

MAYA DEREN

DIVINE HORSEMEN

The Living Gods of Haiti

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contains it. The moment of death, then, is a separation, forever, of this life force from the flesh, the matter. And this invisible force is, in turn, more than the energy of matter as manifest in movement; it is also an energy of mind, the capacity for memory and meaning, for discrimination and invention. Whether called intelligence, consciousness, spirit or soul, it is the invisible action within man which motivates and molds his visible acts and expressions.

The Haitian myth couches this primary contemplation in its own language. It proposes as basic, a generic distinction between visible matter and les Invisibles. By this term it describes a relationship relative to our senses; but the nature itself of les Invisibles, the forces or spirits whose presence in matter constituted a state of life and whose permanent withdrawal constitutes a state of death, is known as *esprit*. For the Haitian, this "spirit" is not some vague, mystical evanescence. In colloquial speech he says that a man has "pil esprit" (much spirit) and means, by this, that the man has great intelligence. *Esprit*, then is a reference to the energy and action of the mind which, as a state of consciousness and as a repository of material and moral knowledge and experience, is the source and the act of judgment, decision, desire and of all the motivation and the will projected in a man's visible action.

The energy of matter is common to all living matter. The lament for the dead is not for this fractional diminution of either the cosmic life force or the cosmic consciousness as a vast anonymous generality. Intelligence which, with death, ceases to be manifest, is at once common to all men and is particular to each. It is the source and means of each man's singular identity. We mourn not man, but a man; and we lament not for his lot, but for our own. His death is as the closing of a door upon that singular, particular self which, projected through his flesh, nourished the world of substance which we shared. We mourn this man because to us his spirit was not like any other. The moment of death is as a separation of a mold from the form to which it had transferred all the

THE MORTAL ME: THE IMMORTAL MYSELF

We look at the corpse and we know that it is dead because we know and we remember what it is to be alive. A critical change has occurred. Yet all that is visible is merely the evidence of this event. The root of the difference is invisible. The stillness of the corpse is, in itself, no different from the stillness of a sleeper. We know that it is not sleep because we know that it is forever; but this foreverness, this time, is itself invisible. The stillness, even of the heart, is evidence of death but is not itself death, just as movement—the mobility as of an object moved—is not always evidence of life and is certainly not life itself. So we are forced to conceive of life as an inner power, a force which may be manifest in the movement of the matter which

particularities of its configuration. As the integrity of the mold's form is destroyed by the act of separation, so the flesh perishes. But the form, the self which had been cast, is non-material, hence is immortal—an identity, invisible but real, acknowledged in common and known by a name.

This self, this form, the Haitian calls the *gros-bon-ange*.^{*} It is born of the body, and may be imagined as the shadow of a man cast upon the invisible plane of a fourth dimension, or as his reflection in a dark mirror. The *gros-bon-ange* is the metaphysical double of the physical being, and, since it does not exist in the world of matter, it is the immortal twin who survives the mortal man. It is these immortal twins, these *gros-bon-anges* of the deceased, who are les Invisibles or les esprits.

The Haitian *gros-bon-ange* is similar to what we understand by a man's soul, if we think of the soul as duplicating the man and not as a moral force of a "higher" nature. The universal commitment towards good, the notion of truth as desirable, all that conscience which, in our culture, is understood as a function of the soul is, for the Haitian, the function of a third element in man, the *ti-bon-ange*. It is the *ti-bon-ange*, for example, that cannot lie. But the very impersonality of this conscience, its detachment from the pressures of actuality, its imperviousness both to development and corruption, its changelessness inspires, in the Haitian, a somewhat reciprocal detachment. He accepts the *ti-bon-ange* as one of the constants of the cosmos. It is as if he said to himself: although all men have a conscience, yet some men do good and some do bad. Therefore, what he does depends on his *gros-bon-ange*. It is what a man does, and not whether he feels satisfaction or remorse, which is important to other men. Of what consequence is the private sentiment of a man if he has not the necessary knowledge or experience or energy or power to act

^{*} *Gros-bon-ange* is used when referring to the souls of living men; *esprit* may mean "intelligence" in the living, but when used as "un esprit" or "les esprits" it refers to the immortal souls of the dead, or what was known, during lifetime, as the *gros-bon-ange*.

upon it? In a collective community, where men are interdependent, the collective welfare cannot be entrusted either to the vagaries of subjective conscience, or to the "free" or "natural" development of the *gros-bon-ange*. The entire Haitian religion is, in fact, structured for the controlled development of a man's *gros-bon-ange* and the enforcement of a collective morality in action.

So, for the Haitian, the significant morality—that which is manifest in actuality—is the product of the flesh and therefore shares its nature. In Voudoun the cosmic drama of man consists not of a dualism, a conflict of the irreconcilable down-pull of flesh and the up-pull of spirit; it is, rather, an almost organic dynamic, a process by which all that which characterizes divinity—intelligence, power, energy, authority, wisdom—evolves out of the flesh itself. Instead of being eternally separated, the substance and the spirit of a man are eternally and mutually committed: the flesh to the divinity within it and the divinity to the flesh of its origin.

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THE BIRTH OF A DIVINITY

The *gros-bon-ange*, as the repository of a man's history, his form and his force, the final resultant of his ability, intelligence and experience, is a precious accumulation. If, after his death, his descendants were able to provide this disembodied soul with some other means of manifestation to substitute for the flesh which perished, they could salvage this valuable legacy. One of the major Voudoun rituals is the ceremony of *retirer d'en bas de l'eau*, the reclamation of the soul of the deceased from the waters of the abyss, the world of les Invisibles. This service for the ancestral dead is not a nostalgia or sentimentality. The poor, and those who live in difficult primitive circumstances, cannot afford superfluous expenditures of either energy or property. It is not a moment of return to the past; it is the procedure by which the race reincorporates the fruit of previous

life-processes into the contemporary moment, and so retains the past as a ground gained, upon and from which it moves forward to the future. The living do not serve the dead; it is the dead who are made to serve the living.

The ceremony of reclamation is as the third and final birth of a man. He emerged into the world, for the first time, as an animal. Initiation was his second birth, as a proper man. And this soul which, with death and the perishing of the flesh, was lost to the visible world is brought back into it once more. The clay jar, or *govi*, in which it is placed at this ceremony is a substitute for the vessel of flesh which once contained it. Out of the mouth of that jar issue the counsels and wisdoms by which the deceased continues to aid and advance his descendants.

An undistinguished member of the family may be neglected and the costly ceremony of his reclamation repeatedly postponed, to be accomplished eventually, without much enthusiasm, only because nothing of heredity's accumulations should be permitted to leak away, to be lost for ever. At the Feast for the Dead, a sense of filial loyalty may induce the immediate descendants to name such departed ones individually; or later, they may be so remembered because of some intimate, personal sympathy. But such individual recognition is rare, and these undistinguished dead become known as that anonymous heritage, *les Morts*.¹ On the other hand, the person who has been distinguished for his wisdom or power, love or therapies, disciplines or skills—who has perhaps reached the rank of *houngan* (priest), with all the accomplishments that such a rank signified—is reclaimed with elaborate care, so that his special virtues may not be lost.²

In due course of time, the parent in the *govi* becomes grandparent and the grandparent becomes ancestor. As his contemporaries die off, and with them all immediate first-hand memories, the flesh of the original human personality withers away, so that there is left within the *govi* only the distilled, depersonalized, almost abstract essence of the principle that

especially characterized him. Thus, in time, *the person becomes principle*. And yet—what once was so real, so substantial, cannot be permitted to end in such rarefaction, to vanish forever into the far reaches of history. This abstraction, to function in reality, must become reality; *the principle must become person*. And so the process of abstraction, as though meeting, finally, the limits of its own extension, curves back toward its origins: those who cannot remember begin to create, building now from the inside outward, as one might be guided by the clues and logic of a skeleton to construct a figure. In time, the ancestor becomes archetype.³ Where there was once a person, there is now a personage. Transposed to this dimension, the summoned voice in the *govi* is no longer intimate, advisory; it is an objective oracular authority that booms as if from the bowels of the earth.⁴ What was once believed, is now believed in. He who was once respected is now revered. Where once the parent inspired filial devotion, the deity now exacts dedication. The ancestor has been transfigured into a god.

Death had deprived the *gros-bon-ange* of its own living form; the memory of the living had reclaimed it and given it voice. Time was a distance separating it from its immediate descendants, from the too-intimate prejudice of such proximity. In a sense, it became purified of human ego. Only after such purification could it achieve the powers of divinity. The special power of the *loa*, or *les Mystères*, as the Haitian calls those *esprits* who have achieved some degree of divine elevation, is that of becoming manifest in a living form. Under certain well-defined and ritualistically determined conditions, the *loa* may temporarily displace the *gros-bon-ange* of a living person and become the animating force of that physical body. This we know as "possession". In the terminology of Voudoun, it is said that the *loa* "mounts" a person, or that a person is "mounted" by the *loa*. The metaphor is drawn from a horse and his rider and the actions and events which result are the expression of the will of the rider. Since the conscious self of the possessed person is, meanwhile, absent, he cannot and does

not remember the events; he is not responsible, either for good or for bad; and he cannot, as a person, himself benefit from that possession. The function and purpose of such divine manifestation is the reassurance and the instruction of the community.

The complete process can be understood as a closed chain circling life and death.* The power of the loa to become manifest in living matter marks their final mastery of matter. The interlocking mechanism of the links is a system of partial and progressive ambiguities, clearly apparent in the succession of receptacles for the *gros-bon-ange*, which in part overlap and yet are graduated. The *gros-bon-ange* may be separated from the body even during the lifetime, and stored in a bottle, as a kind of isolation from malevolent forces. At the *canzo* ceremony—the ceremony of initiation or spiritual birth**—the *gros-bon-ange* is placed in a *canari* (clay pot) or *pot-de-tête* (receptacle for the “head”, soul or mind) and left in the care of the houngan or some trustworthy person. At death this *pot-de-tête* is broken, to release the *gros-bon-ange* to the waters of the abyss; but one year later, this receptacle is replaced, at the moment of reclamation, by the *govi*, in which the soul, now referred to as an *esprit*, is lodged once more and which is as a throat, making speech possible. Thus far the graduated progression of receptacles is evident, and each step is achieved with ritual. But the decisive moment, when the ancestral soul, passed down from generation to generation in the *govi*, emerges finally from this clay shell as loa, is beyond the will of man and the prejudicial power of their prayers. It is as an interlocking of links that takes place beyond the scope of an immediately cognized time and space, as if in the outer reaches of the cosmos. There is no ritual either to make or even to mark this ultimate transfiguration.⁵ It is a moment as unknown, as unwitnessed

* Campbell's (p. 29) discussion and elaboration of the circular life-death concept in other mythologies and as a universal mythological concept, illuminates the Haitian concept and it is apparent, once more, that, far from being a collection of miscellaneous superstitions, Voudoun is a religion of classic mythological character.

** This ceremony will be described *infra*, pp. 220-2.

as the very origin of the first physical life, and it results in physical life. Unlike the mere ancestral spirit which must be passed down in a *govi*, the loa are part of the very blood of the race, and are inherited automatically. They can neither be denied nor destroyed. They may also be lodged in a *govi* or in stones, but these are as secondary residences. Just as a child's physical body inevitably is issue of the physical component of his parents, so his loa are his psychic inheritance* and they carry forward, into his contemporary *gros-bon-ange*, the moral accumulation of the race.⁶

This automatic inheritance is not at all contradicted by the apparent power of discrimination and selection implied in the phrase “temperament *mun*, ce temperament loa/li” (the character of a person is the character of his loa). If the original families were each distinguished by certain of the major loa, intermarriage has, by now, introduced all the major loa into all the family lines and all major loa-principles are latent in everyone. The reference to the sympathetic relationship between the character of a person and that of his loa relates to the *maît-tête*, the “master of the head”, or the loa which is dominant above all others in the psyche of an individual. It may also refer to the particular aspect of the loa (since these major principles may be manifest in various aspects, i.e., Ogoun as the primal hero archetype or as a more recent warrior, etc.) which is carried in

* When the Haitian says “inherits” he does not understand it (as we do in our culture) to be an element distinct from and even opposed to environment. The conditions of family life in Haiti are such that in effect the two ideas are virtually identical. As in all primitive communities, the family is a tightly knit, cohesive and continuous entity, and is the basic unit of the communal structure, rather than the individual. In sheer geographical terms, even the grandfather does not become part of one's past, since one rarely moves away. He is there today as part of one's present. Certainly this is true of one's parents. The transmission of principles, as loa, from parent and even grandparent to child, is not, then, so very mystical as might be understood from the word “inherit”. To say that one has inherited the father's Ghede or the mother's Erzulie is to say (if one were to translate the concept into the logic of our culture) that the father has contributed to one's make-up a sense of and concern for the idea of death and resurrection as contained in the Ghede complex, or that from one's mother one has “learned” the importance of love and the dream of beauty which is Erzulie.

the head of a person. In any case, the ambiguity of the phrase is significant. It can imply, for example, that Ogoun, who is the deity of power, confers the favor of his presence and guardianship on a person whose temperament he has found sympathetic; but it can also mean that a person selects, concentrates on, becomes obsessed by and possessed by the deity who personifies his own personal emphasis. Or, finally, it suggests that the two processes may operate simultaneously. In any case, the fact remains that a person who has been possessed by Ogoun is one who emphasizes the principle of power or strength in his own activities.

If this emphasis has been expressed in his life to a remarkable degree, he will be remembered, after death, for this distinguishing characteristic. As time passes and he becomes, to the living, that depersonalized abstraction which is an ancestor, he may then be assimilated into the concept Ogoun, and so lose his identity altogether in that of the great loa; or his name may be incorporated in the invocation to Ogoun; or, again, if his way of strength was a very distinctive variation on the traditional pattern, he may even become a deity under his own name, a deity understood to be one of the family of Ogouns. By this process, a potentially infinite number of ancestral spirits become condensed into a feasible number of variations of the principled archetypes.

The immediate descendants of the deceased, who may be subject to vanity or other selfishly personal motivations, can do no more than lay the foundations of ultimate elevation into loa by reclaiming the parental soul from the abyss. Time must pass, the purification by time must take place, and the gradual process of abstraction. There is no loa who can be remembered as human being.⁷ Even the *gros-bon-ange*, or the *esprit*, as a singular identity, must cease to be. In the final analysis it is not the ancestor who is worshipped; and the final verdict, the last transfiguration and resurrection, the ultimate elevation into divinity, is in the hands of history and the collective.

Deification, therefore, does not consist in the spiritualization

of matter; on the contrary, the ceremony of *retirer d'en bas de l'eau*, which is itself the ritualistic reversal of the rites of death, restores the disembodied soul to the physical, living universe which was its origin and, in so doing, restores to it a major portion of its original material attributes. The Haitian is an eminently realistic, reasonable man. His loa must share the needs as well as the privileges of life; to have great power is to need great energy. And so the loa, like living, functioning matter, have an unrelenting need for sustenance if their life energies are to be maintained. The physical feasting of the loa is at once the most common and the most important of the obligations of a worshipper.

The entire chain of interlocking links—life, death, deification, transfiguration, resurrection—churns without rest through the hands of the devout. None of it is ever forgotten: that the god was once human, that he was made god by humans, that he is sustained by humans. Hence the Haitian loa, however revered and honored, do not have that quality of absolutism which, in another culture, might characterize the deity of presumably supernatural origin.* The loa bow to the priest, are hurt by disrespect, weep for neglect. And the worshipper is devout but demanding; he both begs and bargains. If he expects and accepts the constant intervention of the loa in the daily affairs of his life, it is not because he has an easy belief in miracle; it is because he does not regard such intervention as miraculous. The undertone of his devotion is, rather, that it is the duty of the loa to intervene; for the *gros-bon-ange*, from which it derives, was itself created by life and was reincorporated into life at the ceremony of the *retirer d'en bas de l'eau*.

* It is significant that the loa who were *houngans* or *mambos* during their lifetime—in other words, the ancestral divinities who derive from men—are considered to be "stronger" than those which are cosmic forces, of cosmic origin.