

# Creole Religions of the Caribbean

*An Introduction from Vodou and Santería  
to Obeah and Espiritismo*

Margarite Fernández Olmos and  
Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert



2003

NEW YORK UNIVERSITY PRESS

*New York and London*

## *The Lwa*

The spirits and the people that are at the center of the Vodou *ounfo* are bound together as a spiritual community. They are bound by their belief in a distant and somewhat impersonal power, which is superior to that of the *lwa* but not very involved or interested in human affairs. His will and power is channeled through the *lwa*, the focus of most Vodou ceremonies.

The rituals through which the *lwa* are called upon to communicate with humans conform to one of two major rites, *Rada* and *Petwo*, which although manifestly different, share many common elements. The *Rada* rite can be traced back to the kingdom of Dahomey, in what are now

Nigeria, Benin, and Togo. This rite is generally considered to be the most faithful to ancient African traditions, and to many, the most genuine. The Rada spirits are invariably portrayed as *dous* (*doux* or sweet-tempered). The Rada pantheon boasts the great lwa, or *fle Ginen*, the first to be saluted in ceremonies: Atibon Legba, Marasa Dosou Dosa, Danbala and Ayida Wedo, Azaka Mede, Ogou Feray, Agwe Tawoyo, Ezili Freda Daome, Lasirenn and Labalenn, and Gede Nimbo. The Petwo rite does not lay claim to the same connection to the ancestral spirits. The Petwo spirits are recognized as Creole or Haitian-born lwa, born in the crucible of the plantation and often incorporating beliefs and ritual practices drawn from central and southwest African groups such as the Kongo and Angola—late arrivals in the New World. Whereas the Rada lwas are thought to be *dous*, Petwo lwas are considered to be *anme* (*amer* or bitter). They are associated with fire and said to be lwa cho (*low chaud* or hot lwa) who display forceful and violent behavior. The Petwo pantheon includes major lwa such as Met Kalfou, Simbi Andezo, Ezili Danto, and Bawon Samdi. Many of the lwa, however, exist *andezo*, or in two cosmic substances, and are served in both Rada and Petwo rituals.

### Legba

The most important place in the Vodou pantheon belongs to Legba or Papa Legba, the god who “removes the barriers” and is the first lwa to be saluted during ceremonies, with the characteristic plea for the opening of the gates: *Atibô-Legba, l’uvri bayé pu mwè, agoé!* As the interpreter to the gods, Legba’s permission must be asked for before any other lwa is summoned or makes an appearance, and care must be taken not to offend him, as it could result in a believer’s being deprived of the protection of his or her own lwa. As the protector of the barrier separating humans from the spirits, he is also considered to be the protector of gates and fences surrounding the house, and therefore the guardian of the home or *Mait’bitasyon* (Master of the habitation). He is also master of the roads, paths, and especially of the crossroads, where offerings are often left for him. Legba is often represented as a feeble old man leaning on a crutch, dressed in rags with a pipe in his mouth and a knapsack slung over his shoulder. Ounfos and altars may display a crutch in honor of Legba. Because of this piteous appearance he is also known as Legba-pied-cassé or Legba of the Broken Foot.

But this apparent fragility conceals terrific strength, which is displayed during possession. Legba's "horses" are jolted as if struck by lightning and thrown to the ground, where they lie motionless. Legba's role as guardian of gates and master of the crossing between humans and the lwas has resulted in his identification with Saint Peter, keeper of the keys to heaven.

### Agwé

Of all the lwa who preside over the elements, the most significant is Agwé or Agwé-taroyo, also known as Admiral Agwé. One of the primary Rada spirits, he is captain and protector of ships at sea, of all marine or aquatic life, and of fishermen. He rules the sea with his consort, Lasiren. His emblems are miniature boats with oars painted blue or green, which may be found suspended from the temple rafters, shells, small metal fish, or occasionally tridents reminiscent of the god Neptune. In the frescoes that often decorate the walls of ounfos, he is represented by steamboats with smoking funnels or warships. He may also appear in the uniform of a naval officer, with white gloves and a pith helmet, in presidential guise. Services for Agwé take place by the sea or at the edge of lakes and rivers, where his effigy (a miniature boat) is carried in a procession and loaded with his favorite drinks (often champagne) and set to float. If the boat floats to the shore it means that the offering has been refused and a new one must be made.

Occasionally members of an ounfo will hire a boat, which they will decorate with streamers, and set sail for Trois Ilets. They will play the sacred drums and dance on board until they reach their destination, at which point they will throw a white sheep into the sea as an offering to Agwé. They then depart as quickly as possible so as not to risk offending the lwa with their presence when he surfaces to seize the offering. Those possessed by Agwé have to be protected from jumping into the sea when seized by his marine nature. He is often represented by images of Saint Ulrich holding a fish.

### Lasiren

Agwé's consort, Mistress Lasiren, is a mermaid. She is linked in worship and song to the whale, Labalenn, and the two are considered either to be manifestations of the same deity, or a fusion of mother and daughter.

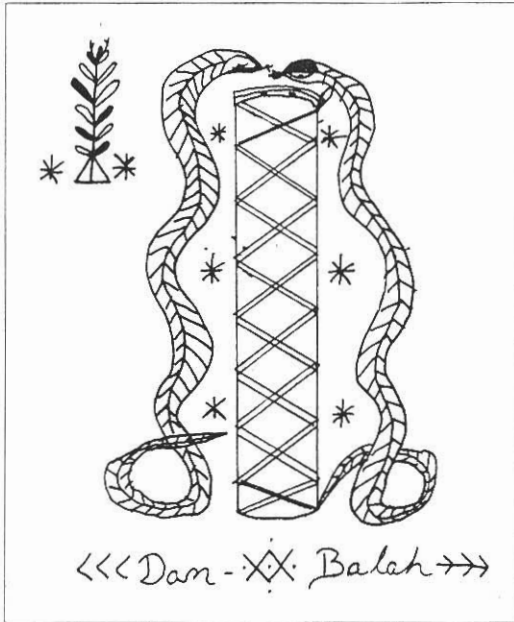
Lasiren is usually represented as a siren or mermaid, and is believed to bring good luck and wealth from the bottom of the sea. As a result, she is sometimes known as Ezili of the Waters. Like Ezili Freda or Ezili Danto, Lasiren is a seductress and those she possesses appear in the guise of a very vain young coquette. Her altar is decorated with combs, mirrors, conch shells, and bugles, and she is often represented by chromolithographs of Our Lady of Charity, the Cuban patroness (Nuestra Señora de la Caridad del Cobre).

### Zaka

Zaka (or Azaka) is the patron lwa of crops, agriculture, and of those working the land. Known as the “minister of agricultures” of the world of the lwa, he is a good-natured peasant from the mountains addressed familiarly as “Papa” or “Cousin.” Those possessed by Zaka during ceremonies dress in his characteristic peasant garb of straw hat, blue denim shirt and pants, cutlass slung across the back, raffia bag, and short clay pipe in his mouth. His “horses” speak in the rough manner of rustic peasants. He is offered typical peasant fare—boiled maize, *afibas* (stuffed pig intestines), and glasses or *clairin* (peasant-distilled white rum), and raw sugar. He is represented in chromolithographs through the image of Saint Isidore.

### Danbala

Danbala, the patriarchal serpent divinity, is one of the most popular of the Vodou lwa. He is an ancient water spirit, linked in ritual and service to rain, lightning, wisdom, and fertility. He and his wife Ayida Wedo, the rainbow, are often represented as intertwined snakes. His vévé or ritual symbol, drawn in cornmeal near the *poto mitan* in preparation for ceremonies, is shown here. In many *ounfos* a permanent basin of water, or often a sink in the *Pè*, is offered to Danbala, as he is known to haunt rivers, springs, and marshes. Since his color is white (as in the case of most lwa associated with water), food offerings to him must be white (his chief sacrificial offering is an egg). Silver, as a white metal, is under his command, and he is believed to be able to grant riches or guide humans to treasure. Those possessed by Danbala during ceremonies dart out their tongues, snakelike, crawl on the ground with sinuous movements, climb trees of the posts of the *peristil*, and have been known to land head down from the



The symbol (*vévé*) of the snake god, Damballah-wèdo

rafters like snakes. Danbala is often represented as Saint Patrick crushing the serpents of Ireland underfoot, and sometimes as the patriarchal Moses holding the Ten Commandments. In another connection to Irish lore, it is believed that whoever can grasp Ayida-wedo's diadem (the rainbow) will be assured of wealth (as in the proverbial pot of gold at the end of the rainbow).

### Bawon Samdi

Bawon Samdi (*Baron Samedi* or Baron Saturday) is the head of the Gede (or Guédé) family of raucous spirits whose activities are confined to the world of the dead, whom they are said to personify. They are not the souls of the dead but mischievous, ambivalent spirits who arrive last at Vodou ceremonies and are greeted with joy because they often bring merriment and sometimes coarse, raunchy jokes. In *Tell My Horse*, Zora Neale Hurston describes Papa Guédé as “the deification of the common people of Haiti”:

The mulattoes give this spirit no food and pay it no attention at all. He belongs to the blacks and the uneducated blacks at that. He is a hilarious divinity full of the stuff of burlesque. This manifestation comes as near a social criticism of the classes by the masses in Haiti as anything in all Haiti. . . . [H]e bites with sarcasm and slashes with ridicule the class that despises him. (1990: 219–220)

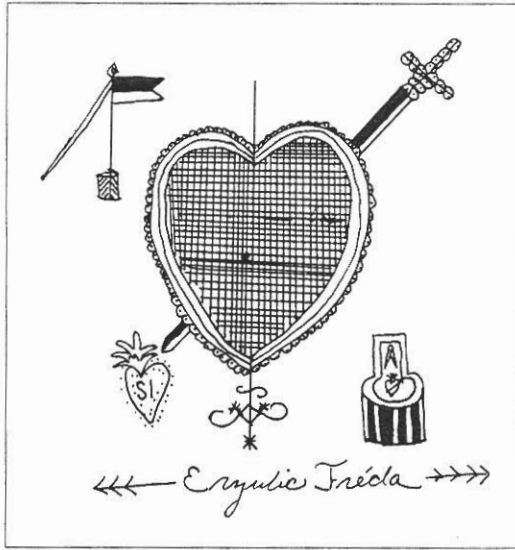
Bawon Samdi is married to Grand Brigitte, mother of the Gedes. Their devotees dress in black and purple and surround themselves with graveyard imagery. They are known for wearing top hats, old funereal frock coats, mourning dresses, and black veils. They are also known for their passion for sunglasses, which they wear in acknowledgment of the fact that they belong to the world beyond the grave and find sunlight too bright. (It is said that François Duvalier exploited the common perception of his being a devotee of the Bawon by having his personal army, the *ton-ton macoutes*, wear the dark sunglasses for which they were known as a sign of belonging to the Gedes.)

Devotions to Gede are particularly common around the Days of the Dead or the feast of All Saints (November 1) and All Souls (November 2). Those possessed by Gede sing a repertoire of obscene songs and dance his favorite dance, the *banda*, recognizable for the violent movement of the hips and lascivity. Many *ounfo* keep a large wooden phallus on the altar, used by Gede's "horses" in their suggestive dancing.

### Ezili Freda

One of the most beloved of the Haitian *lwa* is Mistress Ezili (Erzuli) Freda, goddess of love and luxury, a flirtatious light-skinned Creole known as the personification of feminine beauty and grace. She has, as Métraux describes her, "all the characteristics of a pretty mulatto: she is coquettish, sensual, pleasure-loving, and extravagant" (1972: 110). Her *vévé* invokes images of sensuality, luxury, and unrequited love.

Every Haitian *ounfo* contains a room, or corner of a room, devoted to Ezili. She adores fine clothes (red and blue dresses particularly), jewels, perfumes, and lace, all of which are kept on her altar, together with the basin, towel, soap, comb, lipstick, and other articles indispensable to her toilette. Those mounted by Ezili, whether male or female, make their entrance into the *peristil* dressed to captivate, walking slowly, swinging hips, ogling men, or pausing for a kiss or caress. Ezili Freda's colors are white



<sup>1</sup> The symbol (*vévé*) of the goddess Ezili-Freda-Dahomey

and pink, and in a rare instance of “product placement” in Haitian Vodou, her favorite brand of perfume is said to be Anaïs-Anaïs. Offerings to Ezili Freda include heavily sweetened drinks made with orange syrup or grenadine, rice cooked in cinnamon milk or bananas fried in sugar, and mild cigarettes. Ezili Freda, the *dous lwa* of the Rada rite of Dahomey, is unhappy in love and is often represented by the chromolithograph of the Mater Dolorosa in her familiar depiction with her heart pierced by a knife. In *Divine Horsemen*, Maya Deren describes how she herself was possessed by Ezili:

As sometimes in dreams, so here I can observe myself, can note with pleasure how the full hem of my white skirt plays with the rhythms, can watch, as if in a mirror, how the smile begins with the softening of lips, spreads imperceptibly into a radiance which, surely, is lovelier than any I have ever seen. It is when I turn, as if to a neighbor, to say “Look! See how lovely that is!” and see that the others are removed to a distance, withdrawn to a circle which is already watching, that I realize, like a shaft of terror struck through me, that it is no longer myself that I watch. (1953: 258–259)



### Ezili Danto

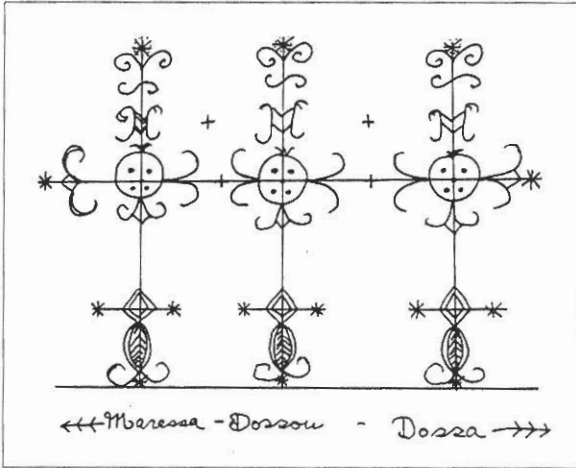
The second popular manifestation of Ezili is that of Ezili Danto, a dark skinned, hardworking peasant woman habitually dressed in blue, red, or multicolored fabrics. Like Ezili Freda she has no husband, but has a daughter, Anaïs, to whom she is devoted. The scratches on her cheek are said to be a reminder of the bitter rivalry between the two Ezilis. Her alter ego is the knife-wielding Petwo lwa Ezili-ge-rouge (Ezili Red Eyes). Offerings to Ezili Danto include scents like Florida Water, *clairin* or raw rum, fried pork, and unfiltered Camels. As the more mundane, peasant incarnation of Ezili Freda as mother, she is associated, not with the Mater Dolorosa, but with madonnas with children, like Our Lady of Mount Carmel, or black Madonnas, like Mater Salvatoris.

### Ogu

Ogu, a lwa from Dahomey of great importance in Cuban Santería, where he is the blacksmith of the mythical world, is in Haiti one of the warrior lwa, represented in ounfos by a saber stuck in the earth in front of the altar. He is also represented by the iron rod or *pince* stuck in a brazier, both symbolic of his ancient role as ironsmith. As a tutelary god whose worship dates back to mythical African wars and the Haitian Revolution, an “old veteran from the time of bayonets” (Métraux 1972: 108), people possessed by him dress in red dolman and French kepi, or simply in red scarves around head and arms, and wave a cutlass or machete. Their speech is that of a rough soldier, full of coarse oaths and violent imprecations. He is a great drinker of rum and is always depicted smoking a cigar.

### Marasa Twins

In Vodou, twins are endowed with special powers and hold a privileged position in the pantheon alongside the tutelary spirits. As the Marasa, or Sacred Twins, they are invoked and greeted in ceremonies immediately after Legba. They are often depicted as three, as seen in the *vévé* below, because twins represent abundant life, and triplets mark exceptional fertility. They are interpreted as representing the sacredness of all children, and some of the ceremonies connected to them involve children in a special way. They rarely possess devotees, but when they do, they manifest themselves as tyrannical children who roll on the floor, whimper petu-



The symbol (*vévé*) of Twins (*marassa*)

lantly, walk uncertainly, and demand food. Special meals for the twins end in a rite during which the *ounsi* mixes the remnants of a meal in a huge calabash or wooden basin, goes around the peristil three times, asking the children if they are pleased with it, and then leaves it for them. The children are expected to throw themselves at the bowl and fight for the contents.

Every "nation" of divinities has its Marasa, and as a result there are multiple manifestations of the twins in Vodou, some of them linked to the *Iwa Gede*, who has special affection for children. In chromolithographs they are most commonly portrayed as the twin saints Cosmos and Damian, and with the Virtues, called the Three Egyptians. Saint Nicholas, who brought back to life the three children placed by the butcher in the salting tub, is represented as their father; Saint Claire as their mother (Métraux 1972: 146). To obtain the favor of the Marasa one must appeal to Saint Nicholas while facing the east.