, a young *oungan* of this Vodou community, stated that Don Pedro was a “*gro nèg*,” (big or important man) who helped liberate the country from slavery and colonial control. He explained that, “when you have a problem, Don Pedro can help you. He is a strong Petwo spirit and whatever you need, he can help you with any situation. If you need help, Don Pedro is who you can ask, because he is so strong.”¹⁶¹ This image enables the memory of Don Pedro’s role in liberation, which in turn provides a source of protection and empowerment for the community.

In *ounfò* that work with the Petwo or other strong spirits, images also draw from historic figures and events to provide a source of inspiration and power. André, for example, has in addition to his Dahomean *ounfò* at Gressier, a temple for Makaya rites, a KiKongo term for leaves that in Haiti also refers to the forest.¹⁶² Overlapping with Petwo and Bizango, Makaya rites are powerful, working with some of the strongest *lwa* to draw from the healing and transformative powers of leaves and the forest. Appropriately, a *vèvè* for Gran Bwa, the great healer and *lwa* of the forest, appears on the *ounfò* wall next to the entrance.

Next to Gran Bwa’s *vèvè* is a scene that links spiritual, esoteric, and political powers to one of Vodou’s most celebrated historical heroes, François Makandal. André rendered him here as Haiti’s symbol of liberation, the *inconnu marron* (unknown maroon), the larger-than-life bronze sculpture by Albert Mangones that stands in front of the National Palace (Figs. 3.45 and 3.46). Above Makandal’s image is a photograph of

¹⁶¹ Lionel Chauvet, personal communication with the author, June 8, 2003.

¹⁶² On the Kongo meaning see Luc de Heusch, “Kongo in Haiti: A New Approach to Religious Syncretism,” *Man* (Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute) 24 (June 1989), 297.

then President Aristide, himself a contemporary symbol of liberation for many disenfranchised Haitians.¹⁶³

In Chapter Two I point to the uncertainties surrounding the biography of Makandal, and how it then becomes difficult to determine the degree to which he affected insurrectionary activities in the years prior to 1791, particularly as subsequent texts about him during those years grew fanciful. But the magnitude of his legend today among Vodou practitioners is incontrovertible. What is clear is that Makandal was a fugitive and a *bòkò*, a spiritual expert who “works with both hands,” meaning for “good” or “questionable” ends. He also must have had excellent botanical knowledge to concoct the poison bundles he and his followers distributed throughout the north. Hein Vanhee points out that some evidence suggests he may in fact have been a “Kongolese ritual specialist, composing and selling *nkisi* charms in the Kongolese tradition.”¹⁶⁴ Given that he was African-born, had a Kongolese name,¹⁶⁵ understood botanical properties, and is surrounded by a legend that credits him for inciting revolutionary acts and achieving immortality, it becomes clear why André chose his Makaya *ounfò* to associate Makandal’s memory with the image of the *inconnu marron*.

The spiritual power linked to Makandal is the fear-inspiring bull Bosou, a protective *lwa* associated with powerful magic who practitioners summon in Petwo and

¹⁶³ This identification was pushed in 2003 when Aristide led a major campaign seeking \$21 billion dollars in reparations from France over indemnity payments demanded by France in 1825. During this campaign, his image appeared in public spaces and during television commercials, which also made full use of the Haitian flag. In keeping with tradition, Aristide allied himself with the past, placing his image next to that of Toussaint Louverture on billboards. An image of the current president is not uncommon on an *ounfò* wall or on an altar. Although in this particular case, André was a supporter of Aristide, but this is not the typical reason. Usually a presidential portrait does not express political support or affiliation, but rather, it is a strategy to be left alone or be protected, no matter who is in power.

¹⁶⁴ Vanhee, 250-251.

¹⁶⁵ On this point see Wyatt MacGaffey, *Kongo Political Culture: The Conceptual Challenge of the Particular* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2000), 139.

other strong rites such as those of Bizango and Sanpwèl secret societies. Legends of double and triple-horned bulls existed among many traditions that found their way to colonial Saint-Domingue, including those from pre-Christian Celtic France, European occultism, and Fon and Kongo peoples.¹⁶⁶ An *oungan* living in Port-au-Prince explained to me that Bosou is the most dangerous of the Makaya spirits.¹⁶⁷ Bosou is also known for defeating his enemies, an ability that makes him tremendously popular during times of war and conflict.¹⁶⁸ Because of his strength and identification with efficacious magic, secret societies display him on exterior *ounfò* walls, a declaration of their association with dangerous power (Fig. 3.47).¹⁶⁹ On the Makaya *ounfò* Bosou is chained to Makandal, another reference to his explosive power. Michel Laguerre recorded a song that depicts Bosou as such a violent and dangerous spirit that chains must restrain him; but when servitors call for him, he breaks free to help where he is needed.¹⁷⁰ For André, the chain not only links Makandal to Bosou's immense power, but also stands for that which had to be broken to seize liberation.¹⁷¹

The Masonic "All-Seeing Eye" positioned between Makandal and Bosou symbolizes justice, mercy, and divine presence. Many *oungan* (particularly those who belong to secret societies) and *lwa* such as Ogou and Bawon Samedi are Masons.

¹⁶⁶ For a brief explanation of these examples, see Donald Cosentino, "Introduction: Imagine Heaven," in *Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou*, ed. Donald J. Cosentino (Los Angeles: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History, 1995), 36-37.

¹⁶⁷ Yvon Ducet, personal communication with the author, January 13, 2004.

¹⁶⁸ Laguerre, *Voodoo Heritage*, 123.

¹⁶⁹ Laënnec Hurbon states that Sanpwèl secret societies revere Bosou; see *Le Barbare Imaginaire* (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1988), 184.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 124-25.

¹⁷¹ André Villaire, personal communication with the author, June 26, 2004.

Freemasonry has a long and significant history in colonial Saint-Domingue and independent Haiti, with the first Masonic lodges appearing as early as 1740 in Le Cap (Cape Haitian).¹⁷² Eighteenth-century Freemasonry's principles had broad appeal in Saint-Domingue, for they "preached political equality, civic liberty, and comradeship of race and benevolence."¹⁷³ Adopting the widespread ideals of "liberty, equality, fraternity, and progress," also so central to the formation of nation during the era of revolution, Freemasonry attempted to transform them into "social habits, political rules and economic facts."¹⁷⁴ Its appeal and access were significant in a colonial and post-colonial state divided sharply by color and class. Although Freemasonry drew many of its members from the upper class, its lodges provided another opportunity for the disenfranchised to advance themselves. Today its shared principles with Vodou—liberty, justice, tolerance, respect, education, and community—provide further tools of empowerment and a vast visual language understood by those who practice in Vodou's sacred spaces.

Rezistans

¹⁷² Pierre de Vaissière, 333. Susan Buck-Morss suggests that free people of color who studied in France were likely exposed to Freemasonry, whose ideals would have been a factor in the revolution. French lodges were egalitarian spaces, where race, religion, and gender "could be at least temporarily overcome;" see "Hegel and Haiti," *Critical Inquiry* (Summer 2000): 855. One could say the same about *ounfò* today. Szymon Askenazy states that Freemasonry was widespread during the war of independence, with "numerous adherents in the [Polish] 114th Demibrigade and the was at the same time . . . well rooted among San Domingo's colored population," as cited by Jan Pachonski and Reuel K. Wilson, *Poland's Caribbean Tragedy: A Study of Polish Legions in the Haitian War of Independence, 1802-1803* (Boulder: East European Monographs, 1986), 309. Determining Freemasonry's impact on late eighteenth-century insurrections and the war of independence is difficult. One reason, as Bernard Faÿ points out, is the supreme secrecy under which lodges operated. Moreover, if lodges maintained eighteenth-century documents, they would likely not share them with non-Masons; see *Revolution and Freemasonry, 1680-1800* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1935), 225-26.

¹⁷³ Faÿ, 307.

The *ounfò* serves many needs of the Vodou community and people build these environments accordingly. The *ounfò* structure, spatial organization, and images painted on their walls cosmicize mundane space, facilitate ritual activities, and enable people to remember a past that challenges the reaches of human imagination and experience, in all its suffering and triumphs. Images of the *lwa*, designs that evoke their power, and the *poto mitan*—the cosmic connection to the other world, all transform space into meaningful and value-filled place. But sometimes power is ambivalent, particularly with the revolutionary heroes Don Pedro, Makandal, Dessalines, and Ogou. With each of these figures power can transform and liberate, but it can also destroy. Rendering images of them provides a visual vehicle for Vodou practitioners to comprehend the ambivalences of history, and to navigate the political and economic complexities and exploits of the present.¹⁷⁵ But more importantly, they stand as images of liberation that signal the potential for monumental transformation so that individuals and communities can empower themselves and prepare their way for the future.

Vodou is a religion of healing and community building, and a significant component of that comes from nurturing relationships with the *lwa* and ancestors, as well as understanding a difficult past and integrating the adversities and triumphs into lived experiences. The *ounfò* enables practitioners in this process by transmitting *konesans* through its visually diverse yet instrumentally cohesive images, the rich narratives voiced in song, and the spirits who arrive from Ginen to provide guidance, laughter, and healing actions. Myth and memory coalesce into narratives that do more than represent, they

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 316.

¹⁷⁵ Karen McCarthy Brown makes this point for the case of Ogou; see “Systematic Remembering, Systematic Forgetting,” 76.

preserve and convey knowledge so that people know themselves and their place in the world, thus enabling social agency and action.

The morning after the community gathered for Bizango rites held in André's Makaya *ounfò* I walked in to get a better look in the daylight. On the base of the *poto mitan* was the conch shell used the previous night to call forth the spirits, who were the strongest and most militant I have encountered. It was also like a battle cry—*we here are ready!* Then across the *peristil* I noticed a tattered poster that featured a man's face with all but his eyes concealed by a red scarf. Above his head inscribed in red capital letters was the resonating word, "REZISTANS" (Fig. 3.48). The image advertised a documentary film detailing the political events and tragedies surrounding the 1991 military coup in Haiti. I had not noticed this the night before, but during the ceremony its implications were there. Then André approached me. We both stared at the image in silence until I asked, "why is this in here?" "Because," he replied, "this is our story."¹⁷⁶

¹⁷⁶ Personal communication with the author, June 24, 2002. André (whose real name I must unfortunately withhold here), an accomplished Vodou leader and drummer, died on November 20, 2005. I am indebted to him for all his help, instruction, protection, kindness, and willingness to allow me to explore Vodou as he practiced it.

Chapter 4: At the Vodou Altar

At the heart of the *ounfò* is the altar, or *pe*, the most sacred and concentrated of Vodou spaces located in the privacy of the *djevo* (Fig. 4.1). While the Vodou community unites in the *peristil* to commune with the spirit world, ritualizing for the individual typically happens in front of the altar because there the space is more intimate and the energy more focused. Because of its charged and extremely sacred nature, non-initiates are not typically given the same access to the *djevo* as they are to the *peristil*. Nevertheless, this is exactly where a friend and I were taken when we visited a famous *oungan* and flag maker living in the Bel-Air neighborhood of Port-au-Prince whom neither of us had ever met.

We greeted the *oungan* in his living quarters. Even though he was feeling unwell, he was extremely kind and gracious, and we much enjoyed the few moments he was able to spend with us. When he needed to rest, he asked his assistant, also a flag maker, to take care of us. The flag maker—whose name I never learned—took us through the *peristil* and much to my surprise he unlocked the door leading to the *djevo*. Although I was permitted to enter and photograph every *peristil* I visited, I was rarely allowed inside the most sacred of spaces. Without electricity or windows the *djevo* was completely dark. The flag maker lit a candle and I was awed by what I could see of the altar's scope in the flickering light. The altar nearly enveloped us, wrapping around three of the *djevo*'s walls with countless objects placed on its many tiers. Despite the dim light, I could make out several libation bottles, chromolithographs of Catholic saints, and plumed *pakèt kongo*. At that point the assistant offered me a drink from a large jug that was clearly filled with herbs. Perhaps as a reassurance, he told me it was for healing, and

I accepted the kind gesture. Reflecting on what happened, I think of the *oungan*'s altar as an extension of himself and his relationship with the *lwa* who are closest to him. Because he could not avail himself to us, allowing us into his *djevo* and providing us a healing drink in front of his altar was the next best thing. It was a gesture that invited us into his personal realm.

This chapter considers the personal realm of the *djevo* and the altar as a primary ritualizing site for work—particularly healing work—that benefits the individual or the community. The altar, built on personal and social experiences, remembrance, and history, instantiates cosmological principles while nurturing one's personal relationship with those *lwa* who are closest to the altar's maker. They are aesthetic expressions of a practitioner's sensibilities and ideas, and accordingly, the practitioner places upon them whatever objects he or she feels appropriate. Altar construction is a highly interpretive and diachronic process that expands and redirects iconographical meaning by assembling seemingly incongruent objects together. It is a strategy that enables the practitioner to make the altar most effective for healing purposes, around which Vodou centers.

Altar aesthetics: assemblage and agency

The Vodou altar is a visual and working assemblage that attracts to its surface—like the *ounfò* captures on and within its walls—so many disparate images and objects. While the altar's surface juxtapositions may mislead the casual viewer, all the components are functionally cohesive, enabling a practitioner to perform spiritual work and to strengthen his or her relationship with the *lwa*. Accordingly, almost anything that a practitioner finds useful may appear on the altar. Depending on which *lwa* or pantheon the altar is for, it may contain any number or combination of the following: Barbancourt rum, wine, champagne, soft drinks, elaborate sequined bottles, Florida water and other

perfumes, flowers, cigarettes, cigars, colored scarves, money, dolls and stuffed animals, terracotta vessels dressed in satin, assorted cups and ceramic pots, bells, rattles, conch shells, candles, tripod metal vessels with burning oil, playing cards, *pakèt kongo*, Amerindian stones, chromolithographs and statuettes of Catholic saints, images of Hindu divinities, daggers, keys, crucifixes, of Catholic saints, commercial action figures, chains, and most hauntingly—slave shackles. Indeed the Vodou altar is a fragmentary and yet totalizing vision of myth, history, knowledge, ideology, and cosmology. As Donald Cosentino observes, “To look at a Vodou altar . . . is to gauge the achievement of slaves and freeman who imagined a myth broad enough and fabricated a ritual complex enough to encompass all this disparate stuff.”¹ And yet, as we will find later in this chapter, what is *unseen* is just as vital, just as present, and just as generative and transformative as all that is seen.

The seen acts with the unseen through an ongoing aesthetic process of assemblage, or in other words, the accumulative and diachronic gathering together of disparate or related objects and concepts to achieve effect, as I describe in Chapter One. Far from being a haphazard or random uniting of “things,” assemblage is an ordered and additive system of arrangement that adheres to a visual and spiritual protocol, or principles of organization known in Vodou as *regleman*. At a Vodou altar *regleman* provides order to seemingly incongruent fragments of material.

Assemblage, in fact, permeates the corpus of Vodou visibility. Whether looking at an altar, the interior of an *ounfò*, or a manufactured charm, the aesthetic of assemblage visually and conceptually shapes Vodou practice. From fragments, assemblage forms an amalgamated whole. Here it is worth restating that Vodou is a composite religion that

¹ Cosentino, "Imagine Heaven," 27.

actively and continually draws diverse traditions, concepts, and ideas into its domain to accommodate the changing needs and circumstances of its practitioners. Moreover, Vodou practitioners make full use of what is available at any given time, particularly when resources are limited. Consequently, practitioners find, recycle, assemble, and reassemble. In this sense, assemblage recalls what Rachel Beauvoir-Dominique identifies as the “‘callaloo’ spirit of salvaging, rebuilding in synthetic layers.”² Assemblage accommodates an inevitable pragmatism, a factor that cannot be underestimated in shaping the Vodou aesthetic.

The visual and conceptual principles of Vodou assemblage may have their roots along the coastal west African region formally known as Dahomey.³ Art historian Suzanne Blier argues that the “eclectic” and “aggregate” qualities of Vodou ritual arts possess a striking resemblance to the principles and traditions of assemblage in Southern Benin and Togo, particularly among Vodun arts and ritual.⁴ Many of Haitian Vodou’s cosmological principles and deities derive from West Africa, most significantly from Vodun, or the “mysterious forces of powers that govern the world and the lives of those who reside within it.”⁵ In Vodun arts, particularly altars and power sculptures known as

² Beauvoir, “Underground Realms of Being,” 166.

³ Some of the complications in affixing ethnicities to slave populations in the Americas has been addressed in Chapter Two. I would like to point out here, however, that the Aja-Fon or Dahomean influence in Vodou is markedly prevalent despite the fact that from 1720 onward, Aja-Fon peoples were a minority group in Saint-Domingue. Philip Morgan suggests that since there are no extant records before 1720, it is possible that Aja-Fon peoples were not a minority in the colony’s early history. Furthermore, the “Aja-Fon languages were particularly easy to learn or their pantheon of gods were especially structured, which gave them influence disproportionate to their numbers throughout the eighteenth century;” see Philip D. Morgan, “The Cultural Implications of the Atlantic Slave Trade,” 137.

⁴ Blier, “Vodun: West African Roots of Vodou,” 61.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 61. Although art historian Dana Rush focuses on the indefinable nature of Vodun, she nevertheless explains it as a “way of looking at life,” and “understanding the potentiality of the myriad components making up Vodun—people spirits, histories, ideas, and faiths.” Vodun is accumulative, expansive, and inclusive—qualities, I would add, that shape Vodou practice in Haiti; see “Vodun Vortex: Accumulative

bo and *bocio*, assemblage is integral to the process of production (Fig. 4.2). The “primacy of assemblage” suggests Blier, “characterizes the corpus of Vodun arts and rituals. . . the vast majority of [such] forms are made from bringing together separate elements of the same or mixed media.”⁶ So woven into the fabric of Vodun visual and conceptual traditions, Fon peoples, who form the principal cultural group in the region, use four different words to describe the action of assemblage: *kple*, *ha*, *agblo*, and *fo*, all of which evoke notions of “bringing together.”⁷ The first of these—*kple*—relates directly to the Vodou altar. *Oungan* Alex Augustin spells the Vodou term for altar, *pe*, with a *k*—*kpe*, keeping its Fon origin in tact.⁸ And rightly so, for as Blier points out, the Fon term *kpe* means to “to solder” or “to join,” which is what Vodou altars do.⁹

Beyond the bringing together of disparate elements is the diverse origin of the Vodun themselves, further revealing the composite nature of Vodun. Growing cosmopolitanism and increased warfare during the eighteenth century contributed to the acquisition and importation of non-local spirits into Abomey, the royal capital of the kingdom of Dahomey. As Dahomean kings conquered their enemies, they also appropriated the major spirits of the defeated, and redirected spiritual power to further the political and religious interests of the kingdom.¹⁰ This process led to a cultural and religious diversity that became increasingly manifest in Vodun cosmology and visual

Arts, Histories, and Religious Consciousness along Coastal Bénin” (PhD diss. University of Iowa, 1997), 5.

⁶ Blier, “Vodun: West African Roots of Vodou,” 75.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Alex Augustin, personal interview with the author, June 23, 2000.

⁹ Blier, *African Vodun*, 375, n. 57.

¹⁰ On this point see Blier, “Vodun: West African Roots of Vodou,” 75-76.

traditions. As Vodou developed in Haiti, it too, appropriated, assimilated, and transformed ritual strategies, protocols, visualities, and further recalling Dahomean practice, appropriated spirits from pantheons outside its own. In this light, assemblage, both in Vodun and Vodou practice is understood as a continual process, always in flux, always evolving, creating what Dana Rush calls an “unfinished aesthetic,” full of potentiality.¹¹

One of the key altar components that work within the principle of assemblage are chromolithographs, mass-produced color prints first introduced in Haiti during the mid-nineteenth century (Fig. 4.3). These images possess open possibilities of meaning and signification, accommodate paradoxical concepts, and, I would argue, assume a constitutive role in Vodou practice. Writing on the use of Hindu chromolithographs in Vodun arts, Dana Rush observes that they “represent a vast conceptual assemblage of ideas, histories, legends, visions and world belief systems” that give rise to fluid forms and meanings and “accumulate multiple readings.”¹² Likewise, chromolithographs employed in Vodou practice are accumulative, multireferential, and as hermeneutical pieces, they reflect the open-ended, fragmented, and fluid relationship between symbol and meaning.¹³ They accumulate and change identities as practitioners see fit, a process that attests to the Vodouizan’s agency in shaping Vodou visuality.

Chromolithographs accommodate shifting meanings as a response to changing economic and political circumstances. For example, Michel Leiris explains that Agwe,

¹¹ See Dana Rush, “Eternal Potential: Chromolithographs in Vodunland,” *African Arts* 32 (Winter 1999): 61-75, 94-96.

¹² *Ibid.*, 62.

¹³ As I mentioned in the previous chapter, Donald Cosentino examines the hermeneutic possibilities of chromolithographs in Haitian Vodou; see “It’s All for You, Sen Jak!,” 250-59.

the *lwa* of the sea whose visual signifier is a boat or fish, had been traditionally identified with St. Ulrich who appears holding a fish. During World War II, however, this particular print became increasingly difficult to find so vendors instead began to sell chromolithographs of St. Ambrose, after having drawn a fish in the hand of the saint.¹⁴ Because, as Leiris observes, the associations between a saint and a *lwa* depend not on words but on “visual puns,” a symbolic analogy need not be present, only “a superficial resemblance.”¹⁵ This adaptation exemplifies the pragmatic sensibility of the Vodou assemblage aesthetic, a sensibility that necessitates accommodation and consequently gives rise to new associations. Donald Cosentino provides a more recent example of this.¹⁶ He recalls that between the *coup d’etat* of 1991 and Aristide’s reinstatement in 1994, Haiti was under the control of General Raoul Cédras and his military junta. During this nightmare of untold brutality, the chromolithograph of St. Elias doubling as Ogou Kriminel became a best seller at Port-au-Prince’s Iron Market (Fig. 4.4). St. Elias/Ogou Kriminel stands prominently in the foreground about to behead his victim, while background flames rise to the sky as an execution occurs under the Golden Calf. The scene is death, destruction, and mayhem, just like the Cédras regime empowered by the murderous FRAPH paramilitary units.¹⁷ It is a pointed example of Vodou’s response to a devastating political climate.

¹⁴ Leiris, 91.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Cosentino, “It’s All for You, Sen Jak!,” 255-56.

¹⁷ FRAPH, or Front for the Advancement and Progress of Haiti, was a paramilitary organization established by Emmanuel “Toto” Constant (who was also a CIA informant and spy) to undermine the presidency of Aristide. During Cédras’s regime, FRAPH carried out a reign of terror that included thousands of executions, rapes, and tortures.

Assemblage also acts as a tool for object activation, or investing a “thing” with casual powers. Blier argues that assemblage is a part of a strategic means to activate or empower Vodun arts. As one of her informants conveyed to her, power enters the object at “the moment one puts all the things together.”¹⁸ Writing of African power sculptures, art historian Arnold Rubin describes this process as accumulation, which operates by the same principle as assemblage: both bring together disparate materials, activate, concentrate, organize, and channel energy to a particular end.¹⁹ It is a diachronic and organizational process—or strategy—that evolves and acquires increased power over time. Similarly, Robert Plant Armstrong refers to a similar empowering strategy as syndesis, or accretion, whereby objects become “works of affecting presence” through an additive or accumulative process that may include prayers, dance, sacrifice or other ritual activities that generate an object’s casual powers.²⁰ When Vodou initiates are “baptized,” for example, their implements (which they will subsequently house on their altars) also receive these empowering rites, further enhancing their casual powers (Fig. 4.5). This accumulation leads to the transformation and the igniting of dormant energies. On a Vodou altar, assemblage generates power, orchestrated and manipulated by *manbo* and *oungan* who possess the requisite *konesans*.²¹ Assemblage reflects, yields to, and generates tensions, paradoxes, and contradictory cohesions; the unfinished aesthetic totalizes fragments as it concentrates and transforms energies, alters realities. These

¹⁸ Blier, *African Vodun*, 74,

¹⁹ Rubin, *African Accumulative Sculpture*, 10.

²⁰ See Robert Plant Armstrong, *The Powers of Presence: Consciousness, Myth, and Affecting Presence* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981), 13-15.

²¹ In her brief essay on Vodou altars, Karen McCarthy Brown states that a person with enough *konesans* may heal another in front of an altar; see “Altars Happen,” *African Arts* 24, no. 2 (1996): 67.

energies simmer with the paradoxes of structure and antistructure, of the explicit and the latent, the revealed and the concealed, yet *regleman* provide balance and order.

Balance and order are principles that also compose the Vodou aesthetic.

Although the process of assemblage may convey a sense of visual disorder, quite the opposite is at work. *Regleman* provide an ordering system based on the preferences of the specific *lwa*, the maker's own sensibilities and ideals, and cosmic principles of creation as they relate to God. *Regleman* determine the altar's aesthetic success. For Alex, order is what makes an altar beautiful. As he explains:

With order comes aesthetics and that's what God is all about—order. In fact the work of creation, creation itself, can be viewed in many ways. It is not that things did not exist before creation, but we believe that God created the order of the universe, an order that we cannot afford to put in disorder again . . . From that disorder also comes disease, and from disease catastrophes and death, which are antithetical to the work of creation. So the work of creation to us is one of putting order in what existed before. God, in fact, was the one who decided to create order when she created first the sun and the moon, meaning the day and the night. By day and night she started to tell you right away that there was a certain rhythmicity in life—there are times for you to sleep, times for you to rest, and times for you to work and produce . . . rhythmicity is order and that order is what is beautiful.²²

Rhythm is order and order is beauty. With the sun and the moon, the day and the night, we have balance. Altars reflect this aesthetic sensibility based on cosmic ordering, which in turn dictates how to best balance our lives. Vodou altars, and Vodou visuality in general, continuously connect the individual to that which is outside oneself.

Altar aesthetics include what is pleasing to the *lwa*, and accordingly altars contain the implements and preferences of the particular *lwa* to whom they are consecrated. This is not to suggest, however, that practitioners disregard their own aesthetic sensibilities in

²² Alex Augustin, personal communication with the author, June 23, 2000. Anthropologist Ira Lowenthal also stresses that aesthetics are inherent to Vodou practice because they are closely connected to the act of

favor of an *a priori* conceptual template informed by iconology, sacred traditions and principles, which would undermine a practitioner's agency while obscuring the emergent and dynamic process of altar production. According to Alex, the *pe* expresses the beliefs and aesthetic sensibilities of its owner, "reflecting one's sense of color, one's sense of arrangement, and one's sense of management."²³ This in turn reflects and builds one's relationship with the *lwa*. From the moment (if not before) a person becomes *ounsi kanzo* (initiate), he or she knows the seven *lwa* who constitute their spiritual self, including their *mèt tet*, the *lwa* with whom they are most strongly linked. For the Vodouizan, the altar reflects how they see their own spiritual constituents; understood as such, the altar is a highly individual construction.

A practitioner balances knowing and respecting the attributes and preferences of the *lwa* with their own sensibilities and what feels right to him or her. This balance is easy to strike as the *lwa* are so deeply connected with the practitioner who serves them. When I questioned Alex about the degree of artistic agency in altar construction, he replied emphatically that the individual may take significant liberties so long as they "believe it's right."²⁴ The practitioner must know the attributes and preferences of the *lwa* for whom they construct an altar—a machete for Ogou, perfume for Ezili Freda, crutches for Legba—and balance that with their own sense of aesthetics. "It just so happens," states Alex, "that what is aesthetically pleasant usually equals what is right for

creation, both on individual and community levels. He also suggests that aesthetics govern ritual performance; see "Ritual Performance and Religious Experience," 405.

²³ Alex Augustin, personal communication with the author, June 23, 2000.

²⁴ Ibid. David H. Brown examines the role of the artist/practitioner in Santería altar making. In that context, "what feels right" is also a determining factor in altar making; see "Toward an Ethnoaesthetics of Santería Ritual Arts," 99.

oneself. And is it right because it is pleasant or is it pleasant because it is right? I think it goes together.”²⁵

Altars for the Rada spirits

Although Vodou altars, including those for the Rada *lwa*, constantly incorporate new objects and images on their surfaces as they challenge interpretive assumptions and expand iconographical meaning, their form and function have nevertheless remained relatively unchanged over the past one hundred years. In 1906, Eugene Aubin visited an *ounfò* in the Cul-de-Sac Plain, not far from Port-au-Prince. The description of the Rada altar could be of one today:

The back of the altar is occupied by numerous carafes in baked clay, called canaries, which contain the *mystères* gathered in the *hounfor*; in front are bottles of wine, liqueurs and vermouth presented to them in homage; then the plates, the cups for the *mangers-marassas*, crucifixes, hand bells, *assons* for directing the dance or calling the *loa*; plates filled with polished stones . . . Beside these miraculous stones are many coins of copper or silver.²⁶

In addition, when U.S. Marine Faustin Wirkus raided a Vodou ceremony in 1922, he found many of the same objects on the community’s altar, including gold coins that dated from 1720.²⁷

²⁵ Alex Augustin, personal communication with the author, June 23, 2003.

²⁶ Eugene Aubin, *En Haïti* (Paris: Librairie Armand Colin, 1910), 57-59, cited and translated by Harold Courlander, *The Drum and the Hoe*, 14. Aubin also states that altars contain “coins of Joseph Bonaparte, King of Spain minted in 1811; of Frederick VII of Denmark, 1959; of Charles IV of Spain, 1783, and of President Boyer, dated year 27 and year 30 of Haitian Independence.” In all direction quotations throughout this dissertation, I maintain the author’s spelling of Kreyol words rather than updating them.

²⁷ See Faustin Wirkus, *The White King of La Gonave* (Garden City, NY: Garden City Pub. Co., 1931), 178-79. Though what she describes is a Kongo altar in northern Haiti at Nan Campêche, near Christophe’s Citadel, Katherine Dunham states that a dinner plate from a set of Napoleon I was allegedly used by Christophe himself for eating sacrificial food, and was a “prized altar piece;” see *Island Possessed*, 114. Indeed colonial objects were and are still highly valued, though many have disappeared over the years. In 1950, a *manbo* told Harold Courlander that while colonial coins (in addition to the Amerindian stones) were still found in the Cul-de-Sac Plain, many were lost in the cleric-inspired raids; see *The Drum and the*

Many of the objects from this description are still found on or near Rada altars today, as evident by Alex's Rada altar in his former Washington, D.C. *djevo*, which contained sequined bottles for Ezili Freda, vermouth, rum, flowers, a doll, candles, and a *pakèt kongo* (Fig. 4.6).²⁸ It also held Alex's *ason*, which not only signifies the title of *oungan* or *manbo*, but is used with songs to evoke the *lwa*.

Before examining these individual objects, I would first like to turn to the most significant components of this altar, the two stones set in basins at its base (Fig. 4.7). Stones are focal points of ritual activities throughout the Afro-Atlantic world, and this usage holds true in Vodou.²⁹ The importance of stones in the ritualizing process became clear to me the first time I sang to the *lwa* with this community in front of the altar. While singing for Legba, the guardian of the crossroads, everyone present took turns saluting the four cardinal points with a large red bottle then poured the libations over the larger of the two stones three times. Then the senior *manbo* poured rum over the smaller stone, lit it on fire, engulfed her hands in the low blue flames, and rubbed a participant's hand while her own still held the flames. She repeated the process for everyone present. I learned afterwards that this action was a greeting of peace, made stronger by the heat, a key ritualizing strategy.

Hoe, 15. At the end of this chapter I provide another, and quite poignant example, of a colonial-era object housed on a Rada altar.

²⁸ In addition to his *ounfò* in Mariani, Haiti, Alex and his wife Simone also lived and practiced part of the year in Washington, D.C. until their permanent return to Haiti in 2002.

²⁹ William Bascom asserts that stones, along with herbs and blood, are the foundation of ritual in Santería. Stones contain the essence of the spirits and accordingly they must be baptized and fed with herbs and blood; see "The Focus of Cuban Santería," *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology* 6, no. 1 (Spring 1950): 64-68. Similarly, Michael Atwood Mason states that stones "become the 'foundation' upon which the orichas' presence rests and is built." He also underscores the connection between these stones and the spiritual head of a priest or priestess; see *Living Santería: Rituals and Experiences in an Afro-Cuban Religion* (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2002), 70-72.

Stones on altars also bear the name *kpe*, after the Fon-Ewe word that, in addition to denoting joining together, also means stone. Keeping in mind that the Kreyol word for altar is *kpe* or *pe*, the stones take on more significance. They are, as Alex states, “the basis of the altar itself.”³⁰ The ritual use of stones in Vodou derives from both west African and Amerindian traditions. In the Republic of Benin, for example, they are used in healing rites and are associated with Hevioso, the Fon god of thunder, which may explain why in Vodou they are also called thunder stones.³¹ The stones most frequently present on Vodou altars are Amerindian stone works or flints found while cultivating the land and which, according to Maya Deren, resemble the Taino *zemi*, carved stones that contained spiritual essence.³²

Whether altar stones are from the Taino culture or are selected because of their physical resemblance to them and their degree of sacredness, they nevertheless contain spiritual essence. These stones not only symbolize the power of a specific *lwa*, but the stones are believed to contain that power, providing them with various abilities. For example, Alfred Métraux writes that “they sweat when touched, or they whistle or talk.”³³ A *manbo* living in Jacmel emphasized the power they behold and that the chief *manbo* placed them on the altar because of the stones’ ability to help in performing work

³⁰ Alex Augustin, personal communication with the author, June 23, 2003.

³¹ Writing in the early twentieth century about Vodun practices in the former Dahomey region, H. S. Newlands describes such stones as Sokpe, meaning stone of the god So, or Hevioso, the god of thunder. He also states that these stones are used for healing purposes; see “An Archaeological Puzzle from West Africa,” *Journal of the Royal African Society* (October 1919): 42. Melville Herskovits also notes that Neolithic celts, or thunder stones, are associated with Hevioso and deposited on the earth wherever lightning strikes; see *Dahomey: An Ancient West African Kingdom* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1967), 2:163. This association also holds true for Shango, the Yoruba god of thunder.

³² Deren, *Divine Horsemen*, 278.

³³ Métraux, *Voodoo in Haiti*, 167. In July 2003, the morning after a friend married Agwe, the *lwa* of the sea, she found a flawless white stone under her bed. A senior *manbo* said it was from Agwe.

(Fig. 4.8).³⁴ It is the residing spiritual essence that makes these stones powerful, and consequently the *oungan* or *manbo* must wash and feed them to assure their affecting presence. Such care includes washing the stones with various mixtures including water and cooked cassava, *akasan* (cornmeal and milk), and *goudrin* (pineapple rinds soaked in water for seven to ten days).³⁵

Another major component of Alex's altar is a large ceramic egg set on a towering stand over the objects. It represents creation. The cosmic egg, as I mentioned in Chapter Three, is the symbol of Danbala and Ayeda Wedo. Because it is also the sacrificial offering to Danbala, practitioners will place a raw egg on an altar dedicated to him, as Alex has done on his (Fig. 4.9). It is unusual to find an egg—real or representational—on an altar for a *lwa* or pantheon of *lwa* other than Danbala, and such a case demonstrates the individual's own sensibilities in how they choose to sustain their relationship with the *lwa* and express cosmological principles. For Alex, the cosmic egg is an expression of God and creation. He states that in Vodou, “we believe that the universe was created originally from the cosmic egg. That's why the dominating factor [on the altar] becomes the egg, symbolically representing all the work of creation.”³⁶ In Vodou understanding, according to Alex, the idea of God is so big and vast that no one can completely define God, but knowledge of God's existence exists in the work of creation and in the four-hundred-one *lwa* who are all manifestations of God. God is omnipresent, existing “outside of us and also in the spaces inside of us—between our guts, our lungs, our

³⁴ Yvette Ducal, personal communication with the author, August 5, 2003. Métraux explains that some stones have a mirror to increase the power; see *Voodoo in Haiti*, 166. As we see in Chapter Five, mirrors also enhance an object's ability to work.

³⁵ Alex Augustin, personal communication with the author, March 19, 2000.

³⁶ Alex Augustin, personal communication with the author, June 23, 2000.

heart.” The cosmic egg, placed centrally on the altar and towering over the other objects, expresses the enormity of divine creation, from the cosmos through to the very depths of who we are—psychically and physically. Like the *kpe*, the egg connects the individual to that which is outside self, thereby absorbing the “I” into the “we.”

A typical object for the *lwa* found on altars, including those that are consecrated to the *lwa* of the Petwo and other strong pantheons, are sequined or cloth-enveloped bottles (*boutèy*) bearing a particular spirit’s symbol, which may take the form of the Catholic saint with which they are identified or the corresponding *vèvè*, such as this example for Ezili Freda (Fig. 4.10).³⁷ These bottles function as offertories for the *lwa* and contain substances that please them, such as particular herbs, spices, or beverages. They typically stand next to bottles of wine, champagne, vermouth, or rum, depending on a particular *lwa*’s preference. Like objects that rest near the altar such as flags, scarves, clothing, or particular implements, these bottles may be brought out during ceremonies if that particular *lwa* should arrive. When not in performative use, the altar imbues these objects with affecting presence.

On almost every Rada altar stand *govi* and *po tèt*. *Govi* are ceramic repositories that contain the spiritual essence of the *lwa* and are draped in fabric of the *lwa*’s corresponding color; they also contain the spirits of the dead, in which case they are usually unadorned. *Po tèt* are smaller ceramic receptacles, typically white, and hold the spiritual essence of an initiate.³⁸ They function as “an individual shrine for the

³⁷ There are some bottles that also contain a spirit (or *zonbi* in this context) captured by a *bòkò* for labor, though due to their morally ambiguous condition, they would never appear on a Rada altar. For more on this, see Elizabeth McAlister, “A Sorcerer’s Bottle.” I examine the issue of conscripted labor briefly toward the end of this chapter and its political economy more fully in Chapter Five.

³⁸ Alex keeps these objects on his altar in Mariani, Haiti, where he initiates people.

person.”³⁹ (In Figure 4.11, the large *govi* stands on the second shelf from the bottom, and the *po tèt* are on the top shelf.)

To realize the significance of these objects and why a *manbo* or *oungan* keeps them on the altar, it is helpful to understand the Vodou concept of the soul, or *nanm*, which, according to *oungan* Max Beauvoir, “involves the very essence of who we are . . . [and] is regarded as the immortal and spiritual part of the person that survives physical death.”⁴⁰ Two major components of the soul are the *gwo bon anj* (big good angel) and the *ti bon anj* (small good angel). The *ti bon anj* is the transcendent part of the soul forever connected to the cosmos. The *gwo bon anj* relates to a person’s consciousness—the seat of “memory, intelligence, imagination and invention,” as Maya Deren explains.⁴¹ Because the *gwo bon anj* may travel away from the body or linger near it after death, it may take refuge in the *po tèt* if faced with spiritual attack or attempted capture. The *po tèt* functions as a spiritual repository and is able to provide the *gwo bon anj* protection. During initiation, an *oungan* or *manbo* places the initiate’s spiritual essence inside the *po tèt*, thus becoming part of the “spiritual collective.”⁴² The *oungan* or *manbo* then houses the *po tèt* on the altar to protect and care for it.⁴³

³⁹ Max Beauvoir, seminar lecture at Le Péristyle de Mariani, July 15, 2001.

⁴⁰ Max Beauvoir, “Herbs and Energy: The Holistic Medical System of the Haitian People,” in *Haitian Vodou: Spirit, Myth, and Reality*, ed. Patrick Bellegarde-Smith and Claudine Michel (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2006), 127.

⁴¹ Deren, 35. Also see Alfred Métraux, “The Concept of the Soul in Haitian Vodou,” *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology* 2, no. 1 (Spring 1946): 84-92.

⁴² Beauvoir, “Herbs and Energy,” 222.

⁴³ Maximilien observes that the number of these pots on an altar reflects the importance of the *manbo* or *oungan*; see *Le Vodou Haitien*, 21.

In Vodou belief, divinity is the basis of life, the generator of all energies, and possessor of potentialities.⁴⁴ Divinity—existing in the *lwa*, the ancestors, and initiates—and actively engaged and renewed on the Vodou altar, is the ultimate in affecting presence and efficacious power. The *manbo* or *oungan* taps into this spiritual essence for those who seek it and to unite the individual with the collective and the cosmos.

Another significant altar component is the inclusion of Catholic images of saints, which enable practitioners to feel more connected to divinity. One *manbo* told me they place these images at their altar to draw from the spirits' strength. "We need the saints," she said.⁴⁵ Although descriptions of Catholic images on or near Vodou altars date at least to Aubin's of 1906, the earliest visual example I have found dates to 1937, an image of an *oungan*'s altar taken by George Simpson in the northern town of Plaisance, Haiti (Fig. 4.12). Although drapery obscures two of the chromolithographs on either side of Mater Dolorosa (Ezili Freda), they are clearly of Saint James (Ogou Feray) and Saint George (Ogou Balendjo). All three images are still found on altars and *ounfò* walls seventy years later.

Whether on the altar or the wall, most visual references to the *lwa* assume the form of their symbol (e.g., Danbala, snake or egg; Ogou, machete or Haitian flag, Ezili Freda, heart) or their Catholic counterpart.⁴⁶ On altars in particular, where the individual works with the *oungan* or *manbo* to effect change in their lives, images of the saints become visual focal points for these meditative efforts because they function—visually—

⁴⁴ Beauvoir, "Herbs and Energy," 114.

⁴⁵ Yvette Ducal, personal communication with the author, August 5, 2003. I should also point out that during the conversation she interchanged the saint names with the *lwa*, so one could infer that she also meant *lwa* here.

⁴⁶ The altars belonging to an *oungan* in Merger demonstrate a marked exception to this, a point to which I will return later in this chapter.

as a “surrogate for what they represent,”⁴⁷ bringing closer what may otherwise seem distant. Interaction with altar images exemplifies David Morgan’s notion of “visual piety,” or “the set of practices, attitudes, and ideas invested in images that structure the experience of the sacred.”⁴⁸ It is a process that emphasizes *looking* as a critical act in the shaping of religious practice. Indeed, this act is no casual matter, as James Elkins emphasizes, for “looking is hoping, desiring . . . never merely collecting patterns and data.”⁴⁹ Looking is laden with the hopes, desires, and needs of the beholder, who then may seek comfort, guidance, or intercession from the sacred image, further informing how an adherent participates in religious practice. For the adherent, visual piety concretizes the “spiritual referent through the image,”⁵⁰ bringing forth what could otherwise remain distant. The spiritual may become within reach through looking.

Many images for and of the *lwa* may assume Catholic form, so long as the image accommodates the major characteristics of the *lwa* and accords with the aesthetic sensibilities of the practitioner. For example, on the center of André’s altar for Ezili Freda stands a plaster statuette of Mater Dolorosa, or Our Lady of Sorrows, the saint with whom practitioners most identify Ezili Freda (Fig. 4.13). Her chromolithograph is one of the most popular in Haiti, its image among the most rendered on *ounfò* walls (Figs. 4.14 and 4.15). Images of the Virgin Mary’s various personae are among the most prevalent

⁴⁷ Hans Belting, *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image before the Era of Art*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 1. Belting also points out that many religions attempt to make visible an object of veneration, 45.

⁴⁸ Morgan, *Visual Piety: A History and Theory of Popular Religious Images* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998), 2-3.

⁴⁹ James Elkins, *The Object Stares Back: On the Nature of Seeing* (San Diego: Harvest, 1997) 22.

⁵⁰ Morgan, 43.

in Haiti, and have been since colonial times. A Haitian priest was emphatic when he told me that the most popular saint in Haiti is the Virgin Mary, and certainly all the myriad images of her and countless institutions named in her honor make this clear.⁵¹ Her popularity, however, is not unique to Haiti; despite limited scriptural reference to her, the Virgin Mary appeals to devotees worldwide as they seek her divine intercession, aid, and protection. As Robert Orsi attests, she has far-reaching appeal: “She is called on to mediate family disputes, judge behavior, listen to the most intimate sorrows and fears. In individuals’ experience of her, the Virgin draws deeply on the whole history of a person’s relationships, real and imagined, living dead, present and absent; she borrows from and contributes to memories, needs, fantasies, hopes, desires, and fears.”⁵² In Haiti, Rachel Beauvoir-Dominique attributes the Virgin Mary’s role as a comforter of the conflicted to her continued rise in popularity.⁵³

The statuette on André’s altar renders the Virgin Mary as the “Queen of Heaven,” wearing a jeweled crown, a royal blue robe, and rings that symbolize eternity and eternal union with the church. The heart refers to her “understanding, courage, devotion, and love” while the sword conveys her contrition, sorrow, and suffering, particularly over her son’s crucifixion.⁵⁴ Vodou, however, has a different reading. The jewels point to her

⁵¹ Father Délimon, personal communication with the author, March 3, 2004.

⁵² Robert Orsi, “The Many Names of the Mother of God,” in *Divine Mirrors: The Virgin Mary in the Visual Arts*, ed. Melissa Katz (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 7.

⁵³ Beauvoir-Dominique, *L’Ancienne Cathédrale*, 119. Beauvoir-Dominique examines the Virgin Mary’s historical role in Saint-Domingue and independent Haiti. For more on the historical and social context of the Virgin Mary in Haiti’s history, see Terry Rey, *Our Lady of Class Struggle*. Marina Warner, who published a major work on the Virgin Mary, argues that one of her major functions is that of intercession, which would further explain her enormous popularity in regions with adverse political and economic climates; see *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976), xxiii.

⁵⁴ Desmangles, 143.

abundant riches, the rings reveal her many lovers, the heart identifies her as the *lwa* of love, the “M” stands not for Mary but for Metrès (the title her devotees use in referring to her), and the dagger piercing her heart signifies her profound sadness.⁵⁵ Visually, the image of Mater Dolorosa most captures Ezili Freda who has all the material comforts of life and yet none of it could ever suffice. Beneath all her luxury and splendor is deep despair, for she is not loved enough. When Ezili Freda arrives at ceremonies she moves with utmost beauty and refinement, lavishing hugs, kisses, smiles, and perfume—first on all the men then to a lesser degree, her female devotees. But if her sadness surfaces she is inconsolable, weeping painfully and tiredly until she departs.⁵⁶ The dagger piercing her heart on the chromolithograph conveys this despair; accordingly, André delicately placed a small metal dagger in front of the statuette, its tip touching the heart.

In addition to giving form and accessibility to the divine, practitioners place images of saints on the altar as gifts to the *lwa*, both to please and honor them. They select images that adhere to the specific *lwa*'s preferences as well as reflect their physical traits. For example, André placed the elevated image of Mater Dolorosa on the center of the altar and adorned it with beaded necklaces, mingling with those of the statuette. Just below Mater Dolorosa is a statuette of Notre Dame de Lourdes (Our Lady of Lourdes), standing elegantly in a robe with blue trim and clasping her rosary, echoing in dress and gesture the central image behind her. Like Mater Dolorosa, Notre Dame de Lourdes is fair completed, just as Ezili Freda is believed to be. The third statuette—a Hindu divinity

⁵⁵ Ibid., 143-144. Joan Dayan views Ezili Freda's opulence less as a “dream of luxury,” as Maya Deren would have it, but more as a legacy of colonial Creole indulgence, or “a mimicry of excess;” see *Haiti, History, and the Gods*, 64.

⁵⁶ This is based on my own observations of her possessions at ceremonies. For more on Ezili Freda see Maya Deren, *Divine Horsemen*, 137-145; and Joan Dayan, *Haiti, History, and the Gods*, who also challenges Deren's commentary, 54-65.

or a bodhisattva—sits on a lotus flower with her right hand striking the “*abhaya*” *mudra* of fearlessness.⁵⁷ The object, as André told me, was a gift.⁵⁸ With its lavish adornment of gold drapery and jewels and poised countenance, the statuette conveys the wealth and beauty of Ezili Freda, its own meaning and context displaced by visual referents. Its placement on the altar is a pointed example of a practitioner working within a system of Vodou altar aesthetics while expanding it.

Altars for the Petwo spirits

Returning to another example from Eugene Aubin’s 1906 observations of Vodou *ounfò* and altars, he compares a Rada altar chamber for Danbala with a Kongo one, and points to a *pakèt kongo* (Fig. 4.16) as the distinguishing object. He writes:

The *houmfort* was divided into two chambers, one consecrated to Danballa with canary vessels, cups, thunder stones, bottles, and images of the saints, used in these kind of places; the other is reserved for the Kongo rite, less furnished and decorated with some chromolithographs representing the Adoration of the Maji. Monsieur Bernard [the owner of the *ounfò*] takes out of a small trunk the symbol of this rite, the *paquet congo*.⁵⁹

As I mentioned in the previous chapter, and as I will examine more fully in the next chapter, Kongo is synonymous with Petwo; both work with stronger spirits and both are characterized by an ethos of militancy, faster rhythms, and heat—whether it is the pervasive use of the color red, the presence of fire, or the sounding of gunpowder explosions. *Pakèt kongo* have their morphological and functional precedent in Kongo

⁵⁷ This gesture also works for Ezili Freda. While visiting various *ounfò* throughout Haiti, many *oungan* and *manbo* emphasized Ezili Freda’s qualities of strength and protection, which tend to go unstated in the literature. For an example of a Hindu statuette standing for Ezili Freda, see Dana Rush “Eternal Potential,” 73-74.

⁵⁸ André Villaire, personal communication with the author, June 24, 2002.

⁵⁹ Aubin, 61.

minksi objects, as described by Robert Farris Thompson.⁶⁰ Similar to their Kongo counterparts, *pakèt kongo* are spirit-activated bundles of herbs, medicines, and other ingredients that are bound together by ribbons or cords. They may appear on Rada altars, but they are a defining feature of altars consecrated to the stronger spirits, as seen on a Petwo altar for Ezili Dantò created by the *oungan* Jean-Pierre Fleurival (Fig. 4.17).

Practitioners use the binding strategy associated with *pakèt kongo* when working with hotter spirits such as those of the Petwo pantheon, but most especially with the fierce spirits summoned by secret societies.⁶¹ The binding serves to harness and channel power, which ultimately allows the spirits to perform effective mystical work. Clustered together on this altar, they provide a significant source of power for Jean-Pierre to heal his clients.

Heat, another major feature that distinguishes Petwo from Rada altars, is often employed as an empowering strategy along with binding techniques to orchestrate spiritual energies, thus enhancing an affecting presence. Placed centrally on the first tier of Dantò's altar is a *chodyè*, a small tripod cauldron typically used in the ritual context for burning oil. During ceremonies the officiating *manbo* or *oungan* must raise the energy of the atmosphere so that the *lwa* arrive. By singing loudly, encouraging group participation, working with the drummers to drive the beat harder, and dancing stronger, the officiant is better able to make the atmosphere *byen chofe*, or “well heated up.”⁶²

⁶⁰ See Thompson, “From the Isle Beneath the Sea,” 108-114. He also relates them to other bound spirit bundles throughout the Afro-Atlantic world, see *Flash of the Spirit*, 125-127.

⁶¹ In the following chapter, I examine binding in relation to objects, so I only refer to it briefly here.

⁶² Karen McCarthy Brown, “Serving the Spirits,” in *The Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou*, ed. Donald Cosentino (Los Angeles: Regents of the University of California, 1995), 222.

Similarly, at the altar the *manbo* or *oungan* must raise the energy to a sufficient level so that they may conduct effective healing work.

As popular as the Ezili complex is on the Rada side of Vodou—with visual linkages to the various Marion personae—it is just as present on the Petwo side, where Ezili also has many faces, such as Ezili Dantò, Ezili Mapyang, Ezili Je Rouj, and Ezili Balyang. Ezili Dantò—a protective mother, fearless warrior, and associated with the powers of magic—is the most visible of these fiercer Ezili, appearing on altars, *ounfò* walls (Fig. 4.18), and in public spaces (Fig. 4.19). Practitioners turn to her in times of trouble to seek refuge, guidance, and active intercession. Accordingly, her image appears on public murals during particularly adverse political climates, such as they did during the Cédras regime.⁶³ She is the strong, heroic, fierce, and hard-working woman with whom so many Haitian women can identify, an identification that surely contributes to her popularity among them.

The Catholic image with which Dantò is most associated, as rendered on the popular chromolithograph and as the statuette on Jean-Pierre's altar (Fig. 4.17), is Mater Salvatoris, resembling Our Lady of Czestochowa, the “Queen of Poland” and perhaps the most famous black Virgin throughout the world (Fig. 4.20).⁶⁴ Although the icon's date is uncertain, it arrived at the Paulite Monastery at Jasna Góra in 1384, where it remains today.⁶⁵ Like the original, the chromolithograph conveys Mary's royalty with her jeweled crown and flowing blue robe. The Christ child also wears a crown, but it is the

⁶³ See Brown, *Tracing the Spirit*, 31-32.

⁶⁴ Ean Begg, *The Cult of the Black Virgin* (London: Arkana, 1985, 1996), 249.

⁶⁵ Uncertainties surround the icon's place of origin and its dark complexion. For more on this, see Janusz S. Pasierb and Jan Samek, *The Shrine of the Black Madonna at Czestochowa* 4th ed (Warsaw: Interpress Publishers, 1985 1991), 6-8.

book in his hand that holds the real power. “According to popular belief,” asserts Rachel Beauvoir-Dominique, “it is a magic book with all her recipes, the source of her power and what makes her a formidable figure.”⁶⁶

Underscoring Dantò’s power are the scars she bears on her right cheek, just as they appear on the original icon, allegedly slashed by robbers in 1430 during the Hussite movement.⁶⁷ As with the book, Vodou understands the scars on its own terms. They are, according to Leslie Desmangles, a testament to her Petwo anger.⁶⁸ Similarly, Beauvoir-Dominique states that in Vodou mythology the three scars correspond to a fight between herself, Ezili Freda, and Ogou (undoubtedly fighting over his affections), and reinforce her legendary strength.⁶⁹ A stronger testament to her strength and power—and one that is more in line with her fearlessness and bravery—is the legend that they are battle scars, received during the war. As a Vodouizan explained to Karen McCarthy Brown, “That Lady is from Africa . . . she was the one that help my country to fight with [sic] the white people. She helped them [insurgents] to win that war.”⁷⁰

While it is difficult to determine when the image became popular in Haiti, Terry Rey proposes that it may predate the introduction of the chromolithographs into Haiti (c. mid-nineteenth century), entering the “Haitian religious field” with the Polish legionnaires conscripted by Napoleon. Rey goes on to suggest that because some Poles deserted the French to fight alongside the rebels, “it is possible that Czestochowa’s

⁶⁶ Beauvoir-Dominique, *L’Ancienne Cathédrale de Port-au-Prince*, 121.

⁶⁷ Pasierb and Samek, 7.

⁶⁸ Desmangles, 144.

⁶⁹ Beauvoir-Dominique, *L’Ancienne Cathédrale de Port-au-Prince*, 121.

⁷⁰ Brown, *Mama Lola*, 229.

banner actually flew above the slaves in their struggle for liberty, which is perhaps the origin of the belief that her scars were gotten in the revolution.”⁷¹ This is a tempting explanation, one that would link directly a Vodou *lwa* associated with battle to the war of independence. But this possibility assumes that a significant number of Poles deserted the French to fight along side the slaves, a popular notion that continues in Haiti to this day with little critical scrutiny. Polish military historian Jan Pachoński and literary scholar Reuel Wilson point out, however, that of the 5,280 Poles fighting for the French during the last few years of the war, approximately 4,000 died (mostly of yellow fever) and only 120 to 150 joined forces with the insurgents.⁷² And of the 400 or so who remained on the island after the war, 160 left as soon as they were able, leaving few people to have a significant impact on Haitian religion.⁷³

Without discounting the possibility of Polish influence, specifically their introduction of Our Lady of Czestochowa to the island and the subsequent appropriation by Vodou practitioners, it is nonetheless important to consider the actual numbers of Polish soldiers fighting with the insurgents. While we cannot know for certain whether or not the banner appeared on the battlefields, it is worth pointing out that in Poland the Virgin of Czestochowa has been credited since the seventeenth century for numerous intercessions during times of war and sieges.⁷⁴ As an emblem of resistance, she surely

⁷¹ Rey, *Our Lady of Class Struggle*, 235.

⁷² Pachoński and Wilson, *Poland's Caribbean Tragedy*, 311. What is nonetheless of interest here is that there seemed to have been mutual sympathy among the insurgents and some of the Polish legionnaires serving under the French. Dessalines, for one, sympathized with the Poles, for they too were fighting for their independence after Russia, Prussia, and Austria annexed portions of Poland.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 311-12. Pachoński and Wilson suggest that those who remained did so more out of necessity than by choice. They also cite B. Ardouin, who suggests that the 400 remaining Poles were prisoners of war.

⁷⁴ For more on the Virgin of Czestochowa's interventions, see Begg, 249; and Longina Jakubowska, "Political Drama in Poland: the Use of National Symbols," *Anthropology Today* 6 no. 4 (August 1990): 10-13.

would have had significant appeal to people in Saint-Domingue fighting for their own freedom, which would help to explain her popularity in *ounfò* today, particularly when juxtaposed next to images of battle. Jean-Pierre, for example, emphasizes her militaristic power by placing her chromolithograph next to the dramatic image of St. George slaying the dragon, who is really the soldier *lwa* Ogou Balendjo— a placement I also saw on the walls of three *ounfò* (Fig. 4.21).

Our Lady of Czestochowa is not the only powerful Black Virgin on Haitian altars. One January morning in 2004 my friend Prosper Charlemagne took me to visit his church in Desermithe, a significantly less affluent area of Pétionville, a Port-au-Prince suburb. At this church “they mix it all up,” Prosper explained, meaning no clear delineation exists between Vodou and Catholic activities and images.⁷⁵ The church was so crowded with congregants praying passionately, clutching their herbs, candles, and rosaries, that it was nearly impossible to move. Many of the women wore blue satin scarves over the head, possibly in homage to Ezili Dantò. The focus of their attention was at the front of the church: standing on an enormous altar covered entirely by flowers was a large plaster statue of a Black Virgin, similar to the one on Jean-Pierre’s altar. “That’s the patron of this church,” Prosper informed me, “in Vodou, we know her as Ezili Balyang.” He never told me her Catholic name.

Balyang, I learned later, is a Petwo spirit, but even more formidable of these strong Ezili is Mapyang, who, according to the *oungan* Yvon Ducet, is a Makaya spirit—

⁷⁵ Prosper Charlemagne, personal communication with the author, January 6, 2004. Father Délimon, a Haitian priest who was recently posted in Washington, D.C., told me that this church is a site of pilgrimage and used by both Catholics and Vodou practitioners.

meaning strong Petwo.⁷⁶ Yvon maintains an altar for Ezili Mapyang at his residence in Port-au-Prince (Fig. 4.22). At first glance it appears to be an altar for Bosou, given the red garment suspended behind it with his *vèvè* and the red triple-horned libation bottle standing directly in front of the large *govi*. Moreover, the sword and soldier statuette underscore Bosou's militant power (though later Yvon told me that the soldier represents wisdom). Militant power is further conveyed with the placement of the libation bottles for Ezili Dantò and Ogou Balendjo—another pairing of these two *lwa*. On the opposite corner of the altar is the bottle for Mapyang bearing her Catholic image, and placed purposely away from Dantò. Yvon explained that Mapyang is among the most dangerous of the Ezili spirits, and accordingly she must be venerated and given her offerings separately.

On the floor in front of the altar was a chromolithograph of Ezili Mapyang (Fig. 4.23), which bears a striking resemblance to Our Lady of Czestochowa in her “Ruby Robe,” and even includes the same scenes: “The Nativity,” “The Mocking of Christ,” “The Annunciation,” and “The Scourging of Christ” (Fig. 4.24). Despite the rich adornment of the image, Yvon stated that the image itself has no power. Its function, rather, is to pay homage to her—and it was she who instructed him to buy it. “It flatters her,” he explained, “but the image itself doesn't do anything.” When I asked him why he did not place the chromolithograph on the wall behind the altar like so many *oungan* and *manbo* do, he repeated that the image conveys the idea of power, but does not possess power; the power on the wall for him was the *vèvè*, which he drew next to the altar.

According to Yvon, there are two images of Ezili Mapyang. “The first one,” he explained, “is black, and she is from Africa, the other is white and she is from Rome.”

⁷⁶ Yvon Ducet, personal communication with the author, January 13, 2004.

The white image he referred to is none other than Notre Dame du Perpétuel Secours (Our Lady of Perpetual Help), the patron saint of Haiti since 1942, and the most petitioned saint by members of all social strata in Haiti (Fig. 4.25).⁷⁷

The icon of Perpétuel Secours has a remarkable role in Haitian history, one that demonstrates how a dominant group (political or religious) may manipulate a sacred image to further their own ends, and how a marginalized group may in turn appropriate the same image for empowerment.⁷⁸ During the years 1881 and 1882, a smallpox epidemic devastated the country. It was also during this time that a pious woman arrived from Paris and introduced the image of Perpétuel Secours, which was then given to Abbé François-Marie Kersuzan, the curate of the cathedral of Port-au-Prince and fervent opponent of Vodou. Seeing an opportunity to eradicate both the epidemic and Vodou from Haiti, and with the blessing of Monsignor Alexis Jean-Marie Guilloux, the Archbishop of Port-au-Prince, Kersuzan “decided to test the new icon’s miraculous powers.”⁷⁹ In February of 1882 the church held a grand mass for the icon’s introduction and within a few weeks, the epidemic that had killed over 100,000 people suddenly ended. Kersuzan and Guilloux championed her “miraculous powers” and worked tirelessly to promote her following throughout Haiti. For Kersuzan, who founded the “Anti-Voodoo League,” a cohort of clerics responsible for the first of three major organized assaults against Vodou, the icon could be used as a new weapon to abolish all

⁷⁷ Terry Rey, “The Politics of Patron Sainthood in Haiti: 500 years of Iconic Struggle.” *Catholic Historical Review* 88, no. 3 (2002): 531.

⁷⁸ Rey, *ibid.*, provides a detailed and fascinating account of her role in Haitian religion and politics. Also see Beauvoir-Dominique, *L’Ancienne Cathédrale de Port-au-Prince*, 115-124.

⁷⁹ Rey, “The Politics of Patron Sainthood in Haiti,” 532.

heresy once and for all.⁸⁰ In 1942 President Lescot, who was also vehemently opposed to Vodou, elevated Perpétuel Secours to Haiti's national patron saint, and like Kersuzan, attempted to use her as a legitimatizing strategy during an anti-superstition campaign to rid the country of Vodou. Both plans failed, for Vodou, as Rey suggests, had long identified the Virgin Mary with Ezili, and the introduction of a new icon simply provided another face for the Ezili complex.⁸¹ On June 27, the feast day of Notre Dame du Perpétuel Secours, Haitians I spoke with were unequivocal: the *bon fèt pèpetyèl* was also for Ezili Mapyang.

The identification of Perpétuel Secours with Ezili Mapyang, one of the strongest of Vodou *lwa*, makes perfect sense if we consider the former's enormous popularity and her connection to institutional power. Both have been a source of strength and empowerment for those who venerate them. In the final years of the Duvalier regime, Marian songs of resistance permeated the streets and the airwaves, and even after the army shut down the liberal Catholic station Radio Soley, which broadcasted hymns to Perpétuel Secours, people continued to sing her songs.⁸²

And what about the African and Roman distinction that Yvon made? Why does he have the African version on his altar? A similar example exists with the European Saint Martha, who, according to legend, subdued a dragon with holy water in

⁸⁰ Rey points out that the Catholic church organized three major "anti-superstition" campaigns against Vodou in Haitian history—in 1896, 1913, and 1941, see *ibid*, 533, n. 43.

⁸¹ *Ibid*. In addition to the timely subsiding of the epidemic, Rey, following the work of Rachel Beauvoir-Dominique, also credits the rising popularity of her following to the growing social and economic adversities experienced by many Haitian people; see *L'Ancienne Cathédrale de Port-au-Prince*, 119.

⁸² Rey, 539. When Pope John Paul II visited Haiti during the presidency of Jean-Claude Duvalier in 1983, which included an unscheduled visit to the Church of Notre Dame du Perpétuel Secours, he announced to the people that "Il faut que quelque chose change ici!" (Something must change here!), a proclamation that according to Rey remains "the rally cry of Haiti's poor masses."

Provenance, France during the first century A.D. Art historian Henry Drewal points out that she has an “African double,” most commonly known as “La Dominadora” (The Dominator) and based on the popular nineteenth-century German snake charmer image that has been associated with Mami Wata and related aquatic spirits throughout the Afro-Atlantic world.⁸³ Despite this aquatic association, the African La Dominadora works with fire and is known for her double-edged strength, i.e., she can work for “good” or “bad.” As the late Haitian artist and *oungan* Pierrot Barra explains, “Santa Marta is a spirit that comes from Santo Domingo. She works with the snake, who is not Danbala, but is very *hot* and cannot be stopped by secret societies.”⁸⁴ The African versions of these spirits are strong and readily incorporated into the hotter side of Vodou ritualizing. In the case of Mapyang, the African version is also the private version—while the Roman image appears throughout public spaces, the African one dominates the *djevo*, where spiritual energy is channeled and orchestrated, and power deployed.⁸⁵

The Petwo Ezili—like all Petwo *lwa*—are fierce and formidable, and provide an immeasurable sources of empowerment when practitioners focus their energy at the Vodou altar. They, like the softer Ezili, embody the range of lived experiences, particularly from the point of view of Haitian women. As Joan Dayan so aptly states,

⁸³ See Henry Drewal, “Mami Wata and Santa Marta: Imag(in)ing selves and Others in Africa and the Americas” in *Images and Empires: Visuality in Colonial and Postcolonial Africa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 206. In Haiti, the image shows up on *ounfò* walls where the association focuses on the snake and is thusly identified with Danbala; see Marilyn Houlberg “Sirens and Snakes: Water Spirits in the Arts of Haitian Vodou,” *African Arts* 24, no. 2 (Spring 1996): 34-35.

⁸⁴ Quoted in *ibid.*

⁸⁵ Given the complicated role of race in Haitian history, there is undoubtedly a political component of this “Africanizing” of Haiti’s patron saint. In a related example, Paul Johnson explains how the patron saint of Brazil, Nossa Senhora Aparecida, for whom practitioners of Afro-Brazilian Candomblé identify with the *orixá* (spirit) Oxum, the aquatic spirit of beauty and love, has been “Africanized” during the past century; see “Kicking, Stripping, and Re-Dressing a Saint in Black: Visions of Public Space in Brazil’s Recent Holy War,” *History of Religions* 37 no. 2 (November 1997): 122-140.

“Erzulie continues to articulate and embody a memory of slavery, intimacy, and revenge. She survives as the record of and habitation for women’s experiences in the New World.”⁸⁶

Balanse

Tucked away in the hills of Merger just north of Léogâne is an *ounfò* belonging to an *oungan* named Marc Fleurival. Along the far wall of the *ounfò* are three separate *djevo* for three different *lwa*: Lisifè, Ezili Dantò, and Bawon Kriminel. Together these *djevo* challenge the notion of a rigid Rada/Petwo or cool/hot binary, and instead they demonstrate how the cooler and stronger spirits balance and help strengthen each other to enhance the efficacy of mystical work.

The first chamber on the right side of the opposite wall of the *ounfò* is for Lisifè, or Lucifer (Fig. 4.26). The color red, the bound black bottle, and the *pwen* object at the base of the altar all make clear that Marc works with strong spirits inside this chamber.⁸⁷ The chamber’s name is also highly suggestive. In Vodou, Lisifè is a powerful spirit summoned by secret societies or by those practitioners who work with the fiercer spirits. Alfred Métraux recounts a myth he heard in Port-au-Prince that explains how Lisifè emerged in the Vodou pantheon: After God created the earth and its animals, he sent twelve apostles who ultimately rebelled against him. As punishment, he sent the apostles to Ginen, where they and their descendants became the *lwa*. One of the apostles refused

⁸⁶ Joan Dayan, “Erzulie: A Women’s History of Haiti,” *Research in African Literatures* 25, no. 2 (Summer 1994): 11.

⁸⁷ I examine *pwen* objects more comprehensively in the following chapter.

to leave and instead began practicing sorcery under the name Lisifè.⁸⁸ In this sense Lisifè is a practitioner of *maji*, but he is also an insurgent, and one cannot help but wonder if that strengthens his appeal among those who likewise practice *maji*.

An iron cross stands centrally on the altar's platform wrapped in red, blue, and silver garland. It may be a reference to Lisifè, particularly if we consider another instance described by ethnomusicologist David Yih. His example comes from a Cap Haitian *ounfò*, where he saw "an iron cross made of reinforcement rod welded to a tire iron . . . for Lisifè."⁸⁹ It could also be a reference to Bawon Samedi, the formidable *lwa* of the dead and head of the Gede family. As we have seen, the cross has significant meaning in the Afro-Atlantic world, but in Vodou it can also be an appropriation of the Christian symbol, particularly when so many *pakèt kongo* contain crucifixes, a practice that is likely derived from Kongo appropriation of the Christian cross for magical purposes.⁹⁰ But the connection to Lisifè also works linguistically. Serge Larose points out that in the Léogâne area, which is close to Merger, every *démembré* (a plot of land

⁸⁸ Métraux, *Voodoo in Haiti*, 326. Elizabeth McAlister understands this myth as a reflection of Vodou's moral economy. She states that, "throughout the oral mythologies of Vodou is a clear theme of morality and a distinction between working with the Ginen spirits and working with the forces of sorcery. Usually the sorcerer is also a slave master of captured spirits and souls, and thus themes of morality are bound together with philosophical issues of slavery and freedom;" see *Rara!*, 128. In another example, the president of a Rara band based in Léogâne explained Lisifè thusly: "God made the king Lucifer. God Commands the sky, and the king commands the earth. Everybody who is poor on this earth is in hell." McAlister interprets this as a commentary on Haiti's severe class inequality and economic exploitation, 129.

⁸⁹ Yuen-Ming David Yih, "Music and Dance of Haitian Vodou: Diversity and Unity in Regional Repertoires" (PhD diss., Wesleyan University, 1995), 165.

⁹⁰ As Terry Rey aptly points out, many Kongolese people absorbed Christian iconography and practices into their own during the Portuguese's proselytizing efforts, and many were already Christianized when they arrived to Saint-Domingue; see "Kongolese Catholic Influences on Haitian Popular Catholicism." Also see John K. Thornton, *The Kongolese Saint Anthony*. George Balandier points to the Kongo appropriation of the cruciform, which included magical operations; see *Daily Life in the Kingdom of the Kongo*, 241-42. This is one reason why the cross and crucifix appear with *pakèt kongo*, which have their origins among Kongo *minkisi* objects. The cruciform may have had significant appeal for Kongolese peoples as it resembled their own cosmograms that parallel the cycles of the sun and human life. On this

where a family venerates the ancestors and *lwa*) for the Zandò nation of spirits contains “an iron bar, surrounded with heavy chains, called Lucifer and which has to be heated up whenever rituals are conducted (in Creole, the word is made up of two constituents: Lucifer, the last one meaning iron).”⁹¹ So here we have a connection between the name and the material.

While this altar area is “hot,” it nevertheless works with cooler spirits who balance the atmosphere, such as Lasyrenn (whose name follows the French La Sirène) represented here by a commercially-produced mermaid figure. Lasyrenn is an Ezili spirit, the aquatic counterpart of Freda and Dantò, possessing the beauty and luxury of the former and the formidable strength of the latter. With this dual character, as Marilyn Houlberg asserts, “she can be the seductive coquette or the angry, demanding mistress. She can change in front of your eyes. She is part black, part white; part Haitian, part European; part Rada, part Petwo.”⁹² As with so many *lwa*, practitioners understand and work with them differently. Marc sees Lasyrenn as white, and accordingly he placed her image on his altar because for him she represents the white part of the world. “Vodou,” he stated, “is the whole of the world, and this is one aspect of it.”⁹³

The other major working element of this altar is the *pwen*, which I will examine more fully in the following chapter and place in its larger economic and historical context (Fig. 4.27). All the components of Marc’s *pwen* enable it to work effectively. Its

point, see Robert Farris Thompson and Joseph Cornet, *The Four Moments of the Sun: Kongo Art in Two Worlds* (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1981), 43-52.

⁹¹ Larose, “The Meaning of Africa in Haitian Vodou,” 112.

⁹² Houlberg, “Sirens and Snakes,” 33. Houlberg also places Lasyrenn in her larger Afro-Atlantic context of female aquatic spirits, connecting her to Mami Wata.

⁹³ Marc Fleurival, personal communication with the author, July 2, 2003.

primary form is a *govi* wrapped in scarves of various colors. Surrounding the *govi* are three human skulls, which, as we will see in the next section of this chapter, involve captured souls (also known as *zonbi*) that enable the practitioner to carry out mystical work. The melted wax on the skulls indicates that the spirits were recently sent on an “expedition,” or sent out to do work, undoubtedly aided by the heat of two *chodyè*.⁹⁴ Beneath the *govi* is a chromolithograph, quite likely of the spirit Expedit (associated with Saint Expedite) who practitioners send on expeditions to perform work. Some also identify Saint Expedite with Bawon Samedi.⁹⁵ Chromolithographs that correspond to the stronger spirits are commonly placed under objects such as *govi* or *chodyè* to serve as directives in carrying out mystical work, as seen in André’s *ounfò* (Fig. 4.28).

On the opposite side of Marc’s *ounfò*, is a chamber for Bawon Kriminel, a guardian of cemeteries and captain of *zonbi*; he is also known for exacting justice (Fig. 4.29).⁹⁶ Bawon Kriminel shares with this spiritual associate, Bawon Samedi, the image of the cross, which in this context serves as an “object of judgment and moral intimidation” (Fig. 4.30).⁹⁷ The attached skeleton—a stark symbol of death—is a reminder of our inevitable lot, though possibly sooner for those who cross the wrong side of Bawon Kriminel. The intimidation factor bolsters the power of Bizango and Sanpwèl secret societies that summon him, for as my friend Claude Lubin explained, Bawon

⁹⁴ According to Serge Larose, “the burning flame of the candle is said to re-animate the dead which is then instructed to go and harass someone (such a procedure is called “expedition”); see “The Meaning of Africa in Haitian Vodou,” 93, n. 2.

⁹⁵ Prosper Charlemagne, personal communication with the author, June 5, 2003.

⁹⁶ Donald Cosentino, *Vodou Things: The Art of Pierrot Barra and Marie Cassaise* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1998), 28.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 31.

Kriminel is “one part Bizango.”⁹⁸ When speaking of Bawon Kriminel’s power, Marc described it in terms of battle. For example, the swords piercing his eyes symbolize—much in the same way they do for the warrior Ogou—Bawon Kriminel’s power and his ability to cause harm if necessary, as one would do in battle. Similar to the *pwen* at the Lisifè altar, the skulls on either side of the cross, particularly the one on the right with its accretion of candle wax, indicate that spiritual forces have been put to work under Bawon Kriminel’s direction on behalf of Marc and his clients.

Bawon Kriminel’s connections with other Petwo spirits such as Ezili Dantò, Bosou, and Danbala LaFlanbo (the Petwo counterpart of Danbala Wedo), are clearly evident with the images that Marc places on this altar.⁹⁹ In the middle of the altar stands a cement sculpture of Ezili Dantò based on the Our Lady of Czestochowa image (Fig. 4.31). Here too the Christ child holds the magic book, the source of her power. To her right is a composite cement figure of Bosou and Danbala Laflanbo (Fig. 4.32). The horns identify Bosou while the serpents emanating from his mouth and ear indicate Danbala Laflanbo.¹⁰⁰ On the object’s base are two sets of inverted triangles that contain the letter “G,” a Masonic reference with multiple implications (God, Gran Mèt [Grand Master], or even Gnosticism)¹⁰¹ that also appears throughout *ounfò* wherein practitioners, particularly secret society members, invoke stronger spirits. In André’s Makaya *ounfò*,

⁹⁸ Claude Lubin, personal communication with the author, July 2, 2003.

⁹⁹ Informed by Pierrot Barra, Donald Cosentino states that Bawon Kriminel also works with Ti Jean Petwo, Marionette, and Simbi An-Dezo; see *Vodou Things*, 28.

¹⁰⁰ While the phallic resemblance is unmistakable, Marc did not make any mention of it and I have not encountered any associations between Danbala Laflanbo and phallic imagery in the literature. This is not to deny the connection, particularly given the multireferential quality of Vodou imagery. But in Vodou the serpent is generally connected with creation; procreation and its imagery are linked to the Gedes.

¹⁰¹ Edouard Laurent, personal communication with the author, December 7, 2006.

the symbol appears on Danbala Laflanbo's *vèvè* along with the Haitian flag, another connection between Petwo power, militarism, and nation (Fig. 4.33).

While Bawon Kriminel is one part Bizango and works with Petwo spirits, he is also, according to Claude, one part Ginen. Marc emphasized this point when he poured an herbal libation at the foot of the altar then offered it to Claude and me; he called it "*bwason* Ginen," or Ginen drink. This altar chamber also invites into its realm the cooler presence of Ginen, or the Rada spirits. On the wall opposite the altar, for example, are four chromolithographs of these spirits: two of Saint Jacques/Ogou, one of Mater Dolorosa/Ezili Freda, and one of Notre Dame d'Altagrâce (Our Lady of High Grace), sometimes identified with Metrès Ezili.¹⁰² Likewise, spirits associated with Ginen appear on the altar. On the far left is a wooden sculpture of Kouzen Zaka, the *lwa* of agriculture, working the land and wearing is characteristic denim, straw hat, and satchel (Fig. 4.34). The chef figure further conveys the idea of food and nourishment with the plump turkey attached to his left hand, ready to feed his children (Fig. 4.35). Claude explained that the image represents the father of the Marassa, the sacred twins who reflect the sacredness of all children. Accordingly, they are invoked along with Legba at the beginning of ceremonies and are always fed first, for they ensure the future.¹⁰³ Finally, next to Kouzen stands a white doll for Labalen, the Rada whale and wife of Agwe, along with Lasyrenn. Some say Labalen and Lasyrenn are sisters, others say they are one and the same.¹⁰⁴ Here is another example of individual interpretation and

¹⁰² Our Lady of High Grace is the patron saint of the Dominican Republic. Yvette Ducal, a *manbo* belonging to a Vodou community in Jacmel, identified this image with Metrès Ezili, or Ezili Fran, i.e., "Fran Ginen . . . closer to God." Personal communication with the author, August 5, 2003.

¹⁰³ Rachel Beauvoir-Dominique, Seminar at Le Péristyle de Mariani, July 16, 2001.

¹⁰⁴ According to Alfred Métraux, "The Siren and the Whale are two marine divinities so closely linked that they are always worshipped together and celebrated in the same songs. Some say the Whale is the mother

practice: for Marc they are rivals, so much so that their images must be in separate rooms.

Although these two altars engage Petwo spirits, Marc emphasized that they possess varying degrees of “hot,” depending on which spirits are pleased, and that they ultimately honor Ginen.¹⁰⁵ The spatial orientation of these chambers is another important point, for in between them is a chamber for Ezili Dantò and Ogou Feray who act as the protectors of the *ounfò*. The altar clearly identifies Dantò with Our Lady of Czestochowa chromolithograph in the middle and a large blue scarf suspended from the ceiling just to the right of the altar (Fig. 4.36). The scarves hanging above the altar represent other *lwa*, with red as the most prominent color identifying Ogou. It is nevertheless Ezili Dantò’s presence who is the most vital here. Marc placed her altar in the middle because it is her power that keeps the rooms on either side “hot” and the spirits who work within them strong. This purposeful balancing of the hot and cool properties of various *lwa* within Vodou practice strengthens the whole of Vodou and reflects its pragmatic nature and philosophical underpinnings.

An emperor’s altar chamber

A progression of energy and spiritual modality exists in Vodou. This progression moves from the cooler and religious Rada, to the hotter “magico-religious” realm of Petwo and Kongo, and finally to the strongest energies of Bizango rites, which fully

of the Siren, others that he is her husband; and there are still others who say that these two names are used for one and the same deity”; see *Voodoo in Haiti*, 104.

¹⁰⁵ In the following chapter I examine the permeable boundary between Ginen and magic.

engage the magical powers of transformation.¹⁰⁶ Although Bizango and other secret societies share the same trunk of the Vodou tree, they have their distinct branch and with that the loosening up of *regleman*. Consequently, Bizango altars are markedly more intense than Rada and even their Petwo counterparts: juxtapositions are strikingly incongruous and dramatic for the igniting of powerful energies and the intimidation of onlookers (Fig. 4.37). As *oungan* Wildred Ignace told Donald Cosentino, “There really are no rules of representation when Vodou gets *this* hot.”¹⁰⁷

Intensity, militarism, and demonstrations of power are at the core of Bizango rites and functioning. This became apparent to me when I attended Bizango ceremonies at André’s *ounfò*, and what struck me as so different from other ceremonies were the intense energy and the feeling of being a part of living memory. At the beginning of these ceremonies, for example, the officiant would draw a large conch shell to his mouth and sound it loudly, purposely evoking the call to battle that persists in Vodou social memory and seen on André’s *ounfò* wall (Fig. 3.45). Then he would thrash the ground continuously with a whip, or *fwèt kach*. I understood that this was to activate the space and dispel harmful spirits, but with its potent resonance, this charged connection to slavery was a purposeful reenactment of the haunting horrors from Haiti’s colonial past.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁶ For more on this point, see Wade Davis, *Passage of Darkness*, 241-284, who devotes an entire chapter to Bizango secret societies. Bizango is also used as an umbrella term for secret societies including Sanpwèl. For more on these societies, particularly on the myths surrounding them, see Hurbon, *Le Barbare Imaginaire*, 175-191. A member of André’s community told me that Makaya, Bizango, and Sanpwèl are synonymous and operate under the following spirits, among others: Kalfou, Bosou, Ezili Dantò, Danbala Laflanbo, Gran Bwa, and Simyte. Personal communication with the author, June 1, 2003.

¹⁰⁷ Cosentino, *Vodou Things*, 24.

¹⁰⁸ Robert Farris Thompson, suggesting that the *fwèt kach* is of Kongo origin, points to a contemporary example of its use among the BaKongo. He states: “ritual experts sometimes activate a *mfimbu* (whip), cracking it loudly to lend energy to a charm or to chase away a spirit of ill-will from a cemetery.” See his “Forward” in *Passage of Darkness*, xi-xv. More recently Elizabeth McAlister explains how the whip

One Haitian friend told me that when Vodou is under fire, it is the Bizango societies who rise up to defend it.¹⁰⁹ This military ethos has its roots in Haiti's colonial history. One Bizango belief, according to Rachel Beauvoir-Dominique, holds that Haiti's modern "secret societies emerged out of the determination of the indigenous people to pursue clandestine struggle against the colonists."¹¹⁰ Similarly, Michel Laguerre argues that secret societies are a continuation of the maroon communities, who, after independence in 1804, safeguarded the plantations over which they assumed control and prepared for a possible return of the French.¹¹¹ He also contends that secret societies are still trained in "tactics of guerrilla warfare" to protect their land.¹¹²

Serge Azor, whose altar chamber I examine here, is an emperor (leader) of a Sanpwèl secret society in Port-au-Prince. The Emperor or Empress is not necessarily a religious role, but connotes high rank and may have its origin during the time of Dessalines who proclaimed himself Emperor of independent Haiti.¹¹³ Secret societies like Sanpwèl and Bizango are open to both men and women and typically have thirty-three ranks (like Freemasonry), with the emperor or empress at the top. Many secret society leaders are also Masons; both traditions share many of the same ritual protocol

signifies the connection between slavery and the annual Lenten Rara festival, wherein the descendants of slaves now "control slavery by themselves enslaving spirits as mystical helpers . . . But these *zonbi* are not brutalized by their masters the way the ancestors were in the colony;" see *Rara!*, 108-109.

¹⁰⁹ Edouard Laurent, personal communication with the author, November 3, 2002.

¹¹⁰ Beauvoir-Dominique, "Underground Realms of Being," 155. A significant example of this kind of resistance as Beauvoir-Dominique points out, is the insurrection led by Cacique Henri, a local chief who led the Baoruco Rebellion from 1516 to 1533.

¹¹¹ Michel Laguerre, "Bizango: A Voodoo Secret Society in Haiti," in *Secrecy: A Cross-Cultural Perspective*, ed. Stanton Taft (New York: Human Services Press, 1980), 156.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 155.

¹¹³ Aboudja, Seminar at Le Péristyle de Mariani, July 19, 2001.

and power structures.¹¹⁴ Displays of his position and linkages to power adorn his *peristil*: certificates of title, a picture of him in Masonic garb (which also doubles as Bawon's) (Fig. 4.38), the Masonic compass and skull and crossbones (Fig. 4.39), and a whip lashed around the towering cross that stands next to the entrance (Fig. 4.40).

As we saw with the altar for Lisifè, the cross is a significant symbol and ritualizing point in spaces where practitioners work with the stronger spirits, and accordingly it appears throughout Serge's sacred space, particularly his altar chamber. He made clear what the cross represents: the four cardinal points and Bawon, who stands at the crossroads between life and death.¹¹⁵ When entering Serge's altar chamber, he instructs people to make the sign of the cross over their chest. The gesture is a request to enter the room and to prepare for coming face to face with another large cross on the left, next to the altar.¹¹⁶ In front of this cross Serge conducts his mystical work. Drawing from the strong powers of Bawon and the four cardinal points of the cosmic universe, many secret society leaders incorporate the cross on their altars, and sometimes include binding strategies for spiritual activation or arresting, which also evoke the tortuous legacy of slavery, a point I will examine in the following chapter (Fig. 4.41). Many of the *lakou* that I visited whose leaders worked with stronger spirits also used the cross, typically placed near the entrance with fresh offerings at the base (Fig. 4.42).¹¹⁷

¹¹⁴ On an occasion when Serge prepared a ritual bath for me, he wore a white Masonic apron with the All-Seeing Eye in the middle.

¹¹⁵ Serge Azor, personal communication with the author, July 26, 2003.

¹¹⁶ Serge emphasized the gesture as one of respect rather than as one with any Christian connection; *ibid.*

¹¹⁷ The most intense moment of a Bizango ceremony at Andre's *lakou* occurred when the spirits left the *ounfò* to dance around an enormous cross and leap through a fire, presumably to strengthen their energy.

With the Bizango colors of red and black and its numerous human skulls, Serge may have designed his altar to intimidate, but ultimately he designed it to help him work (Fig. 4.37). He has numerous objects to accomplish both. Suspended from the ceiling above it are several *pwen* objects (Fig. 4.43). On the altar itself are many bottles, most of which carry Bizango colors and the cross. One triple-horned bottle on the left is unmistakably for Bosou, and also includes a mirror on its belly, improving mystic vision to see potential enemies.¹¹⁸ Undoubtedly, Serge stores more objects to aid him in his work in the closed compartment that supports the towering red cross.¹¹⁹

The visual articulations of death are unmistakable. The cross on the altar is for Bawon, the chief *lwa* of the dead. In Haitian cemeteries one may find the *kwa* Bawon—Bawon’s cross, a focal point of ritualizing activities.¹²⁰ The altar structure itself, with its platforms and door leading to the main chamber, resembles tombs found throughout Haiti, including those in Port-au-Prince’s main cemetery, which is just a few blocks from Serge’s *ounfò* (Fig. 4.44). Even the jack-o’-lantern bag suspended from the arm of the stuffed animal for Bosou (evident by his horns) is linked to the dead (Fig. 4.45). All Hallows Eve, or Halloween, is a continuation of a pre-Christian Celtic tradition that marks a time of seasonal transition but also one linked to the spirit world, wandering souls, and other ambiguous creatures.¹²¹ Halloween also corresponds to the time Vodou

¹¹⁸ I also examine this point in the following chapter.

¹¹⁹ In a similar fashion, the *poto mitan* typically contains a compartment for sacred implements and spiritual offerings.

¹²⁰ See Brown, *Mama Lola*, 368-372.

¹²¹ This Celtic tradition is called Samhain, which Jack Santino argues is the origin of modern-day Halloween practices; see “Hallowing in America: Contemporary Customs and Performances,” *Western Folklore* 42, no. 1 (Jan. 1983): 1-20. The jack-o’-lantern legend, according to Santino, is well known in Great Britain. It holds that Jack was a wandering soul who had tricked the devil. Unable to get into heaven or hell, he roamed the world with the light of lit coal placed inside a large tuber, 8.

practitioners take to the streets and cemeteries to celebrate the Gedes, of which Bawon is the head.

The obvious association with Bawon's realm are the seventeen human skulls that Serge placed on this altar. In Vodou thought skulls are vessels of knowledge, a concept conveyed on a wall painting of a Bizango *ounfò* (Fig. 4.46).¹²² In this case knowledge translates into skill, for each skull represents a spirit with a particular expertise that in turn aids Serge in performing mystical work. Whatever the client's problem may be, there is a corresponding spirit who can help. To make his point, Serge gave an example of battle. He explained that if someone needs help in a fight, he would chose a skull on his altar that belonged to a person who in life was a soldier, because in death that person's spirit can lend his knowledge and skill for battle.¹²³ In this context, these spirit workers are *zonbi*.

Perhaps no other symbol in Haiti conveys more accurately and poignantly the idea of human beings bereft of their consciousness, their being, their soul, as much as that of the *zonbi*. In addition to the metaphorical connection to the legacy of slavery and adverse labor conditions of the present, an important point to which I will return in the following chapter, *zonbi* also fall within a spiritual category. As Elizabeth McAlister explains, "*Zonbi* are spirits of the recently dead who are captured and thence owned by a "master" and obliged to do work [such as] general protection to the improving of specific talents like drumming and dancing, or carpentry and tailoring."¹²⁴ One of the most

¹²² Claude Lubin, personal communication with the author, July 3, 2003.

¹²³ Serge Azor, personal communication with the author, January 9, 2004.

¹²⁴ McAlister also explains the three levels of understanding *zonbi* in Haitian culture. First is the magical extraction of *zonbi* and the subsequent mystical work they are sent to perform. Second is the poisoning of someone to lower their metabolic rate to the point that they appear dead; they are then "resurrected" after burial and forcibly put to work. Rare and criminal, this is the subject of Wade Davis's controversial (and

effective ways to capture a soul is through a person's bones, particularly the skull, a strategy used both by Marc and Serge.¹²⁵ While conscripting the souls of the recently dead into labor by acquiring their bones may appear malevolent, such work is also done to help a client without compromising the welfare of another. Most ritualizing in Vodou is done for healing purposes, and while secret societies leaders may work for questionable ends, they also work to heal. Although Serge would only give me a general idea of the forms of magic he practices—and asked that I not write about them in detail—what was nevertheless clear was that most of them were for healing purposes.¹²⁶ McAlister also states that work involving *zonbi* may be “morally benign” and that “*oungan* and *manbo* use skulls for healing, to remove negative spirits that have been ‘thrown’ on people.”¹²⁷

Another major feature of Serge's chamber is the pair of life-size coffins just to the right of the altar (Fig. 4.47). The blue coffin suspended from the ceiling is typical of those found in tombs while the red coffin supported by two chairs is a traditional style often used by secret societies and placed next to their altars. In Freemasonry the coffin

subsequently sensationalized) study, conducted under the auspices of Harvard University. The third, based on a history of slavery and present adverse realities, is metaphorical—the human being who is forced into servitude by another; see *Rara!*, 102-103. For more on *zonbi* see Hurbon, *Le Barbare Imaginaire*, 191-214. *Zonbi* are not unique to Haiti. In the region of what is formerly known as Dahomey, Melville Herskovits describes a type of ghost that is similar to the *zonbi* in Haiti. He writes: “They are soulless 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 graves and sold them into servitude in some far-away land;” see *Dahomey: An Ancient West African Kingdom*, 2: 243-44. It appears that this metaphorical and painfully real connection to the slave trade exists on both sides of the Atlantic.

¹²⁵ I did not feel that it was appropriate to ask Marc or Serge how they came into possession of the skulls. But according to McAlister, *bòkò* get human bones directly from the cemetery or have cemetery workers bring the remains to them; see *Rara!*, 105.

¹²⁶ Serge Azor, personal communication with the author, July 26, 2003.

¹²⁷ McAlister also points out that sometimes the skulls of other Vodou practitioners are used, drawing on their strengths. Moreover, many practitioners stated that their obligations to one another extended into death, see *Rara!*, 105.

symbolizes “death and resurrection,”¹²⁸ which is one likely reason for their appearance in secret society *ounfò*, particularly when their leaders are Masons and work with *zonbi*. The Bizango associations with the traditional coffin are also evident: the colors of red and black, the *fwèt kach*, the bottle for Bawon, and the black crosses. André also has this type of coffin in front of the altar in his Makaya *ounfò*, although his has a series of bones laid out under a vibrant cloth in the shape of a human skeleton. He also has a separate building used exclusively for healing and inside it is another large coffin with three sets of human bones, each arranged in the shape of a cross.

The bones and the crosses are connected to Bawon and the Gedes, but they are also a link to the ancestors. Vodou is first and foremost a tradition that venerates the ancestors, for it is through them that knowledge is passed. And with the veneration of ancestors comes an appreciation of family—both spiritual and biological—which is the foundation of Vodou. Although the secret societies operate independently of Vodou, they also recognize these fundamental principles, and Serge is no different. He emphasized that the two coffins form a female and male union, and the small coffin at the foot of the large cross for Bawon represents the child; together they represent a family.¹²⁹ And standing next to the small coffin is a statuette of a black Virgin, perhaps Dantò, or maybe Mapyang, but undoubtedly a strong and protective mother.

Called *madoulè*, the small sacred coffin is the “principle icon of Bizango.”¹³⁰ It appears on secret society altars, such as the one belonging to an *oungan* in Arcahaie

¹²⁸ Claudy, 19.

¹²⁹ Serge Azor, personal communication with the author, January 9, 2004. This focus on family recalls André’s Dahomean *ounfò*, wherein the *djevo* for Brize and Twa Letan symbolize the good fathers and the good mothers. This also demonstrates Bizango’s emphasis on opposites and inversions in its signs and signals; see Davis, *Passage of Darkness*, 253.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 253.

(Figs. 4.41 and 4.48) and is also paraded during ceremonies for society members to deposit their cash offerings. Its meaning, however, runs deeper than the practical matter of finances. According to anthropologist and ethnobotanist Wade Davis, a verbal exchange exists among Bizango members that refers to the *madoulè*. Question: Who is your mother? Answer: The sacred coffin.¹³¹ The *madoulè* is like the mother of the society and reflects the matrilineal aspect of Vodou culture. The loss of the mother is the most painful loss that one may endure, therefore one must be prepared to fight for the mothers. In fact “put your womanhood on!” is a powerful Vodou call for bravery.¹³² But above all, the *madoulè* is for the ancestors,¹³³ the roots of Vodou, and its links to the dead and ultimately to the cycle of life; all of which are so playfully and deeply absorbed by the Gedes.

Transformation artist par excellence: Papa Gede

In their typically defiant nature, the Gedes fall outside the Rada/Petwo binary, and do not even form their own *nanchon* as other spirit collectives do. Instead, practitioners refer to them more intimately as a family, *fanmi*.¹³⁴ Although Bawon Samedi heads up this family of the dead that contains other well-known members such as Bawon Lakwa,

¹³¹ Ibid., 255.

¹³² Rachel Beauvoir-Dominique, Seminar at Le Péristyle de Mariani, July 16, 2001.

¹³³ Alex Augustin, personal communication, June 1, 2003.

¹³⁴ Brown, *Mama Lola*, 330.

Gran Brigit, and Gede Nimbo, the one I refer to here is the raucous, humorous, unabashedly prurient, and the ultimate master of transformation: Papa Gede.¹³⁵

Late one afternoon as the members of a Vodou community in Washington, D.C. were departing from a gathering, Alex stopped me just before I walked out the door. He asked, “Leslie, do you know that you have a strong Gede spirit?” This occurred when I was still relatively new to Vodou and this community. Incredulous but nonetheless curious, I replied, “No . . . but how do you know?” A flash of restrained impatience swept over his face that melted into a warm smile. He placed his hand on my shoulder and said, “You smell like rum and hot peppers.”¹³⁶ Given Gede’s notorious ribaldry, I thought he was an odd match for me. Perhaps my expression divulged my thoughts because Alex was quick to add: “Everybody has a Gede!” And eventually everyone will enter his domain. Maybe these are reasons why Gede involves himself more than most other *lwa* in the daily affairs of practitioners’ lives and invests himself in their well being, particularly that of their children. Accordingly, altars for Gede are among the most common in *ounfò* and Haitian homes, both in Haiti and its diaspora.

Jean-Pierre Fleurival has an altar and chamber devoted to Gede, with an image of him in his characteristic black top hat and long tail-coat, along with a devious grin that matches his trickster and clowning self (Figs. 4.49 and 4.50). On the surface of things Gede takes nothing seriously, and he pokes fun at all those grand themes of life that

¹³⁵ For an informative and colorful description of Gede, see Deren, *Divine Horseman*, 102-114. Karen McCarthy Brown also offers a telling account, particularly why Gede is so important to Haitians living in the Diaspora; see *Mama Lola*, 330-331 and 360-381. While I do not focus on Gede’s charged sexual nature here, Donald Cosentino examines why it is Gede, and not Papa Legba who maintains the Yoruba spirit Eshu Elegba’s procreative role and phallic imagery in Haiti; see “Who is that Fellow in the Many-colored Cap? Transformations of Eshu in Old and New World Mythologies,” *Journal of American Folklore* 100 no. 397 (1987): 261-275.

¹³⁶ Gede likes rum and hot peppers, so practitioners include them among his offerings.

humans take so seriously, especially love and death. Next to Gede's image is a playful transformation of the skull and cross bones found throughout secret society *ounfò*, but with the bones changed out for swords, a hint of their military ethos remains.

Jean-Pierre rests his priestly *ason* on this particular altar, an indication that this is the altar with which he is most connected, drawing from its concentrated power to recharge his *ason*. As with many Vodou altars, this one is made of cement and has a niche below to hold items used for ritualizing. And like the altars for Bawon Kriminel and Bawon Samedi, a cross stands centrally—Gede's most recognizable symbol that also appears as part of the altar's painted design. The cross is also painted on the *djevo* wall standing above a stepped tomb, another one of his major symbols. The image is not only based on Gede's *vèvè*, but it also invokes his salute, *kwa asingbo*, or “cross of the stairs.”¹³⁷

Ultimately, Gede's domain is transformation, and with his appearance the tensest of situations may be diffused with his silliness and good-hearted nature.¹³⁸ He applies his transformative abilities to healing. Because he can see into the worlds of both the living and the dead, nothing goes unnoticed by him, giving him tremendous ability as a diviner. Indeed next to Jean-Pierre's *ason* are divining cards, which I have seen on several altars consecrated to the spirits of the dead. Divining with cards is a powerful diagnostic tool for an *oungan* or *manbo* in working with a client, and given Gede's ability to see into both worlds, his insatiable curiosity surrounding the details of people's personal lives, and his concern for people's welfare, Gede is an ideal collaborator in

¹³⁷ Max Beauvoir, seminar lecture at the Le Péristyle de Mariani, July 2003. People then follow the salutation with “*Kwa*.”

¹³⁸ Brown, *Mama Lola*, 330.

performing healing work.¹³⁹ Because he cares so deeply about the well-being of people, he is an unlikely spirit to help those who wish to cause harm. While Gede is the *lwa* of the dead, he is also the *lwa* of procreation, the protector and giver of life. He “raises life energy,” states Karen McCarthy Brown, “and redefines the most painful situations—even death itself.”¹⁴⁰ For all the seriousness and hardships people endure, Gede’s laughter and healing breaks down barriers that keep us from each other, and from ourselves, so that we can find common ground and rejoice.

Redirected remembrance

The *djevo* is significantly more private than the relatively public *peristil*, and although the altar itself benefits the community, it is an individual creation. The *manbo* or *oungan* constructs the altar for the *lwa* with whom who he or she works most closely while balancing an adherence to Vodou principles and the *lwa*’s predilections with individual cosmological interpretations and his or her own aesthetic sensibilities. While a practitioner may place almost anything on an altar, nothing is done so haphazardly or extraneously. Every object has its purpose—they may ignite energies to deploy power, concretize cosmological principles, nurture one’s relationship with the *lwa* through a cycle of gift giving, articulate one’s creativity, or evoke purposeful remembrances—all of which ultimately enable the *manbo*, *oungan*, or other practitioners with appropriate *konesans* to perform healing work.

¹³⁹ Brown, *ibid.*, 330-331; and Deren, 113-114. Toward the end of a ceremony for Papa Gede held in Long Island in early November 2003, I saw a different side of his personality. He became quiet and serious, listening intently to people telling him their problems and he would counsel them thoughtfully, each in turn.

¹⁴⁰ Brown, *Mama Lola*, 330.

Vodou, as I emphasize, is a religion of healing and community building. Karen McCarthy Brown tells us that at the core of Vodou healing is the healing of relationships.¹⁴¹ Not only is this a healing of relationships between individuals, families, and communities, or even within ourselves, it is also a healing between people and events of the present with those of the past. So much of current practice engages the past, particularly the events that inextricably altered the lives of the ancestors, those on both sides of the Atlantic.

While visiting a *lakou* in northern Haiti, near the town of Limonade, a community member showed me a two-tiered altar for Papa Pierre (St. Peter) and Osan-y, a Nago warrior *lwa* who works with Ogou (fig. 4.51). A dense gathering of crepe paper strands in various colors hung from the ceiling, almost obscuring the dramatic red back cloth that symbolized the power of Osan-y. Offerings of flowers and drinks covered the entire surface of the top tier. On the lower tier were the keys of Papa Pierre, a small plaster statuette of the saint, several sacred stones, a bell and *tchatch* (gourd rattle) to call the *lwa*, Florida water, a basin for healing work, a wooden ship for Agwe, and an iron *asen*—a devotional object for the ancestors still used among Fon peoples. Placed behind the *asen*, there was no mistaking it: an iron slave shackle (Fig. 4.52). The *oungan* told me that they found many shackles throughout the property, and he was also quick to point out that not only was this *lakou* once the site of a major plantation, it was also in this area where the first slave insurrections of 1791 occurred.¹⁴² When I asked why the shackle was placed on the altar, he replied without hesitation, “for its power.”

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 331.

¹⁴² Jacques Aris, personal communication with the author, June 9, 2002. Indeed the slave revolts of 1791 began on August 22 in the northern province of colonial Saint Domingue on an estate in Acul. Within

In a related circumstance, Joan Dayan found a ball and chain on an altar to Simbi Lakwa and posed the following question, “How did the relic of a horrible past fit in with the offerings to the gods?”¹⁴³ The placement of the relic on this altar, like the one for Papa Pierre and Osan-y, was a decisive act of remembrance. Practitioners appropriate these objects and their associations with oppression, subjugation, and torment, and redirect symbolic power to empower themselves. Unspeakable pain and hardship of the past is exposed, remembered, and orchestrated. The placement of these objects on the altar collapses temporal distance and interjects them into a vast network of relationships that exists in all reaches of everyday life. Here, at these altars, such objects may be tended to and incorporated into Vodou’s unifying of power and knowledge, the past and present, and the visual and conceptual to ensure strength, healing, and guidance for the community.

three days many of the sugar mills, machinery, tools, and cane fields throughout the parishes were either destroyed or in flames, including Limonade; see Fick, 91-117.

¹⁴³ Dayan, *Haiti, History, and the Gods*, xii.

Chapter 5: *Pwen*, Paradox, and Transformation

During our first visit to Serge Azor's altar room, my friend Gesner Charlemagne and I sat quietly, watching Serge pour Barbancourt rum over the four ends of a tall black and white checkered cross as he intoned a prayer. Behind the cross, a declaration of his leadership was written in bold white letters against the bright red wall (Fig. 5.1). The room, with the intensity of the text-covered walls, the tiered altar in the corner, and the assorted objects placed purposely on the earthen floor and suspended from the ceiling rafters, was clearly designed for Serge's mystical work.

Several of the suspended objects caught my eye: A bound bottle directly above us lashed with eight small animal ribs (Fig. 5.2); a *govi* covered in white fabric and tied to a small wooden chair (Fig. 5.3); and suspended from two yellow bound *balens* (long candles), an upturned chromolithograph of St. Expedit, with an attached hand-written note directing the spirit in his task to "fix things," or change a circumstance for a client's benefit (Fig. 5.4). I had seen many variations of these objects before, always in sacred spaces where practitioners evoke the "strong" and "working" spirits. I recognized them as *pwen*, focused points of energy that "work" to help their owner as instructed. *Pwen* are typically created in the context of *maji*.

These objects "fix things" by performing mystical or magical work. *Pwen* may take the form of lashed bottles, *govi*, and *pakèt kongo*, and contain a spirit who works according to the instructions of a ritual agent. Such people typically include *bòkò*, *oungan*, and *manbo* who use such knowledge to help an individual or community without causing harm to anyone or to counter destructive work performed illicitly by another; and

leaders of secret societies who may hold any of the above titles.¹ This *travay maji*, or magical work, is done with the aid and authorization of the hotter spirits who work effectively and efficiently to create change. Most objects made in the context of *maji* are intended for work, thereby providing the individual an opportunity to alter a circumstance. As such, these objects become extensions of their maker's agency because the objects—though directed—become the source of and vehicle for change.

The practitioner also chooses what to incorporate into these objects and how they will look. Not only do these choices ensure the object's efficacy and steer a situation toward a particular outcome by giving tangible form to a problem, they also reveal the use of intended symbols drawn from a tormented past defined by violence, control, and resistance. The objects, both practical and symbolic, are condensations of myriad historical experiences fused into present memory, which in turn focus present intent for future outcomes. In the realm of *maji* these distillations of memory, power, and the inevitable contradictions that arise from the dialectic of domination and submission become agents of change, which is at the core of *maji's* functioning.

In this chapter I examine objects that I refer to collectively as *pwen*. I describe several of these objects and consider their context of production and operation, particularly in relation to their Kongo predecessors. Many of these objects employ strategies of binding (*mare*) that include ropes, cords, chains, locks, and safety pins. Given this visual articulation of bondage, I look at how these objects both reflect and function within the legacy and current reality of domination, labor, and consumption, and

¹ One distinction between a *bòkò* and an *oungan* or *manbo* is that a *bòkò* does not always possess the *ason*, the sacred rattle of *oungan* and *manbo*. Herskovits states that an *oungan* inherits his family *lwa* who instill in him *konesans*, or knowledge. The *bòkò*, on the other hand, must purchase his *lwa*, see *Life in a Haitian Valley*, 225.

address the issue of morality in relation to their use. I then turn to the Cuban religion Palo Mayombe, and its central object, the *prenda*, a vessel that houses a spirit and materials from the natural world. I compare *maji* and *pwen* with Palo and the *prenda*, which will not only elucidate some of the complexities of *maji* objects, but will also place the objects in their transatlantic and historical contexts. Such a comparison enhances an understanding of how these objects help marginalized people to determine their own futures.

Maji and the concept of pwen

Maji and change

The realm of *maji* holds unlimited possibilities; it is where people become instrumental in their own lives by changing personal or collective circumstances. *Maji* is an attitude, a belief in that change. It is also work, protection, and at times, aggression. Above all else, *maji* is the power of transformation, a power that emerged as a necessity in a world of persistent adversities and fierce inequities created by colonial conquest and domination.² With this understanding of *maji*, one may achieve a fuller understanding of the objects created in its domain.

Although Vodou and *maji* share much of the same history and many of the same *lwa*, *maji*—like Bizango and other secret societies—is a distinct offshoot of Vodou. Various forms of *maji* address all kinds of problems that range from illness and financial troubles, to the anguishes of love. For centuries, *maji*, like Vodou, has continuously drawn into its domain, tools, images, and objects from Amerindian, African, and

² Rachel Beauvoir-Dominique presents a brilliant analysis of *maji* by examining its historical and social developments in colonial Saint-Domingue and independent Haiti; see “Underground Realms of Being.”

European sacred traditions—including the Kabbalah.³ Such ongoing appropriations focus diverse energies and practices into a new fragmented whole, which helps to explain the seemingly disparate inclusion of items such as the widely-circulated French magic books, *Petit Albert* and *La Poule Noire*, chromolithographs of Catholic saints, bound objects, and human skulls. Serge takes no exception to this approach. Indeed he practices five different kinds of *maji* to address the different problems of his clients for their benefit.⁴

Maji is essentially pragmatic, used to find solutions to problems. Melville Herskovits understood this when he explained that *maji* is a system with its own specific operation, separate from Vodou.⁵ He makes this distinction to avoid imposing a moralistic opposition between Vodou and *maji* and to underscore how *maji*'s specificity works to change a circumstance. He gives herbal healing as a prime example of this, for healing operates within the realm of *maji*. Having recognized this, Herskovits understood that *maji* and Vodou defy a black and white moral rigidity, for in them, he rightly states, “all tones of gray are found, and these merge one into another almost imperceptibly.”⁶

³ Kabbalah, a system of Jewish mysticism based on Scriptural interpretation, is also the name of a type of magic practiced in Haiti. Related to this point, Elizabeth McAlister observes that what is striking among Jewish influences in Haiti is the figure of Moses, whom Haitians have sanctified as a Vodou spirit. Known for his magnificent magical powers, Moses's “magic and the magic of ‘the Jews’ in general is an attractive source of power for disenfranchised Vodouists;” see *Rara!*, 131. Zvi Loker has also written on the Jewish presence in Haiti; see “Were There Jewish Communities in Saint-Domingue (Haiti)?” *Jewish Social Studies* 24, 2 (1983): 135-46, and “Jews in the Grand'anse Colony of Saint-Domingue,” *American Jewish Archives*, 34, 1 (1982): 89-97. For more about the European influences on Haitian *maji*, see Herskovits, *Life in a Haitian Valley*, 240-242; Métraux, *Voodoo in Haiti*, 269-50; Pluchon, 29-34; and Beauvoir-Dominique, “Underground Realms of Being,” 260-262.

⁴ I should point out that conceptions of various forms of *maji* are not universally held in Haiti.

⁵ Herskovits, *Life in a Haitian Valley*, 222-23. Herskovits uses the term “magic,” as do most scholars I cite in this chapter. For my own consistency I use the Kreyol *maji*.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 233.

Not all scholars and writers emphasize this nuance. Maya Deren, for example, in distinguishing religion from *maji*, states that religion belongs to cosmic forces and is concerned with collective welfare; *maji*, on the contrary, with its practitioners allegedly motivated by self-gain, operates for the individual, who “sees himself as separate from, in competition with, or even bitterly opposed to the collective and the cosmic good.”⁷ Even so, what one must emphasize in Deren’s observations is her assertion that “magic rituals are performed with the intention of producing a direct result upon the world.” Consequently, as Deren sees it, “in religion the serviteur is changed; in magic the world is changed.”⁸ While Deren does not outwardly state it, what she describes is a dynamic of individual agency at work to effect outward change.

Maji, Ginen, and *pwen*

Rather than contrasting Vodou with *maji*, some scholars are more specific and define *maji* in relation to L’Afrik Ginen (Guinea Africa), which makes sense considering that these realms may overlap.⁹ Their origins, however, do not. Ginen’s ideological and ritual underpinnings generally derive from west African traditions such as those of the Fon, Ewe, and Yoruba peoples, while those of *maji* are from west central Africa, namely Kongolese peoples and those from neighboring Angola. Ginen, as I describe in Chapter Three, is a place—both mythic and real. It is the land across the sea and the cool waters

⁷ Deren, 78.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 76.

⁹ See, for example, Larose, “The Meaning of Africa in Haitian Vodou;” Karen Richman, “They will Remember me in the House: The Pwen of Haitian Transnational Migration,” (PhD diss., University of Virginia, 1992); and McAlister, *Rara!*

below the earth. Ginen is also an ethos¹⁰ shaped by centuries of homage and supplication to the ancestors and *lwa*, an ethos that expands and strengthens one's familial network. And it is that network, including the spiritual family, which constitutes so much of Ginen's foundation. Whether across the waters or the aquatic world below the earth, Ginen is the sacred ancestral land where the descendants of slaves return.

With Ginen's adherence to family, and *maji*'s focus on the individual, Serge Larose suggests that they form, as Karen Richman later articulates, a dialectic, in which Ginen and *maji* are oppositional and yet each defined by the other.¹¹ Because Ginen signifies family, social authority, and prestige, the dialectic clearly gives Ginen the social and moral upper hand. Ginen is pure, benevolent, and moral. God is on its side, for God created all its gifts and all the *lwa*, who are inherited from one generation of practitioners to the next. *Maji*, on the other hand, challenges familial traditions, much like a rebellious and ambitious son confronting his morally-grounded father.¹² Whereas Ginen is collective and enduring, *maji* is individualistic and transient, assimilating innovations into its realm to swiftly meet new needs.¹³ Ultimately, according to Larose, one may express the difference between the two as a difference between the ancestors and *pwen*.¹⁴

¹⁰ Ibid., 87.

¹¹ Expanding on Larose's work, Karen Richman devotes a chapter to this dialectic, particularly as it relates to migrant wage labor of Haitians in the U.S.; see "They Will Remember Me in the House," 231-286.

¹² Serge Larose provides an interesting example of this dynamic between an *oungan* and his ambition son; see "The Meaning of Africa in Haitian Vodou," 89-91.

¹³ Ibid., 89; and Richman, 234. Anthropologist Andrew Apter applies a Yoruba-Dahomean "deep-knowledge paradigm" to explain the contradictions, ambiguities, and so-called origins of Vodou in terms of its Rada-Petwo binary. He explores Petwo's association with money and magic as it opposes the authority of venerable Ginen; see "On African Origins: Creolization and *Connaisance* in Haitian Vodou," *American Ethnologist* 29, no. 2 (2002): 233-260.

¹⁴ Larose, "The Meaning of Africa in Haitian Vodou," 96.

Literally meaning “point,” a *pwen* is a complex condensation of power, action, and consequence. As Karen McCarthy Brown explains, *pwen* “signifies the essence or pith of a complex situation . . . [condensing the] contradictory stuff of life.”¹⁵ A *pwen* may act defensively or aggressively. It may protect or harm, cast fortune or misfortune. Its function depends upon its owner’s intentions. A *pwen* may take material form such as a charm (*pwen cho*), or a design, as seen on the exterior of an *ounfò* (Fig. 5.5). It may take verbal form such as a name (*non pwen*), proverb (*pwovèrb*), or song (*chante pwen*).¹⁶ A *pwen* may also be invisible, as a “consistency of magical forces unleashed into space” by a ritual agent.¹⁷

People deploy *pwen* in social and political exchanges, and therefore they are not exclusive to *maji*. Nevertheless, they assume a central role in it. In a magical circumstance *pwen* are purchased spiritual powers, typically contained in objects that in turn become instruments of change. As embodiments of “knowledge and power,” McAlister observes that “*pwen* objects are aggressive forms of communication whose force depends on the capacity of the owner to direct his or her will on to a situation. *Pwen* . . . are concerned with both the distillation of knowledge and the deployment of power.”¹⁸ And as we will see, they are a key underpinning of *maji*’s functioning and pragmatism.

¹⁵ Karen McCarthy Brown, “Alourdes: A Case Study of Moral Leadership in Haitian Vodou,” in *Saints and Virtues*, ed. John Stratton Hawley (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 152-53. I will address this contradictory character of *pwen* later in this chapter.

¹⁶ For a list of various *pwen*, see Larose, “The Meaning of Africa in Haitian Vodou,” 106; and McAlister, *Rara!*, 167.

¹⁷ According to Harold Courlander, *pwen* are most often invisible; see *The Drum and the Hoe*, 99.

¹⁸ McAlister, *Rara!*, 167.

One point of difference between *pwen* and the ancestors is their origins: God creates the ancestors¹⁹ while people, on the other hand, create *pwen*, which are then available for purchase.²⁰ A person fashions a *pwen* to benefit another, and accordingly, a *pwen* is an “individual affair.” This is in contrast to the Ginen way, which focuses on familial traditions and worshipping in the same manner of one’s parents.²¹ A community may regard the purchasing of a *pwen* as an ambitious, unscrupulous, and illicit act, so instances of sudden material gain are typically met with suspicion.²² Because of this association, an individual will often conceal the existence of the *pwen*, which may eventually jeopardize a son or daughter who, unbeknownst to them, will inherit the *pwen* after its buyer dies. This will be revealed when misfortune befalls the inheritor and only through divination may the cause be disclosed.²³

If we consider *pwen* diachronically, however, it becomes apparent that *pwen*, while created in the context of *maji*, do not necessarily remain there; for they may migrate to the ancestral Ginen. Larose explains that this occurs when an inherited *pwen* moves from one generation to the next, becoming integrated into a family manner of worship, a fundamental practice of Ginen. In fact, he states, many people are aware that

¹⁹ The same is true for the *lwa*.

²⁰ Larose, “The Meaning of Africa in Haitian Vodou,” 96-97 and 106. Melville Herskovits earlier made this distinction when he wrote of *wanga*, or magical charms: “It is men who make *wangas*,” see *Life in a Haitian Valley*, 223.

²¹ Larose, “The Meaning of Africa in Haitian Vodou,” 96.

²² Paul Farmer illustrates this with the common proverb: *Mezi lajan ou, se mezi wanga ou*, or “the extent of your wealth is a gauge of the strength of your spells.” Farmer points incisively to the economic reality in Haiti that gives rise to the proverb. He states, “It is important to underline that what is shared in rural Haiti is *extreme poverty*, and to hypothesize that, in settings in which there is a history of widely shared status, especially poverty, those who break out of that status are likely to be accused of sorcery;” see *Aids and Accusation: Haiti and the Geography of Blame* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992), 204.

some of their Ginen spirits originated as *pwen*.²⁴ Karen Richman is more specific in her description of a three-part ritual process that collects, contains, and tames or domesticates *pwen* so that they may be placed in the realm of Ginen.²⁵ Such a migration, as Richman explains, is crucial to the continued revitalization of Ginen: “Magic—unrestrained, undifferentiated, hot—produces the *viv* ‘to sustain’ the dependent, temper-prone grandparents who become the authentic representatives of Ginen. If to survive, however, Ginen feeds vicariously upon the life-giving powers of *pwen* . . . [and] to maintain its moral hegemony, Ginen has to conceal its exploitation of Magic.”²⁶

While Ginen and *maji* are distinct, to regard them solely as a dichotomy obscures the complexities of their relationship. Such a perspective not only polarizes, but it also positions *maji* as Ginen’s morally ambiguous other, relegating *maji* to the social and spiritual periphery. To view *maji* from such a moral high ground negates not only what *maji* can do for Ginen, but also what *maji* can do for people as they seek to remedy a sense of powerlessness in their lives. This need to capture a sense of agency reveals a significant component of Vodou: *maji* has a vital, not peripheral role. As Rachel Beauvoir-Dominique contends, every *ounfò*, “even the most ‘religious’ in outlook, is set under the patronage of one or several *lwa travay*, divinities destined to work, render service and even amass small fortunes for their possessors.”²⁷ That these *lwa*, are

²³ Richman reports that near Léogâne, a woman’s death was attributed to her “deceased father’s neglected *pwen*,” 254-54.

²⁴ Larose, “The Meaning of Africa in Haitian Vodou,” 97. Larose takes this point further when he asserts that, “whole ‘nations’ [such as Petwo and Zandò] seem to have originated as *pwen*,” see 111-112.

²⁵ Richman, 262-265.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 249.

²⁷ Beauvoir-Dominique, “Underground Realms of Being,” 166.

“*summoned*, not ‘worshipped,’”²⁸ demonstrates the commanding character of magical practice. Moreover, public ceremonies typically include aspects of “sympathetic magic,” just as magical practice draws from “traditional religion” and requires support of the *lwa*.²⁹ Therefore, it is more useful—and accurate—to think of *maji* as a part of the whole of Ginen.

In making these points, however, I do not suggest that *maji* is devoid of ethical breaches that may cause harm, or that *bòkò* never work on behalf of a client to achieve a particular end, no matter what the consequences may be. Certainly I do not minimize or dismiss such occurrences.³⁰ Nor do I wish to gloss over the adverse economic circumstances that foster and sustain a social frame that foments instances and accusations of sorcery. My aim, rather, is to shift the focus away from a moral emphasis and toward understanding *maji* as a force that is not only pragmatic, but instrumental in helping people to achieve their own agency. This dynamic has persisted since the atrocities committed and endured in colonial Saint-Domingue to the adversities of the present day. Given this history, *maji* has an appeal to the disenfranchised because of its potential to change economic and social injustice.³¹ This forms part of the broader context in which *maji* objects are made.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Davis, 53. Deren states that the “patron trinity of the magicians” include Kalfou (the Petwo Legba, guardian of the crossroads), Gran Bwa, (healing divinity of the forest and leaves), and the Bawon Simityè, spirit of the cemetery; see 101-102. Beauvoir-Dominique details how together these three *lwa* “embody and delineate” transformation and “synthesize the lines of force running throughout . . . magic;” see *Underground Realms of Being*, 167-171.

³⁰ On the question of sorcery and ethics in Haiti, see Karen McCarthy Brown, “Afro-Caribbean Healing: A Haitian Case Study,” in *Healing Cultures: Art and Religion as Curative Practices in the Caribbean and Its Diaspora*, ed. Margarite Fernández Olmos and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gerbert, (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 63-65.

³¹ According to Graham Dann, magic has the same appeal for the Umbandista in Brazil; see “Religions and Cultural Identity: The Case of Umbanda,” *Sociological Analysis* 40 (Fall 1979): 208-225.

Travay maji and colonialism

Objects and resistance

Maji and the manufacture of its related objects have a long tradition in Haiti. Colonial-era clerics and chroniclers remarked on the slaves' use of *maji*, charms, amulets, powders, and the "sorcerers" who used *maji* against the whites and even other slaves. Moreau, the eighteenth-century chronicler, provides one such example. Although his disdain for slave practices underlies his observation, it nevertheless reveals their use of objects. He states:

The negroes' belief in magic and the strength of their fetishes follow them from across the seas. The more absurd the tales, the more beguiled they are. Crude little figures of wood or stone representing men or animals are for them creators of supernatural things, and they call them *garde-corps* [protective figures]. There is a large number of negroes who acquire an absolute power over others by this means.³²

Colonial reports of amulets and other magical substances, as I describe in Chapter Two, suggest that a significant number of slaves, maroons, and free people of color believed in their purported powers and used them in acts of resistance. For example, Makandal, the pre-revolutionary maroon famous for his wide-spread acts of poisoning, distributed *pakèts*, or bound packets of magical and protective substances aptly known as *makandals*. This distribution led to his arrest and execution in 1758.³³ Jacques Courtin, the judge who presided over Makandal's case in Le Cap (Cap Haitian) reported that, "They placed the *macandal*, loaded with curses, under a large stone, and it is indubitable

³² Moreau, 1:42. For more on eighteenth-century magic practices among the slave population in Saint-Domingue, see Pluchon, 13-27.

³³ Geggus, "Haitian Voodoo," 32.

that this brings misfortune to whomever they wish it.”³⁴ In 1758, the year of Makandal’s execution, a police ruling prohibited the sale of goats (which may have been used for sacrifice), “fetishes,” or any other object used in *maji*.³⁵ But long before then, people who were deemed “sorcerers” and “charlatans” faced brutal torture for using *gàd-ko* (spirit-invested and protective figures) and other so-called “fetishes” for protection.³⁶ These measures not only point to the prevalence of *maji* practices, but also to the colonial regime’s recognition of their incendiary potential.

Such measures had little effect. In Chapter Two, I mention another famous case involving the mulatto slave, Jérôme Pôteau, who in 1786 stood trial for holding secret meetings and selling *makandals*, charms of chalky stones called *maman-bila*, and *poto* (acacia seeds), used for the detection of thieves. The most powerful object Pôteau sold was the *mayombo*, a stick with *maman-bila* inserted into it, enhancing its user’s ability to fight, and it was even stronger if covered by nails. He also submerged the *maman-bila* in a mixture of rum and gunpowder “to make them angry.”³⁷ At these meetings participants venerated a figural object on an altar (recalling Moreau’s description), drank rum containing pepper and *maman-bila*, conducted ordeals of gunpowder, and distributed leaves.³⁸ I should point out that the gunpowder explosions, the use of leaves, and the overall “hot” atmosphere, all characterize Petwo ceremonies today.

³⁴ J. Courtin, “Mémoire sommaire sur les prétendues pratiques magiques et empoisonnements prouvés au process instruit et jugé au Cap contre plusieurs nègres et nègresses dont le chef, F. Macandal, a été condamné au feu et exécuté le 20 janvier 1758,” presented by Franklin Midy, *Chemin Critiques* 1, no. 1 (1989): 135-142, as cited by Yih, 86.

³⁵ Desmangles, 26.

³⁶ Hurbon, *Le barbare imaginaire*, 84-88.

³⁷ Geggus, “Haitian Voodoo,” 33-34.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 34. Here Geggus does not cite specific sources.

Certainly *maji* and amulets were a source of empowerment during the Haitian Revolution and war of independence. The revolutionaries Georges Biassou, Halaou, and Hyacinthe, for example, not only surrounded themselves with “sorcerers,” they also used protective charms. Moreover, Hyacinthe himself was likely an *oungan*. At the very least, such examples indicate that *maji* practices served protective and resistant purposes among the slave and maroon populations in their quest to endure and ultimately overthrow the colonial regime. Geggus underscores this point when he states that although “beliefs in the protection of talismans or the return of the soul to Africa” did not cause the uprising, those beliefs “carried the slave rebellion forward.”³⁹

In the second half of the eighteenth century, Moreau observed the uses of protective talismans among the slaves, and noted that the belief in those objects “follow them from across the seas.”⁴⁰ Descendants of the colony’s enslaved people maintain this belief today. According to one Vodouizan, an early means of protection came from the ancestors, from Ginen: “Long ago our ancestors were immune to bullets. They had a type of drug . . . That’s what became *pwen*. People came from Guinea with these drugs. They were like a natural gift.”⁴¹ Indeed, some *pwen* are believed to give immunity to bullets (*pwen bal*), just as others may have significant powers that allow one, for example, to disappear (*pwen disparèt*), become omnipresent (*pwen deplase*), or provide overall protection from mystical attacks (*pwen pwotege*).⁴²

³⁹ Geggus, “Marronage, Voodoo, and the Saint Domingue Slave Revolt of 1791,” 33.

⁴⁰ Moreau, 1:42.

⁴¹ As told to Karen Richman by one of her informants, 251.

⁴² Larose, “The Meaning of Africa in Haitian Vodou,” 106. Larose also names *pwen* that are more mundane, but practical in a rural economy (e.g. *pwen gadinay*, for bigger livestock, *pwen jaden* for better crops, and *pwen lavant*, for success at the market).

Varieties of *pwen*

There are specific names for various protective objects and substances. For example, one of the strongest means of protection from poison and bullets that is worn or ingested, is the *dwòg*, which is prepared by a *bòkò* or one who specializes in the efficacy of leaves. One legend has it that Henri Christophe wore a *dwòg*, which gave him immunity to all bullets but silver, and over a century later the Caco guerrillas wore them during the early years of the U.S. military occupation.⁴³ A more common means of protection is a *gad*, which typically consists of a substance-filled packet worn around the neck or waist, or it may take the form of a knotted cord.⁴⁴ A *gad* is also a protective act. For example, I witnessed a ceremony in which Bakoulou Baka, a petwo *lwa* of Kongo origin, gave a *gad* to people by rubbing their forearms with a hot wooden baton to give them strength and protection. Another means of defense is the *arèt*, which works for an individual or an entire household to ward off or neutralize supernatural creatures, assassins, and other forms of aggressive *maji*, such as the *makandal*. It takes the form of a bundle of things or a single object, and is suspended from the ceiling of a home, or from the branches of a nearby tree, or it may be buried in the yard.⁴⁵

⁴³ Herskovits, *Life in a Haitian Valley*, 229-230; and James Leyburn, *The Haitian People* (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1980; 1966), 161. The Cacos were an organized militia that emerged as a response to the brutalities of the U.S. occupation. For more on the Cacos and the occupation, see Hans Schmidt, *The United States Occupation of Haiti, 1915-1934* (New Brunswick, New Jersey, 1971); Kethly Millet, *Les Paysans haïtiens et l'occupation américaine, 1915-1930* (La Salle, Canada: Collectif Paroles, 1978); and Heintz and Heintz, 381-469.

⁴⁴ Courlander, *The Drum and the Hoe*, 98. Regarding the ingredients of a *gad*, Courlander reported one example: “[The *bòkò*] revealed that it contained dried chicken blood, extract of *wari* bean, and gris-gris powder, among ‘a thousand and one’ ingredients. The *gris-gris* powder is made from a dried *gris-gris* bird.” Odette Menneson-Rigaud states that the term “garde” refers to a talisman placed on a Kongo or Petwo *pwen*; see 47-48.

⁴⁵ Courlander, *The Drum and the Hoe*, 98. Herskovits also notes that it protects against *mal jok*, or “evil eye,” and can protect infants; see *Life in a Haitian Valley*, 231.

Still another means of defense, and one that also possesses aggressive capabilities, is a type of *pwen* called *wanga*. It is a powerful object of *travay maji* that takes various forms such as bottles, bound bundles, and other tied objects.⁴⁶ A *wanga* is *range* (arranged or fixed) by its maker and contains spiritual essence and medicines that are put to work.⁴⁷ During the eighteenth century *wanga* was another term for poisons that could take the form of powder or liquid.⁴⁸ Like other *maji* objects, colonial officials construed *wanga* as tools of African “fetishism” and sorcery. This association continued after independence and was addressed by Article 405 of the Penal code in 1864: “All makers of *wanga*, *caprelatas*, *vaudoux*, *dompèdre*, *macandale*, and other sorceries will be punished . . . All dances and other practices . . . likely to nourish in the hearts of the people the spirit of fetishism and superstition will be regarded as sorcery and punished accordingly.”⁴⁹ With the exception of some of the most recent literature, writers have often remarked that *wanga* carry a reputation of immorality that includes committing antisocial, harmful, and dangerous acts, such as inducing illness in a targeted person or inflicting some other misfortune. Consequently, they are something to be guarded

⁴⁶ The origin of the term *wanga* is central African, and has a similar meaning there. Among the Pende, for example, *wanga* denotes sorcery. Zoë Strother defines the Pende *wanga* as “the ability to manipulate the material and spiritual world for personal advantage;” see *Inventing Masks: Agency and History in the Art of the Central Pende* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 12. Like the *wanga* of Haiti, the Pende example is also ambivalent; the *wanga* is suspected of being at the root of both misfortune and good fortune. Among the neighboring Luba, their word *bwanga* also designates a charm; see McAlister, “A Sorcerer’s Bottle,” 426, n. 8. On the other side of the Atlantic, Ira Berlin and Philip Morgan state that slaves practiced their magical beliefs in the field, particularly by planting protective devices such as sesame seeds at the end of rows. In Jamaica this was known as *wangle*; see “Introduction: Labor and the Shaping of Slave Life in the Americas,” in *Culture and Cultivation: Labor and the Shaping of Slave Life in the Americas*, ed. Ira Berlin and Philip D. Morgan (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1993), 37-38.

⁴⁷ Métraux, 285.

⁴⁸ Pluchon, 212.

⁴⁹ As cited by Métraux, *Voodoo in Haiti*, 270.

against. But during my time in Haiti, I rarely heard this association. Instead, the term *wanga* designated a charm of protection or to help change an individual's circumstance, particularly in matters of finance or love.

Bound to work: strategies for object efficacy

Seeing

For examples of these objects, I return to the *lakou* of *oungan* André Villaire. Behind his Makaya *ounfò* is a cleared space where he summons strong and powerful *lwa*, and there, just as he does in the Makaya *ounfò*, he conducts Bizango rites. These rites are stronger than Petwo, and therefore they necessitate effective methods to “heat” things up, which is vital to call upon the fiercer spirits whose response is most immediate. The ritual agent knows how to orchestrate these powerful forces to benefit the individual and the community, and she or he implements strategies for this goal. In the midst of André's Bizango space, for example, stands a thick metal staff surrounded by smoldering coals (Fig. 5.6). This heat recharges energy, increasing the spirits' power for work. André emphasized this point when he stated that the space is a “working” area.⁵⁰

Standing as a sentinel of this working area is a tree to which André attached spiritual implements to conduct his work (Fig. 5.7). Suspended from the higher branches is a small black *madoulè*, or sacred coffin (Fig. 5.8). Also attached to the tree are a bottle, the head of a sacrificial bull, colored scarves, and mirrors. To understand how this tree works, I find it helpful to compare it to another object, the “sorcerer's bottle,” which Elizabeth McAlister describes in her 1995 article (Fig. 5.9). In deciphering the visual

⁵⁰ André Villaire, personal communication with the author, June 24, 2002.

elements of the bottle, she identifies those that have a Kongo source.⁵¹ Such an analysis is helpful here because, as I state in Chapter Three, the Makaya *ounfò* possesses discernible rearticulations of Kongo cosmology and visual production, just as the Bizango space does. The term Bizongo is itself a Kongo proper name.⁵²

Vital for the tree's efficacy are the four mirrors affixed to the trunk, each facing outward in the directions of the four cardinal points, just like those on the bottle McAlister describes.⁵³ This configuration parallels the saluting of the four points, which marks each new segment of a Vodou ceremony. One reason for this, as McAlister observes, is to focus the energies of the four directions and channel them into a *pwen*,⁵⁴ or more specifically, a *wanga*, such as the bottle. Like the bottle, the tree acts as a repository of this channeled energy and thus becomes a concentrated point—an example of *travay maji*.

When I asked André about the mirrors, he said that they enable the spirits to see better—particularly danger—and consequently, they work more effectively. This strategic use of mirrors also derives from Kongo ritual work, where mirrors affixed to power objects called *minkisi* (*nkisi* in the singular), enable them to determine where danger lies (Fig. 5.10).⁵⁵ The comparison is apt: the Kongo *nkisi*, a spiritually-charged

⁵¹ It is important to note that McAlister does not suggest sweeping Kongo retentions in Haiti, but rather she points out that, “these cultural elements, which have since been creolized and re-configured, have an identifiable historical source;” see “A Sorcerer’s Bottle,” 308.

⁵² Geggus, “Haitian Voodoo in the Eighteenth Century,” 35. Michael Laguerre, however, traces Bizango to west Africa’s Bissago Islands off the coast of Kakonda; see “Bizango, 147.”

⁵³ When McAlister asked about the bottle’s mirrors, St. Jean, its maker, replied that they are for “the four corners of the earth;” see “A Sorcerer’s Bottle,” 313.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 309-10.

⁵⁵ Here McAlister pursues a different explanation for the mirrors. For her they symbolize a Haitian conception of the cosmic life cycle, that is the journey between the worlds of the living and the dead, and the sacred importance of water. She compares this concept to that found in Kongo cosmology; see *ibid.*

object, containing “medicines” (*bilongo*) to assist in healing, protective, and retributive work, is the conceptual and morphological predecessor of Haitian works such as the *wanga* and *pakèt kongo* (Fig. 5.11). *Minkisi* take a variety of forms, from medicine-filled packets to carved figures called *minkondi*, but it is the latter that often include mirrors on their midsections or heads.⁵⁶ The mirror, operating as a divination device, is instrumental for seeing danger. In some instances, such as an *nkisi mandombe*, the mirror also serves as a spiritual compass, helping the *nganga* (ritual expert) to determine the location of danger (Fig. 5.12). Accordingly, this *nkisi* has a mirror on its head facing each direction, in addition to one attached to a cord on its back that serves as a handheld compass.⁵⁷ This configuration further explains the mirrors on McAlister’s bottle, as well as the positioning of mirrors on André’s tree. In both cases, mirrors channel energy from the four cardinal points thereby strengthening the spirit’s or diviner’s vision so that they may locate and reveal danger.

Binding

Before considering the next area of André’s space, the area that contains examples of lashed objects, I would like to return briefly to the observation I made in the introduction of this chapter—many *travay maji* use bindings. This raises the question of

⁵⁶ The use of mirrors is not exclusive to figural *minkisi*. Wyatt MacGaffey, who has published widely on Kongo culture and *minkisi*, points to an *mpiya*, or diviner’s whisk, to which a mirror is attached. Similarly, the mirror functions as a “crystal ball” for a diviner to determine which spiritual forces are active. Though the *mpiya* is not an *nkisi*, it could be used as one; see “The Eyes of Understanding: Kongo Minkisi,” in *Astonishment and Power* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1993), 54-55.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 65.

whether these objects are purposeful articulations of a horrid and haunting past of bondage. When I first considered this, the answer was obvious—yes, they are. And I still believe so, but as my understanding became more nuanced, I became increasingly aware of how incomplete it was and I began to question at what point do practical ritualizing strategies end and remembrances begin. And how does one attempt to resolve the apparent paradoxes that arise in ritual and remembrance? To pursue these questions I return to André's *travay maji*.

To the left of André's mirrored tree are three examples of binding in the form of vessels lashed heavily to chairs, which are themselves bound securely to a tree (Fig. 5.13). I saw the same configuration in the summer of 2003 in the private chamber of another temple in Gressier (which also belonged to a secret society), only there it was suspended from the ceiling, as in Serge's *ounfò* (Fig. 5.3). In each of these cases, the vessel seated on the chair is a *govi*, which serves as a repository for a spirit, transforming, focusing, and containing its power.⁵⁸ Usually a *govi*, after consecration, sits upon an altar dressed in a colored satin cloth that signifies the residing *lwa*. But André's and Serge's *govi* are covered by a strong layering of string that restrains the intense forces inside.

That they are further bound to a chair, or “seated,” indicates strong forces at work. It also suggests the “seating” of spiritual power, just as the one in Figure 5.14, where the chair becomes a temporary throne for the *lwa* Danbala on the occasion of a ceremony in his honor. This practice of “seating” spiritual powers extends beyond Haiti. In the Cuban religion La Regla de Ocha, for example, the term *asiento*, as David Brown

⁵⁸ Brown, “The Vèvè of Haitian Vodou,” 130.

states, indicates the “‘seating’ of spiritual power, *aché*, into the material world.”⁵⁹ The *asiento* initiation ceremony, also called the “coronation,” consists of this “seating,” both when the initiate is “seated” upon the *pilón* (sacred mortar), and when the *oricha* (spirit) is “seated” upon the head.⁶⁰ The notion of spiritual “seating” may have its origins on the African side of the Atlantic. In a practice from the Republic of Benin and Togo, for instance, a throne may actually become a *vodun* (mystical forces or powers) because it “seats” the dead and thus becomes a point through which a family may speak to their ancestors.⁶¹

To intensify the bound-up power, a *chodyè*, or a tripod metal vessel, sits above the *govi*, and “heats up” the powers within, typically with burning oil. Just as a *manbo* or *oungan* works to heat up the ceremony to prepare for the spirits’ arrival, the *chodyè* also raises the energy of restrained forces. *Chodyè* frequently appear on Petwo altars such as the one for Ezili Dantò that I describe in Chapter Four (Fig. 4.17). While a practitioner uses a *chodyè* to prepare the favorite food of the *lwa* to which it is consecrated,⁶² in this example the *chodyè* burns oil, ensuring the proper “heat” necessary for Ezili Dantò to work on behalf of her servitors.

In addition to heating up energy, binding devices such as ropes, strings, safety pins, and padlocks all harness, contain, and activate power for a variety of objects such as bottles (as seen in Fig. 4.26), packets (Fig. 5.11), and *govi* (Fig. 5.3). As I already

⁵⁹ David Brown, “Thrones of the *Orichas*: Afro-Cuban Altars in New Jersey, New York, and Havana,” *African Arts* 26 (October 1993): 46.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ Blier, “Vodun: West African Roots of Vodou,” 63-64.

⁶² Arnold Dormilus, “Principaux Objets Rituels et leur attributions dans le Vaudou haitien,” *Bulletin du Bureau National d’Ethnologie* nos. 1 and 2 (1998): 55-56.

mentioned, the strategy of binding, or *mare*, is widespread in *maji*, particularly when working with hotter spirits such as those of the Petwo pantheon, but most especially with the fierce spirits summoned by secret societies. The bound objects indicate strong forces under control, while heat strengthens the activation of mystical power. The binding serves to harness and channel power, which ultimately allows the spirits to perform effective mystical work. And it is this reason, according to André, that these chairs are bound.

To understand further the practice of binding it is helpful to consider other instances of ritual binding, such as the restraining of spirits. For example, *govi* and bottles frequently serve as vessels for spirits, but when they are bound, chances are they contain spirits that a ritual agent conscripted into service, or to prevent it from causing trouble. In many of these cases, tying functions literally as a strategy for containing powers that are not inherited, but bought (*pwen achte*). Typically it is the soul of someone who recently died and who did not receive a proper burial, thus leaving the soul vulnerable and in a “free-floating” state, disconnected from family.⁶³

Sometimes these detached souls and spirits are bothersome and demanding. Because of their power they pose a significant threat to the living, and consequently they must be contained. Larose reports of an *oungan* named Thomas, whose father died after being hit in the back of a neck by a stone. During a ceremony, Marinette, a spirit from the powerful Petwo Zandò nation, possessed Thomas’s aunt and declared that she was the one responsible for killing his father because he had refused to serve her.⁶⁴ The family

⁶³ Brown, *Mama Lola*, 189. In these cases the spirit is a *zonbi*. McAlister writes about the two *zonbi* captured in her bottle; see “Sorcerer’s Bottle.”

⁶⁴ Larose makes an interesting spatial observation here. Because the people present at the ceremony feared that Marinette’s arrival would frighten off the other spirits, they decided to receive her far from the

decided to hold a ceremony to offer the ritual meal she had demanded and then, after she was to be received, they would bind her with chains so that she would be immobilized, rendered too powerless to harm any other family member.⁶⁵ Rara bands also employ this strategy at the beginning of Rara season. For example, McAlister describes how the general of one band “magically ‘tied up’” a rival by symbolically placing and holding him under a rock to drain him of his power, a strategy that echoes the colonial practice of placing a cursed *makandal* under a large stone as mentioned above.⁶⁶

The same tying principle holds for creating a *pwen*. To make a *pwen* that protects against theft, for example, Larose explains that one takes a bottle and places a head of dried herring inside it to represent the flesh of the *zonbi* (captured spirit), a few drops of water, and drops of blood from a sacrificial chicken. Then the ritual agent speaks to the bottle: “Now you have water and you have blood; you are a living one. I want you to be the soul of that garden to kill any intruder.” The critical moment arrives when the agent seals the bottle by tying copper thread around it while instructing, “This is to prevent you from harming any of my children.” This is a pointed example of a maker conferring his will upon an object to affect a situation. Just like the Marinette spirit, this type of *pwen* is dangerous. Accordingly, the copper thread functions as the “chain of the spirit,” binding it in order to restrain it from committing violent acts against family members while focusing its energy to do the work it was directed to do.⁶⁷

property, in the ruins of a colonial sugar house; see “The Meaning of Africa in Haitian Vodou,” 102-103. Luc de Heusch also comments on this peripheral position of the Zandò nation, for in Léogâne they are received in the woods, far from the home; see “Kongo in Haiti,” 298.

⁶⁵ Larose, “The Meaning of Africa in Haitian Vodou,” 102-103.

⁶⁶ McAlister, *Rara!*, 152-153.

⁶⁷ Larose, “The Meaning of Africa in Haitian Vodou,” 106-107.

Restraining is also performed in Petwo rites to appease a demanding *lwa* and prevent it from interfering with a family's affairs. Jean Price-Mars happened upon such a ceremony during the 1930s when he witnessed what he referred to as a Lenba-Petwo rite (synonymous with Petwo, and also of Kongo origin), a secretive event that was held in the forest, far away from the village and the *ounfò*.⁶⁸ Price-Mars observed that in front of one of the altars was a deep hole containing two one-meter long pieces of mahogany, each wrapped around the middle with silk and over that a crimson cloth. The officiating *oungan* chanted a verse in *langaj* (Vodou's sacred language known only by servitors), followed by another in Kreyol while he rhythmically drove nails into the wood.⁶⁹ Then he measured two pieces of cord, each five meters, and had two assistants overlap the cords into the form of a cross holding them tautly and strongly. Then the *oungan* began to bind the studded and clothed pieces of wood onto the cords. With each knot he made he used immense force and chanted the following refrain:

Assuré! Assuré	Assuredly, assuredly
N'ap' assure point là!	We ensure this charm, is sure
Hi! Hi!	Hee! Hee!
Nou pralé mare Loa Pétro	We are going to tie the Petwo spirit
Hi! Hi!	Hee! Hee!

⁶⁸ See Jean Price-Mars, "Lemba-Péto, un culte secret: son histoire, sa localisation, géographique, son symbolisme," *Revue de la Société d'histoire et de géographie d'Haiti* 9, no. 28 (1938): 12-31, especially 24-25. Note the peripheral location, also commented on by Larose and de Heusch.

⁶⁹ Métraux identifies the first verse as *langaj*, *Voodoo in Haiti*, 307. The second verse in Price-Mars's text on page 24 reads as follows:

Ko! M'tendé Ko!
M'apé cloué bois!
Ko! M'tendé Ko!
M'apé cloué bois!

According to John Janzen, the "strike word" "Ko!" derives from the Kikongo word *koma*, which indicates the driving of nails into a ritual objects (an act that happened during the Lenba-Petwo rite) or to spit on a bracelet; see *Lemba, 1650-1930: A Drum of Affliction in Africa and the New World* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1982), 290-291. While this observation strengthens the case for a Kongo origin of this Haitian rite, I should point out that "ko" also means "body" in Kreyol. The Kreyol word for nail is *klou* (following the French *clou*) while the verb is *kloure* (after the French *clouer*), suggesting that the second and fourth lines translate as "I am nailing the wood."

Jean Pétro! Chainne qui chainne Li cassé li Qui dirait corde! Hi! Hi!	Jan Petwo! Chain that chain He will break [even] that Who would [bother] to speak of rope Hee! Hee!
N'ap mare n'ap mare Loa Pétro Hi! Hi!	We are tying, we are tying the Petwo Spirit Hee! Hee! ⁷⁰

In another example, Luc de Heusch describes a Petwo service to restrain four *lwa* near the Port-au-Prince suburb of Petionville in 1970.⁷¹ Similar to the ceremony Herskovits describes, the Petionville ceremony involved “defensive magic” that comprised the pounding of nails into pieces of wood that were then bound and knotted with strings. The *lwa* were then fastened to the knots, restrained so that, according to de Heusch’s informant, the other *lwa* could “eat and work in peace.” The knots, in the informant’s words, “were fixed in order to arrest the *petro* escort.” Knots, just like the ones witnessed by Price-Mars, secure or fix. And while the Kreyol verb *asire* means “to assure,” it also carries the meaning “to fix,” which itself is a loaded term for it implies not only a securing action evident in the Petwo ceremonies, but also an empowering one akin to making an object mystical. So binding, in this sense, is both a securing and power-bestowing action.

To take this point further I turn to the famous “chanson africaine,” first recorded by Moreau (and likely based more on hearsay than on his own observation) in the late eighteenth century and subjected to a curious array of misinterpretations over the next

⁷⁰ Price-Mars, “Lemba-Péto, un culte secrete,” 24-25. For the translation assisted by Jean-Robert Cadely and Drexel Woodson, see Terry Rey, “Kongolese Catholic Influences on Haitian Popular Catholicism,” 282. The verb *assuré* is French while *asire* is Kreyol.

⁷¹ de Heusch, “Kongo in Haiti,” 297-298.

two hundred years.⁷² In describing what he refers to as an initiation ceremony, Moreau states that the participants sing a “chanson africaine,” which he includes in a footnote:

Eh! Eh! Bomba, hen! Hen!
Canga bafio té
Canga moune dé lé
Canga do ki la
Canga li.⁷³

Moreau did not seem to know the meaning of the chant, opening the way for numerous (mis)interpretations to subsequently appear.⁷⁴ Fortunately recent attempts that address the interpretive problems surrounding this chant allow scholars to arrive at an accurate reading.⁷⁵ Carolyn Fick, with the help of John Janzen, a Kongo specialist, correctly identifies its language as KiKongo (though takes for granted Moreau’s initiation explanation) and arrives at the following translation:

Eh! Eh! Mbumba [rainbow spirit = serpent]
Tie up the BaFioti [a coastal African slave-trading people]
Tie up the whites [i.e., Europeans]
Tie up the witches
Tie them.⁷⁶

⁷² Stephan Palmié suggests that Moreau’s *Description* included the observations of his colleagues at the Circle des Philadelphes du Cap-Français and the “troupe de police” who suppressed slave ritual activity. He also questions Moreau’s “mode of data production” and points to textual inconsistencies; see “Conventionalization, Distortion, and Plagiarism in the Historiography of Afro-Caribbean Religion in New Orleans,” 321. David Geggus also suggests that Moreau’s account was largely based on second-hand information; see *Haitian Voodoo in the Eighteenth Century*, 23. Both Palmié and Geggus (though to a lesser extent) address the subsequent misinterpretations of the “chanson africaine.”

⁷³ Moreau, 1:57.

⁷⁴ C. L. R. James, for example, offers one of the most uncritical interpretations, that of a revolutionary declaration: “We swear to destroy the whites and all that they possess; let us die rather than fail to keep this vow;” see *The Black Jacobins*, 18. Geggus tells us that James found the text (without citing it) in de Bercy’s *Saint-Domingue* (Paris 1814), where it was the misinterpretation of a different chant; see *Haitian Voodoo in the Eighteenth Century*, 24.

⁷⁵ Palmié and Geggus (see note 71) provide a good summary of this, particularly Palmié who explores the historiography of the chant, which includes not only misinterpretations, but also outright plagiarisms.

⁷⁶ Fick, 57-58.

Indeed the KiKongo word *kanga* means, according to Wyatt MacGaffey, “to tie, to arrest, to close up, to bar the way to spiritual forces, for good or ill.”⁷⁷ Elsewhere MacGaffey points out that the term *kanga* is associated with the action of “witches” who supposedly remove a person’s soul from their body and enclose it in a different container to be used at will. *Kanga* describes this action—that of tying, arresting, stopping, and closing, “which is perceived in dreams as a use of cords, chains, stoppered bottles, underground caves, and the like.”⁷⁸

Stephan Palmié points out that Fernando Ortiz came across a similar form of the chant in the Cuban *reglas de congo* tradition, which is related to Palo Mayombe, and also posited a KiKongo linguistic origin.⁷⁹ Here, as Palmié diagrams it, is Ortiz’s interpretation:

“hen”	= explanatory phoneme	
“bomba”	= Kik.: mbumba ⁸⁰	(“image, fetish, secret, mystery”)
“canga”	=Kik.: n(kanga)	(“to bind, conjure, bewitch”)
“bafio te”	=Kik.: pl. of mfiote, i.e. an ethnonym for the “Vili,” a group inhabiting the northern regions of the lower Zaire	
“moun dé le”	=Kik.: mundele	(“white man”)
“do ki”	=Kik.: “ndocki”	(“witch, sorcerer, spirit”)
“la”	=French: “la”	(“there”) ⁸¹

⁷⁷ MacGaffey, “The Eyes of Understanding,” 53. The meaning of *kanga* has more than one meaning. John Thornton adds that for Kongolese Christians *kanga* also means “to save in the Christian sense;” see *The Kongolese Saint Anthony*, 133. Building on Thornton’s work, Terry Rey pursues the Christian significance of *kanga* in Haitian culture; see “Kongolese Catholic Influences on Haitian Popular Catholicism,” 280-284.

⁷⁸ MacGaffey, *Religion and Society in Central Africa*, 162. This witchcraft (*kindoki*), as MacGaffey describes, seems to be more of a myth. He states that it “is a negative cult of the dead, both subjectively, in the sense that it is wholly destructive to all but the witches (*bandoki*), and objectively, in the sense that it is not practiced.”

⁷⁹ “Conventionalization, Distortion, and Plagiarism,” 332. For Ortiz’s translation, see *La africanía de la música folklórica de Cuba* (La Habana: Publicaciones del Ministerio de Educacion, 1950), 77-84. Ortiz also provides a brief historiography of the chant.

⁸⁰ Regarding the term *mbumba*, both Geggus and Fick indicate that among the Kongolese people there is a rainbow-serpent deity named Mbumba Luangu; see Geggus “Haitian Voodoo in the Eighteenth Century,” 27-28, and Fick, 58. Geggus adds that Joseph van Wing, a missionary ethnographer who worked extensively in east Kongo, posited that the term might be an honorific title of a spirit that dwells in an *nkisi*.

The chant, Palmié states, means roughly the following:

Hey hey! powerful object/being, hey! hey!
bind/conjure the blacks (i.e., the Vili)
bind/conjure the witch over there
bind/conjure him.⁸²

Hence, from west central Africa to Cuba and Haiti, we have what appears to be a “magical formula.”⁸³ As *kanga* means to bind and conjure, I suggest again that the Kreyol *asire* evoked in the Petwo ceremony described above, likewise means to secure/bind as well as to fix/conjure. In that ceremony the Petwo *lwa* were magically tied to the wood with knots. With the *nkisi*, an *nganga* symbolically binds up spiritual powers to accomplish three things: symbolize what the object will do to its target; activate it; and in the case of this chant, “stop” with a particular emphasis on rendering it harmless.⁸⁴ This is what was done to the Petwo *lwa*, indicating that the binding/conjuring principle of the magical formula is still in use.

With this expanded view of binding, I would like to turn briefly to the most salient example of bound objects in the literature of Vodou visuality: the *pakèt kongo*, a bound packet of herbs that serves as a charm (Figs. 4.16 and 5.11). As I describe in Chapter Three, a *pakèt kongo* is a type of *pwen* typically used for protection and healing work. Because Robert Farris Thompson has described these objects as well as demonstrated the morphological and functional similarities between them and Kongo

⁸¹ Here Palmié refers to Karen Richman’s suggestion of a possible interpretation: “‘cana bafio té = ‘Canga [personal name] came from bafio’; ‘moun’ (as in ‘moun de le’) = ‘person;’” see “Conventionalization, Distortion, and Plagiarism,” 340, n. 33.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 332.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 333.

⁸⁴ Geggus, “Haitian Voodoo in the Eighteenth Century,” 29.

minkisi, I am not going to address them in any depth here.⁸⁵ I would like, however, to underscore a few points that apply to the other bound objects considered in this chapter. The *pakèt kongo*, as Thompson remarks, are wrapped with ribbons or cords, and fastened with pins to emphasize “the capture of forces.”⁸⁶ But like the actions and accompanying words performed during the ceremonies I described above, the binding also refers to the object’s efficacy. Writing about the “safeguard” function of *pakèt kongo*, Maya Deren notes that their “efficacy depends on the technique of careful wrapping (the idea being to enclose the soul well, so as to keep it from evil).”⁸⁷

The same was true during the colonial era, as indicated not only by the “chanson africaine,” but also by the memoirs of Jacques Courtin, who described the preparation of *makandals* to inform other magistrates of their dangers. The ingredients of the charms—allegedly divulged by Makandal and his co-conspirators during interrogation—included herbs, bones from a cemetery (preferably of baptized children), nails, pounded roots from fig and banana trees, sanctified water, incense, and bread. The ingredients were placed in a cloth and carefully bound together with a cord to form a *pakèt*, followed by a soaking in holy water.⁸⁸ Hein Vanhee points out that what was vital to the charm’s successful

⁸⁵ See Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit*, 125-128; and “From the Isle beneath the Sea,” 110-114. For additional descriptions of *pakèt kongo* preparation and uses, see Maximilien, 186-191; and Métraux, *Voodoo in Haiti*, 310-312. I should point out here that Suzanne Blier notes the parallels between Vodun and Vodou traditions. She cites, for example, *bocio* carvings and non-figural *bo* objects that are in fact prepared and function in much the same way as the Kongo and Haitian examples; see “Vodun: West African Roots of Vodou,” and *African Vodun*. While I do not discount contributions to Vodou objects from the area known today as Benin and Togo, this chapter focuses on *maji*, the underpinnings of which, I maintain, are more significantly Kongo.

⁸⁶ Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit*, 127.

⁸⁷ Deren, 275. Rather than understanding the *pakèt kongo* in their Kongo context, however, Deren uses them to build her case for the Amerindian influences in Vodou.

⁸⁸ Pluchon, 210-211. Human bones remain a crucial component of magical work performed by many *bòkò*. The same is true for the *prenda* of Palo Mayombe, which I will describe later in the chapter. Writing in the

functioning was the act of binding the ingredients together with cloth and cords.⁸⁹ The act of binding, like this and the other examples, is to ensure object efficacy by focusing and harnessing powers to complete the work they were prepared to do.

Binding is a power-bestowing action, and it is also a declaration, especially when performed by a spirit. I saw examples of this in a *peristil* belonging to a Bizango society in Léogâne during the summer of 2003 (Fig. 5.15). There were five *mare pwen* centrally grouped and suspended from the central ceiling beam. My friend Claude Lubin explained that every year this society holds a ceremony for all the spirits during which time they sacrifice a goat, a cow, or a pig.⁹⁰ When a spirit arrives he or she takes one part of the animal, typically the horns or the feet, and turns it into a *pwen* that serves to protect the society and the grounds. In this context the choice of horns is apt: horns represent the mighty *lwa* Bosou, the three-horned bull often evoked by secret societies and whose iconography pervades their sacred spaces (Fig. 3.47).⁹¹ When I asked why

1940s, Maximilien stated that therapeutic *pakèt kongo* contain spices, leaves, metal and are tied during the period of the new moon, 185. Karen McCarthy Brown writes that some of the ingredients include powdered bones, livers of sacrificial animals, spices such as “cinnamon, nutmeg, ginger, pepper,” as well as pounded leaves; see “The Vèvè of Haitian Vodou,” 92, n. 11.

⁸⁹ Vanhee, 259. Vanhee also remarks on the Catholic elements involved in this process. While interesting, these observations lie outside the purview of this chapter.

⁹⁰ Claude Lubin, personal communication with the author, July 3, 2003.

⁹¹ Using animal horns for magical purposes should be considered within their larger Afro-Atlantic context. During the Ten Years War (1868-1878) in Cuba, for example, the Spanish captured an anthropomorphic figure from the insurgents. The *matiabo* figure, so named after the runaway slaves, included a cow horn full of medicines, and the likely predecessor of the divination device known today in Cuba as a *mpaka* horn. For a reproduction of the figure and horn, see Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit*, 124, originally found in “Isle de Cuba—‘Matiabo,’ ídolo cogido á una partida de insurrectos,” *La Ilustración Española y Americana* 29, no. 30 (August 15, 1875): 1. Thompson states that the *mpaka* is the Cuban-Kongo counterpart to the Kongo *nkisi lumweno*, or “mirror medicine,” see *Face of the Gods: Art and Altars of Africa and the African Americas* (New York: The Museum for African Art, 1993), 62. Thompson also points to the Kongo practice that involved mounting human figures onto antelope horns for divining and healing purposes. For further descriptions of *matiabo* figures see Lydia Cabrera, *Porqué: Cuentos Negros de Cuba* (Havana: Ediciones C y R (1948), 248-49, as cited by Thompson. Palmié also addresses these figures in *Wizards and Scientists*, 186 and 336, n. 48.

the *pwen* are tied, Claude explained that tying makes the *pwen* stronger, especially when done by the spirits because they give their own force to the *pwen*. The symbolic strength of Bosou, I suggest, strengthens this act. With each revolution around the object, and with each knot secured, the spirit makes a command or a declaration of what she or he will do. Each tie then becomes a signature, a declaration of want or action, and a directive, underscoring the active and working function of *pwen*.

I would like to point out that the location of these *mare pwen*—suspended from the ceiling—is typical. I have seen many similarly situated, both in person and in published examples. In the private domain of spiritual work, many of them are in plain view. In addition to the Bizango space above, three other secret society spaces that I previously described display *pwen* this way: that belonging to Serge (Fig. 5.3), the example I gave from Gressier, and a suspended bottle in Arcahaie (Fig. 4.48). But not all *mare pwen* are used by secret societies. In the altar room of Claude’s uncle, for instance, he suspended several *pwen* above the doorway. Another one over the altar took the form of a dark sack, just like the one in Figure 4.43. Claude’s uncle said it was for improved vision and likened it to a television, where you can see things clearly,⁹² recalling the mirrors attached to the tree at André’s *lakou*.

Why suspend these objects? One possibility is so that they can swing from side to side, a movement encapsulated by the Vodou term *balanse*. According to Karen McCarthy Brown, in daily life *balanse* means to weigh options, but in the sacred context its meaning is more specific: to heat up, enliven, and raise energy.⁹³ Therefore, the swinging or balancing of ritual objects makes them more effective. Furthermore, this

⁹² Paul Lubin, personal communication with the author, June 26, 2003.

⁹³ Brown, *Mama Lola*, 374.

movement points to an active state of being that implies “a situation of conflict,” as Brown states, for “the side-to-side swinging motion is Vodou’s kinesthetic rendition of conflict.”⁹⁴ Conflict thus raises energy, further enabling a ritual object to complete its task. This ties into the general “Vodou ethos,” which Brown reminds us “is one that accepts conflict, works with it, and ultimately orchestrates it to produce something life enhancing.”⁹⁵

Paradox

Conflict may also give rise to paradox; both characterize the Haitian, Vodou, and *maji* experiences. *Pwen* objects embody this condition, for they are, as I already quoted from Brown’s work, condensations of the contradictory stuff of life. The remainder of this chapter will address some of these paradoxes. I begin by returning to the altar of Claude’s uncle to consider one of its central objects, a *pwen* in the form of a clothed bottle with a spoon bound to its neck.⁹⁶

Having seen only a few published examples of this type of *pwen* and one suspended from Serge’s ceiling rafter (Fig. 4.43), I asked Claude and his uncle for an explanation of the spoon’s presence, but they only confirmed that it was a *pwen*.⁹⁷ In the examples that I have seen, utensils appear in spaces where people work with Petwo spirits or the spirits of other strong nations. Karen McCarthy Brown, for example,

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Brown, “The Moral Force Field of Haitian Vodou,” in *In Face of the Facts: Moral Inquiry in American Scholarship*, ed. Richard Wightman Fox and Robert B. Westbrook (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Washington, D.C.: The Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 1998), 197.

⁹⁶ I was unable to photograph this *pwen*.

⁹⁷ Claude Lubin and Paul Lubin, personal communication with the author, June 26, 2003.

witnessed a *pwen* suspended from a temple ceiling in the form of a red-clothed bottle (red is a Petwo color) with a knife and spoon secured to it. Instead of saluting the Petwo spirits at the *poto mitan*, the *oungan* made his salutation beneath this *pwen*.⁹⁸

In ritual contexts the hotter spirits use utensils; the cooler Rada spirits do not. Serge Larose points to this preference in his description of Marinette, the Zandò spirit: “Once I saw one, eating in a very civilized manner, with a fork, a meal which had been presented to her on a porcelain plate placed on a table, behavior any outsider would immediately attribute to a ‘white’ spirit.”⁹⁹ This “white” way relates to what Brown describes as an insider/outsider paradigm, which places the Rada spirits in the role of insiders, or family, and the Petwo spirits in the role of outsiders, or foreigners.¹⁰⁰ Eating with one’s hands, Brown observes, is reserved for more intimate occasions, such as eating with family, while utensils are reserved for guests, or anyone who must be entertained. The same custom holds true for ceremonies. Human participants and the Rada spirits always use their hands to eat, unlike the Petwo *lwa* who are given knives, forks, and spoons.¹⁰¹ That is why Maximilien’s description of an altar table for a Petwo ceremony, called a *bila*, includes pairs of plates, spoons, and knives.¹⁰²

If considered in Brown’s insider/outsider paradigm, the use of utensils captures memories of Haiti’s haunted past. Utensils lie outside the intimacy of the familial Rada

⁹⁸ Brown, “Serving the Spirits,” 213.

⁹⁹ Larose, “The Meaning of African in Haitian Vodou,” 105.

¹⁰⁰ Brown, “The Vèvè of Haitian Vodou,” 102-103.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 93.

¹⁰² Maximilien, 152. He also notes that the term *bila* referred to stone charms used by insurgents, as I describe above and in Chapter Two.

lwa—their use belongs to the domain of the Petwo *lwa*, outsiders, foreigners, the French colonials, and most significantly, the slave masters.¹⁰³ But how can Petwo or any of the stronger and hotter *lwa* come to be identified with a custom belonging to those very people who participated in and profited from one of the most horrid institutions in human history, particularly when the servitors of these *lwa* are descendants of these exploited and oppressed peoples? To begin unraveling this paradox, I find Brown’s explanation for the identification of Petwo *lwa* with the powers of the slave master pertinent here:

These loa are still the masters themselves. A Petro loa is the slaver whom the Haitian knows all too well and whom he nevertheless respects, because he is powerful, imitates because he knows how to make things work, and above all else manipulates for whatever benefit there is in it for one who finds himself defined by the relationship as inferior. It is an old piece of wisdom that the greatest human insight belongs to the oppressed. The slave is not so thickheaded as to simply hate his master and the Voduisant does not see the Petro gods as pure and unadulterated evil. When a person is down he can afford to be more honest than the one who must jealously preserve his position of superiority. Within the distilled wisdom of religious teaching, the Haitians have taken a more or less honest estimate of their oppressors—French, Spanish, American—and while they sometimes project onto their gods . . . they also have acknowledged the powers these slavers have and do wield. Because they do not always have access to these powers they have not foolishly rejected them as inconsequential; they have instead expanded their cosmos to include them.”¹⁰⁴

This pragmatic perspective, which is broad enough to encompass the connection between utensils, the Petwo *lwa*, and enslavement, taps into a reality replete with complicated notions of memory, power, and morality. The utensils bound to bottles and *pakèts*, objects created for work with the aid of working spirits, recall not only the reality of exploited labor, but also point to something just as horrific: these are tools of consumption, the implications of which I will turn to shortly. Labor and consumption are

¹⁰³ Donald Cosentino also makes this connection in his analysis of Pierrot Barra’s work; see *Vodou Things*, 31.

¹⁰⁴ Brown, “The Vèvè of Haitian Vodou,” 105-106.

two realities of colonial economies in the Americas and are key in understanding how *maji* objects function and the moral uncertainties associated with their production, use, and implications. This perspective necessitates a consideration of will and agency, not only as they relate to people, but also to objects, and the complicated intersection of the two. Therefore, I broaden the scope of this inquiry to include a related example of Haitian *maji*: the Afro-Cuban system of Palo Mayombe and its central object, the *prenda*.

Pwen and prenda in the Kongo-Atlantic world

Maji and Palo Mayombe

In Haiti, the Ginen/*maji* complex includes two separate yet complementary systems of spiritual communion and exchange in one religion—Vodou, and derive from west and west central African traditions respectively. A similar system exists in Cuba (and its diaspora) that involves two distinct religions with separate spatial and temporal ritual activities—La Regla de Ocha (also known as Lucumí or Santería), and Palo Mayombe (also called Palo Monte).¹⁰⁵ Although ideological and ritual comparisons exist between La Regla de Ocha and Ginen, it is the similarities between *maji* and Palo Mayombe that are most pertinent here.¹⁰⁶

Like *maji*, Palo Mayombe derives from western central Africa. While “palo,” is a Spanish word meaning sticks or tree branches, “Mayombe” is a geographic name

¹⁰⁵ David Brown advances this comparison, but for the Haitian side he identifies the Petwo/Rada pantheons rather than Ginen/*maji* as being cognate with Palo/Ocha; see “Garden in the Machine,” 300, n. 69. Brown also states that Lucumí and Palo are separate religions; see *Santería Enthroned*, 116. Similarly, Roberto Nodal, who has written the first comprehensive work on Palo in English, stresses that Palo is a religion; see “‘Strangers in a New Land’: Palo Mayombe, and African-Cuban Religious Tradition in the Diaspora” (PhD diss., University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2001).

¹⁰⁶ For a comparison between Regla de Ocha and Palo Mayombe, see Palmié, *Wizards and Scientists*, 25 and Chapter Two, especially 190-91.

referring to the southwest region of the Republic of Congo, the origin of many of Cuba's enslaved peoples.¹⁰⁷ This shared origin of *maji* and Palo Mayombe resulted not only in similar means of practice, but also in shared characteristics among the spirits of each tradition. As I mentioned earlier, the spirits of *maji* work more quickly than those of Ginen. Invoked by rapid drumbeats, heat, and gunfire, the spirits of *maji* and Palo respond to requests of healing, change of circumstance, spiritual attack, and spiritual defense with strength and efficiency. In both traditions this demanding and commanding practice reflects an ethos of militarism—a preparation for struggle—that was put to full use during times of liberation in Haiti and Cuba, and today continues to instill practical tactics of empowerment and individual agency. Given the strong military experiences that central African peoples brought with them to the Americas, and the battles for liberation that followed, it is no surprise that the structure of Palo Mayombe is like an army, and its principal spiritual agent, the *tata nganga* (priest), a “commander in chief.”¹⁰⁸

Palo Mayombe is a rich religion with a complex cosmology, and like Vodou—particularly *maji*—it is too often misunderstood, simplified, and even vilified.¹⁰⁹ Palo shares much with *maji*, from its origin in central Africa, to its history of resistance, its pragmatism, and its ethos of militarism that shapes ritual structure and activities. More

¹⁰⁷ Nodal, 2.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 175.

¹⁰⁹ To go into any significant depth here is beyond the scope of this chapter. For more on Palo Mayombe I refer the reader to Roberto Nodal's dissertation, which includes a thorough review of the literature related to this religion. Three works Nodal points out are two books by Lydia Cabrera, who in many ways is the scholarly pioneer on this subject: *El Monte* and *Reglas de Congo, Palo Monte, Mayombe*. More recently, Guillermo Calleja-Leal wrote about Palo as it is practiced in Madrid, Spain, see “Estudio de un Sistema Religioso Afrocubano: El Palo Monte-Mayombe” (PhD diss. Universidad Complutense de Madrid, 1989).

specifically, in both Haitian *maji* and Cuban Palo, there are objects—willful objects—that function in similar ways, for similar purposes, and contain condensations of complicated histories that are inextricably intertwined with labor and domination.

Recall that in the form of objects, *pwen* are constructed and personified works invested with spirits and medicines. The spirit, materials, and activation extend the maker's agency (who in Alfred Gell's terminology is the primary agent) to the object (secondary agent), and so it effectively becomes causal and willful, able to benefit someone who has paid for the service.¹¹⁰ Purchasing a *pwen* is a pragmatic solution to a problem. Such a transaction is typically individual and secretive, for it works outside the network of family and community. When put to work for individual gain while compromising the well-being of others, *pwen* exist outside the moral parameters of Ginen.

In Palo Mayombe, the central mediating object between people and the spirit world is a *prenda*, or *nganga*, the sacred cauldron that contains the spirit of a deceased person, a human skull (*kiyumba*), forest sticks (*palos del monte*), animal bones, and other natural substances (Fig. 5.16).¹¹¹ Items taken from nature and deposited in the *prenda* reflect the paramount role of nature in the religion. As Roberto Nodal explains, "Palo Mayombe . . . is nothing less than the encounter of man with the natural world, mediated through the agency of the *nganga*."¹¹² With elements from the land, air, sea, and the deceased, the *tata nganga* or *mama nganga* recreates the natural world, infuses it with spirit, seizes its power, and positions him or herself as a commander so that he or she can

¹¹⁰ See Gell, *Art and Agency*, 21.

¹¹¹ Brown, "Garden in the Machine," 371.

¹¹² Nodal, 141.

heal, solve problems, promote a sense of belonging, and provide a sense of security in an insecure world.¹¹³ These abilities that emerge through this distributed agency also apply to the functioning of *maji* and *pwen*.

Both the *pwen* and the *prenda* are key components of a transatlantic ritual complex of central African origin. The Kongo *nkisi*, in terms of function, production, form, and purpose, is the predecessor of *pwen* and *prenda*, as I already mentioned in the case of *pwen*. This point will become clearer in the following paragraphs. The parallels between *pwen* and *prenda* are significant and specific, and help one to understand how they function, and more importantly, the purposes they serve on the western side of the Atlantic—both historically and in the present day. Both *pwen* and *prenda* are complex objects of mediation between people and the spirit world; both contain ingredients from the natural world; both are consecrated; both are typically bound; both work with the dead; both are made by people rather than by God (appropriation versus procreation¹¹⁴); both may work at the physical and moral periphery; both were used during struggles for independence; and both carry legacies fraught with violence and oppression, and with that the potential for revolt.

An additional characteristic of the Kongo *nkisi* also found with the *pwen* and *prenda* is that the *nkisi* occupies a key position in a spiritual contract. An otherwise mundane object only becomes an *nkisi* when an *nganga* imbues it with spirit-directing

¹¹³ Nodal's dissertation examines how the religion is a means for healing and preserving the cultural identities of Cuban immigrants in their new settings in the United States. Nodal points out that Palo Mayombe "is still considered a mainly men-dominated religion," and whether or not the *mama nganga* has the power to initiate people is not always clear; see page 163 for these comments.

¹¹⁴ Palmié, *Wizards and Scientists*, 172.

medicines to benefit a client who enters into “a relationship of permanent clientage.”¹¹⁵ This is not a system of gift exchange but one of work and payment. The contractual character of the *pwen* and *prenda* reflects a major difference between the way people and spirits interact in Ginen/Ocha, which foregrounds morality and reciprocity, and *maji*/Palo, in which pragmatism may supersede moral concerns and contractual work displaces gift exchange. In the case of *pwen*, Karen Richman explains that a client pays only if it works, and failure to pay will create significant problems. As one *oungan* told her: “When you buy a *pwen*, you don’t settle with it easily. It can—pow!—kill you in a second. The *lwa* Ginen are not like that. S/he can hold you, make you sick. You bought the *pwen*, it’s your master.”¹¹⁶ A similar relationship exists between a person and a *prenda*. A *prenda*—like a *pwen*—is fed or paid after completing a task; both work on commission. Palmié describes this contractual functioning. He states that the *prenda*

concretizes a mystical relationship between the spirit and its human counterpart, a relationship often described as a pact or bargain entered into (*pacto, trata*) and surrounded, not by images of domestic nurturance, reciprocal exchange, and beneficial dependence, but by symbols of wage labor and payment, dominance and subalternity, enslavement and revolt.¹¹⁷

This observation points to the larger context of *prenda* and *pwen* that we need to consider: forced labor in the New World.

Labor and consumption

Here I would like to return to the question I posed earlier: Are these objects purposeful articulations of a horrid and haunting past of bondage? Yes, I believe they

¹¹⁵ Wyatt MacGaffey, “The Personhood of Ritual Objects: Kongo Minksi,” *Etnofoor* 3, no. 1 (1990): 51.

¹¹⁶ Richman, 254.

¹¹⁷ Palmié, *Wizards and Scientists*, 167.

are. But the question and the answer are both incomplete. As I just described, a ritual agent works with these objects outside the nurturing and familial network of the Ginen and Ocha spirits and instead works contractually (usually with the dead) in a manner evoking a master/slave paradigm of forced labor. In Palo, a *tata nganga* gains control over the spiritual essence of a deceased human being through the possession of his or her skull, other bone fragments, or grave dirt and then deposits these materials into the *prenda*.¹¹⁸ Similarly a *maji* practitioner may engage a spirit of the dead into service through possession of their materiality, namely shaved bones or a skull, exemplified by Serge as described in Chapter Four, or by capturing a person's soul in a bottle and binding it up.

In both *maji* and Palo, ritual agents use objects to conscript the souls of dead people into the service of work to benefit the living. Considering that many of these agents and clients are themselves descendents of enslaved peoples, or currently work as wage laborers in a capitalist system, it may be difficult for an outsider to reconcile this with active participation in a system of forced spiritual labor. If we consider this pragmatically, and go back in time to consider the life experiences of slaves in a plantation economy, this ideological paradox begins to make sense.

For most of the Caribbean's colonial history labor was forced¹¹⁹ and "socially institutionalized unfreedom" the norm.¹²⁰ While enslaved peoples fulfilled many functions, their primary purpose was to supply labor, as Sydney Mintz points out, for

¹¹⁸ See Cabrera, *El Monte*, 121; and Palmié, *Wizards and Scientists*, 172.

¹¹⁹ Sidney Mintz, *Caribbean Transformations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974), 45.

¹²⁰ Stephen Palmié, "A Taste for Human Commodities: Experiencing the Atlantic System," in *Slave Cultures and the Cultures of Slavery*, ed. Stephan Palmié (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1995), 41.

“the production of market commodities . . . [and] . . . for the gain of the master and the metropolis.”¹²¹ Certainly slavery was the backbone of colonial Saint-Domingue’s economy. During the four decades before the launch of the insurrections in 1791, Saint-Domingue’s plantations were the leading producers of sugar and coffee in the world economy.¹²² Human toil made this possible.

In colonial Saint-Domingue and throughout slave-based economies in the New World, labor was central in the lives of slaves. As Ira Berlin and Philip Morgan tell us, “After all, slavery was first and foremost an institution of coerced labor. Work necessarily engaged most slaves, most of the time . . . Indeed, labor was so inseparable from life that, for most slaves, the two appeared to be one and the same.”¹²³ This inseparability factored into other aspects of slaves’ lives including culture and religious practices. Labor provided, as Berlin and Morgan state, “the ideological and material basis for their most precious institutions and beliefs.”¹²⁴ With labor at the root of so much of quotidian slave life, it is not hard to see that labor became a means of negotiating one’s own agency.¹²⁵

In the contemporary world economic system, it is not enslaved labor that shapes culture and religious beliefs in Haiti (and other former colonies that still occupy a

¹²¹ Mintz, *Caribbean Transformations*, 45.

¹²² Geggus, “Sugar and Coffee Cultivation in Saint Domingue and the Shaping of the Slave Labor Force,” 73.

¹²³ Berlin and Morgan, 1-2.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹²⁵ Dale Tomich provides an example of this in his article on provision-ground cultivation; see “*Une Petite Guinée: Provision Ground and Plantation in Martinique, 1830-1848*,” in *Cultivation and Culture: Labor and the Shaping of Slave Life in the Americas*, ed. Ira Berlin and Philip D. Morgan (Charlottesville: The University of Press of Virginia, 1993), 221-242.

peripheral position in relation to first-world economies); now the focus is on low-wage and migrant labor. In her ground-breaking dissertation, Karen Richman examines how Ginen incorporates *pwen*, identified as wage labor, by considering how wage labor “pwenifies” Haitian migrant workers, and how their tainted wages are incorporated into the moral realm of Ginen.¹²⁶ In this sense the concept of *pwen* is one of contagion. Drawing from Immanuel Wallerstein’s premise that peripheral regions deploy labor to produce raw market commodities for export, Richman argues that “forces aligned with capital, including coercive peripheral regimes, destabilize and devalue peasant labor enough to encourage migration into low wage labor (which can be located either inside the territory or in another nation).”¹²⁷ Richman points out that wage laborers work outside their own communities because such labor is stigmatized, just like the *pwen*. *Pwen* correlate to “alienable labor power” because both are put to work to make money and both work in secrecy. In this process the migrant wage labor is “pwenified.”¹²⁸ Outside laborers, Richman notes, are “derisively called ‘jobbers’ (*djobè*) and ‘zombies’ (*zonbi*).”¹²⁹ This is a telling appellation given that *zonbi* in Haiti are beings stripped of their soul, identity, personhood, and will, and forced into labor.¹³⁰ It is indeed

¹²⁶ See “They Will Remember Me in the House: The Pwen of Haitian Transnational Migration.” Also see her recent publication, *Migration and Vodou* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2005).

¹²⁷ “They Will Remember Me in the House,” 31-32.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 158 and 250.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 158.

¹³⁰ Palmié takes up William Seabrook’s lurid accounts (dating from the late 1920s) of *zonbi* employed by the Haitian-American Sugar Company (HASCO) and points to his “uncanny ring of unwitting authenticity.” The implications of *zonbi*, or rather laborers stripped of their agency and conscripted into alien wage labor is worth quoting at length here: “The loss of control over one’s selfhood and individual volition characteristic of the notion of the soulless ‘living dead’ at work in the cane fields quite clearly indexes the fundamental alienation of labor power . . . Far from representing a mistaken interpolation of archaic fantasy into the rational script of agroindustrial labor relations, the image of the *zonbi* and the reduction of humans to commodified embodiments of labor power to which it speaks are cut from the cloth

reminiscent of slavery, a reality that seems never to be far from the mind of the migrant worker. Richman explains that they “speak and sing about their experience of being treated by dependents back home as slaves, beasts of burden—or *pwen* . . . [they] perceive that the more they slave to remit, the more dependent and hostile their relatives become.”¹³¹

This experience speaks to labor’s corollary—consumption. During the Caribbean’s colonial history, it was not just the products of labor like sugar, coffee and cotton that were consumed across the Atlantic: slavery consumed human beings. As Palmié observes, “the Caribbean plantation, in practice, *as well as* in economic theory, consumed not only labor, but also the laborer himself.”¹³² This consumption was particularly high on sugar plantations, where the mortality rate was two to three times higher than that of coffee or cotton plantations.¹³³ This is staggering considering that on the eve of the revolution, Saint-Domingue was producing more sugar than all the plantations of the British West Indies combined,¹³⁴ which points to a morbidly high rate of human consumption on the colony.¹³⁵ Consumption, like labor, has factored into cultural formations, religious beliefs, and even folktales and myth. With this as a

of a single social reality long in the making, a reality deeply riven with a sense of moral crisis unleashed by a predatory modernity and experienced, chronicled, and analyzed by its victims in the form of phantasmagoric narratives about how even the bodies of the dead, bereft of their souls, do not escape conscription into capitalist social relations of production;” see *Wizards and Scientists*, 65-66.

¹³¹ Ibid., 376.

¹³² Palmié, “A Taste for Human Commodities,” 45. Emphasis his.

¹³³ Berlin and Morgan, 21.

¹³⁴ Dale Tomich, “Spaces of Slavery, Times of Freedom: Rethinking Caribbean History in World Perspective,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 17, no. 1 (1997): 73.

¹³⁵ As I point out in Chapter Two, fifty percent of newly arrived enslaved people died within the first eight years of their arrival; see Debien, 343-347.

backdrop, the utensils found on *pwen* and Petwo altars convey a painful memory and current reality.

Transformation

Objects in *maji* and Palo must be understood in relation to the realities of slavery, labor, and consumption, as well as the resistant and healing actions that emerge from these realities. The horrors of the past inform the arts and rituals of the present. In Haiti I watched *oungan* Alex Augustin fabricate a Petwo altar that was to be included in an exhibition of Vodou arts in France. Centered on the altar was a *pwen* bound tightly to a small chair, similar to the one in Figure 5.17. Alex told me it was a reminder of slavery, and the chair was an indication of being bound to something.¹³⁶ Similarly, when speaking of *prendas* constructed for the spirit Sarabanda (the Palo counterpart of Ogou), Cuban artist José Bedia said that locks are sometimes included, not only for their association with metal but also, more pointedly, because they serve as a reminder of slavery.¹³⁷

Karen McCarthy Brown tells us that in Vodou songs the words *esklav* or *esklvaj* (slave or slavery) never appear, and yet objects carry these references visually.¹³⁸ While these words may be absent from the Vodou song corpus, their implications are prevalent. On this point Yuen-Ming David Yih states that “references to bondage, conflict, mistrust, betrayal, persecution, oppression, and the war are frequent . . . the image of bondage, a

¹³⁶ Alex Augustin, personal communication with the author, June 23, 2003.

¹³⁷ Judith Bettelheim, “Palo Monte Mayombe and Its Influence on Cuban Contemporary Art,” *African Arts* 34 (Summer 2001): 39-40.

¹³⁸ “Telling a Life through Haitian Vodou, 32.

natural symbol of slavery, figures prominently in the songs.”¹³⁹ Likewise, *maji* objects embody the haunting image of bondage, which serves as a reminder of a painful past and a difficult present.

These objects, along with the Cuban *prenda*, are practical strategies of resistance and empowerment, and as such they form another link with their Kongo predecessors. As Wyatt MacGaffey informs us, *minkisi* held a vital role in African resistance during the “scramble for Africa,” (between 1885 and 1921) and consequently, missionaries and military commanders destroyed them.¹⁴⁰ On the American side of the Atlantic such objects have also played an important part in resistance against colonial masters and others whose aim is to oppress or disenfranchise. And it must also be acknowledged that in what can be a hostile world full of trying legacies and realities, *pwen* are sometimes used neighbor against neighbor.¹⁴¹ They are, as they have been, objects used for the preparation of struggle.

Minkisi, *prenda*, and *pwen* objects also work to heal.¹⁴² Before runaway slave Esteban Montejo described how the slaves would use the powers of the *prenda* against their masters, he recalled that people “took offerings to the pot and asked for health for themselves and their brothers and peace among themselves.”¹⁴³ Similarly, an outdoor

¹³⁹ Yih, 473.

¹⁴⁰ MacGaffey, “The Eyes of Understanding,” 33.

¹⁴¹ Based on his study of Vodou songs, Yih states that there is an adversarial tenor in the corpus, one marked by references to battle, resistance, and persecution. Accusations are not limited to oppressors, but are also leveled against neighbors and friends; see “Music and Dance of Haitian Vodou,” 474-489.

¹⁴² See, for example, Wyatt MacGaffey, *Art and Healing of the BaKongo Commented by Themselves* (Stockholm: Folkens Museet; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991). In the case of Palo Mayombe and *prenda*, Roberto Nodal also makes this point in his dissertation.

¹⁴³ Migel Barnet, ed., *The Autobiography of a Runaway Slave*, trans. Jocasta Innes (1968; rpt., New York: Vintage Books, 1973), 26.

space at André's *lakou* is a locus of magic and healing. Inverted *pwen* in the form of bound bottles hang above the healing site from the branches of a large tree, the *repozwa* of Lenba escorts, Kongo spirits of healing (Fig. 5.18). Here the leaves of the forest and *maji* come together for healing.

Maji is transformation. *Maji* is also strong Petwo, which as *oungan* Max Beauvoir puts it, “comes from a mindset. If you find strength in something—keep it, grab it, use it.”¹⁴⁴ Strength imbues these objects—they help people to redirect their lives and determine their own futures. As visual distillations of painful realities—both past and present—they are powerful reminders that build strength to prepare for, endure, and overcome life's struggles. They function much like the image of Makandal on André's Makaya *ounfó*, (Fig. 3.45). The chain is a reminder of what had to be overcome, of what had to change, to seize freedom—it is, like the objects, an example of transformation for liberation.

¹⁴⁴ Max Beauvoir, seminar lecture at Le Péristyle de Mariani, July 17, 2003.

Conclusion

Several years ago I heard Haitian historian Leslie Balan-Gaubert refer to Vodou as a “language of remembrance.”⁶³⁹ Since that time my understanding of Vodou has deepened enough to realize that there are layers upon layers of knowledge that are for now beyond my reach and ability to understand. What has emerged during these years and during the writing of this dissertation, however, is the realization that remembrance—of colonial excesses and abuses, of war, of liberation, of the people who shaped Haitian history, of injustices, of triumphs, of communities, of the ancestors, of lived experiences—is not only reflected in, but *constitutes* Vodou and its visual expressions. As I emphasized at the beginning of this dissertation, Vodou captures the experiences of the oppressed and their responses to oppression—what the gaps and the silences produced in the official record too often conceal. Vodou does not remember through archives and documents, and so these remembrances cannot be burned or otherwise destroyed. Instead, remembrances thrive in Vodou songs, stories, sacred spaces, and arts—in all that its practitioners create and embody—and in doing so they establish a resilient parallel experience.

By focusing on remembrance, I have provided a larger context in which to interpret Vodou visual expressions, one that includes a historical understanding of key events and people of Haiti’s revolutionary era. With this understanding, the socioeconomic, political, and sacred realities that shape Vodou practice and visibility today become clearer and thereby aid in the interpretation of images and objects. But more importantly, this historically-grounded context—which acknowledges the unequal

⁶³⁹ Leslie Balan-Gaubert, seminar lecture at Le Péristyle de Mariani, July 15, 2001.

production of history—points to a “Vodou history” that practitioners actively and decisively capture in songs, dances, and myths as well. Accordingly, this dissertation conveys the visual articulations of practitioner agency and understandings of their own past that exist in plain sight on and within *ounfò* walls.

In considering Haitian and Vodou history, I have demonstrated why and how the idea of liberation and an ethos of militancy assume such a strong position in the shaping of Vodou visual expressions. While Vodou has many of its origins in west and central Africa, it nevertheless took significant form during an era of forced labor, colonial excess and exploitations, war, and the founding of the first Black republic in the western hemisphere—one that seized its own independence. Consequently, Vodou is a religion of intention, conviction, and transformation. But Vodou is also a religion composed of a complex cosmology and accessible spirit world. The *lwa* and ancestors enable the transmission of *konesans* and remembrance, and provide a framework to filter and understand lived experience. And it is through sacred spaces and arts that practitioners actively engage remembrance to empower themselves in the present.

The *ounfò*, the center of Vodou practice, enables purposeful remembrance beginning with Lavalokan, understood among practitioners as a symbol of resistance and a place where one can create change in their lives. The *ounfò* structure facilitates communion with the spirit world, and the images on their walls emphasize cosmological principles, articulate displays of power, and remember revolutionary heroes—both human and divine. The instructive images on *ounfò* walls and the sacred activities held within them unite and empower communities as they remember, heal, and prepare for the future.

The most concentrated point of orchestrated energy within the *ounfò* is at the altar, and consequently, those *manbo* or *oungan* who perform their healing work and deploy power there must possess the requisite *konesans* to master the flow and transformation of energy. While they follow an aesthetic of power, which includes organization, action, assemblage, and efficacy, they ultimately create their altars guided by their own aesthetic sensibilities and cosmological interpretations. This individual artistic agency is what expands Vodou iconology and creates extraordinary personal and social memoryscapes, which not only heal and harmonize, but nourish one's relationship with the *lwa*.

Agency opens the way to self-determinism, the vital principle of *maji* understanding and functioning. *Pwen*, the objects produced in the context of *maji*, require a larger historical and socioeconomic context to understand them, particularly when they employ strategies of binding and involve conscripted spirit labor. Karen McCarthy Brown reminds us that, "Haitian traditional religion is the repository for wisdom accumulated by a people who have lived through slavery, hunger, disease, repression, corruption, and violence—all in excess."⁶⁴⁰ *Maji* responds to this reality, for it provides solutions to problems. Ultimately, *maji* is change and transformation. And the *pwen* object, like its Kongo predecessor the *nkisi*, and its Cuban counterpart the *prenda*, is not only an instrument of self-determinism, but also one of healing.

The heart—or the *hun*—of Vodou, is healing, and the need is great. This is not hard to imagine when so many of its practitioners carry within them remembrances of deadly exploitation and war, and face tremendous adversities each day. But Vodou also heals through spirit possession, in which the lived experiences of the past are embodied

⁶⁴⁰ Brown, *Mama Lola*, 98.

in the present.⁶⁴¹ During these times the ancestors and *lwa* provide guidance, strength, and healing.

In July 2001, I filmed a Petwo ceremony at Le Péristyle de Mariani. The next morning I learned the spirit who came was Bakoulou Baka, a powerful *lwa* of Kongo origin. The only reference I found of him in the literature was by Alfred Métraux. He described Bakoulou Baka as a “terrible spirit” who drags his chain behind him and who no one dares invoke. Because he so feared, people take his offerings to him in the forest where he lives.⁶⁴² This description signals a painful legacy of fear, peripheral existence, and enslavement, but that is not what I witnessed that night. Bakoulou Baka, I learned, represents the “good ancestors,” and is known for his mastery of fire—of energy. He is also believed to be invincible to bullets, for he can remove them from his body and watch them turn to dust. It is he and other courageous *lwa* who practitioners today credit for victory in the war of independence.⁶⁴³

Bakoulou Baka demonstrated this strength and mastery of fire. When he came into the body of a male participant, the *manbo* around him immediately took off his shirt, tied a black scarf around his waist, then placed a red scarf diagonally over his chest followed by a black one, resembling a pair of bandoliers. Next he was given a pair of smoldering batons and he started to single out participants and observers. He greeted them in a most militant manner, his movements mirrored by the participants. The greeting began by stepping into each other’s space three times with extended elbows—right, left, then right. On the final touch they fell to their knees and locked elbows, each

⁶⁴¹ For a fascinating study of this, see Paul Stoller, *Embodying Colonial Memories: Spirit Possession, Power, and the Hauka in West Africa* (New York and London: Routledge, 1995).

⁶⁴² Métraux, *Voodoo in Haiti*, 118.

holding the other firmly. Then Bakoulou Bakou instructed them to reach out their upturned hands so that he could pass the burning baton over their palms three times. This is a *gad*, given for healing and protection. After he instructed the officiant to give them a blessing of rum, he gave each a strong embrace.

Finally, Bakoulou Bakou approached a male onlooker and engaged him in an intense and almost combative salutation. After the man received his blessing, he got up, turned around, and began to walk away. But Bakoulou Baka reached out to him, took his hand, motioned for him to kneel, and offered one of his batons. The man got down on his knees, eye to eye with the spirit. Then Bakoulou Baka gave him his second baton, reached out his arms, and embraced the man with all his strength. The man received and returned the gesture. With locked arms, their foreheads fell onto one another's shoulders to complete a full and poignant embrace. Just moments before, this spirit who displayed such militancy and strength was offering tenderness and love. Bakoulou Baka then collapsed into the man's receptive arms, and he held the departed spirit ever so softly until others helped to carry him gently away.

Passing moments gave way to quiet stirrings until a drumbeat broke the long silence. I recognized the rhythm from the *kata* drum—it was for the Gedes. The Gede *fanmi*—those brazen and vigorous spirits of the dead and remembered, so full of humor, fun, levity, laughter, and assurance of future life—arrived for the community to relax and rejoice. The drums grew louder and the dancing and voices grew stronger, all with renewed and uplifted energy. Nothing can silence the Gedes. And of all this, too, is Vodou.

⁶⁴³ Max Beauvoir, seminar lecture at Le Péristyle de Mariani, July 18, 2001.

Figures

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Figure 1.1 Political Map of Haiti, 1999. Source: Perry-Castañeda Library Map Collection, University of Texas at Austin, http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/americas/haiti_pol199.jpg. University of Texas Libraries. Modified by the author to locate additional towns.



Figure 3.1 Dahomean *peristil*. Gressier, Haiti, June 2002.



Figure 3.2 *Lakou*. Luly, Haiti, June 2003.



Figure 3.3 Cross for Bawon Samedi. Lully, Haiti, June 2003.



Figure 3.4 Ogou's Iron Bar. Archaie, Haiti, June 2003.

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Figure 3.5 Diagram of the *ounfò*—sacred architecture and self. Source: Martha Maria Perez, “Reciprocity and a Sense of Place.”



Figure 3.6 Bizango *peristil*. Léogâne, Haiti, July 2003.



Figure 3.7 Rada *ounfò*. Léogâne, Haiti, July 2003.



Figure 3.8 *Poto mitan*. Gressier, Haiti, June 2002.



Figure 3.9 *Poto mitan*. Mariani, Haiti, July 2001.



Figure 3.10 *Poto mitan*. Carrefour, Haiti, June 2003.



Figure 3.11 Drum baptism. Lakou Djode, Katye Morin, Haiti, June 2001.



Figure 3.12 *Poto mitan*. Mariani, Haiti, July 2001.

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Figure 3.13 *Poto mitan*. La Petite Rivière, Haiti. Source: Phyllis Galembo, *Vodou Visions and Voices of Haiti*.



Figure 3.14 *Poto mitan*. Bel-Air, Port-au-Prince, Haiti, June 2003.

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Figure 3.15 *Vèvè* for Atibon Legba. Source: Robert Farris Thompson, "From the Isle beneath the Sea.



Figure 3.16 *Peristil*. Mariani, Haiti, July 2001.

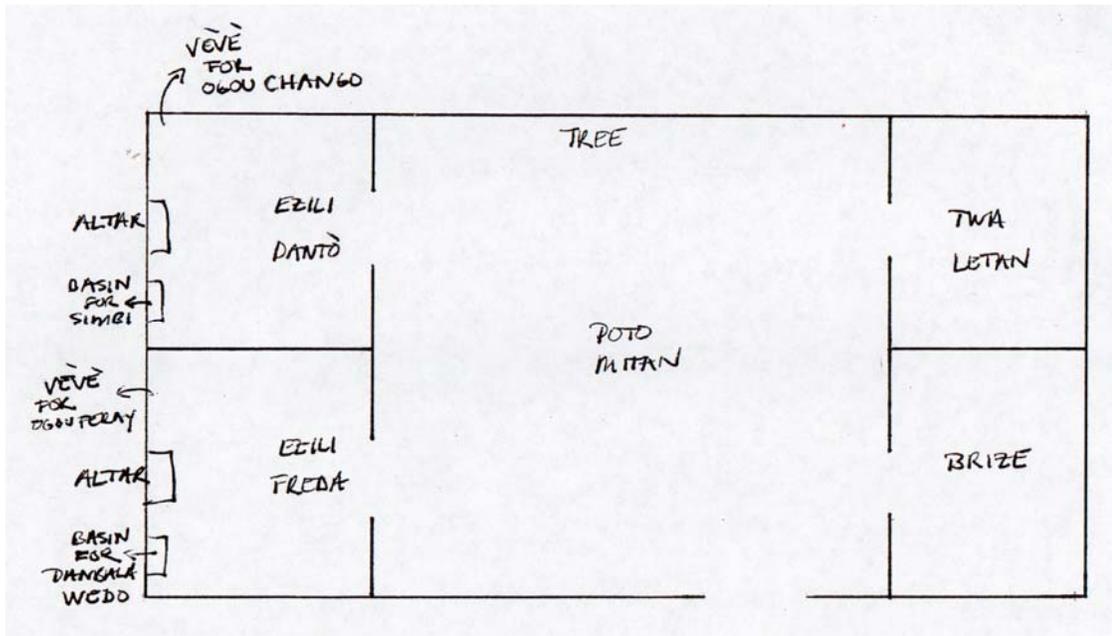


Figure 3.17 Diagram of André Villaire's Dahomean *oumfò*.



Figure 3.18 Flag for Ogou Feray above altar for Ezili Freda.
Gressier, Haiti, June 2002.



Figure 3.19 *Vèvè* design for Danbala. Fort Mercredi, Port-au-Prince, June 2002.



Figure 3.20 *Poto mitan* with Danbala. Fort Mercedi, June 2002.

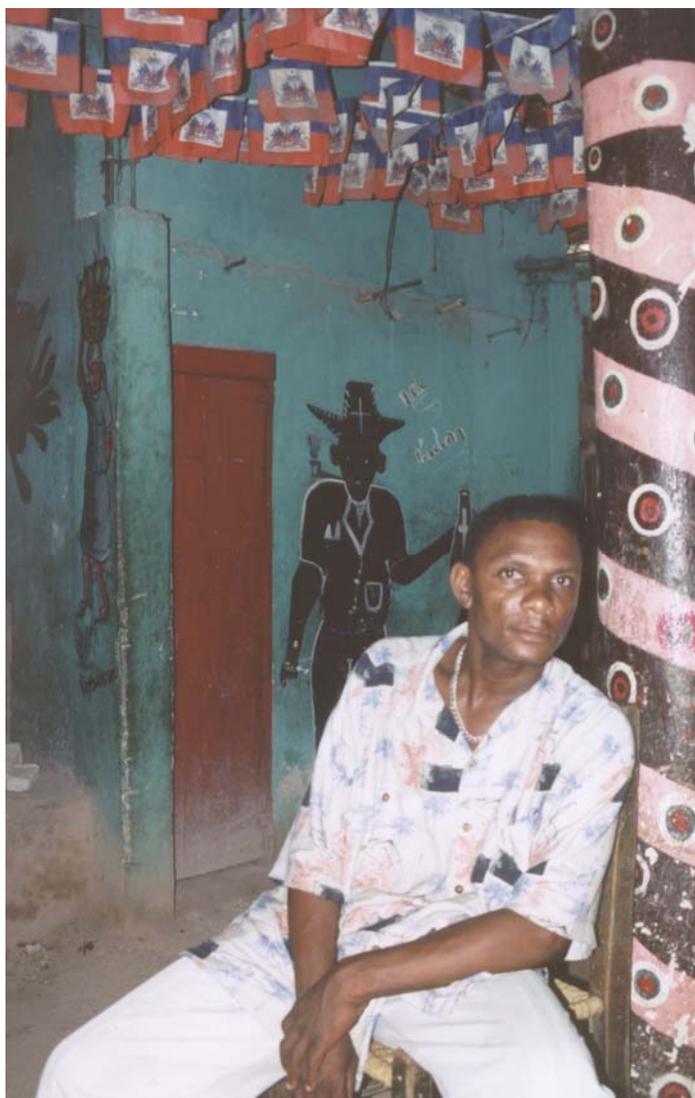


Figure 3.21 *Oungan* Jean-Pierre Fleurival sitting next to a *poteau mitan* with Danbala. Fort Mercredi, June 2002.



Figure 3.22 *Poto mitan* with Danbala/Saint Patrick. Léogâne, Haiti, June 2003.

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Figure 3.23 Chromolithograph of Saint James the Greater.



Figure 3.24 Ogou Feray. Fort Mercredi, Port-au-Prince, Haiti, June 2002.



Figure 3.25 Ogou Feray. Léogâne, Haiti, June 2003.



Figure 3.26 Ogou Feray. Merger, Haiti, June 2003.



Figure 3.27 Saint George/Ogou Balendjo. Léogâne, Haiti, June 2003.



Figure 3.28 Saint George/Ogou Balendjo. Luly, Haiti, June 2003.

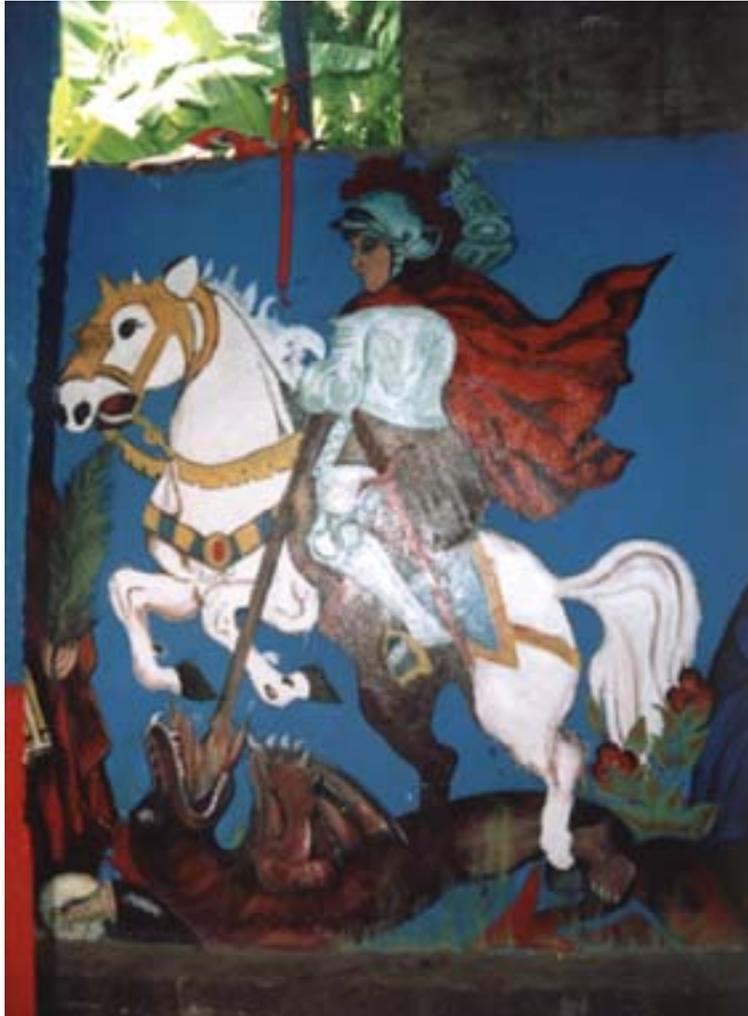


Figure 3.29 Saint George/Ogou Balendjo. Léogâne, Haiti, June 2003.

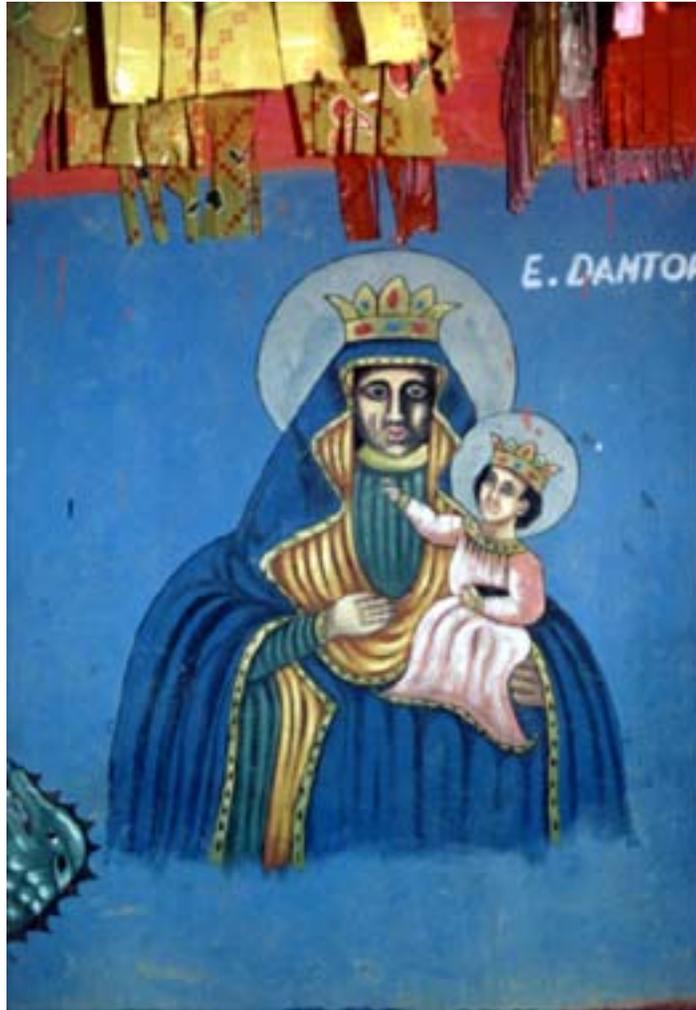


Figure 3.30 Ezili Dantò. Luly, Haiti, June 2003.



Figure 3.31 Saint Michael/Ogou Badagri. Merger, Haiti, June 2003.



Figure 3.32 Bicentennial celebration in front of the National Palace. Port-au-Prince, Haiti, January 2004.



Figure 3.33 *Laplas* and *kòdrapo*. Mariani, Haiti, July 2001.



Figure 3.34 Haiti's coat of arms painted on a Bizango *ounfò* wall. Merger, Haiti, June 2003.



Figure 3.35 Public mural with liberty cap. Port-au-Prince, Haiti, June 2002.



Figure 3.36 *Vèvè* design for Ayizan. Fort Mercredi, Port-au-Prince, Haiti, June 2002.



Figure 3.37 Tearing palm fronds during a *kanzo* ceremony. Mariani, Haiti, June 2002.

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Figure 3.38 *Asotò drum*, 19th century. Musée du Pantheon National, Port-au-Prince, Haiti. Source: Robert Farris Thompson, "Isle beneath the Sea."



Figure 3.39 Mural of Dessalines and Grann Guitonn. Merotte, Arcahaie, Haiti, June 2003.



Figure 3.40 Reconstructed *oufò* of Grann Guitonn. Merotte, Arcahaie, Haiti, June 2003.



Figure 3.41 Mural detail of Dessalines. Merotte, Arcahaie, Haiti, June 2003.



Figure 3.42 Mural detail of Grann Guitonn. Merotte, Arcahaie, Haiti, June 2003.



Figure 3.43 Monument commemorating the site of Jean-Jacques Dessalines's assassination at Pont-Rouge. Northern Port-au-Prince, June 2003.

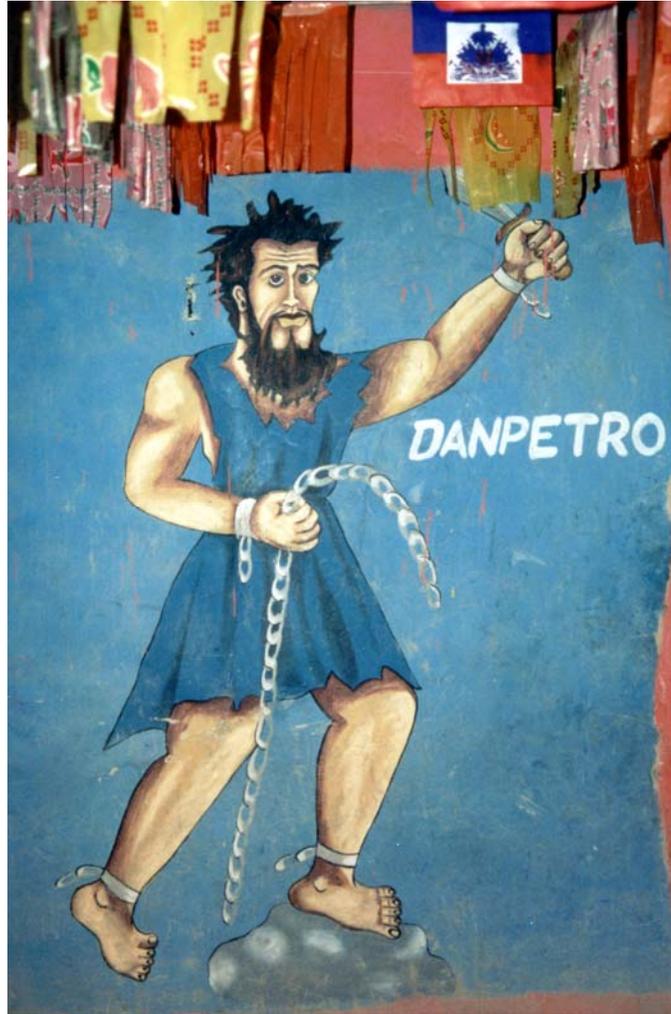


Figure 3.44 Danpetro (Don Pedro). Luly, Haiti, June 2003.



Figure 3.45 Makandal and Bosou. Gressier, Haiti, June 2002.



Figure 3.46 *Inconnu Marron*, by Albert Mangones, 1968.
Port-au-Prince, Haiti, July 2002.



Figure 3.47 Bosou. Léogâne, Haiti, June 2003.

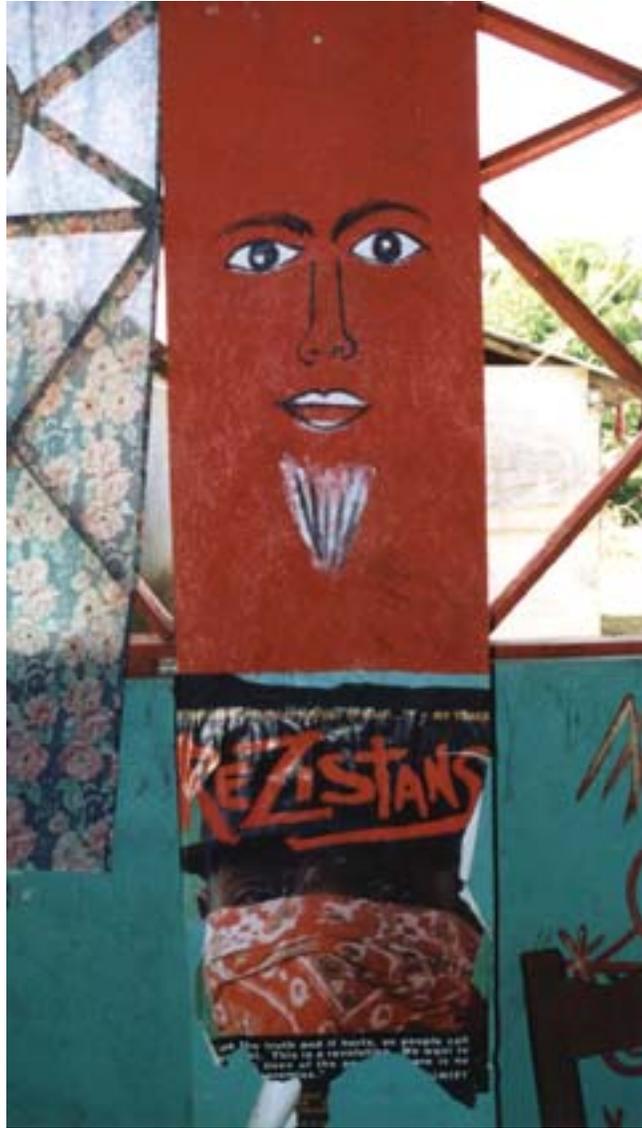


Figure 3.48 “Rezistans,” documentary film poster in André Villaire’s *Makaya oumfò*. Gressier, Haiti, June 2002.



Figure 4.1 Altar for the *Marassa*. Katye Morin, June 2002.

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Figure 4.2 *Bocio* figure. Source: Blier, *African Vodun*.



Figure 4.3 Chromolithographs. Petionville, June 2002.

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Figure 4.4 Chromolithograph of St. Elias as Ogou Kriminel.
Source: Cosentino, "It's all for you Sen Jak!"



Figure 4.5 Object and drum baptism. Mariani, July 2001.



Figure 4.6 Alex Augstin's Rada altar. Washington, D.C., June 2000



Figure 4.7 Detail with stones. Washington, D.C., June 2000.



Figure 4.8 Altar with stones. Jacmel, August 2003.



Figure 4.9 Alex Augustin's altar for Danbala. Washington, D.C., June 2000.



Figure 4.10 *Boutèy* for Ezili Freda

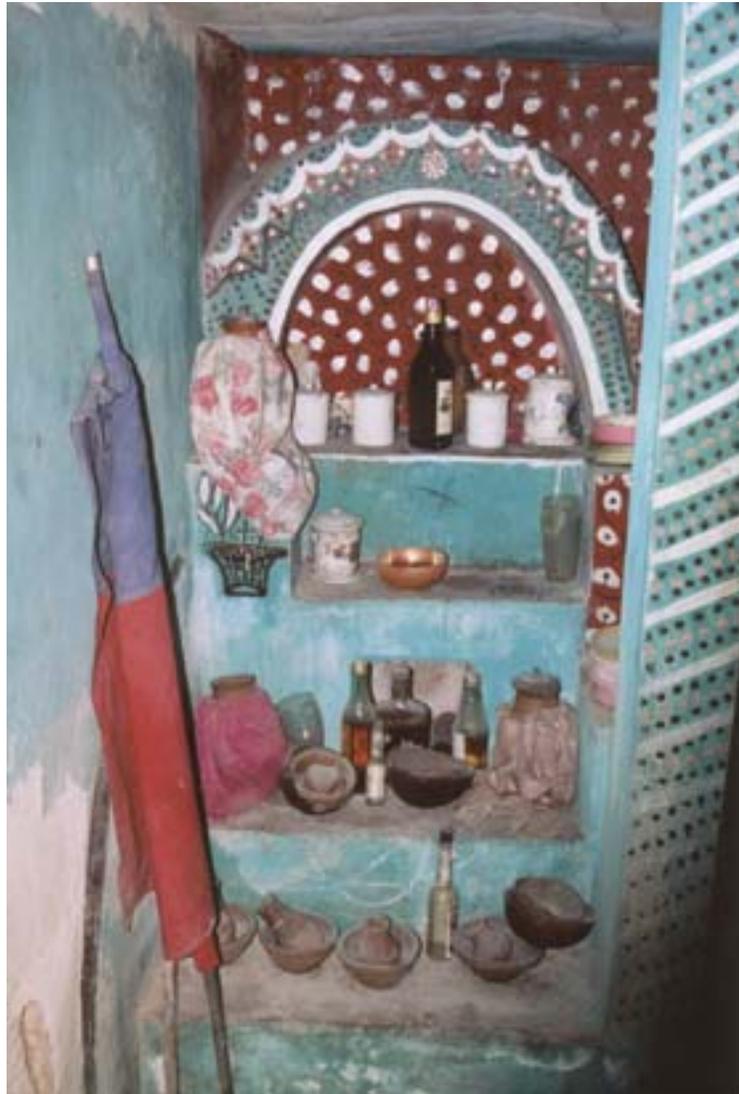


Figure 4.11 Jean-Pierre Fleurival's Rada altar with *govi* and *po tèt*.
Fort Mercredi, Port-au-Prince, June 2002.

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Figure 4.12 Altar, Plaisance, c. 1937. Source: National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution.



Figure 4.13 Detail of André Villaire's altar for Ezili Freda. Gressier, June 2002.

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Figure 4.14 Chromolithograph of Mater Dolorosa.



Figure 4.15 *Ounfò* painting of Ezili Freda. Léogâne, July 2003.



Figure 4.16 *Pakèt kongo*.



Figure 4.17 Jean-Pierre's Fleurival's altar for Ezili Dantò. Fort Mercredi, Port-au-Prince, June 2002.



Figure 4.18 *Ounfò* painting of Ezili Dantò. Léogâne, July 2003.



Figure 4.19 Mural of Ogou Feray, Azaka, and Ezili Dantò.
Carrefour, June 2003.

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Figure 4.20 Chromolithograph of Mater Salvatoris



Figure 4.21 *Ounfò* painting of Ezili Dantò (right) next to Ogou Balendjo (middle). Léogâne, July 2003.



Figure 4.22 Yvon Ducet's altar for Ezili Mapyang. Port-au-Prince, January 2004.

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Figure 4.23 Chromolithograph of Ezili Mapyang

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Figure 4.24 Our Lady of Czestochowa in her "Ruby Robe." Source: Pasierb and Samek.



Figure 4.25 Icon of Notre Dame du Perpétuel Secours, Port-au-Prince, June 2002.



Figure 4.26 Marc Fleurival's altar for Lisifè. Merger, July 2003.



Figure 4.27 *Pwen*. Merger, July 2003.



Figure 4.28 Chromolithograph under a *chodyè* for mystical work. Gressier, June 2002.



Figure 4.29 Marc Fleurival's altar for Bawon Kriminel. Merger, July 2003.



Figure 4.30 Detail with cross. Merger, July 2003.



Figure 4.31 Detail with Ezili Dantò. Merger, July 2003.



Figure 4.32 Detail with composite cement figure of Bosou and Danbala Laflanbo. Merger, July 2003.



Figure 4.33 Vèvè for Danbala Laflanbo. Gressier, June 2002.



Figure 4.34 Detail with Kouzen Zaka. Merger, July 2003.



Figure 4.35 Detail with chef figure. Merger, July 2003.



Figure 4.36 Marc Fleurival's altar for Ezili Dantò. Merger, July 2003.



Figure 4.37 Serge Azor's Sanpwèl altar. Port-au-Prince, July 2003.



Figure 4.38 Picture of Serge Azor in Masonic garb affixed to the *poto mitan*. Port-au-Prince, July 2003.



Figure 4.39 Cross and bones and compass. Port-au-Prince, July 2003.



Figure 4.40 Large-scale cross with *fwèt kach*. Port-au-Prince, July 2003.



Figure 4.41 Secret Society altar with cross. Arcahaie, June 2003.



Figure 4.42 Cross with offerings, Léogâne, July 2003.



Figure 4.43 Suspended *pwen*. Port-au-Prince, July 2003.



Figure 4.44 Tombs. Port-au-Prince, August 2003.

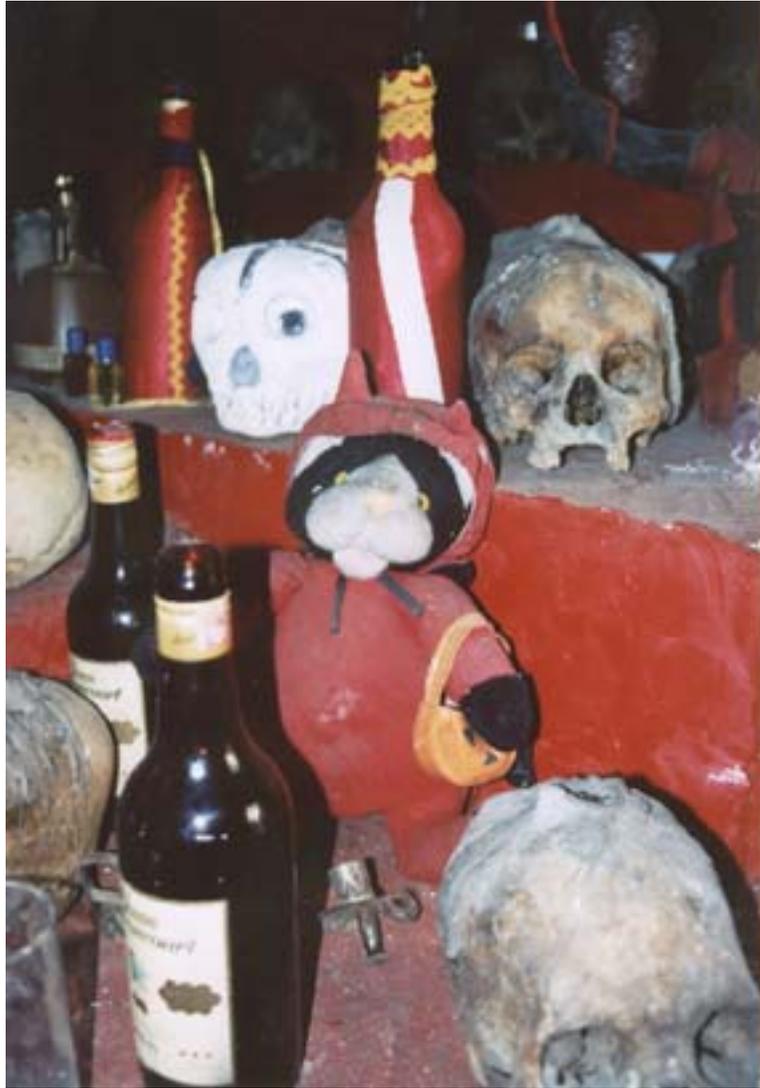


Figure 4.45 Detail with Bosou figure. Port-au-Prince, July 2003.



Figure 4.46 *Ounfò* painting. Léogâne, July 2003.



Figure 4.47 Coffins. Port-au-Prince, July 2003.



Figure 4.48 *Madoulè* and *pwen*. Archaie, June 2003.



Figure 4.49 Jean-Pierre Fleurival's altar for Gede. Fort Mercredi, June 2002



Figure 4.50 Cross tomb painting for Gede. Fort Merced, June 2002.



Figure 4.51 Altar for Papa Pierre and Osan-y. Limonade, June 2002.



Figure 4.52 Detail with slave shackle. Limonade, June 2002.



Figure 5.1 Serge Azor's *djevo* interior with cross. Port-au-Prince, July 2003.



Figure 5.2 Suspended bottle with animal ribs. Port-au-Prince, July 2003.



Figure 5.3 Suspended *govi* lashed to chair. Port-au-Prince, July 2003.



Figure 5.4 Suspended image of St. Expedite. Port-au-Prince, July 2003.



Figure 5.5 Painted *pwen* on *ounfò* exterior. Luly, June 2003.



Figure 5.6 Metal staff. Gressier, June 2002.



Figure 5.7 Mirrored tree. Gressier, June 2002.



Figure 5.8 Suspended *madoulè*. Gressier, June 2002.

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Figure 5.9 Bottle. Source: McAlister, "A Sorcerer's Bottle."

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Figure 5.10 Mirrored *nkisi nkondi*. Source: MacGaffey,
"The Eyes of Understanding."



Figure 5.11 *Pakèt kongo* by Pierrot Barra.

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Figure 5.12 *Nkisi mandombe*. Source: MacGaffey, "The Eyes of Understanding."



Figure 5.13 Chair lashed to tree. Gressier, June 2002.



Figure 5.14 Throne for Danbala. Mariani, July 2001.



Figure 5.15 Bound horns. Léogâne, July 2003

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Figure 5.16 *Prenda*. Source: Cabrera, *El Monte*.

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Figure 5.17 *Pwen* bound to a chair. Source: Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou.



Figure 5.18 *Repozwa* for Lenba spirits. Gressier, June 2002.

Glossary

Ayida Wèdo	creator <i>lwa</i> , wife of Danbala
<i>arèt</i>	protective charm
<i>asire</i>	to assure, to fix
<i>ason</i>	sacred rattle of <i>oungan</i> and <i>manbo</i>
Ayizan	Rada spirit of the market and <i>ounfò</i>
Azaka	agriculture spirit
<i>badji</i>	sanctuary room in an <i>ounfò</i> ; see <i>djevo</i>
<i>balèn</i>	candle
<i>balanse</i>	to balance; to heat up and raise energy
Bawon Samedi	head of the Gede family
<i>bilongo</i>	Kongo medicines, usually set in or affixed to <i>nkisi</i>
Bizango	secret society; see Sanpwèl
<i>bòkò</i>	spiritual entrepreneur who “works with both hands”
Bondye	God
Bosou	strong <i>lwa</i> rendered as a horned bull
<i>boutèy</i>	bottle
<i>chodyè</i>	vessel used for cooking or burning oil
Danbala	Rada serpent <i>lwa</i> associated with the rainbow and water
<i>dekorátè</i>	one who paints <i>ounfò</i>
<i>djevo</i>	sanctuary room in an <i>ounfò</i> ; see <i>badji</i>
<i>drapo</i>	sacred flag, typically sequined
<i>dwòg</i>	protective charm that may be worn or ingested
Ezili Freda	female <i>lwa</i> of love
Ezili Dantò	strong Petwo mother and warrior
<i>fanmi</i>	family
<i>fèy</i>	leaf or herb
<i>gad</i>	protective charm or act
Gede	trickster family of <i>lwa</i> associated with death and procreation
Ginen	Africa; home of the <i>lwa</i> and ancestors below the earth
Gran Bwa	healing divinity of the forest and leaves
<i>govi</i>	ceramic vessel to house a spirit
<i>kleren</i>	raw rum
<i>kò-drapo</i>	flag bearer
<i>kodon</i>	braided prayer cord
<i>konesans</i>	deep spiritual knowledge
Kalfou	the Petwo Legba, guardian of the crossroads
Kouzen	spirit also known as Azaka
<i>lakou</i>	extended family compound
<i>lanbi</i>	conch shell
<i>langaj</i>	sacred and secret language of Vodou
<i>laplas</i>	chief assistant to an officiating <i>manbo</i> or <i>oungan</i>
Lasyrenn	female aquatic divinity
Lavilokan	Vodou’s original <i>ounfò</i> ; meeting place for the <i>lwa</i>
Legba	Guardian of the crossroads, referred to as “Papa Legba”

<i>lwa</i>	term for a spirit in Vodou
<i>madoulè</i>	sacred coffin of secret societies
<i>maji</i>	magic
<i>makandal</i>	talisman or poison, likely named after François Makandal
<i>makout</i>	straw satchel, often worn by Azaka
<i>manbo</i>	priestess, woman who possesses the <i>ason</i>
Marassa	sacred twins and child spirits
<i>mare</i>	to bind, to tie, to secure
<i>mèt</i>	master; owner
<i>mèt tet</i>	spirit most closely linked to an individual
<i>minkisi</i>	(<i>nkisi</i> , singular) spiritually-charged Kongo objects
<i>nanchon</i>	nation, family of spirits
<i>nanm</i>	soul
<i>nfumbi</i>	spirit of a deceased person
<i>nganga</i>	Kongo ritual expert; also known as a <i>prenda</i> in Palo Mayombe
Ogou	family of military <i>lwa</i> that includes Ogou Feray, Ogou Balendjo, Ogou Chango, and Ogou Badagri
<i>ounfò</i>	Vodou temple
<i>oungan</i>	priest, man who possesses the <i>ason</i>
<i>ounjenikon</i>	chorus leader
<i>ounsi</i>	initiate
<i>pakèt kongo</i>	spirit-activated bound packet containing protective substances
Palo Mayombe	Cuban religion of Kongo-Angolan origin; also called Palo Monte
Petwo	one of the pantheons in Vodou of “hot” spirits, many of Kongo origin
<i>peristil</i>	public portion of an <i>ounfò</i> where dances are held
<i>pe</i>	altar
<i>pilon</i>	mortar
<i>po tèt</i>	ceramic vessel that holds the spiritual essence of an initiate
<i>poto mitan</i>	center post through which the <i>lwa</i> enter the <i>peristil</i>
<i>prenda</i>	vessel used in Palo Mayombe containing natural materials and a spirit; also called an <i>nganga</i>
<i>pwen</i>	concentrated point of energy in the form of an object, word, or song
<i>pwen achte</i>	purchased power points
<i>ranmase</i>	to gather; refers to a ritual process that transform places <i>pwen</i> into Ginen
<i>range</i>	to arrange; to fix,
Rada	one of the pantheons in Vodou of “cool” spirits whose origin is Ginen
Rara	Lenten festival performed in the streets by bands associated with Vodou societies
<i>regleman</i>	protocol, ordering system
<i>repozwa</i>	repository for a spirit, generally a tree
Sanpwèl	secret society, means “without skin”; see Bizango
<i>seremoni promès</i>	promise ceremony, performed for penance and forgiveness
Simbi	<i>lwa</i> of Kongo origin associated with water and healing
Simityè	spirit of the cemetery

<i>sosyete</i>	society
<i>tafia</i>	raw rum
<i>taptap</i>	elaborately painted truck used for public transportation
<i>tata nganga</i>	priest in the Palo Mayombe religion
Ti Jan	Petwo spirit
<i>Tonton Macoute</i>	Duvalier militia; bogeyman
<i>travay</i>	work
<i>travay maji</i>	magical work
<i>wanga</i>	charm
Vodouizan	Vodou practitioner
<i>zonbi</i>	zombie; when after death a person's soul and body are separated so one part may be put to work

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