

The Gods Speak English in New York:

Haitian Spirits Adjust to Urban Life

by Lois Wilcken

It was winter in New York, but a crowded roomful of people from Haiti were warmly celebrating the deities of their African ancestors. Sparked by song, dance, and drumming, the priestess in charge allowed the spirit to take possession of her, and all consciousness dissolved. What a surprise when, what seemed a moment later, she found herself knee deep in snow! Apparently, the spirit had felt an urge to step outside. Brrrrr! No place for a tropical soul. And so he left the priestess in the snow and fled back to that balmy place where the spirits of Vodou abide.

Who are the spirits, and from what corner of the cosmos do they originate? In scholarly literature the spirits of Haitian Vodou represent anything from anthropomorphic fantasies to escapist fears, but Vodou practitioners know the spirits as people. The spirits are among the “invisibles” who reside on the other side of the cosmic mirror, that is, the side we humans do not inhabit but gaze into from time to time. They are distillations of such elemental forces as power, attraction, coherence, and decay. Ezili Freda, for instance, becomes the quintessential lover, while Ogou (usually represented pictorially as a warrior) exemplifies power. Our ancestors, whose spirits return a year after their death and dwell thereafter in a *govi* (clay jar), fade into those elemental Gods as the generations distance them from the living. Responding to the call of ritual song, dance, and drumming, the spirits take possession of human mediums so that they can speak to the living. What one sees when gazing at a spirit is a mirror reflection of the self.

The great spirits — Ogou, Ezili, Danbala, Azaka, Gede, and more — are the focus of Vodou rituals. Vodou servants seek contact with them because they possess the knowledge needed to balance the forces in one’s life. Servants offer their bodies as mediums for the spirits to enter the human world, and they keep the spirits alive through ritual feasts complete with food, drink, and live music

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Staff member and wonder woman Dr. Lois Wilcken not only manages City Lore’s accounts, but in her spare time teaches ethnomusicology at Hunter College, takes our computers apart and fixes them, and manages the Haitian folkloric music and dance group called La Troupe Makandal. The company’s repertory is largely derived from the rituals of Vodou, widely disparaged in the United States as “voodoo.” The troupe’s productions help to unmask stereotypes while preserving the magic. Dr. Wilcken would like to thank Frisner Augustin, Marie Charles, and Steve Deats for their help with this article.

Chantal Regnault



A notorious trickster and master of death and rebirth, the spirit Gede (Gay-day) possesses an initiate at a Brooklyn ceremony.



In New York as in Haiti, gestures of reciprocity are part of the ceremonies and lifestyle.

Hope brightens this Vodou initiate and marks the vitality of Afro-Caribbean traditions in modern urban centers.



— remember, the spirits are people who need nourishment and a good time. In return for this sustenance, the spirits guide their servants through life's challenges.

Vodou spirits have traveled a great distance to New York. History traces them to the coast of West Africa and the Congo Basin. The infamous trans-Atlantic slave trade brought them to the Caribbean, where Spanish colonists forced Africans to labor for the Spanish crown. Under French rule later on, enslaved Africans in Haiti rose up to free themselves, and their descendants stress that the spirits fought by their side and helped them win the Revolution. Powerful rulers and merchants perceived Haiti's slave revolution as a profound menace, and efforts to destabilize it have troubled the history of the black republic ever since. Ensuing poverty and political violence have scattered the African descendants of Haiti to such places as Miami, Montreal, Paris, and New York City.

Survival in New York presents a dilemma for anyone, not least a Vodou spirit. Most temples are crowded, stuffy basements with floors that are too slippery to dance on with abandon (earthen floors are the norm back home). Owing to disparate work schedules, Vodou congregations in New York lack the cohesion they enjoy in Haiti, and this becomes evident in choral singing that is

sometimes shaky. The drums do not produce the timbral quality that spirits are accustomed to because drummers cannot keep traditional Vodou drums tuned in the cold climate of New York and they use the Latin American conga instead. Discrimination breeds some of these conditions. In the 1990s, mainstream culture in the United States continues to cast Vodou in a negative light. Knowing that, the spirits and their servants keep a profile that is low and off the beaten path.

Given these obstacles, the presence of Vodou spirits in the boroughs of New York testifies to the magic of belief and community. The spirits visit the Vodou congregations of Brooklyn, Queens, the Bronx, and Manhattan regardless of the cold, and the slippery floors. They find much to be amused at in the Big Apple. They affectionately dub their white devotees "the people with the inside-out skin," and when they speak they like to mock the English language by distorting the words. Back in Haiti spirits have been known as polyglots, mixing French, Creole, Spanish, English, and an assortment of African words. Some speak entirely in English, as if vouching for the well-known presence of British and North American players in the pages of Haitian history. These anglophones have come full circle in New York. "I used to walk on this planet," I heard a spirit observe once in English. Was he referring specifically to the Bronx house that hosted him that night?

While they grumble about supermarket meat and concrete-covered landscapes, the spirits of Vodou are flexible and open to compromise. And because of their Gods' ability to barter and adapt, people in Vodou may one day achieve their dream of serving in open temples in New York, Miami, and anywhere else destiny takes them.