

THE
**COMPLETE
IDIOT'S
GUIDE[®] TO**

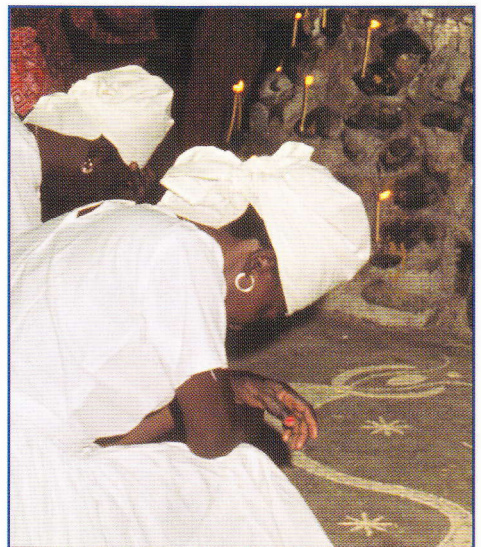
“This is the best book we’ve seen on the subject. It will take you to dark and mysterious places, and shed light where light has not been shed before.”

—Darrell Schweitzer and
George Scithers,
co-editors, *Weird Tales* magazine

Voodoo

- ◆ **The history and mysteries** of this misunderstood religion
- ◆ **Ancient wisdom** on the meanings of voodoo rituals
- ◆ **Expert guidance** on making your own protective charms

Shannon R. Turlington



Dear Reader,

Welcome to the exciting world of voodoo! In this book, you will discover a mysterious realm of magic, ritual, and immortal spirits. Thank you for letting me be your guide into that world.

Your journey starts in ancient Africa, where you will meet old gods and tribal priests. Then travel across the ocean to the West Indies island of Haiti, where voodoo was born in the slave quarters of the plantations and the rebel camps of revolutionaries. Learn how the religion thrived in secrecy throughout the island's troubled history, hiding behind the trappings of the Catholic Church and in nighttime rituals in rural villages to finally emerge into the light of day in modern Haiti.

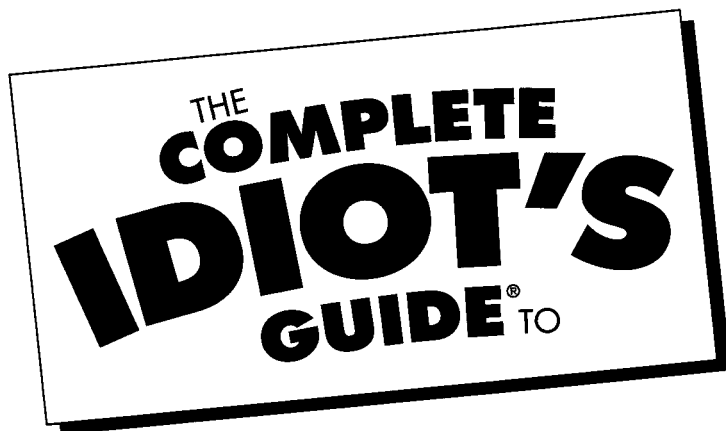
You'll learn the facts behind the myths and superstitions that have long surrounded this mysterious religion. Get to know the thousands of supernatural spirits that the devotees of voodoo serve. Venture into the voodoo temple to meet the priests, priestesses, and other members of the voodoo society. Witness rituals of drumming, dancing, spirit possession, and animal sacrifice. Discover the dark side of voodoo when you encounter black magicians, secret societies, and even zombies.

The Complete Idiot's Guide to Voodoo will show you how to journey even further into the world of voodoo, if you choose. Find out how to build a voodoo altar in your home and start serving the spirits yourself. Visit voodoo shops, attend rituals, and even become initiated if you are truly serious about following this spiritual path.

Voodoo is only now starting to throw off its reputation as superstition, witchcraft, and the occult and become recognized by the outside world as a genuine religion. You are about to discover the reality of voodoo. I hope you will soon find the spiritual fulfillment and power that voodoo has given its millions of practitioners.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'S. Turlington', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Shannon R. Turlington



Voodoo

by Shannon R. Turlington



A Pearson Education Company

For Marty.

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Cover Designer/Book Designer: *Trina Wurst*

Indexer: *Tonya Heard*

Layout/Proofreading: *Angela Calvert, Svetlana Dominguez, Mary Hunt, Ayanna Lacey*

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Foreword

Voodoo! The very word conjures up images of black magic, zombies rising from their graves, jungle drums, and orgiastic rituals in remote places, where the sinister Baron Samedi, Lord of Death, is summoned to receive bloody sacrifices.

Wrong. Although drumming is an important part of most voodoo rituals, and there are blood sacrifices—mostly chickens or other farm animals—just about everything else you thought you knew about voodoo (or Vodou, as the religion itself is called) is the product of generations of prejudice, even outright racism. The popular-culture images, courtesy of Hollywood and New Orleans tourism, have very little to do with the real thing.

Be ready for a few more surprises. Among the further revelations you will find in *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Voodoo* is that Vodou is a genuine, sincerely practiced religion for millions of people. It is extremely adaptable and tolerant.

Vodou is also monotheistic. Believers recognize one God, so remote from the world that he has little intercourse with mankind. But between God and mortal world are any number of spirits—thousands upon thousands of them—including the above-mentioned Lord of Death, the Baron, who is both sinister and a trickster. Indeed, most Vodou spirits—called *lwas*—have both a dark and a light, often comic side.

Voodoo dolls are unknown in Haiti. They exist mostly to be sold to tourists in New Orleans, for whom we offer the following useful tip: If you want such souvenirs, get your voodoo dolls in the French Market, not on famous Bourbon Street, where they cost three times as much.

New Orleans Voodoo, even when not for the tourists, is quite different from the Haitian variety. It has its famous queens. The most celebrated of all, Marie Laveau, is still venerated. Tourists and believers alike still make wishes and leave offerings at her tomb.

Zombies, however, are still in doubt. Wade Davis, the author of *The Serpent and the Rainbow*, seemed to have solved the mystery when he brought back some “zombie powder” to a laboratory. But, not surprisingly, the black magicians Davis met didn’t give him the whole secret. Oh, and by the way, zombies don’t eat human brains.

Like any persecuted religion—and it has been persecuted, not merely in slavery times, but also thereafter by the ruling elite in Haiti, who feared its revolutionary potential—Vodou is a religion of secrets, many of them still not entirely revealed to the outside world. It has suffered the usual slander (“They’re cannibals! They sacrifice children!”), which ancient pagans once repeated about Christians, and medieval Christians repeated about Jews, but Vodou has survived as a vital and ever-changing body of belief.

This is the best book we've seen on the subject. It will take you to dark and mysterious places, and shed light where light has not been shed before.

It's worth your time and attention.

—Darrell Schweitzer and George H. Scithers

Darrell Schweitzer is the author of three novels, *The White Isle*, *The Shattered Goddess*, and *The Mask of the Sorcerer*. Over 250 of his fantasy and horror stories have been published in *Twilight Zone*, *Cemetery Dance*, *Amazing Stories*, and numerous other magazines and anthologies. He has been nominated for the World Fantasy Award three times. With George Scithers, he has co-edited *Weird Tales* since 1988. The two of them shared a World Fantasy Award for the magazine in 1992.

George H. Scithers, after retiring from a career in civil and electrical engineering, was the founding editor of *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine*, the thirteenth editor of *Amazing Stories*, and is now a co-editor of *Weird Tales*. Along the way, he has collected four Science Fiction Achievement Awards, two for his amateur sword-and-sorcery magazine, *Amra*, and two for *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine*.

Introduction

Welcome to the exciting world of voodoo! This book reveals the facts about a religion that has been shrouded in mystery and myth for centuries. If you think all there is to voodoo are black magic, pins stuck in dolls, and the living dead, you're about to discover a powerful spiritual system that can bring immediate benefits to your life.

Voodoo encompasses so much more than mere magic. It developed out of the slaves' struggle for freedom and to preserve their African heritage, and it touches every part of its practitioners' lives. It encompasses a broad pantheon of immortal spirits; rituals characterized by drumming, dancing, and the miracle of spirit possession; a personal relationship with the divine; and the healing power of herbal medicine.

I invite you to explore this complex, and rewarding, religion. This book will teach you the basics, point you toward resources for further study, and even get you started in your own personal practice of voodoo. Here's what you'll find inside:

Part 1, "A History of Voodoo," traces the roots of voodoo to ancient Africa and follows it on the slave ships across the ocean to the island of Haiti. It follows voodoo's development throughout Haiti's turbulent history: examining its impact on the slave rebellion, the new country's politics, and the arts and culture of the Haitian people. Finally, it shows how voodoo has emerged out of the shadows as it has spread throughout the Western World.

Part 2, "The Fundamentals of Voodoo," explores the religion's spiritual foundations, introducing you to the Supreme Being and the thousands of immortal spirits served by practitioners of voodoo. Learn how voodoo devotees appease the spirits and the benefits that the spirits bring in return. Discover the power of taking the supernatural into your body through spirit possession, and travel along on the journey that the soul takes after death to transformation into a revered ancestral spirit.

Part 3, "Voodoo in Practice," gets practical by explaining how voodoo works in the everyday world. Meet the priests and priestesses of the religion and learn the many roles they play in the tight-knit voodoo community. Explore the voodoo temple and discover the wide variety of rituals that take place there, including feeding the spirits, initiation, marriage to the spirits, and sacred pilgrimages. Even find out how you can get started with your own personal practice.

Part 4, "Myth and Magic," explodes the fallacies surrounding voodoo and explores the magical side of the religion. Discover the protective, beneficial powers of white magic and the malevolent, dangerous realm of black magic. Meet zombies and the sorcerers of secret societies, and learn the truth behind the frightening fiction. Finish up with a list of voodoo and zombie movies for your viewing pleasure.

Voodooos and Don'ts

You'll find many signposts along the way to help you on your journey. Four types of sidebars are used throughout this book:



Voodoo Speak

The jargon of voodoo, expressed in the Haitian language of Kreyol (Creole), can be confusing to the newcomer. These sidebars define important voodoo terms and translate them into English where applicable.



Danger Ahead!

Check these caution sidebars to avoid misunderstandings and stereotypes, sidestep common mistakes, circumvent potentially dangerous situations, and escape the wrath of the spirits.



Spiritual Advice

These brief tips give helpful advice and useful inside knowledge. They will aid you in better understanding concepts, finding shortcuts, and receiving beneficial favors from the immortal spirits.

Voodoo Hoodoo

The history of voodoo and the folklore of Haiti are full of fascinating stories. Check these sidebars for illuminating anecdotes, fascinating sidetracks, and more detailed explanations of the origins of some voodoo beliefs.

Acknowledgments

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I would also like to thank all the Vodou priests and priestesses who welcome newcomers to their religion and offer invaluable guidance to them as they follow their spiritual path. In this book, I have striven to portray your religion with the respect and honor that it deserves. Any mistakes are completely my own and not those of the people who guided me in my research.

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Part

1

A History of Voodoo

What do you think of when you hear the word “voodoo”? Black magic? Evil curses? Witch doctors sticking pins in dolls? Worshippers in white whirling in frenzied dances around a bonfire to the constant beating of drums? Zombies digging their way out of their graves?

Chances are, all these images spring to your mind, conjured up by that exotic word. Voodoo can and does encompass all these things, but they are very minor parts of an incredibly complex, and incredibly tenacious, religion, a religion with roots stretching back thousands of years. Voodoo has survived centuries of suppression and has evolved into a joyous celebration of life in one of the poorest countries in the Western World.

To start learning what voodoo is all about, you must travel back in time, back to Africa and to the days of slavery in a small colony in the Caribbean. Only by examining the history of voodoo and discovering its place in the modern world can you truly appreciate all the many facets of this unique religion that extends far beyond mere magic into the fantastic realms of the spiritual and affects every aspect of the lives of its followers.



Chapter

1

Out of Africa

In This Chapter

- ◆ A brief history of the West African kingdoms where voodoo was born
- ◆ The African tribal religions that formed the foundations of voodoo
- ◆ An introduction to the old African gods
- ◆ How practitioners of voodoo regard their homeland

Voodoo. That one word conjures up exotic, bewitching images: Zombies shuffling through a graveyard at night; pins stuck in crudely fashioned dolls as an enemy many miles away feels agonizing pains; priests cutting the throats of chickens and drinking the blood; frenzied worshippers in white whirling around a roaring bonfire. But none of these images paints a realistic portrait of what voodoo—or Vodou (pronounced “voh-doo”), as it is properly called in Haiti—is really like. (Practitioners of voodoo prefer the term “Vodou.” This distinguishes the religion from the popular misconceptions of sorcery, witchcraft, and cannibalism associated with the term “voodoo.” I will use Vodou throughout this book to identify the religion as it is practiced in Haiti.)

For many of us, the movies we’ve seen and the popular books we’ve read have shaped our perceptions of Vodou. In reality, Vodou is not a secret practice of mysterious, sinister island magic. Rather, it is a rich religion, with roots as old as Africa.

To learn what Vodou is really like, first you must follow its roots to the Dark Continent. Vodou evolved out of the tribal practices and beliefs of the slaves who were brought to Haiti from many powerful kingdoms in West Africa. Those traditions had developed over several thousand years into a complex system of beliefs that would form the foundation for the new Haitian religion of Vodou.

In the Ancient Kingdom

In the seventeenth century, Europeans knew little about Africa and even less about the religious beliefs of the people who lived there. They thought Africans were primitive savages who engaged in witchcraft and Satanism. They also thought of Africans as commodities that could be abducted and sold as slaves.



Voodoo Speak

Vodou is the religion that developed in Haiti and is practiced by the majority of Haitians. However, Haitians themselves do not refer to their religion as Vodou. Rather, they call it "service," referring to the act of serving the spirits that primarily characterizes the religion.

Slaves bound for the West Indies were taken from over 100 different African ethnic groups, including the Nago, Ibo, Kongo, Hausa, and Ewe. The following map of West Africa shows which countries the slaves destined for Haiti came from. The tribal beliefs and customs of all these groups would combine to form a new religion, *Vodou*, as the slaves mingled on the tiny island of Haiti. No groups' influence was greater than that of the Fon and the Yoruba, two of the most powerful tribes in West Africa during the time of the slave trade.

Dahomey: The Birthplace of Vodou

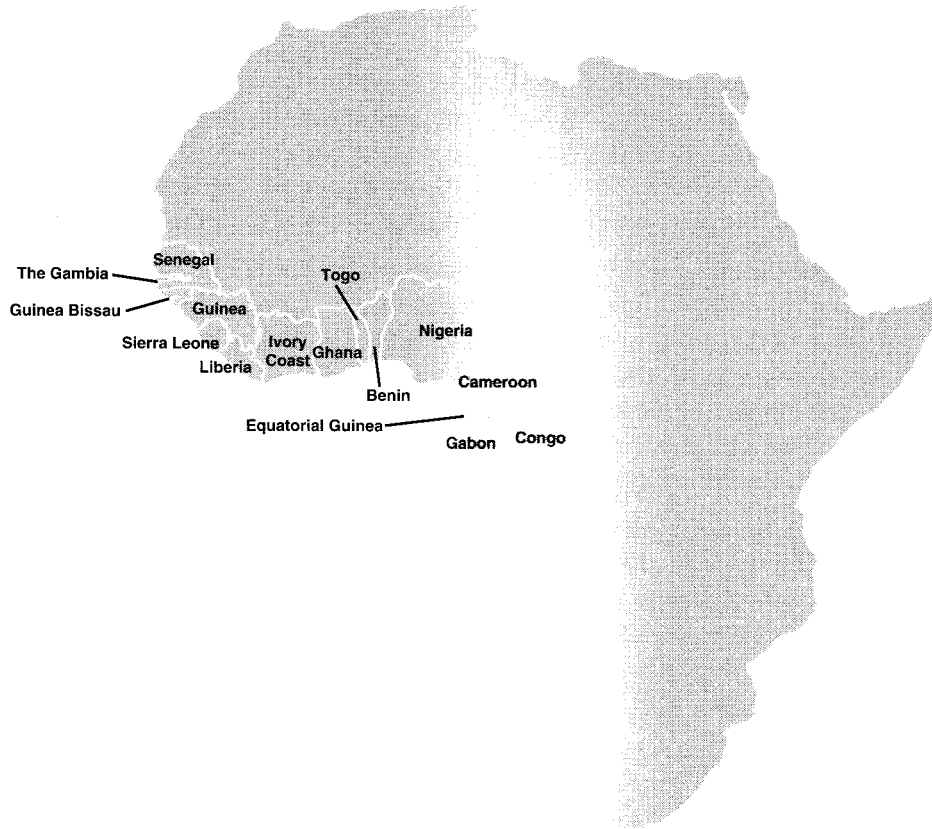
The Fon ruled the great empire of Dahomey, located on the west coast of Africa. This huge kingdom sprawled across most of the countries known today as Benin, Togo, and Nigeria. The majority of the Haitian slaves were taken from Dahomey.

During the time of the slave trade, Dahomey was the most powerful kingdom in West Africa. The empire reached the height of its power in the 1700s. The royal family ruled from the capital of Abomey, which was also the seat of the Fon religion. A well-organized military empire, Dahomey was much feared by its neighbors. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Dahomey conquered numerous small tribes along the west coast of Africa, incorporating those tribes, along with their religious beliefs and gods, into the empire.



Danger Ahead!

The Fon people of West Africa worshipped a snake god called Da. Because of this, European explorers in Africa dismissed the Fon religion as primitive snake worship. But this was a simplistic view. To the Fon, the snake was an important symbol of the eternal motion of the universe and the cycle of birth to death. These complex concepts certainly went far beyond mere snake worship.



Map of West Africa showing the locations of the tribal kingdoms from which slaves were brought to Haiti.

The slave trade was the most important part of Dahomey's economy. European slave traders called the area ruled by Dahomey the "Slave Coast" because of the large numbers of slaves they purchased there. The rulers of Dahomey routinely sold their own people into slavery along with prisoners of war they had captured. In return, they received weapons, jewels, liquor, and even more power.

Most of the Dahomean citizens sold into slavery were criminals, sorcerers, and other undesirables. But many priests were also shipped away as slaves, primarily because they resisted the total reign of the monarchy over the empire's religious life. Those priests brought their religion to the New World.

Dahomey's power began to wane by the 1800s, as it was attacked by European powers seeking to mine the riches of Africa. Eventually, the French defeated the monarchy, and Dahomey became the French colony of Benin.

The Influence of the Yoruba

After the Fon, the Yoruba had the greatest influence on the development of Vodou. The Yoruba were a large ethnic group that lived mostly in present-day Nigeria. The powerful Yoruba empire of Oyo (a region of Nigeria) was the Fon's greatest enemy. The two empires frequently warred with each other. Consequently, many Yoruban people, captured as prisoners of war, were sold into slavery and shipped to the West Indies, including Haiti.

The rulers of Dahomey found that one way to extend their power over neighboring tribes was to integrate the religious beliefs of those tribes with their own. They stole the gods of the Yoruba and other tribes and made them their own. In fact, gods were one of most valued spoils of war. The Fon believed that the powerful gods of other tribes would strengthen their empire. Appropriating their enemies' religious practices also made it easier to rule the different tribes they had conquered. No ethnic group had greater influence on the Fon's religious beliefs than the Yoruba.

This ability to change and adapt to others' beliefs was a common characteristic of West African tribes. The religions of Dahomey and other parts of West Africa were additive; they could adapt foreign elements into their structure in order to grow and thrive. The malleable quality of religion also traveled with the slaves to Haiti. This characteristic was very important in shaping Vodou as the slaves were exposed to the religious beliefs of the native peoples and of their European owners.

Tribe Jive

The West African tribes shared many core beliefs, which was a major reason why the religions of different ethnic groups could so easily adapt to the beliefs of their neighbors. These core beliefs make up the foundation of the Haitian religion of Vodou.

The tribal religion of the Fon had the greatest influence on the development of Vodou. The Fon's religion was probably one of the oldest in Africa, extending back 6,000 years or more.

Spirits Everywhere

The most important religious practice in Dahomey and other parts of West Africa was ancestor worship. Family members venerated the spirits of their ancestors, and their ancestors' wisdom helped guide their descendants. By remembering their ancestors and passing down their knowledge from generation to generation, the West African tribes ensured that their religious traditions would live on. These traditions even survived the slave trade, and ancestor worship and veneration of the dead became important practices in Vodou.

The Fon of Dahomey believed in hundreds of immortal spirits called *vodu*. Most of these were the spirits of ancestors elevated to a higher status after death. The West Africans also believed in spirits that ruled over natural phenomena, such as the weather, and human emotions, such as love. Because the West African tribes shared a belief in these immortal spirits, they could adopt the spirits of their neighbors or enemies for their own purposes. The Fon did this regularly, worshipping the most powerful spirits of the Yoruba and other tribes as if they were their own.

The *vodu* influenced every aspect of daily life. They were not remote beings worshipped from afar but actually took an active part in human affairs. West Africans had personal relationships with these spirits. They “served” the spirits with rituals and offerings, and in return, the spirits helped them make decisions and brought good fortune. This idea of serving the spirits was incorporated into Vodou as well. A personal relationship with the spirits is one of the core beliefs of Vodou.

The thousands of *vodu* formed a hierarchy, with the lesser known spirits at the bottom and the more powerful spirits at the top. As a particular spirit gained influence and was honored by more people and tribes, it rose in the hierarchy.

Individuals and families had their own *vodu*, called private *vodu*, who were the spirits of their ancestors. Every family had one powerful ancestral spirit that had founded their family line. The ancestral spirits acted as personal guardians, advising their descendants on everything from whom to marry to when to plant crops.

Entire villages honored more important *vodu*. The most powerful *vodu* were known throughout the kingdom. These local and national *vodu* were public *vodu*—everybody worshipped them. They oversaw the concerns of the entire society, such as warfare, agriculture, and fishing.

A powerful private *vodu*, such as an ancestor of an important family, was often elevated to the status of public *vodu*. One example is Agassu, who founded the royal line of Dahomey and who is still honored in Haitian Vodou today. Because so many people of the region worshipped the public *vodu*, they were most likely to carry their beliefs in these spirits with them across the ocean on the slave ships, so that the public *vodu* of Dahomey would also become important spirits in the Vodou hierarchy.



Voodoo Speak

The word “Vodou” derives from the Fon word **vodu**, which means “spirit” or “god.” *Vodu* was not the name of the Fon religion as a whole. Rather, the term referred to any one of the thousands of immortal spirits that guided people in their everyday lives.

Voodoo Hoodoo

Agassu was such an important figure in Dahomey that the story of his life has become legend. According to tradition, three brothers vied for the kingdom of Allada. One of the brothers gained control of Allada. One fled southeast and founded the city of Porto Novo. The other went north to found the kingdom of Abomey. These three kingdoms eventually merged into the empire Dahomey, with Abomey as its capital. According to the legend, a leopard seduced the daughter of the king of Abomey while she was walking through the forest. Their son was Agassu, the first in a long line of "divine" kings who ruled Dahomey. In Vodou, Agassu is the spirit who guards the Dahomean traditions.

Rite and Ritual

Because the Fon and the other West African peoples had a personal relationship with the spirits, they needed to communicate with the *vodu*. Ritual enabled them to talk to the spirits and even interact with them physically. The fundamental elements of the West African tribal rituals were incorporated into the rituals of Vodou.

The most important elements of the tribal rituals were ...

- ◆ Dancing, drumming, and chanting to communicate with the spirits.
- ◆ Animal sacrifices made as offerings to the spirits.
- ◆ A priest or priestess who interpreted messages from the spirits.
- ◆ Possession of the bodies of participants in the ritual by the spirits.

All the elements of the ritual were intended to foster the personal relationships that each individual had with the ancestral and nature spirits. The main purpose of the ritual was to communicate with the *vodu* and receive their guidance in making important decisions.

Participants in the ritual communicated indirectly with the spirits via the priest or priestess. In the villages of West Africa, the religious leader was also the leader of the community. The priest or priestess helped their followers determine who their personal *vodu* were and showed them how to honor their ancestors. They received messages from the *vodu* and interpreted those messages for their followers. They also led the ritual and called upon the spirits to appear.

Both men and women fulfilled this role. The most important characteristic of the priest or priestess was an ability to connect with the spirits. They inherited this talent from their mothers or fathers and so were said to be born to the priesthood.

The leadership role of the priest and priestess in the tribal villages carried over into the New World. Many rebellious priests were sold by the rulers of Dahomey into slavery to prevent them from sowing the seeds of dissent in their empire. These priests became the religious and community leaders of the slaves in Haiti and elsewhere.

Participants in the ritual also experienced the spirits directly through possession. Spirit possession is one of the most misunderstood elements of African-based religions, including Vodou, and it will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 11, “Possessed by the Spirit.” The concept of possession—that a spirit can enter a person’s body and take it over—is a vital one in Vodou. The ultimate goal of both the West African and the Vodou rituals was to cause the spirits to appear personally through possession. The importance of spirit possession as an element of the religious ritual again shows the close, personal relationship that the West Africans had with the spirits of their ancestors.

Tribal Religions Today

The religious practices of the Fon and other tribal peoples of West Africa live on today, not only in offshoots like Vodou, but also in Africa itself. In modern-day Benin, the official religion, Vodoun, is essentially the same religion that was practiced in Dahomey and for thousands of years before the empire was founded. Vodoun is also the dominant religion in Togo and southwest Ghana.

The Old Gods

The powerful public *vodu* of the Fon, Yoruba, and other West African tribes are the most venerated spirits in Haitian Vodou, because they provide a direct link to the Haitians’ African roots. Although the characteristics, functions, and personalities of these spirits changed when they were imported to Haiti, they are still the oldest and most important of the spirits honored in Vodou.

In Vodou, the old African spirits are called the *Rada*. Because they originated in the Haitians’ homeland, they stand for stability and tradition. These spirits act as protective parental figures, keeping order and passing along ancient wisdom. They are benevolent, gentle, and kind and are called upon in the pursuit of good, such as ensuring good health and fortune, protecting the community from evil, making ethical decisions, and finding love.



Spiritual Advice

If you would like to learn more about the practice of Vodoun in West Africa today, a good place to start is the West African Dahomean Vodoun Web site at www.mamiwata.com.



Danger Ahead!

Thinking of the African spirits as gods is an easy mistake to make. In Vodou, there is only one god, just as there is in Christianity, Islam, and Judaism. The spirits are the immortal souls of the ancestors—people who were once alive. That is why the spirits are honored or served rather than worshipped like gods.



Voodoo Speak

The name **Rada** derives from the prominent city of Arada, located on the coast of Dahomey, from which many slaves were taken. In Vodou, the names of the Rada spirits often include the word “Dahomey” to indicate their origins.

Rada is one of the most important branches of Vodou, characterized by rituals using special drums, chants, and clothing. Most rituals performed in Vodou are of the Rada type, and these ceremonies are the most faithful to the rituals of the Fon. Through these rituals, practitioners of Vodou experience a direct link to their ancestors in West Africa, particularly in Dahomey. They are able to keep the traditions and beliefs of their culture alive.

You will learn more about the Rada spirits later in this book. For now, let’s look at some of the most important of the Fon and West African spirits that would eventually evolve into the Rada spirits of Vodou.

Fa and Legba: Fate and Free Will

The religious leaders of Dahomey had no qualms about appropriating the spirits of their neighboring tribes, even their enemies. These powerful spirits could only increase the empire’s power.

One spirit that the Fon adopted from the Yoruba was Fa, as the spirit was called in the Fon language. Fa became one of the most important spirits in Dahomey. His province was fate, and he ruled over divination, enabling priests and priestesses to tell the future. His job was to reveal the personal *vodu* that each person was supposed to honor and show the proper rites that each person had to perform in order to get in the good graces of their personal *vodu*. Thus, Fa helped the priests and priestesses guide their followers in their spiritual lives.

Legba, a spirit incorporated from the Ibo and Yoruba tribes, was Fa’s counterpart. While Fa represented fate, Legba represented change; through him, fate could be thwarted and the future altered. Legba also made it possible for humans to connect with the spirits. The priests and priestesses could communicate with the other spirits only through him, so Legba was invoked first at every ritual.

In Vodou, Fa and Legba were combined into one personality called Papa Legba. Papa Legba became the head of Vodou’s pantheon of spirits, invoked first and honored most.

Serpent, Rainbow, and Fire

Two other Fon spirits would play major roles in Vodou: Danbala and Ayida Wedo. Danbala is related to the serpent god Da, revered by the Fon. His symbol is also the snake. His wife, Ayida Wedo, is represented by the rainbow. They are always together, and for the Fon, they were important in gaining prestige and wealth.

Another important spirit was Ogun (called Gu by the Fon). The Fon appropriated the powerful spirit Ogun from the Nago tribe. He ruled the domains of war, iron, and fire, so he was invoked in making weapons and metal-smithing. His qualities were combined with the characteristics of Shango, the Yoruban spirit of storms and warfare. Together in Vodou, they formed one powerful spirit named Ogou.



Spiritual Advice

Haitians speak Kreyol (Creole), a hybrid of West African languages and French. Because Kreyol is primarily a spoken rather than a written language, spellings and pronunciations of Vodou terms, the names of the spirits, and even the word "Vodou" vary from region to region. This book uses the most standardized Kreyol spellings, and Kreyol terms are always italicized. Check Appendix A, "Glossary of Vodou Terms," for alternative spellings and pronunciations of Vodou terms.

Looking Back to the Homeland

By continuing to honor the spirits of Dahomey and the other West African tribes, the slaves of Haiti maintained a link to their homeland and their tribal traditions. But the Haitians knew that their own people had sold them into slavery. Because of this, they considered their homeland—the physical Africa—lost to them.

To replace it, the Haitians conceived of a mythical homeland that no longer existed in Africa. They called this land *Ginen*, after the Gulf of Guinea where Dahomey was located. Although the Haitians' ancestors and the land of their origin are separated from them by the horrible history of slavery, they can keep their memories alive in the perfect world of Ginen.

Ginen represents the idealized world of the past, where the culture and beliefs of the Haitians originated. And it symbolizes the Haitians' resistance to renouncing their African roots throughout their history. This concept is expressed best by the Haitian proverb: "Haiti is the child of Dahomey. Haiti is the child of Ginen."

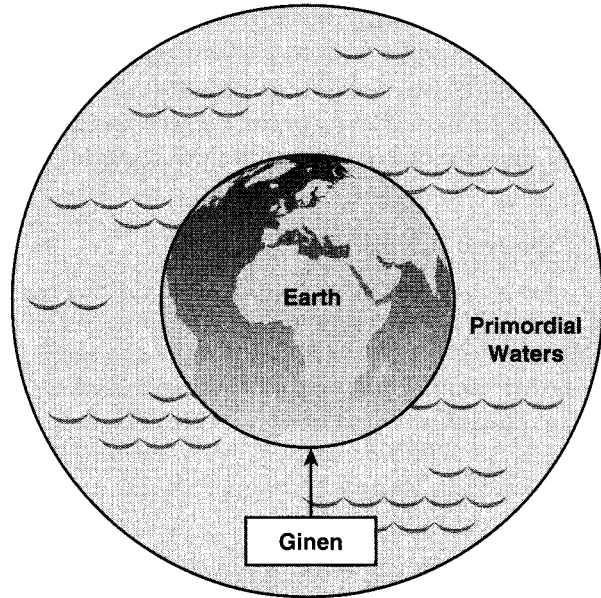
Ginen is not a physical place. You couldn't hop on a plane to Benin and find yourself in Ginen, although you would be where Dahomey was once located. Rather, Ginen is a mythical place, an astral counterpart to the African homeland of the Haitians. It lies on the other side of the world from Haiti, on an island surrounded by great primordial waters, as shown in the following illustration. It can be reached only through communion with the spirits and through death.



Voodoo Speak

Ginen refers to an idealized version of the kingdom of Dahomey, where most Haitian slaves came from originally. It is named for the Gulf of Guinea.

The mythological location of Ginen beneath the earth and surrounded by primordial waters.



Ginen is the birthplace of the ancient African spirits of Vodou—the Rada spirits. It's also where those spirits live. During Vodou rituals, the spirits are called to earth from Ginen. The spirit Papa Legba is the gatekeeper to Ginen. Only he can open the way between the physical world and Ginen and allow communion with the spirits.

Ginen is also the place where the soul goes after death. In Ginen, the soul gains immortality and sacred knowledge and is elevated to the role of an ancestral spirit. The spirit can then return to earth to benefit its descendants.

Finally, Ginen represents the high moral traditions and spiritual wisdom of the African homeland. In Vodou, the goal is to constantly move toward a state of Ginen, a righteous state of being. Ginen is where you find the totality of yourself, where you can connect fully with the ancient, venerated traditions of Africa. Then, after death, you can be reborn as one of the wise spirits of Vodou.

Voodoo Hoodoo

In 1993, old and new came together again in the first world festival of the voodoo arts held in Benin, the modern-day location of the ancient kingdom of Dahomey. Nearly 100 voodoo societies from Africa, Cuba, Haiti, Trinidad, and Brazil met for the festival. They demonstrated their different religious traditions, showing the many expressions of voodoo that had evolved as a result of the African Diaspora. Nearly 300 years later, the old traditions of the West African tribes and the new practices of the former West Indies slaves were finally reunited in the African homeland. The festival has now been established as an annual tradition.

The Least You Need to Know

- ◆ Most of the West African slaves shipped to Haiti originally came from the Fon ethnic group of the great empire of Dahomey and the Yoruba ethnic group of the neighboring empire of Oyo.
- ◆ The West African tribes practiced a religion that fostered a personal relationship with ancestral and nature spirits; these beliefs formed the foundation of the Haitian religion of Vodou.
- ◆ The most powerful spirits of the West African tribes became the most important spirits in Vodou, called the Rada, and were the Haitians' primary link to the traditions and cultures of their homeland.
- ◆ To replace their physical homeland, which was lost to them, practitioners of Vodou created a mythical homeland called Ginen—an idealized memory of the Dahomey empire where the African spirits still lived.

Chapter

2

The Secret Religion of Slavery

In This Chapter

- ◆ An overview of the colonial history of Haiti
- ◆ The discovery of the island of Hispaniola and its establishment as a slave-holding colony
- ◆ The mingling of religious beliefs of different West African ethnic groups under slavery
- ◆ The secret religious practices of the slaves
- ◆ How Vodou hid itself behind the trappings of Catholicism
- ◆ The influence of the native islanders on Vodou

The tiny French colony of Saint Domingue, located in the Caribbean Sea, grew from inauspicious beginnings to become one of the richest European colonies. Its economy was supported by huge plantations, which depended completely on the slave labor of West Africans, taken against their will from their homeland and shipped across the ocean by the thousands. On those plantations, nurtured in secrecy, a new religion took root—Vodou.

Haiti's early colonial history was vital to the development of Vodou. Under slavery, the West Africans nurtured the religious traditions and beliefs of their homeland in secret to preserve their cultural identity and rebel against their masters.

But their religion was fundamentally changed by the new conditions under which they lived. On the plantations, slaves from different African ethnic groups were jumbled together, and their religious beliefs melded. The efforts of their owners to convert them to Catholicism led to the incorporation of Catholic symbols, ceremonies, and holidays into their new religion. And exposure to the native islanders introduced the slaves to new religious practices that they could appropriate to make their burgeoning religion even more powerful.

Voodoo Hoodoo

The life of a Haitian slave was grueling. The slaves began work before dawn and often carried on until after nightfall. What little free time they had during the day they used to grow their own food. For the slaves, Vodou became a means of rebelling against their difficult lives and recapturing some happiness. Vodou still serves that role for modern-day Haitians.

Haiti's Early History

Vodou as it is practiced today began to take shape during the time that Haiti was the French colony of Saint Domingue. Vodou took hold in the slave quarters of the huge plantations there, born out of the slaves' desires to preserve their African traditions and culture. As the number of slaves on Saint Domingue increased and as many slaves escaped from the plantations to form camps of run-aways in the Haitian mountains, Vodou grew in importance. It became a means for uniting the slaves from different West African tribes so that they could unite as one force to overthrow slavery.

The following table shows important events in the colonial history of Haiti and the early development of Vodou.

Year(s)	Event(s)
1492	Discovery of the island of Hispaniola by Christopher Columbus.
1512	Native population of Hispaniola virtually wiped out; import of African slaves began.
1600s	Abandonment of Hispaniola by the Spanish; rise of French activity in the Caribbean.
1697	Spanish ceded the western third of Hispaniola to the French; the French colony of Saint Domingue was founded.
1700s	Saint Domingue became the richest French colony; hundreds of thousands of African slaves were brought to the colony.

Crossing the Ocean to Hispaniola

Christopher Columbus discovered the tiny Caribbean island that he christened Hispaniola in 1492. When he landed, the island was populated by 400,000 natives, the Taino Indians of the Arawak tribe. The Taino had migrated to the island from South America a few hundred years before Columbus's arrival. The Spanish colonized Hispaniola, enslaving the Taino and using them to mine for gold.

The Spanish Settlers

The Spanish were hard on the natives of Hispaniola. Within 30 years of their arrival, fewer than 1,000 Taino were left on the island. Hard labor, disease, and suicide had virtually wiped them out. Several hundred Taino had escaped and hid in the mountains in secret encampments. The Spanish brought in the warlike Carib Indians by the thousands to replace the Taino, but many of them died as well or escaped to the inhospitable mountains.

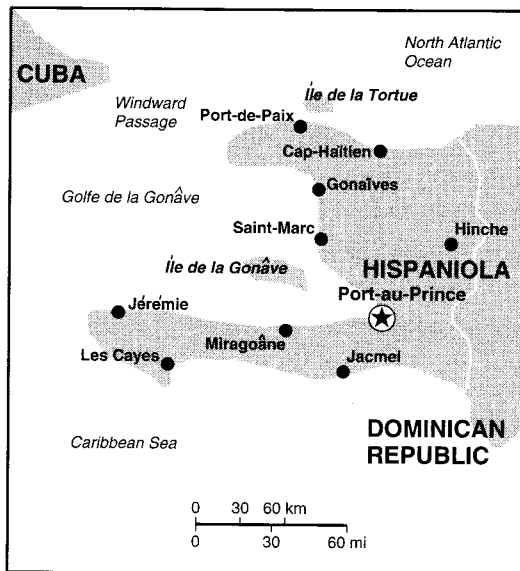
To replace the native islanders, the Spanish began bringing over West African slaves as early as the beginning of the sixteenth century. By the mid-1500s, over 20,000 blacks had been shipped to Hispaniola. But by this time, the Spanish were starting to give up on the idea of finding rich deposits of gold in Hispaniola's mountains. They had turned their eyes west, to Central and South America. By the seventeenth century, the Spanish had virtually abandoned Hispaniola.

The French Move In

During this time, the French became interested in the Caribbean. But it wasn't gold they were after. They saw riches in the form of lucrative crops, like sugar and cotton. French colonists began settling on the western shores of Hispaniola during the 1600s, soon overwhelming the few Spanish who had remained.

In 1697, the Spanish ceded the western third of Hispaniola to the French, as shown on the following map. The French called their new colony Saint Domingue. They established huge plantations to grow coffee, cotton, sugar, and indigo. Through careful irrigation methods, they were able to create rich farmland. But they needed a large labor force to work the massive farms.

Map of Haiti showing important cities and spiritual locations.



Bringing in the Slaves

Slavery seemed to offer the perfect solution. The French stepped up the import of slaves to work their plantations, bringing in hundreds of thousands of West Africans. By the late 1700s, Saint Domingue had the largest number of slaves of any colony in the Caribbean. At least 500,000 African slaves were living on the island. The colony was the richest in the Caribbean and France's most important economic asset, responsible for over one-third of the country's trade outside France.

Voodoo Hoodoo

It took between 40 and 90 days for the slave ships to reach Saint Domingue from Africa, and many slaves died under the horrific conditions of the journey. For this reason, the slave ships were called "floating tombs." If they survived the trip, the slaves were put to work on the plantations, where they were cruelly treated. The average slave lived between 7 and 10 years after arriving on Saint Domingue.

The slaves who were brought to Saint Domingue were torn from their families and their entire way of life. Their freedom and their dignity were stripped away. They were chained together, poorly fed, and beaten to make sure they had no strength to revolt. They were even given Christian names in an attempt to tear away their African heritage.

The slaves were supposed to lose all sense of where they came from and forget that they had ever been free. Stripped of their humanity, they were easier to manage. All they had left to hold onto were the memories of their tribes' religious traditions and the hope that one day they would be free again.

Mixing It Up: Melding of Tribal Customs

The slave owners understood how to keep the slaves under control. They had to keep the slaves browbeaten and submissive, so they treated the slaves cruelly and beat them or executed them for even minor transgressions. One of the most important ways they could prevent the slaves from rebelling was to keep them from uniting.

To prevent their slaves from bonding and forming a community strong enough to allow them to rebel as a single force, slave owners deliberately separated the slaves from their families and ethnic groups. They figured that slaves who didn't come from the same place and didn't speak the same language wouldn't be able to communicate and thus wouldn't be able to unite against their masters. When the slaves from different parts of West Africa arrived in Saint Domingue, they were deliberately intermixed.

The slaveholders' plan backfired, though. As you have already learned, the tribal religions of West Africa were very adaptable to the religious beliefs of others. This held true in the New World as well. Religion was the unifying force of the slaves.

In their religious ceremonies, the slaves honored the ancestral spirits of all the ethnic groups living on the plantation whether they were originally of the Fon of Dahomey, the Yoruba, or some other tribe (see Chapter 1. "Out of Africa"). To give each ethnic group's spirits their proper due, they were split into different nations, called *nanchon*. In the ritual, each *nanchon* of spirits was invoked and honored in turn. This formed a hierarchy of spirits that contributed directly to the present-day Vodou ritual in which the different spirits are named in a specific order, according to their *nanchon*.



Voodoo Speak

A **nanchon** is a group, or nation, of spirits corresponding to the geographic area of West Africa where the spirits originated. For example, the Rada spirits are the *nanchon* of spirits from Dahomey.

By combining the different spirits and religious customs of their homeland into one ritual, the slaves were starting to create a new religion—Vodou. Their religious rituals allowed them to find common ground and come together as a group. Although the slaves originally came from different ethnic groups, they were still all African, and Vodou made them all one people, in a sense. As the slave owners had feared, a common religion enabled the slaves to bond and would eventually give them the strength to resist their masters. But in the early days, the slave owners had no way of knowing how malleable and adaptable the African religions of the slaves were, nor how impervious to suppression they were.

Secret Worship

The slave owners tried to wipe out any practice of African religions among the slaves. The slaveholders knew that religion had the power to unite the slaves. On top of that, they believed that the religions of the Africans were primitive and superstitious. To the whites, any religious practice other than Christianity had to be devil worship. As Christians, their duty was to convert the slaves and end their “savage” ways.

Because Saint Domingue was a French colony, the Catholic Church controlled its religious life. The Church made a series of rulings to try to stamp out the religious practices of the slaves. They prohibited the slaves from meeting together without a master present or traveling between the plantations. They controlled any objects that might have religious use. Any slave caught worshipping the African spirits was horribly punished with beatings, torture, or even execution.

Under Cover of Night

These rulings quickly turned Vodou into a secret religion. The slaves held their rituals under the cover of night in enclosed areas. They stopped chanting or drumming during the rituals to keep from being heard by their masters. Their religious objects were simple things that the whites wouldn't understand were sacred, such as earthenware jars or a common snake living in a tree near the slaves' quarters.

One way the slaves could conceal their religious practices was to hold parties under the watchful eyes of their masters. What looked like a harmless dance to the whites was actually a religious ritual for the slaves. Dancing and drumming had always been an important part of African religious ceremonies, and they remained a major part of Vodou. But to the slaveholders, the rituals simply looked like great fun.

Voodoo Hoodoo

The French traveler Moreau de Saint-Méry published the first account of Vodou in 1797. He even witnessed one of the secret nighttime ceremonies, which he described this way: “Once it has been verified that no curious onlooker has managed to penetrate the enclosure, the ceremony is begun with the worship of the snake with avowals to remain faithful to its cult and to submit to all of its orders. The oath of secrecy, the very basis of the society, is affirmed, between the hands of the King and Queen, and it is accompanied by the most horrible things that delirium is capable of imagining, to make it more imposing.”

The Common Bond of Vodou

Again, the attempts of the slave owners and the Catholic Church to suppress the religion of the slaves backfired and made Vodou, and the slaves, only stronger. Under the threat of punishment and execution, it became vitally important to the slaves to keep their African religious traditions alive. It was actually a form of rebellion against their masters—a quiet rebellion, at first. By defiantly practicing Vodou in secret, the slaves never truly submitted to the will of their white masters. Their religion was the only form of independent free will they had, the only way they could maintain some control over their own lives.

Vodou had another important purpose. Having every part of their lives controlled, having Christianity forced on them, having been torn from their homeland, the slaves held onto their cultural and religious traditions as a way to survive. The solace that the slaves found in their religion helped them endure the hardships of plantation life. Vodou became the means through which the slaves could keep alive the traditions of their ancestors. Through Vodou, they maintained ties to their homeland and never forgot where they had come from.

Their religion became so vital to the slaves that they vowed to suffer death rather than reveal their true convictions. They swore to remain faithful to the culture of their homeland. This bonded the slaves even more closely together.

Over time, the freedom, control, and common bond that the slaves grasped through Vodou would give them the strength to engage in outright rebellion and throw off the yoke of slavery. Because Vodou was practiced in secret, the slaves' plans for rebellion and plots against their masters were also nurtured in secret. Vodou gave them the means to form these plots and organize a successful rebellion.

Staying Safe: Hiding Behind Catholicism

Christianity was forced on the slaves in an effort to rid them of their “superstitions.” French law required that all slaves working in French colonies had to be baptized and instructed in Catholicism, the only permissible religion. Catholic missionaries worked hard to convert the slaves, despite the annoyance of the slave owners, who hated stopping work so that the slaves could attend mass or receive religious instruction.

However, the Catholic Church saw the conversion of the slaves as a justification for slavery. Through slavery, they had the opportunity to eradicate the primitive beliefs of the “savage” Africans. They believed that by enslaving the blacks, they were actually saving them—saving their souls, that is.

Catholic Camouflage

Again, the efforts of the Catholic Church to stop the practice of African religions among the slaves backfired. The slaves found that Catholicism was the perfect tool to use to conceal their true religious practices.

Whites didn't realize how extremely adaptable the African religions were. Again, this flexibility was turned to the slaves' advantage. With enforced conversion to Catholicism, the slaves had to adapt to ensure their own survival, and their religion had to adapt along with them. While the slaves appeared to convert to Catholicism, they never truly submitted to the religion of their masters.

The slaves had no compunctions about adopting the elements of Catholicism that suited their own purposes. They incorporated the symbols, ceremonies, and other trappings of Catholicism into the structure of Vodou. Vodou also absorbed much of Catholic theology by reinterpreting it in light of their own beliefs. For the slaves, Catholicism was simply another expression of the religious truths they already knew.



Danger Ahead!

As a holdover from the days when Catholicism was a screen for the practice of Vodou, images of the Catholic saints are often present on Vodou altars. Outsiders might think that the Catholic saints are more spirits added to the Vodou pantheon for worship. But practitioners of Vodou don't worship the Catholic saints. The pictures of the saints are simply that—pictures that represent the already existing African spirits.

Therefore, the requirement that the slaves follow Catholicism actually undermined the Church's efforts to wipe out the African religious practices of the slaves. The slaves protected their religious beliefs by covering them with symbols of Catholicism. They hid the rituals of Vodou under the camouflage of Catholic masses.

The slaves saw nothing wrong with practicing Catholicism in public and continuing to follow their African religious traditions in private or even with melding the two. As the slaves saw it, they were empowering their own religion and keeping their African traditions alive while avoiding the punishment of their masters.

The Saints and the Spirits

Catholicism and the West African religions shared some common characteristics that made it easier for the slaves to adapt Vodou to fit the mold of Catholicism. Both religious traditions believed in one supreme being, a divine but distant God who didn't meddle in the events of everyday life. And both also believed in supernatural beings; the spirits of the African religions seemed to correspond to the angels, demons, and particularly the saints of Catholicism. Just as in African traditions, these supernatural beings concerned themselves directly with the affairs of people.

The slaves found in the Catholic saints a way to continue honoring the spirits of their homeland while appearing to submit to the will of their masters. They simply gave the African spirits the white faces of the saints. The icons of the Catholic saints secretly represented the African spirits. The slaves could display such icons without fear of punishment and still honor the spirits in the traditional ways.

Each major spirit of Vodou was identified with a Catholic saint. The slaves didn't consider the saints to literally be the spirits, and they didn't worship the saints as holy figures. They were more concerned with the symbols and mythology surrounding the saints, which in many cases seemed to match the symbols and stories already associated with the spirits. The choice of a saint to correspond to a particular spirit was based on this similarity. For instance, Saint Patrick—particularly the image of him driving the snakes out of Ireland—was identified with Danbala, the snake spirit from Dahomey.



Saint Patrick driving the snakes from Ireland.

Voodoo Hoodoo

The old spirits of Africa took on the faces and names of the Catholic saints based on common characteristics. See if you can figure out why each of these spirits was matched with its corresponding saint:

- ◆ Danbala and Saint Patrick (Both are strongly associated with snakes.)
- ◆ Papa Legba and Saint Peter (Papa Legba guards the gateway between the human world and the world of the spirits, and Saint Peter carries the keys to heaven.)
- ◆ Ogou and Saint Jacques (Ogou is the spirit of war and Saint Jacques is always depicted as an attacking soldier.)

Fitting In the Catholic Ceremonies

All Africans brought into the colony had to be baptized. Since the slaves had no choice in the matter, they incorporated this Catholic ritual into their African belief system. The slaves interpreted baptism as an important ritual that could increase their magical powers. Some slaves were even baptized three, four, or more times. This reinterpretation of baptism carries over today into the Vodou tradition of taking luck baths. (Learn more about luck baths are in Chapter 17, “Special Rituals and Rites.”)

The slaves also had to incorporate the Catholic liturgical holidays into the practice of Vodou. The only time off the slaves ever got was on the Catholic holidays, so those were the only times they were free to hold their own religious rituals. In African religious tradition, particular times of the year corresponding to the cycles of nature were very important and were celebrated with rituals. The slaves adapted these ceremonies to the holidays of the Catholic calendar. Thus, Catholic holidays like the saints’ feast days, Ash Wednesday, Lent, Christmas, and All Souls’ Day became the religious holidays of Vodou, although in many cases, they lost their original Catholic significance.



Spiritual Advice

The slaves regarded the communion wafer and holy water of Catholicism as protection against danger and witchcraft. They ate the communion wafer only when they were sick or afraid of danger. They stole holy water, carrying it in gourds and drinking a few drops first thing in the morning to guard against witchcraft.

Vodou took on other trappings of Catholicism as well. Catholic prayers and hymns were incorporated into Vodou rituals. Candles, crosses, and other symbols of the Catholic faith appeared on Vodou altars, although their symbolic meanings were significantly different for the slaves.

Native Influences

The slaves on Saint Domingue not only incorporated the religious traditions of different African ethnic

groups and Catholicism into the evolving religion of Vodou, but they were also influenced by the religious customs of the natives living on the island when they arrived.

While enslaved by the Spanish, the native Taino and Carib Indians were nearly decimated. Many *Amerindians* escaped from slavery and set up camps in the inhospitable mountains where they wouldn't be pursued. There, they encountered and mingled with runaway slaves during the eighteenth century, who were already practicing Vodou. The runaway slaves adapted the *Amerindians'* religious beliefs and practices that they found most useful for their own ends.

The religious beliefs of the Amerindians living on Hispaniola revolved around two supreme gods and several lesser spirits who inhabited trees, streams, and inanimate objects. African religions already had the custom of adopting the spirits of neighboring tribes that were deemed to be especially powerful. It was no different with the slaves of Saint Domingue. One such spirit was Azaka, the spirit of agriculture. The Taino had been an agricultural culture, and the great plantations were of primary importance to Haiti's economy, so a powerful agricultural spirit was crucial.

Like the Africans, the Amerindians practiced ancestor worship. Many of the rituals for honoring the dead that are such a vital part of Vodou today were influenced by the practices of the Amerindians, such as offering tobacco to the spirits of the dead. Even belief in the living dead, or zombies, may have evolved from Amerindian beliefs.

The Taino believed that the souls of their ancestors lived in rocks called thunderstones, which they called *zemi*, the Taino word for "soul." Practitioners of Vodou adopted both the stones and the word. In Vodou, *zemi* are stones and other objects that have great magical power.

Another ritual object appropriated from the Amerindians was the sacred rattle of the Vodou priest, which is referred to in Taino myth. In Africa, rattles are musical instruments and have no religious significance. But in Vodou, the rattle became the symbol of the priesthood. These rattles were decorated with beads, also of Amerindian derivation.

One very important aspect of Vodou that came from the Amerindians was the concept of the *veve*. Each spirit has its own symbolic drawing, or



Voodoo Speak

The term **Amerindian** refers to any native of North, South, or Central America. The Taino, native to Hispaniola, and the Carib, native to the Caribbean islands, were both Amerindian tribes.



Voodoo Speak

In Vodou, **zemi** are stones and other inanimate objects that have magical powers. The term comes from the Taino word for "soul," referring to the Taino belief that the souls of their ancestors lived in special stones called thunderstones.

vever; that is used to call the spirit into the physical world. This concept was derived from the sand drawings of the Amerindians, and the patterns of the *vever* were also influenced by the filigree ironwork designs of the French. During Vodou rituals, *vevers* of the different spirits invoked in the ritual are drawn on the ground with cornmeal, ash, and the like.



Voodoo Speak

A **vever** is a symbolic design that represents a particular Vodou spirit. During Vodou rituals, *vevers* are drawn on the ground to invoke the spirits being honored in the ritual. *Vevers* also decorate Vodou altars, temples, flags, and other religious objects.

Thus, Vodou evolved as an amalgamation of beliefs from several West African ethnic groups, particularly the Fon of Dahomey and the Yoruba, as well as European Catholicism and the religious traditions of the native Taino and Carib Indians of Hispaniola. In the colony of Saint Domingue, in the cramped quarters of the slaves and the secret mountain camps of the runaways, three very different religious traditions melded to create a unique and powerful new religion. By assimilating elements of all these religious traditions into Vodou, the blacks of Haiti retained a connection with their homeland in Africa while forging a unique identity in their new Caribbean home.

The Least You Need to Know

- ◆ During Haiti's colonial period, which lasted from the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries, the West African slaves developed what would become the religion of Vodou.
- ◆ During the eighteenth century, the French turned the colony of Saint Domingue on the island of Hispaniola into a thriving trade center, with large plantations worked by hundreds of thousands of slaves imported from West Africa.
- ◆ Although the slave owners separated slaves from the same ethnic groups, the slaves forged a common bond by mingling their tribal religious practices into one religion, forming the foundations of Vodou.
- ◆ The slaves were forbidden to practice their African religions by their masters and so took their new religion underground, holding rituals in secret and strengthening their resolve to keep their ancestral traditions alive.
- ◆ Under the law, all slaves had to be converted to Catholicism; the slaves adopted the trappings of the Catholic faith as camouflage for their continuing practice of Vodou.
- ◆ The few remaining Amerindians on Hispaniola also influenced the evolving religion of Vodou by providing new spirits, new ways of honoring the ancestors, and new religious objects.

Chapter

3

Rebellion and Revolution

In This Chapter

- ◆ An overview of important historical events in the new independent country of Haiti
- ◆ How Vodou gave the slaves of Saint Domingue the strength and unity to rebel against their white masters
- ◆ The slave rebellion, which was set off by a Vodou ceremony
- ◆ The governmental suppression of Vodou in the new independent republic of Haiti
- ◆ The violent efforts of the Catholic Church to stamp out Vodou
- ◆ The turbulent twentieth-century politics of Haiti that resulted in new attitudes toward Vodou

Haiti's tumultuous history was directly responsible for the development of a brand-new religion: Vodou. During colonial times, the majority of Haiti's population was West African slaves who nurtured their African religious traditions in secret as a form of rebellion against their masters. The mingling of religious traditions from different African ethnic groups, along with influences by the natives living on the island and the adoption of the trappings of Catholicism to hide the secret worship, resulted in an unique and powerful religion.

Vodou was well established as the religion of the blacks on Haiti by the end of the seventeenth century. At that time, the slaves united to throw off white rule in the first successful slave revolt in the Western hemisphere. As you will see, Vodou played a major part in that rebellion. After Haiti became an independent country, Vodou was so entrenched in the lives of its citizens that no persecution, either from outside forces or from the country's own governmental leaders, could dilute its power. Vodou simply became a Haitian way of life.

The History of a New Country

Vodou's power became clear in the slaves' war for independence. The religion was primarily responsible for the slaves' ability to band together and pull off a successful rebellion. But the years following independence were rocked by political tumult and economic devastation for the new country of Haiti while the tiny country was effectively isolated from the rest of the world.

Throughout the two centuries following independence, many groups tried to stamp out Vodou—the Catholic Church, white outsiders, even the country's own political leaders. Still, the religion survived, time after time enabling the people of Haiti to throw off repressive regimes and expel occupation by outside forces.

The following table shows important events in Haitian history and the development of Vodou following the war for independence.

Year(s)	Event(s)
1791	The pivotal Vodou ceremony at Bois Caïman inspired the slaves' war for independence.
1791–1803	The war for independence was waged against French, Spanish, and British forces.
1804	President Jean-Jacques Dessalines proclaimed independence and renamed the country Haiti.
1800s	Period of political turmoil and isolation from the outside world; during this time, Vodou was suppressed by the government but became entrenched in the lives of the peasantry, evolving into its present form.
1915–1934	The American occupation of Haiti; U.S. military forces attempted to eradicate Vodou.
1957–1986	The Duvalier regime took over, using Vodou to support the dictatorship; the Haitian economy was decimated, and many Haitian “boat people” migrated to the United States.
1986	The Duvalier regime collapsed.

Year(s)	Event(s)
1987	A new constitution was approved, guaranteeing religious freedom in Haiti.
1990	The first democratic elections were held in Haiti.

Readying for Rebellion

By the late 1700s, dissent was rife among the slaves of Saint Domingue. At the same time, a growing class of freed slaves was causing social unrest. Blacks were the majority on the island, outnumbering whites 11 to 1. Conditions were right for rebellion.

Three elements combined to create the gunpowder that would set off the explosion of rebellion:

- ◆ Freed mulattos, dissatisfied with their social position, were agitating for freedom for all blacks.
- ◆ Vodou had given the slaves a common bond under which they could unite.
- ◆ Runaway slaves were plotting rebellion with the help of a new nation of Vodou spirits.



Danger Ahead!

The successful Haitian slave rebellion frightened white slave owners in the United States and other European colonies, who could easily imagine the same thing happening there. They did everything they could to belittle the Haitians, including dismissing their religion as witchcraft and superstition. This gave rise to many of the stereotypes that still color outsiders' perceptions of Vodou today.

Freedom for All

During the eighteenth century, a new social class emerged in Saint Domingue: mulattos who were either freed slaves or the descendants of slaves. The children of white slave owners and their slaves, they were called *affranchi*. By the late 1700s, 30,000 *affranchi* were living in Saint Domingue, equal to the number of whites on the island.

France recognized the political rights of mulattos in 1789 by enacting the *Code Noir* (Black Code). Under French law, anyone of mixed blood could not be enslaved and was a full French citizen. The *affranchi* could travel freely and own land and



Voodoo Speak

The **affranchi** were mulattos, or people of mixed blood, who were entitled to freedom from enslavement under French law. In Saint Domingue, they formed a social class somewhere between the enslaved blacks and the elite whites—the plantation owners, government officials, and other wealthy residents of the colony.

slaves themselves. The Catholic Church made it possible for many of the *affranchi* to study in French universities.

This gave rise to an educated middle class of freed slaves. The whites saw the growing mulatto class as a threat to their traditional position of supremacy and broke out in violent protest against the new rights of the *affranchi*. Laws were passed to keep the *affranchi* from encroaching further into white society.

At the same time, the *affranchi* had become dissatisfied with their low position in the social system. The *affranchi*, as a rule, did not practice Vodou. In an effort to become a legitimate part of society, they had distanced themselves from their African ancestry. After independence, the *affranchi* elite would provide many of the new country's leaders and would in their turn try to suppress the practice of Vodou.

But during colonial times, the *affranchi* sought freedom for all blacks. By ending slavery, they would finally be able to rise to positions of social and political power. This ongoing conflict between the whites and the *affranchi* created tension and dissent that the slaves would take advantage of when they did revolt.



Voodoo Speak

On Saint Domingue, the runaway slaves who lived in the mountains were called **maroons**. The term comes from a Spanish word for a domesticated animal that has reverted to a wild state.

Runaway!

A major problem for the slave owners of Saint Domingue was that of runaway slaves. The slaves began escaping from their masters as early as the sixteenth century, and by the late 1700s, the numbers of runaway slaves had reached epidemic proportions. By 1750, 3,000 escaped slaves were living in the Saint Domingue mountains. These runaways were called *maroons*.

The runaways fled to the mountains where they could hide out in secret camps and easily elude recapture. There, they probably mingled with the Taino and Carib Indians, who had also escaped from slavery. They formed secret societies with the mission of waging a kind of guerilla warfare against slavery that went on for 250 years. They helped other slaves escape, poisoned or assassinated white slave owners, and burned plantations.

Vodou played a major role in the efforts of the maroons to fight slavery. A Vodou ceremony with an animal sacrifice preceded any subversive activity. This ensured that the spirits would help the runaways carry out their missions successfully. The shared bond of Vodou also enabled the maroons to work together as a powerful unit even though they came from different ethnic groups and had escaped from different plantations.

Voodoo Hoodoo

The slaves had many folk heroes among the maroons whose efforts at fighting slavery were legendary. One such hero was an African high priest, François Macandal. He aggressively recruited slaves from the plantations and held ritual dances and offerings to the Vodou spirits before raids on the plantations. He also concocted poisons to kill the slave masters and made talismans called *garde-corps*, or bodyguards, that supposedly made the slaves invulnerable to weapons and freed them from their fear of whites. In Vodou, the word “macandal” came to mean any talisman or poison made in Saint Domingue. François Macandal was captured and burned at the stake in 1758.

The Dark Spirits of Rebellion

The runaway slaves helped preserve the religious traditions of Africa while taking the emerging religion of Vodou in a new direction. Most runaways were new arrivals on Saint Domingue who still clearly remembered their African heritage. The leaders of the maroon camps were usually Vodou priests known for their magical powers. They hammered out new religious practices, such as rituals, dances, and myths, that were based on the old traditions but uniquely adapted to the goal of overthrowing slavery. In doing so, they created a new *nanchon* of Vodou spirits called the *Petro*.

The Petro were truly Haitian spirits. Although they took their names and personalities from African spirits, they were born out of the unique situation fermenting in Saint Domingue in the late 1700s—the growing restlessness of the slaves under the brutality of slavery and the call for revolution.

Petro ceremonies were very different from the rituals held to honor the Rada spirits and the other ancestral spirits from Africa. A Spanish Vodou priest named Dom Pedro devised the Petro rituals and gave the group of spirits their name. Dom Pedro came from the Spanish part of the island and settled in Petit-Goave, a mountainous area of Saint Domingue. Because he was Spanish and a former slave, he was probably at least partly Amerindian and helped infuse Vodou with native religious customs. His contribution to the Petro rituals was a rapid dance completely unlike the traditional dances of the African-based rituals. The violent movements of the dance corresponded to the aggressive, violent nature of the Petro spirits.



Voodoo Speak

The **Petro** are a group of Vodou spirits that originated in Haiti and are more aggressive, violent, and dangerous than the Rada spirits. Petro ceremonies are marked by offbeat drumming, special dances and clothing, and the sacrifice of a black pig, and they are never held inside Vodou temples. Instead, they are held in open fields, at crossroads, or in the forest.

Voodoo Hoodoo

Although they were African in origin, the Petro spirits shared many characteristics with the spirits of the warlike Carib Indians, again showing the influence of Dom Pedro and other Amerindians living in the Saint Domingue mountains. The suffix *ze rouge*, meaning “with red eyes,” follows the names of many Petro spirits. A common practice of the Carib Indians was to paint their faces—especially their eyes and eyebrows—to appear fierce and terrifying, emulating dangerous spirits.

From the beginning, the Petro spirits were identified with violence and anger. They were the opposite of the benevolent Rada spirits. Rather, the Petro were very active, aggressive, and even dangerous. Under the oppression of slavery, the spirits could no longer take a defensive, passive role. The traditional African spirits just weren't powerful enough. Action was needed, and that action had to take the extreme form of war. The Petro spirits provided the power for the blacks to go to war.

The intense emotions of the Petro spirits inspired the slaves and the maroons to escalate the fight for freedom. The rage of the Petro spirits helped focus the blacks on their continuing resistance to slavery. Under the guidance of the Petro spirits, the maroons were able to come together and form an organized rebellion against the slaveholders. They had finally become an army rather than a few scattered bands of terrorists.

Voodoo Coup

The rebellion of the slaves and runaways came to a head in 1791. Vodou both inspired and precipitated the final battle for independence. Through the common culture of Vodou, the slaves could communicate with each other. They could plan the final rebellion and whip up the emotional fervor they needed to win the war.

Vodou priests played a pivotal role as leaders of the revolt. They recruited to their cause both slaves and maroons, who looked to the priests as community leaders, just as they had in Africa. In Africa, all social and moral conduct derived from religion. This held true in Saint Domingue as well. The priests could exhort the slaves to revolt because they had all the moral force of the African spirits, especially the warlike Petro spirits, on their side.

War itself would start with a Vodou ceremony that marked, in the minds of Haitians, the night they won their freedom.

Invoking the Spirits of War

On the night of August 4, 1791, in a wooded clearing called Bois Caïman near an alligator swamp on the outskirts of Cap Haïtien, the drums sounded a frenzied beat. A Vodou

priest and runaway slave named Boukman led the dancing and chanting and invoked the Petro spirits to help the assembled in their fight.

Boukman had become a leader of the maroons in the late 1770s and was familiar with the many different ethnic groups assembled in the runaway camps. Under his leadership, he aggressively used Vodou to call the slaves and maroons to revolt.

On this night, Boukman slit the throat of a black pig as a sacrifice to the Petro spirits. He caught the pig's blood in a bowl and wrote the words "liberty or death" in blood. The bowl was passed among everyone at the ritual, and as they drank, their bond was strengthened.

The dancing, drumming, and sharing of sacrificial blood fired up the rage of the assembled maroons and their determination to gain vengeance on the white slaveholders in the names of their African ancestors. Boukman called on the maroons to lead the slaves in revolt with the aid of the Petro spirits. He gave the final orders to the leaders of the revolutionary plot for the attack on the great plantation houses. The participants in the ritual then sealed a secret pact, swearing to die rather than continue to live without freedom.



Spiritual Advice

The drumming and dancing in a Petro ceremony are off the beat and syncopated, inspiring more violent, frenzied rhythms. Sometimes, the crack of a slave whip and the explosion of gunpowder accent the drums.

The War for Freedom

Inspired by the frenzied ritual, the maroons spread the message of rebellion throughout the slave quarters on the plantations. The insurrection began on August 22. By the following week, the plantations were burning, and hundreds of whites had been massacred. During the next two months, 2,000 plantations burned to the ground, and the rebelling slaves slaughtered 1,000 or more whites.

The war was to last 12 years. French, Spanish, and British forces were sent to Saint Domingue to subdue the slave army. In 1791, Boukman was ambushed and decapitated; his head was displayed in the public square as a warning to the rebellious slaves.

But other great military leaders were ready to take his place. The next leader of the slave forces was Toussaint Louverture, who ruled the slave army from 1798 to 1802. He formed an army of 5,000 maroons and slaves, which expelled Napoleon's troops from the colony. By 1803, the French were forced to concede defeat.

Louverture also persuaded the freed slaves to go back to work on the plantations as a public duty. He needed the money from selling crops to support the war effort and establish

the colony as an independent country. Before Louverture could fully establish independence, he was tricked by a promise of safe conduct into traveling to France to negotiate a truce. Once in France, Louverture was imprisoned, and he died within the year.

Jean-Jacques Dessalines, Louverture's principal lieutenant, took over the slave army after Louverture had been imprisoned in France. Born a slave, Dessalines was a great military general. On January 1, 1804, Dessalines declared independence and renamed the country *Haiti*. He crowned himself emperor of the new country—the first and only independent black republic in the New World. (The remaining two thirds of the island, the Dominican Republic, became independent in 1844.)



Voodoo Speak

Haiti is a variation of "Ayiti," the original Taino name for the island. The Taino word means "mountainous land," which was a fitting name since the war for independence was waged from the mountains.

A ragtag army of slaves and maroons had defeated the combined forces of the powerful European countries of France, Spain, and Great Britain. The new Haitians attributed their success to the aid of the Vodou spirits, particularly the powerful Petro spirits. There is no question that Vodou played a major role in winning independence. During the long war, Vodou united the slave forces in solidarity against their white masters and kept their emotions high, so they had the impetus to keep fighting.

Aftermath of War

After Haiti won its independence, it was shunned by the outside world. For the next century, Haiti was rocked internally by political turmoil and was sealed off from the outside. During this time, the leaders of the new country tried to wipe out Vodou, just as the white slave owners had done before them. But just as it had under the oppressive conditions of slavery, Vodou lived on under the oppression of one dictatorship after another.

Vodou Goes Underground

In the 40 years following independence, the first leaders of Haiti tried to suppress the practice of Vodou. They set up totalitarian regimes and pressed the former slaves into working the plantations again, effectively reinstating the conditions before the revolution, except that the masters were now *affranchi* rather than white. The freed slaves became peasants, confined to conditions of poverty and hard labor in the countryside. The *affranchi* became the elite ruling class, living in the cities and getting rich off the efforts of the slaves they had helped to free. This rigid social structure exists in Haiti to this day.

Because the first leaders of Haiti had been military leaders during the war, they were well aware of the power of Vodou to unify its followers and overthrow oppression. If they wanted to retain their positions of absolute power and keep the peasants in line, they had

to wipe out Vodou and eliminate any danger of further revolt inspired by the frenetic Petro ceremonies.

They also sought recognition as a legitimate country in the eyes of the outside world. Haiti's first leaders knew that no white-governed country would take Haiti seriously as long as the populace practiced the "superstitious" religion of Vodou. Rather, they adopted Catholicism as the official state religion.

Starting with the military leadership of Louverture, Vodou was outlawed. The first president of Haiti was Jean-Jacques Dessalines, who was not a president at all, but a dictator who ruled with absolute power. He enacted a Constitution in 1805, which prohibited the practice of Vodou in Haiti for the greater part of the next two centuries. Anyone caught practicing Vodou would be fined or imprisoned. Dessalines also proclaimed himself the head of the Catholic Church in Haiti since the Vatican refused to send any official representatives to a country ruled by blacks. Dessalines ruled from 1804 until his assassination in 1806.

In 1807, Haiti was rocked by a civil war between the north and the south. Alexandre Pétion came to power in 1807 and was president of the south until 1818. Although Pétion didn't practice Vodou himself, he tolerated it because he knew he couldn't survive politically and continue to resist the forces in the north without the help of the Vodou priests. To get their support, he gave Vodou priests large land grants.



Spiritual Advice

Despite his efforts to suppress Vodou, Jean-Jacques Dessalines is seen as an important ancestor in Haitian history who led the Haitians to independence.

As such, he is honored as an ancestral spirit in some Vodou temples.

In the north, Henri Christophe, one of the generals of the slave army during the war, had proclaimed himself king. Under his reign, he built the palace of Sans Souci and the immense fortress of La Citadelle Laferrière, both landmarks in Haiti. He also banned the practice of Vodou completely, with the excuse that he was a good Catholic, but really as a way of keeping his subjects in line.

After Christophe died in 1820, his regime was overthrown. North and south Haiti were reunited into one country in 1822 under the presidency of Jean-Pierre Boyer, Pétion's former minister. But Boyer was not as tolerant of Vodou as his predecessor. He passed a penal code that classified Vodou as "superstition" and made its practice illegal, again subject to fines and imprisonment.

Vodou's Comeback

Unstable governments and internal conflicts took their toll on the new country. Haiti sank into an economic slump from which it would never recover. Many Haitians blamed the

official suppression of Vodou for the country's troubles. Because they had neglected the Vodou spirits, the spirits had abandoned them.

Faustin Soulouque took over the government of Haiti in 1846 and crowned himself emperor. He was the first Haitian leader to practice Vodou openly. He even officiated as high priest at Vodou ceremonies during his reign. His rule lasted until 1859. During that time, Vodou became entrenched in Haitian daily life, much to the dismay of outside observers. Critics in Europe claimed that Soulouque had set Haiti on a course of "full regression to African barbarism."

Nicholas Fabre Geffrard, a Catholic and member of the mulatto elite class, took over the rule of Haiti in 1859 and reinstated the constitutional ban on Vodou. He reached an agreement with Rome and made Catholicism the official religion of Haiti. Again, Vodou retreated into secrecy. But it was too late. Vodou practices infused the lives of the peasantry. Just as in the days of slavery, the peasants used the trappings of Catholicism to mask their real religious practices and avoid persecution, this time from the corrupt governments of their own people. Geffrard ruled only eight years; he was overthrown and executed by a firing squad.

Despite all these early efforts to ban or eradicate Vodou, it survived and took on an even more important role in the lives of Haitians, particularly the peasant class. During the first half of the 1800s, Haiti was cut off from the outside world, including the Catholic Church. This period of isolation allowed Vodou to develop without outside influence, solidifying into its present form.

The Religious War Against Voodoo

For 50 years, there was no orthodox Catholicism in Haiti, so Catholic masses in the country were presided over by Haitians with no formal religious training. Haitian religious practices evolved into a bizarre mixture of Catholicism and Vodou. Catholicism and Vodou formed two parallel systems of religion that worked side by side, a way of life that still exists in Haiti today. In fact, Catholicism and Vodou melded with each other so much that when Catholic priests returned to Haiti, they could hardly distinguish one from the other.

Despite the growing partnership between Vodou and Catholicism in isolated Haiti, the Catholic Church tried many times throughout Haiti's history to wipe out the practice of Vodou. In this, it had the help of the repressive governments of Haiti and the elite mulatto ruling class, which wanted to suppress Vodou for their own reasons. Together, the Church and military forces waged periodic extermination campaigns against Vodou called Antisuperstition Campaigns.

The first Antisuperstition Campaign was conducted in 1896, and more campaigns followed in 1912, 1913, 1925 through 1930, 1940, 1941, and 1986. Military and police

forces raided Vodou temples, burned ceremonial objects, and cut down sacred trees. They imprisoned Vodou priests and slaughtered its followers.

Voodoo Hoodoo

In his book *The Cross Versus the Rattle* (see Appendix B, "Resources for Further Study"), Father Carl Edward Peters summed up the goals of the 1941 Antisuperstition Campaign, in which he took part as a missionary: "We must truly destroy everything: break the bottles and jugs, rip up the images, pull out and burn the post and the cross, carry away the stones, take away the necklaces, crush the *caye-loas* [huts of the spirits], cut the worshipped wood, desecrate all that reeks of the superstitious 'service.' At first, it will seem painful, but it is the people who will remain. And they will not take us seriously if we are not strict."

During the summer of 1941, a particularly horrendous Antisuperstition Campaign called *Opération Nettoyage* (Operation Cleanup) was launched. The Catholic Church, supported by the state police, tried to sweep all vestiges of Vodou from the country. Every Catholic was required to declare in public an oath renouncing Vodou practices as a Satanic cult. In the temple raids, many followers of Vodou were massacred. But as always, the reaction of the practitioners of Vodou was rebellion. Again, they revived the Petro spirits to help throw off the efforts to oppress them. The peasants fought back violently. In 1942, President Élie Lescot ordered the campaign stopped.

The last Antisuperstition Campaign took place in 1986 under the dictatorship of General Henri Namphy. Catholic and Protestant fanatics, encouraged by the Haitian Army, burned Vodou temples, destroyed sacred objects, and killed Vodou priests and worshippers. The Petro spirits were called upon again to come to the aid of followers of Vodou. The assault on Vodou failed and was a major reason for Namphy's expulsion from Haiti two years later.

In the ongoing religious war, Vodou proved stronger than the forces that threatened to obliterate it. The Antisuperstition Campaigns failed to stamp out Vodou, but they did drive practice of the religion underground. Practitioners of Vodou again had to keep their worship secret in order to avoid persecution.

Voodoo Politics

After it gained independence, Haiti was ruled by one dictator after another. Upheaval, violence, and corruption marred the country's politics. From 1860 to almost the present day, Haitian politics were never stable. During that time, Haiti had 35 presidents, of which only 5 completed their terms. This continuous political unrest drained Haiti's economy and impoverished the country.

The twentieth century again saw a series of repressive dictatorships attempt to take power in Haiti. The turbulent state of Haitian politics in the last century led to more efforts to suppress Vodou, this time by American forces, and to corruption of Vodou by the Duvalier regime, which further tarnished the reputation of the religion.

The U.S. Marines Versus Vodou

The calamitous state of Haiti's government and economy caught the attention of the United States in the early 1900s. A state of anarchy in Port-au-Prince (the capital of Haiti), culminating in the lynching of President Guillaume Sam on July 28, 1915, led to the invasion of American military forces. From 1915 to 1934, the U.S. Marines occupied Haiti. This period was called the American Occupation.

With the help of the Haitian government and state police, the Marines enforced the legal prohibition of Vodou that had been enacted with the original Constitution of 1805. In fact, Vodou was an excuse for the American forces to come into Haiti in the first place. When Antoine Simon became president of Haiti in 1908, U.S. Minister H.W. Furniss sent home a report that the president and his family were devotees of Vodou and full of superstition. Believing that Haiti could not govern itself, the United States intervened, setting up its own puppet governments.

Occupation by foreign troops earned the resentment of the Haitian people. The peasants were forced into unpaid labor, this time on public improvement projects. Chafing against what they saw as the return of white oppression, the peasants revived the Petro spirits, who inspired them to revolt. Five thousand armed peasants called *Cacos* waged guerrilla warfare against the occupying forces, sending the country into chaos.



Voodoo Speak

Haitian protestors against the American Occupation were called **Cacos**. The Cacos practiced Vodou and were inspired by the violent Petro spirits in their rebellion against U.S. military forces.

Under the last of the puppet presidents, Élie Lescot, the U.S. Marines launched a concerted campaign to stamp out Vodou for good. The occupying Marines prided themselves on pillaging Vodou temples and destroying the icons of the spirits. Lieutenant Faustin Wirkus published an account of this campaign against Vodou titled *The White King of La Gonave*, which detailed the damage he inflicted in order to “save” the Haitian people from cannibalism and black magic. His book sold 10 million copies worldwide.

Abuse of Vodou Under the Duvaliers

Vodou faced a different kind of threat under the dictatorship of Doctor François “Papa Doc” Duvalier, who was elected to the presidency in 1957. During his campaign, Duvalier

passed himself off as a zealous defender of African culture to gain the support of the peasantry. Once elected, he tried to take over the Catholic Church in Haiti, which he saw as the ally of the mulatto elite. He replaced foreign Catholic priests and archbishops with Haitian clergy who were free from foreign control. Vodou—Duvalier’s own perverted version of it—became the state religion of Haiti.

But Duvalier misused Vodou to support his corrupt regime, turning it to his own benefit and using it to oppress his own people. He belonged to a secret society called the *Secte Rouge* that was made up of sorcerers. Many Haitians came to believe that Duvalier was a black magician, a type of Vodou priest that was much feared and reviled.

Duvalier created a secret police force, the *Tonton Macoutes*, to enforce his reign of terror and strike at anyone opposed to his dictatorship. He brought Vodou priests into his regime, using them as informers or agents of the secret police. Associated with Duvalier’s grisly repression of his own people, Vodou’s reputation suffered in the eyes of the outside world.

The corruption that “Papa Doc” Duvalier instituted continued under the 16-year reign of his son, Jean-Claude “Baby Doc” Duvalier, who took over the country in 1971. But the Haitian people had had enough of the repressive Duvalier regime. They again awakened the Petro spirits with their rage against oppression. Inspired by Vodou, the Haitians came together to fight for their freedom one more time. “Baby Doc” Duvalier and his wife were forced into exile in 1986.



Voodoo Speak

In Kreyol, **tonton**

macoute means “boogeyman.” The Tonton Macoutes were a secret police force that had unlimited power to torture, kill, and extort anyone who stood against the Duvalier regime.

Since 1986, there has been more political turmoil in Haiti, including an unstable junta and at least five presidencies, most of which have been ousted by military coups. But the fall of the Duvalier regime marked a turning point for freedom in Haiti. A new constitution was passed in 1987 that guaranteed religious freedom and protection of all religious practices, including Vodou. For the first time in Haiti’s history, followers of Vodou could practice their religion openly and without fear of persecution. In the 1990s, free elections were held, resulting in the democratic election of Jean-Bertrand Aristide. Under Aristide’s presidency, the pivotal Vodou ceremony at Bois Caïman, which had led to the Haitians gaining their freedom in the first place, was commemorated for the first time in 200 years.

The Least You Need to Know

- ◆ Vodou played a pivotal role in inspiring the Saint Domingue slaves to rebel, but during Haiti's first two centuries as an independent country, it was continuously suppressed.
- ◆ Runaway slaves, hiding out in the Haitian mountains, created a new nation of Vodou spirits called the Petro, whose rage and violence helped unite them in rebellion against slavery.
- ◆ The final fight for independence began with a Vodou ceremony honoring the Petro spirits, which inspired the participants to rise as a united force against the slave owners.
- ◆ Despite the efforts of the dictators who came to power after the war to suppress the practice of Vodou, the religion thrived among the peasantry of Haiti, developing in isolation into the religion as it is practiced today.
- ◆ The Catholic Church, together with the repressive governments of Haiti, systematically tried to wipe out Vodou in periodic Antisuperstition Campaigns, but always failed.
- ◆ In the twentieth century, Vodou was attacked by the occupying American forces and corrupted by the Duvalier regime, but still survived; a new constitution guaranteed religious freedom in Haiti, and for the first time, followers of Vodou could practice their religion openly and without fear.

Chapter

4

Voodoo in the Modern World

In This Chapter

- ◆ How Vodou has been stereotyped as black magic and witchcraft
- ◆ Vodou's place in Haiti today
- ◆ The evolution of a different form of voodoo in New Orleans
- ◆ Vodou's spread outside Haiti
- ◆ Vodou-related religions elsewhere in the Caribbean

Because of the political, economic, and religious isolation of Haiti during the two centuries after independence, Vodou was able to develop without outside interference or influence. This long period of isolation also enabled Vodou to anchor solidly in Haitian society. Vodou's continuing success and spread throughout the Western World still depends on the religion's ability to adapt to new situations as Haitian isolation is lifted and Haitians move out into the wider world.

Long-held prejudices against Vodou, born out of fear, racism, and misunderstanding, are only now beginning to disappear in the popular conception of the religion. Even so, the labels of "devil worship" and "witchcraft" still cling to Vodou to this day. But as more people are exposed to Vodou and its cousin religions practiced in the Caribbean, South America, and Africa, Vodou will gain acceptance as a legitimate religion and lose its tarnished reputation.

Vilifying Voodoo

Throughout its history, Vodou has been faced with constant attack, particularly from whites in the United States and Europe. These attacks were born out of fear and racism.

Starting from the time of the Haitian revolution for independence, Haiti was vilified in the Western World. The successful fight for independence in Haiti brought to life the worst fears of other slaveholding nations and colonies, including the United States. Haiti was a vivid warning of what could happen elsewhere.

Everything associated with Haiti, including Vodou, was perceived as evil. In the eyes of whites, the Haitian rebellion proved the connection between Vodou and the savagery of blacks. Whites in Haiti's neighboring countries saw the rebellious slaves as fanatics inspired by sorcerers who worshipped the devil.

The isolation of Haiti, the constant political unrest in the country, and the air of secrecy surrounding Vodou didn't help. Because no one in the outside world had a clear idea of what Vodou really was all about, exaggerated rumors took hold. Anything that was practiced in secret had to be evil!

In the press, in popular novels, and later in Hollywood movies, Vodou was connected with a host of barbaric practices—devil worship, black magic, witchcraft, human sacrifice, cannibalism, child murder, sexual deviancy, you name it. Once its reputation as a savage, superstitious cult was established, it was difficult to overcome even in the twentieth century when respected anthropologists, such as Zora Neale Hurston and Maya Deren, published scholarly studies of the religion.

Stirring Up Scandal

In the nineteenth century, vilifying Vodou proved a successful way of advancing racist notions about blacks. White journalists and writers sensationalized the practice of Vodou, spreading lurid rumors and exaggerating misconceptions to sell more newspapers and books, and to promote the view of blacks in Haiti as superstitious savages who were inferior to whites.

They also held Vodou to be the source of Haiti's numerous problems. Poverty, unstable dictatorships, and political oppression were all caused by the Haitians' preoccupation with the occult, according to these reports. By painting Vodou as fundamentally superstitious and uncivilized, the leaders of more powerful neighboring countries could dismiss the blacks of Haiti as being unable to govern themselves and feel reassured that the Haitians and other blacks would never pose a threat to white power.

Voodoo Hoodoo

The writer Michel-Etienne Descourtilz visited Haiti soon after it won independence and wrote about the practice of Vodou in his book *Voyages d'un Naturaliste* (Travels of a Naturalist), published in 1809. In his book, he characterized Vodou as an “idolatrous sect that carried out vengeful practices by means of magic.” He gave sensationalist accounts of cannibalism, human sacrifice, devil worship, witchcraft, and orgies, all done in the name of Vodou.

The accounts of Vodou practices published in newspapers and novels of the time scandalized readers in Europe and the United States. These stories seized on the most lurid aspects of Vodou, describing rituals that turned into sex orgies and culminated in human sacrifice. All the stories were either exaggerated or completely made up. No realistic portrayals of the lives and religious practices of Haitians were published during that time.

They Eat Children!

One incident crystallized all the fears and stereotypes about Vodou that developed during the nineteenth century. On December 27, 1863, a little girl named Claircine disappeared in Port-au-Prince. The entire country banded together to search for her.

Ultimately, it was discovered that the girl had been murdered and eaten by fanatics as part of a Vodou ceremony. The inquest revealed that 15 people were responsible for Claircine’s murder. All were convicted of cruelty, sorcery, and murder. Six weeks later, the accused villains were executed by a firing squad.

There were no legal records or other proof that this incident actually occurred, though. Despite the lack of evidence, the gruesome tale captured the imaginations of journalists and novelists, who added their own details. Readers in “civilized” countries were horrified by the accounts. The atrocities supposedly committed by the 15 Vodou followers on a little girl reinforced in the minds of white readers the inherent savagery of blacks.

This incident was revived by Spenser St. John in his book *Haiti and the Black Republic*, published in 1884, which did more to destroy the reputation of Vodou than any other publication. St. John was a member of the British diplomatic corps in Haiti who wrote about his experiences there after he retired. In his very popular book, he called Vodou a “profoundly evil religion” and declared that it was the main reason for the regression of the Haitian people. His book contained detailed accounts of cannibalism, human sacrifice, and orgiastic rituals. Some of the descriptions had been extracted from Vodou priests through torture. St. John’s book reinforced widespread notions among whites at the time about the “heathen practices” of blacks who could only be saved through conversion to Christianity.

In the 1900s, American authors took over the vilification of Vodou. Following St. John's lead, they claimed that participants in Vodou sacrificed *kids without horns*, meaning babies (*goats without horns* refers to adults). Other books with suggestive titles, such as *Cannibal Cousins*, painted a picture of Haiti as a land of cannibals and zombies, which later became a favorite theme of American horror films. These horror stories fired the American imagination. The American public believed that Haitians needed the guidance of whites to join the ranks of civilized nations, leading to the American occupation of Haiti in the early twentieth century.



Voodoo Speak

Spenser St. John invented the phrase **goat without horns** to refer to the sacrifice of a person in Vodou, and **kid without horns** meant the sacrifice of a child or even an infant. Despite stories that human sacrifice was common in Vodou, there is no evidence that it ever took place at legitimate Vodou rituals.

Inspired by a series of bad movies and worse novels, Vodou's bad reputation lives on in the imaginations of outsiders. Many people continue to think of Vodou as black magic concerned only with revenge curses, human sacrifice, and raising the dead. But as the veil of mystery and secrecy surrounding Vodou is torn away and Vodou comes out into the open, more people are acknowledging that it is a legitimate religion with a rich history and a complex belief system.

Voodoo in Haiti Today

Despite the constant assaults on Vodou both inside Haiti and by the outside world, the religion survived. Better than that, it thrived, growing stronger and more entrenched in the daily life of the average Haitian with every assault.

Vodou has always fought oppression, from its roots as a means for the slaves to go to war for their freedom. Over the centuries, followers of Vodou have upheld that tradition time and again, using Vodou to fight the oppression and corruption of various dictatorships, occupying American forces, and the murderous mobs of the Catholic and Protestant Churches.

Through it all, Vodou has remained defiant. Ultimately, Vodou represents the strength and rebellion of the slaves of Haiti, from whom every black Haitian is descended. Vodou is a religion of revolution but also of the hope and joy that can be found in freedom. Today in Haiti, the practice of Vodou is more prevalent than ever.

Who Does Voodoo?

It's difficult to guess how many of the six million Haitians practice Vodou today. It is estimated that the majority of the peasantry, which makes up 60 percent of the population, practices Vodou despite their nominal membership in the Catholic Church. The Haitian

elite—the *affranchi* who still comprise the wealthiest members of society—makes up approximately 15 percent of the population. To all appearances, they are largely ambivalent toward Vodou, but probably the majority secretly consults Vodou priests or otherwise practices Vodou.

The long suppression of Vodou and its abuse during the rule of the Duvaliers (see Chapter 3, “Rebellion and Revolution”) have made Haitians reluctant to admit practicing Vodou. Old habits die hard, and it’s difficult to overcome the long-held practice of keeping Vodou secret in fear of retribution and even murder. Therefore, many Haitians won’t admit to practicing Vodou if asked, which makes it even more difficult to find out how many Haitians actually do Vodou.

For the first time in the history of the troubled country, though, Vodou can be practiced without fear or secrecy. After the constitution of 1987 guaranteed freedom of religion, Vodou rituals could be held in public, and Haitians could openly celebrate their unique cultural heritage and history through Vodou. At the same time, the rest of the world is coming to understand that Vodou is a legitimate religion rather than sorcery or devil worship, with a rich and complex system of beliefs and a deeply felt spirituality. As Vodou increasingly becomes accepted both inside and outside Haiti, more Haitians are declaring their allegiance to it with pride, and outsiders are even converting to the religion. Worldwide, Vodou has an estimated 50 million followers.



Spiritual Advice

Ayizan, an international Vodou newsletter, has the goal of uniting Vodou practitioners of all nationalities with native Haitians. (See Appendix B, “Resources for Further Study,” for subscription information.)

Never the Same Way Twice

Vodou remains as adaptable today as it has been throughout its history. It is constantly evolving to adjust to new situations, such as the changing political climate of Haiti or Haitian immigration to other parts of the Western World.

Vodou rituals, local spirits, and other practices vary greatly from one area to another within Haiti. While the basic characteristics of Vodou remain the same wherever it is practiced, it’s perfectly acceptable for traditions to differ from one community to the next. Vodou as a religion has no formal organization, no dogma or written texts, and there is no one right way to practice Vodou.

How Vodou develops in each separate community depends largely on the leadership of the priest or priestess. Each temple operates independently, under one religious leader. The traditions of each temple are passed down through the priests and priestesses from generation to generation, taking on unique local characteristics. That’s why you can travel throughout Haiti and never see a Vodou ceremony performed the exact same way twice.

Vodou and Catholicism: A New Partnership

Vodou's followers also consider themselves members of the Catholic Church and usually identify themselves as Catholic if asked. They see no conflict in following both religions simultaneously, in calling themselves both Catholic and servants of the Vodou spirits. For many Haitians, both are necessary. This attitude is summed up in the Haitian maxim: "Haitians are 80 percent Catholic and 100 percent Vodou."

Voodoo Hoodoo

Haitians are very fond of proverbs. They pepper their conversations with them to prove a point or express a fundamental truth. There is probably an appropriate saying for every situation. Here are some well-known Haitian proverbs:

- ◆ The rock in the river never knows the misery of the rock in the sun.
- ◆ Beyond the mountain is another mountain.
- ◆ Little by little, the bird builds its nest.
- ◆ God acts and doesn't talk.
- ◆ The pencil of God has no eraser.
- ◆ An empty sack can't stand up.
- ◆ To speak French doesn't mean you are smart.
- ◆ If work were a good thing, the rich would have grabbed it a long time ago.

Catholicism, the official state religion, is very visible in Haiti today while Vodou is unofficial and its practice was largely secretive until just recently. Membership in the Catholic Church gives Haitians a way to participate in the formal rituals of society, such as baptisms, communions, weddings, and funeral masses. At the same time, Vodou enables Haitians to connect with their African heritage and bond with their local communities. The Catholic priest provides contact with the supreme deity, the distant god, while the Vodou priest is a link to the African spirits who affect the everyday events of life.

Despite the official nature of the Catholic Church, Vodou has a large presence in Haitian society, and the Church has become much more tolerant of the religion. It's safe to say that most Haitians who belong to the Catholic Church also practice Vodou and that Vodou is more important than Catholicism in Haitian life. Vodou affects every aspect of life. Unlike Catholicism, its practice isn't confined to a couple of hours on Sunday mornings.

A Religion of Hope and Joy

Haiti is the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere. It has suffered from corrupt governments almost continuously since independence as well as from the decimation of its land and economy, epidemics, and malnutrition.

As it always has since it was born in the slave quarters on the colonial plantations, Vodou gives hope to those who might not otherwise have any. Vodou is practiced mostly by Haiti's impoverished peasant class. Rural life in Haiti means hard labor, poverty, disease, and a constant fight for survival.

For the rural peasants, Vodou provides a way to survive a very hard life. Honoring the spirits is a practical thing to do with tangible benefits, such as bringing good fortune or healing sickness. Vodou allows the peasants to solve what might seem like insurmountable problems, using the means they have available to them. The Vodou priests and priestesses act as leaders, creating a community that bands together to help every member survive. Vodou also enables its practitioners to celebrate their lives and what little they do have through joyous dance, music, feasting, and communion with the ancestral spirits.

Today in Haiti, the Rada spirits dominate—the benevolent spirits of Africa who represent peace and perform good deeds. Vodou's prevalence in Haiti illustrates the Haitians' efforts to retain ties to Africa and the old traditions of their homeland. As a religion, Vodou has sustained African values in Haitian society and enabled the Haitians to preserve their heritage. But the Petro spirits are always waiting and can be called upon at any time if needed once again to fight the forces of oppression.

Southern Style: Voodoo in New Orleans

A very different form of voodoo evolved in New Orleans, Louisiana, at the same time that Vodou was taking shape in Haiti. New Orleans has come to be known as the voodoo capital of the United States. New Orleans Voodoo developed under very different circumstances from those in Haiti, in a thriving city where voodoo was not as suppressed—even whites participated.

The priests and priestesses of New Orleans Voodoo are called Kings and Queens. The Kings are not very powerful, though. A succession of highly revered Queens ruled the voodoo community in the city. Other important figures are the practitioners of black magic, or "voodoo doctors."



Spiritual Advice

New Orleans Voodoo can properly be called "voodoo." This distinguishes the New Orleans traditions from the religion of Vodou that developed and is practiced in Haiti. Although the two came from the same roots, they took very different paths over the course of 200 years.

New Orleans Voodoo emphasizes magic rather than religion. It is mainly concerned with the use of magical charms and potions, *gris-gris* bags, and voodoo dolls, which are unknown in Haiti. Rituals are not as important as they are in Haiti. New Orleans rituals often include living snakes, which are rarely used in Haiti.

Voodoo Comes to America

In the early days of slavery in the United States, a ban against importing slaves from the West Indies into America was passed because they were “steeped in voodooism,” as

Governor Bernardo Gálvez of Louisiana proclaimed in 1782. He also claimed that it “would make the lives of the citizens unsafe.” This prohibition was lifted in 1803 after Louisiana became a part of the United States.



Voodoo Speak

The term **gris-gris** comes from the French word for “gray,” referring to a combination of black and white magic. In New Orleans, white charms are *juju* and black charms are *mojo*. *Gris-gris* are the most powerful and expensive of all magical charms. The charms consist of a potion of herbs and other ingredients, like pepper, hair, and animal skin, contained in a small leather bag.

At that time, white planters fleeing from war-torn Haiti began arriving in New Orleans, and they brought their slaves with them. Over 5,000 blacks, both free and enslaved, came to New Orleans from Haiti between 1803 and 1810. They, in turn, brought their religion. This was the beginning of voodoo in New Orleans.

Starting in the 1820s, voodoo enjoyed a heyday in New Orleans. Officially, the practice of voodoo was forbidden, but it was tolerated and even provided entertainment for white spectators. In 1817, the municipal council, fearing uprisings, outlawed slave gatherings except on Sundays in officially designated, supervised areas. On Sundays, voodoo ceremonies were staged in an open field known as Congo Square, which was a legal meeting place.

However, these were tame traditional African dances put on for the white curiosity seekers who came to watch. The more authentic and notorious voodoo dances were held in secret at night on the shores of Lake Pontchartrain and Bayou Saint John.

The most prominent and powerful voodoo doctor during this time was John Montenet, better known as Doctor John. He was an African priest and freed slave who led the rituals in Congo Square. His knowledge of voodoo made him wealthy. He could predict the future, read minds, cast spells, remove curses, cure illness, and concoct *gris-gris*, all for a hefty fee. After his death, Doctor John was honored in New Orleans as an ancestral spirit.



Spiritual Advice

New Orleans even has its very own voodoo museum, which is well worth a visit if you’re ever in the city. There, you can learn more about New Orleans Voodoo, take a tour of famous voodoo sites, and shop for *gris-gris* bags. The New Orleans Historic Voodoo Museum is located at 724 Rue Dumaine, or check it out on the Web at www.voodooomuseum.com.

The Golden Age of New Orleans Voodoo occurred in the first half of the nineteenth century. After the Civil War, voodoo went underground. But in recent times, it has emerged stronger than ever. Voodoo shops do a brisk business while many visitors to the city take tours of important sites in New Orleans Voodoo's history.

Marie Laveau: The Voodoo Queen of New Orleans

The most famous figure in New Orleans Voodoo was Marie Laveau, the "Voodoo Queen of New Orleans." The story of her life is a mixture of legend and fact, but one thing is clear—she was the most powerful and most feared of all the New Orleans voodoo queens. In fact, she was so powerful that she proclaimed herself the Pope of Voodoo.

Marie Laveau was born in the late 1790s. It's unclear whether she was born in New Orleans or in Saint Domingue and brought to Louisiana after the war for independence. She was probably the daughter of a wealthy white plantation owner and a slave, and she grew up a "free woman of color," as nonslaves were called.

Marie Laveau was very skilled in voodoo. She studied under Doctor John and soon surpassed him. She came to power as a voodoo queen during the 1830s. She was the first commercial voodoo queen, and she grew wealthy off the fees she charged for telling fortunes, making *gris-gris* bags and love potions, and casting curses. She also presided over the annual ritual on the banks of Bayou Saint John on Saint John's Eve, June 23. There, she led the dance with her giant snake Zombi wrapped around her neck.

Marie Laveau was revered and feared throughout New Orleans, and she held an unusually high position in society for a black woman. Even prominent politicians sought her help, asking her to predict their political futures. Her predictions were always uncannily accurate. She had established a spy network of slaves and servants in the houses of prominent locals, and from them she obtained secret information that she used when fortune-telling.

Few dared to go against Marie Laveau, although some of her detractors believed that she sacrificed and cooked children (there was no evidence of this). A prominent New Orleans citizen, J.B. Langrast, once accused the voodoo queen's followers of committing crimes like theft and murder in the name of voodoo. Her devoted followers counterattacked with *gris-gris* bags left on Langrast's doorstep. Soon afterward, he left town. Many believed that he had been driven out of his mind by the *gris-gris*.

Marie Laveau married Jacques Paris in 1819, but he mysteriously disappeared soon afterward. Although there was no record of his death until five or six years later, she immediately began calling herself the "Widow Paris." She had 15 children by her second husband, Louis Glapion (although it's not clear whether they were ever legally married). One of her daughters, Marie Philomene Laveau Glapion, followed in her footsteps to become a voodoo princess almost as powerful as her mother. The younger Marie looked so much like her mother that they were often mistaken for each other, which gave rise to the legend that Marie Laveau could appear in two places at once.

Marie Laveau was also a devout Catholic who went to mass every day. She had so much influence in New Orleans that she even received permission to hold voodoo rituals behind

Saint Louis Cathedral, the church she attended. Eventually, Marie Laveau gave up voodoo and returned fully to Catholicism. She was replaced as voodoo queen by Malvina Latour, who was soon challenged by rival queens. No queen would ever again unite all the followers of New Orleans Voodoo like Marie Laveau had done.

The Voodoo Queen of New Orleans died on April 15, 1881, and was buried in Saint Louis Cemetery Number One. After her death, Marie Laveau was elevated to the status of a spirit. Many believe that her spirit rises every Saint John's Eve and holds court over the annual voodoo ritual. The faithful still visit her tomb to ask for her help and leave offerings of flowers, fruit, candy, and beads.



Spiritual Advice

To get help with a problem or a little good luck, go to Marie Laveau's tomb, place the side of your right foot against it, and mark three Xs with a piece of red brick on the side. Place your hand over the marks, close your eyes, and rub your foot against the tomb three times. Tell her what you wish, say a prayer, and leave an offering.

Moving On Out: The Haitian Diaspora

During the 1980s and 1990s, an estimated one million Haitians fled the poverty of Haiti for other countries, particularly the United States, Canada, and France. Haitians living abroad refer to themselves as “living in the Diaspora.” When they left Haiti, they brought Vodou with them.

Vodou is practiced in almost every major city in the United States, with the largest centers in Miami and New York City. In Canada, Haitians settled mainly in the French-speaking province of Quebec. In France, Haitians congregated in the housing projects of Paris and the surrounding suburbs.



Danger Ahead!

The practice of New Orleans Voodoo and Haitian Vodou should be distinguished from that of African American hoodoo. The term “hoodoo” refers to the African American tradition of folk magic, conjuring, and herbal medicine, which had its roots in African customs and was practiced by black slaves in the United States.

Vodou enables expatriate Haitians to reestablish communities outside their home country. It also provides a sense of control and familiarity as Haitian immigrants struggle with the problems of living in a new place and culture, often in poverty. Vodou priests and priestesses act as leaders of these new communities just as they did in Haiti. They are often called upon to solve problems with love, family, disease, depression, and drug addiction.

Just like inside Haiti, the practices of different Vodou centers in North America and Europe vary greatly depending on the leadership of local priests and priestesses. New rituals have evolved in the urban centers where Haitians have settled, and they have adopted new spirits.

Vodou has had to adapt to the new circumstances of Haitians living abroad. No longer was Vodou a religion of the countryside, with rituals held outdoors under the stars or inside open temples with dirt floors. Immigrant Haitians were living for the first time in large cities. Rituals had to be relegated to apartment living rooms and the basements of houses where the drums could not sound throughout the night. But Vodou was able to adjust to these circumstances. The spirits understood that their followers were far from home and still honored them—although in a different way.

Despite having emigrated to new countries, followers of Vodou, particularly the priests and priestesses, maintain a connection to Haiti. All the accoutrements of Vodou are carried with them from Haiti to construct new temples abroad. The spirits travel with them in bags and jars. The priests and priestesses even bring a little Haitian soil for their altars. They often return home for short visits to reconnect with the temples where they were initiated.

As Vodou has spread into the outside world, it has gained new followers, particularly among African Americans seeking to reconnect with their African heritage. But it also attracted followers from other ethnic groups, including whites. Vodou is generally a very open religion, welcoming anyone who has been called by the spirits. But anyone who wants to be initiated into Vodou still must travel to Haiti for the ceremony.



Spiritual Advice

The voodoo shop provides a central meeting place in the Vodou communities outside Haiti, enabling followers to purchase supplies and consult the local priest or priestess. It's also the best place to meet local practitioners of Vodou. There might be a voodoo shop in your area. Check the Yellow Pages or search on the Web. (Turn to Chapter 23, "In the Voodoo Shop," to learn more.)

Caribbean Cousins

Vodou is a unique religion. Nowhere else in the world does there exist another religion exactly like it. However, the African Diaspora gave rise to other religions that are very similar to Vodou in the West Indies, where slaves were brought from the same regions of West Africa as those that ended up in Haiti. As a group, these are called Afro-Caribbean religions. While these religions are often confused with Vodou, they are not the same. They did not evolve out of Vodou, but rather developed concurrently, based on similar West African religious traditions and nurtured in slavery.

The main difference between Haitian Vodou and its cousin religions is the overwhelming influence of Dahomean traditions in Haiti. There, the religious practices of the Fon predominated, resulting in a religion with a unique pantheon of spirits. In other areas, the religious beliefs and practices of the Yoruba or the Kongo dominated, resulting in important differences in the pantheon of spirits, ritual practices, and other characteristics.

Another major difference between Haitian Vodou and other Afro-Caribbean religions is a result of Haiti's unique history, particularly the successful slave rebellion, which created a fundamentally Haitian nation of spirits called the Petro. These violent spirits are not found in any of the related Afro-Caribbean religions. Amerindian influences, including *vevers* and zombies, are also unique to Haitian Vodou. Finally, Haiti's lack of contact with the outside world following independence enabled a more accurate preservation of the religious traditions of Africa than in most other Caribbean cultures.

It's worthwhile to take a look at these Vodou-related religions. While not as well-known as Vodou, they are rising in prominence and popularity as their followers spread to other parts of the world, particularly the United States.

Yoruba-Based Religions

In Cuba, *Lukumi* originated from Yoruban traditions rather than Dahomean practices. But as in Vodou, Lukumi fused with Catholicism in colonial times, so Catholic imagery and practices became an important part of the religion. There are only about 20 spirits in Lukumi, as compared to the thousands of spirits in Vodou. Spirit possession is a rarity and isn't of great importance. Rather, communication with the spirits takes place via divination, as interpreted in the casting of cowry shells by the priests and priestesses. Religious leaders in Lukumi are very powerful since they are the sole links to the spirits.

In Brazil, the Yoruba-based religion of *Condomblé* is practiced predominantly in the black state of Bahia. *Condomblé* is the most purely African of all the Afro-Caribbean religions. It resisted the melding with Catholicism that characterizes other Afro-Caribbean

religions, like Vodou and Lukumi. Practitioners pride themselves on maintaining strong ties to Africa and often travel there to strengthen their understanding of their religious beliefs and practices. As in Vodou, possession is central to the practice of *Condomblé*, making communication with the higher world of the spirits possible. But *Condomblé* is more structured and organized than Vodou, with formal "houses."

Another Brazilian religion called *Umbanda* originated underground in Rio de Janeiro and dominates in São Paulo, Rio, and other southern Brazilian cities. This religion also focuses on honoring the Yoruban spirits, but it concentrates mainly on their capacity for sorcery. It is sometimes known as *Macumba*, but that is considered a pejorative term.



Voodoo Speak

Next to Vodou, **Lukumi** is probably the best known of the Afro-Caribbean religions. It is practiced in Cuba, Puerto Rico, Mexico, and major cities in the United States. It is more widely known by its Spanish name, *Santería*, which means "the way of the saints." Because that name was given to the religion by outsiders, followers of Lukumi reject it.

Voodoo Hoodoo

Some of the Vodou spirits that you are already familiar with are also present in Condomblé and Lukumi. Although they go by slightly different names, they are all-powerful Yoruba spirits that live on in the New World. They include Papa Legba, known as Eleggua in Lukumi and Exù in Condomblé; and Ogou, known as Ogun in both Lukumi and Condomblé. However, some of the most important spirits of Condomblé and Lukumi don't appear at all in Vodou, such as the fire god Shango (Zangô in Condomblé). Neither Condomblé nor Lukumi honor Danbala, the powerful snake spirit of Vodou.

The Yoruba-based religion that took root in Trinidad and Tobago is called Shango. It is the most open of the Afro-Caribbean religions, having incorporated religious practices not only from Yoruban traditions but also from Catholicism, Hinduism, Protestant practices, and the Jewish Kaballah.

Kongo-Based Religions

The Bantu-speaking people of what are now the Congo Republic and northern Angola were also brought as slaves to the West Indies. Religions based on their traditions are called Kongo-based religions. In Vodou, the Kongo spirits are a prominent *nanchon*, falling just behind the Rada and Petro in importance. Among the Afro-Caribbean religions, though, the Kongo-based religions are not as influential or predominant as either Vodou or the Yoruba-based religions.

In Cuba, the religion of Palo derived from the practices of the people of the Congo. In Jamaica and other former British colonies, Kongo-based Obeah is practiced mainly in secret. Obeah is perceived as being closer to witchcraft or black magic than religion. Its two main components are casting spells and healing through folk medicine.

The Least You Need to Know

- ◆ Over the years, Vodou has gained a notorious reputation as black magic encompassing human sacrifice and cannibalism, spurred by scandalous rumors published in the popular presses of the United States and Europe.
- ◆ In Haiti, Vodou is just coming out of the closet under the guarantee of freedom of religion, practiced mainly by the peasantry as a way of surviving the hardships of day-to-day life.
- ◆ An offshoot of Vodou evolved in New Orleans that places more importance on magical charms and casting spells than on ritual and communion with the spirits.
- ◆ As Haitians have immigrated throughout the Western World, Vodou has also spread, gaining converts among non-Haitians.
- ◆ The family of Afro-Caribbean religions to which Vodou belongs also includes religions based on the traditions of the Yoruban and Kongo ethnic groups of Africa, but Vodou is an entirely unique religion.

Chapter

5

Voodoo's Artistic Legacy

In This Chapter

- ◆ The artistry of Vodou flags
- ◆ How Vodou has influenced Haitian art
- ◆ Collecting Haitian art
- ◆ How Vodou affects Haitian music and dance
- ◆ How Vodou is portrayed in Haitian literature

As you already know, Vodou influences every part of Haitian life. That includes the burgeoning arts scene in Haiti: painting, sculpture, metalwork, folk art, literature, music, and dance. Vodou permeates all Haitian art, and through their art, Haitians honor the Vodou spirits and show how Vodou is tightly woven into the fabric of Haitian life.

Over the past 50 years, Haiti has come to be recognized as a major force in the arts world, particularly the visual arts. Haitian artworks have become highly collectible and now hang in many respected museums and galleries in the United States and Europe. It's impossible to truly appreciate Haitian art without understanding how Vodou has profoundly influenced it, and it's just as impossible to understand Vodou without recognizing the joy and life it gives to the artistic life of Haitians.

Flag It

In Vodou rituals, ceremonial flags called *drapo* play an important role. Apprentice priestesses carry them to salute the spirits and signal the beginning of the ritual.

The art form of ceremonial flag-making is unique to Haiti. Creating a Vodou flag is a complex process and a sacred art. *Drapo* are usually designed by Vodou priests (priestesses are rarely flag makers). Many flag makers spend all their time on design and have apprentices do the actual sewing, with two or three people working on the same flag. In this way, the art of flag-making is passed down from one generation to the next.

Each flag measures 36 by 36 inches. A strong piece of fabric is stretched over a wooden frame. The flag maker stencils the design onto the fabric. He then fills in the design with brightly colored sequins. The sequins form the patterns of *vevers* honoring a specific spirit

of the Vodou pantheon. Alternatively, the sequin designs may portray the Catholic saint that represents a spirit. The name of the spirit is written in sequins across the top of the flag. One flag can require between 18,000 and 20,000 sequins.



Voodoo Speak

Drapo are the ceremonial flags of Vodou. They are decorated with brightly colored sequins in the patterns of *vevers* that represent the spirits honored in the ritual. Vodou initiates carry the flags at the beginning of the ritual to salute the spirits and start the ceremony.

Often, the designers of the flags remain anonymous. But as the flags have turned into a collectible art form, some flag makers have become quite well known. One famous flag artist is Antoine Oleyant. His flags are very different from the traditional image of a single spirit or *vever* on a solid background. Instead, his flags are composed of multiple images that flow across a background of changing colors. His experiences with Vodou ceremonies inspired his most striking works.



Danger Ahead!

Vodou flags that are created for sale to art galleries differ in a few important ways from the sacred flags used in ceremonies. The secular flags don't have the decorative fringe found on the ritual flags. On the secular flags, the artist generally writes his name in sequins across the bottom of the flag. Acquiring a sacred Vodou flag for your collection would be very difficult.

The design of Vodou flags originated in the beadwork of the Yoruban people and the Taino Indians. Originally, the flags were made solely for ceremonial purposes, but their lavish designs and rich colors have attracted the attention of art collectors. Now they are considered Haiti's finest form of folk art and are collected worldwide.

Flags used in Vodou ceremonies are never sold. Instead, special flags are made for export. You can buy the secular flags at many Haitian art galleries (a list of online galleries is provided in the section "Collecting Haitian Art" later in this chapter).

A Picture Is Worth a Thousand Words: Art

Most Haitian art forms have their roots in Vodou: temple murals, metalwork for cemetery crosses, sacred ceremonial flags. Through art, followers of Vodou can express their faith and show how Vodou touches every part of their lives. Art also gives the people of Haiti a way to bring their unique history and the mythology of Vodou to life.

Haitian art provides another way to honor the Vodou spirits. Until recently, followers of Vodou had no way to depict the spirits other than using the traditional images of the Catholic saints. But since the 1940s Haitian artists, inspired by Vodou, have created a new art form that more accurately shows how practitioners of Vodou see the spirits.

During the last 50 years, Haitian art has become recognized around the world and is now avidly collected. An entire school of art has arisen in Haiti, consisting of self-taught artists who were uninfluenced by the outside world and so had no preconceived notions of what art should be. Their paintings are completely experimental, mixing scenes of everyday life with the spiritual and supernatural. Their paintings are characterized by vivid colors and an almost childlike style. The art of Haiti is classified as “naive” or “primitive,” although perhaps a better word for it would be “intuitive.”

Art critics say that Haiti's soil gave rise to a “people of painters.” For such a small country, Haiti has produced an extraordinary number of extremely talented artists. Haitian artists are chiefly peasants, and many are Vodou priests. They are often called “peasant painters” or “Vodou painters.” They found in Vodou a bottomless well of inspiration, and Haitian art is dominated by Vodou themes.



Spiritual Advice

In Vodou, each color has a specific meaning and is usually associated with one of the major spirits. In addition, each spirit is identified with several symbols. These associations are reflected in Haitian art. By understanding the symbology of Vodou, you can better understand the art of Haiti.

The First Generation of Haitian Artists

Dewitt Peters, an American schoolteacher of English and a watercolor artist who was working in Haiti in the early 1940s, is credited with discovering Haitian art. In 1944, he established the Centre d'Art in Port-au-Prince to create a place where untrained peasant artists could live, study, and work. The Centre d'Art catalyzed an explosion of Haitian art, nurturing the talents of many fine artists and exposing their work to the art world for the first time. The Centre d'Art continues the mission of schooling young artists and exhibiting their work to this day.

Peters discovered the acknowledged master of Haitian art, Hector Hyppolite. While driving through St. Marc, Peters noticed a roadside café door decorated with paintings of

exotic birds. He tracked down the artist, Hyppolite. Like his father and grandfather before him, Hyppolite was a Vodou priest. But at that time, Hyppolite was living in poverty because he had decided to pursue art rather than religion and had lost his Vodou temple.



Danger Ahead!

Many art critics date the beginning of Haitian art from the opening of the Centre d'Art, but this is a misconception. The Haitian school of naive art did not spring fully formed out of a vacuum in the 1940s but had instead developed steadily over hundreds of years, in sacred objects and decorations of Vodou temples.

Peters invited Hyppolite to join the Centre d'Art in 1945. When Hyppolite's paintings were exhibited in Paris and New York City, they created an immediate sensation. His instant fame brought Haiti to the attention of the art world.

Hyppolite's subject matter was Vodou. His paintings celebrated the Vodou spirits. Some depicted Vodou conceptions of black magic. During his three-year career before his death in 1948, Hyppolite produced between 600 and 800 paintings, which now bring in five and six figures at auction.

Hyppolite and other members of the first generation of Haitian artists were completely untrained artistically. Consequently, their paintings were filled with passion, spontaneity, and color, unmarred by the artistic conventions of their time. They painted what they saw in their everyday lives. Through their paintings, they showed what was important in the lives of average Haitians. And all their work prominently featured the symbols and rituals of Vodou.

Other important artists in the first generation of Haitian art were ...

- ◆ Castera Bazile, who was working for Peters as domestic help when Peters discovered him.
- ◆ Rigaud Benoit, a taxi driver who decorated shaving mugs and who was discovered by the bright paintings on his Jeep.
- ◆ Wilson Bigaud, whose customary themes included the mysteries of Vodou and everyday life in Haiti.
- ◆ Jasmin Joseph, the first important Haitian sculptor.
- ◆ Philomé Obin, whose style dominated the Cap-Haïtian school of painting. (Named for the northern town where it originated, the Cap-Haïtian school is characterized by a focus on historical subjects and the realistic events of daily life rather than the fantastical Vodou themes expressed in most Haitian art.)
- ◆ Robert Saint-Brice, a Vodou priest who considered his paintings to be messages from his ancestors.

Voodoo Hoodoo

Wilson Bigaud started out as a clay sculptor, but Dewitt Peters encouraged him to switch to painting canvases. His painting "Paradise" won second prize at an International Exhibition in Washington in 1950 and now hangs in the Museum of Modern Art in New York. But Bigaud was plagued by severe depression, and he greatly feared losing his gift because of it. His friends believed that he had made a pact with a Vodou priest to preserve his talent despite his illness.

The Second Generation of Haitian Artists

The second generation of Haitian art began in 1951. A Vodou priest named André Pierre was discovered through the images of the spirits that he had painted on the walls of the largest Vodou temple in Haiti. Pierre had devoted his life to Vodou, and almost all his paintings portrayed the Vodou spirits, usually in the costumes of the colonial era. His first works were done inside the hollowed gourds used to catch the blood of animal sacrifices or hold other offerings to the spirits. But his major works were the large murals he painted on the walls of Vodou temples.

Pierre established himself as the master painter of this second generation of Haitian artists. Collectors in Europe and the United States treasure his paintings, which rarely come on the market.

Some of the most important artists in the second generation were ...

- ◆ Wilmino Domond, who painted scenes of everyday life and Vodou that were not highly symbolic like those of other Haitian painters.
- ◆ Préfète Duffaut, whose masterpieces consisted mostly of Vodou scenes.
- ◆ Célestin Faustin, who was profoundly influenced by his grandmother and her heavy involvement in Vodou.
- ◆ Jacques-Enguerrand Gourgue, the son of a Vodou priest, whose subject matter ranges from everyday life in the village to exotic Vodou images.
- ◆ Edgar Jean-Baptiste, who painted the dark side of Vodou.
- ◆ Gérard Valcin, whose paintings interpret Haitian reality, particularly Vodou.



Spiritual Advice

The *vever*, an essential element of Vodou rituals, also influenced Haitian painting. Many famous Haitian artists, such as Hyppolite, André Pierre, and Lafortune Félix, started out as makers of *vevers*.

The Third Generation of Haitian Artists

In the mid 1970s, a form of art involving abstract expressionism emerged in Haitian painting. The art critic André Malraux discovered this new style of Haitian art when he saw a cemetery decorated with handmade statues and paintings on the graves.

Previously, the Vodou spirits had been painted as human figures either wearing historical costumes or as the Catholic saints. During this third period of Haitian art, artists began painting the spirits in an entirely new way—as abstract energy, spiritual forces, or free-floating images. In other words, they showed the essence of the spirits. This was much closer to how the spirits were actually visualized in Vodou.

The main group of expressionists was the Saint-Soleil Group. Sometimes called a “peasant commune,” the members of the Saint-Soleil Group lived in the mountains above Port-au-Prince. Inspired by the paintings of Robert Saint-Brice, the Saint-Soleil Group claimed to be in constant contact with the Vodou spirits. Their works were directly inspired by dreams and visions of the spirits.

The painters Louisiane Saint-Fleurant and Levoy Exil founded the Saint-Soleil Group. Exil’s inspiration for his work came from dreams, which he claimed were visions about his past lives. He gave the Vodou spirits in his works animal companions, which was unique in Haitian art. Prospère Pierrelouis, the son of a Vodou priest, was probably the most talented of the Saint-Soleil Group. Stivenson and Ramphis Magloire, Saint-Fleurant’s sons, also belonged to the group, painting Vodou scenes almost exclusively. The Saint-Soleil Group disbanded in 1978, but their influence on Haitian art remains.

Another important artist of this period was Lafortune Félix, a Vodou priest from central Haiti who was discovered through the murals painted on his temple. Nacius Joseph, Haiti’s first major wood sculptor, was also working during this period; his sculptures were directly inspired by his deep belief in Vodou.

The Metalwork of Haiti

A unique form of metal sculpture was created in Haiti. This art form originated in Croix-des-Bouquets, a center of Vodou located north of Port-au-Prince. There, metal sculptors forge their works from recycled oil drums, shaping them with chisels. The sculptures are representations of mermaids, snakes, dragons, angels, devils, and beasts that defy description. Each piece has a significance or tells a story that is usually directly inspired by Vodou.

Georges Liautaud, a protégé of Dewitt Peters, was the master of the metalwork movement. Before Liautaud, there had been no metal sculpture in Haiti. Liautaud was a blacksmith by trade. Peters discovered him through the crosses he had made for the local cemetery.

The intricate symbols of Vodou were Liautaud's inspiration. He tapped into his deep knowledge of Vodou to create new images in metal. Liautaud's work is now displayed in the Museums of Modern Art in Paris and New York City.

Collecting Haitian Art

As with everything else Haitian, the country's art is unique. One tiny country has produced an astonishing number of talented artists and several distinct schools of art. In addition to painting, Haitian artists produce metal and wooden sculptures and folk art, such as Vodou flags and other ceremonial objects. There is no shortage of beautiful artworks to choose from for the serious collector and the hobbyist alike.

The first thing you should do before starting a collection is educate yourself about Haitian art. Learn about the master artists mentioned in this chapter, and study examples of their works in books, galleries, and museums. Gallery owners and museum staff are generally very helpful and eager to answer questions. Learn about the different styles of art that have developed in Haiti. Identify the paintings you like and what they have in common, and write down the names of those artists.

The following books will be helpful in your study of Haitian art (see Appendix B, "Resources for Further Study," for details):

- ◆ *Haitian Vodou Flags* by Patrick Arthur Polk
- ◆ *Peintres Haïtiens* by Gérald Alexis
- ◆ *Where Art Is Joy* by Selden Rodman

Now you're ready to buy. I suggest focusing on one theme for your collection. For instance, you may collect from a particular school of Haitian art or from a specific region of the country. You may choose paintings that show your favorite of the Vodou spirits or that depict Vodou ceremonies. Or you may decide to collect only Vodou flags or other ceremonial objects. Ultimately, you should pick the artworks you buy because you love them, not just for their monetary value.

As Haitian art has become highly collectible, many galleries specializing in it have opened, particularly in major cities and in areas near Haiti, like southern Florida, Louisiana, and the Caribbean. If you can't find a Haitian art gallery in your area or you want to look at a wider range of Haitian art, many excellent virtual galleries are on the Internet. The following table lists the best of these online Haitian art galleries.



Danger Ahead!

Because Haitian art has become so collectible, it is also expensive, ranging between several hundred and several thousand dollars for a painting. Haiti has no copyright laws, so a brisk business has sprung up, creating and selling copies of the works of famous artists. If you're buying a piece by a well-known artist for an extremely low price, you're probably not getting a bargain but a forgery.

The Best of the Internet-Based Haitian Art Galleries

Gallery	Web Site Address
ArtCaribe	www.multivisions.com/ArtCaribe
The Art of Haiti	www.medalia.net
B. Yvon Morisset Gallery	www.morissetgallery.com
City Zoo	www.cityzookeywest.com
The Electric Art Gallery	www.egallery.com/haiti.html
Folk Art and Craft Exchange	www.folkart.com/~latitude/home/haiti.htm
Galerie Macondo	www.artshaitian.com
Haitian Art Company	www.haitian-art-co.com
Haitian Art Gallery	www.haitianart.com
Haitian Art Source	www.arthaiti.com
HaitianPainting.com	www.haitianpainting.com
Haitian Spirit Gallery	www.haitianspirit.com
Studio Wah	www.studiowah.com
Whimsey's Haitian Arts and Crafts	www.whimseys.net
World Art Galleries	www.world-art-galleries.com

Take joy in building your art collection. Select artworks that move you personally, that you will want to see hanging on your walls for years to come. The art of Haiti is full of joy, passion, and life. Bringing that art into your home will help you feel closer to the Vodou spirits and to the passion of Haiti.



Spiritual Advice

Many people hesitate to buy expensive artwork from an Internet gallery, but you should have no problems if you take a few precautions. Before purchasing, ensure that the gallery has a 100-percent-satisfaction-guaranteed agreement and an acceptable return policy. Call the gallery to make the purchase and get answers to any questions; you should find the staff of a legitimate gallery knowledgeable and helpful.

The Voodoo Beat: Music and Dance

Vodou ceremonies are characterized by drumming and chanting to specific rhythms and by dance. These important elements of the ritual have spilled over into the arts world, influencing Haitian music and dance.

Vodou Goes Pop

Continuous drumming and call-and-response singing compose the main part of the Vodou ritual. Each Vodou spirit has a particular drum rhythm and a song. These rhythms and songs are a source of inspiration for Haitian musicians, and songs from Vodou ceremonies are found in most Haitian musical creations.

The rhythms of Vodou drumming and chanting have been popularized since the 1950s in the music of Martha Jean-Claude and Emérante de Pradines. Martha Jean-Claude was particularly influential and was called the “high priestess of Haitian music.” Her first album, inspired by Vodou rhythms and song, was *Canciones de Haiti* (Songs of Haiti), released in 1956.

The rhythms of Vodou have reappeared today, fused with American pop, in the music of such internationally known groups as Boukman Eksperyans and RAM. Music inspired by Vodou is called “roots music” or *mizik rasin*. The growing popularity of this music has helped revitalize interest in Vodou among the young people of Haiti.

The following table lists the best known of the roots bands and the names of their albums.



Voodoo Speak

Mizik rasin, or “roots music,” is Haitian music that directly incorporates the drum rhythms and chanting of Vodou ceremonies, often melding it with modern instruments, such as guitars and keyboards.



Spiritual Advice

To learn more about the Vodou-inspired music of Haiti, I recommend the book *Dancing Spirits* by Gerdes Fleurant (see Appendix B).

The Most Popular of the Haitian Roots Music Groups

Artist	Album Name(s)
Boukan Ginen	<i>Jou a Rive; Rev an Nou</i>
Boukman Eksperyans	<i>Kalfou Danjere; Kanaval Rasin-Vodou Adjae; Libete (Pran Pro Pran'!); Live at Red Rocks; Revolution; Vodou Adjae</i>
Foula	<i>Foula</i>
King Posse	<i>I Like It</i>
RAM	<i>Aibobo; Puritan Voodoo</i>
Rara Machine	<i>Break the Chain; Voudou Nou</i>

Let's Dance

Dance is intrinsically linked with Vodou. The major part of the Vodou ritual is the dance, as all the participants circle the temple to the beating of the drums. Through dance, followers of Vodou commune with the spirits. Dance also enables the spirits to possess the bodies of their followers. The spontaneous, African-based dances of Vodou have inspired other dancers.

Katherine Dunham was one of the first to incorporate Vodou dances into modern dance. She was an African American dancer who studied the native dances of the Caribbean. She was particularly captured by the Vodou dances that were such an important part of the religious rituals. Living among the Haitian peasants and taking part in their ceremonies gave her a deep appreciation for African-based dances that she shared with the rest of the dance world. Ultimately, she claimed Haiti as her second home and adopted the Vodou religion herself.

Dunham was also one of the first to record the music of Vodou—the drumming and singing of the rituals. She produced such notable albums as *Afro-Caribbean Songs and Rhythms* and *The Singing Gods*. And she wrote several books about her experiences with Vodou dance, including *Island Possessed* and *Dances of Haiti* (see Appendix B for details). If you're interested in Vodou dance, these books are certainly worth reading.

Today, dance ensembles tour the United States and put on elaborate shows inspired by Vodou rituals. One such group is the Voodoo Macumba Dance Ensemble, a group of drummers, dancers, fire-eaters, sword swallowers, and snake dancers featuring a Vodou priestess. Their performances are inspired by a combination of religious traditions from West Africa, the Caribbean, and New Orleans. In particular, they recreate the dances held along the Bayou St. John under the Voodoo Queen of New Orleans, Marie Laveau (see Chapter 4, “Voodoo in the Modern World”).

Words for the Wise: Literature

Despite the country's small size and the fact that the majority of its population is illiterate, Haiti has produced a number of talented writers. It is the third-largest producer of books in the French-speaking world, after France and Quebec. Between 300 and 400 books by Haitian writers (including Haitians in Diaspora) are published each year.

Like Haitian art, Haitian literature strives to depict everyday life in Haiti, particularly among the peasantry, and to tell the stories of Haiti's unique history. Vodou serves as a powerful context in the works of Haitian writers. The literature of Haiti truly shows how Vodou is infused in all parts of Haitian daily life.

Voodoo Hoodoo

Because the native language of Kreyol is not a written one, Haitian literature is primarily written in French. However, there has been a movement in recent years to publish Haitian novels and poems in Kreyol, thus making Haitian literature more accessible to the average Haitian. This is also part of the effort to separate Haitian culture from French culture and create a separate, completely Haitian identity.

The rich tradition of storytelling in Haiti has inspired its literature. In Vodou, knowledge is not written down but is passed down from generation to generation orally, from the priest or priestess to their apprentices. This knowledge includes the stories of the spirits, which teach fundamental lessons about life and spirituality. These stories have inspired Haitian writers and are often woven through their novels and poems.

The following table lists the major Haitian writers who have all infused their novels, plays, and poetry with Vodou themes and symbols (suggested works for further reading are also listed).

Major Haitian Writers and Their Most Important Works

Author	Suggested Reading
Jacques Stephen Alexis	<i>General Sun, My Brother</i> (University Press of Virginia, 1999)
Edwidge Danticat	<i>Breath, Eyes, Memory</i> (Soho Press, 1998); <i>Krik? Krak!</i> (Soho Press, 1995)
René Depestre	<i>The Festival of the Greasy Pole</i> (University Press of Virginia, 1990); <i>Hadriana dans Tous Mes Reves</i> (French and European Publications, 1990)
Jacques Roumain	<i>Masters of the Dew</i> (Collier Books, 1971)

The Least You Need to Know

- ◆ The finest forms of Haitian folk art are the ceremonial flags carried in Vodou rituals to salute the spirits.
- ◆ Haiti has produced an entirely new school of painting, which depicts scenes directly inspired by the symbols and mythology of Vodou.
- ◆ Haitian art has become very collectible, and many galleries specializing in it have opened to import the works of Haitian painters to the United States and Europe.

- ◆ Vodou rituals are composed almost entirely of drumming, call-and-response singing, and spontaneous dancing, all of which have inspired new forms of pop music and modern dance.
- ◆ Haitian literature reflects the tradition of storytelling in Haitian culture, in which the wisdom of Vodou is passed down orally from one generation to the next.

Part 2

The Fundamentals of Voodoo

In Vodou, the spirits are everywhere. They are in the trees and the rocks. They are in the river's current and in still pools of water. They are in the wind that blows before a storm and in the rain that falls. They are in the ocean waves crashing on the sand. They are in the mountains soaring up into the sky. And they are in the sky itself.

The spirits affect everything we do. They touch every part of our lives and influence every decision we make. They can bring us joy and good luck, or they can bring misfortune and unhappiness. They protect us from danger and lead us along the paths we should rightly take as we make our way through life.

But who are the spirits and how can we connect with them? In this part, you'll begin to develop your personal relationship with the spirits of Vodou as you find out who they are, how you can serve them, and how they can serve you. In Vodou, you cannot act without doing so in full awareness of the spirits that are all around us, all the time.



Chapter

6

God and Spirit

In This Chapter

- ◆ God's place in Vodou
- ◆ The spirits who are the expression of God in the world
- ◆ Where the spirits come from and where they live
- ◆ The different nations, or families, of spirits
- ◆ How the spirits connect people with God
- ◆ What the spirits are like and how they behave

So far, you've read quite a lot about the Vodou spirits and how they affect the everyday lives of the practitioners of Vodou even going so far as to alter the course of history in Haiti. It may therefore surprise you to learn that Vodou is a monotheistic religion that acknowledges the supremacy of one God. Through God, the spirits were created, and they serve him just as people serve the spirits.

But that God is a distant one, difficult—if not impossible—to connect to personally. That's why the spirits play such a fundamental role in Vodou. While it is important to know who God is and to acknowledge his mastery over all elements of life, it is even more important to know the spirits of Vodou. The spirits are the ones whom the practitioners of Vodou interact

with on a daily basis—through their dreams, through ritual, and just through living their lives.

To begin to understand who the spirits are and what they do, you must know who God is and how the spirits relate to him. You must also know where the spirits come from and how they express themselves in the world. Finally, you should understand that the spirits, with their unique personalities and temperaments, are closer to us than God is. That's what enables humans to form personal relationships with the spirits, to serve them so that they may serve us in return.

God in Voodoo

Vodou belief recognizes only one Supreme Being, one deity. In Vodou, he is called Bondye (pronounced “bohn-dyay”), the Kreyol term for Le Bon Dieu, or the “Good God.” He is also called Gran Mèt, or the Grand Master. Although he took on many of the traits of the Christian God when the slaves of Saint Domingue were adopting elements of Catholicism into their religion, Bondye is actually an African deity, an eternal being who originally made the world and everything and everyone in it.

Because Bondye made the world, his divine essence is found in every part of creation—in the spirits, in people, and in all other things, animate and inanimate, visible and invisible. Humankind was created by Bondye in his image. In the souls of all of us, part of Bondye's spirit animates our bodies and gives us consciousness.

The Eternal Nature of God

Bondye is not personified in Vodou. Unlike the spirits, he doesn't have a personality or human emotions. Rather, he is an eternal force. To practitioners of Vodou, he represents the inevitability of fate, the implacability of the forces of nature, and the constant motion of the universe.

Bondye's eternal force can be seen in the cycles of day and night and the seasons. He is present in the rise and fall of the tides, in the flow of ocean and river currents, and in the motion of the planets around the sun. His nature is also manifested in the continuous cycle of birth and death, growth and decay.

When someone comes down with a common, natural disease, they are said to have an “illness of Bondye” rather than a sickness caused by angry spirits or black magic. Weather and natural disasters that can't be attributed to the anger of the spirits are the works of Bondye. God's will can be seen in everything that is greater than us, everything we can't control or even really understand, but must instead accept and adapt to.

The Relationship with God

Bondye is too great to become directly involved in the lives of his creations. Unlike the spirits, who have personal relationships with people, Bondye is remote and out of reach. Pleading with him or giving him offerings won't change his will.

Therefore, practitioners of Vodou don't see much point in serving him directly. No rituals are held in his honor, no sacrifices are made to him, and he never possesses anyone. Devotees of Vodou think of Bondye as an easygoing father figure who watches over them but never gets angry with them. He has delegated the task of dealing directly with the world to the spirits, supernatural beings who are inferior to him.

That doesn't mean that practitioners of Vodou forget about Bondye altogether. On the contrary, he is constantly in their thoughts. When talking of plans for the future, they always add, "*Si Dieu vlé*" (God willing). In this way, they acknowledge that Bondye's will is paramount and cannot be avoided. But Haitians also frequently say, "*Bondye bon*" (God is good). Although whatever God does cannot be avoided, it is always for the best.

Who Are the Lwa?

Since Bondye is so removed from the everyday lives of humans, there must be a way for people to connect with the spiritual world and exert some control over their own lives. Bondye has assigned that role to the invisible spirits called the *lwa*.

The *lwa* are not gods. Rather, they are immortal spirits with supernatural powers. The *lwa* fall somewhere between God and humankind, similar to the saints, angels, and devils of Catholicism. Each *lwa* represents a part of the natural world, such as death, love, the forest, and the ocean. In each of the spirits, a different aspect of Bondye, the divine, is manifested.

The *lwa* oversee all human activities—marriage, childbirth, health, work, money, farming, war, art, music, and politics, to name a few. There is no realm of human experience where a *lwa* does not preside. Through the *lwa*, everything in life—joy and sorrow, compassion and anger, rest and work—takes on meaning.

The *lwa* are all around us, all the time. They are present in all parts of nature—in trees, rivers, the ocean, fire, and stones. The spirits are also found throughout the man-made world, living in dolls, crosses, jars, and other objects that have been consecrated to them.



Voodoo Speak

The *lwa* (pronounced "l-wah") are invisible, supernatural spirits who oversee all the different aspects of human existence and the natural world. The word *lwa* means "law," and the *lwa* represent the cosmic laws. As mere humans, we cannot comprehend these laws fully; they are mysteries to us. Therefore, the *lwa* are often referred to as the *mistè*, or "mysteries."

This doesn't mean that each rock or tree is a *lwa*. Rather, the *lwa* manifest through rocks or trees, making their presence known in the beauty of those objects. By walking in the woods, looking at a mountain, or standing under a waterfall, you can commune with the *lwa* and feel their power.



Danger Ahead!

It's a common mistake to think of Vodou as an animistic religion. Because devotees of Vodou see the *lwa* in all parts of nature, outsiders may think they believe that everything has a soul—every rock, every tree, every river. This is a simplification, though. The *lwa* simply reside in these objects, manifesting through them but not animating the objects themselves.

Where the Lwa Come From

All the *lwa* were once people, just like you and me. When they died, their souls were transformed into eternal spirits. Through death, they gained supernatural powers and a wisdom that far surpassed that of the living. Just as children look to their parents for guidance, so do the living look to their ancestors, who have passed into the spiritual world, for advice and help.

The most powerful *lwa* are the ones who made a huge impact while alive. Perhaps they were important kings, wise men, or priests, or perhaps they greatly affected the history of their tribes. After their deaths, their feats lived on in the minds of their descendants. They were matched with archetypal attributes, such as the masculine domain of war or the feminine domain of love.

Some spirits are stronger than others, able to give better advice and accomplish greater feats. If a family's ancestor seemed especially wise and helpful, the ancestor soon began to receive offerings from others outside the family and was elevated to the status of a local deity. As time went on, the real people whom these spirits had once been were forgotten. They became mythical beings, gaining higher powers as more people honored them.

For example, a man who had been a mighty soldier in life might become a revered ancestral spirit after death. His family and gradually his tribe would consult him on problems related to war and would attribute their victories to his aid. He would probably be adopted by neighboring tribes, who recognized his power to help win battles and sought his help as well. By then, he would have been converted into a tribal god, his human roots long forgotten. The most powerful of these spirits made the voyage with the slaves to Haiti, where they became the great *lwa*.

Lwa Nations

As you have already learned, the *lwa* are divided into several groups called *nanchons*. Originally, the nations of *lwa* were invented to allow the intermixed slaves from different

ethnic groups to each have their turn in honoring their own ancestral spirits during rituals. Each nation was associated with a region of West Africa or with a specific ethnic group.

Over time, the *nanchons* lost their original geographical and racial identities. They came to be associated more with the personalities of the *lwa* that formed that nation. Thus, the gentle, benevolent *lwa* belong to the Rada nation while the violent, dangerous *lwa* belong to the Petro nation.

There are at least 17 different *nanchons* of *lwa* although most Haitians know only a few by name. The known *nanchons* include the following:

- ◆ Rada, the *lwa* who originated in Dahomey
- ◆ Petro, the *lwa* who originated in Haiti
- ◆ Kongo, the *lwa* who originated in the Congo
- ◆ Ibo, the *lwa* of one of the major Yoruban tribes
- ◆ Nago, the *lwa* of another of the major Yoruban tribes
- ◆ Ginen, the *lwa* who originated in Guinea
- ◆ Bambara, the *lwa* who originated in the Sudan
- ◆ Wangol, the *lwa* who originated in Angola
- ◆ Siniga, the *lwa* who originated in Senegal



Spiritual Advice

Each *nanchon* has its own ritual. The details of the rituals of the different nations vary considerably, including the kinds of musical instruments that are played, the kinds of animals that are sacrificed, the colors of clothing that are worn, the drum rhythms that are played, and the dances that are performed. It would be difficult to mistake one *nanchon's* ritual for another.

Of these, the Rada and Petro *nanchons* dominate and have largely absorbed the *lwa* of the other nations. The Kongo, Ibo, and Nago *nanchons* are still important enough to have their own rituals, though. The others are so minor that even Vodou priests and priestesses can't name the *lwa* who belong to them.

The Gentle Lwa from Africa

You are already familiar with the Rada *lwa*, who originated in Africa and represent the paternal authority of the homeland. The Rada *lwa* are essentially good. They play a protective but passive role in the lives of their followers, guarding the stability of the community from whatever outside forces might threaten it. Because they come from the mythical homeland of all Haitians, they are often called *lwa-Ginen*.

Voodoo Hoodoo

Each *lwa*, particularly the major *lwa*, has many faces representing related aspects of the same force. For that reason, most of the Rada *lwa* have Petro counterparts, which are like mirror reflections of their Rada aspects. Usually, the Petro form of a Rada *lwa* is invoked by adding a Petro title to the name of the *lwa*. Thus, adding the title “la Flambeau,” which literally means “the torch,” invokes a fiery Petro aspect of a Rada *lwa*. Adding the title “ze-rouge,” which means “with red eyes,” to the name of a Rada *lwa* indicates a particularly horrific and violent Petro aspect of that *lwa*.

In Vodou, the *lwa* invoked in the overwhelming majority of all ceremonies belong to the Rada nation, and most ceremonies—95 percent or more—are of the Rada type. These rituals follow the traditions of the Fon rituals practiced in Dahomey, where most of the Rada *lwa* came from originally.

Rada rituals are generally held inside the Vodou temple, most of which exclusively serve the Rada *lwa*. Participants in Rada rituals wear all white. At the ceremony, a large fire with an iron bar stuck in the flames—representing Ogou, the *lwa* of fire—perpetually burns. Drum strokes and the dancers’ feet always land on the beat. The Rada *lwa* never demand a sacrificial offering larger than chickens or pigeons, although at more important ceremonies, they may be offered goats or bulls.

Spiritual Advice

Animal sacrifice may seem distasteful or even barbaric to outsiders, but it’s a fundamental part of Vodou. Haitians sacrifice animals to feed the *lwa* and themselves, and every Vodou ritual includes a feast for all participants (both human and *lwa*) on the animal killed during the ritual. See Chapter 15, “Ritual in Vodou,” for a more detailed explanation of the important role of animal sacrifice in Vodou.



While it isn’t entirely correct to call the Rada *lwa* the “good” *lwa*, they are certainly more benevolent than the *lwa* of the Petro nation. They help out their followers without requiring great sacrifices or bringing harmful consequences. They aren’t spiteful, and their punishments, meted out when they are neglected by their followers, are always just.

However, their services aren’t very powerful, and they never assist with performing black magic. Sometimes, the Rada *lwa* just aren’t enough to meet someone’s needs or to assist in a time of crisis. At that time, the practitioner of Vodou may turn to the stronger and more dangerous Petro *lwa*.

The Dark Lwa from Haiti

You have already learned about the birth of the Petro *lwa* during the slaves’ fight for independence. The slaves found that their traditional African *lwa* weren’t powerful enough to

help them with such a great undertaking, so they invoked an entirely new kind of *lwa*, which were much more violent, dangerous, and warlike than the Rada spirits. These *lwa* formed a completely new nation of spirits called the Petro. Because of their Haitian origins, the Petro *lwa* are also called *lwa-Kreyol*.

Although the roots of the Petro rituals, dances, and *lwa* can be traced to the Kongo and Ibo ethnic groups of West Africa, they have been greatly influenced by the natives of Hispaniola and the practices of the Haitian slaves. Petro rituals are never held inside a temple where Rada rituals are held. Rather, they are held in a temple dedicated solely to the Petro *lwa* or outside the temple altogether, such as in a cemetery, at a crossroads, or in the dark forest.

Petro rituals are characterized by all-red clothing and large sacrificial offerings like sheep, cows, goats, and bulls. Pigs are given only to the Petro *lwa* and are the most common sacrifice. The drumming is syncopated, and the dancing is off the beat and more frenzied than in Rada rituals.

The Petro *lwa* are ready to offer their help in times of great need. They can quickly cure an illness, particularly one caused by sorcery. They give the oppressed the strength and will to rebel. They make powerful spells to ward off black magic and get vengeance on enemies.

Because the Petro *lwa* are so strong, the price they demand in return for their services is high and dealing with them is very risky. They will work for someone only if the devotee promises certain services to them in return, usually an expensive sacrifice or even lifelong devotion. If the devotee doesn't fulfill his or her promise, the punishment can be very harsh. The Petro *lwa* may even go so far as to kill a neglectful follower. That's why invoking the Petro *lwa* is often saved as a last resort.

While the Petro *lwa* are demanding of their followers, they are also necessary. They provide an equilibrium in the spirit realm, balancing the benevolent but passive forces of the Rada *lwa*. Because of their strength, the Petro *lwa* can perform necessary tasks that the Rada *lwa* cannot. They are more powerful, quicker to act, and able to work greater feats of magic than are the Rada *lwa*.



Danger Ahead!

Although the Petro *lwa* are often depicted as dark, violent, and dangerous, they are not evil. Vodou doesn't have a duality of good and evil as Christianity has. Thus, the Rada *lwa* can sometimes be stern and harsh, and the Petro *lwa* can sometimes aid with an ultimately good task, such as the war for independence in Haiti.



Spiritual Advice

The Petro *lwa* specialize in magic and oversee the construction of all magical charms. People who need protection against witchcraft often swear themselves to a Petro *lwa*. The Petro *lwa* are also "givers of money" and can provide great wealth in exchange for devoted service.

The Guardian Lwa from the Congo

The Kongo nation is the only other *nanchon* that is important in Vodou although rituals held for the Kongo *lwa* are much rarer than those held for the Rada or Petro *lwa*. In fact, many of the Kongo *lwa* have been assimilated into the Petro nation.

The *lwa* of the Kongo nation originated in the Congo area of West Africa. Like the Petro *lwa*, they are usually considered violent and dangerous, and the Kongo nation includes many evil spirits. They are associated with magic, and they guarantee protection to their servants. Because they are guardians, they are also called *lwa-gad*.



Voodoo Speak

Lwa-gad literally means “*lwa* guards.” The *lwa* of the Kongo nation are called this because of their roles as protectors of their followers.

The Kongo *lwa* are honored collectively in an annual ceremony. Participants in the ritual wear red and white clothing, and live dogs are sacrificed. The dances of the Kongo ritual are the most complex of all the Vodou ceremonial dances, involving serene undulations interspersed with intricate, frenzied dance steps.

What the Lwa Do

If Bondye is distant and removed from the realm of human affairs, the *lwa* are close and very active in the world. They actually intervene in the affairs of the living, always in return for service of some kind.

In this way, people and the *lwa* foster close personal relationships based on give and take. As long as you honor the *lwa* and give them what they want, they will take care of you and fulfill your needs. But if you neglect them or don't give them what they ask for, they will punish you or abandon you altogether. This back-and-forth interaction between humans and the *lwa* is one of the basic tenets of Vodou, and you'll learn more about how it works in Chapter 10, “The Relationship with the *Lwa*.”

The *lwa* can help us because they have greater wisdom and power than we do. They know more than we do, including the future, and so they can help us make decisions and affect the outcomes of our lives. Using their magical powers, they can change the natural flow of events, bringing either good fortune or bad luck as they choose.

Besides helping to fulfill our needs and desires, the *lwa* serve another very important function—they are the link between us and God. Bondye created the *lwa* as manifestations of different aspects of himself and as a way for him to communicate with humankind. Bondye inhabits an invisible, purely spiritual world while people inhabit the physical realm of earth. The *lwa* live in both worlds, and so link the two.

The Lwa Personality

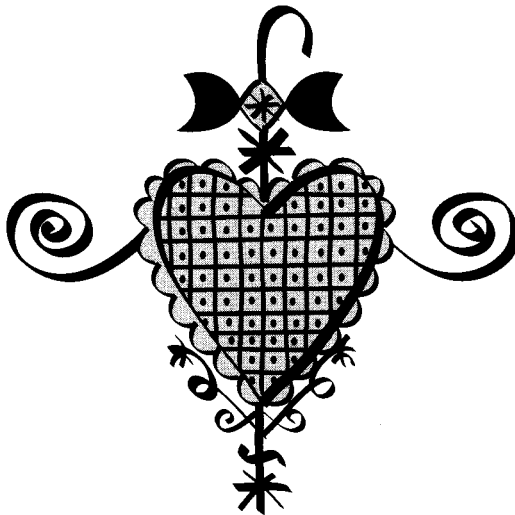
The *lwa* may be supernatural spirits, but they certainly don't act like gods. They behave much more like people. They exhibit the entire range of human emotions, and they often act irrationally. It's very important to stay on the good side of the *lwa* because if you anger them or hurt their feelings, there's no telling what form their retribution will take.

The Faces of the Lwa

Each *lwa* has a well-defined personality that makes him or her instantly recognizable. When practitioners of Vodou conceive of the *lwa*, they imagine them as people whose physical characteristics reflect that *lwa*'s innate personality. For example, the *lwa* of love is perceived as a beautiful woman while the *lwa* of agriculture looks and acts like a peasant farmer. Each *lwa* has a particular way of walking and talking and specific outfits that they wear, usually in their favorite colors.

The symbols of each *lwa* reflect their essential natures. A heart symbolizes the *lwa* of love, for example, while a sword represents the *lwa* of war. The *lwa* are associated with different Catholic saints on the basis of those symbols. They also each have a symbolic drawing called a *vever*, which is used to invoke the *lwa* during rituals. For instance, the *vever* of the *lwa* of love incorporates her symbol, a heart, as shown.

What can be even more confusing is that each *lwa*, particularly the major *lwa*, can have many aspects that represent various sides of the *lwa*'s essential nature. Some people think of these aspects as different faces of the same *lwa*. Others think of each *lwa* as a family of closely related spirits, distinguished by slightly different names. Almost all the major *lwa* have a light Rada side and a dark Petro side.



The vever of Ezili, the lwa of love, always incorporates her symbol, a checkered heart.

The Emotions of the Lwa

The *lwa* have different emotional dispositions as well. Some are calm and loving while others are temperamental and quick to anger. But all *lwa* are subject to the same range of emotions that we feel. Their feelings can be hurt, and many *lwa* are very sensitive to even the slightest offenses. They can fly into a rage at any insult, and sometimes their punishments are completely out of proportion with the crime.

Like people, all the *lwa* are capable of both gentleness and anger, mercy and revenge. Like people, they have the capacity for both good and evil inside them and can perform great acts of compassion as well as horrendous acts of violence.

Voodoo Hoodoo

By nature, the *lwa* are neither essentially good nor evil. But there are some completely evil spirits called *diab*, or "devils." Like all the *lwa*, they are open to negotiation and sometimes assist with magic or evil works. But they are unpredictable and can randomly turn against the people who serve them. Sometimes, these spirits drain the life energy of a person, causing death. When this happens, they are said to have "eaten" the person, although the person wasn't literally cannibalized by the *diab*. Because orthodox Vodou priests and priestesses take an oath not to do harm, they almost never invoke a *diab*. Generally, only black magicians make use of their services.

The personality traits of the different *lwa* are most evident when they enter the bodies of people in possession. The way the possessed person behaves immediately tells everyone present which *lwa* is inside that person. When the *lwa* appear in dreams and other visitations, their personality traits offer the only clues that you are being visited by a *lwa* with an important message to give you.

The Least You Need to Know

- ◆ Practitioners of Vodou recognize one Supreme Being whom they call Bondye, but he is too remote for direct worship.
- ◆ Humans interact instead with supernatural spirits called *lwa*, each representing an aspect of the natural world and overseeing a realm of human activity.
- ◆ The *lwa* were originally living people whose immortal spirits attained great wisdom and power after death and were eventually deified as they came to be worshipped by more people.
- ◆ The *lwa* are divided into different groups called *nanchons* that designated the region of West Africa or ethnic group where they originated; the principal *nanchons* are the Rada, Petro, and Kongo.
- ◆ The *lwa* are very active in the world, playing a major role in the lives of human beings and forming a connection between the material world people live in and the spiritual world of Bondye.
- ◆ Each *lwa* has a distinct personality and temperament, manifested through that *lwa*'s symbols, physical appearance, and tastes for food and offerings.

Chapter

7

The Great Lwa

In This Chapter

- ◆ An overview of the major members of the hierarchy of *lwa*
- ◆ Danbala, the serpent *lwa*, and Ayida-Wedo, his wife
- ◆ Papa Legba, the head of the *lwa*
- ◆ Ezili Freda, the *lwa* of love and romance
- ◆ Ogou, the *lwa* of war and fire
- ◆ Agwé and Lasiren, the *lwa* who rule the ocean

In Vodou, there are thousands of *lwa*—those invisible, supernatural spirits who oversee all the different aspects of human existence and the natural world—and no one knows them all. Some are served only in one family or in one local temple, and some have been forgotten altogether.

But some *lwa* are honored by everyone who practices Vodou. They are the oldest of the spirits, descended from West African tribal gods and imported to Haiti on the slave ships. These spirits are called the great *lwa*, and you will meet them in this chapter.

The Hierarchy of Lwa

The *lwa* of Vodou form a hierarchy, with the great *lwa* at the top, honored by all, and local and family *lwa* at the bottom, honored by only a few. The head

of the pantheon is Papa Legba, without whom none of the other *lwa* would be able to communicate with people. The other great *lwa* rule the largest and most important areas of nature and human activity. The names of the great *lwa*, the realms they oversee, and their symbols are listed in the following table.

All the major members of the Vodou hierarchy of *lwa* belong to the Rada *nanchon*. The Rada aspects of these *lwa* are honored in the majority of Vodou ceremonies. However, each Rada *lwa* has a dark Petro side, which is sometimes invoked under extreme or dire circumstances.

The Great Lwa, the Realms They Rule, and the Symbols That Represent Them

Rada Name of <i>Lwa</i>	Petro Name of <i>Lwa</i>	Realm	Symbol
Danbala	None	Wisdom and ancestral knowledge	Serpent
Ayida-Wedo	None	Fertility	Rainbow
Papa Legba	Kalfou	Gateway between spiritual world and material world	Cross
Ezili Freda	Ezili Dantò	Love and beauty	Heart
Ogou	None	War, fire, and metalworking	Machete
Agwé	Agwé la Flambeau	Fishing and sailing	Boat
Lasiren	Labalenn	The ocean	Seashell



Danger Ahead!

Practitioners of Vodou treat snakes with reverence because of their close association with Danbala, but they don't literally worship snakes. Many times, a snake representing Danbal will live in the Vodou temple or in one of the sacred trees surrounding it. However, devotees don't literally handle snakes during Vodou rituals.

Danbala and Ayida-Wedo, Father and Mother

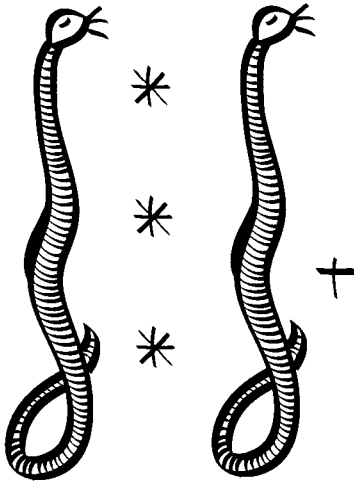
Members of the Rada nation, Danbala and his wife, Ayida-Wedo, are the oldest of the *lwa* and the wisest. They are always portrayed together, as shown in their symbolic *veve*. Together, they represent everything that is powerful and good.

The Great Serpent

Danbala is the first and one of the most powerful of the *lwa*. He oversees the body of ancestral knowledge that

forms the foundation of Vodou. As protector of the wisdom of Vodou, he sometimes appears to people in dreams, encouraging them to become priests or priestesses. The rattle that symbolizes the office of the priesthood is sacred to him.

Danbala's origins can be traced to the Dahomean snake god, Da, who helped create the world. He is closely associated with the snake, his symbol. As such, he is often referred to as the Great Serpent. All snakes are considered to be his servants, and they are treated with reverence by practitioners of Vodou.



The veve of Danbala and Ayida-Wedo portrays the couple as two snakes who are always together.

Danbala is associated with Saint Patrick, particularly the image of the saint driving the snakes from Ireland. He is also linked to Moses because of the miracle that Moses performed when he threw his staff to the ground and turned it into a serpent. Danbala's association with Saint Patrick and Moses is based entirely on the snake symbology; the *lwa* doesn't share any personality characteristics with either of the Catholic figures.

In Vodou, Danbala is conceived of as a heavy boa who can't speak. His hissings must be interpreted by a priest or priestess. Because Danbala is a snake, he lives in trees, springs, marshes, and pools, all places where snakes are found. With Ayida-Wedo, he rules the sky and manifests in the rainstorm. He is a comforting *lwa* who always brings with him hope and contentment.

The Rainbow in the Sky

Danbala's wise wife, Ayida-Wedo, is the mistress of the sky who appears in every rainbow, her symbol.



Voodoo Speak

The title **Wedo** refers to the Dahomean city of Ouhdeh. It is added to the names of *lwa* to indicate that they originated there. Danbala is also often called Danbala-Wedo.

She is portrayed as a narrow green snake. Like Danbala, she lives in the sky as well as in all trees, springs, pools, and rivers. Her Catholic counterpart is Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception.

Ayida-Wedo is just as ancient as her husband, having descended through the centuries from the original ancestral spirits of Dahomey. The Dahomean spirit Da Ayido Hwèdo was one of the incarnations of the snake god, Da, from whom Danbala is descended.

The First Couple

Danbala and Ayida-Wedo are the original couple, the mother and father of humanity and the source of all new life. In that role, they oversee fertility, conception, and childbirth and are symbolized by an egg.

Voodoo Hoodoo

Danbala and Ayida-Wedo were present at the creation of the world. In the beginning, a gigantic serpent protected the earth from sinking into the primordial waters in which it floated. By twining its massive form around the earth and into the sky, the Great Serpent scattered stars, pushed up mountains, and hollowed out riverbeds. From its deepest core, it released rain to seed the earth with life. As the first rains fell, a rainbow filled the sky, and the serpent took her as his wife.

In their paternal and maternal roles, Danbala and Ayida-Wedo are the most benevolent of the *lwa* and two of the most beloved. By serving them, devotees can achieve happiness, good luck, success, and even wealth because they grant riches and allow the discovery of treasure. If a newly married couple pay tribute to them, Danbala and Ayida-Wedo will ensure they have a long and happy marriage. Above all, they provide the reassurance of stability and a secure future.

Papa Legba, Head of the Lwa

The most revered and best-known *lwa* of all is Papa Legba. He provides the only means by which humans can communicate with the other spirits. That's because he holds the key to the gate between the physical world, where we live, and the spiritual world, where the *lwa* live. Without Papa Legba's permission, no *lwa* can manifest in the physical world via possession or any other means. So without his help, no one could commune with the *lwa* at all. Papa Legba is depicted as an old man wearing rags and leaning on a crutch.

The Cosmic Gatekeeper

Because Papa Legba controls communication between the *lwa* and people, he is the most powerful of all the *lwa*. Every ritual must begin with an invocation to Papa Legba, asking him to “open the gate” between the spiritual world and the physical one. No other spirit can join the Vodou ceremony before the priest invokes Legba, and no *lwa* can act without his permission. Think of him as a police officer directing traffic, controlling the order in which the *lwa* appear at the ritual.

If Papa Legba is offended for some reason, he will keep the gate closed, depriving the participants in the ritual of the help of the *lwa*. That’s why it’s very important to honor Papa Legba faithfully and stay on his good side.

As guardian of the gateway between the spiritual world and the material world, Papa Legba has become the guardian of all gates and fences. He is seen as a protector of the home and the temple, guarding their entrances. Indeed, a tree sacred to Papa Legba stands by the main gateway to every Vodou temple. A straw sack hung from the boughs of the tree is kept filled with his favorite foods, as well as a pipe, tobacco, and bottle of rum for him.

Papa Legba’s symbol is the cross. This doesn’t correspond to the cross of Christ but rather to the crossroads where the spiritual world and the physical world intersect and where Papa Legba stands. As such, he is associated with crossroads, which are believed to be magical places, most often associated with black magic. (Learn all about the role of black magic in Vodou in Chapter 21, “That Old Black Magic.”)

Another of Papa Legba’s symbols is the sun, which is seen as the source of all life. He is often invoked in matters involving sex and in mediating disputes between the sexes.

Papa Legba is associated with three Catholic saints:

- ◆ Saint Peter, who holds the keys to heaven and thus is also a spiritual gatekeeper
- ◆ Saint Lazarus, who walks with a crutch
- ◆ Saint Anthony, who helps find lost objects



Spiritual Advice

If you have mislaid something or are lost yourself, Papa Legba is the *lwa* to ask for help. As the guardian of all crossroads, roads, and paths, he can help you find your way or direct you to what you have lost.

Through his great age and power, Papa Legba has attained a knowledge of human existence that none of the other *lwa* possesses. He has lived through all phases of human life, and he knows the past and future of the entire world. His advice is sought in times of crisis or when important decisions must be made. At a birth, Papa Legba might make pronouncements about the child’s destiny, perhaps promising success, wealth, good health, or security.

Papa Legba's ultimate role is the guardian of destiny, and he is often depicted as carrying a sack over his shoulder that contains the world's fate. He ensures that a person's life follows its preordained path and that the world continues on as it should, according to Bondye's plan. In this role, Papa Legba is directly descended from the great Yoruban spirit Fa, the god of fate.

Papa Legba's Dark Side

Although Papa Legba is a member of the Rada nation, he has a Petro aspect called *Kalfou*. Kalfou is a trickster spirit who upsets the natural order of things and causes unexpected accidents. He delights in creating confusion, complicating simple situations, and inciting conflicts between people. Through him, bad luck, destruction, and injustice can come into the world.

So where Papa Legba brings order, Kalfou brings chaos. While Papa Legba represents fate, Kalfou provides the means through which fate can be thwarted. And while Papa Legba is associated with the positive, life-giving sun, Kalfou is associated with the negative darkness of night and the pale light of the moon.



Voodoo Speak

Kalfou literally means "crossroads," a sacred place in Vodou where rituals are held, offerings placed, and magic worked. Crossroads are particularly associated with black magic, and evil spirits are believed to live there.

In these two aspects of the same *lwa*, a dichotomy between positive and negative forces is set up. Without one, the other could not exist, and so both are essential to keep the world in balance. Kalfou is descended from the Ibo god Legba, who symbolized change and freedom of choice and stood as a counterpart to Fa.

Kalfou is a dark *lwa* who controls the evil forces of the spirit world. Magical practices, particularly black magic, are often carried out with his help. At crossroads, he is honored by sorcerers and aids them with casting spells. He also provides strong protection against sorcery.

Ezili Freda, Lwa of Love

Ezili Freda (whose name is often shortened to "Ezili") is probably the most beloved of all the *lwa* because she rules over the realm of love. But like all lovers, she has a dark side that can be jealous and spiteful, prone to malicious fits of rage if she doesn't feel that she is getting the attention she deserves. In all of her aspects, Ezili Freda is a powerful *lwa*, capable of fulfilling the greatest dreams of her followers if she is properly appeased but also capable of severe punishment if she is neglected.

The Pure and Beautiful Ezili

As the Rada *lwa* Ezili Freda, this spirit is the perfect woman of every man's dreams, the ideal of love and beauty. In this aspect, she is portrayed as an upperclass, light-skinned mulatto of great beauty, grace, and sensuality, bedecked with jewels that show her enormous wealth and exquisite taste. She loves beautiful and luxurious things, including flowers, jewelry, rich clothing, and fine perfumes. She wears three wedding rings as symbols of her principal consorts: Danbala, Ogou, and Agwé. Her symbol is the checkered heart.

Ezili Freda rules over the home and provides good health, good fortune, and good looks. She also stands for the hopes, dreams, and aspirations that we all have. As such, she is every artist's muse, inspiring all Haitian painters, writers, and musicians. Although not a mother herself, she has the power to make women fertile and so is invoked when women have problems with conception. In fact, without her patronage, no woman could conceive. She is also the *lwa* to turn to when having marital problems.

As the perfect female, all aspects of Ezili are associated with the Christian Virgin Mary. In her Ezili Freda aspect, her Catholic counterpart is the Mater Dolorosa de Monte Cavario, a light-skinned Mary wearing a crown and surrounded by jewels and finery.

Voodoo Hoodoo

According to legend, the Virgin Mary appeared in 1884 at the top of a palm tree in Ville Bonheur, a small town in Haiti. That place was declared sacred to the *lwa* Ezili because of her association with Mary, and Vodou devotees traveled there in great numbers to leave offerings at the base of the tree. But a local Catholic priest ordered the tree cut down and the site closed. Soon afterward, the priest's house burned down, a fire supposedly caused by the wrath of the Petro incarnation of Ezili. Then the priest died of a stroke. The site was reopened and is now a sacred pilgrimage spot for practitioners of Vodou.

But Ezili Freda isn't perfect. A little lazy and more than a little vain, she prefers to lay around all day painting her nails rather than work. Her main preoccupation is establishing romantic liaisons with men, both *lwa* and human. She is prone to jealous fits and irrational temper tantrums. She instantly mistrusts women as her rivals and treats them with disdain. And she can be hopelessly demanding, always searching for the perfect love but never satisfied.

Still, those who pledge themselves to Ezili Freda see only her good qualities, like ardent lovers who are blind to the faults of the one they adore. In return for their gifts and devotion, Ezili Freda gives her love abundantly.

The Dark and Jealous Ezili

Ezili has a strong Petro aspect, Ezili Dantó. Ezili Dantó is a fiercely independent single mother who would fight to the death for her children. As such, she is considered the spiritual mother of everyone and is often invoked to help with problems with conception and childbirth. She is depicted as an attractive, large, dark-skinned woman.

But Ezili Dantó has a quick temper and she can be very dangerous when angered. As the Petro aspect of the *lwa* of love, she represents the feelings of jealousy, heartbreak, and vengeance that can be wrought by love. Her symbol is a heart pierced by a dagger.

She is associated with Our Lady of Czestochowa, the black Madonna from Poland. This image of the Virgin Mary was brought to Haiti by Polish troops shipped over during the war for independence to fight for Napoleon. Sickened by the war, they mutinied and fought on the side of the slaves.



Danger Ahead!

Ezili Dantó, like many other Petro *lwa*, often demands a black pig as a sacrifice. The black pig is indigenous to Haiti. However, it is now difficult to find due to a U.S. eradication program in the early 1980s. Vodou priests may have to scour the countryside to locate a pig to satisfy Ezili Dantó's voracious hunger.

In fact, Ezili Dantó is supposed to have joined in the war herself, fighting alongside the slaves in the ranks of battle. In fact, during the war, she lost her voice because the male slaves didn't trust her to keep their secrets and cut out her tongue. That's why she can't talk, even when she possesses her followers.

Ezili Dantó demands complete control over her devotees. She often acts maliciously toward women, thwarting their desires. But she has been known to marry women and is considered the patron of lesbians.

Grandmother Ezili

Another aspect of Ezili is Grande Ezili, or Grandmother Ezili. In this guise, she is an old woman so crippled with arthritis that she can walk only by dragging herself along with a stick. As an elderly woman, she is no longer anyone's lover, but instead is filled with grief for all the unrequited and lost loves in the world.

Ogou, the Warrior Lwa

Ogou is a vast family of spirits that embodies all the realms of the masculine: war, politics, machinery, metalworking, male fertility, and fire. He is the balance to the feminine ideal that Ezili represents, and the two are lovers. Descended from the powerful Nigerian god of lightning, Ogun, Ogou belongs to the Nago *nanchon* but is honored alongside the other Rada *lwa*.

The Dominion of Ogou

Ogou rules over everything that has to do with fire, war, metal, and machinery. He is the patron of soldiers and a great soldier himself who fought alongside Jean-Jacques Dessalines during the war for independence. He is depicted as wearing a red military uniform, riding a white horse, brandishing a sword or machete, and waving the Haitian national flag. His Catholic counterpart is Saint Jacques, who is always pictured on horseback in battle.

Ogou is also the patron of anyone who works with metal tools or machinery, including blacksmiths, barbers, surgeons, and truck drivers. Without him, no one could clear fields, dig holes for irrigation, or butcher animals for food. Any tools made from iron or steel are dedicated to him, and anyone who uses those tools owes him tribute and must make frequent offerings to him. His symbol is the machete, a tool forged from iron that can also be used as a weapon in war.

Ogou has a fierce, hot temper that quickly flares up if he encounters injustice. During the course of Haiti's turbulent history, he has emerged as a symbol of political stability, order, and authority, fighting for freedom and against the miserable conditions enforced on the peasantry.



Danger Ahead!

Every major *lwa* has many aspects or diverse personalities that represent slightly different facets of that *lwa*'s fundamental nature. Thus, Ogou is an enormous family of spirits distinguished by slightly different titles and personalities. It's important not to get them confused, as each aspect demands different kinds of offerings and can get angry if not honored properly.

The Many Faces of Ogou

The family of Ogou spirits is larger than the family of any other major *lwa*. Each aspect of Ogou takes on a slightly different but related role. For example, one Ogou oversees metalworking, another rules fire, and another is embodied in lightning. But in all his aspects, the strength and masculinity of Ogou are evident. The following table lists the major aspects of Ogou.



Spiritual Advice

Ogou Badagris is closely associated with white magic. In this aspect, he helps Vodou priests and priestesses prepare potions to exorcise evil spirits. (To learn more about the role of white magic in Vodou, see Chapter 20, "Charms and Spells.")

The Major Aspects of Ogou and Their Roles

Aspect of Ogou	Principal Role
Ogou Baba	Represents a military general
Ogou Badagris	<i>Lwa</i> of the phallus

The Major Aspects of Ogou and Their Roles (continued)

Aspect of Ogou	Principal Role
Ogou Batala	Patron of surgeons and doctors
Ogou Fer	<i>Lwa</i> of fire and war
Ogou Feray	Patron of blacksmiths and metalworkers
Ogou La Flambeau	Represents the fiery rage of battle
Ogou Shango	<i>Lwa</i> of lightning
Ogou Tonnerre	<i>Lwa</i> of thunder

Agwé and Lasiren, Lwa of the Sea

Agwé and his wife, Lasiren, are the king and queen of the ocean. Together, they rule over the dominion of the sea, including everything in it and everything that travels on it. As such, they are important *lwa* in Haiti, an island nation in which many people make their living from the sea. But their power is limited only to the ocean, and they have no authority over anything on the land. Services for them take place on the coast or, more commonly, out on the open ocean itself.

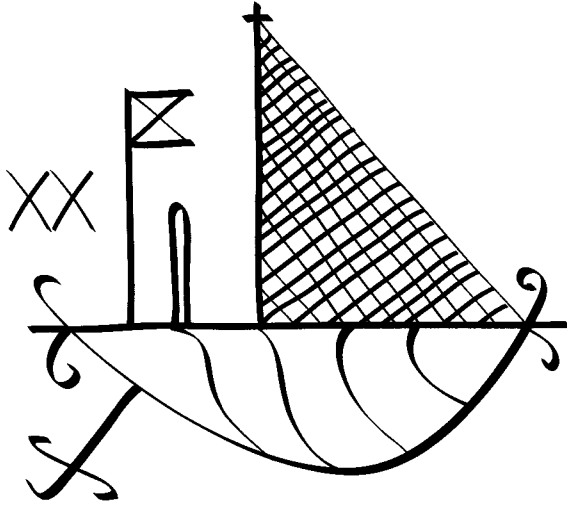
Set Sail for Agwé

Agwé is invoked under many names, including “Shell of the Sea” and “Tadpole of the Pond.” Fishermen, sailors, and anyone who must travel on the water serve him as the master of the sea. Anytime a boat is pushed into the water, Agwé is called upon. When a storm blows up or a ship is in danger of sinking, prayers go out to Agwé. Because he rules over everything in the sea, he owns all the treasure lost in shipwrecks and can lead his faithful servants to those riches.

Agwé is depicted as a mulatto with fair skin and sea-green eyes, wearing the uniform of a naval officer. The sound of gunfire and any reference to signaling always bring him great pleasure. His symbols are miniature boats, oars painted blue and green, and small metal fishes. His Catholic counterpart is Saint Ulrich, who is often shown holding a fish. His *veve*, pictured, always takes the form of a sailboat.

In his Petro aspect, he is Agwé la Flambeau and represents the boiling of water and the heat of steam. The power of the Petro form of Agwé is most evident in volcanic eruptions underneath the ocean, which boil seas and raise new islands.

The veve of Agwé always takes the form of a sailboat.



Most ceremonies for Agwé are held on the ocean. These services can be very elaborate and expensive, taking days to prepare. First, a raft is constructed and decorated with flags, streamers, and tablecloths in blue and white. The offerings and animals for sacrifice are gathered, including white sheep and a ram dyed blue with indigo.

The raft, offerings, and other items necessary for the ritual are loaded onto a sailboat, which heads out for the open sea. When they come to the appropriate spot, a *lambi* is sounded to announce their arrival. Then the raft is piled high with the offerings and pushed out into the ocean. If the raft sinks, that means that Agwé has accepted the offerings, and the ritual was successful.

Offerings for Agwé are also sometimes floated out onto the ocean on miniature boats. If the boat returns to shore, the offerings have been refused, and Agwé must be appeased some other way.



Voodoo Speak

A **lambi** is a conch shell that is blown like a horn during Vodou ceremonies. It is almost always used in rituals to honor the *lwa* of the sea.

The Mermaid and the Whale

Lasiren has two aspects, one Rada and one Petro. In her Rada guise, she is a wise mermaid. Lasiren is depicted as a bewitching white woman with long blond hair and a fish's tail. She is so alluring that she can tempt men to dive into the sea and drown in a vain attempt to catch her. She is often thought of as the aquatic aspect of Ezili.

Because she makes eerie music on the ocean floor, Lasiren is the patron of all musicians. She also shares her wisdom with Vodou priestesses, who dive to the bottom of the ocean to receive instruction from her about sacred rituals and divine knowledge. Her symbols are mirrors and seashells, and her Catholic counterpart is Saint Martha.

Lasiren's Petro aspect is Labalenn, the whale. Large, black, and terrifying, Labalenn has a fierce temper. If offended, she will lure the person who slighted her to a watery grave. Lasiren and Labalenn are so closely linked that they are always honored together.

The Least You Need to Know

- ◆ The most important members of the hierarchy of *lwa* are honored by everyone who practices Vodou.
- ◆ Danbala and Ayida-Wedo are the oldest of the *lwa*, representing the wisdom of the ancestors and all that is good in the world.
- ◆ Papa Legba is the most powerful of the *lwa* because he holds the key to the gate between the spiritual world and the physical world, and only he can allow the *lwa* to pass through.
- ◆ Ezili is the most beloved of the *lwa*, representing pure love, beauty, hope, and ideal dreams for the future.
- ◆ Ogou is a family of closely related masculine *lwa* who oversee the realms of war, fire, politics, metalworking, and toolmaking.
- ◆ Agwé and Lasiren are the *lwa* of the sea who oversee fishermen, sailors, and the riches contained in the ocean.

Chapter

8

The Lwa of Death

In This Chapter

- ◆ An overview of the major members of the Gédé family of *lwa*
- ◆ The family of Gédé, the many *lwa* of the dead
- ◆ The Baron, the head of the Gédé family
- ◆ Maman Brijit, the Baron's wife
- ◆ How the spirits of the dead are honored in Vodou

In Vodou, death plays an extremely important role, so much so that an entire family of *lwa* is required to oversee the realm of death and watch over the spirits of those who have passed on before us. Neither Rada nor Petro, these spirits are an entirely separate category unlike any of the other *lwa*. Feared because of the mortality they represent, they are also great clowns who enliven any ritual and help us face death by making light of life. Collectively, they are called the Gédé.

The Hierarchy of Gédé

Because the Gédé are such an important family of *lwa* and so different from all the other *lwa*, we're going to meet them separately. Like the other *lwa*, the family of Gédé forms a hierarchy, with the stronger and more honored Gédé at the top and hundreds of spirits beneath them that are not well-known or

perhaps not even known at all. The following table lists the major Gédé, with their alternate names and symbols.

The Major Members of the Family of Gédé and Their Symbols of Death

Name of <i>Lwa</i>	Symbols
Gédé	Black cross, skull, shovel
Baron Samedi	Cross, coffin, phallus
Baron Cimetière	Bones, cemetery
Baron Crois	Cross
Maman Brijit	Cemetery, elm, weeping willow

The Many Spirits of Death

Gédé is an enormous group made up of the spirits of formerly living people who after death were elevated to the status of *lwa*. (I'll explain how this process works in Chapter 9, "Lwa Everywhere.") They belong to none of the Vodou *nanchons* but comprise a group separate from all the other *lwa*, with their own peculiar characteristics, personality traits, and ways of behavior. As a group, they form a "family" that generally appears together.

The Gédé are the only *lwa* who are completely Haitian in origin, with no corresponding African tribal spirits. The personifications of the Gédé have been greatly influenced by the Taino and Carib Indians of Hispaniola. For instance, the Gédé are very fond of tobacco, a native plant of Hispaniola, and cigarettes and cigars are often offered to them.



Danger Ahead!

Because the Gédé rule the realm of the dead, they have great magical powers, especially with regard to magic that uses the bodies or spirits of the dead. They can offer help to magicians casting dark spells as well as protection from black magic. They can also open tombs and command the dead to perform tasks for them or for evil sorcerers.

Standing Between Life and Death

Because the Gédé oversee death and everything connected to it, they are greatly feared and greatly honored. They have enormous power—the ability to save a life by preventing a soul from entering the world of the dead and the ability to elevate the soul of a deceased person to the status of an immortal *lwa*.

The Gédé are well-known for their healing powers. They are often the last resort for the desperately ill since they decide whether to allow a sick person to recover or accept the soul into the realm of the dead. They have a special role as the guardians of children.

The Gédé want children to live long lives and thus protect children's lives from being cut short unnaturally.

The Gédé are portrayed as wearing the clothes of death. They may dress as undertakers in top hats and formal but threadbare coats. They also wear mourning dresses with black or mauve veils. Or they may look like corpses, with their faces powdered white, strips of cloth tied around their chins, and cotton stuffed in their noses and ears. They usually wear sunglasses to protect their sensitive eyes, so used to the dark realm of the dead, from the sunlight. Their colors are black, purple, and white, all colors of funerals and mourning.

In rituals held for the Gédé, the blood from animal sacrifices—usually a black rooster or black goat—is collected in a bowl made from a calabash (a kind of gourd) and then poured onto an altar or black cross. Offerings to the Gédé are placed in black boxes decorated with skulls and crossbones. The Gédé's Catholic counterpart is Saint Gerard, who is pictured dressed in a black robe seated next to skulls and lilies, symbols of death. The Gédé live in cemeteries and dark underground places, and like the other spirits, they are around us all the time.

Making Light of Death

Even though the Gédé are a constant reminder of the inevitability of death, they are also greatly loved because of their fun-loving nature and penchant for practical jokes. Their eccentric behavior turns death into satire. Because death is unavoidable, making fun of it helps mortal beings to face it.

In this role, the Gédé are the masters of the human libido, and everything they do lampoons sex. Their open celebration of human sexuality affirms the continuity of life, even in the presence of death. They are not ashamed of their rampant sexuality, but rather parade it out in the open. They are greatly amused by people's contradictory attitude toward sex—both embarrassed by it and obsessed with it at the same time.

As the masters of the realm of human sexuality, the Gédé not only oversee death but also the source of life itself. Therefore, the Gédé represent another aspect of the balance that permeates all areas of Vodou belief—in this case, the perpetual balance between life and death. According to the Gédé, sex is a natural part of life, as inevitable as death.

The Gédé follow their own rules. Unlike the other *lwa*, they may possess anyone at any time, and they often appear unexpectedly at ceremonies where they have not been invoked. However, the Gédé are almost always welcomed at Vodou rituals because their appearance inevitably lightens even the most somber mood and turns a solemn ceremony into a raucous party. They usually appear last, after all the other *lwa*. When they manifest through possession, they dress in ridiculous clothes, tell obscene jokes and stories, flirt outrageously with all the women present (most of the Gédé are male), and dance the suggestive *banda*.



Voodoo Speak

The Gédé have their own dance called the **banda**, which has suggestive movements that simulate intercourse. Often, people possessed by Gédé dance with their walking sticks between their legs like phalluses. Whenever the *banda* is danced at a Vodou ceremony, you know that one or more Gédé are present.

The Gédé are notorious for their use of profanity and sexual language when they possess people. They don't care about breaking the taboos of society; they are already dead, so nothing more can happen to them. In this way, they constantly defy authority and social mores. They represent the rebellious nature of the Haitian peasantry, which has always distrusted the authority of government and the refined manners of the French and *affranchi*.

The Gédé seem to be on a perpetual mission to expose the ridiculous side of human nature. Through possession, they reveal the most scandalous secrets and expose the boldest lies of the people of the community. They are particularly fond of uncovering illicit love affairs, complete with all the dirty details. They also take great pleasure in possessing snobby, prudish, or uptight people and then making them look foolish.

Despite their clownish nature, the Gédé are considered to be very wise. They are the keepers of the entire body of ancestral wisdom and so are knowledgeable about pretty much everything. Their advice is often sought on matters relating to fertility, from planting crops to breeding animals to conceiving children. When a Gédé is possessing someone, if you can pull him aside and ask him a serious question, you will always get a reliable answer. While their antics are usually humorous, they often contain pointed messages or important lessons that shouldn't be ignored.



Spiritual Advice

The Gédé are widely known as thieves. They will steal food off others' plates or even sometimes right out of their hands, and they will pilfer any little thing they want, such as sunglasses or cigarettes. If you humor them, they will steal only a little, and they grant you special favors in return.

The Many Faces of Gédé

The Gédé are a huge family of countless spirits, as varied as the people from whom they originated. The vast majority of Gédé are male. Different Gédé go by different names depending on the roles they play.

There are more than 30 major Gédé who are recognized by everyone and hundreds—if not thousands—of minor Gédé whose names are not known until they suddenly choose to reveal them. The following table lists the best-known of the Gédé.

The Best-Known Gédé and the Roles They Play

Name of Gédé	Role
Gédé-Brav	Represents the phallus
Gédé-Double	Endows people with second sight
Gédé-Fouye	The gravedigger
Gédé-Janmensou	He is never drunk
Gédé-Loraj	Protects those who died violently, usually from gunshots
Gédé-Loraye	Small woman who reveals herself in storms
Gédé-Masaka	Female spirit who carries an umbilical cord and poisoned leaves in a bag
Gédé-Nibo	Takes care of tombs
Gédé-Souffrant	Suffering Gédé
Gédé-z-Aragnéé	Imitates a spider
Linto	Child spirit of Gédé

The Baron, Lord of Death

Baron Samedi is the lord of all the Gédé and one of the most powerful—and most dreaded—of the *lwa*. He controls passage between the world of the living and the world of the dead. Without his help, no soul may pass into the ancestral homeland of Ginen, and no spirit may return to the physical world to become an ancestral spirit or immortal *lwa*.

The Baron knows everything that is going on in the world of the dead. Through possession, he often passes on information about what is happening with someone's family ancestors. For example, if an ancestor is unhappy because his family has been neglecting him, Baron Samedi would give a warning to the family members.

Anyone who wants to contact the dead must first invoke Baron Samedi. He plays a similar role in relation to the spirits of the dead that Papa Legba plays in relation to the *lwa*; without Baron Samedi's cooperation, the gates to the world of the dead are closed, and the dead cannot interact with the living.

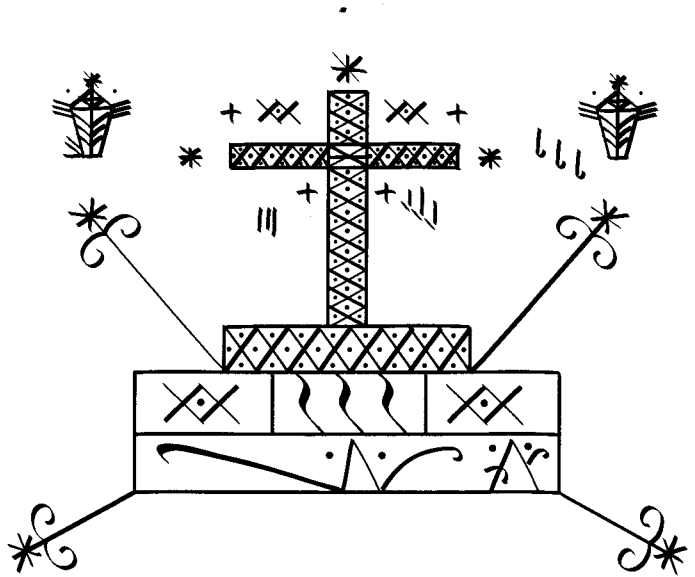


Danger Ahead!

Gédé-Nibo (also known as Gédé-Nibho and Gédé-Nimbo) is probably the most famous of all the Gédé. He is depicted as a handsome young man dressed all in white. If a black magician wants to use a dead person to work powerful magic, he must appeal to Gédé-Nibo first to open the tomb.

Also like Papa Legba, Baron Samedi's symbol is the cross, which in this case represents the crossroads between the world of the living and the world of the dead. The coffin is another of his symbols, as shown in his *vever*, pictured. Because he is the gatekeeper to the world of the dead, the Baron sits at the gates of all graveyards. The black cross erected at the entrance of every Haitian cemetery is consecrated to him, and offerings for him are left at its base.

The vever of Baron Samedi incorporates many crosses and coffins, his symbols.



Baron Samedi forms a triumvirate with Baron Cimetière, the *lwa* of the cemetery, and Baron Crois, who represents the cross of the graveyard. Together, the three are so closely related that they might as well be aspects of the same *lwa*.



Spiritual Advice

Baron Samedi is the last resort against death by magic. If a spell brings a person to the point of death and the Baron refuses to "dig the grave," the person won't die. If the Baron lets the person die, then he will have complete control over that person's soul.

Baron Samedi is portrayed as a man wearing a frock coat with tails, striped trousers, sunglasses, and a top hat. He carries a walking stick and smokes a cigarette.

Sorcerers can employ Baron Samedi's power. His Catholic counterpart is Saint Expedit, and acts of magic carried out with the Baron's help are called "expeditions." These spells are performed at cemeteries and crossroads and involve the strongest, and often darkest, magic. For example, Baron Samedi oversees the process of changing the dead into zombies and shape-shifting into animals.

Maman Brijit, Queen of Black Magic

Baron Samedi's wife is Maman Brijit, one of the few female Gédé and a powerful, but dangerous, *lwa*. She is a guardian of cemeteries, but she is also an evil spirit of black magic and money. With her help, sorcerers can work evil spells or gain wealth through illegal means. But she is also invoked to cure those on the point of death from illness caused by black magic. Finally, she is the queen of all the ancestors. With the Baron, she reclaims the souls of the dead and transforms them into *lwa*, new members of the family of Gédé.

Maman Brijit is one of the few white *lwa*. She was brought to Haiti from Great Britain by indentured Scottish and Irish servants in the form of Saint Brigid, her Catholic counterpart. She is depicted as a fearless, tough woman who curses like a sailor and always dresses in purple. She lives in the trees of cemeteries, and the weeping willow and elm trees are sacred to her. The grave of the first woman buried in the cemetery is consecrated to her, and her ceremonial cross is erected there.

Going to the Graveyard: Honoring the Lwa of Death

If you travel through the countryside of Haiti, you will quickly see how important the peasants consider their dead ancestors to be. In the rural areas, a family graveyard sits beside each house, while in the city, each family has a plot in the communal cemetery. Large black crosses representing Baron Samedi dominate these cemeteries. The tombs are as elaborate as the family can afford. They often look like small houses, and some even contain completely furnished sitting rooms inside.

Devotion to the dead is demanded of participants in Vodou. Graves are visited often and kept in immaculate condition. The tombs are whitewashed, and the ground around them is weeded. Often lit candles are placed in front of them. By taking care of the graves, the followers of Vodou demonstrate the reverence they feel for their ancestors.

The living find that visiting their dead ancestors can be a great comfort. They go to the cemetery just to talk to their family members who have passed on before, to get complaints off their chests and seek communion with the spirits of their loved ones. The ancestors offer the living helpful advice and guidance in all of the everyday problems of life. Because they have already lived full lives and passed on to the world of the dead, they are wiser than the living and can use all their experience to find solutions to problems.



Spiritual Advice

If you visit a house in rural Haiti, you should pour a small libation of water before the tombs in the family graveyard. That will ensure that the family's ancestors will welcome you into the house.

Every year, great rituals are held to honor all the dead. These include the Feast of Gédé, a national holiday in Haiti, and smaller ceremonies in which each family feeds the spirits of their departed ancestors.

The Feast of Gédé

The Feast of Gédé, called Fèt Gédé, takes place every year on November 1, All Saints' Day, and November 2, All Souls' Day. In Haiti, this is a national holiday and one of the biggest annual celebrations. On those days, the Gédé escape from the confines of the cemetery and run amok through the towns and countryside. November 1 also marks the end of the old year and the beginning of the new.

After attending Catholic mass in the morning, everyone crowds into the graveyards, wearing black and purple, the special colors of the Gédé. There, they leave offerings to the Baron and Maman Brijit and pour libations of rum and black coffee at the feet of their crosses, which are decorated with skulls, marigolds, and candles. Any debts owed to the Baron, Maman Brijit, or any of the Gédé must be paid off on this day, usually by bringing offerings of food, drink, and tobacco to the cemetery for them. The celebrants also clean up and repair family tombs, which have been whitewashed for the occasion.

But the Fèt Gédé is not at all a somber occasion. Rather, it is a huge party, and an atmosphere of wild abandon often takes over the crowds in the streets and cemeteries. They drink huge quantities of rum and chant lewd songs, and the dancing of the *banda* goes on well into the night.

During this time, hundreds of people become possessed by the Gédé, whose appearance always brings laughter. All the street vendors and Vodou temples prepare extra food especially for the Gédé, passing it out to the possessed at no charge in the hopes that will receive the Gédé's blessings in the upcoming year.



Voodoo Speak

Manje-mò literally means "feeding the dead." Held every year, it is a Vodou ceremony in which food is specially prepared for the spirits of the ancestors of a family and offered to them.

Feeding the Dead

Once a year, each household holds a special ceremony called *manje-mò* to feed the dead ancestors of the family. This ceremony is particularly important because it shows the ancestral spirits that the family has remembered them and still honors them. In return, the spirits offer their protection and wise counsel.

For the *manje-mò* ceremony, the food is strictly prepared by the men of the family. Typically, a stew of beef, pig's feet, maize, and red beans is made. Other foods that may be offered include rum, sparkling soda,

melons, peas, grilled corn, grilled peanuts, coconut, and “white” foods, such as milk, rice, and cakes. None of the food can contain any salt.

The food is laid out on a table in a room, which is then closed for several hours to allow the spirits to eat in privacy. After that time, the head of the family knocks on the door and enters the room to collect some of the food in a large bowl. This is distributed among the children of the family. Another bowl of food is placed at a crossroads for Papa Legba. Once the ancestral spirits have eaten, the family can sit down to the banquet. The ceremony ends with dances, particularly the *banda*, the dance for the Gédé.

The Least You Need to Know

- ◆ The Gédé belong to no *nanchon* but instead form a completely separate group of *lwa*.
- ◆ The Gédé are a large family of spirits that oversee everything having to do with death; they also help the living face mortality with their characteristic joking and buffoonery.
- ◆ The head of the Gédé is Baron Samedi, a powerful *lwa* who controls passage between the world of the living and the world of the dead.
- ◆ Baron Samedi’s wife is Maman Brijit, the principal female spirit of death who oversees black magic and evil works.
- ◆ The spirits of the dead must be honored regularly through caretaking of tombs, offerings to the Gédé, and meals held for the deceased ancestors of a family.

Chapter

9

Lwa Everywhere

In This Chapter

- ◆ The thousands of *lwa* in the continually evolving Vodou pantheon
- ◆ Other powerful *lwa* you should be familiar with
- ◆ Some unusual *lwa*
- ◆ The power of the sacred twins
- ◆ How to become a *lwa*

You have already met the highest and strongest of the Vodou spirits—the great *lwa* and the large family of Gédé. But the pantheon of *lwa* is enormous, and there is always room for one more. Once again, Vodou proves itself to be a highly malleable religion. It is constantly changing and evolving to include new *lwa*, and old ones are dropped as the number of people serving them dwindles. That's why in Vodou it is impossible to know all the *lwa*. You can only know the ones who make themselves known to you.

For now, let's meet even more of the well-known *lwa* in the Vodou pantheon who are widely honored by most people who practice Vodou. While these *lwa* may not be as powerful as the great *lwa*, they still have fundamental roles to play, and it is just as important to honor them if you need their services.

Thousands of Spirits

The entire Vodou pantheon is enormous. All in all, there are literally thousands of *lwa* who manifest themselves in all aspects of life and in all phenomena of nature. Therefore, it would be impossible to list all of the *lwa*. In fact, no one—not even the Vodou priests and priestesses—know who all the *lwa* are.

The pantheon is also continuously expanding to include new *lwa*, such as regional spirits who gain a wider following, ancestral spirits of deceased family members who become Gédé, and even the spirits of important people, such as presidents and priests, who automatically become *lwa* after death. Some *lwa*, such as a minor temple spirit or a family ancestor, rise in the hierarchy as more people acknowledge that *lwa*'s power and begin to serve him or her. By the same token, other *lwa* are forgotten when they lose too many devotees. If people don't serve a *lwa*, that spirit weakens and eventually fades out of existence. It is vital that the *lwa* gain as many followers as possible, to ensure their own survival.

Voodoo Hoodoo

A fisherman once found an unusual stone with two shells sticking to it in his lobster pot. He kept the stone but forgot about it. He soon found himself plagued with bad luck. So he consulted a Vodou priest, who told him that the stone housed a previously unknown *lwa* named Capitaine Déba, the spirit of a U.S. Naval officer. The priest advised the fisherman to make a sacrifice to the stone. When the fisherman did, his luck returned. From that time on, the *lwa* of Capitaine Déba had a personal relationship with the fisherman, and the stone that housed the *lwa* was passed down to his descendants.

New *lwa* can suddenly reveal themselves. These *lwa* might appear in a dream or through possession, introducing themselves and demanding service. In other cases, new *lwa* might manifest themselves in previously unknown phenomena or in unusual objects, receive names (usually from a Vodou priest or priestess), and get added to the pantheon that way.

With so many *lwa*, how could you possibly serve or please them all? Fortunately, you don't have to. You only have to serve those *lwa* with whom you have a relationship in some way. Those *lwa* will make themselves known to you and demand that you honor them, or they will inflict misfortune and illness on you. One of the jobs of the Vodou priest or priestess is to determine which *lwa* each individual must honor and to recognize when new *lwa* are demanding service.

Other Lwa You Should Know

Besides the major *lwa* that you read about in Chapter 7, “The Great *Lwa*,” there are several other *lwa* whom most devotees of Vodou know and serve. While these *lwa* may not be

as powerful or as frequently honored as the great *lwa* or the Gédé, they still play major roles in the pantheon of spirits. No study of Vodou would be complete without getting to know them as well. The following table lists these *lwa* along with their areas of influence and their symbols.

Important Lwa, Their Roles, and Their Symbols

Name of <i>Lwa</i>	Realm	Symbol
Azaka	Agriculture	<i>Makout</i>
Gran Bwa	Forest	Tree
Loko	Medicine and priesthood	Red rooster
Ayizan	Marketplaces and priestesses	Palm frond
Simbi	Fresh water and magicians	Green snake
Marinette	Evil works	Screech owl
Bosou	Male virility and black magic	Bull
Agau	Storms and earthquakes	Thunder
Sogbo	Lightning	Thunderstone
Badè	Wind	Wind

Azaka, the Farmer's Friend

As the patron of agriculture and farmers, Azaka is an important *lwa* to all Haitian peasants. He guarantees successful crops and harvests. He's also a friend to the peasantry. He dresses like them in a straw hat, blue denim suit, and red neckerchief, and he usually goes barefoot. He may smoke a clay pipe and wield a machete. His symbol is the *makout*, the small straw bag that all Haitian peasant farmers carry. His Catholic counterpart is Saint Isidore, who was also a farm laborer. A true Haitian *lwa*, Azaka is believed to be descended from a Taino spirit that was adopted into Vodou.

Azaka not only looks like a peasant, but he acts like one, too. He is a hard worker with a large appetite, preferring the simple foods that the rural people eat. Although he is unsophisticated, crude, and often inarticulate, he is also gentle and kind, slow to anger and easy to please. But he can be sly, suspicious, and greedy, and he is particularly distrustful of townspeople. Azaka is so familiar to



Voodoo Speak

The **makout** is a small sack made of woven straw that Haitian country peasants wear over their shoulders and use in the fields to carry tools and harvested crops. Because the *lwa* Azaka is so strongly associated with the peasantry, the *makout* is his symbol.



Spiritual Advice

Azaka sometimes manifests in physical form. He limps from farm to farm, begging for a glass of rum or a bit of cassava to eat. If he is refused, the person who turned him away will soon be punished; his crops will fail, and his family may go hungry. But treat Azaka with compassion and kindness, and he will reward you with a good harvest.

the peasants that they address him as “cousin,” but he is respected by them as a hard worker. He is a constant reminder to the people of Haiti of their peasant roots.

Azaka is considered to be the younger brother of the Gédé. For this reason, the Gédé will often appear at ceremonies dedicated to Azaka or when Azaka has possessed someone. Often, Azaka tries to emulate his older, more sophisticated brother in his own bumbling way. For instance, Azaka is as voracious as the Gédé, but he wolfs down his food in a corner so no one else can have any. Also like the Gédé, he often reveals relatively harmless gossip about the local community, such as who is flirting with whom or who is angry with each other.

Gran Bwa, the Lwa of the Forest

Gran Bwa is the patron of the forests and the protector of all wildlife. He personifies the strength of the tallest trees. A big-hearted and loving *lwa*, he always has a joke or good advice for those who consult him.

Along with Kalfou and Baron Cimetière, Gran Bwa forms a trinity of magicians that collectively oversees initiation and healing. Thus, he has a dual role—he knows the secrets of herbal medicine that the forest can offer as well as the secrets of magic that the dark branches can camouflage.

Gran Bwa is depicted as a half-man, half-tree, with a body like a tree trunk, branches for fingers, and roots for feet. His colors are brown and green. He is associated with the Catholic Saint Sebastian because of the saint’s execution by arrows while bound to a tree.



Voodoo Speak

The **mapou** is a silk-cotton tree that is indigenous to Haiti. It is consecrated to many different *lwa*, and it is the symbol of Gran Bwa, the *lwa* of the forest. Because they are so sacred to practitioners of Vodou, many *mapou* trees were cut down during the Antisuperstition Campaigns, and the species was almost wiped out.

Gran Bwa’s symbolic tree is the *mapou*, a silk-cotton tree native to Haiti that was almost completely decimated during the 1940 Antisuperstition Campaign when many of the sacred trees were chopped down. Trees growing within the yard of the Vodou temple are consecrated to Gran Bwa, and offerings to him are left between their roots or in their branches.

Gran Bwa’s followers regularly visit forests to pay homage to him. In fact, the Haitian community in New York City has chosen Prospect Park in Brooklyn as Gran Bwa’s sacred domain. Initiates of Vodou must take a gourd and stay in the woods for a day with Gran Bwa to learn the

secrets of herbal medicine. Often, his followers pick up strangely shaped lumps of wood or roots that they keep on their altars as representations of the *lwa*.

Loko and Ayizan, the Lwa Priest and Priestess

Together, the *lwa* Loko and Ayizan are the ancestral spirits of the first priest and priestess, two of the oldest *lwa* in the Vodou pantheon. In ritual, they are saluted immediately after Papa Legba and before all the other *lwa*, and they preside over the entire ritual. If they are offended, the ceremony cannot take place, and the other *lwa* cannot be invoked. Because of their officiating roles in all Vodou rituals, Loko and Ayizan rarely manifest through possession.

As patrons of the Vodou priesthood, Loko and Ayizan are also the *lwa* of medicine and herbal healing because one of the Vodou priest's primary roles in the community is as a folk doctor. They are consulted whenever a member of the community falls ill, and they provide protection against black magic.

Loko acts as custodian and protector of the Vodou temple and guardian of all Vodou ceremonies. He symbolizes the spiritual authority that the priest provides in the community. He gives the Vodou priest all his sacred knowledge and provides the solutions to problems with the *lwa*. Known for his good judgment, he is often called upon when a conflict needs to be resolved.

As a great herb doctor, Loko is associated with all plant life, and trees are sacred to him. Offerings for him are hung in the branches of trees, particularly the *mapou* tree. In return, he gives healing power to the leaves of herbs and trees, and he can diagnose diseases for the Vodou priest. His Catholic counterpart is Saint Joseph. His colors are white and red, and the red rooster is his symbol.

Ayizan, Loko's wife, is the protector of all priestesses and female initiates of Vodou. She shares her husband's guardianship of Vodou religious traditions, healing powers, and the reverence due to the ancestors. She also acts as the guardian of marketplaces, a common meeting place for Haitian women.

Ayizan is personified as an elderly woman with a good and loving heart. However, she does punish those who abuse the weak, such as the very young, the very old, the poor, and the sick, and she is the special protector of abused wives and children. Her favorite colors are white and silver.

Ayizan often singles out female devotees who should become Vodou priestesses. She is invoked during ceremonies of initiation into the priesthood. She bestows on initiates her great knowledge of herbs and plants that provide cures and protection. The initiates become her children, and she loves them deeply. Her symbol, a palm frond, is shredded during the ritual and worn as a mask by initiates.

Simbi, the Master Magician

Simbi is the *lwa* of all fresh waters, from still pools to raging rivers to the rainfall itself. A withdrawn and bashful *lwa*, Simbi is reluctant to come into the temple through possession, preferring the solitude underneath still waters. He guards all wells, ponds, and springs, and he brings the rain, making him a very important *lwa*. In the city, he oversees the flow of electromagnetic energy through power lines and telephone wires. His symbol is the green snake, which also lives in fresh waters. His Catholic counterparts are the Magi, and his special colors are black and gray.



Danger Ahead!

Fair-skinned children should be careful about playing too close to springs because Simbi might kidnap them. He takes the children under the water to work as his servants. But he does release them after seven years of service, rewarding them with the gift of clairvoyance.

Simbi is the master of all magicians. As the patron of magic, he oversees the making of all charms, both protective and destructive, although he is most often invoked in the practice of white magic. Although he was originally a Kongo spirit, he also shows Amerindian influences. He may have gotten his name from *zemi*, the Taino word for “soul” given to the magical thunderstones with which he is associated.

Marinette, the Black Sorceress

Marinette is a very powerful and violent female *lwa*, one of the most dreaded members of the Petro nation. A sworn servant of evil, she is invoked for aid with all underhanded activities, particularly black magic. She is particularly honored by werewolves, who hold services for her whenever they need her help. She also goes by the name Mairnette-Bwa-Chèch, or Marinette of the Dry Arms, implying that she is a skeleton.

Marinette’s symbol is the screech owl, and her domain is the dark woods, where she wanders at night. Her servants bury her offerings in secret places in the forest, and she retrieves them under the cover of darkness so that she doesn’t have to share them with the other *lwa*. Ceremonies in her honor are held in the open country under a tent, during which gasoline and salt are thrown on a huge bonfire.

Bosou, the Three-Horned Bull

Bosou is a mighty bull spirit with an unpredictable, fiery temper. In his original Dahomean form, he was a sacred monster worshipped by kings, but he is also sometimes honored in the Petro nation. He is depicted as a three-horned bull or as a hot-tempered man with three horns who likes to eat beef. His three horns stand for strength, wildness, and violence. Bosou’s colors are red, black, and white, and his Catholic counterpart is Saint Vincent de Paul.

Bosou is associated with male virility. As such, he is strongly identified with the soil and seeds for planting crops. He is often invoked during times of war. He also works with practitioners of black magic, helping with the creation of small evil spirits that wreak havoc and cause mischief. He also sometimes acts as a spiritual “bodyguard,” protecting his followers when they travel at night.

The Lwa of the Storm

Together, Agau, Sogbo, and Badè are inseparable companions, the *lwa* of the storm, thunder, and wind respectively. As Petro *lwa*, they are the violent earthquake, thunderstorm, and hurricane. In these incarnations, their possessions are very violent and can even cause death. These *lwa* are not as widely served as they once were, and they have been forgotten in many areas.



Spiritual Advice

Sogbo’s special symbol is the thunderstone, which is believed to house spirits. Despite their sacred nature, thunderstones are not rare in Haiti. They are formed when a lightning bolt strikes a rock outcropping and knocks a stone to the valley below. The stone must lie where it fell for one year and one day before it can be collected by a Vodou priest or priestess.

Here Today, Gone to Lwa

People who were famous (or infamous) in life and were well-known throughout the world of the Vodou faithful are often automatically elevated to the status of *lwa* after death. Heads of government generally become *lwa*, including both Haitian and American presidents. That’s why photographs of John F. Kennedy or other U.S. politicians may be displayed on Vodou altars.

Famous figures in Haitian history are also transformed into *lwa* and honored by followers of Vodou. Many of the great leaders of the Haitian war for independence, such as Don Pedro and Jean-Jacques Dessalines, are now revered as *lwa*. In New Orleans, the Voodoo Queen Marie Laveau and the black magician Doctor John (see Chapter 4, “Voodoo in the Modern World”) are both considered to be very powerful *lwa* who regularly intercede in people’s lives today.

Voodoo Hoodoo

The slave revolt leader Don Pedro, who is credited with founding the Petro nation of *lwa*, became a powerful Petro *lwa* himself after death named Ti-Jean-Petro. He is the spiritual leader of the Petro nation and the husband of Marinette. He oversees resistance against oppression and violent revolution, and he often assists black magicians. He is depicted as a dwarf with one foot. His passionate nature can be seen when he manifests himself violently through possession.

Finally, Vodou priests and priestesses—particularly those with large followings—are generally elevated to the status of *lwa* upon their deaths. In those cases, the funeral rites are even more complex and last even longer than those held after an ordinary person's death. The funeral ceremonies, which confirm the priest or priestess's new status as a *lwa*, are attended by everyone in the community and often by distinguished visitors from throughout the Vodou world.

Two Are Better Than One: The Sacred Twins

Besides the *lwa*, there is a second category of supernatural beings in Vodou: twins. According to Vodou belief, all twins are endowed with great powers. This is an evolution of a West African belief, in which the first children were supposedly twins, so they were the first ancestors. As such, all twins are considered sacred. When twin children are born into a family, they are practically deified, and they always become *lwa* after death. The *lwa* of the twins are named Marasa, and they appear in all *nanchons*.

Twins are sacred because they are living representations of the balancing forces found throughout Vodou belief. Together, they represent both the human and the divine, the mortal and the immortal. They form a connection between the physical world and the world of the spirits, and they live in both worlds. Some practitioners of Vodou believe that they are even more powerful than the *lwa* because of the union they symbolize.

Any family that contains twins, living or dead, must serve them with offerings and sacrifices. If they don't, the twins will surely retaliate by bringing misfortune, as the Marasa can be very vindictive. They are also very fussy about the services they demand, and they won't use their powers to aid family members unless their every whim is catered to. It doesn't take much to make twins turn against their parents or other family members. Their punishment often takes the form of disease, particularly stomach pains, and they can even cause death if they are not appeased.



Danger Ahead!

According to Haitian conventional wisdom, it's normal for twins to hate each other. A Haitian saying, *Marasa yo raisab*, or "Twins don't get on," illustrates this. Therefore, twins must be treated exactly alike to avoid making one jealous and misusing his or her powers in anger.

The month between Saint Nicholas's Day on December 6 and Epiphany on January 6 is the season of the twins. During that time, a special feast called *manje-Marasa* is held, usually on the feast day of the Massacre of the Holy Innocents on December 28. Marasa's favorite meal, a stew made from a baby goat and wrapped in banana leaves, is served to them in special dishes made from two or three calabash bowls that have been bound together. Alternatively, the food is left for them in three holes scooped out of the ground in the courtyard of the temple. Additional offerings include cakes, candy, popcorn, fizzy sodas, and other treats that children like. Children are brought in to stand in for the twins and eat the offerings.

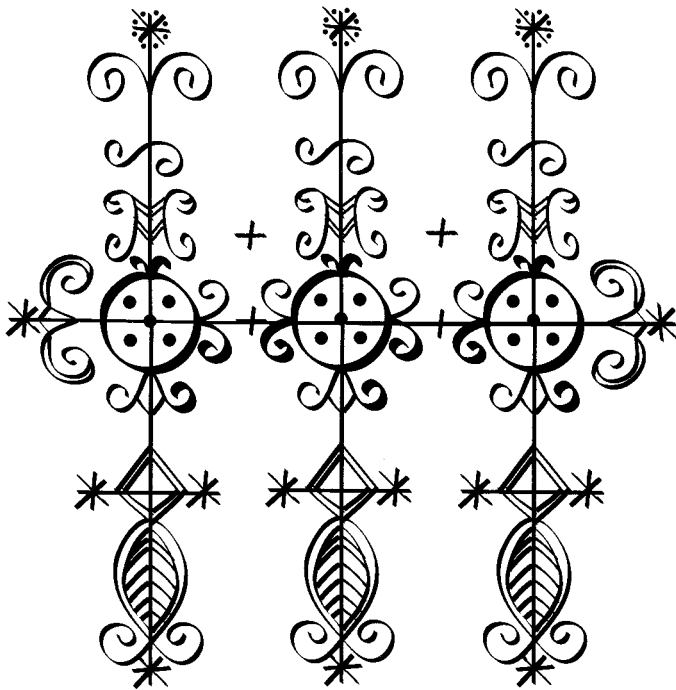
Twins are considered to be gifted with extraordinary powers, particularly the abilities to bring rain and heal the sick. When the Marasa appear in possession, they pass on recipes for herbal medicines, but they also behave like tyrannical children, demanding food and rolling on the ground in temper tantrums. The Marasa are also guardians of children, protecting living children from harm, honoring those who have died, and comforting parents who have lost babies. Their symbols are palm leaves, and their Catholic counterparts are the twin saints, Cosmas and Damian.

Even stronger powers are attributed to the child born immediately after twins in a family (if there is one). This child is called *dosou* if a boy and *dosa* if a girl. The *dosou* or *dosa* has such great powers because the sacred twins are considered two of a trinity, as shown in their *vever*, and the next-born child is the third part of the trinity. Thus, the *dosou* or *dosa* has all the powers of the twins combined in one person. The *dosou* or *dosa* is treated with even greater reverence than the twins and takes precedence over the twins when receiving offerings.



Voodoo Speak

The **dosa** or **dosou** is the first female or male child (respectively) born in a family after twins. They are considered to have even greater supernatural powers than their older twin brothers or sisters because they combine all the powers of the twins in one person.



The trinity represented by the Marasa and the dosou or dosa is symbolized in the three parts of the vever of Marasa.

Becoming a Lwa in Five Easy Steps

As you already know, all the *lwa* were once living, breathing people just like you and me. So how did they get elevated to the status of immortal *lwa*, to be honored by the devotees of Vodou and served with sacrifices and offerings?

After death, the human soul becomes an immortal spirit called a *mò*. (This process is explained fully in Chapter 12, “Death and the Soul.”) Along with the *lwa* and the twins, the *mò* form a trinity of supernatural beings that are honored in Vodou. The spirits of the dead are not the same as the *lwa*, however. They are revered as wise ancestors, but they are not honored outside the family, and they don’t have the great powers of the *lwa* or the Marasa.

It is possible for a *mò* to be promoted to the status of a *lwa*. Baron Samedi or Maman Brijit may decide to elevate the spirit to a *lwa* as a member of the family of Gédé. This

often happens if the spirit has no family to reclaim it from Ginen and revere it as an honored ancestral spirit. The spirit is changed into a *lwa* so it can serve people outside its family and be revered by them in return, thus rescuing the spirit from an eternal existence in the cold primordial waters. But any spirit of the dead can receive this honor, including those already being revered as ancestral spirits.

The new *lwa*’s job now is to find people to help and to serve him. The *lwa* may begin by manifesting to individuals through dreams, possession, or physical objects, thus announcing that the two have a special relationship. The *lwa* will use his burgeoning powers to help and protect that person, and in return, the person should serve the *lwa* with offerings and sacrifice.

If the new *lwa* receives such service, his powers will grow. If not, he will become angry and abandon the person he tried to form a relationship with. If the *lwa* continually fails to find someone to serve him, his powers will weaken, and he will become bitter and lonely. He may even be transformed into an evil spirit or may aid sorcerers in creating black magic, just to find someone who will serve him. If he doesn’t, he may disappear altogether. The *lwa*’s very existence depends on establishing relationships with living humans.

Hopefully, the *lwa* will receive faithful service from his new followers. Over time, he will become recognized for his aid, and more people will begin to serve him in the hopes that he will help them, too. He may even become adopted by a Vodou temple as a local spirit and have a special altar dedicated to him inside the temple. By that time, he will have



Voodoo Speak

The *mò*, or “dead,” are the spirits of deceased people. After death, the spirit becomes immortal and gains knowledge of the secrets of life and some supernatural powers. It is revered by the family as an ancestral spirit and may become promoted to the status of a *lwa*. The *lwa*, the twins, and the *mò* form a trinity of supernatural beings in Vodou.

established himself in that temple's pantheon of *lwa* and will have guaranteed his existence as an immortal *lwa*.

The Least You Need to Know

- ◆ There are thousands of *lwa* in the Vodou pantheon, too many for any one practitioner of Vodou to know them all, and the pantheon is constantly changing as new *lwa* are added and old ones disappear.
- ◆ Besides the great *lwa*, many other *lwa* are honored wherever Vodou is practiced, particularly Azaka, the *lwa* of farming; Gran Bwa, the *lwa* of the forest; Loko and Ayizan, the *lwa* of medicine and the priesthood; and Simbi, the *lwa* of fresh waters and magic.
- ◆ Sometimes a famous historical figure, Vodou priest or priestess, or political leader is immediately elevated to the status of *lwa* after death and added to the pantheon of spirits.
- ◆ The Marasa, or sacred twins, are a separate category of supernatural beings in Vodou; all twins are considered to have great powers and must be given an annual feast and other offerings.
- ◆ A third category of supernatural beings are the *mò*, or spirits of the dead; these spirits may be elevated to the status of *lwa* after death, usually adopted by Baron Samedi or Maman Brigitte into the family of Gédé.

Chapter 10

The Relationship with the Lwa

In This Chapter

- ◆ How to serve the *lwa*
- ◆ The special relationship with a guardian *lwa*
- ◆ Making sacrifices to the *lwa*
- ◆ Giving offerings to the *lwa*
- ◆ What the *lwa* do for you in return for service to them

In Vodou, the *lwa* are not just distant, abstract spirits. They are real beings that manifest themselves in the lives of their followers and literally change the course of those lives. Humans and the *lwa* have a relationship, one based on love, devotion, and, most importantly, service. People must serve the *lwa* by honoring and respecting them at all times, and by giving them gifts and regularly feeding them. In return, the *lwa* serve people by bringing them success and happiness, and by helping them make difficult decisions.

No person serves all the *lwa*; that would be impossible. For each person, certain *lwa* are more important and influential than others. For instance, sailors always serve Agwé, farmers serve Azaka, and soldiers serve Ogou because those *lwa* have the greatest effect on their lives. Each person serves the

ancestral spirits of their own family. And other *lwa* may make it known that they have a special relationship with you, that you owe each other service.

No matter which spirits impact your life—whether they are great *lwa*, ancestral spirits, or little-known *lwa* that reveal themselves to you as your personal guardians—none can be forgotten. Because if you abandon the spirits, then they will surely abandon you.

Life with the Lwa

People who practice Vodou form close, mutual relationships with the *lwa* based on give and take. These relationships have a practical benefit for both parties—the *lwa* benefit by receiving the food and other offerings they need to stay strong and powerful, and humans benefit by receiving good luck and good counsel.

In Vodou, people don't worship the *lwa*, which implies a one-way, distant relationship. Rather, they serve the *lwa*, and they receive payment for their service. Thus, practitioners of Vodou are called *sèvitè*, or servers.



Voodoo Speak

Sèvitè means "server" and refers to a person who practices Vodou, or who serves the *lwa*. *Sèvitè* don't refer to their religion as Vodou but call it serving the *lwa* or simply "service."

This act of service—not magic or God—gives the *lwa* their supernatural abilities. Through service, the *lwa* increase their powers. For example, one act of service is feeding the *lwa* by making animal sacrifices to them. When the *lwa* eat, they become stronger and have more energy, just as we do. But if they don't eat, they waste away. Therefore, the more people who serve a *lwa*, the more powerful that *lwa* becomes. And if no one serves a particular *lwa*, that *lwa* eventually fades away altogether.

Getting to Know the Lwa

In Vodou, there are many ways to develop a personal relationship with the *lwa*. Ritual is the most important. Through ritual, devotees make sacrifices and other offerings to the *lwa*, demonstrating their faithful devotion. In return, the *lwa* physically manifest themselves through possession in the bodies of their followers.

Through possession, practitioners of Vodou get to know the *lwa* intimately. The *lwa* are not just abstract concepts anymore, but real beings with distinct personalities and emotions. You'll learn more about this extremely important aspect of Vodou in Chapter 11, "Possessed by the Spirit."

The *lwa* can also make themselves known in other ways. The most common is through dreams. When a *lwa* visits someone in a dream, it always means that the *lwa* has a personal relationship with the dreamer. The person should be serving that *lwa* if he or she isn't already doing so.

However, it may be difficult to recognize the *lwa*. Details of the dream, such as symbolic objects associated with a particular *lwa*, give valuable clues. Often, the dreamer just knows on instinct that he or she is talking to a *lwa*.

In dreams, the *lwa* give warnings, offer advice, or request a new form of service. These messages should always be remembered and taken very seriously. Sometimes it's difficult to interpret these messages. A Vodou priest or priestess should be consulted in those cases.

Sometimes, an object will catch your eye, such as a pretty stone or a strangely shaped piece of wood. You might pick up the object and take it home with you. The object might very well be the resting place of a *lwa* who has a personal relationship with you. By honoring that object and giving it a special place, usually on the *lwa*'s altar, you can serve that *lwa*. Again, a priest generally must be consulted to determine which *lwa* resides in the object and how best to serve that *lwa*.

Rarely, the *lwa* manifest as physical beings, usually only to a Vodou priest or priestess. This happens only at times of crisis or great need. At those times, the *lwa* have messages of great importance and urgency to pass along, and it is crucial to pay attention to them.



Spiritual Advice

The *lwa* can appear to anyone, not just practitioners of Vodou. If you suspect that you have a relationship with one of the *lwa*, you may find it helpful to keep a dream journal. When you have a particularly intense dream, immediately write down all details that you can remember, especially objects that appeared in the dream and messages that you were given. These details will help you figure out which *lwa* appeared to you and what the *lwa* was trying to tell you.

How to Serve the Lwa

Practitioners of Vodou serve the *lwa* by giving them their faithful devotion. They demonstrate this devotion by holding rituals in honor of the *lwa* in which they make sacrifices of animals and other favorite foods to that *lwa*. They also make offerings of food and gifts to the *lwa* at regular intervals, when they need the *lwa*'s help with a particular problem, or to thank the *lwa* for a favor granted.

The *lwa* are all around us all the time, manifesting in trees, rivers, waterfalls, and mountains. Visiting those places and leaving offerings is another way to commune with the *lwa*. Several places in Haiti and other areas with Vodou communities have been designated as sacred to particular *lwa*. Devotees of the *lwa* make annual pilgrimages to those places to honor the *lwa* with whom they have personal relationships. But even something as simple as going to the forest to commune with Gran Bwa or going to the ocean to honor Agwé counts as service to the *lwa*.

Voodoo Hoodoo

Practitioners of Vodou make special pilgrimages to sacred places in Haiti to commune with the *lwa* and make offerings to them. But some Haitians are unable to return to their home country every year to take part in the pilgrimages. To adapt to their new homes, they have designated other places as sacred to particular *lwa*. For example, every year on July 16 Haitians travel to the waterfall at Saut d'Eau to pay tribute to Ezili. In New York City, displaced Haitians take part in a parade to the church of Our Lady of Mount Carmel in Harlem as a substitute pilgrimage while Haitians in Quebec make a pilgrimage to the shrine of Sainte Anne de Beaupré.

Another way for followers of a *lwa* to show their devotion to that *lwa* is to observe the *lwa*'s special days. Every *lwa* has one or two days a week that are set aside to remember them. On those days, the *lwa*'s followers give them offerings, wear their favorite colors, and otherwise pay tribute to the *lwa*. The following table lists the special days and favorite colors of the major *lwa*.

The Sacred Days and Favorite Colors of the Major Lwa

<i>Lwa</i>	Special Days	Colors
Agwé	Thursday	White and blue
Ayida-Wedo	Monday and Tuesday	White and blue
Azaka	Friday and Saturday	Blue and red
Baron Samedi	Saturday	Black and purple
Danbala	Thursday	White
Ezili	Tuesday and Thursday	Pink and pale blue
Lasiren	Thursday	Blue-green
Ogou	Monday, Friday, and Saturday	Red
Papa Legba	Friday and Saturday	Red and white
Simbi	Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday	White and green

Who Sits on Your Head?

Although practitioners of Vodou have relationships with many different *lwa*, each person has a particularly special relationship with one specific *lwa*. This *lwa* is called the *mèt tèt*, or the “master of the head.” The devotee primarily serves his or her *mèt tèt*, and that *lwa* acts as the person’s guardian throughout life, essentially a personal guardian angel. In

Vodou, this *lwa* is said to “sit on your head,” closely watching over you for your entire life. The devotee is most likely to become possessed by that *lwa* during ritual. The devotee must also keep an altar to that *lwa* in his or her house.

The *lwa* that first possesses a devotee is usually the one that is designated as that person’s *mèt tèt*. Through the initial possession, the *lwa* becomes the “master of the devotee’s head,” forming a special bond with the devotee. This bond between a devotee and the guardian *lwa* is sealed through the ritual of initiation into Vodou when the *mèt tèt* is officially installed in the devotee’s head.

You can come to know your personal guardian in other ways than through possession, though. The *lwa* might appear to you in dreams, or you might inherit your guardian *lwa* from a family member who has died. Quite often, the *lwa* who is your *mèt tèt* is strongly related to your personality and essential character. It is the *lwa* whom you personally feel closest to.

All your life, you have probably been drawn to objects that symbolize a particular *lwa* and places where that *lwa* lives. That’s the *lwa*’s way of telling you that the two of you have a special relationship. For instance, someone with a lifelong love for the ocean may discover that Agwé or Lasiren is their personal *mèt tèt* while a gardener with a great affinity for plants may be drawn to Loko or Gran Bwa.

Your *mèt tèt* will not necessarily be one of the great *lwa*, though. For instance, a *lwa* who is not well-known or a new *lwa*—perhaps an ancestor who was promoted to the status of *lwa*—may reveal himself or herself to you through dreams or special objects. It is your responsibility to get to know the *lwa* who sits on your head, so you can serve him or her properly. Consulting a Vodou priest or priestess is a good way to start the process of finding out who your *mèt tèt* is.

After you discover who your *mèt tèt* is, you have a duty to serve your guardian faithfully for the rest of your life. You must make offerings and sacrifices to your *mèt tèt* regularly and wear the *lwa*’s special color on the *lwa*’s sacred day. The *mèt tèt* also has the right to possess your body whenever he or she likes. In return for this faithful service, the *mèt tèt* will protect you and bring you good fortune. In this way, you develop a powerful lifelong relationship with one *lwa* that is broken only at death.



Voodoo Speak

The *mèt tèt* is the “master of the head,” a person’s principal *lwa* whom that person serves throughout life and who acts as that person’s primary guardian and patron.



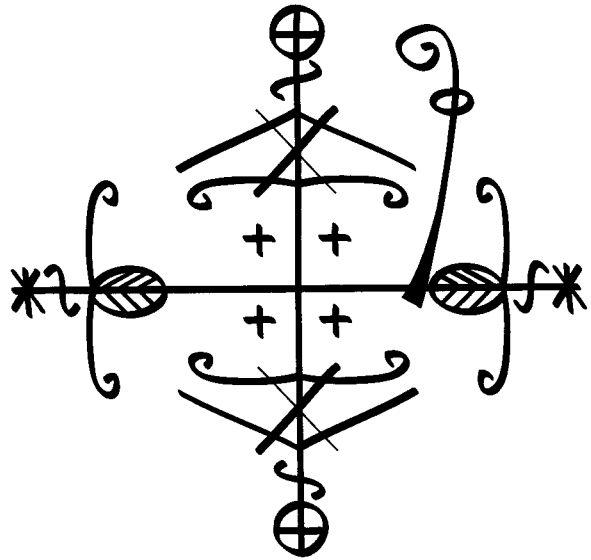
Spiritual Advice

Once you learn who your *mèt tèt* is, you should construct an altar for that *lwa* in your home. Start with objects that you have collected that were clues to who your *mèt tèt* is, such as stones, feathers, leaves, and shells. Always be on the lookout for new items that your *mèt tèt* may like to receive as gifts for the altar.

Care and Feeding of the Lwa

One of the primary ways of serving the *lwa* is to “feed” them by making offerings of their favorite foods and animal sacrifices. Offerings are made during rituals held to honor the *lwa*. You can also make offerings to them by leaving food for them on their altars in your home or in the Vodou temple. Many *lwa* have special places where offerings may be left. For instance, food for Papa Legba is often placed at a crossroads, usually on a *vever* that incorporates his symbols, pictured. Offerings for Gran Bwa are hung in the boughs of a tree in the forest.

Food offerings for Papa Legba are often placed on a vever that incorporates the lwa’s symbols, such as the cross.



Like people, the *lwa* have to eat. If they don’t, they weaken and gradually lose their supernatural powers. Without food, they don’t have the ability to do anything for their devotees. Thus, the relationship between the *lwa* and human beings is one of mutual benefits—food in return for favors.

Feeding the *lwa* comes naturally to practitioners of Vodou. It’s no stranger for a peasant to kill a chicken to feed the *lwa* than it is for him to kill one to feed his family. You can think of feeding the *lwa* as a way of giving thanks or saying grace. When you are lucky enough to have food, you should share it with the spirits who provided it for you.

Feasts for the Lwa

The centerpiece of many Vodou rituals is making food offerings to the *lwa*. There are two kinds of rituals to feed the *lwa*: *manje-lwa*, where animal sacrifices are made; and *manje-sek*,

where food offerings are given but no animals are killed. The *lwa* appear at these ceremonies through bodily possession to take part in the feast. During the ceremony, the participants ask the *lwa* for favors or aid in exchange for the food offered to them.

Animal sacrifice often strikes outsiders as a barbaric practice. It's important to understand that the participants in the ritual don't waste the animals they sacrifice. Haiti is a very poor country, and its citizens often go hungry. When an animal is sacrificed during a Vodou ritual, everyone gets to eat—both the *lwa* and the human participants in the ceremony. Because Haitians value food so much, when they give even a little up for the spirits, that represents a real sacrifice. (See Chapter 15, "Ritual in Vodoo," for a more detailed explanation of the role of animal sacrifice in the Vodou ritual.)

Every year, each Vodou temple hosts a major *manje-lwa* ceremony to honor all the great *lwa* as well as the *lwa* who are sacred to that temple. This annual ritual is like a Thanksgiving feast, held to give thanks to the *lwa* for all the aid they have provided throughout the year and to ensure more good fortune in the upcoming year. It often occurs around harvest time, but there is no fixed holiday when the ritual must take place. The ceremony is very elaborate and may take up to a week to complete. It involves many animal sacrifices and a huge amount of other food offerings.



Voodoo Speak

Vodou rituals in which animals are sacrificed as food offerings to the *lwa* are called **manje-lwa**, or "feeding the *lwa*." This is the most common type of Vodou ritual. A ceremony in which food is offered to the *lwa* but no animals are sacrificed is called **manje-sek**, or "dry feeding."

Favorite Foods of the Lwa

As in all other things, different *lwa* have different tastes. It's important to offer a *lwa* his or her favorite foods, or you risk offending the *lwa*. Some *lwa* are vegetarians and are happy with small offerings of grains, fruit, vegetables, and sweets. Others need more sustenance and prefer animal sacrifices. The following table lists the favorite foods and animal sacrifices of the major *lwa*.

The Favorite Foods and Animal Sacrifices of the Major Lwa

<i>Lwa</i>	Favorite Foods
Agwé	White hens, white sheep, white goats dyed blue with indigo
Azaka	Corn, barley, bread, rice and beans, yams

continues

The Favorite Foods and Animal Sacrifices of the Major Lwa (continued)

<i>Lwa</i>	Favorite Foods
Baron Samedi	Black chickens, black goats, grilled peanuts, salted herring
Bosou	Fried beef, pigs
Danbala and Ayida-Wedo	Pair of white chickens, eggs, rice, milk
Ezili Dantó	Fried pork, black pigs
Ezili Freda	White doves, rice, sweet cakes
Gédé	Black roosters, black goats
Gran Bwa	Bread, cornmeal, peanut cakes
Lasiren	White doves
Loko and Ayizan	Roosters, black or white goats, russet-colored oxen
Maman Brijit	Black chickens
Marasa	Baby goat stew wrapped in banana leaves, speckled hens
Marinette	Chickens plucked alive, goats, black cows
Ogou	Rice and red beans, red roosters, rams, bulls
Papa Legba	Mottled roosters, grilled chicken, smoked meats, rice, yams, plantains, cassava
Simbi	Speckled roosters, guinea fowl, turkeys, goats, pigs



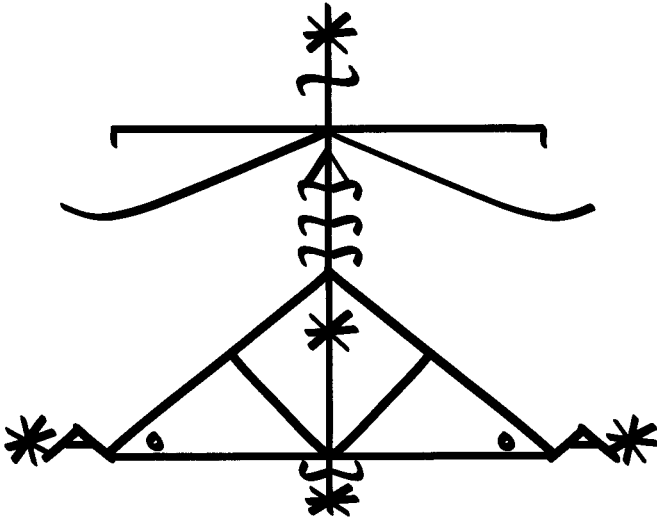
Spiritual Advice

All sacrificial animals are the property of the *lwa* to whom they are being sacrificed. Occasionally, a *lwa* may choose to spare a sacrificial animal. For example, the *lwa* might save a cow or goat that can continue to produce milk for the temple's use. In those cases, the Vodou priest or priestess of the temple is obligated to take care of that animal for the *lwa*.

Presents! Gifts to the Lwa

The *lwa* also love to receive presents—offerings of food, liquor, tobacco, and other items that they particularly like. Devotees make offerings to the *lwa* when they want to ask for a favor or to reward the *lwa* for their help.

Offerings may be placed on the *lwa's* altar inside the home or the temple or on *vevers* drawn to symbolize the *lwa* during Vodou rituals, such as the flag-like *vever* of Ogou, pictured. Offerings may also be left in places that are sacred to the *lwa*, such as in trees, at crossroads, or near rivers. Offerings for the Gédé are left in cemeteries, especially at the base of the black cross consecrated to Baron Samedi.



Offerings for the lwa are often placed on vevers like this one for Ogou.

All the *lwa* have very particular tastes, but making an offering is largely intuitive. You might feel through instinct or be told in a dream that a *lwa* with whom you have a relationship desires a particular object that has caught his or her fancy, such as a piece of clothing or a pretty stone. Generally, the *lwa* prefer presents related to their particular spheres of influence. For instance, Ezili loves gifts that are beautiful and expensive while Ogou prefers masculine items, such as alcohol, particularly the Haitian rum called *kleren*, and tobacco.

Offerings rarely involve money. Among the Haitian peasantry, cash is in short supply. Practitioners of Vodou normally make offerings of items they already have on hand but which still have great value to them. In a place where hunger is always a problem, giving a little food to the *lwa* is a great sacrifice indeed. However, the *lwa* may sometimes ask that their devotees give money to a good cause or a needy person in their name as an offering. Or they may ask their followers to perform certain favors for them rather than give them actual presents.

The following table lists the favorite gifts of many of the major *lwa*.



Voodoo Speak

Kleren is a raw white rum made in Haiti. It is a favorite drink of the Gédé, Azaka, and many other *lwa* as well as of the Haitian peasants.

The Favorite Gifts of Many of the Major Lwa

<i>Lwa</i>	Favorite Gifts
Agwé	Cakes, champagne, liqueurs
Azaka	<i>Kleren</i> , sugar cane, tobacco
Baron Samedi	Black coffee, bottles of rum
Danbala and Ayida-Wedo	Flowers, perfume, fruit, cakes, sweet liquors, olive oil, anything white and beautiful
Ezili Dantó	Barbancourt rum, strong cigarettes
Ezili Freda	Sweets, flowers, candles, cosmetics, French perfume, jewelry, lace-bordered handkerchiefs, silk underwear, mild cigarettes, sweet liqueurs, French wines
Gran Bwa	Flowers, leaves, tobacco, <i>kleren</i>
Lasiren	Mirrors, perfume, sweet white wines
Marasa	Candy, popcorn, fizzy drinks, toys
Ogou	Cigars, five-star Barbancourt rum
Papa Legba	<i>Kleren</i> , tobacco, animal bones

Any gift given to a *lwa* becomes the personal property of that *lwa*. Only the *lwa* can use their gifts, and anything promised to them can't be given away without their permission. For example, if a male follower of Ezili gives her a beautiful dress, he can't turn around and give it to his wife or girlfriend. He will make Ezili jealous, and no one wants Ezili to be angry at them.

Food offerings are placed on the *lwa's* altar overnight and then buried, thrown into water, or thrown under a tree the next day. Other offerings remain on the altar permanently until the *lwa* chooses to dispose of them or use them. For example, a *lwa* may smoke his cigarettes or drink his rum when he manifests in possession (more on this in Chapter 11). Or a *lwa* may insist that a follower donate one of his possessions to someone else.

How the Lwa Serve You

Why do the practitioners of Vodou give such faithful service to the *lwa*? Because the *lwa* give them great benefits in return. At heart, Vodou is a very practical religion. Through service to the *lwa*, you can expect good luck, good health, and a happy life. But if you don't serve the *lwa* as they demand, you will experience misfortune, sickness, and poverty. Because the majority of the people who practice Vodou are the poor peasants of Haiti, they need the *lwa* to help them get through the trials of a difficult life.

The *lwa* love their followers and perform great deeds for them. They will heal illness, grant children, and provide money in times of need. They will warn you if someone tries to hurt you and even take revenge on your enemies on your behalf. If you need a favor, simply ask a *lwa*. For example, they might help you find a job or make a romance blossom. They may even save your life. In this way, the *lwa* serve their devotees just as much as their devotees serve them.

When a Vodou devotee forms a relationship with a *lwa*, it is just as if he or she enters into a contract with that *lwa*, with all the terms spelled out. The devotee promises to honor the *lwa* with regular sacrifices and offerings and by participating in rituals dedicated to that *lwa*. In return, the *lwa* agrees to watch out for his or her follower, granting favors and warning against danger.

The *lwa* never forget the promises that their devotees make to them. There is no weaseling out of a contract with a *lwa*. If you neglect to fulfill your obligations to the *lwa*, sooner or later, you will feel the *lwa*'s anger. At the very least, the *lwa* will refuse to come down and help you when you need him or her, effectively abandoning you. Without the *lwa*'s protection, you will be exposed to evil spirits and the black magic of your enemies, which can cause no end of suffering in your life and the lives of your family.

Some *lwa* are more severe than others, and their punishments for neglecting them or offending them take a more active form. The punishments of the Petro *lwa* are often much more severe than seems warranted, for instance. Persistent bad luck, serious illness, and madness are typical punishments of the *lwa*, and if they are angry enough, they can even cause the deaths of you or your loved ones.

When Vodou devotees come to believe that the misfortunes in their lives are the punishments of the *lwa*, they consult the priest or priestess. Through divination, the priest can find out who the angry *lwa* is, what the devotee did to offend the *lwa*, and how the devotee can make retribution, which usually requires making an offering, providing an animal sacrifice, or even hosting a ritual, which can be very expensive.



Danger Ahead!

One way the *lwa* punish people is by violently seizing possession of their bodies against their will. The possessing *lwa* throws his or her negligent servants to the ground and makes them crawl with crossed feet until they take refuge in a hole carved out of a block of cement in the temple. The *lwa* may make the person stay there for hours or even an entire day.

The Least You Need to Know

- ◆ The relationship that Vodou devotees form with the *lwa* is one of give and take in which the devotee serves the *lwa* with offerings and rituals and receives favors and counsel from the *lwa* in return.
- ◆ Every practitioner of Vodou forms a lifelong relationship with one particular *lwa* called the *mèt tèt*, who becomes that person's special protector and patron.
- ◆ The *lwa* require food to remain strong, generally in the form of animal sacrifices offered at special Vodou rituals called *manje-lwa*.
- ◆ Devotees of Vodou also serve the *lwa* by making offerings to them of their favorite things, such as food, alcohol, tobacco, and gifts.
- ◆ Serving the *lwa* is like entering into a contract with them; if you fulfill the terms, you will receive the favors and protection of the *lwa*; but if you break the contract, you will be punished.

Chapter

Possessed by the Spirit

In This Chapter

- ◆ The important role that spirit possession plays in Vodou
- ◆ How the *lwa* possess the bodies of their followers
- ◆ How the *lwa* behave during possession
- ◆ What happens after possession is over
- ◆ How to tell if someone is faking possession

As you've learned, Vodou places great emphasis on the personal relationship that human beings have with the immortal spirits, the *lwa*. But that relationship would be meaningless if people and the spirits had no way to interact physically.

That's where possession comes in. The literal possession of the bodies of the faithful by the spirits plays a pivotal role in Vodou. Through possession, the *lwa* can manifest themselves in the physical world where humans live. They can take part in rituals, receive offerings and sacrifices, and interact with their followers. They can give messages, advice, and warnings using the mouths of their devotees. For any Vodou devotee, being possessed by a *lwa*, particularly one of the great *lwa*, is a tremendous honor.

Spirit possession is much misunderstood by outsiders. Some see it as a theatrical performance, as if a person who is "possessed" is simply acting the part of a *lwa*. Others see it as a form of hysteria brought about by the frenzy and

excitement of the ritual. But to practitioners of Vodou, possession is a genuine supernatural phenomena. Through possession, mortals connect with the immortal, and humans take the divine inside themselves.

The Possession Obsession

In Vodou, the only way to completely commune with the *lwa* is through possession. Possession occurs when the *lwa* temporarily displaces the soul of a person and takes over that person's body. While the *lwa* is possessing the person, the spirit literally lives inside the body of a human being. During that time, all the person's actions are controlled by the *lwa*, and all his or her words are spoken by the *lwa*.

Possession, which seems so strange and fantastic to people who don't practice Vodou, is perceived as a common and perfectly natural occurrence by people who do, and no one is surprised when the *lwa* appear. In fact, a Vodou ritual would not be deemed successful if possession didn't occur.

When the *lwa* appear through possession, that means that the offerings given in the ritual have been accepted and that the ritual has pleased them. Possession is a sure sign that the *lwa* will bestow their blessings and favors upon the participants in the ritual. If they stay away, that is a sign of indifference—or worse, anger—on the part of the *lwa*.

Through spirit possession, people can come to know the *lwa* better. The *lwa* mingle with their followers in the bodies of the possessed, talking with them and touching them. Thus, possession enables Vodou devotees to actually interact with the supernatural. It is the ultimate communion with the spiritual. They learn what the *lwa* want and need and how best to serve them. As the Haitian proverb says, "To learn about the *lwa*, you must watch the possessed."



Spiritual Advice

There is one exception to the rule about uninvited *lwa* not being able to manifest through possession. The Gédé can possess anyone at any time whether they have been invoked or not. They frequently show up at rituals that aren't specifically for them, so they can take part in the feasting and dancing. Since they bring rowdiness and joviality to any ceremony, they are usually welcomed.

The Rules of Possession

Spirit possession is not just a random occurrence. It follows specific rules. For the most part, possession takes place only during a Vodou ritual. The *lwa* who appears in possession must have already been invoked by the priest or priestess during the ritual, so there can't be any uninvited guests. The priest acts as an intermediary, summoning the *lwa* and helping them leave when their business is completed.

The *lwa* appear through possession at the appropriate time during the ritual, usually just at the moment of animal sacrifice or during the songs and dances

performed in honor of the *lwa*. This enables them to take part in the feast and receive their offerings. Before they can do anything, though, the *lwa* must salute the priest or priestess.

Lwa who appear at inappropriate times are out of order and may be sent away by the priest or priestess. The priest can usually make any unwanted *lwa* leave by pressing his thumb against the forehead of the possessed person.

The possessed person is called a *chwal*, which means “horse.” When the *lwa* possesses someone, the spirit “mounts” the head of the devotee like a rider mounting a horse. Although anyone at a public ceremony, including the spectators, can be possessed, the priest or priestess and the person paying for the ceremony almost always are. (At a private family ceremony, only members of the family can be possessed, usually by ancestral spirits and family *lwa*.)

Possession can be contagious, and once one person becomes possessed by a *lwa*, more *lwa* are likely to follow, possessing other participants in the ritual. This collective possession can be brought about by special effects in the ritual, such as spontaneously leaping flames or exploding gunpowder. Collective possession can also be caused by abruptly shifting drum rhythms. Although the musicians seem capable of inducing possession, they are seldom mounted themselves.



Voodoo Speak

Chwal means “horse.”

In Vodou, it refers to a devotee who has been possessed by a *lwa*. The *lwa* is said to have mounted the head of the possessed person like a rider mounting a horse.

The Purpose of Possession

Possession gives the *lwa* a voice and a body. Through the mouths of their horses, the *lwa* can give advice, provide solutions to problems, prophesy the future, and prescribe treatments for illness. They can warn of danger or scold their devotees for neglecting or offending them in some way. They can also ask for favors, specific offerings, or special rituals. Anything a possessed person says has all the authority of the *lwa* behind it and so is taken very seriously.

In possession, the *lwa* may address the entire assembly or single out one person. For example, the *lwa* may ask one of the participants to grant them a favor, such as giving another devotee a job or some money. Because *lwa* often have a special relationship with the possessed person, they might also have messages they want to give to their horses, but the possessed person cannot actually hear those messages while the *lwa* is riding him or her. In those cases, the *lwa* will ask spectators to pass on the messages by saying, “Tell my horse” These messages are relayed to the possessed person as soon as the *lwa* leaves.

Through possession, the *lwa* can experience the pleasures of the body, which they rarely get to do. They can eat, drink, and smoke, and they do so freely. In fact, they rarely act with the decorum that you might expect of supernatural beings. They gobble food like gluttons, drink too much rum (but rarely get drunk), swear, and squabble with other *lwa*. They also enjoy taking part in the ceremony, joining in the dancing, greeting the other participants, and sometimes presiding over the ritual itself.

Possession can sometimes occur outside the context of the ritual, but usually only in times of great need. If someone is in danger or doing something difficult, he or she may call on the *lwa* for help through possession. Nothing is impossible for a possessed person. Using the strength and supernatural powers of the *lwa*, the horse can accomplish extraordinary tasks. For instance, a shipwrecked sailor may call for help from Agwé. Through possession by the *lwa*, the sailor can swim safely to shore even if he is miles out to sea.



Danger Ahead!

An angry *lwa* might use possession to punish a neglectful servant. Possessed people lose all control over their actions. The *lwa* who mounted them may make them knock their heads against a wall or destroy a precious possession. Or the *lwa* might humiliate their horses by revealing secrets or putting them in ridiculous positions and abruptly abandoning them there.

The *lwa* may also possess their followers without warning at times of crisis. For example, they may appear at the moment of a car accident to spare their servants the shock that the accident will cause. Or they might come down during the heat of battle to lend their strength to the fighters. The *lwa* also sometimes possess the bodies of their devotees to relieve their suffering from pain or emotional anguish.

Saddle Up!

Possession is not an easy or a smooth process. It involves an intense, almost violent struggle between the *lwa* and the soul of the person being possessed, which understandably does not want to vacate the body. When the *lwa* first enters the head of a person, it's like a rider mounting an untamed horse. The horse bucks and fights against the unfamiliar rider but eventually settles down and accepts the rider.

When the *lwa* takes possession, the person's soul is literally expelled from his or her head. According to Vodou belief, there are two parts of the soul. The part involved in possession is called the *gwo-bon-anj*, or "great good angel." (The other part of the soul is called the *ti-bon-anj*. I'll tell you more about the two parts of the soul in Chapter 12, "Death and the Soul.") The *gwo-bon-anj* is the most important half of the soul because it determines someone's essential personality. It isn't clear where the *gwo-bon-anj*



Voodoo Speak

The *gwo-bon-anj*, or "great good angel," is one half of a person's soul. It is the source of each individual's unique personality. The *gwo-bon-anj* leaves the body only under specific circumstances: while dreaming, during spirit possession, and after death, when it becomes an immortal spirit.

goes during possession. What is clear is that once it's gone, the personality animating the possessed body belongs solely to the *lwa*, not the person who has been possessed.

Certain signs may herald the onset of possession. People who are about to be possessed by a *lwa* may suddenly tense up or look anguished and start to tremble and pant. They may feel a tingle of pins and needles in the neck or legs as the *lwa* tries to enter. Alternatively, possession may be preceded by sleepiness. The person whom the *lwa* is trying to mount can't keep his or her eyes open and is filled with a strange heaviness throughout the body. Or possession may come abruptly, with no warning signs at all.

Possession begins with the *lwa* entering the body as if with a blow at the nape of the neck or in the back of the legs. People who are being mounted struggle against the invading *lwa* at first. They stagger around in circles, cry out, sway, and throw out their arms as if trying to catch their balance. They tremble all over, their muscles tense up, and they often convulse violently.

The celebrants closest to anyone being possessed take charge of them, keeping them from hurting themselves and catching them if they fall. They remove the possessed person's shoes, jewelry, hairpins, and anything else that might get lost or broken. This atmosphere of total security helps Vodou devotees give themselves up completely to the *lwa*.

Suddenly, the person being possessed stops fighting. That indicates that the soul has been expelled from the body and the *lwa* has taken full possession. After the *gwo-bon-anj* has gone, the possessed feel total emptiness, as if they are fainting. All sense of time and self vanishes. They are now empty vessels for the *lwa* to fill. From that moment until the *lwa* chooses to leave, the *lwa* controls the body, everything it says and does. The ceremony continues as before, with the *lwa* now taking part.

The intensity of the onset of possession depends greatly on the strength of the *lwa*. The milder *lwa* take possession gently and rarely elicit much struggle from their horses. But the more terrible *lwa* can enter the body with all the violence of a hurricane. Some *lwa*, particularly the more evil Petro *lwa*, are so dangerous that they can even cause death, and they should be invoked only under extreme circumstances.

The experience of the person being possessed also makes a difference. The first time is always the roughest. Once someone gives into possession, that person is much more likely to succumb again. As someone undergoes possession more and



Spiritual Advice

People who don't want to be possessed can prevent it through magic, usually by styling their hair a particular way or placing a ward against the *lwa* in their head cloths. Remaining seated with arms crossed and wearing a forbidding expression can also discourage the *lwa*. The *lwa* may still try, but they will only pass by quickly, making the person tipsy.

more, that person gets used to it. In time, the person allows the *lwa* in with only a token struggle and a few meek movements.

Possession Is Nine Tenths

During possession, the *lwa* completely controls the body of the possessed person. Because the person's soul is no longer present, that person has no responsibility for what the *lwa* does or says while inside the body. To all intents and purposes, the possessed person *is* the *lwa*. Therefore, when addressing the possessed person, other participants in the ritual must call him or her by the *lwa*'s name, or they risk offending the *lwa*.

Who Is That in There?

A person who has been possessed takes on all the physical and personality characteristics of the possessing *lwa*. The horse now walks like the *lwa*, talks like the *lwa*, and even exhibits the *lwa*'s facial expressions.

Children who are possessed by old *lwa* appear weak and frail while older people possessed by young *lwa* dance as if they had no infirmities. A man possessed by a female *lwa* walks and talks like a woman, and a woman possessed by a male *lwa* acts like a man. (When a male *lwa* possesses a female devotee, he is addressed as "he" and vice versa.) Because the

behavior of the possessed is so evocative of the *lwa*, the priest or priestess can simply look at the possessed and determine who is riding the horse.

When the *lwa* take possession, they immediately require their special emblems and accessories, such as costumes, scarves, beverages, and cigarettes. These items are kept on hand in the temple. Once possession has occurred, the nearest initiates lead the possessed person into the temple to get dressed, or they bring out the *lwa*'s special items. Because the *lwa* possess men and women indiscriminately, regardless of the *lwa*'s gender, the possessed often cross-dress. These costumes identify the *lwa* to all present.



Spiritual Advice

During possession, the *lwa* show their favor toward other participants in the ritual in various ways. If a possessed person clasps your hand, anoints your face with sweat, plucks your clothes, lifts you by your arms, or wiggles between your legs, that means you are on the *lwa*'s good side. Such gestures always bring good luck.

Changed into a Serpent: Possession by Danbala

It is always a great honor and comfort to be possessed by Danbala, one of the highest of the *lwa*. Because Danbala is closely identified with snakes, those who are possessed by him act like snakes themselves. They fall to the floor, undulate their bodies, and dart their

tongues in and out. Often they climb to the ceiling beams or scale trees in the temple courtyard, falling down headfirst like a boa.

Danbala isn't able to speak, and those possessed by him can only hiss or whistle. The Vodou priest must interpret Danbala's messages. Ogou also understands Danbala's way of talking, so a person possessed by him may interpret Danbala's messages for the assembled.

Voodoo Hoodoo

People who are possessed by the great *lwa* of Dahomey sometimes speak in a sacred language that originated in ancient Africa and imitates Danbala's hissing. (People who are possessed by Danbala can't speak at all, though; they can only hiss like the serpent that represents the *lwa*.) No human, not even the speaker, knows what the possessed person is saying. Only the other *lwa* can understand the unintelligible words. This is similar to the phenomenon of speaking in tongues.

A Violent Entrance: Possession by Papa Legba

As one of the strongest *lwa*, Papa Legba enters the heads of his horses forcefully. The struggle that precedes possession is brutal and violent. Anyone receiving him is thrown to the ground and struggles frantically before giving in to the possession.

People who are possessed by Papa Legba limp around the temple on the *lwa*'s characteristic crutch, making demands like a crotchety old man. They sometimes twist their limbs into grotesque contortions. They may also twist one leg around the crutch and perform a strange dance before falling to the floor.

She's a Flirt: Possession by Ezili

When Ezili Freda appears in possession, she is immediately led into her room inside the temple to be dressed. A large collection of pink and blue dresses made of satin, silk, and sheer lace are kept on hand for her as well as the jewelry, cosmetics, and perfumes that she loves.

After getting dressed, Ezili Freda enters the courtyard slowly, swaying her hips. She pauses to flirt with all the men, sending them saucy looks, dancing with them seductively, covering them with kisses, and giving and receiving gifts. She is more reserved with the women, simply extending a hooked finger toward them. She speaks in perfect French with a high-pitched voice even if the only language the possessed person knows is Kreyol. But toward the end of the possession, she always collapses in tears, weeping for unrequited love and unfulfilled dreams.

Those who are possessed by the Petro aspect of Ezili—Ezili Dantò—appear with tensed, knotted muscles and clenched fists. They often break out into uncontrollable tantrums. Ezili Dantò can't speak but can only say “da da da” in a hoarse voice. She is fond of drinking *kleren* mixed with hot peppers or laced with gunpowder.

Pass the Rum! Possession by Ogou

In possession, Ogou has the personality of an energetic, rough soldier. The musicians at the ritual sometimes play the national anthem to herald his appearance. Alternatively, gunpowder is thrown into the fire to greet Ogou with small explosions.



Spiritual Advice

While a person is possessed by a *lwa*, he or she takes on the supernatural characteristics of that spirit. Nothing that the *lwa* does while possessing the horse can harm the human body that is the spirit's vehicle, not even drinking rum mixed with gunpowder.

Ogou dresses in military clothing or ties a red scarf around his head or arm, waves a sword or machete, and chews on a cigar. He struts around the temple, demanding rum with the phrase, “Grèn mwê frèt,” which means, “My testicles are cold.” Rum given to him is poured on the ground and set on fire rather than drunk.

Ogou's strength and resistance to fire often manifests during possession. Sometimes he washes his hands with flaming rum, or he may hold a red-hot iron bar in his fists. The fire won't burn his hands, proving that the possession is genuine.



Spiritual Advice

When Ogou Batala, the patron *lwa* of doctors, possesses someone, he can literally heal the sick who are present at the ceremony. To do so, he cleanses his hands over a flame and touches the body parts affected by disease. But he will cure only those he thinks are worthy.

The Greedy Eater: Possession by Azaka

In possession, Azaka takes on the personality and appearance of a peasant. He dresses in a large straw hat, red kerchief, and blue shirt and pants, rolling up one trouser leg. He carries a *makout* over his shoulder and smokes a clay pipe.

Azaka speaks through the mouths of his horses in a rustic, grunting manner that can barely be understood. He limps around the temple, dances with a lumbering gait, and mimes hoeing and digging. When given his food offerings, he immediately takes them into a corner and wolfs down the food without offering to share.

Man Overboard! Possession by the Water Spirits

Those who are possessed by the aquatic *lwa*, like Agwé and Lasiren, are drawn to water. They are compelled by an urge to dive and swim. Those possessed by Simbi are seized by

the desire to throw themselves into fresh water, such as a pond or river. In rituals for these *lwa* held on board boats, the other participants must take care to ensure that those who become possessed don't dive overboard and perhaps drown if abandoned suddenly by the spirits possessing them.

Within the Vodou temple, people who are possessed by the aquatic *lwa* may immerse themselves in tubs of water or ask that water be poured over them. If no water is nearby, they make undulating movements, as if swimming. Or they sit backward on a chair and propel themselves around the temple using a small paddle, as if rowing a boat.

Voodoo Hoodoo

Legend says that if Lasiren possesses you during the ritual held for her and Agwé on board a sailboat out on the open ocean, you will dive to the seabed and return with seven fishes and seven coins. But Lasiren is alluring, and there is a chance that if she takes you to her deep watery home, you'll never return. She might even be able to carry you all the way through the primordial waters and into Ginen, the mythical home of the *lwa*.

Life of the Party: Possession by the Gédé

As you learned in Chapter 8, “The *Lwa* of Death,” the Gédé can possess anyone at anytime even during rituals in which they haven't been invoked. Their appearance is generally greeted enthusiastically by the crowds, who enjoy their joking and exuberance. They tend to arrive at the end of the ritual when all of the other *lwa* have already come and gone.

People possessed by the Gédé dress in elaborate costumes of purple and black. These clothes are kept in the temple and brought out when the Gédé appear. The horses put on mourning clothes, the traditional outfits of the undertaker, or the get-up of a corpse, complete with powdered faces. But their clothes are often threadbare and ragged, and they top them off with ridiculous hats like top hats and bowlers. The Gédé are inclined to cross-dress, particularly when possessing male celebrants. They generally wear sunglasses, sometimes stealing them from the spectators or putting on several pairs at once. They eat greedily from the food offerings, smoke cigars or cigarettes (often two at once), and drink copious amounts of rum steeped with hot peppers.

Fundamentally, the Gédé are clowns. They strut around the courtyard singing lewd songs, telling dirty jokes, making obscene gestures, flirting outrageously, and cursing. They talk in nasal voices, imitating the sounds a corpse would make if it could speak. They play practical jokes, such as stealing food or cigarettes from others. Sometimes they brandish a large wooden phallus kept in the temple for them. Often they lead the dancing of the *banda*, their signature dance with its sexually suggestive movements.

The Gédé particularly enjoy possessing prudish or conservative people and then making fun of them or forcing them to reveal shameful secrets. They also tell about the secret love affairs of the spectators, complete with all the juicy details. But it's a good idea to pay attention to what they say, as they can bring messages from ancestral spirits in the world of the dead or pass on wise advice.

Dangerous Possessions

Sometimes, possession can be dangerous, particularly when the more violent *lwa* or evil spirits are the ones doing the possessing. However, the priest or priestess carefully regulates possession during the ritual, and the other celebrants keep a watchful eye on the possessed to make sure that no one comes to harm.

Possessions by Agau, Sogbo, and Badè, the *lwa* of the storm, are extremely violent, and they have been known to cause the deaths of their weaker horses. Those who are strong enough to accept them imitate the boom of thunder and the moaning of the windstorm. They puff with all their strength and sputter like a storm-tossed sea. Possession by these *lwa* is very rare.

Those possessed by Bosou and the other bull-like *lwa*, which are called the *lwa-taureaux*, are seized by an uncontrollable, destructive rage. They charge around exactly like bulls in a china shop, destroying everything in their path and bellowing ceaselessly. They can be appeased by offering them a handful of grass, which they settle down and chew.

People possessed by Marinette behave like her emblematic animal, the screech owl. They lower their heads, let their arms hang like wings, and crook their fingers into claws. Through the mouths of her horses, Marinette confesses her crimes and boasts of the number of people she has “eaten,” or whose life energy she has drained. She then throws her horse into the bonfire and stamps around until the flames are out. Usually, the possessed person's body is unharmed by the ordeal.



Voodoo Speak

Spirit possession that lasts only a few seconds is called **saoulé**. It produces a slight daze like mild drunkenness. This tipsy state can be caused by any brief contact with the *lwa*. For example, someone carrying sacred objects may be brushed by a *lwa*, which makes them stagger a little and feel dizzy.

The Aftermath of Possession

Possession can last any length of time. Usually, it goes on for several minutes, long enough for the *lwa* to pass on important messages and partake of the offerings. Sometimes it lasts only a few seconds, producing a slight daze called *saoulé*. And sometimes it can go on for hours or even days. After that long a time, it becomes difficult for the horse to sustain the conditions of the trance induced by possession. The *lwa*'s personality fades in and out, as if tuning in a weak radio station.

During possession, the horse has great strength and a vast reserve of energy. But as soon as the possessing *lwa* leaves, the horse is overcome by exhaustion, especially if possessed by one of the great *lwa*. Formerly possessed people drop whatever they are holding and slump to the ground, half-conscious. They sit motionless and dazed for a few minutes, then open their eyes and gaze around as if waking in an unfamiliar place.

Former horses have no memory of what occurred during possession and so can't be held accountable for their actions while the *lwa* were riding them. They are completely indifferent to the behavior of the *lwa* and often don't believe the accounts of what they did during possession. After possession ends, the horses return to their normal, everyday selves. No one is venerated in the morning because a great *lwa* possessed them the night before.

Faking It

Although possession is considered a natural occurrence in Vodou, people have been known to fake it, and it is often treated with skepticism by the participants in the ritual. Fake possessions are usually immediately obvious, particularly to experienced devotees and competent priests and priestesses.

Faking possession is a difficult trick to pull off. The *lwa*'s personality completely manifests within the possessed person, so it's all too easy for a faker to slip and let his or her own personality show through. For example, people who are possessed by Danbala act like snakes; they crawl on the ground, climb trees without using their hands, and don't speak. Think how easy it would for a faker to slip up when pretending to be Danbala!



Danger Ahead!

Newcomers to Vodou may feel tempted to fake possession just to show that they have been accepted by the *lwa* and are legitimate practitioners. But pretending to be possessed is never a good idea, as it will inevitably incur the wrath of the *lwa*. It will also earn the ridicule of everyone at the ceremony, who will immediately see through the effort.

Why Fake It?

Sometimes a person will pretend to be possessed by a *lwa* in order to get something. The person will try to make it look as if the *lwa* is commanding that the person be given what he or she desires. However, the *lwa* rarely take possession to intercede on behalf of their mounts, so anyone who behaves in that way is usually suspected of faking it.

Some people may claim possession in order to get away with attacking others or committing crimes, but that excuse doesn't hold any water. Although the *lwa* are invoked in the creation of black magic and they sometimes possess people in order to punish or chide

them, they never attack anyone directly or physically take part in crimes. All their intercessions are indirect and often supernatural.

The Test of Possession

People who are genuinely possessed can perform superhuman feats of strength and endurance. They feel no pain and can thus walk on hot coals, grasp a red-hot iron bar in their hands, or eat fire. They can also drink copious amounts of alcohol without getting drunk, eat great quantities of food without getting sick, and speak in languages they don't know. Performing any of these feats are signs of a genuine possession.



Danger Ahead!

People who pretend to be possessed by Maman Brijit must pass an even tougher test: They have to rub a hot pepper across their genitals!

Sometimes a possessed person will be asked to pass a test to prove that he or she is really possessed. The Gédé are particularly fond of hot peppers. They traditionally drink rum in which 21 different kinds of peppers have been steeped. This rum is so hot that no human could drink it, so a good test for whether someone is faking possession by the Gédé is to ask that person to drink the rum or wash his or her face with it.

The Least You Need to Know

- ◆ Physical possession of the bodies of the faithful by the *lwa* during ritual plays a vital part in Vodou, as it enables humans to commune directly with the immortal spirits.
- ◆ Possession always begins with an often violent struggle between the *lwa* and the soul of the person being possessed, during which the *gwo-bon-anj* is expelled from the head of the person whom the *lwa* is attempting to possess.
- ◆ During possession, the *lwa* take over completely, manifesting their personality traits and even their physical appearances through the bodies of the possessed.
- ◆ People who have been possessed by the *lwa* have no memory of the possession and thus can't be held accountable for the actions of the *lwa*.
- ◆ It's difficult to fake possession because anyone who is genuinely possessed completely manifests the personality of the possessing *lwa*, feels no pain, and can perform superhuman feats.

Death and the Soul

In This Chapter

- ◆ The parts of the soul according to Vodou belief
- ◆ The Vodou ceremony that sends the soul to the world of the spirits
- ◆ Other important death rituals in Vodou
- ◆ How the soul is raised from Ginen and transformed into an immortal spirit
- ◆ How family members commune with the spirits of their ancestors

Vodou is primarily a religion of ancestor worship. Many of the *lwa* were at one time living people from whom the present practitioners of Vodou are descended. The ancestors are always with the Vodou devotees. These ancestral spirits guide the followers of Vodou through every part of their lives, offering protection, healing, and advice and bringing messages through intuition and dreams.

Because of the importance of the spirits of the ancestors in Vodou, death plays a vital role in the religion. Death marks the passage from life as a mortal human in a physical body to existence as an immortal spirit. Many complex rituals have been developed to ensure that when someone dies, his or her soul successfully makes the journey to the realm of the spirits. These rituals must be followed exactly, or the soul will become trapped in the physical world, where it will bring misfortune to its relatives as a result of its unhappiness.

This emphasis on death has contributed to many misconceptions and stereotypes about Vodou. Outsiders often make the mistake of thinking that Vodou is a fatalistic religion with a morbid preoccupation with death. On the contrary, the Vodou devotee's conception of death is hopeful and joyful, promising an eternal life after this one, a life in which you are transformed into a wise and revered spirit. It is essential to understand the Vodou conception of death and the rituals developed to deal with death in order to understand the religion itself.

A Map of the Soul

To comprehend the Vodou conception of death, you first have to understand how the practitioner of Vodou thinks of the human soul. According to Vodou belief, a human being is made up of four components:

- ◆ The *corps cadavre*, or physical body
- ◆ The *nanm*, or spirit of the flesh
- ◆ The *gwo-bon-anj*, one part of the soul
- ◆ The *ti-bon-anj*, the other part of the soul



Voodoo Speak

According to Vodou belief, the physical self is made up of two components: the **corps cadavare**, which is the physical body, and the **nanm**, which is the animating spirit of the body. Both of these return to the earth after death: The *corps cadavre* decays, and the *nanm* passes into the soil as energy.

The physical or mortal parts of a human being are the *corps cadavre* and the *nanm*. The *corps cadavre* is the body that decays after death, returning to the earth from which it was made. The *nanm* is the spirit that allows the body to function while alive and passes as energy into the earth after death.

Each person's soul is made up of two parts, two separate spirits: the *gwo-bon-anj*, or "great good angel," and the *ti-bon-anj*, or "little good angel." During life, the two parts of the soul maintain a balance with each other. After death, the two parts are separated, and each follows a separate path.

The Great Good Angel

You have already learned about the role that the *gwo-bon-anj* plays in spirit possession (see Chapter 11, "Possessed by the Spirit"). The *gwo-bon-anj* is the most important part of every human being. It gives each person a unique personality. It is the source of all thoughts and emotions, the wellspring of ideas and creative impulses. It is also the accumulation of each person's knowledge and experience throughout a lifetime.

The *gwo-bon-anj* has a divine source. It is the very spirit of Bondye, a tiny part of God manifested in the physical body. As such, it is immortal and endures after death.

During life, the *gwo-bon-anj* is closely connected with the body. It leaves the body only during spirit possession and during nighttime wanderings in dreams. It's very important after death to ensure that the *gwo-bon-anj* separates from the body and is properly dispatched on its journey to becoming an immortal ancestral spirit.

The Little Good Angel

The second half of the soul is the *ti-bon-anj*, or “little good angel.” All living things share a cosmic life force, which connects us in a great web of energy. When a person is born, part of this cosmic life force passes into him or her and becomes the *ti-bon-anj*.

During life, the *ti-bon-anj* is responsible for keeping the body alive and aware. The *ti-bon-anj* acts as the body's protector, and most illnesses, whether physical or mental, are an attack on it, usually by strong spirits or evil spells.

The *ti-bon-anj* is also the source of human conscience and morality. It enables people to distinguish between good and evil and make responsible decisions. It is the source of the emotions that we feel as a result of our behavior toward others, such as regret, guilt, and happiness.

After death, the *ti-bon-anj* is expelled from the body on the final breath and rejoins the cosmos, traveling to a place higher than the sky. There, it presents itself before Bondye and gives an accounting of its life. Afterward, it exists in the heavens as cosmic energy, no longer interacting with the living.

In this way, the *ti-bon-anj* corresponds to the Catholic conception of the soul, which goes to heaven and appears before God to account for its sins after death. Because the *ti-bon-anj* no longer has any effect on the living after death and does not live on as a distinct spirit, as the *gwo-bon-anj* does, it isn't of great importance to Vodou belief, and it plays a minor role in death rituals.



Voodoo Speak

The *ti-bon-anj*, or “little good angel,” is one half of the human soul. It is part of the cosmic life force that keeps the body alive and is responsible for the human conscience. After death, it goes to the sky and communes with Bondye, having no further interaction with the living.

After Death: The Soul's Journey

In Vodou belief, death is not thought of as an ending or an extinguishing of life. Rather, death is a change from one condition—the physical one—to another—the spiritual one. The soul endures after death, just in a different form.

After death, the *gwo-bon-anj* is separated from the physical body for good. It begins a long and arduous journey to Ginen, the mythical homeland of the spirits beneath the primordial waters. There it joins the other *lwa* and ancestral spirits and is transformed into an immortal spirit itself.

The funeral customs of Vodou are complex and strict, and it is the duty of the deceased's family members to ensure that they are carried out in their totality. They must be performed exactly right by a qualified Vodou priest or priestess, and they pose a great expense for a poor peasant family. The various ceremonies to administer to the soul of one person are spread out over a year or more and consist of several distinct rituals.



Voodoo Speak

Desounen is the Vodou ritual that takes place immediately after someone dies, before burial of the body. It accomplishes two important functions. It separates the *gwo-bon-anj* from the body and dispatches it to Ginen, the home of the ancestral spirits. And it releases the *mèt tèt*, or the guardian *lwa*, from the head of the deceased.



Danger Ahead!

During the time immediately following a death, the *gwo-bon-anj* lingers near the body and may even move around the house like a ghost (although it remains invisible to the eyes of the living). At this point, it's very dangerous to the living and can contaminate them with death. That's why it's so important to begin the ritual of *desounen* as soon as possible after death.

The Function of the Death Ritual

Immediately after death and before burial, an elaborate death ritual must take place. This ritual, called *desounen*, helps the *gwo-bon-anj* successfully make its journey to Ginen. If the ritual isn't carried out correctly or is neglected altogether, the *gwo-bon-anj* may become trapped in the physical realm.

Desounen has another important function as well. It releases the protective *lwa*, the *mèt tèt*, from the head of the deceased, breaking the special bond between them. During the ritual, the *mèt tèt* usually passes to another family member, who literally inherits the deceased's guardian *lwa*.

Until *desounen* is complete, the deceased is still considered to be alive. The soul of the deceased is still present on earth, and it can still act. If *desounen* is neglected, the soul will wander the earth forever, with no permanent home. It will take revenge on its careless family members, bringing bad luck and illness. The *mèt tèt* will also visit misfortune on the neglectful relatives. Fear of this retribution is so acute that a destitute family will sacrifice its last pennies to ensure that *desounen* is properly carried out for a deceased relative.

Dispatching the Soul

Immediately after a person has died, the Vodou priest or priestess is called to the house to perform *desounen*. The priest begins by making sure that friends and

family members are a safe distance away from the body. The priest sprays *kleren* over the body to cleanse it and toward the four cardinal points, or points of the compass, to acknowledge the *lwa* and Bondye. He then lights a candle for the deceased.

Shaking his sacred rattle over the body, the priest implores the *mèt tèt* and the *gwo-bon-anj* to abandon the corpse. When the *mèt tèt* and the soul are released, a shudder runs through the body. It slowly raises its head or shoulders as if trying to sit up, then slumps back, completely lifeless.

The guardian *lwa* often possesses the priest as it leaves the deceased's head. The priest goes outside where the mourners are gathered and makes pronouncements about the future of the entire community, using the voice of the *mèt tèt*. Then the *lwa* usually moves on to another family member, who inherits that *lwa* and all obligations the deceased made to him or her.

Putting the Body to Rest

After the ceremony of *desounen* has been completed, a number of other death rituals must take place, leading up to the burial of the body. One of the main purposes of these rituals is to prevent the dead from haunting the living, to keep the deceased from physically rising out of the grave and returning to his or her family home. They are also a community event, bringing the entire Vodou society together to support the bereaved family.

Gathering in Sorrow: The Wake

When someone dies, a member of the family lets out a piercing cry called a *rèl* to let everyone in the neighborhood know about the death. The *rèl* calls the members of the local Vodou community to the house of the deceased for the nightlong wake that precedes the funeral mass and burial. The body is laid out in a room. A table nearby holds pictures of the Catholic saints, a crucifix, vases of flowers, a kerosene lamp that stays lit all night long, and sometimes a plate of food for the *gwo-bon-anj*.

The wake is almost like a party, as the gathered mourners eat, drink, say prayers, sing hymns, and share stories about the deceased. Periodically, though, a family member or close friend suddenly bursts into wailing sobs, reproaching the deceased loudly and bitterly for leaving them. These outbursts of mourning demonstrate how keenly the deceased's loved ones miss him or her and are expected by the rest of the mourners.



Voodoo Speak

The **rèl** is a cry given immediately after a death to announce the death to the Vodou society. Members of the community then gather at the deceased's house for the nightlong wake.

During the wake, friends and family prepare for the funeral rites in the morning. All these preparations are intended to prevent the dead body from returning to disturb the living. To ensure this, the death rituals—starting with *desounen* and ending with the burial—must follow strict guidelines. One task that must be completed during the wake is to dispose of all the deceased's belongings, particularly clothes and personal items.

Preparing the Body for Burial

Preparing the body for burial is the job of the Vodou priest (or priestess), and he usually does it during the *desounen* ritual. (For simplicity's sake, I'll refer to just the priest in this chapter, but the priestess can also perform any of these tasks.) All the preparations ensure that the body remains dead and doesn't physically leave the grave and return home. These precautions also prevent the body from being used to work black magic.



Spiritual Advice

One way to prevent a black magician from disturbing the body of a loved one is to place branches of the sesame plant inside the coffin. If a sorcerer digs up the coffin, he is compelled to count all the sesame seeds before beginning any black magic. But the sesame plant has so many seeds that the sorcerer can't possibly count them all before daybreak, and he can't perform his evil spells in the light of day.

First, the priest draws a cross on the deceased's forehead with flour. The priest then stuffs the nose and ears with cotton. This prevents the body from breathing and from being disturbed by the sounds of the living. Next, the priest shuts the mouth by tying a strip of cloth under the chin and around the top of the head. Finally, the priest ties together the knees and big toes to prevent the body from walking again.

The deceased's pockets are turned inside-out to ensure that they don't contain any items that would give the dead power over surviving family members. The deceased's shoes are removed so that the sound of their footsteps won't disturb the living if the deceased decides to return to this world. Some of the deceased's personal items, like tools, toothbrushes, soaps, and combs, are placed inside the coffin to keep the body from returning to look for them.

To safeguard against black magic being performed on the dead body, the priest snips tufts of hair and clips the nails of the left hand and foot. Dark sorcerers can use these items to gain power over the body and control it. The priest puts the hair and nail clippings in a small white pot along with some chicken feathers that have first been passed several times over the corpse's head. The pot is sealed and put in a safe place until it can be burned in sacred flames during the proper Vodou ritual.

After the priest is finished, the bather is brought in. Bathing of the corpse is a highly complex ritual that must be performed by a trained bather. To begin, the body is placed in a trench dug in the dirt floor of the house to keep the dirty water from washing into the house and infecting the living.

The body is washed with a mixture of cold water, ethyl alcohol, and an infusion made from green oranges, lemon, mint, and sour sap leaves. While washing the body, the bather speaks to the corpse as if it were still alive, explaining that the body will be made beautiful for burial and that it will be buried with dignity. The bather often passes on messages from members of the community in the hope that the deceased will carry them to their dead relatives in Ginen. This tradition of holding conversations with the body while bathing it is common in Africa and has endured in Haiti.

After bathing, the body is ready for burial. The body must be taken out of the house and to the church before dawn, or another member of the family will shortly follow it to the realm of the dead.

Going to the Graveyard

The funeral mass and burial of the body are carried out according to the full traditions of the Catholic Church. When the Saint Domingue slaves were forced to practice Catholicism, they became particularly devoted to the Catholic rites of death. They sometimes took over the rites completely, despite the tendency of slave owners to give their slaves only the most perfunctory funerals.

The funeral mass remains the major contribution of the Catholic Church to Vodou, more important than baptism, communion, or the Saints. It has become integrated into the series of death rites as a Vodou ritual in and of itself, and the mass is scrupulously observed.

After the funeral mass, the coffin is carried to the cemetery at the head of a procession of mourners. This journey can't proceed in a straight line, or the dead will likely find their way back home. So, the pallbearers pretend to lose their way, make unexpected turns or zigzags, and occasionally rotate the coffin to disorient the deceased. Before the coffin is lowered into the grave, it is turned one more time to completely confuse the deceased.

The mourners remain at the graveside until the grave is completely filled with dirt. Then anyone who touched the coffin must wash their hands with the leaves of the *médicinier* tree in order to purify themselves of any contamination by the dead.

Vodou Hoodoo

In some Vodou temples, a ritual called *case kanari*, or "breaking the pot," is held on the day of the funeral. The *kanari* is a large clay jar about two-and-a-half feet high. Family members and friends watch while the priest or priestess rubs the jar with *kleren* and concoctions made from orange and lemon leaves. The *kanari* is placed into a trench dug in the dirt floor of the temple and struck with a steel pipe until it is reduced to dust. The trench is then filled with dirt. This ritual recreates all the death rites: bathing the body; separating the *gwo-bon-anj* from the body (symbolized by the breaking of the jar); and burying the body.

Last Prayers

The night following the burial, the Catholic ritual of novena, or last prayers, begins. This ritual lasts nine nights. An unordained Catholic priest presides over this ritual. (See Chapter 14, “The Voodoo Community,” for more information about the role of the unordained Catholic priest in Vodou rituals.) Every evening, friends and relatives gather in the deceased’s house to say prayers, presided over by the Catholic priest.

At the house, an altar is set up consisting of a table covered with an embroidered cloth and hung with a canopy. On the altar are pictures of the deceased, crosses, and flowers, and plates of food are set on the floor before it. On the ninth night, the food left for the deceased is thrown away, and a permanent cross is erected on the grave. The *ti-bon-anj* is supposed to leave the earth on the ninth night, after the final prayers have been said.



Danger Ahead!

No one is exempt from the duty of wearing the colors of mourning. The period of mourning demonstrates the family members’ respect and love for the deceased. If a relative neglects this duty, the dead will seize him or her and bring harm, such as illness or persistent bad luck.

A Time for Mourning

Those who were closest to the deceased are expected to follow a period of mourning that may last anywhere from six months to two years, depending on the mourner’s relationship to the deceased. Purple and black, the colors of mourning, are worn during this time. When the period of mourning is over, the deceased has completely retreated from the land of the living.

Raising the Soul

After the *gwo-bon-anj* is separated from the body in the ceremony of *desounen*, the spirit descends into the primordial waters beneath the earth and enters Ginen, the home of the ancestral spirits and *lwa*. There, it remains for at least one year and one day. During that time, the soul is transformed into an immortal ancestral spirit and gains sacred knowledge that it can use to guide its descendants.

After one year and one day, the ancestral spirit must be reclaimed from Ginen. A special ceremony called *ouete mò nan ba dlo*, or “removing the dead from the low waters,” is held to accomplish this. This ceremony is very complex and expensive. Often many families must pool their resources to afford it, so that several souls are reclaimed during the same ritual.



Voodoo Speak

The Vodou ritual of **ouete mò nan ba dlo** is held one year and one day after a person’s death. Its purpose is to raise the *gwo-bon-anj*, now transformed into an immortal spirit, from Ginen and through the primordial waters so the spirit can guide its descendants and be honored by them.

Because of the expense of the ceremony, some souls must wait considerably longer than a year and a day. The ritual is necessary, though. Without it, the spirit is condemned to wait in the cold primordial waters without being able to interact with the living. If they have to wait too long, the spirits become angry or bitter, and they may refuse to help their descendants when their souls finally are raised.

The ritual is presided over by Baron Samedi, the *lwa* responsible for allowing the spirits of the dead to return as immortal spirits. A spectator is usually possessed by Baron Samedi or another of the Gédé during the ritual, indicating that the spirits have been given permission to return to the land of the living.

A large metal tub of water draped with a white sheet like a tent is placed in the center of the courtyard of the Vodou temple. The water symbolizes the primordial waters in which the spirits are submerged. A plank placed across the top of the cistern holds a perpetual lamp, a lit wick floating in a bowl of oil.

When the drumming begins, several Vodou initiates enter the temple carrying empty clay pots on their heads. These pots, called *govi*, will become the new resting places of the ancestral spirits. The initiates walk over mats of dried banana leaves and lie down on the mats in a circle around the tub of water, with their heads pointing toward the tub. They can't let their feet touch the ground, or unwanted spirits may try to enter the jars.

The Vodou priest or priestess enters the tent and asks the spirits to withdraw from the primordial waters. He recites the names of the dead while shaking his sacred rattle over the surface of the water. Gradually, the spirits emerge and enter the *govi*, causing convulsions in the initiates as each pot is filled.

The ritual is lengthy and exhausting. The spirits usually speak from the *govi* or possess someone briefly as they return, expressing love for their family members and telling them how much they missed them during the long separation. But not all the spirits come back with happiness and celebration. Some are angry or sad at being neglected by their family for so long, and they may return violently or spitefully reveal family secrets.

When all the *govi* are filled, a celebration of feasting and dancing begins. Once the ritual is over, the family members take the *govi* home to place on family altars. From then on, the spirits housed inside the *govi* are treated as if they were minor *lwa* and are periodically given offerings of food. In return, they answer their relatives' requests for advice when making family decisions or protect them from evil works. The *govi* becomes a valuable heirloom that is passed down from generation to generation.



Voodoo Speak

Govi are sacred clay pots used to house ancestral spirits called forth during the *ouete mò nan ba dlo* ritual. The *govi* are kept on a family altar, and the ancestral spirits inside are given periodic offerings of food and treated like minor *lwa*.

Family Ties: Honoring the Ancestors

After death, the ancestral spirits, now called *mò*, gain a higher wisdom and supernatural powers that the living don't possess. After death, these spirits know the secrets of life and death that remain mysteries to the living. They use their powers to bring their family members good luck and give them helpful advice.

The dead spirits are not the same as the *lwa* although some may be elevated to the status of the *lwa* if the Gédé choose (see Chapter 9, “*Lwa* Everywhere,” for more about this process). Rather, they are a different class of supernatural beings called *mò*, or “the dead.” Along with the *lwa* and the Marasa, or twins, the *mò* form a trinity of immortal, supernatural beings.

After an ancestral spirit is raised from Ginen and installed in a *govi*, it can grant requests made by the living. Usually speaking through dreams, the ancestral spirits provide information about herbal medicines, foretell winning lottery numbers, and otherwise grant favors and good luck to their descendants. They give wise advice on matters related to service to the *lwa* and to daily life, such as marriage, childbirth, illness, planting crops, and family problems. In return, the ancestral spirits expect nothing more than the reverence that is their due and periodic rituals in which they are given food offerings.

Ancestral spirits are a valuable asset for any family, but like the *lwa*, they must be honored and given offerings. If they are neglected, they will bring misfortune instead of good luck, and they will torment their descendants with nightmares. The ancestral spirits are generally more forgiving and lenient when neglected by their family members than the *lwa* would be, though.

Each home contains an altar dedicated to the ancestral spirits of the family. The *govi* housing the spirits stand on the altar and are fed regularly. Photographs of the deceased and some of their favorite things are also placed on the altar as well as symbolic objects, like sacred stones, glasses of water, and jars of earth. (You'll learn more about constructing Vodou altars in Part 3, “Voodoo in Practice.”) Family members pay regular visits to the altar to keep it clean, place food offerings there, and commune with the spirits of their ancestors. They take care of it just as they do the altars of their guardian *lwa* that they keep in the house.



Danger Ahead!

The ancestral spirits are much more patient and indulgent than the *lwa* when it comes to receiving offerings. They understand when family finances are low, and they can wait for years until the family can afford to support them. However, if they suspect they are being neglected unnecessarily, they become angry and express their disappointment through harassment and even punishment.

The Least You Need to Know

- ◆ The human soul has two parts: the *gwo-bon-anj*, which descends through the primordial waters to Ginen after death; and the *ti-bon-anj*, which ascends to heaven to join with Bondye after death.
- ◆ Immediately following a death, the Vodou priest or priestess must hold a ritual called *desoumen*, which releases the *mèt tèt* from the head of the deceased and sends the *gwo-bon-anj* on its long journey to Ginen.
- ◆ The death rites of Vodou are complex and ensure that neither the body nor the spirit of the deceased returns to haunt the living; these rites include a night-long wake in which the body is bathed and prepared for burial, a Catholic funeral mass and burial, and novena, or final prayers.
- ◆ One year and one day after the death, the *gwo-bon-anj* must be raised from the primordial waters in an elaborate ritual, which ensures that the ancestral spirit can return to the world of the living.
- ◆ It is the duty of every family to serve the spirits of their ancestors faithfully with periodic offerings of food; in return, the spirits offer helpful advice and bring good luck to the family.

Part

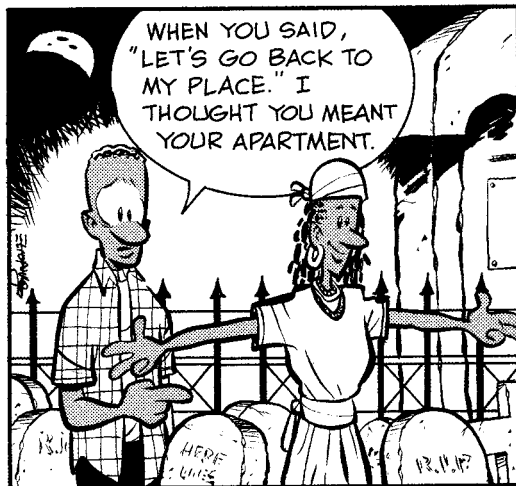
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Voodoo in Practice

Vodou is above all a participatory religion. It isn't enough just to profess a belief in the *lwa*. Devotees of Vodou must show they respect and honor the *lwa* in the things they do every day. They serve the *lwa* by taking part in rituals, building altars, giving offerings and presents, consulting with their priest or priestess, and—if they want to make a serious commitment—becoming initiated.

The ceremonies of Vodou are of primary importance to Vodou followers. The spiritual lives of Vodou devotees revolve around the local temples where they attend rituals. Vodou priests and priestesses play vital roles in devotees's lives, helping them maintain good relationships with the *lwa*. Only through taking an active part in the religion can a practitioner of Vodou ensure a life of good fortune, good health, and happiness.

Anyone may join in Vodou simply by taking action. Building altars, honoring the *lwa* and the ancestors, attending rituals, and developing a relationship with a Vodou priest or priestess are all good places to start. In this part, you'll learn how Vodou is practiced by its followers and how you, too, can take part.



The Priests and Priestesses of Vodou

In This Chapter

- ◆ The Vodou priest's and priestess's roles as religious leaders
- ◆ The priest's and priestess's roles as community leaders
- ◆ How the priest and priestess act as counselors to Vodou practitioners
- ◆ How the priest and priestess use divination to solve problems
- ◆ How the priest and priestess use herbal medicine to treat illness

In Vodou, the temple and its congregation are led by one person: a priest or priestess. Unlike organized religions, such as Catholicism, Vodou has no hierarchy or central organizing body. There is no “pope” who oversees all Vodou priests and priestesses and instructs them in how to officially interpret their religion. Rather, Vodou priests and priestesses operate autonomously, leading their congregations in the way they think best, designing their own rituals, and instructing their community in how to serve the *lwa*. To do this, they employ a huge body of spiritual and practical knowledge that they have mastered over many years of training. The culmination of that training is initiation into the priesthood, which qualifies the new priest or priestess to open a temple, officiate at rituals, and lead a Vodou community.

Because of the independent nature of the Vodou priesthood, priests and priestesses have a lot of power and take on many roles in the community. They are not just the community's religious leaders but are social leaders as well. They play just as large a part in local politics as the elected officials of local government. Vodou priests and priestesses also have a parental role, taking care of everyone who belongs to their spiritual family. In addition, they act as doctors, therapists, financial advisors, social workers, and confessors. Whenever anyone in the community is having a problem—no matter what it is—they usually go see their Vodou priest or priestess first for the solution.

Just as the Vodou temple is often the central gathering place of the rural Haitian community, the Vodou priest or priestess is its central figure: leader, role model, advisor, and spiritual parent. In this way, Vodou carries on the traditions of its ancestral African roots, preserving the role of the religious leader as the lynchpin of the community.

That's Mr. (or Ms.) Spiritual Leader to You

In Vodou, religious leaders may be either men or women. Vodou does not discriminate based on gender. The priestesses of Vodou are equal in every way to their male counterparts, and they are given just as much respect within the community as male priests. The Vodou priest is called an *oungan*, and the priestess is called a *mambo*.

Vodou as a whole doesn't have the same formal hierarchical structure as organized religions. There are no popes, cardinals, nor archbishops. All *oungans* and *mambos* are equal to each other, and all function independently within their own temples and congregations. The *oungan* has the power to make spiritual decisions related to his community without consulting anyone else but the *lwa*. He decides which *lwa* to serve in his temple, when to hold rituals and how to structure them, and how to best keep the *lwa* happy, so they will bestow their favors on his congregation.



Voodoo Speak

A fully initiated Vodou priest is called an **oungan**, and a Vodou priestess is called a **mambo**. To keep things simple, in this book I'll refer to the *oungan* or priest alone, with the understanding that the *mambo* may fulfill any of his duties and is equal to him in every way within the Vodou hierarchy.

A priest's community consists of all the people who attend rituals in his temple (turn to Chapter 14, "The Vodou Community," for more on this). There may be more than one temple in a geographic area, although in the more rural villages, there is usually only one. A priest is free to start his own temple, or he may inherit an existing temple from another *oungan* or *mambo* who mentored him.

Standing Between Us and the Lwa

Vodou is ultimately a democratic religion. Everyone within the community—not just the *oungan*—has direct

access to the *lwa* through possession, dreams, and serving the *lwa* themselves. Strictly speaking, the *oungan* isn't necessary to practice Vodou.

However, the priest makes it much easier to serve the *lwa* well and keep them happy. Through years of training and contact with the *lwa*, he has amassed a considerable amount of knowledge about the spiritual world. This knowledge enables him to know the *lwa* better than anyone else in the community could, to recognize when they are angry or when new *lwa* appear, to call them when needed in ritual and divination, and to interpret the vital messages that they have for the community.

The *oungan*'s primary role is to act as an intermediary between the *lwa* and the people who belong to his temple. Although anyone can contact the *lwa*, he is best qualified to do so. He uses all his knowledge of the *lwa* and his skills for communicating with them to benefit his community; to help each member of his congregation make his or her own personal connection to the immortal spirits.

The priest's close relationship with the *lwa* makes him a natural problem solver. Devotees of Vodou believe that the world is naturally in balance. When problems occur, such as illness, financial woes, or emotional distress, that indicates that the natural balance has been upset in some way. Usually, the person experiencing the problem has angered one of the *lwa* or is the victim of evil spells. The *oungan* communicates with the *lwa*, finds out what the source of the problem is, and discovers the solution—how to appease the upset *lwa* or counteract the black magic. Everyone in the community naturally comes to the *oungan* with their problems of everyday life whether they are medical, financial, psychological, or anything else.

Because the *oungan* has such a close relationship with the *lwa*, he is the absolute religious authority in the community. He knows better than anyone how to please the *lwa*, so that the *lwa* will in turn bestow their favors on the community. He knows the *lwa*'s favorite foods, offerings, sacrifices, ceremonial colors, *vevers*, prayers, songs, drum rhythms, and dances, and he can adapt any of these to fit a specific situation. If the community as a whole is experiencing some misfortune, such as illness or drought, he can quickly figure out which *lwa* to appeal to and design a ritual that will do just that. Because Vodou has no written texts, the *oungan* carries all his knowledge of the *lwa* in his head, passing it down to his apprentices orally.



Spiritual Advice

Anyone who is willing to make the considerable time and financial commitment can become a Vodou priest or priestess. No one is excluded from entering the priesthood based on gender, race, national origin, or sexual orientation. You'll learn more about training for the priesthood in Chapter 16, "Initiation into Vodou."

The *oungan* decides which *lwa* to serve in his temple and how to structure the Vodou ceremonies to please them. He leads the ritual and controls all aspects of it, including which *lwa* are invoked and which animal sacrifices are made. He even controls the *lwa* themselves, calling on them to appear in possession, sending them away when their business is finished, and getting rid of uninvited guests. During rituals, the priest is almost invariably possessed himself, and the *lwa* pass on their formidable knowledge of the state of the community and its future through him. He also decides who to initiate into Vodou and oversees the training of new priests and priestesses within his spiritual “family.”

The Priest's Rattle

The symbol of the *oungan's* religious authority is the *ason*, a rattle used in rituals. The *ason* is made from a hollow calabash gourd filled with snake vertebrae, which symbolize Danbala. The outside of the gourd is decorated with several strands of beads in bright colors, as shown in the following illustration. A small bell is attached to the handle.



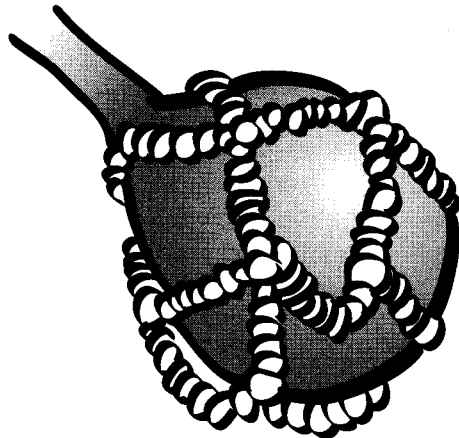
Voodoo Speak

The **ason** is a rattle that represents the office of the priesthood and is used in Vodou rituals. Only an initiated Vodou priest or priestess may use the *ason*. When someone is initiated into the priesthood, he or she is “given the *ason*.”

No one but an initiated *oungan* or *mambo* may use the *ason*. The ritual of initiation into the Vodou priesthood is called “taking the *ason*” because owning the ritual rattle shows that the priest is qualified to lead his own temple and oversee rituals.

The *ason* is the main ritual tool of the *oungan*. He uses it to direct the different stages of the ritual and call the *lwa*. By positioning it and shaking it in certain ways, he can actually control the *lwa*. The *oungan* effectively uses the *ason* to conduct the invisible energies of the *lwa* like a conductor controls the music played by an orchestra.

The ason is a ritual rattle that is decorated with beads and symbolizes the Vodou priesthood.



Getting Paid

Unlike the clergy of organized religions, *oungans* and *mambos* don't draw a salary. There is no central office to pay them. But they are professionals who have trained most of their lives to attain the priesthood, which is often a full-time job.

Vodou priests charge members of their congregation directly for their services. This may seem unusual to people who don't practice Vodou, but in the Vodou community, the relationship between devotee and priest is one of give and take, just like the relationship between people and the *lwa*. The priest provides necessary services and receives payment in return or perhaps barter for services or goods he needs in exchange. No one who practices Vodou sees anything wrong with the priest charging for religious services.

The priest may charge a fee for any of the following services:

- ◆ Making charms and wards
- ◆ Casting magical spells
- ◆ Telling the future
- ◆ Interpreting dreams
- ◆ Dispensing advice
- ◆ Healing
- ◆ Officiating at private rituals
- ◆ Initiating devotees into Vodou
- ◆ Putting on public rituals commissioned by a member of the congregation



Danger Ahead!

Although the *lwa* may demand it, commissioning a ritual is an expensive undertaking. The person requesting the ceremony must pay all the costs, including costs for animal sacrifices and other offerings, drummers, and ritual implements. This financial sacrifice makes the ritual that much more powerful and meaningful, but it often means that important rituals are put off for a very long time.

Fees charged by the *oungan* can vary considerably. They largely depend on what the *oungan* feels his client can afford to pay. But although more accomplished priests with better reputations can charge more, no *oungan* gets rich from being a Vodou priest. They have many expenses, including maintaining the temple, furnishing the altars to the *lwa*, buying animals for sacrifice, paying drummers, and taking care of the temple's initiates. And if anyone in the community is in need, the *oungan* is likely to give that person a little money to help him or her through the hard times.

The Oungan As Community Leader

The *oungan* is not just the leader of the Vodou temple but is also a leader in the community he serves. The Vodou priest is a highly revered member of the community, someone

who can always be relied upon to offer sound advice with all the force of the *lwa* behind it. Almost no important decisions are made for the community without consulting the *oungan* first.

The *oungan* doesn't automatically rise to this leadership position, though. First, he must prove his worth by giving good advice in matters affecting the community and being a



Spiritual Advice

The *oungan* is not just a community leader but also functions as a social worker. If members of the community are in extreme need, the *oungan* will give them money, food, or clothing. He helps pay for sick members to see the doctor or get medicines. He may even pay the school fees for members' children.

strong religious leader whose relationship with the *lwa* benefits the community. As the *oungan* gradually demonstrates his leadership skills, or rather his skills at communicating with the *lwa* and interpreting their counsel, he becomes more accepted as a wise leader and gains more followers.

The *oungan* also knows the value of making influential friends. He allies himself with local politicians, administrators, judges, police, and other important people in the community. This helps ensure that the "official" leaders respect his standing in the community. As such, the *oungan* almost gains an unofficial position in local government.

The Oungan As Therapist and Advisor

Besides being a religious leader and a community leader, the Vodou priest is also a moral leader. Members of the community look to the priest as a role model on how to behave ethically and how to maintain a balanced relationship with the *lwa*. The behavior of the *oungan* shows them how to stay in the *lwa*'s good graces and thus ensure a happy, successful life.

When devotees of Vodou have problems, they are likely to consult the *oungan* first before going to anyone else. In that way, the priest functions as a psychological counselor and all-around advisor to the people who belong to his temple. He listens to their problems, whether with money, a relationship, family, or just a string of bad luck. Then he consults the *lwa* and proposes solutions, which often involve appeasing an offended *lwa* or petitioning the favors of a particular spirit. He may also make a charm or potion designed to solve the problem.

Just listening to the problems of his followers is a valuable service that the priest provides. Life in rural Haiti is difficult, and often there isn't enough money to take care of a person's needs or enough food to feed his family. By going to the *oungan* and asking for advice, a person who feels powerless can take back control. He can take action, and even if that action is merely making a sacrifice to the *lwa*, it may be enough to make the person feel better.

The *oungan* may even go so far as to treat mental illnesses, like depression and schizophrenia. Devotees of Vodou believe that mental illness is the punishment of angry *lwa* or the work of evil spirits. When people suffer from mental illness, that means they are out of balance with the spiritual world. The *oungan* helps them regain that balance.

The Oungan As Fortune-Teller

One of the *oungan's* most powerful tools in advising members of his congregation is divination. All Vodou priests and priestesses perform divination as part of their religious duties. The *oungan* doesn't literally predict the future, though. Instead, he contacts the *lwa*, who can see much more than we can. The *lwa* give the *oungan* advice on what the future may hold and what the best course of action to take is.

The *oungan* has many means of contacting the *lwa*, including dreams, invocation, and fortune-telling. For divining the future, he may use cards, palm reading, figure drawings, shells, tea leaves, coffee grounds, cinders, leaves with magical properties, or glass bottles with dolls inside.

Voodoo Hoodoo

The traditional method of divination in Vodou uses seven small shells that have been charged with magical powers in a ceremony in which a rooster is sacrificed. The shells are kept in a small bag with the skull and tibias of the sacrificed rooster. Before the reading, the *oungan* lights a candle that enables him to communicate with the *lwa*. He lays out sacred stones that have been passed through flaming rum. The *oungan* invokes Simbi, the patron *lwa* of magic, while shaking the shells. He throws the shells onto a mat. The pattern made by the shells gives the prediction.

Divination is a way for the *oungan* to find solutions to problems brought to him by his followers, such as whether to marry, when to plant crops, how to smooth over a troubled relationship, or how to obtain money that is needed. It can also tell the priest what the *lwa* are feeling and what their needs are. Through divination, he can determine whether his clients have been neglecting their service to the *lwa* and how they can appease the spirits, thus bringing back their good fortune.

The Oungan As Folk Healer

One of the *oungan's* most important roles is as a healer. In such a poor country as Haiti, illness is a constant concern. Peasant villages typically make do without doctors, hospitals, or any of the benefits of modern healthcare, so the priest's role as folk doctor is vital. The

temple also functions as a walk-in clinic, and more than half of the *oungan's* religious activities involve treating sickness.

The Supernatural Source of Disease

According to Vodou belief, illness rarely has a natural cause, such as germs or poor health conditions. Rather, the anger of the *lwa* or the work of black magic almost invariably brings about illnesses. As part of the cure, the *oungan* discovers the supernatural cause of the disease and helps the patient set things right. For instance, patients may have to commission a ritual to appease an angered *lwa* or even dedicate themselves to the *lwa* for life.



Danger Ahead!

Don't confuse the *oungan* with the stereotypical notion of the African witch doctor, who in the movies cavorts half naked around a bonfire wearing a fearsome mask. Rather, the *oungan* is more like a traditional folk healer, drawing on a large body of knowledge about herbal medicines amassed over generations and handed down through the line of the priesthood.

In conjunction with appeasing the *lwa*, the *oungan* makes charms, wards, salves, and potions to help treat the illness. He uses roots, leaves, herbs, and other natural ingredients to construct these cures. Each plant has symbolic meaning, and the *oungan* can combine them in a meaningful way to help the patient regain balance with the spiritual world. But there is no doubt that the herbs the *oungan* uses in conjunction with appeals to the *lwa* have curative properties, much as practiced in folk traditions around the world.

The importance of the *oungan's* role as healer and the great fear of disease in Haiti are reflected in the large number of *lwa* who can be enlisted to help heal illnesses. The following table lists the major *lwa* invoked to help with sickness and their special healing powers.

The Healing Powers of Different Spirits

<i>Lwa</i>	Healing Powers
Gédé	Last resort for people with fatal diseases; cures illnesses in children
Gran Bwa	Provides the herbal remedies of the forest
Loko	First to be consulted in cases of illness; diagnoses disease
Marasa	Provide recipes for herbal medicines

The Herbal Medicine of Vodou

The *oungan* treats his followers with herbal medicine called *medsin fèy*. Over hundreds of years, Vodou priests and priestesses have amassed a formidable knowledge of the healing

properties of the plant life of Haiti. They can recognize hundreds of plants, and they know how to prepare them in proper dosages and how to make infusions and poultices from them. They pass this knowledge down through their initiates, and anyone entering the priesthood must master it. Because *oungans* and *mambos* practice herbal medicine, they are often called “leaf-doctors.”

The *oungan* must know not only how to mix recipes to treat different kinds of ailments, but also how to identify the plants growing in the wild and how best to gather them. The plants must be picked fresh and with the correct methods in order for them to be effective. While collecting herbs, the *oungan* demonstrates his respect for the plants through songs and dances. He may even “buy” the leaves by placing money at the base of the plant from which they were picked. This ensures that the plant, or the *lwa* who oversees the plant, will cooperate and provide a cure.



Voodoo Speak

The entire body of herbal medical knowledge amassed by the *oungans* and *mambos* of Vodou is called **medsin fèy**. This form of medicine uses the native plant life of Haiti to treat both physical and psychic disorders. *Oungans* and *mambos* are thus also called “leaf-doctors,” or *doktè-fèy*.

The *oungan* uses herbal remedies to treat all kinds of minor illnesses, including headaches, colds, infections, small wounds, and stomach complaints. Most of his treatments are tried-and-true folk remedies. For example, he treats bleeding by applying spider webs to the wound, alleviates colds with infusions of herbs, and cures infections with garlic. Because his patients believe that he works directly with the *lwa*, his remedies often have a strong psychosomatic value as well as a purely medicinal one, which seems to bring about miraculous cures.

The *oungan* treats only those illnesses with supernatural causes, illnesses caused by the *lwa*, evil spirits, or black magic. Members of the community who come to the *oungan* with illnesses that have natural causes—illnesses of Bondye—or with accidental injuries are usually referred to a conventional doctor. Only the *oungan* can tell the difference between natural illnesses and illnesses with supernatural causes. The *oungan* won't attempt to treat serious illnesses, or he may offer his cures in conjunction with conventional medical treatment.

If all else fails, the *oungan* will appeal to the *lwa* and attempt what may seem to outsiders like ridiculous methods. For example, a man with what seemed like a hopeless disease was lowered into a hole in which a chicken had been buried alive. A banana tree was placed beside him; if the tree lived, the man would surely die. The man was rubbed down with burning alcohol, and a clove of garlic was placed on his tongue. The *mambo* treating him then appealed to Gédé to spare his life in return for the payment she would give the *lwa*. The man recovered. Vodou lore is full of such stories of miraculous, mysterious cures.

The Least You Need to Know

- ◆ The priests and priestesses of Vodou have absolute religious authority in their temples, operating autonomously and acting as intermediaries between their followers and the *lwa*.
- ◆ Because of their close relationships with the *lwa*, Vodou priests and priestesses are usually consulted when making decisions about the community and thus have an unofficial place in local government.
- ◆ Vodou priests and priestesses act as counselors and therapists for the members of their community, offering advice and solutions to almost any problem brought to them, including mental illness.
- ◆ Vodou priests and priestesses use divination as a tool for solving problems; through divination, they consult the *lwa* and receive their advice.
- ◆ The major role of Vodou priests and priestesses, besides religious leader, is folk doctor; they are experts at herbal medicine and often the only medical help in poor rural communities in Haiti.

The Vodou Community

In This Chapter

- ◆ How Vodou unites the community around the local temple
- ◆ The public temple where Vodou rituals are held
- ◆ The places in the temple where the *lwa* “live”
- ◆ The interior of the temple where private ceremonies are held and altars to the *lwa* are kept
- ◆ Other important people who serve in the temple

Although Vodou is not a formally organized religion, it does have an informal organization. The Vodou priest (or priestess), his initiates, and the people who go to them for spiritual services form a society centered on a local temple. The temple itself is a neighborhood gathering place where people can attend rituals, consult with the *oungan*, or simply chat with their neighbors.

The Vodou temple is the place around which all spiritual activities revolve. It is both public and private, church and home, because the *oungan* usually lives there. There, large public rituals take place in a courtyard open to all, and smaller private ceremonies, such as initiations and divination, are held inside rooms closed to outsiders' eyes. The temple is where all the ritual implements are stored, where altars to the *lwa* are constructed, and where the *lwa* themselves live in sacred trees, pools, and artifacts. It is a clinic, a therapist's office, and a magic shop, where wards and charms can be purchased.

Each temple has its own spiritual “family” made up of the *oungan*, who officiates there, and his initiates, who play larger parts in rituals than ordinary devotees do. They watch out for each other just like members of a biological family and operate in an unspoken hierarchy that is nevertheless understood by all. Collectively, they watch over their community by helping it properly serve the *lwa* and by ensuring that the *lwa* benefit the community.

A Neighborhood Religion

The community who supports a Vodou temple, including the temple’s *oungan* and all his initiates, forms a close-knit group called a *socyyete*. The *socyyete* provides a central organizing structure for Haiti’s many small rural villages. As a group, everyone in the *socyyete* supports and cares for each other, which is necessary in such a poor country as Haiti, where everyone must work together in order to survive.

With Vodou as their unifying force, the members of a *socyyete* care for each other’s needs, guided by the leadership of their *oungan* and under the watchful eyes of their *lwa*. Members of the society come together to help each other in times of trouble or illness. They mourn deaths together, celebrate holidays together, and serve the *lwa* together in communal rituals in which everyone participates and food is shared by all.



Voodoo Speak

A **socyyete**, or “society,” is a group of Vodou devotees who serve the *lwa* in a local temple, similar to the congregation of a church. The *socyyete* is headed by an *oungan* or *mambo*. Each *socyyete* forms an extended family that cares for each other’s spiritual and physical needs.

Each *socyyete* serves its own set of the *lwa* in the neighborhood temple. These include the great *lwa* as well as local *lwa* known only in that area, such as *lwa* who were once *oungans* and *mambos* there, who are sacred in a local place, or who are important in a local occupation or craft. These *lwa*, too, are members of the *socyyete*. The members of the *socyyete* are responsible for maintaining their *lwa* and for keeping them happy, and in return, the *lwa* ensure that no misfortune befalls the community. As the spiritual leader, the *oungan* has the responsibility of caring for the well-being of every member of the *socyyete* and orchestrating service to the community’s *lwa*.

The organization of the Vodou *socyyete* is similar to the family compounds of Dahomey, from which many Haitian slaves were taken. They recognized the advantages of working together to benefit the group as a whole, particularly in hard times. In those villages, several families lived together, worked together, shared food and other essentials, and honored the spirits, all under the guidance of a religious leader who was often a political leader as well. Sharing both the responsibilities and the rewards of their labor, the entire group could thrive where individuals might not survive.

Voodoo Hoodoo

The modern Vodou *socyyete* evolved directly out of the tradition of liberated Haitian slaves to form extended family compounds called *lakous*. In each *lakou*, four or five families lived in separate huts around a central courtyard in a horseshoe-shaped arrangement. One hut was set aside for the *lwa*, which eventually became the Vodou temple. The families lived and worked together and practiced their religion under the authority of one leader, the Vodou priest.

Becoming a member of a *socyyete* makes you a recognized follower of Vodou and is the first step toward initiation, which you'll read more about in Chapter 16, "Initiation into Voodoo." However, most members of the *socyyete* don't take that next step, which is both physically taxing and expensive. Rather, they are content to attend rituals, consult the *oungan* when they need to, and give monetary contributions to the temple if necessary.

Gathering Place: The Voodoo "Church"

The Vodou temple is the central gathering place of the *socyyete*. The priest lives there and is available for members of the community who need medical help, psychological counseling, or advice on a problem. Public rituals are held there periodically in order to make offerings to the community's *lwa*, and all members of the *socyyete* attend. In addition, the temple functions like a community center where people gather to socialize with their neighbors and children play. It can even serve as a community theater and museum, where religious drama is performed and sacred art is displayed.

Most of the people who practice Vodou are the poor peasants of Haiti. They don't worship in large, lavishly ornamented churches. Instead, the Vodou temple is a simple, open-sided courtyard with a dirt floor and a tin or thatch roof, surrounded by rough huts. Barnyard animals, such as chickens, roosters, and goats, wander around the courtyard, scratching for food; they belong to the *lwa* and will one day be sacrificed. When not in use for rituals, the temple is hardly recognizable as a sacred place.

The Vodou temple is called an *ounfò*. The term *ounfò* refers to the temple as a whole, including the courtyard where rituals are held, the huts where altars and ritual implements are stored, and even the *oungan's*



Voodoo Speak

The Vodou temple is called an **ounfò**. Each temple includes a roofed but otherwise open courtyard called a **peristil** where public rituals are held. In the center of the peristil is the **potomitan**, a wooden post extending from floor to ceiling that represents the path between the material world and the spiritual world and allows the *lwa* to enter this world during rituals.

house, which usually adjoins the temple. It can also refer to just the temple proper, the closed rooms containing the altars and tools of the priest. As Vodou traditions vary from place to place so can the layout of the *ounfò*, but the basic design of each *ounfò* is the same throughout Haiti.

The Ritual Space

Most of the *ounfò* is taken up by the *peristil*, a roofed but otherwise open space where public ceremonies take place. When rituals aren't being held, the *peristil* functions as a neighborhood social center. The *peristil* has a floor of beaten earth and a roof made of tin or thatch. It is open on most sides but may be bordered by a low wall, so curious spectators who aren't members of the *socete* can watch ceremonies without taking part.

Symbols of the great *lwa* are placed all around the *peristil*. In the center of the yard is a place for the ritual bonfire, with an iron bar set in the middle of the fire to symbolize the warrior *lwa* Ogou. A model ship representing Ezili, the *lwa* of love and the moon, hangs from the roof of the *peristil*. A black cross is erected to one side of the courtyard for Baron Samedi.

The Highway of the Lwa

The most important symbol of all is located in the exact center of the *peristil*. That is the center post, called the *potomitan*. The center post is made from a single tree trunk, and it extends from the floor to the ceiling. It is set in a circular concrete base, about one foot high. A whip hangs on the post, reminding devotees of their origins as slaves. The post is painted in horizontal or spiral bands in bright colors representing Ayida-Wedo, the *lwa* of the rainbow. But the post as a whole symbolizes Papa Legba, keeper of the gates between the material world and the spiritual world.



Spiritual Advice

The majority of all *ounfòs* honor the Rada *lwa*, and the description of a typical *ounfò* given in this chapter is for one of the Rada type. An *ounfò* constructed to honor the Petro *lwa* will look somewhat different. Some *ounfòs* even have two *peristils*, one for the Rada and one for the Petro. Remember that no ceremony for the Petro *lwa* can be held in a Rada temple.

According to Vodou belief, the top of the *potomitan* is the center of the sky and the bottom is the center of Ginen, where the *lwa* live. The *potomitan* is the link between the sky, the earth, and the world of the *lwa*. Thus, the center post functions as a kind of cosmic highway, allowing the *lwa* to travel up through the primordial waters and enter the material world. Once arrived, they can take possession of their followers' bodies and join in the rituals to honor them. The *potomitan* also acts as a conductor of the *lwa*'s invisible energies, irresistibly drawing them up into the material world like a lightning rod.

Every public ritual held in the *ounfò* revolves around this center post. The *oungan* salutes the *potomitan* before each ritual starts. *Vèvers* invoking the *lwa* are drawn around the center post, and the dancers circle it constantly. Animal sacrifices and other offerings are placed on its concrete base, and libations for the *lwa* are poured there. It is the most crucial place in the *ounfò*, and no ritual could properly be put on there without one.

Where the Lwa Live

Because the *ounfò* is a sacred space, many objects inside the courtyard are consecrated to the *lwa*. These objects are sanctuaries that the *lwa* use as “resting places” when they come into the *ounfò*. They are called *repozwas*.

Generally, any trees growing inside the *ounfò* are consecrated to the *lwa*. One tree near the entrance to the temple is always dedicated to Papa Legba. Each sacred tree is decorated with ribbons and cloth in the colors of the *lwa* who lives there. A pedestal at the base of the tree holds offerings and a lit candle for its inhabitant, and offerings may be hung in the tree’s branches. Ritual dances are often held around the sacred trees, or they may be saluted during some ceremonies.

Each *lwa* has one or more favorite trees, which are considered sacred to that *lwa*. The following table lists the favorite trees of the major *lwa*.



Voodoo Speak

A **repozwa** is any object, such as a tree, stone, or pool of water, that is consecrated to a particular *lwa*. The *lwa* uses the *repozwa* as a “resting place,” a place where it can live while in the material world. *Repozwas* are decorated with candles and the colors of the *lwa* who lives there, and offerings for the *lwa* are placed in front of it.

Favorite Trees of the Major Lwa

<i>Lwa</i>	Favorite Tree(s)
Agwé	Raisinier
Ayida-Wedo	All trees, particularly calabash, mapou, palmetto, and tamarind
Ayizan	Palm
Azaka	Avocado, banana, and cherry
Baron Samedi	Citron and médicinier
Danbala	All trees, particularly bougainvillea, calabash, mapou, palmetto, and tamarind
Ezili Freda	Cirouellier and laurel
Gédé	Calabash and médicinier
Gran Bwa	Mapou

Favorite Trees of the Major Lwa (continued)

<i>Lwa</i>	Favorite Tree(s)
Loko	Mapou
Maman Brijit	Elm and weeping willow
Ogou	Bamboo, calabash, mango, and pine
Papa Legba	Calabash, cirouellier, and médicinier
Simbi	Calabash, elm, and mango

In addition to the sacred trees, heaps of stones or other natural objects may also be *repozwas*, if they have been consecrated to the *lwa* who live there. In most *ounfòs*, a pool of water is dug in the ground or constructed above ground as a *repozwa* for one of the aquatic *lwa*, such as Agwé, Danbala, or Simbi.

A Peek Inside the Ounfò

Adjoining one side of the *peristil* is a square house, the *ounfò* proper. This part of the *ounfò* is private, and generally only initiates or devotees holding private ceremonies are allowed inside.

Sacred Storage Space

Inside the house are several smaller rooms. One room is set aside for initiations and other private ceremonies. *Vevers*—abstract, symbolic designs that represent different *lwa*—are painted on the walls of the rooms. Brightly colored sequined flags used in rituals also hang on the walls.



Spiritual Advice

Sacred objects, such as drums, ritual implements, and necklaces, must be “fed” periodically to restore their energy.

This involves sacrificing an animal, such as a chicken, and offering other foods, such as yams, vegetables, and rice and beans. The objects are placed on or near the food offerings, covered with a white cloth, and left inside the *ounfò* overnight to “eat” the sacrificial meal.

Ritualistic objects are stored inside one or more of these rooms. These objects include drums and other musical instruments, the priest’s *ason*, bottles for pouring libations, utensils for preparing animal sacrifices, materials for drawing *vevers*, initiates’ sacred necklaces, *govis* and other pots used in rituals, calabash bowls for holding food offerings, and ceremonial clothing. Candles, tools for divination, ingredients for making medicines and charms, and amulets are also kept inside these rooms. While the inside of the *ounfò* may seem like a jumbled assortment of random objects, everything has symbolic meaning and a specific purpose.

The Rooms of the Lwa

The other rooms inside the *ounfò* contain altars to all the *lwa* served in the temple, including each of the great *lwa*. These rooms are called *bagi*. Alternatively, separate small huts containing altars to the *lwa* may circle the perimeter of the *peristil*. These huts are called *kay-mistè*. An *ounfò* may have up to three or four *bagi* or *kay-mistè*, each containing one or more altars.

When a *bagi* is built and the altar is constructed inside, the entire room and everything in it are purified and consecrated to the *lwa*. This infuses the room and the objects inside it with the power of the *lwa*. The consecration ceremony turns an ordinary object into a sacred one, a tool that can be used to contact the *lwa* to which it is dedicated. This ritual purification also enables the *lwa* to physically live inside the *bagi*, using them as “resting places” just like the sacred trees in the courtyard.

The altars inside the *bagi* represent doorways between this world and the spiritual world where the *lwa* live. Performing a ritual at an altar consecrated to a particular *lwa* calls that *lwa* up from the spiritual world. The *oungan* leans upon the altar and invokes the *lwa* he wants to consult with traditional chants. He can then ask for advice, get the *lwa*'s help with making a charm or herbal recipe, or request that the *lwa* reveal the future through divination.

Each altar is crowded with items that symbolize the *lwa*. Just glancing at a typical Vodou altar, you may see only a chaotic assortment of odd items. But each object was placed on the altar for a specific reason, and each has an important symbolic meaning.

The following items are typically found on altars to the *lwa*:

- ◆ Pictures of the Catholic saints associated with the *lwa*
- ◆ Emblems of the *lwa*, such as a skull for Baron Samedi or a machete for Ogou
- ◆ Sacred thunderstones
- ◆ Dolls—usually ordinary children's toys—that represent the *lwa*
- ◆ Bottles decorated with fabric, beads, and sequins in the colors of the *lwa*
- ◆ Offerings, such as bottles of rum, perfume, cigarettes, or food placed in hollowed-out calabash gourds



Voodoo Speak

Inside the *ounfò* proper, several small rooms called **bagi** are dedicated to the *lwa* served in the temple. These rooms contain altars to the *lwa* and all the *lwa*'s costumes and accessories required when the *lwa* joins rituals through possession. An alternative design is to construct several small huts called **kay-mistè**, or “houses of the mysteries,” around the perimeter of the courtyard.

Voodoo Hoodoo

As you already know, the native Taino thought that thunderstones housed the souls of their ancestors. Believing that the stones have magical powers, practitioners of Vodou consider them sacred. The thunderstones were supposedly created at the beginning of time when Danbala cast thunderbolts to the ground, smashing the earth to pieces. Strong stones are supposed to sweat, whistle, or even talk. They are kept on an altar in bowls of oil to prevent their power from draining away. Sometimes, small pieces of mirror are glued onto the stones to increase their power. Thunderstones are passed down along family lines and are never sold to outsiders, which would be an insult to the *lwa* residing inside.

The *bagi* are also used to store the costumes, accessories, and other emblems of the *lwa*. When the *lwa* mounts someone in possession during a ritual (see Chapter 11, “Possessed by the Spirit”), the possessed person is brought into the *bagi* to dress in the accoutrements of the *lwa*.

Voodoo VIPs

The *oungan* oversees the *ounfò* and leads all rituals held there. But he can’t do everything himself. He has several assistants who help manage the *ounfò* and play important roles in the rituals. These assistants have been initiated into Vodou by the *oungan*, which makes them permanent members of the *ounfò* and qualifies them to take on more responsibilities during rituals.

The Priest's Assistants

Generally, the *oungan* has two or more main assistants: one male, one female, and the rest of either gender. These assistants have progressed far in the initiation process and will one day become *oungans* or *mambos* themselves. They play the most important parts in the rituals, assist the priest in any way necessary, and rank just under the priest in the hierarchy of the *ounfò*.

The male assistant acts as the grand marshal of the ritual, directing the overall movement of the ceremony. He is called *laplas*. At the beginning of the ceremony, he enters carrying a ritual sword symbolizing Ogou, which he uses to cut away the material world, leaving the faithful open to the *lwa* who reside in the spiritual world. Because of this role, *laplas* is also called the “master of the sword.” He leads the flag bearers, who salute the *lwa* with their brightly colored sequined flags. During the ritual, *laplas* orchestrates the flag waving and drumming.

The female assistant leads the chorus that chants during the ritual. She is called the *oungenikon*. She must be able to recognize the *lwa* who manifest in possession during the ritual so she can choose suitable songs to welcome them as soon as the *lwa* appear in costume. She must remember the entire repertoire of chants used in the *ounfò*, which can be hundreds of songs.

The *oungan* may have other assistants besides *laplas* and the *oungenikon*. These assistants also have important tasks during the ritual. They carry the ritual flags, supervise the offerings, prepare animals for sacrifice, and cook the food for the *lwa*. They also may be on hand to give the *oungan* the tools he needs, enforce silence when necessary, and ensure that the ritual runs smoothly, so the *oungan* can concentrate on communicating with the *lwa*.



Voodoo Speak

The Vodou priest has at least two assistants that rank just beneath him in the hierarchy of the *ounfò*. One assistant, who is male, is called **laplas**; his main job is to carry the ritual sword during ceremonies. The other assistant, who is female, is called the **oungenikon**; her main job is to lead the chorus that chants songs to the *lwa* during rituals.

The Initiates

Besides his main assistants, the *oungan* may have several male and female initiates who belong to his spiritual “family.” Although they have not progressed as far in the initiation process as the priest’s main assistants, and thus rank below *laplas* and the *oungenikon* in the hierarchy of the *ounfò*, they still have important roles to play during rituals.

Female initiates make up the chorus that chants songs for the *lwa* during rituals. As such, they must learn the wide variety of songs used in the temple and be ready to begin a new song as soon as the *oungenikon* signals them to do so. Other initiates, male and female, dance for the *lwa*, moving in the precise steps and rhythms called for by the drums and the *lwa* (although any of the spectators may also join in the dancing).

The initiates are most likely to become possessed by the *lwa*. Because they have undergone initiation, they are better prepared to be vessels for the *lwa*, and they have a closer relationship with the *lwa*. Therefore, the *lwa* are more apt to choose them when manifesting during rituals. This is vital to the success of the ritual because if the *lwa* don’t appear in possession, they can’t accept their offerings, give advice, or make predictions about the fate of the *socyetete*.

The initiates also oversee possession, ensuring that no one is hurt and that everything progresses smoothly. It is the job of the priest’s initiates to recognize that possession is occurring, take charge of the people being possessed, and dress them in the accoutrements of the correct *lwa* or bring them that *lwa*’s emblematic objects.

The Bush Priest

Another person who might take part in Vodou rituals is the *prèt savann*, or “bush priest.” The *prèt savann* is an unordained Catholic priest, usually Haitian. Although he doesn’t have any official standing in the Catholic Church, he does know Catholic rites, prayers, benedictions, and hymns. Whenever a Vodou ceremony calls for a Catholic component, the *prèt savann* officiates.



Voodoo Speak

The **prèt savann**, or “bush priest,” is an unordained Catholic priest who performs the Catholic part in Vodou ceremonies. He recites Catholic prayers, hymns, and liturgies at the beginning of rituals, and he officiates at some ceremonies, such as novena, baptism, and marriage to the *lwa*.

During Vodou rituals, the *prèt savann* may recite prayers, chant hymns, and use the symbolic objects of the Catholic Church. He also officiates at some Vodou ceremonies that have strongly borrowed from Catholic traditions. These include the following:

- ◆ Novena, or the final prayers said for the dead (described in Chapter 12, “Death and the Soul”)
- ◆ Baptism, which sometimes occurs during initiation into Vodou (described in Chapter 16)
- ◆ Marriage to a *lwa* (described in Chapter 17, “Special Rituals and Rites”)

Although the *prèt savann* is part of the structure of the *ounfò*, he has no real authority there, and he plays no other part in the ritual. He isn’t necessary for the success of the ritual and may even be absent altogether, particularly in more rural *ounfòs*. The *prèt savann* functions as a symbolic link with the Catholic Church, a reminder of how much Catholicism has contributed to Vodou and how Catholicism still influences Vodou practices.

The Least You Need to Know

- ◆ The Vodou devotees who worship at a local temple under one priest or priestess form a close-knit society who support and care for each other.
- ◆ The largest part of the Vodou temple is an open courtyard where public ceremonies are held around a center post linking the world of the *lwa* to the world in which we live.
- ◆ Trees and other natural objects in the courtyard are consecrated to different *lwa*, who use them as “resting places.”
- ◆ Inside the temple, ritual implements are stored, private ceremonies and initiations are held, and altars to the *lwa* served by the temple are constructed.
- ◆ The *oungan* has several assistants who take important roles during rituals and keep ceremonies running smoothly; his assistants are initiates into Vodou who will one day become priests and priestesses themselves.

Ritual in Vodoo

In This Chapter

- ◆ Why and when Vodou rituals are held
- ◆ The opening of the ritual—consecration of the sacred space and invocation of the *lwa*
- ◆ Drawing of the *vevers* to call the *lwa*
- ◆ Drumming, singing, and dancing to salute the *lwa* and induce possession
- ◆ The animal sacrifice to feed the *lwa*
- ◆ Invoking the *lwa* to appear at the ritual

In Vodou, the ritual is all-important because that is when people come into contact with the immortal *lwa*. The ritual has one main purpose—to call the *lwa* to leave the spiritual world and appear in the physical world through possession. Without the ritual, the *lwa* would be distant, impersonal, and unable to benefit the community. Every part of the ritual, from the offerings made to the *lwa* to the drumming, dancing, and singing, is designed to induce the *lwa* to appear.

To make that happen, the ritual must follow a basic pattern, and certain elements, such as drumming, dancing, and offerings, are always present. Despite that, Vodou ceremonies are fluid and can change at any moment, according to the instinct of the *oungan* or the instructions of the *lwa*. Rituals also vary from one community to another, based on traditions that have been handed down

through generations. Even if you attend Vodou ceremonies all over Haiti for years, you will never see the exact same ritual twice.

Vodou is a participatory religion, and the ultimate act of participation is joining in the ritual. Everyone in the *socyste* has a role to play, and the ritual is truly a community event. After a successful ceremony, everyone leaves feeling exhilarated and revitalized. Thus, the ritual has more value than just appeasing the *lwa*. It also appeases the people who take part, restoring a sense of well-being and balance to the community.

Let's Have a Ritual

Each Vodou ritual is held for a very specific purpose. Rituals may take place at any time, as need warrants, but there are many annual holidays on which specific rituals are always performed. (A calendar of these holidays is provided in Chapter 17, "Special Rituals and Rites.") The elements of the ritual and the *lwa* invoked vary depending on the purpose that the ritual will fulfill.



Spiritual Advice

The ritual described in this chapter is a typical ceremony to honor the Rada *lwa*. While the basic elements of the ritual are the same, the order of events and other details will differ from one *socyste* to another and even from one night to another in the same *socyste*. Therefore, the ritual can be described here only in the most general terms.



Danger Ahead!

Vodou *socystes* often put on rituals as a result of the demands of the *lwa* themselves, who appear at one service through possession and extract promises to hold another service in their honor. Ceremonies that appear stingy or perfunctory offend the *lwa*, so they will request another, better one. In this way, they can keep the cycle going indefinitely.

The following are all good reasons to hold a ritual:

- ◆ To request a special favor of the *lwa*
- ◆ To solve a critical problem in the *socyste*
- ◆ To counteract black magic or remove an evil spirit
- ◆ To guard against harm or danger
- ◆ To heal sick members of the *socyste*
- ◆ To escape a run of bad luck
- ◆ To celebrate success or a change in fortune
- ◆ To give thanks to the *lwa*
- ◆ To appease an offended *lwa*
- ◆ To satisfy the demands of a *lwa*
- ◆ To celebrate one or more ancestors
- ◆ To acknowledge a special anniversary, such as an initiation
- ◆ To mark a holiday, a saint's feast, or a day sacred to a particular *lwa*
- ◆ At the request of an individual or family, who then foots the bill for the ceremony

Most Vodou ceremonies, no matter why they are held, follow the same basic pattern: The *oungan* (or *mambo*)

invokes one or more *lwa*, offers them food and sacrifices, and asks for them to materialize on the physical plane. In most cases, rituals are held in the *peristil* of the *ounfò* and honor the Rada *lwa*. Most rituals last a few hours although some go on for days.

Greetings and Salutations

Let's set the scene. Before the ritual starts, the drums are already playing softly, and the members of the *societe* crowd the *peristil*. The initiates of the temple gather around, the women in white dresses or robes, the men in brightly colored, gaudy outfits. A bonfire blazes in the center of the courtyard, with an iron bar glowing red-hot in the center of the fire for Ogou. Braziers send plumes of smoke into the night sky, and censers fill the air with scent.

The Opening Prayers

First, the *prèt savann* takes center stage to play his brief part in the ritual. He opens the ceremony by reciting in French a long litany of Catholic prayers—the Lord's Prayer, Hail Mary, and the Apostle's Creed among them. He follows this with various hymns, recited rather than sung. While the *prèt savann* intones the Catholic liturgy in a solemn voice, the *oungan* shakes his *ason*.

This part of the ceremony honors the Catholic saints and Bondye, and it anchors the Vodou ritual to the official religion of Haiti. However, this portion of the ceremony may be absent from many rituals, particularly in the countryside where there often is no *prèt savann* to recite the Catholic prayers.

Consecrating the Sacred Space

After the opening prayers, the language switches to Kreyol, and things begin to get exciting. At this point, the *oungan* consecrates the sacred space of the *peristil*, preparing it for the appearance of the *lwa*.

First, the *oungan* presents water to the four compass points and salutes them with a bow and a shake of the *ason*. This orients the temple space to the spiritual world of Ginen. He then pours water three times before the *potomitan* and three times at the entrance of the *peristil*. He traces a line of water from the entrance back to the center post and kisses the *potomitan* three times. Finally, he



Voodoo Speak

The *rèn drapo*, or “flag queens,” are female initiates who carry the ceremonial *drapo* in Vodou ceremonies. They enter behind *laplas* at the beginning of the ritual and march in procession around the *peristil*, saluting the *oungan*, visiting dignitaries, and the sacred space.

pours water three times before each drum. He repeats these libations in front of any visiting dignitaries. The *oungan* finishes by saluting the assembly and the drummers.

After the libations, the drummers play a special rhythm, and *laplas* enters the *peristil* carrying his sword. Two female initiates called *rèn drapo* follow him carrying the ceremonial *drapo*, or sequined flags. Traditionally, one flag represents Ogou and the other represents a *lwa* who has special significance for the *socye*.

The priest kisses the hilt of the sword and the poles of the flags. The three initiates then salute the four cardinal points, the center post, and the drums with their sword and flags. They also salute the *oungan* and any visiting dignitaries. They march around the perimeter of the *peristil*, allowing the devotees to greet the sword with a kiss and the flags with a salute. This part of the ritual evokes the revolutionary past of Vodou and helps the celebrants remember their ancestral roots.

Invoking the Lwa

Next, the priest invokes the *lwa* who will be honored in the ceremony, starting always with Papa Legba. The beginning of the invocation asks Papa Legba to open the gates between the material world and the spiritual world, so the other *lwa* may come through. The *oungan* sprinkles rum on the ground and traces Papa Legba's *veve* while chanting some version of the following:



Spiritual Advice

The priest officiating the ceremony decides the order in which the *lwa* are named, a critical point of protocol. Naming the *lwa* determines which *lwa* will dominate at the ritual, and getting the order wrong carries the risk of offending one of the *lwa*. Vodou priests and priestesses must memorize this sequence as part of their training, but they are free to vary it as necessary.

Papa Legba, ouvri bayè-a pou mwèn

Pou mwèn pase

Lè ma tounen, ma salyié lwa yo

Papa Legba, open the gate for me

So I can go through

When I return, I will salute the *lwa*

Following the invocation of Papa Legba, the priest recites the names of the *lwa* in hierarchical order. He begins by saluting the Vodou trinity of the spirits, Marasa, and *mò*, or the dead. He then salutes Loko, the spirit of the original Vodou priest. Finally, he names the other *lwa* to be honored in the ritual, beginning with the great *lwa* and the *lwa* who are specially served by that *socye*. The invocation usually proceeds in this order: Papa Legba, Marasa, Loko, Ayizan, Danbala,

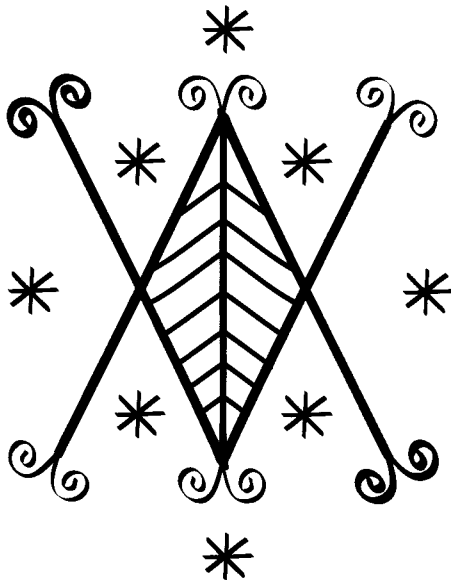
Ayida-Wedo, Sobo, Badé, Agassu, Agwé, Lasiren, Ezili, Bosou, Azaka, Ogou, Gédé, Baron Samedi, and Maman Brijit.

Pictures and Patterns

When the salutations, libations, and invocations are complete, the priest traces the *vevers* of the *lwa* to be summoned in the ritual on the ground. At the same time, the drums play special rhythms and the chorus chants. The *vevers* serve both as places to put offerings and as magical symbols that call the *lwa* to the material plane. They act like magnets, irresistibly drawing the *lwa* they represent up to the site of the ceremony. The complex designs radiate out from the center post in a wide circle. Some are drawn alone, and others are interlinked to honor an entire host of *lwa*.

The *oungan* doesn't kneel or stoop to draw the *vevers* nor does he consult a manual for the proper design. Rather, he lets powder trickle through his fingers, producing elaborate freehand designs that demonstrate the priest's great skill. Flour or cornmeal are generally used to draw the *vevers*, but the priest may use ashes, chalk, talcum powder, powdered red brick, powdered roots and leaves, charcoal, or gunpowder, depending on the type of ceremony and the *lwa* being invoked. He may also draw *vevers* at the place where the sacrifice is to be cooked and in front of the drums.

The first *vever* is generally for Ayizan, the spirit of the original Vodou priestess, as shown in the illustration. During the drawing of her *vever*, initiates shred palm leaves, Ayizan's symbol. By saluting Loko and drawing the *vever* of Ayizan, the *oungan* pays tribute to the two *lwa* who will preside invisibly as priest and priestess over the remainder of the ritual.



The vever of Ayizan is generally the first one drawn in the Vodou ritual.

Voodoo Hoodoo

You have already seen many examples of *vevers* for the major *lwa* in Part 2, “The Fundamentals of Voodoo.” They are elaborate abstract designs that incorporate the symbols of the *lwa*: a cross for Papa Legba; a flag for Ogou; a heart for Ezili; and a coffin for Baron Samedi. The tradition of drawing symbolic designs for the spirits originated in the religious practices of Dahomey, but they changed considerably when incorporated into Vodou. The designs were greatly influenced by the sand drawings of the Amerindians who inhabited Haiti as well as by the filigree ironwork of the French colonists. Freemasonry symbols are also evident, including stars, compasses, picks, spades, and coffins.

After the *vevers* are drawn, the priest sprinkles them with rum, and initiates lay food offerings on top of them. The priest shakes his *ason* over the *vevers* and places lit candles at the center of the circle. By the end of the ceremony, the *vevers* that the priest has drawn with such care and skill are usually completely destroyed, blown away by the wind or swept apart by dancing feet.

Let's Party! Drumming, Dancing, and Chanting

At this point in the ritual, the drumming, dancing, and chanting begin in earnest and will continue for the remainder of the ceremony—often through the night and until the first light of dawn. All three are crucial elements of any Vodou ritual. The music and dancing honors the *lwa* invoked in the ceremony with their favorite rhythms, songs, and dance steps. They also induce the *lwa* to appear at the ritual through possession. Finally, the irresistible rhythms “heat up” the congregation, inviting all to participate in the dancing and welcome the *lwa*.



Voodoo Speak

The Vodou orchestra is called the **batri**, or “battery.” In Rada ceremonies, it always consists of three drums: the **maman**, or largest drum; the **segon**, or middle drum; and the **boula**, or smallest drum. It may also include an **ogan**, a flattened bell struck with another piece of metal to announce the basic drum rhythm.

The Vodou Orchestra

The orchestra of Rada ceremonies consists of three male drummers and another musician who plays a flattened bell called an *ogan*. Depending on the type of ceremony, other instruments may also be used, including triangles, hand bells, tambourines, bamboo flutes, and rattles. Collectively, the orchestra is called the *batri*.

Drums are the primary musical instruments of Vodou. The three Rada drums are treated like sacred objects. They even have their own *vever*, as shown. The largest drum is called the *maman*, the next largest the *segon*, and the smallest the *boula*. The bodies of the drums are

carved from tree trunks in the shapes of truncated cones. Goatskins are stretched over the top to make the drumheads; they are secured with wooden pegs and cords.



The veve that the oungean draws in front of the three Rada drums.

The *maman* is played with the hand and a small wooden hammer, using both the drumhead and the rim. Its drummer controls all the rhythms played during the ceremony. The *segon* is played with one hand and a forked stick, and the *boula* is played with two long sticks. They provide accompaniment to the main drum. The *ogan*, a large, flattened bell, is struck with an iron rod to announce the basic rhythms that the three drums will play and to keep the pace of the drumbeats.

Voodoo Hoodoo

The drums are sacred objects that must "rest" from time to time to restore their energies. Special rituals called *ba tambou manje*, "feeding the drums," and *kouche tambou*, "putting the drums to bed," are held periodically to do this. The *oungean* lays the drums inside the *ounfò* on a bed of banana leaves. He lights a candle on each drum and drives a machete into the ground in front of them. Chickens are sacrificed and food and drink are sprinkled over the drums. The priest then covers them with a white sheet. The drums are left inside the *ounfò* overnight to replenish their power.

Drumming is crucial to the success of the ritual because it controls the dancing, and the rhythms call the *lwa* to join in the party. The drummers are professional musicians who are well paid for their services. They must know a large repertoire of drum rhythms favored by the different *lwa*. In fact, the *lwa* frequently interrupt the drumming and request new rhythms. The drummers also need a lot of stamina to make it through a nightlong ceremony. Skillful drummers interact closely with the dancers, concentrating their energy and even inducing possession by abruptly shifting tempos.

Singing the Praises of the Lwa

Initiated female members of the *ounfò* make up the chorus, performing under the direction of the *oungenikon*. They sing to the *lwa*, inviting them to join in the ritual and take the offerings. The *oungenikon* decides which songs will best draw and please the *lwa*, and she may abruptly choose new songs to welcome a *lwa* who has appeared in possession or to take the ceremony in a new direction.



Voodoo Speak

Langay is an ancient African language that supposedly evolved from Danbala's hissing. Although the meaning of the language has been lost over time, some words in *langay* are still used in Vodou songs. Devotees who are possessed by the more ancient *lwa* might also speak *langay*, a phenomenon similar to speaking in tongues; only the other *lwa* can understand them.

Singing in Vodou ceremonies uses a call-and-response format between the song leader and the chorus. Each *lwa* has a repertoire of favorite songs. Generally, between three and seven songs are performed for each *lwa* to be invoked in the ceremony, and each song is repeated at least three times. When the *lwa* appear in possession, they might demand additional songs and even teach new songs to the chorus.

Vodou songs are like very short stories, and they are often humorous. The songs describe the essential nature of a *lwa*, well-known behaviors or characteristics of the *lwa*, and the relationship between the *lwa* and their devotees. Most songs are in Kreyol although some words might be in *langay*, an ancient African language for which the meaning has been lost over time.

The following is a song for Danbala, the serpent *lwa* who lives in the water (translated from the Kreyol):

The spirit works in the water, it's Danbala
 The spirit works in the water, it's Danbala
 Papa Danbala is the spring
 Papa Danbala is the spring

Here is a song for Ogou, the *lwa* of fire who likes to drink rum:

Fire spirit where are you going, leave your children
 When I remember Ogou Feray
 I must be strong to call Ogou
 He drinks but is never drunk
 Ogou drinks but is never drunk

This is a song commonly sung for Gédé, the *lwa* of the dead:

Papa Gédé is a handsome man
 Papa Gédé is a handsome man
 He is dressed all in black
 For he is going to the palace

The songs performed in Vodou ceremonies retell the stories and myths about the *lwa*. They are passed down from generation to generation. They form a large body of oral literature, preserving in a unique form the folklore of the Haitian people.

Everybody Dance Now

Along with the singing and the drumming, dance is the third vital element of the ritual. Vodou is often called a “danced religion” because the participants in the ritual fully commune with the immortal spirits through dance. In fact, devotees may simply call Vodou rituals “dances.” Dancing attracts and pleases the *lwa*, and it almost invariably brings on possession. The initiates of the temple always dance, but any of the spectators can join in, and often do as the dancing “heats up.”

Dancing at Vodou ceremonies is not frenzied and wild, as you may have seen in the movies. The movements of Vodou dances are intricate, precise, and often slow. There are several kinds of dances, each honoring a different *lwa*. You already know about the sexually suggestive dance, the *banda*, that is a favorite of the Gédé. Other dances are equally symbolic. The dance for Agwé recalls the movement of fish swimming under the sea, for example, while the dance for Danbala resembles the undulations of serpents.

The dancers perform the *lwa*'s favorite dances while their drum rhythms are played and songs chanted. The drumming, singing, and dancing work together to honor the *lwa* and induce them to manifest in possession.

Sacrifice: The Ritual Meal

The climax of most Vodou ceremonies is the animal sacrifice. Unlike the gods of other religions, the *lwa* must eat. Just as we do, they lose energy and strength when they aren't fed. If a community feeds the *lwa* to keep them strong, then the *lwa* will use that strength to support the community and bring them good fortune.

To people who get their chicken from the supermarket already plucked, packaged, and ready for the oven, animal sacrifice may seem like a barbaric practice. Remember that circumstances are very different in Haiti. Most Haitian peasants don't own refrigerators and must kill their food shortly before eating it to keep it fresh. The Haitian farmer butchers his food everyday. For a Haitian, killing a chicken to feed the *lwa* is no different than killing it to feed his family.

Food is in short supply in Haiti. Thus, the sacrifice serves two purposes. It shows the *lwa* how much their followers honor them by giving them something of real value. And it enables the entire *socyeté* to share the food of a community, as everyone who



Danger Ahead!

In the United States, some states and counties have tried to ban Vodou and related Afro-Caribbean religions by prosecuting practitioners under animal-cruelty laws. However, the Constitution guarantees the freedom to practice Vodou as a religion, including animal sacrifice. The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and other religious-freedom groups have fought these prosecutions and won.

attends the ritual joins in the feast. The *lwa* aren't the only ones who get to eat well at Vodou ceremonies!

Preparing the Sacrificial Animal

Either the *oungan* chooses the animals for sacrifice or the person sponsoring the ritual purchases them. They are selected based on the tastes of the *lwa* to be honored in the ceremony. The most common kinds of animal sacrifices are chickens, roosters, doves, and goats. Occasionally, larger animals (such as cows, bulls, rams, sheep, and oxen) may be sacrificed.

The animals are treated very well once they have been selected for sacrifice. After all, they are the property of the *lwa* and must be handled with care. Otherwise, the *lwa* would be offended. Sacrificial animals are also considered superior to other animals of their kind because they have been chosen to feed the *lwa*.



Spiritual Advice

Large farm animals are extremely valuable, so they are reserved for the most important ceremonies. The ritual of reclaiming the dead from the primordial waters requires the sacrifice of an ox, which is why that ceremony is so expensive. However, a large sacrifice satiates the *lwa* more fully, so giving them a cow or ram might be the only way to appease an extremely angry *lwa*.

On the day of the sacrifice, the animal is given a purifying bath in which its head, neck, and feet are washed with an infusion of leaves. The animal is then powdered and perfumed. Finally, the animal is “dressed.” For instance, the beards of goats are trimmed, ribbons are tied on their horns, and they are draped in silk handkerchiefs. Bulls and other large animals are swaddled in elegant robes.

Before being sacrificed, the animal is offered food from a sacramental dish. If the animal eats, the *lwa* has accepted it for sacrifice. If the animal won't eat, then the *lwa* has rejected it, and it is allowed to go free.

Making the Sacrifice

At the climax of the ritual, the animal is brought into the *peristil* and taken to the center post. The animal is always killed humanely. (Vodou priests don't bite the heads off chickens or torture animals, as the movies and cheap novels may have led you to believe.) The *oungan* quickly breaks the necks of birds or slits the throats of other animals.

Once the animal has been killed, the *oungan* lays it on its back on top of the *vevers* around the center post. He draws *vevers* with cornmeal on the body, which is sometimes showered with offerings. Through sacrifice, the animal's life force becomes a part of the *lwa*. After death, its blood is infused with the divine energy of the *lwa*. The celebrants share this energy by tasting a few drops of the animal's blood—mixed with salt, syrup, and rum

and passed around in a calabash bowl—or by making crosses in blood on their foreheads. The animal's blood is also used to anoint sacred objects.

The body is then taken outside the *peristil* to be cleaned and cooked. Some part of the sacrifice is buried for the *lwa*, usually the head, feet, and internal organs—in other words, the inedible parts. The meat is brought back into the *peristil* to be offered to the *lwa* and to be eaten by the celebrants as well. The food for the *lwa* is laid upon their *vevers*, through which they can eat. The food energizes the *lwa* so that they are able to appear through possession. The consecrated sacrifice also energizes the participants in the ritual, so they may continue celebrating the *lwa* throughout the night.

Calling All Lwa

By this point in the ritual, some of the *lwa* may have already put in an appearance, drawn by the drumming, singing, dancing, and animal sacrifice. If not, the *oungan* invokes the *lwa* at the climax of the ritual. He strikes the *vevers* with his *ason*, obliging the *lwa* to ascend to earth. At this point, possession is almost sure to occur.

In a major ritual honoring the great *lwa*, the first *lwa* to arrive is usually Danbala. The drums play a faster, more insistent rhythm as additional Rada *lwa* appear. Ezili and Agwé generally come next, followed by Ogou. The last *lwa* to arrive is almost invariably Gédé. His appearance signals that the ritual is winding down to a close, ending on a high note with Gédé's humorous antics and a joyful dance of the *banda*.

The Least You Need to Know

- ◆ Rituals can be held for many reasons, most often to thank, appease, or request special favors of the *lwa*.
- ◆ The opening of the ritual consecrates the sacred space with salutations and libations and names the *lwa* to be honored in the ritual.
- ◆ Next, the priest draws *vevers* that function as places to put offerings and as “magnets” to draw the *lwa*.
- ◆ Drumming, singing, and dancing are the most crucial elements of the Vodou ritual, as they often induce the *lwa* to appear in possession.
- ◆ Most Vodou rituals involve an animal sacrifice; the animal is prepared with care and killed humanely, and the meat is shared among all the celebrants as well as offered to the *lwa*.
- ◆ At the climax of the ritual, the *oungan* invokes the *lwa*, and they manifest through possession to take part in the feasting and dancing.

Initiation into Vodoo

In This Chapter

- ◆ Reasons to become initiated
- ◆ The commitments an initiate must make
- ◆ The first step of initiation: washing the head
- ◆ The second step of initiation: trial by fire
- ◆ How devotees become Vodou priests and priestesses

To make a serious commitment to Vodou, you must become initiated. This is not a simple task, however, and the decision to undergo initiation is a major one. Initiation requires a lifelong commitment, and many Vodou devotees choose not to take that step. They are content with attending public rituals and serving the *lwa* privately, in their own homes. For those who do choose to become initiated, though, the spiritual rewards are great.

Initiation into Vodou is not a one-time event. It is an ongoing process that can last for years, culminating in achieving priestly status. With each step, the initiate gains a greater understanding of Vodou traditions, a closer relationship with the *lwa*, and a higher standing in the *societe*. Initiates progress at their own pace and can stop at any stage of the process they like.

Practitioners of Vodou treat the series of initiation rituals very seriously. Next to the rituals of death, they are the most important rituals in the religion, and a great deal of what happens during initiation is kept secret from outsiders.

Initiation ensures that the *socyyete's* traditions and practices are handed down to a successive generation and that the religion as a whole will survive.

No secret information is revealed in this book. Everything described in this chapter is publicly known. (Remember that initiation rituals, like everything else in Vodou, vary according to the traditions of the *socyyete*, so details may differ from place to place.) To find out exactly what happens during initiation, you'll have to get initiated yourself. Chapter 18, "Getting into Voodoo," tells you how.

Called by the Lwa

Vodou priests (and priestesses) possess a large body of spiritual knowledge. They know how to recognize and commune with the *lwa* and how to structure rituals to serve them. They can interpret the messages of the *lwa* given through dreams, possession, and divination. They possess a considerable knowledge of herbal medicine and folk magic, and they can construct treatments, charms, and protective wards for nearly every situation. Finally, they have great insight into the workings of the spiritual world, which enables them to channel and even control the *lwa*.



Voodoo Speak

The entire body of knowledge of Vodou lore, rituals, the *lwa*, and herbalism that the *oungan* or *mambo* possesses is called **konesans**. The priest passes this information down to his apprentices during the long process of initiation. Initiates also learn some of this information intuitively or receive it directly from the *lwa*.

This body of knowledge is called *konesans*. It is not written down anywhere, as Vodou has no sacred texts. No seminaries exist where priests can learn it. Rather, it is passed down through the process of initiation. During initiation, future priests and priestesses apprentice themselves to an *oungan*. They learn by assisting the priest in his religious duties, participating in rituals, and absorbing everything their mentor has to say.

Signs from the Lwa

Traditionally, the office of the priesthood is passed down from parent to child. Although these future priests and priestesses start their training at an early age, the process of attaining the priesthood takes several years. Generally, they won't become fully initiated *oungans* and *mambos* until they reach their early 30s, usually at the age of 31.

Vodou is a democratic religion, though, and anyone may become initiated if they want. Devotees don't choose to undergo initiation themselves; rather, the *lwa* choose them. The *lwa* recognize people who have a strong connection to the spiritual world and a talent for channeling the spirits. They often single out those people for initiation into Vodou.

The *lwa* make their wishes known in many different ways. They might appear to their devotees in dreams or reveal their desire through divination. When they manifest in possession, they might tell someone that he or she has been called to become a priest or priestess. A life-and-death event, such as a serious illness or a near-fatal accident, or a long run of bad luck is often a sign from the *lwa* to pursue initiation.

Sometimes the *lwa* coerce their followers into undertaking initiation. Someone who has received a big favor from a *lwa* may have to promise to become a priest or priestess in return, or someone may have to do it to make up for an offense he or she has committed. Followers may even be literally tortured by a *lwa* until they agree to become initiated.

The surest sign that someone has been called by the *lwa* is an unexpected, unsolicited possession. Generally, initiates, *oungans*, and *mambos* are the only people possessed by the *lwa* during rituals. An unexpected possession is a violent and terrifying event to the uninitiated, because the person hasn't been prepared for it. This kind of possession is called *bosal*, or "wild."

The *lwa*'s choice of an uninitiated person as a horse indicates that the person would make a powerful vessel for the *lwa*. The *lwa* need strong horses or they have difficulty appearing. Once the *lwa* choose someone for possession, that person must be initiated, or "tamed," to make the person a better horse. Initiation brings the person along the path to *konesans*, helping him or her better understand the *lwa* and foster closer relationships with them. Thus, the person becomes better prepared to accept the *lwa* in possession.



Voodoo Speak

Uninitiated devotees who experience possession are called **bosal**, which means "wild." They are like untamed horses that are difficult for the *lwa* to mount. The term originated in the colonial period, when it referred to newly arrived slaves.

Benefits of Initiation

Anyone who wants to become initiated into Vodou has probably been called by the *lwa*. The *oungan* who will apprentice the initiate can often tell whether the person has truly been called. Priests won't turn down anyone the *lwa* want because that would risk offending the *lwa* and directing the spirits' anger their way. However, they may reject some candidates if they sense that the potential initiate might disrupt the harmony of the *ounfo*. By the same token, they compete for strong candidates, such as those who have powerful *lwa* in their heads and those who have skills, talents, and money they can contribute to the *ounfo*.

Someone who has been called by the *lwa* would have many reasons for wanting to undergo initiation. The most obvious benefit is that initiation is the only path to the Vodou priesthood. Although it requires a huge commitment of time and money, many

initiates consider it an investment. Once they have become *oungans* and *mambos*, they can establish their own *ounfòs* and make money selling religious services.

Some devotees who don't intend to pursue the priesthood may still decide to become initiated, just for the beneficial side effects. The following are all advantages of initiation into Vodou:

- ◆ The initiate can contact the *lwa* more directly and lead a more rewarding spiritual life.
- ◆ Initiation deepens the bond with the *lwa*, particularly the *mèt tèt*.
- ◆ Initiation may increase the devotee's good luck and good health.
- ◆ Initiation gives the devotee better protection against magical attacks.
- ◆ Initiates hold a higher place in the *socete* and can participate more directly in rituals.



Danger Ahead!

Initiation is not required to participate in Vodou. You can attend rituals, consult the priest, and serve the *lwa* without ever becoming initiated. No one undertakes the ritual lightly. Usually only those devotees who want to train for the priesthood or take a greater part in ceremonies choose to undergo initiation.

Joining In

Initiation is a serious step deeper into Vodou, and it's not easy. It requires great commitment, discipline, and self-sacrifice. After initiation, devotees become lifelong members of the *ounfò*. They have a moral obligation to help the *socete* serve the *lwa* by assisting in rituals and making themselves available for possession.

Initiation is both physically and mentally challenging, and it requires a huge time commitment on the part of the initiate. The process is designed so that only those devotees who are truly serious about dedicating themselves to the *lwa* will complete it.

Initiation rituals are not cheap. The initiate must collect the necessary ingredients for each stage of the process. They must buy ceremonial clothing, beads for making necklaces, animals for sacrifice, foods for offerings, roots, powders, and pictures of the saints.

Once a devotee has decided to become initiated, or has been told by the *lwa* to do so, it can take years to save up the money necessary for the ritual. Initiation at the highest rank can cost as much as 20,000 Haitian dollars. Initiates often have to rely on support from their families to afford it.



Spiritual Advice

There are ways to reduce the costs of initiation. Often several people complete the ritual together to lower the price for each participant. Initiates may strike bargains with the *oungan*. For instance, a professional musician may agree to become a permanent drummer in the *ounfò* in exchange for initiation. The first two steps of initiation are often combined into one ceremony to cut costs.

Washing the Head: Baptism in Voodoo

The first step in the initiation process is a ritual called *lave tèt*, or “washing the head.” This functions like a baptism, cleansing and purifying initiates and readying them for proceeding down the path to *konesans*.

The *lave tèt* ritual has several benefits, and many devotees who don’t intend to pursue initiation fully still complete this first step. The main purpose of the ritual is to establish the initiates’ *mèt tèt* in their heads. This strengthens the relationships between devotees and their guardian *lwa*, so they are better able to serve each other. It also prepares the head to receive the *lwa* in possession, so the ritual is often held after a devotee has been mounted for the first time. After finishing *lave tèt*, devotees are more likely to be possessed by their *mèt tèt*, and possession is a much smoother process.

As a cleansing and purifying ritual, *lave tèt* can help initiates in many ways. The following are all rewarding side effects of the *lave tèt* ritual:

- ◆ It removes negative energies, such as evil spirits or black magic.
- ◆ It can appease an offended *lwa*.
- ◆ It strengthens the bond with the *mèt tèt*.
- ◆ It gives the devotee a deeper connection to the spiritual world.
- ◆ It refreshes the soul and so can help heal sickness.



Voodoo Speak

Lave tèt, which literally means “washing the head,” is a Vodou ritual that takes place before initiation. During the ritual, the priest washes the initiates’ heads with an infusion of secret herbal ingredients. This ritual officially installs the *mèt tèt* in the head of the initiate and makes possession by the *lwa* easier.

Preparing for the Ritual

A week before the *lave tèt* ritual, the *oungan* makes a poultice of foods, herbs, and liquids related to the initiate’s *mèt tèt* wrapped in leaves. He ties this compress to the initiate’s head with a white kerchief. The poultice helps establish the *mèt tèt* by feeding it directly through the initiate’s head. For that week, initiates eat only the unsalted sacrificial foods of their *mèt tèt*. Sex is prohibited the night before, the night after, and during the ceremony.

Up to three days before the ritual, the *oungan* locks the initiates in a room inside the temple called the *djévo*. The *djévo* is the most sacred and secret room in the *ounfò*. It has heavy doors with strong locks and no windows. This part of the ceremony is called *kouche*, or “putting to bed.” The initiates must lie on their sides on rough mats with stones for pillows. They can’t speak or move and can only call for assistance by ringing a bell.

The ordeal of *kouche* enables the initiates to leave their ordinary lives behind. Fasting, lack of movement, sensory deprivation, and constant drumming help the initiates lose their



Voodoo Speak

The **djévo** is a windowless room inside the *ounfò* where only initiates are allowed to go. There, they undergo the part of the initiation ritual called **kouche**, which literally means, “putting to bed.” For several days, they must lie on their sides on the floor while they are instructed in the spiritual knowledge of Vodou.

sense of themselves so that their *mèt tèt* can fully enter their heads. During this time, the *oungan* instructs the initiates how to serve their *mèt tèt* and teaches them about the *lwa*, including the *lwa*'s ceremonial clothing, foods, dances, emblems, and personality traits. Initiates also begin learning about the traditions of Vodou and the practices of the *ounfò* where they are being initiated.

During *kouche*, the *mèt tèt* usually possess their devotees. Possession signifies that the *lwa* is tied to that person for life. It confirms the role of that *lwa* as the person's *mèt tèt* and indicates that the baptismal ceremony will be successful.

The “Head Pots”

What happens during *kouche* is supposed to be secret. One important event is known to take place during that time: making each initiate's *po tèt*, or “head pot.” The *po tèt* provides a place where the initiate's *gwo-bon-anj*, or soul, can go during possession.

The pots are large, white, apothecary jars made of china and hung with bead necklaces or decorated with ribbons. The *oungan* places hair and nail cuttings from each initiate inside their pots, along with food, oils, and herbs identified with the initiates' *mèt tèt*. The *oungan* passes the pots around the initiates' heads three times and then seals them. The initiates parade in front of the senior members of the *ounfò* with their pots on their heads before placing the *po tèt* on the altars of their guardian *lwa*, who will protect the pots.



Danger Ahead!

The *po tèt* provides a resting place for a person's soul when a *lwa* displaces it during possession. Anyone who has someone else's *po tèt* has great power because it gives them control over that person's soul, which can be used for evil magic. Initiates demonstrate their complete trust in their *oungans* by allowing them to keep their *po tèt*.

The pots remain inside the *ounfò*, but they are the initiates' property. By leaving them in the temple, the initiates show their faith in the *oungan* and acknowledge his authority. The *oungan* could use the *po tèt* to capture an initiate's soul and control it for evil purposes, so leaving the pots with him is a great sign of trust. If the initiates ever lose confidence in their *oungan*, they can remove their *po tèt* from the temple. After an initiate dies, the *po tèt* must be burned in a special ceremony in order to release the initiate's soul to Ginen.

The Ceremony

After three days, the initiates are led out of the *djévo*, usually with their *mèt tèt* possessing their bodies. They dress in white or strip naked to the waist. The *oungan* says prayers over them and sacrifices a white chicken or dove. After the long fast, the initiates gorge themselves on the sacrificial offerings.

The *oungan* prepares a special infusion of water, herbs, and medicinal plants; the exact ingredients are kept a secret. The priest washes each initiate's head with the infusion once, three times, or seven times, depending on the customs of the *ounfo*. Afterward, he wraps their heads with white kerchiefs. They lie on mats covered with white sheets and rest in the *ounfo* for the remainder of the day and night.

After the *lave tèt* ceremony, the initiates become full members of the *socyeté*, able to assist in rituals and more likely to become possessed by the *lwa* during ceremonies, particularly their *mèt tèt*. They are now called *ounsi*, which means “bride of the spirit” in the Fon language of Dahomey (although initiates may be either male or female).

Lave tèt is the first step along the path to *konesans*, to becoming a full *ounsi* or attaining the priesthood. However, many devotees stop at this stage, satisfied that they are now legitimate members of the *socyeté* and that they have established official relationships with their guardian *lwa*. If they go on with the initiation process, they may embark on years of instruction and training before proceeding to the next stage in initiation, which will make them permanent members of the hierarchy of the *ounfo*.



Voodoo Speak

An **ounsi** is an initiate into Vodou who has progressed at least as far as the first step of initiation, the *lave tèt* ritual. (Sometimes they are called *ounsi lave tèt* to distinguish them from *ounsi* who have progressed further.) *Ounsi* are full members of the *ounfo*. They take on more important roles in rituals, and they are likely candidates for possession.

Trial by Fire: The Ordeal of Kanzo

After *lave tèt*, the path of initiation leads to a grueling ritual called *kanzo*. This second step of initiation serves as a rite of passage, transforming the initiate into a member of the *ounfo*'s spiritual family and a devoted servant of the temple's *lwa*. In the ceremony, initiates demonstrate their level of spiritual knowledge and the depth of their relationship with the *lwa*, proving that they are qualified to become full *ounsi*. The ritual symbolizes death and rebirth into Vodou, and the initiate is literally considered a different person after completing it.

Kanzo requires a great deal of self-sacrifice. It is expensive, initiates must separate from jobs and family for a long period of time, and after it's over, they take on a permanent obligation to their *ounfòs* and their societies. But it has great rewards as well. It confers good health, good fortune, and protection from spiritual attack on initiates. It also elevates initiates to a higher standing in the community, making them objects of respect, admiration, and envy.



Voodoo Speak

Kanzo is an important stage in initiation. In this ritual, initiates undergo a “trial by fire” and become permanent, full members of the *ounfò*. The word *kanzo* comes from the Fon language of Dahomey and means “fire.” The entire initiation process may also be called *kanzo*.

Preparing for the Ritual

Kanzo is never performed by one priest or priestess alone. Instead, both a priest and a priestess oversee the ritual. One is the *oungan* or *mambo* who officiates at the temple where the initiation is taking place, and the other is a guest priest or priestess of the opposite gender from another temple. Usually, the guest has a long-established relationship with the initiating priest or priestess; for instance, the two may have been initiated together when they took the priesthood. Together, the pair become the initiate’s spiritual parents, and initiates call them “papa” and “mama.”

The *kanzo* ritual takes from one to two weeks to complete. Before the ritual starts, initiates are confined in the *ounfò* with a sponsor who will help them through the process. For three days, the initiates take purifying baths, eat only mild foods, and refrain from drinking alcohol or caffeine. The initiates wear white—pants and long-sleeved shirts for the men and full-skirted dresses covered with lace and ruffles for the women.

During their confinement in the temple, the initiates learn about life in the *ounfò*. The *oungan* instructs them on the *lwa* they will serve and teaches them about herbal medicine. The initiates discover how to strengthen their ability to commune with the *lwa* and form better relationships with them. All this information is secret, intended only for the ears of the initiates.

They also make the sacred bead necklaces, which they wear during *kanzo* and for a period of time after initiation as protection against evil spirits. Over eight feet long, the necklaces are strung with glass beads and worn over the shoulders and crossed on the chest like a figure eight.

When the ritual is ready to start, the initiates begin to fast. They drink a concoction made from the fruit *corrosál*, which has a mild sedative effect.

The Dance for Ayizan

The *lwa* Ayizan oversees the initiation ritual. At the start of *kanzo*, the *oungan* holds a special ceremony for her to request her approval of the initiates and enlist her help with the initiation.

The initiates tie strips of palm around their heads and arms. They lie down around the center post, with their heads in the middle and their legs sticking out like the spokes of a wheel. The *oungan* describes what they are about to experience and lectures them on their obligations to the *socye* once they have completed initiation.

Voodoo Hoodoo

In some temples, the first ceremony of initiation is the *bat ge*, which means, "beat war." Held on three successive nights, this Petro ritual is designed to bring about possession by the initiates' guardian *lwa*. The *bat ge* is an exciting ceremony in which participants dance with machetes, clashing them together in time to the drumming. The initiates are usually possessed by their *mèt tèt* during the ritual.

A crown made from palm fronds rolled in a white cloth is brought into the *peristil* and presented to the four compass points. The crown is called an *ayizan* after the *lwa* it symbolizes. The *oungan* unrolls the crown and splits it several times until it looks like a giant plume. He keeps part of the crown to make Ayizan's "bone," a ceremonial whip for punishing misbehaving initiates.

The *oungan* places the whip and *ayizan* on a throne for Ayizan, which is set on top of her *vever* and covered with a white sheet. On the chair under the sheet are items that only the initiates are allowed to see. They salute the throne and put their heads under the sheet. Then an honored member of the *ounfò* picks up the *ayizan* and dances with it, whirling it through the air and across the faces and bodies of the initiates. Ayizan eventually possesses the dancer, and the *oungan* guides the *lwa* inside the temple.

Meanwhile, the initiates line up facing the *ounsi* of the temple. At midnight, the *ounsi* blindfold the initiates. They spin the initiates around and pull them all over the courtyard until they become completely disoriented. At this point, the initiates' friends and families wail with grief because their loved ones are about to be taken away from them, never to return as they once were. The *ounsi* guide the blindfolded initiates inside the *djévo*.

A seven-day *kouche* follows just like the *kouche* before the *lave tèt* ceremony, except longer lasting and even more taxing. What happens inside the *djévo* is secret, but the initiates do receive more instruction and training during this time.

The Final Test

After the *kouche*, the initiates are prepared to undergo the final test of *kanzo*, the *boule-zin* or “burning pots.” This part of the ritual is literally a trial by fire. It proves that the initiates have achieved a certain level of spiritual knowledge and are qualified to serve as mature members of the *ounfò*. The ritual takes place outside in the *peristil*.

The initiates are draped in white sheets so that no part of their heads or bodies show and led out into the courtyard. There, iron and clay pots filled with oil or cornmeal have been set over open flames. The initiates must dip their hands into the boiling oil inside each pot or take a ball of hot cornmeal into their fists. Because the *kouche* has prepared them for the ordeal and because their *mèt tèt* often possess them at this point, the initiates’ hands aren’t burned. They then must walk through the fire or over hot coals, but they still aren’t so much as singed.



Voodoo Speak

The last part of the *kanzo* ritual is **boule-zin**, which means “burning pots.” It is literally a trial by fire, in which the initiates prove their self-mastery and spiritual knowledge by handling boiling cornmeal or dipping their hands in boiling oil. Afterwards, the pots used to boil the cornmeal or oil are emptied and set on fire.

Afterward, the pots are coated with grease and set on fire. They eventually break or are overturned. More palm fronds are shredded for *Ayizan*, and a chicken is sacrificed to her. The initiates can now feel relief because they have passed the ultimate test.

Reborn into Vodou

The next morning, the initiates reenter the world dressed in white robes and straw hats and wearing masks of palm leaves in honor of *Ayizan*. They are now reborn as full *ounsi*. Members of the temple lead them to all the sacred spots inside the *ounfò*, including the *potomitan* and the *repozwas*, so they can salute the spirits who live there. The initiates are then taken to the biggest crossroads nearby while people in the street cheer them on. There they salute the four compass directions while the drums play.

Back in the *peristil*, the new *ounsi* sit on low chairs. They don’t remove their masks yet because they are still vulnerable to evil magic. They receive a Catholic-style baptism officiated by the *prèt savann*, who sprinkles each initiate with water and blesses them. Higher initiates of the *ounfò* serve as their godfathers and godmothers. They take a communion of bread and wine. They may even receive new names. This ceremony officially brings the initiates into the spiritual family of the *ounfò*.



Danger Ahead!

Initiation can be dangerous. Because *ounsi* are much envied by others in the community, they may be the targets of black magic or attempts to poison them. They must carefully protect themselves before and during *kanzo*. Initiates often hold a service for their family’s ancestors and special *lwa* before undergoing initiation, asking for protection and guidance throughout the ceremony.

After the baptism, the initiates stand and remove their veils. They salute the *oungan* and the other *ounsi* who were initiated before them. For a period of time as designated by the initiatory *oungan*, the new *ounsi* must abstain from sex and certain foods and continue to wear their sacred necklaces.

After Initiation

After completing the *kanzo* ritual, a Vodou devotee becomes a full *ounsi*, also called an *ounsi kanzo*, outranked only by the priest and anyone initiated before them. *Ounsi kanzo* can take much more active parts in rituals—as members of the chorus or as flag bearers, for instance—and they are much more likely to be possessed by the *lwa*. *Ounsi* also help manage the *ounfò* and assist their *oungan* in any way necessary while continuing to receive instruction and training in Vodou.

The Spiritual Family

Going through the *kanzo* ritual makes Vodou devotees permanent members of the *ounfò*. No matter where their lives take them, they will always have a home in that temple, and the other members of the temple are now their “family,” in the spiritual sense. The new *ounsi* are said to be children of the *ounfò*.

The *oungan* who initiated them becomes the *ounsi*’s spiritual father. Like any parent, he demands respect, devotion, and obedience, and he has absolute authority over his initiates. But he also cares for his initiates in a fatherly way, overseeing their education in Vodou, protecting them from harm, and in some cases going so far as to provide for their material needs.

Voodoo Hoodoo

Although Vodou has no formal hierarchy, it does have a rigid informal one, and all *ounsi*, *oungans*, and *mambos* are expected to acknowledge it. Previously initiated *ounsi* have a higher rank than new recruits. While *oungans* and *mambos* are the ultimate authorities in their temples, they still must defer to the priests who initiated them, their higher ranking initiates, their initiatory priests, and so on. These relationships can get complicated. At the beginning of every ritual, all *oungans* and *mambos* present perform a series of gestures and embraces that define their hierarchical relationships to each other. *Ounsi* learn these complex, unspoken salutations as part of their initiatory training.

Ranking above the *ounsi*’s initiatory priest is the *oungan* or *mambo* who originally initiated the priest. This person is like a grandparent for the new *ounsi*, while all the *oungan*’s fellow initiates are like aunts and uncles. Thus, the line of initiation stretches back for

generations. All the priests and priestesses who came before the new initiates are their spiritual ancestors.

Their fellow initiates are like their brothers and sisters. Those *ounsi* who were initiated before them rank above them in the unwritten hierarchy of the *ounfò*. As their fellow *ounsi* achieve the priesthood, their initiates will also join the hierarchy, becoming like cousins to the new initiates. Initiation into Vodou doesn't just bring devotees closer to the *lwa* or closer to the priesthood. It makes them part of a vast family, lifelong members of a spiritual community that will always care for them and support them.

The Path to the Priesthood

Some *ounsi* choose to stop the initiation process at this stage, satisfied with the larger roles they have to play in the *ounfò* and with their closer relationships with the *lwa*. But they may continue along the path of initiation as apprentices to their initiatory *oungan*. As the *ounsi* become more accomplished and knowledgeable, the *oungan* may give them the roles of *oungenikon*—song master—or *laplas*—sword master.

By assisting the *oungan*, playing more important roles in rituals, and taking on more responsibility with the day-to-day management of the *ounfò*, *ounsi* gradually expand their knowledge of Vodou, progressing down the path to complete understanding of the spiritual world, or *konesans*. Over years of study, they develop their religious skills, including herbal healing, spell casting, and invocation of the *lwa*. When the *ounsi* have achieved the highest level of *konesans*, they are prepared to “take the *ason*,” or become priests and priestesses themselves. Their initiatory *oungan* decides when they are ready.



Voodoo Speak

The final ceremony before initiation into the Vodou priesthood is called **prise des yeux**, which means, “opening the eyes.” At this point, the initiate has gained the highest level of *konesans*. The first rank of *oungan* or *mambo* is *si pwen*, which means, “on the point.” After further ceremonies, the *oungan* reaches the rank of *asogwe*, when he can consecrate other priests and priestesses.

The culmination of *konesans* is a ceremony called *prise des yeux*, or “opening the eyes.” At this point, the *ounsi*'s eyes have completely opened to the invisible world of the *lwa*. They can commune fully with the *lwa*, understand their messages, and call them to the material plane. They are ready to lead their own temples in service to the *lwa*. The details of the *prise des yeux* ceremony are secret; only other *oungans* and *mambos* know what happens during the ritual. Initiates do have to undergo another long *kouche* beforehand, though.

The first rank that newly initiated *oungans* and *mambos* receive is called *si pwen*, or “on the point.” These new *oungans* and *mambos* can conduct rituals and provide spiritual services, but they still haven't achieved full priestly status. Under the patronage of a particular *lwa*, they must undergo additional initiation ceremonies first.

After this trial period, the new *oungans* and *mambos* go through the final ritual in which they achieve the rank of *asogwe*. Now, they are full priests and priestesses of Vodou. They have the final authority in ceremonies conducted in their temples, subject only to the demands of the *lwa*. More importantly, they are authorized to initiate other devotees into Vodou. At this point, they are said to “have the *ason*” because they have the power to confer the symbol of priestly authority on someone else. Generally, they go on to establish their own temples, beginning the process of building a *socyeté*, recruiting their own initiates, and earning a living as a priest or priestess of Vodou.

The Least You Need to Know

- ◆ Vodou devotees do not choose to undergo initiation; rather, they are called by the *lwa*, who indicate through dreams, signs, or unexpected possession that the devotees should become initiated.
- ◆ Initiation into Vodou is a serious step, requiring a great commitment of time and money as well as presenting a physical and mental challenge.
- ◆ The first step of initiation is the *lave tèt* ceremony, in which the initiates’ guardian *lwa* are officially installed in their heads as their lifelong patrons.
- ◆ The second step of initiation is the *kanzo* ceremony, in which the initiates undergo a “trial by fire” and become permanent members of the *ounfò*.
- ◆ After the *kanzo* ritual, initiates can continue their training until they have achieved complete spiritual knowledge and are ready to undergo final initiation into the priesthood.

Special Rituals and Rites

In This Chapter

- ◆ The differences between Rada rituals and Petro rituals
- ◆ Marrying a *lwa*
- ◆ Increasing good luck by taking a “luck bath”
- ◆ The harvest ceremony, or feast of the yams
- ◆ Sacred pilgrimages in Vodou
- ◆ A calendar of major Vodou holidays

Rituals are of central importance to practitioners of Vodou because they enable devotees to commune directly with the immortal spirits. You have already read about the most important rituals in Vodou: the large number of death rituals, the long cycle of initiation rituals, and the basic ceremony to “feed” and honor the Rada *lwa*. Many rituals besides these are held under special circumstances, such as to mark a holiday or important time of year, ward off bad luck or give spiritual protection, or cement a close relationship with a particular *lwa*.

You’ll read about the most important of these additional Vodou rituals in this chapter. But don’t think that the practice of Vodou is limited only to the rituals described in this book. Vodou is a very fluid and adaptive religion. Priests and priestesses have the power and the ability to change existing rituals or invent new ones to meet their *socyetes*’ special needs. That’s one reason why

Vodou is so exciting—because it is always new and different, always changing and evolving.

Rituals to Honor the Petro Spirits

The great majority of all Vodou ceremonies honor the Rada *lwa*, and most temples are devoted exclusively to serving them. Sometimes it is necessary to make a ritual for the Petro *lwa*, though. Petro rituals appease these often jealous and violent spirits, who are likely to bring bad luck if they aren't fed from time to time. Petro rituals are also held to request particularly big favors from these more powerful *lwa*, to ward off black magic or evil spirits, or to gain protection for the *societe*.

Petro rituals follow the same basic pattern as the Rada ceremony described in Chapter 15, "Ritual in Vodoo." There are some major differences, though, that immediately distinguish a ceremony for the Petro *lwa* from one for the Rada *lwa*. The most important difference is that Petro rituals can never be put on in a temple where Rada ceremonies are also held. They must be performed in a *peristil* that is completely dedicated to the Petro *lwa* or, more frequently, outside the temple altogether, such as at a crossroads, in an open field, or in the forest.



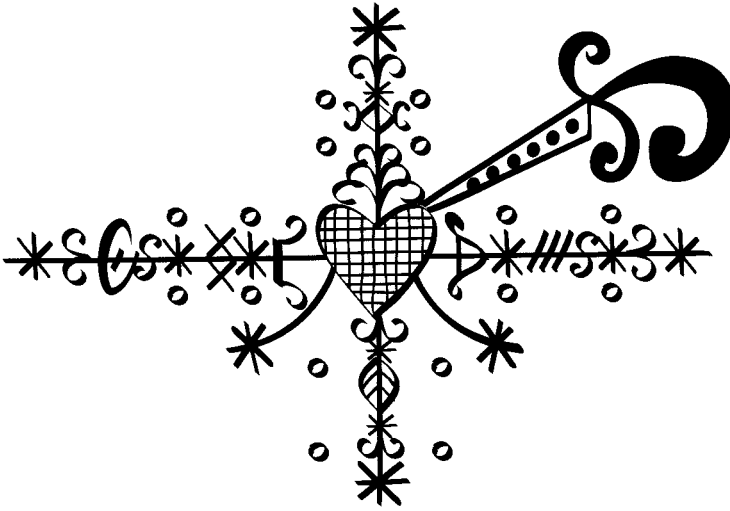
Danger Ahead!

Most orthodox Vodou priests (and priestesses) don't practice black magic. However, some do employ black magic under extreme circumstances (or for large sums of money). In those cases, they must enlist the help of the Petro *lwa*. Petro ceremonies to create black magic are held in secret. They are dangerous because the *lwa* usually require a large sacrifice or a high price in exchange for their services. (Turn to Chapter 21, "That Old Black Magic," to learn more.)

Invoking the Petro Lwa

As in the Rada ritual, the *oungan* begins the ceremony by consecrating the sacred space, pouring libations, and invoking the *lwa*. The priest names the Petro *lwa* in this general order: Legba Petro, Marasa Petro, Wangol, Ibo, Senegal, Kongo, Simbi, Kalfou, Baron Cimetie, Gran Bwa, Ezili Dantò, Marinette, and Ti-Jean Petro. The order of the invocations can change depending on the type of ceremony and the *oungan* officiating, but Legba Petro is always invoked first, just as Papa Legba is the first to be named in Rada ceremonies. Additional Petro spirits other than the great *lwa* may also be invoked if they are to be honored in the ceremony.

After the invocations, the *oungan* draws the *vevers* of the Petro *lwa* on the ground, like the one shown in the illustration. Unlike in Rada rituals, the priest doesn't use flour, wood ashes, or cornmeal to make the designs. Rather, he uses materials like red brick dust, charcoal ash, or gunpowder, which more strongly symbolize the Petro spirits.



The veve for Ezili Dantò depicts Ezili's symbolic heart, but the dagger piercing it represents the violence and anger of the Petro lwa.

Drumming, Dancing, and Feasting

There are two drummers instead of three in Petro ceremonies, and they play using only their hands. Both of the Petro drums are smaller than the *maman* drum of the Rada ritual. The drumheads are made of stretched goatskin, tuned with cords rather than wooden pegs. The drumming is faster than in Rada ceremonies, and the rhythm is syncopated, or off the beat. Whip cracks, explosions of small piles of gunpowder, and whistle blasts often accent the drumming.

Participants in Petro ceremonies dress in red robes rather than white. The dancing is much faster and more passionate than in Rada ceremonies. The more frenzied drumming and dancing evoke the urgency, rage, and tension of the prerevolutionary days, when the Petro *lwa* were first invoked to help throw off slavery. The slave whip and gunpowder also symbolize the Petro *lwa*'s revolutionary origins.

The Petro *lwa* usually require a larger animal sacrifice than the Rada *lwa* do, which is another reason why ceremonies for them are held so infrequently. Often the Petro *lwa* require goats, bulls, or even pigs (pigs are never sacrificed to the Rada *lwa*). If birds are sacrificed in a Petro ritual, the *oungan* cuts their throats rather than wringing their necks in order to drain the blood into a bowl to be used in the ritual.

Till Death Do Us Part: Marrying a Lwa

For most devotees of Vodou, their closest relationship to one of the immortal spirits is with their *mèt tèt* the guardian *lwa* who sits on their heads. But it is possible to form an

even closer relationship with a *lwa* by literally marrying one of the spirits. This ceremony is called *maryaj-lwa*.



Voodoo Speak

Maryaj-lwa is a Vodou ritual in which a person marries a *lwa*. The ceremony is performed exactly like a Catholic wedding, with the *lwa* spouse appearing through possession in one of the guests. After the wedding, the human spouse must remain sexually faithful to his or her *lwa* wife or husband on the *lwa*'s special days. In return, the human spouse receives special benefits and protection from the *lwa*.

Marriage to a *lwa* creates a very close and devoted relationship between a person and his or her spirit spouse. *Maryaj-lwa* often cements a bond that the person has already formed with the *lwa*. Many devotees marry their *mèt tèt*, although they may marry any of the *lwa*. Men most often marry Ezili Freda or Ezili Dantò. Women typically marry Ogou because of the powerful protection he offers, but other *lwa* who are likely to undergo a marriage are Danbala, the Gédé, Baron Samedi, Azaka, and Agwé.

Popping the Question

While marriage to a *lwa* is a huge commitment, it also affords many benefits to the human partner. Just as in a real marriage, spiritual spouses protect, support, and take care of their husbands and wives. They give their partners special help that they don't provide to their other followers, including aid during hard times, good fortune, protection from disease, and wealth.

A person who has been particularly devoted to one of the *lwa* and is getting married for real may arrange a *maryaj-lwa* ceremony to that *lwa* to take place before the actual wedding. This ensures that the *lwa* won't become jealous of the person's future spouse and cause the betrothed harm. However, *maryaj-lwa* should never be used to make a human partner jealous or angry.



Spiritual Advice

In many *ounfòs*, only heterosexual marriage between humans and the *lwa* is permitted, but some temples have a more liberal policy. However, most of the *lwa* are unwilling to undergo homosexual marriage. Ezili Dantò has been known to marry women and is considered the special patron of lesbians, but Ezili Freda is strictly heterosexual.

Sometimes the *lwa* want the marriage, rather than their future human spouses. Marriage ensures that the human follower must provide a greater level of service and more offerings to the *lwa*. The *lwa* can demand marriage through dreams, illness, or spontaneous possessions. Because of the greater level of service required by *maryaj-lwa* and the huge expense of the wedding ceremony, many devotees are reluctant to go through with the marriage and put it off as long as possible.

If one of the *lwa*—particularly Ezili—requests your hand in marriage, it’s a smart idea to agree. The *lwa* can torture you and make you sick until you consent. Once you do get married to the *lwa*, the extra care and protection you receive from your invisible spouse are usually worth the sacrifices you must make.

Here Comes the Bride

Maryaj-lwa ceremonies are rare, primarily because they are so expensive. The ceremony proceeds exactly like a Roman Catholic wedding, with a traditional reception to follow. The human spouse foots the entire bill for the ceremony, including purchasing wedding clothes, rings, flowers, and cake and champagne for the reception.

A *prèt savann* officiates over the wedding, which takes place in a special room inside the *ounfò* or out in the courtyard. Two godparents stand on either side of the mortal bride or groom as witnesses. The ceremony begins with the *oungan* drawing the *vever* of the participating *lwa* on the floor.

The *lwa* then possesses the body of one of the guests in order to take part in the wedding. Usually, the *lwa* possesses someone of the appropriate gender unless the *lwa* is ticked off that the wedding was delayed or wants to make the new spouse feel uncomfortable for some reason. It’s a particularly good sign if the *lwa* possesses the human betrothed of the *lwa*’s new spouse. The possessed guest dresses in the proper wedding attire and acts as a proxy for the *lwa* during the ceremony.

Just as in a real wedding, the two say vows and exchange rings. The marriage certificate lists the names of the human devotee and the *lwa* spouse. The favorite foods of the *lwa* are served at the reception. The celebration includes singing, dancing, and sharing of the wedding cake.



Danger Ahead!

Although the *lwa* attends the wedding ceremony through possession, the human spouse does not consummate the marriage with the possessed person. The human spouse can be intimate with the *lwa* wife or husband only in dreams.

The Honeymoon

Marriage to a *lwa* is for life. There can be no divorce between a human and a *lwa*. In addition, the human spouse must promise to remain faithful to the *lwa* or risk incurring the *lwa*’s wrath.

Being faithful means that for the rest of their lives, the human spouses must devote one or two nights a week to their *lwa* partners. The human spouse must refrain from sex with any other human on the *lwa*’s nights—even with a husband or wife. If the spouse breaks that promise, the spouse has committed adultery against his or her spiritual spouse.

On those nights, the *lwa's* spouse sleeps alone in a specially prepared bedroom. He or she sprinkles the nuptial bed with perfume, hangs it with lace, and makes it with white sheets or with sheets in the colors of the *lwa*. That night, the *lwa* appears in the spouse's dreams, which are often erotic.

Taking a Luck Bath

Taking ritual "luck baths" is an old custom in Vodou. Just as its name implies, a luck bath bestows good luck on the recipient. Commissioning a luck bath is like purchasing the protective and healing powers of the *lwa*, usually from one of the aquatic *lwa* like Danbala, Ayida-Wedo, Ezili, Agwé, or Simbi.

An *oungan* can administer a luck bath in the temple, or the devotee may make a special pilgrimage to bathe in springs and rivers where the *lwa* are known to live. Favorite sites for taking luck baths in Haiti include the waterfall Saut d'Eau at Ville Bonheur and the mud pools in Plaine du Nord. Every Christmas, it's traditional for members of the *socyyete* to return to their home temples to receive purifying luck baths and protective charms from their *oungans*.



Danger Ahead!

You can buy too much luck. Taking too many luck baths can turn a person on with so much of the *lwa's* divine force that the person loses control, with potentially harmful consequences.

In the *ounfo*, the devotees either submerge themselves in a basin of water mixed with the ritual ingredients of the bath or the *oungan* rubs an infusion of water and the ingredients on their bodies. The luck bath requires a mixture of leaves, plants, and herbs associated with the *lwa* whose healing powers are being sought. The more unusual ingredients can be purchased from a voodoo shop or from the *oungan*. Other common ingredients include sweet syrups, aromatic perfumes, scented water, and fragrant flowers.

The baths refresh the *lwa* with their pleasant aromas, who usually possess the priest while he is administering the luck bath. The magical concoctions also strengthen those receiving the baths and heal what ails them. Luck baths cleanse away negative energy and the effects of black magic. When the bath is finished, the devotee should throw a coin into the basin to pay the vessel and thank the *lwa*.

If you want to take a luck bath, the best way is to find an *oungan* to prepare and administer one for you. But that may not be possible. Luck baths don't have to be given by Vodou priests. Many devotees of Vodou give themselves luck baths at home, and you can, too.

Choose ingredients for your bath that will please the *lwa* whose favors you are requesting. For example, taking a luck bath for Danbala will help you succeed in business or land a new job. For his bath, choose ingredients that are sweet, perfumed, and white, such as

flowers, scented water, and champagne. If you need luck in love or money, take a luck bath for Ezili Freda. She prefers luxurious, perfumed ingredients, such as scented water, flowers, and milk. Many voodoo shops sell luck bath concoctions already made up for you (you'll find a listing of voodoo shops in Chapter 23, "In the Voodoo Shop").

You can either sponge the concoction on your body or immerse yourself in a bathtub of water mixed with the special ingredients. While taking the bath, ask the *lwa* to bring you good luck and drive away evil influences. It's a good idea to take the luck bath on the *lwa's* special day and to make a small offering to the spirit afterward to give thanks for the luck they will bring you.

The Feast of the Yams

Every year, Vodou communities in the rural areas of Haiti hold a harvest festival called *manje-yanm*, or "eating of the yams." The ceremony honors Azaka, the patron *lwa* of farmers. Just as with Thanksgiving celebrations in the United States, families gather to give thanks and feast on foods associated with the harvest. The ritual is held just before the first harvest of the yams in the fall, usually on November 25.

Yams are a staple food in Haiti and are thus very important to peasant farmers. They were originally brought over from the homeland in Africa. The *manje-yanm* ceremony helps Haitians remember their bond with their African ancestors as well as thank the *lwa* for a good harvest.

The festival takes place over two days. On the first day, a ritual called *kouche-yanm*, or "putting the yams to bed," is held. In this ceremony, the yams are infused with the divine energies of the spirits. They are placed at the base of the *potomitan*, surrounded by bananas, dried fish, and other traditional foods.

After the *oungan* says prayers to Azaka and the other *lwa*, *ounsi* carry the yams into an altar room inside the *ounfò*. There they are laid in baskets on top of a *veve* drawn with cornmeal, covered with leaves, and left for the night.

The next day, the second part of the ritual called *leve-yanm*, or "rising of the yams," takes place. The yams are now consecrated because they have spent the night in the world of the spirits. Chickens and goats are sacrificed and laid next to the yams in the altar room. The *oungan* draws crosses on the food using cornmeal mixed with ashes, and he pours libations over them.



Voodoo Speak

The **manje-yanm** ceremony is a traditional harvest festival in rural Haiti. The term means "eating of the yams," and the ceremony celebrates the first harvest of the yams, a staple food in Haiti. The ceremony has two parts held on consecutive days: **kouche-yanm**, or "putting the yams to bed," and **leve-yanm**, or "rising of the yams."

During this part of the ritual, the *oungan* invokes the ancestral spirits of Haiti and Africa. Each member of the *socyyete* takes a turn cutting the yams with a machete and remembering the spirits of their family's ancestors. After singing and dancing in praise of the *lwa*, the yams are cooked with dried fish. A portion of the stew is buried for Azaka, and the congregation shares the rest in a huge feast. Now the peasants can harvest the rest of their crop, knowing they have the blessings of the *lwa*.

Voodoo Pilgrimages

Pilgrimages are a long-standing tradition of Vodou. On an annual day sacred to one of the *lwa*, devotees of Vodou make special trips to places associated with that *lwa*. There they give offerings, take luck baths, and otherwise honor the *lwa*. While devotees may not be able to make the pilgrimages every year, particularly if they live outside Haiti, they try to make them as often as possible to receive the good luck and blessings of the great *lwa*.



Spiritual Advice

You don't have to travel to Haiti to take part in a Vodou pilgrimage. In Quebec, Haitians make a pilgrimage to the shrine of Sainte Anne de Beaupré on her feast day each July to honor Ezili, the *lwa* of love. Prospect Park in Brooklyn has become a sacred place for Gran Bwa and a site for pilgrimages honoring him.

Most pilgrimages in Haiti are to natural sites where the *lwa* are known to live, such as rivers, pools, caves, and mountains. Devotees also make pilgrimages to Catholic churches and shrines that have become strongly associated with the *lwa*. The most famous and sacred sites for Vodou pilgrimages are the waterfall of Saut d'Eau and the mud pond in Plaine du Nord. Even if you can't visit Haiti on the dates of the annual pilgrimages, you can still trek to these sites anytime during the year and pay homage to the great *lwa*, perhaps receiving a little good luck from them in return.

The Sacred Waterfall

The waterfall at Saut d'Eau near Ville Bonheur is sacred to many of the *lwa*. It is also a breathtaking sight, plunging down over 100 feet into a deep pool. Ezili once appeared as the Virgin Mary in the top of a palm tree nearby, so the entire area is consecrated to her. The pool underneath the waterfall is the home of Danbala, Simbi, and many other aquatic *lwa*. Ayida-Wedo resides in the waterfall itself, which gives off a mist filled with tiny rainbows.

Every year on July 16, thousands of devotees make the two-mile trek to Saut d'Eau. In the Catholic calendar, July 16 is the holy day dedicated to the Virgin Mary, so it is also Ezili's special day. Devotees tie pink and blue scarves around the trees in honor of her and leave behind small offerings, hoping to receive her good graces throughout the coming

year. To purify themselves, the pilgrims bathe in the pool beneath the waterfall, which is supposed to have the power to heal both physical and spiritual illnesses. Danbala and Ezili often possess the pilgrims as they take their ritual luck baths.

The annual pilgrimage is an awesome spectacle, touted by many guides to Haiti as something not to be missed. The biggest personalities in the Vodou world and the religion's most loyal devotees never miss the festivities. The entire area takes on a carnival-like atmosphere, with drums beating nonstop, joyful dances, and frequent sacrifices of chickens and oxen.

The Mud Baths

Every year on July 25, the feast day of Saint James, a ceremony is held in honor of Ogou Feray at Plaine du Nord in northern Haiti. In the middle of the small town is a mud pond called Trou Sen Jak, which is sacred to Ogou and is supposed to have healing powers. During the time of the pilgrimage, the town resembles a bustling medieval fair as booths selling food, rum, and religious items spring up everywhere.

Pilgrims travel to the mud pond to take part in the annual Vodou ceremony for Ogou, in which sheep and goats are sacrificed. The pilgrims wear blue costumes with red piping and scarves, imitating Ogou's military garb. At the site, they fulfill any vows they have made to Ogou and ask for his favors. Those pilgrims who are possessed by Ogou roll around in the mud pond. The mud is supposed to cure illness and drive away evil magic.

Check Your Calendar

As a result of Vodou's early adaptation to Catholicism, many Vodou holidays coincide with traditional Catholic holy days. This happened not because the Vodou ceremonies resembled the Catholic holidays, but because Catholic holy days were often the only days, the slaves had free to acknowledge their traditional tribal celebrations.

Voodoo Hoodoo

Beginning with Mardi Gras and on each weekend during Lent, a rowdy festival called Rara takes place in Haiti. Bands stroll through the streets, led by an *oungan* who directs the musicians. They play bamboo trumpets, drums, horns made from rolled-up pieces of sheet metal, and the *lambi*, or conch shell. Singers, dancers, acrobats, and jugglers dressed in bright colors accompany them. Before leaving the *ounfò*, the *oungan* holds ceremonies to protect the band from evil spirits along their journey, especially at crossroads. The tradition of Rara started in the Haitian countryside, but it has become a major tourist attraction. Many Haitian pop bands got their start from playing in the festival.

Because traditions differ so greatly from one *societe* to the next, it's impossible to devise a calendar of Vodou ceremonies that is as universal as the Christian or Jewish calendar. The dates when some celebrations are held can vary from one community to another. The following table provides a general listing of the most important holidays that take place throughout the year in the Vodou world, along with the corresponding Catholic holy days (when applicable).

Calendar of Major Vodou Ceremonies

Date	Vodou Ritual	Catholic Holy Day	Description
January 6	<i>Les Rois</i> (the kings)	Epiphany	Honors the ancestral African kings
February 25	<i>Manje Tèt Dlo</i> (feeding the springs)	None	Ritual feeding of the springs, or sources of rivers.
March/April (varies)	Souvenance Festival	Good Friday	A weeklong festival celebrating the great Rada <i>lwa</i> in Souvenance; only <i>oungans</i> and <i>mambos</i> can attend.
March 20	Legba Zaou	None	Honors Papa Legba with the sacrifice of a black goat.
April 29	<i>Case Kanari</i> (breaking the jugs)	None	Sends the souls of those who died in the past year to the realm of the dead.
April 30	<i>Manje-mò</i> (feeding the dead)	None	Ritual feeding of the family ancestors.
May 12	<i>Manje-lwa</i> (feeding the <i>lwa</i>)	None	Ritual feeding of the <i>lwa</i> sacred to the <i>ounfò</i> .
July 16	Pilgrimage to Saut-d'Eau	Day of Our Lady of Mount Carmel	Pilgrimage to the sacred waterfall.
July 25	Papa Ogou	Feast Day of Saint James	Pilgrimage to Plaine du Nord in honor of Ogou Feray.
July 26	Day for Ezili	Feast day of Saint Anne	Rituals and pilgrimages honoring Ezili.
August 15	Soukri Kongo Festival	Assumption	Weeklong ceremony at Nan Soukri to collectively honor the Kongo <i>lwa</i> .
November 1	New Year's Day	All Saints' Day	Ritual bonfires are lit for Papa Legba.

Date	Vodou Ritual	Catholic Holy Day	Description
November 2	<i>Fèt Gédé</i>	All Souls' Day	Festival to honor dead family members, Baron Samedi, and Maman Brijit.
November 25	<i>Manje-yanm</i> (eating of the yams)	None	Harvest festival held in rural Haiti.
December 12	<i>Bato d'Agwé</i>	None	Offerings to Agwé and the other ocean <i>lwa</i> are floated out to sea on an ornamental raft.
December 25	<i>Fèt des Membres</i> (the members' feast)	Christmas	Devotees return home to receive purifying baths.
December 28	<i>Manje-Marasa</i> (the twins' feast)	Feast of the Holy Innocents	Ceremony to honor the divine twins.

The Least You Need to Know

- ◆ Petro rituals are much rarer than ceremonies held in honor of the Rada *lwa* and are distinguished by different drums, ceremonial clothing, animal sacrifices, and other elements.
- ◆ Vodou devotees sometimes marry a *lwa* with whom they have a special bond; in exchange for the *lwa's* protection and good favor, they must remain faithful to the *lwa* at least one night a week.
- ◆ Luck baths are a traditional way of purchasing good luck from the *lwa*; devotees travel to sacred pools and rivers to take them, or an *oungan* administers a bath of herbal ingredients in the *ounfò*.
- ◆ Every autumn, a harvest festival is held in honor of Azaka to bless the harvest of the yams, a staple food in Haiti.
- ◆ Each year, Vodou devotees make pilgrimages to sacred places dedicated to the *lwa* to make offerings and receive the spirits' blessings.
- ◆ While the dates of some Vodou celebrations vary from one *societe* to the next, they tend to follow the calendar of Catholic holy days.

Chapter 18

Getting into Vodou

In This Chapter

- ◆ How to construct an altar for your *mèt tèt* and honor the *lwa* at home
- ◆ How to construct an altar for your ancestors and honor them at home
- ◆ How to find and attend a Vodou ritual
- ◆ Traveling to Haiti to learn more about Vodou
- ◆ Taking the final step: becoming initiated into Vodou

A book like this can give you only a rudimentary understanding of what Vodou is all about. Vodou is not a religion of the written word but of experience. Practitioners of Vodou experience the spiritual world directly through ritual and possession, through constructing altars and making offerings. They don't have a written dogma to study. Instead, they pass their theology on through the songs, dances, and drum rhythms of ritual and through apprenticeship to Vodou priests and priestesses.

As a religion, Vodou permeates all aspects of everyday life. Vodou is about what you do, not what you believe. It is about serving the *lwa* and the ancestors every day. So you can't fully understand Vodou until you take part in it. Vodou is a religion that must be learned gradually, because over time you form a deeper and closer relationship with the *lwa* and your understanding of the spiritual world deepens.

You can go as far into Vodou as you want. You can construct altars for the *lwa* and your ancestors and hold simple rituals for them in your home. You can observe public Vodou rituals and even join in. You can perhaps find an *oungan* (or *mambo*) who is willing to teach you more about the religion. You can even choose to become initiated yourself and make a serious commitment by following the path to *konesans*, to a complete understanding of Vodou. This chapter will help you get started.

Constructing an Altar

A person living outside Haiti may find it difficult to get started practicing Vodou. Unless you live in a major urban center with a large Haitian population, you will probably have a tough time locating a practicing Vodou society nearby.

You can still take part in Vodou by constructing an altar to the *lwa* in your home. Many Vodou devotees, including noninitiates, build their own altars for the *lwa* with whom they have special relationships, or they have their priest build and consecrate their altars for them. They use their altars to make offerings to the *lwa*, commune with them, and receive their guidance. You might start with building an altar for the *lwa* to whom you feel closest, your *mèt tèt*. Or you can build a general-purpose altar that honors all the great *lwa*.

The altar, like almost everything else in Vodou, is a symbol. It represents a doorway between the world in which we live and the world of the *lwa*. You can open that doorway and commune directly with the *lwa* using the objects placed on the altar. Thus, the altar itself is a “crossroads” where the spiritual and the material worlds meet. Any objects on the altar gain magical powers because they are transformed by the supernatural nature of the *lwa*.



Danger Ahead!

It's generally not a good idea to locate an altar for the *lwa* in your bedroom, especially if the *lwa* is of the opposite sex, because the energies of the *lwa* may invade your dreams and disturb your rest. If that's the only place you have for an altar, though, separate it from the sleeping area with a screen or curtain.

Putting Together Your Altar

The first decision to make is where in your home to place your altar. You can build it in a corner or small area of any room in your house. Perhaps you already have set aside a place for spiritual activities, such as meditating, praying, doing yoga, playing a drum, or just sitting and thinking quietly. That space would be an ideal location for your altar.

In Haiti, most altars are constructed directly on the dirt floors of huts, but as that usually isn't possible in American homes, you can place your altar on a small table or platform. Choose an altar cloth in the special

colors of the *lwa* to whom you will consecrate the altar or a white cloth if the altar will serve many *lwa*. First, wash the cloth and hang it to dry in the sun. Then cover the table or platform with it.

All Vodou altars should have certain common elements:

1. Choose four stones from near your house, and place one at each corner of your altar. The stones represent the earth and connect the altar to the physical site of your home.
2. Fill a glass or crystal vessel with clear water, and place it in the center of the altar. The water symbolizes the primordial waters surrounding Ginen.
3. Select a candle—either white or in the symbolic colors of the *lwa*—and place it in a glass candleholder. The candle represents the *potomitan* of the Vodou temple. When lit, it functions as a passageway between the spiritual world and our world.
4. If you practice divination with cards or other objects, keep them on the altar so they can absorb the energy of the *lwa*. Any method of divination—reading tarot cards, casting shells, or even reading tea leaves—can help you better communicate with the *lwa*.

Building an altar is largely a matter of instinct. There is no “right” way to construct an altar. You can place on it any items that symbolize the *lwa* you wish to serve. Items commonly found on Vodou altars include pictures of the Catholic saints associated with the *lwa*, dolls representing the *lwa*, silk scarves in the colors of the *lwa*, and objects depicting the emblems of the *lwa*.

Be as creative as you like. Let the *lwa* guide you when choosing objects for them. Anything that speaks to you or reminds you of the *lwa* should probably have a place on your altar. You might select objects that have special spiritual or personal meaning for you, such as crystals, precious or semi-precious stones, drums, or incense. Unusual natural objects that you find unexpectedly are particularly powerful, including stones, shells, pieces of wood, feathers, flowers, and leaves.

In Vodou, it's common to “baptize” items before placing them on an altar. Baptism consecrates the items to the *lwa*, so the objects on their altar belong to them and absorb their spiritual energy. To baptize an item, scrub it with salt and then rinse it with pure water.



Spiritual Advice

If you would like to practice divination at your altar, the *New Orleans Voodoo Tarot Book and Card Set* (Inner Traditions International, 1992) is a good choice for a divination tool. The tarot cards feature images of the *lwa* and themes from New Orleans Voodoo. There is even a discussion group on the Internet to help you learn how to use the cards at <http://groups.yahoo.com/groups/aeonicvoodoo/>.

If the altar is for more than one *lwa*, create a small space with a few items for each of the major spirits. Arrange the objects in an order that pleases you. The following table lists some emblems of the great *lwa* that you might choose to place on your altar.

Emblems Symbolizing the Great Lwa That Can Be Placed on Their Altars

<i>Lwa</i>	Altar Items
Agwé	Boats; small metal fishes; oars; nautical-related items
Ayida-Wedo	Rainbows; snakes; sky-related items
Azaka	Pipe; machete; straw bag; straw hat; farm implements
Danbala	Snakes; eggs; water-related items
Ezili Freda	Hearts; white lamp with a white bulb; perfume; jewelry; lace; flowers
Gédé and Baron Samedi	Skulls; black cross; shovel; coffin; cigarettes; sunglasses; death-related items
Gran Bwa	Trees; lumps of wood; leaves; forest-related items; natural wood objects
Lasiren	Mirror; comb; trumpet; mermaid; moon; seashells; sea water; beach sand; silver coins; silver jewelry; ocean-related items
Ogou	Machete; sword; butterfly; red scarf; red flags; metal tools; cigars; rum; military-related items
Papa Legba	Cross; crutches; keys; walking stick; straw bag; mirror; rum; cigars; shiny pennies

Always treat your altar with respect. Keep it clean and free of dust. Change the water frequently. Visit it often. Bring the *lwa* little gifts as you find them, making your altar grow over time. Don't use the altar as a convenient place to set nonconsecrated items. If you can find an *oungan* to come and consecrate your altar, all the better!

Serving the Lwa at Your Altar

Set aside one day a week to visit your altar, generally the *lwa*'s special day (see Chapter 10, "The Relationship with the *Lwa*"). On that day, you can perform a simple ritual to feed the *lwa* and request favors from them.

First, prepare some offerings for the *lwa*. Common offerings include the following:

- ◆ Food, such as cooked meat, dried fish, beans and rice, bread, grains, cornmeal, peanuts, vegetables, sweet potatoes, and milk

- ◆ Sweets, such as candy, desserts, fruit, and fizzy sodas
- ◆ Alcohol, such as rum, wine, champagne, and sweet liqueurs
- ◆ Tobacco, such as cigarettes, cigars, and pipe tobacco (you don't have to smoke it)
- ◆ Plant life, such as leaves, fresh herbs, and flowers in the colors of the *lwa*

Voodoo Hoodoo

All the *lwa* are partial to Barbancourt rum, particularly Ogou and Papa Legba. It is found on many Vodou altars and used for libations during rituals. The House of Barbancourt was founded in 1862 in Port-au-Prince. Barbancourt rum is made only from sugar cane grown in the fields of Plaine du Cul-de-Sac. After harvesting, the cane is crushed and processed quickly, before the sugars start to deteriorate. The sugar cane juice is mixed with yeast and stocked in vats. After 72 hours, the juice has fermented into a sugar cane wine, which is distilled and aged in oak casks. This makes what is considered the world's best rum, a great gift for the *lwa*.

Keep each *lwa*'s special tastes in mind when selecting offerings. Choose foods in the favorite colors of the *lwa*. For instance, Ogou's color is red, so you might feed him red beans and rice, beef, strawberries, and cake with red icing. Danbala prefers white foods like eggs, white cake, milk, and rice. Saving a small portion of your meal to share with the *lwa* also makes an acceptable offering.

Put each food offering in a separate small dish or glass, and arrange them on the altar around the large, central candle. In or beside each food offering, place a small votive candle in the color of the *lwa* to whom you're giving the offering.

Set aside a special time for the ritual when you know you won't be interrupted. Dress in white or in the colors of the *lwa*, and tie a white or colored kerchief around your head. Dim the lights in your ceremonial space. As best as you can, eliminate noises and other distractions. Light some incense, if you wish. If you have a CD or tape of Vodou music, you might want to play it in the background while you perform the ceremony. The drum rhythms are sure to inspire you to dance for the *lwa*. (You'll find a list of good CDs in Appendix B, "Resources for Further Study.")

Now you're ready to start the ceremony. Follow these basic steps, but again, let your instincts guide you:

1. Ring a bell, shake a rattle, or clap your hands to signal the beginning of the ritual.
2. Say a prayer of your choice. It may be a Catholic prayer (such as the Lord's Prayer), a prayer from another religion, or a blessing that you make up.
3. Light the central candle. This represents the pathway between our world and the world where the *lwa* live. Focus on the candle's flame.

4. Ask Papa Legba to open the gate between this world and the spiritual world by reciting the following:
 “Papa Legba, open the gate for me
 Atibon Legba, open the gate for me
 Open the gate for me, Papa, for me to pass
 When I return, I will thank the *lwa*.”
5. In a loud, clear voice, call the names of the *lwa* you want to invoke during the ritual.
6. Pour a libation of rum or water three times on the ground.
7. Present each of your food offerings to the four compass points. Breathe on the offerings, touch them to your head and heart, and put them on the altar. Light the offering candles.
8. Celebrate the *lwa*. Sing any related songs you like. Traditional Vodou songs are best, but if you don’t know any, sing anything, such as love songs for Ezili, work-related songs for Ogou, or ocean-related songs for Agwé and Lasiren. While you sing, dance until you work up a sweat.
9. When you feel that the *lwa* are near, ask them for what you want. You might ask them to solve a problem, reveal a secret or the future, or help you make a decision. Perhaps you are looking for love, money, work, success, good health, or strength. Or you can simply ask for their blessings and protection.
10. Spend some quiet time in front of your altar, gazing into the candle flame and vessel of water, and let the *lwa* respond to your requests. Now is the best time to do divination, if you’d like.
11. When you’re finished, blow out the candles and leave the room. Let the food offerings remain on the altar overnight, allowing time for the *lwa* to absorb energy from them.



Danger Ahead!

Don’t throw the food offerings into the garbage after the ritual, as this risks offending the *lwa*. Depending on the *lwa* to whom you gave the offerings, you can dispose of them in the woods, at the foot of a tree, in a river or the ocean, at a crossroads, or by burying them. Wash your offering dishes and store them separately from your ordinary dishes. Don’t use them for regular meals.

The rewards for serving the *lwa* and keeping an altar to them are great. After performing this ceremony, you will probably find that you have extra energy, a new insight into how to solve your problems, and an abundance of good luck.

A Little Respect: Revering Your Ancestors

In the previous section, you constructed an altar for your *mèt tèt* or the great *lwa*. You should also construct

an altar where you can remember and honor your ancestors, the spirits of family members who have passed on before you.

Building an Altar for the Ancestral Spirits

Again, choose a quiet corner to place your altar on a small table or low platform. Cover the altar with a white cloth that has been washed and dried in the sun. On the altar, place a crystal or glass vessel filled with clean water, a dish of earth taken from near your house, and a white candle in a glass candleholder. Sprinkle the altar with perfume or scented water.

Around the altar, place pictures of deceased family members to whom you feel particularly close. You can set the pictures around the bowl or glass of water or hang them on the wall behind the altar. Family heirlooms or objects that had special meaning for the ancestors you are honoring can also go on the altar.

A Simple Ceremony to Honor Your Ancestors

Choose a regular day to remember your ancestors, perhaps one day a month. Make sure the room is quiet and you have uninterrupted time to spend with your ancestors' spirits. Sit in front of your altar. Ring a bell or shake a rattle to signal the beginning of your meditation. Then, light the candle and perhaps some incense.

Gaze into the water while you let yourself relax and your breathing deepen. Meditate on your ancestors and feel the love connecting you to them. Begin to call the names of your ancestors aloud. When you feel they have arrived, splash water three times on the floor to welcome them.

Talk to your ancestral spirits. Tell them how you feel and what problems you're experiencing. Ask them to drive away any misfortune, sickness, or unhappiness in your life and bring you good luck and success.

When you're finished, place food for your ancestors on the altar in special dishes and glasses. Choose foods that your ancestors enjoyed in life, such as the foods of their culture. Make sure that the food contains no salt (the dead can't eat it)! Leave the room, so that the ancestral spirits can eat.

The following morning, throw the food away at the foot of a large tree or bury it in the ground. Wash the altar dishes and put them in a special place to use for next time. Don't use the altar dishes for ordinary meals.

Attending a Ritual

Contrary to popular belief, Vodou ceremonies are not held in secret. Most rituals are in fact open to anyone who wants to observe quietly. Only certain rituals, such as the initiation rituals and privately commissioned ceremonies, are closed to the public.

Ceremonies held in the *peristil* are as a rule open to the public, including people who don't belong to the *socyete*. As long as you behave with respect and decorum, you will be welcomed. You may even be encouraged to join in the dancing.

It may be difficult, however, to locate a Vodou ritual outside of Haiti. Major cities with a large Haitian population, such as Miami, Chicago, Montreal, Paris, and New York, are where you'll most likely find rituals that you can attend. Keep in mind that those rituals may differ significantly from the ones you would see in Haiti. To locate a ritual, find a local voodoo shop—several are listed in Chapter 23, “In the Voodoo Shop”—and ask the proprietor.



Spiritual Advice

Although no one is charged admission to public rituals, it's a common practice for uninitiated participants to make a small cash donation when the hat is passed. The money goes to paying the drummers and the priest and to purchasing the food offerings. If you feel you're being pressured to give more money than you'd like to donate, though, refuse quietly and leave.

In the United States, the easiest place to witness (and even take part in) a voodoo ritual is in New Orleans. You'll get a good taste of New Orleans Voodoo, which differs in many ways from Haitian Vodou but still shares some common elements. Two large festivals are held annually in New Orleans:

- ◆ St. John's Eve Ritual on June 23, sponsored by the New Orleans Historic Voodoo Museum (www.voodooomuseum.com or 504-523-7685 for more information)
- ◆ VoodooFest on October 31, sponsored by Voodoo Authentica (www.voodoooshop.com/voodooofest.html or 504-914-8970 for more information)

Traveling to Haiti

Haiti is the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere. As such, it is not a popular tourist destination although its reputation for natural beauty, a thriving arts scene, and a rich cultural heritage is attracting more visitors. And traveling to Haiti is the best way to have an authentic Vodou experience.

If you decide to make the trip, don't expect resort living. A visit to Haiti is a good idea only for seasoned travelers, not for casual tourists. You will encounter relentless poverty,

hunger, and disease. Travel is made even more difficult by Haiti's poor roads, frequent transportation delays, and intermittent power outages in the cities (there is no electricity at all in the rural areas).

What to Know Before You Go

If you are a citizen of the United States, Canada, or Western Europe, you won't need to obtain a visa for a visit to Haiti of less than 90 days. You will, however, need to produce a return or onward ticket showing that you plan to leave the country. U.S. citizens aren't required to bring a passport, only proof of citizenship, but I strongly recommend that you carry your passport anyway to be on the safe side. You may be asked to produce identification and proof of citizenship while traveling inside the country or before you board your plane home.

For travel from the United States, American Airlines flies to Port-au-Prince from New York and Miami. Air Canada has flights to Port-au-Prince from Montreal, and Air France flies direct from Paris. You will need to pay a departure tax of 25 dollars (U.S.) when you leave Haiti as well as a small security tax in *gouds*, Haiti's national currency. Keep exact change for the taxes with your passport; without it, you won't be able to leave.

American dollars are widely accepted and exchanged everywhere in Haiti. Bring small bills, as larger bills frequently can't be changed except in the larger hotels. Visa, MasterCard, and American Express are accepted at many places although American Express is most widely accepted.

You will need to get immunizations against common diseases before you go, especially against malaria. Check with your doctor well before your trip to ensure that you are completely protected. While in Haiti, drink only bottled or filtered water. Don't eat dairy products, as they are not pasteurized. Peel all fruits and vegetables before eating. Bring over-the-counter medicines with you to treat stomach upset. Also pack essential items, such as bug spray (mosquitoes are everywhere), a flashlight and extra batteries (for power outages), sunscreen, and toilet paper.



Danger Ahead!

While visitors from the United States don't need a passport to go to Haiti, the U.S. State Department strongly advises that you take one. Carry it with you at all times to show as identification while traveling inside the country. Many airlines also require that you show a passport before boarding a flight out of the country.



Spiritual Advice

Appendix B lists some valuable resources for traveling to Haiti, including useful books, Web sites, and tourist agencies.

Don't try to drive yourself around in Haiti. The roads are extremely poor, and driving in the cities is completely chaotic. You should also avoid public transportation, where you might encounter pickpockets or muggers. Instead, hire a driver or take private taxis.

Travel in Haiti is cheap, particularly by American standards. Budget travelers can expect to spend around 50 dollars (U.S.) per day, but if you want to stay in better hotels and eat finer meals, you may pay up to 200 dollars (U.S.) per day.

As a foreigner, you will automatically be perceived by Haitians as “rich.” Keep your valuables out of sight, don't wear flashy jewelry, and lock your doors and windows at all times. Children will beg from you, and everyone will try to sell you something. When tipping or bargaining for wares, keep in mind the extreme poverty of Haitians, and be a little bit generous. If you bring items with you that you don't need to take home, consider donating them to the local people.

Making Friends in Haiti

The Haitian people are, by and large, friendly and welcoming to outsiders. They call all foreigners “blancs” (whites)—even African Americans. This isn't an insult, though, just an affectionate term of address.



Danger Ahead!

Be careful how you use your camera in Haiti. Don't take pictures of anyone without permission. This is particularly important if you manage to attend a Vodou ritual. If you try to take photographs without obtaining the *oungan's* or *mambo's* approval first—and paying a fee for the privilege, in most cases—you will surely get thrown out of the temple.

Haitians are very sensitive to how foreigners treat them. One wrong move on your part can lead to being ignored, receiving wrong information, or even a violent encounter. The Haitians are a dignified and proud people, despite their extreme poverty. Treat every Haitian you meet with warmth, kindness, and respect, and you will most likely be rewarded with friendship and an enthusiastic desire to help.

Greetings are very important in Haiti. Be sure to greet everyone you meet with either a nod or a handshake, and say “*bonjour*” (good day) or “*bonsoir*” (good evening). Maintain eye contact while talking with Haitians. Dress conservatively—skirts for women and pants for men. But keep in mind that Haiti has a tropical climate with temperatures in the 80s all year round so dress comfortably, too.

Getting into Vodou in Haiti

In Haiti, you probably won't be able to witness an authentic Vodou ceremony unless you know someone who can take you to one. Consider hiring a guide or, better yet, make

contact with a local Vodou devotee. If you have a relationship with an *oungan* or *mambo* in your home country, he or she may be able to introduce you to a Haitian Vodou practitioner who can take you to a ceremony.

Vodou rituals take place most frequently in the rural parts of Haiti, where it can be dangerous to travel without a guide, particularly at night. Ceremonies are also held in the poorer sections of Port-au-Prince, where again it's unsafe to walk unaccompanied by a local at night. I don't recommend that you go out seeking a ritual on your own.

On a Saturday or Sunday night, you will likely hear the beating of drums from a Vodou temple. If you happen upon a Vodou ceremony, it's okay to stand quietly outside the low wall surrounding the *peristil* to observe. Say *bonsoir* to anyone standing near you and behave with respect, and you will either be ignored or treated politely.

If you want to see public Vodou festivities without too much trouble, go to Haiti during one of the large festivals or pilgrimages. The following are the best Vodou-related events to attend in Haiti:

- ◆ Rara or the “peasant carnival,” when you can see strolling bands from Vodou societies; takes place every weekend during Lent, but the best time to see it is Easter Sunday.
- ◆ Fèt Gédé (November 1–2), when thousands of people take to the streets to honor the Gédé and be possessed by the *lwa* of the dead.
- ◆ Pilgrimage to Saut d’Eau (July 15–16), when Vodou devotees travel to the magnificent waterfall (worth seeing in itself) to hold ceremonies for various *lwa*, take luck baths, and leave offerings.
- ◆ Pilgrimage to Plaine-du-Nord (July 25), when Vodou ceremonies are held in honor of Ogou and devotees bathe in the mud pools.



Spiritual Advice

Although you can easily attend a Vodou ceremony put on by one of the Haitian tourist agencies, these ceremonies are staged for foreigners and aren't authentic. It may be difficult for you to locate a true Vodou ritual without contacts in Haiti. You'll have more luck if you speak Kreyol or have someone with you who speaks the language.

Getting Serious: Becoming Initiated

Initiation into Vodou is open to anyone not just Haitians or blacks. Legitimate Vodou priests can intuitively sense when someone has been called by the *lwa* for initiation. They won't refuse to initiate someone who is truly sincere for any reason because to do so would offend the *lwa* and bring their anger down on the priest.

Among some Vodou priests, there is an unwritten “rule” that they won’t share initiation secrets with anyone who isn’t black or Haitian. These same priests often take advantage of the ignorance of foreigners, performing bogus ceremonies for them and charging exorbitant fees. People who haven’t been initiated correctly will invariably expose their ignorance to legitimate practitioners and find themselves ridiculed.

If you are coming to Vodou as an outsider—as someone who isn’t Haitian or of African descent—you will probably have to demonstrate your commitment to Vodou and respect for the people who practice it before a legitimate priest will agree to initiate you. Before deciding to take this serious step into Vodou, learn as much as you can about the religion. Also study the history of the Haitian people to develop an empathy for their long struggle for freedom, which Vodou celebrates. It is absolutely essential that you learn to speak and understand Kreyol, which may entail an extended stay in Haiti.



Spiritual Advice

If you are looking for someone to initiate you, I recommend Mambo Racine Sans Bout, who maintains an excellent Web site about Vodou and operates an *ounfò* in Haiti. She regularly performs initiations for foreigners. Find more information about her services at <http://members.aol.com/mambo125/kanzo01.html>.

The first step into initiation is to become a member of a *societe*. Try to find a local *oungan* who will be your mentor. Attend rituals at that *oungan*’s temple, give donations, and demonstrate your commitment to Vodou. The *oungan* should have ties to a *societe* in Haiti and will sponsor you for initiation there.

Initiation rituals must take place in Haiti. The rituals require fresh herbs and other implements that can be obtained only in Haiti. The secret nature of the ceremonies also requires that they be held in Haiti. As a foreigner, you will probably end up paying more than Haitians do for initiation as a matter of course. You will also have to finance an extended stay in Haiti and furnish all the ingredients required for the ceremonies.

The Least You Need to Know

- ◆ Anyone can construct an altar for the *lwa* and hold simple rituals to serve and commune with the spirits in their homes.
- ◆ Another essential home altar is one for your ancestors; the altar is used to feed the ancestral spirits and request their advice on problems.
- ◆ Most Vodou rituals are open to the public; all that is required to attend are respect and a small cash donation.
- ◆ It may be difficult to find a genuine Vodou ceremony to attend in Haiti without a guide, but if you do happen across one, you are welcome to watch quietly.
- ◆ Initiation into Vodou is open to anyone, but it requires sponsorship by an *oungan* or *mambo* and a trip to Haiti.

Chapter 19

Special Issues

In This Chapter

- ◆ The role of sex in Vodou ceremonies
- ◆ Clearing up the myths of human sacrifice and cannibalism in Vodou
- ◆ How Vodou accepts participants of other races, nationalities, and sexual orientations
- ◆ How practicing Vodou affects a previous religious affiliation

Over the years, the reputation of Vodou has suffered from a great deal of misinformation and stereotyping. Many outsiders still think of Vodou as a religion of black magic, devil worship, and cannibalism, based on outmoded, prejudiced accounts from past centuries. Some people who have never seen a Vodou ritual outside of movie theaters still picture the ceremonies as sex orgies culminating in human sacrifice.

Vodou is beginning to obtain a legitimacy in the wider world as it is studied and accepted by more outsiders and as more accurate accounts of its practice are published. Finally, those long-held myths about Vodou are starting to fade. As more people learn about the true nature of this fascinating religion, they find themselves drawn to it. They want to experience it for themselves. Fortunately, Vodou is open to everyone with a genuine desire to learn and a sincere respect for the religion's participants and for the *lwa* they serve.

Vodou is probably one of the most tolerant religions practiced today. Unlike many other religions—particularly organized religions—Vodou is not exclusionary. You don't have to give up any preexisting religious or spiritual beliefs to practice Vodou. In the Vodou hierarchy, women and men are treated equally, without regard to gender. Despite its proud history as a driving force for the first successful slave revolt in the Western Hemisphere and its high regard for the African ancestors, Vodou is open to everyone who is called by the *lwa* whether or not they are Haitian and whether or not they are black.

Voodoo Woohoo: Religion or Party?

Largely as a result of a string of bad books and movies, many people imagine Vodou ceremonies to be drunken debacles with naked dancers whirling around a bonfire, ultimately degenerating into an all-out sex orgy. Nothing could be further from the truth. The depiction of sex in Vodou rituals is completely symbolic, and while drinking does go on at them, very few people get drunk.

In fact, with all the stereotypical images of Vodou ceremonies swirling in their minds, many people may be disappointed when they get the chance to attend a genuine Vodou ritual. Compared to the pictures in their imaginations, Vodou rituals might seem downright tame. If you ever get the chance to attend a ritual, don't let any misconceptions lead you astray. They might keep you from enjoying the true spiritual power and beauty of the ritual.

Drinking in Vodou

Alcohol is a part of life for many Haitians, who drink *kleren* or Barbancourt rum whenever they can afford it. Liquor plays a major role in Vodou as well. All the *lwa* are fond of alcohol, particularly rum and wine, so bottles of liquor make good offerings for altars and ceremonies. Rum is often employed for pouring libations on the ground for the *lwa* during the consecration portion of rituals.

Voodoo Hoodoo

The author Hugh B. Cave described an extraordinary event he witnessed while attending a Vodou ceremony in Haiti during the 1950s. Gédé unexpectedly possessed an eight-year-old boy. The boy slapped an overlarge top hat on his head and lit two cigarettes, which he stuck in his mouth. He then found a bottle of Barbancourt rum that had been spiked with hot peppers, called *trompe* in Kreyol. The boy paraded around the *peristil*, gulping down the rum. He emptied the bottle—which should have killed him—but didn't become drunk or sick. When the *lwa* left, the boy had no memory of what he had done, and his body showed no ill effects.

However, drunkenness at Vodou rituals is rare. Participants at the rituals don't drink very much; they are usually too busy drumming and dancing, which results in a natural high. Someone who is possessed by one of the *lwa*, such as Ogou or the Gédé, may consume an awful lot of rum in a very short time, but the alcohol never affects the possessed person. Once the *lwa* leaves, the person acts as if he or she has had nothing to drink at all.

Sex in Vodou

In Haitian culture, sex is not considered sinful, but rather a natural part of life. The *lwa* approve of sex and have active sex lives, often with multiple partners. Many of them are outrageous flirts, particularly the Gédé and Ezili. But when they manifest in possession, even the most sexual *lwa* don't attempt to actually have sex with anyone. Everything they do remains at the level of harmless flirtation.

Sex has its place, and that is not at Vodou ceremonies. Rituals in Vodou follow prescribed patterns and time-honored traditions. They are dignified, disciplined proceedings that never resemble anything like a sex orgy.

In the popular imagination, Vodou dances are depicted as frenzied and highly sexual. Often, the dancers are wearing very little or nothing at all! But at genuine Vodou ceremonies, the dancing is stately and ordered. The dancers are fully clothed in long, flowing robes and gaudy costumes.

While some dances, like the *banda*, incorporate sexually suggestive movements, the gestures are only symbolic. No actual sex takes place. The dancers never touch each other because ritual dancing doesn't allow bodily contact. Men aren't even supposed to have erections during the dancing. If they do, they may be jeered at by others or thrown out of the *peristil*.

Some Vodou rituals even require a period of sexual abstinence. Initiation is a good example. While the period of abstinence varies from one *ounfò* to another, most temples require that initiates abstain from sex for one week before the initiation, during the initiation itself, and for up to 41 days afterward. An initiate who violates this rule negates the entire initiation and must undergo the grueling ritual again.

Maryaj-lwa is another example of a Vodou ceremony requiring sexual abstinence. A devotee who marries one of the *lwa* (see Chapter 17, "Special Rituals and Rites") must promise to abstain from



Spiritual Advice

On the magical side of Vodou, there are probably more spells and charms for love and sex than for any other purpose.

Devotees often go to their *oun-gan* (or *mambo*) for spells to attract a lover, make a spouse faithful, or get pregnant. Learn more about white magic in Vodou in Chapter 20, "Charms and Spells."

sex for one or two days per week—on the *lwa*'s special days—in order to remain “faithful” to the *lwa*. Many devotees have erotic dreams about their spirit spouses on those nights, though, which may make up for the enforced abstinence.

Vodou ceremonies are sacred, spiritual proceedings. While they may celebrate sex as part of a happy life, sex is never the ultimate aim of a Vodou ritual. Rituals are held to serve and please the *lwa*, and that is what all participants in the ritual focus on.

So When's the Human Sacrifice?

Vodou first gained the widespread reputation as a religion that practices human sacrifice and cannibalism in the late 1800s, when Sir Spenser St. John, an English consul to Haiti who hated blacks, wrote that Haitians practiced the ritual sacrifice of children. Despite there being absolutely no evidence to back up his claim, newspapers and magazines picked up the sensationalized story and spread it even further. To this day, no one has produced any concrete evidence that human sacrifice or cannibalism ever had a place in Vodou rituals.

The rumors of cannibalism, child murder, and human sacrifice associated with the practice of Vodou proved to be potent weapons against the religion and against the people who practice it. What better way to demonstrate that the Haitian people were primitive, barbaric, and in need of control by foreign powers and conversion to Christianity than by claiming that they ate people and killed children in ominous ceremonies? The effects of those rumors still live on, exploited in Hollywood movies, potboiler novels, and tabloids.

Anyone who takes the time to learn about Vodou and the people who practice it quickly realize that atrocities, like human sacrifice and cannibalism, hold no legitimate place in its practice. Like every other religion, Vodou teaches a moral code. Black magic employed to harm others is considered wrong by most practitioners. On the contrary, Vodou exists primarily to elevate and celebrate human life.

In addition, one of the major roles of Vodou priests and priestesses is as healer. They focus their spiritual energies on saving lives, not taking them. Murder has no place in the positive efforts of *oungans* and *mambos*.

Vodou has been persecuted and abused throughout its history—by slave owners, foreign military powers, the Catholic Church, and Haiti's own political leaders. For two centuries, it survived only because its practitioners kept their adherence to Vodou secret. The atrocities perpetrated under the Duvalier regime in the name of



Danger Ahead!

When an evil spirit causes a person's death, that spirit is said to have “eaten” the person. This doesn't mean that the spirit—or the magician who invoked it—literally ate the person who died. Rather, it means that the spirit consumed the person's life force. Colorful, metaphorical expressions like this one may have led to misunderstandings on the part of outsiders.

Vodou didn't enhance the religion's reputation. When something is secret, it is all too easy to invent rumors about it and have them taken for fact.

But you should recognize that associating Vodou with human sacrifice, child murder, cannibalism, and devil worship is a form of propaganda waged in the war against Vodou. Take any such claims with a large grain of salt, and demand proof to back them up. (You won't find any.) By reading this book, you're taking a big step into learning the facts about Vodou. I hope it will inspire you to pursue further study (you'll find additional resources listed in Appendix B, "Resources for Further Study").

Everybody's Welcome: Tolerance in Vodou

Vodou is probably one of the most egalitarian religions you'll find. At most *ounfòs*, the temple is open to everyone: black or white; straight or gay; young or old; initiate or noninitiate; Haitian or foreign. In Vodou, women may rise to the highest ranks as *mambos*, equal in every way to their male counterparts and given the same respect by their followers. Homosexuals may also become religious leaders. All are welcome if they want to serve the *lwa*.



Spiritual Advice

Mambos may be even more respected than *oungans* because some practitioners of Vodou believe that women instinctively form better relationships with the *lwa*. More women than men tend to undergo initiation into Vodou, taking on major roles in rituals as members of the chorus, song leaders, flag bearers, and assistants to the priest or priestess. The only traditional male roles are *laplas* and the drummers.

Non-Blacks and Non-Haitians in Vodou

Haitians have been moving out into the wider world in recent years, and Vodou has gained much attention from anthropologists and other scholars. As such, many people outside Haiti have become exposed to Vodou and have wanted to learn more. African Americans in particular have found Vodou to be a fulfilling way to explore their ancestral roots. But people of other races have also become attracted to Vodou and to the spiritual rewards that the religion promises.

There has been some conflict in the Vodou community over whether only Haitians or only people of African descent should be allowed to practice Vodou or should be initiated into the religion. Some Haitian *oungans* and *mambos* follow an unwritten rule that foreigners and nonblacks should not learn the "secrets" of Vodou. They see nothing wrong with performing bogus ceremonies for outsiders, giving them incorrect information about the religion, and then overcharging them for the privilege.

Many more Vodou priests and priestesses consider this practice unethical. They believe that the *lwa* choose people to serve them, not the other way around. Anyone who expresses a genuine, sincere interest in learning more about Vodou has thus been selected by the spirits themselves. To refuse them would be to offend the *lwa*.

Practitioners of Vodou believe that the *lwa* are everywhere. They don't live only in Haiti but in every part of the world. There are *lwa* of all ethnicities, including Native American, white, mulatto, African, and even a Muslim *lwa* named Senego. All people have ancestors whom they can serve. Everybody is worried about finding love, success, and happiness, which the *lwa* can help with. All countries have crossroads, graveyards, rivers, and forests where the *lwa* can be found. So why shouldn't anyone who wants to, serve the *lwa*, as well?

Homosexuality in Vodou

Homosexuality still carries a stigma in Haiti. Haitians tend to look at homosexuals as objects of amusement, as if homosexuals have had “practical jokes” played on them. Despite this attitude, homosexuals are not prevented from participating in Vodou or from becoming initiated. Homosexuals can even become *oungans* and *mambos* and lead their own temples.

In fact, Vodou represents almost the only form of spiritual expression that openly homosexual Haitians can practice since they are not welcome in the Catholic and evangelical Protestant churches. For that reason, there is a higher percentage of homosexuals at Vodou ceremonies and in the priesthood than in the general population. Some *oumfòs* in Port-au-Prince are composed entirely of gay men or women.



Spiritual Advice

If a gay person is possessed by a straight *lwa*—a gay man by Gédé or a lesbian by Ezili Freda, for instance—that person will behave in an aggressively heterosexual manner. The personality of the *lwa* always overwhelms the core nature of the possessed person.

Homosexual men are almost always under the patronage of Ezili Freda because stereotypical homosexual behavior mirrors her extreme femininity, luxurious tastes, and playful flirtatiousness. The patron of all lesbians is Ezili Dantò, who has the image of a strong, independent woman and who sometimes marries women.

How Voodoo and Other Religions Mix

As you have already learned, Vodou is an extremely adaptable religion. Early on in its history, the religion had to adapt to Catholicism in order to survive, and it has maintained that close relationship ever since. As Haitians have left their home country and moved out into the world, they have had to adapt the practice of their religion to new cultures and new settings.

Because of its long history of adaptability, Vodou can coexist comfortably with any other religion. Initiates into Vodou are not required to renounce any pre-existing religious affiliations and can keep practicing those religions at the same time that they practice Vodou. In Haiti, the vast majority of Vodou practitioners also identify themselves as Roman Catholic.

The real challenge, if you decide to pursue a study of Vodou, may be to reconcile any pre-existing religious affiliations with Vodou, not the other way around. Outsiders still have a hard time acknowledging that Vodou is a legitimate religion. Many organized religions, particularly Christian denominations, continue to view Vodou as the occult or devil worship. Evangelical Protestants, who have recently come to Haiti in large numbers in an effort to convert practitioners of Vodou, are particularly notorious for vilifying the Haitians' native religion and for bribing Haitians to convert.

You might follow the example of the Haitians who concurrently practice Vodou and Roman Catholicism and find worthwhile spiritual experiences in both of your religions. For Haitians, Roman Catholicism is the only available means of better knowing Bondye, or God, who is so impersonal and distant in Vodou. But Vodou is a practical means of improving their own lot in life, of bringing happiness, good luck, and success right now, when it's needed. Vodou isn't concerned with salvation or the afterlife. It's about getting things done. By combining both religions, Haitians lead a very full and balanced spiritual life.

Vodou coexists so comfortably alongside other religions because practitioners see the value in a variety of spiritual experiences. For instance, most Haitian devotees find no conflict in attending a Vodou ritual on Saturday night and going to Catholic mass on Sunday morning. As they say in Haiti, you go to church to talk about God and you go to Vodou rituals to become God.

Vodou is very open to other spiritual beliefs and ideas if they are beneficial. Since the beginning, Vodou has adapted others' religious beliefs when they seemed useful. For instance, it appropriated beliefs from the slaves' Catholic masters and from the native Amerindians of Hispaniola.

Vodou never dismisses or ostracizes foreign beliefs. Everything in the world, after all, is an expression of the *lwa*, who know more than we do. Thus, the Vodou devotee approaches everything with an open mind. Someone coming to Vodou from a Christian, Islamic, Judaic, Buddhist, Wiccan, or other religious background will probably have something of value to bring to Vodou, just as they can obtain something of value from Vodou.

The Least You Need to Know

- ◆ Contrary to popular portrayals, Vodou rituals are not drunken orgies but rather dignified ceremonies of spiritual expression.
- ◆ Vodou has long been associated with horrific crimes, such as human sacrifice and cannibalism, but there is no concrete evidence to support such claims.
- ◆ At most Vodou temples, everyone who has been called by the *lwa* is welcome, including people of other nationalities, ethnicities, and sexual orientations.
- ◆ As a spiritual system, Vodou is very open to other religious beliefs, and initiates don't have to renounce preexisting religious affiliations to study Vodou.

Part

4

Myth and Magic

For many of us, the word “voodoo” conjures up bewitching images. Weird curses involving chicken’s feet or pins stuck in dolls. Secret societies sacrificing children to strange gods. Black magicians conjuring zombies out of their graves. Popular books and movies, which are often based more on sensational rumors than reality, have created a perception of Vodou as the occult and superstition rather than a legitimate religion.

These things do play a part in Vodou, but they are actually a very small part of the religion as it is practiced today. For legitimate devotees, Vodou is about serving the *lwa*, not spells and curses or raising the dead. In this part, you’ll learn the facts behind the myths that you’ve probably always associated with Vodou.

When you first start to discover the true nature of Vodou, you may be disappointed to find out that it is not simply a magical system of spells, potions, and charms that anyone can freely use to bring money or love, or to place curses on enemies. But once you fully enter the world of Vodou, you will truly understand its real power, which flows from a close relationship with and understanding of the spiritual all around us every day. Nothing can be more magical than that!



Charms and Spells

In This Chapter

- ◆ How magic works in Vodou
- ◆ The role of the Vodou priest or priestess as a magician
- ◆ Magical charms for protection against harm and illness
- ◆ Casting magical spells with the help of the *lwa*

Most people immediately think of magic when they hear the word “voodoo.” However, followers of Vodou don’t perceive magic to be a major part of their religion. It is, after all, a religion that exists to serve the spirits and enlist their aid in crises big and small. For true devotees of Vodou, magic plays a very small role.

In fact, most Vodou devotees disapprove of using magic to get what you want. Someone who faithfully serves the *lwa* and leads a balanced life shouldn’t need it. Generally, legitimate Vodou priests and priestesses use magic only for self-defense against black magic and for healing illnesses. According to Vodou belief, magic shouldn’t be employed for selfish gain, especially at the expense of others.

Nevertheless, it’s sometimes necessary for *oungans* and *mambos* to use magic to protect themselves and members of their society. They learn how to make magical spells and charms as part of their training for the priesthood. But

magic as it is practiced in Vodou is very different from how outsiders might think of it. In this chapter, you'll learn how magic in Vodou really works and how it can be a powerful protective force.


"Magic" in Vodoo

Magic has been mentioned quite a lot in this book. However, it's important to understand that magic in Vodou is not the same as outsiders might imagine it. Vodou priests (and priestesses) don't cast spells or wave magic wands. Rather, they manipulate spiritual forces to change the natural course of events. Magic—like everything else in Vodou—is empowered by the *lwa*.

Whenever an *oungan* needs to effect a change, either positive or negative, he must enlist the help of the *lwa*. The *lwa* use their supernatural powers to cause what we would call "magic." Thus, if you wanted to attract love, you would ask an *oungan* to create a love spell or potion. The *oungan* in turn would appeal to Ezili Freda to give her power to the spell. The spell itself isn't magical; the *lwa* is.

Because Vodou is a symbolic system, symbols play a very important part in magic. As you have already learned, all the *lwa* are associated with specific symbols. By using those symbols in manufacturing charms and potions, Vodou priests invoke the powers of the *lwa* associated with those symbols. For example, bones and graveyard dirt—symbolic of Gédé—might be used to construct a curse while eggs and milk—evocative of Danbala—might be included in fertility spells.

Spiritual Advice



Magic in Vodou is related to herbalism. Vodou priests combine herbs, leaves, and roots to cure disease. They also combine them to make magical charms and curses. The herbal ingredients symbolize the *lwa* whose powers are invoked in the spell. The properties of the herbs themselves may play a part as well, such as poisons used in black magic.

Anytime an *oungan* asks the *lwa* to achieve a specific goal—as opposed to serving and feeding the spirits in exchange for general good fortune and protection for the members of the society—he might be said to be working magic. If you need money, you ask an *oungan* for help, he makes an offering to Papa Legba (or one of the other *lwa*), and a few days later, someone offers you a job—it's magic! In reality, "magic" is yet another example of the give-and-take relationship with the spirits that characterizes all activities of Vodou.

The Priest As Magician

Vodou priests have many roles that cross the boundary between religious and magical. They create infusions and potions to cure disease. They use cards and cowry shells to tell the future. They even call supernatural forces into this world through ritual.

An important function of the Vodou priest is to protect and bring good fortune to members of their *societe*. One way he can do this is through “magic,” such as constructing charms, mixing potions, and casting spells. He performs these services to protect followers from the harmful effects of black magic and evil spirits or to help them find love, keep a spouse, conceive a child, succeed in a business venture, or achieve any other positive goal. He even uses magic to cure disease, treat mental illness, and solve sexual problems when traditional healing methods fail.

Like divination, potions, charms, and spells are all tools for invoking and employing the powers of the *lwa*. When the priest practices divination, he isn’t actually telling the future; he is calling upon the *lwa* to reveal the future to him. Similarly, when he practices magic, he doesn’t literally cast a spell; instead, he asks the *lwa* to bring about the desired effect.

In the strictest sense, the Vodou priest is not actually a magician. He has no supernatural powers of any kind. What he does possess is a formidable knowledge of the spiritual world and strong relationships with the *lwa* that he has cultivated over many years. He uses his deep understanding of spiritual forces to get the *lwa* to perform services in exchange for the offerings he gives them. But if the spirits don’t want to cooperate, the priest can’t make them. They are the ones with the magical powers, not him.

While selling love potions and protective charms may be a lucrative side business for an *oungan*, the Vodou priest’s primary occupation is still as spiritual leader of his community. So, although many people associate Vodou with magic, its role in the actual practice of the religion is very small.



Danger Ahead!

Don’t confuse magical charms and spells of this kind with black magic. Orthodox Vodou priests take an oath not to cause harm to others. They can use magic only for positive effects, such as protection, healing, and bringing about good luck. They might also employ magic to repel an enemy or counteract the effects of black magic, but never to hurt someone.

How Charming: Protective Charms

A common magical tool in Vodou is the protective charm. These charms take many forms, including amulets worn around the neck, wards carried on the body, objects placed on altars for the *lwa*, and even tattoos or scars carved directly into the skin. Particularly powerful charms are passed down from one generation to the next. They are treasured objects that have a special place on the family altar.

Charms are commissioned for a particular purpose. The most typical use for a charm is protection against black magic, evil spirits, or attack by an enemy. Since so many people

know how to make poisons or cast evil spells, every *oungan* must know how to protect the members of his society and his temple from those negative forces. (Turn to Chapter 21, “That Old Black Magic,” for more details about black magic in Vodou.) *Oungans* also make charms to help solve problems, usually related to matters of love, health, and money.

The charm in itself has no special powers. Rather, it is charged with the powers of the *lwa*. Each charm is associated with one particular *lwa*. The special symbols and colors of the spirit are employed in constructing the charm to help infuse the charm with that *lwa*'s powers. When someone wears or carries the charm or places it on the *lwa*'s altar, that person gains the powers of the *lwa* associated with the charm.

For example, a protective amulet may be inscribed with the cross that symbolizes Papa Legba. The *oungan* invokes the protective powers of Papa Legba when making the charm. But the charm itself isn't magical. It simply represents the *lwa*, who confers his protection on the person who wears the amulet through his symbol.

Guarding Against Harm

A typical type of protective charm is called a *gad*, which means “guard.” This type of charm uses powdered herbs that symbolize the powers of the *lwa*. When combined in a certain way, they provide concentrated protection to the wearer of the *gad*.

Each *gad* is made under the patronage of a particular *lwa*, generally a member of the Petro nation, whose protective powers charge the *gad*. To make the charm, the *oungan* must conduct a special ritual, also called a *gad*. As this is usually a Petro ritual, the *oungan* dresses in red and sacrifices a red chicken or rooster. The *lwa* whose protection is being sought possesses the priest during the ceremony.



Voodoo Speak

A *gad*, or “guard,” is a Vodou charm that protects against harmful spirits. Generally, it takes the form of a symbolic tattoo or scar. Magical powdered herbs are rubbed directly into the wound. The herbs and the design of the *gad* place the wearer under the protection of the *lwa*. The term “*gad*” also refers to the ceremony in which the charm is conferred.

The person receiving the *gad* often takes a luck bath before the ritual (as discussed in Chapter 17, “Special Rituals and Rites”). During the ceremony, the *oungan* lightly carves the symbol of the *lwa* into the person's upper arm or shoulder or tattoos it on the arm. Then, he rubs powdered herbs directly into the wound. The person receiving the *gad* feels no pain.

Tattoo or scar *gads* protect the wearer against evil spirits. Sometimes, an *oungan* or all members of a temple may need to invoke the powers of a violent or evil spirit for aid in a major crisis. In return for the spirit's help, they must usually pledge lifelong service to the spirit.

But such spirits are unpredictable and irrational, and they may turn their violent rage on those who serve them. The *gad* prevents the wearer from being harmed by the spirit.

Other *gads* are infusions of magical herbs prepared as potions that are drunk. They guard against evil spells, bad luck, or attacks by others whether spiritual, psychological, or physical. Some *gads* provide immunity to certain poisons.

All *gads* lose their potency over time. They must be renewed regularly, usually once a year. To renew the *gad*, the *oungan* simply reapplies the mixture of powdered herbs to the scar or tattoo or readminsters the potion.

Magical Packets

A type of charm commonly seen on Vodou altars is called a *pakèt Kongo*. These charms are used solely in white magic for positive purposes, such as protection from harm. They are also beautiful examples of Haitian folk art. *Pakets Kongo* are usually elaborately decorated with beads, sequins, mirrors, ribbons, feathers, and flowers. Some are topped with plastic doll's heads, crossed forks, black crosses, or horns.

Like *gads*, each *pakèt Kongo* is dedicated to a particular *lwa* and conveys that spirit's magical or protective powers to the owner of the charm. The *oungan* begins making the *pakèt Kongo* by combining herbs and other ingredients—the exact recipes are secrets known only to Vodou priests—in a special way to invoke the powers of the *lwa*.

The *oungan* wraps the ingredients in silk or satin cloth to form a “packet,” or *pakèt*, about the size and shape of a gourd. Alternatively, it may be shaped like a bottle with handles or “arms,” as shown in the following figure. The size and shape vary according to the *lwa* for which the charm is made.

The *oungan* binds the cloth tightly with ribbons in the special colors of the *lwa* symbolized by the charm. He ties the ribbons seven times, representing the seven years that the powers of the charm last. The following table lists the colors of different *pakets Kongo* and the *lwa* to whom they correspond.



Spiritual Advice

All members of a temple may receive the same *gad* as part of the initiation ceremony. The light cuts heal to form a scar with a distinctive pattern. The *gad* thus also serves as an identifying mark, so members of the *ounfò* can easily recognize each other.



Voodoo Speak

A *pakèt Kongo* is a “packet” containing the magical or protective powers of a particular *lwa*. The secret ingredients, which include herbs, leaves, and soil, are wrapped in satin cloth and bound with ribbons. The packages are usually elaborately decorated with sequins, mirrors, beads, and other objects. *Pakets Kongo* are carried or kept on Vodou altars, and they retain their powers for seven years.

Pakets Kongo are cloth packages, and some are shaped like tall bottles with arms; this one, with a cross on top, invokes the powers of the Gédé.



The Symbolic Colors of the Pakets Kongo and the Lwa They Represent

Color	Lwa
Blue	Azaka or Ezili Dantò
White	Danbala or Ayida-Wedo
Pink	Ezili Freda
Purple	Gédé
Yellow	Loko
Red	Ogou

Spiritual Advice

Pakets Kongo are often used for healing purposes. In those cases, they are made under the patronage of Gédé. After constructing the charm, the *oungan* passes the *paket Kongo* over the body of the sick person while invoking the healing powers of the *lwa*.

The ritual for making a *paket Kongo* takes place at night under a full moon. Before making the charm, the *oungan* invokes Simbi, the patron *lwa* of positive magic. He also calls for the aid of Gran Bwa and Kalfou to help him harvest the correct herbal ingredients in the appropriate manner and at the right time.

After constructing the charm, the *oungan* holds a special ceremony to charge the *paket Kongo* with the spiritual powers of the *lwa* that it represents. The priest places the bound package on the *lwa's* *vever* that has been drawn in ground coffee or ginger and then invokes the

powers of the *lwa*. This process “excites” the *lwa*, so the spirit will inhabit the *paket Kongo* and go to work for the owner of the charm.

After the ceremony, the *lwa* actually resides inside the package for the next seven years, conferring his or her powers on the owner of the charm. The package serves as a kind of magnet, gathering and concentrating the power of the *lwa*. *Pakets Kongo* can be carried for protection against illness or evil, but they are more often placed on Vodou altars.

Lamps for the Lwa

Vodou priests also make magical lamps as charms. Devotees commission lamps from their *oungans* to accomplish specific goals, such as find a job, repel an enemy, or ensure a healthy pregnancy. Like all Vodou charms, magical lamps invoke the powers of specific *lwa*, who guarantee the desired outcome. For someone hoping to find a lover, for example, the *oungan* would make a lamp dedicated to Ezili Freda while someone wanting to conceive a child would get a lamp invoking the powers of Ezili Dantò.

The lamp is made from a bowl, jug, cup, coconut shell, dried calabash, crab shell, or bottle filled with oil. The priest suspends the wick in the oil by threading it through a playing card or hanging it from a pair of crossed bone splinters. The *oungan* adds herbs and symbolic ingredients to the oil to invoke the powers of the lamp's guardian *lwa*.

Once the lamp is made, the person who commissioned it places it on an altar dedicated to the lamp's guardian *lwa*. The person must refill the lamp with oil every day at the same time and pray over it, asking the *lwa* for the desired goal. The flame can't die out until that goal is achieved.

Spelling Tests: Requests of the Lwa

Sometimes an *oungan* holds a special ritual designed to achieve a particular goal on behalf of a member of the *societe*. For example, the petitioner may ask the *oungan* for help with getting money, attracting a lover, or defending against an attack. Although the purpose of the ritual is to invoke the *lwa* who then use their powers to accomplish the goal, it's similar to casting a magical spell. After all, if the *oungan* asks the *lwa* for something and the *lwa* grant his request, the miraculous result can seem like magic!

The *oungan* isn't the only person who can ask the *lwa* for favors. Individual Vodou devotees also make special requests of the *lwa* although the results may not be as good because their knowledge of the spiritual world isn't as highly developed as the priest's. Two kinds of simple Vodou spells are prayers to the saints and messenger dolls.

Prayers to the Lwa

One simple spell is called an *oraison*. It consists of a Catholic prayer to a particular saint, written on a small sheet of paper. Vodou devotees buy *oraïsons* in the Iron Market in Port-au-Prince for a few pennies. They sew the small papers into their clothes, pillows, or bedding in the hope that the saint will grant their wishes.



Voodoo Speak

An **oraison** is a Catholic prayer written to a particular saint, associated with a *lwa*, on a small sheet of paper. People with special requests purchase the prayers and sew them into their clothes or bed linen in the hope that the spirits will hear and grant their wishes.



Danger Ahead!

Unscrupulous priests may defraud their customers by casting fake spells. Some of these swindlers haven't undergone initiation and aren't qualified to call themselves *oungans*. Casting phony spells is dangerous for the fake priest. When you commission a spell, you pay the *oungan* to take away your problem. The *oungan* will still take the problem away whether he solves it or not. He may just transfer the problem to himself.

Oraisons may be written to any of the Catholic saints, but the most popular ones include the following:

- ◆ Saint Michael, patron of people who suffer from seasickness
- ◆ Saint Bartholomew, patron of people with nervous conditions
- ◆ Saint Claire, patron of the poor
- ◆ Saint Radegonde, patron of people seeking protection

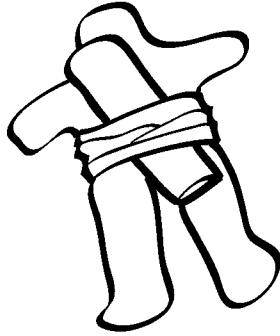
An example of a typical *oraison* is the prayer to Saint Radegonde:

Radegonde, Baron Samedi,
Guardian of the cemetery,
You who have the power
Of going into purgatory,
Give my enemies something to do,
So they may leave me alone.

Messages to the Lwa

Another way to cast spells—or make special requests of the *lwa* or the ancestral spirits—is to use a messenger doll. These are small, simple, featureless dolls sewn by hand out of cloth. They don't in any way resemble Voodoo dolls, which are stuck with pins to get revenge on an enemy. (I'll discuss Voodoo dolls in the next chapter.)

To send a message to the *lwa*, first write it on a small piece of paper. Then pin the paper to the doll or tie it on with a ribbon in the favorite color of the *lwa* to whom the message is addressed. Leave the messenger doll at a crossroads (the threshold to the world of the spirits) or in a cemetery (the threshold to the world of the dead). The doll carries your message to the spiritual world, so the *lwa* or ancestral spirit will receive your message and perhaps grant your request.



Messenger dolls are small, featureless, cloth dolls; the message to the lwa is secured to the doll with a ribbon.

The Least You Need to Know

- ◆ Vodou devotees don't practice magic as outsiders think of it; rather, they petition the *lwa* to alter the natural course of events, achieving what may seem like magical results.
- ◆ Part of the Vodou priest's or priestess's job is to protect members of the *societe* and help them achieve specific positive goals; to accomplish this, they may use magical means by invoking the supernatural powers of the *lwa*.
- ◆ Vodou priests and priestess make charms that protect the bearers from harm and help them solve problems; these charms are made from herbal and symbolic ingredients and take the form of tattoos or scars, *pakets Kongo*, or magical lamps.
- ◆ In Vodou, magical spells are actually specific requests of the *lwa*; Catholic prayers sewn into clothing or bed linens and messages to the *lwa* attached to messenger dolls are examples of simple Vodou spells.

That Old Black Magic

In This Chapter

- ◆ How black magic works in Vodou and the sorcerers who practice it
- ◆ How black magic is used to place curses, cast spells, and inflict harm
- ◆ The facts about voodoo dolls
- ◆ Secret societies and their role in Haitian society

Vodou devotees acknowledge that just as there are benevolent *lwa* and good forces at work in the world, there is also a “dark” side of the spirit world. Devotees’ belief in evil spirits and black magic has led to many misconceptions about Vodou. While black magic plays a very small part in the practice of Vodou as a whole, it is the source of much of outsiders’ fascination. The roles of curses, evil spirits, and raising the dead in Vodou have been exaggerated so much that many outsiders assume that these things define the entire religion.

Practitioners of Vodou believe that the world maintains a natural, harmonious balance. To ask why there is black magic is to ask why there is evil in the world. It balances the good to maintain the necessary balance so important in Vodou. For every positive spiritual force, there must be a negative one. That’s why there are two major nations of *lwa*: the essentially benevolent but less powerful Rada spirits, who never have anything to do with black magic; and the stronger but more malevolent Petro spirits, who often assist with black magic.

In Vodou, evil spirits and black magic are facts of life that must be acknowledged and dealt with. Legitimate devotees of the religion don't worship "devils," nor do they cast negative spells. But since these things exist, and since some unscrupulous sorcerers use them to cause harm, practitioners of Vodou must know about them in order to protect themselves from them.

Sorcerers: The "Left Hand" of Voodoo

According to Vodou belief, black magic is any magic that harms or attacks others without just cause. While legitimate Vodou safeguards the well-being of the entire community, black magic is concerned only with the individual. People use black magic as a shortcut to getting what they want, often at the expense of others.

Most Vodou devotees consider black magic to be evil and have nothing to do with it. Even though legitimate priests (and priestesses) of Vodou know how to work black magic, they don't practice it. They take an oath upon initiation not to cause harm to others. They use magic solely for positive purposes and to protect themselves and members of their *socete* against harmful forces, sorcerers, and criminals.

Some unscrupulous Vodou priests and priestesses do practice black magic, though. They have a special name: *bòkò*. They sell their services for a high price. Whenever someone

wants to cause harm to another or use magic for selfish gain, that person must go to a *bòkò*. These sorcerers are not considered legitimate practitioners of Vodou and are often ostracized by Vodou communities. (While there are both male and female *bòkò*, the majority are men; for simplicity's sake, I will refer to male sorcerers in this chapter, with the understanding that they may also be female.)

According to Vodou belief, priests perform positive magic with the right hand and negative magic with the left hand. Therefore, black magic is called "left-handed" Vodou. *Bòkò* who practice both kinds of magic are said to serve the *lwa* "with both hands."



Voodoo Speak

A *bòkò* is a Vodou priest who practices black magic. The word derives from the Fon word *bokono*, which means "priest." The *bòkò* has no *ounfò*, and he conducts all his rituals in secret. *Bòkò* are said to serve the *lwa* "with both hands" because they often practice both white and black magic.

Buying the Lwa

Bòkò are not usually initiated Vodou priests. Instead of undergoing the long apprenticeship and rigorous initiation ceremonies required to gain *komesans*, or a true understanding of the spiritual world, they purchase the powers of the darker *lwa* who assist in black magic. They also buy the secrets of making curses, harnessing evil spirits, and raising the dead.

As with white magic, black magic is not “magic” at all but rather a way to employ the supernatural powers of the *lwa*, this time for a harmful effect. Because the Rada spirits never have anything to do with black magic, *bòkò* serve the more powerful but more dangerous Petro *lwa* as well as the Gédé, who can control the dead. They don’t develop life-long relationships with these *lwa*, though, like legitimate *oungans* do. Instead, they buy their *lwa*. These *lwa* are more than willing to sell their powers, if the price is right.

The *lwa* who are most likely to assist with black magic include the following:

- ◆ Kalfou (the grand master of black magic)
- ◆ Ezili Dantò
- ◆ Marinette
- ◆ Bosou
- ◆ Ti-Jean-Petro
- ◆ Maman Brijit
- ◆ Gédé-Nibo
- ◆ Baron Kriminèl, a member of the Gédé

When a *bòkò* buys the powers of one of the dark *lwa*, he must pay a high price, such as a very expensive sacrifice. He often must promise life-long service to the *lwa* and feed the spirit regularly. This kind of business transaction between a sorcerer and a *lwa* is called an *angajan*. It’s different from the service of legitimate Vodou priests to their *lwa* because the *bòkò* don’t develop and nurture their relationships with the *lwa* over a long period of time, resulting in positive gains for both the spirit and the *socye*. An *angajan* is like a shortcut to quickly harness the powerful forces of the *lwa*.

Once the sorcerer makes the commitment, the *lwa* will never let him go. The sorcerer becomes the *lwa*’s slave for life, always at the spirit’s beck and call. If the sorcerer ever tries to get out of the *angajan*, the spirit will punish him with death or the death of his loved ones.



Danger Ahead!

Some *lwa*, called *lwa-achtè*, can be paid to bring personal gain or protection at the expense of others. While these *lwa* are more powerful than family *lwa*, they are also more dangerous. Their help comes with a large price tag. If purchasers fail to meet their obligations to the *lwa* they bought, the *lwa* often take revenge on their family members.



Voodoo Speak

An *angajan* (or “engagement”) is a pact that a black magician makes with one of the malevolent *lwa*. In return for harnessing the *lwa*’s powers for black magic, the sorcerer promises to pay the spirit with an expensive sacrifice or an underhanded favor. Often, an *angajan* places the *bòkò* in debt to the *lwa* for the rest of his life.

The Life of a Vodou Sorcerer

Bòkò are loners who conduct their rituals under the darkness of night. They don't lead a *socyete* nor do they have an *ounfò*. Instead, they practice their dark religion in cemeteries, in the forest, and at crossroads.

Everything the *bòkò* does, he does in secret. He jealously guards his recipes for curses, potions, and spells. The fewer people who know how to conduct black magic, the more the *bòkò* can charge for his services. He sells his services to anyone willing to pay for them regardless of the consequences.

Working with black magic and evil spirits carries many risks, and sorcerers rarely escape unscathed. Since they make a living from casting harmful spells on others, they run the risk of being discovered and having magic turned against them. Once anyone begins trafficking with evil spirits, he takes the chance of offending the other *lwa*, particularly his family spirits, and being abandoned by them.

The *bòkò* is no more a legitimate Vodou priest than a Satanist is a legitimate member of the Christian church. Because he has no ethics, he is just as likely to be a swindler and con man as a black magician. So, take care when dealing with *bòkò*. It's best to shun them altogether, just as most legitimate practitioners of Vodou do.

Curses and Revenge

You've probably heard fantastic stories about black magic and Vodou curses. The stories often go like this: A man who owed a *bòkò* money or otherwise crossed a sorcerer found a plastic doll nailed to his door through the leg, a chicken's foot underneath his pillow, or a small bag containing strange-smelling ingredients on his threshold. A few days later, he broke the same leg, or fell violently ill, or went hopelessly insane. Obviously, he had fallen victim to the *bòkò's* curse!

Folk stories like these abound in Haiti. But rumors about black magic and curses are much more prevalent than the actual practice of black magic. Nevertheless, some people do have the secret knowledge required to cast these evil spells. The spells range from relatively mild curses to the creation of malevolent monsters that are unleashed upon unsuspecting victims.

Black Magic Charms

Charms used in black magic are called *ouanga*. Like the protective charms of white magic, they channel the supernatural forces of the *lwa* but for a negative effect. They are also called "poisons," but they aren't literally poisonous. The term refers to the poisonous magical effect of the charm.

To make an *ouanga*, the sorcerer assembles secret ingredients in a bottle or packet. The ritual of making the charm is called a *travail*, which means “labor.” During the ceremony, the *bòkò* chants songs and prayers, invoking the powers of the malevolent *lwa* under whose patronage he is making the charm. The spirit’s powers are captured in the charm, concentrating them.

Ouanga are not very powerful charms. At the worst, they cause a mild, curable sickness or some temporary bad luck but never death. Their effects are limited to the person specifically targeted by the charm. The intended victim only has to touch the charm for the black magic to go to work on him or her. These charms are often used for revenge or warnings against rivals.



Voodoo Speak

An **ouanga** is a black magic charm. It harnesses the supernatural powers of malevolent *lwa* to cause mild illness or bad luck. To make an *ouanga*, the sorcerer combines secret ingredients in a bottle or packet in a ceremony called a **travail**, or “labor.” *Ouanga* is becoming a more generic term, though, and is sometimes used interchangeably with *gad*.

Black Magic Spells

Sorcerers also specialize in casting magical spells to harm others. The power of these spells ranges from very weak, causing a mild sickness, to very strong, resulting in death.

There are four types of black magic spells:

- ◆ An air spell, or *kou le*, is cast through the air; the weakest of the black magic spells, it causes a mild illness or a little bad luck.
- ◆ A powder spell, or *kou poud*, is a powerful magical powder that causes extreme illness or death.
- ◆ A soul spell, or *kou nanm*, enables the sorcerer to capture the soul of a person; the *bòkò* can then use the soul for evil deeds while the soulless body slowly dies.
- ◆ Sending the dead, or *voye lamò*, is the sorcerer’s most powerful spell; he sends dead spirits to inhabit the victim, causing the victim to go insane or die horribly.

The most feared act of the *bòkò* is “sending the dead.” He casts this spell under the auspices of Baron Samedi, so it is also called an “expedition” after Saint Expedit, the saint associated with the Baron. To cast the spell, the sorcerer goes to the graveyard and invokes Baron Samedi under his symbolic cross.

The sorcerer then gathers one handful of graveyard dirt for each dead spirit he wants to send, which he spreads on the path that his victim frequently takes. The dead literally enter the body of the victim, causing the victim to grow very ill. The victim starts to waste

away and vomit blood, eventually perishing. The dead may also completely transform the victim's personality or drive him insane. This powerful spell can't be cured easily, requiring the services of a powerful *oungan*.

Voodoo Hoodoo

Powder spells may not be magical at all. Like *oungans*, black magicians in Vodou possess a wide knowledge of the herbal properties of the plant life of Haiti. Unlike *oungans*, they use this knowledge to harm instead of heal. Many native Haitian plants are very poisonous. Some animals, such as certain insects, the bouga toad, and the puffer fish, also have poisonous properties. The *bòkò*'s powder spells may actually be powerful poisons made using secret recipes and administered to victims through cuts in the skin, in their food, or by inhalation. They cause serious illnesses that resist all treatments.

Monsters and Devils

According to Vodou belief, evil spirits exist. Most practitioners of Vodou don't serve them, though. In fact, they avoid dealing with evil spirits in any way because they are dangerous forces that can turn on you unpredictably. Once someone starts working with evil spirits, that person must constantly placate the spirits to avoid their wrath.

One of the most powerful tools in the sorcerer's arsenal is the *baka*. This evil spirit takes the form of a dwarf, a small monster, or an animal, like a cat, dog, pig, or cow. *Baka* roam the countryside at night, terrifying anyone they come across by shape-shifting into weird forms.

After invoking the *baka*, the *bòkò* unleashes it on his victim. The *baka* steals the victim's life force, or "eats" the victim, causing a slow deterioration that results in death. A *baka* can also drive its victims insane, and some people fall dead at the mere sight of it. The best protection against a *baka* is to simply stare it in the eyes without fear; the monster will turn its gaze away and vanish.



Voodoo Speak

A **baka**, or "little demon," is an evil spirit created by a *bòkò* in the form of a dwarf, small monster, or animal. The *baka* gradually eats its victim's life force, resulting in a slow death.

People who want to ensure another person's death may purchase a *baka* from a sorcerer. They take a big risk if they do this, though. *Baka* are bloodthirsty, violent, and unpredictable spirits that often turn on their owners. They demand a very high price in exchange for their services, such as the sacrifice of a family member.

Sorcerers also invoke wild spirits called *diab*, or "devils." *Diab* look like hideous gargoyles with protruding red tongues. Sorcerers harness the powers of these spirits on behalf of a client to take revenge against an

enemy. Some *diab* drain the life energy of the victim, eventually causing death. Others aren't quite so powerful or harmful.

Like all the spirits, *diab* require payment for their services, usually in the form of regular animal sacrifices. They may also randomly turn against the person who invoked them. A *gad*, or a distinctive pattern of shallow cuts in the upper arm, can protect the sorcerer against a *diab* that he has invoked.

Ouch! Voodoo Dolls

Everyone is familiar with voodoo dolls—cloth or wax dolls stuck with pins to kill or torment an enemy. They are almost universally associated with Vodou, even down to their name. So, it might surprise you to learn that voodoo dolls are completely unknown in Haiti and play no part at all in either the religion or magic of Vodou.

Voodoo dolls actually have European origins. Called poppets, they were used in the witchcraft tradition of Western Europe. An American journalist invented the term “voodoo doll” in the 1920s. Having heard that Vodou was “witchcraft,” he made up a story based on the only witchcraft he knew—European witchcraft. The term caught on. Today, voodoo dolls seem to function primarily as souvenirs sold in voodoo shops in New Orleans.

The “magic” of voodoo dolls relies on the power of symbols. These dolls are generally crudely fashioned from wax or sewn from cloth. They look nothing like the people they're supposed to represent. In making them, the witch incorporates hair or nail clippings from the victim, tying the victim to the doll.

Once the victim and the doll are linked, the witch can inflict harm upon the doll, and the victim will experience similar harm. Stick a pin in the doll's leg, and the victim feels agonizing pain in his or her own leg. Stick a pin in the doll's eye, and the victim goes blind in the same eye. If someone really is hurt, it's probably because the person believes so strongly in the power of the symbolic doll that he or she manifests psychosomatic symptoms rather than the result of any real magical effects.

The important thing to remember about voodoo dolls is that they have nothing to do with Vodou as it is practiced in Haiti. While you may see dolls on Haitian altars, they represent the *lwa* and aren't used in black magic or curses.



Spiritual Advice

The voodoo doll has entered the twenty-first century. You can cast a spell using a virtual voodoo doll at www.tO.or.at/vv/vv.htm. I can't guarantee how good your results will be, but it's still a lot of fun!

What's the Password? Secret Societies

The *bòkò*'s skill with black magic is terrifying; you definitely don't want to get on a sorcerer's bad side. But at least he works alone. Even more frightening are secret societies—groups of sorcerers who meet to worship evil spirits and cast harmful spells.

Secret societies have flourished in Haiti since colonial times. Although they are secret, their existence is public knowledge. They operate in all parts of the country, especially in the rural areas. They go by many names depending on the region. Most commonly known as Bizango or Shanpwel, they are also called Zobop, Vlenblendeng, and Macandal.

In Haiti, secret societies have a fearsome reputation. They are said to be bands of criminals and murderers that meet at night to hold their dark rituals in which they are rumored to sacrifice children and eat human flesh. They march through the streets in the dark

hours, and anyone who encounters them is lucky to escape bewitchment, according to the frightening stories told about them. They are even supposed to have supernatural powers, able to change into animals or fly invisibly through the night.

Secret societies are very real, but they are actually underground police forces and tribunals that enforce unwritten laws and prevent crime. They have their roots in the tribal customs of West Africa and the *maroon* rebel bands of pre-Revolutionary Haiti. While they may practice black magic, they use their powers to maintain order in the community and ensure that justice is served.



Spiritual Advice

All members of a secret society hold "passports," identification papers that enable them to recognize each other and go out at night without fear. If you are out on the streets in Haiti after midnight and encounter a band of secret society members, you only have to kneel in respect and cover your eyes and head to be left alone.

The History of Haitian Secret Societies

Secret societies, such as the infamous leopard society, were prevalent in tribal villages in West Africa, from which many Haitian slaves were taken. These societies enforced laws, judged cases, recovered debts, and protected the property of their members. Members had to be initiated, which meant undergoing harsh tests of endurance and pain. They recognized each other by secret passwords, symbols, and handshakes that they learned at initiation.

In the colony of Saint Domingue, escaped slaves called *maroons* continued the traditions of the West African secret societies. They formed bands that held nighttime meetings in secret locations in Haiti's mountains and conspired to wage guerrilla war on slave owners.

After Haiti won its independence, the *maroons*' struggle continued. Their role then was to protect the peasantry against the oppression of the elite ruling class and the dictatorial

governments of the new country. Bands of *maroons* continued to operate as late as the 1860s. They carried out their activities in secret to avoid prosecution. These groups formed the basis of the secret societies that still exist in Haiti today.

Voodoo Hoodoo

Haitian secret societies were also influenced by Freemasonry. By the time of the Revolution, several Masonic lodges were operating in Saint Domingue. These mysterious fraternities appealed to the slaves because they reminded them of the secret societies of their African ancestors. After independence, the liberated slaves joined Masonic lodges in great numbers. They borrowed heavily from Masonic imagery for Vodou symbols, particularly the pick, shovel, top hat, and skull and crossbones that represent the Gédé. The symbolic sacred coffin of Haitian secret societies also originated in Masonic imagery.

Secret Societies Today

Secret societies operate in all regions of Haiti, each controlling its own territory. Societies respect each other's boundaries and elect one leader to settle disputes within a region. Members of one society sometimes branch out on their own to form new societies under the umbrella of the original group.

While secret societies aren't officially part of Vodou, they are loosely associated with it. Each society is affiliated with the local *ounfò*, and the *oungan* acts as the liaison between the society's leaders and the public. *Oungans* are often high-ranking members of the society as well.

Membership in the society is by invitation only, and members must undergo an initiation ceremony. During the ceremony, they learn the society's passwords, ritual handshakes, songs, and dances. Membership is open to both men and women.

Members of the society and their families receive special protection. They can appeal to the society for help in times of need. The society feeds the hungry and clothes the poor. It aids the unemployed with finding work. It lends money to cover medical bills for the sick. It helps members who get in trouble with the police and protects them from their enemies.

The society is organized in a strict hierarchy, and everyone has an assigned role. The ruling body, called the *groupe d'état*, consists of the following high-ranking members:

- ◆ The emperor, the founder of the society
- ◆ The president, the highest rank beneath the emperor
- ◆ The first queen, a high-ranking female in the society

- ◆ The second and third queens, lower-ranking females
- ◆ The chief détente
- ◆ The vice-president

Other important members of the secret society include the following people:

- ◆ Flag queens, who carry the society's flags in formal processions
- ◆ Flying queens, who carry the society's symbolic coffin in formal processions
- ◆ The sentinel, a scout who moves ahead of processions and guards the entranceway into society meetings



Voodoo Speak

The executive leadership of a secret society is called the **groupe d'état**. Collectively, they decide whether to try cases brought before them, judge criminals, hand out punishments, and enforce the laws of the society.

- ◆ The executioner, who enforces the decisions of the society's leaders
- ◆ The hunter, who brings accused criminals before the society

Additional members of the society hold lesser positions, like prime minister, counselor, lawyer, secretary, treasurer, supervisor, superintendent, monitor, executive, general, prince, brigadier general, and major. The lowest-ranked members of the society are called soldiers.

Judge, Jury, and Executioner

Secret societies are not wild criminal cults that kill the innocent indiscriminately. Rather, they are underground police forces that keep order throughout the community. Members of the secret society patrol the village to maintain respect for the night and prevent crimes. They rule through fear of their rumored supernatural abilities and proficiency with black magic.

The society enforces a code of unwritten laws. Anyone in the territory that the society controls can be brought before the society to face trial for any of these crimes:

- ◆ Talking about the society or showing a lack of respect for it.
- ◆ Being out on the streets late at night when they aren't supposed to.
- ◆ Becoming wealthy at the expense of their dependants.
- ◆ Harming members of their family.
- ◆ Showing lack of respect for their family members or neighbors.
- ◆ Spreading slanderous gossip that hurts the reputations of others.
- ◆ Stealing another man's woman.
- ◆ Land disputes.

If a member feels he or she has been wronged, the member can bring the other party before the society to be judged or “sell” the other person to the society. The rulers of the society meet at night to decide whether the case has merit. If it does, both the accused and the accuser must appear before the society. They are kidnapped in the middle of the night to stand trial. If the accused is found guilty, his or her punishment is usually illness or death. But if the accused is innocent, the accuser is then found guilty of telling lies and suffers the same fate.

Secret societies use black magic to enforce their judgments. Their punishments range from *kou le*, “air spells” causing a mild illness, to stealing someone’s soul, resulting in death. The harshest judgment is zombification, generally associated with the most widespread of the secret societies, the Bizango. (Read more about zombification in the next chapter.) Thus, secret societies are said to be both “sweet” and “bitter.” They are sweet because they protect their members from harm and keep crime from running rampant in the community. But they are bitter because if they find that someone has committed a crime, their judgments are swift and severe.



Voodoo Speak

A meeting of a secret society is called a **séance**. These meetings take place at night. During the meeting, the society’s members salute and invoke their patron *lwa*, including Kalfou and Baron Samedi. Special drumbeats call the members of the society to the meeting. Each member must say the society’s password in order to get in.



Voodoo Speak

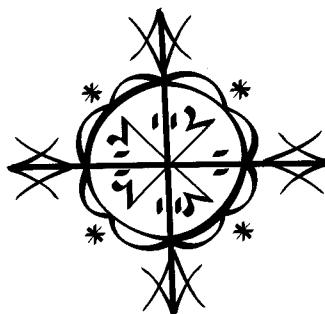
The small, black, wooden coffin that symbolizes the secret society is called the **madoulé**. It is saluted in meetings of the society and carried in formal processions by four female members of the society called “flying queens.”

Members Only: A Secret Society Meeting

The secret society gathers at night in a ritual meeting called a *séance*. A special drumbeat calls the members of the society to meetings, which they attend dressed in red and black costumes. All members know a password, which they learn at initiation. They must give the password to the sentinel guarding the gate before they can enter the meeting.

A *séance* proceeds like a typical Vodou ritual. The presiding emperor enters the meeting space accompanied by his president, ministers, queens, officers, and servants, and the other members of the society salute them. The meeting begins with an invocation of the *lwa*, particularly the Petro spirits who act as guardians of the society. Frenzied singing and dancing ensue, while the musicians beat drums, play conch horns, crack whips, and blow shrill blasts on their whistles.

Secret society members stop at crossroads during their processions to honor Kalfou, the master lwa of black magic; they leave offerings for him on vevers like this one.



At the high point of the ritual, four female members of the society called “flying queens” carry out the *madoulé*, a small black coffin that symbolizes the society. All members of the society salute the coffin. They form a procession and march through the countryside, stopping at every crossroads to salute their guardian spirits, particularly Kalfou (see the following figure). The procession ends at a graveyard, where the society invokes their patron *lwa*, Baron Samedi.

The Least You Need to Know

- ◆ Black magicians in Vodou are called *bòkò*; they are uninitiated priests who work alone and are shunned by legitimate practitioners of the religion.
- ◆ Vodou sorcerers have many tools in their arsenal of black magic, including malevolent charms called *ouanga*, magical spells, and evil spirits called *baka* and *diab*.
- ◆ Voodoo dolls actually have nothing to do with Haitian Vodou but derived from Western European witchcraft traditions.
- ◆ Haitian secret societies, rumored to be cults of criminals and cannibals with supernatural powers, are actually police forces that judge lawbreakers and maintain order in the community.

They Live (or Do They?): Zombies

In This Chapter

- ◆ What a zombie is—and what it isn't
- ◆ How black magic is used to turn people into zombies
- ◆ How to prevent or cure zombification
- ◆ The possible role of poisons in making zombies
- ◆ Natural explanations for zombies

We've all seen them in the movies (and in Michael Jackson's music video, "Thriller"). They claw their way out of their graves and shuffle through the night in ragged clothes and rotting skin with blank looks and one thing on their minds—eating human brains. They're zombies, and they're as familiar monsters to us as vampires and werewolves. (For more on zombies in the movies, turn to Chapter 24, "Voodoo on the Big Screen.")

You're probably aware that the inspiration for the movie-monster zombie came from the folklore of Haiti. But did you know that the Haitian zombie—or the *zombi*, as it is spelled in Kreyol—bears very little resemblance to those rotting, living corpses of the movies? Haitians aren't afraid of running into *zombis* as much as they are afraid of being turned into one. For Haitians, becoming a *zombi* is their worst nightmare because it means becoming a slave again.

But are *zombis* real? No one knows for sure. While plenty of people have claimed to have seen *zombis* or even to know a few, there is no real scientific evidence that *zombis* exist. Many people have proposed theories about what *zombis* really are and how they are made, but they are still just theories. In this chapter, we'll examine a few of them.

Night of the Living Dead: Zombi Facts and Fallacies

In October 1936, a naked woman was found wandering by the roadside in Haiti. Her brother identified her as Felicia Felix-Mentor. Amazingly, he claimed that his sister had taken ill, died, and been buried 29 years before. He even produced her death certificate. And he insisted that she must have been turned into a *zombi*.



Voodoo Speak

According to Haitian folklore, a **zombi** is a person who has died and whose body has subsequently been raised from the dead by black magic to be used for slave labor. The revived body has no soul and thus no will of its own. The word *zombi* comes from the Congo word *nzambi*, which means "spirit of a dead person."



Danger Ahead!

Zombification is often employed as a way of punishing criminals and wrongdoers. Secret societies, particularly the Bizango, are rumored to use zombification to punish those who commit crimes against the society. People also may employ a *bòkò* to turn annoying, lazy, or dishonest family members or neighbors into *zombis*.

Stories like these abound in Haiti. Some people say that *zombis* are merely myths concocted to scare small children. Others insist that *zombis* are very real and even claim to have seen them on the streets. Despite the stories, though, there are few documented cases of actual *zombis*, and there is no proof that they are created by black magic.

What Are Zombis?

According to common knowledge in Haiti, *zombis* truly are the living dead. They are dead bodies stolen from their graves and reanimated by means of black magic. Only the *bòkò* knows the secret of exactly how this is done.

The most important thing that distinguishes *zombis* from the living is that *zombis* have no souls. The black magician removes the person's soul shortly before or shortly after death. This gives the *bòkò* ultimate control over the *zombi*. The *zombi* must do its master's bidding because it has no will of its own.

So, *zombis* are literally slaves. They are completely under the control of the black magician who revived them. They are often used for slave labor on farms, around the house, and on construction sites. Every Haitian is descended from a slave, so the return to slavery—the condition against which Vodou developed—through zombification embodies their greatest fears.

Haitians aren't afraid of *zombis*. In fact, *zombis* are harmless creatures because they have no will of their own. Rather, Haitians fear being changed into *zombis*. The power to make someone a *zombi* is the *bòkò*'s most terrifying magical weapon.

Recognizing Zombis

Zombis have several distinguishing characteristics that mark them as being of the “other world,” the world of the dead. They have blank, glassy eyes, slack mouths, and listless expressions. They walk slowly and stiffly, as if they can't bend their joints very well. The most obvious characteristic of *zombis* is their nasal twang, a way of speaking that in Haiti is always associated with the dead.

In behavior, *zombis* resemble the catatonic. Their human personalities are entirely absent. They move very slowly and act with complete docility. They don't respond readily to outside stimuli. They hardly speak. They have no memory of where they come from or their families, and they don't even know their own names.

Voodoo Hoodoo

Zombis aren't the only folkloric monsters in Vodou. Haitians also tell stories of *lougrou*—literally “werewolves”—or sorcerers who can shape-shift into animals. They don't just change into wolves, though, but also black cats, birds, pigs, cows, and horses. *Lougrou* wander at night, looking for children from whom they will suck their life force. The term also refers to female vampires that drink the blood of children. Evil spirits often punish those who bought their services but didn't repay them properly by changing them into *lougrou*. The condition can also be passed down through family lines or result from a contagious illness.

Contrary to what you may have seen in the movies, the bodies of *zombis* don't continue to decay after they have been raised from the grave. And Haitian *zombis* don't have an uncontrollable craving for human brains. Other than their catatonic, docile state, they can't be distinguished from living people.

From Grave to Slave

Because a *zombi* is a dead body without a soul, making a *zombi* depends entirely on being able to capture a person's soul. The *bòkò* can take the soul of a living person using a *kou nanm*, or “soul spell,” (see Chapter 21, “That Old Black Magic”) soon bringing about the person's death, or he can capture the soul shortly after death during the time that it hovers around the body.

Because the *bòkò* has captured his victim's soul, he actually possesses two kinds of *zombis*: the soulless body and the soul itself, which is called a *zombi astral*. The sorcerer keeps the captured soul, or *zombi astral*, in a jar or bottle. He can control it just as he can the *zombi*, sending it out to perform evil deeds for him. The soul is never allowed to rest or travel to the land of the dead where it can be venerated as an ancestral spirit.



Voodoo Speak

A **zombi astral** is the captured soul of a *zombi*. Unlike a *zombi*, which is a body without a soul, a *zombi astral* is a soul without a body. The *bòkò* who captured the soul has complete control over it. He keeps it in a jar or bottle and sends it out to perform evil tasks for him.

After the *bòkò*'s victim has been pronounced dead and is buried, the black magician goes to the graveyard to resurrect his *zombi*. He stands beside the new grave and performs a magical rite that only black magicians know. He then calls his victim's name three times. The *zombi* has no choice but to answer and come out of the ground. The *bòkò* beats the body with a whip to keep the soul from returning to it. He then binds the *zombi* and leads him away to his new "life" as a slave laborer.

Protect Yourself: Prevention and Cures

In Haiti, any death that isn't natural, or a death of Bondye, is immediately suspicious. Sorcery or evil spirits invariably cause unnatural deaths, and the newly dead are in great danger of becoming *zombis*.

Family members must ensure that their newly deceased relative doesn't become the victim of a *bòkò*'s spell and get turned into a *zombi*. The surest way to prevent zombification is to "kill" the body a second time by shooting it in the head, injecting it with poison, strangling it, stabbing it, or decapitating it. The elaborate death rituals of Vodou also ensure that the soul is not captured by a *bòkò* and that the body remains safely dead.

A *zombi* can be raised only if it answers its name when the *bòkò* calls it, so sometimes the corpse's mouth is tied shut (by tying a strip of cloth around the top of the head and under the chin) or sewn up. Burying the corpse facedown with a knife in its hand enables it to stab any sorcerer who attempts to raise it. Corpses may also be nailed into their coffins to prevent them from being removed.

Family members may set up a watch in the cemetery after the burial of the loved one. They must sit by the grave for at least 36 hours. After that time, the deceased can no longer be changed into a *zombi*.

Zombis are bewitched by their *bòkò* masters so that they have no memory of their past lives or will of their own. But the curse can be broken. If a *zombi* tastes salt, he immediately remembers who he is and becomes aware of his condition as the living dead. In his rage, he turns against his master, killing the *bòkò* and destroying his property. He then sets out

across the countryside in search of his grave. Once he touches his tomb, his body crumbles to dust. If the *bòkò* master dies by any other means, his death also automatically sets all his *zombis* free.

Zombi Powder: A “Natural” Cause?

While some Haitians insist that zombification is solely the result of black magic, the evidence suggests that there may be a natural cause of the phenomenon—a powerful drug administered by a *bòkò* that makes his victim only *appear* to be dead. After the victim has been buried alive, the *bòkò* digs him up and revives him with an antidote. The antidote drugs the victim or causes such extensive brain damage that it keeps him or her under the sorcerer’s control.

The person who first proposed this theory was Wade Davis, an ethnobiologist who traveled to Haiti in search of the elusive *zombi* drug and published his findings in his controversial book, *The Serpent and the Rainbow* (see Appendix B, “Resources for Further Study”). But the *zombi* powder, as it is called in Haiti, was common knowledge in the country well before Davis went there.

Voodoo Hoodoo

The *zombi* powder was even mentioned in the Haitian penal code of 1846, which outlawed use of the powder in Article 246: “Also to be termed intention to kill, by poisoning, is that use of substances whereby a person is not killed but reduced to a state of lethargy, more or less prolonged, and this without regard to the manner in which the substances were used or what were their later results. If, following the state of lethargy, a person is buried, then the attempt will be termed murder.”

The Zombi Powder Recipe

No one but the *bòkò* knows the exact ingredients of the *zombi* powder or the proper dose to give the appearance of death without actually killing the victim. Not even Davis was able to find that out. But he proposed that the *zombi* powder was made from a combination of powerful toxins taken from plants and animals native to Haiti and commonly known to *bòkò* and *oungans* alike. These ingredients include some or all the following:

- ◆ Ground-up human bones
- ◆ Seeds and leaves from poisonous plants
- ◆ Millipedes
- ◆ Tarantulas and other spiders

- ◆ The skins of poisonous tree frogs
- ◆ The gland secretions of poisonous cane toads
- ◆ Four types of puffer fish, which contain tetrodotoxin, one of the most poisonous substances in the world



Danger Ahead!

The puffer fish, known as “fugu” in Japan, is a delicacy of sushi, but it makes for a very dangerous meal. Licensed chefs must prepare it just so, or the fish will kill the diner. Despite their precautions, around 10 people a year die from fugu poisoning in Japan. Fugu is also very expensive, with one piece costing the equivalent in Japan of more than 200 dollars.

While some of these ingredients were obviously included for their symbolic properties, such as the human bones, many contain powerful poisons. Of these, the most likely culprit for the catatonic state that resembles death is tetrodotoxin, which occurs naturally in the puffer fish and some other animals. One of the most poisonous substances known, it is 160,000 times more potent than cocaine and 500 times stronger than cyanide.

Tetrodotoxin is a powerful neurotoxin that blocks the conduction of nerve signals. This lowers the victim’s metabolic rate almost to the point of clinical death. It’s no wonder then that many doctors believe the victim to have actually died.

The Zombi’s “Death”

The *zombi* powder is so powerful that it merely has to be absorbed through the skin to take effect. Thus, the *bòkò* only has to scatter the powder on his victim’s doorstep, sprinkle it into his shoe, or pour it down his back to administer the poison. He may also rub the powder into a cut on the victim’s skin, blow it into his face so that the victim inhales it, or sprinkle it on his food.

The first symptoms of poisoning by the *zombi* powder include tiredness, pallor, and dizziness. The victim feels a tingling in his or her extremities that soon progresses to a severe numbness. Sweating, weakness, headache, a rapid pulse, and sometimes vomiting and diarrhea follow.

Gradually, extensive paralysis sets in. The muscles stiffen, and the skin goes cold. Because the poison causes a radically slowed heartbeat and lowers blood pressure, the victim appears to all intents and purposes to be dead. The victim may retain consciousness and even witness his or her own funeral but is completely powerless, unable to speak or move.

The Zombi's Cucumber

Two or three days after the burial, the *bòkò* goes to the graveyard and digs up his victim. He then administers the antidote, which is derived from a poisonous plant which in Haiti is called the *concombres zombi*, or the *zombi's* cucumber (the same plant is known as “jimsonweed” in North America). No one but the *bòkò* knows exactly how to prepare the antidote or what dosage to give. The main ingredient of the antidote is believed to be a strong psychoactive drug that affects the parts of the brain governing speech and willpower.

The antidote revives the victim, but he or she is so disoriented, drugged up, or brain damaged that his or her senses are dulled, and the victim cannot remember his or her name, family, or home. The ordeal of being pronounced dead and buried alive may have also driven the victim insane. Thus, the sorcerer easily controls the victim, putting the “*zombi*” to work as his new slave. The victim may also have to receive regular doses of the *concombres zombi* to remain in a *zombi*-like state.



Voodoo Speak

The **concombres zombi**, which translates literally to “*zombi's* cucumber,” is a plant-derived antidote to the *zombi* powder. The *zombi* powder puts the victim in a coma that is indistinguishable from death, and the *concombres zombi* revives the victim, but it contains a powerful hallucinogenic drug that keeps the victim under the *bòkò's* control.

The Missing Ingredient

Davis's hypothesis of the *zombi* powder and its poisonous ingredients is convincing, but it has been disputed by scientists ever since publication of his book. For one thing, Davis was unable to prove his theory conclusively. Although he brought home samples of the *zombi* powder, they were shown after testing to contain too little tetrodotoxin to have any pharmacological effect. And Davis was completely unable to produce the vital antidote to the poison.

It seems likely that if *zombis* are real, some form of drug is involved in making them; otherwise, the *zombi* powder and the *concombres zombi* would not be so well known to sorcerers and *oungans* alike. But perhaps black magic is necessary as well. Without the cooperation of the dark *lwa*, the potions are powerless and the *bòkò* cannot make *zombis*.

Or perhaps the black magicians were giving Davis incorrect information. They are *bòkò*, after all, and not to be trusted. It's likely that the *zombi* powder they gave Davis was prepared incorrectly or in the improper dosages. *Bòkò* guard the secrets of their black arts zealously and are unlikely to share them with an outsider.

Mistaken Identity: Real-Life Zombies

Yet another theory for the persistence of stories about *zombis* in Haiti has been proposed—cases of mistaken identity. In other words, Haitians have mistaken well-known medical conditions for zombification.

Medical science in Haiti is not far advanced, and there are few doctors and hospitals. Haitians rely on the folk medicine practiced by *oungans* and *mambos* to treat most illnesses. It seems logical that they might not be familiar with such diseases as catatonic schizophrenia or epilepsy, or with physical conditions like mental retardation, brain damage, or fetal alcohol syndrome. All these medical conditions produce symptoms very similar to the characteristics of the *zombi*. Catatonic schizophrenia, for instance, is characterized by incoherence and alternating periods of stupor and activity. Without knowing the true causes, Haitians may have explained these conditions away by proclaiming that the people who had them were *zombis*.

Voodoo Hoodoo

In 1997, two British researchers went to Haiti to investigate the cases of three so-called *zombis*. They discovered that all three were alive, and their *zombi*-like symptoms could easily be explained. One had a severe case of catatonic schizophrenia. The second had brain damage and epilepsy. The third had a major learning disability caused by fetal alcohol syndrome. There wasn't a single *zombi* among them.

The Least You Need to Know

- ◆ A *zombi* is a dead body without a soul, so that it has no will and can be completely controlled by the black magician who made it.
- ◆ To make a *zombi*, the *bòkò* must first capture his victim's soul; he then conducts a black magic ritual at the victim's tomb to raise the body and reanimate it.
- ◆ Family members can prevent their deceased loved one from being changed into a *zombi* by killing the body a second time; giving a *zombi* salt will instantly cure it.
- ◆ A possible natural cause of zombification is a powerful poison called tetrodotoxin, which causes the victim to fall into a coma indistinguishable from death; the victim is then revived with an antidote called the *zombi*'s cucumber.
- ◆ Reported *zombis* in Haiti may simply be cases of mistaken identity—people with known medical or mental conditions whose symptoms caused them to be mistaken for *zombis*.

In the Voodoo Shop

In This Chapter

- ◆ What voodoo shops are and where to locate them
- ◆ Services and items for sale in the voodoo shop
- ◆ What you can expect to pay
- ◆ Protecting yourself from con artists and swindlers

Now that you've read all about Vodou, you might be itching to dabble in it yourself. As you already know, Vodou is a participatory religion. You can't really understand it until you try it. You can start by serving the *lwa* you feel particularly close to and setting up an altar to honor them and your ancestors. (Turn back to Chapter 18, "Getting into Voodoo," for help with this.) It's also a good idea to meet an *oungan* or *mambo* who can advise you and guide you on your journey deeper into the religion.

You probably don't want to start by moving to Haiti and completely plunging into Vodou. Fortunately, Vodou communities in the United States, Canada, and Europe are growing, especially in major cities. The best way to get started is to visit a voodoo shop. There, you can purchase supplies for your altars and for simple rituals to do at home. Proprietors of voodoo shops are generally initiated priests and priestesses who will consult with you, perform divinations, and lead other ceremonies that you request. They might even help you find a Vodou society to join and take part in larger rituals. Even if you don't want to

participate in Vodou, visiting a voodoo shop is an ideal way to learn more about the religion and talk to participants.

But how do you find voodoo shops, and what can you expect when you visit one? This chapter gives you a brief introduction to the voodoo shop as well as some useful advice for separating the frauds and con men you might encounter from authentic Vodou priests and priestesses.

Finding a Voodoo Shop Near You

If you live in a major metropolitan area, there's a good chance that you can find a voodoo shop close to home. The first place to check is the yellow pages of your phone book under the headings "Religious Supplies" or "Candles and Herbs."



Voodoo Speak

A **botanica** is a shop that sells potions, candles, charms, herbs, books, musical instruments, and other objects used in the practice of Lukumi. A *botanica* is generally owned and operated by a priest of Lukumi, a *Santero* (or a priestess, called a *Santera*), who also offers services, like divination and customized rituals. *Botanicas* are generally located in Latino neighborhoods of major cities.

If there is no voodoo shop nearby, expand your horizons a little and you still may be able to locate what you need. Shops associated with Lukumi (or Santería) are called *botanicas*. Most major cities, especially those with large Latino populations, have at least one. *Botanicas* sell items similar to those used in Vodou, including candles and pictures of the saints for your altars. General occult or pagan shops also sell the candles, incense, books, music, and other items you may need for your home altars or rituals.

Even if you can't find a voodoo or other occult shop in your local yellow pages, you're not out of luck. On the Internet, you can shop at a large number of online voodoo shops selling everything from charms to luck bath ingredients to customized ceremonies. The following online voodoo shops will cater to your Vodou needs.

Mambo Racine is an initiated *mambo* who runs an *ounfo* in Haiti. You can purchase Vodou supplies imported from Port-au-Prince at her online Vodou Emporium, such as candles, bowls, pots, straw bags, and machetes. She also will conduct authentic rituals for you, including *lave tèt*, marriage to the *lwa*, initiation, and making *gads* and *ouanga*. Visit her site at mamboracine.tripod.com/empor01.html; e-mail her at racine125@aol.com; or order by mail by writing Ms. Kathy S. Grey, P.O. Box 347, Sterling, MA 01564.

Lizazetteau is an initiated *mambo* specializing in Vodou, hoodoo, and Haitian roots. She offers a few services over the Internet, including divination, spell casting, and charm making. Visit her site at lizproudfoot.twoffice.com/index.html; send e-mail to info@lizproudfoot.twoffice.com; or write her at Lizazetteau Proudfoot, P.O. Box 531451, St. Petersburg, FL 33747-1451.

Papa Jim practices herbal magic and card reading. You can order candles, powders, baths, oils, incense, spell kits, perfumed waters, herbs, and charms. Visit the store at www.papajims.com; e-mail him at Info@papajimsbotanica.com; or write the store at 5630 S. Flores St., San Antonio, TX 78214.

Doctor Thessalonia DePrince claims to be trained in the arts of voodoo magic. You can purchase psychic readings, spells, or supplies. Visit his site at www.voodooeprince.com/index.htm; e-mail him at deprince-usa@worldnet.att.net; or write him at CO 2, Flushing, Queens, NY 11369.

Scully Elly's Voodoo Joint is run by a Vodou practitioner. There you can buy herbs, charms, divination tools, custom spells, and items for your altar. You can also participate in a Vodou discussion forum at the Web site. Check out the site at store.yahoo.com/jukejoint/sculelvoodjo.html; e-mail Scully Elly at elly@thejukejoint.com; or write her at P.O. Box 770380, New Orleans, LA 70177-0380.

Papa Bones claims to be the largest voodoo and occult store in the United States, selling products made by an initiated *oungan*. It's a full-service voodoo shop, and the staff conducts rituals, prepares spells, and constructs charms. Visit their site at www.papabones.com/index.html.

The New Orleans Voodoo Spiritual Temple offers several services in the tradition of New Orleans Voodoo. You can commission card and palm readings and have customized potions, charms, and baths made for you. You can also participate in rituals like marriage to a *lwa*, healing and love spells, and the snake dance ceremony characteristic of New Orleans Voodoo. Visit the Web site at www.blood-dance.net/~rogue/temple/; send e-mail to voodoo@gnofn.org; or write Priestess Miriam at The Voodoo Spiritual Temple, 828 North Rampart St., New Orleans, LA, 70116.

The New Orleans Historic Voodoo Museum also has a shop where you can buy candles, voodoo dolls, spells, potions, *gris-gris* bags, and



Danger Ahead!

I can't vouch for the authenticity of any of these voodoo shops or validate their claims. Proceed with caution. Use your common sense before spending any money. It's a good idea to contact an employee of the shop directly and ask any questions you might have before purchasing. Legitimate shops list a mailing address and phone number in a prominent place on the Web site.



Spiritual Advice

If you're planning a visit to New Orleans, you'll find a plethora of voodoo shops there, especially in the French Quarter. However, the items and services these shops provide are in the tradition of New Orleans Voodoo not Haitian Vodou. New Orleans Voodoo places a greater emphasis on magical items, such as charms, powders, and voodoo dolls. Be aware of the differences when you visit.

other magical items of New Orleans Voodoo. If you visit, you can request private consultations and healing rituals. Stop by online at www.voodooomuseum.com/shop, and be sure to drop in at the museum the next time you're in New Orleans.

Voodoo Authentica is another New Orleans Voodoo shop. There you'll find a wide range of voodoo products, such as educational packages to help beginners get started, a ritual kit, divination tools, voodoo dolls, *gris-gris* bags, potions, candles, and incense as well as personal spiritual consultations. This store also sells Haitian crafts, including beaded bottles, flags, and metalwork. Visit it online at www.voodooishop.com, or visit it in person; the address is 2244 Oriole St., New Orleans, LA 70122.

Services for Sale

When you walk into a voodoo shop, you'll find all sorts of goods for sale. These include charms and potions for general purposes, such as protecting yourself against negative forces, bringing good luck, attracting love, or finding money. You'll also find items for your altars, including candles, offering bowls, stones and crystals, incense, perfumed water, chromolithographs of Catholic saints, and other representations and symbols of the *lwa*. Some shops even sell items for rituals, like special ceremonial clothing, food offerings that are difficult to find in this country, and herbs from Haiti.

To get more personal service, you will have to commission customized services from the proprietor of the shop. Owners of voodoo shops are frequently initiated *oungans* and *mambos* (but be sure to ask first). Many practicing *oungans* and *mambos* live in the United States, and a lot of them run voodoo shops to support themselves.



Spiritual Advice

If you would like to be initiated into Vodou, the first step is to form a relationship with a local *oungan* or *mambo*, usually the owner of a voodoo shop. That person can counsel you about taking this serious step into the religion and introduce you to a Haitian *socyeite* where you can have the initiation ritual performed.

Initiated Vodou priests and priestesses can perform a wide range of services for you, including the following:

- ◆ Divination
- ◆ Healing
- ◆ Mixing herbal powders, teas, and other recipes
- ◆ Constructing charms, *ouanga*, or *pakets Kongo*
- ◆ Consulting on your spiritual life
- ◆ Giving luck baths
- ◆ Administering the *lave tèt* ritual
- ◆ Casting spells or making magical potions
- ◆ Officiating over private ceremonies, such as marriage to the *lwa* or honoring one of the *lwa*

Get Out Your Credit Card

These services aren't free. Because Vodou isn't an organized religion, Vodou priests and priestesses don't receive a salary, so selling goods and services to individual clients is how they make most of their money. For *oungans* and *mambos* living in the United States, voodoo shops are the bread and butter of their practice.

Divination is the least expensive of the services you can commission, usually costing between 20 and 50 dollars for a session. Charms carry a wide range of prices, depending on how complicated they are, the necessary ingredients, and the effort required to make them. In the United States, prices for charms range from 20 dollars to several hundred dollars, with most charms falling at the lower end of that spectrum.

Simple customized rituals aren't too expensive, ranging from 50 dollars to a few hundred dollars, depending on the nature of the ceremony and the implements required. For example, the *lave tèt* ritual and the ceremony for making a *gad* cost between 200 and 400 dollars. A more complex ceremony, such as *maryaj lwa*, is priced higher, between 700 and 1,000 dollars.

Initiation is more expensive still. Figure on paying up to 3,000 dollars for that ritual. That doesn't include the costs of the trip to Haiti, a required part of initiation. Although almost all Vodou rituals can be performed anywhere, the initiation ritual must take place in Haiti because the ceremonies require specific fresh herbs that can only be obtained there.



Danger Ahead!

If you commission a private ceremony or ask a priest to make a charm or potion for you, look out for hidden costs. Some priests expect you to furnish the raw ingredients for the charm or provide the items necessary to hold the ceremony, such as animals for sacrifice, food offerings, herbs, and ceremonial clothing. Make sure you know the costs of everything required before you agree.

Protecting Yourself Against Con Artists and Swindlers

You run the risk of falling victim to con artists and swindlers everywhere, and voodoo shops are no different. Such unscrupulous people set themselves up as false priests or priestesses without ever having undergone initiation. The superstitions and myths surrounding Vodou in the United States make it a simple matter for these crooks to defraud unsuspecting outsiders.

Now that you've read this book, you should be able to exercise common sense to separate the true priests and priestesses of Vodou from the fraudulent ones. Constant, pushy demands for large amounts of money, even for very simple services, should set off warning

bells. In addition, watch out for voodoo shop proprietors who mix the traditions of different religions, sell “authentic” voodoo dolls, or otherwise espouse practices that you know aren’t truly Vodou. And anyone who claims to be the only true *oungan* or *mambo* operating in the United States is definitely trying to pull one over on you!

To find out whether a voodoo shop proprietor is a true *oungan* or *mambo*, simply ask who initiated him or her, where and when the proprietor was initiated, and what rank he or she has achieved. According to Vodou tradition, an authentic priest or priestess must give a full answer promptly. If the proprietor can’t provide a convincing answer or hesitates in responding, the proprietor probably isn’t who he or she claims to be.

It should also be easy for you to distinguish whether any Vodou ceremony you attend is authentic or not. Admission is never charged for a public Vodou ritual, no more than it would be charged to attend a service at a Christian church. Although the hat is often passed to cover the expenses of the ritual, you aren’t obligated to kick in. Genuine Vodou rituals also don’t include popular entertainment, such as jazz or reggae bands. The experience of the ritual itself is entertainment enough for the attendees.

Voodoo Hoodoo

In Haiti, as everywhere else, many people fantasize about becoming rich overnight, perhaps by discovering hidden treasure. Some Haitians believe that plantation owners buried their gold in secret spots on the island during the slave rebellion and left the treasure behind when fleeing the island. Spirits of the slaves who were executed immediately after burying the treasure still guard those sites today. Some people hire *bòkò* to help them find the treasure and perform ceremonies to appease the spirits guarding it. These common myths offer lucrative opportunities for swindlers, who convince honest people that treasure is buried somewhere on their property and charge them exorbitant fees to locate it.

Don’t let these swindlers dissuade you if you encounter one or two. Simply congratulate yourself for having seen through their acts and move on. Many legitimate Vodou priests and priestesses have set up *socyetes* and opened voodoo shops in the United States. They would be happy to assist anyone who demonstrates a genuine interest in their religion, and they won’t break your wallet to do it.

The Least You Need to Know

- ◆ Voodoo shops can be found in many major cities and on the Internet; they are often owned by initiated priests and priestesses who can consult with you about your spiritual needs.
- ◆ Typical services and goods for sale in voodoo shops include charms, powders, potions, spells, divination, luck baths, protective *gads*, and simple rituals.
- ◆ Because Vodou priests and priestesses don't receive a salary, they make most of their income from voodoo selling goods and services; be prepared to pay for the charms, consultations, and ceremonies you commission, but take care not to pay too much.
- ◆ As in every other area of life, you must watch for swindlers and con artists in the voodoo shop; use your common sense and ask plenty of questions to distinguish the fakers from the real thing.

Voodoo on the Big Screen

In This Chapter

- ◆ How Hollywood has portrayed Vodou in the movies
- ◆ A few good movies about Vodou
- ◆ A comprehensive list of Vodou-inspired movies
- ◆ Zombies in the movies—a definitive filmography

Now that you know what Vodou is really all about, you can probably easily see how the religion has been distorted time and again on the silver screen. Voodoo dolls and brain-eating zombies—staples of Hollywood horror movies—may create exciting films, but they actually have nothing at all to do with Vodou as it is practiced in Haiti.

This chapter will introduce you to the long string of Vodou-inspired movies that have come out of Hollywood over the decades, both the best and the worst of the lot. You may not learn a lot about Vodou from these films, but at the very least, you'll find many of them entertaining!

What Sells Isn't Necessarily What's True

Filmmakers have been fascinated with Vodou since movies first became popular entertainment. Unfortunately, the majority of filmmakers haven't taken great pains to portray Vodou accurately. On the contrary, they have focused

almost entirely on Vodou's more lurid aspects, like zombies and black magic. And they have perpetuated Haitian stereotypes and outright falsities, such as voodoo "cults" holding orgiastic rituals, sacrificing children, and eating human flesh.



Danger Ahead!

You won't see a truly accurate depiction of Vodou in a fictional film. Fiction always sensationalizes the facts somewhat for the sake of a good story. As long as you keep that in mind, you can sit back and enjoy a good voodoo movie. For more accurate film depictions of Vodou, check out the documentaries listed in Appendix B, "Resources for Further Study."

Although the distorted portrayal of Vodou in Hollywood films has contributed greatly to the stereotypes and false notions many outsiders have about the religion, you can understand the filmmakers' point of view. After all, their first goal is to tell a good story, and these sensational associations with Vodou make for more compelling (and scarier) tales.

The problem comes when viewers confuse what they see on the big screen with the reality of Haitian religion and culture. After reading this book, you know that Vodou as it is practiced in the real world bears very little resemblance to the voodoo of the movies. You probably won't ever see an end to voodoo horror flicks or zombie monster movies. As long as you take the time to learn what Vodou is really all about, though, you can easily separate fact from fiction and still enjoy the movies.

Voodoo Done Right: A Few Movies to Watch

Hollywood doesn't have a good track record when it comes to making movies about Vodou. Good movies inspired by Vodou are few and far between (and some may argue that there aren't any). If you're dying to watch some good movies about Vodou—or just some good movies, period—give the following a try:

- ◆ *Angel Heart* (1987): Set in 1955 New Orleans, private detective Mickey Rourke is hired by the "devilish" Robert De Niro to track a missing singer and follows the trail to the underground world of New Orleans Voodoo. Steamy, sexy rituals abound.

This movie isn't the most accurate portrayal of New Orleans Voodoo, but it is a good and scary suspense story. Directed by Alan Parker, the movie was adapted from the voodoo-inspired novel *Falling Angel* by William Hjortsberg.

- ◆ *I Walked with a Zombie* (1943): This is probably the most famous voodoo horror film ever made. Believe it or not, the movie is a serious adaptation of *Jane Eyre*. Directed by Jacques Tourneur, it tells the story of an American nurse who goes to Haiti to care for a woman in a zombie-like state and



Spiritual Advice

To learn more about Vodou-inspired movies, pick up a copy of *Drums of Terror: Voodoo in the Cinema* by Bryan Senn (Midnight Marquee Press, 1998). You're sure to find plenty of items for your "must-see" list!

eventually takes the woman to a voodoo healing ceremony. The soundtrack even contains three authentic Haitian folk songs played at voodoo rituals. The title, assigned to the film by the movie studio that released it, and the advertising campaign preceding its release, capitalized on popular sensationalist notions about zombies and voodoo, but the film itself is a well-written, respectful treatment of its subject matter.

- ◆ *True Stories* (1986): This film, written and directed by Talking Heads lead singer David Byrne, is not about Vodou. However, it does feature an interesting sequence in which an *oungan* prepares a love spell and sings an invocation to Papa Legba to “come and open the gate.”

Your Rent List: A Voodoo Filmography

If you’re searching for additional films about Vodou or would like to sample some of Hollywood’s more sensationalistic offerings on the subject, head down to your local video store for the following:

- ◆ *The Believers* (1987): A police psychiatrist investigating the ritualistic murders of two teenagers becomes involved with a voodoo cult that tries to get him to sacrifice his own son.
- ◆ *Beyond the Caribbean* (1936): This is an early and rather bizarre treatment of voodoo and native crucifixion.
- ◆ *Child’s Play* (1988): A serial killer casts a voodoo spell that transfers his soul into a toy doll named Chucky, so he can resume his killing spree.
- ◆ *The Devil’s Daughter* (1939): This early movie features voodoo ceremonies and an all-black cast.
- ◆ *Dr. Terror’s House of Horrors* (1965): A musician becomes involved with voodoo in this episodic horror flick.
- ◆ *The House on Skull Mountain* (1974): The four surviving relatives of a voodoo priestess meet to hear the reading of her will.
- ◆ *The Killing Box* (1993): Slave traders bring back an evil voodoo spirit that is accidentally freed and possesses the bodies of dead soldiers in this film set during the Civil War.
- ◆ *Live and Let Die* (1973): The first James Bond movie starring Roger Moore features a villainous black magician who plans to control the world with voodoo.
- ◆ *Mirrors* (1978): A voodoo priestess places a curse on a newlywed wife to steal her soul.

- ◆ *Mondo New York* (1987): This episodic film about New York City features a New York-style voodoo ceremony.
- ◆ *Night Trap* (1993): Set during Mardi Gras in New Orleans, a detective must track down a murderous demon with the help of a voodoo queen.
- ◆ *Ouanga* (1936): Set in Haiti, the plot concerns a love triangle, a voodoo curse, and revenge-seeking zombies.
- ◆ *The Possession of Joel Delaney* (1972): A wealthy divorcee suspects that the strange transformations affecting her brother are caused by voodoo.
- ◆ *The Serpent and the Rainbow* (1987): This is a gory, exploitative adaptation of Wade Davis's nonfiction study of the *zombi* phenomenon and Haitian secret societies.
- ◆ *Serpent Island* (1954): A secretary travels to Haiti looking for treasure, but it's guarded by a voodoo cult.
- ◆ *The Snake People* (1968): A small island is crowded with members of an LSD-taking, snake-worshipping, voodoo cult.
- ◆ *Sobrenatural* (1995): A young woman finds herself embroiled in the world of black magic and a race against a powerful voodoo god.
- ◆ *Theatre of Death* (1967): A racy voodoo dance sequence, cut from the original film, has been restored on some video versions.
- ◆ *Voodoo* (1995): A college student must save his girlfriend from being sacrificed by a voodoo-practicing fraternity.
- ◆ *Voodoo Dawn* (1990): A group of Haitian farm workers must fight an evil voodoo priest who wants to use them to create an army of zombies.
- ◆ *Voodoo Island* (1957): Boris Karloff plays a businessman investigating strange goings-on in Haiti and discovers that voodoo does exist.
- ◆ *Voodoo Man* (1944): A doctor uses voodoo rituals and hypnotism to try to resurrect his long-dead wife.
- ◆ *Zombie Island Massacre* (1984): Americans on vacation in the Caribbean watch a voodoo ritual and find themselves under attack by an invisible enemy.

The Ultimate Horror Monster: Zombies in the Movies

Most zombie movies have nothing at all to do with Vodou. Fascinated by the idea of using the living dead as movie monsters, Hollywood filmmakers resurrect the dead and set them against their hapless victims with glee. Movie-monster zombies are sometimes revived by voodoo sorcerers, but they are also awakened by radioactive waste, government-released chemicals, aliens from outer space, Satanists, mad scientists, and other nasties. Often, the zombies are rotting, gory corpses with a hankering for human brains, bearing no resemblance to the *zombis* of Haitian folklore.

Zombie Cult Classics

Released in 1932, *The White Zombie* was probably the first zombie movie ever made. Bela Lugosi plays the sinister overseer of a sugar mill who turns his workers into zombies by giving them a secret powder. Portrayed as mindless creatures that harm others only at their master's bidding, these movie-monster zombies aren't much different from the *zombis* of Haitian folklore. The film is based on the notorious novel that popularized many Vodou stereotypes, *The Magic Island* by William Seabrook.



Spiritual Advice

If you get turned into a zombie, you'll need to get your hands on some brains fast! Fortunately, the Internet has made finding human brains a snap. Just go to Brains4Zombies at www.brains4zombies.com.

Another early zombie movie that you might have missed is *Carnival of Souls*, directed by Herk Harvey and released in 1962. Made for about 30,000 dollars, the movie sank into obscurity soon after its drive-in release. It later developed a cult following as a result of frequent showings as the "late-late movie" on television. This eerie, atmospheric horror film tells the story of a young woman who is the sole survivor of a car crash into a river. Afterward, she is haunted by visions of the dead. Over the years, this film has built a reputation as one of the most chilling horror movies ever made.

Probably the most famous zombie movies are George Romero's trilogy: *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), *Dawn of the Dead* (1979), and *Day of the Dead* (1985). In each low-budget film, man-eating zombies wake up and start shuffling around, hungry for brains. The small cast of human survivors barricades themselves somewhere to wait out the attack. These cult classics have nothing to do with Vodou, but they set the standard for zombie horror flicks.

Splatter-horror lovers should check out *Zombie* (1979), a low-budget Italian flick directed by Lucio Fulci that has become a favorite among zombie-movie aficionados. The plot isn't really important, but it concerns a mysterious disease that kills its victims and then turns them into walking corpses who must eat human flesh to survive. The movie features several notorious gross-out scenes, including an underwater fight between a zombie and a shark. Fulci followed *Zombie* with three sequels: *City of the Living Dead* (1980), *The Beyond* (1981), and *The House by the Cemetery* (1982).

More Flicks for Zombie Fans

If you're hungering for some more gory, brain-eating, zombie action, then this list is for you:

- ◆ *After Death* (1988): Scientists trying to create a new medicine accidentally create a bunch of zombies instead.



Danger Ahead!

Be warned: Most zombie movies aren't for the faint of heart! They're known for their gore and grotesque special (or not-so-special) effects. And if you're the kind of filmgoer who enjoys a movie with good acting, competent directing, and a coherent plot, you should probably skip most of the films on this list.

- ◆ *Alien Dead* (1985): Teenagers are turned into zombies after they are hit by a meteor.
- ◆ *The Astro-Zombies* (1967): A mad scientist creates zombies that eat human guts.
- ◆ *Bowery at Midnight* (1942): Bela Lugosi recycles dead criminals into zombie slave criminals.
- ◆ *Cemetery Man* (1995): This is a gory Italian flick about zombies and necrophilia.
- ◆ *Children Shouldn't Play with Dead Things* (1972): Filmmakers shooting a zombie movie skip the special effects in favor of the real thing.
- ◆ *The Chilling* (1989): Deep-frozen corpses come alive.
- ◆ *Chopper Chicks in Zombietown* (1991): Biker chicks, an evil mortician, and mindless zombie slaves meet in this gross-out from Troma Films.
- ◆ *City of the Walking Dead* (1983): This time it's radiation that has raised the dead.
- ◆ *The Dark Power* (1985): Dead Mexican soldiers rise when a house is built on their burial ground.
- ◆ *The Dead Don't Die* (1975): A madman wants to rule the world with his army of zombies.
- ◆ *The Dead Hate the Living* (1999): Low-budget filmmakers shooting a zombie movie accidentally bring back some real zombies.
- ◆ *Dead Heat* (1988): A dead cop is resurrected to help his partner rid the city of zombies.
- ◆ *The Dead Next Door* (1989): A scientist creates a virus that reawakens the dead, but they need human flesh to survive.
- ◆ *Evil Town* (1987): Yet another mad doctor creates a bunch of zombies.
- ◆ *The Hanging Woman* (1972): A doctor has evil plans to zombify the world.
- ◆ *Hard Rock Zombies* (1985): Heavy metal rockers are brought back as zombies.
- ◆ *Hellgate* (1989): A woman hitchhiker turns out to be a zombie.
- ◆ *The Hereafter* (1987): Zombies take over an old church.
- ◆ *I Eat Your Skin* (1964): Cannibalistic zombies run amok on a Caribbean island.
- ◆ *I Was a Teenage Zombie* (1987): This spoof pits a good zombie against a drug-pushing zombie.
- ◆ *I Was a Zombie for the FBI* (1982): The FBI must stop aliens who are trying to conquer the earth by turning everyone into zombies.

- ◆ *I, Zombie: A Chronicle of Pain* (1998): A graduate student is bitten by a zombie and gradually changes into one himself.
- ◆ *The Incredibly Strange Creatures Who Stopped Living and Became Mixed-Up Zombies* (1963): A gypsy fortuneteller turns her clients into zombies.
- ◆ *The Fitters* (1988): The murdered dead are coming back.
- ◆ *King of the Zombies* (1941): A mad scientist creates soulless zombies. Followed by *Revenge of the Zombies* (1943).
- ◆ *Lifeforce* (1985): A vampire from outer space fills London with rotting zombies.
- ◆ *Messiah of Evil* (1974): Zombies invade a California town.
- ◆ *Neon Maniacs* (1986): Zombies stalk the streets looking for victims to tear apart.
- ◆ *Night of the Comet* (1984): The last two women on earth are on the run from zombies.
- ◆ *Night of the Zombies* (1983): After being murdered, the staff of a scientific research center is resurrected as zombie cannibals.
- ◆ *Oasis of the Zombies* (1982): More Nazi zombies run amok, this time at a Saharan oasis.
- ◆ *Pet Sematary* (1989) and *Pet Sematary 2* (1992): Based on a Stephen King novel, the movies are about an ancient Indian burial ground with the power to raise the dead.
- ◆ *Plan Nine from Outer Space* (1956): In probably the worst movie ever made, aliens resurrect zombies in an attempt to conquer the earth.
- ◆ *Re-Animator* (1984): A crazy medical student reanimates the dead.
- ◆ *Redneck Zombies* (1988): Radioactive beer turns some country boys into zombies.
- ◆ *Return of the Living Dead* (1985), *Return of the Living Dead 2* (1988), and *Return of the Living Dead 3* (1993): This is a series of satires about zombies revived by poisonous gas.
- ◆ *Revenge of the Living Zombies* (1988): More teens are attacked by zombies.
- ◆ *Revenge of the Zombies* (1981): This is a kung-fu exploitation film featuring zombies and evil magicians.
- ◆ *Revolt of the Zombies* (1936): A mad scientist brings the dead to life to form a unique World War I military unit.
- ◆ *Seven Doors of Death* (1982): Zombies try to check out of a possessed hotel.
- ◆ *Shock Waves* (1977): This B-movie features mutant-underwater-zombie Nazis.



Spiritual Advice

If you don't want to sit through these stinkers but still want to see some zombie action, go get *Zombiethon*. This campy film, released in 1986, compiles clips from many B-grade zombie flicks, including *Space Zombies*, *Zombie Lake*, and *The Invisible Dead*.

- ◆ *Teenage Zombies* (1958): A mad scientist, a remote island, teenagers, and a plot to use zombies to take over the world are combined in one movie.
- ◆ *Tomb of the Undead* (1972): Prisoners of war return as zombies to take revenge on their captors.
- ◆ *Tombs of the Blind Dead* (1972), *Horror of the Zombies* (1974), and *Return of the Evil Dead* (1975): This is a trilogy of films about blind zombies.
- ◆ *Vengeance of the Zombies* (1972): A madman unleashes the living dead on London.
- ◆ *The Video Dead* (1987): Murderous zombies come out of a possessed television.
- ◆ *The Zombie Army* (1993): Zombie inmates at an abandoned lunatic asylum menace Army recruits.
- ◆ *Zombie Brigade* (1986): Disgruntled veterans return from the grave in this Australian B-movie.
- ◆ *Zombie High* (1987): Teens are turned into zombies to make them better students.
- ◆ *Zombie Lake* (1984): More Nazi soldiers are transformed into zombies.

- ◆ *Zombie Nightmare* (1986): A voodoo queen brings a murdered teenager back to life, so he can take revenge.
- ◆ *Zombies* (1964): Zombies run amok on Voodoo Island.
- ◆ *Zombies of Moratau* (1957): Underwater treasure is protected by zombies.
- ◆ *Zombies of the Stratosphere* (1952): Zombies try to blow the earth out of orbit.
- ◆ *Zombies on Broadway* (1944): The follow-up to *I Walked with a Zombie* features press agents searching for new talent among the undead.



Spiritual Advice

Are you a zombie movie freak? Then you definitely need to get a copy of *The Zombie Movie Encyclopedia* by Peter Dendle (McFarland and Company, 2000). It's the definitive reference to zombie movies. You're sure to find plenty to satisfy your cravings.

The Least You Need to Know

- ◆ Hollywood doesn't have a good track record when it comes to making movies about Vodou, but if you know enough to separate fact from fiction, you should be able to enjoy a good voodoo movie.
- ◆ While there aren't many realistic portrayals of Vodou in film, a few Vodou-inspired movies are definite must-sees.
- ◆ If you don't mind watching more distorted depictions of Vodou on the silver screen, you'll have plenty of titles to choose from.
- ◆ Zombies are extremely popular movie monsters, and flicks featuring the rotting, brain-seeking undead have developed a huge cult following over the years.

Appendix



Glossary of Voodoo Terms

Because Kreyol (Creole) is primarily a spoken language rather than a written one, spellings of Kreyol terms have not been standardized. In this book, I have taken care to use the most common spellings of all Kreyol terms, but in the course of your reading, you may see these terms or the names of the *lwa* spelled slightly differently. Kreyol derived from French, so you may see Vodou terms translated into French in some works as well. I have included the more common variations in spelling of some terms in this glossary.

affranchi (*ab-fron-shee*) Mulattos in colonial Haiti who were granted the same rights of citizenship as whites under French law.

Agau (*ab-gaw*) The *lwa* of storms and earthquakes.

ago (*ab-go*) A ritual exclamation that means “attention!”

Agwé (*ab-gway*) The *lwa* who oversees fishing, sailing, and all activities in and on the ocean.

angajan (*on-gah-zhon*) Literally “engagement”; a transaction between a person and a *lwa* in which the person receives black magic in exchange for service to the *lwa*.

anj (*onj*) Literally “angel”; a *lwa*, usually a person’s *mèt tèt*.

asogwe (*ab-sog-way*) The highest rank of the Vodou priesthood, which grants the privilege of initiating other priests and priestesses.

ason (*ab-sohn*) The sacred rattle given to an *oungan* or *mambo* upon initiation into the priesthood.

- asòtò** (*ab-saw-taw*) A drum used in some Vodou ceremonies that measures up to five to six feet in length.
- ayibobo** (*ab-ye-e-bo-bo*) A ritual exclamation used in the sense of “amen.”
- Ayida-Wedo** (*ab-ye-e-dab way-do*) The *lwa* of the sky, symbolized by the rainbow, who is Danbala’s wife.
- Ayizan** (*ab-ye-e-zon*) The patron *lwa* of priestesses who oversees initiation into Vodou; also a crown made of palm fronds that is shredded during the ceremony that precedes the *kanzo* ritual.
- Azaka** (*ab-zab-kab*) The patron *lwa* of farmers and agriculture.
- ba tambou manje** (*bab tabm-boo mon-zhay*) A ritual to feed the sacred drums.
- Badè** (*bab-day*) The *lwa* of the wind.
- bagi** (*bab-gee*) A room inside the *ounfò* that is consecrated to a particular *lwa* and contains an altar and the *lwa*’s emblems.
- baka** (*bab-kab*) An evil spirit that takes the form of a dwarf, animal, or small monster and is created by black magic to eat the life force of its victim.
- banda** (*bon-dab*) A dance, symbolizing sex, that is performed during Vodou rituals in honor of the Gédé.
- Baron Cimeterre** (*bab-rohn see-may-tayr*) One aspect of Baron Samedi, the *lwa* who represents the cemetery.
- Baron Crois** (*bab-rohn kwah*) One aspect of Baron Samedi, the *lwa* who represents the cross.
- Baron Samedi** (*bab-rohn sah-m-dee*) The *lwa* who is the lord of the Gédé and overseer of the crossroads between the world of the living and the world of the dead.
- basen** (*bab-sayn*) A tank of water provided in the *ounfò* for those possessed by aquatic *lwa* to dunk themselves.
- bat ge** (*babt gay*) Literally “beat war”; a Petro ceremony sometimes held before the *kanzo* ritual that brings on possession by the initiates’ *mèt tèt*s.
- bat tambou** (*babt tabm-boo*) Literally “beating the drums”; a Vodou ceremony.
- batèm** (*bab-tem*) A ritual in which sacred objects are consecrated to the *lwa* and infused with their spiritual powers.
- bato Agwé** (*bab-to ab-gway*) A specially constructed raft that is loaded with offerings and floated on the open ocean during rituals honoring Agwé.
- baton** (*bab-tohn*) The crutch used by Papa Legba.

- batri** (*bab-tree*) The orchestra in Rada rituals, consisting of three drums and the *ogan*.
- batri maconik** (*bab-tree mah-kohn-eeek*) A rhythmic beat produced by clapping hands and beating the drums that symbolizes rapping on the door to the world of the *lwa*.
- bayé** (*bah-yay*) The gateway between the physical world and the world of the *lwa*.
- benyè** (*bayn-yeh*) A person who bathes the bodies of the deceased.
- Bizango** (*bee-zon-go*) A Haitian secret society known for its practice of zombification.
- bòkò** (*baw-kaw*) A Vodou priest who exclusively practices black magic and does not lead a *socyete*; also commonly spelled *bokor*.
- Bondye** (*bohn-dyay*) Literally “the good god”; the supreme being or God.
- bosal** (*bo-sabl*) Literally “wild”; an uninitiated person who has experienced possession by a *lwa*.
- Bosou** (*bo-soo*) A *lwa* who takes the form of a three-horned bull and represents male fertility.
- boucan** (*boo-kon*) The bonfire lit during a Vodou ritual.
- boula** (*boo-lab*) The smallest of the three drums used in Rada rituals; also called the *cato* or *petit*.
- boule-zin** (*boo-lay zeen*) Literally “burning pots”; the final stage of the *kanzo* ritual in which initiates undergo a “trial by fire” by dipping their hands in boiling cornmeal or oil.
- Cacos** (*kab-cos*) Haitian peasants who waged guerrilla warfare against the U.S. Marines during the American occupation of Haiti in the early twentieth century.
- case kanari** (*kab-say kab-nah-ree*) Literally “breaking the pot”; a ritual sometimes held on the day of a burial in which a large clay pot is shattered in a ceremony that recreates all the important death rites of Vodou.
- cato** (*kab-to*) See **boula**.
- ceremoni** (*say-ray-mohn-ee*) A Vodou ritual.
- cha-cha** (*shab-shab*) A small calabash rattle filled with beads used to guide the singing or as a musical instrument in Vodou rituals; not to be confused with the *ason*.
- chante-lwa** (*shon-tay l-wah*) Ceremonial singing to the *lwa*.
- chay** (*shay*) A magical power or energy that enables a person to accomplish extraordinary feats or change the course of events.
- chire Ayizan** (*shee-ray ah-yee-zon*) A ceremony during the initiation ritual in which palm leaves are shredded in honor of Ayizan.

chwal (*sb-wabl*) Literally “horse”; a person who has been possessed, or “mounted,” by a *lwa*.

Commandant-général de la Place See **laplas**.

concombre zombi (*cobn-com-bray zom-bee*) Literally “zombi’s cucumber”; an antidote to the *zombi* powder that revives the victim from the death-like coma but causes such extensive brain damage that the victim can easily be controlled.

corps cadavre (*core cab-dabv-ray*) The physical body that decays after death, returning to the earth.

Dahomey (*dab-ho-may*) The West African kingdom from which many Haitian slaves were taken and where many of the rituals of Vodou originated; also a surname attached to the names of the *lwa* who originated there.

Danbala (*don-bab-lab*) The serpent *lwa* who created the world; also commonly spelled “Damballah.”

danse-lwa (*don-say l-wab*) Ceremonial dancing; also refers to possession brought about by dancing.

dènyè priyè (*den-yeh pree-yeh*) The final prayers for the dead said during novena.

desounen (*day-soo-nayn*) A Vodou ritual that takes place immediately following a death to release the *mèt tèt* from the head of the deceased and send the *gwo-bon-anj* to Ginen.

diab (*dee-abb*) Literally “devil”; an evil spirit who sometimes assists with black magic or underhanded works.

djévo (*d-zhay-vo*) A windowless room inside the *ounfò* where devotees undergo the part of initiation ritual called *kouche*.

dogwe (*dog-way*) A ram sacrificed to Agwé.

doktè-fey (*dok-teb feh-yah*) Literally “leaf-doctor”; an *oungan* or *mambo* who practices herbal medicine.

dosa/dosou (*do-sab/do-soo*) The first female or male child born in a family after twins who is believed to have great supernatural powers.

drapo (*drab-po*) The ceremonial flags of Vodou, carried by *ounsi* to salute the *lwa* and signal the beginning of the ceremony; they are sewn with thousands of brightly colored sequins in the patterns of *vevers*.

espri (*ay-spre*) A spirit; generally refers to the ritually raised spirit of a dead person.

Ezili (*ay-zee-lee*) The *lwa* of love and beauty; also commonly spelled “Erzulie.”

Ezili Dantò (*ay-zee-lee dabn-taw*) The Petro aspect of Ezili.

Ezili Freda (*ay-zee-lee fray-dab*) The Rada aspect of Ezili.

farin (*fah-reen*) The flour or cornmeal used to trace *vevers*.

Fèt Gédé (*fet gay-day*) The festival of Gédé held every November 1 and 2 to honor the ancestral spirits and the *lwa* of the dead; also called *fêtdemò* (the “festival of the dead”).

gad (*gabd*) A charm that protects against harmful spirits; it takes the form of a tattoo, a scar, or a potion of powdered herbs that is drunk; also commonly spelled *garde*.

garde-corps (*gahr-day core*) Literally “bodyguard”; a magical charm that protects the wearer from weapons and spells.

Gédé (*gay-day*) The large family of *lwa* that represents the dead.

Ginen (*gee-nayn*) An idealized version of the kingdom of Dahomey, from which most Haitian slaves came originally; also the world where the *lwa* live and where the spirit goes after death. Also called *Vilokan*.

goud (*good*) Unit of currency in Haiti; also commonly spelled *gourde*.

govi (*go-vee*) The sacred clay pots in which ancestral spirits are housed.

Gran Bwa (*gron bwah*) The patron *lwa* of the forest.

Gran Mèt (*gron met*) Literally “grand master”; a title for Bondye.

gris-gris (*gree-gree*) In New Orleans Voodoo, a charm that combines black and white magic, the most powerful and expensive of all magical charms.

groupe d'état (*group day-tat*) The ruling body of a secret society.

gwo-bon-anj (*gwo-bohn-onj*) Literally “great good angel”; one of two halves of the human soul, the part that produces a person’s unique personality and becomes an immortal ancestral spirit after death.

Haiti (*hay-tee*) The country where Vodou originated and is largely practiced today; “Haiti” is an Amerindian word that means “mountainous.”

hoholi (*ho-ho-lee*) Sesame seeds placed in coffins to prevent dead bodies from being misused by a *bókó*.

hoodoo (*boo-doo*) An African American tradition of folk magic, herbal medicine, and conjuring not related to Vodou.

imaj (*ee-mahj*) A chromolithograph of a Catholic saint that is placed on the altar of the *lwa* with which the saint is identified.

juju (*joo-joo*) In New Orleans Voodoo, a charm that uses white magic.

kalbas (*kabl-babs*) A calabash, a kind of gourd that when hollowed and dried is used to make rattles and bowls for Vodou rituals.

kalfou (*kabl-foo*) The crossroads, a sacred place where devotees place offerings and hold rituals outside the *ounfô* and where evil spirits are supposed to live; also the Petro aspect of Papa Legba.

kanari (*kah-nah-ree*) A large clay pot that is broken in the *case kanari* ritual following a death.

kanzo (*kon-zo*) The process in which a novice becomes initiated into Vodou and achieves the status of *ounsi*; also the chorus of female initiates who chant during rituals.

kay-mistè (*kab-ee-yah mee-steh*) Literally “huts of the mysteries”; huts built around the perimeter of an *ounfô* where altars to and accessories of the *lwa* are kept, used in some *ounfô* instead of *bagi*.

kleren (*klay-rayn*) A raw white rum made in Haiti that is the favorite drink of many *lwa*.

kolye (*kol-yay*) A necklace bestowed on an initiate into Vodou.

konesans (*kohn-ay-sons*) The complete body of knowledge of the *lwa*, rituals, and herbal cures held by an *oungan* or *mambo*.

Kongo (*kohn-go*) The third most important *nanchon* of *lwa*, which originated in the Congo area of West Africa; these *lwa* are associated with magic and protect their followers from evil spells.

kou le (*koo lay*) Literally “air spell”; a black magic spell that causes mild sickness or bad luck.

kou nanm (*koo nonm*) Literally “soul spell”; a black magic spell that captures the soul of the victim, enabling it to be used for evil deeds.

kou poud (*koo pood*) Literally “powder spell”; a black magic spell that uses powdered herbs and other ingredients to cause severe illness or death.

kouche (*koo-shay*) Literally “put to bed”; the point in the initiation ritual when initiates are enclosed in the *djévo*. Also refers to the ritual of infusing sacred objects with spiritual energy.

kouche-tambou (*koo-shay tabm-boo*) A ritual that reinvigorates the energies of the sacred drums, in which the drums are left overnight inside the *ounfô*.

kouche-yanm (*koo-shay yonm*) The first part of the *manje-yanm* ceremony in which the yams are left overnight inside the *ounfô* to absorb the energies of the *lwa*.

kouzen (*koo-zayn*) Literally “cousin”; an affectionate term of address for Azaka.

Kreyol (*kray-yol*) A hybrid of West African languages and French that developed in and is spoken by the people of Haiti; also refers to anything native to Haiti, as distinguished from items of African origin. Commonly spelled Creole.

- la Flambeau** (*lah flahm-bo*) Literally “the torch”; the title added to the names of Rada *lwa* when a fiery aspect of their power is invoked.
- lakou** (*lah-koo*) A compound formed by liberated Haitian slaves consisting of four or five families living and working together usually under the leadership of a Vodou priest.
- lambi** (*lahm-bee*) A conch shell used as a horn in Vodou ceremonies, particularly those held for the *lwa* of the sea.
- langaj** (*lahn-gahj*) A sacred but unintelligible language that originated in Africa and is included in some Vodou songs as well as spoken by some devotees when possessed by the more ancient *lwa*.
- laplas** (*lah-plahs*) The male assistant to the *oungan* or *mambo* who acts as master of ceremonies and carries the sacred sword during rituals; his full title is *Commandant-général de la Place*.
- Lasiren** (*lah-see-rayn*) The *lwa* of the ocean and wife of Agwé.
- lave tèt** (*lah-vay tet*) The ritual washing of a devotee’s head in which the *mèt tèt* is officially installed as that person’s guardian *lwa*; this ritual is the first step in the initiation process.
- Legba** See **Papa Legba**.
- leve-yanm** (*lay-vay yonm*) Literally “rising of the yams”; the second part of the *manje-yanm* ceremony in which the yams are cooked and offered to Azaka.
- Loko** (*lo-ko*) The first priest and the *lwa* of herbal medicine.
- lougarou** (*loo-gah-roo*) Literally “werewolf”; refers either to a black magician who can shape-shift into any animal or to a female vampire who sucks the blood of children.
- Lukumi** (*loo-koo-mee*) A Yoruba-based religion that originated in Cuba and shares many characteristics with Vodou; more popularly known by its Spanish name, Santería.
- lwa** (*l-wah*) The supernatural, immortal spirits who oversee different areas of the natural world and human experience; Vodou devotees serve the *lwa*, providing offerings in exchange for their help and advice. Also commonly spelled *loa*.
- lwa-achtè** (*l-wah absh-the*) A *lwa* who can be bought from an *oungan* to provide protection or good luck.
- lwa-gad** (*l-wah gahd*) Literally “*lwa* guards”; another name for the Kongo *nanchon* of *lwa*, who act as guardians of their devotees.
- lwa-Ginen** (*l-wah gee-nayn*) Another name for the Rada *lwa*, the *lwa* who originated in Africa.

lwa-Kreyol (*l-wab kray-yol*) Refers to the *lwa* who originated in Haiti rather than Africa; another name for the Petro *lwa*.

macandal (*mab-kon-dabl*) Any poison or protective talisman made in Haiti; also the name of a Haitian secret society.

machè fèy (*mab-sheb feh-yab*) The market in Haiti where many herbal and plant ingredients of Vodou medicines, charms, and rituals can be bought.

madoulé (*mab-doo-lay*) The small, black coffin that symbolizes a secret society.

maji (*mab-zbee*) Magic.

makout (*mab-koot*) A straw sack carried by Haitian peasants when working in the fields that symbolizes Azaka.

maman (*mab-mon*) The largest of the three drums used in Rada rituals.

Maman Brijit (*mab-mon bree-zbeet*) The principal female Gédé who presides over the cemetery, black magic, and matters concerning ill-gotten money.

mambo (*mabm-bo*) A fully initiated priestess of Vodou whose responsibilities and authority are equal to the *oungan*'s.

manje-lwa (*mon-zhay l-wab*) Literally “feeding the *lwa*”; the most common type of Vodou ritual in which an animal sacrifice is made.

manje-Marasa (*mon-zhay mab-rab-sab*) Literally “feeding the twins”; a Vodou ceremony in which a feast is prepared for Marasa, the sacred twins, and which honors all twins, living and dead.

manje-mò (*mon-zhay maw*) Literally “feeding the dead”; a Vodou ceremony in which a feast is prepared for the spirits of the ancestors of a family.

manje-sek (*mon-zhay sayk*) Literally “dry feeding”; a Vodou ritual in which food offerings are made but no animals are sacrificed.

manje-yanm (*mon-zhay yonm*) Literally “eating of the yams”; an annual harvest festival held in honor of Azaka.

mapou (*mab-poo*) A silk-cotton tree native to Haiti, considered a sacred tree in Vodou.

Marasa (*mab-rab-sab*) The sacred twins, who are believed to have supernatural powers; along with the spirits of the dead and the *lwa*, they make up the trinity of supernatural beings in Vodou.

Marinette (*mab-ree-net*) A female Petro *lwa* who oversees black magic and evil works.

maroon (*mab-roon*) A runaway slave in colonial Haiti.

maryaj-lwa (*mabr-yahj l-wab*) The ceremony performed as a traditional Roman Catholic wedding in which a person marries a *lwa*.

medsin fèy (*mayd-seen feh-yah*) The herbal medicine practiced by *oungans* and *mambos*.

mèt ounfò (*met oon-faw*) The guardian *lwa* of an *ounfò*.

mèt tèt (*met tet*) Literally “master of the head”; a patron *lwa* who protects a Vodou devotee and is served by that devotee throughout his or her life.

metrès (*may-tres*) Literally “mistress”: a term of address for some female *lwa*, particularly Ezili Freda.

mistè (*mees-the*) Literally “mysteries”: another name for the *lwa*.

mizik rasin (*mee-zeeek rah-sayn*) Literally “roots music”; a form of Haitian pop music that melds the drum rhythms and songs of Vodou ceremonies with modern instruments and musical forms.

mò (*maw*) Literally “the dead”; refers to the ancestral spirits who become revered immortal beings after death. Also called *Morts*.

mojo (*mo-jo*) In New Orleans Voodoo, a charm that uses black magic.

monte (*mohn-tay*) Literally “to mount”: the act of possession by a *lwa*.

nanchon (*non-shohn*) A nation or group of *lwa* categorized by their geographic or ethnic origin.

nanm (*nonm*) The spirit that animates the physical body and is absorbed into the ground as earth energy after death.

novena (*no-vay-nab*) A nine-day death ritual during which the final Catholic prayers are said by the *prèt savann*.

ogan (*o-gon*) A musical instrument used in Rada rituals consisting of a flattened piece of metal struck by another piece of metal.

Ogou (*o-goo*) The family of *lwa* that represents masculinity, warfare, metalworking, and lightning.

oraison (*o-ray-sohn*) A Catholic prayer written on a piece of paper used to petition the help of the Catholic saints.

ouanga (*oo-on-gab*) A malevolent charm used by a *bòkò* in black magic; also commonly spelled *wanga*.

ouete mò nan ba dlo (*oo-ay-tay maw non bah d-lo*) Literally “removing the dead from the low waters”; the Vodou ritual held one year and one day after a death, in which the deceased’s soul is raised from the primordial waters and installed in a *govi* as an ancestral spirit.

ounfò (*oon-faw*) The entire Vodou temple, including the *peristil* and *bagi*; refers specifically to the inner sanctuary where altars to the *lwa* and ritualistic objects are kept. Also commonly spelled *bounfor*.

oungan (*oon-gon*) A fully initiated priest of Vodou who is authorized to lead rituals, oversee an *ounfò*, commune with the *lwa*, heal the sick, and advise on the affairs of the people in a *socyete*; also commonly spelled *boungan*.

oungenikon (*oon-gay-nee-kohn*) A female assistant to the *oungan* or *mambo* who leads the chorus during rituals.

ounsi (*oon-see*) An initiate of Vodou; also commonly spelled *bounsi*.

paket Kongo (*pab-kayt kobn-go*) A small cloth packet bound with ribbons that protects its bearer against black magic.

Papa Legba (*pab-pab leg-bab*) The most powerful of the *lwa* who guards the gateway between the material world and the spiritual world.

pè (*peh*) An altar consecrated to a particular *lwa* located inside a *bagi* in the *ounfò*.

peristil (*pay-ree-steel*) An open-sided, roofed courtyard adjacent to the *ounfò* where public Vodou rituals are held.

petit (*pay-teet*) See **boula**.

Petro (*pay-tro*) The *nanchon* of aggressive, warlike *lwa* who originated in Haiti during the war for independence.

po-tèt (*po-tet*) Literally “head pot”; a pot containing a devotee’s hair and nail clippings that provides a place where the *gwo-bon-anj* can go during possession.

potomitan (*po-to-mee-ton*) The wooden post in the center of the *peristil* around which Vodou rituals are performed and which represents the highway that the *lwa* travel to enter the physical world.

prèt savann (*pret sab-vahn*) An unordained Catholic priest who recites Catholic prayers and hymns during Vodou ceremonies and presides over the rituals of novena, baptism, and marriage to a *lwa*.

prise des yeux (*prees days yeb*) Literally “opening the eyes”; the ceremony in which an *ounsi* who has achieved full *konesans* is initiated into the Vodou priesthood.

priye Ginen (*pree-yay gee-nayn*) Literally “prayer of Guinea”; a liturgy of Catholic prayers and hymns recited by the *prèt savann* before most Vodou ceremonies.

Rada (*rab-dab*) The *nanchon* of benevolent, gentle *lwa* who originated in Dahomey.

range (*ron-gay*) A ritual in which a sacred object is charged with the power of a *lwa*.

Rara (*rah-rah*) A festival held during Lent in which Vodou societies send bands to march through the streets.

rasin (*rah-seen*) Literally “root”; refers to anything descended from ancient Africa.

rèl (*rel*) A piercing cry given after a death to notify the neighborhood of the death and call friends and neighbors to the nightlong wake.

rèn drapo (*ren drab-fo*) Literally “flag queen”; an *ounsi* who carries the ceremonial flag during a Vodou ritual.

repozwa (*ray-po-zwah*) A tree or other object in the *peristil* that is sacred to a *lwa* and is used by that *lwa* as a “resting place.”

Santería See **Lukumi**.

saoulé (*sab-oo-lay*) A brief state of spirit possession that lasts only a few seconds and results in a slight daze or feeling of tipsiness.

séance (*say-ons*) A nighttime meeting of a secret society in which members of the society honor their patron spirits and march in procession through the streets.

segon (*say-gohn*) The middle-sized drum of the three drums used in Rada rituals.

sen (*sayn*) A saint of the Catholic Church; sometimes used as a synonym for *lwa*.

sevi a deux mains (*say-vee ah deh main*) Literally “to serve with both hands”; refers to a Vodou priest or priestess who practices both white and black magic.

sèvis (*seh-vees*) Literally “service”: the act of serving the *lwa*, which is how devotees of Vodou refer to their religion. Also refers to a Vodou ritual.

sèvitè (*seh-vee-the*) Literally “servant”; a devotee of Vodou.

Shanpwel (*shonp-wayl*) A Haitian secret society.

si pwèn (*see pwayn*) Literally “on the point”; the first rank of the Vodou priesthood in which the *oungan* or *mambo* can conduct rituals but cannot initiate others into Vodou.

Simbi (*seem-bee*) The patron *lwa* of magicians, who lives in fresh waters.

siyale (*see-yah-lay*) The salutation of the four cardinal points by the *oungan* or *mambo* at the beginning of a Vodou ritual.

socle (*sok-lay*) The cement base at the foot of the *potomitan* where offerings to the *lwa* are placed.

socyete (*so-syay-tay*) A community of Vodou devotees who support an *ounfò* and are led by an *oungan* or *mambo*.

Sogbo (*sog-bo*) The *lwa* of lightning.

syèl (*syehl*) The sky; where the *ti-bon-anj* goes after death.

tambou (*tabm-boo*) A drum used in Vodou rituals.

ti-bon-anj (*tee-bohn-onj*) Literally “little good angel”; one of two halves of the human soul, the part that keeps the body alive and is responsible for the conscience.

tonelle (*tohn-el*) A primitive *peristil* consisting of a canopy held up by poles used when the *peristil* is absent.

Tonton Macoutes (*tohn-tohn mab-koot*) From the Kreyol word for “boogeyman,” a secret police force created by François “Papa Doc” Duvalier with a virtual license to torture, kill, or extort any opponents of the dictator.

travail (*trab-vayl*) Literally “labor”; the ceremony in which a *bòkò* constructs an *ouanga*.

vever (*vay-vay*) A symbolic design that represents a particular *lwa* and serves as both a focal point for the invocation of the *lwa* and as a place to put offerings for that *lwa*; also commonly spelled *vévé*.

veye (*vay-yay*) The nightlong wake held after a death.

Vilokan (*vee-lo-kon*) See **Ginen**.

Vlenblendeng (*vlayn-blayn-dayng*) A Vodou secret society.

Vodou (*vo-doo*) The religion that developed in Haiti and is practiced by the majority of Haitians; this term is preferred to the Westernized term “voodoo.”

vodu (*vo-doo*) The Fon word for “spirit” or “god” from which the word “Vodou” derived.

voye lamò (*vo-yay lab-maw*) Literally “sending the dead”; a spell cast by a *bòkò* in which he sends the spirits of the dead to inhabit the victim, causing a slow death.

Wedo (*way-do*) Refers to the city of Ouhdeh in Dahomey; when added as a surname to a *lwa*'s name, it indicates that the *lwa* originated there.

yanm (*yonm*) A yam.

yanvalò (*yon-vah-law*) A Rada dance performed in most Vodou ceremonies.

Yoruba (*yo-roo-bab*) The West African tribe from which many people were sold into slavery and shipped to islands in the West Indies; along with the tribal religions of Dahomey, the religious practices of the Yoruban people formed the foundation of Vodou.

ze-rouge (*ze-rooj*) Literally “with red eyes”; a title added to the names of Rada *lwa* when a violent Petro aspect of their power is invoked.

zemi (*zay-mee*) Stones and other objects that have great magical powers.

zin (*zeen*) The ritual pots used to cook food offerings for the *lwa*.

Zobop (*zo-bop*) A Vodou secret society associated with using the dead for malevolent magic.

zombi (*zom-bee*) A body without a soul that a *bòkò* has raised from the dead to use as slave labor.

zombi astral (*zom-bee ah-strahl*) A person's soul captured after death by a *bòkò* and forced to perform malevolent deeds.

Appendix

B

Resources for Further Study

Publications and Media

So, you want to learn even more about Vodou? I recommend the following books, periodicals, documentary films, and musical recordings for further study.

Books—Essential Reading

Bach, Marcus. *Strange Altars*. New York: New American Library, 1968.

Bodin, Ron. *Voodoo: Past and Present*. Lafayette: University of Southwestern Louisiana Press, 1990.

Davis, Wade. *The Serpent and the Rainbow*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1985.

Deren, Maya. *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti*. London: Thames & Hudson, 1953.

Desmangles, Leslie G. *The Faces of the Gods: Vodou and Roman Catholicism in Haiti*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Press, 1993.

Galembo, Phyllis. *Vodou: Visions and Voices of Haiti*. Berkeley, Calif.: Ten Speed Press, 1998.

- Glassman, Sallie Ann. *Vodou Visions: An Encounter with Divine Mystery*. New York: Villard Books, 2000.
- Gordon, Leah. *The Book of Vodou: Charms and Rituals to Empower Your Life*. Hauppauge, N.Y.: Barron's, 2000.
- Hurbon, Laënnec. *Voodoo Search for the Spirit*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1995.
- Hurston, Zora Neale. *Tell My Horse: Voodoo and Life in Haiti and Jamaica*. New York: Harper & Row, 1938.
- Loederer, Richard A. *Voodoo Fire in Haiti*. New York: Doubleday & Company, 1936.
- Métraux, Alfred. *Voodoo in Haiti*. New York: Schocken Books, 1989.
- Rigaud, Milo. *Secrets of Voodoo*. San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1969.
- Rodman, Selden, and Carole Cleaver. *Spirits of the Night: The Vaudun Gods of Haiti*. Putnam, Conn.: Spring Publications, 1992.

Books—Related Subjects

- Alexis, Gérald. *Peintres Haïtiens*. Paris: Editions Cercle d'Art, 2000.
- Arthur, Charles, and Michael Dash, editors. *Libète: A Haitian Anthology*. Princeton, N.J.: Markus Wiener, 1999.
- Bibbs, C. Susheel. *Heritage of Power (Marie Laveau/Mary Ellen Pleasant)*. London: MEP Publications, 1998.
- Brown, Karen McCarthy. *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn*. University of California Press, 1991.
- Consentino, Donald J., editor. *Sacred Arts of Haitian Voodoo*. UCLA Fowler Museum, 1995.
- Courlander, Harold. *The Drum and the Hoe: Life and Lore of the Haitian People*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1960.
- . *Haiti Singing*. Lanham, Md.: Cooper Square Press, 1973.

- Davis, Rod. *American Voodoo: Journey into a Hidden World*. Denton: University of North Texas Press, 1998.
- Dayan, Joan. *Haiti, History and the Gods*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995.
- Doggett, Scott and Leah Gordon. *Lonely Planet Dominican Republic and Haiti*. Oakland, Calif.: Lonely Planet Publications, 1999.
- Dunham, Katherine. *Dances of Haiti*. Los Angeles: Center for Afro-American Studies UCLA, 1983.
- . *Island Possessed*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994.
- Fleurant, Gerdes. *Dancing Spirits*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1996.
- Girouard, Tina. *Sequin Artists of Haiti*. New Orleans: Contemporary Arts Center of New Orleans, 1994.
- Haskins, Jim. *Voodoo and Hoodoo: Their Tradition and Craft as Revealed by Actual Practitioners*. New York: Scarborough House, 1990.
- Heinl, Robert and Nancy. *Written in Blood: The Story of the Haitian People, 1492–1995*. Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1996.
- Herskovits, Melville J. *Life in a Haitian Valley*. New York: Knopf, 1937.
- Laguerre, Michel S. *Voodoo and Politics in Haiti*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989.
- Murphy, Joseph M. *Working the Spirit: Ceremonies of the African Diaspora*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1994.
- Pelton, Robert. *Voodoo Charms and Talismans*. New York: Drake Publishers, 1973.
- Polk, Patrick Arthur. *Haitian Vodou Flags*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1998.
- Rodman, Selden. *Where Art Is Joy*. New York: Ruggles de Latour, 1988.
- Saint-Mery, Moreau de. *A Civilization That Perished: The Last Years of White Colonial Rule in Haiti*. Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1985.
- Tallant, Robert. *Voodoo in New Orleans*. New York: Macmillan, 1946.

Velton, Ross. *Haiti and the Dominican Republic: The Island of Hispaniola*. Bucks, United Kingdom: Bradt Travel Guides, 1999.

Wilcken, Lois. *Drums of Vodou*. Oakland, Calif.: White Cliffs Media, 1992.

Periodicals

Ayizan. An international newsletter of Vodou. To subscribe, send your name and address with a money order for 25 dollars to: Ms. Kathy S. Grey, Editor, Ayizan, P.O. Box 347, Sterling, MA 01564

Journal of Haitian Studies. Get more information at omni.orda.ucsb.edu/cbs/johs.html

Documentary Films

Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti. Mystic Fire Video, 1985.

Voodoo and the Church in Haiti. University of California at Berkeley, 1989.

Music

Afro-Caribbean Songs and Rhythms. Katherine Dunham and Ensemble. Decca, 1950.

Angels in the Mirror: Voodoo Music of Haiti. Relaxation Company, 1997.

Drums of Vodou. Frisner Augustin. White Cliffs Media, 1994.

Rhythms of Rapture: Sacred Musics of Haitian Vodou. Smithsonian Folkways, 1995.

The Singing Gods. Katherine Dunham. Audio Fidelity, 1956.

Web Sites

Check the following Web sites for more information about Vodou, Haiti, and Afro-Caribbean religions. All Web site addresses were correct at the time of this writing, but keep in mind that because Web sites close or move every day, the addresses may have changed by the time you read this.

Haitian Vodou

Calling on the Gods: The Embodied Aesthetic of Haitian Vodou:
www.ux1.eiu.edu/~cfhl/haitianvodou.htm

Haiti: Land of Beauty and Poverty: lamitie.freeyellow.com/index.html

Haiti Voodoo: www.webster.edu/~corbetre/haiti/voodoo/voodoo.htm

Haitian Vodoun Culture: www.geocities.com/Athens/Delphi/5319

The Quick and the Dead: The Souls of Man in Vodou Thought:
www.cnmat.berkeley.edu/~hodges/QandD.html

Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou: www.amnh.org/exhibitions/vodou/index.html

Temple of Yehwe: vodou.org

Vodou Page: members.aol.com/racine125/index1.html

New Orleans Voodoo

New Orleans Cemetery and Voodoo Pages: www.geocities.com/BourbonStreet/6157

New Orleans Historic Voodoo Museum: www.voodooomuseum.com

New Orleans Voodoo Spiritual Temple: www.blood-dance.net/~rogue/temple

Voodoo Queen: Marie Laveau and New Orleans Voodoo: www.parascope.com/en/articles/voodooQueen.htm

Afro-Caribbean Religions

African-Based Religions: sparta.rice.edu/~maryc/AfroCuban.html

Afro-Caribbean Faiths: altreligion.about.com/religion/altreligion/cs/afrocaribbean/index.htm

Haiti

Discover Haiti: www.discoverhaiti.com/index.htm

Embassy of United States in Haiti: usembassy.state.gov/haiti

Haiti Archives: www.hartford-hwp.com/archives/43a/index.html

Haiti Consular Information Sheet: travel.state.gov/haiti.html

Haiti Country Profile: www.photius.com/wfb2000/countries/haiti/haiti_introduction.html

Haiti Global Village: www.haitiglobalvillage.com

Haiti Page: www.webster.edu/~corbetre/haiti/hait.html

Haiti Tourisme: www.haititourisme.com/ (in French)

Haitian Creole: j_zyric.tripod.com/book.htm

Island Connoisseur Haiti Travel Guide: www.IslandConnoisseur.com/haiti/index.htm

Kreyol Dictionary: www.angelfire.com/ky/LeCorde/krldic2.html#a

Lonely Planet Haiti Travel Guide:
www.lonelyplanet.com/destinations/Caribbean/haiti/index.htm

MyTravelGuide.com Haiti Travel Guide:
www.mytravelguide.com/countries/haiti/home.asp

Travel Channel Haiti Travel Guide:
travel.discovery.com/dest/weisdb/caribbean/haiti/intro.html

Virtual Tourist Haiti Travel Guide: www.virtualltourist.com/Central_America/Haiti/

Windows on Haiti: windowsonhaiti.com/index.html

Yahoo! Haiti: dir.yahoo.com/Regional/Countries/Haiti

Discussion Groups

Carrefour: groups.yahoo.com/group/Carrefour

Roots Without End: www.delphi.com/RootsWithoutEnd/start

Voodoo-L: groups.yahoo.com/group/voodoo-l

VoodooEnergy: groups.yahoo.com/group/VoodooEnergy/

VodouChat: www.delphi.com/VodouChat/start

Tourist Agencies

Embassy of the Republic of Haiti
2311 Massachusetts Ave. NW
Washington, DC 20008

Haiti Tourist Office
18 East 41st St., Suite 1602
New York, NY 10017

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About the Author

Shannon R. Turlington is the author of a dozen books on such esoteric subjects as the Internet, distance learning, and college admissions. Her first book was the best-selling *Walking the World Wide Web*, published in 1995, and her latest project is a children's book, *The Everything Kids Monsters Book*, to be published in 2002. She is also the editor in chief of an independent publisher, LuluPress, located in Durham, North Carolina.

Shannon has been studying Vodou and Lukumi for eight years. She wrote the Voodoo Information Pages for the Web, which quickly became a popular resource for other spirituality seekers. She condensed the information in her Web site into a short book called *Do You Do Voodoo?* published by Garnet Press in the United Kingdom. *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Voodoo* is her first full-length book on the subject. Shannon lives in Carrboro, North Carolina, with her dog Delirium, where she maintains a close relationship with the *lwa* Lasiren.

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SHANNON R. TURLINGTON is the author of more than 20 books, including the entertaining and comprehensive *Do You Voodoo?* which was the culmination of her very popular website of the same name. She is also the author of *The Everything Kids Monster Book*, to be published in 2002. She has been studying Vodou, Lukumi, and other alternative religions for many years; much of what she has learned can be found in this book. She lives in North Carolina with her dog, Delirium.

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