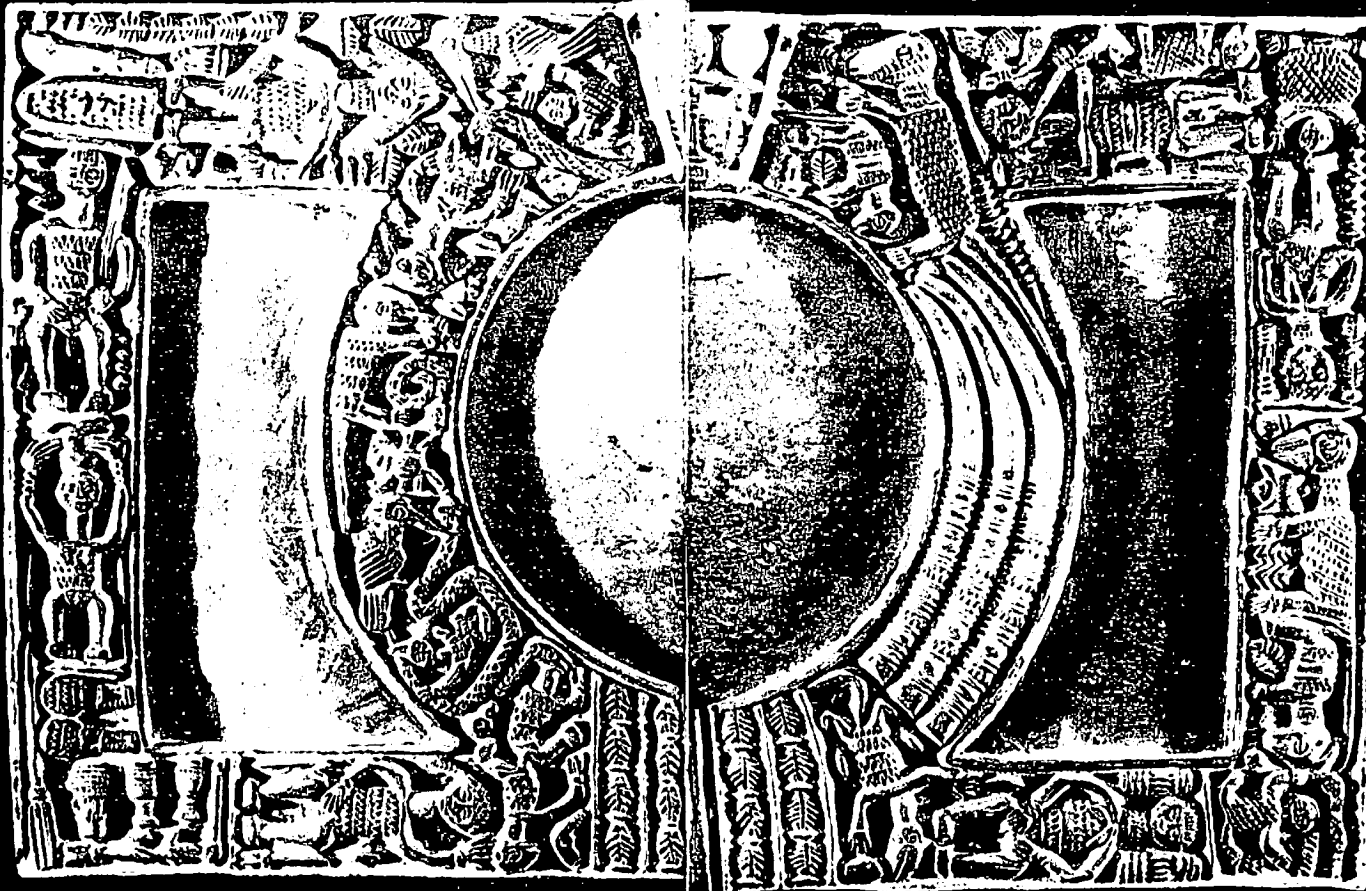


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FLASH OF

THE SPIRIT



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Three

THE RARA OF THE UNIVERSE

*Vodun Religion and
Art in Haiti*

Voodoo, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, is "a body of superstitious beliefs and practices including sorcery, serpent worship and sacrificial rites, current among negroes and persons of negro blood in the West Indies and Southern United States, and ultimately of African origin." Superficially understood by Westerners since the eighteenth century, voodoo (*vodun*) has been reviled as abominable primitivism and vulgarized and exploited in countless racist books and films. *Vodun*, which was first elaborated in Haiti, however, is one of the signal achievements of people of African descent in the western hemisphere: a vibrant, sophisticated synthesis of the traditional religions of Dahomey, Yorubaland, and Kongo with an infusion of Roman Catholicism. What is more, *vodun* has inspired a remarkable tradition of sacred art.

France took formal possession of the western third of the Caribbean island of Hispaniola in 1697. Soon thereafter this part of the island—modern Haiti—developed a vigorous indigo and sugarcane plantation economy. Western Hispaniola, built on the backs of black slaves, became the most profitable French colonial possession in the world, necessitating an enormous increase in the importation of slaves. In 1697 there had been three Europeans to every African in western Hispaniola, but a hundred years later the proportion had radically changed: there were approximately eleven blacks to every white.¹

The men and women of African descent who populated Haiti came primarily from Kongo and Angola, but also from Dahomey, Yorubaland, Bamana, and Mande territories in West Africa, with assortments of Igbo, too. As C. L. R. James remarks in *The Black Jacobins*:

Two-thirds of the population of French San Domingo (at the commencement of the Haitian revolution in 1791) had made the Middle Passage. The whites had emigrated or been exterminated. The Mulattoes who were masters had their eyes fixed on Paris. Left to themselves, the Haitian peasantry resuscitated to a remarkable degree the lives they had lived in Africa. Their method of cultivation, their family relations and social practices, their drums, songs and music, such art as they practiced, and above all their religion which became famous, *Vodun*—all this was Africa in the West Indies.²

Actually, *vodun* was Africa *reblended*. The encounter of the classical religions of Kongo, Dahomey, and Yorubaland gave rise to a creole religion. This religion has two parts: one called *Rada*, after the slaving designation for persons abducted from Arada, on the coast of Dahomey, itself derived from the name of the holy city of the Dahomeans, Allada; and the other called *Petro-Lemba*, or simply *Petro*, after a messianic figure, Don Pedro, from the south peninsula of what is now Haiti, and the northern Kongo trading and healing society, Lemba.

Chiefly from Dahomey and western Yorubaland derived the *vodun* worship of a pantheon of gods and goddesses under one supreme Creator—deities who manifested themselves by possessing (“mounting”) the bodies of their devotees. This aspect of *vodun* was reinforced by contact with French services for Roman Catholic saints who were said to work miracles. Chiefly from Kongo and Angola derived *vodun* beliefs in the transcendental moral powers of the dead and in the effectiveness of figured charms for healing and righteous intimidation.³

Both *Rada* and *Petro* partake of these sources of African influence; neither is traceable to just one source. Both are at once African-inspired and indigenously created. *Rada*, predominantly Dahomean and Yoruba, is the “cool” side of *vodun*, being associated with the achievement of peace and reconciliation. *Petro*, predominantly Kongo, is the hot side, being associated with the spiritual fire of charms for healing and for attacking evil forces. The great Haitian

painter André Pierre, himself a *vodun* priest, has called *Rada* “civilian,” *Petro* “military.”⁴

It is important to stress, however, that the two fundamental *vodun* sections fused similar religious aspects of different African cultures. Thus, the “hot” sorcerous potentiality of an otherwise cool Yoruba riverain goddess was reassigned to the *Petro* side of deities. Correspondingly, the cool, creative Kongo *simbi* spirits were lifted from the realm of Kongo-inspired “attack” charms and reassigned to *Rada*, where their positive powers were akin to those of the gods and goddesses of Dahomey and Yorubaland.

Dahomey: A Distant Paradigm

The Dahomean kingdom once flourished in what is now the Benin Republic between Togo and Nigeria on the west coast of Africa. It lacked vast rivers and mountain ranges and therefore was accessible to Yoruba migrations from the east. From Tado, west of modern Abomey, the Adja branch of the ancient Yoruba migration from present-day Nigeria moved south. Around the fifteenth century, according to tradition, Aligbonon, the King of Tado’s daughter, while seeking water in a forest, met and was made love to by a leopard spirit; the mystic union resulted in the birth of Prince Agasu, legendary ancestor of all the Fon of Dahomey, whose name is remembered in Haiti.⁵

Agasu’s descendants founded the holy Dahomean city of Allada. About 1600 three of his sons contested the throne of the sacred town. The eldest won; the middle son took the throne of Ajase-Ipo (modern Porto Novo); and the youngest, Do-Aklin, trekked north and founded Abomey, capital of Dahomey.⁶

By 1700 the French had established a permanent slaving base on the Dahomean coast at Ouidah. The link connecting Dahomey and the West Indies, especially western Hispaniola, had been forged. The slave trade intensified the Dahomean warrior way of life. Quickly Abomey emerged from relative obscurity to become a major power in West Africa, with an efficient army, a stable cowrie-shell currency, a strong balance of trade, and firm control of political and social affairs.⁷ Defense and economic welfare provided a rationale for military expansion. Abomey struck south, conquered Allada in 1724, and three years later reached the Atlantic Ocean, seizing the

trade in European firearms that flourished on the coast. Already Abomey had captured or was raiding Mahi, Savalu, Ketu, and the Anago Yoruba.

Paul Mercier underscores an important aspect of Dahomean cultural history—the transformation of the deities of immigrants and of conquered peoples into Dahomean spirits.⁸ The cultures of the conquered—Mahi to the north, Ketu and Anago Yoruba to the east—were fairly close to the Dahomean way of life. Thus their gods and goddesses were assimilated by the Dahomeans.

However, the deities of the Yoruba had already made their presence felt in Dahomey over hundreds of years. Yoruba deities were served under different manifestations in Allada before 1659. Therefore, the Abomey conquests brought together Yoruba deities already transformed into Ewe and Fon local spirits, in addition to deities from Ketu and Anago Yoruba. The encounter of Ewe-Dahomean spirits with pure Yoruba *orisha* in Haiti produced still another synthesis of Yoruba-descended religious practices that, in the course of Dahomean history, had become separated from one another. Fusion and refusion of Yoruba spirits, first in Dahomey and then all over again in Haiti, go a long way toward explaining the phenomenon of multiple avatars of the same Dahomean-Yoruba god. It also helps explain the persistence of the concept of the *orisha* in the black New World.

The very Afro-Haitian term for spirit, *loa*, encapsulates the subtle nature of the syncretions that took place. In Abomey, deities are called *vodun* (mysteries); in Yoruba, diviner-herbalists are called *babalawo* (father-of-mysteries), a term creolized by Haitians into *papaloi* (the name for a *vodun* priest) through ingenious Afro-Gallic punning. The Haitian words for deity, *loa* or *mystère*, therefore appear to derive from the Yoruba *l'awo* for "mystery."⁹ The interrelationships binding the gods of Dahomey to the Yoruba pantheon and both to the *loa* of Haiti are fascinating to behold:¹⁰

ENGLISH GLOSS	YORUBA NAME	FON NAME	HAITIAN NAME	Brasil
God Almighty	Olorun	Mawu	Bondieu	
Creativity God	Orishanla	Lisa	Lissa	Oxala
Trickster	Eshu-Elegba	Legba	Papa Legba	Eshu
Iron God	Ogún	Gū	Papa Ogún	Ogun
Hunter God	Oshoosi	Age	—	Oxossi

ENGLISH GLOSS	YORUBA NAME	FON NAME	HAITIAN NAME	Brasil
Smallpox God	Shapannan	Sakpata	Sabata (onutu)	Obalanya
Thunder God	Shàngó	Hebiosso	Chango; Heviosso; so	Kango
River Goddess	Oshun	Aziri	Erzulie	Oxum
Sea Goddess	Yemoja-Oboto	Oboto	—	Yemanjá
Whirlwind	Oya	Avesan	—	Yansa
Rainbow-Snake	Oshumare	Da Ayido	Dambala-Ayida	Oxumare
		Hwedo		
Sacred Tree	Iroko	Loko	Papa Loko	
Twins	Ibeji	Hohovi	Marassa	Irma, Dominga
Herbalism	Osanyin	Aroni(?)	Ossange	
Allada Founder	—	Agasu	Agasu	
Ewe Sea God	—	Agbe (Hu)	Agoué	
Ewe Market Goddess	—	Aizan	—	
Ewe Sea Goddess	—	Avrekete	Aizan-Velekete	
Ewe Sea Deity	—	Gede	Gede	
Yoruba Farm God	Orisha Oko	Zaka	Zaka	

Note that two Ewe-Fon deities merge into a single Haitian spirit, Aizan Velekete. Continuity by combination is a process that throws light on the apparent disappearance of Yemoja, Oya, and Oshoosi in Haiti. Their attributes may have been absorbed in iconographically similar cults.

With the coming of deities shared by Ewe, Fon, and Yoruba to Haiti, the stage was set for their involvement with the religions of Kongo and Roman Catholicism.

Dahomean Influences on Haitian Sacred Art

The Dahomean war deity Gū was destined to live momentarily in an alien land peopled primarily by persons brought from Kongo and Angola. On the Kongo-influenced side of *vodun* in Haiti, he became the *Petro* spirit Ogún-Bonfire, or Ogun-of-the-Blazing-Torch. Dahomeans know Gū as the personification of iron's cutting edge, which exists in the blade of a razor, in the slicing force of machetes, in the piercing jab of an iron-tipped spear.¹¹ Gū's own sword is represented by one of the monuments of Dahomean iron, the ceremonial blade called *gubasa* (Plate 106).¹² The image of the openwork disk of the sun relates this weapon to the sky. The master smith who fashioned



PLATE 106

it in Abomey, probably in the late nineteenth century, attached to its side more than forty miniature iron implements—tiny swords, cutlasses, guns, arrows, hoes, hooks, lances. Arrows thrust out from the cutting edge, like myriad spitting vipers, intensifying the killing aura of the instrument.

A masterpiece of Dahomean brass-smithing (Plate 107) enlarges our comprehension of this dread power: an image of Gū, the iron god himself. This striking figure has been tentatively attributed by Abomey elders to a court brass-smith of Kings Ghezo and Glele, Azidji.¹³ When this image arrived in Paris, near the end of the nineteenth century, it was still dressed in its complement of ritual garments (Plate 108), a brass hat for Age (the Dahomean god of the hunt), a cloak in Dahomean-made raffia cloth, a brass pendant and silver charm, and a loincloth of the kind Dahomeans and their Yoruba neighbors associate with forest cultivators, hence suggestive of brute forest energies.¹⁴ The image brandishes with both hands the *gubasa*.

The bite of iron is matched by the snapping of a lion's jaws in another striking form of Dahomean visual praise (Plate 109). In this example, a lion rampant carved in wood, attributed to the great nineteenth-century court carver, Sosandande Likohin Kankanhou, monumentalizes Glele's famous praise name: "When the lion shows his pointed teeth, he terrifies the world."¹⁵ Fragments of this visual lore of war were brought to Haiti by captives from the Dahomean region and fused in a new cult of the god of war. United with Ogún, the Yoruba god of iron, from whom Gū himself originally derived, Gū became Papa Ogún. Papa Ogún was, in turn, associated with the warrior saints of the Roman Catholic Church.

In Haiti, visual representations of the saints of the Roman Catholic Church were viewed with informed sympathy by the blacks. In such imagery they perceived—unbeknownst to the whites—ties to truths they already knew. They noted striking parallels in the lives and attributes of the saints, the *vodun* of Dahomey, and the *orisha* of Yorubaland.

The Church distributed among the slaves, who were forcibly baptized by law, inexpensive woodcuts and lithographs of the saints, demonstrating, didactically, their individual attributes. These were potent images indeed for minds informed by the visual cultures of Dahomean *vodun*, West Yoruba *orisha*, and Kongo *minkisi*. In the course of supposed Westernization, Haitians actually transformed



PLATE 108



PLATE 107

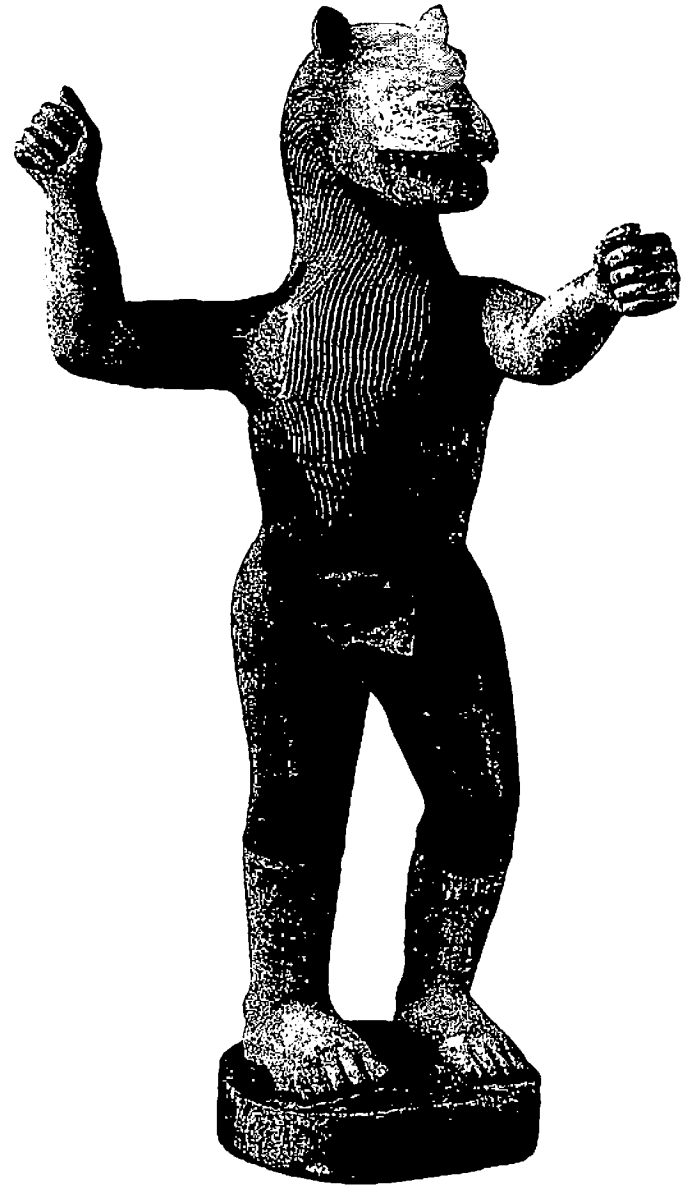


PLATE 109

the meaning of the Catholic icons by observing their similarities to African spirits. Haitians restructured the identity of the saints of the Catholic Church in terms of their own religious language. Consider Saint James. Michel Leiris remarks:

Because of a secondary figure, the picture of Saint James the Great (Plate 110) . . . will receive a double interpretation. The picture shows Saint James on horseback with sword and shield, fighting the Infidels, and escorted by a knight in armor, bearing a red standard with a white cross. All my informants agreed that the principal figure is the blacksmith and warrior god, *Ogun Ferraille* . . . (the essential attribute of which is a saber and, together with the other Ogun, the color red) but according to some, the figure in the background is *Ogun Badagri*, the brother of *Ogun Ferraille*, while others identify him rather as a *guede*, or graveyard spirit; this is because of the lowered visor of the helmet of the figure in question, which seems to recall the chin-cloth and other attributes of a corpse.¹⁶

The vision of *killing by iron* observed within the lithograph distinctly fits the martial paradigm of Dahomean Gū. And just as the *gubasa* is the central sign of war and smithing in Dahomey, so the *saber* became the chief icon of Ogún Ferraille in Haiti, in a new and wondrous context, often flanked by honorific banners, symmetrically displayed and inclined, as if nodding in honor of Lord Gū.

The shape of the shafts of the important flags that traditionally flank the sword of the saint in ground-paintings (and the sword of the master-of-ceremonies in *vodun* dancing) extend a little-noted accent of militaristic assertion. The flags' shafts reverse the S-curved saber's handguard; they are cryptic swords of cloth, following and flanking the lord of the cutting edge, even as a white cross on a field of red in the chromolithograph accompanied the warrior saint.¹⁷

In many instances, then, swords and flags are compared and the enlargement of the original meaning of *gubasa* has been effected by new visual influences of the iconography of Catholicism on the Afro-Haitian aesthetic.

When a person becomes possessed by the spirit of Papa Ogún Ferraille, an iron bar, standing in the earth near the altar dedicated to his name, is heated in a fire. The possessed person will then take this staff or some other equally heated bar and dance with it in his



PLATE 110

or her bare hands to prove that the possession is genuine. Deep mastery of self is the point of the play with fire and heat.¹⁸

An artistic monument of Dahomey also involved with resistance and self-restraint is the circular pendant (Plate 111) symbolizing steadfastness, which the great brass figure of the iron god, now in

zoology the same concept is conveyed by the image of a frog (Plate 112), whose presence correlates with water's coolness, hence with peace imposed by statecraft that is strong and just.²¹ These were ancient ideas in Dahomey, long predating their particular association with nineteenth-century kings.

Another animal present in Dahomean art—Dā or Dan, the good serpent of the skies—appears not only in Haiti but also in Cuba (Plate 113), and, in mixture with the Yoruba rainbow deity, Oshumare, in Brazil (Plate 114), that is, wherever the Fon and their neighbors arrived as captives.

The highest deity of the Fon, Mawu-Lisa, combines female (Mawu) and male (Lisa) valences. Mawu is cool and gentle—she is the moon. Lisa is strong, tough, fiery—he is the sun. Their union represents a Fon ideal.

The good serpent of the sky, Dā, is a metaphor for this primary, combinatory sign of order. Like Mawu-Lisa, Dā combines male and female aspects, and is sometimes represented as a pair of twins. Many are his avatars, but principal among them is Da Ayido Hwedo, the rainbow-serpent. Coiling a resplendent bichromatic body about the earth, Dā shaped its globelike form and sustained its balance and existence. Color symbolism in the lore of this rainbow-serpent is potent and direct: "The male is in the red portion, the female in the blue."²² Aggression and compassion are thus writ large across the skies.

In one Dahomean myth recorded by Mercier, Da Ayido Hwedo set up four pillars cast in iron at the four cardinal corners of the earth. He did this to hold aloft the sky. And then he twisted around these columns in brilliant spirals of crimson, black, and white to keep the pillars upright in their places.²³ These were colors of night (black), day (white), dawn and twilight (red). Clearly the iridescence of the sacred serpent signified to Dahomeans more than danger. It becomes a perfect metaphor for mind's own ordering motion.

Needless to say, Dahomean-influenced folk in Haiti, steeped in such lore, were impressed by the chromolithograph of Saint Patrick (Plate 115), dressed in full regalia, and shown at a critical juncture, driving the snakes from Ireland. They saw an elder, white of beard (things white are African attributes of Dā), making a gesture of power with his right hand. Instead of a saint treading vermin, banishing all evil—exorcism—they saw multiple embodiments of the serpent of the sky. The proof of this assertion, as will be seen, is how



PLATE 115

they rephrased this chromolithograph to fit their own religious language (Plate 116).

In addition, it can be imagined what an elder from Kongo thought when confronted with such a picture: here was an obvious ritual expert, with a staff of mediatory power, communing with forces incarnate in amphibian reptiles at the watery and grand boundary between the worlds of the living and the dead. Fon titles for this spirit are Dā, Dan, and Dan Bada, but the creole name in Haiti is Damballah. This overlaps, in form and meaning, the Ki-Kongo word for flatheaded rainbow-serpent, *ndamba*. MacGaffey elaborates:

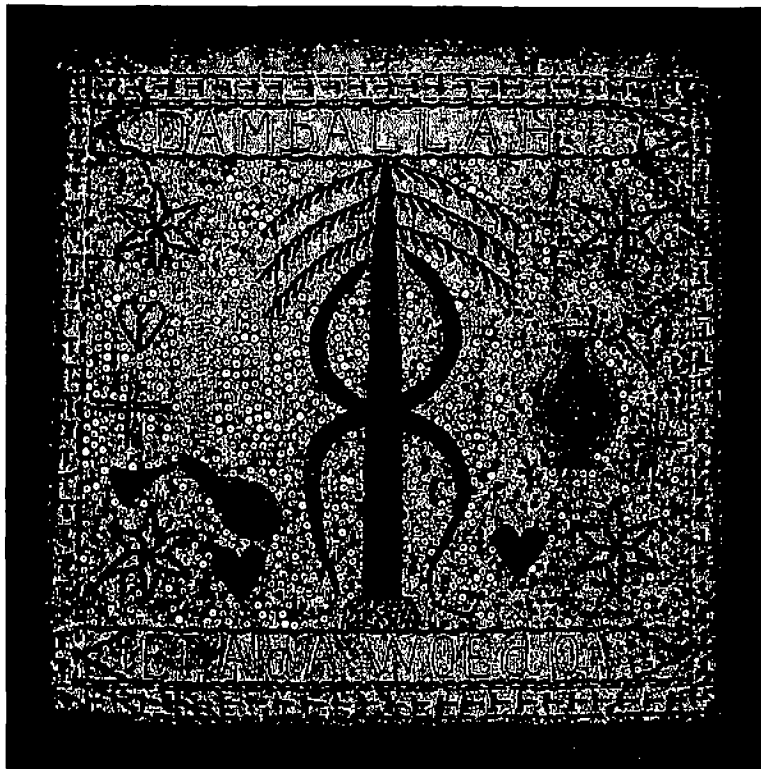


PLATE 116

Ndamba puns on the Ki-Kongo word for “to sleep” in the sense of the ecstatic love-making of two serpents, one male, the other female, who wrap themselves around a palm tree to carnally unite.²⁴

This is remarkably similar to the image summoned by calling the names of Dan and his wife, Ayida Hwedo, in Afro-Haitian *vodun* and identical with the image used in *vodun* blazonry to call and designate these spirits.



Vèvè ground-painting for Damballah and Ayida Hwedo, Port-au-Prince, twentieth century.

Thus, in a commonsensical way, the iconographies of two classical African religions came together: the center post, a ritual site around which *vodun* devotees dance, is often painted with rainbow stripes or embellished with relief representations of serpents intertwined.

Kongo Influences on Haitian Sacred Art

Moreau de Saint-Méry wrote in the eighteenth century regarding a certain *danse à Dom Pèdre*:

In 1768 a black man of Le Petit-Goave [a village on the north shore of the southern peninsula] . . . taking advantage of the credulity of the blacks with superstitious practices, gave them the idea of a dance analogous to that of the *vaudou*, but in which the movements were more sharp and sudden. To give the dance even more of an effect, the blacks mixed well-crushed gunpowder in the cheap rum they drank while dancing . . . this dance, called *Danse à Dom Pèdre* or simply *Dom Pèdre* has caused the death of certain blacks. . . .²⁵

In this account, “superstition” is mixed with substance. Saint-Méry believed that the *Dom Pèdre* “dance” began in 1768, and literally endangered those who danced it. Contesting this image, Melville Herskovits, the American anthropologist, wondered whether *Petro* spirits derived in fact from a species of African-derived ancestorism, for a Haitian black had told him that he believed *Petro* was an intimidating *vodun* priest who had died with the spirit of a god not properly released from his head. Evil and positive divinity therefore lived on within the spirit of this person, perpetually commingled.

Actually, lost here was not paradise but understanding. A ritual expert in Kongo today would have little difficulty in explaining plausibly the significance of these hazily remembered legends: *Dom Pèdre* was a messianic figure or an ancestor come back from the grave to renew his usefulness to the living in the body of a priest or healing charm.²⁶ In fact, there are figured healing bundles, or *pacquet congo*, in Haiti today that bear *Dom Pèdre*’s name. The great ethnologist, Alfred Métraux, writing in that vein of scientific skepticism tempered with artistic charm that was his alone, could sense—without identifying them—sub-Saharan origins in the legend of *Dom Pèdre*:

In the word *petro* we recognize the Pedro discussed above. Only a very naive person could believe that the complicated (petro) liturgy, which is inseparable from the worship of the petro divinities, could have been introduced by one man, however inspired . . . In contemporary Voodoo, Dompèdre is a powerful god who is normally greeted by the detonation of gunpowder. And so it seems certain there must have once been a *hungan* whose impact was so profound that his name took the place of African "nations" who today worship gods bearing his name, *petro*, and not theirs.²⁷

Today additional evidence suggests that those "African nations" lie within Ki-Kongo-speaking Central Africa.

In some parts in the north of Haiti, people sometimes call *Petro* Lemba, the name of an old and most important Kongo trading society. The doyen of Afro-Haitian studies, Jean Price-Mars, stressed the Lemba-*Petro* equivalence thirty years ago.²⁸ If the same cycle of rites is called by a Kongo name—a creole term in the south—in northern Haiti, then *Petro* must be a rite, not a person; a concept, not a name.

The fiery militance of the *vodun* realm was fully evident in 1768 when first contrasted with the idealized coolness of many of the deities of Dahomey. *Petro* ritualized aggression would seem logically to derive from the spiritualized militancy pervading the world of "attack medicines" of Bas-Zaire and neighboring territories. The earliest mention of *Petro* associates the rite with sharp, staccato motions and the tasting of gunpowder—practices sharpened and confirmed by time. Today *Petro* dancing is defined as "distinctively intense, almost nervous. . . . Dancers, instead of riding the beat, as in Rada and Ibo, seem to be running in front of it, as if the beat were whipping them forward."²⁹

The gestures of a *Petro* spirit, filling momentarily the body of a possession priest or priestess, are characteristically stern, hard, fierce:

Whereas Erzulie, the Rada Goddess of Love . . . is concerned with love, beauty, flowers, jewelry . . . liking to dance and be dressed in fine clothes . . . the figure of Erzulie-Red-Eyes, on the *Petro* side, is awesome in her poignancy. When she possesses a person, every muscle is tense, the knees are drawn up, the fists are clenched.³⁰

Here is a spectacle that recalls possession by *bisimbi nganzi* in northern Kongo, spirits of those who died violently. The Haitian

propensity for re-creating and marshaling these incandescent forces is based on a belief in the spirits of *Petro*'s power to make things burn in a positive healing sense; their flames, their whips, their exploding charges of scattered gunpowder are summoned when cooler *Rada* cures have failed. *Petro* altars, in the context of the *houmforts* (the religious centers of *vodun*), powerfully reflect this notion of salvation through extremity and intimidation.

Houmforts betray more than a hint of the spatial arrangement of many compounds in Central and West Africa: the construction of a series of rooms about an open courtyard. The focus of the *houmfort* is the peristyle, a roofed-over dancing court with sometimes brilliantly embellished posts. The center post (*poteau mitan*), at the center of the dancing area, is a mediating object par excellence, through which the deities are believed to ascend from the watery regions of the dead or come down from the skies. It is the still point of the spinning world of *vodun* dance: ground-paintings and the dances in honor of the deities symbolized by these paintings are centered on its axis.³¹

The influences of several African visual traditions are readily discernible in this single column. Firstly, as we have seen, according to a Dahomean belief, the Creator, Dan, "set up four iron pillars at the four cardinal points to support the sky, and twisted round them in spirals threads of the three primary colours, black, white, and red, to keep the pillars upright in their places."³² There are *poteaus-mitan* in Haiti showing spiral decoration in the colors of Dan's own rainbow, or serpents entwined around its shaft.³³ Secondly, a cardinal tenet of Kongo culture is that "a tree stands up tall on the earth, like a chief witness to boundaries." Haitians talk about the central column in their songs as a "planted post" (*poteau planté*), as if it were a tree. Thirdly, among the eastern Igbo and the Ejagham who inspired them, there has existed since at least the eighteenth century the tradition of a special central column in the Ngbe (leopard society) house, a column erected with an important stone set before it.³⁴ The column is planted in a raised, cylindrical dais of shaped clay—details again matched by those of the *poteau-mitan*.

Adjoining the dance court with its all-important center post is usually a building sheltering several shrines that open directly upon the peristyle. Each is a room containing one or more concrete or stonework altars (*pe*). Each altar, dedicated to particular spirits, displays multiple niches, recessed within its base, in which offering

bowls and other objects are placed by the servitors. In *Rada* shrines, in the area between Port-au-Prince and Léogane, one often sees one single, large, dramatic opening for offerings of food to the spirits in the center of the altar's bottom tier. In shape and location this opening resembles the niches or alcoves recessed in Haitian tombs for food offerings on special occasions.

Many *vodun* altars are built in rising tiers upon which myriad objects, crowded and stained by actual use, impress the beholder with a sense of spiritual aliveness and activity. The power of these altars lies in their representation of complex ideas by specially selected objects:

A *vodun* altar is a veritable bric-a-brac display of ritual objects: jars and jugs for the deities and for the dead, plates consecrated to twin-spirits, vessels for initiated priestesses, thunder-stones, swimming in oil, playing-cards, ritual rattles and emblems of the gods, as well as bottles of wine and liquor offered to the deities. . . . chromolithographs are pinned to the walls. Near the sword for Ogun, driven into the earth, one still finds, in some shrines, *assein*, those curious supports in iron which are still to be bought in the market of Abomey in Africa.³⁵

It would be appropriate to compare such altars to the store of an apothecary, for herein are also gathered all kinds of bottles and vessels, in different shapes and colors, many meant to lend spiritual confidence, or a healing sense of security, for troubled suppliants brought before the altar. The close gathering of numerous bottles and containers, on various tiers, is a strong organizing principle in the world of *vodun* altars.

That unifying concept, binding Haitian *Rada* altars to Dahomean altars in West Africa, precisely entails a constant elevation of a profusion of pottery upon a dais, an emphasis on simultaneous assuagement (the liquid in vessels) and exaltation (the ascending structure of the tiers). The intermingling statuary and containers on altars in Dahomey and graves in Kongo become the Haitian mingling of chromolithographs of Catholic saints on the wall and offertory and other vessels on the several tiers below.

In the Port-au-Prince area the *Petro* room is often one of several chambers adjoining the peristyle. Such rooms are striking for the touches, sometimes of deliberate horror, meant to suggest the moral terror of this fiery side of *vodun*. Thus a shrine to the *Petro* spirit Criminel at the sanctuary of Madame Romnus in Bizonton in 1970



PLATE 117

included a human skull embedded in a kind of dado near the bottom of the altar dais. The head of a cat, glassy eyes staring eerily ahead, was suspended on a thread above the altar. Elsewhere, in the region between Gressier and Léogane, I have seen *Petro* altars built apart, in a small habitation separated from the main cluster of altars about the peristyle, emphasizing distance and great danger.³⁶ And there we sometimes find a table, laid for "work," healing, or acts of mystic aggression, instead of a dais with tiers for display of ritual objects.

I was allowed to photograph a *Petro* table on the south peninsula of Haiti in the spring of 1975. Deriving from Kongo on this table is the feathered image (Plate 117) of Simbi Macaya, to the right of a skull and in front of a bottle—a promise of the power of *Petro* to render urgent healing. A cluster of three transparent bottles each with a miniature crucifix within, dramatically displays points of

spiritual contact—crossroads in miniature, ensconced in spirit-attracting glass—and deepens the allusion to the dread powers of the *Petro* spirits. Playing cards have been laid on this table. They are for divination. Renamed in *Petro* terms, the Queen of Diamonds, for example, has become *Erzulie-Red-Eyes*, whose poignant possession style we have observed. There is even a human skull, as in *Madame Romnus's* shrine, here associated, so it was alleged, with the mystic killing of cruel or evil persons through the propitiation of the deity shown seated at this table.

No sooner do I come into this room than a servitor is instantly possessed with the spirit of *Danger-Malheur*, *Danger-And-Ill-Fortune*, a *Petro* avatar. Face frozen, he wears his traditional crimson hat. Sequined bottles for assuagement refer in their glitter to the flash of the spirit that has descended here and add beauty to undertones of terror and moral vengeance. To the left of the table the top of an actual cemetery cross in wood rises from a mock grave and in another portion of this room a great black flag guards a carefully deposited piece of meteoritic stone and a long red coffin, lined with silk, has been set upon two chairs, like a presence in a mortuary.

The art history of the *Petro* table-altars of southern Haiti remains to be completed, but the presence of a strong Kongo element—fused with ingenious invention and an imaginative local sense of visual structure, pace, and timing—already seems quite clear.

Vodun flags

Vodun flags appear at the beginning of *vodun* ceremonies and herald the coming of a god or goddess, the possession of devotees. *Vodun* flags are profoundly liminal. Unfurled and paraded in *vodun* rites, they stand at the boundary between two worlds. The late *houngan* (*vodun* priest) *Loudouique Elien* of *Gressier* told me in April 1970 that *vodun* flags were used to “greet the deities” (*saluer mystères*). *Madame Romnus*, the *mambo* of *Bizonton* mentioned earlier, also in 1970 told me that the meaning of the flags could be summed up in a single word: respect! (*respé!*). When a Haitian approaches another Haitian’s yard, making his presence known by shouting *Hono!* (*Honor!*), he does not, by the rural rules of etiquette, cross the threshold until he hears from within the corresponding cry of *Respé!* The resonance between this custom and the association

of the flags with *respé* underscores the power of these banners as mediating forces. These are creole variations on a fundamental Kongo theme—*nikusa minpa*—the ritual agitation or unfurling or “dancing” of squares of cloth to open the door to the other world.³⁷

Métraux gives us a fine description of *vodun* flags in ceremonial context:

They are brought out at the beginning of a ceremony or when a “great loa” possesses one of the faithful. Also, important visitors are entitled to the honor of walking beneath two crossed flags. When the moment comes to fetch these flags, the flag party, which consists of two women, goes into the sanctuary escorted by the *la place* waving his sword. They come out backwards and then literally charge into the peristyle behind their guide who is now twirling his weapon.³⁸

This can inspire a song for *Sogbo*, lord of thunder and patron of flags, whose thunderous nature, like the sound of cannons on the battlefield, makes an appropriate accompaniment to the use of banners. Then:

The trio maneuvers and from the four cardinal points salutes the *poteau-mitan*, the drums, the dignitaries of the society, and finally any distinguished guests, each according to his rank. The *la-place* and the standard bearers prostrate themselves in turn before them. These show their respect by kissing the guard of the sabre, the staff of the flag, and make the *la-place* and the standard bearers pirouette. The return of the standards is accomplished in a remarkable rite: the two priestesses, still preceded by the *la-place*, pointing his sabre before him, run around the *poteau-mitan*, often making quick changes of direction. This musical ride goes on till the *la-place* leads them off towards the sanctuary door through which, having first recoiled from it three times, they pass at the double.³⁹

The balancing of a male-handled sword with two female-carried flags suggests a trace of Dahomean influence in the pairing of the sexes, and also perhaps reflects the sharing of power between male and female officiants in *vodun* in general.⁴⁰ Note that two women pair with a single male, as if their banners were co-wives to the spirit. And there is yet one more indication, in formal terms, that the flags themselves embody spirit—the fact that in some styles the silhouettes of deities honored by the banners are carefully described by shining beads on a field of gleaming spangles. In such cases the

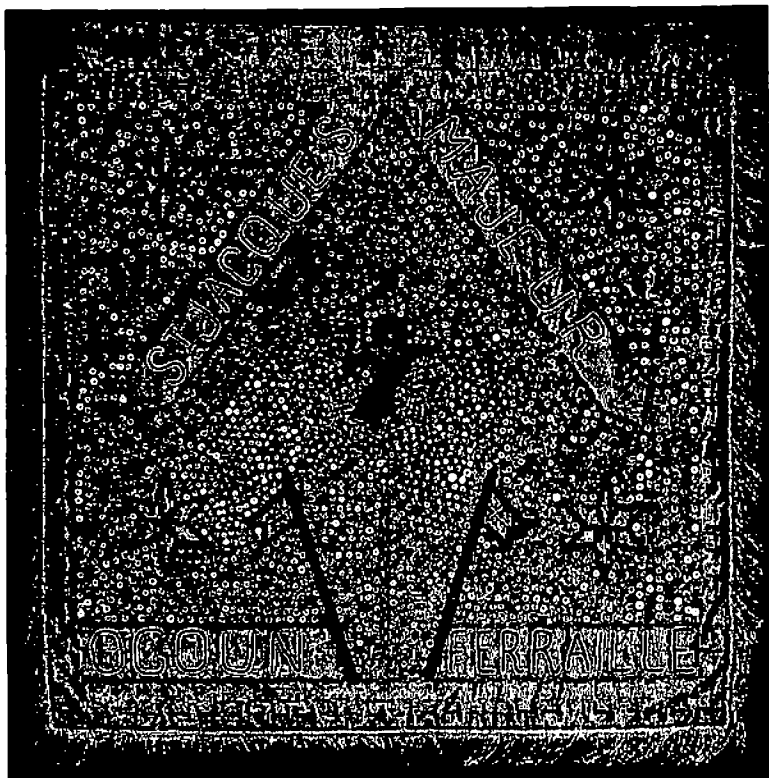


PLATE 118

beads are often reserved for the direct visual rendering of the deity on the banner. In the spring of 1975 the locally famous healer-diviner Álvares told me in his sanctuary near Léogane why he draped shining beads about the tops of swords embedded upright in the earth before his *Petro* altar: "These are *kanzo* beads. They have to be here. We place them on the heads of sabers because there is a spirit in them."⁴¹ And, similarly, the bead-embroidered silhouettes of the goddesses and the gods, on those *vodun* flags where such additional embellishment is found, suggest the presence of spirit within their gathered brilliance, foretelling that mediation is about to happen or confirming its completion.

Two masterpieces of the *vodun* flag tradition—works of the utmost clarity and precision—were fashioned by Adam Leontus, a former dock worker, later celebrated as "the master decorative artist of Haiti."⁴² These flags, made c. 1945 in Port-au-Prince for Saint

James/Ogún Ferraille and for Saint Patrick/Damballah and Ayida Hwedo, incorporate the whole of their tradition (Plate 116).⁴³ They carry inscriptions identifying the powers for whom they were made. Like the Catholic chromolithographs, they sparkle with allusion to the attributes of the saints. Like the costumed "majors" of Haitian *Rara* street paraders, they achieve maximum glitter with sequin-covered surfaces. And like the head of the sword for Gū, the Fon deity of war and iron, observed in the *Petro* shrine of Álvares near Léogane and elsewhere, the portions of their composition indicating the silhouettes of sacred beings—or their attributes—are covered with bead embellishment.

The flag for Damballah and his wife, Ayida Hwedo, the serpents of the sky, is cut from a bolt of pale blue silk (Plate 116). It flashes with countless silver sequins. The serpents crushed under Saint Patrick's foot in his chromolithograph (Plate 115) disappear; they reemerge as twin-beaded serpents in the sky, joined in sacramental love about the swordlike palm tree, the sign of Aizan, the wife of the Dahomean trickster Legba. Aizan "marches" with the twin serpents. Leontus transformed the color of the snakes into gleaming silver, an affective suggestion of the richness of their powers and their purity. They stand, entwined, as rainbow-serpents, sources of creative coolness. The straightforward opposition of good and evil in the chromo has been transmuted into an extraordinary evocation of divinity and love. The intermingling of Damballah's body with that of Ayida is a sign of union and ecstasy, a sign that echoes throughout the composition, in the pairing of hearts, crosses, and rainbows meeting in a jar. Overmastering sensations of ecstatic union are stated and restated within a field whose starred corners suggest it is the universe itself.

Leontus's other flag bears equal witness to his power to shape a vision of two worlds. Gold sequins sewn on crimson silk outline the passage of the mounted warrior-saint across the composition, as if he were caught in a ray of sunlight (Plate 118). The dissolving of the scene of fallen warriors and abandoned shields of the chromolithograph (Plate 110) releases the saint from a single point in space and time and makes his action heroically continuous and iconic. He, too, is set within four stars, which suggests the translation of the action to the skies.

The parting of two flags about the standing sword at the bottom of the composition—precisely the act within the peristyle that her-

alds the coming of the spirit within the flesh of a dancing and initiated servitor—suggests that the hovering mounted figure above this motif is a spirit descending to this world. The miniature banners within the banner not only link this textile to its contexts but also create raking accents that mirror the shaftlike cartouches in which the spirit's Christian name is sited, above the mounted figure. These names descend, like arrows of God, pointing toward the corresponding Dahomean titles. Adam Leontus totally transcended his source of inspiration; he masterfully transformed a single battle against the Saracens into an endless arrest of supernatural power to inform the moral wisdom of this world.

Vèvè: Ritual Vodun Ground-Paintings

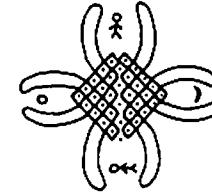
Vèvè, the celebrated blazons of the vodun goddesses and gods, are traced by priests or priestesses in powdered substances (normally cornmeal) on the earth about the central column of the vodun dancing court. Symmetrically disposed and symmetrically rendered, they praise, summon, and incarnate all at once the vodun deities of Haiti.

They take their name from an archaic Fon term for palm oil used in the making of simplified squares or rectangles on the ground for certain Dahomean deities. Essentially they take their structure from a reinforcing merger of Fon and Kongo traditions of ritual ground designs, with the cruciform cosmograms of Kongo and neighboring territory the dominating influence not only in terms of design but, critically, in point of context and process, too. Thus John Janzen:

the tracing of ritual spaces in the Petro phase of the loa service offers some striking resemblances to . . . Kongo rituals. In the staking out of the cardinal points with candles, the [ritual expert] used a common, perhaps worldwide motif. However, in circling this space in a counter-clockwise direction, and then dividing it into two, one half representing the domestic realm (governed by "lord of the house" Mait' Habitation, the other half the realm of the wilds, the deep, of water (governed by "lord of the deep" Mait' Source) he was tracing a cosmogram the way it is done in many Kongo contexts.⁴⁴

And there are analogous ground-signs, mediatory cruciforms, found among the Tu-Chokwe of northern Angola, the Ndembu of

northwestern Zambia, and the Pende of western Zaïre, doubtless fragments from a larger, yet to be discovered western Bantu field of visual expression. The Tu-Chokwe have especially developed ground-designs of intricacy and beauty, as illustrated by an ideograph that artfully fuses various motifs:⁴⁵



The top of this design indicates the realm of God, whom the Tu-Chokwe, like the Bakongo, call Kalunga. There a human figure is shown standing. Twinned serpentlike forces mark the cosmic criss-cross, framing the center of the design where nucleated lozenges indicate the sign of the *muyombo* tree. Myth says that God asked the stars, "On which side of the cosmos is man found?" And the stars replied, "On the side opposite yours." God observed: "Then man will die," thus identifying the bottom of the ideogram as representing the realm of the dead, and explaining why a the human figure therein represented lies in a recumbent pose of eternal sleep.

The symbolizing, with nucleated patterning, of a tree at the center of the cosmos compares closely with Kongo and Angola custom and also with the Haitian tradition of drawing vèvè around a treelike post in the center of the peristyle, as shown below. On the other hand, the contrast between the Tu-Chokwe and Haitian illustrated signs of cosmos not only clearly distinguish the creole blazons

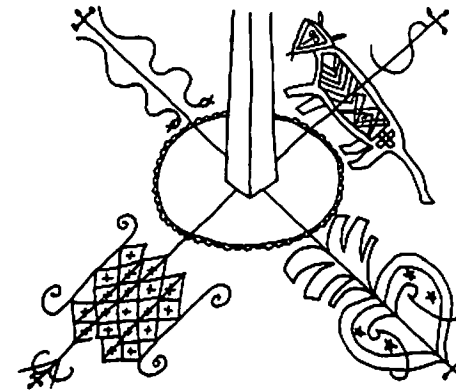




PLATE 119

from their Central African antecedents but also suggests why the explosive variety of *vèvè* emerged. Both the Tu-Chokwe and Haitian signs are centered on cosmic trees, but there the similarity ends. The Central African cosmogram states the same pattern four times. The Haitian illustration combines icons of various traditions and sources

—the upper right patterning is for Simbi, the Kongo-descended spirit, with an alphabetic S, and a sacrificial bullock bearing a Masonic emblem, in celebration of Masonic-like mysteries that surround the power of Simbi; at lower right appears a heart for the Dahomean-derived goddess of lovers, Erzulie, with the M of her Catholic counterpart, Mater Dolorosa; at lower left we find the star-nucleated diamonds of Ogún Badagri, framed with volutes relating, by one scholar's reckoning, to French grillwork; and finally, at upper left, the poised and balanced Dahomean serpents of the sky, Damballah and Ayida Hwedo.⁴⁶ In other words, this is more than a crisscross of the earth at point of contact with the sky. In effect, this *vèvè* complex provides geometric focus for a constellation of Dahomean, Kongo, and Roman Catholic forces constituting the very fabric of Haitian cultural history. The Kongo and Angola cruciforms invoked God and the collective dead, but the Haitian ground-painting invoked a host of deities and emblems inherited from many lands. In the reduction of historical multiplicity of experience to single New World forms, *vèvè* constitutes the quintessential form of Afro-Haitian art.

Everywhere in *vodun* art, one universe abuts another—the gathering of the “chromos” of the saints upon the altar walls; the standing of embottled souls upon the altar; the flash of the double *vodun* flags and swords (cf. Plate 119) about the peristyle; the coming of the deities, responding to this brilliance through the pillar at the center of the dancing court. Luminous force then radiates, so it is believed, from the bottom of this pillar in the form of the blazing chalk-white signatures of the goddesses and gods. These signs, these *vèvè*, are then erased by the dancing feet of devotees, circling around the pillar, even as, in spirit possession, the figures of these deities are redrawn in their flesh. And then the goddesses and gods themselves revolve about this tree, this rainbow, this standing serpent that helped God build the world, creating unities so splendid it is permissible to greet black Haiti as the *coumbite* of the western hemisphere, the *rara* of the universe, a school of being for us all.⁴⁷

Three

1. Melville J. Herskovits, *Life in a Haitian Valley* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1971), p. 31.
2. C. L. R. James, *The Black Jacobins* (New York: Vintage Books, 1963), p. 394. See also Philip Curtin, *The Atlantic Slave Trade: A Census* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1969), pp. 75–77, 144 (graph), 181–83, 191–97, 200. Curtin points out (p. 181) that Haiti's population stemmed from slaves who had accounted for more than three-quarters of the entire eighteenth-century French Atlantic slave trade.
3. See Chapter III, sections on *minkisi* and *nzó a nkisi*.
4. Interview with Ralph Isham, spring 1976, kindly granted by Mr. Isham.
5. Alfred Métraux, *Le Vaudou Haitien* (Paris: Gallimard, 1958), p. 24.
6. See Robert Cornevin, *Histoire du Dahomey* (Paris: Éditions Berger-Levrault, 1962), pp. 74–82.
7. For details, Karl Polanyi's *Dahomey and the Slave Trade* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1966) provides an excellent analysis.
8. Paul Mercier, "The Fon Of Dahomey," in *African Worlds: Studies in the Cosmological Ideas and Social Values of African Peoples* (London: Oxford University Press, 1954), pp. 212–14.
9. This etymology, my own, fits the fact of the intense and creative creolizing pressure brought to bear on many elements of culture from Africa on Haitian soil. The Yoruba term *l'awo*, "mystery," expands into a broader semantic range when it dovetails with the Dahomean sense of mystery, meaning "deity."
10. This chart draws on many sources, including Herskovits, *Life in a Haitian Valley*, pp. 314–17; Harold Courlander, *Haiti Singing* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1939); Harold Courlander, *The Drum and the Hoe* (Berkeley: University of California, 1960); and Maya Deren, liner notes to *Voices of Haiti*, LP (New York: Elektra Records, c. 1953).
11. Mercier, *op. cit.*, p. 223: "Gū is specially linked with *Lisa*, strength and the sun. . . . *Lisa* comes down to earth holding *Gu* in his hand in the form of a *gubasa*."
12. I heartily thank Vincent Kinhoué Ahokpe of the Musée d'Abomey and his assistant for the privilege of photographing and studying the famous monumental *gubasa* of Abomey, 10 January 1968. It was given as an "altar of the spirit of victory."
13. Informants: Sagbaju, son of King Glele and brother of King Gbehanzin, and Akpalosi, son of Sagbaju, Abomey, 10 January 1968.

14. *Ibid.*
15. *Ibid.*
16. Michel Leiris, "Note sur l'usage de chromolithographies catholiques par les voduisants d'Haiti." in *Les Afro-Américains* (Dakar: Ifan-Dakar, 1953), p. 204.
17. Alfred Métraux, *Voodoo in Haiti* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), Plate XV, print of St. James the Elder. For further argument on possible symbolism inherent in the shape of the staffs of the flags of *vodun*, see my section of *The Four Moments of the Sun*, pp. 172ff.
18. Seen on a field trip to Haiti, late August 1961, at Bizonton, in the company of Emmanuel Paul, who kindly led me to a rite for Papa Ogún.
19. Explication of the iconography by Sagbaju and Akpalosi, Abomey, 10 January 1968. Their testimony jibes with Cornevin, *op.cit.*, p. 127: "*Gle gle ma yon ze* fields cannot be lifted up [by the wind]," which he, too, gives as a "strong name" of Glele. See also entry for *togodo* in Julien Alapini, *Le Petit Dahoméen: Grammaire—vocabulaire* (Cotonou: Éditions du Benin, 1969), p. 257.
20. Informant: Vincent Kinhoué Ahokpe, Abomey, 10 January 1968.
21. Cf. Maximilien Quénum, *Au Pays des Fons: Us et coutumes du Dahomey* (Paris: Larose Éditeurs, 1938), p. 149.
22. Mercier, *op. cit.*, p. 221.
23. *Ibid.*
24. I thank Wyatt MacGaffey for bringing this pun to my attention.
25. Moreau de Saint-Méry, *Description topographique . . . de la partie française de l'île de Saint-Domingue*, Vol. I (Philadelphia: 1797), pp. 210–11. Quoted in Métraux, *Voodoo in Haiti*, p. 39. I have reworked the translation.
26. Métraux, *ibid.*
27. Jean Price-Mars, "Lemba-Petro: Un Culte secret," in *Revue de la société d'histoire et de géographie d'Haiti* IX, 28 (1938). John Janzen, an anthropologist who has worked for several years in Kongo, has had occasion to analyze this text and finds many strong influences stemming from Kongo in general and the Lemba Society in particular. He discusses these parallels in a recent volume, *Lemba, 1650–1930: A Drum of Affliction in Africa and the New World* (New York: Garland, 1982), pp. 273–92.
28. Jean Price-Mars, "Lemba-Petro, un culte secret," in *Revue de la société d'histoire et de géographie d'Haiti*, Port-au-Prince, 9, 28 (1938), 12–31.
29. Maya Deren, *Voices of Haiti* LP.

30. Maya Deren, *Divine Horseman: Voodoo Gods of Haiti* (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1970).
31. For discussion, see Métraux, *Le Vaudou Haitien*, pp. 66–67.
32. Mercier, *op. cit.*, p. 221.
33. Seen between Bizonton and Port-au-Prince during a survey of peristyles in the area of the capital in March 1975.
34. P. Amaury Talbot, *In the Shadow of the Bush* (London: William Heinemann, 1912), p. 25, illustration.
35. Métraux, *Le Vaudou Haitien* p. 68. Translation mine.
36. These structural observations are inspired by Karen McCarthy Brown's *The Veve of Haitian Vodou: A Structural Analysis of Visual Imagery* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: University Microfilms, 1975), a landmark study.
37. Thompson and Cornet, *op. cit.*, p. 203, suggesting links between this custom and the rhythmic unfurling and dancing with umbrellas at the traditional jazz funeral in New Orleans.
38. Métraux, *Voodoo in Haiti*, p. 161.
39. *Ibid.*
40. And recalling the fact, as Polanyi, *op. cit.*, p. 54, points out, that in old Dahomey "everything went by pairs and even multiple pairs. . . . every official in the kingdom had his female counterpart. . . . throughout the army . . . every male, from the highest ranking officer down to the last soldier, had his female counterpart in the palace."
41. Interview with Álvares, near Léogane, 21 March 1975.
42. Eleanor Ingalls Christensen, *The Art of Haiti* (New York: A. S. Barnes and Company, 1975), p. 69.
43. I am grateful to Pierre Monosiet, curator of the Museum of Haitian Art, for bringing these flags to my attention in the summer of 1961. They have since been stolen from a private collection in New England and their whereabouts are still unknown. Monosiet himself suggested the tentative dating of 1945 for these flags.
44. John Janzen, *Lemba, 1650–1930*, pp. 284–85.
45. For the Tu-Chokwe design, see Eduardo dos Santos, *Sobre a religião dos quioccos* (Lisbon: Junta de Investigações do Ultramar, 1962) Fig. 1; for the Ndembu ground-sign, Victor Turner, *Chihamba the White Spirit: A Ritual Drama of the Ndembu* (Manchester: Manchester University Press edition, 1969), Plate 8b; Pende drawings of cosmograms, from an unpublished MS. by R. P. de Sousberghe, were kindly shared with me, in a personal communication (18 August 1977), by Marie-Louise Bastin.
46. Cover illustration, Milo Rigaud, *La Tradition voodoo et le voodoo haitien* (Paris: Éditions Niclaus, 1953).

47. R. F. Thompson, "The Flash of the Spirit: Haiti's Africanizing Vodun Art," in Ute Stebich, *Haitian Art* (New York: Abrams, 1978), pp. 34–35. *Rara* refers to Kongo-influenced pre-Lenten street orchestras, *coumbite* to African-influenced communal work parties fueled by percussion.

Four

1. D. T. Niane, *Sundiata: An Epic of Old Mali* (London: Longman, 1965).
2. *Ibid.*, pp. 58, 93–94, note 62: "A 'tana' is an hereditary taboo, can also mean a totem . . . in this case Soumaoro was forbidden to touch ergot, of which a cock's spur is composed, and as long as he observed this he could concentrate in himself the power of his ancestors." The presence of a similar belief, in the power of the animal-*tono* (cf. *tana*), among Afro-Mexicans of the Costa Chica south of Acapulco would appear to constitute an important New World Mandecism.
3. Charles S. Bird, "The Development of Mandekan (Manding): A Study of the Role of Extra-linguistic Factors in Linguistic Change," in David Dalby, ed., *Language and History in Africa* (New York: Africana Publishing Corp., 1970), pp. 154–55.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 156.
5. Charles S. Bird, personal communication, winter 1976.
6. *Ibid.*
7. Personal communication, spring 1980.
8. Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán, "Tribal Origins of Slaves in Mexico," *Journal of Negro History*, Vol. XXXI (1945), p. 280.
9. For details, see Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán, *Cuijla: Esbozo etnográfico de un pueblo negro* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1958), pp. 52–64. As late as 1801, authorities were complaining of the independence of the blacks of the region, "that they didn't have a fixed residence, that they lived in the fields in scattered huts" (p. 62).
10. Lic. Francisco Vázquez, *Ometepec: Leyenda de un pueblo* (Puebla: Editorial Cajica, 1964), p. 74.
11. Aguirre Beltrán, *Cuijla*, p. 60, from a letter by the mayor of Guatulco to the viceroy of New Spain, 1591.
12. Gerard Brasseur, in his *Établissements humains au Mali* (Dakar: Mémoires de l'Institut Fondamental d'Afrique Noire, 1968), p. 247, reports that the primary characteristic of nuclear Mande architecture is the nearly exclusive position held by the cone-on-cylinder type in traditional villages. In this matrix emerged the four variants of the Mande cone-on-cylinder style. For details, see Tod Eddy, "Manding