Vodou in the age of mechanical reproduction

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For Alourdes Champagne, Karen McCarthy Brown, and Peter Brown

Making saints in the Black Atlantic

A systematic study of the way images of Catholic saints have been used to reify non-Catholic divinities would furnish certain fascinating insights into the often roundabout mechanisms by which systems of correspondence are established from one religion to another.

—Michel Leiris

The function of appropriated images in African Atlantic religions has been debated ever since Melville Herskovits (1937) cited chromolithographs of Roman Catholic saints as key evidence for processes of syncretism in the development of Haitian Vodou. Out of Herskovits's scholarship, Bastide (1960) developed his theory of niches and Leiris (1952) of correspondences to account for Diasporic appropriation of imported images. These scholars argued for metonymic correlations between the collective representations of Catholic saints and African divinities that trumped earlier (and rather simplistic) arguments for the engagement of such images as ruse or disguise. The debate has reheated considerably in recent years, as nativist and purification movements in Brazil, Cuba, the United States, and Haiti have sought to root out "inauthentic" and "racist" images from the ritual face of Diasporic religions.

A quick trip to the Iron Market in downtown Port-au-Prince, or indeed to similar markets in Bahia, Miami, or Brooklyn, would disabuse even the most avid purification proponent of the notion that the endless rows of chromolithographs of the saints for sale there (often at hefty prices) were hiding anything at all. Clearly these chromolithographs are prized for being precisely what they are. But what are they? And how do they relate to a yet vaster array of images thrown out by the ever accelerating globalization of American popular culture, creating an imagistic cargo cult that accesses Tupac Shakur and St. James Major with equal facility?

To answer my query I return, like Durkheim, to more elementary forms: to a single Iwa (Vodou divinity) and to the panoply of his evolving representations. The Iwa in question is "Sen Jak" (St. James), generalissimo of a band of divine brothers called Ogou, military musclemen of the Vodou pantheon. Like other Iwa, the Ogous live in a quasi-mythical "Olympus" called Lavilokan (the City of Camps). But for the three days prior to his canonical feast every July 25, Sen Jak manifests himself in the bodies of pilgrims who have traveled from all over Haiti to submerge themselves in a series of trou (mud pits) in the middle of the main road running through Plaine du Nord, an old colonial town near Bwa Caiman (the Wood of Crocodiles) where the Haitian Revolution is said to have begun. In the ever pliant mythology of Vodou, these trou are revered as terrestrial egress zones for a divinity: a Vodouist visits Plaine du Nord in late July like a Christian visits Bethlehem in late December.

At this festival, all is synchronic. Pilgrims, overcome by emotion and spirit, fling themselves into the muddy trou and lie face down, not visibly breathing. When they arise minutes later, arms stretched out for pennies, they resemble primal creatures from some Mesozoic swamp (fig. 1). Nearby, an ecstatic manbo (Vodou priestess), declaiming in a deep male voice, rides a bony bull. Set like an altar with a red ribbon round his neck and burning candles fixed to his horns, her bull becomes a

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1. Herskovits introduced both the term and concept of syncretism into modern discourse on African Atlantic religion in his seminal work Life in a Haitian Valley.

2. Ogou, a.k.a. Ogun, Ogu, Ogum, is a pan-African divinity (Iwa, orisha, vodun) whose origin is undoubtedly from the Yoruba of southwest Nigeria. He is usually associated with "The Iron Complex" and its corollaries: war, roads, technology, civilization, hyper-masculinity. In Haiti, these same qualities are often associated with its military, so that the Ogou brothers are understood to be army officers. See the various essays in Sandra Barnes 1989.

3. Like Olympus for the Hellenic pantheon, there is an actual geographic spot, in northwest Haiti, which bears this name. Alternatively, the Iwa are also understood to live in Ginee, an "Africa" reimagined as existing under the ocean. For more cartographic information on Vodou heaven, see Cosentino, "Lavilokan," African Arts, Summer 1996.

4. There is much historical debate about the reality of a Vodou ceremony, held in the Bwa Caiman on August 14, 1791, which Haitian popular history understands as the genesis of the slave revolt that began the Haitian Revolution. See Mintz and Trouillot, "A Social History of Vodou," in Cosentino (1995:123-147). What is not in doubt is that Plaine du Nord was the first great site of that slave uprising in 1791, nor the fact that Haiti is the first and only country ever born out of a successful slave revolt.

5. For a fuller description of this festival, see my article, "It's All for You, Sen Jak," in The Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou, pp. 243-263.
lumbering sacrifice for Ogou (fig. 2). As the bull falls to his knees, the sacrificial blood is collected in a calabash, and later used to make the sign of the cross on foreheads of the circling pilgrims. Three groups of drummers are situated at cross points around the trou. They play the sharp, hot rhythms of Petwo.6 For three days pounding into three nights, their music never stops. Fr. Keweillant, the Breton priest who is town pastor, strolls around the trou joking with parishioners and explaining to visitors, “What can we do? I have always allowed this.”

This pilgrim’s progress is not limited to the trou. An enormous crowd has gathered in front of the church of St. Jacques, but they cannot enter. Iron grates bar the doors and windows (fig. 3). So the pilgrims shout prayers and hurl candles, pennies, cigars, and rum bottles though the gratings. They aim their missiles at an empty niche that used to contain an image of St. Jacques. Fr. Keweillant gives specific reasons for keeping the fervent pilgrims away from their sacred target. “The Catholic church has nothing to do with this yearly pilgrimage. These rites are for another religion. They go in front of the church because Vodou is a very synthetic religion. It searches to reconcile divinity. These Vodouists think that an aspect of divinity is found inside the church. They call him ‘Sen Jak,’ but they mean Ogou. For them, Ogou is not a saint. He is a divinity.”

Keweillant further explains why he has kept the doors of the parish church closed against these festive pilgrims since 1978. “There were constant incidents. Perpetual sacrifices. People had immodest habits. I saw a woman lift up her skirt in front of the saint’s statue and say, ‘Sen Jak, here I am. It’s all for you!’ I heard these sorts of things and decided to shut the church during the pilgrimage.”

The Catholic priest was merely pointing out what every Vodouist knows: Sen Jak is Ogou, senior brother of Vodou’s divine military lineage. There is no doubt that

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6. “Vodou” is a portmanteau descriptive term, eliding a range of rites, the most important being the Fon/Yoruba “Rada” rites, often described as “cool,” and the contrasting “hot” rites of “Petwo,” derived from Kongo and Kreyol innovations. The Ogou Iwa are understood to straddle both Rada and Petwo rites. See Karen McCarthy Brown, “Systematic Remembering, Systematic Forgetting,” in Sandra Barnes: 1989.

7. Fr. Keweillant was pastor of the church in Plaine du Nord which we visited during the festival for Sen Jak in 1986. All his quoted statements were personal communications to Henrietta Cosentino and me, made either in the rectory or alongside the trou.
Figure 2. Manbo rides a sacrificial bull. Plaine du Nord, 1986. UREP Expedition: John Martin.

Figure 3. Frustrated crowds in front of the Church of St. Jacques. Plaine du Nord, 1986. UREP Expedition: Donald Cosentino.
the equivalence between saint and iwa rests on a perceived iconic correspondence between him and the Fon/Yoruba divinity Ogun/Gu. Nor that this perceived correspondence has inspired a creolized theology that remains profoundly affected by a continuous reinterpretation of imposed iconography. The Ogou metaphor long ago found its correlate in Catholic popular art, but where and how was the correspondence perceived? How deep, we may ask, is the mud at Plaine du Nord?

Measured in time, the mud is deep indeed, sinking into the narratives of the canonical gospels, and the Golden Legends that followed. From the New Testament we learn that Jesus gave the nickname “Son of Thunder” to James, his impetuous cousin (or his brother, depending on whether you accept the genealogical gloss of Luther or his Catholic rivals). Along with Simon Peter and his brother John (the Beloved), James was the apostle closest to Jesus, being present at the Transfiguration on Mt. Tabor, and the Agony in the Garden of Gethsemane. From the Acts of the Apostles, we learn that James was martyred during Herod’s first persecution.

Thereafter legend takes over. According to hagiography, this same “Thunderer” traveled to Spain before his martyrdom, whence his bones were miraculously translated and discovered by a shepherd in the ninth century at Campostella in Galicia. Ever since, Campostella has been one of the two or three most popular pilgrimage sites in Christendom, superseded only by Rome and Jerusalem. According to Chaucer, even his notorious Wyf of Bathe made the pilgrimage in the fourteenth century. And following in her bawdy wake, millions of pilgrims have wended their way over the long and arduous Camino Santiago.

They come for a tangible experience of the sacred. They come to venerate the immense gilded statue of Santiago carrying a staff and gourd, as if he too were making the pilgrimage to his own shrine. Shimmering in the profound gloom of the high altar, the saint on his throne looks as distant and serene as a golden Buddha or sandstone deva, yet the statue functions primarily as a sign for its own bones. It is those holy bones, kept in a gold box in the crypt beneath the altar, which draw the pilgrims. They are the tangible boon at the end of the quest. Their discovery in the ninth century made the site holy. Their loss in the seventeenth century, after the archbishop of La Coruña had sequestered them from the marauding Protestant pirate Sir Francis Drake, coincided with the end of the Spanish Golden Age. Their rediscovery, reinstallation, and reauthentication by Pope Leo XIII at the end of the nineteenth century returned Campostella to its legendary preeminence as a pilgrimage site.

The most important of the legends that arose from the translated bones of the Saint was his sudden apparition in the midst of the reconquistadores, during one of their early battles against the Moors. Brandishing a fiery sword, the apparition shouts “Santiago and go get um!” to the beleaguered Spaniards. And so they did. The Saint’s shout became the battle cry for the following half-millennium of the Reconquista. And that same apparition inspired nearly endless reproductions of this key image (fig. 4): sword and eyes raised heavenward, Santiago rides with sublime indifference over the maimed body parts of the Moors who lie trampled beneath the hooves of his equally oblivious white stallion. He is dressed all in blue, with gold scallops decorating his collar and a red medallion embossed on his wide cap. A knight mounted on a brown steed rides by his side. The knight is in full armor, with the casque of his helmet closed. In his mailed fist, he carries a white flag with a red cross.

This image is crucial to Vodouists who salute it as a representation of the senior brother of their military spirits, all of whom share the name “Ogou.” “Representation” is a very pale word for an image whose properties directly reflect divinity. Mechanically reproduced by the millions, these chromolithographs are nonetheless sacred, in the same way that millions of St. Christopher medals, or knick-knacks stamped with the equivalent between saint and iwa rests on a perceived iconic correspondence between him and the Fon/Yoruba divinity Ogun/Gu. Nor that this perceived correspondence has inspired a creolized theology that remains profoundly affected by a continuous reinterpretation of imposed iconography. The Ogou metaphor long ago found its correlate in Catholic popular art, but where and how was the correspondence perceived? How deep, we may ask, is the mud at Plaine du Nord?

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image of the Virgin of Guadalupe, are sacred in popular Catholicism. Their commonness does not render them common, nor their ubiquity vulgar. Rather, their availability is a sort of miracle, a proof of the divine presence encoded in the mysteries of lithography. And like miracles everywhere, this ubiquitous image has been subject to an intense scrutiny, a folk hermeneutic whose exegeses have significantly reshaped the biography of an Old World Fon/Yoruba deity.

Images of Sen Jak adorn taxis, temples, and home altars in all the towns and places that Haitians have made their own. Wherever Haitians are, so too are lithographs of Sen Jak plastered above bedsteads and stitched onto flags. Befitting Ogou’s role as general of the pantheon, his image is appliqued or sequined onto more Vodou ritual flags than any other Iwa, an appropriate tribute to the spirit who serves as Sergeant-at-arms for every Vodou temple. Nor is image reproduction limited to lithography; it is in fact a multimedia affair. He is painted into wall murals, laminated on plastic key fobs, and recast as the huge concrete statue which dominates the altar space (djevo) in the Vodou temple of Gesner, where Katherine Dunham, the celebrated African American dance-choreographer, was initiated as a manbo (fig. 5).

Not surprisingly the Vodou pantheon also became the greatest source of inspiration for the post-World War II generation of Haitian artists who have come to be known collectively as “the Haitian Renaissance.” Despite its Eurocentrism the term “renaissance” is not entirely inappropriate. Like those fifteenth- and sixteenth-century European painters and sculptors, Haitian artists such as Hyppolite, Obin, and Liautaud were also busy experimenting with new media for new markets, and finding new inspiration in the borrowed gods of predecessor cultures. For Haitians, these borrowed gods were the saints of an imposed Catholicism. What they did with these saints constitutes a moral lesson in Vodou syncretism.

Consider Hector Hyppolite’s painting “Ogou on his Charger” (fig. 6).12 Hyppolite has reimagined Ogou as Sen Jak, dressing his African deity in robes ransacked from Christian iconography. The saint is still there on his horse, but both are profoundly changed. The white saint now has a brown face. He has been stripped of his blue dress and re-costumed in red, the color of Ogou and of the Haitian Revolution, which he led. The horse has changed colors too. He is no longer white, the color of death in many African cosmologies. Hyppolite has ripped white out of the imported Catholic image, like Dessalines, the Revolutionary general, ripped white out of the French tricolor to create Haiti’s national flag. Note also the scale of both figures, how far the dimensions of

12. Hector Hyppolite’s place in Haitian art was thus summarized in The Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou, “[H]is painting emanated directly from his spiritual life as a Vodou priest, devoted to the Iwa . . . . In 1945, the artist was painting and designing houses near St. Marc when Haitian novelist Thoby-Philippe Marcellin saw and was impressed by a saloon door he had painted. Marcellin persuaded Hyppolite to join the newly opened Centre d’Art in Port-au-Prince. From then on Hyppolite poured his energy into painting, producing over 250 works in three years. His visionary style attracted André Breton, who arranged for him to be shown with great success in Europe. Hyppolite died at age 54 . . . but his fame has continued to grow and he is now generally acknowledged as the greatest Haitian painter. In Hyppolite’s painting Christian and Vodou imagery are completely intermingled, the apogee of Creole ‘mélange ’” (1995:198).
Figure 5. Concrete statue of Sen Jak in the Temple of Gesner, Port-au-Prince, 1987. Photograph: Donald Cosentino.
the horseman exceed those of his horse. This is African Atlantic expressionism at work: art reflecting the moral rather than physical order of the universe.

Hyppolite is working another metaphor, that of trance possession. In Vodou ceremonies, the possessing Iwa is always referred to as “the rider” and the person possessed as “the horse.” The Iwa rides the Vodouist as Sen Jak rides his meager steed. That state of transport into another plane is suggested by Ogou’s bulging eyes, the divine energy (or ase in Yoruba) literally pushing out of the horseman’s head through the sockets of his eyes. Hyppolite often paints such “possession eyes” on his gods and heroes, just as he regularly places his divine figures in middle space, hovering between terrestrial and celestial spaces as Sen Jak and his horse float above the maimed Moors.

“Ogou on a Charger” is something more direct than a representation of the Iwa, since it shares in the divine attributes of its subject. At this point, analogies with European religious art fade. Perhaps a more relevant Catholic analogy would be the tilma of San Juan Diego, whose image of la morenita, the dark Virgin of Guadalupe, behaves more like the bones of Santiago than any of the Madonnas painted by Raphael. Like Guadalupe, Hyppolite’s image has agency. It both reveals and establishes a new order of things. It asserts that what was imposed has now been appropriated. As the mother of Jesus is a Nahuatl goddess, so his cousin is a Vodou god.13 Much may be gleaned about processes of visual syncretism in the New World by considering these popular religious appropriations in Mexico and Haiti.

Hyppolite is hardly alone in such sacral resignifications. Haitians have subjected the lithograph of Santiago to a range of metonymic elaborations. Because Ogou is Iwa of iron, reflected in the sword Sen Jak brandishes, he is also, by paradigm shift, the patron of the roads. Thus on the Carrefour Road running south out of Port-au-Prince, Haitians have assembled crashed motor parts around the bank of a Mapou tree (always understood to be a reposwa of spirit), creating a living altar for Ogou (fig. 7).14 By the same divine logic, Haitian taxi drivers tie red ribbons around the base of their rearview mirrors; and in a yet more flamboyant obeisance to modern road warriors, several tap-taps (retrofitted transport trucks) were repainted with the image of Rambo II (fig. 8) during the long, hot summer of 1986—a not-so-oblique homage to those rampant youth who had led the recent uprising against Jean-Claude “Baby Doc” Duvalier.

Sylvester Stallone, a.k.a. Rambo II, is a postmodern avatar of Sen Jak, brandished sword swapped for cradled uzi, scalloped collar for ripped abs. And following Stallone in star billing on the back of tap-taps has been a host of Black sports heroes, most from the Chicago Bulls during their raging years in the late 90s: Michael

13. Was it an act of counter-appropriation for Pope John Paul II to canonize Juan Diego as a saint in the summer of 2002? There were Mexicans who claimed that the official image of the new saint, complete with beard and pale skin, was being assimilated into a Criollo version of the myth of conquest. Of course, we have no direct historical knowledge of “Juan Diego,” the Nahuatl visionary. Nothing links the pious legend of Guadalupe to history, except for the image on the tilma, leading Peter Brown to observe that Pope John Paul II was acting like a Vodou priest, canonizing saints with icons but no biographies (in conversation, March 2002).

14. Because ase is free-flowing, almost any object may become a reposwa (repository) of divine energies. The possibilities for such sacralization are without dimension. In 1986, during my first visit to the Vodou shrine site of Sodo, Mme. Marie Placide de la Rosaire told me that her whole house was a reposwa for the Holy Trinity.
Jordan, Scotty Pippin, and especially Dennis Rodman, whose spectacular transgressions of bourgeois male codes have made him an iconic celebrity throughout the African-Atlantic world. In both a physical and mythic sense, the space once reserved for saints is now being occupied by movie actors, sports heroes, and rock stars. In the last category, Bob and Rita Marley, and their son Ziggy constitute a new sort of Holy Family. Their portraits are painted on shops and bars around the Black Atlantic, and the lyrics of their reggae hits are subjected to the sort of hermeneutic analyses once reserved for Holy Writ. And this process of popular canonization continues, elevating dark and dangerous rapsters like Tupac Shakur into premier status as T-shirt heroes.


16. Of course in 2002 this list could be extended to include political figures like Osama Bin Laden, or female transgressors like Britney Spears or Janet Jackson. Audacity and ubiquity seem to be two qualities necessary to achieve this elevation to popular canonization.
There is a powerful resonance between these African-Atlantic appropriations and the use of borrowed imagery in contemporary Western art. In both cases, artists are reproducing commercially distributed images to forge new cultural symbols. But it took Andy Warhol to teach New York artists what Hector Hyppolite and the tap-tap illustrators had already found out: If you blow up a popular image to absurd proportions, or reproduce it often enough, you are not sneering at it but somehow gilding it with a glamour and pathos of its own. As Vicki Goldberg explicates the process in her review of the “Elvis and Marilyn” exhibition:

For centuries, artists provided forms for society’s heroes . . . Photography, film, newsreels and television changed that, and artists are now reduced to playing with images already established in public fantasies, stoked by forces beyond the limits of art . . . This is evidence of global envy . . . Who is there to look up to? (“A Pair of Saints Who Refuse to Stay Dead,” New York Times, Arts and Leisure section, December 18, 1994, p. 49).

When the referent is invoked, “Who is there to look up to?” Vodou and secular artists once again part company. In Haiti each new irruption of divine celebrity, no matter how materially fantastic, has an objective correlative in the Vodou pantheon. That correlative is palpable in the muddied torsos rising out of the trou Sen Jak, or manifest at the neighborhood temple, where Ogou might ride his horse tonight. Thus images of Rodman, Stallone, or Shakur are not free-floating signifiers. Rather, they are compelling updates of a lithograph whose appropriation adumbrates whatever we might mean by “syncretism” in Vodou.

2. Postcards from heaven

It is impossible to analyze the transformations Vodouists have wrought upon the figure of Sen Jak in the last century without appreciating the influence of chromolithography upon the religious imagination of Vodou. All the major Iwa are represented by these mass-produced glossy images signifying (in the African American sense of the word) correspondence between saint and Iwa. Noting Vodou’s appropriation of these imported chromolithographs, most scholars of African Caribbean religions have dismissed their liturgical use as ruses meant only to shield the deities and their serviteurs from the disapproval of the Euro-Christian Other. But I think that conclusion is a wrong-headed one for Vodou, and for other African Atlantic religions that have confronted and assimilated Roman Catholic imagery. Ruses would hardly have become treasured commodities, sold in abundance and at relatively stiff prices, to eager
Haitian customers (fig. 9); nor would they continue to be coveted long past when it would have been necessary "to hide" African gods.

The chromolithograph trade began in the mid-nineteenth century, after a concordat was signed by the Haitian president and the Pope ending a schism that began with Haitian independence in 1804. Evidently, these early imports of glossy saints' pictures from Europe met an eager market. Their continuing mass popularity confirms not only the imposition but also the cooption of Catholic sacramentals by Africans. And this cooption is as true in Havana and Bahia as it is in Port-au-Prince and Brooklyn. Replete with cabalistic imagery, chromolithographs have become rich food for an African religious sensibility ever eager for innovation and new revelation. Far from being peripheral, chromolithographs constitute the single most important contemporary source for the elaboration of African Atlantic theology. Modern mytho-biographies are constructed out of these imported images whose provenances are never questioned, since they are assumed to be miraculous in origin. They are snapshots sent from heaven.

The bewildering array of folk exegeses inspired by the lithography of St. James indicates some dimensions of the hermeneutic treasure house offered up to the imagination of the Vodouists. Michel Leiris wrote the first, and still most important essay on the subject:

One sees St. James on horseback, with a sword and shield, fighting the infidels and escorted by a knight in armor . . . for all my informants, the main character is god of the forge and war, Ogou Feray or Ogou Fer (who has a sword as his essential attribute, and as with the other Ogous, red as his color). But for some, the second character is Ogou Badagri, brother of Ogou Feray, even though for others, he is more likely a Gede, spirit of the cemeteries, because the lowered visor of the helmet of the character in question recalls the chin piece and other cadaverish aspects (such as cotton in the nostrils) with which the adepts who incarnate the Gedes frequently make themselves grotesque, all things which, besides, explicate why these latter are reputed always to speak through their noses (1952:204, my translation).

Note that the chromolithograph inspires more than interpretation. It also inspires narratives about the deity and his relationships, which constitute a living Vodou
mythology. The chromolithograph has become a revelatory source, open to counter-analyses like rival Jewish/Christian/Muslim hermeneutics of the same Old Testament text. Thus Leiris's informants suggest alternative folk exegeses of the masked figure behind St. James that identify him not as Cede but as Ogou Badagri. His visor has been lowered by his brother to prevent him from courting Ezili Freda Dahomey, the Venus/Vamp of the Vodou pantheon, whose favors both seek. So story becomes plot, and plot thickens.

Haitian writer Milo Marcelin identifies the masked figure as St. Philip, twin brother of St. James, and spiritual double of Ogou Badagri, blinded by his brother's jealousy. So inspired by his deconstruction of this divine imagery, Marcelin writes, “There is a battle between these Ogou warriors, proud, jealous, especially in those things which concern affairs of the heart. To whom does this apply but to the wanton Ezili? A question which can never be resolved, because no one could possess Ezili, but which gives place to a number of myths associated with Ogou and Ezili.”

Thus, Marcelin argues, Catholic images give birth to the golden legends of the Vodou divinities. And those legends enter into popular discourse, as we may note from the rival names of Saints James and Philip emblazoned on a Port-au-Prince tap-tap (fig. 10).

By this very interpretive process, General Ogou acquires his attending officers, St. Michael and St. George. Some of Leiris's informants recognize Ogou Badagri in the chromolithograph of St. Michael the Archangel, wearing a red cloak (fig. 11). In his left hand he holds a balance, in his right a sword with which he gets ready to rip apart a demon. Ogou Balendjo is himself detected in St. George, an equestrian figure also dressed in a red mantle, armed with a lance and spearing a dragon (fig. 12). Leiris notes that both saints appear to be warriors and blacksmiths, the Ogou family trades. The presence of fire in both images (St. Michael encounters flames from hell; St. George braves the dragon's tongue) enforces this double identification with Ogou. Like Ogou's horses on the floor of the Vodou temple, Saints Michael and George don't fear fire while walking on burning coals or handling bars of red-hot iron.

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17. Marcelin quoted in Leiris 1952, p. 204, n. 2 (my translation). Students of comparative African mythologies will note that Ezili Freda plays the same role as her Yoruba counterpart Oshun in frustrating the amorous advances of Ogun, whose unfulfilled libido may have inspired the passionate ejaculation, “Sen Jak, here I am. It's all for you!” which so offended Fr. Keweillant at Plaine du Nord (see above).
Given the breadth and fuzzy margins of the Catholic cult of saints, and the iconic resourcefulness of religious printing houses in Mexico and Italy, Vodouists do not lack for material upon which to work their hermeneutics. Each new interpretation is contingent only upon the attributes of the last, no authoritative voice is powerful enough to check theological innovation. The process is centripetal, pushing out into new forms like a jazz riff. So during the nightmare of the putsch regime which reigned from the coup against President Aristide in 1991 till the American invasion of 1994, chromolithographs of St. Elias suddenly became a bestseller in Port-au-Prince (fig. 13). Saber in hand, this saint was poised to slice off the head of a victim under foot. All around the violent saint flames were arising, while other victims were being executed beneath the image of the golden calf. “Ogou Criminel” one informant confirmed to me. And indeed, so must St. Elias have appeared to the masses absorbing the blows of the putschist thugs under General Cedras: military sons of General Ogou transformed into criminals.

One need not look beyond the agility of this folk hermeneutic to understand the amazing intellectual and aesthetic creativity which generates the hagiography of the Vodou Iwa, nor, by the same token, should one be surprised at how easily many spokespeople for contemporary Vodou adopt New Age jargon. The godfather of Vodou New Age mythology is probably Milo Rigaud, a mid-twentieth-century Haitian writer, whose Secrets of Vodou offers the following gloss on the origins of Ogou:

“[Ogou is] considered in the African tradition as the father of alchemy. [He] corresponds to the first blade of the Tarot, whose hat is the sign of universal life. This is the Magus par excellence. He personifies the “discipline of chaos” because it is he who directs, with the magic wand, the cosmic traffic. [O]gou “disentangles the roads” by placing himself, like a traffic officer, at the magic crossroads. . . .
These are the mystères who are “forgers” like the aelohim which descend from the Jewish Azi luth, or “Lords of the Flame” in Indian mythology. The Ogous in the Voodoo tradition bear the “fire of heaven,” or the illuminous fire of “Venus,” shaped in the forge to represent a short serpent which traverses the planetary earth and sows fire. In Voodoo, Luci-Fer whose name is also Ogou-Fer, is Venus, the morning star (1985:76–77).

It would be easy to dismiss this theosophic farrago for the bizarre conflation of myths that it is. All the hallmarks of New Age philosophy are present: the assumption of a universal solar mythology, gnosticism, alchemy, secret language. These are all “keys” which unlock the hermeneutic secrets of Vodou, including the meaning of the Iwa who are at some dark level manifestations of a universal pantheon. Thus in one short paragraph Ogou is conflated with the Yoruba creator god Obatala, the Juggler and Magus of Tarot, Ezekiel’s prophetic sword, the Jewish aelohim, the Hindu Lords of the Flame, the morning star, and through an etymological trick, with Lucifer, the fallen angel; not to mention other deities of the Vodou pantheon—Danbala, the serpent god, and Legba/Kalfou, magicians of the crossroads.

It would be a serious mistake, however, to so dismiss Rigaud’s metaphysics. They are a paradigmatic source for contemporary syncretisms in the religion, especially as the population of Haiti urbanizes. There has been a long and complicated fascination with Euro-Semitic mythologies in the African Atlantic ecumene, which leaves its enduring mark in the proliferation of Freemasonic and Rosicrucian temples in Haiti, and everywhere else in the Caribbean. A visit to Port-au-Prince Temple 5005 reveals the influence of these cabalistic riffs in wall murals of cyber mythology, such as the Disneyfied Sen Jak on his mystic mount (fig. 14). Trips to other temples in the city affirm that Ogou mythology has been refracted though multiple lenses: Roman Catholic imagery especially, but also the detritus of popular culture, and the alchemy of Spiritism. Haiti’s Ogou is perceived through appropriations from the cult of St. James, now elaborated via the ethereal Spiritism of Allan Kardec,18 and the ubiquitous images generated in various media by American popular culture.

With the folk hermeneutic explored, it becomes easier to understand why the women in the church at Plaine du Nord confronted the image of St. Jacques like hungry lovers. And why they still revere the empty niche where his statue once reigned. By the same token, the motivations of the priests who emptied the niche, and locked the iron gratings around the church are also clearer. The actions of all the dramatis personae at Plaine du Nord are motivated—to varying degrees—by a common appreciation that the image of a god may be more immediately sacred than the god himself. Vodouists, Catholics and iconoclastic Evangelicals and Pentecostals have all intuited, at some level, the truth of Baudrillard’s powerful observation:

What becomes of divinity when it reveals itself in icons, when it is multiplied in simulacra? Do these images mask the platonic idea of God, or suggest that God himself has ever been his own simulacra—that the images concealed nothing at all. In fact they are not images such as the original model would have made of them, but actually perfect simulacra forever radiant with their own fascination.

18. Although the séances of Spiritism are limited to bourgeois salons in Haiti, they are far more common and influential elsewhere in Latin America. For the important role “Old Africans” play as spirit guides within the Spiritist pantheon, see Cosentino 2004.
... then the whole system becomes weightless, it is no longer exchanging for what is real, but exchanging in itself, in an uninterrupted circuit without reference or circumference (1989:255).

From the evidence offered by Sen Jak/Ogou, we can affirm the relevance of Baudrillard's argument to the use of imported images in Vodou and other African Atlantic traditions. Received from unknown sources, they are revered as if they were studio portraits of the gods that have been mysteriously multiplied like the fishes and loaves in Christian mythology. These images hide or disguise nothing. Rather, they are the best and most readily accessible evidence of the divine presence, serving to universalize the gods of the Black Atlantic through correlations with the communion of saints. But as a caveat, I would further argue that such correlations are historically contingent. Images can be and are re-signified, so while in Cuba the lithograph of St. Peter holding the (iron) keys to heaven manifests Ogun, in Brazil St. Anthony of Padua is Ogum's surrogate.

Nor indeed need the correlate be Catholic. There is a whole pantheon of Chinese Taoist figures: porcelain priests, saints, and sages, who now appear on Cuban Santería altars as allomorphs of the Yoruba orisha (divinities). At Temple Saint Nicholas in Port-au-Prince, I entered the shrine room for Baron Samedi, to discover the dread Iwa of Death and Sexuality represented by a six-foot plastic statue of Santa Claus wearing a black embroidered sombrero. Herb Gold (1991:40) reports entering a shrine room where a Vodou priest identified a newspaper cutout of Republican perennial presidential candidate Harold Stassen as Danbala. The correlation of the ancient python deity with the ancient Republican also-ran is updated in other temples where Danbala is saluted in the famous fashion photo of Natassja Kinski strategically enwrapped by a python (fig. 15).

19. Such “Chinese orisha” were documented during fieldwork in Cuba by Dr. Ysamur Flores (personal communication).
20. The correlation of Santa Claus and the Baron Samedi makes some metonymic sense: as Lord of Death, the Baron is sometimes conflated with the Crucified Christ, whose birthday is personified in Santa Claus. Or perhaps it is that Santa Claus in a sombrero is both scary and funny, and so is the Baron Samedi. For further explorations of this strange relationship, see Cosentino 1987.
Perhaps what’s most remarkable in these metonymic transfers is the refusal of the creolized African gods to grow old or irrelevant. There is really nothing they can’t assimilate. Such fluidity augurs well for the future maintenance of their cults. Just as Ogou and the other Iwa rode easily into the age of mechanical reproduction, they now manifest an uncanny tropism for the popular discourse of New Age cybernetics. In his preface to The Vodou Quantum Leap, physician and poet Reginald Crosley explains, “Quantum physics reveals to us that reality has two faces, a visible and an invisible one. Vodou reveals the hidden face of reality... accounts of possession, channeling and zombies all reflect the multidimensional nature of existence” (2000:xxi-xxvi). Inspiring apologetics like these, local religions confound expectations that they will wither away before the homogenizing sweep of globalization.

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