Vodou in Haitian Life and Culture

Invisible Powers

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and
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Invisible Powers: An Introduction

Invisible powers can be made visible. They can be made visible by action, acts by humans on the great stage of life. In Vodou, the *sevitè*, women and men who serve the spirits by literally embodying the divine *Lwa, les invisibles*, manifest themselves during *sèvis*, the ceremonies and rituals in which trances occur. During the *sèvis*, the invisible and visible interact with surprising intimacy. Invisible powers can also be illuminated through research. This volume presents the work of prominent scholars in the field of Vodou studies who offer their expansive views of a religious system which has generally been either unseen or misperceived.

For most of the past five centuries, Western civilization has deliberately demonized peoples of African descent as an easy justification for their enslavement. Africans were considered to be less than human. Their physical features were declared repulsively ugly. Their cultures, denigrated. Their religions? Nonexistent, or a compendium of heteroclite, ill-conceived notions of noxious superstitions emanating from pre-literate and pre-scientific peoples who never quite rose from practicalities into the rarefied realms of abstract thinking. As logic, sophisticated science, languages, and religion became the apanage of the West, African religions were dismissed with terms such as polytheism, primitivism, paganism, heathenism, and animism, seen through European eyes as impediments to progress and material development. The patronization that informed the "white man's burden" became a liberal notion whereby the little brown brother might be educated and elevated beyond his primitive beliefs. And why not try? Many brown brothers and sisters fell into the trap, abandoning their genetic and cultural inheritances.

This predjudice is still common currency in American discourse. "Voodoo economics" or "voodoo politics" are part of a political arsenal in which "black" magic defines the Other from American goodness and munificence. Today, Western powers continue to meddle in others' affairs via government, the private sector, and through missionary workers acting as "agents of civilization." Hollywood, the film industry, and the media perpetuate negative stereotypes. The United States and—by extension—other Caribbean and Latin American republics, justify the military occupation of Haiti using the same "white man's burden" principles. As slaves were denied their full humanity, Haiti is denied its sovereignty.

Generations of educated Haitians, taught to speak and write in French, were also taught to embrace the ideals of their imperialist neighbors and the logic of colonial or neocolonial power relationships, individually and collectively deprecating Haiti, its

citizens and its unique culture. The chapter by Carrol F. Coates is particularly significant in this regard. He studied a half dozen novelists who, though none admitted to practicing Vodou, have generally given a positive spin to Vodou. One author in particular proudly confessed to interviewing *houngan*, priests, in his effort at verisimilitude. The real story is the increasing acceptance of Vodou by middle- and upper-class Haitians. These writers constitute a "who's who" of progressive Haitian politics; their lives parallel anticolonial struggles around the world.

Patrick Bellegarde-Smith extends the foregoing analysis by arguing that socioeconomic development, to be secure and genuine, must always take into account the national culture. The modernization of cultural elements—the acceptance of the Haitian language, Kreyol, and the Vodou religion—are necessary conditions for the realization of balanced development, befitting an autonomous culture and an independent country. Neither democracy nor development can be "spread" from a beneficent West to others; this is merely the white man's burden revisited. In both Coates and Bellegarde-Smith, one sees that social elites have realized that the emperor (imperialism) has, in fact, no clothes. One is reminded of an African proverb: "run from a naked man offering you a piece of cloth."

Claudine Michel provides a clear and succinct explanation of Vodou as superstructure. Vodou transcends its religious role, becoming a spiritual discipline that infuses all other societal systems. Gerdès Fleurant addresses the "song of freedom" and the impact of Vodou music from the country's genesis to the present day, and in the musicians' search for renewal through modernizing their art. As a defining element par excellence, these two chapters show how Vodou provides an integrated and integrative worldview/worldsense that has an effect on every aspect of the Vodouist's life: family structure, economics, healing, and so on. This understanding goes a long way in explicating Haiti's development.

Karen McCarthy Brown, author of the modern classic *Mama Lola*, presents Haiti as a case study in Afro-Caribbean spirituality. Her chapter is a precise and eloquent description and analysis of the religion, with an in-depth discussion of its healing powers—healing in all its permutations, defined broadly. This latter theme is augmented by Pierre Minn in his ongoing research interest on Vodou within his areas of specialization: illness, healing, medicine, and related nomenclature. Largely descriptive, Minn's chapter is an excellent introduction to that field.

The text by Richard Brent Turner reminds us of the Haitian cultural elements found in New Orleans, Louisiana. While Haiti alone cannot be credited with "Hoodoo"—as the origins of U.S. Blacks parallel those of Haitians—aspects of Haitian Vodou, as well as African religions, were absorbed into the rituals of Christianity practiced by American Creoles. In New Orleans and beyond, something of the African *religionwissenschaft* resisted conversion to Protestantism and retained strong Africanisms in its practice of both Catholicism and contemporary Vodou as currently encountered in that part of the world. In Elizabeth McAlister's chapter, one finds the lingering and predictable colonial influences in the adoption of forms of anti-Semitism in the Haitian *rara* festivals around Christian Easter. McAlister addresses "the demonization by European Christianity of two groups—Jews and Black Africans." But, she states, things are never as simple as they seem, since even the Other has agency—a recurring leitmotiv found throughout this volume.

Last but not least are the detailed explanations of specific elements of the religion within overarching contexts of Vodou as worldview. Leslie G. Desmangles reminds one that the Christian cross has alternate African meanings found in the Vodou cross and the *vèvè*. It completes our understanding that culture need not be enslaved to materiality; enslaved Africans who crossed the Atlantic with no possessions, not even clothing—"*yon men devan, yon men derye*," one hand aft, one fore to hide their nakedness—carried their culture with them. Similarly, LeGrace Benson, in her pioneering work on Islamic influences on Haitian Vodou, speaks for the many thousands of enslaved Moslems who made it across and whose impact on Haitian religious culture remains unheralded. Anna Wexler considers sequined Vodou flags as religious art and their role in rituals and culture. Donald Cosentino's chapter is an *envoi*, un *bonswa-dam*, the grande finale, which illustrates through a major *Lwa*—Sen Jak Maje—how the invisible is rendered visible in Haitian metaphysics, how Vodou followers interact with spirits with astounding familiarity, and how this invisible world impacts the daily existence of Vodouists.

The editors selected texts they felt were of great significance in presenting an image or images of Vodou in a number of different disciplinary perspectives. Each of the authors we chose has made serious contributions to the growing field of Vodou studies. Together, these scholars account for hundreds of years, many generations of research, and one hopes that the accumulated wisdom is commensurate. And none make apologies for wanting to rectify false information that passes for knowledge. All would admit to having fallen to Haiti's *envoûtement*, to being enchanted by Haiti.

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Claudine Michel and
Patrick Bellegarde-Smith

Chapter 1

Afro-Caribbean Spirituality: A Haitian Case Study

Karen McCarthy Brown

Haitian views of healing and wholeness as revealed in the religious system called Vodou provide the focus for this study. While the specifics of the discussion would differ if it were centered in other Caribbean locales, there are certain basic attitudes and understandings about the nature of the human condition and the causes and cures of human suffering that are broadly shared among descendants of African slaves throughout the Caribbean—areas that may be collectively named the Afro-Caribbean. Before turning to Haiti, I will first consider briefly the factors that create the differences among Afro-Caribbean cultures and then attempt to outline the common foundation on which their various healing systems rest.

Traditional attitudes and practices surrounding health and spirituality vary from one area of the Caribbean to another for several reasons. Of first-level importance is the place (or places) in Africa from which the slave populations were drawn and the resulting ideas about health and spirituality that the slaves brought with them. For example, in Haiti there are three clear lines of African influence: those of the Fon peoples, most of whom live in the area we now call Benin; the Yoruba peoples (Nigeria); and the Kongo peoples (Angola and Bas-Zaire). By contrast Cuban traditional religion is dominated by Yoruba influence, while that of Jamaica has its deepest roots among the Akan of Ghana. Other factors that account for the differences are the nature of the slave systems under which the first generations labored, including the brand of Christianity practiced by the slaveholders; the geography, plant and animal life of the New World setting and the differences and similarities that the slaves found between these and the ecologies of their homelands; and the social, political and economic history subsequent to slavery.

In relation to Haiti, the last point warrants special comment. Haiti was the second independent republic in the Western Hemisphere and the first Black one. After its successful slave revolution (1791–1804) and mainly as the result of trade boycotts,

Haiti was effectively cut off from contact with the United States and Europe for nearly a century. Furthermore, even though the French colonists had established Catholicism as the official religion of the people of the island, including its slave population, Haiti was denied priests by the church for more than fifty years following the revolution. At the opening of the nineteenth century, when the long struggle for independence ended, it is possible that as many as three-quarters of the slave population of Haiti had been born in Africa. Therefore, for a substantial period of time following the expulsion of the French, several strong African cultural traditions interacted in Haiti in an atmosphere relatively free of outside influence. This phenomenon sharply distinguishes Haiti from the rest of the Caribbean and particularly from places such as Jamaica. Jamaica experienced a continuing colonial presence well into the twentieth century. As a result, the influences of Africa in Jamaican traditional spirituality are subtler and more diffuse than those in Haiti. However, the ubiquitous "balm yards" or healing centers in contemporary Jamaica are significant African survivals. It is likely that their existence is a testament to the durability of a level of religious practice that does not require elaborate temples or rituals, or the participation of large numbers of persons. More importantly, their survival is also evidence of the centrality of healing for African-based spirituality.

In spite of diverse input from Africa and divergent experiences during and after the period of slavery, the various Afro-Caribbean communities share a broad range of traditional assumptions, attitudes, and practices relating to health and healing. I have identified six such factors, which I believe to be common to the healing traditions of the Afro-Caribbean.

First, healing is the *primary* business of these religious systems. In fact, it is not an overstatement to say that spirituality and healing are synonymous in the Afro-Caribbean. Client-practitioner interactions occasioned by problems in the lives of individual persons occupy much of the time of spiritual leaders. Furthermore, even large ritual events that occur on a regular basis can be understood as healing ceremonies when placed in their proper context.

Second, the understanding of personhood operative within these Afro-Caribbean healing traditions is a fundamentally relational one. The individual person is defined by a web of relationships that includes not only the extended family but also the ancestors and the spirits or saints. Furthermore, the individual *qua* individual is also understood in relational terms. Personhood is seen as constituted by a dynamic balance of diverse spiritual energies or tendencies.

Third, healing within Afro-Caribbean traditions takes place through ritual adjustments in these relational webs. To be more specific, healing involves adjusting or reactivating the reciprocal gift-giving that characterizes all relationships in the Afro-Caribbean, whether they are relationships with the living, the dead, or the divine.

Fourth, these African-based religious traditions address a wide variety of maladies. The expertise of the healer extends beyond physical problems to include social problems arising from such areas as love, work, and family life. While a person with physical symptoms could well be given herbal treatment appropriate to those symptoms, herbs would not represent the main part of the cure. In fact, the distinction between physical and social maladies is finally an insignificant one. Basic diagnostic categories are concerned with the *origins* of problems, and problems are virtually always seen as due to disruptions in relationships. The major curative action is therefore, as we have seen, directed at healing relationships. Further, the connection between a specific cause (the root problem) and a particular set of symptoms (the presenting problem) is by no means a necessary one. In other words, failure to honor the spirits could equally well result in the loss of a job or in digestive difficulties.

Fifth, these healing systems have a penchant for working through what Lévi-Strauss called "the science of the concrete."[1] The harmful emotional states that cause disruptions in relationships—such as jealousy, despair, fear, anger—are addressed in ways that appeal to the nonrational and even nonverbal dimensions of human interaction. Emotional or relational states are concretized in sounds, gestures, or objects that are laden with the highly condensed metaphoric referents of such things as taste, smell, and color. Adjustments are then made in the externalized or concretized relational situation. For example, in Haiti, a marriage threatened by the destructive anger of the husband could be treated by placing ice and a little sugar syrup in a jar that also contains a slip of paper with his name written on it several times. The jar is then inverted, the basic signal within the Vodou science of the concrete that a situation is to be changed. The wife, who desires to "cool down" and "sweeten" her husband, "works the point" several times a day. She lights a candle by the jar, prays over it, and concentrates her energy on the desired end. Scientific and social-scientific thinkers alike have tended to label this sort of healing practice "magic" or "superstition," thus dismissing it from the larger psychotherapeutic discussion, where it could well suggest middle-range alternatives to drug therapy and the talking cure.

Finally, all of these traditions are involved in one stage or another of negotiation with Great Atlantic culture, that is, with the Western world. Scientific medicine, capitalism, individualism, and modern technology all present challenges to customary attitudes and practices in the area of health. In some parts of the Caribbean, exposure to these forces has been substantial and long-term (Puerto Rico, for example), and as a result, traditional healers have circumscribed their activity, focusing on problems that would be considered insignificant by the church and by Western medical institutions, such as broken love affairs, predictive dreams, and chains of bad luck. By contrast, in rural Haiti the majority of problems of all sorts are still treated by traditional healers. Yet no area in the Caribbean has been without some contact with the trappings of modern life. African-based systems of spiritual healing characteristically accommodate elements of modernity in their worldview rather than react to them competitively or with hostility. For example, a traditional healer may advise a patient to go to a hospital or get a shot of penicillin from the local clinic. Unfortunately, there has not been the same openness in the other direction.

This summary view of the Caribbean context serves as background to a more detailed discussion of traditional healing in Haiti, which will begin with sections on the centrality of family and the view of person. The focus on exchange relationships emerging from these two topics will provide the organizing motif for discussions of Vodou rituals and of the Vodou spirits. A more specific treatment of the Haitian Vodou understandings of the causes and cures of human suffering will follow. This will touch on a variety of topics, including the etiology of problems, the sources of authority used in treatment, and the questions of morality that arise in the quest for healing.

Serving the Spirits in Haiti

Haitians do not often call their religion "Vodou," a term that in the rural areas at least is still reserved for a particular subtype of dance and ritualizing. (*Vodou* comes from the Fon language and means "spirit.") When Haitians refer to the religious dimension of their lives they refer to a form of activity rather than an institutional entity. They say they "serve the spirits." I have come to believe that human suffering is the major impetus for serving the spirits and, furthermore, that an understanding of Vodou ritualizing in terms of the ways in which it both comprehends suffering and ameliorates suffering yields greater insight than any other.

"Moun fèt pou mouri" (People are born to die), Haitians are fond of saying with a shrug of the shoulders. This proverb comments on the suffering and death that are commonplace occurrences in poverty-stricken Haiti and shows the stoic acceptance that, on one level at least, characterizes the Haitian attitude toward such a life. Haitians have no vision of heaven in their religion,[2] no ideology of progress shaping their understanding of history, and virtually no experience of upward mobility in their lives or the lives of their children. Suffering is an expected, recurrent condition. It is not an exaggeration to say that problem-free periods in life are pervaded with an anxiety that anticipates crisis just around the corner. Life as a whole is thus characterized by cycles of luck and the absence of luck. The clever, faithful, and/or powerful person is one who manages by a juggling of scarce resources to give generously to the living, the dead, and the spirits. The resulting network of dependents who are obliged to serve and elders or social superiors who are obliged to give sustenance and protection—even though subject to the inherent unpredictability of personal relationships—provides the only means any Haitian has of controlling his or her "luck." At the very least, the obligations created by these gifts construct the safety net that is essential for survival, given the uncertainties of life in Haiti.

Haiti occupies the western third of Hispaniola, an island it shares with the Dominican Republic. It is a small country—about the size of the state of Maryland—that is home to 5.5 to 6 million people. Haiti is still largely an agricultural country, although much of its land has been rendered nearly useless by short-range farming techniques and soil erosion caused by cutting trees to produce the charcoal most people still use to cook their food. Diseases such as tuberculosis, malaria, yaws, syphilis, and elephantiasis, which have been virtually eliminated in most of the Western Hemisphere, afflict the population in Haiti still. In parts of Haiti the infant mortality rate is above 50 percent, and anyone reaching the age of fifty-five or sixty is considered among the fortunate. The majority of children show some signs of malnutrition: spindly arms and legs, swollen bellies, reddish brittle hair. Social disease is also rampant in Haiti, a country that has survived a succession of brutal dictators who have increased their personal wealth at the expense of the people and maintained their power through random violence and intimidation. It is estimated that 80 percent of the population is illiterate and that the average annual income for a Haitian is somewhere between $200 and $300. When the considerable wealth of the 8 to 9 percent of the population known as "the elite" is taken into account, it appears most persons in Haiti get by on little more than $100 a year—and yet a chicken purchased in Port-au-Prince can cost as much as $5.

"Mizè mennen parespè," the Haitians say, meaning, if you show you are suffering people lose respect for you. *Mizè* (literally, "misery") is an interesting word choice here, for while it can be used to refer to suffering in general, it is used most often to refer to poverty with all its attendant pains and indignities. There are many beggars in Haiti. One sees them everywhere, but most often in markets, cemeteries, and churchyards. In spite of their numbers, there is a special shame associated with begging. This becomes apparent in the way begging is used within the Vodou system. When the spirits want to teach a lesson in humility to a devotee, they command that person to don the ritual version of rags and go to the market and beg. The ignominy of begging comes largely from the fact that beggars are seen as isolated individuals whose activity announces to the world that they have been abandoned by the extended kin group and now must forage on their own. Even if the family were lost through death rather than discord, the person who must beg can easily be seen as someone who was not clever enough or respectful enough or sufficiently hardworking to find a place as adopted kin in another family.

The Centrality of Family

For the slaves taken from Africa, the loss of extended family was so great that they apparently made efforts to recreate that family before they had even set foot on the shores of the New World. It is reported that some slaves recognized an incest prohibition as existing between males and females who had undergone the Middle Passage on the same ship. We know almost nothing about the interactions among slaves in the early part of the eighteenth century, when large numbers of them arrived in Haiti to work the plantations. However, knowledge of the crucial role of the extended family throughout West Africa easily leads to the conclusion that whatever blending among Fon, Yoruba, and Kongo cultures took place during that period must have been compelled in large part by the need for family. In the early stages this need would have been met through fictive kinship structures in which putative "mothers" and "fathers," "aunts" and "uncles," and "cousins" provided the individual with both identity (a place in society) and protection. Since the contributing African cultures defined family as including the ancestors and the spirits, the need for family was both a social and a spiritual need.

The slaves' loss of access to family land in Africa was as great as their loss of the African family itself. Indeed, from one perspective family and land were inseparable. Prevented from visiting family graves and from leaving food offerings and pouring libations at ancestral shrines, the enslaved African had also been denied the means of ensuring the spiritual blessing and protection of the ancestors. Thus when slaves could bring no other possessions with them, some nevertheless managed to carry away small sacks of the soil of their motherland. This connection of family, land, and religion persists in rural Haiti today.

Unlike most of the other Caribbean nations Haiti is predominantly a country of peasant farmers, many of whom own their own land. Where the social structures have not been decimated by the combined pressures of overpopulation, depleted soil, and corrupt politics, rural people in Haiti tend to live in large, patriarchal, extended families. Even moderately successful men in the countryside may enter into multiple *plasaj* or common-law unions with women. Each of these women is set up in a house of her own in which she raises the children born of their union. Thus a multi-generational extended family can swell to considerable size even when counting only the blood kin. Such families, however, are not defined solely by blood ties. Large rural families invariably include adopted "godmothers," "godfathers," and "cousins," as well as a number of "maids" and other workers who exchange their labor for a place to sleep and for meager rations. Included in this latter group are the *restavèk* (literally, the "stay-withs"), children whose parents could not afford to feed them and so either sold them or gave them away to slightly more prosperous families. Social hierarchy is relentless in Haiti. There is always someone poorer than oneself. Even the most minimal rural household with only one or two able-bodied adults to work an unproductive square of earth manages to have a servant.

The patriarch of the extended family functions as the *oungan* or priest when that family serves the spirits. He is often the one who treats family members when they become ill, although an outsider may be called in for such treatments if there is someone in the vicinity who has a reputation as one who "knows leaves." However, it is necessarily the patriarch who presides at the *gwo sèvis*, the big dancing and drumming events that include animal sacrifice. These ceremonies are held annually if family resources permit. More commonly they are held at longer intervals and then only in response to crises within the group. The purpose of the elaborate ritualizing is to honor, entertain, and feed the ancestors and the Vodou spirits which those ancestors served.

The family dead are buried on the family land and the cemetery is a major center for religious activity. In addition, a cult house for the ritual objects of the family is often built on a small, separate plot of land. Thus, to inherit land is also to inherit the bones of the ancestors and the duty to honor those ancestors as well as to serve the spirits represented in the cult house. Conversely, to be separated from the land is also to risk one's access to the power and protection that these spirit entities provide.

Separation from land and family is, however, an increasingly frequent experience for the younger generations of Haiti's rural poor. Inheritance laws in Haiti work to divide the land into smaller and smaller plots. This pressure, combined with that of the multiple problems cited earlier, has pushed large numbers of young people off the land and toward the elusive promise of a better life in the cities.

For young men urban life is often cruel. In the countryside they are reared to the expectations of male privilege and power. (Even the female-headed households that are prevalent in the cities perpetuate this ideology to a degree.) Yet some experts estimate unemployment among young urban males at 60 percent and others argue that the figure should be much higher. Women fare somewhat better in the urban environment. Most of the factory jobs available are of the piecework variety, and European and American employers seem to favor women for these repetitive tasks. Urban women also have a market tradition bequeathed to them by their rural sisters.

In the country it is the women who take the excess produce to market, along with bread, candy, herbal teas, baskets, and other things they make with their own hands. The urban woman spun away from the rural extended family frequently ends up not only in charge of her house and her children—as she might well have been in the country—but also solely responsible for their financial support. In the countryside her market money would have been the "rainy-day savings" for times of drought and hunger or the means to fulfill a private dream for herself or her children. In the cities she must rely on the old market skills more centrally. The poor urban woman is constantly engaged in small-scale commerce, often in several such enterprises simultaneously. For example, even if she has a regular job, she may sell peanut candy at the door of her home or work as a seamstress or beautician in the evenings and on weekends.

Both men and women who no longer live with their extended families feel the loss acutely. In fact, this sense of loss can persist for generations. In the cities, it is the Vodou temple and the fictive kinship network it provides that compensates for the missing large rural family. The head of the temple is called "mother" or "father," and the initiates are known as "children of the house." The Vodou initiate owes service and loyalty to his or her Vodou parent after the pattern of filial piety owed all parents by their children in Haiti. In turn, Vodou parents, like actual ones, owe their children protection, care, and help in times of trouble. In certain circumstances this help is of a very tangible sort: food, a place to sleep, assistance in finding work. The urban Vodou temples are currently the closest thing to a social welfare system that exists in Haiti.

The differences between men's and women's lives in the cities have also left their mark on the practice of urban Vodou. While in some parts of rural Haiti women can gain recognition and prestige as *manbo* (priestesses), herbalists, or *fanm saj* (midwives), nowhere in the countryside do they effectively challenge the spiritual hegemony of the male. This is not the case in the cities, where there are probably as many women as men in positions of religious leadership.

The urban Vodou temples run by men tend to mimic the patriarchal structure of the rural extended families. The urban *oungan* is notorious for fathering many children and recruiting desirable young women to be among his *ounsi*, brides of the gods, the ritual chorus and general workforce of a Vodou temple.[3] He thus creates a highly visible father role which he then operates out of in relation to all those who serve the spirits under his tutelage. While the female *manbo* who heads a temple is not necessarily more democratic in all of her relationships with those that serve the spirits in her house, she does tend to be so in the ways that a mother's role is normally less authoritarian than that of a father. For example, many temples headed by women function as day-care centers for the working mothers associated with them. In sum, the woman-headed temple tends to reiterate the tone and atmosphere inside the home, a place where women have usually been in charge. This is an atmosphere that allows for more flexibility in human relationships than is found in the male-headed temple, which recalls the more public and therefore more rigid social rules of the entire extended family. This shift toward greater authority for women in urban Vodou has undoubtedly had an effect on the nature of the care given to individuals who turn to traditional religion to solve the many problems that urban life in Haiti can bring.

Whether the temple is headed by a man or a woman, it is clear that its appeal to the urban population is rooted in its ability to recreate family. A song sung at the beginning of Vodou ceremonies in Port-au-Prince illustrates this:

Lafanmi semble,
Semble nan.
Se Kreyòl nou yè,
Pa genyen Gine enkò.

The family is assembled,
Gathered in.
We are Creoles,
Who have Africa no longer.

The Vodou View of Person

In Vodou, persons are said to possess several "souls." In fact, there is no generic term in the Haitian Creole language that includes all of these spiritual entities or energies, even though each possesses some of the characteristics of what Westerners call soul. Furthermore, the word *nam*, derivative of the French word for soul, is only one of the complex of forces that constitute a person. A person's *nam* is usually understood as the animating force of the body. The most immediate effect of death is the departure of the *nam*, which is sometimes said to linger for a short period of time around the corpse or grave. The *nam* is an evanescent thing that disappears soon after death.

By contrast the *gwo bonanj*, the big guardian angel, is capable of sustained existence apart from the body it inhabits. One of the situations in which the person is separated from his or her *gwo bonanj* occurs during the possession trance, which is central to Vodou ritualizing. The struggle that marks the onset of possession is understood as a struggle between a person's *gwo bonanj* and the Vodou *lwa* (spirit), who desires to "ride" that person and to use his or her body and voice to communicate with the faithful. One who is thus ridden by the spirit is known as a *chwal* (horse) of the spirit. Those who are possessed report that they lose consciousness after this initial struggle. The loss of consciousness and the resulting amnesia about what the spirit said and did while riding the *chwal* is explained as due to the departure of the *gwo bonanj*.

Similarly, it is the *gwo bonanj* that wanders from the body during sleep, even into the land of the dead, thus allowing deceased persons or those living at a great distance to appear in dreams. The wanderings of the big guardian angel during sleep are sometimes useful for information-gathering. For example, a mother in Haiti said she learned from a dream that her daughter in New York had met with an accident and broken her arm. In like fashion, when a person is uneasy, she may say that her *gwo bonanj* is agitated. This is an undesirable state mainly because it robs the person of sound sleep and therefore of dreams, which are an important vehicle for communication with the dispersed family, the ancestors, and the spirits.

Finally, it is the *gwo bonanj* that must be ritually removed "from the head" of a person shortly after death. The big guardian angel is then sent "under the water" to dwell for a period of time until it (now referred to as a *mò*, one of the dead) is "called up from the water," installed in a clay pot known as a *govi*, and placed on the family altar. The Vodou ceremony known as *rele mò nan dlo*, calling the dead from the water, calls them from Gine, Africa, a watery land said to exist below the earth. The ceremony ideally takes place a year and a day following the death. Because it is an elaborate and expensive ceremony, however, in practice families wait until there are several of their dead whom they may retrieve at once. As a result the dead frequently emerge complaining of cold, dampness, and neglect. In this ceremony, the dead speak through a kind of ventriloquism possession and genuinely sound as if they come from both far away and underwater. Their identity is confirmed by the intimate knowledge of family life which they display. The spirits called up from the waters of Africa inquire about family members and comment on problems within the group. Given these various understandings of the nature and activity of the *gwo bonanj*, it seems fair to conclude that this dimension of soul is both the consciousness and essential personality of the individual.

The *ti bonanj* (little guardian angel), which each person also possesses, is much more difficult to define. One urban *manbo*, or priestess, gave me two interesting responses to questions about the nature of the *ti bonanj*. "When you look at your shadow," she said, "you will see that sometimes it has a dark center. That is the *gwo bonanj*, but the paler shadow around the dark center is the *ti bonanj*." When asked what the little guardian angel does, she gave another concrete illustration: "When you are walking a long way or carrying something very heavy and feel so tired that you know you are not going to make it, it is the *ti bonanj* that takes over so you can do what you have to do." The *ti bonanj* is thus perhaps best described as a spiritual reserve tank. It is an energy or presence within the person that is dimmer or deeper than consciousness, but it is nevertheless there to be called upon in situations of stress and depletion.

Much less routinely, Vodou *oungan* and *manbo* speak of another dimension of the person called the *zetwal* or star. This is not an inner presence so much as it is a kind of celestial parallel self. The concept of the *zetwal* is rooted in the belief that each person is born with his or her fate already foreknown and unchangeable. The regular movements of the stars and their recurring patterns mimic, perhaps even direct, the larger contours of life in the human community. Whatever control an individual has over his or her life thus comes in specific moments and short-run situations. *Mizè* (suffering) may be held at bay only for a short time and *chans* (luck) only marginally enhanced. The overall shape and direction of a life are determined by fate.

The *nam*, the *gwo bonanj*, the *ti bonanj*, and the *zetwal* are the constitutive parts of a Haitian view of personhood that is clearly derivative of what ethnographers call the "multiple soul complex" in West Africa. The fact that Vodou contains European elements as well as African is also hinted at in this formulation. In addition to their Catholicism, the French planter class of Haiti was known for its participation in a variety of forms of marginal spirituality including Freemasonry and spiritualism. It seems likely that the astrological flavor of the *zetwal* concept also owes its parentage to this line of influence, even though the notion that individual persons are born with

their fate already cast by the gods was a belief held by the Fon and to some extent also by the Yoruba.[4]

While Vodou devotees understand the dead body *(kòr kadav)* of a person to be a material substance separable from these various animating spiritual entities and therefore subject to decay and ultimate dissolution, the body/soul or material/spiritual split is not central to their understanding of personhood. As an indication of this it is worth noting that there is no division within the Vodou view of person between drives or appetites that come from the body—for example, hunger and sexuality—and those that come from the spirit or mind. In fact, sexuality is perhaps the central animating force in all of life. Much of Vodou ritualizing suggests that sexual and spiritual energy come from the same source.

What complicates the understanding of personhood is the realization that individuals are not comprehensible apart from the Vodou spirits associated with them. It is easiest to discuss this in the urban setting, which I know best. Here, each person is said to have a *mèt tet*, master of the head. This is the main spirit served by that person, and if the person is one who serves as a "horse" of the spirits, it will be the *mèt tet* who most often possesses that person. To a certain extent the personality of the individual human being mirrors that of his or her *mèt tet*. For example, a man who has Ogou as his *mèt tet* will be expected to exhibit some of the warrior spirit's anger, strictness, and perseverance in his everyday behavior. Yet he will also have been told that Ogou is "too hot" to be served alone. The spirit of war and anger must be balanced by others, for example, by a strong "sweet" spirit such as the ancient and venerable snake spirit, Dambala.

In addition to a *mèt tet*, each individual has a smaller number of other spirits, usually two or three, from whom he or she receives special protection. This complex of spirits, which may consist of some that are known only in that family and others that are recognized throughout Haiti, differs from individual to individual. It is partly because of this that Vodou, though centrally concerned with morality, could never produce a codified moral law that would apply equally to all persons. In Vodou, an individual lives a moral life by faithfully serving the particular configuration of spirits that "love" or "protect" that person. This includes following their advice, advice that will be consistent with the personalities of the spirits. Thus it might be said that the Vodou ethic is an intensely contextual one.

It is the urban devotee's particular grouping of protective spirits that determines the nature of ritual as well as moral obligations. Furthermore, it is important to note that the choice of this penumbra of protective spirits is not for "the living" to make; Vodou devotees insist that it is the spirits who choose the persons they love or protect. Yet, priests and priestesses do determine the choices the spirits have made, often through divination.

A question may well be raised as to whether the Vodou spirits are truly distinct and separate from the persons who serve them. This question is answered in paradoxical ways within Vodou ritualizing. Beliefs surrounding possession trance and the struggle of the *gwo bonanj* with the possessing spirit, as well as the insistence that the person is chosen by the spirit and not vice versa, point to a clear distinction between spirit and person. However, from the perspective of certain rituals such as those that occur during initiation and after death, the individual person cannot be separated

from the spirits that reside "in the head" or "on" the person, these being equally common expressions among Vodou devotees. Initiation rituals simultaneously "feed the spirits in the head" and establish a repository for them outside the person. This repository is called a *pò tet* (head pot). After initiation it is placed on the Vodou family altar and becomes the focus of rituals designed to cool, soothe, and strengthen the person. Furthermore, when the spirit is removed from a person's head at death, this spirit is sometimes treated as if it were the *gwo bonanj* and sometimes as if it were the *lwa*, the Vodou spirit, who was the *mèt tet* of the dead person. Similarly, when the ancestor is called up from the waters and established on the family altar, the spirit is called both by the name of the ancestor and by the name of the *lwa*. For example, reference may be made to "Marie's Ogou" or to "Pierre's Dambala." Thus there is also a sense in which at least the head spirit is identified with the *gwo bonanj*, if not with the individual in a larger sense.

In fifteen years of work on Haitian traditional religion, I have learned that paradoxes of this sort are to be cherished rather than resolved, for it is invariably such paradoxical statements that provide the greatest insight into the religious system we call Vodou. If it is understood that within the Vodou worldview the individual is both a separate self and an inseparable part of a family, then it can be grasped how the spirits who are part of that extended family can be *both* other than and merged with those who serve them.

Rituals of Haitian Vodou

For some individuals, coexistence with their spirits presents no problems; life flows more or less smoothly. It may be the case that someone within their family serves the spirits and this is sufficient to fill the hungry bellies, slake the dry throats, and stroke the wounded pride of the ancestors and the *lwa*. However, if one is not so fortunate and life is not going well—and it often is not in a country such as Haiti—then more is required. Vodou offers a series of ritual steps that escalate the intensity of the individual's involvement with the spirits. Each of these ritual steps is based on an exchange. The person commits to service of one sort or another; in return the spirits proffer relief and protection.

Some problems can be handled with a onetime or at least a short-term commitment to the spirits. This type of commitment could be something as simple as lighting a candle before the image of a spirit, or it could be an elaborate and expensive feast for several spirits, which would include dancing, drumming, and animal sacrifice. Other problems require a more routinized and long-term relationship with one or more spirits. Such life-time commitments vary from "marriage" to a spirit to the decision to become a priest or priestess.[5]

In the process of escalating their commitments to the Vodou spirits, devotees accomplish two related things. First, they gradually increase the strength and stability of their own *gwo bonanj*. For those who move to the upper levels of initiation this means mastering the art of possession trance, which is the art of both letting go of the *gwo bonanj* and bringing it back. Second, devotees gradually increase their control

over the Vodou spirits as well. Men and women who advance to the grade of *oungan* and *manbo* do so through a ceremony in which they "take the *asson*."[6] The *asson* is a small, hollow gourd covered with a mesh of glass beads and snake vertebrae. This rattle, which is the emblem of the Vodou priesthood, is not used to make music but to signal key changes in the drum rhythms in a Vodou service, as well as to summon and send away the *lwa*. When a *lwa* tries to seat itself on an inexperienced horse, the struggle between the *gwo bonanj* and the spirit can become violent and even harmful to the horse. It is in situations such as these that the spirit must be sent away. Thus, within limits, Vodou priests and priestesses have power over the spirits. As one Vodou priest put it: "The spirits don't like the *asson*, but they give it to us anyway so we can work with them."

Although it is clear that overall the spirits have far greater powers than do the living, the relationship between devotees and spirits is nevertheless characterized by reciprocity and mutual dependence. The *lwa*, like the ancestors, depend on the living to feed them. Hungry spirits are troublesome and destructive. The living, in turn, depend on the protection and luck that only the spirits can guarantee. This relationship is not unlike the one that exists between parents and children. While the greater power and authority of the parents is unquestioned, parental care in Haiti is not purely altruistic. In the rural areas children work from a young age and their work soon becomes essential to the ongoing family enterprise. Play for children four or five years old often consists of small fetching and carrying tasks; and all over Haiti, the childless person is pitied mainly because there will be no one to take care of that individual in old age. For those reared in monotheistic religious traditions, the notion that the spirits are dependent on their devotees is an especially difficult one to grasp. Yet comprehending this principle is essential, for without understanding that the spirits need the living, it is all too easy to attribute the problems, illnesses, and general harassment that the spirits at times dole out to the living as due to their temperamental, or worse, evil nature.

Vodou is a blend of various African traditions with Catholicism. Although it can be argued that Catholicism has been Africanized in Vodou, and that this is a far truer statement than its reverse, this does not mean that the Catholic Church has no role in the life of the 85 to 90 percent of Haitians who serve the spirits. Pilgrimages to various churches and attendance at Mass are integrated into many complicated Vodou rituals. In addition, the church has taken over the major ceremonies of the life cycle. Birth, where it is ritualized at all, is celebrated through baptism. Also, ideally everyone should go through a First Communion. Pictures from this event are among a family's most treasured possessions. For economic reasons, most Haitians enter *plasaj* (common-law) partnerships rather than have legal marriages. However, where there is a wedding, it is understood that it should be a church wedding. The church also buries the dead, although Vodou rituals are woven in and out of the wake, the entombment (burial is aboveground in Haiti), and the memorial Mass that comes nine days following the death.

Vodou ritual pervades the life of the great majority of Haitian people. For example, candles are lighted and libations poured at countless family altars every day. There are also large ceremonies that have a more social and celebratory air. Among these are the sumptuous feasts for the spirits that occur with some frequency

throughout the calendar year at large urban temples. These are a source of entertainment and celebration for curious onlookers and invited guests as well as for the members of that particular Vodou family. Even though all guests may not be offered drinks and plates of food, it is a tradition that the doors of the Vodou temple are closed to no one. Furthermore, the more people present at one of these events, the more chance it has of being a success. The spirits will not come until the crowd is *byen eshofe*, well heated up. When sweat is streaming down the bodies of the drummers and they have found that vast reserve of energy on the other side of fatigue, when their intricate polyrhythms drive the dancers to new heights of grace and spirit, when the voices of the leader of songs and the *ounsi* chorus challenge one another in an ascending spiral of statement and response, that is when the ceremony is *byen eshofe* and that is when the *lwa* will mount their horses and ride.

Spirit Possession

Once the spirit is in charge of the horse, the crescendo of energy stops and people settle in to watch the possession performance. The term "possession performance" is not used here to indicate that there is anything false or contrived about these visits from the spirits. Vodou priest and priestess alike condemn the occasional person in their midst who may *pran poz*, act disingenuously as if possessed. The term is used rather to indicate what has often been noticed about possession in the Vodou temple: it has a theatrical quality. The characters of the major Vodou spirits are well known. Even an outsider such as myself can identify the possessing spirit within moments of its arrival because of certain stereotypical behavior as well as the ritual garb and implements that the spirit requests. However, the Vodou priests and priestesses, the ones usually possessed at these large feasts, improvise freely within the character range of the spirit. Thus a *lwa* not only goes through standard ritual salutations and exhibits certain forms of behavior that are seen virtually every time this spirit possesses someone, but the spirit also addresses particular persons and gives advice about specific problems. The spirits hug, hold, and dance with the devotees. They give ritual blessings and sometimes ritual chastisement, both appropriate to the situation. They sing. They eat. They cry. At these large public events, the Vodou spirits process the problems of the community, fine-tuning human relationships. Sometimes an intimate problem can be whispered into the ear of a sympathetic *lwa*, and the spirit will take the devotee aside for a discreet and private audience. More frequently, these interactions with the spirits become the occasion for an individual's problems to be aired (and healed) in the larger community context.

One specific example of this process will serve to make several points. There was a *oungan* in Carrefour (a town on the coast road south and west of Port-au-Prince) who had a reputation for being a strict and dour disciplinarian in his Vodou family. Because she had angered him, he sent away a woman named Simone, the song leader in his temple, and told her never to return. At a ceremony not long after, this *oungan*, whose name was Cesaire, was possessed by the warrior spirit, Ogou. Ogou arrived in a rage and immediately began to berate Cesaire (the very horse he was riding). Who

did Cesaire think he was, Ogou asked, that he could send Simone out of the temple? Simone was one of Ogou's favorites, and besides, it was he, Ogou, who was in charge of the temple, not Cesaire. The gathered faithful were instructed to convey this message to the ill-mannered *oungan* without fail, and then the spirit departed, leaving the body of Cesaire in a crumpled heap on the temple floor. When he had barely regained his senses, the reluctant Cesaire was carried along in a procession of all the temple dignitaries, complete with the brightly colored, sequined banners of the temple, right to the home of Simone. They stood outside and sang Vodou songs of invitation and reconciliation. After much coaxing, Simone agreed to come back to the temple, and, accompanied by the full parade, she was ritually reintegrated into the Vodou family.

This example shows something of the complexity of the possession process in which a *lwa* can chastise, even humiliate, his own horse. Yet, perhaps more significantly, it also shows the key role of the community in the interpretation and application of the wisdom of the spirits. Thus, the public airing of community problems and issues within the Vodou temple is a means of enforcing social sanctions, mobilizing the assistance of the community, and mending broken relationships. It is, in short, a way of healing.

Yet there are vast areas of Vodou ritual that are concerned with healing in a more direct way. These vary from the individual client-practitioner interactions (practices that will be discussed below in a section on the types of caring used in Vodou healing) to the expensive and elaborate cycles of initiation rituals.

Initiation

Vodou initiation ceremonies are never undertaken lightly or routinely. Almost always it is trouble with the spirits, manifesting in problems in the individual's life, that lead a person to undergo initiation. In the temples of the Port-au-Prince area there are four levels of initiation possible. Each level involves a period of seclusion that may vary from three to twenty-one days, and most temples have a small interior room set aside for such purposes. Persons tend to be initiated in small groups. The men and women in these groups become "brothers" and "sisters" in a special way. Above all, they are committed to helping each other with ritual duties. This is the case even when the groups contain individuals who are seeking different grades of initiation. All grades of initiation have public rituals that occur intermittently in the exterior temple dancing area as well as rituals reserved for the already-initiated members of the house that occur within the inner chamber.

The first level of initiation is called the *lave tet* (head-washing) and involves cooling and soothing as well as feeding the spirits in a person's head. The second level is *kanzo*, a word that refers to a rite in which initiates are briefly removed from the initiation chamber in order to undergo a ritual trial. In the semipublic part of the *kanzo* ritual, small, hard dumplings are snatched from boiling pots and pressed into the palm of the left hand and the sole of the left foot of the initiate. When this ceremony is completed, the initiates are told: "Now you are *kwit* [cooked]; no one can eat you," that is to say, no one can do harm to you. They are also admonished: "Never say hot again, say strong!"

The third level is called *sou pwen*, on the point. *Pwen* is a complex, multivocal concept in Haitian Vodou, as it is in Haitian culture in general. Within the general culture, "singing the point" or "sending the point" refers to a socially appropriate means of indirect communication that is especially useful for conveying difficult messages. For example, one young man in Haiti told me this story: he was courting a young woman who came from a family as impoverished as his own. The girl's mother decided that the match offered neither one any chance of advancement, and yet she was loathe to insult her daughter's suitor. So when he visited, she went about her household tasks singing a popular song, the refrain of which was "Dè mèg pa fri," (Two lean [pieces of meat] do not fry). The young man got "the point" and broke off his relationship. In and out of the temples, it is often Vodou songs that are used for the purpose of singing the point. These songs have a sparse, even cryptic quality to them that lends itself to communicating several different, sometimes contradictory, meanings at once. The person who "sends a song" in the Vodou temple, that is, the one who suggests the next song to be sung by the group, is not only following a closely prescribed ritual order in which each important *lwa* is saluted in the proper order with his or her own songs and rhythms, but quite frequently is also sending the point, *pwen*, to a person or group of persons present at the ceremony. Such an observation both reveals the extent to which Vodou ritual intertwines with and comments on the life of the community and suggests a preliminary definition for the troublesome word *pwen*. At a level of abstraction uncharacteristic of the way people who serve the spirits speak, *pwen* may be said to mean the condensation or pith of something. At a concrete, ritual level *pwen* are charms or medicines composed of words, objects, gestures, or some combination of the three. They may be drawn on the earth, spoken, sung over a person, placed under the skin, or ingested; they may be buried at the crossroads, in a cemetery, or in the courtyard of a house. When one is initiated "on the point," the reference is to the condensation of the power of a particular spirit who has been diagnosed as the *mèt tet*.

The fourth and final level of initiation is the one that gives a person license to begin practicing as a healer. It is called *assògwe*, literally, "with the *asson*," the beaded rattle that gives priests and priestesses some measure of leverage in the spirit realm.

In Haitian Creole, the verb *kouche* (to lie down, to sleep, to make love, to give birth—less commonly, to die) is the general word used to describe initiation. Entering the initiation chamber is like dying. Friends and family members cry as they line up to kiss the initiates goodbye. Shortly after this genuinely emotional leave-taking, the initiates are blindfolded and led through a dizzying dance of spirals and turns before being taken into the small room where they will *kouche*. As in many other sorts of initiation around the world, to *kouche* is to be forced by ritual means to regress, to become a child again, to be fed and cared for as a child would be, only to be brought rapidly back to adulthood, a new kind of adulthood, again by ritual means. When the initiates leave the inner chamber after days of seclusion and ritualizing, they have their heads covered. Initiates must keep their heads covered for forty days. Like newborn babies with vulnerable soft spots, new initiates must protect the tops of their heads. The spirits within have been fed and are still changing and strengthening day by day. On an altar inside, the initiates have left their *pò tet* (head pots), residues of the internal externalized, the self objectified, the spirits concretized.

These *pò tet* generally remain on the altar of the priest or priestess who performed the initiation and who will be ever after the initiates' spiritual mother or father. Thus, through initiation rites, bonds among the living—as well as between the living and the spirits—are reinforced.

The Vodou Spirits

In the preceding discussion, I have been using the term "spirit" in a generic sense, as the Haitians often do, to refer to what are in fact three distinguishable groups: the *mò*, the dead; the *màwasa*, the divine twins; and the *mistè*, the mysteries, more often referred to as the *lwa*, or, using the term in a more specific sense, the *espri*, the spirits. Generally speaking, the dead and the divine twins are more central to rural than to urban Vodou. As the structure of the large extended families unravels, the sources from which people seek wisdom and assistance change. In the cities, possessions by specific powerful ancestors decline, while more energy is focused on possessions by the major Vodou *lwa*, most of whom are known and venerated throughout Haiti. In similar fashion, as children lose some importance for the work of the family, the divine children, the *màwasa*, also lose some ritual significance. However, neither the dead nor the *màwasa* disappear completely in the urban context.

The dead are still venerated in the cities. As was mentioned above, the *lwa* are inherited in urban families, where they will be remembered for some time as the *lwa* of a particular ancestor, for example, Marie's Ogou. Also, in the urban context family graves continue to be important, as do the annual celebrations for the dead that occur on and near All Souls' Day.

The *màwasa* also continue to have a role in urban Vodou. In addition to being routinely saluted in most large dancing and drumming ceremonies, the divine twins are given special attention in two contexts, both of which have to do with enhancing the luck of a particular group or a particular enterprise. The first instance has to do with making a *promès* (promise). This is done when resources do not permit the immediate fulfillment of an obligation to the spirits. In such a case a small *manje màwasa*, a meal for the divine twins, can be prepared. The dishes, favorites of children, will be fed to the actual children in the group. When they take obvious pleasure in the food this is taken as a sign that the spirits have agreed to accept the promise.

The second ritual in which the *màwasa* play a central role is the *manje pov* (feeding of the poor). This ritual is performed by families, both biological ones and those created around the urban Vodou temples. Ideally it is performed annually to ensure the good fortune of the group. Large quantities of all sorts of food are prepared. A small portion of this—a pot of soup, perhaps—along with coffee, soap, tobacco, and small change, is then sent to a gathering place for the poor. The steps of a church or the cemetery are likely places. These things are passed out to the poor along with an invitation to come to the temple or the home later in the day for a feast. Before any of those later assembled can eat from the overflowing pots prepared for the ceremonial meal, the children of the poor (a group doubly identified as the socially vulnerable) must first consume a separate *manje màwasa*.

Within the realm of the spirits, the *màwasa* play a role parallel to that of children in the social realm. They require more in terms of care and material goods than they can give back in the same media of exchange. However, because children are closely associated with the good fortune of a family as well as with its vulnerability (youngsters are said to be the most likely to "catch" destructive spirits sent against a family by its enemies), the exchange can be kept more or less balanced by the luck or blessing that children can uniquely bestow.

The *manje pov* reveals the connection that is made within Haitian Vodou between children and the poor. Both are socially vulnerable groups in need of care. Furthermore, the poor, like children, are understood to be sources of blessing. Almsgiving, particularly when on pilgrimage, is highly recommended in Vodou circles. The identical rituals that end both the *promès* and the *manje pov* reinforce the reading that helping children and the destitute brings good fortune. When the respective meals are finished, the guests—in one case the family children, in the other the poor, both children and adults—wash their hands in a basin containing water and basil leaves. The donor of the meal then stands in the center, and all guests wipe their hands on his or her clothing, face, arms, and legs.

By far the largest proportion of resources, time, and energy in the urban Vodou context is expended on service to the *lwa*. These *lwa* are both related to and different from their West African progenitors. The religious systems of the Fon and the Yoruba, both of which made central contributions to Haitian Vodou, have complex pantheons of spirits. These spirits have hegemony over a wide variety of life domains, including natural phenomena such as thunder, wind, rain, and smallpox, as well as cultural activities such as farming and hunting. When these rich spiritual systems were transported to the Caribbean, their considerable power to make sense of the world came to focus almost exclusively on the most problematic arena of life there, the social arena. For example, Shopona, the powerful Yoruba figure associated with smallpox, was completely forgotten. Others similarly associated with the powers of nature were lost unless their skills and proclivities translated readily into the social realm. In related fashion, many spirits were redefined in the New World setting. The Yoruba Ogun (the Fon Gu), a patron of metalsmithing, hunting, and warfare, came to be understood exclusively as a warrior in Haiti. This pervasive socialization of the divine occurred when West Africans were brought to the New World, and it happened again in new ways when their descendants were forced from rural homelands into the cities. Among the Gède (generalized spirits of the dead) recognized in Port-au-Prince are an automobile mechanic, a dentist, and a Protestant missionary. And Azaka, a *lwa* who is a peasant farmer, functions in his urban incarnations mainly as a voice reminding the dispersed of the importance of maintaining contacts with the extended family.

In the Haitian countryside (probably to a greater extent in former times than now) the various *lwa* are organized into several *nanchò* (nations). The names of these—for example, Kongo, Ibo, Wangol, Nago, Rada, Petro—almost all point to specific areas or groups in the African homeland. In the cities this complex of spirit nations has been synthesized into two major groupings, the Rada and the Petro. Within Vodou lore and practice these two groups are understood as fundamentally different, even oppositional. For example, mixing of the altars of the two pantheons

is prohibited. Furthermore, even though both may be saluted in the course of a single evening, clearly articulated ritual transitions create buffer zones between the two groups.

The opposition between Rada and Petro can be best understood as a contrast between the quite different modes of relationship that each group represents. The Rada *lwa* are the "sweet" spirits. They are served with sweet foods and drink. The ambiance of their possession performances is intimate and warm. Even those Rada *lwa* who are awesome in their wisdom and power are treated with a respect that is transparent to the affection that underlies it. Rada spirits are *rasin* ("root") *lwa*. They are also said to be *frangine* (African). They are, in short, family, and the mode in which one serves them reflects this. While fidelity and caution are required in the service of the Rada *lwa*, these spirits are not overly strict in their dealings with the living. If a promised feast cannot be offered to them one year, they can be persuaded to wait until the next. The Petro *lwa* by contrast are characterized as "hot" spirits. Their possession performances often play at the border of violence and destructiveness. In like fashion, the unfaithful or careless devotee does not escape punishment. Why then would anyone serve the Petro *lwa?* Because they have access to realms of life that the Rada spirits do not. The power of the Rada *lwa* derives from their wisdom, including herbal knowledge. The power of the Petro *lwa* by contrast extends over, but is not limited to, the arenas of money and commerce. The Petro *lwa*, whose iconographic repertoire includes intricate and intense drum rhythms as well as police whistles, whips, and knives, are the spiritual incarnation of the plantation owners and their neocolonial equivalents—the mulatto elite who control the wealth of the country and the American and European businesspeople who profit from the labor of the poor. The opposition between Rada and Petro is thus aptly described as that between family members and foreigners, or insiders and outsiders. Not incidentally, the Petro *lwa* also chart a course for the person who would assert his or her individual needs over and against the demands of family. The two pantheons, Rada and Petro, thus offer different rewards and are in turn characterized by different modes of sociality. Relationships with spirits in both realms require reciprocity. However, exchanges with the Rada spirits take place in a warm familial atmosphere characterized by compassion, while those with the Petro *lwa* operate according to impersonal and inflexible rules and are thus pervaded with caution and anxiety.

The difficulty ethnographers have experienced in attempting to create a definitive list of the Vodou *lwa* is well known. The reason for this difficulty is rather simple: no such list is possible because the *lwa* are inherently mercurial. They are more accurately described as ways of being in the world, subject to endless transmutation through experience, than as beings per se. For example, the Haitians will say that there is one Ogou; they will also say that there are seven or twenty-one. In fact, there are probably many more than twenty-one that could be identified in the Port-au-Prince region alone. Each is an extension and elaboration of the central character of the warrior spirit Ogou. In his various manifestations Ogou plays across the full range of the constructive and destructive uses of power and aggression. For example, there is the politician Ogou Panama. There is the drunkard Ogou Yamson. There is Ogou Fèray the general, and Ogou Badagri the heroic soldier. Moreover, the individual personalities of the *lwa* are not exactly mercurial but similarly multifaceted. A particular

lwa can exhibit power, dispense wisdom, and give solace and practical advice. But the same spirit can also—the particulars of his or her personality permitting—whine, pout, needle, harass, and become wantonly destructive. It is impossible, therefore, to group the Vodou spirits according to the moral categories of good and evil. Each spirit, Petro as well as Rada, has both constructive and destructive dimensions, and these change as the character of a *lwa* is applied to a particular life situation through the medium of possession performance. The *lwa* thus do not so much set examples for the living as they hold up mirrors that clarify certain aspects of the lives of those who serve them.

Treatment in the Vodou System

Vodou priests and priestesses treat a wide variety of *pwoblèm*, "problems." Clients come to them for help with love, work, and family problems as well as with sickness. The first determination that a Vodou healer must make is whether the problem "comes from God." If a problem is determined to have been sent by God, it is then seen as "natural" in the sense of that which is meant to be, that which is unavoidable.

When Catholicism blended with African religious traditions to create Vodou, the great West African sky gods, progenitors of human and divine beings alike, were absorbed into Bondyè (God). Bondyè (literally, the "good god") is the one and only god and is clearly distinguishable from the *lwa*, who are sometimes said to be his "angels." A popular Haitian proverb emphasizes the message that is contained in the name of god itself: "Bondyè bon" (God is good). As a result, if a problem, usually a physical illness in this case, is understood as coming from Bondyè, then it works to the greater good, even though this fact is unlikely to be apparent to the sufferer. No priest or priestess will interfere in such a case.

However, if a problem is determined to come from what some Haitians call "supernatural" causes, it is then thought to be appropriate for treatment within the Vodou system. It is important to remember that Haitians do not live in a two-story universe. God and the spirits are an intersecting dimension of life; they are not denizens of a separate realm. When they call a problem "supernatural," it means two things: the problem is not part of the natural order, meaning part of what is fated to be, and it is likely to have been caused by the spirits. Health problems that have a history of being resistant to scientific medical treatment often end up in the Vodou temple, where that very resistance is taken as a sign of the spirit-connected nature of the ailment. In fact, most problems are diagnosed as supernatural in origin or, if not specifically caused by the spirits, then at least falling within the province of their curative powers.

Once the preliminary determination is made that a particular problem is suitable for treatment, the *manbo* or *oungan* sets out to discover more about its nature and origins. Clients do not present themselves to Vodou healers with a detailed list of their symptoms. According to tradition, nothing more is required than a statement such as: "M'pa bon. M'pa genyen chans" ("I'm not well. I don't have any luck"). From this point, it is up to the priest or priestess to determine the nature of the problem, as well as its cause and cure. This is usually accomplished through divination.

The most popular form of divination used in Port-au-Prince is card-reading. However, gazing into a candle flame may be used or other more exotic techniques, such as pouring a small amount of alcohol into the top of a human skull and then reading the patterns made by the liquid moving along the cranial grooves—a very graphic appeal to the wisdom of the ancestors! For card divination, an ordinary deck is used with all cards below the seven removed. After lighting a candle and praying, the *manbo* or *oungan* offers the cards to the client for cutting. These are then laid out in four rows of eight in front of the healer. The whole process is repeated twice, once to determine the best description of the problem and once to track down its supernatural connections. After the first spread, the healer begins tapping the cards in patterns dictated by his or her own inner perceptions. Occasionally a question will be raised or a statement made. For example: "There is trouble in your house. I see fighting." The client is free to say yes or no without prejudice. Gradually, through a series of such statements and responses, the contours of the problem reveal themselves. It should be emphasized that while this is clearly not a miraculous procedure or even one requiring extrasensory perception, it nevertheless calls on the intuitive skills of the practitioner and represents an important step in the curing. When the problem is articulated through this gradual dialectical process, its definition may well surprise even the client. I once witnessed a session in which a mother brought her young daughter for help because the child would not eat, was losing her hair, and had run away from home. In the course of settling on the appropriate description of the problem, the *manbo* uncovered something that was unknown to the mother and unspoken before by the daughter: the girl's stepfather was sexually abusing her.

Once a full picture of the problem emerges, the healer then lays out the cards once more to determine its cause or origin: "I see the spirits love you a lot. Ezili especially. Did you promise you were going to do something for her and then not do it?" By this means a complete diagnosis is made.

Diagnoses point to disruptions in relationships. Often the relation in question is with the spirits themselves. Broken promises, lax or insufficient offerings, or refusal of the spiritual vocation the *lwa* have chosen for a person can all be reasons for trouble. Many *manbo* and *oungan* have dramatic stories to tell about their own efforts to resist the desire of the *lwa* that they take the *asson*, that is, undergo initiation to the priesthood. One woman was hospitalized three times and given last rites on two occasions for an intestinal disorder, the cause of which medical doctors could never determine. (Eventually she obeyed the *lwa*, and thereafter she reported that she experienced no further health problems.) Obligations incurred or promises broken by family members generations back can emerge as the cause of the contemporary individual's troubles.

However, as was seen in the case of the sexually abused child, it is not always the spirits who cause a problem. For example, the cards often reveal that someone is suffering because of the "jealousy" of other persons. Jealousy is understood to be such a strong emotion that the lives of its targets can be seriously disrupted. Within the Vodou system the object of jealousy rarely escapes at least part of the burden of blame. Such an attitude reflects a society in which it is expected that anyone who has much should give much. Thus, a wealthy person is almost by definition thought to be stingy, and a very lucky person is suspected of having done "work with the left hand." A less serious but related diagnosis is that someone is suffering from "eyes." This mildly unsettling condition comes from the fact that too many people are paying attention to that individual. It may be that there is gossip circulating. With both jealousy and eyes, as with several other diagnostic categories, the troubled relationships are among the living. In such situations the spirits are called on for help, but there is no sense in which they are seen as causing the problem.

Sorcery and Ethics

Disruptions in relations with the spirits cause serious problems, yet in many ways it is an even more serious situation if, in the course of a "treatment," it is discovered that a person's problems arise from the fact that another human being has done "work" against them. The range of magical actions that fall under the category of "work" is considerable. It may only be that a rejected lover has gone to the *manbo* or *oungan* for a love charm, or it may be something more serious, such as an act of sorcery performed by a vengeful neighbor.

For example, sorcery is frequently implicated when a diagnosis is made that a woman has "fallen into perdition." "Perdition" is a condition that befalls a pregnant woman in which the child in her womb is "held" or "tied" to prevent it from growing. When a woman who has missed one or more menstrual periods and assumes herself to be pregnant experiences a discharge of blood, she suspects that she may have "fallen into perdition." In all pregnancies it is believed that the menstrual blood that would ordinarily exit from the body each month is held in the womb where it serves as nourishment for the child. In a state of perdition the nourishing blood bypasses the fetus. The fetus, however, is not expelled but held inside the mother. Fetuses are believed to be able to stay in a state of arrested growth for years until something is done to "cut off" the perdition or "untie" the child. When that is accomplished the monthly blood flow stops, and the child begins to do its "work" within the womb. The infant born nine months later is the one who was conceived before the state of perdition began. Falling into perdition can be caused by several things. It can be caused if "cold" is allowed to enter the womb. It can be caused by restive *lwa* or ancestral spirits. However, work of the left hand, specifically sorcery, is the most frequent diagnosis. All children, but especially the unborn, are said to be susceptible to being "caught" by a work of sorcery directed against a family.[7]

There is an underlying belief in what might be called an economy of energy in Haitian attitudes toward sorcery or the work of the left hand. A rather flat-footed way of articulating the content of this belief would be to say: nothing comes for free. For example, there is a significant distinction made in the types of powers that a person can call on for help in this life. There are first of all *espri fami* (family spirits), and then there are *pwe achte* (literally, "points that have been purchased"). Most often residing in some tangible object such as a stone or bottle (the "point"), these spirits are either the souls of persons who died without family, ceremony, or burial, or they are the free-floating spirits of another, often malevolent, sort.

Serving family spirits entails obligations that may strain resources and energy; however, the demands of family spirits theoretically never escalate beyond reason. Within a given family the living and the spirits are interdependent in a way that makes both parties exercise restraint. Powers that have been purchased are another matter. While it is understood that they may be extremely effective, they have neither history nor loyalty to curb their rapacious appetites. Consequently, working with the left hand leads all too easily to an ascending spiral of obligations. Stories are frequently told of *manbo* and *oungan* who turned to sorcery in a desperate moment and then found it impossible to extricate themselves. First they lost members of their family; finally they lost their own lives. This belief that a person ultimately pays for what is gained through illegitimate means is one moral force within Vodou that curbs the wanton practice of sorcery.

Another moral force is the belief that only in extreme circumstances may one use sorcery to harm another, and only if one is absolutely just in doing so. For example, there was a *manbo* who lost her home through the deception of a woman friend who stole the title papers. The former friend actually went to court in an effort to claim the house for herself. The *manbo* performed a very simple act of magic (there is a widespread belief that the simplest ritual acts are the most powerful)[8] that involved dropping a "point" or charm into a latrine. As a result of this, three people either fell sick or died: the judge, the lawyer, and the erstwhile friend. When this incident was discussed within the family, someone invariably noted that the *manbo* could do this with no fear of reprisal from humans or spirits because she was so clearly in the right. The house was hers.

Yet another belief that acts to curb destructive uses of spiritual power centers on that part of Vodou associated with cemeteries. Although a version of this system operates within the cities, the pattern is clearest in the rural areas where cemeteries are still family property. The first male to be buried in a cemetery is known as the Baron Simityè, Baron of the Cemetery. When a wrong has been done to an individual or family by someone from outside that group, a simple ritual performed in the cemetery calls on Baron to send a *mò*, one of the souls of the dead, to avenge that wrong. The Baron's power can never be used, by definition, by one family member against another.

What complicates this discussion of morality and the uses of power within Vodou is the fact that it is not always possible to keep the categories clear and distinct. What is sorcery from one person's perspective is no more than what was required for an effective treatment from another's point of view. For example, love magic may heal a broken heart or soothe wounded pride, but it also necessarily involves the manipulation of the will of another. Cemeteries in Haiti are littered with the evidence of this common sort of "work." Small male and female rag dolls bound face to face and stood on their heads (inversion creates change) in a jar or drinking glass are evidence of a work designed to bring about a reunion. The same dolls bound back to back indicate that the dissolution of a troublesome relationship was the desired result. One bound with its face to the back of the other is said to be in a position to "eat" the other, that is, to take revenge. Such routine magic is within the repertoire of most Vodou healers and does not involve trafficking with suspect or "purchased" spirits.

Understandably, most priests and priestesses claim to eschew the work of the left hand. Equally understandably, rumors circulate that this one or that one "serves with

both hands." It is not unlikely that most sorcery rumors can be attributed to individuals or groups in conflict wherein each party, knowing their own spirituality to be rooted in family and tradition, can only assume that the practices of their enemies are not so rooted.

Knowledge and Power

In the course of treating a troubled person, Vodou priests and priestesses call on a variety of different types of knowledge and power. The word *konesans* (knowledge) is used to refer to learned skills such as herbalism and divination as well as to what might be called intuitive powers. The different degrees of initiation are seen as increasing *konesans*. At least part of what is meant by this is sensitivity to a sense of foreboding. The attuned person, the one with *konesans*, knows when to cancel a trip or a business appointment. At a higher level of development it may be the gift of "seeing" what is wrong with people just by looking at them. (Although called seeing, one *manbo* described its physical manifestation as a prickling in the scalp.) Many of the most sought-after Vodou healers are said to have this gift.

In addition to their own developed talents, priests and priestesses also call on a range of higher authorities in the healing process. Possession allows the healer access to the awesome wisdom and power of the *lwa*, and in fact it is often one of the *lwa* who prescribes the specifics of a cure. Quite detailed information about what should be done to treat a particular case can also come in dreams. One *manbo* said that it is usually her dead mother (a powerful *manbo* herself) appearing to her in dreams who provides the solutions to her most difficult cases.

Dreams can also function in healing ways in the lives of ordinary devotees. Dreams can give warnings about bad things to come, thus providing the means of possibly avoiding sickness or anger, robbery or accident. Both the dead and the *lwa* routinely appear in dreams to give warnings and advice. The spirits sometimes appear in dreams in the same form as they are depicted on Vodou altars. Individual *lwa* have been conflated with particular Catholic saints, and the inexpensive and popular chromolithographs of the saints have thus become the most common images of the spirits. However, it seems that even more frequently the *lwa* appear in dreams in disguise. Each dreamer has his or her own code which must be applied to interpret the dream. Often it is a friend who has a name or personal qualities reminiscent of the *lwa*'s who comes to stand for that spirit in the dream world. Thus one *manbo* said: "Last night I dreamed about Gerard. [Saint Gerard is the Catholic saint conflated with Gède, the spirit of death.] Gerard asked me how my daughter was doing, if she was out of the hospital yet. That is when I got scared for my daughter. I was afraid she might really get sick because I know everytime I dream about Gerard, that's Papa Gède."

The care given by Vodou healers ranges from truly awesome displays of power to tender solace. I know of one *manbo* who brought her severely depressed female client into her home as part of the curing process. The woman had not spoken for nearly a year following the loss of a child. This mute condition, well known in Haiti and generally seen in young women, is considered especially difficult to treat. In the early

stages of the treatment the *manbo* actually took the woman into her bed and held her until she slept. Yet treatments can also involve humiliation (e.g., being sent to the market to beg) and angry lectures from the spirits. In my experience, women healers routinely use the full range of care, from the solacing to the jarring, that is possible within the Vodou system. Male healers, by contrast, tend to remain authority figures throughout the healing process.

From a more general perspective, the jarring or confrontational aspects of Vodou healing are never separated from the overall context of familial care in which healing takes place. In fact, to make the distinction is to miss the coherence of the system. An image drawn from Haitian culture may make it easier to articulate this subtle point about the tone or ambience of caring within Vodou. Haiti is a child-centered culture. There are no events from which children are excluded. Yet the crying of infants and the misbehavior of older children are not tolerated. Crying babies are grabbed and rather roughly jostled into silence with unspoken messages that communicate at once the full attention of the caretaker and that person's unwillingness to tolerate the behavior. Older children can be given a harsh reproof at one moment and then a quick hug and kiss soon after. In a similar way traditional healers in Haiti can be possessed by an angry *lwa* without having that anger shape their personal relationship to the person seeking the cure.

The Creole verb *balanse* (to balance) has a special significance in Vodou and in healing within Vodou. When devotees take ritual objects off the altar they are instructed to *balanse*, to swing the objects from side to side. This is thought to awaken or enliven the objects and the spirits associated with them. The word can, however, be used in less constructive contexts. For example, when death touches a family it is said to "balance their house." The sense that balance is a dynamic condition is revealing, as is the notion that it comes out of opposition, whether that be the back-and-forth motion of the ritual *balanse* or the harsher clash of death against life. Within the Vodou view of things life is stirred up through opposition. This stirring and jarring, which can wound, is nevertheless healing when the clash of opposites is wisely orchestrated by the Vodou healer.

One example of a specific problem and cure will illustrate the confrontational dimension of Vodou healing. A young woman came to a *manbo* distraught, in fact nearly hysterical, because her husband had left her. In one moment the woman said she wanted her husband back; in the next she recounted a long history of his abuse. Finally, with a shrug of impatience, the *manbo* said harshly: "Pran tèt ou!" ("Get ahold of your head!"). Three ritual baths were prescribed to be administered, one each week for the next three weeks. The first bath was made from warm milk in which cinnamon sticks had been steeped. About four cups of the liquid were placed in a small enamel basin and the woman was instructed to remove her clothes. Because this was a good luck bath, the liquid was applied to the body from bottom to top, starting at the feet and stroking upward. (The reverse would operate in a bath designed to remove bad luck, a more serious condition.) The second bath was composed of various liquors and perfumes. It was applied in a similar fashion, as was the third and final glorious combination of champagne, roses, and perfume.[9] After each treatment the woman was instructed to leave the infusion on her skin without washing for three days. The first bath, she reported, made her smell of sour milk "like a baby." After it she took to her bed and cried for most of a week. She said that the second bath, in which alcohol was the dominant ingredient, burned her eyes and genitals. The second ended the tears, but she was flooded with anger. She sought out her former husband and screamed and yelled at him until the neighbors intervened. She reported nothing remarkable from the third bath beyond the fact that she no longer felt so unhappy. This sequence of baths took a woman's ambivalence about the man in her life and concretized it. The first and second baths shook loose contradictory emotions; they jarred her into powerful and direct experiences of sadness and anger. From the resulting dynamic "balance" came the possibility of the third bath, which moved her beyond the extreme moods of the first two to a less precarious emotional state, one in which she gradually was able to let go of the destructive relationship. These baths, like so many of the Vodou treatments, can also be seen as a ritual regression, a regression to infancy and then a movement back, or even as a ritual rebirth not entirely unlike that which is accomplished through the initiation ceremonies.

Conclusion

"Moun fèt pou mouri," people are born to die—the saying reveals the Haitian's sense that life is both short and painful. This verdict cannot change; it can only be accepted. Yet in the midst of the struggle that is life it is possible to enhance one's *chans* (luck) and minimize the *mizè* (suffering). This is accomplished in two ways: first, by respectful attention to the web of sustaining human relationships that defines family, and second, through conscientious service to the spirits who are after all members of one's own extended family, even—from one perspective, at least—parts of oneself. The spirits are served by the parent (fictive or actual) in the name of the family. In order to serve the family well in this role, the priest or priestess must have *konesans*: knowledge, intuition, insight into human and spiritual affairs. Such knowledge is most often rooted in the *oungan*'s or *manbo*'s own experience of suffering. To *kouche* (lie down, sleep, give birth, die, and, specifically, to be initiated) is to take the risk necessary to be healed oneself and through that process to enhance and focus one's power and knowledge in order to heal others. Once gained, *konesans* carries with it a moral obligation that it be used justly and respectfully. Thus, the *manbo* or *oungan* is one who knows how to *eshofe*, to raise the life energy in individuals and groups, human and divine. Power thus mobilized can then be concentrated in *pwe* (points) which are the concrete embodiments of relationships human and divine. Problems properly articulated in the concrete can be healed. One can pick up the *pwe* and *balanse*—turn the point upside down and bring about change that heals.

Notes

1. Claude Lévi-Strauss, chapter 1, "The Science of the Concrete," in *The Savage Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 1–33.
2. As will be seen below, there is a sense in which the dead continue to exist; however, none of the living would consider this existence superior to his or her own. Thus immortality does not function as a reward for sacrifices made in the present life.

3. A partial qualification to this characterization exists in the large numbers of homosexual priests who have genuine power and prestige within Vodou. This is somewhat surprising given the extreme homophobia in Haitian culture. However, it is only a partial qualification because many of these priests are more accurately described as bisexuals. They often have traditional families.
4. See William Bascom, *The Yoruba of Southwestern Nigeria* (New York, 1969); also Melville Herskovits, *Dahomey: An Ancient West African Kingdom*, 2 vols. (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1967).
5. Marriage to a Vodou spirit—a ritual complete with marriage license, an exchange of rings (wherein the spirit is represented by his or her *chwal*), a wedding cake, and, on occasion, champagne—is a ritual that does not demand that a person experience possession. It nevertheless involves a life-long commitment to the spirit. One day a week is dedicated to the spirit spouse. Special colors sacred to the *lwa* must be worn on that day, and the devotee must sleep alone so that the spirit may appear in dreams.
6. "Taking the *asson*" as a path to gaining status as a priest or priestess is a ritual performed mainly in the south of Haiti and in Port-au-Prince. In the northern part of the country such status is conferred by virtue of family position or reputation as a healer. The initiation rituals are costly for those who take the *asson*. It may be partly as a result of economic factors that individuals sometimes claim to have received priestly training in dreams, visions, or periods of time spent "under the water."
7. Gerald F. Murray, "Women in Perdition: Ritual Fertility Control in Haiti," in *Culture, Natality and Family Planning*, eds. John F. Marshall and Steven Polgar, 59–78 (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1976).

   Murray points out that the socially useful part of this explanatory scheme is that, in providing the possibility of a pregnancy much longer than nine months, a woman can claim the father of her child to be almost anyone with whom she has ever had sexual relations. This in turn allows her to choose among fathers the one who is most likely to be able to give meaningful support. Given the current social instability all over Haiti, finding men with the means and temperament to be responsible fathers is one of the major problems faced by women.
8. See Serge Larose, "The Meaning of Africa in Haitian Vodu," in *Symbols and Sentiments: Cross-Cultural Studies in Symbolism*, ed. Ioan Lewis, 85–116 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977).
9. The ingredients for Vodou treatments are paid for by the client. Fees for the healer beyond the cost of materials are understood to be gifts, and theoretically it is up to the client to decide how much he or she will offer. In practice, however, the range of what is appropriate is usually well known to clients without their asking. It is worth noting that many of the most sought-after healers are not prosperous persons. They adhere strictly to the tradition that healing powers are not to be used for inordinate profit.

Chapter 2

Vodou in Haiti: Way of Life and Mode of Survival

Claudine Michel

Si se pate bon Ginen sa-a,
nou tout ta peri deja . . .
If it were not for the Guinea lwa,
we would all have perished already
Ayibobo!!!

—*Fleurant, Dancing Spirits, p. 155*

This chapter originates in the movement of rediscovery and rehabilitation of religions and modes of spirituality of indigenous peoples with a long history of subjugation and whose beliefs have been dismissed continually as primitive if not downright evil. Animism, fetishism, paganism, heathenism, and black magic are some of the terms that have been used improperly in the West to describe the Haitian religion, which is presented in the foreign press and the media as a religion of blood and sacrifice, as a religion of sexual orgies and malevolence, thus resulting in the widely shared perception that the practice of Vodou equals sorcery and witchcraft.[1] This work is revisionist in that it recasts the values and principles inherent in the Vodou religion, in particular its humanism and sense of communality, and emphasizes the complexities behind the way these values are transmitted from one generation to the next in Vodou communities. It also shows how this New World religion combines and recombines the Africanisms from which it originates with its American and Creole realities.[2]

Vodou, presented in the West in opposition to *true religion*, does not, in effect contrast with *Western religions* as much as the media would like us to believe. The contrast is with the Christian churches and the established religions of the West, their