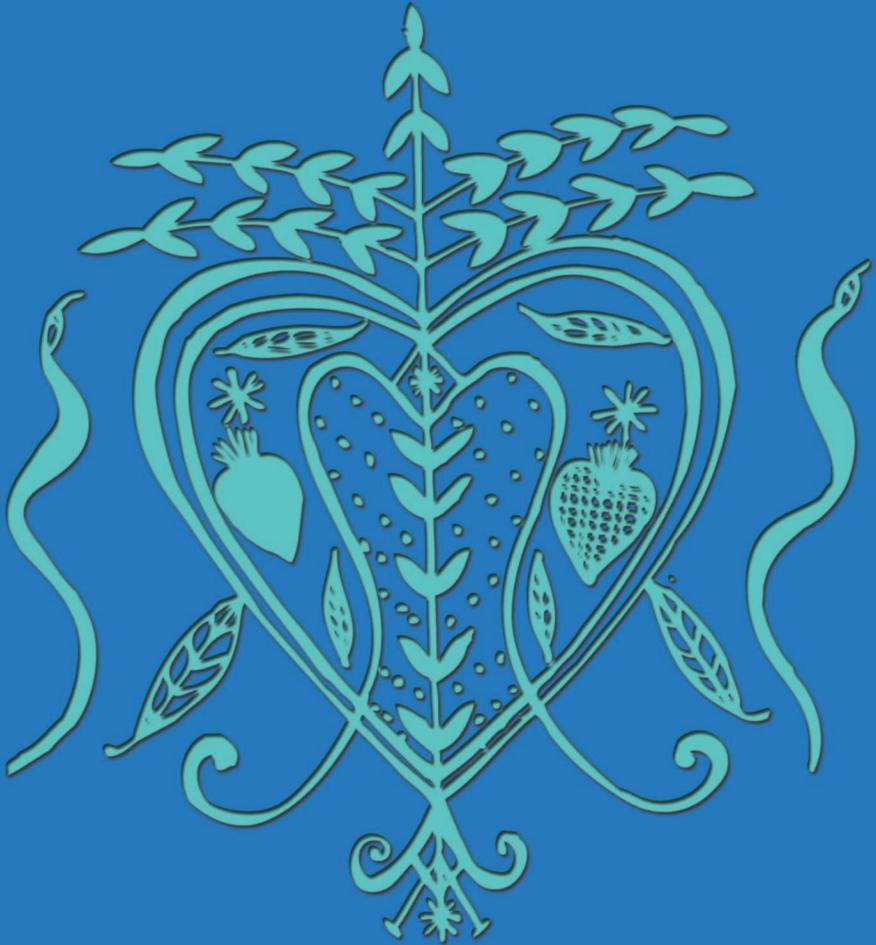


Nan Dòmi

An Initiate's Journey into Haitian Vodou



Mimerose P. Beaubrun

Translated by D.J. Walker
Preface by Madison Smartt Bell

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Contents

	Acknowledgments	7
	Note to readers	8
	Preface, by Madison Smartt Bell	9
	Prologue	29
CHAPTER 1	The Teaching of Perception with Aunt Tansia	45
CHAPTER 2	Placement of the Head	59
CHAPTER 3	<i>Lwa</i> or a State of Lucid Dreaming?	69
CHAPTER 4	The Double and the Dream Body	81
CHAPTER 5	The Purification	103
CHAPTER 6	Manipulating the Double	109
CHAPTER 7	Walking in the Swarm of Stars	113
CHAPTER 8	Fixed in Mystical Knowledge	117
CHAPTER 9	The Eye of the Water	125
CHAPTER 10	Establishing a Means of Communication	137
CHAPTER 11	Manipulating One's Gift	149
CHAPTER 12	The Importance of <i>Je</i>	155
CHAPTER 13	I Remember	165
CHAPTER 14	You Must Be Perspicacious in Order to See or There Are Conditions for Seeing	213
CHAPTER 15	Having Cold Eyes or the Fear of the Unknown	227
CHAPTER 16	Laziness or Indecision	233
CHAPTER 17	Watch Your Step or Constant Attention	239
CHAPTER 18	Witness of the <i>Nannan-rèv</i>	251
CHAPTER 19	The Farewell Ceremony.	259
	Epilogue	265
	Lexicon	269

Preface

by Madison Smartt Bell



Since Europe (and later the United States) first became acquainted with it, Haitian Vodou has been known and popularized only through its darkest, most sinister side. The misperception is very severe; it is as if one were to promulgate a definition of Christianity based entirely on a description of Satanism. Like so many false images of its kind, this spooky picture of Vodou is based on incomprehension and fear.

The spectacular outward manifestations of Vodou observance—hypnotic drumming and chanting, which drive frenetic dancing, which itself is likely (and intended) to culminate in violent-seeming fits of spirit possession—are off-putting to the European mind and its descendants. Since Europe first began to penetrate Africa, white explorers and reporters have described such scenes under the rubric of “savage rites”—spiced with hints or outright accusations of cannibalism, the latter seldom justified by any facts whatsoever. It is a very common human habit to take alarm at anything which seems alien, and then, using rules of spiritual polarization that are by no means unique to Christianity, repel it by defining it as diabolical.

And, to be sure, these diabolical definitions have always had their political motives. The ideology of conquest and colonialism requires that the conquered and colonized be depicted as unenlightened and uncivilized and, if possible, even somewhat less than human. To justify the slave trade it is helpful to see those who are to be enslaved as unfortunate heathens in desperate need of redemption by a militant Christianity, equipped with whips

and chains. For centuries, Europe used these rhetorical devices to put itself at a safe distance from Africa. Therefore, whenever a *blanc* (in Haitian nomenclature all non-Haitians are defined as *blanc*, whatever the color of their skin) encounters Vodou for the first time, the psychological reflexes of his reaction are already in place . . . and have been there for centuries.

We have been well instructed to fear the strange. And yet, if Vodou is disturbing to the European mind, that is partly because, after all, it is *not* so strange. The tremor that Vodou makes us feel down in the older deeper roots of our brain is a pulse of atavistic memory—a response to ancient, original religious impulses which are better called “primary” than “primitive.” So when the *misik rasin* group Boukan Ginen sings

Lafrik, Lafrik maman nou
Lafrik, Lafrik papa nou
*Lafrika, se ou ki wa. . . .*¹

they are singing to those of us of European descent as much as to themselves. *Lafrik se lakay tou nèg*. In Haitian parlance, *nèg* means not “black” but “human being”; the “*blanc*” is distanced as a potentially monstrous alien. Since all humankind originally evolved out of Africa, then inevitably, *Africa is the home of all human beings*.

The Spanish priest Bartolomé de Las Casas, who was among many other things a sort of *ur*-liberation theologian, was not alone in suggesting that Africans be transported to Hispaniola,² to replace the native Taino³ people whom the conquistadors had almost completely exterminated by slave labor. Las Casas had seen a population of over a million Taino reduced—in a mere thirty years—to less than ten thousand. He was wrong to

1 Africa, Africa is our mother

Africa, Africa, is our father

Africa it's you who are king. . . .

2 Hispaniola is the name Christopher Columbus gave the island when he landed in what is now the Bay of Saint-Nicolas in 1492. The inhabitants called it Ayiti, “mountainous land.” [Translator's note.]

3 An Indian tribe (from America), inhabitants of the island of Ayiti before the colonial period, all but decimated by the Spaniards.

hope that the substitution of Africans for Indians might save the remnant of the latter, who after all did not survive. But his disappointed hope helped turn the trickle of African slaves toward the New World into a flood.

Today's Haiti, the western third of the island of Hispaniola, was ceded by Spain to France in the Treaty of Ryswick in 1697. French Saint Domingue, as the colony was known, soon became the most important producer of sugar and coffee in the whole Western Hemisphere—France's richest overseas possession by far. The wealth was created by African slaves; when the French Revolution erupted in 1789, they numbered about half a million. The conditions of slavery in Saint Domingue were extraordinarily harsh—slaves who were not literally worked to death were inclined to commit suicide—to the point that the slave population came nowhere near reproducing itself. Between 1784 and 1790 some *two hundred and twenty thousand* slaves were imported to the colony—merely to maintain a stable workforce. In 1791, when the Haitian Revolution broke out, two-thirds of Saint Domingue's slaves had in fact been born in Africa.

Most were shipped from the West African coast, out of the kingdoms of Benin and Dahomey. They came from many different cultures and tribes: Senegalese, Yolof, Bambara, Mandingo, Arada, Ibo, Nago and Kongo—to mention only a few. The languages of these different groups were for the most part mutually unintelligible. Their religions, though different in detail, shared common fundamentals. The white land- and slave-owners, outnumbered by their chattel by a factor of twelve to one, made some effort to jumble slaves from different tribes, to make it more difficult for them to whisper among themselves or plot against their masters. At the same time, some means of communicating with all the slaves was necessary. The lingua franca of the colony was a patois described by a twentieth-century manual as what one would expect to evolve from requiring half a million Africans to learn French by listening to it but without being told any of the rules.

In theory, the French colonists were meant to bring their slaves into the fold of the Catholic Church, but in fact the evangelical program was fairly weak, especially after the Jesuit order

was expelled from Saint Domingue on suspicion of excessive sympathy for the slaves. The slaves did have some exposure to Catholicism, however, and incorporated many aspects of the cult of the saints into their own beliefs and practices—which were prohibited more in theory than in fact. Slaveholders tolerated gatherings of slaves for the purpose of drumming, singing and dancing—these *Calenda*, as they were called, were seen as useful to release tensions that might otherwise be expressed in the slave rebellion that all the white colonists quite reasonably feared. These assemblies were officially understood as entirely secular “country dances,” though contemporary descriptions by whites reveal that at least some of the colonists knew very well that they had a religious dimension.

On August 14, 1791, a secret gathering (secret from the whites) took place in a forest called Bois Caïman⁴ on the border of the Plaine du Nord, Saint Domingue’s richest sugar-producing region. The written historical record (set down, of course by Europeans) establishes that at this meeting a general insurrection of the slaves was planned—whose outbreak, the first explosion of the Revolution that ten years later would make Haiti independent, reduced the plantations of the Plaine du Nord to ashes within the first few days. The Haitian oral tradition holds, with equal if not superior conviction, that the centerpiece of the meeting at Bois Caïman was a great Vodou ceremony in which the entire pantheon of immortal spirits was called to assist and inspire the Revolution.

Understanding of the meeting at Bois Caïman tends to split on a sharp racial and cultural fault line. For Europeans and their descendants, the most significant thing about it is the diabolical plot to raze the plantations and massacre the white population—in its entirety if possible—a plot sealed by a blood sacrifice and perhaps abetted by actual devils summoned to the scene by the powers of African sorcery. For Haitians, however the slaughter of the *blancs* (whom the slaves had small reason to regard as human beings like themselves) is a relatively insignifi-

⁴ During the ceremony at Bois Caïman on the night of August 14, 1891, the call to the struggle for liberty was given by Boukman Dutty, the chief of the rebels.

cant byproduct of the event, whose real purpose was to create a Haitian national identity, complete not only with a shared revolutionary purpose but also with a common language—Haitian Kreyòl—and a common religion—Vodou. In historical reality the evolution of Kreyòl from the contact of numerous African languages with French and the coalescence of Vodou from various African religions with a common exposure to Catholicism must have taken a great deal longer to happen, but (like the Creation story from Genesis) the legend of Bois Caïman *makes* it happen in one instantaneous flash of an enormous spiritual power. Given the massacres that were part of the immediate practical result, it's understandable that *blancs* should find this story frightening—but to Haitians, what it most resembles is the Sermon on the Mount.

The African slaves of Saint Domingue inhabited a world of death. For most, the ancestral religion was in fact a system of ancestor worship. Many different African religions share the belief that the souls of the dead, instead of departing to a far distant Heaven or Hell, as in the Christian tradition, are translated into a parallel universe quite close to our own—close enough to touch, though normally we cannot see it. These are Les Invisibles, Les Morts et Les Mystères, who yield the individual identities they owned when incorporated into human bodies, and pool into a vast reservoir of spiritual energy, reminiscent of the Emersonian Over-soul.⁵ This parallel universe is to be found on the dark side of any mirror, or beneath the surface of any pool, and especially below the surface of the ocean, where we must find *Ginen anba dlo*—Africa beneath the waters. When slaves said that by drowning themselves in the ocean they would return to Africa, this is what they meant.

The brutality of the slave trade, the horrors of the Middle Passage, and the horrendous conditions of slavery in Saint Domingue tremendously accelerated the passage of souls from the world of the living to the Island Below Sea. An estimate

5 Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–1882) defined the notion of the *Over-soul*: That unity, that Over-soul, within which every man's particular being is contained and made one with all others. . . . Mind is the only reality. [Translator's note.]

of twenty-five thousand deaths per year would be conservative; thus, by the time the ceremony at Bois Caïman took place, at least two and a half *million* African souls must have passed beneath the waters. No wonder the eruption was volcanic when it came.

The practice of Haitian Vodou involves penetrating the barrier between the visible and the invisible worlds, opening passages, gateways and crossroads. The Kreyòl word for crossroads is *kalfou*. Such *kalfou* may be found in many places and represented in many ways, and they have a slight numinosity wherever they may be found. Most *vèvè*—the elaborate designs drawn on the ground as maps to guide the spirits where to come—incorporate the image of the crossroads, especially the *vèvè* specialized for Attibon Legba or Maît' Kalfou. The same image of intersection can be seen in the crossbar of a sword hilt and is easy enough to perceive in any variation of the Christian cross. Material meetings of the ways, roads or streets or mountain pathways are apt to carry the same spiritual charge, and are often seen as powerful locations for the placement of charms. It is well to remember that Hispaniola is one of the most important historical crossroads in the entire Western world—the *kalfou* where American Indians, Europeans and Africans came together for the first time. Out of the fiery violence of that meeting, a new religion was forged.

A formally organized Vodou peristyle will usually erect a *poto mitan*—post in the middle. The *poto mitan* creates a *kalfou* where it enters the ground—implying the lower half of the cross pattern invisible beneath the surface of the earth, as the extension of a tree's roots is equal, symmetrical to that of its branches. Often enough a tree may fulfill the function of a *poto mitan*, at the same time that it serves as a *reposwa*, or resting place for spirits. Or, priest or practitioner may simply stick the point of a blade into the ground, creating a *kalfou* image that stresses the piercing of the membrane between the invisible and material worlds. The image of a sword so placed is part of the most common *vèvè* for Attibon Legba.

Legba has points of similarity with the Greek Hermes; like Hermes he may find a *reposwa* in cairns of stone, and his actions resemble Hermes's message-bearing transits between the differ-

ent spheres of gods and mortals. Haitian Vodouisants identify Legba with Saint Peter, the guardian of the gates to Paradise, and particularly with Catholic icons in which Saint Peter displays a key. Legba must be invoked first in all ceremonies, for he is the spirit with the power to open the gate, the door, the crossroads between our world and *Ginen anba dlo*; only with Legba's permission and blessing can the *lwa*⁶ form themselves out of the great well of Les Invisibles, Les Morts et Les Mystères, and surge up the channel of the *poto mitan* to enter the world of the living.

"Legba, then," writes Maya Deren in *The Divine Horsemen*, "is guardian of the sacred gateway, of the *Grand Chemin*, the great road leading from the mortal to the divine world. It is he who grants contact with the loa, and he who must first be saluted if this is to be achieved. 'Papa Legba, open the gate, Attibon Legba, open the gates that we may pass through, Papa; when I have passed, I will thank the loa'.⁷"

Deren goes on to explain that the *Grand Chemin*, as an image of the road of a person's life, follows the "celestial arc of the sun's path," and the person walking that road enacts the stages of the famous riddle of the Sphinx, first crawling on all fours as an infant, then striding on two feet as an adult, and finally in old age stooping to the point of adopting a cane as a third leg. Legba is most often seen in the last condition, limping with his staff and weighed down by a big straw sack, while Vodouisants encourage him with song: "Try to walk now, Alegba; We will carry Attibon Legba: We will carry his Poteau mitan. . . . When we're tired we'll set it down. This post we carry on our back."⁸

Following this sunset curve toward the horizon, Deren goes on: "It is as if in coming westwards, the Africans had left behind the morning and noon of their own destiny, the promise and power of their own history. The God of the Cross-roads himself approaches the Cross-roads, and already in the dark mir-

6 In general, the *lwa* is a divinized ancestor drawing its power from its earthly life. The *lwa* is a family asset. It is an enlightened spiritual being.

7 Maya Deren, *The Divine Horsemen*. New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1970, 98.

8 *Ibid.*, 99.

ror of the nether regions appear the first dim outlines of his inverted reflection, as the sun setting into dark waters, might there appear as a new darkly rising moon. Already Legba, who is the tree stretching skywards, also carries the name Grand Bois, master of the island below the waters, of its submerged forests. Already his omniscience, which was the result of his central, supreme position in the center, from which all could be seen, becomes the omniscience of one who, being below earth, is of all parts of it. Already he is linked to Carrefour,⁹ whose other hand holds firmly that of Ghede, Lord of the Underworld, God of the Dead.”¹⁰

Deren’s description captures how, in the Vodouisant master vision, the world we normally can’t see (the parallel universe, in Mimerose Beaubrun’s term) tends to be a symmetrical reflection of the world that our bodies live in and that our senses perceive. The passage also shows how the spirits are mutable rather than fixed; instead of remaining rigidly separate, they tend to flow one into another as they rise out of or drain back into the great lake of Soul from which they were formed. Most spirits have more than one aspect, and many have several. Even the beneficent Atibon Legba has his inverted reflection on the dark side of the mirror: Maît’ Kalfou, potentially much more deceptive, sinister and dangerous. Ogou Feray is the warlike aspect of a *lwa* analogous to the Greek Ares—a spirit of iron, blood and fire—but he has numerous other less martial aspects, like Ogou Balendjo, the friend and protector of travelers. Erzulie, in one respect a Vodou Aphrodite, may appear as Erzulie Fréda, a compassionate apparition, represented by the Catholic icon of Our Lady of Sorrows, her heart laid open by a sword. But in her jealousy and rage she manifests as Erzulie Jé Rouj, the Red-Eyed Erzulie—and there is also Erzulie Dantòr, associated with war, revolution, and the sacrifice of a black pig at Bois Caïman.

One finds in the panoply of Haitian Vodou spirits the same wide range and similar universal personalities as are found in any polytheistic pantheon—or, if one prefers the model of depth

⁹ More commonly, Maît’ Kalfou

¹⁰ Deren, op. cit., 100.

psychology, in the archetypes of the collective unconscious (the latter phrase works as a secular synonym for *Ginen anba dlo*). As Roman Catholics position God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost well above the hierarchy of Catholic saints, so Vodouisants place God the Creator—Bondye, Bon Dieu or Gran Mèt Ki Bay Lavi (Great Master Who Gives Life) above their individuated spirits—whose relationship with their *serviteurs*, or human servants, tends to be more direct and more personal. The relationship may also be double-edged.

In the north of Haiti, especially, Vodouisants tend to distinguish between *lwa* and *zanj*. The former are spirits more apt to be called upon to provide material assistance to the people who do the calling: money, power, successes in love or in war or revenge. The more sinister aspects of the *lwa* are more likely to take part in such affairs; if one wants to settle an issue of jealousy, one will more probably seek Erzulie Jé Rouj for help, not Erzulie Fréda. These transactions do tend to involve harm to others, an exercise of force and constraint on the assisting *lwa*, and a resemblance to deals with the Devil as they appear in the Judeo-Christian tradition.

By contrast *zanj*, or angels, are more likely to manifest themselves spontaneously, or in response to prayer and song—in response to an effort on the part of believers to purify their body and brain as a temple for the *zanj* in question. The appearance of *zanj* is inspiration in its purest and most beneficent form. Those who court relations with *zanj* are more likely to be seeking spiritual betterment than furthering personal and material ambitions. In this atmosphere, the highest values are very similar to those of charismatic Christianity: nearness to divinity, detachment from the material world and the passions it engenders in the individual, an abrogation of the individual self in favor of uniting with a higher power, and a mystical sense of union with the community of fellow practitioners, which union is mediated by the presiding *zanj*. This unselfish way of serving the spirits is usually called *Ginen*.

In the seminal song “Kalfou Danjere,” the *misik rasin* group Boukman Eksperyans puts these two different ways of serving the spirits into diametrical opposition with the fierce refrain,

Tuyé, nou pa tuyé
Tuyé, nou pa tuyé, non
Tuyé, nou pa tuyé
*Ginen pa Bizango!*¹¹

In actual practice, the separation is seldom quite so absolute. It is very common for a *houmfò* (Vodou temple) to practice Ginen wholeheartedly at the same time that it harbors a Bizango secret society. The arrangement may be expressed by the maintenance of a separate *kay mistè* (chamber of mysteries) for each practice. Moreover, most *houngans* and *mambos* (Vodou priests and priestesses) are understood to “work with both hands”—the beneficent right hand is applied to good works in the spirit of Ginen, while the sinister left hand works to enable the more culpable human desires: lust, avarice, envy and wrath. Right-handed actions in Vodou are usually about purification and healing—physical, psychological and spiritual—and involve the partaking of gifts freely given, in the manner of communion in the Christian church. The left hand, when it is not overtly violent, still uses force as it may be expressed and embodied in the iron of chains and the gold of coins.

A *pwen*, in the Vodouisant lexicon, is a point of spiritual power, which may be used to do magical work in the material world. A *pwen* is a point in the spiritual world where spirit energy has fixed itself, or been fixed, in a material object: a jar, a bottle, a stone, a carving, or even a bundle of cloth. *Houngan* balanced more toward the left are called *bòkòr*—they are apt to traffic in *pwen achté*, or bought points. The spirit caught in a *pwen achté* resembles the genie shut up in the lamp—the owner of the object can compel the spirit to do work, and so the spirit is best understood as having been captured and sold into slavery. This situation is expressed by the chains or ropes or cord or thread that are used to tie up and bind the typical *pwen achté*. Since the

11 Kill, we don't kill
Kill, we don't kill, no
Kill, we don't kill
Ginen is not Bizango!

Bizango denotes a Vodou sect, a kind of secret society. It is also a state of being.

spirits trapped in them labor under duress and resentment, *pwen achté* are notorious for turning on their purchasers.

At the right-handed, Ginen end of this spiritual spectrum, practitioners may have the use of *pwen* freely. These *pwen* are sometimes called *pwen herityé*—inherited as opposed to purchased points—they may include *pyè tonnè*, the thunderstones which come down to today's Haitians from the extinguished Arawak¹² Indians, or the *canari* jars in which an aspect of an ancestor's soul has been preserved and protected. Powers that a Ginen practitioner may deploy through the focus of such *pwen* come freely out of the goodwill of the spirit which exercises itself through the *pwen*.

Zombification is the ultimate expression of the idea of enslavement implicit in the *pwen achté*. Like so many elements of Haitian culture, zombification turns out to be both metaphorical and literal at one and the same time. For decades, if not centuries, observers assumed that the legend of dead bodies being physically resuscitated and forced, while deprived of their souls and their consciousness, to labor, was no more than mythological. The rapport of this metaphor with Haitian history was apparent: The *zombi*, whose will and identity have been destroyed to force him to work for another's purpose, bears a very close resemblance to an 18th-century plantation slave, if not to a twenty-first-century cane cutter laboring for practically nothing in cane fields across the Dominican border. But in the 1980s, the ethnobiologist Wade Davis¹³ discovered that what was so effective metaphorically also did exist as an actual fact: Certain *bòkòr* did have knowledge of a toxin that would stop all life signs long enough for an apparently dead body to be buried and resuscitated a couple of days later—brain damage and sheer terror would be enough to produce the classic subhuman characteristics of zombidom. Yet when Davis first went looking for *zombis*, he was presented not the *zombi cadavre* (the resuscitated corpse) but what was to the Haitian mind just as

12 One of the Indian tribes living in Ayiti before colonization.

13 See Wade Davis, *Passage of Darkness. The Ethnobiology of the Haitian Zombie*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988.

powerful but infinitely more convenient: the *zombi astrale*, the soul shut up in a bottle.

Of course magical work is by no means unknown in the Judeo-Christian tradition (no more than in others of the world's great religions) nor is it always necessarily associated with witchcraft, Satanism and diabolical deal-making. Consider the Catholic practice of saying novenas, or praying for the intercession of a particular saint to solve some particular problem. But these are always private acts, sheltered and hidden from the adjacent public sphere of outward observance, ritual and worship.

At the outer perimeter, a Vodou ceremony looks a lot like a neighborhood party. And to a degree that's just what it is. Of course, some ceremonies are secret and can only be entered by high-level initiates, but many are at one level community festivals. On the outskirts, everything is quite worldly. Women are selling food and drink. People come to see their friends and enjoy the entertainment of drumming and dancing. A good deal of secular business gets taken care of, as it does, for example, on American golf courses, if not so much in American churches anymore.

The closer one approaches the center, though, the more this ordinariness falls away. The center is among the drums, or more precisely in the space immediately before the drums, the focal point where the most intense dancing takes place. Here too, possession is most likely to occur, as the observers become celebrants the closer they come to the inner circle. The dancers are not merely amusing themselves but dancing their way to an altered state. Under the pressure of tightening of bodies around them and the compression of drumming and chant, one or another will give way to the crisis of possession—from the outside it may look like a convulsive seizure, but sometimes possessions happen very quietly, on the perimeter of the event, to celebrants who don't seem to be dancing or singing at all. Sometimes the possessed look as if they know exactly what they are doing and how they are doing it. Sometimes they seem to be taken completely by surprise.

Very few people have tried to describe the experience from the inside, but Maya Deren does a beautiful job:

“I did not even mark the moment when this ceased to be difficult and I cannot say whether it was sudden or gradual but only that my awareness of it was a sudden thing, as if the pace which had seemed unbearably demanding had slipped down a notch into a slow-motion, so that my mind had time, now, to wander, to observe at leisure, what a splendid thing it was, indeed, to hear the drums, to move like this, to be able to do all this so easily, to do even more if it pleased one. . . .

“As sometimes in dreams, so here I can observe myself, can note with pleasure how the full hem of my skirt plays with the rhythms, can watch, as if in a mirror, how the smile begins with the softening of the lips, spreads imperceptibly into a radiance which, surely, is lovelier than any I have ever seen. It is when I turn, as if to say to a neighbor: “Look! See how lovely that is!” and see that the others are removed to a distance, withdrawn to a circle which is already watching, that I realize, like a shaft of terror struck through me, that is no longer myself whom I watch. Yet it *is* myself, for as that terror strikes, we two are made one again, joined by and upon the point of the left leg which is as if rooted to the earth. Now there is only terror. . . . Resting on that leg I feel a strange numbness enter it from the earth itself and mount, within the very marrow of the bone, as slowly and richly as sap might mount the trunk of a tree.¹⁴ I say numbness, but that is inaccurate. To be precise, I must say what, even to me, is pure recollection, but not otherwise conceivable: I must call it a white darkness, its whiteness a glory and its darkness, terror. It is the terror which has the greater force, and with a supreme effort I wrench the leg loose—I must keep moving! Must keep moving!—and pick up the dancing rhythm of the drums as something to grasp at, something to keep my feet from resting on the dangerous earth. No sooner do I settle into the succor of this support than my sense of self doubles again, as in a mirror,¹⁵

14 Deren’s body thus becomes itself the *poto mitan* for the passage of the *lwa* into her world.

15 This sense of doubling of the self is sometimes called *marassa*, after the twin or sometimes triplet Marasa spirits of the Vodou pantheon. Terror and pain come from the power of the experience of splitting and shredding as the ego clings to its seat in the brain, loath to let go of the person—and the person is astonished and often frightened to learn that after all the ego is not the whole person, or even the whole

separates to both sides of an invisible threshold, except that now the vision of the one who watches flickers, the lids flutter, the gaps between moments of sight growing greater, wider.¹⁶ I see the dancing one here, and next in a different place, facing another direction, and whatever lay between these moments is lost, utterly lost. . . . With a great blow the drum unites us once more upon the point of the left leg. The white darkness seems to shoot up; I wrench my foot free but the effort catapults me across what seems a vast, vast distance. . . . My skull is a drum; each great beat drives that leg, like the point of a stake, into the ground. The singing is at my very ear, inside my head. . . . I am caught inside this cylinder, this well of sound. There is nothing anywhere except this. . . . The white darkness moves up the veins of my legs like a swift tide rising, rising; is a great force which I cannot sustain or contain, which, surely, will burst my skin. It is too much, too bright, too white for me: this is its darkness. “Mercy!” I scream within me. I hear it echoed by the voices, shrill and unearthly: “*Erzulie!*” The bright darkness floods upward through my body, reaches my head, engulfs me. I am sucked down and exploded upward at once. That is all.”¹⁷

The induction of a trance state by whatever means necessary is common to many religions. Sometimes the means is even more flamboyant than the dancing and drumming of Haitian Vodou. The North African Jilali urge themselves into crisis by slashing each other with knives as they dance, and something similar is found among the kriss dancers of Bali.¹⁸ Sufi dancing is a calmer, more apparently controlled exercise than these self-mutilating frenzies—but the goal of the whirling dervish exercise is certainly an altered state. “What typically happens if you enter the Hayy at any depth is that you see the forms of the

of consciousness.

16 These are classic symptoms of entry into a hypnotic trance.

17 Deren, *op.cit.*, 258–260.

18 The dance of the barong or kriss (from the name of a Balinese sword with a wavy blade) pits the barong (symbol of the positive forces in the Universe) against the sorcerer Rangda, who impels the disciples of the barong to turn the kriss against themselves. In the course of this dance, the participants enter into a trance. [Translator’s note.]

world, your own not excluded, overwhelmed and annihilated in the singleness that animates them, their outlines obliterated by a tidal signature of primary light. . . . Later on, the Turn may become many things, sometimes a mill wheel grinding off the chaff around the hearts [of] native grain, sometimes a downpour of grace, sometimes only a crucifying pain in your shoulders as you struggle to keep your arms up.”¹⁹ Monastic ritual also has such purposes, with its taxing, intentionally exhausting routines of wakefulness and ceaseless prayer; consider the intense contemplative method of Saint Ignatius of Loyola. The extreme effort and privation of the North American Indian vision quest leads to much the same goal. And in a completely secular context we have seen excitable young women “falling out” at Beatles concerts and the like, though their experience, which seems to lead no further, is apt to be put down to hysteria.

What sets Haitian Vodou apart from many otherwise similar practices is what happens when the trance state is achieved. Where once was Maya Deren now appears the great *lwa* Erzulie. It is said: It is a fearful thing to fall into the hand of the Living God.

Psychologists examining the phenomenon of possession in Haitian Vodou have found themselves perplexed. A mental illness model becomes ridiculous when so applied. Practically any Haitian may sometimes be susceptible to possession and it is absurd to believe that an *entire* population (of more than eight million people) suffers from schizophrenia, epilepsy or any other psychopathology.²⁰

However, a wholly material explanation for possession can be found in hypnosis and in the role played by hypnosis in multiple personality syndrome. The rhythms of Vodou drumming and chant have all the characteristics of hypnotic induction. One explanation proposed for multiple personality syndrome as a First World psychopathology is that an auto-hypnotic state

19 Rafi Zabor, “The Turn: Inside the Secret Dervish Orders of Istanbul,” *Harper’s Magazine*, June 2004, 56.

20 See Steve Mizrach, “Neuropsychological and Psychological Approaches to Spirit Possession in Haiti,” www.clas.ufl.edu/anthro/scholarly/spiritpos.html.

facilitates the suppression of a the core personality and permits its replacement by a different identity and a different consciousness—and also the successive apparition of many different personalities which are likely to be perfectly unaware of each other.²¹ This mundane and reductive scheme transfers reasonably well to the experience of possession in Vodou. The religious interpretation of the experience can then be explained in terms of “set and setting”; i.e., the *lwa* materialize because they are expected to—both by the possessed individual and by the surrounding, supporting culture.

But most who experience such transformations prefer expansive to reductive explanations. At what would seem to be the absolutely opposite pole from Haitian Vodou, among the most extreme Pentecostal sects in the United States, one finds an amazing similarity in the subjective experience. Pentecostal snake-handlers would almost certainly consider Vodou to be Devil-worship—a pure expression of Satan’s power in the world. But this first-hand description of the snake-handling practice shows how closely related the two experiences really are:

The look in Carl’s eyes seemed to change as he approached me. He was embarrassed. The snake was all he had, his eyes seemed to say. But as low as it was, as repulsive, if I took it, I’d be possessing the sacred. Nothing was required except obedience. Nothing had to be given up except my own will. This was the moment. I didn’t stop to think about it. I just gave in. I stepped forward and took the snake with both hands. Carl released it to me. I turned to face the congregation and lifted the rattlesnake up toward the light. It was moving like it wanted to get up even higher, to climb out of that church and into the air. And it was exactly as the handlers had told me. I felt no fear. The snake seemed to be an extension of myself. And suddenly there seemed to be nothing in the room but me and the snake. Everything else had disappeared. Carl, the congregation, Jim—all gone, all faded to white. And I could not hear the earsplitting music. The air was

21 See Eugene Bliss, *Multiple Personality, Allied Disorders and Hypnosis*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1986.

silent and still and filled with that strong even light. And I realized that I, too, was fading into the white. I was losing myself by degrees, like the incredible shrinking man. The snake would be the last to go, and all I could see was the way its scales shimmered one last time in the light, and the way its head moved from side to side, searching for a way out. I knew then why the handlers took up serpents. There is power in the act of disappearing; there is victory in the loss of self. It must be close to our conception of paradise, what it's like before you're born or after you die.²²

Possession frees the soul from the self. Practically all religions and mystical practices of the world seek this release—by whatever means necessary. What Vodou has in common with the other great religions of the world is the voluntary surrender of the egoistic element of self—if not the entire individual self—in favor of a divine power. One must lose one's life to find it. This insight is beautifully expressed in another song by Boukman Ekspéryans, "Sa'm Pèdi."

*Pèdi lavi-ou
W'ap jwen lavi ki pa janm fini
(jan Kris di. . . .)
Sa'm pèdi pou sa!
M pa pèdi anyen, non*²³

Or, as Saint Paul put it in Galatians 2:20,²⁴ *It is no longer I who live, but the Christ who lives in me.*

Mimerose "Manzè" Pierre Beaubrun is a founding member of Boukman Ekspéryans, which, with her husband Theodore "Lòlò" Beaubrun, she continues to lead. From the start the group

²² Dennis Covington, *Salvation on Sand Mountain: Snake-Handling and Redemption in Southern Appalachia*. New York: Penguin, 1996, 169-170.

²³ Lose your life
You will find the life that never ends
(as Christ said. . . .)

What do I lose in this?
I don't lose anything, no
²⁴ *Epistle to the Galatians II, 20.*

has been politically, as well as artistically and spiritually, engaged. With other *misik rasin* groups like Boukan Ginen and RAM, Boukman Eksperyans wrote and performed the soundtrack for the Lavalas populist movement and the first landslide election of President Jean-Bertrand Aristide in 1990. After the coup d'état against Aristide in 1991, the group was threatened with assassination by the ruling military junta and went into exile until the restoration of the democratic government in 1995. In a sad irony, the Beaubruns and other members of Boukman Eksperyans had to flee Haiti again in the winter of 2003–2004, this time under death threats from the Lavalas regime. Since then they have returned to their country, where they continue to be active in the pro-democracy movement. The members of Boukman Eksperyans were named Peace and Goodwill Ambassadors by the United Nations in the summer of 2002.

Like her husband, Mimerose Beaubrun is a member of Haiti's small but significant educated minority. At its early levels, the Haitian educational system preserves, as if in amber, the entire corpus of the French Enlightenment inherited from the colonial period. One graduates from a Haitian *lycée* with a title of *philosophe*, speaking the French of Voltaire and conversant with most of the knowledge accrued by the other eighteenth-century French *Lumières*. Grafting a modern university education onto this very solid base has produced some of the most formidable intellectuals to be found anywhere in the world.

Mimerose Beaubrun topped off her conventional education at Les Frères du Sacré Coeur de Turgeau with a degree in Social Anthropology from the Faculté d'Ethnologie in Port-au-Prince. She made her first conscious entry into the world of Vodou as an anthropologist/ethnologist—with a project to study the social structure of the Vodouisant/familial communities called *lakou*. At the same time both she and her husband were beginning to collect Vodou drum rhythms and traditional songs to incorporate into the repertory of the fledgling Boukman Eksperyans. In that process, both Manzè and Lòlò made profound reconnections with their own ancestral *lakou*: his in the mountains above Port au Prince and hers near the border town of Ouanaminthe near the frontier of the Dominican Republic in Haiti's North-East

Department. This renewal of living roots in Vodou brought a strong religious current into the music of Boukman Eksperyans, a current that runs under the songs' overt political messages and furnishes them a deeper, more eternal power. Among her own forebears, Manzè discovered her ultimate teacher and guide to the mysteries: Aunt Tansia, whose knowledge, wisdom and spiritual power govern the text of *Nan Dòmì*.²⁵

Since Haiti has spent 200 years as a pariah state, the African roots are much better preserved in Haitian Vodou than in other religions of similar origin elsewhere in the Caribbean and in Latin America. For that reason, Haitian Vodou is especially beloved of anthropologists and has been much more exhaustively studied than other related religions of the region, whose traditions have been more diluted by greater contact with the outside world. But practically all scholarly reports on Vodou are outsider accounts, and practically all outsider accounts are arrested in descriptions of external rituals and practices, which means that they are stopped on the threshold.

Most anthropological studies of Vodou are also hampered by their effort to determine and describe some universal orthodoxy analogous to Judeo-Christian orthodoxies . . . but no such orthodoxy exists in Vodou. As anthropologist Gérard Barthélemy has put it, Vodou offers plenty of rite, but next to no dogma. Because the presiding spirits have their origin in the souls of dead ancestors, Vodou makes plenty of room for idiosyncratic variations between one *lakou* and the next. Paradoxically for a religion that insists on uprooting the ego on a regular basis, Vodou, because it offers anyone the possibility of incarnating a divine spirit, is unusually empowering to the individual at the same time.

Like all the great religions of the world Vodou has an external, public practice of rituals and ceremonies—and also an internal, mystical dimension which is more likely to be practiced in extreme privacy, though it would be somewhat inaccurate to call it personal. Before *Nan Dòmì*, works about Vodou have con-

25 *Nan Dòmì*: a concept that defines the second stage of attention. One enters into a state that permits one to see abstract things unknown until then. It is a state of lucid dreaming.

centrated on the former—on the public, external dimension of the religion and its surrounding manners and mores. Mimerose Beaubrun set out, originally, to write another such work. But after a couple of decades of study and collection, all her notes, tapes, photos and drafts were washed away in a flood. Nothing remained but the essential core of what she had learned and internalized in a place where neither fire nor flood could destroy it.

Nan Dòmi is the only account of Vodou's private, mystical, interior practice that has been offered to the public so far. Its content stands in the same relation to ceremonial Vodou as Zen to conventional Buddhism, Sufism to conventional Islam, the practice of the desert saints to conventional Christianity. Mimerose Beaubrun has been a *student* of Vodou for half her life, but she is also an adept, and in this uniquely valuable work, she divests herself of all scholarly apparatus to speak from Vodou's purest heart.

CHAPTER 1

**The Teaching of Perception
with Aunt Tansia**



We were at Lakou Beaubrun de Malique Nan Ma (four kilometers east of Pétion-Ville) with friends. Lòlò and I had been invited to attend a ceremony of *replasman bòn** (replacement of boundary markers). It was midnight when the prayers and lamentations ended. Everyone then gathered under an arbor improvised for the occasion to sing and assist in the descent of the lwa, to dance and enjoy themselves. I sat down on the north side of the arbor, leaning my chair against the wall of the kay mistè.

I observed the people, the décor enhanced by the *tèt gridap* (handcrafted lamps), and I listened, emptied of all thought. I savored the songs. I relaxed and let my body vibrate to the sound of the drums, when suddenly my eyelids became heavy: I was sleepy. I tried to resist, throwing some cool water on my face, but my eyes closed of their own accord. I fell into a deep sleep with a jug of water clasped in my hands. Yet I was not completely asleep. I could hear everything that was happening under the arbor. I had the strange sensation that my hands and legs were swaying. I wanted to see them. I put my left arm close to my face; I couldn't see it. It was very, very dark. I tried harder. Eventually I saw saffron yellow, then white. When I focused my eyes I realized that I was on my feet dancing before the drummers, still holding the water jug in my hands. Then I stopped paying attention, and let myself go in the dance. At one moment, I said to myself, "My God, how will I be able to stop?" But I couldn't retain this thought. The dance, the sound, the rhythm were all

too strong. They led my body to move in a circle, crazily. I could hear everything despite the deafening noise of the drums. I was unable to talk. I was incapable of pronouncing a word, overcome by a leaden drowsiness—while, at the same time, awake. I experienced pleasure in that state between two waters: profoundly asleep and fully conscious of myself.

A resident of the lakou, Mme. Raynold, asked me to go honor the Pe (altar) of the Kay. She took me inside the kay mistè, presented me with an egg on a white plate, manioc flour (which I do not like) and barley water syrup. I ate the egg whole (that is, including the shell). Then I ate a bit of the flour and drank the syrup. I thanked the woman without saying a word—that is, in a mental language. She understood and thanked me politely, “I am at your service.” I took her hand, led her to a certain spot and told her that in that place there had been a *Ma** (pond) that had dried up to portend the death of people thirsting for consciousness. She answered that in fact, there really had been a pond there, but she had not realized it until now.

I touched her and her whole body trembled. She fell to the ground and I awoke in a pond a few meters southwest of the kay mistè. I was surrounded by people looking at me. I didn’t understand why I was getting so much attention. I didn’t even try to understand. Lòlò took me by the hand and whispered in my ear, “A lwa possessed you.” It didn’t matter to me at all. I was neither content nor annoyed. I only knew that I was in the process of dreaming.

Lòlò covered me with his shirt. He kept asking me questions, such as, “How do you feel? Are you cold? Do you want to change your dress, is it damp?” I didn’t respond. I felt a kind of indifference, a sentiment of non-pity (that state that neither tolerates pity for oneself or for anything else, because nothing is important in itself).

Later, in the course of my analyses, I would conclude that, as with an ontological process, people can come to know different levels of consciousness and experience many states of being simultaneously. I would place my experience within that category. Because my experience was out of the ordinary—that is to

say, it did not appear to have been lived in the everyday world—I understood it as having taken place in the unknown world. I recalled Aunt Tansia’s teaching of the two aspects within our reach: the known world where everything is solid and reasonable, and the unknown world, which comprises the states of Nan Dòmì—dreaming, for example. I also recalled the methods she employed to train us and familiarize us with the unknown world. She used to tell us in a joking way, “*Pa bobo kole ake ankenn bagay. Vire Je an nou chak fwa ke nou santi yon atirans.* (Don’t become attached to anything. Avert your gaze every time you feel attracted by something.) In that way you will gain mastery of the Je. This work must also be accompanied by the force of will.” That was her way of introducing the teaching of perception.

One Saturday afternoon we were in our courtyard, waiting for Aunt Tansia. For two days she had been telling us that, on this Saturday, she would begin to employ special measures in regard to our physical bodies, which supposedly lacked suppleness and were too attached to trivial things. She arrived at three o’clock, bent over her cane, a casserole in her hand. She gave us the casserole and asked us to drink all its contents, which she called “*bon bouyon*” (delicious soup). But the dish did not have the consistency of a traditional broth: It had no meat or *donbrèy* (flour paste), or bananas, yams or malangas; only two small crayfish swimming in an ocean of green water and a few leaves of *mouton zenzen*[★] (a kind of legume, a power plant), she told me when I asked what they were. I tasted it first; the liquid was bitter. I was somewhat vexed because she had urged us to fast and wait for her “famous” repast. But Lòlò didn’t hesitate. He drank half of the “broth” and handed me the rest. It was hard for me to swallow. She asked me not to leave a drop in the casserole. Reluctantly, and out of respect for her, I finished the rest. When I gave the empty casserole back to her, she stood straight up and began to dance and sing, “*Papa Loko,*⁴⁰ *Zany misyonè, Ago*[★] *e!* (Papa Loko, missionary angel, listen!)” She asked us to learn the

40 Master of the temple, conservator of tradition, he is in principle the treasurer of the ritual accessories in the kay mistè.

song. We obeyed and, after repeating it three times, I sang, my heart joyful. I forgot the bitter broth.

Before leaving, she solemnly announced that she would be there the next day at the same hour with the same intention: that is, to continue her favorable treatment. She had the audacity to ask us to fast once again.

The next day, to our great astonishment, we were not at all hungry and our bodies avidly awaited the broth. She returned at the same hour and we repeated the same scenario. Only the song had changed. She sang for *Agwe-t-Awoyo*⁴¹: *Agwe-si, o! Agwe-la, nan lanmè mwen te ye. . .* (Agwe-si, o! Agwe-la, I was amid the waves of the sea. . . .)

In all, the treatment lasted for twenty-one days. Lòlò and I did not go out; every day, from morning on, we were absorbed and motivated by a single goal: to see Aunt Tansia again.

On the evening of the last day, she asked us, “How do you feel?”

“Very well,” I answered without hesitation. I felt light and strong at the same time. I told her so. She laughed good-heartedly. “You feel light because after three weeks, you are no longer concerned with your body. You have let the chains of your worries fall away.” She fell silent for a moment, then spoke again. “The body, this solid part of our being, forces us to weave bonds of attachment with this world around us. The worst part is that we find it reasonable to assume these cares.”

She tickled my ribs. I was startled, since I was deep in thought: *Cares are the lot of human beings; to be rid of them is to enter the realm of the gods.* Aunt Tansia understood my thought and said, “Of course you are gods; it is not I who say it, it is the prophet himself, *se vre wi* (in truth). You yourself know it, and that’s why you feel yourself to be so strong. Your concentration during the last twenty-one days has helped you become conscious of your strength. Since then you have entered into a different world. The door of consciousness is open to you.” She asked me, “Have you by chance noticed anything? I suggest that you look at Lòlò’s hands.” Without turning my head, I saw rays of light. I told him

41 Lwa of the seas and the oceans.

so. At the time, Ouanaminthe had no electricity and we were sitting in the dark.

“This light was always there,” she continued. “You saw it today because you have altered your perception. Didn’t you learn in your catechism that all, all of us are Light? However, some of the lights are brighter than others.”

“Aunt, is what I am seeing real?”

“It is completely real, *pitit an mwen*. You now have a different perception of this part of the body that we call the hand.”

It took me some time to recognize that this part of the teaching would unfold based on perception, which necessarily leads us to give a definition to things.

“*Tou sa nou wè, nou ba yo yon non, nan monn sa* (We give a name to everything we see in this world),” Aunt Tansia said to me. “By social consensus, we have decided to give a name to everything. We have described this world as we do because we perceive it as such. *Nou eksplike chak bagay dapre jan nou wè-y.* (We explain each thing according to our perception of it.)”

Still following an ontological process of thinking things through, I told myself that man is a mysterious being, possessing infinite possibilities that have not been exploited. Aunt Tansia was sighing throughout our dialogue. Then, suddenly, she became quiet. A moment later, she spoke again as if taking a breath. “All is well. I think that you are ready. The veil is finally torn away. Soon it will be necessary for me to go away.”

At that time I understood nothing. I only knew that I was living through special moments with Aunt Tansia and I savored them. I would have liked for her to remain by my side for the rest of my life.

One afternoon, Aunt Tansia had a boy summon Lòlò on the pretext that an important visitor wanted to see him. Lòlò rushed to her house. After half an hour Lòlò returned, accompanied by a young man, the sacristan of the Catholic Church. As this man approached to grasp my hand, I felt a wave of warmth all around as if someone had just lit a big wood fire. He looked me straight in the eyes and I knew he was reading my mind. I didn’t lower my eyes; on the contrary I let myself

open up. My eyes were the portals of my being. I let myself be looked at. And where could I have hidden? He would have seen me—that, I knew. We were still face to face when my father approached, accompanied by a friend. They were having a discussion on the subject of faith. Suddenly the visitor asked for silence and for someone to bring him a Bible. My father gave him one. He thanked him, and opened it directly to the page where it was written: “The Kingdom of Heaven is like a grain of mustard seed.” He read it aloud with perfect diction. When he finished, he handed the Bible to my father, opened to the same page. My father read the same verse and expressed aloud his surprise because he knew that the sacristan was illiterate. Then the visitor handed me a packet of leaves, which I had not noticed in his hands, and said, addressing everyone, “Do you know the name of this plant?” No one knew. He said, “It is called *twa pawòl*.★ This plant is the very symbol of faith. Consider it carefully: Faith is like this point that unites the three leaves into one. Faith is the union of thought, of the word and of the act. It is perfection.”

“Do you mean to say, without sin?” I asked him.

He answered, “I don’t know what ‘without sin’ means to you. I am talking about that state in which you find yourself in perfect harmony with your whole being.” He spoke with so much self-assurance that I no longer knew whether I was convinced or not. I contented myself with acquiescing to his words.

A few weeks later, Aunt Tansia had summoned Lòlò because she wanted to introduce him to a very good friend. When Lòlò arrived at her house, he thought it was a joke—the only person with Aunt Tansia was Ton De, an old man the whole town knew. He was the janitor and bell-ringer at the Catholic church. Lòlò greeted them both, but Ton De introduced himself to Lòlò, grasping both his hands and calling himself “Kalfou.” Aunt Tansia explained to Lòlò that Ton De/Kalfou had important things to teach us. She insisted that our meetings take place at her house. So it was for two weeks.

During that period, Ton De/Kalfou taught us. The lessons amounted to what follows: *Ginen-an se tankou yon gwo pyebwa.*

(Ginen-an is like a giant tree.) All the birds can build their nests there. Despite wind and storms, the birds will have nothing to fear. They will be protected by the branches. The birds will not fall unless the tree itself falls. The roots of the Ginen tree go deep. It is an ancient science.

“Don’t be afraid,” he exhorted, “of obstacles that you will find along your path. You will be called all kinds of names; don’t let go of the branch that holds you up. You will be criticized for good as for ill, but don’t let go. You will be the object of all kinds of flattery; don’t let go. Efface your personal history, cut yourself off from the world and its snares. Like the bird that takes flight after the storm, you also will fly toward toward total liberty after your trials.”

We saw Ton De after that, but he never referred again to his use of the name “Kalfou.” When we tried to talk to him about it, he always answered, “*Ma pa konnen de ki sa n ap pale a.* (I don’t know what you are talking about.)”

Aunt Tansia was radiant when we gave her a complete account of our meetings. She hummed a *chante pwent* throughout our conversation. She didn’t stop laughing to herself and chanting: “*Bòkò ki bezwen se li ki ranmase.* (The *bòkò** in need is the one who collects.)”

One Sunday morning a song awakened us. It was Aunt Tansia’s voice, “*Loko, m bezwen yon layo pou m ale ranmase vye fanmi-an m yo* (Loko, I need a cart to go get my family.)” She brought us some *mabi*,⁴² and had us drink it on an empty stomach. Then she told us the story of the priest who was officiating that morning. “*Ti moun yo, Père Charpentier te transfòme maten-an.* (My children, Father Charpentier was transformed this morning.) He came down from the altar to greet and embrace all the faithful. That very priest, who is so racist and so haughty. No doubt he was in his *Ti Bonnanj*.”

We laughed heartily. I knew the priest. He never greeted anyone. Even when someone bade him good day, he would act as though he hadn’t heard them. He always walked looking straight ahead, ignoring everyone around him.

42 A drink made of fermented cane syrup and orange juice.

Aunt Tansia left after many pleasantries and promised us to return later in the afternoon.

Indeed, she did return. As she sat down she went on, “ I’m here to bear witness. First of all, previously I told you that you will meet many other personages, be it in Nan Dòmì, be it that they present themselves to you *Je klè** (while you are conscious).” She was silent for a moment and resumed, “I want to say something to you. Up to now, you have not been able to establish a point of reference. *Ti moun*, learn this: There are twenty-one important knots in the Ginen. Each knot is a *pwen*. You must find these knots and find out which one of them you can undo and tie again at will.⁴³ This knot will be yours. No one can do it for you. There are people who out of laziness or ambition prefer to buy a *pwen* (here, ‘*pwen*’ refers to a Vodou charm). What they don’t know is that each *pwen* has its own rules. The seller will never hand over all the rules to the buyer. His *pwen* constitutes his force; he knows that he will never give away all his force for whatever he may be offered. *Ti moun, sèvi Ginen pa achte pwen, tande. Alòs, yonn di yonn konprann. Pa fè kòr-an nou lezi, Travay, ti moun, travay dur.* (My children, instead of buying a *pwen*, follow Ginen teaching. Greetings to the good listener! No laziness. You must enter into it seriously, my children.)”

While she was speaking her face was transformed; her features became those of a young woman. She was very, very beautiful. She unfastened her chignon. Her hair was the color of honey. She was agile, at ease, and moved coquettishly. If this change in her physical appearance was surprising, her changed mood was even more so. I was astounded. I couldn’t believe my eyes. She saw my surprise and said, “Why are you looking at me like that? This isn’t the first time I have visited you.” Suddenly something in my mind clicked and a memory surfaced: I remembered having seen a similar woman, this very woman I was looking at in front of me. It was in a dream when I was very young (only nine or ten years old). I was climbing up some stairs and this woman was perched on the topmost step. Hypnotized by her beauty, I did not stop looking at her as I mounted the stairs. But once

43 An expression that may be translated as “to pierce the mystery.”

I got to the top there was no one there, only total darkness all around me. I was seized with panic and called out, “Jesus!” just as my mother taught me to do any time I was in danger. This recollection prompted me to cry, “Ah! Is it you? You?”

“Yes, it is I,” she answered. Then she sang a song:

O! Tansia, ki sa w ape fè la a?

—Se pase mwen t ape pase.

O! Tansia Balendjo!

—M sonje nan tan mwen.

O! Tansia, what are you doing there?

—I’m passing, I’m just passing along

O! Tansia Balendjo!

—I’m dreaming of my old times.

I wanted to understand this scene better, but instead I thought about everything and nothing until I finally dozed off, and in a half-sleep I heard her recount her story:

“Tansia was very beautiful. She was the most beautiful woman in the country. Her skin was the color of a peach, her hair thick and wavy, her teeth white, eyes a clear brown, and she was five feet seven inches tall. She loved life, dancing and love. Among her many lovers she counted men of state, Haitians as well as Dominicans and Cubans. She was sure of herself and proud of her beauty. She was also very intelligent and loved politics. She was an active member of the Cacos. She exploited her important contacts in order to discover the plans of the enemy camp and then thwart them. She had an only son whom she loved a lot and spoiled. She had everything and asked nothing more from life. It was then that Ginen caught her in its nets. The Invisible always chooses the moment to appear when the apprentice isn’t expecting anything, when his self-importance is excessive. It always chooses its hour and its moment. But Tansia didn’t know that the Spirit was lying in wait for her. It chose death to manifest itself. It happened when her favorite lover, the father of her son, was denounced along with her adored child.

They were arrested and imprisoned in the national penitentiary. The boy was sixteen. They were taken to Port-au-Prince, betrayed by one of their own and mistreated along the way, following their departure from Mont-Organisé (a municipality in the Nord-Est Department of Haiti). When Tansia learned about this misfortune, she assembled her things—horses, servants and provisions—and set out for Port-au-Prince with the intention of seeing her lover, the President, and pleading his innocence. They spent fifteen days on the road, and it rained during the whole of the trip, making travel difficult. She had a high fever when they reached Port-au-Prince. At Pont-Rouge⁴⁴ she stopped at a friend's house, washed, combed her long hair and attended to her appearance before rushing to the National Palace. Suddenly, she heard an uproar in the distance. She experienced a moment of anguish, but she mastered it. Her mission was too important to pay attention to rumors, even though Port-au-Prince is, by definition, a city of rumors.

“She went first to the prison and there, in front of the prison door, were hundreds of cadavers. She fell on the body of her lover. Then on her son's corpse. She saw something like a black cloud. Thinking that she was living a nightmare, she sank face down to the ground and cried, ‘My God, what have I done to you?’

“Then a great light covered her. She stood up, no longer feeling anything, either pain or anger, and in control of the situation. Tansia gathered her dead, helped by the *majò prezon*.⁴⁵ She went to the cemetery, where she buried them herself. Then she spent the whole night dancing with the frenzied crowd in the streets of Port-au-Prince. The crowd chanted words of vengeance while brandishing a lopped-off head and penis. She went up to the man who was holding them and snatched the head from his hand. She recognized the head of the President, her lover. At that moment she saw Death, who said to her, ‘Tansia, what do you want? What are you looking for? What are you doing

44 A historic place north of Port-au-Prince where Jean-Jacques Dessalines, the first Haitian head of State, was assassinated in 1807.

45 A longtime, trusted prisoner who benefits from certain privileges, among them that of working as a guard.

there? Get out of that crowd and go away! Leave my kingdom!’

“So she left and walked without any destination in mind, without stopping anywhere for at least three months before she found herself at last in her birthplace. What energy this woman Tansia possessed, capable of withstanding the blows that come from life as well as from death!

“From that day on, she always wore a dress of *syam** (a cloth made of cream-colored, raw cotton) and resolved to dedicate herself to the welfare of orphans and prisoners. She buried her life as a woman of the world, renounced all her worldly goods, distributed them to others, and chose to serve Ginen-an. Death had abruptly put an end to her interest in a life of prosperity. She flattened all obstacles. So it was that Tansia lost her former self, leaving me a place to become a candidate for the rank of grand master.

“That is why I wanted to dance in her, with her: to give her life. I wanted her to live, to follow me without going back. Tansia became extremely thin, she fell ill, struck down by tuberculosis, a shameful illness at that time. I cured her in fifteen days and she became more beautiful than ever. Men who had been wary of her began again to gather around her, captivated and filled with desire. I used Tansia to attract and set a trap for all those I wanted: Vivil, Èmilien, Pasteur Marc, and even Zann the servant.”

I listened carefully. She ended by embracing us and introducing herself, “My name is *Erzulie Pierre*, daughter of *Loko Atissou*⁴⁶ and *Mètrès Dantòr* (Mistress Dantòr).” I wept copiously during her story, without being able to stop. My body shook with spasms. Tears moistened my face and my blouse. Nevertheless, I was not sad. She wrapped me in her long dress and blew into my hair. I trembled. Her breath caused a shiver down my spine. I was cold; like a baby, I curled up in a ball. She blew again and it was then that Lòlò let out a cry and the house shook. Suddenly I fell asleep. I saw a beautiful river in my dream, clear and limpid. I was thirsty and bent down to drink. I was beginning to quench my thirst when I perceived a shadow above

46 Name of a lwa messenger.

me. I raised my head and saw a snake as big as a boa (like one I had seen in the movies). My eyes met hers and I was afraid. I ran, and she pursued me. All of a sudden an enormous flame appeared in front of me. I couldn't go on. Then I jumped to get through the flame and ended up on a red horse waiting on the other side. I turned to look behind me. There was no fire, no snake, no forest, no river—nothing. It was all black. I opened my eyes wide; at one moment I saw saffron yellow, then white, and I awoke nestled in Aunt Tansia's skirt. My body trembled, seized by spasms. She had me drink some water, pouring it over my face. I was hot.

“You are in your Ti Bonnanj, you have been dreaming, you have just seen your *allié*,”⁴⁷ she said to me. And before she left, she advised me not to take off the white headscarf she had put on my head.

After this experience, I went to see my mother, who questioned me about my state of mind. She found me too calm, as if something in me had changed; she noted my eyes were not the same. She was uneasy. My father too. He wanted to know more about the people I had seen recently. “Have you seen Aunt Tansia?” he asked mistrustfully. I did not answer.

I had nothing to say to them. All communication was cut off between us. An unfamiliar way out was offered to me; it was now or never to exit from the “educational and intellectual mechanism” to which I had been exposed. I was now face to face with another dimension. A new synthesis was born in me. I lost the entire vision of the world that I had had since childhood. I understood something profound and important: that I would have to fight hard against the necessities and certitudes that up to then had demanded so much of my energy. I was confronted with a new situation, related to these activities that were not part of the heritage of my own personal culture. I sensed the beginning of a great desire for consciousness. What my mother and father said no longer had any importance. The

47 The *alliés* are luminous, vibrant beings who live in the hollows of the earth and who exchange knowledge and *savoir-faire* with the inhabitants of the earth. In Vodou tradition, each human being has an *allié* to help him perfect his mystic baggage (initiatory).

only thing that counted for me was the instant when I had the courage to accept the slow toppling over of what had been my whole culture.

I saw Aunt Tansia again three days later. I began to feel a kind of warmth in my head. I was sweating heavily. She had me pour a lot of water over my head, rubbed my temples with oil from the *Koko Ginen** (an oleaginous tropical plant), and placed a compress of orange petals on the *pòtay-mistè** (points of opening in the body). She traced a triangle with her fingers on the hair at the back of my head and shaped the hair into the corresponding design. The next day at noon, Lòlò started to suffer violent headaches. His pain lasted three days, beginning each day at midday. Aunt Tansia washed his scalp for three days during each crisis. After that the pain went away.

Aunt Tansia had us drink mabi, then asked me to tell her the dream I had about the snake. When I finished, she sighed. “I can interpret your dream in two ways: The first is to see in the snake a presage of great wealth. Not only material wealth. It’s up to you to choose. In the second interpretation, the fact that you saved yourself provides proof that you are not ready to undertake the struggle with your *allié*. Now, regardless of cost, you must conquer it: only then will it consent to serve you and open the door of its mystery. You will go in and discover your knot. All that presupposes that your head be *fixée* as soon as possible. That is to say, your *Mèt tèr** (the ‘master-head’; this is the *lwa* chosen during initiation whom the adept has agreed to serve) must be firmly in place. The reason for this is that there is nothing more dangerous than the botched setting of the *Selidò* (another term for *Ti Bonnanj*). The dreamer may, as a first option, use his dream to acquire many material goods, achieve political power, or dominate others. In this latter case, he becomes a ghoulish and sucks up everything that passes by his door. The dreamer will then remain attached only to the attractions of this world. That is what happens with the *lougarou*. Nevertheless, there is another possibility: The dreamer may set off as an adventurer into the world of the Unknown. It is not easy to get there, but if you succeed, it will lead you to liberty.”

I understood what she meant to tell me, but all the same I

asked her, “Aunt, how do you explain my experience, did I have a *Zany** (angel)?”

“Non, *pitit an mwèn*, not yet, you have only dreamed. Yet this state is very close to that of the *Zany*.”

The explanation was clear, but I wanted to know a little more about this state in which everything transpired simultaneously in the same context. I also knew that fasting had played a role in the Aunt Tansia’s methods, as well as the famous “bouillon,” the *mabi*, and the *lave-tèt*. I was sure of it. But one particular thought nonetheless led me to pose the question: How had I been able on this occasion to pass beyond the threshold of logical thought where everything is real and objective? The only answer I got from Aunt Tansia was the promise that she would soon undertake another step on my behalf, one that would help me to manage the placement of the *Mèt tèt*.

This time, I asked her no more questions. I set about to await that day.