

Chapter 12

Elizabeth McAlister

A SORCERER'S BOTTLE

The Visual Art of Magic in Haiti

I stepped into a dry dusty alleyway lined with brightly painted houses in a poor neighborhood in Port-au-Prince one summer to pay my respects to the mother of a Haitian friend I know in New York. Kissing and exclaiming my way through the various homes of his family, I was weak from the unspeakable heat and the loud pounding of *Compas* music coming from outdoor speakers. At one disoriented moment I found myself shaking hands with a solid man who had small, baby-like teeth, and a huge grin (FIGURE 12.2). “If you’re really an *ethnologue* you should visit him. He’s a *bòkò*,” someone said.

A *bòkò* is a Haitian expert in supernatural matters. He is a bit of a man out for himself, a freelancer, unlike the *oungan* or *manbo* who establish religious family networks. A *bòkò* is an entrepreneur, and has a reputation as a man who will “work with both hands,” that is, for healing *and* revenge. Traditional anthropology would call him a sorcerer.

The next day I made my way to his house — one of many in a labyrinth of colored concrete boxes with tin roofs along a sewage ravine in Monatuf, a downtown Port-au-Prince slum (FIGURE 12.3). The *bòkò*, named St. Jean, invited me in, smiling to show his tobacco-stained baby teeth and speaking in a very staccato Creole. We stuck to a “nice day, nice house” sort of conversation while he treated me to swigs of *kleren* cane liquor laced, he said, with anti-poison remedy. I couldn’t help but stare at his altar, which took up most of the room. There sat an object as beautiful to my eye as it was strange: a bottle wrapped in cloth of red, white and black, with mirrors fastened around its midriff like headlights (FIGURE 12.1). Scissors, frozen in an open position and lashed to its neck, made big exes. “Nice bottle,” I said. “Thank you,” he said. “Do you want me to make you one?”

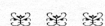
The bottle was thus commissioned; I thought of it as my first piece of art. Or was it? Right before he gave it to me, the *bòkò* turned it into a work of magic, a *wanga*.¹ He performed a ritual on it that I didn’t fully comprehend. Even after I brought the bottle home, it remained an enigma. How can a person from one culture fully understand an object from another culture? I decided to work to find out what this *wanga* was, how it worked, why it was so visually arresting. As I gazed at the bottle, I found it gazing back at me. It began speaking loudly in visual language, teaching me about the interrelatedness of secrecy and knowledge in Haitian magic arts, and about the poetics of will and desire, and slavery and death. Together, the bottle and I taught each other about the deep-rootedness of central African religions in Haiti, and about where it is that history lies in a land where



12.2 ABOVE. *Bòkò St. Jean*. Photograph (still frame from video), Elizabeth McAlister, 1988.

12.1 OPPOSITE. *Sanpwèl* bottle containing *zombi* (spirits of the dead). Glass, fabric, string, mirror, scissors, magnets. Approx. height, 50.5 cm. Courtesy of Elizabeth McAlister.

people don't read and write. My conversations with the bottle became a journey, and this essay its story.



The bottle is an artistic creation, but it is also a wanga, or *travay maji*, a “magic work.” How was I to find out what it means, *how* it works? Recent work in material culture studies gave me an avenue of investigation: any human-made object, even one whose meaning is obvious, is a site for multiple layers of meanings, uses, symbolisms, and connotations. Any object is a possible key to the culture that designed it.

Whatever the meaning of this bottle for its maker, in my possession it immediately began to function within a “capitalist system of objects,” as an acquired, collected possession, displayed on my coffee table for people to admire.² It was only later when I realized the seriousness of the bottle that I removed it out of sight of visitors to my home. The bottle was a constructed, visually coded object, of great aesthetic sophistication, and so on one hand it was art. Yet it was a “fetish” made by a “sorcerer” and so it was also ethnographic. It might occupy a place in what James Clifford calls the “institutionalized systemic opposition between art and culture,” into which objects collected from non-Western places inevitably fall. “Generally speaking the system confronts any collected exotic object

with a stark alternative between a second home in an ethnographic or an aesthetic milieu,” says Clifford.³ As I began to understand this Haitian piece I came to see how its proper home, if it is to have a public home, can only truly appreciate its aesthetic style together with its cultural history.

Almost everyone who saw the bottle on my coffee table commented on it. “You know, that thing never stops,” remarked one friend absently as she spoke about something else. Indeed, the bottle moves and swirls in its own way. This observation is the sort that material culture studies can build on. Begin with the axiom that any made object embodies the assumptions or beliefs of the maker's culture. Then, start an analysis using one's own senses. The object will provide its own evidence for research and interpretation. Back home in my



12.3. *Bòkò St. Jean's house in Monatuf, Port-au-Prince. Photograph, Elizabeth McAlister, 1988.*

living room, I scrutinized the bottle for clues:⁴

“That thing never stops.” It is a bottle, but a most spectacular bottle. It is actually a Barbancourt rum bottle, as one can see by reading the label as it shows through its cloth covering. (Barbancourt is a Haitian rum-maker.) But the label and the shape are the only evidence that it is a bottle. There is no longer any rum inside it. What is inside is not potable; it is filled with a heavily scented liquid. The liquid smells overwhelmingly of perfume, and it has sediment in it, which one can see encrusted along the inside of the bottle's neck. The liquid gives the bottle a weighty quality, a bottom-heaviness which is quite pronounced when I hold it. When I open the cap three pins lie across the inside of the bottleneck, held there by magnets on the outside. Pins join, pins prick, pins hold. They seem to stand in relation to the rest of the bottle simply as pieces of metal — in terms of their most essential characteristic; their metal-ness.

The bottle has a top-heaviness, because of the three magnets that encircle the outside of the bottle's neck. They are industrial magnets, perhaps, round and three-quarters of an inch thick, the color of stainless-steel. They protrude from the thin neck of the bottle,

making a collar or necklace. A woman's yellow earring perches on one of the magnets, giving the bottle a jaunty look. Magnets are elemental forces; a magnetic field surrounds the planet itself. Compasses steer travelers by way of magnetism, lining up the arrow with the northernmost point of the earth. Magnetism creates the earth's life-force at its foundations. In this bottle, magnets creates a dynamism so that the pins inside stick to the bottle-neck. They make up an enclosed polarity, a discrete ecosystem.

The entire bottle save for the unadorned Barbancourt cap is covered in black, white and red cloth in three vertical sections. These are all strong colors with symbolic associations in every culture. Except for the magnets the whole bottle is constructed in terms of a theme of wrapping. This suggests an element of secrecy, for whatever is inside the bottle is hidden.

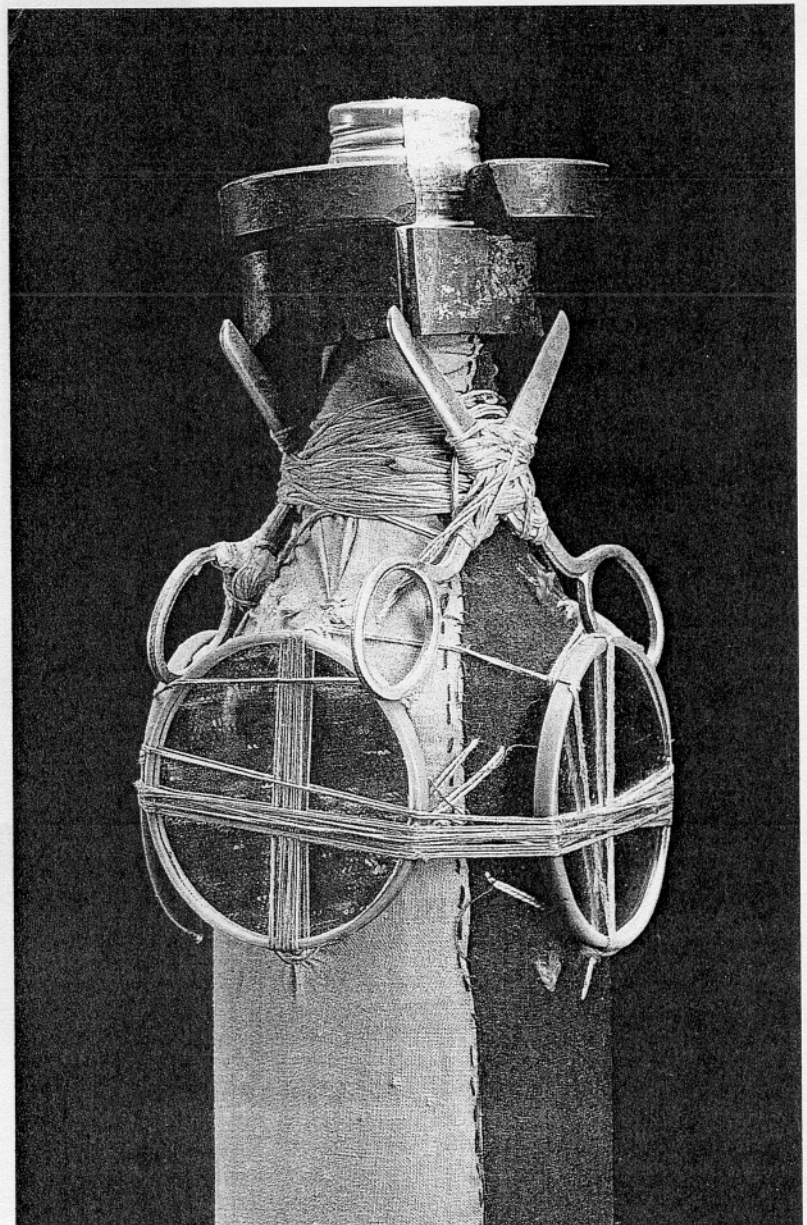
Two pairs of small opened scissors stand lashed on either side of the bottle neck with red thread (FIGURE 12.4). A basic tool in many cultures, scissors cut paper, cloth, cardboard and string. Like pins they are sharp and can be dangerous. Scissors are also anthropomorphic, with four "limbs." These scissors stand lashed in an open position across from one another on opposite sides, giving the bottle an illusion of formal symmetry. However the symmetry is broken, subtly, because there are only three rather than four colored panels of cloth, and also because of the positioning of the four mirrors that sit tied to the bottle directly under but slightly to the side of the scissors. It is this asymmetry alongside symmetry that causes the eye to spiral around the bottle, making it look as though "it never stops."

Four mirrors below the scissors are round, and about one and a half inches across, with a green plastic frames. They have been lashed to the bottle with red thread, in such a way as to make both a horizontal and a vertical line through each mirror. The mirrors are slightly dusty. Between the thread and the dust one can't see very much of a whole reflection in them. The mirrors seem to be *refracting* more than *reflecting*. Shiny light-catchers: they both attract the eye and reflect light.

Perfume, pins, magnets, scissors, mirrors: all of this bottle's features are elemental and simple. Interestingly, each feature has opposing characteristics that lead to a practical impasse: perfume with something sharp in it, huge magnets holding only three small pins, sharp scissors frozen in a useless, open position, mirrors that you can't see yourself in, wrapped with thread that obscures them. What do perfume, pins, magnets, scissors, and mirrors mean in Haitian symbolic codes? What do they mean in relation to each other?

Below the mirrors nothing more protrudes from the bottle, which simply continues down to its cloth-wrapped bottom. The midpoint of the bottle seems to be at the same line as the horizontal thread that spreads across each mirror. This line cuts the object in half horizontally, then, while the scissors, which are symmetrically opposed to

12.4. Side view of the magic bottle.



one another, cut it vertically. But these two aspects of symmetry are set in opposition at different points along the colored cloth wrapping, putting the viewer off balance. The lines of scissors and mirrors lead the eye around and around the bottle in a colorful spiral of red, white, and black.



12.5. Skull tied to small chair with whip in *Sauveur St. Cyr's* temple. Photograph, Chantal Regnault, 1995.

Red, white, and black, it turns out, are the primary colors of the Petwo rite, the *nanchon* or “nation” within Afro-Haitian religion that likes its drums played by hand with slaps and pops that crack like whip lashes. Petwo is the rite whose spirits are invoked, in fact, by cracking whips, by lighting gunfire, by pouring cane liquor *kleren* libations instead of rum. Petwo lwa like fire, they are “hot,” and their magic can work fast and be dangerous. Maya Deren wrote that while the Rada *nanchon* descended from various West African cultures, Petwo spirits were “creole,” born in Haiti out of slavery and rebellion.⁵ This is articulated over and over by elders, and there is an historical link between Petwo and resistance (SEE CHAPTER 5).⁶ Writing in the Fifties before recent research, Deren had no way of knowing that many Petwo spirits, colors, magical practices and ritual gestures are elements found in the Kongo kingdom that yielded so many of its people to the Atlantic slave trade.⁸ Some words in Petwo song prayers are in KiKongo. “Petwo and Kongo, it’s the same path,” the spirits will tell you.⁹

To identify linguistic and symbolic elements in Afro-Haitian religion that derive from Kongo cultures is not to suggest that Kongo languages and religious systems are flourishing in Haiti, centuries after the slave trade. It is to point out that these cultural elements, which have since been creolized and re-configured, have an identifiable historical source. Knowing this may lead us to suggestions about meanings, logics and aesthetic principles fueling subsequent cultural expression. Identifying something of the sources is always only the beginning. We must then hold meanings and aesthetics up against the reality of changing political and economic processes. Afro-

Haitian religion is a creolized New World system with multiple sources throughout Africa and also Europe and the indigenous peoples of Haiti. It continues to be influenced by militarism, U.S. popular culture, and trans-migrants from the Haitian diaspora.

As with any cluster of symbols that moves through time, Kongo-Haitian elements have changed and interacted with the lives of other sign systems. They may feed from other cultural logics — here the Fon, or the Yoruba, or French-style Catholicism, or post-colonial capitalism, or the codes of the Duvalier regime. The Haitian flag under Duvalier, for example, was black and red (with white in the inset) — changed by the dictator himself from the blue and red in a display of Haitian negritude (FIGURE 12.6). And black, red, and white are also the primary colors in Central African religions and cultures.¹⁰

Of this color triad, Fu-Kiau Bunseki-Lumanisa, the Zairean scholar, himself a MuKongo, writes that “the life of man in this country turns around these three colors, and

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they constitute the principle base of knowledge."¹¹ The colors, used in religious rituals, healings, and magical work, express the range of possibilities within the cosmic and social order. In Kongo ritual work, the three colors are combined and contrasted by the *nganga* (doctor-priest) according to the situation at hand. (His Haitian male counterpart, the *oungan*, is also called *gangan*.)

The colors black, white, and red are dressing this bottle to indicate that it is a Petwo *wanga*. This broadcasts its "hot" nature, its willingness to "do work" (*fè travay*). But what of the rest of the bottle's "costume"? What of the four mirrors lashed to the bottle's mid-section, bisected by red string.

Mirrors in Haitian thought can stand in poetically for conceptions of the afterlife, the passage between life and death. They signify water, and water, in turn, is of sacred importance. *An ba dlo* literally means, in Kreyòl, "underneath the water," and it stands for the land where the *lwa* live, and where human souls go for a year and a day after they die. One prayer song makes these three connections explicit:

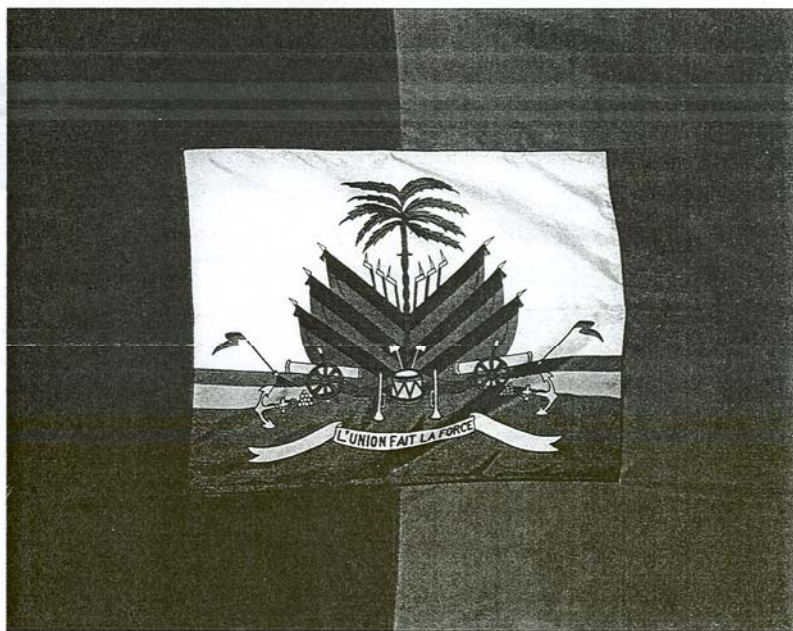
*Anonse, O zanj nan dlo,
Bak, O sou mirwa,
L'a wè l'a wè...*

Announcing, oh angels in the water,
Boat, oh on the mirror,
He'll see (or) she'll see...

Death is a new beginning; it represents a passage into the spirit realm. The initiated soul will go to "an ba dlo," a spiritual dwelling full of spirits and other souls. It is conceived as being a land underneath the water itself, but not necessarily underwater. Sometimes it is *lòt bò* or "the other side." Sometimes it is called *nan Ginen*, the mythological, spiritual Africa that lies across purifying, ancestral waters.

Likewise, in traditional Kongo cosmology, the lands of the living and the dead are separated by a horizontal line referred to as *nlangu*, "separated by water."¹² The universe is a circle, and the upper sphere is the earth, where we, the living dwell. The bottom sphere, under the water, is the land called Mpemba, that belongs to the dead, and is signified by the color white. The sun, as it makes its journey through the sky, visits the living and the dead at opposite times, so that noon for the living is midnight for the spirits of the dead. Likewise, dawn for the living is dusk for the dead. These four points in the sun's travels, in two opposing worlds, stand in for the human life cycle itself, *ziingu kia muuntu*, or "life of man." The sun at dawn signals birth, the sun at noon the peak of youth. The sun's setting at dusk represents the declining years, and the sun at our midnight travels, of course, to where people go: the white *mpemba*, land of the dead.¹³

These four points are a generative scheme for a great deal of Kongo art and philosophy, both in Africa and in the Afro-Americas, as Robert Farris Thompson has demonstrated (SEE CHAPTER 3).¹⁴ In any Vodou ritual the four corners are saluted at each new phase of the ceremony. Candles are held to the four directions when lit, and liquids shown to the four corners before libations are poured. There is a two-fold idea that the spirits of the four directions must be saluted, and also that the energies of the four directions be

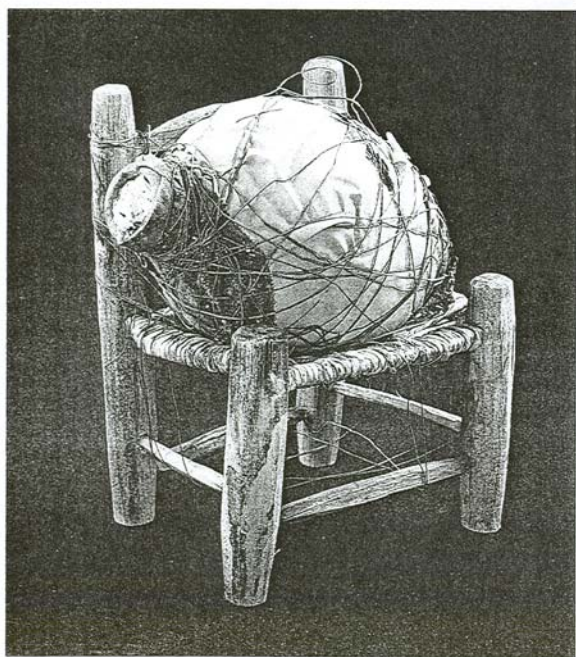


12.6. Haitian flag under Duvalier — black and red (changed from blue and red) in a display of negritude. Black and red (with white) are also the primary colors in Central African cosmology.



12.7. *Yvon's altar displaying pakèt kongo, La Plaine. Photograph, Chantal Regnault, 1995.*

12.8. *Wanga (magical work) that wraps and ties a govi (ceramic pot) to a miniature chair, from Sauveur St. Cyr's Petwo altar in Port-au-Prince. Wood, cloth, wire, twine, ceramic, paper. Height of chair, 29 cm. FAICH.X94.65.1*



consolidated in order to draw them onto a specific point or *pwen*, either in a *vèvè* drawing, or in a magical work, *wanga*. With this in mind, this bottle's four mirrors fixed at opposing points can be seen as yet another reference to the life cycle in Kongo-Haitian cosmology. By using four mirrors, the *bòkò* creates his own site of spiritual "heat" and a place of action and "work," and at the very same time he elegantly references the landscape of the Kongo-Haitian life cycle: the world of the living and the world *an ba dlo*, under the water.

Reading in the literature on black, white, and red in Kongo culture, it seems that the colors are, in a sense, a way to think. Loosely stated, the color white stands for reason, truth, health, good luck, intelligence, and clear sight; also for

Mpemba, the land of the dead. Black, in turn, symbolizes guilt, wrong, envy, social disorder, intentions of killing, and rebellion.¹⁵ The color red signifies sexual desire, vulnerability, magical power, and mediation. The colors are also "thought" into the cosmological theories of the BaKongo: the circle of the sun's path surrounds two mountains in two spheres, one of which is black (for the living) and the other, below, is white, for the dead. So if white is associated with the ancestors, with purity, truth, and clear sight, then the world of the living, in turn, is imperfect, ignorant, a site for evil and secrecy. The water separating them is the great barrier between the worlds; is life-giving, mediating, and associated with the color red, sunrises and sunsets. Red, then, is implicated in passages, ambivalences, in-between stages of a social or religious nature. This tri-color classifying system is integrated with Kongo cosmology to express the most fundamental of the culture's philosophies.¹⁶

Kongo body language gives us a possible meaning for the scissors that stand lashed to the bottleneck. Thompson writes that "Where hands are brought in, the palms are placed in either shoulder, the arms are crossed before the heart... this is *tuluwa ku luumba*, literally "placing oneself within the enclosure."¹⁷ The scissors seem to be limbs indeed; arms crossed under the bottleneck. Now we can understand why the bottle looks like a person, arms crossed. The bottle as a whole is protected by this gesture of defense, in a visual pun using everyday objects.

The bottle's "dress" is a signifying system: it is wearing Petwo colors, which I have suggested derive from Kongo religious thought. It speaks metaphorically about the watery passage from life to death, and about the four cardinal directions. The scissors signal negation, protection, and self-control. Not a simple piece of art, the *wanga* is, in Haitian vernacular, a *gwo koze*, or a "big talk." It delivers an enormous message in "visual vocabulary."¹⁸ As such it is an abbreviation of centuries-old Kongo cultural knowledge, reincorporated into a larger Afro-Haitian religious tradition.¹⁹

If this is a Petwo *wanga*, descended from Kongo spirit practices, then one would expect the BaKongo people to have had a similar magic — and they do. In the Kongo context, containers with instructive visual codes, puns, and specific work to do are called *minkisi* (singular, *nkisi*). Labeled "charm" and "fetish" by Europeans, an *nkisi* was essentially a container of spirit, constructed and controlled by humans.²⁰ Usually drawn from the spirits of the

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dead, the nkisi was there to act, or activate, a particular desire of its maker, the *nganga-nkisi*. More often than not, minkisi were used in healings, and could also be used for good luck, good hunting, and the like. Like the bottle, minkisi were colored red, white and black, in combination depending on their use.²¹

If the bottle is a Haitian version of an nkisi, which it certainly must be, then I actually witnessed its consecration when I went to pick up what I thought was my "commissioned art piece." I was admiring the bottle when St. Jean presented it to me. "Would you like me to put good luck in?" he pushed. It seemed like an intriguing idea.

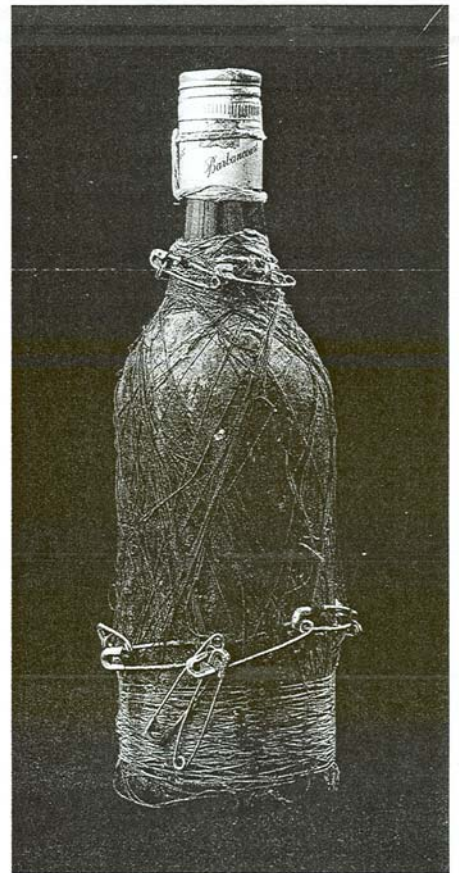
I sat across from St. Jean the *bòkò*'s altar, on his bed, and he sat in an enormous barber's chair. He rummaged around for a cassette tape and snapped it into his Panasonic tape player. Out came the chants of a song recorded at a *Sanpwèl* society, of which, he said, he was a member. He sang along to the tape while playing an accompanying rattle and bell, and waved a red satin cloth dramatically. Wyatt MacGaffey has remarked of Kongo minkisi that they are show business, a spectacle featuring music and singing and drama and taking anywhere from days to months to consecrate — that is, to infuse with spirit. Being alone with the sorcerer himself in this Haitian slum setting made for a very-much scaled down drama. Still, the cassette gave us a reference to a grander, more elaborate tableau.²²

I, meanwhile, whipped out my tiny notebook and pen and wrote down everything the *bòkò* did:

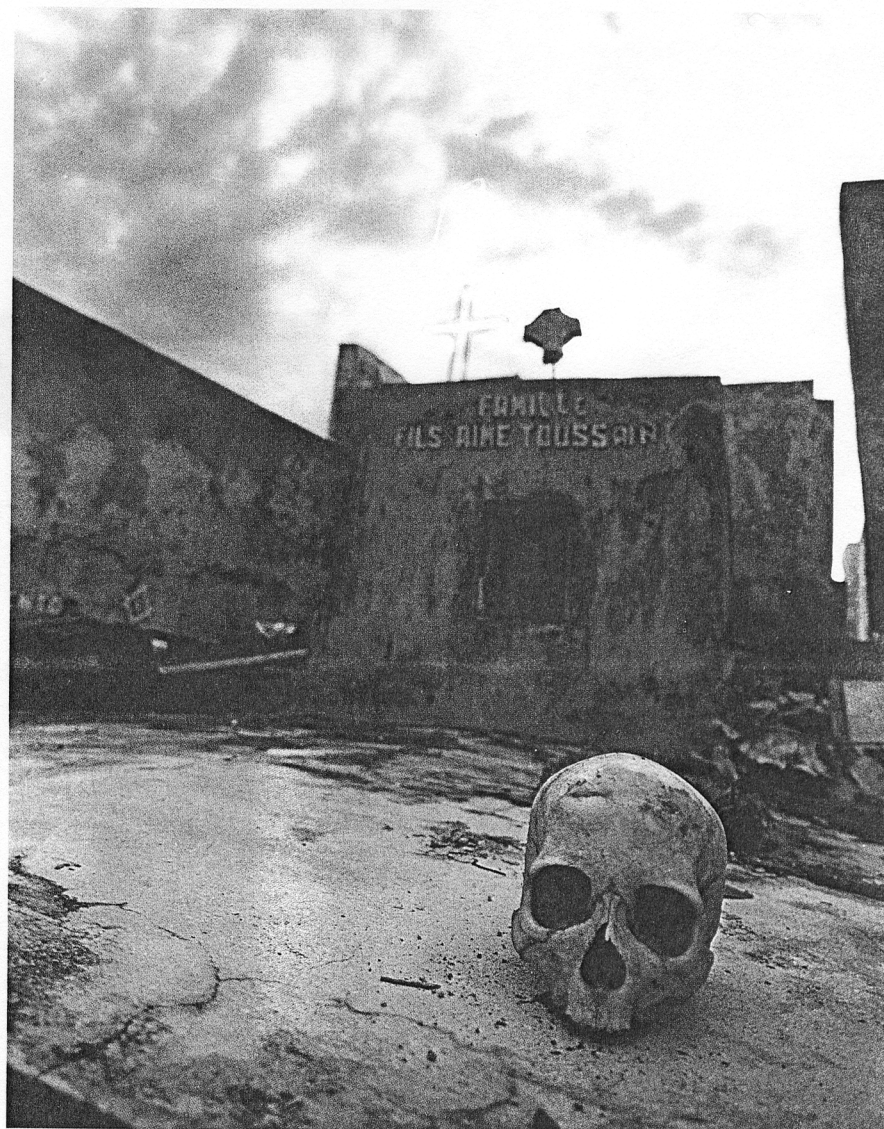
- St. Jean had the little boy buy three needles, asked [my intended's] name. Took the needles with a magnet and put on the top of a long green rock.²³
- Then poured some pink powder into the bottle.
- Then took from under where I'm sitting two human skulls and a — human neckbone — and set them on the floor — !!!
- Poured rum over them.
- Set them on fire... Blue flame.
- Shaved some bone off the skulls with a knife.
- Put the shavings in a bowl with the rock on top.
- Burned an American dollar on a knife and mixed with the skull shavings.
- Poured into bottle.
- Poured in some mixture of liquor and leaves.
- Perfume.
- Another perfume.
- All the while playing a tape of singing and *cha-chas*. Wrapped the bottle in red cloth, waved the *cha-chas* and bell at it. Set the bottle in a bowl of rocks.²⁴

To me, an American accustomed to sanitized experiences of death, it was surprising to see someone produce two human skulls from a sack under his bed. But death is all around St. Jean's neighborhood, this slum which adjoins the sewage canal on one side and the *simityè*, the famous cemetery where Duvalier was buried, on another (FIGURE 12.10). At the time of this writing, Haiti is in a state of acute political and economic crisis and thousands of people are dying of starvation, military-backed violence, and disease. Death lives under St. Jean's bed — and he uses death to "make business." For me, it was unnerving, and I didn't know what to make of his elaborate "good luck" process. It wasn't until I associated my bottle with minkisi that I realized the reason for the human skulls. Thompson writes:

The *nkisi* is believed to live with an inner life of its own. The basis of that life was a captured soul.... The owner of the charm could direct the spirit in the



12.9. Barbancourt rum bottle bound, wrapped, and tied with safety pins. Glass, fabric, thread, safety pins, tin, thread. Height, 28 cm. FMCH X94.55.16.



12.10. *'But death is all around St. Jean's neighborhood, this slum which adjoins the sewage canal...and the simityè, where Duvalier was buried.'* Photograph, Daniel Morel, 1994.

object to accomplish mystically certain things for him, either to enhance his luck or to sharpen his business sense.²⁵

So the bottle is alive. When St. Jean said he was giving me "good luck," he meant he was giving me a living grave; a spirit in a bottle, complete with instructions for what sort of luck to bring. Of minkisi, Thompson writes: "The earths captured the spirit in a miniature grave, or house, the mystic key to which the maker of the charm alone possesses." This is accomplished through the activation of a "spirit-embedding medicine," usually through the ritual insertion of white clay, called *mpemba*, which also means the land of the dead underneath the water.²⁶ It can also be earth, "often from a grave site, for cemetery earth is considered at one with the spirit of the dead."²⁷ In this Haitian wanga, the spirit captured was a spirit of a dead person, metonymically represented through shaving bits of bone from the skull.

Many Kongo minkisi, it turns out, have mirrors in the belly of the container or statue (FIGURE 12.11). Belly, or *mooyo*, means "life" or "soul" and is a powerful point for attaching medicines onto the nkisi. Mirrors are "their eyes for seeing," and could be read by the

nganga-nkisi to find witches, *mindoki*.²⁸ Some mirrors on minkisi are also signaling the four directions. Some have crosses, for example, etched into the glass, while some are divided into four quadrants colored red and white.²⁹ This wanga stretches that concept nicely, using four actual mirrors in the four directions, all around the belly of the bottle.

This gets us to the question of how the *maji* works. The colors, the mirrors and pins, the scissors are all evidence of what Thompson calls "spirit-admonishing medicine" in Kongo minkisi. The spirits are instructed in the form of "seeds, claws, miniature knives, stones, crystals, and so forth."

Seeds in the container, as spirit-admonishing elements, tell the spirit to multiply (or not to multiply), the stones to pelt (or not to pelt), a claw to grasp (or not to grasp), and so on.³⁰

The pins in the bottle, then, are instructing the spirit within to attract love to me, since St. Jean asked my loved one's name. The perfume would be to make me attractive. The one-dollar-bill ashes instruct the spirit to make me rich. After all, what is better luck than having love and money? The pins, perhaps, to prick a harm-doer. The mirrors, clearly, to spot danger and deflect it. And the magnets give the spirit its own world, with a polarity, a north and south, a magnetic field of its own. The yellow earring sitting on the magnets is a final, humanizing touch, a show of personality, perhaps even a feminizing sign, or maybe just a bit of whimsy.

Now I could hear that this small object was speaking poetically about will and desire at the same time that it contained fragments of my own wishes. The bottle was also drawing me into a dialogue between secrecy and knowledge. The bottle is speaking in a coded visual grammar that at once obscures its contents and reveals clues about it. The accumulated materials fastened to the exterior of the bottle — its clothing — are both hiding the inside and pointing to the charged, powerful presence of what is being contained. Coding, obscurity, accumulation, and containment are interrelated strategies that African artists likewise use to convey powerful cultural knowledge.³¹

I had gone a long way in reading the semiotics of the *wanga*, but I still had questions. Did the *bòkò* himself know consciously what I now knew? A man who does not read or write, did he mean to encode all this history and knowledge into this little, one-pound object? And what's more, where did he get the skulls? Who were they? What is the meaning of death in Haiti?

The great advantage the ethnographer has over the historian is the opportunity to ask the culture-makers what they have made. I went back to Haiti a few months later to talk to St. Jean. I found him easily in the cemetery zone, standing in front of his house that was painted, I noticed this time, in a bright latex red from floor to ceiling. He flashed me his baby teeth smile again, and, old friends that we were now, I invited him up to the Hotel Oloffson for a good rum and a chat.

I slowly asked him about each aspect of the bottle. He gave me short and concise answers in his staccato Creole, in between gulps of rum:

What is the smell for?

To attract love.

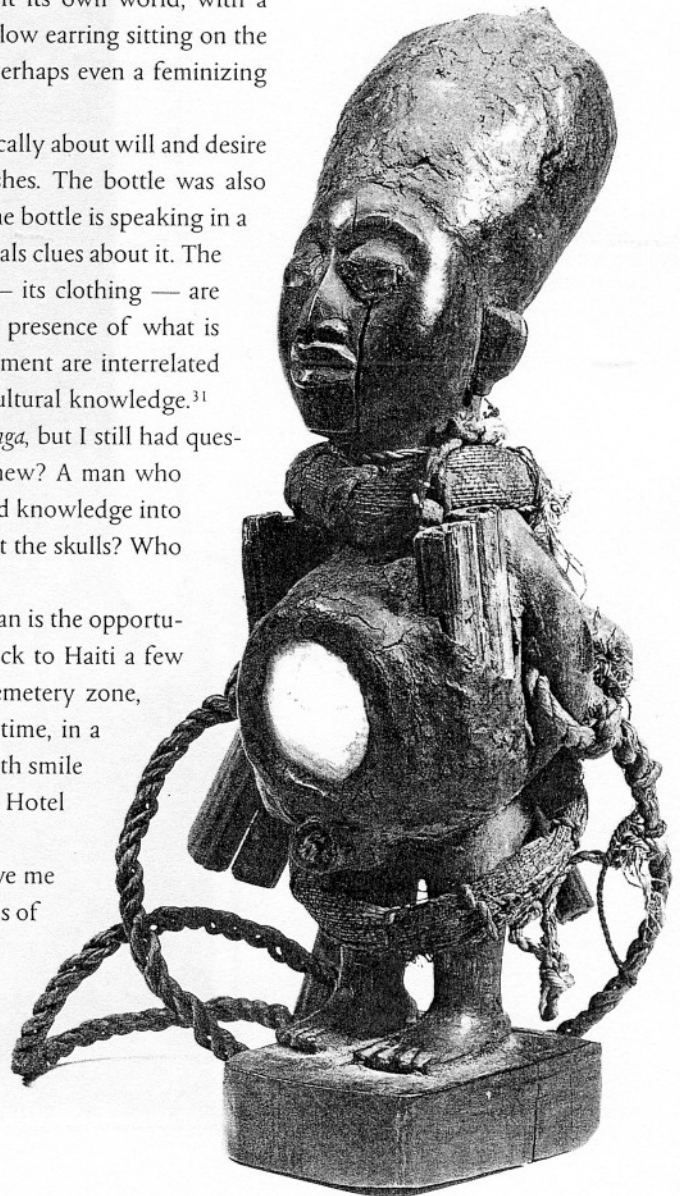
What are the mirrors for?

To draw people you want, to deflect those you don't.

Why are there four of them?

The four corners of the earth.

12.11. Kongo charm or spirit container, *nkisi*, with mirror in belly — a prototype for the Haitian bottle. Wood, mirror, glass, cane, fiber, bone. Height, 25.5 cm. FMCH X65.8501. Gift of the Wellcome Trust.



What are the scissors for?

If someone wants to do you bad, the scissors appear and they stab the person. And the mirrors push them away.

What about the inside?

The magnets attract people you want. The pins bring them.

What about the skulls?

*The two skulls inside are working the bottle. They are *zonbi*. They died once, at the hands of man. They are working for me. When they die by God they'll finally die.³²*

This man, a descendant of African slaves who fought for their independence, is now a slavemaster of the dead. Two *zonbi* are trapped between death and the "other side," they are literally inside this three-dimensional cosmogram of the four moments of the sun; the four stages of life. They are embedded in the pink powder, with a simple but eloquent set of instructions to carry out. The outside of the bottle speaks both metaphorically and metonymically about the inside — a pair of arms in the *lummbu* pose negating any bad energy will actively prick any harm-doer who comes along. The mirrors tell a complex tale of the conception of life and death itself, and at the same time they are unblinking eyes, watching and deflecting. St. Jean also told me that the bottle was not made to be seen. His advice was to hide it in a suitcase, and take it out when I needed luck for something important.³³

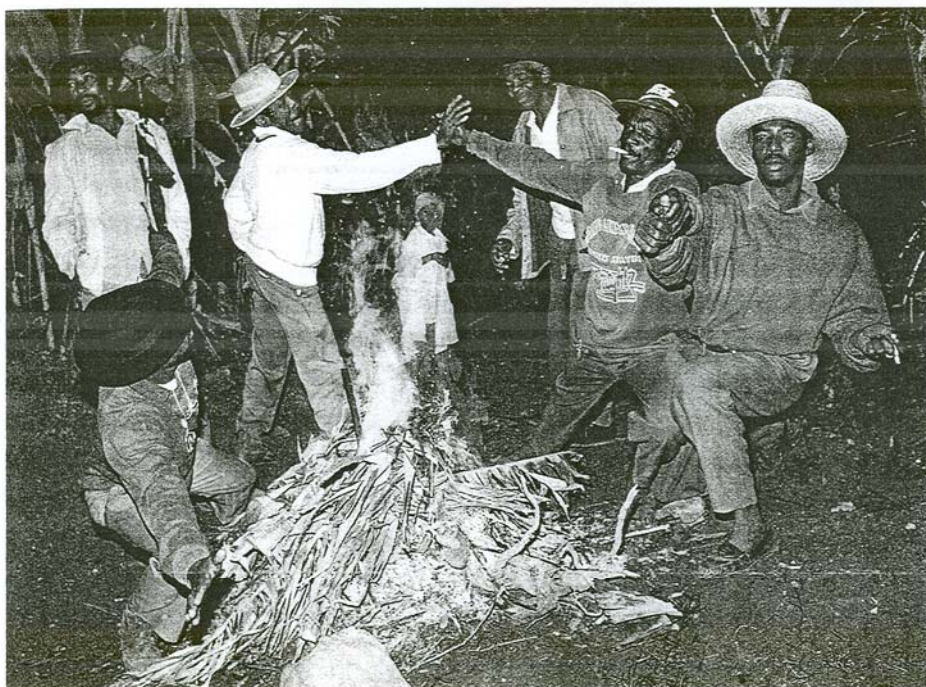
I now had a dilemma. I had two "*zonbi*" in my living room, inside the bottle. "What would you do if someone took you after you died and made you a *zonbi*?" I asked St. Jean, worried, now, about the ethics of being a *zonbi*-owner.³⁴ *Zonbi*, in Haiti, is a loaded word with many meanings and implications. Technically, a *zonbi* is a part of the soul that is stolen and made to work.³⁵ The living-dead zombies that we think of from horror films are rare, and create a national sensation when they surface.³⁶ Everyday zombies are *zonbi astral*, a dead person's spirit that is magically captured and contained. They are used in magical "work," and also by Rara bands to "heat up" the music (FIGURE 12.12).³⁷ In any case, the implication is that they met a premature death; they were killed magically, and not "by the hand of God." Now they are working for their owner.

A powerful and frightening concept, the *zonbi* is also a potent metaphor for the slave and the lasting effects of slavery in Haiti.³⁸ Insofar as the *zonbi* represents the slave, or the worker, there is always the possibility that the *zonbi* will wake up, shake off the oppressor, and start a revolution. The trigger will be the metaphoric taste of salt, or spark of political consciousness.³⁹

There is a fatalism at work in Vodou, a belief that lives are given by God with predestined endings. It is not possible to change the day of ultimate spiritual death; however one can achieve physical death through magic. In this case the person has died "by the hands of man" but not yet "by the hand of God." Simbi Ganga, a *lwa* in the Afro-Haitian nanchon of Kongo, called me to him one evening as he was "dancing in the head," — possessing — a member of the compound where I was staying. Concerned that I was spending too much time researching in the cemetery, he sang me this message, implying that there is too much sorcery in Haiti; there are too many people dead from magic:

*Simityè plen moun O
Bawon mande tout moun sa yo
Si se Bondye ki mete yo*

The Cemetery is full of people Oh
Baron Samedi asks all the people
If it's God who put them there



12.12. Rara band at crossroads 'heating up' the music. Photograph, Chantal Regnault, 1995.

The implication is that if God did not put them there, then they have died magically and are potential *zonbi*.

"And if someone took your *zonbi*," I persisted, back with St. Jean.

"They couldn't," St. Jean said, crunching on his ice cubes. "But if they did, no problem. I'd work."

Tired of answering questions, St. Jean took his leave, and so did I, back to the United States. Still, I was keen to know more about how he got his skulls, if he had killed the people and where he fits in the Haitian moral universe. I wanted to know more about philosophies of sorcery and about death in general. Thanksgiving found me back in Port-au-Prince. I descended into the cemetery zone to find the *bòkò*, making my way to the red-painted house. It was now bright green. St. Jean was dead.



I went back to my field notebooks from the past summer, looking for a way to answer the questions I still had about the practice of making these kinds of *wanga*. St. Jean had been a member of a *Sanpwèl* society from the Artibonite valley. Perhaps if I ever got to go out there, somebody else would be familiar with him and his work.

The Artibonite is a central river valley in Haiti, with a reputation for the hardness of its people. Because it is one of the most productive agricultural regions, people there have more, and therefore more to steal. The social hierarchy is rigid and harsh, with a lot of landless labor and tenant farming. One song says

An verite l'Atibonit gran moun pa jwe O.

The truth is, in the Artibonite, the elders don't fool around.⁴⁰

Papa Dieupè lives in the Artibonite (FIGURE 12.13). Traditional anthropology would call him a "wealthy peasant." Really he is a king. An *empereur*, to be exact, of a secret society, or *Sanpwèl*. He has a great deal of land under cultivation, and with his talents as a *gangan* and *bòkò*, he has developed solid links with the Haitian military, who come to him as clients to make *wanga*. He has five wives, and never travels without thirty to forty

ounsi, or spiritual children, who augment his presence when he goes away to baptize boats and gas pumps.⁴¹

Many people make the journey to Dieupè's *lakou*, or familial compound, asking him to adjudicate cases of theft, abuse, or labor conflicts. He leans back on his chair under the mango tree and drinks Johnny Walker White Label Whiskey out of a glass soda bottle.

Each visitor is offered a beverage appropriate to his or her social status. The farmer is welcomed with cane liquor *kleren*. Rum is for the youth traveling from Port-au-Prince. Ice depends. Whiskey for the military. Soda for the Protestant pastor, who stops by because Dieupè, while "pagan," is, after all, a cousin.

During Easter season, Rara bands of hundreds of people come from miles around to honor Dieupè and "animate" his *lakou*. They are received with a table filled with whiskey and rum, and are given a place to sleep.⁴² In the morning they are given coffee, and they dance away, making room for the next Rara. My friends and I were well-received, too. We were introduced to an *ounsi* named Veronique and told to ask her if we needed anything. During the day we could swim in the Artibonite River, and a solid dinner was served at mid-day. Starting at midnight most nights, Dieupè called the spirits to come and "fe travay," or do magic work.

Since he was one of the most famous *bòkò* in the whole Artibonite, I thought maybe Dieupè would be able to tell me about the spirits in the bottle, the *zonbi*. Where does this practice come from?

"From the descendants of Africa," he said matter-of-factly.

"Do you know which nation?" I asked. (Would he say it was Kongo, or *Wangol*, its Creole gloss? Would this cultural history have been transmitted?) He leaned back and downed his whiskey, and began his story

about the "real" magical origin of *zonbi*. It seems that the first *zonbi* was none other than Christ himself:

The whole reason that we are able to raise people after they die, goes back to when they crucified Jesus Christ. Christ was sent by Gran Jehovah, by Gran Mèt [God]. He also sent Mary Magdelene...along with two body guards for Jesus from the Haitian Armed Forces. When Jehovah gave the password to raise up Jesus from the dead, the soldiers stole the password, and sold it. It's been handed down from father to son, which is how I could get it.⁴³

Part of the aesthetic of Vodou is that it takes what it can use visually and theologically and constantly re-creates itself with fresh material. The Vodouist fits biblical figures into an already-existing Afro-creole scheme. Jesus is problematic for the Vodouist: the heavy catholicizing of the French and, later, the Haitian elite, makes him the god of the dominant classes. This story subtly acknowledges the *bòkò*'s opposition to Christianity: a worker (a Haitian foot-soldier) stole something from Jesus (the god of the white and elite). The stolen knowledge now becomes a tool for the subordinates. That the army is the agent for this gain should not be surprising: Haitian society has become heavily militarized and so has religious practice. (Each extended family has lent at least one son to the army or the *makout* forces, just as each has lost members as victims of Duvalier.)⁴⁴

The *Zonbi*-Christ story is also a morality tale: it tells us that the *bòkò* engaged in "zonbi production" is using a secret stolen from God. The Haitian *bòkò* is an arrogant person, who is sharing in a power that the *fran Ginen*, or "morally pure" servitor would not use.⁴⁵ Boukman Eksperyans, the band that blends Vodou music and rock, sings about the



12.13. Portrait of Papa Dieupè seen outside his peristyle in the Artibonite. Papa Dieupè is an 'emperor' of Sanpwèl, a secret society. Photograph, Elizabeth McAlister, 1995.

moral distinction between Ginen and Bizango, or Sanpwèl, the secret societies. One song says that the malevolent practices associated with these rites will be judged at the crossroads — the penultimate resting point before going *an ba dlo*, or “under the water” after death.

*Si ou touye, ou chaje ak pwoblem
nan kalfou, kalfou nèg Kongo
Si ou vòlè ou chaje ak pwoblem
nan kalfou, kalfou nèg Kongo*

If you kill, you've got big problems
At the crossroads, crossroads of the Kongo people
If you steal, you've got big problems
At the crossroads, crossroads of the Kongo people

*Si ou se fran Ginen ou pap vòlè
Ginen pa Bizango
Si ou se fran Ginen ou pap manti
Ginen pa Bizango*

If you are *fran Ginen* you don't steal
Ginen isn't Bizango
If you are *fran Ginen* you don't lie
Ginen isn't Bizango⁴⁶

Considering that Dieupè is a “big man” in Bizango, I thought I'd ask him about ethics of *zonbi*. I asked him simply, “Would you be angry if someone took *your zonbi* after you died?”

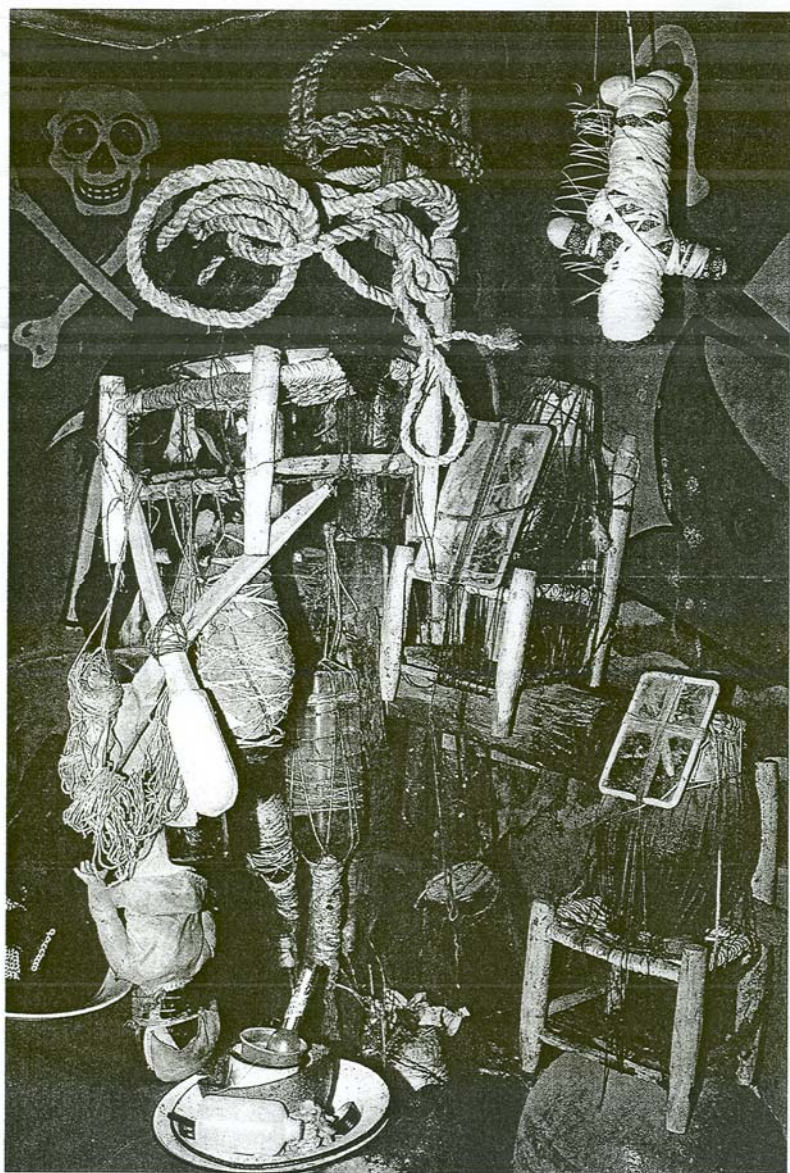
“I wouldn't be mad. On the contrary, there are people who are lazy and people who are not. If you take the *zonbi* of someone who liked to work, they feel happy because they didn't like to sit around doing nothing. You never, incidentally, pick a Protestant,” he told me. They converted and renounced the lwa, and they won't work for Vodouists. (A fierce ideological war wages between the Vodouist and the evangelical Protestant. Running for Protestant cover protects the ex-Vodouist from being touched by the demands and duties of any obligations to the lwa.)

The discussion then launched into an elaboration on *zonbi*, and on *nanm*. A *nanm* is simply a soul; we all have one. You can capture someone's *nanm* and contain it, before or after they die. Some people in the provinces put their children's *nanm* in a bottle when they send them away to Port-au-Prince for school. This way they are magically protected against harm.

Capturing *zonbi* and *nanm* to control them, however, is seen by many people as serious infractions against another person; as evidence of the malevolent nature of the Bizango and Sanpwèl societies. Boukman Ekspéryans sings against the indigenous practice in a song called “*Nanm Nan Boutèy*” or “*Soul in a Bottle*.” They stretch the image into a metaphor for the Haitian post-colonial dilemma: the bourgeois psyche that is dominated by *blan*, or foreign, cultural standards:

*anyè sa rèd O
Nanm nou lan boutèy
Hey that's hard Oh
Our soul in a bottle

Ki le nap rive
Ki le nap pran konsyans
Mezanmi sa rèd O.*



12.14. Bòkò's djevo with tied things and skulls. Photograph, Chantal Regnault, 1995.

When will we get there
When will we become conscious
My friends, this is hard.

Ooyee, nan revolisyon na prale
We're going into the revolution.⁴⁷

☪ ☪ ☪

In any case, there seems to be some room for interpretation over the distinction between *nanm*, *zonbi*, and *mò*, the dead. It became clear that if the person is dead, and depending on the region and context, the words can be interchangeable. The dead, what is more, can be used for revenge or for healing.

"*Zonbi* can help you," he added. "If I have somebody sick, if they've thrown death on him [*voye mò sou li*] then *zonbi* will take it off." Soldiers arrest soldiers. *Zonbi* take off *zonbi*. Like their Kongo *minkisi* counterparts, the spirits of the dead are used to create and heal supernatural illnesses, and like *minkisi*, the spirits of the dead can be consecrated into new supernatural powers, controlled by the living priests.

At that, Dieupè gave me various tips for the care and maintenance of my *zonbi*. I should feed them a meal without salt. Open the bottle and set the food in front of it. And if the good luck stopped working, I'd sense it. Because a *zonbi* can get tired and not be able to work anymore. Then you have to change them. "You can get new ones to put in the bottle. Just like putting a car in the garage to charge its battery."⁴⁸

☪ ☪ ☪

Back in Port-au-Prince, I brought up the subject of *zonbi* with a young *prèt Vodou*, or "Vodou Priest," the snob's term for *oungan*⁴⁹ (FIGURE 12.15). Mondy Jean heads a small but vibrant *ounfò* in the cemetery zone, not too far from where St. Jean lived. Virtually all of Papa Mondy's spiritual children are older than he is, but he is a natural leader, with a quiet charisma. His peristyle is often converted into a Vodou hospital where the sick, *malad yo*, come to lie in and receive treatments, *trètman*. Everyone calls him *le pè*, or "the priest." He is very French and formal, having been raised Protestant before he was *reklame* or "reclaimed" by the *Iwa*.

Extraordinarily compassionate, Papa Mondy is sensitive to beauty and to sadness. He works in the *fran Ginen* end of things, mostly taking off malicious magic sent by unscrupulous *bòkò*. I approached him on the subject of St. Jean and my bottle.

He had known St. Jean to be a *bòkò*, working alone without a society, mostly doing sorcery. Since he was not there when my bottle was made, he couldn't venture a professional opinion. St. Jean could have killed those people magically and then taken their skulls as *zonbi*. On the other hand, Papa Mondy said, it is easy to get skulls from the cemetery, a stone's throw away. He, like virtually all working *manbos* and *oungans* in Port-au-Prince, has human skulls on his altar for the *Gedes*, the *Iwa* of the dead.

Mondy told me that he uses skulls for healings, to take off bad spirits "thrown" on

people. Each bone has a different power, so that to use two skulls will give you a double force. Like the Kongo *nganga-nkisi*, Mondy knows scores of magical recipes, each using activated spirit, material objects, and songs and prayers.

Getting skulls is not a big mystery, he said. The people who work in the cemetery get them for him, because they are *moun pa'l*, or "his people." They get them only for Vodou priests, with whom they have ongoing reciprocal relations. The priests supply the workers with cigarettes and *kleren*, and they in return provide bones. (If you were in a hurry, or had no connections, it might cost you as much as \$30 Haitian for a skull, about US\$12.)

Mondy himself has four *tèt mò*, or skulls, on his altar. (FIGURE 12.14) He knows who the people were: Henri Clement, Jacques Antoine, Etienne Charles, and Marie Joseph.⁵⁰ He pointed out that you pick which skulls you want, because the same talents people had when they were alive, they have when they die. Evidently a similar concept was at work in making Kongo *minkisi*. Grave dirt was often used from "an individual known for the kind of personal qualities needed for this kind of *nkisi*." A Kongo researcher in the early part of this century writes about constructing the *nkisi* called *Mbola*: "Then they go to the cemetery to wherever lies buried a man who was exceptionally strong and virile. They take him and put him in *Mbola*; they take earth from the grave and rub it on the statue."⁵¹

Papa Mondy knew the character of these people, because these were people who had lived nearby. He considered them good people, went to their funerals, mourned them, and saw where they were buried. They were all Vodouists, *Vodouizan*; and therefore all would be in a position to work. (A Protestant, he agreed, would be utterly useless — would refuse to work altogether.)

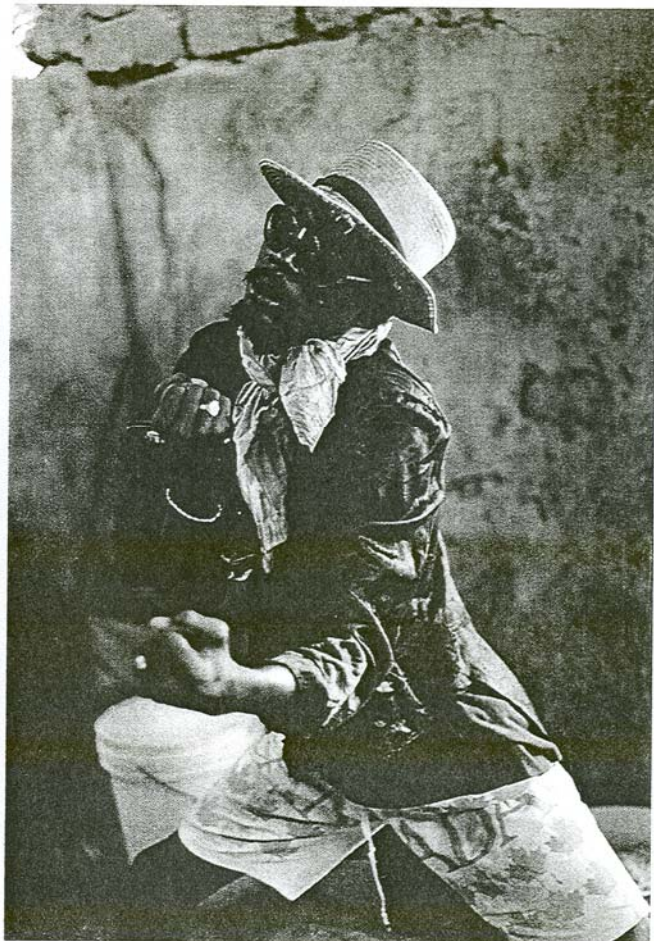
After enough time went by — the custom is one year — he told the cemetery workers to go after the skulls. Like Haiti itself at this writing, the cemetery is in a state of anarchy, held together by a web of traditional social relations. It is not adequately subsidized or centrally managed, and yet it is an inner-city of spiritual and economic activity. An enormous cast of characters inhabits this mini-metropolis: the dead themselves, and also the undertakers, tomb-makers, private tomb-guards, as well as a variety of *prèt savann*, or "bush priests," *oungans*, *manbos* and *bòkòs*.

After the bones are delivered, an elaborate ritual process extracts from the skull of the dead Vodouists an abstract spirit capable of healing work. Each spirit is constructed to have a curative specialty; each can cure a type of supernatural illness. The process is not unlike the construction of Kongo *minkisi*, which are manipulated, with prayers, rituals, and instructive objects, for specific purposes. "[The *nkisi*] only has certain aptitudes, which find their expression within specific fields of activity when the spirit has been caught in a material object, equipped with powerful medicines (*bilongo*) and consecrated according to special rituals."⁵²

In preparing the skulls to be used in magic and healings, Mondy gives them dew, rain, and bathes them in the sun. Then they are given food, and baptized with new names, ritual names like *je m'engage*, "I'm trying," and *jou malè*, "day of misery" or *al chache*, "go look." Each one has a specific job, a specific malady to treat. "*Mò geri mò*," he said, "the dead cure death."

Perhaps it is ritually-treated skulls like these that St. Jean had used for the wanga bottle: people already dead whose energies were

12.15. 'Loray,' Papa Mondy's *Gede*. Photograph, Chantal Regnault, 1995.





12.16. *Ritual coffin (jèkay madoulè) in a Sanpwèl house, Artibonite. Photograph, Elizabeth McAlister, 1995.*

now being consecrated for magical healings and good fortune. It is also possible — although I will never know — that the skulls are people he killed through sorcery and who now must work for him.⁵³ Magic versus sorcery is a key distinction in Vodou. Magic within a religious context yields, ultimately, to the will of God and the lwa, in which case it is *fran Ginen*. Sorcery is magic that “steals from god” as the *zonbi*-Christ story illustrates.

Sorcery practices carry with them their own morality messages. Often Haitian sorcery involves a mystical contract with a spirit that gives “fast” results. The contract must expire, at which time the magic fades. In particularly drastic cases, the expiration of the contract means the death of the person. Mondy hinted that it was no accident that St. Jean had died. He had bought a *pwen*, a “point” spirit that works fast, but outside the morality of *Ginen*. The *pwen*, named “Yabouke,” came from a *bòkò* in his Sanpwèl society in the Artibonite. (FIGURE 12.16) These spirits are not considered *Ginen*, but rather *Bizango*. They are the province of sorcerers, the greedy and the desperate.⁵⁴ Mondy sang me this Petwo song to illustrate how some people would rather be rich and die young than live out their lives in misery:

Ou gen pwen, ou gen lwa (x3)
pase m' mouri malèrè
m' pito mouri jenn gason
moun pa kon afè mwen

You have *pwen*, you have *lwa*
 Rather than die in poverty
 I'd rather die a young man
 Nobody knows my business.⁵⁵

Dieupè, back in the Artibonite, had also spoken about the contract inherent in my bottle. He said that the *zonbi* within would surely fade, and that St. Jean should have let me know their “expiration date.” Not subject to the dangers of the contract myself, my experience would simply be that my extra good fortune in life would pale, and I should consider coming to see Dieupè himself to put new *zonbi* in the bottle. Most likely the *zonbi* were good for seven years; perhaps twenty-one. They may still be there; they may not.

☪ ☪ ☪

In the end, the bottle has more to it than I would ever have been able to imagine. It is alive with spirit; it has a job, a mission, a personality. It is dressed to the teeth in message-flashing style and artistic brilliance. If you can read it, it is a crystalized history lesson, and a miniature cosmogram of the universe. But the bottle is not meant to be a showpiece. It is a stylized rendition of itself, and it is speaking to itself, to the spirit inside. It is alive, spiraling, colorful, provocative. It is a complex metaphor for what the *wanga* is supposed to *do*, not what it *is*.

But if this bottle is a living ecosystem with an embedded spirit inside, how can it possibly be put into a museum exhibit? James Clifford suggests that

[w]e can return to [such objects]... their lost status as fetishes — not specimens

of a deviant or exotic "fetishism" but *our own* fetishes. This tactic, necessarily personal, would accord to things in collections the power to fixate rather than simply the capacity to edify or inform. African and Oceanic artifacts could once again be *objets sauvages*, sources of fascination with the power to disconcert.⁵⁶

The wanga has certainly fixated me for years now, and has also "edified and informed." The bottle has been a show-piece, a worry, an object of study, a preoccupation. The *zonbi*, if they are still there, have been quiet, staying hidden inside their bottle, with its jaunty yellow earring on top. Perhaps they have already died "by the hand of god." It is possible that they are gone now, off to their real resting place under the water. It is possible, too, that they are still in the bottle, watching with large mirror eyes for my well-being.

I am not entirely incorrect to imagine that the wanga has a sort of character. MacGaffey writes that *minkisi* were "like an ancestor in his grave," and were thought to have a kind of personality. Seeing an *nkisi*, he says, "identifies an autonomous personality that is as it were latent in the object and is aroused by the relationship but is not fully constrained by it."⁵⁷

Now I treat the bottle as something with life to it, something with its own identity, something that breathes. It is an object that can tell about hundreds of years of knowledge in the life of a people. It is also an object that carries with it something of the lives of two souls who lived in this century, near the main cemetery in Haiti.

In the end came the question of where it should live. It has spent five years in my study, watching me work at my desk. With the "Sacred Arts of Vodou" came an opportunity: a place in an exhibition that focuses on the visual, but that insists on context and history. A possible compromise resting place, where it can be seen as art and as artifact, as fetish, and as cultural history.

"My *zonbi* are finally getting to go to a museum," I joked with friends. Now they can travel; meet new and interesting people." In fact, maybe the exhibition is a place where the *maji* can even grow stronger, if the more the seeing, the more the spirits are activated. Maybe I will feed them their meal without salt before they go. Perhaps the *zonbi* are the kind that like to work. May everyone who visits the bottle share a little of my good fortune.